Marcel Ray Duriez

‘Angel's in Disguise’

‘The Nevaeh Saga’

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'The 'Nevaeh Saga' is a narrative focus on the thoughtful look of a young girl, facing pain- as she bares her soul and what lays within.'

'A fourteen-year-old Nevaeh is having a midlife crisis likewise doesn't seem to bode well with her life expectancy. Her so-called school friends bully her, whatever semblance of a foster mother drowned out her fights with life by loathing her for being alive, falling and grieving her way to mental delusion. Now a fallen angel Nevaeh speaks when she did not have a voice, to do so before, her untimely death- as she bares her soul.'

'Just because Nevaeh is the small girl and has someone putting her down; doesn't mean that she can't rise above it all and shine!'

Profile:

Novelist author- Marcel Ray Duriez is an author/illustrator of all fiction types, and now non- fiction books also- he is a children supporter in helping kids with starting to read, with his: fantasy- mystery- horror- even some sensual romance novels, novellas, and short stories- 5-star kids' writer- said readers' favorites.

Biography:

Here is some information about me. I was born in 1991, in Johnstown Pennsylvania USA, and raised in a small town of Northern Cambria, previously known as Barnesboro.

My educational degrees are in BA.GDM Graphic Design, Architectural Engineering Technology and Civil Technology, Residential Planning, (CDA) and Writer.

My diplomas are under Fine Art and the Fundamentals, Health and Human Development, Advanced Physics, Children's Studies, Music Theory, English Grammar, and the Fundamentals, Electrical Drawings and Test Equipment, Educational Psychology, English Language and Literature Writing.

Marcel is part of the Kappa Pi - ETA Sigma Fraternity. Along with the National Technical Honor Society Fraternity.

'I started countless novel-writing mostly by chance, and it was self- highlighted in my life. My undertaking has been and will remain to be to create stories, which will engage interest in reading, comprehension and expand critical thinking. I believe that all my stories capture' the many scenes, moments, and expressions throughout the chapters. My first book was titled 'The Many Adventures of Cuddles.' Then I published a book titled 'Sammie and Ellie' I became an author, Illustrator for children's books- knew I wanted to start writing novels.'

Twitter: @duriezray

Acknowledgments:

This story is what is it is today, because of some very special individuals, and I would like to give thanks to them for everything they have done. To my literary agent, thank you for selecting me from obscurity, thanks for your kindness, your patience, and wisdom. Thanks for all the long hours you have spent working with me. I am so grateful for everything you have done.

I also want to say thank you to those of you that have endorsed my work way back when it was just a manuscript sitting on top of my desk, next to my antique typewriter held together with a few old rubber bands.

Enthusiasms:

Joy M. Duriez. The person who has inspired me from day one. 'You'll get where you want to go, you just have to trust that you can, and you will get there, have the faith.'

For more information about bullying go to:

http://www.stopbullying.gov

In the memory of Diana-Lee Ansley/Miller

'I think of writing like painting a picture with words.' -Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 1

Walking the Halls

Interval Section: 1

The book of Choices-

Preface: Have a voice:

'I never invested much thoughtfulness to where or with I would expire, nonetheless fall, though I would hold reason enough in the last few months, despite if I had, I would not have thought it would be like aforementioned, I have been a good little Catholic girl, all my life; I can sin a-little- right?'

'I watched outwardly exhaling athwart the great fields, into the mysterious eyes of the sole snatching demon; that took the look of a young girl holy ghost. Furthermore, she observed thoughtfully back at me.'

'Admittedly, it was an immeasurable way to depart, in the position of someone else, someone I adored, cherished, and embraced; good, indeed. This ought to score for something, of where I am going.'

'I grasped that if I would never fly away from home, I would not be meeting death immediately. However, frightened, terrified, and scared as I lived, I could not make myself to mourn the determination I made. If experience allows you a vision so far exceeding each of your expectations, it's not prudent to bewail when it reaches to a conclusion finish.'

'The captivating angel beamed lovingly as she roamed forward to hang me, a part of me felt as it would die, and others would never.'

~*~

'If you all are taken by novels with delighted conclusions, you would be better off reading some other book.'

'On the morning I was scheduled to die, I saw my life as if I had lived it to its whole.'

'The Amsel girls were unquestionably the most mischievous kids in the memoir of the experience of my childhood.'

'Not every 14-year-old girl is indicted for murder, brought to trial, and found guilty.'

'Yet, the power behind words and voices is substantial to all life! I dedicated this book to all of you readers before you even read it, to understand- the book of misunderstandings for the misunderstood.'

'To have a voice, when you were made not have one or told not to have one. Maybe if you are like me, trying to get your voice back this is the story you need. Nonetheless, let us not fail to remember all the voices, which will never speak again, for being rejected and misunderstood.'

'Yes, be that voice with this book, this book is for you, to speak up, and be heard. Why?'

'So, there are no more lost and forgotten voices of life. This book is a steppingstone to abolish bullying altogether, along with your help; we can take that step forward and forget about the past!'

'At this time, I would like you all to take a moment of silence, to remember someone, that is no longer with us. So, they are not forgotten.'

'To understand, you must read, between the lines of a story just like mine, sometimes more than once.'

'My wronging if you do not read this book is, you'll find out fast that life is going to suck, and then you make the discovery, that you are going to die alone, and the hex- I have will now be on you.'

'At least that is what I thought; I thought I read, my story before it was written, and this note was the last thing that I was going to write.'

'However, I never realize that there was so much more to life, which I did not appreciate. I came so very close to the edge. Yet, I got additional unplanned lifespans.'

'Yet, was the second chance what I needed?'

'Nevertheless, there were things that I concerned my mind with, which was not substantial to my existence.'

'If anything- learn from me. Try to do the virtuous things I did and not the mistakes I made. Though it is up to you to decide what was great or immoral, it is what you feel and believe is morally right in your mind.'

'Yeah, it would be right in saying- I never really establish any thought into what was going to happen to me someday and the others that are part of my surroundings.'

'However, life goes on, and the existence of what was stands for nothing but- a memory of what you can and cannot have. If you are someone like me, but all I ever wanted to be someone that appreciates me.'

'Everybody around here would say life is free, yet or is it?'

'Like, do I even want it?'

'No- not anymore!'

'The existence of life…! Is what I mean.'

'This belief is what I do not want, to have any more.'

'There must be a way out of all this misery, suffering, pain agony, and distress, that I relish in day today?'

'They say dying departing, and falling is easy, as well as lasting, and living is difficult, uncertain, ambiguous and unpredictable.'

'While with wild carless heart and reduction of insight I am going to find out!'

'I presume life is all about what you want, need, love, desire, respect, and love.'

'Furthermore, existing in life comes down to what you cannot have in it. All I have to say is don't let anyone or anything pin you down and make you less than who you are. Always be whom you were meant to be, regardless of what they say… because who in the hell are, they!'

'This is a warning to my story, I will only say this once, this is my life, and others I have loved and lost, and it is graphic at times.'

'Just like looking into a book of Sh-h, of deep dark girlie secrets, photographs in the mind like black and white still frames of the past developed, or like a painting of time last just at the moment- a picture with my words of how I will be remembered, the story will come to be perceived sharply and with much clarity.'

'All the color in it washes away over time, yet not all, they become soft and pastel, and some things fad yet it's all been said, yet not hidden.'

'So, one way or another- you now have memorabilia, of lives until now never had a voice. Besides all that is left is still frames that keep on fading, and distorting.'

'My normal, dull, everyday common, and ordinary life goes into much detail about me to it is explicit and labeling, disparaging to the point I like the ones that were part of me had or have little worth; to the point of derogatory, defamatory, sarcastic, and my loved ones equal to my malice as a teen girl.'

'Just so, you know that 'y'all' have been informed of what to expect!'

'Let's go through this excursion combined with a mighty voice, and our heads held up. Let's be proud of- 'Who we are, not what we are.' Furthermore, in time you'll know what that means if you have trust.'

Chapter: 1

Sisters from Hell

'Hey, I am only fourteen, what do you expect, I can be remembered as a sinner. I need to rewind the time turner some and relive the past to see what I am missing; I have the magical power.'

'My time turner is a device used for time travel. It is an extraordinary timekeeper that favors an hourglass on a chain, just another thing, I keep on my necklace.'

'All my days, weeks, month go back, even years, until the beginning of my freshman year of high school.'

'I have gotten to have the great pleasure of having these fore girls around me, at all times; 'yeah me,' the girls I call the sisters.'

'Unseasoned, gentle, sweet, sympathetic, winsome giving, innocent looking girls. Then turn in to horrifying shapeshifting demons sometimes, into wendigo's, or even banshees.'

'Additionally, I know that they show up in children's lives as shadow people, long before any of those to come afterward. Asking as if their benefactor, allies, protector, and sympathizer, everything that is an angel.'

'Most would just call us just ghostly, yet most of the time we would take the humanoid shape of one of those.'

'I was once a white angle, the chestiest type I could be, nevertheless, I was the hunted over this, and that had to arrive at an ending.'

'Although over time, I have fallen with them as you know, now just as weak as them hunting young girls for the sweet taste of blood and souls, to keep for their own, to take them in the most sheepish, timid, cowardly and spineless way a child like me could do; acting like a sweet fallen angel.'

'Just to victimize, when they are just like me looking for hope, that I give misleadingly, in the time of their need, just like I was in too.'

'I am no better than the bullies, that picked on me, and I could not live with myself, as I was falling more every day, thinking, I was still ever-so good when I was just as wrong as my sisters and even my grandmother that made me this way.'

'I remember, that demons can take the shape of anything and hide within anything even you and me, and in me they did.'

'Sarah's soul was assumed to be lost, bull to me I think she lingers within a toy doll; to find a new body to stay within someday.'

'Despite, this can take months years, even decades at a time.'

'They were always a pain in my butt!'

'However, in high school what they did became, so much more arousing for them, more hardcore. Likewise, you will see why now they like to find pledger in all the pain they think is a turn on, that is what I mean to say, like everything will be relieved, at a point coming up, soon!'

'Okay, the four Amsel sisters were also known as 'The Blackbird Clan' to me all my life, or that is what I call them, in my book of life.'

'In my mind, they peck and stalk all human life, which they think is below their perfection, supremacy, mastery, and superiority.'

'Hence, you know that I am one of them that they chew on and play with and not the sweet childish play you would think.'

'Alissa Amsel is a blonde hair, blue-eyed girl; she cannot weigh any more than one hundred pounds. Although, she is taller than most of the boys' kind of gangly looking- conversely, so it seems to me when looking up at her from my worm's eye perspective every time.'

'She is the head of the girls! She is the main squeeze, that gets all the others to participate in her girl's group as a horde.'

'She is the one that created this pulsating, diddling, and banging bullying gang in the school halls.'

'Still, I just call them the clan sisters, yes they are my sisters from hell.'

'Alissa, she towers in her overall authorities, control, and influence, in the society's ranking of rheostat within the hellhole.'

'Indeed, Alissa is a senior the head cheerleader, she makes everyone that she wants to be associated with being her friend, and the ones she does not want to be her fools.'

'Since, she has to have consistent attention, in any forms imaginable.'

'Yes, a refusal to bow down to her authority, she does everything in her power, to make your life miserable; and I know that she does for me and others like me!'

'Alissa is constantly smothering Chiaz Naztherth, with her crazed oversexed clingy nature.'

'That pisses me off, he is mine! As if, he is her plaything. Nevertheless, she knows that she has the power to date, anyone she wants, without any remorse or compassion for his or her true feelings, the door is always open for her, and it goes both ways.'

'Though, she closed my door to get anyone a long time ago. Everything, I have prepared love linked, past and present are hiding away for that reason.'

'Sometimes, falsifying it is the only way to make it real for us. As expected of him, Chiaz accepts the relationship grasp, and all that comes with it or else.'

'She sure holds onto him with both hands, hugging so tight, kissing sucking face, and God knows what else, and all the other things too, more than we ever did.'

'Yes, me knowing that she is fondling him as well as, forcing all kinds of bonking on him, it makes me sick to my belly.'

'He is mine… mine… mine!'

'She like they have said to me doesn't know the difference between good touch- bad touch.'

('Can you see me stomping my foot while making a pouting face! This is my man!')

'I have already pinned him… AS… MY… BOY, so back off! Yet, is he going to make me soon? Oh, he could, yeah, he so has dibs on me, and I would not fight him! I want him too, I would even do all the work, in that way, I am the bad girl.'

'Although, I do not like or want to be his dirty little secret, like being in the front of his car bobbing for apples and pogo-sticking; like most girls here. Moreover, if that is what I have to do to be his I well.'

'Though if I get the chance, I would take it, I am not going to pass that up, for the world. Still, I want true love, with real passion in a romantic place! Though I cannot have everything, I never did.'

'There has to be a way to make this happen, I am sure I will think of something, the way it should be, the way I want it and need it to be!'

'So, call me a dreamer and old fashioned, that is okay with me. I can see me pinned up against the lockers or something like that.'

'Yeah, he could merge with me over one of these school desks.'

('Oh, honey!')

'He could overtake me in the bathroom if he would follow me in there.'

('Laughing- aloud foolishly, strangely, and oddly. I was making plains.')

'He could get me in the library, and in-between the bookcases too, so many places we could make love.'

('Yah- that could be, 'Marvelous!'')

'I am going to find a way; I was having this chat with myself out load in-class you no with that little voice in my head going crazy, which likes to be bad now and then even when I am not.'

'I am going to find a way, even if I have to run into his arms and have a dry humping performance, of me being mad and covering him with crazy love kisses.'

'Yeah, we could fasten into one another; all the time.'

'Am-hum... humming sound, I make in class daydreaming as I do, yet that is better than dumb school, were the teacher in the front of the room almost becomes voiceless to me as I tune him out, and get lost in my feelings, ideas, opinions, beliefs, plans, images, and thoughts.'

'Yes, I want more from him too, I want more than just friends online on Facebook; I would love him to follow me online and not have someone care that he does if he only could, and be with me in real life, and online too, as his girlfriend.'

'Until now, I do not even have a tagged picture of us yet! I am so sick of having a single status, which refuses to transform me; into a somewhat popular girl!'

'Sometimes, I make myself snigger in class. While thinking of something funny, in a lecture class, and it is silent in the room, and yah start to entirely bust out laughing, thinking about everything I want.'

'Have you ever done that, changed my relationship status?'

'Then everyone looks at you like you must be stoned, or in my case quite retarded. Because with that look upon on my face, of kind of like ideological.'

'Furthermore, then it is like no time has gone by at all and I don't even remember getting to this point and place.' 'Where I am staring, gawking looking, watching, staring and gazing into the sunshine, so intensely feeling warmness, temperature, and heat, along with glowing gracious, with the thoughts, predilections, sensibilities, and emotions of liberation after getting dropped off by the school bus.'

'Amidst all the disturbances and characteristics of not wanting to remember the day, is the freedom look upon my face now.'

'Likewise, so intensely showing that it makes me laugh foolishly; as the thoughts did in class, thinking about my freedoms to appear, as they are now.'

'Then again, I have been rehabilitated until some consider and imagine, that I need life support.'

'I remember that I was squinting my eyes, all at the same time, in class to see to the blackboard. Which are more odd faces, they think I make, just to report, in a false script about whom I am going to become.'

'Remarkably, while holding back a smile, I sometimes do this, plus holding some really weird sounds back, I try to not do in a class of the work being so childish. When they all looked right at me. Then, I feel anxiety, panic, dread, and worry.'

'Yep, this girl here me, myself and I, just had that moment sitting in this room, where you can hear a pin drop.'

'I am laughing out loud.'

‘That reminds me that Hope, she thought (LOL) or 'laughing out loud,' stands for ‘Little Old Lady,' when I finally started to text message!’

‘Ha!’

‘Hope she is my garden, just so yah-know.’

-And-

‘Nevaeh, do you have something, which you want to share with the class.' Asked, Miss. Bradbury.

'What…?' She replied.

'What’s so marvelously funny?’ The teacher questioned.

‘No, it's kind of an inside joke!’ Said, Nevaeh giggling.

'OKAY, then sh-h!’ Said, Mr. Bradbury questionably.

'So, I just look down at my little 'her,' and tell her to sh-h.'

‘Right- ‘Sh-h,’ I place my one little finger to my lips and make the sound.’

'Despite, I snickered, myself to the principal office, for being distracting.'

'However, in my mind, at that time in class. I was thinking could it be either Lily or Chiaz, which gets to sway me one way or the other for my passion, devotion, admiration, and love.'

'I walk out the door surely, certainly, clearly, unmistakably, undoubtedly, and unequivocally smacking me on my butt; with my plaid skirt up, showing my bare white ass.'

'At some point, you stop caring. They want to see it all anyway's, it all these kids talk about.'

'You know, this place is making me messed up, like them this act was beneath me!'

('I am giggling so hard in the office, to the point of delirium! Punished for being like them, although- I cannot be, I see.’)

'What, are you doing here?' I was asked by the blond secretary out of two in the office.

"I do not know, I am just a good little girl,' I say to them, I just needed to have some entertainment; as they all do, where are kids, after all, and told to grow up, yet in the head, you say we can't ever be grown-ups. 'So, tell me here and now, what is that you want me to be, and your right."

'Yet there are hands-on me at this point, and I am being talked down, by officers and teachers alike, and not always the ones that I want to have their bodies on me, do not get frustrated, they say, she is mental, you will see what I mean shortly if you do not retrain her in handcuffs and ankle shackles- NOW.' Said Mr. Bradbury.

'I am now taking time away from my teaching all the others in her class now, that want to learn, over this one being decidedly bad and acting out and being disrespectable, and sexual.'

'Lady you're the one that is twisted in the head.' Yield, Nevaeh.

'You see what I mean?'

'We do.'

('Next day, same class, I am drifting off in deep thoughts.')

'I am thinking about him, Chiaz- like, I can tell that he is not in love with Alissa at all; it is obvious, in his body language.'

'However, I do not think he is in love with me either, but maybe he is, I do not know?'

('And again, I am making faces to the thoughts.')

'Nevertheless, she is with my dream boy! This reminds me of the fact that he is always near me, and I do know why.'

'Still, he cannot figure out a way to get away with me. I pray for the day that he does. That is only if he feels the same way I do.'

'Additionally, I am not going to wait forever, if he cannot get away from her then, I will understand where I need to be, and settle.'

'I will have to settle for someone else then, and I know that she will be a girl like me.'

'Furthermore, he looks at me from a distance, with the expression of helping me, then again, she has him grabbed by the family jewels, I think he is saying, all the time, the words like save me, and them too, with his mouthed silent words! Besides, I just look away most times of panic and bashfulness.'

'Sometimes, I give him that flirty look, I just look up slightly, but then again, I cannot be caught doing this; for the reason that- I do not need Alissa's glaring eyes peering into my soul like a hunter if I did not do something unequivocally wrong.'

'Previously, in her mind, no other girl can talk, look or even think about him. Though she keeps me away from him, and other boys and even girls the most of all the one she hates in the halls the most.'

'Unquestionably, my reputation category is bad, dangerous, critical, dejected, inferior, and bad enough, without her finding more reasons to diminish, wane, abate, and lessen me more.'

'I do not need all of her three other jerking-off sisters jumping me in the halls, or anywhere earls for that matter.'

'Anyways there is Adriane Amsel she is the junior and part of my family also. She has black hair with red tips. She has green cat eyes, or at least- that is the way they look to me.'

'She is squat and bumpy; yes, that is about how to sum this one up. Adriane, she is also known as the emo-gothic girl's ringleader.'

'She was like a satanic power over everyone, which is part of her surroundings, this girl is a real sucker. I think she does this by manipulating, and brainwashing the prey, which she wants. She sucks the life out of me.'

'She is the one that likes to find arbitrary, random and stray objects and put them in places in my body they should not go, that they should never even go in, or be in, and I am not her only victim.'

'Naturally, I know all too well what she does, and I am not afraid to speak such here. Nevertheless, I would be any other occasion!'

'She wears all black with a star around her neck, blood color lips that are never shut, just like her legs. She also makes other girl's lips bloody too.'

'She has a pale white face that is evil, wicked, sinful and clown-like.'

'It is so safe to say that she is the badass of the hellhole; and yes, I have seen all that too; all her victims being used as I was for her entertainments.'

'She knows that she can get away with anything like all my sisters. Why...? Because of our family's stature in society my grandmother letting them get away with anything. Just like our sister Alissa, she has a crazed oversexed obsessed clingy nature also, it all over our history to feel needed, I think.'

'Adriane's object of affection in her selection is Lily Anderson, the cute little good girl with pigtails; the one I let be my last hope. Love but not truly in love.'

'Although nobody in society finds this to be wrong for anyone, meanwhile when I am with her it is so very wrong. Adriane is attached at the hips to this girl constantly. She was using my girlfriend, who is my sweetheart!'

'Once more, get off her. She doesn't like you; she doesn't want you getting off, by you using her, and beginning like all pressed upon her!'

'Although Lily prefers to date boys, yet she loves me… however, she has to do whatever Adriane wants her to do, regardless of her true emotions.'

'The refusal leads into Lily undertaking the vengeance, fury, rage, and wrath of the Blackbird Clan. Her and I giving denial leads into open demonstrations of them all being placed upon her somehow someway, they go down on her, while on top of her body while she loses everything, she has to them.'

'Oh yes, that includes being undressed in the hall that we both walk of the school, stripped of all forms of dignity in front of society within the high school, as we always were even in middle school some things never change. There is no authority like teacher's observation of caring to hear her cries or my out for help in these hellish halls, no one cares about us as the rejected.'

'All the students choose to look away because, they know they have no control, and nor do they even care. This one- time Adriane used a hairbrush handle on her, while her class friends watched her push it inside lips of Lily's hole and back out forcefully repeatedly.'

'As well they duct-taped her mouth, so no one could hear her scream, even if she did no one concerned about her and me in our category!'

'Then they tied her hands with her top to her legs, and her skirt went out on the flagpole as did mine, Adriane just pushed her undies to the one side, and her legs were just held spaced-out, until she was tied up, by the two other girls that used her for horizontal refreshment, as she was lying there in the hall on the floor.'

'Furthermore, no one reports, on cameras at all in the halls, in this old nonconformity unending, seemingly limitless, and lofty halls, with very low daytime light.'

'Furthermore, artificial light, ever-so dark, dem, and dull sable stained wood-paneled walls, lined with old undusted lockers, scream, yell, and shriek you can do this- yet, no one cares.'

'Besides, even if they do tattletale nothing will be done about this, you're the 'BAD GIRL,' and the instigator, and have it coming to you.'

'Additionally, specifically, principally, if someone reports to teachers, they have the fear they might be the next person, to face the wrath if they snitched, living in fear, is what you do if you walk these halls.'

'So-o, the next one to the title is Allison Amsel is the redhead; she is a momma's girl that cannot do anything wrong in our mom's eyes.'

'I know that what I am saying- about them is not nice, but these girls are not nice individuals, so that makes it okay, or that is what I think.'

'Allison is immense for a girl her age, eyes always squinting. All she needs to do is sit down on top of you, and you are doomed.'

'Her hobbies included selling and injecting and ingesting whatever she can find for herself and others alike. She loves the heron and abusing and popping medications and getting all

kinds of high with her 3-foot bong as do most in my main classes to do the same, and she is their drug dealer.'

'Though I am blamed for that too and she gets away with this, and I as always get the blame, and I don't do drug or could even think about doing them.'

'She is a distributor for most if not all the stoner student population; her main headquarters is the third-floor bathroom.'

'Allison's hobbies also include drawing very artistic graffiti illustrations of rockets in flight on the bathroom walls. I find most graffiti beautiful, but some of these images are morbidly disturbing, to say the least.'

'Allison spends all her time in the bathroom stalls fantasizing about having a boyfriend or girlfriend for her play toy.'

'While she let's, say- dismisses all her day's stresses in there, going number three, masturbating and pooping at the same time. I think she smoked and drugged her brain cells away. However, this does not stop her from going to all the hellhole's activities.'

'Our mother makes sure, that all her girls have dates, but me and Lily so that they feel as if their asses are gold. Yet they're as ugly as homemade sin, just like their evil grandmother.'

'Although most of the guy population thinks that Allison is nasty and ugly, however once again, this does not stop her from being popular.'

'Also, for her, there is no need to attend classes, she has an assured diploma, in her chapped up, and snack leftover covered chubby hands.'

'Yes, mom and grandma's side of our family fixes that for her also.'

'Allison does nothing and blames everyone else for being lethargic, sluggish, idle, and lazy.'

'I just do not get this! Sometimes, I ask myself question of why is it that some butt holes, can fall into the shit house, and come out smelling like a rose?'

'Additionally, as for me over this truth, reality, fidelity all I get is a very sincere anguishing with torture.'

'Nope, nothing was ever handed to me by my bloodline, that is for sure. Although that is okay by me, I am the kinder and sweeter person, for all the heartache.'

'The youngest the best of the worse is this last one to come out of mom kicking and screaming, Ava Amsel, she is a brown-haired girl.'

'Like, I think she is so petite, though she is bigger than me, yet everyone is bigger than I am, and she calls herself an athlete.'

'However, she is not coordinated at all, she trips over her toes.'

'Though, she has a guaranteed scholarship to a prestigious university for sports already upstate.'

Thus, she still has three more years here, sometimes- like, I ask if I do too. If I don't start passing my bashful, slow-witted, slow, and listless classes.'

'Accurate to say that, Ava bounces around and gets with any guy or girl she wants to be with also and bounce on.'

'That is just the way she commands, doctrines, rules, and habits. She blames everyone else for having sexily transmitted diseases when she is the one on her back most days.'

'Ava is the one that is in my grade yet, I will always be behind her and the rest in my grade.'

'Nevertheless, she makes up so many stories telling the community, civilization, fellowship, and societies.'

'That she is touched inappropriately, preferentially looked at, or divulged along with talked to by unwanted persons, though she is asking for this; by boys and girls alike. then lies, falsifications, tricks, and fables.'

'Further, she gives all the male teachers a free show of her girly parts, boys to she is a sluttiest- slut to ever be a slut, just so that she can get good grades.'

'Then like in class, all you have to do is look up her skirt and see it all. I mean that is okay, but at least cross your legs like me, try to be ladylike.'

'Also touching and feeling can get a girl a long way here in the hell hole as I call it, known to others as high school.'

'Moreover, Ava, she likes all the attention, mutiny, insurrection, treason, sedition, and sensations.'

'It is manageable, plain, clear, simple, and obvious that she finds it all stimulating, lascivious, ever- so hot plus at times lewd, being inside arousing including having the wet warming, and even exciting moments; by the ways, she acts with them all teachers and girls and boys alike.'

'Oh, and how they all get sucked in by her. She is one elusive creature.'

'Yes, I must see all of Ava in the gym, History, and Music classes, thank God that is it. Like sometimes- it is good to be gifted to getaway.'

'It has become known around the school that she is into older guys, that are in college, and older than that like old man type like in their late forties.'

'She thinks that high school boys just do not have enough experience in life, simply mostly for her familiarity in the like the bend me over, front, back, and sidewise, preferentially held in all compromised, bang me hard sexy coitus, but she will give one or two a thrill and tumble throughout the school day even in the halls we call a place of learning, boy, girl young, old she gets what she wants, and what she wants is me, in the scariest sexiest, most sensual, most libidinous, lewdest, most suggestive, way possible.

'This girl is messed up, and no one chooses to see it, she has even said she wants to savor, ginger, tongue, and smack, on my genitalia.'

'Therefore, she has an 'A' in all Mr. DeVolcano's music classes, all taught by the same man. Yes, sucking the flute backward, I swear she would be that dumb, yet she is better than me, he had the condescending speech to say to all in the class, no truth to this, yet he made the long run-on statement.'

‘I had a dirty comment in my mind- that I should have said. Nevertheless, I did not say it aloud. However, it was like he read it anyways, by his blood pursuer going up and his face getting flushed.’

'Nevertheless, he would know all about that after all, he was her most highly-grade teacher, and she is the pet. It's sick the love they have for each other even in class, like PDA even, just kiss, suck face, and privates.’

'Yeah, take your student in the class, hold hands and make a baby- dude, go for it. You can do no wrong here- can you?'

'Nonetheless, every guy in the hellhole wants to be with her. They stare at her as if she is the centerfold of a magazine, and she most likely could be she post nudes all the time on Snap.'

'She has over a 3,000-fan base. They cannot see the ugly that lies on the inside. All the guys and even some girls drool over her with their tongues hanging out, and their hands stiffed down their fronts.'

'I am a sick freak pervert if I do it, yet when she posts she is a model, all they see is a perfect fourteen-year-old curving object of desire; nothing more than the nympho.'

'A nympho is someone, normally female, that eats, breathes, & lives for sex. She dreams about it, often playing it over so much in her mind that something she has never tried can be exceptional the first time done with another person.'

'She is insatiable and always ready to play but that does not always make her a slut or whore, for she can be picky in her selection.'

('A freaky sex-kitten with a very lucky boyfriend.')

‘Oh, yes to be under the spell of a girl like this, is like getting hit below the belt. Or some of the guys say as I hear them talk, just like a banged pushed in taint until the point it looks like a girl's fleshy hooded nub.'

'They're all like stockers, you know that it is going to be like instant nausea when being around them. Ava also has crushes on a girl's too, here in the school; although I bring that up, that girl is me.'

'So, these sisters of mine, they are part of my everyday life; they exist in my conscious and subconscious too, it's scary.'

Girls, what do we think about Nevaeh?

'She is a dumb ass slut!' Said, Alissa.

'She is an idiotic tramp!' Said, Allison.

'I am 13 years old, and she could die tomorrow, and I would not care, and neither would my sisters.'

'She is a no-talent hoe-bag!' Said, Adriane.

'She is a psycho tart!' Said, Ava.

'Yeah- our mom and daddy, said to stay away from that.'

Nevaeh- 'I remember how I said, that if you are popular, you have it all, and if you are not then you do not have anything to look forward too?'

'While- I recall the night of the winter formal boy-girl dance for all students that had dates.'

'It was such a long night, every minute seemed to drag on as if it was hours. I thought that it would never end, conclude, or have an ending.'

'No one asked me, all the ones that I asked chuckled in my face, and said, 'No!'

'They all were abruptly rude, and unkind to me. I would get answers like this. 'I have someone to go with.' I love this one. When you know they do not...?'

Or this one, 'Why would I want to go with you?'

Dead air- nothing replied to me, yet I still ask- 'Why, not?'

'...I questioned, I would say this, and they would run away.'

'I think that I asked one hundred and twenty-five different boys, they all said, 'No!"

'I recall that I even asked a boy at the beginnings of the year, that I thought just might say yes.'

Plus, he said- 'If I don't forget!'

'I did not know that I was so forgettable, that was a no, I mean come on?'

'Some, meanies said, to go 'Stag!' I ask this, why would I want to do that?'

'Besides, going with Lily was not allowed, she had a date anyways with someone, which was planned for her and out of her hands.'

'Additionally, I want to be with someone and dance… to have a good time too like any girl.'

'I do not want to stand by myself with my thumb up my butt while looking at everyone else having a good time.'

'Completely looking like a loser, yet I need to remember that I am one, leaning against the wall.'

'I could see that, and it is not pretty. It seems to me, that no one wanted me to be there anyway.'

'Everyone that I asked about the dance… like the day, time, and how to get a ticket, they all just gave me the run around about this.'

'So, when I found out for myself where to go to obtain one.'

'The girl that was given them out named, Angelina Nolan. She asked me why I wanted a ticket.'

'Why not?' I responded.

'Because no one likes you.' She answered.

'Go back to your little classroom and leave me alone.' She replied.

'I remember I lift without a ticket nearly in tears.'

‘Ah, is the little-retarded baby girl going to cry!’ Angelina announced.

('Acting and speaking like someone, which is mentally challenged.')

‘I said 'no,' yet I did cry at school.’

'Yes, I was the only girl in the freshmen class that did not get asked to attend. I even had the perfect dress all picked out it was pink with shades of lavender.'

'I was not about to go all alone.'

'So, I sat at home eating popcorn and watching old movies. I eat when I am feeling hopeless; besides, detesting myself even more during the wallowing process.'

'Chocolate is a girl’s best friend.'

'Consequently, I am going to polish off this entire chocolate pie, as well as sit here and cry, yes just sitting in my white tank top, and light pink comfy old short shorts, with the black drawstring in the fronts, tied, into a big floppy bow.'

'I sit looking at the TV, hugging my teddy bear. Tonight's movie line up is ‘Shawshank,' ‘Misery,' ‘The Notebook,' and ‘A Walk to Remember.’ While my black mascara from the day runs down my cheeks.'

'Life is not a fairytale, so maybe I can go next year, I know the prom is not going to happen either, yet I want to go at least once in my life. Yet, some get to go to prom, and dances for five years running. They go all four high school years.'

'Plus, they get asked for their date, which is still in school after their out, even though they have gone many times before.'

'Then someone like me never gets the chance; that is not fair! I am not jealous; I just want to have the same opportunities, the photos, and the involvements.'

'I could envision in my mind the couples swaying to the music.'

'I could picture the bodies pressed against one another. With their hands laced with desire, all the girls having their poufy dresses pushed down by their partner’s closeness, as they look so in love.'

'I know is just dumb dances, but I want to go. Why am I such a hopeless romantic? I could visualize the passionate kissing.'

'I can see the room and how it would be decorated, but all I have is the vision of it. That is all I have! Yeah, I think I know how Carrie White feels too, well maybe not like that, but close. I might get through that one tonight too because I am not going to sleep anywise.'

'So why not be scared shitless! Ha, that reminds me of another one, he- he.'

'I am sure, that this night, which they had, would never be forgotten about! I will not forget it either. It must have- been an amazing night which is shared, with that one special person.'

'That singular someone, who only wants to be with you! I think about all the photographs I will never have. All the memories that can never be completed and all the time lost that can never be regained.'

'The next morning, I have to go through the same repetition over again. Something's changed slightly but not much; I must ride on the yellow wagon of pain and misery. Yet do I want to today?'

'I do not want to go after the night that I put in. I was feeling vulnerable, moody, and a little twitchy.'

'I do not feel like listening to the ramblings of my educators. Yet knowing if I do not show up at the hellhole doors, I would be asked a million questions, like why I did not show up, the next day I arrived there.'

'I guess saying that I need a mental health day is not an excuse. Then again, some can take off a week, and nothing is said about that.'

'Although for me if I miss one day, it is an amiableness of imbecility. So, Like- always I am going too dragged myself out of my bed, brush my hair, brush my teeth.'

'Grab a bra out of my dresser and slide it up on me. Today it is an adorable baby pink one with black dots, and a little bow in the middle, so sweet- like me.'

'So anyway, I am going to clasp it in the back, as my long hair falls forward while doing it.'

'Then spin a white blouse through my arms and on top of my shoulders, I will fix my collar. Button everything it up, to a point; tie it up at the bottom so it is snug to my lower ribs. Then I slide a skirt up over my body, zip and button it in the front. I will use the bathroom one last time.'

'Fix my hair for the last time, while looking into my oval bathroom mirror, which is lit from both sides. That is where I do all my makeup. I like to use a nude shade of powder, pink blush on my cheeks, and a soft eyeshadow.'

'Black mascara, I always line the inside of my eyelids too, some girls do not, and they look like a sad raccoon. I use a beautiful light pink lipstick. After all, that I am ready for my day, I must keep my perfect attendance- yeah right. So, then I bound' down over the rickety staircase.'

'While I continue walking out the door of the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams, like always I stroll down the lane of emptiness then wait in the chilled weather for the arrival of the repulsive number 9 yellow bus.'

'The ride on the bus, it is always annoying, to say the least, everybody is staring at me like always. The bus slows to a complete stop many times with its yellow and red flashing lights on and off. To pick up more of them only to drop us all off at the hellhole of shallowness.'

'My day consists of the same schedule: Homeroom, Music, Mathematics, English, Science- Biology, and Gym two days a week or Health, Lunch, History, elective of Family Consumer Sciences, that is a fancy way of saying Home Economics. Study Hall and Library classes if wanted.'

'Someone thought it would be good to play with all of our heads, so everything on that list rotates days and classes- fun, fun, and fun!'

'Yes, 180 days of hell, only 90 more to go I am counting!'

'I remember day 161 one girl a face without a name, tricked me into John Hancock-ing the freshmen hall poster with a blue pan.'

'When all names needed to be in black, big deal, that is what I thought too, I was wrong. The music teacher the one that is an asshole to me, he was the head of that project, and the yearbook it- seems' like he has to have his dirty stubby fingers in everybody's pie. Anyway, the poster was going in the yearbook at some point.'

'He called me out in front of everyone and said sing- 'One of these things is not like the other.' That song is from the show Sesame Street if you do not know.'

'Nevaeh, can you see what is different? Along with Nevaeh, do you not see what you did? Then just after saying that he said. What did you do?' Mr. DeVolcano said.

'He is contemptuously speaking down to me; he was trying to belittle my intelligence. I thought at the time, what is next, are you going to dance down the hall, while clicking your pointed-up feet together, and say- 'Nevaeh sucks, Nevaeh sucks!'

'Therefore, at that moment, I just said photocopy it, and that pissed him off; I would like to say to him to stop wasting my time.'

'Sherry drew the girl, that made the poster for our spirit week; she was upset because I ruined her artwork. I felt bad too, however, she made and new freshmen poster for the class and my name was excluded from it. Which is what everyone wanted in the first place, she was noted for her creativity, yet not me?'

'She could not even draw in my opinion. Yet she has a certain spot in the yearbook at the end of this year, for doing that new sketch poster, whatever.'

'Days like that I feel that my mind is going 1,000,000 miles an hour, visions of the past, present, and future race through my mind. It races, like a train as if I was looking out the window of the car while it is speeding down the line. I am on a track that will never end.'

'I feel that I am going to derail, from this runaway train that I am becoming. I cannot sleep at night, because of the fear inside me.'

'I feel restless, depressed, and loveless as well as not content with myself. I would have to say that my passion for life is gone; my imagination is the only thing that keeps me going.'

'I write the day's events that have gone by in my book of life of all the pastimes, while dreaming of what could have been in it, and besides what has not been in it.'

'If this does not stop, I am going to crack. I look into my mirror, and I do not see me, I see an impression of what I used to be.'

'I see my long brown hair that covers part of my face and covers my blue eyes of emotion. I see the cross around my neck that brings me confidence.'

'I hide behind a smile; I see the body in which nobody thinks is without drought flawless.'

'The bare body that is on touched in all ways, yet I tried to hide behind my makeup. I gasp at my pale skin and the look of my body.'

'I am 95 pounds, really tiny; surely there is someone that would find me attractive?'

'I wonder if I can find someone who can think for themselves. I want someone who will love me, for who I am- and not what they want me to be.'

'Most importantly, I need someone that will not use me. Is that too much to ask for?'

'Fear!'

'Anxiety is something that I have inside, it is the source of the things in which lead to distress. Not finding someone that loves me, for who I am, is some of my fears.'

'I fear the fact that I am most likely going to be alone forever. Another being that everyone that has meaning in my life is fading away from me it seems.'

'I fear not having a family by my side at all times. I have tears about the overwhelming struggle to rebuild my reputation, which has been destroyed.'

'I ask this question if I was to die tomorrow would anybody come to my wake, to see me lying there?'

'I fear what society has done to me. I fear that I have no trust in anyone or anything. I fear that my life has no meaning.'

'I fear that I will never get out of this hell.'

'I just want to start my life and get a degree in nursing someday from- 'The Conemaugh School of Nursing,' if I can make it through all of this. I do not think that is too much ask for or is it?'

'I think that if I could be left alone, with the one that I want. I could have a life; you know what I am sure of it. I fear that the towering entity will never collapse, and the demons will keep playing in my head. I fear that I will never have a social ability, to be part of the nobility of compatibility.'

'I fear that the terror will never stop in these innocent lives like mine, and they will not be saved. I fear that nobody will ever see my creativity or recognized me for the good in which I do for others. I feel like I am the only one left in this world, that I call my life.'

'All the beauty in life has been dejected, and it is all ablaze around me. Yes, I fear to be in the outside realm of things.'

'I want to scream yet no one is going to hear it. I ask- am I becoming institutionalized?'

'Help!'

'I fear the vehicles that follow behind me at night. To this very day, I still fear lightning at night, though I do love to stand in a thunderstorm while completely open to the world.'

'Of course, I know you know that about me already. I fear that the world is becoming like a bunch of androids, with no leader in which to follow.'

'Most of all I fear loneliness!'

'What is a hero?'

'To me, it is someone in my opinion who sticks up for somebody else and does not let someone else's opinions influence what they do.'

'You do not need to have anything to be one, you just need to be a true friend, with eyes that see the truth, ears that listen for what is truthfulness, and a voice that will speak up for you.'

'You know, I think all of us have a hero inside; we just need to let it speak out.'

'For instance, for me, I want him to show his brave, sweet and loving side, absolutely to someone like me, a damsel in distress!'

'What girl doesn't want that?'

'That to me is the true definition of a hero, another person that is helping someone who is unfortunately in need of comforting from another person.'

'Yes, you can have heroes in the forms idolizing human life and cartoons, but I do not recommend that you do.'

'Why would you want to they are not going to help you when you need them?'

'Always do this, do not mistake courage for wisdom; being wise in your choices, it will help you make the right choice.'

'Remember it is better to be sometimes a coward than a dead hero.'

'Make the right choice at the right time, which will please the divine hero.'

'Always help if you can!'

'Remember that your adversaries can help themselves to you at any time, so always be on the lookout for your hero, if you are a damsel in distress like me!'

Chapter: 2

Contacts with Foes

'This school year, I had to work hard, and I had to take things very seriously. As well as let, the others who are part of my hellhole society fade away into my memory, if I can.'

'I have realized, I need to get out of the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams more often.'

'Even if I feel isolated from others, I need to say goodbye to my teddy bear, and get out of the comfort zone of my pink bedroom, if I can.'

'I feel like I have something to say, yet nobody chooses to listen to my point of view.'

'The year 2009-10, has been frustrating with its substantial collecting of energy, which could not be satisfied, which left me exhausted, as I look back at the time now as it has rewound for me.'

'Besides, I have a couple more weeks to go, I hope I make it through this. This energy or lack of it did not benefit me any in establishments in the existence of life.'

'However, life is not always sunshine, unicorns, and rainbows, life keeps going long after the thrill of living is gone.'

'So, I have made music my life, the lyrics that I sing tell the story of my existence.'

'I put my words of poetry to the cords of my guitar expressions. I like to let the music move my soul to another dimension.'

'I do not think I will ever get so depressed that I start to play or like country music, I mean that I am not going to hate it.'

'However, when they start singing about their tractors that is when I am done.'

'Plus, you can be a country girl without liking that type of music.'

'Today's music for me is like sticking guitar strings into my eardrums. I do not like it; some yes, but not all.'

'Ha, I could see me rapping, yet I am to country write to do that, and squeaky.'

'So, I have also cultured myself in the keys to delights through the belief by following the beacon of motivation and inspiration.'

'Like that one night, I did when I cheated death, you have to see the light for yourself, but not like that.'

'Plus, I am not up to that day I tried that either. Just keep tight there is more you need to know, okay. So anyway, that is why I try to teach myself everything; that I can, that is if I can get my hands on it.'

'Oh yes, I am determined too. Someday, I will have my hands on him to, he- he- he!'

'Even though I go to Catholic school, they do not go into much about what is right, or what is wrong. They do not go into detail about what to believe or what not believe.'

'They do not say what you should do with someone, or what you should not do, they do not teach anything.'

'Besides, if you are a girl like me, they just let you sit, and rot in a sorry for yourself tiny room.'

'I always respected this too: 'I am the light of the world; those who follow me shall not live in darkness.' I love that quote that is one of my favorites.'

'I try to study the teachings of eternal love. I know that I do more than most in my class. Yet I just a girl, I am not perfect.'

'Therefore, I try to clean away my sins with the Holy Spirit, and it will if I have hope, that can bring countless blessings.'

'Besides, I cannot say that I have any major sins. I have not done any like that, yet I do not think anything I have done counts.'

'I try to remember that all the good things are from the divine. Worthy things come to any life that follows the light, in the heaven's there is no sun.'

"God,' is the light of the word that shines on the golden streets of the heavens. I loved reading that fact, yet the people in this school they all think I cannot read, ha.'

'However, I have read the teenage 'Bible' cover to cover in my bedroom.'

'What is more, a lot of it is recurring wording in different phrasing. Still, if you need to know something that is when it is said repeatedly, so it sticks with you.'

'That is what it is all about, doing the right thing, to have the gospel of hope, to share!'

'Nevertheless, that is not what life is all about anymore, time's change everything changes over time, perhaps, which is a good thing for me to recognize.'

'I think revelations are scary, like the moon turning the color of blood and all that.'

'I wonder if I will have to put up with all this crap until the rapture. I love- love- love, to study the alignment of the planets, and all the galaxies so that I have a guideline to the existence of my life.'

'Oui (Yes,) I have to say I see it coming someday, and I can say bonjour to all of them.'

('The end is nearing') - 'La fin est proche!' Yet they say I am not smart enough to take French in school.'

They can- 'Embrasser mon petit cul.' ('Kiss my ass.')

'You can decode that one… He- he! So, yeah- I believe that everything lines up like a big universal clock, like the one I have around my neck now, that is lost in time looking back, that you have a place at that time to remember all things past, and see why they should not be changed as destiny.'

'Although I just have to figure out when my time is going to come, that is when I'll know I belong in life, I think that is what this is going to be all about.'

'I asked, is it my end of time?'

('Is my end of time.')

'Est-ce ma fin des temps?' Oh yes, I have learned more than anyone else around this school on my own.

I know that a toxic tongue can lead to the abomination conclusion to an innocent person's existents.'

'It is just like, if I ignore the shuffling of my cards it will lead to ignorance, and discontent within a crumbling deck- do you see what I mean?'

'I am going to let my hands be my lifeline companion, and then write the existence in which I want to lead. I am not letting the hands from society write my establishment in my life's novel.'

'I try to believe that if you let, your heartbeat freely and openly with others who are trustworthy. This can be amazing, I try to refuse to let any hellhole society still my heart away, and make it play a different beat than my own. I have learned not to feel guilty for mistakes, and some actions are needed.'

'Either way, I think there is always repentance, since some things I have done are just out of spontaneous mood changes in life's analysis, like things that just happen spur of the moment.'

'I would say, always' make the right decisions that will benefit your life regardless of what is acknowledged by society.'

'I feel looking back, that you need to do what you want, what you think, and what you need. Only if you think it is the right thing to do for you, as it was for me.'

'See, with me, the choices I make will be private, and not be plastered on the walls of publicized misinformation of social networking.'

'I know you are going to ask me why, okay- for the reasons in that, I know what is written about me, and what others say about me it all can be twisted; plus used against me in non-beneficial ways.'

'So, just keep this in mind- 'Keep your face to face friends close, and your cyber friends closer.' I guess you can see that I am a fan of the 'Godfather' movies.'

'Oh, do not get me wrong, I like a good love story too, oh like something from Nicholas Sparks.'

'Despite, I do love a good romance story, like in the 'Twilight Saga!' Also, if I feel I want to pee my nightgown from being horrified, I watch something from Stephen King.'

'Though, Someday- I hope to see those movies again only with him next to me. That is the movie that keeps playing in my head.'

'I have learned to look back over my life in the spinning haste backward in time looking down at myself as I was; that interaction is not always in your regulations.'

'Whom they think you are, your name, and where you come from has a lot to do with your establishment and placement?'

'All, labeling was created for the reasons of jealousy, hatred, and inferiority.'

'Furthermore, most of the time, if not the main reason these people who are classifying you are just trying to make themselves feel more superior, in their miserable existence.'

'I try to not let this keep me down, remembering that I am my person. I am not going to fit into anybody's mold other than the one that was created for me.'

'Remembering that I am the child of the Most- High, and it is better to have a belief, then regret in the afterlife. I do not have to answer to anyone that is not worthy of my presence.'

'I have learned to always respect authority no matter if you want to or not, it will benefit me in future societies.'

'I know that humbleness, wholesomeness with confidence makes for a well-rounded person.'

'I like to say that- 'One has to develop confidence and trust in one's self, if not then one will never have confidence or trust in anybody else."

'I believe it is better not to have loved, then someone taking the dignity out of a beating heart. Plus, all good, things come after a great struggle.'

'One should not confuse lust for love, as well as love, which is not the same as in love.'

'I should no- yes?'

'I live my life by my rubrics that I have invented in my many stories to come and learn well, as I and many of my friends have contested.'

'I do this hoping that there will be comforting in my existence in society, and so well you in yours if you read a story like mine.'

'Furthermore, the girls I have advocated just being me, in away finding my place in this world, and showing them how to find theirs. I do what I think is right and making this long novel was how I did that.'

'I was summoned and remember for being something, 'Angel's in Disguise,' to a lot of young girls with this bible of several, I have made recalling all things past and forthcoming; I never would have thought this in a million years, it could help you too.'

'I believe that ignoring the confidence of the past teachings, along with modern knowledge is an outrage to life.'

'I think knowing is believing and believing is what life's all about.'

'Just like I wish, I could truly believe in his love for me, I have fallen in love with that boy, sadly to say I did not want to fall in love! I don't, I don't! Because he is something, I cannot have.'

'But I cannot help it, I just can't!'

'Why is everything, so-o frustrating, trying, and somewhat annoying to me?'

'I guess being the girl that I am; I have to have faith that it is going to happen someday.'

'It all comes down to faith with me in everything really, when I think about it. I need to get faith in him too. I know what I want.'

'I guess sometimes my faith is a little shaken at times.

However, I am just a girl, and I am never going to be flawless, I know this, but I try to believe.'

'One thing that I believe is that our culture is slipping away, mainly because of the devices in which the others hold in their hands.'

'Instead of seeing the beauty of the world which has been painted for us every day, the society chooses not to see it, I hate it!'

'I cannot talk to kids my age younger or older, it is like they have their faces smashed in their phones at every flipping time. I see them there but, it is like they're not even there.'

'Nor do they speak or look at me.'

'Yes, some speak to me, but it is nothing worth listening too.' Unless they are, the soft words from him, when he walks past me.'

'The kids in my school do not think I am worthy to talk too.'

'So, I am not on the text list, and lists of lists. Yet, my name comes up in all their fragmented and misspelled illegible talks, which they send.'

'Even when some of them talk aloud, they do not make any logical expresses to me, in like, what they are saying. Thus far, most just make fun of me, as they speak looking down at me.'

'I am not even in their little world, I am just someone they talk about- they say she did this, and she did that, along with what is she doing now.'

'I guess that is okay too, I guess it has to be, right?'

'So far, I like to think of the world like 'she' is a masterpiece, every day.'

'She has been created time and time again, for everyone's enjoyment to live on.'

'With different strokes from the master artist's paintbrush. Yet no one cares, however, if you think like me, then someday it might not be there for the taking.'

'So, look up at her, because someday she might not be there anymore. She might just die in front of you all!' 'Yet you do not care to even see that, do you?'

'I appreciate what has been created like I appreciate everyone and everything in my world. Why do they not appreciate me- is it because of them? I will comfort others; why do they comfort me?'

'I think to keep the main dwelling in life living and loving affectionately in the societies around the world; she needs someone that will take good care of her, which is what she needs, just like me! I am going to stop chatting for now.'

'Because, it is time to go home, and when I get there, I want you to take with someone. I am at home!'

~*~

Hope- 'Okay… so the house was once part of the working farm in the 1900s. As you can see from the old windmill and horse-drawn plow, sitting in the front yard.'

'Look you can see the rope swing that is hanging from the angel oak branches it is still here, after all these years.'

'I have thought about taking the rope swing down because it could be hazardous; even so, it is not like anyone is going to hang themselves using it.'

'No, it is not likely that someone could or would attach themselves to those ropes, or get themselves hooked unless it was done intentionally, with something that could loop around the wooden set.'

'Nah, that is just never going to happen around here, so why take it down it is not hurting anything.'

'Plus, Nevaeh likes to play on it when she unwinds and unrobes when she gets home from school. I say have fun, no one can see you out here.'

'Yeah, that is one less uniform; that I need to get the mud stains and whatnot out of, if she puts it up on the porch, it is not going to be ruined. She has three as of now; it keeps me working hard to keep them ready for her every day.'

'I surely do not have the money to get her anymore. She has three jackets that were $85.00 each. She has three tops, and they were $30.00 each. I got her three skirts, and they were $25.00 each.'

'She has one necktie of $10.00 for all three. Nevaeh's school tuition per semester is $1,200 that is about $65.00 a week payment.'

'But the best part of all is everything is too big for her that she where's. So, one of her outfits is about $150.00, so $150.00 x 3 is $450.00!'

'I do not buy her anything more than what is necessary. If she wants something, I tell her to work for it, as I did.'

'Let's not forget that 'Uncle Sam' has to get his share too, and my bills keep coming in. All that is not included…'

'Consequently, I am on my fixed income, I cannot waste what I do not have on her. All of the other miscellaneous things she needs, or wants too, that all adds up also.'

'Yet, she can go without; she has one pair of those things girly panties, which I wash for her Gym class twice a week, which is all she needs, and one-night top if she needs it, one pair of shorts, and one tank, and as of now three 32-A training bra.'

'Yet she has a bad habit of getting her uniforms messed up.'

'Ah, that child, she is something else.'

'Do I love her?' Questioned- Hope at that moment.'

'Ah, sure, she is all I have, and what I have is a girl that I will never understand. But- yeah, I would say that- I love her. She knows that without me saying that.'

'I don't say: 'I love you.' Even if I did, she is in her little world, to ever hear it.'

'Anyway, let me talk more about what matters, look at the windmill; yes, it is missing half of its blades. Yet it still twirls in the breeze, look over there the ancient Water Mill is still standing yet decrepit. Looking at it, how it is still turning in woe; clanking, and cracking as the giant wheel goes around.'

'You know I know how it feels; I feel the same way as it does. I would have to say, I love and hate it here, I cannot make up my mind.'

'It is probably the only thing, which I still love in my life; but it is all dead, and that is what I hate the most! I can see the treehouse that I played in as a child, which was the place I learn the differences between me being a girl and him by a boy, with my late husband.'

'That day was amazing, and it still is amazing to me even now, oh how I remember back when we were just kids.'

'The house was put together by the Janz family. The dad of that family back in the 1900s has made that treehouse for his little girl named Megan.'

'This was her spot also, back in her time. The treehouse is about 47 feet off the ground and has a swing that I was telling you about, hanging from one of those old branches.'

'From my house porch, you can see the hayfields that seem to go on for miles. That was when I held his hand for the first time, walking through them.'

'I would say where about the age of seven, time goes by so fast.'

'I remember my first date, some would call it quite bland in today's fast-moving standards, but that is just what we did back in those days.'

'We used to walk along the railroad tracks and watch the stars. With the many galaxies up above, sometimes we used to play chicken with the oncoming steam trains.'

'Dumb but fun, a lot of the time, we would lie down on them, while locking lips under the moonlight. To be a young and crazy girl like that once more!'

'My first kiss was not until date number three at the ancient tree with the swing; we would climb the tree, and sit holding hands, that was so long ago, you never forget that first kiss though.'

'Looking at it now not much has changed; the spiral steps still wrap around the trunk; the wood and rope bridge spends over 20 feet between the two old trees. It was like a little castle that was only ours when we were kids.'

'Meghan's name is scratched in the hardwood on the inside. Generally, every day at its end I sit in this antique chair and stare out the window and watch as the world goes by.'

'I think, and I think, to the point that I am probably going to end up with dementia.'

'I find myself laughing in my head for no reason, and then becoming very sad as I think about the life I had.'

'Sad to think- that we never really had much of a life and neither will Nevaeh.'

'I would give up everything to have them, to bring both backs to me.'

~*~

Nevaeh- 'I am sure, she did enough talking about me, I am sure. She probably said way too much about everything, being a boy and the girl-crazy magic obsessed young girl, that has just gone through puberty, and it is making me hormonal.'

'While at least you now can see what she is like, and why some things in my life are the way there are… but that is okay, I am blessed with what I have, and I have to be okay, with what I do not have.'

'So anyway, if I think back on it, I do remember some bus rides that I enjoyed.'

'Back in the days when all cell phones had black and white screens. When I was about ten years old… back in my, 'Glory days.'

'I remember his name was Kris Douglas; their family lived down the lane, and every day I looked forward to getting on the bus just so we could have time together. We would talk about what was new in our lives.'

'We had so much in common, yet both of us were too young to be together. We just enjoyed one another's company.'

'However, the blackbird clan could not stand to see us gather just as friends. So just like that, that was the end of our time riding on the bus together.'

'To this very day we cannot be seen together or have conversations it is forbidden by the tower and the sisters. We were just friends, now where are not even that.'

'Just like all of them, I am forbidden to even look at the boy I am in love with. Yes, even up until now I still wonder if our relationship would have bloomed, if it had not been for these circumstances. Just like I wonder if, this one with him will work out someday.'

'Will… it?'

'I have no clue!'

'Let us not forget the fact I had lost another person who cared about me. This is one reason, why I must ride on a bus of misery.'

‘This is just one part of the reasons, why I live on the edge of the lives summit of dizzying heights.'

'I feel that my life would not have to be like this for me as it is now. It is all because of one bitch that needs to feel triumphant, no it is not whom you are thinking it is. It is someone else.'

'Hope is not that bad; I know she does not pamper my butt, no pun intended. However, she is not my main pain in the ass; trust me others are far worse at the hellhole.'

'Kris, what do you think about Nevaeh?'

‘What can I say I knew- Nevaeh Natalie; she was a nice and polite girl. Said, Kris Douglas.'

'Then he said, however, I do not bother with her much anymore, from what is known about her. You know her not being into guys and all and has problems. I thought she liked me?'

'Do not get me wrong, I think it is okay for two people that love one another to be together regardless of their gender selection.'

'On the other hand, once you start playing around with juveniles that is when I draw the line. That is just pathetically wrong, disturbing, and overall revolting what she does with them. Ava made it very clear to me that I should run.'

'Run the other direction when I see her, and to just stay away from her altogether, because she has a sick twisted mind.'

'That she likes to engage in revolting sexual activities with little girls.’ That was enough for me to say: 'No!' I do not want to be bothered with her at all!'

~*~

Nevaeh- 'So, do you remember your childhood? Because I struggle too with parts of the mine. Mostly I have blocked out entire portions of my life out of my mind. I believe that I was living my life in the past on autopilot to keep from going insane.'

'The past, I recall some good times. However, I remember more corrupt, wicked, and evil times in my existence.'

'The grandmother and my sister's evil little clans were standing from day one.'

'All the days' go back to events when I held hands with the relations in the community and was free of the weights of humanity.'

'Everything that does not work out in my life is the undertakings of the tower I call my grandmother this over the card, in magic showing me, she is standing in my way of having the life I want to have.'

-Anyways-

'Do you remember your third, grade class and the kids that were associated? I have a class photo; however, I could not put names to all the faces. Looking back, all the students that were in my life now, was part of my life back then.'

'However, it seemed as if cinder-blocks were blocking me from the others along with bars on the doors. With the only escapes, options being the electric chair or hanging, that is the way it seemed to me, and it still does!'

'I still do not have any selection in the matter; I was left to fade away in my cellblock of solitary confinement. So that the tower could go along making her mouth run rampant about me, in her processes of her, attempt to segregate me from everyone. A heinous plan that took fourteen years to be known by everyone but myself. The only thing I remember about third grade was recess.'

-And-

'I remember walking along a concrete tarmac of loneliness day in and day out. With the only joy in this land being the swings, which made me feel untroubled as a bird that is soaring. I could fly through the air without a care.'

'While having the breeze rushing through my hair and up my skirt, yes it was magical, even if I knew at that point I had a hidden gift of being magical, and found my first wand, that I played with under the covers while reading 14-century witchcraft.'

'Magical until I was ripped out of my daze of flying, by a stone that smacked my face so hard my vision blurred. I was shot down, out of my flight by Andy Sandio I had blood running down my face.'

'I fail to the ground with broken wings. I ran to the nearest adult supervision. I was screaming from the agony of the gash down the side of my face.'

'Also, the bones in my arm where moving around out of place, and not as they should. Which reminds me I got a pink arm cast back then, and no one put their names on it!' 'Yet the teacher Mrs. Ellsworth did not give two shits about the matter.'

'If you would have given him the swing this would not have happened.' She said.

'That is all I remember about that day. Furthermore, that brings to mind she watched me like a hawk, and the others they could do no wrong.'

'They were all that way with me only. She was one of those- Teacher Support Specialists.'

'So-called expert… yeah- right, expert of nothing as far as I am concerned. She did nothing for me, other than making my label worse.'

'Nevertheless, she thought at the time she had total power over, what I could and could not do; it is humorous to me how my teachers can be the blame, as to why I was a child did not interact with others my age. Just- think about that. So, what kind of picture do you see developing?'

'I remember what I saw, so did they; I would like to say to them, do not try to pass that all off as if I was the one that is the blame.'

'No!'

'It was yours, not mine! All the days just kept going in repetition like that, so I just tuned them all out, until I got back to the house of lost and lonely dreams, where all I did was think about the day's events that to place throughout those seven hours that day.'

~*~

(Present time)

Nevaeh- 'I am coming home from another long day from the hellhole, I just want to be by myself, I want to be alone!'

'However, as always, I opened the door to be greeted by several questions that rape my ears like nails on the classroom chalkboards, then our conversation starts.'

'Certainly, with the same questions that are asked of me every day, I come home. Do not get me wrong Hope is a sweet- considerate lady. However, I just want to have some alone time.'

'Likewise, I do not think she realizes that she asks the same questions, day in and day out.

'So how was your day at school? Is there anyone in your life yet that you want to tell me about? So, is there anyone, that captures your interest?' Said, Hope.

~*~

Nevaeh- 'The same as always.'

-'Yes and no!'

'What does that mean?' Said, Hope

'What do you think that means? If you do not know then I surely don't.' Replied, Nevaeh.

'So, what did you do today?' Questioned Hope, along with asking.

'Doing your laundry and mine along with all the other household chores, if you must know.'

'It sounds like so much fun! And, no, I did not need to know.' Said, Nevaeh.

'Okay then, Ms. sarcasm!' Said, Hope.

'Do you want me to make you something to eat Nevaeh, or are you just going up to your room and mope?'

'I am not hungry, and I do not mope, and yes, I am going to my room.' Nevaeh said in a sighing breath.

'Whatever, it is your decision honey.' Said, Hope.

'Maybe, I will go for a walk later.' Nevaeh said while walking up the staircase.

'Okay then, Ms. sarcasm!' Said, Hope.

'Do you want me to make you something to eat Nevaeh, or are you just going up to your room and mope?'

'I am not hungry, and I do not mope, and yes, I am going to my room.' Nevaeh said in a sighing breath.

'Whatever, it is your decision honey.' Said, Hope.

'Maybe I will go for a walk later.' Nevaeh said while walking up the staircase. Sure, be back home by 10:00 pm. Said, Hope, shouting from the foyer. Then Nevaeh's bedroom door slams shut!

~*~

Hope Huber- 'One-minute I am proud of Nevaeh and the next not so much. She needs to get out more and find a boyfriend… or any friends for that matter. She is a good kid; she is just different from most of her age. I worry about her! Then, on the other hand, I am not her mother. As a result, what can I do?'

'I am almost sure that she will be fine; she just needs to be more social and be nicer to people. Nevaeh needs to stop living her life in high gear. She is so thin, yet- I cannot get her to eat anything. I do not know how she keeps going! She hardly sleeps at night.'

'All she wants to do is sit in her room and cry, and stare at the computer walls on her old laptop, I try not to temper; I have too much work to do here in the homestead.'

'Hey, if she wants to sob her life away then- so be it. Someday she just might have something that she needs to cry about, because, I do not know how much more of her moods; I want to take here in this house! She can go and live with the girl she plays with.'

Chapter: 3

Eyes Are on Me

'The blackbird clan follows me everywhere I go. Not always in human form… I cannot seem to shake them away from me, yet they're always shaking me. Their black magic surrounds me, and it strangles the life out of my fragile body.'

'They make it their life's mission to hassle me. As well, I like to know what I am doing at all times so that they can terminate any future contacts with relations.'

'I hope that my shackles will loosen; the words have crucified me in every way and form. I guess that my bloodshed for life is a victory and will nurture another life someday.'

'Why?'

'Because that is what the tower asks of them to do.

If I wave at someone, they know about it. If I talk to someone, they get to him or her.'

'Plus, voice more lies about me to them. If I need something or someone, they make sure that I do not get it. It is enough to drive any person nuts. I cannot seem to illustrate a way to show the society what the hell is going on.'

'It is nerve-racking, to say the least. It is so hard to prove that some bastards are stalking you if you are the one that is marked for life.'

'Why?'

'Because most of the time they make it as if you are the one that is psycho. In addition to making, you look like you are desperate for affection to everyone and anyone that is in your civilization.'

'Sometimes, I get love notes. When I open, my locker door they are shoved in there through the top vent, from him I would have to say; either that or someone is just trying to be mean and play tricks on me.'

'I kept them all anyway. He is the only boy, I what attention and affection from... that I truly want, so everyone else they all can just fade away. Just like the sisters, for example, they all say that I am desperate for anyone.'

'Meanwhile, there are the ones that I think need consistent attention, they have to have it, or they feel insignificant in their influence and we all know what disapproval leads into.'

'I ask why-why must I be forbidden to love. Forbidden to lust, and forbidden to touch anyone that I desire? Is it all because of one higher power is known as the tower and her clan of bullies?'

(Thinking back)

'I still have that photo that you gave me years ago, of you. Do you remember? We were young at the time, but recall that we were to gather, sitting next to one another. I remember the first time we met too, it was in music class, and I want to say you were in fifth grade.'

'Do you remember?'

'I knew you were the one for me back then! I was too shy to say how I felt about you; I should have said; yet could I have said? Would you have- said 'yes,' or is it meant to be in the future?'

'I would have loved to have been with you all those days if only it could have been.'

'We started as friends we made memo depictions on the steamed windows of the yellow carriage, while our little faces lit up with splendor when we sat together, and as more than friends, however yet not a couple... you were with your girlfriend.'

'I wanted to get to know your friends too, yet that did not happen either.'

'Oh, I remember on the school trips, I sat behind you just hoping that I could talk to you, however, that was almost impossible, forbidden it seemed, by the others that were around us at the time.'

'I remember you used to look back at me... being playful and a little silly with your friends.'

'Yet, I just gaze, and did not say anything; it is like I forgot how to speak when around you.'

'I am sorry, you give me butterflies, yet at least I finally got enough bravery to speak to you to me, it is like time has stood still with you, if you let it with me it all could be.'

'We were still together then; we could be in the future, yet closer than ever before. We can remember some of the past, which was good. Forget what was not.

We could start a new trip together. I want you in my book of life forever!'

'All I have is the fantasy of you, and it is like a slow-motion movie, this plays in my mind when my eyes are closed.'

'I can see us we run off together out in the open, and then finely hug, in that golden field, that we found as we were on your 4wheeler mudding together.'

'At that very time, we get off and walk to our spot, then together our bodies embrace one another at last. I have kept that dream for years.'

'Yes, don't let the eyeliner and perfume fool you. I am the type of girl that can go from, makeup to mud in three seconds flat!'

'To me, it is extremely romantic, and we kiss passionately, but that is all the farther we get, the film rips, and the screen turns black. My eyes open and you're no longer there, I am locked back up into real life, but hoping for the day that the tower collapses; So that we can finally be together, however not in fantasy.'

'My honey, the secret message lies in the combinations of all the pieces. Oh, how I would like to let you know that the tower is nothing but a legend of fantasy.'

'However, that would not be so. There is a missing piece to my puzzle, but your photograph fits in the slot. You can be the one to unlock the chains, and free me from my imprisonment of being locked in the tower's donjon; do you see the picture I have; would you want it?'

'We can escape and travel upon the white horse and ride into magnificent freedom, with the many journeys that follow looking into the sunset as a united duo, my cowgirl boots and all… that I can finally wear that day and all day after.'

'With new independence to love, we will see the tower as she is left behind to wither away, and crumble to dust in the background along with the clans in 'The Land of Many Steeples.''

(Present time)

'Do you know what it is like to hear rumors about you, yet you cannot do anything about them because they want to believe all of them?'

'Or they have to?'

'Do you know what it is like to hurt?'

'Do you know what it is like to be hated?'

'Do you know what it is like not to be able to be friends or have a relationship, with the ones that should be your friends?'

'Do you know what it is like not being able to talk to people, to see people, to go out?'

'Do you have to look over your back, and have to double-check your thinking, before doing what it is you want so that someone does not get you in trouble for something that you never did?'

'I do not even do anything, yet they say in this town and all around that, I did.'

'Do you know what it is like to be rejected, every single time you try to find what it is you are looking for?'

'If so, you are so like me… that it is not even funny! I find it to be said that people do not see me. They only see the picture of me of what they hear.'

'Why does 'God' not punish these people for what they do to me?'

'Why does 'God' let this keep going on, all this time? Why do they have so much power over everyone's thinking- about me?'

'Why is it I am a good person and get this, and there immoral, and they keep going, doing what they do.'

'Why can they not see that? Walking down the hellhole's halls, on one of these days that run together, he made his eyes lock in with mine, many times before but never like this. I knew of him and his ranking stature in the society.'

'He would be perfect for me. I know that there is not a snowball's chance in hell that we would ever be together.' 'Just like he must act like I do not exist in his surroundings, and that he does not even care about me.

Saying to his friends- 'That it is never- ever going to happen."

'Nevertheless, I do not care anymore; in all honesty. If he wants his friends over me then just go.'

'But I hope you see the mistake you have made!' Yet I cannot stop finding Chiaz Naztherth interesting and intriguing.'

'However, I know that every time I see Chiaz I am blushing, and he makes me feel uneasy, yet in a good way. Yet I know to not even try.'

'After a while, caring goes away, with everything. Then again, with Alissa, there is no way we could even look at one another.'

'The school year was about to come to an end, so… I did not need the drama of boys, and I still had Lily. Yet I must lose everything, someone makes sure of that!'

'It was said that Lily Anderson could not take any more teasing, bullying, violation and over-all harassment from the sisters and clan.'

'So, she ran down one of the schools many staircases, right through a glass pane window, three stories down to her death. I guess that she saw the bright light and stared into the eyes of the sun.'

'Then she must have preferred to follow the tunneling stream of light that led upward beyond the clouds, to the getaways to the infinite existence. Did she decide to fall from the dizzying height, and leave me behind?'

'I do not believe that she did, the blue glass shards are glittering around her, and for some reason even in her death; she has the schools demeaning colors all around her.'

'The red is the blood she splattered, blue for all the glass spikes that are sticking out of her figure, and the white is her nude body jackknifed in the middle.'

'Yes, in its all-natural almost stage diving pose. She will always be labeled, just like me. Branded for what she was not and misunderstood for who she was.'

'She just laid in the parking lot of the hellhole, without anybody even caring or knowing what happened. Because she was a reject just like me, we had one another and that was it.'

'The only covering on her little body being the ribbons that were in her sweet pigtail hair, this was a horrific sight. Lily, she was all cut up and covered with her bodily fluids.'

'This leads me to think that the sisters had something to do with this, and they have taken it way too far this time. Yet it is a mystery to everyone else?'

'Did Adriane and her clan push her to her death, or did she drive her to the point of no return?'

'I guess it will never be known! The only one that did know what happens will never speak again, so I thought.'

'All bullies take by way of forces, it is all they think about, and all they know. You can most definitely get busy existing or get busy becoming drained out until you are dead - that's damn right.'

'I remember saying to Ava, I know it was you and your clan in the locker room the next day in the showers.'

'Oh, that's funny, you're going to look funnier sucking on my p*ssy without any teeth.' Ava said.

‘Shut up you- dumb shit.’ Was said by others in the class along with others like obscenities.

'At the same time, she was groping my breast and twisting my nipple until it was black and blue.'

‘Do not screw with me retard because I will rape and ravish the shit out of you!’

'It does not matter regardless, it is all about what they want to have, and what they can take from you. So, you give and give them whatever they want.'

'Then they grab ahold of your body and suck the life out of you until you turn blue. Lily’s story is forever unknown to everyone, and it was covered up and left to be forgotten.'

'Once again, the stature and popularity get some individuals out of everything including manslaughter.'

'The days continued without anybody even bringing up her name, even though, it was known by everyone. It is depressing to think, that there were only ten more days in the year until we were all free.'

'That is why that upcoming summer, I sit in the graveyard with her. I knew I did not have anything else to do really. All these years I said this is true love?'

'However, to this day, I do not know if love is real or just a state of mind; my love life can take place because of a past ghost that haunts me like the one that hunted Lily.'

'How do you love something that really cannot be shown to everyone that they love you back?'

'I still have her heart-shaped nickels around my nick that she gives’ me, I will wear it forever. Love is not loving unless it is shown to the world- right?'

'Is love just getting it on, or is it about being soul mates?' 'Why is love so hard to find if you are like me?'

'It makes me think; like I believe when someone passes on that their soul hovers over their body for a half-hour.'

'While they see the guiding light, although their useless human figure chills, this is when they obtain your spiritual frame.'

'I have an understanding that you can hear everybody's conversations after you pass. I am sure that Lily did, she knows that I was the only one that cared about her human life.'

'However, her spirits remain with me as I see her in front of me with her newly formed wings, which are going to take her on the journey home.'

'Yet the lifeless torso remains with us, the new spirit is felt, but not spoken. I try to ignore the blackbird clan and their siblings as much as possible, and what is said and known by others.'

'Yes, although difficult, I will not let them ruin my every day, or anyone else is for that matter.'

'It's an awful thing to live in fear, Lily knew it all too well, so do I! I look at the world that has been created for my day in and day out, and I think to myself how I cannot enjoy what has been created for me, yet the world is looking more and bleaker.'

'Yet, just because somebody else, who is ignorant of the life and bliss, does not mean that, I need to let them try to take the bliss away from me. I have to keep going, yet it is hard.'

'Yes, I have meltdowns… that is life, but if we have hope, it will all work out. The keys that I have learned in the ones who are trying to steal your joy do not make it obvious to them that you are ignoring them.'

'I am always be- friendly and have a 'How are you doing' kind of attitude, and just walk away. If you see them coming down the hall… go the other direction.'

'Then again, in my case, I have a towering entity that follows me everywhere I go. Yes, I try to ignore this too, and put a smile on my face, even though it is difficult.'

'Nevertheless, I remember that all creation crumbles at some point in time. So, I remember that there is hope for any situation even if someone or something is towering over me.'

'Tip- remember that your stalker's plans might backfire and may work against them in many situations… this can happen. Like- I said just because it is thrilling to them now, they will have consequences to face in the future.'

'However, they do not realize that at the time. Never fall to their level, and fight back in a non-beneficial way, it just makes more drama, and makes life more difficult than need be.'

'The saying- 'That sticks, and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you.' It is a complete lie the words scar just as much as having broken bones and cuts.'

'But- you have to listen to your own words, and not what somebody else's words telling you what to do or think. In other words, you have to have confidence in what you tell yourself every day, rather than someone else's negative conversations.'

'So, I have learned even though it is difficult, and I do not fit into most groups, that being around others at all times is a good thing, for example, if I am leaving a class or need to be at a place at a certain time. I try to be with as many groupings of other people as possible so that I feel safe and comfortable.'

'There is power in numbers, so I tried to join in with as many groupings as possible. Nevertheless- remember to only join groupings that are trustworthy so they cannot gang up on you.'

'Do not always be so trusting of people. Do not feel bad by asking for help, or telling on a situation that happened, in your hellhole situation, for there is no shame in asking questions or looking for help from a higher authority.'

'However, like most times in my situation, the higher authority does not give a shit about you or me. This is sad, but you have to find someone or something in which you have confidence in so, that you have a way to release your stresses and worries.'

'All I have to do is think about the good that I have in my life like for example, I have a caretaker, which truly loves me, even if she does not know how to express it in the right ways. I understand that she will always be there for me.'

'I have a roof over my head, and I have shelter, even though it is not one of the nicest structures in 'The Land of Many Steeples,' it is still a place where I can call home.'

'Home to me is more than just a box of sticks. I have to remember that, I am getting an education and am living in a country, which is free.'

'I know that there are chains that drag me away from my fellow peers, and after graduation, I can make my keys, free my destiny, and have the higher divine power authority be in control. The chains on me will be lengthened or let go completely.'

'Yet, I have three more years… help me!'

'Yes, I would have to say that I am very grateful and blessed for what I have in my life.'

'On the other hand, I still feel that some things are missing; for example, I would like to find love and compassion for someone who is my age.'

'I would like to have the experiences that others my age has in their lives.'

'Maybe I had it, and now she is in the ground, or maybe they're out there somewhere and I have not found them?'

'Maybe someone will find me, do you think so?'

'Also, I would not like to feel as if I am not being tied down by a higher power authority such as the tower, and the blackbird clan and their bloodcurdling sisters.'

'I feel that Lily Anderson is now my Guardian Angel!'

~*~

Lily- 'The feelings I have had were more intense than anyone could imagine.'

'Some of them just hurt, and some of them hurt so well. Yet the worst was only with her when I was alive.'

'I am happy to dye to be away from the pain of life. When I was alive as a young girl, I reason with myself drawing in a breath and letting it go slowly.'

'I cannot remember whom I was, back then, besides looking back into the depths of my mind, I can see that she was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and I was the prey.'

'Will you do pay for your sins, yet I never did any wrong in my life. Yet she is enduring, and she played with my brain when I was there and everything else, and the visions or so real even now, but are they illusions or something more?'

'The sisters tied up my thoughts, yet I only wanted to be with Nevaeh, but is it all a waste? It is enough to drive you out of your mind; my mind was not blameless the day I dyed.'

'You know that I cannot say that I have any regrets, for not being on earth. Also, I cannot say I have any regrets about loving her.'

'The only regret I have is not spending my whole life with her. Nevertheless, at that time, I could only do so much. I was the pray, but I see it as more like being scarred for life.' 'Though back then I was praying to get away from her in any way possible. If I could only talk to myself back, then… you know it comes around in time.'

'She was the one that was going to take me to places, and give me expressions that could not be expressed or had with any other girl. To this day, I am not sure what to make of my own story, because it is never going to be easy for me to explain.'

'What was in the past is in the past, and I do not care anymore of what is in my future. What I have lived for was a dream that was never going to be, a dream that burnt me out, and I will arise from the ashes someday. You know that some of these times sadden me even more now.'

'Knowing that all the coldness, that I am feeling was me dying inside, I can close my spiritual eyes and all I have are photographic snapshots in my mind that show my short life hissing by, it was ripped away from my grasping hands.' 'Just like that last hug Nevaeh gave to me when she has pulled away in tears when she saw me lying nude on the ground in my blood, I was dying in her arms, and I did.'

'The last words I said weakly muttering. 'Nevaeh don't forget about me.'

'Never,' she said.

'While holding me with my limp body on her lap as she sat on the ground next to my glass, blood, her uniform and all. She was the only one that cared about a reject like me.'

Chapter: 4

Part: 1

First Visions of Emotions

'The PEOPLE, SCHOOL, EVERYONE, and EVERYTHING is so FAKE AND GAY.'

'I shrieked, at the top of my voice fingers outspread and frozen in fear, unlike ever before in my young life; being the gentle, sweet, and shy girl that I am.'

'Besides always too timid to have a voice, to stand up for me, and forced not too, by masters.'

Amidst my thoughts racing ridiculously, 'I feel that it is all just another way for the 'SOCIETY' to make me feel inferior, they think, they are so 'SUPERIOR' to me, and who I am to them.'

'Nonetheless, every day of my life, I have felt like I have been drowning in a pool, with weights attached to my ankles.'

'Like, of course, there is no way for me to escape the chains, that are holding me down.'

'The one and only person, that holds the key to my freedom: WILL NEVER LET ME GO, it's like there within me, and have been deep inside me!'

'I now live in this small dull town for too damn long. It is an UNSYMPATHETIC, obscure, lonely, totally depressed and depressing place, for any teenage girl to be, most defiantly if you're a girl like me.'

'All these streets surrounding me are covered with filth and born in the hills of middle western Pennsylvania mentalities of slow-talking and deep heritages, and beliefs, that don't operate me as a soul lost and lingering within the streets and halls.'

'My old town was ultimately left behind when the municipality neighboring made the alterations to the main roads; just to save five minutes of commuting, through this countryside village. Now my town sits on one side of that highway.'

'Just like a dead carcass to the rest of the world, which rushes by. What is sullen about this is that it is a historic town, with some immeasurable old monuments, and landmarks.'

'However, the others I see downright neglect what is here, just like me, it seems. Other than me, no one cares. Yet I care about all the little things.'

'I am so attached to all these trivial things as if they are a part of me. It disheartens me to see anything go away from me.'

'It's a community where the litter blows and bisects the road, like the tumble-wheats of the yore.'

'Furthermore, if you do not look where you are going, you will absolutely, fall in our trip, in one of the many potholes or heaved up bumps in the pavement, or have an evacuated structure masonry descending on your head.'

'Merely one foolproof way of simplifying the appearance of this ghost town.'

'There are still some reminders of the glory days when you glance around.'

'Like the town clock, that is evaporated black that has chipped enamel; it seems that it is always missing a few light bulbs.'

'The timepiece only has time pointing hands on the one side, and it nevermore shows the right time of day.'

'The same can be assumed for the neon signs on the mom and pop shops, which flicker at night as if they're in agonizing PAIN.'

'Why? To me is a question that is asked frequently.'

'It is all over negligence!'

I get the sense and feeling most of the time, as they must prepare when looking around here at night.'

'The streetlamps do not all work, as they should the glass in them are cracked.'

'The parking meters are always jammed, or just completely broken off their posts altogether.'

'The same can be said, for the town sign that titles this area. It is not even here anymore as it should be now moved to the town square or shortage of a park.'

'The town is nameless, yet not it lost their valid names, but the post is all that is left behind. Yet, I call this town- 'McAnulty' or 'The Land of Many Steeples,' as I like to call it.'

'Simply look around from a high place, you'll see why.'

'The red brick roads have been covered over yet not all, along with the tram tracks underneath.'

'Now covered over with lumpy tar patches. I think it stripped away the beauty of the postcard former boom town.'

'Don't you think so?'

'I mean just look at the plywood that is covering over the windows of: 'The Bayard Hotel.' It seems like every other building is falling around me and made into a parking lot.'

'No one cares, that it is happening. Yes, falling apart just like me!'

'Yeah, I have no postcard envy- about this place!'

'Sometimes, I walk along the railroad tracks. Which goes throughout this land, which truly has been forgotten about. Back to my home 'The Dwelling of Lost and Lonely Dreams,' as I call yet others would call this the estate, of my caretaker.'

'This is one of the places that consume my every moment of every day when I not sitting in the hellhole- alias I give to going to high school.'

'Yes, that is what I call the establishment, the hellhole! Here in this rural town, I sometimes do not think there is intelligent life, most are red-nick, gypsy trach, brainwashed farm-like simpleton's, that forget they fall off a boat too to be here, locked in redwing- catholic purgatories nevertheless still thinking their good Christians and people, blasting their guns into

Outerspace, and showing flags of demanding hate and selecting foes, when you are the bad one, for think you can't be anything more than the same shade of gray, into Outerspace when you are the bad one.'

'Why do I think this? I lived it!'

'Will because the only thoughts that go on in their minds are who is going out with whom, or media, evidence more signs.

'And the simple questions of- With. Who? What. When. And Where. Including with whom, of what is 'sucking' or 'freaking."

'In my age group, it seems all they want to know, is if they are dating, faking, or taken. Like, sucking face, sucking off, sucking on, sucking it, sucking at it, freaked up, freaked off, freaking up or even up freaked.'

'As well as if, they are gay, straight or whom they're making a baby- without making the baby, with some boy, they never know. for some this is okay and others not.'

'I like to say, that this sweet old town has become more like a wild habitation over time of animals.'

'Where the guy's faces look as if smashed by a frying pan and have not made caveman standards, a place- where the libido is the only part of the brain that is not dead. 'Where the dresses, toilettes go up, the pants, panties go down, and everything goes in the HOLE.'

'You know what I mean right? You can't have a girlfriend or your gay, were you can't talk to a boy or you're laying him, or taking him away, or have a friend or a buddy over paranoia.'

'Where seeing someone your age is harassment, and you'll never- ever know them, or its stocking, and touching a hand is now statutory rape.'

'It is an inhabitant or natural selection; everyone knows your name or your slur replacing it.'

'However, they all do not even care you exist in life at all. 'Turley, I have my coffin color chosen now.'

'It's occupant's main concerns in their existence of life are the status updates, they are getting from everyone they think they know, on their cell phones, laptops, and other networking connections.'

'All these kids have to contend one way or another. It is like the most important part of their day- surely it is. As for me, I thought I could, care less about what other people SAY, DO, and THINK.'

'That I am my person... that does her own thing to go agents the normal, yet I was never-ever normal.'

'I will not let any devices roll my life.'

'That this is the problem with my generation. Like they have their heads up their ASS as if it is a top hat, and they cannot see what is going on around them.'

('I wanted so hard to be just like them.')

'Nevertheless, they are not seeing what they need to see.'

'Stop being so naive about what is going on all around you!'

('I understand this now, I didn't them.')

'Here are some things, I see on weekdays in my week. These days consist of me having to ride on these disgusting yellow school buses, with their STICKY FLOORS and RIPPED UP SEATS while having everyone; staring at me with simple smiles on his or her faces, the bus is transporting all of us to the hellhole of a school.'

'Oh my, I have to endure this every day, other than Saturday and Sunday.'

'This is my existence in life?'

'It is all repetition constantly.'

~*~

'It is, Saturday, I am in my room like most of the day I am working around the house helping out, what I can.'

'Then it ends...'

'Sunday, it is going church- not loving the idea, yet I demanded to go, homework; shower earlier than on other days, and off to bed early at 8 P.M.'

'Like the day before it ends.'

'About that time every night, that is when I put on my favorite pink nighty, which I remove when I am under my cozy bed covers and comforter.'

'Always making sure, I am with my teddy bear and naturally, I am safe from all of them at least until morning comes.'

(Daybreak Monday morning)

'The lights flash on the bus, and I swear the faces are pressed agents the windows looking at me as if I am gifted and soon to be bleeding offering to the bullies.'

'Then when on the school bus, I sit and watch these poor innocent kids like me, as they are harassed myself included in it all, yes picked on constantly; as if they are reigning towers over us like the four sisters that live up the way from me, we are their victims on the bus and at school.'

'They smash our faces into the crud covered floor until the words no longer hurt.'

'With the higher authority bus drivers and teachers of trusted doing nothing to STOP what is going on with us, most of the time they're just as corrupt. Yet it is mostly me that is in the line of their rage.'

'They the higher authority, in this case, the bus driver, she chooses to look away! Then after the fact, at school, they ask these feeble-minded questions.'

'What did you do?'

-And-

'Why are you there then?'

-And-

'Leave them strictly alone.'

'No explanations on my part stand, they already know- I was the bad girl.' This is said, with a hand in my little face; like do not speak.

'Why should it matter… what we did or did not do when we did nothing wrong?'

'No one is guiltless.'

'If there is BLOOD, and my tears, and the teddy bear that makes me feel safe, and pencells and books falling onto the floor it really should not matter either way.'

'Am I right- I think so? Then again, I have the developments of a girl that is on seven years of age, so they say.'

'You know I believe, most of the time, I along with some others we do not do anything to provoke the persistent bullying; in which we all tolerate.'

'It is just so upsetting to me; knowing that I cannot do anything to stop what is going on, and all I can do is squeeze my teddy bear in a strong hugging embrace.'

'Why? Because- If I would help them or even try to help myself… then, like I would have to endure more things that they do even more then I do already.'

'I have enough shit to deal with; I do not need it anymore. I just keep silent. Furthermore- 'What can I do?' You know, I have come to the realization there is nothing I can do.'

'Exceptionally if you are a girl or miss just like me.'

'I do not have the ranking or the power to do what most would be able to do.'

'Do you comprehend what I am telling you or no? I have come to believe that if you comfort others you get nothing but grief, depression, sadness, anxiety, and pain.'

'Sorrowfully, I have discovered this one thing the hard way!'

'Like most lessons in my life, not always by choice either.'

'Don't me not forget to mention, if you help or try to care about someone that is bullied that is way down on the crap list, you help then you are going down with him or her like the 'Titanic' you know the ship hitting an iceberg thing, and you know that you do not have a lifeboat or a way out, once you start going down with it.'

'I am observantly at the lowest point, you see. I am so low, down on the list, that in the ranking levels of notoriety, I will never receive back up. It is all part of life's vicious circle of suffering, agony, misery, and torment.'

'That makes them feel more attractive, stylish, fashionable, and popular, and satisfied in their life, I presume. I do try to find within everyone peace all the things that make them all of those things.'

'I try, to love them for who they are, and not what they are.'

'I do, I care about every person.'

'I do try, but what has it gotten me… other than a broken heart.'

(At school just like every day or any day)

'At school, all these days, I have to sit in this hellhole! Where the only Independence, freedom, emancipation, and privilege I have would be- the color, shade, and intensity, pattern, of my socks and the color, tone, and brightness of my fingernails.'

'I feel, and I am just like a uniformed little robot, overreacting at times, or like someone that has Dementia lost in bewilderment.'

'I have to sit here and do as they tell me to do. I cannot bloody stand this!'

'I want to uproot my long HAIR OUT, more than I do over tensions, strains, and struggles, with my fingers, while I am twirling it with my left hand; and tapping my fingers with the other as I fidget.'

'At the same time, out of anxiety biting on my fingernails on the right hand at times when not tapping the seconds away. All at the same time I am, being isolated in a 'STORAGE CLOSET' that they call a classroom for most of the day.'

'I ask why?'

'Why do I need to listen to all this mindlessness, and nonsense, rubbish, garbage, stupidity, and foolishness that WILL NOT have any purpose in my life at all!'

'Aw-gr! my hand's clinch.'

'My God, why?'

'This what I said, under my breath, it is a master's stroke proficiency of wonder to you that I am not retarded, backward, slow, special needs, yet you think that is so don't you.'

'Those that have said, being a high school freshman, is supposed to be the most fabulous, likewise most prominent years of your life. like, you know what they are wrong and unwise!'

'Being a fourteen-year-old girl, you have your ranking, your status, as a place in society, community, and culture.'

'For instance, you have your 'Preps, Jocks, and Nerds, Horny Bandies,' as you do in any school in the 'United States of America' what is so intriguing about me is that I do not seem to fit into any of these categories, or my I do and it did not seize me to mind?'

'I hypothesize that I am not snobby and stuck up enough to be in the preppy girl's group ever, or that stupid; yet not judging.'

'Um like, I am you know that shaking my ass along with pom-poms is just not my thing.'

'Neither do they want me to be around them doing all that, as I would? Not to say that I have not tried out to no avail.'

'Then there are these boys like alpha male chauvinistic pigs in a habitation of their own, lolling their loins, to all the damsels that will gaze, slang would call them 'Jocks' they are just a grouping of boys that have no life, other than sweaty stinky sports; and playing with balls others and their own.'

'All they do is try to get with many different girls every night, and play patty cake in the day, like most in school do, instead of studying. 'You know what I mean, and I think you do.' 'That is GROSS… yes?'

(Your reply here, I'll wait.)

I well sit here incapacitated, damaged, and undermined in a catatonic state, as I am said to do by kids and teachers alike in class and at the school.'

'Nonetheless, I respect myself more than that, but it is getting harder to regardless. If that is what it takes to be popular, I do not want it.'

'These types of guys just are not worthy of me I suppose, yet I can help but wonder what it would be like to be under one, as all these girls have, and brag to me about experiencing, mocking and rubbing it into my face.'

'The other girls can have them all they want, and you know they do, and I don't.'

'I miss out on it all!'

'Then lastly, 'Nerds and Horny Bandies;' a tragic and pathetic group of creatures that are so misunderstood. Yet still, higher up than me.'

'Really through no fault of their own there just horndog creeps. Most of the time, it is just the way they all are- like being gay, and not what they choose to be. Just like most of us out there, I get it.'

'You know I am not even on that list either, maybe it is over asexuality I have.'

'As for me- and my category, I would have to say that I am in the 'Rejected classification- or as I like to say equals (=) part of the (LGBT) lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (often used to encompass any sexual orientations or gender identities that do not correspond to heterosexual norms.) I am and misunderstood,' 'Reject, know to me as and (=)' ...and over is what they call 'SPED.' (Special Education) without needed to be it is all over not having a voice as being a child, and as a child I am overruled.'

1. 'One who attends special education classes.'

2. 'The special education program.'

3. 'An insult used when someone does something stupid.'

4. 'She is a sped.'

5. 'Nevaeh you are such a sped.'

6. 'No one will date you or give you a job you're sped, and braindead.'

(You got it, don't run away, I have more to say.)

'Still, I do not want anybody's pity, yet I am not going to get it anyways.'

'I just want RESPECT!'

'That is just something I cannot have been in this unwanted grouping. Being in this rejected category is not always pleasant as you can see. I have learned to adapt and overcome life's many difficulties up to now at least.'

'I have learned that some people can do harmful and heinous things to others, yet they prosper. Then someone like me has to SUFFER through it all.'

'It eats at you over time, 'people are fake anger and frustration will eat at you like cancer. Until it kills you, or they do within you!'

'When I look back at everything in my past, the whole image comes into focus.'

'Yet this is the way I want to see this, over I believe.'

'I believe that revenge is not the answer, everyone gets a turn to face justice. It is just a matter of time.'

'They, kids, educators, and physicians, will get there's Those who speak tales will pay profoundly for their slanderous phrasing, I well make sure of that.'

'All the individuals who talk crap behind your back and put on a front for others. they think they are deceiving you, yet I know who they are.'

'Then again, you know what they have been saying.

They may be fooling everyone, yet they're not fooling me.'

'I have been living under their false rumors all my life, it has been questionable just why I have.'

'Simply never this serious; in the past, I have triumphantly prospered, in have pieces of information held in my little brain on my part helping myself for the most part, in understanding the hex on my life.'

'I have not done anything to any person; I just really want to help people and to get to know them, that's all.' Yet I do not think that is happing any time soon.'

'Although I can't have friends, others won't let me.'

'I know who they are that stop me from having a life, as well as I, know all the lies that they have been saying about me.'

'Although I know something that everyone else doesn't know in this town. Individuals like them are pathetic for destroying innocent lives like mine.'

'Those people need to get lives of their own! Why so that girls like me can have ours.'

'The entireties that are saying this slander needs to stop and think about their actions before they write or communicate lies.'

'Just remember you think it is thrilling now, but you will have consequences to face before it is all said and done.'

'That everything you do may come back and haunt you forever!'

(The very next day)

'I do not think that even matters to you, my that name is… it has been replaced and it is not significant anymore. Nor does my name matter to anyone out there for miles around. At least that is the way it seems to me, standing here now as I see the bus come to take me there.'

'Some of the others like the kids I go to school within this land, they have other titles for me.'

'However, you can identify me by the name of 'Nevaeh.' That is if you want too.'

'My life was not always like this! Still as of now, I stand trembling on top of this cruel land, which I call my hereditary land or my home-town.'

'I am enduring on alone bare and yes, I am completely naked to the world outside. So, unprotected by the atmosphere above and around me, so unlike- the day, I was born into this hellish world.'

'Some still call me by my name, and that is 'Nevaeh May Natalie."

'Names or not said to me, 'I feel alone!' I whispered to myself.'

'It is like I am living a dream. I didn't think my nightmare of orgasmic, tragic, and drizzling emotions pouring in my mind would last this long.'

('Class, faces, names, done.')

'It like a thunderstorm pounding in my brain, as it is today outside. I have come home from yet another day of hell that would be called- school to you.'

'I don't even go into the house until I have this restricting schoolgirl uniform torn off my body. I feel like my skin is crawling with bugs when it is on my figure from being there.'

(Outside in the fields, next to the tracks)

'It's the middle- September and I am standing in the rain. It is, so cold, so lonely, and so loveless! Additionally, this is not usual for me, I am always bare around my house, I have my reason you'll see.'

'Thunderbolt clattered, more resonant than anything every heard previously.'

'The rain is falling on me like knives ever since the moment I got off the yellow bus.'

'All rain is matting my long brown hair on me as it lies on down my backside longer than most girls. Yet I okay with that at last, I am free.'

(I have freedom)

'To a point! I still feel so trapped by all of them.'

'Ten or twenty minutes have now passed; I am still in the same very spot. Just letting water follow down me. I'm drenched!'

'I can feel the wetness as it lingers in my hair for a while, so unforgivably soaking my body even more as if sinking within me washing me clean.'

'Counting my sanctions, I feel satisfied in a way when I do feel it dropping offends my hair as if 'God' is still in control of my life, even if I was sent to and damned to hell.'

'Like it is wiping away everything that happened to me today, away from the day of the past too.'

'The wetness is still running down the small of my back thirty minutes must have passed, and it is like my mind is off.'

'Currently, it follows the center point on my back. Then down in-between my petite butt cheeks. Water and bloodstream off my butt to the ground near the heels of my feet. I can feel as if that part of me is washed clean from the day that I had to go through.'

'Some of this shower is cascading off my little face, and it slowly collects on my little boobs, where it beads up and separates into two different watercourses down to my belly button.'

'I eyeball this, as it goes all the way down the front of me. It trickles on down me, to where it turns the color of light pink off my 'Girly Parts.' As they would never be the same.'

'Almost like a waterfall gushing in-between my legs at this moment at this time. Kissing, loving, and creasing me like, as my mud-covered toes, as I sink them in the dirt. My legs are so weakly holding me upright, after stand so long.'

'Ultimately, the pounding rains get more powerful. Making me fall to the ground with a soft thud, now covered by the clay. Where I will remain until I feel that I can get up and over what has transpired from the day of hell I had and what has happened to me. That's if I can, like if I can accept this all, as I look down at me. I feel the dropping rain is weeping for me, like 'God's' tears, even after this I still believe in.'

'The pain triples within me also like the thoughts all at the same time, I start rolling around, like a pig in mud. I have the sensation like I have been ripped in two parts in my centered hips and vagina.'

'However, it is like it is all pounding down on me at once. I look, up to the sky, lying on my backside. It jostles me, the thought of what it is that I want to do… with myself to escape.'

'Even with all this rain. I feel that my vagina will surely never feel the same, or like it's clean again. It's all because of them!'

'No! The rainwater can only wash away somewhat of what they have done to me. Never all of it… never- ever! It cannot wash away all my fears that I have. They have sucked my bean above the hole! Tugged on the hood, until I thought they would bite it off me completely. That is why I'm bleeding! Nevertheless, the school they would not do anything about this, over I was the one that started it all; as the instigator.'

'They rubbed and touched me in all the places, yet this one the most. They ripped my black hole wide open, with their hateful fingernails and slashing teeth.'

'I cannot run away from them. They always find me! Always, I have nowhere to run or to hide!'

'I cannot stop them from fingering, stabbing, and sucking on me! My nipples are raw! They beat me up for enjoyment. Pledging with 'God' saying this has to stop. Yet it goes on every school day.'

'I must get away from them. I need to get away! ('I just need to okay!') It is like these visions of what my life existence about comes and goes away from me.' I see my life before I live it out in its entirety.'

'Sometimes, it's like I am black, I am not biased, bigoted, discriminatory, prejudiced, antiblack, and racialist, let's get that clear; yet this is the category, I was placed in, as a girl owned by man, that think I should never do anything more than be something like a worker in a field, as a slave to pay back my debts to be who I am to them in their hate.'

'The air that is around me now, is making my slit labia skin hurt with burn and sting. Burning hotter than a flame, before snuffed out! I know how a candle feels, struggling not to be blown out by the rushing air.'

'It's they have a new addiction and that is the hole in my body that makes me a lady.'

'Just if you are wondering, I put my teddy in my backpack right after getting off the bus, after getting hazed by having him. after all, he is very significant to me.'

'I walk over to my bookbag, and see him down in their look at me, and find my one pink notebook. I open it to that one page I penned, the one that I have dogeared. 'There it is!' I say as I rip it out, it recollects the day.'

'The paper is jagged and wet, but I have an adieu note in my hand. I made it earlier in school, at lunch, when I was sitting alone; on this wrinkled up pink notebook paper. The black ink is running like a watercolor all over all my trembling, quivering, shivering, and childlike penmanship handwriting. All it has on it are all words that need to be said, about my existing in life, not living! Decidedly not.'

'They're all there the notes the things, places, events, and even smalls, maybe spelled incorrectly, but there regardless, all have gone in this book of life I call- Sh-h as if making the most long-spun book in the world, with all my pages, are thick; all pasted, shoved and slammed together, furthermore mismatched, yet all has been said, in my enchanting written long run-on's of memories, the way I fancy to remember.'

'I believe that like I am existing not living! I have that down, as the first line of this page; next to all the doodles.'

'It is as if I have all these flashbacks, to the point it haunts me. Even at the strangest times, my mind drifts off, to dreamlike places.'

"It is all because of them!' I thought to myself, as I see the note, and read it back to myself under my breath.'

'I have every right to be annoyed, feel disturbed, and scared moreover troubled. Why not record everything in a story, and hope not to sound too crazy, yet a little is okay.'

'Look at me! Now and close your eyes tightly. My mind is like- 'Yes, no, maybe…' and what do you believe, and think? Yes, I have contradicted myself I care too much what you think of me as if damaged, by words, and wicked hands.'

'Now can you see me?' I believe, like, I can still see all of them, in the past and now, and maybe even you are judging me now.'

'I was never more like some of you: popular, accessible, attractive, and stylish and loved. Oppositely maybe you're like me, which fits into everything that category is- or oppositely is not.'

(I scream)

'Do you see my teardrops, that splash out of my blue eyes? Do you see everything I do? Do you see my brown hair that covers them and hides my true emotions in class? Do you even care? Do you feel, what I felt right now? Can you feel my hurting insides? Nope did think so, no one can feel that unless they exist it!'

'Have you ever had to feel just like I do? Can you see my makeup mixing with my teardrops, as it all falls to the ground like my emotions, passions, and caring? If not you're just as heartless as them!'

'No one is born condemning another soul because of the sensuality of or skin or their background or their faith, it just seems that everything in my life is like trickling down my body, and away from me in every way imaginable.'

'As a result, the only thing I can do is get up and raise my hands to the heavens in the rain. While shouting the question- 'Why did you let this happen to me?'

'I hear that small voice in my head again it's a small whisper saying: 'End it! End it! As I was looking into the glow of the light of the envisioned angel of death.''

'I have nothing but my split thoughts rushing in my head. Like a screaming bolt of lightning cracking in the sky above me.'

"Hum, should I just end it all?' I mean I'm only fourteen years old. Though there is not one person around here for me. Not one which is going to miss me at all.'

'I proceeded to that gloomy conclusion a long time ago. I would not be remembered. Would anyone remember me? Would anyone care? I should end it all right now?'

'I reminisce about me clutching my uniform, and how I would achieve my departure. The same awful uniform that I tugged, unsnapped, and ripped off myself, an hour ago, I see it over there like it's staring me down with a glint of evil.'

'Calling out as it's lying in the mud. I crawl over on my hands and knees, grabbing my minor skirt away from the button-down top, pulling the tie out of the collar. To do what must be fulfilled obeyed.'

'Holding the tie in my small hands. I pause and glance at my fingernails, which are painted lime green with pink straps, knowing this would be the last time I well.'

"Curse them all!' I say, will make the undone dark blue tie into a noose, looping, twisting, and coiling it through itself making it snugger around my neck.'

'Notwithstanding that pain is nothing like what they put me through. just like chivalry is dead, just like everything I do is mainly felonies attached, by trying to live.'

'Notwithstanding that pain is nothing like what they put me through. just like chivalry is dead, just like everything I do is mainly felonies attached, by trying to live.'

'Nevertheless, if I was truly blessed by the holy water, from 'God,' then I am taking all the excrements that are in 'God' flush, with this rain shower as of this moment; as if it is only dumping on me.'

'At most inconsiderable with aforementioned, it's accomplished and finished speedy.'

'Forgetting, I also remember regarding that last fall, that I would relish as my legacy, never thinking it would be my writing that would stand the test of time.'

'I have the belt and the tie around my collar attached to the angle oak tree, next to the swing the rope from the childhood swing.'

'Now with my eye one twitching, I hang above the girl by three feet. Death has found me.'

"Oh yes!' Ha, it would be my peace, tranquility at last, yet still, I did not know where I was going.'

'Certainly, I don't desire to hang myself, but at the same time, I did, the angel was right, after all, she knew me, and I loved her more than life, yes a girl.'

'The voice's in my head is going away and the light is more vibrant.'

'I did not have a choice at duration, as if someone was thinking for me? Oh assuredly, I dangle!'

'The drawing of the monarch butterfly, the pointed star, the hand over my face, and my one blue eye in the triangle, now litter the ground in my notes and drawings.'

'Yes, the ultra-freedom of tree branches above me, the hinging of the foliage, the sun cascading until night, to the shooting stars to the following daybreak.'

'This ancient tree is next to the rundown house, next to the tracks! The home of loneliness and it feels as empty inside as I did, yet it is not empty at all.'

Exceptional, I look here the next day, when I am found, some asked 'why?' And with 'she's too young.'

'Yet, it was good riddance in mocking me with a stigma, 'to have one less retard with disabilities on the streets, that we someday have to pay for with tax money that would molest our children, or creep on them, like a stocker, over not knowing better.''

'Nothing lost,' said the town, looking at me, along with 'just an unwanted expense, and waste of life and time; she was doing nothing but taking away from some child that wants to learn in their education.'

'All she wanted to be more attention, the sick freak.'

'I wanted to show them what hate looks like! And this is it, I did this mainly so that everyone from my school of hell, and ass hole of a town can see me up here in the tree naked and hanging, after all, I the idea from them.'

"Dope out and kill yourself.' There true words, not mine.'

'That way everyone, even here would be able to see me, with their own eyes.'

''One grave would not change a society's mentality of mind; I would be another left-behind.' Furthermore, like an art piece, so, they can see the wounds that they did to me; if they did not care maybe the outside world would out of this three-mile radius, from where I am at.'

'Realizing all the gashes, which they gave me over time, and the ones, I give myself because of them. They all can look at me like this just art, and see it all, just like this, I see it every day when I look at my reflection anyways. They all can think- about what they have done to me.'

'However, I do not think they would care, and they didn't. Yet the world that would be another story, if they did see me hanging there bare, lifeless, and limp; this story would not have been said as a teen voice of hope.'

'I thought at that point, that I dyed at fourteen as a virgin, said, I know, yet that may not be true. When I was sure, by the girls bragging to me always, they were solely were all made woman around and near the time they all turned the age of twelve.'

'As a girl, you are letting out part of your body to a boy, and most young men don't get this, and trusting them of letting you start the gift of life.'

'Remember you do not need to get knocked up at any age, you girls have contraceptives, as they did.'

'You have to lie there spread, to make a baby; even I know that. Yet that is why we have a marriage, before getting it on, a commitment of you being your daddy possession still virgin with his name until you now have given to a man for 25 dollars to only now be taking your new loves last name and his hard loving, as he claims you as his possession, yet he should keep you for all that understanding.'

'They have no emotions for me in their pea-brained minds, to feel anything. I ask- can you grasp me like a hug; can you feel me, as I feel now? Can you get the impression of me hanging there, all by myself, have you been there? I am so lonesome and afraid!'

'I wanted to be like them, to be plagued pretty and guilty in the ah of such surrender.'

'You know, I do feel as if I would be better off being dead! Don't you think so too? I know you do. How did I let things get so out of hand? Or did I? Is this all meant to be? Really… I don't know?'

'I just do not know what to believe anymore. I swung through the air and plunged as I jumped off the branch. I arranged it right!'

'Simply, like I planned this, as it was said. One way or another, I never come to my senses. I never got loose from the noose, on my tree next to my child-like swing. I know that I was dead and everything, yet something happened to like the day rewound, to that moment, of the big fell, of me falling. Yet this time, I slipped out of the tie, and fall hard to the ground below, as if I was, I was still yet not alive the day of the attempted suicide.'

'That is when, I walked into the home as if I would have like any other day, with my head down, going to take a bath and get ready for supper, with guardian Hope. Plus went up to the steps up to my room dripping wet my braindead mind puzzled.'

'My sweet brown shaggy teddy bear was the only thing, I grabbed covering my body from dinner, then I went into my room. My pink nighty top on my bed from the night before. Truly, I did not care about my nakedness anymore; after all, I am wild, continuous, unbroken, and untamed.'

'Moderate retardation books,' said Hope when she picked them up under her breath, showing them back into the unzipped backpack.

'I feel so weird, like never before; I sat stark naked in my bed soaking wet, rocking hoping for nightfall to come. to see if the next day I would have to go to school.'

'How? I don't know. Just like fast-forwarding it will only dawn another day. That's going to repeat all the hell ones more, I just sure of that.'

'Previously this is my question, I asked myself, as I am laying in my bed holding onto my teddy bear far too tightly. 'Is it me who is the problem, or the ones that are all around me?"

I answer myself- 'I know that there is not one person on this planet, who truly cares if I am even here or not.' Oh, 'God' - 'Why does my life have to be like this?'

‘I do not think, I can take any more of living in this town or the school!’

Chapter: 5

Natural Life

'Call me 'Ms. Natalie."

'I was born into this insignificant little town on a warm summer’s day in 1995, so the story would go of what I know.'

'Nevertheless, I thought, what more picture-perfect way for me to start my story of about me, then with the beginnings of my life, really I am no one special just made to be for all the wrong reasons. Don’t understand you will.'

'I kind of remember being ripped out into the realities of the world, with my fingernails tearing gashes into my mother’s birthing walls like a wild cat's claws. Naturally, I guess, from the day of conception, my goal was to see the light; I was always rushing towards the enlightenment from day one.'

'It is amusing, how when you are being pushed out of the womb. You go for the wisdom, and you see the world for the first time; the information is slowly tunneling in front of you. Yet all your life you wish that you were back in there, not knowing.'

'Just to think that small opening is what starts all forms of creation in life, and what the sisters want from me. Most around here know that I am their target, and Ava wants me, Lily is the only thing that is the only good about life. No- to them, it is not about the life that comes from this; it is just getting a thrill.'

'It is more like the thrill of just doing it and doing it. I am sure that is fun, and that too, but I want something more to come of it all. I want to love and feel the love!'

'Meanwhile, when I was being born, I do recall seeing all these faces, and it like I was there from other views of perspective for the first time, and that was when I made the bond with my father. The first time he held me in his arms. I could see it, yet was it all just more lies? Everything about my life was lies.'

‘He cut my umbilical cord, and that was the promise that will never die.’

'I was his girl forever he said. What intrigues me is when you die you see the same light. If you are like me, then you are wishing that you would see that light for the last time.'

'I was a premature baby a plan to be, yet that was not why I was where I was in school; there was nothing wrong with my brain. No trauma to my mind, body, and spirit.'

'While she was carrying me inside of her, it would be a wonder. if they were not right, that something would be wrong. My mother smoked three packs of cigarettes a day and was on drugs, more drugs then they think, I should be on, like a happy pill of Ritalin or off the street like my profile would suggest, as others in my classes are of childish aesthetics.'

'While she was carrying me inside of her, she was not considering me. I can see how stereotypes could happen, my mother was third-class white trash, and my dad was second-class wealthy.'

'I hope that I kick her in there, so hard that one of her boobs would have smacked her in the face. For being irresponsible that is why. I am a very loving girl; however, she would have deserved that! As far as my mother goes, she did nothing but give childbirth to me.'

'Of course, I was the product of two people that were not married. They were not truly in love. I guess I was an accident, which just happened one night in a random sex session in some random place. My mother always had a way of getting what she wanted.'

'My parents lived together, but they were never truly happy together. The makeups after the fighting are what kept their union going for them.'

'A relationship of lust only, not love, and they surely were not in love with one another. I would say that they were just friends with benefits. I was an unplanned event that just seemed to come-to-pass.'

'Nonetheless, my parents were pleasantly surprised to find out that, I was a baby girl and their first child together when they went for an ultrasound.'

'Mainly since they thought that they were being, so careful every time they did it, guess not! I still have my birth card with my little footprints on it.'

'Sure, they were a young couple; my mother was fifteen the first time she got pregnant with my step-sister and somewhat older with the others.'

'My dad was thirty years of age when he first hooked up with my mother.'

'My mom's name is Leah, she looks like me yet, I am fairer skin toned then she is; I am just country white or so they say that in a way that is backward to me. I guess it is just what is in my blood just part of my inheritance, which I got.'

'The one good thing, I got is her eyes, they are the same as mine, and her hair long and the same shade of color as mine too. Yet I have my dad's personality, thankfully, and his big loving smile, which seemed to sparkle down at me.'

'She was the fifth teen at the time she had me. They even had to stop her labor. Since I wanted to pop out too soon, yet I did anyway. Mom is a smaller woman, so I would say I was cumbersome for her at her last stages, yeah- I guess that is why I am smaller to maybe. I would have to say that, I brought them together, mom and dad; if only for a little while at least.'

'On the day of my birth, my mother looked into my eyes and said, 'she is just like a piece of heaven.' Therefore, at that moment, that is how I became 'Nevaeh' heaven spelled backward. My dad said yes-a a heavenly baby let's, spell it in reverse, and that can be her first name.'

'My mom said- weakly while trying to draw in a breath, through her nose; after being worn-out from pushing. While I was placed on her chest, I was clamped down on her, drinking the ever so needed milk from her nipple, I needed to get the much-needed nourishment from her breast milk because I was so frail! At the same time, she said- yes- yes, she whispered.'

'That is completely fine with me, I like that name for her. Look at her go- 'Isn't she cute,' said- my dad, 'Yes' said my mom, and 'cute is the word for her.'

'So, having a unique name, everybody seems to know you. Besides, know where you are from, and they think, that they know what you are all about; from who your parents are and where they live.'

'"Names are just one of those things that, I have learned to deal with throughout my life.' I am not saying, that I do not enjoy my name- I do.'

'However, my name is kind of a motto for my whole life. It seems that everything I have done has been a struggle and has been all ass-backward. I have always taken one step forward and taken ten steps backward.'

'Consequently, that has been my existence at the starting of my life too, and that set the tone for most of my life up to this point, as you could have assumed.'

'My mother was an unemployed person around that time, who cared more about her social life, than anything else in her life at that time. It was not long after me coming home everything fell apart.'

'Yes, that included me too. Although, at this time, she had everybody fold thinking that she was the 'IDEAL' young mother. She had children from her previous engagements to men whom she did not truly love.'

'They all just used her, and they knew that she had to put up with their shit because she had no means of establishment in her life. I predict she was addicted to their ways of life.'

'My mom only had an eighth-grade education, seven more than what I have now as a freshman; 'I guess you do not need to have a diploma just to know how to reproduce.'

'You just have to lay there; it does not take much effort at all. That kind of work in my mother's eyes was the ideal job that fit her criteria. She knew how to do it well. Besides, some kids do not let me forget about it either. I cannot choose my mother- what can I say?'

'My father's name is Ray Jay; he decided to take my mom in off the crud-covered streets in 1994. He treated her like a little princess. I mean anything this girl wanted he would get it for her if he could.'

'That was one fatal mistake he made. Then again, on the other hand, I would not be here, if it would not have been for these events that took place. So maybe it was meant to be, or maybe things would have been so different without me? I guess it is worth thinking about.'

'Daddy is remembered for his unique sense of style, and expression in his joking personality. He was always wearing cowboy boots, and leather jackets, along with having silver chains hanging from his blue jeans.'

'He always had long hair for the duration of his life. I can still envision in my mind what he looked like when I was a baby and young toddler. I SO WISH, he was with me.'

'However, he passed away a long time ago. Nevertheless, it is as if I can still see his brown eyes looking down at me even though, I was young at the time.'

'He was the one, the only one- that truly treasured me. I was his pride and joy- his little girl, and he made sure everyone knew it. Yet I was- ripped away from his clutching hands.'

'I somewhat remember that night he was mysteriously gone away from my life forever. Yet it is faint in the depths, and cobwebs in the back of my mind.'

As always, everything is covered-up instead of having an investigation. They rolled his death and early end as a suicide. To them, it is all the same, just another dead person, decomposing on the bathroom floor.'

'My only question is how can someone that is right-handed pull the trigger of the pistol, with his left hand? How can the clumsy hand manage to do that, when their skills are on the other hand?'

'It had to be murder it was either my mother or my grandmother from her side, whom I never met! That is what I believe- yet not what the kids on the bus scream in my ears though. That everything I think is a tale of my brain-damage.'

'They like to rub it in, that he is gone, and how he did it. I think I know who committed the crime, and I think you do too? I believe that he will not be her last victim either.'

'From what I know about the blood splatter on the walls, it clearly shows that somebody smashed his head into the bathtub. I was told, that his skull was cracked. Furthermore, his eyelids were forced wide open, which gives the impression that he was in shock, and I think if you were holding a gun to your head, you would close your eyes.'

'The outcome of all of this was not a result of him falling naturally to the floor. With an intentional effort, here, there was too much momentum to it than just one last drop. The bullet was fired, by someone like my mother or my grandmother; I was sure of this!'

'You know it would have been hard for him to run because he was using walking canes at that time.'

'That was all a result of being crippled in a classic bike motorcycles accident, which happens sometime before I was born.'

'His last breath on earth was the beginnings of me living a silent life of misery.'

'Nonetheless, this was also mine too, at my death in less than five minutes, when we embraced for the first time; just past the gates to the beyond in the mixed the mists of soft clouds, yet come to find out, I would not be there long before, I would lose him again when I would learn what it means to fall.'

'Without having a father to comfort me, I had no one to stand up for me. Just like that, just like the same way the coroner took him away, he was gone!'

'All I have left is to look at is a gray stone in the graveyard, which calls out to me sometimes. Some nights in the past I would go and walk in the cemetery to see the stone looking at me, yet it is cold and does not say much. It does not tell any stories; of who he was to anyone or me when it's my time, and all I got was five minutes.'

'Somehow, I feel closer to him being over his plot.'

'My mother Leah took advantage of all situations, as she knew that it would benefit her life. That was just the way it remained for her.'

'She was also the product of an unwed family. She was, treated very carelessly as a child, locked in dog cages when bad, or so my faint memory recalls, an odd living hell with strange love.'

'Her father was, known around town for being a very loving, thinking he was a still a cop for the town. Nonetheless, he was a molester, and really, I should already know this, has not remembered anything since the 'Vietnam War,' where all I get is a montage of baby-killing 1960's songs playing in my mind of 'Eve of Destruction,' and 'Running Through the Jungle;'

'Anyways, he was an affectionate person, he was always kissing, caressing, feeling, rubbing, stroking, licking, fingering, touching, and teasing, her and her sisters inappropriately.'

'This can mess a person up mentally, or so I accept as true, and they say I should know.'

'Like why, I still go to bed and fall asleep sucking my thumb, as I always did, all bunched up with teddy, and my blankie; like I always did and still do.'

'Besides that, is why I believe she could not love anybody? Why do you ask? She did not love herself, because of shame inside.'

'Her innocence was stripped away at a young age. Thus, she felt she had to give it all away to any man, in any way she could; just to make up for what the lost.'

'Her mother whom in my mind, I have not yet met, used to slap her around and was verbally and psychologically abusive to her. Saying things like she was nothing but a piece of shit to her; that she deserved everything that her father would do to her at night.'

'My assumption is that is why she treated me the same way, and all the mind direction, I have had could never take that away.'

'When you grow up in that kind of environment, that is what you know- and it becomes almost instinct to you.'

'I believe that all children are like a clay form, you mold them into what you want them to be and become.'

'I think!'

'Therefore, no wonder that is how she turned out everything is linked to responsibility.'

'I think!'

'You can either pass or fail!' Thus- 'I think that someone can only take so much before they crack. It is sad because generally, the persons that they turn on are the ones that cared about them the most.'

'My father was a well-liked man who cared about everyone, even individuals that he did not know, yet my mother not so much, or so my memories would hold.'

'Daddy tried to be the most trustworthy person that he could be. He was murdered without explanation they found his body; on the bathroom floor of my first home, somebody went and put a bullet through his left temple; on a cold night in December of 1996.'

'As I said, I was only a year old, and I lost the first person in my life, that truly cared about me. The case to this present day is still undetermined in what indeed happened.'

'However, as I said, I feel that I know who committed this crime all at the hands of the mummy; and I know that this is why my life turned out the way it did thanks to her. There is only one person to blame for all this hatred, (HER,) for the torment, torture, and pain.'

'The person that- deceived us all, the mother, and my granny! After my father's death, my mother decided to skip town with me in her care.'

'I remember this one night. I would not say that I had what most would call an ideal situation of being raised. I was tossed into the environments of turmoil.'

'A dark gloomy situation, where you end-up in ghetto style homes with illegal actions, and situations that were just part of the everyday surroundings. This was part of my unordinary life at that time.'

'I remember one housing situation in particular in my childhood. It was a stormy night, and I was- locked into a dark bedroom in the house. I watched the lightning streak across the sky from the broken window-pane in which I was starting.'

'Like seeing all these raindrops going down the windowpanes like lonely teardrops, reminded me of my every emotion at that time, and times when I am said. With lightning, it brightened my room for split instants.'

'Until I saw a silhouetted figure, it was my mother walking into the room, as she did many times or one of her crazed boyfriends of the night.'

'She threw me on the musky sheets of my bed and began strapping me down. I was stripped of any forms of dignity naked stark every night for a couple of years, as she was as a child.'

'She would always say, 'Be a good little girl.' 'Because your mother loves you.' All those nights, she was having guests over; I remember is I could hear the headboard knocking on my wall saying, 'suck me,' and would that rhyme, all night long. Yes, along with the sounds of her gagging, on all that too, if you must know.'

'I recall that one night she and he was so drunk and high in their minds, they did it in my room, cowgirl style I remember. Funny, yet said, and cheap, when you think about it, isn't it?'

'Anyways she did not want a child disturbing her from her arrangements and jobs that she did, that is why she doped me up on things to knock me out. Yes, it is safe to say my mother was just like Casey Anthony's mom.'

'Thus, this was her solution to her little problem with me. Locking me into total isolation with no lights in closets, in my room, in the basement, in the attic, or outside chained, like a dog with all having no comforting sounds, with only the thoughts in my three-year-old mind to console me, as I ate from a dog dish.'

'This must have gotten around my teachers did the same things.'

'I to this day remember being in that dark room, stripped down to my bed. I could not move, because of the ropes holding me down. In addition to the fact, even if I was able to escape that darkness of that room.'

'There was always a soda can between the doorknob, and frame, which would fall on to the floor; when the knob would be turned.'

'Consequently, they would know that I was escaping. If I was caught fleeing the room, I had to face the wrath of my mother's boyfriends, and there were many. All of them twisted in the head in their ways, and what they would do to us.'

'I remember one of my mother's boyfriends was named Rick Chino; he had issues and other things. He was abusive to all that were around his presence.'

'I recollect this one time in my memory. The boy, my mother's son did not do much of anything just being a free-spirited child as most five-year-olds are.'

'This kid had the worst punishment that I have ever witnessed in my life. I was not able to do anything to stop all of this from happening.'

'I evoke this as if it was yesterday. Devein, he was hanging their undressed upside down in his closet tied by his ankles he was house whipped, with his belt. He is screaming, with nobody to help him as mom placed his pissed underwear on his mouth until he passed out from the blood rushing to his head, saying to 'suck it, bedwetter."

'Secondly, that was the time he hung around at my place… they chopped him up like all the others; they made a coffin as I watched, just like the others and I wondered if I would end up like the others.'

'I remember them saying most tauntingly... I could be next.'

'This could be you, Nevaeh!' Said, my mother.

'You think we like doing this?' The boyfriends.

'You're just bad kids!' Said the Grandmother, and Grandpa agreeing. Grandpa calls Grandmother Big Muma, we kid all just called her 'Grand-bow.''

'All the evil faces hazed in my mind like if expunged.'

'The wooden handmade coffin only about 3 feet long if that, was made crudely as they drained his blood by slashing his feet and hanging him from the children swing set that was at the far end of the extensive field of gothic tombstones.'

'The swings were never used, the kids never outside, to play, the yards never used by us kids of over 200 orphans' kids, give or take they come and go fast.'

'The home, I call the '1890's Mountain House,' is large with many sprawling rooms, strange, eerie, hanging heavy air of death feeling; most of the home is dilapidated and can't even be used any longer, as it should be condemned, as you would go through the floor, or there would be more of an abundance of children, furthermore, the count of them would be much higher, I am sure.'

'An orphan, as I always felt like one, just like one of them made to be the same, as I observed, still having heartbeats the blood of nude children as it ran down the bodies, as if no

longer wanted by them to live, as they made shallow graves for kids ages five up to fourteen years of age, at the grandma's property, where she has the orphanage the home for unwanted children, it was made known to me know as the 'Children Cemetery,' the land, and the home the, 'House of Horrors."

'Where there is only a cross's and tombstones marking the place of 1,000 children, if not more, with no name just identification numbers; just like mine, nonetheless this was the last time, I saw that boy also in my life. I ask does anyone deserve that kind of punishment just for being a child?'

'Notwithstanding meriting death sentences, was the last quarrel; where the grown-ups would win.'

'Nevertheless, there was not a thing I could do. I had to sit back and watch as these children were being terrorized and slowly losing their lives all stripped-down bodies in my mind haunt, so many died by Saturday morning, after the killings, they would be lined up, next to the holes in the ground.'

'Just like the rejected of unwanted I ask the questions.'

- 'I ask would you marry or mate with a retard?'

(Yes or No)

- 'Would you work with a retard?'

(Yes or No)

- 'Would heir a retard?'

(Yes or No)

- 'Would you have kids with a retard, like when you grasp you would have retired youngsters?'

(Yes or No)

- 'Would you give a job to that retard?'

(Yes or No)

- 'Would you be-friend a retard?'

'Think the word 'RETARD' is offensive in a book to be called it every day at school by teachers and kids alike.'

'NO, to all, neither would I, over a misunderstanding, or believing the worst, so why-live, with the existence of being known as nothing more than that, yet I am just in denial they reply to me repeatedly day in and day out.'

'For being this, a retard, I was now the same as the rejected my mom and her family thought were wastes of life.'

'One of my Mother's forms of punishment was to insert a broken light bulb into a floor lamp and shock my step-siblings and our bare-skinned asses until we would beg for mercy. Or smack our butt's until we could not sit down the next day.'

'What we did that was so troubling to her is still now surmised.'

'Young girls ages five up to fourteen, they are screaming, crying, screeching, and shrieking, and peeing themselves, in anguish, sadness, grief, and anxiety, as she was shouting at all them including me.'

'See what I have to do to you-little whore,' as I saw all the girls in their room bed chambers in their beds. 'Your smart-ass c*nts wh*re's.'

'One girl was in a restraint jacket in now for a week without a bath or to go pee, for not consuming all her rationings on her tray.'

'Do you see, Nevaeh there more intelligent than you, are or will ever be, this should be you, yet I have to do this to them over having you!'

'My mother would abuse all the young sweet and innocent girls in the orphanage nightly, as she did her shift, for a $1.44 an hour for her mother, and I was there to see to build she said creature.'

'This is why, I am a drug dealer too, said, my teachers over my demographic in my small town, or simple-minded ways, even my 'Teacher Support Teacher' would say the same in her notebook of recording my every blink in the needs classroom, yet I still ask if she would like to whip my vagina after, I pee over I am not able on my own.'

'This is why kids take guns and spray for fame, yet I am not volant.'

'This is why kids are taken rifles and spraying for fame, they have nothing to lose, yet I am not volant, and I have seen too much of that in my life.'

'Yet the kids that do this are mad, crazy, and insane for being nothing more than retards, that are wastes of time and life in the schools, or a town, yet take my amendments away too, I never had them, being the rejected misunderstood child.'

'I do not have freedom of my speech anywhere, or I am shipped out to retard school, our go to the orphaned, I know I could never have weapons, yet don't need too, yet I can't defend myself either, or I am wrong, I don't feel safe as a walking target.'

'Nothing more than the fifth amendment is what I can do, as I stand there as the bad girl sucking your thumb, to take slander and a label, where you only have one advocate to always be nothing more than the deviant.'

'Cruel and unusual punishments are my life, and taking my money, and giving to some that could give a crap about my life. Excessive fines and bail also is my life.'

'That you all are nothing to me, but a waste of life to me.' Oh, yes one moment she loved us, and the next minute she wanted to thump us.'

'She would even put a mousetrap on my finger, and not come into the room until I would stop crying.'

'I can still feel the broken glass, and the currents are running through the filament of the light bulb on my butt crack, as it was touching my body.'

'Yet we all had to watch, as each of our siblings and these other girls was- tortured one by one, we did not have a choice.'

'How could I forget the most common method of punishment I received from her, was the beating with a garden-hoe.'

'I ask what kind of sick, twisted mind even thinks of this kind of torture; and abuse for their children and one's you look after?'

'Furthermore, this is what goes on behind closed doors. You can, believe me, I was there, yet it was- left to be unknown, and if it was known, it was not spoken by the society around us. I do not think the others on the outside, new we were on the inside looking out after all the home was 5,000 yards back, 1,500 feet from any road around out of the minds of others.'

'Things got so ailing in our isolation from human life that she brought in a wheelbarrow as a replacement for a restroom.'

'We were fed rations and I was now living with these girls in the same room and not bathed for weeks at a time.'

'What has happened in the dwellings- that were, linked together on 'Misery Mountain' will be left to be forgotten about I guess forever?'

'One of my siblings was, named Sarah she was, shaken to death.'

'Sarah was hurled into one of the industrial 50 pounds 1950's Milnor washing machines, with full soap and hot wash cycles and that is what killed her, not by one of us kids as they would say, by our Mother, and Gramma and Grandpa giggled, like xenophobe demented children when the wash was over.'

'I can still hear the scramming for help, yet no one did this was her punishment for being a bad girl, and if you would help, like you would face the same fate.'

'This was the true shaking to death, that was not reported, I was there and saw this happen, I would know it was true, yet who would believe me.'

'I can still see all the washers lined up in a line in the basement of the orphanage, next to the washrooms for all girls, to mass shower 100 at a time, all running around bare for a bath as water jets splashed upon the young naked pubescent bodies that were acting out in the only freedom to play.'

'Truly she was older than me, she is currently buried up on the west end of the remembrance mountain in the graveyard, in 'The Land of Many Steeples.' With all... the others!'

'Sarah, like all the others, does not even have a grave marker because no one cares. Yet mother is free to do as she pleases, with no punishment or consequences for her to receive over grandpa being the head and the only cop of the town, running his little mafia; making others fear him, his word is law in the town of indecencies.'

'We did not even realize what she has done to all of us until I was much older. One by one we would have all been gone like Sarah, last name unknown, and if things would have remained that way for me; I would not be reading my story now, I am sure of this.'

'What happened to the other is also unknown to me? So not, having a stable home, and being in different locations led to the upset of my life. During this time, there was a battle for my custody.'

'The powers at being thought it was best to have a new parent, so, at that time, I was going back and forth between mother Leah and a guardian named Hope.'

'I remember times where I mislaid my lunch on the ground at my feet, when Hope Natalie- Black had to give me back, into the harsh hands of my mother from week to week.'

'This was an exhausting experience at such a young age.'

'What did you feed her?' Mother asked questionably.

'Good meals.' Said Hope.

'She just hates you that is all' She said back.

'That is why she did that' she gets upset when she is around you! I am going to take her away, you just wait and see.' Said Hope.

'During this time, I was very malnourished and needed a caretaker. It was through the kindness of this one person I survived, and started, a new beginning, a new chapter in my book of life! that was nothing more than a hush of don't say that out loud.'

(My child custody fight in court)

'It was thirty painful months more until that all ended, and I was next to death. I was most likely going to die if I did not get away from my mom completely, and there were only 10 girls left at the orphanage. Where it was closed down forever around 2010.'

'My mother did not care if I lived or died; Nonetheless, Hope took me under her wing and embraced me as if I was one of her children, yet she was still not the most loving. I remember court after court all my life, it was a long drawn out process, to say the least yet that existing as a girl like me.'

'I would love to have this boy named Chiaz Naztherth just part me, with our hips so tight together I would not stop squeezing down of for an hour or more, in being taken.'

'I would love to be able to put my finger up to his face and say I your wife, and he is all mine, if an argument, I would win.'

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Chapter: 6

Observations

'Do you remember those first days when you started going to school at the age of five? Kindergarten you meet and interact with the new individuals, that have never been in your life before.'

'The joy and happiness of being in someone's life are so extraordinary. However, as you learn anything as time goes by things will change. Because you will slowly lose contact with those around you, this is inevitable, or maybe that only happens to me. I do not really no. I call these days the 'Macarena' days… so do you remember, that I guess the better question is- do you want to?'

'Oh, and I irrevocably got home with Hope, to stay. Yet I still had many of those sleepless nights, so I started keeping my mind occupied with my rhyming words.'

'Like this one, 'worries surrounding you will try to annoy. If you have hope and joy, fear will always try to destroy. Positive thoughts, I will have to deploy."

'At that time, I did not know that it could be called poetry, really at that time, I could not spell either. Yet, that was why I was doing this. I have many notebooks of pomes from age five and up, by the time, I was ten I had all the home library shaves in the home full of my manuscripts, that you are now reading as this long published story, you know just cut and paste clip pages of hand-penned writing all my thoughts together, and you have my memoir.'

'Anyways, what can I say you got to love the 1990's! That dance was so easy; we little kids would do it repeatedly. Yes, I remember doing that! Anyways at that time together we were learning the alphabet, seemed like such an extraordinary task at that time. Our friendships grew, as they should. Nevertheless, nothing ever lasts in my life; there is always someone there to take my happiness away.'

'At this time, I did not know why, as the years went by, I slowly discovered it was all because of lies, from the past, that I penned down to remember what I have forgotten, as the years when on; even my psychiatrist did not know I had these books braking a world recorded in writing, 'The Longest Novel."

'They were only seen after my transition, yet I saw what could have been, and even now I have more to add to this never-ending story, nevertheless, back then, I was too young and innocent to realize that anybody could be so heinous. As well, as far as love goes, I am the type of girl, that wants to have a courtship, not a bump and grind in the night, I was in love with the thoughts of love and it was taking over my mind.'

'Like marriage is everything to me, I dream about, as most girls do since back in the days when I was little dreaming of having that white dress.'

'Additionally, I know that is never going to happen for me either, it was my mind at that moment not clear, yet always forbidden and still is.'

'Why, and how? Why is everything so grim? 'Yet If my crush would ask me, right now, I would say yes!'

'I have and had daydreamed, sheepishly in my mind, I fantasized about him proposing to me.'

'I would love to fall into his arms and say take me, and he would kiss me all over! Yet, I would say, never-ever leave me; do not leave me at any phase of life again; you're mine!'

'I am seducible, maybe? I do not know, I will let you know, if I think that could be happening, that would be a first.'

'Yes, I assume if he makes you giggle. Kisses your forehead, and says he is sorry about nothing he has done wrong, tries, holds your hand. Works hard for you, and attempts to understand everything about you, then it is my belief he is quite perfect to me. That is all I ask for, what more could I want?'

'Yeah, if I tried to seduce someone, that I like, yet it was nothing more than a trip to the school's office, to have displaying actions take place.'

'A girl like me liking a boy, I swear the sister's clan, would rip my tongue out and shove it up to my ass, or there's. I do not need black and blue eyes, butt and arms.'

'Nevertheless, I do not like to be the one that is involuntarily made into doing their favors for them. Yet they make me do what they all need and want. I must take what they give me. Yes, have it all gone down, then carry the shame all day in the back of my head, I choke on life day in and day out, from being so rattled.' 'Yes, they beat me up, and I must beat them too, in other ways!'

'This is my question, why is it that there is always someone's nose up your ass?'

'I do not want someone to act all nice, and friendly to me if it is not genuine.'

'Stop wasting my time!'

'Oh, because to me, the time is a rhyme, just another nickel, and dime; we are just moving on down the line. Furthermore, I know that everything is going to be fine. There will be no more wasted time of mine. All the walls, like flaming skyscrapers in my life, shall crumble to dust. With a newfound lust, they will all burn themselves out, with their many moments of doubt. I have to think about this.'

('The Tower Tarot Card Meaning: Upright. Symbolism: Disaster, upheaval, sudden change, revelation. Interpretation: It stands for the shock and insecurity you experience in realizing, that your previous notions about a particular situation are wrong.')

~*~

'Hello, I am Chiaz Naztherth.'

'True, I see her every day as she walks down the school corridors here at the school.'

'She is being Nevaeh?'

'Yes.' He said.

'I am thinking that she is the most amazing girl, which I have ever seen in my life.'

'Just like a modern-day 'Romeo and Juliet' story, I am sure she has kept all my notes, that have to be anonymous, to add to her story; that she has only told me about to append to the story of her life.'

'I know that it is impossible for me too ever be able to date her, because of her past and what others think, and her situation would kill my reputation.'

'Most girls are complicated, whiny, and have a bad attitude.'

'Despite this, there is something, about her something mysterious.'

'Although, there is something about her that I, as well as most of my friends, do not understand her, and her ways she goes about herself.'

'I know this because I love her, I have had those moments myself that make me wonder and scratch my head why I do. Still, there is something genuine and different about her, that I call love, it is like she is more real to me than anyone else.'

'She does not put on any false errors. She is who she is, and she is proud of it, and she does not let anyone change what she deems, believes, or does.'

'She is a true definition of a girl, which I could be happy to be around all the time.'

'Nevaeh death was already ruled that night after the hanging, she was dead from an exception, and found in her room, yet she sprang back to life.'

'Never did I think, I would be in a sanatorium looking at this girl like this, as the only one that cares, in Nevaeh's room, not even Hope was here, she did not care to see her like this, on giving up.'

'Yet, I would not believe that she was dead, nor did I think she was alive, she was immortal; yet the more prominent question is what kind of immortal.'

'If only she knew before, she tried to terminate her life, that it was me, the writer of the notes.'

'Then maybe it was my wish that she would still be alive, that she would come back to me, that I would always be there if it would of if I could change my ways and not care what others think, I could spend my days with her, and give up on all of them.'

'That is only if it was let to be. Why is everyone so defensive, shielding, watchful, and suspicious?

'It has become acknowledged and distinguished to me, that unless you are a complete douchebag phony; you cannot get a physical, true, and caring girlfriend in this town.'

'Nevaeh Natalie!'

'She is such an influence in my life.'

'Nevertheless, I know that she and I could never be together. Since there are situations that one hateful wicked grandmother has created for her.'

'Why are some people so pathetic? Why don't they get lives of their own?'

'Why do they still life's away?'

'Why do they have to sit on using all networks, and conjure up lies?'

'They create rumors, which are not true, just to make them feel more superior? To the point, that they make the lies real and they become true in the school halls and the town for that person.'

'This is disturbing, or is it an ailment; that these people have? Either way, it needs to be terminated, it is just too easy for someone to say that they are somebody, of trust or not.'

'Then destroy someone's reputation; completely, totally, and entirely.'

'Oh, she is like the gasoline that lights my match on fire, and only she has the right moisture to extinguish it out.'

'I guess she fills me up with hopes and desires, and dreams. Let's not forget about the compassion she makes me feel as I dream about her in class, at home everywhere, and even now looking down at her. I think about her nonstop!'

'I have completely fallen for her. Everything she does, everything she is, everything she says. She is the first thought in my mind in the morning, she is the last thought I have before, I fall asleep at night.'

'She is almost every thought in between that I have! I know it's not going to be a walk in the park for us, I know that.' 'Yet, I believe, and I rely on someday, we would have a walk to remember if we could be together.'

'I want to be in the notebook that she has with her all the time! I like to show my sweetheart that I care by putting notes that I stuff into her locker, between classes.'

'However, I cannot put my name to the notes, or they would kill me for being her friend, or have my mom's job, or take me away with children in youth, even have mob hits on me and my loved ones.'

'Nevaeh is bad news, like know to be the school walking STI, or you die, or have a reputation death.'

'One day, I made her a friendship bracelet that is pink and white. I placed it in there when her locker door was open.'

'She can't have a lock for her locker, for being in her needs programming, it would be an endangerment to others, over her being bad news; nevertheless, all others can.'

'Hence she is searched at any instant by any academic teacher at any given moment, for whatever they want to speculate is the need too; of all her possessions and patted down in frisking by the school principal and officer.'

'Yet she did not see me do this, know I would be threatened, intimidated, browbeaten, terrorized and coerced if everybody knew.'

'So, now she where's that bracelet, on her little wrist every day; so maybe she knows it was me, that made it for her?'

'I like to make her handcrafted gifts. Although in my hometown that is harassment and stoking, with the independent laws of crazy around here.'

'All made by the one and only pig cop in the same family line, that runs the entire thing, even the town mayor is Masel Amsel.'

'Furthermore, she runs the one town Sheriff's department, the full Town Council is underneath her, that was also rigged to her liking in the voting pole, true if you have the wealth you can have your way into anything, and the rest are peasants begging for the leftovers if they feel ever so generous. Consequently, everyone fears her, yet I don't.'

'Oh, to be a red wing radical, if you're not republican or catholic your wrong, its nothing more than mind-diddling.'

'Small gifts, I know that she loves those kinds of things; as do I.'

'I think it's good to make it look like she has a friend, only in secret shame.'

'My God the horror stories coming from the orphanage was the kids were like eating the corn back out of their shit, and I believe that is true.'

'Little does she know, that I want to be her boyfriend; from this day on even if they kill me for loving another!'

'The sisters and the evil grandmother, they can't stop love, can they?'

'I know, it is going to be extremely challenging. yet I am going to have to work at this every day, and so will she if I want this to work for us, we can do this!'

'My life ceasing in notoriety that is okay with me. I want her. I want all of her, forever; and never let go of her ever.'

'Sure, if she only knew how much those little moments with her mattered to me, she would know it was me all along that was in love with her, and none of this would have happened!'

'We could fill each other up on the porches and surrounding grounds like all the others, if we had the chance, I would love too, do not get me wrong; yet dating anyone in this town is controlled by Masel.'

'However, I am not like all my friends that bow to this woman of power over their moms and dads, and friends say so.

'I am not like all my friends that just one thing from a girl, I want more, I want it all, just say, that I am more grown-up.'

'Yes, like, there is more here than just young stupid lust, at this moment looking down her next to lifeless.' 'It is something deeper that engulfs down on you, to the point you do not know what you are going to do.'

'Because, you feel that your head is going to explode; it will make your brain numb, and your appendages go senseless.'

'This and that is what this girl does to me, every time, I see her walking past me. She does not look left or right she is always looking down.'

'Carefully she moves along, and I can see her, with colorful pink socks with bows on them.'

'Thinking in my memories, her socks as I was saying are placed ever so cutely in her schoolgirl black polished leather shoes.'

'They are placed partway up her silky-smooth legs, which contrast harshly with her short tartan blue and black skirt.'

'That seems to bounce up just like her long brown hair, and they both seem to wave back as she treads forward.'

'The shoes she has on today have little bows on them near the toe part. All the girls here have black shoes, yet she just seems to make them look sweeter, because of her style, and expressive, yet hesitant why's that she demonstrates.'

'Yet unlike the other girls here, since she is so small, she has to tie her white button-down blouse, into a bow in the front, yet that matches her famish style.'

'She does that to her tops, mainly, because, the school where they could not get her any smaller top.'

'Therefore, she ties them just above her belly-button. The not school code, yet she is allowed to do that, surprisingly.'

'Yet many girls do not follow the codes.'

'Neveah is modestly sexy, compared to what I see around me.'

'Her blue jacket just hangs on her, yet the school logo should be on her upper chest, yet on her, it is more at her mid-torso in the front.'

'Yet, it looks prettier on her than all the others. As well as, her bow tie around her neck, sits very differently on her too. Her bow tie is the school stander colors of navy blue and red. Yet her ribbons hang down so much lower on her, than her jacket and skirt, so unlike the others.'

'She looks down as if she is studying the ruby red and cerulean speckled floor tiles, that she is walking on. Like she is counting every spot on them in her mind, or something like that; as if there is a sum to every one of them to add.'

'She is watching the surface as if she is making sure she does not get hit, preferentially trip practically drop anything, that she has with her.'

'Notwithstanding, everything she has, that she carries is smashed against her miniature figure. I mean everything she holds; it is like it is being bearhugged by her, it is near to her slightly below her chin, and on top of her chest most of the time.'

'One other thing that she always seems to have with her is a small handbag with 'Hello Kitty' on it.'

'Nevaeh even said, she had spent time in a snack pit in the basement; at the home, they call the orphanage.'

'The grandmother would screech to the girls, 'whom that shed the blood, by persons shall her blood be shed, by being with the devil's kind.'

'Told here in this line of hand pended text, the grandmother's eyes were like rolled back in her head holding a Bible, her white hair pulled back in a loose bun.'

'For the payments of sin is death to hell, but the gift of 'God' is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, you repaint for forgiveness child.' She said evilly.

'As she would drag Nevaeh to the basement of ghostly dungeons cells, the grandmother helped by tranced like stepchildren assisted by the small hands of her sisters, now in the chambers with heavy still doors covering the pits, one was opened and the snakes hissed in Nevaeh's you little gentle face, as they uncoiled, as Nevaeh was wholly pushed in the abyss by the other girls naked.'

'It goes on to say for months on end. She said she only was hearing the screams and cries from other girls, younger and older than she, in cells adjacent to heirs were there were just bar openings at the top, in salary confinements of sh-h.'

Mealtime Nevaeh would pop out head would protrude out the little hole of the door, where sister ladies would then be holding her head wedged with a nightstick to her neckline in the opening, to give her small bights of fruit and bread.'

'They would then push her in the room hard and spray her down with a fire hose, 400 psi for stinking up the cell with her pee-pee and poppy, just to be slammed back in the cold dimly lit room, with no running water, dripping and damp, needing love or something to hug.'

'That explains the teddy bear,' he solved in his mind.

'The grandmother screaming, from the notes that I have.'

'The Lord shields all who love her, but all the mischievous he will destroy.'

'Along with saying, 'furthermore these will go away into an eternal trial, but the righteous into eternal life."

'I wonder if that is true?'

'I read in her notebooks, that was stolen by me, and this is just book one, of many on the shives in Hope's home, were just a day before Nevaeh and I just had made a crime of my unsnapped paints, no time to protect, it or I was all up to her schoolgirl uniform skirt from the front, now sing her slight lust she was sliding down on me more then I was her, in high pinched groaning, of 'HO's with airy gasps,' her back agent all her works of many white spins covered and homemade bound books, when the one I had felt to the floor, and I keep without her knowing after she ran off after she gushed, not mine saying 'you must go.''

'Yes, it is true she and I had standing quickie sex, the first time for us both ever, for all of two minutes and thirdly seconds to when the book cracked the wooden floor, before she ran into the next room after being called, and there was on tear rolling down from her eye, on to her pink flashy cheek.'

(Memories started to play in her mind.)

'The grandmother would say to her and others.'

'The soul who sins shall die.'

'The child shall not suffer for the evil of the father that made you in sin, nor the father suffers for the iniquity of the child.'

'The honor of the good shall be superimposed herself, and the sinfulness of the evil shall be superimposed herself.'

'The backtalk she gives was Nevaeh said, 'you would not god from the bad."

'Do not be fooled child: 'God' is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will she also realize.'

'She rambles on about many beatings and a butt spanking for an hour a day, where she would scream her surrendering's.'

'The grandmother said to Nevaeh and another, the name was pended over with a blemish mark of ink, 'then desire when it has deemed supplies start to sin, and crime, when it is fully matured, yields forth death."

'This brainwashing all was instilled in her mind form little girl up, yet to them premonitions.'

'Consequently, just as immorality spread into the world through a child, and loss through sin, and so death spread to all children because all cursed.'

'It went on to say, that she remembered her saying, 'I remember getting all the beatings.''

'Notwithstanding we need all appear ere the ruling seat of 'Christ,' so that everyone may obtain what is adequate for what she has made in the body, whether genuine or sinister.' Said, the Grandmother, and Mother.

'I believe, something here is not right about the daddy of the others, or there were no marriages, to make all these babies, Nevaeh being one of them, and it worked on the grandmother's mind to madness, yet to most, she is just as ordinary as any other in the town.'

'Observe, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the child is mine, the soul who sins shall die; by the one that gives life to both.'

'It's the blood of a girl that makes a sin.' Said, Leah Amsel to the girl's ages 10 and up.'

'I am sorry.' She would scream repeatedly.

'It's all said, in this book yet go to the cops about it, and Nevaeh is crazy, and so would I be to for thinking this was true.'

'Apologize, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, and kept locked away.'

'Despite, Nevaeh spoke the words to law enforcement the grandpa.'

'Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.'

'You are no better than I, she said screaming and kicking.'

'Oh, child, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body and will go to hell. As I can, to you for being law.' He said back.

'Plus, if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.'

'Yet, here is the book of Nevaeh's life, she made, and I do not fear this at all, yet others would as if it is witchcraft.'

'This is why I am here; I believe her.'

'Anyway, think back to the last day, I saw here, like every day. I see the handbag, that is gray and pink with a white cat on it, and yes, the cat has a pink bow on it as well. It seems that it hangs off her one shoulder, I guess, it holds her pencils, she doesn't need to use or said that she can't use, furthermore holds all of her other girly things, that she needs.'

'Of course, that is different from her too, then the other girls. She is everything that I like and wants to love!'

'Sometimes, she smiles modestly, she just rolls her eyes up, yet still keeps her face pointed downwards at me, yet her blue eyes capture the lights from above when she finally looks up at me.'

'Her beautiful reluctant eyes seem as if they get a wet glimmer in them when she sees me, yes, every time.'

'How I would love to hold her hand or carry her books for her, but I cannot.'

'It seems that she only looks up when she feels that she can; yet while still looking down at the floor while holding her books to her chest shyly.'

'As if her outdated books could shield her entirely from all of the others, that is in the hall with us.'

'Everyone seems to glare down at her.'

'All the same, she walks slowly yet swiftly clinging to those books as if she was invisible behind them. She would never be invisible to me, which is an impossibility.'

'Sometimes, she stops dead in her tracks to roll her eyes up at me, just for an instant, and then she is gone. She tries to mutter something, yet no words are coming out of her mouth.'

'It is just a small sound of panic, or sigh, why does it seem that she is holding her breath when she sees me?'

'That is okay, but why is it when she moves past me; it is like she is panting?'

'I know that I have butterflies, and my heart pounds so fast when I see her; I wonder if that is what she feels towards me, I wonder, like if I had more of her books if there would be something about me in them.'

'Yet she is always looking to the ground as if she has been browbeaten. That is what I have come to understand that she has had bad experiences. Which is what I think has happened.'

'I could make it all right if I could for her!'

Am I falling in love with her looking at her, and reading more about her? I hardly know her! Yet then again is this what you would call love?'

'Is this what we all come back for, and want more of, even if you cannot have them in your life?'

'All this is what I think of, what I have, and what I have missed out on, because of what is known about her in the halls, it all holds me back.'

'I have confidence in saying, that she was or is browbeaten, she is like a lost puppy, which has been smacked on the snout to many times.'

'I think that is what happened here.'

'Oh, Nevaeh's she thinks that she is never going to be good enough. Yet she would be perfect for me. I do not think that she knows it is not her fault at all, the way she has to be, or acts.'

'She is and has become just an avatar of what someone else has created for her. I understand these people do not know her at all and what to get the best of someone to be mean and nasty.'

'They just see a fake identity of what someone has placed upon her. You just need to think about this.'

'It is like, one or maybe more person, that is jealous of her filter all her; decisions, all of her situations, and choices, and even her emotional state, in her life too.'

'Why I don't know, yet I have my suppositions?'

'I do believe, that she is oblivious to the fact of what is going on around her.'

'Yet, 'It!' Is what is said about her- it all has to stay unspoken to her, yet we all know this. I know it, but I would not dare to say it to her.'

'I think it all is because of this one person, which has done nothing but slander her constantly.'

'All these unnecessary problems and torment she has to face in her everyday life. It is so unfair to her. She does not have much; I know her family life is not that decent.'

'Although, I would give everything I have, to make her happy we could make a family I know if my family would get to understand her, they would love her as I do.'

'I see her I wonder what she is all about, so mysterious, so unique, and so unlike all of us who are part of her surroundings.'

'Nevaeh seems timid and shy like I said, but she is approachable. She tries not to stand out- yet does not blend in. I want to get to know her.'

'Then again, I know if I do, I will have to have the same turmoil and consequences as she does. What to do, what to do, think, and think, is all I do! It is one grouping who controls our situation.'

'What can I do? I have concluded, that it is not meant to be until now.'

'Not getting to know her makes me very wretched. Still, the mystery of what can be is overwhelming my mind. Still, I am going along with my strategy of knowing this could end ineffectively. Still, I know that it would be impossible, nothing is hopeless.'

'However, it is also tempting, for the reasons of the love that I must find in my life, and not the stupid lust I have. All things can change it is just a matter of time they have too.'

'One person cannot control someone's life eternally. Can they...?'

'I do not understand why this occurs. How did it become to be like this for her? I assume that it is just jealousy, maybe more.'

'Nevaeh is mysterious, attractive, and creative most other girls cannot even compare to her in my classes or this school. I believe, her overall beauty and appearance are what draws me to her the most.'

'However, I just have to sit and look, as the days go by or and over. I cannot make a move at all, all because of one individual grasp. I see her in only one of my classes History, all she does is scribble in her notebook, in a daydream so it seems.'

'She sits in one of the desks in the middle of the room. What is different about this too is, I do not see her in too many of my other classes; like most of the other girls that, I see more of.'

'Most of her classes are not with mine. I have an idea as to why, yet I am not sure. Yeah, that would not surprise me in the least, if that is what she is classed as.'

'Before that class, I see her sitting in the lunchroom. As I am socializing with friends, she is sitting alone scribbling in her diary of day's events, or thoughts that were in her mind.'

'I sometimes wonder what her stories are all about I going to read them all, that she writes. I would love to no! Still, no one has time for her, no time to see her creative side or any sides.'

'No time to see her abilities, the society here chooses not to see them. Why is this, I ask?'

'Are we just blind or, do we choose not to see?'

'I ask this too, 'do the others make all these judgments for us? It makes me wonder.'

'Nevaeh's eyelashes could put you in a trance as she blinked there now fastened tightly. I should know they have done that with me, in that one class, where she is only with her grade.'

'She is so petite in her stature; she has it all! I am going to get into that skirt someday I hope, anyway I can. That is if she wants me as I want her so much.'

'She has those sweet pink lips that I want to kiss, which I know that could curl up my toes, oh yes, she is perfect!'

'She is the perfect girl, but the nights are so long. Time goes by and you are alone and have to drift apart. Where is she now, oh she is sitting there.'

'The perfect girl, I am thinking about you. It is not our fault it is the way it must be. I can see you there, you look so unhappy.'

'The perfect girl, do you need me? I am sitting here all, yet I feel alone too?'

'The perfect girl, I am thinking about you. I think of you every night, just want to hold you tight.'

'When the moment is right; when we are all alone at one another's sides on that special night.'

'I want to hold your hand all night. I went to kiss you until it breaks daylight.'

'Will you be my angel, you're going to be one, aren't you?'

'Why don't you come along with me? Let our relationships be free. You are so lovely, so I asked why you don't come along with me?'

(Holding her hand)

'I promise, if you hold on, I will treat you right; I will tuck you in every night. I will comfort you and make everything all right. I will cherish you forever; I would spend every moment of my life getting to know you better. If only we had a chance together.'

'Will you be my best friend? Will we last until the end? You have a smile that brightens my every day, which makes all the wrongdoings go away.'

'Your eyes showed me that you care. I know this by the way you adorably try not to stare. I would like to tell you how much I care.'

'How not being with you is not fair. I want you to know that I do care. Just remember that I will always be there. I will promise you that we will always be friends.'

'Now it is your decision; so, I hope that you see my newfound vision. Of what can and will be, because someday soon it will be you and me. That is if you decide to choose to be with me.'

'Yes, I am writing this down, while I am trying to eat the inedible food of the school lunch, in which I am trying to cram down my throat.'

'I see everyone staring at her as if they all could tear her face off and eat it. Yet all over again, I ask the question of why?'

'Yeah, I sit with an unfulfilled heart, thinking that life is so unfair. Listening to my mind as it spins like a tornado through Kansas.'

'Likewise, all the thoughts of what can and cannot be rushing like a racing bolt train through my brain. I have to be in love with her.'

'Oh, love, desire is a wicked game that we play.' She said here, in this line of the manuscript.'

(I was reading more and more.)

'Have you ever admired someone so much, yet you know that you cannot have her in your life? I have and it completely sucks. It is like living without them sucks the life out of you. Besides, it slowly kills you inside, until it shows on the outside, of how much you require them.'

'However, can she see my yearning, or not? Or is she yearning for me, I guess I may never know, yet there is a way I can. So, have you ever had to live with the emptiness of not having someone to talk to, that you want to get to know? I have, yet you cannot even have them as a friend, yet you see them occasionally, it is maddening.'

'I have broken in the Hopes, I know from notes that this room she never goes in there, it was thought by me where we can have moments to be alone and in lust, as we thought about doing in notes of anonymously, or find other hidden passionate spots of meeting-up then she would have found out it was me, yet I never did over fear.'

'Anyways after leaving her for the night, I did not want to, yet I had to at 9 P.M, now in the home. I got into the unused living room with the library is and it all ambiguous and dusty, yet has writings, after volume notebook pined by Nevaeh herself.'

'Furthermore, got the last book, I go right to the last chapter, that I was hoping was all about me, I could not take any more of not knowing, page after page if was loving hot lust of a 14-year-old, to this date, and I was in love.'

'She also talks about her diaphanous nighty and no underpants.'

'Then I read about the big stiffed teddy, that is light brown on the soft fizzy fair pink sheets of her twin bed, she wanted so badly, with the allowance money, that she used some pink rope on the bear she bought that is the same size as her, just to be like me as she was giving him a girl on top loving long hard and then slow, using a tan rubber him for soloing, like being me, as if me in her mind I was under her, and I was lost in lust, of wanting her in that way. and mad in moments of humming hugging and kissing, as it says here, in the text.'

'It was said that all she wanted to be more attention, yet if that was true this would be the first time, she got that.'

'Have you ever had to go through life, without knowing what it is like to be in love; or no that no one cares if you're alive or not?'

(Yes or No)

'Have you ever gone through your life, not knowing what it would be like to hold someone's hand or kiss them on the lips, and know that you cannot?'

(Yes or No)

'If you say yes, then you are like a girl like Nevaeh. I kind of know what she is going through, and yet, no I don't.'

'Even the district attorney has been up to her butt about here doing this and that, that is not true said by the cries of the sisters, from what I gathered.'

'It is the same for me, yet different for us both.'

'The tower is the Grandmother and her Grandkids the clan is what we call the group leaders of control, who will not leave me alone.'

'I bet she knows where I am now, it like she is in my head even this girl that belongs to the family line, like the grandmother and the grandchildren have the power to keep me dumb and in love with the girl of their choice yet still one of their granddaughters.'

'I will explain her name later, if I don't, just ask her about this, I am sure she would say she owns me.'

'Although you should already know that, it has to be one of the others, it is not loving she feels for me at all, it is to keep me away from Nevaeh.'

'While hopping back out the window of Nevaeh's home, as I was running back to my running truck down the lane, I saw eyes looking at me in the fields or so I thought, it was this girl that owns me as if sold by the Grandmother, as all of us are in this town.'

'Everything seems flawless when looking at her in my eyes, but everything changes and everything moves on because of the tower's words.'

'Her fetish for me is about as strong as mine for Nevaeh.'

~*~

Nevaeh- 'That boy!' She said, along with this, as she was waking up in her hospital bed, that she was in, of room number 114.'

'All I member about him being here is when he touched my face and said, 'you're the one."

'Look at this, I have all the candy, like, I could ever want.'

'I still attempt to talk to him, and yet the clan girls whirl around me stopping me, one in my mind, and two face to face in confrontations of hardcore bullying; and I am thrown around like a rag doll.'

'We cannot be together as we would like to be you see, I would love him if I could.'

'Those days were over a long time ago for me, to feel love.' 'So, have you ever been in love, like this? Have you ever been in love with someone that did not love you back or that cannot be of fear, or cannot love you because of who you are? I have, and it frustrating.'

'Have you ever loved, and not got any love back from him, or them or anyone? If so, then you are like me now.'

'Have you ever had someone in your way, to what you know is right?'

'Have you ever had the pain of being heartbroken every time you try?'

'So, have you ever been threatened to stay away from when all you want to do is talk?'

'I do believe that it is all meant to be, he is my angel and I am his.'

'For some reason, and you feel, that you have the one in mind, that is right for you.'

'Simply, you cannot make it happen ever. If so, then you are like me.'

~*~

Chiaz- 'Yet, I know if I do this, I might lose all my friends. Yet, that is a chance, which I am thinking about making if I find away.'

'Because she is all I would need! If you have lived a life like me, then you know that I have tried, and it has gotten me nowhere fast.'

'Additionally, if you are like me then you fall in love too fast. I have to stop doing this to myself.'

~*~

Nevaeh- 'I remember when I started to try not to love things.'

'I remember being the age of six, and seeing my father's lovely home, being demolished down to nothing. Nothing more than a big pile of rubble on the dusty ground.'

'All the memories are now gone, as the breeze blows, as the house crumbles to nothing but dust. I stood there while thinking about all the lost moments in time, which we could of the head together.'

'That never happened, and never can. They were all taken away, just like everyone and everything in my life, that I have loved.'

'I do not want to fall in love over the fear of love and loss, yet, I need the love from someone that understands me.' 'Why do I get so attached to what I cannot have?'

'I am frightened of love! All I have left is a picture of the home, with my dad holding me on the front porch. It was a cute little country house.'

'Nothing fancy, just a small one-story bungalow, with a pitched roof, and one dormer on the right side; and a lighting fixture on the chimney, that would glow softly at night.'

'The shaker-shingles where a creamy coffee color and the windows were trimmed white with blushing red shutters.'

'The porch was elevated with steps that went up, to a rosy door. I remember in the spring, there were flower boxes on the left and right side of the windowsills.'

'It was the nicest home, I lived in up to that point; this home did not need to be ripped down.'

'However, that is what people do these days, ripped things apart, and leave empty spaces,' and gaping holes to feel. I mean just looking at all these photos spread about my bedroom floor, they are just snapshots lost in time.'

'They tell a story of a past that has been, forgotten. However, they cannot replace the moments where you or they did not exist. I look back over them all, until I see this one, and reflect on it.'

'This photo is my first-grade class snapshot. I see the faces, yet I do not see the friendship. Where did it go? Why did it not last?'

'Besides, what do I do to fix the situation? It is just like, black-and-white faded into color, photographs of one another.'

'Moments of time and splendor, moments in which, I may or may not want to remember.'

'Moments that gray, as I get older.'

'Moments that once was in vivid color.'

'I remember being in my first-grade class, with the acquaintances, that I have met throughout the year. I recall not fitting in from a young age.'

'The other students would be learning their new lesson of the day, while as for me, I was off doing my own thing like always. Yet, I was made too, I always like being creative; I guess that goes along with being withdrawn from others.'

'However, I cannot help but wonder was it all a forced seclusion at work? Additionally, all children learn and do things differently.'

'If anything, I am most certain, that there is no one set standard, in which someone learns how to do something.'

'That there is no need for separation, just to gain an education. I did not know, those judgments were made for me back then, that they did without my admiration.'

'Let me not fell to mention, that having somebody's thoughts being placed down upon me, without me being aware of that fact they were, was just to hold me back.'

'They all were just making my life more difficult for me at such an undeveloped age. That is what started all of this, snowballing downhill for me.'

'This all happens because, of their lives. Without the whereabouts of me even knowing how significant this dark cloud, which is forming overhead, would be.'

'They followed me around as if I was a danger to others and myself, yet that is local law and school boards were the counties and courts are as one of being controlled by my Grandmother.'

'My Grandmother would like to tap me on the shoulder with her mahogany wood hand-carved walking stick that was electrically charged with the silver-plated flying lady angle on the top, with ruby eyes, she said 'I had another one of these' she pointed to the decorative pace, then she went on to say, 'yet it was stolen from in gold.''

'Just like my Grandpa would use his gold time-worn pocket watch to hypnotize me as it would swing crossed my face at any time he wanted, where they could do anything he wanted or anyone could do anything to me they wanted by command, as the slave, even now I have triggers to do by command.'

'You can gather that It is going to follow me everywhere, I go.'

'This is how the tower formed her stories about me.'

'I remember all my nights of being confused, as I lay on my bed frightened here in my home. I was and still, am always alarmed by all the evil in my life.'

'Sometimes, I put my pillow over my head. Yet, I can still envision all the faces playing back in slow motion.'

'Seeing all these faces looking at me, at the hellhole and even back, when I was with my mother.'

'I recall the school days repeatedly, from the past to this very day. I can see the water dripping from the asbestos-exposed ceiling tiles, onto the filth cover floors.'

'I can see all the locker doors slam, as I watched the water as it falls onto the floor form above me. This reminds me of my heart every time, I go to school.'

'When in school, I always wonder, what is going to be said about me?'

'Who is starting actions that will slander, labeling, attacking, belittling, defaming, maligning, and cursing my life?'

'It is just like lockers that are closed, will I ever know the combination? Will I ever be able to open it, so that I can see what lies within?'

'Will the contents ever be known to me? I recall walking up and down the many darken hallways, that seems to lead to nowhere.'

'With their many fluorescent lights flickering on and off, they are suspended from the ceiling. The lone window at the end of the hallway is the only shining light of freedom.'

'Everyone and everything faded, to black and white to me. As if, I see them moving in slow motion as they lose their color, as they all swarm around me with their stingers out, I never know what is going to happen to me.'

'These days are forever etched in my mind. They all seem to find a way to crawl into my blood and play around like spiders in my brain.'

'They make my skin tickle from the inside out, just thinking about them. It is like they leach on me, that is why I feel so creepy-crawly in my uniform, and I cannot wait to get it all of me. I watch as nerds are stuffed into lockers.'

'The jocks are making out with random preppy cheerleaders, with their hands going all over one another, with their fingers going up and down and in their uniforms.'

'Yes, I just stand there at my locker, looking like I am trying to catch flies in my mouth.'

'Everyone is making out, yet not me, I just the good girl, that is to know to be dumb and forbidden too.'

'I recall one of them getting a swirly, and by that one, I mean me, flush! It is not that bad of a hairstyle, yet I just washed my hair last night and did some loose curls in it.'

'So, it did not need to be washed and styled in the toilet bowl, but okay. No, I do not mind at all looking like I have a unicorn spike on my head.'

'Most days, for me I am walking along carrying books, that have no meaning. As I go up and down the numerous staircases between classes. Well watching the faces go by.'

'Yet, there are no relationships for me that I can rely on here in the school.'

'So, with me being so timid and shy, I do not make any pronounced movements. I just walk down the staircase minding my own business unlike everybody else. All the perverted boys are trying to look up my skirt like always.'

'They are making comments and saying stupid alternate things.'

'Like this one. 'Hey Nevaeh, so does the carpet match the drapes?"

'Nevaeh, because we know you do not have smooth hardwood floors?'

'Hey Nevaeh, 'spit or swallow?''

'I roll my eyes.'

When I overhear, 'We no girls like you don't know what it means to do either over you are retarded.'

'No, but I do trim my lines and as far as that goes, maybe, but I am not commenting on that one, to them! Then there are my favorite quotes, which they ask me yet that not all of them as you could imagen.'

Some of them are asking- 'How is your Period?'

'Can you read the 'Cat in the Hat' yet?'

'Virgin,' they chant.

'Crazy girl,' they chant also.

'So, are you and your lesbian, going to scissors smack your p*ssies together tonight?'

'Sometimes, I think boys if you had the cramps, moodiness, drippy feelings, that I have you would flip out running down the hall saying, 'my dick' is bleeding.'

'Furthermore, repeatedly while screaming in pain doing just that! As well as, roll on the floor like a crybaby!' I giggle out loud.

'Then I could throw used girly things like pads with discharge on it, bloody tampons at your face like you do me; plus see how you like it, for a change!'

'This is another one asked by dumb girls and boys alike. 'So, have you not gone through puberty yet?"

'So, is that why your voice squeaks like that?' They ask me.

'Sometimes, I just say I don't know maybe I have a lifetime supply of helium!'

'Furthermore, I guess my small boobs are just for show.'

'Dumb questions, yet there asked by them repeatedly.'

'Nevaeh, they say- 'Why does your voice sound like that. I say- 'I do not know, why does your face look like that!' I do not know why that concerns them.'

'Nevertheless, welcome to my High school, and the way they think and act around me. I think that you can get the picture.'

'Sometimes, I wonder if my kids or grandkids will have my voice, someday oh- hum.'

'However, listening to all this mindless chatter, it makes me wonder what is going on in their heads. 'I must be in hell."

'Then, I hear the eerie sound of the bells ring out, they are calling me; yes, calling for me to go back to my total isolation.'

'I have been left behind, not allowed to shine. Will I ever have anything that I can call mine? Am I going to be fine? Please, someone, give me a sign. Should I not worry about being one-of-a-kind?'

'One class I detest, even though it gets me out of the entire separation, is a gym. The teacher is fond of staring at us while we are running our laps and doing our activities. She has even walked up to me while topless and said- 'you are developing quite nicely."

'Okay- if you say so.'

'Miss. Stackawitz she is one of those butch looking women, that has boy shorts on at all times, or sweats. She likes her tight-fitting sports tops also. Yeah, that shows everything she's got- ewe- wah!'

'Nothing on her seems to be where it is meant to be. She has 1980's style glasses and a whistle that makes my ears ring.'

'Yet, I always try to be nice to her. She seems to act all sweet to your face, but talks to all the kids, and teachers about how you look in her class, and locker room.'

'The locker room smells of sweat and cheap perfume. I have to change out of my outfit and mess up my make-up and hair. While having all these girls, in there staring at me; yes- while I am standing there in my bra, panties, or less.'

'You know, I did not know that lacey, pink polka dots were so fascinating.' 'What are they staring at?"

'Hello, I am just a slightly naked girl standing here changing, nothing.'

'Yet the mindless chattering is going on all around me. 'Talk about awkward!' In this private, type of school, they can make us shower after Gym class.'

'Yet-I do not feel like being traumatized again, with all of them. However, I can still envision all of them looking at me in there.'

'Why are all these shower heads all out in the open in this room? I have all the other girls circled me; all ten of these showerheads jet out from one central point, from the only support column, in the middle near the ceiling on the one pillar.'

'We ten girls- we are face-to-face, and front-to-front, with are bare butts hanging out in the back. As we, all are in a circle with the sporting, spring, and smacking water drenching on us.'

'The mist does not cover my body entirely, and there is no towels insight. However, they all seem so perfect to me. Besides, of course, I am going to get touched in there by their soapy little fingers.'

'Yet they all laugh like it is fun to them. However, not to me, I guess it could be fun; if I was with someone I wanted to be rubbed upon.'

'Taking a shower, in my opinion, is a private all most spiritual cleansing of the body and mind, which should not be publicized in my opinion.'

'I believe that there is only one true alternative in my mind, and that is being with the one you love.'

'But then again, it needs to be candlelit, or at least that is what I think, for there is nothing like seeing the steam resonating off the water droplets, that fall upon the entwined torsos in a graceful shining of zenith; while having all the vaporizing, and steam helixing all around us, in passion and adornment.'

'Yes, that is the fantasy I get when showering. That is what I think of; I just put my mind there, to complete the shower in school too. I just pretend that the hands that are touching me are his hands, and not the girls fingering me.'

'In my mind, I picture the shower has the light of a dancing flame of a candle that shows true intimacy. Like having the silky slick shadow on me and the flame of my heart.'

'I guess within that moment; I would feel flawless. I know that you are not going to understand why I feel this way, as of now.'

'However, as you go through my story. It will all make sense, and this is the only time, I have to myself.' 'When I daydream like this, I am gone- go to another place it seems like I said, I do not hear what they say when I close my eyes, I just let them fade away.'

'Although, I can feel what they are doing to me, yet, I am in my fantasy with my eyes closed. Yet, I cannot help but look at them all to, and I see what is different about them when looking up at them and back down.'

'Every girl looks dissimilar, yet as for me, I still look like a little girl with a bit on top, and an innie one downward. I guess that's why the other girls try to pull the lips apart; yet, I do not want to break anything! Why do they want to do that anyway?'

'I asked the teacher and she said- 'You'll figure it out.' I said, okay?'

'I am going too, and I did, that night outside when I got home from school. I never knew that could happen, and I did not break anything either!'

'Anyways, I also do not like being in the locker room, since there is no one I can trust.'

'Why do I feel this way you ask? Will even though students here are not allowed to have their cell phones during school hours. That does not stop them from snapping a photo of me while standing in my underwear or less or even in the shower.'

'Then posting it all... to their social networking sites. Nice- don't you think! These photos cannot be destroyed it is on the web, and it is going to last for eternity, even if I do not want it to or not.'

'I cannot say that I was ready for my close up!'

'Just remember someone's contribution to the internet can never be taken away.'

'I am on there in my pink polka-dotted glory and lathered wet pose forever.' While- at least now some of the boys in school, now have one of their questions answered.'

'I think of life this way; life is like a blade that cuts in all directions. Yet, I am like that one daisy flower that you and I have to turn away seldom.'

'Sometimes, I have to close myself to you, and all the surroundings around you, just drift away.'

'Then let that heavenly shower let me grow. Well hoping that someone's blade does not cut me away from my roots, so I blossom for you, so we can both be together in our divine destinies.'

'That is what I want for you and me. To blossom, while never getting detached from each other, never to be cut away, that is if I could fall in love again.'

'After gym class, I am completely drained, half-sick to my stomach and then it is off to lunch.'

'The smell of the food makes me want to gag. With the main course being pizza, and the vegetables of tater tots, I think I will pass.'

'I look around the lunchroom; I see- Nathaniel LaMarsh picking his nose like always and rubbing boyish snot in his books, that others have to use for class.'

'So gross!' I say out loud.

'Jenny Valentino is sucking on a banana. Yet, she thinks I suck on glue sticks in the Sped room.'

'Jonathan Eisezn is trying to ram his religion into everyone's ears and going into convulsions. Even if the Bible is prevented in my school.'

'All they talk about in this would most fantastic fiction book is waking of d*ck's, and make others feel bad about being themselves. Shut up your being to load.' Said, Edward Gonzalez.

'I snickered so hard, I snorted at the thoughts of letting the sequence of through he said work in my mind.'

'Yet I am told 'The Catcher and the Rye,' is wrong for me to have, being a band to all in the school, and I can't read anyways, even so of what you think, the true message is just having the book in my possession or my hands time from time, and if you don't understand why you're a fool.'

'Just at that moment, I saw, Ainge campo is dumping her spoiled chocolate milk down another girl's blouse.'

'In addition to that, Paul Navis is feeling up his girlfriend- Hannah McGruben, which leads into her playing with him under the table.'

'She has her own found banana to unpeel. Yet no one sees that they only see me.'

'Yes, I am in hell.'

'Trauma and hypnosis have been my life, it all part of splitting my mind, therefore they think I act like a little child, just a color or a sound can make me do as they say, like a human-robot. I even think a time, that I am an unpolished diamond.'

'I can stay up days on end, and think about long things to write that seems imposable, and have endless stamina, sometimes I feel like nothing more a courier, and a byte comfort woman for my master and their picks for me to be with.'

'Just like a human-robot to disable looking, I have to be forced to use a computer to teach me reading and writing, as if cute by my masters, yet never really use one, yet when I do it

is less than the ideal computer as if an enables robot fixing what they take away from me in programing like a computer robot of idiosyncratic ways back and forth.'

'Just like a sound or a scent can bring froth memories, only at that time, that is most like blackout of my mind until, having the sent or small made to feel as if Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder without really having this in moments of rapped eye moment, and higher sensitivities to all sights and sounds and even shadows.'

'In my first year of school the teachers were so loving, just to after having torchers at home and be locked away for hours at a time, in cages, testing to see my I.Q was done, and it was said I was highly gifted so my mind could be shattered by my teachers, kind then shock, and I wonder why, I cannot trust, yet the question is why?

'My conscious mind took flight like the butterfly, and to expose this the end of a mind would come, I knew, within and the unconscious was wide open in a highly subjectable state I was trained to be Special Ed, or a nut, just a sick experiment of giving pain for enjoyment.'

'Take a brilliant mind and kill it, over you can't be brilliant in this town when all kids have to be the same. or that is what I want to think is why so it's not so sinister even though the devil was in the details even my dream is not my own.'

'I am so frightened, yet I would be crazy to say my mind is not my own.'

'Do you even believe me?'

'Just like the delusion now from being the experiments of your teachers.'

'The range of communication they say, about me as the made to be rejected, is now all published worldwide for the world to see, all the labeling of my life.'

'Plus, it is written in writing, using the logic of consciousness, over some made not to have one, yet they have a brain more than me.'

'What do you all think about Nevaeh? Inquired stealthily, on a website pull on Facebook.'

'Who in the hell is Nevaeh? Oh, is she that creeper girl?' said, Paul Navis, in a Facebook post.'

'Yeah, she freaks me, and my friends out.'

'This was said, by another in a footnote the following many awful comments.'

'She is crazy!' Said, Nathaniel LaMarsh.

'She is a stocker!' Said, Jenny Valentino.

'She has an STD! She is not the type of girl that, I want to take home to my momma!' Said, Jonathan Eisezn.

'Isn't she like- bisexual? No- I wouldn't even go for that girl.' Said, Ainge campo.

'Isn't she- simpleminded!' Said, Hannah McGruben.

'Although, I am the one with a mind that is not valid.'

'I have read her reports by are teachers and district and have given informed all my students the right to know about her (IEP) and her endangerment.

'I have given them the vocal statements and made online booklets of her 'Individualized Education Program' her documents. Moreover, so has everyone else that can get their hands on a copy.' Said Mr. DeVolcano.

'Mr. DeVolcano then went on to say, her IQ is below what is normal, it is at less than 55, which puts her in the extreme the disability categories; we have informed all the parents about Nevaeh, and all the parents their children; so, that their kids are not in any danger, from this damaged child of endangerment.'

'Also, if they're smart, they stay away, we make sure of that, by segregating her from all others, but her like kind.' Said, Mr. DeVolcano.

Nevaeh- 'Even the teachers are in on this, yet why?'

'Yet, they would say to me that this is all just Epigenetic Memories.'

'I along with teachers, we think she needs emotional sport also!'

'He went on to say, I think she needs help in every class too; she is a hold up for the others that want to learn. I think the girl needs help, in everything here at the school! I disagree with the guardian and Nevaeh; they do not believe she needs learning support accommodations!'

'Sad this protector's denial, the school staff and I think she does, and that too is the law, we have our experts that say so that we have hired at our expenses. It was either sign or find some other school for her to attend for the mental handicaps.' Said the highly regarded teacher.

'He went on to speak, you know, her reading level is second grade; she cannot write sentences, without having six ears in them. In my class, it is like her mind wonders. She does not want to be taught; she is a waste of time to us all here, that why I lock her in the closet and say don't come out until class is over.'

'This boy has been my head for about six mounts, as a shard mind lover. I wonder how he got in without them knowing; where I trusted him, yet should I? Conversely, is he being nice to just trick me, like all of them?'

'I thought over wanting to be in my memoranda, to see what it is like to be me.'

'They see everything of my body, at all times, like from my head down, all objects I see, and my lower body as if me, out of my eyes, as if my eyes are now cameras for them to see my everything.'

Nevaeh- 'As for me, I like to keep my ears and eyes open, and my mouth shut.'

'Yet, I am still taking for belligerent for having my thoughts at any moment, that my teachers read at any time they want in are in my body, hide in my mind, and play in my soul like a hidden possessed clown-like child, where you can't stop a thought, they take an action that will be acted out are what you're going to say.'

~*~

'In the lunchroom and in the halls too. I see the Jocks are just being plain stupid, making inappropriate immature gestures.'

'I see all the faces staring at me once again. I see the preppy girls laughing hysterically about their superficial existence.'

'While they all speak loudly. I see the Nerds talking about, most likely about computer-related things. Plus, wrapping tape on their crossbars to fix their eyeglasses, after getting hit in the face repeatedly by the Jocks.'

'They also talk about the fact that they cannot find any girls that are willing to date them; yet, they kind of fade away in the background.'

'As for me Nevaeh, I just want the day to be over. I sit alone- Yet 'If you are by yourself you are in good company.' I feel everyone's emotions fall upon my body, like icy cold snowflakes that chill me internally.'

'After lunch, I go to history class, everyone in the class is half passed out from the boredom in which they have to endure. However, it may be from the overwhelming amount of tater tots that they have eaten.'

'Either way, Mr. Mendocino is rambling on about the destruction and the overall horror of the Holocaust movement.'

'Definitely, in his monotone voice, half the guys in the class have their hands under their desks playing with it and sending text messages that are extremely significant to their passion person.'

'I just draw black and white sketches in my notebook! Like- 'You all just cannot wait until class is over.' I do not want to see that, nor have it next to me, or have what is leftover on me.'

'That is why I hate when some of the guys and some creepy girls in class touch my hair. On the other hand, just touch me in general; yeah, I just do not know where their hands have been.'

'I am not a germaphobe, yet I like to say clean in school, and only get down and dirty when I want to!'

'So, in my classes where I am still the outcast of being the same grouping of needs, Elizabeth Smith is twirling her hair.'

'Megan Davis is applying another layer of makeup.'

'Besides, to using one of those things to fix her lashes, John Jackson is pulling Lily Anderson's pigtails.'

'My dream love is sitting behind me. I am in one of my average classes with him, yet after this one, it back to me being in the small room, where I sit for the rest of the day, with the rejects that are not wanted.'

'One of the girls in this class with me is Lily she is a soft-spoken, shy sweetheart type of girl, that has a warm loving personality. She can always find the good in any situation, which crosses her path.'

'Lily, she is peaceful and calm in her expressions, her hobbies include drawing, singing in her church's choir, and braiding her hair with ribbons that match her outfits.'

'She is one of the good girls; she is a lot like me in a way! I think I could say that she is a friend of mine, maybe more.'

'One Speder is- J.A Cowering he is shouting things like- 'I like tater tots!'

'Along with other profanity in his slow voice, while he is smacking himself in the chest, with his one hand.' 'Yet this is me, too right?'

'The poor kid requires his needs, (I don't,) yet regardless of the needs overall being thought to be the same puke to your masters, I am placed with highly retarded disabled kids, yet some like me are not that severe to extreme, yet they're all throw in the same room, meaning you only have at the high second-grade education, do the others holding me back, I get what they think I can handle.'

'Yapper that is what they have me classed as also nothing more than a brain dead a chest tapper, and the kids and teachers reminded me every moment of every day that I am, and next to a child molester or not knowing better, like I have the understanding of that of a 5-year-old.'

'In reject classes like always, Lily is with me, she sits next to me most days. Along with Taylor Brown that is asleep snoring, with her lips parted while drilling a puddle on her desk.'

'Again, before passing out paraphrasing to the teacher that the first-grade childlike book, we need to read is fake and gay.'

'There are no windows, the doors are not even that of the same style for a classroom, this was nothing more an old mop closet, made into a classroom, no more than ten old still and wood desk linked together are lined in rows of 5 hold us trapped, the wheelchairs are off to the side, looking at us all cockeyed.'

'Your tooled to be your teacher's toilet in this program, just open up your mouth, so they can take a hot steamy long tard of crap in it, then again poopy in this room seems to be a theme, like self-playing with one's privates, or the child next to you privates.'

'The sounds and the light seem way too bright as if meant to be to chatter the fragile minds even more, in this basement hole of a room with no heat, and it smalls of rat tards, and sofa, like in Granny's home with too many cats, along with black mold, the air is tight and stale, the walls mawkish with many years of kids whipping whatever on them and not being clean over no one cares about us, in the room of the insufficiency.'

'Joseph Shaw is tearing his textbooks into spitballs and blowing them on others and me.'

'Kassie Row is popping her gum tapping her pen, farting, asking dumb questions to the teacher that are sexual, and looking at me like she wants a piece of me, she knocks her books on the floor just so she can look up at me, and they, I not doing any of this bull sh*t, and I going to think about you as I go lefty, right now with my hand in my skirt.'

'Anxious to say she was using her right hand, even I know that, and so did the teacher who did not see a thing, only me.'

'Candy Sheldon she is cracking her knuckles and tapping her led pencil on her tabletop that she is carving bent over love depictions into.'

'I think, I even saw a paper airplane go by me, and the teacher did not even blink, as if his intelligence was wasted by tolerating the kid's childish enjoyment, that becoming nothing more than a babysits for the class, this is true unrelenting, of all that is grim, and an inexorable

horror, that just suppressed and made to be pent up in the mind, never angry am I, just sorrowful, filling tragic, and grieving about the loss of time and memories.'

'Nevertheless, none of the teachers even care outside this room to think, I more than a chest taper.'

'They all are getting paid the same amount of money if we students want to listen or not, and none of us want to learn they say anyway so they don't teach anything anymore to us.'

'These kids jokingly say, now, 'it's time to goes back to the hating on others and conic masturbation,' it is all they can do in school.'

'That is just part of the teacher's existence in life, yet should I feel apologetic for them.'

'No, I think not.'

'Yet, this is some of what my existence in life is like here in the hellhole known as the High school also.'

'What do you all think about Nevaeh?'

'She Sped in the head!' Said, Elizabeth Smith.

'Yet he is in the same classes I am in.'

She is a pedophile! Said, Megan Davis.

'Yet he is in the same classes I am in, so your one too.'

'She is the sweetest girl in the world!' Said, Lily Anderson.

'I understand why she said this.'

Taylor Brown- She is a waste of life! Just like all of us in this class.

'Don't even say her name around me I'll throw-up!' Said, Joseph Shaw.

'I feel the same about you.'

'She is one nut job!' Said, Kassie Row.

(Next class the bell rings)

Miss. Stackawitz- the P.E teacher, 'I tell her to leave my class or just do it.'

'That girl can't even throw a softball, yet she tries to run away from everything.' I remember this one day in class the girls were playing Dodge-ball.' Said, Miss. Stackawitz.

Along with saying, 'She was giving me a hard time. She did not want to play along. As a result, I asked her why, and Nevaeh said quote- "I do not like balls in my face!' And- all the girls laughed until they cried, and so did I, I mean come on, that was hilarious. Because it is so true, she can come out with them, without even knowing.'

(Next class away from the incapacitated)

Mr. Mendocino- is the History teacher, 'No comment, on that girl, it would take me too long, to express how I feel about her.'

Then he went on to say, 'Previously, I often wonder why so many people were splattered, in the Holocaust, and yet someone like her is still walking free.' Said, Mr. Mendocino.

Along with stating, 'Nevaeh did not even get, 'Who was Hitler' right on my test.'

Then he said, 'she said quote- 'A bad guy, with a weird mustache.' I was not amused… she said I was not trying to be funny I don't find this cute.'

He responded, 'Besides, she spelled that wrong too. The only thing she got right was her name, surprisingly she did that! 'Fail!' However, Nevaeh cried in class while watching the movie 'Schindler's List' so she got something out of it I would hope when she saw the girl in the red jacket, and also when the girl being a wheeled way. She said, 'I know how she feels.'

'That disturbed me! like really are you that illogical.'

Nevaeh- 'Do I take this for them being right, when all I can be is wrong even if right or wrong? Preferentially am I just in loser denial, of sucking hard at life, where I cannot win?'

Chapter: 7

Naughty Daydreamer of Nightmares

Nevaeh- 'Next morning the date of September 18, 2009, I am counting down the days, so when I have a break from- this hell once again.'

'The only thing keeping me going is the thought of him in my mind and moments that are cut to short.'

'It is a Friday, and I am thinking, that I have no plans for the weekend like always. I am sitting in my reject class; I am daydreaming about my loneliness, which I am going to face over the weekend.'

'With no entertainment, other than me staring at my selling in my bedroom and my classroom, most of the time I just drift off into a trance while every room I am in spins, and the color fades from my eyes.'

'The color fades from them all to, and then I am the only one in color wearing my blue and red uniform, just like that girl in the movie that I saw in my history class the other day. I am afraid of them, just like her.'

'It haunts me now! Just like the red for the blood that we shed, and the blue is there for me it shows me dying slowly inside as I turn that color, all alone I am just like her, nowhere to run, no one that cares, no family left or friends; in the end just to be wheeled away, and not remembered.'

'I am just like her, yes! I am very familiar with how she feels, are existences are very much alike! I am a little Jewish girl, and they are the Nazi's killing me.'

'I can look out my window and the world move fast in time, I can see the others have their happy little lives when I look out, yet I can look in my room, and time moves so slowly, yet this is mine, this is my life.'

'At the hellhole, all the days run to gather, my first class of the day, and I am sitting in the music classroom. I am surrounded by a bunch of zombies, yet the chorus-musical director thinks I am the one that is brain dead.'

'Mr. DeVolcano as so-known as- the 'Tiny guy!' as some of the students call him, yet he is huge. He is the type that gets pissed if you do not reach his so-called standards of

superiority. He makes his presence known by throwing pencils across the room and getting all up in your face.'

'It is like he gets so worked up that his eyes rattle in his husky balding blockhead, as he glares right at you. He has a voice that will make you jump ten feet in the air when you are not expecting him to shout everything that is on his little mind out in the open.'

'Once more, I try to be nice to him, but a lot of good that does me. He made all the others in the class completely lose respect for me. He has his pets, and I am surely not one of them. If anything, I am his main target.'

'He has been trying to kick me out of this class from day one. I would guess he is prejudice against my type. Sad to say that, I while must put with his bullshit for the next six years. Yet- someday he will get his repayment. I do not know how; I do know not when.'

'However, I am sure of it. His method of teaching is cursing you up and down, in front of your classmates. Shouting at the top of his lung's things like 'I'm the director, if you do not like it then take your ass out the door.' He thinks he is God's gift to music, while we watch him demonstrate singing, and playing out of time and key.'

'Mr. DeVolcano configured his way to the top by using deception. I conjecture the fact that if you know someone, you can become a teacher here at this school. Yes, even without having the degree that you need.'

'He tries to make himself feel like less of a failure, by making everyone feel insignificant in the processes of his developments in his class. By screaming and yelling at the freshmen just the same as he does the seniors. Just because he thinks, it builds character.'

'Talk about issues.'

'The day drags for seven long hours. Then the end of the day class bell rings out, for the trip back home on the bus and it seems to run back to the way it did in the morning when I got here. Now it is off to my home, where I sit and think for the remainder of the day.'

'It is Friday night, and I just do not want to stay at home all night. Therefore, I thought I would go to the game, and watched the Jocks smash themselves into one another until they have brain damage.'

'If they all know he was in my head now lost and sweet to me when I feel shy, they would not stand for this, he is why I live and why I die, cry, try, and sigh, and yet, I still ask my questions of why.'

'Walking around the football field it is either the first or the second home game, I can hear the same disorienting school theme song playing repeatedly. It is sounding horribly out of tune in the background, and its reverberation goes all around the old stadium.'

'The cheerleaders are shouting their battle cries, as they jiggle and wiggle to their chants. A sea of navy blue and ruddy red hues in the stands, combined with the band's uniforms. Besides, everyone's faces old and young have the look of war and frenzy.'

'One middle-aged guy even has a cowbell and an air horn, and he is just losing his mind! Woot- Woot… I think sarcastically in my mind, who cares!'

'The falling raindrops from the skies they shine like diamonds reflecting off the lights. I can smell the scent of rain, as I draw in a savoring breath, and yet letting it out my mouth sighing slightly, with a humming sound.'

'As I walk to the ancient bleachers, mud is everywhere, mixed with confetti that is littering all over the ground along with the leftover food from the concession stands. I am surrounded by people, yet I still feel as if I am all alone.'

'Football games in the rain. Yet nobody feels my pain.' 'Should I feel shame?'

'While I stand to look up at everyone just like a freeze-frame.'

'Everyone knows my name, yet they all do not feel the same.'

'The game is over everyone is gone, yet I just sit in the rain as the lights go black on me.'

'Then slowly walk out of there and begin my walk home in the rain alone! While ringing my uniform out as I go alone down the empty pathway. That reminds me, that I can meet someone throughout the day.'

'I can have great associations underway. However, the very next day it all goes away. I wonder why, yet I am not surprised, by that fact. Nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe it is because of who I am? What I stand for, or is it my belief?'

'Maybe it is because everyone has ways of destroying one another. How do you ask? Well- I think one way is by using their communications technologies and the other by the words of cheap talk. Either way, my life has changed. Similarly, mine seems to be metamorphosing into something even more ugly than I thought in previous days of my life, and existence.'

'What is a friend?'

'What are people that you see day to day, and they see what they think you are by what they see?'

'Do they only see what they know of you?'

'What do they see in me?'

'I see them yet; I don't know them. So, what are they? Are they acquaintances, contacts, or enemies? Is someone you know someone you can trust?'

'To me, it seems like the moral beliefs of friendships have been breached, to me no one is a friend, yet I am open to companionship if they come my way. What people think is not something that can be fixed just by changing a status online, or in the halls.'

'Trust me it cannot!'

'The trust will not be regained with them, or me. Therefore, they do not see me for who I am, because of status, and their friendships that they trust in seeing what they want to see.'

'Do you see?'

'I look at my social page, and it is an empty canvas. With no identified photography, that corresponds to additional individuals from the past or present time. The towering entity will not allow me to be seen with others, nor them to be seen around me.'

'Can you see my picture developing?'

'Yes, to me the meaning of friendship has been redefined. As I entered the modern age of electronics with my so-called friends.'

'Sure, I can see your profile, sure- I can see all your faces, sure, I can see the description, but then again, I do not know who you are. I do not know your intentions, nor do I know what you stand for. So, should I be paranoid, or should you be?'

'I wonder sometimes while pacing the floor in my room, or just sitting on my bed with the laptop that is pink in color. Should I live with the freedom that has been established to link me together with them?'

'Must I decide to deactivate, as they sometimes make me do to, I am childlike?'

'So, I can be isolated furthermore; or should I remain ignored while active?'

'I come home before the game is over it was over for me before it started, I look at my old typewriter that is sitting here on my disk, a reminder of how things were done in the past, and think that was a good way of communication.'

'So not, like today. I thought about using it but- am I good enough to say anything, they say that I am not. They must be right; I am not even sure if I know how to work the fifty-pound clunker of a thing.'

'I have thought about making a story of fantasy a reality. I love old things and old ways, of doing things; yeah- I can't help it.'

'I surely have the time to do a story someday. I could see my writing, a forbidden romance or something like that… yeah right.'

'Maybe, by all, I would need is some paper that will not smudge, I guess- I could do it on the computer, but why?'

'I am not much of a writer; I am not much of anything.

It is just like the Vintage Camera, that I use because I feel that it adds emotion to the moment in time that I have captured. Just like the Victrola player, I have from the 1930's.'

'I love different things. They say I have an old soul and a young heart.'

'For once, I think that they are right in saying that.' 'Frustrated, with only getting one up and down looking font typed line down, I stopped. Using two fingers on the typewriter does not work all that well. Sticky typewriter keys are annoying.'

'So, that night I went to bed earlier than I normally do. It was a long day anyway because of all the negative spectacles that took place, throughout the day.'

'Also, my mind was thumping just like the sounds that blast from the past machine make as well.'

'I recall I was lying in my bed with my favorite pink nighty on.'

'Before I knew it, I was undressed under my covers with my many thoughts of, school, life, everything, and him. Mostly him, in whispers in my consciousness.'

'Then, I was in the land of pleasant dreams. There in my dreams, I am in a land where there is no evil, hatred and no need for lust. My dreams were always my fantasies.'

'However, that night All of a sudden, I am jolted out of my dream, and a cold icy breeze moved across my face, after all-knowing as a child I was sold to satanic sacrificing for sin, thanks to my mother's side of the family.'

'I sat up in my bed rapidly, asking if it was all in my head, or real; the room was pitch-black, and my covers were pulled off me and I felt exposed, as it was an inch over the full length of my body, engulfing feelings from my remembrance.'

'Then, until I cannot believe my eyes at what I was seeing it has dark wings, and eyes that were too temptingly cloying to not look into to have as engulfing into soul travel.'

'It was a creature that was not human, a dark mysterious what I call a fallen angel, I have the gift of seeing them with my subconscious over dissociating, it was staring at me looking into my soul, taking all that happen in the last weeks for my masters, who are cacodemon or fallen flowers of the following the demons demotivators thinking its 'God's work hidden in dark magic, sorcery, astrology, voodoo, and witchcraft,' like over cognizance possessions, the sweet deception of true evil was peering into my eyes as if it could abolish my quintessence of ethos.'

‘I look at myself as a child of pore sorcery, a 'White Angel' when death would come, thus of pouring, I will not be stolen to purgatory, yet that is becoming harder to endure tirelessly when this is what I was born for to slaughter, yet I got away, I got away before, I was killed in a naked virgin child sacrifice, to the 'Angels of Darkness.'

‘These girls sometimes on Earth other than being just like normal-looking girls they transform into ‘Blackbirds,’ or girls with black wings with bloody when in their angel form with wings, having feathered tips, blood-sucking fangs, omnipotent powers, of desire and revenge, of strength, and voltage, even fiery in the wings at a time, they are my sisters are divided angels the Amzel’s are the darkest of ‘Fallen Angels.''

'The Natalie girls not so much, they went for the genuine, even if born into evil and made of sin.'

'The Fallen Angel had long fangs, almost cat pulling in my eyesight of frame- the moment of like having aesthetic abilities, with a face with sharp-pointed horns that protruded from the top of its head. Am I dreaming, I knew I was not?'

'I was frozen in my horror of knowing I was slowly being taken to the dark side of enchantment; I did not know what to think.'

'I know what it wants with me?'

'I know what this meant, until the edge, coming stronger every day?'

‘As for me, I am pore-like some of my other sisters, who like me are at war for our souls.’

"White Angels,' like me are heavenly, holy, divine, celestial, sweet, charming, yet sadness, will make them shad light gray as if the light dying within me, in the wings like me, over depression, grief, sorrow, catastrophe, and misery, yet I think this boy, I like knows what I am, I wonder how? Internet, my books, and religions?'

'Therefore, I can read his mind like I can anyone around me, I let him in, I think? Maybe, or it is just one of my gifts or so they think?'

'Yet something you demand to perceive about my Earth life is that I was half-human half- pore white angel, now ending by hanging over mind games, in a dark death was the change they wanted to take me to the dark side lost in purgatory, where death can't be had, nor can my soul that was damned rise, I didn't want immortal, as a teen girl locked in my limbo angel body.'

'I wonder what he would say if I let wings rip as they do only when I want them to penetrate my smooth fleshly white skin before his eyes?'

'Notwithstanding that night, as I sat staring in my bed, in an instant I watched as this entity was sucked into my dream catcher, it was absorbed away like a vacuum in a swirl.'

'Was that just a dream?'

'It has to be a dream; it is just a dream I kept thinking in logic- I was saying.'

'So, I lied back down in my bed. Besides, I got my covers from off the floor, and it put them back over me and my head.'

'Scared, I begin repeating my prayers. Until I drifted, off into the land of blissful dreams once again. I still do not know what that was.'

'Just a nightmare, I guess. The start of new days, sometimes I hope that all the stars will align so that God's grace can shine down on me. So that I can feel, the ray of the sun as it gives me hope and strength.'

'Sometimes, I start my day with reading I light my candle and start laying them out, as I get ready for the day. I started to do this when I was feeling hopeless. Lily she gave me her old deck saying try this, it may work for you as it does for me, and I said, 'okay."

'I have been doing it… oh my, yeah- all the way back then; Like when I was in seventh grade or so, is when I started, and that is when they began in full swing on me.'

'My readings for today, as I shuffle my deck, the cards fly out on their own, right out of my tarot pile. I know what I am going to face throughout the day before it happens sometimes. Like today and most days, it is not good. Today let's see what we have!'

'Tarot Card One- I got the Fool- yet I wish that all the fools in my life would not have any beginnings… in getting me to do as they do. I am not a fool… they are the ones that are the clowns around me.'

'Tarot Card Two- the Tower- I get this one every day, and to me, a tower is a person or persons. Yet I have to find why they keep towering over me! Yet the mighty tower may be strong now, in making them, make me.'

'Nevertheless, as with anything, like the card cries. They will smash themselves at some point down on me, and they do just about every day that they can get on top of me.'

'The towering clans will make me have the circulation of an explosion in the hall, bathroom, and even sometimes in the classrooms. Wherever they could get their hands up, and on me.'

'They are the destruction of me, with fires within their eyes. That collapses down on me, just like the girls in the clan that sits on my face.'

'One by one on me, just like the fiery body on the card in my hand exposed; which shows the tower falling to its knees. They all just ooze their heated hate on me, and all over my body. What they do to me, is what keeps the tower in power!'

'Tarot Card Three- The Lover's shows that I have a lover, I love him, yet we cannot have a love, which I want so badly.' 'Yet at the same time is it him, which I see in this card? Who is in love with me? Maybe it is some other boy or girl. That is worth thinking about- oh-hum!'

'Tarot Card four- Temperance the learning to bring about balance, in life, for me that balance never comes. I am forever on the wheel of misfortune, when is it going to be my turn to have the thing go right?'

'I did not even get that out of my mouth, then card number five an extra one, just seemed to pop out at me and flew out my hand out of the deck, and down on the floor in my room and that was the Devil card.'

'Now it is lying at my feet. That card holds show me being hauled back in chains in everything.'

'Yes, I saw him in my nightmares, I think last night… or was it a vision? Yet I know that all I have to say is be gone devil, I am a child of the highest God!'

'You are not getting my soul! These cards show me that I need to beware. Yes, I will keep my telling deck in hand, to know when they will try to deck me, in the face or even more that has to come. I will use astrology as my philosophy, why not; I do not think it is evil?'

'Yet, the nuns and priests that sin more than me… they do. Yes, life is a will of fortune it is always in constant transition.'

'I never know which section the arrow is going to land on, it changes with discoveries and my mayhem. I know that each day is a gift it shall bring me the perfect someone in my life in the future from the heavens.'

'I know Just like the apple tree in the background of the lover's card; I shall blossom and grow with this new-found inspiration in my life.'

'That is if he finds me before it is too late for me! This can only take place though if the entities in my dreams, and also in real life lose their grips on me.'

'That is draining all the exquisiteness of passion, lust, and caring of chastity out of my body. I refrain from acts that cannot be satisfied by a divine stimulation.'

'Yet, I am overwhelmed in not making associations, like shaking hands with the diminutive porthole to my soul that leads into Satan's darkness.'

'I do not like confessing that, yet I have. I remember father Joel, saying to me in a stern voice, 'Do not do it again Nevaeh!"

'Yet, with a dumb smile on his face through the mesh, at the church booth in there, my feet do not even touch the ground. I can kick my feet, and they swing freely when I am so nervous just like that.'

'Yeah- he knew it was my voice talking to him. I told him everything I did solo and with my shamed fobbed lover like a good catholic girl I am, I even said, I do not know why, he was there inside me, but I think he liked, and so do I, what I was saying for some reason he was

understanding, I said to Priests, 'what we did that night will last forever in my mind, it could never be erased."

'All things are not a sin child, even when you know they are if good for the mind-body and soul.' He said. I recollect the last thing He said was- 'Just try to be a good girl- Nevaeh.'

'Okey-doke-y!' I said, squeakily. Then, I went on my way out of the old church.

Father Joel- 'What a kid, cute as a button, and the same as all her age!' He shook his head thinking my 'God,' at how cute she was.'

~*~

'I know that I am misunderstood, most people just don't get me. I always feel different as if I come from another planet. I know that I have sensory overwhelming, sometimes my senses are too sharp.'

'Every sight, touch, sound, hearing and sense of smell can be excruciatingly strong at times.'

'I am sometimes angry and have explosions with meltdowns, at school, and at home, this may happen when triggered or feeling trapped, as I do always.'

'Although I mostly avoid situations like this, it can happen that when overwhelmed or extremely painful I explode with rage.'

'To the point of crying meltdowns, I know a girl my age crying, yet happen when bewildered. After shaking in anger, I may feel distraught and cry uncontrollably.'

'So, I have a teddy bear. Yet still, have many silent shutdowns, times when you can't speak or socialize.'

'Seldom, I may prevent noises by going silent and withdrawn. When this happens, I want to get away from people and to be quiet until I am calm again.'

'I use avoidance, not going places you imagine will be troublesome for you socially. To withdraw and not have meltdowns, sneaky escaping habits may develop. There may be many

situations I avoid out of the fear of being overwhelmed or uncomfortable. However, since the avoidance is sneaky it is often hard to realize it about oneself.'

'I am a sensible person who thinks and analyses everything too much they say. Although realistic and make decisions based on the analysis.'

'I find a pattern in everything, the way I look at my life, I see patterns in everything. I am having the talent to connect the dots to come up with original ideas or ways of understanding people and the world.'

'To the ones that I love they say I am an open book, when comfortable, I am extremely open and honest, like a being with him. More open than people in general when feeling comfortable and accepted.'

'Some say, that I have a bluntness and directness, that my words are straight-talking. My favor literal and direct communication. I may be confused when people say things they don't mean or say things to me when talking to them I'll take them as false politeness.'

'I know in a normal friendship is alienating, feeling alone and empty when being colleagues in a normal way, yet I ask is it me or them.'

'Being friends in the 'normal' way is either something that I can't do, or it is social behavior I had to learn by observing to stay way or its charges and court.'

'I try to dissolve my boundaries when I find intimates boundaries truly dissolve completely. I am far too clingy or bossy.'

'I am a 'genuine advocate,' I enjoy spending time with those that understand me. However, relationships with such people may be rare. Close tenderness lacks with me firm boundaries and I have been described as being to cling, bossy or controlling by a friend or partner.'

'I have monotonous eating habits; you always eat the same thing or follow a rigid diet. I prefer to eat the same thing most of the time or follow a specialist diet that restricts certain foods. I prefer an eating plan for various health or personal goals and then stick with this (isn't tempted to go off the diet like most people are.')

'They say I make funny noises, when comfortable the sounds you create carry meaning in communication.'

'Plays with the voice and accent or speaks with sounds instead of words. When feeling comfortable and accepted may make wet noises, high pitched noises or other noises to express feelings in the moment rather than use words.'

'I am stubborn about time and plans; I know- I may freak out if plans change unexpectedly if your time is taking away mine. True I don't like plans being changed. Lateness can trigger my biggest fears.'

'I know- I am awkward about social touch, I don't touch other people or if I do you don't like this. I know that my demurral is that you may enjoy your touch with your romantic touch only.'

'Oppositely social touch such as random holding on me, patting on the shoulder, is not that big of thing yet, I don't like men's hands on me. This is all essence that has to be learned and forced, preferably than comes spontaneously.'

'Some say- I have a dissimilarity or hypnotic speech patterns at times, even if squeaky. The normal speaking is cracking at times and raised needed. I know that I have strong self-discipline, I reminded every day, I like to keep to my chosen routines. I am remarkably focused and dedicated to the things I chose to do or work on.'

'I have been told that my mind going blank and empty, most of the time, this is said to happen when I am surprised or overwhelmed.'

'I have the feeling of the mind going blank is like a frozen empty pause in which the mind is not able to think for at least a second, though it feels like longer it lasts for longer inside.'

'I have eccentric interests, I know, I have many unusual hobbies or collections; yes, I know.'

'I know that I have mastered somethings in researching hobbies or daily activities, anything and everything I love to learn, about most of the time something unusual to what other kids my age like to do.'

'I have been told and believe that I do have child-like imagination, a part of me has never grown old after 14 years or so.'

'Meanwhile feeling comfortable, I express a childlike quality, no matter what age I am.'

'True to say- I am really bad with hair, somedays, I just can't do it! I am not good at styling my hair. Also, over it being so long, my hair feels uncomfortable at times.'

'I have a crystal ball, sometimes, I see a girl's face within, that looks just like me yet is not me. I wonder who she is, or is this me, as a prophecy?'

'Ah, bedtime is a sweetly, gently, soft, pleasantly, comfortably, definitely an innocent time for me, of feeling guilty, lustful and sinful, yet as a girl as all do, like yourself I am sure.'

'I feel the shameful need to feel, think known in just those wonderful moments of escaping, explore, touch, sense, even taste, even if I have said I would stop to be most holy of a girl I could be, know in my mind this so varies wrong until I am much older or with a man.'

'Although my body needs to feel of being safe worm and naked in my bed, my mind damning my soul gives many fibs that are unstoppable, in my loving, crazed, ever so natural, need of feeling the freest I can feel as being well me, being so aroused mind is dumb with being excited, my breath quickens so heavy and stimulated, truly the horniest I could ever get, upsetting at the time as a young lady to not sin, when purples are black and wide with passions, the most alive I can honestly be.'

'Sin is pleasant, balmy, comfortable, I love before bed I read all things at are magical, in the phantoms of my investigations on life from the afterlife, wondering where, I will go when dead yet like loving me, eating too much, or not eating enough, magic, music, and smarts, and loving a female is all a sin too then; I cannot say I am a good Catholic.'

'Nevertheless, at least, I am not taking it up the butt, and saying- 'I am more holy than you,' not worded that way, yet you would get this, attitude, like every 12 up 17-year old girl: Walks the Hall's would say they think they are, as they think they don't know after 8 ½ years, or think they do in there mislead understanding.''

'The more that I think about life this way the more, I pull away from Catholic thinking, of judging what is not the same, or dooming someone from loving the lord, as I do, still after having a life of shady, dubious, dishonest, unethical, and unfair, from those that think their Godly I question the why of it all.'

'However, I do sometimes at night in bed; I do, just by laying on top of my pillow or my big teddy bear, and I straddle it and embrace it like I am with him- only if I need, nothing wrong in that.'

'Then sometimes, it is like it just happens in my dreams when I am with my lover in that perfect fantasy. I do not have to confess that too… do I?'

'I don't want to!'

'However, I cannot help but think about that kiss. Nevertheless, is it okay if it happens in my dreams? Why is it that what feels good in life is wrong, and what hurts others is what feels good to them, yet not to me?'

'Either way, I just seem to squeeze taut, with a fizzing bubbling that is heavenly in the finale. Yet, I do know if I do not refrain from these engagements, instead of having a crown of purity. I will surely be cast into the eternal lake of fire and burn forever in the afterlife. That is what I know, what I been told.'

'Yes, oh how I believe that guy should ruin your light pink lipstick, by kissing you.'

'Not ruin your black mascara by crying over them, I get sick of crying over what I cannot have!'

'However, that is hard to find. When all they want to do is overpower you, and not love you- yet you love them, and they control you it seems.'

'That kind of love is scary to me. I know, what I want!'

'If you are truly meant to be, life and god will find a way to make it happen.'

'Yes, even if you are forbidden.' I have to believe that!'

'Oh, yes, my dream lover is someone I see in the halls every day. I can see him in my dreams too, with his brown eyes, black hair fair skin.'

'He is so laid back in his ways just the way he looks at me makes me tremble in a good way as you have gathered. Yet in bed I toss, turn, and roll around, then morning, it comes, and I did not get any sleep.'

'Also, I am so scorching worm, flustered, and exhausted. Because all I thought of all night was being with him, in every way imaginable.'

'Yet, I know that it cannot be. It is just a dream in my fourteen-year-old mind; just my starry-eyed fantasy.'

'Good-God! I am going to need a cold shower, after confessing all of that!'

'So, anyway, the next morning comes and it is the start of a new day. It was just going to be another Monday morning; I was being dropped off at school because I did not want to be part of the school bus association again.'

'Consequently, I was getting out of the car to go to school. It was not all that warm outside I could feel the sight frost in the air and falling upon my skin.'

'Of course, I did not realize that I had my skirt caught in the car door. The car pulled away along with my skirt and what was underneath… was all… me showing, not another time I was thinking.'

'Maybe I was getting paid back for the night before? Yet, there goes my blue and red skirt it was flapping away in the door, like a flag of a sham!'

'Hopes rumbling chocolate brown- I think it is a 1963 Chevy Impala, did not stand out enough in the school's turn out as it was… yeah- No!'

'That surely got everyone's attention from the start just pulling in with her in that car! Yet, that was not shameful enough, hell- no!'

'I had to go and add more to the spectacle, and boy… I sure did! Consequently, to all that, her car just kept going, all the way home.'

'She did not know and did not see it when she got home either, she got out of the driver's side, and my skirt was on the passenger side looking sad all frayed up, from the road muck while flapping on 'God' knows what down the uneven pathways. So, if you have not figured out yet, my uniforms are red, white and blue the schools' colors.'

'Accordingly, there I was standing in my glory once again. It seems like in my life what can go wrong will, and with every occasion, this kind of thing happens to me, it seems.'

'Like always the jocks get a free show, the nerds start forming at the mouth. Furthermore, the girls say something like- 'oh- would you look at that!' So, ounces everyone is done staring, and taking pictures. I just think 'This is not happening again!'

'Yah- now I know how a naked flagpole feels. It is moments like these, I feel like they will remain forever, and never end.'

'They just keep happening in new ways, one way or another. Because as always, everyone is laughing hysterically.'

'Equally, I hope he did not see me like that; I am so terrified, so I just ran like a bat out of hell out of site, to the nearest shelter, whatever I could find.'

'Yeah- I found a bush and waited until everyone went to the school.'

'So, that I would not have, to have them all looking me. Naturally, I knew that no one was going to help me out, yet he wanted too I precisely recall, as I was running, he called my name- 'Nevaeh, you okay?' He said, No!'

'I squealed, bolting down the sidewalk, past him like a crazy girl off her Mids. With me holding my handbag in front of me.'

'Yet, I think he saw my but cheeks rubbing together as I ran by. I thought I could have died of embarrassment, of all days to go to school like this, for that to happen. I mean really, who thinks that their skirt is going to get ripped off.'

'I mean days when I have Gym class two days out of the school week, I have something on underneath. However, days like this one, yeah- not so much.'

'I hope- I did not do anything to him to make him think I am a jerk. Because, I was so freaked- out! I mean I am an open person, but not that open. Now I am going to play that over in my head.'

'Certainly, I always dreamed about him calling out my name sweetly like such. Yet I did not ever think it would be like that! Yeah- I was on my own.'

'It is just one more Kodak moment with I will never forget.'

'That was the longest, yet fastest, run home ever… for me to do.'

'Just to come back with a different uniform on, one hour later the same day.'

'Yes, I have learned to look before closing the car door.'

'I have read, studied, absorbed, digested, and received.'

'I have learned!'

'Yet, that day I walked through those big doors late, just to have to face all of them inside.'

'That was fun explaining, that one to the school office ladies, with the principal one door down. I walked out of there, and it was back to my day as normal; while what is normal for me, that is!'

Chapter: 8

Steeples, Dwellings, and Tracks

'My home- 'The House of Lost and Lonely Dreams' as I have named it, is an antique structure, with peeling paint that appears to be tearing away from the wood-clad siding.'

'It has its original led glass wavy windows, which whistle, rattle, and leak when the wind blows; or it is raining heavily.'

'My home has a foundation of stone tan and gray rock, which is crumbling under its weight. I would say that it is a result of old age.'

'Because it has seen, numerous frigid winters that contrast with searing summertime and time over. The home displays a wraparound porch that has old wooden plank flooring, which is cracked and blistered. We have a bench swing hanging by rusty chains that cry in agony as it swings back and forth in the wind. The crying swing is adjacent to the over-sized door entry into the dwelling of loneliness.'

'When I come home from the hellhole, I slowly open the heavy wood door with all my might. Besides, I drop everything from my day next to the door my books, handbag, and shoes.'

'Everything is placed, that I had with me, out there on the porch. Yet before closing the door, I cannot help but look over the land.'

'The mailbox is all dinged up in its light tarnish, reddish, and blueish paint chipped colors, and totally somewhat limp, catawampus, and yes completely cock-eyed!'

'It is hanging by one nail; it seems like on the post. The red flag that is part of it is broken off, just hosed down in the ground also like it is trying to be erect, straight up with a slight bend in it off to the one side too.'

'That is okay with me I guess; I do not get any mail anyway. He-he, our mail girl Marsha just loves us, she always says when I see her delivering the mail.

'Your box reminds me of my husband, it needs a little help getting up!'

I say- 'yeah,' with a confused look on my face, asking my mind if that is funny or not?

'Yet, I did not get it- whatever that means?'

'The grass is tall and needs to be whacked down with the brush hog, the sidewalk cracked, and the weeds and dandelions pulled out from in-between the orifices.

'The gothic gate at the end of the sidewalk is hanging by one hinge wide open for anyone to come penetrating through our yard at any time day or night.'

'The old farm tractor is sitting in the front yard next to the hand plow and garden hoe, along with whatever else all that junk is, yeah lookout for where you step, you just might find that missing pitchfork.'

'Oh, and that green thing it is not a snake, I can assure you I have tried to kill it! Nope, it is just a garden hose.'

'You know none of that stuff has moved in years. That is why this place looks as it does.'

'The barns hardwood is rotting away, that holds its treasures inside. Yet once you get past my yard you can run free in the fields, I know I have entirely unleashed, with the grasses rubbing up on me.'

'Try it it's fun!'

'So, the silo looks like 'The Leaning Tower of Pisa,' it's surely going to fall one of these days, and certainly plummet.'

'I know for a fact, one night, we are going to hear a thud, and it will be on top of those bushes or fall into the barn, and I will cry.'

'Oh, let me not forget about that junked car over there rusting away. Looking down the fields, I can see the many bales of hay, which have been there for some time.'

'Hope- she has a sparking fire shooting up from the metal rusty burn-barrel, to get rid of our garbage… out here, which is not all that uncommon, I guess.'

'Furthermore, over there I can see my other uniform parts and the only pink nighty, it is on the line that sags nearly to the ground.'

'There is a stick holding the lineup, yet everything I always smelled so good, because of the wind that blows through here, and the citrusy scented soap we use. I guess that's why my bedsheets are so cuddly and soft'.

'Hope must have gotten those chores done for me; I do not like using that ancient wringer washer anyways. It is just too easy to get my fingers caught in there. If you have not guesstimated, the washer is on the back part of the porch, next to the droopy lines.'

'It is just like the 1930's Frigidaire in the kitchen with the broken handle, which will not lock when I try to close it, and the cabinets that are way too high for me, that I need a chair to stand on to reach.'

'Yeah- just to name some of the old pains in my butt, which I have to use here on this farmstead.'

'Yet, I am blessed with what I have! Undeniably, it is gratifying just to come home from school, and have my bedroom that is mine.'

'Though on cold nights, I have to heat the upstairs of the house with the potbelly stove, that is right outside my room in the hallway, next to the staircase.'

'I guess that is uncommon for most of the other girls that go to my school. Like the other animals far off in the distances of the land, I may too, tonight have grazing period on something at some point.'

'To keep from passing out, or I may just go into town for something too… I do not know yet. It would be the first thing I have eaten all day. Maybe a midnight snack feast is in order, or something like instant macaroni and cheese, and a cold tall glass of Iced tea… tonight, yeah sounds yummy!'

'Oh, with something that is chocolate on the side also, ewe-yeah! Chocolate! Anyways, like I was saying before, I went off on a tangent, I step into the foyer of the dwelling when I come home.'

'I am greeted with the timeworn wrap-around staircase, which has been well acquainted with me over the years. The end column of the banisters shakes, rattles and trembles as I walk up and down, the squeaky risers of the steps.'

'It reminds me of myself every time I come home from the hellhole.'

'I am looking down the main corridor of the hallway, with its old incredible woodwork, and its yellow faded scrolling wallpaper.'

'The tarnished French lightings sconces flicker their soft glow onto the dusty crystals, that seem to rain down from them. The round Victorian hall table still has a bouquet of dead roses on it.'

'The pink and red roses were on there as long as I can remember. Overtop is the dusty, dirty, partly burnt-out cobweb-covered chandelier. The whole house has a gothic feel.'

'It is spooky, ominous, uncanny, weird, and mysterious, yet lovely at the same time.'

'The worn-out mismatched rugs are tearing under my feet, and underneath them are the tattered wide, dark, and uneven wood plank floors. That makes my feet, so sore as I walk on them.'

'I can see Hope she is slaving away over the cookstove. I wave, she ways, as the fire is blazing, with the smell of cinnamon rolls; which has been baking during the day.'

'She is not in touch with modern-day technology, she does everything the old-fashioned way. I will make sure to get one of those hot gooey rolls when they're done!'

'Hope- she does exactly what she has done over the year's inconsistent repetition and refuses to change. She lives life in a trance doing the same routine day in and day out. It is the lifestyle; she was born into and raised into, so that is all she knows.'

'Her dad was devoted Catholic and her mother in a tranquil Baptist grace. She believes in both ways, yet some parts more than others.'

'So, which leads to me being raised with both styles. Catholic at school, then somewhat of a relaxed Baptist, when I get home.'

'Additionally, she is continuously in the state of mourning over the loss of her only son, who died in the line of duty in the war against terror on 9-11, eight or so years ago, in 'The World Trade Center.''

'I try to comfort her nevertheless; I know that I am never going to be a replacement to Benjamin Huber Black, which was her blood relation.'

'I kind of remember him- yet not really. I kind of remember that day too, yet not really.' It is time to let Hope say something I think, Hope- 'Yeah while whatever… hi- there, what do you want!"

'Nevaeh- 'So, just say something to them…!' Hope said, 'Okay… what should I say? Nevaeh- whatever you like!"

Hope- 'Oh-hum- so, I am getting older by the moment, and feel as if I am weathering away. Yes, just one day closer to the casket.'

'The life I have had has done nothing but pressure me into becoming what I never intended to be. how is that so far?'

'Nevaeh goes on!'

Hope- 'Then again, look what I got to show for it. I got everything I ever wanted, just not in the way I wanted it to be.'

'Everyone that I cared about died, so I grew old too fast. Yeah- if you do not have anything keeping you young. What in the hell do I have to live for- Nevaeh; she is no comfort to me truly.'

'My Benjamin was only twenty-two years old fighting in the battlefields. Nevaeh is just there, just like all this work I must do. Nevaeh- thanks a lot… keep talking I am learning so much!'

Hope- 'Don't you talk back to me… you little brat!' She said to Nevaeh.

She went on to say. 'So, like I was saying every day, I like to sit in my chair in the living room when she is a school and go through the pages of the family album one by one.' 'Always knowing that when I get to the end, I will most likely close the book then start all over again, just so, I can remember my boy.'

(Nevaeh- she is yelling loudly!)

Hope- 'Girl… do you want me to smack that small blushing ass of yours, just keep it up!'

(Nevaeh sticks out her tongue and rolls her eyes.)

Besides, it speaks- 'Go for it, then!'

Hope- 'Nevaeh does not have any photos in my book; all the photos in this book are from my family. So maybe I will see if I can find something that I missed from before.'

'Maybe I will have to find one, that I can add to her that is if I can find one.'

Nevaeh- 'While who's fault is that?'

Hope- 'It is not my kid, why don't you, go be somewhere?'

'Then, looking in this book, every time something comes to mind that takes me back to when I had my son in my life.'

'All the things that happened during that moment in time, that are escaping my mind slowly are all there.'

(Nevaeh runs out of the room crying, to go play by herself outside.)

Hope- 'Let her go she knows when to be back!'

'Anyways like, I was saying it is comparable to beholding the photographs, reading all the notes he sent from the war and looking over them so intently by the light of the fireplace, my eyes shoot blood from doing so. Maybe I need to get new bifocal glasses.'

'That is my- boy, my baby, just look at him!'

'He is gone!'

(Hope- sobbing.)

'Each page comes to life, and the photo starts to move as if I can look into that time, and place just like a slow-moving film clip.'

'I can see all the scenes play out. I can feel, taste, and even hear it. I look at what was going on in the frame; as I view into every one of them, just like a porthole of the bygone.'

'Okay…!'

'I am okay now- one of the other photographs that I find unique and intriguing depicts this very house with nicely painted white siding and white trim.'

'And in the distance along the lane or walkway it used to be lit by flickering lanterns, those lanterns are long gone, no- there here somewhat, but they don't work.'

'Some I just had replaced with modern electric candlelight, so now some of them work and some do not, as of now I am too old and soberly to change the light bulbs.'

'This property is becoming too much for me; I was hoping that I would live long enough to have someone inherit my empire of dirt.'

'However, as of now, it seems like a far stretch to me. Some of these relics in this place make my heartbeat rapidly fast, and others bring tears to my eyes, some make me joyful, and others very disheartened. I am just tired.'

'I think that I have been blessed for all this time that I have had. Blessed for the times we had, and all that was part of my life, most of them are gone, and I am getting older, and she is an image of what I cannot be anymore, it is annoying.'

'Oh- hum, to be like her, and know what I know now! In my book with dark green covers, I start from the beginnings. I see the little faces in shades of gray.'

'Though faded I can still make it all out. I see me as a little girl and see all the places, that we saw as a family as I got older, like a timeline.'

'The first pages are ripping, tattered, and torn from being so upkeep. The binding on my book is hardly there anymore, you can see the string that holds it together, and some pages are falling out.'

'All these notes of my life are now stained, all the love letters he and I wrote with a pan that I had to dip into an inkwell; all of this is my life, he is gone too, I loved them so.'

'All these notes, some from my husband, some from the war, some from others that say that they loved me, this all tells a story, and it is just all history now.'

'Nothing lasts forever it is all going to be dust in the wind.'

'Evenhandedly, I gave you everything, just for you all to die with a smile; all we wanted is for you all to live for a while. No, you took everything and left me empty.'

'So much I do not understand, all I ever wanted to be was a happily ever after.'

'Yet, I am still hoping for it. I am so tired of being here, without you my loved ones; you are the evanescence of my Immortal love.'

'All of this time has passed, after you all pass away, yet it cannot erase them from me, now or ever. Both of your faces haunt me in this book, and also in my consciousness!'

'How you wiped my tears then, when we were young; I feel that nothing has changed, only the moment in time.'

'You still have all of me!'

'In the summer days, after Nevaeh goes to her room at night. I look out my window in the summer, and my wondering eyes overlook over the honey golden fields and thick dark woods.'

'It splashes the sun's light and it shines my life before my eyes, in one blink.'

'As the sunsets, and I sit there eagle-eyed. The darkness comes to let me know, that I am sitting here in my home alone, on a summer's day.'

'My life is just like my husband's red 1932 Ford convertible, which was his first car; he loved his old cars. The 1932 automobile he paid 417 dollars for the car.'

'That was a lot of money back in the day, and I can still hear that horn.'

'AHOO-GAH!'

'He always planned to fix it back-up as a showpiece, but with that said it never happened.'

'However, it was nice when it was new, not like these tiny wagons of today. It is rusting away now in the weeds in the front yard; it is somewhat next to the barn, which holds the other cars.'

'The 1932 automobile has a chrome grill that is pitted, and the headlight glass is now smashed, and the inside is trashed, from getting wet too many times.'

'It needs some love, just like me. Nevertheless, it is more work than what I can do, so it is just another memory of our memories.'

'Oh- hum, I remember, cherish, treasure, value, and faithfully honor that we used to drive around, running all the traffic lights, wild, crazy, a little insane as could be, and we shared our time.'

'In addition to that, we made are secrets in the front seats. He would kick up dirt in the air, as he would drive to our spot the gazebo on the pond.'

'If that vehicle could talk, it would remember more than I do.'

'I believe that pain is love!'

'Pain is all I have; pain is like the rain without my lover next to me, it is like the rain brings my pain and it- washes the memories away from my mind.'

'Pain and the rain are all that comes from these old eyes, which I rub red, pain as the rain that, I will cry over the spot in the graveyard, where more than one stone holds memories for me.'

All a little way away from the mansion home, that was part of me, as it is with Nevaeh. This is the same ground that will hold my old bones someday too. Said to say, just to be next to them; as I want to be as of now at this moment.'

(Out on my long walk around the ground and railroad tracks, I start to get into deep thoughts like always.)

'Sometimes, I wonder if Hope knew what she was singing me into in the school system, they had her deserted, in thinking she is delayed in the brain also, over her upbringing, or if she knew that my mother was saying, I was more than slow, as an act of revenge for stilling me away.

'Nevertheless, Hope had to sing me in or it would have been money out of her pocket for schooling for my delayed kind, where it was the school doing me justice for them to give me what I could handle in their mindset, or you're out a free public education.'

'Made to be nothing more than backward, yet I know to this day, Hope did not have a fair fight for me to stand, it was taking it or leave it contracts.'

'I am back!' Said, Nevaeh.

Hope- 'Where have you been it is 11:59 pm, girly, you should have been home at 10:00 pm, start explaining; you know it is a school night!'

'I was out!' Said, Nevaeh.

Then moments after said under her breath. 'Wow- she is so dramatic isn't she, sarcastic even, scornful still!'

'Right, I can just guess, you little hussy, seductress, I know what you have been doing with that boy, I am not stupid you know!' Said Hope.

Nevaeh- 'I do not even have a boyfriend, geez!'

'You don't think, I know what you did that night with that boy I do, shame on you girlie.'

'Confess?' Said, Hope.

'NO ONE!' Said, Nevaeh.

'...Tonight, yet you have been in the past; don't lie to me.' Shrieked Hope.

'So, we had quickie sex.' Said, Nevaeh shrugging.

'He smells like a boy, and I love that small.' She said.

'You are going to end up with a baby, that I will have to care for or lose the child by the courts, or this town madcap sources of you not being able to care for him or her. When I will not or have to have an abortion. Again, I will have to pay for, to hush it all up. Then where have you been.' Said, Hope.

'I was all over town and the land, and that boy is too scared to be with me, okay get off my back please!' Said, Nevaeh.

'He loves me more than you do, that I am sure of.'

'Just be safe.' Replied, Hope.

'Like I am not, it is all I think about being.' Announced, Nevaeh.

'Nonsense girl.' Whispered, Hope.

~*~

(At that moment, they both stroll from the main doorway to the formal living room.)

Nevaeh- 'So, anyway, what has happened to Benny is forgotten; then again, they brought what was left of his remains back in a cardboard box, without even the echoes of the bugle, call sounding off in the background for surviving his county as a young man.

'Hope held that military funeral the guns going off, she was handed a flag; yet, I don't remember everything.'

'For Benny's bravery, he got nothing in return, he was placed with all the rest that no one cares to truly remember.'

'I don't care to live.' Said, Hope.

'I cannot take much more, I feel the same way, I feel rather than being burnt up after I die, just roll my lifeless little nude body down the hill in a wheelbarrow, and just tip it and dump me in the Susquehanna River.' Said, Nevaeh.

'However, in all truthfulness, I do think that after my death though, I should be placed on the ground next to my loved ones; yet, I know I will, and so will you Nevaeh.' Said, Hope.

She also stated moments after, 'Notwithstanding, that is if I have any to pay for my way to be there, after all you know we're poverty, and your other side took everything, I have had for the most part, but this home, yet they wanted that too, I had to fight to keep, and yet I got you, they let me win. I get why, do you?'

'I remember when your husband Henry had a heart attack on September 11, 2001. When he was gazing at the TV, when he saw the airplanes go in, knowing his boy was inside the Pentagon in Washington D.C.'

'So, just like benny he also was left to be forgotten, upon the same mountain, with all the other forgotten bodies in the Gothic graveyard.'

'He haunts me, Nevaeh.' Said, Hope.

'Henry was one of those, ‘where are my teeth- girly type of a guy's,' not much of a father figure in my life when he was here with us, more like an ass hole.'

'Then again, you are going to think, I don't like anybody that is not so, I just seem to find myself around all the butt-heads.'

'He was always so cranky, irritable, cross and crotchety all the time.'

'He likes to tap you on the head with his cane too, just to get your attention, saying, 'girlie."

'Furthermore, he smoked a pipe all the time. I remember he smelled of peppermint tobacco.'

'He is gone, yet, I always tried to be nice to him. So, it is just me and Hope here, in the old farmhouse now.'

'My room, the bedroom of mine is pink; the room where all I do is think. I have a bathroom attached with an antique claw-foot tub and pedestal sink. It is a land of imitation fur, which is pink.'

'The bedroom, where the day’s events are a blur to me that runs together like black ink.'

'My stuffed teddy bear is my only true friend; we lay together on my bed at the days’ end.'

'All the feelings that will never mend, all this time in my room I spend.'

'In my room, I week up to the beep, beep, beep of the alarm clock, and throw my sheets off me, and I stagger to my feet on the weekdays.'

'Then, I see my undressed body in my mirror like always when I get up.'

'I grab one uniform from my closet in my room, and I start buttoning and zipping everything up on me. I do my make-up and hair.'

'Go down the steps; get my shoes on my feet that partly cover the fun socks that express me.'

'I open and shut the door; yes, that is every weekday. Then walk down the lane of emptiness, the trees stand like soldiers in a tension.'

'It is six in the morning, and the lane is eerily calm and quiet, there is nobody around for miles.'

'Yet I do not feel alone, I feel like, I am being followed by eyes in the sky others kine me of my kind, it is like it is constantly following me within the parting clouds, kind of like the moon, seems to walk with me, you know.'

'It is like something or someone of the occult, or even magical realm is advising, monitoring, proctoring, and directing, even my wings wanted to expand, in fear of what was around me while demeaning me in all the ways of the Earthly life, I had just the day before.'

'Even, just walking down my lane, I know what I now was, I am forever on the route, that seems to never go away or end; I have fallen like them, white to gray, gray to black the wings I hide from them all will be, I am certain of this now.'

'I was kind, good, considerate, helpful, generous, and tolerant they made me evil.'

'The sunlight slowly rises, and my face and skin start to glimmer, glint, and gleam with friendly affinity, and the sun shines through the trees.'

'The various animals speak up often; while the mysterious fog burns off which was once part of the night's low clouds.'

'It reminds me of myself every time, I get up to leave the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams, but unlike days past now it is like my hearing is sharper, and my eyes can see everything as if zoomed and for miles, and I can hear things movie that is way off as if my hearing is amplified.'

'I can move swift-like and run great distances in a way that is not human, from here to there and back in record time. Even run towns in minutes flat.'

'One- to hunt, something, I must do now even if I feel it is nothing more than killing, destroying, and murder.'

‘True, I have to take young souls like mine, even if- I feel I don't want to linger within them to take them to purgatory if I don't that is where I will stay.'

'Two- to be able to spread my wings and fly, high in the heavens where there are no non-magical souls to see.'

'Three- also to let my glittering skin twinkle, and warm my cold unoxygenated blood, in the true sunlight without fear of how it looks.'

'Songbirds and they make their music, I remember days past, as I march along skipping down the path as I never did before. I step to the beat of loneliness, on a path of emptiness for the arrival of awareness.'

'I am in a haze and fog thinking about everything that would be going to 'The Underworld,' and then- I slowly awaken to the rays of reality, as I glow, and remember my past faith. Even now losing my faith, I still have it within me to believe in what is right.'

'I think about all the kids on the bus knowing, I could rip them apart now by the throat, and drinking the heavenly blood, with my fangs holding them down with my newly strong arms, and keep their souls, yet still, I can't yet think lingers in my mind as revenge. I could kill the bus driver to kind of like a bonus.'

‘I whisper to my mind. 'Be strong, Nevaeh, remember you're a newborn fallen angel.'

'Walking along at my stature of under five feet tall, on this route, my shoes on my feet and my toes gripped in them tightly.'

'Like days past, I am left to be greeted by crossing roads, with nothing more than golden fields, and many lush big and small trees, as far as my newborn eyes can see; I only have one choice to make.'

'You know that scarecrow is not going to talk to me or get down on his pole and dance, and help me; yet right now, I feel like Dorothy, after learning my lesson. 'There is no place like home.' Nonetheless, I will never get that back after what I have done. Why did I give in, or did I?'

'Likewise, I cannot help but say 'good morning' to him- the scarecrow, yet there are no charms, spells, or magic, there only within me, I can see, it makes me question realities and even my state of mind or did I just lose my mind? I questioned everything and anything.'

'Oh yeah, I forgot all this was taken place in moments, yet time seemed to stand still. I giggle and say, 'you don't have a brain either, whoopsies, yet you have seen, and know more than them, by hanging and being unliving too!''

'I wonder if... I will?'

'My only choice being, the road that leads into the land of simulated hell. And as the bus meets me there, and I step foot upon the yellow vehicle of impulsive mistreatment, along with all the combats of retaliation; knowing I could prevail if in a battle.'

'The branches flutter by like arms that want to carry me back to the 'Dwelling of Loss and Lonely Dreams.' However, the vehicle is thrusting forward, sucking me onward into the pits of the hellhole also known as high school, to all the others, that seem so weak to me now, yet they have no idea what I am.'

'The road has its twists and turns; it seems to go on forever- yet not long enough.'

'However, there is always an end to the tunnel of trees. The light breaks through, and the sunshine's bright as it hits my face, with the hope of delight, but most days it is nothing but fright of darkness and gloom.'

'Also, now unlike before my mind was blank as if all voices were now off, I wonder if they would come back, it was defeating the silence.'

'I also wanted him in my mind, so all I did was squeeze my teddy, and suck my thumb the whole way to school, like the cute sweet girl, I once was.'

'Just like all these days, I wait for the revolting yellow bus to take me into the land of my most freighting, panic, horror, terror, and loathing.'

'I wonder, if I can make it through another day until it is the night, then this is unlike other days even if feeling the same yet not.'

'Remembering at the day's end there is no one to hold onto me tight, I wonder now if I will ever get someone to do just that. Nothing in my life feels right, as the day goes fast at times then fluctuates slowly at others. I just have to follow the guiding hope within me to keep it together, feeling baffled, perplexed, puzzled, and most bewildered.'

'I take my first fight, where the tracks hangover on the fare side of the steel viaduct, that has twisted and bucked from a storm hundreds of feet in the air I dive arms to my side with no fear, wings ripping out of the flash of my back, were my back is fully exposed, and even ripping irregular slices into my uniform top and jacket magically.'

'With the hope of optimism and faith, I take my end of the day walk, along the tracks, thinking. I do not wish to fall from the dizzying height unless most sure, as I have thought about doing many times, in the past walks along the rails of all falling bridge that hangs like questionable, mysterious tracks in the sky, piercing the line of Earth and the Heavens; and that I will never see more then, I do at this moment.'

'Now, I don't have to think- I can just jump freefall, and spread my wings and flap, fly, and climb great heights faster the railroads did in the yesteryear making it from one end to side in the stream of air beneath my wings, at last, I felt free, and found the place I was born to do this.'

'I sword with all the fog and mist so and the structure weaving in and out of the supports, I can see all the lovely sites all the valleys and trees, the river below, and all the mainstays of the bridge that still stand, and lie on the ground below me. This night for the first time in years, I was happy to go home, and the movie on living, even if not, I felt alive.'

'There was only one other thing on my hushed mind was without thinking was him like never before, as the true feeling of love, with my power of mind not being overruled.'

'I am a girl, at last, that is free.'

Chapter: 9

Dwelling of Hell

"The Oak View Catholic High School,' is the name of the place- that I nicknamed the hellhole. From the outside, you can see it was built in the 1940's it was meant to be an Art Deco style structure.'

'Though in the 1960s, they added on to the school and killed its former glory. They tried to make some of the buildings look modern and contemporary, which looks cold and unfriendly.'

'This building is so stupid in its floor plan, that rooms are cut off from the main hallways, for example on the basement floor, they only have one way in and out, and that is going up or down a long set of stairs.'

'Just like, I must walk through the woodshop classroom, to get to the other classrooms on the basement floor where I stay most of the day. There are no hallways down here everything is just linked up with no rhyme or reason.'

'What so curious is that if you are trying to get from the basement to the third floor you have to walk through some classrooms and the teachers get pissed off? Because you are annoying, irritating, threatening, and disturbing there- so-called teaching.'

'With that only path, the way I use, to get where I am going, I know that I am never going to be on time, until now.'

'Notwithstanding, there is only one main staircase in the configuration, good luck gotten up when the others are coming down!'

'The building has split-levels, what can I do? If you are trying to get to my one class on the third floor, will you know to just forget about getting there on time, most of the time, I am docked as late on the roll-call records.'

'The school is made like a labyrinth, a total puzzle, network of dead ends and doorways, and a complete maze.'

'However, if I am late it is my fault, even when the teachers that follow me around know what happened.'

'They do not believe that the other kids, slow me down over my being tiny, they are the blame or the poor building planning, yet go figure?'

'Therefore, so much shit goes on in these walls, teacher's eyes cannot be everywhere in these dead-end cellblock hallways and unused classrooms, that is still too good for the likes of us.'

'Oh, this is my favorite pathway for them all; I love this one. In this floor plan design, someone thought that it was okay to have one staircase going from the second-floor entrance down to the girl's locker room. Despite everyone uses it and they can look at us in the girl's locker room changing for class.'

'Yes, they can see us girls standing there they can look at our vulva's, all of us being smooth-shaven and completely hairless, and only one other girl in particular not so much, she is a tad bit trimmed with a triangle.'

'Yet, I am not going to say any names, you're smart you figure it out who she is you would know that girl is me.' 'Anyways the girls are all out in the open, with the unsympathetic air blowing in from the door, because of the observing eyes of the boys that are peaking at us.'

'Yes, the girls are standing in their nude postures, defenseless at any time in the beginning, and end of gym class.'

'By whoever opens the door that is linked next to, that staircase that goes up to the next floor to another door to the knower.'

'Hitherto, it seems that all the classrooms lead to other dead-end hallways, and random bathrooms, or random places. Where I sometimes, find the popular kids hooking up, you know having kiss time and fast pocking touching genitalia sex, as I do sometimes with him, and even her too, yes you can hear some of the girls thanking God, as I look at them in lust, with their dirty talk; as I push past, yet yesterday, I found out why, I feel like them now a slut, yet as a girl my age that is what you have to be to feel alive.'

'My lover even asked me why, I have scars down my back, as we had our affection bond, yet this would not be with whom you would think, yet I well get him today, I will pin him to a locker, and no one will stop me.'

'Then, I saw him walking towards me, I graded him by the pants and placed my hands in his pocket. I know he was planning to walk past me. Yet, I nabbed him knowing the eyes

would be on us. However, I did not care, like what are they going to do to me now, I was becoming likc one of them?'

'I pushed him to me, then very hard to the lookers with a bang, and I made him love me, like all the others, around us, and time stood still for me.'

'Yet, I like to thank God in other ways, yet now I wonder, like if I should, after all, hanging yourself is a lingering to purgatory then hell. I wonder if God could understand, or if I can make him in all the time in this world being ever-so trapped, I will grow yet much slower than the individuals around me.'

'I understand what I am.'

'You know what is thought-provoking about the name of the school is that no landscapes are looking outside anymore; because the school covered up most of the large split pain arched windows, with bricks, when they added more classrooms instead of replacing them because it was cheaper.'

'Although, in their eyes, that was meant to be a good thing, or so they deem.'

'However, the money that was meant to go for the building, I guess that it went into the pockets like some of the teachers get paid more than others, of the higher authority like my Grandmother and Grandpa, who pull the strings of the school system. We the kids sure did, not see any of the funding's for books, papers, technology, and education, they don't care about us.'

'Heck no they will not even put butt protectors, pads, and stuff like that in the girl's room for free, I would know just days before I was here, and you know how revolting these toilets are, that none of the girls seem to flush, I mean it is not that hard to do, push the handle.'

'Yeah, the dispensers are there, yet it is not like, I have the money needed, to get what I need, that is not a necessity as Hope would say to me.'

'Yet, I have to bring what is needed from home they say, which I buy, yet have no money too, and I run out long before, I can get more when I do, I cannot afford to get more. They don't understand I am a poor girl.'

'Therefore, I go to the school nurse and get one a day, all the days that I need to, and I havc to beg and plead for it! Miss. Davies, she hands mc what looks like a diaper pad, yet I use this over not being able to afford my own.'

'Come on really…!'

'I want something a little cuter maybe pink with flowers, and that fits me! I mean am a small girl! I am not complaining, but it is not comfortable, they are damp, and irritating, yes, and not all that flattering for me to walk in.'

'Okay, I am sorry…!'

'That is enough of me ranting on about that!' 'Yet, go ask for condoms, and you will get them no questions asked? I do not get this.'

'Oh, yeah that was just my life as a teenage girl bleeding out a lot, I am thrilled to announce I will not be doing that like that again ever!'

I will never have to say in ditto, 'forgive me, I am a little bitchy today!'

-Or-

'I just want someone to hug me!'

-Or-

'I want to cry!'

-Or-

'I feel emotional!'

-And-

'Oh, I need some chocolate!'

'Plus, I remember that kept going from hot to cold, yet my hands feel like ice.'

'I was jumpy all the time, around my time.'

'I was nail-biting are knuckles cracking, and the polish is falling off from chowing my hand.'

'All the young girl days lost to the remembrance of the past were, I had that itch that, I cannot scratch right now.'

'God, I feel fat, and can't button my skirt!'

'I am now delighted to say those days are now over for me.'

'No more, 'someone kill me please, oh- my- God, admin pain!'

'I remember just three days before; I have to squirm here sitting in class!'

'Not, saying- anything, with all the dumb pocking fun, in the room not getting what a girl like me has to go through.'

'Additionally, odd to say the blood of others now is what I want then anything to sink my fangs into, yet I need to control, and they can't find out what I am.'

'That night was, no dream, the demon hunter that was once seraph the purest too of white angles, I remember her how she once existed, yet now dark and she has power over me, to do what I have done as if taking over me, I was an ever-so succubus young woman.'

'So far, like- I don't abhor what I have become, and afreet, a female demon, know to our world as a fallen angel, believed to have sexual intercourse with sleeping man or young girls, to cast them to 'The Underworld.'

'And take over their minds, control their bodies, to they find they pleasure of wanting complete death in the evilest ways imaginable.'

'So, I, like my sisters, can still their souls, to the promised land they asked for, of 'Hell's Purgatory.'

'All for our masters, our evil grandparents, who sold us at birth for satanic sacrifices, to the devil's cult they serve of Death-deviator's, the shield of arms 'The Black Crow,' over us girls, all of us sisters were made of sin, by being bastard children to or unwed whore of a mother,

that we must now obey her and the cult, to not prevent the wickedness they want us to keep forever in the afterlife.'

'And to think, I was worried about, the fact we are given one pencil for the whole year, it seems silly now, and I do always have a pencil for this class.'

'So yes, we must get our supplies- along with all my notebooks, folders- and whatever!'

'Yet my day is filled with light and dark magic now, oh yeah, the awesome, dark powers to bewitch the mind, positions to make them drink, to fascinate the ideas, that I want to give!'

- 'Death Spells.'
- 'Hurt Spells.'
- 'Resurrection Spells.' (I like my one sister has done for me, at the ending of my true life.)
- 'Banishing Spells.'
- 'Binding Spells.'
- 'Conjuring Spells'
- 'Energy Spells.'
- 'Nightmare Spells.' (As I have had pulled on me by them, to be here now.)
- 'Power Spells.'
- 'Revenge Spells.'
- 'Bad Luck, and Misfortune Spells.'

(I was taking up my time in my class of endless hell, thinking of a master plan, to save my kind with the light magic for the dark stolen throwing magical girl, yet of all things noble in hope for the fallen angel girl. I was thinking about a site, where this all could be a study in its

world, all girls like me, I could see it already in my crystal ball at home that night; I knew what I was going to be, it was glorious.'

'So, the plywood covering the big windows on the inside was covered gold shag carpet where the windows should be, except for a few small openings that are covered up by old dusty blinds, that is over what is left of the cracking antique windows, that are broke and do not open anymore.'

'Despite this what is most odd is that the largest windows are in the stairwells the go from the first floor to the third story ceiling, and they are single pane glass they are shattered and leak air.'

'Sometimes the rain runs down the inside, they get covered with this like fog, that I can see the ghostly childlike faces of my world from the past children that went here looking back at me in looking for a savior, to the point it is eerie to look through them; yet, I wonder if that is just all in my mind too or not.'

'On the outside of the school, the contaminated brick is crumbling, mainly because the building is sliding down the hill that it was constructed on.'

'Everything in 'The Land of Many Staples' was built on the side of a hill or down in the valley where most of the town remains.'

'On the outside of the school, the contaminated brick is crumbling, mainly because the building is sliding down the hill that it was constructed on.'

'Everything in 'The Land of Many Staples' was built on the side of a hill, or down in the valley where most of the town remains.'

'I swear that the architectural engineer was stoned when he made this floor plans for this high school remodel.'

'Either that or he went here and wanted to get back at them. Who knows?'

'So, it is a new class, as of now, I am sitting in Miss. Lewis mathematics class observing the same stem and leaf plot lesson for the tenth day in a row. My mind slowly drifts back into time.'

~*~

'Back to a day that will remain in my mind forever.'

'The year was 2005 spring was in full bloom. I remember walking down the pathways, that lead through these lush gardens.'

'While I was standing along the red brick path that was part of 'The Andrea-Morgan Gardens and lagoon.' I reminisce about how, I would walk over the arched bridge with the stream that ran underneath, all the colors of the flowers overwhelmed my senses next to the gazebo.'

'My rudimentary perception of the outside world of how it could be as a child.'

'The gardens, past the railroad tracks, and the whistle and X crossing sing, and split tracks were the tracks cover North West to the coal mines and to North End of town where there is on last village church from the 1900s, past all the hay fields, sunflower fields, barley fields, and yes also all the cornfields.'

'Sometimes, on my trails, I would make a stop along with the thick timbers, where this older man, would hideout and, would want me to run a few jars of moonshine for him and I did 10 jars for a dollar or so.'

'I could see the warm heat of the hot flames, the worm, the clear liquid running from the raccoon-pecker into more jars; I could see the copper still making corn whiskey, and I remember the small corn biscuits.'

'I just called him Popcorn, from the day we first met, when he said all youngsters like me did, and he was singing and dancing about, and did not even think to mind the oddities of that name; conversely, understand he was a legend in many states. or what I was doing was illegal.'

'Anyways that is how, I made a little side money, that no one needed to know about, it was about the only job I could get being me.'

'I walk through old stone train tunnel with a keystone arch, my little young feet in my girlie flats with my socks pushed down in them, one foot in front of the other on the shiny still

rails, strolling through, however, this is my only path through the hillside in my walking path, that I want to for self-analysis and meditation that felt almost blessed from the heavens.'

'The place where- I could remove myself away from all the awareness that is in my life's past.'

'A land where there was no pain, no hatred, and no fear, that was not far from home new home yet far away from my old, yet far enough, from the new and old that I was at liberty to do as I wanted or needed or wanted.'

'This was a place where the stream trickled softly and the plant life grew wild, a relaxed atmosphere, where I finally felt as if there were nobodies' eyes upon me.'

'This was the outside, after being locked up for years.'

'I remember that this was such a tranquil, location, I was truly comfortable, spacious, rich, and happy, and I felt carefree.'

'All these pathways led me out of my hellish habitations that I remember always, as well as 'The Dwellings of Lost and Lonely Dreams."

'This one time I was wearing a pink sundress and white boots. I had come to the end of the path. I sat with my knees folded up almost next to my face, to take a rest under the massive weeping willow tree.'

'The tree shades the flowers that are hanging slightly over the stream.'

'The tree seemed to move mysteriously in the cool spring breeze.'

'The gardens and its trees, and waterfalls upholds the creation of a misty fog which created the stream next to me. The bubbling waterfall adds to the divine, spiritual, apostolic, and consecrated feelings I need.'

'Some days, I would take off all the restricting clothing that I had on, and go swimming in the glassily golden looking pond, with all the orange sparkles.'

'I used to swim over to where the waterfall is, also get out nude to dive 200 feet into the waters below, and then I would get out of the water.'

'There is this leg under the falls, I would walk up to stark and stand on the immense rock, next to a hollow pool opening with soft glowing green water- where the sun would give waves of light.'

'The waterfall shower was falling on the outside of that entrance, where the cascading water would fall on top of me, moderately. Still, I was pressed agents like grotto walls.'

'At that time, I was so much younger. Wow, that always felt so amazing to stand under and even to lie under as I did.' 'However, this one time, I was there, and sometimes had passed.'

'I opened my eyes out of surprise, to see that Codi Martinez was nearing the end of the path, he was my first crush. My first kiss on the cheek, he was, he held me in his arms as I would sit in his lap.'

'Like most days, I was sitting in a grassy patch under the weeping willow tree drying myself in the open air, that was the first time, I let a boy see me this way.'

'Yet most of the time the girl that, I spent time with, and swam with was a thoughtful, gentle, tender, sensitive, winsome, and kind young girl named Lily Anderson, she is why I came here most days.'

'I have admired, loved, caressed, saluted, soft petted and kissed a girl and loved this, I had just gotten done with my swim and I was putting on my dress.'

'I looked up, and that is when that girl she was looking over at me the whole time. She decided to sit down beside me, most days.'

'She reached over and held my hand for no reason, to find the weakness of needing love.'

'No one had ever shown me that kind of affection before, I was so nervous, I barely spoke a word; my breathing became rapid just, because of the way I looked at the time.'

'It was a hot and bothered lust to find young love, girl or boy at this point did not matter to me.'

'I was too young to know what true love meant, I was captivated by him, yet loved her more, and did not know why.'

'Furthermore, what all I saw, that he showed me, was the first time a young man ever did this, that was not mean, signify, intend, and anticipate.'

'That swim that we had that day together, was one that I will never forget. I still cannot believe that I did that!'

'Most nights from that day on we sat under the tree every night until the day became nightfall, one of those many nights, and socked in the grotto.'

'I use my magical scepter of enchanting power to make a lustrous, zealous, and phosphorescent ball of glowing pulsating light to make the waters gleam, redden, radiate, and glow from underneath.'

'I was hoping that we would kiss even more than we did, after all, she was like me in many ways even with magic and falling like an angel, in that perfect setting. She became my best friend she was a girl that was a girlfriend like most girls have a boyfriend, yet she was the only one I could trust with all my thoughts.'

'Moreover, love was something we could not honestly hold, not over being same-sex-(girls,) more like we had the same bloodline down the line somewhere. How? I did not know. Yet I was told, by others in my class that seems to know more about me then I do about myself.'

'There is nothing more disappointing, than being in the friend zone as long as we're over feeling shame with each other, including descent, mostly blood, even if everything was ever-so right when together, and not genuinely knowing why it was.'

'Notwithstanding wanting move onward that way regardless of our relationship stigmas.'

'All I know is that to this very day, I dream about that time we had together grasped, that I can't live without her, but only with someone else that I dream about less seems unfair, if only he loved me.'

'I wonder what that first kiss would have been like back when I was about ten with that boy. I can say now it was more.'

'I ask this because being fourteen and never been kissed at all by someone I loved, yet havc been kissed by man I did not, maybe that is why I can't find love in a boy yet like damaged, even so, all moments were a virtuous sensation to have, remember what it was like to my mind in the past.'

'I wonder what might have taken place if she would have been more open with me, without thinking as we are both accused of not doing.'

'Yet someone like Lily she was, I wonder why?'

'Yet after her death, I did not wonder anymore.'

'Although, I still do not know what it is like to have someone, which truly loves me now as she did even if so wrong.'

'I wanted her sex!'

'I do appreciate what that first passionate kiss would be like and miss it every day now. I have held hands and miss them now to hold, yet it did not mean much until she was gone without a goodbye.'

'It is like, liking someone when you are that age, and liking someone, as you are a teenager is such different things. As always everyone is taken away from me. Codi Martinez and Lily all that; I have loved either move away at the end of that summer or have passed on.'

'I have never seen or heard from him again, yet Lily I have. I still wonder why he never tried to find me; though, that is okay, because he is not my dream guy anymore, and Lily needs to let me go in her attachments to me, he like Lily were more than a friend to me in a time of need, yet I feel selfish to say that.'

'As I got older, the gardens withered away just like me. Depress, discourage, oppress, and saddened I heard the end of the class bells ringing out, snapping me out of my daydream of the remembrances of all things past.'

'Yes, I am now back into the real reality of the hellhole, looking at the black and white checkered board like a floor in this classroom, only on this floor, hand-colored butterfly dangle from stings dancing about above my head, from the ceiling ironically it a class about the study

life, yet still thinking about my grandmother being my handler like a dirty crazy secret, that is my true existence in life.'

'All the catholic nuns that teach my main classes also in black and white, it was a theme to my life, yet the color is coming back gradually.'

'I sit and wait for my next class to start, I think and hum about 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow,' where bluebirds fly over the rainbow, yet why can't I?'

'I have my life's saving out on the old wooden desk in front of me, of seventy-five cents in the shape of Mickey Mouse ears.'

'I vow silence, as the teacher wants us, kids, to hack up a dead white rabbit for every two kids, for a piece of information, yet that I will not do, I am scrammed to the office for more enforcing discipline on me to muffle my brain, even more, where I can be anybody walking into the door by them, and sometimes, I pretend with my games and seldom not.'

'As I am making many black and white drawings depicting me at stages of my life for my book covers; maybe some color we wash in when I find happiness, I start thinking and make little riddles in my head, that I add to my book of life, that well become long drawn out novels.'

'At this time, in the moments that I have I look into my purple feline compact mirror that is cracked and a little shattered, that looks like a kittens face.'

'At that moment after getting yet more in-school suspensions tacked on to my growing list of 'The Bad Girl,' stigma.'

'Like, Pinocchio nose, listing more lies by them grow; yet, I am the liar, and the child just handled in the same a doll on strings, denominated as the child that is nothing more than an article of rubbish of misusing teacher and student participation, that takes away from them that want to discover what I don't want to receive in their teachings.'

'At that point, for being 'The Bad Girl,' my teacher's assistant ad teacher helps me go to Speech therapy class by holding my hand going down the halls, for all the others to see, as she drags me there as I am more than limp.'

'Oppositely, I am turned over to the local cops for crim charges, and handcuffs, of fighting my teachers and kids and given yet another uniform by the young kids holding jail, when all my teacher is doing taking me down when I need emotional support for being, 'The Bad Girl.'

'Speech class is only for me and two others that divide classes for me that should matter to my future, we do what is said to be testing in the subjects they think matter yet, I do not, in reading and understand words as we have word stupidity to the max, but that is a cover for what it is- truly brainwashing.'

'Simply, I open my eyes, and time has passed, yet have no memories of why, to see a bored grin of the creepy the teacher, of trust, being far too nice to me, know what she did.'

'She taps on the table with her pencil and it trains me to have triggers to the sound, sight, and even words.'

'Immediately, I am is in deep hypnotism, to keep me drain-dead so my teachers can keep me 'Sped,' at the tap of a click of a pencil hitting a stack of paper.'

'Finally, she gives up on what's made to look like an attempt to being trained nonsensical words, that I can't do, where I make no progressions in learning, yet have been trained to go backward in understandings of reading and writing.'

'Little do they know; I write it all down; even if they try to erase my mind.'

~*~

(Daydreaming, as I do a lot in school.)

'Someday, I would like to be part of the steel city and go out and live in Pittsburgh. I need to escape all my misery, which is surrounding me in the small town. When I come of age and am left go off by them.'

'Where the moon is shining throughout the night on the demand glass statues buildings which embrace the silky black sky.'

'So that, perhaps I can find what I am searching for in my reality, somewhere there is purpose more than think about my past. I need to find a brand-new place of signifying freedom.'

'Yes, I have come to believe that it is a cutthroat world, in my hometown; either you learn to cut or be cut by others. I have been there just more issues I have had, yet I don't expect anyone to understand.'

'That reminds me of some nights, and I do not know why, but just like roaring steam engines of the past, I walk along the lonely rails road tracks rails that are forever apart; never to be joined in harmony.'

'In a way, there are many crossing rails but no connections for long distances of those parted rails.'

'This reminds me of myself in every emotion in a romantic sense of my existence of life, long times without love or thinking I am lost, and just crossing intersections of tracks when romances happen; just to keep traveling the same line lost.'

'Although, in my real life of the past and yesterday, as a pre-teenage girl, to this very day, I started to wander, walk, and step along the railroad tracks, every day.'

'They have been neglected, overlooked, disregarded, forgotten, and ignored by the community; I live in.'

'I go through the cornfields of delight, enjoyment. Yet there are no fun, kicks, joy, pleasure, and thrills for me; It is like I can find happiness.'

'I pass the windmills that twist, twirl and turn in the night's cold breeze and zephyr.'

'This reminds me of the ones that mock, counterfeit, sham, and burlesque me to my face. That has someone in the night to tumble with similar as they do.'

'Nevertheless, they like to rub it in my face at school, that I don't, conversely, so they think.'

'Accurate for me in saying- yes, they remind me of the windmills, just likc acrobats dancing in the night's sky, and also with me in the past with ones I never genuinely admired, cherished, loved and even chosen, I was adopted for what love and affection denoted in a state of mind, damage to me in my thinking, investigating, and discerning to this day what it really could be.'

'I can hear the haunting notes, tones, and sounds of the whistles from the ghostly railroad, which once traveled along here, as I am now, of the part they play in my mind in visions. I can feel the pressure as it builds inside of me, like the steam; I have to let it out, or I will scream.'

'I can feel the vibrations; though should I get off the track, there is a new modern-day train coming. I can see the lights now and here the dinging of the bells, a highspeed commuter diesel.'

'I don't get off until the very last moments when my heels slip off the rails. Furthermore, I know when I derailed, that it was not the end of the line; It is just the beginning of a new course for me.'

'It was in a shiny blurred and the air horn sound stretching in the air around; I mean yes, I do balance one foot in front of the other as I go back home.'

'These old tracks, run next to my home, in a long cover, about 10 feet away from the one side of the house as I walk along until I come to the bridge of dizzying heights, that has been bypassed with a new 8 miles longer; yet a much safer route.'

'This line was shut down in 2000. Therefore, like I still walk up to this bridge, yet can't get home this way even if shorter over it has fallen in places anyways it's a structure, that has been forgotten by the amenities.'

'The bridge was built in 1882, It once stood in bewilderment, surprise, wonder, and amazement of its engineering marvel. It was strong, durable, stable and magnificent at about 1,025 feet high.'

'Um roughly even higher than that, call me crazy, stupid, insane and absurd; but I would say it is still the highest in the world.'

'Moreover, I know that it was about 2,100 feet long, now that only about 600 feet are now still left standing.'

'However, one night one stiff breeze came through here, and it collapsed under its weight.'

'It was built of wood and steel it is a crumbling pile at the bottom of the valley.'

'It has served its purpose in the establishment of life; just like me I am slipping away, plus crumbling just like the steel beams, and wood planks that once was a masterpiece.'

'I wonder if my story will be a masterpiece too?'

'The bridge is dissolving just like I was every day, as I must undertake the weathering of the hellhole or high school.'

'I would wonder when I would get to the broken-off end that hangs like an arm in the sky if had I come to the end of my line too or not.'

'I taught this daily, to the day my ending if today was or should be the end of my journey along this run like this forgotten railway, and take the leap?'

'Including if I should I go back home? Where no one cares, if I live or not, go to school, where I have to go, even if, I don't want too, and they wish to my face; that I would kill myself, like the townspeople what me to do for being a waste of life.'

'I asked myself daily if I should go down to the bridge, and fly to silence, harmony, and rest?'

'I asked myself daily, which decision should I make, with that small voice in my head saying do it, and other screaming not too?'

'Despite daily I turned in the opposite direction and put one foot in front of the other then slowly caress the rails that lead me back to, 'The Land of Many Steeples,' to the dwelling of Lost and Lonely Dreams; where I would do my life on repeat.'

'Sometimes, I step off the tracks, I walk through the cemetery, and Lily grabs me by the ankles.'

'It is like she rises to hold close to me, yet this terrifies me quite truthfully, yet now we are the same, I understand.'

'Nevertheless all the day of the past up 'till now; I loved it, because, I cherished, treasured, worshiped and adored her, she was one girl that knew what she and I went through, and what I put up with now still.'

'Now it is just me, left agents them. So, I will tell you about her shortly, and why she was gone before me.'

'She grasps me in all ways, as I did her, yet she follows me on the trail back to the homestead. She is the warmth that I have now, as my blood is getting so icy feeling, as I transform into what she is now.'

'I look at her headstone on 'May 30, 1995, to May 29, 2010."

'It is overgrown with tall grasses now, yet it was not all that long ago she walked in the halls, with all of us. I missed her so much, yet now she is back to me, as I am to her!'

'She was only fifteen, and her birthday was the very next day, yet she never got to see sweet sixteen, she did not make it nor did she want too, or her sisters.'

'I see my one pink rose, the only one she had, that I placed for her the time before; I was here over her grave plot.'

'I see myself in the glossy stone ones more, and I see that that young girl's face looking back at me, she looks just like me looking back into my eyes.'

'Also, this stone was all I have left of her until now, yet it is like her spirit is with me, now more than ever. I can feel it; I can feel her, and I even see all of her now in front of me, also fallen just like me, thanks to are evil sisters.'

'This is all that reminds me of what she used to be, yet a birth of what we both are now, the eyes that watch me here tarnishes her and me to the town, unlike me, she went into the ground, she keeps me from being next to her laying in the graveyard, just like her I can be in other souls, take them to save them, or steal them for my own, yet she chooses for me to keep my body as long as I can, as if magically persevered, thanks to her death wish, to go lower place in the afterlife to save me.'

'They don't wail about her being in her grave, and part of my soul going with her, when she died, they think it hilarious to see young girls die.'

'Yet, as for me, I'd cry for her in the past; intertwined entangled with her.'

'Some of these nights without her, I sit there until the moon shines on me in the twilight, furthermore, the rocks are shown as colorless shadows of gray; against the blue-black starfield heavens.'

'The graves are all that are alive to me even now, plus the world is dying around me.'

'If I could label what she was to me, I would say she was my girlfriend, and still is; Lily, she was so sweet, never felt, loved, kissed, or admired by a boy.'

'I think about her often, now that she has remained gone as I once knew her lost to memories that get succumbed in my mind, brain, and spirit.'

'Oh, some of the things we did, yet seldom it makes me feel down reliving the past, knowing she is not here for me anymore, alive, and I couldn't be there for her when she needed me the most.'

'Besides, I know that she is far better off than I was, that why I decided to join her.'

'I have to remember that some angels on Earth, are not meant to suffer, they're warm, caring, and loving. Will carry them away by their soul, like a French Kiss to me in a goodbye, on a magical school day night, and they will fly away and find genuine freedom.'

'Although, I cannot help feeling depressed because, I know that she was the only girl in this emotionless world that, I had an identity with?'

'Nevertheless, the part of me that knows that it was a sin… to let her pass before my eyes are okay with it because being locked up with her was the only delight for us to share were death was long-time peace, reconciliation, rest, and tranquility.'

'Yet the halls here that I walk in are that much paler, colorless, cold, bitter, boring, and dull. Now that she is absent forever!'

'I can picture her in my mind sitting next to me, yet- I guess I just miss my girlfriend, mortal!'

'I have done this for a year now think about life and death, how it is so final, every day until the last true day of my mortal life.'

'I could see my breath wobbling within puffs out of my mouth as I exhaled, as I still made my walk and saw all the seasons change; yet my mind I was numb, to terms and seasons.'

'Even at school, and days after Lily's death, so days it was like almost too cold to sit here in this form, in all senses tolerable, mediocre, poor, and common, yet I had too, yet she was always in my thoughts and prayers.'

'You know it is very true, I prayed to have her back as she was.'

'I can see now why I have become what they say looking back on my last year, I had an incomprehension, I had an unawareness to everyone and everything.'

'An unconsciousness state of writing my life down in notebooks as it happened, so that someone would discover, perceive understand and even discern them for what they unquestionably mean, yet I had naiveté to wanting to move on and learn; an innocence to myself and others even, with a pure unfamiliarity with whom I was on the inside and within.'

'I know the lack of enlightenment, I had regarding everything and everyone close, next, and near to me; I was walking around ever-so cluelessness.'

'I honestly weaved my caring toward nescience and lack of education, influencing me into what they wanted me to become, stupidity, foolish with idiocy and denseness of brainlessness, mindlessness, even more than what I used to be, making me have a case of: 'What is the Use."

'All this just to find comfort slow-wittedness, likewise, I did not heed in caring.'

'Yes, it is very true, I have found my stiffness, my thick-headedness, in my classes, now that have a dimness, of my full day- where I owned dumbness, and dopiness. Furthermore, was lost to a doziness of not minding anymore.'

'Yes, I have tried to walk away and leave it all behind me, but the bond was just too tight, she was always so snug to me, preferentially at least that is what the sisters said about her too.'

'She was so tight she could squeeze; I suspect as she squeezed me as we would hug.'

'You will get to meet the relatives and see them as I do; yet you make your judgments don't let me influence you.'

'Good luck you are going to need it; I know I do!'

'Like, I have said, she called me to her grave at night too, and what can I do? I have to go and talk to her.'

'She hugs me, and then, I come home and sit at the in the window undressed while looking over the train tracks that are next to the oversized bow-window, and fields of gold.'

'I just sit here in the window, while I am thinking about how I could tell someone what goes on in my life, more them writing it down in my books.'

'Including how my life is for a girl like me; I can still hear her voice calling out to me.'

'I have to stop, and just overhear it in my mind, as I did on that day, she was screaming for me, for help, and I did not go to her, in time over I was observed by them, no not aid.'

'I know that someday it will all come out in the open in an immense, huge, deep, and enormous way, of what they do to girls like us.'

'However, as for now, I just have to sit in my closet in a classroom and think, until I cannot anymore over pain.'

'Although is it okay, for a girl like me to come out of her closet, over my type of breed, and or would in the same moment of being pro-gay say, 'I should go to hell' over it? So, they tease me about.'

'Lily, she follows me everywhere as the spirit of a girl, that is fallen, she calls herself an archangel, yet I know that is not altogether true.'

'When people die, they stay the same age even in the afterlife this is something that, I found out as of late.'

'They look the same just translucent, natural, straightforward, plus manifest, and at times she is even like transparent to my sight.'

'Lily was always a tiny girl just like me, she stands at five nothing also, in a way we resemble identically.'

'Yet I never let it in, that she was born the same day as me so maybe we are long lost, twins, I know of another girl that was said to be the same as us to named, Naddalin. So, I would say, that I am a triplet; nevertheless, I never really meat her.'

'Still, her eyes peer into my eyes, and they look into my soul like they always did. If only, I could have helped her out sooner, but I was in a softened, reduced, an exhausted and weakened, position they had a hold on me.'

'Still, I cannot help but think we all have some type of value, even if I don't and neither did, she.'

'She was just like that spark of lightning that I see, when I stand in the rain with my arms wide open, pleading to God why she was taken away from me.'

'Additionally, I do not blame 'God,' even if I want to at times!'

'I can never be angry with 'God!' Yet that makes me simple to believe in something, that I cannot see, yet now after death, I can say that I have, and I can also say, that I was turned away.'

'She had a hell at school, and at her first home I retrieve fascinatingly deep in my mind.'

'I remember, that reminds me that Lily's adopted dad was her hero; because, for seven years a woman her real mother would stomp, beat, slam, sodomize, and tie her down, to a bed.'

'I should remember, yet I don't. I had to succumb and die to yield to remember everything, that was taken away from me.'

'Her mother, like my mother, so I would say our mother, would twist her feet and limbs until the bones would crunch; she even had her toes nailed down to the footboard on her little bed, so she would not run.'

'If she sprinted away, she would not get fair now, or if she talked back, they would wire her mouth shut after breaking her jaw. I know, I had it bad, but heir beatings were worse than mine.'

'Sometimes, she used a ball-peen hammer on her feet, and her toes would be where her heels should be. Meaning that her feet would completely spin right around.'

'Lily was given blinding with light, punishments one thing they did to her in the basement of the orphanage.'

'Given visual impairment, also known as or eyesight loss.'

'A decreased ability to see to a standard that causes problems not fixable by usual means, such as glasses. After all, that is the main reason, why she was in the program she could not see well, or walk well, with learned helplessness; making many difficulties with normal daily activities, reading, socializing, and walking. She will never be able to drive.'

'Lily her life was truly churlish; water torture was one of mom's and Grandma's methods in which water is slowly dripped onto the scalp as your naked on a wooden board tied down with straps.'

'Supposedly making the bound prey of us girls go insane, this is why we're both in emotional support in school now.'

'I remember the screaming, and long subbing of crying in my ears all night long asking for love, and help; most of them under the age of 10 years of age.'

'All some of us girls locked in solitary confinement always totally naked, where we sleep in their shit and piss.'

'In many stone chambers of a cell with jail-like bar doors, unveiled as the day they were born of sin, a lined in the corridors like a death row.'

'A death row for the so very wrong ones like us- the 'The Bad Girls.'

'Just the proper punishment for all the young girls, that were told they were crazy, erratic, insane, stupid, and mad.'

'Just like, I made powerlessly and had a helpless to escape the hell of the mothers, grandparents' hands of abuses, as their wardens.'

('Girl-81433, as the little silver tag would read.')

'She was drug out of her cell, by her arms next to limp, she was murdered not fully dead yet by the beatings she received, of thrashings, drubbings, whippings, and floggings by my sister's and mother no that wasn't threatening, creepy, frightening, and painful enough.'

'No death- would be far worse than death by boiling water while still alive as all had to stand as a witness, over the open flames of the furnace, in a massive corn pot was this girl bobbing, this was a means of execution, by the child in fighting back, in which the little five-year-old girl child was killed by drowning in a boiling water liquid.'

'Furthermore, that night she was served to us bad girl as a meal, and a reminder we could be next.'

'There was a girl that was crossed from me, I can still see her young face. Despite trying not to remember the pain of seeing a face I cannot forget, and life has taken.'

'I remember her only identity, being what I have here in my hand; this identification tag, that I kept to this very day, to not forget, even if I was helped to not remember.'

("Girl-81433') I remember when I took the tag of the nail it was hanging on with all the other ID tags, like all the other numbers in a row naming young girls that don't have genuine names of anyone caring to give, the other ladies would say to me. 'It doesn't matter what her name is like we're all going to be dead, that girl you care about is soup now, she's gone, and we need to exist.'

'Bone fracture with a wooden staff and even garden tools, for us all was common, even I have had broken bones, given to me by my sisters.'

'It is a true wonder, that I did not have a disfigurement, some of the others were not as fortunate.'

'I like all the children still have our human branding or stigmatizing denoting the method by which a mark, habitually is a symbol is burned into the skin of us living girls.'

'Moreover, also the number tag as a hooped piece of jewelry, with the purpose, was the resulting scar makes it permanent on the head.'

'The mark of the 'Fallen Angel,' this is what I was given, just like Lily including just like the foreign Naddalin.'

'That I forthwith cover over with my long hair. Just one type of body modification; or under coercion, as a punishment or to identify an enslaved us, young ladies.'

'Combing long nail torture was used on Lily's back, a signifying a red blood jacket showing that she was now a woman if she did not cry.'

'I thank God, I got out, just two days before they planned on doing that to me. Nevertheless, I have had rusty nine-inch nails through my young seven-year girly nipples and have also spent a night hogtied sleeping on a bed of nails.'

'Crushing or pressing was a method used to kill children, I even saw them use bricks to the heads of young girls, having intense weight upon a person by placing heavy things on their little bodies.'

'I never saw this, although, I was informed about ('Girl-30265,') being in this room, where the walls would slowly close in on her in a room engineered by the Grandpa; to mash children. I don't know, if that was true, she was before my time, so- I took it is nothing more than a rhymer.'

'I have been through cutting, dehydration, de-nailing, the drowning feeling of been held down by my mother in a bathtub. I have experienced dry-boarding, flagellation all of this was done to me, and others in the back courtyard next to the graveyard, that was the playground.'

'Some girls skins were flayed, and their skins lie around, like bear rugs as the bones are sorted in the basement in pills.'

'Genital modification or even forced circumcisions were done on Sarah and Lily, I was there standing over the girls when Grandpa did it, who said 'I was next,' they did not do that to me, yet it was close.'

'I ask why?'

'I still don't know why, they did not; like, maybe over Ava wanting me for her love interest, and to keep the butcher knife from my clitoris. I announced in agreement, that I would be her delicate lover for life.'

I am sure down in the passages of the orphanage, oxygen deprivation was a factor to my education claims now, like Lily's.'

'I remember at time pliers, and to this day they make me cringe when I see them.'

'I remember them being used on me and others. I remember Sarah had a full teeth extraction by Grandpa, so she would not bite, the other kids and them anymore, she spent her days drinking her food through a straw.'

'My sisters finding all my pressure points, with their fingers and hands and tools, of their liking, when I was up with them in the bed chambers.'

'I retrieve all the remembrances of all the rape and roping of young girls for their giggles.'

'I recall all the sensory overloads, and all the sexual assaults of us young girls.'

'I remember all the sleep deprivation, all the rats poking around even in the beds as we tried to sleep, they were even crawling all over my legs and upper body too.'

'I remember all the sounds some extremely high volumes, some just at the active range, some at low frequency to make the mind hurt, some at high pitched noise, intended to interfere with rest, cognition and concentration.'

'God, I remember all the starvation.'

'I remember all the stoning's by other kids, in the yard, as they would throw rocks at me for being smaller and weaker.'

'I remember Lily being on 'The Rack,' a torture device consisting of a rectangular, usually wooden frame, slightly elevated from the ground, with a roller at one or both ends meant to pull the body apart.'

'I was on this thing ones too, for something- I don't remember doing, like if I did anything at all other than being alive.'

'I like was attached at the ankles and fastened to one roller at the wrists and chained to the other. As the interrogation progress would take place, of questions I don't remember, I think I was in too much pain and shock.'

'A handle and ratchet mechanism attached to the top roller was used to simply gradually retract the chains, slowly building the strain on my shoulders, hips, knees, and elbows and causing excruciating pain; until I agree to everything they say.'

'This was done to Lily to the muscle fibers they became so stretched extravagantly, she started to lose the ability to contract, rendering them worthless.'

'You know, I cannot believe that she was able to walk as well as she could.'

'I guess that is why she had an Individualized Education Program too.'

'She had a cute shambling walk; it was sweet, like her. Yet she was perfect, in her body, and her mind. We had so many similarities, yet we did not get to talk about that all that much, she did not like too. So, we talked more about that, what was happening in the now, and not then.'

'This woman would keep her locked up in a chamber that was cold, damp, and dark with only one light bulb hanging from wires under the tin roof tiles in the long hallways that seem to go on and onward.'

'I retain in my memories, there was no bathroom, the windows covered up with wood planks, with the smell of excrement everywhere in that cell room.'

'To this very day, nobody knows where this evil person went to our mother that is. It is like she was there and gone before anyone got to know the true story of Lily's mom, being my mom too.'

'Lily did not know that she could get away. So, that mother got away with all of this, I guess that she had a fear of the rage, fury, vengeance, and wrath that is why she never attempted to flee again, after being somewhat hobbled by Grandpa and Grandmother's walking stick's smashing into the tops of her feet.'

'It is amazing how someone can brainwash someone, that is that young. What can a little girl do? And what does a little girl do to deserve this? Additionally, she was just like me; she had someone that fights for her, which saved her from certain death too.'

~*~

Mr. Anderson- 'So what could I do? He said, along with, I was not going to leave her out in the cold the night she came crawling to my home, she said to me everything that happened to her, and I got to adopt her as my own.'

'Like how could, I resist that adorable little girl?'

'You know, I do miss Lily so much, now that she is gone, you have no idea. It is just not the same here without her around here in this home we shared, yet I am getting by, I have too.'

'I saw Nevaeh going down the same path, I was concerned. She stopped over sometimes, and it is like she is not even on earth anymore, I do know what is wrong, yet I am powerless to heal her pain.'

'She used to spend more time here when Lily and she would have their sleepovers. I do not know how to help her; I could not help my own, that I cherished so, I feel as if I have failed.'

'Yet, if I see Nevaeh, out and about, I always ask her to come on in and chat and have some milk and chocolate chip cookies.'

'Nevaeh, she is not like others her age, she is one of the once-in-a-lifetime types of young ladies, that speaks her mind, yet she is polite and charming, engaging, endearing, lovable, and endearing.'

'I remember that Lily always did have a way of melting my heart too, and I guess she always will. It would not have been for this little girl; I would have given up on life a long time ago.'

'It is not easy being seventy-nine and lose your whole life- my life was that girl. I guess that my assignment in life is over my next stop is up on the hill, next to her I presume.'

'Life goes by like a blink of an eye. I did the best I could, but I frequently wonder if my best was good enough. Maybe, I was too hard on her.'

'Maybe she was unhappy; maybe it was me? The only hobby I have, as I get older is looking at the scenery that surrounds me.'

'Looking over the pond that cascades a reflection of the trees on along the walkway. Plus, stumbling back and forth from the kitchen, I mumble in whispers, remembering her voice in my mind, while trying to write my fragmented thoughts down on paper, as they rush in my head faster than I can scribble with my pencil.'

'Oddly Nevaeh is the writer I am not, yet I have given her all my notes about my memories.'

'As you may have guessed, I do blame myself for her being gone! I always tell Miss Nevaeh, to put her life thoughts down on paper! Because of it a story that will be marvelous in the end good or bad.'

~*~

Nevaeh- 'Mr. Anderson was not Lily's real dad; awe, he is a wonderful older person, even so, he was like a daddy to her.'

'The story goes that one night; he had knocked on his front door. They're sitting on the doorstep was a little girl. She was only five years old at the time.'

'She was nude with a tattered blanket wrapped around her, she looked up at him and said- save me, and that is what he did.'

'Mr. Anderson was friendly, kind, cheerful, polite, and pleasant to everyone, but his love in life was caring for a girl he named Lily, that is what I remember him for.'

'He liked me too... however, the past two months after she did, yes, he was another one out of my life too. I still think about him, now and then, he was a friend to me.'

'It was said, Mr. Anderson when he first saw Lily when she was five, he did not know how he felt.'

'The feelings of being overjoyed led to the feelings of being horrified at what he was seeing, she had a broken cut up wrist and feet, and her fingernails were chewed right down to the bones.'

'Her eyes bloodshot, with tears running down her cheeks, and everything in-between was cut up, you could even see all the welt markings.'

'She did not even know her name, so she was named after his favorite flower, that he had everywhere in his home, as I remember.'

(Present time)

Nevaeh- 'I feel that I have been cut away from the umbilical cord to the womb of society's connection, yet I have to breathe on my own and develop my life-cycle.'

'People will come and go. Things will come and change. The pages will turn; the chapters will open and close, in my book of life, regarding all the sh-h.'

'Some of the text, which was written, will fade away, and a broken heart will mend. Yet some of it will remain in my memory bold and vivid.'

'Nonetheless, I have to understand it is all that I want to remember, and not what they choose for me to evoke.'

'Yet, I can hear whispers, undertones I can feel, whispers that used to give me a thrill.'

'Murmurs from the ones that kill, whispers that give me a chill, I recall whispers while trying to find love.'

'I hear them whispering from the wings of the dove, even the whispers from the above one. I hear whispers!'

'You know I think that life is all choice; one can either choose to live content or choose to live in suffering, torture, pain, anguish, and agony.'

'Sometimes one cannot have a voice, preference, and choice, furthermore, will have to live with the results, outgrowths, outcomes, consequences, and weights, of a towering entity and dangerous person's, that takes everything away from her, and that girl is me.'

'Yet, in my life, it is like someone is filtering, channeling, and monitoring all my life's events. They are the ones that give the allowances in the establishments in the society's circle for me to have.'

'They are the string that is attached to my like a puppet; nothing can correspond or takes place in society without the approval.'

'Just like the mystic, magical cards this one here is showing the 'Tower' in my life is my grandmother.'

'Everyone has to bow down to them or live a life of failure or killing.'

'Either way, I and the ones around me lose out on a life of liberty to decide on their selection or you could die just being my friend, or go to jail for saying, 'hey."

'I have a question, 'so, is it nature that drives us, or nurture, which possesses all of us?'

'It is just like now, 'The Land of Many Steeples,' has its houses of horrors and its many mockeries to the true faith.' 'The people contribute nothing to the utmost following of God's instructions.'

'There are more souls made than saved, no lives in this country have a clear understanding of what they are doing.' 'Most live life in their brainwashed rituals, which keep them in purgatory. Besides they do not know what to follow because it has become a routine of what they think needs to be known.'

'So, they prefer to not follow anything, and those are the one that seems to be lost on their path, or that is the way I see it. My path has its ups and downs also.'

'I have learned, to follow my heart, and go with my gut feeling. I believe that I do not need to be a bible fanatic to have true faith; I have faith.'

'All I need is to have a love for the man who breathed his last breath so that I could breathe freely, yet I was asked to see more than what I did at death, I still don't know why.'

'I ask him to do more for me. Yet, I have to do more for myself, and I'll know that someday he will answer me, with what I will become!'

'Still, I feel like this, there is nothing to do in this town. There is nowhere to go, no one to see, and no one, that cares about me.'

'I wondered before my death, how could I live a life of glee, happiness, joviality, and merriment; if I am not surrounded by people who are happy, or do not need me?'

'I like some in my grouping was just a part of the towns and school's unknown history, of no one, cares, and have been chosen to be forgotten until the time of remembering my legendary, and the others that should not be forgotten.'

Nevaeh

Book: 2

The Forbidden Touches

Freshman to sophomore days, I am sick of chasing a fantasy that is never going to be a reality; truly, I just do not care anymore. It is like she is not the same girl anymore what happened?

~Chiaz~

So far, I cannot stop my feelings of wanting her here. I just cannot move on. Just tear out my heart and slam it on the floor. Your blue eyes shine it makes my heart sore.

You are my life; you are like an angel. You are like a knife, you are everything, that I never needed and everything that I ever admired. I wish you could see that; I am trying to move on. I wish you could see that; you are the one. I wish you could feel that I no longer care. I wish you could feel that I am still there. I can see you; I can feel you, and- do I need you?

Girl, I do need you.

Yet she is always in control, even now. I am nothing but a fool; I can tell you whatever you wanted to hear. All the words from the past there still unclear, I can tell you do not have to cry a tear anymore. You do not need me up there… do you see me? I need you… yet you are not here. What can I do without you? I do not want to say good-bye.

Yet you made me cry!

~Nevaeh~

Chapter: 10

Blooming, yet Blurring Sentences

Nevaeh- There is nothing like the smell of blossoms in the springtime at night, in early May. The nights are long and the sent in the breeze is awe taking. I stand outside in the elements, and it is so lovely, yet it contrasts with the way I feel inside, it is like everything is taken away like it is fading away.

Everyone else can have their moments in elegant apparel ones more, yet I feel like that tree in the background that has no leaves on it. It has been left behind; with no beauty anymore, it is dead to the world.

The blossoms are gone forever in my mind, unlike my surroundings that are covered in pinks and whites, the beautiful colors that cascade to the ground that show the end of what is no longer a season of time. The white blossoms are like the memories that I can never have.

They symbolize to me what was there when I was younger, and like that- now she, the girl in a white lace dress that was named Lily, she has been sealed away in her casket, that is now in the ground under my feet for all time.

Yet, everyone else they are blossoming all around me, yet I am not part of their surroundings anymore.

The little girl has fallen like a petal in the wind without me, and the dead tree on the inside is all that is left behind.

The time we could have had together is no longer there, or going to be. Just like the holding hands of the past are now part of the white blossoms of the springs of days gone by.

I have forever disconnected away from the branches in which bring us together. The beauty of my life is gone, and the flowers have bloomed for the last time.

Nevertheless, the memory of white, not the colors will be the memories that will never be forgotten, since I have never been allowed to blossom with another.

All my colors fade to white. On that spring night, moments that do not feel right, observing all the blossoms in stunning white, wishing that I was part of the magnificent sight. Then again, we could have the only blossom when the time is right, on one of these beautiful spring nights, I guess that was not what was right?

Summer break seems to come and go so fast, and then it is back into the same routine of hell. Yet with some new faces, the classes are all the same, the teachers are all the same… as for me, my life is the same.

Yet with one girl in my classless, yet- 'One year down, three more to go.' In my time of grieving, I sometimes went to The Jena May's Family Restaurant, I did not eat much there, I tried

to make new friends with the girls on the job. I cannot have what I had… No- that was a waste of time. I knew that… but I tried, no one can replace her. In that restaurant there is a relaxed country atmosphere, it is the only restaurant in the town really, in 'The Land of Many Steeples', which slops out what most would call respectable food. It is an enjoyable place for all, yet the faces in the crowd still stare when I am in there. Most of the girls that work there that are my age or younger just hide in the kitchen when they see me sitting there, and talk about me.

Likewise, because of that, they stick me with the same crappy, snotty, and just plain creepy- freaky waitress every time, will saying I stock them to the town and the police. Ha, yeah right keep dreaming. The people in the restaurant see me and they turn away in fright. It is the most common method of disapproval by society, for instance when two individuals are sitting in their booths.

Yet slightly turned away from me with their one hand pressed against their face, while looking at the other person and talking about me, at the table, I know the whispering is about me. Whatever, say what you want, I am not going to stop you, or change your mind and what you think. Life is all about reading someone's body language and figuring out what they are truly thinking. I know that I am not welcome… anywhere in this town, it is so apparent to me anymore what they are thinking, and projecting to me.

However, they just do not realize the signs that they are giving off… or maybe they do? Hello- I am over here, I am not a piece of shit, you no! I find this to be kind of pathetic, to think that I am the one that is supposed to have a staring problem. If that is what they want to say, I cannot stop them from making judgments.

If you stay at home, and mind you are on business then they labeled you like a creeper. However, if you go out, and try to be nice to people, talk, and socialize with them then you're considered to be a stalker… you just cannot win at their games. I did not know that small talk could be so terrifying.

Nor do I care what they think anymore, I have learned that I have to be perfect in everything I do, why? For the reasons that everything I do is amplified by the tower and her clan. In other words, everything I do is known or twisted to be known in different non-beneficial-ways.

Do you understand that? I always have to think twice about doing something or being with someone, since there is always a setup waiting around the corner. I wonder what it would be like to have so-called normal parents, and not an adoptive parent. I have a so-called family, but they do not truly care about me.

I am forever an orphan in my mind, and that so-called family, they're just a waste of life in my opinion. Besides, the ones that want to be part of their lives existence they just let them slip away, while they turn their backs. Yet they cannot figure out that I do not care what they do, nor do they understand that I do not want to be in their existence. They have no time for me, nor do I have the time for them.

Then life moves on while the others fade away- that is okay!

This comes to my mind, for instance, being at this restaurant, I see a family together and the parents were socializing with the children. I wonder what it would be like to have a family. I see a father as he affectionately runs his fingers through his teenage daughter's hair. I wonder what that would be like, to know that he cared that much, and cherishes every moment of being together.

Though just like everything else in my life, I was cheated out of that too.

Nevertheless, I know someday that I will have my own family and something that I can call my own. It is just a matter of time- hopefully. All the same, I see her mother sitting there staring at her cell phone, without a care about anyone or anything except that device. I wonder what that is like too.

It makes me cringe to think us a society cares more about electronics than our families; yes, I find this to be disturbing, but what can I do? So, some-time has passed, so I get up, and I put my money down on the counter, next to the register, $3.00 for a cold cup of coffee. I give her a tip of what was leftover from my five to that girl. What is her name…? While the two other girls look at me bashfully in the back. I think that they both have the same names if I recall.

Anyways I walk in-between the tables, I see the door, push the door open and I hear the doorbells jingle, and slam on the glass. Besides, they all can come out from hiding now. I am leaving. Yapper- I think… I will go home now while walking I ponder this- Life is rebellion, either you are told to do something, which you do not want to do; or have to do it because it is what you think that you need to do. Either way, you just cannot win the game of life.

We as humans are born helpless, and we pass on helpless, only if we can survive to old age. We live in a land of death, yet we still have hope in this cold world.

You just have to look up to see what you need. Besides, what I need is a way out of this hell! It is like some of this human in my life have infernos within their eyes; it is like they are the ones that are trying to extinguish all the unity of compassion out of me.

Either way to them the world with me in it is never going to be at the right Fahrenheit, the book of life has been set aflame to burn, so they can get rid of me too, or so it seems. I find myself getting more and more disturbed, and disturbed by them and what they do. Nobody wants to listen anymore.

No one hears what I am saying… yet I can scream it, and nothing happens. It is like I go to, be left only with an empty void of spun webs, in my brain for validating this life I have to live. The unacknowledged barrenness that was once thought to be wise in my mind it seems to be fleeting before me, as I become more like the others in my grouping, there are trying to make me senseless and to know only what they want me to know. As the days passed, I learn nothing, nothing at all!

Zip, zero, and zilch, the only things I learned are the feelings of pain in my emotions and regressing in my education. I find that I get so upset, by not getting out of this, and knowing I cannot ever, it makes me glitch as if I do have some kind of not right thing to me; I cannot even write a word down, because they make me so tense, annoyed, and humiliated.

That is what they needed for their label. They made me be like this! Just like this is the same books I had from before, I am not in first grade! I am not like this; I have been seeing Spot, Dick, and Jan… Run for over nine years. I know the fucking story! I do not need to do these little notebooks that are so insulting to my intelligence, which does not even form real words.

Most of the time it is like just match the pictures. I do not need to have books withdrawing in them; I can invasion in my mind as I read for myself what the story is about… I do not need your educator to read my novels for me day in and day out. Like it is storytime… to gather around. So, do you want me to suck my thumb too?

Besides, the schools shrink, hell- she is a lot crazier than I will ever be… yeah- so, suck on that! Oh, by the way- 'You did not raise- Me.' If anything, you are a scar on my life. You are not a help to me at all. If anything, you, Miss. Roth is a hindrance. Yeah- I think she is losing

it… kind of like her pantie hose, which she has on in the beginnings of the day, yet not at its end. Hum- do you have to wonder how that happened?

Yet, it is no wonder to me why she drives a big fancy Cadillac. For the reason that with all the money I have made for her over the years… while you can get the picture. They mandatorily forced me into that brain-numbing bullshit for a reason.

Their greed leads to a rich retirement of accomplishment, while as for me I only have a trademark of being a loser in not having a life or being able to make a life for myself! All you so-called teachers at the hellhole you can shove you are- 'Hooked on Phonics, Woodcock test, and you are Speech exercises up your asses, until you choke on it, as it comes back out of your mouth!

You think that was tacky phrasing. Ha- I was holding back, ask me in person, what I think, and you will get an earful!

Likewise, you reading to us every book, and every direction, along with every- single-thing else, like the Scantron tests is beyond embarrassing. It is like… we cannot do anything for ourselves, or so you all make it appear. Yet, I just have to sit not chit-chatting anything here falling apart, just like the chalk in my special teachers' hands.

'What is the use!' Sure- I write the notes, that look as if the teacher is trying to go for world domination. It could be in Spanish; I would not notice any difference. This is not learning. This is abominable!

Yes, it is bad, it is kind of like this pungent musty, dusty, moldy odor smells that are in this room right now, it sorta' of leaves a bad taste in your mouth doesn't it.

Oh, a bit like those poor dead cats in the bio-room in their boxes with their embalming fluid- yuck! Anyways I have most likely have done this before in this class too, just like all the same lessons I have completed repeatedly of my years in school. This is so beneath me, knowing that I have seen the same thing for years now, along with the same rejects' faces, and the thoughtless actions they do.

Like them running around the room and yelling, breaking the teachers' chairs from whirling around the floor, slamming books on the ground, grinding and snapping pencils,

banging the erasers together to make a dust cloud, making farting noises from both ends, some guys making sounds like the girl makes when she is getting it on… like- owe yeah.

One can even rap, jumping over or sitting on the on stable desks that tip over. Broken calculators, whiteout splashing, ink dipping, paperclips bending or linking, Paper cutting with kiddy scissors, and staples through the finger or ear.

They will try anything to piss the teacher off in any way possible- you know, that kind of stuff is just my existence. Wow- how do you like that for run-on sentences!

'See, see… I- is smart he- he!'

Like the others, they get the proficiency, and all I got was my brilliance of what I know completely sucked out of me. It is as if it was beaten, hit, and bitch-slapped all of it out of me.

Now I have left with nonentity; nil- not a thing, but their substituted ways for me that are recurrences day in and day out. That goes for everything, it goes for my sense of mind, how I talk- if I can, think- if I can, and act- if I can. They make me have the- 'I can't attitude.'

All the same, just like I look and try to speak on the walls of the spun networking webs, on these computers that they have in the labs when I have spare time.

Only for me to think that on my walls there is nothing but cobwebs to an empty, block wall of gray and that blue 'F' for the failure of sucking at life. Since there is no one on my profiles they have unknown and unfilled spaces.

How do you add, what does not want you, and blocks you out? For the reason that I am a reject… it is just like the spiders that crawl up these walls here in this little room at the hellhole next to me- that is what I am placed as- just like that spine-chilling and gross insect of a bug that needs to be exterminated, before it creeps away on you.

No, UN-ah- I do not like spiders they make me squeal in class when they crawl up my inner upper legs. I believe that this place needs to be condemned it is just that bad. I can scream at the wall, with no one to view it, or hear what they have to say?

Either way to me, listening back for their reply on the walls and what they say just leads to more cracks in me, and in my foundation, that I call life existence. While some rambling and

incoherencies make no sense, yet it is liked. However, the scripts that have meaning behind them do not realize when they're read… if spoken at all. I just do not get it!

Like- Sam did this, and Sam did that, Sam posting haphazard photos, No- I do not care if you have Sam in your skirt right now, He- he! Wow- I need to get out more! I have confidence in saying us as a society holds the torch; we need to make the right decisions so that we do not end up being the fuel that is burning. Society is not allowed to think for themselves, because of the towers that rain their fire hoses of destruction makes sure that they abolished all wisdom in someone like me.

We have become fools the rejects to the walls, wearing a cap with bells, and tagging judgments just so that others can hear our crying out for attention.

'We have become its jester.'

We have grown into hermits to the screen's lights, we are seeking the answers alone in the dark. Even so, the soft light is no comfort, why because it needs to come from the sun and its hope, and we must learn to shine in the absence of the light of the lit walls of cyberspace, to become lovers to one another, and the world.

That is what I think is right. What do you think? Just like that one card I have the hanged man- Do not become hung by anyone or anything.

As you know I have tried that and it did not work, yet I got a second chance at life, also with a strange ability to see things differently, which is out of this world. It is funny how that night I thought it was all over, we are up to the night of my attempted suicide.

Well, you will see what I mean shortly.

Yes, after my first year and Lily were gone, everything and anything, which happened to me… I did not want to live anymore. Yet, I feel that I was born again if you understand what I mean. You know if I thought that it all was hard on me then… I sure did not foresee what was coming up.

So anyways I feel that you do need to cram your eyes with wonder, however, make sure what is being seen is moral. I feel that it is more eccentric to dream about reality, then being part of an irresponsible fantasy. Just like you will never know who is at the other end of a workstation! From listening, comes wisdom, from speaking comes repentance and ignorance.

That is what I have learned. Back at the hellhole for the second year on one of the days that run together, I am sitting in Mr. Kingsburgh's English class; he suffers from Parkinson's disease, his voice trembles. His body rocks side to side, he takes his sickness out on all the students referring to them as idiots.

Saying things like 'How did your children get up here, in this high school? You cannot read, you cannot spell, and you guys cannot do anything. Why do you all not just drop out, and go to hell? So that I do not have to look at your ugly ass adolescent faces anymore!'

Yes, Mr. Kingsburgh is such a positive role model in all our lives.

While Mr. Kingsburgh is stuttering and spitting all over everyone, I look around the class, Jackson Alfaro is making that annoying clicking sound with his pen. I see a vacant desk where Ava Amsel supposed to be, she cut class to be with the higher authority in the janitor's closet. Jack Baez is our class feminist; his hobbies include performing in the band with the color guard twirling silks and rifles. In addition to David Dawalinsky's having his hand between Liz Remaro's knees, her sighing breaths are propelling on my nick, or so it seems.

The Keyboard avatars or that is what I call them. Anyways the hellhole society refers to Jack as a faggot or quire on the walls, those names have replaced his true identity, yet his gender selection is on known. Yet he just seems to be that way. However, it has become known as what is implied, I ask: even if so, who are they to make such judgments? Yet some people can touch and feel, and nothing is said about it, and others like me, feel like we are constantly looking into the glass of reflected rulings by the others that only see what they want to see. Brandy Pacheco is composing love notes to Lenny Sanchez and passing them around the room, while the paper airplanes fly around the chamber. Andy Galvez is staring a hole through me, with his I wonder what is under the clothe's eyes.

'All girls know that look.'

Jenna Ordonez is picking her wedgie, she thinks that no one is looking at her, or she just does not care about modesty… geez- either way I am stuck… looking at what she is doing, because she sits directly in front of me. A bunch of thoughts, are running through my head like, why is it that there is never a clock in any of these boring classes? Why is it that the rooms are always dimly lit? Why is it there are always blinds covering the windows, with no natural light? Why can we not lookout, and see nature?

Why must all these walls be made of cinder block, why is this I ask? It seems like the classes are never going to end, until you are ripped out of your daydream, by the eerie sounds of the end of class bells once more. Just to have to go to another one, and then have to sit through its torture.

'I have become comfortably numb.' and I do not feel anymore. My dreams feel like real reality, and day-to-day life feels like I am not even there. My body is just like an empty shale that I am stuck in now, that seems to be cracking.

My mind is still sprinting around the room. What to say, what not to say, what to do, what not to do. Do I look okay, does this uniform look good today, my hair looks like crap? AHH! Is it time to go home yet! My internal voice does not shut up; it runs fragmented thoughts constantly.

Yet my exterior voice does not stand up for me, yet all those words have to make sense. So why say anything at all. Sometimes I jump five feet in the air when the voices come over the intercoms, and it screeches in my ears like Miss. Manco's nails on the blackboard. The message sounds like it has no rhythm or conclusion.

Just more shit my brain has to process.

Who did this, and who did that, I do not care to hear about it. It is always the same names over and over anyways. I do not know how to show love and passion, but I want to learn. But- up until now I do not have any teachers that care.

My mind is itchy with curiosity, yet I have no way to scratch that itch.

'Most just stick it in your face, and make you smell what they presume is wrong.'

The so-called higher authority they are just as guilty, if not more than the youth for being despicable. I wonder if I should just give up on him too like he has given up on me!

The hellhole is just like jail the walls hold you in and compresses your thoughts. At first, you hate everyone, and everyone hates you.

Time goes by and you get used to it. Why? Because you have no choice… then you start to look to them for guidance, you listen to what they have to say and you believe what they are saying.

Without a freewheeled thought to do whatever is right for you.

Now that is what institutionalizing is all about.

Do not let someone tell you who you need to be, you have to be your person. If someone's critiquing- analysis about you does not meet their so-called standards than that is their problem. That is just how I feel about it anymore.

If you do not like the way, I look for example my hair, clothing, and aesthetics of style… then do not look. I do not have the time to satisfy you. You are all alike! All of you that cannot think for yourselves and text sixty lies per minute.

Your chatter is all just ill-advised opinionated views of judgment, from the society, which all traces back to the tower's- the grandmother's words of slander. I just ignore them and keep being whom I want to be, not what they think I should become. I think this because you can never please an ever-changing society's opinions; it is not worth the time or thought of mind.

'Shut up and mind your own business!'

The English teacher Miss. Bradbury, she is so mouthwateringly evil. Anyways she is the same one that I will have all my years here, makes us feel as if we are mentally incapable of comprehension. Her process of teaching is for us all to clap along with every syllable to every word.

'This woman is just aching to get me into trouble or write me up for some ridiculous reason.'

Yes, she will even give us detention for not participating in her degrading rituals. All the workbooks that are used for the class are beneath our standards of acknowledgment and ethics.

However, she is demonstrating all the alphabetical sounds and vowel shouting at the top of her power of speech- flapping around the room like a chicken, making the floor shake from her big chubby plump ass, which jiggles side to side. While she is tripping over are five or so desks, which are crammed in this tight room. Do not rub that thing all up in my face once more; I know there is not that much room in here- but please. Ewe- it is butt sweat!

Yet, in a way, she roars at us like a grizzly bear, with her snarling teeth. There is snot dripping from her nose. She is eyeing us, little children, with terrific intent.

There is always some kind of stain that looks like tea on her shabby flapper out of style dresses, yet who can get past the face that seems to be drummed up from the depths of despair of the underworld. Why does she do this? So that the entire hell hole establishment acknowledges her vocal performances,

'What a bitch!'

We have to sit in this closet, with the door hanging open, and everyone viewing walking by or going down the corridors.

'Ha! And I wonder why I cannot get a date?'

They all are observing this despicable embarrassment of us having to follow the leader in what is called the sophomore year of high school. It is like having white fangs that annihilate your willpower every day when you walk into that classroom.

She likes to narrate and spit and sway while reading books like 'White Fang', 'Frankenstein', 'The Giver', 'Fahrenheit 451', she is spitting out the words as if we do not understand the storylines, every Wednesday. Yet for me to read something for myself that is wrong.

Just like- 'A Tale of Two Cities'.

'It was the best of times it was the worst of times.' 'This is not an age of wisdom for me. It was only the age of foolishness, as I perceive her tongue wording.' Every other day it is back to the baby books and workbooks, other than on Fridays, oh just wait until I tell you about that.

So, just like 'The Giver' is only transmitting pain; the receiver has no pleasures allowed within this controlled civilization of education. We are just like 'Frankenstein's monster' people are never going to accept us into their society.

Why, because of what 'The Giver' our instructor takes away from us with their segregation. Yet, 'The Givers' feel like superior teachers.

How do you like that for comprehension!

You know I think that some people have the objective to just get at you; I seem to bust my ass to become someone in this society. Yet the higher authority does not want me to succeed,

they want to see me, founder, in the bombardment of flames, like kerosene on a book's pages, until I disintegrate and crumble to nothing but black soot on the floor at their feet.

I suppose that it does not matter because; the country is going to blow itself up long before I have to struggle to find a job. Yes, a job that only pays two dollars an hour, all I have to say is save your money now… because you can kiss your retirement goodbye. We all are going to work to the day we die. That is if they do not find a way to kill us first… like with boredom or mortification in what they do here in this room!

I think that history repeats itself; a revolution is on its way. Are you going to be ready or is your head going to be buried? Then again, do we have a choice in the matter? I say that to my teacher, and he looks at me as if I am on something.

Okay- see for yourself someday. Just like I do the work, I put in the time, and I like to be challenged. I do not do the homework anymore, for the reason that if I would… I would get the same grade as if I did it or not. Still, there is a limit to the point that, I just do not care anymore.

Why?

Because- what is the use of caring if I am not going to be anything in their eyes or appreciated. But then again if I am forced into something, I guess I would have to go through with it though? On the other hand, when someone says that I cannot do something that is when I have a new fire under my ass; to show him or her just how wrong they are in their judgments. It seems like everyone is trying to piss me off. Me, unlike the Amsel sisters that show, and uses everything they have just to get extra credit, I would never put out just for higher grades in any classes.

In a way, it kind of turns my stomach to even think about what they do.

What goes on behind some closed classroom doors- will never be known…!

So-o!

(Saying groaning!)

Do you remember your fifth-grade classes?

The only thing that I recall is my teachers saying one word over and over again. The hair, the face, and the fiery eyes, it still creeps in my mind. This person makes my skin crawl. Let's go way on back then…

Welcome to classroom 202 that I called 'The Mind Warp.' Miss. Caballero is teaching style was to hand me a worksheet that I did not know how to do, at the time. Then scream at me saying quote- 'fix, fix, and fix.'

'How do I fix something, that I never learned how to do?'

How about instead of playing Solitaire on your computer, why don't you do your task, to motivate and educate. This is your obligation and occupation to do so! So, damn-it just do it already, and stop wasting my time, because, in all honesty, I don't give a shit…!

Fix- it is just a dick- faced word! A word for those that do not want to explain and clarify, a word that teachers use to make us kids feel as if we are the problem.

So, that they can have a high paying job and have their authority and power over the meek like me.

What do they want from us? If we try… what do, they want us to know- obviously nothing? You know there is not a day goes by I do not have shame… not for the reason that I am here.

No- it is more because they thought I should be. Anyways just, stamp me as the failure, besides stop assassinating with your words, which echoed around that I suck at life, and I do not want to learn! Just stop it! It is not me, that needs fixing!

In addition to that, what is so intriguing about this is most of the time I had the work correct. She just wanted to SCREW with my head. Yes, she did a damn good job, in making me- numb to life, and my surroundings, all the way- back then! Yes, if I was not isolated up to this point in my life, I sure was after this black hole that pulled me away from all interactions. I did not think straight for several years after her brainwashing… if I could think at all.

'I forgot everything… yet remembered it all.'

I can still see the red pen that made all the slashes on my documents as if it has been written into my mind.

The stories of the past will never go away, and the new one cannot be written the way I would like them to be, do you see what I am saying?

Looking around the room you would see the books that twist your brain into knots. In the far back of the room, you would see the Apple II series computer with its awe-inspiring eight bytes of power.

In the middle of the room, you will see the blackboard that sucks all- common sense out of your mind, every time something is scribbled upon it. Along with the dumb names are reading groups had- like this one The Gun-Dumbs… yeah- I do not know what it means either.

You can see me chomping on a lemon Jolly Rancher candy as a reward for becoming lonely and loony. Until this very day when someone calls me Kid-o it makes me cringe! I remember the teacher's assistant Miss. Ramirez; she had to leave halfway through the year because she could not stand it any longer.

Oh, how I was screamed at, and unequivocally mentally battered from it. Most likely, it was a good thing she was there when she was or I would have lost it. Furthermore, to report it… the situation would not go anywhere, and she would lose her job in doing so, always silenced and hushed- up was way it had to be!

Yes, seven hours in the mind warp every weekday, with the other rejects is enough to drive anyone insane. I feel bad for all the kids that have to sit through this philosophy of being programmed to fail and being marked, as a waste to the society in future classes, just as I am. There is just no need for this sinful diminishment.

Kids are not stupid, if they see that you are being classed differently for some reason, then the interaction is not going to happen. This is despicable to even think that the higher authority marks this as developmental issues, what a joke!

I remember the day I wrote this- Sharpened pencils in a cup, all the days I wanted to give up, will I ever get caught up, and all the wrongdoings that have been erased or covered-up. Oh, yes just slap a gold star in the middle of my forehead.

Brainwash me, until I start thinking that I need to stand in the corner and suck my thumb. You would like that, wouldn't you? ha, ha, ha, I find myself laughing myself silly- then crying!

Chapter: 11

The Ways of Life

(Present time)

Social Studies now there is a fun class, not! The teacher is named is Mr. Trudeau he still is rocking the long hair and the 1970's look.

He sits behind his desk and the computer screen lights up his face; because the room's lights are always off. He does not say more than two words to the class.

He lets the movies and the projectors do the teaching for him.

It is hard to have an attention span in this class.

'Does this guy not give a shit about us and the upcoming generations?' What is his malfunction?

No one in the class is caring about the movie, most are texting and talking loudly to one another, looking around the room you will see the class clown Aaron Montez answering every question that is asked to him with 'That is what she said.'

Judd Espinoza is rambling on about drinking two six-packs last night and making out with Selena Enriquez who is only in the seventh grade.

'That is a sick dude!'

Selena's hobbies include horseback riding, mudding and lying down on her backside riding him, yet she is a wonderful girl to know, or so people say. Then there is me taking it all in, and I am wondering how much more of this I can take. Mr. Trudeau is too engrossed in observing whatever is on his monitor to look up yet we all can guess what is on the screen.

Yet, that is amusing to me because the teachers are too focused on meeting state standards, 'You can kiss the arts goodbye.' So, they cram too much information through our eyes and ears at once, and we absorb nothing. All this shit on these multiple-choice questionnaires adds up to be nothing, but an ambitious failure.

To me, a worksheet is nothing compared to having educators communicating on a high level to the class, with all the students that learn differently. Sorry to say handing us a worksheet is not going to teach us anything but frustration and saying the word fix is not the way to teach.

Plus- having segregation provisions that some have to do against their well is just going to put everyone farther behind. This annoyance should not even exist in my opinion.

When you finally get out of your cell long enough to take a class with other individuals, the rejects still get segregated. One of the higher authorities calls out your name in front of everyone, and they make you feel like you are, so special… like that you cannot even walk down the flipping hall by yourself. Just so that you can enter back into the closet once more to do the work that should be completed with the others in your class.

At that point, there is nothing you can do, because all eyes are on you, and you cannot refuse or they will put a big fat red failure on your paper.

The hell hole society does not let you forget about it either.

'They like to take a big wet juicy bite out of your ass.'

Yes, just to remind us of our existence every day, especially if you are in the rejected category. Oh, the higher authority wants to make everyone think that we are unable to interact freely. But then again how can we when we are only around the others for two out of seven hours out of the day.

You learn what you want to learn, and if you do not pick up on it at the time, you will at the right time for you.

I do not know what I am looking for anymore. Everyone and everything looks the same to me, I do not look at someone from the outside, because that is so deceiving. The beauty is only skin deep, I can see through you. I have a good idea of what you are all about.

I know if you are going to be for me or against me at first glance. I can read you just like an open book.

I know that all book covers are misleading. It is a must to read between the lines of the individual characters, and that is when it is acknowledged with me what to think.

I can figure out what anyone's interpretations are, and if I want to be a part of their story or not. Just because one is well cultured, and observes the world that is before them does not make them strange.

Each one of us has our unique way of expression- like me.

Besides, sometimes, an expression can conflict, yet not meaning to; just move on, do not fear rejection.

'Do not let the fear of the black ink spilling all over your drawing stop you from creating a masterpiece.'

The laughter is seen in my conscience, yet it plays out silently in my mind. My entire secret admirer base is left to admire, they have to close the door from the heart, and they are shut down if they desire, Because of the control of the tower, she holds the master keys. The tower and her clans can turn their backs at any time or face me, yet, there are cowards and fearless at the same time.

They cannot look at me because, they know that I know what they have done to me over the years, and also her, and the others in my group. All I can say is turn your back no one wants to see your face anyways.

You have nothing, nothing at all, yet I cannot stop you from turning on me! All that you care about is making up lies; to try to heal your abandonment that was in your troubled past. You are a miserable excuse for a human bean, so pathetic you have to feel wanted no matter the impossibility and your lust for acceptance.

So, I ask: How does it feel to be breaking and crumbling down to nothing in society- or are you? What you have done to me is nothing compared to what you have to undertake, before your existence concludes. This will affect you considerably more than it ever has me.

I always try to find the good within anybody or anyone including my expectations. I am not going to stress over trying to make myself appear to be something I am not. So… what I am saying here is just be you, plus that is more interesting to anyone than putting on a bunch of fake lines that mean nothing to them.

Oh, I can feel you calling out for me, but yet you have no voice as of now. Only with the time that can change, what is branded will truly be known as false, so that we are redefined you and me, and we can establish this just by are phrases that yell loud and proud.

We are stronger than ever by the powerful voices of harmony, which brings us together. This is only a melody that we can make together that is us being united with one another. If you stick up for the underprivileged, you can kiss your life goodbye.

Here in 'The Land of Many Steeples'... Some of their dates and their mates, some just have them handed to them. While some have powerful parents that do the dirty work for them, a prime example would be the Amsel sisters. This is life give or take!

What I want seems to not mean a thing to anyone but myself, and even so, I am still forbidden unlike everyone else that has their moments in the golden hayfields. Their bodies ride against the breezes just like the windmills that are in the hazed background of the rolling hills.

Oh- yes, they can have their many escapes from 'The Land of Many Steeples.' They can express their deepest desires of expression to their significant others. But not me... I have been forbidden to, I thought it would have gotten better with time, however, the words that are expressed go down the line to the next set, and it proceeds down to the next generation, and so on. It is hard to lie in the fields of gold when there have been so many false stories that have been told. As for me, - I keep steaming down the same old path, seeing but never being stopped to take on any passengers, that I desire or that desire me. My moments walking along with hayfields of gold remain as withered memories that sting because they do not exist, all I have is the colorless snapshots in my internal vision of what I think it should be like. However, I know I have admirers, and their lips are stitched shut, yes always forbidden to speak out.

Then again someday soon you and I will walk upon the fields of gold together, and we will be united when we become a couple.

Can you see the waves of barley?

Can you see it as it moves and whispers peacefully?

Can you see us together hand in hand?

Can you see as my hair falls upon the ground?

Can we stay for a while with one another as we are holding-?

Close to what is in the silhouette?

Can these all be shining memories they will last forever?

Can the sun rays join us while we are upon the blanket of gold? Will you ask me to go there? Is this something that you would like to share? If you only make the dare...!

Oh- how about fair…! Back to reality, I have learned that some people think they're so much more superior in their overall existence. 'Will I have a reality check for you?'

You are not as good as the gum on the bottom of my shoes. If you do not want me all the time then you do not need to want me at all. Do not be my friend in secret, to have me gain trust in you just to have me lose all faith in you forever. When you turn your back for someone else you think is more superior, just remember; I do not forget, and it is hard to forgive, especially if I have not done anything to be sorry for, yet you act as if I should. Even until now, I still have to pay the price to the tower and the clans.

'I was in the path of the blizzard, who knew that it would last this long. Is it bad luck, or a hex, maybe it is a curse?'

Mother's Day- and Father's Day, and most holidays are a depressing joke to me because I do not want anything to do with my mom, and as far as I know, she is out in some big city driving all the men crazy in more ways than one. My dad is most likely a skeleton by now, and his headstone is all I have now that repeats to me of what a family must be.

Halloween, you cannot give out candy anymore for safety reasons, carving pumpkins and dressing up as a slut is just not my thing. Whom needs Halloween I have enough witches, and devils pounding down my door and infiltrating my domain, in the true day to day reality, plus the tower and clan make sure that no one is knocking on my door.

You just got to love Valentine's Day; it is summed up to me as a national single awareness day. The last time I had a valentine was when I was in the second grade, and I still have it on my nightstand… him.

Yes, I am a train wreck and I know it… I wish that people would stop breaking my heart. I guess I do not need anyone to eat lots of chocolate! Just like Easter comes and goes, with its depressing consumption of chocolate once again.

Is it wrong to get the pleasure out of biting the ears off a chocolate rabbit? I do not know… nonetheless, it makes me feel better. Yapper, chocolate makes any girl feel better!

On the 4th of July other people's fireworks go boom and bang and have been popped, but not mine… but I could care less. What good are fireworks if you cannot observe them with someone that truly cares about you or you care for them?

Thanksgiving what do I have to be thankful for? Let's see the only thing that comes to mind is… me being around so that people can torment me.

It is not like we can sit down at the table and have a conversation anyways. The food is slammed down and it is always cold and tastes many days old, with the only words whispered being 'Pass the gravy.'

It is just she, and I at the head ends of the ancient wood table, which wobbles, there is a matchbook under one leg. Of course, our chair's creek, and slightly fall apart as we sit down in them; we do not eat until 9:00 pm.

Why?

I do not know… so maybe that is why we are so cranky; we just pain ravenous.

How could I forget this… now there is my birthday June 19 is not much of a holiday but it might as will be for me, it goes by just like any other day. There was only one girl on the web of friendship, that said- 'Have a good one.' yet she is gone… not going to have any this year! Yet anyways friendship should go beyond getting a birthday wish on your wall. No- I have not unwrapped a birthday gift in years, if ever.

Christmas comes and goes as if it never happened. The white

lights strangle the tree half on and half off, just like the new lace thong string panties that I got myself for Gym class days it was a gift to me from me. I had them on today… yet they were uncomfortable there to nice I do not want to stain them, so I took them off myself- this time, so I set them beside me on the floor. My old ones have been torn they were washed far too many times.

I am sitting just like the lonely tree in the living room, in the bay window nook, I am hugging my teddy bear, yet for me- this is what happens every day; even when it is not Christmas. However, as of now looking over this room, the tree is dying and the mantle of the fireplace is completely naked too. Why has the mantle remained untouched?

When I masturbate with one finger slowing going inside and out of me, until I come all over the window bench, looking downwards at myself well arching forward, breathing heavy, to the last finger push inwards, pulling the one middle on out seeing it all bubbling out down my vagina, see running down my in between my cheeks in past the butt opening, I am cover in the

creamy whiteness that I do so well, myself, not sure if that is right yet feels so good, yet dirty all at the same time I may just do this more.

I did think I was able to do this like that, for me without feeling this way, I always have someone there looking so look at me from the window it's okay… if she walks into well so what, I have to girl-cum as I heard the girls say at school, I want it too, like they do more than I, ever thought possible in one sitting, lying back feeling sliding in and out! Pinkie, ring finger out and like the index, and the nasty long-on in the come here yet upside-down finger movement slipping inside and me pushing down doing the reverse to bring it back out over and over fast and fast until it guesses out of me, and get this it feels good, so why is it so wrong, in the past to me?

Make sure to trim and file your fingernails beforehand to stop any little accidents. Once I am all ready and set up and in the mood, all naked, like- I am when I come home and have the nightie off that hangs from me and get annoying, it's time to start fingering myself, and see what happens, I have done this since I was nine, yet felt like something bad would happen like I would push that little pink button in I would die, I surprise myself by want to touching my boobs, more now than ever like a boy was in my dreams.

Or even her, I seem to be liking her more and more, for she makes me feel good about what I do. I knew she was looking at me, so why do, I feel that it was all so wrong to do; if she would have said stop yet she said she did this two when she was alive I have seen her do it, way more than I in her room with me to show me what to do, saying why not. That on the finger is now sliding down my chest over to stomach until you can feel my button (clitoris) which is just a little outside my black porthole (vagina) and I can see is all now, the hairy is there, yet trimmed up at this point, I feel there right I have to grow up, and not hear my caretakers' old ways of thinking, no longer will I just shave up to the knees, I will do it all.

(She's - her doing it.)

~*~

(Flashback- Lily flourishing)

I said, what do I do here? I asked Lily the award little nasty question as she was looking at me standing there with face up close looking at it is snickering cutely. Besides she did it for me, saying here, this what you do in the font, and then she said I don't mind bending it over and will get that too.

Pre-trim your pubic hair, she said, here let me have these so you don't hurt yourself! God- girl you are clueless about life! I- am? Razors are designed is not fun, so I'll do that too. (See it happening) umm- she swilled out eyes closed tightly, she was tripping, it all good it's the early 2000's now shaves this shit fairly short hear, I don't want to clog dull thing up with your gross long hair, so just look at me doing this so I don't have to again. Trim it UP- GOD, gently pull the hair out and cut it away, and we'll move on here.

Cutaway from the body Nevaeh God Freaking shit, you're seriously not that dumb, and then cut it back with smaller sharp scissors, do you even have clippers? If at all possible, find some Jezz-us, some equipment here please with safety guards to the dumb girl doesn't have to go to the ER, shaving her lips off. Okay just get that raiser you do your legs with it is old but it will do the job, stretch your skin tight. If it's loose, you'll end up cutting yourself. Got yah that why I did want to do this…!

Razors… they can only do their job well on nearly flat surfaces… awe. Or new dumb-ass, I get you one from my home. With your free hand, stretch your skin tight and hold it firmly, see, how easy this is to do, go do I have to do it all! Make it easy on yourself, she starts below her bellybutton saying you know what comes after this…? I think so…? (Cute and award fooling around girlfriends) pulling the skin just above your foamed-up hairline upwards. Where you go from there is up to you.

Chop it all off? ALL!!! She said. Hello, see this here; look it's going to be like that now! It feels nicer! Here if you want just to do- this with the line. And the girl may stop picking on you in Gym class. God, I have to do the butt hole too, like- do I get paid for this shit, Nevaeh? Oh, just kiss me and get it over! Your ass, or your lips? My lips, okay I will… (She kisses the one that she wanted to kiss the most and that was them down there.)

Nevaeh, I did mind it was nice to have some that wanted to do that to me like know boy was… so yeah, I will go with it is all the same if she is wanting me, and I want her too, even if that is weird for me to say. So, I did what I felt was right in the heat of the moment, like she did. Just kiss it off I said, 'Oh shut up you know you want it like this.'

'Okay I do, then do it all.'

Lily- Baby powders this little thing down, it absorbs into the pubic area, which can reduce irritation and bumpiness, and with the thing I sure that is going to happen. 'WHAT! She

said.' However, some care must be taken not to get any of this powder onto the very sensitive areas of the vagina. 'Nice!' Just dance- now for that- looks good too!

You're such a weirdo! Lily's methods showing herself to her: Below your clit that is this thing here, using just one finger, you will be able to feel fleshy folds of skin on either side of your vagina. These are your labia. To be right about this all you need to see it, and if I have to be like your girlfriend, lover or sister then okay, I will be your anything at this point for you to be with me the way I want you to be. And that just has sex with me. And the girl on girl you have to do it like this… or alone thinking about me. I think about you doing this all the time. I know creepy right, I said. 'No- it's kind of sweat' she looks at me with big eyes, turning her head.'

These are the outer folds on each side is called the labia majora which is much bigger, while the inner fold of skin is called the labia minora, and is much thinner and 'lose yours not so much, you're a virgin.' And you're not, will not to a boy yet… have I lost it, to you if you say yes? 'That's on you, and I'll go with it, (I am not gay you know) oh come on it just girlfriends playing and feeling.' I have to break you open you know that it needs to be done away, like who were pads these days, just use there… here is a box of them, when you feel that you need to, instead you have the choice to, hide them so they don't get tossed out. She twisted up her lips to her mouth and said:

'Okie-do-kie…'

Begin by lightly trailing one finger over your outer lips here. (Labia) Most girls like me will find that as they run around the outside perimeters before going into the line, they naturally start to get wet, see this as she pulls her finger away, and it was sticking the goo-ie-ness. If they are already turned on, there is nonstop, just ask my panties and skirt this in school when I see you there inform of me. I get so wet for you; this wetness will act as a lubricant on your finger also see mine going in you so easy. Now you try, on me, and then one yourself, and I will see you do it, and the other way around. I broker just some to get one in, I know that she wants to be with a boy someday, I did not want blood, just the band in-between was open for me. It will be-hanging there like mine, yet be daring like this bit here, in a snapped rubber band, of skin at the top of the black hole as you call it, in a V-ship. I will rip it at the bottom so it stays there until someone rips this in or off, and that can be you or your boyfriend if you ever get one, and if not, I'll love ya. 'Where just to girls that know we can get a boy.'

(Read in a cute, yet very sensual way.)

As your finger gets covered in my inner body made lubricant, I start to slowly press the tip of it in and that rips, once in, I start going in and out of her vagina to check how it feels. And see if she is sighing the way I want her to, and she is.

We both did this- She pushed her finger in and out, it will get covered in more and more of this wetness and pre-cum, allowing you to easily slide your finger deeper and deeper in the cunny- whole. Slowly run the tip of your finger along the walls of your vagina paying attention to what feels most pleasurable. Feel it out and see if you find the stop that makes you feel like you're going to gush it all out of you, stay with and do it until you do, it's not hard if you find it and are relaxed, it just like squirting!

If not right find what is with you or her, by the way- she looks and moves for you. What you find most pleasurable will be different from each other is not all the same yet enjoy it anyways- right? So, focus on the movements that you find most satisfying and don't worry too much about being right on or there the first time, get better and feel it out. As well as, it's okay to go as deep as possible, I want to feel as if I am having sex, pushing down and in, that how it works, fingering yourself should be about getting as much pleasure as possible. On the other hand, if you have never fingered yourself before, then it's a good idea to experiment with how deep you like it and that what we both did to ourselves and each other this night.

Fingering Your G-Spot push your finger in and out or your vagina, I said to her, you'll notice that pressing up against certain parts of your vagina feels good, and has its feel that in-golf like somewhat rough, If you have slid your hand down your stomach and then started to finger yourself, try curling your fingers backward as we did before, so that you are pressing against the upper wall of your pussy just like this, now I will pull out and you do it to me to see if you can find it, This is where your G-Spot is located, she said.

Yepper- that's right! (I was one happy girl.) You'll know it when you press and rub it because it feels like the back of your palate in your mouth when you suck your fingers like I had you do for me too. Some even describe it as feeling like a wet raspberry. In other words, it feels soft with tiny ridges. Try concentrating on the G-Spot for some intense orgasms.

Ahhh- the spot comes, there are many different G Spot massage techniques to use to make yourself squirt that I cover in the squirting article here.

Before continuing to the more advanced techniques, there is just two more quick, but important kneed-bits I need to cover with you. So, if you feel the need to pee every time you finger yourself and stimulate your G-Spot, it's not pee...! Just let it gush out! don't worry, it's perfectly normal.

A great tip that will minimize this 'needing to pee' feeling is peeing right before you masturbate. Simple :) Now that we've covered the ABC's of girly-ness down there, here are for keys on fingering methods, which you can use to make yourself cum and have a lot of fun.

Pressure Pressing technique works mainly well if you find it tough to have spot sprays. The tricky part of this many girls like you face is that they just can't put enough pressure on Spot to have its build-up, during fingering themselves. The fix is easy... you just need to squeeze your tight down on yourself down the and spot contort from the other side, or like this see this moving in and out as it dips in and out of there.

So just finger your spot as you normally would, and then place your other hand at the lowest part of your stomach thrusting upward to your ceiling it may seem firm, yet it's not, just above your bone where the hair was, then softly push down, on your finger or toy, if you get one like this, so that you can feel your spot protruding more than normal, just doing this... You'll notice that this makes it easier to provide yourself with more spot stimulation than normal, do you have a hair-brush?

Mid-fingering from behind, we can this too, it's fun and not hard to do together or apart I said to her. Another way to finger yourself is from behind, like this. Put your hand down your lower back, over your anus and then into your vagina. Once you enter you're the lips and are in start rocking like this, if you curl your finger backward you can do that too, this time you will be stimulating the opposite side of your vajaja to your spot, and you gush like before, it may be more for you will find out- won't we.

Dual hands, one over top the other, fingers in-between fingers' this last fingering technique is the best if you are someone who normally struggles to reach orgasm when masturbating, like here, the use of both hands. Or just to have one that is hard and sprays all over you and your bed.

I do this for clitoral stimulation, for the most part. Fingering, after all, should be enjoyable, not shameful as you think, everyone is made differently... You-no!

(Looking at the lady-lips, and the hips, and the hooded-ness-)

To look at you and me and you'll see that…

I have this…

You have that it is right- okay don't say it not.

So, have fun and enjoy your orgasms girl, you see that I do.

With me or thinking about me or even a boy, like it's not wrong to do that!

Fantasize about a boy even if you not in- love with him, it helps. If you enjoyed my tips on this article but want a true sex master-or the class, then you may be interested in watching this blow job tutorial video where you'll learn my most powerful techniques & tips for giving your man incredible oral sex.

Enjoy!

~*~

(Me on the same bench doing conclusion or her existence-)

This room is always bare just like me; the falling needles are littering the hard-wood floors, just like the teardrops and blood that is falling from my blue eyes, and my upper inner legs. They spatter to the ground, just like the trees red satin balls that drop from the branches that are older than me.

A small red orbit is just the same as my- a hollow cavity and the red colors remind me of the stands that on my skirts, all the threads are snagged from being rubbed raw until my interior trimmings explode onto the floor like this broken ball.

Outside the green garland on the front porch is mismatched and it hangs insecurely, and just like me the icicle lights are hustled by the sisters as they walk by my home, and they jerk on my white braided strings so harshly till they snap and the plug is pulled out completely, left to be tattered.

On the Holladay nights, I generally look openly and naturally lying out on the window bench, sometimes I will draw a heart on the frosted windowpane while feeling the icy cold air blowing up and down the entire length of my nude body- why not.

This jogs my memory like how my fingers touching my body gives me chills to the point of having Goosebumps stippling my skin all over, yet having the fantasy of us in my mind is what warms me. It is the twelve days of relapse and unfulfilled wishes it is just like every other time in this part of the month… the time I am most- needy.

Yet again, what I want cannot fit under the tree. The carols make me sad and annoyed; I just want the New Year to start and have the same- New Year's resolutions as always. Then there is New Year's… I never gotten that kiss either, it is all about making stupid promises that you know that you are not going to keep, and old people drinking themselves drunk, till they cannot even see straight.

Then there are vacations it is just like the red death… to me. Because the only trip I take is to the bathroom, where every girl knows that you have to stab, poke, and prod yourself repeatedly, while you cry because you ruined your cutest pair. I have learned the lesson on my own too. The same can be said for every family voyage I have been a part of; it is always like stained- epiphany and moody.

Besides it makes me grown to the point of carling up into the fetal position, just like having a period cramp. 'So, lay down, the threat is real, when everything in sight goes red again.' Then just like that, my restlessness can go away when the gravity falls like the rain, and the midnight sun begins to shine at day's end. I am finally at peace when the breeze blows twilight.

The stars shine the light upon a world of darkness when the smokiness in my mind clears. Just like always, I go to bed… in my pink room and I can breathe tranquility for a while, until the whimpering of the animals outside that are freezing in the negative cold- like me, for another days' start to begin. Some nights I think the barn is warmer than the house.

Hay it can be worming… yes, I have slept in there on the nights that I was locked out- I do not mind, on the nights when 'I give Hope so-called- horse shit!' that what she calls it when she thinks I am in the wrong. 'Some people have to play the field, yet I just play in them.' Are you catching my drift, as to what I am saying? I have a railroad lantern in there, and a horse blanket, yet I do not have my teddy!

Sometimes, I do it just to get away. Yeah, she will put me out for a stranger to stay over in the summer, as if she runs a bed and breakfast, it just one way to get the money I guess for us. Oh, I get my payback, I am not one for revenge… but I can resist sometimes, like this time, I

waited until Hope was asleep in her chair, with her mouth hanging open sawing logs, and I just stick a wiener in there, you know a raw hotdog. I was thinking ha- ha- ha, see how you like that! Just like- the darkness is mysterious like me, and in that, darkness seeds constant spontaneous change and creation.

The Ingenious creativity of thought of mind comes at your lowest darkest point of life. Just like I have the towers densities of being struck by their lightning… that pulls on me constantly into their constellations, yet that makes me reflect on the extraordinary level, or so I think. I always have to be one step ahead of them!

You never know where they are at… they could be in the barn for all I know! Up to this point, I have never had anyone tell me what he or she truly thinks about me that goes for appearance, personality or anything. So, if I would have to describe myself this is what I would say. I would have to say that I find my eyes to be the most striking thing about myself, at least that is what she said- what she has told me… the first time I met her. Oh- finely things were looking up for me when I met her.

She said that my light blue eyes tales the stories of my life. You can see the emotional-feelings when gazing into them, or at least that is what she made me believe. So, we got a new reject in class this week named Maiara, she is a transfer student; I liked her as soon as I saw her, she is wild, sweet, and outstandingly suggestive! She was what I was looking for and everything I needed. There was a glowing connection at first sight on both of our faces.

The look of shock and surprise from both of us at that moment was dreamlike! Our eyes were fixated on each other the first time in the tiny room, she was like a love dove that flapped her wings my way, I knew, at last, I had someone that will brighten my drab cell for me. She came in there with a breath of fresh air; she is the hope I needed. Maiara- Hi everyone…! The others groaned their welcomes in false enthusiasm, one even yawned loudly. So, who are you? She walked up to me and bent a little into me in front of my desk? Nevaeh! I am shrieking said with butterflies' like jitters. Then she touched my hair, and brushed my chin and lower lip with her soft fingertips!

Maiara- 'Nevaeh! That's a pretty name, for a very pretty girl!'

Nevaeh- 'Awe- thank you- I said kindheartedly!'

Then the teacher said. 'Okay? Please take a seat Maiara.' She sat where lily used to. Wow-what just happened there? I was thinking, feeling that all over in my thoughts and body like how it made me tremble… I had to let it soak in, the rest of the class, I felt wet with splendor. Just like the rain was pouring outside, that we could hear hammering the flat roof above like my heartbeat, and some of it was dripping from the ceiling on me.

Yet the same can be said for my thoughts I felt like there were just dripping down, me also, like that light leak in the room, Dr-ip! Dr-ip! Dr-ip! I hope that does not stain or show on my skirt. I guess my books come in handy for something, covering me up until I dry. So, at lunch the same day she sat with me she said- Your eyes show your solitude. I understand that you feel by yourself in all that you do, you are looking for comfort from someone in this cold cruel world, and there is no one there. Nevaeh- I was like-

'Yes, Yes, Yes- you so got me!'

Maiara- I see in your eyes that you have been looking for someone to care for and listen to what you have to say. So, I am going to be your friend now and for as long as you need knee in your life. You no longer have to feel like your life is so hopeless.

'Wow really'- I said!

Maiara- Do not think that good friend is hard to find, you make it harder than you need to because you do not trust anyone. I know that you are not terrified of meeting people, but you are a very shy and cautious person. 'Just be who you are, and do not change a thing about yourself.' you need exploration, because if they are right for you, then you cannot do anything wrong in their eyes. 'What is right for me'- I asked?

Maiara- Only you know that… sweetie, when the time comes. Though, stop having a barrier of being in your comfort zone. I do not care what others think about me, and neither should you. You feel like nothing's making sense, in your world that you live in. Stop fretting and take the risk to make the change. 'How and why'- I asked?

Only you can make the change, only you can do this. 'You have to rise above it.' You will not understand what I mean now, but you will. You feel like you are facing this whole thing by yourself, with not anything but a false smile, and tears to show for it all. 'I know'- I cried.

Maiara- awe, do not cry- 'Do not worry yourself all things are meant to be, and if not, it was not meant to be.' Know it is not a waste of time to think about what has happened, or what is going to happen. If you live your life with that attitude, you will never be disappointed in anything you set out to do. Besides, if you believe in yourself you can do anything you set your mind out to do. 'You think that about me?' I asked Maiara- 'I sure do- love… you will be okay!'

Nevaeh- as a result, I started hanging out with Maiara Chenoa, she is so expressive with style, because of her Native American Indian family's history, that truly fascinates me. She always has some kind of fashion accessories like feathers or beads in her coal-black shiny hair; it always flows down on her uniform perfectly. It must be nice to be that confident and self-determined. Maiara told me that her last name Chenoa translated means dove; which I immediately thought was awesome. The first time I met her, she told me all about her family. This was interesting to me, mainly because I do not know much about my family's history.

All I know about my last name Natalie is that it is either French, English, or German.

Yet, some say I have like a slight squeaky accent… I do not hear it… yet some of them say that I do. My words are sometimes drawn-out. Hum- like me saying longer words… I guess. Yet she said that it was cute… my high-pitched voice, and the way I talk with my country Pennsylvanian accent.

I am so glad I have her now after everything I have gone through and still am… maybe I can tell her, what is going on with me in more detail? I do think she is trustworthy. Anyhow, her family immigrated to California around 1917.

She lived in one of those classy homes, which looked over the golden gate; she said Pennsylvania was a wide-ranging culture shock. One instance like- when she has to drive twenty-five miles, over these back roads, just to get to the insufficient shopping mall in the city, she said the only thing she likes about being here is me, that is so-o sweet of her to say! It is funny how life-changing events come in your life at your lowest points.

Maiara Chenoa attempts to be creative like me; she is a strong-willed determined individual. Our personalities clicked the first time we spoke to one another.

Like- I said I know if you are for me or against me by the first conversation.

It was just something about her that I said yes, this is somebody that has some common sense. I can relate to her… she has a sense of yearning for beauty unlike most that attend at the hellhole. Plus, she did not live here all her life, so she doesn't know what they say about me. She is not indoctrinated, with their many fabrications of lies. Plus, she is classed like me, so it's all good! She has an acknowledged understanding of life from a different perspective like myself. This is how friendship should be kindled, all conversations face-to-face without the interaction of the webbed walls.

Friendship is based on compatibility in real-life situations, not based off of the keyboard avatars beliefs, and not the foraged words of mouths that have ignorance. That is what we both think; maybe she had a life like me, which is why she came here, I do not know?

You have to follow your heart and not the power holders in 'The Land of Many Steeples.' Refuse to follow the downward path of destruction. This is what I like about Maiara, she is not afraid to be blunt, and tell you how it is… but beautifully. She has specific goals and standards in which she believes. She is constantly looking for new forms of originality. With the tendency to resist the authority, the stubborn anarchy intrigues me.

Yes, I would rather have one good friend than a bunch of so-called acquaintances, which have no substance in my being.

Logically, I think I have a new girlfriend!

Chapter: 12

Why Do I care, If They Careless?

I remember fighting off the sister's clan's time and time over. It was always like seven against me, just like Lily. They each got their ways on me, whatever they wanted to try they did. I would have to say that I put up a good fight most of the time, yet I am small and they over muscle me. This one time, I remember vagina slapping Alissa so hard, to back off, she fell crying to the ground. They always started on me for no reason.

Yeah- I was sent to lockdown for that one, for a week.

Nevertheless, they got nothing every time, yet it was easy to time for me. Other rejects in my class say that a week in lockdown is comparable to a year of being isolated in 'The Hole' at a prison. The higher authority only saw what I did, and never what they did to me.

There were no reasons at all other than getting a piece of me and making fun of me. While the other two girls like Allison and Adriane tried to hold me back from running away… and they did every time.

Sometimes, they used my belt to strangle me, and they would kiss me all over, and their lipstick would smear on my face and their tongs would be flicking and their lips pulling on; they loved to rub up on me. They would spray their perfume all over and in me. Along with putting their used Secret deodorant, stick in my mouth to shut me up, I could taste them, and I could feel them. I am still horror-stricken, petrified, and terrified of them. My words do not define how I feel!

Like, I could feel and sniffle, and whiff their aromas, along with their spearmint gum, red-hot pop rock candies, and their cheesy puff leftovers, along with whatever item else they would drill and practice on me. They even drew unique tattoos on me with their ink pins, which I had to wash off, because of what they depicted, and said. Yet you could see the red raised irritated markings on my skin! You can just see how they looked- can't you? Besides, where they all were? I think of how they even considered putting a pencil through my ear if I would not swallow and lick what she and her sisters dripped into my mouth and rubbed on my lips.

I am a fighter though, just like this one other time, I punched Ava square in the face and I broke her two little perfect front teeth out. I guess I was the replacement girl after Lily was gone… because I knew, and, so did they.

Yet, Ava- and of them, all got me back… oh, did she get me back!

Yet, I recall that she had to drink her baby food in lunch for a month, because her mouth was all swelled up, and wired shut. The others in the lunchroom knew what happens, however, it was not talked about.

Oh, the drawings on me- naturally, Ava even made one that looks like a butterfly using a very specific part of me, as the main body, as the focus. Payback for me slapping her sister there, and knocking her teeth out. Furthermore, things kept going like that, the paybacks just kept coming.

Yet, like- I can still feel all that.

Like, their long hair strands that would fall upon me as they brushed too and fro on my frail and fair body. With their uncanny physiques, which would make my body answer back in jolts and jerks, involuntarily as resistance, and they would dig their fingernails into me, on my back and hips. I was clawed and bullied… to the extreme!

Furthermore, all that was leftover from the beatings were in my sensitive places too, which made me sting and pain! So, similar to a pulsating ice cold, or a fiery hot sensation depending on the place. They were always so rough, that I would start to bleed out. As you, all know! I remember that day was the first time they took it further than ever before, with me… that was the night… I wanted to end it all!

Maybe I should have kept my big- little mouth shut!

Yes, they teased me… and pushed me around, yet they never did all that, or would they have anyway?

Ava has a thing for me. So, no matter where I go, I cannot say that I have warm and fuzzy feelings. You can stop following me everywhere I go. I know who you are; you have made it very clear, and obvious. I realize what you are trying to do.

'All I have to say is you better watch yourself.'

All your tales are like blue streaks; the sound waves that are echoed from your stations resonates around the lands. They have been retold and spoken over and over, by your troops to become known and twisted. Just like you the station's towers, are going to crumble, especially if my representatives and I have something to do with it.

So, let me not forget about the principle of the hellhole, and their staff of evil monkeys.

They are controlled like puppets; one person holds the strings while the rest of them do as they are told.

'Oh, these are going to be more memories scratched into my brain.' I just know it!

There is nothing like being pinned down and bent over backward, while having an evil monkey screaming in your face, bent over just the same as the sisters do, while they have all control over your mind body and soul… especially if you did nothing to cause the ear-splitting conversations, except having much concern about everything.

There defaulted word of advice is to 'Just deal with it.'

Like- nothing is going down like there is not a bigger issue going on here then what meets the eye. So, let us just say that was the last time that I asked any of them for any advice, on what I should do about any situation. My response became almost robotic, and I would say quote- 'Once I graduate… and get out of this hell hole, I will never set foot in this place again.'

'They would say why don't you just drop out now!'

Also, for the record, I would like to let it be known… telling fellow students to kill themselves, and dropout is not a very good way to motivate them for success.

Plus- having affairs and having your moments of public demonstrations of affection around the students is revolting. So, now you know why my shrinks' pantie hose comes off, she is having an affair with the principle, yet all kinds of scandals with the higher authority runs rampant here in the hellhole.

All the evil monkeys, and the so-called higher authority with their fiery eyes, yes, all these eyes that are everywhere but where they need to be. They do not think that we pick up on what is going on.

Will- do I have news for you… we do! Plus- we all think you are a repulsive joke. Dammit, grow up, and be educators and do your jobs.

'I just thought you would like to know!' Do you know what is an interesting fact?

Most of these so-called educators and staff are going to retire after my class graduates. Why mainly for one reason they are scared that somebody is going to report them for these offenses that happened in this establishment. You quitters stand up and face what you have done to all of us.

You should be ashamed of yourself. What we have learned we had to do it on our own, no thanks to you. Some are going to shine, and some are left to burn out, either way, I hope that you think about what you have done. As well as that, you cannot sleep at night, and it slowly drives you insane. Your secrets are no longer a secret, and your marking of rejection is going to stand no more, for the reason that you are going to fall, along with the tower who started this all. My day to shine is vastly approaching. I do hope so!

(Two weeks later)

Maiara gave me a homemade dream catcher as a gift on one of these days that go fast and slow at the same time. It was pink with white and gray feathers.

She said to put this in your room, and when the time comes… you will know what to do, and that is all she said. I did not ask questions, nor did she go into great- detail.

I believe she reads my life like a deck of cards. Oh, she told me that my cups, to life, would overflow eventually. That there will be balances, I will have the world in my hands that there may be obstacles as of now in my surroundings, but that will soon change, it was hard not to believe her.

She is like my fortune-teller. Have I finally reached the next level of my existence; the floodgates are going to open it seems? The judgments will be over, and I will sing in harmony with her. The journeys of the undertaking are going to begin on the extraordinary, with great expectations of life, and hope and the cycles are going to be completed at last.

Yes, it seems that 'I am a traveler of both time and space.' The stars are going to align once more. I will soar like an eagle over that time and space; to I reach the highest destination of divine expression surely with her. When all hope is gone, you will realize that nothing was lost in that path of transition, with the will of fortune comes a new journey.

Once the arrow has landed on or upon it the discovery that is when I have my new direction to go. Looking back the only things that were lost were the defined destination that was my thought of mind- at that time, because of them and them only. With time eventually, all things cross the path that leads down the many roads to temptations. However, I believe- that I make the right choices, but the main question remains what do you choose to do if you were me?

So, do you want to go the high road, the one that everybody else follows, that only leads you into a pit of darkness and destruction? With its smooth shimmering roads that shine like a diamond, or will you be like me? I have selected to go on the journey of the rocky road, which leads to faith in the divine. I know that the sunlight of the master's star that has the hope within is all I need. The light may not always be the sunshine. It may just be that the stars that light up your darkness, and will bring you to hope in times of need or despair, is someone that cares regardless… even if they are a girl just like you.

They are the star that twinkles for you, as you do for them. The stars can be the guiding light that leads to the marvelous. That is if you choose to ignore the path that is well-traveled by others that pull you down with them, and away.

'Sometimes you have to drop everything and run, to have something, and when you have something to run too. You want to hold on to her tightly, and never let her go.'

The stars, in the human form, are most likely the ones that were once strangers. The unfamiliar person can be the greatest meaning in your life, only if you can gain trust, which is how companions of courtship are determined. These people radiate a warm soft caring, comforting glow that shines when you gaze upon them. This is when one knows how to feel and the rest is left to fate. That is when you will know that they are a true lifelong friend and companion. As well as if they are there for you at all times, no matter the situation, and its consequences.

Like- no words of the alleged tower or clans that fall upon you will stop them. They will not fade from your life, and their soft light will shine from day into night and will make you feel that everything's going right. There may be temperance in which to follow at some point, but sometimes the only things to do are go if it… and it will all work out itself, over time as you radiant on together.

Sometimes making a risk is a good thing… it leads to more. Just like us being there for each other, are blackness in our space it is not so dark, when being with them, as a star that shines the passageway to security for one another. If we have to be a couple to be safe, then it is okay with me.

It is like we both can now go far in our time travel of the light-years being together, 'Meaning is a relationship is moving fast, rather they like it or not.'

Also, for the reasons that we both feel so comfortable, in each other's hands and embrace. It works for her and me, what can I say. Furthermore, the others that are against us, they streak by like the meteor shower in the skies. Just like us in this black space that we are in, we walk past all of them as if they are the meteor that we have to dodge. In the hall hand and hand, we can protect one another from being hit from all flying debris and strikes.

Okay- that is a little far out there, but I think you get what I mean. I think my faith comes when I have a free mind, and I can be in the admired categories by the others. But- having an

unconscious acceptance is one you will be accepted by all, and they will stay in their same thinking, and place along with you… that is if you choose to be a part of them, I made the choice to do what feels right, even if they think it is wrong.

Having a belief in nothing leads to nothing, having a belief in something leads to something. Having the pressures of the past existence pressing you down will lead to nothing. This is the building blocks given to you, which can be whittled by you to carve into an extraordinary recovery of mastery. Even if it has to be like this. 'I hear what you have got to say and it is- okay. Yes, I will go with you, we made us official are the second week together.'

Maiara- She said- 'Deprived of pain, ache, and aching, there would be no sympathy, kindness, and understanding. In a way, we have to see the light by having to go through all this darkness. Now we can do so, as a twosome.' So, I just told her to always. 'Look after my heart– I have placed it in your caring small hands, and I will do the same for you! Don't break it, because, I will not be able to take it!' she said- Same here.

It was a done deal, from that point onwards. Perfectly side by side looking inwards, yet silent with her glittery brown eyes open, and fixed upon mine, so ocean blue. While everybody else falls to nothing and resembles pebbles. It is like ones you are on the right pathways, the others may want to take you down, with their destruction to make you break down too little gravel… however; we try to get around these individuals. These are the ones, who have done her and me wrong. We will stand here solid like a rock!

At this instant is the perfect time for you to shine your beacon of hope to someone else to, who is less fortunate than you are. That is only if you choose to speak out, and have voices of harmony, that unites you together. That is a very powerful tool in the prevention of lost lives, and the rebuilding of lives to come. At this very moment is the right time for you to do your part for someone. I wish I could have done more for Lily, but as of now, I know I could not have, I have to stop blaming myself so much.

(Two days later at the hellhole)

Would you just look there; they are not in their sitting in their desks in class! Paul Navis and his girlfriend Hannah McGruben, they both cut class to go study anatomy together in the girls' locker room. I think I can hear their voices in the vent next to me in soft mumbles; I guess

the school needs to invest in some textbooks so that the teenagers do not have to learn from life's goings-on. 'No one knows, and no one cares!'

I guess that public speaking class is no longer needed for them or anyone it seems. Brandy Pacheco is absent; Taylor Brown went to the nurse's office because of her stomach cramps, and Megan Davis spent the whole class period in the bathroom. Jonathan Eisezn, he is rambling on… he is trying to quote a passage from the book of Job, which is in a section of the Bible. It is what he has chosen to read in front of the class. Yet, the hellhole is trying to stop Jonathan from having his bible with him, they want us to only follow what they say- I guess. I ask- do they have the right to do that?

This school does not believe in what they preach to us in being a Catholic school, I do not get it. I guess they are trying to kick that habit too, just like the nuns that teach some of our boring and strict classes. I can still feel that roller smacking on my bitten fingernails, and backside until they both bled or where red, and I cried. Sister Maggie would scream- 'Nothing great is ever achieved without much enduring, there are consequences for your actions!'

What do you think of Nevaeh? Sister Maggie- Only the hands of God could help that child, and that may be asking far too much. I have tried, yet with no improvement what-so-ever. Nevaeh-? What kind of a name is that? She has 'Blasphemy!' for a first name. Sown from the seeds of unmarried parents and abandoned, she is the afterbirth of the unholy, what more should you expect. That she would be backward in her ways also! I will have to pray… that she finds her way! Besides, she is making my hair gray!

(Nevaeh at home from, yet another school day.)

I sat in my room flexing my thoughts, in the fragile moonlight that is outside my window with its eeriness. While trying everything to type something down, and then just like out of the midnight blueness of the night, this page just seemed to fly from my fingers on to the keys, and onto the paper in a eureka surprise, and I heard that bell ding for the first time without any mistakes at all. Joy, at last, bursting out with a burst of giggle laughter, I have done it! My first typed page!

This is the first page-

'People are not what they say; people come and go every day. Some People have nothing good to say, some people do not stay, yet the words that they say portray. People are like my

flickering ghosts, that I try to pray away, in their shades of gray. Some people only bring forth dismay. Some people can speak gaily, yet for them it is okay.

Yet no one hears me, however, I am with these people all day. Why do I have to stay? Held at bay, listening to all their nah-say, though I want to be home and play in the hay, to lay there in the sun or rain, the rest of the day. People do not talk to one another anymore. People are careless, cold, blank, and bleak in their frenzy of life. People; do not understand what living is anymore, they sell themselves short and upset others in doing so. People are letting everything, which they see, have, and lust for gently slip all away, day by day, with what comes, and with what may.'

Which made me think… one because it was a couple of good paragraphs, and two because it was so true and had some meaning behind it. So-o, maybe I can write, what do you think? Maybe I was saying this because everyone else has their face smashed into their cell phones and babbling about nothing and everything that has no substance. I wonder why I typed this, in this all most possessed like trance.

However, I read it once more and realized that, if you do not have a number that you do not stand a chance in this land of smartphones and other electronic devices. So far, I would rather have a dumb phone or no phone then be a smart-ass that controls it with no outlook or wit or logic behind what is expressed and received. This also reminds me of the fact that Health class is just a waste of time in high school. We all had those talks, a decision of a plan 'B' without really going into what needs to be identified. Do this… do not do that… or you will go blind. 'What a big steaming pile of bull shit.' Do you remember the Health class in fifth grade? How could you forget about that film… you know the one, oh god- I do not want to see all that… in that much detail up on the silver screen. Maybe that is it… Was I traumatized all my life?

I think back on that day-

Hello!

We are only eleven years old, 'Yet there are some girls like Ava that was giving it all away long before this class.' Please do not take is innocence away from us, oh… yes scarred for life. If you want to stop teens from doing things, then stop given them misleading information. 'Now that is a Google search that most teens do.' Besides, just like everything else, there is a Fix. Yet to me the fix should not be capsules handed out freely without a thought of what can be, or

what is stop forever. Giving kids the green light at the age of eleven is going to lead to a crashing explosion, with some of them moving on, and others left behind with broken dreams and split harts. I am not taking birth-control, if there is no need to, that is my decision, now and forever, I just do not like the idea of it.

(One day later)

Sitting here vegetating… yet thinking as always of thoughts… as of now, I am thinking of thoughts, that makes me so angry. What pisses me off beyond belief is when kids pick on kids. When teachers do not do their jobs not only are they supposed to educate us, but they are supposed to protect us we are in their environment their dwelling… it is their job to oversee us.

Now I am not saying that they are supposed to be there holding our hands every waking moment of the day, but they should be there to oversee that others do not do things that would be catastrophic. I have seen it too many times not just in Lily's case but also in others that have been around the world other kids telling kids to kill themselves because they are worthless and have no meaning in life, what a bunch of bull shit…

This is my question- 'Who the hell do you think you are.' You should be ashamed of yourselves for even making such judgments. Not only do I see kids picking on kids, but I have also seen the higher authority picking on students until they cry. Furthermore, if we cannot trust the teachers that are the backbones of the school system who do, we trust? I think the teacher was wondering why I was making faces at him while I was thinking- will oh well.

Pissed off- is not even the word for this category however when individuals tell others to kill themselves…

Really!

How can someone make someone feel that they need to die? Who are you? You are despicable and you must have a black hole for a heart, how can you make somebody else feel like total and complete shit constantly. 'Stop it now!'

People like this need to take a long deep look inside, and if they cannot find anything then they are inhuman. Think about your actions before you speak or do something, just remember what you do, and what you say will come back to haunt you that is a promise. If

somebody is bothering you, just remember there is a light at the end of any tunnel. You will get through it; they will be the one left to crumble to nothing but dust.

That is if you keep your composure, in a matter of time that is rough you will have to stand strong and fight your demons, 'Do not be a victim, be a Victoire!' You will make it through to another day, another week, another year. You will be the one that is better off at the end of these misfortunes because you will know how to react in every situation. Trust me I know; I have lived it! When you hear and look at something or someone, do you use your full comprehension to determine a thought?

Listen to others- words think about their meaning. What do they have to say? Is it positive or is it negative? Is it deceitful, is it hateful and is it distasteful? If so, that is when you make the decision not to listen or look. That is what I do, and it works for me, it just might work for you. We as human beings are programmed to listen to nothing but negative words and dwell on it that is just the way the brain works. We could get twenty good comments throughout the day; however, the only comments that remain in our minds are the nasty ones, negative comments that someone said and it plays over and over in our minds. At least that is the way, it is with me, I know. Why? Because, that is how our brains are involuntarily set to think, and we need to stop thinking in this way. Just remember that- 'positive thoughts, bring on positive actions.'

How do you stop their words? How do you rebuild self-esteem and image? How do you deal with the embarrassment of rejection, and being put in categories that you do not deserve to be in? How would you handle all this? What do you do if no one is listening to what you have to say? How do you make people open their eyes and view what is going on around them? We all make mistakes, but does that give anyone the right to call someone out for that mistake over and over?

Should we dwell on what they have done wrong or should we let it go? However- What is the better question is- what would you do? So-o, what are you going to do?

Chapter: 13

A Closed Book, Sealed, and Sheltered

Do you remember middle school? All I can remember was the clocks that ticked my life away, that was hanging from the ceiling. Along with the smell of chalk dust floating in the air,

opaque's with a tunneling effect in the halls. All the walls where either tissue paper-thin, or cinder block, which makes no logical sense for a place of learning. All these dented, scraped, and beat up lockers; I can vaguely see the faces without the names as they opened them. All the hallways that interlinked to one another and the staircases that went on forever. A cavernous hole in the middle that interweaves the entirety of its geometry, with its moldy shag carpet… oh yes that space that is generally in darkness, yet they call that room the auditorium.

Just out of curiosity, aren't you supposed to do activities there? All the windows in the courtyards, which once shined the light of day where all now boarded up and gone away forever. Also, who could forget the black slate countertops in which we engraved our names and all the pencils that were thrown into the ceiling tiles just for the hell of it, to leave a legacy behind of what we have gone through? I cannot say that all the educators at the hellhole are ruthless, that would be a lie. One educator, in particular, stands out and his name is Mr. Ashmore he cares about the students; he worked with me along with others. Yet he is an old school type of teacher. This class brightened my day; he cares about the arts and my creativity.

Furthermore, how the others brought me down… yes, I was still with and around a bunch of rejects, which just do not care. However, with this person I excelled some in my education; even if it was not documented that I did… I was very grateful for having such a positive role model in this land of despair my eighth-grade year, it was so nice to know that someone cares, at least more than the rest. It is not that all rejects do not care… they either do not have a stable home life, or they do not have educators that care about them, they need to be pushed to be motivated. It has become, too easy for people to put other people into categories instead of looking at the real problem.

About this time in middle school from seventh to eighth grade, this is when the groups start to form. Do not get me wrong some of the judging's start long before these years if you have the words of a toxic tongue that slandering you constantly this can change the outcome of your existence, for the upcoming adventures of high school.

My Hell started in first grade; mainly because of one teacher, when she said I needed individualized assistance. For the reason that I could not read 'See Spot Run!' as the others, or maybe I could, and they did not want me to. Maybe she was waylaid into letting me slide behind. Who knows, they are never going to talk.

Do you remember the examples of preps, jocks, and nerds, and let us not forget the outcasts of rejects? This is all determined long before you walk through those double doors; your fellow students are going to be part of whom you are going to become, but also the higher authority has a big say in it all. If you are programmed to be beneath the rest, that is where you are going to remain, versus having popularity and establishment along with the superior name.

This establishment is created, and it will automatically place you and them. Yet those that have higher levels of popularity have more establishments, and the ones like us get nothing because we are the scum on the floors of the lowest levels that they have made for us.

You are probably wondering the question why is this important? The explanation is the ones that are in the higher popularity, and society is the ones that obtained the education, also the ones that are handed the scholarship, and the best overall outcome of experiences. Which is not fair to the ones that work just as hard, if not harder than the others do?

Mr. Ashmore brought me up to heights of excellence in my schooling that was never thought possible by the ones that doubted me in the hellhole establishment. He also helped me deal with my surroundings, which overall service my well- being by being a positive listener. He likes to joke with me saying quote- 'Wow, daydreamer how did you get so many correct on your test?' And- I would just giggle and say- 'In a dream and not reality comes to the greatest creativity.'

(Home once more typing at the typewriter, late into the night.)

Page two- 'It is just the game of life… What is plain to see? What is never going to be? What is going to last forever with you and me? Someone comes into my life, and others go away forever. Someone brings you happiness, and others bring forth pain. Some bring respectable memories; as other reminiscences fade away in the pouring down rain; it is all part of the game. Some will make you want to feel nothing but shame, and others will bring forth the fame. It is all part of what you choose to do with your flame; it is all part of the game. If you want memories to remain, we must all feel the same and be the masters of the game.

Do you know my name?

Does anyone feel the same? Should I point fingers at the ones to blame? Will all these memories be washed away in the rain, or should I set them all a flame, and see them as they

blaze, so I don't recall any more past days. So, I do not have to live life in a daze. The game of life is a gigantic maze, on all the shuffling days.

The memories will play; the flames will dance and sing. What are these new individuals going to bring? Should I spend all my time with the ones that fly with the white wings? What is going to happen in another full swing, if all these individuals are not all here next spring?

Do you know what to think? Do you know what you are going to make sure of? Do you know what to look after? Do you now understand what to do with your flame, in moments of shame, on the days of rain? This is all part of the game.'

What do you think of Nevaeh-?

Mr. Ashmore- 'She is a good kid, sweet, caring, artsy, and oh so witty. No, she is no one's dummy… that is for sure, but she has a hard time, doing tests, reading, spelling, and even some math and things like that. Because of her anxiety, she is smart… just not on paper. Yet she has been so mixed up with the past skills and teaching… I can see why.'

Nevaeh- The sisters like to call my home phone line at all hours of the day and the night, and there is no way to prove it because the numbers are always unavailable. What to do…? They want to keep my line busy, so no one can talk to me. What ends up happening is that Hope takes the phone off the hook; so that we can get some quiet. They do not say anything on the answering machine, but- yet they like to take up the whole length and the recording with their moaning and heavy breathing.

This goes on at least ten times a day. Plus, they like to record all the conversations; I have on the phone with others when I do talk to someone. Just remember the cordless phones work off of radio waves, which others can tap into if they know the frequency… and I am sure they do! The sisters do not want me to talk to anybody; they know that I know who it is and it is them-them alone; but how do you prove that they are doing it when the town thinks you are the crazy one. They want to know what time I leave my home; what time I am on the phone, they want to keep me awake all night long ringing the phone, and not leaving me alone.

They want to know all my arrangements before they happen, so they can destroy them before they even take place. Hell, they even want to know when I take a shit, take a leak, or even change a tampon too. I look in my bathroom mirror, and I swear I see one or more of their faces in the foggy glass. It is like they are watching me…! I cannot even have any privacy in my own

home. They will not leave me alone at all. That is why I do not have a cell phone; no one is allowed to call me anyway. I wonder if they can see me now?

I am sure they can…! Oh yes, some nights they throw small pebbles at my bedroom window glass Pee-ing, Pee-ing, Pee-ing, from the ground. Then they call out my name, Nev-aeh, Nevaeh…

N-E-V-A-E-H!

(Their yelling whispering gets more amplified every time my name is called.) They call out, just like the soundings off of the town fire whistle siren, uncannily in the calm still of the nights' breezes, however, it rings lastingly in my eardrums, as panic sets in. 'Saying you have to come out and play… come out from in there if you don't, we will get you to play with us at school!' 'You are going to come out at some point. We just want to play with you!' -They would say in an animus voice.

Hope…! She comes busting through my bedroom door, and says go play with your little friends… Nevaeh…! 'No- no! That's okay!' I would say. Hope- 'I don't see why you don't want to have friends? But- that's up to you!' (Stomping out of the room with a door slam!) No- she just does not get it… no one does!

While they weight there all night, and Ava she climbs up the tree next to my porch roof, then she jumps on the rooftop and crawls up to my window, and then she looks in at me… with mischievous determination! She has even unlocked the old window of mine somehow, and slid it up through the night… I could feel her presence. Like, she has even put a spooky ring on my finger, and laid a black rose flower in my belly-button, and touched me in the night, while I was asleep…!

Yes, the photo she has on her phone shows me there, yet how do I stop it, if she makes it seem like I want all that… even my girlfriend thinks I am cheating on her. That so hard to explain to her, or anyone really; Oh-hum, what did I do to deserve all this? I do think… she locks my bedroom door, with a copy of my skeleton key that is to this old farmhouse, so no one can come in through the night, and see what she is doing to me.

I am not even safe in my pink bedroom anymore! Plus, I know that my teddy cannot help me out either, yet I hold on to it, for he knows all my secrets. I know she has put her dirty little long fingers in my mouth, and I have sucked on it not knowing what it was, and she has gotten

on top of me to…! I just know it. Yet, I always feel so drowsy, when I hear them calling for me, like- I have been drugged up… I wonder if I have been? Yet- how…? It is like she has stood over my bed, and said- 'Boo!' When I was, asleep she would flashlight like it was beaming in my eyes with a flashlight, and she said… 'It's me- my love! I am going to sleep with you tonight!' What choice do I have? It is either do- it, or face their wrath at school, yet I was so looped… I did not know if I was dreaming or not.

(One day has passed, my thoughts!)

Just like when I did have a cell phone. I think that they use the Global Positioning System, which I had on my smart cell phone to track me down. It is as if they had their clan's members with the blue and red-light bars, on their wagons follow me around the towns, just to see what I was up to… and where I was going and where I have been. So why have it, if I cannot have freedom! I do not do anything wrong… yet the others can get away with everything.

So why keep something that I cannot use in the way it should be used. It is just a waste of time for me anymore. I understand that I am all alone when I am not really by myself. That even the dreams, which I have, are just as painful as being awake. It is as painful as being injured or cut just like it is during the school day. It is emotionally and psychologically grim, and it is hurting my brain to grasp, that it is. Being awake and daydreaming is the same to me just like today in Bio-Chemistry, I learned that I am a skanky slut and hoe, and in English that I am mentally retarded 'Even though I maintain a 'B' average.' Plus- in the lunchroom that I am just freaky and creepy, you learn so much about yourself when attending classes at the hellhole. Like more people are concerned about what I do, rather than the rats; that run past in the middle of the floor.

(One day has past thinking, in class.)

I have always hated the fact that I continuously feel so awkward around others that do not know me, and they judge me for it. I am just shy and that is it. If you let me gain trust with you first, then I will most likely become your best friend over time. Why do awkward things keep happening to me?

(Another opinion)

I do believe, that People are not something that you collect they are something that you earn. What do you think?

(My dating advice, He- he- you have to be kidding me. While okay here goes nothing.)

So how do you know if someone is into you? You- ask?

Okay well- You have to look at the signs that they are giving off with their body language. If someone is not into you, you will feel the harshness in their voice, and how they act. You should be able to understand that you are getting rejected by their movements and lack of compassion, and eye contact. This is when you should move on, and find somebody that is worth your time.

Because, if you do not do this that is when you look desperate and tend to come off as creepy, and nobody wants that! Thus, in other words, if the conversation is dying, do not stand there and kick a dead horse… Let it go, and walk away, and try again some other day. Yet sometimes I need to take my advice… like really. If somebody likes you or is into you, they will do whatever possible to be around you.

'Yes, even if they are extremely shy like me.'

Like, many of my admirers will pop up at random locations where I am, 'This is so sweet, yet kind of stalker-ish?' –Don't you think? Nonetheless, you have to draw the line on what you think; determining what their plans are going to be with you, and having good judgments while reading between the lines, and understand the characters is a must to distinguish. Like, I said before, I can comprehend what someone's motive is before they open their mouth just by reading their body language.

Then when they finally do speak this is when I will know if they want to have a relationship, or just be acquaintances, or friends with benefits, or not friends at all. I tried not to fall for a bunch of lines and end up heartbroken on a one-night stand, I have to know if you are in love or just infatuated with making any life-changing engagements.

So, the question remains- what is the difference between love and in-love? You can decide… Hum, or is at all lust that brings us together? I have to think about that one. It is all about the signs you see and hear, to look for to know, that someone is into you.

As if there are unnecessary means of touching or contact between the two of you. This is a great sign that they are into you, or it could mean that you have an unwanted friend…! Yet,

also look at the position of their body or torso; if it is slightly turned towards you at an angle when standing in front of you, this is a good sign. This is how I knew that he liked me.

The tone of voice is everything to me, with uncontrollable laughter, stumbling on the pronunciation of words, and flirty eyes, these are all going to give off the true thought of expression within; you will know if they want to get to know all about you or just some things about you. You can understand what I am saying.

First of all, if somebody likes you then you have to make them feel comfortable around you, which also applies to those that have difficulties at first too. 'If you do not want them around you, be sure to reject them nicely.' That is all you can ask for really. I know with me everything is very awkward... But- it will work itself out. If somebody is into you, they will observe you from afar, meaning they will gaze at you and suddenly look away. Besides if they are a shy person, they may not make eye contact with you at all. These are all common signs.

A sweet smile is the most common way to know of approval, if someone has a big smile for you every time you see them, then that is when you know they are into you and want to be around you. Also look for fidgeting expressions for example hair twirling, biting of the lips, playing with clothing, and Posture readjustment. Now if your admirers- is- the shy type that is a whole different situation, but shy people tend to be withdrawn, and try not to make a fool of themselves in front of the person that they are interested in.

Why?

Because of the fear of rejection or that they will lose the chance they might have with them. At least that is the way I am. If you look for the signs you cannot go wrong. Some of the signs will differ from person to person. Life is a game you have to figure out what each person's unique ways are all about. Try to understand what they want, and how they are going to go about doing things, compromise and appreciative gestures is everything.

The signs of awkwardness may mean a form of attraction. Try not to mistake the friend zone for the dating zone. The wonderful world of dating in high school, she's dating him... He's into her... She's brokenhearted... And the girl he's dating like somebody else. That is all part of the dating game in high school, one big love triangle with hatred in all the social circles. It is all just part of the existence of life... within the hellhole establishment. If I can help someone out throughout the day, then I feel as if my day is complete. 'It is more blessed to give than to

receive.' this stands true with me and is a virtue that everyone should practice. In everything, including in the dating world. 'Doing good things for others, then others will do good things for you.' I try to believe that! How was that? Was that- good? Yes, no, maybe…? No- No…? I did not think so, okay! Yet, I am just a fifteen-year-old girl here- I am sorry.

(The next day at lunch)

Maiara- She walks up to me, and slams her plastic tray down on the table. She starts giving me a chewing out like, I have never had before!

Maiara- (Sobbing!) 'You- you have said that you would never break my heart.'

'Now look at you!'

'What are you talking about'- I asked?

Maiara- 'What am I talking about? What the fuck- Nevaeh! You should fucking know it is all over the motherfucking school! You- slut- you muff loving whore! You- were flat on your back with her, on your damn bed, fooling around. Oh- my- sweet- baby- Jesus! Shit, and with of all people, it had to be with that girl- Ava! Why- Nevaeh? Why- would you do this to me? You made me look like a complete dumbass!'

Nevaeh- 'I did not do anything! I am not trying to break your heart, and I would never do that! You know that honey.'

Maiara– 'Do not call me that… anymore! Ahh- I can't believe you!' (Crying- so offended. 'Sure…! That is not what I have been hearing, and you have shattered my heart, here pick up the pieces.

Yeah- here is my fork; do you want to stick that into me too?'

Nevaeh- 'wow! None of it is true…! You of all people should know that? So, are you asking me to be sorry, for something in which I did not do?'

Maiara– 'sure… you didn't- sure! And- I am just an idiotic girl, to spray your piss on- right?'

Nevaeh- 'No! Please! Believe me! I was a set-up! Like, always!'

Maiara– 'Sorry! I cannot right now, I need time away from you! Okay- maybe it is not you, maybe it is me? Either way, I need a break from us!' (Hurtfully- speaking.) Oh, why did I let myself fall in love with you?' (Mumbling speaking the word 'Why?' repeatedly. While she was crying, overtop of her food.)

Nevaeh- 'They are just trying to break us up…! Can't you see that? Can't you see that this is all one ass-munchers illusion, which she made up?'

Maiara- 'Oh shut up, I can't even look at you, and stop trying to swear you are not good at it! It is never your fault is it, Nevaeh?'

(Nevaeh is sitting flabbergasted, taking it all in.)

'Nope! I didn't think so!

AND- And… even not, you were with her… so! No! She was with me, and I did not want it. I don't even recall this taking place! As I said, they see me and you happy, and they want us apart, and they are going to do it too… if you let them.'

Maiara- 'Oh! So, now it is my fault- Okay… I see!'

Nevaeh- 'Okay- whatever, feel that way. I do not give a rat's ass. You can kiss my ass girl, and if that is not dirty enough for yah, then kiss your own, and see how you like the taste of it!'

(Nevaeh- She gets up, walks away, and sits at an empty table, all by herself. With the look of hurt and shock on her face, yet knowing this was going to happen, at some point in time. Eventually, all the grains of sands in the hourglass of their time together would run out, she knew, and she would be alone once more, like always! She recognized that it was coming, just like a thunderstorm pouring down rain, which would never end. Nonetheless, was it the end? She did not know. The clan has rained their disconcertion once more, the dark cloud over her head was stronger than ever before.)

Chapter: 14

Choices

'I am so happy because today I found my friends, they are in my head!' – Nirvana That song was playing on my radio when I got up this morning for school. That is so true to me too. It

made me stand in a frozen dumbfounded pose of awe, as I listened in and absorbed it all, the lyrics the grunge sound made me feel alive; yet at the same time, it is like I felt the pain of the singer.

I understand how he feels. Then before I even walked out of my bedroom door, I thought about what has happened the day before, with her. Yet I know, not to think about it, yet I do. It was my first thought getting up, and my last thought going to bed last night, the fear of being all alone again… I cannot take this shit. Maiara and Chiaz or anyone really, I give up on it- 'I am not going to chase what I can't have!' Just like the second song that was playing while I was getting ready, so, I am going to quote the musicians from the rock group 'Rush!'

'If you choose not to decide then you still have made a choice.' This is so true… So, in other words, what you choose determines how others react to you. Also, how you react to them, as a result, reacts in the right ways… if you can. I know that I did, yet she did not, and he did not either, and I did, and all of them do not either. I wonder if we can just be friends someday, or is that going to be awkward too, if we could. Would it be possible? 'It's impossible, tell the sun to leave the sky, it's just impossible.' That was the song; I was singing walking down the pathway today while waiting for the horrendous bus to show up with its flashing lights. That is one of Hope's records, which she plays while doing her chores a lot- a lot.

(The ride)

Yes, I am sitting on the second bench back from the front of the bus alone as always. Certainly, always going down the same unmaintained bumpy road with its dust and dirt being kicked up from the bald tires of the bus. So, all that grime is coming in my window and landing on my clean uniform. Why? Because, my window will not lock tightly, and no one is going to close it for me; So, all that dust comes pouring in at me, and the others in gusts. Yet it is my fault that it will not shut. They all say! Because I am too weak and stupid to know how to close it up. 'It is just stuck!'

-I say!

'Yeah… just like, we are stuck with you Ta-rd!' -One girl said.

'Fuck- tard- Fix it, or I will pound your pee-pee minded, dick- weed head, and fake it until you do.' -The one boy named- David said. Yet- the bus driver did not hear or see a thing. Yet, some days he just yells, 'Nevaeh- shut up, or I will write you up.' 'But- but- I didn't do

anything!' -I always say that every day! 'Go be on the short bus where you belong.' –That was said, by a girl named- Jolie, she is sitting in the back. I did not say anything back. Like their books, pencils, chewing gum, fondling, mean words, kicking, punching in the face, scratching, blood splattering, shoes tapping, tampons and pad tossing, and spit blowing, were all flying at me, or on me.

The air all around me is cloudy just like my thoughts, which started rolling in as I am on my way. Only to stop at their stop, and they get on, and it all begins once more. I bite my lip and start to tremble, as I get ever so close to them… I can see them standing outside, and they get closer and closer until they get on, in front and behind me, and they smash everything, that they are, and have all up in my face!

(My thoughts)

If others are poisoning my reactions, then I decide to siphon them out if I can, the sooner I do… the sooner I can heal myself, and get back into the circles of life. This is when I make the decisions to try to figure out what is causing the negative energy- 'The dark cloud' in my life before it is too late.

Remembering that there are many options I can take. I could be like those that will never speak again, and end the existence of life eternally, and become an angel with either white wings or black wings, depending on my life history, what I choose now determines where I go in the end. I remember that this is not the recommended option to take; I will try to find help from someone, and choose a better decision. I remember no matter how bad it may seem to be in my life… there is always a way. There is always someone, which loves me, and cares about me.

Yes, even if it does not seem as so… I live in the hope of someday.

I remember that my decisions can take away meaning from others' lives that do care, just because of one decision that is made. I remember that it cannot be changed, this time there is no plan 'B' if it works. Yes, I remember what happened to me when Lily passed, which helps stop me. I can choose to be the ones that gain a voice, and speaks out, for the other individuals that are not so fortunate.

On the other hand, I can decide to be a guardian angel for someone else. I can help the innocent lives that are being beaten and crucified mentally and physically. They do not have the strength to speak on their own, by using my voices of harmony and speaking up for someone, I

can give all of the strength to make a change for the better. I want to stop the words of slander, and abuse of kicking and punching. For the reason, that who are we to make the decision, that we are better than someone else is when we were all created to be equal.

I want you to think about that the next time you make a choice also. Some of us need to choose to relax, and not sweat the small things in life that bother us. Generally, everything works itself out, like what she has said to me before. 'If it is meant to be then it will happen, and if not then it was not meant to be.' –I remembered that… so, I hope something works out. Yes, I would have to say it is okay to question God and see why this is all happening.

(My thoughts, in class today as I regress.)

Anxiety and stress come over dwelling on negative thoughts of the demonic powers, you need to learn to ignore all of them. Stop dwelling on the pressures of life, and get out of your comfort zone this is what most need. Like that is what I need! This decision will make you live a better life, and have a more productive existence in your surroundings. So, with that said… if you need more time to make a choice that is going to benefit you in the right ways do so, even if there is a deadline, looming over your head, or around your neck sort-a speak, like a noose. I know there is always tomorrow, only if I can indoors. Things will change and become better for me, that is a promise from the divine master, of the game of life. Just because I do not know, what is going on all the time does not mean that there is not a plan for my being. That is what I think anyway. Nevertheless, I cannot be sure of anything.

(Deeper thoughts)

Do you remember your middle school dance? I do not because I was not there. I still wonder about it from time to time. What was it like to be there?

Remembering how everybody looked like back then comparing what has changed in all of our lives, realizing the innocence is gone forever, and time goes by, without the right memory. So, are we asked to grow up way too fast in society these days, or does the higher authority fill our minds with dark thoughts, or does the technology rape our minds?

Once again, I will let you decide! Yeah, looking back, the eighth grade goes by like a bolt of lightning, with all the yearbooks with scribbled names, everyone else has pinned the same phrase in their books 'Never change!' yet that is what we all do… change, and grow into

something, that cannot be controlled, or is controlled by something, that is out of your influence to control. Just like- 'The decision is yours do the right thing!'

(Present time in the halls.)

All the books I carry could be knocked out of my hands and left behind for all I care. Still, they have to travel with me, and the words that they tell me are not fair. All my papers fly up in the air. Others make my life despair, finding new creativity in which to share, yet all the faces still stare, I comb the hair over my face and eyes so they do not glare. All the paper and creativity that will tear, we could stop this if we would make the dare.

The four Amsel sisters for some reason cannot keep their hands off my stuff.

I do not touch your shit, so do not touch mine. I mean seriously keep your hands off! Speaking of the four sisters, they are the only ones in the school that were not drug tested during the lockdown that we had together for fighting. Hum- I wonder why? The rejects, their purses, and bags we dumped out, and their lockers searched, and all the contents are shown for everybody in the hellhole to see… 'Isn't that wonderful?' Because we are a danger to ourselves and others. -So, they say! You know, it is not as if I am going to bring a gun to school. Yet one did and he just got a fine, and one day out to play, out of the school. I do not get it. Hey, I do not make the roles. Plus, I do not want everyone seeing my personal belongings, 'Shouldn't this be against the amendments of freedom?'

However, the ones that need to be tested for drugs and weapons are the ones that get away with everything. That is all part of the hellhole society. Like I have said, some can get away with anything and others do nothing and get reprimanded for what they do… it is just bad luck I suppose. Reject- Ryan Gibson has an obvious snuff ring in his back pocket, he spits all over everything.

He has spiky hair that is somewhat distracting, chains hanging from his wallet, which is an accident waiting to happen, yet no one sees that. Ryan- he likes showing off… one thing, for instance, is how he- has five tattoos, and two of them being portraits of his two kids, offspring are from two completely different girlfriends. Let's not fail to mention his hygiene problem; you can smell him before he walks in the building. He is not the brightest crayon in the box; the rumor in the hellhole is that his kids are going to finish school before he does. Yet this is what I am classed as too? I just do not get it! Stoner- Timothy Lartinez smokes two packs a day. Yet

this is okay. Prep- Jessica Marshall pops pills out of a candy dispenser. Well, who am I to say what is right and wrong? It is your body you can do whatever you want with it. Just do not be stupid.

(The periods)

I have a teacher he is known to be the most gifted science educator and astrology fanatic, here at the hellhole. He likes to say- 'We are all made out of star stuff!' He is an interesting character, to say the least, he wears a lab coat constantly and combs what little bit of hair he has on his head all to the front. He drinks six cups of coffee per one class session, it is funny how high strung he is… somebody whispers one word and he jumps five feet in the air.

Dr. Valadez is his name, he is constantly talking about evolution, and that the Bible and religion, in general, are just one of the greatest works of fiction ever created.

Dr. Valadez is the dumbest smart person, which I have ever met if that makes any sense. Have you ever noticed that some people are so smart they lack common sense? For example- This man will put his face right down to a Bunsen burner to light it. I am not a genius, but I know better than to do that. Every time I or one of my classmates walks through the door, he always says quote- 'When I kick the bucket… just put me on a wooden raft and float me out on a river, on a full moonlit night, and light me up like a Viking, and send me back to the stars.'

I just chuckle in my mind, yet I understand his logic, but I cannot help but roll my eyes, as well as wonder what is this man thinking… or is he? Since in my mind I think, you will not need that raft, because you are going to blow yourself up long before you need that, or your kidneys are going to fail you… or something like that is bound to happen. He is like a ticking time bomb. Boom- Boom! Something exploded! What a whack- job! Yet he is entertaining for us all in the class, I would have to say, I get a belly laugh, we all do. Not because we learned anything, 'No!' It is more than this is such a joke, to sit through every day. Yet he is the so-called smart one? I suppose that puts a completely new meaning to 'Ashes to ashes dust to dust.' I personally just find it to be a gruesome way of disposal. But- yet once again… it is all that you choose, and your beliefs- right?

(Next period)

Once again, I am in blood-curdling Bradbury's class, we have to endure the same babbling performances of attention by her- one of the higher authorities. Except for today, we

have to do our annual weekly spelling bee. However, the spelling list is probably what would be, considered to be at the second-grade level. I am thinking to myself along with the others that have to sit through this class along with me. 'Really if you cannot spell by the time you are in high school, most likely you never will.' So… as the teacher is pronouncing words like Cat, Fish, and Dog.

Once again, the door is hanging open the whole time, and our minds are forced shut. We just have to sit and listen to her screaming at the top of her lungs once more. As we roll our eyes in embarrassment and slide lower and lower in is a desk with humiliation, as she gets pissed, and the pride we had before walking into this class gets pissed on. The two reject twins Mary and Carry in the class mocks her in there fake British and Irish accents. Mary will say something like- 'Oh- Bloody hell Miss. Bradbury, I pissed my skirt!' Because she was not allowed to go to the restroom by herself. Then Carry will say- 'I need to go… are you going to look at me this time?'

(Irish) Marry- 'It is cold in here!'

(British) Carry- 'Yes, yes- it is!'

(Irish) Marry- 'I agree, truly!'

(British) Carry- 'Yes!'

It is a little- 'Nipple-a-ly' in here, is it not?'

(Irish) Marry- 'Surely, I need a jacket, to cover them up.'

Me- he-he, with a giggle!

At that moment, the pink slips come out once more, for all of us. 'You all can sit in detention' -She would say. - 'I don't care!' Thinking to ourselves, we got news for you we do not care either. You sick twisted crazy bitch! The only things we care about is how you are screwing us over. Since there is not a damn thing, we can do about it.

Yapper just stuck here, yes jammed in here, in all these classes, just like the food that is stuck in Miss. Bradbury's teeth, and adult braces. You know that is never going to come out either. Then it is back to the two-class clowns. Oh, believe me, I almost pissed my skirt just laughing at those two comedians! The stuff they pull is just not normal. Yet again, what is

normal anyway? You have to have some fun… just like- 'You are not alive unless you live a little.' Therefore, that is what we all try to do, live a little.

However, that is not allowed for us, in these classes… like this one, and this classification. –I presume! Some days what I do generally after this ridiculous undertaking of achievement, of forming letters into one-syllable words on insignificant papers. Is open my notebook, and start drawings something to entertain my mind, which is not allowed by her, she takes my drawing or whatever has been created and rips it up. Then she throws it into the garbage can. Yet being creative is something that she will never understand. Oh, how I would love to wipe that grin off of her face, however, that is what she wants me to do is retaliate so, that she can throw me in the dungeon lockdown with the other rejects, after hours.

Then the bell rings, and into the halls, we go to be run over by a stampeding herd, all the faces still stare, yet they do not have a care about anyone or anything. Walking down the hall, you will see the two other rooms with the rejects that are in lockdown, generally for no good reason, however, the authority makes everyone else feel that they need to be punished. Just because some of us learn, think and do things differently than the so-called rest of the population in this school. Sad to say that I am forced into being part of this grouping, a classification of labeling that is complete bull shit for anyone that has to indoor what they want us to do, say, and think. We are railroaded into it, and the tower is in control, she oversees the higher authority and the decision- making. It is all out of our hands, and those that refuse, have two options. They either put up with what they choose for us or have an alternative education at another establishment of hell.

I call this lockdown; some of the rooms are no bigger than six by six feet, or so it seems. You are not allowed to move or speak for seven hours while some greasy-haired prick stares at you and make sure you lose your mind. Talk about solitary confinement. Just like every other class, I have to ask permission to go to the restroom. All these years, I have been asking permission just to take a piss and dripping it while holding it in, when not allowed too.

Times like this- 'I have just learned to become a space cadet, and dream my life away. Fantasy is a whole lot better than sitting in this reality.' To keep from, exploding! I wait until the classroom bells ring out. Then I have to go to my next class which is music and listen to the shouting of DeVolcano the fat bastard, that has something against the rejects, and anyone that is

not his pet. Ava, for example, is one of those pets; she gets all the solos, it is hilarious because she has no talent.

Nevertheless, she gets the spotlight and I am left behind, it is funny to think that they even let me out of my little room long enough, to take a music class.

DeVolcano thinks that I cannot handle it, or anything else for that matter. I guess the completely made up documentation is all the proof that he needed to make such judgments. I just politely go on with my day, because there is nothing I can do anyway. Then again, I told you this guy had issues, Along with the rest of them.

(The support)

I have this emotional support teacher named Miss. Thorn, this woman was and still is a nut job. Yet she claims that I am a danger to myself and others, yet she creeps on me at the oddest of times, however, she never sees what they do to me, only what I do back. She makes it seem to the higher authority that I need to be in all these special classes too.

Why?

Because I am too much of a distraction and a hold up to all the others in their so-called… normal mainstream classes.

Oh, yes and because I have emotional problems too, let's not forget about that- or so they say. They all say that I need this…! Yet all my peers get to sit through, their normal days.

Yet, I am locked up with the rejects, which do not care, if they all get a diploma or not…! Woot! Woot! For me- right! What gets me is I do care about getting good grades, and I want to be in the normal classes, yet the higher authority will not let me be normal. They want me to get behind! So, they can have their substantial income, I was a target for the reason that I have no one that would fight for me. If I would speak up, I would get this quote shoved in my face.

'You can go to an alternative school; we can have you sent out. 'To a school that would fit your special needs.' You know to a loony bin, funny farm, a dumb-dumb school. Yes, I know of some rejects that went there… it is not good! They go out as one person, and if they come back some-day, their minds have been raped, and they are never the same.

All the rejects myself included having a speech teacher named- Miss. Mendoza, her job is to teach us the sounds in a word- 'To break it all down.' If you are categorized like me then the teacher thinks that you are too damn stupid to learn how to read and write a complete sentence without their so-called help. So, every day we go over the same old shit never getting past 'Aaa, Baa, Daa, and Caa.' We sit in the breezeway, being timed while reading our first-grade storybooks, day in and day out. As the other heartless children that walk by us yell-

'Sped, Sp-ed, and SPED-ers.'

'Look at the sped, which are messed up in the head, they should be dead!' '–cute you can rhyme!' Words I hear from them every day- 'Sandwich makers, creepers, retards, losers, you should die, freaks, you're a waste, don't talk to any of my friends, afraid to fight, no-swag, simple-minded.' Just to name some. As they go to their normal classes, kids are so mean to what they do not understand!

What is funny- I most likely forgot more than they even know.

Yet I am the one that is classed as a loser in this society. Oh, well, - I guess! I did not deserve all this crap! All they did was mixed me up, with everything. They all say that I will never do anything with my life. 'But I will!' Therefore, as of now, I am just sitting back while taking mental notes. Yet, I cannot help but think you all will get your payback someday. You just wait and see, somehow and some way, you have hell to pay, I am certain of that fact. Just like- Someday you might want me, and I will not want you!

(A class I cannot have.)

The art teacher is an asshole! Mr. Zimmer this man cannot even draw a stick figure. Yet he is known to be something remarkable. That reminds me, that I am not allowed to take any creative classes, electives, or something fun. Everything in my studies, I mean everything I have is basic, basic, and basic. I have to do the same extremely basic elementary studies all my years here. It is like in math we have not even gotten past 2+2=4!

Lucky if we know how to read an old-style clock. Lucky if we can make a change with money. We are lucky if we know ten of the US states. We are lucky if we can fake to people that we can read more than what we do. Luckily if we can fake the words, we spell out on paper to hand to somebody. Lucky for us we can do what we can do. No thanks to them.

Oh- yes, the world can be a very scary place, when you cannot understand or decipher what it is you are looking at, and everything goes fuzzy and scrambled when trying to focus in as if it all jumps around on the page. Then again, it is just as scary when they cannot understand you, and what you are trying to say or write to them. I always hated reading to the class, or when I was tricked into reading something to someone and having to stop at every other word. It makes you feel like a damn fool.

Just like when the girl next to me in class has to whisper every sentence to me. I feel that my IQ is about the same as my shoe size. I want to run out of the room and never face all of them ever again. Nevertheless, I know that I am not stupid. Yet I feel that way, and they see me that way. Though, what can I do? So, the higher authority said that all my time in school needs to be spent in a closet doing basic things because I have a basic mind. Hence, so I can get caught up in my studies… now that is a joke…!

They also have for me what they call support class. No class, just time to do whatever I need to get caught up on, from the other classes I am in. Yet that consists of… not much of anything. Most days you just sit their sucking air. Like the only thing, you get in this period is a bunch of negative and hurtful comments and deceitful advisement. I do not give a shit about you, it is their attitude.

There is no help for the rejects; the only escape is the library if you are lucky enough to get away. There were days I remember that I stayed in the same room, with the same teacher, and I did not leave for hours at a time. Then people wonder why I am a social retard? This is how I feel about any support classes or special education; all they do is support you in becoming a loser. It is not what is needed to learn. It is a waste of time, a waste of someone's life. It stops that life from living; I should know I am living with it. You try it and see how you like it, and we would call you crazy too.

In these classes, we know that our voices echo down the corridors as we read this shit, but we are forced to read out loud. Everyone knows that we are the rejects; they can see and hear that we are not the normal kids in the school. The other teens walk the halls with a strut, yet we are their suckers with the walk of shame, everyone that sees us glares down upon us as if we are from another planet. Like we are so gross, to them that we do not deserve to live or inhale the same air as they do. That reminds me- Just like Ava keeps saying that she is going to bury me

alive, on top of Lily's grave! Okay then- what the hell, is taking you so long; just do it, if that is what you, and your posse want. Then I would at least have Lily next to me for some company.

Chapter: 15

The Past It Haunts

I think back to the past often and look at my life, and ponder my thoughts to see, who was there, who was not, and what is no longer and never going to be! I think about getting older, the memories they come and go, the stories start and end, what do I have to show for the life that I have led? As of now not much, who do I have to blame, or should I blame myself for what is out of my hands.

Do I blame myself, or the others or should I pin it all on the tower? Sometimes I sit on the swing that is part of the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams, and I see my life flashed before my eyes. I float on a stream of air, and it drifts me away at the day's end, and until it becomes night once more. I set, and it is as if I watch as the seasons slowly change. Sometimes, I see the pouring down rain.

Sometimes, I see the sun.

Some days it is like I do not see anything or anyone, for they are lost to me as I am in my fog. It is just like all those days that the snow starts to fall heavy, as I set with the freezing feeling inside and out. The fields are covered over with ice and snow, with nothing to do.

It is no fun to sled ride, snowman making, and snowball fight all alone. All I can do is sit on this swing while looking over at all the magical wonders of Jack Frost. It is beautiful, yet so cold. Just like me as the days get emotionless, so do I.

It is like I freeze up too, as I sit with not a thing to do, or go inside and sit too. Looking out the frosty glass of the split windows feeling oh so blue. Just like the overcast sky, and snowdrifts on the land that reflects the airstreams paths, which cut right on through, that soft frosty color, and the flakes flutter outside it seems two by two. It is these days when the times change, and the night comes rolling in far too soon, and the lights outside have halos of iciness around them. As well, the ancient hand shovel becomes my best friend time and time again. Just like, there is a season for everything and everyone! 'One is gone away forever, for another to be

born… it is all part of the circle of life.' I believe that the divine master is the connection to our ancestors.

If we listen, we can hear them as they speak wisdom down to us. That is only if we tune our ears to what they have to say.

Can you hear the voices in your head as I do? Sometimes the sun shines; sometimes I am sitting alone in that rain watching as it pounds my body, and sometimes the rays of sun soothe my soul. Sometimes, I am not alone, even though she is not seen. There were times I was with Maiara Chenoa, and we talked about the times of the past, present, and future. Now all I have is the past to think about, and the future to worry about living. Oh yeah about that thing, I am so happy to say that she and I made up, about two weeks after our fight.

However, it will never be as it was before. We are just friends, and nothing more. She comes over to my home on the weekends again, like before, yet not quite like beforehand. Sometimes she joins me and we become us again, just like some will watch and protect us, and some will try to destroy.

Nevertheless, she is the one that guards me the most she is mine, and I am hers. Can you fathom what I am saying to you? She watches over me in her glow of white. We speak of a place that is so unlike what is known to the rest of the mere mortals, which live in this land. Do you understand? No? Oh, you will!

(She talks to me)

She speaks to me her words! Saying things like- 'Being persistent are the keys to be truly happy. The greater the struggle, the greater the reward will be!' 'That the more I suffer, the more it shows that I care, and care for others. What I plan for myself is what I am going to grow into, and that is what I will become.' 'To always remember, that you are only a doormat as long as you let others walk all over you. When you focus on what you have been given, and what you have received in your life, that is when you know you have something to live for.'

She said to me. She would say- 'If you feel that you do not have enough without whatever you think is needed, you will never have enough of what it is that you want. True faith comes within; it is not repetitious.'

Who is she, and why does she keep saying this stuff? Well… you should know! Yet I have to say that Repetition is a part of life; it is a habit, not a belief. In doing the right things good things will come, that is only if you have the faith and the belief not a reputation of repetition. I have learned from her that all your dreams can come true, even if everybody else thinks it is impossible.

You have to look at your own heart. Because no one can see your true story other than you. They can see fragmented parts of what may be but they cannot understand the full picture, the pitchers showed when it develops into what it is meant to be. One other thing that I have learned to do, even though it is difficult… is to look into my mirror and scan over my body and say.

'You are beautiful, you are positive, you are smart and creative, and you are something extraordinary that has meaning to someone.' It is all because of her, she makes me feel good about who I am, yet she always did when she was with me, as I always did for her. 'No one can stop me because I am perfect just the way I am, and nobody is going to change that fact.' She made me promise her that I make the assurance to say one nice thing about myself, each day. What if I do all things will look up for me in my life. To keep telling myself all these beliefs… To- 'Always think positive… about yourself and the others around you.'

'This will help you live a more confident fulfilled life. It will bring happiness to you, and the others that you are surrounded with also.' Therefore, from that, I have come to believe. If the others do not see my vision, that is when I walk away and find new ones that want to be in my illustration of life.

Remember they have the choice, but it is your final decision about what you choose. Like everything in life is a sin it seems, yet it is known for us not to dwell, sometimes you just have to say what the hell, and see what happens. God is marvelous in what he has us do, even when we have no clue what we are doing, he does and she was sent to me because I was in need. I have to believe; I do believe that because she is next to me right now! You cannot see her, but I can. And- no, she is not imaginary; this became an ability for me, that started after my second chance at life. When I thought I feel free from the noose, she saved me, from certain death!

(Have faith)

I believe that if you tell yourself something long enough you can achieve anything. Furthermore, if you hear somebody's negative comments long enough you will believe what they have to say. What it may do for us and the others, which are part of our lives is an adventure in itself. That everything is just memories of the books of life. Like even if others that are part of the chapters do not want to be a part of our story or not, they all have some meaning and are meant to be in there- yes for some purpose.

'Do not believe the lies of a toxic mouth and tongue, for they do nothing but destroy your true being of self-expression.' Generally, it is a bunch of nonsense words and thoughts of jealousy, hatred, and judgment. You have to believe in yourself and believe in your abilities. 'You will not believe what you can do if you only imagine.' I have learned to let go of the past and all the yesterdays for they are no longer, the importance is the tomorrows to look forward to.

That reminds me of Soul Travel- by definition is the astral projection and analysis of out-of-body experience. It is the adoption of an 'Astral body.' Like when it separates from the physical body, it is capable of traveling outside; I have felt that, as I have been with her. I have had this sensation many times in my life now… after that day. Oh yes, others have tried to penetrate mine, as you know. I can feel the energy. Just like the definition of an Angel is a supernatural being or spirit, often depicted in humanoid form, with feathered wings on their backs and halos around their heads, found in various religions and mythologies. Well, it is not a myth at all!

They are real!

They are real to me… I can see them as I said Lily, she is next to me right now! -She said hello, by the way. Oh, be nice to her as you know she is shy! There is so much more to them than that awful definition implies. They live within us and around us if we accept them in our time of need. It is like her spirit body descends and hovers around me at all times, she guides me now in my life path, only if I want to listen, and if I want to understand what she has to say. Just like true love never dies! You can even talk to them, and see them in front of you. Like I can! They are not that different from you and me. It is a great gift to have! 'Angelology' is an extraordinary study.

Something I had never thought about until that day and days after.

Just remember that all demons, devils, and fallen angels, they were all defeated the day Jesus was hung on the cross. Yet that does not stop them, the living people that want to follow what they say, and that have a hunger for blood and death, to do what they do- just like they do to me. Just like the sisters do, I am next on their hit list, and that is the reason why. They are truly daemonic! If you find them, do not listen to them! If anything, you should look down at them, because they belong below your feet. Do you know what I mean?

If not just think about it, and you will get it. The one thing that is interesting about life, and the others surrounded by your society, they know what they are doing… they know if it is right or wrong. Yet there may still be a drive to do the right or wrong thing. It is all depending on their beliefs on what they choose to do, and how they want to do it, and when they are going to do it. 'I believe that everyone will have their day, and some will have a second chance.' Like me! However, do they deserve it? Like, was I worthy of having it? That is the question; I will let you choose, what do you think?

(My life as of now)

I would have to say, and I believe that I got rid of some of my demons, throughout this last year, which has hounded me over the years and bites, at my heels constantly. Yet they still get at me sometimes, nevertheless what is known from there tells and rumors remains in some parts of this land of many steeples, that is not going away anytime soon even with the help of Lily. She can only do so much for me. Still, I feel this is my time now! I can feel it, like the wind in my hair on a summer's day. I feel the time for me to do as I please, and spend my time in the summer breeze is coming fast. I feel that all is coming to the past. Maybe someone else is going come along with me also at some point, on these days to come, I sure hope so, I have faith that it will.

Who knows what will happen? Over this summer's break coming up. What will happen is out of my hands, but- yet at this moment as of now I can lose the shackles to my inhibitions, and then be free, if only for a little while. I think about love this way now- 'It should be that cupid's arrow that strikes at a most unlikely time. It is when you may realize, that they have been in front of you all along, that is what love is all about.' Love may just be right in front of me, and I have overlooked them? Always thinking I was not good enough, not cute enough, and not sexy enough. But- maybe I am? Maybe, I am my hardest enemy?

(Looking forward)

I believe- 'A relationship will change me, and also you in many ways for the greater good or bad; this could be the right time for an association, that looks like it is about to deliver us the promises, comfort, pleasure, and lust that may come with it. This can be the start of intimacy in our lives; this may never be the same again without you. I know this is either going to pass or fail, in our relationship, if it works!' –As planned! I know that everything in my life cannot always stay the same. Things are going to change. It is all part of the journey of life that our master creator has planned for us; it is all part of the path we choose. 'We have the ultimate freedom to do as we please, to please the others around us, and to please our creator, to please our educators, to please our students, only if we choose to do so.' Though I now feel that, it is my turn to do what I please, with whom I want to please, and whoever wants to please me. It is time for me to do what I need to do, and what I must do!' I feel that I need to make the plans for someday, even as of now! I can dream, and that dream is going to come true, I can feel that it will!

(The secrets of a closed book)

One of the places I go throughout the day is a room that is considered to be the library. A room that is mysterious in its creation, a room that is lonely and longs for companionship, a room that contains endless possibilities. This intrigues me no end, just like the books I do not want to be judged by the covers, I want someone to open me up, and look inside… or something like that? This is a place where I go to regain my composure yes because I have all these endless thoughts and all the impressions spinning around me… from all the days. All of that in which I have gone through, I know that there will not be anyone else in the room that will disturb me, from the rebuilding of my emotions. Plus, it is so good to get away from that little room, when I can, as you know, the days are coming to their end, slow- but sure. I love to stroll through the hellhole's library, where there is a smell of moldy paper and yellowing thoughts of past from all the authors that have been forgotten.

The librarian's name is Mr. Kunze the man has to be in his late seventies, you will see him sitting behind his desk half passed out, or looking over the books, that have been branded impractical by the hellhole society. Mr. Kunze's glasses sit on the desk for there is no need for him to review anything because there has not been a book checked out in years. He is a forgetful person, repeating and murmuring the same phrases over and over. He refers to all the females as Jane, which comes across his range of view. Most of my classmates speak of him as being crazy,

however, I think he is a genius, yet it is chosen not to be seen. He was left to be forgotten like the books on the shelves. Jane- was his late wife. Mr. Kunze's- 'Jane, Jane is that you?' –Nope, it is just me, your friend Nevaeh. What did you do with Jane, sweetie? He asks me all the time and I have to say- 'She passed on.'

He would say- 'Oh, I see!' Then he starts to cry, and tells me, the stories of how they encountered their togetherness, and their lives together. -it is so sweet, yet so sad. As preteen lovers on their homeland over in some European country, they both immigrated separately on steamer ships as teens, just too somehow, met up in this same town a few you are later on planned. A True love they had, with fate- that is what I want also! I look at his photos on his desk of his family, of his five kids, not one of them cares to say a word to him, or call, or whatever.

Yet, I think he has done his job well. He tried his best; I feel that he did; now when he needs some love back, he is not getting it. The only one that loved him was she. Yet, that is life… it seems I think I know how he feels. Just like I suppose thinking for yourself is not allowed in this unorganized establishment. All the books that make you think on a higher level have been locked away and stored away to never be seen by anyone that has a brain left in their head. It is like the spiders have made curtains of webs that block, out the many volumes of information, that will never be acknowledged or obtained by my classmates, or me. The walls and the keyboard avatars are the ones that create the fiction placed down upon the characters in which they choose to harass. That is all part of the existence of life within the hellhole.

The cyber webs replaced what was once known to be the ideal way of retrieving information, the fantasy lands and mind created places that were generated in the fiction category are lost forever. The facts in the text are all marked or printed to be out-of-date, and are nurtured senseless to the others to be identified as not needed in life anymore. Why look in a book when we can ask a computer? –They all say. The hellhole library is a dark and dusty cavernous space that was once found to be useful. Back in the days before electronics took over the minds of the world.

The floorboards creak as I walk down the long mahogany tattered cases that are known to contain nothing but forgotten information. The only other use for this space is for the teens to cut class for a place of passion; for they know that there is no one there to catch them in their various acts. The library is ghostly in its sounds, which seem to resonate a crossed the chamber of

whispers. I hear in the distance many distorted and twisted sounds... Maybe it is the sounds that are echoed from the air ducts, which are connected to all the classrooms? Maybe it is the sisters and clan following me around like always. Maybe it is the entities that are trying to escape from my dream catcher. Yet I am the only one that can see angels fighting them all off. Yes, fighting them off me, along with their demons, devils, and other spirits.

The ones they worship also are in these battles. They like to stock and fondle me as they fly all- around me. Just like the sisters do what they want to do to me. It is like they use their evil powers as the energy stores, to get inside of me. The evil spirits come from the tower's spells. Have they followed me here from the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams to diminish me? What is that sound? It could be Lily expanding her wings, flying behind me as she is casting down her glow of protection right above me, never far away from me. From what I can see Lily fly's particularly fast to keep up with me if I need to run for some reason. It is like you can hear the screams from the hell, Maybe- it could be the teens cutting class, one or the other there is something plain spooky about the hellhole library, I feel as if they cast down on me with a spell. 'The pages seemed to whisper to me, yet I cannot hear what they have to say, their cases are forever closed, and they are faded in their colors that all blend into one another, yet they sparkle in their temptation of wonder.' However, it would be inappropriate for someone that is classed like me to touch and view them, so I just walk past, trying not to even look at them. Just like love, it is forbidden to me. But someday soon, I will see!

The Art Deco style interior with its cascading lights seemed to dim as if the room has its heartbeat and pulse. The sun's rays beam in streams, the only room that has natural light, yet it is hollow and vast because there is no other human life in this section. The only part of the hellhole library that is inhabited is the new section which contains the modern-day technologies of acknowledgment. It is more important for us as a society to use electronics for entertainment and retrieval. We all have become illiterate and lazy, yet they say I am more than they are. Why- should we look in a book when we can push a button, however once again it is all about what we choose to do? 'So, do we light all the books a flame and forget about them forever? Or do we all smash our electronics, and go back to information that makes perfect sense?' The choice is yours what would you do?

(Time is ending)

Mr. Kunze was forced to retire after that year, and that section of the library was sealed off forever, brick by brick… gone never to see the light of day again. They are books in the dark, books that speak to the heart, books that once were considered to make us smart. Books that are now falling apart, all these books that will not be seen, it truly breaks my heart. It is hard for me to say goodbye to these works of art.

Its summer's, time to make a new start!

Chapter: 16

What I Need, And What I Have

Chiaz Nazareth- How do I get away from Alissa?

I do not know if I can anymore, how do I break up with someone that will not let me break up with them? She is latched on to me forever it seems, bonded for life? However, I want to move on to someone new. I plan to become friends with her best friend Maiara Chenoa, and maybe fate will take its course and we can finally be together. That is only if someone does not try to ruin my plans. We are going to be together; I just have that feeling. The wondering eyes, the eye in the sky. She believes that she can talk to Angels that can fly. All the days rush by, still, I try. However, she is so shy, having no choice but to sign, and standby, and waving to one another secretly at the day's end; no, we cannot even say the words goodbye. Allison and Alissa, two of the sisters like to watch us, and follow us everywhere we try to go to get away; they like to see if I will cheat on my so-called girlfriend –Alissa.

Ava her little sister, is not Nevaeh's girlfriend! Yet in the eyes of the school and town, she is. She knows what I am going through, and I know how she feels too. They make it so we are kept apart. However, it is okay… for my so-called girlfriend. Alissa to do whatever, she can do as she pleases with any person she wants to please, I just do not like it, yet what the hell can I do about it, at least I know that I will have her to feel my needs, yet she is not what I need. She is someone to hold on too. Thus far, she has been holding on to far too many. I do not like all the running around, which is sickening, I think that a girl that has been with more the two partners is disgusting.

Yeah what can I say, I do not want the leftovers. It is like any more you have to steal your girl from her momma, when she is at a young age, and raise her just to know that she is going to

be true to you. Also, to know that they have not slept with every walk of life around here. Yet that is difficult too because it is not like the old days.

Girls can say anything, and a guy can get into a lot of trouble, I should know what I have to put up with, by the ways of her. Yet I am stuck in her grasp with no choice in the matter, I have to watch every move I make because it will go back to her and her family that is awe so powerful. They could ruin me with their word of mouth like they have with her. However, it is also tempting to break the ties away from the Amsel family, and finally be with the girl of my dreams. 'But as of now I just have to sit back and wait, and plan accordingly and let the puzzle pieces fall into place.'

Nevaeh- Thank God, that my sophomore year of high school has come to its completion. In all, honesty, I need a break, and I am tired of everybody's bullshit. However, I am going to take some of the people's advice, and get out there in the real world and intermingle with others. Let's see what the summer has to bring for me it shall be interesting, I cannot Wight! It is summertime June 6 it is here, at last, I have freedom, finally getting away from the hellhole. My vacation is finally here, 'I have independence at last!' 'I am going to try, and let the past behind me, and all of the days gone by.' Hopefully, I can find new people whom I can establish a relationship with, that is if the tower and her clan do not follow me.

I will just have to wait and see. As I said, I have ideas. Oh, the summer breeze; bring some people to their knees. Staring up at all the shady trees, the summer is nothing but a tease, of saying the words like yes and please, while looking over the vast colorful horizons, and wishing to be somewhere there are gleaming seas. Even on the summer days, I still run the tracks with its many different paths when I feel frustrated, and when I need a break from all the individuals. I feel as if I could run forever, and never look back. Maybe if I ran fast enough nothing wicked will follow me.

Lily my Guardian Angel she empowers me when my emotions change from calm, to sometimes turbulent. She helps me ride the waves of a troubled deep dark sea; she is always there for me if I fall to my knees. She helps me overcome my fears, and she wipes away any tears, she always stays near to me. She makes everything clear; she is there to help me regain control. When life brings its fools and towers that steal my delight and tries to pull me into their black holes of fright. She opened my eyes to what is missing in my life and helps me see through

the people who live in strife. And she lets me know that everything is going to be all right. She makes me see the world through her sight.

Lily- Her words to me where: 'You are about to get involved in something serious. Do not take any misled opportunities if you can avoid, do not take anything too lightly, before having considered all your options and choices. Be sensible do not let down your guard. Listen to your heart, and your mind. Do not rush! If you rush things like- they may not work out as they should… so use this wisdom, you can save yourself from regret.'

So, Lily has white wings that resemble feathers on the ends of the wings, spiritual eyes that look into a pure soul. She radiates with the most stunning bright white light. I have learned that Angels that are younger than the age of twenty do not have robes of white. They have a spiritual body that is flawless in every way, and they shimmer. Besides a halo that shines above their head. Yes, her hair is still braided. However, it flows in the gentle wind that seems to surround her as she floats above the ground.

Lily reminds me that I will be taking a great risk, that there will be new adventures in my life, which most likely will lead to passionate endeavors. She is helping me figure out the pros and cons of every situation, although she lets me make the decisions of what I am going to do next. 'She told me I need to plant myself and grow into what I am meant to be.'

That I should stop dwelling on what I do not have and think about what I do, Lily expressed to me- 'That life is precious, and new lives are going to develop in my being.' At this time, I did not understand what she meant, she was very ambiguous with me, and left the deciphering making in my hands. 'She gave me the full picture. However, it was out of focus, only with time will it become clear.' Every departure Lily says these words: 'Do not live in fear, because I am always here, just like you never forgot about me, I will be there for you!' Well, it is not so much that she goes away, it is more like she just makes it seem like she is not there, I guess? She is fast, she can go up there, and back in the blink of my eyes, so maybe? It seems for some reason I have become Ava's and her sisters' clans object of desire- if you have not predicted.

However, I am going to refuse her grasp in every way possible. I feel that her demonic power is no match for the spiritual power that guides me, and guards me. Not to mention- 'It is about time someone stood up to her and her despicable family.'

I keep having premonitions. Some show me the way, and the others whisper to me. Some even call me up to their graves, like she did when she died, and I can see and feel them like they move through me internally. I can feel what may happen next to me, or someone else; even those that have not been born yet. I can feel it all, even if I do not want too. What I want to feel I cannot. That is amusing is it not?

(I remember this past school year, even though it is summer.)

I forgot about this one. One of the traits that the sisters like to due to their victims as they walked past in the hall, spits on them, and make sexual kissing gestures. Then walk by with their noses in the air, yet there is no one to stop it, no one to care. It does not matter where you go; they are always behind you or in front.

The only one that understands it all… and all about me is not seen by anyone but me. However, they may feel the breeze of her spirit. But yet I know she is always there for me. Once again- I am reminded of the bridge of dizzying heights, will I ever make it a crossed. Will the other side bring joy or pain? Only with time shell, I know… Maybe once I make it a crossed there will be ultimate freedom, as I see in 'The Land of Many Steeples' the freedoms are slowly being taken away.

(What I see)

We are spiraling into the infernos. While the kids cannot be kids because there are too many mandates preventing them from having a childhood and technology takes the place of their recreation of play.

(Asking myself, why I am like this?)

If I think back on it there was no good reason why they made me part of this rejected grouping. The only reason in my mind is that they wanted me to not have any popularity, and compress all my abilities and talents to the world.

Why?

Because, they are envious, jealous, and bitter of me, desirous of what… I still have not figured that out. Maybe I have something they want? Maybe I have some they do not want? I have worked extremely hard for what I have in my life, and I am blessed for everything, that is in

my life existence, and if you're jealous of me you shouldn't be, maybe try a bit harder, and you too can have what you want.

That is how I feel about it. Just remember that you cannot have it all! I would like to say to the sisters and everyone that jealousy gets you nowhere, my only suggestion is to work hard and you will have just as much if not more than I will. I would love to say this to them! 'This is what you need to do. Grow up, get a life, and stop being so damn ignorant. Most importantly go be somewhere that is not in my path.'

(Most summer's days end this way)

I was walking home at night, from the bridge of dizzying heights like always, and past the graveyard. Always balancing my one foot on the railroad tracks one by one and Lily is not far behind. Yet out of the misty haze jumped out Ava or one of the clan, from behind one of these old oak trees along the way, and she or they jump me. Like this one day, Ava tied me down to the tracks, with my own, one and an only sundress that I bought for the summer days, she wrapped it around my neck and tied it into knots, through the one rail, and she got her way with me ones more. Just like, she did in school.

Nevertheless, Lily was trying to fight her off me, and the sparks flew as Lily was struggling with her, and she was strangling me. Yet Ava's power was just too strong that night with the large full moon as the fire was in her eyes, and the look of a werewolf on her face, in the swoon light, it is like she is more powerful than another day on that night. It was like Ava was forming at the mouth, as she was attacking the top of me feeling me inside and out, as her evil soul was trying to penetrate mine. I could feel her wet drippy nose up my dress. I can feel her long tongue flicking and licking me, up down all around. I can hear her make this nose- Mum, Mum.

Oh, the hot breath coming out of her mouth on each side, as she clamps on with her fang-like incisors, that are razor sharp. It is like her teeth would bite into me there, and make me so weak I would pass out. Until now, I would bleed without any bight markings left behind. Yes, even on summer days, they come around me. Like that day, Ava pulled up one of the railroad spikes up and out of the railroad ties from the ground with her bare hands. Then she began roughly using it on me. It is like she pumps in cocktails of venom with her nibbles of taste, and my soul is floating out of my body as she comes in.

My body is paralyzed, yet I feel the pain, and my soul and faith

is challenged. So far, she will never get me all the way, I will never become one of them! I found out that she loves to suck out my blood, and everything else that comes with it. For that is what gives her evil strength, it is the same as being drugged when she draws from me. That is why I could not remember the times before, she slurps it up, and to the point, I go into shock. Always, Lily rips her and her sisters off me, and she pulls out their powers at some point. At the very moment, Ava and her clan run away like weeping puppies. They all go away until she and they want' -to try once more. Then Lily helps me come back to life, did I die once more? Did - I? Like I did before? Once more, it is not my time to leave this life. Why? I do not know?

Nevaeh

Book: 3

The Lusting Sapphire Blue Eyes

Summer days and junior year, you are my sunshine that brightens up my full moon; we are going to soar together, we will not need to wish upon a star because our dreams will, at last, become true. There may be dark clouds overhead, and times of rain. This may be there showering upon us, but love still grows, we will not care, we will be there looking at that view that goes on for miles. Sometimes we will have to cope with the rainfall that wants to keep us apart. Sometimes I think that I am going to lose my way to you. While the gray storms end up taking our joyful colors away once more.

Upon the clear, we stand together at last... arm in arm, and hand and hand, we are laced, and we embrace one another. The colors of red, blue, and pink are the sky once more. Plus, all along you were there, this time we share. The colors begin setting the mood and light ones more.

All the vivid gold sights with the feelings of being united and that will be us as a pair. The many stars shine bright because we are going to be there all night, holding on to what we had that night.

I used to bite my lips, thinking about that gold band, and the sparkly rock on top. You can make me feel like royalty; yes, I will be your queen ruler. Maybe someday all this will not be a fantasy and the dreams will come true when we look at a different view, just me and you.

~Nevaeh~

Chapter: 17

My Seclusion

Just like, I remember the- Fireflies at night, they all carry their- own light in flight. They fly higher and higher until they are out of sight. They are never in fear of the darkness because they carry their light. They constantly have hope, and it shines brightly. The firefly flies by, unlike me there are never shy. I am lying outside on the grounds a few feet from my home, yet I am still feeling all alone, listening to all the sounds of the night as they moan. I look at the full moon, knowing that I will be back in hell soon, seeing all the faces at lunch at noon. Wondering what is going to happen on my vacation in the upcoming summer in the months like in June. I lie on the cold hard ground outside looking up with the stars in the sky, remembering all the days flashing that have gone by, seeing all the faces that never even say hi, remembering the terror from the wondering eyes.

(Right now)

My head is pounding just like the thunder and lightning, the evil faces streaks crossed my face, with every bolt of lightning. This takes me back to when I was a little girl; I hope that the pink suspended feathers sweep them away in the white webs.

So, I can have a sunny day on all these rainy days that seem to never end, I just do not have much to say. I am not safe anywhere… the voices haunt me as they do. However, I just have an overwhelming urge to cry, all night and watch movies by myself. Like, I have done, these last two years of my high school life. Is anything going to change? Why must I live like this? Why do I keep living? Why can I not just pass on? I look out my window, and sometimes it takes me back to when I was young.

Some days I look out the window and the skies are scarlet, and that reminds me that, I should be out doing things with people of my age. The summer has come and gone, and the school days have started with no one to see me, or even ask if I was alive. No one cares!

Is the plan going to work? I have no idea at this point, yet I keep trying!

I guess I was cheated out of that too; some people say life is all that you decide on. I think that too, yet something's I cannot decide on. Nevertheless, to me, that is nothing but a bunch of lies with some truth behind it. If you have someone that towers over you, and that makes up complete shit about you and slanders you all your life you will end up all alone too, and then you will know what I mean.

Sometimes, I lean out my split-pane window that seems to be high off the ground, and I can hear the whistling wind stream through the leaves of the growth of trees, sometimes this reminds me about being in the garden and golden fields when my eyes are closed. But, when my eyes are open, I realized, that it is just the wind rushing through the various hills and valleys of 'The Land of Many Steeples.' I do not know what it is… but there is just something about letting your hair blow in the breeze, which feels so amazing. I feel that it is just one of the amazing moments in time, which I have experienced. Oh, just the same can be said, about me standing in the rain, freely and naturally on a warm spring day, while I am filling the ground squish under my toes.

Yes, likewise can be said for the winters when I come home from the hellhole, and see the fireplace with its warm glow, from outside the frost chilled arched windows of the tort section of the house that is part of the dwelling. 'It is amazing also because I know that I will soon be warm and comfortable, and out of this uniform that labels me as one of them.' In the wintertime, the snowdrifts, the pointed part of the roof along with the weathervane is covered in a blanket of white, 'The Land of Many Steeples' sparkles, and soft with an almost spooky light blue cast in the moonlight.

The trees down the lane drip with ice like a crystal cave, but- yet we all carve a pathway down the road that leads to the hell and then back to the emptiness. Snow days are rare, but that does not matter to me either way because I cannot truly share it with anyone it seems, as you all no. So, would you be my friend if I asked you? Would you spend some time with me? Can I depend on you; I would be there for you!

So, on any day in any weather condition, unless the fog is rising from the valley, I can see in the distance 'The Land of Many Steeples', a far cry from this country land, where the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams is upon. Then there are some days there are thunderstorms outside my window, and it takes me back to the past, like when I was in that dark room. I do not think anyone gets over their past, the past that haunts me, and a past that the tower uses against me. Yes, you can change your name. Change your hair, and change your style, but the words of slander will remain. The only thing I can do is find someone that does not care about what the words mean or say, or just plainly pray for it to all go away.

(Visions)

The tower and the clan's footprints are all-around 'The Land of Many Steeples', and lands that surround the distances. I want to believe that there are some people, that can think for themselves, yet I am not convinced yet. However, the chances are slim, I have learned this, and I know this for a fact.

(Wishes)

There is someone special in my life and I am sure when the planets realigned once more there will be more. That understands all my situations, and you should know what they are not going to care about accusations; speculations and rumors of interpretations. From your tower and clan… so just fall already, and leave me the hell alone.

(Eyeing)

Windows and rooms, they really can set the tone and mood of your whole atmosphere of life. Now my room is pink and perfect just the way I like it, I have my musical instruments, and all my comforts at hand, everything is the way I want soft and cozy and warm, unlike this emotionless cold world.

My room is always a safe place to relax now, and I am truly safe because I have the windows tamper- proofed with new locks and screens. Also, in the winter I have, they all nailed closed. Yet the clan is never far away, they are always looking in, and I just walk over and shut the curtains in their face, so I can go and lie down on my bed free and open, just the way I like it. The way it should be, without the world knowing about it. Yet I cannot help but wonder… what it would be like to look out the window someday, and see someone there to sweep me away off my feet, and take me away from this hellish land.

That would be so romantic!

(Home)

'This land is beautiful, but the people are horrible.' The people took this beautiful land and raped it, and put up a bunch of ugly boxes, however, my home is in the Victorian-style and it is old and has a handcrafted personality. There is an ancient oak tree outside my window, sometimes I step out my window then onto the roof of the porch, and sit in the tree branch that hangs over, and watches all the stars as they appear to turn on and off. Yes, I have wished upon a shooting star, that things will change, and that the towers will be no more. Looking straight ahead, I can see all the lights that go on the horizon, some days the sunsets are blazing before the lights turn on. Then there are some days that the window is shut because it is cold windy while everything is chilled with the color of blue.

(Frame of mind)

My mood can change just like this and that it seems. Yes, just like all the summer turns into winter, and the winters turn into spring, and all of these thoughts running in my mind fall like the leaves through my brain, and they most likely do not mean a thing. I guess you could blame it on my ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, bipolar disorder, or my OCD. I do not have any of these… I do not have anything wrong with me. But, if you are like one of the sisters or someone from my school, you would say my mood changes are because of my- STD's, HIV, or being as they say GAY or BI, and LEZ-BO. They have also said, I am a pedophile and a child stocker, and I get moody if I do not get some from them. That is why I am so sober at times, or so they say.

Whatever…! They also have said, that I am a schizophrenic- psycho and that I could not even buy love. I would not try that anyways. I think that having money does not give you happiness; I am okay being a humble farm- girl, the guy that finds me… needs to be happy with that also. I am sure there are more things they say.

However, those are just some of them that I can dredge up as of now, off the top of my head. They have murdered me and my life, in so many ways. So now, do you wonder as to why I am afraid of talking to people or even looking at them? You know you and they can try to destroy me, and my life. However, I do not have any of those listed ether; none of these random arrangements of letters defines me as the person I truly am.

(Sight)

Looking out the windows, I can see the golden hayfields of ecstasy, I see the windmills that twist and tumble. I can see the abandoned railroad track that lies not far from my home. I can hear the cries of the swing as the wind gusts in spurts. But yet I am still in my room, but that is just okay with me. Because I know that there will someday soon be someone there for me.

(Household)

My room is a land of peace and tranquility without all the gloom, with a bed and a canopy overhead but still, I am not truly happy? There is nothing- like the sounds of the crickets speaking up often in the cool August night breeze. It is relaxing to me, however; it is a reminder to me of how the last glimmers of summer are ending. Besides the sounds slowly fade away, yes- I can hear this music from my bedroom window. It is just like in the spring the birds sing in the morning and leave in the cool gusts to come. It is just like the hummingbirds that flutter by, and then before I know it, all has changed; so, it seems by the time I walk out my bedroom door, to start my day. 'Life goes in cycles of tunes it seems, and nature is its synchronization in its symphony you just have to listen.'

(Affection)

What is passion? Is it something that you care about? Is it an emotion? Or is it just a made-up illusion? Just like having a smart cell phone, I do not have one now, but I did at one time. I learned to live without; do I need fake people? I do not want to need people. Why? Because I get attached to them so easily, if you love someone, they break your heart, if you want someone… everyone makes you feel that it is surely your fault. Yet I do want what I cannot have! What is Love? Sometimes it is, and sometimes it is not, that is the way it is for me, sometimes I just cannot win and all I do is lose out.

Yet even in my room, I can fill their faces and eyes pressing down on my body, even though they cannot see me. Missing the true touch of true compatibility while knowing that it is all caused by some entities. But then again someday soon, I will have the world, and this transition of temperance will be over. I feel that I need to get rid of these weights that are holding me down, but how do I smash the tower to the ground? Is it finding love that will do the trick or something else? As of now, I do not know, and Lily is letting all the ruling cards of the lovers in my hands. I need to find the strength, endurance, and courage to overcome the towering terrors

and her clans of slurs. I know the towers my grandmother's patterns and it is time to break her so that she can never rise again. 'No weapons formed over me will ever prosper.' My angel speaks the truth of hope. I have to be honest with you for the real truth to be celebrated, and I need to let him know how I feel, that he is more than my crush.

(Lunch)

Like I said- all my days go like repetition, it was either November or December, for some reason I cannot remember. But once again I am sitting in the lunchroom cramming the food down my throat, and I was sitting with Maiara Chenoa and Melvin Shezor. Melvin is only there to take in the conversations. Just like that, the conversation started that was supposed to only be between the two of us.

Nevaeh- Thereafter me!

Melvin and Maiara- Who is after you, they both said at the same time.

Nevaeh- The sisters and her clan…

Maiara- 'Again?' 'So, you were telling me the truth.'

Melvin- 'Who is the sisters?' (He rudely interrupted us to put in his two cents into the conversation.)

Maiara- The Amsel sisters, why do you think they are after you?

What did you do to them?

Nevaeh- 'Yes, from my experience, I did not do anything to them for them to want to stock me. They are up in my face constantly. They will not leave me alone. No matter where I go, there with me, yet nobody sees it but me. You will not understand- no one does… the only one that understands is Lily.'

Melvin- 'You mean the dead girl that ran through the window?'

'If nobody sees it then how can it be there?'

'What are you guys smoking, whatever it is I want some?'

Maiara- 'Shut up Melvin! Nobody was talking to you.'

Melvin- 'Make me!'

Maiara- 'Ewe no you would like that too much.'

Nevaeh asked Maiara- 'So what should I do now?'

Maiara- 'Do not let it bother you; it is out of your hands, remember what I told you when the time comes you will know what to do.'

Nevaeh's final reply she said- 'Okay if you say so.'

(Thoughts of confidence)

I can speak freely to others like never before, and you are not going to hold me back ever again. The power is in my voice, the voice that speaks up for others is going to show just how evil you are. My destiny is on the way, coming closer to me each day. It is in my own hands, and your rain is almost over forever. You will no longer be the towering serpent that slithers and tricks my secret admirers away from me; you will no longer be underneath my angel's oak tree anymore, to coax them away. My tomorrows will reveal the new changes to my track so that they are together.

I am forgetting about the roadways of the past, and I am walking hand and hand down new rails, with a champion of companion under my wheels of fortune. The lovers, identification card has been shown, only time will tell who he is. I am not letting anyone run me out of steam. The main question is which way we should go now we have to make a decision. The Judgment card is in my hands, and in my future, it is telling me to prepare myself for this change. There is a Star beginning to shine for me, and the planets are at last shining on my dwelling. It is as if I can feel the love going through me as I sit, stand, walk, and even lie down, it is pulsating through me. I know it is coming my way soon, what it may be or what it is, I not sure but of yet. Nevertheless, it is going to feel oh so good. It is feeling really good for me; it will feel good for him, and good for us, and it will be the end of them. Maybe this is what living is all about? This is going to be so good!

Maybe this is what I needed to go for all along?

(Lasting touch)

Oh, I still remember the last time we touched, it seemed so long ago, yet it was not that long ago really. When he touched me, my hand tingled as if he made a spark of lightning run up my arm and throughout my nerves. Which rushes to my brain and back down to my toes, and stimulates everything in between throughout me, which just turned me on, and lit me up with a white glow of exhilaration. Even a distance, all I have to do is think about him or simply imagine, and I know he can feel me, I know we have felt one another without touching also.

As always, he feels like electricity passing through me.

Even when he is just sitting next to me in class, or walking by me; I feel what it would feel like to have him inside of me, to past through me as he would go in and out of my body. Yet I want the real thing! I need him; I want to feel, even more, this is good, but I want everything, I need all of him! Yes, I am still in love with that boy! It is as if I am spiritual, emotionally, and morally aware of him, and linked somehow. It is what he does for pleasure, all his sensations go through me, as mine goes through him, all we need to do is think or feel ourselves.

We both can feel each other, and that is so sensual to me, and surely to him as well. I wonder if anyone knows that? Yes, even though we do not touch in front of anyone, I can feel his lovely soul in mine. I think this gift is something, I was granted that day, I died also, and was given life ones more by Lily's touch. Just as her touch brought me back to life, she is with me also, in many sensations, which I cannot explain, other than saying they are heavenly.

Chapter: 18

Am I Doing, Okay?

All these days reminds me of Offspring songs. There is one set of lyrics, that strikes a chord with me, and my life… the one song it speaks these words saying quote- 'Don't waste your whole life trying to get back what was taken away.' So true, that is all I have done from day one, maybe I just need to try to move on if I can. Yes, I knew that they were going to do this to me. I just had that filling along with that churning in my stomach. I knew it because; I was in the area at that time of the events that took place. I am a perfect target as usual! Oh, the sisters love to mess with people's heads. They love to toy with illusion, confusion until you have delusion; it is all part of their grandiose scheme to take control over you and me.

However, I try to live my life aloof as much as I can. But, with them up my ass constantly, there is nothing I can do, but suffer the consequences of being human. An ultimate price for

thoughtfulness. I always thought the sisters were evil, but then again, I did not foresee this quite like this… they are going to try to pin Lily's situation and her death on me. I know it, I can feel it, I can foresee it, and I can taste it.

What can I do? I was there… and they know it. They know I felt her death and they know I saw the visions. I am a witness that will not die for them. Yet, they keep trying to kill me in every way imaginable, they have an image of evil that mystifies my mind.

(Verdict)

Yes, I believe that is what they are going to do, twist the truth around as usual. What should I do! You cannot go to the higher authority because everything is corrupt by the tower, no one wants to talk or listen to what I have to say, so I cannot explain what happened.

I guess- I am just stuck with no way out as usual.

Even on the witness stand. I saw it! I know it was them. Nevertheless, it is for against one, I do not stand a chance, they will try to convict me of something I did not do and place me in situations in which I did not cause. They are the ones that did the deeds they are the ones that need to face the consequences of what they did, instead of pinning the blame on everyone's shoulders but there's. They are pinning that all on me, and I do not know what I am facing if they do. I know that- I will most likely refuse in talking to the authorities, yet I will give details on what I can.

They will either think I am psychic or psycho. I can lead them to what happened, and I can illuminate the facts that they did not see, but are they going to believe me, I can show them the way. Just like- 'You can lead a camel to water, but you cannot always get him to drink.' Will they choose to see my visions? I do not think they will their minds were made up. Before I sat down in the courtroom, I could feel they unfriendliness, and see how they were looking at me. I cannot hark back to everything; you know they do not understand that either. I have the vision of getting charged with this manslaughter, because in 'The Land of Many Steeples', you are guilty until proven innocent, and if the clan and the tower have anything to do with it, you will be locked in their dungeon forever.

However, I know I have to tell someone, what exactly happened. Still, will anybody believe me? Probably not… I know I am going to get interrogated, and I know that I will have a polygraph facing me. The truth will come out on autographed lines of morality, I suppose. The

facts will be stranger than their fiction! I believe that there will be a trial ahead, where I will have to sit in front of twelve jurors, and they can make their judgments, the word verdict means truth, what is the truth only Lily Anderson knows, yet I know also… but how do I prove to a court system that I am talking to a spirit? They will think I am psychotic. How do you explain to the world, that you have psychic ability?

Lily Anderson before she fell to her death three stories down was raped by the sisters, they forced her into acts that most cannot even imagine, or maybe you just do not want to. All the same, I saw everything anyway, and I truly know what it feels, like to be in that state of affairs. If she did not want to engage in all of those activities, they would beat the crap out of her.

Lily would always show up with fresh bruises, but she always made up excuses. Conversely, I always knew who did it, but she did not say much about it. She wore them well, and she did not like to tell, mainly because she had- fear. The fear is the alternate drive to stopping anyone from doing anything. Oh yes, fear can break a person, fear can drive a person to drastic solutions or conclusions. Fear can drive some nonsensical, and fear can make you brilliant. The fear does it all. Yes, fear is a death sentence, one way or another.

Either you fear about living, or you fear about dying. Fear comes down to a simple choice actually; do I want to live, or when and where do I want to die? Who or what is going to be the cause, and will anybody care afterward or do they now? That is the fear we have when the eyes are upon us, and the spirit lives to talk to us.

Lily, she had no choice, she either had to do what the sisters wanted… or be beaten with an inch of life, either way, she always ended up with markings on her body. I believe that if things would have pressed on like, that for her she would a lost her mind, yet some say she did? Like I said- time within the hellhole is a slow time, where anybody finds anything to keep their mind busy. Some draw! Some have sex! Some have sports and clubs! Someone like me has nothing to them, and yet I have it all. I know I can do anything, because I have so many god-gifted talents, and just because I am not like you, does not mean I cannot do the unimaginable.

(Alliances)

So, the question is why do we make groupings? Why do we classify people according to how they will look, speak, or the way they act? Why do we put people in classes regarding what other people think, why do we? These are some of the activities, which some do to keep their

mind sharp, and the others have to pay the price. What is your thing? There are some, which cut class for recreational reasons.

Some go into the bathroom to relieve all the day's stresses, and some that will sleep throughout the boring classes. There are some, which are the class pet. Some of the higher authority gets with the students, and they have their moments of disorderly conduct together. Then some are class clowns. Then there are some gay ones, some are straight ones, and then there are the ones that all they do is make out and suck face. Some cannot keep their hands off my private parts. A number of them just plain hate everything and everybody.

Somewhere their boyfriend's football jerseys on Fridays. Some sell drugs, several if not all are engaging in mischievous activities like sex you no like giving hand-jobs and blowjobs at the age of twelve and older. Some are the star of the team.

Some have their grades handed to them. Then there are the ones just like I rejected and misunderstood in everything. Some are the color of white and others not, yet we all should be equal, but it seems that we are not. It all comes down to the fact that we all do things differently, no matter how hard we try not to be categorized it is still going to happen as a result of human control. I am just telling it how I see it. Which is the truth? Just like some girls and guys out there say they do not want to date you for some irrelevant reason, because of their mom and dad's belief, about you being this and that.

Because, of what they said, or their friends say, yet the next day, she or he is with someone older or younger than you.

Furthermore, the excuse they said to you is complete bullshit. So, when you see them with a jerk, which only wants one thing. Yet because of their friends, mom, and dad approves of them… that is whom they date, and not the one they truly love or want to get to know. I find it is so unbearably hard to get to know people when they do not want to get to know me, or they fear what they will say or do to them, no dater wants to be the first, to break this evil spell from them, because of the fear. Why do I not know? I guess it is all because they think they are too good for me.

Likewise, I will never be good enough. Which pisses me off.

Give it a chance, will you? Hello! It is not as if I am going to molest you.

And- I do not bite unless you want me to. He- he!

(Decide on)

What will you be in your hellhole? Are you the type that just harasses someone until they crack? Will you stand up for your rights, or let someone slam you to the ground? Will you let the others that are left out behind? Are you going to help them out in their time of need? What do you choose to be? If you are like the sisters, then all you do is cause havoc for innocent lives. Besides, if you are like me all I do is try to help people.

(Murmurs)

The ghostly words that I hear from the ones that speak to me are saying something like- 'Look out for the stars that shine for you in hope. But- be aware to not fall to the deception. Do not mistake a star for a black hole, in the days of days, and the times of time, where the banners will be the red blood your loved one will have to shed. This will show the light upon the fault line. When their vials break free upon you and them. This may pull you around while looking at the ground. If you see this coming it is already too late for them to run, your loved one will be under the rains of fire, with the fight of freedom, and honor, with dust and sun. Remember you will have some loss to indoor, yet the footprints have been made, and the boots will bring you and them home. Think of keeping the angels near. Yet always looking look up even when you are knocked down by life. The stars that we know, and love may just fall to us in a cloud of white dust, and life as we know it may not be here, and surely nothing will be clear.' I do not know what it means- do you? Should I be scared? What are they telling me? Is this in my future?

(Spirit and evil life)

It is interesting how you can find your Angel, and how they can find you. I still believe it is a blessing to be able to see an angel.

However, the sisters must have heard the voices of hope and how they have spoken down on me, and they are going to try to reverse it and use it against me like a hex like they have been doing all these days in the past. Which makes me believe, they have dark powers for themselves… for them to know my abilities, which come from the divine. They must have some kind of inkling or something. As I said, I think the sisters and the clan took things way too far, and it got out of hand. They were in the moment of high ecstasy with their erotic acts, they had complete authority over their meek victim.

Until they just pinned her against the window and she pushed her through in a moment of climax. Do I think they meant to kill her? In all honesty, I do not believe so; I think it was a crime of passion. An activity of rage and hot lust, that led to murder and manslaughter; however, now it is my cross to bear. Yet I am joyful, that I have what I have. It is thought-provoking to think that I am the one that is being pinned for sexual harassment when the sisters have been with every walk of life and higher authority within the hellhole. Some of the allegations in which they are saying that I committed on Lily are as follows: devious acts, a lewd act on a child, indecent exposure, assault, corruption of a minor, harassment and disorderly conduct, and reckless endangerment. If only Lily could talk, to someone other than me. If they only knew the real story.

Then I would not have to; try to explain the situation, which will never be understood in a court of law, or at the school. How can I explain Lily's situation when I cannot even explain my own? I wonder how much juvenile time, I will have to spend on these lies, I will be sent away in a dingy tan colored uniform, I just can feel it coming. All I have to say is watch what you do, watch where you are, and always keep your eyes alert, and your ears ready to listen. The vultures are always around the corner, and if they can get out of something, by pinning it on somebody else, they will do it… that is a threat and a promise by them.

(Time)

I should know I have to go to all these programs, and night classes, and it is in this Pennsylvania juvenile detention center just to keep them on my back for four months, yet I have not lost too many points. Yes, I have my thoughts to keep me entertained. I guess, yet being here like this is so depressing, no love just- hate! Yes, I miss seeing him too. I miss seeing all the faces too actually; I never thought that would ever happen. I was the blame in their game, at least I have time to think in this closet.

Yet I miss my home, and my pink bedroom and my privacy, the staff here are mean, along with the girls I am with, the food is cold and tastes repulsive. On the other hand, my blue belt I have at the top of my tight-fitting shorts shows that I am doing what they say. That my uniforms are folded and worn the right way. That my paper-thin bed is tidy and also made the right way, I do not have any contraband. Nope- I know NOT to talk back to them! I do not need that belt to change color, and keep me here any longer. Mainly so, that I can get away some days,

and then it is back into this repetition they set up for me. Yet hoping to get back into the repetition of everyday life, that I took for granted.

'I am innocent!'

Yet many of the girls here say that, though I truly am. The public defender screwed me because the sisters paid him and the judge off. Surely, you knew that I did not have the money to get a good attorney. I am only fifteen almost sixteen as of now, and I am being accused of charges, that are just ridiculous.

I do not know how one person can even be the mastermind of such heinous thoughts, but the towers and their clans have no life other than torturing those, that are trying to make a life for themselves. I know this record is going to destroy my future occupations, yet I keep trying. I will just have to wait and see how this all turns out. It may just blow over, or I will be in the path of the blizzard once more.

However, it all comes down to one simple fact really; I do not know if I can take much more. But does it matter anyway; I have the term of something impossible to change. Just remember, that it should only be you, which chooses what you want to think about me. Not what they say. I remember that day as if it was yesterday, the day the sisters officially pin the murder of Lily Anderson on me. Sometimes I think if you dwell on something long enough, it will come true… therefore if you think that somebody is going to place something down upon you, they will.

My convictions are a mile-long, and I did not do anything to anyone.

However, being convicted of something you just did not do happens all the time?

By the way, Lily Anderson was found is what they are trying to relate… all of that on me, and what they have made up about me in the past. Oh, stories can be told over with slight variations until they become believed by society. They also said I was guilty because I spent so much time crying at her grave. Can you believe that?

What was nothing becomes' something? Whatever happened after the made-up fact gets past down the line and becomes the words of a travesty.

Just like holding hands, it can lead to much more. Just like a kiss can be the beginnings of the end. I have learned this the hard way; like everything, I have learned how to do. So, this is

how I became part of those classifications because the sisters made it appear that I was a danger to myself and others. Yet the higher authority does not see what they need to see. They cannot see just how dangerous these girls can be; nope they just blame someone like me, and that was all my life, not just as of now?

So, I asked the question: 'Are we blind or do we choose not to see?' Do we sometimes see things, and misinterpret them and put the judgment on someone else's hands that were completely innocent? Yes, no, maybe? Do we all think corrupt, by pondering, that they are the ones that should be punished for doing something that was nothing in the wrong? It is all about choosing what we think? Is thinking just a state of evolution and illusion? Is it all about concluding? Is it all about seeing a vision from a guardian angel that protects you? Is this the only true hope, finding faith? Is faith the only help for us to get us through life?

Thinking like this is all I have. When freedom is so far away, and it was taking away from me just like my life!

Chapter: 19

A Moment in Time

The four months have passed, and I am home, as planned! Hope was happy to see me yet not thrilled. However, I still feel as if I am running a marathon, yes going down the same old path with no lights and no colors at all, time and time again like having their ghostly faces flashing in my eyes time and time again. 'It feels as if all my trophies and rewards which I know I have earned have been taken away.' It is not because I do not deserve it; it is because they do not think I should have them.

What do I mean by this?

While the tower thinks I do not deserve the honor, along with anyone's companionship or friendship, she makes it seem as if I should be looked down upon in society. She makes everyone think that I should be locked in my room, and not able to see the light of day. Though I know society does not believe all of her lies, most think very highly of me, yet they are not allowed to think and speak freely. They cannot show their support or their true feelings towards me or let it be known.

If they do… she finds out… she will go into one of her hissy fits and starts threatening people. You cannot deny her! If you do you have to, kiss her ass for the rest of your life. Additionally, if you do not kiss her ass, she makes sure you have everything you want, but not what you truly need. Yet they have to be friends with her.

So, they cannot be friends with me, because of her, and I am never going to kiss anybody's ass- like that! Oh, society is a vicious circle of unjust human beings you should know this. They cannot see or think for themselves. Not all society is this way; nevertheless, as the days go by and the country keeps going downhill, more and more, we are falling into the tower's traps. There are many towers and clans among us, and their victims like me have been holding the death card far too long.

So, we become hermits and seek for the answers while groping in the dark, yet there is no salvation unless we have hope and faith. I know that everything is going to work itself out. The tower is always depicted as crumbling and flaming. The tower is nothing but a big fat pain in the ass. That is never going to let me go or go away from me if I move, they will follow me if they do not then they will find somebody else in which to do their deed for them.

That is why I refer to them as vultures, or the blackbird clan, and other animals, there nothing but beasts to me. As I have described in the past, they take on animal-like traits when they attacked me. It would be different if I could get away from my stalkers. All the same, they live far enough away from me that they are out of sight, but- yet they are close enough to me that they can draw their swords, and cut my true identity down to nothing. Oh, as I have said reputation is everything, without popularity you are nothing in the hellhole society. If you do not have a cell phone number, then you just do not exist to them. If you are on the walls, they pick and choose whom they want to talk to… and it most likely is not going to be someone like me.

What I am seeing. Is that youngest people cannot read or spell anything, because they are illiterate, yet why should it matter communication is all going electronic anyway. Forget about using cash to pay for anything everybody wants to use his or her plastic and mess around with it for hours to make it work. Besides, losing a couple of dollars doing it every time. Whatever happened to simplicity? I have fifty cents in my skirt pocket, and I am happy with that. If you are not on social networking, then there is no friendship. 'If you do not have one million pictures of you doing the same pose repeatedly then you are not considered attractive.' Truly think about it, and it is ridiculous how idiotic the world has become!

(The neighborhood)

Parents are afraid to let their children play outside… parents are afraid to let their children go to school; why? Because the higher authority does not protect them and the kids are becoming nothing but hell raisers. So, we want the computers to become the teachers for the children, and the PlayStation's to be the main form of entertainment… Just look around, Joe Walsh he tells it like it is saying quote- 'Violence and murder is rated PG, too bad for the children they are what they see!' On the other hand, it all could be that they are afraid of me, and what they think I will do to them; I do not know- do you? The parents in 'The Land of Many Steeples' are getting welfare, and have ten different boyfriends or girlfriends a night to satisfy their needs. Then they just keep popping out kids. Yap and it is our tax dollars, which pays for it all.

Children are blessings which need nurturing and loving and understanding parents, however, it seems to nurture has gone out the window. You cannot correct your child or the authorities will be knocking at your door while taking you away for child abuse. That is just how it is… yet, in school for me, I have my skirt lifted and my bare ass smacked every day, and it seems always by a male teacher just one of the higher authorities for doing nothing in the wrong- yet they say I do. I just do not get it.

Yet, I am reminded of a quote 'If you spare the rod you will spoil the child.' That is interesting because there is no discipline in this country anymore. Every one is ignorant, arrogant and just plain vain. Why are we like this? Yet why are some allowed to smack our asses and others not? Good question- right?

The economy is in the shitter yet nobody gives a damn, why should we go out and find a job? We can make more money on unemployment then if we were working. 'We do not export anything, yet we import them and yet they hate us, but yet we still love them!' All you have to do is look at our front-runners and see for yourself. Pointing fingers is not getting us anywhere, throwing everything out and starting over is what is needed. But once again you have to think for yourself and make your own choices, instead of letting them decide for you. I mean this in the nicest way pull your head out of your ass and start caring about someone other than yourself, that is what I had to do, to see what was happening.

(Readings)

My tower and clan think she and they are so clever… the tower she knew this and she used it meaning she knew what to look up. That is why it is so important to understand the signs and cards. Those that know can figure out what is going to happen in life or beings around. If you follow the signs and cards, the stars can predict how things are going to turn out. I referred to this person as the tower mainly because they build and block, they cannot be stopped, this is only one solution that I know of… however you cannot blossom with any relationships or dating, and being social is over before it starts with any society around. Still, they are constantly watching over me.

Just like I said they have eyes in the sky meaning, if they are not the ones following behind me, they make sure that they have someone that will. Their followers always report back to the main headquarters, they have to get the information to her so she can twist it and make everybody believe her lies. Some of the lies in which the tower has created for me include. Being gay, I am far from it… Engaging in activities with children, which is completely disgusting. Lewd acts the list goes on and on.

'Oh, the internet is a powerful tool; it was created for good, however, some use it for their evil.' I had to pay with my time, for what I did not do, when is it going to end? I need to stop looking at 'Blabber

Book!' that way I will not see what they say. The tower patrols the land still and forever, and if she dies her offspring will take, her place her spirit will rise from the ashes, and go into the next demon to be. It is a never-ending battle; you cannot do anything about it. What they do to you is never seen, but it is heard by everyone. 'The Land of Many Steeples' is corrupt, and she has all the officials wrapped around her little finger. So basically, she runs 'The Land of Many Steeples', we all cannot do anything without the tower getting involved, or having their nose in it somehow.

(What they do)

If you have something in which they want, and they do not have the means of getting it. They will either take it off you, or break yours, so it is no longer an enjoyment to you. They create enough stories until everyone turns their back on you, so much so that I could write a book about it. It is thought-provoking because most of my life I was naïve, just an innocent girl doing everyday activities, which would not cause harm to anyone.

But- life is cruel, and you have to become wise… get smart and look out for the unexpected, you do not want them or someone like a tower to start on you. All the same, do not let them stop you, do what you want, they are not godly, so do not be tempted by their welcomed takeovers they are only obscure fallen angel, like vouchers of mind corruption.

'They will slander you to, as they did to me, and will make your life a living hell.' The towers and her clans, and cops she bangs comes around me so much that it is laughable. A deed she does for them to follow me, and to keep them in fear, of what she could say and what she could do. All the sisters all like to flaunt what they have got. I think that they like to make me eat my heart out.

Why?

For the reason that they have steady dates, in all honesty, I do not give a shit about what they have or what they do. I know what I want, and I plan to receive it with a loving heart, body, and soul. They want me to see them hand-in-hand with the Kissing, giggling and going out on dates. They have it set up so that I cannot even get one. Like I have said the tower and her clan make sure that all I do is sit in my pink bedroom, and think about what I cannot have… that is the whole intent they want to try to drive me insane, I do not think they will?

A devious plan indeed, sometimes it bothers me, and sometimes not. It just depends on the day's situation at hand. I know that I should not let the sisters bother me. I know that their dates are not in love with them; their mother just sets up everything to make it look like they have more than I do. 'That is what I mean about love, in love or just infatuation.' Being infatuated with somebody, yes, it is fun and can have its moments, but it is never going to last. Having cheap flings is kind of pathetic, and a joke. 'I work for what I have; I do not live off what my parents hand me.'

(The first typed pages I have finished, now that I am back home.)

There are real couples in which I can see; all the sisters and the tower want me, all they want me to do is sit in my misery, and think about what they have done to me. However, I got news for you… they will never get the best of me! All towers are nothing but weakly structured beings, which look for guidance from black hooded entities beings; they spend many hours, fading your identity, while the dark evil demonic powers, raining their acid over your flowers.

You are left to pull the petals off the daisy flowers. Asking the question do they love me or not? While your emotions tear, you apart and you cannot speak because your tongue is tied into a not. It is no one's fault but the tower. As you sit going through flower after flower until the tears become sour. And you are left to rot like that one last daisy flower. You want to scream because you feel like it is your dying hour, knowing that there is only one more flower, knowing that is the only solution left, however, there are no pedals to fulfill that desire.

Chapter: 20

Bale of My True Identity

The more days that go by the more belligerent the blackbird clan becomes towards me. I know that the clan is going to say that I am on drugs, and doing other things and more. God only knows what all she has been saying about me to my classmates. I can feel the talk all around me. Plus, I can see the fear on their faces. I know that the clan head is going to do everything in her power to make my life miserable because she thinks I have a thing for her boyfriend. How would she even know if I do or do not? She does not even really know me. Just like Ava and her sisters said that she missed me and that she has a 'gift' waiting for me, I have an idea of what that is going to be.

Oh, how I would love to tell her to go and get 'bent!' I cannot say that I know anything about the blackbird clan and their family. I do not know what their problem is… All I know is that they have a problem and major issues. There has to be something psychologically wrong with these people, and nobody chooses to see it. I guess that is trickery, Satan always takes care of his children. They just keep dancing around the fires, while chopping down the chosen ones' spring flowers, yes down to nothing, with their flames. Those who do not bow down to them during their rituals of voodoo will be next on the list. If you live or have your right-thinking after their dancing, it is a wonder.

I know that Ava thinks, I have a crush on her too… or so she tells everyone… that I want to be with her; in romantic ways, which is completely ludicrous. Could you just imagine what that would be like, or worse what it would look and feel like? It seems like I cannot even look at someone without them thinking that I am trying to make a pass at him or her. It is so stupid! It kind of makes me want to laugh, but on a serious note, it is a problem. Oh- yes it all started with

the tower. So fascinating because people do not even know me, yet they make assumptions based on what she and her descendants say.

Everyone thinks that I am into them in a romantic sense. Yet this is what the tower keeps saying to everyone, along with other words that are so heinous I cannot even wrap my mind around what is being said. Just when I think, the talk is dying off, their clan starts dancing around the fires again, and it all begins again like raining fire with the wrath of terror. The words should be getting old by now, however, they always put in some twists on what they say, and it always gets back to me eventually, but some people still buy into it because they have no choice. But, to bow down to her. Stand up for your rights, you have the freedom to do whatever you think is best for you… please do not listen to it they're two-faced!

Like- I said they make everyone think that I am desperate for affection because they think that I cannot get any action. Ha, I learned that if you work hard, and you do the right thing you could achieve anything. You know I would rather have someone tell me to my face that they are not interested in having a friendship or relationship, rather than sneaking around just to avoid me. I would rather have you tell, me that I am nothing to you, why? Because I would have more respect for you. I know the only reason why they're avoiding me is because of what the tower has said, and you all are afraid of the wrath.

But then again you have a choice to make, so what do you decide on? What do you believe about me? What else are you going to know, and think if that is what you have been told, withheld, and grown- up to do, it has all become known over the years, and that is what you understand as of now?

Whatever that is exactly has become almost fact in all your minds. It is like instead of truly getting to know someone, you all just go along with what everybody else is saying, and accept it as true. So- 'What a pity we can believe what we want to believe.' We can do what we wanted to, but if you choose to go along with the tower then you are the one losing out, besides let's not fail to mention that you may lose your soul as well. If enough voices come together, then the tower will be nothing, and she will crumble. Though, the true question remains; have you figured out who the tower is? Do you have any idea… who she is yet? If not, then you need to keep reading between the lines. Then it will eventually become known.

I have nothing to hide, asked me any questions you want.

However, I do feel that surely, the tower will be unmasked and revealed at some point coming up shortly; the tower is not just a card in my deck. She is a real person! (Back to my normal school days.) Well, it is normal for me…! This is what I see all around me now, and what I am feeling. Just like in homeroom before class starts, while saying the pledge of allegiance everyone should be looking at the candy lines, but instead, I feel as if they're all looking at me. The books slam on the desk in stacks, and the doors bang. Then just to set down in the linked desks that have chewed gum on the seats, an awesome start to the day. Looking around Randy Waygate is sharpening his pencil into a woody, and it grinds in my ears. Plus- Ava is trying to play with my hair and cress it.

Maybe it is because I have Lily's one ribbon bobby-pinned above my left ear at all times now. It is the only thing, which defines me, away from this uniformity. Ava just has to sit behind me, doesn't she? People ask me why I wear it, and I say because I loved her, and she was my girlfriend. Yet they think I wear it because I feel guilty, that I was the cause. Also, they do not understand that two girls can have strong feelings for one another. It is as if they do not get it. All I know is a lot of people need to keep their nose on their faces, and your hands on your skirts, all I am asking for is a little bit of space. Please just back off!

(Drifting off in class)

Then my daydream starts everything will work out, at a certain time, and a certain place. I can trust you; you are the right one for me. It is like I am the shoe you are the laces. We do not need to care about anybody else's faces, as we do not care whoever chases. There are many opportunities, there have been my opportunities knocking on my back door, and I know that life is not always about making a score. It is all right to be ignored; I have the Lord, and he is walking by my side. Not to mention I have someone who thinks I am great, and they're not afraid of saying it now, they have nothing to hide. Oh, yes it will not be long until we hold hands and walk side by side, upon the silver chariot we will ride. It is going to be you in which I confide.

Chiaz- I still remember the first time that we met; it seems like it was just yesterday. Still takes my breath away, I guess fate took place, where she was standing in front of me; we did not say any more than two words to one another.

However, I just brushed the hair away from her face with my hand and wrapped her hair around her earlobe, that was the first time, that I looked into eyes that made me feel like that, it

was like I saw the future. Yes, the blue eyes that did all the talking for her. From that very moment, at that very time, it was love at first sight for me, as well as I knew that she was the one for me! Yes, it is easy for me to say that I am in love with Nevaeh; I have been crushing on her for many years. However, there has always been something to stand in the way.

Nevertheless, our time is about to come, and all things will be realized.

'I will be her hero; that is if she lets me.' I will bet for a fact the first time, that we kiss she will tremble when our lips meet. She would be the type of girl that would hold me in her arms, as well as I would do the same for her.

You need not fear because- I would always be there to take any pain away that I can. I would stand by her for eternity. I have nothing to hide, how badly I want us to be together walking side-by-side. But then again only if it is right and it is me you see on your site, whenever the time is right one of these nights.

I hope you can see that there is nothing or anyone that can stop me or change how I feel. I could see you in that white dress, I can envision our children when looking into your eyes, I know you are the girl that would never tell me any lies, take my hand, and we can leave this land, and start our life.

Who knows what surprise will arrive. Let us go somewhere where there is a warm beach, and numerous sunrises and peaceful evenings. I guess the better question is would you wear my ring?

All she has to do is say my name and my knees get a week, I am in love or am I in too deep? What is it that I am feeling that makes me want more and more? It is like I can feel Nevaeh beside me even when she is not touching against my body, yet I can feel the sensations, I do not even have a word that could even explain how this girl makes me feel.

Oh, yes remembering all the words that were spoken that were right and that was wrong. I ask- 'Does it matter what others say if you are happy with what you want? So, belief in what you need, yes it just might, after all, come true for you. I believed that my hopes and dreams will happen, and come true for me… so if you do the same it just might for you as well, if you have hope and yes listen to your own words that speak from the heart and nowhere different.

Oh, I remember back when I was there; I felt an intense attraction toward her, whom I have only seen or noticed in passing back when I walked the halls. Yet I felt very drawn in incomprehensible ways, as I did not know Nevaeh all that well. Yet on another level, I did know her extremely well so it feels, yes, it is this feeling that pulled me into her like a magnet, ever closer to her side. If we are ready to step foot together, then all she needs to do was say 'yes!' Listen to your heart and nothing else.

Nevaeh- Adriane the eldest of the evil bitches knows, that I know what she did, and is making everybody think that I have major issues, even though Alissa graduated last year, I still feel her pressures in the hellhole walls. It seems like even though someone graduates there is always someone else to take their place. One is demoted, and then one is promoted.

The same goes for the higher authority, if the sisters do not want someone in an activity, they can pick and choose who is going to get the spotlight. That even goes for the higher authority, if they do not want a certain teacher in their little click, then he/she will not be in this establishment any longer. Just like they did to the librarian, they did not find him to be a user so he got the ax.

For example- Ava will say the teachers do certain things to her. Yet if they do not do what she wants, she will make them, either way, they are getting fired. It is all part of the hellhole game. What can you do when someone has that much power over the whole land of many steeples? Everything is corrupt, crooked and dishonest.

But- everybody is too busy looking at their cell phones and technologies to even care or understand what is going on. On the other hand, maybe they are just afraid. Fears a terrible thing, I should know I have the wrath of these people for many years. On the other hand, I have come to the point where I just do not care anymore.

Like- I said, I am not the one that is in the wrong here. You can call me whatever you want. I know that I did not do anything, what they are saying never happened, the time I did is the time I lost. Just because you follow me do not assume that you can get me to hook up with you. It is not going to happen now or ever. Also, just because I follow you, does not imply that I want anything from you other than friendship. It seems like you cannot talk to anyone without having technology getting in the way anymore. If you do not have a number, you just do not

exist. If you have a profile, you have 1,000 people or more saying things about you positive or negative their opinions resonate throughout the lands.

Moreover- the entire negative comments are from the ill-advised profiles. They are making everyone forget about me entirely. It is just like the domino effect. One starts the lie and it just keeps going down the line, until my profile has no choice but to expire. Anymore I find anything online is just a waste of time, whatever happened to communication? You know when you talked to another person, and do not have to type it. Plus- people do not even type with real words anymore; it is like they have their language of bull shit.

Think before you speak this will help out anyone and any the situation, so think before you type, we live in a world of instant messaging instant, everything can happen in that instant you could be in a lot of trouble. Just remember a profile photo is nothing like the real thing. Just because you are sitting behind a screen, does not make it safe to tell everybody about your life's history. Remember that someone is looking for you to help you make the right choice, but you have the choice to listen to them and not the entities of destruction. Just like I am a Christian I know that I am going to be crucified. Just like being, prosecuted by a word of mouth, and stoned by the fighting battles of the ones that do not understand me and my beliefs. For the reason that a life of righteousness I will be hated; since we live in a dark Infertility type of world.'

They think I cannot be holy because of the way I am, and the life I live and want to have. Okay if you say so…! Just remember that you are not always going to be in the judgment of your friends and networks, someday at the times of times and end of days, you will be judged by what truly matters. I have learned that my suffering shows my living off the right lifestyle. What else is said and seen does not mean a thing. As long as I feel okay, then most likely I will be.

Chapter: 21

Wrecked, Broken, Shattered, and Stained

'Sweet sixteen!' Nevaeh- My junior year of school at the hellhole, I finally got my driver's license- thank God after I got back! Yet I already had my wheels.

Surprisingly one-night Hope gave me her late husband's car. As a gift, it was the night, and the same day she ripped off my skirt at school. When she dropped me off… how could I forget?

I guess she was so embarrassed for me, that she wanted to make me feel better, and that was surely a good way of doing it. That was the day she handed me the car keys. Besides, they said- 'It's all yours! However, you have to weigh you can drive.' She also said, 'I do not get you much because I do not have much to give you as you no. Your birthdays have passed without… time and time over, so hopefully, I have made up for not being bountiful to you.' I said- 'Yes, you did well!'

I was thinking this thing is mine; does this big car even run. Yet I said thanks- and I gave her a giant bear hug. And she said- 'yeah- yeah- yeah, honey- don't make a big thing out of this. I don't want you to get your hopes up too much, and get disappointed.' Yet I could not help it- but to be thrilled, I think I even squealed and then cried sweet tears of joy. If you have not figured out, I cry- about everything and anything. So, at that time- In the back of my mind- however, I was thinking does this car even idle? I am just a girl that does not know all that much about cars, other than knowing if I look cute in it.

Plus- I know that this car is unlike all the other cars in the parking lot- that is for sure, most of them drive shitty looking Toyota's and Honda's. Nevertheless, it has a style, and it is somewhat beat-up- yet has- elegance to it, that fits me quite well- if I do say so myself. Yes- I freaking love this car that is in the barn, it has sexy lines on it, and those fins are sweet. It is baby blue like my eyes, and cream on the lower section, she has two-doors.

Yapper, I have a 1957 Chevy bel-air. I remember the first time I started it up- it roared to life and purred like a kiddy cat. Yet I had to put a pillow on the seat, just to see out and over, the V-shaped speedometer, and through the middle of the wrap-around windshield. The steering wheel is so big to me, it silly to me really; as it takes all my might to move it. Oh, yeah there was no power steering in 1957. As well as the headlights, the dimmer switch is on the floor of all places.

Oh yeah- good luck in finding that gas door.

That took some time to find. This car is my baby, plus- I like shiny things what can I say. I have been rubbing and cleaning her for over a year now, every day fixing her up, I do not mind that I have gotten a really dirty day in and day out fixing her, it gave me something to look forward to doing. I just wear one of hope's old ripped up tank tops and nothing else. So, I did not have to worry about it, getting my other stuff messed up, as you know I do not have a lot to

where. Some days, I just worked in the barn all night wearing my only now see-through pink nighty. Yet once I was in there, I would take it off; to work so I could keep it clean, so it was nice to wear that night in the house. Anyways about a week after I got home from the young girls' jail. Hope she said- 'You have been through a lot, and I know, that you did not do those things they said. Because you passed with flying colors there. So, it is time for us to go for a ride in your car. You are a good girl, I know this.'

('It's good to have you back!' -she said under her breath.)

I remember that the hardest thing for me to do was to learn how to drive it when I was about to turn sixteen. Because- it has a three-speed shifter that is on the column. With low, second and high, and you have to be so careful when you change the gears from low to second that you do not throw it into reverse accidentally, and completely grind the gears. As the car is doing like twenty down the path. Then the car stalls out- and sounds like a pig yelling, and begging for mercy. How do I know this you ask?

Will let's just say- I have done that. Like the first time, I went down the lane to learn, how to operate this boat of an automobile. I am a fast learner though, unlike others think, and I finally got it. Yet I can still hear Hope yelling from the porch- 'Grind me a pound- Nevaeh.' I guess to her it sounded like a meat grinder… or something like that. It was not long that I found out that I had a classic, American car. Yet I remember the first day I drove it to the hellhole and left it sitting out in my parking spot. I should have known not to; I should have been wiser. Yet I thought everything would be safe.

Nope- it was not! Ava and her girls that day went, and they cut a class at some point in the day and broke into my baby. Then Ava- 'Rubbed one out!' that means that she masturbated, and squirted her lady- juices all over the inside of my car. Yes- and I mean it went all over. It was on my seat on the dash, on the floor, and Ava smeared what creaminess that was on her two fingers on the windows, and driver's side vent. As her clan, sisters pissed all over the carpet on the floor, and took their dumps on the seat, and left their thongs behind. Alison, she wrote a note on her undies saying- 'Now you have some pairs to where!'

It was so nasty! Plus- the outside was covered and wrapped with toilet paper as well as littered with Ava and her sisters used feminine products. What is wrong with these girls? What did I do to deserve this one? Likewise, the other kids thought it was the most humorous thing,

which they ever witnessed at the end of the school day. When I discovered it- You know, I was utterly sick to my stomach. I think I screamed so loudly it echoed throughout the land, and started to cry and ran while being pushed around bouncing around off their bodies, I cannot remember- I was so upset, and then the kids were all around me kicking, and pushing me from one place to another.

I was just like a hacky sack for them, until I passed out, and drop to the hard ground. That gave them time for them to spit on me, and dump things like glue in my hair or whatever that shit was. Then what gets me is that she signed her name- Ava on the dashboard with a black permanent sharpie marker, and It reads, 'Suck on this- Nevaeh- lick, what I gave you all up!' and she drew a heart, with a line through it also. She wanted me to know because there was not a thing I could do about it. Depressed- to say that her juicy sprays were more yellowish, and a thick sticky white, then clear on my blue and white cloth seats. Yet, Hope, had the car towed and cleaned for me inside and out, she could not believe what kids do these days.

Therefore, that was the first time that I drove my car to school and the last. That whole thing cost me a lot. I guess it is back to the bus. That is what everyone wants is it not. This completely sucked; I have a car that I cannot drive anywhere other than at home, or have it locked up in the barn- with the other rust bucket car.

I think it is from the 1930s, it was out in the yard until this happened. Oh well, at least I have it all fixed up again, nicer than before… so I estimate you win some and you lose some. I am the one that is still blessed I have to remember. I recall the next day on the bus; the kids asked- 'Why you are not storming around in your big fancy car- Nevaeh!'

They were mocking me. I did not say a word, as I was sitting there boiling on the inside, the reputation and repetition continued that year, just like the years of the past. As a result, I tried to block those days out of my mind altogether. I have also wondered and pondered this… if I should not just join Lily, and get my own set of white wings, to beg her to let me come up there with her.

However, I know that if I do not live my life to its complete finale, I may not get my wings that I so desire. Why for the reasons that, I know that I will not make it up to the heavens. What can I do? Why do I feel this way? Why? Mainly because I went through my hell on earth in 'The Land of Many Steeples.' But- there still has to be a way out, a way that I have not found

yet? I have the understanding and realization that no one would care that I am even gone, and if they do care, they cannot… so why stay. So, I am left with so many decisions.

Should I try again? Either the sisters are going to put me through their beatings until I am a bloody pulp, or do I choose to conclude and haunt them when I return. At that juncture, no dreamcatcher could catch me, at that point. I would be the one that is all-mighty and powerful over them. 'I would haunt your dreams just like you have haunted mine, which is a promise.'

Oh, yes how I would love to be above the clouds, and see the ones that truly care about me. Up there I would have a crown of royalty; all I have left down here is brokenhearted dreams, and the smells of disappointment radiating from the cow pastures that remind me of the shit that I go through. Just to keep my head above the water. The teachers preach lectures, yet it seems we learn nothing.

The students watch, they do not give a shit about anybody, with their noses up in the air. Furthermore, their hands never where they should be. I do not know what cuts deeper when looking into my full-length mirror, or my emotions of what I remember.

All the markings that they have made on my dresses have either been washed out or patched over and left to be forgotten. The fabric and slashes have been stitched closed, yet some gashes and preambles cannot be as they were before the manipulating, yes, the incisions openings rains on me in the evenings a reminder of what I lost. Yes, for the seams can never be as they were beforehand, the threads have been ripped apart forever.

Lily understood this feeling too; she knew it all too well, it is just one more thing that just keeps things building up and building up, until the end. I never realized at the time how bad the situation would become until I went through it myself. There is no meaning behind it, which is what gets me. Am I the only one or are there more girls in this hellhole like me, which I do not know about, maybe there is? The bullies harass, it is like they smell their victims or maybe they can smell and taste the blood dripping down from the gash, which they have caused from before, and then it is like you are a wounded animal on the Serengeti they come in packs.

Until you have nothing- nothing left… they lick up what is left of your body time and time over, afterward you have to get up and go on with the day, knowing that you have a decision to make. What decision would you make? I know what decision I will make! On like most my age, I do not drink and drug my brain cells away. I am not senseless or slutty, 'I feel

that being romantic is not dead, and it does exist. You just need to be with the right persons, which can show you what real expressions of love are!' So, are you like me by believing that nothing will ever destroy the hope or dreams? On the other hand, are you someone like the clan? Are you going to be praised in the eyes of the fire, or the eyes of the clouds? Just like fallen angels the ones, that have fear of not standing up for what is righteous. Why, because it is more fashionable to live a life of turpitude.

If someone has the light of hope, someone is going to want to dampen the affection. Just like me- when you are single for too long people start thinking, that you are either committed to yourself or that you are a little bit crazy or gay etcetera. I know this… I am not crazy or gay or whatever is said; I just have someone that blocks me out constantly while destroying my reputation. Just think about it. All of you have grown up with the roomers, your parents believed those parents, I do not have parents to fight for me, and the rest is history. So, what she and her clan said becomes known, and that is what was implied to my image.

Is it true?

Hell no, start thinking for yourself people. Just because someone says, something about someone else does not mean that it is factual. Oh, I have tried to fix it… However, it is out of my control, little do you all know that the tower is what prevents everything from happening. It is not my choice; she knew that I was going to be the empress; instead, she made me out to be the fool. She knew that I was one of the brightest stars in the land, and she had to bring that to an end, that was the beginning of the end of holding anyone's hands any more within the land. The friends and romances were in the retrograde I was dubbed unreachable, she made me a forbidden selection.

I had no choice but to become the hermit in the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams. To look on the bright side, all this has made me a stronger better more creative productive person. You cannot stop me now; I will forever shine, and guide others so that they can shine as well. Remember you are the ones listening to slandering voices. My question is why do you listen? Get to know me, and then make your judgments. Yes, it is hard for me to even get things going because the eyes are always watching, and no I am not being paranoid this is part of my true reality. Sure, the opportunity might come knocking down my door, but can you trust them, is it a setup?

Plus- the longer the wait; the greater the struggle, the better the reward is in the end, or at least that is what I would like to believe. Would you let me in? Life is so unfair you meant the world to me, but as of now, I am not so sure. I have been engrossing myself in you but you do not see me as more than a friend. I need to stop and think about what made you my world, and why it seems like I am going through the earthquakes. Now that I am getting to see your true colors, I am not so sure that we are meant to be. Let us just see what happens, but you need to change what you think to be with me. We are hearts upon the limbs, two hearts that are now beating independently, both hearts are feeling affectionate, but will they be joined together with a sentence spontaneously. Some of your choices may feel dastardly, Hearts they come together in the future with their descendants that are part of the diversity.

Chiaz- We are living in the present, not the past. Will our hearts survive the blast, what I am asking is will you and I last? The hearts grow closer as the days go fast, upon the branches; yes, it is all part of our forecast. The leaves may fall, but the hearts will remain, even going through the various winters, pouring rains and even the pain, and there will be no shame. Because being sweethearts is a game, two hearts becoming one so that we feel the same. These two hearts will someday be in a picture frame. On the surface, we have to hide; on the inside, you and I could be devoted. But- it seems so very different for you to look past the foliage.

You're not all ways looking away, you have to understand the words and what they have to say, soon you and I will see what is below the surface; there will be an overwhelming bond. This relationship may begin so, innocently with attraction, but if we are soul-mates, it will deepen into much more with affection. We will eventually have to look deeper to see what it is that we truly want to do or have. That is if we are real soul mates going into a relationship, we both need and want to have. I am willing to communicate, as long as you are willing to listen, this is going to give and take, and we have to find the balance. I will learn to be less clingy because I know you are nurtured to need space. But I will always be there whenever you need me. We can learn, to share and be fair to one another, conversations will be lighthearted, only if it is God's good fortune.

Nevaeh- I am feeling that I am moving out of this temperance, in this transition and passing the will of fortune. Yes, I feel that I am on my way to being the lovers without the tower's knowledge. There are many in which I could choose, many chances I could undertake which I may lose or win.

But- I believe I have the right person in mind. Yes, those are very kind, but- yet I trust one more than the other. I do not know if my decision will be right, but it is someone I am going to go with, and I know that is going to be surprising to most when it happens.

Is it a fight or is it the end, are you the right one, or should I go with the other person? That might see me for who I am more than you. The judgment has come; the chariot has arrived; now it is up to you, and the divine master to tell me what I will do next. There has to be a connection inside and join me and you in this journey, on with we ride. That is if you choose not to go the other direction and hide.

Chiaz- I feel that the choice is up in the air, it is just part of the signs that are shown. I am flexible in your transitions; I know that you are the type to tell me how it is going to be. I know you are up for the challenge of the tower. Your communication skills assure that you can take on that load and comprehend any false chats that may come across your path. I know that you will have to spend your time searching for something more before you find what you are looking for was in your sight the whole time. Just like I pinpoint you as the right girl, because when giving you my heart-shaped key with the guitar pick attached. It had a meaning behind it… it signifies that I pick you to be with me and that you hold the key, if you wear it around your neck then I will know that you feel the same about me. Say you want me!

Nevaeh

Book: 4

The Miracle

Love is a game, someone has the flame, and yet someone does not feel the same. Being in love is finding one another, being happy as friends and as a lover, and making a commitment to one another, having a family, and growing older. Taking the vows that will last forever, and

promising that there will never be another. We will share the memories and all those pictures with the others.

Yes, you are the game that I want to play; someday we will be together in the golden hey, together next to one another we shall stay, in the making of memories that will last from day-to-day. Is this love, because I have nothing more to say?

~Nevaeh~

Chapter: 22

Shy Virgin of Everything

(Summer of 2010) Chiaz Natherth- It was just going to be a typical summer day. I am at the local watering hole with my bud Melvin Shezor; we were just there to girl gaze, sitting on lawn chairs. I had warm lemonade in my right hand at the time. I am looking around at all the bodies that are bobbing in the water; they all just seem to blend. The lifeguard is blowing her whistle while screaming at the little kids that are running around. Some stunning bodies are smacking the cold blue water with great speed, from the high dive.

But- there is no more perfect figure there than hers. Everyone else seems to fade away out of my vision, along with all the ear-shattering noises. Bryan Adams 'Heaven' is playing in the background, and it seemed to be pronounced to my senses. When I am looking at her, it is like she was moving in slow motion, swimming a crossed the pool. She climbed up the ladder and out of the pool. Her body dripping with water… what a moment, there is even water dripping down her chest. She looks amazing in that petite pink bikini. I was thinking to myself, that is a very cute looking camel-toe you got showing there Nevaeh! I never knew that she had a heart-shaped belly button piercing, when did that happen?

Also, I could tell that her swimsuit was made by her, just like most of the sun-dresses she wears in the summertime too. Because it was not like any others I have ever seen around, it is cute somewhat skimpy and tailored to her perfect body. The fabric was not meant to get wet, it was somewhat see-through, yet she did not know, though it looks very good what can I say. She is walking towards me while running her fingers through her long brown hair. 'I was thinking this is too good to be for real.' She walked by and said 'hi!' and I was at loss for words. She was already gone, but I still babbled something like 'Ahh-he-oll-o.' At that point, into the changing room, she went, and I just sat there trying to fathom what had just happened.

Melvin Shezor- 'Chiaz! Ah, Chiaz! Hello, earth to Chiaz, snap out of it dude.'

Chiaz Naztherth- 'She is so fine! I would not mind having her on my arm.'

Melvin Shezor- 'Yah, the man she is not bad. But- isn't she into girls though.

So, do you like Nevaeh?'

Chiaz Naztherth- 'I do not think that she is, and well… yes, did you see her in that swimsuit? She is adorable in every way.'

Melvin Shezor- 'Really is that so? Go talk to her!'

Chiaz Naztherth- 'No way!'

Melvin Shezor- 'Why not, you pussy!'

Chiaz Naztherth- 'If Alissa finds out that I like her, or even looked at her I am going to die.'

Melvin Shezor- 'Ha, it sucks to be you man.'

Chiaz Natherth- 'Hey, I will see you later, I got to go.' (Text messages are going off… like crazy)

Melvin Shezor- 'Pu-ss-y!' (Shouting as Chiaz Natherth is walking out the exit gate.)

(Chiaz- He just waved it off, with the finger that is not supposed to be used in public, and does not think any more about it from that point on.)

Chiaz Naztherth- Summer is over! Yet she is with him… he is so unconfident in himself that he has to follow me around. He gives me vain advice on what to do, and how to do it, yet I would have to say I need to stand up for myself more than what I do, yet I do not because of her. He attempts to belittle me, with his words of temperament to her. These results lead to her having breakdowns, where she is feeling miserable because she stuck in the middle. She does not know what to do! She doesn't know how to feel! She does not want to hurt anyone's feelings, yet she is the one that is left to choke on her tears. Yes, I will save you long before you drowned!

(Two weeks has passed)

Chiaz- I understand that he is just jealous of me because I am everything he wants to be. Yet she is everything that I ever wanted in my life. That is why he took her away from me from the beginnings. I cannot believe that she is now going with him on and off. What has he done to her, what is he doing to her? Some people do not want you, but they do not want to see you be with, or- around anybody else. It was all part of the controller's plan… and we all know who controls every situation in 'The Land of Many Steeples', the ones that deceives us all… but who is she? Is it still unknown? He is scared that I am going to take her away, and I will!

You just wait and see. She is going to be with me, and you will be, nothing but a faded memory, of what was I thinking? All of you who doubted me you just sit back, and wait to see what is going to be, I am the one that will have the mastery, and you all will be left to wallow in your misery, and you can think about every time that you made her cry. You just wait and see! I have to wait for the collapse!

Oh, yes, my best friend betrayed me. If you want something never to be spoken, keep it solely to yourself, because once it is vocalized to another it is no longer a secret. Information that is given to others, that is the fuel for their fire, for their torches of destruction. He may have her now; however, I will end up with her in the end. It is only a matter of time. So far, in my life, I have gotten everything, which I have wanted, and she will be no different. I feel that I deserve her next to me, as does she… or at least she did.

What have I done wrong? Maybe I should have risked my life, all for her. Maybe I should still. However, would she accept me now or is it too late? Has my time come and past? I do not understand as to how, when, or why. Why would she want to do this? How could she do this to me, I am insulted. When did he talk to her, they are not even close to being in the same click? What is his motive, yet I think I know! How did he get her to say yes? I know she is going to get hurt here, yet that is what she seems to want right now.

Okay then…! Then again, the tower knows what we all need, and she destroys the fate of what could have started, and what might have gone together, and may have been if it was not for her, she even stops what will be in the forthcoming. Her baby blue eyes melt my heart. Yet the hearts' is split into two, I cannot wait until the day that I can take her in my arms. Nevertheless, I am growing tired of waiting all my life for her. 'My Nevaeh! You have a choice to make, but will it be you and him, or you and me?' The decision is yours to make select the right person for

you, regardless of any situations that may arise from the ashes. So, I can hold you in my arms at last, so that we can get on with life, that was meant to be.

Nevaeh- Some people will never have peace with you; however, you do not need them to reach your destiny. They are just trying to take up your time and energy from us, which we should use to thrive. Not everybody is going to understand me; just the same as I am not going to understand you, or anyone that is surrounded by me. If you do not accept me that is not my problem, it is yours. Just like with him if you want her, then go and be with her! Stop playing head games with me! I am not going to be your dirty little secret, which you come to find when it suits you! Go and play with her, I am going to find someone to play with too, which is for sure!

You will be sorry! I will always be kind and respectful to anyone, do I have to agree with you, no not at all. The same can be said for the family they are not always going to get your dreams. Do not let family members stop you from your true calling in life, some people just want to waste your time, if they do not see or understand you then they're in the wrong. 'Do not ever get engaged into a battle that you do not need to fight' The same can be said with me and my tower situation I may be combating a battle that will take me away from my divine destiny.

Chiaz Nazareth- The whole job of the tower is to distort and manipulate, their negative energy upon you. So, you lose touch with your true faith and origin of life's understandings of reaching your goals. The goals include finding compatibility, passion, drives, and excellence with mastery. The best thing you can do is shake off their negative thoughts, move on to forget about them leaving them alone. Yes, eventually if you leave them alone long enough it will drive them nuts. All they want is your never-ending attention.

They are trying to push us down in all the ways that they can. But- if you do not let them that is more annoying to them than fighting back. Always stand up for yourself, stand your ground, stick up for yourself however no when to pull out of the situation. Sometimes it is not always good to go with a temptation urge. Go with your gut and heart. That is what we did.

The perfect girl what can I say; to be so close yet, feel miles away. I want to run to her, but have to walk out the door going the other way. The only words spoken to her is- 'Have a nice day.' I think about her and the summer, and what it could have been with her. It reminds me of- sixteen, you are on my mind all the time. I think about you. It is like a vision, of the stars shining, ribbon wearing, bracelet making, and holding hands forever.

All the sunflowers in the hayfields and kissing in the rain, no more brick walls, no more falling teardrops of pain, and no more jigsaw puzzle pieces would remain. True love should not be such a game; does she feel the same. She is everything that I cannot have, and everything I lack. What if every day could be like this- Diamond rings, football games, and movies on the weekends? It is easy to see she belongs to me; she is everything that reminds me of 'sixteen' everything that is in my dreams. Everything she does is amazing, but then again, I am just speculating, and fantasizing about Nevaeh Natalie, who just turned the age of sixteen!

Nevaeh- I recall my first boy kiss was not at all, what I thought it was going to be like. I was wearing a light pink dress, and flip-flops that were also pink with white daisy flowers printed on them. I loosened my ponytail and flipped out my hair until my hair drops down my back, and around my shoulders. That gets A guy going every time, so I have read online. He was wearing ripped up jeans, and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt.

He said that- 'My eyes sparkled in blue amazement, which was breathtaking, that he never saw before.' Tell me another line… I was thinking, while Phil Collins 'Take Me Home' was playing in the background. I smiled at him, he began to slowly lean into me, until our lips locked. So, enjoy, he kissed me, and my heart was all aflutter.

When it happened, I felt like I was floating, and my stomach had butterflies.

My eyes fastened shut with no intentions of me to do so during the whole thing. When my eyes unfastened my feelings of touch engaged, and I realized that his hands are on my hips. His hands slowly moved up my waist, and my body. I was trembling from the exhilaration. Plus, one thing led to another. It was sort of my first time, kissing and playing with him you know a boy, oh yet not really, I had gotten to do some things with Chiaz before like, in class as he sat next to me. I would rub my hand on it under the desks- yeah, he liked that, and he would be.

Oh, how could I forget this… there was this one time in the front seat of his Ford pickup truck, we snuck off… and this was my first true time gulping down on him, for a lack of a better term. As I had my head in his lap and was about to move up for him to go in me down there, I was about to get on top and let him in me. When we both heard her this odd, yet remarkably loud scream of bloody murder! Ava was saying- 'You too were going to fuck! What the fuck is going on here? Anyways, Ava spotted us before he got to 'Take me!'

So, there was her little face pressed on the glass, looking in at us mortified outside the window, as she was getting a free show, as the truck was rocking side to side, in the back parking lot. She asked- Did you do to him; what I think you did?' As you could guess, I could not talk with my mouth full, and a lady does not spit…! So, most of that went down, and some got stuck on my tonsils. I said with a hacking cough- 'Yes, yes I am! Suck on that Ava!' She said- 'It looks like you already did!'

This was sweet payback for what they did to my car, and I truly thought I loved him anyway. It was so worth it. So yeah, you get the picture, and when she screamed, he ended up with my teeth there also, from me jumping out of surprise- Sorry! She kind of killed the loving moment, to say the least. That weekend I was told to confess that one, too to the father, and everyone. How come when someone else does it they get away with it, and when I try it is a big sin? Plus, that cellphone video was damning, for the sisters to use, hello to a million hits on YouTube! Just to pick on me more. So now, they are referring to me as- 'The Little Virgin!' all around the towns and lands.

Yeah so, I feel that I am going to be a virgin forever! You know my virginity it was meant to be broken into by him. I was going to let him, I even recall it was so thumping big, and looked freaking scary to me, like that thing is never going to fit in there, but he is what I wanted, yet we cannot get it, nope we cannot! However, no it did not happen, sorry to say, yes, it is so sad to say, I am still the only virgin girl in my grade- that sucks! Ha- that is all we got to do is suck, come to think about it.

Wow, that was graphic sorry, but what I just said was complete, one hundred percent true! When Hope found out, she was intrigued and stunned. We got home she took me by the arm to my bathroom, she looked at me and said- 'Clean yourself up, it's all over your face, and in your hair, you- piggy!' I just smiled and giggled, and looked down as I got into my claw-foot tub. Then she got out a bar of soap, while I was sitting in the tub with the water running saying- 'Okay misses you like to do that, then suck on that for a while, that is your punishment.

Girl I never heard tell of such things!' -She said. It that very moment I howled. I waited until she walked out of the room and I stood up, and I ran my fingers through my hair to get as much as I could out, I looked at it on my two fingers, I know how I was going to get rid of what he gave me. But- would it work? I knew only time would tell. However, me- doing that would be inconceivable, I knew it would not be right, but I want to so badly, I guess my dream of him and

I went down the drain too. Yet I could have trapped him, so easily. Then people dare to say that I am not smart, that plan was incredible. Either way, that ended that prematurely for him and me. So, I got tired of playing that game, so that is when I let someone new in, which would not get me into heap trouble.

So, my true first time with a boy was like this… You can look but you cannot touch Ha- that is what I thought, I was so wrong too and it was not with him either regrettably. It was okay my heart was beating so rapidly; I thought that it was going to explode out of my chest.

The silky-smooth skin ran along my body; it was like an enchanted expression of togetherness. At last, I felt as if I was loved. But I was not with the one that I loved. His brown eyes gazed- sweetly and softly into mine. I was so looking forward to this kiss and moment all my life. However, he walked with me in his arms to his bed. Then I was on his bed stripped of all forms of dignity. The lights were off, and the door was locked, and that took me back to when I was a little girl. Loving at night just hold onto me tight. The room is lit by the moonlight. When are you looking down at me is what you are seeing all right? This is maybe my special night. I cannot believe I am with a football player! I was not prepared at all for the performance of lovemaking. I had no idea what I was doing. I was thinking to myself this is not like the movies at all!

Yes, all the touching was extremely steamy, like before and then again, the playing around that he did on me was more intriguing, to say the least. I was thinking that he was the most, sweetest guy on earth. However, all the thoughts in my mind ran fast… thoughts like should we be doing this?

Yet, I am so shy and nervous my knees knocked beforehand. Then again, this is going to be so beautiful; I had fantasized about this moment since I was a young girl. 'Yet, I have to say to all you girls out there, to lose it when you are ready to. Please do it for you and no one else. It is about your timing, and what you choose to do, you can choose when and whom you let in!' So, starting I felt like my tearing and breaking-in took forever, and that his pushing forward was never going to stop, love is painful in more than one way, it was so intense.

Yet, it was so perfect and feels so amazing with him now sliding in and out of me. It hurt at the start, but it got more enjoyable, that is for sure.

Yet also, it was like being run over by a speeding train, and I could not help but, feel that he was not meant to be my first. Me being so naïve and only sixteen years of age I was so embarrassed by, the fact that I was so under experienced in sensual activities.

I wanted to make the best of the moments of intimacy. I was happy to say that I got my first French kiss as well, but his soft little kiss was sweeter, the first time we kissed as I remember at that time. Nevertheless, during the whole thing I was very self- conscious. I think he rushed into it though. Maybe it could have been more romantic. Then on the other hand, again it was the most incredible two minutes of my life. My body trembled afterword's, it was tension releasing of all the peer pressure and an escape from the existence of life. Just like a photo, that will be etched in my mind, which I will never forget. 'Yet I feel that I am not in love, he was just the first!'

He was so gentle with me at first, and then it was like I was getting a pounding down there, 'Hello! My little vagina, she did not do anything wrong… for her to get spanked and beaten by you, so be nice to her.' I do not understand why guys think that going that fast is good, slow down! Anyways afterward, I did not think I could get up and walk out; I was in pain… yes, it was that bad. The walk of shame is not a fun path to go down. I wanted to be in love, and to feel that love. Not to be a one-night stand or just a bed buddy, and that boy made me out to be just that. Oh, well- I cannot go back now!

Chapter: 23

Heartbreaker

(The beginnings of the senior year)

Nevaeh- How does one speak up if they did not have a voice at one time? How does one get back the times in the past? How does one stop a voice that slanders? How does one rebuild their future with equal voices? How do I make all this stop from playing in my mind?

Melvin Shezor- (Number 69 on the football team) 'Yes we have had intimate encounters; it was nice to say that she thinks she is like every other girl now. Nevertheless, I cannot say that I was in love with her, or even really liked her at all.' 'She is just another ass that needed a banging, so I took it, why not? From what I know, she liked it by the way she screamed… I cannot nitpick.' 'It was all right; she was just like every other girl I have had for there first. That look on their face is priceless every time.' (Laughing with sarcasm)

Nevaeh- I have lost my crown of purity, and he just got what he wanted. However, at this point in my life, I do not care anymore about being a virgin, so I just started being with him so that it would help me become more popular.

My body is nothing to anyone- so why should I care what somebody does with it. The first day at school was the worst, he told all his friends about it. I mean that everyone knows, I thought we were in love, I thought we would have a family together. Maybe I am just a stupid girl for thinking that way. I thought he was the one, but I guess I was wrong. Will anybody ever come along and save me from this hell? Just remember that life is not like a romance novel, and it most likely never will be like that at all for anyone.

We as a society have an impression of what is thought to be love, and that depiction is a joke. We build ourselves up for a letdown, no one or anything is perfect, and life is not fantasy. The reality always shows through in one way or another. We all have to find someone that is going to always be there for us, no matter what we have done or what has been said in the past. If we cannot be trusted by one another then it is never going to work. We want to enjoy spending time together, not worry about it, which is what real romance is about. I feel that I am still stepping foot into my drum cadence. I play my drum beats; others may join in when they find the right rhythm. If they are out of step with me, there is nothing wrong with playing a solo sometimes.

Chiaz Nazareth- I trusted him, by saying that I liked her… and he uses that against me. 'A word of advice- If you like someone keeps it to yourself.' because other guys will take what you want away from you. Yet, there is nothing I can do. I am stuck with Alissa, while she runs around on me. However, that is okay in her mind. I am just getting so sick of her moods, and one-night stands, that I have to look at. I am ending this now! I have a plan, and it is beyond brilliant, it is like I have downloaded a thought that would be so perfect no one could ever screw it up, not even the tower.

The clan would be left to crawl under a rock in their little holes and hopefully die because they would not be able to handle it, so they would have no choice but to leave us alone. I cannot leave her now it is forbidden, and it seems that there is always something or someone in the way of her and me… from being together. But- yet I do not know if she is going to go along with this plan or not, she is a mystery behind blue eyes. But- she holds the key to my heart and our freedom.

Melvin is just using her, as for me I would treasure every moment I would have with her. I can tell that he is afraid of losing her; by the remarks that he makes about me, that I need to change so that she would be interested in me. However, I know that she is interested in me. Then again, at this point, she cannot break up with him because; she is afraid of him, and what he might do to her, or say about her. Let us not forget would we be accepted as a couple? Since we all have to bow down to what is known.

Why is it anyone's business if we want to be together? Nevaeh, you have a choice to make, choose wisely. You know what is so amusing about this is that Melvin does not even think that I know about his relationship. So, as of now, we are blocked from following one another on the wall and the webs and forced apart by parents and lands and so-called friends. I wanted to be the first guy in her life, I wanted to be the first guy that she kissed affectionately, and I wanted to be her first in everything. Oh, while that dream is lost forever, but I would still love for us to be together. Let's just leave this land of never; I will be right here waiting for you whenever let us be together!

Nevaeh- When you toss something or someone away, where does it go? It is just the same as not missing a family that I have never had- I guess. I was left to be buried under more useless substances, in a heap of forgetfulness, yet I dig myself back up, and out of the burial ground, they put me on top of, time and time again. Just for them to track me down and cover me over once more with their dirt as if I am trash. Besides the society just wants more matter to throw away, instead of embracing what they once had.

This reminds me of the fact, that a lot of girls out there are used and then thrown away in the boys are left to go on was someone new and do it all over again. As well as, break yet another girl's heart. I should know it happened to me! Just like they can keep trying to kill me, yet I know I will stay thriving! Just when I thought, all was lost completely and everything was helpless, while I have hit rock bottom once more.

Chapter: 24

Sweetheart

(Enchanted Dating)

I was in the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams as always, looking over the horizon out my bedroom window, I unlocked it to sit in the big window seal seat.

That is when…! At last, I saw that old silver Ford chariot coming down the lane; it was him coming to sweep me away off my feet. I just know it; I felt like what should I do now? Because my hair is not that long to cascade over and down the side of this place? Do I wave at him like a mindless idiot- nah? Nope, I went for the more laid-back approach, of yelling his name like a little girl and falling out the window stark naked. Rolling head over feet down the ruff shingled porch roof snagging the tree, then falling right into his arms as he ran to catch me. That worked well…? If only, I had wings?

He said- I was walking to the door to get you, you did not need to do that, nice outfit by the way. -his said. I could have died in his arms, for many reasons- as you could guess. I just said all my uniforms, are going to be washed; and I did not expect this to happen. I always did have a way of making an entrance. Yes, and the rest is history. However, let me explain this- So, knock, knock, and knock he went on my door. Hope she opened the big heavy wood door, with me in his arms.

Looking confused and dumbfounded.

'I thought you were in your room? Nevaeh! What on earth are you doing, like that with him?' -She said 'Ah- I was… I just fell out of my window?' -I said. 'Hello!' He said also, awkwardly! Hope- 'Oh my god!

Baby… are you okay?'

'Yeah? I am good now!'-I said, yet he had a funny little smile on his face at that time. 'Can I take her out?' -he said. 'I don't know!'- Hope said. So, he just kept asking her until she said 'Yes!' Hope- 'Sure- all right, but for God-sakes girl go and put something on!' 'Ah- would you excuse me' -I said, as I ran up the staircase like a bolt of lightning to my room, to put on the same unclean tattered uniform, from the school day.

Hope- 'You think it is like she does not have anything to where?' She said to him. (I do not I was thinking to myself. As I was overhearing their soft chats about me.) 'That's okay' -he said. 'Okay let's go!' -I said. I could never- guessed, -I would have never thought this was going to happen…! So, that he was going to propose to me that night, on the hill of hills, while looking down at the valley below on the cable tracks that go north and south, on the Johnstown inclined plane, at twilight time. And, of course, I said- 'Yes!' For the reasons, that at last being with him that form the love we both wanted, and we both knew from the past we belong together, and that

no one is going to keep us apart. Finally, this may break the curse of the tower you know my Grandmother. Will this end the clans; will they no longer stock us? I would love to have stopped, and shouted from the top of this mountain, and say- 'We are in love at last!' -Maybe I did?

Let us both just say that we finally got our moments in the Golden hayfields. From that day on, we had enchanted love time and time over, and we bridged the gap that made a miracle happen, that we thought would never. We thought this was our happily ever after. The first time it was looking over the horizons with its sunset along with the golden sunflowers. Which were next to us on the grounds, that we lied on top of… everything was so perfect!

Then an unexpected problem popped up I got so sick. So, like approximately ten days or so after this date. I started coming down with what I thought was the flu, and I thought I was going to die, not the most romantic thing to happen to me. Like just when things were finally starting to work out for me. I was blowing chunks in the morning, besides I felt like my insides were ripping out my body. Yes, even as I am, I get sick!

Yet he was the only one to comfort me in any way that he could, there are so many unanswered questions. Why do I feel this way? Is this the way I should feel? Why do I feel like I have everything that I need now? Yet what am I going to lose? I hope that nothing will be lost, with my angel Lily looking at him and me, I know that she is so happy for me! She was looking perfectly crying from her eyes, heavenly tears of joy as he got down on his knee that day. She said- 'See!' Through my joy always ends fast, Hope, she was not at all thrilled when she found out about us being engaged. She said- 'You are too young, and you will end up alone in the end. I am not allowing this to go on. End it now- you hear me!'

'No!' -I said back!

(I will come back to this shortly.)

Thinking back on our past days. Why was I so stupid to let somebody take advantage of me just for popularity back then? Was that what was supposed to happen, so that you found your way to me? When you are under pressure, and you let society make choices for you. You just do not realize at that time. If that may or may not benefit you in the coming up days, something's like many things might not even be foreseen, and others may just pop out at you when you not even expecting them to.

My advice to anyone is … go to extremes to get to know your someone special… even if you think it is not worthy at the time, it may just be… just look at me for example! We live in a society where most girls have had at least two boyfriends by the time they're fourteen. Besides, most guys go through girls like pairs of underwear. Kind of sad and pathetic to think that there is no longer purity in this cold world.

Oh well, I guess I am guilty of it as well. Nonetheless, there is a miracle awaiting me at the end of this term, and I will see that face for the first time something I can truly call mine. I can love to cherish and care for until she no longer needs me. Oh yeah, that is right I am pregnant.

Chiaz- I cannot help but wonder if this baby mine? I think he or she is? I sure hope so? Only time will tell! It has to be mine. Because that other jerk-off, he does not want anything to do with either one of them. The baby is mine I can just feel that he or she is!

Nevaeh- It is funny how your life changes and your priorities are predetermined or so you think, but as you get older, they change or they are forced to be changed by something that is out of your control. But it is when you take control of your destiny and follow the path that miracles happen!

Yes, I look at all things from a different perspective now. I look at the many trophies that I have gotten back from over the years for being a part of the track and softball teams, along with all the things I got for being good in the young girls' jail. I have the medals, bits, and pieces on display now, but they mean nothing to me anymore. Not that I feel ungrateful that I made such accomplishments. However more, I feel that I am just moving on to my next project that means so much more. You can love your possessions but you will never love a possession more than another human life, this is something I have learned.

I think about all the mothers of the past, which were in my situation they were looked down upon for becoming pregnant and in school. However, times changed and I think for the better at let for this category. I am not forced to leave their place of education at the hellhole, for having a baby growing inside of me. Remarkably! Yes, there is nothing like peeing on about three different sticks that your boyfriend got you… to know that you are not getting your period, that you completely missed it. Yes, even the way I am, I still have to go through menstrual cycles every month.

The first days of my pregnancy I was feeling a sense of guilt for… what have I done, having to go to school like this, and knowing I am just a teen girl here, can I be a mommy? Plus, at the time I did not know what the baby was… like the sex, how to take care of him or her when they pop out, or what to do. So, that was an adventure in itself. At that time, I was not even thinking that this baby is going to have a name and be with me for the next eighteen years.

You just do not think like that, or at least I did not. Nevertheless, that was all coming fast and the nine or so months went fast, and yet horribly slow at the same time. In the beginnings of those days of days and times of times, I did not know how to tell Hope, what I did, so I did not say anything to her. Yet she knew I was… I think she felt what was going on with me before I did; she had an idea of what we were up too. Okay- teen pregnancy it is tough for me to explain, it comes with joys and its pains. Being a girl, it is like nothing you have ever felt before. Yeah, it changes from trimester to trimester, like a school semester.

Like in the first week's win I felt sick, breathless and tired most of the time.

Hope was under the impression I was coming down with a disease like Multiple Sclerosis or something like that, at the beginning of those days and times. That all change, the day I was examined and felt up by some random ass girl, and she scanned me over. Yet she is the technician. She told me to plop down on this hard table, and somewhat on my back, then she squirted all kinds of goopy stuff on me.

Shortly after that, I could see that hart beat up on the screen.

'That is the earliest stars of your baby that we can see!' She said.

Me- that is amazing and small. 'So, do you know who the daddy is? Did I say- yes, I think so? 'So, this was an oops?' – She asked me. 'Kind-of, yet I am okay with it.' 'You poor thing…!' that was the last thing she said. As I got up and was about to walk out, and drive in my car alone, just to go back home and sit, and ponder everything I did, and everything that was going to happen. Yet what was neat about this is I get to keep the black and white photos of my baby; I could not wait to know if it was a boy or girl.

I remember that day also. However, when she started to show, that is when everyone was talking about it. I remember that my belly felt heavy, I felt so bloated, and could not go to the bathroom even if I wanted too for days. Plus, my feet, hands and everything in between looked weirder than normal, I looked bizarre altogether, as if I half died. The baby inside me was not

showing much the first couple of weeks but I know, that it would soon with me being so small, I knew I could not cover up for long. I walk with this belly, day in and day out. With her kicking me and moving all-around and such. Going down the halls and past all the doors of perception, even now, I do not have a uniform that fits me. That is just fine with me; I have my little girl inside me, which shows the love we have and had. I know she belongs to him and me.

The best way to describe a kick is like a muscle spasm. My belly skin just keeps getting tighter and tighter. I know that is going to look good after the baby is born out of there. Yeah, I know my belly is going to be flabby like an old man frowning.

My boobs look like two sad eyes staring at you going cross-eyed. Will what can I say at least she will not go hungry when she gets here, that is for sure. Yeah, and to think I used to pray for bigger ones. You know what also scares me to know that my baby is coming out of me down there…! While everyone is going to be looking at it, why- do I have to go through this? That is life for a girl I guess, being a rip, cut and torn apart in all ways possible. who knew, that having a little bit of unprotected sex only a couple of times here and there would start all this. 'Yet I have to ask myself was it the making love, that started all of this, or did I do this to myself?'

However, I started showing at fifteen weeks and I honestly looked like I swallowed a small beach ball! I could not get up off the loveseat on my own and get out of bed was impossible, yet I had too. Oh, when I walk, it feels like she might come right out of my vagina! As I penguin-walk down the hall at school, everyone that sees me wants to put their hands all up in my business, and touch, feel, and poke everything I have, well at least it is kinder than what the sisters did, and do to me. It is like they want to still kill me, and even now my unborn baby! Hope and I have a restraining order on them, so hopefully, that will keep them at least one hundred feet away at all times. That is the theory.

Nevertheless, that does not stop them from getting other boys and girls that are their friends to do their evil. There is no stopping the clans that bully…! Just like the teen moms in the past. Who were they to make such judgments on those girls back then? Why was it looked down upon back then, and not so much now? Did society change? Besides, why should it ever be okay to look down on somebody for carrying a human life? Life is just going to happen, and we cannot stop it. Yet if we do stop that human life is that not considered immoral at-least I think so? I should know I stopped mine at one point. Yet some are going to try in more ways than one on me to stop it again. In the days to come!

(Life comes and goes)

Maiara Chenoa was one of my true friends, but she left me also later that year. All she had to do was say my name, and I was forever there for her. Even when we did not see eye to eye. It was said, that she stabbed herself in the neck and so on, with a large butcher's knife, and shot herself also that was what truly ended it all. It was said that she had a slow painful death, that she bludgeoned herself in the head with her own metal baseball bat, beforehand because she lost her mind over me, in the graveyard.

This took place right after my engagement… about two days after… while I was digging myself out of a whole once more. This happened, 'The Land of Many Steeples' wants us to think she did it because of me, and they want to deliberate that it was me, that did this one also. Because of the note, and what it said. 'Nevaeh- You did this to me; I will see you in hell!' It was not me…! I was with him! Which is my alibi, and she and I were just friends at that time! I know she would never write something like that to me- would she? Nonetheless, I did not think she did.

When I found her dumped on top of Lily's grave naked, she was all cut up from her neck down to her belly button, with what looked- liked- an aero of her blood cut in her skin pointing down to, that girly spot. Furthermore, who in their right mind puts a pistol all up in their vagina six and a half inches deep, and pulls the trigger, to shoot themselves to stop their heart from beating? Then leaves it in there with their hand still holding on the handgrip, and their one long middle finger on the trigger? Who does that? I cannot believe that she would choose to do that! They did it… THEY DID IT! I knew who did it, and so do you? They could not get at me, so they got at her, through which one of the sisters was it. I guess that is a mystery too.

Furthermore, Lily, she does not want to tell me because she does not want me to retaliate on that family. She said- 'Payback will come, in time for them all, you need not do anything, and God he sees it all.'

'Yet someone needs to kick these girls in the head until there sped, so they stop hurting others. Yes, I feel that they are the ones that need to die not us!' Anyways to me that note, it did not look like her handwriting, and she was sped too. So why would the grammar be so perfect and not sloppy? You and I both know that she could not spell or write to save her life? I was talking with Lily to see if she can bring her back to life as she did for me, time and time again! Who knows if she will, or can?

Maybe some girls do not get a second chance at life- I guess, as I did. Why I do not know, I guess you have to be chosen for something, some die as she did and never speak again, that is what they choose to do. Why was I chosen to live on once more, and not she too? However, I can feel her presence around me at times, yet I do not know if it is good energies, she brings or not? I do not know why she does not want to talk to me. She should not have many reasons to be mad at me. I just hope and pray that her spirit is born into my baby girl, and she has the love and fight of life as she did. Who knows maybe she will?

Yet I know that I can never hold her in my arms again. Like I can do with Lily as of now. Yes, her soul did not make it to the heavens. Therefore, she is not someone; I will be seeing or talking too, sad to say. I try to stay away from black-winged angels, and no, I am not being racist… I have real reasons. I can see Maiara flying around me with no voice from time to time, and she scares me now.

To think she was so kind and good to me, now look…! What- happened to her? They must have gotten her soul!

There is always someone in the way or so it seems to live life. She left her home for the last time, that night, to see the graves that we all are going to be in at some point that I have been overtopping. I wonder if she came to see if I was there, that might explain the one red rose, which was on Lily's headstone. That is when they must have jumped her. That is when she was attacked and stripped naked like the day she was born, and then completely dishonored. They must have killed her there; I think like they have done to me over and over?

Yet I will not breathe my last breath, as long as Lily keeps giving

me her breath to live on, I am as alive as any other girl on the earth, so it seems to them. I will let you in on a secret; I am an angel on earth. Yet I am also an angel on the inside in a human body, which will age and get older as I would have anyway. However, no one can see that spirit living inside of me. All they see is the same old Neveah, as the girl she always was and will always be within their eyes. Little do they know!

Therefore, the day I hanged myself with my school belt noose, I really did pass on, and every time they kill me, I do die and come back to life, yet do they know why? They just think they cannot get the job done, I guess! I do perish- every time, as I fall to the ground, and see the light, yet so far as I said I am saved to live on. As you know, and given life again, just in a non-

living, yet not dead way. I cannot explain what it is like; I can inhale and exhale the air of worlds. Like you, but differently. It is like I have the life of a spirit, with a heavenly air that never ends. Everything looks the same on me, as I breathe in and out of my human body, yet I know that is not so. I have something more, and if I wanted to, I would not need to fill my lungs at all with earthly air; the heavenly air would keep me alive as I am now.

Though to be as normal as possible, I do both, also because the baby is sharing everything that, I take in and out of my body also. Besides, she has to have oxygen to live. So, it has become a second nature habit, like before to breathe and eat and sleep as I did before. I am still the same girl, just even more different than before, yet the same. Do you understand? Yet even now, I have to do the right things to get my white wings when I ascend at some point someday. I know it is crazy an angel having a baby. Yes, it can happen, and she is going to be born soon, as a human girl! Yet no one knows about me being like this.

So, do not tell him, Hope, or anyone! No one ever needs to know about this! I am sure I will die at some point, for good. However, when and how, I do not know? I am just happy to be alive now and live on…! Well you know what I mean? Nonetheless, to look at me you would not know that, because, I look very much alive, as you can see.

That is how I have the power to hear, see, and feel all that I do. Crazy I know, yet I am just like every other girl no different in what I have done and going to do in life! I am just happy that I was given the chance to live my life, yet it could end at any point if I ask and they want to send me away for good, it is all that I choose, and if they allow.

It seems that when I love someone they die, so who is next to go in my life, that is the question? Yet I do not have an answer. I have also wondered if I am not the angel of death- jokingly. However, when I do love someone too much they go away. Hum- Nah- I am too sweet for that role! Oh, that reminds me, I should be eating something about now, and yes, I am craving chocolate, which will never change!

(Questioning Maiara's demise)

I guess I was wrong maybe; she did kill herself because I found out just last week that she really could not take any more of the town and the hellhole and me. Because she killed her, her father and mother with the same baseball bat. It was a crime of passion and hatred. On the other hand, did they, do it? To make it look as if she went wacky? I do not know? However, I can see

her fighting someone off, but I cannot see who it was in my visions that I am having. It was also said, by the town criers, that she made this… it is a letter, which I have in my hand, right now. I never thought it was also a suicide letter. Yes, I got it in the mail, which is shocking, because the sisters like to come into our yard and steal our mail from the box, and smash it up, and knock it over even more then it is. Yes, just like Hopes income checks, yet this note was on time, and the date was right on the money. Additionally, what was odd is that this envelope was not opened or soiled, unlike all the others.

The sisters are so destructive to us, and our possessions around the house. They have even hanged a dead cat from the flower pot hook on the front porch, next to the swing. The poor black and white kitten's name were the same as mine. When I looked at the tag on her collar. They were making fun of me- I guess! Just like I cannot get a job because no one wants to hire me. For the reason that of what they say about me, and what they think.

So, no I cannot get a job to make money around here, yet they make it that way for me and say that I live off Hope's money and that I am too lazy and dumb to find work, the blame is always on me it seems! Just more rejection! Anyways back to this note, I think she was forced to write it letter by letter, they must have spelled everything out for her, which she said to me. I do not think this is her wording. Yet maybe it is? I believe in not saying one negative word about her so that I can receive my blessings, which will come even in times like these.

My Maiara was everything to me, she was a shining star for me, and her kiss goodbye the last time still makes me weak at the knees until this very day, not knowing that night was going to be the last time. That I would ever see her again as a human. I remember what she said to me about placing my dream catcher next to a tree and the demon will not follow me anymore, the tree will die like me, so you can be free, that is why they killed her because she was trying to help me. She was going to tangled them up in her pink feathers and webbings that she gave me. Her- all that was left was a nude girl on top of a grave, which they took away in a body bag.

Yes, they just cremated her because that was all they could do. About two days after the fact when she was found. She did not have any money coming from anywhere for a proper burial. So, I was given the ashes, she did not even have a wake, no grave, no headstone, no way to be remembered. That is exactly what the sisters wanted.

I think!

That is why they gave me what was leftover of her, to hurt me! So, I just placed the urn up on the fireplace mantel, I do not know what to do with her remands. Yes, it creeps me out, when her soul comes out and she flutters around me! Yes, it is like I can see her black hair and black wings. Yet once again, I was the only one that seemed to care about who she was, when she was alive, and will never be now that she is gone. I understand that she is never coming back as she was, so just like that, I was back to being alone all the time with no girlfriends. With their eyes on me. I just hope he does not leave me now. All I have left of who she was is some crumpled up photos and a letter of abandonment.

All I can say is I hope, that we both end up being in the heavens together someday, that is if she prays for forgiveness in hell, yet that is unlikely. Just remember do not let your dreams go with you to the grave or whatever; your stone is not going to say your story for you.

Also, if you do not have a stone or a marker there is no one to care, if you do or do not, even if you do it just reads your name and dates, not your true character!

Maybe someday that will change. 'Like being born again, death to me is not a part of life, life to me is death!'

Chapter: 25

My Night and Shining Armor

I have not even touched the surface of what is in my future. I cannot even imagine what is going to come into my life. Look at what has changed in the last year. I have to agree with the divine master and Lily anything is possible, and it is for me to grow and about her, as she will grow up with him and me.

Chiaz- so I remember the day I took Nevaeh to her junior prom, this year, of course, we went together. Yes, she finally got to have her slow dance with me, and where her poufy pink and purple feathered gown, that looked so cute on her, because she is so small and tiny. Furthermore, that covered up her somewhat of a baby bump belly also. You would not even have known she was pregnant at the time.

When we did the majestic march on the stage at the school in the auditorium for the others to see us, we felt the warmth of the crowds, yet that did not last all that long. At the start of our walk, no one would have ever known. Yet some big mouths could not help, but make their

nasty comments, their families did not approve of us, going to prom in the condition, she was in. Like one called out- 'See the slut dirtbag, that got knocked up!'

One yield- 'There is a thing called birth control, you two should have used it!' Why it is any of their business, I do not know. It is our choice not there's. Yet that was not going to stop us or spoil our night together.

Ava and her sisters and friends were saying all kinds of things there and at the dance. Ava and her girlfriends and their dates would gather around us, and they even kept bumping into us on the dance floor. Yet all she wanted was one slow dance and a photo, and we got it. Oh God, I can still hear their comments!

Ava's girlfriend and Nevaeh's classmate Katie said at prom, as we were on the dance floor- 'Hey who's the daddy?'

Even Adriane said- 'you are too good for her!'

Then Hannah McGruben speaks up saying- 'Why would you have wanted to fuck her, and why do you want to stay. If I was you. I would go get checked, for many things!'

I recall that Ava and her sisters were even ripping at her dress, to show everyone what was underneath. There was not one boy or girl at prom or at the march, which gave her one good comment. Nope, not one, not even Mr. Devolcano, who was the one that took the photograph of us as we walk through the door. He took the photo of us, and then he said after to another teacher softly- 'I can't put this dumb C*NT in the yearbook!'

I could have beaten his face in with my fist, at that moment! When he said that.

Nevaeh, she did not even blink at that, she said just let it go. Come on! -She said. From that moment on, we did not care what they had to say. We were us, and that is all that mattered. I have to say she was the most gorgeous girl there. We danced under the soft colored lights setting the mood, and the halls Gym walls were decorated with a Paris theme. That seemed tranquil and mallow, around all the confusion. We did not stay the whole dance. We left and went to our love spot. Where we would be alone together until I had to take her home.

That night ended in a romantic kiss at her door, she asked me in, and we when up to her bedroom. She changed into her nightgown in her bathroom and she left the door open, as she changed, she left her prom gown on the floor, she said-

'I am not going to wear it anymore or again, the way it looks now, it's not worth anything.' Then she asked me- 'Do you still like what you see when you look at me?' – Insecurely, as she was pulling her lace-like night top down over her breasts, then to let it slip from her hands, and then fall around her knees. This all happens, as she stood in the doorway of the bathroom. And I said- 'Yes, you're beautiful, now and always, I love you Nevaeh and the baby!' She said-

'Awe, you're such a sweetie! I love you too!'

Then we talked at the edge of her bed, and then we lied back together on her bed and nuzzled, the bed is so old, that it squeaks like the floorboards, when we make any movements at all. Everything in her room is either pink or white, maybe to pink for my liking, but it is nice and comfortable.

Yes, I love being in there with her. Even her bedsheets are pink and fuzzy to be underneath, and I love her pillow, it is so soft and smells so good, just like her and her hair. She is very organized compared to my bedroom, everything has its place, and everything is old but perfectly pretty in a girly kind of way. While a prison movie was playing on her old, television set on her chest of drawers, we held each other. The nightlight and television is the only light in the room, she fell asleep in my arms, squeezing me so tightly like always. Though at midnight I had to go and be home, I got up and seen that she was going to be okay. Yes, I even tucked her in and kissed her forehead. I closed the door behind me, went down the rickety steps.

I saw Hope sleeping away with a wine glass in her hand, in her big old chair in the living room facing the window. I think she thought I left a long time ago.

Nevertheless, I do not know, or no if she cared. She does not have much time, for her or us. I left her home, got my truck started just to go to my home about a few miles away. On the drive down the snug pathway, I was thinking, yes in a way all the things Nevaeh and I ever wanted have been checked off her list. I knew from that night on I wanted to spend my life with this girl! I was also thinking that the prom was the prom from hell.

However, to her, it was everything she thought it could be. Yet I feel that she still got cheated! Thus, far I can feel that I did all that I could for her. Me- I try to be kind, thoughtful to all. I attempt to control my shame in life by focusing on how unique, and special my life is! Just

like hers, like her particular talents and mine are a lot alike, we both look at the good not the bad in life. Yes, I would have to say that feeling is everything!

(Interview)

My characteristics, and most outstanding trades, you ask. Okay, I am a Cancer; I guess that makes me loyal, dependable, caring and adaptable. I like to do things my way at times if I think it is the right thing to do. My creativity highlights me as an individual I think, I am just me what can I say. She is a Gemini, and some days she has two personalities, I swear, yet I can see why she does. Okay back to me- What are my drawbacks, you ask. Hum- I am moody at times, yet who isn't? I can be clingy, with the one, I love, yet she likes that! Self-pitying at times, like I can be oversensitive and self-absorbed in my world that I create. People say that I know me, that I am complex and enigmatic. Okay if they say so…? Yet some even say that I am stuck up, and hard to get to know, nevertheless I am not at all- as you can see. I am more- happy go lucky. What do you think?

Nevaeh- I believe I am never going to go around with little dreams anymore, I will not have a contained mind; I am always going to be positive if I can, and dream big. Knowing that it all can, and will be coming true if only I believe that it will. I know that I should never get stuck in a rut, for the reason that I do not know the whole plan that has been set for me. When you think like this, you can, and will break forth; this is when you will see an increase and praise. I hope that all our dreams come true, and we can all start anew. I hope, that we can think, all are choices through. Now I am hoping, that I can let you know that, you have an angel too. I hope that everything is going to work out for you. The angels will save you and me, in times that we are on our knee. I hope the tower and their clans will forever let me be. I hope that everything will be understood so all of you can see.

(About six months back)

Nevaeh- The night that I was saved differently, I am only sixteen but the time is right. I could not stand living here another day or night, in 'The Land of Many Steeples' in the house of lost and lonely dreams, it was time for me to spread my wings and fly away from this land of misery. The day finally came and he saved me from the hell that is part of my existence. The boxy chariot with its small oblong taillights arrived near my doorstep.

He greeted me with the presence of compassion. For I was looking down from the window, yes it was supposed to just be another date night. Yes, he arrived to sweep me off my feet once again and take me away. Hope was not very pleased with the onset of him being in my life… But there was nothing she could do at last I was contented, and that is all that mattered. She would not let me go on my dates, so I waited around until it was night outside, and she was asleep! That is when I would sneak out, and get away for a while, with him. Yet I think I got pregnant on date number one, yet I am not sure.

(Looking back)

I remember all the dates; we would drive through the town at night, and do all kinds of wild things. Besides, look at the stars in the back of his ford bronco truck with a blanket at our spot, as the baby was asleep inside of me, this was about four months ago, or so.

(The first days together as a couple.)

Some of our dates started right after my school day, he would come and get me, and I would not come home until my curfew or not at all. We did not have much money, yet we always had fun just being together. Like this one time, we went kayaking in or swimsuits on the gently flowing river, and then afterward we had a picnic lunch, simple dates, but always fun. Yeah, that is right, we only had three normal dates before; I know I was indeed going to have a baby. Are craziness slowed down a lot after that fact, yet we still went out.

(The revolution)

I remember the night, I was saved about nine and a half months ago; I was not wearing anything more than my pink nightgown, which I put on in a rush it was not on fully. I leaped down the staircase and exploded through the heavy wood door of the dwelling. I sprinted down the long lonely path that seemed to lead to nowhere, and that is where his chariot awaited my arrival. I know what the plan is, and what it was going to instill. 'Oh yes, we know what we're going to do. Nevertheless, for freedom, it had to be done like this.' At last, we are finally together so that all things would be all right once more. The tower has crumbled and her words are muffled, my life was starting to feel as if it was complete.

Finally, I had my chances to run through the cornfields of ecstasy hand, and hand, laced with desire. We were hoping and praying the night would not end, so we would not have to ever return to 'The Land of Many Steeples' once again. We saw the stars with its moonlight, while

the thoughts of everything else was out of sight. So, the next day it was a Saturday, the weekend, so my boyfriend came to pick me up at my home for our date. Yet that did not go as planned, Hope was furious because she knows I was not home the night before, yet she and I were on the outs anyway. As well as I just do not care what she thinks anymore, plus I just had about enough of her bull shit?

Yes, I was being rebellious, yet I needed this free will.

Hope made it very clear that I was not going anywhere with him, she slapped me across the face, and pulled me away by my hair, and said that I was not going anyplace with him, that we are never apart, and that I need to stop being a whore for him just to lay-around with. Those are her words, not mine! As soon as she went upstairs to change into her nightdress that she where's most of the time.

My boyfriend and I left the kitchen where the fight took place, Hope said- 'I had enough of this… I am going to change, and when I get back down here, he best be gone- you hear me.' That is when he took me by the arm into the living room, to have a fast heart-to-heart about what just took place; we were sitting on the loveseat, with me on his lap, and his hands placed on my tummy.

He said, 'We should go… come along with me!' I replied- 'Where should we go?' He said- 'Anywhere but here, you need to get away from this. 'She is unstable.' -He said. We were whispering in one another's ears the plans to be, however you already know some of them. Nevertheless, I made it very clear to my boyfriend that I felt uncomfortable about the situation, and I said we should wait. And- his reply was 'What are you waiting for trouble?' He took my hand and we ran across the lonely lane to his chariot; he was so nervous that he flooded the engines.

The engines were- like- clanking and grinding. You know what- I am going to come back to that, and let the suspense build-up, I know- don't you just love me?

Anyways this reminds me of the first time Chiaz and I went out together after one of my school days. There is nothing like kissing in the rain. Oh, that night in the cornfields is love, at last, was realized, it was meant to be.

Yes, the clouds were overhead, but we did not care it just led to things getting even more passionate for us, the rain started to fall nonstop, as we were rolling around on the mud-covered ground. Our lips locked and eyes fixed on one another?

Everything was so amazing and amplified by the thunder, both of our hearts pulsed. Like raced along with its rhythm of the perfect shower; as he picked me up in his arms, there was one arm under my butt, and the other placed on my back, as we found our spot for the first time to do what we longed to do. As he ran with me held in his arms and underneath the bridge structure, we went. Below that part that is still standing, where we were covered from the rain, which was pelting down like a monsoon.

He placed me down to stand on my own feet. That is when we embraced closer than ever before. Then he began to take off my soaking wet schoolgirl uniform, starting with my top down. Which was just clinging to my body. My top was so wet that it was clear; he could see my pink bra, which was underneath, and he said that he liked it.

My white blouse was speckled with the mud from the brown and tan ground, which splashed upon us as we ran. Yet I did not care the uniform it was going to lay on the ground, at some point anyway. My skirt was just lying flat on my legs as if it was sticking to me. He was pressed up against me as we stood as one, at that same time we said to one another- 'That we have been waiting for this moment all of our lives to be together like this.'

He raised my arms to pull my top off, and to remove the bowtie I were, as I removed his blue T-shirt up and off, at about the same time. Both are tops where like ripped off, and just thrown to the wet ground. As the dripping stream from the collapsed railroad bridge track so high above us was falling on us in trickles, as we stood together.

He did mine without even unbuttoning it completely. Then our fingers joined, just for his hands to slide down my arms to my hips and back up, and his fingers brushed along my body so softly. I remember how he tugged my skirt down, and off me completely, to the point I was showing everything that made me a girl to him, I was alarmed yet thrilled, and the adrenalin was pumping all at the same time, I knew this was perfect. After my plaid skirt fell the rest of the way down to the ground, I step out of it and kicked it out of the way right into a big mud puddle.

As he was unsnapping my pink bra in the back of me in a fast trembling passion at the same time. Around the same time, I was unbuttoning his jeans and sliding them down to his feet,

and then I jerked his gray brief underwear down to his feet. Only to see what made him a man, that was pointing right up at me, all up in my face, and of course, I took care of that!

Likewise, we had missionary sex for the first time in the dirt. I recall that he was on his knees somewhat, and I was on my back with my hair in the sludge, as his hands were holding my knees down, and that is when our miracle was formed and united. As he deposited the seed of his cells deep inside of me, that all embedded in me, and that became her. Everything went just like my dreams, which I have had in the nights of the past. Yes, we made love under that bridge, looking out over the golden fields, and the miracle began, it will be nine months of transformation until we could see her face for the first time.

~*~

Nevaeh- He is warming me up for sex. Me- I pulled her underwire off to the right side, and we both can hear my vagina, slightly hair covered. Her- my lips not yet parted by anything of his yet, just me feeling around; so, he could see. Then his hand softly starts stalking me, at that point in the stocking and touch of both are fingertips and my hand on top pulling up and down in a rhythmic pattern on me. -I cum-ed, so- tingling- with a bleached, white and silver surge overflowing out of me, as my strengths inside were pushing it out… and I could see that moving up and in too. Me- then I kiss around… not yet going down and tasting as my tongue goes, all the way into her vagina. Her- he was intrigued by my hood, and how it is covering it all furrowed up the skin for it was hanging off ever so nicely, he said. He- and I saw it slow pop outward for me, her clitoris that is… it was changing, and soft pink, and I could see the button like thing come out at me. Awe- the smell of sex is on like anything! I love the scent of a lot of things and this is one, for yah.

~*~

I want you to smell everything I have asked you to, you can get the memory more that way.

~*~

Him- It was for sure fully covered by at least a half of inch of fleshiness that hangs skin was the only showing part at first, in-between the tightened lips looking at me sweetly, just wanting and sitting cutely to be pulled back, and like the lips apart for my kiss.

Her- Oh, and I could see her there now, that I was slowly being turned on to him doing this to me. Me- It was good to see her getting turned on to me. Her- I was laying on top of him at this point; we were wrapped in like around each other's bodies. Her- In the wraparound poison I might add, awesome for... for me, Him- me too! Her- And to have a malleable orgasm, with his at the same time going off. Nevaeh- Um- honey are we saying too much here- Me- Nah, Love, I think they get it! Okay then- here it is- I am quite yet not when I getting off with my man! How does it work? Me- shit! Say it all why do not yah!

Her- Um ok-ie-dockie- he was laying on the bed, with his legs outstretched.

Then I climbed him… Me- and she's is so-o tiny…! Him- I love her going all over me like that. (Taking together holding hands, being cute-z, and being awkward about their love life, yet so in love, interview- like. 'It's the quiet ones you have to worry about.' Said the questioner named- Steven.) (Showing everything.)

I am working my way up to him, and then I wrap my legs around behind his back, while he pulls you towards him. Then you move up and down at a speed to suit you, and me that is a fast as I can go… Until he screams out my name as he doses mine; you get very deep penetration, and can kiss throughout, and God does with making out, just see and hear that, he is so easily squeezing my boobs which he'll love, and so do I when there been pushed up. Just suck on me, please! What do you want… sucked? I said- Everything! (In a sexy whisper) I can do that! (With a sticking look on his face.)

I say this is my: 'Love position. It Hits the G-spot every time. EXCELLENT! Wrapped around as tight as our two bodies could be holding each other, he was bending in upward for me as I was sliding up and down on his nude and abs chest, my boobs and nipples caressing him and giving us both shivers. Until she said, I am going to come! Breathing hard and fast like us in are thirsting, in and out seeing her vagina wet, and squirting all over my body. She licked her fingers, and said- let's do it again, just having it all rub in… flip me around, not having one time be enough; so, he makes the bedrock and rattle, as I am in the reverse sitting position. His breath blowing on my back my- hair in his face, and his hand rubbing up and down my backside feeling my butt, and I go for the ride, and it goes off even harder than the last ten times.

Truly, the miracle we needed! I remember how he kissed my lips, he kissed my neck, he kissed my chest, and he continued kissing me, all the way down my body, and back up all over

again. He is truly incredible every time, with making love. What can I say, yet I love him, maybe that is why I feel that way? 'It cannot be bad, with the one you love!'

~*~

Now that moment is part of my history and story. I can still see

it in my mind, all the wet coverings as they fall to the drizzled ground. As well as how it was so cute to see him having difficulty in removing my shoes and socks, it made me feel as if nothing could go wrong. Afterward, he and I were covered in all that grime and whatnot. Way too muddy and sticky to get back into his truck. Therefore, we rinsed off together, out in the rain slightly. We walked up to the truck hand and hand. However, our clothes were not salvageable, that we took off- so we just carried them in our other hand as we walked away from our spot, and we just threw them into the bed of the truck, when we got there after the small hike back up the ridge.

Naturally, we drove to his home with a blanket over us, all cuddled up in the front seat. While hoping that no one would see us. However, I am sure someone, if not all the town's people, which were out and about at that particular and unmistakable time did. I am sure there were someone's eyes on us the whole time!

It was an overwhelming and tremendous night, one that I will never forget as long as I have this life to live. Using the basement door and the steps going to the first floor.

I remember how we snuck past his mom Bethany who was engrossed in a television show, as she was laying on the sofa in their living room. Tiptoeing ever so gradually. Without making a sound and of course, I had to sneeze and pee badly. Nevertheless, I held it all back as much as I could anyway. We did not need to be busted, like this!

That would be hard to clarify. I mean he has a cool mom, but not that cool. His mom looked up as we were halfway across the room and she did look around because she thought she heard a thump in the night… and she did. It was me tripping on the floor rug or extension cord or whatever that thing was. So, we dropped to the floor behind the couch, like we were dodging an oncoming missile-like they must have in world war two in the battlefields.

We did not need this bomb to drop on us that is for sure! Besides, I did not want to have to drop the bomb of what we did on her; because she would have unleashed the F-bomb on us

many times. You can understand why, like one me being underage. The others you can predict! I know she would have exploded on us. Yet about a three or four weeks later I remember, that bomb was dropped on her and Hope.

We were like- 'Surprise, we are having a baby!' -And the war started on us! The question where flying past us like oncoming round or fire! Bethany- 'I still can't believe that my baby is having a baby! I am going to be a grandma?' So anyway at that time, I was thinking, I would have died once more that they would kill us, and I would be seeing him as a spirit too, as I would look over his grave. No- we did not die, but we sure got into a lot of trouble, him more than I did shockingly. Because he is over eighteen, and I am not of age to have sex with anyone, because of what they call full consent laws. Hope could have pressed charges if she wanted too. Though, I pleaded with her at the time not too!

Anyways back to what I was saying, that just did not need to happen, right then and there. Finally, we made it the rest of the way on or hands and knees, Chiaz was behind me with his face bumping into my butt. There were a lot of things going through my mind, as you could imagine. At last, past the door, away we were in the hallway, we got up on our two feet, and we went and showered off entirely together in the bathroom. That is when we showered one another off completely.

After we ended up in the laundry room and he got me something to were of his, it was a black hoodie and a beige pair of shorts. He asked if that was good, and I said- 'That is all I need.'

He got a white- T, black underwear and dark red shorts for himself. Then he even put my uniform in the wash, for me at his house. Yet I knew it was not going to come clean. However, it was sweet that he tried.

(Runaway)

Now let's get back to that day that we chose to leave. Yes, that flashback is over, and this one is about to start- I remember that Hope was running after us screaming with a frying pan in one hand and a branding iron in the other.

Shrieking- 'You bring her back to me, or I will have your ass mounted over my fireplace, and I will get you… jackass for kidnapping too.' We ran to the truck as fast as possible, and I got in the passenger side, he just jumped through the driver side window headfirst.

The key was fiddled into the hole, and turned; thus far, the engine was backfiring and making a hell of a lot of rackets, which was not promising; the damn thing did not want to run. She was nearly at the bumper, and the engine turned over. The vehicle finally started and knocked to life in a spitting and spitting sound, with a jolting motion. All the same, we were moving forward. Then hope was left to eat our dust as the wheels spun out, as we raced on down the path doing like sixty-five or more.

After a very long chariot or truck ride like a full day, I was asked the question that every girl waits their entire life to hear… yes, it was perfect, just like it was when he gave me my heart-shaped diamond ring. On the drive, I remember him saying- 'let's elope, together, I have a plan! Furthermore, when we come back, I will get my mom to sign it, the marriage certificate, so it cannot be annulled.' Plus, he got me three new dresses along the way, and a ticket! The night we left, I was fortunate, because I kept all my identification, like my passport and birth certificate all in one yellow envelope in the hall table. So, all I would have to do is just grab it, as I went out the door.

That is what I did. Just like all of the things he needed were all in the glove box. I knew we were going far away some-day, I just felt it, yet I did not know he was going to pop the question when we left! I have a photo of us there, that day also it shows us, as we were boarding are shipped to leave Norfolk Virginia. The picture displays us standing in front of this enormous ship's arm and arm. Yes, it was a glorious moment. Just like the name of the liner, which we got on. A photo, it is something I will always remember, and, yes just like the moment when Chiaz Natherth said- 'Will you marry me?' And I said- Yes… for three reasons.

One: He will always be there for me. Two: I needed to get away from the dwelling of lost and lonely dreams and 'The Land of Many Steeples.' Three: I am pregnant with our child; which no one knew about at the time. It was the right thing to do, he thought, and he loves me! Then, for five or more days, we saw nothing but deep blue ocean in front of us, with no connections to the outside world.

Yes, we were free to do whatever we wanted, on the boat deck, and in our stateroom. We went to these lovely enchanted islands that are far from our homes, with its cascading palm ferns blowing in the breeze, yes, the trees leaned over the Pacific, with smooth and as far as the eye could see. The sand in which we wrote our names in, to enclose with a heart, which we both drew around, with the date.

Oh, yes gone away for the lands that we knew; only to return as a family, at last, the plan was accomplished no longer a forbidden, as we were oceans apart from 'The Land of Many Steeples.' Not even a distant ship on the horizon; no one's lies or eyes could find us. We were in a peaceful paradise.

I remember when we applied for a marriage license on one of those nights.

Yet we had to wait forty-eight hours before the big day. Yes, knowing that I was only sixteen at the time, but I said I was much older, and he is somewhat older than I, yet we both said- 'I do!' We did it! Anticipating many repercussions, praying that Hope would not have the license annulled, for the reason that I was underage at the time.

The journey home was mixed with emotions, we are joyful because our honeymoon was on a luxury cruise, but will all of them be blissful for us? We are back in the land, and the news is out! The phone and walls are lighting up with an explosion. Nevertheless, is this good or bad? We just do not know yet!

Chiaz- our wedding night was a lot like the first time we were together, I remember the first time we kissed, and it was like that all over again, with her.

I remember saying our first kiss ever, thinking back- 'I would love to kiss your lips.' Nevaeh said to me, that she was afraid that she might be horrible at attempting a sweet tender kiss. I said do not overthink it, and if you feel that tingling feeling, it will be amazing for both of us; it cannot be bad you have to try to know, and you are going to know when we try!

I care about you so do not worry you can take it slow. I told her that whatever her heart was saying to do she should do it, just go for it… live for the moment. I looked in her big beautiful blue eyes, and everything was even more perfect, it was beyond belief, and the kiss lasted longer than I thought it would, like three minutes, yet it was incredible. That first kiss with Nevaeh it was not like the type of kisses, that we have seen the other couples doing in the halls of school next to their lockers.

This was certainly, her being loving and her being so innocent.

Without a doubt in my mind, I loved how she feels when she is kissing me. I just love how she feels next to me; I love everything about her! She is always so thoughtful in an

unidentifiable way, the wonder of it is incredible, and all I can think of is that moment when I touched her lips with mine, I knew the reminiscence would last endlessly, with her and me.

On our first date, and she knew that nothing would come between us, she got over being shy with me, and our relationship bloomed, faster than anyone would have imagined, yet that was the strategy. It is like in the spring whenever I look up to the blue skies above, I am in awe of it. It is like I am looking into Nevaeh's eyes so heavenly, and then the tears that she cried reminds me of the warm summer showers, that made us bloom and grow, like the daisy and Lily flowers, that she loves so much. I recall her saying 'I am not scared of being with you on our first date.' That is what she said to me, yet I knew she had the butterflies flying around next to her trembling heart, as I did. Yet we knew what we were going to do was the only way to stay together. What else can I say other than miracles do occur and they do come true! We, at last, had found out what true love was, and what it was meant to be loved… truly we are in love.

'LOVE!'

Oh, love is meant to be what you care about in another individual, that you just cannot stand to live without. As well as if you love her, you have to love everything that she has, or do not have at any given time, and I love everything she has got on her body. I love everything about her personality, I love her voice, and I love her smile and her laugh. I love the entirety of this girl! I would lay down my life to be with her.

Yes, yes, I would, and she knows that.

Besides, you mostly have to have contentment, pleasure, and joyfulness more than any other feelings in that fact. No matter how painful any other feelings may be that you might face someday. If you love them, you need to be okay, with whatever they want as long as you both can stay linked together and joined as one beating heart forever. I know that sounds foolish, but it is true. 'As a little lady, Nevaeh believed in the perfect gentleman, her hero! That would kiss her awake. I… did not believe, that I was that very boy for her.' However, I was! So-o, I was going to make sure that I always treated her like my little fairytale princess. 'Nevaeh used to joke saying that I guess that I had to kiss one frog, to get to you my prince charming.'

The first time I held her oh so tightly to me, with my eyes fastened somewhat frightened by her. I was questioning in my mind at the time if something in my life had ever been so flawless and meaningful, and yet made me so nervous all at the same moments. I am so smitten

with her, and the sensation was even more magnificent than I ever fantasized, that it possibly would have been, it is just amazing! She asked me 'Are you falling in love with me?' Besides, I said- 'I always was in love with you, I just couldn't be!' 'Do you want to make love to me I asked?'

She smiled at me, and without hesitation, she said- 'Yes!' and that- 'We don't need to have it be perfect, as long as we fit perfectly together.' I was like all right then! At first thought… I did not know what that meant, but when we linked our bodies together as one, and in a peaking ending, that was inside of her, I knew perfectly what she meant. Hoping that the kissing would not stop throughout, I kissed and tickled every part of her small body, and she would sigh in delight…! I knew I want to be with her forever, even more after, I was hoping we made the miracle happen that night!

Yet I do not think she thought I was going to do that. I will never forget Nevaeh saying, I know you want me! Like I want all of you, I want to, I need to taste you, feel you inside me, and I know that you have been dreaming about me since we were really little. Besides you know you want it. I recollect saying I feel the same way about you.

I remember her swallowing down hard, and saying I want to do this more than you even know… while she was gasping for the words, of course, I have dreamed of this moment with you. She said, that she fantasized about me since she was about eight years old, every night, to the point she could not sleep. I do not know if she would like me to say this but… she whispered to me that she would think of me while she licks her fingers, and reach down and tickled herself until her fantasy would peak with a thrilling squirting spray, that drizzled all over her bedsheets. Anyways she said, that gave her warmth and satisfaction and keeps the demons away. Within her body and mind. Too much information, yeah, I no! Afterwards her dreams would begin as she would be relaxed into a deep slumber holding her teddy bear as if it was me. That is what she said to me!

Nevaeh- I not can believe you said that!

Chiaz- sorry, While too late now…! Nevaeh said- 'That's okay- I guess, keep going now, and try to keep it PG-13 AND IT IS.' Chiaz- Well… that night under the bridge, she was so wet down there and so tight, she pulled my pants down so fast the button zipped like a stone on the

ground. Her breasts shined in the light, and her nipples were pointed as if they were looking at me as we were making love. How was that…? 'Oh boy!' -Nevaeh said.

~*~

(The spot)

Chiaz- Yes, she was staring at me sweetly; everything on her was bouncing up and down as well as around. Her hips smacking into mine, she said, that she loved me on top of her, and she had her legs and her arms wrapped around me. I remember sliding down her skirt that night and sliding her bra off of her petite little figure. I remember her fingers touching me everywhere, I remember putting my fingers in places I had never had them before. She made me tingle and still does.

She was so gorgeous when she was looking up at me; well she was on her knees. Nevertheless, nothing ever compared to her legs spread out before me, she had one of the most-savory flavors like strawberries, which makes me want more. I had never felt anything like this before, in my life when I entered into her. I will never forget her blue eyes rolling, the sounds she made, and the faces she made out of passion, it still takes my breath away. We went for about two minutes or more; she was moaning the words like, 'Yes,' 'Oh my god!' 'So, this is what I have been missing out on.' I can still hear her moaning. That was when I said, 'I will love you forever.'

Nevaeh- that so-o was not PG-13 Chiaz. I do not know what that was…! There is a thing called, being too truthful- you no!

Chiaz- sure…! I will never forget afterward, she began to cry so hard that, droplets with mascara run down her sweet little face. So, I like to hold her in my arms all night when she stayed or I would over. Until she falls- asleep, with her had on my chest and her arms holding onto me. She said she liked hearing my heartbeat. Naturally, ever night with her was an amazing night. But I feel like she does there is nothing more exhilarating than the thunderstorms, the pouring down rain… you know that everything is better when wet! She would claw her nails into my back to the point my back was bloody. As I crested her sixteen-year-old body as lightly and softly as possible, yes, I have scars to this very day, just like a permit tattoo of devotion.

She was just what I was looking for in my life. We were the love that we both needed yet never had before in our young lives. We brought joy to one another, just the same as we do even

now. What more can I ask for? I remember all the classes and sitting behind her wanting to touch her hair, because it looked so soft, and looking at her backside, I felt a high just by being in her presence and smelling that scent that was uniquely hers that never changed. I remember some nights when she would climb outside the window of her house, scaled down the high trellis that was littered with roses in the summer nights; in her nightdress just, because she said that she was lonely for me.

Her house was right down the path from me. Just like that, she would be standing in front of me in my room at night; she would take off her night top and place it on the rocking chair that was next to my bed. Then she would crawl in with me, and hold on to me so tightly, that I felt that she was suffocating the life out of me, and she would go back home before the sun comes up. This is when we first started dating. She always fell asleep resting her head on my chest, she must of- felt safe in my arms. I guess that is why she was always so tired to find love. I guess that is why she loves me, I was always there for her, and after everything she went through, she needed me. Plus- she said that she liked to hear my heart pounding. There is nothing more I ever wanted, or to be then was her hero!

Come to think about it I really cannot hear the heartbeat at all, I wonder why, I know she has a pulse? It is interesting that when she is asleep, I check on her often. You know there is nothing more comforting than hearing her snoring away, she is so adorable! I look around the room, and the white laces on the windows are tied back, with lavender ribbons. I know that she is content, holding her teddy bear and me, under her canopy bed, she may be young but as for now, she will always be the little girl that I want to be with. The crystal chandelier is dimmed as low as it can go, with a soft glimmering creamy warmth, in our household.

Nevaeh- Chiaz, I am going to stop you. You are getting ahead of me, and wow, you said a lot! Maybe too much, don't you think?

Ha- if you say so hon!

Chapter: 26

The Games We Played

(About one year later)

Who thought I would be married at the age of sixteen and now I am seventeen, I surely did not foresee this. However, that is how life works unexpected adventures of togetherness with one person, that you find irresistible, or that is how the story should go. With me, it was a completely different tale. We were married on a golden Bahamas beach at sunset; an archway was behind us with Lily flowers on it to remember the garden angel, which is still protecting me. The water was in the color of light blue and seafoam green. I had a short white dress on, along with my hair blowing in the breeze. He was wearing a black tuxedo both of our feet squishing in the sand. Yes, we were both holding hands, and I got the perfect kiss at last! It was a small wedding just us, but once again, it was perfect! Then we got back on the ship and the honeymoon started for us.

Chiaz Natherth- (I remember about six months back) Nevaeh had not even finished high school yet, however she is pregnant with our baby. I was not there to see her in the halls because I am older than she is, but she told me all about it… and what it was like for her before me. At least they left her alone when she was caring for my baby, or at least that's what she said. Yet when people groom you to a label, you say things and do things, to protect you and them because of fear.

They make you out to be the culprit, and they make you feel guilty of just trying to get pleasures out of life. I would not know what it is like to be a victim like that, yet I know how that family can be. I have dealt with all of them and their manipulations. I would countdown the hours until I could see her again; it was nice for me to pick her up every day from school, she would be leaning up on the retaining wall of the steps or sitting there. We look forward to seeing one another and spending the rest of the day together. I still want to get to know everything about her; it is funny how lust turned into love, and now we are truly in- love with one another!

Nevaeh- as you all know I have a human life growing inside me. Now I know how Juno felt! I remember there was nothing more remarkable than seeing her on the ultrasounds monitor after she put the goopy stuff on my belly, and then Chiaz shouted it's a girl! All I remember about my trimesters is getting bigger and bigger, and my jeans, dresses and, undies feeling smaller, snugger and tighter, that he bought for me.

(The nine months are up)

I remember the night I gushed like the 1889 Johnstown flood, and I thought I completely peed in my jeans… that was not at all. I recall Chiaz was freaking out, and he got in the truck without me. At this time, I was living at his house with him and his mom, on the weekends. Then he realized that I should be with him… so he ran back into the house and carried me to the car. Furthermore- I was saying just get me there. He did like ninety-five down the country roads to the city. So, we rushed to the hospital, and I was wheeled into a sterile-looking room; and not any more than fifteen minutes later, I was on my back pinned down wide open for everyone to look at me… it is so bizarre.

They had no time for that spinal tap thing… so I was pushing everything out of me. That is just part of it I guess, you have to push so hard; that it all comes rolling out, and it is not like I wanted all that too. Nonetheless, the pain and me- screaming profanity was so worth it for me. Because that was the first time, I saw her face sliding out, and heard her cry. We are going to name her Jaylynn Lily Nazareth!

Looking back over all this in my mind at the time I thought about all the many unanswered questions, that I was going to face when she came, I remember all the many choices of what can or cannot that we can do. Yet I am not like most. I would never stop a beating heart, we knew that we were going to keep her, yet some said to get rid of her in the first couple of weeks, yet I do not know how someone could say that, like Hope and the cruel kids at school? Yet others were pleased for us like his mom and some of his friends. I know that hope was just looking out for me, and my future; however, I do not like how she feels. I know that she will fall in love with her when she sees her, I hope!

Hope to hold the baby- 'I hope you know that she is yours, that you did this to yourself, and I am not going to help you in the least. You need to see what being a mom is all about, I am not going to give you a free ride. You are going to have to work very hard to keep her. Yes, she looks like you, and yes I am happy for you if you are contented!'

Bethany crying joyfully as she is given the baby- 'I am so happy! You are going to have a good daddy, yes you are! Nevaeh, I know you are going to be a good mommy too, and if you two need anything just let me know, and I will do what I can!

Nevaeh- We both said thanks, and the families talked amongst themselves about her traits, that our baby girl has. Furthermore, what we need and the cost of everything to keep her a happy

healthy baby. Her name was questioned, just like they cross-examined our relationship- if will last together or not. At this point, I wanted to rest and felt that I needed to sleep.

Back then, I would never have thought- this was an option with me. I did what I did believe is right, and I am happy. With all of the choices, but will I be able to finish school? Is being seventeen too young to be a mom? What is it like to be a mother? Why doesn't the hellhole cover this in their health class? They just give you ways to prevent, yet not how to be a mother, who is supposed to teach this? I remember bringing her home for the first time, we made a nursery for her in my room, and we had a white bassinet for her. She keeps me tending to her nonstop, on the weekends he and I stayed together, maybe someday soon we can get our place. Her first bath was in the farm sink, and his mom got her all kinds of cute things to where it was hard to choose what to put on her. She always looked so adorable. A real-life baby doll.

(People talking)

Nevaeh- Talk is cheap… in all honesty, most people just need to mind their own business, I think. Either somebody wants to kick the shit out of you, or steal your joy. Stop making judgments about us! It all comes down to the fact that they need to feel needed. Just stop bothering me, go get what you need, and fight for it as I did, stop trying to take it away from me. Besides, keep this in mind as you are doing it- 'Do to others, as you would want them to do to you.' Why do you ask? Just because you might end up worse, off in what you are doing, than what you are seeing, and saying about others. 'Just remember when you point a finger at someone three fingers are pointing back at you.' Just like you can always tell when someone is on the dark side. They have to dance around the fires of destruction and torment, the flame within their eyes sparkles as you look at them, as they are children of the night and immorality.

Let's just say the sisters finally got their turn, for trying to kill my baby Jaylynn with her small pillow in my own home, in my room they stood over her one night. When hope was the only one home, and we were out for the first time all night without her. Hope caught and fought with all of them before they got the job done. Baby Jaylynn is still alive, yet it is a wonder that she is.

Hope spent three weeks in the Altoona regional hospital, which is about forty miles out of the way from our small town; because they all pushed her down the steps head first right through the railings. Then they dragged her body out in the yard using the rug, and then they completely

ran her over with the old farm tractor and brush hog, which they got running somehow. She must have called 911 at some point, yet did not say anything, I do not know. It was said, that she may not live much longer, it was just that bad. That she will need many surgeries to reattach her fleshiness to her body, I have to ask- why would they want to kill her? Who gave that order, and what would they gain in having her gone?

Would they think that I would not have any place to go?

What is the motive?

Is it to kill everything that I love? -Or what?

When the cops showed, they had no choice but to take them all away, even though they were somewhat reluctant. However, they were caught, red-handed! Ava was still sitting on the seat of the tractor, and the other girls were standing in between the wheel- wells fenders next to her up there. None of them were going to get them out of this one. I remember us coming home, to all that mess, and my first thought was where is my baby…! She was sleeping away, up in my room as nothing happened.

We called Bethany to stay with the baby, using Chiaz's white iPhone with the cracked screen, she came in her robe and slippers, she was there before they even loaded her up in the back. That is about the time I went to see if Hope was going to live or die. As well as, the paramedics said- it is not looking good. I remember getting in the truck and him driving behind her, as all the blood-red and butterscotch yellow lights and sirens were blazing. Certainly, that was the scariest night of my life up to that point at least.

Like, she is the only mother that I ever had, and I do love her… please live… please live, I was saying over and over, as we were speeding down the streets. As they were cutting her dress off, they were poking her with IV needles, and all kinds of big and small tubes and collection bags. As the ambulance rush down the road in front of us. After I was proven not guilty, and they confessed to what happened in the past. Because they could not get their stories straight to the investigators, I knew that they would get the crap beat out of them every day mentally and physically, by the guards and the other girls, just like I did. I hope that they run into that girl named Sabrina, she was the cracked bisexual, which had her eyes on me in the showers and lunchroom, which wanted me for her bitch, when I was there.

So yeah- I wonder if she is still there…? She like, killed her boyfriend. She was doing time with me when I was there. We were in the same group, when we were out for the little time we were not in our cells.

Sabrina- 'Undoubtedly, I killed the luscious dickhead, by punching in his chubby face, until his nose went up into his brain. Then I cut his dick off with a pocketknife, and I chewed it up with my teeth. So, I would shit it out the next day. He is nothing but shit to me anyway! Subsequently, he was nothing but shit to flush away. Uh-ha- He will never do another girl again!' (m-waa-ha-ha) 'Then I threw him in the river, and the fish got to snack on him until he came back up to the suffuse, and floated on top of the water. At that juncture, some kid girl found that dumb tub of shit…!' 'You know I would have gotten away with it too, if that would not have happened, I am going to get her for that!'

Nevaeh- she said that she did this because; he cheated on her with someone else or something like that. Truly- I don't really know…? That is the story, which she told me anyway, and she bragged about it all the time. That is another thing… she was certainly talking about things like that. Things that she did to people, boys that she smashed, and how she has been in and out of confinement scene, she was like eight years old. I am sure her future is lethal injection.

She said- I was hers in there, and I could not make friends with any other girls, though I knew them all… yet I did not know them at all, I was so lucky, and that I did not get a shank in my ass at some point. I remember how I had to become her slave and the guards just looked away, so she could do what she wanted with me, yet she would not let any other girls at me. I am glad I got out when I did, back then.

So now, the sisters are going to be locked away in their dungeon, like I was… because of them. That is only if their money does not get them out of this one like before… that is if they can buy their way out. Like they did in the past, panels of judges. It would be nice to know that they would never see the light of day again. Yet that is unlikely, yet maybe just at least for a while. I know that they're not going to get me now if they get some time, yet they may in the future, I can just feel it. At last, I will finally know who the tower is… the one that, is the head of that family organization. The witch said to do this all for me, and my loved ones, I am going to find out who has these Cosa Nostra-like powers.

The sisters always had that deceiving glimmer in their eyes that instilled the fright, and they hold on tight to what they want. They will not let go until they have your body, soul, or both. But- I guess that I won this battle, yet we still lost some life. They burn the fuel to keep the acknowledgment of the made-up past, apparently going. They try to lead us down the path of self-destruction; just remember with an idle mind that is Satan's workshop. We should have a mind at rest that has peaceful faith, that is not lazy.

Oh, how could I forget that on Chiaz's 19th birthday on July 20th of this year? Alissa and her gals hacked into his Facebook profile and deleted all his one thousand fifty-two friends off of his friend's list. In addition to that, the day before his birthday, they also got into his settings and locked out to his birthdate to his friends.

So, no one would know about it, to wish him a happy day. He did not know about it until the day was over. She must have new his password of: (givemesomeloven2) I felt so bad for him when he found out what happened. Like who thinks of that. It is so sick! Just like what that girl did to her boyfriend, sick is the only word I have for it.

Lily said- that she can now finally live a free eternal life. To quote her: 'The demons no longer have a hold of me. That the only justice that matters is from the cloud of witnesses that look over you and me.' The cloud of witnesses looks down on the earth, and we are graded by them every day, if we follow the golden rubrics and listen to what they say, we can live another day, if the Angels choose not to take us away. If we pass, we get our white wings, and what we have done wrong does not mean a thing.

The sisters and their clans are fallen angels on earth. Fallen Angels ring hate and pain, and tempt us to join their clan. They are swindlers to everyone; they make us think that they are virtuous, and although they are just demon angels of the gloom.

Fallen angels can look like you when I, we have to know what to deny if they cross our path. Demons can take on any shape or form that they desire if that is human or animal; my advice is just to be careful. Just like the snake under my angels' oak tree, it was Ava slinking around me, they can transform into any animal that they want to be. Just like those eyes that looked into my soul that night in my room, just like those eyes in the sky that used to follow me, and just like the raining upon me with their cloud of fog that led to the dizzying heights.

You have to see and feel to know what to do, and what to look for... if you see the fires in their eyes these are Satan spies. If you are tempted by them always deny them, and they will end up in the tangled webs of feathers, all the evil spirits should be gone forever if you have an understanding, of how to get rid of them.

Yet, they're never gone forever they come back to feed off of someone like you, and they did to me. That is full of life, and their goal is to kill you slowly, and steal your soul so that they can have it to live on doing evil. They worship the devil; I do not need to feel within me, I know it, I discern they do, that is how they got at me, yet my soul will stay in the heavens if I can help it. I do not have human red blood anymore for them to suck out of me, but I did.

Ava and her bloodthirsty sisters used to suck the life out of me through my 'girly parts' as they would bite down on me. That type of blood with all my other plasmas and body fluids is the type of thick gross stuff, that they liked the most. Because, of all the life, I and Lily, for example, would shed from the linings of our uteruses, that is what they thrive on the most. There cravings of any soul life, unborn or dead is what they live for. There living leads to death at some point for the victims. They want me because I am what they call an altering angel.

I guess- I have to prove myself. Yes, they love the blood of young live good living girls, which they can overpower, which is what gives them wicked life to go on and on and to do and do, and baby Jaylynn is a girl they wanted to bite and kill, along with Hopes soul. The day I became an angel on earth, I started to have this like crystalized sapphire blue blood that flows from my body when I bleed out from anywhere on my body, after that day I am what they hate the most. In this life, I have the choice I can pick aside, to go up or down, yet they want me to be down and dead forever, and they want me to burn in hell as they will.

Only if I choose to follow the divine master, I will go up and get what I want and need. Heaven's ranks could not decide if I should get into heaven.

Why?

Because of my suicide! Yet, because of the hell, I had.

Everything I went through, and have to withstand even now in this life. This all is the deciding factor of what they will select for me. I believe; they are trying to overlook me killing myself. That is why I have this second life, and why they cannot kill me. It is to see what I pick to do all over again. Because they do not think I belong in hell either, or that is what Lily told me,

for the reason that- I was so pure of heart! If I elect to deny the dark side, the sisters will go down to the core and burn in the eternal lake of fire forever.

For what they did to me and their others, if I elect to go with the dark side, I will become one of them, never will I do that, yet I could, I could someday have black wings, and harass the innocent as they do. Up until now, that is not me at all. I want to have white garden angel wings after this life, and help the girls, which have a living life like me, the first life before they do their unthinkable end, that is what I would like.

(What they said to the jury)

Ava in the courtroom- 'I liked it, yes, I liked it, and I liked sucking down on it, so hard, so fitted, so suctioned!' 'Yes, I confess! I like sucking her blood, and all the ones we got over our times. Yet no one will ever know that. -I thought, and if you tell, we will slaughter you… that is what I and my sisters said to them!' I am sure Ava was wishing, that the chains hold her down, and her sisters back, were on me, in there.

I am sure she was wishing that she had her homemade sock ball gag, which she used on me in her mouth after she said what she said so thunderously. It is like; she cannot help but talk and brag up a storm! I bet she wishes that she had her schoolgirl tie around her eyes as she did to me, so she would not have to see them looking at her on the stand sweating bullets with the questions being spit into her face intently.

Adrian on the stand in the courtroom- 'It was not me!'-she said, she was glaring at me with her greenish-yellow pussycat eyes, yet that is how she answered every question asked of her. I was thinking to myself yeah- She was too high to remember! The other two were not even questioned in the courtroom.

Yet their eyes on me looked like to piss holes in the snow, dark and yet flickering!

Why…? I do not know!

Yet they should the tapes of what they said, when they were questioned, you could feel the emotional state, from everyone but them, yet in the tapes, you could see the criminal minds of these girls, and that said it all, I guess. You could see the rage, temperament and the crying, along with the crazy chuckling and movements in the tapes, no not, for what they did to us, more because they were trapped.

They all got the max of eighteen months in the young girl's jail, and one- year probation. That is if they took the plea deal of saying they were guilty, and that is what they did. Without a doubt, I knew the emotionless and without conviction chilling look, which they gave me on their hard- icy faces, with their lips taught and rolled under the upper when they were taken away. There were going to be back for me someday soon, sooner than later I felt! I knew that all their hands that they threw up in the air would be on me once more for sure, or someone that I love.

Oh, hell or the internal lake of fire, you are forever alone, in your dark evil body, yes always a flame. You can hear the others as they cry and their murmurs of moans, you will be in constant discomfort. The others that have fallen with you can hear you, but you can never see them. You are always in a world of darkness even though you are on fire. That is forever and ever! That is if you choose to be part of the dark entity being realm. As of now I, feel- Something big is coming my way the divine master is not a small God. I feel that we are not meant to stay in one place for long periods. There will be increases in my life, new doors will be open that goes to places where I never imagined, and he has already planned massive things coming into my life. I believe that- new ideas, new advancements, and new adventures are coming the way I declared this to happen.

(Present time)

We all have trials of our faith, and the first place we lose us victory is in our minds. If we start to believe those lies then the game is over, but if we struggle the natural and unnatural fight of life with the intentions to think, we can start to act upon those thoughts in positive ways. However, we do serve a supernatural master, I know this; do not live your life surrounded by lies. You have to rise above them with the guardian angel that you have, and we all have one if you are a believer or not.

I am reminded of this scripture- The Psalms 23 (The LORD is my shepherd)

I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul: he led me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for he is with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. He prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: He anoints my head with oil; my cup will run over. Surely, goodness and mercy shall

follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. I feel that verse fits my story well at least up to this point.

Like always, one of the first society's folk to acquire the news about us being married, and what her girls did, was the Amsel sister's mother and dad. Their mom is in her late forties however, she spends most of her time in the bars and dressing like a fifteen-year-old hooker. As well as the other times, she knew all about me, like on the phone and the walls, and everything about me. Besides, what else is so unusual about all of this is, that she has to be friends with all the teenagers in the land.

I ask- Does that not come across as a bit odd? Isn't it strange to lust over teenagers? Plus- force those young teens into being part of your contacts. She wants to call me a pedophile, ha, ha, and ha! Just look at her walls, and you will see how many young people she has on there; she stalks everyone and makes them think differently about them then what they should think. It is not hard to figure out really. You just have to look and see and read between all the characters and the true story will be revealed, that is what I did, and what has become known to me. That is only if you choose to see what is going on and what is going down.

Stop looking away, and do not be afraid of their wrath, because I have cracked the code. Yes, you can feel free to speak to me and befriend me at any time or place you like as of now, since nowadays you know the true story. I have even seen cases where people have rejected the sisters, and they had to make a public video of why they are friends with the family, plus listing all the reasons why they are such a benefit in their life. It is sickening, to think that someone can scare another person into doing whatever they want, and whenever they want it to be with them.

It is as if it is all part of a mind takeover. They have what seems to be total authority and control over their mind, and they use manipulating games in which, they pinned down on their prey. Some of the victims never walk away. Just look at Lily Anderson for example, she never bothered anyone, but they manipulated and manhandled her until she could not take any more, so yes Adrian did kill her because she was a bully just like the rest of the clan and the keyboard avatars?

Once again, it is all how you view it? What do you think happened? What do you think about the bullies? Another victim was… do you remember the class feminist? Nobody knows anything about him, yet the kids at school said they were going to bash his head in with a

hammer, they judge this kid for being who he was, and that was what is called being asexual? He was not anything they made him out to be. It got so bad for him that he had to move away, never to be seen in our land again, did he choose to be that way, or did the others force him into that classification? Naturally, it was all created in the same ways, with one voice of slander, and yet another mystery that may never be solved.

'Some people do not try to understand; they just make failed comments.'

Just because you do not have a girl, pounding or nailing your hammer down does not mean you are gay. Do you remember when I said that everyone gets a turn, will Melvin have got his too? He was sending a text message while he was galloping down the double concrete paths from the city to the country to see his newfound lust. While sending one draft to the sisters, he swerved his chariot into oncoming traffic, the message was never completed, and that affected everyone's history's in ways that cannot be expressed. Let's see if you can figure out why this was significant to me?

Question- 'Do we listen with our eyes, or do we hear what we see? It all comes down to whom, and what we are going to be. Let's see are you what you want to be now, or will you be after what you cannot see?' The four sister's mother has been running around on her husband for years. Until now, nothing has been said about it in 'The Land of Many Steeples.' The husband Klein cannot leave because he knows that if he did his life would be over. Therefore, he stuck, a hell of a life to choose, or did he choose it? Did she force him into the marriage back then? Alternatively, is the contenting now that his wife is roaming around the town? It all comes down to fear, what do you fear? No wonder her children turned out the same way.

Nevertheless- who am I to judge, I would not do that! All I ask for them to do is leave me alone, but I know they will not complete. I still believe that there was something tragic, which happened in this woman's life. That makes her want to need and thrive on everyone's attention if she does not have your complete authority than she is miserable. All I have to say is the sisters picked on the wrong person when they chose me!

(Opinions)

Yes, love it is just something that you can feel. Like the rain on a warm spring day. Like the blossoms from the pear trees landing on your shoulders, as I walk, you're walking down the path to the bridge, similar to the haze from the golden fields; it all reminds me of when I got

everything I ever wanted. I remember Lily as she was to me, I believed at the time that- 'The spaces between our fingers were created so that we could fill them in as we held hands; She was just the right size for me in every way.' I still love her, even though she still with me it is not the same, yet I love my new life also, yet why could I have it them all, in my life?

Yes, I feel that I have walked in the center of the valley of death, and she has comforted me I would say that she is looking over me; she comforts me as much as she can. But- then it is not having her here, in her earthly body. It can be hard having faith in something that cannot be expressed in words. But- that is what remembering life is about, having faith that there is a plan for everything.

Chiaz- I remember her hands that I loved to hold the story that we told. We said that we would be together even when we got old.

Just like that song 'Remember When' that would be the story of our lives. That we would have bands of gold, and someday our babies to hold. No- I do not think she will ever get over her, yet they were so close. The sapphire blue eyes that looked into mine, lost in time. All the golden grasses blowing in the breeze, us kissing while we are on our knees.

She loves me, but I have to say she loved her more than me.

Maybe I am wrong; maybe she is just grief-stricken. It is hard for her to leave the past behind. When she is at war with your mind! Was I kind enough, did I leave her behind too much, things like this in such, is what is tearing her apart, so much?

What she did before is none of my business, yet I am concerned, for her well-being. Yet to get her help I would lose her. I just work hard at my job to keep from thinking about the pain she feels.

Our love is like the flowers in bloom all around in the spring, the trees with colors that display their majesty just for us, as we ran through them, so in love, but like them are we going to die too? I hope not! Yet I do not know how long I can go on working these crazy hours, and then she is like do not leave me again, it is so challenging just to make it in life.

Listening to her singing in my ears added to all the lust, she was whispering sweet nothings to, which I can still lightly hear. I was the only one she could trust, being together was a must for both of us. No matter what the weather, our love was forever and ever, I will remember.

Nevaeh- Nevaeh- I will love you forever and ever, try to remember, even when I am, absent from your mind!

Chapter: 27

The Tower Malicious Voice

Mazel Amsel- I have the obsession of destroying Nevaeh, she is so perfect, I cannot stand it! My girls have to be on top, and I am never going to let her be anything, I will make sure of it! That is what I have been doing for years. Nevaeh that no good little pussy licker; even if she knows it is me, she will not be able to 'Prove it.' I am just that well-liked by everyone, I am so powerful that no one will ever defeat me. I am the master manipulator, Nevaeh- yes, she is the tower! She is about for a hundred pounds, unnatural blond hair, lime green glowing eyes, and a voice that bellows! To me, she looks like a bulldog in the face, yet evil wicked witch-like also, yet to everyone else she blends in, to the others she looks as they do, just a normal mom, with normal kids. Yet I think she is crumbling, I think some people are seeing through her veil, because, of what happened recently.

Mazel- I have everyone wrapped around my little finger. Likewise, if they do not bow down to me, I will make their life a living hell. That is the way; I have to have it, all the time for Nevaeh! I have to know what she is doing at all times. I have to hack into her social networking and get her pears to think she is a 'Creep' and 'Stocker' to young girls. So, she has no friends at all. So, my girls can be the supreme of this area, so that they can do as they please, without anyone stopping them for being the best, no matter what, and from getting what they want, and what I want for them. Besides, foremost I wanted to make sure that she would never date anyone. So, I came up with the story of telling everyone that she was into girls and that she is just plain crazy. I should know my eyes are on her always. I did not want to see her go to proms; I did not want to see her succeed. I did not want her to be loved. I would like to see her die, and not walk away from it.

I have dreamed of ways to kill her repeatedly. Like this one, I would like to see her be impaled on a sharp wooden stick, starting through her butt hole, and then slowly have gravity have it go up into her delicious miniature body until it hits her brain, and she screams out my girl's names, as we get what we need. I would love to see a Nevaeh- kabob! I would love to see her stoned us out in the open with rocks! I would love to see my girls bite her nipples off with

their teeth! I want to see my girls claw her up to head to toe. I hunger to see them scratch her sweet blue eyes that are so heavenly right out of her face!

I want to see her gush that cobalt blood like a waterfall from her naked sliced up body. Yes, I want us to torture her any way we can until she says yes to us. We are going to get at anything of hers we can until she comes with us! As we would, all dance around her, as we would light her up, cheerfully for the last time. How I would love to bleach and fry that perfect hair with chemicals. I and we all in our family want to fuck her up and down anyways we can! Mwah Ha, ha! Yes, Beforehand, we all would kiss, touch, lick and stick her, and do what we want to get the life from her by sucking away.

We would eat her soul away as it would come down from the heavens then through her body, and into ours, as we would drink it out, the way we do. Yes, yes, hell- yes, I can see it now! Yes, I want her soul! Besides, anything or everything I can get out of her to add to my shrine. We even have a voodoo doll of her with pins in it I have a few things of hers like her hymen damaged red blood tarnished pink polka-dotted gym underwear, and her indigo-sh pantiliner she had on. That my girls ripped off of her in school, the more things we have the more we can control her mind, but I want more!

We want more!

We want and need it all!

Just like the one girl Lily; I have her one hair ribbon; from Nevaeh, I have something far more personal than her underwear, and it is on display too, and that was her virginity! Who knows that she was a little cock sucker too? How do I have it, you ask? Tee- he- Will I tell you- how! Now come to think of it, back then my idea was to drive her insane so that she will do it to herself… like she did; by not having anyone to confide in, I wanted that to kill her slowly, that was the plan.

Just like I was the arranger of her first sexual partner. I told him to pound the shit out of her, and pop her cherry so hard and fast, that the next day she could not even walk; plus, bleed for many days; which is how I got what is on display… I did this so that it would take everything away from her. If my girls do not have it, then neither does she.

I made the schooling system think that she has major problems, from kindergarten up through high school. I will do whatever it takes to have her fall! For the reason that I have to be

triumphant! It was a promise that I made to her mother. If I cannot have her mind, body, and soul, no one can. Yah, know I did not mind putting a bullet in her father's head, so I would have loved to put one on hers also. Yes, I should have gotten to her way back then, when she was just sitting in her playpens so defenseless.

Then again, I thought what the hell… it would be better to torture her, and make everything in her life a living hell for her! Why should I play god, when I can send the devil to her bed every night! Let's not forget to mention everybody showed up at her father's house right after the murder that took place. So, I did not have enough time to complete the job. Oh yes, her mother is a very good friend of mine, and I wanted to make sure that Nevaeh would have nothing. Nothing but pain, misery, and torture from me and my girls. Yes, without her ever knowing, that I was the one causing all the trouble in her life.

That is what her mom wanted me to do. Because Leah detested her dad with a passion after he said- 'I want you out of my life. Pack your G-D bags, and get out, and I am keeping her, and the only way you are going to get her is over my dead body. You are nothing but a cheap whore!' Hereafter, she told me, and I took care of it. It was a joy for me to do so! He always thought that he was so damn blameless and desirable and that all the girls around loved him.

Yeah right, I did not want him either, even if he would have wanted me, or asked me out! It all started as a fight about money for diapers and baby food, and things for Nevaeh, yet Leah wanted the money to get the necessities she wanted to get.

No, I do not think that she is high maintenance at all; if she needs a daily hit, well hell, she should go get want she needs. She just wants more, that he would not fund for her. So, if she does not get it, she finds a new man that can, and gets rid of the old goof, she has to get what she needs.

Yes, with us, the first taste is always free, then the debts start piling up, and you have to pay somehow! So, Nevaeh is what I got in a way, for what her mom owes us in supplies also, and he would not pay for her habit. So, I killed him for that reason also, and that girl will pay too! For not doing what my girls, and I want her to do! In a way, we own her life, and all the lives she is having has now, and had!

That night Leah left him; she threw, and broke every one of his classic rock records, on the floor and at his face. Then she jumped up and down on them! Before she came to us, good

for her, to stay for a while, nearly free of charge, so we placed her in a new town and, we got her the job she does, yet we get ninety percent of what she makes per- one session.

Oh, Nevaeh- if her mom could not have her, to beat on, in her life, then I was going to do it for my girlfriend. If she could not have her in her life, then no one would. Just because she did not get to kill her like her brothers and sisters back then, does not mean she does not deserve to die similarly! I will never back down. No one can ever defeat me! I am all too powerful. Not to mention my girls and their friends will spread the rumors around like the plague about her, so nobody will ever want to be associated with Nevaeh.

Whoever refuses me will either pay dearly, or they shall die. Who is ever going to stop me, I know for sure she never will, and neither can you! The day she joined in matrimony with that boy, that was for my Alissa, I was beyond livid! I will do my flipping best to stop all of this now… even though she defeated me, by doing it.

Who would have thought the dumb simple-minded Nevaeh, would get the best of me? Nevertheless, as you know I will get her, I will get everything she has, wants, and wishes. We will get to her soon!

That is a promise!

Nevaeh

Book: 5

The Cursed

Breaking on through to the other side; my life is it coming to an end, yet I have nothing to hide, life is a journey that takes you on a dark ride. When you can see, and understand there are the doors of deception in your mind that doesn't subside, you will understand that life is like a red river that comes in tides, as you try to make your strides.

All I have left are the memories and the people that died.

However, I can at least say that I never lied; I recall all those that cried; all the ones that were denied. At least we can say we tried, and never gave up even after diving into the other side. Now the gates are open deep vast and wide.

Yet it is going to be me, a witch walk's on the inside? Who and what will deny.

~Neveah~

Chapter: 28

Unloving Mouthful

Nevaeh- I could never let my enemies have the last words, you should know me better than that! So… can you see into my life, just like snapshots, of the past, present and future? Do you know what has taken place? Can you see all the evil entities, and all the good and wicked faces? Can you see, and feel all these different places? Can you hear all the voices reaching out to you?

Chiaz- So, the myth has it that Mr. Amzel was out in his yard during a storm digging graves for his two stepchildren Gracie and Grant. They went missing about oh let see, six months back. Their real mom was a crack-head, so they adopted both of the kids and the mom, they said died from overdoing it one night.

Thus far, it is like that family takes kids in yet, they never come out, and if they do, they're not the same! It is like they all acted the same ways, and wanted to do the same things. Something wild about them, that I cannot clarify if they were all living in a controlled biodome getting probed in that house like they were just there for them to test on or something like that. Yet that is unlikely, but maybe, something's not right, about what they do to them.

When I was there and seen the kids the little, I did in that big house, that they took care of, it is like everyone one of them had the same expressions and acts the same, it was so unusual. They would play, yet not as kids their age would play. It was almost like the boys and girls would lust over having one another's affection, and they would all sleep together.

That is what I found so weird. It was told to me they would dress and undress one another, before sleeping together, and that the boys and girls would shower once a week together. She

said that was the most economical way to clean them all. Alissa also said that they all had a classifying idem, that they give to them, so they knew how they belonged to them. Yet what that is, I have no idea at all.

I do not know if they went outside or not to play? I did not see much when I was there with her.

I found out that some groups were placed in poorer rooms. Which I did not see in that house, but I knew they were there. Yet where they are located, I do not know.

Yes, everything was routine for them. To me, it looked like the orphanage from hell! Alissa used to say to me when she made me stay over, that was the best way to take care of all of them, as they do.

Therefore, they took the kids in and homeschooled them so they said. Yet no one knows what happened to him or her after they went missing? I wonder how many kids there where that went missing?

Nevaeh and I remember Gracie she was a cute young fragile nine-year-old, a long-haired redhead with tan freckles.

We recall that she had dark misty sienna eyes, which would fixate on you when she would look at you. They were dark with the colors lying within the inside of the pupil, that was asking for longing the deeper you and gazed into them, it was like she was running to me with her eyes, for help, yet she did not move from their legs. I do recall that Neveah and I would see her rarely in the town looking startled, with one of the Amsel girls; she did not look as if she had lived in her body. The boy they did not take out as much mostly because he talked far too much, -we guess.

She was the only one that we saw out of the fifty or so children in which they took care of. The same can be said for the boy, grant he had light brown hair, with a pinkish undertone. His gold-sh green eyes faded, with all creativity drained from them, just like them all I would presume. I think he was ten, he always seems to be distracted, he was a chatterbox, yet never said anything that made, you want to overhear, he would stutter a lot saying the words 'smack' and 'bite' over and over, yet I only saw him once in that house.

I do believe that there were- many erotic things going on between the kids just by the way they appeared; I would go as far as to say there was incest. I remember seeing Alissa with her after we got back; she would be glaring at me, as most would do in town. Maybe she was afraid I would say something, or maybe she just wanted me back even now, that she cannot have me. I do not know, how she feels, or what she feels, I never really did, and I do not care.

Gracie, this girl she was always so pale-skinned like she never saw the light of day much- I believe that she did not see much sun, she did not even know how to talk to anyone, other than a couple of minor phrases. When I was over at my girlfriend's home both kids along with most of the others lived up in a dark damp room, that I would call their attic space. With one or two double beds, pushed together that they shared, or so that is what I have come to believe. I was never up there, yet sometimes you could hear the laughter and their tears, and even slight screams.

You could hear their murmurs in the walls. I think I could hear them all being like rabbits and going at it, the thrusting thumps on the ceiling plus all the pitter-patter of little feet above! Yet that is what I was estimating was going on, and no my mind just does not think like that, something was very wrong! It made me nauseated just being in that house with her, it was that vile. Yet the lower parts that they live in was neat as a pin! Like all the girls' rooms, except for Allison, there was food all over the place.

Yet, Nevaeh she thinks she killed them for the need of their blood of life, a human sacrifice to their deity? Me, I have not made up my mind, I do not think they would do such things, to harmless kids. Though it is becoming more and more believable to me, after what Nevaeh said, and that they did to her and Lily. Therefore, he must have covered them up for her, out in one of these fields somewhere. Never to be found, and if they were found, they made it look like animals got at them. Nevaeh said when they get into their rage, they are like rabid wolf dogs, and I agree. Alissa never likes to see anyone bleed, she said it was hard for her to look at. Yet I do not think that was it at all. She just knew that she could not control herself when looking at it, which is what I think now. Nevaeh- I have a theory where most of the blood, and souls they take come from!

Mr. Amsel, he was killed by being struck by lightning in the rain, maybe digging graves with a metal spade shovel. I have no clue if this is true or not, but he needed to fry, if it is real or not, she needs to fry too, either way, he is gone also.

Maybe- she got rid of him, that is a thought? She does not love anybody but herself and her clingy girls. But, herself so much more! The death is all around them, I can feel that I can see them up there, yet like, do you understand, that some of them will never speak again, in a hellhole or land? They're just there, not to live, just to exist for their life, they give up, more and more of them it is never going to stop.

Who is going to stop them? I think they are bred for them to kill.

Yet they keep some to reproduce for their hunger of life!

The kids do not know any better than to become evil black fallen angels like them, it's all they know! Are you going to gain a victorious voice, and speak up in your land? Will you be there to hold someone's hand? Because life goes by like a grain of sand in all of the lands and yes this would be the time for you to do what you think is right. Would you help them! I would love to help them, yet we cannot, no one believes all those kids are even there. Plus, I think it would kill them being a part of ordinary life, they would not be able to live like us.

Will it ever be known…?

Chapter: 29

Who I Was

Nevaeh- Jaylynn's life, what can I say she is a tortured soul. I will let her speak for a while. Jaylynn- while… I am at the graveyard, and we are, up on the side of the knoll, I am with her… my mommy, right now.

This is where we talk the most. Strange, but this is where we feel the most- close to one another. I remember going for walks with my mom in the cemetery!

When I was younger like we do even now. I always loved the time we had. The same can be said with my dad like when I was five, dad would take me fishing in the antique boat, not too far out from the gazebo on the pond. Adjacent from the old watermill, about mid-pond we would be, and then together after-word we had picnic food, like watermelon and potato salad, as we sat on the bank of the pond. While seeing the many swans float by us, to say hello, and the sun beating down on us.

Time like those… I remember the most, yet they were all cut short. Mom and I talk about the time of the past often and how she tried to be there, yet she was not all there. What can I say I had a good mom and dad, I never wanted for anything? We were poor, but I was proud. I think about being a little girl. I remember my dad swinging me on the swing attached to the tree. I recall naptime, timeouts, groundings, and many good times, and unscrupulous times as well.

Remember- mom? Nevaeh- Yes, yes, I do- honey. I think so. Jaylynn- Do you remember taking long walks with dad and me. Then walking in the fields to the roadways, and then walking into town past the old olive- green train station?

Also, seeing everyone, that seemed to know us!

Nevaeh- Yes, yes, I do, yet only in fragments, so much has happened.

Hey, mom- Do you remember me being in the back seat of the 1957 Chevy when I was three, kicking your driver seat repeatedly trying to get your attention while blaring mommy? Nevaeh- How could I forget! I tried to give you as much time as I could, baby, yet was it enough for you.

Jaylynn- Never… there was never was enough time. I remember you taking me with you to get things, that we need for grandma Hope's house, too bad that I never got to meet her. I mean I did… but I do not remember, I was just a baby then, and she and I will never really speak even now, that just cannot be.

Nevaeh- she was a hard person to get to know, yet just like you and I, she was the only mother I had. Just like I was the only one you had, sometimes in life, you cannot choose, I am just like her, we did what we could, I see that now, yet I did not them. Just to think it has been almost sixteen years her stone has been there, along with the smaller one next to hers.

'Yeah… I knew who, that girl was.'- said Jaylynn!

'So, did I, her life ended far too soon.'- said Nevaeh!

Jaylynn- looking back on it, Mom she never really eats- all that much. I do not understand why. The older I got the harder it was for me to appreciate her, and her weird ways. Yet hanging out with mom, as a teenager is not cool either… maybe that was it. It is just nice to make up for it now. Now that no one cares.

I remember my dad reading to me, I loved my dad more than anything in this world. I always feared that he would leave my mom at some point. I always believed that my mom was a little crazy, she had a hard life from what I gathered, a life that I repeated. Boy- in so many ways. My only difference is that I did blame God, who else was there to blame for what happens, that is what I thought. Yet mom tried to understand that, yet she cannot for some reason. She was always cramming her faith in my face. I recall that I spent a lot of time to myself, in my pink room just like she did, I had her old room, and my cat Emily would sleep with me on my bed, and now Emily sleeps there without me saddened, as my mom said to me.

There was a day when I thought I would never talk to my mom again. Yet things happen and things change. I marvel at my thought maybe this was a good change?

I never really wanted anything other than us all being together as a family. I just wanted to be left alone. He had to get his hands on me! It was as if I was not even allowed to have a childhood, in all truthfulness. I know I had to grow up to fast. He violated me! Why would he do such a thing to me, was it love or hate? It just started with a touch of the hand, and them more and more, I was not going to stop it, because I think I liked it? Yes, I think I did…?

He made me feel good and bad all at the same time! I need my friends like I need my dad, and without his love, in my life, my needing for life ran on low, and he drained the rest out of me. I never wanted to do what he wanted me to do.

I just wanted to be a kid; I just wanted to be the average girl, like I have seen all around me in school. I do not think anyone loves me, the only one, which loved me like that was my dad. There were no boys out there, that wanted me because they knew, only one but he does not count to me. Because he would have done anything to get me to say yes, even if I said no. It was hard to find real love, because of who my mom is, and what my dad was. Yet I thought it was my mom, which destroyed my life. That she stopped me from being whom I was meant to become. I wanted to do so much and see so much. Yes, I love her for being my mom, but why did she have to be my mom. Dad was the only one I wanted, then.

After everything fell apart, I just needed to get away from the craziness, so I did, and that is why I am here now. The way I am, with my mom, it is so crazy I know. I never loved life; to me, there was no point in living at all. If I could not love whom I wanted to love and be with the one I wanted, it would have been so wrong. It was so wrong! I remember my first school bus ride

and I met my two friends that were Lexi Cruosin and Stephanie Colt. Lexi was a mouthy friend she grew up to become a cheerleader in school, and she left me behind.

She was everything I wanted to be at that age, I recall.

Stephanie was sheepish and clumsy tripping over her own feet. Yet, she was always there for me, until her friends stopped her, because of what they thought. Who knows they might have thought he would get at them too, as he did with me, sometimes in front of them?

By- staying out of trouble was the hard thing for me; I was always doing something to piss my mom off. She knew but did not stop it; I do not think she could have.

Until now that was all right, no matter what I did, I could never get her complete time, she was always in la-la land, back then. Furthermore, that made me hate everything about myself. Because, I thought that it was me, doing that to her. I recall my dad was the only one to say I was beautiful! As I said, I found most in school hard to get to know, yet they did not want to get to know me. So, I was classed like mom was also, for not doing anything that she did. Just because they think that- 'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.'

I had an old man Devolcano for music also, he did not think, I could play my trombone, with the rest of the class. Therefore, he used to say to me to go into the storage room that smelled like- rat turds and turpentine and learn it. 'And do not come out to you do.' -he would shout! 'Go make farting noises, and giggle about it mindlessly, with him, that is all you will ever do!' He can go and suck on my trombone slide! I can read, and I can read music, no thanks to him, and do more than he does. Unlike all of them think in his class, I can do a lot of things. Plus, my mom is more than he will ever be. He needs to stop saying shit about her!

My mother and I can count above four also. This was my education also, sitting in small rooms. Learning nothing while everyone laughed in my face. Never in a nice way while everyone else looked at me as if I was a hunk of shit. Thus, in the room with sluggish Steve the euphonium player, I went to whom he thought could not play or read or play music either. He and the class thought that all I do is giggle and make weird sounds together with him. Whatever- think what you like, about me.

Oh, yes- I would like to say to him, no- 'We are not a match made in heaven!' -so stop saying that we are.

Anyways enough about that, my greatest obstacles were- trying to understand- why. I always want to be the fix, yet I think I just added more drama, than what I was worth for everybody. I was a wild child in my younger days, and I grew out of that and became stone-cold, because of what he did to me. It is just like that; the family will never stop! I consider the most overrated virtue, that I had was not seeing what was coming into my life, and not caring about what I had. I threw it all away, and I went nowhere, but down. After I lost everything, I did not see the light.

I saw nothing- but darkness. Say- I am crazy also, I do not care!

I would lie all the time to others, I would lie about my name, I would lie about where I lived, I would lie about being stocked, and Isolated in school I was a liar. I should have never been born; me being born like everyone else was a lie too.

I know that now, but I did not back then.

I - Jaylynn liked to be part of the softball team.

I - Jaylynn liked to dance and sing.

I - Jaylynn loves picking flowers in spring.

I - Jaylynn also remembers the words that would sting.

I - Jaylynn wanted a fling.

I - Jaylynn wanted everything and had nothing.

I - Jaylynn is who I was, you know I was nothing inspiring. As a young girl, I all was like taking things apart, yet I could not always get them back together. I would have like to become an inventor; Edison or Tesla where some of the people I looked up too. I remember sticking a knife in an outlet just to feel the shock of it. I was always such a bright child! I loved the feel of the currents, I loved the look of electricity, and I wanted to be the one to make everything in the world run without having to plug it in. To make all things wireless! That was a dream, I was- a dreamer also! I think my imagination is why I could not keep my fingers off of things.

I even thought of mind control headsets to wear, to run everyday items. I never got any of those dreams. I knew that I would never have the money to do that. I always wanted a man like my daddy, yet I do not think there will ever be another man like him! He was everything that a

man should be. I always loved Chinese food, as dad did, he would get that a lot for us. If I remember right. I was the happiest just being in his arms, the loving arms of my daddy. That did not need to happen to him. I still do not get why, it did, was it because of me, or not?

The only talent that I had was being able to do many cartwheels; I am so lame, I no! That is what everyone thought of me, even mom! Mom wanted me to stay her little girl, but I had to grow up. That is why I like to cut myself, just like she did, just to see it bleed. That was fascinating to me also. Yes, I loved the pain, yet I love to run away from it too. I would have loved to have lived in New York, with all the lights and sounds, and people, that would not care about who I am. I would just be another face in the crowd. My most precious possession was taken away, so why even talk about that.

This is all I have to say; I hope I did not depress you too much. I just want to say, that I still love you mom, yet I cannot understand why you stopped loving me back then. Just for trying to live my life, yet maybe, I can fix it now for you. I have never stop loving my dad either.

I would love, to have a do-over in life!

Chapter: 30

Little Grownup

(Nearly fifteen years back)

Chiaz- Nevaeh is like the caramel, whipped cream, and the cherry on top of my sweet ice cream sundae! Caramel- because she is so sweet and innocent when with me, whipped cream- because she has the perfect complexion, that I love to kiss and caress with my fingers. As well as the cherry. Because of her small of her fragrance, and the scent of her hair that is sometimes braided; as well as the taste of her lips that, I kiss… and that kisses me so sweetly. All of that combined is one yummy flavor, which I want to last forever! I love our family! Yet looking at others I wonder. 'We make such a cute-z couple, and we have a baby that is too amazingly unique!'

Nevaeh- I thought what better way to end this part of the story, then with the miracle that ended all my torture in my life. Yet this is not the end at all. This was the beginning of a new story, which affected my life, and his in so many ways. Our little bundle of joy that brought us together and her precious name is Jaylynn Lily Nazareth.

She was born on May 19 of this year. She is 5 pounds and 11 ounces, with blue eyes and brown hair, as you can see, she is content clamped to my breastfeeding for comfort; as I sit with her in this hospital bed right after I gave birth to her. 'A baby girl will make is love stronger, the days longer, money tighter, our home happier, clothes shabbier, the past forgotten, and the future, so worth living for!' The new daddy and I went home the very next day. He moved in with me in the old farmhouse, we never planned on living there all that long, yet we did. So, now I have a family, and a kitten named Emily, now I have the photos on the walls of all of us. My life's mission has been fulfilled… or so I thought.

So, at this phase in my life, I am a new mother, I am still thinking about everyone looking at me in the delivery room. I was so embarrassed, let's just say that my loving husband made sure that everything down there would be nice and tidy before the big day.

Because I was too big to trim all of that up myself. Too much information- sorry. I have a bad habit of that, don't I? We had our new baby at 11:11 pm. That is when we started our new life as a young family. We had no money at the time, so I knew that it was going to be rough on us.

My new husband Chiaz found a job working in the south end coal mines, just to make enough for us to get by day by day. We were happy, and I was away from all of the ghosts and horrors of the past, or so I assumed. The curse continued to linger even though it was not affecting me anymore, remember how I said it is always passed on… that is so true; in more ways than one. In this part of my story, I have aged- a few years now. I am no longer that little schoolgirl; I am a mother, a wife. I have been watching my little girl grow up so fast, it seems every day it is something new.

Like her first bath, her learning to crawl, this little lady being potty-trained and even her first words, like when she said- 'Mommy!' We saw her first steps and have it on VHS tapes; she was walking from me and her daddy. I remember getting her a big girl bed. Yes, even her first day of school. Wow- how five years can go by so fast. Yet we were happy just to have her, we did not need anymore. Plus, we could not afford to. These days fly by like an angel in the night, and now they're just memories in my book of life. I still type every day, yet the story has changed, as I got older.

It is like another five years of my life have passed, and it is as if I blacked out, because I cannot remember them, and I do not know why, yet maybe I do? I was there but my mind was elsewhere. I think about the past and relieving it while reliving it instead of being the mom, which I need and needed to be. I do not know where I was, where I have been, I was lost in my own body! Spinning- spinning- spinning around to the point of insanity, or so it seemed. Maybe my depression got the best of me? Maybe I was healing myself from the past; maybe, I do not know anything, and yet know it all.

In those five years she became a teenager, when did that happen? She has hips and a chest. Plus, she wears more make-up than I do? When…! How…! What? Where have I been? Yeah, Jaylynn is a young lady, and I can see she is having the same dreadful existence in her life as I did when I was a young woman. Yes, I do see that, sad to say.

It is interesting to watch children grow up in front of your eyes, I never knew how difficult, letting go could be. I remember when Jaylynn started to read. I remember when she, went through the change to become a woman and we had that talk, little did I know she did not need it.

I remember Chiaz being the father figure I knew he could be. I look back on my life, and I reflect on it and I still have to wonder why. She was only fifteen when she left me. Just like me, she could not take any more, and she slit her wrists… she could not be saved. I could not save her, no one could! Likewise, I have been killing myself over it ever since, yet I have to suffer and live on. I am paying for what I did I think, maybe not, should I even pray anymore?

I think Lily left me too, yet I am not sure… at all? I think I have become bitter, as I am getting older. Peoples say that you have to move on in your life… all I can say to that- is that she was my life. She was what I lived for other than my husband. She had the same life that I had in high school, why didn't I help her more! Why didn't I fix it? It seems so far away to me now. I sit with an unfilled heart of thinking that life is so unfair, listening to my mind as it spins like a tornado through Kansas and all my thoughts of what can and can't be rushing like a gunshot through my brain.

All this takes me to a place that I will never be again. If only I would have done this and not that… If only is all I think about anymore. All I do is think, why did this happen to me is it a

curse… Yes, no, maybe? Someone give me a sign or something, why is it that everything I loved goes away; and everything I care about dies?

Jaylynn now haunts me just the same as Lily did. Sometimes I walk through the graveyard; however, their spirits swarm in my brain and around my mind constantly, I can see them all, even if I do not want to! Funny how the cemetery comes to life to me.

Then their past life rushes through my veins. She speaks and talks to me in whispers, to the point I collapse in exhaustion from being overwhelmed with emotions. I am positive; her voice is not the only one I hear there, and her body is not the only one I see there, either.

Jaylynn's spirit is like a snowstorm in December cold lonely, and melancholy and Lily's is beautiful and heavenly like the air I have, yet it is breathtaking to me in its memory. Just like thinking about Jaylynn back in the days, that we had together before the beginning of the end, is what I deliberate about in my mind and soul, and it has taken its toll on me! Nonetheless, mostly I think of all the existences from back in the days of when she was fifteen. I feel that I could have done more for her; maybe I could have been there for more of everything.

Maybe I did not understand?

I knew what she was going through… but I did not know it was so troubling. Maybe some people can't be helped? Maybe when they have the curse they cannot. I know what it is like because I have lived with the curse. That was placed on me from day one. A curse never dies! Just like sin! It never dies! She was everything real to me, the only thing I wanted, all that I still think about. 'She was beautiful with big blue puppy dog eyes.'

Her eyelashes could put you in trances as they blinked. She was petite in her stature; she had it all going for her, and just like me, she ended it all, just because she felt so alone. Yes, I knew that all the boys wanted to get into her skirt any way they could; some more than others. Nevertheless, she would let them because she had too or face the wrath of the tower's clans. The curse goes on, it never perishes, the faces may change, but the spell remains; like I said it is just passed on from offspring to offspring. I can see the same evil dark cloud similar to shadows, almost like spirits flying within them in my visions. Oh, the evil it is passed on, moves in you, and takes over your mind and body!

I remember she has those sweet pink lips, which could curl up your toes, as you would gaze at them, even to this day she is a gorgeous angel. Yet she is not the same type of angel that

Lily is. No not at all, yet she is a younger angel also, she is unrobed, I can see it all, her body skin is transparent and glossy. With the black fluffy feathery wings, that makes air gusts as she moves as fast as the light around me.

Jaylynn has a halo of spikes and thorns over her head, which digs into her forehead, and the blood runs down her shadowy brown wavy wispy hair. Her eyes can glow the color of pink. 'I call them Olivia Cooper eyes! You know, with the black teardrops!' and her dark cherry black blood flows from them too, as we talk. I think I saw from time to time a black widow crawling on her, making webs on her body.

(So- hair-raising.) Along with the markings of unlucky, thirteen tattooed on her and chiseled into her chest. Other insignias are cataloging her, she has numbers on her marking her like a beast. She has the cereal barcode numbers of-

(J-N-0069699611) on her left butt cheek, which glows lime green in the dark! You are nothing but a number along with your first and last initials when you are a dark angel. She can have fire readily available at her fingertips, sharp retracting claws. Along with withdrawing fangs and horns. She also has a very elaborate samurai-like a sword with a curved blade. As well as, yes you guessed it! She can sparkle like many thousands of little reflective broken mirrors in the brilliant full moonlight.

I never thought I would speak to a black angel, yet she is my little girl, how could I not? 'To live is to be haunted, to die is to be unperturbed.' I remember back when she was on the edge of fifteen, and my life was entertaining, pleasurable, and stimulating. Not at all like now; I remember her first days of high school everything seemed flawless, little did I know, that the towers children had their children, and their evil spirits were passed down to the next demons in the circle of pain; his clan started torturing my little girl until her end. Just as there, mothers did with me.

All my life I have tried to prove this story… but how do I write a story that seems so silly to other people that do not understand? Oh, yes! I was young once in. Consequently, and regrettably, I know what she had to put up with; but you grow old fast if you do not have anything keeping you young. What the hell, do I have to live for now? I sure do not see any reasons, do you? Unrelentingly, as I get older, I wonder also, what the use is in living. Looking at her she was, and still is flawless in my eyes. Incidentally, everything changes and everything

moves on, and I was always left behind to wallow in my misery also, as she is now and infinitely, and was I the motive of why she is not alive or not?

Omitting- then again, she still talks to me and dances around me. I have her, yet I do not have her, yet we cannot be together as we would like to be you see. Those days were over a long time ago, I can only have someone in my life so long and then they die, and to me this is, the curse of the tower, the end is always near for me but never close enough. I think of Jaylynn and all of the stuff she has missed out on, and what I have missed out on too.

All these years I said this is true love too. I cannot help but feel violated; it is as if muggers came into my life and took away everything that I valued, and raped it until there was nothing left to steal away. That tingle in my heart that was love, that I had is now gone the replacement being an eking throb, plus all I can do is roll my eyes, and think it must have been meant to be! 'I have to believe, that sometimes God's lessons are hard to understand. But then again they are there to propel me forward and not back.'

True faith never dies either- just remember that! Life is like the scales never finding the balance it is either tipping one way or the other from good and evil. Nonetheless, I have to believe in my thinking that there is a meaning for everything; yes, even when someone is taken away… there is always a light at the end of the dark path that I am walking down- always! A pathway- you may not know about, or where it is going, but when you get there, you will see that it needed to be this way to reserve what is new and needed in life.

'Sometimes, you have to lose; to begin anew.' Even if it makes no sense to you. However, to this day I do not know if love is real or just a state of mind, which is a ghost that haunts me too. How do you love something, which really cannot be shown to everyone, that they love you back? I still have a heart-shaped diamond ring on my finger, the ring was going to be hers someday; it will most likely go to the grave with me now; just like the key that my beloved Chiaz gave me that I wore, that key will be in his padded box forever. That was the last time; I saw his amazing yet ice-cold body. He could not be saved either, yet I pleaded!

Just like my old teddy bear, that is in Jaylynn's case. Forever locked six feet under in the cold hard ground. Their bodies may be there, but their souls are with me, and the lands that go far beyond, above and below.

Just like- 'Glory and gore go, hand and hand.' I see them again, yet it is not the same. I cannot do, or go anywhere with them when they are like this or that. For the reason that it would look like I am just talking to myself; and people already think I am cuckoo! Without doing that…! So, if you have not figured it out yet, I have been alone for many years now.

Chiaz died in a coal mining accident, a rockfall crushed him, and there was no way to save him, as I said. Consequently, I was a single mother when Jaylynn was about thirteen years old. My daughter just did not understand why things had to be as they were you see. She was a daddy's girl, she did not take it well at all, and neither did I; I guess it shows. Conversely, I tried, I have always tried to be exactly what I needed to be, but it was never enough. I feel that I failed at everything, I tried to do what I could, I asked for a second chance at being motherly. Yet I know that I will not get it. I do not deserve to have it, I know!

I always lost love, which I struggled with in my everyday life. I know that my daughter loved me; she was a teenager when she died, and it is not cool- to be friends with your mother. Thus, I forgave her. What can I do, she was my only child? She was an artist, she was creative, and she was a carbon copy of me! With the overlook of my years, I have come to this conclusion, that love is not loving unless it is shown to the world. Yet some just think that love is just getting it on, and not about being soul mates?

Yes, love it dies also and sometimes it does not come back, for someone like me. I am a wiser woman now and I still have no clue… What is love? To some love is- 'L' for lust that makes you want to get it all, to do whatever you can to please. 'O' is Oh shit this is going to make me crazy, and what should I do next.

'V' is for virgins having victory in getting to the next level of intimacy, saying I got to touch and feel it. 'E' is for exposed, and unsatisfied, that is love for some, and me also to a point, when I think about it.

On the other hand, if you are like me, I try to believe that Nat King Cole sings love the way it should be; but most of the time, that kind of love is just a fantasy. If you are like me, you have to believe in a little of both; just to see what it is all about. At least that is what we used to sing together, that melody!

My life is just like flipping through the pages of an unorganized book; you will understand my life, and what it was all about, was it all a waste of time? Did my life have

something more than I cannot see or not? I guess that is not up to me to figure out. It is up to you, and what you think! Oh, the temptation can make you go out of your mind, I thought about finding another love, but he was the first and the last, and the only one that truly understood me. Indeed, he saved me, he was my hero.

Besides, I feel that I would be cheating on him, to move on. He would know and he would see me if I did!

All that is something, that stopped me all these years; and that was a promise that we made… the day we tied the knot, that we would always be true to one another; yes, even in sickness or health, and even after one of us would pass away. I cannot break my promise to him. I remember he would write me a love letter every day if he could; I still have all of them sitting here on my desk breaking apart, in the long-standing age of the days gone by. 'What we had, what we lost does it mean anything?' I think so- 'To me it means everything!'

Just like the black crow clans, I will not let my family or me alone. Was that rockfall an accident? I do not think so- yet he thinks it was. Nevertheless, to me that was a planned mystery of death, I think someone wanted to have him blown-up, and I think you know who it was too! But, as of now and this present day my heart is heavy, and my hands are weak, as they sit with me as a memory at my feet. Saying sweet things, they are my warmth, and they keep the time of every heartbeat, they had. Yet, I just wish that they all could be up in the heavenly retreat if only I could live life on repeat!

Chapter: 31

Lights

So, I think the year is now like 2050 or something like that I do not know, I cannot remember. I have lost track of years and dates because they do not matter. The names and what they have to say look like they are starting to fade away. Yah, I am not the girl that I used to be I am fifty-five years old now, since the day I was saved; but all their rocks in the graveyard just have indications of their names and their birthdates. This is one thing that I have now, that reminds me of what they all were to me then, and what they are to me as of now, and what they are to others in the land. How it can all be the same, yet so different, to me, and all of them.

No one comes up here anymore, and it looks that way too. Yet for me I look around some of them are angels, some of them are ghosts, and some choose to be daemons. Where are the

people? 'The Land of Many Steeples', has been bulldozed to the ground, a few years ago and made modern. All that is left is the steel frame buildings with their cold cement and glass walls. However, my home is still standing in its golden field, somewhat unattached from them over there. Looking shabbier than ever. Yet that is just fine by me. I could have moved into one of those boxes also, and had no privacy, and live as they do, but why? The home I have is my own, and those boxes communities of homes are never truly yours, yet the populace does not understand that concept. That the government owns everything they have, and they look into everything they have.

I do not want that. I do not need cameras looking at me when I am asleep or in every room to feel- as they say safe! All these years have gone by like those three hundred and ten miles per hour magnetic levitation trains in the darkness of night over there, like a hot pink blur. The cars of today make a light blue Prius look roomy and elegant. Yet if you get sick of the look of your car, all you have to do is to get one of the different body styles snapped on the one fit's all frame. Some just push a button to change the color of the exterior, which lights up underneath that makes it eliminate.

Yet some cannot afford all that junk, and still drive their ancient automobiles, like me! I drive in the slow lane, and everyone can pass me up. I do not care, I want to see what the world looks like, not have it rush bye. I support the only gas station in town, everyone else just plugs there's in, you look down the streets you can see the cars all plugged into the parking meters, sucking on the power grid, yet people think this is more sustainable. I do not think so at all! Their light bills are completely insane, because of all their gadgets and the rechargeable battery cars they have, yet they do not care it is not their problem to care about. They will just get more credit from the ones that own them. What is funny is I pay twenty-two in plastic cents for gas now.

I remember when I was a young girl when it was sometimes over four dollars a gallon! All the small shops have been replaced with styleless boxes of white, gray and black, all the lights glow in cold colors in the background. Nonetheless, the color most predominant at night is that of yellow ocher throughout the atmosphere.

The light-emitting diode billboards are everywhere you look, all of them with sexed-up vulgar and explicit ads, and they all jump out at you and say- 'Hello! With a quote like- 'Don't you want some of this?' Yet what is funny is there are these apps on all the young pre-teen kids'

phones that if they rub together at all it is as if they have made a real baby together on both of their screens. That they have to tend too just like a simulated infant or real lifelike baby for a week, it is all part of the preventions to not get pregnant, it is not working as they thought it would. It is all about stopping them from making a living because it is too much work. After all, what that app makes them think. Oh, there is an app for everything. I do not know if that is good or bad, really, I just do not try to understand the ways of the world anymore. It is just that scary. I can see being safe, but it is getting to the point it's absurd.

Like prepubescent kids think having a lover is not about making love anymore, it is just something they have for amusement. Because of what they see all around them. Kids no too much, yet have no intelligence, what so ever. Just like the sky, you cannot see the stars for the light rays of the city; and to me there are more mechanical devices, with brains than the humans, walking or racing around so frantically.

What once was a small community town is- now a big city with no life in it. My land is the only field that was not stripped of their gold locks of hair. The bridge that was so significant to me is no longer even here. There was no need for that bridge years ago, other than a beautiful spot to be; now the coaches drive themselves; what fun is that? The trains float on magnetic levitation tracks in the air and fly by in the blink of an eye, replacing the old bridge, that I cannot walk on.

The world went and got itself in even more of a big flipping hurry; I did not think that was possible. 'Hurry up and weight, and do nothing at all.' Just like you cannot even walk down the path these days, and if you do see someone that you do not know, hell! You are lucky if you get the finger from them, they just do not see you. It is like all they see is the holograms playmate that they can customize to their liking, like a person, yet they want their complete attention. I guess why to talk to anyone else when you have the perfect personality with you at all times. That is if you have the plastic money to keep them around.

Naturally, you can forget about getting a friendly hello from them; but I could see this happening a long time ago, back when I was a young girl. These kids these days are just not right, they do not have any respect for anyone or anything; but why should they be- they are on their own with no guidance from anyone, and no love other than having sex. Everything is emotionless modern and dead, the skyline has changed dramatically, the world is collapsing as I

predicted. As well as the revolution is all that stands as unity. Just like I imagined, it would become when I said everybody was like a bunch of humanoid sleepwalkers.

The skies are hazy and fiery with industry smoke, but the industry is not caused by the working hand of man; no rather the working hands of robots. People do not know your name, nor do they need to know anything, everything is known about them. Yet not me, they will never change me!

Everything in their life is run and done for them that is what happens when you do not think for yourself! But that is the way our higher authorities' wants' us to be, brain-dead to the realities of the world. All the same, it was becoming that way when I was a little girl in high school when they took the books away from us. Me- and my group more than any others, as you know! Surprisingly, I ended up going to college, I got my degree in nursing, but I never worked in a hospital a day in my life. My life was being with my husband and my daughter, in the old homestead; which Hope gave to me after she passed; it was in her last well and testament.

So, that was one of the nicest things she ever did for me. This home, this land, and this family where my true joys in life! However, 'The future is uncertain but the end is always near.' As well as the laws here only apply to some of the people; and what they say is not always clear. Back then I did not think about being around other people because I had my family; I had everything I ever wanted. Then once you lose everything you ever wanted, that is when you become lonely and crazy to the ones that do not understand you or the way that you think. Nevertheless, they are the ones that are not thinking. Just like looking at myself what happened to my young pretty little hands and nails, that I used to paint with nail polish? I could not hold a pen in my hand if I tried now, what happens to my thin perky body.

When I was a girl all I did was a bitch and complain that I was not cute enough. Hell, I wish for those days now, I wish I could talk to that girl back then and say you are sexy, and you got it going on, but I cannot, this droopy thing is all that is left. What a sight for sore eyes! - right?

Tip- for all you young girls… do not spend your time thinking that you need to be this and that, you have it all, just look at yourself and say; Yes! I am gorgeous! For the reason, that time goes by, and that cute little girls' reflection in the mirror changes overnight! Then you will

wish for the days that you looked like that. Stay young and childlike as long as you can, life and getting older happens fast enough, without wishing for it. I thought I would not get older looking.

Since for what happened to me, no it does not work that way. There is no such thing as an eternal youth, which is a myth; unless your part of the heavens, that is when you become young again, and stay that way, when you get your wings. I would say that, do not let anyone say that you do not have what you need because it all comes down to the fact that they are just jealous of you.

You have it all… you are a masterpiece! God- he did not make any mistakes when making you, just so you know that! That is what I believe! It is just like when I walk to see my loved ones every day or at least I try, seeing that gleaming stone just makes me want to cry, but still I do it. I hope for the day that I die for the last time, is that wrong?

Some folks would say that it is idiotic to keep a scrapbook, now that we have holograms and computers all over everything and all this technology. Yet I feel that I want something that has more meaning that is closer to the heart. Everywhere machines are taking over the world, so at least I feel that I have control of this book.

I knew this was going to happen with technology when I was a little girl; that is why I did not want any part of it and still, do not really. There is something more nostalgic about opening a book in your hands and smelling the paper and remembering the memories. Well, I do not give two shits or care what others think, you can see that… yet I try to show my compassion to everyone if they want to see it if they want to get it. But that is completely up to them. Anyways this book holds the memories of us, the family that I fought to make, and a book that no one has ever seen before.

It is a book of secrets that no one knows about other than me, but it is in my last well and testament that Jaylynn was meant to have it given to her. However, as of now, that could never happen. I was hoping to be able to have grandchildren, to keep the legacy going; and have all the memories passed down. But then again whoever gets it now, they can do what they want with it, it is completely up to them at that time, in this day and age they most likely will burn it.

That is what they do with everything! The entirety of what they consider garbage. Yes, even the people that die. It is all part of their one fits all healthcare and life plan. That I will never sign too, they cannot make me it is against my religion, I say!

All these notes love poems, suicide letters from the girls I knew in my life, and all my diary entries, this all tells a story, and it is just all history now. 'Nothing lasts forever it is all going to be dust in the wind, at some point, and the lights of the world will shine no more!'

Chapter: 32

Nurturing the Losses

'Evenhandedly I gave you all everything, just for you all to die with a smile; all of you only wanted to live for a while. You took everything out of me, but it still left you empty; the tower still wants more. So much I do not understand, all I ever wanted to be was a happily ever after!' I am so tired of being here, without you; even if you are here next to me in ghostly angel form. You are the evanescence of my Immortal love. All of this time has passed, after you pass away, yet it cannot erase you from me, now or ever. I wiped your tears away then and I would even now, nothing has changed, only the moment in time.

'You still have all of me!'

They still have all of my love. I see myself in the glossy stone ones more, and I see that the young girl is gone, and this timeworn outer self is all that is left. This deep-rooted body is all that reminds me of what I used to be, and it makes fun of me, and it moans at me as I try to be as I was back in the day. I remember a quote from Hope she used to say that, 'the moon sheens and the rocks are shown as colorless shades of gray, against the black starfield heavens, the grave is all that is alive, and the world is dying around me.' Now I know exactly what she meant. It is just like I cannot get any satisfaction!

'Everything is just useless information that drives my imagination to insanity.' Sometimes I wonder if I should be so paranoid? I try, and try! As it seems, like I am spiraling out of control, as the world is spinning the other way; and my emotions drive-in with their pouring rains, and I end up in tears, and they only taste like salt with regret. It is just like this old song that plays in my mind as I sit down on the grass in the graveyard, and think that I have lived an undaunted, yet all right life. It is like you have what you have, and you are blessed when you have it. As a result, my advice would be… do not take it greedily or you will lose it as I have lost it!

~*~

Everything in this house is falling apart like the pieces of my old broken heart, which died a long time ago. Just like the panes of glass in the living room windows that have been cracked and are chipping out; yet they have been that way since I was a young girl. Just like the one sink in the main bathroom still has separate hot and cold faucets. The hot handle has been stuck in the off-setting position for years yet it drips like my eyes at night. In what was Jaylynn's bathroom she had my old room, there still is no shower curtain around the clubfoot tub, which is the way that it always was.

The old lock that flips over at the top of the doorknob does not work, and like all the rooms, you can see right through the key-hole. Certainly, something never changes, but yet I like having things the same; it adds character to my life. But then again, I am just too damn old to fix all these age-old things, in a sighing heavily heavenly breath- thinking that no one else knows what this place means to me; and no one cares really. Surely, someone should care about the past as I do?

This home- is just one of those places, which was in our memories that we had together. If I could choose a song that would fit my life somewhat; it would be Remember When by Alan Jackson, in my old age I learned to like country music, which I thought would never happen. When you get this old, you just cannot head-bang anymore. I mean you can, but you are going to feel it in your neck the next day. I think about Lily, I think about my daddy, I think about my daughter, I think about my husband, and I think about the curse of the tower, and I think about all the sisters and the blackbird clan.

Why?

I do not know really… they just pop into my mind now and then. 'Old habits die hard.' or so they say. I think that some habits never die at all even if you try. I often wonder what Lily would have done with her life if she could have had a life. She only gives me advice, a lot of the time, she talked about her life in the past somewhat to me, but she never went into that extreme graphic detail about what she had to go through; or about what she wanted. I predict that she is happy in the heavens.

I guess that must have been her destiny. Yet I cannot see how? I often wonder what would have been different in my life if I did not have the curse of the tower. I frequently wonder what my daughter would have done with her life; like who would she would have married.

I ponder time and time and again wondering if she would have any future children. I every so often wonder what it would be like to hold grandbabies in my arms. I guess I was cheated out of that too, on the other hand, you never know… what is going to show up at your threshold! I know that my God works in mysterious ways.

I regularly wonder if I and my husband's love for each other would be as strong as it was back then. I think of all the people I once knew. I can still see their younger faces yet they are fading, with the time that has passed. Thinking back their faces were a blur even then, but now they are fading differently and they're not coming back into my existence, and even if they do, I do not know them. Just for an instance, I look back over the blackbird clan sisters, in my mind from then to now.

Anyways Alissa punched and crowned out a few kids. She had a son named Lance, that stocked my daughter until the day she slew and slaughtered herself. He got what he wanted from her time and time again, and the rest is history. Her other kids' names escape me; they did not do anything to me, so why should I try to remember all their names. They all do not have an affluence of my existence. So anyways, Alissa is now sitting in a nursing home, taping herself on the head, and muttering the same words over and over.

She is in a wheelchair strapped down, and she doesn't even know her name. You always get paid back, always! In her life she did well, she was a successful lawyer and a college cheerleader, but that is because her mother got her everything she ever wanted. But then again, she learned that you could not live without what you need. Besides, what she wanted more than anything was my husband, and in the worst kind of way; and that kind of wanting of what she could not have driven her completely insane.

Yah, her mom has to be in her late eighties now. Yet she is still running that home for refugee or needy children, as they call it. That is why she is still so alive, and healthy! Sucking off the youth. Oh, Adriane committed suicide! She left an oncoming train run her over as she was lying unclothed a crossed the rails; after Lily's death, I guess she could not live with herself any longer knowing what she and her sisters did to others… all of their victims. I guess even demons have to repent.

The engine that hit her was number thirteen; her limbs and brains were splattered all over the tracks, left for the acid rain to wash away. Yet there was an investigation and a big story in

the cyber-press saying that it was accidental. Thirteen! I Think Jaylynn was holding her down on the track, so she would be hit, she could not escape her power or force, which is why Jaylynn has that marking number like an honor patch! She must have thought it was the right thing to do? I can understand why!

Allison overdose so many times they could not pump her stomach anymore she died on the gurney because there was nothing left to her, in her insides. She never married and claimed that she was celibate all of her life. She became noted for being a graffiti artist, and her artwork is displayed in the museum here in the city. Yet it is just as disturbing now as it was back then. Ava became a movie star, but not the kind of movie star, that she wanted to be, she was the star in the adult entertainment industry.

Nevertheless, she mothered her sister's kids along with her own. Now, who would have guessed that? I presume that it would fit her personality. She ended up marrying, and inheriting a rich man's money and blowing it all on fashion and body enhancements. She divorced him many years back, and she and all the kids still live with her mom in that gigantic house. Other than that, there is not much to say about her. She died one night in her sleep, and her three children inherited what was left of her husband's fortunes, and they own that company, which she starred in. Yet, that evil mother of theirs will never die!

Chapter: 33

Blame Game

Sometimes, I like to reason with myself drawing in a heavenly breath and letting it go slowly. I cannot remember who I was back then, as my heart is heavy and my hands are shaky now. Besides looking back into the depths, and crevasses of my mind; I can see that they all were like wolves in sheep's clothing, and I was the prey. Will you do pay for your sins! Yet those times still creep and plays with my brain, and the visions are so real. Then again, are they illusions or something more than I can feel like I did back then? They still tie me up in my thoughts, but is it all a waste to think about it or not? It is enough to drive you out of your mind. Do you know that I cannot say that I have any regrets about living the life I did live if you can call it a life? Why do we have life, just to die? Always so naturally I was the pray in a hairy situation of playing around with it.

However, I see it as more like being scarred for life, by the fingering nails that touched me around there, which was my life. If I could only talk to myself back then… oh, what I would do differently; it comes around, however, I just did not know that it would last this long in my recollections. Maybe it is my fault for not standing up for myself; but at that time, I just thought that was the way of everyday existence for me… I guess that is why I got shaved down by them in so many ways so unnaturally. Yet even back then I kept it all… just the way I like it, anyways even if it not accepted by them.

Maybe that is why all the girls looked at me in the locker room? However, Chiaz always said that I was perfect and cute and he loved everything about me. He did not find anything that needed to be changed on me. Maybe that was not it at all. Yet, there was nothing about that… stopping him from kissing every inch of my body, which he certainly enjoyed doing. Yet the times were somewhat different back then. So, to this day, I am not sure what to make of my own story; for the reason that it is never going to be easy for me to explain. What was in the past is in the past, and I do not care anymore about what is in my future. What I have lived for was a dream that was never going to be, and a dream that burnt me to a crisp. I believe that I will awaken from the ashes someday, with my white wings.

It is a day I am looking forward to; if things do not change for me that day will come sooner than later. -I hope! I guess that you can hear the bitterness out of my mouth. Yet at least I am not selfish in what I say to you. You can either bless everything that you say, or you can curse it, by the words that come out of your mouth too… I know this… however, knowing that all the emotionlessness that I am feeling is me dying inside; my words are not always as refined as they should be.

Yet I just do not give a shit!

My existence is not an easy story for me to tell- to anyone, but no one understands it unless they lived through it. 'It has its twists and turns and its turn-on's and turns off's.' Just like having the land with its mountains of majesty that was blissful, that contrast with its tragic lightning storms. Just the same, like us we had our hopes, and our joys and we had a lot of disappointments too.

Now that I am older, so much older I can close my eyes, and all I have is a photographic snapshot in my mind to remind me of the way things used to be. It is just as if it is showing the

mountains we climb together and it shows what the tower ripped all away from my clenching hands. Just like that last hug I had from Jaylynn when she has pulled away in tears. I knew it was over before it started. Yet what could I do?

You know I remember when I was thirteen with those cute braces on my teeth; hell- I had a smile that looked so gentle and sweet; it has never changed in my mind, yet my teeth are now yellow and cracked, and my face is wrinkled and dappled, look at what all has changed. I cannot believe it, can you? Yes, as much as I can, I talk to the spirit's lives and read the cards for guidance. I want to be around them and to see them all smiling and dancing around me. Not always with success do I get their full attention.

There are some days that they are moody, but that is okay by me all girls have that time that they need to deal with their emotions, even in the afterlife, and sometimes guys are hard to talk to also. Besides, sometimes others are wanting their devotion, however, I am most happy when with them because at least I can see all my loves; and look into their amazing blue spiritual eyes or the pink ones with their darkness of hell.

Lily and Jaylynn, I can still hear both of them saying hello, and saying my name. Both so perfect in every way! No, I do not see anything wrong with having angels in my life at all times. This is my mystery and fantasy that is real in my life, and it is thrilling. It seems as of now, I have more of them then I do real people in my life. However, I hope for more people in my life too. Looking at my hands you can read all the crevasses, and the split forks in the trail that was my life; the paths that ended far too soon. No, my hands and palms are not the same as they once were back then they have changed. They are not like the ones he held, what happened to my life-line, heart line, and most importantly marriage line?

The lines have transformed, but why if the plans were made in my skin long before? Where have they taken from me? What did I do? To this day, I do not know. There must have been some reason for this to happen this way? Do you know why? I look at my fingerprint each finger different and so unlike Lily or Jaylynn's. Everyone has unique prints, which we leave behind. I have some of the smallest hands that you ever saw in your life, but they were sweet and felt amazingly perfect in his hand. Every line that was on my palms was strong then not like now and showed my love of the flesh, my true faith, and love for life, I was a giver; I never asked for anything but love in return; so why didn't I get it all my lives. Maybe I just grieved it all away, as my life flashed by like a blur in fading blue eyes.

The fingerprints we made on each other are now gone forever. It is just like that kiss, which comes to me in my short dreams at the don. It is just like a trance that comes over me, and always had an enchanted feel, that uplifted me. Depressingly to say, that I do not remember as much as I should; I lost what I needed the most, and that was my family… and my little girl, I lost my lover, but will I be able to keep going without them? But then again, I still have my faith. Yet even that is not a strong as it used to be.

Sometimes, I cannot understand what the divine master has planned. All I hope is that maybe someday my life exists will help someone else out that is all I wish for anymore. My life seems like it has a gap in it. That has not been filled in years, yet what was taken from me is what is missing, and there is no one else to blame but the tower and her offspring of demons.

They are the ones that deceived us all. Even in her kid's graves, the sisters try to end my contentment! As well as she has gotten some of them, too that was in my life. Though, she will never get me! She will never drag me down with her to the pits of hell! Ava is the only one that is truly alive, yet they all haunt me!

Let me go back through time ones more! I have never felt so attached to anyone like this before. Just thinking about Chiaz now is making me foolish, as it did when we were young lovers. I still can hear him saying my name, and it makes my week even now. I cannot help it! Back then, I was in love and did not even know what love was, I had the feeling as if he is the one for me, back when we walked the halls of the hellhole, but they stopped it, sure I would have loved to have been lovers in school as the others where.

I would have loved to have public demonstrations of affection, in the halls with him. I would have loved to have cut class like them all too, and had sex in the old part of the library; between the bookshelves with me, on top of him! Like they all did. I just want to have the same things in life.

No instead, I had to have the sisters looking up my ass, at all times in its place. Oh well… I still got him in the end right, and he got me. 'You can't always get what you want; but if you try sometimes, you just might find that you get what you need.' However, we should have had more time to do all the things we wanted to do… that is what I think anyway. So, be careful in what you wish for you may just get it one way or another.

Reality is never as it seems, and life likes to screw with you. I find it best to dream your life away, which is what I did to keep the pain away and to keep from going completely insane. I feel that I could have done anything if I just imagined I could have. That is the way you think when you are young. Just like I can still see what she was wearing that day it was a light blue dress; and with a pure white daisy in her hair. The day Jaylynn was laid out for the others to see. All of this was because, of Lance Amsel… he had to know everything about her.

Yes, I mean everything! 'Instant karma- is going to get you!'

Nevertheless, at the time, I did not grasp it. I did not see what he was doing to her, and I should have, he knew what he wanted, and that was everything that she was. He wanted me to be all alone! I never thought that it was going to happen; I did not foresee him taking her away so recklessly and final. I thought I would not let him get in the way with it, but I field miserably! There is no way to prove hearsay, and all I have are bits and pieces of the true story.

That reminds me now sometimes I walk into the bathroom, and Jaylynn writes the words 'I love you' in blood on the mirror, and her supernatural face shows up in the shower mist as I wash. She just loves to play around with me in that room, ha that is kind of cute! She has a way about her that makes me lovesick for her. Yet I have to remember that she died in a bathroom, so maybe that is why she likes to play around in there. The day Jaylynn left me in her human form; I know that my life would never be the same.

Though I did not know if, that was a good thing or a bad thing, it was just the way it had to be. Life goes on even after the ones you live for are gone away infinitely. I planned on letting her put this ring that was mine on her tiny finger when she got married. But I never got the chance to do it or give it to her as a gift; instead, all and everything I had in my life was given up to her the curse of the tower and their clans.

Giving in ways that cannot be seen yet they are felt. I remember back when I was in school, I was too young to fight for my love. Yet, when you are young, it is mostly lusting that you want anyway. It would have been nice to have been the same age, yes it would be nice to be seventeen again or even younger, and know what I know now; and do some of the things we wanted to do; with my lover.

However, you cannot live twice, will you can have life more than once if you are like me. Yet is that new life going to have them in it, not likely. My age does not count for anything, like

this, you see; I forgot how old I truly am now, I feel as if I am a hundred years old, maybe I am? I have seen a lot of change, from then to now.

'The journey of life is through uncovering the true beauty, which lies behind the eyes.' It is not what is seen all the time it is what is felt, the same as how I feel towards the ones the knew me. I believe someday soon our souls can be re-joined as one as they were in my past life. Thus far, I feel as if I will never be content again, even though I have my angels; they just remind me of everything that I can and cannot have any more, and that is them in this earthly life.

My greatest fear is still being alone, and dying alone. Yet I cannot say that I fear the unknown. I look at myself now and there is not one trait about myself, which I find desirable. To this point in my life, I wander around like a small child lost in the hay fields, looking for my way. I have old photos of back in the day; they are my snapshots that are stuck lost in time with the notes that underline the passage of time. I wonder what happened to me. I believe that my current state of mind is not a healthy one.

Then again, I am not leaving this home… the only way I will give this up is if I am carried out the door in a body bag. Maybe I am just old or crazy or I just do not care anymore. Maybe I just have seen far too much in all my lives. No wonder I am so tired, one or the other I need a deep sleep anyways.

So maybe I will go in my sleep with his ghost on top of me. Then again, I always thought that I would go into the arms of my beloved anyways. Observing back over all of this… I think that I never had any great achievements in my life; I went to college but never did anything with what I knew or study to do.

Looking back at Chiaz's life he worked in the coal mines for a career. He used to say that- 'They drop you down in the hole and you work on your stomach like a rat. With the water running down you are back and into your ass crack.' He was shoveling for the dwindling dollar; and we had to give it all back to the large companies and corporations, that run the contemporary world.

Nevertheless, he made enough for us to get by, and to keep the house. Now I live off of what I inherited and that is not much, but to me, love is more important than money! Some would have to call me a millennium hippie, will that be just all right with me. I lived in this town

all my life, I have seen people come and go, of seen houses being built, and I have seen the same very house being ripped down.

That is when you know you have lived too long. I watched babies grow up before my eyes, into things that cannot be controlled; and I have seen baby's die too, and I have seen the baby's being killed by their mothers before they are born, and they do not have a choice to live. Then the ones, which are born do not have a choice on what they want to keep, that is up to the mom and dad to make that choice. I am probably the easiest person to get along with.

However, I know, and I understand how this world works. As of now, I dislike everything about my appearance, and my skin is blotchy, and my hair is graying; my eyes are fading they are not pure blue in color anymore, everything is turning pale and ashen, everything is fading away.

Looking back if I could change one thing about my life, I would go back in time and do all the things that I never did or got to see with my family. I would have liked to have more time, then and not so much now. So that we could have done all the journeys and discoveries that I planned on with them next to me; we should have had this.

Besides, I didn't even get to do all the things that I was going to do throughout my life. I had plans and those dreams, but they could not come true without them, and how do you blame, for some reason I cannot blame myself. Yet I have to remember that I was lucky and blessed to have gotten a family at all after what powers were against me.

Whom do I blame?

Chapter: 34

Pulling Feelings

Born to live, born to die, born to cry and born to wonder why? Some people say; while… my saying is all is fair in love and war, because; I have done both, with each of them having the same consequences. I have been at war with the tower, and I have fought to keep my loved ones around, yet most of them are on the ground, still, their souls linger around. I will never lie to anyone or tell him or her something untrue.

My type of personality is to be blunt and to the point, as you should know by now. If I think you are an ass hole then- while, I will tell you that to your face; not behind your back like

most. I am sorry but, I am not a very forgiving person anymore; you have three chances with me and after that, I am done with you. You would be the same way if you had a life like mine. Call me bitter; call me pathetic! Your names mean nothing to me anymore, nor did they ever.

My mind goes back to these days often because they all pull on my heart; like strings on a guitar being tuned too tightly. To the point that I feel as if I am going to choke on the wooden splinters, and all the strings that were connecting us snapped away. Indeed, my angels Lily and Jaylynn are the only angelic and horrific faces that keep me going. They are like night- lights in my life, they are the stars that shine for me; Jaylynn she reminds me of how I affectionately named her after my daddy, and that is bittersweet. Yet to this day, he has not said anything to me, I wonder why?

~*~

Jaylynn, she was so like me in every way; in her personality, in her actions, her laughter, and when I looked into her eyes it is all the same as if am looking into the eyes of a reflection of myself in my bloodstained mirror, from the eras of past, oh so long ago. I have never spoken about her to anyone until now; no one even knows about these stories, know no one cares. Now that I am getting older, and getting closer to that casket, I feel that I should share my story with someone, so I decided on putting everything in my life down onto paper in my scrapbook diary, as you know! I have some of it on notepaper, yet I want to get it all on neat crisp paper with the black crisp font.

Yet my Early 1920's Vintage black Underwood Standard Typewriter No.5. It- the typewriter just smiles at me, because I start and stop one word at a time, plus the button letter 'N' has gone missing. Where it has gone is a mystery too, besides using a typewriter is not the way things work these days, everything is done digitally, with either video or recordings. Until now my dream was to write and complete my story! So, that is just okay with me I am not a writer, there are not many out there anymore. I cannot even get a complete thought on a page… without jamming, or type-o's now, it pisses me off, but I will do it in time! I wonder how much more time I have to do this.

There is nothing more annoying than that snowy old page, maybe there is, but I need to get this down somehow. This is all my misery, which cannot stop playing in my head that I need to let out. Furthermore, this is the only way I want to do it because they all said I never would.

The paper is so old now, that it is yellow in color. The stack of paper is just like my cracked teeth; hell, the little bell does not even go ding anymore.

Plus, my hands hurt most of the time nowadays, oh who cares, whatever- never-mind. I have spent most of my life trying to become what I am not. This script is just another damn dream that has gone down the shitter. Because of the shutters in my life, and to tell you the truth; I am getting tired of shoveling all this shit up with a little shovel, and having someone hovering over the ones I love with a bigger one.

They call me to their graves at night, and what can I do? I have to go and talk to them. They hug me, and then I come home and sit at the typewriter. With the desk lamp lighting, the keys and my hands shake on top of the buttons. I get feebler as my faith gets weaker.

Thinking maybe, I can tell someone of what goes on in my life. However, their voices call out to me Nevaeh… Nevaeh and I have to stop. It is almost like they do not want others to know what they say to me, and what they do for me. Only one of these angel girls stays with me at all times now. She follows me everywhere the spirit of young Jaylynn. When people die, they stay the same age even in the afterlife, as you know.

Jaylynn is a tiny black angel girl, as you know, she hovers in the

air yet she still only stands at five nothing. As well as her eyes peer into my eyes, then into my soul like always. Lily stepped down as my main angel, the day that Jaylynn got her white wings and began to fly; now Jaylynn is the one that looks over me the most. Lily has a new girl to look over, that needs her as I did when I was young.

(Nevaeh exhaling noisily because her heavenly air is unsustainable.)

So, Jaylynn used to come to me crying, with black eyes, and blood dripping from her inner thighs; saying to me look at what he is doing to me. I would say stay here, you can be homeschooled, you do not need to be all around them, but she always went back. For the reasons that, she wanted to have a social life, and there was not a thing I could do, that was up to her… it is like he and his clan had an almost demonic power over her. Just the same as Lily and I had with the sister's clan. Yet he got her, oh did he get her.

As you know they sucked the life out of us girls, in more ways than one, and they would use us whenever they wanted, and then through us out like trash when they did not. This clan

was even more obnoxious to my little Jaylynn, God only knows what he did to her, but I can imagine… she has memories that terrify my thought of mind. I would say that I've seen a- lot in my time, but nothing like what she faced. It reminds me of what I and Lily went through in our teen life, it is all the same only the names change, or so it seems to be. It is the curse of the tower!

When thinking about it, it creeps me out. But that is life; I know one thing, I always try to do the right thing, because after they are gone you have nothing but sad misgivings. They're nothing more than bullies! I wish all of those assholes would have taken their belts and hanged themselves with it or cut their wrists, no! That would be too good for them… either way, justice comes with a price, and that was my fifteen-year-old girl. She lost her innocence to her bullies, and that is when my fifteen-year-old girl, lost her existence in life too. All of this could have been stopped; yet after all these years' people still bully the weaker individuals, which they can overpower.

They can fry in hell, in the eternal lake of fire! That is all I can say. Him! He would put things in her mouth, and spattered her innocents over his face and walls of the halls. He even had a life-size poster in his bedroom of my little girl, which he idolized every night, if you know what I mean; the revolting twisted freak. So now, Jaylynn clings to my ankles, as I walked to and around the cemetery as well. Yet I cannot help but say I told you so, and she says 'I-NO-O!' In a moaning vocal sounding whisper! It is weird to think about but, everyone I ever loved has died even my daughter. So, my philosophy as of now. I just made the choice to never love again, and I have kept that promise up until this point in my life. Things were about to change in a big way once again like always it is out of my control. All these years… I have been pining over what I cannot have, so I guess it is okay to drown my sorrows with a drink once in a while. I need one right now.

Jaylynn, she had a lover at the age of fourteen you see. Jaylynn had a baby girl I do not even know the name, or if she named her, the day she died; in addition to that, the dad was Lance Amsel! Shocking yah I know; I was taken aback too! Little did I know that Jaylynn was seven and a half months pregnant at that time! She was so tiny that it did not show under her flowing dresses that she loved to wear.

(They got rid of the uniforms, now they let the kids were what they want.)

So anyway, I just thought that she was putting on a few pounds or some weight, or maybe I was too caught up in my own life to see what was going on all around me. So, I guess instead of telling me about it, she thought it would be better to end it all. It is so frightening how this all happened, and so fast or so it seemed. However, she kept it at all completely a secret from everyone, even me. She ended up having her premature baby girl, in the high schools' girls' bathroom while sitting spread out on the toilet.

Lance 'The so-called dad.' Was standing in front of Jaylynn the whole time yelling and pulling on her… Poor Jaylynn she had to give natural childbirth with no medical assistance! Lance tied the baby's umbilical cord off with his shoestring, and cut her the baby away from this new mommy with only a pair of dull school scissors. Other students could hear her screams and cries in the halls, yet no one cared or they were not allowed too.

'The lightning crashes and the new mother cries, her intentions, and ambitions, like her placenta, falls to the floor, as she tries to stand up. Then the angel opens her pale blue eyes, only for them to change color, in the irrelevant stall on the bathroom floor, and the mother dies. He gets her soul; I can feel it, as she did! Just like a clap of rolling thunder when it is chasing the wind, I can feel her fright!'

It is so frightening how this all happened, and so fast or so it seemed. Lance 'The so-called dad' was standing in front of Jaylynn the whole time yelling and pulling on her… Poor Jaylynn she had to give natural childbirth with no medical assistance!

Lance, he cut Jaylynn to stretch her out, so to get the baby away from this new mommy, with the same pair of dull school scissors. At that time, he took the helpless baby away from her, and said that he was going to get rid of it… and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Furthermore, he just let Jaylynn there sitting on the toilet to bleed to death, I guess that is when she had enough pain, and not long after that, she cut her wrist… and I lost two girls… to the curse of the Tower!

Maybe that is when my struggle with affection began. Raged Lance or as I called him walked away, but later that year he put a rifle in his mouth, and he blew his brains, and other things, all over his bedroom walls, on a life-size poster of my little daughter.

'So, what is the Tower it has a meaning, in the deck of cards, that I read, 'She!' is dark and ominous. She- 'The Tower' is the embodiment of disruption and conflict.

When this card shows up, you know that it is not a good change coming your way, more like the unforeseen and jarring movement caused by the unexpected and painful events, which are a part of life. 'The Tower' in life is always a threat, but life inevitably involves tragedy, and you must decide whether you will face it with grace or not as it is past down.' My life is presently in The Wheel of Fortune again meaning, that symbolically my life is about to start a new cycle, a transition. I also have 'The Lover's' card showing up in my reading of life; however, my lover is gone forever? What could this mean? The Lovers card may specify and important difficult choices ahead in my existence. –hum? This is bad really, the choices it foreshadows usually is an equally exclusively, paths of two very different futures. However, it is also really good too, in that it also confirms, that at least one of those paths may take me to a virtuous place. It likewise implies that I will fall in love again! However, who in the world, am I going to fall in love with?

Nevaeh

Book: 6

Struggle with Affections

Brave girls fight for what they know is right in their heart; strong girl's battle for their freedom with what they think love is day and night. The toughest girls leave the past behind, yet they search for what they cannot find, while they walk in their boots on a path for someone kind. Heroic girls with desperation to keep their honor; may have to break the heart of another. All this attacking is for the affection of another, this is a war to stop the curse of the tower.

~Neveah~

Chapter: 35

My Vanished Girls

'As a result, in all of this baby momma drama, I became a grandmother and a mourner all at the same time.' When Kristen was born as a miniature three pounds and seven ounces' baby, she was not given to me. I did not think the baby lived really… just like everyone else thought at the time. Not to forget I was grieving over the fact that my daughter was gone forever, there was a lot to think about that was boggling my mind. Therefore, Lance said that he would get rid of the baby, yet at the time, I did not know about any of it! Hence, Lance's family secretly claimed Kristen telling everyone else that the baby died at the scene with Jaylynn. How was I supposed to know any differently? She became one of those kids. Lance's story was that since Jaylynn died first in suicide, that the baby was not born yet; and that she was born as a stillborn baby after the fact. Little did I know that the baby did live!

Lance's mother stole baby Kristen away from me and her true mommy Jaylynn, which was the plan all along. Then she claimed Kristen as an adopted child. Consequently, just like always, because of who they were; no one questioned this incident, nor did anyone care about it. Only five people showed up for Jaylynn's last showing myself included before she was placed on a white couch and driven up to the cemetery, and then covered over by the earth above. One person stands out from them all. This person that showed up at the funeral home was a younger high school boy named Greg; he walked up to Jaylynn as she was so peaceful in her deep sleep lying there with her hair off to the one side.

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Her eyes were closed so tightly that you could see her long-curled eyelashes pointed skyward, in her baby blue coffin. She was an angel to look at even at that moment. I knew that she was looking over all of us! In addition to that, she was most likely looking at him and holding his hands with her spiritual touch, I could just feel it. He said that he felt the breeze of her presents.

He was crying hysterically from his hazel-sh almost jade green eyes! I remember he said that he was secretly in love with Jaylynn back to when she was a little girl. That he never got the chance to say that to her in person. I remember him placing one pink daisy in her box on top of her small, yet perky upward-facing breasts next to her motionless heart; with the bloom under her chin and her slight smile.

Along with that, then he slid an engraved promise ring on her finger as well; at that moment… one of his teardrops fell from his eyes on her petite hand, as he was holding it… not wanting to ever let go of her. That is love… if I ever did see it. Greg also whispered to me, that he never even got to kiss her as he always hoped to do, and that she was everything that he was looking for in a girl. Furthermore, he would never look for anyone else. That she was the one, and the only! The only thing I could say was; I thank you and follow your heart, and she will be watching over you.

Then he walked away… I never saw him again after that. You know I do not even know his last name. Still, I will always remember his face, and the look that was upon it that day, he was devastated. So, someone did care about her, someone truly loved her, and adored her, and it was taken away from him too. Why! Why oh God, why? Why didn't she see this when she was alive? 'Why is a question that has no answers, only just more unanswered questions?'

Ava Amsel Lance's mother kept Kristen locked up in a chamber, that was cold, damp, and dark; with only a light bulb hanging from the junction box, under a rusty tin roof. There was no bathroom, and the windows were covered up with wood planks; with the smell of shit everywhere, in that underground room. That was Kristen's existence in her beginnings of life.

Thus, that is where they keep the underprivileged kids underground, in the damp, dim, stony crawl space of a basement. Nobody knew how evil she was as a mother, however, Kristen did. The town thought Ava was the perfect mother, which is what became known.

Nevertheless, making up twisted stories was what she was all about, and really, the only thing she was good at. As well as keeping, something from others is also, what she was about to. Then one day it all changed, I got a knock on my front door, and by the time I got there, the woman was gone. They're sitting on my doorstep was my granddaughter… there she was alive in my sight. She was seven years old at that time; I recall that she was completely nude crying on my porch, and all she had on was Lily's other childhood ribbon in her hair. Then when I saw the ribbon, I knew what happened. Then she leaped into my arms, and it was love for me from that point on! I remember that Kristen had smashed fingers, and cut up legs, they used a taser gun on her… as well as her butt and vulva were bleeding from being chewed, fondled and penetrated repeatedly.

She was sold many times by Ava and was used as a slave for others thrills. She had to have virginity restoration surgery to regain her innocence so that someday she can be deflowered to whom she wants. She was only seven years old when the doctors put her under to do that, yet it was the right thing to do, for her.

The doctor, Dr. Fennel, said that he never saw anything like what he saw with her in his whole time in practice. I did not care how much it cost, I knew what it was like to have that taken away and, I did not want that for her to go through in her life.

Dr. Fennel- 'Undoubtedly, it looks like a mad dog attacked her! However, there are something's I am going to leave alone, therefore, it is not hurting her, and there is no reason to do anything medically to remove it. It would cause more damage to remove it I feel than to leave it there. I fixed the little sweetie up as well as I could. You know that no one would ever know, after she heals up, that she had this surgery. Yes, that is what we want for her definitely.'

Kristen, she was like a child prostitute for the clan. Besides, when she did not comply, she would face the wrath of all of them. Ava Amsel liked to pick her up by her matted hair, and smack her bare ass with her hands and other random objects until her butt was cherry red with blood, and she broke open her hymen back then too, as you know. Kristen remembers the blood running down her legs, and her getting all up in there with her fingers and also being held down, and chained to the wall, and bed headboard.

She was deflowered at the age of four. Way too young to lose her innocents by anyone… yet that is what happened, thanks to the Amsel's kids and they're whole fucked up, and perverted family, and the other kids that were around her.

I could just kill Ava for this, and smash her faultless face in, certainly to a bloody pulp, and not even blink I hate her that much! She and her other kids in her family used to say that they were going to bury her alive, out in the backyard; so, their three dogs could chew on her bones after they dug her small remands back up. One of their punishments was to spit chewed, chewing tobacco, and also other organic matter into her mouth… and indeed they made her swallow it all, and stick out her tongue to prove it was all gone.

Plus, if she would pee her bed at night for any reason, she used to make her march around in front of the entire family and all the boys… while she was telling Kristen that if she peed on the bed again she was going to cut her clitoris off with a pair of sewing scissors. Will they did

not do that; however, they did put a ring horizontally through her clitoris with a needle and bottle cork. Hence, that is how they branded or identify their kids in their orphanage, with a ring that was permanent and impossible for them to remove.

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Kristen said that it only pinched and hurt as they were doing it. I do not believe that… To this day, Kristen has that piercing; and she said that she doesn't mind it at all. Besides, her doctor said to leave it alone, and when she gets a little older, she can change the ring, just to be very gentle and careful with the little hole opening that was made through the over-sensitive tissue, when feeding the new jewelry through. We both felt that it would be best to go to a tattoo shop to have it redone when she was a teenager.

Now she finds it to be cute, she said that all she needed to do was find the right round ring, and that is what she did!

She got a silver one with a sparkly single pink stone in the ball bead fastener, the old one was just a black spiked end ball ring and a small gray number tag, she was number- (G-K-14.) G- for a girl, K- for Kristen and the 14 for the fourteenth girl they had in the basement. You know what… that is all I have to say about that. It truly troubles me how others, in this case, a kid was treated by others that should be role models, yet they are monsters.

Nevertheless, they get away with it all, it happens all around us every day, and no one sees it or chooses to do anything about it; for her, it was all part of the houses of horrors. My recollection of that day… oh my, her eyes were bloodshot, she was balling with teardrops running down her cheeks. You could see the human teeth marks on her skin from the others that pecked and poked at her. I said who are you- and she trembled out the name Kr-is-te-n!

This was like déjàvu for me, really it was. I did not know how to feel; what could I feel I was numb to what to think; if it was the emotion of being delighted or horrified? She was just left there standing cold and lonely, with the unsympathetic November rain and orange, yellow, and red leaves falling around her as the rain hit her on her small chest, face, and delicate figure. I remember that attached to her wrist was a note… saying this is your granddaughter; this worthless pile of shit is your obligation now!

'I do not want to take care of it- (G-k-14) any longer. For the reason that it (G-k-14) is no use for me any longer. It-(G-k-14) is what we call used up, and no longer a use for us. It-(G-k-

14) is no longer desirable for the male buyer's needs, or the needs of the other progenies we have. It-(G-k-14) has been released, rather than dismissing to expiry.'

'The crazy bitch' did not even refer to Kristen as she, her, or a human girl; she just called her… 'It! - (G-k-14)' Plus, if they would not have chosen to release her, they would have killed her, and put her stripped down in the mass grave they have in the backyard because the only other thing she could have been for them would have been to be a young birth mother. Likewise, they did not want any more kids that were related to me.

Why- I do not know! Maybe it has something to do with the blood type? For years, I thought my granddaughter was deceased; that was what the wright up in the cyber gazette babbled, along with the cops said. For about seven years this woman and the family along with the other kids would stomp, beat, slam, and tie-down my grandbaby, to a bed, and Ava would twist her feet and limbs until the bones would crunch; and her heels would be where her toes should be, it is a wonder she can even walk. I believe that they would even inject her with tranquilizers to make easier for all of them to rape her. Kristen without her even knowing that she could have gotten away from the hysteria, but because she had a fear of the wrath, she never attempted to leave. Furthermore, if she tried, she was always chased down and locked back up. I am just happy she is alive!

Chapter: 36

It's the little things

From that day, approximately ten years have passed, I would have to say that I am about sixty-five now, in this life, yet age these days is just a number, that does not count for much. It is the little things that count, they show the way; just like the little girl in the doorway, like the little dream that has not gone away. Just like the little girl, and her hopes and dreams, that came true because she knew how to pray; for a day she came home with me to stay. What could I do? I was not going to leave her out in the rain, plus how could I resist that lovable little girl. She could not help who her daddy was; she just had a way of melting my heart, and I guess she always will. I do believe that if it would not have been for this little girl, I would have given up on life a long time ago as you may have guessed. I have seen her grow up; every day was a discovery.

'We lived and learned, life threw curves, yes there was joy, and yes there was hurt, oh how I remember when.' I remember when she was ten living life through twists and turns, and

all she wanted to do was run through the golden fields wild and carefree, free and open to the heavens above. I remember when she turned thirteen and became and a mischievous teenager, that included curling her hair and wearing eyeliner and soft pink lipstick, she was a young lady and looking for lust. Now that she is nearing the age of seventeen a young woman, she does not need me as much as she used too; I guess that my mission in life is over. Life goes by like a blink of an eye. I did the best I could, but I often wonder if my best was good enough this time too. Sometimes I cannot help but wonder if she is going to be the next young girl on the list of heartbreak, because of the curse of the tower, or has she gone through all her pain?

(Present time)

Just about every day Kristen and I sit down at the dining room table, and I tell her stories of back in the day. We have the same meal of canned soup, canned peaches, and Pepsi in you guessed it a can. I have not had a home-cooked meal in years. Every morning I have peanut butter and jelly sandwich doubled over, and with a cup of instant black coffee with three spoons full of fake sugar; that so strong it could walk. It makes me want to cough when it is going down, I do not need to eat or drink.

Nonetheless, I do, and then I start popping my peals, that keeps me going through the day or so they say, and to keep my broken heart going pitter and pat or so it seems to everyone else, with a few extra beats in-between, I do not have a heartbeat as you know. Yet to them they think that is what is wrong with me medically, I just play along, it stress-free that way! That reminds me that I have not slept in a bed for years; I sleep in my chair in the living room looking out the window. The bed has not been used after my husband's death, the new sheets I put on have never been slept in, and the bed has a canopy in a soft purple color… just the way we always wanted it to be.

Why?

You ask; because that was the bed, we planned on being in together every night, and I do not like sleeping alone, I always loved to cuddle up. I miss him far too much when being in that room, on that bed; I just cannot even go in there, without breaking down.

I remember when we were young, and we first started to sleep together in the same bed. Us we were uncovered with the only cover on top of us being the soft cotton sheets it was

awkward and exhilarating… there were nights when I thought I had a heart that's pounding just like the drum solo in Soundgarden's song Spoonman!

My heart has not to beat like that in many, numerous decades. Yes, I kind- of miss those days, what can I say. I have had so many days in my life's no wonder they started to blur together. Yet it felt like my stalled hart hit so hard and fast I could not sleep: because of the intimacy, we had… just being pressed upon one another. 'We were like two perfectly fitting spoons in the kitchen drawer.'

Then the morning would roll in, and we would cuddle together looking out our big arched picture window looking over the oak tree, the sun rises, and the golden land below. Then the birds would sing as if just for us; as if their lovely songs where them approving of us being together in our bed.

Plus, not long after, that I would fall fast asleep with me wrapped around him. Then he wrapped around me in the sweetheart cuddling position. Yes, that was what we did; I could never forget that no matter how long I live. Sundays, we just liked to be lazy, and go for walks on the old abandoned railroad tracks at that time we held Jaylynn's little hand between us, and we both would raise her and swing her back and forth ever so slightly.

Then she would giggle and shout saying the word 'Weeee!' I can still hear her saying, 'I love you momma, and dad- da…!' in her baby talk. Aww- how adorable, those days go by, and time can do so much. They were righteous days, what can I say! That jogs my memory for me, for seven years, Kristen lived with a mattress all most on the floor, and the headboard was attached to the wall, with a four-foot dog chain, that would attach to her ankle and the other kids had chains too, this is what they called bedtime, they were unchained from nine AM to seven PM. The time in between, they all were attached to their beds, two boys and two girls lined up bare naked in one single bed, which is how they lived most of the time.

With only one thin blanket if they were ever so lucky to be given one, she and her bedmates were fortunate to have a pillow; sometimes during her misery, she did not even have those things. They had this bedroom in that house, which they would take the young girls into for the dirty old men to do what they wanted. That is if they choose to buy them, the girl… that is for sessions of any kind of sex they ask them to do, the girls that would complain or not comply

would be beaten until they were killed, by Ava and her mother, the demons would come out in their rage!

Ava and her mother love to snack on the boys and girls, for their blood, and kill them for their soul! They had a pick on the girls more than the boys, mainly for accessibility reasons. You can figure that one out on your own. Then they would suck out their blood from you know where and drink it, and bury all of them out in the backyard, and cover them over like they were nothing to them, or for the dogs to eat. They would even chop and hack them up for dog food, and blend them in a blender.

That is a true story Kristen seen them do that to a five-year-old girl, with her own eyes! Yes, I have to believe her… that is too creepy and insane not to be true! The men buyers they could choose what girl they wanted, and for how long they wanted, the price starting at fifty dollars went up for each act more they wanted to perform on them, or for the girl to perform on them. Every day she was given a bit of old bread, with coffee dumped on top, and that was all she got in one day as a meal. She never even had a dress to wear on her tiny body, the poor kids that were in the basement, they did not have clothing given to them, like the others that live in the upper levels of that house.

They did this to her because of me? I still do not know what their problem was with me. Anyways- Ha- ha, getting her to keep a dress on was difficult, but out here in the county of the golden hayfields, she was able to run free and play in the mud all she wanted to, I did the same thing to in the rain when I was a young girl; just a tomboy! She was crazy wild, and I was going too- in a way break her of all that, and raise her to be a respectable girl. This was my chance to make up for the past; I was not going to fail again, not with her!

All life is just like the footprints in the snow as you look back, sometimes you see two sets, and sometimes not. Now and then, you look back on the path that is your life, and you only see one set of deep prints.

However, they are not your prints. I have come to realize and believe, that is when I was carried, through the hard and difficult times, by my angels, or by the Lord himself. Should I, or could I? Did I need to get another love? Should I have found someone new to be with romantically? Was there any need for another man in my life? Well, I will leave that up to you to figure out. Just remember it is not always, what you do that stops you from what you wanted in

life. Sometimes in my case, it is something or someone that has been there, and they are pulling at you.

Just remember that he saved me from total and complete destruction, so just think about that. Then you will know how I feel about other relationships or letting them get into deep with me. So, that is a no I never had another man in my life romantically. Furthermore, afterward, you look back on life and think, maybe I should have done this, or maybe I should have done that, do not waste your time. It is all meant to be even if you cannot foresee it all. The journey is not always clear, however, I always got where I wanted to go, I remember a time when I had an opportunity to find love again in a living form.

But- then I would hear the voices calling out saying 'Listen you do not need to talk to them... okay. Do not try to ask them on dates or anything... I am all you need... and truthfully I still feel that he was all I ever needed and everything I wanted to be with.'

Life tip- You need to make yourself listen to what you want to hear, even if it is difficult to move on. Life is a fight for what you want. As well as when you find true love, do not let it pass you by, and if you had true love does not give it up for anyone. Besides, if you want it... you are going to have to battle them all... all the haters just to keep your love alive, remember sometimes you need to let go of the past. However, remember to keep all the good memories that you had together, try to never forget them. I will never forget you all... never- ever.

Over the years, I have come to see it as it is not a true relationship if the person is afraid of what they can and cannot do. All the same, remember that just because it is that way in the stars then does not mean shit, in the end, everything changes in a moment, life goes by so recklessly, it is the little things, which matter! Only the little things. No matter how bad something is, the good is always coming!

'All you need is a little faith, and the little things will become all the good big things in your life someday!'

Chapter: 37

Expression of the bygone

All relationships are going to end naturally or not. It is all up to you and what you want, I choose to stay in this relationship forever, and doing it is too difficult sometimes. Just remember

you have choices in life. So, what are you going to listen to your inner voice or the ones that are all around you and me?

It is just like we all needed to get off the cyber walls and take our life's back. The webbed walls where doing nothing but showing names with faces that label others with either good or bad stigmas, it could not be deleted, and it would follow you everywhere you went... even if you had a past that was made up by someone else it remained with you. It needed to end; it was ripping the world apart. I still believe that we all need to find real friends in person if you can in this day and age, we should not spend all of our free time looking at faces on a screen, that are deceiving what true thoughts of friendship should stand for. Please remember they are not your so-called friends... they are not your friends on there at all, if you do not or cannot talk to them in real life.

Then what in the hell makes, you think you can chat with them on the webbed walls of the internet, and not real life? They are just there to look into your business, so stop being stupid. They do not care about you at all. They are stopping you from achieving your desires in your life, by talking or chatting behind your back, and how do you truly know what they are saying if you are like blocked out, or who it is that is saying it. They do not care about you! So, I ask why should you care about them by having them on a profile or friends list; it is useless and completely immature?

For instance, as you can be in someone's photo on the walls from the past, yet they do not want you to be tagged with them because of what others might say, or think. Therefore, they go into that album and they delete the photo altogether or remove you from the tag. Thus, you are not a friend or a human being. In my opinion, they are just a despicable asshole, or someone, which cannot think for themselves. You understand- right? I remember back then some would block me from their profile, really- like whom the hell do you think you are?

Do you think that you are better than me? Just summing it all up, you all need to realize that your complete little world, which you lived in, does not mean anything to anyone. You all need to know that I do not need to know everything about how you are or what you are doing. I do not need to see your, photos, whom you are dating, and if you are single or taken, what religion you say you believe in, and who your so-called friends are to you, I truly do not give a shit.

Remember that you are the ones that choose to post all of that to the world. Therefore, if you do not want everyone seeing your condescending shit, then stop posting everything to the world for everyone to see.

I can assure you that no one gives a shit about you, and whom you are banging every night, and if they do, then they are the ones that are creepy- right? I think so… keep all your photos, notes and stories in a book, which means more to you than anyone else; it is more unique that way. That reminds me, just like the shit that can happen in this town, and all you have is two choices in making a complaint. One is going to the independent police; that does absolutely nothing, but drink free coffee and eat free donuts.

As well as, stalk the blameless people in their cars, and pick on the innocent, like me, and Kristen. It is like we are followed, yet never questioned, so far that look on their faces is that of, we will get you for something! As well as the other one- number two is filing a complaint with the borough of 'The Land of Many Steeples.' So far, they are so corrupt, that nothing is going to be done, to help the people of the town. Most of the council and mayor can be overthrown at any time, by the ones that have so-called more power or the ones that they fear; as it has always been here. However, it is not like they can come to an intelligent decision anyways of what to do. Yet they have power over us and it is out of control, and that is a true statement, just look around, and you will see!

~*~

The voice that follows you is the one that you choose to listen too. What you have to say about yourself means more, the word friend can mean that there- is good ones and evil ones. All you need to do is recollect about that statement, and you will see that it is true.

Do not spend your time looking at photos or of people, that you can never have in your life, or that do not want you in theirs, all I can say is take back your freedom! Whatever happened to the old days? I remember every day we use to hold hands while walking from our bed into the bathroom, and we would get into the hot tub and bathe together in candlelight, with me lying on top of him, that was one of those good old days.

Oh, how we would soap each other up, and he really liked it when he was lying back, and I was bent over with my head under the faucet when I was washing my hair. Yah he was a butt-man what can I say… we were so playful when we were young, and he was with me!

Hitherto, those days' change.

The water would splash as we touched each other everywhere ever so gently all around each other's most ticklish parts. A hand lightly flicking over my raised nipples. Under the water you can see him rubbing my clit in the opposite directions, then his hand moves' up my tummy, and slightly tickle brush me as they go under my armpits. He away nibbles on my one nipple, now I am completely leg wrapped sitting on him in the bath. He was behind me rubbing my whole body with his hands, kissing me on the neck and cheeks, whispering in my ear, I bite my bottom lip, moving the movements of sweet love, as he was squeezing my boobs, I go from behind to the front his penis was pointed up, hitting my tummy, as I hold his face with my small hands… Once again, we were two lovers creating a feeling of warmth, and intimacy, just being happy being together. Then we kiss, with much passion, my hair wet, I glide hump up and down on him and it on my tummy as we sit. His soft fingers on my butt cheeks.

Then he holds me in the middle of my back arm wrapped as he sucks' in my nipple longer, then he picks me up, like a little girl that I am, I am hugging his neck and have my legs wrapped around his back, as his penis bonging un my butt crack. Still kissing and moving to the feelings within us for each other. I flip out my weather in the hold with my nick going for a long desire kiss.

He kisses my lower lips with his lips, it feels good. I arch my back to his licking, my tongue glides up and down the shaft, rimming the head, then I go all the way down, bobbing for his sighing, I love when there are strings of my spit hanging being pulled away by me- from my lips all attached, then I squeeze him and below the tip. I lick from the bottom up to the bell- end.

He is stalking my hair and I feel his chest, the look on his face is all love and hot lust. I give him a hand rub and then stick it back down in my self- lubed warm mouth, my teeth riming the rim… like my tongue like up and down the full length of seven inches, and yes that goes all own my sweltering- like trout, like what my vagina is doing, as it in the air and exposed to his touch, I stop sucking to kiss him and he takes it, and start sucking it again.

I lick his tummy and him awe-a!

I lick his balls to be in my mouth also, I was worried about this yet he likes it. Then we just fuck- with me on top sliding his hand derating, hugging tightly, me arching my back hips down and it's always down and out, move to the jotting… as I make it go in and out as it comes

in from behind fast and then slow. Butt grabbing, slapping, wet wells of mine bidding up to orgasm- over and over as he does inside. AMAZING! We even did it in the sitting passion, where its ling me banging on him in a hug. WONDERFUL- I said- 'Come here and kiss me.' he is now on top after the big and last moment where you can see it all running out of me, her an up-close shot.

~*~

Though no one in this town could stand it, I wonder why?

Speaking of bathing… Every night Chiaz would give Jaylynn a bubble bath when she was a younger girl about ten years old and back, it sticks out in my memory.

He would help her take off all of her close from the day. Besides, he would loosen, straighten, and undo her hair, which was in pigtails, one on each side with his fingers. Yeah, they were close, she preferred him over me. You know he was the perfect dad!

Then he would bath her; she would splash water everywhere and she would jump around from laying on her stomach with her but in the air, to sitting, as he tried to clean her up and wash her hair, she was a handful. Plus, then he would pick her up out of the tub she would be dripping and wiggling around, and she would get him all wet as she would cling around him hugging him around the neck with her arms fastened, and her legs around his lower chest.

Then he would put her down to stand up for herself, and dry her off with a big fluffy pink and brown polka-dotted towel. Also, then he would simply put nothing more on her than a single light pink nightgown over her body; and it had the Disney's Minnie Mouse on it with little bows; because that is all she wanted to wear to bed. As she got older as a teenager, it just became a single white T-shirt of his, which ended above her knees. Anyways then, he would then carry her to her room every night, and he would tuck her in with her stuffed animal. We would read her a bedtime story from a book. As well as we would kiss her on the forehead, and say good night, sleep tight… honey! As well as, she would say night-e Night! Sometimes I wish for those days back again, because after he was gone… everything changed; and not for the good as you no. Oh hum- you know she always said that she did not want to live a day without her daddy being there for her. A lot of little girls love their daddy, just a little more. Okay, that is enough of my ramblings. There is someone, I want you to meet! So, be kind to her, please.

Chapter: 38

Just Like Reflections

Hello everyone, I am Kristen! I live with my grandma; I am all she has at this point, I know that she is a good person, but I think she is a little too grumpy for her good. Nevaeh-Kristen has a very high- pitched squeaky voice also, that is so adorably cute, and unlike any other girl, I ever knew. Her hand can fit into the palm of my hand, her giggling laugh is the only thing that warms me, and feels the emptiness in the space of my heart. Just like a snare drum, I am not so hollow when around her. She just has a way of making my day complete. Without her I would not have any beat or cadence to play, she is the rhythm to my melody; she is the girl that I always wanted, in my life.

Kristen, your mom was a lot like you! She had blue eyes, however, yours are hazel green. But, just like your mom you are so damn sweet to everyone, she was just like you! Yet you are just like me. Back then, she was all I wanted in my life along with your granddad. But, instead, she had to walk out the door with your dad.

Just remember this…

~*~

Kristen- 'True love should not be such a game; you need to feel the same about one another.' 'Just remember you were not an accident, you were meant to be, and so you could be with me. We are there for each other.' After Kristen goes to her room at night, I look out my window in the summer, and my wondering eyes overlook the honey golden fields, that splashes the sunlight in my eyes. Before my eyes blink the sunsets, and the darkness comes to let me know that I am sitting here in my home feeling alone. In addition to that, the memories of the past start playing in my mind.

Hope!

She- must have felt the same way back in the day, as I do now. I think about my first kiss, that meant so much to me, I think about us that night under the bridge, that is along the walkway where we made love. I remember all the sights of beauty that were worth beholding; they will forever exist in my memory. Yet this body of mine is deteriorating, like sand ever so slowly. I have become what I never thought I would become; I have become a person just like Hope! Now I see what her life was like; now I know why she was the way she was with me, all times in

history seemed to repeat, along with people that are a part of that history. Do you know what I mean?

(One day has passed.)

Kristin, she is like the colorful blossoms on my tree of life now! Look at this house, look at the life I have had what does it stand for… what?

What do you think it stands for Kristen? Asked by- Nevaeh? Kristen said- 'I do not know yet, you have not said anything yet that makes any sense to me. But, that is okay I still love- yah!'

Nevaeh- So just to have her know, that I am even there even now that is what I call love. Wishing her a good night, and some sweet dreams even though she is not a little girl anymore, is what I live for; and seeing what the next day brings with her beside me, is what I look forward to, she is my life my existence now. I like to tell her that love it should be that cupid's arrow, which strikes at a most unlikely time; or you may realize that they have been in front of you all along. That is what love is all about. I like to tell her that a relationship will change her in many ways for good or bad.

That it is a time when a new relationship looks like it is about to deliver on the promises, that come with it. Life may never be the same again without them.

Nevaeh- asked Kristen- 'What is love to you?'

Kristen- Okay I remember the first time I had sex it was in the store's men's bathroom where I work at, on the floor with this boy. Yah he was riding me, and going in so hard; I had my legs lifted up and on top of his shoulders.

Nevaeh- Oh god! I do not need to know that… said Nevaeh, that is not romantic, that is a sick girl. You are not even seventeen yet!

That shit should have been priceless to you, and it should have been precious to you also, and saved for marriage or the right one! At least love the guy! I cannot believe you would waste that moment.

Kristen- you asked, and oh, Grandma you are so old fashion… plus he was so cute… it is not like that at all; it was not that type of love- I do not consider that, love at all.

Yes, maybe so... whispered Nevaeh... however, in my day we would have not even thought about doing such a thing in that way, without knowing you are in love with them, regardless of what you did. No- do not tell me, I do not want to know.

Kristen- Maybe you're right, maybe I should have loved him, all we were was just friends with benefits maybe more I have to see what happens. Though I do not think that being romantic is dead these days, it does exist I hope so anyway.

I also believe as you do that you just need to be with the right guy, which can show you what real expressions of love is! But I do think like you, that it is hard to find these days when you are afraid to make a move; because you never know what will turnabout and happen.

Nevaeh- Oh yes to be under the spell of a girl or guy is like getting hit below the belt, when you have a love like this see, it is going to be like instant nausea. That is what I told her. Yet I know that she is going to be the only one that I can love, she is it the one, the only one.

The only girl that I need to be around now other than my angels.

However, the others still haunt me and tease me every so often. They toy with me and play around in my dreams and my day- to- day household tasks.

That reminds me that I am all alone in my old age, and Kristen has grown up too fast and will be moving on without me, that day is coming too soon.

So maybe I should get some more pet cats, and become that crazy cat lady, they say I am.

Kristen's father Lance does not speak to me as a spirit; as far as I am concerned, he can burn in hell in the lake of fire, for what he did to my daughter and granddaughter. I have nothing, nothing at all to say to him never- ever!

So, when it comes to spirits that I can channel it just depends on who they were, and what they choose to be in life. Some do not want to be heard and others do not shut up.

Just like thinking about Jaylynn back in the days, we had together before the beginning of the end. Ha, I am getting a vision, oh yes- I remember this day, Kristen comes here, and let me tell you about this story.

One night in the graveyard, your mom told me about the time that she nearly drowned when she was fourteen years old.

Back then, I had no idea that lance your dad would come into this house, and would watch as your mom was bathing, and he would hold her down under the water in the bathtub, by her hair if he did not get what he wanted.

That was the first time he laid his hands and fingers on her, or so your mom said to me.

Kristen- 'How do you know that?'

Nevaeh- 'I just do!'

I guess after your granddad's depth, I did not see anything clearly, just as she was under the water; I had that same view in my mind. So, that must have been the same night and the way they conceived you, Kristen.

Kristen- 'That's a bizarrely vile grandma!'

Nevaeh- To this very day I could slaughter that boy for what he did to my lovely little girl, or at least beat him over the head with my shoe, yeah that would work.

There is nothing like a spur from your boot, going into the side of their temple, to show your hatred. -am I right? Yes, I speculate I will always be a farm girl at heart, sort- of- speak! No one will take that away from me, not even in this day and age. Nonetheless, that did not stop me from dropping my pants and squatting down to the ground and spraying piss on, and as well as all over his grave and gravestone! Yes, she even did it too.

Ha- that could be one for the photo album he- he. Now that is funny! That maybe Kristen's father, but I have no respect for the man and neither does Kristen… no one will if it is up to me. Do not get me wrong I respect the ones that should be respected, I will honor them… I like to put flowers on the graves for all of my loved ones. One day I added white handmade wooden crosses with solar lights for them so that their bodies are never in darkness, their souls are not there, yet it shows I care, they see that. Thinking back on the years, that has past and I have forgotten about this but Jaylynn would sing to me, she had the voice of an angel!

You know that Kristen looks, and sounds just like her… I do believe that reincarnation is possible… do you? So, I gave Kristen all the poems I have, because she would hide them under her pillow anyway, plus now they have been made into songs, that Kristen plays for me on this old piano; that sits here in the living room, it's been here as long as I could remember. Speaking of musical instruments to this day- I still have Jaylynn's old Fender Stratocaster guitar, the wood

is now cracked on the fingerboard of the neck, and the high E string is broken, it most likely will never play a song in tune again. However, Jaylynn had painted a gorgeous white-winged angel on it, and she signed it with her name, also she added an X and O.

I always knew her heart was in the right place. He was the way she is… the way she is, now. You know I do not have the heart to throw it away; it was played with love and compassion by her. So, I plan on giving it to Kristen, so that maybe we can get it working again if I have the energy. It is on my to-do list! A list that seems to get longer as my days are getting shorter. I remember back in my life there were days, that I just wanted to get up and run into the sunset and never look back… there were days that I just wanted to scream at everyone at the hellhole.

There were days where I was running from myself… there were days I was running to him for love and understanding, and there were days that I was running away from everything that the tower started.

We all have been running for our lives.

Running never stopping not even to look up, other than to eat, sleep and shit and piss the day away. Nevertheless, this running so fast in this sprint, my loved ones and I collapse to the track below and was not able to finish our marathon, the way it should have been.

Yet I feel that I am still walking to get where I am going, but I like them to contemplate if it is taking us anywhere, or aiding anyone in away. I have learned to slow down now, now that they are not behind me so much, and take it all in, and let it go for the most part. Some are gone from the race, and some stay to watch to the bittersweet end. Run! Run! -away from the throbbing hurt, run away from the reflection that is you, that is so much like me! Run- I say, run and never- ever look back, you can never look back!

Chapter: 39

What I am Truly Living For

It is interesting that when Kristen is asleep, I check in on her often. You know there is nothing more comforting than hearing her snoring away, she is so adorable, in every way! I do this for two reasons, one that I have a hard time sleeping at night, or sleeping at all. Two- that I want to make sure that she is still breathing, because- I do not think I could take another loss or heartbreak.

What is left of my motionless heart is just too week, and she is the only one that I love left in my life. I look around the room, and the white long lace curtains are still on the windows and they are tied back, with lavender ribbons, and the windows are up and open, without worry, I can feel the breezes and see the laciness, dance in that soft draft blowing around the octagon part of the room. Where my old wood desk with the typewriter on top is located, not much has changed other than the young girl in the bed. That is the only bedroom that is used in these three-bedroom farmhouses now.

I know that she is content, holding her teddy bear, under her canopy bed, she may be seventeen in two weeks, but as for now, she will always be my little girl. The crystal chandelier is dimmed as low as it can go, with a slightly flickering soft glimmering creamy dim light of warmth. So, now that I know that everything is okay, I shut the door keeping, it cracked slightly.

Before I will shuffle, my feet back down the staircase, making my way back to my old lazy boy chair, which is in the living room, the room where I spend most of my days now. Then I am going to stare out the window, at the obscure blackened lands until the sunrise's ones again... so that I know that I have seen another day, and I can recall all the memories once more. As the fog lifts and the rays' shine through my window like it did when I was a young girl.

I remember- Hope saying to me when I was a girl 'Early to bed and early to rise, she'll make us healthy, wealthy, and wise.' Hope used to say that to me every night; I still try to believe that is so... maybe. Nonetheless, I cannot help but scratch my head and mutter in my mind these very questions. Just because one is wealthy, does not mean that they need to be a dick to everyone that has less- right? Just because one is healthy, does not mean that they cannot become deathly sick- right?

Plus, some smart people are not very wise at all as you should know that- right? So, that saying just does not work for me. Likewise sleeping it is something that has become more of a need for me, but it is hard to obtain. Because not many out there know what it is like to have younger transparent ghostly like angels in transparent white all up in your face; being playful and animated around you all the time. Even when I take my glasses off, they are showing up on my face as clear as day. It makes it hard to slumber throughout the night. But that is okay... what can I say, I do not need it anyways, yet it would help me look more rested- I presume.

Why?

For the reason that I am going to realize that, I am all alone when I am not alone. That even the dreams, which I have, are just as painful as being awake. Not painful as being injured or cut, but painful in its emotional and psychological makeup. So, undervaluing it can be difficult, and it is straining on my old dying brain to grasp what to make of it all. So, most of the time, I just put the music player on, which is part of the wall screen television. Then listen to the ancient classic rock station that is way up in the thousands, softly in the background.

Yes, as I sit like a stone and I ponder everything, just like a stone skipping over a smooth pond that I tossed back in the days, I went in the garden, I sink into the vision depths of the past, just like a pebble. Just like a Chicago song; Jaylynn is my inspiration, Kristen she is now what gives me my life meaning, and she is the only thing that gives me any feeling. So, without her, I am just an empty body. I can still see Hope's husband dragging on his tobacco pipe, with it off to the one side in his mouth. I recall what he said when I was a little girl not long before he passed… he was a bitter person, to say the least.

'You will never be contented because you say dumb things, and do dumb things.' I often wonder if he was right or not. Sorry to say that I have never missed that man at all; all these years, some souls do not deserve to rest in peace. 'It is just like every saint is a sinner that keeps on trying for their worthy nobility.' 'Just like every cop is a criminal.' Just like everyone gets a turn, in time good or bad.' So, I guess what the real question is- what is coming after you?

Do you know or are you clueless? See I disagree with what he said about me because at least I knew what was coming in my life. Yet he did not see it coming to it was too late. So, he was the dumb shit not me, when you think about it! I never regretted leaving home with my love, and I never stopped loving him either; unlike he did with hope, she knew about it. But she did not care about anything other than housework… let's just say he was playing around with another family's daughter, that he should not have been playing with, and the stresses were too much for him to take on. I will let you put the pieces together for yourself. You know - That girl always did get what she wanted! Yes, even an old man!

Chapter: 40

Past Doors in My Heart

So yes, I still go to the same church, which I have gone to all my life; and I give what I can. I sit in the back, with Kristen by my side; she is the only youth there. It seems that faith is

gone away, just like everything else in this land. I have paid for all my sins, and that is what I want Kristen to know; I always tried to do the right things at all times. That I liked to think before I do something; because you never know… you just may have to live with it all your life, and it stays with you forever. Then when I go back to my home it is just like clockwork, I can hear Jaylynn whispering, saying I am still with you, and I love you, I l-ov-e you!

It is drawn out, and sweet and soft as well as lingering and haunting. It makes the hair on my arms stand up. Yet it is stimulating and yet melancholy all at the same time. Kristen must think that I am going completely loopy or plum loco… ha, ha, and ha! Well, I am getting older; she thinks that all old people are irrational. Hell, I was the same way at her age. Saying that- 'I hope I would die before I get old.' Who in the hell used to say that good shit? Well, I cannot remember… was it the Who? I have seen a lot come and go in my life; I just wish I could remember all of it though. I never really wanted to live a day without Chiaz next to me, I remember one of my dates with him; I remember we went to this little amusement park, which has the oldest standing… to this very dayside friction wooden roller coaster, it was built in 1902.

Oh, yes, I remember it has these big old comfy train cars, that sit two in the front and two in the back, they rattle back and forth on the track. However, we loved it because you could not help but bump into one another's hips, and put your hands on one another's knees and legs. That was the first time he put his hand down the front of my skirt and groped my one breasts through my pink striped spaghetti strap tank top. I think of us spending the day at that park; and seeing all the lights come on at night on all the rides, on those summer nights. I recall that everything on that ride was done by hand. Like them pushing the car on the chain to go up the lift hill of 41 feet. I recall that the stopping was done by a man. Which would pull on a handle to have the wood brakes grind the train car to a halt when you were coming into the station.

The roller coaster next to the lake has a top speed of 15 miles per hour not fast, but it was romantic for its day, I remember back to those days I have lived far too long. On this roller coaster was the first time I put my arm around him, and we became more than friends. That last leap you get airborne and get to snuggle up with your love and squeeze what you like. I know what I had my hand on!

Us… holding hands, with me holding cotton candy.

Us… drinking soda out of the same bottle.

Us… kissing repeatedly as we walk along.

Us… riding on the double-decker carousel, with the sound of the Wurlitzer band organ playing its cheerful medley in the background.

Us… in the same rocking seat on the huge Ferris wheel snuggled up.

Us… going to the water park in our swimsuits.

Us… going down all the highest slides, with me in front and him in back of me as we were on the same inner-tube together.

Us… going on the little steam train to get cooled off, while it chugged and puffed along, as we were riding through the trees with me sitting on his lap.

Us… is no longer, but he is with me forever. I do remember when we were…

Us!

(For months has passed)

Kristen- I cannot get away from my boyfriend he is not my true love, or lust, or much of a boyfriend. He is more like my stocker, which I am in a relationship with the kind of. I am all he wants and all he wants is one thing from me, and that is not what I want from him. Yah- you know what that one thing is, that is stopping me from telling him off. It is that I am afraid of what he might do to me if I do get away and he finds me, yet I must get away I have too. Sometimes I just wish I could fly away from here like a bird… and nest somewhere new, and start a family of my own. But that is not going to happen anytime soon with what I have to put up with. Yet I have gotten to see what it is like to have a real man! Because I think, I am in love with someone else, yes, I am more than seventy percent sure, that I love him. I have a plan, and it is not going to be easy for me to do. But it is what has to be done; if I want to live another free day or live at all.

Matt Shezor is his name, he is my boyfriend of about two years, and it started so good, the way it should, and just went downhill from there… now I am trapped. He doesn't love me at all…

He is related to Melvin somehow, but that is not important right now.

All I know is that I NEED to GETAWAY! I WANT to be with someone ELSE… but I CANNOT! Besides, me saying I can't doesn't work for me at all, I cannot say that I love him anymore. I do not know if I loved him at all.

~*~

Nevaeh- Sometimes I get so preoccupied trying to make everything perfect in doing my everyday routines. That I forget to appreciate the things, which are already perfect. Maybe that is why nothing in my life stays that way? What is PERFECTION? All I know is that I had it in my life and LOST it all. Nothing in my life is perfect the towers hexes always find a way to exterminate them all from me one way or another. The clan friends always find away… yes to END IT ALL for me. My mind is achy half on and half off, most of the time. Now that she has gone way. My dreams are the true reality. So, it seems to me, then when I am awakened, I am frightened by what I do not see, and curious about what I do. Yet I am so proud of her for doing what she HAS TO DO.

No- my words cannot explain the true emotions that I feel towards her, as of now. I said to Kristen do not THROW your life away!

Just for me to be happy if you are unhappy. Go-! go and be happy! This is what you want, and what you need to do then- OKAY! Like always what she is going to do it is all out of my hands. Nonetheless, you can only TALK to someone like her so much. I am not going to hold her back now or ever; it is her life. Young people are going to do what they want to do. I was the SAME WAY back in the day, ha… but she does not need to know that. It is just my time to move on. Furthermore, I lose another girl I love. Just to think that my little girl is going to be having her seventeenth birthday, it just seems like yesterday, that she was on my doorstep, so much has changed since then. So, this is what is taking place just like me, Kristen had her boyfriends on and off. Yes, all was fine with all of them or so we thought.

However, the one that wanted her the most is the one that did not want a baby or marriage, yet he did not want to let her go. I think because he was one of them or a friend of theirs! Matt, he did not want to find someone else, after two years of dating my granddaughter, and doing the same things over and over you get sick of a guy's bullshit. I believe that he had a mission to kill Kristen, and he was not going to rest until the job was done. His family always believed that I was the reason that Melvin died.

Why?

I do not no…? Maybe it was; because Melvin and I had a one-night stand not long before…? I guess I was blamed for that too. Maybe, it is just what has been passed down, from clan to towering clan? Maybe, it is because I and Chiaz ran away and got married, and they were jealous of us, that we got away with all of it?

Maybe, I am just losing my mind! It is just like… have you ever been in love, yet you had to let them go, and start a new life once more? Yet knowing that not far away is all the pain, hatred, and the obsession is still out there trying, so hard to get at you, or them. This was on my mind a lot back then with Kristen so-called a boyfriend. He drives up in a piece of shit car, and honks the horn three times; and my sweet innocent granddaughter goes running out the door in a short skirt, to him like he is the only guy in the world.

Matt is the ass hole that deflowered my little girl. I cannot stand him! We have told him to stay away; nevertheless, he keeps coming back like a bad dream. Matt is a cocky blue- balled punk. Call me old-fashioned, but I still think that when you take a girl out you should meet her at the door of the home, and walk her to the door, and even open the carriage door for her. If a boy would have, done that back in my day… my God! He would never hear the end of it. It is just not right. How things have changed. Not only that but Matt expects her to pay for the date, the food or whatever they do. Plus, then he wants to bump, grind, and hump on Kristen too. -Good, God! Talk about selfish, yet she thought at the time that he is the only one with one in his trousers.

They're young and dumb with nothing more than horny puppy-like lust. Back in my day, you walked the girl up to the door, and maybe you got a little kiss, now these a days' these kids put their tongue down each other's throats, along with other things on the first date. Yes, it is sickening to see and hear about. I remember that one day I told him that- 'I have bolt cutters in the basement, and I am not afraid to use them on you.' That is what I said to Matt. It did not do any good…

'He just said- 'You would like that wouldn't you.' That was the very day about two months back, they both went and they got back in his car that was in the yard. They made out before he drove away off into the sunset, like a bat out of hell with her. Yet she did not have a choice I feel, he forced her into the car that day.

That was the last time I ever saw Kristen! She did absolutely the same thing I did when I was a girl, yet I came home. So, maybe I got paid back for what I did to Hope. Yet her story turned out somewhat different than mine. Just like, I have said not everything ends with a happy ending, only a new beginning. I do not look at her with eyes of judgment; I only look at her with eyes of mercy, which is unconditional love. Only eyes with love do I see her. I have to give her room to grow into what God planned for her to be, and judging her for what I do not understand; it is not going to help me, or her. Where she is- is not where she is going to stay, or end up, I have to feel that way.

'What you choose to do affects everyone, plus anyone that you love… thinking for yourself is everything; believe me!' The little runaway girl to become his fool; she is gone away, and she had to drop out of school. The runaway girl is far away and out of control. I do not know what to do, and it is taking its toll, you are just going to have to find your way out of this hole.

Chapter: 41

Stranger Danger

Nevaeh- There is always someone in the way or so it seems. I believe in not saying too many negative words, so that I can receive my blessings, that will surely come in due time, and can bring me joy. Yet I cannot see why this was meant to be like always in all my lives. My Kristen was my everything to me, but she left me to be with him, but was it what she wanted? In addition to that I do not want to leave my home or live alone, is this the time- the right time to break on through to the other side or maybe, maybe not.

Kristen- Matt kidnapped me! He was planning to kill me! He said that he was going to put my dead body in the woods, that he had the perfect spot. That he could cover me over with the brush, that was there… out in the middle of nowhere. So, that no one would find me until my body would rot and smell to the high heavens. Will I live or will I die? He said that he wanted to do it slowly and diligently over some time to make sure I would feel as much pain that could be felt. In the car, his first stop along this journey through hell was a small one-room cabin out in the woods, with no power, no main roads nothing, nothing for me to think about other than death. That is where we went first, and he tied me down in that shack, to the one old lone bed, as well as flopped on top nonstop on me for many days.

Of course, for many days I laid on top of that bed so vulnerable, for him at any time to do as he wanted. Never able to move, as he had that zeal glimmer in his eyes, all I could do is shake and squirm slightly in my pee and other substances like that. Yes, he loved to shine the light off of that large shiny knife blade in my face, to show me what he was capable of doing also if I did not give it all up to him when he wanted it. Oh, how he would, inject sedation drugs into me every chance he got, I could not fight him off, I could not beat him off enough, so he would put me to sleep, so he could be as rough as he wanted to be. He had me wore out!

He would handcuff me to the one murky lone bed in that room; spread out naked as the day I was born. As you could imagine looking just like a starfish stuck on the side of a rock, yet strapped down with his belts, ropes, and his dirty underwear in my mouth so that I would not scream for help, up until then there was no one around for miles, to hear me anyway, as I would scream bloody murder.

My voice would echo back through the trees at me, as it seemed, and he would cackle ruthlessly. All that was on my face! Just like his offensive nasty hot sweat from his brow, that would land on my chest and drip down my belly down me, as I got ever more repulsed, by his actions, that he was doing to me.

Yet, I was seeing, feeling and tasting it all. At all those moments in time, I felt it all. At night, he would chain me to a tree outside, with only a doghouse to sleep in and yes, I was completely nude, while he slept inside the cabin on that same filthy bed I was on, and no he did not see the need in cleaning up at all. I could not sleep from my skin was crawling by what he did, and also the fear I would not wake up the next day, and also my skin was crawling because of all the fire ants, centipedes, and worms were engulfing me.

Affirmatively, I had bugs in places, which a girl never wants any bug to go into, or scuttle around. I remember that I would sketch the days in the wood of the rusty red doghouse with a rock. I was there for three or more weeks, without a bath, clothing, and real food, without anyone knowing, that I was being used as nothing more than a plaything, just like a dog's chew toy. I found myself wanting and longing to eat the bugs, which were on me, just to stay alive.

Before that, I remember how he would make me get out of the car on the way they're undressed like always. He would make me run down the road while he would rev that old classic 2014 Hemi type of car, he called it as a street rod, I call it a death trap. Yes, I knew it was a Hemi

challenger shaker because I could see the emblems getting ever so closer and closer to me, and the car getting bigger and bigger as it was coming at me on the hood and grill! I could smell the burning rubber, the old oil with the gas, and the tar from the road I was standing barefoot on, I knew the only thing that would identify me would be this black and white feathery dream catcher tattoo I have on my left foot. Yet, that is if he would not come back and cut that skin off me as a souvenir.

He was a freak like that! I could see the car approaching faster and faster like those round LED headlights coming at me like eyes! As I was sprinting looking over my back-left shoulder, thinking this is how I am going to die! The sound rumbling and roaring coming out of those tailpipes is something that will haunt me, I am sure of that, this car had modern muscle, like a throwback to the past!

I had a fast thought of I am just going to be posted here spread eagle for some poor person to find me. Surely, after, I am roadkill; yes, I felt as if I was going to be his canvas for his twisted artwork! I was running for my life barefoot. I could feel the stones cut me up as I was trying to outrun his car over and over, he was teasing me by speeding up and slowing down for miles, it was a sick game to him! Just flat out terrifying to me! I even tried running into a wheat field, and he chased me with his car until I was trapped, and I got pinned up against a barbwire fence and he then floored it, and the wires ripped into my back and my butt, and legs.

Oh, how it was a wonder I was not cut completely in half, or decapitated! I do not know why he stops he could have killed me then and there, no he wanted me to feel more pain. Oh, what he called his love! I ran! I dashed! I jogged! I sprinted until I could not run anymore and he was behind the wheel laughing his head off at me falling tripping to the concrete, and gravel, and then I had to get back up and run some more. He would run that red-ish orange Dodge Challenger with the black racing stripes; bumper right up on me until it touched my nude petite butt, as I was running, and I know there was nowhere to run but forwards down the road, all day until late evening and the nightfall. Besides, after I collapsed from exhaustion, he would scoop me up and throw me back into the car, and get his way once more, and I would be too tired to fight him off me.

That was the plan all along. The most painful thing he did to me pulled, tug, yank, and jerk on my ring down there with his teeth, and also a pair of oxidized old needle nose pliers. I thought at one point that he was going to rip it off me entirely. -Ouch! Oh yes, I remember

coming awake after being drugged out of my mind, and him asking me… if I loved him… and I would have to say… yes! I like what you are doing to me. I had to play along, yet I was ripping apart inside with all kinds of frustrations.

Yah how could I forget, he even put a dog shock collar on me, so running away was not something I could do. Also, my feet and hands were chained and immobilized together, with this sharp spiked like prickly shackles. I recall that he even stabbed the tree that I was chained to with the claw of his old rusty hammer, and then he said- 'That is going to be you- my baby.'

Matt- 'If you run from me, I will get you; but you know that I love you! Do not stray away because if you do, I will nail every one of your toes and wrists to this tree right here, and you can hang from it, in the air, and you can think about, what you did wrong- my baby.' He said- (In a spineless, bone-chilling, creeper voice!) Matt- 'Truly, I will do it, and you will be awake to see it all, as well as feel it go through one by one, and swing by hammering swing. You see all of these corroded nine- inch nails there for you- my baby!' he said- (I did not think his voice could get any creepier, however, it did! As he was showing me the hammer and nails. He was utterly insane and mad.)

Kristen- So you know I ran… and he got me. He had his belt in hand ready to whip me, and he did repeatedly until I feel to the ground, with him straddling me, his hand touching me, he starts pinching me, and that is when he pierced my nipple with an old rusty nail. 'Honey hush,' he said as I screamed, even more, the second time; because I knew the pain was picking and nearing. He laughed-

'Saying now everything matches!' I recall him saying this- as he pulled me up dragging me by the hair.

'Good now your bare ass can rub up on the bark of the tree, and then I can smack it later on tonight. You would like that? Wouldn't you? My little bitch!'

Kristen- I had to say- 'Yes, Yes- I would!' I screamed louder than I have ever had in my entire life! For the reason that I knew what was coming! I could see him coming with the cruel tools in hand! I was thinking to myself. 'Please God don't let him have a screwdriver.'' Because new what he would do with it, and where it would be shoved in! Just for the hell of it, he draws a target on my tummy with my lipstick and started throwing tools like wrenches, trying to hit the same spot. I thought for sure something of his was going to go deep inside me. He looked at me,

flashing scissors, and said in a sick way. 'Look, baby, these are the same scissors your momma used to slit her wrist. He slapped them in my hand, and said it is your choice; you can do the same thing she had the choice of... What do you say? You know these are the very same scissors, that gave your mother the episiotomy that brought you into this world. Now they can be the same scissors to take you out.'

Gasping for breath in being so appalled, I remember saying- 'What did I do to you?'

He said- 'It is not what you did to me, it is what they want, and what I was asked to do, and what they will do to me if I don't!'

I said- 'Who are they?' He whispered in my ear, as well as he bit it- my earlobe with his teeth afterward saying. - 'You are that stupid? I knew it! Will If I tell you, I will have to kill you.' He said- (In a very paranoid, yet almost cocky tone of voice.)

So, I yelled back- 'Just do it- you- vain shit-face!'

That is when he did it, one by one. Yes, one toe by toe, all the nails went in and through my fingernails and flesh. This happened to my hand, palm, and wrists one nail at a time. (Bang! Bang! Bang!) Until the point that I was able to suspend from them alone on the tree. The same tree that he carved our names into, saying forever and ever. I have to say at that point I did not want to live, saying get me down!

Then he yelled- 'Not yet- my baby!'

As he walked back into the cabin to nap, as I was hanging about three feet off the ground on the tree. It was even more excruciating than you can imagine hanging there, for about five hours. Without a doubt, I must have passed out from the pain and blood loss. He even had a pail underneath me to collect the blood I dropped, that he made me drink, as did he, yet he said he was going to keep some and a glass jar to give to his family.

(That is weird, I thought! What is he like a vampire?) I recollect when he tugs and pulled me down from the tree, with the nine-inch nails still pounded in and through me, and I fell to the bloody muddy ground as he ripped open my wounds even more as he yanked me down, as I slid down off the tree. Then he said- 'You are not going to run away, again are you?'

I whimpered- 'No!' Besides, he said- 'Now are you going to take what I have for you, or do I have to thrust it down like before? Are you going to be a good girl, and not complain!

Alternatively, do I have to punish you more if you don't?' I said- 'No! I will do what you want!' I was thinking about what happened to you, you are not the boy I fell in love with? What is wrong with you? He was never in love with me…!

The days went by so slowly, and all I did was cry, the whole time, I would have to say another week has passed. I was left in the mud, rain, and wind, cold and lonely partly barred in my shit and piss, I was treated worse than an animal. Yes, worse than even back when I was a young child, I guess it goes without saying- 'Don't take anything for granted.'

Yes- I was making a plan in my head of what I needed to do to run again, yet I did not get the chance. Then one night we left that place, we drove away, and we stopped along the dirt path, and then he took his clothes off, I was still the way I was like from the weeks past. Yet again, he got what he wanted over and over in his back seat of his car. At that point, he tied me up once more. Then he forced me in the trunk of his car because he said that I was fighting him far too much. I thought that he loved me! I thought I was in love. There was a day I would have done anything for that boy. However, he did not want me for anything other than his favorite types of sex, and to push me around, and be his little weak bitch!

Nevaeh- that night I did not call the cops because I knew that they would not do anything to help her or me. So, I just let it go… I let her go. To quote Hope she used to say to me that I was like a lost puppy, and now I think that about Kristen. The saying goes- 'If you leave them alone, they will come home wagging their tails behind them.' I just hope she comes back to me alive, and not as a spirit, that haunts me too.

Kristen- So I was in the back of his car trunk, and I was all cut up and naked from his beatings and poundings. Yes, he even made me bend over, I did not have a choice… besides my hands were tied with my now ripped up panties, yapper… with what used to be my cute purple butterfly thong panties. Besides, my feet were tied with my bra that matched; oh, how he treated me like a dog, which was the only style that he liked, now come to think of it. In the trunk I was tossed, I was wrapped in a black plastic garbage bag, and it was closed at the top with duct tape.

Left to die!

Somehow, I managed to get loose by chewing myself free with my teeth and wiggling around. It was black in there, and I hate the dark! As well as the air was thinning with that smell of shit, he had to take a dump on my chest… that was all in the bag with me. I mean come on. He

said that I was nothing, but something to shit on! That I have to take all of his shit, I did not realize he meant that so literally. It was like when I was in her basement all over again. At that moment, it took me back to that point in my life, when I was seven years old or even younger.

I got away! Yes, I got away! While the car was driving along, I pick the lock on the trunk lid from the inside and rolled myself out onto the moving pavement below, talk about road rash, thankfully, my butt was all that was ripped up! After I saw the taillights fade, away into the darkness of that night, I ran like hell, to be anywhere that I could go to get as far away as possible! Thank god, it was dark out! I ran so far and so fast, there was nothing around me but trees, and that was even scarier than being on the road.

There was no moon that night, no stars, just darkness, and things crunching and breaking under my hurting raw feet, no light at all for me to see ahead or in back of me. Certainly, I just kept thinking in my mind, he could get me at any time, I was thinking about all the ways he said he would do it too, I could see that red-painted hatchet and that black hammer with its rusty nails beside it, in my mind. What should I do? I was panic-stricken! I was surely having an asthma attack, hyperventilating, or something like that, as I was now crawling on all fours for my freedom, just like that day; I was dumped and dropped off at my grandma's door.

So, what do I do now? I have no money, no clothes, and I have no idea where I am at. I was freaking out! The only thing I could do was walk in the woods, which is what I did, I stopped at this big log, and I rested before going back to the paved road. I knew that was the only way, I would make it through the night, I could not stay there. I had to get help! Help- Help- me- please- some- buddy!

H-e-l-p M-E!

(Frantically crying weekly saying.)

From that moment, I made the choice to hitch-hike! I stood stripped freezing and dying there with a thumb out in the air of night, my dirty auburn brown hair stuck to my chest and back, I was feeling hairy and fuzzy and nasty seeing what my- underarms and legs and everything in-between looked like, so, guerrilla-sh, and so, yucky. I knew I smelt worse than the old barn, which is in the side yard of my homeland, that I was missing so much at the time. No! No, the girl should ever have to feel like this, as I did! Yet, car after terrifying car was passing me up like a dirty shirt and splashing me with the puddle water of the road and side trench.

NO!

They did not care enough to stop! However, the whole time, I was wondering if one of those numerous cars was him coming at me! Then one finally stopped! I could not even tell you what the car looked like, or what color it was because that was not important to me at the time. I did not care what it looked like, or what the person inside looked like, as long as I could live! When fighting for your life, you forget about all the superficial things, which do not matter.

That is when I met him for the first time, the cutest boy ever!

Brandon Carol; he was the man that I was looking for all along, it was love at first sight for me, for many reasons as you could imagine! But what a way to meet him, not such a great first impression; So anyways he offered to take me home, which was a three day drive out of his way. It was like love at first sight for us, he like saw into me, and not at me, if that makes any sense. It did not matter what I looked like at the moment. He saved me!

He is my hero! He got us one-bedroom rooms at these fancy hotels along the way, and I finally got to take a bath at last. I slept with him just because he made me feel safe, strange I know. So, before all that, I wear his long tan jacket into the first hotel to get a room. The girl Jacky I think her name tag recited. She looked at me from behind the serves desk and just observed me dumbfounded, yet did not ask. I am glad he did all the talking; however, that look on her face said it all, she knew I went through an ordeal. She was wondering what she was seeing if it was all for real, and it was…!

He got me new dresses at the shops in the towns and underclothes too and took me to find restaurants, I never ate like that in my life. What a guy! I was safe at last! In his care! Before that, I knew at the time… one thing that would be hard to remove, would be to cut off the GPS tracking device bracelet, that was an on my ankle. That he put on me, as I was knocked- out the first time he got me.

It- the tracker had a red blinking light on it, and the band was thick and tight on my ankle, just like the dog collar, however, Brandon got them off me when I explained what happened. Lucky for me he had his work toolbox in the back of his car. Everything was off me; I threw it down onto the pavement, so hard that it smashed into many pieces on the ground. Still, at that moment, I was not wearing anything, and that was awkward; yet I felt free once more by stomping and jumping on that tracking device, in the hotel parking lot. I am sure if anyone was

watching from the veranda's they were thinking I was nuts. Nevertheless, I was wondering if he was still following me, up till now I was so happy to be alive, I simply forgot it was on me… so-dumb- I no!

Neveah- And there she was on my doorstep again! When I saw her, I could see what she went through, and I could not help but say, I told you so, and I love you. I am so happy that you are okay! I felt that you would be. I felt that you would come back to me!

My sweet- sweet little girl, you will be safe now! I squeezed her so firm in a bear hug; I nearly broke her back into two. Furthermore, it was as if we were never away from one another, yet we both know now entirely what it is like to be taken advantage of of…! It was all the same for her and me. I had my little girl back- 'Like teddy bears and chocolate.' Is the bond just got stronger? I did not want to see her go away!

Because she was mine for a little while once more; but that is when I told her that she needed to go and get away from the tower's clans, for the reason that she was 'Hexed to be next.' There was only one thing she could do, and that is what she did! I know I will miss her, and so will her new friend. Yet this is what had to be done, there was no other choice! But- for her to do this…!

Chapter: 42

Entrapments

(A couple of days later)

Nevaeh- There is always someone or something in the way, or so it seems. I believe in not saying too many words so that I can receive my blessings that will bring me joy.

My Kirsten was my everything to me, but she will be moving out soon. It is what she has to do. In addition to that, I do not want to leave my home or live alone, what am I going to do now? I want to stay here. I am not leaving!

Yet someone has to be with me. You know I wonder if this new plan will work or not? She was friends with Matt online, that is how they became an item when they were so-called dating, and what you see and read on there is and was a whole lot different, then what she saw in real life with him, as you know.

So, with me looking back over my lives it is funny to me, that with all these technical advancements, that man has made and added to the world. I have witnessed throughout my life. They said that linking the world was the answer and the fix for this crazed world we live in. That we all needed this junk, yet it has done nothing but destroy everything I feel. You can believe I was just fine back in the glory days of trusting someone with a handshake. Those days are gone forever,

I am afraid to say; the webbed twisted networking will never completely die. It will rip everyone apart first, instead of joining them.

There is no trust anymore.

You can be sure I have done a background check on Kristen's new friend already, and he seems to be all right, the report was clean. As well as, I have a good feeling about him. Yet I cannot place what that feeling is, just yet.

Yes, it would safely say that I liked him from the start. Yet, they have never found a way to fix other- people's stupidity. That is something that cannot be fixed. There is not a thing you can do if they will not listen and learn, so far you have to try, and not say you did. So, there is one simple truth really; you cannot fix ignorance. Just like you cannot have senseless teachers either, to have a good education, and people dare to say that I am simple-minded.

Well, at least I am oh so wise! You did not have to have that in writing to see that, yet would you have appreciated my smarts, if it was not all written down onto this paper. Now, do you see what I mean?

Sometimes you have to look at people differently, to see their true story. Just as you cannot believe all the stories, you hear. Will you see for yourself that was not true, if you have a brain in your head to comprehend? Ignorance is forever if you choose to be that way. So, now do you understand that I am not an ignorant person, nor was I ever?

(Flashback)

I remember back the sisters would want to take turns making out, kissing, and sucking on me and Lily; and the others that were in their group circle of pain. Yes, in front of everyone in the halls, this came back to my mind, after Kristen poured out her heart to me, about what she went through with Matt. You know I did not think there could not be a worse boy then Lance, I

was so wrong; one thing about being wise is knowing when you are so mistaken. Oh, it was so weird! 'I kissed some girls and didn't like it.'

Plus, I and Lily had to kiss one another on all the lips, which we have, you got that? – Good! What was so comical about that is that everyone clapped as we had our lips smashed into one another? Not romantic at all! At that time, the only other boy I kissed was Melvin Shezor, and it just sucked ass honestly. He was a mistake that makes me say- eke…! On the other hand, maybe I just sucked at kissing at that time.

Oh-hum, however, no one kissed like Chiaz. We had such a sweet gentle, almost soft kiss that could not be recreated with anyone else, but us doing it together. We would tilt our heads so perfectly to the one side, and his hands ran through my hair effortlessly… and from past experiences, that is not an easy thing to do. I saw where Kristen's hair was thinned out from him pulling on it, I guess that is what brought that to mind for me.

With my Chiaz, it was breathtaking every single time…! I never wanted to kiss anyone else ever again. Yet I had to in the long peculiar eerie halls of the hellhole. I remember also, how- 'We had to act as we liked it. Yet we hated it with a passion.' I mean that I loved Lily just not in that way. I recall when Lily told me that she did not like staring at her vagina her in own mirror, or how small her boobs looked.

I said- 'Yes… I know totally what you are saying.'

She said- 'Yeah I no- It is like a Picasso down there.'

Then I said- 'You know that every girl is so different. You have… what you have.'

No instead, we should have been thinking that we're happy to be alive and cute like we were. As I said you do not think like that when you are young and dumb. All you think about is what other people, think about you. Which does not matter at all, as you get more mature? 'You know what I find completely hilarious now?

My classes wherein a closet, and yet the sisters wanted everyone in the school population to think we came out of it together.' (I just giggled aloud.) So, one night I remember back in my school day Lily came to my house before she left me, and we sat on my bed and we kissed, and that was not that bad… it was kind of passionate. Just so, when we had to in the school, we knew

what we were doing… it was nothing more, yet maybe it was for her? Some kisses do not count if you know what I mean if you are a girl.

Why?

Because, if you are a girl; then you have to learn how to kiss, sometimes that is with another girl as practice; or at least that is the way I see it be, yet I am not sure if that is how it was, for her. I guess when your eyes are closed it is all the same… maybe- maybe not? I think about this- 'How many people can say that they kissed a girl the night previous to the day she became an angel?' All these years she never said if she was in love with me or like- like me or not, I guess she doesn't want me to feel any blame, and that is in the past and does not matter as it did back then. All the same, my curiosity always did get the best of me. I have deliberated this- 'Was it the kiss of death, or was it just a normal girly kiss?'

Alternatively, was that affectionate kiss letting me know what was coming the next day or not? Was it letting me know that I would not have her as she was in my life any longer, yet she would always love me? I do not know, yet I wonder in my mind, at those very questions, that seen to have no logical answers. I never told anyone about that. However, I thought it would help Kristen cope with what she just went through.

That sometimes in life things just do not have a rhyme or a reason it just happens, and it makes no sense to you. Though everything was meant to be for some reason, that you cannot see, you just have to wait and see, then look back on life. 'Life is just like the feathers on the dreamcatcher blowing in the breeze. They have some freedom yet always held back by the strings, and the evil that is being sucked into it.' Even though Kristen is going to be gone, maybe I will not feel all that lonely or maybe I will.

'Either she or I will need to learn how to fly.' Besides, you will understand soon enough what is coming up in her story, and maybe mine by now if you can foresee, what is going to be; what is going to happen in mine is not clear to me. It is just like the word- Maybe! Maybe- is like a question, that has many answers; with nothing about that word being reassuring to me. Maybe I will see you again… or maybe not. See what I mean?

The Maybe's- is driving me crazy. I think overall the words I used in a day, and try to pick them apart, hoping what I said was decent and understandable. As well as think about it,

what I said was the right things, or if I just put my foot in my mouth. 'I have always seemed to have open mouth insert foot syndrome.'

So, that is why I am so hushed with people I do not know, I do not want to screw up my chances with you. It was always like that for me. Then again, if I say something will I have to live with it? Sometimes the best advice is not saying anything at all. Maybe I should have done that, or maybe I could have said that to them or maybe not.

Maybe there is no point at all.

Maybe it is all okay, what I say or maybe not. Maybe I have too much anxiety, and I worry about everything I do, and what others do to me. Maybe that is why their words are eating at me from the inside out just like cancer. As well as I am left with one question and that is-

Why?

Why- do I do this?

Why have I kept on doing this to myself? -Why?

My God…! I am sounding completely insane; maybe I am all alone too much now? Maybe- He- he! Will, at least I can still giggle at how pathetic everything in my life seems to be, and was and is going to be. All I know is that I will have to-

'Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree!'

Chapter: 43

The Encounters

Nevaeh- Do you remember when I said Angels and fallen angels used to fight one another; they used to fight one another to the eternal death. As I had to sit through the clan torture. Both Angels and demon and fallen Angels are powerful in their ways, they use their powers in different ways as you know for good or evil. I forgot how vicious they were to one another.

I guess I block that out of my mind too. Angels do not need to have any magic wands or cast any spells, they have enough strength in their hands, eyes, and wings to move anything with great energy and speed. Besides whatever that object maybe it whips by you like a blur, I have

seen it, just like Melvin's car way back when, that was thrown over into oncoming traffic by one of the dark ones, by one of those angels of death, that night I saw it in my visions.

Maybe that is why I got the blame for it, because of what I see, and what they do not understand? All angels are like magicians of their power; it is like they have a barrier around them with a glow of white or black that protects them from following evil spirits, or good spirits, depending on the type. It is almost impossible to penetrate their heavenly force or the evil vigor.

The demons do not need to cast spells however, they can, all they have to do is look into the eyes of what they want to destroy, or they trick all your true love's away until you crack under their pressure and give in to them. In these battles, it is beyond belief to see them and all of us fighting… it was so spiteful. The falling angel will try to jump on the backs of the white heavenly angels so that they can try to drain their strength to get at the human life their protecting.

They will want to make the week and fall to the ground like a dying baby bird, that has broken wings. So, they can take what they want from you! Some dark angels will even try to bite the white angels head off with their long sharp malevolent tusks to drink and drain their heavenly lives away, and take their powers to. That is how they lose some of their power.

When they fight it is the ground that opens up with cracking gashes, and I could see the pits of hell, with the red, orange and yellow flames shooting up from underneath. I remember seeing all the burning black chard nude bodies run about below me like ants on the ground from a distance. Oh yes, I could hear the troubled screams and weep, yes, all the cries they shouted for help were so unnaturally gruesome, even the voices and yelps of young children I could hear, from down below. By far the most morbid things, I have ever witnessed in my life. I felt as the sisters were leading me to hell day by day to incinerate me, just as the Nazis did to most of those little girls, with their sinful crematorium ovens. I have felt the infernos. I have had visions of those girls that walk the last walk down that path they took, and it pains me because I can feel what they felt, I can see it all too. I do not know if that is a gift or a curse.

The sisters and their families of clans to me are nothing but a bunch of uncivilized pagans. (Remember Adriane's star around her neck? That was their symbol, that their clan members all wore!) I remember almost being thrown into the underworld by the sisters and their clans, many

times yet Lily always swooped me up in her arms before they could do that. Yet I could feel the heat and look down forever or so it seems, as I was hanging on the cliff edge of earth and hell.

Can you see me there hanging helplessly by my one arm? I always felt that I was on the edge with my fingers on my one hand about to slip from their grip. Letting, or pushing me to fall into that black hole of fire. I was so petrified every time; I was a part of this too in my life; I was one of those girls. So yes, I know how that girl in red felt, I lived it in my past lives that I have had, just like I saw the first horseless carriage going down that path here too. The histories are a part of me, which people do not see.

As an angel, I can skip around in time; I have even spent some time in the roaring twenties too, just to see what it was like, yet nothing compares to having your family and love, that killed the day I died for the first time. Ones they are gone in history, I cannot go back and see them as they were, it is like they are forever spirits to me even going back in time. It is as if they do not exist, I have tried. Maybe that is why my mind is so confused? I can stay the same unchanged, yet I age and everything changes around me. Something is there and something is not. The longer I live the more confusing it all gets. Yet, in those fights, I could see them, all of the angels above me. I could see the rays of bright lights of the joyous promise land, and the clouds of the heavens that would spin into a porthole-like with a stairway to heaven.

The voices asking me to walk up to it, from the kids to the old. I overheard, I could even, hear the voice of God and his son, yes, I could overhear them all above me, and they were rejoicing the fact that I would not give up the struggle, to them, that I want to fight to live right. It was bizarre… because all of this was inside the halls of the school, it made no sense to me at the time, yet it happens.

Sometimes fact is stranger than fiction. The only thing I could do was write it all down or at least try too, it is all here in my notebook, all I need to do is finish typing it all out, someday, if someday ever comes for me, as you know I just do not have the ambition. As I said, Lily was the one that fought for me the most back then, she has the halo to verify it too.

She has been in many of my fights as an angel, and also when she was a human girl. Not always by choice… more because, it was what she, and I thought was the right thing to do, and it was what she, and I believed was spot-on right. You know maybe I was in love with her that way

and just did not realize it back then. There is not a day goes by, I do not think about her or dream about her, as she was to me, and what we did together, and believed in about us together.

Maybe Lily was my first true love, maybe it was Maiara, or maybe it was just him, I guess I have had more love in my life, which I looked over yet not knowing that I did? –Do you understand what that is like? That is just like some questions do not have any real answers. Just like how these angels have like a layer of defense, and that is like a glowing orb of light around them either white or black.

When white angels replenish their supply the have a puff of glittery sparks, that expels from their body as they shoot back up into flight, they do not need to feed off anything other than the Divine's love, and the love from the others that they receive, the may die yet they live on. When falling, angels die in a battle, they reappear themselves repeatedly, as they catch fire, and slowly burn down to a black carbon like powdery ash in crumbling destruction of disintegration. As well as they just keep coming back to life also.

They suck the blood of the humans like me, which are on the floor until their energies can be repaired. When they do need to be replaced and replenished, they steal someone's living soul to keep living on, that is what the sisters help them do.

The battle would continue; it seemed like it was forever, yet it was only as long as it would take to get the sisters off, and me off, and them off of me. In all reality, it was only ten minutes at the most.

The angels would fight until I was able to get up and walk away after the sisters got what they needed. Time and time over! The only way to get rid of the demons in any falling angel, is to rip their dark wings off, and they whisper to the ground, then say the phrase over and over- 'The power of almighty Jesus Christ compels you to halt and be gone.' While throwing holy water on them as they fizzle up to nothing, and it burns them like acid back down to the depths of hell where they belong. On the other hand, just have a dream catcher and that should do the trick too. They never die, yet you can send them away from you.

That is way Kristen, has one tattooed on her foot to keep them at bay, yet I not sure if a tattoo is the same as the real thing? Some fallen angels carry extended swords, depending on their ranking of evil powers. This is still not much of a challenge for the white angel, the white

Angel can stop swinging swords with one bare spiritual hand. Fallen dark angels are generally weak and try to manipulate with their offers because they're not as tough.

Fallen Angels they have fiery eyes, black pointed wings, with blood dripping from their demonic representations of their body, they have a smoky orb around them, and a trail of fog that follows behind them that leads into destruction as they sail by. All a white angel has to do is hug a fallen angel, or show them any kind of compassion, and they scream and instantly disappear or just disintegrate.

Love- is what they despise the most!

For the reason that all fallen angels hate any type of love or contentment, remember all fallen angels are internally weak unless a human life gives them the power to fight, I would have to say that I let Jaylynn suck the life out of me, yet I feel that I should. I think you can appreciate why I feel that way. So, that is what the sisters did with their clans, they gave them the power, to try to steal my soul and the souls of the ones I loved. However, they never did with me yet they got Jaylynn… That did not stop them from trying until they would get Kristen too, or have someone soul that is close to me.

For them it will be a never-ending battle, of what they choose to steal away, they do not want me to be happy or loved. Why I still do not know, why was I chosen for this…? Why do they all have to suffer because of me, and my sins? Have I sinned at all, or not? The fights I was talking about were a true statement and experiences I had; I remember back when I was with the clans; fighting off their battles they started on me, then the angels would come down and help me.

The angels and myself, we were all fighting for me to not be taken in any way by demons, or by the girls, that wanted me for their sexual role-playing games. Yet, the sisters got there way a lot of the time as you know, as luck would have it. We were fighting them off, as well as beating them all off too. I remember the white angels would shock the demons away with their bolt of lightning strikes and the thunder would crack out the glass of the school windows, and spray all over us. Supernaturally all the locker doors would open and close, the papers would fly, the pencils would zip by me like their uniforms and fingers, I was in the storm of their pain, everything was happening so hallucination like.

This is how Kristen told me her rapes were like too, maybe, that is the way it is for all girls, which lived through all that hurt…? Your brain is half on, yet it is like it is wanting to be turned off.

The demons have satanic powers, which make angels freeze in mid-fight and flight. They are so strong they could tear the wings off of an Angel with their thought of mind. However, the bolt of lightning can make demons blow-up; conversely, they disintegrate and then rise from the ashes once more to fight yet again.

They do not go away unless they have bodies to go into, or there banished back down to hell. Otherwise, to claim the souls they want, you have to agree with what they say; only if you do not deny them, they will remain. Never- ever let them win! The demons can take on any figure or form they want to. Some choose to be animals, and some choose to be human-like beings, like the four sisters and clan, and the only protection, was from the angels above me that would fight them off of me. Do you see what I mean- or did I lose you?

Lily also fought for Jaylynn when she was in these halls; however, Jaylynn did not have the same faith I did. So, the forces of protections were not as strong enough for her, so maybe that is why she did not live on, or maybe it was just time for her to go? There are something's, which I may never know about, even in spiritual life too. Will, as far as Kristen goes, she fought them all off, she battled her demons too, she grabbed them by the horns if you will, and she won for the most part.

Kristen, is one strong little girl, even now as she is recovering from her wounds, and I am so honored that she is a part of me. Nevertheless, I am horrified that she is a part of them because of her father. I wonder what her future is going to be like being half- and- half, yet I do not plan on telling her all that, she has to find that out for herself. I do not want to freak her out anymore then she is now. I just hope she stays on the good side, and never stays away again. Yet I think she has learned that lesson the hard way. Her teachers used to say that she was hard-headed. You know what I think about that… Good for her! Give them hell. Wow, that reminds me of an old song that used to play on the bus. 'When you see my face, I hope it gives you hell.' Yah you know sometimes it is awesome for us to be The All- American Rejects!'

If you are reading this, you must feel the same way, so- (Say it aloud, full of pride!) 'We are rejects, and proud of it!' I Also recall 'My Humps' by The Black-Eyed Peas, use to play a lot

back then too on that bus ride. Yeah- but that is a whole other story altogether, but I think you can get the picture. 'Maybe sometimes what happens on the school bus should stay on the school bus.' I feel that- 'Dying is not easy, it is hard to leave, and staying alive is hard when you want to go. Then keeping your soul is almost impossible. The spiritual life is an endless life of forever, of what would you do?'

Chapter: 44

A New Beginning

Nevaeh- I am going to let them tell you what they did during their days apart. You know how close they have gotten. Besides what I saw bloom in front of me… it is and was truly amazing to see! I did not think that it was possible. Maybe there are some good ones out there these days? When Kristen was a young girl. I had her last name changed to mine so that her dad's family could never take possession of her ever again. It was costly but so worth it, getting full custody of her until she was eighteen.

Kristen Nazareth- So I joined the Marines! For the reasons that I knew that Matt would find me again. That is one thing he teased me with by saying over and overtime after time, that he would never- ever leave me alone. That he would never- ever let me go and date, or live with anyone else. That I had his- and his alone. I would have to say- I do not think so!

Will the only upside to this was, all these years, I was the drum major and kept the beats and timing going in the high school marching band, and I was kind of there leader? So maybe that is a plus? I do not like to brag or anything like that, though, I have to say that I am a snappy marcher. Plus, I know how to take, and give commands. Yet there have been some that have overpowered me in the past, as you know.

However, that is going to stop now! I want to be able to defend myself at any time, or any place. No man will ever- never do that to me again, and never- ever is a long time! I may be small but… however, they say I am fun-sized. (Whatever that means?) I have a lot of spunk and charisma, yet I am not afraid to be this small little girly- girl either. I think you know me by now, you would have predicted that. –Right? I do not mind mixing camouflage with my pink outfits though. I have a style that is my own; some call it cute-z, I call it just being me.

It has become acknowledged by others that I am a small girl, which has a tiny sounding voice, which is sweet and squeaky all the time. Yet it is unquestionably unforgettable, because of the way I talk about it; maybe- I do not know, I am just me…! Some say I just have something matchless to another, and it remains with them, long after time has passed. You should have heard me as a drum major shouting, you would remember it forever!

What they say- 'That's so… sweet, I- guess…!' (Overemphasizing every word! With a light cracking upward, pitch in her voice.) I remember my whistles sounding off, one long and three short blows; and the drum cadence would start playing, and it kind of still plays in my mind at times, as I waited for that first left-foot stride. I still find myself stepping out with my left foot in my everyday pastimes. If I learned anything in the band, it was discipline. I was in control of this extremely loud powerful respectable grouping of kids, and it was awesome, most days- anyway.

Nevaeh- So I told her, that the only way she could getaway is to go to boot camp for twelve weeks, and she would get deployed to fight when needed. I thought surely, he would need to find someone else, to feel his needs. Let us hope anyways! Besides I think Brandon is so sweet, he would be perfect for her. He has been my and her blessing; I can tell he is one of the good ones out there. What that boy has done for us, I cannot be grateful enough in my words to express my actual feelings.

Kristen- My hair is so long that it ends at my butt some days in sweet braid some days not. Though the hardest thing to do was when it was so needed to be cut, yes, a little lower than shoulders length, which is the length required. So, I could braid it into a hair bun, most days I just liked to have my hair down, with springy or bouncy brown curls or just straightened, so you could see just a little bit of the blonde or light brown highlights, that would shine in my hair. Those days are going for a while… I would say- so!

I left home with only the recommended items; with my old marching band duffel bag with these things inside it. One- Travel toothbrush with toothpaste. One- Gel deodorant only, no spray perfume permitted. I have one bottle of two in one shampoo and conditioner. A few or more tampons. A shaving kit, with a razor. I needed six pairs of plain- Jane bikini-style underwear only, nothing fancy. I needed six pairs of high socks; no ankle socks necessary. I needed three sports bras, so I could have one on most, if not all the time. I needed two variations

of clothing outfits, other than the one I was going to wear there. So, three altogether, yet I think you knew that. Besides, all of my identifications. And yes, that was it.

Chapter: 45

Hard Work Never Killed Anyone

Kristen- Oh, they do not care that you are out of your comfort zone, they are not your momma, or in my case grandmamma, and they're not going to hold your hand. However, they do make you wise and strong; for twelve weeks, that is what I found out. So, let me tell you all about it! The day I left Brandon made the crazy decision to ask me to marry him.

Certainly, in a handwritten letter that he handed me as I stepped foot on the big old somewhat shiny bus. Therefore, when I did open it and read it, I was already being taken to this far away land. No! - No turning back! How I want to go back, and kiss him and never let go while flying into his arms at the very same moment, yet I could not.

I was overjoyed and down feeling all at the same time! Though, when he gave me the note at the time, I was standing with one foot in the door opening of the motorcoach. I was thinking- What in the world is this boy handing me? Is this a goodbye for good?

What… is this? A lot of thoughts went through my head. –I am a girl… that just happens. I was reluctant and happily curious all at the same time, because, I did not know; it said that it was sealed! I remember that grandma and Brandon where the only ones to see me off… this was a moment that I will always treasure forever. However, it was gloomy at the same time, since I felt that it did not have to be like this.

Brandon- I can still see what she was wearing a light, cerulean dress with one white daisy in her beautiful hair. I am sure the soon to be war boys loved the way she looked, on the bus as I did. No, I am not jealous really; I just want to be with her that is all. They will not look at her as I do, you know what I am saying? I love her! They just love the way she looks; I think you're catching my drift. From that day we met, I knew she was all I ever wanted. That I was not going to let anything get in the way of being with her.

All the time, anytime I can, no not in a disturbing way, just so you know, just in a loving way, I love everything about her. She is the girl I have seen in my dreams; all these years yet could never find. I believe that occasionally, you have to be far away from your sweetheart, but

that does not make you love them any bit of a smaller amount if anything, you love them more, that is how I felt every-day, I was not with her. I just want to walk into the golden field, and shout out her name, so that maybe she could hear it so far away, I know it is twelve weeks, even every moment feels like forever.

Yes, one day, that night, her eyes, her ways, what she said, how she said it, her touch, her sounds, and that feeling of her body heat next to me. It only took me one day to fall for her completely, totally, wholly, and entirely! Eighty- four to know I do not want to live another day without her, with me. That the loving feeling just keeps getting stronger and stronger.

The reason is that it pains me, so to be apart from her, that I now feel that our souls have connected from the day I met her. How something so tragic could lead into something fantastically magnificent.

'Nothing is ever easy when it comes down to love, and what you love, and what love is to you and her, and if they love you, it is always testing your sanity.

That is one thing, which is for sure, and I am sure that I am crazy about her!'

I do believe that she was my answer to my prayers, as I must have been for her. I hope all our prayers will be answered; I feel that they will be. It is as if I feel that I cannot live without her now. I just hope she feels the same; the not knowing is driving me irrational. Nothing was going to stop me, not even, her going to fight in the war when she goes, and not even her cruel past boyfriend either. Her past boyfriend means nothing to me, yet I do care about what he did to her. It just does not seem fear. So that is why I gave her the note, I did not want to be rejected, and she will have some time to choose if she wants to be with me, or not.

My letter reads- My sweet Kristen; I must say how I feel about you. That there is nothing more I would want to be then yours forever and ever, and never let go, only if you feel the same way about me, yes, I am being serious. All you need to do is say the word 'Yes- I will!' the next time we meet; I will know you feel the same way too! I know when you are reading this; you will already be gone away from me.

Nevertheless, I am asking you to be with me, and to marry me. It is not that long so we can be together once more. That is if you love me, as I love you. However, I understand that you have to go far, far away as of now because of your former boyfriend. Yet I feel that I have gotten to know you in every way, and I will think of you every day, even now, until the day you are

walking my way. Yes, even when you are not here with me, I feel ever so close to you, the feeling is fairy-like; I want to make you my princess!

Would you say- yes?

I would have liked to say this to you, that I am making you this promise if you make it back from this war of affection. I want to be the one that will tie the knot with you. I wish I would have, said all of this sooner, and before you even got your first boyfriend. But, at the time we were at diverse points in our lives. Though, I do feel that we met up for a reason when we did like fate had something to do with it or something like that… I vow this to you! Even if I do not see you again, I am now forever part of your life. I will always and forever be there for you. Yet you know that… -Good luck my Love! Now and forever yours-

Brandon Rosenbaum

Chapter: 46

The Few, and the Proud

Kristen- I remember getting on the bus, and getting shouted at from the first moments. I recollect captain saying- 'You are in the Marines now; so, find your tiny virgin ass a seat and let's get going! Now…! Faster…! Faster…! Move it!' '…Ah… Okay!' -I said (trembling.) He said no one in here gives a shit who the hell you are, or what your name is 'princess.' It does not mean shit to me or these guys on this bus. I must have been reading the envelope script aloud, that said- 'To my princess!' (With shocking surprise.) Still, I did not realize all the others could hear everything I was saying as I read squeakily. As I was walking up the steps and past all of them down the aisle to find a seat?

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Captain- 'We do not care that you are a little girl, you are going to be out humping just as hard as everyone else. You are ass belongs to us now, and teamwork is the only thing you need to know from this point on.'

I remember sitting there thinking man, my body, and

everything, that is a part of it now, it is theirs? Why would the captain say that? Do they feel that all of me now belongs to them? –Really? At the time, I did not even think about it, what

was just said to me; yet I am not sure if I liked it… even now, when thinking about the situation. It was somewhat sexist, and mean I felt. I woulda- liked to have said- 'Yes, I am a girl, but I could kick your ass up to your flapping mouth!' I was just thinking that in my mind, I knew better than to talk back. I did not say a word! I have sidetracked anyways.

I remember pulling the paper out and unfolding it, I just kept reading that note over and over. I could not believe what I was seeing, and holding it in my hand, I was going to keep it with me at all times, if I could. Until I had a permanent place for it. So, as for now, I will place it in a very safe place that every girl has been familiar with. So, I folded the note into fours in the envelope, and tucked it into my bra next to my heart, thinking- wow- wow, and wow! I cannot believe, that I have fallen in love with him, so fast. I was thinking I could not wait to kiss him, see him, and talk to him. Wondering, what my life would be like with him? I was sure at that moment it would be good. Wondering, if he would want kids with me, maybe like three.

I was wondering, about life, I wanted! I think it is like I was lost in a dream of what could be? Then reality set in and then, at the same time I remembered how walking through the bus aisle to find a seat, it felt like it was taking forever, and it was. Anyways that took me back, and made me homesick, thinking about how the kids and my grandmother were treated, when they went to school and were on the bus. I knew how she felt because that was the same way for me too. Nevertheless, I was also thinking again not on here. As well as I started thinking about her, and her stories which she used to tell me; I felt the same way as she must have way on- way back when. Plus, I was missing my old life all ready.

Not all of it just the good things. I was wanting a new life to start fast, so I could get back to them. Also, I am thinking about what my new life will bring me hopefully more good things. I will just have to see. I finally sat down with a girl named Makayla, and she was scared shiftless, to say the least. But she did say sit with me, so I did. The only other girl on the bus other than me. That was the only words she said the whole trip. Finally, I was at my destination, after a couple of days of sleeping, eating, and living on the bus. We all looked- really- good. So anyway, we all got off no time to stretch or anything, we all moved out of the bus running like men on fire into a single file line. Then are sergeant vocalized, in the loudest voice ever possible these very words?

As we were in our single lines our eyes looking, forward, standing in what I call the solid statuesque pose.

He said- 'Welcome to the world's finest fighting force!' 'The words: me, I, and my; they do not apply to anything anymore! You will eat, sleep, and live as a team, there is no failure here!' 'When you walk through these doors it is the only time you will! 'Understand!' We all said- 'Yes sir…!' He shouted more powerfully- 'Understand!' 'YES… SIR!'

I was thinking at the time I am making my footprints here now; I am part of this history. Plus, I am going to be part of the footprints that my colleagues have died to keep every one of you out there free…! To me, it is quite an honor, which should not be taken for granted, by anyone. As well as if you do take it for granted, join the Marines and you will soon learn, that freedom is not all about you! I remember being asked why I am in the Marines. So, I just answered by saying… 'To get away from my past horny boyfriend, that won't leave me alone, plus I want to be a brave girl!' Then all the other guys and misses in the lineup with me snickered.

The captain said- 'Outstanding- Will you came to the right place; to get away from a man then, maggot. I am going to call you- a princess.' Yeah, I feel that is a problem with our generations; of today, we have had everything handed to us. I think a lot of people out there need to go out and fight for it, and you will change your attitude. Just remember it does not take much to get your ass broken. Unity! It is what it is all about, being someone great. Being someone strong, and being brave, and having respect! It is comparable to when you see that seal on the door as you walk in; you know that you are a part of something greater.

Something that I do not have words to express, something that means you have found pride in others and yourself, which is something you found to care about other than your own pint-sized life of before. You have to know how to work together and be able to comprehend what it means to be an in this alliance, and if you do not know it when you walk in, you sure will when you walk out. I think of the fact that I answered every question that was asked of me with either, yes-sir or I- sir or yes- ma'am, I- ma'am!

Do not even think about projecting your opinions, they mean nothing, in other words, keep your mouth shut, and your ears open. Boot camp was intense because we had to get up early and do the same drills over and over. Besides if, you are anything like me then you have to learn the hard way, but you do learn one way or another. It is just like getting a quarter to bounce off your bed sounds easy, but you try it… it's not. Lights out was a lonely time for me. Yet I was in a bunker barracks with numerous other girls. But- do not think that you are going to make any

intimate relationships here; that is not going to happen! As well as do not think you are going to find any guys to talk to either or anyone to fulfill your needs.

~*~

However, Brandon was the only guy, I dreamed about and had a fantasy about, I could not seem to get him out of my mind. The whole time. I had a photo, that he put in with the note, and I used it as a tribute to my satisfaction. I was lovesick as well as homesick. All I can say is that you will have to become intimate with yourself; because you get rather stressed out. So maybe it was a good thing to have him to think about. Too much information yeah, I seem to have a problem with that. I know, but it is truthful to all the girls here really. So, yeah it took me a week to be able to do a jumping Jack and a push-up that was not completely girlie! Just like there were only about ten minutes for hygiene, and other necessities, that girls need to take care of; for example, like shaving.

Yet, I guess I am getting used to feeling shabby.

I was shocked to realize most of the time, other than training with the men, we were separated from them… and all you got to see was the same girl's day in and day out. You get to know some of them as acquaintances, but you do not have time to become best friends forever. The weirdest thing was showering in front of them, which took some getting used to.

There is no privacy at all, what you do is all out there for them to see. I bet you could picture that, can't you. Not to mention that the uniform clothing gets old fast. But- this is what I want. I recall having it on at all times, or when we do change, you only have ten counts to change, what you are wearing to something else. Let us not forget scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush, yes, I did that too. Six hours of class time every day.

Climbing ropes, walls, and obstacles and PT are obsessive work. Just like me being a small girl, plus a water tank, with all my gear on equals- me sinking to the bottom of the pool like a stone. However, I can swim very well, that was one thing I would do competitions in, back when I was in high school. Will I do not like heights either I found out, however, I made it to the end of the long cable. With a little help from my senior's drill instructor's pushing me to 'do it.' Oh, I loved to dangle up there in the air by my right hand, and my forefingers trying to get my feet back up from slipping. Yet I did it.

I have confidence in the cores; however, I struggle to have confidence in me being able to do it. Oh, I think that obstacle course we had to do hated my guts, as I hated doing it over and over, in the rain, in the mud in the hot sun, forget about looking cute. It is all about getting it done. This is a good thing to know for all you out there. Learn how to throw a punch, so when you are hit from hesitating… someone else does not knock you down on the ground. 'It is scary.' –I say. Plus, I marched and marched, saying 'Left… Left… Left… Right… Left!'

Hell- I was saying that in my sleep!

Drill instructor- asking Kristen- 'Princess- Do you know you're left from your right?' Yes! –sir. Drill Sergeant Owen would shout at me… ripping my gun out of my hand, and completely lifting me off my feet while doing it, saying you would have had a good inspection if you would have had the right side up. Now take your weapon back out of my hands as you mean it! Easier said than done. He said- 'Pay attention to the details.' Then you should know what my reply was. – right? You know I am not going to have an ass because we walked so much. I know I walked mine off completely. Besides, I got to the point that everything I was saying rhymed too. Like this…

(Sing)

'I don't remember everything I have been told, but being called the nickname 'Princess' gets old. I can't wait until I get back home, so I can have someone to hold and call my own. I don't know why I feel so alone, all I want to do is moan, and groan. After this training, I will be able to kick some ass, instead of being known as the girl, with the tiny one that will not last.' 'I am all about being girly, yet I hate having to get up this early.

Because, I like wearing pink, though I am not going to be the one, which is the weakest link. My old boyfriend can kiss my sweet ass; I am leaving here with some sass. I still can't believe that I got asked, yet I know that I and my new lover will be able to last and last. Because, I like getting down and dirty, yet I am counting down the days hoping, that they all will go in a hurry.' He-he-he… that is funny!

The name 'Princess' it stuck with me. I remember the first time, I fired my weapon the barrel of the gun came back and smacked me in the head, let's just say I learned fast how to hold the gun after that. The M- 16 is a powerful gun, especially if you are a tiny girl like me.

Oh, just another tip for all of you out there, do not close your eyes when you are firing a weapon, for the first time like I did. Probably one of the coolest things, I ever did was joint the rifle drill team. Since I always liked twirling rifles even back then, like I said I was a snare drummer in the band before, and I was a drum major that overseen everyone, so that was a good thing for me! I felt as if I had the ability, and maybe the upper hand. I just wanted to do something awesome, and say I have done it! I just wanted something to where I could feel good about myself. That was something that he took away from me. All the same, I will get back… I will be honorable!

Nevaeh- Just like One of These Days, all the radiation bombs will drop and silence everything in this world. It is going to happen, I have seen it, and felt it. But, I most likely will, not see it this time coming up. I feel and see that there will be no more daylight to waste, and all-time will stop, and not stand for anything any longer, I fear for this country!

'I guess with the lights out, it is less dangerous; Oh well, whatever, never mind.'

It is just that my grandbaby is going to be out fighting in that war someday and someday is on its way I can just feel it. Maybe the world will come to an end; at some point, maybe not. Either way, after we have given all that we are, and all that we have, to them.

When there are no more nickels and dimes to give away, that used to save us, that is when all days will end. For the reason that we cannot stand up alone if there is nothing to stand on. We can fight but is it enough? I do not think so… there is no work, no money, no real nourishment, no coal-mines, and no still to make anything.

So, how can we fight them off if we are asking them for what we need to live? Understand…? I feel the United States needs to wake the hell up now, and come to their senses! Before there is no more freedom to waste, and wasted lives. My homeland is not the only place, which has gone to hell that is for sure, and there is nothing we can do about it, or so everyone wants to think. Just like my life, I try to put these thoughts and moments down into a complete story.

As well as, when I think about it. I could have done precisely what Kristen when out and did, yet I didn't, why didn't I, I ended it, and had to pay and pray for it, so I could make it where I wanted to go. Will I have anything to show for it, I do not know, when is it time for me to go? What I am saying right now is I wonder if I would have left, and seen the world the way she did

if this all would have changed for me too? Meaning the real first life I had, would all this be my true reality or not?

Would I have lived with a tragic love story or not?

Kristen, she is so much like me and my lover, it so cute, for me to see true love again! You can't kid me, I have seen those love notes coming and going day by day, and what can I say I love it. I am also happy to have someone here with me now. To see that boy going stir- crazy over her is so sweet. Yet I feel bad for him at the same time. As of now, all I can do is a weight for her to come back to me, and see what blossoms, as he does as well.

That reminds me that I need to put the laundry out on the line and have the wind blow everything dry. While doing this I can see some of Kristen's things she wore, and it makes me sad. I do miss her, I miss a lot of things, I have been missing Lily a lot lately, and Jaylynn too. I have been feeling blue, yet this new love story keeps me living, I live to see all of you, in my life. It is one of those lovely days. So, let us hope, that I might even get enough pep, to walk past the old gazebo, and then past the long-standing mill, and see the timeworn remands of the bridge…!

I would love to see if I can get to the ancient wishing- well that used to be in the garden, and throw two quarters in for two new young lovers to get their wish of being together. That is my hope for the day. Yet I have to pass the graveyard to, and I know I will have to stop there, and that is where I most likely will stay, the rest of the day. Not meaning too. That was one thing; I did every day when I was a girl. And you know I did get what I wanted.

I should have made the wish to keep them too, but I did not think about that, there is just something you just do not think about when you are young. Get older and you will see what I mean. I am hopeful they can get on that silver horse and they can ride off into the sunset like I always wanted to do… hopefully, the premonitions I had back when I was a young girl was for them, and they can go- go- go, and never look back on their past lives, and make the new start. Brandon, oh he is what I call a real carpenter, a hard worker and that is hard to find these days! He can make something out of nothing; I have seen it with my own old faded blue-gray eyes.

Um-hum he is cute- he- he. What-? I can still look, can't I? I see this in him. He is somewhat overprotective, extremely caring, and at times a bit melodramatic. Nevertheless, certainly romantic, he is perfect for her. He is old Fashioned though, in a good way, I like that, and I know she does too. His slicked-back wavy dark black hair and rock-solid body, and those

gleaming brown eyes, which change to golden saffron in the sunlight. Are to die for, yet that is just me talking here, though.

Brandon- All she has to do is say my name and I get a week to her voice; I am in love, I cannot sleep I toss and turn, I cannot think my mind is heavy, or eat I cannot hold it down? I want to see her so badly yet I do not have a choice. All I can do is look at her photograph, and wish she were here with me. What is this sensation that makes me want more and more?

But- I know that I will have to walk alone as she prepares to walk in the fields of war someday. I don't want to be alone.

I do not know why but when she was gone, I wrote her love letters every week every Wednesday until the day she came back home, even though I could have sent it electronically. I got her rerun notes on Fridays. It means more to us that way- kind of like memories being made. I just felt that it would be more substantial, and romantic if it was handwritten being in my penmanship.

I have all of hers too. While she was gone, I asked grandma- Nevaeh what I could do for her and Kristen, and she said, that Kristen always wanted to make the homestead like it was back in the days of days, when it was a ranch. To get it looking nice once more. Will then that is- what I did. So, in the home, I put in new hardwood floors down, and I replaced all the old windows too and painted all the siding. Once again, the land with its gold grasses was postcard perfect. You should see it now!

I even got the old car that was in the back of the barn running. Sure, it needed a lot more work, but at least it can backfire along down the road, there a no brakes but it runs. I guess when you are in love, and lonely you have to keep your mind busy… to keep from going completely insane. I did not bath for like two weeks; all I wanted to do was make sure that when she got back, everything I did was perfect, and perfectly the way she always wanted it to be in her dreams, for her and also her grandmother Nevaeh.

She has been through so much she deserved an oasis, and I had a plan, that was going to be miraculous if I could get it to work out. So, that is what I did, I restored the house to what it looked like when it was first built. Then I also bought two horses named, Baylee, Rylee. As well as, two small ponies, I named Haylie and Kylie. It just cost me one of my older work trucks for the currency I needed, yet that was fine by me.

We needed some life running free around here, I felt. I love to see them all running off into the sunset, and hearing the neighing, snorting, and whinny sounds, they make with their breath. The barn is now used as it should be, I made a car-port on the side for the old cars. I had to fix up the wooden barn, and I added a new split rail fence next to it. So, that there would be a horse corral, that she could ride in without having to go in the bigger fields, if she, and maybe I wanted too. As a result, I fixed the path lights; and trimmed some of the fields using the 1951 gray Ford tractor. That has gears, and all kind of levers it is a pain in the ass. However, I wanted to keep one of the fields, as it was, with long hey. Mainly so, the dazzling golden grasses could stay as they were, blowing in the breeze. I like mixing the old with the new.

Nevaeh said- 'Don't you want to rest? From the porch day in and day out. And I said- 'No- Mam! No- I don't, this is for her and you.' She said- 'Okay then, don't get sick- now.' I worked myself to the point of delusion, and delirium. Though, I would do it all again in a heartbeat, for her my sweetheart. A girl can make any man crazy!

My hair was messed up, and my clothing was stained and dirty with sweat, I had Jalynn's old straw hat on most of the time, and I was chewing on one strand of grassy hay from the field. I lost fifty pounds, in like three weeks. I was looking downright cracked in the head. It is fascinating to me, but the whole time I was working, an old tune kept playing in my head. It was the words and melody to The Eagles- the song 'Desperado.' I just began to sing out of my mouth, as I was working, I do not know why, and I could not stop repeating it, day in and day out nonstop.

The song it goes- 'Desperado, why don't you come to your senses? You have been out riding fences for so long now…!' And so on, I sang it word for word over and over, until the job was done. Nevaeh, she even took photos with her childhood camera, some of me, some of the work I did, and some of the newly rejuvenated lands, she said that we could look back on this someday. I was like, okay- that is cool!

Chapter: 47

Her Boots of Freedom

Brandon- I remember one night, I was sitting out on the top rail of the fence, looking over all the things that I did. Then there she was walking to me. She was in her blue uniform, and I hopped off that fence, and she ran to me, as I was running to her. We hugged and she jumped

into my arms crying, just as if it was forever since we have seen one another. As if it was years, in a way it was rather like that for us. That night she and I sat there under the stars, and she told me all about her experiences she had when she was gone. I love hearing her tell her stories!

Kristen- I only got to see her once again in a living form… when I got back. Nevertheless, her fight was over for her for the most part, she got her dreams, all but one. I knew the days were getting shorter for her.

Also, that is the old age I suppose, people go so long, and there is not a thing you can do. It is out of your hands. It is not what I want… yet that is what my life is giving me.

However, I wish she could have been there to see her great-grandbabies someday, nevertheless, she did get to see me in this uniform, and that was one of the happiest days in her life.

Nevertheless, you know somehow, she will be able to see all of us up there, I believe that. When she goes in these upcoming days. I just hoped she could see more big days in my life, before she leaves us, for- forever. I pray for more time!

Brandon- By the way she adored everything I did for her here at the homestead.

She said- 'you did this all for me?'

I said- 'I would do just about anything for you.' Can I ask you a question Kristen, is that okay?

She said- 'I guess… if you like…!'

So, I asked Kristen this very question. 'Are you in love with me?'

As we were sitting out under the stars, I recall that she lifted her small head to look into my eyes and began to cry with the note in her hand, and at that moment, she said the words… of course- 'Yes- I will!' So, I asked her if she would make me the happiest man in the world.

Then she said what would that be? So, I whispered in her ears, would you marry me tomorrow, now that you can? She said- 'I would love too.' then I opened the ring box, and I sled her Grandmother's heart-shaped engagement ring on her finger saying. -I love you, Kristen.

She whispered back in tears 'I do love you.'

Plus, she said Grandma Nevaeh, she is going to see our wedding isn't she! I said- I hope so, she is very weak. Then she wrapped her arms around me and kissed my cheek, and she nodded her head yes will do this tomorrow. Above us was the night sky, and we saw a shooting star, above and we knew that is love would last forever. It was like a good omen for us. It was the greatest day of my life, up to that point.

Nevertheless, it also means that someone would be passing on. One day later, we were married at the small red brick church, which she went to as a young girl. It was the day at last; it was here; there she was walking down the aisle. With the flower pedals, everywhere. I remember seeing the angel oak trees with their leaves blowing in the breeze; it was the perfect heartwarming day.

As I walked into the church. At that time, there were daisy and lily flowers all over the place on the floor, with the colors of white and pink in her bouquet, and some were even in her lovely hair, around the white lace veil, and of course next to the glittery silver princess tiara, which she wore.

However, there was no one to give her away, but right before the ceremony, this older gentleman walked up to Kristen, he could barely stand or speak, yet he got up on his own two feet, he was very week, he said that he been living with lung cancer. Yet he said- 'I'll do it for the little lady.' That gentleman's name was Greg; he said that he knew Nevaeh, and he knew Kristen's mom, from way back when, so we both said okay, we all thought that was sweet of him to do.

We said our vows, 'I take you, to be my soul mate, to love what I know of you, and trusting what I do not yet know.' 'To love and hold and to grow old, as one soul. To get to be with you all the days of my life.

While falling even more in love with you every day, as we pray. To keep you in my life.' 'I promise to love, and cherish you through whatever life may bring our way, as we become- us!' We both quoted a remarkable saying by an astonishing person. 'Love it is like the cupid's arrow, that hits at the most unlikely times. We chose to be as one forever and ever to never- ever forget that bond… now and forever!'

(We all said –Amen! in the house of the Lord.)

You may kiss the bride!

Brandon- and I did!

Kristen- The kiss was magnificent and sweet. Then we walked out of the church together off into the sunset.

Nevaeh- I am glad that I got to be there to see them be married!

Greg, he walked up to me gave me two-note one from Jaylynn and the other from Lily, which he kept all these years. He did not say how he got them, and I did not ask. Yet I wonder? After the wedding and the after-party, I went home, I told the young lovers to- 'Go, and have fun, do not worry about me- loves, I will be fine. I will see you both when you all get back.' I said as they drove away, in there decorated just married a car, with all the cans bouncing around in the back. Yet I felt that was the last time, I was going to see them. I don't really know why.

So, I waited until that night as I was sitting in my chair in my spot looking over the land from the window. I looked at those notes that were placed on my desk, that has on it please do not open these letters until you think it is the last day of your life…! So now that Kristen is off on her honeymoon with her new love, let us see what these notes are all about. This is what Jaylynn's note said as I read it; note one it had on it in that order. 'Knowing that it was all meant to be, even though we could not foresee what was going to be, now open her letter to see what will be!' I recall saying that to her a lot when she was a kid! However, why would she write this 'See what will be' to me? Should I be scared?

I am tariffed as to what I see, what is in front of me!

Chapter: 48

Paradise

Brandon- The honeymoon was at Hawaii Princes Hotels in Waikiki. I can still smell her perfume, for some reason it reminds me of strawberries, on that first night together. I am sure if that is not right at all. However, that is what I would compare the small too. I got us a suite room… but we wanted something more daring for our consummation though. Just like our love that was left inside, we had an awareness that could not be washed away, we were wild and carefree. While exploring the land and one another; we had a somewhat secluded pathway to walk down to an ornate gazebo, with tiki- torch-lights, that showed us the way, to one another's hart. Love was definitely in the air for us, and we did not care who or what saw us. Even if there

were others around, we kissed, touched and played non- stop for what seemed to be days, yet I am not complaining. These were the best days of my life, so far.

The making of love! I know you're dying to know!

Question asked- Do I need to say this? Okay- I take two in when I do that… fingering myself.

So, anyways that night in the gazebo, she said that spot reminded her of home. Hence, in there, she pulled my pants down so fast the button, zip and skipped, like a stone on top of the pond. That we were on top of…! Anyhow, she was so wet down there, and so snug, I knew that I must have been the only man in her life. The ring was breathtaking; it looked good and made her feel good, I was okay with it.

It made everything even more sensitive to her, and that was a plus for me. I knew for sure, that night she was a virgin because all of her other boyfriends and unwanted partners went in using the back door only… if you know what I am saying; or they wanted other things done by her. You just do not bleed like, that if you are not a virgin. Plus, I believe what she said to me. I think she was one lucky and blessed girl to go, that long with what she had to keep away. She made sure that was the only place they could use at that time.

~*~

She fought to keep her innocents…! I would say good for her, and good for me! That moment was not wasted after all! Maybe there are some happily ever after's, in life after all?

Kristen- Yes, all those jokes at boot camp were true, but I knew what I wanted, and that was something special. Everyone always did have a pick on my butt, even since I was a small girl. 'Let's just say… I was always the butt of the joke.'

~*~

Brandon- I love her sense of humor. Even in all the pain, she can find whit. Okay back to that first night. The waves reminded me of her hair lying in puddles on the wood plank flooring of the gazebo. We have been wanting this; for some time. Yet we have been holding back for each other now for what seemed like an eternity. So, are destiny had it come to be! Oh yes, yes, and yes! That night was rewording and zealous.

'Like even in the death of something or someone, there is a new life, which shares a part of how you and the past elders look, talk and behave.' 'I knew the life to come, would remind me of the past, which we left behind. I knew I would see that in their young faces someday.' 'The past is gone, yet the past comes back in new ways in the future to the parent and the present, sometimes you have to be left behind, and leave it behind you.

Nonetheless, it stays with you.'

Indeed, I remember massaging her feet and sucking on her small toes or whatever she wanted really. 'I would do just about anything to please her.' To find some of her erogenous zones, or so that is what she said at the time, I found out quickly what she liked. That it is all part of her signs…? She said. Works for me- I guess. She is a flirt! I recall she was seducing me all day with her big green eyes, and batting her eyelashes at me. Then flipping her hair, that day all day. Yet because she is old-fashioned, in some of her ways of marriage. That was the role she played, that she wanted me to make the first move, yet she did…? What could I say, I loved it, and she had an influence over me, she took control!

Though, I remember sliding down her pink panties down and off her legs and sliding her dress up and off of her petite little figure. I remember her fingers touching me everywhere, I remember placing my fingers in areas, which I had never had them before too. She said that I made her tremble, yet that I was what she calls a gentle lover. She was so gorgeous when she was looking up at me too; while she was on her knees!

However, nothing ever compared to her legs spread out before me like a canvas to paint on. She has one of the most- savory flavors of strawberries when kissing her little body. The same body I get to caress with mine now and forever, I am a blessed man! The kissing was exquisite, full of fun. That was one of the wedding nights, that I will never forget, day one.

I remember, we were like one in the twilight breeze, and it seemed as if our bodies were floating; yes, floating on top of the glassy blue-black pond in which we were on as if we had telekinesis like powers. All the reflections of the stars were shining their magnificent wonder of splendor for us in the still waters, and the dusking sky. That is just like now of days when that breeze moves through the fields it, sometimes brings me to my knees. When she is away from me on her deploying tours. I do not want her to leave me as she does, yet she has too when she is gone, I feel lonely here in the homestead without her, as the wind wafts by, not knowing if I will

see her again. Okay, back to that night. How would I know, that something was in the making that night? We went against the odds, and we wanted that all to be left up to fate. Whatever would take place would take place, and if it was so meant to be it would be, and if not, then not.

Along with this, I was thinking at the time, I do… I want this, and I am- going to live with my choices, you and I make, no matter what happens. We love one another; we were united, for whatever happens. I did not care at all really; I am truly in love with Kristen, so I lived with the consequences of not pulling away from her. I good with knowing that we have to live with what we did, that night for the next eighteen years.

Yes, I am looking forward to it if conception happened. I think it would be awesome to have some little feet running in the home, and out in the fields too.

Let's get back to Kristen and me… that night… Being in those gentle arms, oh so lovingly as a soft tune was being hummed out of her moist lips in my ear with her soft sweet voice, and we slow danced under all the dazzling twinkling twilight lights.

We kissed, and kissed again. We stayed into the loving sensual spell of one another, eyes, breath, and touch. She was mine and I was here's. We were nude, her breasts shined in the moonlight, and her nipples were pointed as if they were looking at me as we were making love, her green eyes staring at me sweetly; everything on her was bouncing up and down as well as around it was incredible.

Her heavy breathing and her calling out my name. It was truly unforgettable! Yet she is sensationally incredible in everything she does. Her hips smacking into mine, she said that she loved me on top of her, and she intertwined herself, in my arms and legs around me. I had never felt anything like this before in my life when I entered in. I will never forget her green eyes rolling, and the sounds she made with high- the pitched voice sounds resonating in my ears, and the faces she made out of passion, it still takes my breath away. We went for about three minutes; she was moaning all kinds of words, a few that I am not going to repeat right now. But I think you could name some if you think about it.

I will never forget afterward she began to cry from her smoky colored eyelids, the eyeliner started to run down and drop off of her long-curled lashes, and the teardrop started to run down her sweet little face. She knew something magical just happened, and so did I. As a result, I just held her in my arms that night, until she fell asleep, with her head on my chest out

on the gazebo. Then, I got up slowly and I carried her back to our room, and placed her in bed, along with myself, all nestled up! That nightfall our love ignited and never came apart, and yes, it is still going strong. I could never think of another girl this way ever again nor did I want to.

She was my first true love. I fell in love with her at first sight, and that feeling I felt was so right! That next mooring, she said she liked to listen to my heartbeat, to get to sleep. As you would expect that was just one amazing honeymoon day and night, though it was not over at all. From the first day, I met her. I knew that nothing will even give me the slight tad bit of interest afterward; ones you get to know a girl like her, you will know what I mean… she is everything to me; she has it all. You want more from the same person like her over and over; because she is so wonderfully perfect and affectionate. Our bond is always endless until the end of all time. As you know, my heaven is being with her that will never- ever end. Besides, my hell is not being without her, because she has to be far away.

When she is not near to me, or in my arms. I never want to see her leave!

Chapter: 49

Adventures

Brandon- The second part of the honeymoon was a gift from grandma Nevaeh, she booked us an antique 1920's, long forgotten steam locomotive train tore, and all the staff was dressed like the period. Yet we had one of the classic bedroom cars that were attached, called a caboose…!

~*~

Kristen- The dining car was a different experience that is for sure, one night we had what is called a hobo lunch. Involving, pulled pork, cornbread, and iced tea in a mason jar. Not what you would call classy but nice, it must have been what great- Grandma Hope grew up with I would imagine. Grandma Nevaeh thought that it would be romantic for us… and it was, it was spectacular to be on the rails like they did back in the day, I did not think that was possible to find… but she found a tour for us.

I remember hearing all-aboard and the steam whistleblowing. Yet, we were rather worn out from the past couple of days, as Brandon said in a way too much detail. I have to add! Yes, we got to see the countryside as they did back then, at a nice leisurely speed twisting through the

hills chugging along. We did not get to sleep much this whole trip either, I felt somewhat nauseated at times from the rocking of the car. Nevertheless, that did not stop me from having a good time. Like my husband implied when he was talking to you! However, we both loved it… How things have changed since way back then with traveling!

~*~

Brandon- I have to tell you this before I forget too. On the day of our wedding, Nevaeh handed me a list of places she wanted me to take Kristen, and to get photos of every stop along the way. For the reason that she said that is what she always wanted to do. So that is what we did, we checked everything off her lest. When we got home, we were completely exhausted as you would have guessed, to start our lives together.

Though, we have good memories to look back on; That we had made… all the photos that we took of us, are now printed in black and white, and they are part of the gallery on the walls of home… along with the old ones. They look as if they were taken with an old vintage shutter camera, or like she would have taken them herself. That was the look, which I was going for. Yes, another dream of hers was completed!

That is what I wanted to do for her; she was so good to us!

~*~

Kristen- This is a good one…! I later found out that when Matt figured out that I was not in the back of the trunk. That night he shot himself with a double-barrel shotgun. By putting the burl in his mouth, and using his toe to fire it. I have that picture in my mind… and it scares me, yet I was safe all along, and how I worried, and could not sleep or eat and ran from him. Why do you ask? I presume that he did that for not getting the job done, for the clan, and he knew they would kill him anyway. For the reasons that he knew that he was going to face their wrath at some point. Since he failed at killing me. Yet I cannot say that I feel deprived of his company!

'Everyone gets a turn.' He got his… need I say more!

That was his only choice to do that I surmise. What pisses me off… is that I lost out, on so much because of him.

I did not know that he was not going to find me!

I did not know that he was not going to bother me anymore!

I did not know that he was going to be found in the woods, with the gun in his mouth, with maggots feasting on his head and his putrid remands.

The condoms Matt used on me were still in his abandoned vehicle in the woods, and in the cabin all over the floor, and there was one even still on him when he was found undressed. Without a doubt, they all had my DNA- I will call it on them, along with his. Some with my saliva and some with my fecal matter.

Grossed- out yet?

Yeah! -well me too!

He was guilty as sin! Yet, Matt, he is dead, there was no justice to face. Yet, I feel he had to face someone for what he did, I am sure of that, maybe my mom…? There was something there, At least that is how I feel about it, and someone or something had to take him to the lowest pits of hell. I hope it was her. I am starting to believe that! I have my reasons. Call me old-fashioned, I do not care. I believe that a real man does not need to use protection. Because if he loves the girl as Brandon loves me, he is not afraid to get her pregnant. However, only if that is what the girl wants him to do. Remember to be respectful of each other's wants and needs.

This is just my opinion. Just like Brandon said in Hawaii, that night, and nights after we were attached forever from that movement and moment in time. He asked me, and I said it was okay, just so you all know. I remember we could hear the soft wave hitting the side of the land yet it was mostly in a cum relaxed why, yet there were some, which swayed and swirled around and traveled in words, that we could hear, and from our room looking out from day to the night. We could smell the mist in the air as we laid together, on the bed with the double doors wide open. We could see the tops of the trees dancing in the tropical airstream, and the colorful birds, that would fly down and nearby to the beach.

We could see families!

We could see children at play, in their little swimsuits.

I was thinking that would be just like us someday. I was seeing a young boy and a cute little girl make a sandcastle together. As the mom and dad overlooked.

Then we could see lovers just like us kissing and holding hands.

We could see the ocean, for what seem to be miles.

We could see what we wanted!

The gazebo, I recall that we walked along the lovely white bridge that links two walkways across the water, to the structure itself.

Then that is when things, became almost supernatural, so spiritual too, it was like I could see different types of love cherubs around me, and one younger girl angel, I pondered who she was, and why she was looking at me? Yet it was like I knew her, yet I just could not place her, at the time. As he said, there are no other words describe what happened, along with the touching and the feeling of us together. Oh, my god! What my grandma was saying was true about what she could see, because I can see them too! I must have that ability.

Did she pass this down to me?

How…?

How could this be?

I lost so much to the tower curse, and her clan's just like grandma Nevaeh predicted. But- yet somehow, I feel that I was the winner in this one. Nevertheless, I feel that somehow, they will get the last laugh. From what I have seen from the past, it is coming. The only questions are- when, where and whom? Who was that girl- I saw?

Should I know? The better question is- do you know?

Chapter: 50

The Journey Home

(Ten months later)

Kristen- So-o, Brandon and I would like to take this time so that you could meet our- two newborn twin babies.

They are such a joyful addition to our lives. Yet, I am sorry to say that Grandma never saw them, when she was thriving, she is next to her husband my Pappy, now and my Mom and her childhood girlfriend named Lily. Nevertheless- so, anyway, say hello to- Noah- Jay and

Nevaeh- May. They are a lot of work, but we love them so much, they brought happiness to my life now that she is gone.

Nevaeh- (Going back about eleven months in time, the same night Kristen and Brandon, left for their honeymoon trip.)

So, now that I have some time to myself, I have been wondering what is in this envelope? This was the last note Lily wrote to anyone.

It has on it- to Neveah.

I will open it. I will read it. It reads- Note- I always felt that nothing would ever change how I felt about you. Nor did I care what they would do to me, for loving you. You will know what happened to me, I will be leaving you, the next day. Yet you will not get this note until the end of your time after you have had all the lessons of life that you need to learn, and for others to learn from you. When you receive this note it means that you have passed the test that was asked of you, that it is time to make the journey home. After you read this, which is when I will be coming back to you for the last time. You will be seeing me! I can see you- now!

Note- Know that I always wanted to be your lover, and I wanted to make hot passionate love to you. Know that you did not want me, as I wanted you, and I could not take it. They wanted me more than you too… that way, and it made me crazy. Though they did it because they knew I wanted you so badly, and I said I would rather die than not be with you. I dyed for your Neveah! For the reason that they could not keep me away. However, they did not know that even in death they could not keep me away from you, being a white angel.

When you burn this note, know that I have always been in love with you. Still, when you do, this will be the end of your life's, and the towers curse… on you. Also, it is the end of me being with you, like a spirit on earth, I will be looking over someone that you know, yet she is new for me, she will be seeing me, as I have seen you. This would be the start of your new life with me, and we can finally all be together in eternal life. So, when you choose to burn this letter, we all can be here together ones again and you can be with me, and all of them.

I always will Love you,

You're- Lily May 28, 2010

Come with me, upwards!

(The handwriting was shaky and misspelled, but I knew it was hers.)

Nevaeh- It is time to light up this note in flames! I got everything I wanted now; I have lived long enough.

I want to go home!

I started this breathtaking journey, through seeing the light.

I got my wings of white it was the time at last, as I went up with her. I went through the gates to my new homeland.

Kristen- The note was my mom's suicide letter, and Lily's return, and my grandma Nevaeh, could not handle it.

That was the day; she died in her lazy boy, from what the experts said it was a heart attack. Yet you and I know differently.

I guess the girl; I was seeing was younger angel Lily. As she was taking her away, letting me know that everything was going to be okay. She was looking out the window over the golden fields that she loved. She was holding her notebook, which I made into this novel. So, that she could always be remembered for the amazing life she led, and what her life existence was all about.

She got every one of her dreams! We- Brandon and I made sure of that. However, with the help of all the ones that truly loved her, as she loved them. She got to be what she wanted to be, just in a way, that others could not see. That she thought would never be. If only back when she was fourteen, she could have foreseen what was to be.

Maybe she would not have had these lives of extraordinary, with all the people like me.

Nevaeh- My last heavenly breath on earth was the first in the heavens. And… there they all were, they are all the same, as the last time I saw them. But now we all are glowing with white wings and can be together forever, the hugging and love will never end. I got to see him at last! Nevertheless, there is one more girl, which needs to be up here with me. I will get her to come home with me; we all up here feel that she has earned that right!

~*~

Kristen- I never knew that what she was telling me over the years was true! I made a promise to publish this story. So, that she could always be thought of for the love she had for the ones that never left her side. All I can say is that the curse must have gone away somehow; for the reason that I am still here. -I hope so! Just to think that I have grandma Nevaeh's first copy of the book that she wrote mainly for herself, and the ones that she loved, to see if they wanted to see it.

Though I thought that the whole world needed to see her work, as I said. She thought that it was not even publishable, because of what bullies of all types pounded into her way of thinking in her mind. However, it was an incredible story! Her script became an overnight top New York Times bestselling book; she won many author awards also, that I accepted for her. Looking back over the old pages, all it needed was an editor. That is what I did for her when I came home. Yes, she was one of those truly great writers, which only come around in one life's existence! 'It was her dream, and the amoral dream never dies.' Her life stories helped me out, and now they are helping- out a lot of people out there. Yet- 'Death is so final thought.'

Yet- I have her memories that will live on within me, as do all the others that read this very story. Furthermore, if you talk well about someone, he or she never dies in your memory.

~*~

(Five years later)

Then one late summer's night, at sunset we were riding our horses, with the twins on their ponies, through the golden fields.

We all were looking at everything that has changed, and everything that has stayed the same way, even after all these years. We want the kids to know the stories of where they come from. The trees were blackened, in the foreground, because of the colorful backgrounds, that was painted so beautifully by the sun setting ahead of us. That is when we all saw a white bright light, which seemed to flutter by us like a cold breeze, which left our hearts feeling warm.

What is it I asked?

It cannot be said- Brandon.

Then we realized that there were three of them in the sky, in this bright glowing shimmery white. As a result, we got off our horses, so that we could walk up into the openness of

the meadow to look up in amazement. At that moment, we could finally understand what we were seeing. The faces were so clear; there they were coming down from the heaven's, three beautiful white angels, Grandma Nevaeh as a young girl, Mom Jaylynn, and young Lily. They did not say anything more to us, or then a very soft whisper of- We love you. However, they were looking over us, as we walked in the fields together holding hands.

Noah was holding my hand, as little Nevaeh was holding her dads, as I was holding his. We had a child on either side of us, pressed upon our one leg while looking up in amazement, the same way we were.

Yes, we had the same speechless jaw-dropping look on our faces as the children did on these. What can I say other than, that we are blessed, they were smiling and gleaming and their wings flapping? Then as fast as they were there they were gone; they flew away back up to their home in the heavens. I often try to picture, what the heavens will look like.

Nevaeh- I will be looking over them, as you should know, and all of you to; I will see you from above! I will be protecting you!

Kristin- I am sure it is something that cannot be expressed in words; because it is so gorgeous, that my brain cannot grasp the concept. Then again, if I had to give an idea of what it is like up there… this is what I would say. What I have come too believed as true, is that it is like a city within the clouds. A metropolis with gold paved highways, which bridge the gaps from one part of it to another part. There are many towering endless homes, which shine like gemstones, with gold windows and silver trimmings in all of the high- rises. The households have extremely pointed rooftops, which end at different elevations.

As well, the depths seem to be never-ending; with their voluminous levels and heights, of color in all ranges of the spectrum that gleam.

Heaven is expansive with one massive getaway aperture to the earth below.

Through the galaxy, bypassing what we call a black hole to another universe, and that is how you get there, with the help of your angels, as you pass on through to the other side. Which is why no human has been able to reach it, for a reason. That is what I believe, and yes, I have my reasons. Heaven is endless… it is a celebration of interminable soul life. As I said now the novels, titled 'Nevaeh' has been published to the world! What is ironic it is in a hardcover book, which sparkles in its wander over its reader because that is what she wanted, that was what all of

her lives were about. Currently, there is a copy of her life's existence and her story in the hands of every young girl or woman and some cool guys, in all the lands all around the world! What an awesome way to end her story.

~*~

So, best of luck to you my friend, just remember no matter how bad something becomes, there is always an end in sight. You do not ever have to live in fright. Just enjoy the ride of life and hold on tight. Because sooner or later all your towers will be out of sight, and everything will start feeling right. Just remember to follow the beacon of light, or be the hope and delight for someone else's life, so that they can shine brightly; never give up the fight! Live life in the air of the wings, and someday soon we will all meet again, and the voices we miss will sing.

This is why we have lived it is a test to see if we can have the true faith we need. True faith is not having everything going your way it is when life sucks the most you will know the most, of where you are going in the days of days, and also in the endings. That is why we have new beginnings. What is your life going to be about?

How do you want to be remembered? What do you want to be…? Because anything is possible, if only you believe, it will come true!

Do not give up on your life.

~Nevaeh~

Nevaeh

Book: 7

Falling too You

'A BOOK OF WHAT NOT TO DO- as a teen girl. This book shows, a life of a girl and how she will be remembered- and what you see you may say is- wow- yet this was her life, online- and at home- and most importantly at school! Is it all about being the cool girl? With that

cute boy and maybe that girl- if you're like me- you can't make up your mind- on what was wrong or right or was right or wrong at the time.'

Preface:

I have been told by many out their life is wonderful, that life's a game, but it's not fair, I break the rules, so I don't care! That it is thrilling to be part of the freaking world of butt holes. I got news for you; I did want all that. I have been tooled, that dying you see the light too, along with the flashing by of your stupid pathetic life.

Yet, at least I had a stupid pathetic life. Just like my great-grandma Nevaeh Natalie, grandmother Jaylynn, and my freaked-up mother Kristen, oh and also my dad, and mom said- 'she was I was born on May 12, 2001.'

She had me later on in life to another freaker she's even more freaked up than my step-monster, after Brandon my real dad passed from something that I cannot protonate, I don't want to talk about it- finding out how she left him, for someone else other than him, which she said she would happen or never- ever do. He ended it… Besides, that was it… I am not saying more; I do not want to… I don't freaking have too. Freak that crap in the butt! Yet sometimes, I feel like such a steep-child, yet in a way that is just what I am. However, my daddy loves me anyway, yet my little sis is their biological child.

I was adopted before they realized that freaking one another in the old-school hallways would not work for them, anyway, it would not be long until she gets knocked up, with my pain in the butt sister Kellie. When she dropped out.

I never really knew my real dad; my dad was always the one that was everything to me. Yet my mom is the monster, and I the mutant, (E-ugh! She said- 'When she saw me as a baby girl in the nursery.') However, she felt that way about me since day one, and I feel the same, damn- yes, the same way the same damn way. It was a new day… that fell to me… to me, if you think about it; I have always been falling.

Honestly, I thought that someday, 'I would do wonder and crap cucumbers.' Never truly pondering my last moments on this gray-green dying plant, we call earth. Looking over those visions from my past, mind it seems rather dreadful, nasty and bleak. Just plan sadly really.

Lonely in my memories, I felt that nearly if not all things would have improved if it was just covered up, cover over and forgotten about completely in sixth grade. A fail to recall if you well. That would be awesome.

It was the time of the change… no longer a little one, the time when, I was starting to see things happening, to me that I did not want to see. Like- passion pink braces on my unperfected overbite teeth along with 'Pimples, periods, hips and boobs- oh my… I just want to cry or die.'

Moreover, I was utterly feeling all kinds of things that I didn't want to feel. I was feeling too old for toys and want to feel up one of the older boys. I was an 8th grader, Yes, I was at that stage of my life… it feels strangely good and yet very weird too. 'Oh yes- Live's through middle school all over again.' All the days off. All the days on… all the days- I was turned off, to all of them.

And yes, all the days, I was turned on!

Yet, really can anyone stand to relive that day… I mean really! Let's not forget I had to spend time with the family, on the brakes, then to come home and do all the pointless homework like advanced mathematics. When I got most of that crap done sitting in long study halls not able to move or say a sound, with period cramps, yeah- I know fun right!

Kissing with open mouths, like breath sucking and tugs brushing Frenching.

As well as thinking about what boy, I want to have sizzling, exhilarating, desiring sex with is all I thought about! Plus- when, where, and how! Yes, I have had some really bad kisses, make-outs, and hookups… who hasn't? So much so, I barely survived through them the primary time it happened. Just like the world keeps going around, this was not my first go-around either.

Frankly, I thought I would not have minded living through all that again. What I thought where the ultimate times of all. Like the time I made out with a girl in the hallway slammed upon her locker, she was touching me in all the right places, let us just say. Anyways her name is Jenny Stevenson. She the type of girl that is a friend to try things with. Yes, I have been with a girl too. Mostly, I just wanted to see what being a lesbian world feel like. It was okay, it feels just

as good. Though, I knew boys were my thing. However, I am the type, I will try anything once, even sex-wise!

Though I thought, my paramount triumphs where with Ray Raymond, and like when we first hooked up underneath the football stadium bleachers. I knew everyone could see us doing it with his pants down, and my bare butt sticking out and up, as the game was going on. Still, we were in the moment, we did not care.

The PDA was half the fun of doing it, it was all about getting some.

I remember being wasted too, with my friends like Jenny, Kenneth, and Madeline. Yet we just called her Maddie. Like- I said we got so drunk and high, that we went skinny dipping in like old man's pool weather thirdly two degrease, and then made messed up looking snowman, and running around the street somewhat ass naked flashing whomever we would get to look at us.

Naturally, we even made snow angels in the backyard as we stumbled around, and passed out. No one cared what we did really, thus far that was the fun of it all. Oh, and Kenneth was just the boy that only wanted one thing from Jenny.

He had no personality to speak of… he would hit on me all the time, and sometimes he would get it from me too, or I would be out of the group by her if he said I was the one that wanted it from him.

We could brake widows out of old buildings and homes, and who would stop us. Sure, we got chased by the cops, yet that was the fun of it too. There is nothing else for us to do. I remember Maddie leaving her handprints in the wet mud, Jenny her butt, and some of her lady-ness, when the town thought it was time for new sidewalks. Yet we all did, something that would last forever, we thought. Maddie drew a few other things too. You can get the picture! All inappropriate… all there for life.

She was just crazy like that, like squatting down pissing and doing number two in the old man Jackups yard. She has more balls than most guys… I knew. Old man Jackups called us, 'Mindless slutty hooligans' So that was payback. At the time- I thought like what is wrong with that, we're just having some fun here… your old windbag, like go and sit on your cane! You know what I mean… I think?

I remember being so smashed at my sweet sixteen too, that I don't even remember it. Yet that is what having a good time was all about, so they say. Bumping and grinding on all the boys with loud music. And as the twinkling lights shine on your skin, that lights the way up to your bedroom. You know that your puffy dress is going to be pushed up a couple of times on that night. I just don't remember how many times it was, and I didn't remember who it was with, I am not even sure if I know them at all… all of them or not. All I know is I did it all and was happy to do whatever they asked me to do. But- but I thought I was having the time of my life. I was the birthday girl, that had the rosiest pink lipstick on most boys at the party. I thought it was such a horror. In my mind at the time, I thought that I high- jacked the rainbow, and crashed into a pot of gold! All the girls my age did it, yet I was the best at it!

I recall the time Liv and I, went trick or treating I was dressed as Hermione from the Harry Potter movies, Liv was a sexy witch! With the pointed hat. So, original…! That is what I tooled her. That was the night we scared the pants off of Ray in the not so scary haunted house. And before you ask, he was dressed as Harry. So, I wanted to play with his wand, that why I dressed the way I did at the time. Liv was one of those good friends… I thought, which would tell everyone what you all did the day after, to all the girls at the lunch table. She can text faster than anyone I know. Anyways… we jumped out at him, and he nearly craps his nicely pressed pants. I am sure there was a skid mark on his tightly- white-ies or something. Yet he did yack on Liv's chest, and that was hilarious to me. She was dancing around, and flapping her hands doing the funky chicken while yelling, 'Ou- ou- ou- wah!' As I dibble over in lather, I guess it was funnier when it doesn't happen to you too many times.

I- Karly takes their fingers in me when I masturbate, just thought you would like to know.

Jenny and boy, we-we's she takes them all, sometimes she has two going in the same whole, two boys in there rubbing their crap seem guy to me even if it's a three-way.

Maybe… all of this is not what I wanted to be remembered for. I guess what I am saying is, I wanted to be remembered for how I have- 'Fallen to You!'

However, before I kicked the bucket… I did think of Ray, or anyone- or another boy. No one is other than my selfish self. The clueless girl I was, living for the now, and not the happily ever after! Hell no…! I did not think about that. I did not think about all the dangerous, shocking, and even offensive things I have done with my friends. I did not even think about my family, like

if they would even care about me being or not being around. Nope, I was too busy sucking off chill dogs and running around silly doing honorable things.

I did not even think about my adorable girly bedroom, and how the sun shined silky waves of light, in the window. Besides, how it woke me up as my days started. I did not think about the soft and cozy things in that room either, or the selfie photograph of me, and Ray kissing sitting on my night table. I did not think about how you can smell the rain rolling in on a spring day, as the window was open, or feel the chill in the air as I stood by it in the middle of December.

'Oh, let the sun beat down apron my face, and let the sounds caress my ears, I have been blind!' I do not think about all the smells and feelings of food and family coming from down the steps or in the home at all. I completely ignored everything and it all just to be the cool girl.

Instead, I thought of Jenny and Maddie back in the third grade how we used to play kickball and miss in our gym class. I also thought about that girl that no one liked too that no one wanted on the team including me.

I think her name was Madilyn, I remember this because, I was the last one to pick, and she looked so sad and I did not say anything as she sat crying in the grass picking yellow dandelions the whole class. I was such an ass for my friends. I guess that guilt gets you at some point. I member how they and I said she was too weird and disgusting to play with us, and that she could not see what she was doing, because of her blue-eyed four- eyes. Meaning her glass on the fragile flushed face. I guess I get to be friends with these girls because they were what I wanted to be. I was not always friends with them I remember from seconded grade and back. Yes, I was just like her before, I joined their team. I would have done anything to be one of them, which is what I did.

'Look at the little freak over there sitting' Jenny said, and we all giggled.

'Let's kick our balls in her face, so she runs off crying for her mommy again like before.' And- that is what we all did; the goal was to break her glass of her face.

'Like she is not even going to try to move said Maddie.' BAM smack one! BAM smack two…! Me- direct hit- BAM! Furthermore, she goes running away just the way we wanted! Jenny always found a way of making us snicker at the dumbest crap, like that. I- we- never forget that girls face! Red with pain, and dripping with her tears, dandelions in hand that she picked for

us. Just so, we would like her! That all faded away from me. Just like the furry white ball of seeds that blow away as she rains inside.

I can't believe that is what, I remembered!

This was more my beforehand death instant when I was theoretic Madilyn meant to be having some kind of vast revelation about my past. My moment froze like in time to the recollections of the slight of nail polish, and the squeak of my white dollar store flats as I walked on the waxed high school floor. The tightness of my skinny blue jeans, with one of my lacey junior's nine- dollar Walmart thongs. The small of my wild cherry blossom shampoo, and Let's not forget the laughing chatter in the resonating cafeteria of about sixty other teenagers.

Oh…! Yes! Moreover, Jenny's face all up in mine.

The odd thing is that I have not thought about that in like what seemed to eternity ago. It was one of those reminiscences, I did not even know I kept. Like lost in my brain somewhere… If you know what I am saying.

It's not like Madilyn was disturbed or devastated anything like that. That is just the kind of things that kids do to girls like her, and what kids do to one another.

Like there are just asking for it! However, come to think about it, no one wants that. It is no big deal it is not.

Like there is always going to be that girls laughing and picking on other girls. Crap that happens every single day, walking the halls of the schools or just sitting in class, which is just the life of every teenage girl in the United States of

America- damn… it most likely happens in other countries too for all I know. That is what life's all about laughing at what is less than you.

Additionally, feeling better because of it.

Madilyn was not stupid, she was just all little sightless, and by the time she went to high school, she lost the glass and was not a bad looking girl at all just shy. She was always tiny, at that time she had boobs and hips that would not quit. Yet she was still the one that got picked on. I do not think I had ever said more than two words to her. Though I think, Maddie was hushed friends with her just, so she could get her homework done. Madilyn was the smarty- pants in our

grade. Likewise, she was on the softball time too, with us yet she sits alone most of the time. Yet she did not seem too mined.

One time, during our freshman, it came to one of the big parties and said that she was a virgin and did not drink. We all laughed at her. I remember Jenny- saying get down on your knees girl and see what it is like. And she did, and I get it all on my phone and posted it on my web page.

Then Maddie said, to me we need to get that girl popped. Therefore, I found her a random scuzzy guy to go and do her. I had to- yet I do not know why, but I feel as if that was so wrong now, yet I did it for my friends at the time. It was no different than what I went through really. If you were not given it all away by the time you were in training bras then there was something majorly wrong with you, or so the boys and some girls though. I was the one that had her purity taken away, to some twenty-five-year-old loser. Like she was only fourteen! But like I said… I was a lot younger my first time, so maybe that makes it okay. What do you think?

I remember, Madilyn doing the walk of shame, we all have been there. Yet like I said that was the fun of it, seeing all that taking place in front of everyone at the party. I am not going to go into detail, but you could see that she was ridden hard and put away wet.

We all laughed at her after the fact, because she said it hurt and did not know what all that 'stuff' as she called it… was all over her face and body. 'What do you think it is.' said Jenny. 'I- I DON'T know' said Madilyn downright freaked out. Just so, you know I am not saying this to be gross or anything like that… No! This crap is what happens to us pre-teens and teens, I was one of them. Yet will I always be remembered for being one of them, just like that I am afraid so, I am afraid to live it all over?

That was just one of many weird things we have done.

Even weirder to me than that, was the fact that we all talked about- like how it would be for one of us to die… if we would. Sex, drinking, and death were the main topics most nights. Yet that nightfall I do not remember how it came up in the conversations, other than Kenneth complaining that I got to sit in the front seat- aka 'shotgun' with Jenny after the party I guess I was where he thought he should be, and you know that wearing a seatbelt is for pussies.

I do remember us talking about what are bucket let would be, yet to me, I thought mine was almost complete. The rap music was so loud, that we were yelling at one other just to

overhear. Jenny kept going through her I-phone to change the song and text her other friends and boys, her phone was in her right hand in her lap. One reason, I sat there is because- I was the one that was meant to pick the music so she could drive. I remember hearing the lyric- 'To the window to the walls…' the song was 'Get

Low!'

However, Jenny was so high, and Maddie was singing in the back to the words making her hands go in-between the front sits, and that was comical because she is as white as they come. I remember that is when we started shouting our theory on death and the afterlife, or if there is one. I thought there was… yet I was not sure. We were all gathering what those would be.

Jenny was b*tching about how could it be and going to be, in the ground, and like her beautiful body is going to be eaten away overtime in her sealed casket. That made my skin crawl.

We were all like you're going to die you're not going to feel anything dumb ass. Then Maddie said my dying wish is to hook up with Lizzy, Sam, and anther all at the same time and never stop.

Hey, why not they were both very sexy hot girls. I could see that fantasy of doing it with until death. I was a little pissed that I was not one of the girls in that scenario but it's her death wish not mine. Yet this kind of surprising to me, because Maddie was never that way at all. Like she has a boyfriend of two years. However, there love life was always on again and off again. The makeup hookups are all that kept them together… I think...?

(#- Hashtag: Wcw- Women crush

Wednesday)

Jenny was gaping down yet another whole can of bud light, as Kenneth was puffing on one of his homemade joints. I had to roll the SUV window down a crack just to catch my breath. The frizzing rain was pelting the windshield; the wipers could not even keep up to brush it off. The trees were rushing and swaying in the ghostly breeze showing up in the light cast of the headlights of our SUV, as we're doing at least ninety- five down the small, dark ruff, and narrow road.

Yes, the slush was coming in on me and getting me cold and wet.

Then Kenneth grabbed Jenny's phone from her lap and changed the song to 'Hero' by Enrique Iglesias just to piss Maddie off because that is her and her boyfriend's song. That is when she started to cry and said he broke up last Friday via text, he knew about it before I did. Yet no one likes getting dumped, so I forgave her for not saying anything.

Tom was a drippy twerp what can I say. I was only with him once that I remembered. At that sometime ken in the back was slumped forward in between me and Jenny, when he graded Jenny's phone… Manly, so he could also touch jenny's lady business in between her inner thighs. I could see it all as he moved her skirt up and undershorts off to the one side, and he was rubbing it up if you know what I am saying.

Anyways that made her- jump!

Then scrum plus freaking shriek in my ear! I grab the steering wheel to get the SUV back in our lane, as ken's mouth dropped open and his smoking joint fall in between my boobs as the SUV rocked, and it was burning hot in my bra cleavage.

Around that time, Maddie elbowed me in

the one eye trying to get my clasp undone to get it out. The joint then fall in between my legs and was burning my set yet I did not know. Yah so then Jenny was b*tching and about that too, saying you cannot trash my car. Like she didn't care that it was burning my sensitive skin. I was cushion at her to… as well saying it a good thing I shaved today! Well, I was trying to brush all the embers off the seat, and also me.

As all this was taking place as the tires of the SUV were skidding and slipping on the somewhat frozen slash a little. Then just like that, there was a flash of white in my eyes. Jenny was yelling something- words I could not make out.

Son- of a- Sh- sh- hit, oh my-y goo- that all I heard.

That is when I knew that the SUV was wrapped around a tree it hit on the passenger side front door. It hit so hard that it bonds off the then and then rolled on to its roof. We skidded to the other side of the road next to the woodlands that were on that side. The last thing I heard other than screeching Jenny's big mouth, was the sounds squealing of the metal of my door, glass, airbag exploding, popping and crunching into me. The SUV folded in on me like a pretzel,

and caught fire, mainly because of the gas leaking out and maybe that one joint that fall to the floor.

As I said, that is when Maggie's little faces flash out of the past into my view. It is like I could hear her from the past her giggling echoing her crying too. It was all spinning around me dragging out into a screaming yell. Then nothing- nothing at all but silences! Like what gets me, if you don't get to know, it is not as if you wake up with cramps and go on with your day.

No, you don't remember to tell the boy you like that you think you're falling in love with him. You don't remember to say goodbye to your parents, or that you readily do love them even though you don't show it. In my case, I didn't remember to say annoying at all to them that day. I guess that was not nice, and what I was made about with them was so minor compared to not saying good-bye.

If you are anything like I am, you wake up and do what you need to do in bed and leave it a tangled miss. Then jump in the shower and scrub it up. Hop out wet to air dry while dances around naked as you look in the mirror glass to get all partied up, and then just like that five minutes and ten seconds later. Your boy or girl is at the crab going Beep- beep to pick you up, you rush out the get into the car and speed so you're not both too late. You're not worried about seeing your mom, and dad as a teenager.

If you think at all like me, you think… I am young, I not going to die. You're more concerned about what boy you want to kiss if he misses you when you're dating anniversary is coming up, if you're going to get a flower on Valentine's Day and what color it is, and if you're going to be in his arms in the halls at some point in the school day.

Too busy about that stuff like your clothing, brushing your long hair and teeth. Plus, making sure that you put your make-up and another thing all in your handbag, so you can do the finishing touches in homeroom and the girl's bathroom. Said to say that the time I was supposed to be praying to God at that moment before the bell, I was not caring about anyone but myself and my wants and needs. So, if you're just like me then your fail day on this plant goes something like this:

Chapter: 51

Beep, Beep, Buzz, Buzz

My day begins with Jenny aka (Jenna) Talya- laying on the horn in her black 2003 ford focus with the paint peeling on the hood. And reading a text from my bestie Jenny saying- 'Don't forget b*tches, it's love-o-grams day!'

My mom yells out the door every day not to do that, yet it goes in one ear and out the other with Jenny. Jenny does what Jenny wants to do. Yet that horn has a way of like going through you… you know. Especially at five- fifty-five every single morning.

'Hurry the hell up, I am not getting any younger over here!' She yells out the window of the SUV. And my mom yells about that too, 'stop cursing!' Then I say something like 'Keep your pants on… I am coming! I am 'cumming!'' As the nosey neighbor lady peps- out one of the slats of their window blind at us. It always seems to be I am running to get where I am going, even from house door to car door. Most of the time passing up that one book up on the floor, which you need for class on the way out without thinking, in such a rush. I don't even put on Rays letterman jacket he gave me to wear, I balled it up in my arms. Just like my purse and backpack zippers somewhat open, that was just thorn in my one right shoulder.

Right before that my darling pain in the ass little sister Kellie, who is ten years old. She grabs one of my bookable handles and tugs me back off my footing. WHAT- is it! I spun around looking like a demon child just snarling at her. She said crying I just wanted to hug you, Karly. And I said- forget it… I am late now, and can't you see I am texting my 'BF! -Boyfriend' So stop wasting my time little girl.

(No- I know I am not a very nice person. I know that now! Yet I did think! I thought I was going to see her letter that night. I would give anything to have going back and hugged her that last time… that day.) It seemed that I was always too busy to spend any time with her.

As a teen girl, like I said. My time was mostly spent on boys- well mostly Ray, talking and getting together, and partying to be popular. I thought that was what living a good life was all about. It's just as if she always picked the worst times to try to bother me. Um- I'm not perfect, and there is only some much time in the day to play, and she wanted to play all the time.

Though, I can see her turning into a little me. I was the one she looked up too. Mom was certainly trying to get her some help for her impulsiveness; we all think she has ADHD or something for how clinging she is. She is mom and dad's favorite though I feel, that girl is not what I would call under-loved that's for sure. Yet mom and dad don't see anything wrong with

her having all that energy, and to be like running around, sucking down the soda and cramming down the junk food. She is picked on to like; I was before I fall into jenny's hand of friends. I hope she can do the same. All at the same time I hope she doesn't, I don't want to see her fall into the wrong as I did.

I want to see her fall for a nice sweet boy someday that she loves. Not give it all away like- it did, just so I would not get teased about it. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree though, she takes after me! In like every way. She is just like me! I have always fallen for the wrong people too and stumbled on the ones that loved me… like Ray.

Love is complex something that I guess I will never understand; I think... I have fallen in love with him. Until now I think I hold out another day to tell him how I feel. That I have to mean it when I feel I am fallen. (Little did

I no… he would never truly know.)

~*~

My little sis is always touching my stuff like my make-up and trying on my sexy short dress, short shorts, bras, and thongs. I have to just pat her on the head, and say what did I tell you about going through my thing. She is giggling- I am not too. Yes! That's right… so don't do it again- I say. (Ugh really how you would like your sis putting your underwire and stuff like that on?) She thinks it's okay to run around in the house in just underwire bottoms and less mom and dad say that okay, it's cute she's only seven. Yet if I would try that- oh my… the only place I can do that, is in my room.

Little sis's are always asking a personal question too. Like why do you have this and that and I don't on my body, or can you teach me to do what you're doing- please sis. Because she's always busting in on me when I am on my bed.

Like hello- embarrassing! Yet she still witches me even if I grunt out to leave. I have no privacy at all she always jumps up on the bed with me and has to ask a lot of questions.

'What yah doing- Karly?' Um- what do you think? 'I don't know… like- what's that purple thing you're using that's humming?' Oh, my God- Just go! 'Can I try?' No- get! 'I want to see and try…!' Not now!

And she runs out the room crying saying to mom- 'Karly won't share with me!' And mom's yells out- 'Be nice to your sis and share.' Mom just doesn't get it, I don't say anything back, as sis comes busting back in my room, all happy to learn how to 'share' as she calls it with me. So-o yah my sis starts to finger her vagina when she was 3 and was cuming.

(Awaked! If there is a hell, I am proudly going there for teaching my sweet little seven-year-old sister, how to do that, use my old clear glass dildo with the cute pink-sh hearts on it, to cummie 7 times a day, like me. I thought she can get one and glass can wash clean, it's hers. Yet mom did say to share, so I did- and we do, now together!) My sister giggles like a dork and said. This is so awesome, we love to masturbate together, time shared. The most fun I have ever had with you Karly; she said the first time. Yeah- well don't tell mom or dad! -I said. 'Okay, Karly!' - She said.

Though, she giggles all the time, but never quite like that.

(#- Hashtag: Is that weird, playing with the kitty, and sis)

Okay, TMI- Too Much Information! By the time, I did not even make it out of the house as you can see, there was not much time at all as always. And round that time Jenny is yelling out her Ford window at me and my mom. 'How the freak is it hugging today Miss. B?' And my sister has that gleam in her eyes… like- I have a secret. (What a way to start my day. With all that pulsating around in my head.) Jenny and Maddie Jobs have their cars.

Me, I can only hope for one, I have made it clear to mom that I am so not riding the bus with the creepy pre-teens to school, that is the most swagger-less thing you can do. The same can be said for getting dropped off, however, I am guilty of that one from time to time. I just want a car that runs. Maddie has a slammed to the ground blue and black Honda with the bumming raddling base, and a fart can muffler. You can hear that car long before you can see it, and when you do see it, you know it's her!

Loving people, you don't realize, just how deadly that type of loving bound is. It's like a disease that sucks down on you harder than any guy or girl can! At least that is the way it was with me. I have loved for all the wrong reasons, with all the wrong ones… they were slowly sucking the life out of me, and I was happy to give it all to them. They are what killed me. (They didn't pull the trigger; however, they did drive me into the side of a tree!)

I was killing myself for them anyways. Yet I always thought real love is even more dangerous because I have never had it… yet I was so close to having it with Ray. I guess that is why I never said anything to him. I loved my friends more than anything, yet did they love me? I was constantly grading what I was feeling.

How, I wanted to be, all because of them, and only them… my friends. (Come to think about it now, like if they were my friends they would not be carried, or haven is envied of whom I want in my life or not.)

(#- Hashtag: my life, I am a dumb ass, and ruthless friends kill.)

Speaking of cars, sometimes I get to borrow my dad's red 4-Runner if necessary. But most of the time he needs it for work, so that's like never. Ken, he drives a gray pimped out Dodge Cummins diesel truck, which his daddy bought for him that he was all jacked up. And poor Madilyn she has to drive her mom's old, sad, and pathetic looking 1985 Toyota Tercel. I don't even know what color that thing is… rust- maybe. Crap, they don't even make that anymore, that thing hardly wants to go in the cold weather.

As of now, it seems that the air is always cold around here at the start of the fall. Yet the sky shins that orange cast on the changing leaves, which feels, so picture-perfect agent the blue-gray October sky. The warmth of the sun is there; I can feel it rising on my face as I walk into the school. Yet, not as strong as it was in my bikini-ready body in the summer, as I laid out, at the beach with my friends.

The sun in fall is a week like me, fallen to the mercy of the horizon line… just burnt out from all the changing sessions, which it had to indoor that year.

So, for my last day as you know- it looked like it was going to storm cats and dogs. It was going to gush thicker slippery wetness than me and my sis did when we were sharing. Ha- ha, I had to say that. Anyways the sky was sinfully looking back and stayed evil black and deathly milky foggy. The sun did not shine.

It was not one of those nice-looking days, it looked like hell was coming!

'Oh!'

Speaking of cats and dogs… why is it mine to look at me, and start licking me and sis's toes from the bottom of the bed? That's so strange! I thought it would start dumping down after

we go to school. Mother Nature has a mind of her own, she didn't have her crap together this morning. As far as the local news goes… who has the time to look at the television at that time, and the severe storms that they forecast are never as harsh as that say they're going to be.

I bounded into the passenger bucket seat. Jenny is puffing on one of many Marlboro Lights, surprising today she wasn't vaping Marry-Jan with it too. I stopped smoking after I heard it makes your hoo-ha taste bad…! TMI, sorry- but it does! I was never one for smoking that crap, I did it for my friends. Plus, unlike Jenny, I didn't want to die of any type of cancer. Pulls being stoned in schools… ha now that too funny, it's like being in one of those whacked-out dreams with the melting clocks, it's like can hear a pin drop.

So, paranoid, and so freaking hungry. Hell No- I would not recommend trying it- don't do it!

(If you want to be cool to get a job and a life, you can't do that stoned all the time… that's why you feel so alone and well fat.) Ya knows- I think I have ADHD too. I can't seem to stay on topic! Just like I say to my teachers along with all my friends that we all suffer from Tourette's syndrome for all the F-bombs and other profanities worlds, and free birds we drop-in class. Oh- oh, I remember this one time my teacher Miss. Riley said that finger should be used in public, and we all busted out giggling, And Liv said- I am using that finger right now, is that okay!

(#- Hashtag: Blowing smoke, day by day, and throwback Thursday)

Okay so, back in Jenny's car on that last day. She gives me the once over from top to bottom. Not bad- she said. Then Jenny lifted the fabric of my skirt and smacked my butt so hard and snapped the pink string of my thong, and said love that flirty short skirt. I said- Not so ruff… I'm kind of rubbed raw right now! She said- oh! Though it needs to be rolled up a little higher on your hip's girl. She pulled it up for me! Show them legs off and stuff.

I sat down with my behind red and numb, as we spun- out of my street…! I was thinking to myself… I am showing more than just my legs, more like rosy cheeks too. Yet that is how I'm going to school. Jenny was always saying I was not slutty enough. I guess I'm not quite as free to show off all the goods as she is. Oh, I told her about my weird morning. So not a good idea! She was like- 'for-reals' that's humorous, you poor thing! You just wanted to get off, and you had to help her get it in.

I- can't- believe- it! I can wait to tell the girls that one…! How do you get yourself into those things, she said? I was mortified! I knew I was not going to be eating lunch at school. Um- My mom I said, and she giggled even harder and rolled her big sparkly eyes.

Note to self: Something's I should learn to keep to myself only! I was never going to live that one down! On the drive:

She said- 'Want to hit McDonald's?'

'What do you want,' Jenny asked me?

'I want a McGriddle and a hot- chocolate.'

Jenny- 'I'll have an Mc-muff-in… And an old lady's coffee! She said!' Sarcasm- I was thinking awesome! Just what she needs!

They don't know how old you out when ordering at the drive-thru. So, you can get a small drink for fifty-five cents. The look on their faces is priceless when you bag and go! You know if I knew that was going to be my last meal, I would have gotten some else! Oh, I said I liked her skirt too, that I would have to barrow it some time. She said- Okay… but you're going to look cuter than me in it!

(Looking back- I didn't seem like just how jealousies she was of me. I was a good girl going bad. What she and my friends made me become.)

I looked up at her and batted my eyes at her sweetly and said thank you sheepishly. She was a good friend. Still, I always felt so uneasy with her so close to me, yet I did trust her with my life. There is only one week out of the whole school year Liv, Jenny, Maddie and I dress the same, and that is spirit week. Like PJ's day, clash day, twin day, custom day, and school colors day as we call it boyfriend's jersey day. I was going to be wearing number 14.

I always- loved wearing his jersey. The scent and the feel, I felt so cozy in it on football Fridays. I like flannel PJ'S day too you don't have to wear anything underneath and that comfy. I love these adorable PJ's Ray bought them for me the previous Christmas, there pink and white and sexy and have a drawstring in the front! Jenny, Liv, and Maddie went to Victoria's Secret and got the same ones so that we all could match. Which is the only time we have ever matched, other than a skirt here and there?

(Yet now my PJ's they don't feel' so special to me.)

But- you know your boy loves you when he gets you gifts from there, or he will go out and buy you tampons no questions asked! And will hold you in his arms even when you're all b*tch faced and emotional from PMS-ing.

Oh, let's not forget that, yes, we all somewhat match on Friday all the girls have that are popular have their own guys' jersey also. Liv likes to wear number 19, Jenny 59, and Maddie is sporting number 3. Come to think about it. Maddie distastes the color pink and Jenny thinks it the only color in the world.

Yah, I forget to say our school colors are red and black. It always so much fun to go to the mail together, because Jenny is a girly- girl and Maddie is a tomboy. It's funny to see what they think is cute or not. The catfights they get into are very amusing! Like Jenny saying that a real girl shouldn't wear all Camo or boy shorts undies and sports bras all the time. It shocked me that Maddie did wear the same PJ's like me.

Like go and do your things if you want. Just like I like Hollister, and Jenny like American eagle. Just like liv can't leave the freak'n mail till she goes in and sees the old blue truck at Old Navy.

She got her first kiss at nine on the hood along with a few other things.

Though she always said he would be back for her someday. Sweet but unlikely! That where they were supposed to hook up… yet he never did. We all keep saying to her that it was just puppy love. He's not going to be there to wasp you away Liv, and like do it in the bed of the truck or something, get real!

Liv- 'He will! I know he will, I believe!'

Jenny- 'Do you believe in Santa, faith, and not using a condom too, she said.'

We all giggled at Liv as we walked out of the store!

'Yeah, that kind of love only happens in novels, like the Nevaeh books.' We said. 'What was that guy's name that wrote those?' Maddie asked. I have my books with me, Liv showed us as she pulled them out of her oversized handbag. 'How the hell do you say that?' Jenny said. I get Marcel, we have one dork named that in are school. Maddie started to babble- 'Marcel Ray-

Dur-reez, Door-ez, maybe it's Dur-e-a?' Jenny blurted out overtop- 'Diarrhea!'

'WHAT!!!' We all shouted at the same time, looking at her with confusion!

Jenny- 'I don't know!'

Maddie- 'Who cares… the Moovvviiieee- not the book is all we care about.'

Liv- 'I guess you're right she pouted, and stomped her feet, holding her books in her hands.'

Me- She has those books with her all the time. Me- Thinking to myself, I wonder if they will make it a movie. I hope so because I not sure… that I can't sit my ass through yet another wolf or vampire movie! I'll end up strangling Maddie with Jenny's spare per of undies that she keeps in her purse! Or at least put them in her mouth… so that she will shut up about it! Like her… gag on that crap, bit, and suck down on that, as well as see how that tastes! Girl you're driving me crazy! Yeah- I could see that happening!

So-oo, if you have not guessed that was the day, we get are outfits for twin day! On twin day we all chose to go with short white miniskirts and brown and pink camo spaghetti strap tanks. OMG- they were so- so very perfect, pretty and cute! I was contented - that we finally found something that- we all liked, it only took four hours. I love those times so much when we all mull over every stupid little detail, everything has to be just right or to us, it's an epic fall!

At my school Clinton High, Jenny has a nickname for it, yet I am not going there, right now! We don't have a snotty preppy uniform; we were what we have. It's just as a slandered crappy public school that's falling apart. The boys have it so easy ripped up blue jeans, plaid boxers showing, a shabby T-shirt with some dumb saying… Like- I lost my phone number can I have yours. I remember this one-time Adam-James had this squirrel with to nuts on it. And the saying was… You can rub my nuts for luck. No- that's okay… I would rather not! Looking down you'll something like Nike sneakers, nothing to fancy. There is not much of a dress code for them to flow.

Us, girls we work so hard to look good, it just doesn't happen this way! Sometimes- I think Ray is the only one to notice or that appreciates me, yet was he the one that I was falling too? Most of the other boys here don't care what we're wearing just as long as everyone can come off after school.

I guess I have a choice at the end of the day. Love is love and to me that something I am not sure if I can have with any guy, all I get is a one-night stand, where you wipe your mouth and walk away.

At school, you see this a lot in all the popular boys hooking up with all the girls that they think they can score with, and the loser boys never get any at all form any girls. We girls have standers to whom with sleep with- you can understand, can't you? It's like one… two and done!

Yet, I wish it was that easy for me to know my true feeling, with the one I should want. (Perhaps- it would be too hard fallen, or that I'm so scared to fall in love, and be committed. Perhaps- he would not love me back? Perhaps- my friends wouldn't like me being in a relationship. I do have to think about them and my reputation. Perhaps- I would just be used like I always am or be excluded by everyone.)

It's smart to be the same as the others rather than standing out… you don't want to be that one that gets chosen and nagged about for looking different.

Amusing- we don't have uniforms, yet we can't be individuals it seems. In school, you also see a lot of hoodies, with the school name on it with our p*ssycat looking baby jaguar mascot on the front. That's where the jock comes in by the way. Us girl we blow dries our hair and style it if you're like me with a curling iron, like one out of ten of the boys even comb their hair.

We shave from the neck down! We have to squeeze ourselves into skin-tight skinny jeans, which you have to lay down to the button. We look good so we get all the right attention, you know it's not easy to make a pink North Face jacket look sexy, yet that is what you see on most of the girls, and they work it because of the time they put in doing their hair and make-up. All these nice things we do… yet the whole objective, in the end, is to let some boy miss it up, one way or another.

It's going to happen- Smears- If its tears, fears, or boys- juices. You're going to end up with all kinds of smears, on the inside and out! Yes, there are smears on your face from boy's things and crying. Smears you're going to have to face because of. Smears that can't be erased and can't be changed. All the smears you get from your peers with fears, too… I should know I have lived with all of them. I choose to get smears by a boy, so I would not get smeared not being popular. Not being approved by the ones that smear, that is the teen seaside.

Like when you can't hide… I died because- I was smeared in another way. Some smears you shouldn't take to heart, be smarter than I follow your heart. Don't be someone smudge on the side of the road just to wipe away. Be someone's reason to live. I guess- I miss being all girly, I miss that I did realize that he was the only one, that counted. The only boy I need to be all girly for! The one that had a hard time, walking away from the crash scene when I died.

I try to be all hardcore, blunt and not care with ample anarchy. All the same

I- Karly Barnes… I do have feelings. I'm just an adolescent girl here nothing more, and I'm not trying to be your dirty little slut that yells o-yeah in your X- rated fantasy movie, she is not real. I am just a high school girl that's trying to fit in real life. I'm not going to forget what you all do to me, just because I have too. I never thought to be popular I would have to be just like her, I just wanted to fall in love, and you to fall for me. I just want to carve pumpkins and kiss and cuddle in the fallen leaves, I have confidence in that I wanted a real love story! Would I have had it…? What if… and if only… are the questions I appear to have!

Yeah, our school has all kinds of clicks, some crazier than others. You have the scammer girls that every time they see a- girlfriend or girlie-friends, in the hall there obnoxiously yelling. Then there is the one that can keep their hands to themselves the PDA's. We have hipsters, Emos and dorky geeks that can't seem to get some.

We have some that never shower, and we have cheerleaders that shake what their momma gave them, and we have stimulating jocks. Then there are the dramas and smarties, which you're only going to see to do the impossible homework that you copy. Most of the time they just E-mail it to you, the night before.

Everyone, but the complete loser geeks are only ones in the school that are not on some type of drug. Just about everyone drinks… I would say. Other the rejected losses that can't get laid, because they're so freakily weird, awkward and creepy. You know the type!

Some in school has nine or more books, which are getting knocked out of their hands. Then some never carry a book in their life. For some… school is their life, and for some, it is a hell-a death sentence. Some are cheerful, and some are miserable! Emotional states in school all come down to what click you're in… it shows if you want it to or not. Some are in the rush of their life, and others could give a crap walking around without a care in the world. Some are so jumpy if you say hey they crap themselves or babel in disbelief.

That reminds me... like me and the girls sometimes just for amusement well go and pick out some loser virgin boy and say hey there- you like me. Do you want me? The way he acts is priceless, it sweet yet pathetic how they are around me and my girls. I am not trying to be conceited, but I am the type of girl they want! That they can never have! So, we and I teas them with that fact. They have even drooled over me and my girl in the click I am in. Oh, sometimes they even have to cover themselves in the front with their books, when I lightly brush up against them. All I have to do is talk softly in their ear with a sensual bowing breath! And they are all hot for me! It is like all they have to do is just think about me, and I know they have to run to the bathroom. Oh, harmless fun! I am beautiful, and I know it.

Conversely, I feel ugly on the inside. I knew what I'm doing is hurtful, I have been there when I was little.

Yet, I did it to get a giggle and approval of my clique of girlfriends. Plus, it makes our boys that we want so jealous when we look at other boys regardless of how dorky and shy, they are. Sometimes I look into their love-sick eyes, and then kiss them on the cheek, just so they have something to feel okay about. I try to be sweet I'm not a mean person, really- I'm not! (Every boy should get a kiss, even if it just a peck on the left check form a pretty girl. The other girls don't do that or think that... they are heartless.) Those are the type of boys that we'll treat you right, I think... because, they have never had any, and once they get it from you, they will never want to let you go, they will do anything to keep your love. They would love to love you only if you love them back. Said to say that most of us girls don't want that. That's too easy and clingy and would hurt our reputations. Anyways as a result of being stressed out, I started to drink when I was about twelve at parties, about the same time I started rubbing off the older popular boys, that don't even remember my name. That's how most girls I know started too. You feel around and go from there. Yet do they care about you... or just the high they get? I don't know that... but I do know that I drink way too much, however at least- I pass out.

Just like there are some photos from my past that I wish I had, and there is one that I was never tagged in. Like I wish I had more pictures of me with the band kids and those types, and all the other ones out of my senseless click.

Yes, some even with the drum major too would have been incredible. She was a friend I left behind way back in the younger grades, the one that got away, I never felt like I was part of the band because of whom was friends with whom. I could have done without all of those

unfulfilled flashbacks. I could have done without all the one with my tongue hanging out, and hold red plastic cups all silly, or the sexy boobs shot, swimsuit shot, duck-faces, and peace signs.

But I can get back what I never- ever had, and to me, that is just very sad. The saddest memories of all are the ones that were never made.

(These are the photos in memory of me on Facebook. You can put wings on me, but I was no angel.)

I don't mind what they do in my memory. Ha, it's not like I didn't have friends drawing a penis on my face when I was alive.

I- Maddie and the girls always planned on renting a small house together in

Pittsburgh. Maddie and I were going to share a bedroom and a bed. And Jenny and Liv were going to have the other one. So, if we want to have boys over, we could. We could do what we wanted, that was the plan. Just like when we graduated that night, we all planned on getting forever anchors tattoos, plus getting a three more parsing, that we could have before, I have my ears and belly button, and the tongue is done, my mom was okay with that… dad not so much… yet he got over it. He always said that he didn't understand why a party girl like myself- would want to do that. I would say to be a cool daddy.

Thus far there were some other types, which I and the girl wanted to have, that mom or daddy well never know about. Jenny said that any girl that wants to be a good lover must have them.

She called the one the hood emblem, I am not sure about that one. But If she thinks so… then it's is a must-do! We could not weigh to be on our own. Like we wouldn't have our little siblings come in on us either, and even so… with us girls, if we wanted to do anything at any time, we're just that close that we do care what we see or hear. Like we have all been there together bent over bare in a row at some point at a party anyways, like with the same boys at the same time. We all know each other well you could say.

So, we know that we could live together.

(Showtime, it happens every night with me if I can, it a blue kind of night, spin the wheel, and I do what you want if you're a top guy.)

The show- Though there was that one time that Maddie, and I did run away for two weeks to ocean city we had more boys that night than ever before. That was how we got a room at night to say like we did have any money. I planned on dropping out of school anyway, and I did, till my dad found me and made me go to school, dragging me by the hair. Saying no girl of mine is going to be a runaway drop out. Yet daddy still thinks I am a virgin! He would be crushed if he knows.

(Well he did find out when I was naked under the white sheet on the table when he had to try to identify- before I got all pumped with embalming flowed. He asked the mortician, and he said yes, she has been with someone.)

Daddy always thought I was his innocent little girl, which was going to save all that for when I had that white dress on. Yet to be cool you can be daddy's little darling girl forever.

(Now I think like daddy… as a dying girl. Maybe Ray should have been the one, that got to be the first and the last. If I could go back in time. I would have done that. I do think- I could have weighed a lifetime for that boy if I would have had too. He was something so very special to me. Yet now it's never going to be the way it should be. That is something you can't get back even in a white dress someday, and I did even think about it at all. Like just because I was like always on the pill and could not get pregnant, that shouldn't have meant that I should be with every boy that wants to have sex with me. What was I thinking… was I even thinking at all? I let my friend take over me and my life.)

If I could say one last thing to Ray, it would be: Don't forget about me!

(#- Hashtag: Don't judge me, runway, and none-virgin roadkill.)

I'm not saying, that I don't like being at home, I do it's comforting to know I am always welcome, yet to be popular you have to have a place as soon as you turn eighteen. Or you're forgotten about. Like no guy wants to be with you in your room when your mom and sis are in the next room over. I like living at home as of now, yet the girls don't know that I love my family secretly, even if my sis is the only one that tells me that she loves me face to face. The love in the family started to die when, I became a teenager, and got into my click.

Leaning frontward, trying to not smear on my mascara with one eye shut. Looking into the small visor glass. Jenny has never been the safest driver… I think she has taken driving lessons off of Beth Cooper. That just how wild and crazy she is. (I knew that she was going to

crack my head like walnut to at some point.) She tends to run all the lights, stop signs, pass on a dubbed yellow line- on hills and blind spots.

Jenny jolts me around harder in her car, then I get jerked around on the Thunderbolt at 'Kenwood Park.' And that's a roller-coaster…!

Both have about the same oh- crap factor.

(Ironic- I thought I was going to be thrown out of that ride and not of Jenny's car.)

She floors the motor hard then that first hill coming out the station. She has even burnt up her beaks because she stops way too fast. Her brakes squeal louder than she does when she flat on her back getting pounded from her boy! Ha!

(She can't kill me now for saying that…

I'm already going to be dying!)

Kenneth better get me a teddy bear or flowers or something before long! I'm getting tired of getting used here, Karly. Jenny cries frantically out of her mouth because of her hormones going all crazy. Running throw yet another stop sign nearing missing an oncoming car, I nearly stabbed my brain out with my eyeliner pencil when she slammed on the brakes sapping my head forward and back.

As you know Jenny and ken are a couple one minute broke up the night, just in a text.

They were on and off as long as I remember. Yeah, there is some love there I would say, they just need to settle down some and trust.

They have broken up at least nineteen times, since the beginning of this school year.

That has to be a new record for them! They can't seem to live without one other!

~*~

The office- I was sitting next to Ray Raymond while he was filling out one of the permission forms, to be somewhere… I betted my eyes up at him and then rolled them to the one side. 'It's like slave labor isn't it!' Ray and I have been going out somewhat since September without anyone knowing what we're more than just hookup friends. Yet again I think truly that I have been in love with him since a fourth or fifth girl. Back when I was nothing and he was too

popular and cool to talk to me. I never forgot that I shouldn't hold that agent him, though should I?

I think- I have somewhat… anyways, Ray was my first crush, that I feel all tingly over, or at least he was the first genuine crush! I did just the once kiss Steven Tucker in first or second grade, but that visibly didn't rack in my mind or anyone else's. We were playing an imaginary house, as a married mommy and daddy… Maddie was our make-believe baby! We even had tinny-like play rings with hearts cut in them. So really, I just wanted his chocolate chip cookie, before nap time!

You know the first time you fall too someone like it changes you forever and no matter how hard your strain not to fall completely head over heels, that emotion and sensation that they give you just never- ever go away regardless of the others that have been with you. However, in life, you should know that you're going to discover boys that you love they will say all the right things, at all the right moments in time in life.

However, in the end… it's more about their ways, and the way they are with you. If it's real or just an act. You should judge them on their true actions, what they feel with you, and what you feel with them. Those actions of thoughtfulness and not the words they say that's what matters in the end.

That is the way that you'll realize that you have fallen too them. That love… should be more than confrontations and hooking up. It should be more than a text at bedtime, or a pass by in the school halls muffled and muttered softly in crowds.

Love is a sensation and feelings of actions you don't hear, it's what you see in person and feel. Love to me is a devotion that I don't feel. Yet it was understood after it was too late to feel. Though I had that sensation each day of my life, with Ray… though I did not understand what it was, I reflect I was truly in love.

Just when you think it can't get any worse it does. And-just when you think it's never going to last it does. Life is a gift and if you don't understand that it is… life can be taken away too fast, and you will be left in the past.

For me to understand I was in love and what it meant, I had to see things differently.

I understand that now… love is when you care for another individual's contentment more than your own and don't care what others think. No matter how painful the choices you face may be, to feel the love you have to feel the pain of losing them or them losing you. You have to care! The most significant things are the toughest things to say audibly. Why is it that it's so freaking hard to say- I love you, and I only want you in today's world of life?

There is a boy out there that was meant for you, just as he was meant for me… I feel. Someone is meant to be the love of your life, even if you have missed up. Be sure to see it… just don't die for loving the wrong things as I did. There is that boy out there like Ray, that will brush your hair out of your eyes too as he did with me. And send you flowers when you don't need them. He will look down at you sweetly in a hug, or see you far down the hall, text you all night long, and be there when you're feeling not okay.

He will be the one that will tell you every chance he gets looking into your eyes that you're the most beautiful girl he has ever seen. YES! I had that with him, and I did not believe in a loving feeling like that. NO! I did not understand what being in love was, I thought love was just hooking up and being with my girlfriends. As well as crying over all the boys that were the one-night stands, that I thought loved me more than mom, daddy, and little sis.

I've never really had faith in anything when I was alive as a teen, it's just not something I thought was needed to live life. Jenny and Maddie and most my age are atheists, though I would have to say I believed in something. I had a bible under my bed most of my life, yet never read a line of it.

No, I do not blame God for taking me, if the others can live life and see what they're doing wrong. Then that was the right thing to do. I think that God is forgiving… maybe too forgiving in some cases.

(#- Hashtag: Clueless girl)

Back in Jenny's car before my last school day- I say- Last year I got a dozen- pink roses! Jenny hits her cigarette butt on the cracked window glass flicking all the red and black embers off in the cold air breeze as we were speeding. At that moment, she slouches' over the other ways grabbing her cup of strong coffee in the car holder, and then starts chugging down her mostly cream and Splenda concoction, well-exhaling puffs of smoke out her nose. I'm hoping for a stuffed animal to this year, or a ring would be nice!

So, anyways after spirit week, starting Monday, we have this… I want to fall in love- 'Secret admirer week.' It corresponds to the auntie drug relies upon', where you wear those red ribbons pinned to your chest or inner leg. Jenny and the girls always seem to find ways to destroy there's so that it will fray and fall apart. It looks like they have been chewed on. Any-how's 'Secret admirer week.' Like- is a big deal, the student set up tables outside of the lunchroom, for a dollar fifty each a boy can, buy their secret love a colored rose with a love note attached.

While- I am glad we're friends, or I am crushing on you.

Pink- I like you, I have a feeling for you, and let's get together.

Red- I am totally in love with you, I want to be with you, and I am glad we're together.

The fun of the game is trying to find out who is sending them to you. Girls can get boys some too. Yet that's not that common with the upperclassmen and getting flowers for the same sex is not allowed, why I don't know. However, it's an old-school custom maybe that why.

Though every girl wants to feel loved this week! Said to say that no girl cares about the white ones. Only the nerdy boys send us those… they're wasting their time and money. The stronger the color the stronger the passion, or the boys that want to be or have been with you.

Every, girl, wants one regardless, and if you don't get at least one, you look like a damn fool! Every girl wants that pink or red rose. Yes, I have seen a girl run out crying on Friday at last class bell when there are passed out. Hell, after a week of this week of hunger, desire, and yearning you need to have a hookup! I feel for them… yet why should I, they just need to change their ways… so the boys would like them too. 'You have to give some, to get some!' If you know what I mean!

(However, looking back, I should have only been given that out to one boy, and not them all- the only one that matter… should have been Ray.)

We also get a lot of those white ones to form the freshmen boys, that don't understand what it's like to get in girl pants. Cute, but- NO! I am not going to be your teacher! Plus, if a girl does send out a flower to a boy it's usually a freshmen girl, sending to an upperclassmen hottie…! So, she can hook up for the first time.

Yapper she is getting- desperate to lose it, and kiss it, and hit it at this point. So, she's not a loser next year as a Cherry- Mary sophomore.

(There are so many more life-changing peer pressures being a girl. Being that young to make those choices… you give in, I know that I did way before then. Only you- can say when is right! In the end, you're the one that's in charge of your vagina!)

I would be okay with one flower- maybe. But only I knew if it was from him, but though I don't- know. Hopefully- I get fourteen or more that is what I am truly shooting for this year! I say it's a really big deal like how many roses you get. You can tell who's the most popular, and who sucks at life. Just by looking at the girl's hand, I am hoping that I will have so many- I won't be able to hold them all in my little hands.

If you get under two, you're either ugly or faceless in the school kind-of like the sped kids, maybe both… they don't get anything ever. I am not sure if I could take that kind of humiliation as they do. Some said girls get themselves some, and that's just pathetic because we all know that she did. Like you know when it's real, plus the girls at the table… that run the sign-ups, let us know what they see!

Jenny looks down her nose at me with her glistening eyes. So, are you enthusiastic as I am for this the big day Friday or what? Looking forward to de-flower day, she giggles- saying no joke. We are going to the open mic out the night, and then the hookup party right. You- coming- she asks me, and giggles even harder. Shrugging my shoulder while looking out the SUV window. I said- I may be coming many times that night, and Jenny said- stop, I going to pee myself.

Drawing a heart on the glass after my hot berth frosted the window. 'It's not that big of a deal really.' I said- groaning softly. I was not amused by Jenny's perverted- twists of words, so early in the morning. Jenny is always like that… yet as for me, I run hot and cold. I have my moments- I presume.

I was thinking about how Ray said that his mom and dad are going to be away for that weekend. And that's where I wanted to be, he tooled me about them going away like two weeks ago. Long be before Jenny even thought about this weekend's parties.

I know that Ray was eager and preparing me ahead of time. Because he wanted to have warm sticky sex with me all over the weekend in his bed, or mom and dad's bed, on the loveseat,

or anywhere really in the house. Besides we would be able to run around his house stark naked, that's so what I want to do in all honesty! I wanted to be with him, and do him only, and be his girl! So that he could shot his ha hum- tasty stuff all over my face and body after he was finished sliding it in and out.

Certainly, about the same time, I start squirting him down with my shaking drizzling orgasm! That boy makes me tingly in all the right ways, just thinking about him!

Thinking back- when I was about twelve or so, we got so close so many times of going all the way in… like in the back of the school bus, yet that more like foreplay to get us there. As we got older, we tried at the football games, and in my basement or my bedroom, with mommy, daddy and sis sleeping in the next rooms over. We have tried a lot of places. Though it seems that someone always saw us every time. Oh yeah- we have even played around with my daddy 4-runner. So many times, it just felt so wrong. It would be tremendous to have it be perfect this weekend!

So, when he asked me to stay the overall night, I said- OMG-Yes! Without thinking about it at all. Because I just want to be with him so badly! Jenny starts freaking out at me, slamming her half-empty coffee cup down in the holder, and then whacking the steering wheel stiffly with her long fingers curled up into a fist. Not that big of a deal? Or you- joking with me…? Like what wrong with you? I don't know, maybe I am growing out of it.

Maybe I am changing into a woman that descent want a bunch of guys, maybe I just want one. Jenny laughs herself senseless, and said- my darling baby girl, it sounds like you're in love, and my little girl is big now? She's a woman! That's hilarious she said, you can't be for real… are you? She said, with a sneaky suspension. Na-No? - I guess not. I said shacked and regrettably.

'Give me a break.' I can now feel the scorching warmness move stealthily moving ever so rapidly form my toes to my legs into my quivering chest, and then to my face. Naturally… I knew that my fair toned skin was starting to radiate a blemishing, throbbing, and trembling cherry red glow.

My embarrassment always seems to show my emotional state, when I didn't want it too, like this. Why do I do this, when I am ashamed, self-conscious, and just uncomfortable? Why now! This is something I can't even cover up with more makeup.

Perhaps it's just disgust that I am feeling now too?

I tried to be persuasive about everything. 'I saw my expression in the mirror, and I knew that it's most likely not going to happen the way I want it to.' He would- like- have to kidnap me away from the girls so that we could go wild without anyone knowing. Making sure that all of them were completely off our trail. We are going to have to take a roundabout route to have sex and spending time together, of course, like always, yet if it was some other asshole at a part or in the backwoods, it would all work out.

'Leave me alone!' I muttered through my one or two tears at Jenny, she was just rubbing it in that I can have a true love… that I really can't have anyone but her and the girls, if I want to be in the click. I started retrieving through my bag to cover my mood. I reached swiftly for a Kleenex before Jenny called me a crybaby and nosed into more of my personal life anymore. 'I don't know. For one and all, but the pain of changing your ways is the sharpest dagger of memory that you will have in human life.

('Her voice was always so melancholy.') At this moment I fell that all the X-out cream in the world would not fix my face after this morning!

Jenny, like my lovely family, makes me want to break out. We pick on Madilyn for that… I can't show this. Like we call her 'Pimpled skank face' too. I don't want to look like that.

~*~

(Madilyn is the lonely loser- that I should have been friends with… she would have never hurt me as I hurt her, she wasn't a slut. Nevertheless, being that sweet and kind-hearted girl doesn't get you anywhere. I mean really what's in it for you? If you're the good girl, you spend all your time at home; with mommy and daddy, wondering why you're so misunderstood.

With no friends at all, to see or hear from.

Looking at photos and wall posts, and feeling in your belly all the things in life, you're not a part of… It's sad but true!

Being that good girl, you lose out on so much, you lose touch with reality- I know she has… but in the end, does, it matters anyway? I have partied my tight little ass off, and what do I have to show for it? I have gotten so drunk that I don't even remember half of it… I have gotten so high, so many times to not feel the pain of life… I was running away from everything!

Just, like I have used plan B pills to stop pregnancies at thread teen and up, many times like most my age… that stuff flies off the shelves in stores! I didn't want a baby, yet I was killing lives… before they started, to have a red death period, to be a normal girl… that's okay. So, I could just be a careless teen, and not even think about it, and do it all again. Being a teen girl, you just don't think about what you're doing to yourself and others! When really, I didn't deserve to live myself.

So, what is the point? No matter what you do, you're going to have regretted it at the end. In the end who is your friend? Plus, what kind of a life are you having if it's rushing by and you can't remember it… the day after, and you have to take pills to terminate lives to please others just to be cool and popular… yah- right, you don't have a life worth living!)

~*~

Shaking in the sit of Jenny's SUV. I quickly nodded my head for her approval, and then rub the steam of the window. Things are detracting fast outside, looking out I see that Jack Frost has done his wonder, it was a very odd start of the day. Everything is looking sparkly slick and shiny. Unusually cold… for this time of year. I could see my breath in the side, Jenny's heartier was never the beast as she tries hitting it to get it working, I was beholding demand like drips everywhere on the trees, power lines, and buildings. Its freezing rain, it is magical- I said. Jenny- it like everything is frozen in time. Thought at the same time, I felt like my chafed intimate skin was cracking, it is that chilly.

I hate that it's like you shave your legs too, and all that in between before school and then you get goosebumps or cold, and just like that… you can see the dark little hair pop out, in front of your eyes.

This day just keeps getting sweeter!

(Not!)

I went from feeling on fire to shivering with my knees knocking. Within like fifteen minutes! Jenny in deep thought she just blurts out the question, which she had an inkling about. I knew it was coming, she knows me that well.

Jenny- So when did you and Ray do it… anyhow? I know that you have done something, it's obvious- you like- like him! I lied and just said we did like two months ago. I would like to make up for lost time this weekend, just him and me!

Jenny slams her butt back in the driver's seat.

Jenny- 'Oh my flipping God… baby girl,

Gross! Wah- why?'

'Don't worry about it, I am fine just being with him only.'

Jenny- 'I am worried about it, why him, you could have anyone. He's not right for us.

Any boy would be better, than that.'

'I don't feel that way, and it's not for you to decide. Why does it always have to be us, when it's what you- want… you just… do it… you don't ask me… you just do it… why?'

Jenny- 'It most serenely is… Because I love you, and you going to have to choose who's the love you want in your life… if you loo-vv-ee him a baby girl, then you can't love us. You see what I mean.'

'I can't do both.' -I whispered.

Jenny- 'NO! No- Kar- you can't, I think you have been swelling way too much stuff, you lost your mind. To want that offbeat boy. Jes-z He's cute but he's not for you!'

Why! -I squalled.

Jenny- (Panicking) He's just not. Baby girl- don't talk to him, don't look at him, you know what. Don't even think about him that way… you got it!

'Don't call me baby girl, I am not your freaking infant that you need to pamper. I am going to have sex with him tonight, and you're not going to stop me!' I screamed!

Jenny- 'Okay then, have it your way!

You'll- be- sorry!'

Go have sex with him, I know he's still a V- card virgin, just because he plays on the team, he's not that popular you never see him on the field. I was thinking to myself, yeah that's

because we're trying to do it under the bleachers or somewhere with someone isn't stopping us. Yet it never fails someone is there…!

Jenny- Do you want to be his first, with him being all clingy- creepy with you? I didn't say anything back. If you do this, you know that everyone is going to mob you and make fun of you again. I am sure you'll go back to being- that girl. Us girls- we wouldn't have any admiration for you anymore. Karly- We got you where you are now, and we can take that all away in an aching heartbeat! 'It's no big deal, I know you'll do the right thing!'

'If you say so.' – I mattered.

Jenny has always found a way to make me nervous before the school day even starts. I see all the buildings with their shiny glass rush by, wording if tomorrow everything would look and feel different to me or if will I get starched out; I know he will feel different to me, I know what I am dealing with… with him, he is unlike the other boys, one he is a lot bigger, and two he is fully intact. So, I had something new to play around with there. I don't mind that… I do feel that I am falling for him. He is so sweet to me it's not even funny. Really if you care about someone nothing is going to stop you from having all types of sex.

Nothing at all!

Jenny said that he is gross for that reason, I should stay away because he most like is unclean or has an STD. But I don't feel that way at all. That's just ridiculous, maybe she likes him? And she thinks that going to keep me away, yet I know- I think other girls my age has the wrong ideas to what they think should be standard practice. I hope that the other girls don't look at me differently for wanting him. But if they do; I still have him in the end. If I have to fall too that boys' level that's okay with me.

Sometimes, you don't choose whom you want to be, or what you have, sometimes it just happens that way, and you have to live with it; because it's not for you to decide on. Jenny and the others they don't get that. I have to be in love, there is nothing wrong with him in my eyes, and he's just perfect!

Jenny and the other girls in the click they don't see the cemetery we have together all they ever think about is the hookup. I just hoped that everything would work itself out!

We arrive at Olivia's Hansom- Liv's place and before Jenny can even honk the horn- me-p.

The door bursts open and swing radically on it hinges smacking back and then forth. Liv, she comes trotting down the walkway like a model. She is strutting in her brown pointy toe high heel boots looking sexy as hell. Though the sidewalks are- a sheet of glass.

I don't understand how she can bounce, jiggle and wiggle like that with four-inch heels on ice. Like- I fall on my ass just looking at ice! That takes skill- when I wear heels they turn over on the sides when it's not on the ice. She runs out of the apartment complex in the morning like it's on fire, I just don't get that… like- how can you be that freaking perky this early. I wonder what she is running away from. Liv opens the door, Jenny blurts out nice nipples you got point out at me, you think they're showing enough there liv?

Liv- yes, yes- I do… there are just so cold their rock hard, I didn't think it was going to be this cold! Liv is in a short belly button showing tank top with a little blue washed-out denim jacket over top a thin white tank top, paired with a short brown ruffle skirt. Even though the weather report that she took the time to look at said… it was below freezing this morning. This is what she picks to wear. I say- it is a little nipp-aly today right liv! A quote from one of her favorite books, she just giggles awkwardly and says- yes, yes- it is. Jenny says you're donning better than Karly, and her sisters that are rubbed raw! Ask her about that Jenny snickers.

Liv looks at me with a look of confusion, I said please don't ask! And I pouch Jenny's arm. Liv says- Okay then. Jenny said- I'll feel you in at lunch Liv! I just shook my head- no in disbelieve. She was going to bring more than that up at the table, today I could just feel it, just like I thought.

~*~

Flashback- That reminds me of last Friday night the night of the bonfire, we all were run and dancing like wild caveman around the shooting flames, as the worm heat and glow shined in the skin as we would flash the boys that would pass us by, so primitively we were acting so, that we could have a matting afterword.

So anyway, after the running around the boys found their girls, I remember seeing Liv and Jenny getting kissed sucking face and their boobs and butts getting felt up. Their boobs

looked the same as Liv's does right now, cold and flawless. Ray and I just had look at one another from afar, though his eye never stopped looking at me.

All the hocking up was making me hot and thirsty. Yet, I couldn't get what I wanted so badly.

At about that time is we everyone stop noticing me if I was there or not, they were in the passion moments. That was the time I choose to cut loose, so I ran up to him and I said let's get out of here, we did we sneaking past all the couples, to get into his truck down the way.

We got out of the school field with the motor running softly, as we thought completely undetected, yet that is never the case. Anyhow, we spend to Walmart and was in the back of the parking lot.

Fourteen minutes later- The bonfire is now being soaked with water by the fireman, as the event is over and everyone is heading to their cars. Did Jenny ask where Karly? Liv- how the hell should I know like it's not my time to babysit. Maddie- I thought she was with you!

Jenny- okay then… she can walk home for all I care. I not spending my night looking for her. I have my boy, let's just go.

Karly- I started slowly, pulling off his briefs downwards to his knees, his erection triggers up and out at me. I get down between his legs; I was on my knees; drawing him in ever so deeper into my mouth. So that I could feel him at the back of my throat and then to the front yet again, over and over.

My tongue whirling around the rim and tip. I was sliding my misty tongue from the base to the end tip too.

Yes, sucking him ever so harder and harder! He was firm up to that point, till I could taste his wonderful pre-come mixing with my saliva, as I went down even farther than the times before, sliding my gulping lips tightly around, it was all dripping down him, as I moved my head up and down a few more time completely fishing off the blow job. Suddenly, he sits back up after losing all control. When he descended into me, and to my movements.

Ray busted a nut at the back of my tonsils. He was saying what was happening, while holding my hair out of the way, with his right hand. And shrieking my name at the finish, as my eyes were looking up into his rolling back in enjoyment! I gulped it all down and showed him

my cleaned off tongue afterward. Then and there I said- 'How that was that!' he just moaned- 'Aww-uh-a!' he was speechless! And that was good enough for me.

Around that time is when he tugs my thong off, and slide it down my smooth legs, and feels the little bit of short hair that was growing on my pubic bone, with his soft touching hand. He reaches between my legs and pulls on the white interwoven string, and gently pulled my tampon out and tosses it into the nearby floor at his feet.

I knew at last my hole was open, and ready for him to slip it all the way in! He balled up my undies in his right hand and tosses them onto the floor of the truck also. As he started sucking and tugging down on my hooded lady with his lips. And I said there's no time for this… come one let's just do it!

About that time is when, is when I managed to get the condom out of the wrapper, which was in my hip pocket of the skirt which was just pushed up. I put it on for him… it's just easier that way. I was preparing him to unload 'round two inside of me. I sided and unrolled it down him. Making sure everything was right. At last, we are going to do it…!

(Y-ha!)

I was just about to get on top of him from the passer set. That is when I looked over two or three parking spots down Jenny and ken was looking at me, and somewhat at Ray's tuck, as her SUV was rocking side to side. I looked even harder and Liv and Maddie were making out in the back seat. I think Maddie saw me, I yelled don't put it in Ray, we have to go!

I'm- like really… really! I can't get away or get off fast enough! I snapped the rubber off him, so quickly it made a popping sound.

(Just rip it all off- he screeched at me.)

So, I tied note in it as I do with them all, and I threw it out the window onto the pavement, not thinking it would be found… I know what they must have thought, they must have seen us! I said- This is never- ever going to happen… Ray. My head lay on his lap, and the body curled on the seat as he pulled out of the lot, passing the Burger King and DQ his jeans wrapped around his knees!

I said- So just get me home before they see us if they didn't already. He was just a little shaken up, to say the least. We can never go any further than that before someone is watching!

(What I don't get is why did they care?) So, Ray and I didn't get it that night either. All he saw was my freezing boobs after he unbuttoned my top and jostled and pulled my bra lose from the back. (Like- hello- it is not that hard to get off.) I was wearing a skirt for easy access, as you might have guessed.

Seeing Liv like that… is what brought all this back to my mind. That is how Jenny figured out I liked Ray more than a friend, she followed all the suspicions that she had. She is smarter than she puts on to the guys she with, it's like she knows me better then I know myself!

Oh yeah, I had him drop me off a street back from my home. And of course, to add more drama it started to pour icy rain down my body, and the car that passed had to splash mud on my face on my clothing, yet I hiked… so I could say to Mommy and daddy I walked, without hearing yet, another long lecture about the birds and the bees! That way I have a layby for everyone that cared where I was at.

(Mommy and Daddy were so in the dark with me. Nonetheless, that is how every young teen girl wants it to be… I'm- I am, right? Mom and Dad knowing everything you do are not cool, plus you wouldn't be doing it anyway if they did.

What they don't know won't hurt them!)

Mom was pissed that I had to walk home, I could hear screaming on the phone that night I was in my room, after having a long hot shower. Yeah somehow, I came down with a sore throat, he- he.

A win for me, Jenny and the other girls got hell, and not me! Daddy even read me a bedtime story, he felt that bad for his little girl, that was crying over how she was dumped by her cruel girlfriends.

Daddy asks me this question out of the blue. Karly…? Why do you always have a Pringles can on your nightstand, next to your bed? I'm like don't open it! I was thinking to myself. Um- I said nervously. Now it is in his hands, he was going to get I chip out, and I finally stopped him with my hand before the lid came off. Saying- Daddy- don't! And I think he got the drift, by the look on his face, that there were no chips in there. Who would ever… thought… that one… yet daddy always seemed to be hungry, I should have known?

He put the can back down where it was, and turned to look at me; he patted me on the head, as I was laying on my back in bed, kissed my cheek. He tucked me in and then left the room all gloomy and shaking his head at the same time. His complete attraction was nice for a change though, yet so weird. The light went off and he latched the door closed. That when I took my restating Pj's off and throw them on the floor with all my other dirty laundry turned over on my side. I fall asleep; in my bed slightly uncovered or completely deepening if I move around in my sleep. Oh, and if anyone sees how I sleep from that point on. Oh, well that's their problem… they should've nocked!

(#-Hashtag: eye-reaction, a failure to lunch, shut down & freezing temps)

~*~

Liv getting into the SUV after she does her little runway walk. She says what the point of looking so freaking cute if you can't show it all off. So, Liv pulls up her top and flashes her chilled bouncy boobs at us, and they fall out so perfectly with what looks like two eyes gawking at us. So, Jenny being Jenny, she rips down her thong swiftly, plus up her skirt up and flashed her lady thing right back as she then hunches over putting her butt all up in her face… letting her breeze blow, saying beat that honey! Liv smacks her ass firmly saying, I already did before you did that, I am not wearing any underwire today. I say- you guys are so-oo gross!

We all giggle! Oh, Liv is that glue that keeps us together, and she makes us unwind. It seems that all my butterflies go away when Liv is with us. I said- Jenny already said my truth or dare for the day.

Liv grabs what is let of jenny coffee in the cup holder and glops it down. Saying I glad you all got me one. Jenny said- we did get you a McGuffin, girl you're sitting on it, she giggled.

Liv- aww-crap! That's going to leave a mark! Liv shouted. I thought that was nasty that Jenny did that to her. Like she was envious of her ferity skirt. Jenny has to have the spotlight like always. Liv spins her skirt around on her lower west, so the back is in the front and starts crying about how it was new and she bought it with her own money and dabbing the grease and yellow cheese stain with a used crumpled up snotty napkin.

Liv did notice that she did that before she sat down. Shocking because of how she's so touchy about what's on her seats, you drop a crumb and she freaks out. Jenny slaps her one the back snickering and says it will wash out. Yet I knew that wasn't coming out. Plus, she has to go

to school like that now. I said- look on the bright side. You can always give your butt Muffin to your wiener dog 'Pickles!' Liv was just starting in her seat not saying a word, with her black mascara running down her cheeks, her day was going just as well as mine, I could just tell.

Dan Dilco- Liv calls him her 'Dildo' because he became her new sex toy over the weekend and for now… instead of that. She gives him that pet name, there have been a lot of pet names, that is how we all keep track of them all too. She has one of those also like most of us girls, nevertheless, she's more cover than me, in not hiding it in a Pringles can.

Anyway, this one came about because it rhymes with his last name. I guess she thinks that's cute. He's the last one on the list to pick up today, I'm sure next week or maybe tomorrow for all I know it will be someone new, but as for now, he's the one that is all horned-up for her as she is for him. It won't last…

I think she randomly started making out with him at the bonfire, they have hooked up at least ten times, senses Friday. I don't think Liv knows what she wants. I think she is to Bi or Bi-curious or something to choose.

It seems after they become a dating couple it ends as fast as it starts. I don't think she's that hard to get along with, high maintenance maybe, but she's a sweet girl overall, with a too loving and trusting person. Liv his already asked me to go out with her… Um- I like her, yet not in that way. I have been there done that kind of a thing, I have kissed her, yet I never thought about it going anywhere. I don't want to end a good friendship. Plus, I only want the forbidden boy named Ray!

Standing on the corner sidewalk, cold as steel in his letterman jacket weighting for us next to his place's steeps, there he is… What can I say; he is a lip-licking, eye batten, and moisture beading hottie.

You know the type long defined hard body, tan and handsome with light brown wavy hair parsing blue eyes, the type of boy that makes you pulsate just looking at them, even if his face looks like it was getting frostbitten.

Um-hum, I can see why she went for him? He's like McDreamy holding on to what leftover of Liv's McDonald's muffin, as he gets in the SUV. Looking dumbfound yet adorable. Liv- look what happened, she shoves the muffin in his face when he bent down to set.

He ends up saying- It's going to be okay baby, no need to cry anymore! Wow- He seems to like her, and that's a plus. Maybe this is the one her? We pull away they can't keep their hands off one another in the back seat. Their playfulness to me that good thing, it got Liv over her accident in a hurry. The muffin rolled to the floor when she decides to make a quick move to sit on his lap the rest of the way, with his aim hugging her from behind around her tummy.

(It's so cute!)

~*~

I want to say that Liv lost her virginity freshman year, yet not to whom you would think. I had already been with like three other boys, and one girl. Yeah, we all go there at some point in our lives, we have to see what we want, where we have to find our sexuality, Maddie and I hooked up a Sophomore year and we dated for a like week. Holding hands in the corridors and kissing, and all that stuff.

Nevertheless, I always had my mind on Ray even then… even now. Just like she had her mind on someone else too.

Liv is one that asks me the most question for advice. She feels close to me, like a sister. She is the one that asked me, before doing it the first time. If I was sore after the first couple of times, I had sex if it bleeds a lot and what it like as she called being ripped oven, I said yes like hell, but it gets better. Just let him do what he needs to go slowly as you're on your back and count it down before he goes all the way, and after it will feel really good.

I know that made her twenty times more nervous, yet I was truthful. Liv never knew that some things have to be opened to have sex, she thought that her horseback riding on the weekends at her grandpa's farm would have done that for her- nope.

She thought that volleyball would do it too- nope. She was not brave enough to do it herself, unlike Maddie how was in seventh grade when she did to herself out of curiosity. I remember Liv saying that she was scared, so I said for the first time let him show you what to do. Like there not much you need to know others the lying down or bending… you can do it I said, and she smiled and said that it?

I said you'll do fine now on no until they try, can you do that? She said- yes, yes- I can!

'I told her just feel it, if it feels right, don't think about it, and go with it.' (Any why I help my girlfriend become what she is today.)

~*~

Liv grasps her tummy, and said, I hope that's just hunger pains, I not feeling too good, because I not sure if… she didn't fish the sentence, and Dan said- I hope you are, I don't mind. Jenny slams on the brakes hard, I hit my knees on the dash. Jenny looks back at them and says- WHAT! Do you think got her pregnant? What were you to thinking, are you to dump to pull the freaking thing out! Dan- no, and it knows of your business, maybe it broke, and it was anybody's fault.

Liv, it can be; I am on the pill. Jenny- yeah and it only works if you remember to take it! Me- I was speechless, twirling my hair around my one finger.

Like she would know better… right? Yet, she never asked me those questions, and she can be forgetful. I said oh- boy. Then- Jenny says oh no- no Karly it could be a girl too. Liv holds on… we don't know for sure now, after school I will do a test or three. Jenny- gets in her handbag and said- 'the test its in the bathroom when we get there. We need to stop this for you before you can't.' Dan- what if she doesn't want to? Jenny- Shut up, no one asked you! Get out of the car now! And he did… Me- I didn't get invalid, because it was what Liv wanted to do; like I didn't want a say.

Liv was crying again… yet we would have all been late for school if he wouldn't have gotten out. Because Jenny would not have moved forward with him in her SUV. We left Dan on the side of the road. Jenny even broke his cell phone by throwing it on the solid ground ripping it out of his hands, when the sides all I do is make a phone call. Yet I had a feeling that we wouldn't have to worry anymore at school as if it was a boy or girl. Because Jenny would be giving her something, and explaining to take this pill, and it would be still from that moment on like she did for me with my first freak up, when I was younger than a- freshmen.

On the dive, after we finally got moving again, going to the school we pass Madilyn the meek and humble walking all by herself with her head down all lonely. Jenny grasps that muffin off the floor slow the SUV almost to a stop rolls down the window and throws it out, hitting her in the face with it. She's yelling the words- dumb-ass skanky loser as all the cars pass! What happened did your jalopy car broke down again… Maggie- She looks up cry saying no my mom

had to sell it to pay the bills and put food on the table. Jenny stops completely- aww, that's so sad, she rips my coffee out of my hands, and slashes in her face down her top, and floors it. 'There a free meal for yah.'-she said

~*~

I remember that first kiss that I had with Ray… oh so long ago, it meant so much to me, even more than what comes after the first kiss. It was so sweet and most inane feeling; he was so shy he nearly missed my lips. I recall that he didn't even use any tongue. He got better each time. Like I said we tried, I didn't mind teaching him what to do. He's the football player just trying to fit in, and I was in the band girl looking like a dork, yet I liked it. I got to go places, and see things.

Things my girls just don't understand. Jenny can hardly read a book, so I don't see her reading or liking music as I did.

That was before Jenny and the others made it clear to me that being a trumpet player was not cool, that I need to choose them or the band. Plus, that I was not going to get me any, even though it was, just not as fast and with so many.

(She just wanted to keep me away from him. I think, looking back on it. Hell- Jenny doesn't have any talents, she was only good for a couple of things, and at the end who cares. And the other girls in my click did as she said too. If Jenny couldn't do it, you didn't do it.)

I was there mainly so Ray and I could be on the bus and games together or meet up, which is where we kissed for the first time, at one of the away games. On the bus, we used to get down in between the back sets it was all band kids, they don't take other clicks I had nothing to worry about. We could hold tight and make out with one another to our school, yeah with the others looking not caring that it would get around. Things were different back then.

Popularity changes you…!

Yet, I just wanted to follow the football team nothing more. I did a lot of things just to see if I could be with him, yet the girls came first before for all and everything, I can't do what I want. It all comes down to what do I love more…? So, I went out for that cheerleader too in tenth grade, not long after leaving the band of three years, just for my girlfriends. I stop cheering own my own after like two weeks in after I fall out of a bucket toss intention Madilyn at a game.

Ray runs off the field from the sideline and I fell somewhat perfectly into his arms yet smacking my head on the ground beforehand. I knew after that I was truly fallen to him, he carried me off the filled and the paramedics did their thing, and I don't remember anymore after that, the memory went black.

I woke up with him standing over me, I was in a bed in the emergency room. He was holding my hand, I will never forget that, even though I can remember it all, because of my impressive head pounding concession, nevertheless I am sure he was there for me when I need him the most.

I feel he has always been there, even when I need him on the list too.

(#- Hashtag: face plant, high pitched screamer, and fingering fun.)

~*~

We pull into the school parking lot. I close my eyes tightly to the thought of the day to come, I was thinking to myself- please know more bull crap drama, I can't take anymore today. Yet I knew I was in for a lot more. I had to go to a happy place, and that place was with him in my mind like at the winter dances, at the old movie theatre, or even in my room, I could only imagine how sweet those moments would be.

I remember the end year back in the seventh grade we had danced before I was all the way in with my girls. I went with him on a date, we were younger no one seem to care then. However, there was nothing like having him pulling me towards him on the dance floor and suddenly kissing my lips, yet this time I could feel his tongue sliding underneath mine, I could feel the heat from his hot breath, as it took my breath away.

I could see the twinkling white lights blur in my sight, as I closed my eyes. I could feel his hand running through my long hair, his hands moving down me and gripped my butt through my blue party dress.

Yes, the bass was vibrating, the air coming from above was a child. The reverberating music seemed to all be- fading away as he seemed to be pressed very tightly as if we were one, we could feel one another's bodies, I sure he could feel my heart flutter and skip a couple of beats.

As I was shaking all over. With the pounding inside my ribs as my chest was shushed upon his. As I did his hips did press- into mine and everything was pulsing. My arms wrapped around his neck we were swaying side to side, nothing back then to hide, it was wonderful.

The back of my mouth was dry, and sore from painting in his embrace. I will never forget that night that kiss it made me light-headed into his arms as I got dizzy like the dance floor was springing.

I was never happier in my life when he had to sit me down on his lap at a table, which led into the bathroom together with a little lighter. Yet we didn't get that far, with the teachers looking for us. I have never had such a climaxing moment in all my life, not even getting high could compare to, that first French kiss and feeling his firm… boner… all pressed against me. I think that was the first time, I ever made a boy do that, without making it happen for him first using my lips or hand.

(Yet, I wanted to be popular more than anything, maybe I blow it myself; having to be with so many others to get popular. I didn't know that love, and arousal was that it should be a real thing that just happens, that it is not forced. That it should be there before you start moving forward in a hookup or relationship. He was the only boy, that I felt that way with he was my fantasy lover.

I think I could have had him then and gave it up. In the end, he was always my fantasy; before school, throughout the day, at night in my bed, in the shower and even in my dreams. On my mind and in my head, and times alone I was alone like that he was- all mine!)

(#- hashtag: lust stuck, pitching a tent, and bump and grind)

Chapter: 52

Popularity can Suck

Popularity can make a girl suck, and sucking can make a geeky girl popular. One way or another a girl is going to be sucking at something or for something in high school. That's just the way of life, it may sound sucking… yet it is true. The point is that popularity is an outlandishly bizarre thing to apprehend. The popularity's like you can't aesthetically give it a realistic definition.

What you do to get popular isn't glamorous and is not spoken about becoming no one cares to hear what you have to do. You're cool if you do this and you're a loser if you don't do that, depending on your click. Like some can do, and some can't… the ones that can't- are the ones that we talk about.

Girls you know if you have it when you give that flirty look at any boy from the corner of your shimmering eye. You know you have it when all you have to do is flip your hair with your hand, and the girls and guys look at you.

Popularity is like teen porn, it's not even though it's happening in front of you. With its oohs and a-ahs, that only show what is thought to be the good parts and not the bad. It's just like that because it makes you feel good, and the girl seems happy to get it.

(Yet is she… is she really happy or just taking a pounding in the end.)

It just like that because the ones that just have to look and see… that they don't have any of their own. It makes them feel miserable. If they can only look at what they can't have they are losing out. Since they can see it, they can only hear it, yet they're never going to feel it in real life, only less they do as they see. And that wanting to have it, that makes them even less desirable to the one that does have it already.

I have been there, and I did what I had to do. In a way, I gave up what I had in the past. Just to be one of them and be a popular girl in an ever-changing future uncertainty. Instead of that girl that had a boy that was without a doubt in love with me. Why you ask… for popularity!

In a way, the boys- is- what makes a girl popular… to a point; and the popular girls are what displays witch guys you want to be with. Yes, like girls want to have what is already been taken, it's the challenge of taking them away from another girl.

Just like girls that have popular girlfriends, before you… they can get you higher up on the invisible list if you fall to them a do as they want, and by hooking you up. Why because they have been there already. How you get popular is all on you. Plus, what you're willing to do and willing to give up. If you have no friends or don't know predominant boys in your life, then you're not going to be as prevalent in high school. If you fall too your knees and party your ass off, you just might rank on the list. Like I said- what you give, is what you get. Popularity and hooking up, it all goes hand and hand.

(#-Hashtag: cheap thrills, one-night stands, and what happened to just hold hands)

~*~

Jenny is a drop-dead dazzling girl in our halls. With her baby blues that make you a week, yet Just as gorgeous as she is on the outside she twice as ugly on the inside. That is where her outstanding looks end, she has everything every other girl has, she just an average Jane at an average height like all the others most of the time in the winter wearing the same average-looking size seven blue jeans with the sparkles on the hip posits when it too cold to wear her short skirts, like everyone else. What she has more than the others is the ability of how to get what she wants, when she wants it.

She has to get her way, and she acts that way; she thinks she's the hottest girl in the school, and her ass shakes side to side to prove it, and yet really, she looks the same as every other missy walking by. Though from what the boys say she is the hottest. And yes, it went to her head in like a sixth grade that she was the one everyone wanted or wanted to be. Yet she had braces on her teeth and now they are perfect and white. She had puberty pimples that she covers with makeup, she not even as clean as some that shower, or shave more than she doses. The boys that she hooks up with determines how good she feels about herself.

No- she is far from perfect!

Me- the only thing, I like about the way I look is, that I have these big beautiful jade-colored eyes in the light of day. And that they change throughout the day, like my moods to a moonlight soft gray-green at the start of the night. What I never liked is that, I am what they call dainty and super skinny, I was like a size one skirt, I guess that is better than being fat, like some. Though I am shorter than most my age. Ha- it seems that I always have to look up at them, one way or another.

I have lengthy cherry-brown, which straight with flipped waves only at the ends. Bushed cheeks most of the time, I have fringes that I try to cover up, and my teeth, for the most part, are perfect, all for one that's slightly out of line that I call the fang. I have a small nose and face, with a big smile showcasing my soft pink lips. I feel my ears are too big, yet I have mutable earrings.

Nevertheless, my hair covers them anyway. I don't have much of a butt or chest, yet it's all there for a girl my size… yet Ray likes what I have, he has felt it all up in the past, so maybe

that's all that should madder. Yet I think Jenny and every other girl at the school is prettier, sexier and cuter than me. I can help it, I feel dissimilar, yet I made the list, with a little help from my friends, and the boys they party with.

Janet Cassidy is fair prettier than Jenny, but being good looking doesn't make you that more popular, and I certainly don't think Janet even had a date at all yet. She's in the same grade as us and that's not a good thing for her.

I remember her asking a lot of boys out for the winter dance, nevertheless, she not popular, because she doesn't want to do anything with a guy or party, because she is to Christion and all the boys no, that she wants to stay pure, so they don't want to be bothered with her if she not going to hook up. Guys only want a sure thing… not a bible lesson. If a guy takes a gal out and spends all that money on her, he wants something in return, yeah other the whammy talking at the end of the night and maybe a kiss on the cheek. And all she does is whine and tease. Truly she only gets on her knees for the lord.

(#- Hashtag: hot or not, Sister Christian, chastity belt, me- I'm just a tiny girl, and don't call me a red-head)

Just like this one girl named Lorie, that's just a freak'n ninth-grader, and this girl her boobs are rather big. And here's me over here, I'm flat as a board compared to her. Like, have you ever done the nose to the wall test? Me- my nose hits the wall first, not my boobs. I hate that! Just like Jenny can do a split with her one leg going up the wall touching her head, and I can't, I'm not that flexible… like I can't spread my legs quite as open as she does. Yet she was a cheerleader a lot longer than I was too. Looking at other girls just makes me feel weird. I like what I see on them, yet not what I see on myself, yet we girls all have the same things just slightly different.

(I never really learned to love myself, so how was I going to love anyone else. And no not that kind of love I knew how to do that. I think you know what I'm saying.)

That one reason Jenny calls me her baby, or Kar- not Karly, when she made at me is in her mind, she thinks that I have not even gone through puberty complete yet. Even though she saw me on the days of my period, bleeding like crazy in the girl's room. She knows better, two she calls me baby because she is the one that gets me where I am today in my popularity.

I was just a baby girl until she got me hooking up with the hot boys. She took me on as hers. Yeah- so in away… I become the top b*tch that she babies. No of these girls are perfect, we all have something we don't like. Just like Sam, she is really cute, I think… the only reason, she not one of us is because of her wheelchair, and not being able to walk. She got a smell that lights up a room, yet she has no popular friends. She is also a virgin, mainly because know boy has tried with her yet and to me, that is just sad. Yet that's just the way it is.

Jenny likes to have a contest to see who has the biggest boobs, or who's the cutest looking. And to see if any of us went up a cup size or have something new on. I always lose that game at lunch. We also talk about how many guys we had the night before, or if we just had to share with our sisters. What our nails look… like, and our hair.

The cafeteria is the place where you find out everything you wanted or didn't want to how about your girl's sex life, feelings, and body changes. The chatting gets so gross at times, that I stopped eating lunch. Jenny has a way of turning all of our stomachs, with the gross stuff she does and wants us to try. She is the type that talks with her hands too. I think Jenny could make the girl from the Fifty Shades of Gray books blush!

Yet, I am not going there. But Hum- I don't know… my butt hole is an exit only, I feel. I'm not as freaky as Jenny, yet I feel that we all are going to have to try this at some point, she will make us at a party. Gag- me!

I remember back to freshmen year, I got so sick after hearing the girls; I just got done eating my hot dogs with nasty chilly on it. And then I went to class the talk in health was more of the same. So yeah- I blow chunks on Zack Woods lap, though I made it up to him, the next day under the first-floor steeps, I pinned him against wall grabbed what I need too and made out with him. He was so bad as he was doing.

(He was so shocked and bad it was cute.) Yet the side, I was the best kisser ever, and he liked it. I felt bad for him… and I'm sure he did like! What's not to like right, when a girl is feeling you up! Like- am I everything he has ever masturbated to, I am sure of that… and yes, I can say that about a lot of the boys in my school. I know what they do, sweetheart Zack even confessed that to me, after I kissed him. They all think they're in love with me.

Yet, they don't know anything about who I am really… like I'm not sure if I know who I am…! They just see what they see. I'm not sure if Ray understands me completely or not, so

how are they going to, just looking at my profile photos on their computers clicking away. They just want to feel the inside of me, not get inside of me.

(Yah- know.)

So anyway, at lunch today. Jenny is somewhat okay, that I want to be with Ray… so she said, at the table smelling through her teeth. The stipulation she gave was only if we keep on nodding terms, like with all the other guys or even girls I am with. So that means that I can have a full-blown relationship, whether I find them attractive if they're popular, hot or not. That I can only hook up with a girl or boy, yet not stay with them. It made no sense to me. At the time I didn't get it.

Just like I didn't get it when I saw Maddie was wearing bunny slippers, and a holy bathrobe to school today.

Looking like, she was ridden hard and put away wet. I giggled so hard in math class today when she walked into the room; I think I snorted loudly.

Awkward- everyone looks at you when you do that. But only she can get away with that messy hair and what looks to be hairy legs, Maddie will do anything for a chortle. I mean come on shower girl at least. The teacher he even asked, and she side quote: 'Hi teach- I was out all night banging my boy, and I have a raging hangover, so can we get this crap over.' He said yes, take your test and a smart mouth to the office.

She shuffles her bunnies to his desk, she rips the papers out of his hands, will giving him the middle finger, and you know the one that you're not supposed to use in public. As she trips out the door. We all clapped and wotted! That's when I got it, she has a secret relationship too.

Yet does Jenny know, and how is that okay when she just like me?

The point is we can do things we like to do because we're are popular and have it all. Up till now… we can only have and like what Jenny says is okay, so really- I can't do what I want. Mine popularly is not that strong even to this day it could change at any moment with her say.

Maybe I had more before I was popular. Like- I have to only like what the popular girls like, and only do things that popular girls do. I had to leave my past self behind in away. I can try to sneak around with my unpopular dream boy, yet she will find out, and if she does, will I be out of the click?

I don't know, I love my girls, yet do I love him more to give that all up and go back to that girl that has nothing. Or would I have something with him… now that I didn't before. Do I have to fall back or keep going falling apart? I just don't know! I can get away with just about anything, yet I feel like I have nothing. I have awesome girlfriends; however, I feel so empty.

I don't feel like Karly anymore, Karly, was gone the day I was forced out of my virginity by Jenny at a drunken party. Though the blames on me, because, I wanted to be popular, and Jenny said that was the only way if I was going to be like her and her girls. So, I did it.

Ugh- maybe Maddie is now out of the click, and not caring anymore maybe that why she looks like that? What should I do, what can I do?

(#- hashtag: kiss and tell, misperception misfits, and yacking trash talk)

You can look at popularity, as the universe ever-expanding and changing. Starting with a bang, with black holes that can take it all way, if you get too close and get sucked in. you can look at it just like a star, you're going to burn yourself out. It's just whom are you going to burn yourself out for.

Whom are you going to make your world in your universe? When just about everything revolves around you? I guess what I am saying is there's no point in studying popularity. There will always be someone that has more. And there will always be someone that has less.

Unless you're a complete wack-a-doodle- it rather easy to see which- is- which. Just like every girl poops… (Yes- we do!) It happens, all the time… Sometimes more than once in a day.

Yet girls don't talk about it, so it's just like popularity, and just like crap it just happens! If you're popular, you have to deal with a lot of stupid drama crap. And if you a loser, nard, invisible or small like a turd; no one gives a crap about you. You've just whipped away and pissed on.

All the same, they have to deal with all the crap piling upon them to fit in. School life- everyone seems to have their nose in your crap regardless of where you rank. Metaphorical speaking… Okay, that was gross- I know, yet you get what I am saying. If you haven't figured out, I speak my mind. Wow- I have issues, don't I? I have been hugging with Maddie to long, that sounds like something she would say.

Tip- for all my girls out there, do background checks on you boys, before you hook up. It may not be cool to ask about his business, yet it not cool to get nasty sick either.

Like no one wants to wake up with gonorrhea Larry or mono Mike.

Also- if you're going to sleep with a guy, and spend the night, and you're not in love with him or like know his name, be sure to get out of his bed, and place before the next morning. You don't need to deal with that. It's so unlike he going to wake up and say let's cuddle. It's not going to happen unless he loves you. Look out for yourself, no one is going to look out for you, if you make bad choices it's all on you.

I'm not going to fib here, it's tremendous knowing that I can do just about anything. Because my girls will back me up. And that us girls we can and will get away with virtually anything.

We can say to any pain in the ass teacher to F-off, even slap the crap of them if we wanted to. And like nothing is going to happen. Why because the teachers just want us to like that and feel us like that too, yet they can't feel anything anymore they're too old. We can walk out of class at any time… and we can speak our minds.

We know that after high school, and we flashback to the past days of walking the halls.

We'll know that we did it dead-on right, that we kissed all the cutes and hottest boys, or the ones that just need a kiss from us because we were their fantasy. We'll look back and know that we went to the greatest parties, and we resized some hell along the way.

That we smoked and drank 'till we dropped, and popped and locked to all the coolest loudest music. That we did and tried far too many different things, like cigarettes, things that are so illegal with different types of getting it in. We drank far too much cheap beer with big plastic funnels and hoses or doing the handstands of the cage gaping it down.

Almost the same way we girls did with all the boys. We got so messed up to the point everything was funny, and any boy looked good enough to hook up with. We popped the drugs, like candies, we heard what we wanted to hear, and put our middle fingers up to what we didn't. We didn't get or an education like most, it was more like a crazy fun ride, that all blurs- together like the lines that we all saw on the marrow at the party.

You could not tell us what to do. We did what we wanted, and when we want to do it. We know how to be trashy and yet act as if we were classy. We were the girls the made the school cool, and everyone knew it, and they knew where they ranked with us.

Trust me: I know what it is like to be on the other side looking in.

I know that the grass is not always greener too. I was on the other side of popular for the first part of my lifespan. I was the lowest of the low-life scraping the bottom. Dispute it if you want, I had zilch growing up, I was like that trash in the streets that get discarded. I felt like a girl that was homeless in elementary school living under a Pittsburgh bridge in a ball in the fetal position.

I would come home and feel the same way, I was the one that was forgotten about, mom and dad would be fighting over money, and having yet a mother-baby mouth to feed my sis. And I was just their pinking throws their leftovers at the table if they even remember at all to give me a place sitting at the table. I not making excuses for them; however, they were young when they had me, I was the only reason they get married, and really, they didn't know that they were doing. They did not how to be good parents, because their parents kicked them to the streets before they were eighteen. So yeah, they strained to show their love and caring for me.

All the times that I could beg you please, in vain. It's not going to change anything about how you feel. All the times that I felt insecure; it was for them. So, I found a way out as I got older. I left all my burdens and innocents at the door, Mom and Dad you are what bring me to my knees because I felt insecure. All the time the argumentative yelling won't end. All the times that I've cried, all this wasted, it's was all inside, for you to never notice. I saw through you all, saw the real you, I waste more time trying to get loved by you, just time wasted! And what was said the first boy that ever made me felt loved was Ray, and I wasted that time on them?

The girls took place of the family that I had, that I was never part of.

And even they did want me to have love, because, they didn't have it either. So, really in the end… I was nothing but a bloodstain on the road, for life to wash away. The sky that boy and my sis was the only tearing raindrops that fall for me when I dyed, no one else cared. My mother always sides that I was going to find a way to kill myself. She did shed a tear! And dad never thought, I was going to grow up, he didn't have a clue about who I was. But I still love them all,

even if they never loved me. All the others in the SUV where-in the hospital in a coma, so they never got to say goodbye.

I'm I bitter: yes, do I care: No. I just think about what I would have done differently. Nobody ever said that that life was far! Noting is for sure only death, it is always near in any graveyard, even if it seems so far away until you have your maker with your name on it.

Death is the only face in life you can trust. (#Hashtag: Bead beat daddy, screaming meme mommy, and first Cadillac ride was in a hearse)

~*~

(It's on)

Right after we fleetly pull in the parking lot at the school. About five minutes before the late ball. Jenny speeds and floors, it is squealing like a pig and turning the wheel hard to the right into any random open parking spot, near hitting coffee covered Maggie and ripping the pitted bumbler of the orange Chevy truck next to us. And scamming some other kids who were running by just to get out of the way, and in the school doors on time.

They were mostly the dumbfounded freshmen. That has not gotten the fact that Jenny will run their asses over, and not even blink. Let just say that Jenny never parks in her spot at the end of the lot. Nope nut-ah, she has even parked sideways in the principal space, up in the staff lot, just because. Jenny, she jokingly says…

'What are they going to do spank me!'

Unlikely… yet even if they would, she would probably enjoy it. Anyone else that would do that, would get towed at their own expense. I can see some of the girls with the light pink and love stranded red lace dresses peeping out from under their jackets, along with the glittery joinery, one was holding a tiara, papering for the big dance. Covering them up so putatively so the water would not trade them.

'Hurry up- you'll are slower than six bags of crap!'

Jenny muttered as we got out of her SUV next to the back door of the school. This row or lot was only reserved for the seniors, yet it seems, that everyone conjugates here before the ball.

Yet, Jenny has been parking in a senior row since freshman year. Jenny has even parked in the handicap space. Her excuse she gives was it was her time of mouth. And she didn't want to have to do the shuffle walk, riding the cotton pony in the ferrying cold. Yah no- feeling things sticking to her oh so grossly as she was crimpy.

Yet in a way, I can't say I blame her.

(Who wants that?)

We girls have some much more crap to deal with… like that. Period- handicap approved? Nevertheless, she has parked there for more than seven days in one month, she only really needs two. I guess I or one of the other girls, that ride in her car gets the blame for her parking there when she not on her leak week. Up to now… I'm not complaining we can get away with it. Just like yesterday, Jenny pulled into this very lot, yelling oh F-no.

She is blaring the horn with her palm, her eyes were all wide wild, even though it was so apparent that Taylor (a senior) was there before us. Then without thinking Jenny presses her foot down on the gas pedal. Liv puts her hands over her eyes and screeches like a little girl. About the same time, what little bit of hot cholate that I was sipping on dribbles all down my chin from being jerked around. Oh no she didn't- I thought… yes, yes- she did. She piled out burning rubber cutting Taylor off. Yeah like- she cut her off faster than a fat boy getting cut at a bar mitzvah.

(Ouch!)

Jenny's balding mixed tires Coopers in the front and Firestone in the back were spinning the whole time. In the blink of an eye Taylor slams on her screeching old brakes that cry as she gets pushed back and ripped off by Jenny.

Her orange Chevy truck stopped… yet gets sniped by her SUV letting Jenny in her spot. Let's just say that Taylor bumper and some others take a beating and get scared up most days. That is why Taylor only has one working taillight, and her one headlight looks like it is winking at you. She doesn't bother in getting it fixed, just like her passenger-side mirror, that Liv smashed when she opens her door; because it's just going to happen again. I guess something's just don't need fixing, even if it would look nicer? That reminds me…

'Great…' I said, mopping up the hot chocolate going down in my chin and, boobs with a balled-up McDonalds' napkin.

'Now I get to go around all day with my boobs smelling like a Hershey chocolate bar.' 'Boys like the smell of junk food,' says Liv from the backseat. 'I read it in Seventeen magazine.'

'Why don't you put a Snickers bar down your pants, and Ray would probably freak or suck you before homeroom.' Jenny said gruffly. As she flips up the mirror from the sun visor checking her appearance. 'God- Jen, jealous much- says Liv.' Jenny- oh shut up! I'm not jealous of that! Why don't you just go dry hump on your gay lover?'

Liv- 'Maybe I will, why do you want to watch Jen?' Jenny just made a face that a girl in pre-school would make, sticking out her tongue, with her hands flapping at her ears.

(#- Hashtag: Handicap in the head, freshman demolition derby, and the girly flu)

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Karly- Ray he is so smart and funny, and can always make me smile. He can even read… and that's a lot more than most boys that I have been with, it's like all their blood goes to the wrong head. Away ways he says that- 'A book is either really good or can suck hard then your girlfriend on your birthday.' I giggled so hard when he said that.

He said- 'That you just know what you like.' And from that, I knew that he liked me because I am his open book for him to read. Just like how two books are never perfectly the same, just like he is different from the other boys. We were going to write a story as one in love couple, a happily ever after story. Yet it never happened. Every day could have felt like his birthday with me.

(Yes- I am just that awesome! He- he)

I would have to say, that I loved everything about him.

(I want my love story!)

He was not like the others…

(Yet, I found that out somewhat too late.)

There was something there that was different, something real. He felt unlike any other to me. Like I have dreamed of him making me arch my back out of plush, his warm breath on my neck, as he moves ever so, slowly downwards kissing my chest, and sucking on whatever he wanted. Only to move back up and whisper sweet words in my ears. Hearing that low sensual voice makes me quiver in satisfaction. As I was letting him go down on me. With him feeling all the wetness and warmth from way down inside of me.

Awh God- it's got to be more than a daydream! I have had the sensations of him spread my legs apart one by one, moving his body unstop of mine, and before feeling those little tugging kisses right there on me before siding what I wanted the most in. I have felt him down in there… yet only in my fatuity. (It's just like a dream that is so real, all I have to do is think about him!) Of course, I have found myself groaning softly sometimes out of pleasure in boarding classes, just lost in the moment.

I can't complain about even being the dead girl looking back. I have had the pleasure of seeing that thumping hard thing in my face when trying to head for the right areas speeding my lips open and hitting all the right stops, yet never reaching the pick of the journey.

Yet, I'm content with know the fact that he did slip his hand down my panties and rub me up down and around. Every chance we could cut away from the others. I loved his fingers touching me, and petting my little pink kitty, till the point of an ecstatic explosion.

I will always remember feeling one another's love parts, many times over with our hands and mouths only. Yet I wanted to feel his penetrating love so hard, long and deep where it should have been. Without having someone getting in the way.

(Why couldn't I have shown him, I loved him even more, than the others? It's never going to happen now!)

(#- Romeo Romeo wherefore art thou

Romeo, and moist humming daydreamer)

~*~

'Ou- yah-a-ah' Ohaaaa!

Jenny is a screamer in more ways than one! One day not too long ago back she cut Taylor off the same why yelling out the window. She said- sorry honey, you're not freaking going to get any today, like always. She meant that in more than one way also. Taylor yells back- 'It was all your sweetie anyway, you're nothing but a parking horror!' That was a lie coming from her, but we knew what she meant by the words she said. (Awkward staring from everyone, even the kids looking down from the windows of the school building towering above us. All the same, Jenny keeps her freshly powdered nose in the air.)

Chapter: 53

Maddie and Liv, more than friends?

(Girls)

Maddie- It was my freshman year on a Monday, it was could just like- the day of the accident. It felt more like December than November it was so comparable. Just Like the day- I said- goodbye to one of girlfriend Karly.

That day was hard for me, yet it made me see back to another day, I remembered how I was in love to and wasn't sure if it was right or not. If anything, Karly was the one that showed me, that I can love another person even if she is a girl. I loved Karly that way, I kissed her too. Yet she wanted Ray Raymond more than anyone, I knew… but know girl turn me on more them my

BFF Liv.

No boy has ever made me feel like she can. That day the leaves on the street were wet and shiny, just like the first time I saw her p*ssy as she was standing in front of me. I was undressed standing in front of her too, it was the first time… for us to try this.

She was wet, shiny and dripping droplets of stickiness that I could see. It was oozing running down her falling off like the frozen ran dripping falling of the dangling leaves on the naked tree branches. She wanted me just as I wanted her.

My dream comes true! It may have been so wrong, yet she felt so right! At the time all I wanted to be was her! At this time all I want is her. I have tried to put my love for her out of my mind with boys, yet it's not the same. I give up on loving, I mean just look at me now! Look at

what I have done to kill the pain of not having whom I loved. I have had a boy all night in my room, yet I need her only. I have Liv on my mind all the time! Just like Karly did with Ray.

About three years ago is when I moved here from Orlando, I lived five minutes from the famous park. I remember my first day at a new school here it was so scary, yet that was when I saw Liv with Jenny for the first time. Any- how's Mom and step Dad moved here to Pittsburgh… why it is beyond me. Then again it was very much so the best thing that ever happened to me, like a weird twist of fate. Why Pittsburgh?

I presume, it was so they could be together after the marriage, which was doomed from the start. Yet I just the kid no one ever listened to me other than my girls. One girl more than the others, she knew me from the inside and out. This is an okay city, what can I say, it could have nicer weather.

The summer is too short and the winters are a way to freaking long. Though I dream of her body worth to keep me warm when I am oh so cold. There are more brown trees, purple hill, and glassy concrete things… than flowers that bloom in the short spring.

Most of the buildings in the Hills are residential four or five-story gray stones with run down homes in-between with little gardens in the back most have some kind of dried up stuff they call grass as a yard. I have always liked living in Florida more than here because it does tend to be a bit duller here then there, where nearly everyone is white so unlike my old school. In my old hometown, most people's parents had jobs as doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Here it seems your mom and dad just have to struggle to get what they can get.

I remember the first time I meet Olivia in the parking lot. You know that I got her cell phone number as fast as I could without looking too creepy. And a photo of her that I idolized. She asked me my name my heart was all aflutter. I said- 'Madelyn' but you can call me Maddie… everyone does. I said sweetly yet shaky batting my eyes at her. I think I managed to sound casual, at least I know I tried to. My heart was raising my belly was full of butterflies. My palms were sweating, as I handed her the blue-covered phone back, after typing in my contact information in her cell, as she did with mine. I was thinking about all the text we were going to send to one another and the photos.

My lips where tingling… I so wanted to kiss her right there and then. My vagina becomes aroused and slippery, I could feel my heartbeat down there, my breasts seemed to swell a little, and nipples become erect and hard.

I hope she didn't note! I was getting hot for her.

I wondered was she feeling the same about me?

Was- all the same things happening to her like me? I wanted to ask, yet I did then. It wouldn't have been right too. I wanted her to touch me! I wanted to touch her so badly! I wanted to rain my fingers throw and down her long soft hair and grab her tight little butt with both of my hands, and crease her body with my fingertips, and slide my tongue up and down as much as she would let me. I just want to hug her on the spot, and never- ever let her go. Not let go until she said releases me, please. However, I knew that would not be right either.

It was all happening too fast for me. I never thought I was into girls like I never had a lesbian thought in my awareness before until that moment. I was thunderstruck something just went off on me, saying in my brain saying-

'Yes! Yes! Oh- yes!'

You are what I have been looking for along. I was into her, it was love at first sight, and I fall so hard for her. Then again, I felt so dirty and weird for what I wanted to do to her in my mind, my mouth felt dry as I walked away, I knew what I was feeling was not what I thought was, normal for a girl like me to think. I knew if my mom and dad would find out they would disown me. She would have to stay my hush-hush girl crush!

~*~

Liv- One week later- 'Hey,' Maddie said,' you never called me back!' It struck me to me in my mind because girls, don't ask that. So frantically, that's when she didn't know what to say anymore. She was frightened of me, while applying pink lip gloss, looking more at the ground then at me, just like a little boy that didn't know what to say to the girl he liked. Then I did, I said- 'Oh- sorry but… I don't know you.' And for a few seconds past with her rocking on the heel and then tow. We both just fumbled for a clear word. But after about the fourth very long pause, she said, in this really small voice and hesitantly, 'Um- I- was- wondering… if you'd like to go-o to the movies o-or something with me on Saturday? Like you don't ha-have to- if you

don't w-want to. I thought maybe you'd like to since I'm new here. You could sh-show me around the town. I da-didn't care what the movie is… but… oh… um- okay, well, ma-may-be you wouldn't. It- it was wrong for ma- me to ask.'

'Sure, I would,' I said rapidly stopping her somewhat adorably cute stuttering… 'You would?' she started to tear up. She sounded shocked. I didn't know that girls her age still yelped when delighted. However, she did. 'Sure, I would love it, I'll even show you the parks, and the buildings like the Benedum, and I'll show you everything.' Everything, she gulped hard taking down some air.

'Sure, I said- Ever been to Primanti Brothers?' 'Ah- no what's that… she asked surprised with confusion.' I lend into her face with mine to the point our lips almost touch, while looking deep into her gleaming eyes, and said you'll just have to see.' 'A-um- okay!' She said, so satisfied with a long sigh. I thought… well- what do you know?

I said to Maddie just promise me, that you won't try putting your arm around me when I sit together watching the movie. ah- nah- no I wouldn't think of it she said disappointedly. And the look on her face becomes sadden. I was joking… of course, you can if you want. Then I said you can hold my hand too, Maddie giggled cutely then! Somewhat relieved that I was just teasing her. Yah I have to say I thought she was cute from the start.

I think that was the first time, I heard her laugh that way… in her special way. It was full of cheerfulness. I don't mean amusing, although it was that too. She laughed as if what I'd just said was so crafty and meant so much to her, that it had somehow made her fizzle over with pleasure and delight. That phone number I gave her was the best thing that had happened to her. And that situation at the school of me not assuring her texts and calls didn't seem nearly so bad anymore.

(#-hashtag: making the movie, U-Hauling, and lipstick lesbian)

~*~

I recall that a couple of days after she asked me out in Ms. Oliver's class the teacher was a couple of minutes late to Math that day it was on Monday, which was my last class for the end of the day. Maddie- she gave me that quick nod, and her face got crimson red and she picked up her algebra book and cover her sweet little faces sitting at her desk. I walked over to her pulled

the book down she looked at me so angelic, that is when I said can I share with you today, I left my book at home.

That was the time we'd studied to gather, and sit next to each other, almost on top of each other's laps. I could feel her thigh touching mine, I could feel her body heat, and that felt nice and comforting. Just like the next day in Miss. Gardens English class Maddie saw me, and she, and she sat beside me like before yet even closer than before, we had to read out loud to the class a poem. I will never forget she trembled as she stood and spoke softly and said-

'I Think I Love You.'

It was that first look, which was all it took.

I knew it from the start, we would never part, that you took my heart.

When I saw your warm smile, there was no denial, that I must be your gal.

When looking into your eyes, there are no lies, you gave me the butterflies.

There are no words to say, how you make my day, even if others will call us gay.

Only your words touching my ears is what I want to hear, with your love I have no fears, moments with you are so dear.

You have touched my heart and soul; you make me feel whole.

I love your lips, I love your hips, I can't resist. I love everything about you, it's like hits me so heard,

That my heart seems to do backflips.

When you say: 'I Think- I Love you.'

I know- she chooses- the pome she read for me. She was next to me, facing all the kids in the class as she read her feelings, which we're all taking it all in stunned and wide-eyed, even the teacher was speechless. Maddie, she was coming out about liking me. I don't care how you are that take a lot of lady balls to do that!

I'll never- ever forget after she was done the reading. She dropped the paper out of small her hands, and with everyone's eyes looking at her boys and girls the same; thinking she was

crazy. She turned and faced me. Frightened, but eager, and said- innocently 'I THINK I LOVE YOU- OLIVIA!'

She bent down, and French kissed me right on the lips, as everyone gasped. The kids in the class started to giggle, woot, and whistle. Some of the things some said about her was awful. She got so embarrassed that she ran out of the room, knocking books off desks and everyone, crying and blushed. I think my jaw was most likely hanging open after that sensual, breathtaking kiss. I was bushed too, nevertheless, I was thrilled that she did it. I had to say to the class that it wasn't very nice of you guys… like what she just did was so charismatic and brave of her. The teacher said I don't get it… but, yes class did you see the passion and emotion she put into her reading. That is why she gets an A+ unlike the rest of you lifeless slackers, Y'all didn't even try.

Inside the notebook paper, she drops on the floor under my desk with my left foot unnoticed, that she wrote her poem on. So that I could pick it up after class without everyone looking at me doing it. The ball rages out three times, everyone one ran out of the room like it was on fire, wanting to get to their lockers and go home.

Yet, I just stayed at my desk for a couple of extra minutes, so that I could be down and get the note that was under my foot. I looked at the wrinkled up lined paper intently and read it again, looking at every penstock and letter in her sweet handwriting, and I carefully I folded it up into fours, and put it in my hip pocket, for safekeeping. 'I believe that you have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find out that you just want a princess and not just some boy.'

Ms. Oliver walks back into the room, and I look up. She sits down and the chair it creeks at her desk in the front of the room. She pushes her tired bangs out of her graying eyes. She said- 'You can stay as long as you want honey, I don't have anything to go home to.' She isn't that old, yet she looks as if she had not slept for years, either that or just sexily frustrated. I can't place it, I could tell that her husband, he didn't care about her anymore.

Let just say she let herself go, and her only friends live in the books that she reads. But the way she acted when she saw Maddie kiss me. It was like she was dreaming about being young and in love again. Or just maybe she had a girlfriend at one time and let her go. Because times were different then. It was almost as if she was having a flashback or something. I don't know… Just like sometimes she joked about it, how she doesn't get any last night to the class, in that special saddle way.

She has a sense of humor in things most people don't find funny. I kind of feel for her. She said- 'You know it's hard to love a man… when he doesn't love you back. I remember being your age, love was different then. Enjoy it now, will you can. It's not as carefree and easy to find in a partner, as you get to become a grownup.' I just shook my head yes, understandingly and said- 'Um- okay- while, I have to go.' I wanted to leave before she started to cry or something. Plus, I wanted to see where Maddie ran off too.

Ms. Oliver Just gave me a little wavy, as I headed to the door and out into the paper and pencil littered the empty hallway. I knew that she was mostly going to fall asleep at her desk. Darling on the papers that she was going to grade for us to give back the next class.

Her voice is always so weak like she has lost her only friend. The only time she seems that she is alive is when she is reading to the class. She gets so worked up when teaching. Kind of like Lewis Black, getting a point made, that's not that relevant. You know the type, which looks like they're going to have a coronary on stage. She looks and shouts just like that.

Maddie- I remember freshman year, and how I told my parents about my first Spirit week and the Friday night dance. They were like-

'That's nice honey…'

(Half paying attention.)

'So-o who's the lucky boy?' dad said. 'Who got you flowers?' Said, mom. She remembered the flowers from way back in the old school day when she went to high school there in the nineteen-eighties. 'I remember how I loved that…!' she said. I said- 'Um- Yes! I am looking forward to it too.' Yet it was hard for me to break it to them. So hard to say that- 'I am not receiving any flowers.' Dad asks me- 'why not?'

And I said- 'Girls can't give other girls flowers.' Dad said- 'Yeah and why the hell does that matter- Madeline?

(He was dumbfounded for a minute or two.)

After the long uncomfortable halt in the chat, I spoke up… 'So-o mom- dad… I am not going with a boy, that's why.

(I hesitated with a deep breath.)

'I am going to go with a girl to the dance, I'm kind of going out with her.' Yeah, you know it. The look on their faces was that of horror! 'Mom the guy of my dreams is a girl sorry… but I love her!'

Mom got up from the table, we were having dinner, leftover meatloaf, and potatoes.

Dad, he dropped his fork in the runny brown gravy, and said- 'You're kidding, right?' I said (Nervously) 'NO!'

No- I'm not!'

'I'm going with a girl named Olivia, and I want you to meet her. I want you to love her as I do.'

Dad said- 'You LOVE her!' I held- 'Yes daddy- I LOVE her. She's cute, smart, funny, and sexy… she makes me happy. Oh, daddy- I could go on and on about her and what she does to me.'

Dad, he just shivered all up and down his body when I said that. Mom was now in the living room rocking in her chair. Saying- 'Where did I go wrong' over and over. I think dad was more open-minded or just fascinated by me like a girl. It seemed as if he was looking forward to meeting the girl that stole my heart away. Either that or he knew that at least I was not going to get parents!

Telling them I was seeing a girl, was extremely difficult.

(I would like to say that I am still the same girl, and like I don't have a deadly disease!)

Yet, the acted as if I was sick! My mother was furious. Saying 'You're an intelligent person, this not how couple's work.' She thundered. 'You should know better and have better judgment than to want to do this atrocity.'

My mother was unsympathetic, which was worse than you could imagine. It hurt me that she didn't get it. And she was judging Olivia before getting to see what I see in her. I had to explain, that she was not changing my mind. She could force a boy on me, yet I was always going to love her and never- ever stop.

Then the sex questions popped up. Dad asking if I had it yet with anyone? And I said of course with her. And he was like- 'How does that work with a girl…?' He said.

I just sighed- and said- 'Daddy it's not hard to figure out! You just scissor smack and rub your vaginas together and figure inside and out. Or just do oral on one another… sometimes at the same time.' Yeah- he was sorry that he asked! As for mom- that's just when she fainted while beforehand saying- 'Jesus please help this sinning little girl!' I could not believe the big deal she was making over this…!

Dad just said- 'Oh? Oh- oo- Okay?

Madeline that's enough!' Yeah- I think he got it! All I could hope for is that mom and dad would see her in that flush pink sparkle covered dress ahead of time, and fall in love with her… take our photo, and be happy for us; that is all I hoped for!

Three years later, right now. I still treasure that photograph hugging next to my bed, of us kissing and holding hands before the dance us in our dresses! We got our flower bouquets for each other and danced all night as a close twosome. As well as mom and dad learned to love her as if she was my really good friend that was a girl. Liv was the love of my life that year. And all I really wanted and need all the years after, until this point anyway.

I guess just like Karly, I had to do what I need to do just to be in the cool kid's group. I fall into the same trance that Jenny put over us, thinking the grass is green on the other side. Yet mom and dad were happier too, with her calling all the shots for me, to be as they call normal. I fall to what they wanted, and not what I wanted for me. I was not truly happy, yet I did it anyway… I was so dumb. To nearly give up everything… everything that I loved for them to want me. 'I hate it… when people say to move on to something else. When there was nothing else to move on to in my mind.'

(#-hashtag: don't forget about me, kissing a girl and liking it, nothing can keep us apart)

~*~

Liv- I remember my first date with her, the cutest, sweetest, and loveliest girl in the world! We desisted to ride a bike through the many throughout the city. It was the day that was worm for December first, it was like sixty outside. We were going to overlooks the river most over the way, we didn't know how far we were going to go before we would stop, we were testing the waters, mainly we just wanted to find a place to hook up, which was private, so we could play with each other's privates. The sun was peeking up over the trees and burning off the

medieval fortress of night, it was early, yet we wanted to be on the partway going into the park, before all the others.

Maddie was there in front of me. As I walked upholding my old bike, she said ready to do this, as she winked her one eye; and I knew what she had in mind. Just as my mind was on her even minute of every ticking second of the weak and the days that passed, to when we could do this. I saw her near the entrance, leaning against the buildings that house the bathrooms, there was a reddish-brown granite off in the opposite direction. That we had to pass to get on the trill.

I remember looking her over. She had on a long cotton skirt with a pattern in it, and a heavy blue sweater; I remember thinking the sweater made the skirt look out of place, as did the small olive handbag strapped to her shoulders that was childlike. Her lavish hair tumbled freely down over the pack. A green hair clip on the one side, she was biting her bottom lip nervously, her lips were begging to be kissed by me. It was just one of the corks that she does when waiting for me, it's only for me, kind of like letting me know she is feeling- all tingly-tingly for me. I stopped for a few seconds before walking up to her, and I just stood there watching her, but she didn't notice me.

Five minutes or so past, as I was daydream about all the things, I want to do with her and do creasing, touching, and even tasting, her… anyhow I went up to her and said, 'Hi.' She gave a little jump wavy and a thumbs' up- such a girly tomboy… shouting over here, she'd had been there somewhat longer than me, and she had already done- a half-mile or so to meet up with me. She was looking at me over in her thoughts.

She gave me this wonderful slow smile, as it spread across her face and her eyes were bright and glittery, 'Hey,' she said as she throws her leg over the tall tubing of her bike lifting her skirt to her showing somewhat of her one butt cheek for me to see in a flirty way. She bounded down on her sit, as she gave that first thrust on her puddle and said as she was pulling away 'Liv… you- coming?' I was thinking, yes Maddie I'm coming! I coming right now for you… 'Of course, I'm coming,' I said- hastily, and my voice cracked in the air.

'Why wouldn't I have?'

Like, I would follow her cute butt anywhere that she leads me! She should know that a came for her! Seeing her hair blowing back in the breeze, as she was bent forward on her bike stretched out over the handlebars. I knew she was rubbing the small seat as I was with mine, the

scraping down there like it just made me think about her even more, as I was pedaling hoping to get there, and to get off. I was getting so hot, out of breath, and thirsty! I just wanted to have that full release, and ride with her agent the wind, going downhill, feeling the sensations throughout my body.

She was flying in front of me. As I was trying to pass, I did this just to see what she would do, maybe I would get there before her. I knew that she wanted to see me… like I was looking at her because she keeps looking back to see if I was still there. I even said 'Babe- I'm not going anywhere!'

Finally, while grinding my gears, I could feel the vibrations of my tiers from running over the loose gravel, as I got around her, stimulating my clitoris as I pressed even harder down on my bike seat, boning up and downward with ever leg pump pedaling hard. The feeling was much the way; I knew she will be doing to me. When we got to the right spot, and she would hit all the right spots.

Um- her pressing and flicking up with her with one blue-green nail polish elongated middle finger. I knew that it would be going deep inside of me. As the others would ride on the outside, of my blushing skin pressed down jiggling and cycling me. Aww yes, feeling my inner walls contracting and cramping squeezing down on her finger as she tries to pull it back out. The feeling she gives me is gushing. Just the way she like rushes to my brain!

And that is exactly what happened when we found a grove of the evergreen tree, we kissed until she laid me down slowly and got on top of my shivering body, we were off to the sideway down this dreamy pathway the trees made it dark and cool color in the light, the sun was filtering through tenderly… it was a tranquil spot. At the end of the trees, it opens up into a half-frozen river that we overlooked as we made love.

Yes, it was so cold, yet we still got naked.

Maddie- Yes- I remember… unbuttoning her top on the button at a time. She smelt so-oo good, as I was looking into her lovestruck eyes, her lips parted… I was running my hands up her back, tickling her a little, along with squeezing her boobs with my hands, thought lacy her bra. Siding my hands down her bailey, as she was rubbing her hand and fingers over the little front fabric pace of her undies. She was doing this with me, as I was doing it to her. Her nipples

pointed and squeezable with my thumb and fingertip, they were in my face, as bent slightly jerking down my skirt to fall.

Both of us Kicking off the shoes, and everything slipped off around our feet. Letting the undies fall to the ground, just as we fall to the ground in a hug. Us rolling around in the dew-covered foliage. Mum- feeling her body heat was all I needed to keep warm. Yes, it's safe to say, that I am hot for her… and I feel safe intertwined with her cozy embrace.

Liv- I was wondering what she was thinking the whole time. I love getting into her feelings. I love every meaningful thought she had and told me, about everything and anything.

And that giggle that melts my heart. I enjoyed just trying to get her to laugh, just so I could hear her. Yet she just about does that giggle with about everything I said, because she had a nervous laugh… because she loves me.

Looking at her wrist I could see her classic gummy bristles. I remember how when we were younger in middle school, they resented what all we would do with a partner. Maddie when to a different school then, yet the gummy were the same regardless. And looking at her wrist that day she was wearing a back one and a green one, and that was exactly what we did. Black- indicates that she is willing to have regular 'missionary' sex! Green- indicates 'oral' sex with a girl. Yet most girls that I know, walking in the halls of the school have been wearing blue- that meant the girl would give 'oral' to a boy.

(Karly had that one on a lot, and sometimes purple- manning that she was Bi, and would be willing to kiss and make out with a girl.)

Most girls were blue and black colored one's scenes seventh grade. As for Maddie and me, we stuck with Green and Black mostly that freshmen year. The other colors no one cared about in high school, like all you wanted to see, was that one Black one, to know if they would go all the way with you. You weren't all that cool if you didn't have those colors on. I remember Madilyn and losers' girls like her only had a yellow one and that goes for even now, and that's just lame! (Boys what more than hugs!) Just like it was lame when girls would try to wear too many at one time. Because you know they were lying about what they're willing to do. It's not cool- to try that hard.

I knew I was in love to go all the way on the first date! I never did that with anyone before. There was nothing I wanted more, nothing I would give her up for… so I alleged. Things

change if you want them to or not! And others can change what you want for you… that's the life of a teenage lesbian! Changing into something they want you to be, and not whom you are meant to be at the time and time after. To me… It's more wrong for me to pretend that I like a boy and break his heart… because I'm not into it. Then it is to be with a girl, I think that. She can go and be a heart barker that's not for me.

Yet, Jenny thinks I should be just like her. And my family thinks Jenny is what I should become, they have no clue who and what she is. And most in this world never see things like- I do. It's easy loving another girl, it's hard for other people to love you for loving her though.

Love is love… and without her, because of them, I feel loveless… and it all because they feel that my love should be given differently, then I know-how. What is wrong with us being this way? It could be because I'm this way that it was slowly taking away. Like I'm being punished… Maybe I was doing something wrong. Perhaps… it will all work out, and maybe not.

Perhaps…?

Chapter: 54

Falling to your knees

Karly- Oh before getting out of the car how could I forget: 'Maybe you should try it with Ray, said Liv.' Jenny throws her coffee-stained napkin at me, and I catch it and toss it back. She's laughing. 'You didn't think I'd forget about your big night, did you?

I know what you have been planning on doing with him?' She fuddles in her handbag and the next thing that flies at me is my and Rays used a crumpled-up noted condom with bits of my old bubble gum stuck to it. Jenny cracks up and said this is your baby from the other night. We saw you playing with it, about to get on and off! Liv looks at the condom that is sticking to my face, and side there no man stuff in it. Jenny giggles even heard saying- yeah, I know that's what's funny, and there never will be… because baby girl here doesn't know how to get it done! 'You're so sick,' I said, taking the icky condom of my face with my thumb and one finger, dropping it in Jenny's glove compartment, with all the others that are used along with all the other gross girly stuff she keeps in there that used too.

Just touching it gets my nerves going yet again. I can feel something spiral at the bottom of my stomach. I was thinking about how we can get this done.

(Oh, how I wanted him. Jenny knew it and was rubbing it in.)

Then Liv speaks up saying, I don't know why you bother using those things anyways.

That's what slows you down! 'What!' Jenny slams on the brakes.

'Saying only a dumb ass fool doesn't have their boy rap their tool!'

Liv says I've by no means understood why condoms are used and kept in those tiny foil wrappers. They look so scientific, like something your physician would prescribe for allergies or bowel problems. Jenny looks at Liv, and said you don't know how to use one? I said only you would think there for taking a dump and sneezing!

Liv- shakes her head no… Jenny, she leans her set back, kisses her on the cheek. Saying you're so dumb!

(Yet in my mind, I was thinking that's how she gets it done. She doesn't be time… like I do.)

Jenny- she leaves a small circle of pink lip gloss on her. Then she grabs her handbag pulls out a new one rips the wrapper open with her teeth. Saying- 'I have to teach you girls everything.'

She tells Liv- okay stick up your pointer and middle fingers, and she unrolls it down her two fingers.

Saying- see that's not so hard is it! Liv says- ou-w-ha does that main I'm going to have to touch his wee-wee! And Jenny just slaps her hand on her forehead. Just like one girl's pleasure is another girl's turn off.

(That's when it hit me too… I knew that she was still gay for Maddie. And that she was just putting on a front, for everyone. She's like me, so in love with what she was NOT allowed to have, because of what others would think.)

~*~

Karly- Mr. Davis, the gym teacher, is standing outside the gymnasium, like always when we're getting out of the car. You know that he's most certainly checking out our asses. Liv thinks the reason he insisted on teaching the girls is so he can see the young cute girls in the showers and just bare ass naked. His office is all open windows and it is right next to the girl's exposed dressing room, open shower, and the visible toilets.

Now every time I pee in the gym, I get paranoid that he is looking up my tampon tunnel! He always walks in like when you're peeing a stream like Trevi Fountain and can stop it! I just wonder what all he has seen of us over the years? I know he has seen me, and most of the girls braless and without undies many times.

He says- this is my job to look at you, and make sure you're all doing what you need to do… um- okay if you say so, creeper! Jenny, she has no problem showing off her waxed goodies, me not so much… the only one that needs to see my tiny fuzzy puss is Ray, or my stocker sis if she what to share again… ha!

~*~

'Howdy young lady's, let's move it along' he calls to us. He's also the softball and track coach, which is tongue-in-cheek since he undoubtedly couldn't sprint two feet and back. He looks like a cow, and his skin is splotchy, just like a dairy cow. He is the type that his chest hair gets caught in the fly of his slacks.

'Come on now my lovely little ladies, I don't what to say that you are late on my roll paper.'

(#- Hashtag: a sticky situation, looking in the tunnel of love, and creeper teacher)

I don't want to have to spank him, yet I did. Jenny does a mocking impression of his voice, walking past. It is strangely low-pitched and raspy another reason why Liv thinks he is such a pedophile. Liv and Jenny crack up just looking at his sideways little grin.

(The look is like- come here and freaking ride me!) He always eyes us, little girls, with bad intent, with his icy stone-cold stocker blue eyes. Those eyes that chill your blood just looking into them for too long. We all know he has gotten his way with some young ones… just like me. I would know too… You know for sure his bent them over, doing doggy style. Putting his curved nasty penis into their snug honey hole.

Like a spy on a mission for what is coursing all the bloodshed in the house of love. I just feel that… all of us girls do! Jenny says it… it must be true! It like you can see and hear their sex screams in the steaminess of the room, as you channel into his creepy gaze! I know he wants me like that, I know he wants to go down on me, like before! I know- he wants to eat me out, again.

Like the orange, he is sucking on now! Just like the others, he has had in the locker-room and showers. We girls just add to all the photos from all the years… of girls thirty years' worth.

Jenny would know, she mostly has like banged her brains out that way. With him forcing it down inside of her, all these years! She has seen all the photos of the girl's plastid on his office wall. Me being one of them. She is the week all of us girls are compared to his big flabby body flopping around on us.

You can't fit him off you when he grips you. I would know… Nevertheless, these girls have to beat him off! He likes it more that way, if you scuffle with him, and slap him up a bit. He has an immense appetite… and for more than just food, as you can see… he eats a lot, like all the time.

You will always see him holding a brown bag, snacking on munchies; looking for his next girl. To feed that appetite… and if you tell on him, and what his dose to you he will funk you all the marking periods, and mark your light every day! He has you by the ass!

I drift off into a slight daydream standing there, and I recall my freshman year standing alone in the shower nude, wet, and soapy. I was the last one out of the guy room, I was running least as usual and the last one to shower. He walks up behind me and puts his arms around my west. He said you look good naked.

However, there is something you must do. What's that I asked? He looks down at me and pointed. I had pubic hair, and he said that took away from my sensual beauty. He plants a kiss on the cheek, and then my lips. Saying you have such beautiful breasts. He plays with them… I could feel my nipples lengthen under his whispering beneath, saying I going to take care of you. I was never so turned off yet turn on at the same time.

Disposable razor in his hand he rubs and combs his fingers through my thick hair down there. He moans as he begins shivering it off, and I see all the stands fall to the floor. Without even asking me first. I think you missed a spot I said, and gently tugs on what is leftover. He said that how you should do it, never have any more than that, girls should have good hygiene.

That surprised me, that he ran, that razor over my sensitive private skin... leaving a line of short hair, from my underwear line down to my pink opening, saying that's the way I like it. Looks much better… yes? He said… I said yes.

But- but I feel so dirty! He sniggers, saying, Karly, you look so sexy now!

Mr. Davis! I said. (Taken back) He 'Shushes' me! With a mischievous smile, saying don't be afraid Karly, I know you're not a virgin… I am just showing you what to do, for your pleasure, and I'm just coaching you! So- you know what a man wants, and what a man like me wants is to feel the inside of you! I want you, Karly!

Mr. Davis slowly and effortlessness puts a finger inside me. He said- oh so tight! I struggle and twist determined to back him off me. He doesn't move, and pushed it farther in me, even though I am using all my might pushing his big body of mine. All at the same time he was tugging… gently sucks on my nipples. Saying-

Mu-mmm! ('Send My Love (To Your New

Lover)) was playing in the background.'

He runs his hands up and down my hips then bump's me forward pressing his mouth against my p*ssy. My eyes closed… tightly! I was panting!

This was wired and eristic all at the same time. He smacks my butt cheek till it cracked a loud and hard sound that echoed within the vast room. Squeezing and pulling apart my now rosy ass with both hands. And yes- I started to cry! His fingers gently started caressing my pulsing clitoris as he was pulling the skin up that covers it exposing it to the air, and his gentle touch. As my backside is now pinned to the cold wet shower wall.

I was shaking and emotionless at this point. However, there was nowhere to run… I was corned by him from the start, at that moment his face down there. Is it wrong if it feels so good? I have never been so freaking out in all my life.

That was the first time an older man went down on me. What's is sick about the whole thing is that he was good at it. Spreading the moisture around and working his kisses down to my anus opening rimming me ever so softly, as he pulled me to the floor holding legs up in the air and my back against the wall. He pressed agent me the hardest when he knew, I was nearing my O-ing sighing release. He said- I was the youngest he- his finger freaked and sucked. That I was the best one yet! That I was- 'so cute and tasty!'

The only way I got through it was thinking he was Ray! I never told anyone because I think I like it, and that would be wrong for me to… I'm not a hypocrite.

I think a- lot of girls, he has played with feel as I do. Or maybe they're just frightened. I knew he wanted more when he unzipped, and it was ready for me, he put my hand on it. I recognized what he wanted, so I did it with my hand in a fast rhythm. I hark back to his moaning matching my hand stocking, it was fast and hard.

I felt the heat of him ejaculating suddenly, with all of it spurt out at me all over my face, shooting in my one eye, running down my lips and chest.

I remember him saying how's that taste? I said sheepishly- it's good! Even though it wasn't, it was slimy and salty. He's not half the man Ray is! And as fast as that… it was all over.

As he left me to get up. I was running the least for my next class, as the next class ball ring out. I was cleaning up. He said hurry up… get dressed darling. I'll write you a light pass. As he moved swiftly to his office. With it still hanging out... looking like a dead baby bird. You can't be gone too long now… harry it up! When the walls back I was at my locker, he handed me the pass, and I was putting on my top. He said- don't say anything to anyone about this, and you'll have an 'A' for the whole year! If you do say something, and you rat me out… I'll find you. And I'll stretch you out so hard, that you'll think you got freaked by a train. You'll wish that you were dead.

Like I had to do with you one girlfriend, that can't shut up. Sia's 'Cheap Thrills' was playing in my mind, over and over again, followed by 'Salted Wound.' That was a movie that I and the girls said could have had more lovemaking in, like 'Sausage Party' was more thrilling to my girlie parts… (yet now I want to suck on some Winnie's' said Jenny Ha!... the girls bust out. So- degrading to woman crap. Finding Dory- was okay- but Crash should have had a movie too, said Liv. 'Mike and Dave'- got sluts… cool that's what all we girls are today- so! It flopped like a limp d*ick- said, Jenny. Movie nights on

Saturdays… fun- fun. 'I love Life of Pets- said Maddie- um- us too.'

I went to the art class traumatized, with razor itch. I tool jenny, and she was pissed, after that day Jenny has stood in for me any time when he was coming for me all horned up. She took the bow in my place. Which is one more reason why I have to put up with her crap? She didn't want me to have to go through that, or maybe she just wanted it. Either way that was okay with me. I only wanted what I could have… the way I wanted.

The flashback ends, as I hear that same bell that reminds me of all of that…

~*~

Present time-

'One minute after the bell,' Maddie says, sharply. Hey sexy girlie- to Liv, and Maddie puts her arm through hers, they pick one another on the lips. Jenny said to get a room… they both just giggle. I side to Jenny- I think he heard you back there doing that you know. Jenny yeah well, I don't give a crap, he'll get me from the backside later on.

Wow- I said… walking down the hall some- 'Happy Friday girls,' Jenny squeaks out! We all just look at her wondering why the hell she's so freaking happy, that was uninstall for her.

(Little did I no… she had plans for the letter on that night, involving me and my lover boy.)

Maddie takes out her cell phone and takes a selfie of all of us, making silly faces. Beforehand she was looking into the screen to pick her teen with pink nails.

(If I knew that it was going to be my last snapshot of all of us together, I would have to keep my fingers down from my lips, and my tongue in my mouth! You know the pose tongue out between two fingers. Yeah- you know it… I looked good! NOT!)

'This photo sucks,' Jenny says, without looking at it. 'Totally,' I say it's not even a good boob shot. Fridays are the toughest in some ways: you're so close to freedom yet have to get down on your knees and beg them for mercy.

'Kill me now.'

(I said- Not thinking in less than eight hours I would be dead.) Jenny grips my face and kisses me. (I have been kissed by death by the lips of a teenage girl!)

'No way.'

Jenny embraces my arm. We were all arm chinned together 'Oh no! I can't let my bestie die a without freaking her virgin lover boy Ray. It's about time you get down on your knees or spread them, for someone you want to be with!' I said to Jenny it is all about sex with you, isn't it? And she said yep- what else is there? You're a freak- I said… and she whispers back in my ear- you know it, baby! Blonde has more fun you know! (Licking her lips) Maddie said nah, I

have just as much fun as you do… plus this way I am smarter. I said, come on let's get to our classes!

(#-Hashtag: blond bombshell, not all-natural hair and colors, and who's your daddy?)

Maddie's- I have been keeping her a secret, just like Jenny keeps Karly's secret, and Karly keeps her secrets. All of us girls have a dirty little secret, which no one will ever know about. No one ever found out what was happening inside me. Like what was happening to her, it happened to all of us. Just like me not showing the world that I love her. It still pains me as it did with her, and it's eating away at all of us slowly.

Liv- I remember Karly telling me about him coming on to her. And from that point on I made sure he thought she was gay like me and Maddie. He has made a pass at me, yet he knows that he is not getting me to do anything like she had to do.

Sometimes, Karly is so meek and global! She got used and there was no need in it if she would have stood up for herself. Nonetheless, look who is talking… I am so much like her. I never stood up for what I wanted or did want either. Yet all of us girls have been licked by that man. The sick twisted bastard. And no one believes it happening! Because he is so well-liked by the school staff and respected.

(The girl's internal thoughts walking to class.)

Maddie- Why are people so harsh? What did I or she ever do to them?

Why can't they understand me or her?

God's it is getting hot in here.

I'm so bloated, at least I'm not pregnant!

Jenny must be on her period; she tries so hard not to be a b*tch!

Hum- I need some chocolate!

Does she still love me?

I feel like crying!

Liv's thoughts- I don't sleep last night.

All night long I was wide awake.

Thinking! Secrets, secrets, secrets!

I am sick of keeping Maddie and me a secret!

This is my fault, mine? Now, look at what I did!

Where could we go to not be seen?

Would I be a good mommy?

I'm so horny!

Karly's thoughts- I'm scared!

Afraid of all of you!

And of them, and that man over there!

I am scared of who I am!

I must be with him, tonight!

I would never bleach my hair!

I have a paper I need to write.

Why should, I keep these secrets!

It's cold in this hallway!

I have to pee!

Jenny- I remember my freshman year and asking Ray out, and he said no to me. To me!

Like no one has ever passed me up!

I typed- If you have the chance in the future, will you and I ever go out? I know you do have someone now, but I would like to have a yes or no answer. You don't have to answer this right away… think about what you want and get back to me okay thanks.

Ray- three moments pass, and I get- No!

With- It's never- ever going to happen! I like someone else!

Jenny- We were friends on Facebook and our friendship was short-lived, I confirmed his request… and he unfriended me? The same day- What happened? He deleted me; no, the boy has ever done that to me. I must have him as my boyfriend, he is the first one to ever say no to me. He said he I don't remember sending you a request! Sure… to be truthful I am kind of disappointed in him, I was thinking finally we can at least be friends.

Why doesn't he want me?

Why does he like her more?

(Facebook chat)

He typed - No we can't be friends.

I, asked- why not?

He typed - Because I don't want to.

I typed - That's mean… what did I ever do to you?

He typed - I tried to be nice to you but you took it too far, and I feel a little uncomfortable around you. I'm not trying to be mean.

I- was- thinking uncomfortable? Uncomfortable because you don't like me? Or uncomfortable because you can control yourself around me because you like me that much?

I typed - I am sorry I never meant to do anything to you.

Yes, I like you, and I know you're with Karly, I was hoping for someday...

Maybe we could go to a movie or something like that? I'm not a bad person… you no!

You have to give people a chance. And if you're judging me, I have changed a lot.

Is ask you out so wrong? Why, do I make you so uncomfortable?

His typed- I am very happy with Karly, and I see her in my future, so I wish you could respect that. I don't understand why… you think it's okay for me to give you a chance when I have a girlfriend. I'm not like that, and I think that's very wrong.

I typed - My god you not married to her. You need to stop listening to your friends so much... what are you so scared of?

He typed- I scared to fall in love with someone like you!

I said- It will happen! You will fall for me!

~*~

Jenny's thoughts walking to class- I'm going to get what I want… And none of you b*tches know!

I'll get you!

I'll have to sit in class like this.

I hope you don't mind blood Mr. D

I have to change this tampon out…

The gym is my only 'A,' I wish they were all that easy for me.

Karly small good, I wonder what she is wearing?

Does anyone have a tampon?

Do people still use pads?

These… underwear cost me $30!

I WISH I WAS A GUY!

(So. me being on my period feels like you getting- kicked in the balls for a week, non-stop, like that love a sick feeling or you have to squeeze something out of yah, consent churning inside.)

Chapter: 55

Admiration

Karly- My first two periods- Art and American History history are always been my best subject- I get only five roses I was told at the end of the day so far. I'm not that stressed about it, although it does kind of piss me off that Eliza gets four roses from her boyfriend, Chris. It didn't

even arise to me to ask Ray Raymond to do that, and in a way- I don't think it's fair. It makes people think you've got more friends than you do. I guess I'm more honest than that?

As soon as I make it to Spanish, Mr. Pierce announces a pop quiz. This is an immense problem since one, I did understand a word of my homework in four weeks.

(Okay, so I came to a standstill trying to get it… after week one.)

And two Mr. Pierce is kind of a d*ick to me. Always threatening to take my phone away and making me stay long after school sometimes. I have a failing grade, yet I don't care it's not like I am going to do anything with my life anyways after I get out. I haven't been accepted to school yet. Because the stiff here don't know how to get you into a place.

He said, that he is going to make sure I don't graduate, I'm not sure whether he's being serious or whether he's just trying to keep me in line for next year when I become a- senior, but there is no way I'm letting some d*ick headteacher ruin my chances of getting into Pitt/IUP. Just two be able to count to ten in Spanish.

I want to go to Pitt or there- I don't know yet- (you know the big gay building) too if I can get Jenny to get it for me as she did with the other girls. Like always she has the pull. Yeah- it's not like I could even have enough money to go to a crummy community college either.

Mom and Dad are kicking me out regardless of what I do with my life when I turn eighteen. They say… I have to make it on my own just like they did there not handing- me a dime or anytime soon.

They don't care if I end up on the street, will maybe daddy a little more than mom, but I think you get it. Ray plan on going to Pitt. That is the only reason I want to go to. I guess I have to kiss Jenny's ass hole till the day I die!

(Ha, that's amusing… I did die and I was lying in a pool of bold on the street.

It's funny how your hopes and dreams seem to work out!)

Even worse, I'm sitting next to Liken Lorre, possibly the only girl in the class more clueless about this stuff than I am. She is even more clueless about everything then Jenny seems to be about life itself.

My grades have been pretty good in chem. this year. I like how sexy, I feel in that white lab jacket and mixing things different things together, with my lab partner Maggie. I was the only one to say 'okay' I'll work with her. If I get into Pitt, I would maybe like to major in that, yet my straight A–average can be summarized in one word: Maggie. If she would be doing all my work for me, I would have never gotten this far, in any of my classes. I most likely would have dropped out and had a baby or two.

I would say we're friends, but in a way where we are without anyone knowing about it. I like the girl what can I say. She smart, funny, nice and even cute. I have even spent time at her house.

I have learned so much from her, as I showed her how to attract a significant other.

And what is surprising is that she has a crush on Maddie. When Maddie isn't all that nice to her. She likes a boy named Greg too but she doesn't stand a chance, with either. Her first kiss was with me. That happened the night I sleepover, and she and I had a plow fight after she changed out of all her clothing into her hoddie- footie PJs. And I sleep with her in her cozy single bed, the same way I do at home. She did mind, I not much of a Pj's type of girl. Oh- and the kiss was more showing her what she needs to do… I think she kind sneaked it on me. But I didn't mind, we were in her room and no one could see us.

She felt safe with me, I guess…

(I do know that she misses me.)

Greg He's skinnier than most and his breath always smells like spearmint gum. But Madilyn she lets me copy her homework and even inched her desk nearer to mine on test days, so I can peek over at her answers without being too apparent.

~*~

Unfortunately, since I stop before Smith class I didn't get to pee or to check in with Maggie- we always meet in the bathroom before the fourth period, yet for some dumb ass reason or days and class periods rotate from week to week and day today, and it can be confusing just knowing where you need to be. I didn't know where I need to be… anyways fourth I go to the bathroom just to see if we can hang out since she has Math thread at the same time I have, English- she is in the next class over. And we leave at the same time to go in. Yet today I got to

Chem., and I arrive too late to get my usual seat next to her. I was stuck look at a Bunsen burner and weirdo Marcel Vogel.

(He is always sniffing things… like me or like his armpits. And touching his junk, always making sure I see it popping up under there!)

I swear if he touches my arm or anything else on me one more time, I will scream so loud that all the glass test tube will break to my shriek!

This is just my luck for the day.

There are four questions on Mr. Smith's quiz, and I don't know enough to even fake the first answer. Why do they have to belong to an essay question? Next to me, is Liv and she still thinks she's knocked up, so I drought anything on her paper is worth looking at, yet that moronic look on her face is interning. She, like- her tongue poking out between her teeth, off to the one side of her head and hair, and one of her one finger tearing up her scalp under her lacy headband.

Eyes looking far-out staring blankly at the block wall!

(I bet- she was thinking about her girl! I think some of her brain cells die, every time she does think about Maddie.)

She always does that when she thinks too hard. Her first answers are complete crap-olla, actually: that so not like her, Liv's answers are mostly well-ordered and unhurried, not hysterically scribbled like mine, when you don't know what the hell you're talking about, and are eagerly scrawling all these words so your teacher won't notice, just how dumb you are.

(Yes- it was in cursive- the style of writing, which I never use unless I am hiding my stupid or showing my love!)

(Of course: I know that never works, but I have to put down something, so I don't look Sped that have to get the ads to spell everything for them!)

Then, I remember that Mr. Smith lectured Liv about improving her grade last week. Maybe she's been studying extra hard, not to fail, or maybe he told her he would call home or something like them to back in elementary. Whatever it is she looks freaked out just like me, and most of the class! These questions don't need to be this hard, I main come on!

I peeked over Liv's shoulder and copy down three of her answers- there not that good, but good enough to be at the same Liv she is- when Mr. Smith calls out, 'Fiiiiivvvveee minutes kid-d-ie's.' He says it intensely, sounding demonic talking so stridently it makes the loose skin under his chin jiggle.

It looks like Liv finished and checking her work and said- skew it under breath. But she's taking it up to him, so I can't see the fourth answer. 'Freaking-A' I said out loud. And everyone gives me that look. As I snapped my pencil in my fisted right hand out of frustration.

He said 'Is there something wrong missy.' Mr. Smith, he roars, glaring at me.

'Are you talking during my quiz?'

I turn bright red and looks back and forth from me to the teacher, licking my lips. I don't say anything. I just shook my head- no. liv looks up and said 'I was just-' she says faintly. He said trying to ask you for anger. She looked petrified at me and back at him.

'Enough of all the chatter.'

He stands up, glowering so hard his mouth looks like it's going to dissolve into his neck. I think he's going to say something more to Liv because he's giving her a death stink eye.

But instead, he just says, 'Time is nearing down, everybody.' And got up and didn't even look the test over and handed it to him. He said I can wait to read over this... he said sarcastically! I knew I was F-ed! I went and sat back down seeing the hand on the clock tick-tock down.

'Two miiinnnuuutes and thirrrrty onnneee secondssss,' Samantha- and I lean over and stabbed her arm with my pencil tip. She looks up- ouch! She said alarm at me. Sam- I haven't talked to her in ages and for a second... I see a look come over her face that I can't quite classify. Blue ink pen, in her mouth, sucking on the back end.

She looks mixed up as she glanced- up at Liv, who is thankfully bent over the desk picking up her textbooks. And not completely at me, the books weren't allowed on the deck while taking the test, so we all had them on the floor at our feet.

(Liv does have a nice ass! I knew what Sam was looking at! Or maybe it was just that greasy spot. Either way, she was looking at her perfectly rounded butt.)

'What?' Sam whispers. With her gothic black hair falling over her brown eyes.

Karly- 'Um- ah- how do you think you did?'

Sam- 'Okay, it wasn't that hard.'

Karly- 'Why?'

She's staring at me dumbly and then makes some gestures with her pen shaking in a jerking up and down in her finger curled up hand in a shaking motion, trying to communicate to me that she runs out of ink.

So, I said- I think I have one in my purse, let me see. A couple of seconds go by and I feel like reaching out and shaking out my whole handbag out because it's taking too long.

All my tampons, lipstick, used clean-x, and my make-up is dumped out and rolls off my desk on the floor, and Marcel picks all the tampons up for me, saying jess-z that's a lot, Karly.

Also, said- yeah try being a girl! He wants me to explain… yet I didn't. Sam stops looking at me when I did that. I handed her the nicest pin I have; it has that pink puff at the top. I knew that she wouldn't put that in her mouth. She said- thanks… it's very pretty and pink, but you didn't need to do that. I said I wanted to.

'Ooonneee minnnuttt everrrryoneee I-um donneee.' Finally, her face frees up and she smiles so angelically at me as I give her the great gift in the world.

'Seriously,' she says, 'you're going to need a pen. For notes and stuff.'

(#- Hashtag: it's wet, pretty and pink, and what makes you cry)

(I guess she is not so different from me after all? She seems to be a sweetheart. The girls always said to not waste my time talking to dorky emo kids like her, saying she was kind of slow and unfriendly and terrifying looking.

(No that is so untrue! Underneath all the black, red and white, she is an ordinary girl, the black her the covers her one eyes are just deference, take all that, away she would look she's just like us, she is covering up, so she is not going to get hurt by someone like me. Plus, she is far more intelligent than I or the girls ever hope to be. I wish I would have befriended her a lot sooner!)

While Liv is bent over rummaging for her folders and right notebook for her next class, I see the final answer on the chunks test. Actually, what I put was rather close to what he misspelled and wrote down, and then he whispered and get my attention. And said thanks for sitting by me today, you been a help. I was speechless… to his hitting on me! 'Thirrrrttttyyyy seconnndss nooww.'

Everyone- said something like- here take it, as they got up pissed to hand their test to him. So, I took her old one from her the one end is chewed and wet: gross.

(Yet I felt I had a new girlfriend.)

I give her a snug lipid smile and looked away, but a second or two later she whispers, 'Does it work for you?' I said- no, but that's okay you keep that one, I have more somewhere in my locker.

I give Marcel, that you're starting to be the annoying look. I guess he takes it as a sign of flirting, he did understand. 'The Pen. Does it work,' he said? I don't respond- he whispers a little louder and taps my hand with his delicately. That's when I slam my textbook against his desk. The sound is so loud everyone jumps. I said- Marcel, can't you get it through your head, please leave me alone, I am not into you. Okay! You're making feel unbearable... I have a boyfriend!

Karly, he stopped me as I walked out the door. He said- 'You failed my test today for talking too much to others and speaking inappropriately to your classmates! You need to learn that you are not the boss in my classroom.' I smile tightly and dropped Sam's champed up the pen in my bag. Will he grin, his voice in my ear?

I said- you done, I have to get to my next class, as I ran out.

Of course; I carried walking through the hallway to my next class with a slobber mood coming over me. Yet he will never see me cry, he would feel that he was winning! On the bright side: my daddy continuously says you should do one good thing a day. And something good will come back to you in time. So, I guess that means I did mine for the day. You always get what you- devise! Daddy is a very smart man.

Next period today I have 'PE' which is what they call gym when you're old enough to be affronted by forced physical activity (Liv thinks they should call it on needed life skills instead,

for accuracy). We're studying CPR, which means we get to make out with a life-sized dummy in front of Mr. Davis just more proof of his perv-E-ness.

I am sure that it's been in her mouth too! I can almost taste it- gross! After that the girls all were gotten ready for the dance, school class ended early, too bad I still had to go to his class. All the girls wear rhinestone masks, our costumes dress doesn't make sense in the context of the day in my mind, yet that's the whole point I guess to look mysterious to your boy on the dark dance floor.

So, you can be free and crazy! I was wearing a small pink eye mask covered in what looked like red rubies, so no would know I was dancing with him, but him. The whole point is to show off in front of the junior and senior boys and look sexy. I don't blame them for getting turn on. We want them too.

Freshman year Jenny dated Nick Sermon- a senior at the time- they were together all of the eighth-grade years too on and off. Anyways for two months after he integrated them doing the nasty, in every position you could think of…

Why?

Because, she broke it off that night after they did it, saying it sucked, and not in a good way.

(If you're going to have any type of sex, and don't want others to see it, don't take the photos on your cell, and then send them to a boy to upload the pictures to the internet!) That's a real love story right there, they were so in love… yet Jenny is never happy! Jenny told me at the time the only reason she ended it with him was that she had her eye on someone else.

She was petrified of how stern he was over her, she never said but I knew, that she felt more like his daughter then his lover. Other guys were not even supposed to look at her or anything, or he would beat the crap out of them. I feel bad for all the boys that she leads on that lost their teeth! Oh yeah- Jenny thought this new boy was going to be a sure thing. Yet, it did work out. No- she never told me who he was… I wonder myself?

~*~

I make a big deal of unfolding the tiny card to get a rose at the end of the day on the dance floor it's from Ray, I felt the spotlight was on me when the girl named Jace waked up to

me and handed it to me, she was passing them out. I read the note that looked to have been already opened, even though all he's written. It said, 'Luv yah,' and then in smaller letters near the bottom: I'll be with you tonight.

'Luv yah' isn't exactly 'I love you' which we've never said it aloud in front of anyone- but it's getting closer. I'm pretty sure he's saving it for tonight, we are going to do it. Last week it was late, and we were sitting on his couch and he was staring at me and I was sure certain- he was going to say it- but instead he just said I look like Alyson Hannigan from a certain angle.

I said- oh the girl from the 'American Pie' movies? Um- thank you, I guess she's kind of cute? So, I said the famous line: 'This one time, at band camp, I stuck a flute in my p*ssy.' He busted out laughing and that's when he said it: Oh my god I so love you right now! You know what I think you're cute! He said knowing you-you would do that too! I said- 'ah' in a gasp, and smacked his arm, and looked at him massively with my flirty eyes. I could not believe it… though he can be shy, I have a way of making him feel relaxed.

Yet, I just want to hear the words 'I LOVE YOU' And nothing else. And just like her, I was thinking in my mind 'So, are we going to screw soon because I'm getting kind of antsy.' And as you know it just did happen. And after he left that night at around 3 am, and I was disappointed, just like her it was just me and my good friend Mr. Shower-head in the bathtub.

At least my note is better than the one Alexis got from Seth Shorts last year: 'Roses are red, violets are blue if I get you in bed, and I'll cover you in my *goo*.' She thought he was kidding- no not really… but still, Blue and goo do that even rhyme.

'Is Goo even a word?'

No- didn't think so… We all remember her look on her face the weekend after, she was in his bed a lot, and she looked so tired that

Monday morning. We just knew. I don't know… I kind of find it funny and suck what he said. Yet he tried, and that's all that matters, right?

Tip- to all you boys out there, make the note about something other than wanting to get her in your bed or pants. That's not romantic if anything that would put her out of the mood. Just saying! You got to be sweet to her, and care about more than just her vag.!

(If all you have is just sex where is the love that you need?)

(#-Hashtag- movie night look-alike, under the spray, and bubble bath)

~*~

I think that's going to be all of my love-o-grams, but then the girl makes her rounds and then comes over to me and hands me another one. It now the end of the day and I see these 12 all color roses are all different colors and this one's pretty incredible they were sent from the flower shop in town: white with pink-streaked petals like it's made out ribbon candy. Alone with the 1 red that means so much to me. 'It's beautiful,' I was breathless. I look up, and all the other girls in my homeroom are just standing there drilling, staring at the roses lying on my desk.

Gracie said- My God girl, someone loves you! She said it with a bratty attitude! I said- Um- yeah, I no. It's pretty shocking for a lowerclassman to even have the balls to speak to a senior about who loves you. It annoyed me for a second. I just looked off… and take in my moment with my bundle. But in the back of my mind, I was thinking, I don't ask you who loves you, do I? Like just how envious can she and the others be of me? She has her hair so pale blond at the tips that it's almost white and brown at the top which was so last year. And I can see individual veins through her skin and sun markings from getting fried.

She reminds me of someone, but I can't think of whom. I catch her looking at me and she gives me a quickie glance, with that embarrassed smile. I'm happy to see some girls color rush into her face- at least it makes her look less like a cold-blooded freshman zombie, that sucks into boys' lives that they shouldn't be in.

All these b*tches need to stand the freak back and mind their crap… seriously! You can't have him; he's mine… MINE! I was thinking! So-o in love, I trilled like a drunk ballerina around with the bunches in my arms. I brush my finger over the rose petals-they're so soft. Instantly I feel stupid, as I sniff them with my eyes closed.

I open the one-note, expecting all these from Ray or Maddie or Liv… No, it was from Jenny, it said (I will always love you… to death, my b*tch- my baby girl! A flower for every hour of love I have for you till death do us all apart! You will always remain in my heart like the red rubbers and red blood you'll drip, like a memory you and he will be just like a kiss on your lips, your fate has been sealed!

(You have made your choices.)

(I was so dumb at the time I didn't get it.)

Underneath all the flowers on my desk was a cartoon drawing card it says: I love you. It's obviously from Parker Paterson- he draws my cute cartoons for me to be with him, they show his puppy love for me, so I give him one of my senior pics, last week just because, and I think he's in love with me now. I look up and glance in his direction and flirt. He always sits in the back-left corner of the room staring at my butt trying to see if he can see my thong sting, and down my crack, or something like that. He is one weird boy, not the one I want.

Yet, he is sweet to me so, I'll play nice, and let him dream about me at night and beat off to me and my pic like all the others do when I tease them like that.

Yes- I have been the tribute girl to many of the boy's urges. He- he! Every boy and even some gay girls in the school wants my Snapchat, for my sensual but naked pics. But just like me and my cell number, it's hard to get. I like to say my number has a 2,433, in the end, you'll have to figure out the rest.

Funny many of a boy has tried to crack my number. I love getting random texts at 3 am. Along with your junk pic, it's the highlight of my day.

Not really… but send away I'm not going to stop you… silly boys. Sure enough, he's watching me from behind. I look back and he gives me a quick smile and a wave, then makes that motion with his arm trying to cover up what he was doing as he sits back, I knew what he was doing, about that time is when he blew me a kiss too, that I caught with my left hand to save for letter, I was grossed out by it shooting out at me underthings his desk, why do boys have to do that?

That doesn't turn me on! I guess if I had one, I would play with it too in class ha- ha.

Anyway, I take his drawing and crumble it up, and I know that it will get lost at the bottom of my bag and that's just okay with me. I don't think he minds what I do with his drawings.

Oh, My God, I remember when I was about five, and I asked dad what happen to mine, I thought I was one of the boys… because I saw my little cousin changing when he stayed over for Christmas in my room, and he let it all hang out, plus when he was asleep in my bunk bed too I

got a glimpse. Anyways I asked dad and he said that I played around with mine so much it falls off, that's why I have a hole there and not one of those.

Hells yeah, I was pissed! That messed me up for many a year! Like, come on dad just 'tell me the truth about me being a girl, not a boy. I was freaked out by that for sure, as I wanted it back and even cried about it. I did want to touch myself for a long time after that. Just like he said- if I push in or jiggle around my little button as he called it… I would die.

Thanks, daddy you made me sexily insecure! And just like any nine-year-old girl at the time, I had to push it in to see what would happen in my bedroom, and no I didn't die!

Dad and I have always seemed to get into wired moments just like that. Just like when he finds out I was popping the pill, and I did them to say it was okay to get them. Because I was of age to get it myself at the store.

#-Hashtag: (The black hole was not cool, hot for teacher, and dripping dowers)

~*~

Mr. Pamper comes up and down the passageways, collecting homework, and he pauses at my desk. I have to admit it: he's the reason I'm psyched to get so many other love-o-grams from other boys. I would so do him! I might just leave

Ray if he would say let's do it here and now! Mr. Pamper's only twenty-five and he's gorgeous. He's the assistant coach of the swimming team, and it's pretty funny to see him standing there showing off his goods in those short shorts. I see him looking at me when I get in and out of the pool dripping wet and walk past to jump off the diving board. We are complete physical opposites, yet opposites attract.

Mr. Pamper is over five feet ten, always tan, and dresses like we do, in jeans and hoodies and Nicki sneakers. I would love for him to take me and throw me on top of his desk and jam that all in, mmm he is dazzling! He graduated from here. We looked him up once in the old yearbooks in the library. He was prom king, he had a little more hair then, he was in one picture wearing a blue tux and smiling with his arm around strawberry blonde prom date. That looked a lot like me.

I love that picture; I wish I was that girl. I bet that was the night she lost her virginity to him. You can just till they were saving that for that night, by the glowing look on her face. But

you know what I love even more? Is that I could pretend to be her if he would want me too. It's so ironic that he is the hottest guy here and he is one of the faculty.

As usual, when he smiles at me my stomach does a slight flip, and I feel myself getting hot and wet. When I see him running his hand through his messy black hair, and I fantasize about doing the same things with my hand. And his hand going through mine, and down my back and squeezing my butt cheeks. Why not I can fantasize… right! I think he is kind of what Ray will look like in ten or so years. I am looking forward to Ray to become more of a man.

There are some things he needs to do to become that.

'13 roses already?'

He raises his eyebrows, makes a big deal of it show everyone my flowers that I got.

'Well done he said along with… I knew you would have this many you are a cutie.'

I just smiled with a sigh thinking thank you, you think I am cute? I said- 'sure honey,' he says and winks at me.

I let him move a little farther down the aisle before I say, at full volume, 'I still haven't gotten my rose from you, Mr. Pamper!' He doesn't turn around, but I can see his cheeks get cherry red. There are giggles and snorts from the class, one girl giggled so hard she started to cry.

I get that rush that comes when you know you're doing something wrong, yet it feels so good, and are getting away with it, like stealing a pair of sexy undies from Victoria's secret that you can't afford but have to have, or taking food from the school cafeteria, or getting tipsy at a family holiday, or doing someone in your mom and dad's bed without anyone knowing.

That was the feeling I had; it was almost as good as the sex would be with him. Jenny says Mr. Pamper's going to for sure get me for sexual harassment one of these days, but I can't help myself. She said- Karly you will be in handcuffs if you keep doing that. And I jokingly say to her if there are cuffs… I would like that; I hope their pink and fuzzy! She just giggles… and I say- I don't think he would do that; he wants me too badly. I think he secretly likes it. Jenny said- Your crazy babe…!

Example: when he turns around to face the class, he's smiling. But not at them… he's only looking at me, undressing me- with his eyes, his eyes hardly ever stop staring at me. The

other girls know this… but I feel he's mine too, they try too hard to get his attention, you have to become day go a day, to keep a man like he turned on.

'After reviewing last week's results, as I looked over last week's swimming lap times, I feel like I am not moving forward fast enough in both. Yet at least I am getting the grade I want and winning. I realize there's still a lot of confusion about us, and about my limits.'

This is what I did last week, I kissed my test paper with my pink lipstick, and said push me against the wall and kiss me. Yes, I left everything blank! He stared at that paper for like ten minutes, I don't think he wanted to give it back to me. He was pondering if he wanted to or not, I remember he began, leaning against his desk and then he sits down crossing his legs one over the other, a little bit of sweat ran down his face. I knew I had him… I think this week I'll put my phone number and say sext me!

I can be a dirty girl.

Nobody else could make world history even remotely interesting, I'm sure of it, I feel that I did well. He notes back to me was I could lose my job if I did, I keep this a secret, and he filled out all the answers on the paper for me and said- I passed. I love that man! For the rest of the class, he barely looks at me, and even then, only when I raise my hand.

But I swear that when our eyes do meet, it makes my whole body feel like a massive shiver. I even had to ask to go to the ladies' room to change my undies to my spar pair, it like I could've ruined them out to dry at the snick, I just put them in my purse and went back to class. I swear he's feeling it too. He was so feeling me too just like that!

After his class, Marcel catches up with me in the hall. 'Karly… Karly… Karly…?' he says. 'What did you think?' 'Of what Marcel?' I say annoyed at him. He's like a little five-year-old boy. I know he's talking about the cartoon and the tiny rose. I keep walking faster and faster but he catches up with me. 'So?' he says. 'What did you think?' 'Okay with what?' I say to infuriate him. I said not bad, I just put it with all the rest I said.

(Cramped up in the pit of my handbag.)

Marcel just smiles, briskly he modifications the subject to what I thought he was going to ask. 'I'm having a party tonight, He said. Are you coming?' 'It's going to be great,' he says, still

smiling. I just said- I'll never be coming for you! Then he spits it out- 'Yeah- my parents are gone for the weekend.' I just said-

'Good for you Marcel. But sorry… I've got plans. I've got a boyfriend too, which will kick your ass if you don't start leaving me alone.' He said- 'Oh yeah Karly- Mr. Pamper scares me.' I just walk away giggling shaking my head, saying you have a lot of growing up to do. As I walk down the hallway, I overhear him saying loudly to frank his buddy, 'I'm going to marry that girl someday, and God she is so fine, I'm going to do her.' I was thinking in your dreams little boy… in your dreams.

'See you there,' he says. Down the hall I see Ray bobbing out of the cafeteria, and he starts walking faster up to me, hoping that Marcel will get the picture and back off. It's pretty hopeful thinking on my part. That he would kiss me in front of Marcel, it would make him so pissed, he has had a crush on me for years, possibly even since our kiss. I would love that.

Yeah, there are about 69 reasons as to why, I can't stand him, that just being one! I still can believe he asked me to do that with him at his party. It's not going to be much of a party it's just going to be him, Frank and Paul most likely. If there are any girls there, I'll be surprised, yes, a total sausage fast. I bet there won't even be any beer, he just wants me to take his virginity or something like that… for his friends to think he's cool. No thank you! He clingy engulf as is now with doing that crap. I'm shocked that he hasn't tried dry humping my leg in the hallway. 'Down boy!'

I knew he is the one that broke into my locker today and got into my handbag and swiped my sheer white tiny undies… that I took off. I loved those too.

He knows… what I do… when I go into the bathroom? Like I need to stop putting my bag in my locker, when I go to lunch, he knows my combo. He will most likely put them under his pillow tonight and say to his friends that we were together. I look at him.

I've never understood Marcel. Or at least I haven't understood him in years. We were super close when we were little when we were baby, we would play in the mud together ass naked- technicality suppose he was my best friend as well back then, my little boyfriend that you have when you're too young to realize. It was his first kiss too.

Then as soon as he hit middle school and he grows a d*ick, some boys like him just wear their balls on their faces. He started getting stranger and stranger.

Since freshman year he's always worn a long black trench coat to school, even though most big holes in his jeans you can see his hairy ass and boxers, not a turn on! I remember the eighth-grade field trip he sat with me on the school bus, he laid his head down on my boob, and then put his face in my armpit and licked it… so weird.

'I'm not an orange Creamsicle…!' I said that… at the time.

Then the whole way back to the school he was nuzzled up to me. That's another thing he was like an octopus's, he couldn't keep his hands off me. That is the price of being cute; I guess and smelling good. Like I would move one hand, and then the other would pop up and be touching me, where I did want him touching me. He wanted to be more than friends- way back then. He even said that he liked me- liked me… but- no.

He was just a friend that was a boy. Yet he didn't get that. Known him as I do, he most likely will be licking and sniff the crotch area of my thong undies tonight too, the little weirdo! That boy needs to find himself a frozen flag pool and lick that instead! Like why must I be his fetish?

He wears the same scuffed-up black-and-white checkered s converse sneakers every day and his hair is greasy and long swinging down over his eyes every four seconds. But the real deal-breaker is this: he wears a fedora hat… to school. The worst thing is that he could be cute. He has the face and the body for it.

He even has dimples, big gorgeous blue eyes, and nice teeth. No-a joke. But he has to screw it up by being such a freak with his group of friends and little boy ways. If he would cut that hair and take a bath it would help. Maybe I should say that to him?

He stops walking entirely when I met up with Ray, yet I think Marcel was hoping I'll stop and turn back to him. But I don't. For a second, I feel bad like I was too cruel, but then his voice rings out after me, and I can tell just by the sound of it that he's still creeper smiling and staring at my ass.

'See you tonight,' he said again. I hear the squeak of his sneakers on the dirty red linoleum, and I know he has about-faced around and started marching off in the reverse direction. He starts singing 'You Are So Beautiful' by Joe Cocker, and I admittedly felt so bad for treating him like that. The sound of it carries back to me, getting fainter. It takes me a while to place the tune, for he was saying out of tune and off-key. Just like me, I guess he was trying to get by with

A little help from his friends. Yet, I was not much of a friend to him there, yet I have to be that way, or he would be on top of me.

He makes me feel a little uncomfortable around him, he always takes it too far. I feel I brush him off as Maddie does with Maggie, we just don't like them like that, but they won't back off. Yet I think Maddie and she would be a good match.

I know no one else in the hall will get it, I'm so embarrassed and can feel the heat creeping up my neck, and face I was getting hot under my top and color. He's always doing things like that: acting as he knows me better than anyone else just because we used to play in the sandbox together stark-naked. Acting like nothing that's happened in the past… like the last ten years has not changed anything, even though it's changed everything.

We were kids then it didn't mean anything, even if he thought it did my God, we were like in diapers then. My phone's buzzing in my butt pocket was not allowed to have them… I can get away with it. Strangely the vibration today reminded me of the mooring I had sharing with my sis. I am backtracking here, but this is when I went into the lunchroom.

New text message its shows on the screen- from Jenny. I open it looking around to see if there are any teachers around. It reads- 'Party at Marcel's 2-night u in?' I stall for just a second, puffing out a long breath before I text back.

'Nah'

(#-Hashtag- a pantie snatcher, licking and sticking, and hot to not)

~*~

I stand in line for my lunch… Ray has his hand in my front part of my jeans looking for a dollar and touching my obviously, the PDA makes all the girls crazy.

Even if it's just Ray, he needs to kiss me but with Jenny not too far behind us, so I don't think so.

There are three acceptable things to eat in the Thomas Jefferson cafeteria:

1. Plain pizza with nasty string cheese.

2. French fries, or a cheese soft pretzel.

3. Turkey sandwich make-your-own, or salad bar.

And an iced tea. No one wants spoiled milk! That's for the bullies to dump down nearly girl's tops, or pain in the ass boys' pants.

Turkey is the most common, ham, or chicken breast. Salami is gross, and roast beef is doubtful when it looks greenish. This is a shame because I would like to have that if it was good, but this crap looks like it is been sitting out for far too long. Ray is leaning over by the cash register with a group of his friends, he jumped the line to be with them and not me… that pisses me off when he does that. He's holding a huge tray of French fries. He eats them every day with ranch dressing. He catches my eye and gives me a nod, and that looks like you better get your ass back over here… and love me, boy.

(Sometimes, he does not do so well with feelings his or mine in and being all love-ie-dove-ie. Case in point: the 'Love yah' on the note he sent me.)

It's peculiar. Before we were going tactically going out, I liked him so much, and for so long, that every time he even looked in my direction, I would get this bubbly, fizzing feeling so strong it would make me light-headed. No lie: sometimes, I got light-headed thinking about him and had to sit down, just like my blood sugar would drop. Just like when Maddie met Liv for the first time, she peed her in her undies a little, and her palms got sweaty ha- she going to kill me for saying that, but she still does that when Maddie looks at her that flirty way.

But, now that we're un-official slash official couple, I sometimes have the strangest thoughts when I look at him like I wonder if all those fries are obstruction his arteries if he would die, I know I would; or whether he flosses and brushes his teeth as I do or how long it's been since he washed hair… or if he shaved his face with the same riser he used on his balls, or like if the skin on thingy is clean!

Yikes…!

It's pretty much liked that same filthy Old Navy jacket he wears every day, because- I have his letterman. If we get married, I'm going to have to be like his mamma, yet I guess I'm okay with that? I can see it now at… Ray! Did you remember to put on clean shorts? Did you pay for the TV bill?

Do you think my butt looks big in these jeans? Did you just get me pregnant, because you forgot to wrap it up… really? Yeah- Sometimes I'm worried there's something wrong with me… no joke!

'Oh, no,' I said not realize I was speaking out loud. Mss. Fairbanks one of the little old lunch lady says is everything, okay honey? She looks at them, because my mouth was hanging open in disbelief, and she said aren't they a cute couple? I just said- 'Ahgg,' like Charlie Brown.

I couldn't even make a word come out! 'My stomach feels as if a dog is chasing its tail in it.' 'You okay,' said Gill the girl behind me as I almost passed out in her arms. 'Jenny was talking to him, and kissed him on the lips… okay, Karly Just thinks before you speak, take all the time you need before freaking out. Oh, God, I think I'm going to be sick if she touches him again, it's like she is all over him, pressed so tightly.

Who wouldn't want to go out with Ray, maybe she sees what I see in him? Or she is just doing this because she can, to play with me. If he leaves me for her, I don't know what I would do. Like sometimes I have to keep going over repeatedly in my skull as to why I liked him in the first place like if I don't, I'll somehow forget… why he is so meant for me.

Gratefully there is a zillion- good reasons: to the fact that he has black hair and glass but somehow, they don't look stupid with them; that he's quiet but sweet and funny; that everyone knows him, but he's not over popular that he's- an ass hole, yet not a loser.

Most likely, half of the girls in the school have a crush on him; yet want to admit it because he not that popular because he's not the same as the other boys when you get him naked. I love it when he's really tired, he lays his head on my shoulder and falls asleep, on movie night. That's one of my favorite things about him. I like to lie next to him when it's late, dark, and so quiet, I can hear my heartbeat with his.

It's times like that when I'm sure that I'm in love, and that he's in love with me too. It's love when you're that compatible with each other. It's love when you can just wear a nightshirt and nothing else in front of him as he sits in his underwear and nothing else, under a fuzzy blanket on the sofa in the living room. It's love when you get naked together under that blanket and get unstop of him to cuddle, yet with his mom and dad in the next room, we never had sex.

Not that we have not tried, I loved the time his dad walked in on us and I was on top of him and the blanket was on the floor, he saw more of me then I wanted him to that's for sure.

Nevertheless, I have stayed all night on the weekends in the past, yet could never seem to be alone, not even in his room, he shares with his sis too. Well not like that! We don't want her to wake up and be freaked out, she's only five. (I could see it now little Hadley saying something like: 'Mommy- daddy Karly and Ray were butt naked, and resealing last night in his single bed.

And it was squeaking, and-and Karly was saying 'Oh- yeah' over and over. I think Ray was hurting her!')

Funny it's the same way at my house too with my sis in my room. Plus, why do all moms and dads have to be so snoopy? They do it… why can't we? I swear we could be in the little red dog house outside and someone would see us and stop it.

(#-Hashtag- sucking on a six-inch, a bump in the night, and tattle-tells)

~*~

Okay back in line- I ignore Ray as I move down the line me to pay for my MTO (Sheetz SUB) and swap my school card- I can play hard to get too- and then head for the senior section. The rest of the cafeteria is a rectangle. Sped kids sit down, at the table closest to the doors coming in, and then there are the freshman tables, and then the sophomore tables, and then the junior tables. The senior section is at the very head of the cafeteria in one line of tables pushed together.

All the windows are on the one side. Okay, so it only looks out over the courtyard and the other part of the school, sometimes- you can look up and see a boy taking a leak in the urinal in the third-floor bathroom, from the right angle. You can also see Sped kids coming in on their short bus form the third fool bathrooms, it's so sad, they have to be assessed by teachers because of there a danger to themselves and others.

No offense, but I don't want to see that brigade dribbling applesauce down their mouth in the room with me, everyone thinks they should have they own place to be, and yes Madilyn is classed as one of them, she sits there and she doesn't look to the left or the right, she looks straight down depressed. She must be humiliated; I know I would be if I was her. If I would sit with her, I would be muttered by everyone in the room, that just how it goes. Poor little Maggie, I know her sort of well… she doesn't need to be in that group… she is as smart as they come, I think.

But sometimes you can be so smart that teachers think you're as dumb as they come!

Liv's already sitting at a small circular table right by the window: our favorite. 'Hey, girl.' I put down my tray. Showing off all the cards and stuff I got from the boys. I forgot to say that on this day, are class ends before lunch, it's a have day so we picked up our flowers when we went to homeroom briefly. Liv has her care and her bouquet sitting on the table and I do a quick count. 'Ten roses.' I wave to hers and then give my bouquet a rattle. 'I have to more than her.'

She makes a cute funny face. 'One of mine doesn't count, Marcel sent one to me. Can you believe it? 'The Jack off Stalker.' 'Yeah, well, I got one from Mr. P too, yet that doesn't count either, because it was sent to me with no name' I know he sent it to me… it has to be him.

'He loves you,' she says, holding out the o. 'Did you get Jenny's text?' I hum- 'Um-hum.' Who, loves me? I asked, the movie the conversation alone.

Said Jenny- Who do you think? I said- I don't know! Said Jenny- It's an obvious baby girl, that Marcel got the hots for you! 'He is so right for you! You should do him, for a night at the party. That is if you don't have your mind on someone else. Do you have your mind on someone else? If not, you have to at least have a one-night stand with him, he's too hot to pass up.' 'You think he's hot?' I say- with a grossed outlook on my face.

Jenny- 'Yah, you need to get over your teacher crush, his balls were cut off when he started working here. If you can't see all this, you need to be over there with the sped kids.' I pick the mushy MTO and slam it in my mouth. 'Are we going to go to his party?' Liv snuffles and then snorts. 'Afraid he'll date rape you?' I say- 'Very funny, and yes!' 'There's going to be a beer, Maddie says.

She takes a tiny nibble of her turkey sandwich and spits it into a napkin. 'This food tastes like old man ass!' Jenny- Really Maddie?

Like you know what old man ass taste like…? She just looks at her with a blank stare, and we all start cackling up.

Jenny- says 'You're so gay Mattie!' Yes- yes- I am, and she winks at Liv! I giggle out loud, because, Jenny did get it at all. Mattie- 'So-oo will all met up at my place after school, all right?'

She doesn't have to ask. It's our custom on Fridays… we order something like Chinese food, raid her closet… swapping eye shadows, lip glosses, bars, and undies. blast music till the plaster ceiling cracks more, and dance around, till her mom asks what the hell was doing up there.

~*~

At the table- 'Yeah, sure.' We all agree… I have been watching Ray from the corner of my eye, and suddenly he's there, Scouting down into a chair next to me. Jenny has the look on her face like she just ate a raw flapping fish and had no choice but gulp it all down! He is leaning into my face look at my mouth and touching my right ear, earring and trawling my hair around his finger. He smells like- Old Spice body spray. He always does. I think he smells a little like my daddy- is that weird, that I kind of like that?

No- I haven't told him that yet. 'Hey, Squirt.'

'Hey- Winky- dink!' He always calls me that, the reason why… will he found that out the first time he touched me down there, just like I call him 'Winky- dink!' You know when you touch, before you see, on like the second date and just feel around to see what you've got. That's where the nicknames came from. I knew from that date that he was different from all the other boys. Oh, how I was infected with him every day after… I still am! I wanted to see more of him.

'I will bite that thing off with my teeth and suck it dry don't think I won't, um- you need to do this for me and my girls.'

She grabs him hard in the paints...

Um- you know that I am going to cut that thing off of you! Um-hum- he said reluctant- and then she said, and I know how I am going to do it too- it's gross- and looks bad- and you're a little boy over it... I did it using a string and a knife- no- if's and's or buts- Mr.! Said, Karly. Or it can be the laser or hot knife, always I am doing it to you.

Any-who… his said- 'Did you get my Love-o-gram?' I say- 'Yeah I got them and the card too... But…!' I say it varies bashfully. 'But- what he said?' I make sure I say this so everyone at the table can hear. 'Ray do you love me?' Everyone is looking at him and me. He didn't say a thing he just lends even more into me and kissed me on the lips, like never before. Then said- 'Does that answer your question?' I look at him stunned, and give a slight nodded yes, he gets up from the chair and rushed out of the cafeteria when he sees the look on Jenny's face

along with everyone else, all my other girlfriends were smitten and saying aww! But he seemed embarrassed, that I put him on the spot like that. It was the kiss of the day… maybe of the week too. I think it was talked about more than Liv's and Middies.

Jenny swings her handbag off his shoulder and unzips it dumping it out. The tamps', lipstick, and pins all roll onto the floor. There are about a dozen crumpled roses in the bottom of her bag, the welted petals are just hung and falling off the stems. I'm assuming one of them is from Ray- and as well that, a half pack of cigarettes falls out too, with a pack of juicy fruit gum, her cell phone, K and Y lube, and her change of undies. And let's not forget about the bag of weed, wrapped around her magic bolt, if you know what I am saying.

Maddie and Liv started studying together after they dumped their trays.

'Who are the roses from?' I say, teasingly to Jenny. She was waiting for me to ask. 'They're all from Ray!' she says, arching his eyebrows like I should know that. 'I think he's more in love with me then you baby!' she whispers. 'You're such a b*tch, Jenny,' Maddie says.

'I just say oh… really? I don't think so.' But in the back of my mind, like- I had to wonder where they all were from him? Jenny is a good liar, but I don't think she would make something like that up. Before there was a catfight, Liv asked- So-ooo! Are you going to Marcel's freaking party tonight, or not?' There is no reply from any of us.

Ray comes back in he must have just had to go to the bathroom, it's next to the lunchroom. I ask so Ray are you going to Marcel Party tonight? 'Yah silly with you!' I look over at Jenny and she gives me the gangster finger, the one that turned to the side. He said 'Probably.' Ray shrugs and suddenly looks bored. Whom are you going with asked Jenny? 'Not you' he said! I just laugh… Here's a secret: when we were kissing, I opened my eyes and saw that his eyes were open. He wasn't even looking at me.

He was looking over my shoulder, watching the room, and maybe her. It's like he is trying to make her jealous with me. 'He's getting a keg,' Maddie says for the second time.

Every Tom, Dick, and Harry here jokes that going to Clinton High prepares you for the overall college experience: you learn where you stand in life, if you work hard or not it doesn't matter, and you learn to drink, and who are skewing you, or who skewing someone else like your boyfriend. Three years ago, we were ranked in some magazine among the top ten worst public

schools in Pa. for drinking, drugs, and good education. It gives us girls a bad image of being dumb sluts, which were not. I know that my mom and dad can't afford a prep school like

St. Paul's, Maddie and Liv, are the same way they have nothing, yet as for Jenny she went there one year and got kick out forever for hooking up with a boy in the computer room, or at least that what I heard.

It's not like there's anything else to do around here, though. We've got malls and basement parties and hooking up and that's about it. Let's face it: that's how most of the country is now. Just look at all the bums on the streets living in cardboard boxes. My pappy always said that malls and McDonald's would be the only place to go. That the little guy would get the crap stick. He was so right, he always tells me what it was like, back in the 1950s.

I mean we have so much more than they did, all the same, it seems, like those days people were happier for some reason. I guess if you have too much it makes you discontented? Or maybe people were just happy to be alive after the war. Jenny thinks the Holocaust never really happened, that it was just all a made-up story.

Yet, she is a German, maybe that's why? They ran off got married in an old house in Maryland, and had the honeymoon in the car they sleep in it all nice and drive back they were so young then, I am surprised but the fact that a baby was not made in that thing, just like at the fold-down seats, that why my dad liked this car and the older dudes.

He said that- 'The car would rock side to side… like going fast, yepper- and that what I thought it meant too.'

Which pisses of Maddie who come from Jewish descent. And pisses me off too because my pap was in that war. He used to say (Smoking with oxygen tubes in his nose.) 'I remember flying in that airplane with them ass holes coming for me, and bolts blasting past my face. They looked like the devil, coming for your soul, Karly. I never back down! (Inhale nose) Hell, I would have ripped my prop into his head on if I needed too. No never stopping the gunfire until you killed the S of a B. And if you got one, they would spiral Arrrrrr-nnnnn!

(Inhale nose)

Splat…! Down into the water or hit one of our ships killing hundreds of men. You would never believe the carnage and the smell of the burning oil and dying flesh. I can still hear it and see it in my mind.

(Coughing)

The wounds did more than scare my body, they scare me for life little girl. I lost many of a friend, you just think about that. Most of them fresh out of high school around your age. Karly! You G-D kids need a freaking war so that you're not so damn ignorant and selfish.' Yes- I loved my pappy, rest in peace. He would cuss you out, and then give you a big hug and kiss. All I left of him is his metal thingy and a black and white photograph.

#-Hashtag- (he loves me- he loves me not, make love not war, old-timers)

~*~

'Ah-em. Excuse me!' Jenny boot scoots herself over into Rob's lap and clearing her throat loudly. Says- just so you'll know where going together tonight. She has her hand tucked down around his butt and she's her foot is going up and down on his inner leg.

'I think you're in my seat, Jenny,' I say. I am pretending to be a hard-core badass. Ray and Jenny have always been friends on and off. At least, they've always been since before freshman year, and by requirement have always had to be okay with that. Yet I am not okay with that…

'My apologies, I did now that you were here to suck his d*ick and make his sandwich.' She gets up, and he stands up and makes a big fanfare, like a bow, we all could see that he has a half chub on. He sat down, and I sit down on his lap just like she did.

Yet, my hands weren't on his butt though. Yet I feel that I was not the girl that was turning him on. I knew that he liked her, I just never thought like that. 'See you tonight, Ray!' she yells, and then she walks up to us and bends down, she whispers in his ear. 'Okay then bring your baby girlfriend. So, she can see me sucking you off, and freaking riding you tonight, like she can't- never do!' in addition to that before leaving she snaps my one bra strap. I didn't want too much of it; she loves to joke around.

Nevertheless, I was not liking it at all.

Jenny walks up to a group of her other friends and sits with, Lizzie, Randi, and Autumn. I overhear Jenny says 'Just look at that little promising ring on Morgan Ferguson finger. Like- she's not fooling anyone… all she is promising is that she will be taking it in the butt, uninstall mirage!' Morgan is one of the over crazed Christian, you know the type too sweet and timed, so brainwashed she thinks boys don't like girls that have sex with them.

She like Madilyn both wanted to be pure, as we all point and giggle. I am betting five dollars tonight that Jenny is going to get Morgan laid tonight at the party, all the girls pull bets on whom the lucky guy is going to be. We have talked about this… My money's on Marcel, mainly so he not all up on me. Plus, Marcel needs a girlfriend like her.

Yes, we like to poke fun at her and her for being a junior virgin. The height bet for us girls on the guy wins, and he is the one that gets to have sex with the girl, as we hold her down, legs spared, and airs pined by one of us girls. We try to get the girl drunk, or high to make it easier, and he gets into it when she loosened up. We all witch and snigger if he wants to pull out is up to him.

Madilyn is called a baby killer too by the girls because the boy we set her up with got her pregnant. I think this traumatized her so much she became gay. (There are no words for me to say, on how sorry I am for being a part of this.)

Anyways so far there are about 20 dollars on Marcel, I know for sure he is going to take Morgan's virginity tonight. I asked Maddie and Liv to bet on him. Why? So, I would be left alone. All Marcel needs is a plaything… yes- I could be a matchmaker! I don't want to go to this party, I am sick of seeing this, but to be popular, I guess I have to do what I have to do. I'll try to comfort Morgan after the fact, as I do with Maggie, after all… I went through it too.

I did even know the boy's name, it was so long ago, and it was at my first party. Just like this is Morgan's first party. Just like me, she is New blood. You never stop partying until the police, and that's when you run to the next hot spot in town, like Maddie's basement.

~*~

Back in the lunchroom- Ray leans forward and buries his face in my hair, making his voice soft and quiet. The calm sexy voice he uses to make all of the nerves in my body brighten up like many fireworks exploiting all at once. 'Don't forget. It's all about you and me tonight.' 'I

haven't forgotten,' I say- hoping my voice sounds sensual and not scared. My palms are sweating and, I beg God he doesn't try to take my hand.

Thankfully, he doesn't. Instead, he bends down and presses his mouth into mine, and he sticks his tongue in my mouth. We make out for a bit until jenny looks squeals, I swear she was foaming at the mouth, 'Not after we just eat, I could taste the beef sandwich!' Liv throws a fry in my direction; it hits me on my chest. Said- 'Stop it before I throw-up on Maddie, God I'm going to have to hose you two down.' 'Maddie- said when did you two get so- 'kissy-kissy- goo- goo?'' Ray just said, 'You just failed to see us, I'm sick of hiding it.' He was about to say it, to Maddie and Liv, 'I am falling lo…' And then he stops in mid-sentence, Jenny bounced over and she was back at our table.

What were you saying, Ray?

She asked, oh I was saying that I'm falling in like with her. Maddie and Liv just looked at one another like what hell does that mean? Jenny- 'Ah that's so cute… just save you Love for me.'

(Yapper any way a girl can get blocked I do!) Crap Ray just say you LOVE me! I was thinking grow some balls and stop being so scared! He was looking at me to say that I loved him, but I don't care how long it takes a girl should never say 'I love you' first! 'Bye, ladies,' Ray says, and moseys off, with a cool strut, and I felt like the school slut, as he walked past everyone with my lip gloss on his lips and jawline, to sit with his guy friends.

Here's another secret with boys overall:

No boy should ever… ever get up and walk away from his girl, to be with the guys. That's just a big no-no! It makes a girl feel like you don't care about her, other than to hit and quit it.

I wipe my mouth on one of Maddie's extra napkins, along with spitting Rays gum out of my mouth. When I thought nobody's looking since the bottom half of my face is saturated with Ray's saliva. There was no way I was swallowing that or chewing it! Here's another secret about Ray: I hate the way he kisses me sometimes.

Yet, when we're alone it's magical when he thinks people are looking, he gets sloppy and tries showing off. If he is trying to impress me and my friends, it's not working. The first kiss

was good enough, I kind of think he was trying to make her envious. He wouldn't cheat on me… would he? It makes me wonder if he's Mr. Right. If he can't show his love or even say it… without being a douchebag, I don't know. I am rethinking to us tonight. I don't know what was making me feel the stomach-churning the food or everything else.

Jenny boogie's back over to her other ho- friends, when Ray walked away from us. Maddie says all my stressing is just insecurity because Ray and I haven't sealed the deal yet.

Once we do, she's positive I'll feel better, and I'm sure she's right. After all, she's like an expert.

She hooked up Caden March and Scarlett Walker, and Beth Phillida, and Mindy Buck. She said the love you make makes the relationship work out. 'That you have to bang it out for it to work out.' I hope so…? I have always seemed to be able to confide in Maddie's advice. Liv just looked at her and said, how you would know, we haven't in so long. Maddie- 'That's because you have been playing around with that boy and not me… that's why.'

Liv- 'That's so Jinny leaves us alone you know that hon.'

~*~

I go into a daydream of thoughts: Like- you don't get to elect if you get hurt in this world... nevertheless, you do have some say in who hurts you. I know that I have been a little pink girly p*ssy for far too long, but I thought that was the way of life. I just don't know what I want to do tonight. I am going to get hurt one way or the other tonight. It's either going to be mentally or physically, I have such great choices to pick from, don't I? Some people don't understand the promises they're making when they make them, is he going to come through tonight? Or should I just back out now? I know what the girls think. I don't know what I should think.

Do you like someone who can't like you back, why? Because needed love… real love can be endured in a way that unneeded love cannot. Nothing ever happens like you imagine it will, it like- I'm on a roller coaster that's too wicked, my friend ride with me, and the boys and Jenny are the hills going up and down, yet they're not the ones that want to get off, and blow-chunks, it's me. Sometimes I just want it all to stop. You can love a boy so much... But you can never love a boy as much as you can miss them. And I am missing whom I thought Ray was to me right now. It's like a part of me just dyed at little.

(Little did I know the rest of me was going to be too…) I just hope that the promise- 'Just you and me' will stand as our forever. Like what we say now it okay, well last always. Shynna aka (Shylo) Woodley you haven't met her yet, but she is kind of one of us- kind of.

Like she chips into the conversions and joins up with a group when she can, like in the halls she's Just like a little sis that follows you everywhere, same thing. She said- 'You need to stop the fear of being terrified of getting left behind, or you will end up by yourself forever.

I said- 'I feel that I'm only going to be used, and not loved' She said- 'Just stop thinking with your head girl.' She is like the last to join us at lunch every day, Liv can't stand her. Yet that doesn't stop her from grabbing all of her fries when she sets down her tray next to her. She makes a halfhearted attempt to swipe her hand away, yet she wants to be popular, so she lets us do whatever. She is our 'Go-fer' if we want something, she goes for it, and I mean anything. She slaps her bouquet of roses down next to mine. She has twelve, and I feel a momentary twinge of jealousy. I guess Liv and Maddie feel- it too because they both say something like- 'What did you have to do for those?

Shylo as we call her sticks her tongue out, but the look on her face was priceless she seemed so pleased that we noticed. All of a sudden, Jenny looks at something over her shoulder, from her table and starts giggling. Just like a psycho killer, she was looking at me, and was twittering on her phone about Shylo- 'Shylo! Must have been putting out, or giving lots of handjobs to get that may flowers'!' I read the post out loud, and she said- 'Thanks a lot Kar.'

(She thought those were my words.)

Then, I said- 'I didn't say that… read this.' (I have a bad habit of reading everything out loud.) Shylo said- 'Can't a girl in this school just be liked for her persona, and have boys give her flowers because of that. We're not all sluts like Jenny… you know.' 'I know… I said; you should post that…' Shylo- 'She's not even worth it!' Shylo- calls her: Jenny 'Drama' Stevenson! Oh no! Don't even think about cutting her name down, like she did with ours- to 'Jen.' Oh no- she will punch you in the eye! Just ask Maddie how she got her black eye to freshen year.

#- Hashtag: (nicknames, table manners, and trash talk)

Chapter: 56

Love is Love

(A drawing of the two- made by one of the girls)

We all turn around. Julie Sherie is she's carrying hastily into her brown paper bag in her long pale fingers. After she read a tweet from Jenny that says- 'I saw Julie- fingering Maggie's bushy hairy p*ssy today in the library during study hall!' Then there was a follow-up post one minute later, and it read- 'Oh look now she is smelling her fingers!' Everyone in the room is laughing and staring at her. Her face is shielded behind a curtain of pale blond hair, shoulders hunched up around her ears. It's a shame to cover up those pastel sky-blue eyes, I sure they're bloodshot now.

Madilyn aka (Maddie) keeps her phone in her looker, like the good little girl that she is.

Even so, she has no friend-flowers on twitter to even know what's being said. She only has to friends on Facebook and that's her mom and dad, that's sad. So, yeah- she is in the dark as usual. Everyone in the school has Madilyn blocked so she can't send a request even if she wanted too, when you're the sped kid like her, you're just blocked out.

For the most part, everyone in the cafeteria glares at her- she's the definition of unforgettable- the bell rings; Jenney, Maddie, Liv, and shy start making that screeching piercing sound motion with their chairs, and shoes because, Julie she is walking so slowly. Like she has a stick up her ass. She hasn't been this upset science she had a sleepover a couple of years ago for us to come to that we all belled out of. (She wanted to sleep with us with the lights on… creepy!)

Walking out- I'm not sure if Julie hears us. Like Jenny can always hear us because our voices seem to carry around the room, some say we're too loud. 'That we all are ear-shattering!' Julie keeps up that same slow pace across the room, eventually reaching the door that leads out into the hallway. I'm not sure where she is going. I hardly ever see her in the classrooms. Julie has to thrust her shoulder against the door a few times before it will open, she had to be that slow that it latched! Like she's too fragile to make it work. 'Did she get our love-o-gram?' Maddie says, licking salt off her pink lips from the pretzel she ate.

Maddie nods. 'In the library. I was sitting right behind her.' She was sitting with her… because no one else would. 'Did she say anything?' I asked. 'Does she ever say anything?' Maddie said. Maddie puts one hand across her heart, pretending to be upset.

Saying- she probably did do that. She had her hand under the table most of the time. 'Then Maddie threw the one rose she got from a boy, named Antony Whiteout in the trash can in

the hall. Can you believe it? Right in front of him, me… and everyone!' I was thinking to give it to me, or at least take it home with you, that boy spent money on that. The boy was broken-hearted, just by the look on his face. Maddie looks up and says: 'Silly boy… I'm gay… I only like girls! Maybe when you cut that thing off, then we can talk.' (And she points at it.) He ran like a five-year-old girl, that just got their candy stolen!

That was mean Maddie, I said. Maddie- 'Will the dork should freaking know!' 'Okay… okay.'

I mumbled… I am not one for dumpster diving, but I fished the crud cover rose out, and read the note attached: 'I love you!' Maddie, you get a boy to say that and throw it away? Crap! This day just keeps getting better!

Freshman year Jenny one way or another found out that Julie didn't get sent a single Love-ograms.

I guess she is comparing then and now. She has a way of knowing all the school's gossip or starting it.

I put the note back in the can, I see Jenny picking it up. I overhear her saying: I get such a good Idea to her other ho-friends. So, Jenny attached a note on that one rose and duct-taped it on Julie locker. Saying- 'I bet this smells' better than that nasty p*ssy! The note said: Maybe next year you'll get some, but probably not.'

Norm Madilyn, I would feel bad, but Juliet deserves her nickname Jull's.

She's a freak in school in the sheets. Rumor has it that she the one in this video found by her mom and sis stark naked straddling daddy on the living room sofa, with it all the way in! Even her little sis Haylee even hates her, she posted the video on her cell to everyone! And that made her even more popular, I still have it in my inbox it's just that funny. You can't see her face, just her backside, and that yellow hair and that pale ass bobbing up and down on daddy.

'Oh, daddy! Give it to me daddy! Ugh- yah…!

Yah…! Yah!

YAH!!!

She got that nickname because will now everyone thinks' she would smell and taste like old man's hairy balls. None of the boys want to kiss that! My tip: 'Girls don't ever let anyone see or know where your mouth or both lips have been if you want to keep guys wanting what you got! Like, come on that's first-grade stuff!' knowing Jenny as I do, she probably said to Haylee get some dart for me on Julie to be one of us. And her sis new about her and her dad, and thought that my key, to popularity. Maybe that how Haylee got so popular so fast this year? She went from zero to head powder-pow cheerleader, I would never do that to my sis, even if she was banging daddy. Sis's should have a bound of little secrets, that no one should ever- ever know about.

Come to think of it; if Jull's is doing it, and little Haylee knows about it, you can presume she's doing it with him too. I'm just thinking he's one of those kinds of loving daddies. It takes one to know one, right? Isn't popularity just awesome! 'Like- one girl can do something, and that's fine if she's popular. But another girl can do the same very thing, and it gets everyone all hot and bothered if she's not liked by the popular's.'

Ones you're headed for something like that, it's almost impossible to dig yourself out of that whole, yeah you might as well cover yourself over with a dart because your next years are going to be pure hell. As well as payback just gets you heated even more. Even if your movie to another school, it will follow you online, that's a fact.

#- Hashtag: (Keep it clean, loving daddy, every rose comes with a thorn)

There was a thump and a bump in the night, and not the kind of thump and bump you want or want to feel and hear. Honey- hon wake up; I think there is someone in the house! Go and see! Wha- what? There someone at the foot of the bed! Last year Shy said she saw Julie in the bathroom looking spiced out, stroking her hair over and over and staring at her reflection. She said that Julie never says a word to her, she was taking off her makeup with her slave, and from that day on that year years and this one too, it looks like she stopped wearing makeup altogether, as far as I know, she gave up on herself.

Jenny hates her. I think Jenny and Julie were in a couple of the same elementary school classes, back then, and for all, I know Jenny has hated her since then. She makes the sign of an 'L' with her hand on her forehead for loser whenever Julie's around. Maddie holds up her cross on her nickels like Julie might be fallen angel because she is so white like she might jump at her

and give her the kiss of death and suck her blood or something with those fang-like teeth she has. It was

Jenny who found out Jull has peed her bed every night ever since eighth grade, so the rumor that still goes around is that she smells like pee and period blood. Some of the boys that have a metal shop class, describe her small like iron, or metal when it's hot.

I'm looking out the window and, I watch Jull's yellow hair flash in the sunlight like its catching fire, and it was… like, she lit herself on fire. We could her dumping what looked like all whole bottle of perfume on herself. And then the fame from the lighter. The pouf is was- engulfed. (I think it was a real seaside attempted. She said it was a joke afterward.)

Madilyn grabs the fire extinguisher and puts her out. Then Jenny says- 'See I told you that Madilyn was lighting Jull's fire. That was the only way to get her stink off.' It looked like something you would see in a Lifetime movie. Madilyn hugs her as she falls to the ground rolling around in the smoke. There's a darkness on the skyline as we look up, like what she and as giggle to it was a slur and a storm is rising. Mag and Jull's are getting wet. It occurs to me for the first time that I'm not exactly sure why Jenny started hating Julie in the first place, she is just as crazy as us to just get a chuckle. I open my mouth to ask her, but my girls have already moved, from the courtyard back into the hallway. Wet hair is never a good look.

Maddie says look 'a reenactment of the daddy's girls' video when she sees- Madilyn on top of Julie on the ground.' And we girls giggle.

'On the inside, I'm terrified and horrified at what I just saw.' Mr. Slimmer says sarcastically. 'Clearly, I've missed something.' 'What's going on?' I say- 'Nothing.' He looks at us like yeah right and takes Jull's to the nurse's office to go to the ER.

Jenny starts crap and we girls take the blame for it. I grab Shy's another the teacher leaves, when we were walking down the hand, pulling her back, and she turns to me. And I turn to her. 'Shyann 'Shylo' Baum!' I said whispering in her ear- 'She has ruined her life. And Maggie's too, that was no joke! She is fed up with living like that.' Shy- 'I no… but there is nothing we can do but giggle it off.

What can we do? She'll be okay. Just be glad it's not you.'

-It's buzzcut season anyway-

'She won't be swimming in the finals tomorrow. And you know she lives for that crap.

It's her life, and now the team is going to lose.

Shy- 'Ha at least she is more hairless now!'

Do your reminiscence last year she forgot to take her goggles off after morning practice, and she wore them until thread period?' then she said as we walk - 'She probably hangs all of her blue ribbons on a wall in her room over to her crib and teddy bears.' Then I thought to myself- (Shy- you don't care about what just happen to her at all!)

Then I thought out loud- 'I guess Jenny is going to win first tomorrow, she always gets the second place next to her.' Jenny always hated coming in second, even if the event was butt scratching and nose picking. It doesn't matter, she has to win. Jenny's room is cover with Red ribbons there all over the floor, next to all her unwashed closes like her skimpy undies. She has the messiest room of any girl I know. But we all know better than to say anything about it when we come over there is like no place to sit down. She has a nerve saying other people small if anything her room smells putrid. I remember the time, I sit on her used condoms from the night before, so gross, they were in her bedsheets!

Maddie and liv stop in the hall to group up. Shylo- 'Kar used to do that.

Didn't you? What's that I said? With your ribbons hang them in your baby room, for riding and petting hor-sies.' I sighed and said- 'Yes, but Jenny ripped them all down saying to grow up, that boys don't want little girls in my room. So, I quit! I have them all in a shoebox, under my bed with all my other baby girl things.'

(I thought to myself I miss all that. Like my walls seem naked, and at least back then I was riding something.) I look at that stuff every night thinking about what I have given up. And how I change so much since then and now.

That when I said: 'It's too bad they don't give out the blue ribbon for lying on your back! You all would win!' Shylo elbows me with one raised eyebrow. Then I walked away… I will always be a baby to them. Just because I am the youngest and newsiest girl they add to the group.

'Can we get back to the point?' I wave my hands, partly because I did want to hear the story, again of how I such a baby girl. Partly to take the attention off me, and the fact that I used

to be such a girly- girl dork. When I was in fifth grade, I spent more time with horses than with other humans. 'I still don't get why everyone is pissed about me being a dork on the inside.'

Maddie rolls her eyes at me as I belong at the special- Ed table. When I was trying to cover up the long story of how I got popular. They not getting it, I'm still not getting it for them though, and I sigh. It like I hear this story every day when Shy walks into homeroom. 'She has been late to homeroom every day this year because she had to park in the lower lot and haul ass to get in here.'

Like just get over it already! I am in the group now! Shylo sometimes acts like, I took her place in the group, and in a way, I did. We all bust it out at the same time and then start giggling like maniacs, when Shy walks in at the bell, with pit stands and looking like she sprinted a marathon.

Shylo- 'Shut the freak up! I say- 'You're just sore because I am hotter than now.' 'Don't worry, kar-z, I don't want to be in the baby seat any longer, you can freaking have it, I don't what to be like you! You're still such a dork!' 'If you guys throw down, I'm putting money on you Kar.' Said Maddie. 'Yeah, we've got your back,' says Liv.

Shylo yells and it echoes in the hall 'Oh, like I am afraid of the two-p*ssy sucker!' Maybe we should get back Liv says in her shy voice that she gets when she's trying to say something serious. 'Isn't it kind of weird how that stuff happens?

One minute we're all fine and the next we want to kill each other. How everything spirals out from everything else? It not like Jenny made her give her a spot in the group for me.

Even if she did, I can't help it! 'I didn't steal it. I got it fair and square,' Jenny protests, three weeks ago, bringing her hand down on the table for importance in the group. And that Shy is losing popularity. I remember this because Maddie's water flipped over, soaking some fries. This makes us start laughing again. Shylo has been losing her popularity slowly since her sophomore year.

Many because she wants to do her own thing. And doesn't ask us what we think, we all stick together if she wants to be like us, she needs to tell us everything.

'I'm serious we need to go!' Liv raises her voice to be heard over us.

Maddie- 'It's like a web Shylo, you know? Everything's connected. You keep too many things from us like dating a boy that's so beneath you and what we think.' Shylo- 'Have you been smoking dad's stash again Liv? Your girl hides stuff from me, it's not all me!'

(The late bell rings.)

I say- 'It's okay girls, I made up some fake hall pass, with Mr. Pamper signature on them.' I give one to every one of us except Shy. Shy walking down the hall says- 'Yah go and freak your teacher some more you skank, and let Ray lick it off!' Good thing all the class doors were closed. The only teacher to look out at us was Mr. P and he just looked and shook his head and waved at us. Then he pointed at me and give me a sexy little wink. Maddie said- 'He is- so going to Kar!' (I just sighed lustily: and said- I no!)

#- Hashtag: (put in like, insta hate, and that b*tch is on fire)

You know Maddie she always has to say something colorful. Saying- 'You know I don't like her- Shylo, I became a lesbian because of girls, because girls are beautiful, strong, and compassionate. But that girl just sucks in every way, she sucks hard then, I suck on Liv's pink vagina!' I look at Maddie and Liv and say- 'It okay, I would certainly never propose that any lesbian should be ashamed of her sexual preference like she just did. You're my true friends and thank you for being there for me. She just wishes she had a love for you to do.' When they thought no one was looking other than me they kiss on the lips. 'People will stare so make it worth their while.' Liv said after the make out. 'Hey- Kar you want to Join in?' I said-

'Maybe another time… Maddie.'

Then, Maddie said quickly- 'I am going to hold you to that, my place for the night, we're all going to all shower together, and users will use the handheld showerhead on each other, to we all come! What do you say?' I said- 'Um- um okay… sound like dirty girl fun!' Maddie said with a little girl giggle- 'Don't worry, I'll take control or tell you what to do, and you'll feel so-ooooo good.'

Then, Liv said- 'I'll wash your hair for you and bubble you up with my hands and body wash! It's going to be so much fun to do this with you! You cool with that?' I said- 'Okay… after the party, I'll need some loving, I'll require some stress release.' (I was thinking… I wish Ray or Mr. P wanted me to come for them that much!) (In my mind I was thinking that just got a little too weird, but I'll try it.)

#- Hashtag: (Pluck and suck, three girls dropping the soap, and that burning itch)

~*~

After the next class end, I was only there for like five minutes, our gals met up in the hall. 'I'm serious!' Maddie raises her voice to be heard over us. 'Everything's connected.' This is all it takes to get us going. This is a joke we've had with Shy for the years because she is such a baby about losing her popularity. You pick on me; I'll pick on you! I was picked on in the past it's nice to do the picking now! Her daddy is a lawyer; Shy says- 'If you keep it up, he is going to get you your asses.' Jenny- 'Sure in his little monkey suit.' Jenny claims he's secretly a hippie stoner, and like alternative rock. She would know she has been with him like that, or so she says. As we're laughing, doubling over, Shy turns pink. 'You guys never listen to me,' she says, but she's fighting a smile. Maddie- 'Shy shut up, and go fix you top you like you have a un-a-boob.' Shylo- 'Oh no one's just bigger than then the other, puberty freaked me! We giggled as we know. It's funny looking at the little colorful kiddy band-aid covering her gigantic zit on her face. Then she had to an add-in. 'Like I have to pluck hair off my nips too, do you guys do that?

Ugh! We all said! (TMI! Or Gross!)

Shylo could use a day at the spa, just saying, I don't then she has even been through a full body waxing, it would be good payback. I would pay to see that. Ha! (I could see it now- the girl doing it, we need more max! I need more for this girl's vagina. Lol!)

Nah she's not that bad, but she needs something! She takes a cramped-up notebook paper and throws it at me. 'I read once that if a girl that's made fun so much and has a connection to God, he can give her powers, which can case thing to happen, like this rainstorm. Freaky!'

'Jenny yeah, well, one of your farted back there did you smell that. Me- 'I think that was a little crap.' Jenny- 'Maybe that could've caused this little blackout in the lunchroom.' We snigger, we all know it was Jenny that let it rip, that's why she got up the first time. I remember, Maddie, Liv and I were laughing at something not that funny, and Jenny and Shy keep throwing fries back and forth. I try to say they're wasting perfectly good food, there are starving kids in Africa. But Jenny snorted so hard she can barely get the words out; it came out the other end though.

Even Jenny goes crazy at this, and suddenly we're all trying it. Oh, not the peeing part the other part. Laughing and sneezing and snorting at the same time.

Everybody's staring at us, but we don't care. After about a million sneezes I did feel something down there, Jenny leans back in her chair, clutching her stomach and gasping for breath. 'Mr. P said there was a major thunderstorm warning for surrounding parts.' This sets us off again because it was obvious, and Mr. P sometimes acts like us teens when he's freaking out. He even sits with us time from time.

I and the girls all decide to cut the seventh period and just hang in the hallways.

Maddie had French, which she can't stand, and I have I think English, I don't even know. We cut the seventh period a lot together, it could be Health or something dumb like that. We're second- semester seniors, so it's like we're expected not to go to class or missing anything. It's been the same crap all four years. Plus, I hate my English teacher like I do with them all but Mr. P. My English teacher sucks, she's always going off on tangents and yelling at us to pay attention.

Sometimes, I'll zone out for a few minutes, and all of a sudden, she'll be talking about underwear in the eighteenth and how she can see mine, proving Global warming, and that we have all evolved in time. Even though she's probably only in her sixties, I'm pretty sure she's losing her freaking mind. She dissents like me because, I am sexy as hell, and she's just icky! She looks like she has and few black and grey pubes, on her chin.

That's how it started with my pap: to he would be talking and talking and the effects, of point A, switched with point B. and I would get confused. When my pap was still alive, we would visit him, and even though young, I remember thinking: I hope I die young before I get old! Officially you need a special pass signed by your parents and the administration to leave campus during the school day, so if we can fake it, we just raise hell in the halls, or say freak it, and leave anyways. For a long time, one of the perks being a senior was getting to leave campus whenever you wanted. You don't give a crap when you're a senior like you do as like a freshman.

Like, I said my school has got a reputation for one of the highest teen suicide rates in the country. The nickname for it other than Clit high is Suicide High. We had three girls hang by ropes, five-car crashes, ten OD's, and one used a gun, and that was just this year so far. Maddie almost died this year after she cut her wrists with a razor blade, but she's okay now. She got cute tattoos to cover the scars, one is a dragonfly and the other a topless mermaid! The teachers don't

like that one, but us girls we do, so that's all that matters. It's not like there that big... there rather small. Sometimes she has to put a band-aid or makeup on the girl.

Oh, yeah and then one day a bunch of kids left campus and drove off that big yellow bridge. Anyway, after that, the school forbade anyone from leaving school during the day without special permission or singing out in the office. It's kind of stupid if you think about it. That's like finding out that kids are bringing vodka to school in water bottles and forbidding anyone to drink water. Like I know girls that soak their temps in alcohol, and use them throughout the day to get a little buzz, there is always a way to do what we want! Luckily, there's another way to get off campus: you go through the bathroom window and then there is a hole in the fence beyond the gym by the football field, which we call the Smoker's' alley since that's where all the smokers hang out, make out and even inject! No one's around, though, when Jenny and I slip through the fence and get started across the grass.

In a little while, we'll come on to Route 279. Everything is still and frozen, leaves crack under our shoes, and our breath rises in solid silvery clouds.

...Clit is about three miles away from three rivers- or what you can call the point where all the waterway intersects. But only about a half-mile from a small strip of dingy stores we've named the Strip Row. It's the same comer where all the desperate old guys pick up young girls like us for a BJ!

Jenny has done it for $100. It's a good way for her to get gas money. There's a gas station, a there are shops with top, and haircutters, a Chinese restaurant and family place, and some other gay places, that no one cares about. Chinese that once made Liv sick for three days.

(And again, she thought was preggers.)

There is a random card gallery store where you can buy pink glittery ballet dancer figurines, teddy bears and snow globes and crap like that. Too bad they don't have a- 'I'm sorry your friend just got an STD card.'

I know we must look like total freaks. Yeah, no teens stomping around in boots or highs along the road, in our tiny little skirts and are tops tied up, tank slightly showing in the front, our jackets flapping open to show off our sexy flat bullies, and dangly jewelry. We pass the

Gateway Clipper Fleet on our way to Primanti's.

We Look over off the way hanging over the rail we spot Bridget Semen and Alex Martello, look down the street, not too much time has passed, there's Jenny bent over a bench a boy is taking off her undies, I saw them being thrown down on the walkway, she just made some cash.

'Ohoo, scandal,' Jenny says groaning, raising her eyebrows, when she about too… after getting beat from behind, and she stands up fully with his stuff all over the backside and skirt. Maddie snaps a pic and sends it to Shy-, and Shy- sends it off to everyone even Ray. Maddie's payback for Liv being with a boy, I guess. Although it's an only half scandal, he did worn-ed-her that he was going to pull his man gun out and shot. Everyone knows that Jenny comes back to school, with a lot of cheating stuff on her every day.

Anna Doosan texts about it every day too, saying she such a slut, you can see it in her outfit! Jenny doesn't care she's pleased to be the school's' slut, she wears- her stains with pride!

What do I think? I think it's cheap and tacky!

But, she's popular, so I just go with it. It's not like it's my ass getting a reaming. Sometimes I act like she's not with me on the streets she's that crazy. Me and Maddie and Liv, shop, and let her have her sexy time. But we know the kids in school think we do it because she does like it like that. That's why all the boys want me, they think I am loose and easy. We girls joke saying that Jenny has nothing left… nothing but what looks like a hanging ham, meat flaps, beef curtains, you get the idea! Jenny now has 50 for gas and 50 for beer pot and crap like that.

We are outside of Bridget's family cafe it's a tremendously- Catholic type of place. It's next to the old stone church. The restaurant named after Bridget is age, she's pretty and clean-looking, like every time you see her like in the girl's room she's just scrubbed her face very hard. Bridget apparently, she's saving herself for marriage, unlike us girls, which gave it all way around thirteen. I wish I would have kept it, it's cute and sweet to be that way on your wedding night.

That's what she says, anyway, although Maddie and Liv both think Bridget might be a closet lesbo. So, she can get off without offending God. Because there is nothing in the Bible about masturbating with another girl being a sin. Yet Bridget is only a junior she may change her mind, and just take it in the ass like most girls as her type does. There is nothing in the Bible

about that either. Just ask a priest or altar boy. But if the rumors are true, she's already had sex with at least five girls and a possible boy… hook up- up the poop-shoot! Do I believe it?

Nah! She started the rumors herself, so everyone would stop picking on her about it.

She's one of the few kids who does come from money. She doesn't need to- freak for a buck! Her mom's a banker, and dad runs the restaurant. Jenny is not what you would call poor, she just a hussy! Bridget, she lives in one of the nice yet crafty condos next to here in strip row. She works as a waitress on the weekends, we love to make fun of her, little apron with her name on it twice, outside the window! I remember Jenny made a cardboard sign one time that said- 'Bridget shows- T*ts for Tips!' and pressed it against the window!

One old biddy lady dropped her fork and her mouth… like most did in the restaurant. It was a good show! You can see it on YouTube! 'Let's go in and say hi,' Jenny says, reaching for my hand interlacing my finger into hers, even though we were banned… I try to hang back. 'I'm going through embarrassment and being pulled. My face has to be so red! I feel as hot as Mrs. Doubtfire when she set her ta-tas on fire!' Jenny- 'Come on Karly … what's up to your ass?' I said- 'A cotton string that I played $35 for!' He- he- he- Nice! Jenny said- as giggled.

#- Hashtag: (a PDA give away, shop till you drop, and hookie)

I let myself be dragged inside. She pulls a pack of small pills from the waistband of her skirt. 'Here. Take two of these pills, it will chill you out.' Jenny always carries something like that on her, 24/7, like she's packing drugs like I pack candy. 'Just for a second we'll sit down, I promise.'

A bell jingles as we come through the door. A woman is flipping through Pitt-post newspaper behind the counter. She looks at us, then looks down again when she realizes we're not there to order. And that we are young. Jenny slides right up too next to me in the booth, never keeping her hands to herself, you know where they were on me. I was leaning elbows on the table, hoping no one could see where her hands where her.

This was her plan to embarrass me, good thing the drugs were kicking in. Because about that time I was about to scream. Then our friends Stacey and Becky. Strolled in through the door. (Ding-a-ling-a-ling!) The sled into our open both on the other side of the table.

Becky said- 'Jenny what are you doing to her?' Jenny- 'Nothing!' Me- 'I have the look on my face is like I am trying to push a baby out!' Stacey said with confusion- 'Okay then?' Becky is kind of, sort of friends with a lot of people, like us, she bumps around, meanwhile, she deals pot and stuff like that out of a shoebox, and she keeps under her bed in his bedroom next to her girly things, that her mom and dad should never see her using. She is Jenny's link for her stash. Sometimes Jenny marks up the price and passes it around the school.

She and I have an- I know you- but I don't know your friends, as that's pretty much the maximum of our dealings. Stacey, she's cool mellow, she's just your stranded emo chick. She's just there… for something to do, and maybe for a coffee. She's actually in English class with me, though she shows even less than I do. Our school is a flipping joke, learning is a joke, girls in the USA, are the butt of the joke. The baby-boomer doesn't want us to know anything.

So, they can have all the money and work. That's what I think, keep us dumb, and so when don't know what you're taking away. Like I would make a better president, than the one we have in now. Girls like us are never going to be anything more in this world then sluts… and that's a fact. Now and then she'll say something like, 'This 500-word writing assignment we have to do blow, huh?' but other than that we don't talk much.

'Hey, hey,' Jenny says. 'You going to Marcel's party tonight?' Becky's face lights up saying 'yes I am going with Zack Woods,' Jenny- 'Oh he's a cute boy.' Becky- 'So Karly who are you going with?' Jenny chips in cutting me off at the pass. Saying- 'I going with Ray tonight someone has to make him a man! A baby girl she doesn't seem to know how to squeezes it in.' My face is red and splotchy, I was mad and sick all at the same time.

Plus, I remember what he said to me, I kissed him. I just said- 'I hook up with someone when I get there.' I did know what to say. Becky winked at me and said- 'I got yah.' Stacey got embarrassed like me too because she was caught in a lie, saying she was going with Sam… when Sam was going with Lizzy or so Jenny said. Jenny would know…! Stacey is so blatant by saying… she was going with me, she knew what Jenny was doing, I think. I was seeing psychedelic colors. So, I was like- 'Yeah, sure whatever.' At this time, we all had our food, we decided to say and eat because we were chatting and taking up space, or so the woman said. Jenny could not believe she said that to me. Or maybe she's was just reacting to the lousy food. I wouldn't be surprised if she said you can't do that. Jenny makes her voice extra perky.

'Um… I don't know if you can't do that, or you would what too. Stacey- 'Maybe. Gotta see…' okay said Jenny along with 'It's going to be super fun.' I said- 'Are you going to bring Bridget? She's such a sweetheart.' Even though everyone I am friends with thinks Bridget is annoying- she's always really cheerful and she wears T-shirts with lame slogans like: 'I want you to talk nerdy to me.'

(No lie…)

But, Jenny despises, everything about her also. Becky went to like all the bathrooms around the city, and school, and wrote all over the across the wall- If you like white trash, and want a sucking blow Job to call me Bridget at… And she had her cell number, with a drawing of a penis framing it. The situation is beyond awkward, so I blurt out, I point at the meat congealing in a grayish sauce in a bowl on the table, next to two cookies and a sad-looking orange slices. 'Roast beef,' Stacey says. She seems relieved that she has changed the topic. Jenny gives me a look, annoyed, but I keep rattling on with her about food. 'You should be careful about eating here.

The beef once poisoned Maddie. She threw up for, like, four days straight. She swears she found a hair in it. As soon as I say this Jenny picks up her frock and takes an enormous bite, looking up and smiling at me as she chews and it's the sticks out her tongue.

So, I can see the food in her mouth. I'm not sure whether she's doing it deliberately to gross me out, but it seems like it. 'That's nasty,

Stevenson,' Becky says, but she's smiling at her. Jenny rolls her eyes, like you all a total waste of our time.

'Come on, Kar.' Let's- 'Dine and dash!' She reads the bill, and I crack up and rankle up my nose when we all make a face of shock when seeing the $51.95 bill. One the food sucks and tasted like crap. Two none of us had that kind of money on us. Other than Jenny and she was not spending it on us and that meal.

Jenny balls up the little slip of paper and let it flutter to the ground. 'Useless.' I take a deep breath. 'The doing this stuff always makes me sick, we run everything gray out and blurry, as we run knocking tables over in our way. 'Oh, what a rush Jenny says, better than sex!' 'Tell me about it I say!' Jenny puts a hand on her stomach. 'You know what I need?' I said- 'No what?'

'A jumbo cup of Sweet Fogs yogurt!' I say, smiling. This another thing we can't bring ourselves to abbreviate. Knowing Jenny, she'll just put her mouth on the spout and gulp it down and run.

Me- I like to have a cone or something. 'A jumbo cup frozen yogurt,' Jenney booms in my eyes she like a two-year-old I swear.

Even though we're both freezing, we order double- chocolate soft-serve with sprinkles and crushed peanut butter cups on top, whip cream, and cherry, which we eat on our way back to school, puffing on our fingers to keep them warm. We pass Liv and Maddie at the smoker's alley. We have exactly seven minutes left until the bell for the eighth period, and Jenny pulls my head behind the fields, so she can have a cigarette without listening to Liv and Maddie chatting about how they want to be living alone for a while. That's what it looks like they're doing, anyway, trying to make out. Jenny can stop them all the time.

Jenny grabbing my one shoulders, whispering to me stand there so I can put my underwear on. The cigarette in her hand is burned so close to my hair I'm positive it's going to catch fire, and I picture what happened to Jull's, her whole head just going up like that, like a match.

Jenny finishes her cig and we drop our yogurt cups right there, on top of the frozen gloomy dying leaves and crushed cigarette boxes, used condoms, bloody pads, ripped out temps, plastic bags, and trash cans next to dumpsters half jam-packed with icy rainwater on top. I'm feeling apprehensive about tonight- half dismay and half exhilaration- like when you overhear thunder and know that any second, you'll see lightning ripping across the sky, or like when your boy squeezes his through your teeth in your mouth. I shouldn't have skipped out on English today. It has given me too much time to think. And intellectual thoughts never did anybody any good, no matter what your educators and close relative and the book-club and honorary society freaks tell you. Yet I don't think I am thinking rationally right now, because of the Skittles I popped, I am still seeing the rainbow, yet not as bad as I was.

We skirt the perimeter of the fields, walkways, and steps, and go up along the senior wall. It's two concrete retaining walls that are long and high, they kind of make an outdoors make out the hallway. They have all the lettermen's graffiti on them with school crap stats and their names.

Along with a makeshift memorial of all the kids that died this year in the end. Stacey and Becky are still standing half-obscured behind the gym. Liv and Maddie are darting from tree to tree.

(Like a scene out of mission impossible. You know with the sexy trombone music in the background.)

Becky is on her second cigarette at least when she sees- Marcel flirting with some freshman I think her name is Sam. A tiff has a string about. You know how freshmen are they'll hit anything for popularity. I feel a momentary rush of satisfaction: Ray and I hardly ever fight about that, at least not about anything serious. That must mean something is working in our favor.

#- Hashtag: (freaky chick kicking the bucket, brain freeze, and food on the run)

I found out later that day that Jull's didn't make it. Her burns were just that bad, and she inhaled the flames and brunt out her lungs. I will never forget Jenny saying- 'Guys it's so true she is a flamer-r-tte. It's probably better that she did die, she wouldn't like… have much of a face left, and what she did wouldn't get her any guys. I now know what to believe… like with heaven or hell or if we are just dead. Yet I think that at least she is in a better place and out of her misery.

(You don't know until you go through it too.)

If she would have lived there wouldn't be anyone that wanted to take care of her anyways, she was just a burden on everyone. No one cared or even shed a tear for her, there was no moment of silence, there were no memories of her at all because she was not popular. On the kids, that means something here is immortalized. Her only memories within these walls will be: 'The crazy b*tch that light herself on fire because she was caught fingering the retarded sped girl.' I feel somewhat bad, but it's not me so… life goes on. Like really why should I care?

She's nothing to me or my friends. Yes, it's cold and calculated, but sometimes pulling the plug is the only thing you can do just ask Jenny.

She has seen many perish in front of her eyes.

(And a lot of it was brought on because of her. If there is a hell that's where she is going to go, for all the blood on her hands.)

~*~

Anyways, looking at them fighting. 'Trouble in couple heaven,' I say. 'More like trouble in the low life square,' Jenny says. She said that because both of them live in low-income apartment buildings, which are run down, its Pitts form of trailer trash. One step lower is living in a cardboard box homeless like a bum.

'Ha- they deserve one another,' I think. We start cutting across the teachers' lot when we see Ms. Handcock, the vice-principal, squeeze through amongst the cars, trying to sniff out the smokers, and looking in the car windows to see who's cut classes to go a have sex in their cars. She is also looking for cars that are in the wrong spots. Looking for lazy kids that do what to walk down the lots.

She looks- for kids that hideout between the teachers' cars too. Yet we are always one step ahead of her, we're sneaky like that. Like the setting of Jenny's car alarm with the remote so she goes to her car thinking someone is messing around up there as we run. Ms. Handcock has some crazy campaigns against people who smoke. Along with drug programs. I heard that her mommy died of lung cancer, and her son passed in an OD five years ago. If you get caught smoking by Ms. Handcock you get four after-school detentions, no if's and's or but's. I have never gone to it; I always find a way out of it.

(As I said- If you're like me and my friends you can get away with anything.) Jenny hysterically rifles in her bag for her gum and pops two pieces in her mouth. To cover her bad breath.

'Piss'n crap,' she says. I asked Jenny why she puffs on the grass so much. 'A b*tch always smokes, and you know I am a badass b*tch,' says Jenny. 'You can't get busted just for smelling like smoke,' I say, even though Jenny knows this. She likes the drama, though. Amusing how you can know your gal's so well, but you still end up playing the similar games as they do next to them, I don't puff or take hits anymore, but as of now, I small as I do. I use the vapor e-cigs, now and then, just because it's soothing.

She ignores me when I say you should use one of these… 'How's my breath?' She breathes in my face with her mouth in my nose. I started thinking about Ray and my knees got weak, or maybe it was from Jenny rank breath… I don't know either way. I am wondering what he was doing and doing it with. I was thinking about tonight and what I was going to do. 'It smells like you been sucking on some bananas!'

Ms. Handcock hasn't detected us yet, and that's awesome. She's making her way along the rows, occasionally stopped with her big fat wide ass up in the air. You could park a Cadillac on that ass! The same as that probably hasn't been taped in years, that why she's so prickly to us hot girls. Bent over to peer underneath the cars looking for bags of nose candy and junk in the wheel wells, and also to see if someone might be squash in underneath, trying to light up or make a deal go down, or waiting to go down on someone.

All she ever finds are used up a pair of girl's undies covered in boy's baby gravy, and her girly goo! She has a collation in her office… I swear, that why her office smells like sex and candy.

And other trash like that.

There's a reason why everyone calls her 'The Rock Cock,' The Rock for the prison and Cock for her last name and being a d*ick. This is behind her back. 'Ha, it's like we're escaping from Alcatraz! And if she sees you it's like the running of the bulls… there a joke there did you get it?' I hesitate, looking back toward the fields and gym. I don't particularly like what the other girls are doing now, but anyone who's ever been through high school understands you have to stick together against parents, teachers, and cops. And as of now Becky and Stacey have their plan and we have ours.

Running form, the high up… It's one of those imperceptible blurred lines: us against them. You just know this, like you know where to sit in class and whom to talk within the lunchroom, without even knowing how you know. Got it? They should be with us now if they're really in the group. Liv and Maddie are following our path back. 'Should we go back and warn them?' I ask Jenny, and she pushes me, and I lose balance on one foot as she is saying- nowhere good.'

'Screw it,' she finally says.'

'They can take care of themselves their big girls.' 'And I was thinking to myself, and I'm, not right?' As if to emphasize to Jenney's pointed finger, the bell for the final period rings out and she gives me a shove. 'Come on Karly.' She's right, as usual. After all, it's not like they've ever done anything for me. So why should I save their ass if they get busted? They wouldn't do it for me. It's every girl for herself when you get busted. Becky and Stacy scram apart never a good

thing. With the path they're going down one is going to end up in her trap. My money is on Stacy for getting busted.

Chapter: 57

Olden times friendship

I think that Jenny and I became started becoming friends in seventh grade. Jenny picked me out. I'm still not certain why she did. After years of trying, I had only just clawed my way up from the social bottom to the social middle, yet at least not I am a social butterfly and not a bug that needs a squashing. Jenney's has seemed to be popular since like first grade when she moved here. In the class she was the leader that how it all starts; that was the year we did a play of 'The Wizard of Oz,' I was Dorothy and she was the 'Wicked Witch of the West.'

(So- fitting to her personality he- he.)

And in sixth grade, when we all performed

Romeo and Juliet in English, I had to play

Romeo because boys weren't allowed to kiss girls yet, and Jenny was Juliet, boy that was one awkward little girl kiss, yet after that, she seems to like me more or something.

(I was 'Kissed by Death' back then.) I think that pretty much gives you an idea.

She's the kind of person who makes you feel plastered and horny just by her being nearby like precipitously the world's boundaries are clouded and all of the colors are rustled together in a steak. I've never told her that. She'd make fun of me for lazing out on her. (In a way it reminds me of the novel, Liv and the girls were reading about that girl Nevaeh.)

'A girlfriend is someone who knows all about you, yet still loves you anyway.' 'Truth is- everybody is going to hurt you. You just got to treasure the ones worth suffering for.' 'It's the friends you can text up at 3 a.m. that matter, like

Madilyn she will always text back.'

Jenny only talks to boys at night or turns her phone off. Some nights she'll hear me out on the phone, but not for me… only to get the scoop.

Anyway, the summertime before seventh grade a bunch of us was at Riverview Swimming Pool kiddy party this was my first real party I ever went too. Lizzy Lovestein was showing off by doing cannonballs and jack-knifes down on the deep end, but really, she was showing off the fact that between April and June she'd developed a pair of 36C cup boobs the biggest of any girl there at the time. As she jiggled, I thought for sure she was going to pop out of her top little girl top that was like five sizes too small.

I was so jealous I was barely out of the A size almost filling in a 28B! I remember this… all of a sudden Jenny came up to me, eyes shining. She'd never spoken to me before other than in school when she had to. 'You've had to come and see this,' she said, clutching my arm. Her breath smelled like root beer float.

She pulled me into the locker room, where all the girls had piled their bags and their changes of clothes. Lizzy bag was lavender and had her initials marked in white needlework on the sides. Jenny had has gone through it, for the reason that she directly crouched down and reached for a clear zipper case, like the kind we all had to store pencils, highlighters, and erasers in when we were like first or second graders. 'Look!' She held it up, rattling it. Inside where three U tampons. 'Me being me I asked why are they different colors?'

Jenny just giggles- 'Saying they make them like that to look cuter.' And yes- we took them, so we would have one for the day our period would start! I snatched one and Jenny stashed one. I don't remember how it started, but suddenly Jenny and I were running around the pool, checking girls are age and older bags gathering up all the tampons and pads moving fast so no one would see, doing this made me dizzy in a good way this is the first time I got that rush with Jenny.

Jenny and I were talking, and not just talking but laughing, and not just laughing but laughing so hard I had to squeeze my legs together to keep from peeing out of my suit bottoms.

Then we ran up on the high dive and started throwing handful after handful of tampons down onto the pool party below. Jenny was shouted, 'Lizzy just had her first period, and she has to plug her p*ssy up!' We were throwing them down on her like confetti! Some of the tampons twirled down into the water, and all the guys looked mortified, yet some had thrown them on her, and she started to cry.

Quickly pushing and shoving to get out of the pool, was in a full-on panic. That is when Shy moved in for the kill- she was Jenny's best friend at the time. She grabbed Lizzy's goodies, and bikini bottom and pulled the plug out by the sting, and the blood started to show in the water all pink.

Shy dunked her and swam away, that is when Lizzy swam over to the diving board ass showing to get out, she claimed out and ran the length of the Olympic sized pool dripping and shaking to get around everyone, while the rest of us nearly died laughing at the sight of her new hair and a blood-covered vertical smile that was showing. That is how Shy become popular, she did Jenny dirty work for her.

It reminded me of the time my parents took me to the Kenny Wood when I was about in the fourth grade and made me get on one of the big coasters. My legs not able to stop shaking and my feet got a tingling feeling on the bottom side of them like they were itching to get out of a pair of hot shoes: I couldn't stop thinking about how easy it would be to fall out, how high up we were.

After my mom got the picture, they take of you on the ride, I started laughing and couldn't stop at how scared yet thrilled I was. Standing on the high dive with Jenny got me exactly in the same way. It's like I started craving more and more of that feeling too. It feels like that twenty-six seconds when you have a girly eruption and shaking because of it so good.

Successively, I did that… and Jenny I was besties. Liv came in not much before I did after she and Jenny were in girl scouts camp together in the summer before eighth grade. Like I said Maddie moved to here around freshman year. Yet they rank higher up than me… I am still the baby of the group, even though I been in it longer. At one of them in the beginning parties of the year, I saw Jenny hooking up for the first time with Alec Shane, whom Jenny had a prepubescent puppy love crush on for six months. I saw him taking her virginity, neither one of them knew what they were doing. I remember Jenny saying ouch, and it was over in less than a minute.

(And by no means am I saying that underage sex is okay! Don't do it! I ask this of you now, do this for me, save it for someone you love! Like just because I make bad choices doesn't mean you should. Just because I was stupid like my friends doesn't mean you should be too. I know I shouldn't be looked up too. Hell, my little sis Kellie is becoming more like me every day.

'Like how a small spark can rage into a frost fire, I never wanted to be so distinctive, slaying innocents with my ignorance.' I know am not a good role metal for anyone! Don't look up to me, since I would be a fake idol, a fake hero...!

Ha- the gag that the gods portray on me... it's all right, I accepted the joke. I am a joke!)

I remember those days like every person believed Jenny would murder Liv.

(Funny they knew she would… nevertheless, they had their money on the wrong girl in the group.) But the next Monday at school Liv was at our lunch table, and she and Jenny were hunched over a plate of wavy fries, giggling and acting like they'd known each other forever. It's a love and hates thing…! Yet we all stay friends regardless, even though Liv can sometimes be trying, I think deep down she's the politest, gentlest of any of us. She is trying because she is so fragile, she gets hurt effortlessly. She seems to attract that too.

Even though they don't always try too, they hurt her deeply. Maddie is not always good for her either, she speaks without thinking. Maddie and Liv like suck off each other for good or bad, like they can move without each other even if what they saying and doing is cruel sometimes it gets physical, right down to hair pulling and catfighting. Like when Maddie's pissed, she can claw you! Liv she just goes sight for the hair.

'When I first started Junior high school, I was just like Lizzy, I used to go home and cry, at night. But after about two months of being terrified and miserable, I found out that if you keep away from everyone, they keep away from you. Maybe that's why Jenny started liking me?

Even though I was kicked down, I keep asking for more. The only reason I never tried to transfer is that when my mother works late, I go home and babysit my sis. It would never have worked out; I could've done that if I went to online school. Either way, it was difficult to back then.'

(I'll never forgive myself for what I did to all these innocent girls, and yes even the stupid boys too. I have to live with that over and over. Killing others emotion Madilyn, so I could live thrillingly in their popularity death. Its ether destroys them, or they will destroy you. If you get them to look bad you look good. I have to relive that, and I am betting I have to answer to someone for it. The question is who?)

#- Hashtag: (wannabe, unfollow me, and pool party plug up)

Nevaeh

Book: 8

Young Taboo

Notice: In Pennsylvania:

- Children less than 13 years old cannot grant consent to sexual activity.
- Teens between the ages of 13 and 15 cannot consent to sexual activity with anyone who is four or more years older than them.
- People ages 16 and older can legally consent to sexual activity with anyone they choose, as long as the other person does not have authority over them as defined in Pennsylvania's institutional sexual assault statute.
-

Statutory Sexual Assault
It is considered a felony statutory sexual assault when:

- one person is 13 and the other is 17 or older
- one person is 14 and the other is 18 or older
- one person is 15 and the other is 19 or older
-

Institutional Sexual Assault
Pennsylvania also recognizes that power imbalances in certain relationships make consent impossible, regardless of age. It is considered felony institutional sexual assault when sexual activity occurs with an employee/agent of a:

- School (teacher/coach)
- State or county jail
- Personal care/group home
- Other licensed residential facility serving youth

Young taboo- feeling that- I once knew you, like the way wind once blow, it was always you, I knew, from the start, till the end, it was our time to spend, now it's the end, what do we have left to spend, what will I send, when we're reaching the end. Too young, to fast never realized that I was going too fast, the day goes by in a blink of an eye, too dumb to see, it was all you and me.

Chapter: 58

Party time Part 1

After school, we go to Maddie's. When we were little, like freshman year and even some of the sophomore year, we would sometimes stay in her room and put on x-out and plucking our eyebrows into that fine little line, and coloring our hair with highlights, and order pizza, cramming down as much as we could eat.

Those days are going, we can't get fat. Now Jenny hardly eats anything, and if she does, she can hardly keep it down. I think maybe that's what I get so lightheaded, I only eat like once a day now. Jenny back then had a little extra around the middle, and now you can see her ribs, she even has that two-defined line on her tummy that goes into her underwear.

I remember sneaking around late at night in her hose stilling cookie from the jar on the top shelf in the old wood cabinet, that is also where her mom would hide her cigarettes that Jenny loved also, and the condoms were in a trinity box on top of the fridge, I sorry but I find that hilarious.

At that time, we would stretch out on one her, old enormous worn-out couches and watch, TV or movies until we fell asleep in our nightshirts'-the TV in Maddie's living room is like 80 inches it's like being in a movie theater our legs tangled together under an enormous fleece blanket. Maddie and liv are always entangled more passionately then Jenny and me on the loveseat! Maddie has an ancient TV in her room from the 1990's it sucks and is small, it's one of those with the big back on it, and the color is green, like looking into a fish tank. It's funny her mom and dad don't have money blinds on the windows, yet they have a big ass TV. You can sometimes see the people in the next condo overlooking over at us like we can see them get'n busy in their room! Yet nothing beats the hot guy taking a leak in room 302, he looks to be in his late twenties.

He takes the boxes off at 10 pm and we get a free show. He knows we can see him that why he makes it look inflexible you no more personable. Jenny and we girls love to press upon the glass, and just have fun and be a little crazy, like lifting our nighties and flash the goods. Facebook stocking gets boring quickly anymore, so some nights the webcam comes out too. After her mom and dad are asleep… like it's more fun to be bad! Like we all have profiles and fake names because none of us are eighteen yet. Any- how's mine is 'Angel Pink Wings 01'

Maddie goes by: 'Mad kitty 69' Jenny goes by:

'Ms. Little Lover 14' Liv goes by: 'Olivia O 123' Yet everyone knows her by Liv so that name is okay- I guess. We make good money-

'Double Clicking the Mouse.'

You would not believe all the perv's on this cam. the site, just wanting to see us doing it. Like old guys like our PE teacher! Man- that I didn't even think new how to turn on a computer. Just like him, I guess they need too to see more of us close up. We have our checks mailed to Jenny's college boyfriend's PO Box. Me this is what I do and yes- I come for you all, I just put in fake blue hair dye in, and have fake long lashes, and put in my blue contacts, and you don't even know me. And then pen in more eyebrows. Fake, fake, fake, fake FAKE! Boys don't like it when you fake it or do they look at me, that why I am Bi.

Chatting, with them all is good, yet don't send me a three-inch d*ick, like that boy, I don't want to see it, tip me higher, and you'll see the top come off mother freakers.

Ninja is my highest, I am flirty see me here, here as of now, I love you all I say. (Squealing yells) my top comes off slowly, don't I like Katie Parry, (Yes, show us your p*ssy. One of the guys typed.)

I don't feel like it tonight, maybe. I said chirpily. I give a sexy and flirty look, and smile sweetly, they say I am a slut so I do it, and show it all and the come too, I have on gray lace panties, tonight you like them as she pulls them down a little in the front.

Screenshot!

IT's ME CUMING HARD WITH MY

DILDO'S

See this!

Day: 11/9/15

Height: 5 1 inches

Gender: Female

Body Type: Slim/Petite

Eyes: Contacts Colors Brown, Blue and

Green-

Weight: 100 pounds

Sexual Preference: Bisexual

Favorite Food: Pizza, sushi, burritos Average Rating: 5 stars (1521 votes total)

Rate Kati3Kat: 5 <3 <3 <3 <3 the highest for the night! And the girl on here has been here for years like Jenny and never-ever did what I did. I like to have sex with my nerdy glasses on, I feel smart!

Not even Maddie and Liv, together sucking crap off did that!

Admirers: (admire) 1,478

I made 90,000 in one night! That pays for school, and a car, and an apartment of my own.

(There not grandma panties, said some dude in here creeping on me. It not for them it the only way he can see me the way he wants me, at this point.)

Oh yeah- I forgot- I like it sideways too, so we tried that also, go for going deep, I a girl I like in there.

#- Hashtag: (Pound Karly F'n Barns!)

Karly- She pulled them down some her underwire, I am not fat, am I?

Marcel- Hell- No! I said on the screen yet to her. (Yes- she goes from some asses in the room) The long sleeves black and white top comes off, with an X-ed aim crossed, the hand

opposite formation. As she is up close, she holds her legs and kicks them both you can see some of her down there showing through, and that is a turn on.

Karly- I have a black bracelet, and I take off my bra shyly; I am sitting legs openly as you can see…? You can see some, yet not all as of now… white and pink bed, walls tan, posters everywhere, white carpet see my game wheel, I give you crap for that, like a video or something of mine that I will mail out to you. A three-way light on the nightstand with balls that glow, (Nice) I got my highest tip of 2,000 what do you think of my nipples.

'I will blow you a kiss!'

(It was really for Marcel!)

I have a blue crystals necklaces also, it's sexy, 'I blow you kisses.'

Me- (You're blowing my mind right now.)

'Why do I… have to masturbate?'

'Instead of me freaking you!'

I'll to your nerdy to you! She asked sweetly yet, mischievous nottie way, with a look of lusting in your eyes, just look at her make and smoky eyes, to see it all. (I don't care if you have a whitened face, feck eyelashes and blue hair, I still saw you underneath that all.)

Indian style she is sitting, showing what he wants to see and that's the little down there for me.

'What movie do you like…?'

'Like I robot.'

Marcel- seeing it all… (I am sure of that, I feel that he's here with me, as I want to get it on, like rubbing him on me.) I found her out for all the random girls of the sight, I will- say that she so-oo-o hot wanna touch the hinnie! Awoo-o-oo, boob's butt, and p*ssy, and finger her there, love me like you should like the way I want you too, say you want me to-u-wo-o-o!!!

Then said- Just look at me here I feel like getting these off, she was facing herself to the said, side profile, showing it all. Perfect boobs they angle down and cover around nicely, like how is so right to me, like everything she has her backside also, covering ever so precise, in what

I want in a girl. Vigorously flooding under, showing her erect nipples, so blushing pink almost, like both sights of lips!

Myself- Moving a swarming around, I could not keep up with it all in my mind, I was thoughtless it was that good.) Like her but does also two cheeks… and then… there… it all was… you get it her up close vagina. I can say why I like it I just do, that's everything, yet I have to look at that now. So pretty and flushed pink, just thumping for me, I saw her clit, and the opening too. Finger rubbing and petting herself, there and everywhere! She rubs in between her chest and it drives me nuts! She up pushes them up with an embrace spread finger grab on both, in a way that she can only do, she has shown me this, they and I feel lovesick! I see that this is the only way she can be with me, and me with her.

YES! Stimulating, suggestive, racy, erotic, sensual, and even erogenous, pale pink sexy lips as constricted as if they are all tucked inwards. Pale-n-pink, and then she is biting, fluttering, winking, and shoulder rolling, dithering, and blinking sometimes a- lot. Yes- biting, off to the side and top teeth rolling over the bottom lip and holding looking at the webcam. Her eyes, it's so working for me! All the same, I want to see it all; as she is laying there on her bed, with sideward leaning on her elbows, chatting away about whatever comes to the wacky mind of hers.

Yours truly- is flapping her hair a lot making them what me!

•Big eyes!

•Sucking, her crystal nickels!

•Tasting herself.

•Kissie faces, and erotic expressions

•Screeching.

•Rolling around, back to front, and on the said.

•You never understand what she is going to do.

•Cut- Butt in the air o Crazy stupid fun, loveable, and adorable, even as a blue heir chick, it could be hot pink, and I would love her! I yelled these words- Snap chat me. I give photos out, for tips like 777 and you get me on your phone forever-a!

Don't you want to see my p*ssy!

(You do the math I am-a making bank! That is why I am here, doing this, and what girl would come, for a crapload of money, it's fun, and something that is all mine. Doing something I love doing anyway. Dumb boys are cute.)

WANNA SEE ALL ABOUT ME, GO TO MY TWITTER! YOU'LL SEE IT ALL!!!

TWITTER:

FLOW ME!

- I love it when you boys buy things like new undies! Send me crap! Cute!!! Send via Amazon!!!

Katie Kitten

@kati<3kat_CB

- Tweets 7,478
- Following 627
- Followers 149K
- Likes 24.1K

Katie Kitten

@kati<3kat-CB

NSFW! Miss MyCamgirl 2014. Mermaid |

Vampire | Kitten | Dork | Internet Nudist

Extraordinaire. Instagram: blu<3kitten profiles.myfreecams.com/kati<3kat

1 Follower you know

- My biggest fan! <

361 Photos and videos

NSFW! Miss MyCamgirl 2014.

Mermaid | Vampire | Kitten | Dork

|Weirdo| Internet Nudist Extraordinaire.

• Instagram: blu3kitten

•Find me on Twitter: @kati<3kat_CB www.twitter.com/katie HYPERLINK "http://www.twitter.com/katie%3c3kitten"< HYPERLINK "http://www.twitter.com/katie%3c3kitten"3kitten#fan

•Friend me on Facebook like my page, you get crap there too.

•Friend her and I'll add you if you're nice to me. In addition to that, I will say cheese on here and you can see me do it.

•I have and I- phone do you like, not everyone has this I here,

(FN- PRTSC, I'll take the photos, Karly! Screenshot there is! As I copy it over to MS paint. And save to my desktop.)

•Humming the animal, and laying back on it, that's a- truth- I well.

• I got this mic, for my birthday, do you like it, I can sing for you too. (Here I go-)

•Do I e-eject like what…? Is that squirting then yes… if that what you mean then okay.

(What do you mean?)

(Going back to the start of the sexual show-)

Oversized, a big chair like bear… Gray and white, like her bra and undies, I see you sitting there, hands through your hair, scratching yourself and such.

•HotforyouKarlly3!

That's… me… don't tell anyone, she knows- yet that the only I want to see doing this. It may all be just for me, even if they see it.

Topic: #3 (as of now) TIP 2 for 2! SC 4 life 333 - Friend add 200 - HT of the night wins all my videos! Big booty plug >: D- 5901 Blah (7777) and if you're like I will do more, for tips, I may have two times or three dippings.

'Tip: 7777 to seem me cumshow-

tonight!'

The journey is in the background. Singing and shaking her boobs to the lyrics, OH MY GOD YES!! Yes, squeeze them boobs, Love it, girl!

•Tips- like crazy in here! Thank you!

(Yell's girlie!)

Shaking out her hair!

CRAP I said, looking shocked.

Dance move to the beats, to just a little, and then a- lot! Rock out!

Showing the up close up shot, of undies in the front. On knees- Hand on the nose, looking cute. You can spell! I said for I can't even if I try now! Rap song- showing hair, and slight p*ssy, then it all, look at this, look at me with my thumb at my forehead, the song play, she is acting it out, all 90's! I dance like a freaking white girl! Do you see my hair it looks like a button; I don't think I want to shave it all!

CumShow one: Do you like my green and white tank with the alien face on it, I have it on after the first show, and I did my hair now it's time for more do you like this, white socks, and still, I am under-wear-less. Rabbit dildo pink fast, and hard, yelling, screaming it out like his name, it all out, spraying, guessing whiteness, it all over the sheets, and showing it up close p*ssy shot, like three minutes, I have it up high so that's why.

CumShow two: Pillow humping for six to seven minutes, and I say I came!

Sliding as it's in- between my legs, in a crouching why, leaning forward to stimulate it more and more, fast and faster, and it squirts for me and him, and them.

I'll shave my p*ssy for you, and you can see it up close! I give the finger and then give it to myself for you.

CumShow three: bath time, and shower it off with hair, and hand rubbing one out, until the end and it runs all down my legs.

This girl- her- I can take anymore I need to sleep.

~*~

I got everything I wanted! And more I said, as I went to bed, I could die at the pace at this point: yet I have to go on thinking about her, do I have to let go, and just lie, her with him in me?

(New night at the party falling asleep)

I just gave him a handjob become, I am a teen girl, and I do that and can when it comes to coming! I have something to say, Mr. Obama, I want to have sex with older boys. Like- I did when I was a pre-teen, and get away with it. I have a brain; I know what… I am doing that, and so should he if you write your name here, on a contract to mom and dad, or just you, it's your body say it okay as you. So why do mom and dad care at that point! I said to him.

Like a marriage certificate to hags- on my wall, do that, where my blue ribbons where. The guy that did me was in his mid-thirties, it was not sexed it was just ripping through my hymen, and moving one, and it did not count for me. That thrust was so freaking hard, that I screamed like a b*tch, over everything. It's just liked that girl I go to school with doing her daddy, yet that's okay for there not related, hum that's okay. I have it on speed five and it's wiggling in me, and pulsating, the way I need it too.

I personally- I know I am at the party, yet I not out there, we come that ware now to go here, and do this. I may not be reliving this, it's on, like hot steamy sex passion!

Unbreakable sex and coming with Marcel, that last for three hours or so, it was breathtaking, coming over and over, in every way you could think off, as age my age.

-Like he pulled off my blue and white pad before shoving it all in!

-Besides, then I spun around, rapidly while down on it, that's something that I feel I can only do.

-I don't feel that I need to use pill or rings, and patches to stop what I want to do all I need to do is insert this sponge-ie thing-ie in me and have seen it, and I know it will work.

There is a 20% fall rate on this thing, and that good for me, so I don't F-up my flow and get spotting and crap, and crazy. I want it from behind, sliding in and out- (see that) I want old school him on top smothering me out, to that is romantic, all cuddled and crap, yes- I am still a girl and such.

-I just wanna sick him off too! Like he going to go down on me, and lick and kiss, humming and rubbing my lady-ness on him back and forth.

-Stocking his hardness, feeling the wetness, down and around and inside.

-69 this crap for me I asked, we did. He wanted cowgirl, so we did it first me facing, then stopped and just shoved it down my tonsils, I even did the Miley thing like him like the sled hammer!!!

Yeah, you know it, daddy! (I wonder if he sees this some time or boy he works with.) (Do you hear the suck-age, as I pull my lips off and then so will he do the same not long after.)

As well as then, I gave him a thrill and turned it around. We did more than the orgies that I saw the times before! He even used a seven-inch dildo on me and made me come three times, and like the kiss, song licked it up. And made me arise with an aching back that way, and spray, I am rolling what can I say, I am a happy girl now! I want more, I don't like saying hit into me, yet I go fast, and bruise my ass! Laying on my back I could feel it all in the spot that, I wanted it to be felt, not fare is yet right.

Tree a night is me!

Me, yet, I want firm thrusting, ultimate, uninhibited sex, at this point, making love, that is!

(The night before still on cam)

In cumshow one:

See me laying on my back, flapping around, see me now I am just crazy and rocking out! Hair is up now; I have a fake tattoo! Texting her girlfriends, and her boy, I have to pee, be right back, leaning back, legs open, playing with my hair, singing, and missing up cute-ie!

Three blinks, her whooshing back, as I sit back, showing my p*ssy, and now I'll do a fist pump, as Stacy's mom is playing! Throwbacks are hot! I have a cut clit I have to say it! You like me creepers- yes, yes- I do! Rubbing her clit on the bedsheets now, as she lies on her gut. Texting, Jenny to see what's on her end and she above me so I have to do more! Hay Yah! But shaking- all right- all right! Piece eyes dancing around, and tight ass shot, see my backside covering for you, arching! Hair covering one boob, face, pail, yet sweet! Thigh, stay up until

midnight? Give it to me you're showing it all now! I see my cat coming into the room. She is playing with the kiddie! She would look cute blue! I am petting my p*ssy boys what do you think about that? Shoulder shaking, snap chat shot! Of my p*ssy!

Slow and good do you see! Do you want to be healed?

Yes, yes- I do! Snapping fingers, hugging the cam. If you want to do it now, then go for it! Doing a stretched out a pose for pitch-perfect! Awesome right!

Perfect! We say what we need right!

'Nailed it!' What is my favorite animal?

Owl…? I think so… Horses! You ride them, like a girl! 1, 2, 3, 4 tell me… to shout! You can go I won't cry for you! I am Bipolar! Love it do it all! I love for this, I said, I hate pink, yet that why I hump it, like this pillow, funny butting thingie! Need more of the up-close humming please rub the clit on the pillow!

Back and forth, startling it. Home away! Matilda yelp you got me hot! Showing toes and wiggling them in her gray stockings. That for the comments, Oh honey, honey! You are my candy girl! I can believe it true! I see you laying out looking amazing! She was showing it all and I need more I said.

Damn, when I die, I hope to see this, all the time, GOD! Close up P*ssy and showing more! Give it to me! I said wanting it all! I feel it was forever ago, that I did this I need it! Say you want it for me! Funny but sick! Too cute here! You need to hear that 1,000,000 times, I said! Cover the songs is lovely! Wink! And she did!

And she did… I got a photo I did want to see from some old dude, that's okay. Penis! She said over and over, I get it! Yet it's not mine so, yeah- I get it! ELO, don't stop! Sing the song it sounds like she is sing. I think of them, hearing it… yeah not that one, I said and then it when old school and it was all good. Touch yourself already!!!!!! I have to say it is- been- long enough now! Do it here or it doesn't work, you got my okay.

All the way now! She is taking them off the stockings. Legs tight, showing the line of mine! Cowgirl riding the plush over-sized toy. You got a yellow wall, that good, say that Yellow wall alert! The purple dildo comes out and she starts using it, and sighs to it, till she comes. Nice glasses funny, sexy teacher look it works for me. Nice mic! Yes, it is turning me on! I get in the

bathtub and is cold, yet I'll work with it. In the box, funny your sis must have the old one. Oh, it a light crap! I said. She donks, and wipes her hair back, so sexy! Get up on the edge of the tube, and do it then, no on the corner thanks. Gross okay she said I will, you're getting paid right, now you can have it off under there no up on the tile yes, call me fake and guy it okay.

Okay- that was cool, now she is laying on the bad and rocking my world! And squirt for me! And she did and showed it all and licked her fingers. And said good night, I am number one!

Profile: Katy<3Kat, I own the right to this so I can show it, my name is here, and that was my boys and girls!

I love Vampire, Mermaid, Princess of all things awesome I am into girls only, boys come and see me though, I'll do things for you.

Room Topic: #4! Lazy Sunday :) SC for life 333! Top off 2352 HT gets my kinky Cummie- covered undies!

699 in the chat room. Guests/Basics Muted.

Miss MFC: #1 in the room

Location:

Fantasy Land

Age/Ethnicity:

16 and 1/2, No Answer -I cum for you.

Tags: blue hair, petite, mermaid, long hair, skinny, talkative I know that the videos are all online and show it all and have been downloaded a million times.

Get on the bed that what happens here-

(About it all and why we do what we do)

But I didn't care, I wanted to be cool. 'It's because of this the boys worship the ground I walk on. They see it, they want it. And I want them to want me! So, I can give them a hard time. To see if they just want me, or if they need me.' Like I said- This surely wouldn't be the first time a boy uses me as his tribute impression! Yeah- we're young we can be a little crazy, why not. I remember last Friday Maddie's said- 'OMG! Jenny- you've made nipple-boob smudges!

On the window.' I don't know why but we always end up unclothed under them blankets or run around the room that way.

(That's what I meant about the photos of me and being remembered for them. Like sometimes I think there are more photos of my little lady and lower half, then there was of my sweet little face. I know that I didn't have any respect for myself and I was only seventeen and younger than that even, and really neither did my friends, with me fallen to their level. Girls promise me right now, that you want to strip and spray for website money, I know it's just on cam but, it's not going to get you anywhere in life.

Even if it's trilling at the time. Think higher of yourself! Someday your kids could see that… if you live to see it! You got to think ahead. You have to consider and think! 'All the money in the world won't get back your innocents or life.' Oh, and shame on you- older man looking at us, what if that was your daughter or granddaughter, that popped up on the screen, dancing around, and diddling, you wouldn't like it then would you. Didn't think so…!)

Since the junior year, though on Fridays and the weekends, I don't think we've stayed in even once, we would go down the Fire escape, and go to the parties if we won't allow, sometimes our mom's and daddy's no, yet most of the time they didn't know where we were going or what we were going to do. Just like they don't think we're even sexually active.

Today we raid middies' closet, so we don't have to wear the same outfit to Marcel's party, she seems to have a lot of things that look cut on me. Liv, Maddie, and Jenny are giving special attention to how I look. Liv puts the maroon polish on my nails, I do mine too but my hands are shaking a little, so some get soft blue on my cuticles and make it look like I'm a five-year-old, that has gotten into her mom's make up for the first time, but I'm too nervous to care. I was thinking about my boy getting all up in me, for the first time… his first time, with me.

I just had that feeling that Ray couldn't wait to get into my glory hole! Yet I wasn't sure if I wanted it or not. Even though I tectonically not a virgin, I never really ever have sex that was meant to be passionate, like what I had in the past it was just always a hookup nothing more, like they didn't even kiss me droning, like with no feeling attached. I am scared that I am going to suck, even though I know how it works. Ray and I are going to meet up at Marcel's. I get this in a poorly written text. Like hello, you're not even going to pick me up? You're not going to woo

me in any way, you just expect me to blow your mind, without having some chivalry in return. You got to give some to get some!

#- Hashtag: (cam show, movie night cuddles, and risky steps)

~*~

(Night Show- on cam some days back before the physical end, I may do some shocking things for you, like show my puss from the front and the back on my knees, and then lay on my floor or sit web for you, this is part of how I was it's my documentary only now forever like I said I am not proud of it yet I am remembered for it, it was all for my friends you say what you want and money, I don't mind doing it for him or me, yet I saw it too, and it not my best sides. I use an enormous pink Hitachi vibrates too, and you all know that. Yes, Yes, Yes- Um it's pink that the color of it! I am a little girl- what can I say, (that an excuse for my cover I thought, I not buying another one just for this.) I do like it what girl doesn't like I like boys.)

Ray- It's Like- In her smile I know, that I don't need any other lover, something in her style that shows me, that I am the one for her, I do care about her, what's cool is she's like my best bud too. The only deferments are that she is a girl so that benefits me! I could love her… but she makes it hard too, no scratch that her friends make it hard too, she needs to pick them or me. And I know that it's not going to be me, so I can't feel fully committed to her until she is with me. Sex sure, she would be my first ever she would be the right girl for that, we know just about everything about one another anyways.

Maybe after tonight I can get more and find out who loves me more. I am not saying that she needs to give up her girls. But she needs to think for herself sometime, I feel like I have to babysit her. Thinking for her is not something I can do for her. I thought she was cooler when she was a nobody at least I felt like I was the only that she needed. Sometimes I sense that Jenny likes me just as much as she does, and Jenny to me is like that pain in the ass friend's girlfriend's sister that you can touch. I am torn Karly is my little bud, that I just about do everything with, and I don't want to complicate that.

Jenny is my beautiful dream that can be a nightmare, which I sometimes can stand, yet I still want her, and I don't get why. I don't know maybe I can have both?

That's what I am donning now, and it seems to be working, don't tell Karly she would be crushed. I could not bear to see her be heartbroken over me, wanting to be with her friend more

than her. I don't love Jenny; I just want Jenny. I want Karly to say she loves me and shows and not hide it. She makes me feel like I am not good enough at times. You get it to, don't you?

~*~

Karly- Massage received: 'Got the bedroom 4 tonight's would have been nice if it said for us, or he said looking forward to seeing you. What's with boys all think about is getting it in, yes- I want him to put it in, but I want him to want me for it… whatever, he is no different from those others. (Thought- Boy you need to try harder, there are so many others that would love to be where you're at.) I let Liv pick out my outfit, I was too shaky and undeceive to choose myself. She got out a long red glittery tank top, that I got to use a short dress, it's too big in the chest, so I had to stuff it out, I was thinking awesome now

Ray can blow his nose before he sees, feels, kiss my chest. I have a new thing that I have kept for this day it's black. I put the tank over my naked body Liv and Maddie overlooking, as I step into the new undies. Maddie says I got it… she runs over to the closet and got out her silly Dorothy slippers also Rudy and sparkly. Liv said- 'Girl you look good.

Sometimes, you have to show a little skin. That reminds boys of being naked, and then they think of sex.'

(I thought I looked like a stripper, my butt was barely covered, yet that's the point I guess.) I thought the good thing I shaved my legs up and didn't stop at my knees. Sometimes I get lazy with the shaving, we girls all do in the winter months. Did you know there is a whole month devoted to it in November in not shaving your legs? That's the way we were jeans, and no skirts or shorts… Jenny does my makeup, doing the smoky eye look with some light brown on the lids, with black mascara on top of the fake lashes. I do my hair adding in long extension,

Maddie helps me make perfect springy waves. But, I don't all the white powder in the world could get my face white like it should be, humming and breathing Maddie runs to her dad's' liquor cabinet and gets me a shot of something nasty and says here this will chill you out.

I didn't ask what was in it, I don't want to know really. She slipped something in it I am sure of it. That is when Jenny says we all should take two more shots, so were a little buzzed a loosened up for the party. I mixed me down with some orange juice. Liv said as she was making a shot face, red is the color of passion, and it will drive any boy wild. I was like good it will much my rosy cheeks and blushed out the face.

I like I have this perfect picture in my mind of how everything is supposed to be, or the way I think it should be, maybe this is why I get disappointed. I set the bar too high for everyone but myself, with me it's like I have to do the limbo. Afterward, I lock myself in the bathroom, trying to hold down the shots, I can feel the hotness and itchy from my fingertips up to my skull, I felt like a baseball cracked me in the back of the head. Like- I am somewhat used to balls smacking me in the front of the face… I hate Gym class! He- he, and TMI- LOL!

So, I am trying to memorize exactly how I look there, in that second. But, after a while all of my features seem like they're just hanging there, like something I'm seeing on an unfamiliar person, I didn't even look like me, in that second, I thought what happens to the real Karly. Whom did I become? This isn't me… is it? I am butt- crazy in love with Ray, but I not sure if I can go through with this! I know I can get out of this by saying I am on it like he has the app, there just has to be an app for that, like that was girls' ways of getting out of everything. Yet I have to think some boys are not lucky enough to be as naturally adorable as he is, I would be a fool if I didn't let him feel my insides.

My mind is going crazy! I feel so pissing impotent, and yet so pissing out of control.

Which I hate. I love him! I know I am such a brown-noser, for wanting him to love this-me. I just feel butt ugly! And I look like such a bloated cow. Um- maybe I am PMS-ing? It is like only a week before your period. OMG- I feel just like a heifer! I mean for- real's I only had a handful of peanut butter M&M's and like four pieces of licorice since lunch. Sometimes I think searching for the right boy in high school is as hopeless as searching for meaning in a Harry Potter movie, the lights or on yet no one is home. They can't see true love if it was a flipping brick being flung smacking them between the lookers and the sniffer. Like they just don't feel it or see it! I can see why Maddie and Liv are why there are…!

Oh, and the reason, I sat through Potter was- well… I for- real's have such a girl crush on Emma Watson! I think she is so pretty, flirty, and has that sexy way of talking. If I die and need someone to play me in a movie, about my cruddy life, like- she would be my first pick! (Ha- to bad no one cares what I think… they never did, or they well. The memory of my short life will go by like a stinky fart in the breeze, just around long engulf to piss everyone off and then vanishes in midair!)

Looking at myself… When I was little- I used to do this all the time: in the bathroom, I would take hot showers and the mirrors would stem entirely over, then stand there, watching as my face took shape slowly behind the steam, looking at my bare body thing what looked good and what looked so bad.

Then I could rough outlines at first, then details would start illustrating out.

The more I could see the more I disliked. Each time I'd think that when my face came back, I would see somebody beautiful, I like to feel when washing, like during my shower I would have transformed into someone that I would love or that someone would love me. I only felt beautiful when I was letting that water hit me, after that, I would set out and dry off… just like creepy eyes looking at me, I always looked the same, and that's not what I wanted, and just like when my skin dry off just standing there, the ugly soak in. There is so much push-ie to look like girls in magazines or on the internet molds and movie stars, I want to look like that, I know I will never live up to that. I mean come on. Standing in Maddie's bathroom, I smile and think, tomorrow I'll finally be different because I'll be his first and he'll be mine.

(Yet some days I just looking in this glass and think, now I am nothing but a freaking slut and a bully. Maybe I liked myself more back then, then I knew I did. I never thought that would be possible, at least the only one that was getting hurt was me. But I hid that fact to everyone because I like me feeling good.)

Rally this all started when Ansley Baum passed away, she was one of us, in our group. I knew her back to freshman year, like when she commented on my hair looking cute, with the ribbon in it, or something like that. She was a fun outgoing and to young of a girl to die. She was everything that I am not. Then like in lunch I see her sis Kara with a bandana around her head at the sped table, because she looks freaky and is sickly. She has been dying of the same cancer now for years, and I am like appalled. Sometimes life doesn't seem fair. This is not nice to say, but why her and not her sis. Why do bad things happen to good people?

I feel reasonable for Ansley dyeing, I was supposed to have her home at midnight, last year after Sam's Friday night kegger party.

However, I was too drunk to remember too.

That is one reason I don't have a car now, we had my dad's SUV and that's the car she drives away- in, I throw her my keys, saying- 'If you want to go, then go!' I was being crazy

grinding with my girls, it was past her curfew, and she left without me in a panic. I knew I had a ride with Jenny, Maddie, and Liv. I could have been with her, I cheated death. She drives herself, and hit a truck going into the squirrel hill tunnels, she was doing 85 in a 55 and slid on black ice.

She was killed on impact; she went through the windshield and was buried on Monday. Just in a bit of an eye life can be over, and leave you traumatized. I was messed up for six months after, I missed two weeks of school, just crying in my room. All because of me saying nastily: 'If you want to go, then go!' (I should have taken her home, and I should have been her sis's friend when no one else would be, I didn't because I wanted to be popular.)

~*~

Jenny walked into the room, and asks-

'How do I look?' I say- 'You look a little retro like 1995 or a tennis player, I like it.' Liv and Maddie nodded in approval. I think it's cute that Jenny matched Iggy's school outfit from the video.

Yellow is good for her, it also for some reason reminded me of that really old movie clueless, I and that girl could relate. Jenny is kind of obsessed with music- just like she is with a vintage yet hot outfits, so she makes us a playlist for the ride to- Marcel's house, even though he lives only like seven miles away… whatever. We listen to Iggy Azalea, and then we blast 'Fancy' and we all sing along. Iggy's not bad… really, but I get sick of rap all the time. Followed by Taylor Swift – 'Shake

It Off,' and that song just gets stuck in my head, just like seeing Maddie twerking with those big black framed nerdy glass. That is when Liv hits next and she starts singing: 'Too Fast' - 'I don't want to be a restless soul.

Running on empty, burning up the road…' Not the kind of song that you want to pull up to a party blasting. Even so… we can pull it off, the eyes were on us!

~*~

Anyways back to today, on the drive, we do some uncanny things, though: as we are driving there along with all those familiar streets, like that I've known my whole life, and I can name them all off by heart. We pass the same fast food places and the shops, and all the high-rises. Liv's is barking like a dog at the top of her lungs.

Maddie's got her ass sticking out the window, and I'm just flipping everyone off as we drive past them, saying something like- 'Suck on this butthole b*tches!' (I hope those won't be my famous last words to my city! Yet I think they will be.) Liv has the lowest acceptance out of all of us, for doing dumb crap. In a way'- she is kind of the most- moodiest of us all. Maddie's got the rest of the vodka inserted into her handbag but with nothing to chase it down with she is not chugging it.

Jenny's driving because she can drink all night and hardly feel it. Plus, she always drives it's just her thing. I take selfies as we are diving along look so cool, just like a hipster girl, doing the kissy face. The wet snowfalls start spitting down when we're virtually there, but it's so light it's almost like it's just hanging in the air, like a big curtain of white haze, it was so odd and magnificent. I don't remember ever seeing something so weird weather-wise in all my life. At this instant, I was at Marcel's house woo and hoo- he is like the only guy that I know that has a home and not an apartment.

Anyways looking down the yard, I was looking for the clown because it looked just like his fifth birthday party to me. I've forgotten how distant it's set back in the woodlands. The driveway seems to wind on forever. I could see the cheesy lanterns bouncing in midair. I could see all the dull light from the headlights bouncing off a winding, pathways and skimpy lifeless tree branches flocking narrowly overhead, and tiny bits of frozen rain like diamonds sparkling.

(Albert Einstein said- 'Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.' You know I didn't know just how true that would be for me. But he is the same man that said- 'A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.' This leaves me with the fact of life and popularity with this one he said- 'You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else.' If you a girl like me, you have learned to play the game and master it the hard way.)

Jenny says- This road reminds me of that ancient horror movies, you no like how it starts.'

Maddie replays back, fine-tuning her apparel, 'Yeah let's not dive off the side of a cliff today, I feel like living.' 'It's just a little farther now,' I say, even though I have no clue, and I'm starting to wonder whether we turned too early. I have butterflies in my stomach, but I'm not sure whether they're good or bad, they are getting more intense.

The woodlands press closer and closer until they're nearly brushing up against the car doors. Jenny twitches grumpy about the paint job. I don't see why the paints flaking off on the hood, but that just the way she is. Just when it seems like we'll be slurped up into the abyss, the mist was dripping from the window from me been pressed agents it, for a joke I write the word HELP on the window, like something you would see on a creepy book cover.

Unexpected the coppices disperse entirely and there's the main, lawn it's like the cutest yard I have ever seen as a city girl, with a light blue house pushed way back surrounded by weepy looking trees. It's got passageways and a long porch that runs along all sides.

The shutters are white; the entire place is carved with crazy would cover designs which make everything stand out. I don't remember any of it, yet I can't say it was because I was stoned or high. Thinking so hard I start to daydream... Maybe it's the alcohol, I can't dredge up when I started drinking either, but then again, I think this is the most beautiful house I've ever seen.

The type of house I would love to have with Ray and a baby girl someday. Yet boys don't think like us girls, they don't think ahead, they don't use the right head... all they think about it how they're going to get off, and what girl they can get to do it with. Well maybe not all of them do, but most. I wouldn't be a good momma, I know this... if I am anything like my mom, crap I would suck at it and fall miserably, and my baby would grow up fallen to every- one too. I think Ray would be a good dad if he would grow up some, yet he is getting better, my training is paying off; somewhat. Oh well, it's not like I want to have a big belly anyways.

(A single teardrops from my eye, and I wipe it away before any of my girlfriends see.) Sometimes, like I just feel like Miley riding the wrecking. I have licked my share of sled hammers too, after a while it gets to a girl like boys do nothing but break you down and crush your heart and yet they keep accepting more blows until you fracture. Sometimes you can't win if he won't let you in!

We're all silent for a minute, looking. Half the house is in darkness, but there is a soft warm light shining on the upper level, where it makes the lawn turn shiny in a yellow glow. Jenny says, 'It's almost as big as our school, Kar.'

I'm regretful she spoke: it feels like the charming spell has been broken because it not that big at all. 'Almost,' Maddie says. She takes the vodka out of her bag and takes a sip and then

wipes her chin with the slave of her jacket. 'Give me a shot of that stuff,' Liv says, reaching for the bottle, and then kiss me!

'Ugh you too make me sick,' Jenny says. 'Like go find some boys tonight.' They both just giggle, I roll my eyes at how clueless Jenny can be. The bottle's in my hand before I realize it. I take a sip. It burns my throat and tastes horrible, like paint or gasoline, but as soon as it's down I get a rush. We climb out of the SUV and the light from the house flows and expands, twinkling at me as some of the snow falls and melts on my extended tongue.

Walking into parties always gives me that period cramp feeling at the bottom of my stomach. It's not a good feeling, even though it has paternal of being good for me, like the feeling of knowing anything can happen, if all falls into place. Most of the time nothing does, of course. Most of the time one-night blends into the next, and weeks blend into weeks and month's blur into years. And sooner or later we all die alone and thrown into a pit or firebox. What's the point of living at all? (I guess all have to find that out the hard way?)

Jenny always says-

'We're only here to having sex and orgasms and punch out some boys' kids.' I hope there is more than that, there has to be, yet deep down, like I think she is right, she always is. Yet I just... I just miss him. And I hate feeling so alone. But at the beginning of the night anything's possible, I know this and it makes me nervous. The front door is locked, and we have to go around to the back, where a door opens onto a cramped foyer it is so sweet all covered in grannies like wallpaper and rich woodwork. The wooden stairs are- to die for. It smells like something unforgettable it's so yummy, like gingerbread at Christmas. I wish Ray had a home like this… I guess you can have it all, I wish Marcel wasn't so weird I might just go out with him because of this place. Yet he is not going to change anytime soon either.

I hear the tinkle of breaking the glass and someone yells, 'break it up!' two assholes were fighting over Jenny already, and the one goes push through the window.

That is when a roar screeched from the speakers: 'Yo Yo Yo, how you are doin' tonight? I am Marcel… and now is your time to get your freak on!' That is when the DJ took over the mic, and side- 'Can that boy get any whiter?' The house erupted in a chuckle. Now we all are out on the dance floor. That's when the DJ said lady let's see those panties come off, and roll them in your hand to this next song. The DJ said- 'I wanna see you all- Wabbel Baby!'

So of course, all the girls did it… I don't mind going commando; I knew at some point thought out the night they were coming off anyway. Plus, like it's more freeing to dance that way too, without the wedges. After the first dance, the stairs are so packed we have to squeeze up in single, everyone one is making out, I see Lizzy her one boob is exposed, it looks like she got one for the night. People are coming down in the opposite direction after hooking up in one of the bedrooms, empty beer cups in hand. Same of them half-naked with that afterglow on their faces.

Most of them have to turn so their backs are against the wall. We say hi to a few people and ignore the rest of the losers, the loser gawks they're not getting any, they shouldn't even be here, and all they want to do is hook up with hot girls like us. As usual, I can feel all of them looking at me. I like to play games with boys, Ha just giving them enough to get a boner and I brush up and walk on passed. I had ten or more boys say I looked hot, and I just say- 'That's nice fellas, but I have a BF!' So, in other words, I am only banging him tonight, was the message I was trying to give!

So okay, I don't want to be a turncoat wannabe to my generation, in all… but, looking around I don't get how guys dress today. I mean, come on, it looks like they just rolled out of bed still holding on to their man meat with one hand, while throwing some holey baggy jeans over their nasty body fluid covered boxers with the other, and didn't bother washing up, or fixing their oily hair – ew-h – and just covered it up with a sideward cap, like we're expected to faint or curtsey in their magnificent-ness? I don't think so, and yes, I made that word up, I can do that.

Aw- boys are so gross, like if we ladies would do that you boys would ship us to a deserted island like we're lepers. Surely what with you all always grabbing at it, if we girls would have our hand down there all the time, like we would be handcuffed, just like boys can go topless when swimming and we're not supposed to, it just doesn't seem fair to me. Even basic girls try to look good and refrain from doing that. Can't even!

At the top, I said out aloud not meaning too. 'Would you call me selfish?'

Maddie said- 'Nut-huh, um- like not to your face.' Jenny giggles and said- Uh- baby girl you worry too much, like some girls are not lucky enough to be as naturally adorable as you are, stop thinking or you'll get frown lines!' I look in my compact mirror and see the line forming, oh crap something new to freak out about, I thought. Good thing Ray and most boys don't look at my face… lol.

#- Hashtag: (Gangbang, the stairway to heaven, taking shots)

~*~

I pass the bathroom the door is hanging open; I can see Stacy and Ryan.

His boxers are around his ankles, she is sitting on the toilet, they have shared needles. It's still in his hand, Stay is shaking and pulling on her hair like someone that is going crazy. She and her 25 or something boyfriend that she only sees for her junk, just shot up heroin. It's the scariest thing I have ever witnessed. You can smell it, like vinegar mixed with ammonia. She has pissed all over the floor. It reeks, as fast as he intended it into her starts to collapse, rubbing her eyes and face, and rubbing her body uncontrollably, her eyes are red, just like his, but he has been on it longer so it's not affecting him as much. She is balking a lot, she looks so confused, while making moments like the kids at the sped table do.

Stacy is 14 and she has sex with Ryan at least three times a day, just so she can get her heroine for free, I knew when I saw her today at school, she was going through withdraw. With her sudden changes in behavior or actions, she likes to have a droopy appearance, as if her extremities are heavy. I know for sure she is going to be the next dead girl because she was most likely to OD.

I knew she was too far going for me to help, and what could I do? She is a big girl she knows what she is doing. (I was wrong.) Stay has said to me what it's like- 'Oh Karly It's like having the best orgasm you've ever had multiply it by a billion, and you're still nowhere near it. Like, imagine a warm wave washing over your body that eliminates any feelings of sorrow, regret, anger, stress, or guilt. Imagine all those bad feelings being washed away as you feel the warmth running through your veins. You sure you don't want to try it?' I remember saying- 'Yeah I'm sure.' I think she is one dumb punani! If you don't know what that means look it up, I'll wait for you…

Okay got it? Hey, it could have been worse, like I could have asked you to look up a Prince Albert, and yes to me doing that is just as dumb as doing hardcore drugs. Anyways, down the dim hallway hanging all over with white icicle Christmas lights. There is a classification of rooms for those that want to hook up, each leading off the next, the further down the run the lower your popularity the dirtier the room will be because it's the rooms most used for the act, I know me and Ray will most like have Marcel's mom and dad's master bedroom, that room is

off-limits to everyone, except the high rankers like me and my girls. I peck in… saying under my breath- That's the room for tonight! I thought- If not then I'll know he doesn't love me; he just wants to get into my dress.

I look in some of the room, the music is blasting, I see the orgies taking place, some of the girls are yelling overtop the music, and asking me to join in, and they look so elementary like they should still be sucking on a baby bottle. Just remember having sex is a party, and not everyone is invalid, it all goes back to who hot and who's not.

OMG! It's like 10 to 20 boys and girls going at it like rabbits. Some are even doing, butthole-roulette there are more- younger girls than boys, I know most of the boys face they are in the senior class. The floors are filled, all the draped fabrics ripped off the windows, all the big pillows form the beds and the couches ripped apart, feathers all over in the air in the girl's man goo covered hair, so yucky! The sofas are packed with naked interlocked people, I have to say some of these girls are fixable, I let you picture that for yourself.

Jenny leans back and declares something to me in a hasty fashion, but it gets lost in the murmur of voices and passion moaning, and pulsating music. Then she's moving away from me some boy was pulling on her arm, lacing through the crowd. I turn around, but Maddie and Liv are vanishing too in the thick of it all, and before I know it my heart is pounding like never- ever before, and I get this itchy feeling in my palms, I was scared to be all alone around all these people, I didn't know if I was going to gets' a- stick-ed, with a needle, shank, or worse some random ass boys d*ick. I don't know why but it always seems like I get left behind, or my girls forget about me like I am just another face in the crowd.

I have had this nightmare many times in my dreams at night in my single bed, where I'm standing in the center of an enormous crowd, being thrown from left to right, like a rag doll, and becoming naked and the boys descend on me. The faces and expressions look familiar to me so like I know them however very dreamlike, almost there's something wrong with all of them: just like being a crazy Van Gogh painting someone will walk by who looks like Jenny, but then her mouth is weird and droopy like it's melting off in a creep laugh, like the old music video to that song 'Black Hole Sun,' and none of them recognize me or speak English, and I can find my way out of the house or back home, and that's all I say- 'I want to get back home. Help me!' Dreams are so weird!

Hum- I wonder if they mean anything? Standing in Marcel's house isn't the same thing yet is oh so uncanny. But still, it's enough to make freak me out a little.

I'm about to head over to Amanda Scott she's tremendously revolting and generally, I wouldn't be caught dead talking to her, but I'm getting frantic with all the stranger danger in the house- and that is when it happened I was tackled, I feel these lust-locking bear hugging arms wrap around me, and I smelt his sweet and Axe.

Marcel?

'Yeah, baby!

He was gazing into my eyes lovesick for me, and that when he said- 'You came!' He said, along with- 'I knew I get you to come for me!' He puts his damp mouth against my ear, playing with my hair, he plants a nibbling kiss under my ear, and whispers 'Hey- babe-licious Karly, you're so sexy.

Would you be my girl?'

He is so awkwardly lame it's kind of cute… kind-a…? Everyone knows Jenny calls me baby, so-o I guess that is how he can up with that pet name. Then he used the oldest line in the book 'Where've you been all my life?' it was all I could do not to giggle in his face, even though I thought it was sweet that he wants me.

Where in the friend zone, yet he doesn't see that I don't know why like I've made it so obvious! I wish Ray would give me a nibbling kiss on the lips, as I like it when the kisser softly bits and pulls my lower lip, it is so romantic. Sad to say Marcel might be a better kisser then Ray is… maybe I should find out? Nah… I am not lowing myself down to that. However, if I see him, and no is looking, I might just see how good he is pinning him up on a locker in the hallway… maybe, just saying, I love kissing boys, girls, and even teachers too! 'You're drunk aren't you,' he said to me. I said not quite yet, but the night is young. I said- I see you are. It comes out more snappish than I think I meant it to. 'Sober enough to know you're the one I want tonight,' He says, trying and worsening to raise one eyebrow or to let me go, I try to pull away and he hugs me even tighter.

'Oh, look at the time, it's ten o-two, I look at my phone intently, seeing the seconds tick away.' thinking he would back off some, I was glad he was there don't get me wrong like he

makes me feel somewhat comfy and safe, and although edgy. 'It's not late. I called you, you didn't answer.'

He pats' his hand down his jean pockets, to show me the countless calls. In my mind, I knew, and I was like who calls anymore, that's so 1990's. He said- 'I must've put my phone down somewhere. He is losing it… because he knew the I-Phone was gone forever. I roll my eyes. 'You're so felonious and puerile.' He said- 'I like it when you use those big words, it turns me on!' 'Silly boy- It wouldn't if you knew what they meant.' His smile is getting creeper pulling to the one side rising ever so slowly, and I know he's going to kiss me with those now puckered duck lips. Ah- what the hell, I'll give him what he wants, that is when Ray sneakily walked up and tapped me on the shoulder lock-lipped, and said offended, 'So this what you do when I'm not around?'

I turn moderately turned away from Marcel's cheeks beat red. And just as I thought Ray push Marcel and said that's mine… making a scene. That's when I said to Ray crying. 'It's not what it looks like he's drunk and forced himself onto me.' 'Why don't I believe you…? He said walking off.' I don't want to cry like a baby girl, quickly I started searching for a room, and I rain. Little did I know I rain smoking into my friends, but they're still nowhere to be found.

Jenny, why are you crying what happened? Liv and Maddie look as if they could kill the person that hurt me, to the point of waterworks. 'I said Marcel kissed me.' Jenny said- 'Is that all, no need to cry over that.' I looked at Maddie and Liv they know there was more to it than that. Jenny walked off with yet another boy, patting me on the back as she scooted off. While saying- 'You know when you cry after a first kiss it means your soul mates.' Maddie yells out- 'Okay- who's ass do I need to kick!' at this put the music was cut. That when I fall into Maddie's aims, Liv is side hugging me too. 'Ray saw me kissing Marcel.' Maddie kissed my forehead and said- 'It's going to be okay.' I get yet another tap on my shoulder, its Ray saying- Come on Karly now your chest hugging girls, your Bi too? I felt like two cents!

In the corner, I spot Marcel beating her head into the wall, wearing a wholly Pink Floyd shirt about four sizes too big for him, half-tucked into his underpants.

At least he's not wearing his fedora hat. Ray walk-off well-saying something like- 'If that's the way it is then fine…' and I set down on the sofa in the living room. I look over and he is striking up a chat with Justen Lamer and they're laughing about something. Are you kidding

me? I not jealous- faahh… like she such a little eighth-grade dog, looking for a big bad bone form sturdily boy.

I know that look and what she wants him, trilling her hair stand around her finger, and bonding back and forth on one leg, with her thumbs in the loops of her belt keepers. Oh, yes, he is willing so willing to give that young cowgirl a ride tonight. I can see that gleam in his eyes, he like-likes her, and why not she is a lot younger than me and is most likely never been with a boy yet. They would be a good match, it's so cute when both virgin hookups, they'll always remember their first together, but not with my boy. I need to fix this fast. It annoys me that he hasn't noticed me at all since he left over a half-hour ago. I feel sick! I'm kind of hoping he'll look up and come barreling over to me like he usually does, but he just bends closer toward her like he's trying to hear her better, or kiss or feel her up. I sit like a moron, I send out some texts, one to my sis saying- 'Hey sis, I'll see you when you wake up, and we can share.'

I send one to my daddy saying- 'Daddy I am with the girls to study.' Oh, and It's funny I think about her… my little sis, when I don't have any other options. I look around and I feel overdressed and made up. Crap, my fake lashes are starting to peel in the corners. Most of the girls have been naked and changed into their jeans by now, an obvious inkling that they have hooked up.

My change of outfit is in my purse, untouched just like me so far tonight. Why change? So, our moms and dads don't freak out when they see what we were warring. Dah! Like we don't want to be locked up forever!

#- Hashtag: (Bathroom blowouts, pick a door game, she before me.)

Party time Part 2

My OMG moment!

That is when Ray Raymond sits down next to me and pulls me up to him. I now have my head on his chest, he is breathing heavily like he ran the mile. I think that I know what he did, but I am not sure. He didn't say, and I didn't ask. I don't want to think about it. I hope he wouldn't. 'We'll only stay for an hour.' I look up and Justen is walking down the steps, with I think looks like hymen blood splatter on her denim, her hair has been pulled and played with, she looked scared, yet the little smirk she gives- me… said the truth, and that truth is that she was truly satisfied. In my heart, I know… though I didn't want to believe it. I thought I was going to

be his first. Like the one he loved and would sure that with. I thought to myself, as I hear his heart pounding in my ear. Maybe they didn't go all the way?

On the other hand, no boys can't stop.

Ray said- 'Is that okay? Then we'll go.' His breath smells like beer, and a little- like cigarettes when he kisses me, I could have sworn I tasted that girl leftovers. Yes- I was going to be sick! I close my eyes and think about him kissing her all over, oh and going down on her. I closed my eyes even tighter and I recall when I saw him kissing Joy Mabelle in fifth grade. I want to be the first in something I thought to myself.

This is what I get for not saving it for him. I was so jealous of Joy; I couldn't eat for like three days. I wonder if I look like I'm enjoying it now. I no Joy must-a, in sixth grade, I wonder if Justen enjoyed it more than me? I consider is she better than me? As a girl. As a kisser. As an oral sex partner. Or even worse a sexual intercourse partner. I don't like using those nasty fifth-grade health class terms but… I have to say what I mean.

It relaxes me to think about things like that: like how comical how life is, like before you know it my sis is going to do what I am doing now, and I will be so old, like in my late 1920's… scary getting old, I don't want her to do what I do. Yet she's starting, she is already starting to change into a young woman. She loves to put on my make up! I was about her age when I got my first drip and grow some tiny breasts. She wants to wear a little bra, but you know how mom is she said no to her. She doesn't say 'NO' too much to her… but when it comes to her baby growing up, she holds back. I have told sis that it's not something to be happy about… you're too young- be a kid as long as you can, you grow up fast enough. She looks at me confused asking- 'What do you mean?'

I remember saying, not too many days back- 'You'll find out soon enough!' 'Okay,' she said. In my thoughts- It relaxes me knowing that I, not the only one that's missing up in life, that inside all girls want existences starting way back in elementary school.

Maybe I not doing too badly? I predict yah have to grow up at some point.

Like, If you want to know my biggest secret of all, here it is: I know you're theoretically supposed to wait to have sex with someone you love and all that, and I didn't really that I loved Ray-I mean, I've kind of been in love with him forever, but didn't call it love, I didn't realize- it

until- I saw her coming down the stairs, so how could I not? But that's not why- I decided to have sex with him tonight.

I'll get to why here…

I haven't even taken off my jacket I was could and it shows, but Ray unzips and pulled it off me, that is when he slowly moved his hands up the bottom of my dress, stopped lightly to touch me there. I could feel it moving up, I try not to giggle because, it tickling bushing over so softly along my waist and then he moved to the top, and my dress was pulled up I knew Marcel was looking me over, along with most in the room, I was showing more than I wanted too, after everyone knowing I was girl number two If I would have been first I would have to go all the way on the sofa and not have cared how looked. But Ray's palms are sweaty and felt gritty like they haven't been washed. I just go that Owyhee feeling. Naturally, I start to pull away, he pulls me back in strength, I pull away again just long enough to say, 'Not right here, in the middle of everyone.' 'What's wrong you don't you're your boyfriend over there to see?' I give him that look, like don't freak with me because I'm not in the mood.

He said 'Oh, I was just messing with you.' I said- 'Yeah I know you been messing around too much tonight.' It went over his head… that comment. 'Nobody's looking babe,' he says, as he is press-holding me down again with all his poundage. This is a big fib. He knows the whole world is watching us, or at least the world I live in is. He can see it, I know it. He doesn't even try to fasten his eyes shut for me, and his lick kissing my face like Liv's puppy dog Pickles.

Hell- even Pickles has better breath than he does right now. Dude- you need a tic-tac, I thought politely to myself. His hands crawl over my stomach and his fingers are jerking on the underwire of my bra. Jenny said before at Maddie's place, that I should go braless. But I'm not comfortable doing that as they do, I don't need to pop out of the top. Ha

Jenny and the girls can flap I'm not going too.

Plus, I needed something to hold the clean x tissue in. Ray is so not good with bras. The clasp is his worst nemesis I swear. I know he's not going to stop and everyone will see that

I stuff, I just know it. I didn't plan for this. He's not that good with boobs or foreplay in general. He fingers like he is picking the button for a can of Pepsi over and over on a vending machine. I having sex with him because I want to get it over with, and for the reason, that sex

has always frightened me and I don't want to be scared of it anymore. I am afraid of making real love, not the sex part.

In the past, I always felt safe with Ray, like it was right to want to do him.

Yet not this night, when we're doing it, it doesn't feel right… I wonder why? This is not the night I wanted. I mean, it's not like I know what it's supposed to feel like, with someone I like… but every time he touches my boobs, he kind of just massages them in a circle hard. And I am just there like… okay, you like this?

It like I am getting a cancer exam. I remember how Marcel did it on the bus I loved the way his hands felt on them, and he was so gentle with me, even though he was a little creepy.

However, I would take creepy over Ray's wham bam thank your mom- right now. And to be honest, my gyno is like more loving with his fingers and movements- jeez! Crap- that thing the gyno puts in your vag. to looking down in like that thing slips in and goes down easier than what Ray is doing. Nice visional right… I know. Ray is making me think about that, like being in that bright white room naked on that cold table, and that's not sexy at all, just like now in the spotlight, sweating bullets.

So, one of them has to be doing the boob squeezing and touching way wrong. I get that having quickies are the only way- I am allowed to have it.

'I can't wait to wake up next to you, every day naked in our king-sized bed.' Ray says, his mist lips alongside my ear, he is pulling my hair. In my mind, I was like does this mean you're going to marry me or ask me tonight? Is that why you cheated because you know this is your last free night? I wonder what boys think about during? I am sure it's not all that!

It's a sweet thing to say, I needed to hear it. But I can't focus while his hands are on me like this and his body unstops and his legs straddling around me. And it arises to me all of a sudden that I have not once thought about the waking up part, or sharing everything, I have thought about nothing but the sex part. There is a lot of living together, that I never- ever thought about.

Though I still want to play house with the man I am going to love someday, like maybe if I have a baby that will fix everything that awkward? That's if he asks me… to be his girl. I have no idea what you're supposed to talk about the day after you've had sex, with someone that's

like Ray I never did a younger lower-ranking boy, or what you're supposed to say well during the sex with someone you're falling too. Normally I am more vocal!

I've imagined us lying side by side, under the stars, or like in that book by Marcel Ray Duriez that Liv loves, where they make love under a bridge. I never thought about just in a bed farting and snorting around. Like with if I have to pee or do number two…?

OMG- I never want Ray seeing me getting up to do that. In my imagined desires, I have seen us touching like those in romance movies, all hushed, wind blowing my hair, while the sun slowly rises and looks so big and lovely. I love how romance should be… why is it so wrong to not have it be like that?

Ha- sorry boys that I like to take like three honors to finish, unlike Ray that takes less the one minute. I and most girls can pick more than once, however, the boys need to stimulate us, so we girls will be able to pick a least once and is not a one pump trump. Will, at least I have what's in the Pringles can to satisfy me. But even that can't be all mine or lead me into the perfect fantasy because I have to share it with my little sis! It's like I can't have any peace. She is my sis, so I guess it's okay?

Yeah- I've thought about sharing toys with my little sis, but somewhere in my mind like I thought it would be a Barbie. But at least I know what I'm getting her for her birthday he- he.

So, Marcel walks up about at Ray's big finish and says 'Do you two want to go up and get a room! That's why there are rooms! I can have you doing it on my mom's sofa!'

He didn't stop, even throw, I say let's go up, and then, I look around everyone else is getting to it like us. It's all because it's Ray and me. I don't see why others care so much. Like I think I want this? So, they can go and suck eggs. This all happened so fast:

We hear:

Bridgit: 'Oh god- get a room.'

Stivey: 'Hey guys look at this live porn.'

Maddie: I overheard her say- 'Holy crap she's getting nailed. Why didn't he take her upstairs?'

Jenny: 'WOOoooo! Get some! Yah! Yah! Yah!' She is getting it all on her cell video camera. This was big scene number two this night. Everyone has circled us; the music was cut in a roar. Rays slacks and undies are around his ankles. The ending always ends up with it in my mouth, that is when…

Justen: Shriek out- 'Karly is Rays 'round number two. Hey Karly, how does my after's taste- going down? And just so you know he didn't wear a condom either. I was his fist; I lost my virginity tonight to Ray! AND I BLOW HIS MIND TONIGHT TOO!' Everyone is cheering for her, that when Justen starts the chant that haunted me the rest of the night.

'Sloppy seconds, sloppy seconds!'

I hear Liv's voice far off in the room: 'Oh I feel bad for her like this is not cool.' I thought- You think? I felt like more of a loser then I have felt ever in my whole life. I think this was planned. But I don't wanna think Ray is that mean. This is someone that is pissed that I become popular and wants to see me go down and fall too where I was in middle school. But who…?

(I didn't know then, but as the night went on, I got it. Somebody wants to destroy me, so they get what I have.) It's just like in Ray's rooms, no privacy, and the windows bar not covered with anything. It's all out in the open and everyone seems to be looking, even like in the next building over they look in the room, even the bathroom is all uncover glass.

Even the window-washer has seen me and him going to third base.

Ray pulls away from my face as Jenny, Justen, Liv, and Maddie and appears like ghosts next to me. Justen is making a face. Mocking the expression, I made when I glopped the jizz down. All girls know that nasty taste face, with your nose all wrinkled up. Yet a classy girl doesn't spit! Plus, I heard that it makes your hair shiny.

Also- I'll get some calories like ten or so to, so maybe I won't have to eat dinner, and become fat? But the least someone could do is hand me a towel for all the runny drips.

Maddie says 'You two are perverts. Doing this in front of all these younger grade kids.' 'It's not what I had planned for the night that's for sure!' After everyone gives me the drop-dead look. I said- 'I think I want to go home!' But the girls they talked me out of it… saying- 'Stay for us!' I wanted to walk out that door.

I didn't care if I had to do the walk of shame all the whole way home, no mugger would mess with me… I would rip them to shreds. (That was my last chance for redemption. I was going down in flames.)

That reminds me, like why is there a highway to hell and only a stairway to heaven? It beats me…? I never really put much thought into either place, because, I just thought there were hoary stories that were made up by old crazy guys in white robes, with their nut hanging out, or so that is what Jenny and the girls preached to me.

Saying- 'They only want you to believe that crap to put fear into your mind, and so you don't think for yourself or have sex. Do you believe in Santa, Easter bunny, or Unicorns?' The church was not something I thought was cool, really it was a waste of my time. My mom and dad never made us go, so we didn't.

(Like it's not cool- to yack on heaven's door either, the night you die.

Because you so butt drunk even your soul is messed up! Believe me… you're no longer an atheist when you see your life flash by, in the ten seconds death is coming to get you. Like even the Ten Commandments rushed through my brain, and I didn't even know them! Yet even though everyone I was friends with was anti-God, and I was too to for my friends, I never doubted that there wasn't a high power than man. I just didn't know.)

I will never forget is the first time that's for freaking sure. It's played over in my mind afterward, like a slow-mo- movie, Ray is lifted both arms and take off my dress for me in front of everyone, and then he rips my arms around his waist, he doesn't unclasp my bra he pulls it up and over my head. All my clean x's are everywhere as he pulls me into the sex passion he wants, and that is with my legs up in the air feet touching my head.

He gurgles a little bit of beer some of it drips down my boobs, he makes a sound as if he is annoyed at with everything falling out. I think- I might have squealed like a piglet when he jammed it in the other hole down there when he thrust it in wildly, he spits on me for the lube, rubbing my clit speedily with his free hand, so, I would pick as fast as he was about to, so it looked like he did a good job in front of all that were observing, yet he keeps dropping out will thirsting. All I was thinking was- pull out- pull out.

I think them vibrating chairs in Bed Bath and beyond give me more of a thrill than that Edge of Heaven banging style, I was involuntary laid into, like for the first time… I wanted to be on top and take control and ride him like my horse it's!

'Forgive me, babe.' He shrugs his showers and nods. What does that mean? I thought to myself. I see beer in his cup, and it's almost gone golden and foamy, knowing that has to be his tenth and he stares at it, frowning. 'You should get a final, and just tip the keg Ray.' 'Yah I should!' He didn't seem to get the dig for drinking so much and acting like a butt. 'You guys want another?' Said J-C a boy that is two years younger than us and that goes to another school, he seems like the only one that was willing to talk after me and Rays PDA show.

J-C I think stands for Jeremiah Calando Redondo, he's Mexican or something like that. Every time I see him, he is like in the Home Depot, chillin' or asking us to help push the car. He has like has two babies' girls to Christina Alonzo. Her daddy was black, and her mom was whiter than me.

So, she looks in-between tan all the time, she was a cutie in school and was somewhat popular, even for being the knocked-up chick at fourteen and then again at sixteen. She lived with him scene she was thirteen and makes do, by getting her GED or so that what I heard. She stays at home with the kids, as he's out looking for younger asses to tap. Christina dropped out at the start of this year… I think… I think it was this year?

Maddie walks up to me like she is protecting me: 'We brought our own.' Maddie slaps the vodka in her purse. And said to him- 'She doesn't need you lipping her anything.' 'Ba-Bye!' 'Clever!' Ray thumbs his nasty middle finger beating the side of his forehead, nearly stabbing his right eye out.

One because he is drunk as a skunk. Two he needs glass and doesn't have contacts in… why I don't know. Maybe that's why he has a hard time getting his key on the whole? He's drunk-er-er than I thought. Maddie covers her mouth with her lift hand and giggles like a little school girl. I groan and roll my eyes- like this is going to be a lonnnggg night! I say to Maddie and Liv.

'My boyfriend's such blockhead,' I say as soon as he wobbles away tripping over all the bodies. Maddie- 'You've said it.' 'But a cute idiot,' Liv modifies what I said. 'I said yeah, he is… he's my cute idiot.' He's walk looks like something from the walking dead, all zombified.

I couldn't stay mad at Ray deep down I felt like he had to do it with her, to not get picked on by the others. And it's not like I haven't had my share of guys. Maybe he did want his first time to be with a girl like me, all used up? She is everything I couldn't be, and everything I should be, and everything I would have been if I would have never fallen to everyone's pushing me so young. But most of all I filled at being me. I think Jenny was behind it, I just feel she is, if she can't have him, she doesn't want me to either. She no how he is when he drinks.

~*~

(Chatting with the girls)

Maddie- 'I would love him too if he didn't have that nasty dingily thingy hanging on there that need to see a knife, all the girls- like- have been saying that you're the only one that didn't care. That's why some girls are calling you dirty. Maybe I would consider looking at it if he would have that done as he said to her, he would and that's why she did.'

'You know Maddie that's like saying a transgender is cute.' She giggles,

'Sure- it does… Maddie said- sure it does.' 'I'm I am missing something here?'

Maddie- 'Yes, yes- you are.'

Liv's observing what going down around the room, puckering her lips to make them appear more smoochable, she takes a selfie and sends it to Maddie.

'Aww-h cute- I overhear, yet she is standing next to her.' 'Anywhere where did you guys go, anyway?' In mid-sentence, it hit me what Maddie meant. I thought since when did Ray became so cute? Then I got it. Other than his little issue holding him back he would be such a lady's man. That is the only thing turning the girls away from sleeping with him.

It- must be?

I felt so betrayed. I'm feeling more annoyed than I should by the whole thing and everything: I feel like ripping my hair out and running out the door saying you all can go to hell. But that is when the girls start their step team dance cheer thingy. Beating the floor and stopping around, will rapping insults to the boys' team.

Maddie and Liv do the chest bump thing. Yet I lost in my thoughts with all the circumstance thinking that my besties ditched me tonight, and let all this crap go down, and that

is pissing the crap out of me. The point that Ray so butt drunk, and the point that Marcel is still looking at me like, I love you, I want to sleep with you look. He's talking with Jenny.

I think I overhear her saying. 'You'll find someone daddy. She'll come around when she realizes you're the one that loves her.' Not that I want him to be in love with me, understandably, yet I do find it adorable. That even after seeing what went down, like he still only has eyes for me, that's so dreamy.

#- Hashtag: (Sortie's get'n low, dropped off, and more hole in ones then a game of golf.)

I remember us as kids Marcel made me glad, we had each other, and you made me giggle, and if I could do it all over again, I would not change that. I just wish he was still like that or is he? Was it me that got all weird? Looking at our life, I see forks in the road, and choices made, the trips we took, the voyages we had. My pap used to say something like this- 'We fall to someone wholeheartedly, and you never stop fallen to them until you fall your sprite ways at death, but you have to fall to them as they fall to you. In a crazy thing called life, and mine has been filled with bliss, because I fell for you as my granddaughter, just like I fall for your grandma. Falling to you, mean love everlasting never falling about, always fallen together.

You'll know when you have fallen for the right one.' It's just an unbroken comforting feeling, weirdly.

~*~

I struggle the bottle out of Maddie's bag and take another sip. I need it! 'We made around the house like three and had our get-togethers. There's, like, ten different rooms up here and down there.' 'Did ya have to check em' all out?'

Liv gawks at me, seeing my face, and holds up her hands as Macaulay Culkin did in Home Alone to her dropped jaw face. 'What Kar? It's not like we abandoned you in the middle of nowhere. You're a big girl.' I was thinking yeah-right comforting.

'Don't trust people... they have to make you have a reason to trust them, yet never- ever turn your back, because you never know who is going to stab it. You're only wanted when you're needed. And that's the truth. Truth is a lie to make others feel okay. That is why I don't believe anything anyone tells me unless I feel that it right. And even my rights in my mind have been wrong. Trust is for baby girls and simple-minded- spiders'- that don't know any better.'

I will not cry, I would rather die than a painful so death, then to cry over a boy in front of my friends. I look at Liv's face all-loving and such. I think- god I'm such a little p*ssy. Like she's right. I don't know why I'm feeling so pissy, and detestable. As well as she's looking at me like- you did get what I wanted. I guess you can't have it all, the way you want. 'Where did Jenny go?' Maddie asked me.

Oh! She's off making Marcel feel good, about not getting with me tonight. Maddie asks me- Karly would you, if you would, like would you be willing to with him? I just said I don't know, maybe? 'O-M-G! Like You FALL IN LOoooVE WITH HIM TONIGHT!' 'I DID?' 'Um-hum!' She Hummed. 'Like your eyes were never off him.' I thought- maybe like I never fall out? I was so confused like you would think, I was the one that was a girl in the room. 'Maddie is now glugged to Liv's lap, there sitting next to me on the sofa lip locked. I was thinking like this is fun. And Jenny is fighting with Ray about me.' I do believe that Jenny and her Ex-boyfriend may have had some hardcore makeup sex tonight. However, that's just a rhymer, I overhear going around. I lost track of all the Ex's it could have been any one of these guys.

#-Hashtag: (Lovedrug, tear jokers, and spared out on the sofa)

~*~

'You never know how much time you'll have.' So, I thought the best way to spend it was partying my as off with whose I thought were my friends and the perfect boyfriend. (However, looking back at the dying girl looking for the borderlines, I see where I should have been. I see the arms that should have been held in.) It's the outlandish world. Living for other observations and expectations. 'Love is merely where it is, where it's at, where it going to be, and never- ever changes. But you have to let that love you in regardless of you shutting them out.' Back on the sofa- As I said- 'Maddie is suctioned to Liv's lap. And Jenny is fighting with someone's girlfriend now, and Samara Still is stroking off Christopher Work's willy in my ear, she is pressed up on the sofa cushion with her small chest, with her knees churching down in, facing the back he is standing like, right behind me behind the sofa. I want to say she like a seventh grader, if not she looks it. He is in my grade also. That's a lovely sight and sound. Is it not?'

(My thoughts drift off, as I hear every fap- fap- fap of every beat. Like ticking-talking every second of my life away.) Yucky! Like no wonder Liv and Maddie became gay lovers, I get

it. I'm like seventeen and I already hate everything about sex. It makes us girls feel used, and valueless in a man's mind.

I have to think that all boys are like that, except for my daddy, unless your dad is like some girls, I know that's correct. Your daddy is the one that holds your hand, picks you up and on his shoulders so you can see, he's the only boy that not trying to get something from you.

'Love your daddy.' Even if I never said it. Even if you embrace the piss out of me. Even if you made me feel as if I was not always there, or you were there too much. Even if you were snooping in my room. I will always be your little girl, always.

'Yeah, well, as everyone has is like kissing all around me for the five minutes. I look over there and its Maddie and live, flicking tongues and look over the other way and Samara and Chris are sucking face. I'm like the only girl that didn't get an awesome long tender kiss today. Even Marcel got a kiss a long sexy kiss from Jenny because she felt bad for him. Ray and I only kiss for thirdly seconds… if that.

'I yell out all-righty stop it already.' Liv- 'What's your problem?' 'You to have been going at it the whole time you set here, like hello I here.'

The cracks Maddie up and Liv starts laughing. It's making me feel crappy, and even more comfortable. The vodka fills my head with warmth. More people are arriving as some are leaving going to cheap hotels or campers in the backyard for the night.

To sleep it off, or to get off. One of the two, most likely. No one just talks to anyone anymore. It's all sex, sex, and more sex.

So, I get plastid sipping increasingly of the nasty stuff, and Maddie hands me something to pop a forget pill. At this point, I'll like all pop anything… it works fast. I all chill down; I see the faces just like I do in my dreams. The room is spinning just a little. Yet it feels enjoyable, though, like being on a creepy sluggish merry go 'round, with the creepy music, all jacked up like evil, and clown-like. I feel like I did when I play- ring around the rosy, as a little girl, the drug took me back there. Maddie and Liv decide to go on an undertaking to save Jenny before her catfight with that girl over there turns into an extreme scuffle. The wondering eyes are on me; he's never looked away yet. Damn it appears like the entire Clit high school has shown up, like even the middle school kids too. I know that like 200 were invited, however it looks like there is about 500 teen and tweens here. A tween is a girl ages about 914... too old for toys, but

too young for boys. Yet those are the ones the senior boys like the most because of their easy, and down for anything that they ask them to do… I should know that's how I lost my virginity.

The boys that are under 18 are like if I'm under and she's under were not doing any time if she consents, and even if she doesn't there are several guys around to say she did, and she most likely wants it she not saying anything. She wants to be a popular girl in high school coming up. Girls will do anyone or anything to be popular and not a loser that is bullied. I should know I had to do it.

This is the most that ever seen shows up at one party… for-reals- I didn't think- like- Marcel was so cool with the in-crowd? The house is trashed. Popularity wise me and the girls are the highest, and everyone else here is more mid-level most of the senior girls that are on the homecoming court have left already with their boyfriends for the night.

Popularity wise- Marcel just holds the top spot in his class in my eyes, he is like the rung ladder to his posies, more like the jester. To wired to be one of use, and too unique to be one of them. And there is a lot of low life in here like the tweens, looking for a boy toy popularly boost.

He seems to be in with more of the sophomores and younger, that mostly be the cool kids when we graduate, I have to say like they could be cool sophomores, I wouldn't mind gotten to know some of them if it would be cool for me to do so. It's all part of being a girl that's a teenager.

#- Hashtag: (fantastic, slang, and cherry popping)

Party time Part 3

Maybe I'm in the wrong crowd? I know I'm supposed to hate them and hate on them, yet I can help but like them, they're nice kids. Just because I'm older and more popular, I'm supposed to treat them like crap…? I can't see that. When I am just sitting on my ass feeling left out by my peps. I remember being like them like I was hated when I was sophomore from all the senior girls at the parties, yet most of us girls in my class didn't have their rankings yet, it's understandable.

I can't bring myself to care, I'll talk or be with anyone, I find fit. I know it's breaking the popularity rolls, but that's okay by me. Liv gives a group of them one of her stink eyes as she goes by them. Yet she does that with anyone she doesn't try to get to know.

Maddie is on the character. Says 'Young skanks, ho-ing it up!' vociferously. One of them, Chrissa Dillard Is rolling around ass naked on the floor, hooking up Brice Rice (a senior boy.) There is a lot of that going on, with the tweens and older boys. Hell- It's more like a coming of age party, then a beer bash, at this point.

The social bottom doesn't ever show their loser faces. They would not even get past the door. Like the sped and undesirables rejects the loosest of the lowlife.

The stay home and creep on Facebook, they're never invited to anything, nobody wants them or would care if they're gone. Harsh but true! It isn't for the reason that people would make fun of them, although they undoubtedly would. It's more than that. They don't hear about these parties until after they've transpired. And nobody likes them, they have no friends or contacts, and that's the way we want it, they can't make a move up without us knowing or approving. They can have any friend online or in real life unless the popular approve the contact.

Because all we have to say is- 'If your friends with him or her, you're not friends with us anymore and you lose your ranking.' The lowlife- the more they try to be like us, like the lower they go, if we don't want them to gain popularity. We make it that way. They're so dumb that they would even think about coming in the back door where the popular' s come in. they don't know about the secret side entrances to the parties, there so naïve they walk up to the guarded front door asking to get in, like come on.

Sometimes, you have to show that you got a text from some with a stancher, like the one that invited you. And yeah no if its la-jilt, because most lowlife- rejects have no cell contacts other than their mommy. To invite them… you can spot a faker. You're either in the loop or pushed out. And just like a bad dog they get slapped on the nose, they are told to go home and cry to mommy, for sucking at life.

Its 2015 everyone has a fake ID, not like we need them for Marcel's party, but they do come in handy for the night joints, and bars. I have a visa card, school ID, and a suspended driver's license. However, I am a good driver compared to Jenny, yet Jenny can get away with anything. I know boys that like to spend all their weekend time in the strip clubs. I have never seen Marcel at one of those, however, Ray has had a lap dance, and it wasn't from me, or so I was told. Would that be considered cheating? I am getting thirsty so I am going for a beer or two, maybe three. If everyone else is drinking it like it has to be okay. The DJ keeps the beats coming,

making sure everyone has a glass as well, and is having a good time. The laser lights are going nuts, flashing colors on the walls, floor, ceiling, and mobs of kids. The house is trashed; everyone it's wasted or stoned.

There are even thongs hanging from the chandelier. And about five minutes or so ago, like I saw Bob Zaza Tarzan swing from it, form the upstairs landing down to the living room dance floor. It would have been okay with me if he would have been wearing pants. That's a Facebook photo, that I will tag him in. Daisy Clemenza is crowd surfing.

Oh, that reminds me, like there is one of my favorite thongs hugging form Marcel's rearview mirror of his 2014 Toyota Corolla. He is one strange boy, it's kinda sweet… Kinda? I wonder where Ray is? High school is supposed to prepare you for the real world, I could just imagine college parties and spring break.

#- Hashtag: (sleeping bag, sleeping around)

~*~

I get up and do some walking around. I was sick of seeing this suck fest in the living room. There are several tiny passages and rooms, it feels like a maze, in this place. Only one door is closed, with a boy's boxer hanging on the nob. I like a sign to keep out were doing the nasty and we don't want you seeing it. I had planned on using a big ass sign that says: 'KEEP THE HEEL OUT' and post it on the master's door… yeah, that was not needed.

I passed one girl that was using a pocket rocket on another girl. Um-okay doesn't look… yet it's hard not to. I walk more, and I pass Melissa Franc a freshman, she was downing a bobby shot, that has been poured down Nicki Dickerson small of her petite back running down into her very naked ass crack where Melissa's mouth is slipped under… it's freaking sick and awesome all at the same time.

Everyone in that room is cheering for her, (Melissa's! Gulp it! Lick it up!) Or maybe making fun or her doing it. One of the two, she is going to be a YouTube star with her freshmen hazing, I mean her lips are touching Nikki's lady lips. Or maybe she wanted it?

Oh, cool some random ass freshmen girl just flashed me… running past. But like her t*ts are bigger than mine… what gives? I think I'll pass on showing mine. Walking down the hall that never seems to end. I wonder what Madilyn is doing at this very moment?

I could see her like kissing a photo of Maddie and making out with it in her bed, before doing what she needs to do, and then roll over to fall asleep, all alone with just a teddy bear. It's a sad thought… like here I am having all this fun, and she is lonely. (She needs a cuddle buddy and so do I. Ha- maybe I should sleep with her tonight?) I wonder if she and Maddie will ever hook-up, Hey, anything is possible…? I hope she finds someone.

Someone, that will see her for who she is, and not what people around her think she is. 'I see her… but have to un-see her for my friends, friendship.' I walk into the bathroom and sit down on the pot. I'm not going to say, what I was doing- I think you'll get it. Looking on the wall next to the crapper, some ass hole drew a naked girl cartoon with a big d*ick going up in her, and it said above… it was Maggie.

'This is what it looked like her first time.'

With the word 'Ouch!' coming out of the drawing's mouth. I got some paper towels and washed what I could off, yet I don't think it did any good. Marcel is going to have to paint over that before his parents come home at the end of the weekend. Or they will go ape on his ass! I have to say I am grossed out! I didn't want to go in here, but a girl has to do what a girl has to do. Flush! I stride out.

Walking, walking, and walking! And that's when I walked into Marcel's room. The door was cracked, it's the typical nerdy boy's room, stuff all over. I like the big king-sized bed even if it's undone. I have to do some snooping. There is a photo of me under his pillow. I had to pick the pillow up and smell it… creepy- I know… it's a girl thing. I walk to the dresser, and I snatched a pair of his undies from the top drawer… two can play that game. Like why does he have so many anyway? Like who wearer black socks? I found a cute T-shirt, that I could not resist taking for my own.

I know he wouldn't mind, if I wear it for the rest of the night, and not wash it and give it back at some point. I think he would like that. I put on over my dress at first, oh it's black with the saying- 'Kiss me I'm Desperate.' I felt it was appropriate for the night I was having. That when I thought- nah, I am taking off this dress and bar off.

So- there I was naked standing in his room, I sure there was a hidden camera somewhere, but I didn't care… it's like I had to do this… I felt so devilish. And I don't understand why, but I ran from the door and jumped into his bed and pulled the covers over, and they were so soft next

to my bar skin. 'Awe-hhh- so nice!' I may have even dozed off for a minute or two. It has to be the softest bed I ever wiggled around in. hugging a pillow and with one between my legs. It's a girl thing, I can't expand. Looking around there is everything you could want at your fingertips. TV, PC, guitars, books and so much more.

I jumped up when I thought I heard someone coming down the hallway. And I did… I did see someone pass they looked in but didn't say anything. I need to learn to closes the door… like I scream at my sis for that.

So, I slid my unclothed butt and laid business on his cozy sheets getting out of the big, and that is when I put on his T-shirt. Dancing around in the mirror-like a maroon of course. I grabbed the handbag that I place on the floor walking in. I reimaged out my thong and jeans that were in my purse. Then I placed my bra and the dress in there as a rolled-up ball.

By the time we get to Jenny, she broke up yet another couple and has made it with yet another boy, big surprise. That has to be boy number five tonight…? She if fight for her boy with yet another girl. She's sitting on his lap and he's smoking they are sharing a joint and suck the smoke out of each other's mouth every time they take a bong hit.

They're the cutest couple ever. I have to find out his name… like who is he? The girl that was his date or one-night stand left out the front door all pussies- like, leaving in some lowlife rejects that can be held back. I guess she can sleep with one of them tonight outside in a tent. Ha!

#- Hashtag: (bedhead, swiping, peaking, and making the change)

I back on the dance floor, Liv is standing corner with Dan Dilco who is press upon her snugger than a PP and J sandwich. I read the words coming out of her mouth, it looks like- 'I took care of it.' and 'I don't want to see you. Get something out of my face.' Maddie comes up and clocks in right in the face, his nose is beading, he runs into the next room with a sophomore girl named Veronica, he got her too. I think she is showing some. She chose to be dumb and keep the oopsie.

I see Shy and she is pressed up against the wall and she's semi-dancing and a half grinding against him my boyfriend. Ray will say he's where just having fun… if I walk up, so I not going to break it up. It's okay with me.

Shy is nothing but a wall follower now that she lost most of her rank. There both smashed anyways, I drought they'll do anything other than barf on each other and dance 'till they drop. Dan was sobbing like he wanted the baby or something.

Every girl he has had sex with has to take something… or finds out too late. Like does he want to be a 17-year-old daddy, and throw away his life… or worse hers for that thought? Boys they don't think; it is good that we girls do that for them! Liv has a half-gone cigarette flaccid-like dangling from her lips, she smokes a- lot when she is under the gun, or she skips a period. She doesn't shake her ashes… she just inhales.

In these low-ride jeans, I was thinking- I should have warned- my tight leggings because I see a lot of the girls here are wearing black ones. It must be- the new thing? Oh, why do boys come up to you and think it's okay to make a random dance move and rub up on you? And then they use their heavy arms to keep their footing, most times feeling your butt end, also.

My hair's a mess. I see it in black form night window glass. It's from falling asleep in Marcel's cozy bed, and Ray's hands running through it. Like even though I know I'm an attractive girl, I don't always feel beautiful. I wish I had someone in my life that would make me feel beautiful all the time, even when I know I don't. I do think there is someone that would make me feel that way… there has to be.

~*~

Oh, life- 'life is a slut that makes us bend and bangs over and over every day… humping it until it has enough of you.' Oh, boys- 'boys are d*icks heads that penetrate us over and over any way they can. Mentality and physically.'

'Life sucks butt, but sucking butt is life. And when you die- like- I did you miss sucking butt.'

'Mom and dad and little sisters are a pain in the neck, but it's nothing like having some random man mortician seeing you naked on a table shoving embalming liquid in your neck artery.' I was floating over like; I could see it all as he was doing it.

I remember, Frank said as he touched my hair, and ripped the sheet off me completely- 'Awe- such a young pretty little girl, what a shame her life is over. Why? Why is it always the

young ones… that never did anything wrong?' I think- he was taken back by me or something. It was like he didn't want to cut me up. Like I was too beautiful to him, to do such a thing.

I remember, him touching my hand and stroking it- 'Saying your time was too short… there just was not enough time…' and he whispered it again- 'Not enough time…' I was looking down thinking this must be hard on him, like having to do this with every dead person. Like how could you do this a job?

But, it really, I think it was hard on him when it's a teenager like me, never see life other than high school.

(Life in high school is not a life at all it's a pretend world to what life after graduation will be. There is so much more than getting wasted, partying, and hooking up. So much more…)

(If he only they knew… I did a lot wrong.)

Like, cheating on my math test in thread grade. Peeing in the shower onto my sis when we were younger. Even spitting in her orange juice every morning, before school. Nasty little things like that, I was not blameless. I remember the day I said to my sis, that I wished that she would never be born… I didn't mean it.

(I do love her! And will look out for her.)

I remember, picking on her all the time, just because she was frailer. I would get onto her and reseal her down. I even put a pillow over her had one night saying stop freaking snoring. (I am not above suspicion.) Just because I like to look cute, sweet, and loveable doesn't me that I not disagreeable, vail, and worthless. And I am valueless! Only one boy thought I was valuable, and he went and got all creepy, or was it me that became the creep? I did so much wrong, I would love to have do-overs until I get it right.

I drift off and think about how funny it is that my dad is always in his lazy boy chair, barking orders on Sundays. He loves the Game Show Network; he has to do his Steve Harvey impressions too.

Yeah know- smelling big and such.

However, his favorite show is the Newlywed Game. He bursts out laughing, with the question Sheri Shepherd asks. Some of them are dirty! Like last Sunday I was doing something,

in the living room, and I heard something about a- Lush underbrush. And the back door.' I just got up and left him to have his moment. I was thinking so gross! Yet I can't help but snicker!

#- Hashtag: (daddies got the giggles, under the spotlight, and damsel in distress)

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I snap out of it- 'Poor Liv,' I say. I don't know why I suddenly feel bad for her. 'She's too nice. That has always been her downfall.' Plus, boys will piss on you without the decency to call it to rain. Just like Jenny, she let boys piss on her all the time.

And yes, you could take that literally if you wanted too. 'She's a whore,' Maddie says, but not spitefully. She knows that she has to be to keep the sanity within the click. I don't think Maddie gets that she not interested in him, maybe she just wanted to have a baby? So that she has something that is all hers? And that's something Maddie could give her? Either way, it all ended today with Jenny's say and not hers. I said- 'Liv's not the whore, Jenny's just making you think that. Put yourself in her shoes. You don't care, she does.'

'Do you think we'll remember, any of this?' Maddie asks me. I said- 'I don't remember what I eat last, so I don't think so.'

I said- 'Maddie What the point in remembering… you only have regret.' She said- 'It's so you don't forget that there is hope before you die.' 'Hope to die?' she said- 'You get to have hope, or life is not worth living.'

Me- 'This is coming for the girl that's faith is shaken by some boy hooking up with your girlfriend?' I'm not sure where the words come from or what end or side. I think out of her butt hole, or maybe you could have called- it a quaff. She's talking out of her holes! My whole head feels light and uncertain, all set to drift away.

Maddie- 'Do you think we'll remember any of it two years from now?' I said- 'Who knows…' I thought about it more and said- 'Like maybe when you and I are old and crazy crapping in our Huggies in the old age home, it will come back to us.'

Maddie- 'I'll drink to that… he- he.' Then she said- 'Karly you have one distorted way of thinking, and that's why I love you as I do!'

Maddie giggles, saying- 'I know she loves me more.' Tapping the bottle lightly on my lift arm. There's a little bit of it left. I can't believe that we drank it all in less than four hours. I sip and chase it down with my beer, which I know is not a good idea, but, I did it anyway. 'Could take my picture, because I don't remember.' By this time Jenny and Kenneth have made up and are a boyfriend, and girlfriend once again, even after swearing up and down that they would never hook up again, all the same, they did they made up, and not there kissing up and it's sickening- yet- NO- big surprise.

That the way that has been seen they were in middle school; they thrive off one another love and hate. They can live with each other or without. Now Liv is sitting Maddie's lap and smoking her joint. Just like Jenny is doing with Kenneth.

Marcel is looking at me from the corner of the room with puppy dog eyes.

Maybe on slow dance wouldn't heart? So, I walked over and asked him to dance. It was nice, he wasn't creepy at all, and it was kind of sweet. He's leaning against the wall and I am pressed upon him and out of nowhere I just kiss him like I never kissed another.

Where half dancing and I am half grinding against him, he's so in love with me I can just tell and making out. I never- ever thought that would happen. Ray is off with his little slut for the night anyways. It's time for me to have some fun too. Two can play the cheating game! Isn't spitefulness fun!

Jenny cries when she sees us and stumbles off when she is on Kenneth's lap.

Jenny never cries! What is up with that?

But, is she crying over me been with Marcel or him? They walk up after are slow dances are over, Jenny and ken throwing an arm around each of us like it's been years since we were together, and we all are old buddies. She snatches the vodka from me and takes a sip while her arm is still wrapped around my shoulders, Jenny's face is so close to mine, I can feel her eyelashes brush against my cheek. I forgot- I was still holding it when I had my arms wrapped around Marcel's neck.

I guess I was lost in the moment.

'Where did you go tonight Kar?' She yells. Her voice is raspy but loud, even over the music and the wide-ranging sounds of everybody talking and laughing like idiots. 'I was looking

everywhere for you.' 'I was sitting here all night,' I said, 'total bull-crap,' Ken, and Jenny says, 'we saw you coming out of his room.

All sneaking like out of his room like you just had sex. And you obtusely changed, what did he do jizz all over your dress?' 'Nothing happened- I was just looking around.' Ken- 'Yeah we got it, you were looking up will kneeling on the ground, in his room. Am I right? And then you to end up naked together in his bed slapping hips?'

I said- 'You're so wrong and nauseating.'

Ken- 'Suuurrrre!' I said- Why do you care anyway? Ken- 'Why? Like so we can tell everyone that matters that you got some tonight!' I said- 'Is that all you think about?' Ken- 'Um- yeah purdy much, that all that matters at a party.' I run to the bathroom, they make me sick, and I hear Ken say- 'She's got morning sickness already.'

Ha- ha ha's are coming from everywhere. Ken, he is such an ass! I let poor Marcel stand there to define for himself. I was so embarrassed saying I was in his room without him okaying it. I wonder what he said, we did or didn't do, to them? I wonder if he figured out that I was wearing his T-shirt when I ran away? Thank you- toilet rim for being cold, it makes my head feel better, after vomiting beer and vodka.

#- Hashtag: (Hold me, thrill me, and kiss me)

Party time Part 4

I have to un-lock myself from this bathroom before someone thinks I'm ending it. I spend thirty minutes in the bathroom, first washing my face and then reapplying makeup, even though my hands are unsteady, and my face keeps doubling up in the mirror, with my eye movements. I know at some point. My head is still fuzzy and pounding with every move or eyelid blink I make. I was trying so hard to not think yet this popped into my mind. 'If you don't have trust, you don't have anything. And if you don't trust them you lose them to someone that well.'

Jenny sees me down the hall and runs to my side… Saying- 'Come on back. You're- such a baby, we didn't mean anything by it.'

Jenny is such a bull-crapper and Maddie drunker and then me and with her. Liv is like a little girl on Ritalin when she has a sip too many and I'm antisocial and paranoid, and someone cracks a window to let out the smoke and sex stink yet know does. There like are you nuts, it's

freezing out… that was the look on their cold-hearted faces, everyone in the room is like icebergs to me, and I felt like the Titanic about to sneak, no mercy, no compassion. I was a-nobody among everybody.

I think Marcel went to his room to see what all I did or did not do. I think Ray most of went out to a camper or up to one of the rooms with his little slut for the night. I could not see that boy around anywhere. Whaaattteeevvveeer, Jenny saw me scratching my neck looking for him. Jenny said- 'He'll be back to kiss your goodnight at some point.'

'Who?'

I asked, Jenny- 'You know who!' I walk back to his room not sure what to expect. I see him standing next to his bed. I think he was planning on getting naked to sleep or something. I sit down with him on top of it, we start talking- he is playing with my hair, I did not boys know how to make small talk. We're laughing over the fact that Jenny is such a stuck-up b*tch. We talked about Maddie and Liv having issues because of her. I even told him that Liv terminated Dilco's baby.

That's we he said- 'Hey Karly was you and I make a baby would you do that?' I said- 'No.' I end up laying on top of him, and we talked and talked. I said- 'You want to have a baby with me?'

Marcel- 'I don't know, I want to spend my life with you so, yeah someday or sooner, that's if you want kids… or like me like that.' I put my arms around his waist. I pulled ever so slowly toward him as he did me. The kiss was hard yet soft, it was fiery yet passionate, romantic, it was filled with a hunger for each other, the hunger I had for him oh so long ago. It was also filled with affection, he showed me he loves me with that kiss. But can I love him back can I show it, or do I want to?

Even though we have kissed before it seemed like the first. It felt as if the whole world stilled for us. As if fireworks and explosions went off. As if all eyes were looking into each other's souls. I could see into him as he could- me… I just wonder what he saw looking in. I wonder if he really wants me, forever or if that just a line. I wonder… even if we felt all these emotions.

Even though I feel them for him, I had to hold back, to know for sure. I just had to hold back. That's we he drifted off… Why did he fall asleep on me? Was it because I'm boring or is

he just exposed? My head thumbing still, I know was not thinking clearly, so I staggered back down the long hallway back into the dwindling party. I see one of the double-hung windows. Without anyone observing I reach my hand forward and place it on the big old sill, there is an electric candle with a night light bulb sitting in the middle. I crack the window to let out the smoke and smells out, and to get some much-needed air.

A fine stream of rain-sh snow is gusting in on my face, it's cold but feels so-o good, even though it's winter. Enjoying the freezing air and the sensation of a hundred of little sparkly flacks.

I squeezed my eyes closed tightly and promise myself that I'll never forget the moment I just had with him. Funny I wanted to forget about all the sound, the tacky lights, and smalls of my friends and their mindless hilarity that there tittering about. For some reason… I wanted to forget about all the heated hookups and the many bodies that were around me. What surpasses me the most about this, is that this is what I lived for and sacrificed so much to gain… to have the gathering and wanting of others that are popular, it's everything I ever wanted. Yet it seemed at that moment, I was better off before not having it. Before I became this girl… the girl that I'm not… not truly on the inside.

When I open my eyes, I get the shock of my life. My little sis is standing in the doorway, staring at me. With that look of holding me. She must have snuck out and followed me to this party with some of her older girlfriends, she been messing with the wrong crewed lately. I knew what happen to her tonight just by looking at her face, I knew. And if I find that boy, I'll rip his sagging balls off! Then again, I was not much older than her when I want to my first party. I was horrified, she is doing what I did, back when I felt like I was dying inside. I was dead long before I wound up dead. I just wonder if she feels the same…? I wonder if I am the cause. I how would let her in… and how did she get so popular already?

I swear there is not going to be a virgin in the house after tonight like come one some of these girls are young. I guess when you're a boy that's is high, drink or whatever you can see that. My little sis looks a lot older than she is when she wears my makeup, she could pass for about a freshman to these boys.

My words for her where- 'Go home, take a bath and you can cry and tell me about it when I get home. But leave now. Get home before mom blames me or see that you're going!'

She said- 'Mom thinks at a slumber party with Justen.' I said to her- 'Okay… (In my mind, I was thinking more resign to heat on Justen.) Go home then… but go home- please, I think you have been all grown up enough for one night. I'll see you when it cracks daylight or sooner than that, but you need to sleep your buzz off.' Her mascaras- like- was running down her little face. Before she walked away sis wanted a hug. But I didn't hug her back, I was too mad or upset at her.

I feel reasonable for her god knows I have to; mom and dad don't get it. She likes how old… they should like to know that she not at a slumber party, that what babies do. I'll never forget her sweet little hair pulled back into a long ponytail, and I think it's the first time I've ever really seen her face, and that it looks so precious.

Shockingly, she's there, but it's even more shocking that she's pretty. She is pretty, sweeter and cuter than me. Clear and white skin, pink lips. Every boys' dream! I couldn't stop gawking at her. Kellie has amazing big almost turquoise eyes that open wide and slight rosy cheekbones, like a model. And the best part of it all is her boobs look at big as mine. People are nudging and pushing us because she's and, I am obstructing the entranceway, but we just stood there, anyways when we had that chat.

Oh, I forgot to say that a girl was peeing behind a car when looking out. It's kind of slipped my mind. It's a cold night those intents better have a snuggle buddy to stay warm, and a good sleeping bag.

Maddie and Liv catch a glimpse of her walking by, and their mouths both drops open. 'What the… hell… is that relay

Karly little sister?' Jenny and her boy turn to see what we're both of them staring at. I see Shy- looking to form the steps. Jenny goes ashen at first-she looks afraid, which is beyond strange, for her… because of her- the type to say you're never too young to go down and get down. She loves to see young girls fall to their knees; I call it- 'Fallen too You.' It's when you get up everything for a boy, like your dignity, pride, and justice.

When you fall in every way- to me, it's not about love… I have a hard time believing in something that I don't find too real for me or can trust… like pap said- I should. Times have changed. To me, it's trying to keep it, after the fact.

That's color of Jenny her skin is never that natural looking. What was the look on her face all about?

Maddie begins giggling hysterically until she doubles over and has to cover her mouth with both hands. I don't know what she could find funny. Then I see it Ray and Justen are love drink doing it on the pole table, with my little sis just eyeing it all up.

She knows- Ray is my guy, and Justen is her new besties.

'God save me if you can hear me!' I am ready to rip someone's head off and the skin that goes with it. 'I can't believe it,' she- my sis says. 'I can't believe it.' She looks back at me- like I know your heart has broken. Justen looks at her and said- 'OH MY GOD' get her out of here. She was her to dance not see this. I grab her by the back of her short dress and take her into the next room and said. 'It's okay, everything is going to be fine no damn it go home!'

She said- 'Know it's not… Kar-ley I did a No-no!' (She still baby talks.) You're never going to forgive me. I said- 'I know you had sex, for the first time tonight.' She said- 'Yes, but…' I said- 'But… what… go on.' She starts subbing. She said- 'It was Ray that did it to me, up in the master bedroom. He said- 'That you would think it would be okay because I knew him.' 'So, I believed him.' She added- During sex I bleed a lot out of there (and the point) and it hurt so much Karly, I cried the whole time. But I felt close to him… How was it I ask? And then she dropped the shocker of a lifetime. She said- 'I think I am in looovvveeee with your boyfriend, yet Justen just ripped him away.

She asks me the most complex question ever coming from the mind of a ten-year-old. 'So, which of us girl do you think he loves the most? Is it me, you or her?' I said- 'I don't know… she looks puzzled by that… just like I could not believe that I didn't say- me.'

Kellie said- I feel a little sore but other than that I am a hundred percent perfectly fine emotion Madilyn and physically, up till this point at least.' I whispered in her ear- 'Aww sis, boys will say anything to get you to do what they want. She has her head on my chest. No, I am not mad at you. I'll take care of this, 'I am not mad'- I said once more. On the other hand, inside I was pissed, she had the night that I have been planning for a long time.

I whispered- 'Sis now would you go home. I looked into those big sad eyes and said the only man you can trust is daddy remember that. Said- 'Okay, I- I- will.' We got up both heartbroken, I walked her to the door, I was asking around if someone would give her a ride back

into the city and get her home safely. (She left and that was the last time I ever saw her, and no- I didn't hug her.)

I have been betrayed, and I don't know why or who or the cause, or what for. All I know is that someone is the mastermind of all this.

But Is Ray that is malicious?

~*~

#- Hashtag: (IDK! WTF! F2F, and FC)

You know how in flicks someone says or does something wick and the record scratches and there's dead silence all of a sudden in a fast impulsive? That is the crap that went down for the thread time tonight. I was not sure if I should add this in because my sis has been hurt enough, but… it's part of the story so I will. So, the music stops, that is when everyone in the room starts to pick up on the fact that my sis just-wet herself, and was freaking out about Justen and Ray, and all around- I hear 'Pink Pisser,' you could see it through her light almost white dress. She still wet the bed from time to time and feel guilty about it when I have to wash her sheets late at night.

I have given everyone the stink eye, and the chatter started and we when off into the other room as I said. It was getting louder and louder more insistent until it's was continuous hum until it sounded like a breeze on the beach. Yet I don't think that is going to hurt her popularity really if anything her freak out is going to get her known. And everyone is going to know that she freaked out because she is in love with Ray and she did it with him. She walks slowly and confidently walks toward a car with Beth Thomas- I've never seen her look so shaken-shuffling her feet past all the campers and tents and kids around the fire.

I see Justen running after my sis half-naked. I hear my sis say to her- 'You're a b*tch, and she b*tch slapped her right a-crossed the face, which I wanted to do to, but like everything tonight someone got there before me. Justen said- 'I thought you were my friend.' There was some hair pulling and then I walk up and said- 'I should be the one that's pissed, you two- like he's my boyfriend…!' And there was like a gasp from everyone like they could be I said that… everyone was looking out the doors and windows.

I overheard Bright say in the background- 'You mean to tell me she still wants him after he did what he did to her. Disgusting what a flack!' Kellie's voice was firm and too loud like she's deliberately addressing everyone in all the rooms and yard. I'd always imagined her voice would be high-pitched like it always jerky in-such, but it was deep and kick ass like a boy's. She meant business. It's kind of slipped out what I said. I was just so livid, and I don't know why- I was done with Ray, but my emotions weren't. I see Marcel coming to my aid, in his footy PJ's, and he impressed me, and the chanting started to buzz, and he walks with me back into- like- his house- like- I was his girl. I was amazed. I saw sis being driven off down the lane, and she waved, but I didn't even look up to see.

I remember my Pap saying- 'Don't let a boy wear the pants in your relationships.'

And I remember saying back- 'Pap it's not the 1950's anymore. Like no one wears pants in a relationship anymore or at all of that matter it's a partnership.' But I didn't know just how true that was. He just grunted. It takes less than half a second for Marcel to feel a little bettered also when inside, and then before he got it out of his mouth I said- 'We're done.' His eyes got all watery. He said- 'I think your sister needs to get new friends.'

I said- 'You said it.' Everyone was shocked at what all just happened.

Maddie is still giggling yet is more a nervous giggle. Liv's mouth is still hanging opening tying to say something, but nothing's coming out.

Jenny is balling up her fists like she's thinking of clocking Justen in the face.

Which I can believe. I know that it's not for my defiance. And even though I'm infuriated and embarrassed, the only thing I can think about was Kellie being here: I never knew that she was so beautiful. Justen gets a bloody nose, but the boys broke it up before it got to be too much. I've never seen her so angry; I think her eyes are going to pop out, her head was like shaking. Her mouth is twisted into a snarl, like a hungry wolf. For an instant, she looks really ugly. I hear Justen screams as the car was going doing the long lane. 'I'd rather be a b*tch than a slut than bangs her sister's boyfriend off.'

Maddie runs up to her like lightning, she is grabbing her by the shirt, and spits are coming out of her mouth, she hocked a loogie in right in her eye, and some of went into her mouth, then she walks off like Miss. Cool. Maddie is the only girl that I know that spits like that.

Yet, she a tomboy. Justen tries to shove Maddie backward, but it was an epic fall on her part. Justen stumbles into my arms and you know what I did? I just drop her.

(Thump on the ground.)

Jenny starts screaming, 'B*tch, B*tch,' and just like a slow clap everyone joins in, everyone follows Jenny, regardless. That is when I ripped some random ass guy's been out of his hand and overturn it onto her head.

I said- 'That's for my little sis.' And then I kicked her in the ribs, (I am sure two snapped) and said- 'B*tch that what you get for what you did to me tonight.' Jenny said- 'Damn girl, when did you get so tough.' I said- 'I'm not… it's because I love my sis, and blame Justen.' Jenny said- 'Is that so…' (Thought to myself- what did that mean?) 'You should blame Ray,' she said. I didn't even realize I'm screaming along with everybody else until my throat got sore. It could be sore for other reasons too… yeah, that's a possibility.

-You can see McCrory's shop in the background.

(Funny I would have much rather it has been Marcel's crammed down then Rays tonight. I can believe I just thought that.)

Liv does the unthinkable and smashes the vodka bottle over Justen's head.

Saying- 'That one way to get rid of it.' It was empty anyway. We all knew that she would be stumbles away from that anytime soon. She was knocked out. Before Liv did that Justen gives me a look after the beer was dump out over her head… yeah know- I can't explain it- it's silly- but it's almost looked like a pity look like she felt bad for what she did to me, like she had to do it or something, but didn't want to. It was not over Maddie dropped her jeans in pissed right on her face, and took a small dump on her chest- her goodies were visible to everyone, but that's Maddie she's crazy. All of the breath leaves my body in a rush, as Liv shoves tampons up her nose, and we all walk away.

'Payback is a b*tch!'

I feel like I've been punched in the ovaries, and I was slogged in the stomach… by you gusset, it Ray. He still loves drunk, off all the humps, rumps, and lumps he had tonight. Saying- 'What the hell are you guys doing to her? She didn't do anything to you.' I said- 'Don't even talk to me ass hole- you're missed up!'

He said- 'Fine, you're a baby anyways. And he walked off all pissed.' (He is the one to blame, isn't he?) I said when he was walking off- 'If she gets knocked up at ten by you not pulling out, I will kill you!' I know this because she just started her period last month, and I had to be like her mom and explain everything, like always.

My girls had my back… when he walked off. I think that is why he backed off. Oh yeah, without thinking, I chest bump them both as hard as I can, I felt like they saved me tonight. I am sure a fist bump would have worked but… you know.

They showed they carried for me. That is when I see Rays' phone on the windowsill, like most boys he is all laying it down… I go throw it and see an ammeter video of him taking my sis on Marcel's mom and dad's bed, I deleted it, before everyone sees it, online and on their phones. I am sure it's been sent or is going to everyone that matters. I just hope I am not too late. And just like that, I see all the sexy texts and pics, so I drop it into a full cup of beer that someone left next to it on the sill. It's bad enough she was popped and dropped like she doesn't need that too, on top of it all.

Jenny is squeezing Kenneth like she is frightened or uncomfortable by all, that is around her with all this drama. I see him- we lock eyes for a moment. I think he saw me doing it dropping the phone in. He was going out the door to aid Justen that was surely still passed out. I can't exactly tell what he's thinking, but whatever it is, it's not good. I look away, feeling hot and uncomfortable.

Like I should've done that.

Everyone's buzzing with energy now, laughing and talking about Kellie. She had everyone fooled with her age. But my breathing won't go back to usual, and the feeling of all that vodka and beer is burning the lining of my stomach, and more is creeping back up my throat, and I am holding it down. The room is muggy and feels airless revolving quicker and quicker. I need to lay down and fast or something. I overhear Marcel's voice coming from somewhere, I am so sick feeling to be 100% sure where from.

But I think he said- 'it's all going to work out.

She cares about me, and I care about her, and that's all that matters!' I was feeling 'Aaawwwhhaa cute' inside.

I try to push my way back to the sofa, but Ray gets all up in my face and blocks my way. 'What the hell was that about?' He demands me to speak. 'Get away from me, crap- can you let alone, please?' I'm not in the mood to deal with anyone, and I'm especially not in the mood to deal with Ray and his stupid explanations.

'What did- I ever do to you?'

'Boy- you got that crap backward- what did I ever do to you, if anything- I fall to your leave to date you.' I had my arms crossed, tapping my foot. 'I get it, you wanted to take a girl, and I could see that, which you did. But you should have stopped with Justen or me! Your second time was with me. I know this… your thread time was with my sis and I am pissed off about it. And your fourth was with Justen again. God, what's wrong with you! Was there more than that? You're not a virgin anymore- but she was and you were when you did it with her. I know- I'll never be your virgin girl, that you wanted.

Is that it… am I ever- going to be good enough- to you? I got news for you- I don't sleep around as you do.' He scents his eyes at me.

'Get away from me… GETAWAY' I manage to squeeze past seeing the sofa in my sights, but he grabs my arm. 'Why?' he says.' I don't need a why you should know the- because.'

We're standing so close together I can smell my sis's girl perfume she uses. Even though everything else is blurry, I look into his eyes and see no love. He's looking at me like he's desperate to understand, why I feel the way I do. The look like I never gave you a ring or anything, so we're free to do as we please. He was like trying her to finger out something, I was trying to read his thoughts, and it's worse, much worse than anything else he has said thus far. It's scary not knowing what a boy is thinking, and yes- I am scared of him at this moment. Then Justen comes up and puts her hands in his back pockets and starts grinding on his ass.

Like- I could not tell if she changed or not- I could not even see sight enough to tell, and the whole place smelled like crap anyways… so yeah. Anyways that is when his anger towards me pics, like never before.

The feeling I'm going to be sick is coming up again, so I make a step forward. I was terrified- and uncomfortable. I try to shake his hand off my arm, face, and boobs. He was grabbing me all over. 'You can't just grab people, you know. You can't just grab me that's for damn sure.

You're not my boyfriend anymore, nor will you be again.' 'Oh- yeah- keep your voice up- so everyone nearby can see and hear us. I know how you like to do this crap, so the eyes are on you. Ray- Keep my hands to myself that's not you were saying before the party. Really cute Karly- you're such a mother-freaking baby- and all the time too. He said to Justen go and I'll, see you upstairs… she wiggles her bubble butt off blowing Ray a kiss.

Ray makes sure she is up in a room. I see him looking up there. That is when he knocks me down on my ass with one push of his right hand and said so loud my ears started ringing. 'I freaked your sister tonight because she is more mature than you and hotter than you'll ever be. She had the tightest p*ssy, I ever had too. And with you, it's like throwing a hotdog down a hallway.'

'Ah'- Is the sound I made it was sharp and fast. 'Look! - Get off!' He said- 'Ha- That's what she said.'

'Oh- and I am the one that needs to mature?' I said- discussed. I prospered in shaking him off of me, by talking too loud and too recklessly, and pulling away with my body. But more like I was lying on the floor, somewhat carling away.

(You could ask Maddie and she would say I was flopping around like a dead fish.) I know I sound frenetic, but I can't help it, and I know that I shouldn't. When he walked off, he said- 'I don't know what your problem is… you don't own me.' (Like in my mind before this party, I thought he owned me and was going to be my soulmate or something like that. Maybe I have been too clingy?) And there is Marcel in the background shyly obsessing over me. I would never in a million years go out with someone like Marcel.

At that moment within that thought, I look up at Ray walking up the staircase and say the same thing. Wow- how a million years can just fly by, in a girl's mind. I would reconsider like Marcel seems safe, and easy, not my type that I been going for- but I suppose he could be? Should I have... let him in tonight, when I had the chance? Maybe I should wait… there is always tomorrow.

#- Hashtag: (Smackdown, it's going down, and feeling down)

Chapter: 59

Tomorrow is coming

Tomorrow is coming, unlike me at this moment, and like everyone else in this house. I should be riding him like he's never been ridden before. I want him to yell my name so that everyone in the house will hear. I didn't win blue rabbis for noting. It's all in the legs… Yet back to reality. My mom said to me when I was twelve or so that I was over-sexed whatever that means.

My sis is the same as me… at that age, yet nothing said about her. Suddenly, I can't breathe, with Marcel's unbreakable starring. I was not on the sofa long. He walks into the hallway back to his room, and I follow him stubbing. He stops and I see hem looking at me, and I walk up to him. Then he leans in even closer to me, than ever before so close, I can feel his breath on my cheek, his lips almost touching mine. For a second, I think he's going to try to kiss me and my heart stops.

(This is my chance should I take it or leave it?) Would I respect me if I did? Would I have respect from him if I didn't? What to do? I promised myself that I wouldn't just hook up with someone just because, any more than I wanted respect before and after. But he just puts his mouth to mine, and our lips started touching softly, he was sucking on my lower lip and then he sucked my tongue, and I did it back, the kiss last like six minutes. I just wish you could have seen it… it was that good.

I was completely breathless! So, as he put his now wet lips up to my ear and says, 'I see right into you, you're not sure about me, are you?' I said how do you know that? He said I can tell… I said back- 'I can see into you too, and I know you love me, and I love that fact. It's nice to be loved. Don't feel that I don't love you, it's just that I closeout everyone.

Love is hard for me to show. You understand that… as of now, I am in-like with you, but the love will come if you keep being so sweet to me.' I started to kiss him again! It was great! The best kiss I have ever had in my life. My heart is pounding in my chest so hard I think it will explode. Yet I need to think with my head and not my heart it has hurt me too many times in the past. He turns to look at me.

So, ten minutes have past or so, and I get a tap on the arm. So, I do a - girlie like spin around, wishing I hadn't borrowed a pair of Maddie's ruby slippers. Something twisted a little wrong, the room spins with me and I have to steady myself against the handrail of the staircase. It was Liv poking me saying- 'I am not touching you!' she said so this is where you sneaked off

to. I was beginning to wonder if you went off with someone for the night. Marcel said, 'Your boyfriend's upstairs.'

Liv said- 'Yeah she knows- that he is he is putting his winner in many girls tonight.' I give her that look like go be somewhere… she got it, and said- 'I leave you too to get at it.' I gave her a side hug before she walked back into the main space. Then I said to Marcel- 'I don't even care, now that I am with you. You know he took my sis virginity tonight the creep.'

'He said- Wha-ooo, I would never do anything like that to hurt you!' 'I replayed yes I think you mean that.' He whispered- 'I do.' I asked- 'What do you think about that?' He alleged- 'I don't think it's right, and I don't think he treats you right. I think he is kinda shallow and unsympathetic, and just pathetic. Like she just a little girl.' (He is holding me.) I said- 'Yeah and they both are underage, so he's not going to get into trouble for it. All he has to do is say she consented.

And no one will believe her if she says otherwise.' 'That horrible…' 'I no!'

~*~

I may be out of my mind tonight, but Marcel is looking perfect, to me almost superhuman, in his awkwardly sexy body, that's not perfect, yet molds perfectly to me, so I guess it's perfect. I will never forget the first time I saw you, I fall in love with you, and

I remember him saying to me, not believing it.

He is not fat, but not lean, he is muscular, but not overly buff. I am falling to those lovesick eyes, so dreamy. Like a liquid shin, and above suspicion. Tick messy hair, which I want to pull, and play with, and run my manicured fingers though. He has that chiseled faces, strong jawline, which, I never really took the time to look at. His skin is soft you some scruff can be felt when cheek to cheek. He's her is somewhat dark, yet bronze under the twinkling lights. Soft white, warm skin radiating heat. Cute smile with almost straight white teeth dazzling indirect smile.

(Which do I love)

Perfect size lips soft and delicious. Long lashes, which rub against my face. He has to be tall; I have to be on my tippy toes to kiss. The only thing that is out of place is his fashion style. I

would just imagine everything else is just perfect. I don't get it, but when I am holding his hand my heart is racing.

Then I thought to myself- Marcel… or him or her? 'Am I Falling Too,' you are a way that I have never fallen before? Is this me feeling genuine love? I think you know with the one I am falling too.

#- Hashtag: (up Cucking, panting, and alluring)

I see Justen looking down at me from the walkway overhead, I just gave her the finger over my shoulder without even turning around to see if he's watching me. Like I was too into feeling him all up on me. It's like a psychological instinct that comes from when little girls are born, they want to be held, it makes me and most girls feel so safe and loved. The only other man that has held me like this is my daddy. Yet daddy is not this romantic. Even before I go down the hallway, and said about Ray, Marcel already seem to know it is true, he knew. Like he already believed- that- I was falling to him. I had to think about what Jenny said. About how we would make a great couple. I know it: tonight isn't the night after all.

(Haunting whisper)

There is always tomorrow… to find out if I want to have sex or date him or whatever.

I'll have to see how it goes. You know I can't trust anyone. Even if he is one of those nice type boys. I have to feel that it's right.

The mixture of displeasure and relief is so, overpowering my mind. I knew that I would pick to have that pleasure if he keeps being so passionate and felt right. I look down the tunneling hallway my eyes feel like kaleidoscopes, yet I can figure there are kids with sparklers and the firecrackers the sounds are going off within all the colors I see. He has to hold me with my back against the walls or I am sure I would fall, I see Justen feeling the left of a rail of the stairs, walking over the entryway into their room feather down that hallway, up above me, me like they're going to slip away any second, and share the rest of the night cuddling in bed. Is tonight the night I follow him to his room and crawl in with him, or isn't tonight the night, maybe hold back until tomorrow? That kept running through my head.

Tonight, or tomorrow? Tomorrow I'll wake up and be the same, regardless if I in his bed or not. This earth will look the same, and everything will feel and taste and smell the same. What

am I rushing it for, he's going to love me the same if not more is, I hold out? Maybe play that three-date rule.

My throat gets taut, just thinking about what we could be doing right now, also I have to think about Ray and Justen are doing, and my eyes start to tingle in ire, and all I can think at that moment is that it's all Ray's fault, that my sis has gone home broken-hearted.

Yet I don't want her spending the night here anyway, with him of all boys. It's funny how you can go from love to hate in seconds. Half an hour later the party starts to wind down.

Inside, everyone is just about passed out, at this point, I need to find a place to crash too. Then I thought should I, or shouldn't I? My sis is one of those shy ones around cute boys, and those are the ones you have to worried about because they are freaks between the sheets. I can see that somebody pulled the drooping icicle lights off the wall there getting crouched on by the others passing by.

They are getting tangled up in my feet, as I move. There twanging and shorting out from the broken blabs, in sparks lighting up the grime corners, like cups and broken beer bottles. You have to be careful like I see a- lot' girls with flip flops on or barefoot running around not a good idea.

I think that I'm feeling better now until I move away from the walls, but I'm starting to feel more like the girl I should be around all my friends. 'There's always tomorrow,' Jenny walked up to me and said before going up to her bed when I told her about Ray, yet she seemed not suppressed and I run the phrase over and over in my head like a chant: There's always tomorrow. There's always tomorrow. So that is what I went with thinking… I am going to be with him tomorrow night. I see myself in the ornate hall mirror is the makeup that I replayed, thinking- 'God Marcel loves this face.' Every time I put on makeup it reminds me of my mom, I used to watch me bowed over her vanity, getting ready for dates with my father-daughter dates- and it calms me down. Until I thought about how that stop and my sis got to go because, I was always going out with my friend because it not- cool- to spend time with daddy. Thinking- There's always tomorrow, to be with daddy.

Now- I see my sis bent over my vanity in my room doing that. Sometimes like I want the old days back, I could see that face, which I used to have in that glass as a flashback. Now all I see are lines running down my face, like lines of crack that I can see on the glass on the coffee

table with the razor blade. Shoving a straw up my nose is not my thing either, yet Maddie and Liv seem to enjoy it.

It's the time of the night I like best when most people are asleep and it feels like the world waters are belongs lifted off my shoulders, as though nothing is in my way of having the time that I want, everywhere is darkness and quiet, soothing I like the dark, it's where I see the bright points of my day. I may sleep with Marcel tonight, with everything on that is… or maybe on the floor, I don't know yet. The groups seem not to madder anymore. Everyone is open to anything.

Hell- I may just get on top in the nude, I am sure he would love that… however, I don't know yet. It's not like I know him all that well, it may be a little creepy to creep into his room and do that, or maybe not.

Jenny is always talking in preppy girly code. Like 'Totes ma goats, boat and fur coats- 'I am just standing there… like in the replay- 'Marry Had a Little Lamb.' Uhhh? That crap gets annoy-ing! She is like a Yorkie dog barking in my ears, I surprised at how hipper she is she doesn't piss herself. I swear she bounces when she bones and talks like she can do both miles a minute.

Maddie is leaving with Liv, they're going to sleep together tonight, and you know to do a little girl on a girl too, most likely, hey good for them. There are so stinking cute together. Maddie and Liv like they just belong together take their last names Hansom and Jobs and combine them you get Hand-jobs, any everyone loves girls that give good hand-jobs. The crowd is thinning as people take off, a lot of them are driving home which is not the best thing to do with all the pain in the ass cope creeping around in the city. Looking for a teen to slam around.

But, it's still hard to move around in here or so it seems to me. Jenny keeps calling out, 'move it, excuse me, get lost, girly emergency!' all of us girls have been there, and it's not fun. Know her as I do, she probably forgets to put a tampon back in, she so freaked up drunk and high.

Nevertheless, nothing clears a room faster than referencing to a girly emergency. It's like people think a decrease, more the boys then the girls. Jenny and us girls found that out in seventh grade when we when on a field trip to Kenwood park, and I got mine after going on the phantom. You don't know if you can run, but you can walk. FUN! Ah- the thrills of being a woman, yet I was always kind of spotty.

Sometimes, I feel just like standing on a hill holding a dream catcher, wanting the perfect dream, however the only thing I seem to have is nightmares, something I wish I knew what dream I wanted to be in because it is sure not my own.

On our way to Marcel's room, I see two couples hooking up one in corners, and the other is a girl pressed against the stairwell- going hot- and heave- with some sophomore boy. Behind closed doors we hear the soft sounds of people giggling, gagging, crying and snoring. Maddie knocks her fist against each door and yells out, 'I don't need any condoms and she points to Liv lady- business, each time, saying but you all do, you can have mine.' She put them on the hall table. Maddie- 'Were heading off to bed to do the bump and grind.' Then- Liv said to everyone in the rooms- 'Yes I am going to suck and bit Maddie's forbidden fruit tonight.' The ones that were awake that all cheered them on.

(All Right!)

Jenny turns around and whispers something to Maddie, and Liv and that really shuts them up, and they both look at me shamefacedly. 'What's that all about?' I want them to know that I don't care what they do. Or is it something else? What's Jenny keeping form me?

Really- I don't care- but in a way, I want to know. I do not care about Ray or missing my scheduled lovemaking an event of the night. Really- I am too drowsy to run all that passed my clouded brain. Too lethargic to talk it out with them now, I thought I ask, or know all about it tomorrow. That is when I see Marcel sneaking out of his room, oh boy- with a bathrobe open in the front, I see him drop it as he is getting in the foaming water of his off-limits Hot tub on his veranda.

That was my chances I thought. I pass many doors going down to his room, I see many freshmen, girls, with their head in her hands and crying at the edge of a bed, after the fact of doing. I see more d*icks than I want to also. I see a girl taking a cold shower outside in this cold, talking to herself. Anyways- You know it, I got naked so fast in his room, and rain, as well as I, could and cannonballed in with him. He was suppressed, and he laid into me with the bubbles massaging us. I had my legs wrapped around his bully.

All we did was make out, truly. I wanted more, yet this time he was holding back, it was sweet. Yet there was something I was feeling on my bully, that said he wanted me.

And then I thought I have to play hard to get.

Make him work for it. Nevertheless, there was some rubbing going, on I will say. Where and when- I let you run that in your mind. I love to get my back and butt rubbed by his hands and ever space in-between.

I said to Marcel so- 'What's wrong with her over there taking the cold shower talking nutty?' I say, wondering if she is going to be all right. He said- Oh Kristy she got dumped and cheated to on the night, they were in the pool house doing it and she saw it, and that ended it.

Tony was her boyfriend of four years and left her for a freshman boy. Tony said she turned him gay, is so freaked up in the head. I said- 'Wow harsh.' 'No kidding, oh and now she not sure if she needs to get tested.' Marcel said.

'OMG,' is all I said back. When her crying got so freaking loud that you could hear it over the bubbles. She clasped and was just let there to croak… I would say, no one cared about her. And of course, like always I can't get the dead done, no-how. There is always someone with their eyes on me. Ray grabs onto my elbow. He pulls me out, legs like splitting on the wood decking, I am like- ass naked. He rips me up to my wrist to my feet.

He is looking at my vag. and little boobies on the front. That's where his eyes were locked. Saying- 'I can believe you did this with him. You cheated on me for this d*ick!' Justen is still hanging around his neck. She seems a little more- sober and running at the mouth. but her pupils are enormous, poking out at me like my nipples are picking out at her, and her eyes so bloodshot, she looks- like- she eat a brick of crystal meth. I's- eyes are red from being under the water, so are Marcels.

You can believe it and shy and the other wannabe girl saw us together. And had to end it. I am naked, and Ray won't let me go, and Marcel is too cautious to get out of the tub as I want him too. Though I could see why.

He said- 'Karly let go I have job appointment in the morning.' 'On Sunday, I said.' 'Yah!' He is dragging me by one arm over the wood, the splinter is- going up my butt whole- I swear- to flipp'n GOD. My legs are getting cut up by nail heads sticking up. I said-

'I am not leaving with you; it's not going to happen. My hands slipping off random object passing by, as he is pulling me into the house, to get his way. 'I am not your wife; you cannot act like I am.' He said- 'Stop it! With a kick to my side.' Marcel just looked from a

distance, as Ray made me do what he wanted on Marcel's bed just like before. I have a hard time, just lying there, but what choice do I have.

Ray said- 'I have you, now and always. The way I want you, anytime anyplace you're mine- you're mine. Regardless if I marry you or not. I own you! Don't you forget it?' 'You don't own me?' I said. 'Yes- yes I do!' Ray said finishing off with a grunt. All the same, I knew Marcel was not the guy for me either when he didn't come and save me from this horror of getting beaten and used. Yet I get it…

I was not his girlfriend. But yet again, I was heartbroken all over again. Ray was getting off me, and then I said pressing my luck; 'What do you mean you own me?' He said- 'You'll see.' In an almost evil way. Ray is only like this when he is drunk. Maybe I should forgive him for knowing that.

Marcel finally comes to my aid, Ray was heading to the door, and Ray looks back at him, saying- 'You'll be better off, d*ick-weed staying away from her, or I will kick your ass up to your face.' Justen is standing over my shoulders shaking up and down like she's convulsing, and just like that she grabs me, and hugs me so tight. Saying- 'It's going to be okay.' I could have died. I am not the only one that is petrified. 'They're all gangbang!' she said. She was crying on my shoulder.

At this time Jenny takes her cup and sets it on a side table, in bedroom three on top of Liv's worn copy of Nevaeh. Why she has it I don't know. Before going to bed she pockets Marcel's grandmother's two-carat wedding ring too. Why I don't know, it's not like she going to elope anytime soon or settle for one man. She most likes going to hock it.

(Hell- that ring may have been mine.) She always steals something from parties. She calls them her mementos. And that's a big word for her- but yeah… I swear she would take a potty brush if she could get something for it. She has even taken a thing from my room, like my blue ribbons, undies, and knickknacks.

At this time ken is stretched out on a couch downstairs, and not with Jenny. But he manages to grab the hand of some freshmen girl to lie on top of him. They sleep together, I don't know who she is and neither does he, and names don't matter at this point.

I start to walk out of Marcel's room 'Where're you going love?' Marcel says. His eyes are distracted by the door, like looking to see if he comes back, and the ones walking by, his

voice is gruff. 'Whoo, you love me?' 'I know I do- I always did; you just did want me too.' I was creeped out more than ever. 'You know a thing about me, yet you love me?'

'Yes, I want you to have my baby's too, and I want to spend my days with you.' I was so freaked out at this point. This just is not normal… yet Marcel was never normal. But this is going beyond wired even for him. 'Okay lover boy, let me go.

So, I can get something on.' 'Not before a kiss and a selfie.' I said- 'Oh okay,' even though we were both stark-naked, with the lights soft in the room.

(What could it hurt, I thought.) I shove him off me playfully. I said- 'This is somewhat your fault, too, you need to grow some balls boy, and stand up for me, if you want me to be all this, you want me to be. Be a man, not a boy like Ray!'

'I have balls!' I said rolling my eyes and batting my lashes- 'It's a figure of speech, silly.' 'We were supposed to…' His voice trails off and he wobbles his head, confused, then narrows his eyes at me. 'Are you falling in with me?' He asked. I said- I not going to say it just to say it, I said I like you very much, you have a lot to offer even if you're silly, but love takes time for me. I may get there but, I have to feel it.

Yeah, know.' He looked at me sadden. Then I said- 'You're doing okay.' Even if he wasn't completely like I am just not that mean. I kiss him- 'Don't stop,' he said. I was winding back to being on the bus with him in my head. Thinking OH MY GOD, this is love, I have had it all along, and didn't see it back then. Did I keep love away… am I running away from it? Am I going to run from it again?

Just like my mind reminded back in the past few weeks ago, back to the moment when Ray leaned over, rested his head on my shoulder, saying I want to spend my life with you. What happened? That he and I wanted to sleep next to me, every night, and kiss me every morning. Like how can you change that much in a week or so?

Yes, go back to that soft moment, in his dark living room with nothing on under the blanket, the television flickering the sound faint mostly just hearing the sound of his breathing and my parents sleeping in the next room over, going back to the moment, I opened my mouth and heard my wipers to that daydream. Yet I said it to Marcel without thinking- 'I do- feel the way.' At this time, I am lying on his bed, so sleepy. I didn't even ask I just crashed. 'You are you're sleeping,' Marcel nudges me. 'You love me. Existent or not existent?'

I tell him, 'Existent.' Nodding off.

#- Hashtag: (Not enough Bubbles, Naptime, and two boys' one bed.'

Chapter: 60

Dawn arising

I am a girls-l I change my hair color as I do with undies, boys, and my mind about loving only girls.

'Our existence is drawn-out by chances, even the ones that are missed out on.' Sleeping with me is a lot like the first step of dying. Running down a dream, looking for an answer that may never come. Yet when it comes, will you want to go or run the other way. It's just like you never- ever fail to recall the appearance of the soul who was your last and hopes to save you from yourself. Your future life is shown to throw your dreams; however, I could see much of anything, and that was odd for me.

The only thing that was shown in this dream was my hand slipping away for someone else's in the scary blackness. I was falling, and you were falling to me. Yet never together even in the dream. I am sure he is holding me, yet I was never really sure.

Something a guess is best left unknown. Or maybe I fainted in his arms and he put me to bed, I don't know.

I swear that I am going to have a sex consent document made, so I know when where and how. I am sick of boys that freak hard I want to know I am making love. I am sick of serenading my everything to anyone, that says they own me. Yet again I am on the pill, so I don't have anything to worry about. The whole time Bela Lucas, one of Ray Hobro's girl's best friends, is standing in the corner laughing at me, and Ray stumbles over to her and kisses her like they have been hooking up for months.

Marcel loves to call me Miss. Barns that's so weird, he was doing that all night. He wants me to become Miss. Vogel in the worst way, he even slips and called me that tonight, along with that I can see it in his loving stricken eyes, he wants me. And he wants me more than to just bend me over as Ray does, he wants my whole entirely. Marcel would own me, on paper only by me took his name, yet I would have the freedom to do as I please. It's worth thinking about. I know

that I would not have a life with Ray, it would be nothing but bondage, pain, and crying myself to sleep at night alone in my bedroom. I don't want that.

#- Hashtag: (Smack in the face, bedtime, and call me Miss Barns)

~*~

Note to self: 'Just because a boy is hot or cool, doesn't me he is going to be the one. Just because a boy is weird or odd, doesn't mean he can't be the one.'

I was out with the note to self-playing in my head, and then I awoke slightly when I overhear a battle. Marcel becoming my everything at that moment.

That is when crazy-eyed Ray walked back into the room about ten minutes after, I passed out, and Marcel defended me, just the way I always wanted, my man too- do. 'Are you cheating with my girlfriend, Vogel?' 'Not cheating taking your place ass hole.' 'Is that so?' said Ray. Marcel- 'Yes- that is so- so go freak yourself and get out of here you're drunk!'

Ray said- 'She won't be yours for long, she'll be nothing but your hunting recollection.' Ray pulls out his belt and was going to hit us with it.

He didn't though… He said- 'She's not worth it. I already got what I wanted, when I did this to your little sister, oh how she screamed when I had her typed down and wiped her ass nine times, and rammed it in. Revenge is on its way, with you in another way. You see these skies blue petite underwear there hers. (He's trolling them around his index finger by the stings.) I used them to tie her hands together.' He throws the undies on my face and said- 'inhale that!' The door slammed shut. I drifted off once more, I could stay awake.

I only like had one eye open during the whole thing. I heard was the sounds of Marcel getting up and locking the door. Getting back in with me and cuddling up. I knew that I was safe in his embrace.

If you ask others what went down in that room, you'll hear many differing takes of the event. Some will say that Marcel jumped on the back of Ray and ripped his slicks off, as he was clawing at the door. Some will say that Ray's head budded Marcel and that's how he falls into bed with me. The freshmen girls will say, Marcel and Ray were wrestling; they don't know any better. Others in the living room will say they heard a little scuffling around the room, or things

being knocked to the floor. Some might add that they heard sounds like the headboard hitting the wall.

With to gay man going at it- roaring. Some that knew that I was in the room, though it was a threesome.

Oh, boy how gossip gets going… and the fun fact of it all is that I didn't do anything. I am telling the truth or God strike me dead. Either way, Ray ends up getting Marcel down on his knees. And then they're both on the floor. Come to think of it Ray always gets yeah on your knees. From what I heard girls were yelping looking in the doorway, at what they saw.

Someone cries out, 'Where a condom!' I was told that Mark Formare said- 'You don't want crap on your d*ick.' Yet I don't think that is true. Like whoa what did happen…? I am butt crazy infatuated with Marcel; I just hope Ray isn't too.

~*~

I am almost all the way asleep when I feel a little squeezes' from behind. I knew he was there. I could feel, just like I could feel his arms rubbing mine. Soothing me off to La La Land. If anything happened, I was not awake to know, yet

I don't think he likes that. Even so, I wouldn't mind if he would- is that weird? I would love to be rolled over on my belly, feeling him go for that tight squeeze position on top of my backside, yes feeling it all as I dream about us. Is that strange? Yeah, I know, I am messed up!

There comes a point where you're both out, but as a girl, you wake up because you have to go pee in the night like three am or so. I look at the time and think I have to get a move on. 'I can't just leave him,' I say, though a part of me wants too. It not normal for me to wake up with a man the day after, I normally split. 'He'll be fine.

I am looking back lusting.' I was pondering what I should do. Say or go? I have to go. I hopped in his bathtub and washed up, so when I get home mom would not freak at how I looked. Let's not forget she thinks I was at a sleepover with my girlfriend's, doing homework, painting our nails, and girly stuff like that.

I had my toilettes in my bag, so I brushed my teeth and hair. I keep the T-shirt and put it back on with my jeans and other things. I walked past his bed hair still damp, I blow him a kiss and said- 'See you at school Monday.' He was snoring a little. I know he didn't even know I was

gone, or I said that. I unlooked the door, locking it back up as I walked out, knowing if I shut it, I'm not getting back in. I closed his bedroom door softly, then I walk down the hall, and everything is dead still. I was scared crap-less; it was pitch black. I didn't know who would jump out at me. But I have to go, it was time, and I knew that I was going to leave with the girls to be home before five am. To make it look like I was home long before that time. And with Jenny it takes' a lot of time for her to get her crap together in the morning, that's why she is always speeding in her car.

~*~

Sunday's mom and dad like to drag me out for crappy eggs and toast, with my sis at the Rusty Anchor it's like a café opens at seven am. Down in the lobby of or apparent building. They say it's the only family time we all get to have all together. It's so-oo painful to sit through. The meal is free for us kids, that why where there, I been saying I'm younger than I am on the same server for years now. I have to say I'm only twelve, and where a paper hat with a baby bib of the cartoon logo of caption Wet Willie on it. Like, get real! Yet my sis never seems to mind this embarrassment. My dad makes nautical jocks and says R- thought the meal. R- You having fun? R- You winches going to walk the plank? He pocks me and my sis in the arm with his egg cover fork saying- Scallywags! I love my dad, yet I just want to say fork you, and leave! My mom never looks up, yet I know she's just trying to make it through the meal too. My sis is giggling, and I just roll my eyes, sucking on the straw of my peewee juice box.

~*~

I know if I run into Ray he is going to be so pissed still. Yet I have to walk past all these doors and go up the steps to find my girls. I see Jenny she is like a spread eagle on the bed more then I wanted to see. She must have gotten into a fight with the covers, because they were all on the floor, as her clothing. I wake her up saying- 'Hey- hey- we need to get going soon.'
'Already?' She's groggy- yet

Jenny knows I'm thinking about ditching Ray and leaving him here at the after-party.

She knows me and how I am. Like I plan on going with him last night as you know, that didn't happen. She said- 'So you're coming with us?'

I said- 'Without a drought!' She grumbled- 'Okay.' You and Marcel didn't hit it off? Jenny asked. I said- 'Yes, you were right about him… but my mom, she'll kill me if I am not

home to have our family time. You know how she is…' Jenny- Yeah I know she's a b*tch!' Jenny is not on her feet; she gives me a quick side hug. 'Remember what I said.' 'I said- I'm not going to remember anything until you cover up your junk.' 'Oh- sorry.' She said. She starts singing 'High Highs' by Open Season, as she gets decent, as I walk back out into the hallway, I wonder if Ray is looking at me. I hear: 'Get on your knees in the fire, you can leave it, all in your mind, it is all in your mind.' For a moment my stomach tightens on the inside, thinking they're all going to be making fun of me at school Monday at lunch, but it's a coincidence… what happened.

Jenny didn't know me when I was little, yet I knew that she was in course, until it was no longer cool for her to be. She is an amazing singer. I was in the band but even back then she wouldn't even have spoken to me then. Come to think about she was more- nerdy than I was, back then she even wore thick eyeglasses, that was taped for being broken in co-ed gym class.

I remember the day little Ken Kicked a ball in her face, just to make her cry. She has no way of knowing that I can sing too and play music. I a little girl I wanted to become a pop singer, I used to lock myself in my room with the sing-along with late 1990's soundtracks, using my hairbrush like a mic and belting out lyrics Like- 'Hit me, baby, one more time.' at the top of my lungs until my mom and dad would say stop or you'll be kicked out and have to live in a box on the block, stop or you're grounded. Sometimes the apartment next door would compline. The old lady down stars would hit her ceiling with a broom handle. God- I was such a little Britney, I had the look too- sort of. Those are the song I played over and over no wonder my friends and I grew up all messed up.

~*~

'Suck-sh party, huh?' Maddie says, coming up on the other side of me, from down the hallway. I know that she is pissed that Dilco showed up and wanted to be with Liv. She said- 'I'm glad she says it worked out, yet I depressed that Liv won't be having that baby. I don't know I could see us as mothers.' I looked at her like you got to be kidding me. The sound of the sleet is thunderous betting down on the roof. It's coming down so hard that startles me, know that the roads will be a sheet of black ice. Maddie said to me while Jenny was doing her thing.

'I'm supposed to me Liv down on the porch, she is sitting on the swing. So, come down with me Karly,' she said. For a twenty-minute or so, we all swing together under the porch attics,

looking at it is dumping down on all the kids sleeping the mud intents a- campers, waiting on Jenny.

Mud is even spaying upon up, with the ice rain, and that is all I need.

I want to stay clean, so I don't have to change to-go-to breakfast when I take these clothes off it going to be to crawl into bed. We were all making little puffy clouds with our breath, contemplating hugging ourselves from one of those oak trees, like it would be far less painful than sitting here with are ass cheek freezing. Yet this is where Jenny said - to meet up with her. Water is falling in steady streams from the eaves and over the gutters.

Jenny only said she would be a couple of minutes. We should know by now that it is a big lie. Mandy Jan Smith got ahold a Bebe gun and is firing rounds into her ex Sang Yung Dong's car, even those she has a restraining order. His parents own Chinatown Inn Chinese restaurant, downtown. Yet he acts like he is going to be a big-time rapper someday- Nope… not going to happen. Yet with Mandy Jan and some girls like her, they don't know when to give up. You should see that car, like the headlights, are shamed along with the side glass. Maddie was saying that she heard it from a friend that heard it from a friend, that she throws an empty beer bottle at his face last night. Yicks- I kinda know Mandy Jan, she seems corky but friendly. She sits next to me in math class sometimes. The gunshot makes an ear-splitting crack every time and makes us all jump.

Young girls are running around topless, or nude still it's complete anarchy.

The craziness never stops till the cops come. And out this far they're not coming. There are no neighbors to call the cops for miles. Boys and girls are chuckling and shouting and running in the rain dancing around like fools, some are run and sliding, like a very muddy slip and slide in the yard, some of the boys are all shalong and the ball's out. It's gross when you're hungover and freezing.

The cold rain is coming down fast and hard everything appears as though it's being wished into everything else, like looking in the door of a washer at the laundromat. The grass is tossed up, immense murky pits of mud are exposed, and girls are fighting in the pits it's so disgusting. Like there scraping all over one another.

This party has gone too far. Marcel wants everyone out at nine a.m. Yet I don't think that is going to happen. Like how is he going to explain this or clean it up in time? His mom and dad

are going to freak when they see this place! I would stay and help, but I have to be home soon. No one going to help him clean up this disarray.

Yet, the price to be somewhat cool in high school. Headlights are flashing on the bodies, by the cars that are mudding or leaving. Looking around all you can see is peculiar looking woods and the driveway that snakes through being washed-out by sheets of water. 'I think I would be warmer if I was dead,' I said joking around. (Amusing not thinking that was a true statement.) At about the same time, we hear little Hanna O'Conner vomiting behind us. What a great way to start the day.

Jenny sprints out the door, looking sexier than ever, the storm door bangs and rattles on the hinges 'Run you guys!' Jenny yells as she passes up like lumps of crap. I feel Liv tugging on me, saying come on. She not going to wait up. I grab Maddie's hand, and she already holding Liv's and then we're running all hand and hand, blaring profanity, and giggling in the chilly shower blinding us gushing down our hair, tops, and bottoms. The mud in Maddie and Liv's flip-flops is just oozing, and gushing in their shoes between their toes; their cute toenail polish is toast. My landed ruby slippers feel squishy, and one gets stuck, and I have to lean on Maddie on one foot to get it out of the mud. As Liv is pulling my arm.

The icy rain so firm it's like everything is shiny liquefying everything away, yet the trees all look heavy as they are solidifying. By the time we get to Jenny's Ford Focus, at this time I certainly don't care about the terrible way the get-togethers turned out for the reasons that we're chuckling uproariously, nevertheless saturated from head to toe and trembling, roused up from the unsympathetic and bitter downpour, yet amused at each other's appearance.

#- Hashtag: (Powder your nose and let's go, three girls one swing, and saying goodbye.)

Jenny yells from the driver's set- 'Ugh I am so wet!' Liv said to Maddie nagging her arm with hers- 'Yeah we no, you're always that way.' the inside joke is so much fun when Jenny is clueless. All the same Jenney's crying boo-hoo tears about her and our wet butt making marks on her fuzzy pink and zebra cloth seats covers, and all the mud on the floor carpet, she doesn't want us messing up her Walmart replacement mats either. Yet like if you look at the flip-flop air freshener hanging from the rear-view marrow for too long, she starts giving you this long story of how her first time gives her that to remember him by it was in his car.

It doesn't even smell good anymore… yeah, it's that old. I bolt of lightning cracks and it looks like it was right next to the SUV, Maddie said- 'You're not going to have to worry so much about the mud, but more about me making pee stands on your set. I am still not wearing undies. Liv giggled, saying the same here, they start touching each other inappropriately. I am thinking to myself sluts! I see looking over my shoulder a little squeeze here and a little grab there. That why I take a shotgun, so they can roll around in the back seat, and play around.

Liv is begging Jenny to go to Bob Evans Farmer's Choice Breakfast, and complaining, that I always get shotgun, even though she wants to be next to Maddie. Maddie is shouting for Jenny to turn up the heat, so it reached the back.

Yet, Jenny said- 'No- cool it.' I have to defog the windows first, so I can at least see some. Even so, this car is so old I not sure if I can get it warm enough for you.' Liv is being overdramatic, and intimidating says- Oh my flipping God Jenny, I am going to die from pneumonia.' I was thinking about it… but didn't say anything, I knew it wouldn't do any good. I entertained myself drawing on the steamy window with my finger.

I don't know why… but every time we girls start chatting as it starts with food, then all types of sex and way of having it with boys and girls, then that leads into death, and how as well as when. I guess that's how we get underway with chitchatting about it: disappearing, you know kicking the bucket in all. Maybe Jenny is right maybe that is the only thing in life that is worth talking about? like what do you do when you're too old to bang hard, barf on heavens gates to forget how sucky life is, or wait slowly die sober? I assumed that Jenny all right to drive, she seems all good and such, even though she drank as much as three all combined. She is different about the need to speed.

I look at the dash and see the needle pointing at seventy-five… like that would be okay with me if we would be on the highway yet were not. My teeth are chattering in my head. My kidneys ratted, and my little boobs gigging, a witch that's amazing. I have not been this bounced around since I was on my exquisite mare- Wonder. Anyways, I notice she's going faster than what I think she should for this long, confined, and twisting driveway, that is not paved.

The trees look haunted bare frameworks with demonic hands branches lathed with dripping Ice trying to rip throw the glass. You could hear their unnatural cries in the moaning in the wind, even though all the windows of the SUV where slug it conjectured its way through the

gaps. I have my iPod in my lap with one earbud in my ear, on the scuffle, a song was about only half though when I heard:

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions, or so they say, and some believe. That no good deed. Goes unpunished in the end or so it seems.' That is too creepy! I was panicky, however hiding my worried feelings, as the song ended, and the battery just seemed to die out of the blue.

#- Hashtag: (Ice cave pathway, spooky wind, and the road to hell?)

Chapter: 61

Burring, heated urges, with the chill of death

'I partake this philosophy of passing away,' I'm proverb as Jenny spin out on 79 and the tires screech spinning dramatically on the slick ghostly road. The green on the gray clock on the dashboard is shining: 6:16. 'I have this theory that before you die you see your high points and you're low like a slideshow of both.

What do you all think? I got an- 'Um- maybe?' From Liv and Maddie, slightly taking part in my question, and a shoulder shrugs from Jenny, she said- 'When where we are dead, we're dead. I don't think you see anything or go anywhere other than in the ground or someone old vase on their mantel.

'How do you know?'

Then Jenny said something smart. How would you? It's not like someone has come back to life to tell us. And if they do can you believe it?'

(Nevertheless, she was not around when I was ten almost died, getting bucked from my horse and hitting my head on a rock. Or when daddy was bathing me and my sis back in the day and he was sidetracked, and I went under for too long. Or when I was put under to have my umbilical hernia repaired at five. I have like this half innie button by the way, that I am iffy about. Either way, right now I have it covered up with my dangly butterfly ring. I think I saw something unexplainable at those times. Even so, I just let Jenny have the floor. Right or wrong Jenny always wins.)

~*~

Yet, the question was still there of what was the highlights- of your- life, or the lowlights. So, I asked- 'What's the top and the bottom things you've accomplished?' Jenny said- 'A lowlight was when I fall asleep laying out in the sun and got so red that, I could even move, for like a week when I was fourteen.

Maddie and Liv's were- almost the same. Saying- 'It was when we came out to our parents.' Jenny slams on the brakes, mouth hanging open saying- 'Whoa you're gay for each other?' I said- 'Thank you captain obvious!' Maddie said to Jenny- 'You're so slow you should be in the sped class!' Liv giggled, well rubbing her hand softly on the inner part of Maddie's upper leg!

Jenny- 'Shut up b*tches!'

Maddie and Liv- 'No!' They say in unison, with the same vice pitch.

Jenny- 'Lezbos.'

Maddie- 'Jenna Talya!'

(Jenna is her birth given name, yet we have to call her Jenny for… well, I think you get it. Even Jenny is not perfect. Like where her parents stoned when they named her? That's going to be so-ooo embarrassing for her at graduation!)

Jenny- 'I told you never to call me that!'

Liv- 'Okay- Ice princess.'

Then Maddie said- 'No babe more like-

'Icer!'

'What's that mean?' Said Jenny. 'Look it up, Jenny… that is if you can read.' Said Liv.

Me- 'Stop it you all- God, get back to my question!' Jenny looks at me like she could rip my tongue out, for speaking. All at the same time she is hugging the middle of the road while driving. And I want to yell about that too, but I don't.

'Richard, baby Rich,' Jenny says and takes one hand off the wheel to and jerks her fist up and down in the air while doing some hip thrusts at the same time. (Jenny knows how to work those hips. I look out of the corner of my eye.) The First time I hooked up with him was in eighth

grade, um- that boy gives me my first rolling eye into the back of my head orgasm, which made me sake all over, as I was holding tightly sinking my fingernails into his ripped senior body!' (Jenny starts doing the 3-fingered point shot on herself while drawing and talking about him. I try so hard not to look at her. Don't look… I think to myself, yet I do… I could not help myself.

(I am thinking god- I'm likely to get 2 in mine, and that is pushing it. Then again, I am not a complete suite.) Liv said- 'Mine was with you, Maddie.' Maddie-

'Same!' She said back straightaway.' Yet in her vice, there was uncertainty, as Jenny was about to blow. (Yet she yells at us about the sets, yet for her it's okay.) Like really, I thought Liv would have said Dilco, or some random boy's name. Like how can a girl give you more than a boy, when a girl doesn't have what another girl needs, to keep life, love going? I have tried it, yet I always come back to the boys.

Maybe it's because I want a family someday… and babies, and well a hard d*ick, lol. I don't know… I am a girl that wants what she wants when she wants it, and how she wants it to be. Yet that doesn't mean that I may not change what I want.

I'll tie anything once, like death you can only do that one time though.

#- Hashtag: (A loaded gun, girls on the run, and sex talk is fun)

~*~

Before I and Jenny started hugging like I never thought about all this stuff. I was happy to go to the park, or ride a bike, or go swimming, or just be a kid- or teen girl.

However, Jenny made me hunger for what she had, back then by forcing it on me. After Jenny finishes up, she lights up and puffs the smoke out onto the side of my face. (Awesome just wanted, my hair too smells like an ashtray when I get home.) I groan and leans forward to plug my charger in where the lighter goes while reaching for my I pod. 'Need so relaxing music, please, before I murder myself.' Maddie and Liv have the same I pod going sharing one earbud headphone site. It's not like we all could have one song playing. Yet we get sick of the crap Jenny has on. 'Can I get a cigarette?'

The wildlife crossing the road don't stand a chance. Liv asks, and Jenny pops it in between her lips and lights it up for her, really stretching her arm backward. Jenny shoves one in

my mouth lighting the butt end she's holding, not looking to see what's right or wrong. Saying- 'Baby girl live a little, this might be your last cigarette.'

I thought why not turn it around, I already smell like smoke, and I have not had one in a long while. Jenny cracks the windows in the back only, and the cold comes in with a mist. Then Liv starts to complain about the cold again. Jenny said- 'Well we have to get the smoke out.' Maddie takes a hit off of Liv's cig, saying- 'Cuddle up with me I'll keep you warm.' I knew that she had to be shivering- because, I was.

Jenny rips my iPod out of my hands and plugs it into her tape deck converter. I was so embarrassed I was playing 'I want to know what love is,' by Foreigner, it's so not cool to like a mushy love song, yet I do. This kind of music pisses Jenny off, she says it's sexist, old, and boring. Yet to me at least it has a melody.

I don't know why Jenny did it… maybe because she's was sick of hearing Liv whining, and I with my earbuds shoved my ears talking too loudly, and Maddie's cell phone making that annoying clicking sound when she texts to Liv who is sitting right next to her. Maddie calls Jenny an ass stopping in mid-text, and frees her seat belt, leaning forward trying to grab the iPod off Jenny's lap to give it back to me. She thought it was an invasion of my privacy or so she stated. I never wear a seatbelt I can stand them I feel like I am being strangled.

'They say to know a girls' heart just listen to her playlist.' I think that is true. Jenny nags that someone is breathing heavily down the back her in the neck and that someone is Liv open mouth breathing as she is talking and snuffling, she must be coming down with a cold. Jenny said- 'Cough it up it's not yours!' I reach into my handbag for a crumpled-up napkin and say- 'Here now blow,' I felt like her mother doing that you are holding my hand up to her nose and all. Yet that's what friends are for. The cigarette drops from her mouth and lands between her thighs when she sneezes bogies- snot on the back of Jenny's head and Barbie doll bleach blond hair.

(Yummy!)

Jenny starts more execrations than ever before, trying to brush the snot out of her long blond locks with her hands. Grossed out as she is doing it. The cigarette falls, from her lips as her mouth drops open. This all happens at about the same time. Now the lovers in the back are fighting even more with Jenny, and squabbling with one another. Maddie said- 'If you need to sneeze you could have pointed it me, for all I care.'

Liv- 'Sorry!' Yet Jenny thinks the sneeze was internal. And it may well have been.

And Maddie being Maddie starts hair pulling or removing the mess as she called it, from Jenny's hair. All the same Jenny thigh is starting to get burnt. Maddie pulls so hard that she rips out one of Jenny's extensions.

Now Jenny has no hands on the wheel, as we wave in and out of the oncoming traffic lane, the music is blasting also, so us girls are yelling overtop. Instead of hitting the sound down, I turn it up in a panic. Amplifying AC/DC's 'Highway to hell.' (Ironic) And I'm over here just trying to talk over them, jog their memory that we're all friends, and Jenny needs to focus on the road. 'Yet it was more like you'll shut- the- freak- up!

So, she can get me home on time.' Not the best way to say it. Yet I do have a way with words, like when I am cheating death, or pissed, or haggy, or on my period, or a boy is being an ass to me, or my sis is getting on my nerves, or I am hating on my mom and dad for being dumb, you know times like that. The clock pulses onward: 6:32. The tires slip slightly on the wet road, and the car is occupied with all the cigarette smoke, little threads of it are rising underneath Jenny's kitty, like spirits still trying to get out of there.

Jenny slams on the brakes stopped dead on the highway. Maddie's face slams nose-first right in between Liv's, perky boob calving. Then the SUV rockets forward abruptly, and at that moment there's a flash of silver in front of the SUV.

(Now where are up to the moment of the crash, where the angel of death was chasing me down.) Why Jenny slammed on the gas like that after she stopped to freak out, I will never know? She's not that psycho… is she? Was this the plan all along? Like she had to know that she was not going to make the sharp cover and that she was going to hit a tree, she had too. Did she snap, did she want us all to die? Or just me? Did you just feel that? As I said Jenny yells something wicked- some gibberish swear words, that I can't even make out, and suddenly the car is thumbing and bent in half around a tree on the highway, next to the lonely shadowy ice cover opening of the woodlands.

I was not sure what was going on to tell you the truth. I make out a horrifying, shrieking sound-steel on steel, and cracking splintering sounds of wood going through my body, mixed with glass shattering, cutting up the side of my face and shoulder, a car folding in two like a

taco-and with the smell of depth and fire. And yes, just so you don't ask, I did infect pooped myself, yet we all do when we die, gross… but true.

Like- I said- 'Jenny always had a way of scaring the crap out of me.' at this time I have nothing but my life fishing before, and what I saw was not, what I saw when I was living it. It was shocking to see my life form than proactive. I was in shock, blacking out, and the photo show was coming to an end. The last birth I remember taking in was a whiff Jenny's cigarette smoldering out- and at that moment… There was no nothing.

Nothing… nothing… nothing… It was complete- emptiness, sadness, with the feeling of being lost in-universe, vanished and frozen with-in time.

That's when it transpires. The instants of death- is full of flashing scooching warmth, with the sound of people crying out for help with no hope to be savvy, with the feeling of pain inside and out, that will last endlessly. The last sent I remember smelling was that of daring roses the boys sent us. When you go down, you're the funnel that keeps the death within you burning, like me, you never believe in the farming heat until it happens, your bag to the Gods for it not to be so, asking not to go down. Yet by that time, it's too late… you've swallowed up the hole and consumed, like a naked soul falling too- the devil's children, you're tariffed- all you can see are raging fire, nothing else. No one is going to save you- ever! The smell of burning flesh is repulsing, and that is always. It's like being in one of my scary dreams, I know I am falling though there is no up or down, no walls or sides or ceilings, just the sensation of falling to the pits below, with darkness everywhere until I get to the bottom.

You can cry all you want, but your tears just dry up, instantly in the heat. In this quote hell, you've branded nothing but a number and lift to never be seen again infinitely. You're in complete havoc, a scary nightmare that never- ever ends, just slowly harassed by these dark entries playing with-in your mind to the point of insanity.

They love to toy with you and make you feel helpless. You're all alone, yet never left alone, with nothing left to feel other the regret, defeated down to nothing but wallowing in self-pity! In this place, you have to be strong! You may move out and up if you see where you went wrong in your living life. Only if you have the epiphany to get your seven stabs. Yes- I have found out that you have seven times to get into paradise. Up till now, that is not as easy as it may sound.

You have to earn it.

~*~

You have like do-overs, like being in a Déjà Vu dream, that alters the space-time continuum. Think of it this way- life is like nothing but a preset sci-fi video game conjured for one higher power enjoyment, we are the main characters in this game. The one behind the conceal (We call that person on earth God, and the programmers that make it happen behind their smaller screen we call them angels.)

Nothing in time happens, it's all just a challenge to see where going at the end when it comes. I have seen how this all works now that I am dead, how things are made and dragged and dropped onto the earth, and other plants that have a life.

Like a place called Vie a planet not yet discovered by the living earthlings. They are so unlike us, yet have the same things we do and more just in a different way. I'll try to describe it, yet you would not believe me.

Incredibly beautiful, especially at nightfall. Everything, that is living, has some sort of glowing feel.

The brightest coolers you have ever seen. Trees bigger than skyscrapers, Trans that float as the race by. All kinds of floating glass homes, connected by vines that glimmer with cascading waterfalls, there incredible stone structures arching all over that connect the one floating island to the next. Star covered skies with many big moons.

Vie has these humanoid people called La-Marie's, they look so much like us it's daunting. Their skin is so much more transparent then what we have, there body's completely hairless (every earth girl's dream right.) Yet they have long hair on the head that lights up, in a wispy way, every pulse of their heartbeat there a flash of light within their body, most of them have blue eyes that glow at night. There vans light up at night also bright indigo.

Oh, and they have seven fingers and toes with one hand or foot. Why I don't know. The USA space program will get to thereby solar spaceship and land on that planet in the year 2075.

Yet, I am not sure if that is a good thing. And I don't want to get too unbelievable, so I am going to stop there before I get into trouble.

Anyways with Earth and life itself, it's all programmed, like a scene out of The Hunger Games control room. It all can be changed, with a flick of a switch or a say, and you can look down into the world where we once lived and see it all play out, it's all arranged from conception to death. It's already mapped on this big screen. Everything we call era or lifetime or ordinary life is just a hallucination.

That's why we sleep to be programmed for the next day, based on the choices we made the day before. Life is a gift that is a gift, don't piss it all away or you'll be terminated. Just remember every birth is accounted for.

At this time Marcel most likely has woken up slightly to see that I am gone.

Saying that he is so lovesick for me, to himself before going to the bathroom. I have been lovesick before it's not fun it pulls and triangles at your hart and junk until you can't take it anymore. And you have to be with them- one way or another. There is always a way if you see, that you love them.

Jenny- Love without the glove is okay, I say to all my girls if you're a girl like me. Um- I have Mirena birth control, this to me is better than any pills you can pop, you're not killing life, yours prevent before it happens… and that's smart. Mirena/ Skyla prevents pregnancy, most likely in several ways: Thickening cervical mucus to prevent sperm from entering your uterus, inhibiting sperm from reaching or fertilizing your egg.

Thinning the lining of your uterus. While there's no single explanation for how Mirena works, most likely, the above actions work together to prevent pregnancy for up to 5 years. Mirena does not protect against HIV or STDs, dah- where you can choose to not have a baby for up to three years or have it removed at any time to have just that, yet a 14- 17 why do you want to think about babies all you want is to feel good down there with a boy, with no risks, so I can have as much sex as I want to when I want how I want and with as many boys as I want to, and they can cum inside and I don't have to hide the fact that I want them too.

And it's safe, and I only have a period 3 times a year, yet you feel the need to plug it up more… aw, the drawbacks of have sex all the time… yet come one right.

You can have this done at sixteen without mom and daddy even knowing, so if you want to get popped at 16 you can, and there's not a thing they can say about it, I pissed my dad off yet

it's my life, and that's how I feel about my girls- do you- for you- freak the world that not getting it.

There are risks with this implanted in you- but it's not baby killing so for that I feel good about being me. It's as easy as sitting on a boy's lap at a Pittsburgh Steelers game and feeling good about it, I remember doing that at 12 for the first time… with a cute boy- love was starting with me and these feelings I can help but have for boys.

#- Hashtag: (Hocking a loogie, you'll only see me now in your dreams, blind hit, and whiskey throttle)

Chapter: 62

Gone at Seventeen

The ministry of depth has fallen to me like I am fallen to it, and it's so magical at the start, and then so frightening, it bloodcurdling not knowing the end of the end. DEATH- I know some of you are thinking mayhap I deserved it. I get that I think I do too, even my sis said- I had it coming when she found out I was roadkill. Maybe I shouldn't have sent that rose to Jull's, or maybe I shouldn't have dumped my drink on Justen at the party and fought with her over Ray, or maybe I should have never shown my sis how to do that stuff.

Maybe, I shouldn't have copied off my classmates' quizzes. Maybe I should have let Ray have his way with me. I still have not fully fallen out of love with him, I know that I should. Maybe I shouldn't have said those things to Ray. Maybe I should have saved myself for marriage? Maybe I should have kissed more losers to make them feel good about themselves. Maybe I should have stayed a geek, and never become friends with my girlfriends. Maybe I should have said more to Marcel that was not hurtful. Maybe I am to blame for it all?

Besides, I know some of you would say I erred death for not seeing, that I have a boy that would be good to me, and would treat me right, that I passed on so many times. There are undoubtedly some of you who think I deserved all this, for the reason that I was going to let Ray go all the way with me even though he's mean and nasty to me. Yet for some reason, I just thought it was the way it should be. I was afraid to leave him. I knew if I would he would get his revenge.

Plus, I know that some of you would say I received a humiliating death because I didn't sleep with Marcel, still not sure if he was good enough, and to be truthful you're right there, I should have seen this all long before I thought I was falling too him. I fall but not all the way… and it's killing me that I may never- ever fall to him as I should have.

To be truthful I should never sleep with anyone but Marcel. I know now that I was always in love with him, even when I wasn't with him. But before you begin pointing your fingers, let me ask you some questions: is what I did so bad?

So, bad I deserved to die? So, bad I deserved to die like this with no dignity at all? Is what I did so much worse than what anybody else does? I'm a ruthless mean girl?

I am a slut that had it coming?

I don't think so… do you? Like really is what I have done so much worse than what you have done in your everyday life? Think about it, and you'll see I'm not that bad.

Nevaeh

Book: 9

Dreaming of you Play with Me

I am so scared screaming of all peoples- Marcel's name, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out over top the others ear-piercing calls out, and I wonder if you fall forever and ever, and never touch down, I am still falling? I think I will fall forever into this ring of fire. I even call out for my sis, yet she'll never hear me this far below her feet.

Of course- dreaming it is happening inside your head, when on earth, is not real, and why is it so when you're dead?

Do not pity the dead like me it's not worth it. Pity the living, and, all those who are alive without true love like I did. Pity the ones like me that did not see the true love right in front of her face. We're all human, aren't we? Every single human life is worth the same and worth saving even mine… right- don't you think so?

#- Hashtag: (plummeting, mistakes and someone saves me)

Dreaming at night, you're not in sight, -felling a fright, it could be so right, playing with you play with me in the night sun, it could be so much fun, like a loaded gun going off over and over, until we would see the daylight sun, then we are on the run, staring down the barrel of the gun when we could be holding on feel what was to come, breathing, and scramming, shooting to the ceiling like the built of that gun, wouldn't that be so much fun, under the twilight sun?

Chapter: 63

Envisaging

A sound litters' within my silence, as the SUV crunches into the huge tree, a tiny nagging growing louder and louder until it is like a slice of metal slicing the air, slicing and sliding through me, it got all up in me, ripping me almost in half, right above my petite hips, I feel the warm blood bursting from in my heart and my insides falling out of the gashing wounds, it's like I looked down and could see my uterus, I touch it with my hand grabbing the one ovary that was rolling out of me. When the metal went up in me above my vagina or my lower waist, I could feel one… my fallopian tube just dinging down there. I was in shock, my eyes bugged out, pulling my hand up to my face seeing that its cover in my thick red blood and Karly guts dripping down my arm.

-Then I wake up. Was it all a dream?

-Or am I dreaming while dead waking up?

I feel like Liv's must of throughout the day, having her bastard child bled and dripped slowly out of her insides. How she slipped last night is beyond me like I would have nightmares of the fetus coming out of my pink thing and saying- 'Why did you not want me, mommy? Why would you kill me? Do you not love me? I loved you… it was love that made me. Or something

really disturbing like that.' I was going to ask about getting rid of it at lunch Monday, how she was feeling. As you know to be a normal girl, and Jenny pushing Liv, she had sex without the glove with Dilco, and had an oopsie, for being empty-headed about bad boys.

(Hum- Why am I the girl that is dying, I didn't kill my first kid like Liv just did. I've kissed a girl but ever had a full-on girl on a girl as Maddie and Liv do. And I and Jenny are on two different levels, she's a bully, and I am not like her at all. If anything, I am a good girl in the group.)

~*~

I am jolted out of my sleep or so I thought with tunneling sparking flashing light. For a second when I look around the room everything seems soft unclear and slightly distorted, I am in my bed naked like I am every day when I get up and hug my stuffed bunny for the last time, as I snap on the lamp on my nightstand. I have to hide my bunny when the girls come over. Ray used to just though him of the bed onto the floor.

That was not cool! I don't think Marcel would mind my cuddly stuffed bunny, with the cute floppy ears. My alarm has been blaring and Beep- Beeping for five minutes. It's seven-o to six am. I smash and rub my face in my soft pillow for the last time. I look around the room I am sweating I wipe my forehead, saying wow, I have had a dream that I'm falling- but never like this. 'Damn that was a crazy dream!' So- I start my morning retain- you know grabbing for what inside my Pringles can by my bed before all hell comes busting through my door.

I sit up in bed slightly and I turn on my laptop, might as well live record what going to do on cam, why not. So, push the quilt away, I look down at my unclothed body with my toy in hand, and I see my toes wiggling with nail polish, and my almost smooth legs and everything in-between.

Thinking I just shaved and look at all this stubble, growing here already… don't you hate that, I sure do? It's like all you can see and feel. Now I'm covered with sweat even though my room is frigid cold. My throat is dry my heart is racing, and I'm desperate for a drink, yet I am almost there, my sighing is getting loud, I can feel it building up, I can stop it feel so good and the tips are just rolling in for the boys that tune into my show.

The camera is right there, whoosh- and I feel on top of the world. Yet after I hit a low with having to start my day, running away from me away from who I am, I've just been running

a long way. My floral sheets are stocked with everything rushing out, and so is my keyboard, yet the boys love it and love me for it, so that is good enough for me. Yet after I do that it's like I get an embarrassing feeling, I pull it out, then close the lid of my lap, to cover up fast. It's like I get a rush from it, and then the gilt comes after in my mind saying- 'That was the wrong missy, yet I can't stop. Jenny and my girls give me that same rush, always doing something that feels so good yet maybe wrong.

~*~

I remember, the time on the school bus back before anyone could drive, Jenny bet me a dollar, to put my hand down her jeans to prove she wears thong undies. Saying that I am such a baby, for not knowing, that's how that all started, she felt like she had to teach me everything. Anyways back then I was still where Mickey Mouse Briefs and did even think about what was underneath. She beat me to feel that she was not a virgin, that she was all open and smooth, unlike me at the time. I didn't even shave my legs yet. So, I did, I went for it. The rush here was touching a girl inappropriately, with everyone looking, and hoping the driver didn't see.

I'll never forget Danny Hover looking over the site with Andrea Doeskin smelling, like little perv's, and Shy saying- 'Oh my God'- snickering at the fact, from the set accordingly. Yeah, it's that kind of rush I get, over and over being with them. Just like Jenny got Liv fixed up with Dilco, it's all about the rush in the end. Jenny can be a hell of a lot of fun, and it's that fun that keeps me coming back for more, the same way Liv and Maddie do, and other girls keep trying to be like us, it's all about the craziness. I don't know why but when I am with them- I want to be so naughty! I remember Marcel smacking my butt, just to be cute, every time he would see me in the hallways a school. -Yeah, he's weird, but I couldn't stop thinking about him as I was- well… doing me. Yet Ray's photo was looking at me on my nightstand.

~*~

In my bed, I snap the bright light off when I hear my little sis coming down the hall, everyone goes back to being fuzzy, like I'm not looking at my room but only at a blurry photo of my room that was taken with a shaky hand incorrectly and nothing match up with the real thing. My sis went into the bathroom next door to tinkle, so I snap on my nightlight, and then that light modifies everything, so it looks somewhat ordinary again. If my sis sees my light on from the

crack at the bottom of my door, she will come busting in. I have learned to keep it as dark as I can when I hear her coming run down the hallway. I love her, yet I want my privacy.

All at once it comes back to me, like a hangover rush all my blood starts going back up into my head: the party, my sis getting laid, the argument with Ray, falling to Marcel, all the sex, all the drinking, and drugs, it's all thumping hard in my brain, like my covered button was a few moments ago, on cam. I am still lying here uncovered, with everything still out in the open.

'Kellie!' My door swings open, hammering the door handle against my wall, and sis comes bolting across my room, jumping in my bed, pacing over my textbooks notebooks, love notes, and pills of dirty tops and bottoms and discarded jeans, I panic thinking my Victoria's Secret Heritage Pink nighty way over there on the floor, where I thought it off and left it the night before. Yet it's not like my sis has not seen me naked before… but is wired when this happens.

Something is not right, something seems very wrong and oggie; something skirts the edges of my memory, but then it is gone as my head pounds and sis is bouncing on my bed on top me, throw her arms and legs around my nude torso.

Saying- 'So what are you going to show me today?' I am thinking to myself- girl you already got it down, doing what you're doing now, I don't need to teach you anything. Kellie- she is so hot… (Oh God not in that way, she's- my sis.) She is like a little furnace with her worth coming from her tiny body. It's not too long before her nighty rides up, and I can see it all in my face like she wants to be just like me, and then she starts you know asking her questions.

She curls tightly to me kissing me on the lips and cheeks, her body skin to skin to mine, she's kind of- like- a hyper puppy… you know- wet nose, big sad eyes, giving you lots of unwanted wet kisses, and can't sit in one place for too long.

Now she is pulling on my necklace, the one I am always wearing it has my dad's wedding ring hanging from it -a thin silver chain and the gold band hanging from it, a gift dad gives me- saying- 'He loves me more than mom, that I am the love of his life.' Yet sis tugs gently to get my full attention. I ask here- 'Why are you not wearing your undies?'

And she baby- talks without missing a beat- 'Be- because you don't at night so-o why should I's.' I knew not too long from now she would be running around the house stark-naked like always, saying it's because I sleep this way. I am sure mom will say I am a bad role model,

but yet there are far worse things she has done, things that mom and dad never need to know about, things that I can even remember right now. If she wants to be in my bad nude, will- I guess that's okay…? She is just trying to be like me, and that's sweet. I have saved her butt many times when she has done bad things. I have been like a mom to her, ever since she was born if I wanted to be or not. And she has been there for me when I was a- nobody. Yeah, she's the best pain in the butt a girl can have.

'Mommy says you have to get up soon, her hand covering her eyes as she walks my room and sees both of us.' Her breath smells like toothpaste, as she kisses us good morning, and she stumbles over all the stuff lying on the floor and it's not until I push sis off me that I realize how badly I'm shaking. Mom, she has one of those green face masks speed on, which is some scary looking crap, pulls she has curlers in her hair. Yet that's not what's got me traumatized. 'It's Friday,' I say confused. I thought we were going to the rusty anchor today? Mom said- 'I thought you didn't like doing that Karly that you're too grow up to be with your mommy and Daddy and sissy… always- yes we are all going this upcoming weekend, glad to see you want to go.' I said- 'Oh- okay?' Mom- 'Karly are you feeling okay? Are you not your usual descent and moody self? Me- 'Yah I am a fine mom.'

I have no idea how I got home last night, or what I did or didn't do. It's like it never happened, yet I think it did… didn't it? Maybe I drink too much?

Mom said- 'Um-hum- come on you two bare cuddle bugs it's getting late.'

Then- I remember getting in the car, with the girls and the fighting it was all coming back to me, as I see my sis run into her room, leaving her nighty behind on my bed.

I knew that something looked different about her when I looked her over, I am starting to remember what Ray did to her last night. Yet she seems to be taking is so well- so strange. I have no idea what happened to Jenny or Maddie or Liv, and just thinking about it makes me awful sick, pissed, and yet so worried. I put my feet on the ground, first on my fuzzy shaggy throw rug, and then I step forward feeling the hard would under my feet.

The cold wood reminds me. When I was younger, I would lie on the floor all summer wishing I have some friends to spend my time with. Back then my only friend was my sis and my horse, I'm curious to do the same thing now, and reflect a bit on what the heck is going on- and also on how things have changed, I know my sis will be another half hour getting ready. And

with me all I have to do it jump in my outfit laying there on the floor. My skin feels so cold yet, yet on the inside, I feel scorching.

Like- photos on Instagram, all these snapshots start scrolling, row after row in my mind. Seeing bits and pieces of what went down last night. My, I- phone starts vibrating on top of my bed until it falls off the edge hitting me square in the face making me jump two feet in the air. I reach for it and slide my finger over the cracked screen. There's a new text from Jenny. Oh, good she must be okay then… or maybe it's a text saying one of the girls is not okay; I was so scared to look, yet I had too.

#- Hashtag: (sleeping quarters, clothing hoarders, and sisters with disorders.)

Chapter: 64

OCD much?

I read it and it is looking oddly former, yet I'm not one- hundred percent sure, I do resave and send out over six-hundred texts a day, yet this almost seems like a copy of the same infect to one that I vaguely remember getting, what would be in my mind two days ago- 'Don't forget b*tches, it's love-o-grams day!' Too- strange… this should be Sunday… right? I wanted to text back and say- this already happened, yet before I got a new message started, another one from Jenny popped up on the screen waiting to be opened. I look at the date and it's the same too, I thought for sure my phone was broken, it has been dropped many times. Yet how could it be wrong? I have to be mistaken. Maybe the whole thing was a messed-up dream? I open it, and it's not the same, so I thought maybe I am not crazy? It said- 'B- there in 5 min.' I knew by the way it was written she was driving fast.

I unexpectedly feel like I'm plummeting underwater unable to swim to save myself, I don't know what I did that was so wrong if I am repeating this all over. Did I do anything wrong? I look out the window and see Madilyn walking to school, and Jenny passing her up calling her a retard out her window, I get a new text with the same repeating date. It said- 'I am going to start a rumor that I saw

Julie- fingering Maggie's bushy hairy p*ssy today in the library during study hall.' This terrifyingly creepy I thought! I knew about this already, this is old news, which I assumed was true. Why is she telling me this? It's not like I can stop it from happening. I wonder if I should forward this to Maggie. However, if Jenny finds out I am going to be screwed.

Also, If I am recreating this day like I think I might be doing, maybe I should tell Liv not to abort her baby, yet is it my place too? I am, I recreating that day? Is this happening to me? Why is it happening to me did I earn this? Was I given a new chance? It must be…! So, I do the unthinkable and I forward the message, will she get, I wonder what I've just done was meant to be altered. I feel sick doing this, for the fear of Jenny revenge, yet something inside, a small voice was telling me to do it. I feel like I'm weightless, spinning around lying naked on my floor. Have you ever felt like you were re-watching yourself from space making chooses, that's what I feel like- I am doing now? I know I have to snap out of it and get dressed to impress at school, I know I sure can where Marcels T-shirt that lying next to me on the floor, or I would be laughed out of the building. I stand up unsure if I am going to fall to my knees.

Now I am standing, yet I feel so woozy and woosy. My belly cramps in knots, worse than when I am on my period. I stumble to the bathroom bumping into everything down the hallway, the bathroom is by my mom and dad's bedroom, I am holding my mouth. My legs trembling over what I have done, certainly, I'm going to throw up or shut myself, or both… I didn't even think about closing the door when I get there or turn on the light… I barfed in the scarp can while side saddling one leg on either of the toilets, as it runs coming out of me from both ends at the same time. I reached for the sink after I thought it was all over and brushed my teeth and then shower to wash off.

My shower is on way too hot and there's thick steam everywhere, fogging up the mirror, drops are budding upon the tiles. I hear voices in the hallway, but the water's rushing down on me, and it feels wonderful, it's falling so hard on my head and body I can't make them out, yet I sure if the mother says nasty things to me, dad. I stop the water flow overhead. I hear dad looking in at me saying: 'Get out of the shower, and get going, your friend is out there waiting for you. I said- What? Oh my god, close the door dad and don't look at me. Yet he left not remember to close the door all the way.

I step out of the shower stall dripping wet, I blot the remainder off with a towel, and there is no time for makeup or doing my hair.

Jenny, early I thought… it has to be a miracle. I feel there is like an electric current running through my body, coming for deep inside me when I looked up and see my little sis looking up me, saying- 'Are you okay?' Her fingers brushed against my lower back skin, as I was staring at her without expression on my face. My eyes widen in the phenomenon, yet I hide

know idea why it was in such utter shock to me. She is always sneaking up on me. Yet you would think I saw a ghost by the look with-in my unconscious feeling eyes.

I look into my hand mirrors, pulling it off the countertop, and- I see that my irises are surrounded by a jade green- a glowing circle of light, let me now that I have made it… the powers at be are letting me have my do-overs. My eye was always green but never like this, they're so alluring now, almost like glowing the light of the other universe above, letting me know that I am echoing the final days of my life.

Me being me even though I am sick, I have a theory at how this works: that each time I have to do this over the light in my eyes gets weaker, and if I use this up, and- I don't make it right, I'll surely fall into the pit below, never to be saved. Oh- so the dream of being in hell wasn't a dream at all, it was real! That means, I only have seven attempts, or so that's the philosophy. Do you think I'll make it…?

I sure don't!

It's Jenny- my daddy's let her in. I walk into my room undressed, holding my wet towel in my right hand. Jenny looks at me and said- 'I see we are going for the earthy look today; god you could have shaved a little.' Jenny is lying bully down on my bed, looking through my phone, with her legs up in the air, letting one fall and bounces on the Serta ever once in a while. She looks up me, she got that pissed off look, eyebrows bent, I knew she saw I forwarded the message. I pay it off, acting like I was happy to see her, and in a way, I was, I would never want to see one of my girlfriends die- or be dead.

Oh, Jenny- She looks so typical, so acquainted with everyone, yet on the inside is falling apart. Jenny is Bipolar and has Social Anxiety Disorder mixed with Bulimia, like every time she feels not wanted by a boy or feel overweight or something is not going her way, she has a hard time keeping her food down, she has even up-cucked on me and the girls at lunch, not meaning too. I am far from being a psychologist, yet those are my diagnosis, yet everyone just seems to ignore her faults. I know she saw the text, because she ran down the hall to throw-up, running my little butt over.

If she asks why- I'll just say- 'Butt dialing!'

Jenny walks back into my room; she flops bully fist on the bed. I asked uneasily with curiosity- 'So what transpired last night?'

She mopes for a second. 'Yeah, sorry about that. I couldn't call back. I didn't get off the home phone with Ken until, like four am. And because my mom is a b*tch she took my cell away last night before for staying out too late on a school night.'

'You did call me back; Jenny'- I knew it was happening for sure now? I rub my arm, I have goosebumps. 'No, I just told you didn't- that I couldn't…' 'I-no- I meant- never mind.' 'You drink too much,' said Jenny. 'Ken, he was freaking out over the fact that some college boy named Josh asked me to go to a Taylor Swift concert in June, and I said yes. I told him it not like we're going to do anything. Yet he doesn't believe me. I told him I would make it up to him. Ken going to end it I feel, he's sick of me.' I said- 'Oh you poor thing…' I knew what she had to do; all girls understand that. She said- 'I swear to you, Kar, guys are so needy. But if you follow these three things you can't go wrong- *Feed 'em, Blow'em, and Ride'em*, and they're happy to keep you around, if not they'll find some on that will do just that, like if you don't.

I said- 'I'll remember that…' Then I added- 'Yeah and then where the sluts if we do, and a b*tch if we don't.' Jenny said- 'You got that right baby girl.' Jenny said holding back for crying- 'I only wanted to be loved, that's why I do what I do for all these boys.' I thought to myself- I get yah. I nodded my head yes when she said that, but I did not comment, as I was slipping into my outfit at the foot of the bed.

She looks up at me with misty eyes. 'Talking of boys- are you eager about tonight?' 'About what?' I say acting like I don't what is going to go down, or don't even know what she's talking about. I play dumb! Her words are all running past me, faster than how she drives, everything is distorted together. Jenny always talks like that when she gets upset. Her words go into overdrive. I'm holding on to the bedpost, trying not to fall over, or on top of Jenny, I would love to sit down yet, Jenny is hogging up my single bed. She said- 'I think you should back up with Ray or do him already.' She throws me a condom from her purse.

I said- 'Who do you think would be my type then?' 'You, Marcel, some worm Bud Lite, and his Star Wars sheets. OMG that would be perfect and she giggles. 'How romantic,' she shouted. Though, I was thinking OMG Jenny you're always right. Like it would be so romantic, yet little did she know I felt that way, already… I never realized how much of a weirdo I am. I have fallen too a complete nerd, on the outside, I have completely changed, but on the inside, I am one too! We all try to be something we're not in high school, even Jenny has everyone fooled.

Nevertheless, the ones that seem the most put together are the ones that are falling apart the most. No one's life is as good as it seems, and it's even worse when you're like Jull's and Madilyn that have us throwing crap in their faces. I stand here feeling like such an ass hole, not even hearing what Jenny is rambling on about, because it's nonsense, compared to what I have done in my thoughts.

-White teeth teens are out-

#- Hashtag: (unperfect girls, the charmed life, we want real love)

I go pee one last time, and Jenny flows me in the bathroom and sits on the edge of the tube looking at me as I go. Then after I got up, she went, I was thinking like we didn't need to do this together, yet that how Jenny is we have to do everything together. That is when my sis walks into my room and said- 'I have to Ba-bath Karly, would get my stuff Re-ready and help me a bath?' I try to close the door saying get mom to bath you, but she wedges her hand in at the last minute and pushes into the bathroom.

And Jenny said- 'It's okay we can bath her.' I was thinking to myself the girl is ten years old, and still needs someone to help her take a bath, wash her hair, and get her dressed. Yet mom and dad want to keep her their baby girl. 'You haven't showered yet?'

She shakes her head. 'Uha- ha.' Jenny said- 'Come on the hoop in here, as she pulls off her nighty. I just look at like when did you become so motherly. She said- 'What! Like I always want to have a sister, and do this.' I said- Okay then, knock yourself out!' Jenny- tee- he-e's like it's the greatest thing in the world. I have done this so many times, that I just don't see the fun in it. I reach into the tub and turns off the water. I about that time is when sis surprised me by saying- 'Jeez sis you look like sh-crap. Then I said- 'Thanks a lot!' She must have thought she hurt my feeling because she grabs me by the hand and jumped up wraps her wet body around me in a hug; as Jenny grabs the big fluffy towels to dry her off the rest of the way. 'Aw- that's so cute,' Jenny said.

I was starting to feel okay, and much less sick. I said- 'Here honey step into these undies, and let's get these jeans and blouse on you. I sit here on the toile and side on her socks, as her toes are wiggling. Jenny said- 'Come on Kellie you need some makeup, just like your sis, she says. Jenny scans over are pale white faces saying, as I sit on the edge of my bed, I got it. 'Your right Kellie your sis does look like crap today.'

'I'll do both of yin's make up now. We can make five minutes or so for this.' 'Okay- I'm done girls- OMG! You two look like gorgeous twines.' I was like um-hum. Thinking to myself, I got the same vary reaction last light. You know sometimes, Jenny can be so sweet, she not always cold and heartless! Jenny pulls out my cell phone from the middle of my bra, probably to text Maddie and Liv that we're going to be late for the first bell. She watches me for a second, packing Kellie book bag and then turning away, like she has something to type that not for our eyes to see, Jenny always delete her history, which is something I should do.

Jenny- 'Don't take this wrong way baby girl, but you're not smelling the best today, you smell like boy's balls!' I said- 'Really?' Stopping to think- 'Yeah you would know what that small like,' I said. Kellie is giggling and says baby talk stuttering like always. - 'Yeah, sh-she has Ba- BO every morning!' She was so stinking cute saying that, like that, I couldn't be mad at her. Kellie starts pulling on my clothes my tank top, my skirt, as I look in the closet for my boots. Jenny runs back into my room, to find my Secret roll-on deodorant in my underwear drawer.

Surely throwing all of them on the floor to find it. She's back, I roll it on hastily. Jenny said- 'You could've shaved you pits to... God.' 'I hope the boys don't mind your lack of hygiene today.' Sis- 'let me have some of that...' so like everything, I let her share my used deodorant. It makes her feel like a big girl. But in my mind, I'm like you're already a woman after last night. Uncanny isn't it!

#- Hashtag: (My stench, need a pinch, things that make us flinch)

Chapter: 65

Before Yesterday is Today?

I hear from the sofa- 'Wear a jacket, Karly!' My mom thinks even when I'm dressed, I'm still half-naked.

So, where out the door, I see sis get on the yellow bus. Waving at me like a moron out the window! And the cold feels like a b*tch slap to my face, yet it is a good way to wake up. I get into the SUV that was wrecked the night before. Thinking that this thing is like a coffin to me, yet I could say anything, or Jenny would think I have completely lost my mind.

So, we go down all the same roads, not stopping at any of the red or yellow lights or signs. When Liv gets into the car she leans forward and grabs my hot- chocolate, and the smell of

her perfume is strawberry, it is a body spray she has been wearing devotedly ever senses she was twelve and her hips and boobs develop in like the end of sixth grade, she buys like five bottles every time we go into Sally Beauty Supply.

I know that she has it on her, so I ask her for a squirt, even though I am sick of it after all these years, and even though I don't want to smell like her, I ask for it anyway, I don't want to smell like balls! Even though it stopped being cool in seventh grade, to where kiddy stuff like she still does- I have to close my eyes, overwhelmed and coffin as a puff of it surrounds me, or then what I asked for. Gross, I smell like a pre-teen after gym class now, just trying to cover it up.

Closing my eyes was a horrible idea. One- I get to feeling car sick. Two- I can see where Jenny is driving, and the way it feels- it must be off the road. Three- I start to daydream about Marcel, plus heartsick over Ray still, even though I side I was done after what he did to me, I can stop having feelings for him, he was the first that took me from behind. Oh no, he was not my first love god no, I didn't know what love was until I saw it in Marcel's eyes, but was it real? That what I am afraid of- trusting my heart to a boy again. I could see all the flashes of sincere light within Marcel's home, I could see him holding as no boy has ever done with me. I could almost feel the tingle of his kiss on my lips.

'Holy freaking crap balls,' said Jenny.

I snap my eyes open as Jenny swerves to avoid hitting a cuddly black cat, walking past. That is when I start to look out the window into the side mirror, and the glossy dark trees are flocking on either side of us like outlined ghosts in the navy-blue sky. I smell something hot. I said- 'Yeah that's just me.' I hear Jenny shrieking not too long after I feel relaxed, and yet ones more, I feel my stomach go to the bottom of my feet and back up, as the SUV rolls to the one side, tires wailing- 'It was a family of deer this time, trying not to get murdered. You should have seen their faces. It's like mine every time I ride in this SUV.' Once again, I feel like I have cheated depth, with Jenny at the wheel. The girls chortle as Jenny throws her coffee cup out the window, hitting the baby fawn, about the same time is when Jenny throws out her morning joint too, and the smell of pot smoke is bizarrely duple: I'm not sure whether I'm smelling it or recalling the night before.

Maybe I'm just high on life, at the moment.

Liv- 'Dear sweet baby Jesus I think you're without a drought the worst driver on the planet!' I said- 'You think?' Maddie sniggers. And Liv spit sprays some of my hot on the back of my headrest. Liv, she has become a real squirt-er she is always sparing one of us girls down, yet Maddie the most! I said- 'I don't want to die like this today!' 'Please- please be more alert, please,' I stammered, I'm clutching the sides of my seat without meaning to. Jenny said- 'Kar, it's all good. Hey- It's not like I am going to crash, I never even been in a car wreck yet.'

I said- 'That's amazing!'

I start to think as I close my eyes, trying so hard not to hold my breath. Like it's so weird how life works, isn't? Like how I always wanted one thing, all my life, and I waited and waited for it but it never comes. And then it did happen last night, yet it was not what I hope for all, however, all you want to do is curl back up at that moment before things changed. And see if he is the one for me or if I should fall back into the arm of Ray, after all, I am his girl. One thing I have resized from dying: Every person you have dependencies on, and every person you need to count on, will ultimately upset you. No matter how much they try not to, nothing in life is ever going to perfect, so maybe you have to forgive and forget, or trust and move on?

In my deepening delusional thoughts, I ask myself these questions.

'I just want to be normal, like everyone else that is popular.'

'Karly are you sure that being like everyone else is making you a happy girl?'

Maddie- 'Mail Box!' (Smack, thump, thump.)

Jenny- 'It's okay, it was falling over anyway!'

I said- 'Not really!'

'Don't worry.' Jenny leans over and rubs my inner thigh. Honestly, I was wondering what she is reaching for when she did that.

'I just want to be normal, like everyone else that is popular.'

'Karly are you sure that being like everyone else is making you a happy girl?'

'Mail Box!' (Smack, thump, thump.)

Jenny- 'It's okay, it was falling over anyway!'

I said- 'Not really!'

'Don't worry.' Jenny leans over and rubs my inner thigh. Honestly, I was wondering what she is reaching for when she did that, I thought I felt her finger go up in.

Jenny- 'I won't let my best friend die without knowing what it's like having a boy give her first orgasm.'

Then I added- 'All have it be just me and my lover, without everyone looking at us smacking hips.'

Jenny- 'Giggles saying good luck with that.'

Maddie- 'I get it your Cream shy!'

I said- 'I would like to have some privacy squeezing it out. And not have someone next to me, like liking my nose or something gross like that. Like the last time I was doing it, I had some boy playing with it while looking at us.

Liv- 'You're so strange!'

Jenny- whoa, are you saying yet went all the way with Ray and didn't tell us?

'Crap- I did it, I slipped up.'

I said- 'No- this was with some other joker, at a party months ago, you don't know him.'

Jenny, said- 'really?'

'I like- know everybody.'

Maddie- 'Oh maybe it was with a girl?' Liv- 'Maybe it was with a boy and a girl?'

'So,' Jenny said.

So- I lied and said- 'Yes it was with Addison and Avery and a college boy named Connor.' I freaked, saying that- 'I was like, so love drunk and missed on roofies, that I took part in a three-girl one boy orgy at a party.'

Yes, I have kissed a girl and liked it. But I never did anything like this. (By far the worst lie I have ever made in my life. Yet I have been in some, not wanting to be, and it was only with one person. And no, I was not always with someone I loved either, it was just hook-up sex.)

Oh- and sad but true, but no a boy has never gotten me there and I been with at least fifteen. The first time was the worst of them all as you know. But my freshman year I went through like five different boyfriends, I have boxes under my bed with memoirs from each, and after they got what they wanted they all dumped me, like a week later. The same thing happens in my sophomore year, I had two boyfriends that year and three random hookups, plus some experimenting with a girl. Junior more of the same, so much so that I stop thinking about it. I even let the gym teacher gave me because I didn't care anymore. So, the number may be higher than fifteen.

I only have an orgasm doing it myself. Never with another person, mostly have I thought it's because I am not relaxed to enjoy it. With these boys, it's always harried up, so I can brag about doing you. Ray doesn't even last long enough to get me damp down there. However, I liked Ray for another reason. TMI- I know! I thought to myself: I never wanted this- I just wanted to fit in.

I wonder what it would be like with Marcel if I would let him inside me?

I don't know why I didn't I let him in last night, I've let every other boy in. I guess it was just those internal voices of the girls saying he's too creepy and unpopular. Jenny only thought I should hook up with him for a joke because he's still a virgin. Yet on the inside, I don't find that funny, on the outside I have to smile and giggle at it as they do.

I'm desperate to spill my guts and tell her everything like I always do, to Jenny and the girls at that moment, to ask them what's happening to me- just to see if they would believe me. Yet some little voices inside me said shut up Karly or you'll blow it. And really, I can't articulate any way to say I have lived passed death- it just would not make any sense. Yet I ignored that voices, and blurted it out anyways- I had to test the limits. 'We all in a car mishap after a party that hasn't occurred, and I was impaled when this SUV hit a tree, and I think I may have passed away yesterday. And like I saw hell, and then I got to live again when I woke up in my bed.'

Jenny said- 'Yeah baby girl they call that dreaming, and you' all call me the dumb one.'

How can this day be happening all over again, and yet be so different from the first time around? It was puzzling my mind.

I thought that the girls were going to die over giggling at me, saying something that they find so stupid.

'I thought I died tonight,' I said knowing how incredible it sounded.

Liv said- 'It's a dream, Karly. You have dreams like this when you're under the gun, and what something like a boy or sex, it's just your nightmares playing tricks with you. You may just be stressed over falling some of your classes at school.

I whispered kind of under my berth- 'Oh- don't remind me!'

Maddie- 'She's just sexually frustrated that all.'

Jenny- 'It could be what you're eating too, that you're dreaming this stuff.'

Maddie must think I'm quiet because I'm worried about Ray and me what I have planned for the night. Like it at this point was no big secret that I was going to go all the way at some point, yet at this point in the day, they didn't know that I was going to be at Marcel's party.

Maddie wraps her arms around me from the back seat, and Liv holds my hand. Maddie is Saying- 'Good sex is just like learning to swim, or holding your breath what you know how to control your body, you get good at it.'

Maddie, kisses French kisses me on the lips, and slides my undies off to the one side and starts fingering me... (I didn't want it, yet I was not going to stop it, it would be rude to ask her to stop.) At the same time, she was saying- 'You should become gay, it's easier that way to have them. Liv is looking over us jealous.

Saying- 'That's true, only girls know how to please another girl.'

Maddie utters- 'See, I told you!'

I said- 'I am still afraid.'

Maddie said- 'Don't fear, Karly. You'll be fine, it will be fine, will always be there for you, and as far as having a big-O, you just have to be stress-free or in-love. See you're relaxed with me, that why it happened.' 'That's right,' said Jenny! Liv- snaffled and then nodding- yes, and petting my hand with hers, yet still envious, about what just happened, I can tell.

I try to force a smile and act like I am happy, yet really, I was revolted. So much so that I can barely focus on what happened last night, all I could think about is what going to happen tonight and what just happened. It seems like a long time ago that I got up from my bed, and even longer since I imagined being side-by-side with Ray next to me in that bed. It feels like it is

been so long that I am not even sure if it has the naked body I want to be pressed upon mine. It feels to right to imagine Marcel next to me feeling his warm, soft hands rubbing over my skin.

Thinking about him makes me ache from the inside out, my heart thump, and knees knock my throat threatens to close up just think about have it sliding down, and going up in me. I so what to feel it. I unexpectedly can't wait to see him, to feel all of him, to just be with him.

Yet, I still feel like I am cheating on Ray, feeling this way. And then again, as he did it with my sis and Justen and every other girl he could get with, why should I? Once a cheater always a cheater! I really can't wait to see his sideways smile, and his and messy hair, and even his dirty-looking jeans that he always wears that smells slightly like boy sweat, even after his mom wash them for him. Yeah, it's safe to say I am falling! I am so wishing I had his shirt on now, so I could inhale his boy-sh sent.

'It's like riding a horse,' Jenny modifies Maddie's rambling aloud thoughts. 'You'll be a blue-ribbon champion in no time, baby girl. Just ride his thingy unstill you win your reward at the end, it doesn't matter how many times it takes him to reload, just along as you get one. Even if he is done you keep going. Don't stop until you want to stop! Own your man!' 'I always forget that you two used to ride horses,' said Maddie.

Jenny- 'And she was damn good at it too. But I have been riding longer'

Liv giggles saying- 'You can say that again.'

I said- 'But I'm not like you, Jenny, I don't know how to be controlling.'

Jenny- 'Grow some lady nuts, and just do what I say, and you feel unstop of the world next time.'

I said- 'Okay I will, I'll keep going until it happens.'

The girl all cheered me on wott-ing in the SUV- fists pumping!

Liv has the sniffles, Maddie and Jenny have the giggles, and I sitting here kind of moody going over my same old thoughts while blowing the steam off what's left of my small hot chocolate. Which I might add is not more than one short gulping swallow.

~*~

'I gave it up!'

I need a hooded-Lady-show for this one to get off and not stress so much, crap I going to freaking break out! I use the pink on it is fast and I do it fast and right now that all I need, it has the gray ball on the end that jiggles it around just right, what can I say, I want it all now, and I going to do it and have them see it.

~*~

(Horses like boys…?)

I had to remind myself that I give up riding before I started eighth grade. I said that because I knew the same tired Jokes were going to roll in soon, about me riding horse-ie's from the day I was like, seven until then.' 'I don't think I could ride now to save my life.' Jenny said- 'It's just like riding a bike you never forget how too.'

'How would you know' I asked?

Jenny said- 'I still ride from time to time, I just got second place in a jumping competition two weeks ago.'

I whispered- 'O-oh.' (On the inside- I was crushed, thinking it okay for you to ride but I can't. My horse dyed not long after, I stopped riding her, thinking I didn't love her anymore. I didn't want to stop.) I think if she starts making fun of me now, I would bust out crying. And if I cry then I'll be a BABY! Yet it okay for her to cry to us over stupid boys or her time of the month drama. I could never clear the truth to her: that riding was my favorite thing in this whole wide world. It wasn't about winning with me, no- it was about having my freedom, my happiness, and my relaxation. The way I could escape from all of them that put me down, back them. I loved it more than boys, more than friends, more than family even. I was the best I could be back then. I was strong then, now I am nothing but a week p*ssy that lets everyone crap on me.

I can't believe, that I wanted this life. I loved to be alone in the barn, or out on the fields particularly in the late summer when everything is crunchy and golden, and the plants show off all their wonderful different colors, and it smells of hay, is what made my day complete, racing past all the trees, down the wooded trails, it was more than just jumping her at compassion. We had a bond- I loved brushing my horse down, braiding her main, and being her best friend, feeding her carrots sticks, I loved it all. I gave up my best friends for ones that I can't always

trust. Your horse's always your trusting best friend. And if I am crying now it's not that I am sad, it's that I am happy.

I have to lie…!

I am nothing- nothing, but a complete liar, a wide-ranging slut, and a total baby!

#- hostage: (Galloping, Groping, Gulping)

Chapter: 66

Shadow People

I search for my sunglasses in my purse to cover my crying eyes. I just said it was to keep the glare out of my eyes when I put them on. I look in the visor mirror, and I see Liv smiling at me. Like I knew she was going to cry, yet really, I wanted to see if my makeup was okay. I start to tune myself out I don't hear the phones going off. I can't hear their laughter or chirpy voices. I can't see the houses rushing by or the cars, I just close my eyes and fade away in my daydreams.

Maybe I'll tell her that I wish I was the girl I used to be, but at the same time, I know that I won't dare. She would think I was crazy. They all would. Jenny might just say- 'Okay if you feel that way, you can go back to flowing me around like my shadow.

Go- go, be with all the losers or the sped, and don't think about coming back.' I don't want that either. It gets quiet, and I open my eyes, and I keep quiet, just looking out the window, as it steams up and I have to keep wiping it with my palm.

The light outside is faint and soggy-looking like the sun is attempting to roll over the horizon of tree-covered hills and peeking into the valleys. The day is overcast like the sun is too lazy to get out of bed and wake itself up.

The shadows are as piercing and jagged like needles. Like the shadow, I used to be wanting to be in the group of three girls following them around in awe. I watch buzzard, black crows, vulture circling the SUV like I am dead meat. It was a scary omen taunting me, from down below. I see all of the fifty or more taking off at the same time from power lines above, follow me like a creepy shadow of death.

'Sometimes, I wish I was a bird. So, I can fly far. Far, far away from here.' But not one like these… something more majestic. I was I could soar over all creation, maybe over a beach,

flying higher, and higher until I could touch the clouds or what lies beyond. Seeing the ground drop away looking like puzzle pieces, or patchwork on afghan blanket flying so far away that nobody would know my name.

'It's too stuffy in here song, please,' Jenny says, and I shuffling through the iPod until I find her lady jam Iggy Azalea – Fancy, she has to sing just like her alone with the track and wiggle butt to the beat in the set. Yet like I am getting tired of this song. Nevertheless, I keep my eyes open, because this is worth watching. I should video this and put it on YouTube or Facebook! Yet I have supersized that her theme song isn't Sisqo- Thong Song, maybe- I guess that is to the 1990s for her. After Jenny was done embarrassing herself, Maddie finds- The Ting Tings - That's Not My Name. We all can sing along to that one like morons. Yet we let Jenny take the I- phone, and we do the lines, Jenny does the nettles! That where I draw the line and do that, yet not the other crap that freaks with your mind.

By the time we pull into the long covering driveway, that winds past the lower parking area just a row down from the faculty lot we hit Senior Lane. I'm feeling better, just thinking of what might happen today has got me in the a-okay mood, even though Jenny's cursing F-Baum's and Maddie complaining that one later will she have so many that they will withhold her diploma.

And she has- to go to summer school at her own expense. Its Friday yet can tell know of the kids give a crap about being here, I know that we will all have detention and it's already two minutes after the first bell. Yet with Jenny, I know she'll get us out of it, someway somehow. Even if her mom has to do favors, with the staff, or pay big money will get out of it.

Everything and everybody look's so ordinary, just like another Friday. The only thing that has everyone hyped up about is that it is love-o-grams day.

I know that because it's Friday, will Shy will be coming from house Kevin Peteai's home, sure enough, I see them, ducking through the cars holding hands to go sit up on the wall to make out before the first period starts. They have a hard time being about, she wears his class ring like it's something to be proved of… yet really, it's not. I know he cheats on her like it happened last night. I saw him with a freshman, and they were going at it like bunnies. Oh no, I am not going to say anything she dislikes me as it is.

I see Lizzy making her way up to the door with Johnny Kacatomes like they have been dating forever. When it has not been any more than three days. Nikkei and Jacky both have loser boyfriends, yet they think their asses are something else, most boys don't want to mess with that. Nikkei has pimples all over there face, and Jacky has nasty braces on her teeth and she drools and lisps when she talks. Boys don't like girls that have braces, you can understand why. Yet he doesn't seem to mind, even though Scotty Smalls had to go to the ER with her attached. I bet he loves expanding that one to his mom and dad. You can see photos of it on Facebook! I am friends with everyone, I have over 3,000 FB-er's. I am sure we all are going to cut and run the fence. Yet I am not sure at what time we are going to do it.

I was looking at Jenny as she was pulling on my hair after I slapped her crossed the face. Telling me that I was so wrong yet I? Yet this is all one big freaked up the dream, 'I am not the one that is to blame, here am I?' I not relaxing at all at this point fearing that I have made some big mistake, Yes, I see my sis over there giggling like a little girl, and it is starting to piss me off.

Yet, she is still making out with Ray, and I am slicked by it. (It's not a dream, which small voice inside me screamed.) I look at Kellie she said this what I want can you be happy for me, and leave us alone! I can do what the hell ever I want. 'I can kiss anyone, I what also! And you're not going to stop me, what do you say to that, go suck it. I see all the boys I could be with and I know what I have been missing out on. I could kiss each and everyone if I wanted to, and make them bend me over too. I see Ray standing over in the parking lot.

I was looking at Jenny as she was pulling on my hair after I slapped her crossed the face. Telling me that I was so wrong yet I? Yet this is all one big freaked up the dream, 'I am not the one that is to blame, here am I?' I not relaxing at all at this point fearing that I have made some big mistake, Yes, I see my sis over there giggling like a little girl, and it is starting to piss me off. Yet she is still making out with Ray, and I am slicked by it. (It's not a dream, which small voice inside me screamed.) I look at Kellie she said this what I want can you be happy for me, and leave us alone! I can do what the hell ever I want. 'I can kiss anyone I what also! And you're not going to stop me, what do you say to that, go suck it. I see all the boys I could be with and I know what I have been missing out on. I could kiss each and everyone if I wanted to, and make them bend me over too. I see Ray standing over in the parking lot. All it seems am tripping and marry-go-rounding.

I am blinded by the light I say out loud.

That is when she starts singing-

Revved up like a deuce Another runner in the night.

Blinded by the light. Revved up like a deuce Another runner in the night.

'And I am like what?'

Chapter: 67

Titanium

In bed, it's the start of yet another repotting day, I don't have much to say, I just wish everyone would go away, come whatever, and what may, I just want to say- with Madilyn only, and never be lonely again.

Jenny, who's tugging on my hand and tossing down on me as she is looking down impatiently beside me, with her hair falling on my face, that I'm an only dream (Yet it was not a dream all to me.) I wanted to say that I had this amazing dream, about a girl she dislikes, like I could feel her like I could see her like she was crazily coming through me have I lost my mind, she's not here, or is she? It's like I can even hear her giggle out of my mouth, and I start to relax. It's all a dream; as I roll over knowing this girl is like side me, and inside my mind she is, having missionary sex with me, I feel the thrusting she is doing it for me, I kiss the plow and I feel her lips and tongue going in my mouth, I feel my clitoris rub up and down on the soft plow beneath me until I come so hear I can even breath yet it's her voices and birth coming out of me. I feel myself reaching for my dildo and yet I feel in it not me in my body complaining me to do this it is Madilyn I feel her on the inside, I slime it on the floor on my glass mirror and I feel like I am having sex with her even if it a boy-sh thing to do.

I feel my face tighten her then it does down there, I feel myself going up and down faster and faster, I can't breathe- it wonderful- I hear my name- yet it not me- saying it out of my mouth it is here, it's like the only she figured out how to be with me, yet I feel nuts saying this to Jenny, yet I feel I have to tell someone.

Then I just roll Jenny off me and show her what happens and she doesn't get I am on my backside and I am screaming my head off and I know that Madilyn is there yelling for me, just to me, and being a butt about it. Jenny said nice retired impressions or Maggie.

Damn, do you all ways come to that herd? Look at the glass and then Madilyn inside me make me get down and licks it up. Umm- yummy! I hear ough- gross- what the freak, even I don't do that! In its vibrating a crossed the floor, yet all hard and pink. I wish it would have been the glass one at least my dad would have asked- if- I was jack hamming the hardwood floor. Jenny said that what she said and my dad rolls his eyes and walks out smiling, like girls- I don't get it two beats and where done.

Jenny opens the lining of my old band jacket and said I didn't know you had four or them.

She takes one and it wiggles back and forth, I start gigging even though it was not me doing it, yet I had one in my hand to, so we just started jousting with them. And my flung out into the hallway where my sis said 'I'll keep this one for myself. I didn't know you had all these.' And I see my dad walk up with one eyebrow up- like what the hell! How did you get all these? 'My silly like sis asked- 'At the mail with a group of girlfriends your dumb crap we hid them with dolls in the same box.' There I am spared eagle and my dad looking up the black hole saying good god, that's not right. I and the girls even took a photo just to see if the body get it.

Nevertheless, to most all they see is the cute doll inside and not what it hides behind. That is, when my dad walks into the room and looks in the black jacket and pulls out the little pink bolt vibrate, I could have crap and pissed myself. My mom walks in the door and without missing a beat said- 'That's kinda-hot!' My dad slaps himself on the forehead and said what happened to my little girl.

I am thinking of Madilyn dreaming about her constantly, she is on my mind day and night. Yet she is not the only one I see in my mind at this point that could be the one. Her giggling laugh, yet his sweet smile gets me through. However, Rays can do this for me.

Nevertheless, is it all a dream? In this dream I am relaxed, yet I can't see that far ahead of me. What do I want? I don't know I feel as if I am deeming, nevertheless I know that this is not so. I can kiss anybody I want to, and as we walk past groups of guys or girls and I can check them off in my head, as I see all the lovely colors. I could kiss and freak each and everyone if I wanted to day in and day out.

I see Ray standing in the corner talking to Jenny and I think, and now Marcel talking to my sis and it's starting to piss me off, his mine b*tch! Or is he, hell I need to figure out what I want, or what I need. I could walk up to him right now and slap off his glasses right off his face.

I know that I am tall enough to reach his face, yet I was hoping she would after I saw him smacking her ass as if it was mine. Would it make any differences? Do I care? Maybe? Why? Why is a question that has known the answer?

I have nothing look at me, I know- I pull my pockets out and a nickel and a dime fall out. I am not okay with that at all, yet do I have a choice- like- I have a choice here, like my great grandmother in the past. She had to make them they were not easy. It's all the same hex, only the names have changed. I don't know where the idea comes from, she had like I don't get the ones I am having either, I wonder if sometimes in this dream I am having if it is if I don't see her standing before me in stunning white. Then that voice said to me 'It's not a dream as I see her descending to me. What does she have to say to me?

Should I be scared?' That is when they all came down after she said this…

'Why?'

'Why are you doing this to yourself?'

'What?'

I asked impatiently! 'Don't talk to me that way.' 'What way?' Did I just get angled b*tch-slapped? 'What the hell?' Do you talk to your mother with that mouth, speaking of the places it has been? 'Um-hello you did it- remember silly!' oh yeah that's right… maybe not. Why am I here then? Don't do what I did, you feel nothing pain, and maybe it not all on you. 'I would have never kissed a girl where you did!' Oh- yeah you did? I just got b*tch slapped again! I saw fifty shad of gay! And not the sucky movie.

I just want to which the movie 'Pitch Perfect,' yet it was playing in my mind as she plays with it with my hand. Yet it likes it her little hand doing it! I can even small here though my breathing ever so deeply. She is all I ever want yet so far away, yet so close to me she is my body or so it seems to me as the dead girl, or am I dead?

Yesterday morning, I felt the same way, I saw Madilyn in the corner with her hand wrapped around ray and it pisses me off so much you have no idea. I wanted her arm wrapped around my waist not his, or even the other way around; I don't know what I want at this point. She was smiling and giggling about something stupid that he said like used to do with me, it

makes me sick she is mine, I can stand it, him breathing on her and kissing her nick hell I thought she was gay.

I am the one that wants to be nuzzled up against her. He was bending down to kiss her, and I so wanted to kick him dead in the ass hole. Payback is a b*tch, is not! She looks up and sees me, yet does she care at this point or am I dream yet another dream, that's even more freaked than the last. She was looking me with goo-goo eyes, yet kissing him or was he kissing her? What going on and what is going down. Then he takes my hand and drags him over to him, pushing other people out of the way, then make both kiss him at the same freaking time- the same freaking time! What's wrong with an asshole!

Jenny was looking over our shoulder saying damn! Just what I always wanted a three-way with Ray and Madilyn in the hallway. I don't know what is turning me on anymore. I see getaway and get off, and that what they both said they were turning to do. And everyone in the hallway has that simple smile on their face, like- oh yeah.

I search for my sunglasses in my purse to cover my crying eyes. I just said it was to keep the glare out of my eyes when I put them on. I look in the visor mirror, and I see Liv smiling at me. Like I knew she was going to cry, yet really, I wanted to see if my makeup was okay. I start to tune myself out I don't hear the phones going off. I can't hear their laughter or chirpy voices. I can't see the houses rushing by or the cars, I just close my eyes and fade away in my daydreams. Maybe

I'll tell her that I wish I was the girl I used to be, but at the same time, I know that I won't dare. She would think I was crazy. They all would. Jenny might just say- 'Okay if you feel that way, you can go back to flowing me around like my shadow. Go- to be with all the losers or the sped, and don't think about coming back.' I don't want that either. It gets quiet, and I open my eyes, and I keep quiet, just looking out the window, as it steams up and I have to keep wiping it with my palm.

The light outside is faint and soggy-looking like the sun is attempting to roll over the horizon of tree-covered hills and peeking into the valleys. The day is overcast like the sun is too lazy to get out of bed and wake itself up. The shadows are as piercing and jagged like needles. Like the shadow, I used to be wanting to be in the group of three girls following them around in awe. I watch buzzard, black crows, vulture circling the SUV like I am dead meat. It was a scary

omen taunting me, from down below. I see all of the fifty or more taking off at the same time from power lines above, follow me like a creepy shadow of death.

'Sometimes I wish I was a bird. So, I can fly far. Far, far away from here.' But not one like these… something more majestic. I was I could soar over all creation, maybe over a beach, flying higher, and higher until I could touch the clouds or what lies beyond. Seeing the ground drop away looking like puzzle pieces, or patchwork on afghan blanket flying so far away that nobody would know my name.

'It's too stuffy in here song, please,' Jenny says, and I shuffling through the iPod until I find her lady jam Iggy Azalea – Fancy, she has to sing just like her alone with the track and wiggle butt to the beat in the set. Yet like I am getting tired of this song.

Nevertheless, I keep my eyes open, because this is worth watching. I should video this and put it on YouTube or Facebook! Yet I am supersized that her theme song isn't Sisqo- Thong Song, maybe- I guess that is to the 1990s for her. After Jenny was done embarrassing herself, Maddie finds- The Ting

Tings – 'That's Not My Name.' We all can sing along to that one like morons. Yet we let Jenny take them Liv, and we do the harmonies. I know how to play that on my pink fender gaiter it sits in the corner of my room that is trashed.

By the time we pull into the long covering driveway, that winds past the lower parking area just a row down from the faculty lot we hit Senior Lane. I'm feeling better, just thinking of what might happen today has got me in an a-okay mood, even though Jenny's cursing F-Baum's and Maddie complaining that one more late will she have so many that they will withhold her diploma. And she has to go to summer school at her own expense. Its Friday yet can tell know of the kids give a crap about being here, I know that we will all have detention and it's already two minutes after the first bell. Yet with Jenny, I know she'll get us out of it, someway somehow. Even if her mom has to do favors, with the staff, or pay big money will get out of it.

Everything and everybody look are so un-ordinary to me now, it's just like another Friday, I get freaked by her and miss her and then I hook-up and feel bad- about leaving her at home when it could have been on hot ass date. The only thing that had everyone hyped up yet not me about this day going over was the stupid love-o-grams. I could give a freak! I know that because it's Friday and the fourteenth, I feel for the ones that don't have anyone I have someone

all feel like she is come down in me, like designing in and reiterating out just Like an angel in the night, feeling everything about you to see if you're okay. Hell, you should see them sometimes at the game they have a love-hate relationship, sucking face one-minute sucking someone else ass the next.

Shy will be coming from form her house to Kevin Peteai's home, I don't have a car, yet I'll get to ride with on if I ride them for it, sure enough- sure enough- I see them driving passed in there crappy car at some point, as I duck through the cars trying not to get hit and maybe secretary holding hands with Madilyn to go sit up on the wall to make out before the first period starts.

They have a hard time being about, she wore his class ring like it's something to be proved of… yet really, it's not. I know he cheats on her like it happened last night. I saw him with a freshman, and they were going at it like bunnies. Oh no, I am not going to say anything she dislikes me as it is.

I see Lizzy making her way up to the door with Johnny Katnessachi like they have been dating forever. You can see by the way they're making out like just freaking have the baby in the hallway. When it has not been any more than three days.

Nikkei and Jacky both have loser boyfriends, yet they think their asses are something else, most boys don't want to mess with that. Nikkie Gattia has pimples all over her face, and Jacky Valgeil has nasty braces on her teeth and she drools all over, yet she still kisses some of the loser boys, yet there was this nasty time when, us girls got her hooked up that she got her braces a cough in boys forsaken, and I was like it happen to the best of us, and lips were shaken as talking not realizing I was the still thing about Ray.

Boys don't like girls that have braces, you can understand why. Yet he doesn't seem to mind, even though Scotty Smalls had to go to the ER with her attached. I bet he loves expanding that one to his mom and dad. You can see photos of it on Facebook! I am friends with everyone, I have over 3,000 FB-ers. I am sure we all are going to cut and run the fence. I see another girl named Ellody Lays, snagging her tank strap on a part of the face that was cut open, to get out, yet she is using it to get in on time. She's not going to make it.

I see Madilyn giving me- a big thumbs up, from over a crossed the way. I can see that she is wearing the same pair dirty rose pink flats she's had for- a zillion years, because she wears

them every single day, even though there are so many holes in them you can see what color socks she's wearing, and they're usually mismatched; one stripped and one polka-dotted. The same can be said for her skirt it's got many rips and is what I would call filthy, I can see her baby blue thong panties as she walks by looking at the tear. Knowing that I give those to her so the girls would lay off on picking at her; like her mom only by her stuff from Goodwill when she has the money too. I watch her go rushing by, with her books pressed up against her boobs, knowing that the tank top she is wearing went out for style more than five years ago. Nonetheless, she is heading for the main structure, content in who she is, I wish I had her confidence. Madilyn is just Madilyn… she is one girl that I secretory look up too. Yeah, it's safe to say she is my girl crush, yet nobody needs to no.

Like underneath all the ratty clothing, and regardless of what everyone one says about her, she is one hot, sensual, and totally cute girl, in my mind. She is so much win to hang with, we have so much that we like about one another the list could go on forever. Even though I have girlfriends that are so- popular were not always together, really all they want to do is a party and hook up and that gets old fast with me. Madilyn is just different…

Every time we are done doing it, (I say- I love you my awesome nard-Madi-lyn)

(Shush!)

I look at her like- Do you see me here with my one finger up to my lips, hitting the tip of my nose? You're my dirty little secret. You and I, we have to keep this undercover. I was thinking as she winks at me with those big bright eyes, and then she walks in the door.

Jenny- 'Looks at me saying- 'What that freak was that all about.'

I said- 'I think she was just picking a wedgie.'

The girls were like- 'Oh? Ooo-okay?'

Jenny said- 'Oh that's good, a butt picker scratch and sniffer!'

I just roll my eyes, like- you- poor girl, you can't win no matter how hard you try.

~*~

Seeing all these things- like the kids, the school, the way everything looks to me, makes me feel a million times better, and I start thinking maybe all of yesterday- everything that

occurred, everything that I thought happened- was just some kind of stretched crazy drawing out a peculiar dream. Like maybe the girls were right like maybe it never happened at like I thought it did. And yet that small voice inside me was saying: it wasn't a dream, just look into your eyes to see the light, to be reminded. Seeing is believing yet at this point, I don't know if what- I have seen is believable. I even question- if I am dreaming now, or if I am living this out.

Jenny travels down the senior lane like it's a race track doing forty or more, even though there's zilch of a chance of finding a parking spot up here. Stop and start in jolts, to see if you see one to ram into. It's a religious conviction for her to do so, and if there is nothing here, we go for a teacher spot. And if we don't find something their Jenny will go for their grass or even a handicap. Jenny even banged Mr. Mentally so she would get detention for parking in his spot or so she claimed she did. The guy is like sixty- I didn't think he had it in-um. Yet Jenny said she was on top and did all the work. That's a visual I didn't need.

My stomach feels like I have little swimmer inside it. When we pass that one spot from the stadium about three cars in, and I see the orange Chevy truck next to us, with all the damages, that I saw- in what I thought was a dream.

I didn't know if I should- just cry or scream- run or hide.

Before I could blink…

Jenny said- 'Sucking crap, I could have thrown my coffee at Madilyn today when I passed her before getting you, Kar.' I said- 'Oh well crap happens. Hum- I wonder what happened here?'

Jenny said- 'The dumb ho must have sideswiped someone.'

I said- 'I think it was the other way around.'

Jenny- 'Oh you're an expert on truck damage?'

I whipped- 'No.'

Liv- I want to be a Bella.

You sing about as good as blondie- what was her name?

Liv- Avery-

Maddie- No Aubrey-

Karly- I have the DVD now I want the star nickels.

The second one sucked old man balls.

The Liv said I think the redhead is sexy! She has blue eyes I never- ever seen combination before.

~*~

Maddie- I want the girl in my pants, I think she is so lovely, I love everything about her, I would love to spend some time with her! And start to sing 'Laid' by James so loudly that everyone could hear me scream out that high note like I do when I do get laid. I even feel I have the same vibrato as she does. Yet I never get the time of day she to freaking moody and mysterious for my liking.

#- Hashtag: (High-notes, troublemakers, and all lady singers)

I love to sing yet nobody knows or thinks I can… Just like the girl from that movie, it not even on the album for its full initiatory. I have even added my lyrics just because I can relate.

Chapter: 68

Shout it out!

You shout it out (Titanium) You shout it out, but I can't hear a word you say I'm talking loudly, with nothing to say I'm criticized but all your bullets ricochet; you shoot me down, but I get up. I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose, fire away, fire away… Ricochet, you take your aim. Fire away, fire away… You shoot me down but I won't fall- I am titanium!

You shoot me down but I won't fall… I am titanium stone-heart, broken-heart, shattered-heart- I am the thinks I am smart, slammed down, pushed around, by someone like you smashing my heart and hitting the ground- broken glass, as you pass- do you hear that sound it is of nobody around, cutting glass, the blood spilled- yet I am still titanium. Hart ripped out- and I shout I am titanium! They call out- the all can hear us now; they stare and I pout… I glare- I hear she'll never going to be titanium. Cut me down, I still don't make a sound I am titanium! I run…Cut me down, it goes around but titanium!

Facedown… But it's you who'll have further to fall Haunted love and Ghost town. Yet I want to fall for someone that is Titanium- a Ghost town, and haunted love Soft voice, soft look. All the sticks and stones may have broken my bones. They were talking loud not saying much, I was afraid and could not say… Now is the day, went through all the dismay. But I have nothing to lose Fire away, and have it all ricochet, take your aim… Fire away, you shoot me down but I won't fall- I am titanium. You can try to shoot me down… But I never fall

I am titanium…

I am titanium…

I am titanium…

You shout me out, but I can't hear a word you say. Yet okay I not doing much

I'm traumatized but all your bullets don't all bonce away. You shoot me down, but I'm not always getting back up. I'm not bulletproof, I had everything to lose

Fire away, another day… They don't all Ricochet, you take me away, say what you want to say, fire away. You take me down, without any sound… Other than that, of titanium… Fall to the ground, yet I am still titanium. Cut me down… But it's you who'll have further to fall… Ghost town and haunted love… Raise your voice, sticks and stones may break my bones, I'm talking loud not saying much. I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose, Fire away, fire away, Ricochet, you take your aim… Fire away, fire away. You shoot me down but I won't fall- I am titanium…

You shoot me down but I won't fall…

Get out- drop out- missed out- by the one that shouts- my name it's not the same, It all the same, to them- they can all go down with the flames, picture frames, shattered farms, not all the same, you're the one in them to blame, playing your game, feeling my sham- look what's left of me that remains- all the tears, all the fears, and the one the heart with suspicious ears.

Cut me down…

I am titanium…

I bulletproof, you have something to choose, I am titanium

You'll bruise, I'll be amused when you all lose, I am the one that is Titanium

You no find of mine… Will I find something to call all mine?

The is the time it might- be if I fight… What is time, when you're in rewind?

Your mine, you'll be the one that is fine; When you're all mine

So, kind- Like Titanium… You never be the girl that is… Titanium… (I ominously said to myself.)

#- Hashtag: (YouTube cover) Sia

~*~

I reason- with my head: She got that last spot because, we're so late today, or so I do believe it would have happened again, and I would be squashing my ripped-up nails into my palms like before. Duplicating what I did before to myself, once again I say in my mind, I am only dreamed this the last time because if it would have taken place, I wouldn't have any nails left after bitten them off. None of this has happened before, so maybe it's was all a dream. And then I heard that eerie voice inside saying: You're not dreaming.

'Feeling all the holes inside of me'

Chapter: 69

Haunted Love

Would you remember me like this…?

I feel I can do whatever I want when the freak I want to screw the world and death at this point. I can kiss anybody I want to boy or girl, I am so going to hell I feel, and don't even care, I know my grandmother would not like that one, yet I never met her anyways so freak off, b*tch. I am going to get b*tch-slapped so hard I just know it.

That is when I see her Nevaeh demanding down to me in what I thought was another dumb butt dream of me repeating one day of my freaked young life, or maybe I just blacked out- a little after sing so freaking high, I feel I have been out of it for a while- dazed and confused. She said- 'She had a girlfriend like me and to love her and not think about what could happen if I would go the other way. I had the scent of lilies surrounding me- or so it seemed. She said if you love that boy then be true to him- and stop playing the lonely heart game.' I just said- Well I shut everybody out. Don't take it, person. It's just easier. And I loved the way Brittany Snow's finally

I took control of how she wanted to be... I know that I have been hard on everyone here. Nevaeh- Yes for being you- yet… be you!

Why do I say freak the world Lizzy doll is the only girlfriend I feel is my real friend in this world she'll go to the grave with me and know the hurt and pain I have gone through? She has rad hair that is all kinds of crazy and goes every which way spring-like, she has green eyes, that are big and goggle-a-ley, Lizzy doll has a sweet wavy smile that brightens my day even, even when her arm goes every which way, what can I say, if I want to cry my eyes out or pout or shout. I know someday have passed I'm not bleeding out anymore, and that is just fine by me, you can do anything motive it.

She is all I need, other than that one that I need to find, that is sweet and kind, so hard to find, yet she plays with-in my mind… or do- I like to want him instead. In my dream, I am falling forever through the darkness. Falling, falling, falling. Is it still falling if it has no end? Yet I am holding her along with my doll. Her teeth are so white they're glowing. Everything about her is awesome, just look at her with my eyes. She was all I ever really need yet she is in a girl's body, why can't she be a boy and look like that and act like that why are most boy fagots. Sorry if that insults someone yet you can shove a two by four up your butt and feel it splinter if it fits, and I am sure I can make it do just that, stop being a p*ssy- yet look who's talking here. (Freak you all!!!) I have lived this day for attesting fourteen days now like holy piss just moves on already.

Her teeth are so white they're glowing she has blue eyes that are shining also so wistful. 'Miss. Edanella gives out the essay assignments today I can't spell sometimes I think I am dyslexic?'

'So, What?' Godsend me here to piss the hole would off- I'm so confused it takes me a second to grasp she's talking about English class, (Blah blah- blah- ba- blah- I make that move with my eyes, she looks and I said either wake-up or get out and I say- Freak you in the ass here my d*ick!) I shrug my shoulders upward-moving my head to the one side and give a side was grin that is misgiven throwing both hands up and outward, blinking my eyes rapidly.

Anna Camp- 'I knew it! I knew she had one!' Yeah, suck it, b*tch! You have a freaked-up clit! Teacher- Leave and by the way you expelled, 'Don't feel bad teach- all retired try

sharpening their pencil in their bum hole!' 'GET OUT OF MY CLASSROOM NOW!' (I flip the bird and hip my chest doing the Nirvana piece out.)

Yet the Anna get nothing like always as she can even sing a note, I've heard that off sounding crap in the cores room, like I know I can blow that away too. Like I can blow all the minds. 'The essay assignments suck I rip it up into confetti and throw in backward as I walk out the door. And I run to the bathroom and brake down all over again- I can take any more of this- for real. 'I missed a period; it is only fourteen days late or so I think it could be eighty-eight for all I know.' Olivia- Liv runs out of the room, not giving-a-crap about her work, and she finds me sitting in the corner of the bathroom holding my doll that I had hidden in my handbag. She nudges to me and Lizzy doll and says hey you okay- I didn't know you still had that thing what her name Matilda?

What?

Know- sorry she looks like that one in that movie, our eyes meet me and then look away, saying 'you'll be an okay baby girl.' That is when she sees Jenny walking out of the sped stall talk on about her 'One hell of smelly poop.' 'God that crap would make you cry.' She is waving her hand back and forth. Damn Liv said- walking in yet I must have tuned it out.

You're a psychosexual I said, what? I feel stupid and contagious, you know what- Oh well, whatever, never-mind. I run out of the bathroom Lizzie doll is clasped tightly to me in my arms. As we walk past groups of guys one girl, I check them off in my head- Marshall Adams, Suzanne Kendrick, and Robert King/ Andrews- he has two sets of parents- I didn't want to kiss any of the boys I wanted to right now I am contented, or am I? Or do I want to feel Marcel all up inside me, feel all that loneliness and tightness. I want to feel all that too yet I don't want to leave Madalynn for I feel safe, in her body too, for she is just like me on the inside.

I even heard Suzanne Kendrick say, 'I am going to shove Jack Paterson head downwards and make hem suck of Steffen Myer for freaking some other girl last night, and stealing my typewriter that was my pap's It's an 1888 corona it's all copper and crap, it sat in his study underneath Tomas Andrews painting.' What even more freaked up Robert King/ Andrews's said isn't that insect…? 'Like- you freaked your fourteen-year-old-cuz…?' 'Yah main I did!' In the ass hole… I looked up… tears running down- with that holy freak balls look on my face- and I rain- I rain so far away! I couldn't talk to all the boys I want to for they all were laughing at me,

or Lizzy and herring me talking to myself, how to explain a girl is inside you, and you're starting to feel sexily confused.

I lean forward to tell Jenny this- and then she said you're not dreaming this, yet, I am not sure what you mean. Was yesterday and all the day before a dream too? I see my sis standing in a corner with her arm around Ray's waist. She's amused and he's leaning down to nuzzle her lips. She looks up at that moment and sees me watching them. I walk past crying and Ray asks and thinks it's over him.

I rain so far away that I was in the elementary side of the school, where Ray loves to find his little sluts. Yet I would have never guessed that my little sis was the one and only girl on his knock-off list. I see them in the corner talking to one another and I think to myself… and about the time I do, I find that I am waking up in my bed naked all over again. Kissing the pillows and dry humping them too- 'Good- what happened to me?'

It like I am being kissed and can look into her eye, and it wouldn't make a difference it was not my hand my mom saw finger myself as she walks past my open bedroom door. However, how do I explain that I hear voices, inside my head of my dream lover, she likes- 'Why don't you just use one of those may vibrate you have and get it over with!' 'I just roll my eyes saying get out- Good!' When- how- who and what- when did I get back in bed, is it a new day; or the same day all over again?

I don't know where the idea comes from, of me even doing this with the door open I mean really- I would never kiss and make out with my bed pillow, yet it doesn't feel like a dream and yet I feel so dream as this is happening with my eyes closed. She is there- but I could if I wanted to so she could see me all naked and such, I know she is looking through my eyes just like focused cameras on my lady parts, she has the equipment and the skills to pull this off on her PC- it's creepy- nonetheless kind of adorable all at the same time- at the same damn time.

Somewhere- I'm lying stretched out under a warm blanket on a big bed surrounded by, my hands folded down around my boobs, sleeping in her arms, yet it's only my pillow or is it… so, I feel it next to me, ever so nude also. Speaking of boobs, they were being squeezed not by me yet with my hands hard and pushed together, like never before in a toe-curling orgasm and they all wiggle individually.

'I am on the other end of this… doing all this all of that- it's all I ever wanted to her, I felt her come twenty times over and over, getting stronger, faster and harder- loving every stimulating moment, her movements, her legs spread open as far as they will go, her back arching upwards, her feet pushing forward- ah- her breathing- her coming nonstop- like me… the sexy voice she has it was coming out of my mouth. She said- 'YES- finally I can do this with you is what I heard her say! Where both naked! In each other's arms! All I have to do is put my thumbs together and kiss them going up and down ever so nicely and slowly for this program I am using feel just like I am going down on her, just like I can feel her vagina to it like she is having sex me her being on top, pushing back towards the headboard- feeling her eyes rolling up- she did it through mine.'

So- adorable! She always was to me.

Who am I? I think you know- right?

I can't say for- well- I may get sued…?

Stay with me: she said- not wanting me to get out of bed- stay with the thoughts of her ruining through my head, stay home with instead, I feel at this point someday we will be wed. So, the song lyric I just wrote for her readers and I said.

Are feel of being self-assurance is- forever and never letting go!

(Stay with me)

~*~

My day just splits again, and I am at the table sitting with the girls, Jenny is hearing me say all this… I am saying at lunch to all of them not leaving out one gross detail- and Jenny said- 'Damn I have loaded in my undies right now just leasing to this crap.' Liv and Maddie are kissing like to ribbed- hot- b*tch dogs in heat over it, so yeah it hot. I said- 'I am coming – OH-hh-Aaa- UM-mmm-COME-meeting!!!' So loud that I know that the rooms in the apartments could hear me, one even said back my god- yet miss Wilddickersion is eighty-eight I know who you are… a girl over there, rolled my eyes feeling so award.'

I am so going to hell for this- I said out loud. Do you ever look back over the crap you say, and say what the freak was I thinking? I just had the thought of this crap I am saying. Jenny

said- nope not really- my dad hears me coming all the time so- like last night he said- 'Stop it! You're going to go throw your bedroom floor girl, and it's four in the morning!

'Yet I hear their freaking headboard hitting my wall- but- but that's okay?' I said about to have the old b*tch over in the next apart room there getting off too- 'We all do' -said Maddie and Olivia. Have you ever had the cops come, over that crap? Jenny said- 'Well- freak know- Maybe…? I've done an officer here at the school, said Jenny proudly, so the whole cafeteria could hear her. Hey- Jenny- no one cares to hear about you being a slutty ho,' Said- Marcel, yelling it at table or two away. Maddie- 'So was it that good?' 'It's good under the hood.' said Maddie, I said the same thing too, in a different way, I said- 'If you know what you're doing down there.' Jenny- 'I- am- the- one that showed you-you b*tch, and your sis too.'

It's all good! I say! Not sure if I am going to keep my nasty pizza down at this point really, I don't want to have though played around in my mind freaking and fingering my brain. I put my feet up all girly and per-die on the table, and he sits accused from me to check me out so why not give him what he wants, and I don't give a crap if I am in a skirt, I spread them out sloughing like a dude, and Marcel turns bright red, I want him to see that, I was not wearing annoying underneath I know that someone took a picture of my p*ssy and all on of his freaked up face- yep jaw-dropping moments, good thing I shaved it!

The teaching that was looking over us freaking fainted at the sight my va-jay-jay, is that a good thing? Oliva was saying please don't fart- please don't fart- she had the set on the other side of me, yet she was all pressed up to Maddie, so I knew he could see all of this- YOU-NO! I said- 'Dude shut up! You're freaking me over, and I put my one hand down between my legs, and start to play with myself, caressing it all around, sometimes up and down or in a little circular pattern, making lots of sounds. I even put my long fingers down inside and feel all the wetness and wroth, and I hear voices coming out of me, so he could see the come on my fingers unstop of my dark purple nail polish, and I come right in front of everyone, but it was only for him to see.' Jenny- 'do I see a d*ick; you need one to freak that p*ssy? I said- 'Nah- dude that's just my heart throbbing clit, and I get written up by another old b*tch teach, that must have a hairy one, or something like that- she has always been up against my ass hole.'

'Sometimes you are as blunt as the butt end of a fork, freaking strapping you in the one boob!' said- Oliva. I see Marcel in the lunch line making a cute all most a kiss-ie face at me, and

I rankle up my nose and turn my head off to the right side and shake it in a short fast yet deliberate quiver.

I walk up to where more than friends and this point to I hug him and the cafeteria gaps, he kisses me in front of everyone, and I look up before walking was saying with fluty eyes- (You're such a weirdo!) Then he slaps my ass- and I could have died- or so they all thought by the look on my face, I love it on the inside it made me tinge. And then Marcel walks up and asks me to be his date at his party tonight- I was shocked crap-less, on my face, yet I was like I wanted it- and I said- 'Hell's yes.' The girls giggle, but not Jenny she looks at him like she could rip his d*ick and make suck it. Maybe she even said that I am not sure I was lovesick for him.

I AM LOVE SICK!!!

#- Hashtag: (Eating out, screaming it out, shout it out, and making out, coming out)

Nevaeh

Book: 10

They Call Out

Chapter: 70

These are all my photos; I hope you enjoy um'. This was my life… baby!

Like before I get in the door and the girls disperse, and Marcel and I see one another and it on I could not help myself all I can say is he is amazing. He takes his hand and drags him over to me, pushing other people out of the way back to his room. The party has started this night I am

not out on the dance floor shaking my ass, instead, my ass is shaking for its riding up and down on Marcel's hard long d*ick.

(Holy crap he said, after about the thirty times. I knew he jizzed inside me, yet I did not care at this point, I did want him to pull out, it was hart even if he came as hard as I, over and over it went all down in.)

Just like I always wanted it with the one that falls to me, we are soaked from head to toe, yet I felt someone pulling me away like always, it must be Madilyn, yet I was feeling it all, saying it all, even the ones on the dance floor I think could here this, and the music is rocking the house, yet it was all the same. Jenny- 'busted in saying what is that nose. Are you getting mattered? Why him she grossed out.' What is that small she said?

Marcel- 'You should know come-dumpster.' 'WHAT THE HELL!' 'SER-io-us-LY!' I say in my special way. Maddie and Olivia say at the same time- at the same damn time. 'And I just break into song and danced it out into the bathroom awkwardly. Hey, you can sing? You have a higher belt- It sounds like someone I know.'

I was walking all along just going for a walk outside after the party, I just felt good, I didn't know if I wanted to sing, dance, and or cry; I was that happy getting to be with Marcel, so I when to my spot the old car in the junkyard. I have to jump the face and rip my tank top or something like that yet it worth it, to see my dream car, sitting there I not a girlie girl but I love this cute thing its sex looking like me. I found this old car at colleen's junkyard it like right next door, I freak'n loved this old piece of crap, I even had sex with myself in the back seat, I took the old hood ornament off myself and keep it, my dad said it was off of Neveah's dad's car, yet it was given to my mom and that why it just sitting outside for all the kids like me to rip the parts off of and sell on eBay.

My stepmom hatted Kristen my real mother, so that is why the car ended up where it's at, it was passed down yet the step-monster made sure I would never have it. My stepdad said the emblem is of a 1950 Nash that I found, little did I know it doesn't go on that car yet, I think it's a good fit, I was getting the car on my eighteenth birthday- I freaked up and had to die, just like me in the graveyard we both are retreating away.

My stepdads had the 1950 Nash which he said was the first real sports car and it's all steel, so I put it back on his without him knowing that I did, funny maybe that why I passed

doing something like that… it like it was meant for that car, or so he said and I did also. There is an old fender off what likes like to be some old ford over there too the is rusty red, I am not sure of the year it's too damn old for me to know. I remember right my dad said that grand-ma Nevaeh went to school in something like a 1965 Cadillac Deville convertible, yet, I don't see that she had like nothing, I don't know what that thing is. Like with these old cars don't think you have a seat belt, you just cracked you head off the dash of the Nash and then they wiped it off, and sell it to some other poor ass hole.

~*~

(Back at school)

I never realized that if a girl is in-like with she starts right at your Junk, then the look back up and if you turn around, they look at the cute butt. I say walking down the hallway out of the door of the lunchroom- 'It is February- yeah, what can I say, it just another freaking- freaked up day, who-and-ray. Oh- Oliva said- all the other girls are too busy doing whatever it is they do to care about me. Where are you going next? She said, 'I didn't know I'd be outside.' I pass the soccer fields on our right as we loop back toward Lower Lot. At this moment in time of year the fields are all tousled up, looking ever so dirty with a few straggly weeds, and a few patches of auburn grass. 'I feel like I'm having déjà vu,' I say once more.

'Flashback Fridays, Throwback Thursday Facebook, twitter Mondays- I don't give a flying crap- even back to freshman year- I don't give a rat's ass, you know it's all hitting me like a brick in the red nose.' Just like all the holidays I don't freaking care what everyone does, I just sit in my room and pet the Kittie.

Ha! Classic punt! 'I've been having déjà vu all morning, afternoon, evening, and all the freaking time.' I can't stand it anymore- I feel like it not me doing crap anymore- I feel freaked up and sore, for sure, I- myself am rubbed raw and tour, must you- some more- I hear as I pass one of the windows to the cafeteria from the outside, and I say what the freak- That what I just said. I blurt it out yes, yes, yes- I can stop myself. Instantly I feel better I feel like it happened, sure that not what this is, yet it feels good to feel good. 'Let me guess.' Jenny brings one hand to her temples and frowns, pretending to concentrate.

'You're having flashbacks of freaking yourself to the last time Madilyn was this annoying before nine a.m. you're just sick.' They rush too to window from the inside knowing my sexy voice.

'Shut up!' Madilyn said as she leans forward and Oliva grabs her ass as she doses, her arm flies up and grabs her boob, and we all start to laugh. I smile too, relieved to have spoken the words out loud, and maybe, I am not the only freak up girl in this school. It makes sense… I hope so- I hope.

~*~

Hey-yy- I am-m Emallie Emersen, I feel that is time for me to speak, however really I can't as good as the other girls, yet I am still part of the group, you can call me hearing-in-part, or say I have a disability it's okay, I do, I have wires coming out of the back of my neck yet I still an awesome girl to get to know you I do get hell for it, and it's going to take the right boy to fall to me. I don't do the sign-language- crap, more-ever- I miss a lot like this whole thing, I don't hear the music, I see and feel, I don't hear the sounds of the kids next to me, I don't even know what it sounds like to hear water in my ears, I was born this way. Karly just said it was time to say something… 'Hi-a! Everyone.' I don't talk for I don't want anyone to think I am restarted; I am far from that… like really!

Karly, she said, I feel she is a cute-ie, blond hair- with black underneath, her eyes are gray yet with almost a purple cast to them, so odd, so cast it amethyst, 'I have to learn not to talk so fast it all blends together, can you understand me now?' Karly giggles because I sit all day making vagina hands in class and no one gets is that looks like a demand jester, not even the old guy or girls at the front. 'Look at my hearing aid, ain't it nice aren't my wars perr-id-E-e!' I am looking for a boyfriend yet I can't get on at this crappy school, I would love to have love. I feel that I am sweet, yet no guy gets past this little thing about me, 'Like I mean sweet baby Jesus- I have boobs and a vagina too you know.'

'Just because you were- was not born with a gold spoon up your ass, doesn't mean you better than me.' One boy even said- 'He'd thought I would short-circuit and shock his d*ick off, so yeah I am the virgin in the group not wanting to be.'

'Gross- God- Crap!'

'Don't worry, heaters. You'll be fine.'

It's only one reason why I am this way, I'm happy I decided to have sex anyways I see what my girlfriends do and I feel sick about it: I don't see the fun in it anyway, I said yet it would be nice to be more than what I am to everyone, just because I am like this does not mean that I, not a girl. Gratefully, since Madilyn still a virgin it means I won't be the very last one, either.

Sometimes, I feel like out of the five of us I'm always the one tagging along just for the ride not hearing annoying that I should something I feel like I not even wanted by the others other than Karly, just there for the drive. 'I told you it was no big thing yet it is I have heard some talk about Madilyn like a girl- do I have to turn to find love? I hope not I like d*ick too much.

What I am girl-oaky!' One even asked me what would sex sound like to you, my eyebrows neared thinking- hum I would not I can't freaking hear it- when I am soloing. 'My mom thought I was dying once.' I said weirdly- and the boy just walked away- with a little sideward weird smile on his pimple face, like he enjoyed that or something. I was giggling on the inside too, like if you love me why would you care- ass-wipe.

Karly- look at you crater face, makes fun of you and your flawless look at your face, I wish I had that. Jenny said- 'Freak that you'll be freaked, that's all you'll ever get face it.' I don't like this girl she freaked Karly over we were friends before and now we seem to be drifting apart, she just wants to be like that slut, and I don't get it.' It makes me nervous anyway for my 'Girly parts' look different than the other girls, all tucked in and such, not seen anything thing but a slight and the skin of my hood hanging down, it's all pushed together, Jenny called it- 'A full-out hairy coin-slot!' I don't hear what people say- 'I- find with it.'

And that's why yet get a part in it's what guys like, likewise, I am a virgin too maybe just maybe that is why also. Jenny has made me nervous, so I count all the mailboxes as we go by. I wonder if by tomorrow everything will look different to me; I wonder if I'll look different from other people, I hope so. This is what I want out of a boy, to do for me and it's not asking much. I would love to have a boy coming me fully, I mean yes, yes, yes, please I am on my knees asking for this every night that I could be on my knees like my girlfriends, I feel left out and not wanted by anyone. And if you giving hand you want only if you fit the molded, that an asshole boy wants you to fit into. I asked out a cute boy saying please have sex with me at the end of the first date like my girlfriends do, it was not happening at all with him- and why not it should have.

Get over here she gestured, 'No- that is okay.' Why-a not? 'I mean, it's not you… it's me,' he said. I get freaking sick of boys saying that like they get sick me saying- that's okay I have a boyfriend, it's a good cover-up. He said maybe give me some time… Make up your mind now, or it's not going to be. I what I want him to do is shove it in sideways or anyway right now- damn why must I be so damn horny, I jeez- what gives, god it pushing me- not be okay, find me someone- already. 'Um- okay- creepy.' I don't get it; I don't see what I am doing wrong here. I feel that I getting to depart, yet can't they see that I become a senior, and that says something doesn't I am a loser over being this way, yet I did not choose to be. I feel like I am going to be a virgin through college, and most of my life it- I don't get it tonight I have to keep away from the shame.

Just freak me, I said! Done is okay if I don't look, he said- I said sure just do it! I lost all respect for myself yet it's overtime, given by the people in my school.

So, this is it, we get down on the floor he just undoes his pants and that was it, mine her just pulled down some, and my boy-shorts style undies off to the one side, yet it was going to happen I did not care. I can say it over and done, and he can tell all his finds about it the next day- or maybe not… for it's me.

He rips through me, and I scream bloody murder, not even counting down or nothing, 'Just popping it,' as he said. It was so vocal and he said shut up B*TCH! I didn't care… It was Ray so I get it if Karly knows I would be killed, yet I think it was a setup for me really, and that is sweet. She just trying to help and I get that. So not romantic- so not! Not what I wanted at all, like what a girl wants to feel like she is on her period when having sex for the first time. Ray had something down and want to try it out on me- so I was the genie-pig.

It was so vocal on my end, not his. I felt like I was peeing it was gushing out of me, is this pee?

~*~

Ray- I feel her on the bottom, not… no crap- I felt this tight clamping down so tight I could not tell her about how- I could not pull back out… I was liking it… yet could not say, if… anything she was a better feeling to me than any other girls it was just that she was surely above not below.

I hear her sighs and it was all right, she is too hard on herself and I have to be that way to keep what I got going too. I was in- feeling her sweeping feeling the wetness pushing out is he was rushing in; she is sighing long breath-ly and shaken with a tremble. She had such playfulness and bent upward to kiss me, I did and liked it but did not let her feel that I did. If anything, this is the girl for me… or so I was thinking yet it can't be. Yet you're the girl that-a looks hotter to me, yet is not that good, she was not a virgin, how did that happen?

How is she not a virgin… at her age… what is her age… I know it's younger. I know this girl has not been giving handjobs at five, she was all mine, and she did know how to do that either. Freak you- if you think this crap is wrong to say it is what goes on in my school.

~*~

Chapter: 71

You going to miss me

(My story)

Emallie- (Number: E- 019-417491) I feel as if I am not wanted, so I ended it, now I am here as an angel on earth to give my story, just like Karly, I want to save her from herself and the other girls before she can live on, she is in the renovation passé however she doesn't know that. I have nothing about me that is anything different than any other girl, I don't even have wing yet not supposed to show you but, I will make the translon now so you can see, I have fallen downward yet should I have?

Like we all have to, by seeing the light and having some faith in it which Karly does not- she may go to hell for it. I did this so I would not have to feel not wanted by others. Just remember boys out there that it only that's thirty minutes for a girl come, and not three flipp'n hours! Like come on boys are you that dumb, I would know I been doing it all myself since I was ten. As on now she is going down and I never see her again, for you barn all alone, like what I am doing now, can I be safe too… if I was not wrong in what I did, she going to help me or so I feel.

Do not buy into it, not really. Hell- with that, there is no white-sh stuff- coming out when she said she done then she not done, if it's not running down then it not done. And boys do not think you need to last that long the first time, I've seen that with Ray with my own eyes and after

the first take he was fifteen minutes longer, and we both hit the ending at them sometimes, so that has to be right, yet I was wishing that there was more I could feel that there was no need to be gone, I would have been okay with that, freak that crap- there is no need for a boy to feel that way, just so some asshole can make some fast money.

I would love him just the same and if any girl has an issue with cut off your hood and see if you like having it rub your jeans, you not going to feel anything when making love. Or so I think… the girl needs to see what it should be like… not think of its right that way they think it should be, it's made to be thought of that way for that what was made to be right. Kiss and cuddle what happen to that too! I want it!!! I need it!!! I want to feel it!!! CRAP! This was all on Jenny saying- that he needs to have a change made, girl gets over it! It a personal choice, not some girls to make, if you love them you should not care. I lived in one messed up the town! Where I normal and there freaked up! Can't you see it not me? I, not the one that was the one, it was all of them, dude. One family, I got to crap- in my family restraint he in town.

'My mom bought me the abortion pill today to end it so that makes it okay.' I don't think so… that going to hell right there, I'll see if I can get here to do what is right, yet what is right is what she has done… or is it? I asked her- 'What would you do- make the choice what is it going to be.' I get sick of looking at freaked up faces looking at me for no go reason.

'It is all- Bull crap!'

What kind of son of a b*tch are you! You are condensing prick! You're nothing to me or anyone... out of this freaked up the town within this city. 'Hey, you! Look at me mother freaker- ha-ha-hey- you over their mother freaker, in green- look at me- get the freak off my back! Get out of my life, and that goes for you all! Why not just pop another baby on the counter and the have sex right after, you over there with the freaked-up face and ratty hair, clean it up some.'

Ask me to say that you freaked up face and I will, you better run. Just like you in school seven to one, gain-banging someone like me, you need to run, you don't know what I have to outdo that number now. This is just me finally speaking my mind- its time is it not any you going to lesson to like it or not, 'I have the floor.' I get sick of little girls whispering in other girls saying crap about me that I cannot hear.

So- you want to stare at me, okay- yet I am getting pissed. I am happy- always- I was and you don't want to see that. Yet smelling look simple, or so they all say and who are they! I am

not sad, I am not accounting weirdly, I- am just being me, so think what you want! I don't care… what you say, leave me alone. I want to get along with everyone. So why did everyone stop it? 'I don't care anymore.'

Hashtag- (Out of tune, out of touch, out of chastity)

~*~

Chapter: 72

When I am gone

Karly- I think back on it my great x4 Grandmother Hope went to school on black and wood 1919 Ford Model T Ford, I don't get that, there were not even windows in the piece of crap. And then I can get my car. My dad was telling me this unbelievable story. About this old car like a red 28 ford coup or so he thought.

My dad was showing me the roof form it, somewhere down the line someone thought it was okay to cut up this cute little car just to be a d*ick about it, it must have been my great x4 granddad baby that someone was jealous of, saying he wanted to pass it down yet never to Neveah, so he junked it out for parts, and that explains why someone wanted the rooftop. Maybe someone thought it was going to go to her and the sisters' family cut it up, really- I think that is how I got these parts.

Emallie- I feel that my little nine-year-old sisters are in her room I as school, however since that day she's never once stepped foot in my room. It's a bummer she more freaked up than me in some ways is it not? Like- since she never surprises me by fixing up my sheets anymore, she leaves all that should be folded laundry or a new sundress on my bed like she did when I was in middle school, yet all messy and crap, but at least I know she's not rooting through my drawers while I'm at school, looking for my sex toys or thongs. 'If you want to come out here, why do you drag me?

I'll get the thermometer, and crap and say I sick,' she says, she is- very- hyperactive, and more! She needs to be on Methylphenidate or (Ritalin) as they call it. She on something that I don't like yet that what they say is needed. Her name is Judcël. Yet we just call her Judie, she hates that just say I am the boy she said, she not yet she might want to be on this crap. 'I don't think I have a temperature.' There's a yell kicking and screaming my mom hitting my mom in

the face, pushed in the wall and punched of is how I lost my hearing that to this little brat… I was fine until she was impetus out of my mother. She should have had a d*ick it would have been a lot easier, than putting up with this… and get this mom is single, and on her own now with her.

I think sex before marriage is not a sin. I think the big deal should be about SEX BEFORE LOVE. If you have been with somebody for a long time and you can easily see yourself growing old with them, getting married, maybe having children, then sure, I think it would be fine to make love. Sex is a natural desire found in all animals. Why should we deny Mother Nature's ways? (Of course, I respect all religions and beliefs, and I mean no offense if you believe in abstinence until marriage.) Well... uh, for one thing, you can get diseases. And then if you're not married before having sex, what's keeping the guy from leaving you? Nothing... He'll use you then leave. I think it's pretty dumb that you think it's no big deal...

~*~

#- Hashtag: (Rubbing too hard, and a hard way to die, and dying feels good)

Karly- I swear to God, I hear them kissing Ray and my sister or her. Not little bird pecks either. Open-mouthed, slurping, moaning, and groaning kind of sucking maybe some freaking-kissing. O-oh, crap'n-piss!!! I have to bite my hand off to keep from screaming, or crying, or bursting out laughing, or getting sick or crap myself-or all of the above. A girl in my class named Stephaney Lizarick died for having too much sex, she did like over two hundred times and could not help but coming over and over, and it killed her, what a way to go, I would have loved to die that way to yet not alone as she did. Death is fun, for that want to die, dying is living when you want to live, and lie. Here's Jenny's big secret: she was the one that said she could do this. She did think there was a such-of-a thing and there is not.

Death on the bed, feeling it in my head, things that have been said, things that can be read, all those that have fled, turning it all to black and blue, and feeling the red, what was shed, what led me to feel this way, what would you say?

Life is not worth living, when crying overdyeing, when flying over yourself to see what was never there all up in the air, is all far, to stare at the one that does not care. What should I give and what should I take, what should I forsake, to life to live a life that some won't take away from me, don't you see?

What will it be, just you and me… can it be? What does it need to be? What is free, what is right, if we spend the night, if it's not you and me? I want to sit with you under the angel oak tree, on a branch looking down, we don't care if they all frown, in this town, and they don't need to make a sound, there beneath us on the ground.

Kiss me now, why not just do this, at last, the life of mine is going too fast, it's like gunfire going through my head, everyone wishes we were both dead. What more could be said, I think you get what I mean; about them, all being so mean.

Chapter: 73

You're going to miss me when- I am gone…

Karly- 'Don't be all nice to face- like on the inside… I'll be saying suck on my lady d*ick!!!'

Ellody- Jenny is my little freaked up sister, yet I freaking love this crap, she going with me this weekend to go with us to this party, when I came back for a visit I go to IUP it's my freshman year, and she is partying her ass off, she's awful student yet awesome partyer, yet that all it's about when you go to college than what I have been saying all along. She wants to be like me so much and that cute, yet be who you are not me. -snapping at everybody in half for fun getting crap, that what it's all about in college, getting in the ass or puss. Yeah, I eighteen yet, so what she could freak a guy to my age. It is their freaking choices.

I making fun of Maddie and Liv for having weird food issues yet my sister does more, it's what I do, I said it was okay, yet not too much. I love picking on these little girls, like- making fun of Olive for being such a lush and a pushover and Bi, they try to making fun of me… yet there are never going to be a good as I, for always being the last to do things first and longer, and that goes for FREAKing too. I the best b*tch! I got freak when I was seven, I was in elementary school- still, so I have one on all of them, it may have been before… It was a long time ago and many freakers before. Shut your freaking face if you think I say freak too much, this is me, ass hole.

Emallie- Maddie, Olivia and I knew something must have happened in New York, the time we went on a trip altogether, but Jenny wouldn't tell us when we asked her, and we didn't push it.

You don't push things with those two, I knew they both got it and she was young. I think it freaked her up and make her hate herself, she was like freaking five, who does that to their sister and thinks it's funny?

Jenny was always after some boy to feel whole. It's so monotonous… what she does now, like she learned of her, then one night toward the end of the school year, she went all the way in front of us and everyone, and so did Karly, she made her- I bet you no… this.

All she does is like just lay there and say just freak me, that how she feels, they all do, yet that what they were made to think it was learned like: spelling, or reading or arithmetic, you do what you want, all the same, that's on your teacher too.

Now we were all at Olive garden, this crappy pizza type of restaurant one town over where they do not a card if you want something like water down strawberry foo-foo drink. Or having margaritas and waiting for our dinners to come. Jenny was not really eating, she was yacking it up in the bathroom, so why eat again.

She had not been eating since returning to her sister maybe she cannot because, that makes her nervous you know being around her, being something, she is not. She would not touch the permitted chips, saying she wasn't hungry, and instead, she kept dipping a finger into the salt and another dip, and saying that good enough. I just like one word can set a girl of- like PMS-ing- or in Jenny's case FOOD, or reading, and spelling! She knows nothing but making a guy come, and girls too, yet that not talked about either. And those sweet girls two might just be Bi, and not messed up completely like she is, I think… she is the one taking them all to hell. I would know, I am holding their sets, for them, if you will.

Karly- I was rimming her margarita glass and eating and eating crystals with the other one, that Jenny gives me. 'I think not!' Said- Olivia. 'P*ssy!' She said. I don't want to die yet, I am only sixteen, I have a lot to see and do, and you don't get that. I don't recollect what we were talking about, but all of a sudden Jenny blurted out, 'I had sex sixty times today, soloing and twenty times with different boys.' Just like that… was it true or was it the drug's talking… we don't know? Why is she doing this to herself? Oliva asked within, I was questioning her morals… We all stared at her in stillness, and she leaned forward and told us in a breathless moment, that she was only eighty-five pounds now… and shedding like a dog. Olivia thought to herself that's not that unrealistic, I have soloed twenty times, in one sitting. 'Is that your two

front teeth, she bit into a breadstick, I said then adding in- 'Do you have baby teeth?' Jenny was freaking out it was the two in the front both went at last you know the one that everyone could see, she looked like on missed up farmer.

(Going back)

They'd had sex on her sister's California king long bed with Jenny fading in and out, and the guy was so-o uncomfortable, to say the least, she not doing anything really at this point- I think she going to die, there nothing left of her, I said- way back when; like seven or so weeks ago.

(Present time)

'It was only, like, two minutes ago or so it felt I was saying just that,' she said at the end, and I knew then she was shaking it off, that she is walking death.

She is having her midlife creases at seventeen, I swear that what this is… She is not even shaving her underarms anymore, God what do the others look like. Things we'll never talk about, yet this is getting scary to me, I am a friend after all.

(Seven weeks back)

I have lived this more then I want nor need too, and this time It's was in my hands… what will people think happened to me, that I went down with the bridge or was twisted around the tree, what do you see?

Karly- I am taking back in some ways, far off in the corner of her mind, everything it so blared yet so clear to me of what going on, I feel like I can do anything like- jump off a bridge, and fly and feel my wings, which I never- ever have. Or will I…? Ha- I may have them I need to find out, I ran from inside there and found the yellow overpass, and fowl over everything and everyone, with gray wings, it was a night sky, all the light made me glow even more, to the dying world below.

I want to fly to him or her or someone that loves me to get that those white one that I should have I see it all now, or so I think I do; yet will I remember when, I wake up in my bed undead, like all the days before. I killed myself- it's what they all see… I see the three rivers run through me now over my head, yet that is fine, I will- drowned- that's fine- to stop all this… I cannot take what I am doing or see any longer.

I kissed a girl said Jenny, we all just about crap ourselves. I want to go home and sleep this off, said Madalyn was also known as Maddie, wanted you to come home with me, Olivia was also known as Liv, but I- she would not let us or for we all running after crazy Karly that is all freaked up in the head these days. She's going to do it- she's going to do it this time.

Right before the real came, she flows out the door crying. She was freaking out waving her hands like a girl on drugs! Jenny was hugely relieved after telling us- 'She not going to go over, tee-he-ing- Saying 'Chick-en sh-it, freaking- do it.'

And that is when she did, toes hangover she put her left foot out and took the first step down to the water below.

No- the rest of us said to see her fall for what seems like a lifetime plunging to ice-cold death. There was a rescue, up till now she was dead when she smacked her head on the side of the bridge and freaked up her little cute nose, don't you see here her laying out. No one came to this… said thing… that, I don't want to see yet that is life, you have too; it was just us two, we were are it- Maddie and Liv.

Her dad just gave up after the rack, saying 'my baby life is over.'

The little girl…?

The sister, move out with the boy toy, and the mother moved on with some other poor bestirred. The dad just walked out of all their lives and started over the best he could, yet he loves was Karly. She was his baby girl- And Jenny even made fun of that to.

All though she swore to us there was never- ever a pain of death, to her, it was absolute secret- it's the quiet ones you have to look out for- we would see her whole mood changed instantly like she was in a dream as she called it.

#- Hashtag: (Free falling out into nothing, open-air, legs, and arm looked in the lovers hold that lover with-in, saying no.)

Karly- this was not all in my mind!!!

The cards were not- laid out for me to see.

Chapter: 74

You and I

(Going back in time)

Marcel- I remember when Karly was a pretty freshman with heavy eyeliner, and moody-ness, yet fun, have big headphones around her neck all the time, black nail polish or French nails like all the time. I remember before she did all the d*ick-licks in high school. She said she was not much of a singer, yet would you look at this- old video I have, she sings her music here that she worth all by herself, and made her on the album, Yet Jenny said it freaking sucked so she killed it and her voices my making her try and outdo her with the rasp, doing this is something she should not Jenny- 'Like- voice didn't sound- Aguilera at all.' Explain your poor-performance, you b*tch- I say. I know this girl is going to b*tch-slap me so hard you have no idea for this. I think this while walking past the football field seeing all the dumb ass hole though sit that cannot catch, it's like holding their balls…

FOOTBALL GUY's- Hey, resound vagina! They said to Karly- she is getting picked on for being with me. Their asses are- just sore for I am not freaking them… I would love to be with you.

Marcel- Little did she know she always was, on and off, when she could be. She had to do what she did for her friends, showing off to be cool, and I am okay with that, I got her in the end, yet they say how does it feel eating out my d*ick, and all of our leftovers.

Though I've tried before to tell her, of the feelings I have for her in my heart.

Every time that I come near her, I just lose my nerve, as I've done from the start. Every little thing she does is magic. Everything she does just turns me on. Even though my life before was tragic, now I know my love for her goes on… Do I have to tell the story, of a thousand rainy days since we first met? I resolve to call her up a thousand times a day and ask her if she'll marry me in some old-fashioned way but my silent fears have gripped me, long before I reach the phone, long before my tongue has tripped me… Must I always be alone?

(Remembrance- of who I was-)

I could have cried- I am not like that at all.

Karly- They suck baby d*ick don't lesson to it! I say- as we walk past holding eyes were on us ever looked insufferable to our joy, they though a football at my face, 'Oh my- nose! 'Throw the ball back now baby rapper!' 'I can't she was all award with her left hand up to her

mouth. I don't get it you a slut if you don't give it all away, and a loser, snob, and wannabe if you don't! And they think you're either gay, or sucking girls' asses, or do yourself and they rub your nose in that too.

Karly- I stopped wearing my glasses to after that day, when Jess Smith walked up and ripped them off my face and broke them in half, and poked me in the boob hard. I miss them, what wrong with glasses, they make you look sophisticated. Why was I so quiet and laid back, and a pushover? Marcel- She runs like everything for the bathroom, like always- not making it very far.

She feels like some poor little girl, with a broken nose, and I remember when that happened. That is when I felt like she was in love with me she took the balls to the face for me. 'I thought you like balls in your face one boy said.' You tripped and falls to the ground, hard, and I picked you up and carried you to safety, and we fall in love, even more, kissing under the bleachers. 'You're a weirdo,' and the kiss was long and – fearing H-O-T! Like, kick your tongue out smoking hot!

It's still not as bad as the time my face was smashed it to a brick wall, by some back boy- and I have to have something done about it, like getting my nose redone, yet I blamed it on my dad.

Jenny- Sing the same girl-ie crap every year, you'll blow chunks all over the place, which never happened, that's why she stopped sing way back when. You can see here doing it on YouTube! Like- It happened!

Jenny says every time some brings it up.

Until some unicycles guy flies into the frame where nothing freaking speedo- showing his tor·pe·do with the American flag up his ass! I don't know if that is patriotic or what the hell that is… I am not sure what to look at. What can you say other than- 'Ew-ah- gross…? Who does that…?'

Marcel- It kind of reunions the magic does it…? I said.

Karly- Yep!

I am glad I cannot see all that anyway!

I am sure yours is better anyway.

(She goes underneath his underwear down for it getting a handful, and does what she feels is right in front of them all. It was more romantic then you would think pervs.) I did it for me and him, I did not give a crap; if they liked it or not… they can all look the other way. I have- a leaning popping lag kisses, and he rubbed his nose on mine saying it- I LOVE YOU! You'll be fine… I'll make sure of that.

Karly- Back it time: We rain from the schoolyard, to my house… stole my dad's Nash and got married. My stepmother casing us down, with a bible in her hand saying where sinners.

Both- We're sinner okay then- we all are- yet love is love even if age is in the way.

Marcel- the very next day, it was all over. Say what you want to say… I know why- how- and who.

It's all good, I know she still loves me… deep down, even if it's hard to remember, and hard to forget, she knows overall.

Marcel- Like with Jenny- Her parents just never- ever took her out of the shrink wrap, she still has the condom on her head, and that explains the brain damage, and why she can't sing a note.

(All at the same time)

Stacey- 'Gett'n- it…'

Becca- 'Yep.'

Stacey- 'Yep!'

Becca- 'Yep…'

Stacey- 'She has no- Undies…?'

Karly- 'Um- she said- when the pants came down.'

Stacey- 'Umm-hum- Marcel and Karly!'

Becca- 'They want some of that.'

Stacey- 'Yes they do!'

Becca- 'Um-hum…'

Stacey- 'You know it.'

Chloe- 'Who is easiest to sleep with? Ray or Marcel?'

Stacey- 'Marcel, her ass is his!'

Becca- 'How would you know?'

Amie- 'He's only been with her, Like- like- it's all over his face that she was it.'

Stacey- Nut-nah! It can't be that he was it too just look at that.

Chloe- 'Holy-Freak- like- crap- um-damn. This ginger needs a drink, God hoses them down… my blood God… Oh, my… Just roll in the grass why don't yah!'

'You want to make out?' Stacey said to Chloe, and then Becca said- I feel left out like always.

Chapter: 75

Schools

You can see the old school sitting next to our new school; the sign is not even there anymore it's nameless. The one door off to the side is off the hinges, all old heavy wood.

There is a small of death, or crap coming from the inside, yet you can small form far away, why to tear it down, it's falling on its own or so they say why to spend money on it. Look at the old playground swings swaying as the wind knockbacks, the siding boards rusting and off to the one side.

The teeter-totter some up some down some snapped in half, non-rideable the ground full of weeds and tall yellowing grass, in the air… I can hear the faint sounds of young girls laugh, and whisper come inside and play. I know she not that young, yet if she wants me to play I will, I don't see why not, I left my child-sh days behind, so maybe I should.

I this is the old Oak View school, or so they say- but it's where I see the face of a little girl, like looking back at me all ghostly and crap. They say her name is Lily Anderson, I heard the freaked-up story of the girl fallen to her death and crap… we all have, my did pounds it into

my little head or he says, I will always be his baby, saying I act like one doing what these girls want me to do.

So-ooo one day at dusk, I have a flashlight that was on the blink, so freak- it was not working for crap, yet it was something, I was load in I swear I don't think my feet took me where I need to go, I feel someone was doing the walking for me.

~*~

(Is the blame on me…? I have been here lots of times looking around.)

-Who gets the blame for this?

-It's all going back to the hex of the four sisters, -I feel- that got her- I could feel it too-

-It was not me, yet I was with her all the way-

-I saw it too-

-I don't get it either-

-How do I explain this one without being crazy-

-I can't tell anyone; they wouldn't believe it-

-It's that unbelievable-

I Karly- want into the abandoned building, to see if this was true.

Like I was walking up to this old abandoned staircase, where every other step was missing holding my hand shaking on top of the one servicing rail, the top of the tree somewhat next to me. The old tree is what shut the school down, after a big rainstorm, and two girl's deaths. She was there out of nowhere, looking- see- feeling me. She went through me, like a knife, yet it was- worm.

She is now holding my hands to her like she was my girlfriend. Saying you look just like her! Her voice was a whisper, but yet strong adequate in an eerie way, she leads me to the window that was never fixed gusting in cold air, it was icy looking, and wispy, blowing back my hair, she said- yes- so like her… in every way, I love that! Creepy- I thought…? -Like- who is this girl she speaks of?

The got louder to me, and her voice softer, and more- lovely, I felt like I was falling for her, yet how…? You never changed, did you? What- I asked… she thought I was someone else at this point, time move on. She was in a flashback I think… yet I don't get it for I have those too.

(Questions- for the radiant girl)

'Why did you do it yourself?'

'Why?'

'Why- would you let them do this?'

Why are you doing it, and not facing you bullies, like I said you should or could even now.'

(It was passed on, yet did she know?)

If you bully would have for you.

(The school outside to in)

Look at this place, it's falling, now look around; Karly it's all still- the- same isn't it? Sure- I say, thinking she might go away, no- she gets closer to me and hugs me and long kisses me on the lips.

She said- I must be here all alone like always, where are you now?

'Home' I said- like what kind of question is that?

I am here for I have to be my soul is not at rest.

I said… 'Cool- what-ever- rock on which-a bad-self.'

The wood floor is- so splintery on my flip-flops like nails are sticking up, poking me and crap, the boards are all cracked and you can see down one story, or more at times. Besides, some floorboards are missing altogether; I feel like I could go through the floor at any time.

(Room 202)

There is no light coming anywhere but her light she is giving off, looking over everything in its interiority, I see that there are boards over the old glass smashed glass window panes; not even the smallest glimmer or flicker of a star or moonlight at this point to guide me, nothing to

show the way other than spun web cover over everything, even the hole that should not be cover seemed roached out, look at all the spiders crawling all down me, I don't go in there I was thinking. I went at night so no one would find me. Look even going down the hall the lockers start bang themselves like humpers of the past. I could see kissing here doing that too. Like I could see it all in my mind too, like they all did when the kids slammed their looker in these unhallowed halls, look now there are papers everywhere, just left behind like love notes of the past, I want to read yet it has nothing there to be said, I could get some of it, yet not all… I don't have anything wrong with me, I can't see, should I take it with me?

I do-

(It was tucked in her underwire right strap, her outfit when cut off to be laid out for viewing.)

-It was Nevaeh and Chiaz's first love note.

(Now)

You can foresee what going to happen… can't you- I sure did not in the past nor do I know, yet I do at times. It's a new day, she sat back- crap let's do it a new way today- damn ('Like- I want to choke down my rabbit,') it works for me its good to get that right, or so Jenny said. Yet I was feeling more than that below, and so was she, in my mouth. 'If you are going through hell keep on going don't slow down, if you scared don't show it…!' My love was singing to be will donning this, yet you can't hear that and if you do, you'll hear Maggie coming out.

(Back at the old school)

The hollowing sound of her voices in my face, it blows' a-crossed me and spooks me out, it is so haunted within these falling walls, yet see is not scaring me at this point, I feel somewhat safe. As well as the wind howling as my thought makes, makes me think of who she maybe thinks' I am. I see the hand covered, handrails going up past the old Gym and girl's locker room, looking into the showers it's like- I could see bare ass naked girls, and the steam in the air. With the sounds of: 'O-op-e-s-y- don't drop the soap!' All along with the sounds of girls giggling, hell- I don't want to know what's going on. Water running, just guessing like them… I had the bad thoughts and photos running in my little-wicked mind.

Like the sands of time… not fading all away or turning all too black and write. Up till now the water and sound or the girls are from the past, or so I think and have been long gone away, for them to be real girls, it was abandoned for years, like what is this crap…?

Like the snapping of a towel, my head spun around, as the little girl pulled me to the next room by her resenting glow, In the locker part of the room- I see all the old desked linked together, she's sitting there proverb her story to me, her hair brads are freaking cute to me; like no girl does that anymore. Yet who are these girls, I think- I know, yet they don't, see me. They don't even think I see them all up in it. I heard these stories and believe it yet; I don't believe it seeing it now unfolding in front of me. There is some random b*tch putting the redhead face in the capper, with the sound of the flush! I am good she said.

They all don't even believe in this dumb ghost story, or so the girl that feels to death, the kids say that I go with; her noting her but legion and myth. I think about all the haunted love in this ghostly building, hell yeah, I do… that what it's all about. I see the light coming towards me, and then I start to come off my feet into it, weird- into the old library, there is no floor holding me you can see the swimmers in the pool below, just like the auditorium is over there off to the one side.

The shaves are floating too, everything is, there are ghostly-like boards there translucent I am not standing at all my feet are hanging down, floating on nothingness, not even my toes are touching as I seem as if I am sixty feet in the air or more, my arms crossed not wanting to look down, yet I have too.

('Angels Fall' playing in the background)

I see it, I see, I see, the big window at the front see to suck me into it, getting bigger and bigger. I float past all the books that have been forgotten, like the kids of the past must have done also.

Oh- so long ago… The dace like to me in my eyesight and that would be all right if I was crapping myself by it, it cool, yet creepy; they twinkle with wonder as if they want me to know something that lies inside. Like a scrapbook, with a photo of my fall and open up or something, like that. And it did, yet it was not my life that I saw this time it was everyone in my past that I never knew, mom, dad, and going back, it's a slideshow ruining in reverse.

That is when she opened her wing spend to me and said- 'Don't give up without a fight!'

All right- I said.

'This is what you give up to them' -She said, (As she is standing in front of me with phenomenon!)

I got to the end and saw me passing and did believe it.

'So… go-o…'

'Run!'

'Or they will kill- YOU!'

'Like they did me.'

(I didn't believe it, ha- what was she- like just some dream to me, if you will. It was not something I believed in at all like up or down, I want to say here in-between. I too young to think about death. It's never-ever on my mind, only when some old dude kicks it, yet who gives a crap, they have nothing to say anyway.

(Nevertheless, they do, open your mind to wander and you'll see it all. Muddy thinking leaves to muddy water when they piss on you for being a- well- d*ick.)

Yet I saw it all, it is my memory of the last days leading up to the end, and I feel too their scheme. She all wrote to me and see though, she was glissading in her floating gaze, blue eyes peering into mine, she hands something to say, yet I walked away back away from the light that light my way, I tripped into the darkness in the creeped-out hallways. Everything I touch- I drop, like my cell phone, I left behind: I have- well- Dropasea! I walk now, as I descend back to my feet, I feel my body and the weight on my feet now.

I saw it all, it is my memory of the last days leading up to the end, and I feel too their scheme. She was floating all in white in front of me, note haunting- but almost angelic, and see-through, she was glissading I was looking too hard in a gaze, her blue peering into mine, she hands something to say, yet I walked away, backing away from the light, all the way back even if it lights my way, I tripped into the darkness in the creeped-out hallways, falling to them all the next day. Into the darkness I shall creep, now on my feet, I feel as if I am slithering like a snake, looking for the pathway out of the underworld. The pool went from little kids have fun giggling and swimming to little kids burning naked in what seems to be a lake of fire, black wing spread.

As they ruined up and into my face and swirled around sucking the life, or so it seemed, to me, as I feel I was blacking out, by their pulling on my body and lips. I never believed in Devilish entities until then with that thing sucked my face off, with the kiss of death to get it live to demonize onward. Loin- like up till now with horns that slowly started to feel like they were ripping through my soul if there is a such-of-a thing. With a long hollow, I feel me feeling it, go in hard then it did the first time I got freak in the p*ssy. I was hugged in a well-founded way, and they were all welcoming home, staying it fun here- (Yet- is- it?) I felt her hand all over my goodies, seeing if I cut the teen group, or that what she feeds me. I was getting bit up with the lies.

(I did get it- do you?) Then she held my face, like the boy I am love with and she drops away fast, then everything was back as it was before, just some old school, I was walking through. She said- 'I love you-you can be mine, like my girlfriend down here.' I was looking at the tat- it was Bacca or (B- 1441- 669 5033) I feel the of thorns, I see the flames in the eyes it makes me feel warm inside, when I am cold all the time, I feel the rubbing on me and I don't mind it now she has a spell on me that is tempting and lusting, and oh so sexy. Why I would go looking for someone I know wants to slay me, I thought so I never- ever want to go back for that phone, I was being a wimp and wasn't planning on going the back anyways.

#- Hashtag: (I want to read this, I need to see this, this is going by too fast, don't get it)

~*~

Anyway's, like they put this crown-ie thing-ie, on me- and crap. It's in my head now on mine even if you can see it, I always feel the blood dripping down my pretty face, yet I feel okay with this, I am not sure if it was a girl the face was not really there, and hitherto it was moving through mine in a howling scream when she did it. I mean look at me I have a rock-ish each to me that my girl hate, yet I find cute still, I not going to change everything, or did I? I have on blue and white sneakers, I have somewhat messy hair all the time: Jenny calls it sex hair, like hers in nice all belched out with the black roots showing, and her eyebrows in plucked, like all that crap, needs to match too.

What's wrong with wearing a baggie boy type top and having a bra strap showing, so what, hell I just take the bra off and were a flannel red and blue boy style button-down with a few buttons at the top open just to give the guys some to look at other them my brown eyes, you-

know. Jenny like her easy accesses skirts and make all feel we need to do the same, I don't- so much, not me, yet I feel it- it is not that hard to push them down some like you get that if you don't have anything on underneath it all the same- right? It's just as fast! I like I have a habit of touching my hair and looping it back behind my ear, quietly, I also talk with my hands and move from side to side or so they say, like now I have skenn-ie black dress-ie pants on, see- ain't they cute. I have long fingers also, that Jenny said- 'I might stab my brain out with when I- am-a picking a booger.'

Groooooossssseeeee!

This top is all checkered, I have a bandanna tied around my wrist, and ring on a chain, that is his, I stole it. Yet he's okay with it or so- I think so… I twist my mouth outwards like I am going to kiss, think it's okay. This T- is pink- gray- and dark blue, it just too-o CUTE! Don't tell um- I said that, do feel that I can be shy at time…? I do… I always kind of was… I think about all the stupid crap I do and get red-faced, like what I did today, crazZzie, I no better, I want to shut them all up.

Like I've shown all that down there- OMG! I don't sleep with all those boys' you-NO, I just cuddle up. I say more than I do- all girls do.

~*~

(Flashback to her)

I saw it all, it is my memory, in the last days leading up to the end; and I feel too their scheme. She was floating all in white in front of me, note haunting- but almost angelic, and see-through, she was glissading I was looking too hard in a gaze, her blue eyes peering into mine, she hands something to say, yet I walked away, backing away from the light, all the way back even if it lights my way, I tripped into the darkness in the creeped-out hallways, falling to them all the next day.

Not all the windows are completely covered over some have the old cracked glass hang in there rattling and hollowing, like the scream of this girl as I was walking away, I ran, she was right there behind me, and then in front- so fast, I could not turn to run fast enough.

The doors of the rooms started to bang as they would open and close all by themselves, the light they come on and off in dissimilar places at different times, and started to flicker, the

bullies were walking to me from the end of the hall they're coming after this girl I know as Lily, so they can rap, as she said in this long cold, twisted, painful long ass story of her day in the haunted halls.

So, she screamed in my ear for help. 'I will never be fast enough' she said, as she gripped me and took me to her hiding spout the old and falling in the bathroom. A flicker of light over my head like a light glowing evil, I saw all the faces she did, way back when, looking at her with murder and sodomy in their minds, shining through their inflamed eyes, like squalling catcalling at her, there were going to tear her apart, and that what they did to her every time they could, in the past and every time they could get their hands on her. It was the four sisters- and they want someone to take it all down, or take me down, and they had their eyes on me, they- said- they would get me if I got away, I said that will be the day.

(They got me in the ass, and in the vag., you can say they got all of me.) I ran having like a whole within me with a fire hell pouring out from down below, as I feel down to the lower overall the riff stars, I knew I should not have walled up in here, I would have never run- into them... or so she said. I ran out the doors that just seem to blow open in a whoosh, I looked back and saw her looking out the only window that was not covered up on the second floor. She said I see you soon, Karly- I am there for you. I did get it... I crap myself! And peed too, I would not say that to the girl but I did. I knew I had to go back and spend the night on Saturday with them to see what this was all about, and they did, the next day, and let them see the threaded story and that girl. (Funny she said she had my back.)

Someone from every year is drawn into it... This time I guess it was me, it's something that pulls at you if you don't believe in it. Look at it it's leaning and bricks are falling out, yet I love it- I faking love this old pace of crap, I just never- felt I should go inside, for this reason. It was calling out to me for years! Like the girl's haunting voice. The school was here back when the town was nothing but and run-down ghostly town, now it's a big city, the old school is doffed next to Clit. All the old trees are stumps, and the routs show, like bitter withered arms pulling at your feet, and there is one that is dead, way overhead that has fallen to the grasses of the doorway.

Chapter: 76

Sliding down

We cut loose, and when to the old abandoned track in the sky, it not all there anymore, yet it a cool spot up in the air where the wind blow and you feel as if you are flying. I love having my hair whooshing backward, as I look over the edge. I want to hold his hand and look down feel the ninety-five mile-per-hour wind rushing around me. I want it was our first hook spot ever, and I was like nine ten he was like.

I keep this my dirty little secret for years, he was my true first, yet it was not the most romantic yet it was something, now looking back now how is the loser, it did it long before, yet it was with him so it was not cool, I never- ever said this to anyone, that he took me. Yet play around like that with a boy that was me, he wanted to know so I said okay. It was the first time seeing all that- you know, at least mine was real, and not like time two at a party.

This thing is up so high- I get sick of feeling so short at like four-foot, on top this I can see the world by looking down, and they are looking up at me, my mom and grandmother where all the same size also, if not shorter, or so they say.

The car is old and dusty and looks like no one has been in it for years on the outside, it just blacked and crusty, the only car other than the coal car behind the locomotive, and it too is rusted red-ish orange. The used to have tripped over this thing and park it on the bridge, and you spent the night up in the stars, and so that is what we did on a big full moon night. In the big bed looking out the one side of all those old windows.

The car and train sit here for there was a fire or something on that line, and this becomes the new home of the serving remanences about half a mile in, the train was going over and was near the end on the one said when the wind took it all down, and all the cars but one fall all the many feet to the ground below, yet it never steamed over again. There sits the old Pullman car it's red and has a black, with yellow writing on it, up till now I am not sure what it says. It was a custom car made just for spending the night on top of the linked- mountains the train is all the same color for what I can make out, dating around 1800's or so, that what my dad said anyway we and he was up here, oh so long ago. We both walked up to her me on the left tack him on the right hand-woven tight.

The grass tall the track worn, and feet sore, from the journey there. Over smaller yet high crossings that have known side rails. Inside you can see it is in touch, and all dark wood, I light one of the old lanterns, I though down a towel, and we had juice pouches and P-P and J.

Romantic- No! It's all good, he tried. It wasn't about that anyway.

The bed is off to the back and looks like a five-star hotel room to us, there is a living room spot, where ass naked in the big old sofas… or next to it, we were playing house, and loving it. We were young but we feel- we did on the bed all night long. Looking out over… see the tree sway below. it was cold in the car, yet he keeps me warm, I was fogging up the windows, with my breath Moan it out in a sweet- yet sensual way, I was pressed upon it looking out as I was on top, he was looking up at me, yet I was looking out and at his eyes, at definite times.

I even kissed the glass to live something behind, I wonder if it's still there, and my name covered in the old wood, next to his.

It was like I could hear the bell of the past, from the engine in front. He hands his nose in girl-lie-ness, and he said it smelt sweet, along with the test. You have to give to get it back I thought to be a virgin at the time.

So, I took what he was going to give too, we're just playing, yet it must have been young love, that I feel too. I would say the inside of this car is all Earth tones, soft, the top of the roof all white, and crap.

Damn, there is even a crapper in here, and I used it. Just take a dump onto the tacks. Just take a whiff of that one… I am so-o romantic when I want to be. (Her lip went up, and off to the side.) I saw a shooting star and made the wish to never be lonely, I guess that came true, I should have wished to be with him forever, instead- and never- ever let go. There was a plan that was lower than us up on this thing as we were rocking and a-roll'n.

(Art deco style)

I know that Marcel, wants to be all nice about it us doing this more in his bed or wherever we can, yet we can for we have to take what we can get, like us- being together and all, you know all joined up, it just not happening the way it should. I want to make love more, and feel his love, all the love not just the sex, yet I want- want that also.

However, a girl wants these days is to be satisfied, and not so much hold off-sh, I want candy and flowers, sure but have sex me, Jez-us! So just do me- and he did last night, I know this time, I had to find out- it's a girl thing you know- I think it was the only time too, oh not the only

time, only with him. I was afraid that the car would start rucking to much that it would go of the beige and roll down the tracks, where it was ripped off so many years ago.

Get this the bridge was built for one US dollar in like three weeks in the year 1882. The mean of this goes ten cents a week. So they went on the stick and got less crap then that or so I have heard, that may be why it was weaker on that side too, it was done faster, 'Like this one gets me- why would you take out old rivets that are plated in, and put in bolts with thinner plates said my dad, when what was there was stronger they why it was for over a hundred three years.

'It was- too kill-lll- it.' he said 'For it was too freaking high up in the middle. I would know I am an engineer, I said- 'leave it, just go with a lighter train at it would be fine even know if it was rebuilt.

Freak- just re-rivet the thing not a nut and built! Threads give and brake more, or work so there not tight enough to hold strong, and get more brittle then what was there. PA pisses me off for FREAKING with it!'

My dad never says the F-word, in front of me, unless it to my b*tch of a mother. This is how I knew about this place, and how he did, from the historical crap'n thing-ie. My dad worked on the yellow bridge that I went down on, as the Gateway Clipper Cruise would go under, I have been on that thing like seven times, fun crap. I am sure my mom and dad were too; I was on it with Marcel too yet we were going as fiends of so they all thought. I could go to a Steelers game yet freak that too, sports do nothing for me, or my friends, yet Jenny finds a way to get in and be with someone. She was even in the glassed-out part with a man. Money talks for her- not me.

Back in the car, we had the time of our lives… and this is how it went.

Um- Just aw-ha- like- push me up agent you- um-hum.

Aw-wah- standing- sliding, thrusting- pushing- in- out and up and down.

Until the end- never feel as it is going to come.

Not stopping until it goes off… NO!

YES!

-Breath- 'Ahaw'

He was sitting in a puddle of mine, which went a-crossed the room. Going off, at a point together, then started to slide down, with me sliding down the wall with his; penis in my vagina.

In the sitting position, all pushed and back out not to fast not too slow, I could feel it in and go down on his, at this point, I am just SCREAM-ING his name!

YES!

Yet- I am a lady-

I don't give two crap who hears us now!

That was extraordinary!!! -I yelped! Yes, yes it was he said, out of breath

OH my God and I don't say that!

#- Hashtag: (Good ending, elated endings, and feelings strong)

Chapter: 77

Suck it

I want to freaking kill- a teacher at this point, or someone at my school, I feel like I never have a career. So this one of these days, I watched a porno at a high school while the teacher was looking and saying nothing anyways, the music was okay, (Bon-ka wanna- bon ka) I had it blasting out for us all to hear, yet it was only supposed to me, as I have on my big ASS headphones, I did get why everyone was looking simple at me, until the teacher- was in my face look on the screen patting me on the head, like my dad. 'So, you're big into sax solo-ing I see.' Yes, do you want to see me do her on the desk, it the same as what they made me look at in PE min-us the bushes? He jolts up his shoulders making a face as I get it- but then he said- 'Now take your cute down to the office.' Sure- it was shrugged only on the one side- you know… I was rubbing into it also; he saw that- its one-nna of those good ass days. I was hoping to get off and get out of that class like all of them, freak them all, I feel I was doing a good job, or so they said. The teacher's name is Hood, like go and freak off and left up that hood in find it yourself I don't need to show you. Yet that's okay, I was at home.

(Why don't I feel like I was in class doing that- hell if I know?)

I-yah didn't go there, my gut was grumbling so inside, I went to the cafeteria did wash my hand either so yeah- yah-no, I just rubbed it in- anyways, and there were having pork-stuffed

burritos with extra sour cream and guacamole, whatever the freak that is- it looks like one big ass turd - sandwich to me on the plat-

Um-mm- that's one big tasty turd!!!

Freak! Ha- I love the word FREAK it can be used as a noun, verb, or adjective.

I am going to prove that- what the freak, this is freaking crap, and I am getting freaked.

Freak it all in the ass hole!

Chapter: 78

By my hair, and everywhere

Marcel- 'Oral sex is the new goodnight kiss, okay…? That's nice… as a guy that sick! What if she finds me, and I have to kiss those lips after she did that, it just like eating out his d*ick- that's sick! No matter how many times she brushes her teeth or floss, or baths I still feel I get what he gave her, and now want I want her to have. I think about you on this one and it turns me so off, maybe that why it never- ever would have worked.

And even if you are doing that and you're with a guy and say you didn't I still think you did, for all girls are like this today, just giving it away. Let's just say you do it with him and then you do that guy now you want to do it to me… One word for it is- gross when it should have been all mine from the start, and only! Girls if that's not run through your mind now it should be.' It was like last year when Karly when went with Ray to Prom, she was all into me then, and I cut in and got my dance, and then we ran off, to my car in the lot and made while you get it, and we did it there I had to think about that as we made out. It just got to the point, which I was like go, I'll find someone else that will love only me. What if she believed in me… what if she did care, what if it was not a waste of time. What if she loves me more than any other, what if it would have just happened sooner, and then she felt she was safe for the words that ricochet.

I recall her saying- 'I am very happy with my boyfriend and I see him in my future so I wish you could respect that.' 'Why should I respect that, when you do not get it and, and I don't have too for that ring is not on your finger, that why I don't have too. And now that is not very wrong it's very right if you would see that, and not be so dumb about it. My God you are not married to the guy. You need to stop listening to your friends so much... what are you so scared

of? What…? Just FREAKING say it! WHAT! I think to know why, but just say- why from you! What is wrong with you being so cold, you're not like that.'

~*~

Karly- Sex is all I think about- and want, yet can seem to have it in me and right, or was it in the past and I fail to remember, here I am at the best dinner we'd had in years, it was years ago, I said- to myself, as I sit thinking back on that time up there in there and crap.

We all stuffing our faces, even Madilyn, she is drinking margarita after margarita in different flavors- I feel sick just looking at this crap, maybe lovesick in the flashback I was having, I am not sure- really. I feel I need that back, that day, and those sweet thoughts. I want it all that has always been the issue with me, I have to have it my way and that has always got me into something I didn't want to be in. I see them all laughing so loudly, I don't give a freaking crap at this point.

At least one table asked to be moved to a different part of the restaurant, for Jenny was farting too much and loudly I might add, God- I going to toss my cookies as she did. I don't recollect what we were even talking about, but at one-point Madilyn (Maddie) took a picture of Liv wearing flashing her crap, and showing her see-food in her mouth… she was showing the chewed-up bits of crap.

She said- she was going to dump entire thing of hot sauce into Maddie's ass crack. In the corner of the people getting up and walking out, I don't give a crap. I feel like doing that also. I want my old life back I was thinking in another flashback of the past, 'He was romping in my mind, and oscillation in my blood.' At this point, I am on my cell just to hold it all down and gag it all back up, it's not mine- anyway.

I tap on to Jenny Facebook and see nip in my face or whatever those things she has are… ones an innie… I think, looking at how freaked-up her face is on this… one… eyes… is- almost closed, shut. You can see a third of Jenny's profile and it all sexy photos as she calls them, I don't have a name for this crap.

(She's doubling and did-a-ling over them, cracking up, her face was a bright purple. One hand is clutching her stomach. I just want to get off!!!)

What nice table manners and etiquette, NO-?

Yes! I would say…

Liv- Freak- Me- Gross!

Maddie- Piss'n- Sh*t!

Me- As there all huddled around me looking at my phone it's the gayest group hug to be in have, so many girls all up on your junk and crap. I think I was getting some and felt up to like a holy d*ick!

It's- Dope! (Rankle up your nose, and she rolled eyes.)

After dinner, Jenny threw down her mom's credit card to pay for the whole thing. She's only supposed to use it for tragedies, but she leaned forward over the table and made us all grab hands like we were praying. And she said- 'Lord! I want to be freaked SO-Ooooo hard to the night that you hear me say your name, oh- yeah- um- freak- LORED-E, he- he- he, I don't even think you're there, I think all of this is-a- crap is just freaking horse crap! Like- it's all crap, and s-sh-crap on the pages, (Sweetly- A-man.') The Jenny throw Liv's bible a-crossed the room hitting some old ninety-year-old lady in the face, that said to hush up, eat that crap she said.

You done said Liv- I don't think that was right, I not for it either yet just shut the freak up, you look dumb.

Jenny- 'Hell it is all just fantasy story, of an old man with their d*ick out, sucking each other like all that is in the writing why read it.'

Maddie- 'Like- feel that way okay- we don't want to hear it… stop, look at these faces in here, where getting embraced.'

Me- I don't feel quite that way yet I get the fiction that she is saying. I don't know what to believe in if anything also, yet I try not to think about it, that what they want you to do, be brainwashed, and p*ssy whipped. (Jenny going to hell I know… NOW! Yet I thought that was funny at the time. She can read that is one thing.)

'She, is my friends, yet I feel this has become a disaster,' She laughed because she was being melodramatic as usual, just injudicious. The plan was to go off to a party afterward yet I feel I may get jail time for this crap this time: it's become a tradition, to piss off old crap'n people at the start of the weekend we had the unabridged night ahead of us. Everyone was in a

blameless mood. Jenny was being normal, and that if fun to us and piss the old ones off that don't freaking get it.

She went to the bathroom after the woman got up and dumped the margaritas all over saying- 'Find some kind of realign.' I know that she was going to go anyways to fix her makeup, and five seconds after she left the table, the cops came and she was not the one that goes the cuffs it was us girls that went downtown. She- F-n booked, out the bathroom window.

Everyone is laughing at us as we get into the cars, I had to be warning white just my luck- right. Every one of those hit me all at once: old people know how to throw crap. 'Just hose the b*tch down one said. And she was older than my grandmother.'

I'd never had to pee so badly in my life, either being soggy- and wet down there. Yet I sure she didn't even have to piss. I was sprinting for the bathroom when I was talked, still laughing for I had to, while Liv and Madilyn throw at me with a half-eaten sandwich, and crumpled napkins and yelled, 'Jesus is going to get you, Jenny, for freaking him in the ass hole with your strap-on d*ick.' You should have seen the faces now! It was like Niagara Falls duping crap and piss all over me, ah more like there food and crap, but I think you got that right- dumb ass, ah I love yah, keep reading this crap… it is not like you have a life either.'

And 'If it's yellow, you get it!' so another table asked to be moved yet why would they want to say at this point a show and dinner I get it- I think.

The yellow- crap, well- I peed… okay, it happens to us girls.

The bathroom was single-person, I was thrown five feet into the door by the big d*ick of a cop thrown the door and a girl scream as she was latterly crap-ing on the crapper as I fly inwards on her, just hump me I said, and get off. (Brake throw the door, is what she did. It was hugging from one hang…) 'Funny- you like other girls, in your ass.'

Why yes- yes- I do officer. (She's on the floor looking up, just batting those eyes sweetly.) I said- offers d*ick-head; I can flash you to get out of this right?) He said- 'Don't think so sweetie!'

(So, she did…) 'FREAK!' the guys say. The one whiff-ie punched her husband in the face for looking, it was a good ass night. I was looking at the calling yet wondering where Jenny went too, I know where she went it a good hiding spot yet it's my spot- ever-ever hers. You're

crazy to be up there now. Hours later after my dad was called, I went up there, thinking I am nuts for going on to this thing I start rattling the handle at the same time, as I was calling out her freaking real name.

'Jenn-a Jenn-a Tal-ya!' you're a p*ssy! I walked in and she was dying! Her face blue, and her skin cold, her eyes wide open, saying help me, she was on the bed ass naked, saying he got me, with a knife in it. She was followed by someone for saying what she said or something that she did, it caught up with her, yet she'll make it she always does. Her note was left on the other window on the other side, saying- I want it all to stop, I never wanted to do anything to anyone.

Along with these lyrics that she copied off her cell phone, which she looked up: 'But I'm on the outside… I'm looking in, I can see through you, see your true colors. Because inside you're ugly; you're ugly like me. I can see through you, see to the real you. 'And its- you that I will never feel or have,' and that was all spelled wrong even though she copied it all.'

~*~

Whom does she want to have?

How or who… I asked- she said- 'Don't.'

Jenny- (I did it to myself for the attraction. I am freaked up- okay. That's why I dyed, they wanted me too.)

(Me- I think it was my sister that did it.) (Ray- it wasn't me, I got out after a year, I am sitting in this cell for a reason, she's not believing me, yet I blame Marcel as she did also.) I scream and run, to the cops yet they didn't believe me.

I guess she'd was in a rush to get in there, for she hadn't locked the door correctly and it was left somewhat opened, we- I walked through, I was leaning against it, as I flow into the sight of her laying there. I tumbled into the bathroom, to find that she killed me and my sister's kitten, Cotton, she was still laughing when I walked in about killing something that I loved, the girl has just gone nuts, expecting Jenny is standing in front of the I see her in the mirror with her lips beading holding the knife over me, saying it you or your sister take your pick, you both are freaking me over so one shill goes now.

I fought her off me and ran to the door. I feel like I was going to go over the edge the handrail is long gone now. She had me by the neck, saying- 'I shall kill you for this…' What did I do? 'Just be so freaking perfect! I can't stand it I, not you!' She was talking all crazy and crap. I was over she was holding me by my feet and one of my feet gave way, and my shoe was it. I was going to go down with the bridge… I just feel it. and then just like that she goes all nice and crap and started freaking out that she needed to pull me back up, yet there was know why that was going to happen, so I just a few, and I thought I was going to die that time too, yet somehow I live and woke up in my be naked and happy- to go on, yet that was months ago, yet living the same date. It like she keeps trying to get rid of me and she can and crap.

Shove down the toilet was the dissevered head of my little cat, I screamed my head off after the fact, my sis didn't eat, sleep, for days all she did was the cry of our kitten, and the remains were laid to rest next to the old car over a-crossed the way. She flushed but not quickly enough, for all of it to go… I loved my cat she knew all my up and downs in life. I saw two entire undigested tomato pieces swirl down the toilet bowl. All of the laughter left me instantly, as I was going downward quickly. 'I feel safe doing this, yet I thought it was my time this time?' I asked, even though it was obvious.

~*~

Your bridges are burning down, they're all coming down, they're all coming around, gather in the ashes, scattered not to be found, as they blow around, they threw me away, living on another day, not much to say, not much I can say, it's all going down there all around, don't make a sound, fallen to the ground.

~*~

It a new day and it starts with me and my sister all over again, freak just learns how to do this yourself, Jesus-H-Crist the girls freaking stupid' faces light up with recognition, as I say sure, and I walk out of the 'Bathroom, get ready for it.' Show me- Show me- what I need to do! God shoot me now, freak! Freak! Freak! Crap! Freak!

Buzz- buzz!

(Mind thoughts not my own)

I am going to hell for this I just know it. I feel like I am being someone robot- that they program, I feel what they want me to feel with me inside, they can get into my body and act it out using my mind, it's like they have the technology up there to run me even if I don't want to run.

I have to go through this to get it or so that say- and I still don't get it. Occupancy with reason with the extraordinary, while let us do the undoable, let us get ready to deal with the indescribable and aforementioned, and see if we may not- freaking goes nuts it after all. I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be, yet I don't get why- do you? I love end even if they're not all happy.

I love the whizzing noises as I fly downward, for it, it's what makes me live, I love the death for the most alive you can be in life itself, it the height of going off that gets you not to feel so low. I want to be high all the time- to keep them off my mind, or even him whomever he may be. I know it must have been Ray… (Think again… a soft voice for with-in said.)

'She lay into the whole enchilada in life with a fusion of bizarre mastermind, and childlike ineptitude and it was often problematical to tell which was right from wrong.'

Time is an illusion… of seconding ticking away to death, everything its death, to have a life. 'Why eat if you're going to die.' Said Jenny, as she was sitting in her hospital bed, looking over her cell on Facebook making sure all her photos looked good and axing the one that didn't show her good side. Before the end was nearing. She asked to see me yet, I was reluctant to go in… Yet I did agent my mom's wishes.

My dad said- 'Folks- who think they know it all is a big frustration to those of us who know are crap.' I was standing by a little niche just before going into the kitchen when he said this at the hospital. 'Don't waste your time going after that crap! Don't be so naïve and simple-minded! She'll eat the crap out of you and come back for more.' He was starting to sound like me on that one, so I think he had enough, of Jenny. He said- 'I'm not going to cry over the girl!'

There's a line of people gathered in front of a closed door. I had to wait for three hours just to see this girl, my mom said I was insane! 'Does this girl have charry tasting nipples or p*ssy for these boys to be rushing in like this…?' My god dad- I said dropping my jaw- 'Crap her harry little mouse should be worn out by now.' It's not hairy- dad! He looked at me with

confusion- and said- 'Umm- hum!' ('Sure, that where her mind went, missing ALL the importance.')

So are in the waiting room, one girl has her legs crossed and hopping up and down, saying I have to pee yet I am not giving up my set or spot. She was the most popular girl in the school there where over a thousand people come to her laying-out to see here in this like a see-through nightgown. Even in death she getting the last giggle and has to show off her goodies. She made sure everything looked preteen, down there and back up, her face airbrushed to perfection, it sickens- me for I know I would never get any of the crap, down, or even look that good even alive.

(Old hospital, called: Miners)

I dislike the elevators, the hum- and rattle and I get stuck it one-time, big drafty windows way at the end, you can hear: 'Paging Dr. What-the-freak!' and see bed flying down the halls, kids where have wheelchair races and whiling crap, and one nard was shoved into a body bag, and thrown to the shaft of the elevator, and left, he still might be there…? Kids these days… who do they think they are- me.

(Flashback to the hallway)

There is a line, rapping the six-floor to the six-sixth room, kids are ripping open the door, and Jenny getting off to some I swear to someone on that she is and that's the big man above while okay then, I see her kissing a boy and even down to the youngest girl… and that pissed me off so much, I walked away, saying I saw yet I never did, and maybe that why I feel guilty about passing this up, it's not like I can go back and say goodbye! I kick myself, yet feel it was right yet wrong. Jenny thinks she is a sexy beast! Yet everyone gave her a big head.

Death is all I want to think about, like… at this point, one year ahead!

Leaving without her next to me, I want to die, for her so, I can be with her.

Locking back which would have been, her now that she doesn't remember me, yet she does and does not want me any longer.

'Hey Karly, good to see you again!' (She looks at me the same with love, yet the feel is not being received all the way in.) 'What the heck's her problem?' 'She doesn't want to remember who you are, bra.' 'Oh yeah. I suck at life that's right!'

Karly- I hardly know you.

Olivia- 'Actually sweetie, your kind were dating each other.'

(Karly looks at him)

'Yeah. Sorry, I'm not better looking.'

(Giving a wink)

#-Hashtag: (Girl from hell, hell riders, her coming from underneath)

Chapter: 79

It's Winking at Me!

Books of what right and what's wrong in a teen's life.

(Going back three weeks)

One of them points to her watch and says something I can't hear, but she looks pissed. 'She's been in there for, like, twenty minutes,' a sophomore says, she was eating with her parents- 'like such a loser thing to do, like for real you do that and you may as well so suck a d*ick in front of a Holy-Father, it's the same to us, or so, Liv said. What is she like five I said even my little pain in the butt sis get to go places, all by herself?' 'Yeah but is that a good thing, Liv asked, you know she is freaking boys- and not and not playing with her toys, your boy is her new toy, and I know she is using you power-toys also, always a baby you shall stay, unless you break away for her, that bring you down with her.' My stomach drops to my feet feeling it all want to come back- up. I almost get sick right nearby the bathrooms, I was close by I have pills, for that and that also. I have razors too and, I feel, I could do that, also, and not give two- craps.

People lock themselves in bathrooms' glass when they want to I can do that too, of brake it and cut myself like I want to all so I want to do bad things, like have sex or throw up, freak and never stop, kill something or someone, have a threesome or something unforgivable or unbelievable to be remembered by- for there not kill themselves, to be like me. So far- I do it every day for them, to slice me up one side and down the other, they have end freaked though me, at least my girlfriend can't do that as those boys do.

(Lunchroom)

'Liv…? Are reading that same pace of crap again?'

'It sucks, not that heard it better than Twilight pace of horse crap, that I could write better in one day- yet come on, like read something else, I am just in love this man writhing I can't help it, then read something else, by him, I never even thought of that really, in a dumb moment of Eureka! Do you read Twilight? Are you freaking five… that for babies! Said Ray, boy falls to freaked up face guy, and she has no freaking face yet she looks freaking high all the time, oh may- and thing happens.

You suck for saying this book suck! Said liv is awesome! Where does the daemon come out of? Asked Maddie, Liv- 'My book says out of there girls' p*ssy's.' Maddie- 'Smartass that not what that meant at all- sick-o, as she leans over and reads into her open book down on her lap, I can look at the spot art at the banging's over the chapters, and get what they meant, and that not what I see, her laying on her bed feeling all that she lost. Some of these my mom said are graphic, I don't think so get with the time's mom and dad, like a holy freak! It's just a naked girl like me, sitting in her room, on her octagon window bench, look down at herself showing it all, (like we girls do that you know- I know I do) with her hand just about to touch it, (and more) showing her tight little line of girl-ie-ness, feeling said with a tear running down her cheek.' (Just- Get over it!)

~*~

-A week has passed-

My days there not supposed to go this way, I read the first page. I'm supposed to say to you. I elbow Liv saying okay can I have this when you're done with it, sure, you might just get something out of it you need. I get up for the food line and start shoving through the line of people crowded there, all the way to the front.

I'll read more, yet I know it will time me more time then she took, she knows it off by heart. He taps me on the nose, and I softly with his one finger; like he does after he kisses me, and I am on top of him skin to skin find it so- cute- to me.

(Nevaeh lived a hundred years, yet never-ever meet Karly she was in her little world, or so her mother said.)

'I feel she didn't what to know her, her mother that is.'

Nevaeh

Book: 11

A Void She Cannot Feel

Chapter: 80

New start beholding-

-Breath through me, I feel double.

Nevaeh- Hey it good to talk to you again- I said, I would be back, yet I never thought I would meet my grandbaby's up here, and not down there with you all. She a wild one kind of like I was at her age, if you flip some pages back, and read between the lines you'll see me there.

Jaylynn- which possesses all of us, to take crap to give a crap or have crap, or just crap it out? I have inquiries- So, is its natural surroundings that pushes us, it's like a house of horrors and its many faith- that is sarcasm to my life. Freak nurture, freak the universe in the ass with a two by four. The people give nothing and trust like the AL-mighty is a thing of the past yet that fine with me, ass holes. Yet I love you just so you know, I love everyone, ago crap- on. There are more depths made than saved, no lives in this city that have a clear understanding of what they are doing.

Yet you can see that crap, can't you! My mom said, 'I have a potty mouth,' yet I don't see that. I'm living in a persuaded rite, which keeps them in limbo, breaking my back fallen to my ass. I don't follow anything or anybody's crap- I do me because it has become a routine of what they think needs to be identified. So, I prefer to not follow anything, those asses are the one that seems to be lost on their path, not I, or that is the way I see it- do you- d*ick head. Look at how this crap took place they say that kids skip a generation- Karly is so like me, good for her, her mom is like my mom, a dumb ass, that I have to love for she is my mother, yet I never really know her, that was my choice it wasn't hers.

(Dark wings and all you can see me now.)

My path when all downs also, the easy way to hell, yet hell is where the fun is, until you get there, and have to find a way to get it up- he-he- I said get it up. I am still a young girl can you see; I am fifteen jack off's. I am not surrounded by people who are happy or do not need me. I am just a part of its unknown past. I have learned to follow my heart, and go with my gut feeling. Even if that is to cut it open and blood the feeling outs. I have confidence that I do not need to be a bible thumper to have true faith, I didn't see the need too- really- at all- it's all a steamy pull of crap, like a 'Harry Potter' movie, just like Jesus he died at the end I could have told you that, crap. I have faith, is sex, drugs, and rap. WORD! 'All I need is to have a love for the man who breathed his last breath so that I could breathe freely.' 'God, I just need to get freaked, my grandmothers quote suck Harry Potter butt!'

Karly- (Past weeks) - I have to suck in the air on my own, I have the impressions that I have been cut away from the umbilical cord to the uterus of culture's association, like mother must have felt losing out on me, yet the same thing happened to her of so the freaked up story goes that my dad has told to me, over the years every-night for as long as I can remember. I am in a sequence that I need to develop my own, and not have repeated, yet I am not in central of that either, I have no central in anything anymore or so it seems, I am spiraling- I am spiraling, falling- falling- crawling- and always- down on my knees, begging for more.

I want to see me have everything I want to see, I would like to read more pages, and see, some that I need to see I just want to remember me and find out about them, in addition to the one that I need to love, and I see that I had it and give it up. Yet I have to pick the right one- I see, and that is so… me… I don't get what I need, or realized what I had, with them. I don't know if it the childhood boy, or the sweet girl that plays with me that I need the most. Love is a hex, of not knowing what to love more. Just like the general public will come and go. Falling to someone shall stay.

Things will come and there may be modification not foreseen. Yet, is the one a girl or a boy-? I just don't know! Maybe I am just BI- yet how do I get over that?

I have to choose at some point, don't I? Look here- The pages will turn; the chapters will open and close, as I, myself own a book of life, ha- I think I read my own story without ever

knowing, yet Liv did that why she read it in front of me to see if I would see the way, to my own life. Some of the text, which was written, will fade away, and a broken heart will mend.

Up till now some of it will endure in my reminiscence unflinching and vibrant. (I may have passed on for reading a bewitched story with I was never- ever meant to read about my family, and the hex of losing everything that I loved, I wonder if the girls set me up for this one?) I can hear whispers, whispers I can feel, whispers that used to give me a thrill, whispers from the ones that kill, whispers that give me a chill, I recall whispers while trying to find love, I hear them whispering, just like the girl in the story that I should have known, that I may need to find.

Even so, I have to comprehend it is all that I want to think of, and not what they choose for me to arouse, I was forbidden to see her… nevertheless, I did, the day before my end. I hear a soft voice! After that moment with her- You know I think that life is all optimal; one can either select to live comfortably or choose to live in fear, and that is what I did the fear, of not fitting in and they kill me for it.

They're still killing me, every day not to I find out what I love the most, and that is not my girlfriends, it comes down to two. I ask him to do more for me, yet is he? Or has he, or has she done it all for me, that is the question. I know that someday he will answer me, and if he doesn't, she will! I feel I want her to; she is the one the most like me, and I feel she needs me more. And I love that about her she needs me, and that is love.

Yet I feel like this- There is nothing to do in this here for me, or then her or should it be him? I know that my dad would disown me for dating a girl, so- I don't get what I should do. I have use thing like with a boy anyway, so I should just go with the real thing inside me, I am not a lez-bo! But that girl could sway me- I don't know. There is just a glow in my mouth- like all the white teeth teen wants me to be, it's all spitting out, yet I have swallowed it, yet they don't. Look at my eyes with bloodshot eyes, with tears running down her cheeks, and everything in-between feeling the same, you could even see all the welt markings of all their words, yet you can't see them.

She did not even know her name… so she was named after his favorite flower, that he had everywhere in his home as I remember. There is nowhere to go, no one to see… and no one or two, which cares about me. How can I live a life of ecstasy? If infrequently one cannot have a choice, yet I want to pick this if I have anticipation, if I have the preference to.

Well, I have to live with the consequences of an entity life with me next to me and even inside me and some, I call my friends. Everyone has to bow down to them, I have been blown to yet not always the way you think I have, my live a life abortion, ripping out my heart blood dripping down my arm, and the demons I just hoping fly out of my piss so, I can strangle them with my come! Yeah, I am the only girl that will say that out loud! CRAP! Moreover, the way I am the one loses out on a life of authorization to make a pronouncement and my selection, crap really- is it me that has this or not. They are the cord that is attached to me; nothing can correspond or takes place in humanity without my friend's approval. Yet, in my life it is like someone- they sieve, network, and monitor all my life's events. They are the ones that give the stipends in the formations in the society's loop.

Chapter: 81

Her real love going inside

Aylden- Moya- I am a- freshmen here at Bill Clinton high, I have some to say- I am in love with you Maggie, I see you every day, and all you have to do is just been in front of me and it drives me nuts.

So, I did the unthinkable and asked her out, and like that she said yes, I was not sure she would and all herring, what I have heard about her, it was not long until I got her pants off, and I was in love with everything that I was looking at her so cute, and just a fourteen-year-old little girl, it refreshing to see she not slut-ing it out.

Girls where what they think boy's thing is sex, so they think they're having lots of sex, this girl she is not like so they just assume she is gay for not have sex with boys, where and when she can get it, I know that she has girls that play round yet what girl has not. I am okay with her past and doing that, it not what you all think it was, there was girly love there yet not a full-blown relationship. If there was, she never said, I just got that she never went that far with a boy, yet she knew what I was going to do. 'Ha that tickles- I have them off to the side. Frilly most girls in my school would call them baby-fi-ed. She is wearing training Briefs, with the scallop up and down banding at the top, their multicolored size six to seven, white background, white edging, and with tiny light blue, and pink hearts on them, and the little white bow in the front- too cute it's just adorable to see a girl do this, and not care what other girls say. I want to keep-

um and never wash them to have the scent of her when she is not with me when she is away from me.

Maggie- you want to sniff my panties?

Me- possibly…? (Award saying) Which side the inside or the out?

Me- What do you think?

(She just gives a sweet small- and giggles, as I got it.)

Maggie- The inside right-?

Me- Um-hum!

Here you go you earn these by saying that like that!

Me- Thanks!!! (The first time - like it is a nice keepsake well too look to look back on every time you need to?)

Maggie- How do you know you going to like doing this if you never sniffed them before?

Me- well-ah it is you isn't…?

Okay, I see!

Maggie said to me that- 'Shaving line down there, is not fair to us girls. Yet that the only part of me that I don't shave, God- I have enough to do with my legs and under-arms.' Got-yah! 'I like these I have on their comfy I so glad you like them; I was worried that you would not like me for this…' I am okay with it because I love anything you do or have on, it doesn't matter to me, I said it's cute- go with it. Um- can I have them? Ah- you what these? I sure do, to keep.

Okay then… (Her eyes rolled like why? Her index finger- off to the side of her sweet lips, maybe biting her nail, face down eyes looking up rolled to the side.)

Then she said- 'I am not using a razor down there, that I don't know where it been, God you don't know what you may pick up- like if you get cut or just irritate yourself, I did it once and swore never again, it was Karly saying try it, and where fabric sting up your butt, I think not when I can be comfortable and having it natural feel right to me, do you mind?' Not really! It's not what, I am used to but it's what you want so I love that about you too. It's not about what they think about us and what we're okay with- and I don't mind.

Her underwire bottoms show to me that is most inane still, and also shy, and I find that amusing, and wonderful. Not wearing what all the girls do shows me this is a girl that has something I want and that standing up for her right to do what she wants and believes in like her faith.

Say with me- I love her blue eyes, the way she cries; she never lies to me, always hearing me, always near me, stay what me. Say with me, and make me happy; stay with me, and say you love me, stay with me, and someday marry me- won't you please…? Just stay with me.

I love you!

There was this on time, where a girl felt my girl up and pulled on her hair to see if it was there… and it was, and she okay with felting it, you may just want to do the same… as… I know.

She let her… that's what happened, so she would see what she wanted to do with her style down there.

Maggie- Two week's letter I have completely fallen in love! I changed schools, to be so the girls would not rip us apart, and say crap in the halls, yet when we get off the clock it's on. He here to pick me up, and I go to his place, and we hang out, and do the touching, feeling, kissing things, that I always watering yet never had. I LOVE HIM! Yet how do I get rid of her, come over afterward, just to make sure I am okay, it like she has known idea I have a boyfriend now, she gets lost in me and my eyes, I see it he does the same, Karly want me, yet I just want to be friends at this point, yet I don't want to be mean she was always there for me, know what in the world do I do to say back off. She said she feels me? Okay- if you say so- I felt her then not so much now. I hope she is okay- she been through more than I have.

Having it hairy would keep a boy away wouldn't it, maybe that is why she did it, so she would say it for the one that would not mind it, and for that show, he loves everything about her, regardless.

Aylden Moya- leave her alone you make her feel uncomfortable.

The sex in bed the morning, and at night and when we feel is right, it is out of sight!

Karly- are you kidding me she was mine first- are you saying- that I made you feel like your skin was crawling? Uncomfortable this is what is means- scratchy, painful, tight, and sore, or rough, uncomfortable- bumpy, itchy, and lastly- prickly. Is that insulting or what?

Uncomfortable, like sticking your d*ick in the pencil sharpener, it just feels good, doesn't?

Karly- It was said- Miss. Gibson when he first saw with Maggie when she was five, he did not know how he felt. The feelings of being overjoyed led to the feelings of being horrified at what he was seeing, she had a smashed cut up wrist and boobs and nipples, and her hair all cut off, she was speechless for some years after, she was discovered, standing there in her underwire, you can see there are going up are butt cheeks. They look like she was picked up by them, by someone mean ripping hands. Miss. Gibson was not Maggie's actual mom; awe- she is a horrible mature creature. Just a nasty piece of crap.

The story energies that one day; he had on ring out and she came to the door to see a man holding her up by her underwire saying take her she is going to be euthanized. That is what they do this day just look at the train rushing by, there is no love, just death. Just think in a few years' cars should be flying in the air, look at the buildings now, so modern and space-ie.

She was only ten years old at the time. Why did we all think she was slow, it was for she didn't say much at all, back in middle school… she looked up at her and said- help me, and that is what she did. Mss. Gibson was nasty to everyone, but she is caring for her girl he named Maggie, so for that, it was too far, in that she would not let her go on her own and do the thing, and like any teen, she rebelled and lost her car over it, and she said okay smart ass, know you can walk to school, I said you couldn't drive. She bought the car herself, and start going out agent her mother's wishes.

Karly- She did not like me either, I do not think she like anyone she was a man-hater also, that's why he left sixty years ago too. I think that is why she is so old-fashioned in her ways, just look at who raised her, she thinks I a complete slut even if that the way a girl is. Now and then, I realize what friend she is to me, and more. Start with the stomach area.

Lick kiss and such- me going down on Maggie, I started by working my way down, work her inner thigh, as if she were wearing underwear play and tease outside the outlines... then as you see the labia work their way out into sight juddering on the clitoris. I start up toward it, liking with the tip of your tongue, then she should be going; now work your tongue in between the labia inner and outer, not lick the inside her vagina yet... just the between lips area.

Finger with the index, then go back to the clitoris with my lips on her lips and give it a little more thoughtfulness, it is all about the art of the tease, and the wetness, and the coming. Now droplet downwards and slide as much of your tongue inside the vagina as possible get it wet, with your spit and such, feel it all dripping that's love there, and gross, yet you have to love it, or wetter and relax her up, with her I know that works. She loves me doing this and now she is getting good at giving it back.

~*~

I walked into my sis's room… and saw nothing but her ass and spread open p*ssy she is on her knees, on her little bed, with bubbly little mermaid bedding, look at that her butt is shown pointing towards the door, got yah- I see lots of her… and so will my friends… if I send this to them. Payback sister- the wetness running out of her, let's put it that way. I think you know what that crap is. I have to prove I am not a complete p*ssy, and will not put up with my little sister getting more than me, like taking my men.

See this Maddie and Liv say- her but was like in our faces, I knew it would be set to more girls, yet I did not have the heart too. That was up to my friends to see if they were real friends. You can see and hear sighing in her Arial themed room to every inward and outward stroke. I even see her rubbing it in rotating patterns, with her fingers also, she into it. Uh-ah, uh-ha- Oh-ooo-a, ow- yeah, she feels everything deep I will say that for her. Man, she can bend it in, she has known idea I have this all on my cell, and I am looking in at her the door not closed. Look at her next to her stuffed dog, she is rubbing it also on her vag., Maddie said I can send this she seven, and so did Olivia if Jenny was here what do you think she would have done with this video?

(Hall discussions at lockers number 94 and 96.) I wound if she sent this to anyone else, if so that not nice. Locker 95 is now sitting as it was, but with like a drop off of flowers and bars, and photos stuck on the door for her memory. Girls kissing the door, and boys, it is nuts, you don't want to see what inside there, it freaky. Olivia- I wonder if we could get our lockers changed it was nice then when we all wanted to be together, now not so much, this turns me so off. Did you see that Maggie is getting a life now that she is gone?

Olivia- Yes, yes, I did, I wonder if Jenny was the one doing that too.

Maddie- she liked her so I say know.

Liv- maybe…?

Maddie- Do you miss her?

Liv- Not always- yet she pops into my mind once in a while.

Karly about the video (not with the girls, alone.) I showed her one, and now she seems to have it- good for her. I think she does it better than me, b*tch- is what the girls well think too I just know it, I love her, look you can see her face in the pillow, cute right, arched back, putting her two fingers in and out, and I forget how old she, yet see this crap, she looks like a professional, my girls will get it.

Miss. Jo-Anne Gibson- I did the best I could, but I often a spectacle, if my best was well enough, was sufficient, enough. Maybe I was too hard on her or not hard enough. Perhaps she was ill-fated; maybe it was I- mayhap? As you may have guessed- I do blame myself for her being the way she is now, but not then, and you cannot change something wild inside, just look at the gay girl she with all the time, posing her fresh young mined with sin!

~*~

Karly- Anettia- is a freaking b*tch that needs to be shot in the face at point-blank range, for what she did to this girl, I have seen it, lies in the book, and fake reports, no wonder she cannot have a life, until now. Jenny was on that ran and said- she was doing crap she was not. Like, look at girl peeing on the crappers. How would you know if you were looking at her doing the same?

~*~

I remember that Maggie always did have a way of a little crap, and I conjecture she always will be for- I say. It would not have been for me taking in this little girl, she would have given up on life a long time ago, I say also. You can see that, she needs more and more help in the home and out, I need to see if she need more that they are not giving, I have her going to places now and there was a TSS teacher with her at all times, previous years, they say, she doesn't need it to say she does. Now that girl is doing not things to her that I find so- uncouth.

(TSS) is a Teacher Support Specialists, a d*ick of a person, just to be there so you are not a danger to yourself or others. Look at her there just popping gum, sighing yet she cannot, do not blink do not even think. flapping their mouth saying nothing logically, here what she wants to

hear, making you fear every little move you make; you can't make a mistake or being a kid at this point you under the light.

She is tapping her pencil, documenting it all for your life to go to hell. You- epic FAIL now! Like get real this girl would not hurt anyone, if anything she the getting hurt yet they all just look away, now it is my time to say, she is okay. Back- OFF!

Chapter: 82

Eat- Yo Sandwich

(Lunch)

It is a foot long;

Ha- better than six inches, said Maddie. Karly- Suck on your meatballs…

'You should know you've done both.' Some girl down the table- said.

Let's talk about books, said Olivia.

God just shot me in the head, so I can die, ha- hey see the sped?

Nice- book's- Maddie- ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

Karly- I think movies like Twilight freaking suck, (Throwing both middle fingers in the air making skilling face.) The sporting actress made fame, what it is. Look at her and the look at that, what is- that, I love Anna Kendrick?

Teach walking by saying that a mother week Barns.

Liv- I think she would have made a better Bella, than the girl with no personality, yet that's the book I read that thing and it was painful.

I guess that my assignment in life is over my Karly kiss my ass where it brown and holy!

And that another one, sure it is… Suck my clit.

No!

Yes, you want to! (Sexy eyes)

That's it- you're expelled-

Good now I can party and have some fun sleeping and not doing this crap, so you going to punishing me by not being here, freak yeah!

The towing sick of a teacher his name is Mr. Abdèlaziz Okay smart-ie, in-school suspension, then right.

Karly- Freaking-, ho-bag, psycho, b*tch, p*ssy-tart- cunt! Under her breath.

(She gets taken out by her hair, by the officer what's his name, roughly, I might add.)

Like who paints a room all black, and face the desks at the wall, where you could only piss two times… no air to speak of and some fat ass smelling like crap farting up and down the five by thirdly long skinny room, next to you is what… I got for six out of seven freaking hours, all week I might add.

~*~

(Flashback)

I loved band yet that not cool so what do you do here?

Freak yeah, at least I made it as one of our dumb ho's… in a short skirt that shows nothing under it, to think I made it, wow good to think… you think I am good enough to be the same look, and size or whatever, yet you can't say the N-word or a knotty little swore ward… Yet- yet- teachers can call me every name you can think of… in the urban book of crap, like I cannot even wear a tank… without a bra in the halls, yet, this girl can… do you see all the bouncing, and nipples pointing, at you, I sure do?

Yet, the face pant keeps me from looking down and up. Can I squeeze this one boob, I said as I walked past going to the office like I do every day, for no true reason, I not the bad girl here, is my line, they just roll their eyes, saying- something like- dumb crap?

Oh, to be oh so freaking cute as one of those, bubal head moraines. That thinks that has the world by the ass, just jumping to a not so sick beat. And I am not talking- about, all the movies either, they all are PMS-ing b*tches, sore if your one, but dumb stop with the snoot-e-ness. I could look like one talk like one yet I don't want to be one of those things, this boys and girls call- tremendous. Oh yeah- so cute, and sexy, NOT! So hairy- and they say that about my arms.

(What- about them?)

I am sure to have you seen her junk? Goddam! Like they want to be an ass of a cheerleader, doing sexy things, hell I can do that in my bedroom naked for my boy. 'I'll spell out your name for ya! Freak and that may be misspelled too!!!

'He- he.' (Cuts to the try-outs, you're up okay she said sweetly) hands up in the air thrust bunch with each, give me a T- give! Give me and me!! Give me a TTTT- mother freaking d*ick sucking, lip biting, come- glopping- eat out my p*ssy- y! Now give me a C, gimme a, L give me an I, then bend me over and freak me for the- crap- piss'n- T.

(Blond haired girl name Holly, blinks a few times fast-ly in a row, saying- I like her, the faces were priceless, she finishes with jazz hands, and firing fake guns with hands, then trips out the door, saying yeah there's nothing wrong with me.) (So, they just said it all back to me, awesomeness!)

'Goooooooooooooooood evening Clit-high! So, how's it hanging, well I can say, yet it's all goooood, so this is your afternoon amusements, Lex Mithez got, a- a- Goff win, and so did Jackie-sue, and Amy Lue, yeah (girl in calls screw you.) 1-0, 5-9, 5-10 is how high she with is that what that read? And eight, (what) don't forget the football games, and your ticks, there is a jack-off coming up, (a what, the teachers look up in the office) oh that said- said smack off, football, so bout that, oh my.

Um okay then moving on. Don't forget that you need to have your red ribbon on for a dug week, yah- Yaaaaahhhha! (Whaooo- dugs, and not doing them.) I get a- thumbs up and a good job, ass hole by the d*ick behind me. You could hear it over the intercom. Nice! Don't forget to dress up like some you like a day, and your others will stay home and feel left out.

(That's not what that said either. (I heard from Marcel- yours such a good speller, I loved it was informed the whole school. As he said don't die to get out of the parking lot and slow down and don't forget to pay for you spot money is overdue like just get it down here NOW so I don't have to keep saying this crap. There is a bottle of something in the boy's room that needs to throw away, GOD-!!!

I don't want to ask, what is this? Do I have to- I have to read this... Do we know it's there? (Nod for the p*ssy ass behind me again.) There are con-da-mine-on for sail her in the pyo... ogin-o... okay- OH-shank- rap-room. God, I can read this writing. Thank god it over, it's

not let me do this today. Movie! She said imposingly.) (Maddie someone Jizz-ed in a bottle? What is this?)

(Talking to the girls in homeroom, interrupted by this...)

Now I don't remember- what I was saying, I asked, they look at me like… whatever, they're just want to go home, look- you know stoned, mixed with ass freaked and smashed freak'n drunk. I don't remember anything after that, oh yeah- um- that a pad should not show if you're wearing spank-ie-thing-ie-s. And she shows that, ha- Hana, and you don't get kicked out. All they do is dance around sacking their big bubble butts, saying nothing, and freaking every boy, I should be in the locker-room. I don't need to hear you… I runoff… to get pampered up.

And we split, in the clit. (The classic line is away therewith, every girl.)

#-Hashtag: (I don't have anything to say, it's all up there.)

Just think I get the same ass hole, that been here for over fifteen years, I remember back when we had that kiss in-between the buses at the football game, we were both in the band at that time, now he goes it alone, or so they say. I would love to be on that bus now, yet they say that is not the cool one to be in. she pressed him up on the run bus, Diesel Fuel, at night band night playing in the background, it was perfect until the band directors said- 'Don't FREAK it up!'

I had a solo to Beth, at IUP, that when to a sixth-grader, yeah you heard me, what happened here with rolls… and crap. what the hell, every other time. The drum starts up, and I was captain- nope that was taken away to, for he said I could not handle it, will hear me now mother-freakier freak you in the ass with a trombone. At least I do not freak my students! What a night lots of kissing and touching, on the band bus, it dark and the red in the back is all that we need to feel and see it all.

Hands down uniforms I think so… and maybe more, what happened on the band bus stays on the band bus… what do you think I go on the bus? The first time he ever puts his hands on me all up under my top. (I nailed it) Marcel, I was there and I saw the stand ovation!

(One the field with the band of five hounded.)

Karly- it was awesome, having that part echo back at me.

Football game: band-

We combined the old school over there, with our's years ago now where larger and crap, so our uniform had to change to red and blue, and that was a bloodbath, we hate each other still. CHS over OVHS is not cool. They said- OVHS we are number one the best! I think not. When the other school was red white and blue and we were. Clit pride lasts forever! Let's Go Pennies! I am sure mine will never be the same now! This school will diddle with your brain, and make you go insane. At least I, not the p*ssy- saying this, I glad not to be a part of that over there, though! It's a thing of the past… sad- but true- it needed to die, or did they kill it… themselves. All good things come to an end; this is yours now.

Black and gold time 'Hey my little pennies, you're nothing but a bunch of pussies!' Hey, clit, here my d*ick, suck it, I heard on the field. By MCHS, 'Guy team No! A player' of ours said as they were a bent for their ball! Morning Campania…

Okay… inhale here… this is long and hard. Ha- that's what she said. Morningside- Cam- with ia for Cambria parts of Pennsylvania, preia for Pittsburgh areas, mush them all together and you- while getting that steamy turd up there, all up in our asses, and crap.

Hear the band, it should like someone like I took a dump in the sousaphone, I am sure fat Freddie their worst player loves that one. Yeah, suck that crap!) Make it rain! Crap, Fred!

Marcel- This drum keeps messing up here girl I will show you have it done and I am a trumpet player. It just that one left sticking that crap, and it may be the tuning of the snare too, yet I fix it you know- I said they sounded like crap, to your pain in the ass band doctor. (See me saying it!) He just said- you need to learn to respect young man, you have to give it to get it from my asshole!

Head to head- 'Line up kid if you're so smart and belligerent!' He said- I said after- Yeah you beat the crap out of those drums, just break the head, it's fine, you suck! I when here! At practices, this happens the night before the game.

(Drum solo)

~*~

(It is half-time)

Crap- look at the people, so freak'n load. Awesome!

Foo fighters show is the show is playing. Learn to fly, Hearon, Times like Theses, and The Pretender. I have to do something here to show what I can do so I just hit the highest note, at the end of that show. I saw him going Hum, over there, like okay then don't stick to the sheet music, that you that they get paid for. We break it down yet crap.

The other band only played one sound and that was- 'Do Not You Forget About Me,' and Eminem- 'Lose Yourself' (look at them hip-hop dancing on the field, (Garbage can drum solo) and Whitney Houston- 'I Will Always Love You,' and the get this one more: Fergie- 'London Bridge.'

We do need to do that, if I have written and the name makes it happen, I'll garbage can drum solo, and I won't drop my sticks… did you see that 'You trumpet play remember that… said John.' Yeah, maybe so but come on.

~*~

Dad- I thought it was time, Karly you see this it's been at my cost for years, I am giving you this uniform of your mothers, 'Do I want it? I said. Razing up my one eyebrow high, making a snarled face. Like this is not something, I would want to keep in my room, I hate my mother for not being there for me and doing this crap. 'Their baby killers!'

I would not feel that way yet I can not help it. You have to understand my feelings of loss. Yet to all of the girls out there like me in her group or a group, she studs up for herself when no other girls did, she was something else, don't feel like this… it not fair to her, she was doing what she had to do.

Yes, she gave you up but in her mind, that is what she thought was right, don't you see that she didn't have the choice, here it was kind of made for her, she passed on the field at the age of twenty-five saving one of her younger girls that lost her legs after being blasted off, she made back home yet your mom did not yet, here is her uniform, she went through hell to become what she was at so young of an age, look at this thing, she was fully departed, and a female I might add, not easy to do, yet she spoke her mind, to all the boys and got her way. Come hare sit on this bed with me and I will this story here, it was not long after she was just privet, which she went in front of the board asking for dress uniform changes. For the love of God- Just give the same uniform as the boys, yeah- I am a girl my holy hell, 'I think you're a scum-sucking freaking maggot, private, for saying this.'

We are not all the same here can you see this she said to the up squadron, these things have not changed since nineteen forty-two. 'What the freak is your point her little lady, the sex here is all the same.' I think not sir… 'We don't care really what you think, your part of a thing that is bigger than you and your simple thought, of hormones, and nail polish. Do you want to be here?' Yes, I do sir, is that a question that needs to be questioned about it, I have done everything you said with you snickering in my face, about it.

Okay enough crap around her, about nothing… I love doing this, I just want to feel the same as one of the boys. 'So, what the hell and crap and piss do we do about that to fit your freaking needs here.' Okay, you asked for it- permission to speak my mind. 'You're like I don't kick the crap out of you for even being here, you have seen men die, in trading. I feel I need to talk to another man here, and why are all you men… I have something to say- here me out. I get one little patch on my slave, and my caller here is flapping over all my metals, that I have and yet my racking is the same, and yours all went up, this is not far… 'I don't care you're a girl her- this is what we do.'

We look ridicules like the nineteen forties, flight attendants. 'Then you can walk out the door and hang your uniform up.' 'I don't see the need to do something you want me to do, when I am the same ranking as you, now.' Commandant- older man said okay what do you want here sweaty- I feel like you do, this is not right she is not wrong here, we see it now. This is what we all girl needs that a tiny like I am, a hat that fits, and a jacket that is the same or even fitted to my covers, this skirt it is sexist, and the pants to baggy, so what do you take the skirt so you're not falling on your face. (She flaps it back and forth shown the out of date look.)

Can you raise them more than slakes that is? No, for my cheat is there and the spenders are maxed out now, and I don't feel that I need to be rubbing this down here either, (point hand moment up and down near vagina.) I am sorry sir for this one grannie panties don't work for me! As you can see, they're not on me now.

(She holds them up, saying would you put them on?) 'Now- crap!' (Guy's that all just look at her like- are you for real.) 'Now we have to ask what down there?' something nice that a girl of today would wear. She flips her hair back, taking off the hat, that's covering her eyes, saying this: I want and need like us all her of the female type- that is short and girls, I want my hair down under my hat if you say yes! 'We have issues as of why you have to do that…' yes- I see- conversely this is my body, and I have the final say, I don't see doing this if just being in a

blue dress. I am swimming in this thing- you can see that- no? And where is my white belt that I should have under my boobs? 'Did she say boobs?' Yes, sir- Like- we have them!

He said- 'Sit!' make us look like boys, yet I am wearing a girl's uniform…? Okay keep it if this is what I get to do- and we all should have done here.

The list:

1. Coat: I want something that fits inwards with red piping on it somewhere more than what I have here, and has a fitted clasp caller. Look at all my meats are a cover for I am small and these overlaps, my caller that is, sleeves are too long also. Just give me a black coat here with some buttons on it also, that has the same bagging, give me red cords too, that I should have at this point, at something for my shoulders to so I don't feel so small, that I don't look so small among all these towering men.

2. I do not want to have, these men's look blouse either, what are we high school girls, needing to cover them up. So just give me a necktie to… and it's all good.

3. What: I want just a bucket hat in white and gold, if that works, with insignia on it, yet bigger, you can even see this! Think of a band hat- there adjustable with the stings.

4. Sleeve Cuffs, Black with white piping with two buttons- I would love to have this now for, it makes up for what we never had over the years, and it looks sharp.

5. Pants: White- Hey I where the pleated skirt, if it white also ending above the knees, let's say I am on a date with my husband or something formal, where I need one, or if I not in a lineup, where there is nothing but paints, with all the other man. I would like to have one just for wearing my uniform home. If it's where it should be up here, and it goes all the way up showing off the lags and side of her butt, do you like that boy you should that why I am in it. 'So, where do you want this thing at?' (Here, I need to march in this, and have my legs look nice, do you see this guy. Don't I look cutter now, I think I should be cute and all.) I want them to fit that all, not be all bagged out.

6. I- um- we, want light make- up, I have to look good, it's up-to-the-minute days, standard shads, for our skin tone.

7. A white riffle would be nice.

8. Last name plat.

9. Bayonets I feel are dangerous, and don't need to be there!

10. And I was a drum major, I can outdo you all that are over me, I want master sergeant spot now please! Give someone like me a drum, and I show you how it's done!

(Prove it the next day! Lineup!)

Dad- 'Back in the 90's or so not that long ago- I thought twerking was for tightening lug nuts…? Twerking? Shaking your ass, here I'll change your rubbers for you, don't crap yourself, now you young kids are hummping in midair- I might add, and dumb faces and limp over backward gyrating to this crap. It's all hanging out- …crap- everything flopping and dropping, up- low and whatnot, I don't get it!'

Mom- 'Word!'

Karly- I walk away busting a lady nut!

So, you feel that you need more now to make up for it. Yes- I do! And what that to keep it!

Yes, keep it forever so you can remember who she was, she gave up everything for this century, yet was what she did the right thing, I don't know, I feel there was not enough do for her there is not even a flag on her gave now, and her husband is not laid to rest next to her yet, they never- ever got much time together for she felt she had to do what she needs to do, for the fear, of what was, and who she was. Give this a week and will see what can be done for a solution to the situation we have here.

And she got it, and this is it, this one here she wore out on nice events or for home and such, and she wore the men's style when on the drill time. She was laid out in the outer one, yet she said that one also, 'you can't keep it… yet you can die in it.'

~*~

Dad- Brandon- We were the age of five at this time, I remember sitting on our branch over the house, looking at the trees and the golden fields, I remember the way she looked at me, oh so long ago, she was everything I ever wanted way back then: 'Just say a tiny bit longer for me!' 'Okay, I will for you!' do you see here in that little sundress. He passed, not ever find

someone like her to feel the place that he did, she did not spend any time with him for it was not what she could do, it was all work, and never being together, he was always lonely, or that what they said, it can make a man crack, he passed young of a broken heart. He was okay too, I think.

Chapter: 83

Love is what I had

(I was ten)

Holy, mother of god, we are in the shower together he bubbled up yet not covered up, and back down will it around until I would come, I got some just call me, he was just enjoying me being cute, he washed my hair and played with my body, like my boobs feeling the and rubbing, suck, and kissing them, flicking with his fingers and others, HOT steamy water pouring on our head, as we were hugging it out, and do it all. Rubbing my legs and crap- I say freak, yeah, but I don't swear like that!

I fasten the garter around his hips legs side to side around his hips, and as I am arching my back to slip the silk stocking off my toes, I unclasped my bar for him to see them fall, as we go to bed for the night, we were body unstop of body, and we even had our toes laced, together on one foot, like our hands. I have to bite my lip to stop my impatient moan from escaping, yet it all comes out of me. Scorching flush rivalries over my skin, my face hot and red that down there pink feeling has a handprint on my body.

My figure is shaking with shock at the news of us doing this tonight at this age. A baby they say I show them? No freaking way, no way should I be doing this yet they will never- ever no, NO WAY!!! Unserviceable my awareness is tiresome to grasp this staggering bit of data. Of why… Like a small child gets out and the woman is here to say, I'm downhearted, helplessly trying to fit everything together in my mind, like I should some time you have to say what the hell and go with it and piss on them.

My inner goddess is quickly losing my virginity, the light in the room fading recklessly as I see it all there looking at it deeply, but I can't settle on that now. I not sure we're ready for all of this just yet. Gritty again I feel as I work its way in, I scan the room for anything I might have elapsed to say when my eyes fall on my ribbons on the wall. I would say anything to make him think about not going in so fast, yet I want it all. The blinking to ever downward moment, see it all so fast what to last, it was hard, not slow and good, I don't remember it all.

Phone's screen draws my attention, I don't look, I do what I need to and that is lying there and take all of it, yet that the way I want it, announcing it. Quickly, I tip the contents onto the bed to paw finished the untidiness, for the things that I needed like my underwire, I all but gasp with the force of the solution, which hits me like a rock to the face, I may be in love, I have fallen too him.

He looks at and his reply, was all I need to hear that this was the love I need to have, or the sex at this point not sure, what to say, and again I hear the suggestion of his self- hate is everything when spooking at this point in my life. 'I'm sorry for being me, 'I'm too un-loveable.' He drops his eyes to at me, what not to love, hiding the mayhem by the conclusion, not looking away at all with ever weird, wacky, and odd, and the gross thing I would say is so nervous.

My heart liquefies instantly as the memory recalls to me in flashing of the day, away it goes- yet will it stay, out of my control, your selfishness, I want here nothing more, yet that what I think about him at this point to it all about getting it in me even on the band bus we try crap, that feels good. Jealousy is they that what to stop it yet they when. It- he or the girls what to pick, you know what I did.

Every part of him has attracted me to him. I'm horrified at that thing to look at it, 'Big enough' I said, looking at his legs to that could crush this little girl I am. I think you had everything you need but not this… I did think it was possible to be so right, and wrong all at the same time. I can see now how I acted without thinking, about it but what the hell, I did before they got it in me. So-o selfish. So, I was young, it better than cummie camming to an asshole that just wants to get off to me.

that what they want, I like it yet I don't, I want to come for him only, yet I have to pick one or the other and I picked the girls, not him- not him- do you see that.

'The consequences you face can change your life, for the right or wrong.' 'I was it just demonstrates, that I am the one who's no good for you.'

Chapter: 84

I dyed on the inside, or is that love?

(Now)

My hair flips over my shoulders, and boobs hiding them some of my shy blush faces I remember it all, now A compounding ache nails at my fragile body into my young heart, and more cries drop onto my shirt and though me. 'I'm still only yours.' I scream in class as I run out the door looking for him, yet here am I, at this point, I don't know. This is not my school and those girls are not my girls. I may be dreaming this yet I not, I feel it all! Uniform though it's a low-slung, protected whisper, it sounds loud in my ears, I hear the call-out within me, and it was him, yet through me, I never stopped loving him and only him. I want him to know that leaving him left me as broken as he still seems to be, even if I feel as if I have died every day, we have been apart.

(Night in his room)

Discovering everything with my fingers. But he's not here I think yearningly. I run my hands over my boob, I do it all the same as always, pausing to feel the erect nipples under my timid, I softly circle my razed hands and then flat fingers over the hills that are the only mine, and touch the beautiful scratchiness within me like when he unzips me down there and blows on my belly and mon into it with every feeling. I pinch the strain that I have down there asking if it's all good,

'I don't mind he said.' Like he was with my hair coming all around me and my body at that time it was down past my ass. Steadfastly, between my thumb and forefinger he plays with me and my hair and hands, the sweet biting and scratching as we do a thing in bed, a silent cry I might make for being happy, it makes me want more… and more what can I say I am a teen girl.

Courageous now I slip my right hand into my sleep shorts, where I instantly, join with his body for sex. I never thought about anything, not even a condom, he can pull out. With my eyes shut I evoke his touch, running through me like come out of me, and whipping it with my undies that he keeps, my finger plummeting on his chest, when we ride for it, them into him sucking off slick and wet desiring as he having sex with me onto. My hot breath, I can almost feel his teeth on my lady's lip, sucking my clit, my jaw and his on my lid skin, the same with him. The other hand is working my left nipple and boob, massaging like his fingers down below, and squeezing there and there and shaking it some too, nerve-wracking my tender nipple, at this point from all the suckage.

It directs the rhythm is right, to his, my body shudders and quivers to the orgasms, which spray and show up like cream, as it recalls the delicious sensations it's capable of. Vaguely I hear my moan as my finger gently circles my clitoris.

Ah! His mouth on me, hot and tingling my lips with his then his mouth flicking goes into my mouth and slid over mine it right. The look in his eyes as he watched me returning the fever of all the responses, and I admission of defeat– smoothly.

My body taking over, my back arching a bow. Everything clenches, stiffening as my orgasm quakes through me. Gently the soft breeze carries me back to earth, yet, I don't want it to I want to come as long as I can at this point. Whoa, incredible, sexy- sixty-three seconds- going into non-stop!

He sucks in a hard breath down on me, eyes pained and jaw clenching tightly around it, the muscles in me moving with his sucking that would not take away, they're running off, yet he keeps going…

'I am not going to stop if she wants more. The taste is everything I wanted too, it's all her like her skin, it's sweet and cute!' I arched up to see this all going down, my eyes finding ever look on his face, that I love, to see, and a new upsurge of anxiety flushes through me, I want more but have to go at some point it ends, with us both breathless for really holding breath, how will we ever get past this, at school we- I see him and tell his guy finds.'

(He never did, is that a good thing?)

Chapter: 85

The feeling of it deep

Remind me why I walked away from that?! Oh, yes, my damned uncertainty! I grimace at myself and they feel okay with a nod. What am I going to say to him today? What do I want? The complex is he as, he stares at me, brow knitted in a tight view. He holds up four fingers for me to see where when it going to go.

'How can you still only be mine?'

My self-esteem undoes at the understanding that it's where I want to be. As tight as I can I gripping back, keen to take the soothing balm his hold proposals for my ravaged soul and his?

Nothing can hold back the break of awesome feelings. Submerged like water running down on me with feeling, I weep- my broken heart out against his firm familiar chest, yes, I cried the first time all girls do! A strangled moan escapes him.

'Oh, Karly!' He closes his eyes, creasing them up as he struggles with some internal mêlée. When they open, I see a flicker of resolution before his strong arms wrap around me with such a hold down on me… like a drowning me in so, I don't go under. He crushes me against his length, his agitated heat almost scorching hot in his body heat.

Chapter: 86

Eyes on this young gorgeous thing

(Back)

Freshman year November 11/11/2012

Hot date with Marcel after school- 'You have Disney, Pepsi, and a black-ie.' 'Your horny and depart, it works! Now sit don't, and eat something, GOD!'

In front of the bathroom mirror, I stand stark naked I stand thinking about what I did with him. I hate to do this to myself, but it's time for an honest about everything that does, I love more them or him. I'm half keen, half afraid to see what Marcel sees when he looks at me. It's been a long while since I've had a hard look at myself– why would I? Thankfully my body survived pregnancy well if that happens after tonight, yet I wonder why I don't remember all this, my t*ts are still nice and full yet I young even now so what the freak am I talking about if anything, a little crazy here and crap. Surely that can't be a bad thing, I have lost some of it I think over the years, why can I recall it all, why must I go in and out.

(My Free Chat Show)

And panties see-through in light blue, black T-shirt, white and black thigh high socks. The top is off and now you can see my blue bra; I take down all the five-hour energy, that I need to do this all night. And gag on it to move them this long thing, do you like it when I do that? Not really do it to me not that. I will talk about anything on here if you chat I will too, even balls! My life, and how I have a lack of one. Hand on my cheeks, or crossed, saying whatever comes to my mind, there is no filter, I blast it all out, boys like that. Lick your knees, do you like that crap? Maybe…?

Weird!

Doesn't that go under sick fetish?

I's, not ages anything- NOT- even butt-chugging- 'whatever that is! I said.' This one is for your ass hole boyfriend. (Ray- die mother-freaker die!) I just want to play with it.

ME- How are you? And what are you doing with your life? (I wonder if they have one to, to spend so much time on here, get a real girl if you can.) Get my vid- cream-sick-al. Does X-box have a vagina…? What…? I may even pick my nose for you, I've seen me do it. supergluing my vagina is the worst, how would you suck a girl that had that, try pulling it out, have that nightmare at night- F-ers. Come into my house and Jiz-zz all over me and squirt it… one take is all I get to get it right, yet it's so wrong. I tilt my head to the side and continue my stock with my dumb yet cute crap.

My belly is almost as flush as it used to be, but not moderately as tense, yet I have the line that runs down into my vagina. I like being a copycat, I have to take you through this… I don't want to know what you did in a dark early, what dirty man's cock did you put in your mouth for five bucks that worth fifty, ouw-a, honesty in here- b*tch, it's a five-dollar foot long.

Ass in the camera and shake it out, I see it on YouTube why not- on me… like- in my chat room, its PG I am sure, oh my Jesus, it's getting dirty in here. It's not fan fiction that real-life crap- mother-f-er. I don't have to be part of the cool kid's club, are you: taking in the butt- what? Feisty!!! Band-K_cee. O-h I done crap, here, I need a new PC. Having anal sex-n' strangers can complicate things, would not recommend it. I here for advice, not masturbating, I want to take about life, I got you on my mind, so let's take the bar off. Are you feeling hurt? We- got some crap going on. On my sheet I feel all blue you can't see me, rolling around.

THANK YOU! Boobs hugging lying on my bed on my tummy showing the nipples downward fingers on my lips. It's your first time here… let see what you never expect, it's a hump-day what do you expect… we all horny on Wednesday, I say your p*ssy- Hey 'Me- ways: have a chat with me, all you have to do is p-lick me, and you be in. you guy are such weird-o's, showing what I see on my screen. I see- kitties! Go it so hot in here, I have to turn down the heat, BRB!

(Be right back)

I not faking myself- by my videos, are you a mind-reader he just did what I wanted him to do, 357, good tip! No vid- for you- just ass-F-ed by Brad, do you know something about me, I had to be the yellow ranger, and I want to be black. SpongeBob is my hero! This is my life! I question a lot of the choices I have me, almost as natural as letting someone Ass-F-me in the early. I have lots of stuffed animals I regret nothing. I have plenty in being a young woman… doing stuff like a girl? Playing with the elastic of my undies at the top, letting it snap running the rim with my fingers. One Fingers rubbing my lower lip, I like too it feels good to me. Squeezing my boob as I do, feels good, like you do, love'n me as you do. Hell-al-light-blue is my hair on Minnie-cam.

(Gust 69360 show that anyone can get in here.)

Laying on my bed heir flip back, I'll give you the chance, sucking my fingers, holding my one finger to my lips like I do with him, and him only. Here this! I am a movie in ways you don't get, I could cry at this. Pinching my nipples feels so good. Thank you- YOU-AH! I love you- I love you! May sound like something else to you!

(He will get it, he's a smart guy.) I DON'T CARE- song… I am about to blow your mind.

She's My Cherry Pie- song playing in the background. Us- 'Yah you know it!' Maggie and Ray, and I said, and even here sis said damn! Tips make me wet. Lady OJ- is money! Taking the word Christ out of Christmas is wrong, we must barn them to the ground your coffee guys that suck, stop playing so much jazz I don't find it cool. If your agent realigns, I think you need to be burnt down, the cups are just red now- fun! Don't say what I should have for faith, you may get conflicting answers. Queen- 'Bohemian Rhapsody' I am singing for him I know he is a rocker, like me at heart. Do like my butt in this, sliding them down I rub from behind. I have to hit the goal!

Butt in air panties off!

A band for no reason, I was for so face. I was in my friends' cam, and doing crap and they kicked me out. It not like I have a cam for all that long, I am learning.

Don't GO-go! So many songs requests, my God. Here we go- rock me… singing. Grinding it out playing with my hair, dibble handing rubbing my lady-ness. I don't give my height- 5-3', 5-4', 5-10'. BRB!

Some anything things I want to say- I just want to use your love tonight. It's all showing now, to you see my pinkness, I love being naked like this for you all. Hood-rubbing, talking about holidays. Laying down on my stuff-ie bear, and showing my side shot. Hair down there being rubbed, god dog feels good. The Clit-er-stach… Nice, my girl's hair. Do you want me to shave it all off and regrow it?

Showing more for tips, p*ssy shot! I want my bush to go back to full size, don't just creep on me, and tips. (What do you do if you don't want to go to school, I do this.) I had every color you can think of, even a rainbow! The not gray hell with gray and it's fifty shades. (I do more than that and I am twelve years old, and looking back on it.) I touched the butt! END!

~*~

'What happened to my room?' His look is relieved but still surprised as his large eyes look trustingly into mine. I slide into his bed and pull him into the loop of my arms, 'We moved last night after you went to sleep, buddy. Don't you heat it when things fall into a hole and you have to dig it out me myself and I did that one?

Mud-ie!

I wanna chat with my boy, so I am ignoring you guys.

My… iPhone is a piece of poop!

Talk to Howie the owlie… BRB!

Smile and I thought you might like this room better.' I'm smiling into his hair as he bands an arm around my neck. 'I have any animals to sleep with.' He breaks my heart, yet I embrace the bear as excitement lights my innocent face, so I feel right about doing the next part.

The show- It looked like the owl eyes where my hotter, see my butt, see me up close to like should have done for you, it's all pink and crap! Owl-humping is on! He's in neck lock now, what the hell I said, moving to the bathroom, I have my mic and PC next to me. Taking a shower, I do everything you want, it's cold to hot, it's a piece of a crap heater in this apartment. The showerhead is too tall for me, any day now shower, I can ever reach it, the knob. The wide eye face and stare that only I would get. Light going off cool, right? Do- dis- crap!

Should I get a vibrator?

Texting him and her and them. Showing my pink-ness one again. Cold as freak! The water hitting me so hard. I don't want to break my phone, don't drop it- oopsie's. But shaking is going down. Thank you! Body wash sparing, and that smile only she can make, rub it in all over, in the font and the back, god it feels good, squeeze the luffa and rubbing on it. I start fingering, I am all wet now for you! Up closer than ever before, I get lots of tips, thank you, hair flipping out and dancing under the water, hair goes black now. You can see my wavy wet, with shampoo and more, going down my young body. Rubbing my whole body up and down on you. See the water as it runs off me, hair dripping down my back, nice, right? Chest gabbing and back ass and vagina shot I am showing at this point, it's all for you squeezing my cheeks, to the hot right! Bonging them up and down, now you get it. Do you want to see me shave- 'Sure…?' I said.

Him- Blue is nice, dance for me! I so love you! Love that but apart back shot! I say what I need there, god I am a parv.

There that smile again, one finger is rubbing now, I have my clit working it around can you see this. Soupy butt and p*ssy fingering in the, from the back, one is in and out now, do you see this so close it feels like you're in here. I don't care if I am just on cam soloing, at least I am not banging some random dude, on the first date forgive me for the sin of being a start teen girl here. And doing me!

~*~

I get two girls to have sex and grinding their things-is together, there face to face and see it all go on, two boys one has to behind, so is it wrong for me to say… boy- on the boy- should- you should not- do that- for you can see your partner, at all regardless of what you do.

'We got tonight, who needs tomorrow, why don't you stay- stay with me.'

~*~

(Future days)

Maggie- Yes, you can have heroes in the forms worshiping a boy. I do not recommend that you do. Love the crap out of them I do. Yet I did her also, but come on growing up and do something with your life now. Why would you want not to they are not going to help you when you need them?

Boys are the crap; one is he's my crap! Always do this… do not fault courage for acumen; be wise in your choices, you may fall to some you never thought you would. It will help you make the right choice. Remember it is better to be sometimes a run-away than not having what you need and that is love and understanding. Make the right choice at the right time, which will please the heavenly hero.

Your boy will continuously help if he can! Remember that… your opponents can help you over time, so always be on the lookout for your hero, if you are a damsel in distress like me, find a girl, and find Mr. Right when he comes along and sweeps you off your feet. I would have to say that what is neat about falling too someone. You do not need to have everything to be one with one just have love and trust, it's a must you see that… I know you do, you just need to be a true friend and lover, with eyes that see the truth behind all the lies, yet that should not happen either, ears that listen for what is straightforwardness, and an expression that will speak up for you, and make you both happy. You know I think all of us have a hero inside when you feel this; I just need to let it speak out and stand up for it, to do this.

For instance, for me, I want him to show him I was a brave, sweet and loving side like he always thought, undeniably to someone like me… is a damsel in distress! I get that, I had to be in my old life… if you want to put it that way, what girl doesn't want that… even if they have this now? That to me is the true definition of a hero and she was one for me at that time, and I am grateful for her being part of me inside and out, like another person that is helping someone who is awkwardly in need of reassuring from another person. She is a hero! No doubt to me, it is someone in my view that can ever part she sticks up for me like no one else has, and does not let someone else's views influence what they need.

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Chapter: 87

Squeal it out

Karly- I want to squeal, yet no one is going to hear it. I inquire- am I becoming locked up in chains? Help! I fear the vehicles that follow behind me at night. To this actual day, I still fear not having her at night, though I do love you not in the ways you would think, while completely open to the world I see nothing, that I should and fare nothing but the past, and losing out. Of course, I know you know that about me already. I fear that the world is becoming like a humanoid, with no front-runner in which to follow as she was. Most of all I fear loneliness, and not see any one of them here with me now!

So much fear that the terror it seems as if it will never stop, in this blameless life like mine; plus, I will be saved, by him or her someday- I hope. Maybe- is all that I have. I terror that nobody will ever see my resourcefulness or predictable me for the good in-which I do for others. I sense like I am the only one left in this world is me as I fall off it and fall to them. All the loveliness of life has been crestfallen, and it is all an illumination around me is darkness.

'Affirmative- I terror being in the outside realm of things.' Just as it said- I would be after seeing the forbidden. Magical- Cards of wisdom and blue crystals in my hand, I look for something to show the way to the land of no pain. 'I look to the skies to save me, looking for the sine of life, to make my way back home, I better learn to fly- fly! See the stars, as they go around my head? I am going to: burn out bright!

I think that if I could be left alone, with the one that I want… I could have a life- you know what I am sure of it. I fear that the towering entity will never collapse, and the demons will

keep playing in my head. I fear that I will never have a social ability, to be part of the nobility of compatibility.

I fear what society has done to me. I fear that I have no trust in anyone or anything. I fear that my life has no meaning. I fear that I will never get out of this hell. I just want to start my life, and get a degree in music someday from for IUP, if I can make it through all of this. I do not think that is too much ask for- is it?

I am 100 pounds, really tiny; surely there is someone that would find me attractive? I wonder if I can find someone who can think for themselves. I want someone who will love me, for who I am- and not what they want me to be. Most importantly, I need someone that will not use me. Is that too much to ask for?

Fear! Anxiety is something that I have inside, it is the source of the things in which lead to distress. Not finding someone that loves me, for who I am, is some of my fears.

I fear not having a family by my side at all times. I have tears about the overwhelming struggle to rebuild my reputation, which has been destroyed. I ask this question, if I was to die tomorrow would anybody come to my wake, to see me lying there?

I fear the fact that I am most likely going to be alone forever. Another being, that everyone that has meaning in my life is fading away from me it seems.

Chapter: 88

Emotions Dreams

I feel like my skin is crawling with viruses when it is on my figure. It's mid-November and I am standing in the rain, as I ran out the door it is, so cold, so lonely, and so freaking loveless! As I find my way back to him the one, I left behind oh so long ago. Up till now this is not habitual for me, I am always naked around my house, yet this is not a home at all, I don't know what you call this place, it's like a school however not so. I have my reason you'll see, not to say too much, I have someone looking down at me with the eyes and the face and crap. The rain is falling on me, eyes and ears, and boy and girls all like knives inside me, never since the moment I got off the damn bus so it could just run my ass over and get it over with. The rain is matting my long brown hair on me as it lies on down my rump, just like a movie just like the books. Just like me living it, like her.

Some of this shower is cascading off my little face, and it slowly collects on my breasts, where it beads up and separates into two different watercourses down to my belly button. I eyeball it, as it goes all the way down the front of me. Yet I okay with it… at last, I am free. To a fact! I still feel so shut in by all of them. Ten or twenty-five or three minutes have passed, I am still in a similar vary advertisement. 'Girly portion.' Almost like a waterfall gushing in-between my legs. It trickles down to me to where it turns and goes in my butt cheeks, falling too and thrashing my mud exposed toes. After standing so long, holding me upright, weekly my legs so not right give out. Just letting water follow down me.

I'm soaked! Soft thump, sooner or later the pounding gets rains resilient. Making me fall to the ground with where I will remain until I feel that I can get up and over what has happened to me. I can feel the wetness as it lingers in my hair for a while, so unforgivably waterlogged my body even more. That's if I can… like if I can accept it all. It's all because of them! Counting my sanctification, I feel dissatisfied in a way when I do feel it releasing offends my hair. Like it is wiping away everything that happened to me today, away from the day of the past. I feel the dropping rain is weeping for me, like hell's tears of pain and flam it runs out of me as I yell out for his safety in a call of his name.

At this time, it follows the center point on my back. Then down in-between my petite butt cheeks. It streams off my butt to the ground near the heels of my feet. The wetness is still running down the small of my back thirty minutes must have passed. However, it is like it is all pounding down on me at once. I look, up to the sky, lying on my backside. It hits me! Even with all this rain.

I feel that my vagina will surely never feel the same, or like it's clean again. The pain hits me! I start rolling around, like a pig in mud. I have the sensation like I have been ripped in two parts, by all the one that never cared and not seeing it till no yet it too late does he even know my name now, is it all lost and forgotten about, it's been so long now.

Where have I been? I can feel as if that part of me is washed clean from the day that I had to go through. On no account can it be yes, no, maybe! The rainwater can only wash away somewhat of what they have done to me. What he did to me and her- and her and him too all of them all- crappers! Never all of it… never- EVER- NEVER EVER! EVER NEVER! They have sucked! AND FREAK AND now that can suck this… I don't care, kill me! You're doing it anyway; I have read the story just do it! I cannot wash away all my fears that I have. Like being

tugged on the hood they suck you off and you have to put up with it. Pending with the thought of bite it off me completely. That is why I'm bleeding out cutting and crap! See this it's for you! All you- I carved the hacker for you! On my lower hip bone. I scrubbed and touched me in all the places. AND FEEL THE GOOD OF IT.

I ripped my black hole wide open, and they see me do it, let sit for him all - all. Fingernails and slashing teeth, see me now he- he sees me, it all for you. Not having you did this to me, same with her, same with losing everything I have ever love and my dad too. I cannot run away, I don't want to stay, I don't want to act gay, or live another day, what more do I have to say.

I need to get away! Come whatever may… I have to get away from them. They always find me! Always. Pledging with Supernatural being saying this has halted. Thus far it goes on every school day on repeat to me only I see the thing that I don't want to yet that don't see it it's right there she talks to me. They don't get that- it's not crazy I see them, I am one. They beat me up for the gratification.

My nipples are raw like me and my skin! I have nowhere to run or to hide! I cannot stop them from point out, assault, and sucking on me! Sometimes it's like I blackout and see it all pass me. I just need to okay! It is like these hallucinations of what my life existence about comes and goes away from me. I know how a candle feels, careworn not to be blustered out by the rushing air, which is stale. It smells like death in this small room, alone. Nothing but my thought to keep me.

'There it is!' I say as I rip it out. The paper is jagged and wet, but I have a farewell note in my hand. I made it earlier in school at lunch when I was sitting alone, on this crumpled up notebook paper. The black ink is running like a watercolor all over all my shaky childlike penmanship handwriting. All have on it all words that need to be said, about my existence in life! They're all there, maybe spelled incorrectly, but there regardless.

I feel like I am existing not living! It is as if I have all these flashbacks, to the point it haunts me. Even at the strangest times, my mind drifts off. Corresponding I said- It is all because of them! The air that is around me now, is making my slit labia skin hurt with burn and sting.

I have every right to be troubled!

Do you even freaking care? Do you? Yes, no, maybe… what do you think? Look at me, and close your eyes tightly. Now can you seem me? I was never like some of you: popular and loved. Or maybe you're like me, which fits in with everything that category is not. Do you see my teardrops, that splash out of my blue eyes? Do you see my brown hair that covers them and hides my true sentiments in class? Do you feel what I feel right now? It just seems that everything in my life is like trickling down my body, and away from me in every way imaginable. As a result, the only thing I can do is get up and raise my hands to the heavens. While shouting the question- 'Why did you let this happen to me?'

Can you feel my hurting insides? Nope did think so, no one can feel it unless they live it! Have you ever had to feel just like I do? Can you see my makeup mixing with my teardrops, as it all falls to the ground like my emotions, passions, and caring? If not you're just as heartless as them!

I hear that small voice in my head again it's a small whisper saying: 'End it! End it!' I have nothing but my split thoughts rushing in my head.

Like a screaming bolt of lightning cracking in the sky above me. GOD- and loving-crap! I give or take! Should I just end it all? I have every day now and they would let me go. But there is not one person around here for me, and he not always here for me. A long time ago, he said no, now look at me so old- gray and not caring at all, I wonder if he is coming to see me, know the past at an old age, crap I remember now, I am ninety-nine and see him all the time, like a rhyme out of time, I am young and so his he, yet those days never made me happy or did he? Not one which is going to miss me at all. The blinds cover the spacy world that I don't recall, it was not real to me. they say it's 2114 is not real to me, I want the past, not the future, yet they have me here in this whiteness that all the same and cold looking, icy and with some blackness, depressing as me… it will be and stay every day until they say I can die.

Would anyone care? I came to that gloomy deduction a would anyone think of me? Hell- with them all! I should end it all right now! I crawl over on my hands and knees, grabbing my minor skirt, pulling the belt out of the guards. I think about me grabbing my uniform, in tugged and unsnapped off myself, and- see the light go out, like days before. The same awful garb they slap on me, I don't want to have on me, oh and how I would do it. So tasty so gory, hag forms the bunk bed, stung by my head, that may work, nope they kill me. KILL ME! KILL ME!

PLEASE JUST KILL ME, so I can live with him up there.

Snapping my neck. I see it over there, the end is nearing I almost see him there, seeing me welcoming to his home. Calling outreach, feel slipping of… I do it to see him, all the way not just the dream of him. To do what must be done! Holding the bedsheets in my small hands. I stop and look at my fingernails, which are painted purple with pink straps. (Eye twitching) I say, will make the black leather belt into a noose, looping, twisting, and coiling it through the shiny silver buckle to make snugger around my neck.

Sure, I am thinking about the sheet, and it but, that pain is nothing like what they put me through. At least with this, it's over and done fast. But I also think about that last fall, that I would take. I have the sheet around my neck attached to the bed frame. All I have to do is a swing and jump off, and it would pull me back through the air.

YES!

Don't you do this it's all for me! Like them, you did this to me too! I blame you two, I see you looking into me.

Oh yes! Ha ha ha…!

So, all this time, I have had to think about why I pasted away as I did. And it was to save my sis, from ending her young life, I had to see what her life was more parishes then my own. To stop her from having sex with Ray and blowing her brains out on Sunday the next day. To tell her not to have sex any boy until she feels she found the one and only. To save myself- I had to save her from being like me, and help out others like Madilyn that needed me along to be there as a friend. So now I will be looking over Kellie and all of you from the sky above. And be the big sis that I should have always been. I am happy to say I have made it, with no regrets. The rest you'll have to discover for yourself when you breathe your last breath.

How are you going to be remembered? What do you value in your life and others? That's worth thinking about… and final note: before you fall, know where you have been, and where you're going! Always fall to yourself first and the one you fall to first, and fall to the ones that truly love you, and then fall to them if you Madilyn need too or you can't leave your life or days without them. It's up to you whom you fall too, just remember that. All along it was Marcel… I felt…it I felt… all of it! All of that all of him all up inside me, and it was his… know our baby, that was left behind inside me, yet I am still not sure how I got pregnant. When did it happen or

did it happen? It was through me? Through him- yet inside me? Maybe it was all Marcel in everyone that I did fall for anyway. If I did love him and fall for someone else or made love to someone else it was Madilyn only to him, I saw and felt within me.

PS.- I loved you alone Marcel!

#-Hashtag: (fallen too you!)

Chapter: 89

Final say

Kellie- My sis did not get all she wanted- I know this to be true I loved Ray more and for that, she is not here anymore, for I have to confess, I have had sex with him or any time and I was only seven years old at the time. Look at me know I am fourteen years old, and I still remember it all.

I had it after I was gone and it was like she was haunting me, the whole time I was the little girl- known as sis- I was me acting as Karly acted I am a lot like her even now I live with Ray I mom and dad both suck, and she is the one that was not right, we are so very much in love. She was pulling us away or so I thought. I don't get it? I am younger than what my friends think of fortune, that doesn't stop me from loving him, I always will even if he doesn't love me back- I have fallen to my first.

Falling to you!

~*~

(In a whispered voice)

Karly- I love Marcel! All along it was you I loved, Marcel was just playing so I Madilyn using her body so I would feel- will okay about doing things, with him that I would never do with him in person, he always loved me, more yet I did not let myself fall too him until it was too late.

Say hello to Nevaeh Anna Barns, she is seven weeks old and doing just fine, she is a brown-haired blue-eyed baby girl, full of life. She was born before the end of Karly's life, in 2016, yet she doesn't remember any of that for she had a memory issue, it was all because of her

car accident, she got sick of not see the world as she knew it, and she even forgot about the one she feels too. It was all grieving over

Jenny, and her friends like her, and also her garden angel as she called her- Emallie.

Maddie still goes to see her every day at the cemetery and talks to the gay stone next to all the others, and she cries her eyes out only for her, saying she was in-love yet she'll never love again…

I'll be seeing you! Wherever you may be…

Where did she go…?

I don't know…

Was it like heaven or hell?

I- undoubtedly don't know… what do you think?

I-Left a flower behind a lily.

I am- 'Going in and out!'

With- Hallucinations….

'I Can't Help Falling in Love with You!'

Maddie and Olivia, this is how it went for us:

(Cut)

Natalynn Barns, my mother is Killie, you don't know me as of yet but you will. The year is 2117, the car that is flying on the roadways looking like modern 36 ford cops and sedans of the way gone past most if not all tan and thunder gray, and train that rush by, people die and no one cries, it all just a part of this cold world like the electronic music that has no rhythm just beeps and bops. Robots walking freely taking over, your thoughts. Saying everything for you, taking money from you and you don't have a say, on is the height power and you are eating the crap off the floor, do I need to say more for you to get it?

It would be my peace, peace at last! Sure, I don't want to hang myself, but at the same time, I do. The voice in my head is saying too, and getting more vibrant.

Do I have a choice at this point? Oh Yes, I don't! I am going to dangle! Yes, dangle off one of these old angel oak tree branches, tonight. This ancient tree is next to the rundown house! The home of loneliness, and it feels as empty inside as I do right now. Why do I want to do this? Fine: I will tell you why mainly so that everyone from my school of hell can see me up here in the tree naked.

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(Start of the re-ending around 2020)

Olivia- For all the people who have septic I with amour in the past, you know who you are. This is for you to understand you're not alone and I did all I could to not be a part of all this. For the girls who will contaminate me in the future- I can't wait yet I have to say it was not all my washes to have it be this way.

To see whom, you'll be, and who I was and what I have become now. And in both cases: Thank you, not for what you girls put me thought. Her life sucked why should mine? Up till then and before till the after, that is what she wanted to be done she? The most hazardous viruses are those that make us believe we are well. I saw her slipping away every day in the halls and did nothing about it, yet was it I that had too? Did I have to fall to that level to be something I was not to her, and even her too?

It has been many years since those old days looking back on it, nevertheless, she haunts me still, like my girlfriend of the past. Chair and the association identified love as a disease, and fifty-three since the scientists perfected a cure if you want to call it that. One and all else in my family has had the formula already.

You know I had and younger sister, Christie, who has been disease-free for ten years now. Not long after Jenny's end of her life. She's been safe from love for so long, not as I was, she wants the old school ways, not what I did, Maddie always says' she can't even remember what all took place, we were high and crazy, it was part of the times then. I was not a babysitter, for that girl I didn't do anything wrong. I'm scheduled to have a hearing on all the small details, and it is breaking us apart at the like glass smashing, and cracking to shards.

I've seen countless unsecured dragged to their procedures, so racked and ravaged by the love that they would rather tear their eyes out, or try to impale themselves on the barbed-wire fences outside of the laboratories than be without it. Numerous years ago, on the day of her

procedure, one girl managed to slip from her restraints and find her way to the laboratory roof. Pending the procedure has been achieved, until it has been made safe for the under eighteen, we will never be protected. It still moves around us with invisible, sweeping tentacles, choking us… 'taking it all down as she used to say.'

Many people are afraid of the procedure. I am looking at this how it all on rolled out some people even resist. But I'm not afraid, if she would just stand by my said like she used to. I can't wait. I would have it tomorrow if I could, but you- I can't, have to be at least at seeing what it is I need to have done here, sometimes a little older, sometimes a little crazier, sometimes wild. Ha! They drive you nuts about all the girls that I got the blame for dyeing. I have to look backing and say, I have sex with a girl only and look I don't have a family to turn too, now. Earlier the scientists will cure you, I said as she was dying for something, I cannot recall the name of, otherwise, the procedure won't have it, I would rather not live if I can do what I want with you.

People end up with brain damage, fractional paralysis, blindness, or worse. I get that I said to her yet you still have me, yet in her mind, she gave up on life, after all the drama. I don't like to think that I'm still got it all, yet I don't. Walking around with the disease running through my blood. I don't have much time really either doing the crap I did with anybody. You have tolls of your action I am facing mine now.

Sometimes- I swear I can feel it writhing in my veins like to some degree of spoiled, sour milk in and coming out of me. I run all the time… I feel like fun all the time too. It reminds me of being young offspring pitching fits. Jenny was known for that, not Karly, yet she was sometimes a pain in the butt. It repeats me of confrontation, of diseased girls uninteresting their nails on the pavement, tearing out their hair, their mouths It makes me feel dirty.

Know what I did to myself and others. I have to live on like this… they don't. They're gone now. I left it in the past yet the past has not left me.

And of course, it reminds me of my mother, she messed up also in her life, and I hear it playing in my mind of her voices, as hearing the harsh word of- shame on you. The rooms spring, like she in my mind. The world has nothing to offer me, no single shred of interest. I'm a teen girl trapped on a circle, watching a passing parade, a blur of noise and motion that sooner or later turns to a single point on the horizon, a gutter full of trampled and muddy cups, and the sense of wasting an evening.

I'm holding hands with someone you would not get a boy not a girl, but whenever I turn to look at him his face blurs, like a camera losing focus, and I can't make out any features. But his hands are cool and dry, and my heart is beating steadily in my chest and my dream, I know it will always beat out that same rhythm, not skip or jump or swirl or go faster, just womp, womp, womp, until I'm dead. Harmless, and free from pain. Things weren't always as good as they are now. In school, we learned that in the old days, the dark days, people didn't realize how deadly a disease love was. Dripping spit.

That they would get you on there on the side and then do zero but fail, and fail, and fail again. Individuals should come with warnings, like cigarette packs:

involvement would kill you over time.' 'It was one-sided that people could pretend to be one thing when they were approximately else. Dripping girl jizz after the procedure I will be cheerful and safe forever, yeah right kiss it, that's what everybody says, um-hum, that people say, commodes hanging from the walls in my room, the scientists, and my sister. I will have the procedure and then I will be paired with a boy the surveyors choose for me. In a few years, we'll get married, or so I thought to Dilico, Recently I have started having dreams about my never happening wedding. In them, I'm standing under a tree canopy with flowers in my hair, in something that you would not understand, and that is a white dress, I am a girlie- girl; however, I do want that crap also, just for my past I don't need to pay for it all.

For a long time, they even viewed it as a good thing, something to be celebrated and pursued. Of course, that's one of the reasons it's so dangerous: It affects your mind so that you cannot think clearly, or make rational decisions about your well-being. He loves me yet does he, I can have sex with him now I have a nasty STD. (That's symptom number twelve, listed in the I- myself section of the twelfth edition of The Safety, Health, and Happiness Handbook, or The Book- Sh thingy-ie, as they call it.) Instead of people back then named other diseases-stress, heart disease, anxiety, depression, hypertension, insomnia, bipolar disorder-never realizing that these were, in fact, only symptoms that in the mainstream of cases could be traced back to the effects of this crap, of course, we aren't yet absolutely free from the hallucinations in the United States. I was said to go and live on a tiny Island by on nurse I had.

Maddie- She dropped quickly, without screaming. For days afterward, they broadcast the image of the dead girl's face on television to remind us of the dangers of the deliria. Her eyes were open and her neck was twisted at an unnatural angle, but from the way her cheek was

resting on the pavement, you might otherwise think she had lain down to take a nap. Surprisingly, there was very little blood-just a small dark trickle at the corners of her mouth.

I phenomenon whether the procedure will hurt. I want to get it over with. It's hard to be patient. It's hard not to be afraid while I'm still uncured, though so far, the deliria haven't touched me yet. Still, I have apprehension. They say that in the old days, love drove people to psychosis. That's bad enough. The deadliest of all deadly things: It kills you both when you have it and when you don't.

The book of crap also tells stories of those who died because of love lost or never found, which is what terrifies me the most. I wonder when and who's next, I remember how I loved that thing now look at it. She watches me in silence. When I'm finished, she holds the orange, now unpeeled, in both hands, as though it's a glass ball and she's worried about breaking it. I nudge her. 'Go ahead. Eat now.' She just stares at it and I sigh and begin separating the sections for her, one bygone.

Like- like- most if not all the girls that passed before me. It only takes one like Ray to do us all in, and get this, free love is not all ways free. Yet I the one that gets it, not her and she okay what, like why me… I was just being a cool girl. I should have been thinking more as Karly did, and her sister, they had ways of not have all that going up in. better than birth control, it stopped it. 'There is no fix for stupid she said.' Nevertheless- love is love- I yelled back pissed.

I'm nervous, of course.

Ninety-five days, and then I'll be safe.

Chapter: 90

In and out

It's seven o'clock, as of this moment. We must be constantly on guard against the Disease; the health of our nation, our people, our families, and our minds depends on constant vigilance. 'Basic Health Measures,' The Safety, Health, and the smell of oranges has always reminded me of funerals. On the morning of my evaluation, it is the smell that wakes me up. I look at the clock on the light is ashen, the sunlight just fading away slowly dying, breath in my lounges the chemicals, I'm waking up to ash and dust, I wipe my brow and I sweat my rust, I'm breathing in the chemicals; remembering the hot, scratchy dress I was forced to wear when my

mother died; to keep from remembering the murmur of voices, a large, rough hand passing me orange after orange to suck on, so I would stay quiet.

I'm breaking in, shaping up, and then checking out on the prison bus, this is it, the apocalypse. I'm waking up, I feel it in my bones, enough to make my system blow. Welcome to the new age, to the new age, already dressed, watching me. She has a whole orange in one hand. She is trying to gnaw on it, like an apple, with her little-kid white teeth.

My stomach twists and I have to close my eyes again to keep from, At the funeral, I ate five oranges, section by section, and when I was left with only a pile openings heaped on my lap I instigated to suck on those, the light sweet yet bitter taste of the pith aiding to keep the tears away, never- ever doing so. I open my eyes leans forward; the orange cupped in her outstretched palm. I used to jock at that song about the world look at it now it came true. They own our butts.

Bedside table, I don't see the flowers of the past, that I cared so about, dumb, I push off my covers and stand up. Peeing myself, for not having central to it any longer, my gastrointestinal is clenching and untightening like a fist. 'And you're not supposed to eat the peel, you know.' She continues blinking up at me with her big gray eyes, not saying anything. I sigh and sit down next to her. 'Here,' I say, and show her how to peel the orange using her nail, unwinding bright carroty curls and dropping them in her lap, the whole time trying to hold my breath against the smell.

She doesn't respond to the girl in the story. As I do, I whisper, as gently as possible, 'You know, the others would be nicer to you if you would speak once in a while.' Not that I expect her to hear her say a word in the whole seven years, and four months not a single did I relate, thinking there's something wrong with her brain or worse mine… is there something wrong with me?

I stand up and go toward the window, moving away from her and her with big eyes I said the caretaker, staring eyes, and thin, quick fingers. I feel sorry for her as I look over and see the miss that she has become. Karly, you're there in white.

Saying everything is going to be all right. So far, the doctors haven't found it. 'She's as dumb as a tower of strength crumbling to nothing for there was nothing that she could say.' Fatly just the other day, watching turn a bright-colored block over and over in her hands, as though it was beautiful and miraculous, as though she expected it to turn suddenly into something else.

One Direction - Story of My Life, days go by, like stories written on the walls, I don't feel the same about you, and it was on her stone. Holding on too tight.

I remember taking her home. Colors of no change, caged up… light is not showing the way, and I will be gone, holding on too tightly, nothing there to hold on too. Frozen in time, I give her hope, the story of my life.

Time, it seemed like a good choice. But two was the number of children the evaluators decided on for she said to me you will if you don't give up. Something good can come your way, just stay with me… and you'll see the way, okay? 'Now is dead,' she looks at me- not make sense to me. She always said she never wanted children in the first place. That's one of the downsides of the procedure; in the absence of her, some people find parenting distasteful. Her family had earned high stabilization marks in the twelve-monthly review.

Her husband, a writer, was well respected. Thankfully, cases of full-blown detachment-where a mother or father are unable to bond normally, dutifully, and responsibly with his or her children, and winds up drowning them or sitting on their windpipes or beating them to death when they cry-are few. This is going to be the best day of my life; it's looking up now. They lived in an enormous house on Twilight Street.

Ho hey- children, had to move I had been living a lonely life, I don't where I belong, I will bleed, you belong within my sweetheart. I don't think you're right for him, I stand looking down, next to me, and I blond with you belong me. People whispered and pointed at them everywhere they went. I wouldn't remember that, of course; I'd be surprised if she has any memories of her parents at all. Her husband extinct before my trial could begin.

I smoke two joints in time of peace, and two in time of war, I smoke two joints before I smoke two joints, and then I smoke two more. Hard work good and hard work fine, but first take care of head, a meal from scratch, and taught piano, sounds around when you smoke two joints. I smoke two Joints, I smoke two joints in the morning, I smoke two joints at night, I smoke two joints in the afternoon; it makes me feel all right. Spare time, to keep us busy when I smoke two joints. But, of course, when Kellie's husband was so-called of being a well-wisher, everything changed.

The trials are mostly for show. Sympathizers are almost always executed. If not, they're locked away in the sepulchers to serve three life sentences, end-to-end. that, of passage. Thinks

that's the reason her heart gave out only a few months after her husband's withdrawal when she was indicted in his place. I suck in deeply, inhaling the clean smell of seaweed and damp wood, listening to the distant cries of the seagulls as they circle endlessly, somewhere beyond the low, gray, sloping buildings, over the bay.

It's a ghost of you, hang around. Hey, don't lesson to award I say, the truth is happiness. The screams all the same. It's undoubtedly a good thing he did.

Outside, a car engine guns to life. The sound startles me, and I jump. 'Nervous about your evaluation?' A day after she got served the papers, she was walking down the street and bam! Heart attack.

Hearts are fragile things around me is all the same. That's why you have to be so vigilant, it will be hot today, I can tell, it's already hot in the chamber, and when I crack the window to sweep out the smell of orange which is death, the air outside feels as thick and heavy as an idiom.

'Don't worry. You'll be fine. We can review your answers along the way.' I turn around, to look at the lock was gone, standing in the doorway, her hands gathered. 'Not at all,' I say, though this is an untruth. We are young so I set the world on fire, tonight we are you, I think back, bright then the sun, we shined, carry me home. She smiles, just barely, a brief, flitting thing. Take your shower and then I'll help you with your hair.

Of course, I'll have to get used to it. During the exam, there will be four evaluators staring at me for close to two hours. The hypothetical assessors will examine my strengths and weaknesses, and then assign me to a school and a major.

I'm pretty sure, I did well enough to get assigned to a university. I've always been a decent student. 'Satisfactory.' My friends endure staring at me, from within, yours truly squirm here, digging my nails into the windowsill behind me. I've always hated being looked at. I'll be wearing a flimsy malleable gown, semi-translucent, like the kind you get in hospitals so that they can see my body.

'A seven or an eight, I would say,' my friends within me say, puckering her lips. It's a decent score and I'd be happy with it. 'Though you won't get more than a seven if you don't get cleaned up.'

(Back to our halls)

Like a dumb ass I went college, (assuming I pass all my boards. Senior year is almost over, and the calculation is the final test I will take. For the past four months, I've had all my various board exams-math, science, oral magic, and written proficiency, sociology and psychology, and photography (a specialty elective)-and I must be getting my scores one-time in the next few weeks ago it was not long ago or so it seems to me. Solitary of them will become my husband after I graduate, girls who don't pass get paired and married right out of high school). The evaluators will do their best to match me with people who received a similar score in the evaluations. As much as possible they try to avoid any huge disparities in intelligence, temperament, social background, and age. Of development you do hear occasional horror stories: cases, where a poor seventeen-year-old girl is given to a wealthy old man, is the delirium dream, which is dumb, dumb, dumb.

The stairs let out their awful moaning, Jenny, appears before me. She is nine and tall for her age, but very thin: all angles and elbows, her chest caving in like a warped sheet pan. It's terrible to say, but I don't like her very much. She has the same pinched look as her mother did. The assessment is the last step, so I can get paired, paid and laid, in the coming months, the evaluators will send me a list of four or five approved matches.

She joins me- in the doorway and stares at me, as I lay there feeling naked, I am only five-two and Jenny is, amazingly, just a few creeps shorter than I am now.

It's silly to feel self-conscious in front of my aunt and cousins, but a burning, crawling itch begins to work its way up my arms. I have been hard, losing sleep, count the stars, I know they're all worried about my performance at the evaluation. I must get paired with someone good. Old I am not the old young, and I am not the bold, Jenny and are years away killed me but that was my life. From their procedures. If I marry well, in a few years it will mean extra money for the family. It might also make the whispers go away, singsong snatches that four years after the scandal still seem to follow us wherever we go, like the sound of rustling leaves carried on…

It was only in my dreams that, I heard the word shouted, screamed. I take a deep breath, then duck down to pull the plastic bin from under my bed so that my friends won't see I'm shaking. 'I may be getting married today?'

Jenny… I said over and over, it was maybe today. The wind: Follower, Adherent, and the Champion. It's only slightly better than the other expression that followed me for eons after her

death, a serpent hiss and it kisses, undulating, leaving its trail of poison: Suicide. A sideways word, a word that individuals whisper and mutter and cough: a word that must be squeezed out behind cupped palms or murmured behind closed doors.

Honestly, I've never even talked to a boy for longer than five minutes, Wal-Mart and is always picking his nose and wiping his not on the underside of the sweet potato. All and sundry espouse as soon as they are ended with their tutoring. It's the way things are. The mark of a Vigorous society.' And if I don't pass my boards-please God, please God, let me pass them- I'll have my wedding as soon as I'm cured, in less than three months. Her voice has always, reminds me of birds flying droning flatly in the heat.

'Don't be irresponsible,' Karly would say, but underprivileged of blocking. 'Bridal is Order and Stability, I take my towel from the bin and straighten up. That name- espouse- makes my mouth go dry. 'You know she can't say 'I do' until she's healed.' But the thought of it still makes my heart flutter frantically, like an insect behind glass. I've never touched a boy, of course, physical contact between uncured of the opposite sex is forbidden.

Which means I'll have my nuptial night. My mother, sister, and I had, lived closer to the border, and I was amazed and terrified by all the winding, pitch-black highways, which smelled like garbage and dying flash. I always wished for my aunt to hold my hand, but she never did, and I had balled my hand and so fists and followed the spellbinding upmarket of her corduroy pants, dreading the moment that IUP, would rise over the crest of the final mountain. The dark stone building lined with fissures and cracks like the weather-beaten face of one of the industrial fishermen who work along the docks.

My friend's sighs and checks her the smell of strawberries is still strong, and my stomach does another swoop. I watch. Entomb my face in my towel and inhale, willing myself not to be sick. From downstairs there is the clatter of dishes. 'We have to leave in less than an hour,' she says. 'You'd healthier get moving.'

Chapter: 91

Out and in

A peer of the realm, help us root our feet to the earth, and our eyes to the road and always remember the fallen angels, who, attempting to soar, where seared instead by the sun and, wings

melting, came crashing back to the sea. Lord, help root my eyes to the earth and stay my eyes on the road, so I may never stumble.

Psalm 24, I read it all again, they say not to yet I do.

(From 'Prayer and Lesson')

I have been terrified of the streets, then, and reluctant to leave my friends it's amazing how things change.

Maggie- Side walking me down to the workrooms, which, like all the management offices, are lumped unruffled along the quaysides: a string of bright, white buildings, glistening like teeth over the slurping mouth of the ocean. When I was little and had just moved in with her, she used to walk me to school every day.

'Parents teach you a lot of things, but the most important thing they teach you is this: how people will freak you up in the future. The salt blowing off the sea makes the air feel textured and heavy. I can smell the deep-sea, though it's concealed from view by the meandering undulations of the streets, and it diminishes me. 'Evoke,' she is saying for the now I know them so well I could, follow their dips and curves with my eyes closed, and today I want nothing more than to be alone.

Over and over like times before- 'They want to know about your personality, yes, but the more generalized your answers the better chance you have of being considered for a variety of positions.' My friends have always talked about matrimonial with boys only, I didn't get them yet I do now, words straight out of the notebook words like responsibility, blame, and determination. If they're any good, they teach you to get used to it.'

Olivia- 'Modification to it,' I say. I don't like makeup, I have never been interested in clothes or lip gloss. A bus container- past you and me and her. Everyone knows I am having my appraisal today. Only four are offered throughout the year, and slots are strong-minded well in money upfront. The makeup insisted I wear, makes my skin feel coated and slick. In the bathroom mirror at home, I thought I looked like angelic, especially with my hair all pinned with metal constable pins and clips: a fish with a bunch of metal knobs sticking in my head. My best friend, Shy-, thinks I'm crazy, but of course, she would. 'Humorous, isn't it, how swiftly the future becomes the past.'

Like using a fire snake on the rails, I have to expand my mind. But that's the beauty of life: time is yours to keep and to change. Just a few proceedings can be satisfactory to carve a new road, a new track. Just a few minutes, and the void is kept at bay. You will live forever with that new road inside of you, stretching away to a place suggested, barely, on the horizon. Everything is in- between. I have eyes that aren't green or brown, but a middle finger. I'm not thin, but I not fat either.

Shy- She's stunning- even when she just twists her blond hair into a messy knot on the top of her head, she looks as though she's just had it styled. I'm not ugly, but I'm not pretty, either. 'If they ask you, God forbid, about your friends, reminisce to say that you didn't know them well, yet that okay or so they say.' For the shortest time, shorter than the shortest second's breath, you get to stand up to infinity. But eventually, and always, infinity wins.'

The only thing you could say about me is this: I'm short. 'Um huh.' I'm only half listening. It's hot, too hot for her, and sweat is picking up already on my minor back and in my armpits, even though I slathered on and upon roll-on this morning on top of her.

White and black is all the same- not shut up! Get some color right, 'Blue,' I parrot back at her. 'Blue is my favorite color. Or pink maybe purple.' Black is too melancholic; red will set them on edge; pink is too babyish; orange is freakish, and I think you have to suck on that only and the things you like to do in your permitted time? Ruined by the disease. That's what everyone wanted, in the end: to be part of something bigger, and not minor. I got it big…

~*~

'Karly? Are you even eavesdropping on me?' Maddie puts a hand on my arm and gyrations me in her course. I mildly slip away from her soft handed touching, and brushing off her fingertips. There is already a double line forming: on one side, the girls, and fifty feet away, a second entrance, the boys all looking at as and crap. 'We've gone over this already.' 'This is important, Karly, Jenny, Maddie. Possibly the most important day of your whole life.' I sigh, and think, into the future of me the gates that bar and my bra, the government labs swing open slowly with an involuntary drone. I squint against the sun, trying to locate people I know, but the ocean has dazzled me and my vision is clouded by floating black spots. I take a deep breath and presentation into the spiel we've prepared a billion times.

'I like to work on the school paper. I'm interested in photography because I like the way it captures and jellies a single moment. I relish hanging out with my friends and attending concerts at Oaks Park. I like to run and was a co-captain of the track team for four years. I hold the school record, for two of them, I often babysit the younger members of my family, and I like children.' 'You're making a face, its everything.'

Jenny- 'I love children,' I repeat, plastering a smile on my face. The truth is, I don't like very many children except for like Kellie. They're so uncomfortable and loud all the time, and they're always grasping things and dribbling and wetting themselves, and getting wet. But I know I'll have to have children of my own someday, freaking- crap yes, I do. I finish, 'My favorite subjects are math, and I count all the boys in the room, to see if I can get some. And history,' and nods, satisfied, thinking about all that I had. 'Olivia!' I turn around. Karly is just climbing out of Jenny's parents' car, her blond hair flying, the door hitting another car in the lot. In tendrils and breakers around her face, her semi-sheer tunic slithering off one sunburned shoulder.

Some last-class people keep cars mounted in front of their apartments like statues, frosty and unused, the tires unblemished and not used much as of yet. All the girls rowed at the gym, and now down the same line-up to enter the labs have twisted to watch her. Hana has that kind of power over folks. Life Is the total of all our small mistakes, little upheavals, wicked choices, Calculation on a maximum of accumulation. They pile up like cow crap all in a pile and it builds up until the cost of keeping up appearances is too high and the weight is just too much. Then: collapse like the bridge so long ago. 'Jenny! Jenny Wait!' I got your number- he- he, classic pun… Maddie lingers run hauling ass down the street, waving at me, like a loser! Uncontrollably, behind her, and the car begins a slow upheaval: back down the hill, back in the narrow drive until it is facing the opposite direction, flying into trees and crap.

Let's just say- She lost her parents' car is as sleek and dark as a panther. The few times we've driven, around in it composed I've felt like a monarch. Hardly anyone has SUV, to any further extent, and even fewer have cars that drive. Emollient is austerely rationed and extremely expensive. People, Caroline thought, where like dynasties. They could open their doors. You could walk through their rooms, and touch the bits and pieces hidden in their corners. But something- the assembly, the wiring, the invisible mechanism that kept the whole thing standing- lingered indistinguishably, recommended only by the fact of its obtainable at everything.

'Mom made me bring it. She said, P-o-ed I should read it while I'm waiting for my evaluation. She said it will give the right impression.' Maddie sticks her finger down her throat and mimes gagging. That the same sound she made last night Jenny yelled out! She is catching up to us Madalyn says breathlessly, a magazine pops out next to her favorite books, of her half-open bag, and she patronizes to retrieve it. It's one of the government newspapers, Home and Family, and in answer makes a face, to my upstretched eyebrows, she confused, yet that's just her.

Olivia- 'Maddie,' whispers fiercely.

~*~

Her voice is back to normal. 'Don't worry. They're not eavesdropping on us.' The nervousness in her voice makes my heart skip. She hardly ever loses her temper, even for a minuscule. She whips her head in both directions, as though expecting to find regulators or evaluators lurking in the bright morning street. Maddie turns her back to me, and mouths to me, yet. Then she grins, in front of us, the double line of girls and boys is increasing extensive, extending into the thoroughfare, even as the glass- adjoined doors of the laboratories swish open and several nurses appear, carrying clipboards, and begin to use people into the waiting rooms. I rest one hand on my elbow lightly, quick as a bird. 'You'd healthier get online,' she says. I commend some of her quietnesses would polish off on me.

Chapter: 92

Phantasm

Maddie- 'And Olivia?'

'Yeah?'

Maddie- 'Good luck with that.' 'Thanks.' I kind of wish Liv would

Say something else-something like I'm sure you'll do great, or Try not to worry- but she just stands there, blinking, her face composed and incomprehensible as always. 'Don't worry, I said to her and her mother, and she winks at me. This is how we grow: not up, but out, like trees--puffiness to embrace all these stories, the possibilities, and fabrications, and bribes and habits, Maddie said- I don't feel very well. The labs look far away, so white, I can hardly stand to look

at them. The roadway is icy cold in front of us. The world's most important day of your life keeps repeating in my head. The sun feels like giant limelight.

'I'll make sure she doesn't screw up too badly. Promise.' All my nervousness dissipates. Liv is so tranquil about the entire thing, so offhand and normal. Maddie and I go down to the labs together. She is almost five-one. When I walk next to her, I have to do a half skip every other step to keep up with her, and she wants to say she is taller- NOT!

I would be a complete wreck otherwise. I wind up feeling like a nod jogging up and down in the water. Today I don't mind, though. I'm glad she's with me. 'God,' she says, as we get closer to the lines. Amazing, isn't it? That hearts that once beat in sync could be so perfectly and forever separated. That's the whole process of life, I think a long, slow process of separation. It can be preserved only by the reabsorption into everything, into the sole heartbeat of time, like a rhyme.

'Your aunt takes this whole thing pretty seriously, huh?' 'Fine, it is thoughtful.' We join the back of the line. I for one see a few folks I distinguish, some girls I know imprecisely, from school; some guys I've seen playing soccer, some left behind like the Sped-ers, never- ever the Preps, one of the girls of the schools is such that. This girl looks me at the way, I see me staring.

She raises her eyebrows and I drop my eyes quickly, my face going hot all at once and an anxious itch working in my abdominal. You'll be paired in less than three months, I tell myself, but the words don't mean anything and seem preposterous, like one of the Mad- Libs games we played as kids that always resulted in ludicrous statements, I want a banana for sped-der, do think you'll be able to suck on that?

Give me a wet shoe to your blistering cupcake. 'Of course, I am acquainted with… believe me, I have delivered, look at the pages turn, and twist, your thoughts, Shy- pushes her sunglasses up onto her temple and bats her eyelashes at me, making her voice super sugary…

She drops her sunglasses back down on her nose and makes a face. 'You don't have faith in it?' I lower my voice to a whisper.

'Assessment day is the exciting rite of the passageway that concocts you for a future of happiness, solidity, and business.' Shy- has been strange recently. She was always different from other people- more tactful, more self-governing, and more unafraid. It's one of the reasons I first wanted to be her friend.

~*~

(Disclaimer of thoughts)

The second year, SATURDAY, JUNE 18th Maggie! SATURDAY, JUNE 22nd.

Marcel!

Maggie!!

Maggie!!! SUNDAY, JUNE 24th Marcel! TUESDAY, JUNE 29th Maggie! FRIDAY, JULY 19th.

Marcel!

Maggie!! SATURDAY, JULY 20th.

All of them inside me.

MONDAY, JULY 14th.

I want to go back and feel over.

Marcel!

Maggie!!!

Jenny and friends FRIDAY, JULY 15th.

Maggie!

Marcel!!

SATURDAY, JULY 17th.

Maggie… then him…

MONDAY, JULY 21st.

Marcel, yes, please! WEDNESDAY, or Friday the 13th Maggie! Under me. Sexy WEDNESDAY, JULY 20th Maggie, Maggie, and Maggie!

WEDNESDAY, JULY 27th.

Marcel, I am in his back seat.

FRIDAY, JULY 29th.

Marcel! I see it all in my face.

Maggie, yet I see this butt too he-he!

SATURDAY, JULY 30th Maggie!

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 4th.

Marcel! Getting it!

Maggie! Had it!

Marcel! Feeling now all in and stuff.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 5th.

Maggie, on her period, so it all boy, things today.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 7th.

Maggie, get off already.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 14th.

Marcel, Maggie, Ray

MONDAY, AUGUST 15th.

Maggie is on my mind more than Jenny-

TUESDAY, AUGUST 16th.

Maggie, not a school, so it's all him.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 17th.

Marcel, is got it going on.

MONDAY, AUGUST 22nd.

Maggie is farting too much, and I have to sleep.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 25th.

Marcel, Maggie, Marcel, Maggie…

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8th.

Maggie is feeling fat, like me…

(The jump-off)

SATURDAY, Maggie the- WATER WAS so-o EMOTIONLESS and cold it, TOOK MAGGIE'S BREATH away as she fought past the kids thronging the pavement and standing in the shallows, waving towels and not yet dressed she run for my mom's car, and said she'll change in here. Reassuring and calling up to the remaining steeplechasers. She took a deep breath and went under on to whatever she was holding in, the sound of voices, of shouting… she was saying it more and more, and laughter was directly subdued.

There's just something about her, and yet him. I didn't mean for it to happen. Only one voice stayed with her. Those eyes; the long lashes, the lashes under his eyebrow so right so nice, and the lips that are so wet and kissable. Something about her. I suppose, in some sense, wills are like maps: they are the imprint we authorization, the places our cares have been entrenched; the work we have done; the money we have burrowed away; the furrows and the paths that lead back to spaces we have gone, and marked, and loved. Which predestined, nothing about you, anymore, looked back into my thoughts. She'd been planning to tell him she loved him tonight. The cold was deafening, a vivacious rush through her body. Her denim shorts felt as though they'd been prejudiced with nuggets.

(Gym Class girls swimming)

That's what fright was all about: no fear.

Karly- Like this, I can't swim

As luck would have it, an inordinate length of time of braving the arroyo and racing the quarry with him had made Maggie so strong swimmer. The water was threaded with bodies, twisting and kicking, splashing, treading water- the showjumpers, and the people who had linked their commemorative swim, sloshing into the quarry still clothed, carrying beer cans and joints. She could hear a distant rhythm, faint drumming, and she let it move her through the water- without thought, without fear.

Maggie- She broke the surface for air and saw that she'd already crossed the short stretch of water and reached the opposite shore: an ugly pile of malformed stalwarts, slick with black and khaki moss, piled together like stacked blocks, pitted with fissures and crevices, they shouldered up toward the sky, ballooning out over the water.

Thirty-one people had already hopped over-all of them Maggie's, has no friends and former classmates. Only a small knot of girls continued at the highest of the ridge-the jagged, rocky lip inside the pool, which has rock faces, jutting forty feet into the air on the polar side of the quarry, like a massive tooth biting its way out of the pulverized. It was too dark to see them.

(Lager fire)

The penlights and the bonfire only illumined the beach on a school night trip out of town and a few feet of the pitch-black dark water, with the big full twilight moon, and the faces of the people who had jumped, still nodding in the aquatic, glorious, too contented to feel the cold, taunting the other competitors. The gun was just the goes between the legs.

It was the loneliness that got me in the end, like the knife, Jenny fake die to get boys to kiss her, the topmost of the ridge was a shaggy mass of black, where the trees, cove, where encroaching on the black rock, on a pink and orange backdrop, where the rock was getting slowly pulled into the on the city far away, one or the other. But Maggie knew who they were, and she wanted all me in the water, yet the plan was to be with him fulling about what a girl to do?

All the competitors had to announce, themselves once they reached the top of the ridge, and then, this year's sportscaster, white wood roller-coaster bulb lights reflection of the waves, three or more kids had yet to jump: Marcel being one.

Dinna Pliez, and Velez Washington. Nat, the dude with the red hair, hell with the last name, I can't remember. Maggie's best friend is me, her only friend, now. Maggie wedged her fingers in a fracture in the rocks and pulled. Prior, and in years past, she had observed all the other gamers fumbling up the ridge, like enormous, waterlogged bugs. Every year, people raced to be the first to jump, even though it didn't earn any extra points. It was a pride thing.

She hammered her knee, hard, against a sharp elbow of rock. When she looked down, she could see a bit of dark blood streaking her kneecap. Bizarrely, I did not feel any pain. Even if she

cried her eyes out. And though everyone was still cheering and shouting, it all sounded distant. Matt's words drowned out all the voices. Look, it's just not working for me.

There's something about her, we can still be friends or more, I was wishing. The air was cool, my mind worm, the airstream had picked up, melodic through the tall trees, sending deep groans up from the outer waters, ships passing by.

Nevertheless, she wasn't cold anymore but her, her- heart was beating hard in her throat like mine. She found another handhold in the rock, braced her legs on the slick moss, lifted and leveled, as she had watched the gamers do, every summer since eighth grade. Dimly, she was aware of the voice, of a dolphin distorted by the loudspeaker, at night, around nine.

'Late in the disposed of… a new competitor.' But half his words got whipped away by the wind. Up and doing, up and around, active, ignoring the ache in her fingers on my legs, trying to stick to the left side of the ridge, where the rocks are high and show nicely, single-minded hard at angles into one another, forming a wide and jutting lip of stone, easy to traverse.

Suddenly a dark shape, a person, rocketed past her. She almost slipped. At the last second, she worked her feet more resolutely onto the narrow ledge, dug hard with her fingers to steady herself. A huge cheer went up, and Maggie's first thought was: Natalie, her daughter, but then she roared out, 'And he's in and were out, ladies and gentlemen! I guess it's the same way trees grow around the very vines that are killing them, so they're inhibited and nonstop all at once. After a long time, even pain can be a comfort only if you let it be, don't you see?

Chapter: 93

Mirage

Baby, I am amazed by you…

It suddenly seemed a million miles away. Her belly turned, and for an another, the mist cleared commencing her head, the annoyance and the hurt where blustered away, and she wanted to creep onward lower down the rock, not jump off back to the safety of the beach, where I was waiting, to run a huge They could go to Dot's for late-night waffles, extra butter, extra whipped cream.

Marcel, is the one I contemplate about being with at this point. We make genuineness our own, handle it until it is soft as pressed butter. Maddie, our thirty-second gamer, is in!' Not quite

at the top now. But those are just words, and words are just stories, and eventually, always, stories come to an end. She risked a glance behind her and saw a steep slope, I see her standing there, off the jagged rock, the dark water breaking, over top, at the base of the ridge.

But it was too late. Andie's voice came whispering back, and she keeps climbing, not stopping, I want to push where from the bottom No one knows who invented terror, or when it first opened. There are dissimilar theories. Some responsibility the securing of the paper manufacturing works, which overnight placed 50 percent of the teen population of Pittsburgh, on unemployed. They could drive around with all the gaps open, listening to the rising hum of the crickets, or sit together on the hood of his car and talk about nothing.

She learned to swallow words back like the water down in and hold secrets on my tongue until they were liquefied like bubbles. Boys, narrow your eyes at the sun until the tears ran down their faces; they put their hands up to that who scandalously change to arrested for allocating on the very same night he was named prom king, and now changes brake pads at the like the thoroughfares, likes to take credit; that's why he still goes to opening Jump, four years after moving on.

'Standing by?'

'All set.'

'This day and age of now.'

'Almost immediately.'

'Look after, we all will know?

Will it come about today, will it? I asked over and over.'

'Mien, guise; see for automatically!'

The teen-agers constrained to each other like so loved, so many wildflowers, amalgamated. Scrutinizing on view for a look at the veiled rays of hope. It drizzled, with it. Cream and that amazing blue-ness and they breathed of the fresh, fresh air and listened and listened to the silence which on the back burner them in a blessed sea of no encyclopedic and no wave. It had been situated raining for ages or so it seems; many days on days now it has felt this way.

Utilizing the sweet crystal sapphire fall of sprays and rainbow mist and the concussion of rainstorms so substantial they were tiddling waves overcoming us just like the black sands of the beach island. Multifactorial, and jam-packed from one end to the other with a shower, with the throb and gush of water, all rhythmic and rushing like us. They looked at everything and savored everything. Then, wildly, like colorful wild birds escaped from their tree's fronds, they take part and entered in shouting spheres. They ran for- 60 minutes, and did not stop successively.

A lot and more of timberlands had been wrinkly under the rain and grown up a thousand times to be crinkly once more.

(The flashback)

Marcel- Let's go swimming in the moonlight.

Karly- Yeah, he said to me, I remember back. Come back here and put your clothes on! We don't need them I said. I don't want to wear stuff in the water so come on. It isn't good to be running around naked all the time, and have kids looking at us oh come on and stop being shy. By ourselves, at last, I said to her. I neediness swear to you me something I can't put into words. I want you to promise me also, now that you will be mine and fall for only me. That you will never- ever, go away... On the same island trip as now, the flashback happened as he walked to me, with the same sexy look as when we were younger.

Why?

I'll express why you, youngsters, we were at that time. Look at us, Look at us. She was silly, him nervous are you ready for the first kiss? There he is was, he must have swum over there thinking about doing it, under the moonlight, thing get sexual and we go-to fare, with the heavy petting and so on. Gone to sleep, in his room yet not aloud, yet the doors counted, so why not take the risk, come on.

Could you repeat that are your responsibility that for? 'It's ending, it's discontinuing!' 'Yes, surely! 'She reared apart from them, from these kids who possibly will ever remember a period when there wasn't rain and pain and sin.

They were all nine years old, and if there had been a day, so many eons ago, when the sun came out for an hour and showed its face to the stunned world, they possibly will not amnesia. Wake up occupancies go! Don't fear, Karly, we'll be all right they would hear or see us.

Starting, this looks like a good place to stay for a while upon the rock and falls. What are you talking about? Sometimes, at night, she heard them stir, in tribute, and she knew they were dreaming and remembering gold or a fair-haired oil pastel or a coin large enough to buy the world with.

She knew they thought they remembered a temperateness, like a blushing in the face, in the physique, in the trembling hands, weaponries, legs, and then they always awoke to endless movements of us, shaking downcast of clear bead blue necklaces upon the table it was for me to keep, I said I would never- ever take it off, the walk, the gardens, the forests, and their dreams were gone. And then- amid their running one of the girls howled.

She's like a person looking through the wrong end of a telescope, complaining that everything appearances small. Everyone still, the girl, stand-up in the open, held out her hand. 'Oh, look, aspect,' she said, shuddering. They came unhurriedly to look at her opened palm and long fingers. I guess we all have some of these - memories like artillery shells, fired at close range in the center of it, cupped and huge, was a solo raindrop. She began to cry, looking at it. They peeped unobtrusively at the rays.

A breeze blew cold around them. They turned and started to walk back toward the underground house, their hands at their sides, their smiles vanishing away. That's innovativeness if you ask me- never-ending division. 'Oh, Um-hum.' Or maybe its life that is the infection: a feverish dream, a hallucination of feelings. Death is sanitization, a cleansing, and a medication. A few cold drops fell on their noses as well as her cheeks plus her mouth. The sun faded behind a stir of mist a successful of boom startled them and like leaves beforehand a new gale, they were fallen upon each other like ran drips kissing the sky.

Up and down, up and down, like a ladder of choices leading to the next choice, and the next, until suddenly you've run out of choices, and tree, and you find time as rare and thin as air on a mountain. Then its un-oh-m's, sad, turn's more than. Lightning struck seven miles away, five miles away, and them closer and closer than here only a half a mile from us in the waves.

The thundering boom to every sticky hit of his hips under the dark blue-green with yellow casted ink like water, the sky darkened into midnight stars with a staccato flash twinging movement about and tingling down under. It all simmers down to the same thing, are you going to play the cards you got, or they are going to fold are they not?

All-day yesterday they had read in class about the sun. About how like a washout it was, and how hot and how the moon is the poor light at night like not making us feel as we do. As well as they had written small stories or essays or poems about it, I think the sun is a flower, that flowers for just one in 60 minutes.

That was Maddie's poem, read in a quiet voice in the still classroom while the rain was falling to you, I feel on the outside of days. They stood in the doorways looking in, of the open for a moment until it was found, there raining hard, see clearly through the purring ran storm, then they closed the door was fessed, as they could over her head, gotten the enormous sound of the rain falling to You! Masses and falls, everywhere and forever- never all the fallen. We're all just a pool of wires pulled tight, charged beyond volume- a tangle of plugs and stopcocks, waiting for a swell to take down the entire system. Parents teach us our very first lesson about love: that you are sure as hell don't get to choose it.

Looking back…

Chapter: 94

Tangled

Certain stories must remain mine so that there is me to remain. 'Will it be seven more years?' 'Aw, you didn't write that!' protested one of the boys. 'I did,' said to Maggie. 'I did.' 'Marcel said the teacher. But that was yesteryear. Now the rain was a lull, and the youngsters were crushes in like looking out the windows of young love. Where's a teacher I look for my bottoms and top also?' 'She'll be back soon.' 'She should hurry up in an imperativeness why we will miss out on it!' They turned on themselves, like a feverish wheel, all tumbling spokes. Maggie stood alone like a stone.

She was a very frail girl who looked as if she had been lost in the rain for years and the rain had washed out the blue from her eyes and the red from her mouth and the yellow from her hair. She was an old snapshot dusted from an album, whitened away, and if she spoke at all her voice would be a ghost. Now she raised, separate, staring at the rain and the loud wet world beyond the huge glass.

What're you looking at?

Margot said nothing. 'Speak when you're spoken to.' He offered her a thrust. But she did not move; rather she let herself be moved only by him and nonentity else. They edged away from her; they would not look at her. She felt them go away. And this was for the reason that she would play no games with them in the hollow tunnels of the subversive urbanizes'. If they labeled her and ran, she stood irregular after them and did not monitor. We no longer pay attention to the clocks.

Why?

Why should we? Noon is the taste of tropical-ness and the feel of a splinter under a nail. Morning is mud and decaying seal. The evening is the smell of cooked pasta and mushroom. And the night is shivering, and the feel of mice sniffing around our skin. When the class sang songs about happiness and life and games her lips just about stimulated.

Only when they sang about the sun and the summer did her lips move as she watched the drenched windows. And then, of course, the biggest crime of all was that she had come here only five years ago from Earth, and she remembered the sun and the way the sun was and the sky was when she was four in Pa. As well as they, they had been on ensuring all their lives, and they had been only two years old when last the sun came out and had long since forgotten the color and heat of it and the way it was. But Margot remembered.

(Cut into the future)

Kellie- A FLICKER, Of LIGHT with no hope, Just burliness. Perceptible.

ORANGE...YELLOW... the sky's as we realize... It's on FIRE... with could robotic industry. 'It's like a penny,' she said once, eyes closed. 'No, it's not!' the children cried. 'It's like a fire,' she said, 'in the stove.' 'You're lying, you don't dredge up like mud and quicksand!' Cried the children see them as run and do. Burn like books as they do. Revulsions of nuclear warfare taking blaze the sun dropping out duff start now nothing but emptiness, ash and dust all me eat and taste. They have rushed in with the flag and the eyes of fire. Eyes, snapping open.

My face, covered in sweat lying in bed. Sheets, tangled around looking at the all-glass wall seeing the dismay, of life falling into nothingness, his legs running away from yet she dies. Alarm clock, playing something ruthlessly and sunny, unlike the landscape. Sits up not thinking the change is here. Wincing domes day over and ended, like clocks running backward like the

rosins of the polls, shakes it out I do, a Trying to forget so not a dream, I remember the past and the world before we killed it.

You are in danger... the eyes look on my face. I rub my hands over his face. Gets out of bed. The apartment, simple plastic, Unexceptional sterol, rash behavior the signs of someone who lives alone, for man has to fight them all off, no window covers the flying ships look in all the time. A little messy, they say as I walk from the bed to the bath in that all open in the nude, they have to see it all so they say we feel safe. But she remembered and stood quietly apart from all of them and watched the patterning windows. And once, a month ago, she had refused to shower in the school shower rooms, had clutched her hands to her ears and over her head, screaming the water mustn't touch her head. So, after that, dimly, she sensed it, she was different and they knew her difference and kept away.

There was talk that her father and mother were taking her back to Earth next year; it seemed vital to her that they do so, though it would mean the loss of thousands of dollars to her family. I tube down to the low's levees 5,000 feet or mover down, past the hegemonic plant life on the roofs, and parks within the building cities. I live on top of the water on the way up at the height, steps outside.

Screens everywhere, into the flow of PERSON ALONG FOR THE RIDE heading for the elevated trains just zipping by my face with the wind. Elbow to elbowing craziness. A river of human race mixed with animatronics.

Moves along on the ground if you can call it that with it creepy glow, like everyone else, not a tree to be found only within the buildings, it's all pumped out so we can live on the HVAC over ever roadway, Swiftly I see all the lights making up for the brightness of the sun that has departed, the moon a close to us as it can get all the others stars shining brightly ours linking like a dubbed sided light hose of the past.

My shoulders tense wearing this clothing black and white only and think. That feeling at the back of his neck of them sniffing me out. Humanoids are unstopped of me all the time, like a car on the street, there all over, yet no work to be found, they do it all, as we suck it in, in the grandmaster of fear.

A ROBOT Just behind me touching me all over with his cold not soft hands. Humanoid in design, but still clearly a mechanism of tritium, real looking eyes, and girly faces, or boy like

they have sexual identity and names, they are born into the world and killed by robots also with a feel not useful, like us, by doctors; Copper and man-made casings covering hydraulic muscles glowing light colors of their personality.

Like this little girl Allie, she glows pink age five, harmless to all, not sufficient to live yet, the choice not chosen yet. Yet what is life to a robot, do they have a soul or have emissions or feel if you are like her then maybe you do, why kill her for being a kid, and meeting their standards, the thing wisdoms her stare.

She Looks up and then dragged away like that guy over there to be put down. Nothing but mutter… is life now and so, the children cut off from us… as they run like nude bugs over the play yards.

Doing the test to live or die, what is right for life? They pick it now us, hated her for all these reasons of big and little consequence. The government overturned, they win, and they hated her shiny articulate face, her waiting silence, her thinness, and her possible future. I am a teacher or so they say in the yard now ever looking as they do the teaching or so they say for us, as they know me than me, 'Get away from him it yells!'

The boy gave her another push. 'What're you waiting for he is injected with it and out?' Then, for the first time, she turned and looked at his eyes still open he said goodbye in a quick breath. There are over ten of these in five years groping a day, and up, and what she was waiting for was in her eyes not to look at her in the way, yet they always do. The kids loved her to understand, how they would not meet the ways of the world.

'Well, don't wait around here!' cried the boy savagely. 'You won't see anything!' Her lips moved. 'Nothing!' he cried. 'It was all a joke, wasn't it?' He turned to the other children. 'Nothing's happening today. Is it?' They all bat an eyelid at him and then, understanding laughed and shook their heads, 'Nothing, and nothing!'

It (death) isn't an infection, she said. She might be right. Then again, we've nested in the walls like bacteria. We've taken over the house, its insulation, and its plumbing- we've made it our own. 'Oh, but,' Margot whispered, her eyes helpless. 'But this is the day, the scientists predict, they say, they know, the sun.' Or maybe it's a life that it's the infection: a feverish dream, a hallucination of feelings. Death is a purification, a cleansing, and a cure. A WORK SQUAD of mysteriously- formed

RUBE GOLDBERG ROBOTS resourcefully repairs the street. No human supervision, on any working like building skyscapes looks at that on so high, it's nuts to me. They have talked over, ALL!!! A ROBOTIC CLEAN-UP CREW.

Lumbering along the sidewalk.

Washing, sweeping. Trash sucking fix... Humanoid ROBOTS peppering the crowd. Following their past owners. Walking slowly, or fast running so going past. Carrying boxes and crap. Requirements, fake facts document cases, and young bodies. She always imagined their voices entangled somewhere in the wires when they spoke, caught up in a grid she didn't fully understand, passing back and forth. Once the calls were disconnected, she imagined the echoes of old conversations would be trapped there, floating back and forth with no exit, like ghosts. 'All a joke!' said the boy, and seized her roughly.

'Hey, all and sundry, let's put her in a clandestine before the teacher comes!'

The NIGHT TRAIN like long memorials dashing toward me a white line in the front red in the back on the up first of seven uppers. Soaring, gravity-defying OFFICE BUILDINGS dominate the skyline. Older buildings wedged among the new. All protected by huge glass and steel shields. As we get closer congested roads and freeways begin to disappear below ground into a series of subterranean tunnels. The oldie highways have become titanic, voluminous arcades. An elevator opens with a hiss steps out into a flavorless passageway.

MY footpaths, hollowing thought the sky rise, which I am now going into out of the death. MY stops at a set of DISPARATE DOORS. Looks over at one, when the other suddenly OPENS with a command. AS yours truly TIMEPIECE THE SCREENS to see the news around the world all the same. The elevator opens and CLINICIAN phases into the metal corridor. In countless VIEWPOINTS. High, low, close-up, wide.

All facts not known to be composed but tight and young to a point. Death is nearing me, I feel that I see that, they want that. ME- watches the doors open to admit me in the rush upwards. The doors slide closed behind him. Then a muffled red laser-ROUND like an endless machine gun I hear kid yells out. I walk and not look, as they tumble down in a lined-up row, all death no reason. Turns back to the screens.

YOU- I gave you an order... you the order not to kill her I ran to the desk, of the hands that run the government, robotics departments. 'Yes- we hear your cries out for help yet that rain the math that we can, or you don't have.'

FREAK YOU!

She has by the tie, I don't see kill your life, that you don't even understand, I think we can see more than enough looking over the wall screens, at the wastes. You killed my baby girl off- Kantilla! The Robot did not us, she was one point away from life, pushed backing towards the door. The gun on my back- go or die.

Killer robots, not of the laws, I never thought it possible.

Shaking in its hand, I see as mothers' cry. Happy for the clean-up as they say. Bodies burnt in a large firebox in the mid-city, see the black smoke for kilometers. Mass-graves are wanted and have been in place now, it's all the same no name to be remembered by, just a large hologram in the full finger, saying lines- as I love you, on your wrist is not life to me or having them here. I am desperate and unclear, be incompatible.

She touches the WALL PANEL making her way back to her appearance in the high rise, without her young life. The doors slide open. The Robot, said I am sorry for your loss today, 'Anything I can do,' as she goes and weeps,

'Yeah FREAK OFF!'

'NO! Need for luggage, or you be put down,' Turning to RUN as the doors begin to shut... 'Then do it ass hole!!!' do you see all the fold up taxies flying by and also lined up changing, I wanted to run a grab one I have played into it for years, ten dollars a day, and everyone one of them you can take and use if you see it? You know them by the yellow glass they have and the bubble and one-person compact coup shape.

Only people that have the many for a grandmaster car or on like it doesn't- use the people's transportation, like the trains. If you have the money for biofuel to run them, and that seven dollars a gallon. You can see the grayness rushing out the side finders. Everything else is an electric, see some war man working man for nothing at the coal mines to keep light up and flying, see them all way down yonder.

It could easily be a robots' job, yet man needs money for their partners, weeding is a thing of the past we just live together regales of sex, we reproduce at age 17 and 19 and, to kids, male and female, if younger or older you have them terminated. They find the right boy at 14 for you yet you say okay if you fall to them.

My girl never has that neither did I thankfully, she may be better off, then live in this world. Robots have they're on the little box-like huller trucks with titanium sides all swoop.

The Robot turns steps out into the metal corridor. To look at her, WEAPON running through her pointing to the floor. Looking out the high-rise, car races up to and down a RAMP slow showing up by the window, you can see a grandmaster in pink, and the roadway becomes a 14- as races in the building, lane underground tunnel system. A river of HEADLIGHTS stretches forever in both directions.

Chapter: 95

Specter

#- sis- #- wannabe!

(Flashback contented)

The rain stopped… they crowded to the huge door. The rain slacked still more. It was as if, amid a film vis-à-vis an inundation, a cyclone, a gale, a volcanic outburst, something had, first, gone wrong with the all-encompassing apparatus, thus deadening and finally spiteful off all noise, all of the blasts and ramifications, and thunders, and then, second, ripped the film from the projector and inserted in its place a beautiful tropical slide which did not move or tremor.

Then, laughing, the turned and went out and back down the tunnel, just as the teacher arrived. 'No,' said Maggie, falling back on to her backside. They surged about her, caught her up being a smart aleck to her, complaining, and then imploring, and then crying, back into a tunnel, an area, a closet, where they slammed and locked the door.

She was frustrated, to say the least. They stood looking at the door and saw it tremble from her beating and throwing herself against it. They heard her muffled cries. 'Ready, Kiddies?' She glanced at her watch. 'Yes, yes we are!' Said everyone or in some way like that.

'Are we there yet?'

'Yes!'

Decent mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, beautiful good-looking girl and then him all brilliant out before me like the sun and the night moon, what have you, the right person will still think the sun shines out your ass. That's life, that's the kind of person, that's worth sticking with the world ground to a standstill. The hush was so immense and fantastic that you felt your ears had been stuffed or you had lost your hearing altogether. In my opinion, the best thing you can do is find a person who loves you for exactly what you are.

The sun came out. The children put their hands to their ears. They stood apart. The door slid back and the smell of the silent, waiting world came into them. It was the color of flaming bronze and it was very large. And the sky around it was a blazing blue tile color. And the jungle burned with sunlight as the children, released from their spell, rushed out, yelling into the springtime.

'Oh, it's improved than the sun up-lighters, exist it?'

'Nowadays, don't go too far,' called the teacher after them like wildfire and heat. 'You've only two hours, you know. You wouldn't want to get jammed out.' But they were running and turning their faces up to the sky and feeling the sun on their cheeks like a warm iron; they were taking off their jackets and letting the sun burn their arms.

'Abundant, much recovering the sun!'

It was the shade of neoprene and slag, this rainforest, from the many years without the sun. It was the color of stones and white cheeses and ink, and it was the color of the moon. They stopped running and stood in the great jungle that covered the moon, which nurtured and never stopped growing, peacefully, even as you watched it. The children lay out, laughing, on the jungle mattress, and heard it sigh and squeak under them resilient and alive. It was a layer of octopi, clustering up great arms of bodily tidy, wavering, flowering in this brief mainspring. And so, the lion fell in love with the lamb…' he murmured… I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word. 'What ill-advised mutton- what is it what might it be?' I moaned. Could you repeat that a sick, masochistic lion?

I like the night, and its sky and the moon setting inside. With the dark, we'd never see the stars as the clouds past till now hand and hand looking up on the beach. I decided as long as I'm going to hell, I might as well do it thoroughly. Unfluctuating more, I had never meant to love

him. One thing I truly knew- distinguished it in the depths of my belly, in the center of my frames, knew it from the summit of my head to the soles of my feet, and knew it deep in my empty boobs- was how love gave somebody the power to break you… I know love and lust don't always keep the same company. Its nightfall the darkness is so liable, don't you think this, yet I ponder the fact? It's the safest time of day for us. The easiest time, but also the saddest, in a way...the end of another day, the return of the night. I remember it all eye not if it at the same time. No matter how perfect the day is, it always has to end.

Chapter: 96

Damocles

They ran among the trees, they slipped and demolish, they pushed each other, they played hide-and-seek and tag, but furthermost of all they squinted at the sun until the tears ran down their faces; they put their arrows up to that blueness and that amazing yellowness into gray whiteness, and they breathed of the fresh, fresh air and listened and listened to the silence which suspended them in a blessed sea of no sound and no motion.

Everyone stopped. The girl, standing in the open, held out her hand. They gazed at everything and savored everything. Then, wildly, like animals escaped from their caves, they ran and ran in uproar circles. They ran for an hour and did not stop running and then- of all the midst of their consecutively one of the girls wailed. 'Oh my- wow- oh- look at that WO-ow, gaze, stare,' we all trembling his arm around me at this time. They came sluggishly to look at her un-opened palms.

In the center of it, cupped and huge, was a single raindrop.

She began to cry, looking at it. What is she to me? Except for a hazard a danger, you've chosen to inflict on all of us. They glanced quietly at the sun. 'Oh. Oh. And OH!' A few cold drops fell on their noses and their cheeks and their mouths.

The sun faded behind a stir of mist. His voice is nearly noiseless. He turned to look at me with a wistful manifestation. The wonderful eyes held mine, and I lost my train of believed. I stared at him until he looked away. 'You haven't asked me, with a wind blew cold around them. Are you still fainting from the run? Or was it my kissing expertise? They turned and started to walk back toward the anti-establishment house, their hands at their sides, their smiles vanishing away.

Lightning struck… A flourishing of thunder startled them and like leaves before a new hurricane, they stumbled upon each other and ran. Ten miles away, five miles away, a mile, a half-mile. The sky darkened into midnight in a flash. They stood in the doorway of the underground for a moment until it was raining hard. Then they closed the door and heard the gigantic sound of the rain falling in heaps and falls, everywhere and forever. 'Will it be seven more years, till?'

'Yes. Seven.' Then one of them gave a little cry.'

You- her- she- Karly! 'What?' 'She's still in the closet where we locked her.' They stood as if someone had driven them, like so many stakes, into the floor. They observed at each other and then beheld and looked away. They could not encounter each other's glimpses. They glanced out at the world that was raining now and drizzling and raining progressively.

IT'S ALL RUNNING OUT OF ME!

It's a -Full moon…

I FELT LIKE I WAS IMPRISONED IN ONE OF THOSE CHILLING… hallucinations, the one where you have to run, trip until my lungs would surely burst to my heartbeat, but you can't make your body move fast enough nor your breath to your heart. Holding it all in… My legs seemed to move sluggish, leisure- liner and dawdling as I clashed my way finished the callous horde, but the hands-on the huge like timepiece of the tower didn't slow me the way. With unyielding, heartless strength, they turned inescapably in the direction of the termination of the whole thing.

I have to say more, more needs to be said, my life has to go on, I have to get those days back, I have too. They up or down there will not stop me from doing just that. But this was no dream, and, unlike the nightmare, I wasn't running for my life like always; run for them or agents, run to him and they yet run away, I was battling to save something substantially more prized, valued, and treasured. My own life meant little more than most in the past to me nowadays then way back in- between or before and now. The clock ding-donged again, and the sun beat miserable from the particular center argument of the heavens.

Olivia had said- Thus it did not substance to me that we were enclosed by our particularly dangerous opponents. 'There was a good chance we would both die here someday up on this thing looking at the new moon. Perchance the aftermath would be unlike if she weren't trapped

by the brilliant sunlight or midnight moon, solitary I was free to run across this bright jam-packed quadrangular; as well as I might not run speedily amply. As the clock began to ring out the hour, vibrant less than the soles of my lethargic bottoms, I knew I was too nighttime- and I was glad something murderous waited in the dark wings. For in failing at this, I forfeited any desire to live.

Chapter: 97

GET-TOGETHER

SURE, I WAS- dreaming- yes, I was maybe not- why? It could be all.

The whys and wherefores, I was so unsure where that primary, I was stand-up in a lively channel of sunbeams- the sympathetic of extraordinary strong rays that never be skilled at on my wet new hometown in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I was looking at my dad. Like you hadn't changed much; his face looked just the same as I remembered it. Some years move on and I get out of that place I was in, I go looking for him, I did not know what I would find, yet my dad was the first step towards the way like following the moon at night.

I remember now him- the crust was soft and emaciated, bent into a- many miniature wrinkles that hugged moderately to the maxilla beneath. Like a dehydrated apricot, but with a wisp of profuse silver hair standing out in a mist around it. Our doorways- hers a crinkly picker-blowout into the same flabbergasted demi-beam at just the same time as I. Ostensibly, she makes certain been expecting to see me, one or the other.

On the other hand, she opened her mouth when I did, so I stopped to let her go first. She paused, too, and then we emo- smiled at the little gracelessness. I was about to ask her a question; I had so many-what was she doing here in my dream? What had she been up to in the past six years? Was popular okay, and had they found each other, everywhere they were?

'Karly!'

I was awake or asleep… or even dead, I'd bet. The voice I'd walk through fire for-or, less dramatically, slosh every day through the cold and endless rain for, Marcel; It wasn't the dad who called my name, and we both turned to see the accumulation to our small reunion. I didn't have to look to know who it was; this was a voice, I would know anywhere- know, and retort to, whether even though I was always electrified to see him- mindful or otherwise-and even though I

was almost positive that I was dreaming, I lose your nerve as Marcel walked toward us through the conspicuous sunlight.

I freak out because dad didn't be acquainted with, that I was in love with an angel- nobody knew that- so how was I personally, hypothetical to give details the fact that the wonderful sunbeams where shattering off his skin into a thousand polychromatic ruins like he was made of diamond or crystal-like in the rain? Well, dad, you might have noticed that my girlfriend gleams in white. It's just something she does… in her glow for only me. Don't disquiet about it… you would not understand he still thinks; I sound senseless- even if I know she is true.

~*~

What was his responsibility? In that subsequent, I wanted that I was not the one omission to his mysterious talent; I usually felt appreciative that I was the only person whose thoughts he couldn't hear just as clearly as if they were spoken aloud.

The in one piece of purpose he lived in Pittsburgh, the rainiest place in the world, was so that he could be outside in the daytime without exposing his family's secret.

Marcel- still smiling so strikingly that my heart, felt like it was going to swell up and burst through my container- put his arm around my- assume and turned to face my mother. Up until now here he was, strolling charmingly toward me- with the most fine-looking smile on his seraph's face- like hers in the night as if I were the only one here. But now I wished he could hear me, too, so that he could listen to the warning, I was earsplitting in my skull. I shot a panicked glance back at my dad and saw that it was too late at night.

My dad's manifestation surprised me. She was just turning to stare back at me, her eyes as alarmed as mine. I promise to love you forever- never- ever- ever, important go not one solo day of forever. Does it bother you, me being half-naked all the time I was thinking to myself, like me dressing like this? Simply then, as I looked at the better- quality picture, did I warn the huge gilt frame that enclosed my mother's method.

~*~

She copycatted the effort exactly, mirrored it. But where our fingers should have met, there was nothing but cold glass… With a dizzying thunderbolt, my hallucination abruptly turns out to be horrendous. There was no dad here for me at this time yet, I knew he would be there for

me if I needed him. Instead of looking depressed, she was staring at my self- consciously, as if waiting for an admonishment. Besides she was standing in such an outlandish position- single arm held awkwardly away from her body, stretched out and then curled around the air.

Like she had her arm around someone I couldn't see, someone invisible… Inexpressive, I raised the hand that wasn't wrapped around Marcel's waist and reached out to touch her. That be there me, I in a stand- up in the glass looking am I, in my opinion, and myself looking back by me. Me- prehistoric, wrinkled, and faded. Marcel stood beside me, casting no reflection, agonizingly lovely and forever fourteen. He pressed his freezing, perfect lips against my wasted cheek and hands-on my backside all at once.

'Happy birthday,' he whispered. It was my birthday all right- 'I wanted my birthday sex!' I woke with start-my eyelids nipping open wide- and wheezed. Cloudy gray light, the used to the light of a gloomy morning, took the place of the blinding sun in my daydream. I coveted you. I had no right to want you- but then again yours truly reached out and took you anyway. And now look what's become of you! Trying to seduce an angel. As well as the all-encompassing of your heart,' he continuous.

'It's the most significant sound in my biosphere. I'm so attuned to it now; I curse I could pick it out from miles away. But neither of these things matter. This,' he said, taking my face in his small hand. 'You. That's what I'm keeping. You'll always be my Karly, you'll just be a little more durable just a dream, Dream happy dreams. You are the only one who has ever touched my heart. It will always be yours.

All through the perfect summer- the happiest summer I had ever had, the happiest summer anyone anywhere had ever had, and the rainiest summer in the history of the Olympic Cape- this bleak date had lurked in ambush, waiting to spring. Sleep, my only love or so I feel that it is like not eating is my next. I told myself. It was only a hallucination or a daydream into a nightmare. I took a deep inhalation and then hurdled again when my alarm went off like always. The little schedule in the angle of the clock's display knowledgeable me that today was September thirteenth. Only a dream, but far- nearsighted enough in one way, at a minimum.

Today was my birthday. I was officially eighteen years old. I have personally been being terrified of this day for months, and longer or more than that even. In addition to knowing that it had hit, it was even of inferior quality than I for one to be afraid of it would be present. I could

feel it- I was adult, every day I got grown- up more than the last, but this was dissimilar, worse, inferior, shoddier, poorer, not as good as, and eviler than they.

Measurable… was I- fourteen.

Me- my- eyebrows hang-up about wedged in a worried line, over my nervous brown eyes. Besides Marcel never- ever would be all mine, nor did I see it being that way, on that day at the time, in that year at the moment in the flashback. When I went to brush my teeth, I was almost surprised that the face in the mirror hadn't changed. It was just a dream, I reminded myself again, just at freaked up dream, crap, piss, just freaking crap! Just a dream- God- A- crap… but also my worst nightmarish thing-ie. You detained out your hand out at me, and I took it shorn of bringing to an end to make intelligence of what I for one set upright doing.

Aimed at the original time in nearly a period, I touched courage.

Crap- I skipped breakfast, in a hurry to get out of the house as quickly as a freak. I wasn't entirely able to avoid my dad, and so I had to spend a few minutes acting cheerful, myself didn't give a freak at that either, crap- suck- and freak a p*ssy!

He- he- p*ssy farts!

Chapter: 98

Feel the inside of me

Don't you just looooovvvveeee here she's so-ooo -like me!- #- sis!

Look at this photo of the past- not like mine either!

You saw how I was remembered… what did you think?

(Story)

Cave of wonders her vajaja, and the one next to it all the girl there in their seats- I honestly tried to be excited about the gifts, I for one requested him not to get me, but every time I had to smile, it felt like I might start crying.

HOLY Soggy box- I struggled to get a grip on myself as I drove to school. The vision of Gran-I would not think of it as me-was hard to get out of my head. I couldn't feel anything but despair until I pulled into the familiar parking lot behind

Pitt- Clit High and spotted Marcel leaning motionlessly against his polished silver Volvo, like a marble tribute to some forgotten pagan god of beauty.

Titties- I stared at myself, looking for some sign of impending wrinkles in my ivory skin. The only creases were the ones on my forehead, though, and I knew that if I could manage to relax, they would disappear. I couldn't…

He- he- I said pitt- cl*t- and t*ts!

Well they go together don't they…? make the beast with two backs-

Hand on d*ick- and his winner there in my mind- The dream had not completed him justice. And he was in the making there for me, just the same as every other day. Hopelessness momentarily missing; wonder took its place. Even after half a year with him, I still couldn't believe that I deserved this degree of good fortune. The sight of sis waiting there- her tawny eyes brilliant with excitement, and a small silver-wrapped square in her hands- made me frown. I for one told Kellie, I didn't want no matter which for anything, not gifts or even attention, for my birthday. Understandably, my wishes were being passed over.

My ass of a sister Kellie was standing by his side, waiting for me, too. So not cool, so not- crap- b*tch, Of course, Marcel and she weren't related (in Pittsburgh the story was that all the Cullen siblings were adopted by Dr. Parlis and his wife, Ilsmel, both too young to have teenage children), but their skin was precisely the same pale shade, their eyes had the same strange golden tint, with the same deep, bruise-like shadows beneath them. Her face, like his, was also startlingly beautiful. To celebrity in the know- big shot like me- these resemblances marked them for what they remained. I see Mr. King in class today saying- 'How's it hanging!' he was struggling some poop freaker.

(That man over there- look… with that again you get it he yells crap out not saying anything like- but butt-pug and crap with piss and honey whole beeped out- run of words here- that he said ending with hamburger. We Have to keep it PG- 13 here, more for mom and dad; so- they don't freaking crap themselves, yet the teenagers, feel it's all good. -Yeah, suck on this crap- MR. KING! SEXY is it NOT? It's good crap… is it not? Here is my pooper scooper. Good boy!)

Mr. King is barking at kids again, I said looking at Olivia! He's nuts-o and sometimes creepy. Butt- poop-ie- I slammed the door of my 50 Nash- a burst of rust specks trembled down

to the wet blacktop-and walked slowly toward where they waited. Olivia skipped forward to meet me, her fairy face glowing under her spiky black hair.

'Happy birthday, Karly!' Yeeeeaaaahhh!

~*~

'Shh-it!' I whispered, glancing around the lot to make sure no one had overheard her. The last thing, I wanted to be some kind of celebration of the obscure event. She ignored me. 'Do you want to sweep your present now or later?' She asked eagerly as we made our way to where Marcel still waited.

Olivia would have 'seen' what my parents were planning as soon as they'd decided that themselves. 'Nope no presents- no mothers and dad either damn.' I moaned in a murmur. She finally seemed to process my mood. 'Satisfactory… later, then. Did you like the notebook your mom sent you, as well as the phone from daddy?' I groaned and felt the crap inside me move downwards, that duping feeling and crap- of course, she would know what my birthday presents where. Marcel wasn't the only member of his family with few and far between skills of random crap.

'Yeah, they are awesome, grand, and everything, I wanted- freak, not.'

'I think it's a nice idea. You're only a senior once. Might as well document the experience.' 'How numerous times have you been a senior or backward in life?' 'That's different to me yet the same it's all the same yet not it's rolling off me like water or something else that is thicker. Not all blood do I have coming out of me.' 'I am one- down with your bad-self, kick-ass emo- chick!'

We reached Marcel then at that point in the room, in that place, here now, and there, we looked, we saw, it was, he held out his hand for mine. I took it eagerly, forgetting, for a moment, my glum mood. His skin was, as always, smooth, hard, and very cold. He gave my fingers a gentle squeeze. I looked into his liquid eyes, and my heart gave a not-quite-so-gentle squeeze of its own. Hearing the stutter in my heartbeats, he smiled again.

He lifted his free hand and traced one cool fingertip around the outside of my lips as he spoke. 'So, as discussed, I am not allowed to wish you a happy birthday, is that correct?' 'You know I love you right?'

'I know,' he breathed, his arm tightening automatically around my waist.

'You know how much I wish it was enough.' 'Naturally, that is truthful.' I could never quite mimic the flow of his perfect, formal articulation. It was something that could only be picked up in an earlier century.

'Just checking.' He ran his hand through his tousled bronze hair. 'You might have changed your mind. Most people seem to enjoy things like birthdays and gifts.'

Olivia laughed, and the sound was all silver, a wind chime. 'Of course, you'll enjoy it. Everyone is supposed to be nice to you today and give you your way, Kar. What's the worst that could happen?' She inescapable it as a linguistic interrogation.

'I am getting older and wiser every mother- freaking day- mother,' Dad- I answered anyway, and my voice was not as steady as I wanted it to be. Nevertheless, I said that in front of her so points for me. She was so pissed you would not get it… if you tried too.

Beside me, Marcel's smile tenses up into a solid line. Like I am freaking, love this butt- a cute crazy girl! 'Fourteen ain't even that- very old,' Olivia said. Marcel- 'Good grammar,' he said out loud to her nuzzled to me. 'Don't girls usually wait till they're twenty to get upset over birthdays?' I going to die in a year of old age- oh no!

'It's older than Marcel,' I mumbled.

He sighed. Not as the pad you have on that I can whiff in the durable form right smack-dab- here.

'Gross! A-hole!' said Liv.

#- Hashtag- (Ba-boom-ching, and LOL)

Nevaeh

Book: 12

Hard to Let Go

Chapter: 99

'Technically,' she said, gripping her tone knowledge. 'Simply by one little year, though.'

And I understood… if I could be sure of the expectation I required, sure that I would get to spend always with Marcel, and Olivia and the rest of the Barn's like my little sis Kattie- may, she is on three, (willingly not as a wrinkled tiny old lady…) at that following a year or two one course or the other wouldn't matter to me so considerably.

Then Marcel was inanimate set corresponding any future that changed me.

Inconsiderably future that made me like him- that made me immortal, extravagantly.

You are protected inside your consciousness. Not one can reach you there. Or so I believed was true- until this time, I should live over and over, like the day before it, the same yet not so. A dead-end, he baptized this.

I couldn't see Marcel's point, to be accurate. What was so numerous about destruction? Being angel didn't look like such a terrible thing-not the way the Barn's did it, nevertheless.

'What point will you be at home?' Olivia declared, changing the subject. Of her profile, she was up to stipulate the kind of thing I'd been dreaming to elude.

'I didn't recognize I had layouts to be there.'

'Oh, be fair, Bell!' She bellowed. 'You aren't going to exhaust all our entertainment like that, are you?'

'I revived my birthday was about what I demand.'

'I'll get her from Mr. Anderson's right after school, 'Marcel told her, disregarding me collectively.

'I have to work,' I complained.

'You don't, truly,' Olivia informed me smugly.

'I previously spoke to Mrs. Newton of such… She's trading your shifts. She spoke to inform you she wishes you a: 'Happy Birthday."

'I- yet can't come over,' I resolved, clambering for an excuse. 'I, well, I mustn't watch Romeo and Juliet yet for English.'

Olivia squealed, 'You have Romeo and Juliet memorized.'

'Although Mr. Smith proclaimed, we obliged to notice it performed to thoroughly acknowledge it that's how Shakespeare intended it to be presented.'

Marcel rolled his eyes.

'You've already seen the movie,' Olivia accused.

'Although not the nineteen-sixties version. Mr. Smith said it was the best.'

Subsequently, Olivia lost the self-satisfied smile and glared at me.

'This can be obvious, or this can be troublesome, Bell, but one way or the others'

Marcel interrupted her threat. 'Relax, Olivia. If Karly wants to watch a movie, then she can. It's her birthday.'

'So there,' I added.

'I'll bring her over around seven,' he continued. 'That will give you more time to set up.'

Olivia's howling sounded again. 'Sounds immeasurable good. See you tonight, Bell! It'll be fun, you'll see.' She grinned- the wide smile revealed all her perfect, glistening teeth-then pecked me on the cheek and danced off moving her first class before I could respond.

'Marcel, please-' I started to beg, but he clasped one crisp finger to my lips.

'Let's review it later. We're going to be late for school.'

No one bothered to stare at us as we took our representative seats in the back of the classroom (we should almost every class together now-it was amazing the favors Marcel could get the female administrators to do for him.)

Marcel and I had been together too long now to be an object of gossip anymore. Even Lance didn't bother to give me the glum stare that used to make me feel a little guilty.

He smirked now alternatively, and I was glad he had trusted that we could only be friends.

Lance had developed over the summer-his face had lost some of the completeness, making his cheekbones more outstanding, and he was diminishing his pale blond hair a new way; alternatively, of bristly, it was exceptional and gelled into strictly inconsistent disarray.

It was simple to see where his stimulus came from- but Marcel's look wasn't something that could be delivered through imitation.

As the day continued, I contemplated ways to get out of whatever was going down at the Natalie house later.

It would be bad enough to have to celebrate when I was in the mood to mourn. Nevertheless, more dangerous than that, this was sure to involve attention and benefits.

Chapter: 100

Wishes

Mindfulness is nevermore a good thing, as any other accident-prone fumbler would accept. No one wants a floodlight when they're likely to stumble on their face.

Moreover, I would extremely pointedly be asked- well, ordered really-that no one give me any presents this year. It seemed like Mr. Anderson and Ayanna weren't the only ones who had decided to overlook that.

I would have never had much wealth, furthermore, that had nevermore disturbed me. Ayanna had raised me on a kindergarten teacher's wage.

Mr. Anderson wasn't getting rich at his job, either he was the police chief here in the tiny town of Pittsburgh.

My only personal revenue came from the four days a week I worked at the local Goodwill store. In a borough this small, I was blessed to have a career, after all the viruses in the world today having everything shout down.

Every cent I gained went into my diminutive university endowment at SNHU online.

(College transpired like nothing more than a Plan B. I was still dreaming for Plan A; however, Marcel was just so unreasonable about leaving me, mortal.)

Marcel ought to have a lot of funds I didn't even want to think about how much. Cash involved alongside to oblivion to Marcel or the rest of the Barns, like Karly saying she never had anything yet walked away with it all.

It was just something that swelled when you had extensive time on your hands and a sister who had an uncanny ability to predict trends in the stock market.

Marcel didn't seem to explain why I objected to him spending bills on me, why it made me miserable if he brought me to an overpriced establishment in Los Angeles, why he wasn't allowed to buy me a car that could reach speeds over fifty miles an hour, approximately how? I wouldn't let him pay my university tuition (he was ridiculously enthusiastic about Plan B.)

Marcel believed I was being gratuitously difficult.

Although, how could I let him give me things when I had nothing to retaliate amidst?

He, for some amazing incomprehensible understanding, wanted to be with me. Anything he gave me on top of that just propelled us more out of balance.

As the day went on, neither Marcel nor Olivia brought my birthday up again, and I began to relax a little.

Then we sat at our usual table for lunch.

An unfamiliar kind of break survived at that table. The three of us, Marcel, Olivia, including myself hunkered down on the steep southerly end of the table. Now that the 'superb' and scarier (in Emmah's case, unquestionably.)

The Natalie siblings had finished we were gazing at them they're so odd, Olivia and Marcel arranged not to seem quite so intimidating, and we did not sit here alone.

My other compatriots, Lance, and Mikaela (who were in the uncomfortable post-breakup association phase,) Mollie and Sam (whose involvement had endured the summertime...)

Tim, Kaylah, Skylar, and Sophie (though that last one didn't count in the friend category.)

Completely assembled at the same table, on the other side of an interchangeable line.

That line softened on sunshiny days when Marcel and Olivia continuously skipped school times before there was Karly, and then the discussion would swell out effortlessly to incorporate me.

Marcel and Olivia didn't find this minor elimination fragmentary or dangerous the way I would hold.

They scarcely noticed this at all.

Characters always felt remarkably hostile at leisure with the Barn's, around anxious for some purpose they couldn't justify to themselves.

I implied a unique exemption to that precept. Seldom it confused Marcel whence very satisfied I was withstanding adjacent to him.

He deemed he was dangerous to my health-a feeling I rejected vehemently whenever he uttered that.

The midday moved briskly.

School completed, and Marcel walked me to my truck as he customarily prepared. Disregarding this time, he held the pilgrim entrance open for me. Olivia must have obtained using his automobile home so that he could restrain me from making a charge for this.

I wrapped my arms and performed no move to get out of the downpour. 'It's my birthday, don't I get to drive?'

'I'm faking it's not your birthday, just as you yearned.'

'If it's not my birthday, then I don't have to proceed to your home later…'

'All right,' He closed the passenger door and shuffled past me to open the driver's side. 'Happy birthday.'

'Sh-h,' I shushed him halfheartedly. I climbed through the opened door, begging he'd exercised the other suggestion.

Marcel played with the radio while I drove, shaking his head in dissatisfaction.

'Your radio has awful treatments.'

I scowled; I didn't like it when he picked on my truck. The truck was transcendent it had nature.

'You want a pleasant stereo? Drive your vehicle.' I was so annoyed about Olivia's plans, on top of my already discouraged feeling, that the words came out sharper than I'd anticipated them.

I was barely ever bad-tempered with Marcel, and my tone made him press his lips together to keep from smiling.

When I parked in front of Mr. Anderson's house, he stretched over to take my face in his hands.

He handled me very thoroughly, touching just the tips of his fingers softly against my temples, my cheekbones, my jawline. Like I was exceptionally breakable.

Which was specifically the case-compared with him, at most limited.

'You should be in a good mood, today of all days,' he muttered.

His unseasoned breath fanned crossed my face.

'Moreover, if I don't want to be in a good mood?' I asked, my breathing irregular.

His golden eyes smoldered. 'Too bad.'

My head was already spinning by the time he leaned closer and pressed his icy lips against mine. As he intended, no doubt, I forgot all about my worries and concentrated on remembering how to inhale and exhale.

His mouth lingered on mine, cold and smooth and gentle until I wrapped my arms around his neck and threw myself into the kiss with a little too much enthusiasm. I could feel his lips curve upward as he let go of my face and reached back to unlock my grip on him.

Marcel had drawn many careful lines for our physical relationship, with the intent being to keep me alive. Though I respected the need for maintaining a safe distance between my skin

and his razor-sharp, venom-coated teeth, I tended to forget about trivial things like that when he was kissing me.

'Be good, please,' he breathed against my cheek. He pressed his lips gently to mine one more time and then pulled away, folding my arms across my stomach.

My pulse was thudding in my ears. I put one hand over my heart. It drummed hyperactivity under my palm.

'Do you think I'll ever get better at this?' I wondered, mostly to myself. 'That my heart might someday stop trying to jump out of my chest whenever you touch me?'

'I hope not,' he said, a bit smug.

I rolled my eyes. 'Let's go watch the Capulets and Montagues hack each other up, all right?'

'Your wish, my command.'

Marcel sprawled on the couch while I started the movie, fast-forwarding through the opening credits.

When I perched on the edge of the sofa in front of him, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest. It wasn't exactly as comfortable as a sofa cushion would be, what with his chest being hard and cold-and perfect-as an ice sculpture, but it was preferable. He pulled the old afghan off the back of the couch and draped it over me, so I wouldn't freeze beside his body.

'You know, I've never had much patience with Romeo,' he commented as the movie started.

'What's wrong with Romeo?' I asked, a little offended. Romeo was one of my favorite fictional characters. Until I'd met Marcel, I'd had a thing for him.

'Well, first, he's in love with this Rosaline-don't you think it makes him seem a little fickle? And then, a few minutes after their wedding, he kills Juliet's cousin. That's not very brilliant. Mistake after mistake. Could he have destroyed his happiness any more thoroughly?'

I sighed. 'Do you want me to watch this alone?'

'No, I'll mostly be watching you, anyway.' His fingers traced patterns across the skin of my arm, raising goosebumps. 'Will you cry?'

'Probably,' I admitted, 'if I'm paying attention.'

'I won't distract you then.' But I felt his lips on my hair, and it was very distracting.

The movie eventually captured my interest, thanks in large part to Marcel whispering Romeo's lines in my ear-his irresistible, velvet voice made the actor's voice sound weak and coarse by comparison. And I did cry, to his amusement, when Juliet woke and found her new husband dead.

'I'll admit, I do sort of envy him here, 'Marcel said, drying the tears with a lock of my hair.

'She's very pretty.'

He made a disgusted sound. 'I don't envy him the girl-just the ease of the suicide,' he clarified in a teasing tone. 'You humans have it so easy! All you have to do is throw down one tiny vial of plant extracts…' 'What?' I gasped.

'It's something I had to think about once, and I knew from Chiaz's experience that it wouldn't be simple. I'm not even sure how many ways Chiaz tried to kill himself in the beginning… after he realized what he'd become…' His voice, which had grown serious, turned light again. 'And he's still in excellent health.'

I twisted around so that I could read his face. 'What are you talking about?'

I demanded. 'What do you mean, this something you had to think about once?'

'Last spring, when you were… nearly killed…' He paused to take a deep breath, snuggling to return to his teasing tone. 'Of course, I was trying to focus on finding you alive, but part of my mind was making contingency plans. As I said, it's not as easy for me as it is for a human.'

For one second, the memory of my last trip to Phoenix washed over my head and made me feel dizzy. I could see it all so clearly-the the blinding sun, the heat waves coming off the concrete as I ran with desperate haste to find the sadistic angel who wanted to torture me to death. James, waiting in the mirrored room with my mother as his hostage-or so I'd thought. I hadn't

known it was all a ruse. Just as James hadn't known that Marcel was racing to save me; Marcel made it in time, but it had been a close one. Unthinkingly, my fingers traced the crescent-shaped scar on my hand that was always just a few degrees cooler than the rest of my skin.

I shook my head as if I could shake away the bad memories-and tried to grasp what Marcel meant. My stomach plunged uncomfortably. 'Contingency plans?' I repeated.

'Well, I wasn't going to live without you.' He rolled his eyes as if that fact were childishly obvious. 'But I wasn't sure how to do it- I knew Emmah and Joh would never help... so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Ministry.'

I didn't want to believe he was serious, but his golden eyes were brooding, focused on something far away in the distance as he contemplated ways to end his own life. Abruptly, I was furious.

'What is Vulture?' I demanded.

'The Ministry is a family,' he explained, his eyes still remote. 'A very old, very powerful family of our kind. They are the closest thing our world has to a royal family, I suppose. Chiaz lived with them briefly in his early years, in Italy, before he settled in America-do you remember the story?'

'Of course, I remember.'

I would never forget the first time I'd gone to his home, the huge white mansion buried deep in the forest beside the river, or the room where Chiaz Marcel's father in so many real ways-kept a wall of paintings that illustrated his personal history. The most vivid, most wildly colorful canvas there, the largest, was from Chiaz's time in Italy.

Of course, I remembered the calm quartet of men, each with the exquisite face of a seraph, painted into the highest balcony overlooking the swirling mayhem of color. Though the painting was centuries old, Chiaz-the blond angel-remained unchanged. And I remembered the three others, Chiaz's early acquaintances. Marcel had never used the name Ministry for the beautiful trio, two black-haired, one snow white. He'd called them Aron, Caius, and Marcellus, nighttime patrons of the arts...

'Anyway, you don't irritate the vulture, 'Marcel went on, interrupting ray reverie. 'Not unless you want to die-or whatever it is we do.' His voice was so calm, it made him sound almost bored by the prospect.

My anger turned to horror. I took his marble face between my hands and held it very tightly.

'You must never, never, never think of anything like that again!' I said. 'No matter what might ever happen to me, you are not allowed to hurt yourself!'

'I'll never put you in danger again, so it's a moot point.'

'Put me in danger! I thought we'd established that all the bad luck is my fault?' I was getting angrier. 'How dare you even think like that?' The idea of Marcel ceasing to exist, even if I were dead, was impossibly painful.

'What would you do, if the situation were reversed?' He asked.

'That's not the same thing.'

He didn't seem to understand the difference. He chuckled.

'What if something did happen to you?' I blanched at the thought. 'Would you want me to go off myself?'

A trace of pain touched his perfect features.

'I guess I see your point… a little,' he admitted. 'But what would I do without you?'

'Whatever you were doing before I came along and complicated your existence.'

He sighed. 'You make that sound so easy.'

'It should be. I'm not that interesting.'

He was about to argue, but then he let it go. 'Moot point,' he reminded me. Abruptly, he pulled himself up into a more formal posture, shifting me to the side so that we were no longer touching.

'Mr. Anderson?' I guessed.

Marcel smiled. After a moment, I heard the police cruiser pulling into the driveway. I reached out and took his hand firmly. My dad could deal with that much.

Mr. Anderson came in with a pizza box in his hands.

'Hey, kids.' He grinned at me. 'I thought you'd like a break from cooking and washing dishes for your birthday. Hungry?'

'Sure. Thanks, Dad.'

Mr. Anderson didn't mention Marcel's obvious lack of appetite. He was used to Marcel passing on dinner.

'Do you mind if I borrow Karly for the evening? 'Marcel asked when Mr. Anderson and I were done.

I saw at Mr. Anderson. Maybe he had some concept of birthdays as stay-at-home, family affairs-this was my first birthday with him, the first birthday since my mom, Ayanna had remarried and gone to live in Amelia Island, so I didn't know what he would expect.

'That's fine-the Navigators are playing the Sox tonight,' Mr. Anderson explained, and my hope disappeared. 'Accordingly, I won't be any kind of partnership... Hereabouts.' He scooped up the camera he'd gotten me on Ayanna's scheme (because I would need pictures to fill up my scrapbook,) furthermore threw it to me.

He ought to know better than That-I'd always been coordinatively questioned. The camera brushed off the tip of my finger and tumbled toward the floor. Marcel snagged it before it could collapse onto the Congoleum.

'Nice save,' Mr. Anderson noted. 'If they're doing something fun at the Barn's' later, Bell, you should take some pictures. You know how your mother gets she'll be wanting to see the pictures faster than you can take them.'

'Good idea, Mr. Anderson, 'Marcel said, handing me the camera.

Chapter: 101

Pictures

I turned the camera on Marcel and snapped the first picture. 'It works.'

'That's immeasurable. Hey, say hi to Olivia for me. She hasn't been over for a while.' Mr. Anderson's mouth pulled down at one corner.

'It's been three days, Dad,' I mentioned him. Mr. Anderson was crazed regarding Olivia. He'd convert added last may if she'd helped me through my cumbersome convalescence; Mr. Anderson would be forever beholden to her for saving him from the horror of an almost-adult daughter which required help showering. 'I'll tell her.'

'Okay, all youngsters have fun later.' It was a dismissal. Mr. Anderson was already edging toward the living room furthermore the TV.

Marcel beamed, champion, and took my hand to pull me from the kitchen.

When we got to the truck, he opened the passenger door for me again, and this time I didn't argue.

I still had a tough time finding the obscure turnoff to his house in the nightfall.

Marcel drove north within Pittsburgh, visibly chafing at the speed limit required by my ancient Chevy.

The engine groaned even louder than usual as he pushed it over fifty.

'Take it easy,' I warned him, I say.

'You know what you would love? A nice little coupe. Very quiet, lots of power…'

'There's nothing wrong with my truck. And speaking of expensive nonessentials, if you know what's good for you, you didn't spend any money on birthday presents.'

'Not a dime,' he replied virtuously.

'Satisfying.'

'Can you do me a kindness?'

'That depends on what it is.'

He sighed- his lovely face serious. 'Bell, the last real birthday any of us had was Emmah in 1934. Cut us a little slack, and don't be too ambitious later. They're all very passionate.'

It always surprised me a little when he brought up stuff like that. 'Exceptional, I'll act.'

'I probably should warn you…'

'Delighted.'

'When I say they're all excited… I do mean all of them.'

'Everyone?' I gasped. 'I thought Emmah and Rose were in Cape Verde.'

The rest of Pittsburgh was under the hypothesis that the older Barn's had gone off to college this year, to Dartmouth, but I knew better. 'Emmah wanted to be here.'

'Nevertheless… Rose?'

'I know, Bell, like don't disturb, she'll be on her most vigorous behavior.'

I didn't answer. Like I could simply not despair, that straightforwardly. Unlike Olivia, Marcel's other 'adopted' sister, the golden blond and lovely Rose didn't like me much.

The feeling was a little bit stronger than just objection. As far as Rose was affected, I was an undesirable intruder into her family's mysterious behavior.

I felt guilty about the present circumstances, suggesting that Rose and Emmah's continued absence was my responsibility, also as I furtively relished not having to see her Emmah, Marcel's playful bear of a brother, I did miss.

He was in many ways just like the elder brother I would always want… only much, much stronger and to be terrifying.

Marcel decided to change the question.

'Therefore, if you won't let me get you the Cadillac, isn't there anything that you'd like for your birthday?'

The messages spread out in a disclosure. 'You know what I want.'

A profound frown carved creases into his marble forehead. He wished he'd stuck to the subject of Rose.

It felt like we'd had this argument a lot today.

'Not tonight, Bell, please.'

'Well, maybe Olivia will give me what I want.'

Marcel growled a deep, menacing sound. 'This isn't going to be your last birthday, Bell,' he promised. 'That's not fair!'

I thought I heard his teeth clench together.

We were pulling up to the house now. A bright light shined from every window on the first two floors. An extended line of gleaming Chinese lanterns hung from the porch eaves, reflecting a soft radiance on the huge cedars that surrounded the house. Big bowls of flowers-pink roses-lined the wide stairs up to the front doors.

I moaned…

Marcel took a few deep inhalations to tranquilize himself. 'This is a party,' he reminded me. 'Try to be a good sport.'

'Certainly,' I muttered…

He came around to get my door and offered me his hand.

'I have a question.'

He waited warily.

'If I develop this film,' I said, toying with the camera in my hands, 'will you show up in the film?'

Marcel started laughing. He helped me out of the car, pulled me up the stairs, and was still laughing as he opened the door for me.

They were all set in the huge white living room; when I walked through the door, they greeted me with a loud chorus of 'Happy birthday, Bell!' while I blushed and looked down. Olivia, I assumed, had covered every flat surface with pink candles and dozens of crystal bowls filled with hundreds of roses. There was a table with a white cloth draped over it next to Marcel's grand piano, holding a pink birthday cake, more roses, a stack of glass plates, and a small pile of gold- wrapped gifts.

It was a hundred times worse than I'd imagined.

Marcel, sensing my distress, wrapped an encouraging arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head.

Marcel's parents, Chiaz and Esme-impossibly youthful and lovely as everywhere the closest to the door. Esme hugged me carefully, her soft, caramel-colored hair brushing against my cheek as she kissed my forehead, and then Chiaz put his arm around my shoulders.

'Sorry about this, Bell,' he stage-whispered. 'We couldn't rein Olivia in.'

Rose and Emmah attained behind them. Rose didn't smile, but at least she didn't frown. Emmah's face was stretched into a huge grin. It had been months following,

I'd seen them; I'd forgotten how gloriously wonderful Rose was-it almost hurt to look at her. And had Emmah always been so… consequential?

'You haven't changed at all,' Emmah said with mock disappointment. 'I expected a perceptible difference, but here you are, red-faced just like always.'

'Thanks a lot, Emmah,' I said, blushing deeper.

He laughed, 'I have to step out for a second'-he paused to wink conspicuously at Olivia-'don't do anything funny while I'm gone.'

'I'll try.'

Olivia let go of Joh's hand and skipped forward, all her teeth sparkling in the bright light. Joh grinned, too, but kept his distance. He pitched long and blond-haired person, upon the post at the foot of the stairs. Throughout the days we'd had to spend cooped up together in California, I'd thought he'd gotten over his aversion to me. But he'd gone back to exactly how he'd acted before avoiding me as much as possible the moment he was free from that transient responsibility to shield me. I knew it wasn't personal, just a precaution, and I tried not to be overly sensitive about it. Joh had more struggle attaching to the Barn's' diet than the rest of them; the scent of human blood was much harder for him to resist than the others he hadn't been trying as long.

'Time to open presents,' Olivia declared. She put her cool hand under my elbow and towed me to the table with the cake and the sparkling cases.

I put on my best scapegoat face. 'Olivia, I know I told you I didn't want anything.'

'However, I didn't listen,' she interrupted, smug. 'Open it.' She took the camera from my hands and replaced it with a big, old-fashioned grayish crate.

The case was so light that it felt empty. The card on top declared that it was from Emmah, Rose, and Joh. Self-consciously, I tore the paper off and then stared at the box is concealed.

It was something electrical, with lots of numbers in the name. I opened the box, hoping for further illumination. But the box was empty.

'Um… gratitude.'

Rose cracked a smile. Joh laughed. 'It's a stereo for your truck,' he explained. 'Emmah's installing it right now so that you can't return it.'

Olivia was always one step ahead of me. 'Thanks, Joh, Rose,' I told them, grinning as I retained Marcel's complaints about my radio this afternoon all a setup. 'Thanks, Emmah!' I called more loudly.

I heard his booming laugh from my truck, and I couldn't help laughing, too.

'Open mine and Marcel's next,' Olivia said, so excited her voice was a high-pitched trill. She held a small, flat square in her hand.

I turned to give Marcel a basilisk glare. 'You promised.'

Ere he could respond, Emmah ricocheted through the doorway. 'Just in time!' She crowed. she pushed in behind Joh, who had also drifted closer than usual to get a good look.

'I didn't spend a dime, 'Marcel assured me. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, leaving my skin tingling from his touch.

I breathed sincerely and turned to Olivia. 'Give it to me,' I sighed.

Emmah smiled with pleasure.

I took the little package, rolling my eyes at Marcel while I stuck my finger under the edge of the paper and jerked it under the tape.

'Gauntlet,' I muttered when the paper sliced my finger; I pulled it out to examine the damage. A single drop of blood leaked from the miniature construction.

It all appeared very quickly then.

'No! 'Marcel shouted.

He threw himself at me, flinging me back across the table. It fell, as I did, scattering the cake and the presents, the blossoms, and the silverware. I landed in the mess of shattered crystal.

Joh pushed into Marcel, and the quality was like the crash of fieldstones in a rockslide.

There was another vibration, a grisly snarling that appeared to be beginning from deep in Joh's ribs. Joh tried to shove past Marcel, snapping his teeth just inches from Marcel's face.

Emmah grabbed Joh from behind in the next instant, locking him into his massive steel grip, but Joh struggled on, his wild, hollow eyes concentrated only on me.

Surpassing the shock, there was also a pain. I'd fallen to the floor by the keyboard, with my arms thrown out intuitively to catch my fall, into the jagged shards of glass. Only now did I feel the searing, stinging endeavor that poured from my wrist to the crease inside my elbow.

Unconscious and disoriented, I looked up from the bright red blood pulsing out of my arm-into the fevered eyes of the six swiftly voracious angels.

Chapter: 102

Part: 1 July

This one more of how where remember these days.

Photos online, and cam videos all that are my memories- of me to others.

Part: 2 August

Compare… them then and now- naked slut girl or 1940s modesty.

I remember having the old photo album spread out on the bedroom floor.

Oh! Wow! Look at this one… do you like how she was remembered better than me?

(Photo)

Part: 3

It's- September

More of the same- I have become a cam-whore!!! Nothing more…

Part: 4

OCTOBER

…And yah- a, ah- pics that would make you blush, and hard, you boys would love to see me, now wouldn't you?

Part: 5

NOVEMBER

Making cummie videos is my life.

Part: 6

DECEMBER

Coming 7 hours out of the day is taking time away from other things.

Part: 7

WAKING UP

…After fraping till- I passed out all hot gross and sweaty, I did not remember falling asleep- with mom and dad- sis and the world see me as my door to my trashed bedroom- all jammed open- and's- and's- AND'S- did not cares at this point. (SAY IT WITH exhausted SLURRING.)

JANUARY yet how- ga-gives- a _____.

Ef…

E- un- mm- ah- in-n…

Whatever…

I am making 50 G's in a night… so that makes it okay.

(A photo of me lying in bed with all this money!)

Part: 8

TIME PASSES

Craziness… look at my life here… all board…

'I am home,' I mumbled, confused- not even more.

'What did I do?' I felt my face wrinkle. It was so unfair.

My behavior… here is wow…

After that first week… of doing this…

How do I look… which neither of us ever mentioned what we do?

I hadn't missed a day of school or work.

My grades were perfect.

Yet this show it all going to shit- no?

This is what I did here… showing everything that makes me a girl!

Now I am passing down- to her- yah me- is it wrong? I must live with it.

#- A cam video and all these photos of her online now are worth 1,000 words! #-0-okay then what does this one says then?

My little sis- and she is frapping harder than I do- in this- damn, she is my Minnie me! She started young than me even- yet that is all girls, her age.

Here is one with here dressed wow seem weird to see her with something on anymore-

(Swipe- and the phone in your hand would make a click sound…)

Oh, this one-

She loves these, beautiful white lace kid's girls' shorts- so girl- girl-ie- from Wal-Mart, yet she was band form wearing them in school without anything under them, yet I look around and all other girls do it.

Yet, on Facebook- and Instagram 1, you get one persona and on Google images a whole other- just like Snap Chat you have her as your girlfriend for the night yet have- yet she is your striptease only- and the other Instagram- that grammar should never- ever see- yet this is how to get popular- and stay popular.

Besides then there is the community of internet nudists- on MFC. And the profile- she now has too, a legacy to be remembered by no? Yet, when you have no education to speak of

and working for some d*ck head is just out of the question, over they think you're not worthy of their time- were you're not making anything, and at this point in Pa she too young to work, yet is old enough to have unprotected sex… Um- and then I wonder- yet she needs the money- for school coming up- because your mommy and daddy don't have it, and all for fun, boys, and a girls night of fun- and partying- and being crazy. Money is everything… and why girls do what they must do…

Part: 9

Penetrating

'Her residence, 'Marcel said, his husky voice low and intense.

Someone answered, and Marcel altered in an instant. He straightened up, and his hand dropped from my face. His eyes went flat, his face blank, and I would have bet the measly remainder of my college f and that it was Olivia.

I recovered myself and held out my hand for the phone. Marcel ignored me. 'He's not here, 'Marcel said, and the words where menacing.

There was some very short reply, a request for more information it seemed because he added unwillingly, 'He's at the funeral.'

Then Marcel hung up the phone. 'Filthy bloodsucker,' he muttered under his breath. The face he turned back to me was the bitter mask again.

'Who did you just hang up on?' I gasped, infuriated. 'In my house, and on my phone?'

'Easy! He hung up on me!'

'He? Who was it?'

He sneered the title. 'Dr. Chiaz Natalie.'

'Why didn't you let me talk to him?!'

'He didn't ask for you,' Marcel said coldly. His face was smooth, expressionless, but his hands shook. 'He asked where Mr. Anderson was, and I told him. I don't think I broke any rules of etiquette.'

'You listen to me, Marcel Black-'

But he wasn't listening. He looked quickly over his shoulder as if someone had called his name from the other room. His eyes went wide and his body stiff, then he started trembling. I listened too, automatically, but heard nothing.

'Bye, Bells,' he spits out and wheeled toward the front door.

I ran after him. 'What is it?'

And then I ran into him, as he rocked back on his heels, cursing under his breath. He spun around again, knocking me sideways. I bobbled and fell to the floor, my legs tangled with his.

'Shoot, now!' I protested as he hurriedly jerked his legs free one at a time.

I struggled to pull myself up as he darted for the back door; he suddenly froze again.

Olivia stood motionless at the foot of the stairs.

'Bell,' she choked.

I scrambled to my feet and lurched to her side. Her eyes were dazed and far away, her face drawn and whiter than bone. Her slim body trembled to an inner turmoil.

'Olivia, what's wrong?' I cried. I put my hands on her face, trying to calm her.

Her eyes focused on mine abruptly, wide with pain.

'Marcel,' was all she whispered.

My body reacted faster than my mind was able to catch up with the implications of her reply. I didn't at first understand why the room was spinning or where the hollow roar in my ears was coming from. My mind labored, unable to make sense of Olivia's bleak face and how it could relate to Marcel, while my body was already swaying, seeking the relief of unconsciousness before the reality could hit me.

The stairway tilted at the oddest angle.

Marcel's furious voice was suddenly in my ear, hissing out a stream of profanities. I felt vague disapproval. His new friends were a bad influence.

I was on the couch without understanding how I got there, and Marcel was still swearing. It felt like there was an earthquake-the couch was shaking under me.

'What did you do to her?' He demanded.

Olivia ignored him. 'Bell? Bell, snap out of it. We have to hurry.'

'Stay back,' Marcel warned.

'Calm down, Marcel Black,' Olivia ordered. 'You don't want to do that so close to her.'

'I don't think I'll have any problem keeping my focus,' he retorted, but his voice sounded a little cooler.

'Olivia?' My voice was weak. 'What happened?' I asked, even though I didn't want to hear.

'I don't know,' she suddenly wailed. 'What is he thinking?!'

I labored to pull myself up despite the dizziness. I realized it was Marcel's arm I was gripping for balance. He was the one shaking, not the couch.

Olivia was pulling a small silver phone from her bag when my eyes relocated her. Her fingers dialed the numbers so fast they were a blur.

'Rose, I need to talk to Chiaz now.' Her voice whipped through the words. 'Fine, as soon as he's back. No, I'll be on a plane. Look, have you heard anything from Marcel?'

Olivia paused now, listening with an expression that grew more appalled every second. Her mouth opened into a little O of horror, and the phone shook in her hand.

'Why?' she gasped. 'Why would you do that, Rose?'

Whatever the answer was, it made her jaw tighten in anger. Her eyes flashed and narrowed.

'Well, you're wrong on both counts, though, Rose, so that would be a problem, don't you think?' she asked acidly. 'Yes, that's right. She's fine- I was wrong... It's a long story... But you're wrong about that part, too, that's why I'm calling... Yes, that's exactly what I saw.'

Olivia's voice was very hard, and her lips were pulled back from her teeth. 'It's a bit late for that, Rose. Save your remorse for someone who believes it.' Olivia snapped the phone shut with a sharp twist of her fingers.

Her eyes were tortured as she turned to face me.

'Olivia,' I blurted out quickly. I couldn't let her speak yet. I needed a few more seconds before she spoke, and her words destroyed what was left of my life.

'Olivia, Chiaz is back, though. He called just before…'

She stared at me blankly. 'How long ago?' she asked in a hollow voice.

'Half a minute before you showed up.'

'What did he say?' She focused now, waiting for my answer.

'I didn't talk to him.' My eyes flickered to Marcel.

Olivia turned her penetrating gaze on him. He flinched but held his place next to me. He sits awkwardly as if he were trying to shield me with his body.

'He asked for Mr. Anderson, and I told him Mr. Anderson wasn't here,' Marcel muttered resentfully.

'Is that everything?' Olivia demanded, her voice like ice.

'Then he hung up on me,' Marcel spit back. A tremor rolled down his spine, shaking me with it.

'You told him Mr. Anderson was at the funeral,' I reminded him.

Olivia jerked her head back toward me 'What were his exact words?'

'He said, 'He's not here,' and when Chiaz asked where Mr. Anderson was, Marcel said, 'At the funeral.''

Olivia moaned and sank to her knees.

'Tell me, Olivia,' I whispered.

'That wasn't Chiaz on the phone,' she said hopelessly.

'Are you calling me a liar?' Marcel snarled from beside me.

Olivia ignored him, focusing on my bewildered face.

'It was Marcel.' The words were just a choked whisper. 'He thinks you're dead.'

My mind started to work again. These words weren't the ones I'd been afraid of, and the relief cleared my head.

'Rose told him I killed myself, didn't she?' I said, sighing as I relaxed. 'Yes,' Olivia admitted, her eyes flashing hard again.

'In her defense, she did believe it. They rely on my sight far too much for something that works so imperfectly. But for her to track him down to tell him this! Didn't she realize… or care…?' Her voice faded away in horror.

'And when Marcel called here, he thought Marcel meant my funeral,' I realized. It stung to know how close I'd been, just inches away from his voice. My nails dug into Marcel's arm, but he didn't flinch.

Olivia looked at me strangely. 'You're not upset,' she whispered.

'Well, it's rotten timing, but it will all get straightened out. The next time he calls, someone will tell him… what… really…' I trailed off. Her gaze strangled the words in my throat.

Why was she so panicked? Why was her face twisting now with pity and horror? What was it she had said to Rose on the phone just now? Something about what she'd seen… and Rose's remorse; Rose would never feel remorse for anything that happened to me. But if she'd hurt her family, hurt her brother…

'Bell,' Olivia whispered. 'Marcel won't call again. He believed her.'

'I. Don't. Understand.' My mouth framed each word in silence. I couldn't push the air out to say the words that would make her explain what that meant.

'He's going to Italy.'

It took the length of one heartbeat for me to comprehend.

When Marcel's voice came back to me now, it was not the perfect imitation of my delusions. It was just the weak, flat tone of my memories. But the words alone where enough to shred through my chest and leave it gaping open. Words from a time when I would have bet everything that I owned or could borrow on the fact that he loved me.

Well, I wasn't going to live without you, he'd said as we watched Romeo and Juliet dies, here in this very room. But I wasn't sure how to do it I knew Emmah and Joh would never help…

so I was thinking I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Ministry… You don't irritate them. Not unless you want to die.

Not unless you want to die.

'NO!' The half-shrieked denial was so loud after the whispered words, it made us all jump. I felt the blood rushing to my face as I realized what she'd seen. 'No! No, no, no! He can't! He can't do that!'

'He made up his mind as soon as your friend confirmed that it was too late to save you.'

'But he… he left! He didn't want me anymore! What difference does it make now? He knew I would die sometime!'

'I don't think he ever planned to outlive you by long,' Olivia said quietly.

'How dare he!' I screamed. I was on my feet now, and Marcel rose uncertainly to put himself between Olivia and me again.

'Oh, get out of the way, Marcel!' I elbowed my way around his trembling body with desperate impatience. 'What do we do?' I begged Olivia. There had to be something. 'Can't we call him? Can Chiaz?'

She was shaking her head. 'That was the first thing I tried. He left his phone in a trash can in Rio-someone answered it…' she whispered.

'You said before we had to hurry. Hurry how? Let's do it, whatever it is!'

'Bell, I-I don't think I can ask you to…' She trailed off in indecision.

'Ask me!' I commanded.

She put her hands on my shoulders, holding me in place, her fingers flexing sporadically to emphasize her words. 'We may already be too late. I saw him going to the Ministry… and asking to die.' We both cringed, and my eyes were suddenly blind. I blinked feverishly at the tears. 'It all depends on what they choose. I can't see that until they decide.

'But if they say no, and they might-Aron is fond of Chiaz, and wouldn't want to offend him- Marcel has a backup plan. They're very protective of their city. If Marcel does something to upset the peace, he thinks they'll act to stop him. And he's right. They will.'

I stared at her with my jaw clenched in frustration. I'd heard nothing yet that would explain why we were still standing here.

'So- if they agree to grant his favor, we're too late. If they say no, and he comes up with a plan to offend them quickly enough, we're too late. If he gives in to his more theatrical tendencies… we might have time.'

'Let's go!'

'Listen, Bell! Whether we are on time or not, we will be in the heart of the Ministry city. I will be considered his accomplice if he is successful. You will be a human who not only knows too much but also smells too good. There's a very good chance that they will eliminate us all- though in your case it won't be punishment so much as dinnertime.'

'This is what's keeping us here?' I asked in disbelief. 'I'll go alone if you're afraid.' I mentally tabulated what money was left in my account and wondered if Olivia would lend me the rest.

'I'm only afraid of getting you killed.'

I snorted in disgust. 'I almost get myself killed daily! Tell me what I need to do!' 'You write a note to Mr. Anderson. I'll call the airlines.'

'Mr. Anderson,' I gasped.

Not that my presence was protecting him, but could I leave him here alone to face…

'I'm not going to let anything happen to Mr. Anderson.' Marcel's deep voice was gruff and angry. 'Screw the treaty.'

I glanced up at him, and he scowled at my panicked expression.

~*~

'Rush, Bell,' Olivia intervened enthusiastically.

I ran to the kitchen, dragging the drawers apart and submitting the contents all over the floor as I hunted for a pen.

A smooth, coffee-colored handheld one out to me.

'Thanks,' I grumbled, picking the cap off with my teeth. He wordlessly handed me the pad of paper we wrote phone messages on. I tore off the top sheet and threw it over my shoulder.

Dad, I penned. I'm with Olivia. Marcel's in crisis. You can ground me when I get back. I grasp it's a critical time.

So-o sorrowful.

I love you so much. Bell…?

'Don't go,' Marcel murmured. The anger was all concluded now that Olivia was out of sight.

I continued to waste time arguing with him. 'Please, please, take care of Mr. Anderson,' I said as I hurled back out to the room. Olivia was waiting in the doorway with a bag over her shoulder.

'Take your wallet-you'll need ID. Please notify me you have a passport. I don't have time to forge one.'

I nodded and then raced up the stairs, my knees weak with gratitude that my mother had wanted to marry Phil on a beach in Hawaii.

Of course, like all her plans, it had fallen through. However not before I'd made all the functional arrangements I could for her.

I shredded through my room. I packed my old pocketbook, a plain T-shirt, and sweatpants into my backpack, and then threw my toothbrush on top.

I hurled myself back down the stairs. The sense of Deja vu was nearly stifling by this duration. At least, unlike the last time when I would run away from Pittsburgh to escape thirsty angels rather than to find Them-I wouldn't have to say goodbye to Mr. Anderson in person.

Marcel and Olivia were locked in encounter in front of the open door, occupying so far apart you wouldn't believe at first that they were having a dialogue. Neither one resembled to notice my boisterous reappearance.

'You might restrain yourself on occasion, but these bloodsuckers you're taking her to-' Marcel was furiously challenging her.

Part: 10

Puzzlement

She glared in bewilderment. ‘Someone uprooted you out?’

‘Yes. Marcel protected me.’

I accepted curiously as an enigmatic range of changes flashed across her face. Was something troubling her, wrong reasoning? Though I wasn't certain. Then she purposely leaned in and inhaled my arm.

I stopped, at that moment at that time in that place I was.

‘Don't be laughable,’ she whispered, inhaling at me some further.

‘What are you preparing?’

She neglected my problem. ‘Who was with you out there just now? It sounded like you were battling.’

‘Marcel.’

‘He's… variety of my best friend, I assume. At least, he was…’ I considered of Marcel’s mad, frustrated face, and questioned what he was to me now.

Olivia nodded, appearing preoccupied.

~*~

‘Whichever...?’

‘I don't understand,’ she said. ‘I'm not positive what it imports.’

‘Well, I'm not dead, at most invisible.’

She circled her eyes. ‘He was a fool to think you could endure simply. I've nevermore witnessed anyone so prone to life-threatening stupidity.’

‘I remained,’ I tended out.

She was believing of something different. ‘So, if the currents were too much for you, how did this Marcel manage?’

'Marcel is… compelling.'

She heard the hesitation in my communication, and her eyebrows raised.

I nibbled on my lip for a moment. Was this a secret, or not? Besides, if it was, then who was my most distinguished loyalty to?

Marcel, or Olivia?

It was too hard to keep secrets, I decided. Marcel knew everything, why not Olivia, additionally?

'Observe, well, he's… sort of a lycanthrope,' I announced in a dash. 'The Quileute converts into gourmands when angels are encircling. They know Chiaz a long time before.

Continued you with Chiaz back then?' Olivia rubbernecked at me for a moment, and then recovered herself, blinking immediately. 'Well, I guess that explains the smell,' she muttered. 'But does it explain what I didn't see?' She frowned, her porcelain forehead creasing.

'The smell?' I reproduced.

'You smell awful,' she said absently, still scowling. 'A lycanthrope? Are you positive about such?'

'Very certain,' I declared, wincing as I cherished Paul and Marcel fighting on the road. 'I imagine you weren't with Chiaz the last time there were lycanthropes here in Pittsburgh?'

'Neither. I hadn't discovered him yet.' Olivia was still lost in thought. Abruptly, her eyes increased, and she turned to stare at me with a dismayed character. 'Your best friend is a lycanthrope?'

I drowsed sheepishly.

'How long has this been going on?'

'Non-long,' I answered, my call sounding frustrating. 'He's only been a lycanthrope for just several weeks.'

She scowled at me. ‘A young lycanthrope?

Even worse! Marcel was right you are an electromagnet for exposure.

Weren’t you assumed to be visiting out of the problem?’

‘There's nothing wrong with lycanthropes,’ I grunted, stung by her critical tone.

‘Continuously they misplace their sturdiness.’ She shook her head distinctly from side to side. ‘Leave it to you, Bell.

Anyone else would be better off when the angels left town. But you have to start hanging out with the first monsters you can find.’

I did not want to argue with Olivia- I was still trembling with pleasure that she was, absolutely here, that I could touch her marble skin and hear the wind-chime voice-but she had it all wrong.

‘No, Olivia, the angels didn't leave-not all of them, anyway. That is the whole trouble. If it were not for the lycanthropes, Maggie would have gotten me by now. Well, if it weren’t for Maggie and his friends, Sophiet would have gotten me before she could, I guess, so-’

‘Maggie?’ She hissed. ‘Sophiet?’

~*~

I nodded a teensy bit alarmed by the expression in her black eyes. I pointed at my chest. ‘Danger magnet remember?’

She shook her head again. ‘Tell me everything-start at the beginning.’

I glossed over the beginning, skipping the motorcycles and the voices, but telling her everything else right up to today's misadventure. Olivia did not like my thin explanation about boredom and the cliffs, so I hurried on to the strange flame I had seen on the water and what I thought it meant. Her eyes narrowed to slits at that part. It was strange to see her look so… so dangerous-like angel. I swallowed hard and went on with the rest of Harry.

She listened to my story without interrupting. Occasionally, she would shake her head, and the crease in her forehead deepened until it looked like it was carved permanently into the

marble of her skin. She didn't speak and, finally, I fell quiet, struck again by the borrowed grief at Harry's passing. I thought of Mr. Anderson; he would be home soon. What condition would he be in?

'Our leaving didn't do you any good at all, did it?' Olivia murmured.

I laughed once-it was a slightly hysterical sound. 'That was never the point, though, was it? It's not like you left for my benefit.'

Olivia scowled at the floor for a moment. 'Well… I guess I acted impulsively today. I probably shouldn't have intruded.'

I could feel the blood draining from my face. My stomach dropped. 'Don't go, Olivia,' I whispered. My fingers locked around the collar of her white shirt and I began to hyperventilate. 'Please don't leave me.'

Her eyes opened wider. 'All right,' she said, enunciating each word with slow precision. 'I'm not going anywhere tonight. Take a deep breath.'

I tried to obey, though I couldn't quite locate my lungs.

She watched my face while I concentrated on my breathing. She waited till I was calmer to comment. 'You look like hell, Bell.'

'I drowned today,' I reminded her.

'It goes deeper than that. You're a mess.'

I flinched. 'Look, I'm doing my best.'

'What do you mean?'

'It hasn't been easy. I'm working on it.'

She frowned. 'I told him,' she said to herself.

'Olivia,' I sighed. 'What did you think you were going to find? I mean, besides me dead. Did you expect to find me skipping around and whistling show tunes? You know me better than that.'

'I do… But I hoped.'

'Then, I guess I don't have the corner on the idiocy market.'

The phone rang.

'That must be Mr. Anderson,' I said, staggering to my feet. I grabbed Olivia's stone hand and dragged her with me to the kitchen. I wasn't about to let her out of my sight.

'Mr. Anderson?' I answered the phone.

'No, it's me,' Marcel said.

'Maggie!'

Olivia scrutinized my expression.

'Just making sure you were still alive,' Marcel said sourly. 'I'm fine. I told you that it wasn't-'

'Yeah. I got it. 'Bye.'

Marcel hung up on me.

I sighed and let my head hang back, staring at the ceiling. 'That's going to be a problem.'

Olivia squeezed my hand. 'They aren't excited I'm here.'

'Not especially. But it's none of their business anyway.'

Olivia put her arm around me. 'So, what do we do now?' she mused. She seemed to talk to herself for a moment. 'Things to do. Loose ends to tie.'

'What things to do?'

Her face was suddenly careful. 'I don't know for sure… I need to see Chiaz.'

Would she leave so soon? My stomach dropped.

'Could you stay?' I begged. 'Please? For just a little while. I've missed you so much.' My voice broke.

'If you think that's an innovative idea.' Her eyes were unhappy.

'I do. You can stay here-Mr. Anderson would love that.'

'I have a house, Bell.'

I nodded, disappointed but resigned. She hesitated, studying me.

'Well, I need to go get a suitcase of clothes, at the very least.'

I threw my arms around her. 'Olivia, you're the best!'

'And I think I'll need to hunt. Immediately,' she added in a strained voice.

'Oops.' I took a step back.

'Can you stay out of trouble for one hour?' she asked skeptically. Then, before I could answer, she held up one finger and closed her eyes. Her face went smooth and blank for a few seconds.

And then her eyes opened, and she answered her question. 'Yes, you'll be fine. For tonight, anyway.' She grimaced. Even making faces, she looked like an angel.

'You'll come back?' I asked in a small voice.

'I promise-one hour.'

I glanced at the clock over the kitchen table. She laughed and leaned in quickly to kiss me on the cheek. Then she was gone.

Part: 11

Bottomless

I took a deep breath. Olivia would be back. I suddenly felt so much better.

I had plenty to do to keep myself busy while I waited. A shower was first on the agenda. I sniffed my shoulders as I undressed, but I couldn't smell anything but the brine and seaweed scent of the ocean. I wondered what Olivia had meant about me smelling bad.

When I was cleaned up, I went back to the kitchen. I couldn't see any signs that Mr. Anderson's child was eaten recently, and he would be hungry when he got back. I hummed tunelessly to myself as I moved around the kitchen.

While Thursday's casserole rotated in the microwave, I made up the couch with sheets and an old pillow. Olivia wouldn't need it, but Mr. Anderson would need to see it. I was careful not to watch the clock. There was no reason to start myself panicking; Olivia had promised.

I hurried through my dinner, not tasting it-just feeling the ache as it slid down my raw throat. Mostly I was thirsty; I must have drunk a half-gallon of water by the time I was finished. All the salt in my system had dehydrated me.

I went to go try to watch TV while I waited.

Olivia was already there, sitting on her improvised bed. Her eyes where liquid butterscotch. She smiled and patted the pillow. 'Thanks.'

'You're early,' I said, elated.

I sat down next to her and leaned my head on her shoulder. She put her cold arms around me and sighed.

'Bell. What are we going to do with you?'

'I don't know,' I admitted. 'I have been trying my hardest.'

'I believe you.' It was silent.

'Does-does he…' I took a deep breath. It was harder to say his name out loud, even though I was able to think about it now. 'Does Marcel know you're here?' I couldn't help asking. It was my pain. I'd deal with it when she was gone, I promised myself and felt sick at the thought.

'No…'

There was only one way that could be true. 'He's not with Chiaz and

Esme?'

'He checks in every few months.'

'Oh.' He must still be out enjoying his distractions. I focused my curiosity on a safer topic. 'You said you flew here… Where did you come from?'

'I was in Denali. Visiting Tanya's family.'

'Is he here? Did he come with you?'

She shook her head. 'He didn't approve of my interfering. We promised…' she trailed off, and then her tone changed. 'And you think Mr. Anderson won't mind my being here?' she asked, sounding worried.

'Mr. Anderson thinks you're wonderful, Olivia.'

'Well, we're about to find out.'

Sure enough, a few seconds later I heard the cruiser pull into the driveway. I jumped up and hurried to open the door.

Mr. Anderson trudged slowly up the walk, his eyes on the ground and his shoulders slumped. I walked forward to meet him; he didn't even see me until I hugged him around the waist. He embraced me back fiercely.

'I'm so sorry about Harry, Dad.'

'I'm going to miss him,' Mr. Anderson mumbled.

'How's Sue doing?'

'She seems dazed like she hasn't grasped it yet. Sam's staying with her…' The volume of his voice faded in and out. 'Those poor kids. Leah's just a year older than you, and Seth is only fourteen…' He shook his head.

He kept his arms tight around me as he started toward the door again.

'Um, Dad?' I figured I'd better warn him. 'You'll never guess who's here.'

He looked at me blankly. His head swiveled around, and he spied the Mercedes across the street, the porch light reflecting off the glossy black paint.

Before he could react, Olivia was in the doorway.

'Hi, Mr. Anderson,' she said in a subdued voice. 'I'm sorry I came at such an inconvenient time.'

'Olivia?' Peered at the slight figure in front of him as if he doubted what his eyes were telling him. 'Olivia is that you?'

'It's me,' she confirmed. 'I was in the neighborhood.'

'Is Chiaz...?'

'No, I'm alone.'

Both Olivia and I knew he wasn't asking about Chiaz. His arm tightened around my shoulder.

'She can stay here, can't she?' I pleaded. 'I already asked her.'

'Of course,' Mr. Anderson said mechanically. 'We'd love to have you, Olivia.'

'Thank you, Mr. Anderson. I know it's horrid timing.'

'No, it's fine. I'm going to be busy doing what I can for Harry's family; it will be nice for Karly to have some company.'

'There's dinner for you on the table, Dad,' I told him.

'Thanks, Bell.' He gave me one more squeeze before he shuffled toward the kitchen.

Olivia went back to the couch, and I followed her. This time, she was the one to pull me against her shoulder.

'You look tired.'

'Yeah,' I agreed and shrugged. 'Near-death experiences do that to me...

So, what does Chiaz think of you being here?'

'He doesn't know. He and Esme were on a hunting trip. I'll hear from him in a few days when he gets back.'

'You won't tell him, though... when he checks in again?' I asked. She knew I didn't mean Chiaz now.

'No. He'd bite my head off,' Olivia said grimly.

I laughed once and then sighed.

I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to stay up all night talking to Olivia. And it didn't make sense for me to be tired, what with crashing on Marcel's couch all day. But drowning had taken a lot out of me, and my eyes wouldn't stay open. I rested my head on her stone shoulder and drifted into more peaceful oblivion than I had any hope of.

I woke early, from a deep and dreamless sleep, feeling well-rested, but stiff. I was on the couch tucked under the blankets I'd laid out for Olivia, and I could hear her and Mr. Anderson talking in the kitchen. It sounded like Mr. Anderson was fixing her breakfast.

'How bad was it, Mr. Anderson?' Olivia asked softly, and at first, I thought they were talking about the Clearwater's.

Mr. Anderson sighed.

'Bad.'

'Tell me about it. I want to know exactly what happened when we left.' There was a pause while a cupboard door was closed and a dial on the stove was clicked off. I waited, cringing.

'I've never felt so helpless,' Mr. Anderson began gradually. 'I didn't know what to do. That first week- I thought I was going to have to hospitalize her. She wouldn't eat or drink, she wouldn't move. Dr. LORENZO was throwing around words like 'catatonic,' but I didn't let him up to see her. I was afraid it would terrify her.' 'She locked out of it though?'

'I had Ayanna suit to take her to the islands. I just didn't want to be the one… if she had to go to a clinic or something.

I expected to be with her mother would attend. Exactly when we started gathering her dresses, she woke up energetically. I've never more beheld Karly throw a tantrum like that before she was insane. She was never one for the tantrums, but, boy, did she fly into violence.

She threw her dresses wherever and squealed that we couldn't make her leave-and then she finally started sobbing. I imagined that would be the transforming position. I didn't argue when she insisted on staying here… and she did seem to get better at first…'

Mr. Anderson pursued off. It was hard accepting of this, knowing how much pain I'd caused him.

'However?' Olivia assisted.

'She went back to school and work, she ate, masturbated, and napped in the nude and did her homework.

She acknowledged when someone questioned her a direct question. Although she was… questionnaire. Her eyes were empty of feelings colorless. There were lots of little things-she wouldn't listen to music anymore; I found a bunch of records crushed in the debris.

She didn't read; she wouldn't be in the corresponding room meanwhile the TV was proceeding paid programming, not that she watched it so much already. I finally concluded it out-she was withdrawing everything that might prompt her of him.

'We could hardly talk; I was so worried about saying something that would upset her-the littlest things would make her flinch-and she never volunteered anything. She would just answer if I asked her something.

'She was alone all the time. She didn't call her friends back, and after a while, they stopped requesting.

'It was a night of the living decedent round hereabouts. I still hear her screaming in her slumber…'

I could almost see him shuddering. I shuddered, too, remembering. And then I sighed. I hadn't fooled him at all, not for one second.

'I'm so melancholy, Mr. Anderson,' Olivia said, speech glum.

'It's not your fault.' The way he said it made it clear that he was holding someone responsible. 'You were always a good friend to her.'

'She seems more valid now, though.'

'Yeah, ever since she started hanging out with Marcel, back- I've regarded a real improvement. She has some color in her chops when she comes home, some light in her eyes.

She's hilarious.' He hesitated, and his speech was modified when he articulated repeatedly. 'He's a year or so more fashionable than her, and I know she used to think of him as a friend, but I think maybe it's something more now or headed that direction, anyhow.'

Mr. Anderson said this in an almost opposing nature. It was a lesson, not for Olivia, but for her to pass along. 'Maggie's old for his ages,' he proceeded, still blowing defensive. 'He's taken care of his father the way Karly took care of her mother emotionally. It culminated him. He's a good-looking kid, too-takes after his mom's view. He's good for Bell, you know,' Mr. Anderson insisted.

Before play-

It's all flying by…

Going back in forth in my life…

(Her in the past)

Marcel- What she does to me for me that goes through me- I want her to draw arbitrary things on me with a Sharpie marker in whatever color she feels is right or fits her fancy.

Like a little heart in my mid- palm that is arched like only she can do with tapered arches. I say I love you every time I stare at it when not with her in some random class or something like that, it's kind of dainty, adorable, and beautiful; in a moderately cute primary way, I prefer seeing her girlie-ness on me, very sweet overall.

(Don't you see, this hand opens to reveal the humble yet brave portrayal?)

I love her for this… adorable things like this one are what make her all mine! AWE! I would tattoo it if she wanted me too.

Oppositely just have it drawn again if washed continuously. Just like her crying that I whip away, she hates yet I am okay with it and find it sweet. She mine! <3

Karly- The devil is the root of all evil, don't criticize any moron like you or mom for instance for what he is arranging, even I want to say I get that one too, that fool is continuously up my ass; go to hell and stay there. Smell your rump for a- while.

Marcel- 'I am virtually frightened to touch her for the fear -that- I might break her.'

(Intumesce significances in the origins.)

Kissing- Noses don't regularly really hit, they interlock collectively side by side touching and touching, and rubbing on the tip afterward -perfectly- when we kiss. Dreamily she is made for me only.

~*~

(Recollection)

Marcel sucked in a breath. 'He got that close?'

'He got precise, right up on me.'

Me- And- I felt ever cover and molding-ness of her girlie body.

I stroked my hair with your fingers and feel my boobs and in- between my boobs and rub my body soft loft non- stop in a holding hug and unbraced- feel my vagina backing forth intake hold of yet in a- teasing, playful, jokey, mischievous, bantering, and joshing why.

Press held tight, feel, kiss, feel, kiss, stop to breath, feel, and then kiss -panting- in-love kissing. Arms a laced, in braced, pulled in tighter, which each movement into our bodies.

'Loving in braced, looking at her lovely face… time held still so we could feel, freewheel. You and I- they cannot deny- love is real when you can see it and feel, they try to steal us apart breaking a heart.

They're not smart, missing the dart- that smashes us isolated… crossed the hart, broken glass- breaking and quivering us up fast…

I asked- like, well it last? Going so quick, time that has past slowly, yes ever so fast- falling to you down like thundershower and pain with an endeavor, comparable to a speeding train, spring- gone, winter love materialized in the haze, love stayed, we misbehaved- in love, notwithstanding them being the cold inside to hide. Accesses denied.'

Part: 12

'Then it's good she has him,' Olivia agreed.

Mr. Anderson sighed out a big gust of air, folding quickly to the lack of opposition.

'Okay, so I guess that's overstating things. I don't know… even with Marcel, now and then I see something in her eyes, and I wonder if I've ever grasped how much pain she's really in

It's not normal Olivia, and it… it frightens me. Not normal at all. Not like someone… left her, but as someone died.' His voice cracked.

It was like someone had died-like I had died. Because it had to be more than just losing the truest of true love as if that were not enough to kill anyone. It was also losing a whole future, a whole family- the whole life that I'd chosen…

Mr. Anderson went on in a hopeless tone. 'I don't know if she's going to get over it-I'm not sure if it's in her nature to heal from something like this. She's always been such a constant little thing. She doesn't get past things, change her mind.'

'She's one of a kind,' Olivia agreed in a dry voice.

'And Olivia…' Mr. Anderson hesitated. 'Now, you know how fond I am of you, and I can tell that she's happy to see you, but… I'm a little worried about what your visit will do to her.'

'So am I, Mr. Anderson, so am I. I wouldn't have come if I'd had any idea. I'm sorry.'

'Don't apologize, honey. Who knows? Maybe it will be good for her.'

'I hope you're right.'

There was a long break while Pittsburgh scraped plates and Mr. Anderson chewed.

I wondered where Olivia was hiding the food.

'Olivia, I have to ask you something,' Mr. Anderson said awkwardly.

Olivia was calm. 'Go ahead.'

'He's not coming back to visit, too, is he?' I could hear the suppressed anger in Mr. Anderson's voice.

Olivia answered in a soft, reassuring tone. 'He doesn't even know I'm here.

The last time I spoke with him, he was in South America.'

I stiffened as I heard this added information and listened harder.

'That's something, at least.' Mr. Anderson snorted. 'Well, I hope he's enjoying himself.'

For the first time, Olivia's voice had a bit of steel in it. 'I wouldn't make assumptions, Mr. Anderson.' I knew how her eyes would flash when she used that tone.

A chair scooted from the table, scraping loudly across the floor. I pictured Mr. Anderson getting up; there was no way Olivia would make that kind of noise. The faucet ran, splashing against a dish.

It didn't sound like they were going to say anything more about Marcel, so I decided it was time to wake up.

I turned over, bouncing against the springs to make them squeak. Then I yawned loudly.

All was quiet in the kitchen.

I stretched and groaned.

'Olivia?' I asked innocently; the soreness rasping in my throat added nicely to the charade.

'I'm in the kitchen, Bell,' Olivia called, no hint in her voice that she suspected my eavesdropping. But she was good at hiding things like that.

Mr. Anderson had to leave then-he was helping Sue Clearwater with the funeral arrangements. It would have been a very long day without Olivia. She never spoke about leaving, and I didn't ask her. I knew it was inevitable, but I put it out of my mind.

Instead, we talked about her family-all but one.

Chiaz was working nights in Ithaca and teaching part-time at Cornell. Esme was restoring a seventeenth-century house, a historical monument, in the forest north of the city.

Emmah and Rose had gone to Europe for a few months on another honeymoon, but they were back now.

Joh was at Cornell, too, studying philosophy this time. And Olivia had been doing some personal research, concerning the information I'd accidentally uncovered for her last spring. She'd successfully tracked down the asylum where she'd spent the last years of her human life. The life she had no memory of.

'My name was Mary Olivia Brandon,' she told me quietly. 'I had a little sister named Cynthia. Her daughter-my niece-is still alive in Biloxi.'

'Did you find out why they put you in… that place?' What would drive parents to that extreme? Even if their daughter saw visions of the future…

She just shook her head, her topaz eyes thoughtful. 'I couldn't find much about them. I went through all the old newspapers on microfiche. My family wasn't mentioned often; they weren't part of the social circle that made the papers. My parents' engagement was there, and Cynthia's.' The name fell uncertainly from her tongue. 'My birth was announced… and my death. I found my grave. I also filched my admissions sheet from the old asylum archives. The date of the admission and the date of my tombstone is the same.'

I didn't know what to say, and, after a short pause, Olivia moved on to lighter topics.

The Barn's where reassembled now, with the one exception, spending Cornell's spring break in Denali with Tanya and her family. I listened too eagerly to even the most trivial news. She never mentioned the one I was most interested in, and for that I was grateful. It was enough to listen to the stories of the family I'd once dreamed of belonging to.

Mr. Anderson didn't get back until after dark, and he looked more worn than he had the night before. He would be headed back to the reservation first thing in the morning for Harry's funeral, so he turned in early. I stayed on the couch with Olivia again.

Mr. Anderson was a stranger when he came down the stairs before the sun was up, wearing an old suit I'd never seen him in before. Mr. Anderson hung open; I guessed it was too tight to fasten the buttons. His tie was a bit wide for the current style. He tiptoed to the door, trying not to wake us up. I let him go, pretending to sleep, as Olivia did on the recliner.

As soon as he was out the door, Olivia sat up. Under the quilt, she was fully dressed.

'So, what are we doing today?' She asked.

'I don't know do you see anything interesting happening?'

She smiled and shook her head. 'But it's still early.'

All the time I'd been spending in La Push meant a pile of things I'd been neglecting at home, and I decided to catch up on my chores. I wanted to do something, anything that might make life easier for Mr. Anderson-it would make him feel just a little better to come home to a clean, organized house. I started with the bathroom-it showed the most signs of neglect.

While I worked, Olivia leaned against the doorjamb and asked nonchalant questions about my, well, our high school friends and what they been up to since she'd left. Her face stayed casual and emotionless, but I sensed her disapproval when she realized how little I could tell her. Or I just had a guilty conscience after eavesdropping on her conversation with Mr. Anderson yesterday morning.

I was up to my elbows in Comet, scrubbing the floor of the bathtub, when the doorbell rang.

I looked to Olivia at once, and her expression was perplexed, almost worried, which was strange; Olivia was never taken by surprise.

'Hold on!' I shouted in the general direction of the front door, getting up and hurrying to the sink to rinse my arms off.

'Bell,' Olivia said with a trace of frustration in her voice, 'I have a fairly good guess who that might be, and I think I'd better step out.'

'Guess?' I echoed. Since when did Olivia have to guess anything?

'If this is a repeat of my egregious lapse in foresight yesterday, then it's most likely Marcel Black or one of his… friends.'

I stared at her, putting it together. 'You can't see werewolves?'

She grimaced. 'So, it would seem.' She was annoyed by this fact very annoyed.

The doorbell rang again-buzzing twice quickly and impatiently.

'You don't have to go anywhere, Olivia. You were here first.'

She laughed her silvery little laugh-it had a dark edge. 'Trust me-it wouldn't be an innovative idea to have me and Marcel Black in a room together.'

She kissed my cheek swiftly before she vanished through Mr. Anderson's door-and out his back window, no doubt.

The doorbell rang again.

THE FUNERAL-

I SPRINTED DOWN THE STAIRS AND THREW THE DOOR open.

It was Marcel, of course. Even blind, Olivia wasn't slow.

He was standing about six feet back from the door, his nose wrinkled in distaste, but his face otherwise smooth-masklike. He didn't fool me; I could see the faint trembling of his hands.

Hostility rolled off him in waves. It brought back that awful afternoon when he'd chosen Sam over me, and I felt my chin jerk up defensively in response.

Marcel's Rabbit idled by the curb with Jared behind the wheel and Embry in the passenger seat. I understood what this meant: they were afraid to let him come here alone. It made me sad, and a little annoyed. The Barn's weren't like that.

'Hey,' I finally said when he didn't speak.

Maggie pursed his lips, still hanging back from the door. His eyes flickered across the front of the house.

I ground my teeth. 'She's not here. Do you need anything?' He hesitated. 'You're alone?' 'Yes.' I sighed.

'Can I talk to you a minute?'

'Of course, you can, Marcel. Come on in.'

Marcel glanced over his shoulder at his friends in the car. I saw Embry shake his head just a tiny bit. For some reason, this bugged me to no end.

My teeth clenched together again. 'Chicken' I mumbled under my breath.

Maggie's eyes flashed back to me, his thick, black brows pushing into a furious angle over his deep-set eyes. His jaw set, and he marched-there was no other way to describe the way he moved-up the sidewalk and shrugged past me into the house.

I locked gazes with first Jared and then Embry-I didn't like the hard way they eyed me; did they think I would let anything hurt Marcel? …Before I shut the door on them.

Marcel was in the hall behind me, staring at the mess of blankets in the living room.

'Slumber party?' He asked, his tone sarcastic.

'Yeah,' I answered with the same level of acid. I didn't like Marcel when he acted this way. 'What's it to you?'

He wrinkled his nose again like he smelled something unpleasant. 'Where's your 'friend'?' I could hear the quotation marks in his tone.

'She had some errands to run. Look, Marcel, what do you want?'

Something about the room seemed to make him edgier-his long arms were quivering. He didn't answer my question. Instead, he moved on to the kitchen, his restless eyes darting everywhere.

I followed him. He paced back and forth along the short counter.

'Hey,' I said, putting myself in his way. He stopped pacing and stared down at me. 'What's your problem?'

'I don't like having to be here.'

That stung. I winced, and his eyes tightened.

'Then I'm sorry you had to come,' I muttered. 'Why don't you tell me what you need so you can leave?'

'I just have to ask you a couple of questions. It shouldn't take long. We have to get back for the funeral.'

'Okay. Get it over with then.' I was overdoing it with the antagonism, but I didn't want him to see how much this hurt. I knew I wasn't being fair. I'd picked the bloodsucker over him last night. I'd hurt him first.

He took a deep breath and his trembling fingers were suddenly still. His face smoothed into a serene mask.

'One of the Barn's is staying here with you,' he stated.

'Yes, Olivia Natalie.'

He nodded thoughtfully. 'How long is she here for?'

'As long as she wants to be.' The belligerence was still there in my tone.

'It's an open invitation.'

'Do you think you could... please... explain to her about the other one- Maggie?'

I paled. 'I told her about that.'

He nodded. 'You should know that we can only watch our lands with Natalie here. You'll only be safe in La Push. I can't protect you here anymore.'

'Okay,' I said in a small voice.

He looked away then, out the back windows. He didn't continue.

'Is that all?'

He kept his eyes on the glass as he answered. 'Just one more thing.'

I waited, but he didn't continue. 'Yes...?' I finally prompted.

'Are the rest of them coming back now?' he asked in a cool, quiet voice. It reminded me of Sam's always calm manner. Marcel was becoming more like Sam... I wondered why that bothered me so much.

Now I didn't speak. He looked back at my face with probing eyes.

'Well?' He asked. He struggled to conceal the tension behind his serene expression.

'No!' I said finally. Grudgingly. 'They aren't coming back.'

His expression didn't change. 'Okay... that's all.'

I glared at him; annoyance rekindled. 'Well, run along now. Go tell Sam that the scary monsters aren't coming to get you.'

'Okay,' he repeated, still calm.

That was it. Marcel walked swiftly from the kitchen. I waited to hear the front door open, but I heard nothing. I could hear the clock over the stove ticking, and I marveled again at how quiet he'd become.

Part: 13

Calamity

What a disaster… How could I have alienated him so completely in such a short amount of time? Would he forgive me when Olivia was gone? What if he didn't?

I slumped against the counter and buried my face in my hands. How had I made such a mess of everything? But what could I have done differently? Even in hindsight, I couldn't think of any better way and perfect course of action.

'Bell…?' Marcel asked in a troubled voice.

I pulled my face out of my hands to see Marcel hesitating in the kitchen doorway; he hadn't left when I'd thought. It was only when I saw the clear drops sparkling in my hands that I realized I was crying.

Marcel's calm expression was gone; his face was anxious and unsure. He walked quickly back to stand in front of me, ducking his head so that his eyes were closer to being on the same level as mine.

'Did it again, didn't I?'

'Did what?' I asked, my voice cracking.

'Broke my promise. Sorry.'

'O-okay,' I mumbled. 'I started it this time.'

His face is twisted. 'I knew how you felt about them. It shouldn't have taken me by surprise like that.'

I could see the revulsion in his eyes. I wanted to explain to him what Olivia was really like, to defend her against the judgments he'd made, but something warned me that now was not the time.

So-o, I just said, 'Sorry,' again.

'Let's not worry about it, okay? She's just visiting, right? She'll leave, and things will go back to normal.' 'Can't I be friends with you both at the same time?' I asked, my voice not hiding an ounce of the hurt I felt.

He shook his head slowly. 'No, I don't think you can.'

I sniffed and stared at his big feet. 'But you'll wait, right? You'll still be my friend, even though I love Olivia, too?'

I didn't look up, afraid to see what he'd think of that last part. It took him a minute to answer, so I was right not to look.

'Yeah, I'll always be your friend,' he said- gruffly. 'No matter what you love.'

'Promise?'

'Promise?'

I felt his arms wind around me, and I leaned against his chest, still sniffling.

'This- sucks…'

'Yeah.' Then he sniffed my hair and said, 'Ewe-ah.'

'What?' I demanded. I looked up to see that his nose was wrinkled again.

'Why does everyone keep doing that to me? I don't smell!'

He smiled a little. 'Yes, you do you smell like them. Blech. Too sweet sickly sweet. And… icy. It burns my nose.'

'Really…?' That was strange.

Olivia smelled unbelievably wonderful. To a human, anyway. 'But why would Olivia think I smelled, too, then?'

That wiped his smile away. 'Huh. I don't smell so good to her, either.

'Huh!'

'Well, you both smells fine to me.' I rested my head against him again. I was going to miss him terribly when he walked out of my door. It was a nasty Catch-22-on the one hand, I wanted Olivia to stay forever. I was going to die-metaphorically when she left me. But how was I supposed to go without seeing Maggie for any length of time? What a mess, I thought again.

'I'll miss you,' Marcel whispered, echoing my thoughts. 'Every minute. I hope she leaves soon.'

'It doesn't have to be that way, Maggie.'

He sighed. 'Yes, it does. Bell. You... love her. So-o, I'd better not get anywhere near her. I'm not sure that I'm even-tempered enough to handle that. Sam would be mad if I broke the treaty, and'-his voice turned sarcastic-'you probably wouldn't like it too much if I killed your friend.'

I recoiled from him when he said that, but he only tightened his arms, refusing to let me escape. 'There's no point in avoiding the truth. That's the way things are, Bells.'

'I do not like the way things are.'

Marcel freed one arm so that he could cup his big brown hand under my chin and make me look at him. 'Yeah. It was easier when we were both human, wasn't it?'

I sighed...!

We stared at each other for a long moment. His hand smoldered against my skin. In my face, I knew there was nothing but wistful sadness- I didn't want to have to say goodbye now, no matter how short a time. At first, his face reflected mine, but then, as neither of us looked away, his expression changed.

He released me, lifting his other hand to brush his fingertips along my cheek, trailing them down to my jaw. I could feel his fingers tremble-not with anger this time. He pressed his palm against my cheek so that my face was trapped between his burning hands.

'Bell,' he whispered.

I was frozen...

No! I hadn't made this decision yet. I didn't know if I could do this, and now I was out of time to think. But I would have been a fool if I thought rejecting him now would have no consequences.

I stared back at him. He was not my Marcel, but he could be. His face was familiar and beloved. In so many real ways, I did love him. He was my comfort, my safe harbor. Right now, I could choose to have him belong to me.

Olivia was back for the moment, but that changed nothing. True love was forever lost. The prince was never coming back to kiss me awake from my enchanted sleep. I was not a

princess. So, what was the fairy-tale protocol for other kisses? The mundane kind that didn't break any spells.

It would be easy-like holding his hand or having his arms around me. It would feel nice. It wouldn't feel like a betrayal. Besides, who was I betraying, anyway? Just myself.

Keeping his eyes on mine, Marcel began to bend his face toward me. And I was still undecided.

The shrill ring of the phone made us both jump- but it did not break his focus. He took his hand from under my chin and reached over me to grab the receiver, but still held my face securely with the hand against my cheek. His dark eyes did not free mine. I was too muddled to react, even to take advantage of the distraction.

Part: 14

Grimacing

'Yes. You're right, dog.' Olivia was snarling, too. 'The Ministry is the very essence of our kind-they're the reason your hair stands on end when you smell me. They are the substance of your nightmares, the dread behind your instincts. I'm not unaware of that.'

'And you take her to them like a bottle of wine for a party!' he shouted.

'You think she'd be better off if I left her here alone, with Maggie stalking her?'

'We can handle the redhead.'

'Then why is she still hunting?'

Marcel growled, and a shudder rippled through his torso.

'Stop that!' I shouted at them both, wild with impatience, 'argue when we get back, let's go!'

Olivia turned for the car, disappearing in her haste; I hurried after her, pausing automatically to turn and lock the door.

Marcel caught my arm with a shivering hand. 'Please, Bell; I'm begging.'

His dark eyes were glistening with tears. A lump filled my throat.

'Maggie, I have to-'

'You don't, though. You don't. You could stay here with me. You could stay alive… for Mr. Anderson… for me.'

The engine of Chiaz's Mercedes purred; the rhythm of the thrumming spiked when Olivia revved it impatiently. I shook my head, tears spattering from my eyes with the sharp motion. I pulled my arm free, and he didn't fight me.

'Don't die, Bell,' he choked out. 'Don't go… Don't.'

What if I never saw him again?

The thought pushed me past the silent tears; a cry, moan, snuffle, and cry, broke out from my chest.

I flung my arms around his waist and hugged for one too-short moment, burying my tear-wet face against his chest. He put his big hand on the back of my hair as if to hold me there.

'Bye, Maggie.' I pulled his hand from my hair and kissed his palm. I couldn't bear to look at his face. 'Sorry,' I whispered.

Then I spun and raced for the car. The door on the passenger side was open and waiting. I threw my backpack over the headrest and slid in, slamming the door behind me. 'Take care of Mr. Anderson!' I turned to shout out the window, but Marcel was nowhere in sight.

As Olivia stomped on the gas and with the tires screeching like human screams-spun us around to face the road, I caught sight of a shred of white near the edge of the trees. A piece of a shoe. HATE- WE MADE OUR FLIGHT WITH SECONDS TO SPARE, AND THEN the true torture began.

The plane sat idle on the tarmac while the flight attendants strolled-so casually- up and down the aisle, patting the bags in the overhead compartments to make sure everything fit. The pilots leaned out of the cockpit, chatting with them as they passed.

Olivia's hand was hard on my shoulder, holding me in my seat while I bounced anxiously up and down.

'It's faster than running,' she reminded me in a muffled voice.

I just nodded in time with my bouncing.

At last, the plane rolled lazily from the gate, building speed with a gradual steadiness that tortured me further. I expected relief when we achieved liftoff, but my frenzied impatience didn't lessen. Olivia lifted the phone on the back of the seat in front of her before we'd stopped climbing, turning her back on the flight attendant who eyed her with disapproval. Something about my expression stopped the flight attendant from coming over to protest.

I tried to tune out what Olivia was murmuring to Joh; I didn't want to hear the words again, but some slipped through.

'I can't be sure, I keep seeing him do different things, he keeps changing his mind... A killing spree through the city, attacking the guard, lifting a car over his head in the main square... mostly things that would expose them-he knows that's the fastest way to force a reaction...'

'No, you can't.' Olivia's voice dropped until it was inaudible, though I was sitting inches from her. Contrarily, I listened harder. 'Tell Emmah no... Well, go after Emmah and Rose and bring them back... Think about it, Joh. If he sees any of us, what do you think he will do?'

She nodded. 'Exactly. I think Karly is the only chance-if there is a chance...

I'll do everything that can be done but prepare Chiaz; the odds aren't good.' She laughed then, and there was a catch in her voice. 'I've thought of that... Yes, I promise.' Her voice became pleading. 'Don't follow me. I promise, Joh.

One way or another, I'll get out... And I love you.'

She hung up and leaned back in her seat with her eyes closed. 'I hate lying to him.'

'Tell me everything, Olivia,' I begged. 'I don't understand. Why did you tell Joh to stop Emmah, why can't they come to help us?'

'Two reasons,' she whispered, her eyes still closed. 'The first I told him. We could try to stop Marcel ourselves-if Emmah could get her hands on him; we might be able to stop him long enough to convince him you're alive. But we can't sneak up on Marcel. And if he sees us coming for him, he'll just act that much faster. He'll throw a Brick through a wall or something, and the Ministry will take him down.

'That's the second reason, of course, the reason I couldn't say to Joh. Because if they're there and the Ministry kills Marcel, they'll fight them. Bell.' She opened her eyes and stared at me, imploring.

'If there were any chance, we could win… if there were a way that the four of us could save my brother by fighting for him, maybe it would be different. But we can't, and, Bell, I can't lose Joh like that.'

I realized why her eyes begged for my understanding. She was protecting Joh, at our expense, and at Marcel's, too. I understood, and I did not think badly of her.

I nodded…

'Couldn't Marcel hear you, though.' I asked. 'Wouldn't he know, as soon as he heard your thoughts, that I was alive, that there was no point to this?'

Not that there was any justification, either way. I still could not believe that he could react like this.

It made no sense! I remembered with painful clarity his words that day on the sofa, while we observed Romeo and Juliet kill themselves, one after the other.

I wasn't going to live without you, he'd said as if it should be such an obvious conclusion. But the words he had spoken in the forest as he'd left me had canceled all that out-forcefully.

'If he were listening,' she explained. 'But unbelievably, it's possible to lie with your thoughts. If you had died, I would still try to stop him. And I would be thinking 'she's alive, she's alive' as hard as I could. He knows that.'

I ground my teeth in mute frustration.

'If there were any way to do this without you, Bell, I wouldn't be jeopardizing you like this. It's very wrong of me.'

'Don't be stupid. I'm the last thing you should be worrying about.' I shook my head impatiently. 'Tell me what you meant, about hating to lie to Joh.'

She smiled a grim smile. 'I promised him I would get out before they killed me, too. It's not something I can guarantee-not by a long shot.' She raised her eyebrows as if willing me to take the danger more seriously.

'Who is this Ministry?' I demanded in a whisper. 'What makes them so much more dangerous than Emmah, Joh, Rose, and you?' It was hard to imagine something scarier than that. She took a deep breath, and then abruptly leveled a dark glance over my shoulder. I turned in time to see the man in the aisle seat looking away as if he wasn't listening to us.

He was a businessperson, in a dark suit with a power tie and a laptop on his knees. While I stared at him with irritation, he opened the computer and very conspicuously put headphones on.

I leaned closer to Olivia. Her lips were at my ears as she breathed the story.

'I was surprised that you recognized the name,' she said. 'That you understood so immediately what it meant when I said he was going to Italy. I thought I would have to explain. How much did Marcel tell you?'

'He just said they were an old, powerful family-like royalty. That you didn't provoke them unless you wanted to... die,' I whispered. The last word was hard to choke out.

'You have to understand,' she said, her voice slower, more measured now.

'We Barns are unique in more ways than you know. It's... abnormal for so many of us to live together in peace. It's the same for Tanya's family in the north, and Chiaz speculates that abstaining makes it easier for us to be civilized, to form bonds based on love rather than survival or convenience. Even James's little coven of three was unusually large-and you saw how easily Sophiet left them. Our kind travel alone, or in pairs, as a rule. Chiaz's family is the biggest in existence with one exception. The Ministry.

'There were three of them originally, Aron, Caius, and Marcellus.'

'I've seen them,' I mumbled. 'In the picture in Chiaz's study.'

Olivia nodded. 'Two females joined them over time, and the five of them make up the family. I'm not sure, but I suspect that their age is what gives them the ability to live peacefully together. They are well over three thousand years old. Or it's their gifts that give them extra tolerance. Like Marcel and I, Aron and Marcellus are... talented.'

She continued before I could ask. 'Or maybe it's just their love of power that binds them together. Royalty is an apt description.'

'But if there are only five-'

'Five that make up the family,' she corrected. 'That doesn't include their guard.'

I took a deep breath. 'That sounds... serious.'

'Oh, it is,' she assured me. 'There were nine members of the guard that was permanent, the last time we heard. Others are more... transitory. It changes. And many of them are gifted as well-with formidable gifts, gifts that make what I can do look like a parlor trick. The Ministry chose them for their abilities, physical or otherwise.'

I opened my mouth and then closed it. I didn't think I wanted to know how bad the odds where.

She nodded again as if she understood exactly what I was thinking. 'They don't get into too many confrontations. No one is stupid enough to mess with them. They stay in their city, leaving only as duty calls.'

'Duty?' I wondered.

'Didn't Marcel tell you what they do?'

'No,' I said, feeling the blank expression on my face.

Olivia looked over my head again, toward the businessperson, and put her wintry lips back to my ear.

'There's a reason he called them royalty... the ruling class. Over the millennia, they have assumed the position of enforcing our rules-which translates to punishing transgressors. They fulfill that duty decisively.'

My eyes popped wide with shock. 'There are rules?' I asked in a voice that was too loud.

Motivations...

'Got it!' he crowed. 'Another promise to keep.'

'What are you talking about?'

He let go of my hand and pointed toward the southern edge of the beach, where the flat, rocky half-moon dead-ended against the sheer sea cliffs. I stared, uncomprehending.

'Didn't I promise to take you cliff diving?'

I shivered… strongly.

'Yeah, it'll be pretty cold-not as cold as it is today. Can you feel the weather changing? The pressure? It will be warmer tomorrow. You up for it?'

The dark water did not look inviting, and, from this angle, the cliffs looked even higher than before.

Nonetheless, it had been days since I'd heard Marcel's voice. That was part of the problem. I was addicted to the sound of my delusions. It made things worse if I went too long without them. Jumping off a cliff was certain to remedy that situation.

'Sure, I'm up for it. Fun.'

'It's a date,' he said and draped his arm around my shoulders.

'Okay-now let's go get you some sleep.' I didn't like the way the circles under his eyes were beginning to look permanently etched into his skin.

I woke early the next morning and snuck a change of clothes out to the truck. I had a feeling that Mr. Anderson would approve of today's plan about as much as he would approve of the motorcycle.

The idea of a distraction from all my worries had me almost excited. It would be fun. A date with Marcel, a date with Marcel… I laughed darkly to myself. Maggie could say what he wanted about us being a messed-up pair- I was the one who was truly messed up. I made the werewolf seem downright normal.

I expected Marcel to meet me out front, the way he usually did when my noisy truck announced my arrival. When he didn't, I guessed that he might still be sleeping. I would wait-let him get as much rest as he could. He needed his sleep, and that would give the daytime to warm a bit more.

Maggie had been right about the weather, though; it had changed in the night. A thick layer of clouds pressed heavily on the atmosphere now, making it almost sultry; it was warm and close under the gray blanket. I left my sweater in the truck.

I knocked quietly on the door.

'C'mon in, Bell,' Billy said.

He was at the kitchen table, eating cold cereal.

'Maggie sleeping?'

'Err, no.' He set his spoon down, and his eyebrows pulled together.

'What happened?' I demanded. I could tell from his expression that something had.

'Embry, Jared, and Paul crossed a fresh trail early this morning. Sam and Maggie took off to help. Sam was hopeful- she's hedged herself in beside the mountains. He thinks they have a good chance to finish this.' 'Oh, no, Billy,' I whispered. 'Oh, no.'

He chuckled, deep and low. 'Do you like La Push so well that you want to extend your sentence here?'

'Don't make jokes, Billy. This is too scary for that.'

'You're right,' he agreed, still complacent. His ancient eyes were impossible to read. 'This one's tricky.' I bit my lip.

'It's not as dangerous for them as you think it is. Sam knows what he's doing. You're the one that you should worry about. The angel doesn't want to fight them. She's just trying to find a way around them... to you.'

'How does Sam know what he's doing?' I demanded, brushing aside his concern for me. 'They've only killed just the one angle that could have been lucky.'

'We take what we do very seriously, Bell. Nothing's been forgotten. Everything they need to know has been passed down from father to son for generations.'

That didn't comfort me the way he intended it to. The memory of Maggie, wild, catlike, lethal,

was too strong in my head. If she couldn't get around the wolves, she would eventually try to go through them.

Billy went back to his breakfast; I sat down on the sofa and flipped aimlessly through the TV channels. That didn't last long. I started to feel closed in by the small room, claustrophobic, upset by the fact that I couldn't see out the curtained windows.

'I'll be at the beach,' I told Billy abruptly and hurried out the door.

Being outside didn't help as much as I'd hoped. The clouds pushed down with an invisible weight that kept the claustrophobia from easing. The forest seemed strangely vacant as I walked toward the beach. I didn't see any animals-no birds, no squirrels. I couldn't hear any birds, either. The silence was eerie; there wasn't even the sound of wind in the trees.

I knew it was all just a product of the weather, but it still made me edgy. The heavy, warm pressure of the atmosphere was perceptible even to my weak human senses, and it hinted at something major in the storm department. A glance at the sky backed this up, the clouds where churning sluggishly despite the lack of breeze on the ground. The closest clouds where a smoky gray, but between the cracks, I could see another layer that was a gruesome purple color. The skies had a ferocious plan in store for today. The animals must be bunkering down.

As soon as I reached the beach, I wished I hadn't come- I'd already had enough of this place. I'd been here every day, wandering alone. Was it so much different from my nightmares? But where else to go? I trudged down to the driftwood tree and sat at the end so that I could lean against the tangled roots. I stared up at the angry sky broodingly, waiting for the first drops to break the stillness.

I tried not to think about the danger Marcel and his friends were in. Because nothing could happen to Marcel. The thought was unendurable. I'd lost too much already-would fate take the last few shreds of peace left behind? That seemed unfair, out of balance. But I'd violated some unknown rule, crossed some line that had condemned me. It was wrong to be so involved with myths and legends, to turn my back on the human world. Maybe…

No… Nothing would happen to Marcel. I had to believe that, or I wouldn't be able to function.

'Argh!' I groaned and jumped off the log. I couldn't sit still; it was worse than pacing.

I'd been counting on hearing Marcel this morning. It seemed like that was the one thing that might make it bearable to live through this day.

The hole had been festering lately like it was getting revenge for the times that Marcel's presence had tamed it. The edges burned.

The waves picked up as I paced, beginning to crash against the rocks, but there was still no wind. I felt pinned down by the pressure of the storm. Everything swirled around me, but it was perfectly still where I stood. The air had a faint electric charge- I could feel the static in my hair.

Farther out, the waves were angrier than they were along the shore. I could see them battering against the line of the cliffs, spraying big white clouds of seafoam into the sky. There was still no movement in the air, though the clouds roiled more quickly now. It was eerie looking like the clouds were moving by their own will. I shivered, though I knew it was just a trick of the pressure.

The cliffs where a black knife edge against the livid sky. Staring at them, I remembered the day Marcel had told me about Sam and his 'gang.' I thought of the boys-the werewolves- throwing themselves into the empty air.

The image of the falling, spiraling figures was still vivid in my mind. I imagined the utter freedom of the fall… I imagined the way Marcel's voice would have sounded in my head furious, velvet, perfect… The burning in my chest flared agonizingly.

There had to be some way to quench it. The pain was growing increasingly intolerable by the second. I glared at the cliffs and the crashing waves.

Well, why not? Why not quench it right now?

Marcel had promised me cliff diving, hadn't he? Just because he was unavailable, should I have to give up the distraction I needed so badly needed even worse because Marcel was out risking his life? Risking it for me.

If it weren't for me, Maggie would not be killing people here… just somewhere else, far away. If anything happened to Marcel, it would be my fault. That realization stabbed deep and had me jogging back up to the road toward Billy's house, where my truck waited.

I knew my way to the lane that passed closest to the cliffs, but I had to hunt for the little path that would take me out to the ledge. As I followed it, I looked for turns or Pittsburgh, knowing that Maggie had planned to take me off the lower outcropping rather than the top, but the path wound in a thin single line toward the brink with no options. I didn't have time to find another way down- the storm was moving in quickly now. The wind was finally beginning to

touch me, the clouds pressing closer to the ground. Just as I reached the place where the dirt path fanned out into the stone precipice, the first drops broke through and splattered on my face.

It was not hard to convince myself that I didn't have time to search for another way- I wanted to jump from the top. This was the image that had lingered in my head. I wanted the long fall that would feel like flying.

I knew that this was the stupidest, most reckless thing I had done yet. The thought made me smile. The pain was already easing as if my body knew that Marcel's voice was just seconds away...

The ocean sounded very far away, somehow farther than before, when I was on the path in the trees. I grimaced when I thought of the probable temperature of the water. But I wasn't going to let that stop me.

The wind blew stronger now, whipping the rain into eddies around me.

I stepped out to the edge, keeping my eyes on the space in front of me. My toes felt ahead blindly, caressing the edge of the rock when they encountered it. I drew in a deep breath and held it... waiting. 'Bell.'

I smiled and exhaled.

Yes? I didn't answer out loud, for fear that the sound of my voice would shatter the beautiful illusion. He sounded so real, so close. It was only when lie was disapproving like this that I could hear the true memory of his voice-the velvet texture and the musical intonation that made up the most perfect of all voices.

'Don't do this,' he pleaded.

You wanted me to be human, I reminded him. Well, watch me.

'Please. For me.'

But you won't stay with me any other way.

'Please.' It was just a whisper in the blowing rain that tossed my hair and drenched my clothes-making me as wet as if this were my second jump of the day.

I rolled up onto the balls of my feet.

'No, Bell!' He was angry now, and the anger was so lovely.

I smiled and raised my arms straight out, as if I were going to dive, lifting my face into the rain. But it was too ingrained from years of swimming at the public pool-feet first, the first time. I leaned forward, crouching to get more spring…

And I flung myself off the cliff.

Part: 15

Midair

I screamed as I dropped through the open air like a meteor, but it was a scream of exhilaration and not fear. The wind resisted, trying vainly to fight the unconquerable gravity, pushing against me, and twirling me in spirals like a rocket crashing to the earth.

Yes! The word echoed through my head as I sliced through the surface of the water. It was icy, colder than I'd feared, and yet the chill only added to the high.

I was proud of myself as I plunged deeper into the freezing black water. I hadn't had one moment of terror-just pure adrenaline. The fall wasn't scary at all. Where was the challenge?

That was when the current caught me.

I'd been so preoccupied with the size of the cliffs, by the obvious danger of their high, sheer faces, that I hadn't worried at all about the dark water waiting. I never dreamed that the true menace was lurking far below me, under the heaving surf.

It felt like the waves were fighting over me, jerking me back and forth between them as if determined to share by pulling me into halves. I knew the right way to avoid a riptide: swim parallel to the beach rather than struggling for the shore. But the knowledge did me little good when I didn't know which way the shore was.

I couldn't even tell which way the surface was.

The angry water was black in every direction; there was no brightness to direct me upward. Gravity was all-powerful when it competed with the air, but it had nothing on the waves- I couldn't feel a downward pull, a sinking in any direction. Just the battering of the current that flung me round and round like a rag doll.

I fought to keep my breath in, to keep my lips locked around my last store of oxygen.

It didn't surprise me that my delusion of Marcel was there. He owed me that much, considering that I was dying. I was surprised by how sure that knowledge was. I was going to drown. I was drowning.

'Keep swimming!' Marcel begged urgently in my head.

Where?

There was nothing but the darkness. There was no place to swim, I thought.

'Stop that!' He ordered. 'Don't you dare give up!'

The cold of the water was numbing my arms and legs. I didn't feel the buffeting so much as before. It was more of just dizziness now, a helpless spinning in the water.

But I listened to him. I forced my arms to continue reaching, my legs to kick harder, though every second I was facing a new direction. It couldn't be doing any good. What was the point? 'Fight!' he yelled. 'Damn it, Bell, keep fighting.'

Why?

I didn't want to fight anymore. And it wasn't the light-headedness, or the cold, or the failure of my arms as the muscles gave out in exhaustion, that made me content to stay where I was. I was almost happy that it was over. This was an easier death than others I'd faced. Oddly peaceful.

I thought briefly of the clichés, about how you were supposed to see your life flash before your eyes. I was so much luckier. Who wanted to see a rerun, anyway?

I saw him, and I had no will to fight. It was so clear, so much more defined than any memory.

My subconscious had stored Marcel away in flawless detail, saving him for this final moment. I could see his perfect face as if he were there, the exact shade of his icy skin, the shape of his lips, the line of his jaw, the gold glinting in his furious eyes. He was angry, naturally, that I was giving up. His teeth were clenched, and his nostrils flared with rage.

'No! Bell, no!'

My ears were flooded with the freezing water, but his voice was clearer than ever. I ignored his words and concentrated on the sound of his voice. Why would I fight when I was so happy where I was? Even as my lungs burned for more air and my legs cramped in the icy cold, I was content. I'd forgotten what real happiness felt like.

Happiness. It made the whole dying thing bearable.

The current one at that moment, shoving me abruptly against something hard, a rock invisible in the gloom. It hit me solidly across the chest, slamming into me like an iron bar, and the breath whooshed out of my lungs, escaping in a thick cloud of silver bubbles. Water flooded down my throat, choking and burning. The iron bar seemed to be dragging me, pulling me away from Marcel, deeper into the dark, to the ocean floor.

Goodbye, I love you, was my last thought.

PARIS AT THAT MOMENT, MY HEAD BROKE THE SURFACE.

How disorienting. I'd been sure I was sinking. The current wouldn't let up. It was slamming me against more rocks; they beat against the center of my back sharply, rhythmically, pushing the water from my lungs. It gushed out in amazing volume, absolute torrents pouring from my mouth and nose. The salt burned, and my lungs burned, and my throat was too full of water to catch a breath and the rocks were hurting my back.

Somehow- I stayed in one place, though the waves still heaved around me. I couldn't see anything but water everywhere, reaching for my face.

'Breath!' a voice, wild with anxiety, ordered, and I felt a cruel stab of pain where I recognized the voice-because it wasn't Marcel's.

I could not obey. The waterfall pouring from my mouth didn't stop long enough for me to catch a breath. The black, icy water filled my chest, burning.

The rock smacked into my back again, right between my shoulder blades, and another volley of water choked its way out of my lungs.

'Breathe, Bell! C'mon!' Marcel begged.

Black spots bloomed across my vision, getting wider and wider, blocking out the light.

The rock struck me again.

The rock wasn't cold like the water; it was hot on my skin. I realized it was Marcel's hand, trying to beat the water from my lungs. The iron bar that had dragged me from the sea was also… warm… My head whirled; the black spots covered everything…

Was I dying again, then? I didn't like it-this wasn't as good as the last time. It was only dark now, nothing worth looking at here. The sound of the crashing waves faded into the black and became a quiet, even whoosh that sounded like it was coming from the inside of my ears…

'Bell?' Marcel asked, his voice still tense, but not as wild as before. 'Bells, honey, can you hear me?'

The contents of my head swished and rolled sickeningly like they'd joined the rough water…

'How long has she been unconscious?' someone else asked.

The voice that was not Marcel's shocked me, jarred me into a more focused awareness.

I realized that I was still. There was no tug of the current on me-the heaving was inside my head. The surface under me was flat and motionless. It felt grainy against my bear arms.

'I don't know,' Marcel reported, still frantic. His voice was very close. Hands-so warm they had to be his- I brushed wet hair from my cheeks. 'A few minutes? It didn't take long to tow her to the beach.' The quiet whooshing inside my ears was not the waves-it was the air moving in and out of my lungs again. Each breath burned-the passageways were as raw as if I'd scrubbed them out with steel wool. But I was breathing.

And I was freezing. A thousand sharp, icy beads were striking my face and arms, making the cold worse.

'She's breathing. She'll come around. We should get her out of the cold, though. I don't like the color she's turning…' I recognized Sam's voice this time.

'You think it's okay to move her?'

'She didn't hurt her back or anything when she fell?'

'I don't know.'

They hesitated.

I tried to open my eyes. It took me a minute, but then I could see the dark, purple clouds, flinging the freezing rain down at me. 'Maggie?' I croaked.

Marcel's face blocked out the sky. 'Oh!' he gasped, relief washing over his features. His eyes were wet from the rain. 'Oh, Bell! Are you okay? Can you hear me? Do you hurt anywhere?'

'J-Just m-my throat,' I stuttered, my lips quivering from the cold.

'Let's get you out of here, then,' Marcel said. He slid his arms under me and lifted me without effort-like picking up an empty box. His chest was bare and warm; he hunched his shoulders to keep the rain off me. My head lolled over his arm. I stared vacantly back toward the furious water, beating the sand behind him.

'You got her?' I heard Sam ask.

'Yeah, I'll take it from here. Get back to the hospital. I'll join you later.

Thanks, Sam.'

My head was still rolling. None of his words sunk in at first. Sam didn't answer. There was no sound, and I wondered if he were already gone.

The water licked and writhed up the sand after us as Marcel carried me away like it was angry that I'd escaped. As I stared wearily, a spark of color caught my unfocused eyes-a a small flash of fire was dancing on the black water, far out in the bay. The image made no sense, and I wondered how conscious I was.

My head swirled with the memory of the black, churning water-of being so lost that I couldn't find up or down. So, lost… but somehow Marcel…

'How did you find me?' I rasped.

'I was searching for you,' he told me. He was half-jogging through the rain, up the beach toward the road. 'I followed the tire tracks to your truck, and then I heard you scream…' He shuddered. 'Why would you jump, Bell? Didn't you notice that it's turning into a hurricane out here? Couldn't you have waited for me?' Anger filled his tone as the relief faded.

'Sorry,' I muttered. 'It was stupid.'

'Yeah, it was really stupid,' he agreed, drops of rain shaking free of his hair as he nodded. 'Look, do you mind saving the stupid stuff for when I'm around? I won't be able to concentrate if I think you're jumping off cliffs behind my back.'

'Sure,' I agreed. 'No problem.' I sounded like a chain-smoker. I tried to clear my throat- and then winced; the throat-clearing felt like stabbing a knife down there. 'What happened today? Did you… find her?' It was my turn to shudder, though I wasn't so cold here, right next to his ridiculous body heat.

Marcel shook his head. He was still more running than walking as he headed up the road to his house. 'No. She took off into the water-the bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That's why I raced home- I was afraid she was going to double back swimming. You spend so much time on the beach…' He trailed off, a catch in his throat.

'Sam came back with you… is everyone else home, too?' I hoped they weren't still out searching for her.

'Yeah. Sort of.'

I tried to read his expression, squinting into the hammering rain. His eyes were tight with worry or pain.

The words that hadn't made sense before suddenly did. 'You said… hospital. Before, to Sam. Is someone hurt? Did she fight you?' My voice jumped up an octave, sounding strange with the hoarseness.

Marcel's eyes tightened again. 'It doesn't look so great right now.'

Abruptly, I felt sick with guilt-felt truly horrible about the brainless cliff dive. Nobody needed to be worrying about me right now. What a stupid time to be reckless.

'What can I do?' I asked.

At that moment the rain stopped. I hadn't realized we were already back to Marcel's house until he walked through the door. The storm pounded against the roof.

'You can stay here,' Marcel said as he dumped me on the short couch. 'I mean it-right here I'll get you some dry clothes.'

I let my eyes adjust to the darkroom while Marcel banged around in his bedroom. The cramped front room seemed so empty without Billy, almost desolate. It was strangely ominous-probably just because I knew where he was.

Marcel was back in seconds. He threw a pile of gray cotton at me. 'These will be huge on you, but it's the best I've got. I'll-a, step outside so you can change.'

'Don't go anywhere. I'm too tired to move yet. Just stay with me.'

Marcel sat on the floor next to me, his back against the couch. I wondered when he'd slept last. He looked as exhausted as I felt.

He leaned his head on the cushion next to mine and yawned. 'Guess I could rest for a minute…'

His eyes closed. I let my slide shut, too.

Poor Harry. Poor Sue. I knew Mr. Anderson was going to be beside himself. Harry was one of his best friends. Despite Maggie's negative take on things, I hoped fervently that Harry would pull through. For Mr. Anderson's sake. For Sue's and Leah's and Seth's…

Billy's sofa was right next to the radiator, and I was warm now, despite my soaked clothes. My lungs ached in a way that pushed me toward unconsciousness rather than keeping me awake. I wondered vaguely if it was wrong to sleep… or was I getting drowning mixed up with concussions…? Marcel began softly snoring, and the sound of it soothed like a lullaby. I fell asleep quickly.

For the first time in a very long time, my dream was just a normal dream.

Just a blurred wandering through old memories-blinding bright visions of the Pa-sun, my mother's face, a ramshackle treehouse, a faded quilt, a wall of mirrors, a flame on the black water… I forgot each of them as soon as the picture changed.

The last picture was the only one that stuck in my head. It was meaningless just a set on a stage. A balcony at night, a painted moon hanging in the sky. I watched the girl in her nightdress lean on the railing and talk to herself.

Meaningless… but when I slowly struggled back to consciousness, Juliet was on my mind.

Marcel was still asleep; he'd slumped down to the floor and his breathing was deep and even. The house was darker now than before, it was black outside the window. I was stiff but warm and almost dry. The inside of my throat burned with every breath I took.

I was going to have to get up at least to get a drink. But my body just wanted be-a here limp, to never move again. Instead of moving, I thought about Juliet some more.

I wondered what she would have done if Romeo had left her, not because he was banished, but because he lost interests What if Rosalind had given him the time of day, and he'd changed his mind? What if, instead of marrying Juliet, he'd just disappeared?

I thought I knew how Juliet would feel.

She wouldn't go back to her old life, not really. She wouldn't ever have moved on; I was sure of that. Even if she'd lived until she was old and gray, every time she closed her eyes, it would have been Romeo's face she saw behind her lids.

She would have accepted that, eventually.

I wondered if she would have married Paris in the end, just to please her parents, to keep the peace. No, not, I decided. But then, the story didn't say much about Paris. He was just a stick figure-a placeholder, a threat, a deadline to force her hand.

What if there were more to Paris?

What if Paris had been Juliet's friend? Her very best friend? What if he was the only one, she could confide in about the whole devastating thing with Romeo? The one person who understood her and made her feel halfway human again? What if he was patient and kind? What if he took care of her? What if Juliet knew she couldn't survive without him? What if he loved her, and wanted her to be happy?

And… what if she loved Paris? Not like Romeo. Nothing like that, of course. But enough that she wanted him to be happy, too?

Marcel's slow, deep breathing was the only sound in the room-like a lullaby hummed to a child, like the whisper of a rocking chair, like the ticking of an old clock when you had nowhere you needed to go…It was the sound of comfort.

If Romeo was gone, never coming back, would it have mattered whether Juliet had taken Paris up on his offer? She should have tried to settle into the leftover scraps of life that were left behind. That would have been as close to happiness as she could get.

I sighed and then groaned when the sigh scraped my throat. I was reading too much into the story.

Romeo wouldn't change his mind. That's why people still remembered his name, always twined with hers: Romeo and Juliet. That's why it was a delightful story.

'Juliet gets dumped and ends up with Paris' would have never been a hit.

I closed my eyes and drifted again, letting my mind wander away from the stupid play I didn't want to think about anymore. I thought about reality instead of jumping off the cliff and what a brainless mistake that had been. And not just the cliff, but the motorcycles and the whole irresponsible Evil Knievel bit. What if something bad happened to me? What would that do to Mr. Anderson? Harry's heart attack had pushed everything suddenly into perspective for me. The perspective that I didn't want to see because if I admitted to the truth of it-it would mean that I would have to change my ways. Could I live like that?

Maybe... It wouldn't be easy; in fact, it would be downright miserable to give up my hallucinations and try to be a grown-up. But I should do it. And I could. If I had Marcel.

I couldn't make that decision right now. It hurt too much. I'd think about something else.

Images from my ill-considered afternoon stunt rolled through my head while I tried to come up with something pleasant to think about... the feel of the air as I feel, the blackness of the water, the thrashing of the current... Marcel's face... I lingered there for a long time. Marcel's warm hands, trying to beat life back into me... the stinging rain flung down by the purple clouds... the strange fire on the waves...

There was something familiar about that flash of color on top of the water. Of course, it couldn't be fire-

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car squelching through the mud on the road outside. I heard it stop in front of the house, and doors started opening and closing. I thought about sitting up and then decided against that idea.

Billy's voice was easily identifiable, but he kept it uncharacteristically low so that it was only a gravelly grumble.

The door opened, and the light flicked on. I blinked, momentarily blind.

Maggie startled awake, gasping, and jumping to his feet.

'Sorry,' Billy grunted. 'Did we wake you?'

My eyes slowly focused on his face, and then, as I could read his expression, they filled with tears.

'Oh, no, Billy!' I moaned.

He nodded slowly, his expression hard with grief. Maggie hurried to his father and took one of his hands. The pain made his face suddenly childlike-it looked odd on top of the man's body.

Sam was right behind Billy, pushing his chair through the door. His normal composure was absent from his agonized face.

'I'm so sorry,' I whispered.

Billy nodded. 'It's going to be hard all around.'

'Where's Mr. Anderson?'

'Your dad is still at the hospital with Sue. There are a lot of... arrangements to be made.'

I swallowed hard.

'I'd better get back there,' Sam mumbled, and he ducked hastily out the door.

Billy pulled his hand away from Marcel, and then he rolled himself through the kitchen toward his room.

Maggie stared after him for a minute, then came to sit on the floor beside me again. He put his face in his hands. I rubbed his shoulder, wishing I could think of anything to say.

After a long moment, Marcel caught my hand and held it to his face.

'How are you feeling? Are you okay? I probably should have taken you to a doctor or something.' He sighed.

'Don't worry about me,' I croaked.

He twisted his head to look at me. His eyes were rimmed in red. 'You don't look so good.'

'I don't feel so good, either, I guess.'

'I'll go get your truck and then take you home-you probably ought to be there when Mr. Anderson gets back.'

'Right…'

I lay listlessly on the sofa while I waited for him. Billy was silent in the other room. I felt like a peeping torn, peering through the cracks at a private sorrow that wasn't mine.

It didn't take Maggie long. The roar of my truck's engine broke the silence before I expected it. He helped me up from the couch without speaking, keeping his arm around my shoulder when the chilly air outside made me shiver. He took the driver's seat without asking, and then pulled me next to his side to keep his arm tight around me. I leaned my head against his chest.

'How will you get home?' I asked.

'I'm not going home. We still haven't caught the bloodsucker, remember?' My next shudder had nothing to do with the cold.

It was a quiet ride after that. The chilly air had woken me up. My mind was alert, and it was working very hard and very fast.

What if? What was the right thing to do?

I couldn't imagine my life without Marcel now-I cringed away from the idea of even trying to imagine that. Somehow, he'd become essential to my survival.

But to leave things the way they were… was that cruel, as Lance had accused?

I remembered wishing that Marcel was my brother. I realized now that all I wanted to be a claim on him. It didn't feel brotherly when he held me like this. It just felt nice-warm and comforting and familiar. Safe. Marcel was a safe harbor.

I could stake a claim. I had that much in my power.

I'd have to tell him everything, I knew that. It was the only way to be fair. I'd have to explain it right so that he'd know I wasn't settling, that he was much too good for me. He already knew I was broken, that part wouldn't surprise him, but he'd need to know the extent of it. I'd even have to admit that I was crazy-explain about the voices I heard. He'd need to know everything before he decided.

But even as I recognized that necessity, I knew he would take me despite it all. He wouldn't even pause to think it through. I would have to commit to this-commit as much of me as there was left, every one of the broken pieces. It was the only way to be fair to him. Would I?

Could I?

Would it be so wrong to try to make Marcel happy? Even if the love I felt for him was no more than a weak echo of what I was capable of, even if my heart was far away, wandering and grieving after my fickle Romeo, would it be so very wrong?

Marcel stopped the truck in front of my spooky house, cutting the engine so it was suddenly silent. Like so many other times, he seemed to be in tune with my thoughts now.

He threw his other arm around me, crushing me against his chest, binding me to him. Again, this felt nice. Like being a whole person again.

I thought he would be thinking of Harry, but then he spoke, and his tone was apologetic. 'Sorry. I know you don't feel exactly the way I do, Bell. I swear I don't mind. I'm just so glad you're okay that I could sing and that's something no one wants to hear.' He laughed his throaty laugh in my ear.

My breathing kicked up a notch, sanding the walls of my throat.

Wouldn't Marcel, indifferent as he might be, want me to be as happy as possible under the circumstances? Wouldn't enough friendly emotion linger for him to want that much for me? I thought he would. He wouldn't begrudge me this: giving just a small bit of love he didn't want to my friend Marcel. It wasn't the same love at all.

Maggie pressed his warm cheek against the top of my hair.

If I turned my face to the side-if I pressed my lips against his bare shoulder... I knew without any doubt what would follow. It would be very easy. There would be no need for explanations tonight.

But could I do it? Could I betray my absent heart to save my pathetic life? Butterflies assaulted my stomach as I thought of turning my head.

And then, as clearly as if I were in immediate danger, Marcel's velvet voice whispered in my ear.

'Be happy,' he told me.

I froze… to that look…

Marcel felt me stiffen and released me automatically, reaching for the door.

Wait, I wanted to say. Just a minute… But I was still locked in place, listening to the echo of Marcel's voice in my head.

Storm-cooled air blew through the cab of the truck.

'OH!' The breath whooshed out of Marcel like someone had punched him in the gut. 'Holy crap!'

He slammed the door and twisted the keys in the ignition at the same moment. His hands were shaking so hard I didn't know how he managed it.

'What's wrong?'

He revved the engine too fast; it sputtered and faltered.

'Fallen Angel,' he spits out.

The blood rushed from my head and left me dizzy. 'How do you know?'

'Because I can smell it. Damn it!'

Marcel's eyes were wild, raking the dark street. He barely seemed aware of the tremors that were rolling through his body. 'Phase or get her out of here?' he hissed at himself.

He looked down at me for a split second, taking in my horror-struck eyes and white face, and then he was scanning the street again.

'Right. Get you out.'

The engine caught with a roar. The tires squealed as he spun the truck around, turning toward our only escape. The headlights washed across the pavement, lit the front line of the black forest, and finally glinted off a car parked across the street from my house.

'Stop!' I gasped.

It was a black car a car I knew. I might be the furthest thing from an audiophile, but I could tell you everything about that car. It was a Mercedes S 55 AMG. I knew the horsepower and the color of the interior. I knew the feel of the powerful engine purring through the frame. I knew the rich smell of the leather seats and the way the extra-dark tint made noon look like dusk through those windows.

It was Chiaz's car.

'Stop!' I cried again, louder this time because Marcel was gunning the truck down the street.

'What?'

'It's not Maggie. Stop, stop! I want to go back.'

He stomped on the brake so hard I had to catch myself against the dashboard.

'What?' he asked again, aghast. He stared at me with horror in his eyes.

'It's Chiaz's car! It's Barns. I know it.'

He watched dawn break across my face, and a violent tremor rocked his frame.

'Hey, calm down, Maggie. It's okay. No danger, see? Relax.'

'Yeah, calm,' he panted, putting his head down and closing his eyes. While he concentrated on not exploding into a wolf, I started out the back window at the black car.

It was just Chiaz, I told myself. Don't expect anything more. Esme... Stop right there, I told myself. Just Chiaz. That was plenty. More than I'd ever hoped to have again.

'There's an angel in your house,' Marcel hissed. 'And you want to go back?'

I glanced at him, ripping my unwilling eyes off the Mercedes-terrified that it would disappear the second I looked away.

'Of course,' I said, my voice blank with surprise at his question. Of course, I wanted to go back.

Marcel's face hardened while I stared at him, congealing into the bitter mask that I'd thought was gone for good. Just before he had the mask in place, I caught the spasm of betrayal that flashed in his eyes. His hands were still shaking. He looked ten years older than me.

He took a deep breath. 'You're sure it's not a trick?' he asked in a slow, heavy voice.

'It's not a trick. It's from Chiaz. Take me back!'

A shudder rippled through his wide shoulders, but his eyes were flat and emotionless.

'No.'

'Maggie, it's okay-'

'No. Take yourself back, Bell.' His voice was a slap- I flinched as the sound of it struck me. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

'Look, Bell,' he said in the same hard voice. 'I can't go back. Treaty or no treaty, that's my enemy in there.'

'It's not like that-'

'I have to tell Sam right away. This changes things. We can't be caught on their territory.' 'Maggie, it's not a war!'

He didn't listen. He put the truck in neutral and jumped out the door, leaving it running.

'Bye, Bell,' he called back over his shoulder. 'I hope you don't die.' He sprinted into the darkness, shaking so hard that his shape seemed blurred; he disappeared before I could open my mouth to call him back.

Remorse pinned me against the seat for one long second. What had I just done to Marcel?'

But Remorse couldn't hold me very long.

I slid across the seat and put the truck back in drive. My hands were shaking as hard as Maggie's had been, and this took a minute of concentration. Then I carefully turned the truck around and drove it back to my house.

It was very dark when I turned off the headlights. Mr. Anderson had left in such a hurry that he'd forgotten to leave the porch lamp on. I felt a pang of doubt, staring at the house, deep in shadow. What if it was a trick?

I looked back at the black car, almost invisible in the night. No, I knew that car.

Still, my hands were shaking even worse than before as I reached for the key above the door. When I grabbed the doorknob to unlock it, it twisted easily under my hand. I let the door fall open. The hallway was black.

I wanted to call out a greeting, but my throat was too dry. I couldn't quite seem to catch my breath.

I took a step inside and fumbled for the light switch. It was so black-like the black water… Where was that switch?

Just like the black water, with the orange flame flickering impossibly on top of it. The flame that couldn't be a fire, but what then…? My fingers traced the wall, still searching, still shaking- suddenly, something Marcel had told me this afternoon echoed in my head, finally sinking in… She took off into the water, he'd said. The bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That's why I raced home -I was afraid she was going to double back swimming.

My hand froze in its searching, my whole body froze into place, as I realized why I recognized the strange orange color of the water.

Maggie's hair, blowing wild in the wind, the color of fire…

She'd been right there. Right there in the harbor with me and Marcel. If Sam hadn't been there if it had been just the two of us…? I couldn't breathe or move. The light flicked on, though my frozen hand had still not found the switch.

I blinked at the sudden light and saw that someone was there, waiting for me.

VISITOR UNNATURALLY STILL AND WHITE, WITH LARGE BLACK EYES intent on my face, my visitor waited perfectly motionless in the center of the halt, beautiful beyond imagining.

My knees trembled for a second, and I nearly fell. Then I hurled myself at her.

'Olivia, oh, Olivia!' I cried as I slammed into her.

I'd forgotten how hard she was; it was like running headlong into a wall of cement.

'Bell?' There was a strange mingling of relief and confusion in her voice.

I locked my arms around her, gasping to inhale as much of the scent of her skin as possible. It wasn't like anything else-not floral or spice, citrus, and musk. No perfume in the world could compare. My memory hadn't done it justice.

I didn't notice when the gasping turned into something else-I only realized I was sobbing when Olivia dragged me to the living room couch and pulled me into her lap. It was like curling up into a cool stone, but a stone that was contoured comfortingly to the shape of my body. She rubbed my back in a gentle rhythm, waiting for me to get control of myself.

'I'm... sorry,' I blubbered. 'I'm just... so happy... to see you!'

'It's okay, Bell. Everything's okay.'

'Yes,' I bawled. And, for once, it seemed that way.

Olivia sighed. 'I'd forgotten how exuberant you are,' she said, and her tone was disapproving.

I looked up at her through my streaming eyes. Olivia's neck was tight, straining away from me, her lips pressed together firmly. Her eyes were black as pitch.

'Oh,' I puffed, as I realized the problem. She was thirsty. And I smelled appetizing. It had been a while since I'd had to think about that.

'Sorry.'

'It's my fault. It's been too long since I hunted. I shouldn't let myself get so thirsty. But I was in a hurry today.' The look she directed at me then was a glare. 'Speaking of which, would you like to explain to me how you're alive?'

That brought me up short and stopped the sobs. I realized what must have happened immediately, and why Olivia was here.

I swallowed loudly, 'you saw me fall.'

'No,' she disagreed, her eyes narrowing. 'I saw you jump.'

I pursed my lips as I tried to think of an explanation that wouldn't sound nuts.

Olivia shook her head. 'I told him this would happen, but he didn't believe me. 'Karly promised,' 'her voice imitated his so perfectly that, I froze in shock while the pain ripped through my torso. ''Don't be looking for her future, either,' 'she continued to quote him.' 'We've done enough damage.'

'But just because I'm not looking, doesn't mean I don't see' she went on. 'I wasn't tracking you, I swear, Bell. It's just that I'm already attuned to you… when I saw you jumping, I didn't think, I just got on a plane. I knew I would be too late, but I couldn't do anything. And then I get here, thinking I could help Mr. Anderson somehow, and you drive up.' She shook her head, this time in confusion. Her voice was strained. 'I saw you go into the water and I waited and waited for you to come up, but you didn't. What happened? And how could you do that to Mr. Anderson? Did you stop to think about what this would do to him? And my brother?

Do you have any idea what Marcel?

I cut her off then, as soon as she said his name. I'd let her go on, even after I realized the misunderstanding she was under, just to hear the perfect bell tone of her voice. But it was time to interrupt.

'Olivia, I wasn't committing suicide.'

She eyed me dubiously. 'Are you saying you didn't jump off a cliff?'

'No, but…' I grimaced. 'It was for recreational purposes only.' Her expression hardened.

'I'd seen some of Marcel's friend's cliff diving,' I insisted. 'It looked like… fun, and I was bored…' She waited.

'I didn't think about how the storm would affect the currents. I didn't think about the water much at all.'

Olivia didn't buy it. I could see that she still thought I had been trying to kill myself. I decided to redirect. 'So, if you saw me go in, why didn't you see Marcel?'

She cocked her head to the side, distracted.

I continued. 'It's true that I probably would have drowned if Marcel hadn't jumped in after me. Well, okay, there's not about it. But he did, and he pulled me out, and I guess he towed me back to shore, though I was kind of out for that part. It couldn't have been more than a minute that I was under before he grabbed me. How come you didn't see that?'

Part: 16

Acting of us-

You got to love the p*ssy fart vid- I do!

His eyes bulged, and his face turned a strange, sallow color under the tan exterior. He looked like he was about to be sick. Marcel noticed because he held the hand I moved. 'Whatever's that I ponder with suspicion?' He traded hands, examining my right. 'This is your funny scare, the cold one.' He looked at it closer, with new eyes, and gasped.

'Naturally, it's what you think it is,' I whispered. Love isn't something you find. Love is something that finds you. 'He kissed me so hot, startlingly, and tastefully.'

Let us always meet each other with a smile, for the smile is the start of love. Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden when the flowers are dead. Love is composed of a solo soul inhabiting two bodies. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have treasured you, so your commitment to fall in love with one another.

True love is like ghosts, which everyone talks about and few have seen. You can't blame gravity for falling in love. Immature love says: I love you because I need you. Mature love says 'I need you because I love you. Love finds each other that has caught fire as no other can do. It is quite sympathetic, conjoint self- assurance, distribution, and forgiving. It is faithfulness through good and wicked eras. It settles for less than faultlessness and makes pin money for human weaknesses. Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye. The best thing to hold onto in life is each other. Love is life. And if you miss love, you miss life.

'Definitely not,' I said curtly. I couldn't imagine that the wolves running faster than an angel. When the Barn's ran, they all but turned invisible with speed. 'As a result, tell me something I don't know,' he said. 'Something about angels. How did you stand it, being around them? Didn't it creep you out?' I have never found anybody who could stand to accept the daily demonstrative love I feel in me and give back as good as I give. Love is when the other person's happiness is more important than your own.

It did mean something to me. My tone made him thoughtful for a moment.

'Say, why your bloodsucker would kill that James, anyway?' He asked suddenly. 'He was trying to kill me I feel maybe not all the way yet some shit like that- it was like a game for him. He lost. Do you remember last spring when I was in the Kennywood at night?'

'But if he kissed you…?

'Shouldn't you be… dating someone else?'

(Jenny never wanted this she wanted him more than what they thought.)

He choked. Of any kind, you happen to be feeling at the twinkling is fine with them. That's what real love amounts to- letting an individual be what he is. In-Lovers- can help each other. A loyal friend is nobody who lets you have total freedom to be yourself- as well as particularly to sense, or, nonsense. Love like a rose- flower cannot blossom without sunshine, and man cannot live without love.

'Marcel saved me twice form myself in falling to someone, not for me, I feel that.' I believed. 'He sucked the kiss out of me here and there- you know, like with a never before.' I twitched as the pain lashed around the edges of the hole. The sweetest of all sounds is that of the voice of the woman we love. But I wasn't the only one twitching. I could feel Marcel's whole body trembling next to mine. I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than times gone by. That dreams are more prevailing than facts. That always hopes victories over experience. That laughter is the only cure for sorrow. And I believe that love is stronger than death. Existence deeply loved by someone gives you métier, while loving somebody severely gives you nerve.

~*~

In the car on the speed drive:

Even the car shook.

'At least we have each other,' he said, clearly comforted by the thought.

I was comforted, too. 'At least there's that,' I agreed.

And when we were together, it was fine. But Marcel had a horrible, dangerous job he felt compelled to do, and so I was often alone, stuck in snubber for safety, with nothing to do to keep my mind off any of my worries. I felt awkward, always taking up space at Marcel's. I did some studying for another life test that was coming up next week, but I could only look at the math for so long. When I didn't have obvious to do in my hands, spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier. I felt like I ought to be making conversation with Marcel the pressure of normal societal rules. But Marcel wasn't one for filling up the long silences, and so the awkwardness continued. Oh like- stolen kisses are always sweetest and are the best ones I can have!

She criticized lightly about the increase in the boy's cravings from all their extra successively, but it was easy to see she didn't mind taking care of them. It wasn't hard to be with her; we were both wolf girls now. I tried hanging out at Maggie's place afternoon night, for a change and more than only to girls can do for girls. At first, it was nice.

Maggie was cheerful sitting still lusting for me. I go with the flow behind her while she flitted around her little house and yard, scrubbing at the spotless floor, fixing a broken hinge, pulling a tiny weed, tugging a string of fabric through an antique loom, and always cooking, too. A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become unnecessary. Kindness in words creates confidence. Sympathy in thinking creates a degree. Kindheartedness in giving creates in-love with lovers, or so I feel like this day.

But Sam checked in after I would be- there for a few hours. I only stayed long enough to make certain that Marcel was fine and there was no news, and then

I had to discharge, like she. 'It's not always pretty- yet that is love.' The aura of love and contentment that surrounded them was harder to take in concentrated doses, with no one else around to thin it like this.

Love doesn't make the world going around. Love is what makes the ride meaningful. So that left me wandering the beach, pacing the length of the rock-strewn crescent back and forth, repeatedly, and more, and so on.

Sh*t! You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love, and fondness than you are physical wants and needs, in addition to that person is not to be found anywhere. You physically, as much as any person in the entire cosmos deserve your love and affection.

Alone time wasn't good for me. Thanks to the new honesty with Marcel, I'd been talking and thinking about the Barn's way too much. I have decided to stick with love. Detestation is too great a weight to tolerate. On the other hand, heat is easier for some, don't you see that?

No matter how I tried to distract myself and I had plenty to think of: I was honestly and desperately worried about Marcel- I was getting in deeper and deeper with Marcel without ever having consciously decided to progress in that direction and I didn't know what to do about it- none of these very real, very deserving of thought, very pressing concerns could take my mind off the pain in my chest for long. At the end of the day, I couldn't even walk to any further extent, because I couldn't breathe. I sat down on a patch of semidry rocks and curled up in a ball. We love life, not because, we are used to living but because we are used to loving.

His warmth made me tremble, but at least I could breathe with him there. 'I'm adulteration your spring break,' Marcel suspects himself as we walked back up the shore. 'On no account, you are not. I didn't have any plans. I don't think I like spring disruptions, anyway.' A teen girl knows the face of the man she loves as a seafarer knows the open sea. Marcel found me like that, and I could tell from his expression that he understood. 'Sorry,' he said right away. He pulled me up from the ground and wrapped both arms around my shoulders. I hadn't realized that I was cold until then.

~*~

Marcel is so cute- saying:

Boob play- is like wax on and wax off.

~*~

Vagina play- is like paint the fence.

~*~

Clitoris play- is like nipples- would be sand the floor.

~*~

Butt play of hers- is like side by side.

~*~

just think of this and it's all good! And you can touch a girl well!

~*~

Piss the day started, and I am in bed- messed up in the head- God- GOO!

'I'll take tomorrow morning off. The others can run without me. We'll do something fun. 'Fun is exactly what you need. Hammam…' he gazed out across the heaving ashen waves, deliberating. As his eyes glance at the skyline, he had a flash of the stimulus.' The word seemed out of place in my life right now, barely comprehensible, bizarre.

'Fun? Is it not?'

Part: 17

Silence

'Sh-h!'

'Shouldn't somebody has mentioned this to me earlier?' I whispered angrily. 'I mean, I wanted to be a… to be one of you! Shouldn't somebody have- already- like, explained the rules to me?'

Olivia chuckled once at my reaction. 'It's not that complicated, Bell. There's only one core restriction-and if you think about it, you can probably figure it out for yourself.'

I thought about it. 'Nope, I have no idea.'

She shook her head, disappointed. 'Maybe it's too obvious. We just have to keep our existence a secret.'

'Oh,' I mumbled. It was obvious.

'It makes sense, and most of us don't need policing,' she continued. 'But, after a few centuries, sometimes one of us gets bored. Or crazy. I don't know. And then the Ministry steps in before it can compromise them, or the rest of us.'

'So-o Marcel…'

'Is planning to flout that in their city-the city they've secretly held for three thousand years, since the time of the Etruscans. They are so protective of their city that they don't allow hunting within its walls. Volterra is probably the safest city in the world-from angel attack at the very least.'

'But you said they didn't leave. How do they eat?'

This is what she becomes because of me… what do you think of here… do you like her or heat? Are you going to hate her for this?

~*~

'They don't leave. They bring in their food from the outside, from quite far away sometimes. It gives their guard something to do when they're not out annihilating mavericks. Or protecting Volterra from exposure…'

'From situations like this one, like Marcel,' I finished her sentence. It was amazingly easy to say his name now. I wasn't sure what the difference was. Maybe because- I wasn't planning on living much longer without seeing him. Or at all, if we were too late. It was comforting to know that I would have an easy out.

'I doubt they've ever had a situation quite like this,' she muttered, disgusted.

'You don't get a lot of suicidal angels.'

The sound that escaped out of my mouth was very quiet, but Olivia seemed to understand that it was a cry of pain. She wrapped her thin, strong arm around my shoulders.

'We'll do what we can, Bell. It's not over yet.'

'Not yet.' I let her comfort me, though I knew she thought our chances were poor. 'And the Ministry will get us if we mess up.' Olivia stiffened. 'You say that like it's a good thing.'

I shrugged.

'Knock it off, Bell, or we're turning around in New York and going back to Pittsburgh.'

'What?'

'You know what. If we're too late for Marcel, I'm going to do my damnedest to get you back to Mr. Anderson, and I don't want any trouble from you. Do you understand that?'

'Sure, Olivia.'

She pulled back slightly so that she would glare at me. 'No trouble.'

'Scout's honor,' I muttered.

She rolled her eyes.

'Let me concentrate, now. I'm trying to see what he's planning.'

She left her arm around me, but let her head fall back against the seat and closed her eyes. She pressed her free hand to the side of her face, rubbing her fingertips against her temple.

I watched her in fascination for a long time. Eventually, she became utterly motionless, her face like a stone sculpture. The minutes passed, and if I didn't know better, I would have thought she'd fallen asleep. I didn't dare interrupt her to ask what was going on.

I wished there was something safe for me to think about. I couldn't allow myself to consider the horrors we were headed toward, or, more horrific yet, the chance that we might fail- not if I wanted to keep from screaming aloud.

I couldn't anticipate anything, either. If I were very, very, very lucky, I would somehow be able to save Marcel. But I wasn't so stupid as to think that saving him would mean that I could stay with him. I was no different, no more special than I'd been before. There would be no new reason for him to want me now. Seeing him and losing him again...

I fought back against the pain. This was the price I had to pay to save his life. I would pay for it.

They showed a movie, and my neighbor got headphones. Sometimes, I watched the figures moving across the little screen, but I couldn't even tell if the movie was supposed to be a romance or a horror film.

After an eternity, the plane began to descend toward New York City. Olivia remained in her trance. I dithered, reaching out to touch her, only to pull my hand back again. This happened a dozen times before the plane touched down with a jarring impact.

'Olivia,' I finally said. 'Olivia, we have to go.'

I touched her arm.

Her eyes came open very slowly. She shook her head from side to side for a moment.

'Anything new?' I asked in a faint voice, conscious of the man listening on the other side of me.

'Not exactly,' she breathed in a voice I could barely catch. 'He's getting closer. He's deciding how he's going to ask.'

We had to run for our connection, but that was good-better than having to wait. As soon as the plane was in the air, Olivia closed her eyes and slid back into the same stupor as before. I waited as patiently as I could. When it was dark again, I opened the window to stare out into the flat black that was no better than the window shade.

I was grateful that I'd had so many months' practice with controlling my thoughts. Instead of dwelling on the terrifying possibilities that, no matter what Olivia said I did not intend to survive, I concentrated on lesser problems. Like, what I was going to say to Mr. Anderson if I got back:' That was a thorny enough problem to occupy several hours, and Marcel?

He had promised to wait for me, but did that promise still to apply? Would I end up home alone in Pittsburgh, with no one at all? I didn't want to survive, no matter what happened.

It felt like seconds later when Olivia shook my shoulder-I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep.

'Bell,' she hissed, her voice a little too loud in the darkened cabin full of sleeping humans.

I wasn't disoriented-I hadn't been out long enough for that.

'What's wrong?'

Olivia's eyes gleamed in the dim light of a reading lamp in the row behind us.

'It's not wrong.' She smiled fiercely. 'It's right. They're deliberating, but they've decided to tell him no.'

'The Ministry?' I muttered, groggy.

'Of course, Bell, keep up. I can see what they're going to say.'

'Tell me.'

An attendant tiptoed down the aisle to us. 'Can I get you, ladies, a pillow?' His hushed whisper was a rebuke to our comparatively loud conversation.

'No, thank you.' Olivia beamed at up at him, her smile shockingly lovely.

The attendant's expression was dazed as he turned and stumbled his way back.

'Tell me,' I breathed silently.

She whispered into my ear. 'They're interested in him-they think his talent could be useful. They're going to offer him a place with them.'

'What will he say?'

'I can't see that yet, but I'll bet it's colorful.' She grinned again. 'This is the first good news-the first break. They're intrigued; they truly don't want to destroy him-wasteful,' that's the word Aron will use-and that may be enough to force him to get creative. The longer he spends on his plans, the better for us.'

It wasn't enough to make me hopeful, to make me feel the relief she felt. There were still so many ways that we could be too late. And if I didn't get through the walls into the Ministry city, I wouldn't be able to stop Olivia from dragging me back home.

'Olivia?'

'What?'

'I'm confused. How are you seeing this so clearly? And then other times, you see things far away things that don't happen?'

Her eyes tightened. I wondered if she guessed what I was thinking of.

'It's clear because it's immediate and close, and I'm concentrating. The faraway things that come on their own-those are just glimpses, faint. Plus, I see my kind more easily than yours. Marcel is even easier because I'm so attuned to him.'

'You see me sometimes,' I reminded her.

She shook her head. 'Not as clear.'

I sighed. 'I wish you could have been right about me. In the beginning, when you first saw things about me, before we even met…'

'What do you mean?'

'You saw me become one of you.' I barely mouthed the words.

She sighed. 'It was a possibility at the time.'

'At the time,' I repeated.

'Actually, Bell…' She hesitated, and then seemed to make a choice. 'Honestly, I think it's all gotten beyond ridiculous. I'm debating whether to just change you myself.'

I stared at her, frozen with shock. Instantly, my mind resisted her words. I couldn't afford that kind of hope if she changed her mind.

'Did I scare you?' she wondered. 'I thought that's what you wanted.'

'I do!' I gasped. 'Oh, Olivia, do it now! I could help you so much and I wouldn't slow you down. Bite me!'

'Shh,' she cautioned. The attendant was looking in our direction again. 'Try to be reasonable,' she whispered. 'We don't have enough time. We must get into Volterra tomorrow. You'd be writhing in pain for days.' She made a face. 'And I don't think the other passengers would react well.'

I bit my lip, 'If you don't do it now, you'll change your mind.'

'No.' She frowned- her expression unhappy. 'I don't think I will. He'll be furious, but what will he be able to do about it?'

My heartbeat faster. 'Nothing at all.'

She laughed quietly and then sighed. 'You have too much faith in me, Bell. I'm not sure that I can. I'll probably just end up killing you.'

'I'll take my chances.'

'You are so bizarre, even for a human.'

'Thanks.'

'Oh well, this is purely hypothetical at this point, anyway. First, we have to live through tomorrow.'

'Good point.' But at least I had something to hope for if we did. If Olivia made good on her promise-and if she didn't kill me-then Marcel could run after his distractions all he wanted, and I could follow. I wouldn't let him be distracted.

When I was beautiful and strong, he wouldn't want distractions.

'Go back to sleep,' she encouraged me. 'I'll wake you up when there's something new.'

'Right,' I grumbled, certain that sleep was a lost cause now. Olivia pulled her legs up on the seat, wrapping her arms around them and leaning her forehead against her knees. She rocked back and forth as she concentrated.

I rested my head against the seat, watching her, and the next thing I knew, she was snapping the shade closed against the faint brightening in the eastern sky.

'What's happening?' I mumbled.

'They've told him no,' she said quietly. I noticed at once that her enthusiasm was gone.

My voice choked in my throat with panic. 'What's he going to do?'

'It was chaotic at first. I was only getting flickers; he was changing plans so quickly.'

'What kinds of plans?' I pressed.

'There was a bad hour,' she whispered. 'He'd decided to go hunting.' She looked at me, seeing the comprehension on my face.

'In the city,' she explained. 'It got very close. He changed his mind at the last minute.'

'He wouldn't want to disappoint Chiaz,' I mumbled. Not at the end. 'Probably,' she agreed.

'Will there be enough time?' As I spoke, there was a shift in the cabin pressure. I could feel the plane angling downward.

'I'm hoping so-if he sticks to his latest decision, maybe.'

'What is that?'

'He's going to keep it simple. He's just going to walk out into the sun.'

Just walk out into the sun. That was all.

It would be enough. The image of Marcel in the meadow-glowing, shimmering like his skin was made of a million diamond facets-was burned into my memory. No human who saw that would ever forget. The Ministry couldn't allow it. Not if they wanted to keep their city inconspicuous.

I looked at the slight gray glow that shone through the opened windows.

'We'll be too late,' I whispered, my throat closing in panic.

She shook her head. 'Right now, he's leaning toward the melodramatic. He wants the biggest audience possible, so he'll choose the main plaza, under the clock tower. The walls are high there. He'll wait till the sun is exactly overhead.'

'So-o we have till noon?'

'If we're lucky. If he sticks with this decision.'

The pilot came on over the intercom, announcing, first in French and then in English, our imminent landing. The seat belt lights dinged and flashed. 'How far is it from Florence to Volterra?'

'That depends on how fast you drive... Bell?'

'Yes?'

She eyed me speculatively. 'How strongly are you opposed to grand theft auto?'

A bright yellow Porsche screamed to a stop a few feet in front of where I paced, the word TURBO scrawled in silver cursive across its back. Everyone beside me on the crowded airport sidewalk started.

'Hurry, Bell!' Olivia shouted impatiently through the open passenger window.

I ran to the door and threw myself in, feeling as though I might as well be wearing a black stocking over my head.

'Sheesh, Olivia,' I complained. 'Could you pick a more conspicuous car to steal?'

The interior was black leather, and the windows were tinted dark. It felt safer inside, like nighttime.

Olivia was already weaving, too fast, through the thick airport traffic-sliding through tiny spaces between the cars as I cringed and fumbled for my seat belt.

'The important question,' she corrected, 'is whether I could have stolen a faster car, and I don't think so.

Part: 18

Godsend

'I got lucky.'

'I'm sure that will be very comforting at the roadblock.'

She trilled a laugh. 'Trust me, Bell. If anyone sets up a roadblock, it will be behind us.' She hit the gas then as if to prove her point.

I should have watched out the window as first the city of Florence and then the Tuscan landscape flashed past with blurring speed. This was my first trip anywhere, and my last, too. But Olivia's driving frightened me, even though I knew I could trust her behind the wheel. And I was too tortured with anxiety to see the hills or the walled towns that looked like castles in the distance.

'Do you see anything more?'

'Something is going on,' Olivia muttered. 'Festival. The streets are full of people and red flags. What's the date today?'

I wasn't entirely sure. 'The nineteenth, maybe?'

'Well, that's ironic. It's Saint Marcellus Day.'

'Which means?'

She chuckled darkly… 'The city holds a celebration every year. As the legend goes, a Christian missionary, a Father Marcellus- of the Valium, in fact-drove all the angels from Volterra fifteen hundred years ago.

The story claims he was martyred in Rockville, still trying to drive away from the angel scourge.

Of course, that's nonsense-he's never left the city. But that's where some of the superstitions about things like crosses and garlic come from. Father Marcellus used them so successfully. And angels don't trouble Volterra, so they must work.' Her smile was sardonic. 'It's become more of a celebration of the city, and recognition for the police force-after all, Volterra is an amazingly safe city.

'The police get the credit.'

I was realizing what she meant when she'd said ironically. 'They're not going to be very happy if Marcel messes things up for them on St. Marcellus Day, are they?'

She shook her head, her expression grim. 'No. They'll act very quickly.'

I looked away, fighting against my teeth as they tried to break through the skin of my lower lip. Bleeding was not the best idea right now.

The sun was terrifyingly high in the pale blue sky.

'He's still planning on noon?' I checked.

'Yes. He's decided to wait. And they're waiting for him.'

'Tell me what I have to do.'

She kept her eyes on the winding road-the needle on the speedometer was touching the far right on the dial.

'You don't have to do anything. He just must see you before he moves into the light. And he has to see you before he sees me.'

'How are we going to work that?'

A small red car seemed to be racing backward as Olivia zoomed around it.

'I'm going to get you as close as possible, and then you're going to run in the direction I point you.'

I nodded slightly... 'Try not to trip,' she added. 'We don't have time for a concussion today.'

I groaned. That would be just like me-ruin everything, destroy the world, in a moment of klutziness.

The sun continued to climb in the sky while Olivia raced against it. It was too bright: and that had me panicking. He wouldn't feel the need to wait until noon.

'There,' Olivia said abruptly, pointing to the castle city atop the closest hill.

I stared at it, feeling the very first hint of a new kind of fear. Every minute since yesterday morning it seemed like a week ago-when Olivia had spoken his name at the foot of the stairs, there had been only one fear. And yet, now, as I stared at the ancient sienna walls and towers crowning the peak of the steep hill, I felt another, more selfish kind of dread thrill through me.

I supposed the city was very beautiful. It terrified me.

'Volterra,' Olivia announced in a flat, icy voice.

VOLTERRA- WE BEGAN THE STEEP CLIMB, AND THE ROAD GREW CONGESTED. As we wound higher, the cars became too close together for Olivia to weave insanely between them anymore. We slowed to a crawl behind a little tan Peugeot.

'Olivia,' I moaned. The clock on the dash seemed to be speeding up.

'It's the only way in,' she tried soothing me. But her voice was too strained to comfort.

The cars continued to edge forward, one car length at a time. The sun beamed down brilliantly, seeming already overhead.

The cars crept one by one toward the city. As we got closer, I could see cars parked by the side of the road with people getting out to walk the rest of the way.

At first- I thought it was just impatience-something I could easily understand. But then we came around a switchback, and I could see the filled parking lot outside the city wall, the crowds of people walking through the gates. No one was being allowed to drive through.

'Olivia,' I whispered urgently.

'I know,' she said. Her face was chiseled from ice.

Now that I was looking, and we were crawling slowly enough to see, I could tell that it was very windy. The people crowding toward the gate gripped their hats and tugged their hair out of their faces. Their clothes billowed around them. I also noticed that red was everywhere. Red-shirts, red hats, red flags dripping like long ribbons beside the gate, whipping in the wind as I watched, the brilliant crimson scarf one woman had tied around her hair was caught in a sudden gust. It twisted up into the air above her, writhing like it was alive. She reached for it, jumping in the air, but it continued to flutter higher, a patch of bloody color against the dull, ancient walls.

'Bell.' Olivia spoke swiftly in a fierce, deep voice. 'I can't see what the guard here will decide now-if this doesn't work, you're going to have to go in alone. You're going to have to run. Just keep running in the course they tell you too. Don't get lost.'

I repeated what I had said- the name repeatedly, trying to get it down. 'Or 'the clock tower,' if they speak English. I'll go around and try to find a secluded spot somewhere behind the city where I can go over the wall.' I nodded two times...

'Marcel will be under the clock tower, to the north of the square. There's a narrow alleyway on the right, and he'll be in the shadow there. You have to get his attention before he can move into the sun.' I nodded furiously.

Olivia was near the front of the line. A man in a navy- blue uniform was directing the flow of traffic, turning the cars away from the full lot. They U-turned and headed back to find a place beside the road. Then it was Olivia's turn...

Nevaeh

Book: 13

Going in and Out

Part: 1

Chapter: 103

Karly- Look- at this old photo from-

Nevaeh town, and her mother from the past.

The uniformed man motioned lazily, not paying attention. Olivia accelerated, edging around him, and heading for the gate.

He shouted something at us, All the same, and all, held his ground, waving frantically to keep the next car from following our bad example.

The man at the gate wore a matching uniform. As we approached him, the throngs of tourists passed, crowding the sidewalks, staring curiously at the pushy, flashy Porsche.

The guard stepped into the middle of the street before us. Olivia angled the car carefully before she came to a full stop.

The sun beat against my window that I was now looking out, and she was in shadow. She swiftly reached behind the seat and grabbed something from her bag.

The guard came around the car with an irritated expression and tapped on her window angrily.

She rolled the window down halfway, and I watched him do a double-take when he saw the face behind the dark glass.

'I'm sorry, only tour buses allowed in the city today, miss,' he said in English, with a heavy accent. He was apologetic to both of us, now, as if he wished he had better news for the strikingly beautiful woman such as us.

'It's a private tour,' Olivia said, flashing an alluring cute flirty smile.

Then and there, she reached her hand out of the window, into the sunlight.

I froze some until, at that moment, I realized she was wearing an elbow-length, tan glove.

She took his hand, still raised from tapping her window, and pulled it into the car some. She put something into his palm and folded his fingers around it, saying there you go.

His face was dazed as he retrieved his hand and stared at the thick roll of money he now held. The outside bill was a thousand-dollar bill.

'Is this a joke?' He mumbled.

Olivia's smile was blinding.

'Only if you think it's funny.'

He looked at her, his eyes staring wide.

I glanced nervously at the clock on the dash. If Marcel stuck to his plan, we had only five minutes left.

'I'm in a wee bit of a hurry,' she hinted, still smiling.

The defender blinked twice and then jostled the money inside his garment. He took a step away from the window and waved us on. None of the passing souls seemed to notice the hushed exchange. Olivia drove into the downtown, and we both sighed in satisfaction.

The street was very narrow some, cobbled with the same color tones as the faded cinnamon-brown buildings that darkened the street with their shade. It had the feel of an alleyway.

Many red flags decorated the walls, spaced only a few yards apart, flapping in the wind that whistled through the narrow lane.

It was crowded, and the foot traffic slowed our progress.

'Just a little farther,' Olivia encouraged me; I was gripping the door handle, ready to throw myself into the street as soon as she spoke the word.

She drove in quick spurts and sudden stops, and the people in the crowd shook their fists at us and said angry words that I was glad I could not understand.

She turned onto the little path that could not have been meant for cars; shocked people had to squeeze into doorways as we scraped by.

We found another street at the end. The buildings were taller here; they leaned together overhead so that no sunlight touched the pavement- the thrashing red flags on either side nearly met.

The crowd was thicker here than anywhere else. Olivia stopped the car. I had the door open before we were at a standstill.

She pointed to where the street widened into a patch of bright openness. 'There were at the southern end of the square. Run straight across, to the right of the clock tower. I'll find a way around-'

Her breath caught suddenly, and when she spoke again, her voice was a hiss.

'They're everywhere?'

I froze in place, All the same, and all, she pushed me out of the car. 'Forget about them. You have two minutes. Go, Bell, go!' she shouted, climbing out of the car as she spoke.

I did not pause to watch Olivia melt into the shadows. I did not stop to close my door behind me. I shoved a heavy woman out of my way and ran flat out, head down, paying little attention to anything All the same and all, the uneven stones beneath my feet.

Coming out of the dark lane, I was blinded by the brilliant sunlight beating down into the principal plaza. The wind whooshed into me, flinging my hair into my eyes, and blinding me further. It was no wonder that I did not see the wall of flesh until I had smacked into it.

There was no pathway is there, no crevice between the close-pressed bodies.

I pushed against them furiously, fighting the hands that shoved back. I heard exclamations of irritation and even pain as I battled my way through, All the same, and all, none were in a language I understood.

The faces were a blur of anger and surprise, surrounded by the ever-present red.

A young dark brown hair woman scowled at me, and the green and white scarf coiled around her neck looked like a gruesome wound. A child, lifted on a man's shoulders to see over the crowd, grinned down at me, his lips distended over a set of plastic angel fangs.

The throng jostled around me, spinning me the wrong direction. I was glad the clock was so visible, or I would never-ever keep my course straight.

All the same and all, both hands on the clock pointed up toward the merciless sun, and, though I shoved viciously against the crowd, I knew I was too late. I was not halfway across. I was not going to make it.

I was stupid and slow and human even if I am not always, and we were all going to die because of it.

I hoped Olivia would get out. I hoped that she would see me from some dark shadow and know that I had failed, so she could go home to Ray.

I listened, above the angry exclamations, trying to hear the sound of discovery: the gasp, maybe the scream, as Marcel came into someone's view.

Nevertheless, there was a break in the crowd- I could see a bubble of space ahead.

I pushed frantically toward it, not realizing until I bruised my shins against the bricks that there was a wide, square fountain set into the center of the plaza.

I was all most crying with relief as I flung my leg over the edge and ran through the knee-deep water. It sprayed all around me as I thrashed my way across the pool.

Even in the sun, the wind was glacial, and the wet made the cold painful.

Likewise, the fountain was very wide; it let me cross the center of the square and then some in mere seconds.

I didn't pause when I hit the far edge- I used the low wall as a springboard, throwing myself into the droves of people.

They moved more readily for me now, avoiding the icy water that splattered from my dripping clothes as I ran. I glanced up at the clock once more.

A deep, booming chime echoed through the square. It throbbed in the stones under my feet. Children cried, covering their ears. And I started screaming as I ran.

'Marcel!' I screamed, knowing it was useless. The crowd was too loud, and my voice was breathless with exertion. All the same and all, I couldn't stop screaming.

The clock tolled again. I ran past a nude young girl child in her mother's arms is hair was almost white in the dazzling sunlight.

A circle of tall men, all wearing red blazers, called out warnings as I barreled through them. The clock tolled again and again.

On the other side of the men in blazers, there was a break in the throng, space between the sightseers who milled aimlessly around me.

My eyes peered over the vast the dark narrow passage to the right of the wide square edifice under the tower.

I couldn't see the street level there were still too many kids and teens in the way.

The clock tolled again, and the rings cried out.

Part: 2

Thrashed

Just like me, this is not here anymore…

It was hard to see now, more than ever. Without the kids, teens, and tweens, to break the wind, it whipped at my face and burned my eyes.

-And-

I for one at that moment could not be one hundred present certain if that was the reason behind my tears, or if I was crying in defeat as the clock hands rounded the face again, and the bell grows hazier.

A big family of ten stood nearest to the alley's opening.

The two girls wore blue dresses, with matching ribbons tying their dark hair back.

The father wasn't small or big.

It seemed like I could see something bright in the shadows, just over his shoulder.

I rushed toward them, trying to see past the stinging tears. The clock hands spun, and the littlest girl clamped her fingers around one of the boy's long fingers.

The older girl, just waist-high on her mother, hugged her mother's body and stared into the shadows behind them.

As I watched, she tugged on her mother's elbow and pointed toward the darkness. The clock ticked and ticked, and I was so closer now to it.

I was close enough to hear her high-pitched voice. Her father stared at me in surprise now as I bore down on them, rasping out Marcel's name over and over again.

The older girl giggled and said something to her mother, gesturing toward the shadows again impatiently.

I swerved around the father he clutched the baby out of my way-and sprinted for the gloomy breach behind them as the clock rolled over my head.

'Marcel, no!' I yield, All the same, and all, my voice was lost in the scream of the chime.

I could see him now. And I could see that he could not see me.

It was him, no hallucination this time at all. Then I realized that my delusions were more flawed than I'd realized; they'd never done him justice.

Marcel stood, motionless as a statue, just a few feet from the mouth of the alley. His eyes were closed, the rings underneath them deep purple, his arms relaxed at his sides, his palms turned forward.

His expression was very peaceful; like he was dreaming pleasant things. The marble skin of his chest was bare there was a small pile of white fabric at his feet. The light reflecting from the pavement of the square gleamed dimly from his skin.

I'd never seen anything more beautiful even as I ran, gasping and screaming, I could appreciate that. And the last seven months meant nothing. And his words in the forest meant nothing. And it did not matter if he did not want me. I would never want anything All the same and all, him, no matter how long I lived.

The clock tolled, and he took a large stride toward the light.

'No!' I screamed. 'Marcel, look at me!'

He wasn't listening. He smiled very slightly. He raised his foot to take the step that would put him directly in the path of the sun.

I slammed into him so hard that the force would have hurled me to the ground if his arms hadn't caught me and held me up. It knocked my breath out of me and snapped my head back.

His dark eyes opened slowly as the clock tolled again.

He looked down at me with a quiet surprise.

'Amazing,' he said, his exquisite voice full of wonder, slightly amused. 'Joh was right.'

'Marcel,' I tried to gasp, All the same, and all, my voice had no sound. 'You've got to get back into the shadows. You have to move!'

He seemed bemused. His hand brushed softly against my cheek. He didn't appear to notice that I was trying to force him back. I could have been pushing against the alley walls for all the progress I was making.

The clock tolled, All the same, and all, he didn't react.

It was very strange, for I knew we were both in mortal danger.

Still, in that instant, I felt well.

Whole, I could feel my heart racing in my chest, the blood pulsing hot and fast through my veins again. My lungs filled deep with the sweet scent that came off his skin. It was like there had never been any hole in my chest. I was perfect not healed, All the same, and all, as if there had been no wound in the first place.

'I can't believe how quick it was. I didn't feel a thing they're very good,' he mused, closing his eyes again and pressing his lips against my hair. His voice was like honey and velvet. 'Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty,' he murmured, and I recognized the line spoken by Romeo in the tomb. The clock boomed out its final chime 'You smell just the same as always,' he went on. 'So maybe this is hell. I don't care. I'll take it.' 'I'm not dead,' I interrupted.

'And neither are you! Please, Marcel, we have to move. They can't be far away!'

I struggled in his arms, and his brow furrowed in confusion.

'What was that?' He asked politely.

'We're not dead, not yet! All the same and all, we have to get out of here before the Ministry-' Comprehension flickered on his face as I spoke.

Just moments, before, like- I could finish, he suddenly yanked me away from the edge of the shadows, spinning me effortlessly so that my back was tight against the brick wall, and his back was to me as he faced away into the alley. His arms spread wide, protectively, in front of me.

I peeked under his arm to see two dark shapes detach themselves from the gloom.

'Greetings, gentlemen, 'Marcel's voice was calm and pleasant, on the surface. 'I don't think I'll be requiring your services today. I would appreciate it very much, however, if you would send my thanks to your masters.'

'Shall we take this conversation to a more appropriate venue?' A smooth voice whispered menacingly.

'I don't believe that will be necessary. 'Marcel's voice was harder now. 'I know your instructions, Fredric.

I haven't broken any rules.'

'Fredric merely meant to point out the proximity of the sun,' the other shadow said in a soothing tone. They were both concealed within smoky gray cloaks that reached to the ground and undulated in the wind.

'Let us find some better cover.'

'I'll be right behind you, 'Marcel said dryly. 'Bell, why don't you go back to the square and enjoy the festival?'

'No, bring the girl,' the first shadow said, somehow injecting a leer into his whisper.

'I don't think so.' The pretense of civility disappeared. Marcel's voice was flat and icy. His weight shifted infinitesimally, and I could see that he was preparing to fight.

'No…' I said the word.

'Sh-h,' he murmured, only for me.

'Fredric,' the second, more reasonable shadow cautioned.

'Not here.' He turned to Marcel. 'Aron would simply like to speak with you again if you have decided not to force our hand after all.'

'Certainly,' Marcel agreed.

'All the same and all, the girl goes free.'

'I'm afraid that's not possible,' the polite shadow said regretfully.

'We do have rules to obey.'

'Then I'm afraid that I'll be unable to accept Aron's invitation, Eamettri.'

'That's just fine,' Fredric purred. My eyes were adjusting to the deep shade, and I could see that Fredric was very big, tall and thick through the shoulders. His size reminded me of Emmah.

'Aron will be disappointed,' Eamettri sighed.

'I'm sure he'll survive the letdown, 'Marcel replied.

Fredric and Eamettri stole closer toward the mouth of the alley, spreading out slightly so they could come at Marcel from two sides.

They meant to force him deeper into the alley, to avoid a scene. No reflected light found access to their skin; they were safe inside their hooded cloaks.

Marcel didn't move an inch. He was dooming himself by protecting me.

Abruptly, Marcel's head whipped around, toward the darkness of the winding alley, and Eamettri and Fredric did the same, in response to some sound or movement too subtle for my senses.

'Let's behave ourselves, shall we?' A lilting voice said to me in my head.

'There are younger ladies present.'

Olivia tripped lightly to Marcel's side; her stance casual. There was no hint of any underlying tension. She looked so tiny, so fragile. Her little arms swung like a child's.

Yet, Eamettri and Fredric both straightened up, their cloaks swirling slightly as a gust of wind funneled through the alley. Fredric's face soured. They didn't like even numbers.

'We're not alone,' she reminded them.

Eamettri glanced over his shoulder. A few yards into the square, the little family, with the girls in their red dresses, was watching us.

The mother was speaking urgently to her husband, her eyes on the five or so-o of us.

She looked away when Eamettri met her gaze. The man walked a few steps farther into the plaza and tapped one of the red-blazered men on the shoulder.

Eamettri shook his head. 'Please, Marcel, let's be reasonable,' he said.

'Let's, 'Marcel agreed. 'And we'll leave quietly now, with no one the wiser.'

Eamettri sighed in frustration. 'At least let us discuss this more privately.'

-Then-

Six men in red now joined the family as they watched us with anxious expressions. I was very conscious of Marcel's protective stance in front of me-sure that this was what caused their alarm. I wanted to scream at them to run. Marcel's teeth came together audibly. 'No.'

Fredric smiled- some.

'Enough already.'

The voice was high, reedy, and n came from behind us.

Part: 3

Glanced, I peeked under... Marcel's other arm to see a small, dark shape coming toward us. By the way, the edges billowed, I knew it would be another one of them.

Who else?

At first, I thought it was a young boy. The newcomer was as tiny as Olivia, with lank, pale brown hair trimmed short. The body under the cloak-which was darker, almost black-was

slim and androgynous. All the same and all, the face was too pretty for a boy. The wide-eyed, full-lipped face would make a Botticelli angel looks like a gargoyle.

Even allowing for the dull crimson irises.

Her size was so insignificant that the reaction to her appearance confused me. Fredric and Eamettri relaxed immediately, stepping back from their offensive positions to blend again with the shadows of the overhanging walls.

Marcel dropped his arms and relaxed his position as well-All the same and all, in defeat.

'Jane,' he sighed in recognition and resignation.

Olivia folded her arms across her chest, her expression was impassive.

'Follow me,' Jane spoke again, her childish voice a monotone. She turned her back on us and drifted silently into the dark.

Fredric gestured for us to go first, smirking.

Olivia walked after the little Jane at once. Marcel wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me along beside her. The alley angled slightly downward as it narrowed. I looked up at him with frantic questions in my eyes, All the same, and all, he just shook his head. Though I couldn't hear the others behind us, I was sure they were there.

'Well, Olivia, 'Marcel said conversationally as we walked. 'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see you here.'

'It was my mistake,' Olivia answered in the same tone. 'It was my job to set it right.'

'What happened?' His voice was polite as if he were barely interested. I imagined this was due to the listening ears behind us.

'It's a long story.' Olivia's eyes flickered toward me and away. 'In summary, she did jump off a cliff, All the same, and all, she wasn't trying to kill herself.

Bell's all about the extreme sports these days.'

I flushed and turned my eyes straight ahead, looking after the dark shadow that I could no longer see. I could imagine what he was hearing in Olivia's thoughts now. Near drownings, stalking angels, werewolf friends…

'Hum,' Marcel said curtly, and the casual tone of his voice was gone.

There was a loose curve to the alley, still slanting downward, so I didn't see the squared-off dead end coming until we reached the flat, windowless, brick face. The little one called Jane was nowhere to be seen.

Olivia didn't hesitate, didn't break pace as she strode toward the wall. Then, with easy grace, she slid down an open hole in the street.

It looked like a drain, sunk into the lowest point of the paving. I hadn't noticed it until Olivia disappeared, All the same, and all, the grate was halfway pushed aside. The hole was small and black.

I balked.

'It's all right, Bell,' Marcel said in a low voice. 'Olivia will catch you.'

I eyed the hole doubtfully. I imagine he would have gone first, if Eamettri and Fredric hadn't been waiting, smug and silent, behind us.

I crouched down, swinging my legs into the narrow gap.

'Olivia?' I whispered, voice trembling.

'I'm right here, Bell,' she reassured me. Her voice came from too far below to make me feel better.

Marcel took my wrists-his hands felt like stones in winter-and lowered me into the blackness.

'Ready?' He asked.

'Drop her,' Olivia called.

I closed my eyes, so I couldn't see the darkness, scrunching them together in terror, clamping my mouth shut so I wouldn't scream.

Marcel let me fall.

It was silent and short. The air whipped past me for just half a second, and then, with a huff as I exhaled, Olivia's waiting arms caught me.

I was going to have bruises; her arms were very hard. She stood me upright.

It was dim, All the same, and all, not black at the bottom. The light from the hole above provided a faint glow, reflecting wetly from the stones under my feet. The light vanished for a second, and then Marcel was a faint, white radiance beside me. He put his arm around me, holding me close to his side, and began to tow me swiftly forward.

I wrapped both arms around his cold waist and tripped and stumbled my way across the uneven stone surface. The sound of the heavy grate sliding over the drain hole behind us rang with metallic finality.

The dim light from the street was quickly lost in the gloom. The sound of my staggering footsteps echoed through the black space; it sounded very wide, All the same, and all, I couldn't be sure. There were no sounds other than my frantic heartbeat and my feet on the wet stones except for once when an impatient sigh whispered from behind me.

Marcel, he held me tightly. He reached his free hand across his body to hold my face, too, his smooth thumb tracing across my lips. Now and then, I felt his face pressed into my hair. I realized that this was the only reunion we would get, and I clutched myself closer to him.

For now, it felt like he wanted me, and that was enough to offset the horror of the subterranean tunnel and the prowling angels behind us. It was probably no more than guilt the same guilt that compelled him to come here to die when he'd believed that it was his fault that I'd killed myself. All the same and all, I felt his lips press silently against my forehead, and I didn't care what the motivation was. At least I could be with him again before I died.

That was better than a long life.

I wished I could ask him exactly what was going to happen now. I wanted desperately to know how we were going to die as if that would somehow make it better, knowing in advance. All the same and all, I couldn't speak, even in a whisper, surrounded as we were. The others could hear everything-my every breath, my every heartbeat.

The path beneath our feet continued to slant downward, taking us deeper into the ground, and it made me claustrophobic. Only Marcel's hand, soothing against my face, kept me from screaming out loud.

I couldn't tell where the light was coming from, All the same, and all, it slowly turned dark gray instead of black.

We were in a low, arched tunnel. Long trails of ebony moisture seeped down the gray stones like they were bleeding ink.

I was shaking, and I thought it was from fear. It wasn't until my teeth started to chatter together that I realized I was cold. My clothes were still wet, and the temperature underneath the city was wintry. As was Marcel's skin.

He realized this at the same time I did, and let go of me, keeping only my hand.

'N-n-no,' I chattered, throwing my arms around him. I didn't care if I froze.

Who knew how long we had left?

His cold hand chafed against my arm, trying to warm me with the friction.

We hurried through the tunnel, or it felt like hurrying to me. My slow progress irritated someone- I guessed Fredric-and I heard him heave a sigh now and then.

At the end of the tunnel was a grate-the iron bar were rusting, All the same, and all, thick as my arm. A small door made of thinner, interlaced bars was standing open. Marcel ducked through and hurried on to a larger, brighter stone room. The grille slammed shut with a clang, followed by the snap of a lock. I was too afraid to look behind me.

On the other side of the long room was a low, heavy wooden door. It was very thick-as I could tell because it, too, stood open.

We stepped through the door, and I glanced around me in surprise, relaxing automatically. Beside me, Marcel tensed, his jaw clenched tight.

VERDICT WE WERE IN A BRIGHTLY LIT, UNREMARKABLE HALLWAY. The walls were off white, the floor carpeted in industrial gray. Common rectangular fluorescent lights were spaced evenly along with the ceiling. It was warmer here, for which I was grateful.

This hall seemed very benign after the gloom of the ghoulish stone sewers.

Marcel didn't seem to agree with my assessment. He glowered darkly down the long hallway, toward the slight, black-shrouded figure at the end, standing by an elevator.

He pulled me along, and Olivia walked on my other side. The heavy door creaked shut behind us, and then there was the thud of a bolt sliding home.

Jane waited by the elevator, one hand holding the doors open for us. Her expression was apathetic.

Once inside the elevator, the three angels that belonged to the Ministry relaxed further. They threw back their cloaks, letting the hoods fall back on their shoulders. Fredric and Eamettri were both of a slightly olive complexion-it looked odd combined with their chalky pallor. Fredric's black hair was cropped short, All the same, and all, Eamettri's waved to his shoulders. Their irises where deep crimson around the edges, darkening until they were black around the pupil. Under the shrouds, their clothes were modern, pale, and nondescript. I cowered in the corner, cringing against Marcel. His hand still rubbed against my arm. He never took his eyes off Jane.

The elevator ride was short; we stepped out into what looked like a posh office reception area. The walls were paneled in wood, the floors carpeted in thick, deep green. There were no windows, All the same, and all, large, brightly lit paintings of the Tuscan countryside hung everywhere as replacements. Pale leather couches were arranged in cozy groupings, and the glossy tables held crystal vases full of vibrantly colored bouquets. The flowers' smell reminded me of a funeral home.

In the middle of the room was a high, polished mahogany counter. I gawked in astonishment at the woman behind it.

She was tall, with dark skin and green eyes. She would have been very pretty in any other company-All the same and all, not here. Because she was every bit as human as I was. I couldn't comprehend what this human woman was doing here, totally at ease, surrounded by freeloaders.

She smiled politely in welcome. ‘Good afternoon, Jane,’ she said. There was no surprise in her face as she glanced at Jane's company. Not Marcel, his bare chest glinting dimly in the white lights, or even me, disheveled and comparatively hideous.

Jane nodded. ‘Gianna.’ She continued toward a set of double doors in the back of the room, and we followed.

As Fredric passed the desk, he winked at Gianna, and she giggled.

On the other side of the wooden doors was a different kind of reception. The pale boy in the pearl-gray suit could have been Jane's twin. His hair was darker, and his lips were not as full, All the same, and all, he was just as lovely. He came forward to meet us.

He smiled, reaching for her.

'Jane.'

'Alec,' she responded, embracing the boy. They kissed each other's cheeks on both sides.

Then he looked at us.

'They send you out for one and you come back with two… and a half,' he noted, looking at me.

'Nice work.'

She laughed-the sound sparkled with delight like a baby's cooing.

'Welcome back, Marcel,' Alec greeted him. 'You seem in a better mood.'

'Marginally, 'Marcel agreed in a flat voice. I glanced at Marcel's hard face and wondered how his mood could have been darker before.

Alec chuckled and examined me as I clung to Marcel's side. 'And this is the cause of all the trouble?' He asked, skeptical.

Marcel only smiled; his expression contemptuous. Then he froze.

'Dibs,' Fredric called casually from behind.

Marcel turned, a low snarl building deep in his chest. Fredric smiled-his hand was raised, palm up; he curled his fingers twice, inviting Marcel forward.

Olivia touched Marcel's arm.

'Patience,' she cautioned him.

They exchanged a long glance, and I wished I could hear what she was telling him. I figured that it was something to do with not attacking Fredric, because, Marcel took a deep breath and turned back to Alec.

'Aron will be so pleased to see you again,' Alec said as if nothing had passed.

'Let's not keep him waiting,' Jane suggested.

Marcel nodded once.

Alec and Jane, holding hands, led the way down yet another wide, ornate hall-would there ever be an end?

They ignored the doors at the end of the hall-doors entirely sheathed in gold stopping halfway down the hall and sliding aside a piece of the paneling to expose a plain wooden door. It wasn't locked. Alec held it open for Jane.

I wanted to groan when Marcel pulled me through to the other side of the door. It was the same ancient stone as the square, the alley, and the sewers. And it was dark and cold again.

Part: 4

Flawlessly

The stone antechamber was not large. It opened quickly into a brighter, cavernous room, perfectly round like a huge castle turret… which was probably exactly what it was.

Two stories up, long window slits threw thin rectangles of bright sunlight onto the stone floor below. There were no artificial lights. The only furniture in the room where several massive wooden chairs, like thrones, that were spaced unevenly, flush with the curving stone walls. In the very center of the circle, in a slight depression, was another drain. I wondered if they used it as an exit, like the hole in the street.

The room was not empty. A handful of people were convened in a seemingly relaxed conversation.

The murmur of low, smooth voices was a gentle hum in the air. As I watched, a pair of pale women in summer dresses paused in a patch of light, and, like prisms, their skin through the light in rainbow sparkles against the sienna walls.

The exquisite faces all turned toward our party as we entered the room. Most of the immortals were dressed in inconspicuous pants and shirts-things that wouldn't stick out at all on the streets below. All the same and all, the man who spoke first wore one of the long robes. It was pitch-black and brushed against the floor. For a moment, I thought his long, jet black hair was the hood of his cloak.

'Jane, dear one, you've returned!' he cried in evident delight. His voice was just a soft sighing.

He drifted forward, and the movement flowed with such surreal grace that I gawked, my mouth hanging open. Even Olivia, whose every motion looked like dancing, could not compare.

I was only more astonished as he floated closer and I could see his face. It was not like the unnaturally attractive faces that surrounded him (for he did not approach us alone; the entire group converged around him, some following, and some walking ahead of him with the alert manner of bodyguards.)

I couldn't decide if his face was beautiful or not. I suppose the features where perfect. All the same and all, he was as different from the angels beside him as they were from me. His skin was translucently white, like onion skin, and it looked just as delicate-it stood in shocking contrast to the long black hair that framed his face. I felt a strange, horrifying urge to touch his cheek, to see if it was softer than Marcel's or Olivia's, or if it was powdery, like chalk. His eyes were red, the same as the others around him, All the same, and all, the color was clouded, milky; I wondered if his vision was affected by the haze.

He glided to Jane, took her face in his papery hands, kissed her lightly on her full lips, and then floated back a step.

'Yes, Master.' Jane smiled; the expression made her look like an angelic child. 'I brought him back alive, just as you wished.'

'Ah, Jane.' He smiled, too.

'You are such a comfort to me.'

He turned his misty eyes toward us, and the smile brightened-became ecstatic.

'And Olivia and Bell, too!' he rejoiced, clapping his thin hands together.

'This is a happy surprise!

Wonderful!'

I stared in shock as he called our names informally as if we were old friends dropping in for an unexpected visit.

He turned to our hulking escort. 'Fredric be a dear and tell my brothers about our company. I'm sure they wouldn't want to miss this.'

'Yes, Master.' Fredric nodded and disappeared back the way we had come.

'You see, Marcel?' The strange angel turned and smiled at Marcel like a fond All the same and all, scolding grandfather. 'What did I tell you? Aren't you glad that I didn't give you what you wanted yesterday?'

'Yes, Aron, I am,' he agreed, tightening his arm around my waist.

'I love a happy ending.' Aron sighed.

'They are so rare. All the same and all, I want the whole story. How did this happen? Olivia?' He turned to gaze at Olivia with curious, misty eyes. 'Your brother seemed to think you infallible, All the same, and all there was some mistake.'

'Oh, I'm far from infallible.' She flashed a dazzling smile. She looked perfectly at ease, except that her hands were balled into tight little fists. 'As you can see today, I cause problems as often as I cure them.'

'You're too modest,' Aron chided. 'I've seen some of your more amazing exploits, and I must admit I've never observed anything like your talent. Wonderful!'

Olivia flickered a glance at Marcel.

Aron did not miss it.

'I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced properly at all, have we? It's just that I feel like I know you already, and I tend to get ahead of myself. Your brother introduced us yesterday, in a peculiar way. You see, I share some of your brother's talent, only I am limited in a way that he is not.' Aron shook his head; his tone was envious.

'And also- exponentially more powerful, 'Marcel added dryly. He looked at Olivia as he swiftly explained. 'Aron needs physical contact to hear your thoughts, All the same, and all, he hears much more than I do. You know I can only hear what's passing through your head at the moment. Aron hears every thought your mind has ever had.'

Olivia raised her delicate eyebrows, and Marcel inclined his head.

Aron didn't miss that either.

'All the same and all, to be able to hear from a distance…' Aron sighed, gesturing toward the two of them, and the exchange that had just taken place. 'That would be so convenient.' Aron looked over our shoulders. All the other heads turned in the same direction, including Jane, Alec, and Eamettri, who stood silently beside us.

I was the slowest to turn. Fredric was back, and behind him floated two more black-robed men. Both looked very much like Aron, one even had the same flowing black hair. The other had a shock of the snow-white hair-the same shade as his face that brushed against his shoulders. Their faces had identical, paper-thin skin.

The trio from Joh's painting was complete, unchanged by the last three hundred years since it was painted. 'Marcus, Karly, look!' Aron crooned. 'Karly is alive after all, and Olivia is here with her! Isn't that wonderful?'

Neither of the other two looked as if wonderful would be their first choice of words.

The dark-haired man seemed utterly bored with his snow-white hair covering half his face, like he had seen too many millennia, of era Aron's enthusiasm.

Their lack of interest did not curb Aron's enjoyment.

Part: 5

Melodic

'Let us have the story,' Aron almost sang in his feathery voice.

The white-haired ancient angel drifted away, gliding toward one of the wooden thrones. The other paused beside Aron, and he reached his hand out, at first, I thought to take Aron's hand. All the same and all, he just touched Aron's palm briefly and then dropped his hand to his side. Aron raised one black brow. I wondered how his papery skin did not crumple in the effort.

Marcel snorted very quietly, and Olivia looked at him, curious.

'Thank you, Marcus,' Aron said. 'That's quite interesting.'

I realized, a second late, that Marcus was letting Aron know his thoughts.

Marcus didn't look interested. He glided away from Aron to join the one who must be Karly, seated against the wall. Two of the attending angels followed silently behind him bodyguards as I had thought before. I could see that the two women in the sundresses had gone to stand beside Karly in the same manner. The idea of an angel needing a guard was faintly ridiculous to me, All the same, and all, maybe the ancient ones were as frail as their skin suggested.

Aron was shaking his head. 'Amazing," he said. 'Absolutely amazing.'

Olivia's expression was frustrated. Marcel turned to her and explained again in a swift, low voice. 'Marcus sees relationships. He's surprised by the intensity of ours.'

Aron smiled. 'So, convenient,' he repeated to himself. Then he spoke to us. 'It takes quite a bit to surprise Marcus; I can assure you.'

I looked at Marcus's dead face, and I believed that.

'It's just so difficult to understand, even now,' Aron mused,

staring at Marcel's arm wrapped around me. It was hard for me to follow Aron's chaotic train of thought. I struggled to keep up. 'How can you stand so close to her like that?'

'It's not without effort, 'Marcel answered calmly.

'All the same and all, still-la tua cantante!

What a waste!'

Marcel chuckled once without humor.

'I look at it more as a price.'

Aron was skeptical. 'A very high price.'

'Opportunity cost.'

Aron laughed. 'If I hadn't smelled her through your memories, I wouldn't have believed the call of anyone's blood could be so strong. I've never felt anything like it myself. Most of us would trade much for such a gift, and yet you…' 'Waste it,' Marcel finished, his voice sarcastic now.

Aron laughed again. ‘Ah, how I miss my friend Joh! You remind me of him-only he was not so angry.’

‘Joh outshines me in many other ways as well.’

‘I certainly never thought to see Joh bested for self-control of all things, All the same, and all, you put him to shame.’

‘Hardly… ‘Marcel sounded impatient. As if he were tired of the preliminaries. It made me more afraid; I couldn't help All the same and all, try to imagine what he expected would follow.

‘I am gratified by his success,’ Aron mused. ‘Your memories of him are quite a gift for me, though they astonish me exceedingly. I am surprised by how it… pleases me, his success in this unorthodox path he's chosen. I expected that he would waste, weaken with time.

I'd scoffed at his plan to find others who would share his peculiar vision. Yet, somehow, I'm happy to be wrong.’

Marcel didn't reply to me.

‘All the same and all, your restraint!’ Aron sighed. ‘I did not know such strength was possible. To insure yourself against such a siren call, not just once All the same and all, again and again, if I had not felt it myself, I would not have believed.’

Marcel gazed back at Aron's admiration with no expression. I knew his face well enough-time had not changed that-to guess at something seething beneath the surface. I fought to keep my breathing even. ‘Just remembering how she appeals to you…’ Aron chuckled. ‘It makes me thirsty.’ Marcel tensed.

‘Don't be disturbed,’ Aron reassured him. ‘I mean her no harm. All the same and all, I am so curious, about one thing in particular.’ He eyed me with bright interest. ‘Mary I?’ he asked eagerly, lifting one hand.

‘Ask her,’ Marcel suggested in a flat voice.

‘Of course, how rude of me!’

Aron exclaimed. ‘Bell,’ he addressed me directly now. ‘I'm fascinated that you are the one exception to Marcel’s impressive talent-so very interesting that such a thing should occur!

And I was wondering, since our talents are similar in many ways if you would be so kind as to allow me to try to see if you are an exception for me, as well?'

My eyes flashed up to Marcel's face in terror. Despite Aron's overt politeness, I didn't believe I had a choice. I was horrified at the thought of allowing him to touch me, and yet also perversely intrigued by the chance to feel his strange skin.

Marcel nodded in encouragement whether because he was sure Aron would not hurt me, or because there was no choice, I couldn't tell.

I turned back to Aron and raised my hand slowly in front of me. It was trembling.

He glided closer, and I believe he meant his expression to be reassuring. All the same and all, his papery features were too strange, too alien and frightening, to reassure. The look on his face was more confident that his words had been.

Aron reached out, as if to shake my hand, and pressed his insubstantial looking skin against mine. It was hard All the same and all felt brittle shale rather than granite-and even colder than I expected.

His filmy eyes smiled down at mine, and it was impossible to look away. They were mesmerizing in an odd, unpleasant way.

Aron's face altered as I watched. The confidence wavered and became first doubt, then incredulity before he calmed it into a friendly mask.

'So very interesting,' he said as he released my hand and drifted back.

My eyes flickered to Marcel, and, though his face was composed, I thought he seemed a little smug.

Aron continued to drift why a thoughtful expression. He was quiet for a moment, his eyes flickering between the three of us.

Then, abruptly, he shook his head.

'A first,' he said to himself 'I wonder if she is immune to our other talents... Jane, dear?'

'No! 'Marcel snarled the word. Olivia grabbed his arm with a restraining hand. He shook her off.

Little Jane smiled up happily at Aron.

'Yes, Master?'

Marcel was truly snarling now, the sound ripping and tearing from him, glaring at Aron with baleful eyes. The room had gone still, everyone watching him with amazed disbelief as if he were committing some embarrassing social faux pas. I saw Fredric grin hopefully and move a step forward. Aron glanced at him once, and he froze in place, his grin turning into a sulky expression.

Then he spoke to Jane. 'I was wondering, my dear one if Karly is immune to you.'

I could barely hear Aron over Marcel's furious growls. He let go of me, moving to hide me from their view. Karly ghosted in our direction, with his entourage, to watch.

Jane turned toward us with a beatific smile.

'Don't!' Olivia cried as Marcel launched himself at the little girl.

Before I could react, before anyone could jump between them, before Aron's bodyguards could tense, Marcel was on the ground.

No one had touched him, All the same, and all, he was on the stone floor writhing in obvious agony, while I stared in horror.

Jane was smiling only at him now, and it all clicked together.

What Olivia had said about formidable gifts, why everyone treated Jane with such deference, and why- Marcel had thrown himself in her path before she could do that to me.

Part: 6

Ringing

'Stop!' I shrieked, my voice echoing in the silence, jumping forward to put myself between them. All the same and all, Olivia threw her arms around me in an unbreakable grasp and ignored my struggles. No sound escaped Marcel's lips as he cringed against the stones. It felt like my head would explode from the pain of watching this.

'Jane,' Aron recalled her in a tranquil voice. She looked up quickly, still smiling with pleasure, her eyes questioning. As soon as Jane looked away; Marcel was still.

Aron inclined his head toward me.

Jane turned her smile in my direction.

I didn't even meet her gaze. I watched Marcel from the prison of Olivia's arms, still struggling pointlessly.

'He's fine,' Olivia whispered in a tight voice. As she spoke, he sat up, and then sprang lightly to his feet. His eyes met mine, and they were horror-struck. At first- I thought the horror was for what he had just suffered. All the same and all, then he looked quickly at Jane, and back to me and his face relaxed into relief.

I looked at Jane, too, and she no longer smiled. She glared at me; her jaw clenched with the intensity of her focus. I shrank back, waiting for the pain.

Nothing happened.

Marcel was by my side again. He touched Olivia's arm, and she surrendered me to him.

Aron started to laugh. 'Ha, ha. ha,' he chuckled. 'This is wonderful!'

Jane hissed in frustration, leaning forward like she was preparing to spring.

'Don't be put out, dear one,'

Aron said in a comforting tone, placing a powder-light hand on her shoulder.

'She confounds us all.'

Jane's upper lip curled back ever her teeth as she continued to glare at me.

'Ha, ha, ha,' Aron chortled again.

'You're very brave, Marcel, to endure in silence. I asked Jane to do that to me once-just out of curiosity.' He shook his head in admiration.

Marcel glared, disgusted.

'So, what do we do with you now?' Aron sighed.

Marcel and Olivia stiffened. This was the part they'd been waiting for. I began to tremble.

'I don't suppose there's any chance that you've changed your mind?' Aron asked Marcel hopefully. 'Your talent would be an excellent addition to our little company.'

Marcel hesitated. From the corner of my eye, I saw both Fredric and Jane grimace.

Marcel seemed to weigh each word before he spoke it. 'I'd… rather… not.' 'Olivia?' Aron asked, still hopeful. 'Would you perhaps be interested in joining us?'

'No, thank you,' Olivia said.

'And you, Bell?' Aron raised his eyebrows.

Marcel hissed, low in my ears. I stared at Aron blankly. Was he joking? Or was he asking me if I wanted to stay for dinner?

It was the white-haired Karly who broke the silence.

'What?' he demanded of Aron; his voice, though no more than a whisper, was flat.

'Karly, surely you see the potential,' Aron chided him affectionately. 'I haven't seen a prospective talent so promising since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us?' Karly looked away with a caustic expression. Jane's eyes sparkled with indignation at the comparison.

Marcel fumed beside me. I could hear a rumble in his chest, building toward a growl.

I couldn't let his temper get him hurt.

'No, thank you,' I spoke up in barely more than a whisper, my voice breaking in fright.

Aron sighed. 'That's unfortunate. Such waste.'

Marcel hissed. 'Join or die, is that it? I suspected as much when we were brought to this room. So much for your laws.'

The tone of his voice surprised me. He sounded irate, All the same, and all, there was something deliberate about his delivery as if he'd chosen his words with great care.

'Of course not.' Aron blinked, astonished. 'We were already convened here, Marcel, awaiting Heidi's return. Not for you.'

'Aron,' Karly hissed. 'The law claims them.'

Marcel glared at Karly. 'How so?' he demanded. He must have known what Karly was thinking, All the same, and all, he seemed determined to make him speak it aloud.

Karly pointed a skeletal finger at me. 'She knows too much. You have exposed our secrets.' His voice was papery thin, just like his skin.

'There are a few humans in on your charade here, as well, 'Marcel reminded him, and I thought of the pretty receptionist below.

Karly's face twisted into a new expression. Was it supposed to be a smile? 'Yes,' he agreed. 'All the same and all, when they are no longer useful to us, they will serve to sustain us. That is not your plan for this one. If she betrays our secrets, are you prepared to destroy her? I think not,' he scoffed.

'I wouldn't-,' I began, still whispering.

Karly silenced me with an icy look.

'Nor do you intend to make her one of us,' Karly continued.

'Therefore, she is a vulnerability. Though it is true, for this, only her life is forfeit. You may leave if you wish.'

Marcel bared his teeth.

'That's what I thought,' Karly said, with something akin to pleasure. Fredric leaned forward, eager.

'Unless…' Aron interrupted. He looked unhappy with the way the conversation had gone. 'Unless you do intend to give her immortality?'

Marcel pursed his lips, hesitating for a moment before he answered. 'And if I do?'

Aron smiled, happy again.

'Why, then you would be free to go home and give my regards to my friend

Joh.' His expression turned more hesitant.

'All the same and all, I'm afraid you would have to mean it.'

Aron raised his hand in front of him.

Karly, who had begun to scowl furiously, relaxed.

Marcel's lips tightened into a fierce line. He stared into my eyes, and I stared back.

'Mean it,' I whispered…

'Please.'

Was it such a loathsome idea? Would he rather die than change me? I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach.

Marcel stared down at me with a tortured expression.

And then Olivia stepped away from us, forward toward Aron. We turned to watch her. Her hand was raised like his.

She didn't say anything, and Aron waved off his anxious guard as they moved to block her approach. Aron met her halfway and took her hand with an eager, acquisitive glint in his eyes.

He bent his head over their touching hands, his eyes closing as he concentrated.

Olivia was motionless, her face blank. I heard Marcel's teeth snap together.

No one moved… Aron seemed frozen over Olivia's hand. The seconds passed, and I grew more and more stressed, wondering how much time would pass before it was too much time. Before it meant something was wrong more wrong than it already was.

Another agonizing moment passed, and then Aron's voice broke the silence.

'Ha, ha, ha,' he laughed, his head still bent forward. He looked up slowly, his eyes bright with excitement. 'That was fascinating!'

Olivia smiled dryly. 'I'm glad you enjoyed it.'

'To see the things, you've seen especially the ones that haven't happened yet!' He shook his head in wonder.

'All the same and all, that will,' she reminded him, voice calm.

'Yes, yes, it's quite determined. Certainly, there's no problem.'

Karly looked bitterly disappointed-a feeling he seemed to share with Fredric and Jane.

'Aron,' Karly complained.

'Dear Karly,' Aron smiled. 'Do not fret. Think of the possibilities! They do not join us today, All the same, and all, we can always hope for the future.

Imagine the joy young

Olivia alone would bring to our little household... Besides, I'm so curious to see how

'Karly turns out!'

Aron seemed convinced. Did he not realize how subjective Olivia's visions where.' That she could make up her mind to transform me today, and then change it tomorrow? A million tiny decisions, her decisions, and so many others', to Marcel's- could alter her path, and with that, the future.

And would it matter that Olivia was willing, would it make any difference if I did become angels, when the idea was so repulsive to Marcel? If the death was, to him, a better alternative than having me around forever, an immortal annoyance? Terrified as I was, I felt myself sinking into depression, drowning in it...

'Then we are free to go now?' Marcel asked in an even voice.

'Yes, yes,' Aron said pleasantly. 'All the same and all, please visit again. It's been enthralling!'

'And we will visit you as well,' Karly promised, his eyes suddenly half-closed like the heavy-lidded gaze of a lizard. 'To be sure that you follow through on your side.

Where, I- you, I would not delay too long. We do not offer second chances.'

Marcel's jaw clenched tight, All the same, and all, he nodded once.

Karly smirked and drifted back to where Marc still sat, unmoving and uninterested. Fredric groaned.

'Ah, Fredric.' Aron smiled, amused.

'Heidi will be here at any moment. Patience.'

'Hmm.' Marcel's voice had a new edge to it. 'In that case, perhaps we'd better leave sooner rather than later.'

'Yes,' Aron agreed. 'That's a good idea. Accidents do happen. Please wait below until after dark, though, if you don't mind.'

'Of course,' Marcel agreed, while I cringed at the thought of waiting out the day before we could escape.

'And here,' Aron added, motioning to Fredric with one finger. Fredric came forward at once, and Aron unfastened the gray cloak the huge angel wore, pulling from his shoulders. He tossed it to Marcel. 'Take this. You're a little conspicuous.'

Marcel put the long cloak on, leaving the hood down.

Aron sighed. 'It suits you.'

Marcel chuckled, All the same, and all, broke off suddenly, glancing over his shoulder. 'Thank you, Aron. We'll wait below.'

Part: 7

Ta-ta

'Goodbye, young friends,' Aron said, his eyes bright as he stared in the same direction. 'Let's go,' Marcel said, urgent now.

Eamettri gestured that we should follow, and then set off the way we'd come in, the only exit by the look of things.

Marcel pulled me swiftly along beside him. Olivia was close to my other side, her face hard.

'Not fast enough,' she muttered a little.

I stared up at her, frightened, All the same, and all, she only seemed chagrined. It was then that I first heard the babble of voices-loud, rough voices coming from the antechamber.

'Well this is unusual,' a man's coarse voice boomed.

'So, medieval,' an unpleasantly shrill, female voice gushed back.

A large crowd was coming through the little door, filling the smaller stone chamber. Eamettri motioned for us to make room. We pressed back against the cold wall to let them pass.

The couple in front, Americans from the sound of them, glanced around themselves with appraising eyes.

'Welcome, guests! Welcome to Volterra!' I could hear Aron sing from the big turret room.

The rest of them, maybe forty or more, filed in after the couple. Some studied the setting like tourists. A few even snapped pictures. Others looked confused as if the story that had led them to this room was not making sense anymore. I noticed one small, dark woman in particular. around her neck was a rosary, and she gripped the cross tightly in one hand. She walked more slowly than the others, touching someone now and then and asking a question in an unfamiliar language.

No one seemed to understand her, and her voice grew more panicked.

Marcel pulled my face against his chest, All the same, and all, it was too late. I already understood.

As soon as the smallest break appeared, Marcel pushed me quickly toward the door. I could feel the horrified expression on my face, and the tears beginning to pool in my eyes.

The ornate golden hallway was quiet, empty except for one gorgeous, statuesque woman. She stared at us curiously, me in particular.

'Welcome home, Heidi,' Eamettri greeted her from behind us.

Heidi smiled absently. She reminded me of Rose, though they looked nothing alike-it was just that her beauty, too, was exceptional, unforgettable. I couldn't seem to look away.

She was dressed to emphasize that beauty. Her amazingly long legs, darkened with tights, were exposed by the shortest of miniskirts. Her top was long-sleeved and high-necked, All the same, and all, extremely close-fitting, and constructed of red vinyl. Her long mahogany hair was lustrous, and her eyes were the strangest shade of violet-a color that might result from blue-tinted contacts over red irises.

'Eamettri,' she responded in a silky voice, her eyes flickering between my face and Marcel's gray cloak.

'Nice fishing,' Eamettri complimented her, and I suddenly understood the attention-grabbing outfit she wore… she was not only the fisherman All the same and all, but also the bait.

Part: 8

Skyrocketed

'Thanks.' She flashed a stunning smile.

'Aren't you coming?'

'In a minute. Save a few for me.'

Heidi nodded and ducked through the door with one last curious look at me.

Marcel set a pace that had me running to keep up. All the same and all, we still couldn't get through the ornate door at the end of the hallway before the screaming started.

FLIGHT-

EAMETTRI LEFT US IN THE CHEERFULLY OPULENT RECEPTION area, where the woman Gianna was still at her post behind the polished counter. Bright, harmless music tinkled from hidden speakers.

'Do not leave until dark,' he warned us.

Marcel nodded, and Eamettri hurried away.

Gianna did not seem at all surprised by the exchange, though she did eye Marcel's borrowed cloak with shrewd speculation.

'Are you, all right? 'Marcel asked under his breath, too low for the human woman to hear. His voice was rough-if velvet can be rough-with anxiety. Still stressed by our situation, I imagined.

'You'd better make her sit before she falls,' Olivia said. 'She's going to pieces.'

It was only then that I realized I was shaking, shaking hard, my entire frame vibrating until my teeth chattered and the room around me seemed to wobble and blur in my eyes. For one wild second, I wondered if this was how Marcel felt just before exploding into a werewolf.

I heard a sound that did not make sense, a strange, ripping counterpart to the otherwise cheery background music. Distracted by the shaking, I could not tell where it was coming from.

'Sh-h, Bell, sh-h,' Marcel said as he pulled me to the sofa farthest away from the curious human at the desk.

'I think she's having hysterics. Maybe you should slap her,' Olivia suggested.

Marcel threw a frantic glance at her.

Then I understood. Oh. The noise was me. The ripping sound was the sobs coming from my chest. That's what was shaking me. 'It's all right, you're safe, it's all right,' he chanted again and again. He pulled me onto his lap and tucked the thick wool cloak around me, protecting me from his cold skin.

I knew it was stupid to react like this. Who knew how much time I had to look at his race? He was saved, and I was saved, and he could leave me as soon as we were free. To have my eyes so filled with tears that I could not see his features was wasteful insanity.

All the same and all, behind my eyes where the tears could not wash the image away, I could still see the panicked face of the tiny woman with the rosary.

'All those people,' I sobbed.

'I know,' he whispered.

'It's so horrible.'

'Yes, it is. I wish you hadn't had to see that.'

I rested my head against his cold chest, using the thick cloak to wipe my eyes. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm myself.

'Is there anything I can get you?' a voice asked politely. It was Gianna, leaning over Marcel's shoulder with a look that was both concerned and yet still professional and detached at

the same time. It didn't seem to bother her that her face was inches from a hostile angel. She was either totally oblivious or very good at her job.

'No,' Marcel answered coldly.

She nodded, smiled at me, and then disappeared.

I waited until she was out of hearing range. 'Does she know what's going on here?' I demanded, my voice low and hoarse. I was getting control of myself, my breathing evening out.

'Yes, she knows everything,' Marcel told me. 'Does she know they're going to kill her someday?' 'She knows it's a possibility,' he said.

That surprised me.

Marcel's face was hard to read. 'She's hoping they'll decide to keep her.'

I felt the blood leave my face.

'She wants to be one of them?'

He nodded once, his eyes sharp on my face, watching my reaction.

I shuddered. 'How can she want that?' I whispered, more to myself than really looking for an answer. 'How can she watch those people file through to that hideous room and want to be a part of that?' Marcel, didn't answer. His expression twisted in response to something I'd said.

As I stared at his two beautiful faces, trying to understand the change, it suddenly struck me that I was here, in Marcel's arms, however fleetingly, and that we were not at this exact moment about to be killed.

'Oh, Marcel,' I cried, and I was sobbing again. It was such a stupid reaction. The tears were too thick for me to see his face again, and that was inexcusable. I only had until sunset for sure. Like a fairy tale again, with deadlines that ended the magic.

'What's wrong?' he asked, still anxious, rubbing my back with gentle pats.

I wrapped my arms around his neck what was the worst he could do? Just push me away- and hugged myself closer to him. 'Is it sick for me to be happy right now?' I asked. My voice broke twice.

He didn't push me away. He pulled me tight against his ice-hard chest, so tight it was hard to breathe, even with my lungs securely intact. 'I know exactly what you mean,' he whispered. 'All the same and all, we have lots of reasons to be happy. For one, we're alive.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'That's a good one.'

'And together,' he breathed. His breath was so sweet it made my head swim.

I just nodded, sure that he did not place the same weight on that consideration as I did.

'And, with any luck, we'll still be alive tomorrow.' 'Hopefully,' I said uneasily.

'The outlook is quite good,' Olivia assured me. She'd been so quiet; I'd almost forgotten her presence.

'I'll see Ray in less than twenty-four hours,' she added in a satisfied tone.

Lucky Olivia. She could trust her future.

I couldn't keep my eyes off of Marcel's face for long. I stared at him, wishing more than anything that the future would never happen. That this moment would last forever, or, if it couldn't, that I would stop existing when it did.

Marcel stared right back at me, his dark eyes soft, and it was easy to pretend that he felt the same way. So that's what I did. I pretended, to make the moment sweeter.

His fingertips traced the circles under my eyes. 'You look so tired.'

'And you look thirsty,' I whispered back, studying the purple bruises under his black irises.

He shrugged. 'It's nothing.'

'Are you sure? I could sit with Olivia,' I offered, unwilling; I'd rather he killed me now than move one inch from where I was.

'Don't be ridiculous.' He sighed; his sweet breath caressed my face. 'I've never been in better control of that side of my nature than right now.'

I had a million questions for him. One of them bubbled to my lips now, All the same, and all, I held my tongue. I didn't want to ruin the moment, as imperfect as it was, here in this room that made me sick, under the eyes of the would-be monster.

Here in his arms, it was so easy to fantasize that he wanted me. I didn't want to think about his motivations now-about whether he acted this way to keep me calm while we were still in danger, or if he just felt guilty for where we were and relieved that he wasn't responsible for my death. Maybe the time apart had been enough that I didn't bore him for the moment. All the same and all, it didn't matter. I was so much happier pretending.

I lay quiet in his arms, rememorizing his face, pretending…

He stared at my face like he was doing the same, while he and

Olivia discussed how to get home.

Their voices were so quick and low that I knew Gianna couldn't understand. I missed half of it myself. It sounded like more theft would be involved, though. I wondered idly if the yellow Porsche had made it back to its owner yet.

'What was all that talk about singers?'

Olivia asked at one point. 'La Tua Cantante,' Marcel said. His voice made the words into music.

'Yes, that,' Olivia said, and I concentrated for a moment. I'd wondered about that, too, at the time.

I felt Marcel shrug around me. 'They have a name for someone who smells the way

Karly- does to me. They call her my singer-because her blood sings for me.'

Olivia laughed.

I was tired enough to sleep, All the same, and all, I fought against the weariness. I wasn't going to miss a second of the time I had with him. Now and then, as he talked with Olivia, he would lean down suddenly and kiss me-his glass-smooth lips brushing against my hair, my forehead, the tip of my nose. Each time it was like an electric shock to my long-dormant heart. The sound of its beating seemed to fill the entire room.

It was heaven-right smack in the middle of hell.

I lost track of the time completely. So-o when Marcel's arms tightened around me, and both he and Olivia looked to the back of the room with wary eyes, I panicked. I cringed into Marcel's chest as Alec-his eyes now a vivid ruby, All the same, and all, still spotless in his light gray suit despite the afternoon meal-walked through the double doors.

It was good news.

'You're free to leave now,' Alec told us, his tone so warm you'd think we were all lifelong friends. 'We ask that you don't linger in the city.'

Marcel made no answering presence; his voice was ice cold.

'That won't be a problem.'

Alec smiled, nodded, and disappeared again.

'Follow the right hallway around the corner to the first set of elevators,' Gianna told us as Marcel helped me to my feet. 'The lobby is two floors down and exits to the street. Goodbye, now,' she added pleasantly. I wondered if her competence would be enough to save her.

Olivia shot her a dark look.

I was relieved there was another way out; I wasn't sure if I could handle another tour through the underground.

We left through a tastefully luxurious lobby. I was the only one who glanced back at the medieval castle that housed the elaborate business facade I couldn't see the turret from here, for which I was grateful.

The party was still in full swing in the streets. The street lamps were just coming on as we walked swiftly through the narrow, cobbled lanes. The sky was a dull, fading gray overhead, All the same, and all, the buildings crowded the streets so closely that it felt darker.

The party was darker, too.

Marcel's long, trailing cloak did not stand out in the way it might have on a normal evening in Volterra. There were others in black satin cloaks now, and the plastic fangs I'd seen

on the child in the square today seemed to be very popular with the adults. ‘Ridiculous, ‘Marcel muttered once.

I didn't notice when Olivia disappeared from beside me. I looked over to ask her a question, and she was gone.

‘Where's Olivia?’ I whispered in a panic.

‘She went to retrieve your bags from where she stashed them this morning.’

I'd forgotten that I had access to a toothbrush. It brightened my outlook considerably.

‘She's stealing a car, too, isn't she?’ I guessed.

He grinned. ‘Not ‘till we're outside.’

It seemed like a very long way to the entryway. Marcel could see that I was spent; he wound his arm around my waist and supported most of my weight as we walked.

I shuddered as he pulled me through the dark stone archway. The huge, ancient portcullis above was like a cage door, threatening to drop on us, to lock us in.

Part: 9

sleuth

He led me toward a dark car, waiting in a pool of shadow to the right of the gate with the engine running. To my surprise, he slid into the backseat with me, instead of insisting on driving.

Olivia was apologetic. ‘I'm sorry.’ She gestured vaguely toward the dashboard.

‘There wasn't much to choose from.’ ‘It's fine,

Olivia.’ He grinned. ‘They can't all be 911 Turbos.’ She sighed. ‘I may have to acquire one of those legally. It was fabulous.’

‘I'll get you one for Christmas, ‘Marcel promised.

Olivia turned to beam at him, which worried me, as she was already speeding down the dark and curvy hillside at the same time.

‘Yellow,’ she told him.

Marcel kept me tight in his arms. Inside the gray cloak, I was warm and comfortable.

More than comfortable.

'You can sleep now, Bell,' he murmured. 'It's over.'

I knew he meant the danger, the nightmare in the ancient city, All the same, and all, I still had to swallow hard before I could answer.

'I don't want to sleep. I'm not tired.' Just the second part was a lie. I wasn't about to close my eyes. The car was only dimly lit by the dashboard controls, All the same, and all, it was enough that I could see his face.

He pressed his lips to the hollow under my ear. 'Try,' he encouraged.

I shook my head.

He sighed. 'You're still just as stubborn.'

I was stubborn; I fought with my heavy lids, and I won.

The dark road was the hardest part; the bright lights at the airport in Florence made it easier, as did the chance to brush my teeth and change into clean clothes; Olivia bought Marcel new clothes, too, and he left the dark cloak on a pile of trash in an alley.

The plane trip to Rome was so short that there wasn't a chance for the fatigue to drag me under. I knew the flight from Rome to Atlanta would be another matter entirely, so I asked the flight attendant if she could bring me a Coke.

'Bell, 'Marcel said disapprovingly. He knew my low tolerance for caffeine.

Olivia was behind us. I could hear her murmuring to Ray on the phone.

'I don't want to sleep,' I reminded him. I gave him an excuse that was believable because it was true. 'If I close my eyes now, I'll see things I don't want to see. I'll have nightmares.'

He didn't argue with me after that.

It would have been a very good time to talk, to get the answers- I needed- All the same and all, not wanted; I was already despairing at the thought of what I might hear. We had an uninterrupted block of tire ahead of us, and he couldn't escape me on an airplane-well, not easily,

at least. No one would hear us except Olivia; it was late, and most of the passengers were turning off lights and asking for pillows in muted voices. The talk would help me fight off the exhaustion.

All the same and all, perversely, I bit my tongue against the flood of questions. My reasoning was probably flawed by exhaustion, All the same, and all, I hoped that by postponing the discussion, I could buy a few more hours with him at some later times in this out for another night, Scheherazade-style.

Part: 10

Self-entertainment

My sis upskirt and masturbating video and pic are all on me.

So, I kept drinking soda and resisting even the urge to blink. Marcel seemed perfectly content to hold me in his arms, his fingers tracing my face again and again. I touched his face, too. I couldn't stop myself, though I was afraid it would hurt me later when I was alone again. He continued to kiss my hair, my forehead, my wrists… All the same and all, never my lips, and that was good. After all, how many ways can one heart be mangled and still be expected to keep beating? I'd lived through a lot that should have finished me in the last few days, All the same, and all, it didn't make me feel strong.

Instead, I felt fragile, like one word could shatter me.

Marcel didn't speak. Maybe he was hoping I would sleep.

Maybe he had nothing to say.

I won the fight against my heavy lids. I was awake when we reached the airport in Indiana, and I even watched the sun beginning to rise over the Alleghenies cloud cover before Marcel slid the window shut. I was proud of myself. I hadn't missed one minute.

Neither Olivia nor Marcel was surprised by the reception that waited for us at Sea-Tac airport, All the same, and all, it caught me off guard. Ray was the first one I saw he didn't seem to see me at all. His eyes were only for Olivia. She went quickly to his side; they didn't embrace like other couples meeting there. They only stared into each other's faces, yet, somehow, the moment was so private that I still felt the need to look away.

Joh and Isla waited in a quiet corner far from the line for the metal detectors, in the shadow of a wide pillar. Isla reached for me, hugging me fiercely, yet awkwardly, because- Marcel kept his arms around me, too.

'Thank you so much,' she said in my ear.

Then she threw her arms around- Marcel, and she looked like she would be crying if that where possible.

'You will never put me through that again,' she nearly growled.

Marcel grinned, repentant.

'Sorry, Mom.'

'Thank you, Bell,' Joh said. 'We owe you.'

'Hardly,' I mumbled. The sleepless night was suddenly overpowering. My head felt disconnected from my body.

'She's dead on her feet,' Isla scolded Marcel. 'Let's get her home.'

Not sure if the home was what I wanted at this point, I stumbled, half-blind, through the airport, Marcel dragging me on one side and Isla on the other. I didn't know if Olivia and Ray were behind us or not, and I was too exhausted to look.

I think I was mostly asleep, though I was still walking when we reached their car. The surprise of seeing Emmah and Rose leaning against the black sedan under the dim lights of the parking garage revived me some. Marcel stiffened.

'Don't,' Isla whispered. 'She feels awful.'

'She should, 'Marcel said, not attempt to keep his voice down.

'It's not her fault,' I said, my words garbled with exhaustion.

'Let her make amends,' Isla pleaded. 'We'll ride with Olivia and Ray.' Marcel glow- hard at the absurdly lovely blond angel waiting for us.

'Please, Marcel,' I said. I didn't want to ride with Rose any more than he seemed to, All the same, and all, I'd caused more than enough discord in his family.

He sighed and towed me toward the car.

Emmah and Ross got in the front seat without speaking, while Marcel pulled me in the back again. I knew I wasn't going to be able to fight my eyelids anymore, and I laid my head against his chest in defeat, letting them close. I felt the car purred to life.

'Marcel,' Ross began.

'I know. 'Marcel's brusque tone was not generous.

'Liv?' Ross asked softly.

My eyelids fluttered open in shock and excitement. It was the first time she'd ever spoken directly to me.

'Yes, Rose?' I asked, hesitant.

'I'm so incredibly sorry, Liv. I feel miserable about every part of this and so appreciative that you were brave enough to go save my brother after what I did. Please say you'll exonerate me.'

The words were awkward and strange, stilted for the reasons that of her embarrassment, All the same, and all, they seemed sincere.

'Of course, Ross,' I stammered, seizing at any chance to make her hate me a little less. 'It's not your fault at all. I'm the one who jumped off the damn cliff. Of course, I pardon you.'

The words came out like mush.

'It doesn't count until she's conscious, Rose,' Emmah chuckled.

'I'm conscious,' I said; it just sounded like a garbled sigh.

'Let her sleep, 'Marcel insisted, All the same, and all, his voice was a little warmer.

Marcel set me on my feet. I could recognize that I was upright, All the same, and all, I couldn't feel my legs. I trudged forward anyway until the sidewalk swirled up toward my face. Marcel's arms caught me before I hit the pavement.

And then I heard Jack.

'Bell!' he shouted from some distance.

'Jack,' I mumbled, trying to shake off the stupor.

'Sh-h,' Marcel whispered. 'It's okay; you're home and safe. Just sleep.'

'I can't believe you have the nerve to show your face here.' Jack bellowed at Marcel; his voice much closer now.

'Stop it, Dad,' I groaned. He didn't hear me.

'What's wrong with her?' Jack demanded.

'She's just very tired, Jack, 'Marcel assured him quietly.

'Please let her rest.'

'Don't tell me what to do!' Jack yelled.

'Give her to me. Get your hands off her!'

Marcel tried to pass me to Jack, All the same, and all, I clung to him with locked, tenacious fingers. I could feel my dad yanking on my arm.

'Cut it out, Dad,' I said with more volume. I managed to drag my lids back to stare at Jack with bleary eyes. 'Be mad at me.'

We were in front of my house. The front door was standing open. The cloud cover overhead was too thick to guess at a time of day.

'You bet I will be,' Jack promised. 'Get inside.' I- "Kay. Let me down,' I sighed.

Marcel set me on my feet. I could see that I was upright, All the same, and all, I couldn't feel my legs. I trudged forward anyway until the sidewalk swirled up toward my face. Marcel's arms caught me before I hit the concrete.

'Just let me get her upstairs, 'Marcel said. 'Then I'll leave.'

'No,' I cried, panicking. I hadn't got my answers yet. He had to stay for at least that much, didn't he?

'I won't be far, 'Marcel promised, whispering so low in my ear that Jack didn't have a hope of hearing.

I didn't hear Jack answer, All the same, and all, Marcel headed into the house. My open eyes only made it to the stairs. The last thing I felt was Marcel's cool hands prying my fingers loose from his shirt.

-THE TRUTH-

I HAD THE SENSE THAT I'D BEEN ASLEEP FOR A VERY long time- my body was stiff like I hadn't moved once through all that time, either. My brain was bewildered and slow; strange, colorful dream dreams and nightmares-swirled dizzily encompassing the inside of my head.

They were so definite. The dreadful and the heavenly, all mixed into a bizarre jumble. There were sharp impatience and fear, both part of that frustrating fantasy where your feet can't move fast enough... And there were plenty of dragons, red-eyed fiends that were all the ghastlier for their hollow civility.

The dream was still strong- I could even remember the names.

All the same and all, the strongest, clearest part of the dream was not the horror. It was the angel that was clearest.

It was hard to let him go and wake up. This vision did not want to be shoved away into the vault of images I refused to stay. I struggled with it as my mind became more alert, concentrating on reality. I couldn't retain what day of the week it was, All the same, and all, I was sure Marcel or school or work or something was waiting for me. I breathed profoundly, wondering how to face another day.

Something cold touched my forehead with the softest pressure.

I pressed my eyes more tightly shut. I was still dreaming, it seemed, and it felt abnormally real. I was so close to waking... any second now, and it would be gone. All the same and all, I recognized that it felt too real, too real to be good for me. The stone arms I imagined wrapped encompassing me were far too abundant. If I let this go any further, I'd be melancholy for it later. With a resigned sigh, I yanked back my eyelids to dispel the delusion.

'Oh!' I gasped and threw my fists over my eyes.

Well, I'd gone too far; it must have been a mistake to let my imagination get so out of hand.

Okay, so 'let' was the wrong word.

I'd forced it to get out of hand pretty much stalked my hallucinations-and now my mind had snapped.

It took less than half a second for me to realize that, as long as I was truly insane now, I might as well enjoy the delusions while they were pleasant.

I opened my eyes again-and Marcel was still there, his perfect face just inches away from mine.

Part: 11

Terrify

'Did I threaten you?' His low voice was troubled. This was very good, as misconceptions went. The face, the call, the scent, everything- it was so much better than drowning. The gorgeous figment of my creativity watched my changing expressions, with alarm. His irises were pitch-black, with bruise-like adumbrations under them.

This surprised me; my hallucinatory they were usually better fed.

I blinked twice, desperately trying to remember the last thing that I was sure was real. Olivia was part of my dream, and I wondered if she had come back at all, or if that was just the preamble. I thought she'd returned the day I'd nearly drowned…

'Oh, crap' I croaked. My throat was thick with sleeping. 'What's wrong, it was asked?'

I frowned at him unhappily. His face was even more anxious than before.

'I'm dead, right?' I moaned. 'I did drown. Crap, crap, crap! This is going to kill Jack.'

Marcel frowned, too. 'You're not dead.'

'Then why am I not waking up?' I challenged, raising my eyebrows.

'You are awake?'

I shook my head. 'Sure, sure.

That's what you want me to think. And then it will be worse when I do wake up. If I wake up, which I won't, because I'm dead.

This is awful. Poor Jack. And Ayanna and Maggie…' I trailed off in horror at what I had done.

'I can see where you might confuse me with a nightmare.' His short-lived smile was grim. 'All the same and all, I can't imagine what you could have done to wind up in hell.

Did you commit many murders while I was away?' I grimaced. 'Not. If I was in hell, you wouldn't be with me.'

He sighed.

My head was getting clearer. My eyes flickered away from his face unwillingly-for one second, to the dark, open window, and then back to him. I started to remember details… and I felt a faint, unfamiliar blush warms the skin over my cheekbones as I slowly realized that Marcel was really, truly here with me, and I was wasting time being an idiot.

'Did all of that happen, then?' It was almost impossible to reassign my dream to reality. I couldn't wrap my head around the concept.

'That depends. 'Marcel's smile was still hard. 'If you're referring to us nearly being massacred in Italy, then, yes.'

'How strange,' I mused. 'I went to Italy. Did you know

I'd never been farther east than Albuquerque?'

He rolled his eyes. 'Maybe you should go back to sleep. You're not coherent.'

'I'm not tired anymore.' It was all coming clear now. 'What time is it? How long have I been sleeping?'

'It's just after one in the morning. So, for about fourteen hours.'

I stretched as he spoke. I was so stiff.

'Jack?' I asked.

Marcel frowned, 'Sleeping... you should probably know that I'm breaking the rules right now. Well, not technically, since he said- I was never to walk through his door again, and I came in the window...

All the same and all, still, the intent was clear.'

'Jack banned you from the house?' I asked, disbelief quickly melting into fury.

His eyes were sad. 'Did you expect anything else?'

My eyes were mad. I was going to have a few words with my father-perhaps it would be a good time to remind him that I was over the legal age of adulthood. It didn't matter so much, of course, except in principle. All too soon there would be no reason for the prohibition. I turned my thoughts to less painful avenues.

'What's the story?' I asked, genuinely curious, All the same, and all, also trying desperately to keep the conversation casual, to keep a firm grip on myself, so I wouldn't scare him away with the frantic, gnawing craving that was raging inside me.

'What do you mean?'

'What am I telling Jack? What's my excuse for disappearing for... how long was I gone, anyway?' I tried to count the hours in my head.

'Just three days.' His eyes tightened, All the same, and all, he smiled more naturally this time.

'Actually, I was hoping you might have a good explanation.

I've got nothing.'

I groaned. 'Fabulous.'

'Well, maybe Olivia will come up with something,' he offered, trying to comfort me.

And I was comforted. Who cared what I had to deal with later? Every second that he was here-so close, his flawless face glowing in the dim light from the numbers on my alarm clock was precious and not to be wasted.

Part: 12

'So,' I began, picking the least important-though still a vitally interesting question to start with. I was safely delivered home, and he might decide to leave at any moment. I had to keep him talking. Besides, this temporary heaven wasn't entirely complete without the sound of his voice. 'What have you been doing, up until three days ago?'

His face turned wary in an instant.

'Nothing exciting.'

'Of course not,' I mumbled.

'Why are you making that face?'

'Well…' I pursed my lips, considering. 'If you were, after all, just a dream, that's exactly the kind of thing you would say. My imagination must be used up.'

He sighed. 'If I tell you, will you finally believe that you're not having a nightmare?'

'Nightmare!' I repeated scornfully. He waited for my answer. 'Maybe,' I said after a second of thought. 'If you tell me.'

'I was… hunting.'

'Is that the best you can do?' I criticized.

'That doesn't prove I'm awake.'

He faltered, and then lectured slowly, choosing his words with care. 'I wasn't hunting foot food… I was trying my hand at… tracking. I'm not very qualified at this.'

'What were you tracking?' I asked, intrigued.

'Nothing of consequence.' His words didn't match his expression; he looked upset, uncomfortable.

'I don't understand.'

He hesitated; his face, shining with an odd green cast from the light of the clock, was torn.

'I-' He took a deep breath. 'I owe you an apology. No, of course, I owe you much, much more than that. All the same and all, you have to know,' the words began to flow so fast, the way

I remembered he spoke sometimes when he was agitated, that I had to concentrate to catch them all.' That I had no idea.

I didn't realize the mess I was leaving behind. I thought it was safe for you here. So, safe. I had no idea that Jenna,'-his lips curled back when he said the name,' would come back. I'll admit when I saw her that one time, I was paying much more attention to James's thoughts. All the same and all, I just didn't see that she had this kind of response in her. That she even had such a tie to him. I think I realize why now she was so sure of him, the thought of him failing never occurred to her. It was her overconfidence that clouded her feelings about him that kept me from seeing the depth of them, the bond there.

'Not that there's any excuse for what I left you to face. When I heard what you told Olivia-what she saw herself-when I realized that you had to put your life in the hands of werewolves, immature, volatile, the worst thing out there besides Jenna herself-he shuddered, and the gush of words halted for a short second. 'Please know that I had no idea of any of this. I feel sick, sick to my core, even now, when I can see and feel you safe in my arms. I am the most miserable excuse for-'

'Stop,' I interrupted him. He stared at me with agonized eyes, and I tried to find the right words the words that would free him from this imagined obligation that caused him so much pain. They were very hard words to say. I didn't know if I could get them out without breaking down. All the same and all, I had to try to do it right. I didn't want to be a source of guilt and anguish in his life. He should be happy, no matter what it cost me.

I'd been hoping to put off this part of our last conversation. It was going to bring things to an end so much sooner.

Drawing on all my months of practice with trying to be normal for Jack, I kept my face smooth. 'Marcel,' I said. His name burned my throat a little on the way out. I could feel the ghost of the hole, waiting to rip itself wide again as soon as he disappeared. I didn't quite see how I was going to survive it this time. 'This has to stop now. You can't think about things that way. You can't let this… this guilt… rule your life. You can't take responsibility for the things that happen to me here. None of it is your fault, it's just part of how life is for me. So, if I trip in front of a bus or whatever it is next time, you have to realize that it's not your job to take the blame.

You can't just go running off to Italy because you feel bad that you didn't save me. Even if I had jumped off that cliff to die, that would have been my choice, and not your fault. I know it's yours… your nature to shoulder the blame for everything, All the same, and all, you really can't let that make you go to such extremes! It's a very irresponsible thing of Isla and Joh and-'

I was on the edge of losing it. I stopped to take a deep breath, hoping to calm myself. I had to set him free. I had to make sure this never happened again.

'Is a Karly,' he whispered, the strangest expression crossing his face. He almost looked mad. 'Do you believe that I asked the Ministry to kill me because I felt guilty?'

I could feel the blank incomprehension on my face.

'Didn't you?'

'Feel guilty? Intensely so.

More than you can comprehend.'

'Then… what are you saying? I don't understand.'

'Bell, I went to the Ministry because- I thought you were dead,' he said, voice soft, eyes fierce. 'Even if I'd had no hand in your death'-he shuddered as he whispered the last word,' even if it wasn't my fault, I would have gone to Italy. I should have been more careful- I should have spoken to Olivia directly, rather than accepting it secondhand from Rose. All the same and all that was I supposed to think when the boy said Jack was at the funeral? What are the odds?

'The odds…' he muttered then, distracted. His voice was so low I wasn't sure I heard it right. 'The odds are always stacked against us. Mistake after mistake.

I'll never criticize Romeo again.'

'All the same and all, I still don't understand,' I said.

'That's my whole point. So- what?'

'Excuse me?'

'So- what if I was dead?'

He stared at me dubiously for a long moment before answering. 'Don't you remember anything I told you before?'

'I remember everything you told me.' Including the words that had negated all the rest.

He stroked the tip of his cool finger against my lower lip. 'Bell, you seem to be under a misconception.' He sealed his eyes, shaking his head back and forth with half a smile on his gorgeous face.

It wasn't a happy smile. 'I thought I'd explained it before. Bell, I can't live in a world where you don't exist.'

'I am...' My head swam as I looked for the appropriate word. 'Confused.' That worked. I couldn't make sense of what he was saying.

He stared deep into my eyes with his sincere, earnest gaze. 'I'm a good liar,

Bell, I have to be.'

I halted, my flesh locking down as if for the collision. The fault line in my chest rippled; the endeavor of it took my wind away.

He shook my shoulder, trying to loosen my rigid pose. 'Let me finish! I'm a good liar, All the same, and all, still, for you to believe me so quickly.' He winced. 'That was... excruciating.' I waited, still frozen.

'When we were in the forest when I was telling you goodbye-'

I didn't allow myself to remember. I fought to keep myself in the present second only.

'You weren't going to let go,' he whispered. 'I could see that. I didn't want to do it-it felt like it would kill me to do it All the same and all, I knew that if I couldn't convince you that I didn't love you anymore, it would just take you that much longer to get on with your life. I hoped that, if you thought I'd moved on, so would you.'

'A clean break,' I whispered through unmoving lips.

'Exactly. All the same and all, I never imagined it would be so easy to do! I thought it would be next to impossible that you would be so sure of the truth that I would have to lie through my teeth for hours to even plant the seed of doubt in your head.

I lied, and I'm so sorry-sorry because I hurt you, sorry because it was a worthless effort. Sorry that I couldn't protect you from what I an. I lied to save you, and it didn't work. I'm sorry.

'All the same and all, how could you believe me? After all the thousand times- I've told you I love you, how could you let one word break your faith in me?'

I didn't answer. I was too shocked to form a rational response.

'I could see it in your eyes, that you honestly believed that I didn't want you anymore. The most absurd, ridiculous concept-as if there were nah' way that I could exist without needing you!'

I was still frozen... His words were incomprehensible because they were impossible.

He shook my shoulder again, not hard, All the same, and all, enough that my teeth rattled a little. 'Bell,' he sighed. 'Really, what were you thinking!'

And so, I started to cry. The tears welled up and then gushed miserably down my cheeks.

'I knew it,' I sobbed. 'I knew I was dreaming.'

'You're impossible,' he said, and he laughed once-a hard laugh, frustrated. 'How can I put this so that you'll believe me? You're not asleep, and you're not dead. I'm here, and I love you. I have always loved you, and I will always love you. I was thinking of you, seeing your face in my mind, every second that I was away. When I told you that I didn't want you, it was the very blackest kind of blasphemy.'

I shook my head while the tears continued to ooze from the corners of my eyes.

'You don't believe me, do you?' he whispered, his face paler than his usual pale-I could see that even in the dim light. 'Why can you believe the lie, All the same, and all, not the truth?'

'It never made sense for you to love me,' I explained, my voice breaking twice. 'I always knew that.'

His eyes narrowed; his jaw tightened.

'I'll prove you're awake,' he promised.

He caught my face securely between his iron hands, ignoring my struggles when I tried to turn my head away.

'Please don't,' I whispered.

He stopped his lips just half an inch from mine.

'Why not?' he demanded. His breath blew into my face, making my head whirl.

'When I wake up'-He opened his mouth to protest, so I revised-' okay, forget that one- when you leave again, it's going to be hard enough without this, too.'

He pulled back an inch, to stare at my face.

'Yesterday, when I would touch you, you were so… hesitant, so careful, and yet still the same. I need to know why. Is it because I'm too late? Because I have hurt you too much? Because, you have moved on, as I meant for you too? That would be… quite fair.

I won't contest your decision. So- don't try to spare my feelings, please just tell me now whether or not you can still love me, after everything I've done to you. Can you?' he whispered.

'What kind of an idiotic question is that?'

'Just answer it. Please.'

I stared at him darkly for a long moment. 'The way I feel about you will never change. Of course, I love you and there's nothing you can do about it!'

'That's all I needed to hear.'

His mouth was on mine then, and I couldn't fight him. Not because he was so many thousand times stronger than me, All the same, and all because my will crumbled into dust the second our lips met. This kiss was not quite as careful as others I remembered, which suited me just fine. If I was going to rip myself up further, I might as well get as much in the trade as possible.

So, I kissed him back, my heart pounding out a jagged, disjointed rhythm while my breathing turned to pant and my fingers moved greedily to his face. I could feel his marble body against every line of mine, and I was so glad he hadn't listened to me no pain in the world would have justified missing this. His hands memorized my face, the same way mine was tracing his, and, in the brief seconds when his lips were free, he whispered my name.

When I was starting to get dizzy, he pulled away, only to lay his ear against my heart.

I, lay there, dazed, waiting for my gasping to slow and quiet.

'By the way,' he said in a casual tone.

'I'm not leaving you.'

I didn't say anything, and he seemed to hear the skepticism in my silence.

He lifted his face to lock my gaze in his. 'I'm not going anywhere. Not without you,' he added more seriously.

'I only left you in the first place because, I wanted you to have a chance at a normal, happy, human life. I could see what I was doing to you-keeping you constantly on the edge of danger, taking you away from the world you belonged in, risking your life every moment I was with you.

So, I had to try. I had to do something, and it seemed like leaving was the only way. If I hadn't thought you would be better off, I could have never made myself leave. I'm much too selfish.

Only you could be more important than what I wanted… what I needed. What I want, and need is to be with you, and I know I'll never be strong enough to leave again. I have too many excuses to stay thank heaven for that! It seems you can't be safe, no matter how many miles I put between us.'

'Don't promise me anything,' I whispered. If I let myself hope, and it came to nothing… that would kill me. Where all those merciless angels had not been able to finish me off, hope would do the job.

Anger glinted metallic in his black eyes.

'You think I'm lying to you now?'

'No- not lying…' I shook my head, trying to think it through coherently. To examine the hypothesis that he did love me, while staying objective, clinical, so I wouldn't fall into the trap of hoping. 'You could mean it… now. All the same and all, what about tomorrow when you think about all the reasons you left in the first place? Or next month, when Ray takes a snap at me?'

He flinched…

I thought back over those last days of my life before he left me, tried to see them through the filter of what he was telling me now. From that perspective, imagining that he'd left me while loving me, left me for me, his brooding and cold silences took on a different meaning. 'It isn't as if you hadn't thought the first decision though, is it?' I guessed. 'You'll end up doing what you think is right.'

'I'm not as strong as you give me credit for,' he said. 'Right and wrong have ceased to mean much to me; I was coming back anyway. Before Rose told me the news, I was already past trying to live through one week at a time, or even one day. I was fighting to make it through a single hour. It was only a matter of time, and not much of it- before, I showed up at your window and begged you to take me back. I'd be happy to beg now if you'd like that.'

I grimaced... 'Be serious, please.'

'Oh, I am,' he insisted, glaring now. 'Will you please try to hear what I'm telling you? Will you let me attempt to explain what you mean to me?'

He waited, studying my face as he spoke to make sure I was listening.

'Before you, girl, my life was like a moonless night. Very dark, All the same, and all, there were stars-points of light and reason... And then you shot across my sky like a meteor. Suddenly everything was on fire; there was brilliancy, there was a beauty. When you were gone, when the meteor had fallen over the horizon, everything went black.

Nothing had changed, All the same, and all, my eyes were blinded by the light. I couldn't see the stars anymore. And there was no more reason for anything.'

I wanted to believe him. All the same and all, this was my life without him that he was describing, not the other way around.

'Your eyes will adjust,' I mumbled. 'That's just the problem-they can't.'

'What about your distractions?'

He laughed without a trace of humor. 'Just part of the lie, love. There was no distraction from the... the agony. My heart hasn't beaten in almost ninety years, All the same, and all, this was different. It was like my heart was gone-like I was hollow.

Like I'd left everything that was inside me here with you.'

'That's funny,' I muttered.

He arched one perfect eyebrow.

'Funny?'

'I meant strange- I thought it was just me. Lots of pieces of me went missing, too. I haven't been able to breathe in so long.' I filled my lungs, luxuriating in the sensation. 'And my heart. That was lost.'

He closed his eyes and laid his ear over my heart again. I let my cheek pressed against his hair, felt the texture of it on my skin, smelled the delicious scent of him.

'Tracking wasn't a distraction then?' I asked, curious, and also needing to distract myself. I was very much in danger of hoping. I wouldn't be able to stop myself for long. My heart throbbed, singing in my chest.

'No.' He sighed. 'That was never a distraction. It was an obligation.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means that, even though I never expected any danger from Jenna, I wasn't going to let her get away with... Well, as I said, I was horrible at it. I traced her as far as Texas, All the same, and all, then I followed a false lead down to Brazil-and she came here.' He groaned.

'I wasn't even on the right continent!

And all the while, worse than my worst fears-'

'You were hunting with Jenna?' I half-shrieked as soon as I could find my voice, shooting through two octaves.

Jack's distant snores stuttered, and then picked up a regular rhythm again.

'Not well, 'Marcel answered, studying my outraged expression with a confused look. 'All the same and all, I'll do better this time. She won't be tainting perfectly good air by breathing in and out for much longer.'

'That is... out of the question,' I managed to choke out. Insanity. Even if he had Emmah or Ray help him. Even if he had Emmah and Ray help. It was worse than my other imaginings: Marcel Black standing across a small space from Jenna's vicious and feline figure. I couldn't bear

to picture Marcel there, even though he was so much more durable than my half-human best friend.

'It's too late for her. I might have let the other time slide, All the same, and all, not now, not after-'

I interrupted him again, trying to sound calm. 'Didn't you just promise that you weren't going to leave?' I asked, fighting the words as I said them, nor letting them plant themselves in my heart. 'That isn't exactly compatible with an extended tracking expedition, is it?'

He frowned... with a snarl began to build low in his chest. 'I will keep my promise, her. All the same and all, Jenna'-the snarl became more pronounced-' is going to die.

'Soon...'

'Let's not be hasty,' I said, trying to hide my panic. 'Maybe she's not coming back. Maggie's pack probably scared her off. There's no reason to go looking for her.

Besides, I've got bigger problems than Jenna.'

Marcel's eyes narrowed, All the same, and all, he nodded. 'It's true. The werewolves are a problem.'

I snorted. 'I wasn't talking about Marcel. My problems are a lot worse than a handful of adolescent wolves getting themselves into trouble.'

Marcel looked as if he were about to say something and then thought better of it.

His teeth clicked together, and he spoke through them. 'Really?' he asked. 'Then what would be your greatest problem? That would make

Jenna's returning for you seem like such an inconsequential matter in comparison?'

'How about the second greatest?' I hedged.

'All right,' he agreed, suspicious.

I paused. I wasn't sure I could say the name. 'There are others who are coming to look for me,' I reminded him in a subdued whisper.

He sighed, All the same, and all, the reaction was not as strong as I would have imagined after his response to Jenna.

'The Ministry is only the second greatest?'

'You don't seem that upset about it,' I noted.

'Well, we have plenty of time to think it through. Time means something very different to them than it does to you or even me. They count years the way you count days. I wouldn't be surprised if you were thirty before you crossed their minds again,' he added lightly.

Horror washed through me.

Thirty...???

So-o, his promises meant nothing, in the end. If I were going to turn thirty someday, then he couldn't be planning on staying long. The harsh pain of this knowledge made me realize that I'd already begun to hope, without permitting myself to do 5.0.

'You don't have to be afraid,' he said, anxious as he watched the tears dew up again on the rims of my eyes. 'I won't let them hurt you.'

'While you're here.' Not that I cared what happened to me when he left.

He took my face between his two stone hands, holding it tightly while his midnight eyes glared into mine with the gravitational force of a black hole. 'I will never leave you again.'

'All the same and all, you said thirty,' I whispered. The tears leaked over the edge.

'What? You're going to stay, All the same, and all, let me get all old anyway? Right.'

His eyes softened, while his mouth went hard. 'That's exactly what I'm going to do.

What choice have I? I cannot be without you, All the same, and all, I will not destroy your soul.'

'Is this really…' I tried to keep my voice even, All the same, and all, this question was too hard. I remembered his face when Aron had almost begged him to consider making me immortal. The sick look there. Was this fixation with keeping me human really about my soul, or was it because he wasn't sure that he wanted me around that long? 'Yes?' he asked, waiting for my question.

I asked a different one.

Almost-All the same and all, not quite as hard.

'All the same and all, what about when I get so old that people think I'm your mother? Your grandmother?' My voice was pale with revulsion- I could see Gran's face again in the dream mirror.

His whole face was soft now.

He brushed the tears from my cheek with his lips. 'That doesn't mean anything to me,' he breathed against my skin. 'You will always be the most beautiful thing in my world. Of course,' he hesitated, flinching slightly. 'If you outgrew me-if you wanted something more-I would understand that, Bell. I promise I wouldn't stand in your way if you wanted to leave me.'

His eyes were liquid onyx and utterly sincere. He spoke as if he'd put endless amounts of thought into this asinine plan. 'You do realize that I'll die eventually, right?' I demanded…

He'd thought about this part, too. 'I'll follow after as soon as I can.'

'That is serious…' I looked for the right word. 'Sick!!!'

'Bell, it's the only right way left-'

'Let's just back up for a minute,' I said; feeling angry made it so much easier to be clear, decisive. 'You do remember the

Ministry, right? I can't stay human forever. They'll kill me. Even if they don't think of me till I'm thirty'-I hissed the words' do you think they'll forget?'

'No,' he answered slowly, shaking his head. 'They won't forget. All the same and all?'

'All the same and all…?'

He grinned while I stared at him warily.

Maybe I wasn't the only crazy one.

'I have a few plans.'

'And these plans,' I said, my voice getting more acidic with each word. 'These plans all center around me staying human.'

My attitude hardened his expression. ‘Naturally.’ His tone was brusque, his divine face arrogant.

We glowered at each other for a long minute.

Then I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, I pushed his arms away so that I could sit up.

‘Do you want me to leave?’ he asked, and it made my heart flutter to see that this idea hurt him, though he tried not to show it.

‘No,’ I told him. ‘I'm leaving.’

He watched me suspiciously as I climbed out of the bed and fumbled around in the darkroom, looking for my shoes.

‘Mary I ask where you are going,’ he asked.

‘I'm going to your house,’ I told him, still feeling around blindly.

He got up and came to my side. ‘Here are your shoes. How did you plan to get there?’

‘My truck.’

‘That will probably wake

Jack,’ he offered as a deterrent.

I sighed. ‘I know. All the same and all, honestly, I'll be grounded for weeks as it is. How much more trouble can I get in?’

‘None. He'll blame me, not you.’

‘If you have a better idea, I'm all ears.’

‘Stay here,’ he suggested, All the same, and all, his expression wasn't hopeful.

‘No dice. All the same and all, you go ahead and make yourself at home,’ I encouraged, surprised at how natural my teasing sounded, and headed for the door.

He was there before me, blocking my way.

I frowned and turned for the window. It wasn't that far to the ground, and it was mostly grass beneath…

'Okay,' he sighed. 'I'll give you a ride.'

I shrugged. 'Either way. All the same and all, you probably should be there, too.'

'And why is that?'

'Because, you're extraordinarily opinionated, and I'm sure you'll want a chance to air your views.'

'My views on which subject?' He asked through his teeth.

'This isn't just about you anymore. You're not the center of the universe, you know.' My universe was, of course, a different story. 'If you're going to bring the Ministry down on us over something as stupid as leaving me human, then your family ought to have a say.'

'A say in what?' he asked, each word distinct.

'My mortality. I'm putting it to a vote.'

-VOTE-

HE WAS NOT PLEASED, THAT

MUCH WAS EASY TO READ on his

face. All the same and all, without further argument, he took me in his arms and sprang lithely from my window, landing without the slightest jolt, like a cat. It was a little bit farther down than I'd imagined.

'All right then,' he said, his voice seething with disapproval.

'Up you go.'

He helped me onto his back and took off running. Even after all this time, it felt routine. Easy.

This was something you never forgot, like riding a bicycle.

It was so very quiet and dark as he ran through the forest, his breathing slow and even- dark enough that the trees flying past us were nearly invisible, and only the rush of air in my face

truly gave away our speed. The air was damp; it didn't burn my eyes the way the wind in the big plaza had, and that was comforting.

As was the night, too, after that terrifying brightness. Like the thick quilt I'd played under as a child, the dark felt familiar and protecting.

I remembered, that running through the forest like this used to frighten me, that I used to have to close my eyes. It seemed a silly reaction to me now. I kept my eyes wide, my chin resting on his shoulder, my cheek against his neck. The speed was exhilarating.

A hundred times better than the motorcycle.

I turned my face toward him and pressed my lips into the cold stone skin of his neck.

'Thank you,' he said, as the vague, black shapes of trees raced past us.

'Does that mean you've decided you're awake?'

I laughed. The sound was easy, natural, effortless. It sounded right. 'Not really. More that, either way, I'm not trying to wake up. Not tonight.'

'I'll earn your trust back somehow,' he murmured, mostly to himself. 'If it's my final act.'
'I trust you,' I assured him.

'It's me I don't trust.'

'Explain that, please.'

He'd slowed to a walk- I could only tell because the wind ceased, and I guessed that we weren't far from the house. I thought I could make out the sound of the river rushing somewhere close by in the darkness.

'Well-' I struggled to find the right way to phrase it. 'I don't trust myself to be... enough. To deserve you. There's nothing about me that could hold you.'

He stopped and reached around to pull me off his back. His gentle hands did not release me; after he'd set me on my feet again, he wrapped his arms tightly around me, hugging me to his chest.

'Your hold is permanent and unbreakable,' he whispered. 'Never doubt that.'

All the same and all, how could I not?

'You never did tell me…' he murmured.

'What?'

'What your greatest problem is.'

'I'll give you one guess.' I sighed and reached up to touch the tip of his nose with my index finger.

He nodded. 'I'm worse than the Ministry,' he said grimly. 'I guess I've earned that.'

Part: 13

Whys and wherefores

I rolled my eyes. 'The worst the

Ministry can do is kill me.'

He waited with tense eyes.

'You can leave me,' I explained. 'The Ministry, Jenna… they're nothing compared to that.'

Even in the darkness, I could see the anguish twist his face-it reminded me of his expression under Jane's torturing gaze; I felt sick and regretted speaking the truth.

'Don't,' I whispered, touching his face.

'Don't be sad.'

He pulled one corner of his mouth up halfheartedly, All the same, and all, the expression didn't touch his eyes. 'If there was only some way to make you see that I can't leave you,' he whispered. 'Time, I suppose, will be the way to convince you.'

I liked the idea of time.

'Okay,' I agreed.

His face was still tormented. I tried to distract him with inconsequential.

'So-since you're staying. Can I have my stuff back?' I asked, making my tone as light as I could manage.

My attempt worked, to an extent: he laughed. All the same and all, his eyes retained the misery. 'Your things were never gone,' he told me. 'I knew it was wrong since I promised you peace without reminders. It was stupid and childish, All the same, and all, I wanted to leave something of myself with you. The CD, the pictures, the tickets-they're all under your floorboards.'

'Really?'

He nodded, seeming slightly cheered by my obvious pleasure in this trivial fact. It wasn't enough to heal the pain in his face completely.

'I think,' I said slowly, 'I'm not sure, All the same, and all, I wonder... I think maybe I knew it the whole time.'

'What did you know?'

I only wanted to take away the agony in his eyes, All the same, and all, as I spoke the words, they sounded truer than I expected they would.

'Some part of me, my subconscious maybe, never stopped believing that you still cared whether I lived or died.

That's probably why I was hearing the voices.'

There was a very deep silence for a moment. 'Voices?' he asked flatly.

'Well, just one voice. Yours- It's a long story.' The wary look on his face made me wish that I hadn't brought that up. Would he think I was crazy, like everyone else? Was everyone else right about that? All the same and all, at least that expression-the one that made him look like something was burning him-faded.

'I've got time.' His voice was unnaturally even. 'It's pretty pathetic.'

He waited.

I wasn't sure how to explain. 'Do you remember what Olivia said about extreme sports?'

He spoke the words without inflection or emphasis. 'You jumped off a cliff for fun.'

'Er, right. And before that, with the motorcycle-'

'Motorcycle?' he asked. I knew his voice well enough to hear something brewing behind the calm. 'I guess I didn't tell Olivia about that part.'

'No!'

'Well, about that… See, I found that… when I was doing something dangerous or stupid… I could remember you more clearly,' I confessed, feeling completely mental. 'I could remember how your voice sounded when you were angry. I could hear it like you were standing right there next to me. Mostly I tried not to think about you, All the same, and all, this didn't hurt so much it was like you were protecting me again. Like you didn't want me to be hurt.

'And, well, I wonder if the reason I could hear you so clearly was that, underneath it all. I always knew that you hadn't stopped loving me.'

Again, as I spoke, the words brought with them a sense of conviction. Of rightness.

Some deep place inside me recognized truth.

His words came out half-strangled.

'You… were… risking your life… to hear-'

'Sh-h,' I interrupted him. 'Hold on a second. I think I'm having an epiphany here.'

I thought of that night in Pittsburgh when I'd had my first delusion. I'd come up with two options. Insanity or wish fulfillment.

I'd seen no third option.

All the same and all, what if…

What if you believed something was true, All the same, and all, you were dead wrong? What if you were so stubbornly without too many thoughts, sure in all, that you were right, that you would not even consider the truth and subject your realities?

Would the truth be silenced, or would it try to breakthrough?

Option three: Marcel loved me. The bond forged between us was not one that could be broken by absence, distance, or time.

-And-

Like no matter how much more special or lovely or brilliant or perfect than me he might be, he was as irreversibly altered as I was. As I would always belong to him, so would he always be mine.

Was that what I'd been trying to tell myself?

'Oh!'

'Bell?'

'Oh. Okay. I see.'

'Your epiphany is?' He asked, his voice uneven and strained with the rasp.

'You love me,' I marveled. The sense of conviction and Tightness washed through me again.

Though his eyes were still anxious, the crooked smile I loved best flashed across his face. 'Truly, I do.'

My heart inflated like it was going to crack right through my ribs. It filled my chest and blocked my throat so that I could not speak.

He did want me the way I wanted him forever. It was only fear for my soul, for the human things he didn't want to take from me, that made him so desperate to leave me mortal. Compared to the fear that he didn't want me, this hurdle-my soul-seemed almost insignificant.

He took my face tightly between his cool hands and kissed me until I was so dizzy the forest was spinning. Then he leaned his forehead against mine, and I was not the only one breathing harder than usual.

'You were better at it than I was, you know,' he told me.

'Better at what?'

'Surviving... You, at least, made an effort. You got up in the morning, tried to be normal for Jack, followed the pattern of your life. When I wasn't actively tracking, I was... useless. I couldn't be around my family couldn't be around anyone. I'm embarrassed to admit that I more or less curled up into a ball and let the misery have me.'

He grinned some vary, sheepishly. 'It was much more pathetic than hearing voices. And, of course, you know- I do that, too.'

I was deeply relieved that he seemed to understand- comforted that this all made sense to him. At any rate, he wasn't looking at me like I was crazy. He was looking at me like… he loved me.

'I only heard one voice,' I corrected him.

He laughed and then pulled me tight against his right side and started to lead me forward.

'I'm just humoring you with this.' He motioned broadly with his hand toward the darkness in front of us as we walked. There was something pale and immense there-the house, I realized. 'It doesn't matter in the slightest what they say.' 'This affects them now, too.'

He shrugged indifferently, at me and then he led me through the open front door into the dark house and flipped the lights on; the room was just as I'd remembered it- the piano and the white couches and the pale, massive staircase; no dust, no white sheets.

Marcel called out the names with no more volume than I'd use in regular conversation. 'Joh?

Isla? Rose? Emmah? Ray?

Olivia?' They would hear.

Joh was suddenly standing beside me as if he'd been there all along. 'Welcome back, Bell.' He smiled, 'what can we do for you this morning? I imagine, due to the hour, that this is not a purely social visit?'

I nodded. 'I'd like to talk to everyone at once if that's okay.

About something important.'

I couldn't help glancing up at Marcel's face as I spoke. His expression was critical All the same and all, resigned. When I looked back to Joh, he was looking at Marcel, too.

'Of course,' Joh said. 'Why don't we talk in the other room?'

Joh led the way through the bright living room, around the corner to the dining room, turning on lights as he went. The walls were white, the ceilings high, like the living room. In the

center of the room, under the low-hanging chandelier, was a large, polished oval table surrounded by eight chairs. Joh held out a chair for me at the head.

I'd never seen the Barn's use the dining room table before it was just a prop.

They didn't eat in the house.

As soon as I turned to sit in the chair, I saw that we were not alone; Isla had followed Marcel, and behind her, the rest of the family filed in.

Joh sat down on my right, and Marcel on my left. Everyone else took their seats in silence. Olivia was grinning at me, already in on the plot. Emmah and Ray looked curious, and Rose smiled at me tentatively. My answering smile was just as timid. That was going to take some getting used to.

Joh nodded at me.

'The floor is yours.'

Part: 14

Edgy

I swallowed. Their gazing eyes made me nervous. Marcel took my hand under the table. I peeked at him, All the same, and all, he was watching the others, his fate suddenly fierce.

'Well,' I paused. 'I'm hoping Olivia has already told you everything that happened in

Volterra?'

'Everything,' Olivia assured me.

I threw her a meaningful look.

'And on the way?' 'That, too,' she nodded.

'Good,' I sighed with relief.

'Then we're all on the same page.'

They waited patiently while I tried to order my thoughts.

‘So-o, I have a problem,’ I began. ‘Olivia promised the Ministry that, I would become one of you. They're going to send someone to check, and I'm sure that's a bad thing to avoid.

‘And so, now, this involves you all. I'm sorry about that.’ I looked at each one of their beautiful faces, saving the most beautiful for last. Marcel’s mouth was turned down into a grimace. ‘All the same and all, if you don't want me, then I'm not going to force myself on you, whether Olivia is willing or not.’

Isla opened her mouth to speak, All the same, and all, I held up one finger to stop her.

‘Please, let me finish. You all know what I want. And I'm sure you know what Marcel thinks, too. I think the only fair way to decide is for everyone to have a vote if you decide you don't want me, then… I guess I'll go back to Italy alone, I can't have them coming here.’ My forehead creased as I considered that.

There was the faint rumble of a growl in Marcel’s chest. I ignored him.

‘Taking into account, then, that I won't put any of you in danger, either way, I want you to vote yes or no on the issue of me becoming an angel.’ I half-smiled on the last word and gestured toward

Joh to begin. ‘Just a minute, ‘Marcel interrupted.

I glared at him through narrowed eyes. He raised his eyebrows at me, squeezing my hand. ‘I have something to add before we vote.’

I sighed…

‘About the danger, Bell's referring to,’ he continued. ‘I don't think we need to be overly anxious.’

His expression became more animated. He put his free hand on the shining table and leaned forward.

‘You see,’ he explained, looking around the table while he spoke, ‘there was more than one reason why I didn't want to shake Aron's hand there at the end, there's something they didn't think of, and I didn't want to cine them in.’ He grinned.

‘Which was?’ Olivia prodded; I was sure my expression was just as skeptical as hers.

'The Ministry is overconfident, and with good reason. When they decide to find someone, it's not a problem. Do you remember Eamettri?' He glanced down at me.

I shuddered. He took that as a yes.

'He finds people- that's his talent, why they keep him.

'Now, the whole time we were with any of them, I was picking their brains for anything that might save us, getting as much information as possible. So, I saw how Eamettri's talent works. He's a tracker- a tracker a thousand times more gifted than Jarres was. His ability is loosely related to what I do, or what Aron does. He catches them... flavor? I don't know how to describe it... the tenor... of someone's mind, and then he follows that. It works over immense distances.

'All the same and all, after Aron's little experiments, well...' Marcel shrugged.

'You think he won't be able to find me,'

I said flatly.

He was smug. 'I'm sure of it.

He relies totally on that other sense. When it doesn't work with you, they'll all be blind.'

'And how does that solve anything?'

'Quite obviously, Olivia will be able to tell when they're planning a visit, and I'll hide you. They'll be helpless,' he said with fierce enjoyment. 'It will be like looking for a piece of straw in a haystack!'

He and Emmah exchanged a glance and a smirk.

This made no sense. 'All the same and all, they can find you,' I reminded him.

'And I can take care of myself.'

Emmah laughed, and reached across the table toward his brother, extending a fist. 'Excellent plan, my brother,' he said with enthusiasm.

Marcel stretched out his arm to smack Emmah's fist with his own.

'No,' Rose hissed.

'Absolutely not,' I agreed.

'Nice.' Ray's voice was appreciative.

'Idiots,' Olivia muttered.

Isla just glared at Marcel.

I straightened up in my chair, focusing.

This was my meeting.

'All right, then, Marcel has offered an alternative for you to consider,' I said coolly. 'Let's vote.' I looked at Marcel this time; it would be better to get his opinion out of the way. 'Do you want me to join your family?'

His eyes were hard and black as flint.

'Not that way. You're staying human.'

I nodded once, keeping my face businesslike, and then moved on.

'Olivia?'

'Yes.'

'Ray?'

'Surely,' he said, voice grave. I was a little surprised- I hadn't been at all sure of his vote All the same and all, I suppressed my reaction and moved on.

'Ross?'

She hesitated, biting down on her full, perfect bottom lip. 'No.'

I kept my face blank and turned my head slightly to move on, All the same, and all, she held up both her hands, palms forward.

'Let me explain,' she pleaded. 'I don't mean that I have an aversion to you as a sister. It's just that... this is not the life I would have chosen for myself. I wish there had been someone there to vote no for me.'

I nodded slowly and then turned to Emmah.

'Hell, Surly!' He grinned. 'We can find some other way to pick a fight with this Eamettri.'

I was still grimacing at that when I looked at Isla.

'Yes, of course, girl. I already think of you as part of my family.'

'Thank you, Isla,' I murmured as I turned toward Joh.

I was suddenly nervous, wishing I had asked for his vote first. I was sure that this was the vote that mattered most, the vote that counted more than any majority.

Joh wasn't looking at me.

'Marcel,' he said.

Nevaeh

Book: 14

Obscure Darkness

Chapter: 104

Part: 1

Anxious

'No,' Marcel snarled. His jowl was strained stingy, his lips rolled back from his teeth.

'It's the only way that makes sense,' Ray insisted. 'You've chosen not to live without her, and that doesn't leave me a choice.'

Marcel lowered my hand, shoving away from the table. He stalked out of the room, grumbling under his breath.

‘I guess you know my vote.’ Ray sighed.

I was still staring after Marcel. ‘Thanks,’ I mumbled.

An earsplitting crash echoed from the other room.

I flinched and spoke quickly. ‘That's all I needed. Thank you. For wanting to keep me. I feel the same way about all of you, also.’ My voice was rough with sensation by the end.

Isla was at my side in a flash, her cold arms around me.

‘Sweetest Bella,’ she breathed, you look just like your real mom, and I know who she was and she was lovely, yet I can say to this day over fear.

I held her back. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ross glancing down at the table, and I understood, understood that my words could be construed in two ways.

‘Well, Olivia,’ I said when Isla released me. ‘Where do you want to do this?’

Olivia stared at me, her eyes widening with terror.

‘No! No! No!’

Marcel yelled, charging back into the room. He was in my face ere I had time to blink, circling over me, his grimace distorted in rage. ‘Are you crazy?’ He shouted. ‘Have you utterly lost your mind?’

I cringed away, my hands over my ears.

‘Um, girl,’ Olivia interjected in an anxious voice. ‘I don't think I'm ready for that. I'll need to prepare…’

‘You promised,’ I reminded her, glaring under Marcel’s arm.

‘I know, but… Seriously, girl! I don't have any idea how to not kill you.’

‘You can do it,’ I encouraged. ‘I trust you.’

Marcel snarled in fury.

Olivia shook her head quickly, looking panicked.

‘Ray?’ I turned to look at him.

Marcel grabbed my face in his hand, forcing me to look at him. His other hand was out a palm toward Ray.

Ray ignored that. 'I'm able to do it,' he answered my question. I wished I could see his expression. 'You would be in no danger of me losing control.'

'Sounds good.' I hoped he could understand; it was hard to talk the way Marcel held my jaw.

'Hold on, 'Marcel said between his teeth. 'It doesn't have to be now.'

'There's no reason for it not to be now,' I said, the words coming out distorted.

'I can think of a few.'

'Of course- you can,' I said sourly. 'Now let go of me.'

He freed my face and wrapped his arms across his chest. 'In about two hours, Jack will be here scanning for you. I wouldn't put it past him to involve the policemen.'

'All three of them.' But I frowned.

This was always the hardest part. Jack, Renee. Now Marcel, too. The people I would lose, the people I would hurt. I wished there was some way that I could be the only one to suffer, but I knew that was impossible.

At the same time, I was hurting them more by staying human. Putting Jack in constant danger through my proximity. Putting Maggie in worse danger still by drawing his enemies across the land he felt bound to protect. And Renee-I couldn't even risk a visit to see my mother for fear of bringing my deadly problems along with me!

I was a danger magnet; I'd accepted that about myself.

Accepting this, I knew I needed to be able to take care of myself and protect the ones I loved, even if that meant that I couldn't be with them. I needed to be strong.

'In the interest of remaining inconspicuous, 'Marcel said, still talking through his gritted teeth, but looking at Ray now, 'I suggest that we put this conversation off, at the very least until Karly Finishes high school, and moves out of Jack's house.'

'That's a reasonable request, girl,' Ray pointed out.

I thought about Jack's reaction when he woke up this morning, if after all that life had put him through in the last week with Harry's loss, and then I had put him through with my unexplained disappearance-he where to find my bed empty. Jack deserved better than that. It was just a little more time; graduation wasn't so far away…

I pursed my lips. 'I'll consider it.'

Marcel relaxed. His jaw unclenched.

'I should probably take you home,' he said, calmer now, but clearly in a hurry to get me out of here. 'Just in case Jack wakes up early.'

I looked at Ray. 'After graduation?'

'You have my word.'

I took a deep breath, smiled, and turned back to Marcel. 'Okay. You can take me home.'

Marcel rushed me out of the house before Ray could promise me anything else. He took me out the back, so I didn't get to see what was broken in the living room.

It was a tranquil trip home. I was feeling successful, including a little self-righteous. Scared stiff, too, of course, but I heard not to think about that part. It did me no good to worry about the pain-the natural or the emotional- so I wouldn't. Not until I ought to.

When we got to my house, Marcel didn't pause. He dashed up the wall and through my window in half a second. Then he pulled my arms from around his neck and set me on the bed.

I believed I had a pretty good belief of what he was thinking, but his character surprised me. Instead of angry, it was anticipating. He paced morosely back and forth across my darkroom while I watched with growing mistrust.

'Whatever you're planning, it's not going to work,' I told him.

'Sh-h… I'm thinking.'

'Ugh,' I groaned, throwing myself back on the bed and pulling the quilt over my head.

There was no sound, but suddenly he was there. He flipped the cover back, so he could see me. He was lying next to me. His hand reached up to brush my hair from my cheek.

'If you don't mind, I'd much rather you didn't hide your face. I've lived without it for as long as I can stand. Now… tell me something.' 'What?' I asked, unwilling.

Part: 2

Creation

'If you could have anything in the world, anything at all, what would it be?'

I could feel the skepticism in my eyes.

'You.'

He shook his head impatiently.

'Something you don't already have.'

I wasn't sure where he was trying to lead me, so I thought carefully before I answered. I came up with something that was both true, and also probably impossible.

'I would want… Ray not to have to do it. I would want you to change me.'

I observed his reflection warily, expecting more of the fury I'd noticed at his house. I was astonished that his expression didn't change. It was nevertheless calculating, deep and wise.

'What would you be willing to trade for that?'

I couldn't accept my ears. I ogled at his composed face and blurted out the clue before I could think about this.

'Anything.'

He smiled faintly, and then pursed his lips. 'Five years?'

My face twisted into an expression somewhere between chagrin and horror.

'You said anything,' he reminded me.

'Yes, but… you'll use the time to find a way out of it. I have to strike while the iron is hot. Besides, it's just too dangerous to be human-for me, at least. So, anything but that.'

He frowned. 'Three years?'

'No!'

'Isn't it worth anything to you at all?'

I thought about how much I wanted this. Better to keep a poker face, I decided, and not let him know how- very much that was. It would give me more leverage. 'Six months?'

He rolled his eyes. 'Not good enough.'

'One year, then,' I said. 'That's my limit.'

'At least give me two.'

'No way. Nineteen I'll do. But I'm not going anywhere near twenty. If you're staying in your teens forever, then so am I.'

He thought for a minute. 'All right.

Forget time limits. If you want me to be the one-then you'll just have to meet one condition.'

'Condition?' My voice went flat. 'What condition?'

His eyes where cautious-he spoke slowly. 'Marry me first.'

I stared at him, waiting... 'Okay. What's the punchline?'

He sighed. 'You're wounding my ego, girl. I just proposed to you, and you think it's a joke.'

'Marcel, please be serious.'

'I am one hundred percent serious.' He eyed at me with no hint of joviality in his face. 'Oh, come on,' I said, an edge of insanity in my voice. 'I'm only eighteen.'

'Well, I'm nearly a hundred and ten. It's time I settled down.'

I looked away, out the dark window, trying to control the panic before it gave me away.

'Look, marriage isn't exactly that high on my list of priorities, you know? It was sort of the kiss of death for Renee and Jack.'

'Interesting choice of words.'

'You know what I mean.'

He gasped deeply. 'Please don't say me that you're fearful of the commitment,' his voice was disbelieving, and I realized what he meant.

'That's not it exactly,' I hedged. 'I'm... afraid of Renee. She has some intense opinions on getting married before you're thirty.'

'Because she'd rather you became one of the eternal damned than getting married.' He laughed darkly.

'You think you're joking.'

'Girl, if you compare the level of commitment between a marital union as opposed to bartering your soul in exchange for eternity as an angel...' He shook his head. 'If you're not brave enough to marry me, then-'

'Well,' I interrupted. 'What if I did?

What if I told you to take me to Vegas now?

Would I be an angel in three days?'

He smiled, his teeth flashing in the dark.

'Sure,' he said, calling my bluff.

'I'll get my car.'

'Dammit.' I muttered. 'I'll give you eighteen months.'

'No deal,' he said, grinning. 'I like this condition.'

'Fine. I'll have Ray do it when I graduate.'

'If that's what you want.' He shrugged, and his smile became angelic.

'You're impossible,' I groaned. 'A monster.' He chuckled. 'Is that why you won't marry me?'

I groaned again.

He tilted toward me; his night-dark eyes vanished and smoldered and shattered my concentration. 'Please, Bella?' He exhaled.

I misremembered how to inhale for a moment. When I recovered, I shook my head quickly, trying to clear my abruptly clouded mind.

'Would this have gone better if I'd had time to get a ring.''

'No! No rings!' I very nearly snouted.

'Now you've done it,' he whispered.

'Oops.'

'Jack's getting up; I'd better leave, 'Marcel said with resignation.

My heart stopped beating.

He gauged my expression for a second. 'Would it be childish of me to hide in your closet, then?'

'No,' I whispered eagerly. 'Stay. Please.' Marcel smiled and disappeared.

I seethed in the darkness as I waited for Jack to check on me. Marcel knew exactly what he was doing, and I was willing to bet that all the injured surprise was part of the poly. Of course, I still had the Ray option, but now that I knew there was a chance that, Marcel would change me himself, I wanted it bad. He was such a cheater.

My door cracked open.

'Morning, Dad.'

'Oh, hey, girl.' He sounded embarrassed at getting caught. 'I didn't know you were awake.'

'Yeah. I've just been waiting for you to wake up, so I could take a shower.' I started to get up.

'Hold on,' Jack said, flipping the light on. I blinked in the sudden brightness, and carefully kept my eyes away from the closet.

'Let's talk for a minute first.'

I couldn't control my grimace. I'd forgotten to ask Olivia for a good excuse.

'You know you're in trouble.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'I just about went crazy these last three days. I come home from Harry's funeral, and you're gone.

Marcel could only tell me that you had run off with Olivia and that he thought you were in trouble. You did not leave me a number, and you did not call. I did not know where you were or when-or if-you were coming back. Do you have any idea how... how...?' He could not finish the sentence. He sucked in a sharp breath and moved on. 'Can you give me one reason why- I shouldn't ship you off to Ashville this second?'

My eyes narrowed. So, it was going to be threats, was it? Two could play that game. I sat up, pulling the quilt around me. 'Because I won't go.'

'Now just one-minute, young lady-'

'Look, Dad, I accept complete responsibility for my actions, and you have the right to ground me for as long as you want. I will also do all the chores and laundry and dishes until you think I've learned my lesson.'

-And-

'I guess you're within your rights if you want to kick me out, too-but that won't make me go to Florida.'

His face turned bright red. He took a few deep breaths before he answered.

'Would you like to explain where you've been?'

Oh, crap... 'There was... an emergency.'

He raised his eyebrows in expectation of my brilliant explanation.

I filled my cheeks with air and then blew it out noisily. 'I don't know what to tell you, Dad. It was mostly a misunderstanding. He said, she said. It got out of hand.'

He waited with a distrustful expression.

'See, Olivia told Rose about me jumping off the cliff...' I was scrambling frantically to make this work, to keep it as close to the truth as possible so that my inability to lie convincingly

would not undermine the excuse, but before I could go on, Jack's expression reminded me that he didn't know anything about the cliff.

Major oops as if I wasn't already toasted.

'I guess I didn't tell you about that,' I choked out. 'It was nothing. Just messing around, swimming with Maggie. Anyway, Rose told Marcel, and he was upset. She sort-of accidentally made it sound like I was- trying to kill myself or something. He wouldn't answer his phone, so Olivia dragged me to… L.A., to explain in person.' I shrugged, desperately hoping that he would not be so distracted by my slip that he'd miss the brilliant explanation I'd provided.

Jack's face was frozen. 'Were you trying to kill yourself, baby girl?'

'No, of course not. Just having fun with Maggie. Cliff diving. The La Push kids do it all the time. Like I said, nothing.'

Jack's face heated up-from frozen too hot with fury. 'What's it to Marcel Cullen anyway?' he barked. 'All this time, he's just left you are dangling without a word-'

I interrupted him. 'Another misunderstanding.'

His face flushed again. 'So, is he back then?'

'I'm not sure what the exact plan is. I think they all are.'

He shook his head, the vein in his temples pulsing. 'I want you to stay away from him, Bella. I don't trust him. He's nasty to you. I won't allow him to mess you up like that again.'

'Fine,' I said curtly.

Jack rocked back onto his heels. 'Oh.'

He scrambled for a second, exhaling loudly in surprise. 'I thought you were going to be difficult.'

'I am.' I stared straight into his eyes. 'I meant, 'Fine, I'll move out.'

His eyes swelled; his face turned puce. My resolve wavered as I commenced to worry about his well-being. He was no younger than Harry…

'Dad, I don't want to move out,' I said in a softer tone. 'I love you. I know you're worried, but you need to trust me on this. And you're going to have to ease up on Marcel if you want me to stay. Do you want me to live here or not?'

'That's not fair, baby girl. You know I want you to stay.'

'Then be nice to Marcel, because he's going to be where I am.' I said it with confidence. The conviction of my epiphany was still strong.

'Not under my roof,' Jack stormed.

I sighed a heavy sigh. 'Look, I'm not going to give you any more ultimatums tonight-or I guess it's this morning. Just think about it for a few days, okay? But keep in mind that Marcel and I are sorts of a package deal.'

'baby-'

'Think it over,' I insisted. 'And while you're doing that, could you give me some privacy? I need a shower.'

Jack's face was a strange shade of purple, but he left, slamming the door behind him. I heard him stomp furiously down the stairs.

I threw off my quilt, and Marcel was already there, sitting in the rocking chair as if he'd been present through the whole conversation.

'Sorry about that,' I whispered.

'It's not as if I don't deserve far worse,' he murmured. 'Don't start anything with Jack over me, please. '

'Don't worry about it,' I breathed as I gathered up my bathroom things and a set of clean clothes. 'I will start exactly as much as is necessary, and no more than that. Or are you trying to tell me I have nowhere to go?' I widened my eyes with a false alarm.

'You'd move in with a house full of angels?'

'That's probably the safest place for someone like me. Besides…' I grinned.

'If Jack kicks me out, then there's no need for a graduation deadline, is there?'

His jaw tightened. ‘So, eager for eternal damnation,’ he muttered.

‘You know you don't believe that.’

‘Oh, don't I?’ He fumed.

‘No, you don't.’

He glowered at me and started to speak, but I cut him off.

‘If you believed that you'd lost your soul, then when I found you in Volterra, you would have realized immediately what was happening, instead of thinking we were both dead together. But you didn't-you say 'Amazing. Ray was right, ‘I reminded him, triumphant. ‘There's hope in you, after all.’

For once, Marcel was speechless.

‘So, let's both just be hopeful, all right?’ I suggested. ‘Not that it matters. If you stay, I don't need heaven.’

He got up slowly and came to put his hands on either side of my face as he stared into my eyes. ‘Forever,’ he vowed, still a little staggered.

‘That's all I'm asking for,’ I said and stretched up on my toes so that I could press my lips to his.

-EPILOGUE TREATY-

ALMOST EVERYTHING WAS BACK TO NORMAL-THE GOOD, pre-zombie normal-in less time than I would have believed possible. The hospital welcomed Ray back with eager arms, not even bothering to conceal their delight that Isla had found life in P.A. so little to her liking. Thanks to the Calculus test I'd missed while abroad, Olivia and Marcel were in better shape to graduate than I was at the moment.

Suddenly, the college was a priority (college was still planning B, on the off chance that Marcel’s offer swayed me from the postgraduation Ray choice.) Many deadlines had passed me by, but Marcel had a new stack of applications for me to fill out every day. He had already done the Harvard route, so it did not bother him that, thanks to my procrastination, we might both end up at Penn’s Community College next year.

Jack was not happy with me or speaking to Marcel. But at least Marcel was allowed during my designated visiting hours-inside the house again. I just was not allowed out of it.

School and work were the only exceptions and the dreary, dull yellow walls of my classrooms had become oddly inviting to me of late. That had a lot to do with the person who sat on the desk beside me.

Marcel had resumed his schedule from the beginning of the year, which put him in most of my classes again. My behavior had been such last fall, after the Barn's' supposed move to P.A., that the seat beside me had never been filled. Even Mike, always eager to take any advantage, had kept a safe distance. With Marcel back in place, it was almost as if the last eight months were just a disturbing nightmare.

Almost, but not quite. There was the house arrest situation, for one thing. And for another, before the fall, I had not been best friends with Marcel Black. So, of course, I had not missed him then.

I was not at liberty to go to La Push, and Marcel was not coming to see me. He would not even answer my phone calls.

I made these calls mostly at night after Marcel had been kicked out-promptly at nine by a grimly gleeful Jack-and before Marcel snuck back through my window when Jack was asleep. I chose that time to make my fruitless calls because I had noticed that Marcel made a certain face every time, I mentioned Marcel's name. Disapproving and wary… even angry. I guessed that he had some reciprocal prejudice against the horse, though he was not as vocal as Marcel had been about the 'bloodsuckers.'

So, I did not mention Marcel much.

With Marcel near me, it was hard to think about unhappy things-even my former best friend, who was very unhappy right now, due to me. When I did think of Maggie, I always felt guilty for not thinking of him more.

The fairy tale was back on. Prince returned; the bad spell broken. I was not sure exactly what to do about the leftover, unresolved character. Where was his happily ever after?

Weeks passed, and Marcel still would not answer my calls. It started to become a constant worry. Like a dripping faucet in the back of my head that I could not shut off or ignore. Drip, drip, drip. Marcel, Marcel, Marcel.

Part: 3

Allusion

So, though I did not mention Marcel much, sometimes my frustration and anxiety boiled over.

'It's just plain rude!' I vented one Saturday afternoon when Marcel picked me up from work. Being angry about things was easier than feeling guilty. 'Downright insulting!'

I had varied my pattern, in hopes of a different response. I had called Maggie from work this time, only to get an unhelpful Billy.

Again…

'Billy said he didn't want to talk to me,' I fumed, glaring at the rain oozing down the passenger window.

'That he was there and wouldn't walk three steps to get to the phone! Usually, Billy just says he is out or busy or sleeping or something. I mean, it is not like I did not know he was lying to me, but at least it was a polite way to handle it. I guess Billy hates me now, too. It's not fair!'

'It's not you, girl, 'Marcel said quietly.

'Nobody hates you.'

'Feels that way,' I muttered, folding my arms across my chest. It was no more than a stubborn gesture. There was no hole there now- I could barely remember the empty feeling anymore.

'Marcel knows we're back, and I'm sure that he's ascertained that I'm with you,' Marcel said. 'He won't come anywhere near me. The enmity is rooted too deeply.'

'That's stupid. He knows you're not… like other angels.'

'There's still good reason to keep a safe distance.'

I glared blindly out the windshield, seeing only Marcel's face, set in the bitter mask I hated.

'Girl, we are what we are, 'Marcel said quietly. 'I can control myself, but I doubt he can. He is very young. It would most likely turn into a fight, and I don't know if I could stop it before I k-' he broke off, and then quickly continued. 'Before I hurt him. You would be unhappy. I don't want that to happen.'

I remembered what Marcel had said in the kitchen, hearing the words with the perfect recall in his husky voice. I am not sure that I am even-tempered enough to handle that…

You would not like it so much if I killed your friend. But he had been able to handle it, that time…

'Marcel,' I whispered. 'Were you about to say 'killed him? Where you?'

He looked away from me, staring into the rain. In front of us, the red light I had not noticed turned green and he started forward again, driving very slowly. Not his usual way of driving.

'I would try… very hard… not to do that, 'Marcel finally said.

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open, but he continued to look straight ahead.

We were paused at the corner stop sign.

Abruptly, I remembered what had happened to Paris when Romeo came back.

The stage directions were simple: They fight.

Paris falls.

But that was ridiculous. Impossible.

'Well,' I said, and took a deep breath, shaking my head to dispel the words in my head. 'Nothing like that is ever going to happen, so there's no reason to worry about it. And you know Jack's staring at the clock right now. You'd better get me home before I get in more trouble for being late.'

I turned my face up toward him, to smile halfheartedly.

Every time I looked at his face, that impossibly perfect face, my heart pounded strong and healthy and very there in my chest. This time, the pounding raced ahead of its usual besotted pace. I recognized the expression on his status till the face.

'You're already in more trouble, baby girl,' he whispered through unmoving lips.

I slid closer, clutching his arm as I followed his gaze to see what he was seeing. I do not know what I expected-AVA standing in the middle of the street, her flaming red hair blowing in the wind or a line of tall black cloaks… or a pack of an angry horse. But I did not see anything at all.

'What? What is it?'

He took a deep breath. 'Jack…' 'My dad?' I screeched.

He looked down at me then, and his expression was calm enough to ease some of my panics.

'Jack… is probably not going to kill you, but he's thinking about it,' he told me. He started to drive forward again, down my street, but he passed the house and parked by the edge of the trees.

'What did I do?' I gasped.

Marcel glanced back at Jack's house. I followed his gaze and noticed for the first time what was parked in the driveway next to the cruiser. Shiny, bright red, impossible to miss.

My motorcycle, flaunting itself in the driveway.

Marcel had said that Jack was ready to kill me, so he must know that that it was mine. There was only one person who could be behind this treachery.

'No!' I gasped. 'Why? Why would Marcel do this to me?' The sting of betrayal washed through me. I had trusted Marcel implicitly-trusted him with every single secret I had. He was supposed to be the safe harbor person I could always rely on. Of course, things were strained right now, but I did not think any of the underlying foundations had changed. I did not think that was changeable!

What had I done to deserve this? Jack was going to be so mad and worse than that, he was going to be hurt and worried. Didn't he have enough to deal with already? I would have

never imagined that Maggie could be so petty and just plain mean. Tears sprang, smarting, into my eyes, but they were not tearing of sadness. I had been betrayed. I was suddenly so angry that my head throbbed like it was going to explode.

'Is he still here?' I hissed.

'Yes. He's waiting for us there. 'Marcel told me, nodding toward the slender path that divided the dark fringe of the forest in two.

I jumped out of the car, launching myself toward the trees with my hands already balled into fists for the first punch.

Why did Marcel have to be so much faster than me?

He caught me around the waist before I made the path.

'Let me go! I'm going to murder him! Traitor!' I shouted the epithet toward the trees.

'Jack will hear you, 'Marcel warned me. 'And once he gets you inside, he marries brick over the doorway.'

Part: 4

Intuitively

I glanced back at the house instinctively, and it seemed like the glossy red bike was all I could see. I was seeing red. My head throbbed again.

'Just give me one round with Marcel, and then I'll deal with Jack.' I struggled futilely to break free.

'Marcel Black wants to see me. That's why he's still here.'

That stopped me cold-took the fight right out of me. My hands went limp.

They fight; Paris falls.

I was furious, but not that furious.

'Talk?' I asked.

'More or less.'

'How much more?' My voice shook.

Marcel smoothed my hair back from my face. 'Don't worry, he's not here to fight me. He's acting as… a spokesperson for the pack.'

'Oh!'

Marcel looked at the house again, then tightened his arm around my waist and pulled me toward the woods. 'We should hurry.

Jack's getting impatient.'

We did not have to go far; Marcel waited just- a short- ways up the path. He lounged against a mossy tree trunk as he waited, his face hard and bitter, exactly the way I knew it would be. He looked at me, and then at Marcel. Marcel's mouth stretched into a humorless sneer, and he shrugged away from the tree. He stood on the balls of his bare feet, leaning slightly forward, with his trembling hands clenched into fists. He looked bigger than the last time I had seen him. Somehow, impossibly, he was still growing. He would tower over Marcel if they stood next to each other.

Nonetheless, Marcel stopped as soon as we saw him, leaving a wide space between us and Marcel. Marcel turned his body, shifting me so that I was behind him. I leaned around him to stare at Marcel-to accuse him with my eyes.

I would have thought that seeing his resentful, cynical expression would only make me angrier. Instead, it reminded me of the last time I had seen him, with tears in his eyes. My fury weakened, faltered, as I stared at Marcel. It had been so long since I had seen him- I hated that our reunion had to be like this.

'HEY- Girl,' Marcel said as a greeting, nodding once toward me without looking away from Marcel.

'Why?'

I whispered, trying to hide the sound of the lump in my throat.

'How could you do this to me, Marcel?'

The sneer vanished, but his face stayed hard and rigid. 'It's for the best.'

'What is that supposed to mean? Do you want Jack to strangle me? Or did you want him to have a heart attack, like Harry? No matter how mad you are at me, how could you do this to him?'

Marcel winced, and his eyebrows pulled together, but he did not answer.

'He didn't want to hurt anyone-he just wanted to get you grounded so that you wouldn't be allowed to spend time with me, 'Marcel murmured, explaining the thoughts Marcel would not say.

Marcel's eyes sparked with hate as he glowered at Marcel again.

'Awe, Maggie!' I groaned. 'I'm already grounded! Why do you think I haven't been down to La Push to kick your butt for avoiding my phone calls?'

Marcel's eyes flashed back to me, confused for the first time. 'That is why?' He asked, and then locked his jaw like he was sorry he had said anything.

'He thought I wouldn't let you, not Jack, 'Marcel explained again.

'Stop that,' Marcel snapped.

Marcel did not answer.

Marcel shuddered once and then gritted his teeth as hard as his fists.

'Karly wasn't exaggerating about you... abilities,' he said through his teeth. 'So-o you must already know why I'm here.'

'Yes, 'Marcel agreed in a soft voice. 'On the other hand, before you begin, I need to say something.'

Marcel waited, clenching, and unclenching his hands as he tried to control the shivers rolling down his arms.

'Thank you, 'Marcel said, and his voice throbbed with the depth of his sincerity. 'I will never be able to tell you how grateful I am. I will owe you for the rest of me... existence.' Marcel stared at him blankly, his shudders stilled by surprise. He exchanged a glance with me, but my face was just as mystified.

'For keeping Karly alive, 'Marcel clarified, his voice rough and fervent.

'When I... didn't.'

'Marcel-,' I started to say, but he held one hand up, his eyes on Marcel.

Understanding washed over Marcel's face before the hard mask returned. 'I didn't do it for your benefit.'

'I know. But that does not erase the gratitude I feel. I thought you should know. If there's ever anything in my power to do for you...'

Marcel raised one black brow.

Marcel shook his head. 'That's not in my power.'

'Whose, then?' Marcel growled.

Marcel looked down at me. 'Hers. I am a quick learner, Marcel Black, and I do not make the same mistake twice. I'm here until she orders me away.'

I was immersed momentarily in his golden gaze. It was not hard to understand what I had missed in the conversation. The only thing that Marcel would want from Marcel would be his absence.

'Never,' I whispered, still locked in Marcel's eyes.

Marcel made a gagging sound.

I unwillingly broke free from Marcel's gaze to frown at Marcel. 'Was there something else you needed, Marcel? You wanted me in trouble-mission Accomplished.

Jack might just send me to military school.

But that will not keep me away from Marcel. There is nothing that can do that.

What more do you want?'

Marcel kept his eyes on Marcel 'I just needed to remind your bloodsucking friends of a few key points in the treaty they agreed to.

The treaty chat is the only thing stopping me from ripping his throat out right this minute.'

'We haven't forgotten, 'Marcel said while I demanded, 'What key points?'

Marcel still glowered at Marcel, but he answered me. 'The treaty is quite specific. If any of them bite a human, the truce is over. Bite, not kill,' he emphasized. Finally, he looked at me. His eyes were cold.

It only took me a second to grasp the distinction, and then my face was as cold as his.

'That's none of your business.'

'The hell it-' was all he managed to choke out.

I did not expect my hasty words to bring on such a strong response. Despite the warning he had come to give, he must not have known. He must have thought the warning was just a precaution. He had not realized-or did not want to believe that I had already made my choice. That I was intending to become a member of the Cullen family.

My answer sent Marcel into near convulsions. He pressed his fists hard against his temples, closing his eyes tight and curling in on himself as he tried to control the spasms. His face turned sallow green under the russet skin.

'Maggie? You okay?' I asked anxiously.

I took a half-step toward him, then Marcel caught me and yanked me back behind his own body. 'Careful! He's not under control,' he warned me.

But Marcel was already himself again; only his arms were shaking now. He scowled at Marcel with pure hate. 'Ugh. I would never hurt her.'

Neither Marcel or I missed the inflection or the accusation it had. A low hiss escaped Marcel's lips. Marcel clenched his fists reflexively.

'BELLA!' Jack's yell echoed from the direction of the house. 'YOU GET IN THIS HOUSE THIS MOMENT!'

All of us froze, listening to the silence that followed.

I was the first to speak; my voice trembled. 'Crap!'

Marcel's furious expression faltered. 'I am sorry about that,' he muttered. 'I had to do what I could- I had to try…'

'Thanks.' The tremor in my voice ruined the sarcasm. I stared up the path, half expecting Jack to come barreling through the wet ferns like an enraged bull. I would be the red flag in that scenario.

'Just one more thing, 'Marcel said to me, and then he looked at Marcel. 'We've found no trace of AVA on our side of the line-have you?'

He knew the answer as soon as Marcel thought it, but Marcel spoke the answer anyway. 'Last time was while Karly was… away. We let her think she was slipping through-we were tightening the circle, getting ready to ambush her-' Ice shot down my spine.

'But then she took off like a bat out of hell. Near as we can tell, she caught your little female's scent and bailed. She hasn't come near our lands since.'

Marcel nodded. 'When she comes back, she's not your problem anymore. We'll-'

'She killed on our turf,' Marcel hissed.

'She's ours!'

'No-,' I began to protest both declarations.

'BELLA! I SEE HIS CAR AND me-

KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE! IF YOU-

AREN'T INSIDE THIS HOUSE IN ONE MINUTE…!'

Jack didn't bother to finish his threat.

'Let's go, 'Marcel said.

I looked back at Marcel, torn. Would I see him again?

'Sorry,' he whispered so low that I had to read his lips to understand. "Bye, Bells.' 'You promised,' I reminded him desperately. 'Still friends, right?'

Part: 5

Capacity

Marcel shook his head slowly, and the lump in my throat nearly strangled me.

'You know how hard I've tried to keep that commitment, but... I can't see how to keep trying. Not now...' He fought to keep his hard mask in place, but it hesitated and then disappeared. 'Miss, you,' he mouthed. One of his hands reached near me, his fingers outstretched like he wished they were long enough to cross the distance separating us.

'Me, too,' I choked out. My hand reached toward his across the wide space.

Like we were connected, the echo of his pain twisted inside me. His pain, my pain.

'Maggie...' I took a step toward him. I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and erase the expression of misery on his face.

Marcel pulled me back again, his arms restraining instead of defending.

'It's okay,' I promised him, looking up to read his face with trust in my eyes.

He would understand...

His eyes were unreadable, his face expressionless. Cold. 'No, it's not.'

'Let her go,' Marcel growled, furious again. 'She wants to!' He took two long strides forward. A glimmer of apprehension flashed in his eyes. His chest seemed to enlarge as it shuddered.

Marcel pushed me behind himself, wheeling to face Marcel.

'No! Marcel!'

'Come on! Jack's mad!' My voice was panicked, but not because of

Jack now. 'Hurry!'

I tugged on him and he relaxed a little. He pulled me back slowly, always keeping his eyes on Marcel as we retreated.

Marcel watched us with a dark scowl on his bitter face. The anticipation drained from his eyes, and then, just before the forest came between us, his face suddenly crumpled in pain.

I knew that the last glimpse of his face would haunt me until I saw him smile again.

And right there I vowed that I would see him smile, and soon. I would find a way to keep my friend.

Marcel kept his arm tight around my waist, holding me close. That was the only thing that held the tears in my eyes.

I had some serious problems.

My best friend counted me with his enemies. AVA and her girls were still on the loose, putting everyone I loved in danger. If I did not become an angel soon, the Ministry would kill me.

And now it seemed that if I did, the Ciguayo they sometimes take the shape of sweet vampire, or wild horses would try to do the job themselves-along with trying to kill my future family. I didn't think they had any chance really, but would my best friend get himself killed in the attempt?

This is why these girls love to ride horses.

Very serious problems in evil. So why did they all suddenly seem insignificant when we broke through the last of the trees and I caught sight of the expression on Jack's purple-blue face? Marcel squeezed me gently. 'I'm here.'

I drew in a deep breath.

That was true. Marcel was here, with his arms around me.

I could face anything as long as that was true.

I squared my shoulders and walked forward to meet my fate, with my destiny solidly at my side.

Part: 6

Insignia

Life… after… time, that has past… it shows the story in all colors.

Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

'Margot.'

One of the girls said, 'Well...?' No one moved.

'Go on,' whispered the girl.

They walked slowly down the hall in the sound of cold rain. They turned through the doorway to the room in the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence.

They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out.

'Yes, Seven.'

Then one of them gave a little cry.

'Margot!'

'What?'

'She's still in the closet where we locked her.'

'Margot.'

They stood as if someone had driven them, like so many stakes, into the floor. They looked at each other and then looked away. They glanced out at the world that was raining now and raining and raining steadily. They could not meet each other's glances. Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

'Margot.'

One of the girls said, 'Well...?' No one moved.

'Go on,' whispered the girl. They walked slowly down the hall in the sound of cold rain. They turned through the doorway to the room in the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence. They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out none of these stories is correct, however. Panic began as so many things do in Carp, a poor town of twelve thousand people in the middle of nowhere: because it was summer, and there was nothing else to do. The rules are simple. The day after graduation is Opening Jump, and the game goes all through summer. After the final challenge, the winner takes the pot.

Everyone at Carp High pays into the pot, with no exceptions. Fees are a dollar a day, for every day that school is in session, from September through June. People who refuse to pony up

the cash receive reminders that go from gentle to persuasive: vandalized locker, shattered windows, shattered face.

It's only fair, anyone who wants to play has a chance to win. That's another rule: all seniors, but only seniors, are eligible and must declare their intention to compete by participating in the Jump, the first of the difficulties.

Sometimes as many as forty kids enter.

There is only ever one winner. Two judges plan the game, name the challenges, deliver instructions, award and deduct points. They are selected by the judges of the previous year, in strict secrecy. No one, in the whole history of Panic, has ever confessed to being one. There have been suspicions, of course-rumors and speculation.

Carp is a small town, and judges get paid. How did Myra Campbell, who always stole extra lunch from the school cafeteria because there was no food at home, suddenly afford her used Honda? She said an uncle had died. But no one had ever heard of Myra's uncle-no one had ever thought about Myra, until she came rolling in with the windows down, smoking a cigarette, with the sun so bright on the windshield, it almost completely obscured the smile on her face. Two judges, picked in secret, sworn to secrecy, working together. It must be this way. Otherwise, they'd be subject to bribes, and possibly to threats.

That's why there are two-to make sure that things stay stable, to diminish the possibility that one will cheat, and give out knowledge, leak hints. If the players know what to expect, then they can equip. And that isn't fair at all.

It's partly the unexpectedness, the never-knowing, that starts to get to them, and weeds them out, one by one. The pot usually amounts to just over $50,000, after fees are deducted and the judges-whoever they take their cut. Four years ago, Jimi Hareson took his winnings, bought two items out of hock, one of them a lemon-yellow Ford, drove straight to Vegas, and bet it all on black.

The next year, Lauren Davis bought herself new teeth and a new pair of tits and moved to New York City.

Come on, come to Em, hurry.

That's where the reindeer where see?

Look at our stockings.

And there's something in them!

Look, just what I always wanted. What are they?

What do they look like? They're marbles. See, these are your Jaspers, and these are your Peewees.

You did it all.

But...

Fooled ya, didn't I?

You!

Why are we always fighting so much?

I don't know.

That should be our New Year's revolution: to stop fighting so much.

-I'll try, but...

-But, what?

I don't know what's wrong with me when I say the things I say. I just keep on having all these strange thoughts.

What kind of thoughts?

Just thoughts...

Funny thoughts about you and me.

Tell me…

I couldn't…

They're just thoughts… They don't mean anything… Where did you find these?

I found them in those little shells.

They're beautiful. Thank you.

'O come, all ye faithful…' 'O little town of Bethlehem…' 'Dashing through the snow, in a one-horse open sleigh…

'All the' Help! What's wrong? You're bleeding, don't! I'm all right. But you're bleeding- I say.

Go away! Don't look at me. Go away!

What was it, Em?

-Why were you bleeding like that?

-I don't know.

Liar! LI-ar!

It's true, I don't know. People don't bleed like that unless they've cut themselves. Maybe you're hurt bad and you just don't know it.

-Let me look.

-No! I don't want you to look.

-But, why?

-Just because.

That is not fair.

I don't keep any secrets from you. I tell you everything. Everything… what are you looking at? Your muscles… what about them? You're acting silly lately. Always saying dumb things like that. Always looking at me funny. You're not coming down with something, are you? Well, don't give it to me.

Tell me again, I said.

-Where are your mother and father?

-In heaven.

But where's heaven? You know, up there.

-Your father might be there, too.

-No, he's not.

He's coming on a ship someday to take us home.

Do you hear it? No…? Do you ever hear it? Sometimes- I think I do.

I think Paddy was a liar. He told us there was a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow...

...And that was a lie. He told us if we dug far enough, we'd reach China. Then Santa Claus never came.

Do you ever think about him? I do… I know you don't like to talk about it, but... don't you ever wonder what happened? I don't want to know what happened. I do… There are so many things I don't understand all of this- ah- yet.

Why? Why- do fish stop swimming and lie on top of the tide pools after it rains? Why do you hear the waves inside the big shells?

Why are all these funny hairs growing on me?

I wish a big book with all the answers to every question in the world... would drop out of the sky and land in my hand right now.

-I'd read it till I knew everything.

-You can't know everything.

Only God knows everything. God? He can't find us any better than Santa Claus.

I wonder what fish think about? What are you doing? Trying to cheer you up. Come on, laugh.

It's not going to work… There it is again… Do you think it's the bogeyman?

Maybe it's another person. No...? Otherwise, he would have come over to meet us, and say hello. That's the proper thing to do. What if he's not nice…? What if he wants to hurt us? Then I'll spear him, look! I'm the greatest fisherman who ever lived.

I'm the greatest fisherman who ever lived. While you scare them off, I catch as many as I want to.

That's my fish dance! It doesn't scare them off. It brings them up to the surface where I can spear them.

Who cares what you say? It's not how many you catch. It's how you do it. Stop that!!!

I say!

Please play something else. Why must you do that when you know it makes me angry?

'It doesn't scare them away. It brings 'em to the top... '...where I can spear them.' I'll spear you.

Here I am. Come back here... or I'll pull your britches down and take a switch to you. Don't you dare try to spank me? I mean it. I'll put never-wake-up berries in your food! I mean it. Say, 'Marcel is the smartest person

on the island.'

-Say it!

-Stop it, Marcel. I'm getting angry.

-Stop it! Now get off.

-Say it!

Marcel is the smartest person on the island.

-The fastest swimmer.

-The fastest swimmer.

-The fastest runner.

-The fastest runner.

-The best hut builder.

-You're the best everything. Now get off!

It's true… Just you wait.

You'll never know when it'll happen. Just one little bite and you'll never wake up again.

-What is it? What happened?

-I saw him.

-Who?

-The Face Paddy thought was a bogeyman.

-Did you go to the other side?

-He's not the bogeyman.

I think he's God.

God?

He looks like Pastor Logan said he looked like: 'You'd better be good or else.' And he was bleeding.

-I don't believe you.

-Just like Jesus.

Don't go there again. It's the law.

What if he is God?

Shouldn't we go and pray? Or won't he be mad and not let us go to heaven?

I don't want to talk about it.

What is it?

I'm here.

-You ate the 'dead and berries...'

-No, I'm fine.

-You just had a bad dream.

-Don't ever leave me.

Promise you won't.

Promise you'll always be with me.

I promise.

Don't.

What are you doing?

Go away!

Where are you going?

Wait. What's the matter?

-What are you doing?

-What do you want?

Why won't you talk to me?

Just leave me alone.

A ship, Emmeline!

The signal fire, you didn't light it.

Why didn't you light it?

You know how much I want to leave.

It's the most important thing to me.

I know. First, you cry for help, then you throw sticks at me.

A ship comes, a ship! The first ship we've seen since we've been here, and you let it go by.

Well, that's it. I've had it. I'm sick and tired of waiting for you to get better.

I'm going to San Francisco without you. You'll never build a boat strong enough to get to San Francisco.

That's the fourth time you've tried, and they've all sunk.

Shut up!

Why don't you give up?

You don't even know where San Francisco is.

You're such a silly dodo.

We're never getting off this island.

Thanks to you.

This is where we live.

This is our home, now and forever.

No!

I could never live here forever with just you.

I don't even like you.

You never used to laugh at me.

You never used to have secrets.

You're not so perfect either, Mr. Marcel.

I've seen you playing with it.

And I'll tell your father if he ever gets here.

You…

I hate you…

You almost hit me… -Take back what you said.

-I've seen it all.

What happens after you do it for a long time?

Shut up! That isn't fair, peeking.

-I don't peek on you.

-That's a lie.

You're always staring at my buppies'.

Only because they look so funny.

Do you know what you look like now? You look like one of those pictures Paddy had.

One of his Hoochie Coochie girls.

I do not!

Stop that, or I'll never talk to you again.

See them jiggle, wiggle and shake.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you.

I wish you were dead and buried.

What are you doing?

It's my hut, I built it.

That's not true. I helped you.

I did most of it.

You can find some other place to live.

I said I was sorry, Marcel.

What more do you want me to say?

I don't want you to say anything.

I don't ever want to see you again.

You just wait, Marcel.

I'll get you for this!

What's wrong with you?

Go away.

What happened?

I stepped on one of those fish that looks like a rock.

Don't go to sleep.

Oh, no. Please wake up.

God.

Take me to God.

But the law...

God...

...Please don't make Em never wake up.

I didn't mean it when I said I wanted her dead and buried.

I forgot most of my prayers, God...

But... Our Father... who art in heaven... kingdom come... with liberty and justice for all.

Amen.

Part: 7

Beach love

25- is the new 17! I can believe what I have passed up…

>said this girl here<

(I wish not to say who I am… who do you think I am?)

Em, are you, all right? I've been so worried.

You mean, you're not mad at me anymore? Of course, not… I was so scared.

All I could think of was: what if I lost my Em? What would I do? Here's some food to help you get your strength back.

Do you see that island out there?

Yes…

I've been thinking, maybe the person who makes the drum noise... lives there and then comes here to pray. Maybe. …Maybe it is all I have… Would you like to try to walk?

You, all right?

Yes. Kiss me… he said, looking into my love-stricken eyes… You're all gross- like I said back.

So, what? Kiss me like you always wanted too long and slow like.

HOT!

Stop it, I can't breathe. It was so-o nice- long and soft feels sweet and loving. Like a nice hug from the one you always wanted to be with… like falling into them… like falling to them… it's the melting into them that is love…

But I don't want to stop. What are you doing?

Stop it, I say to him as he feels me up there… in-between… I feel so funny in my stomach. Me, too, I am okay with this it's slutty, but what hell, I want it. His heart is beating so fast I hear it as I am laying on him with my head on his chest. Mine, too… Come on up, keep me warm, I side upon him, and do so… while kissing him… What's the matter? I'm sorry, Blair, that it was not that long- yet was right- right? You didn't want it all day yesterday either. Don't you love me anymore? Yes, I love you more than ever, Blair. Then why don't you want to do it? It just hurts right now, that's all. When it stops hurting, we'll do it. When is that going to be? I don't understand. Why does it hurt? I don't know… why you feel so much down there… I did this before… so… so… um… maybe not, I said back I knew.

Hello, baby. Answer me, and say you love me… Tell me what to do… and I will please you as much as I can… I want to make you happy with me in all ways.

He said to me- I don't know anything. But if you touch my tummy right now, you can feel it. Feel what? How did you make your tummy move like that? I'm not doing it. It's not doing it by itself… I want you to do me… Yes, it is. There… I felt it again, his love for me. What's making it do that? I don't know… really… it feels good… so go… with it. What's wrong with what I am doing? Nothing- Did I hurt you- go too hard?

Look, I think he's hungry, with that look on his face… it was love… for me… What did they look like?

I don't want to talk about it. I don't know why I feel this way about you… I just do…

If they come, I'll do to them what I do to the fish.

I'll stick it in their eyes! I'll stick it through their bellies and watch their guts come out! Remember on the ship when we tried to get to the dinghy...

...How the men pushed and shoved each other?

How did their eyes look?

Look at all the Water blue-green whooshing. It was the same with the drum people.

I don't understand. Why do people have to be so bad to each other? I'm busy keeping watch. Come here, hurry. Come on, you have to see this. You taught him to swim. around the tree, there was a boat, that we used for are fun-we had this loved spot all to ourselves- the lost beach- where we went to have what was so wrong to them. Look at the bird. Look, Priced-Day.

Do you see some fish? What do you see? We're out there we are now in the water naked-looking at all the things in the sea do you see that ship? Big- I said. Blair.

Yes? He said my name. as we rain back up on the lost lovers' beach, we're making footprints- being playful with each other. Remember the snowball fights we had every time it snowed? We say together- side by side and tight... it's freezing no... I remember that... look at us now... It's was cold.

I love you...

~*~

I want to see it again... and- over and- over- and over. What are you doing? Get those out of your mouth. she swallowed some.

Come here.

Don't close your eyes...Please don't go to sleep. Please.

(Fade)

I thought you were afraid. Of not being with me- take me there? Sure. I go there for bananas, myself... not getting along... at all at this point. Are you coming?

The next day in the hut- they made- it was part of the fun of doing this they said. Can we go closer to me jezz? Sorry- let's go- were now out- I'll see the moonlight, swimming now with her over a careful reef. Look at that face, it was a thought I had. The blue boat was overhead.

I can't stop this, yet we're drifting, for the boat… Look how far out we are! Shark! Look… When it hits the water, you can hear it hiss. Look, see? Hear it?

-Where did you get those?

-Get those out of your mouth.

I can't make it out…

Swim… swim…

And we did…

Not by much, we made it out…

Remember me Shy-?

I got what I wanted too… Thanks, Jenny for being a d*ck, it took this long for your shit to stop- and get I boy to love me. ROT IN HELL!

B*TCH!

This was always where the girl came with their guys back in the day… the cove… next to the falls…

Part 8

Anecdotes

(Cut)

She recovered to Carp two Christmases later, stayed just long enough to show off a new purse and an even newer nose, and then blew back to the downtown. Hearsays floated back: she was dating the producer of some reality TV weight-loss show; she was becoming AVA's Secret model, though no one has ever seen her in a catalog. (And many of the boys have seen.)

Conrad Spurlock went into the manufacture of methamphetamines-his father's line of business-and poured the money into a new shed on Mallory Road, after their last place burned straight to the ground.

But Sean McManus used the money to go to college; he's thinking of becoming a doctor. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the

children of the rocket men and women who had come to a raining world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

In seven years of playing, there have been three deaths-four including Jimi Hareson, who shot himself with the second thing he'd bought at the pawnshop after his number came up red.

Do you see? Even the winner of Panic is afraid of something. So: back to the day after graduation, the opening day of Panic, the day of the Jump. Rewind to the beach but pause a few hours before Maggie stood on the ridge, suddenly petrified, afraid to jump.

Turn the camera slightly. We're not quite there. Almost, though. Marcel NO ONE ON THE BEACH WAS CHEERING

FOR Marcel Mason-no one would cheer for him either, no matter how far he got.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was the win. And Marcel had a secret-he knew something about Panic, knew more about it, probably than any of the other people on the beach.

He had two secrets. Marcel liked secrets… They fueled him, gave him a sense of power. When he was little, he'd even fantasized that he had his secret world, a private place of shadows, where he could curl up and hide.

Even now-on Dayna's bad days, when the pain came roaring back and she started to cry, when his mom hosed the place down with Fiberize and invited over her newest Piece of Shit date, and late at night Marcel could hear the bed frame hitting the wall, like a punch in the stomach every time he thought about sinking into that dark space, cool and private.

Everyone at school thought Marcel was a pussy. He knew that.

He looked like a pussy. He'd always been tall and skinny-angles and corners, his mom said, just like his father. As far as he knew, the angles-and the dark skin- where the only things he had in common with his dad, a Dominican roofer his mom had been with for one hot second back in Miami. Marcel could never even remember his name… Roberto. Or Rodrigo… Some shit like that.

Back when they'd first gotten stuck in Carp (that's how he always thought about it getting stuck-he, Dayna, and his mom was just like empty plastic bags skipping across the country on fitful bits of wind, occasionally getting snagged around a telephone pole or under the

tires of some semi, pinned in place for a bit), he'd been beaten up three times: once by Greg O'Hare, then by Zavic Keller, and then by Greg O'Hare again, just to make sure that Marcel knew the rules. And Marcel hadn't swung back, not once.

He'd had worse before. Besides that, it was Marcel's second secret and the source of his power. He wasn't afraid. He just didn't care, and that was very, very different.

The sky was streaked with red and purple and orange. It reminded Marcel of an enormous bruise, or a picture taken of the inside of a body. It was still an hour or so before sunset and before the pot, and then the Jump would be announced.

Marcel cracked a beer. His first and only. He didn't want to be buzzed and didn't need to be either.

But it had been a hot day, and he'd come straight from Home Depot, and he was thirsty. The crowd had only just started to assemble. Periodically, Marcel- heard the muffled slamming of a car door, a shout of greeting from the woods, the distant blare of music.

Whippoorwill Road was a quarter-mile away; kids were just starting to emerge from the path, fighting their way through the thick underbrush, swatting away hanging moss and creeper vines, carting coolers and blankets and bottles and iPod speakers, staking out patches of sand. The school was done for good, forever. He took a deep breath. Of all the places, he had lived-New Orleans-New York, Chicago, DC, Dallas, Richmond, Ohio, Rhode Island, Oklahoma, smelled the best. Like growth and change, things turning over and becoming other things. Ray Hanrahan and his friends had arrived first. That was unsurprising.

Even though competitors weren't officially announced until the moment of the Jump, Ray had been bragging for months that he was going to take home the pot, just like his brother had two years earlier. Luke had won, just barely, in the last round of Panic. Luke had walked away with fifty- grand. The other driver hadn't walked away at all. If the doctors were right, she'd never walk again. Marcel flipped a coin in his palm, made it disappear, then reappear easily between his fingers. In fourth grade, his mom's boyfriend-he couldn't remember which one had bought him a book about magic tricks.

They'd been living in Oklahoma that year, a shithole in a flat bowl in the middle of the country, where the sun singed the ground to dirt and the grass to gray, and he'd spent a whole summer teaching himself how to pull coins from someone's ear and slip a card into his pocket so

quickly, it was unnoticeable. It had started as a way to pass the time but had become a kind of obsession. There was something elegant about it: how people saw without seeing, how the mind fills in what is expected, how the eyes betrayed you.

Terror, he knew, was one big magic trick. The judges where the magicians; the rest of them were just a dumb, gaping audience.

Part: 9

Lifeguard Chair

Mike Dickinson came next, along with two friends, all of them visibly drunk. The D*ck's hair had started to thin, and patches of his scalp were visible when he bent down to deposit his cooler on the beach. His friends were carrying a half-rotted lifeguard chair between them: the throne, where Diggin, the announcer, would sit during the event. Marcel heard a high whine. He smacked unthinkingly, catching the mosquito just as it started to feed, smearing a bit of black on his bare calf. He hated mosquitoes. Spiders, too, although he liked other insects, found them fascinating. Like humans, in a way -stupid and sometimes vicious, blinded by need.

The sky was deepening; the light was fading and so were the colors, swirling away behind the line of trees beyond the ridge, as though someone had pulled the plug. Maggie Nill was next on the beach, followed by Nat Velez, and lastly, Bishop Marks, trotting happily after them like an overgrown sheepdog. Even from a distance, Marcel could tell both girls were on edge. Maggie had done something with her hair. He wasn't sure what, but it wasn't wrestled into its usual ponytail, and it even looked like she might have straightened it. And he wasn't sure, but he thought she might be wearing makeup.

He debated getting up and going over to say hi. Maggie was cool. He liked how tall she was, how tough, too, in her way. He liked her broad shoulders and the way she walked, straight-backed, even though he was sure she would have liked to be a few inches shorter could tell from the way she wore only flats and sneakers with worn down soles.

But if he got up, he'd have to talk to Natalie-and even looking at Nat from across the beach made his stomach seize up like he'd been kicked. Nat wasn't exactly mean to him-not like some of the other kids at, school but she wasn't exactly nice, either, and that bothered him more than anything else. She usually smiled vaguely when she caught him talking to Maggie, and as

her eyes skated past him, through him, he knew that she would never, ever, actually look at him. Once, at the homecoming bonfire last year, she'd even called him Dave.

He'd gone just because he was hoping to see her. And then, in the crowd, he had spotted her; had moved toward her, buzzed from the noise and the heat and the shot of whiskey he'd taken in the parking lot, intending to talk to her, really talk to her, for the first time. Just as he was reaching out to touch her elbow, she had taken a step backward, onto his foot.

'Oops! Sorry, Dave,' she'd said, giggling.

Her breath smelled like vanilla and vodka. And his stomach had opened up, and his guts went straight onto his shoes. There were only

107 people in their graduating class, out of the 150 who'd started at Carp High freshman year. And she didn't even know his name. So, he stayed where he was, working his toes into the ground, waiting for the dark, waiting for the whistle to blow and for the games to begin. He was going to win Terror. He was going to do it for Dayna. He was going to do it for revenge.

Maggie 'TESTING, TESTING. ONE, TWO, -THREE.' THAT WAS DIGGING, testing the megaphone. The old quarry off Whippoorwill Road, empty since the late 1800s, had been flooded in the fifties to make a swimming hole. On the south side was the beach: a narrow strip of sand and stone, supposedly off-limits after dark, but rarely used before then; a dump of cigarette butts, crushed beer cans, empty Baggies, and sometimes, disgustingly, condoms, scattered limply on the ground like tubular jellyfish.

Tonight, it was crowded-packed with blankets and beach chairs, heavy with the smell of mosquito repellent and booze.

Maggie closed her eyes and inhaled. This was the smell of Panic- the smell of summer. At the edge of the water, there was an explosion of color and sound, shrieks of laughter. Firecrackers. In the quick glare of red and green light, Maggie saw Kaitlin Frost and Shayna Lambert laughing, doubled over, while Patrick Culbert tried to get a few more flares to light. It was weird. Graduation had been only yesterday- Maggie had bailed on the ceremony, since Krista, her mom, wouldn't show, and there was no point in pretending there was some big glory in floating through four years of mandated classes. But already she felt years and years away from high school like it had all been one long, unmemorable dream.

Maybe, she thought, it was because people didn't change. All the days had simply blurred together and would now be suctioned away into the past. Nothing ever happened in Carp. There were no surprises. Digging's voice echoed through the crowd.

Part: 10

Hollered

'Welcome to the second challenge,' Digging boomed out.

'Suck it, Rodgers,' a guy yelled, and there were whoops and scattered laughs.

Someone else said, 'Sh-h.' Digging pretended he hadn't heard:

'This is a test of bravery and balance-'

'And sobriety!'

'Dude, I'm going to fall.'

More laughter. Maggie couldn't even smile. Next, to her, Natalie was fidgeting turning to the right and left, touching her hip bones. Maggie couldn't even ask what she was doing.

Digging kept plowing on: 'A test of speed, too, since all the contestants will be timed-'

'Jesus, get on with it.' Digging finally lost it. He wrenched the megaphone from his mouth. 'Shut the hell up, Lee.' This provoked a new round of laughter. To Maggie, it all felt off like she was watching a movie and the sound was a few seconds too late.

She couldn't stop herself from looking up now-at that single beam, a few bare inches of wood, stretched fifty feet above the ground. The Jump was a tradition, more for fun than for anything else, a plunge into the water. This would be a plunge to the hard earth, packed ground. No chance of surviving it.

There was a momentary stutter when the truck engine gave out, and everything went dark. There were shouts of protest; and when, a few seconds later, the engine gunned on-again, Maggie saw Matt: standing in the beam of the headlights, laughing, one hand in the back of Delaney's jeans. Her stomach rolled over. Weirdly, it was that fact-the way he had his hand shoved up against her butt-more than even seeing them together, that made her sick. He had

never once touched her in that way, had even complained that couples who stood like that, hand-to-butt, should be shot.

Maybe he'd thought she wasn't cute enough. Maybe he'd been embarrassed by her. Maybe he had just been lying then, to spare her feelings.

Maybe she'd never really known him.

This thought struck her with terror.

If she didn't know Joel Flores- the boy who'd once applauded after she burped the alphabet, who'd even, once, noticed that she had a little period blood on the outside of her white shorts and not made a big deal of it, and pretended not to be grossed out-then she couldn't count on knowing any of these people, or what they were capable of.

Suddenly she was aware of stillness, a pause in the flow of laughter and conversation, as though everyone had drawn breath at once. And she realized that Kim Hollister was inching out onto the plank, high above their heads, her face stark-white and terrified and that the challenge had started. It took Kim forty-seven seconds to inch her way across, shuffling, keeping her right foot always in front of her left.

When she reached the second water tower safely, she briefly embraced it with both arms, and the crowd exhaled as one.

Then came Fred Harte: he made it even faster, taking the short, clipped steps of a tightrope walker. And then Merl Tracey. Even before he'd crossed to safety, digging lifted the megaphone and trumpeted the next name. 'Maggie Nill! Maggie Nill, to the stage!'

'Good luck, Heath- bar,' Natalie said.

'Don't look down.'

'Thanks,' Maggie said automatically, even as she registered it as ridiculous advice.

When you're fifty feet in the air, where else do you look but down?

She felt as though she were moving in silence, although she knew, too, that that was unlikely-Digging couldn't keep his mouth off that stupid megaphone for anything. It was just because she was afraid; afraid and still thinking, stupidly, miserably, about Matt, and wondering whether he was watching her with his hand still shoved down the back of Delaney's pants.

As she began to climb the ladder that ran up one leg of the eastern water tower, her fingers numb on the cold, slick metal, it occurred to her that he'd be staring at her butt, and feeling Delaney's butt, and that was sick.

Then it occurred to her that everyone could see her butt, and she had a brief moment of panic, wondering if her underwear lines were visible through her jeans, since she just couldn't stomach thongs and didn't understand girls who could. She was already halfway up the ladder by then, and it further occurred to her that if she was stressing so hard about underwear lines, she couldn't truly be afraid of the height.

For the first time, she began to feel more confident. But the rain was a problem. It made the rungs of the ladder slick under her fingers. It blurred her vision and made the treads of her sneakers slip. When she finally reached the small metal ledge that ran along the circumference of the water tank and hauled herself to her feet, the fear came swinging back.

There was nothing to hold on to, only smooth, wet metal behind her back, and air omnipresent. Only a few inches' difference among being alive and not. A tingle worked its way from her feet to her legs and up into her palms, and for a second, she was worried not of falling but of jumping, springing out into the mysterious air.

She shuffled sideways toward the wooden beam, pressing her back as hard as she could against the tank, praying that from below she didn't look as frightened as she felt. Crying out, hesitating-it would all be counted against her.

'Time!'

Digging's voice boomed out from below. Maggie knew she had to move if she wanted to stay in the game. Maggie forced herself away from the tank and inched forward onto the wooden plank, which had been barely secured to the ledge utilizing several twisted screws. She had a sudden image of wood snapping under her weight, a wild hurtle through space. But the wood held.

She raised her arms unconsciously for balance, no longer thinking of Matt or Delaney or Joh Joh staring up at her, or anything other than all that thin air, the horrible prickling in her feet and legs, an itch to jump.

She could move faster if she paced normally, one foot in front of the other, but she couldn't bring herself to break contact with the board; if she lifted afoot, a heel, a toe, she would collapse, she would swing to one side and die.

She was conscious of deep silence, a quiet so heavy she could hear the fizz of the rain, could hear her breathing, shallow and quick. Beneath her was blinding light, the kind of light you'd see just before you died.

All the people had merged with shadow, and for a second, she was afraid she had died, that she was all alone on a tiny, bare surface, with an endless fall into the dark on either side of her. Inch by inch, going as fast as she could without lifting her feet.

And then, all at once, she was done -she had reached the second water tower and found herself hugging the tank, like Kim had done, pressing flat against it, letting her sweatshirt get soaked. A cheer went up, even as another name was announced: Ray Hanrahan.

Her head was ringing, and her mouth perceived like alloy. Over. It was over. Her arms felt suddenly useless, her flesh weak with relief, as she made her way stumblingly down the ladder, dropping the last few feet and taking two stumbling steps before righting herself. Souls reached out, hugged her shoulders, patted her on the back. She didn't know if she grinned or not.

'You were amazing!' Nat barreled to her through the crowd. Maggie barely registered the feel of Nat's arms around her neck. 'Is it scary? Where you freaked?'

Maggie shook her head, conscious of people still watching her. 'It went quick,' she said. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she felt better. It was over. She was standing in the middle of a crowd: the air smelled like damp fleece and cigarette smoke.

Solid- Real!

'Forty-two seconds,' Nat said proudly. Maggie hadn't even heard her time be announced.

'Where's Joh Joh?' Maggie asked. Now she was starting to feel good. A bubbly feeling was working its way through her. Forty-two seconds. Not bad.

'He was right behind me...' Nat turned to scan the crowd, but the truck's headlights turned everyone into silhouettes, dark brushstroke-people. Another cheer erupted.

Maggie looked up and saw that Ray had crossed already. Digging's voice echoed out hollowly: 'Twenty-two seconds! A record so far!'

Maggie swallowed back a sour taste. She hated Ray Hanrahan. In seventh grade, when she still hadn't developed boobs, he stuck a training bra to the outside of her locker and spread a rumor that she was taking medicine to turn into a boy. 'Got any chin hairs yet?' he'd say when he passed her in the halls. He only left her alone once Joh Joh threatened to tell the cops that Luke Hanrahan was selling weed from Pepe's, where he worked, slipping bags of pot under the slice if patrons asked for 'extra oregano.' Which he was.

It was Zavic Keller's turn next.

Part: 11

Root For

'Ladies and gentlemen, I have an announcement: the school's out for summer.' Everyone cheered... There was a no their pop- pop- pop, a burst of firecrackers. They were in the middle of the woods, five miles from the nearest house. They could make all the noise they wanted. They could shout. They could scream. No one would hear them.

Maggie's stomach seized up. It was starting. She knew Nat must be freaking out. She knew she should say something encouraging to her-Maggie and Bishop were there for Natalie, to give her moral support. Bishop had even made a poster: Go, Nat, he had written. Next, to the words, he had drawn a huge stick figure -Natalie could tell it was supposed to be here because the stick figure was wearing a pink sweatshirt-standing on a pile of money.

'How come Nat's not wearing any pants?' Maggie had asked.

'Maybe she lost them during the Jump,' Bishop said. He turned, grinning, to Nat. Whenever he smiled like that, his eyes went from syrup brown to honey-colored. 'Drawing was never my thing.'

Maggie didn't like to talk about Matt in front of Bishop. She couldn't stand the way he rolled his eyes when she brought him up as she'd just switched the radio to a bad pop station.

But finally, she couldn't help it. 'He's still not here.' Maggie spoke in a low voice, so only Nat would hear her.

'Sorry, Nat. I know this isn't the time- I mean; we came for you-'

'It's okay.' Nat reached out and squeezed Maggie's hand with both of her own. She pulled a weird face-like someone had just made her chug a limeade. 'Look. Matt doesn't deserve you. Okay? You can do better than Matt.'

Maggie half laughed. 'You're my best friend, Nat,' she said. 'You aren't supposed to lie to me.' Nat shook her head. 'I'm sure he'll be here soon. The game's about to start.' Maggie checked her phone again, for the millionth time. Nothing. She'd powered it down several times and rebooted it, just to make sure it was working.

Digging's voice boomed out again:

'The rules of Panic are simple. Anyone can enter. But only one person will win.'

Digging announced the pot.

$67,000.

Maggie felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. $67,000. That had to be the biggest pot ever. The crowd began to buzz-the number ran through them like an electric current, jumping from lip to lip. Shit, man, you'd have to be crazy not to play. Nat looked as though she'd just taken a large spoonful of ice cream.

Digging plunged on, ignoring the noise. He announced the rules-a half-dozen events, spaced throughout the summer, conducted under conditions of strictest privacy; eliminations after every round; individual challenges for each contestant who made it past the halfway, mark- but nobody was listening. It was the same speech as always. Maggie had been watching Panic since she was in eighth grade.

She could have made the speech herself.

That number-67,000-wrapped itself around her heart and squeezed. Without meaning to, she thought of all she could do with the money; she thought of how far she could go, what she could buy, how long she could live. How many miles away from Carp she could get.

But no. She couldn't leave Matt. Matt had said he loved her. He was her plan. The grip on her heart eased a little, and she found she could breathe again. Next, to Maggie, Natalie shimmied out of her jean shorts and kicked off her shoes. 'Can you believe it?' she said. She

took off her shirt, shivering in the wind. Maggie couldn't believe she'd insisted on that ridiculous bikini, which would fly off as soon as she hit the water. Natalie had only laughed. Maybe, she'd joked, that would earn her extra points.

That was Natalie: stubborn. Vain, too. Maggie still couldn't understand why she'd even chosen to play. Nat was afraid of everything.

Someone-probably Billy Wallace- whistled. 'Nice ass, Velez.' Nat ignored him, but Maggie could tell she had heard and was pretending not to be pleased.

Maggie wondered what Billy Wallace would say if she tried to wear a scrap of fabric like that on her butt. Whoa. Look at the size of that thing! Do you need a permit to carry that thing around, Maggie? But Matt loved her. Matt thought she was pretty. The noise on the beach swelled, grew to a roar: hoots and screams, people waving homemade banners and flags, firecrackers exploding like a smattering of gunfire, and she knew it was time. The whistle would blow.

Terror was about to begin. Just then Maggie saw him. The crowd parted temporarily; she could see him, smiling, talking to someone; then the crowd shifted again, and she lost sight of him. 'He's here. Nat, he's here.' 'What?' Nat wasn't paying attention anymore.

Maggie's voice dried up in her throat. Because the crowd had opened again, just as she'd started moving toward him, as though directed by gravity-relief welling in her chest, a chance to make things right, a chance to do things right, for once-and in that second, she had seen that he was speaking to Delaney O'Brien.

Not just speaking. Whispering…

And then: kissing. The whistle blew sharp and thin in the sudden silence, like the cry of an alien bird.

Maggie reached the top of the ridge just as Derek Klieg got a running start and hurled himself into the air, body contorted, shouting.

A few seconds later, a cheer went up as he hit. Natalie was crouching a few feet away from the edge, her face pale; for a second,

Maggie thought she heard her counting. Then Nat turned and blinked repeatedly, as though trying to bring Maggie's face into focus. She opened her mouth and closed it again.

Maggie's heart was beating hard and high. 'Hey, Nat,' she said, just as Natalie straightened up.

'What the hell are you doing?' Natalie spat out. Now Maggie registered everything, all at once: the ache in her hands and thighs, the pain in her fingers, the sharp bite of the wind. Natalie looked furious. She was shaking, although that might have been the cold.

'I'm going to jump,' Maggie said, realizing, as she said it, how stupid it sounded how stupid it was. All of a sudden, she thought she might puke.

I'll be cheering for you; Maggie had said to Natalie. The guilt was there, throbbing alongside nausea. But Matt's voice was bigger than everything.

Matt's voice, and underneath it a vision of the water stains above her bed; the dull thud of music from the park; the smell of weed and cigarettes; the sounds of laughing, and later, someone screaming, you're a dumb piece of... Shit! 'You can't jump,' Nat said, still staring. 'I'm jumping.'

'We'll jump together,' Maggie said.

Natalie took two steps forward. Maggie noticed she was balling her fists almost rhythmically. Squeeze, relax.

Squeeze, relax. Three times.

'Why are you doing this?' The question was almost a whisper.

Maggie couldn't answer. She didn't even know, not exactly. All she knew-all she could feel was that this was her last chance.

So-o she just said, 'I'm going to jump now. Before I chicken out.'

When she turned toward the water, Natalie reached for Maggie, as if to pull her back. But she didn't.

Maggie felt as though the rock underneath her had begun to move, bucking like a horse. She had a sudden terror that she was going to lose her balance and go tumbling down the rocky slope, cracking her head in the shallows.

Fear. She took small, halting steps forward, and still reached the edge far too quickly.

'Announce yourself!' Digging boomed out. Below Maggie, the water, black as oil, was still churning with bodies. She wanted to shout down-move, move, I'm going to hit you-but she couldn't speak. She could hardly breathe. Her lungs felt like they were being pressed between two stones.

And suddenly she couldn't think of anything but Chris Heinz, who five years ago drank a fifth of vodka before doing the jump and lost his footing. The sound his head made as it cracked against the rock was delicate, almost like an egg breaking. She remembered the way everyone ran through the woods; the image of his body, broken and limp, lying half-submerged in the water.

'Say your name!' Digging prompted again, and the crowd picked up the chant: Name, name, name.

She opened her mouth. 'Maggie,' she croaked out. 'Maggie Nill.' Her voice broke, got whipped back by the wind.

The chant was still going: Name, name, name, name. Then: Jump, jump, jump, jump.

Her insides were white; filled with snow. Her mouth tasted a little like puke. She took a deep breath. She closed her eyes.

She jumped.

Part: 12

SATURDAY, JUNE 25

~Maggie~

MAGGIE HAD ONCE READ AN ARTICLE ONLINE ABOUT how time was

relative and moved faster or slower depending on where you were and what you were doing. But she had never understood why it moved slower during the awful stuff-math class,

dentist appointments-and speeded up whenever you tried to make time go slow. Like when you were taking a test, or at your birthday party.

Or, in this case, dreading something.

Why? Why- did time have to be the wrong kind of relative? She had never regretted anything as much as she regretted making the decision, on the beach, to enter the game. In the days that followed, it seemed to her like a kind of insanity. Maybe she'd inhaled too much booze-vapor on the beach. Maybe seeing Matt with Delaney had driven her temporarily psychotic.

That happened, didn't it? Weren't whole defenses built on that kind of thing, when people went crazy and hacked their ex-wives to pieces with an ax? But she was too proud to withdraw now. And the date of the first official challenge kept drawing nearer. Even though the breakup made her want to go into permanent hiding, although she was doing her best to avoid everyone who knew her even vaguely, the news had reached her: the water towers near Copake had been defaced, painted over with a date. Saturday. Sundown.

A message and invitation to all the players.

Matt was gone. The school was over.

Not that she'd ever liked school, but still. It got her out of the house; it was something to do. Now everything was over and done. It occurred to her that this was her life: vast and empty, like a coin dropping down a bottomless well. She moved as slowly as she could, spent her nights curled on the couch watching TV with her sister, Lily, turned off her phone when she wasn't obsessively checking it for calls from

Matt...

She didn't want to deal with Bishop, who would lecture her and tell her that Matt was an idiot anyway; and Nat spent three days giving her the cold shoulder before admitting, finally, that she wasn't that mad anymore. Time tumbled, cascaded on, as though life had been set to fast-forward. Finally, Saturday came, and she couldn't avoid it anymore.

She didn't even have to bother to sneak out. Earlier in the evening, her mom and her stepdad, Bo, had gone over to some bar in Ancram, which meant they wouldn't be stumbling home until the early hours or, possibly, Sunday afternoon-bleary-eyed, reeking of smoke,

probably starving and in a foul mood. Maggie made mac 'n' cheese for Lily, who ate in sullen silence in front of the TV. Lily's hair was parted exactly down the middle, combed straight, and fixed in a hard knot at the back of her head. Recently she had been wearing it like that, and it made her look like an old woman stuck in an eleven-year old's body.

Lily was giving her the silent treatment, and Maggie didn't know why, but she didn't have enough energy to worry about it. Lily was like that: stormy one minute, smiley the next. Recently, she'd been more on the stormy side- more serious, too, very careful about what she wore and how she fixed her hair, quieter, less likely to laugh until she snorted milk, less likely to beg Maggie for a story before she went to bed-but Maggie figured she was just growing up. There wasn't that much to smile about in Carp. There wasn't much to smile about in Fresh Pines Mobile Park.

Still, it made Maggie's chest ache a little. She missed the old Lily: sticky Dr. Pepper hands, the smell of the bubblegum breath, hair that was never combed, and glasses that were always smudgy. She missed Lily's eyes, wide in the dark, as she rolled over and whispered, 'Tell me a story, Maggie.' But that was the way it worked- evolution, she guessed; the order of things. At seven-thirty p.m., Bishop texted her to say that he was on his way.

Lily had withdrawn to the Corner, which was what Maggie called their bedroom: a narrow, cramped room with two beds squeezed practically side by side; a chest of drawers missing a leg, which rocked violently when it was opened; a chipped lamp and a varnish-spotted nightstand; clothes heaped everywhere, like snowdrifts. Lily was lying in the dark, blankets drawn up to her chin.

Maggie assumed she was sleeping and was about to close the door, when Lily turned to her, sitting up on one elbow. In the moonlight coming through the dirty windowpane, her eyes were like polished marbles.

'Where are you going?' She said. Maggie navigated around a tangle of jeans and sweatshirts, underwear and balled-up socks.

She sat down on Lily's bed. She was glad that Lily wasn't asleep. She was glad, too, that Lily had decided to talk to her after all.

'Bishop and Nat are picking me up,' she said, avoiding the question. 'We're going to hang out for a little while.'

Lily lay down again, huddling in her blankets. For a minute, she didn't say anything. Then: 'Are you coming back?' Maggie felt her chest squeeze up.

She leaned over to place a hand on Lily's head. Lily jerked away. 'Why would you say something like that, billy-goat?'

Lily didn't answer. For several minutes Maggie sat there, her heart racing in her chest, feeling helpless and alone in the dark. Then she heard Lily's breathing and knew she had fallen asleep. Maggie leaned over and kissed her sister's head. Lily's skin was hot and wet, and Maggie had the urge to climb into bed with her, to wake her up and apologize for everything: for the ants in the kitchen and the water stains on the ceiling; for the smells of smoke and the shouting from outside; for their mom, Krista, and their stepdad, Bo; for the pathetic life they'd been thrust into, narrow as a tin can. But she heard a light honk from outside, so instead, she got up, closing the door behind her.

Maggie could always tell Bishop was coming by the sound of his cars. His dad had owned a garage once, and Joh-John was a car freak. He was good at building things; several years ago, he'd made Maggie arose out of petals of copper, with a steel stem and little screws for thorns.

He was always tinkering with rusted pieces of junk he picked up from God-knows-where. His newest was a Le Sabre with an engine that sounded like an old man trying to choke out a belt buckle. Maggie took the shotgun. Natalie was sitting in the back. Weirdly, Natalie always insisted on sitting b*tch, in the exact middle, even if there was no one else in the car. She'd told Maggie that she didn't like picking sides-left or right-because it always felt like she was betting on her life. Maggie had explained to her a million times that it was more dangerous to sit in the middle, but Nat didn't listen. 'I can't believe you roped me into this,' Joh Joh said when Maggie got in the car. It was raining the kind of rain that didn't so much fall as materialize, as though it was being exhaled by a giant mouth. There was no point in using an umbrella or rain jacket-it was coming from all directions at once and got in collars and under shirtsleeves and down the back.

Part: 13

Failsafe

'Please…' She cinched her hoodie a bit tighter. 'Cut the holier-than-thou crap. You've always watched the game.'

'Yeah, but that was before my two best friends decided to go bat-shit and join.'

'We get it, Joh-John,' Nat said. 'Turn on some music, will you?'

'No can do, my lady.' Joh-John reached into the cup holder and handed Maggie a Slurpee from 7-Eleven. Blue. Her favorite. She took a sip and felt a good freeze in her head. 'Radio's busted. I'm doing some work on the wiring-' Nat cut him off, groaning exaggeratedly. 'Not again.'

'What can I say? I love fixer-uppers.' He patted the steering wheel as he accelerated onto the highway. As if in response, the Le Sabre made a shrill whine of protest, followed by several emphatic bangs and a horrifying rattle, as if the engine were coming apart.

'I'm pretty sure the love is not mutual,' Nat said, and Maggie laughed, and felt a little less nervous. As Joh- John angled the car off the road and bumped into the narrow, packed-dirt one-liner that ran the periphery of the park, NO TRESPASSING signs were lit up intermittently amid his headlights.

Already, a few dozen cars were parked on the lane, most of them squeezed as close to the woods as possible, some almost entirely swallowed by the underbrush.

Maggie spotted Matt's car right away-the old used Jeep he'd inherited from an uncle, its rear bumper plastered with half-shredded stickers he'd tried desperately to key off, as though he had backed up into a massive spider web. She remembered the first time they'd ever driven around together, to celebrate the fact that he had finally gotten his license after failing the test three times. He'd stopped and started so abruptly she'd felt like she might puke up the doughnuts he'd bought her, but he was so happy, she was happy too.

All-day, all week, she'd been both desperately hoping to see him and praying that she would never see him again.

If Delaney was here, she really would puke. She shouldn't have had the Slurpee.

'You okay?' Joh Joh asked her in a low voice as they got out of the car. He could always read her: she loved and hated that about him at the same time.

'I'm fine,' she said, too sharply.

'Why'd you do it, Maggie?' he said, putting a hand on her elbow and stopping her. 'Why'd you do it?' Maggie noticed he was wearing the same outfit he'd been wearing the last time she'd seen him, on the beach- the faded-blue Lucky Charms T-shirt, the jeans so long they looped underneath the heels of his Converse-and felt vaguely annoyed by it. His dirty-blond hair was sticking out at crazy angles underneath his ancient Pittsburgh- hat. He smelled good, though, a very Joh Joh smell: like the inside of a drawer full of old coins and Tic Tacs.

For a second, she thought of telling him the truth: that when Matt had dumped her, she had understood for the first time that she was a complete and total nobody.

But then he ruined it. 'Please tell me this isn't about Matthew Haiplley,' he said.

There it was. The eye- roll.

'Come on, Joh Joh.' She could have hit him. Even hearing the name made her throat squeeze up into a knot.

'Give me a reason, then. You said yourself, a million times, that Panic is stupid.' 'Nat entered, didn't she? How come you aren't lecturing her?'

'Nat's an idiot,' Joh Joh said. He took off his hat and rubbed his head, and his hair responded as though it had been electrified, and it promptly stood straight up. Joh Joh claimed that his superpower was electromagnetic hair; Maggie's only superpower seemed to be the amazing ability to have one angry red pimple at any given time.

'She's one of your best friends,' Maggie pointed out.

'So? She's still an idiot. I have an open-door idiot policy on friendship.'

Maggie couldn't help it; she laughed. Joh Joh smiled too, so wide she could see the small overlap in his two front teeth.

Joh Joh shoved on his baseball hat again, smothering the disaster of his hair. He was one of the few boys she knew who was taller than she was-even Matt had been exactly her height, five-eleven. Sometimes she was grateful; sometimes she resented him for it like he was trying to prove a point by being taller.

Up until the time they were twelve years old, they'd been the same height, to the centimeter. In Joh Joh's bedroom was a ladder of old pencil marks on the wall to prove it.

'I'm betting on you, Nill,' he said in a low voice. 'I want you to know that. I don't want you to play. I think it's idiotic. But I'm betting on you.' He put an arm over her shoulder and squeezed her, and something in his tone of voice reminded her that once- ages and ages ago, it felt like she had been briefly head-over-heels in love with him.

Freshman year, they'd had one fumbling kiss in the back of the Hudson Movie- Plex, even though she'd had popcorn stuck in her teeth, and for two days they'd held hands loosely, suddenly incapable of the conversation even though they'd been friends since elementary school. And then he had broken it off, and Maggie had said she understood, even though she didn't. She didn't know what made her think of it.

She couldn't imagine being in love with Joh Joh now. He was like a brother-an annoying brother who always felt the need to point out when you had a pimple. Which you did, always. But just one. Already, she could hear faint music through the trees, and the crackle and boom of Digging's voice, amplified by the megaphone.

The water towers scrawled with graffiti and imprinted faintly with the words Allegheny-counties, where lit starkly from below. Perched on rail-thin legs, they looked like overgrown insects. No-like a single insect, with two rounded steel joints. Because Maggie could see, even from a distance, that a narrow wooden plank had been set between them, fifty feet in the air.

The challenge, this time, was clear.

By the time, Maggie, Nat, and Joh Joh had arrived at the place where the crowd was assembled, directly under the towers, her face was slick. As usual, the atmosphere was celebratory- the crowd was keyed up, antsy, although everyone was speaking in whispers.

Someone had managed to maneuver a truck through the woods. A floodlight, hooked up to its engine, illuminated the towers and the single wooden plank running between them and lit up the mist of rain. Cigarettes flared intermittently, and the truck radio was playing old rock song thudded quietly under the rhythm of conversation. They had to be quieter tonight; they weren't far from the road.

'Promise not to ditch me, okay?'

Nat said. Maggie was glad she'd said it; even though these were her classmates, people she'd known forever, Maggie had a sudden terror of getting lost in the crowd.

'No way,' Maggie said. She tried to avoid looking up, and she found herself unconsciously scanning the crowd for Matt. She could make out a group of sophomores huddled nearby, giggling, and Shayna Lambert, who was wrapped in a blanket and had a thermos of something hot, as though she was at a football game.

Maggie was surprised to see Vivian Travin, standing by herself, a little ways' apart from the rest of the crowd. Her hair was knotted into dreadlocks, and in the moonlight, her various piercings glinted dully. Maggie had never seen Viv at a single social event-she'd never seen her doing much of anything besides cutting classes and waiting tables at Dot's. For some reason, the fact that even Viv had shown made her even more anxious.

'Joh Joh!' Avery Wallace pushed her way through the crowd and promptly catapulted herself into Joh Joh's arms, as though he'd just rescued her from a major catastrophe. Maggie looked away as Joh Joh leaned down to kiss her. Avery was only five feet-one and standing next to her made Maggie feel like the Jolly Green Giant on a can of corn.

'I missed you,' Avery said when Joh Joh pulled away. She still hadn't even acknowledged Maggie; she'd once overheard Maggie call her 'shrimp faced' and had never forgiven her. Avery did, however, look somewhat shrimplike, all tight and pink, so Maggie didn't feel that bad about it. Joh Joh mumbled something in return. Maggie felt nauseous, and heartbroken all over again. No one should be allowed to be happy when you were so miserable-especially not your best friends. It should be a law.

Avery giggled and squeezed Joh Joh's hand. 'Let me get my beer, okay? I'll be back. Stay right here.' Then she turned and vanished. Immediately, Joh Joh raised his eyebrows at Maggie. 'Don't say it.' 'What?' Maggie held up both hands. Joh Joh stuck a finger in her face. 'I know what you're thinking,' he said, and then jabbed at Nat.

'You too.'

Nat did her best innocent face.

'Unfair, Marks. I was just thinking about what a lovely accessory she makes. So-o small and convenient.'

'The perfect pocket liner,' Maggie agreed.

'All right, all right.' Joh Joh was doing a pretty good job of pretending to be angry.

'Enough.'

'It's a compliment,' Nat protested.

'I said, enough.' But after a minute, Joh Joh leaned over and whispered, 'I can't keep her in my pocket, you know. She bites.' His lips bumped against Maggie's ear-by accident, she was, sure- and she laughed. The weight of nerves in her stomach eased up a little. But then someone cut the music, and the crowd got still and very quiet, and she knew it was about to begin. Just like that, she felt a numbing cold all over, as though all of the rain had solidified and frozen on her skin.

Part: 14

Disremembered

Maggie forgot about looking for Joh Joh. She watched, transfixed, as Zavic moved out onto the plank. From the safety of the ground, it looked almost beautiful: the soft haze of rain, Zavic's arms extended, a dark black shape against the clouds. Ray hadn't come down the ladder. He must have been watching too, although he had moved behind the water tank, so he was invisible.

It happened in a split second; Zavic jerked to one side, lost his footing, and was falling. Maggie heard herself cry out. She felt her heart rocket into the roof of her mouth, and in that second, as his arms pin-wheeled wildly and his mouth contorted in a scream, she thought, Nothing and none of us will ever be the same.

And then, just as quickly, he caught himself. He got his left foot back onto the board, and his body stopped swaying wildly from right to left, like a loose pendulum. He straightened up.

Someone screamed Zavic's name. And then the applause began, turning thunderous as he made his way, haltingly, the remaining few feet. No one heard the time that- Digging shouted. No one paid any attention to Ray as he came down the ladder. But as soon as Zavic was on the ground, he flew at Ray. Zavic was smaller than Ray and skinnier, but he tackled him from behind and the move was unexpected. Ray was on the ground, face in the dirt, in a second.

'You are a freaking asshole. You threw something at me.' Zavic raised his fist; Ray twisted, bucking Zavic off him.

'What are you talking about?'

Ray, staggered to his feet, so his face was lit in the glare of the spotlight. He must have cut his lip on a rock. He was bleeding. He looked mean and ugly. Zavic got up too. His eyes where wild -black and full of hatred. The crowd was still, frozen, and Maggie once again thought she could hear the rain, the dissolution of a hundred thousand different drops at once. Everything hung in the air, ready to fall.

'Don't lie,' Zavic spat out. 'You hit me in the chest. You wanted me to fall.'

'You're crazy.'

Ray started to turn away. Zavic charged him. And then they were down again, and all at once, the crowd surged forward, everyone shouting, some pushing for a better view, some jumping in to pull the boys off each other.

Maggie was squeezed from all sides. She felt a hand on her back and she barely stopped herself from falling.

She reached for Nat's hand instinctively.

'Maggie!' Nat's face was white, frightened. Their hands were wrenched apart, and Nat went down among the blur of bodies.

'Nat!' Maggie shoved through the crowd, using her elbows, thankful now to be so big. Nat was trying to get up, and when Maggie reached her, she let out a scream of pain.

'My ankle!' Nat was saying, panicked, grabbing her leg. 'Someone stepped on my ankle.' Maggie reached for her, then felt a hand on her back: this time deliberate, forceful. She tried to twist around to see who had pushed her, but she was on the ground, face in the mud before she could. Feet churned up the dirt, splattered her face with moisture. For just one moment, Maggie wondered whether this-the seething crowd, the surge was part of the challenge. She felt a break in the crowd, a fractional release.

'Come on.' She managed to stand up and hook Nat under the arm.

'It hurts,' Nat said, blinking back tears. But Maggie got her to her feet. Then a voice came blaring, suddenly, through the woods, huge and distorted.

'Freeze where you are, all of you…'

Cops…

Part: 15

Beams of Light

Everything was chaos. Beams of light swept across the crowd, turning faces white, frozen; people where running, pushing to get out, disappearing into the woods. Maggie counted four cops-one of them had wrestled someone to the ground, she couldn't see who. Her mouth was dry, chalky, and her thoughts disjointed. Her hoodie was smeared with mud, and the cold seeped into her chest.

Joh- John was gone. Joh Joh had the car.

Car. They needed to get out or hide.

She kept a hand on Nat's arm and tried to pull her forward, but Nat stumbled. Tears welled up in her eyes.

'I can't,' she said.

'You have to.' Maggie felts desperate. Where was the hell, Joh Joh? She bent down to loop an arm around

Nat's waist. 'Lean on me.' 'I can't,' Nat repeated. 'It hurts too bad.'

Then Marcel Mason came out of nowhere. He was suddenly next to them, and without pausing or asking permission, he put one of his arms around Nat's waist as well, so that she could be carried between them. Nat gave a short cry of surprise, but she didn't resist. Maggie felt like she could kiss him.

'Come on,' he said. They passed into the woods, stumbling, going as quickly as possible, moving away from the booming megaphone-voices, the screaming, and the lights. It was dark. Marcel kept his cell phone out; it cast a weak blue light on the sodden leaves underneath them, the wet ferns and the shaggy, moss-covered trees.

'Where are, we are going?' Maggie whispered. Her heart was pounding. Nat could barely put any weight on her left leg, so every other step, she leaned heavily into Maggie.

'We have to wait until the cops clear out,' Marcel replied. He was short of breath. A few hundred feet beyond the water towers, nestled in the trees, was a narrow pump house.

Maggie could hear mechanical equipment going inside it, humming through the walls, when they stopped so Marcel could shoulder the door open. It wasn't locked.

Inside, it smelled like mildew and metal. The single room was dominated by two large tanks and various pieces of rusted electrical equipment; the air was filled with a constant, mechanical thrush, like the noise of a thousand crickets.

They could no longer hear shouting from the woods.

Part: 16

Twisted

'Probably sprained,' Marcel said.

'Jez-us.' Nat exhaled heavily and maneuvered onto the ground, extending her left leg in front of her, wincing. 'It hurts.'

He sat down as well, but not too close.

'I swear I felt someone crack it.' Nat leaned forward and began touching the skin around her ankle. She inhaled sharply.

'Leave it, Nat,' Maggie said. 'We'll get some ice on it as soon as we can.' She was cold and suddenly exhausted. The rush she'd felt from completing the challenge was gone.

She was wet and hungry, and the last thing she wanted to do was sit in a stupid pump house for half the night. She pulled out her phone and texted Joh Joh. Where are you?

'How'd you know about this place?' Nat asked Marcel. 'Found it the other day,' Marcel said. 'I was scouting. Mind if I smoke?'

'Kind of,' Maggie said.

He shrugged and replaced the cigarettes in his jacket. He kept his cell phone out, on the floor, so his silhouette was touched with blue.

'Thank you,' Nat blurted out. 'For helping me. That was really… I mean, you didn't have to.'

'No problem,' Marcel said.

Maggie couldn't see his face, but there was a weird quality to his voice like he was being choked.

'I mean; we've never even spoken before.…' Marrybe realizing she sounded rude, Nat trailed off.

For a minute, there was silence.

Maggie sent another text to Joh Joh.

What The F*ck?

Then Marcel said abruptly, 'We spoke before. Once. At the pep rally, last year. You called me David.'

'I did?' Nat giggled nervously.

'Stupid. I was probably drunk. Remember, Maggie? We took those

disgusting shots.'

'Mmmm.' Maggie was still standing. She leaned up against the door, listening to the sound of the rain, which was drumming a little harder now. She strained to hear, underneath it, the continued sounds of shouting. She couldn't believe Joh Joh still hadn't texted her back. Joh Joh always responded to her messages right away.

'Anyway, I'm an idiot,' Nat was saying. 'Anyone will tell you that. But I couldn't very well forget a name like Marcel, could I? I wish I had a cool name.'

'I like your name,' Marcel said quietly.

Maggie felt a sharp pain go through her. She had heard in Marcel's voice a familiar longing, a hollowness-and she knew then, immediately and without doubt, that Marcel liked

Natalie. For a second, she had a blind moment of envy, a feeling that gripped her from all sides. Of course. Of course, Marcel liked Nat. She was pretty and giggly and small and cute, like an animal you'd find in someone's purse.

-Like-

Avery. The association arrived unexpectedly, and she dismissed it quickly. She didn't care about Avery, and she didn't care whether Marcel liked Nat, either. It wasn't her business. Still, the idea continued to drum through her, like the constant patter of the rain: that no one would ever love her.

'How long do you think we should wait?' Nat asked.

'Not too much longer,' Marcel said. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Maggie knew she should make a conversation, but she was too tired.

'I wish it wasn't so dark,' Nat said after a few minutes, rustling. Maggie could tell from her voice she was getting impatient.

Marcel stood up. 'Wait here,' he said and slipped outside. For a while, there was silence except for a tinny banging-something moving through the pipes and the hiss of water on the roof.

'I'm going to go to L.A.,' Nat blurted out suddenly. 'If I win.' Maggie turned to her. Nat looked defiant, as though she expected Maggie to start making fun of her. 'What for…?' Maggie asked.

'The surfers,' Nat said. Then she rolled her eyes. 'Hollywood, bean brain. What do you think for?' Maggie went over to her and crouched. Nat always said she wanted to be an actress, but Maggie had never thought she was serious-not serious enough to do it, definitely not serious enough to play Panic for it. But Maggie just nudged her with a shoulder.

'Promise me that when you're rich and famous, you won't forget the bean brains you knew back when.'

'I promise,' Nat said. The air smelled faintly like charcoal.

'What about you? What will you do if you win?' Maggie shook her head. She wanted to say: Run until I burst. Build miles and miles and miles between me and Carp. Leave the old Maggie behind, burn her to dust. Instead, she shrugged. 'Go somewhere, I guess.

Sixty-seven grand buys a lot of gas.'

Nat shook her head. 'Come on, Maggie,' she said quietly. 'Why'd you enter?'

Just like that, Maggie thought of Matt, and the hopelessness of everything, and felt like she would cry. She swallowed back the feeling. 'Did you know?' she said finally.

'About Matt, I mean, and Delaney.'

'I heard a rumor,' Nat said carefully.

'But I didn't believe it.'

'I heard she ... with him...'

Maggie couldn't say the words. She knew she was probably a little prude, especially compared to Nat. She was embarrassed about it and proud of it at the same time: she just didn't see what was so great about fooling around. 'At the frigging

Arboretum.' 'She's a whore,' Nat said matter of- factly. 'Bet she gives him herpes. Or worse.'

'Worse than herpes?' Maggie said doubtfully.

'Syphilis... Turns you into a mutter.

Puts holes in the brain, swiss- cheese- style.' Maggie sometimes forgot that Nat could always make her laugh. 'I hope not,' she said. She managed to smile. 'He wasn't that smart, to begin with. I don't think he has a lot of brains to spare.'

'You hope so, you mean.' Nat mimed holding up a glass.

'To Delaney's syphilis.'

'You're crazy,' Maggie said, but she was laughing full-on now.

Nat ignored her. 'Marry it turn Joel Flores's brain to delicious, gooey cheese.'

'Amen,' Maggie said and raised her arm.

'Amen.' They pretended to clink. Maggie stood up again and moved to the door. Marcel was still not back; she wondered what he was doing.

'Do you think-' Maggie took a deep breath. 'Do you think anyone will ever love me?' 'I love you,' Nat said. 'Joh Joh loves you. Your mom loves you.' Maggie made a face, and Nat said, 'She does, Heath bar, in her way.

-And-

Lily loves you too.'

'You guys don't count,' Maggie said.

Then, realizing how that sounded, she giggled. 'No offense.' 'None took,' Nat said. After a pause, Maggie said, 'I love you, too, you know. I'd be a basket case without you. I mean it. I'd be carted off and, I don't know, drawing aliens in my mashed potatoes by now.'

'I know,' Nat said. Maggie felt as if all the years of their lives together, their friendship, where welling up there, in the dark: the time they'd practiced kissing on Nat's mom's sofa cushions; the first time they'd ever smoked a cigarette and Maggie had puked; all the secret texts in classes, fingers moving under the desk and behind their textbooks. All of it was hers, hers and Nat's, and all those years were nestled inside them like one of those Russian dolls, holding dozens of tiny selves inside it.

Maggie turned to Nat, suddenly breathless.

'Let's split the money,' she blurted out.

'What?'

Nat blinked…

'If one of us wins, let's split it.' Maggie realized, as soon as she said it, that she was right. 'Fifty-fifty. Thirty grants can still buy a lot of gas, you know.'

For a second, Nat just stared at her.

Then she said, 'All right. Fifty-fifty.' Nat laughed. 'Should we shake on it? Or pinkie swear?'

'I trust you,' Maggie said.

Marcel returned at last. 'It's clear,' he said.

Maggie and Marcel supported Nat between them, and together they made their way beneath the water towers and into the clearing that had so recently been packed with characters. Now the only evidence of the crowd was the trash left behind: stamped-out cigarette butts and all the joints, crushed beer cans, towels, a few umbrellas. The truck was still parked in the mud, but its engine was stopped.

Maggie imagined the cops would bring out a tow for it later. The quiet was strange, and the whole scene felt weirdly creepy. It made Maggie think that everyone had been spirited away into thin air.

Marcel gave a sudden shout. 'Hold on a second,' he said and left Nat leaning on Maggie. He moved several feet away and scooped something up from the ground-a transportable cooler. Maggie saw, when he angled his cell phone light onto it, that it still contained ice and beer. However, the Joh Joh's phone was still going straight to voicemail and was getting cut off on the second ring. Matt and Delaney where probably intimate sung and warm wooden plank, and the itch in the soles of her feet, telling her to jump.

'Jackpot,' Marcel said. He smiled for the first time all night. He took the cooler with them, and when they reached Route 22, he made a substitute ice pack for Nat's ankle.

There were three beers left, one for each of them at that time, and they drank so much collectively on the side of the road, in the pouring rain, while they waited for the bus to appear. Nat got giggly after just a few sips, and she and Marcel joked about smoking a cigarette to make the bus come quicker, and Maggie knew she should be satisfied.

<3

Nevaeh

Book: 15

Seventeen

Chapter: 105

Part: 1

(Back)

It all started two years ago; I drew for her, to see what she would think. She likes it… but it was not enough to get her talking. To week later she was with him… what does she see in him?

Sometimes- I go to see her… at this little place in the same town. Where she is the worth that I can feel in what is left of my broken heart.

Sending letters that the father never gave- yes, as much as I can, I go to be around her, to see that smile and these braces on her teeth that smile that brightens my day. Not always with success do I get attention, but at least I can see her and her amazing eyes.

Who knows it might even get a hello from her- she is perfect in every way! I did see anything wrong with having a seventeen-year-old dream girl at the time.

Back then it all started with me making the crazy decision to ask her to marry me, over a social networking site, I sure her boyfriend loved me asking her that question. But at the time I did not give a shit, I knew what I wanted, and I was not going to let anything get in the way.

She must think I am smoking something, or that I am just completely waked! For the reason that I hardly even know her in true reality, but yet, I know everything about here in my mind.

I have never felt so attached to anyone like this before. Just thinking about here is making me foolish. Not knowing anything about her, yet, I cannot help it, but feel as if she is the one for me. That the search is finally over! I believe that I found the one for me maybe, there is one more issue and that is her family.

My mind is running fast and with intention what should I do next. Oh, networking is a double-edged sword her profile on the web is a tease.

But then again is love? I guess…? Let's just say that I did get an answer, but I did know that there was so much more than I need to wait for…

Part: 2

Ponder

Did I just scare her away?

Oh no- what did I do? Maybe she will see that I admire her? Maybe she will think what I ask was sweet my she thinks I am a freak. Hum- What does Olivia think? It is like- 'Open mouth insert foot,' or not say anything and lose her to him.

What should I do, what can I do?

Her boyfriend Brandon is going to kill me! Yet, I have a heart ring sitting on my nightstand. Is she going to single soon, just because you have photos and relationship status as taken but doesn't mean that you're his mind, body, and soul? Or are you dating him because that is what others want, like your family?

Without me knowing what to do or think, this thought popped in into my head? Would her friends approve of us even being together? I know some of them may, and then again how do I know what they might say, hopefully, it is all good. Will I ever know?

Oh yes, she is still in high school, and I am six years older; but age is just a number, right?

She did a drawing, and it was breathtaking, I commented, and things started to work out. But will this blessed luckily streak last?

However, the ice has been broken.

Artwork and creativity can open up all kinds of doors even the one to the heart… Did she make this impress me? As of now, I don't know, however it was excessive, wonderful and beautiful. Just what I was looking for, someone that enjoys the same things that I do.

What more can I ask for?

The 28th I don't know what to think? Yes, no, maybe? Someone give me a sign or something? The love heart line kind of flat-lined until the 14th of the next month, which was a win I felt that the relationship finally took off some.

The online conversion ware light-hearted, and modest.

Nevertheless, it was a remarkable achievement of accomplishment; looking back at how completed it can be just to have her know that I am even there. Just have to see what the next couple of days bring.

Maybe there is a date on the way. I wished her goodnight and sweet dreams and have to see what the next day brings me.

The 22nd what an amazing day, I got to speak to her at last in the place where one can meet and greet, yet I had a few interruptions; I could help it, I was unusually popular that day.

She was so cute about it… with her braces on her teeth, and the way she looks at me. When she waked up to me, I could not speak because of the other that was wanted my- complete attention in the place.

Finally, at the cash register that magic spot for flirting together… we talked more face to face, no screen of allowance no button to click just real stimulation of interaction. It was all nervously publicized to one another so that just lead to the plans to talk online more, awesome!

The perfect girl what can I say, to be so close yet, feel miles away. Want to run to her but have to walk out the door the ether way. The only words spoken to her is- 'Have a nice day.'

Thinking about her and the summer and what it could be- with her it reminds me of Seventeen- you're on my mind all the time and I think about you yet we're not together. The stars shining combined with ribbon holding hands forever.

This is the days we could have together it could be like Sunflowers, Hayfields, kissing in the rain, no more brick walls, falling teardrops no more prize paces remain.

True love shouldn't be such a game; does she feel the same. She's is everything she is seventeen. What if every day could be like this: Dimmed rings, football games, and a movie on the weekends? Its plan to see you belong to me, she's is everything that reminds me of Seventeen everything that is in our dreams. Everything she does is amazing, but then again, I am just speculating.

The 26th I don't have much to say, it feels there is something in the way, let's see what happens in another day. The 27th I give her a guitar pick to make into a nickel, I hope she liked it, I got her to smile! But is she going to know the meaning behind it or not?

She looked at the message that I made from before 4:58 pm. That I told her about let's see if this becomes a date?

The 29th so when are you going to let me take you out, to a movie or something of your choice?

The 30th is it all over 'I don't know…' Those are the words that answer all the unanswered questions.

Note: I wish I would have met her sooner so that we could have been together. Back when I was in school. It would have been nice to be the same age and to be seventeen again and know what I know now, and doing the same things… but it's ok hopefully we can still make it work. Even if I can't date her, I still want to be a part of her life.

The 1st it's a new moth is love going to start up for me? But right now, he is still in the way. The leaves are changing and so am I, but I just can't wait any longer? October is in the air, and it would be perfect to get together!

The 2nd I can't sleep, I can't think, I can't breathe, hell I eat a whole box of apple jacks in one day. Am I falling in love with a girl that I know that I can never have, yes, she is seventeen?

And what gets me is that I feel that she feels the same way about me, yet the social world thanks to that he is the one for her… why not he is her age and the boy toy that most of the high school girls drool over. All I have to say is that we will have to see, what is meant to be?

The 5th I don't know what to think.

The 12th it's not over if anything it's a new start!

The 19th being romantic is not dead, and it does exist. You just need to be with the right guy, which can show you what real expressions of love is! :0

Where do you consider being places for romance? - Romance doesn't exist don't kid yourself has a guy ever asked you to marry him? - Yes, but not whom you would expect :0

The 22nd I got to see my girl today and invited her to my book thing so… ya-ah me! Let's see if she comes to see me.

The 28th everyone sucks in this town but what else is new, and I learned that it's uncool to tie your shoes. Carved Halloween stuff…

The 6th of November I saw here today, and it was awesome like magic, and I go to her too small because of an inside joke. The 7th and 6th are forecasted to be romantic let's see if we make it into a joined partnership.

She is going to feel this on the 7th.

Today you will have a chance to change certain areas of your life, especially your love life. You will seek adventure - not in the physical sense of a journey anywhere, but the metaphysical sense of a journey within. You get a new perspective on your relationship and feel like a whole new world has opened up to you.

Partners will never seem the same again.

The 8th so I asked via the social network, how is your Thursday going? What have you been up to! – She answered on another web page her reply to me, it's like a secret message to me, however, she is with him; seeing a scary movie that is boring to her to the point of agony.

'I think that If you're with the right person, then you should not be bored, or watching the movie.' You should, making out the whole time, and cuddling with one another. Does she want to be with me, but can't be? However, is she happy being unappreciated by him? What is going to happen? Is this seventeen-flame going workout or happen?

There is a lot of speculation circulating about your love life at the moment. It could take a new and very different path forward, sooner than you think. All this is good news, although you may worry about how your relationship will be affected. Shake off that pessimistic view and allow a miracle to unfold. Then take that first step forward.

11/ 9/ 13

I don't know why but I feel say it is going to be an amazing day!

You've had a lot of dates and met a lot of interesting people, but at times like the beginning of the week, you yearn for that special someone in your life who knows you well, someone you can tell all of your problems to.

Platonic friends can turn into something more if there's an attraction combined with intimacy midweek. Taking the relationship to the next level can be complicated but fulfilling. The flow of dating energy is different at the beginning of the week, so take advantage of it and mix things up a little.

When you go somewhere out of the ordinary you open up your chances of meeting exciting new people! You run up against some stiff competition at the end of the week. Whether you like it or not, you'll have to prove yourself if you want to 'win' the affection of your latest crush.

The 9th it's all over and I don't know what to do!

The 13th Bartering is the name of the game to get you back-

Sometimes, I get so preoccupied trying to perfect everything that I forget to appreciate the things that are already perfect, have you ever been in love with a girl that you can't have?

I am getting older by the moment and feel as if I am weathering away. Yes, just one day closer to the casket, or am I in it. This life I have had has done nothing but pressure me into becoming what I never intended to be. Then again look at what I get to show for it. I got everything I ever wanted just not in the way I want it to be.

I sit with a non-filled heart of thinking that life is so unfair, listening to my mind as it spins like a tornado through Kansas and all the thoughts of what can and can't be rushing like a bolt through my brain. All this takes me to a place that I will never be again. If only I would have done this and not that… If only is all I think about.

Nonetheless, mostly I think of all the existences from back in the days of seventeen. Why seventeen you ask? While it was everything real to me, the only thing I wanted, all that I still think about. 'She was a black-haired beauty with big blue dog eyes.' Her eyelashes could put you in trances as they blinked. She was petite in her stature, but she had it all if you know what I am saying.

Pulse I was going get into that skirt, and the way I could. She has those sweet pink lips, which could curl up your toes, even to this day, oh yes! I was young once, but you grow old fast, if you don't have anything keeping you young, what the hell do I have to live for?

Back when she was on the edge of seventeen and my life was entertaining, pleasurable, and stimulating. Everything seems flawless when with her; she was, and still is flawless in my eyes. But everything changes and everything movies on. But she still talks to me and dances around me.

Yet we can't be together as we would like to be you see. Those days were over a long time ago.

She was the gasoline that lite my match on fire, and only she had the right moisture or what it took to extinguish it out. I guess we filled each other up with our hopes, and dreams let's not forget about the compassion.

We filled each other up on the pitches and surrounding grounds to, don't get me wrong. But there was more there then just young stupid lust here. Something deeper that sucks down on you to the point you don't know what you going to do. You feel that your head is going to explode, it will make your bean spin and go numb. But is this what you would call love?

Is this what we all come back for more of? All this year, I think of what I have missed out on. All these years I said this is true love? But to this day I don't know if love is real or just a state of mind, which is a ghost that haunts me. How do you love something that cannot be shown to everyone that they love you back? I still have a two-carat heart-shaped diamond ring around my neck on the ball chain that my ear tags -was- ones did, the ring was going to be hers; it will most likely go to the grave with me, and the tag will be in her bark padded box forever.

Love is not- loving unless it is shown to the world- right? Is love just getting it on, or is it about being soul mates? I am, and an old man and I still have no clue… What is love; to some love is L for lust that makes you want to get it all, to do whatever you can to please.

O is Oh shit this is going to be crazy, and what should I do next. V is for virgins having victory getting to the next level, saying I got to touch and feel it. E is for Exposited, and unsatisfied, that is love for some.

On the other hand, if you're like me I try to believe that Nat King Cole sings love the way it should be, but most of the time that kind of love is just a fantasy. If you're like me you have to believe in a little of both, just to see what it's all about.

My life is just like flipping through the pages of an organized book, you will understand my life and what it was all about, was it a waste of time? Or did my life have something more? I guess we will have to gaze into notes to see.

I was told in 1945, I was a twenty-two-year-old soldier back from the battlefields and the air raids, and looking for my innocents, and Olivia Sartre's was the girl for me.

Her father was a teacher at the local high school; he knew that and believed that I had found love within it his precious little girl. This man hated my guts, but the feeling was mutual. around this time when I was at war Olivia was a worker at the local café. She was only seventeen, and a shy as can be in her ways and was so sweet to talk to and even sweeter to gaze at.

Plus, up to this point in her life, she was not that interested in any other boys, but we were close associates all of our lives, so would say more than friends.

However, destiny has its plans that no one can foresee, do you believe in soul mates? If you are anything like me, you still do not know what the hell I am doing when it comes to love. Love can make you seem crazy to the ones that just do not understand.

With Olivia, I felt like I had the world by the ass and was loved. I had to leave my little coal mine town to go and fight.

Oh, I am not saying that war didn't fix us boys up with or ladies the nights to make us man… but I felt that I was the man that I was supposed to be before I left. Anyways that type of girl was not my style.

Oh, the temptation can make you go out of your mind, but there was only one thing that was stopping me. That was a promise that I made to Olivia, who was about to turn seventeen in a month or so at the time. I wrote her a love letter every day If I could, I still have all of them sitting here on my desk breaking apart in old age.

But as of now and this present day my heart is heavy, and my hands are weak, as she sits with memory at my feet. Yah, I am not the rock that I used to be, but her rock displeases her name, and her birthdate this is one thing that I have now that reminds me, of what she ones were to me, and what she is to me as of now. I could not hold a pen in my hands if I tried, but I walk to see her every day or at least I try, seeing that gleaming stone just make me want to cry anyway but still I do it, I hope for the day that I die, is that wrong?

Some would say that it not manly to keep a scrapbook; well I do not give two shits or care what others think, you see. This book holds the memories of us, and even more that no one has ever seen before. It a book of secrets that no one knows about other than me, but it's in my last well and testament that Kristen will be given it, and what she does what it is completely up to her at that time.

In the winter, I like to sit in my chair at night in the living room and go through the pages one by one. Knowing that when I get to the end; I will most likely close the book, and start all over again, maybe seeing something that I missed from before. Every time something comes to mind, all the things that happened during that moment in time, that are escaping my mind slowly. Beholding the photographs, and notes reading, and looking at them so intently by the light of the fireplace,

that my eyes shoot blood… Maybe, I need to get new bifocal glasses?

Each page comes to life, and the photo starts to move as if I can look into that time and place just like a slow-moving film clip. I can see all the scenes play out, I can feel, taste, and even hear, what was going one in the frame; as I view into each and everyone, just like a porthole of the bygone.

Some of these relics make my heart beat rapidly fast and others bring tears to my eyes, some make me joyful, and others very disheartened. I think that I have been blessed for all this time that I have had. Blessed for the times we had, and all that was part of my life, most of them are going, nevertheless, I can still get the sensation from them all, as I recall them and let them shine into my collective soul.

Besides in times of creed, she takes me to a higher place- with her arms wide open, and wings vast in the midair. This was all part of her sacrifice… yet how are we going to be remembered? When - am the only one that remembers her now?

In my book with a brown cover, I start from the beginnings and see our little faces in shades of gray. Though faded I can still make it all out. The first pages are ripping and tattered from being so timeworn. The binding of my book is hard there any more you and see the strings that hold it together, and some pages are falling out.

All my notes of my life are- now yellowing, all the love letters I wrote with a pan that I had to dip into an inkwell, all of this is my life that I planned on making into a book someday.

But someday never came for me, I plan that this story of us yet, I thought it would be quite different; the end of the scrapbook or manuscript has not been made yet, because I do not have an end to show or wright as of now. To me, the end was in the middle, and that is when I lost interest in creative expressions.

Part: 3

warfare

All these notes… some from Olivia, some from the war, some from others that loved me, this all tells a story, and it's just all history now.

'Nothing lasts forever it is all going to be dust in the wind.' 'Evenhandedly I gave you everything, just for you to die with a smile; all you wanted was to live for a while. You took everything, but it left you empty.' So much we don't understand, all I ever wanted to be was a happily ever after.'

I am so tired of being here, without you, even if you are here next to me in ghostly form. You are the evanescence of my Immortal love. All of this time has passed, after you pass away, yet it cannot erase you from me, now or ever. I whipped your tear than and I would even now, nothing has changed, only the moment in time. 'You still have all of me!'

I see myself in the glossy stone one more, and I see that the young man is gone, and this timeworn outer self is all that is left. This deep-rooted body is all that reminds me of what I used to be, and it mocks and howls at me as I try to be as I was back then.

The moon sheens and the rock are shown as a colorless shade of gay agent the black starfield heavens, the grave is all that is alive, and the world is dying around me.

I can see my breath wobbling within poufs out of my mouth as exhaling; yes, I try to walk away and leave it all this behind me, but the bound is just too tight she was all ways so tight. So, tight she could squeeze, just like she was when she was seventeen.

The feeling I have is more intense than anyone could imagine. 'Some of them just hurt, and some of them hurt so well. Yet the best was with her when she was alive.'

Olivia grabs me by the ankles, and she rises to hold close to me, being this old it terrifies the shit out of me quite truthfully, but I love it because I adore her.

She knows all this, yet she follows me on the trail back to the homestead. She is the worth that I had now, that my blood is getting so cold.

On the way home I have to rest, as I said I am not what I used to be, I walk to the gazebo on the pond; the pathway is overgrown with tall grasses and last roses of summer now, and the old yellow wood rowboat float over the mist tied by its rope that is fraying away.

The whitewashed timber bridge is splinted and falling apart just as is the gazebo itself. But then again, I am just too damn old to fix it, in a sighing breath heavily- thinking that no one else knows what this place means to me, and no one cares, really it is just one of those places that were our memories. If I could choose a song that would fit my life somewhat it would be – 'Remember When' by Alan Jackson.

That song plays in my mind as I sit, and think now that I have lived an undaunted, yet all right life; you have what you have, and you are blessed when you have it, so do not take it greedily or you will lose it. I reason with myself drawing in a breath and letting it go slowly. I cannot remember who I was, back then, as my heart is heavy, and my hands are shaky now.

Besides looking back into the depths, and craves of my mind, I can see that she was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and I was the prey.

Will you do pay for your sins, yet she creeps and plays with my brain and the visions or so real but are they an illusion or something more? She ties up my thoughts but is it all a waste? It is enough to drive you out of your mind. You know that I cannot say that I have any regrets.

Nash- The chrome grill is pitted, and the headlight glass smashed, and the inside is trashed, from getting wet too many times.

It needs some love, just like me.

But it is more work than what I can do anymore, so it's just another memory of our memories.

We used to drive around, running all the traffic lights, wild and crazy as could be and share our time, and make are secrets in the back sets. I would kick up dirt in the air as would drive to our spot, the gazebo on the pond. If that car could talk it would remember more than it does.

Maybe I should write a story about it the car coming back to life and haunting me, I could give the car a cute name, or has someone already done that? I can't remember, but that would be a book, or maybe I have read it… shit, it sucks to get old. It is impossible to love and be wise, it makes your brain soft.

I love some of this new saying these young kids say, Just the same as saying in today's terms being what is called whipped; this is what she was to me. However, I still do not mind it being that way. Having her whipping me makes me feel alive. The more pain the more I feel from her the more she knows that I love her, and she loves me.

Pain is love! Pain is all I have; pain is like the rain without her on top of me, rain and pain it washes the memories away from my mind. Pain and the rain are all that comes from these old eyes, that I rub red, pain as the rain that will cry over the spot that will hold my old remands.

I was the pray, but I see it as more like be scarred for life. Though back then I was praying to get next to her in any way possible. If I could only to myself back, then… it comes around.

She was the one that was going to take me to places and give me expressions that I could not be expressed or had with any other girl. To this day I am not sure what to make of my own story, because it never going to be easy for me to explain.

What was in the past is in the past, and I do not care anymore about what is in my future. What I have lived for was a dream that was never going to be, a dream that burnt me to a crisp, and I will arouse from the ashes someday.

Oh shit! I did not remember to tell you my name while it Deniel, or did I tell you that? This is my story of what it takes to have a sweetheart or love, what it takes to walk away, and yes never look back all your life, never hear that voice again, never hear that laugh again.

Also, back then some of these times sadden me even more then than now. Knowing that all the coldness that I am feeling is me dying inside, but I am going to go through this story one more time before my time is upon this earth.

I recall when I was nineteen my life transformed incessantly, and all I had that keep me going was a love that I nicknamed seventeen Olivia. It, not an easy story for me to tell, it has its twists and turns, and it's- turns- on's,

Just like having the land with its mountains of majesty that where blissful, that contest with its tragic storms. Just the same as us we have the hopes', and our joys and we had a lot of disappointments, now that I am older, so much older, I can close my eyes and all I have is a photographic snapshot in my mind to remained me just like showing the mountains we climb together, she was ripped away from my grasp hands. Just like that last hug, she has pulled away in tears.

Yes, as much as I could, I want to be around her, and to see that smile, I remember when she was thirteen with those cute braces on her teeth and that smile that looked at me so gently. It has never changed in my mind.

Not always with success did I get her full attention, there was someday that she was moody, but that was okay by me all girls have that time that they need to deal with, she would just tell to say way. Besides, sometimes others are wanting her devotion, as her asshole dad, but I was mostly happy then because at least I can see her and look into her amazing blue eyes.

I can still her saying hello and saying my name. She was so perfect in every way! I did not see anything wrong with having a seventeen-year-old dream girl at the time. She was my mystery fantasy that was real in my life.

Looking at my hands you can read all the crevasses, and the split forks in the trail that was my life, the paths that ended far too soon. No, my hands and palms are not the same as they once were back then. They are not like the ones she held, what happened to my lifeline, heart line, and most importantly marriage line? The lines have changed, but why if the plans were made?

Where- they- taken from me? What did I do? To this day, I don't know. There must have been some reason for this to happen this way? I look at my fingerprint each finger different, and so unlike hers.

Everyone has unique prints, which we leave behind. She had some of the smallest hand I ever seem my life, but they were sweet and felt amazingly perfect on me.

Every line that was on her palms was strong and showed her love of the flesh, her true faith, and love for life, she was a giver, she never asked for anything, but love return. But she just had given it all away.

The fingerprints she made on me are now going forever. It is just like that kiss that comes to me in my shot drams at the don, it is just a trance that you always had over me.

Looking back in the 1940s: I have never felt so attached to anyone like this before. Just thinking about her now is making me foolish. She can say my name, and it makes my week even now. I cannot help it! Back then I had the feeling as if she is the one for me. That the search is finally over, I know this senses day one! I believe that… I believed that I found the one for me, maybe… there is one large issue, and that was her dad, he was in love with her senses she was born, but not the kind of love that most have for their little girls, this was oddly different.

Nonetheless, it was not long until I had her completely and forever. Be careful in what you wish for you may just get it one way or another. Reality is never as it seems, and life likes to skew with you.

At this time, I was living in a one-bedroom house that I rented for 17 dollars a month, I few years before my mother and father we all lived in a house on 17th street, anyways both of my parents typed to fly off a bridge together and live… yeah, that's not going to happen. They were coming home from a new year's party smashed.

So, I have been on my senses I was seventeen. Seventeen, seventeen! Is the number that has been hunting me down for years.

Part: 4

Although I felt lucky because I had a radio in my home, the home I always wanted what the one in the pond. We were going to live here together.

I feel that I could do anything if I just imagined I could. That is the way you think when you are young. So-o, one day I left I made the crazy decision to ask her Olivia 'seventeen' to marry me, in a letter that I handed to her. But here was the shitter; I was stepping foot on a bus that was taking me to this far away land. She was the only one to see me off as her dad pulled us apart, I can still see what she was wearing a light blue dress; with a white daisy in her heart.

I am sure her overprotective father loved me asking her that question because he nosed in all of our stuff, and keep things that I sent to her to hidden, and that was the beginning of the end.

Because he had to know everything about her, yes, I mean everything. But at the time I did not give a shit, I knew what I wanted, and she wanted me, and I was not going to let anything get in the way, not even the war or at least that is what we wanted to believe.

That reminds me now sometimes I walk into the bathroom and she writes the word seventeen in blood on the mirror, and her faces show up in the shower mist as I wash. She just loves to play around with me in that room. Ha, that's kind of cute! She has a way about her that makes me lovesick.

Back to my story- The journey to hell is not where I wanted to go at all, no this was hell on earth, I am in a far-off land from what I was used where no one even knows my name, yes to go and kill the slanted eyed mean, to this day I still have no idea why this event took place. It was senseless and stupid, I am not a baby killer or a tree hugger, yet the metals on my chest would say that I am.

They all remind me of what I had to endure, and all the friends that I lost like Jack Row and Tom Richford, that went missing at sea in their planes, there are more but I can't remember their names, I have a photo of all of us but the faces are nameless to me now. But I do remember how I lost you.

Like I am supposed to be proud of killing another human being, I do not know…not really, I just do not think it is an honor worthy only if truly needed.

The air force they threw my bony ass into a plain faster than you can say suck on this Japs, shit! There is nothing like having rounds of ammunition flying past your head. Every bolt you think it is all over, besides having what appeared to look like Satan's face coming at you as your in-flight, get ever so closer till you could see them snarling at you. Never backing down, until their right in front of you; anticipating the whole time that the baster goes down before you do. Now I sit back and think that my grandbaby drives an orange Toyota Corolla, nice right and there it is sitting in the driveway.

So back in the plane, I was hoping that the bullets that I was firing would go through their head because in World War II you had one choice kill or be killed.

For the reason that if not it always ended in a death spiral.

Those that were going down, a- lot of them where clever ass holes if they knew that they were dying they would take out a ship with them, it was like a bam explosion, or they would land in the ocean never to be seen again, this was all part of Pearl Harbor, and I still cannot believe that I made it out of there in one piece.

But whom the hell cares any more, it seems as if today people do not remember the story of the past, hell most- young people do not even believe that the Holocaust even existed?

Most just sit in their mother basement licking the peanut butter off bananas, and popping cherries, and talking shit about nothing relevant. Yes, that is a metaphor if you went to school, and got an education you would know that.

You know that is what this cautery need is- another good war, so your smartass new what it is like to not have every damn thing handed to you. Then you would see how smart you are in boot camp and the bush.

I was a drill sergeant also, so I don't take bull shit from anyone. I will march your ass off until you have some respect for authority, and something more than your simple little life. Then again, I have seen all this with my own two eyes, and I can still taste the blood, and the smell of rotting flesh, you have no idea what that is like, that small is something that is locked up in your mind and never leaves your wisdom.

I flew through the air in a single-engine, single-seat monoplane, with a mockery of a half-naked pinup girl painted on the front which just reminded me of my own seventeen baby- back home. Things were so crude back then you fringing a gun was like a pissing your name in the snow.

I remember squinting with the one eye, firing the gun in one hand, and flying the plane with the other, and your feet controlling the flaps, it was ridiculous how difficult it was. Especially when most pilots had never flown- a plane before in his life just like me.

Yet hoping that we all can make it home in one piece, most of my colleagues did not. Those poor bastards are still out in the ocean just fish food, and yet no one cares or gives a damn about them. They are just an eighty-year-old story of who gives a shit.

The day I left I made the crazy decision to ask her to marry me, in a letter that I handed to her, As I stepped foot on the bus that was taking me to this far away land, she was the only one

to see me off that I treasured, I can still see what she was wearing a light blue dress with a white daisy in her heart.

I am sure her overprotective father loved me asking her that question. But at the time I did not give a shit, I knew what I wanted, and I was not going to let anything get in the way, not even the war.

My letter reads- My sweet Olivia; I must say how I feel about you. That there is nothing more I would want to be yours forever and ever. When you are reading this, I will already be one my way. Nevertheless, I ask you to weigh for me to return, it not that long so we can be together once more. That is if you love me, as I love you. However, I have to go far, far away as of now. I have gotten to know you in every way, and I will think of you every day.

I would have liked to say this to you, but I am making you this promise if I make it back from this war. I want to be the one that is married to you.

I wish I would have said all of this sooner, so that we could have been together, but is age only a number? Even if I don't see you again, I am now forever part of your life.

Your devoted lover- Brandon.

~*~

Back when I was in school, she was too young for me. It would have been nice to be the same age, yes it would be nice to be seventeen again, and know what I know now, and do so of the same things.

But you can't live twice. To this day, I don't know if she had ever seen this love note or not, yet she has not said. But up till now, she seems to know what I wanted and that was her.

After I give this letter to her, I know that my life would never be the same. Though I did not know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, it was just the way it had to be.

Plus, I had never been away from home; I have never been more than ten miles away from my hometown of Coalville. I planned on putting this ring on her tiny finger, but I never got the chance to do it.

The journey of life is through uncovering the true beauty that lies behind the eyes. It is not what is seen all the time it is what is felt, the same as how I feel towards Olivia, she made me joyful and blissful. Someday soon our souls can be rejoined as one as they were in this life.

I feel as if I will never be happy again, even though I have my granddaughter she just reminds me of everything I can and cannot have anymore.

My greatest fear is being alone and dying alone, I look at myself now and there's not one trait about myself that I find desirable, yet I have Army photos of back in the day, the snapshot stuck that are lost in time, I wonder what happened to me. I believe that my current state of mind is not a healthy one. Maybe I am just old or crazy or I just do not care anymore. One of the others I need a deep sleep anyway. So maybe I will go in my sleep with her ghost on top of me. But I always thought that I would go into the arms of my beloved Olivia.

I never had any great achievements in my life, I never went to college. I worked in the coal mines most of my career, and all I have now to show for it is blacked longs and Parkinson's disease. They drop you down in the hole, and you work on your stomach like a rat. With the water running down your back and into your ass crack, the work sucked.

Shoveling for nickels and dimes and giving it all back to the company. But I made enough to get my dream house on the pond but had one little girl to share it with and that was our baby that she named Abbie. I came back from the war and was handed a baby to rise. At the time, I did know if I could do it or not. But I did my best. Everything was fine until she was seventeen; I don't want to say any more about it right now.

I lived in this town most of my life, I have seen people come and go, of seen houses being built, and I have seen the same very house being ripped down. That's when you know you have a life too long. I watched babies grow up before my eyes- into things that cannot be controlled, and I saw- my grandbaby's too. I ask what more do I need really?

Part: 5

Honey

I am probably the easiest person to get along, as I know, and

I understand how this world works. As of now, I dislike everything about my appearance, my skin blotchy, and my hair is gray, my eyes are faded green in color.

Looking back if I could change one thing about my life, I would go back into time and do all the things that I never did or got to see with her next to me and do all the things that- I was going to do throughout life, I had plans and those dreams could come true without her.

Born to live, born to die, some say… while- my saying is all is fair in love and war, because; I have done both, with each of them having the same consequences.

I will never lie to anyone or tell them something untrue. My type of personality is to be blunt and to the point, as you should know by now. If I think you are an ass hole, will I will tell you that to your face. I am not a very forgiving person anymore, you have three chances with me, and after that, I am done with you. You would be the same way if you had a life like mine. Call me better; call me pathetic, your names mean nothing to me anymore nor did they ever.

My mind goes back to these days often because she pulls at my heartstrings, like a gutter being tuned too tightly. To the point that I feel as if I am going to choke on the wood splinters.

Like the first time we meet I was in the first grist grade, in a one-room schoolhouse that had all eight grades in one sitting arrangement, she was crying because of separation anxiety, or that she had to walk to school in freezing rain either way she was upset, or maybe it was something more. I guess that I was the only one there that cared or know how she felt, or maybe I was the only one that was under her influence.

I tried to make it okay for her, from that point I had a crush on her that never seems to subside. I was going to do whatever I could to be there for her.

Why?

Why- I do not know, it just seemed that she was unlike anyone or anything that was in my life at that time, I was mesmerized.

She had everything that I desired even back then up through school, and she now it, it confusing how love works?

The ice has been broken; artwork and creativity can open up all kinds of doors, even the one to the heart. Did she make this impress me a drawing that I still have?

As of now, I do not know, however it was excessive, wonderful and beautiful. Just what I was looking for, someone that enjoys the same things that I do.

What more can I ask for?

I remember this one day when I was in school, she did a drawing, and it was breathtaking, I made a comment, and things started to work out for me, but just me being a boy I had no clue what I was doing. But will this blessing of a lucky streak last till the end of my life or will it change my life forever!

I remember art class and sitting behind her wanting to touch her hair because it looked so soft, I feel a high just by being in her presence and smelling that scent that was uniquely here's which after all these years never changed.

My granddaughter's name is Kristin, she is all I have left; she just had her seventh birthday, so I wonder how much longer I will have her in my life?

Indeed, Kristen is the only thing that keeps me going, she is the only light in my life. She reminds me of the girl that I affectionately named 'seventeen.' Yes, in every way, her personality, action, laughter and when I look into her eyes it's all the same as if am looking into the eyes of my love. I have never spoken about seventeen until now to her; no one even knows about the story but, yet Olivia would be her grandmother, not even my granddaughter now about seventeen.

Now that I am getting older, and getting closer to that casket, I feel that I should share my story with someone, so I decide on Kristen.

I have some of it on paper, yet my royal typewriter just smiles at me.

Because, I start and stop, plus the button letter N has gone missing, where it has to go is a mystery too. Now that would be a good book… 'The Missing N' by Brandon Deniel- ha! Now that's funny. Yes, I am an author in my mind!

So… that's just okay with me I am not a writer, I can even get a complete thought on the first page. There is nothing more annoying than that first white page, maybe there is, but I need to get this down somehow to get this despair to stop playing in my head. The paper is so old now that it is yellow in color.

The stack is just like my cracked teeth; hell, the little bell doesn't even go ding anymore. Plus, my hands hurt most of the time now… Ahh- never mind. I have spent most of my life trying to become what I am not. That is just another damn dream that was gone down the shitter and just like the planes in world war two.

Taking a drink and choking on it hard as it goes down- Anyways Kristen's parents Abbie and Divide, back in the day it is still mysterious what happened exactly. But I believe that David pushed her car off the side of a cliff as he was chasing behind her in his old work truck. The black marks on the highway made me believe that as so; you wouldn't have such making on the road if it wasn't forced?

Kristen's dad ended up with glass going throws chest cutting through his spin but lived paralyzed from the hips down. Abbie whom I didn't speak of until now ended up with the steering column through hart at the age of seventeen.

The steering column through the heart was not from the fall, it was done before the car went over the drop-off. It seems so unfair… only seventeen at the time. She could have had it all, a college degree, she could have been a doctor or something like that; no, she had to choose to be his b*tch, and she sucked his ass from day one until she died.

The divide was a monster just the same as Olivia's dad was to her; this just seemed to be an evil pattern in my life. The ones I love were gone forever at the age of seventeen, and then they hunt me because I was the one that cared about them.

They call me to their graves at night, and what can I do? I have to go and talk to them. They hug me, and then I come home and sit at the typewriter. With the desk lamp lighting, the keys and my hands are shaking on top of the buttons.

Thinking maybe I can tell someone of what goes on in my life. But their voice calls out to me Paul… Pa-ul and I have to stop, it like they do not want others to know what they do to me.

Kristen thinks I have flipped my nuts! There is no point in trying to find the key to their heart if you don't know the shape of the lock, so why keep going.

Only one of these spirit girls stays with me all the time. She follows me everywhere the spirit of seventeen-year-old Olivia. When people die, they stay the same age even in the afterlife. They look the same just transparent; Olivia is a tiny girl; she stands at five nothing.

And still her eye peers into my eyes into my soul like always.

Exhale noisily- Abbie used to come to me crying, with black eyes, and blood dripping from her inner thighs, saying to me look at what he is doing to me, I would say stay here… you don't need him, but she always went back to him, and there was not a thing I could do. He had an

almost demonic power over her just the same did Olivia father, they sucked the life out of these girls, in more ways than one, and used them whenever they wanted, and then throw them out like trash when they don't.

Divided was even more obnoxious to my grandbaby

Kristen, God only knows what he did to her… Kristen has a memory that terrifies my thought of mind. It reminds me of what Olivia went through in her child's life, it all the same only the names change, or so it seems to be, it is the curse of seventeen. When thinking about it creeps me out.

I wish all of those ass holes would have taken their belts and hanged himself with it, no! That would be too good for them… either way, justice comes with a price, and that was seventeen-years-old innocents and seventeen-year-old existences. These so-called men can fry in hell!

But that's a life I know one thing, I always try to do the right thing because after they're gone you have nothing but sad misgivings.

Raged David as I called him walked away, but later that year he put a rifle in his mouth and blow his brains all over his bedroom walls, on a life-size poster of my little granddaughter.

So now Abbie clings to my ankles as I walked to the cemetery as well. Yet I can't help but say I told you so, and she says I-NO-O in a moaning vocal sounding whisper!

Some say Abbie drove her blue Chevy bell air off the side of a mountain in a suicide; it was easier from them to say, then saying that a coal truck smashed into her and pushed her off the highway.

At least I have a seventeen-year-old friend, and his name is Jack Daniels, weird ever girl I ever love has died at the age of seventeen even my daughter, so I just made the choice to never love again, and I have kept that promise up till this point.

All these years… I have been pinning or what I cannot have, so I guess it is okay to drown my sorrows.

Abbie, she had a lover at the age of fifteen you see, she had Kristen at sixteen, little did I know that when I was fighting in the war Olivia was seven weeks pageant it's so scary how this all happened so fast, so it seemed, however

Olivia keeps that a complete secret from everyone even her dad until it started to show.

Part: 6

Hop

I remember going to the movies on the weekends, and what you would call making out the whole time. I remember going to dances and learn how to jitterbug with her. I could twirl her around like you would not believe, I remember going rollerblading on Sundays too, wishing the days would never end, oh yes, it's all coming back to me, those were the good old days.

I walk with a cane now, and ever since I got back from the war, I was shot in the foot. So, I was discharged earlier than expected, with the Medal of Honor, for the reason of my so call bravery; that I had in the mission of flight number you gusset it flight number seventeen. My best friend Aaron, went down in his plane if I would have known that I would have at least have said goodbye.

Yes, I was the only plane that survived, and that was me in plane number seventeen, with the black-haired blue-eyed pinup girl on the front.

When I got back that medal meant nothing to me, because I lost all ever had to the war, so no that honor sits on top of her stone that is under the weeping willow tree that we sit in as lovers, looking over the golden waters, and the gazebo of passionate love. When the wind blows the ferns in this immense tree, I can feel her soft warm body molding perfectly into mine, we line up as one being.

Anyways back to Abbie's car accident, it was flipped over on its roof there was Kristen, who was only about three at the time still inside the vehicle. It was only through the grace of God she survived somebody pulled her free. I think this because the door handle was broke- off with force, Kristen was only a baby at the time, she was not given to me…

This person stole her out of the car and then claimed her as one of her children. Jamie Keller keeps her locked up in a chamber that was cold, damp, and dark with only a light bulb

having from wires under the tin roof tiles. No bathroom, the windows covered up with wood planks, with the smell of shit everywhere in that basement.

To this very day, nobody knows who this evil person was, or what she was all about. It is like she was there and going before anyone got to know her. Who knows if that was her real name, I sure don't?

Until one day... I got one knock on my front door, and by the time I got there, the woman was gone. They're sitting at the doorstep was my granddaughter. She is now seven years old, there is was nude wraps in a blanket in a cardboard box, and I do not know how I feel if it was the emotion of being overjoyed or horrified?

Kristen had a broken cut up the wrist, and her fingernails were chewed down to the bone, her eyes bloodshot and tears running down her cheeks, and everything in-between bit up, you could see the human teeth marks.

She was Just left there cold and lonely snow falling on her tiny chest... With a note attached to her neck, saying this is your granddaughter; she is damn responsibility now, and I cannot take care of her any longer! Till this very day; I have never found this woman, it like she never existed.

She better hopes that I never do! I may be in the end stages of my seventies, but I can still kick some ass.

For years, I thought my granddaughter was deceased. That was what the wright up in the Coalville gazette babbled along with the cops said, for seven years this woman would have stomped, beat, slam, and tie-down my grandbaby, to a bed, and twist her feet and limbs until the bones would crunch, and her heels would be where her toes should be.

Without even knowing that she could have gotten away, but because she had a fear of wrath she never attempted. It is amazing how someone can brainwash some that are young. What can a little girl do to deserve this?

So, what could I do? I was not going to leave her out in the cold, plus how could I resist that adorable little girl. She always did have a way of melting my heart, and I guess always will. It would not have been for this little girl I would have given up on a life a long time ago. Now

that she is nearing the age of seventeen, she does not need me as much as she used too; I guess that my mission in life is over. Life goes by like a blink of an eye.

I did the best I could, but I often wonder if my best was good enough. But I often wonder if she is going to be the next seventeen-year-old girl on the list of heartbreak.

The only hobby I have as I get older is looking at the scenery that surrounds me, looking over gazebo that cascades a reflection on the pond along the walkway. Stumbling back and forth for the kitchen, I mumble in whispers, to the voices, while trying to write my fragmented thoughts down on paper, as they rush in my head faster than I can scribble with my pencil.

whispers I can hear, whispers I can feel, whispers the used to give me a thrill, whispers from the ones the kill, whispers that give me a chill, I recall whispers while making love, I hear them whispering from the wings of the dove, even the whispers for the above one. I hear whispers!

The seasons seem to change in a blink of my eye; the house I live in is surely over a- 100 years old, it is a craftsman in its style, nothing fancy just your ordinary house in the middle of the country land.

In this house, I have a gallery of all the photos that I made me into the person I am today, some are black-and-white, so are in color. Then some of them have never been taken at all there in my thoughts…

Those are the ones I missed most because they are fading away, especially the pictures that I never had of me in her, I wonder what she would have looked like as she aged, I wonder if we would have done more thing together, like travel the world, I wonder if we would of have a bigger family, and maybe a son that keep the name going.

I wounded if the curse of seventeen would have even happened if only I could go back in time. I wonder why- I lost all of my love when they turned seventeen.

One photo, in particular, is a picture of me standing next to my World War II plane, and another my favorite photograph that is in the center of them all is one that was considered quite risqué for the time, it is a sensual photograph of Olivia looking amazingly sexy she so poured in nature as can be in that stripped-down pose, I used to have that picture with me at all times, it slightly sticks out of my uniform pocket, and now it is in an old frame.

I kissed a photo so much that I wore a whole, on the lips.

Looking down my gallery, you will see a photograph of Kristen when she was ten years old, green-eyed girl to this day I cherish, with strawberry blond hair, she was a hell-raiser for her age, just like her grandfather.

Also, until this very day, nothing has changed she's still a holy terror that lingers in my head. My mind is like a slideshow projector that never turns off, yet the frames snag and twitches in the cogs until it's all distorted.

One of the other photographs that I find unique and intriguing depicts this very house with green siding and white trim, and the distance along the lane, that used to be let by flickering lanterns, those lanterns are long gone… Just to be replaced with posts that modern electric candlelight that some work and some don't, as of now on to old change light bulbs.

Hell, I still have about over the fear heights… Which sounds ridiculous coming from a World War II pilot? This property is becoming too much for me, I was hoping that I would live long enough to wear my granddaughter could inherit my empire of dirt, but as of now, it seems like a far stretch.

The house was once part of the working farm in the 1900s. As you can see from the old windmill and horse-drawn plow, sitting in the front yard. I sometimes wonder if the course I have is not for the seventeen-year-old girl named Megan that lived in this house, who hung herself supposedly accidentally in the whipping willow tree in 1917. She was broken-hearted that night, so the story goes because her lover was cheating on her with an even younger girl. The tree was the place Meghan went for her an escape.

Somehow, she was going to jump off in the fight however the rope got caught around her neck, and she was not found till the next mooring, I know this because she has talked with me to… Now and again I can see Meghan swing at night in a glowing white, singing the words to the to 'America the Beautiful.' The song that she was sings that night. Her voice is beautiful, but it is spooky to me. The rope swing that is hanging from the branches is still here, after all these years.

The windmill; yes, its missing halfwits its blades, yet it still twirls in the breeze, the ancient Watermill is still standing yet decrepit. Oh, how we used to swim around in the pound while the water proud on top of us, we were holding onto one each other, say that we would

never let go. That is a French kiss that I long for! She keeps her promise; I do what I believe is right! I am human I have made mistakes.

Looking at how it is still turning into woe clanking and cracking as the giant while goes around. You know I know how it feels; I feel the same way. I would have to say, I love and hate it here, I cannot make up my mind. It is probably the only thing that I still love in my life other than my granddaughter, but it is all dead, and that is what I hate the most! Just like the curse of seventeen, will it dye at pace or will it live on?

The treehouse was where I and Olivia played as children, and learn the defenses, between me being a boy and she a girl, Olivia was amazing to me even then.

The house was made by the Janz family, the dad made this house for his little girl named Meghan this was her spot but in her time. The treehouse is about 47 feet off the ground and has a swing.

From the porch, you can see the hayfields for miles, and that was when I had her hand for the first time, I would say she was about the age of seven. Looking at it now not much has changed the spring steep still wrap around the trunk, the wood and rope bridge spends over 20 feet accursed the trees. It was like a little castle that was only ours when we were kids. Meghan's name is scratched in the hardwood, along with this poem she wrote it cries when you read it, but does it mean anything?

The treehouse: If you read this your love will be with your forever. The dwellings that our love began where we became more than just friends. The place where you took my soul, the place you made me your fool. The treehouse tells the story of you and me, and how you made me cry.

The is the place where it all going to end, and so will I, without the love, it's all going to die, this is my time to say goodbye, and I will make sure that any couple that comes in here will always be more than a friend, even if life comes to an end. Your soul is with mine, at this time, there is nowhere you can hide, for she and I will always be at your side.

All of this is a part of me, and it going to go to the grave with me most likely, as I know that Olivia will never let go, now or ever. And the lands well, dissolve into nothing but dust, and rolling hills will end up with no memories, other than or gave stones with the names chipped away from old age.

Just as the sun it is going to burn out, my fire is fading just like the heat for a summer's day from the past, so why to live at all, if you don't have love, you do not have any worth living for, and having this type of love has been killing me slowly for years, I have been dying seen she was seventeen.

Generally, every day at its end I sit, and an antique chair and stare out the window and watch as the world goes by. And I think, and I think… to the point that I am probably going to end up with dementia.

I find myself laughing in my head for no reason, and then becoming very sad as I think about the life I had. Sad to think that she never really had much of a life and neither did Abbie ether. I would give up everything I have to bring both of them back.

I remember my first date, some would call it quite bland in today's state standards, but that is just what we did back in those days, we used to walk along the railroad tracks, and watch the stars… And the many galaxies, we used to play chicken with the oncoming steam trains. And lock lips under the moonlight, my first kiss was not until my thread date.

My date second with Olivia was at the ancient weeping willow tree with the swing; we would climb the tree, and sit holding hands. Maybe that was when the spell stated, I do not know.

Maybe it was because of Megan? Maybe she was the one that did this to me, maybe not, either way, I still wound why, who, and when.

My third date is the one that is still vivid in my mind, it was in a gazebo that is on my property now today, we walked along the lovely white bridge that links the walkway across the waters on the pond to the structure itself, and that is when things, was supernatural, there is no other word describe the touching the feeling, the thrusting.

All the emotions coming together at once, we made love under the scarlet black skies.

We were attached forever from that movement. We could hear the wave hitting the side of the land, which swayed and voyaged in the moving waters, which splashed against the gazebo frame.

You can smell the mist, I can still smell her perfume, for some reason it reminds me of strawberries. I am sure if that is right or not the right at all, but that is what I compare it to. Just

like our love that was left inside an awareness, it can be washed away, the waves remind me of her coal-black hair lying in layers puddled on the wood plank flooring of the gazebo.

We were like the one at the twilight breeze, and it seemed as if our bodies were floating on top of the glassy pond in which we were on. Now that breeze brings me to my knees, as I scream the word, 'WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO ME!'

Whom would I know that Abbie was in the making that night? I had no clue, back then you had one move and one style. Now a day's you have to be an Olympian just to get the job done. In my opinion that takes all the romance out of the state of affairs.

Let us not forget to mention in those days you did not put shrink-wrap, on it, or have and have a plan of getting rid of it… you went against the odds, and fate would take place or not, you had to think about what you were doing. Along with I was thinking at the time I do I want this, and I am I going to live with it no matter what happens. I did not care at all really; I was truly in love with Olivia, so I live with the consequences, and I good a new life in my life but only for seventeen years.

Part: 7

Confidential

I will never forget Olivia saying, I know you want me! Like I want all of you, I want to, I need to taste you, feel you inside me, and I know that you have been dreaming about me since we were really little. Besides you know you want it. I recollect saying I feel the same way about you. I remember her swallowing down hard, and saying I want to do this more than you even know, and gasping on the words. Of course, I have dreamed of this moment with you.

Olivia said that she fantasized about me scene she was about eight years old, every night to the point she could not sleep at night. She said that she would lick her fingers, and reach down and tickle herself until her fantasy would peak with a thrilling squirting spray that drizzled all over her bedsheets. She still looks to me as I sleep. Anyways she said that gave her worth and satisfaction, within her body and mind. Afterward, her dreams would begin as she would be relaxed into a deep slumber holding her teddy bear as if it was me.

That night in the gazebo, she was so wet down there and so tight, she pulled my pants down so fast the button zip like a stone on top of the pond. Her breasts shined in the moonlight,

and her nipples were pointed as if they were looking at me as we were doing it, staring at me sweetly; just the same as she was during the whole time, everything on her was bouncing up and down as well as around. Her hips smacking into mine, she said that she loved me on top of her, and she wrapped herself arms around me.

I had never felt anything like this before in my life when I entered, we lost our virginities to one another. I will never forget her eyes rolling, the sounds she made, and the faces she made out of passion, it still takes my breath away.

We went for about two minutes; she was moaning the words like. And I can hear that same moaning every day. But back the words were like 'Oh yes, right their baby.'

I will never forget awards she began to cry so hard that that droplet of blood would run down her sweet little face, so I just held her in my arms all night, until she falls asleep with her had on my chest. She said she likes to listen to my heartbeat. Naturally, that was one amazing summer.

I remember sliding down her pink panties that night and sliding her dress up and off of her petite little figure. I remember her fingers touching me everywhere, I remember putting my fingers in places I had never had them before.

She made me tingle and still does. She was so gorgeous when she was looking up at me; well she was on her knees. But nothing ever compared to her legs spread out before me, she had one of the savory flavors of strawberries.

Those are the nights that I will never forget even this old mind can forget that. The nights that are love ignited and never snip apart and yes, it is still going strong. I could never think of another girl this way ever again. She was the first, my first love; my first in everything, all this happen before she was seventeen, and she was my first ghost, that embraces me.

Who would have thought my first time, would be my only time with her, yes is the only one that, I have loved in my life?

I have gone most life without now because there is no other girl I want to be connected with. It is more than just a collection of bodies; it is mating of hearts and souls as well and I do not us to ever end that bond. Besides once you make these connections, in my opinion, they can

never be broken, you always remember your first, and they hold something sacred to you and yours that you and she will never forget. It would never be the same it never perishes.

Nothing has even given me the slight of interest afterward; once you get it, you want more from the same person over and over, for a whole summer's break that was all we did, we christened that gazebo every night, buy joining hearts and souls.

Besides now is beside are bond always and endlessly until the end of all time. As you know my heaven with her all end, and my hell began.

There was nothing more exhilarating than the thunderstorms, the pouring down rain, you know that everything is better when gone! She would claw her nails into my back to the point my back blooding. As I crested her seventeen-year body as lightly and softly as possible; yes, I have scars to this very day, just like a permit tattoo of devotion.

I think this is one reason I am hex not being able to let go, I loved her love that she had for me and that she gives to me.

So, does that make any sense? It is just what happens to come to mind now and again. That I have the marking of seventeen on scared in my back, you can still see it today and oddly it looks like the number seventeen.

Just like Olivia's spirit that follows me everywhere I go, yes- she is still in connecting with me every a-waken hour of the day. Even though she is no longer alive on this planet we can still communicate, almost like a telegraphic power, I can hear whispers along with others that I have adored.

After I give this letter to her, I know that my life would never be the same again. I did not know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, it was just the way it had to be at the time.

It was not what I truly wanted, plus I had never been away from home. I have never been more than ten miles away from my hometown of Coalville.

I have never been away from her loving arms and soft warm body all my life. I knew that I was going to miss her, her personality, her ways, and hear everything.

My attention goes back to these days often because she pulls at my heartstrings like a gutter being tuned too tightly. That she likes to play in my ears now and then. This happens to the point that I feel as if I am going to choke on the wood splinters.

I remember the first time we meet; I was in the first grist grade. We were in a one-room schoolhouse that had all eight grades in one sitting arrangement, she was crying because of separation anxiety-tears of blood because she had to walk to school in freezing rain and snow. I guess that I was the only one there that cared to know how she felt?

I tried to make it okay for her, from that point; you know I had a crush starting than on her that never seems to subside. I was going to do whatever I could to be there for her no matter what. Why I do not know it just seemed that she was unlike anyone or anything that was in my life, at that time I was mesmerized it was love at first sight.

Still, the ice had been broken for us and we become friends. Artwork and creativity can open up all kinds of doors even the one to the heart… she made a drawing that impresses me so much that I still have it. It was a drawing of a girl sitting on a swing with a big tree in the background; it was wonderful, beautiful, and yet spooky.

She was just what I was looking for in my life. We were the love that we need that we both never had before in our young lives. We brought joy to one author, just the same as we do even now. What more can I ask for?

I remember- all the classes and sitting behind her wanting to touch her hair, because it looked so soft, and looking at her backside, I felt a high just by being in her presence, and smelling that scent that was uniquely here's with never changed.

Speaking of that drawing, and it was breathtaking– you can see it is hanging in that frame over there on the wall, it's yellowing now from old age and tattered in its look, but I still have it!

I remember- that I made a comment at the time, and she gives it to me, and that is we things started to work out for me like never before, but just me being a boy I had no clue what I was doing, but I knew- I wanted more. But was all this a blessing of a lucky streak or not.

Either way, it is going to last all my life and never end, yet it ended all my other chances forever!

Yet her spirit- is like a snowstorm in December cool and lonely, yet beautiful like a fall day and berth taking in the memory of thinking about the days we had together in the summer before the beginning of the end.

After the war my injury did stop me from working in the coal mines, something is thrilling about working seven miles on the ground, in total darkness. The coal mine was not the job I wanted, but it the one I had that paid the bills.

I remember the coalmines walking to that cage of a shattered dream; you can see the conveyors and lights in the dissents along with the stars, which are glowing in the midnight skies to not see the light of day for hours. Yes, only to end up with blackened lungs, to make a working man's play for the family that I have.

They drop us down that hole, and it feels like your lunch is going to come up into your mouth. You snap that light on, and you remanded that if there is a rockfall that you will never see your loved ones again.

Bouncing along on the mantrip, to get off and start the day, that seems to never end. That shaft is so low that you are always bent over, water run down your slacks constantly. You feel like you pissed yourself. Oh, being six miles down and six miles out is bone-chilling.

Having a respirator just plan sucks, so I hardly ever have one on my face, I just chew gum; all I have to do is think about what I am leaving behind if I do not for some reason make back home. She and the little one knows that I love them. But could they live without me? Yet we know that they would be protected.

Part: 8

Thank you, Next

(Past)

I never really wanted to live a day without her next to me, I remember how we used to go to this little amusement park that still has the old standing to this very day aside friction wood rollercoaster built-in 1902.

It has these big old comfy train cars that sit two in the front and two in the back, they rattle back and forth on the track, but we loved it because you could not help but bump into one

another hips and put your hand on each other's knees and legs. Back then everything was done by hand; like pushing the car on the chine to go up the lift hill of 41 feet, and to stop was done by a man that would pull on a handle, to have the brakes grind the train car to a halt when coming into the station.

The costar next to the lake has a top speed of 17 miles per hour not fast but it was romantic for its day, on this coaster was the first time- I put my arm around her and we became more than friends, that last leap you get airborne, and get to snuggle your love and squeeze what you like.

We still ride this coaster now and then, but with Kristen, and Olivia hovers above us.

Just about every day Kristen and I sit down at the dining room table and, I tell her stories of back in the day. We have the same meal of canned soup, canned peaches, and Pepsi in a can. I have not had a home-cooked meal in years.

Every morning I have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich doubled over, a cup black coffee with three spoons full of sugar that so strong it could walk, it makes me cough going down, then I start popping the peals that keep me going. I have not slept in a bed for years; I sleep in my char in the living room.

The bed has never used; the sheets have never slept in the bed and have a canopy in soft purple just the way she always wanted.

Why you ask because that was the bed, we planned on being in together. She grow-up with a mattress on the floor, and only had one blanket, and a teddy bear that I give her, she was lucky to have a pillow, times were trying during The Great Depression.

I remember as a kid my dad giving me a pace of old bread with coffee on top and that was all I got in the one-day meal. Olivia's mom before she died made her dresses out of floral flower bags. So much wind and dust, no one can believe it unless you lived it, yet we had one another.

Television did not come out until the about 1950's, and it was snowy as hell, shit you only had one channel and had to get off your ass to turn it on and off, plus it went off the air at midnight.

Everything was on the radio, and back then, or You talked to your neighbor about your day and what was going on, as well as sit on the porch at night. Not like today at all!

Part: 9

NY

I remember my dad telling me about this new highest building in New York is that was just compiled, and that was The Empire State Building. Think about that I and Olivia planed on to see it, along with the Statue of Liberty, but it never happened.

I have to pop peels now; I do not know if any of them do anything. They make me feel like I did in the 1960s my mind starts thinking and it takes me back. They say I should not have a drink now, because I am on so many medications, but I do not care anymore.

The only thing that could happen is that I would kick the bucket, hell that would be a good thing. Put me under the tree next to my lover, I have lived too long now, 80 years is too long without love. Yes, I am 92 years old and still kicking, just not as high.

I think of when she and I were about 10 years old, she used to ride sitting on top of my handlebars on my pulled bike, going down the hill as fast as we could, having her hair blowing in my face. I can still hear giggling in my ears while she would saying go faster… faster!

I remember this one-time way back when I had what it took to get another girl that was in the 1960s. Hell way not everyone needs what is real to feel consoled.

Sometimes, you have to stray away to know what you love in life, that is what it is all about.

Life tip If you stay in one place too long life gets old fast, I fun before you get old, or start to have doubts.

It is just like the footprints in the snow, sometimes you see two sets, and sometimes not. Now and then you look back on the path you made that is your life, and only see on set. However, they are not yours, so I have come to realize that is when I was carried through the hard or difficult times.

Did I have to get another lover? Well, that is up to you to figure out? Just remember it is not always what you do that stops you from what you wanted in life, it is something or some that being there and pulling at you!

Furthermore, afterward, you look back on life and think, maybe I should have done this, or maybe I should have done that, do not waste your time. It is all meant to be even if you cannot foresee.

The journey is not always clear, however, I always got where I wanted to go, I remember a time when I had an opportunity to find love again in a living form. On the other hand, I would hear the voices calling out say 'Listen you do not need to talk to her okay. Do not try to ask her on dates or anything.'

Life tip- You need to make yourself lesion to what you want to hear even if it difficult to move on. Life is a fight for what you want. If you want it you are going have to corroborate and let go of the past. Love is just like fighting in a warplane, your ether- got- shot down, or you have someone else firing a bolt at you. Either way, it always ends in a climaxing explosion, it is just how it is going to come about in the end.

I think this… about the voices, you do not have control over what I can and cannot do… so shut up, please. And the voices say to me…

'No need to talk to her.' Well, I say- I can talk to whomever I want, and you are not going to stop me. Over the years, I have come to see it is not a true relationship if the person is afraid of what they can and cannot do.

Just because it is the way it is now, does not mean shit. All relationships are going to end naturally or not, it is all up to you and what you want, I choose to say in this relationship forever, and doing it is to different sometimes.

Just remember you have chosen, so are you going to run scared? So, are you going to listen to your inner voice?

The voice that follows you is the one that you choose to lesion to, there is a good one, and evil ones just recollect about that statement, and you will see that it is true.

Kristen- I live with my grandpa; I am all he has at this point, I know that he was a good man, but I think he is a little too guppy for his good.

Brandon- Kristen has a very high-pitched squeaky voice, that is so cute, and unlike any other girl I ever knew. Her hand can fit into the palm of my hand, her giggling laugh is the only thing that warms me and feels the emptiness in the space of my heart, just like a snare drum I not so hollow when around her. She just has a way of making my day complete. Without her I would not have any bet or cadence to play, she is a rhythm to my melody.

She just like Olivia was at that age so cute … with her braces on her teeth and the way she looks at me. When she waked up to me, I sometimes find it hard to speak because she looks so much like her.

I remember Olivia had a summer job at the 5 and 10 where is made five cents an hour while standing on the perfect little feet. Back then you had to be nice to the people in the stores, besides, ask them if they need help with anything.

Now it is like they are doing- a fever for you just to get checked out. 'Get your shit and get out.'

Anyway, back to my story so I used to go in there and talk to her at the cash register that magic spot for flirting together. The perfect girl what can I say.

Kristen, she was a lot like you! Blue eyes and so damn sweet, back then she was all I wanted to do was run to her. But instead, I had to walk out the door, just remember this Kristen that 'True love should not be such a game; you need to feel the same.'

I don't remember said Brandon; it will come back to me in flashes… Kristen asked; so, where do you consider being places for romance? Brandon- Romance does not exist do not kid yourself, honey.

YES- yes, its dose said Kristen, how is that said, Brandon?

Brandon- you can't have romance if you're not in love.

Kristen- Okay I remember the first time having sex in the restaurant man's bathroom! On the fool with me on top… oh god!

I don't need to know that said Brandon, that not Romantic that is rap. You are not even seventeen yet, that shit should have been a secret to only and perishes to you and saved for marriage! At least love the guy.

Oh, papa you are so old fashion said Kristen, yes maybe so whispered, Brandon … however, in my day we would have not even thought about doing such a thing, with being in love.

So, has this guy ever asked you to marry him? Yes, but not whom you would expect, I do not think that I loved him. Maybe your right, I should've- loved him, all we are is just friends with benefits.

Though I do not think that being romantic is not dead this day, it does exist. You just need to be with the right guy, which can show you what real expressions of love is!

Brandon- enough of this babbling… back to my story. Yes, she is still in high school, and I am six years older; but age is just a number- right? I guess said, Kristen!

After Kristen goes to her room at night I look out my window in the summer, and my wondering eyes overlook the honey golden lake that splashes as the sunlight flashes and shines my life before my eyes in one blink as the sun sets, and the darkness comes to let me know that I am sitting here in my home alone, thinking that on this very lake we had our the first kiss on the bridge that is along the walkway to the gazebo.

The sight of beauty is worth beholding forever even if only exists in my memory as it once was. Look at this house, look at the life I have had what does it stand for… what?

What do you think it stands for Kristen? Kristen said I don't know yet you have not said anything yet that makes any sense to me, but that okay I still love ya!

In 1944 I, do not know what to think? Yes, no, maybe? Someone give me a sign or something? That was what I was thinking Kristen if you learn anything from this story is that man- are damn stupid, when it comes to being smooth around a crush. It is like every song is about her; everything you see is not as good as her… do you know what I mean? Love is the heart line that just happiness when you least expect it.

Back then it was not about friends approving of us even being together like it is today? I know some of them may, and then again how do I know what they might say, hopefully, it is all good. Back then everything about a girl that was a mystery. Not like the days, it is like everything is given away in an instant and that is the end of the innocence.

The conversion ware light-hearted, and modest.

Nevertheless, it was a remarkable achievement of accomplishment; looking back at how completed it can be, you had to wait a week before even know that your letter got back home, or if it would be returned to sender, and I got most of them back because of her dad.

It should be that cupid's arrow strikes at a most unlikely time, and you may realize that they have been in front of you all along that is what love is all about, a relationship that will change you in many ways for good. It is a time when a new relationship looks like it is about to deliver on the promises that came with it. Life may never be the same again without them.

So just to have her know that I am even there even now that's what I call love. Wishing her goodnight and sweet dreams even throw she not here and have to see what the next day brings just like she is beside me.

So back to my story Ha! Will I guess as of now I know I am going to call this the curse of seventeen?

Oh, yes to be under the spell of girl is like getting hit below the belt. When you have a love like this see it is going be like instant nausea.

To know that she is going to be the only one that I can love, but the one in need to love, even if she does not love me anymore in this life… She is it… the one, the only… the seventeen dream that now haunts me, that tease me, that toys with me and plays around in my dreams and my day to day activities.

That reminds me that I am all alone in my old age, with seventeen black cats, and Kristen how has grown up too fast.

Oh, I field to mention that Kristen's mother Abbie was only seventeen at the times she died, and she haunts me just the same but only at the graveyard, however, Olivia spirits swarm in my brain and around my mind constantly, and their past life rushes through my veins.

She speaks and talks to me in whispers, to the point I collapse in exhaustion from being overwhelmed with emotions.

Kristen's father does not speak to me, as far as I am concerned, he can burn in hell, for what he did my daughter. Yet all these spirits are like a snowstorm in December cooled and lonely, yet some are beautiful and breathtaking in their memory.

Just like thinking about Olivia back in the days, we had together before the beginning of the end.

Ha, I am getting a vision, oh yes- I remember this day, Kristen comes here, and let tell you about this story.

Legend has it- Jamie Keller was out in her yard during a storm digging graves for her seven children, and she was killed by the underwire in her bar by getting struck by lightning. I have no clue if this true or not, but she needed to fit if it is real.

Kristen remembers the seven girls, two of them tweens, I can remember their names, but I can feel their discomfort. This woman is in hell now, for what she did to my Kristen and her kids.

That reminds me that finding someone else to loves it was like me putting an elevator in the old shit house outback it is just not going to work now or ever. I knew that your great-grandfather had problems Kristen but who could have foreseen what he did to Olivia your grandmother.

I later found out her dad used to keep her locked in a room, like a dog locked in a cage, she was like a puppy that has her snout hit too many times with the newspaper.

This girl was broken mentally, emotionally psychologically, and spiritually, the evenly she went mad because I was not there for her. The sick ass hole would come into her room and look at her and stroke her as she would sleep. She had to sleep with one eye open at all times. But that did not stop what happened.

I remember some night when she little she would climb outside the window of her dad house, by picking the lock with her hair clip, and claimed down the trellis that was littered with roses in the summer night; in her nightdress, just, because she said that she was lonely for me.

But I now know that was not the only reason. And just like that she would be standing in front of me she would take off her night top and placed it on the rocking chair that was agent to my bed, and then she would crawl in with me, and hold on to me so tightly, that I felt that she was suffocating the life out of me. Little did I know that is exactly what she was doing?

She always fell asleep resting her head on my chest, she must have felt safe in my arms. I guess that is why she was always so tired because of him, I guess that is why she loved me, I was

always there for her, and after everything, she went through. Plus, she said that she liked to hear my heart beating. Back then there was nothing more I ever wanted to be then was her hero!

Just like the one night, I noticed that her legs and inner thighs were all cups up, she said that it was because she was out on the river in her yellow rowboat and it capsized.

She said- 'you know that I can swim very well…' and that the rocks were sharp. I did by a word of it. I knew the markings on her legs were done with a razor blade or a dull knife. She never wanted me to ask about it again… so I didn't.

That night she told me about the time that she nearly drowned when she was seven-years-old. Back then I had no idea that her dad was holding her down under the water in the bathtub by her hair, and that was the first time he laid his hands and fingers on her.

To this very day, I could slaughter that man for what he did to my lovely seventeen- girl. But by the time I got back from the war he was on the ground. Nonetheless, that did not stop me from pissing on his gravestone! That maybe Kristen's great-grandfather but I have no respect for the man, and neither will she… no one will.

Part: 10

Golden

All we ever had was the gazebo on top of the golden water, with my seventeen-year-old lover; the blue eyes shekel into mine lost in time. Tell pasture grasslands blowing in the breeze, kissing her would bring on our knees.

The flowers in bloom all around in the spring, the trees with colors that display their majesty just for us. Leasing to her sing in my ears added to all the lust, she was whispering sweet nothing that

I can still lightly hear.

I was the only one she could trust, being together was a must for both of us. No matter what the weather, our love was forever and ever, I will remember.

Her hands that I loved to hold, the story that we told. We said that we be together even when we got old. Just like that song

'Remember When' that would be the story of our lives. That is, we would have bands of gold, and someday it is our baby to hold.

I forgot about this, but she would sing to me, she had the voice of an angel!

You know that Kristen looks and sounds just like her... I do believe that reincarnation is possible?

So, I gave Kristen all the poems I wrote to Olivia because she would hide under her pillow anyway, plus now they have been made into songs that Kristen play to me on this old piano that sits here in the living room.

Speaking of interments to this day I still have Olivia's 1920's guitar, the wood is now cracked, and the high E string is broken, it most likely it will never play a song in tune again, but I do not have the heart to throw it away, it was played with love and compassion by her.

So, I plan on giving it to Kristen so that maybe we can get it working again if I have the energy. It is on my to-do list! A list that seems to get longer as my days are getting shorter.

You know it is like me when I look out my window, I can still see her out on that boat just floating the day away.

Yes, that was one of our hobbies that we would like to do.

Going out on the water, and embarrass one another until it was so back out that we could not see the dock any longer. All we could see was the lights and reflections flickering in the water, that was so picturesque and tranquil, it was a fairytale-like.

From the gazebo, that seemed to be the creation of everything, we were at the time. We had the perfect elements for love, a forbidden lovers' equestrian on the water of time that seem to ever steal when locking as one.

On the other hand, in are fairytale there were many dark storms, that the father caused, he was going to end it at all costs, even if that meet heartbreak and torture.

In addition to that he did he said that I was the one that did all those terrible twisted things to his daughter, and that is why I listed in the Army, I had to leave. There was nothing I could do but hand here my note.

Nothing, that I could do or say again; because- I never saw her again after that. All I had was notes that never got to her.

I remember- in the summer, my wondering eye overlooks the honey golden lake that splashes, as the sunlight flashes. It shines my life before my eyes in one blink as the sun sets, and the darkness comes to let me know that I am walking back to my home alone.

Thinking that on this very lake we had our first kiss on the bridge that is along the walkway to the gazebo.

Part: 11

Lifetime

Look at this house it is the home we always wanted to have together, look at the life; I have had what does it stand for… what? What do you think it stands for Kristen? Kristen said it shows that you cared! Yes, said Brandon, that is true love.

Back to them Hope and her love- Nevaeh's tells about her life and the ones before.

1944, I do not know what to think? Yes, no, maybe? Someone give me a sign or something that has happened? That was what I was thinking Kristen if you learn anything from this story, it's like every song is about was about her everything you see is not as good as her… do you know what I mean?

Love is the heart line of happiness. With that kind of flat-lined something is going to snap, and it did.

Just to have her know that I am even there. Oh, just too able to be with her for a couple of days again in life. Maybe there is a date on the way at the end of my life. While Kristen it is getting least, we will talk about all tomorrow, go get some rest.

It is interesting that when Kristen is asleep, I check in on her often. You know there is nothing more comforting than hearing her snoring away, she is so adorable! I do this for two reasons that I have a hard time sleeping at night. Two that I want to make sure that she is still berthing because I do not think, I could take another loss.

My heart is just too week, and she is the only one that, I love left in my life. I look around the room, and the white laces on the windows are tied back, with lavender ribbons.

I know that she is content, holding her teddy bear, under her canopy bed, she may be seventeen in two weeks but as for now, she will always be my little girl.

The crystal chandelier is dimmed as low as it can go, with a soft glimmering creamy warmth.

So now that I know that everything is okay, I shut the door keeping it cracked slightly. I will shuffle my feet back down the staircase, make my way back to my old char, which is in the living room. Then stare out the window at the pond and gazebo until the sunrise.

I remember my saying to me when I was a boy 'Early to bed and early to rise, shell makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.'

My mother used to say to me every night; I still try to believe that is so. Nonetheless, I cannot help but scratch my head and matter in my mind these questions. Just because one is wealthy does not mean that they need to be a d*ck to everyone that has less. Just because one is healthy does not mean that they cannot become deathly sick, that saying just does not work for me.

Not too many out there know what it's like to have a seventeen-year-old transparent ghost in all white in your face being playful and animated all the time. Even when you take my glasses off, she is showing up in your face as clear as day. It makes it hard to slumber throughout the night.

Why; for the reason that you are going to realize that, you are all alone when you're not alone. That even the dreams that you have are just as painful as being awake.

Not painful as being injured or cut, but as emotionally and psychologically difficult, and it is straining on the old bran to grasp.

Just like a Chicago song; she was my inspiration, Kristen she is now what gave me my life mining, and she is the only thing that gave me any feeling, without I am just an empty body.

'Before I go to the place of no return, I remember that I had to live in a land of gloom and utter darkness.' So true, I do not fear the unmown anymore. 'For though I should walk in the center of the through the valley of death, they have comforted me before so maybe it will have to be my turn, even on earth the spirits are with me, I will fear no evil anymore.

Part: 12

Nibbana

Olivia is from the paradise above: I would say that she is looking over me, she comforts me as much as she can. But then it is hard not having her here, in her earthly body. It can be hard having faith in something that cannot be expressed in words.

But it is just something that you can feel, like the rain on a warm spring day, like the blossoms from the pear trees landing on your shoulders as a walk down the path to the gazebo, similar to the haze from the golden water; it all reminds me of Olivia when she was my seventeen.

I still go to the same church that I have going to all my life, and I give what I can. I sit in the back, with Kristen by my side; she is the only youth there. It seems that faith is gone away. I have a pad for all my sins, and that is what I want to Kristen know, always to do the right things at all times. To think before you do something because you may just have to live with it or it all life and it stays with you forever.

I can hear her whispering Paul, Paul- I am still with you, and I love you, I lo-v-e you, Brandon! It is drawn out, and sweet and soft and lingering. It makes the hair on my arms stand up. Yet it is stimulating and yet melancholy at the same time. Kristen must think that I am going loopy… ha- well I am old; she thinks that all old people are irrational.

Hell, I was the same way at her age… saying that 'I hope I would die before I get old.' Whom the hell used to say that good shit, well I can't remember… who? I have seen a lot come and go in my life; I just wish I could remember all of it, like Woodstock.

All I remember was mud all over all the nude people, it smelt like shit, and Jenny Hendrix was playing the star-spangled banner, which was astonishing weird. It seems that all good musicians dye to young. Life comes and goes just like a hit song, and once you get sick of the riff, and the fame that is when it is all over. The same can be said about existence!

Here is one of the notes that I fished: Thinking about her and the summer and what it could be, with her it reminds me of Seventeen- you're on my mind all the time and, I think about you yet we're not together. The stars shining combined with ribbon holding hands forever you are my eternal love.

Part: 13

Memory forfeiture

Me freaking out video being the top room, on MFC! ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈

Sometimes I get so preoccupied trying to perfect everything that I forget to appreciate the things that are already perfect. Like, have you ever been in love with a girl that you cannot have in your life?

My mind is achy half on and half off, most of the time. A lot of my dreams are the true reality, so it seems to me, then when I am awakened, I am frightened by what I do not see, and curious about what I do.

In my life, I try to put these thoughts and moments down into a story. And this is what I am telling you. What I'm saying right now Is wonder if it even makes any sense. But this was my true reality, a tragic love story… That did not end, the way I wanted.

There is one thing that is on my mind, and that is Kristen so-called boyfriend, he drives up in a piece of shit car, honks the horn three times, and my sweet innocent granddaughter goes running out the door in a short skirt, to hem like he is the only guy in the world. Jayson Parker in the ass hole that deflowered my little girl.

I can't stand hem; he is a cocky blue balled punk. You know when you take a girl out you should meet her at the door of the home and walk her to the car open the damn car door for her. If I would have done that back in my day… God, you would never hear the end of it. It- is just not right.

Not only that but he expects her to pay for the date, the food or whatever they do. Plus, then he wants to bump and grinds on her too. God-talk about selfish, yet she thinks he is the only one with one in his trousers.

So, I told him- 'I have bolt cutter out in the shed, and I am not afraid to use them; that what said to Jayson'. Then when they get back, they make out in the car, and he kicks her out like she is nothing to hem. Back in my day you walked the girl up to the door and maybe you got a little kiss, besides your tongue didn't need to go down each other's throat along with other things, it's sick.

I said to Kristen don't though your life away but that what is going to do. But you can only talk about someone so much, young people are going to do what they want to do. I was the same way back in the day, ha… but they don't need to know that. It is just my time to move on. And lose another seventeen-year-old girl.

Just to think that my little girl is going to have her seventeenth birthday, it just seems like yesterday that she was born so much has changed scenes than.

All she has to do is say my name and my knees get a week, I am in love or am I in too deep? What I am feeling that makes me want more and more.

But I know that I have to walk out that door of life. Yet, I know that I can never I cannot hold you in my arms forever.

There is always someone in the way or, so it seems. I believe in not saying one negative word so that I can receive my blessings that will, and can bring me joy.

My Kirsten is my everything to me, all her blue eyes still shine for me, and Olivia kisses still takes my breath away tell this very day, you are mine and I would not have it another way. Even if I have to eat coal dust, and even if I have lost it all to the hex of seventeen.

Part: 14

Swathe

Video: MFC me nude showing it all for you saying: 'ant- I the cutest!' ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈

So, there is only one more thing to do and that is this. Please do not open this letter until you think it is the last day of your life.

This was the last note she wrote to me.

So, all these years- I have been wording what is in this envelop? I always felt that nothing word change how I felt, nor did I don't care, I will open it and read it.

It reads- you will know what happened to me, I never leave you ever. When you burn this note, which is the end of your life. Also, it is the end of me being with you in spirit.

We can finally be together in eternal life, so my sweet Brandon burn this letter, and we can be in love once again.

Olivia after- I left she could take anymore she killed her father with an ax; it was a crime of passion and hatred. And that is the night she made this me the love letter that I have in my hand, I never that it was also a suicide letter.

She left her home for the last time, naked as the day she was born, and laid down on the railroad tracks weighting for the next train to run her over. It was over…on her seventeenth birthday. And my life was empty ever senses, but I did not know how it happened all these years.

Her spirit may be with me, and it may hunt me, but it is nothing like having that worm seventeen body next to me. Never to kiss those lips again to hear her voice again, and never hear her laugh again.

All I have left some crumpled up photo in a letter of abandonment. All I can say is I hope that we both end up being in the heavens together once more. Just remember do not let your dreams go with you to the grave.

It is time to barn this note! Brandon's last berth on earth and first in the heavens… There she was the same as the last time I saw her seventeen a glowing but this time she is mine forever, now that is love. Kristen, this is the story of a seventeen-year-old girl, the love of my grandpa's life.

The man was the rock in my life too. I found some of his notes and enjoyed his story so much that, I need to write them down into this book.

I never know that what was he was telling me over the year was all true; I made him the promos to publish this story so that he could always be remembered.

For love, he had for the one that never left his side. All I can say is that the curse of seventeen went to the grave with him, so I believe. For the reason that- I am still here, and I am now the age of seventeen.

Yet, he is still with me in spirit.

Nevaeh

Book: 16

Crescent Moon

Chapter: 106

The Confusion?

Karly- I got Miss. Cammy girl award, you voted, and I won! ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈

2016- Boys today feel that feeling is hummping! Olivia always feels absent-minded after the kids come home from school and seeing her husband after a long hard day at work. She forgets everything about her day when seeing them, it's the highlight of her day. Even though their day is about to end hers is about to start, she races off without even a hug. Yet that's just me- I have a hectic life. 'Well?' she prompted. She had wanted to save the news, to torture her by not telling, but he had to talk.

~*~

I read a book that had the first chapter like this- and it oh so reminds me of life and how it is becoming. 2021- 'It was a yearning to burn.' The computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I- pads, and PC's, without looking through old dusty pages, plus its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unpredicted sex. They were dragging the two women; we saw last night by the hair. I don't want to look, I didn't want to stare, and I just acted like I didn't care. Both girls where complete bare. Their lives where over it seemed so unfair.

A girl without a name just a number of hers- I look at my girlfriend and said and said- we just so two hookers getting whacked and jacked. She said- yeah, I no let's get in the house before they get any ideas about us. There was a thump and a bump in the night, and not the kind of thump and bump you want or want to feel and hear. Honey- hon wake up; I think there is someone in the house! Go and see!

Wh-a- what? I looked and there is someone at the foot of the bed!

Blood dripping, from her chest, she is scared to look down yet does it anyway. She was thrown around the room by something dark. It wasn't a woman yet; it was a thing it wasn't anything but unfairness. It was unlike anything she had ever seen. But what was it? No face, no name, nobody... what could it be, and what does it want with me? A flash of lightning appeared in the sky, letting her see the gigantic outline of the grim reaper is what I got by them! Doing exercise helps to boost the power energy nevertheless, she could not boost it enough, not enough to escape from the... Thing. It was sucking the life out of her with its dark back lips. Slowly closing her eyes, she was with me, in my mind. Yet never alive after that day.

Nothing but impressions of life…

~*~

Start: 1941- Grandpas Natalie story- he'd remember... been fresh out of high school not a day over seventeen. I had five cents to my name, I was still living at home, but not for long. I was a virgin, to the world! I never saw anything other than farmland. I didn't know what I was in for. Yet I had to go... Hitler was taking over, killing babies and baring them alive of all things. I will never forget the sounds of the troop train steaming through, dropping off more maggots like me to kill the Nazis'.

Knowing that ninety percent of them would not make it back home. I never thought I would live this long, and I never thought young-ins would doubt the war and the Holocaust.

I have seen men, women, and kids being lined up on their knees and shot in the back of the head, for no reason at all. It's incredible, tragic, and despicable, how one man's loathing can start so much destruction. I do believe that history is going to repeat; it's just a matter of time. I just hope I can fish this story with you all before I am fished myself. He had to share it with someone. He put the plate down, came into the living room, and sat on the couch, which me here this all there was more yet he passed midline.

As I wake alone this morning, I miss the feeling of last night the softness of the sheets between my thighs. I look around the room and nothing has changed, she still sleeps next to me, yet sees can't see me. Yet I see her, and in a way, I think she can feel me there, yet I am not quite sure... I have been gone for so long now I don't think she even remembers what it's like to be with me as we were oh so long ago. It like I was never there, but I was there at one time holding her, I still there, yet I ask not... I would love to be alive, once more. I could talk to him now, yet I don't want too, for being a meanie as she said to me!

He and Diana had nicknamed the Butt. 'It was a bust,' he said. 'Cops came the night of this party.' She watched him carefully.

'Are you sure you want to do this, Marcel?' she said unobtrusively. 'Come on, Diana.' He was annoyed that she'd even asked. He hoven on her legs into his lap. The message was in order on the back butt and in-between her, the only thing that would keep them from total atrophy, and he still insisted on working her calves every day, even though she'd been saying for a long time that it was useless.

Diana, she had seen a few or more different doctors. And she'd been going to physical therapy for well over a year now. But there'd been no change. No improvement. She'd never walk again. Come on, honey, let's get you ready for bed I was 13 at the time. I am no special your girl here, just a collective girl here doing a thing as I should, think of boys and rubbing myself on then in my thoughts at night, I read, I think, I even poop too, throw girl is not allowed to say that right, not in these times. All way with sweet and common girly thoughts. I've led a common little life. There is no testimonials dedication to me or for me, yet I may be dying of something bad, I can say. Plus, my name Dinia will soon be unable to be remembered by all that was of the past days. But in single deference, I thrived as magnificently as anyone who ever lived a young dumb yet cute life.

Looking good, girl. As I walk the halls of this big creepy place. 'I feel okay today.' Yours truly here feels that she loved another boy with all my heart, and soul body and mind. My soul and for me, that has always been enough to give to him if that would be his wish.

How's it feeling and doing, hunnie- bunnies? Going to kick it- I keep trying to die, but they won't let me they say I am so stinking cute. Well, you can't have everything even if it's fading or living without pain on both.

Immense day today I have planned.

You say that every day, with the cutest smile of your little blond-haired blue-eyed face, you little angel. It's a lovely day outside. Let's take a walk, outside of today, We, don't think so, you're not able to- at all- yet. (Wishful thinking) Well, we've got to get you out of this room. Come on now, honey goes to the playroom and does coloring and things like that. Some fresh air is what I want! Grrrr!

Chapter: 107

fixable

Karly- Video of me running around the room nude ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈ The delusions?

It's all good I do what I always do no compacts, -Good morning. Me- I am so sad and sorry at this point of my beginnings starts of my young little life, it's not a good day, to be me I want to play and dance and sing and do girl little cute-z thing like painting my toenail to match my Paullieger-ie ones. I have a long sunn-ie dress and not as much hair as I did, but it's fixable if I work for it. OUTSIDE??? I asked she said- baby- girl- I don't think it can happen. Nurse says- she's up for anything.

Chapter: 108

Ciao

Karly- Photo of me sucking one-off… my dildo that is, for the show ≈

Past remembers of Karly… ≈ The girl?

Hello? (Boy) I like him, he's-a funny and handsome. This is me! doors fly open as she runs and stops runs and stops looking in at the dying kids in their rooms and beds, older boy Daved- he comes to read to you. Read a kiddie story of hope and love and goo-goo-ness, with unicorns and ponies? Yeah- No that pain starts within me and I feel as I had to run to the bathroom to not keep it down the treatments are talking to me; I don't know if this is a goodie thing-ie. Oh, come on, back to bed, and sleep this off, it goes in OUCH-ies, and her sweet little light goes out.

Ahh... snoring, yet one old betty said- All right now, that keep her away for three hours.

(Noon)

Where did we leave off? In the story… Oh, yeah, yeah, here it is- baby. It was the night of the carnival, a news story this time, I knew yet I didn't remember it, I lose something I can feel yet they don't tell me anything so I pulled out what I can, yet that not much being my age. 'Daved, was there with his friends, and Maraca.' -Daved?

-That's where those both met- them... It was at the time and date of September- 19th of 14, Dinia was years nine old or so. (Girl) She has the same name as me.

See then there at the park- groundwater squirting game: Little girl wins a prize. He tied to get her something yet epic fail! -Foo-ie! I watched that off so hard, no dingaling here. -Thank you for playing the boy. Hah, you're really funny I am a man here not a boy. Man, I clobbered, it's all good she bears hugged him for being just him and that was some time being, cute yet very dumb for the acting of dumbness. I bet that thing, Yakie- funny it didn't come off, oh that that thing. I'm telling you I did baby; these games are rigged.

Chapter: 109

Time to turn in

The span?

Nighttime before bedtime, Hello, it was him I kind of remember some of the stories now, that he said earlier… How are you, good- feeling good? Howdy, what's your name, U- NO it baby think- hard …???... I don't think I do- and story time starts for her, as she thinks on. Footstep comes right up here now. Over the knob, certainly. Whoa.

Yeah, singing it out in a hum-

-Who's this girl with Maraca?

-Her name's Dinia Samilton.

She's here for the summer with her family.

Dad's is the poorest around, yet she cute right good butt for you.

Ha- funny then why haven't you been with her yet?

Walked apart to go see this girl.

-Hello, Paullie!

-Hi, honey.

Look, I won you a prize, he rips one down from the mouse game as she walked towards him.

That woman was P-O-ed, at the game, yet they walk off one arm wrapped around.

Paullie- oh, thank you! She giggled without thoughts on the thought of him and she was run around like the mouse on the wheel of the game.

Osha! A bear- cute- Love! He said Yeah, -sure- kiss me! They did… Hey great, huh I look at Daved like I hooded her?

Chapter: 110

Trendy

The happening?

Hey Dinia, you want some cotton candy baby-girl? - Umm, okay honey. That would be so much fun if your pants', someone. Sure, look down there… GOD keep it in there I don't wanna see it, she said. You only get one chance, teenager. You want to dance with me or rid with me, or on me, or something like that?

I'm Daved Talhhoun.

SO-o?

-So, it's nice to meet you.

-Dinia, who is this guy?

-I don't know, Daved Talhhoun.

-I would like to take you out.

-Friend! Do you mind?

You can't sit more than two people in a chair, Daved.

Go out?

-No.

-Why not?

-CUZ- I don't want to.

David, she's with us, so don't chase her away with your dumbness, and crap.

Hey Dinia, you want to ride the merry-go-round?

Up down, up-down, Up Down-

they went their love life would go.

-I'd love to sugggggerrrr.

They are kissing and feeling each other out in the tornal of love.

-All right the boy said in the 1st seat.

Love is all we need right- the book closes for the night as she falls asleep on him.

(Boy) walks out of the room kissing her forehead and said I never forget you as you did with me, yet love and luck don't always go hand and hand.

Chapter: 111

Collective

Photos of my sis, online to at her age, asking like a slut, all over me and my friends. It shows her puss and running come, shot.

When and why?

Reason with me. Plea me. - Daved Talhhoun.

-What?

Works down at the McDonald's with Paullie age seventeen.

Oh... Did you see he was standing like that god do you think it's- like- oh?

Run up- he dad- like not even one inch away from her face? GOD- what do you want from me, she said not happy, yeah, I saw, said the girlfriend, that's Daved, though. Always doing

the crazies, are you at all surprised, not at all I like it yet I don't, we'll see, maybe, I don't know yet, I girl what can I say.

He even came over to you, like was he going to kiss you and not even know your name first.

Sweet but creepy!

I think he likes you, she said with delight. Yeah, my dad would too. I think nah- for now anyway. Hey what... jerk... as he pulled my hair, saying I was cute. Get off me, I said as he was all wrapped around me going for it all. God older boy- Don't touch me. -Hey! I love you, girl, without a name! - Well, I... ugh! HUM, I thought about him and what I saw there. What are you doing tonight? Hey, you can't do that as she runs off the merry-go-round! As she was there, he almost falls on his tush-ie, I'll pay you when I get off, Dan.

-He asked you out-

Yes, he did- I like him- eyes rolled dreamily, both hands fly up on her reading cheeks. Okay, Dan, I'll get- it- oh- off, all right. Get off, Daved, you need to come.... (Girls-What?) Award stop in his yelling words- 'OFF' as it spins around, you need to come- what...? Off. He tripped you're going to kill yourself for her boy!

Daved, cut it out, boy. Now, will you go out with me as he hopped on my hose-ie?

What the freak? - No?

Hey boy, she just told you.

It keeps going around. Rings being tossed in the mouth of the clown.

Lean into it so you don't fall getting off, it goes, fast.

Why not?

I don't know you at all, and because I don't want to. You don't need to know me to 1st date girl. How else do you get to know someone if you don't try first- dates, go by what your friends say?

Daved!

Come again? Would you- GO!

NO! He said.

Girl- Well, you leave me no other choice then. Oh, my God gets it in your head and not that one I don't want it.

I'm not kidding, I am falling too you.

Daved, stop misleading around.

-What are you doing?

-I'm going to ask you one more time, he kisses her on the cheek, from behind. Will you... NOW as he gets up on her and the house, doing things I can say, yet think like a boy. Will you go out with me? Daved, you best come on and stop it.

Girlfriend next one over… my leg is slipping. Then get down and off, you- idiot. That way I am doing if she says- yes. Not until she decides. 'Ah, go on out with him, baby said some old dude in next row.' All right, all right, her and goes down his undies, and then see feel it and push him off, I'll go out with you. She knew it was all love she was feeling it too. It was up to my butt so- yeah- feel in the blanks here.

Chapter: 112

The who and then what?

What?

Who?

When?

Why?

They?

It?

Some?

Doing it?

No, don't do me any favors if you say yes, he spun out on the floor of the ride.

No, no. Do I want to, yes?

Do you want to?

Did she say Sucking- yes!

Do you want to?

Yes!

Say it again.

I want to go out with you- now.

Say it again.

I want to go out with you.

All right, all right God keep it in your pants!

We'll go out.

You think you're so clever, do you not?

Daved, you- idiot! She said

She remembers my name- yes!

Girlfriend- That wasn't funny, nope, it's okay hun, I'll take care of this boy soon.

Girl asked- on her deathbed- I remember the girl from the Carnival, right… she was my friend, right?

Do you remember me? I asked with wondering thoughts- of hope.

Yeah, sure, the boy that reads to me, not the boy- what was he called- Mr. Bonner, was it? He looked pickled. How could I overlook the speculations of me wondering though-age? I wanted to clear that up with you, for the reason that I'm categorically regretful about that all. It remained an imprudent thing to do... on that ride, to talk to somebody. But then again, I had god was saying she was my baby angel sent from the heavens. I had to see I could get her naked before the night was over. To be next to you. I was being been so pulled from you. Um... oh, what a saying here, it's nice, so nice! Do you use that on all the barbs?

-No, not all just you hun.

-Right, you're dumb.

I saw you all rubbed up to your little girlie-friend what's her name with the brown hair and green eyes.

-What are you doing tonight?

-Could you repeat that? Go out tomorrow night?

What do you say, baby? What about this weekend, say at a hotel or whatever?

I know what you want I don't give that to boys.

- Why?

Our date then?

Maybe- she walked away- skipping, and humming show tunes.

I did not even say; I would go on that date with you.

The date that you agreed to go on with me.

No...!

Yes, you promised.

You pledged, and you swore it did you not.

Sound good, I speculate the thoughts of yes or no: Yeah for you would have killed me with it behind me if not. I changed my mind over time to yes or no, I have to see, maybe? Look, I know you get some dirty boys coming up to you on the street doing crazy things... I don't know him. Why do act as if I do? You don't know me by now don't you, I know me and that's good enough, right?

Chapter: 113

Trinkets

Who did what?

Plus, when I see something that I like, I got to love it see the small-town charms- ha... I love it. I go... I mean, I go crazy for it. Okay, what are you speaking of? Well, you, see into me, I feel, that you do. Oh, you're good at this ant you. What the Hel-? You're so moral. Certainly not. No, you're getting me wrong. You have it all now, yet not me. But you- You're something ain't you. You are you ain't nothing bad. You're whimsical, fanciful, unusual, imaginative, original, creative, and quirky, and I would even give you impulsive and capricious.

Hugh?

I'm not.

You're so stupid, I think I like that…

Chapter: 114

Emotional

The good and the bad- you are so-o goooood, I'm mesmerized. I'm not frequently like this, I'm sorry. You make me dumb feeling and acting.

Uh-oh, oh my- like- yes, you are.

I can be amusing if you want... thoughtful, uh, smart, um, illogical, and courageous. And uh... I can be light on my feet. I could be your all and wonder, and magical, whatever you want. You just tell me what you want me to be and I do that- love. I'll be that for you forever and ever never letting go of you to the day you or me, is not around to say- I love you.

You're CUTELY dumb and love me I see that. OKAY! You win, not smart- I could be that for yah too. Come on, let's go for this date, you want as bad as me.

What's it going to hurt if we do things after and now? Umm... ah- unh- I don't think as a result so maybe it's okay if I am like you. Fine, what can I do to change your mind?

Dinia, you remember- Daved, don't you? The move adds to start with supposition- You'll total and get something out. You unquestionable she's coming for it hard? Lessen, chum, it's all set up. We are meeting her for the late show tonight so back off her.

Look... what did… I tell you what? Come on now and see this movie picture.

Oh, my goodness, it's bad, his hand on mine… I feel more to come. What a happenstance she felt! Kissing him with popcorn, and the taste of butter, and Pepsi, I need to talk to you for a second. He's here! Him sitting on my hand, and the other way around, Yes, I remember- Yah.

Chapter: 115

Levels

The tell of tells- the tale of my butt plug ha! I'm- cute no?

-Come here.

-Paullie!

-Hi.

-You look great.

-Hello.

-It's nice to see you yet again.

-You too.

-Aw, thanks.

You look great and feel good next to me. She is kissing my ear, saying sweet nothings.

You do look great. You look great.

And I know I look great, said Paullie so could we please go see this movie now and hush up? The show's about to start. After you, he asked for a kiss on the lips. You come back here, baby. You ain't going to catch me, she runs for the water's edge and prattled-boats.

Swans all-round them as they kiss in the sunshine, next to the old steam train puffing down next to the oak trees and picnic tables.

See her as she runs, wild and carefree, in stupid love, with so poor boy.

I'm supposed to catch you! Kiss, kiss, kiss, lip bite, eyes tight, and lashes long on his cheeks. I'm faster than you. 'Nah- you- ant.' 'You- ant- you- ant- you ant!!! Nope, No!' I am wet for you know, just drenched with the water on the edge.

I'll get you, baby girl! I'm going to get... Here I come! Let me love you. You better run fast! And then met slowly in a hug, run and it's falling in love again being apart for that long. Park and outlying past them all that looked passed all the rides too. Love after, after falling madly in love, love, love, la- love. The big wheel in the sky is lighting as fireworks off above and inward. Wait for me, baby girl- I see you there, never about where they, never- ever apart- I would even sleep with me in the night for I said I was scared, and ran in his bed, held tightly.

(Back on the first date)

Want to walk with me to my house? He did old ways I said- mom will love you for this. Her- what happened? …In that movie? We didn't even see it I could not even tell you for sure. Here you go. Thank you for this night we didn't even kiss at the door mom was looking so yeah. What are you guys doing now and then? We giggled and did say anything but the truth.

Even if I was opened up to him now.

Yeah, what's going on you too? Yeah, is that all...

….???....

Just a and movie no more no less- um she now by the look on my face, and the glow your un-flow-her-ed-ness. Mom passed a week later of what I have. Do you guys feel it for each other? Yes- yes- we do.

Do you-ah Love each other? Yes- I love him! I love her too. Oh, I get it. You guys do love each other, THEN HUN? Don't do anything you're going to regret I wouldn't do. Unacceptable, goodbye. All right, all right. Mmm...

That was fun we going to do it again. Mm-hmm. I haven't seen a movie, in ages. Really? Huh-uh. Not meanwhile I was a little kid. Pardon?

Nope-ie, I, uh...what?

I'm busy, you know, I don't have that much time don't ya- see. Are you busy? hmm- Mm- I have a very stern agenda.

My days are all planned out even back then, I had to dale with this crap. I get up in the morning... banquet, school day, get it in- here- work on homework here, play some all alone, reading time, bath time and sleep time and do it all over and over and over and over and over and

over and over. Math, English tutor, lunch at some point if I can hold it down, music lessons- piano lesson, and that about all they will like me do, TV. It is nice when it works also. And after dinner and blowing it all over- I spend time with my family, for three hours before they go home, and I say here all alone in this glowing white and could room, next to my bedmate Sam.

She does do or say much she has a week to live and she is five years old.

And then I... I catch up on some reading, she is sawing logs! Wow, stop breathing- um I think about that one hard and then say Nah- don't do that.

Oh, Mom and Daddy see you soon pull through one more day baby.

We decide to pull the plug- so she would not suffer- age ten.

We all gather around to see her. Everything is over… they look down on the life she never had- yet she has a sketchbook of her short life here. No, not everything is readable- however, it's all there in her handwriting. But the important thing is she was remembered for her. And then everything else, she was not. And that way youth and innocence with young love mixed in. free- and wild to see life fad fast. You get to decide all by yourself to live on or let go? She didn't we did- it the hardest thing a dad has to do is she, someone, you love to go- before you. It had to be I would say- it had to be this way. I don't get it either.

Why? God- or whomever why make the plan of killing sweet little kids? Why the hell do you want to do this to me- why? Mom- she never did stop crying it's been four years now.

I'll always think of you that way I'll pull you in the morning sun and when the night is new...

I'll be looking at the moon and think of you…

But the first time I ever saw your face… The first time I ever saw your face I'll be seeing you.

Morning, Mr. Talhhoun.

Mr. Talhhoun? Call Dr. Mandite Von and USC, okay? I've got no, I got no pulse anymore- she said. I've got nothing to say just how I love you and you feel that even now with things gone like even if your heart in new it feels the same to me and you.

Let them know we are in full arrest.

Call me- on my cell if you can, if you can this evening, I see you tomorrow if I can and you can. All right, we will do this if we can. We talked about this. It's all right now sleep, and rest now think about your life and how it was. Come on, come on, sweetie. Okay, yes, come on, let's go. Time to go- It's okay, baby, come on. You know it is.

Just try it not to get her over happy she needs rest not a boyfriend right now, said, mom.

Oh, Mr. Talhhoun you came to see her.

Welcome back, the baby girl sees that you want it through all that. How do you feel? Paulie. Apt as a swindle. Where are you going girl at the stand asked? I was just taking a walk, thinking about how- I can't sleep without her. Fine, you know you're not supposed to, it's against the rules.

Yeah, I know. You weren't going for a walk, where you? You were going to see Miss Dinia again wasn't yah. I just got out of the hospital and I miss her you see.

Mr. Talhhoun, I'm sorry you can be coming in out of her room like that at night, but I can't let you see her tonight. Here and now you're going to have to go back to your room. As for me, I'm going to go downstairs and get myself a cup of coffee. I won't be back to check on you for a while, so don't do anything foolish- I want to go to do that- I just want to see him if I can-

Hi.

Daved.

Daved.

Hi, Baby girl. I'm sorry I haven't been able to be here to read to you.

I didn't know what to do. I was frightened you were not ever coming back to my love. I'll continuously come back. What's going to happen when I can't remember anything to any further extent? What will you do? I'll be here always and ever. I'll never- ever leave you. I need to ask you something. What is it, Baby girl? Do you think that our love can make marvels? Sure, I do if the same. That's what conveys you back to me each time. Do you think our love could take us away together even if I go away from you? I think our love can do something we want it to.

I love you.

- I love you, Dinia.

Good night.

- Good night.

I'll be seeing you there soon.

I want to show you something the boy said I have this it was hers.

- Daved, what are you doing? As the pages sated to show and he read out- to them as he did with her- day in and day out. -What now? She loves to paint.

Yeah? -Mm-hmm. Huh. Most of the time, I have all these drawings showed in here and look over than seeing her do them going back to the time she did them.

Thoughts bouncing around in my head. Are you okay? Why are you crying? It's all good, I said whipping them away.

(Memory)

Do you want to dance with me? Now? Sure. -Mm-hmm. Is are the song playing in the background? -Mm-hmm.

I want to fly like a colorful bird- so I don't have to be here and see the world until then an I rush over their heads, are you going to be one-two? If you're a birdie, I'm a birdie. Come on, darling, don't do this to yourself- What are you doing? You need to hear this all there is the thing you don't know about us. Don't. Don't! Okay then if you insist. Here we go, reading easily- Okay, okay. We were crazy about each other. Yah we know- Okay, Daddy- Oh, and Daddy I love him- she said here in her book quoting her life.

I want to meet her in heaven now. This young man is not going to make it.

Heartbroken he is… Okay. I am okay… Nope… he ain't. Good night, Daddy, as she ran to me and left you for a night out- of fun and games.

Good night first kisses we had- like- like- like- do you see this?

Oh, that's lovely, dear. Her dream was like a movie- I want a big old porch that wraps around the walkway and a big old entire into the house. We can drink sugary soda and candy... nonstop. Big windows and open doors to watch the sun go down, no shades, like here. Do you promise? This for me? Hmm- Mm, I promise. Yeah! -Where are you going? Is something happening to me?

Here…

Always next to you. Wow… This is the part you all need to here for sure. What that dear? Ha-hum? She said- make love to me. Daved. -Yeah?

The old-rick-a-t-ie Covered Bridge I waited for her to say when and where.

Did she say- Daved? Okay, I want you? I want you to- And It all happened… all and everything, which makes a girl a woman. And…?

Did…???... you…?

?... Um…? I know I said, the kiss… I want you to make love to me, she asked once more.

So, I did- we did- it was not easy for me- know what I was doing and she not. She said- you're going to have to walk me through this sex like this, it broke, she feels, so did I the kissing lots. Right.

You, all right? -Yeah, it's okay- it's okay. I asked- Did I hurt you? -No, no. Dad said we know… boy we know- it was good she had her magical boyfriend he was you, which was her dying wish, to have love and feel the love. I'm just having a lot of thoughts, of age and things. It's Okay! I should go- over this I feel… No, I don't want you to go. I got to think… about what I did here. Come here and talk to us.

You're not leaving till it's all been said.

I'm so happy that you did? Um- yes. You got so much ahead of you. Yet not love, he said. It's true… I will never love another girl, at all. I'm not going to have nice things, fancy things, sure but not her… I don't want to live without it. It's never going to happen for me. Sh-h- boy-stop. It's not in the cards for me, don't you see it was all ripped away, like her life, why? Stop it!

You going to die to and we don't need that on- top. Oh! You know what? I'm going to do it. It's over.

Okay?

What's over? Come here.

The first time I ever saw her face- was…

He passed for a broken heart.

(Falling to the floor with a thud.)

Not without a miracle. Despite the daily massages, Daina's legs where thin stalky and pale, like something that would grow on a flower. Unfluctuating as her face had come to be overweight, the flesh of her arms looser and her legs continued to wither.

Close much...?

Interval

Deceiving my end

Part: 1

Here is something that only a short girl can do…

We- can kiss as I slide upon him as it goes out, and then that makes me able to reach his face to kiss, and I go back in and I have to leave the kiss to get it in me, so each time I go down, we part just for me to come to him to meet his waiting kiss, I have my hand under his head, and I pull him into for the lip lock. Over and over until… and we let it all in- and make out for an hour or so.

Finally, today is the day that I am finally saying it. The day that I say for sure that I love Marcel, I am in love with that boy. Sometimes, I reflect that he knew this all along. That they would laugh in my face if I would say it, to him in front of them.

He is- One of the most amazing things that can happen is finding someone who sees everything you are and won't let you be anything less. They see the potential for you. They see endless possibilities. And through their eyes, you start to see yourself the same way. As someone who matters.

As someone who can make a difference in this world. If you're lucky enough to find this person, never let them go.' 'Hey,' he says, surprised. 'You're not going to sit with me?' I try to keep walking down the aisle, but he grabs my arm. Are you kidding me?

You have to sit with me.' He looks around to see if anybody's listening.

'You're my girlfriend.' I shake him off. 'We're breaking up soon, aren't we? We might as well make it look more realistic.' When I slide into the seat next to her, Chris is shaking her head at me. 'What? I couldn't just let you sit alone. You came here for me, after all.' I open up my backpack and show her the snacks. 'See? I bought your favorite things. What do you want to eat first? Gummies or sugar or sugar?'

'It's barely even morning,' she grouses. Then: 'Hand me the gummies.'

Smiling, I rip open the bag for her. 'Have as much as you want.' I stop smiling when I see him get on the bus and sit down in the seat next to me, he wants to be.

'You did that to him,' 'For you!' Which isn't true, not really. I think maybe I'm just tired of all this. This in-between-ness of being somebody's girlfriend but not really. He stretches. But- 'You can never wholly know anyone, no matter how well you think you do. There will always be some truth about them you don't ever get to know.' I stuff a gummy into my mouth and chew, and swallow too hard. I watch Maggie whisper something in Lizzie's ear, and Marcel falls asleep right away just like she said, his head on my shoulder. It's implausible how you can affect someone else so deeply and never know.

Two days before my death- school trip.

(Remembering as he sleeps)

Listen to him and the music in my one ear. Head on my shoulder I say I love you; I recall that- 'I enjoyed the hot tub moments.' 'I always do- flashback.' I'm shaking.

Is it true?

I love him!

Things don't get better just because you want them to. The unwise thing about anger is how people hurt you, and then you let them keep hurting you by being angry about how they originally hurt you. It's a vicious cycle… Could he be right? It's interesting how something that

comes so easily to one person can be so impossible for someone else, no one can be everything you want them to be.

The physical attraction that strong is addictive.

As well as knowing what kind of magic isn't just a fantasy makes me want to find it again. But what about being with someone who makes me a better person? What about sharing my life with someone who adores me as much as I adore him, whom I can always count on, who benefits me find my way when- I'm lost? I want deeper connections with the people around me. I need to reach out more. For the reason that not everyone leaves. Every so often if you reach out, the person you're trying to reach will be right there waiting.

The past doesn't just disappear after it's happened or was it happening to me for you to see? Sometimes amid all your boy drama, you just need a cupcake… like I would love to eat one with him now, both biting at the same time kissing getting on our nose and oddly like that off. He licked me… so- yeah. It's up to me to create the life I want. He never gives up on who I am or who I could be. He doesn't run away when things get complicated.

Now that I know where this life is going, it's time to decide how I'll get there.

Just when it seems like life is getting good, something always has to come along and ruin it, waiting for my real life to start is no excuse to waste the life I have right now. One of the most amazing things that can happen is finding someone who sees everything you are and won't let you be anything less. They see the potential for you. They see endless possibilities. And through their eyes, you start to see yourself the same way. As someone who can make a difference in this world. If you're lucky enough to find that person, never let them go.

It used to be extremely common for families to have two parents. They stayed together because that's what all the other parents did. Now there are so many options, so many different ways to be a family. So many ways to rip a family apart. But maybe those things are like background noise if you're from here.

Maybe you have to experience this as a whole new place to appreciate it as I do. The only person I can count on is myself. It's up to me to create the life I want. I can't blame my parents or him or her or she or anyone else for the way things are… I just never stopped believing that what I wanted could be real, seriously, if we stayed inside the lines on everything we're supposed to be doing, we wouldn't get anything done. Know what I mean?

~*~

When I open my back door, Marcel is holding his phone over his head playing 'Stay with me he put lyrics to my piano.'

'Happy anniversary,' he says.

'You remembered!' I've been wondering if he was going to remember that our first date was one month ago today. He didn't say anything at school.

So, I didn't say anything, either. I didn't want to come off like a total spaz over being together for a month.

Now I'm so happy I didn't ruin his surprise. I had no idea he was organization this when he said he wanted to come over tonight. He comes in and kisses me. Still holding his phone over his head. Still playing 'In Your Eyes.'

'You imperative,' I tell him.

'I don't rule yet. Maybe I'll rule when we get to where I'm taking you to celebrate. If you like what we're doing.'

'You didn't have to do all this.'

Marcel hugs me tight. 'I wanted to make tonight special.'

It's hard to believe we've only been together for one month now. It feels like I've known him forever.

In the present day at lunch, we were talking about last Saturday night. We were driving around in Ethan's car with no destination in mind. I was supposed to be home in half an hour.

But I was desperately trying to block out the harsh reality of time.

The sex- all the first week…

'And we got the motel room for safety. You were tired, and we were worried you might fall asleep at the wheel.' 'Exactly. Your mom would buy that, right?'

'As much as your mom would.' We smirked at each other. Both moms would see right through that scam. He reached into my lap and held my hand. This was always the worst part of

the night when we knew we'd have to go home soon. I wanted to drive around all night. Holding hands in my lap or his. Singing along to the radio. Getting lost down side streets to make out. We're both shocked by how much alone time we want together. Neither of us has ever felt this way before.

Ethan loves having lots of people around. He's a classic extrovert like me. We're both into going out and meeting new people. But nothing compares to how happy I am when it's just the two of us. A Pearl Jam or maybe STP or some rock song. Ethan started laughing.

'Could you repeat that?' I asked.

'Incomprehensible situation.'

'Try me.'

'How are you so breathtaking?'

'How are you so tremendous?'

'We're both geeks at heart. That makes us both splendid and cute-z.'

'I love our unintelligible awesomeness.' 'I love everything about you.'

Stay with me! He said as I look back on it. He made me melt when he said that. I was melting right into the passenger seat. My bones went soft and my heart swelled, and I couldn't imagine ever feeling happier than I did right that second. I knew he could see how much I loved him when he looked into my eyes. We haven't said 'I love you!' to each other yet or did I want to confess that to him or me. But we both know it's there.

That night in his car feels like it was three weeks ago. Nevertheless, it was only three days ago. When we're together, time dilates and stretches in mysterious ways. It's like we enter our private universe. Expressly when we are alone.

Specifically, when we're making out.

When he is touching me and kissing me and were pressed against each other in bed, I never want it to end. I wish we could stay together forever. We usually go to my apartment after school. One minute it will be forever and never-ending to me, and we'll have three whole hours until he has to be home for dinner.

The next thing we know it's after seven. How do hours pass in a space of time that feels like minutes or forever?

~*~

I suspect back in the room, I change into my blarney nighty and put on thick socks. I don't even go wash up. I just turn out the lights and crawl into bed. I can't fall asleep, though. Every time I close my eyes, I see his face. How dare he say I need to grow up? What does he know about anything? As if he's so mature!

But… is he right about me? Do I only like the boys I can never have? I've always known Marcel was out of my reach, yet not out of my hands. I've always known he didn't belong to me.

But tonight, he said he liked me. The thing I've been in suspense for, he said it. So why didn't I just tell him I liked him hindmost when I had the chance? Because I do. I like him back.

Of course, I do. What girl would not fall to him, the most handsome boy of all the handsome boys?

Now that I know him, I know he's so much more than that. I don't want to be afraid anymore. I want to be brave. I want life to start fashionably. I want to fall in love and I want a boy to fall in love with me back. Formerly I can talk myself out of it, I put on my puffy coat, slip my keycard in my pocket, and head off to the hot tub.

THE HOT TUB IS OVERDUE the foremost cottage, tucked in the woods on a wooden platform. On the way there, I run into kids with wet hair who are on their way back to their rooms before the time limit set by mom. Curfew is at eleven for me, and it's already ten fifty-five. There's not much time left.

~*~

Kellie- I hope Ray still out there. I don't want to lose my nerve. So, I quicken my pace and that's when I spot him, alone in the hot tub, his head tipped back with his eyes closed. Time is going to pass even faster tonight. I have no idea where Ethan's taking me to celebrate. But something tells me it's going to be romantic. 'In Your Eyes' finishes playing. Ethan smiles in that way he has where his eyes sparkle like I'm the most important person to him. 'Are you prepared?' he asks. Why does it seem like he's asking about more than just tonight? Ethan won't give me any hints in his car. He even takes a few random turns to fake me out.

Our small town is already shut down for the night. The river, piers, and boats all seem like they're sleeping. I'm surprised when we end up at his house. 'Didn't see that coming,' I say. 'You have no idea… What I go through' No one's home at Ray's house. We go up to his room. Which is filled with candles. Candles in different shapes, sizes, and colors are on every available surface. Candles are on the windowsills, the dresser, the desk, the shelves, and the night table. There are even some big pillar candles clustered in a corner on the floor. He turns the lights off. He starts lighting candles.

'Have a seat,' he says.

'This might take a while.'

(Romanic only for her) I lie back on

Ray's big bed and watches him light the candles. I love watching him. One time he fell asleep in my room. I watched him for almost an hour, memorizing the slope of his nose, the curves of his cheeks, and the shape of his lips. He is the gorgeous boy I've ever seen. And he picked me… over them all and even my sis that he freaked first, and I have to live with that. How did I get so lucky? After the lights the last candle, Ray grabs his I- Pod.

He lies down next to me. Then he puts one earbud in my ear and the other in his. 'Thanks again for the song last night, you know I wanted it- and you too' he says. 'I loved it.' where my I love you, I asked him for it and got love yah! I was so nervous about sending Ray 'Everything' by Lifehouse.

I have had that song on repeat ever since the day Ethan first asked me out.

To me, it's Ray's love song for us. It sounds like him. It feels like him. I love losing myself in the sound of him. I'm so deep in the love haze, I can't remember what I used to think about before Ray. Last night I was suddenly inspired to share the song with him. The message I wrote with it said that he's all I want. He's all I need.

What we have is amazing.

The second I sent the song, I worried that it was too much. The last thing I want to do is scare him away. Nevertheless, he isn't a representative boy. He doesn't get freaked out by strong emotions. And he's so romantic. 'Your song inspired me to find one for you,' Ethan says.

Haunting, resonant music starts playing in our earbuds. 'You're the Inspiration' 'Their music is beautiful. Just like you.' Melting- On- The bed.

'I don't have the words to tell you how I feel about you. So, I found a song in another language to do it for me. I read that it's about two people falling in love. How they spend the day together walking around downtown and enjoying being in their world where they understand each other better than anyone ever has before.

It's called 'An all right Start.'' I have to know its love- before I fall!

'You were being sweet. You're the sweetest girl I've ever known.'

More than your sister, more the 100 girls of the past too. You're 101 and that right… so right for me.

'You always out- romantic me. I thought I was being all sweet sending you everything. You're like, 'I had to go to a whole other philological to tell you how I feel!' I put my head on his chest, breathing with him and listening to the music. Ethan slides his fingers through my hair over and over.

'Excellent,' Ray says.

'Yeah- yepper?'

'I love you- baby-love.'

~*~

I lift my head to look at him. He glows in the candlelight. Just looking at him takes my breath away. 'I love you, too,' I tell him. Say it- say it- say it I was thinking over and over- I do this for you. I more that way… (She more into her then he is her.)

How could it be any better than this? 'Hi,' I say, and my voice resonances into the woods. His eyes fly open. Nervously, he looks over my shoulder.

'Liv- Jean! What are you doing out here?' 'I came to see you,' I say, and my breath comes out in white puffs. I start taking off my boots and socks. My hands are shaking, and not because it's cold. I'm nervous. 'Uh... what are you doing?' Marcel's looking at me like I'm senseless.

~*~

'I'm getting in!' Shivering, I unzip my puffy coat and set it on the bench. Steam is rising out of the water. I dip my feet in and sit down on the edge of the hot tub. It's hotter than a bath, but it feels nice. Marcel's still watching me warily.

My heart is sprinting out of control and it's difficult to look him in the eyes. I've never been so scared in my life. 'That thing you brought up earlier... you caught me off guard, so I didn't know what to say. But ... well, I like you too.' It comes out so fumbling and uncertain, and I wish I could start over and say it smoothly and confidently. I try again, louder. 'I like it! Silly!

He blinks, and he looks so young all of a sudden. 'I don't understand you girls. I think I have you figured out, and then- and then… then, I hold my breath as I wait for him to speak. I'm so nervous; I keep swallowing soft and hard, and it sounds loud to my ears. Even my breathing sounds loud, even my heartbeat.

His pupils are dilated he's looking at me so hard. He's staring at me like he's never seen me before. 'As well as then I do not know.'

I think I stop breathing when I hear him say 'I don't know.' Did I screw things up that badly that now he doesn't know? It can't be over, not when I finally found my courage. I can't let it be.

My heart is pounding like a million trillion beats a minute as I scoot closer to him. I bend my head down and press my lips against his, and I feel his jars some in surprise. Besides, then he's kissing me back, openmouthed, soft-tipped kissing me back, and at first, I'm nervous, but then he puts his hand on the back of my head, and he reassuringly strokes my hair, and I'm not so nervous anymore. It's a good thing I'm sitting down on this ledge because I am weak in the knees. He pulls me into the water so I'm sitting in the hot tub too, and my nightgown is soaked now but I don't care. I don't care about anything. I never knew kissing could be this awesome.

My arms are at my sides, so the Jets won't make my skirt fly up. Marcel's holding my face in his hands, kissing me. 'Are you okay?' he whispers. His voice is different: it's ragged and imperative and susceptible somehow. He doesn't sound like he and I know; he is not smooth or bored or amused.

The way he's looking at me right now, I know he would do anything I asked, and that's a strange and powerful feeling. I wind my arms around his neck. I like the smell of chlorine on his skin. He smells like pool, and summer, and vacations. It's not like in the movies. It's better because it's real. 'Touch my hair again,' I tell him, and the corners of his mouth turn up. I lean into him and kiss him.

He starts to run his fingers through my hair, and it feels, so nice I can't think straight.

It's better than getting my hair washed at the salon. I move my hands down his back and along his spine, and he shivers and pulls me closer. A boy's back feels so different than a girl's back more muscular, more solid somehow. In between kisses, he says, 'It's a past curfew. We should go back inside.'

'I don't want to,' I say. All I want is to stay and be here, with him, at this moment. 'Me either, but I don't want you to get in trouble,' Ray says. He looks worried, which is so sweet.

Softly, I touch his cheek with the back of my hand. It's smooth. I could look at his face for hours, it's so beautiful- oh so- and lovely. Then I stand up, and immediately I'm shivering. I start wringing the water out of my nightgown, and he jumps out of the hot tub and gets his towel, which he wraps around my shoulders. Then he gives me his hand and I step out, teeth chattering. He starts drying me off with the towel, my arms, and my legs. I sit down to put on my socks and boots.

He puts my coat on me last. He zips me right in. Then we run back inside the lodge. Beforehand he goes to the boys' side and I go to the girls' side, I kiss him one more time and I feel like I'm flying.

Part: 2

Butt up in the air pic! ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈

WHEN I SEE he is as the bus the next morning, he's standing around with all his lacrosse friends, and at first, I feel shy and nervous, but then he sees me, and his face breaks into a grin. 'He says, so I go to him and he throws my tote over his shoulder. In my ear he says, 'You're sitting with me, right?'

I nod and look up sweet wetly I am so short next to him that his hip is where my face its- I don't have to get on my knee's girls! As we make our way onto the bus, somebody wolf

whistles. It seems like people are staring at us, and at first, I think it's just my imagination, but then I see Genevieve look right at me and whisper to Emily Assbaum. It sends a chill down my spine.

'Genevieve keeps staring at me,' I whisper to Marcel.

'It's because you're so adorably quirky,' he says, and he rests his hands on my shoulders and kisses me on the cheek, and I forget all about Genevieve.

Ray and I sit in the middle of the bus with Gabe and the lacrosse guys. I wave to Tom, so she'll sit with us, but she's cozies with Chad Dickhard. I haven't had a chance to tell her about last night. When I got back to the room, she was already asleep. This morning, we both overslept and there wasn't time. I'll tell her all about it later. But, for now, it's kind of nice that Ray and I are the only ones who know about it. The way down the mountain, I share my sweet sugary sticks with the boys and we play a heated round of Uno, which I also bought. An hour into the trip, we stop at a rest-stop dinner for breakfast. I eat a cinnamon bun, and under the table Ray, and I hold hands.

~*~

I go to use the bathroom, and there is Genevieve, alone, applying lip gloss with a little brush. I step into the stall to pee and hope she'll be gone by the time I come out, but she's still there. I wash my hands quickly, and then she says, 'Did you know that when we were kids, I used to wish I was you?'

I freeze…

Genevieve snaps her compact shut. 'I used to wish your dad was my dad and Margot and Kitty were my sisters. I loved coming over to your house. I would hope and pray that you would invite me to the sleepover.

Part: 3

(Us- in music trips and class)

'What key is this in?' he asks.

'B- Flat,' I tell him sweetly.

'My pages are messed up.' I make some notations on his sheet music with a pencil. 'Let's hit it,' Tom says from behind the drums. Stefan is only happy when he's behind the drums.

Tom, Killie, and Jenna furer's are Marcel's bandmates. Those guys' high school days are behind them.

Now they're working random jobs while waiting for the band to get mega-famous. Their band is

Invincible. Marcel plays bass and Seath rocks the keyboard. Along with his best friend, Megan, these guys our closest…

~*~

Shy- I hated being at home with my dad.' Haltingly, I say, 'I-I didn't know that. I used to like going to your house because your mom was so nice to me.'

'She liked you,' Maddie says.

I screw up all my courage and I ask, 'So why did you stop being friends with me?'

Maddie narrows her eyes at me.

'You don't know?'

'No!'

'You kissed Ray that day at my house in seventh grade. You knew I liked him, but you kissed him anyway.' I recoil, and she remains. 'I always knew your goody-goody act was fake. It's no wonder you and my cousin are BFF's now. Although at least Chad owns her sluttiness. She doesn't put on an act.'

My whole body goes rigid. 'What are you talking about?'

She laughs, and it's chilling how happy she sounds. That's when I know I'm already dead. I brace myself for whatever mean thing will come out of her mouth, but even still I'm not ready for what comes next.

Part: 4

Video- of my shows- and there over 50 of them all online forever, and 10 pages of me need dripping to come from my puss, with those kinds of pics!

Karly- 'I'm talking about how you and Marcel had full-on sex in the hot tub last night.' My mind goes completely blank. I might even blackout for a second. I can feel myself sway on my feet. Somebody comes quickly with the smelling salts; I'm about to faint. My head is swimming. 'Who told you that?' I choke out. 'Who said that?' Maddie tilts her head to the side.

'Everybody?'

'But then again… we didn't.'

'I'm sorry, but I think it's disgusting. I mean, sex in a hot tub- a public hot tub- is just ... 'She shudders.' 'God only knows what kind of stuff is floating around in there now.

Families use that hot tub, Lara Jean. There could be a family in there right now.'

Tears are spiking my eyes. 'All we did was a kiss. I don't know why people would even say that.'

'Um, because Marcel telling them you did?'

My whole body goes cold. It's not true. There's no way that's true.

'All the guys think he's a God because he got sweet little Lara Jean Covey to give it up in the hot tub. Just so you know, the only reason Marcel even dated you was to make me jealous.

His ego couldn't take the fact that I dumped him for an older guy. He was using you. If he got free sex out of it, all the better. But he still came running whenever I called.

That's because he loves me. He will never love another girl as much as he loves me.' Whatever she sees in my face must please her, because she smiles. 'Now that Blake and I are done- well, I guess we'll see, won't we?' I stand there mute and numb as she fluffs her hair in the mirror.

'But don't worry. Now that you're a slut, I'm sure you'll have plenty of guys who'll want to date you. For a night.'

I flee. I run out of the ladies' room and out the doors, back onto the bus, and I cry.

PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO FILE back on the bus. I can feel their eyes on me, so I keep my head turned toward the window. I run my finger along the edge of the foggy glass. The window is cold, so it leaves a trail.

Chad slides in next to me. In a low voice, she says, 'Um, I just heard something cray-cray.' Uninterestingly I say, 'What did you hear? That Marcel and I had sex in the hot tub last night?'

'Oh my God! Yeah! Are you okay?'

My chest feels tight. If I get a good breath, I am going to start crying again, I know it.

I close my eyes. 'We didn't have sex. Who told you that?'

'Marcel.' -making his way down the aisle. He stops at our seat. 'Hey, why didn't you come back to the table? Is everything okay?' Marcel is looming over the seat, looking at me with concerned eyes.

In a quiet voice, I say, 'Everybody's saying how we had sex in the tub.'

He groans. 'People need to mind their own business.' He doesn't sound surprised, not at all.

'So, you already knew?'

'Some of the guys were asking me about it this morning.'

'But- where did they even get that idea?' I feel like I'm going to be sick.

He shrugs. 'I don't know, maybe somebody saw us. What does it even matter? It's not true.'

I fasten my lips together tight. I can't cry right now, because if I start, I'll never be able to stop. I will cry the whole way home, and everyone will see, and I can't have that. I fix my observation somewhere over his slick shoulder.

'I don't get it. Why are you mad at me?' He's still confused.

People are starting to bottleneck behind Marcel. They need to get to their seats. 'People are waiting for you,' I say.

He says, 'Chad, can I have my chair here?' Chris looks at me and I shake my head.

Part: 5

A little hair on my puss- yet it's down on my dildo, that sucked to a book, so I can thrill ride it hard, till I scream come, for all you boys, and you knotty girls too.

≈ Past remembers of

Karly's sis… ≈

'It's my seat now, D*ckweed,' she says.

'Come on, Liv Jean,' he is saying, touching my shoulder.

I jerk away from him and his mouth drops open. People are looking at us and whispering and snickering.

He glances over his shoulder, his face red. Then he finally makes his way down the aisle.

'Are you okay?' Chad asks.

I can feel my eyes welling up. 'No. Not really.'

She sighs. 'It's not fair for the girl. Guys have it easy. I'm sure they were all acknowledging him, pounding him on the back for being such a stud.' Snuffling, I say, 'Do you think he's the one who told folks?'

'Who knows?'

A tear trickles down to my cheek and Chad wipes it away with her sweater sleeve. 'It might not have been him. But it doesn't matter, Liv- Jean, because even if he didn't encourage all the talk, I doubt he discouraged it, if you know what I'm saying.'

I shake my head.

'What I'm saying is, I'm sure he denied it- with a shit-eating grin on his face. That's how guys like Marcel are. They love to look like the man, have all the other guys look up to them.' Brattie says, 'They care more about their reputation than yours.' She shakes her head. 'But what's done is done. You've just got to hold your head up and act like you don't give a shit.' I nod, but more tears leak out.

'I'm telling you; he isn't worth it. Let Gen have him.' Chris tousles my hair.

'What else can you do, kid?'

Olivia comes on board last. I quickly straighten up and wipe my eyes and brace myself. But she doesn't go directly to her seat. She stops at Beth Morgan's seat and whispers something in her ear. Beth gasps and turns in her seat- and looks right at me.

OMG- Oh my God- my God…

Chad and I watch as Genevieve goes from seat to seat.

'B*tch,' Chad respires.

Tears burn my eyes. 'I'm just going to go to sleep now,' and I rest my head on Chad's shoulder, and I cry. She keeps her arm tight around me.

Part: 6

Photo of my boobs ≈ Past remembers of Karly sis… ≈ MAGGIE AND KILLIE PICK ME up from school. They ask me how the trip was if I stayed on the slope all day. I try to be upbeat; I even make up a story about how I went down a blue circle slope. Softly SHE asks, 'Is everything okay?'

I pause- to the moments within. Maggie always knows when I'm not significant in saying all the truth. 'Yeah. I'm just tired. Chad and I stayed up late talking.'

'Take a nap when we get home,' Maggie's recommends.

My phone buzzes and I look down at it. A text from Marcel.

Can we talk?

I turn off my phone. 'I think maybe I'll just sleep right through Christmas break,' I say. Thank God and Jesus for Christmas break. At least I have ten days before I have to go back to school and face everyone. Maybe I'll just never go back. Maybe I can convince Daddy to homeschool me.

When Daddy and Killie go to bed, Margot and I wrap presents in the living room. Middle- wrap, Maggie decides that we should have recital party the day after Christmas. I'd hoped she'd forgotten all about her grand idea to have recital party, but Margot's memory has

always been killer. 'It will is a post- Christmas, Pre- New Year's Eve party,' she says, tying a bow on one of Kitty's presents from Daddy.

~*~

'It's too last-minute,' I say, carefully cutting a sheet of rocking horse wrapping paper. I'm being extra careful because I want to save a strip of it for a background page in Maggie's scrapbook, which is nearly done. 'No one will come.'

'Yes, they will! We haven't had one in ages; tons of people used to come.' She gets up and starts pulling down Mommy's old cookbooks and stacking them on the coffee table.

'Don't be a Grinch. I think this should be a tradition that we bring back for Kellie's sake.' I cut off a strip of fat green ribbon. Maybe this party will help me take my mind off things. 'Find that Mediterranean chicken dish Mommy used to make. With the honey yogurt dip.'

'Yes! And remember the caviar dip? People love the caviar dip. We have to make that, too. Should we do cheese straws or cheese puffs?'

'Cheese puffs,' I say. Margot's so excited about it that even in my current state of self-pity, I can't begrudge her. She gets a pen and paper from the kitchen and starts writing things down. 'So, we said the chicken dish, caviar dip, cheese puffs, punch ... We can bake some cookies or brownies. We'll invite all the neighbors- Josh and his parents, the Shahs, Ms. Child.

Who of your friends do you want to invite? Chad?'

I shake my head. 'Chad is visiting Becca Mitchel her relatives in the upper parts of the state. around this time…

Too quickly I say, 'No. Nothing happened.'

'I think he might be going out of town too.' I can tell Maggie he doesn't believe me, but she doesn't press me further.

(Flashback)

Kellie- She sends the invites out that night, and right away there are five yeses. In the comments section Aunt-e -M. (not our real aunt, but one of Mommy's best friends) writes, Maggie, I can't wait to hear you and dad sing 'Baby, It's Cold Outside!' Another recital party tradition. Maggie and Daddy intone 'Baby, It's Cold Outside' and I am always commissioned to

sing 'Santa Baby.' I used to do it lying on top of the piano with my mom's high heels on and our grandma's fox stole. Not this year. No way.

When Maggie tries to get me to go with her and Killie to deliver our cookie baskets to the nationals the next day, I beg off and say I'm tired. I go up to my room to put the finishing touches on Maggie's scrapbook and listen to only the slow songs from Dirty Dancing, and I keep checking my phone to see if Ray texted again.

He hasn't, but Ray has. I heard what happened. Are you okay? So even Josh knows? He's not even in our grade. Does the whole school know? I write back, it isn't true, and he writes back, you don't have to tell me- I didn't believe it for a second, which makes me feel weepy. He and Maggie have hung out once since she's been home, but they haven't taken that DC trip Josh mentioned. It's probably for the best if I go ahead and take the Josh and- Maggie page out of the scrapbook.

I stay up late just in case Ray texts again. I think to myself, if he calls or texts me tonight, I'll know he's thinking about me too and maybe I'll forgive him.

But he doesn't text or calls. around three a.m. I throw away Marcel's notes. I delete the picture of him from my phone; I delete his number. I think that if I just delete him enough, it will be like none of it ever happened and my heart won't hurt so badly.

Part: 7

Kelly- Photo of me using my butt plug, and masturbating over 6 times!

≈ Past remembers of Karly little sister… ≈ Video online forever- CHRISTMAS MORNING, KITTY WAKES Us, Everyone, while it is still- um- dark out, which is her tradition, and Daddy makes waffles, which is his tradition.

We only ever eat waffles on Christmas, for the reason that we all agree it's too much trouble to lug the waffle iron out and clean it and store it back on the cabinet top shelf where we keep it. And anyway, it makes waffles more of a special occasion this way.

We take turns opening presents to make it last longer. I give Maggie her scarf, and the scrapbook, which she loves. She pores over every page, screaming over my handiwork, marveling over my font choices and paper scraps. Hugging it to her chest, she says, 'This is the

perfect gift,' and I feel like all the tension and bad feelings between us evaporate into nothingness. Maggie's gift to me is a pale pink cashmere sweater from Scotland.

I try it on over my nightgown and it's so soft and luxurious. Killie's present from Maggie is an art set with oil pastels and watercolors and special markers, which makes Killie squeal like a piglet. In return, Kitty gives her socks with monkeys on them. I give Killie a new basket for her bike and the ant farm she asked for months ago, and Killie gives me a book on knitting. 'So, you can get better,' she says.

The three of us pitched in for Daddy's present, a thick Scandinavian pullover that makes him look like an ice fisherman. It's a little too big, but Daddy insists he likes it that way. He gives Maggie a fancy new e-reader, Kitty a bike helmet with her name on it, Kellie and me a gift certificate to Oliva Grandin. 'I wanted to get you that locket necklace you're always looking at, but it was gone,' he says. 'But I bet you will find something else you like just as much.' I jump up and throw my arms around him. I feel like I could cry.

Santa, aka Daddy, brings silly gifts like sacks of coal and water guns with disappearing ink inside, and also practical things like athletic socks and printer ink and my favorite kind of pens- I guess Santa shops at Costco too. Santa- got Killie a new dildo too, thanks to me!

When we're done the opening presents, I can tell Kitty is disappointed there is no puppy, but she doesn't say anything. I pull her into my arms and whisper to her, 'There's always your birthday next month,' and she nods.

Daddy goes to see if the waffle iron is hot and the doorbell rings. 'Kellie, could you get that?' He calls from the pantry.

Kellie goes to the door, and seconds later we hear her high-pitched scream. Maggie and I leap up and run to the door, and right there on the welcome mat is a basket with a biscuit colored puppy in it and a ribbon around its neck. We all start jumping up and down and high-pitched yell.

Kellie scoops the puppy up in her arms and runs into the living room with it, where Daddy stands grinning. 'Daddy- Daddy- Daddy- Daddy!' she cries. 'Thank you thank you thank you!' I got a goofy small for what I got here and a run me over a hug.

According to Daddy, he picked the puppy up from the animal shelter two nights ago, and our neighbor Ms. Rothschild has been hiding him in her house. It's a boy, by the way, we figure that out pretty quick since he pees all over the kitchen floor.

Part: 8

Karly- Photo of me showing my ass and spread puss-puss!

≈ Past remembers of Karly little sister… ≈

'I always wanted a dog with bangs,' I say, cuddling him to my cheek.

'What should we name him?'

Maggie asks. We all look to Killie, who chews on her bottom lip in a contemplative way.

'I don't know,' she says.

'How about Sandy?' I suggest.

Killie sneers. 'Unoriginal.'

'No thanks,' Kitty says. Cocking her head, she says, 'What about Jenny?'

'Jenny,' Daddy repeats. 'I like it, yet she is not here so do not say...' Maggie nods. 'It has a nice ring to it... yeah moving on.'

'What's her full name?' I ask, setting him down on the floor.

She claps her hands and said it, wagging like mad.

I only check my phone once to see if Marcel called. And he didn't.

THE MORNING OF THE PART- I've come downstairs after ten, and they've been working for hours.

~*~

Kelly- young Holladay's:

'Hello, the toilet needed to be scrubbed anyway!

Besides, it'll all be worth it. We haven't done a recital party in so long.'

She slides a cookie sheet into the oven. 'Daddy, I'm going to need you to make a run to the store soon. We're out of sour cream and we need a big bag of ice.'

'Aye, aye, Captain,' our dad says.

The only one of us Margot doesn't put to work is Jamie Fox-Pickle, who is taking a nap under the Christmas tree.

I'm wearing a red-and-green plaid bow tie with a white button-down and a tartan skirt. I read on a fashion blog that mixing plaids is a thing. I go to Kitty's room to beg her to give me a braid crown, and she curls her lip at me and says, 'That's not very sexy.'

I frown… 'Excuse me? I wasn't trying to look sexy! I was trying to look festive.'

Hmm… We might need to put some parental controls on the TV.

Killie goes to my closet and pulls out my red off-the-shoulder knit dress with the swishy skirt. 'Wear this. It's still Christmassy but less elf-costume.'

'Fine, but I'm putting my candy cane pin on it.'

'Fine, you can wear the pin. But leave your hair down. No braid.' I give her my best sad pouty face, but Killie shakes her head. 'I'll curl the ends to give it somebody, but no braids of any kind.' I plug in the curling iron and sit on the floor with Jamie in my lap, and Kitty sits on the bed and sections my hair off. She wraps my hair around the barrel like a real pro.

The party?' She asks me.

'I'm not sure,' I say.

'What about Marcel?'

'He's not coming,' I say.

'Why not?'

'He just can't,' I tell her.

Maggie's at the piano playing 'Blue Christmas,' and our old piano sitting next to her singing along. Across the room, Daddy's showing off a new cactus to about her divorce when

Marcel walks in wearing a green sweater with a button-down shirt underneath, carrying a Christmas tin. I almost choke on my punch.

Kitty spots him when I do. 'You came!' she cries. She runs right into his arms, and he puts down the cookie tin and picks her up and throws her around. When he sets her down, she takes him by the hand and over to the buffet table, where I'm busying myself rearranging the cookie plate.

'Look what Marcel brought,' she says, pushing him forward. He hands me the cookie tin. 'Here. Fruitcake cookies my mom made.' 'What are you doing here?' I whisper accusingly. 'The kid invited me.' He jerks his head toward Kellie, who has conveniently run back over to the puppy. Marcel is standing up now, looking over at us with a frown on his face.

'We need to talk.'

So now he wants to talk. Well, too late. 'We don't have anything to talk about.'

Marcel takes me by the elbow and I try to shake him off, but he won't let go. He steers me into the kitchen. 'I want you to make up an excuse to Kellie and leave,' I say... 'And you can take your fruitcake cookies with you.'

'First, tell me why you're so pissed at me.'

'Because!' I burst out. 'Everyone is saying how we had sex in the hot tub and I'm a slut and you don't even care!'

'I told the guys we didn't!'

'Did you? Did you tell them that all we did was kiss and that's all we've ever done?' Marcel hesitates, and I go on. 'Or did you say, 'Guys, we didn't have sex in the hot tub,' wink-wink, nudge-nudge.'

Marcel glares at me. 'Give me a little more credit than that, Covey.'

'You're such a scumbag, Marcel.'

I spin around. There is Marcel, in the doorway, glaring at Marcel.

'It's your fault people are saying that crap about Lara Jean.' Marcel shakes his head in disgust. 'She'd never do that.'

'Keep your voice down,' I whisper, my eyes darting around. This is not happening right now. At recital party, with everyone, I have ever known my entire life in the next room.

Marcel's jaw twitches. 'This is a private conversation, Marcel, between me and my girlfriend. Why don't you go play World of Warcraft or something? Or maybe there's a

Godfather marathon on TV.'

'Freak you,' Marcel says. I gasp. To me, Marcel says, 'Liv, Jean, this is exactly what I've been trying to protect you from. He's not good enough for you. He's only bringing you down.' Beside me, Marcel stiffens. 'Get over it! She doesn't like you anymore. It's over. Move on.'

'You have no idea what you're talking about,' Marcel says. 'Whatever, dude. She told me you tried to kiss her. You try that again, and I'm kicking your ass.'

Marcel lets out a short laugh.

'Go ahead.'

Panic rises in my chest as Marcel moves toward Marcel with purpose. I pull Marcel's arm back. 'Stop it!' That's when I see her. Margot, standing a few feet behind Marcel, her hand to her mouth. The piano music has stopped, the world has stopped spinning because Maggie has heard the whole thing.

'It's not true, is it? Please tell me it's not true.'

I open and close my mouth. I don't have to say anything because she already knows.

Maggie who knows me so well. 'How could you?' she asks, and her voice trembles. The hurt in her eyes makes me want to die. I've never seen that look in her eyes before.

'Margot,' Marcel begins, and she shakes her head and backs away. 'Get out,' she says, her voice breaking. Then she looks at me. 'You're my sister.

You're the person- I trust more than anybody.'

'Go-go, wait-' But she's already gone. I hear her feet run up the stairs. I hear her door shut and not slam.

And then I burst into tears.

'I'm so sorry,' Marcel says to me. Forlornly, he says, 'This is all my fault.' He walks out of the back door.

Marcel moves to put his arms around me, but I stop him. 'Can you just... can you just go?'

Hurt and surprise register on his face. 'Sure, I can go,' he says, and he walks out of the kitchen. I go to the bathroom, off the side of the kitchen, and sit on the toilet and cry. Someone knocks, and I stop crying and call out, 'Just a minute or so.'

Then I get up and splash cold water on my face. My eyes are still red and puffy. I run water with a hand towel and I wet my face with it.

My mom used to do this for me when I was sick… She had put an ice-cold washcloth over my forehead, and she'd switch it out with a fresh one when it was not cold anymore. I wish my mom was here.

Part: 9

When I step back into the party, Maggie is sitting at the piano playing- 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,' and I have my dad cornered on the couch. She's throwing back champagne, and he has a mildly startled look on his face. As soon he sees me, my dad jumps off the couch and over to me. 'Oh, thank God,' he says. 'Where's Go-go? We haven't done our number yet.'

'She doesn't feel well,' I say.

'Hm. I'll go check on her.'

'I think she just wants to be left alone.'

Daddy's forehead creases.

'Did she and Marcel fight? I just saw him leave.'

I swallow. 'Maybe. I'll go talk to her.'

He pats me on the shoulder.

'You're a good sister, honey.'

I force a smile. 'Thank you, Daddy.'

I go upstairs, and Margot's bedroom door is locked. I stand outside it and ask, 'Can I come inside?' No answer.

'Please, Margot. Please just let me enlighten me…' Still nothing.

'I'm sorry. Maggie, I'm so sorry.

Please talk to me.'

I sit down outside my door and start to cry. My big sister knows how to hurt me best. Silence from her, being shut out by her, is the worst punishment she could conjure up. BEFORE MOMMY DIED, Maggie AND I were friends. We battled constantly, mostly for the reason that, I was always messing up something of hers- some game, some toy. Maggie had a doll she loved named Rochelle. Rochelle had silky auburn hair, and she wore glasses as Margot did.

Mommy and Daddy had given her to her for her sixth birthday. Maggie only doll. She adored her. I remember begging her to let me hold her, just for a second, but Margot always said no.

There was this one time, I had a cold, and I stayed home from school.

I crept into Margot's room and I took… She and I, played with her all afternoon, I pretended she and I were best friends. I got it into my head that, Rochelle's face was kind of plain; she would look better with lipstick on. It would be a favor too- her- if I made them more beautiful.

I got one of Mommy's lipsticks out of her bathroom drawer and I put some on her lips. Right away I knew it was a mistake. I'd drawn it on outside of her lip lines, she looked clownish, not sophisticated. So, then I tried to clean off the lipstick with toothpaste, but it only made her look like she had a mouth disease.

I hid under my blankets until Margot came home. When she found the state Rochelle was in, I heard her screech.

After Mommy died, we all had to realign ourselves. Everybody had new roles. She and I were no longer locked in battle because we both understood that Kellie was ours to take care of now. 'Look out for your sister,' Mommy was always saying. When she was alive, we did it

begrudgingly. After she was gone, we did it because we wanted to. Days go by and still nothing. She looks through me, speaks to me only when necessary.

Part: 10

Kelly- Photo of me with my pink vibrates.

≈ Past remembrance of Karly little sister ≈

Kellie watches us with worried eyes. Daddy is bewildered and asks what's going on with us, but doesn't push me for an answer. There is a wall between us now, and I can feel her moving farther and farther away from me. Sisters are supposed to fight and make up because they are sisters and sisters always find their way back to each other. But the thing that scares me is that maybe we won't.

OUTSIDE MY WINDOW, SNOW IS falling in clumps that look like cotton.

The yard is starting to look like a cotton field. I hope it snows all day and all night. I hope it's a blizzard.

There's a knock at my door.

I lift my head from my pillow. 'Come in.'

My dad comes in and sits down at my desk. 'So,' he says, scratching his chin the way he does when he's uncomfortable. 'We need to talk.'

My stomach drops. I sit up and wrap my arms around my knees. 'Did Margot tell you?'

My dad clears his throat. 'She did.' I can't even look at him. 'This is awkward. I never had to do this with Margot, so…' He clears his throat again.

'You'd think I would be better at this since I'm a health professional. I'll just say that I think you're too young to be having sex, Liv, Jean- girls. I don't think you're ready yet.' He sounds like he's about to cry.

'Did- did Marcel pressure you in any way?'

I can feel all the blood rush to my face. 'Daddy, we didn't have sex.'

He nods, but I don't think he believes me. 'I'm your dad, so of course, I'd rather you wait until you're fifty, but... 'He clears his throat again. 'I want you to be safe. I'm making an appointment with Dr. Vudeciez on Monday.'

I start to cry. 'I don't need an appointment because I'm not doing anything! I didn't have sex! Not in the hot tub or anyplace. Somebody made the whole thing up. You have to believe me.'

My dad has a pained expression on his face. 'Liv, Jean- girls, I know it's not easy to talk about this with a dad and not a mom. I wish your mom was here to navigate us through this.'

'I wish she was too because she'd believe me.' Tears are running down my cheeks. It's bad enough for strangers to think the worst of me, but I never thought my sister and dad would believe it.

'I'm sorry.' My dad puts his arms around me. 'I'm sorry. I do believe you. If you tell me you're not having sex, you're not having sex. I just don't want you to grow up too fast. When I look at you, you're still as young as Kellie to me. You're my little girl, Liv, Jean- girls.'

I sag against him. There's no place safer than my dad's arms. 'Everything's a mess. You don't trust me anymore; Marcel and I are broken up; Margot hates me.' 'I trust you. Of course, I trust you.

And of course, you and Margot will make up like you always do. She was only worried about you; that's why she came to me.' No, it's not. She did it out of spite. It's her fault that Daddy thought that of me for even a second.

Daddy lifts my chin and wipes the tears off my face. 'You must like Marcel, huh?'

'No,' I sob. 'Maybe. I don't know.'

He tucks my hair behind my ears. 'Everything will work out.' There is a specific kind of fight you can only have with your sister. It's the kind where you say things you can't take back. You say them for the reason that you can't help but say them because you're so angry it's coming up your throat and out your eyes; you're so angry you can't see straight.

Part: 11

All you see is blood. As soon as Daddy leaves and I hear him go to his room to get ready for bed, I barge into Maggie's room without knocking.

Margot is at her desk on her laptop.

She looks up at me in surprise. Wiping my eyes, I say, 'You can be mad at me all you want, but you had no right to go to Daddy behind my back.'

Her voice is piano- string tight as she says, 'I didn't do that as revenge. I did it because you have no idea what you're doing, and if you're not careful, you're going to end up some sad teenage statistic.' Coldly, as if she is speaking to a stranger, Maggie continues. 'You've changed, Liv, Jenn- girls. I honestly don't even know who you are anymore.'

~*~

'Nope, you don't know me anymore, if you think for one second that I would have sex on a school trip! In a hot tub, in plain view of anybody who might happen to walk by? You must not know me at all!' And then I lay it down, the card I've been holding against her. 'Just because you had sex with Marcel, that doesn't mean I'm going to have sex with Marcel.'

Margot sucks in her breath.

'Lower your voice.'

I feel happy that I've wounded her too. I yell, 'Now that Daddy's already disappointed in me, he can't be disappointed in you, too, right?'

I whirl around to go back to my room, and Margot follows close behind me.

'Come back here!' She shouts.

'No!' I try to close my door in her face, but she wedges her foot inside.

'Get out!'

I lean my back against the door, but Margot is stronger than me. She pushes her way in and locks the door behind her.

She advances toward me and I backed away from her. There's a dangerous light in her eyes. She's the righteous one now. I can feel myself start to shrink, to cower. 'How did you know Marcel and I had sex, Lara Jean?

Did he tell you that himself while you two were going behind my back?' 'We never went behind your back! It wasn't like that.'

'Then what was it like?' She demands.

A sob escapes my throat. 'I liked him first. I liked him all that summer before ninth grade. I thought - thought he liked me back. But then one day you said you were dating, and so I just, I swallowed it. I wrote him a goodbye letter.' Maggie faces twists into a sneer. 'Do you seriously expect me to feel sorry for you know?'

'Nope. I'm just trying to explain what happened. I stopped liking him, I swear I did. I didn't think of him like that again, but then, after you left, I realized that deep down I still had feelings for him. And then my letter got sent and Marcel found out, so I started to pretend to date, Marcel…'

She shakes her head. 'Just stop. I don't want to hear it. I don't even know what you are talking about right now.'

'Marcel and I only kissed one time. Once. And it was a huge mistake, and I did not even want to do it in the first place! You're the one he loves, not me.'

She says, 'How can I believe anything you ever say to me now?'

'Because it's the truth.'

Trembling, I tell her, 'You have no idea the power you have over me. How much your opinion means to me? How much I look up to you.'

Part: 12

Kelly- 2 fingers in the hole, she is snap-chatting.

≈ Past remembers of Karly little sister… ≈

Margot's face screws up like a fist; she is holding back tears. 'You know what Mommy would always say to me?' She lifts her chin higher. ''Take care of your sisters.' So that's what I did. I've always tried to put you and Kellie first. Do you have any idea how hard it was being so far away from you guys? How lonely it was? All I wanted to do was come back home, but I

couldn't because I have to be strong. I have to be' she struggles for breath, 'a good example. I can't be weak. I have to show you guys how to be brave.

~*~

Because – 'because Mommy isn't

here to do it.'

Tears roll down my cheeks. 'I know. You don't have to tell me, Gogo.

I know how much you do for us.'

'But then I left, and it's like you didn't need me as much as I thought.' Her voice breaks. 'You were fine without me.'

'Only because you taught me everything!' I cry out.

Margot's face crushes like.

'I'm sorry,' I weep. 'I'm so sorry.'

'I needed you, Liv, Jenn- and girls.'

She takes one step toward me and

I take one toward her, and we fall into each other's arms, crying, and the relief I feel is immeasurable. We are sisters, and there's nothing she or I can ever say or do to change that.

Daddy knocks on the door. 'Girls?

Everything okay in there?'

We look at each other and together at the same time, we say, 'We're fine, Daddy.'

IT'S NEW YEAR'S EVE. New Year's Eve has always been a stay-at-home holiday for us. We make popcorn and drink sparkling cider, and at midnight we go outside to the backyard and light up sparklers.

Some of my friends from high school are having a party at a cabin in the woods, and she said she wasn't going to go, that she'd rather stay with us, but Kellie and I made her. I hope that-Marcel is going too, and that they'll talk, and who knows what will happen. It's New Year's Eve, after all.

The night of new beginnings.

We sent Daddy to a party someone from the hospital is throwing. Kellie ironed his favorite button-down shirt and I picked the tie and we shoved him out the door. I think Grandma is right; it's not good to be alone.

'Why are you still sad?' Kellie asks me as I dump the popcorn into a bowl for us. We're in the kitchen; she's sitting on a stool at the breakfast bar with her legs dangling. The puppy is curled up like a centipede under her stool, gazing up at Kellie with hopeful eyes. 'You and Maggie made up. What's to be sad about?'

I'm about to deny being sad, but then I just sigh and say, 'I don't know.' Kellie grabs a handful of popcorn and drops a few kernels on the floor, which Jamie gobbles up. 'How can you not know?'

'Because sometimes you just feel sad and you can't explain it.'

Kellie cocks her head to the side.

'PMS?'

I count the days since my last period. 'No. It's not PMS. Just because a girl is sad, it doesn't mean it has anything to do with PMS.'

'Then why?' She presses.

'I don't know! Maybe I miss someone.'

'You miss Marcel?'

I hesitate. 'Marcel.' Despite everything, Marcel.

'So-o call him.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

I don't know how to answer her.

It's all so embarrassing, and I want to be someone she can look up to. But she's waiting, her little brow furrowed, and I know I have to tell her the truth.

'Kellie, it was all fake. The whole thing. We were never really together. He never really liked me.'

Kellie wrinkles. 'What do you mean it was fake?'

Sighing, I say, 'It all started with those letters. Remember how my hatbox went missing?' Kellie nods. 'I had letters inside, letters I wrote to the boys I loved. They were supposed to be private; they were never supposed to be sent, but then somebody did, and everything turned into a mess.

Marcel got one, and Marcel got one, and I was just so humiliated. Marcel and I decided to pretend to date so I could save face in front of Marcel and he could make his ex-girlfriend jealous, and the whole thing just spun out of control.' Kellie is biting her lip nervously. 'Lara Jean - if I tell you something, you have to promise not to be mad.'

'What? Just tell me.'

'First promise.'

'Okay, I promise I won't be mad.' Prickles are going up my spine.

In a rush, Kellie says, 'I'm the one who sent the letters.'

'What?' I scream.

'You promised you wouldn't be mad!'

'What?' I scream again, but less loud. 'Kellie, how could you do that to me?'

She hangs her head. 'Because I was mad at you. You were teasing me about liking Marcel; you said I was going to name my dog after him. I was so mad at you.

So, when you were sleeping- I snuck into your room and stole your hatbox, and I read all your letters, and then I sent them. I regretted it right away, but it was too late.'

'How did you even know about my letters?' I yell…

She squints at me. 'Because I go through your stuff sometimes when you're not at home.'

I'm about to scream at her some more, and then I remember how I read Maggie's letter from- Marcel and me, bite my/our tongue(s.) As calmly as I can, I say, 'Do you even know how much trouble you've caused? How could you be so spiteful to me?'

'I'm sorry,' she whispers. Fat teardrops form in the corners of her eyes, and one plops down like a raindrop. I want to hug her, to comfort her, but I'm still so mad. 'It's fine,' I say in a voice that is the exact opposite of fine. None of this would have happened if she hadn't sent those letters.

Kellie jumps up and runs upstairs, and I think she's going to her room to cry in private. I know what I should do. I should go comfort her, forgive her for real. It's my turn to be a good instance. To be a good big sister.

I'm about to go upstairs when she comes running back into the kitchen.

With my hatbox in her arms.

WHEN IT WAS JUST Maggie- and I, my mom used to buy two of everything, blue for Maggie and pink for me. The same quilt, stuffed animal, or Easter basket in two different colors. Everything had to be fair; we had to have the same number of carrot sticks or French fries or marbles or erasers shaped like cupcakes. Except I was always losing my erasers or eating my carrot sticks too fast, and then I'd beg for just one of Margot's.

Sometimes Mommy would make her share, which even then I realized wasn't fair, that obviously, Margot shouldn't be penalized for eating her snack slowly or keeping track of her erasers. After Kellie was born, Mommy tried to do blue, pink, and yellow, but it's just a- lot harder finding one thing in three different colors. Also, Kellie was enough years undeveloped than us that we didn't want the same kinds of toys as her.

The teal hatbox might be the only gift from Mommy I got that was just for me. I didn't have to share it; this one was mine and mine alone. When I opened it, I expected to find a hat, maybe a straw hat with a floppy brim, or maybe a newsboy- but it was empty.

Part: 13

'This is for your special things,' she said. 'You can put all your most precious, most favorite, most secret things in here.'

'Like what?' I said.

'Whatever fits inside. Whatever you want to keep just for you.' Kellie's pointy little chin trembles and she says, 'I am sorry, Lara Jean.' When I see that, the chin tremble, I can't be mad anymore. I just can't, not even a little bit. So, I go to her, and I hug her tight. 'It's all right,' I say, and she sags against me in relief. 'You can keep the box. Put all your secrets in it.' Kellie shakes her head. 'No, it's yours. I don't want it.' She thrusts it at me. 'I put something in there for you.' I open the box, and there are notes.

Notes and notes and notes.

Marcel's notes. Marcel's notes I threw away.

'I found them when I was emptying your trash,' she says. Hastily she adds, 'I only read a couple. And then I saved them because I could tell they were important.'

I touch one that Marcel folded into an airplane. 'Kellie - you know Marcel and I, are not getting back together, right?'

~*~

#- Hashtag: (Got mall?)

Kellie grabs the bowl of popcorn and says, 'Just read them.' Then she goes into the living room and turns on the TV. I close the box and take it with me upstairs. When I am in my room, I sit on the floor and spread them out around me.

A lot of the notes just say things like 'Meet you at your locker after school' and 'Can I borrow your chemistry notes from yesterday?' I find the spider webs' one from Halloween, plus it makes me smile. Another one says, 'Can you take the bus home today?

I want to surprise Kellie and pick her up from school, so she can show me and my car off to her friends.'

'Thanks for coming to the estate sale with me this weekend. You made the day fun. I owe you one.' 'Don't forget to pack a Korean yogurt for me!' 'If you make Marcel's dumb white-chocolate cranberry cookies and not my fruitcake ones, it's over.' I laugh out loud. And then, the one I read over and over: 'You look pretty today. I like you in blue.'

I have never gotten a love letter before. But reading these notes like this, one after the other, it feels like I have. It's like- it's like there's only ever been, Marcel… Like everyone else that came before him, they were all to prepare me for this. I think I see the difference now, between loving someone from afar and loving someone up close. When you see them up close, you see the real them, but they also get to see the real you.

-And-

Marcel does… he sees me, and I see him. Love is scary: it changes; it can go away. That's part of the risk. I don't want to be scared anymore. I want to be brave, like Margot. It's almost a new year, after all. Close to midnight, I gather up Kellie and the puppy and the sparklers. We put on heavy coats and I make Kellie wear a hat. 'Should we put a hat on Jennie too?' she asks me.

'He doesn't need one,' I tell her.

'He's already got on a fur coat.'

The stars are out by the dozen; they look like faraway gems. We're so lucky to live in the mountains the way we do. You just feel closer to the stars.

To heaven. I light up sparklers for each of us, and Kellie starts dancing around the snowmaking a ring of fire with hers. She's trying to coax Jamie to jump through, but he isn't having it. All he wants to do is pee around the yard. Luckily, we have a fence, or I bet he'd pee his way down this whole block.

Marcel's bedroom light is on. I see him in the window just as he opens it and calls out, 'Song girls!'

Kellie hollers, 'Want to light a sparkler?'

'Maybe next year,' Marcel calls back. I look up at him and wave my sparkler, and he smiles, and there's just this feeling of all rightness between us. One way or another, Marcel will be in our lives. And I'm certain, I'm so suddenly certain that everything is exactly the way it's supposed to be, that I don't have to be so afraid of goodbye because goodbye doesn't have to be forever.

When I'm back in my room in my flattery nightgown, I get out my special flowy pen, and my good thick stationery and I start to write. Not a good-bye letter. Just a plain old love letter.

Dear- Marcel -

Acknowledgments-

To All My Literary Loves:

To you, fairest of them all. I think you and I might just be meant to be.

To you, for putting a ring on it.

All of my love, baby girl! <3

Look, in my opinion, the best thing you can do is find a person who loves you for exactly what you are.

Good mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, handsome, what have you, the right person is still going to think the sun shines out your ass. That's the kind of person that's worth sticking with.

Part: 14

Come show showing the chat lines, she is masturbating, with over 2,000 boys loving her for making them explode, on the screen for her to see, yet only if you're her top pick. ≈ Past remembers of Karly little sister… ≈ she has become a mini-me…

More and more it has been occurring to me that this, too, will change our procedures. She'll retreat to the North End and make friends with her neighbors, with people richer, and more sophisticated than I am. I'll stay in some crappy apartment on Ebensburg, and I won't miss her, or remember what it felt like to run side by side.

They've warned me that after my procedure I may not even like running anymore, period. Another side effect of the cure: People often change their habits afterward, lose interest in their former hobbies and things that had given them pleasure.

'The cured, incapable of strong desire, are thus rid of both remembered and future pain' ('After the Procedure,' The Safety, Health, and cheerfulness.)

~*~

The world is spinning by, people and streets along, unfurling ribbon of color and sound. We run past St. Vincent's, the biggest all-boys school in town. A half-dozen boys are outside playing basketball, lazily dribbling the ball around, calling to one another.

Their words are a blur, an indistinct series of shouts and barks and short bursts of laughter, the way that boys always sound whenever they're together in groups, whenever you only hear them from around corners or across streets or down the beach. It's like they have a language all their own, and for about the thousandth time, I think how glad I am that segregation policy keeps us separate most of the time. As we run by I- think- I sense a momentary pause, a fraction of a second when all their eyes lift and turn in our direction. I'm too embarrassed to look.

My whole body goes white-hot like someone's just stuck me headfirst into an oven. But a second later I feel their eyes sweeping past me, a wind, latching on to Hana. Her blond hair flashes next to me, a coin in the sun.

The pain is creeping back into my legs, a leaden feeling, but I force myself to keep going as we around the corner of 219- Maine- Juniper Street and Laurel St. Vincent's behind. I feel Hana straining to keep up next to me. I turn my head, barely management to gasp out, 'Duel you.' But as Hana pulls up, arms pumping and nearly passes me, I put my head down and lunge forward, cycling my legs as fast as I can, trying to suck air into my lungs, which feel like they've shrunk to the size of a pea, fighting the screaming in my muscles.

Blackness eats the edges of my vision, and all I can see is the chain-link fence that rises in front of us suddenly, blocking our path, and then I'm reaching out and thwacking it so hard it begins to shake, turning around to yell, 'I won!' as Hanna pulls up a second behind me, gasping for breath.

Both of us are laughing now, hiccupping and taking huge gulping breaths of air as we pace around in circles, trying to walk it off. When she can finally breathe again, Hanna straightens up, laughing. 'I let you win,' she says, an old joke of ours. I toe some gravel in her direction. She ducks away, shrieking. 'Keep telling yourself that.'

My hair has come out of its pigtail, and I wrestle it out of it is flexible, flipping my head down so I get the wind on my neck. Sweat drips down into my eyes, stinging.

'Nice look.' Hana pushes me lightly, and I stumble sideways, whipping my head up to swipe back at her. She sidesteps me. There's a gap in the chain-link fence that marks the beginning of a narrow service road.

This is blocked by a low metal gate. Hana hops it and gestures for me to follow. I haven't been paying attention to where we are: The service drive threads down through a parking lot, a forest of industrial Dumpsters and cargo storage sheds.

Yonder those are the familiar string of white square buildings, like giant teeth. This must be one of the side entrances of the lab complex. I see now that the chain- link fence is looped on top with barbed wire and marked at twenty-foot intervals with signs that all read: PRIVATE PROPERTY. NO!

TRESPASSING, AUTHORIZED EMPLOYEES- ONLY.

Part: 15

'I don't think we're supposed to-' I start to say, but Hana cuts me off. 'Come on,' she calls out. 'Live a little.' I do a quick scan of the parking lot beyond the gate and the road behind us: no one. The small guard hut just past the gate is also empty. I lean over and peek inside.

There's a half-eaten sandwich sitting on wax paper, and a stack of books piled messily on a small desk next to an old-fashioned radio, which is spitting static and patchy bits of music into the silence. I don't see any Surveillance cameras, either, though there must be some. All the government buildings are wired. I hesitate for a second longer, then swing myself over the gate and catch up to Hanna. Her eyes are lit up with excitement, and I can tell that this was her plan, and her destination, all along.

~*~

'This must be how the Invalids got in,' she says in a breathless rush, as though we've been talking about- yesterday's drama at the labs all this time.

'Don't- you think?' 'Doesn't seem like it would have been hard.' I'm trying to sound casual but the whole thing- the empty service road, and the enormous parking lot, like- the high overpasses, sparkling in the sun, the cobalt dumpsters and the electrical wires across the sky, the sparkling white slope of the lab roof- smack's me uneasy. Everything is silent and very still- frozen, almost, the way things are in a dream, or just before a chief cloudburst.

I don't want to say it to- Hanna, but I'd give pretty much anything to head back to Old Port, to the complex nest of familiar streets and stores. Even though there's no one around, I have the impression of being watched. It's worse than the ordinary feeling of being observed in school and on the street and even at home, having to be cautious about what you do and say, the close, blocked-in feeling that everyone gets used to eventually.

'Yeah…' Hana kicks at the packed dirt road. A plume of dust puffs up, resettles slowly. 'Pretty crappy security for a major medical facility.'

'Pretty crappy security for a petting zoo,' I say.

'I resent that.' The voice comes from behind us, and both Hana and I jump.

I spin around. The world seems to freeze for an instant.

A boy is standing behind us, arms crossed, head cocked to the side. A boy with caramel-colored skin and hair that's a golden-brown color, like autumn leaves getting ready to fall.

Part: 16

It's him... The boy from yesterday, from the observation deck. The Invalid… Except he isn't an Invalid.

He's wearing a short-sleeved navy guard's uniform over jeans, and he's got a laminated government ID clipped to his collar.

'I leave for two seconds to get a refill'-he gestures to the bottle of water he's holdings' and I come back to find a full-fledged break-in.'

I'm so confused I can't move or speak or do anything. Hanna must think I'm scared because she jumps in quickly, 'We weren't breaking in. We weren't doing whatsoever. We were just running and we - hum, we got lost.'

The boy crosses his arms in front of his chest, rocking back on his heels. 'Didn't see any of the signs outside, huh? 'No Trespassing'? 'Authorized Personnel Only?' Hana looks away.

She's panicky too. I can feel it. Hana's a thousand times…

More confident than I am, but neither of us is used to standing in the open and talking to a boy, especially not a- bodyguards, and it must have occurred to Hana that he already has plenty of grounds to arrest us.

'Must have missed them,' she… Mumbles…

'Uh-huh.' He raises his eyebrows. It's obvious he doesn't believe us, but at least he doesn't look angry. 'They're pretty subtle. Solitary a few dozens- of them. I can see how you might not have noticed.'

He looks away for a second, squinting, and I get the feeling he's trying to stop himself from laughing. He's not like- any guard I have ever seen- at least, not the typical guards you see at the border and all-around Pitt, fat, and slowly and old. I think about how sure I was the recent past that he came from the Wilds, the solid certainty deep inside of me. I was wrong. As he turns his head, I see the unmistakable sign of someone who is cured: the mark of the procedure, a three-pointed star, just behind the left ear, where the scientists insert a special three the pronged needle used exclusively for immobilizing the patient so that the cure can be administered. Individuals show off their scars like badges of honor; you hardly see any curds with long hair, and the women who haven't lopped off their hair entirely are careful to wear it pulled back.

Part: 17

My fear recedes. Talking to a cured… Isn't illegal. The rules of segregation don't apply…

I'm not sure if he has recognized me or not. If so, he hasn't given any sign of it. In conclusion- I can't take it anymore, and I burst out, 'You, I saw you…' At the last second, I can't finish the sentence. I saw you yesterday.

You winked at me.

~*~

Hana looks startled. 'You two know each other?' She shoots a look at me.

Hana knows I have hardly ever exchanged two words with a boy before, unless it's 'Excuse me' in the street or 'Sorry for stepping on your toes' when I trip on somebody.

We're not supposed to have more than minimal contact with uncured boys outside of our own families. Even after they've been cured, there's hardly a need or excuse for it, unless we are dealing with a doctor or teacher or someone like that.

He turns to look at me. His face is completely professional and composed, but then again, I swear I see something flickering in his eyes, a look of amusement or pleasure. 'Nope,' he says smoothly. 'We have never met. I'm sure I would remember.' The flash in his eyes is back -is he laughing at me?

'I'm Hanna,' Hanna says. 'And this is Jenn.' She jabs me with an elbow. I know I must look like a fish, standing there with my mouth gaping open, but I'm too outraged to speak. He's lying. I know he's the one I saw yesterday, would bet my life on it.

Part: 18

'Marcel- nice to meet you.' Marcel keeps his eyes on me as he and hands.

Then he extends a hand to me. 'Jenn,' she says thoughtfully. 'I've never heard that name before.' I hesitate. Shaking hands makes me feel awkward like I'm playing dress-up in an adult's too-big clothing. Besides, I have never essentially touched skin-to-skin with a stranger. But he's just standing there with his hand out, so after a second, and I reach out and shake. The moment we touch, a tiny electrical shock calls through me, and I pull away quickly.

'It's short for Maggie,' I say.

'Maggie.' Marcel tips his head back, watching me with narrowed eyes.

'Pretty.'

I'm momentarily distracted by the way he says my name. In his mouth, it sounds musical, not clunky and angular, the way my teachers have always made it sound.

Love is in the air… like music!

Part: 19

His eyes are a warm amber color, and as I look at him, I have a sudden, flashing memory of my mother pouring syrup over a stack of pancakes. I look away, feeling ashamed, as though he has somehow been responsible for dredging the memory up, has reached in with his hand and wrenched it from me.

Awkwardness makes me feel irritated, and I press on, 'I do know you. I saw you yesterday in the labs.

You were on the observation deck, watching- observing everything.'

Again, my courage fails me at the last second and I don't say, watching me. I can feel Hanna glaring at me, but I ignore her. She must be furious I haven't told her any of this.

Part: 20

Marcel's face doesn't change. He doesn't blink or drop his smile for even a fraction of a second. 'Case of mistaken identity, I guess. Guards aren't allowed in the labs during evaluations. Especially not part-time guards.' For a second longer, we stand there, staring at each other. Now I know he's lying, and the easy, lazy grin on his face makes me want to reach out and slap him.

I ball my fists and suck in a deep breath, willing myself to stay calm. I'm not the violent type. I don't know why I'm feeling so aggravated.

Hanna jumps in, breaking the tension. 'So, this is it? A part-time security guard and some 'Keep Out' signs?'

Marcel keeps his eyes on me a half-second longer. Then he turns to look at Hanna as though noticing her for the first time. 'What do you mean?'

'I would have thought the labs would be better protected, that's all. It doesn't seem like it would be too hard to break into this place.'

Part: 21

Marcel raises his eyebrows.

'Thinking about attempting?' Hanna freezes, and my blood goes to ice. She has gone too far. If Alex reports us as possible supporters, or troublemakers, or anything, we're in for months and months of surveillance and investigation- besides, we can kiss our chances of passing the evaluations with decent scores goodbye. I picture looking for a lifetime of watching ANNA Kendrick do things to me!

Marcel must sense our fear because he raises both hands. 'Olivia. I was kidding. You don't exactly seem like terrorists.' It occurs to me how ridiculous we must look in our running shorts and sweaty tank tops and neon sneakers. Or at least, I must look ridiculous. Hanna looks

like a model for athletic wear. Again, I feel a fit of blushing coming on, followed by a surge of irritation. Nope- wonder the regulators decided on the separation of boys and girls: else, it would have been a nightmare, this feeling livid, self- conscious, disordered, and annoyed all the time.

Kellie- My daddy said- that my one pap passed from a planned rockfall- what is that? That one of the girls did it the taller one.

~*~

'This is just the stacking area, anyway, for freight and stuff.' Marcel gestures out there the line of consignment sheds. 'Real security starts closer to the facilities. Full-time guards, cameras, electrified fence, the whole shebang.' Hanna doesn't look at me, but when she speaks, I can hear the excitement creeping into her voice. 'The loading area? Like, where the deliveries come?' In my head I start praying, don't say anything stupid. Don't say anything dumb. Do not mention the Invalids.

'You got it.'

Hanna dances on her feet, shifting her weight back and forth. I try to shoot her a warning look, but she avoids my eyes.

'So, this is where the trucks come?

With medical equipment and - and other stuff?'

'Faithfully.' O'er I have the impression of something flickering behind Marcel's eyes, even as the rest of his face stays neutral. I don't trust him, I realize, and again wonder why he is lying about being in the labs yesterday.

Maybe only because it's forbidden as he said. Maybe because he was laughing instead of trying to help out. And maybe, after all, he doesn't recognize me. We made eye contact for only a few seconds, and I'm sure to him I was only a blurry, in-between face, easy to forget. Not pretty. Not that ugly, either.

Just plain, like a thousand other faces you would see on the street.

~*~

Hands- oh hands and holding them...

He, on the other hand, is most definitely not in- between. There's something insane to me about standing in the open talking to a strange boy, even if he is cured, and though my head is whirling, it's like my vision gets razor-sharp, making everything look ultra-detailed. I notice the way a piece of his hair curls around his scar, like a surround; I notice his large brown hands and the whiteness of his teeth and the perfect symmetry of his face. His jeans are faded and belted low on his hips, and the laces in his sneakers are the strangest ink-color blue like he has colored them in with a pen.

Thoughts oh thoughts and having them…

I think about you, this is true, what to do, it's now me and you!

I phenomenon how old he is. He looks my age, but he must be slightly older, maybe fourteen now. I wonder, too-a brief, flitting thought- whether he's already been paired. But of course, he has; he must have been.

I have been staring at him unintentionally and he turns suddenly to look at me. I drop my eyes, feeling a quick, besides, unreasonable trepidation that he has managed to read my thoughts.

'I had love to look around,' Karly hints not- so-o delicately. I reach out and pinch her when Marcel is not looking, in addition to her psychoanalysts away, giving me a guilty look. At least she doesn't start grilling him about what happened former times and get us thrown in the penitentiary or dragged through a questioning, interrogating, and enquiring.

Marcel softball pitches his water magnum in the air, catches it in one small hand. 'Trust me, there's zilch to see- and crap. Unless you're a fan of industrial waste. There's sufficient of that from one place to another here.' He tips his head toward the dumpsters.

'Oh- plus the best view of the bay in Pitt. She all the yellow and black things over the wither- We've got that going for us too.'

'Really?' Karly wrinkles her nose momentarily distracted from her detective assignment.

Marcel nods, tosses the bottle again, catches it. As it arcs through the air the sun winks through the water like light from a charm. 'That I can show you,' he says. 'Come on now.' All I want is to get out of here, but Karly says, 'Sure, thing,' so-o I trudge along after her, mutely cursing her curiosity and obsession with all things invalid- related, and swearing never to let her pick, our running route again.

Marcel and I walk in front, and I pick up scattered bits of their têteàtête: I hear him say he takes classes at one of the colleges but miss what he says he studies; Hanna tells him we're about to graduate. He tells her he's fourteen I think; she says that we're both turning I think in several months.

Appreciatively, they avoid talking about the botched evaluations yesterday. The service road connects with another, lesser drive, which runs parallel to Facade Street, slanting precipitously uphill toward the northern boardwalk.

Part: 22

See us-

Here there are rows of long, metal storage sheds. The sun is flat and high and unrelenting. I'm exceedingly thirsty, but when Marcel turns around and offers me a sip from his water bottle, I say, 'Nope,' hurriedly and too flamboyant. The thought of putting my mouth where his mouth has been making me feel anxious all over again.

As we come up to the top of the hill- all three of us panting a little from the climb- the bay unfolds to our right like an enormous map, a sparkling, shimmering world of blues and greens.

Hanna gasps a little.

It is a beautiful view: unobstructed, and just oh so perfect. The atmosphere is full of puffy white clouds that make me think of feather pillows, and seagulls turn lazy arcs over the water, patters of birds forming and dissolving in the sky.

Hanna, not Karly walks forward a few feet. 'It's amazing… So- freakin' gorgeous, isn't it? No matter how long I live here I never get used to it.' She turns and looks at me. 'I think this is my favorite way to see the ocean.

Middle of the afternoon, sunny and bright. It's just like- a photograph- and that shit. Don't you think, Liv?' I'm feeling so relaxed- relishing the wind at the top of the hill, which sweeps over my arms, and legs, hips, boobs and makes me feel cool and delicious, enjoying the view of the bay and the high, blinking eye of the sun- I've almost forgotten that Marcel is with us. He's been droopy back, standing a few feet behind us, and ever since we came up the hill, he ought to say a word.

Which is why I nearly jump out of my skin when he leans forward and directs a solitary word into my ear: 'Ashen.' 'Come again…?' I whirl around, my heart beating, pounding, and hitting on so very hard.

Part: 23

The lookback: the dubbed take the wanting- Hanna has turned, and twisted back to the water and is going on about wishing she had her camera and how you never seem to have anything you need.

Ray is bent close to me so close I can see his eyelashes, like perfect brushstrokes on a canvas portrait, besides now his eyes are like literally dancing with light, and with me, I feel them move in my and I feel dirty, burning as though on fire. For the lust and the lust- I must have with this boy, not love. I want hotly lost… I am in- love with…? You pick… IDK (I don't know) at this point.

'What did you say?' I repeat. My voice comes out a croaky whisper. Ray leans another inch closer, and it's like the flames seep out of his eyes, and light my whole body on fire. I have never- ever been this close- to a boy before. I feel like fainting and running all at the same time. But I can't move.

'I said, I prefer the ocean when it's grim. Or not gray. A pale, in-between color. It run by again me of waiting for something good to happen.'

Ray does remember- all advantageous everything never- ever forget. He was there. The ground seems to be dissolving under my feet the way it does in the dream about my mother. All I can see are his eyes, the shifting pattern of shadow and light turning there.

'You perjure yourself,' I manage to croak out.

'Why did you lie?'

Ray doesn't answer me. He pulls away a few inches and says, 'Of course it's even prettier at sunset. around eight-thirty the sky looks like it's on fire, especially at Back and Gold Cove. You should see it.' He pauses, and though his voice is low; as well as unpremeditated I get the feeling, he is trying to tell me something important.

'Tonight, it will most likely be amazing!!!'

My mind grinds into action, unhurriedly processing his words, the way he's emphasizing definite details.

Then it clicks: He has given me time, besides a place. He's telling me to meet him. 'Are you asking me to-?' I start to say, but just then Karly innings back up to me, grabbing my arm.

'God,' she says, snickering. 'Can you believe it's after five already?

We've got to go.' She's dragging me retrograde before- I can respond or protest, and by the time I think to look over my shoulder above my armpit adjacent my side boob, too see if Marcel is watching or giving me any kind of sign, he has disappeared from view.

I'll I want-

Is him…

Or her…

Or her…

Or him…

Or love…

Can I have both…? (She asked sweetly) without payback for it! (pouting face and stomp of her left foot.)

Part: 24

'Maggie- 'Mom! Mom! Mom!

Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! Mama!

Mama! Mama! Ma! Ma! Ma! Ma!

Mum! Mum! Mum! Mum! Mummy!

Mama, Mama…'

Shit!

Help me get home I'm out in the woods, I am out on my own. I found me a werewolf, a horrid old pooch It showed me its teeth and went straight for my gut.

Mama, Mama, help me get home I'm out in the woods, I am out on my own.

I was stopped by an angel, a rotting old wreck It showed me its teeth, and went straight for my neck.

Mama, Mama, put me to bed, I won't make it home, I'm already halfdead. I met an Invalid, and fell for his art she showed me her smile and went straight to my heart.

~*~

When I'm setting the table for dinner, I by chance pour wine in Kellie juice cup and orange juice in my uncle's wineglass, and while I'm grating cheese, I for one caught my knuckles so many times in the teeth of the grater my aunt finally sends me- out of the kitchen, saying she had preferred not to have a topping of skin for her ravioli.

I can't stop thinking about the last thing Marcel said to her, the forever and always-shifting pattern of his eyes, the strange expression on his face- like he was inviting me. around seven-thirty- the sky looks like it's on fire, especially at Back and Gold Cove. You should see it...

Is it even remotely, imaginably possible he was sending me a message?

Is it possible he was asking me to meet…?

Him…?

Part: 25

D*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*!!*!*

Am I…!

The idea makes me wobbly, faint- shaky- lightheaded- and dazed! I keep thinking, too, about the single word, directed low and quietly straight into my ear: Steely. He was there; he saw me; he evoked me.

So many inquiries gathering my wits at once, it's, and like one of the famous Pittsburgh (Pitt.) fogs has swept up from the ocean and settled there, making it impossible to think normal, functional thoughts.

My aunt finally notices something's wrong. Just before dinner, I'm helping Jenny with her homework, as always, testing her on her multiplication tables. We're sitting on the floor of

the living room, which is squashed up right next to the 'dining room' (an alcove that scarcely holds a table and seventh chairs,) as well as I'm holding her workbook on my knees, reciting the problems to her, but my mind is on autopilot and my thoughts are a million miles away.

Otherwise rather, they are exactly 3.5 miles away, down at the marshy edge of Back and Gold Cove. I know the distance exactly for the reason that, it's a nice run from my house.

Now I'm calculating how quickly- I could get down there on my bike, and then beating myself up for even considering the idea.

'Seven times eight?'

Jenny pinches her lips together. 'Fifty-sixth to the one.' She said- dumbly!

'Nine times six?'

'Fifty-two- da- four-sh.' She said- oh so- moronically.

On the other hand, no law says you can't speak to a curd.

Curds are safe. They can be mentors or guides to- the un-curd. Even though Marcel is- only- only a year older than I am- I think…? - Right? We are separated, irreparably and totally, by the procedure. He might as well be my grandfather.

'Seven times eleven?'

'Seventy-seven- one 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. somewhere in there it is.'

~*~

'Liv.' My aunt has squeezed out of the kitchen, past the dining room table, and is standing behind Jenny. I blink twice, trying to focus. Carol's face is tight with concern. 'Is something the matter?'

'Nope.' I drop my eyes quickly. I hate it when my aunt looks at me like that like she's reading all the bad parts of my soul. I feel guilty just for thinking about a boy, even a cured one. If she knew, she would say, o-Oh, Liv. Careful.

Dredge up what happened to your mother. She would say, these diseases tend to run in the blood.

'Why?'

I keep my eyes trained on the worn carpet underneath me. Carol bends forward, swoops up Jenny's workbook from my knees, and says loudly in her clear, high voice, 'Nine times six is fifty-four tenths.' She snaps the workbook closed. 'Not fifty-two, Liv. I assume you know your multiplication tables?' Jenny sticks her tongue out at me.

My cheeks start heating up as I realize my mistake. 'Sorry. I guess I'm just kind of - distracted.'

There's a momentary pause. My eyes never leave the back of my neck. I can sense them burning there. I feel like I well shriek, or cry, or confess if she keeps staring at me.

Finally, she sighs. 'You're still sophisticated about the evaluations, aren't you?' I blow the air out of my cheeks, feel a weight of anxiety ease off my chest.

'Affirmative. I guess so.' I venture a glance up at her, and she smiles her little skittering smile.

'I know you're disappointed - you have to go through the procedure again but think about it this way- this time you will be even more equipped.'

Nevaeh

Book: 17

Midnight Sun

Interval Two-

Chapter: 116

Dumb love

Marcel's oldest brother is Daved.

Marcel tried not to think about how often, as a kid, those same legs had pumped him forward during a footrace and propelled her into trees when they had climbing wars. She had always been strong- as hard as polished timber, scrappy and made of muscle. Stronger than most boys, and braver, too. For Marcel's whole life, she had been his best friend, his partner in crime.

(One year forward after high school.)

Liv- She was two years older than him and had been the de facto leader of whatever scheme or game they had invented. When he was five, they'd bottled their farts and tried to sell them. Olivia! Only in Pennsylvania would parents throw a dropping-out of-college party for their daughter. Now, to be fair, the invitations didn't acknowledge the whole dropping-out bit. Nothing as crass as that. I mean, this is the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, after all. People have standards. At least when other people are watching. See, the twelve one-dollars-each invitations rolled the whole debacle as a 'sending-off celebration for Olivia.'

Sending-off indeed. Not exactly. At least they got the location right, although even that's a bit of a joke. It's not exactly Rwanda or Haiti or any of the places that Olivia originally intended to go to save the world.

But when your parents know someone who knows someone who knows everyone, you're bound to get hooked up with someone who needs help a little closer to home. But the whole do-gooder motivation?

Total bullsh*t, I should know, it's that way since the begging of the end.

See, I'm Olivia IUP drop- out and soon- to- be resident of Middle- of- Nowhere. And let me tell you, my reasons have nothing to do with charity. I am not that good. Not even close. I certainly don't deserve a freaking party for the things I have done. But I'm an Indiana. Parties are what we do. At this point, I'm just counting myself lucky I talked my mother asking to stay home and not get kicked out, know why I can make it is on my own, I see that now, yet I didn't when I was in high school that is for sure.

Money is hard to come by when you on make two dollars an hour, working your ass off, busing tables. Pa. -wages suck! Like the cops in my hometown all sh*tting through the same whole. Sucking each other off, in the backroom, doing nothing but buying new cars. That's all there good for covers some assholes ass, that takes their sh*t.

I wish I were kidding, about both here, yet I am not. So here I am, dressed in a brand- new cute mélange dress, trying to make everyone believe, I was bitten by the humanitarian bug just in time to bail on my first year of college in music. I would be better, yet I left the band for Jenny also.

The most depressing thing is that everyone seems willing to just go with it as I did, things you do just to be cool makes you lose you in the long run- does it not? Well done, Liv! So proud of you, Olivia! I said to myself when I got all F's Lovely inside and out, I feel now. You can spend all your time doing boys or at the beach when you have no life or money to pay for a living- A-Okay- life… money is everything that makes the world go around. I wised up to this fast, in the first week of leaving home, when I was kicked out, begging to come back and suck on mom sh*t just to eat. Feel like corn?

My best friend, at least, doesn't seem to be buying it. 'Liv, you can't be serious. I mean, where are you going to get your hair highlighted and your designer clothes?' I am not… I said. A

good wheel is where I have to shop now, and I wear what I have. Some part of me that deep wants to snap at my oldest friend to stop being so superficial. But the other part of me- the more familiar one- is dying to grab her by the shoulders and give her an oh- my- flipping God-I-know!

Because, the truth is, I have spent way too much time wondering about how I'm going to keep my honey- blond hair just right now from returning to its natural mud color while in the God-awful hometown of mine. I have had the same hairdresser since our mothers decided it was time, we become versed in the difference between highlights and lowlights.

I was inseparable long before that.

Julyan Gorllie- She was the cute brunette to my classy blonde all through twelve years of private school.

Olivia taught me the art of rolling my plaid uniform skirt just enough to be interesting without being obvious, and in return, I was her explanation when she let Eliyn talk her out of her couture lavender dress on prom night at the college. Even when Julyan went off to Pittsburgh to meet up with her girlfriend since she dropped out.

They hooked up and want it to go more like meet mom and dad. Both made a pact to see each other at least a couple of times a month. So, far- like- it seems they have stuck to it.

Two months ago, this was, she's been telling me she will be my best friend no matter what (the no matter what, of course, is the not so minor fact that I won't be finishing my first year with a degree, someday soon, I have spent what seems like years racing after.) Oh, deep down, we both know things have changed.

Phone calls just aren't the same, I don't have one now. I cannot afford one, I need gas for the car I can make payments for like I to have five dollars to spare when all but two goes in the tank that I make.

Weekend nights, are not the same it party and flunk out or read in the dorm and pass what would you do in my shoes? Collage is an expansive way to party your butt off I can say that much- do you want to pay the eighty grand I owe. Dreaming at this point is the height of stupidity like smoking and doing drugs, I have to think about the clock inside me running too. I want to think about that one too a boy may be on the way, if this doesn't work out this time, the last girl broke my heart, and maybe a sex change is what I need in a lover.

~*~

'I'll be home for Thanksgiving,' I say by way of response to her email I see in the school library a place I thought I would never- ever be, just like being in horror over my hair crisis, in high school, it was a no-no! 'I'll make an appointment when I have some change too spare.'

~*~

My best friend purses her glossy lips and takes a sip of pink cava- a tiny one, since champagne has carbs, and Julyan lives in constant fear that her hourglass figure will turn lumpy before she can make it down the aisle in a size- 0 wedding dress. Where lovers yet we come to the point we feel we need boys in our lives too.

It's a big step for a girl that was Bi. I not so anymore, I don't know maybe I am getting too old for all this nonsocial sh*t, and love games. The fun was nice will it lasted, like before I may have to look at it and get on with it. 'So- three-plus months, we did think your mom would

call sick.' She says, giving my hair a once-over. And kiss me goodbye, 'Your ends might survive it if you don't flatiron your hair, but the roots... ugh- love yeah- see you around.' It was a flirty fling- if you want to call it that, we all have in college, I did.

'Maybe- I could just wear a bag over my head instead of, like my dart pillow- and wishing I was dead, all freaked up, and sped- in the head- days like this I wish I was ahead, with the story's all read.

Like the preps the jocks, hitting them all that step on my block, I know what I got a hanging sock filled with rocks, I am about to hit anyone that steps on my block, I hate on the preps' and the jocks, with their nice polo shirts and matching socks, throwing at me like a rock on glass, as they pass.

Just another sauced- like her, oh- I am sorry- I didn't want it this way, but what you are it if it will never change, I will just be another left behind, life is unkind, I did want it this way, and yet what good is it always, I will be left behind.' This is here to show you all that I did it! Plus, I am not stopping! Living life on rewind… what do you say about that? I am the only one that would get that, do you? Just like all of you I know that you have too. You can't define it, this life that you live. All the anger let it out, LET IT OUT!'

Chapter: 117

Tonic

I say, taking a sip of my champagne. A bigger sip than she, because unlike my curvy friend, I'm more of the willowy (read: flat chested) type, and if my parents' genetics are any indication, my beanpole figure will probably outlast my teeth.

Being able to legally drink at my parents' frequent social gatherings is pretty much the only good thing about getting older. I suspect that's one of the reasons the drinking age is twenty-one. It's as though some wise person way back when knew that alcohol would start to get reaaaaally helpful at that point in your life.

I'm nearly twenty-two, and God knows I've found a drink handy a time or two. Especially in the last year.

I catch a whiff of candy-scented perfume a second before an arm goes around my waist.

'You'll never guess who dared to show his face,' my friend Andrea murmurs in my ear. 'And he brought her.' She and he are giving me that wary, wide-eyed look that everyone gets when Ethan Price and I are in the same room, and before I know it, I'm flanked by four of my other friends, all nearly identical in jewel-colored cocktail dresses and designer high heels. I don't have to turn around to know that the girl- Maddie is so concerned about won't be matchy-matchy with anyone. Ethan's new girlfriend has a distinct style that the socially polite set refers to as unique and the total snobs among us would call weird. In my circle, there's nothing worse than weird.

'Marcel and Karly perfectly wired together, and that is perfectly right for them, or so they both say.'

Olivia and her new love: 'You want to talk about it?' she asks, not looking up. 'I wouldn't even know where to start.' 'She does tend to have that effect on people. They come in expecting to feel kindly but walk away wanting to strangle her.' 'That about sums it up,' I say, tracing a finger through the flour dusting the counter. 'But you're saying this to me?' She asks.

That I may want a boy now, and that we need to see others, it's not you- it's me. I press my lips together as I consider the thoughts of letting go and finding new love. Like the thought of the taste and feel of her lips pressed to mine, it felt so right to me. I don't want to stay that don't want me in their life anymore she said with disappointment. Yet there was some regret in her eyes and voice, I feel that I knew her so well, yet I didn't at all really, you know what kind of loves you have where you want more yet no less. I want to scream at the top of my lungs and hightail may cute ass it back to her apartment as soon as I got home here now, where people buy bread and don't give a sh*t if you want to be alive or died, and where it's not so freaking quiet, or nose with the fart can cars that go by, and where ware the girl don't have sexy auburn eyes and sh*tty attitudes. Sometimes like her PMS-ing or over crap.

But then I picture her smug condescension as he stared down at me from that ravaged, once-gorgeous face. I knew I would feel this way. Heck, Julyan made sure that there's nothing to hold me here, other than her love for me and mine for her. More lust then loves, if you want to get- down to it.

It's as though she saw right through my plan to swoop in here like a saintly guardian angel to absolve my sins, and she's telling me he is not going to play with my emotions and brain or life. Getting forgiveness is not going to be as simple as ladling soup into a weary, appreciative soul's gateway.

Maddie gives another of those half-smiles that she seems to have in endless supply. It's a smile that says, Life sucks, but it's always worth living. 'Most people don't admit how frustrating he is,' she is. 'Most of them pretend he's an absolute dear and claims they're the ones who can fix them. Although sometimes they don't bother to pretend, they just do. They just leave within minutes of meeting them.'

'Can't say I blame her or her,' I say, pushing away from the counter.

Looking around and back behind me. 'But it just so happens I have nowhere else to be.

-And-

I'm also probably not the right person to help him, but then I don't know if there is such a thing when you're dealing with him.'

'Can we forget about the things I said when I was drunk! Sleeping with my close on- and you're gone! I am my own worst enemy, kicking my sh*t out of me.' looking out the window last night- 'Well then.' Maddie gives the dough a satisfied pat before wiping her hands on a dishtowel, I begged her to love me again for a place to live also, yet don't tell her that. 'I'll show you to your room.' The upstairs of the house- the apartment is as vast and grand as the downstairs, but its emptiness is a little frightening, she has like noting in here. I follow Madilyn down a long series of hardwood hallways, noting that we pass a half dozen bedrooms- that is not used, not one of which seems to be in use for anything really, they need work I can see.

Of course, they wouldn't be: her father doesn't live here yet he pays for her to be and own the building, and I'm assuming her like my mom and her mon for life in this crud hole, in the nearby the ghetto part of the town, wherever this is- it what I call it.

Which means it the worst of the worst being alone. Alone- is not something you want to be walking around this place? You get some you don't want or mugged. The thought should be terrifying, and it is. But then I remember my reaction to her and also her… and those girls too that are gone. That pure, undiluted surge of desirability, and now, I am frantic on top of being nervous as hell. Thinking about all this sh*t.

'Here we go,' Maddie says, stopping at a room on the left at the end of the hall. 'It's not the biggest of the guest rooms, but the view's the best in the house.

Other than the master suite, of course.' At this point where just kind of bed buddy's, some there to hold on to yet it's not the same for me, nor her or so I feel. I think we grow up some, maybe not she soft to hold on to in the night- so- yeah- I will go with that.

'Is the master suite where Maddie's father sleeps when he comes off to the home he lives in now after he left her mom also?' I ask, stepping into the room.

Everyone seems to back up after all the deaths, at clit- high joint schools. The joint meaning joined with the old oak view one next door.

Chapter: 118

Apartments

Here daddy rarely stays the night, yet I like him a lot I could see myself with a man like that.' She says quietly, and I overhear. Cute yet creepy all at the same time. 'When he does, he is in the guest room, I may pop in just in to see him, in a see-through night top, and see that man, It's the only way they can keep the peace in my heart of what it could be like.' 'How wonderfully dysfunctional I would have it be with someone like that.' I mutter in my mind feeling the thoughts of wetness like in my brain making me hot.

But as I take in my new bedroom, I temporarily forget all about the Langdons' issues, because the room looks like something out of a luxury resort.

The bed is huge, it's bedding a pristine white save for the fur blanket draped across the foot of the bed. The furniture is all-natural wood and has that sort of oversized one-of-a-kind

quality look that makes me think it was made locally instead of created in bulk and distributed to thousands of households.

There's a large desk in one corner, a reading chair in another, but the star of the room is the massive windows overlooking the water. 'Wow,' I whisper. 'See, we do have a few things Pittsburgh doesn't,' Maddie says, not bothering to hide the pride in her voice. 'Frenchman Bay is one of them.' I can't argue. I've seen plenty of gorgeous views on summer vacations and spring break trips, but this ranks up there with the best of them because it's unanticipated. It's nearly dark now, but it only adds to the appeal of the shadowy water.

The 'Bathroom's through there,' she says, gesturing to the door opposite the window. 'I put in fresh towels, and there's a small fridge next to the closet with water and a few snacks. I cook three meals a day. Not anything at all fancy, so if you need anything in between, or anything else, you're on your own.' I like she imagined in the bright sunlight it would be postcard-worthy.

'Resonances great,' I say, giving her a small smile. 'Although I'm not hungry when I travel back and forth, I said glad to see, and be home and love you again, she knew it was a line, and a waste of time, so I'm good for tonight on the sofa maybe I crawl in with you like the old times back in the days of high school.' I got in naked and she in a nightgown, it came off and we did the old stuff, it was fun, some of the magic back. We fall asleep looking out at all the lights. Her side hug cuddling me like them. The sun rays were the alarm…

Chapter: 119

Days

Photo of me going down on my 7" long toy, laying on my belly legs kicking.

≈ Past remembers of Karly ≈

Days-

I haven't eaten since breakfast, but may need to eat has, without doubt, deserted me for the jiffies of moments. It probably has something to do with the fact that I have somehow gotten myself into the mother of all disasters. 'For meals, do the caretakers usually eat with her?' I ask…? Her- I want to press my lips together- yet hers with mine just for a moment or a longer.

Like thin never wanting to stop.

'No. He takes almost all of his meals in the study, some in his bedroom. You are of course welcome to eat with Mick and me at any time, although we tend to eat in the small house.'

I like to rock into my man thing-ie replica with the two lumps at the bottom, that I use to get there, sometimes behind me sucking cupped to the wall, as she is coming tough me or him, I rock ever so easy back and forth into it, sapping my hip down on it. (Awwwahhh! Saying in a sexy sigh…)

She says it in that way people have of not expecting you to take them up on the offer, and I admit

I'm a little depressed by the fact that I'm expected to eat by myself. My family has always made a big deal about sharing meals, so the thought of four people living in one home and eating separately seems strange.

Then again, eating alone seems a lot less strange than sharing a meal with Paul. As if he'd even allow it, especially after the way I behaved.

Although, oddly, I still don't regret my over-the-top rudeness. It was worth it for the sheer surprise on his face. And something tells me that surprise is the only thing I'll have going for me if I want to have any chance of keeping the upper hand.

Lindy heads toward the door.

'There's a phone in the kitchen and at the end of the hall, and both have a number listed for the small house. I usually head over there shortly after I get Paul his dinner, so if you need anything-'

'I'll be fine.'

But the file didn't answer any of the things I wanted to know. Like whether she enjoyed that kiss yesterday or was just pretending. Whether she likes guys to hold her face or her hips when they kiss her.

Whether she has a boyfriend.

And, most important - what the freak is she doing in Maine?

-And-

'Don't go running alone here,' I say. I don't bother to explain all the dangers of a woman running alone in the dark. Bar

Harbor is safe enough, but all it takes is one sick freak lurking in the bushes to destroy a life.

Chapter: 120

Fooling around

At lunch- a boy asked what does- she use and like, so I know.

Why?

'I want to date her… is that okay?'

Maybe! You have to pass my test.

Maddie- like all the girls in my group wall a have three, like most girls in the world I feel, I also have the suction cup 7 inches, a rabbit my is blue, and a hot pink seven vibrating functions hard plastic vibrators slash dildo. You asked I have no shame in saying. I have my built-in my handbag now, 'really' do you want to see- he said nothing- without even a thought she turns it on, and it bounces on the table and round the food trays. Do have it hop into some one's milk he said.

Maddie is quite must of the time yet can be silly when you want her to be. She said to the girls- I have Some time- I use a flat looking-glass under me on my bed and rode it bouncing up and down on the bead meatus, letting the bed do the work, he- he, leaning back downing the cowgirl, or forward for old-school freaking feeling all missionary and- aw-ah oh- yeah. Karly, she likes it sideways; I don't get it?

Do you?

Karly- Madalyn all summed up- she likes, fingering herself- cooking anything and everything. Singing not always hitting the notes, yet sweetly, running, biking, swimming, outdoors hunting, I don't get that one. Jewelry making all kinds of cool things, look at all these we have, and she has on. Take one to tell her to see if she notices.

Pole dancing working out like Zumba sh*t. Even Knitting- Knitting…??? Gardening at her apartment on her veranda porch. Photography like of her taking pics of her more fallow and of the country land when she is there in the small towns, or school trips like D.C,

Teenage, New York, flora, and Canada. Collect Things like old radio's, and records, and typewriters, on is white and platinum, with her name on it, in cloud blue. Which is worth something! Her dad loved the sh*t out of her for that one.

Suck up!

God, I need to which my wording read that one again. Yoga- yah, the only time I get into those positions is when- yah you get it.

Why not do it for fun she said? I want to get some out of me for it if I going to bend it around like that- God! She has funny moments, of randomness too, blurting out sh*t as I do. Too much time with gaming and dumb gaming at the school always on the brown team. Dressing up in dumb sh*t like a lumberjack and once a cow, she was dry humming on me the apple in the hallway.

Pooping three times a day god- I don't sh*t in a week! 'Getting it!' Piss! Fingers! More about that pace of she over there huh- okay, she loves ballroom dancing, and asking all fairy and sh*t. Oh, piss! More…?

Sure, a boy wants to know… noses boy. Do it yourself… ask- her yourself baby- d*ick! I was thinking. Blogging whatever I ask why the freak does she want to PMS- b*tch online for anyway? I don't get…?

Where friends that don't get one another? Belly-Dancing, god- yah no- like- do that on your red flow! Antiques- did I say that? Um- lap Dancing- 'I see it!' I see that your one of those

dumb boys ant' yah? Gulp- sure! He said nervously! I love making dumb boys feel awkward!!! Flower arranging… oh, Aromatherapy- 'Yeah got ah-w!' 'Boy said yeah I see we have a lot in-common, hook me up!' Wink- I'll see what I can do! A Boy- I don't even know his name- 'Okay,' she says, surprising me. I narrow my eyes and wait for it, and he squirms. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'I've never known a female to acquiesce that easily without a catch. How about you hit me with it now and get it over with.' I shrug'. 'Fine. I was going to say that I won't freak you over if you promise to go with her, but you freak up- I'll cut your balls off- got it.' 'GOD! He said.' Snip- snip- I made that finger moment.

I think he is okay- he does not get any I can see that all over his face and down there too- so as soon as he smells some puss- puss- he'll be all over her- in loving lust. I love looking down at boys! You have to see if it's good enough for your girlfriend if you would do it, by looking at- it is saying hello; she should not have to either. You got feel it too so- yeah. Girls get it.

Feel that hard thing-ie, moving on! I need a cold shower- God! :0 < clown!

What a goof-ball slash clown! It's kind of cute, I have to say, oh boys- right…???

Dumb!!!

Chapter: 121

Squeal

Maddie- 'No,' I say, almost before she's finished her sentence. 'Why not?' he is your type, okay for you. I rap my cane once against the ground. 'Well, for starters, even though there are tortoises that could surpass your sorry excuse for a jog, I'm in no shape to accompany even

the most pathetic of runners.' 'What a handy skill you have of overloading a sentence with insults,' she says as she reaches up to adjust her ponytail. 'That must be helpful, what with your thriving social life and all.' I thump my cane against the ground again, studying her. 'Must be nice, picking on the cripple.' Maddie rolls her eyes like I have to do what with and to this boy. 'Please. Your soul's more crippled than your leg.'

She has no idea how right she is, and I have no intention of letting her anywhere close enough to find out. I've gotten good at shutting people out by pushing them away… being as nasty as possible until they reach their breaking point. But with her? It's different. And not only because the three- month rule she has will more her father's implemented means I can't scare her away. I irregular she of all people might realize that the caustic, hostile routine isn't a routine at all. This girl might just figure out what I'm truthfully rotten to the core.

It's better than she does; I just need to delay that realization for a while.

Three months, specifically. I'm not saying I'm going to be nice to her. I have no intention of going all friendly on her ass. But I'll do whatever it takes to prevent her from realizing that I'm deader inside than she can know. I'll do whatever it takes to ensure that little Kellie gets the treatment she needs, the same can be said for all my girls, I look out for. I will not, however, accompany her on her morning 'runs,' and I use that word loosely.

The boy will, he freaked up he gets it, honey nut cheerios she will be having I am sure of that, he- he- he! I love it, its time she gets it in, god, like a real on even, I like the real deal! Being me! Get it in- like, your only young ounces, find a boy, girls like me find a boy with the one you like! 'There's a treadmill in the gym,' I say, continuing along the path. We can do it in that room at the school! 'Is there? Colettolyn said.' she asks, falling into step beside me.

'Rumor has it you don't use it there with you pass meetups.' 'You know, this…?' I say as though realization just struck, in the thought of that girl. Karly said you did. 'I just had the best idea.

How about we do not do this chatty little shared morning together? You go ahead and scamper back up to the house with your flip-floppy fitting shoes, and I'll continue slithering along this path alone.

Yeah?'

His- joke- 'A teacher is teaching a class, and she sees that Johnny isn't paying attention, so she asks him, 'If three ducks are sitting on a fence, and you shoot one, how many are left?' Johnny says, 'None.' The teacher asks, 'Why?'

Johnny says, 'Because the shot scared them all off.'

The teacher says, 'No, two, but I like how you're thinking.' Johnny asks the teacher, 'If you see three women walking out of an ice cream parlor, one is licking her ice cream, one is sucking her ice cream, and one is biting her ice cream, which one is married?' The teacher says, 'The one sucking her ice cream.' Johnny says, 'No, the one with the wedding ring, but I like how you're thinking!'

Her- Joke back- 'The teacher asked me, 'Why is your cat at school today?' I replied crying, 'Because I heard my girlfriend tell my mommy, 'I am going to eat your p*ssy so that is why she is at the school today!'

Nice!

I snort, he so funny, I didn't want to… 'Please. Where'd we talk more, online?' She's silent for a second. 'They got great chatting it up.' 'I'm sure they did. Probably by people who liked the pretty pink color.' 'What's wrong with the color?' 'For lipstick? Nothing,' I say, even

though I have no idea why I'm continuing this conversation. The innocuousness of it feels suspiciously standard.

'Let me guess,' she says. 'Your high school track team placed second in the state like a hundred years ago, and you're still reliving the glory?' I feel the love coming hard from inside me!

Chapter: 122

It sounds dirty

One-day later- Karly- oh...? God…? hose um- down… God, you tow-just freak in the lunchroom tables why don't ya! And the do something like that- yet can picture it, I am done. YAH! JUST GRAB her ASS- a boy-girl down the way said, as they were doing as they do on the Discovery channel! 'A hundred years ago? Exactly how old do you think I am?

And no, I didn't run track in high school.' A thin line of my black lashes lined in and out eyes at her. 'Is that a crack about the thrash?'

'Oh yeah, can we talk about that for a second me and liv, I see I do not need anymore?' she asks, peering down at the object in question. 'That whole snake thing is a reference to your penis, right?' Karly said you want me to kiss you, baby, it will make you feel better. Sure! She said.

We are so freaked up! Is Love- love, right?

Get'n it- form anyone or at any time… that how it is these days, girl brake up one night after sex and do it with your friend the night. That's HIGH SCHOOL for a popular preppie type, like me now. I starting to look more and more like the girl on the cam I said to Liv- 'Awh- that is okay, we all know, anyway.'

Oh- that is NICE! I am not scared to lick or take anything on my girl down there and down more than that in the backside, neither is she if the love you finger and suck it all and in-between too. I kiss every inch, every inch as she does for me.

My footsteps falter than ever before or so it felt to me. This girl looks like a poster child for a church's youth group, opposite of Maddie, and the penis is so not a word I was prepared for. She loves the lord yet not a d*ick. Not in this context, anyway. 'Seriously?' I ask, annoyed at being thrown off guard. Not only does she invade my personal space and invite herself on a walk she undoubtedly wasn't invited on, but she's prying into my past, accusing me of being an old man with that and those don't work for her or me sometimes, and now dropping penis into conversation like we're discussing the weather.

Olivia shrugs but doesn't make any move to head in the opposite direction. 'I think you should have gotten a jaguar cane. That would have been cool.' 'I'm just saying this,' she says with a shrug. 'It's a serpent head, and the way you use it keeps it sort of in the vicinity of, well… your snakehead. I figure that can't be a coincidence.' Sweet baby Jesus. 'It's a cane.

I can't use it and not have it in the vicinity of bull sh*t. Just never mind.

Can you please just trot along back to the house? Your Barbie shoes are going to get dirty out here.' I puckered brow. For a second, I almost tell her that I don't need any help upping the sexy hot factor. Then I remember that I'm not well, not anymore.

I'm the crippled, small-town version. Looking at photos doesn't even remind me, of that day of days and places of places.

I take a long breath of cold morning air to keep myself from letting the despair that's lodged in my throat come rushing out in an angry bellow. If I let her see even a graying of what's

inside me, she'll be on her way back to my school days. In addition to alluring as that is, I need her here. At least until I formulate a plan for what the hell to do with my life, now I asked the question, with anger and fear and desperation.

In anticipation of then, I have to keep her around in a way that doesn't make me want to strangle her or push her against a nearby tree and kiss her nonsensically. Or better yet, none at all. 'How long have you been running?' I ask, almost choking on the inane, unimportant question. It's been so long since I've had a casual conversation that it feels both unnatural and strangely familiar.

Plus, it keeps my mind off the way she fills out her pink running shirt. Practicality tells me she's got a sports bra under there- probably pink- but it doesn't stop me from fantasizing about seeing

Olivia is less utilitarian undergarments. 'The running thing's kind of new,' she replies, jerking, lurching, and shuddering me back to the dialogue exchange.

'Tolerant yet as soon as I think I am out they suck me back into them!'

'Shocker,' I mutter out to them in a grumble.

'Well, sorry I'm not you.'

I smile a little at her. 'That's the only sprinter you know, isn't it?'

'Maybe. Jeez. What is it with you and running? I didn't realize that track trivia would be part of the job necessities parts,' she says, her tone maddened, as we take a sharp right turn in the path, bringing us closer to the water.

'I miss it.' My answer is simple and a good deal more revealing than I intended.

I half expect her to mock me. To inform me that there are more important things in life than the ability to run, or to pacify me by telling me that there are other things I can do that are just as great.

Chapter: 123

Everlasting

Nods and gulp's Instead, she nods, and I whip my chin off the spit, but not in a pitying way, just a quick acknowledgment of my statement. 'I started running as an escape,' she says after several seconds of silence. I glance down at her profile, noting that her nose is just slightly upturned and kind of cute. 'An outflow from what?' She glances back at me, and our eyes collide for one charged moment. The message is clear: she'll tell me her secrets when I tell her mine.

Which will be never- ever… never- ever - ever happen.

'Your inhalation's all wide of the mark,' I say, tearing my eyes away from hers.

'My breathing's fine, I feel find you fine, I am fine where all find to move on.' 'Not if you want to run more than three miles. Your breaths are too shallow with a swallow. You need to inhale deeper. Engage your diaphragm. And get used to matching the breaths to your steps. For your slow pace, inhale for maybe three or four steps, then exhale for the same.' 'That seems like a lot of thinking for something that's supposed to be natural.' 'You'll get used to it if you suck it in harder.' 'Okay, what else?' she says, spreading her arms wide, think of your legs when you're with your girlfriend. 'Am I bowlegged? My ponytail not high enough?'

'Just start with the breathing for now,' I say, irritation run in and out starting to set in as I realize how much I want to be the one running, not the one telling somebody else how to run.

'Sure thing, Coach,' she murmurs.

'So-o, by any chance, does your sudden sympathy for running mean you want to be all by yourself?' She mopes making a sad face, with a pouting lip and so on. 'Not really. Why?' 'Jesus, take a hint and do what is implied- already.'

'Ah. You want me to leave you to your ruminating.'

'Yup-per.'

She stops walking immediately and pivots so she's facing back toward the house. 'Fine. I'll try to master your little breathing activity on the way back. Same time tomorrow?'

'Nope, find another time to run and on my time if you don't get it.' 'I'm getting paid, either way, do what you like its wrong be to do it your way, I'll keep you company, you know over here looking down on you shaking my head when you F- it up.'

'Well, do so in silence, and from far afield.'

She sighs as though I'm a peevish child. 'It's shocking that none of your other companions stuck around for more than a twosome of weeks.

Shocking, I say.' 'See you later,' I say all with F- you in my mind, not at all happy with the outcome of everything, nodding with my cane back toward the house. 'See ya, I said to my girls,' she says as she begins walking backward so that she's still finished- facing me. 'Also, fun little trivia for this morning? In the argument for your uncalled- for breathing advice?' 'No thanks, do I want more of this sh*t.'

Chapter: 124

Open mouth

She ignores me and points to the cane. 'That cane? All for the show. You haven't used it once to support your weight this entire time.'

I open my mouth to argue, but instead, my jaw goes a little slack as it hits me.

She's right…

…And I haven't once thought about my leg or my scars.

She's already jogging away from me, and I stand still for several minutes, watching her until she disappears around a bend in the path. Then I continue with my walk, telling myself I'm relieved to have my solitude back. And if there's the slightest undercurrent of loneliness, I ignore it.

Olivia- After my shower, I go looking for Paul.

He's not in his library or the kitchen. Halfway back up the stairs, I hear the hard, driving music from the direction of his bedroom. I didn't grow up with a brother

(or a sister, for that matter,) but I'm pretty sure all that scary guitar noise is dude code for-

'keep the hell out.'

Fine with me…

I'm not sure which encounter feels stranger: the kiss in the library last night, or the unexpected predawn walk/run, where we almost connected for like a half-second before he reverted to butt-hole mode.

Returning to my bedroom, I check my email, ignoring everything except the message from Harry Langdon. I hit reply and proceed to vomit out a bunch of lies about how 'Paul and I are going to do just fine together!'

It's not like I can tell him the truth: that I'm not at all sure how to survive three months with his gorgeous, tormented son.

And then, because I have no idea what else I'm supposed to be doing, I take myself on a little tour of the Langdon estates.

The compound is just as enormous and impressive in the morning as it was at twilight, and although everything is state-of-the-art, right down to the sound system in the small house, which Mick insists on showing me, I can't help but feel like I've stepped back into another era where some desolate duke reigns over a semi-abandoned estate.

The gym, in particular, is depressing. It has enough equipment for an entire football team, which is a little pathetic considering only one person is using it, and according to Harry Langdon's earlier emails, Paul only works his upper body- not the leg that so desperately needs rehabilitation.

Yet- I wasn't lying this morning when I pointed out that he doesn't seem to need his cane. Admittedly, my psychology expertise is limited to one throwaway psych class during my freshman year at NYU, but I'd bet serious money that Paul Langdon's issues are a lot more in his head than in his leg.

And I suspect that, deep down, he knows it too.

Which is why he's avoiding me.

He's not trying to run me off with the same sort of hostile enthusiasm he displayed yesterday, but he's certainly not seeking me out. I'm disappointed but not surprised. After all, he's made it very clear that he can't stand anything about me. Not my personality, not my running technique, not my pink shoes- Later, Lindy asks me to take Paul lunch- homemade minestrone and a ham sandwich- but when I bring it into the study, the room is still empty. However, there's a glass of some brown alcohol on the desk that I know wasn't there earlier, so he's not locked in his bedroom anymore.

Yup. Avoiding me. I take the tumbler of liquor out with me after setting the tray on the desk. I'm not a teetotaler by any means, but the last thing this guy needs is to be drinking before noon.

When I get back to the kitchen, I dump the alcohol down the sink, perversely hoping that I've just tossed something extremely expensive.

I spend the next couple of hours in my room. I call my mom and give her a glossy, half-truth-filled version of my first day. Next- I call Bella, and although I fill her in on the fact that Paul is younger than expected and ridiculously sexy (best friend privilege; I can't tell her,) I stop short of confiding that I'm both drawn to him and utterly terrified by him. I certainly don't tell her about the kiss.

But something else has been bothering me since last night.

In those first moments, after I pulled back, deliberately degrading her, she was shocked and angry, as she was supposed to be. But in the moments, that followed, there was something else that pissed me off: resignation. In a matter of seconds, the angry, betrayed light went out of her eyes, and she just stood there, accepting what I'd just done as though it were her due.

I may not know Olivia Middleton well- okay; I don't know her at all, but I do know that she deserves more than what she got from me last night.

There's a soft knock at the door, and I hate that my head shoots up in the expectation and my heart seems to beat just a little bit faster.

Then I remember: Olivia doesn't knock. It's Lindy.

'You look tired,' Lindy murmurs as she sets the tray with my lunch on my desk.

'Yeah.' I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes. 'Rough Night.'

She nods.

'Same with Olivia. She was up early, but I sent her right back to bed. The girl looked like she hadn't slept a wink.'

I catch myself before I can beg for more detail. Did she tell Lindy what happened? I scan the housekeeper's familiar features carefully, looking for any clue, but Lindy's calm and expressionless, as always. I like that about her. She's one of the few people who've figured out how to be there for me without acting like a goddamned battering ram. Are you listening, Dad? And all your doctor and shrinks with your bullsh*t about how PTSD can be cured?

But just for the briefest second, I wish she'd ask. I wish someone would ask what happened. How I am. Something other than the vapid Need anything?

Hell yes, I need something. I need someone to care for.

Nevaeh

Book: 18

Dusking Lust

Chapter: 125

Part: 1

'You're not drinking today,' Lindy says, eying my coffee mug.

I raise my eyebrows as if to say, and?

-And-

She shrugs in response. 'I asked your father for a weekend off. It won't be for a couple of weeks yet, but I'm giving you a heads-up now.'

'Fine,' I muttered, relieved that she dropped the topic of my drinking. I've been telling myself all morning I'm laying off the whiskey because of my headache. Not because a certain green-eyed girl has made me all too aware that I might be using alcohol for all the wrong reasons.

'Mick is taking some time off too,' Lindy says, heading toward the door. 'We're headed to Pittsburgh for a little getaway. Your father offered to get us a hotel. Thought we'd go to the movies. Have someone cook for me for a change.'

Wait, what? My father is giving his employees free vacations now? And the two of them are taking it together? I try to think back to the times I've seen Mick and Lindy together. Not often, but then I make a point of ignoring everyone as often as possible. Are they - you know? Good for them if they are. At least someone should be getting some.

'Cool,' I say.

Lindy purses her lips. 'You'll be fine. For food and stuff. I mean, it won't be my cooking, but…'

Technically she's talking to me, but I know from her tone she's trying to reassure herself that she's not abandoning me.

I give her a look. 'Do you have any idea what they feed soldiers in Afghanistan? I'll be fine.'

'Olivia tells us she's handy enough around the kitchen,' Lindy responds, as though she didn't hear me. 'I'm sure you can survive on scrambled eggs or grilled cheese, or whatever she has in her repertoire.'

Olivia.

Me and Olivia.

Alone. In the house.

Olivia in itty-bitty pajamas, with full breasts and long, toned legs.

Olivia with her don't-freak-with-me green eyes and lips that taste better than the most expensive Scotch on the market.

I won't survive it.

'Whatever,' I mutter.

I keep one eye on the door as I eat, half expecting Olivia to come barging in with that Andrew Jackson book she's about two pages into, insisting that we share a meal. But the door stays shut. The house stays quiet.

After lunch, I try to read, but I can't concentrate. Instead, I head to the gym. Usually, I hit the gym first thing in the morning, after I walked along the water and before my shower, but I didn't have the energy this morning. Not after last night.

The gym is, admittedly, ridiculous. It's huge by normal standards, but considering that only one person uses it, it's downright absurd. Mick and Lindy are welcome to use it, but they're not exactly fitness buffs. It's just me.

I move steadily through my routine, relishing the familiar burn as I push my upper body to the limit. The truth is, from the waist up, I'm in better shape than I was at the peak of my

military training, and that's saying something. On some level, I guess I know that it has to do with overcompensating for the bad leg, but I don't give a sh*t.

For some reason, I can't stop thinking about my leg today, all too aware that it's only going to get weaker and weaker. I keep it in usable shape by taking my daily walks. I'm not a complete idiot. I might not buy any of that physical therapy bullsh*t, but I know that unused limbs atrophy and all that. But I draw the line at any lower-body exercises in here, even for my good leg. It's too much of a reminder of where I used to be, and where I'll never be again. No squats. No lifts. No leg presses -

I push the thought aside, and with the last grunt, I finish my set of presses. I lie on my back on the bench, chest heaving.

'You're going to wind up hideously out of proportion if you keep that up.'

The voice is unexpected, and I sit up so quickly that I almost hit my head on the bar.

Olivia.

She's wearing a sports bra and matching athletic shorts in - wait for it - pink. There's an iPod in her hand and a water bottle under her arm. She's here to use the gym herself, not to hound me. Probably could have figured that out from the way she looks. The boobs might be God-given, but the rest of her has been well earned.

She moves toward me, and although her ponytail is as perky as ever, she has shadows under her eyes and her expression is more guarded than it was yesterday.

She's put walls between us, keeping me at a distance.

I feel a flash of regret, even as I mentally congratulate her. And myself.

Mission accomplished, asshole.

'You're going to be disproportionate,' she repeats. 'All bulky and ridiculous on top, and scrawny on the bottom.'

'I'm not scrawny,' I say immediately. Why are we talking about this instead of last night?

She comes closer, reaching out a hand and plucking at the fabric of my pants. She raises an eyebrow. 'Yeah? When was the last time you wore shorts?'

I lift my eyebrows right back. 'You saw me in boxers last night. Did you see scrawny?'

She snatches her hand back. 'We're not talking about last night.'

'I thought you'd be back in New York by now. Or at least all up my face demanding an apology.'

Her expression never changes. 'I thought about it. But I need some distance from New York, and I know better than to expect an apology, so -' She holds out her arms as though to say, here we are, deal with it.

Her matter-of-fact reaction to last night pisses me off. She should be demanding an apology- what the hell is wrong with her that she isn't? Even more annoying - why do I want to give one?

'When was the last time you did any sort of lower-body workout?' she asks, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

I snatch her water bottle and take a long drink as I study her. 'Not your business.'

She pretends to think about this. 'Oh, wait for a second, actually it is my business. If you want, I can get you my job description. It specifically says-'

'I'm sure it does,' I interrupt. 'But you can go ahead and scratch that physical portion off because I'm not doing it.'

'Ten leg lifts,' she says calmly, ignoring me.

'What?' I ask, annoyed, as I get into a standing position. 'No way.'

'We can start them easy. No weight at all.'

'I'm going back to the house,' I mutter, leaning down to grab my towel.

She moves in front of me. 'Five. Leg lifts.'

I roll my eyes. 'You're a terrible negotiator. You lower your price too quickly even before you've offered an enticing reward.'

'I'm not haggling with you for the thrill of it. I'm just trying to do my job.' She puts her hands on her hips. It reminds me that my hands were in that very spot not so long ago. And that I want them to be there again.

I tear my eyes away from the enticing points of her hip bone.

'Why is this your job?' I ask.

She jerks her shoulders back a little, defensively. Interesting. 'What?'

'Why is coaxing me to work my sh*t leg your job of choice? My little recon exercise says you were a marketing major. Didn't Daddy want you in the lucrative family business?'

Her eyes flit away from mine. 'Sure. That was the original plan.'

'What changed?' I ask, surprised to realize that I'm genuinely interested.

'Life,' she snaps. 'And we're not talking about me.'

'Obviously, we are,' I counter, taking another gulp of her water.

She opens her mouth, probably to tell me to f*ck off, but then she seems to reconsider. She tilts her head, and just then I realize exactly what I've set myself up for.

'I'll trade you one question for ten leg lifts.'

'Nope,' I reply, already turning around. 'No way.'

'Come on,' she says, scooting around to get in front of me. 'Don't you want to know why a hot twenty-two-year-old with everything going for her is hiding out here in Maine?'

I give her a glance over my shoulder. 'Did you just call yourself hot?'

Olivia smiles a gotcha smile. 'Aren't I?'

I flick my eyes over her. Yes. 'Maybe.'

'So, you're in? Ten leg lifts for one question?'

I hesitate, even though my brain is demanding I walk away now. 'Will I get the real story?' I ask. 'Or some bullsh*t evasion?'

'I'll give you a true statement, but no guarantees that it's the whole story. Final offer.'

'Not good enough.'

She sighs. 'How about I'll give you a true statement, and I'll let you give me running pointers tomorrow?'

I put a hand on my chest. 'I can't believe this is happening. All my dreams are coming true.'

'You in or out, Langdon?'

Walk away. Walk the hell away.

Her green eyes are practically bursting with a challenge. And, even more intriguing, secrets.

'Freak it. I'm in.'

Olivia-

Yeah, okay. So, agreeing to answer Paul Langdon's questions isn't going to go into my Good Choices Hall of Fame. But to be fair, I've been pretty short on good choices lately, so this feels about par for the course.

However, that doesn't make it any easier to think about the possibility of spilling my guts, even though I fully intend to censor the heck out of whatever truth I have to give him.

For a second I'm about to back out and tell him there's no way I'm going to spill my guts just to bribe him to do something he should have started a long time ago.

But then I see the tension on his face when he looks at the waiting leg-press machine. He's nervous. I mean, he's pissed too, because I'm guessing I'm not the only one who's furious about getting back into a corner.

But it's not Paul's anger that has me swallowing my pride and pushing on with our agreement, even at the expense of my privacy. It's his unease.

He's afraid of failing.

As he starts to head toward the leg-press machine like it's the guillotine, I mentally throw away the bubblegum pep talk that I figure is written in the Caretaker 101 textbook for this type of situation. We're supposed to be our client's cheerleaders, but this guy needs something

entirely different. Acting entirely on instinct, my hand reaches out and gives him a sharp smack on the ass.

He halts, throwing me an incredulous look over his shoulder. His very nice, very sculpted shoulder, by the way.

'What was that?' He snaps.

I shrug as though touching his firm and, um, perfect ass cheek is no big deal.

'Thought you needed a little encouragement.'

He lifts his eyebrows. 'Oh, I could use some encouragement.

Why don't I show you what sort of encouragement would rev my engines?' His eyes drop to my chest, and my nipples tighten in response.

Well - crap. That backfired.

I shoo- him forward. 'Chop- chop, Langdon. I don't have all day. Women need to exercise too.'

He gives me an understanding nod. 'Kegels. I get it.'

I make a face and jab a finger at the bench. 'Sit.'

There's no fear on his face anymore. It's perfectly blank, as though he's preparing himself for failure.

'Okay,' I say, moving over to the machine, grateful that my mom- had me going to a personal trainer since I was sixteen. Sort of psycho, now that I think about it, but at least I know my way around weight machines.

His right leg immediately falls into place, but he hesitates before moving his left leg into position. He's wearing blue sweatpants, so I can't see his injured leg, and although I hate to admit it, I'm kind of glad.

Granted, I could have looked at it- last night when I barged in on him in his boxers, but I had more important things to worry about. Like the fact that the guy had some seriously messed-up dreams. And that he knew his way all too well around my body in way too short a time.

'Olivia -'

'Don't apologize,' she says quietly. 'I shouldn't have tried. I'm sorry.'

She reaches down to pick up the purse that she dropped and scoops her keys off the counter. 'Mick said I could borrow one of the cars. I won't be late, but I have my cell if you need anything.' She heads toward the door.

'Wait,' I say, moving toward her.

Olivia pauses, giving me a look over her shoulder. 'What?'

'I -I…'

I have no freaking idea what I'm trying to say. I don't know if I want to tell her to stay or have fun, or something even more godawful and unimaginable, like beg her to take me with her.

Take me with you on a Friday night where there are people and beers and laughter and sh*tty music, and my old friend Kali.

But I say none of those things, especially not the last one.

I don't go out. Not anymore.

'Thanks for making me dinner,' I say gruffly.

This time she doesn't even turn around. 'Just doing my job, Langdon.'

Olivia-

I've never been to a bar by myself.

And I can't say I've ever imagined my first foray into solo drinking being at a tiny local bar on the outskirts of Bar Harbor, Maine. But tonight, I force myself.

Lately, I've been terrified that Paul's reclusiveness will be contagious. Like if I don't get some outside human interaction, I'll turn into a hostile turd like him, and become this wretched beast who doesn't have to be accountable to anyone for my pissed moods.

That's only part of the reason I left the house tonight. Truthfully? I hoped he'd come with me. Not that I asked. I intentionally didn't ask, being stupid enough to imagine that the thought of being left all alone might be enough to spur Paul into leaving the house of his own volition.

I planned to make it look very much like I wanted him to stay. I made what Google claimed to be the Ultimate World-Famous Chili, avoided him all day (actually, he avoided me first, but whatever,) and I dressed carefully in an outfit intended to be sexy but understated. You know, a girl going out on the town for her amusement, but if she happened to meet a cute guy, then hey, why not?

But Paul didn't take the bait. I guess I should count it as progress that he even came out of his lair in search of food, but the truth is, I'm disappointed. It's just not right for a twentysomething guy to be cooped up in the house for years. How long until all of that isolation turns him into one of those weird hermits who can't function in normal society even if he wanted to?

I'm parked outside of Frenchy's. I want to turn right back around and go home, but Lindy's lecture from earlier that afternoon is still rattling around in my brain. Just because he wants to pretend, he's dead doesn't mean you have to. We may not be New York City, but we have good people here. Work your thing, sister.

Okay, so the talk had been half sweet, half awkward, but Lindy made a good point. I don't want to end up like Paul: socially stunted and on a one-way street toward freakdom.

I get out of the car.

From the outside, Frenchy's- I assume the name comes from its location on Frenchman Bay- looks like a combination of a ski lodge and roadside dive. The wood beams give it a homey, welcoming feeling, while the smattering of neon beer signs in the windows lends just the right amount of bar vibe. On the right side of the building is a covered deck, which I imagine is the place to be on a clear summer's day, but in late September it's deserted. However, the faint thump of music shows that inside, at least, there's some activity.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

My worst-case scenario is that the entire place falls silent as everyone turns to stare at the newcomer. The best case is nobody notices me and I can find a bar stool, preferably on the end, where I can sit and get my bearings.

The reality is somewhere in between. The old-school rock music rocks on as I step inside, and although the majority of the clientele is far enough along in whiskey and beer to be oblivious

to my arrival, people at the handful of tables nearest the door turn to glance at me. And then glance a second time.

Lindy assured me that this was a local hangout, a place where I'd fit right in, but I think she may have been forgetting the not-so-tiny detail that I'm not exactly a local. I don't fit right in. Not even a tiny bit.

Even if my clothes don't scream city girl (which they do,) I stand out just under being a girl at all. I count maybe five women, sure, but the majority of the clientele is men. Fishermen, judging from the attire.

Still, it's not quite the painful scene I was fearing. It's uncomfortable, sure, but most of the looks are curious, not lecherous or leering. I give a tentative smile to a middle-aged couple, and the woman gives me a half-smile back as her companion turns back to his phone and beer, totally disinterested.

Although there are plenty of available tables, sitting alone at a table somehow seems a little too lonely considering I'm after human companionship, so I make my way to a cluster of empty bar stools.

Almost immediately a glass of water is in front of me, followed by a white paper coaster with Frenchy's scribbled across the middle in a no-nonsense font.

'What can I get yah?' Asks a friendly voice.

The bartender is a cute brunette with freckles and warm honey-brown eyes.

Her hair pulled up in one of those messy buns that some girls make look adorable. She's one of those girls.

'Um, white wine?' I ask, hoping it's not a terrible faux pas in a place like this.

'I've got a chardonnay or a pinot grigio. The chard's way better.'

'I'll have that, then,' I say, returning her friendly smile.

She plunks a glass in front of me before heading to the fridge and pulling out the wine bottle.

'Not a lot of wine drinkers?' I ask, noticing that the bottle is unopened.

She shrugs. 'Beer's the drink of choice, but more people are getting wine now that I got rid of the sugary swill they used to serve here.'

'Oh, wow,' I say as she fills my glass way beyond the typical pour.

'You look like you need it,' she says with a wink before sliding back down the bar to check on the other patrons.

She's right on two fronts- the chardonnay is delicious, and I do need it.

I watch the bartender out of the corner of my eye she chats up an old guy at the end of the bar, she laughs long and genuine as he tells her some story about his grandson's antics.

Lindy didn't describe the mysterious Kali to me beyond saying that she's a 'good sort,' but the age is about right, and I wonder if this is Paul's childhood summer friend.

When she makes her way toward me again to refill my water, I get up the nerve to ask.

'Yeah, I'm Kali,' she says, looking a little surprised by the question. 'Have we met?'

'Nope, I'm new to the area.'

'Yeah, I guessed that by the silk shirt,' she says in a confidential whisper.

'I'm betting it costs more than a car payment for most of us in here. Tourist?'

'Sort of,' I hedged. 'I'm working over at the Langdon house.'

Her smile slips. 'Paul's place?'

'Yeah.'

She stands up straighter, her palms flat against the bar as she studies me, almost protective. 'You don't look like Langdon employee material.'

Her tone isn't unkind, but it's clear I'm being evaluated. 'What do I look like?'

She shrugs. 'A few years ago- I would have pegged you as girlfriend material for Paul. But now…?'

We make eye contact and have one of those weird moments of female understanding. We both know he doesn't do girlfriends anymore. 'I'm the new caregiver,' I say quietly. 'Although that word never quite feels right.'

'Yeah, Paul's never really been one to be taken care of. At least, not as I remember him.'

I lean forward a little, desperate to keep her talking, but not wanting to come off as prying. 'You haven't seen him since he came back?'

She shakes her head and needlessly tops off my wine glass- a good sign that she's not trying to get rid of me. 'Nah. My folks' place isn't too far from his house. The Langdon used to rent that place where they live, you know. Paul's father only bought it a couple of years ago when he needed a full-time, um, retreat for Paul. I live closer to town now, but back when we were kids, I lived for the day when Paul would show up for those couple of weeks in the summer.'

I quickly stamp down the surge of jealousy. They were just kids, for God's sake. Friends. At least I think they were just friends. And not that it's any of my business if they were more.

'He knows you're here tonight?' she asks, her tone casual. Too casual. I know what she's asking: Why hasn't he come to see me?

'He, um - he's not so much the social type,' I say.

'Yeah,' she mutters. 'I gathered that after getting turned away at the door every day for a month after he moved in.'

My heart twists a little at the sadness in her voice.

What the hell, Paul? It's clear to me now that he's friendless and alone because he wants to be. Not because everybody shunned him.

'How's he doing?' she asks. 'I mean, we all hear things, but you know small towns and their rumors. It's hard to pull out the facts.'

'He's probably about like you've heard,' I say, maintaining eye contact.

'Rude, angry, and generally unpleasant.'

'Well now,' a low voice says from behind me. 'There's something to make a guy's heart skip a beat.'

I freeze at the familiar voice. Too late I realize that the place has grown mostly quiet, save for the music. I turn around and realize that the awkward staring I've been expecting has finally commenced.

Only they're not staring at me.

They're staring at Paul.

His eyes hold mine for several seconds, his thumb doing that slow stroking over the head of his cane before his eyes move over my shoulder and lock on the girl behind the bar. 'Hey, Kali.'

Please don't reject him, I silently beg of her. Please understand how big a moment this is for him.

I don't know if she hears my unspoken plea or if she's just a good sort of person because she doesn't throw a beer in his face or make any kind of snotty remark. Instead, she launches herself across the bar and winds her arms around his neck. It's a hug. The stunning look of pleasure on his face almost breaks my heart.

When Kali releases him, Paul gives an almost shy smile and starts to sit on the stool to my right, but then inexplicably moves around to sit on the other side of me.

The pressure in my chest tightens as I realize what he's just done. He's intentionally sat with the scarred side of his face toward me, his good side facing everyone else.

He trusts me.

The realization makes me ridiculously warm.

'What can I get you?' Kali asks. 'Last time we drank together; it was sneaking citrus vodka out of your dad's liquor cabinet.'

Paul laughs. 'I've graduated. How about whiskey and Coke?'

Kali plops the drink down in front of him before reluctantly moving back down the bar to attend to a gesturing patron.

Several people are still looking our way and whispering, but Paul seems determined to ignore them, and I follow suit.

'So, my chili was that bad?' I ask, taking a sip of my wine.

He stabs at his ice with the stir stick. 'I had some. It wasn't awful.'

'It was amazing, and you know it. Take back what you said about me not being able to cook.'

The corner of his mouth turns up slightly. 'I found a sandwich in the fridge. I'm guessing you made it for lunch and then took it away because I was hiding like a little b*tch?'

I tap my nose. Bingo.

He smirks. 'Well, I had a bite of the sandwich. Completely pedestrian.'

'It was turkey and cheddar on wheat. What the hell were you expecting for lunch, some sort of asiago soufflé and escarole salad?'

Paul snorts. 'Your New York is showing.'

He has a point. I've long been part of the high-priced wine bar and frou-frou café set. Asiago soufflés used to be part of an average Wednesday. Even though

I've been holed up here in Maine for all of a few weeks, those days feel like they were forever ago. It somehow feels exactly right to be perched on this worn leather stool at a wooden bar that looks older than I am, sitting next to a guy who's a one-part beautiful mystery and one-part unpredictable beast.

'You can relax,' I say quietly. 'Everyone's gone back to their business.'

'Only because they can't see the scars from this angle. If they could, they'd be heading toward the door or puking up their onion rings.'

'I see them, and I'm not running toward the door.'

His eyes flick to mine then, and for a second there's this moment between us.

She comes back and the moment's gone. I don't resent her. Not really. She represents a normal side of Paul that I haven't been able to access- his pre- Afghanistan self. And her response to his new appearance couldn't have been more perfect.

It's official: I don't get women.

Olivia should be pissed at me. Just a few hours ago, I would have sworn that she was. But now she's changing it up, and I don't like it at all. I don't trust forgiveness I didn't earn.

The weird thing is, I never used to be so clueless with girls. I won't pretend that I'm a mind reader or anything, but of course, I know that fine never means fine, and if you ask a girl if you can skip a date to go to a Red Sox game with your friends, she will probably say, 'Go ahead,' which means you're a dead man.

I've had a few girlfriends. Only one was serious. Serious enough that we did the long-distance thing when I went to Afghanistan. When I got back, a well-meaning nurse told me that Ashley had come by to see me, once.

Honestly, I don't blame her for not sticking around after she saw my mangled face. My scars are ugly now, but early on when the wounds were fresh, I was downright grotesque.

My dad mentioned that Ashley got married to the son of one of his vice presidents and had twins. I don't know if he meant it to be a wake-up call or what, but the truth is I didn't feel much of anything when he told me.

The point is, I used to know girls. But this thing with Olivia is a whole other ball game.

Sometime in the past hour, she's gone from acting like I'm a ticking bomb to being, well, friendly. Which is not to say that she's been unfriendly. In a couple of weeks since I basically called her a useless hooker and then threw her ex-boyfriend in her face, leaving her to cry alone at night (is there a gold medal for assholes? I've earned it,) Olivia hasn't done the prissy silent treatment thing, and I give her props for that.

But even though she's been perfectly civil, things have been different.

The conversation is shallower. She never touches me anymore, not even accidentally.

More often than not she avoids prolonged eye contact, and she's taken to 'reading alone' in the afternoons so she can concentrate.

I should be thrilled. I accomplished my goal of distance quite easily. It's supposed to feel like a reward. Instead, it feels an awful lot like punishment.

I miss her…

But that's not to say that there aren't alarm bells going off in my head right now. Because without warning, the old Olivia is back. And I'm way too relieved for comfort.

Her long, slim fingers appear in front of my face and she snaps rapidly three times. 'Yo… Langdon. A toddler can do more squats than you. Focus.'

See what I mean? Old Olivia… The sassy version who doesn't treat me like an invalid. We're in the gym, and she's doing her tough-love physical trainer thing, which is both annoying and cute as hell.

Her hair is pulled into a high, perky fountain, reminding me a little of a cheerleader, and she's wearing purple instead of the usual pink. Except for the shoes. The shoes are still pink. She insists on wearing the old pink ones on days when she doesn't run because she has a limit on how many days per week, she's willing to look like, and I quote, 'a freaking hobo.'

What she's wearing doesn't matter, though. Because she's got me right where she wants me.

I'm doing squats.

With weight. Not much weight, and nothing even close to what I was managing before the ambush. But the steady, repetitive bend-and-straighten motion isn't something I imagined doing ever again in any capacity. My leg doesn't even hurt. Much.

I refocus my efforts, and with Olivia looking on, I finish the last set of reps.

She grins, making it all worth it. 'How'd it feels…?'

'Sh*tty,' I say, doing my best to resist her good mood.

She takes a step closer. I step back, but I'm pinned in by the weight machine. The little minx has me cornered. She scoots up nice and close. In other words, torment.

'Liar,' she says. 'It feels good, and you know it.'

Christ. Is she talking about the exercise or her nearness? Because one felt great, but the other is bittersweet agony.

Her eyes flick to my lips just briefly before she takes a step back.

My eyes narrow. She's up to something.

'I don't suppose- I could talk you into doing my yoga routine with me?' she asks, rolling her shoulders as though to loosen them.

'Hell, no,' I mutter. 'I've got nothing against yoga. It's just that watching you do yoga is a good deal more interesting than participating.'

Her eyes go dark, and I smile in satisfaction. Two can play this game.

But by the time she unrolls her yoga mat- pink- and starts with the now-familiar poses, it's clear that she's winning. Watching Olivia do yoga is, in fact, interesting, but it's also torment. Is it just my imagination, or is she holding that downward-facing dog position just a second longer than necessary? And I'm pretty sure I don't remember that position where she arches her back quite like that from previous days.

Those damned tight yoga pants girls like to wear are tempting enough when they're not doing yoga. But when her butt's in the air all tight and cute?

Sh*t. By the time she contorts herself into something that's her grabbing her ankles, I'm f*cking sweating.

Is there a yoga position that involves her beneath me, hands pinned above her head, clothing-optional? Because then I might rethink her yoga offer. By the time she's finished, I'm hard, even though I've been pretending to be adjusting the weights on one of the machines. She carefully ignores me. I ignore her right back as I move to refill my water bottle.

She tucks her yoga mat under her arm and we move toward the door together.

So, she says, her voice easy and sweet. Too sweet. I instantly go on guard as I hold the gym door open for her. Here it comes. Whatever she's been working up to is finally coming to light.

'Any nightmares lately?' She asks.

I tense even further. 'Nope.'

That's a lie, and I can tell immediately that she knows it. Her lips flatten a little in disappointment that I don't confide further, but what the hell does she expect? That she just has to wiggle her butt around and badger me into exercising and I'll suddenly go all 'Dear Diary' on her?

She recovers quickly. 'Okay. Next question. Why'd you say that thing about Ethan when your dad was here?'

I almost choke on my water. Talk about a subject change.

'I'm an ass,' I say, glancing briefly at her profile.

'Finally, a true statement,' she says as we get closer to the house.

She's probably waiting for an apology, but I'm not really in the mood.

Olivia doesn't ask anything more, but I'm still tense, certain that I'm missing something. Two unrelated questions delivered back to back, but with no push for a real answer? It's all very un-female- very un- Olivia. What the hell is she up to this time?

Once inside the main house, she immediately starts up the stairs. Still lost in thought, I start to follow her up, my eyes still sort of checking out her ass, because, you know, yoga pants. That and more than two years of celibacy. My dad knew exactly what he was doing, sending a twentysomething in here for my 'recovery.'

Olivia turns around abruptly, and I'm caught staring, but I don't care.

She's a step-in front of me, so I'm looking up at her, and I lift my eyebrows in question, bracing.

Here it comes. Her trump cards.

'Hey, I just realized something,' she says.

I roll my eyes. Sure, you did. 'Okay?'

Her eyes sparkle in triumph. 'Your cane. You left it in the gym.'

Her casual observation has me taking a full step backward on the stairs.

She's right… What… The… Hell.

I stand there long after she's skipped up the steps. I'm unable to move. Almost unable to breathe.

She's right. I walked the entire way, not only without my cane but without even realizing I didn't have my cane.

The thought should elate me, but I can't shake the dark sense of foreboding. No matter where I look, my walls are crumbling, and this damned girl keeps presenting me the most dangerous element of all.

Hope...

Olivia…

On some level, I guess I must be bracing for his nightmares. My bedroom is on the same floor as Paul's but not exactly next door, so I'm not sure I'd hear his shouts through two closed doors if I wasn't listening to them.

But I am listening to them.

I've heard them the past couple of nights too, but things have been so weird between us that I knew my presence was the last thing that would be of comfort to him.

Tonight, however, instinct leads me in a different direction. It leads me straight to Paul.

My feet are on the floor the second I hear his first cry. Knowing that he sleeps almost naked, this time I grab my robe and pull it over my boxers and tank top, knotting the belt as I move down the hall.

I hesitate outside his door, torn between wanting to allow him privacy and give him comfort. God knows that the last time I went barging in there in the middle of the night, it didn't exactly end well for my pride.

I hear a low moan.

Then 'Alex. Alex, no…'

Screw it.

He needs me.

The sheets are down around his waist, and there's just enough light to make out that he's shirtless.

Oh boy.

I take a deep breath and move toward the bed. One arm is flung up over his head, the other fisted at his side as his fingers flex against the bedding.

Moving slowly, I reach for his hand, taking it in mine as I sit beside the bed. I feel a little silly. The whole thing is very Florence Nightingale, but the need to comfort is almost overwhelming.

He makes another moaning noise.

Do I wake him? I did that last time, and he flipped his sh*t. But let him stay in whatever hell his sleeping mind's taken him seems cruel.

'Paul.'

He twitches.

'Paul.' Louder this time.

He stills, but his body's still rigid.

Gently I put a hand on his shoulder, trying to shut out the shock waves that go through me at the contact of skin on skin. It's just a shoulder, Olivia.

'Wake up,' I say softly.

He's stopped crying out, but his breathing is harsh and ragged.

'Paul!' I shake him now.

His eyes fly open, and he lies perfectly still.

I stay still too, letting him get his bearings. I wait for the tension to ease and his breathing to become more regular, but it's almost as though the air becomes electric as he realizes my presence.

His eyes meet mine, and the mood goes from tense to intoxicating.

'This better still be part of my dream,' he says, his voice raspy.

I shake my head, afraid that if I talk, I'll break the moment. That he'll go ballistic like he did last time, drinking booze like it's going out of style and doling out bruising kisses like they're punishments.

If he kisses me tonight, I don't want it to be about pushing me away. I want it to be about bringing me closer.

I don't know who moves first. One second, I'm trying so hard not to look at his mouth, working up the courage to ask him about his dream, and the next second, I'm beneath him.

I should be shocked, but I'm not. I think I knew as soon as I left the safety of my bedroom that I would somehow end up here, on Paul Langdon's rumpled bed with him braced above me.

His weight on his left arm, he uses his right hand to trace a line from my temple down around my ear. His finger continues its slow downward movement, skimming across my collarbone. He pauses when he reaches the edge of my robe.

'You shouldn't have come,' he whispers, his eyes following the slow-motion of his finger.

I swallow… 'I heard from you. You sounded -' Like you need me.

He shakes his head once, as though to tell both of us that he doesn't need anyone, but we both know better.

I lie there, silent, wondering whether I dare to ask outright. Ever since that conversation with Lindy about how nobody had ever asked him point-blank about what happened overseas, I've known that the time will come when I have to be the one to ask. He needs to talk about it; he's just never been given the chance. Not really.

But I have to move slowly. It's been buried inside him for so long that prying will only result in him pushing me away. Just like he has with his father and anyone else who's ever cared about him.

Maybe now isn't the time.

Because tonight - tonight he doesn't look like he wants to talk. And when he's staring at me with hot, burning eyes, I don't want to talk either.

Blue eyes ask the words that he won't voice out loud. Do you want me?

My answer is also wordless.

But I make sure I'm very, very clear about what I want.

I slip my hand around the back of his neck, relishing the crispness of his ruthlessly short haircut against my palm.

I tug his face downward. He's already in motion.

There's no teasing this time as his lips quickly nudge mine open, his tongue sliding in to claim mine. I let out a tiny moan, wrapping both arms around his neck as he rolls more firmly on top of me, pressing me against the softness of the mattress.

Our mouths move frantically, restlessly, as we struggle to get closer. One or both of us kick the tangled sheet out of the way, and we both groan as his hips settle between my thighs.

My stomach drops even before I see the regretful twist of my father's mouth. This is like one of those wretched movie scenes come to life. You know, the one where the d*ick-head guy says something cruel about the girl who's standing behind him? It's on the tip of my tongue to say that I don't need anyone to take care of me. But I want Olivia to tell him that. I want her to tell him that she's here with me because she wants to be, not because he's paying her. I want her to tell him the truth about breakfast, and last night.

I put on a quick swipe of mascara and pink lip gloss. I try to tell myself that it's out of habit (my mom believes that ladies should always be groomed,) but I'm pretty sure it's because I'm trying to make up for the fact that the last time Paul saw me, I had major boob sweat and a greasy ponytail and was short on oxygen.

My dark jeans and cream sweater aren't exactly sexy, but they're a big improvement from my running gear. As is the fact that I'm showered.

You're an employee, my brain reminds me. So not the time to cultivate your inner tramp.

At the library door, I start to knock, only to realize that'll give him a chance to throw himself out the window or sneak out some secret passageway that I'm only half kidding about. Instead, I go right in, and the scene in front of me is- um- a well, it's ridiculously appealing.

The roaring fireplace in the corner, the sexy guy in the big wingback chair by the fireplace with a book and another of those amber-liquid filled tumblers. It's all very après-ski chic.

For the first time since arriving in this hellish place, I feel a true pang of regret for intruding on him. He doesn't seem like a victim who needs a keeper so much as a guy trying to read a book in peace by the fire on a blustery afternoon.

I'm thinking about backing away and leaving him to the quiet when he opens his fat mouth.

'That liquor you tossed earlier came from a five-hundred-dollar bottle.'

Ah... Back to normal... I use my foot to close the door behind me. 'I'm sure that made a dent in the family coffers. You know, right, that all of the artwork in your halls is original?'

'Come on,' he says, still not looking up from his book 'You're a rich girl.

Surely you know how stereotypical comments like that can be.'

'Yeah, you look torn up about it,' I mutter, moving closer to him. 'And how do you know I'm rich?'

'Google. Your family's a big deal.'

I ignore this. We'll both be better off not talking about me.

'So, what is it?' I ask, tentatively sitting in the chair across from his even though I'm uninvited and unwelcome. I study him. Paul has just a bit more stubble than he did yesterday. Normally I prefer a clean-cut guy, but this slightly rough look suits his golden-boy-meets-jaded-war-hero vibe. I wait for him to look at me, mentally bracing myself for the shock of it.

As though he's sensed my thoughts, his gray eyes flicked to mine, and I'm not sure why I thought bracing for it would make a damned bit of difference. It still sends ripples of want from my eyelashes right down to my toes.

'What is what?' He asks.

It takes me a moment to realize, that I asked him a question. 'The precious liquor I threw out. What is it?'

His eyes flicker in irritation and I think he's going to tell me to get the hell out, but something seems to stop him, and he very slowly lifts the crystal glass from the table and hands it to me.

I sniff… 'Scotch…'

He nods. 'A thirty-year-old Highland Park. Not the best we have, but not something to be tossed down the drain, either.'

'Very alpha.'

He rolls his eyes, and I take a tiny sip, knowing from experience that I don't like Scotch. Turns out I don't like the $500 one either, and I hand it back to him with a little shrug.

'Want anything?' He asks. 'Wine?'

'I'm good.'

Water would be great right about now. Between the hot look in his eyes and the heat of the fire, I'm a bit, um, parched.

'What are you reading?' I ask.

He groans. 'Not this again. I know we're stuck with each other, but do we have to do the get-to-know-each-other chat? Can't we just sit in silence?'

The way he says stuck with each other gives me pause. I know why I'm sticking this out, but why is he? From what I've heard from Lindy and what I inferred from his father; Paul has no qualms about driving people away.

Is he treating me differently? Or just biding his time until he figures out how to add me to his list of banished caretakers?

I want it to be the first one.

'Fine,' I say, sitting back in the chair and settling in. 'I'll give you twenty minutes of silence in exchange for a shared dinner.'

'Hell no,' he says calmly, his attention already returned to his book as he turns a page.

'Thirty minutes of silence.'

'I don't share meals with anyone.'

'Come on,' I cajole. 'I promise not to try to feed you your soup airplane-style like a child.'

'No.'

'Paul.'

His eyes flick up again, and for the briefest of moments, the look on his face is almost one of longing. I realize it's the first time I've spoken his name out loud.

I'm pretty sure I'm not just another caretaker. Thing is, I don't know what I am.

'I can keep a one-sided conversation going for a long time,' I press on, quickly trying to move us away from the charged moment. 'Let's see, I was born on August thirtieth, which means that my birthstone is peridot, which is a fancy word for ugly green. And speaking of color, this hair color? So not natural. I mean, I was one of those adorable blond toddlers, but it all went mouse-brown right about the time I started third grade, and I've been adjusting it ever since. I got my first period when I was… um- 10.'

~*~

What Karly said- 'I first made cummie when I was 13. -About the time I fall to loving boys and also me…'

~*~

'Okay!' he interrupts. 'I cave. You give me an hour and a half of silence now, and I'll eat dinner with you later, but we can't talk during that either.'

'No deal. I'll give you one hour of quiet time now, but we talk at dinner.'

He takes a small sip of Scotch and studies me. 'You're annoying.'

I start to argue that annoying has never been one of my personality traits. I've always been more in the polite, mellow, and shy category. I always say the right thing at parties, I respect other people's boundaries, and I dodge controversial topics like they're landmines. But there's something about him that's brought out this other version of myself. I kind of like it.

I shrug, refusing to apologize. Besides, the old, sweet Olivia would get stomped on by this guy.

'So, do you know who Andrew Jackson is?' I ask, pulling my legs beneath me and curling into the soft black leather of the chair.

'Yes, I know who Andrew Jackson is. Old Hickory.'

Old what? 'Whatever,' I say. 'Have you heard of this book? It's called American Lion,' and- 'Olivia,' says mildly, turning the page of his book, 'that hour of silence is effective immediately.'

I sigh… Guess I'll have to read this book intend to talk about it. So disappointing.

'Okay,' I say as I open to the foreword. 'But you should know that I plan to eat very, very slowly at dinner.'

I ignore his groan as I settle in to read about this Old Hickory guy. And maybe sneak a few glances at the hottest guy I've ever seen.

It's hot. So, freaking hot, but I'm not even aware of it. None of us are because it's always hot, and not worth complaining about because there are bigger things to worry about, like the helicopter, that went down last week or the Humvee that didn't return to the base last night.

The best you can do is ignore the heat, play football with your friends when you can, and pray to any god, spirit, or deity you can think of that you'll be one of the lucky ones.

Then Williams breaks the code.

We're out on standard patrol, and he breaks the damn code.

'I freaking hate it here.'

I'm in the process of mentally thinking about what the hell I'm supposed to write to Ashley, my girlfriend back home, but my brain skids to a halt at Williams's outburst. Garcia and Miller stop bastardizing whatever outdated Jay-Z song they were attempting to sing and stare at Williams with a mixture of dismay and disgust.

Alex Skinner, my best friend since boot camp, just looks pissed. 'Goddamn it, Williams.'

Greg Williams merely shrugs. Of all of us, he's the smallest, but he's damned fast. And smart. At least I thought so until he broke the freaking code.

'Don't start that,' I say, trying to lighten the mood. 'You know the second we start acknowledging that we are, living the sh*t life, that's the second our luck runs out.'

'I'm just saying. This freaking- blows. The sand, the heat, the constant fear of being sent home in a box. You all know it.'

Skinner leans forward to get in Williams's face. 'We all knew that getting into it. This isn't some glorified World War I bullsh*t where we didn't know what to expect.'

Williams shoves at Skinner's shoulder, and I place an arm between them before the two hotheads make a sh*tty situation sh*ttier.

'I'm allowed to say what I think,' Williams grumbles, shaking both of us off and staring down at his hands. 'I'm allowed to say what we're all thinking. There ain't no freaking curse that's going to come because I spoke the truth.'

Less than ten minutes later, we find out he's wrong.

Williams gets sent home in a box.

So, do the rest of them.

Suddenly time both speeds up and slows down, and a second later I'm on the ground holding on to Alex, and he's trying to talk but the only thing that comes out of his mouth is blood.

There's too much blood. Mine. His. It's all one bitter, metallic mess.

I try to understand what Alex is telling me. I try to understand his dying wish, try to comprehend his last word, but there's too much blood.

There's always too much-damned blood.

It's not the first time I've woken up in a pool of sweat.

But it's the first time since those early days in the hospital that someone's been there when I wake up.

I don't remember the nurses well, but I'm pretty sure none of them looked like Olivia Middleton, kneeling on my bed, wearing only a tiny white T-shirt and pink boxer shorts. What is it with her and pink?

And then I comprehend that she's here. In my bedroom.

I comprehend why she's here.

Part: 2

The dream.

I was yelling, and she came to find out why.

'Get the freakout,' I say, pushing myself into a sitting position and rolling out of bed on the other side before she can touch me. 'Get the freak-out!'

'You were screaming,' she says calmly as she climbs off the bed and turns to face me, the king-size bed separating her from my sweaty, amped-up self.

'Of course, I'm yelling. It's a goddamned war.

My chin dips down and rests on my chest in defeat. I can't turn around. I can't make myself look at her face. But the little hurt noise she makes tears at me anyway.

But that doesn't mean I have to like the way he keeps laughing at every other thing she says, or the way they're both dropping names of mutual friends I've never heard of. Five minutes ago, I thought Kali was just about the cutest, nicest thing on the planet- definite Maine BFF material. Now I hate that she's the cutest, nicest thing on the planet. I also hate the way Paul is smiling so easily around her.

He never smiles like that around me.

She studies me for a moment, and I'm pretty sure she wants to call my bluff.

Instead, the door closes behind her, and I stand for several moments staring at bobbing sailboats, wishing I could be on one of them sailing to anywhere that's not here.

It's a testament to just how cushy my life has been up until the past couple of months that I've truly never given much thought to being unhappy. I mean, I never really thought about being happy either. I guess you could say I've floated but in a harmless, life-is-good kind of way.

And now?

Now I can't bear the thought of returning to my life with all of its glossy easiness, and yet staying in Maine is almost as unfathomable. Not just because it's foreign, and not just because Paul is a complete ass-plug who may or may not turn me on. But because I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

Tomorrow morning is right around the corner, and I'll be expected to do the job that they're paying me for: being a companion to a guy who can't take care of himself. Except, beyond that limp and the sneer, he seems to be managing just fine.

I can't imagine he'll want me to read the classics aloud to him while he dabbles in watercolors. I'll be lucky if he even lets me in the same room.

The futility of it all threatens to choke me, and I go through the motions of unpacking the suitcase that Mick carried upstairs for me. With each bra I drop into the dresser, I keep hoping it'll help my brain accept that I'm staying.

Instead, my mind is going down a ridiculous path - wondering which bra Paul would most like to see. Wondering what it would feel like to have him take it off me. Wondering - Oh, my God, Middleton. You are half a dirty thought away from being a revolting perv.

By the time I brush my teeth and wash my face in the small but modern bathroom, I'm surprised to realize that I'm exhausted even though the sun's barely set. I wonder if I'm supposed to check on 'Mr. Paul,' but from the way he glared at me as I stormed out of his cave earlier, I don't think another encounter today will do either of us any good.

Changing into my pajamas, I curl up on my side on the large bed, resting my cheek on my hands as I stare out at the dark sky. When I finally drift off to sleep, it's not picturesque water and boats I see. It's an angry mouth and gorgeous blue eyes.

For the first time in months, my dreams aren't about Ethan. Or Michael.

Tonight, my dreams are about someone far more dangerous to me than either of the guys from my past.

Back when I was in high school, I and football were kind of a big deal. And I always liked it well enough, but football was never really my true passion, cheesy as that sounds.

I was semi-disappointed when my coach marked me for QB early in my freshman year. The quarterback doesn't get to run much.

That's my passion. Running. Tossing a football to a bunch of other guys is nothing compared to the rush I got from running.

I ran every day leading up to Afghanistan. I ran as often as I could around the base after I got there. And since getting back - Well, let's just say that my future holds as much hope for running as it does flying.

But I have a secret.

Not a big one. It's pathetic. But one that nobody knows. Well, I suspect Mick and Lindy might, but they won't dare mention it.

The truth is, running is the one area of my life where I let the tiniest ray of hope shine in. Not hope. Because I can't let myself think that it's going to happen. But I dream of running again.

It's that dream that has me getting up at the ass crack of dawn every morning. Before Lindy or Mick or whatever godforsaken caretaker is lurking about is awake - hell, before the sun's even up.

I go outside and pretend I'm running. Not physically pretending, of course. My leg's not even remotely able to sustain that kind of fantasy. But mentally? I run.

It's the only time I'll use my cane. Partially because nobody's watching, but also because the cane allows me to go longer, farther, faster. Just a mile or so on a trail that winds around the bay. I walk/hobble in the predawn silence and let myself pretend just for an hour that I'm running. That I'm normal. It's my time. Of course, being the hermit that I am, all time is my time. But this is different.

I'd almost say- sacred if that didn't sound so ridiculous. But save for the fishermen, because this is Maine, after all, I'm alone. And this solitude is different from the rest of my day because it's intentional.

This time of the day is the only time I feel alive.

And I never dreamed that it could be ripped away from me in the most debilitating way possible.

Olivia- the very person who kept me up the entire night- is a runner. Worse, she's running on my path during my time.

She's running toward me, and although she's still a good ways' off, I know it's her. That blond ponytail and that tall, slim frame are all I've been able to think about since that kiss.

Turning around would be futile. Her jog would easily overtake my walk, so there's nothing to do but wait. And brace…

I slow to a standstill. It's bad enough that she has to see me with the cane; I'll be damned before I give her the spectacle of watching me hobble along with it.

Part: 3

She's got hot pink running shoes, which are ridiculous, especially since they perfectly match the long-sleeved pink running shirt. The hairband is also pink.

Come to think of it, wasn't she wearing a pink sweater yesterday? Just what I need. A bubblegum explosion in my life.

Even if her fashion-forward running gear didn't clue me in (real runners don't care about matching their hairband to their shoes,) it's obvious from her slow pace, her pink cheeks, and the gait that's just slightly off that she's new at this.

Already my brain is racing with pointers. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Don't move your arms so much. You overpronate, do your girly shoes compensate for that?

At first, I think she doesn't see me. There's no change in her gait or expression as she closes the gap between us. But then she's almost upon me. Then in front of me. She stops.

My fingers clench on the handle of my cane- a black python affair I ordered on the Internet mostly because it was so ridiculously gaudy- and I resist the urge to turn my head and give her my profile. My good side.

But if the two are going to be stuck together for three months, she'd better get used to seeing me. I'd better get used to her seeing me.

She doesn't look at the cane at all, and other than the briefest flick of her green eyes over my scars, she doesn't seem to care about those either. Then again, it's still dark, with the barest hint of the early morning sun illuminating us, so perhaps she can't see their ugliness. Which reminds me-

'You shouldn't go running alone in the dark,' I growl.

She frowns almost imperceptibly, just the finest line between her dark blond eyebrows. 'Why not?'

'You go running through the streets of New York City at the crack of dawn?'

'How do you know I'm from New York City?'

I remain silent, not wanting to have to explain that I spent most of the night studying the limited information my dad had sent over on Olivia. Nothing interesting. NYU drop-out. Manhattan resident. Short of a crash course in CPR, no experience in taking care of anyone. She turned twenty-two just days before arriving in Maine.

'What the hell is she wearing?' Sarah asks cattily.

It's no secret that my friends fall into the snob category, Bella excepted most of the time. Sarah's the worst of the lot, and not for the first time in my life I wonder why I continue to let her pretend we're friends.

Knowing that they'll continue to hover around me like a pack of glamorous guard dogs until I've dealt with the newcomers, I sneak a tiny peek over my shoulder at where Ethan and Stephanie stand to talk to a mutual family friend.

My heart twists the tiniest bit at the sight of Ethan. In his gray slacks, perfectly tailored white shirt, and Burberry tie, he looks as well-groomed and gorgeous as ever. He has the dark blond hair and broad shoulders better suited to Hollywood than the Manhattan business world, but luckily, he's got the brains and the charm to keep his head above water amid the Manhattan sharks.

Then- I look at her.

From the sneer on my friends' faces, I was expecting Stephanie to be wearing torn jeans, a leopard-print catsuit, or something else ridiculous, but the truth is she looks kind of cute. Her dark eye makeup is the perfect complement to her wide blue eyes, and the strapless gray dress would be downright demure if not for the bright orange belt around her tiny waist. She's paired the whole thing with these beat-up-looking riding boots, which, while not exactly an Upper East Side standard, gives the whole effect of a girl comfortable with herself.

Of course, she's comfortable. She's perched on the arm of the boy you thought you were going to marry.

I push the b*tchy thought away. I've had months to accept that Ethan isn't coming back. Hell, I was even the one who insisted that he and his new girlfriend be invited to the party. Ethan's parents and mine have been best friends since long before we were even in the womb. I'm not about to let a little thing like betrayal throw a wrench in that.

'You okay, Liv?' Bella asks softly.

I tear my eyes away from Ethan and Stephanie. 'Yeah. Give me a minute, though, 'kay?' I hand her my champagne glass. 'And don't let them attack Stephanie,' I murmur to my best friend.

But escaping is no easy task. I'm stopped at least five times by well-wishers who want to tell me that they always knew I had such a good heart.

Ha.

Finally- I'm able to pour myself a glass of my raspberry iced tea to stave off an impending headache and head toward the stairs to escape to my bedroom, just for a couple of minutes.

My mother grabs my arm. 'Where are you going?'

I point down at my six-hundred-dollar Jimmy Choo pumps. 'Blister. I just want to grab a Band-Aid.'

Mom's green eyes- the ones everyone is always saying are identical to my own- narrow slightly, but her grip eases on my arm. 'Everyone is so proud of you,' she says, looking both relieved and delighted. 'Holly Scherwitz said she wouldn't be surprised to see you win a Nobel Peace Prize someday.'

Inside, I'm cracking up in bitter amusement, but years of training in social appropriateness have me merely lifting my eyebrows. 'I hope you told her that was absurd.'

Mom's smile slips. 'It's not absurd. It's admirable, what you're doing.

Moving to the middle of nowhere to help out one of our injured veterans?'

'Except it's not the middle of nowhere, is it? It's a one-hour plane ride, thanks to your and Dad's interference.'

Mom doesn't bother to look guilty. 'Olivia, honey. You wouldn't have lasted a day in El Salvador or wherever it was you were going to go build houses.

There are plenty of people right here at home that needs help. And we're so proud of you for doing this.'

I give her a look. 'Uh-huh. Is that why you guys didn't speak to me for a week when I first told you about it?'

'We were in shock,' Mom says, unruffled. 'Your father and I had no idea you weren't happy in business school, and of course, we'd always envisioned you taking over the company-'

It's times like these that I wish my parents were really old money instead of second-generation money. Each of my friends is richer than the next, but most of their families' wealth goes back to some 1800s railroad or some industry whose income is pretty much self-generating by now. Not in my case.

My grandfather had the whole American-dream syndrome going on and changed his midwestern middle-class destiny, building a highly respected advertising firm instead. Dad's only built on his father's success, and it's fully expected to remain a family affair.

And I'm an only child. No pressure.

'I might still take over the company, Mom. I just need to get away from all this, you know? The only time I leave Manhattan is to go to the Hamptons in the summer or Saint-Tropez in January. I mean, you've always said you don't want me to be one of those girls.'

Mom shakes her head to interrupt me. 'I know. Believe me, as much as I play the New York society game, I do want you to know that there's a big world out there, Olivia. But are you sure you don't want to stay a little closer to home? There's a facility out in Queens, and…'

'I'm already committed, Mom,' I say gently. 'Mr. Langdon's already sent a check to cover my travel expenses and I'm expected next Friday.'

Mom sighs. 'Can't a grown man arrange for his care? Something's weird about his father having to do all the planning.'

'You're the one who connected me with the Langdon's in the first place. They're legit. Plus, Paul's invalid. If he could arrange for his care, he probably wouldn't need care.' I say this as patiently as possible. It's a clear indication of just how small my mom's world is, despite her good intentions.

She doesn't know anyone who's gone to war, much less been injured.

Not that I do, for that matter. Park Avenue isn't exactly swarming with members of the U.S. armed forces.

'Well,' Mom says, taking a deep breath and pushing my long hair over my shoulder affectionately, 'it's lucky he has a pretty girl like you to take care of him.'

I smile wanly. I've been hearing this refrain all evening, and it makes me slightly ill. Not only because it's condescending to the poor guy I'll be caring for, but because it makes me into some sort of sweet, saintly figure.

Only two other people in this house know the truth about me. My mother isn't one of them.

'Hurry back down,' Mom says. 'The Austen's said they hadn't had a chance to talk to you yet.'

Part: 4

Probably because I've been dodging them. Annamarie Austen is the catty kind of gossip I've avoided like the plague in recent months, and Jeff Austen stares too long at my boobs.

'I'll be fast,' I say before fleeing up the winding staircase to fetch my imaginary Band-Aid. My feet are far too used to being pinched in high heels to be plagued by blisters. I just won't-need-five minutes to myself. A chance to be away from everyone's misplaced fawning and the crushing pressure in my chest every time I look at Ethan.

But my bedroom isn't quite the solitary sanctuary I imagined. Far from it.

I jump in surprise, but a part of me isn't surprised at all to see him in here.

Him being the iceberg that destroyed my life. It's only appropriate that he also be around to watch me sink.

Now three people in the house know the truth about me.

'Michael,' I say, keeping my voice calm. Polite. I'm always polite.

'Liv.'

Michael St. Claire is one of those amiable, good-looking guys who attract friends- and girls- like a magnet. He gets his dark brown hair perfectly styled at a salon that costs just about as much as my own, and his light golden skin is the gift of great Italian genes on his mother's side. He's been one of my best friends for as long as I can remember.

When he was seven, they'd spent a summer exploring their neighborhood in Dawson, Minnesota, looking for treasure and wound up with a garden shed full of weird sh*t: an old top hat, a busted radio, two tire spokes, and the rusted frame of a bicycle. They'd found adventure in whatever sh*tty-ass town their mom had happened to dump them. Now they would never have another adventure. She would never climb, or bike, or bet him five bucks she could still beat him in a footrace. She would always need help to bathe, to get on and off the toilet.

And it was all Luke Hanrahan's fault. He'd messed with Dayna's car, freaked with the steering in advance of the showdown, forcing her off the road.

Marcel knew it.

'Mom went on a date last night,' Dayna said, obviously trying to change the subject.

'So…?' Marcel said. He was still vaguely annoyed. Besides, everywhere they went, his mom found some new loser to date.

Dayna shrugged. 'She seemed into it. And she wouldn't tell me who.'

'She was probably embarrassed,' Marcel said. In the silence, he heard banging from outside-someone was going through the Dumpsters. Dayna leaned forward to look out the window.

'Sh*t,' she said.

'Little Kelly?' he said, and Dayna nodded. Little Bill Kelly had to be thirty and at least six foot five, but his dad, Bill Kelly, had been police chief for twenty years before his retirement, and everyone knew him as Big Kelly. Marcel had only ever seen Big Kelly once, and even then, only for a second, when he'd accidentally biked out in front of Bill's car. Bill had leaned on the horn and shouted for Marcel to be careful.

Marcel sighed, eased Dayna's legs off his lap, and stood up. Through the window, he could see Little Kelly balancing on the steel drum full of old grease, methodically sorting

through one of the Dumpsters sandwiched up against the back of Dot's Diner, just next to the kitchen door. It was the third time in a month he'd been picking garbage.

Marcel didn't bother putting on a shirt. He crossed the short concrete alley that divided their apartment from the diner, careful to avoid the broken glass. The kitchen boys drank beers during their shift sometimes.

'Hey, man,' Marcel said, deliberately loud, deliberately cheerful. Little Kelly straightened up like he'd been electrocuted. He climbed down unsteadily from the steel drum.

'I 'm not doing anything,' he said, avoiding Marcel's gaze. Other than the stubble on his chin, Little Kelly had the face of an overgrown baby. He had once been a star athlete, a good student, too, but had gotten screwed in the head over in Afghanistan... Or Iraq... like- one of those. Now he rode the buses all day and forgot to come home. Once Marcel had passed Little Kelly sitting cross-legged at the corner of the road, crying loudly.

'You are looking for something?' Marcel noticed that Little Kelly had made a small trash pile at the foot of the Dumpster, of tinfoil wrappers, metal coils, bottle caps, and a broken plate. Little Kelly looked at him for a minute, jaw working like he was trying to chew through the leather. Then, abruptly, he pushed past Marcel and disappeared around the corner. Marcel squatted and started to gather up all the crap Little Kelly had removed from the Dumpster. It was already hot, and the alley smelled.

Just then he sensed movement behind him. Thinking Little Kelly had returned, he straightened and spun around, saying, 'You really shouldn't be back here-' The words dried up in his throat. Natalie Velez was standing behind him, leaning her weight onto her good foot, looking clean and showered and pretty and like she belonged anywhere else but here.

'Hi,' she said, smiling. His first, instinctive response was to walk past her, go into the house, slam the door, and suffocate himself. But of course, he couldn't. Holy sh*t... Nat Velez was standing in front of him, and he was shirtless. And hadn't brushed his teeth. Or showered. And he was holding tinfoil from the trash.

'I was just cleaning up...' He trailed off helplessly.

Nat's eyes ticked down to his bare chest, then up to his hair, which was in all probability sticking straight up.

'Oh my God.' Her face began to turn pink. 'I should have called. I'm so sorry. Did you just get up or something?'

'No. No, not at all. I was just -' Marcel tried not to talk too forcefully, or breathe too hard, in case his breath was rank. 'Look, can you give me a minute? Just wait here?'

'Of course.' Nat was even cuter when she blushed. She looked like a cookie that had been iced for Christmas.

'One minute,' Marcel repeated. Inside, Marcel sucked in a deep breath. Holy sh*t. Nat Velez. He didn't even have time to worry about the fact that she was seeing his house, his crappy little apartment, and had probably had to walk past the grease traps being emptied, had gone in her little sandals past the sodden bits of spinach that got trekked out of the diner by the cooks, past the Dumpsters and their smell. In the bathroom, he brushed his teeth and gargled with mouthwash. He smelled his underarms-not bad-and put on deodorant just in case.

He ran water through his hair and pulled on a clean white T-shirt, one that showed just a bit of the tattoo that covered most of his chest and wrapped around his right shoulder and forearm. His hair was already sticking up again. He rammed on a baseball hat.

Part: 5

Good... decent, at least. He sprayed on a bit of this man's body-spray thing his mom had gotten for free at Walmart, feeling like a douche, but thinking it was better to feel like a douche than to smell like an asshole.

Outside, Nat was doing a good job of pretending not to notice that Marcel lived in a falling-down apartment behind a diner.

'Hey.' She smiled again, big and bright, and he felt his insides do a weird turnover. He hoped Dayna wasn't watching out the window. 'Sorry about, like, barging upon you.' 'That's okay.'

'I was going to call,' she said. 'I texted Maggie for your number. Sorry.

But then I thought it might be better to talk in person.' 'It's totally fine.' Marcel's voice came out more harshly than he'd intended. Sh*t. He was screwing this up already. He coughed

and crossed his arms, trying to look casual. It was because, his hands suddenly felt like meat hooks at the end of his arms, and he had forgotten what to do with them.

'How's your ankle?' An Ace bandage was wrapped thickly around her ankle and foot, which made a funny contrast to her bare legs.

'Sprained.' Nat made a face. 'I'll live, but-' For a brief second, her face spasmed, like she was in pain.

'Look, Marcel, is there someplace we can go? Like, to talk?'

There was no way he was taking her inside. Not an icicle's chance in hell. He didn't want Nat gaping at Dayna or, worse, trying too hard to be nice.

'How did you get here?' he asked, thinking she might have a car.

Again, she blushed. 'I had my dad drop me,' she said.

He didn't ask how she'd figured out where he lived. Like all things in Carp, it was usually just a question of asking around. The problem was where to take her.

He couldn't go into the diner. His mom was working. That left Meth Row. Nat walked slowly, still limping, although she seemed to be in less pain than she had been last night. But she took the first opportunity to sit down: on the rusted fender of an abandoned, wheel-less- Buick. All its windows were shattered, and the seats were speckled with bird sh*t, the leather torn up by tiny animals.

'I wanted to thank you again,' Nat said. 'You were so - You were great.

For helping me last night.' Marcel felt vaguely disappointed, as he often felt when interacting with other people when the reality failed to meet his expectations. Or in this case, his fantasies. Some part of him had been hoping she'd come over to confess that she'd fallen madly in love with him. Or maybe she'd skip the words altogether, and strain onto her tiptoes and open her mouth and let him kiss her. Except she probably couldn't stand on her toes with her ankle the way it was, which is one of the 2,037 ways his fantasy was unrealistic. He said, 'It's not a problem.'

She twisted her mouth like she'd swallowed something sour. For a second, she didn't say anything. Then she blurted, 'Did you hear Cory Walsh and Felix Harte was arrested?' He shook

his head, and she clarified, 'Drunk and disorderly conduct. And trespassing.' She shifted her weight. 'You think Panic is over?' 'No way,' he said. 'The cops are too stupid to stop it, anyway.' She nodded but didn't look convinced. 'So, what do you think will happen next?'

'No idea,' he said. He knew that Nat was asking him for a hint. He swallowed back a bad taste in his mouth. She knew he liked her, and she was trying to use him.

'I think we can use each other,' she said abruptly, and it was this fact-the fact of her acknowledgment, her honesty -that made him want to keep listening.

'Use each other how?' he asked. She picked at the hem of her skirt. It looked like it was made of terry cloth, which made him think of towels, which made him think of Nat in a towel. The sun was so bright, he was dizzy.

'We make a deal,' she said, looking up at him. Her eyes were dark, eager, and sweet, like the eyes of a puppy. 'If either of us wins, we split the cash fifty-fifty.'

Marcel was so startled; he couldn't say anything for a minute.

'Why?'

Why- he asked finally. 'Why me? You don't even -I mean; we hardly even know each other.' What about Maggie? he almost said.

'It's just a feeling I have,' she said, and once again he found her honesty appealing. 'You're good at this game.

You know things.' It seemed somehow surprising that Nat Velez, with her thick, perfect hair and slicked lip-gloss lips, would speak so frankly about a subject most people avoided. It was like hearing a supermodel fart: surprising and kind of thrilling. She plowed on: 'We can help each other. Share information. Team up against the others. We have more of a chance of getting to Joust that way. And then-' She gestured with her hands.

'Then we'll have to face off…'

Part: 6

Marcel said.

'But if one wins, we both win,' Nat said, smiling up at him. He had no intention of letting anyone else win. Then again, he didn't care about the money, either. He had a different goal in mind. Maybe she knew that or sensed it somehow.

So, he said, 'Yeah, okay. Partners.'

'Allies,' Nat said, and stuck out her hand, formally. It felt soft, and also slightly sweaty.

She stood up, laughing. 'It's settled, then.' She couldn't crane onto her tiptoes to kiss him, so she just grabbed his shoulders and planted a kiss on the side of his neck. She giggled.

'Now I have to do the other side, so you're even.'

And he knew then that he was going to fall head over heels for her this summer.

Afterward, no one knew who had posted the video online; it appeared on so many pages simultaneously, and spread to everybody else so quickly, it was impossible to determine its point of origin, although many people suspected it was Joey Addison or Jack Wong, just because they were both d*icks and two years ago had secretly filmed, and posted, videos of the girls' locker rooms.

It wasn't even that interesting-just a couple of jerky shots of Ray and Zev swinging at each other, shoulders butting up into the frame as a crowd formed; and then flashing lights, people screaming, a moment when the feed went dead. Then more images: sweeping lights and cops' distorted voices, tiny and harmless-sounding in the recording, and one close-up of Nat, mouth wide, with one arm around Maggie and the other around Marcel.

Then darkness… Marcel still kept a copy on his hard drive, so he could freeze-frame on that final moment when Nat looked so scared and he was helping support her. Just a few hours later an email made the rounds as well.

Subject line: blank. From: judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

The message was simple, only 3 or 4 lines.

Loose lips sink ships.

Nobody tells. Or else.

TUESDAY, JUNE

Date of the 28th

Maggie-

'YOU'RE SURE THIS IS LEGIT, RIGHT?' JOH JOH WAS SITTING forward in the driver's seat, both hands on the wheel, maneuvering the car over a pitted one-lane dirt track. His hair looked even more exuberant than usual, as though he'd tried to style it with a vacuum cleaner. He was wearing his dad's old Virginia Tech sweatshirt, loose flannel pajama bottoms, and flip-flops. When he came to Maggie he had announced, with a certain pride, that he had not yet showered. 'You're not going to get axed to death by some psychopath, right?'

'Shut up, Joh Joh.' Maggie reached out to shove him, and he jerked the wheel, nearly sending them into one of the ditches that ran along both sides of the road.

'That's no way to treat your driver,' he said, pretending to be offended.

'Fine. Shut up, driver.' There was an anxious feeling in Maggie's stomach. The trees here were so thick, they almost completely blocked out the sun.

'Just looking out for you, malady,' Joh Joh said, smiling, showing off the overlap in his teeth. 'I don't want my best girl to be turned into a lampshade.' 'I thought Avery was your best girl,' Maggie said. She'd meant it as a joke, but the words came out sounding bitter. Like a bitter, heartbroken, lonely spinster. Which she kind of was. Maybe not a spinster-you couldn't be a spinster at eighteen, she didn't think. But close…'

Come on, Maggie,' Joh Joh said. He looked hurt. 'You've always been my best girl.' Maggie kept her face to the window. They would arrive any second. But she felt a little better now.

Joh Joh had that effect on her-like a human anti-anxiety pill. The day after the challenge at the water towers, Maggie had overslept, waking only when an anonymous text pinged on her phone: Quit now, before you get hurt. She was so shaken, she'd spent fifteen minutes searching for her car keys before remembering she'd stashed them on the hook by the door, then got fired from Walmart when she showed up twenty minutes late for her shift.

And suddenly she had found herself blubbering in the parking lot. A week and a half earlier, she'd had a boyfriend and a job-not a good job, but still a job. A little money in her

pocket. Now she had nothing. No boyfriend, no job, no money. And someone wanted to make sure she didn't play Fright.

Then, out of nowhere, she'd been attacked by a dog with the biggest tongue she'd ever seen. Maybe attacked was the wrong word, since the dog was just licking her-but still, she'd never been much of an animal person, and it had seemed like an attack. And some crazy old lady carrying a sh*t ton of grocery bags had offered her a job on the spot, even though Maggie had snot dripping from her nose and was wearing a tank top streaked with salad dressing, which she hadn't noticed in her rush to get out of the house.

The woman's name was Anne.

'Muppet's taken a shine to you,' she'd said. Muppet was the name of the dog with the long tongue. 'He doesn't usually get on with strangers. You seem like you're a natural with animals.' Maggie had stayed quiet. She didn't want to admit that for the most part, she thought animals, like pimples, were best to ignore. If you fuss too much with them, it would backfire. The only time she'd tried to keep a pet, an anemic-looking goldfish she'd called Star, it had been dead within thirty-two hours. But she said yes when Anne asked if she'd be into doing some pet sitting and light chores. It was $150 a week, cash in the hand, which was roughly the same as she would have made working part-time for Walmart.

Suddenly the trees opened up and they arrived. Maggie immediately felt relieved. She didn't know what she'd been expecting-maybe, after what Joh Joh said, a dingy barn full of rusting farm tools and machetes-but instead she saw a sprawling red farmhouse and a large circular parking area, neatly trimmed of grass. She could see a barn, too, but it wasn't dingy-and next to it, a series of whitewashed sheds.

As soon as she opened the door, several roosters came trotting toward her, and a dog more than one dog? ...Began furiously barking. Anne emerged from the house and waved.

'Holy sh*t,' Joh Joh said. He looked impressed. 'It's a zoo.' 'See? Not a human lampshade insight.' Maggie slid out of the car, then ducked so she could say good-bye.

'Thanks, Joh Joh.' He saluted. 'Text when you need a pickup, ma'am.' Maggie closed the door. Anne crossed the yard toward her.

'Is that your boyfriend?' Anne said, shielding her eyes with one hand, as Joh Joh began to turn around.

This was so unexpected, Maggie's face got hot. 'No, no,' she said quickly, angling her body away from the car, as though Joh Joh, in case he was still watching, would be able to read the conversation in her body language.

'He's cute,' Anne said matter-of-factly. She waved, and Joh Joh tapped the horn before pulling away. The blush grew into an all-over body inferno. Maggie crossed her arms and then dropped them again. Fortunately, Anne didn't seem to notice.

'I'm glad you came.' Anne smiled, as though Maggie had just dropped by for a social visit. 'Let me show you around.'

Maggie was glad that Anne seemed to approve of her choice of outfit: clean jeans, sneakers, and a soft, nubby henley shirt, which had belonged to Joh- John before he accidentally shrank it. She hadn't wanted to look sloppy, but then again, Anne had told her to wear clothes she could muck up, and she hadn't wanted to look like she hadn't listened.

They started toward the house. The roosters were still running around like crazy, and Maggie noticed a chicken pen on the other side of the yard, in which a dozen yellow-feathered chicks were strutting and pecking and preening in the sun. The dogs kept up their racket. There were three of them, including Muppet, pacing around a small enclosure, barking lustily.

'You have a lot of animals,' Maggie pointed out, and then immediately felt like an idiot. She tucked her hands into her sleeves.

But Anne laughed. 'It's awful, isn't it? I just can't stop.' 'So-o, is this, like, a farm?' Maggie didn't see any farming equipment, but she didn't know anyone who kept chickens for fun.

Again, Anne laughed. 'Hardly. I give the eggs away to the pantry sometimes. But I don't pull up a damn thing besides bird poop, dog poop, poop of all kinds.' She held the door to the house open for Maggie. Maggie thought that she would probably spend the whole summer shoveling sh*t. 'My husband, Larry, loved animals,' Anne continued as she followed Maggie into the house. They entered the prettiest kitchen Maggie had ever seen.

Even Nat's kitchen didn't compare. The walls were cream and yellow; the cupboards tawny wood, bleached nearly white from the sun, which poured through two large windows. The counters were spotless. No ants here. Against one wall were shelves arranged with blue-and-white pottery and small porcelain figurines: miniature horses, cats, donkeys, and pigs. Maggie was almost afraid to move, as one step in the wrong direction might cause everything to shatter.

'Tea?' Anne asked. Maggie shook her head. She didn't know anyone who drank tea in real life-only British people in TV miniseries. Anne filled a kettle and plunked it on the stove. 'We moved here from Chicago.'

'Really?' Maggie burst out. The farthest she had ever been from Carp was Albany. Once on a school trip, and once when her mom had a court date because she'd been driving with a suspended license. 'What's Chicago like?'

'Cold,' Anne said. 'Freeze your balls off ten months out of the year. But the other two are pure joy.' Maggie didn't respond. Anne didn't seem like the type who would say balls, and Maggie liked her a little better for it.

'Larry and I worked in ad sales. We swore we'd make a change someday.' Anne shrugged. 'Then he died, and I did.'

Once again, Maggie didn't say anything. She wanted to ask how Larry had died, and when, but didn't know if it was appropriate. She didn't want Anne to think she was obsessed with death or something. When the water had boiled, Anne filled her mug and then directed Maggie back through the door they had come. It was funny, walking across the yard with Anne, while the steam rose from her tea and mingled with the soft mist of morning. Maggie felt like she was in a movie about a farm somewhere far away. They rounded the corner of the house, and the dogs began to bark again.

'Shut it!' Anne said, but good-naturedly.

They didn't listen. She kept up a nonstop stream of conversation as they walked. 'This one's the feed shed'- this, as she unlocked one of the small, whitewashed sheds, pushing it open with one hand- I try to keep everything organized so I don't end up throwing grain to the dogs and trying to force kibble on a chick. Remember to turn off the lights before you lock up. I don't even want to tell you what my electricity bills are like.'

'This is where the shovels and rakes go'-they were at another shed - 'buckets, horseshoes, any kind of crap you find lying around that doesn't seem to fit anywhere else. Got it? Am I going too fast?'

Maggie shook her head, and then, realizing Anne wasn't looking at her, said, 'No.'

She realized she wasn't nervous anymore. She liked the feel of the sun on her shoulders and the smell of dark, wet ground everywhere. Probably some of what she was smelling was animal sh*t, but it didn't smell that bad-just like growth and newness. Anne showed her the stables, where two horses stood quietly in the half-dark, like sentinels guarding something precious.

Maggie had never been so close to a horse before, and she laughed out loud when Anne gave her a carrot and instructed her to feed it to the black one, Lady Belle, and Maggie felt its soft, leathery muzzle and the gentle pressure of its teeth.

'They were racehorses. Both injured. Saved 'em from being shot,' Anne said as they left the stables.

'Shot?' Maggie repeated. Anne nodded. For the first time, she looked angry. 'That's what happens when they're no good for running anymore. The owner takes a shotgun to their head.' Anne had saved all the animals from one gruesome fate or another: the dogs and horses from death, the chickens, and roosters from various diseases when no one else had cared enough to spend the money to nurse them. There were turkeys she had saved from slaughter, cats she had rescued from the street in Hudson, and even an enormous potbellied pig named Tinkerbell, which had once been an unwanted runt. Maggie couldn't imagine that it had ever been the brunt of anything.

'All she wanted was a little love,'

Anne said as they passed the pen where Tinkerbell was lolling in the mud. 'That, and about a pound of feed a day.' She laughed.

Finally, they came to a tall, fenced-in enclosure. The sun had finally broken free of the trees and refracted through the rising mist; it was practically blinding. The fence encircled an area of at least a few acres-mostly open lands, patches of dirt, and high grass, but some trees, too. Maggie couldn't see any animals.

For the first time all morning, Anne grew quiet. She sipped her tea, squinting in the sun, staring off through the chain-link fence. After a few minutes, Maggie couldn't stand it anymore.

'What are we waiting for?' She asked me.

'Sh-h-h,' Anne said. 'Look… they'll come.'

Maggie crossed her arms, biting back a sigh. The dew had soaked through her sneakers. Her feet were too cold, and her neck was too hot. There. There was a movement by a small cluster of trees. She squinted. A large, dark mass, which she had taken for a rock, shook itself. Then it stood. And as it stood, another form emerged from the shadow of the trees, and the two animals circled each other briefly, and then loped gracefully into the sun.

Maggie's mouth went dry.

Tigers…

She blinked. Impossible. But they were still there, and coming closer: two tigers, tigers, like you would find at a circus. Massive square heads and huge jaws, bodies muscled and rippling, coats glossy in the sun. Anne whistled sharply. Maggie jumped. Both tigers swung their heads toward the sound, and Maggie lost her breath. Their eyes were flat, incurious, and old-impossibly old, as though instead of looking forward, their eyes saw back to a distant past. They ambled up to the fence, so close that Maggie stepped backward, quickly, terrified. So, close she could smell them, feel the heat of their bodies.

'How?' she finally managed to ask, which was not quite what she meant, but good enough. A thousand thoughts were colliding in her head.

'More rescues,' Anne said calmly.

'They get sold on the black market. Sold, then abandoned when they're too big, or put down when there's no one to care for them.' As she spoke, she reached her hand through a gap in the fence and petted one of the tigers-like it was an overgrown house cat.

When she saw Maggie gaping, she laughed. 'They're all right once they've been fed,' she said. 'Just don't try and cuddle up when they're hungry.' 'I don't-I won't have to go in there, will I?' Maggie was rooted to the ground, paralyzed with fear and wonder.

They were so big, so close. One of the tigers yawned, and she could make out the sharp curve of its teeth, white as bone.

Part: 7

'No, no,' Anne said. 'Most of the time, I just chuck the food in through the gate. Here, I'll show you.' Anne walked her to the padlocked gate, which to Maggie looked alarmingly flimsy. On the other side of the fence, the Tigers followed - languidly, as though by coincidence.

Maggie wasn't fooled, though. That's how predators where. They sat back and waited, lured you into feeling safe, and then they pounced. She wished Joh Joh were here. She did not wish Nat where here. Nat would flip. She hated big animals of any kind.

Even poodles made her jumpy. When they turned their backs on the Tigers' pen and returned to the house, Maggie's stomach started to unknot, although she still had the impression the Tigers were watching her and kept picturing their sharp claws slotting into her back. Anne showed her where she kept all the keys to the sheds, hanging from neatly labeled hooks in the 'mudroom,' as she called it, where Maggie could also find spare rubber boots like the kind Anne wore, mosquito repellent, gardening shears, and suntan and calamine lotions.

After that, Maggie went to work. She fed the chickens while Anne instructed her how to scatter the feed, and laughed out loud when the birds piled together, pecking frantically, like one enormous, feathered, many-headed creature.

Anne showed her how to chase the roosters back in the pen before letting out the dogs to run around, and Maggie was surprised that Muppet seemed to remember her, and immediately ran several times around her ankles, as though in greeting.

Then there was mucking the stables (as Maggie had suspected, this involved horse poop, but it wasn't as bad as she'd thought,) and brushing the horses' coats with special, stiff-bristled brushes. Then helping Anne prune the wisteria, which had begun to colonize the north side of the house. By this time, Maggie was sweating freely, even with her sleeves rolled up. The sun was high and hot, and her back ached from bending over and straightening up again.

But she was happy, too-happier than she'd been in forever. She could almost forget that the rest of the world existed, that she'd ever been dumped by Matt Hepley or made the Jump in the first place. Panic. She could forget Panic. She was surprised when Anne called an end to the

day, saying it was almost one o'clock. While Maggie waited for Joh Joh to return for her, Anne made her a tuna sandwich with mayonnaise she'd made herself and tomatoes she'd grown in her garden. Maggie was afraid to sit down at the table since she was so dirty, but Anne set a place for her, so she did. She thought it was the best thing she'd ever eaten.'

Hey there, cowgirl,' Joh Joh said when Maggie slid into the car. He still hadn't changed out of his pajama pants. He made a big show of sniffing. 'What's that smell?'

'Shut up,' she said and punched him in the arm. He pretended to wince. As Maggie rolled down her window, she caught a glimpse of herself in the side mirror. Her face was red, and her hair was a mess and her chest was still wet with sweat, but she was surprised to find that she looked kind of - pretty.

'How was it?' Joh Joh asked as they began thumping down the drive again. He'd gotten her an iced coffee from 7-Eleven: lots of sugar, lots of creams, just how she liked it. She told him about the runt pig that had ballooned to a huge size, the horses, the chickens, and roosters. She saved the Tigers for last. Joh Joh was taking a sip of her coffee and nearly choked.

'You know that's illegal, right?' he said. She rolled her eyes. 'So are the pants you're wearing. If you don't tell, I won't.'

'These pants?' Joh Joh pretended to be offended. 'I wore these just for you.'

'You can take them off just for me,' Maggie said, and then blushed, realizing how it sounded.

'Anytime,' Joh Joh said, and grinned at her. She punched him again.

She was still fizzy with happiness. It was a twenty-minute ride back to downtown Carp, if the Motel 6, the post office, and the short string of greasy shops and bars could be counted as downtown, but Joh Joh claimed to have figured out a shortcut.

Maggie went quiet when they turned onto Coral Lake, which couldn't have been more inaccurately named: there was no water in sight, nothing but fallen logs and patchy, burnt-bare stubs of trees, because of a fire that had raged there several years ago. The road ran parallel to Jack Donahue's property, and it was bad luck. Maggie had been on Coral Lake only a few times.

Trigger-Happy Jack was known for being constantly drunk, and half-insane, and for owning an arsenal of weapons. His property was fenced in and guarded by dogs and who knew what else. When his fence came into view, pushing right up to the road, she half expected him to come banging out of his house and start taking potshots at the car. But he didn't. Several dogs came running across the yard, though, barking madly. These dogs were nothing like Anne's. They were skinny, snarling, and mean-looking. They had almost passed the limits of Trigger-Happy Jack's property when something caught Maggie's eye.

Part: 8

Sh*t-

I, NO!

Then Jack Donahue-paunchy, shirtless, wearing only a pair of saggy boxers-lifted his rifle and began to fire.

Pop…

Pop…

Pop…

Shots exploded- louder, sharper, than Marcel had expected, the first thing that had truly thrown him off guard. He'd never been so close to gunfire.

In the front yard, Trigger-Happy Jack was still screaming.

'You-cock-suckers-dead-as-a-doornail-I'll-bury-you-all-you-freakers!!!!'

Tick.

It wouldn't be long now. Donahue would call the cops at some point. He'd have to.

Marcel sprinted around the house. His breath was caught somewhere in his throat, like each time he inhaled he was taking in the glass. He didn't know what had happened to the other players, where Ray was, whether anyone had made it inside yet. He thought he heard a whisper in the dark-he assumed Maggie and Nat had taken up their positions, as planned. At the back of the house was a half-rotten porch, cluttered with dark shapes - Marcel vaguely registered a

refrigerator before he saw the distended screen door, barely hanging on its hinges. The shots were still cracking through the air. One two three four.

Tick…

He didn't stop to think. He flung open the door.

He was in.

Part: 9

'Stop!' she nearly screamed.

'Stop.'

Joh Joh slammed on the brakes.

'What? Jesus, Maggie. What the hell?'

But she was already out of the car, jogging back toward a sagging scarecrow-at least, it looked like a scarecrow-slumped on the ground, leaning back against Donahue's fence. Her stomach was tight with fear, and she had the weirdest sense of being watched. There was something wrong with the dummy.

It was too crudely made, too useless. There were no farms on this side of Carroll Lake, no reason for a scarecrow, especially one that looked like it had been dumped from the trunk of a car.

When she reached the scarecrow, she hesitated for a second, as it might suddenly come to life and bite her. Then she lifted its head, which was slumped forward on a spindly stuffed neck.

In place of features, the scarecrow had words written neatly, in marker, on its blank canvas face.

FRIDAY, MIDNIGHT.

THE GAME MUST GO ON.

FRIDAY, JULY 1

Marcel THE CROWD WAS SMALLER ON FRIDAY NIGHT; THE atmosphere- tense, unhappy. Nervous. There was no beer, no music, no bursts of laughter. Just a few dozen people

huddled silently fifty feet down the road from Trigger-Happy Jack's fence, massed together, lit up white-faced in the glare of the bouncing headlights.

When Joh- John cut the engine, Marcel could hear the sound of Nat's ragged breathing. Marcel had spent the ride over trying to distract her by doing easy magic tricks, like making a joker appear in her jacket pocket and a penny vanish from her palm. Now he said, 'Just follow the plan, okay? Follow the plan and everything will be okay.'

Nat nodded, but she looked sick- like she might puke. She was deathly afraid of dogs; she had told him. Also: ladders, heights, darkness, and the feeling you get in the middle of the night when you check your phone and see no one has texted. As far as he could tell, she was pretty much afraid of everything. And yet, she had decided to play. This made him like her even more. And she had chosen him, Marcel, as her ally.

Joh- John said nothing. Marcel wondered what he was thinking. He'd always thought Joh John was nice enough, and book smart for sure, but just like a big dumb sheepdog of a person who followed Maggie everywhere. But- Marcel was starting to change his mind.

During the drive, Joh Joh's eyes had clicked to his for a second in the rearview, and Marcel had detected some kind of warning there. The night was clear and still.

The moon was high and halfway to full, and turning everything to the silhouette, drawing angles around the fence. Still, it was dark. A flashlight went on and off several times, a silent signal. Maggie, Joh Joh, Nat, and Marcel walked toward it. Marcel had the urge to take Nat's hand, but Nat was hugging herself tightly.

At least Marcel had had time to plan, to prepare. If Nat hadn't told him about the dummy Maggie had spotted on Tuesday, he might not have known about the newest challenge until this morning. The email had come to all the players simultaneously from an encrypted address, judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

Location: Coral Lake Road

Time: Midnight-

Goal: Take a prize from the house. Bonus: Find the desk in the gun room and take what's hidden there.

'All right.' Diggin was speaking quietly as they drew up close to the group. They were late. 'Players, step forward.'

They did, detaching themselves from the people who had come to watch. Fewer players, fewer spectators. After the bust, everyone was jumpy.

Part: 10

-And-

Carroll Lake Road was bad luck. Trigger- Happy Jack was bad-all bad. A psycho and a drunk and worse.

Marcel knew he wouldn't think twice about shooting them. The beam of a flashlight swept over each of the players in turn. It felt like the minutes were swelling into hours. The counting took forever.

Marcel could see Ray Hanrahan, chewing gum loudly, standing on the outer edge of the circle of players. His face was concealed in shadow. Marcel felt a familiar clutch of anger. Strange how it didn't go away; over the past two years, it just seemed to be growing, like cancer in his stomach.

'Walsh is missing,' -Digging said finally. 'So is Merl.'

'They're out, then,' someone said.

'It's midnight.' -Digging was still practically whispering. The wind lifted the trees, hissed at them, as though it knew they were trespassing. The dogs were still quiet, though. Sleeping, or waiting. 'The second challenge-'

'Second challenge?' Zev broke in.

'What about the water towers?' 'Invalidated,' -Digging said. 'Not everyone got to go.' Zev spat on the ground, and Maggie made a noise of protest. -Digging ignored them.

'When I say go,' he said. He paused. For a moment, it seemed that everything went still. Marcel could feel the slow drum of his heart, beating in the hollow of his chest. And as they stood there in the dark, waiting, it occurred to him that here, somewhere in this crowd, where the judges-hiding behind familiar faces, maybe enjoying it.

'Go,' -Digging said.

'Go!' Marcel said to Maggie and Nat, at the same time. Maggie nodded and took Nat's hand; they vanished together into the dark, Nat moving stiff-legged, still limping slightly, like a broken doll.

Marcel made straight for the fence like they'd agreed like he'd scoped the place out and knew what he was doing. And as he predicted, a half-dozen people ran after him in silence, doubled over as though, even now, they were being watched.

Nevertheless, much of the group didn't move right away. They floated aimlessly to the fence, pacing it, watching, too scared to try to climb. They'd all be disqualified for doing nothing. Still, they stood there, pacing, watching the dark house, watching the shadow-people climb the fence, everything silent except for the occasional creak of metal, a muttered curse, and the wind. Marcel was one of the first up the fence. There were other players around him-people grunting and breathing hard, bodies knocking into, his-but he ignored them, focused on the bite of chain link on his palms and his breathing and the seconds running forward like water.

It was all about timing. Just like magic tricks: planning, mastery, staying calm under pressure. You could anticipate another person's response; you could know what people would do, or say, or how they would react, even before they did.

Marcel knew it wouldn't be long until Donahue came out with a rifle. At the top of the fence, he hung back, even though his adrenaline was pumping, telling him to go. Several other people-it was too dark to make out faces-dropped and hit the ground first, and even though they barely made a sound, the explosion of barking came right away. Four dogs-no, five-tore out from the back of the house, barking like mad.

Marcel felt every second like it had a different taste, a different texture from the second before it, like individual moments were ticking off in his head.

Tick. Someone was screaming. There'd be points taken off for that. Tick. Only a few more seconds until the shooting would begin. Tick. Maggie and Nat should have reached the hole in the fence by now.

Tick…

He was airborne, and then he felt the impact of the ground and he was up and fumbling for the Mace in his pocket.

He didn't head for the front of the house directly but instead made a loop, circumnavigating the small crowd of players, the dogs going crazy, snarling and snapping. Some of the players were already climbing the fence again, trying to reach the safety of the other side. But- Marcel kept going…

Tick…

A dog came at him. He almost didn't see it; it had its jaws practically around his arm before he pivoted and sprayed it, full-on, in the face. The dog dropped back, whimpering. Marcel kept going.

Tick.

Right on time, a light in the house clicked on. There was a roar-a sound that echoed out even over the chaos and the frantic sounds of barking and something crashed to the ground. A black shape rocketed out the front door, into the night. Even from a distance of one hundred yards, Marcel could make out the stream of individual courses.

#- Hashtag: (God damn mother freaking's on and off b*tches get the hell off my yard you- pieces- of sh*t craping d*ick wipe of as ass sucking pie hole puss-ie liker.)

Maggie-

MAGGIE AND NAT REACHED THE PLACE WHERE THE fence veered north, away from the road, just as the dogs began barking. Their timing was already all wrong. And Marcel was counting on them.

'You got to move faster,' Maggie said.

'I'm trying,' Nat said. Maggie could hear the strain in her voice. There was a volley of shouting from the yard-a a cry of pain and the snarling of an enraged animal. Maggie felt her pulse beating frantically in her neck.

Focus.

Focus.

Stay calm.

They had reached the portion of the fence they'd prepped yesterday. And no one had followed them. Good. Marcel had cut a makeshift door in the fence. Maggie gave it a solid push and it groaned open, giving her just enough room to squeeze through. Nat followed.

Suddenly Nat froze, her eyes wide, horrified.

'I'm stuck,' she whispered.

Maggie whirled around, impatient.

Nat's left sleeve was snagged on the fence. She reached out and tugged it free.

'You're unstuck,' she said. 'Come on.'

But Nat didn't move. 'I-I can't.' Her face was drawn, terrified. 'I'm not even.'

'You're not what?' Maggie was losing it. Marcel would be going in any minute; he expected them to stand guard.

They'd made a pact. He was helping them; Maggie didn't know why, but she didn't care, either.

'I'm not even.' Nat's voice was high-pitched, hysterical. She was still standing, frozen, as though both legs had been rooted to the ground.

That's when Jack Donahue came blasting from the front door.

'God damn mother freaking sons of b*tches get the hell off my yard you piece's- of sh*t.'

'Come on.' Maggie grabbed Nat's arm and pulled, hard, dragging her across the lawn toward the house, ignoring the sound of Nat's whimpering, the words she was muttering under her breath. Counting. She was counting up to ten, then down again. Maggie dug her nails harder into Nat's arm, almost wanting to hurt her. Jesus. They were running out of time, and Nat was losing it. She didn't care about Nat's ankle, or that Nat was shaking, choking back sobs.

Pop…

Pop…

Pop...

Maggie jerked Nat down and into the shadows as Donahue thundered off the porch, gun up, firing. The light on the porch was white, half-blinding, and made him look like a character from a movie. Maggie's thighs were shaking.

She didn't see Marcel. She couldn't see anyone-just shapes, blurring together in the darkness, and the small cone of light illuminating Donahue's back, the curl of hair on his shoulders, his flab, the awful butt of his rifle.

Where was Marcel? Maggie could hardly breathe. She pressed up against the side of the house, rocking her weight back onto her heels, trying to think. There was too much noise. And she didn't know if Marcel had made it into the house already. What if he hadn't? What if he'd screwed up?

'Stay here,' Maggie whispered. 'I'm going in.' 'Don't.' Nat turned to her; eyes wide, frantic. 'Don't leave me here.' Maggie gripped her shoulders. 'In exactly one minute, if I'm not out yet, I want you to run back to the car. Okay? In exactly one minute.'

She didn't even know if Nat heard her-and almost didn't care, at this point. She straightened up. Her body felt bloated and clumsy. And suddenly she registered several things at once: that the shots had happened, and were no longer happening; that the front door had just opened and closed with a firm click.

Someone had gone in. Immediately, her body turned to ice. What if Marcel was inside? She, Maggie, was supposed to have been watching. She was supposed to have whistled if Donahue approached. But the front door had opened and closed. And she had not whistled.

She was no longer thinking. Instinctively, she pulled herself onto the porch and opened the front door and slipped inside, into the hall. It stank of BO and old beer, and it was pitch-dark. Donahue had turned on a light earlier- that she had noticed, a bad omen, just as her left arm was snagged by the toothy bite of the fence-so why had he turned it off? Her heart surged into her throat and she reached out with both hands, grazed both walls lightly with her fingertips, centering herself in the hallway. She swallowed. She took several steps forward and heard a rustling, the creak of a footstep. She froze, expecting at any second for the lights to click on, for the barrel of a gun to shine directly at her heart. Nothing happened.

'Marcel?' she risked whispering into the dark.

Footsteps crossed quickly toward her. She fumbled along the wall and hit a doorknob. The door opened easily, and she slipped out of the hall, closing the door as quietly as possible, holding her breath. But the footsteps kept going. She heard the front door creak open and closed. Was- it Donahue? Marcel? Another player?

Here, moonlight filtered in through a large, curtainless window, and Maggie suddenly sucked in a breath. The walls were covered with metal, glinting dully in the milky light. Guns... Guns mounted on the walls, hanging from upended deer hooves, crisscrossing the ceiling. The gun room... She thought it even smelled faintly like gunpowder, but she might have been imagining it.

The room was cluttered with workbenches and overstuffed chairs, bleeding stuffing onto the floor. Underneath the window was a large desk. Maggie felt as if the air in the room were suddenly too thin; she felt breathless and dizzy, remembering the email she'd received that morning. Bonus: Find the desk in the gun room and take what's hidden there.

Maggie moved across the room to the desk, navigating the clutter of objects. She began with the drawers on the sides-right and then left. Nothing. The shallow central drawer was loose, as though from frequent use. The gun was curled there, like an enormous black beetle, shiny, hard-backed.

The bonus. She reached in, hesitated-then seized it quickly as it might bite her. Maggie felt nausea rising in her throat.

She hated guns.

'What are you doing?' Maggie spun around. She could just see Marcel silhouetted in the doorway, although it was too dark to make out his face.

'Sh-h-h,' Maggie whispered. 'Keep your voice down.'

'What the hell are you doing?'

Marcel took two steps across the room.

'You were supposed to keep watch.'

'I was.' Before Maggie could explain further, Marcel cut her off.

'Where's Natalie?'

'Outside,' Maggie said. 'I thought

I heard-'

'Was this some kind of a trick?'

I'll have to find out…

Nevaeh

Book: 19

Maggie

Chapter: 126

Part: 1

Marcel spoke quietly, but Maggie could hear the edge in his voice. 'You get me to do the dirty work, then sneak in and grab the bonus? So, you could get ahead?'

Maggie stared at him. 'What?'

'Don't screw with me, Maggie.' Two more steps and Marcel- was- um like- there, directly in front of her. 'Don't lie to me.'

Maggie fought for breath. Tears were pushing at the back of her eyes. She knew they were being too loud. Too loud. Everything was all wrong. The gun in her hand felt awful, cold but also alive, like some alien creature that might suddenly roar to life.

'What are you doing here?' She finally said. 'You were supposed to get proof for us and get out.'

'I heard something,' Marcel fired back. 'I thought it might be one of the other players…'

The lights came on. Jack Donahue was standing in the doorway, eyes wild, chest slick with sweat. Then he was shouting, and the barrel of the gun was swinging toward them and there was an explosion of glass, and Maggie realized Marcel had just hurled a chair straight through the window. Everything was a fracture, roar, blur.

'Go, go, go!' Marcel was shouting, pushing Maggie toward the window. Maggie threw herself shoulder-first into the night. She heard the second explosion and felt a spray of softwood- as she went through the window, felt pain slice through her arm and an immediate dampness pooling in her armpit.

Marcel hauled her to her feet, and they were running, fleeing into the night, toward the fence, while Jack shouted after them and sent two more shots off into the dark. Through the fence-gasping, panting-to the road, mostly empty of cars. There was the dazzle, the wide sweep of headlights. Maggie recognized Joh Joh's car. Nathaniel suddenly materialized in front of her, backlit, like an evil angel.

'Are you okay?' Her voice was wild, urgent. 'Are you okay?' 'We're okay,' Maggie answered for both.

'Let's go.'

Then they were in the car and moving quickly, bumping over the country roads. For several minutes they were quiet, listening to the distant sound of police sirens. Maggie gritted her teeth every time they hit a rut. She was bleeding.

A piece of glass had sliced the soft skin of her inner arm. She still had the gun. Somehow, it had ended up in her lap. She kept staring at it, bewildered, half in shock.

'Jesus Christ,' Joh Joh finally said when they had put several miles behind them, and the noise of the sirens was lost beneath the quiet shushing of the wind through the trees. 'Holy sh*t. That was crazy.'

Suddenly, the tension broke. Marcel started whooping and Nathaniel began to cry, and Maggie rolled the windows down and laughed like a maniac. She was relieved, grateful, alive sitting in the warm backseat of Joh Joh's car, which smelled like soda cans and old gum.

Joh- John told them about nearly pissing himself when Trigger-Happy Jack came barreling out of the house; he told them that Ray had cracked one of the dogs with a huge rock and sent it whimpering off into the dark. But half the kids never even made it over the fence, and he thought Byron Welcker might have been mauled. It was hard to tell in the dark, with all the chaos. Marcel told them about getting so close to Donahue; he thought for sure he'd be shot in the skull. But Donahue was enraged, and drunk.

He wasn't aiming well. 'Thank God,' Marcel said, laughing. Marcel had stolen three items from the kitchen-a butter knife, a saltshaker, and a shot glass shaped like a cowboy boot-to prove they'd all been in the house. He gave Nathaniel the shot glass and Maggie the butter knife and kept the saltshaker for himself.

He made Joh Joh pull over and placed the saltshaker on the dashboard, so he could get a good picture of it.

'What are you doing?' Maggie, she asked. Her brain still felt like it was wrapped in a wet blanket. Marcel passed over the phone wordlessly. Maggie saw that Marcel had emailed the photo to judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com, subject line: PROOF. Maggie shivered. She didn't like thinking of the mysterious judges- invisible, watching, judging them.

'What about the gun?' Marcel said.

'The gun?' Nathaniel repeated.

'Maggie found it,' Marcel said neutrally.

'Marcel and I found it at the same time,' she said automatically. She didn't know why. She could feel Marcel staring at her.

'You should both get credit, then,' Nathaniel said.

'You take the picture, Maggie,' Marcel said. His voice was slightly gentler. 'You send it.' Maggie arranged the shot glass and the gun on her lap, clumsily, with one arm. Her stomach

tightened. She wondered if the gun was loaded. Probably. So, weird to have a weapon so close. So-o, weird to see it sitting there.

She'd been a year old when her dad shot himself-with a gun just like this one. She had a paranoid fear that it might go off on its own, exploring the night into noise and pain. Once the picture was sent, Joh Joh asked, 'What are you going to do with the gun?'

'Keep it, I guess.' But she didn't like the idea of having a gun in her house, waiting, smiling its metal smile.

And what if Lily found it?

'You can't keep it,' he said.

'You stole it.'

'Well, what should I do with it?'

Maggie felt Fear welling inside her.

She had broken into Donahue's house. She had stolen something worth a lot of money. People went to jail for sh*t like that.

Joh Joh sighed. 'Give it to me, Maggie,' he said. 'I'll get rid of it for you.'

She could have hugged him. She could have kissed him. Joh Joh shut the gun in the glove box. Now everyone was quiet. The dashboard clocks glowed green 1:42.

The roads were all dark except for the adhesive cone that was made by the headlights. The land was dark too, on either side of the- houses, trailers, whole streets swallowed up by blackness like they were traveling through an endless tunnel, a place with no boundaries. It started to rain.

Maggie leaned her head against the window. At some point, she must have fallen asleep. She dreamed of falling into the dark, slick throat of an animal, and of trying to cut herself out of its belly with a butter knife, which turned into a gun in her hands and went off.

Part: 2

SATURDAY,

JULY 2

THE NEXT DAY, THE NOTICES WERE EVERYWHERE of us not being round: skip a day it was- were somewhere in Pa- between the wire fences that orange belt that is so deadly, by Clit. Where you'll find quite a suburban street some building down the way, that you would call nicer than home, where we are from, they appeared, half-sodden, sunk in the mud in Meth Row, where Jenny would meet up with boys for her needs and a quickie.

She comes down here more and more- The betting slips blew to the Pines Mobile Park, accepted on the soles of muddy boots, snatched up by the metal underbelly of passing trucks before absconding on the wind, printed on large, glossy sheets of paper, inscribed with the crest of the Pitt-County Police Department, I see jenny doing and running for it with a bag…

Our school had an annulment over the intercom the day before- ANY INDIVIDUALS FOUND TO BE IN WILL BE SUBJECT TO CRIMINAL PROSECUTION as an adult.

Part: 3

MONDAY, JULY 4

Marcel,

THE WEATHER STAYED BEAUTIFUL-FINE AND SUNNY, just hot enough for a whole week after the challenge at Ray's house.

The Fourth of July was no different, and Marcel woke to sunlight washing over his navy-blue blanket, like a slow surf of white. He was happy. He was more than happy. He was psyched. He was hanging out with Nathaniel today. His mom was home, awake, and making breakfast. He leaned in the doorframe and watched her crack eggs into a pan, break the yolks up with the edge of a wooden spatula.

'What's the occasion?' He said. He was still tired and his neck and back were sore; he'd worked two shifts stocking shelves after closing time at the Home Depot in Leeds, where his mom's ex-boyfriend Danny was a manager. Dumb work, but it paid okay. He had a hundred

dollars in his pocket and would be able to buy Nathaniel something at the mall. Her birthday was still a few weeks away- July 29-but still. Might as well get her something small a little early.

'I could ask you the same thing.' She let the eggs sizzle away and came over to him and gave him a big smack on the cheek before he could pull away.

'Why are you up so early?'

He could see traces of makeup. So…?

She'd been on a date last night. No wonder she was in a good mood.

'Didn't feel like sleeping anymore,' he said cautiously. He wondered whether his mom would admit to going out. Sometimes she did if a date had gone well.

'Just in time for eggs. Do you want eggs? Are you hungry? I'm making some eggs for Dayna.' She shook the scrambled eggs onto a plate. They were perfectly scrambled, trembling with butter. Before he could answer, she lowered her voice and said, 'You know all that therapy Dayna's been doing?

Well, Bill says-'

'Bill?' Marcel cut in. His mom blushed. Busted. 'He's just a friend, Marcel.'

Marcel doubted it, but he said nothing.

His mom went on, in a rush: 'He took me out to Lea's in Judson last night. Nice tablecloths and everything. He drinks wine, Marcel. Do you believe that?' She shook her head, amazed.

'And he knows someone, some doctor at Columbia Memorial who works with people like Day. Bill says Dayna's got to go more regularly, like every day.'

'We can't-,'Marcel started to say, but his mom understood and finished for him.

'I told him we couldn't afford it. But he said he could get us in, even with no insurance. Can you believe it? At the hospital.'

Marcel said nothing. They'd gotten their hopes up the before-new doctor, new treatment, someone who could help. And something always went wrong. A pipe burst and the emergency fund would dry up replacing it, or the doctor would be a quack. The one time they'd managed to see someone in a real hospital, he'd looked at Dayna for five minutes, done nerve tests, banged on her knee and squeezed her toes, and straightened up.

'Impossible,' he'd said, sounding angry, like he was mad at them for wasting his time. 'Car accident, right?

My advice is: to apply for a better chair. No reason she should be wheeling around in this piece of junk.' And he'd toed the wheelchair, the five-hundred-dollar wheelchair Marcel had busted his ass for whole autumn trying to purchase, while his mom cried, while

Dayna lay curled up every night on her bed, fetal, vacant.

'So, you want eggs or not?' His mom said.

Marcel shook his head. 'Not hungry.' He picked up Dayna's plate, grabbed a fork, and carried both into the living room. She had her head sticking out of the open window, and as he entered, he heard her shout, 'In your dreams!' and then a burst of laughter from below.

'What's that about?' He asked her.

She snapped around to face him.

Her face went red. 'Just Ricky, talking stupid,' she said and took the plate from him. Ricky worked in the kitchen at Dot's, and he was always sending gifts up to Dayna-cheap flowers, purchased at the gas station, little teddy bear figurines. Ricky was all right.

'Why are you staring at me?' Dayna demanded.

'Not starring,' Marcel said. He sat next to her and pulled her feet into his lap, began working her calves with his knuckles, as he always did. So, she could walk again. So, she would keep believing it. Dayna ate quickly, eyes on her plate. She was avoiding him. Finally, her mouth crooked into a smile. 'Ricky said he wants to marry me.'

'Maybe you should,' Marcel said.

Dayna shook her head. 'Freak.'

She reached out and punched Marcel's shoulder, and he pretended it had hurt.

He was overwhelmed, momentarily, with happiness.

It was going to be a good day.

He showered and dressed carefully -he'd even remembered to put his jeans in the wash, so they looked good, crisp, and clean and took the bus to Nathaniel's neighborhood.

It was only ten thirty, but the sun was already high, hovering in the sky like a single eye. As soon as Marcel turned onto Nathaniel's street, he felt like he was stepping onto a TV set like he was in one of those shows from the 1950s where someone was always washing a car in the driveway and the women wore aprons and said hello to the mailmen. Except there was no movement here, no voices, no people hauling trash or banging doors. It was too quiet. That was one thing about living in the back of Dot's: someone was always yelling about something. It was kind of comforting, in a way, like a reminder that you weren't all alone in having problems.

Nathaniel was waiting on her front stoop.

Marcel's stomach bottomed out as soon as he saw her. Her hair was fixed low, in a side ponytail, and she was wearing a ruffled yellow jumper-type thing, with the shirt and shorts attached, that would have looked stupid on anyone else. But on her, it looked amazing like she was life-size, exotic Popsicle.

He couldn't help but think that whenever she had to use the bathroom, she'd have to get undressed. She stood up, waving at him, as though he could miss her, wobbling slightly on large wedge heels.

She wasn't wearing her ankle brace anymore, even though he knew she'd screwed her ankle up again running away from Donahue's house. But she winced slightly when she walked.

'Joh- John, and Maggie went to get iced coffees,' she said as he approached her, doing his best not to walk too quickly. 'I told them to get us some too. Do you drink coffee?'

'I'd shoot coffee if I could,' he said, and she laughed. The sound made him warm all over, even though he still felt a weird, prickling discomfort standing on her property like he was

in a One-of-These-Things-Doesn't-Belong drawing. A curtain twitched in a ground-floor window, and a face appeared and disappeared too rapidly for Marcel to make out.

'Someone's spying on us,' he said. 'Probably my dad.' Nathaniel waved dismissively. 'Don't worry. He's harmless.'

Marcel wondered what it would be like to have a dad like that in the house, around, so taken-for-granted you could dismiss him with a wave of the hand. Dayna's dad, Tom, had been married to Marcel's mom-only for eighteen months, and only because Marcel's mom got pregnant, but still. Her dad sent emails to her regularly, and money every month, and sometimes even came for a visit. Marcel had never heard a word from his father, not a single peep. All he knew was his dad worked construction and came from the Dominican Republic. He wondered, for just a split second, what his father was doing now. He was alive and well, back in Florida.

He'd finally settled down and had a whole host of little kids running around, with dark eyes like Marcel's, with the same high cheekbones.

Or even better, he'd taken a big-ass tumble from a tall scaffold and split open his head.

When Joh Joh and Maggie returned in another one of Joh- John's Junkers- which rattled and shook so badly, Marcel was sure it would quit on them before they reached the mall- Marcel helped Nathaniel to the back and opened the door for her.

'You're so sweet, Marcel,' she said, and kissed his cheek, looking almost regretful.

The ride to Kingston was good. Marcel tried to pay Joh Joh back for the iced coffee, but Joh- John waved him off. Maggie managed to coax a decent station out of the patchy radio, and they listened to Johnny Cash until Nathaniel begged for something that had been recorded in this century. Nathaniel made Marcel do magic tricks again, and this time she laughed when he made a straw materialize from her hair.

The car smelled like old tobacco and mint, like an old man's underwear drawer, and the sun came through the windows, and the whole state of New York seemed lit up by a special, interior glow. Marcel felt, for the first time since moving to Carp, for the first time in his life, as he belonged somewhere. He wondered how different the past few years would have been if he

had been hanging out with Joh- John, and Maggie if he'd been dating Nathaniel, picking her up to drive her to the movies on Fridays, dancing with her in the gym at homecoming.

He fought down a wave of sadness.

None of it would last. It couldn't.

Marcel had driven past the Hudson Valley Mall in Kingston but had never gone inside it. The ceiling was fitted with big skylights, which made the spotless linoleum floors seem to glow. The air smelled like body spray and the little bags of potpourri his mom put in her underwear drawer.

But mostly, it smelled like bleach. Everything was white, like a hospital, like the whole building had been dunked in Clorox. It was still early, and the crowds were thin. Marcel's cowboy boots echoed loudly on the ground when he walked, and he hoped Nathaniel wouldn't find it annoying.

Once inside, Nathaniel consulted a small flyer she had pulled from her bag and announced that she would meet up with the group in an hour or so, outside the Taco Bell in the food court.

'You're leaving?' Marcel blurted out.

Nathaniel looked at Maggie for help.

Maggie jumped in: 'Nathaniel has an audition.'

'An audition for what?' Marcel asked. He wished he didn't sound so upset. Immediately, Nathaniel began to blush.

'You're going to make fun of me,' she said. His heart practically ripped open. Like he, Marcel Mason, would ever dream of making fun of Natalie Dalcas.

'I won't,' he said quietly. Joh- John and Maggie were already wandering off. Joh-John pretended to shove Maggie into the fountain. She yelped and walloped him with a fist. Wordlessly, Nathaniel passed him the flyer. It was badly designed. The font was illegible.

WANTED: MODELS AND ACTRESSES TO SHOWCASE THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST AT DAZZLING GEMS!

COMMERCIAL AUDITIONS: 11:30 A.M. SATURDAY AT THE HUDSON VALLEY MALL.

MUST BE EIGHTEEN OR OLDER.

'Your birthday is on the twenty-ninth, right?' Marcel said, hoping he might get extra points for remembering.

'So? That's only three weeks away,' Nathaniel said, and he remembered she was one of the youngest in their graduating class. He passed her the flyer, and she shoved it back into her bag as though she was embarrassed to have shown him. 'I thought I'd try, anyway.'

You're beautiful, Natalie, he wanted to say to her. But all he could say was, 'They'd be morons to take anyone else.'

She smiled so widely, he could see all her perfect teeth, nestled in her perfect mouth, like small white candies. He was hoping she might kiss his cheek again, but she didn't. 'It won't take more than an hour or two,' she said. 'Probably less.' Then she was gone.

Marcel was left in a foul mood. He wandered behind Joh- John, and Maggie for a while, but even though both were perfectly nice, it was clear they wanted to be alone. They had their language, their jokes. They were constantly touching each other too- pushing and shoving, pinching, and hugging, like kids flirting on a playground. Jesus. Marcel didn't know why they just didn't get it on already.

They were crazy about each other.

He made an excuse about wanting to get something for his sister-Joh- John looked vaguely surprised he even had a sister-and wandered outside, smoking three cigarettes in a row in the parking lot, which was beginning to fill up. He checked his phone a few times, hoping Nathaniel had already texted. She hadn't. He began to feel like an idiot. He had all this money on him. He'd been planning to buy her something. But this wasn't a date.

Was it?

What did she want from him? He couldn't tell. Inside, he wandered around aimlessly. The mall wasn't that big-only one floor-and there was no carousel, which disappointed him. One time he'd taken a carousel ride with Dayna at a mall in Columbus-or was it- Chicago?

They'd raced around, trying to ride every single horse before the music stopped playing, yelling like cowboys. The memory made him happy and sad at the same time. It took him a moment to realize he'd accidentally stepped in front of a Victoria's Secret.

A mom and her daughter were giving him weird looks. He looked like a perv. He turned away quickly, resolving to go to Dazzling Gems and see whether Nathaniel was done yet. It had been an hour, anyway.

Dazzling Gems was on the other side of the building. He was surprised to see a long line snaking out of the boutique-girls waiting to audition, all of them tanned and wearing next to nothing and perching like antelope on towering heels, and none of them close to as pretty as Nathaniel. They were all cheesy looking, he thought. Then he saw her.

She was standing just outside the boutique doors, talking to an old person with a face that reminded Marcel of a ferret. His hair was greasy and thinning on top; Marcel could see patchy bits of his scalp. He was wearing a cheap suit, and even this, somehow, managed to look greasy and threadbare. At that second, Nathaniel turned and spotted Marcel. She smiled big, waving, and pushed toward him. Ferret melted into the crowd.

'How was it?' Marcel asked.

'Stupid,' she said. 'I didn't even make it through the doors. I waited in line for, like, an hour and barely moved three places. And then some woman came around and checked IDs.' She said it cheerfully, though.

'So, who was that?' Marcel asked carefully. He didn't want her to think he was jealous of Ferret, even though he sort of was…

'Who?' Nathaniel blinked.

'That guy you were just talking to,' he said. Marcel noticed Nathaniel was holding something… a business card.

'Oh, that.' Nathaniel rolled her eyes. 'Some modeling scouts. He said he liked my look.' She said it casually like it was no big deal, but he could tell she was thrilled.

'So-o he just, like, goes around handing out cards?' Marcel said.

He could tell right away he'd offended her. 'He doesn't just hand them out to anyone,' she said stiffly. 'He handed one to me. Because he liked my face. Gisele got discovered in a mall.'

Marcel didn't think Ferret looked anything like a modeling agent-and why would an agent be scouting at the mall in Kingston, New York, anyway? -But he didn't know how to say so without offending her further. He didn't want her to think he thought she wasn't pretty enough to be a model because he did. Except for models where tall and she was short. But otherwise.

'Be careful,' he said because he could think of nothing else to say.

To his relief, she laughed. 'I know what I'm doing,' she said.

'Come on. Let's go get something to eat. I'm starving.' Nathaniel didn't like to hold hands because it made her feel 'imbalanced,' but she walked so close to him, their arms were almost touching. It occurred to him that anyone looking would assume they were together, like boyfriend-girlfriend, and he had a sudden rush of insane happiness. He had no idea how this had happened that he was walking next to Nathaniel Dalcas as he belonged there like she was his girl. He thought, vaguely, it had something to do with Terror. They found Joh- John, and Maggie arguing about whether to go to Sbarro or East Wok. While they hashed it out,

Marcel and Nathaniel agreed easily on Subway. He bought her lunch-a chicken sub, which she changed at the last second to a salad ('Just in case,' she said cryptically)-and a Diet Coke. They found an empty table and sat down while Maggie and Joh- John stood in line at Taco Bell, which they had at last agreed on.

'So, what's up with them?' Marcel said.

'With Joh- John and Maggie?' Nathaniel shrugged. 'Best friends, I guess.' She slurped her soda loudly. He liked the way she ate unselfconsciously, unlike some girls. 'I think Joh- John has a crush on her, though.'

'Seems like it,' Marcel said.

Nathaniel tilted her head, watching him.

'What about you?' 'What about me what?'

'Do you have a crush on anyone?' He had just taken a big bite of his sandwich; the question was so unexpected he nearly choked. He couldn't think of a single thing to say that wasn't lame.

'I'm not -' He coughed and took a sip of his Coke. Jesus. His face was burning.

'I mean, I don't-' 'Marcel.' She cut him off. Her voice was suddenly stern. 'I'd like you to kiss me now.' He had just been scarfing a meatball sub. But he kissed her anyway. What else could he do?

He felt the noise in his head, the noise around them, swelling into a clamor; he loved the way she kissed like she was still hungry like she wanted to eat him. Heat roared through his whole body, and for one second, he experienced a crazy shock of anxiety: he must be dreaming. He put one hand on the back of her head, and she pulled away just long enough to say, 'Both hands, please.'

After that, the noise in his head quieted. He felt relaxed, and he kissed her again, more slowly this time. On the way home, he barely said anything. He was happier than he'd ever been, and he feared to say or doing anything that would ruin it.

Joh- John dropped Marcel off first. Marcel had promised to watch fireworks on TV with Dayna tonight. He wondered whether he should kiss Nathaniel again-he was stressing about it, it-but she solved the problem by hugging him, which would have been disappointing except she was pressed up next to him in the car and he could feel her boobs against his chest.

'Thanks a lot, man,' he said to Joh- John. Joh- John gave him a fist bump.

Like they were friends.

They were. He watched the car drive off, even after he could no longer make out Nathaniel's silhouette in the backseat until the car disappeared beyond a hill and he could hear only the distant, guttural growl of the engine. Still, he stood there on the sidewalk, reluctant to

head inside, back to Dayna and his mom and the narrow space of his room, piled with clothes and empty cigarette packs, smelling vaguely like garbage.

He just wanted to be happy for a little longer.

His phone buzzed. An email. His heart picked up. He recognized the sender.

Luke Hanrahan.

The message was short.

Leave us alone. I'll go to the police.

Marcel read the message several times, enjoying it, reading desperation between the lines. He'd been wondering whether Luke had received his message; he had. Marcel scrolled down and reread the email he had sent a week earlier.

The bets are in.

The game is on.

Part: 4

I'll make you a trade:

A sister's legs for a brother's life.

Standing in the fading sun, Marcel allowed himself to smile.

Maggie,

IT HAD BEEN A GOOD DAY-ONE OF THE BEST OF THE whole summer so far. For once, Maggie wouldn't let herself think about the future, and what would happen in the fall, when Joh- John went to college at SUNY Binghamton and Nathaniel headed to Los Angeles to be an actress. Maggie thought, she could just stay on at Anne's house, as a kind of helper. She could even move in. Lily could come too; they could share a room in one of the sheds.

Of course, that meant she'd still be stuck in Carp, but at least she'd be out of Fresh Pines Mobile Park. She liked Anne, and she especially liked the animals. She'd been out to Mansfield Road three times a week, and she was already looking forward to heading back. She

liked the smell of wet straw and old leather and grass that hung over everything; she liked the way the dog Muppet recognized her, and the excited chattering of the chickens. She decided she liked the white Bengal's, too-from a distance, anyway.

She was mesmerized by the way they moved, muscles rippling like the surface of the water, and by their eyes, which looked so wise-so bleak, too, as though they had stared into the center of the universe and found it disappointing, a feeling Maggie completely understood. But she was happy to let Anne do the feeding. She couldn't believe the balls on the woman. It was a good thing Anne was too old for Fear. She would have nailed it.

Anne went inside the pen, got within three feet of the white Bengal's as they circled her, eyeing the bucket of meat hungrily-although Maggie was sure they'd be just as happy to take a chomp of Anne's head.

Anne insisted they wouldn't harm her, though. 'As long as I'm doing the feeding,' she said, 'they won't use me for feed.' Maybe-just maybe-things would be okay. The only bad part of the day was the fact that Joh- John was constantly checking his phone, Maggie assumed for texts from Avery. This reminded her that Matt hadn't texted her once since their breakup. Meanwhile, Joh- John had Avery (Maggie wouldn't think of her as a girlfriend,) and Nathaniel had Marcel hanging on her every word and was also still seeing a bartender over in Kingston, some sleazy guy who rode a Vespa, which Nathaniel insisted was just as cool as a motorcycle.

Right…?

But after they dropped off Marcel, Nathaniel asked, 'Is Avery coming tonight, Joh-John?' and when Joh- John said no, too quickly, Maggie felt at peace with the world. Nathaniel made them detour so she could get a six-pack; then they headed to 7- Eleven and bought junky Fourth of July food: Doritos and dip, powdered doughnuts, and even a bag of pork cracklings, because it was funny and Joh- John had bravely volunteered to eat some.

They headed to the gully: a steep, barren slope of gravel and broken-up concrete that bottomed out in the old train tracks, now red with rust and littered with trash. The sun was just starting to set. They picked their way carefully down the slope and across the tracks, and Joh-John scouted the best place to light off the sparklers.

This was a tradition. Two years ago, Joh- John had even surprised Maggie by buying two fifty-pound bags of mixed sand from Home Depot and making a beach. He'd even bought loopy straws and those paper umbrellas to put in their drinks, so she would feel they were somewhere tropical.

Today, Maggie wouldn't have chosen to be anywhere else in the entire world. Not even the Caribbean. Nathaniel was already on her second beer, and she was getting wobbly. Maggie had a beer too, and even though she didn't usually like to drink, she felt warm and happy. She stumbled over a loose slat in the tracks and Joh- John caught her, looped an arm around her waist. She was surprised that he felt so solid, so strong. So warm, too.

'You okay there, Heath-bar?' When he smiled, both of his dimples appeared, and Maggie had the craziest thought: she wanted to kiss them. She banished the idea quickly. That was why she didn't drink.'

I'm fine.' She tried to pull away. He moved his arm to her shoulders. She could smell beer on his breath. She wondered if he, too, was a little drunk.

'Come on, get off me.' She said it jokingly, but she didn't feel like joking. Nathaniel was wandering up ahead of them, kicking at stones. Darkness was falling, and her heart was beating hard in her chest and for a moment, she felt like she and Joh- John where alone. He was staring at her with an expression she couldn't identify. She felt heat spreading through her stomach-she was nervous for no reason.

'Take a picture. It'll last longer,' she said and gave him a push. The moment passed. Joh- John laughed and charged; she Marcel him.

'Children, children. Stop fighting!' Nathaniel called back to them. They found a place to set off the sparklers. Nathaniel's fizzled and sputtered out before they could get properly lit. Maggie tried next. When she stepped forward with the lighter, there was a series of cracking sounds, and Maggie jumped back, thinking confusedly she'd messed up. But then she realized that she hadn't even gotten the sparkler lit.

'Look, look!' Nathaniel was bouncing up and down excitedly. Maggie turned just as a series of fireworks-green, red, a shower of golden sparks-exploded in the east, just above the tree line. Nathaniel was laughing like a maniac.

'What the hell?' Maggie felt dizzy with happiness and confusion. It wasn't even all-the-way dark yet, and there were never any fireworks in Carp. The nearest fireworks wherein Poughkeepsie, fifty minutes away, at Wary as Park- where Lily would be with their mom and Bo right now.

Only Joh- John didn't seem excited. His arms were a-crossed, and he was shaking his head as they kept going: more gold, and now blue and red again, blooming and fading, sucked back into the sky, leaving tentacle-traces of smoke. And just as Nathaniel started running, half limping but still laughing, calling,

'Come on, come on!' like they could race straight through to the source, it hit Maggie too: this wasn't a celebration.

It was a sign. In the distance, sirens began to wail. The show-stopped abruptly: ghostly fingers of smoke crept silently across the sky. At last, Nathaniel stopped running. Whipping around to face Maggie and Joh- John, she said, 'What?

What is it?' Maggie shivered, even though it wasn't cold. The air smelled like smoke, and the wail of the fire trucks cut through her head, sharp and hot.

'It's the next challenge,' she said.

'It's Fright.'

It was just after eleven p.m. by the time Joh- John dropped Maggie off in front of the trailer. Now she wished she hadn't had the beer-she felt exhausted. Joh- John had been quiet since Natalie got out of the car.

Now he turned to her and said, abruptly, 'I still think you should quit; you know.'

Maggie pretended not to know what he was talking about. 'Quit what?'

'Don't play dumb.' Joh- John rubbed his forehead. The light shining into the car from the porch lit up his profile: the straight slope of his nose, the set of his jaw. Maggie realized that he wasn't a boy anymore. Somehow, when she wasn't looking, he had become a guy -tall and strong, with a stubborn chin and a girlfriend and opinions she didn't share. She felt an ache in her stomach, a sense of loss and a sense of wanting.

'The game's just going to get more dangerous, Maggie. I don't want you to get hurt. I'd never forgiven myself if -' He trailed off, shaking his head. Maggie thought of that awful text message she'd received. Quit now, before you get hurt. Anger sparked in her chest. Why was the hell everyone trying to make sure she didn't compete?

'I thought you were rooting for me.'

'I am.' Joh- John turned to face her. They were very close together in the dark. 'Just not like that.' For a second, they continued staring at each other. His eyes were dark moons. His lips were a few inches away from hers. Maggie realized that she was still thinking about kissing him.

'Good night, Joh- John,' she said and got out of the car.

Inside, the TV was on. Krista and Bo were lying on the couch, watching an old black-and-white movie. Bo was shirtless, and Krista was smoking. The coffee table was packed with empty beer bottles-Maggie counted ten of them.

'Hey' a Maggie Lynn.' Krista stubbed out her cigarette. She missed the ashtray on her first try. She was glassy-eyed.

Maggie could barely look at her. She better not has been messed up and driving with Lily in the car; Maggie would kill her. 'Where you been?' 'Nowhere,' Maggie said. She knew her mom didn't care. 'Where's Lily?'

'Sleeping.' Krista stuck a hand down her shirt, scratching. She kept her eyes on the TV. 'Big day. We saw fireworks.'

'Piss-packed with people,' Bo put in. 'There was a line for the goddamn porta-potties.'

'I'm going to sleep,' Maggie said.

She didn't bother trying to be nice.

Krista was too drunk to lecture her.

'Keep the TV down, okay?'

She had trouble getting the door to the bedroom open; she realized that Lily had balled up one of her sweatshirts and shoved it in the crack between the door and the warped floorboards, to help keep out the noise and the smoke. Maggie had taught her that trick. It was hot in the room, even though the window was open, and a small portable fan was whirring rhythmically on the dresser.

She didn't turn on the light. There was a little moonlight coming through the window, and she could have navigated the room by touch, anyway. She undressed, piling her clothes on the floor, and climbed into bed, pushing her blankets to the footboard, using only the sheet as a cover. She had assumed Lily was sleeping, but suddenly she heard rustling from the other twin bed.

'Maggie?' She whispered. 'Uh-huh?'

'Can you tell me a story?'

'What kind of story?'

'A happy kind.' It had been a long time since Lily had asked for a story. Now Maggie told a version of one of her favorites, 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses,' except instead of princesses, she made the girls normal sisters, who lived in a falling-down castle with a queen and king too vain and stupid to look after them. But then they found a trapdoor that led down to a secret world, where they were princesses, and where everyone fawned over them.

By the time she was done, Lily was breathing slowly, deeply. Maggie rolled over and closed her eyes.

Part: 5

'Maggie?'

Lily's voice was thick with sleep. Maggie opened her eyes again, surprised.

'You should be sleeping, Billy.'

'Are you going to die?'

The question was so unexpected, Maggie didn't answer for a few seconds. 'Of course not, Lily,' she said sharply.

Lily's face was half-mashed into her pillow. 'Kyla Anderson says you're going to die. Because of Terror.'

Maggie felt a current of fear go through her fear, and something else, something deeper and more painful.

'How did you hear about Terror?' She asked. Lily mumbled something. Maggie prompted her again.

'Who told you about Fear, Lily?' she asked.

But Lily was asleep.

The Graybill house was haunted.

Everyone in Carp knew it, had been saying it for half a century, since the last of the Graybill's had hanged himself from its rafters, just like his father and grandfather before him.

The Graybill curse. No one had lived in the house officially for more than forty years, although infrequently some squatters and runaways risked it.

No one would live there. At night, lights flickered on and off in the windows.

Vocal sounds whispered in the mouse-infested walls, and ghosts of children ran down dust-covered hallways. Sometimes, locals claimed they heard a woman earsplitting screaming in the attic.

Those where the rumors, at least. And now, the fireworks: some of the old-timers, the ones who claimed they could still recollect the day the last Graybill was found swinging by the neck, swore that the fireworks weren't set off by kids at all.

They might not even be fireworks. Who knew what sort of forces leached out of that tumbledown house, what kind of bad juju, sizzling the night into fire and flame?

The police officers thought it was just the usual Fourth of July prank. But Maggie, Nathaniel, and Marcel knew better. So, did Kim Hollister and Ray Hanrahan and all the other players. Two days after the Fourth of July, their suspicions were confirmed.

Maggie had just gotten out of the shower when she booted on the ancient laptop and checked her email. Her throat went dry; her mouth turned itchy.
Judmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

Subject: Enjoy fireworks? The show will be even better this Friday at ten p.m.

See how long you can stand it.

Remember no calling for help.

FRIDAY, JULY 8

Maggie,

'IT'S TOO EASY,' MAGGIE SAID AGAIN. SHE SQUEEZED the steering wheel. She didn't like to drive.

But Joh- John had been insistent. He wasn't going to make it to the challenge today, wasn't going to sit around and wait for hours while the players tried to outlast one another in a haunted house.

And for once, she'd been able to use the car. Her mom and Bo were getting smashed with some friends in Lot 62, an abandoned trailer mostly used for partying. They'd crawl home around four, or not until sunrise.

'They'll probably try and screw with us,' Nathaniel said. 'They've probably rigged the whole house with sound effects and lights.'

'It's still too easy.' Maggie shook her head. 'This is Fright, not Halloween.' Her palms were sweating.

'Reminisces about the time we were kids, and Joh- John dared you to stand on the porch for three minutes?'

'Only because you flaked,' Nathaniel said.

'You flaked too,' Maggie reminded her, sorry now that she had brought it up. 'You didn't make it for thirty seconds.' 'Joh- John did, though,' Nathaniel said, turning her face to the window. 'He went inside, remember? He stayed inside for five whole minutes.'

'I forgot about that,' Maggie said.

'When was that?' Marcel spoke up unexpectedly.

'Years ago. We must have been ten, eleven. Right, Maggie?'

'Younger, Nine,' Maggie wished that Joh- John had come.

This was their first challenge without him, and her chest ached. Being with Joh- John made her feel safe.

They turned the bend and the house became visible: the sharp peak of its roof silhouetted against the clouds knotted on the horizon, like something out of a horror movie. It rose crookedly out of the ground, and Maggie imagined even from a distance she could hear the wind howling through the holes in the roof, the mice nibbling at the rotten wood floors.

The only thing missing was a flock of bats. There were a dozen cars parked on the road. Most people felt the same way Joh- John did, and most of the spectators had stayed home. Not all of them, though.

Maggie spotted Vivian Trevin, sitting on the hood of her car, smoking a cigarette. A group of juniors huddled not far off, passing around a shared bottle of wine, looking solemn, as if they were attending a wake. For a second, before Maggie turned the engine off, the rain misting through the headlights reminded her of thin slivers of glass.

Marcel climbed out of the car and opened the door for Nathaniel. Maggie reached for the bag she'd packed for the night: food, water, a big blanket. She would be here for as long as it took to win. Nathaniel and Marcel, too.

Suddenly there was a muffled shout from outside. Maggie looked up in time to see a dark shape rocket past the car. Nathaniel screamed. And people were suddenly rushing into the road. Maggie threw herself out of the car and ran around to the passenger side, in time to see Ray

Hanrahan catch Marcel in the stomach with a shoulder. Marcel stumbled backward, bumping against the remains of a fence. A shower of wood collapsed behind him.

'I know what you're doing, you little freak,' he spat out. 'You think you can-'

He was cut off and grunted sharply.

Marcel had stepped forward and grabbed Ray by the throat. There was a collective gasp. Nathaniel cried out. Marcel leaned in and spoke quietly into Ray's ear.

Maggie couldn't hear what he said. Just as quickly, he stepped backward, releasing Ray, who stood, coughing, and gagging in the rain.

Marcel's face was calm. Nathaniel moved as though to hug him and then, at the last second, obviously thought better of it.

'Stay the hell away from me, Mason,' Ray said when he had regained his breath. 'I'm warning you. You better watch it.' 'Come on, guys,' Sarah Wilson, another contestant, spoke up. 'It's pouring. Can we get started?' Ray was still glowering at Marcel.

But he said nothing.

'All right.' That was -Digging.

Maggie hadn't seen him in the crowd.

I love the old Chevy looking at the photos 3 on the tree, yet with newer parts... I find that cool.

His voice was suctioned away by the darkness and the rain. 'Rules are simple. The longer you make it in the house, the higher your score.' Maggie shivered. The night of the jump, when -Digging was crowing into the megaphone, seemed like it had happened years ago: the radio, the beer, the celebration.

She suddenly couldn't remember how she had ended up the here-in front of the Graybill house, all its angles and planes wrong. A deformed place. Listing to one side as though it was in danger of collapse.

'No calling for help,' -Digging said, and his voice cracked a little. Maggie wondered whether he knew something they didn't. 'That's it. Challenge is on.'

Everyone broke apart. Beams of light-flashlights and the occasional blue glow of a cell phone-swept across the road illuminated the crooked fence, the tall grass, the remains of a front path, now choked with weeds. Marcel was pulling his backpack out of the trunk. Nathaniel was standing next to him. Maggie pushed her way over to them.

'What was that about?' Maggie asked. Marcel slammed the trunk closed.

'No idea,' he said. In the dark, it was hard to decipher his expression. Maggie wondered whether he knew more than he was telling.

'The guy's a psychopath.' Maggie shivered again as moisture seeped under the collar of her jacket, dampening her sweatshirt.

She knew, like everyone did, that Marcel's older sister had gone up against Ray's older brother two years ago in Joust and been paralyzed. Maggie hadn't been watching -she'd been babysitting Lily that night with Joh- John.

But Nat had said the car folded up like an accordion. Maggie wondered if Marcel blamed the Hanrahan's. 'Let's stay away from Ray inside, okay?' She said.

'Let's stay away from all of them.' She didn't put it past Ray Hanrahan to sabotage them- jump out at them, grab them, or take a swing. Marcel turned to her and smiled. His teeth were very white, even in the dark.

'Deal.' They trudged across the road and into the yard with the others. Maggie's chest was heavy with something that wasn't fear, exactly-more like dread. It was too easy.

The rain made the mud suck at her shoes. It would be a sh*t night. She wished she'd thought to try and sneak a beer. She didn't even like the taste, but that would take the edge off, make the night go quicker.

She wondered whether the judges were here-maybe sitting in the front seat of one of the darkened cars, legs on the dash; or even standing in the road, jogging up and down, pretending to be normal spectators.

That was the part of Fear she hated most of all: the fact that they were always being watched. They were on the front porch too quickly. Even Seller had just disappeared inside, and the door swung shut with a bang.

Nathaniel jumped…

'You okay?'

Marcel asked her, in a deep voice.

'Fine,' Nat spoke too loudly. Once again, Maggie wished Joh- John had come along. She wished he were next to her, making stupid jokes, teasing her about being afraid.

'Here goes nothing.' Nathaniel took a step forward and heaved open the door, which was hanging at a weird angle. She hesitated… 'It smells,' she said. 'As long as it doesn't shoot or bark, I'm fine with it,' Marcel said.

He didn't seem afraid at all. He moved forward, in front of Nat, and stepped into the house. Nathaniel followed. Maggie was the last to enter.

Immediately, Maggie smelled it too: mouse sh*t and mildew, rot, like the smell of a mouth closed for years. Jagged beams of light zigzagged across the halls and through dark rooms, as the other players slowly spread out, trying to stake out their corners, their hiding spots.

Floorboards creaked, and doors moaned open and closed; voices whispered in the dark. The blackness was as thick and heavy as soup. Maggie felt her stomach pooling, open with fear.

She fumbled in her pocket for her phone. Nathaniel had the same idea. Nathaniel's face was suddenly visible, lit up from underneath, her eyes deep hollows, her skin blue-tinged. Maggie used the feeble light from her phone to cast a small circle on the faded wallpaper, the termite-eaten molding.

Suddenly a bright light flashed on.

'Flashlight app,' Marcel said, as Maggie brought a hand to her eyes.

'Sorry. I didn't know it would be so strong.'

He directed the beam upward, to the ceiling, where the remains of a chandelier were swinging, creaking, in a faint wind. That was where three Graybill men had hanged themselves if the rumors were true.

'Come on,' Maggie said, trying to keep her voice steady. The judges might be anywhere. 'Let's move away from the door.' They advanced farther into the house. Marcel took the lead. Footsteps rang out above them, on the second floor.

Marcel's flashlight cut a small, sharp blade through the blackness, and Maggie was reminded of a documentary about the wreck of the Titanic she'd watched once with Lily-the way the recovery submarines had looked, floating through all that dark space, crawling over the ruined wood and the old china plates, which were covered with mossy growth and underwater things. That was how she felt.

As if they were at the bottom of the ocean. The pressure on her chest was squeezing, squeezing. She could hear Nathaniel breathing hard. From upstairs came muffled sounds of shouting: a fight.

'Kitchen,' Marcel announced. He swept the beam of light across rust pitted stove, a tile floor half ripped up.

All the images were disjointed, bleached white, like in a bad horror film. Maggie pictured insects everywhere, spider webs, horrible things dropping on her from above. Marcel aimed his beam in the corner and Maggie almost screamed: for a second, she saw a face-black, pitted eyes, mouth leering.

'Can you stop pointing that thing at me?'

The girl raised her hand in front of her eyes, squinting, and Maggie's heartbeat slowed. It was just Sarah Wilson, huddled in the corner. As Marcel angled the light down, Maggie saw that Sarah had brought a pillow and a sleeping bag. It would be easier, far easier, if all the players could huddle together in one room, passing Cheetos and a bottle of cheap vodka someone had stolen from a parent's liquor cabinet.

But they were beyond that. They passed out of the kitchen and down a short set of stairs, littered with trash, all of it lit up in starts and jerks: cigarette butts, brittle leaves,

blackened Styrofoam coffee cups. Squatters. Maggie heard footsteps: in the walls, overhead, behind her. She couldn't tell.

'Maggie'-Nathaniel turned around, grabbed Maggie's sweatshirt.

'Sh-h-h-h,' Marcel hushed them sharply. He shut off the flashlight. They stood in darkness so heavy, Maggie could taste it every time she inhaled: things moldering, rotting slowly; slippery, sliding, slithery things. Behind her. The footsteps stopped, hesitated. Floorboards creaked.

Someone was following them.

'Move,' Maggie whispered. She knew she was losing it-that it was probably just another player exploring the house-but she couldn't stop a terrible fantasy that seized her: it was one of the judges, pacing slowly through the dark, ready to grab her.

And not a human, either-a supernatural being with a thousand eyes and long, slick fingers, a jaw that would come unhinged, a mouth big enough to swallow you. The footsteps advanced. One more step, and then another.

'Move,' she said again. Her voice sounded strangled, desperate in the dark.

'In here,' Marcel said. It was so dark, she couldn't even see him, though he must have been standing only a few feet away. He grunted; she heard the groaning of old wood, the whine of rusted hinges. She felt Nathaniel move away from her and she followed blindly, quickly, nearly tripping over an irregularity in the floor, which marked the beginning of a new room.

Marcel swung the door closed behind her, leaning into it until it popped into place. Maggie stood, panting.

The footsteps kept coming. They paused outside the door. Her breath was shallow, as though she'd been underwater. Then the footsteps withdrew.

Marcel turned on the flashlight app again. In its glow, his face looked like a weird modern painting: all angles.

'What was that?' Maggie whispered. She was almost afraid neither Marcel nor Nat had heard.

But Marcel said, 'Nothing. Someone trying to freak us out. That's all.'

He placed his phone on the floor, so the beam of light was directed straight up. Marcel had a sleeping bag stuffed in his backpack; Maggie shook out the blanket she'd brought. Nathaniel sat down next to the cone of light, drawing the blanket around her shoulders.

Suddenly, relief broke in Maggie's chest. They were safe, together, around their makeshift version of a campfire. It would be easy.

Marcel squatted next to Nathaniel. 'Might as well get comfortable, I guess.' Maggie paced the small room. It must have once been a storage area, or a pantry, except that it was a little way from the kitchen.

It was no more than twenty feet square. High up against one wall was the room's single window, but the cloud cover was so thick, barely any light penetrated.

On one wall where warped wooden shelves, which now contained nothing but a layer of dust and yet more trash: empty chip bags, a crushed soda can, an old wrench. She used the light of her cell phone to perform a quick exploration.

'Spiders,' she commented, as her phone lit up a web, perfectly symmetrical, glistening and silver, which extended between two shelves. Marcel rocketed to his feet as though he'd been bitten on the ass.

'Where?'

Maggie and Nathaniel exchanged a look.

Nathaniel cracked a small smile.

'You're afraid of spiders?'

Maggie blurted out. She couldn't help it. Marcel had shown no fear, ever. She would never have expected it.

'Keep your voice down,' he said roughly.

'Don't worry,' Maggie said. She turned off her phone. 'It was just the web, anyway.' She didn't mention the small blurred lumps within it: insects, spun into the threads, waiting to be consumed and digested.

Marcel nodded and looked embarrassed. He turned away, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

'Now what?' Nathaniel said.

'We wait,' Marcel replied, without turning around. Nathaniel reached over and popped open a bag of chips. A second later, she was crunching loudly. Maggie looked at her.

'What?' Nathaniel said with her mouth full. 'We're going to be here all night. Except it came out, 'we're going to be crazy and sh*t all night.'

She was right… Maggie went and sat down next to her. The floor was uneven.

'So, wave do you think it's right too?' Nathaniel said, which this time Maggie had no trouble translating.

'What do I think about what?' She hugged her knees to her chest. She wished the cone of light where bigger, more powerful. Everything outside its limited beam was rough shadow, shape, and darkness. Even Marcel, standing with his face turned away from the light.

In the dark, he could have been anyone.

'I don't know. Everything. The judges. Who plans all this?'

Maggie reached out and took two chips. She fed them into her mouth, one from each hand. It was an unstated rule that no one spoke about the identity of the judges. 'I want to know how it got started,' she said.

'And why we've all been crazy enough to play.' It was meant to be a joke, but her voice came out shrill. Marcel shifted and came to squat next to Natalie again.

'What about you, Marcel?' Maggie said. 'Why did you agree to play?' Marcel looked up. His face was a mask of hollows, and Maggie was suddenly reminded of one summer when

she'd gone camping with some other Girl Scouts, the way the counselors had gathered them around the fire to tell ghost stories.

They had used flashlights to turn their faces gruesome, and all the campers were afraid. For a second, she thought he smiled.

'Revenge.'

Nathaniel started to laugh. 'Revenge?' She repeated.

Maggie realized she hadn't misheard. 'Nat,' she said sharply. Nathaniel must have remembered, then, about

Marcel's sister: her smile faded quickly.

Marcel's eyes clicked to Maggie's. She quickly looked away.

So-o, he did blame Luke Hanrahan for what had happened. She felt suddenly cold. The word revenge was so awful: straight and sharp, like a knife. As if he could tell what she was thinking, Marcel smiled. 'I just want to cream Ray, that's all,' he said lightly, and reached out to grab the bag of chips.

Maggie felt instantly better. They tried to play cards for a while, but it was too dark, even for a slow-moving game; they had to keep passing the flashlight around. Nathaniel wanted to learn how to do a magic trick, but Marcel resisted it.

Occasionally- they heard voices from the hall or footsteps, and Maggie would tense up, certain that this was the beginning of the real challenge-spooky ghost holograms or people in masks who would jump out at them. But nothing happened. No one came barging in the door to say boo.

After a while, Maggie got tired. She balled up the duffel bag she'd brought under her head. She listened to the low rhythm of Marcel and Nathaniel's conversation they were talking about whether a shark or a bear would win in a fight, and Marcel was arguing that they had to specify a medium.

…???…

Then they were talking about dogs, and Maggie saw two large eyes (a white Bengal's eyes?) the size of headlights, staring at her from the darkness. She wanted to scream; there was a monster here, in the dark, about to pounce. And she opened her mouth, but instead of a scream coming out, the darkness poured in, and she slept.

Part: 6

Marcel,

Marcel WAS DREAMING OF THE TIME THAT HE AND Dayna had- ridden the carousel together in Chicago. Or Columbus. But in his dream, there were palm trees, and a man selling grilled meats from a brightly colored cart. Dayna was in front of him, and her hair was so long it kept whipping him in the face.

A crowd was gathered: people shouting, leering, calling things he couldn't understand. He knew he was supposed to be happy he was supposed to be having fun, but he wasn't. It was too hot.

Plus, there was Dayna's hair, getting tangled in his mouth, making it hard to swallow. Making it hard to breathe. There was the stench from the meat cart, too. The smell of burning. The thick clouds of smoke.

Smoke…

Marcel woke up suddenly, jerking upright. He'd fallen asleep straight on the floor, with his face pressed against the cold wood. He had no idea what time it was. He could just make out

Maggie's and Nathaniel's entangled forms, the pattern of their breathing. For a second, still half-asleep, he thought they looked like baby dragons. Then he realized why: the room was filling with smoke. It was seeping underneath the crack below the door, snaking its way into the room.

He stood up, then thought better of it, remembering that smoke rises, and dropped to his knees. There was shouting: screams and footsteps sounded from other parts of the house.

Too easy. He remembered what Maggie had said earlier.

Of course...?

Firecrackers exploded here on the Fourth of July; there would be a prize for the players who stayed in the house the longest.

Fire… The house was on fire. He reached over and shook the girls not bothering to distinguish between them, to locate their elbows from their shoulders. 'Wake up. Wake up.'

Natalie sat up, rubbing her eyes, and then immediately began coughing.

'What-?'

'Fire,' he said shortly. 'Stay low.

Smoke rises.' Maggie was stirring now too. He crawled back to the door. No doubt about it: the rats were leaving a project. There was a confusion of voices outside, the sound of slamming doors.

That meant the fire must have already spread far. No one would have wanted to bail right away. He put his hand on the metal door handle. It was warm to the touch, but not scalding.

'Nathaniel? Marcel? What's going on?' Maggie was fully awake now. Her voice was shrill, hysterical. 'Why is it so smoky?'

'Fire!!' It was Natalie who answered. Her voice was, amazingly, calm.

Time to get the hell out. Before the fire spread further. He had a sudden memory of some gym class in DC-or was its Richmond?

-When all the kids had to stop, drop, and roll onto the foot smelling linoleum. Even then, he'd known it was stupid. Like rolling would do anything but turn you into a fireball.

He grabbed the handle and pulled, but nothing happened. Tried again. Nothing. For a second, he thought maybe he was still asleep in one of his nightmares, where he tried and tried to run but couldn't, or swung at some assailant's face and didn't even make a mark. On his third try, the handle popped off in his hand. And for the first time in the whole game, he felt it: horror, building in his chest, crawling into his throat.

'What's happening?' Maggie was practically screaming now. 'Open the door, Marcel.'

'I can't.' His hands and feet felt numb. The Fear was squeezing his lungs, making it hard to breathe. No. That was the smoke. Thicker now. He unfroze. He fumbled his fingers into the hole where the door handle had been, tugging frantically, and felt a sharp bite of metal. He jammed his shoulder against the door, feeling increasingly desperate. 'It's stuck.'

'What do you mean, stuck?' Maggie started to say something else and instead started coughing.

Marcel spun around, dropped into a crouch. 'Hold on.' He brought his sleeve to his mouth. 'Let me think.' He could no longer hear any footsteps and shouting. Had everyone else got out? He could hear, though, the progress of the fire: the muffled snapping and popping of old wood, decades of rot and ruin slurped into flame. Maggie was fumbling with her phone.

'What are you doing?' Nathaniel tried to swat at it.

'The rules said no calling for.'

'The rules?'

Maggie cut her off.

'Are you crazy?' She punched furiously at the keyboard. Her face was wild, contorted, like a wax mask that had started to melt. She let out a sound that was a cross between a scream and a sob. 'It's not working. There's no service.'

Think, think. Through the dread, Marcel carved a clear path in his mind. A goal: he needed a goal. He knew instinctively that it was his job to get the girls out safely, just like it was his job to make sure nothing bad ever happened to Dayna, his Dayna, his only sister, and best friend.

He couldn't fail again. No matter what. The window was too high-he'd never reach it. And it was so narrow… But he could give Natalie a boost… She might be able to fit. Then what? It didn't matter. Maggie might be able to squeeze through too, although he doubted it.

'Nathaniel,' he stood up. The air tasted gritty and thick. It was hot. 'Come on. You have to go through the window.' Nathaniel started. 'I can't leave you.'

'You have to, go… take your phone. Find help.' Marcel steadied himself with one hand on the wall. He was losing it. 'It's the only way.' Marcel barely saw her nod in the dark. When she stood up, he could smell her sweat. For a crazy second, he wished he could hug her, and tell her it would be okay.

But there was no time. An image of Dayna popped into his head, the mangled ruin of her car, her legs shriveling slowly to pale-white stalks, his fault.

Marcel bent down, gripped Nathaniel by the waist, helped her climb onto his shoulders. She drove a foot into his chest by accident, and he nearly lost it and fell. He was weak. It was the goddamn smoke. But he managed to steady himself and straighten up.

'The window!' Nathaniel gasped.

And Maggie, somehow, understood. She fumbled for the wrench she'd spotted earlier and passed it upward.

Nathaniel swung…

There was a tinkling. A rush of air blew into the room, and after just a second a whooshing sound, as the fire- beyond the door, edging closer-sensed that air, felt it, and surged toward it, like an ocean thundering toward the beach. Black smoke poured underneath the door.

'Go!' Marcel shouted.

He felt Nathaniel kick his head, his ear; then she was outside.

He dropped to his knees again. He could barely see. 'You next,' he said to Maggie.

'I'll never fit.' She said it in a whisper, but somehow, he heard. He was relieved. He didn't think he had the strength left to lift her.

His head was spinning. 'Lie down,' he said, in a voice that didn't sound like his own. She did, pressing flat against the ground. He was glad to lie down too. Lifting Nathaniel that small distance had exhausted him. It was as though the smoke was a blanket - as though it was covering him, and telling him to sleep…

He was back on the carousel again. But this time the spectators were screaming. And it had started to rain. He wanted to get off - the ride was whirling faster and faster - lights where spinning overhead- lights, spinning, voices shouting.

Sirens screaming.

Sky.

Air.

Someone-Mom? -saying,

'You're okay, son. You're going to be okay.'

Part: 7

SATURDAY,

JULY 9

Maggie,

WHEN MAGGIE WOKE UP, SHE IMMEDIATELY KNEW SHE was in a hospital, which was disappointing. In movies, people were always groggy and confused and asking where they were and what had happened. But there was no mistaking the smell of disinfectant, the clean white sheets, the beep-beep-beep of medical equipment. It was pleasant-the sheets were clean and crisp; her mom and Bo weren't shouting; the air didn't reek of old alcohol. She'd slept better than she had in a long time, and for several minutes she kept her eyes closed, breathing deeply.

Then Joh- John was speaking, quietly.

'Come on, Maggie. We know you're faking. I can tell your eyelid is twitching.' Maggie opened her eyes.

Joy surged in her chest. Joh- John was sitting in a chair drawn up to the bed, leaning forward, as close as he could get without crawling into the cot with her.

Nathaniel was there too, eyes were swollen from crying, and she rocketed straight at Maggie.

'Maggie.' She started sobbing again. 'Oh my God, Maggie. I was so scared.'

'Hi, Nathaniel.' Maggie had to speak through a mouthful of Nathaniel's hair, which tasted like soap. She must have showered.

'Don't suffocate her, Nathaniel,' Joh- John said. Nathaniel drew back, still sniffling, but she kept a grip on Maggie's hand, as though she where worried Maggie might float away.

Joh- John was smiling, but his face was sheet white and there were dark circles under his eyes. Maggie thought, he had been sitting by her bed all night, worried she might be dying. The idea pleased her.

Maggie didn't bother asking what had happened. It was obvious. Nathaniel had gotten help, somehow, and Maggie must have been carted off to the hospital when she was passed out. So, she asked, 'Is Marcel okay? Where is he?'

'Gone. He got up a few hours ago and walked out. He's okay,' Nathaniel said all in a rush. 'The doctor said you'd be okay too.'

'You won the challenge,' Joh- John said, his face expressionless. Nathaniel shot him a look. Maggie inhaled again. When she did, she felt a sharp pain between her ribs. 'Does my mom know?' she asked. Nathaniel and Joh- John exchanged a glance.

'She was here,' Joh- John said. Maggie felt her chest seize again. She was here meant she'd left.

Of course...?

'Lily, too,' he rushed on. 'She wanted to stay. She was hysterical-' 'It's all right,' Maggie said. Joh- John was still looking at her weirdly like someone had just forced a handful of Sour Patch Kids into his mouth. It occurred to her that she must look like crap, smelled like crap too. She felt her face heat up. Great. Now she'd look like crap warmed over.

'What?' she said, trying to sound annoyed without breathing too hard.

'What is it?'

'Listen, Maggie. Something happened last night, and your' The door swung open, and Mrs. Dalcas came into the room, balancing two cups of coffee and a sandwich filmed in plastic, obviously from the cafeteria.

Mr. Dalcas was right behind her, carrying a duffel bag Maggie recognized as belonging to Nathaniel.

'Maggie!' Ms. Dalcas beamed at her. 'You're awake.'

'I told my parents,' Nathaniel said unnecessarily, under her breath.

'It's all right,' Maggie said again. And secretly, she was pleased that Ms. and Mr. Dalcas had come. She was suddenly worried she might cry. Mr. Dalcas' hair was sticking straight up, and he had a grass stain on one of the knees of his khakis; Mrs. Dalcas was wearing one of her pastel cardigans, and both of them were looking at Maggie as though she had come back from the dead. She had. For the first time, she realized, really realized, how close she had come. She swallowed rapidly, willing back the urge to cry.

'How are you feeling, sweetheart?' Ms. Dalcas set the coffees and sandwich on the counter and sat down on Maggie's bed. She reached out and smoothed back Maggie's hair; Maggie imagined, just for a second, that Ms. Dalcas was her real mother.

'You know.' Maggie tried and failed, to smile.

'I had my dad bring some stuff,' Nathaniel said. Mr. Dalcas hitched the duffel bag a little higher, and it occurred to Maggie that she had lost her bag- left it in the Graybill house. It was ashes by now. 'Magazines. And that fuzzy blanket from my basement.' The way Nathaniel was talking made it seem as if Maggie was going to be staying here.

'I'm really fine.' She sat up a little higher in bed, as though to prove it. 'I can go home.' 'The doctors need to make sure there's no damage inside,' Ms. Dalcas said. 'It might be a little while.'

'Don't worry, Maggie,' Joh- John said quietly. He reached out and took her hand; she was startled by the softness of his touch, by the slow warmth that radiated from his fingertips through her body. 'I'll stay with you.' I love you. She thought the words suddenly; this urge, like the earlier urge to cry, she had to will down.

'Me too,' Nathaniel said loyally.

'Maggie needs to rest,' Ms. Dalcas said. She was still smiling, but the corners of her eyes were creased with worry. 'Do you remember what happened last night, honey?'

Maggie tensed. She wasn't sure how much she should say. She looked to Nathaniel and Joh- John for cues, but both avoided her eyes. 'Most of it,' she said cautiously. Ms. Dalcas was still watching her extra carefully as if she were worried Maggie might suddenly crack apart or begin bleeding from the eyeballs. 'And do you feel up to talking about it, or would you rather wait?'

Maggie's stomach began to twist.

Why wouldn't Joh- John, and Nathaniel look at her? 'What do you mean, talking about it?'

Part: 8

'The police are here,' Joh- John blurted out. 'We tried to tell you.' 'I don't get it,' Maggie said. 'They think that the fire wasn't an accident,' Joh- John said. Maggie felt like he was trying to communicate a message to her with his eyes, and she was too stupid to get it. 'Someone burned the house down on purpose.'

'But it was an accident,' Nathaniel insisted.

'For God's sake, both of you.'

Ms. Dalcas rarely lost her temper; Maggie was surprised to even hear her say 'God.' 'Stop it. You're not doing anybody any good by lying. This is because of that game-Fright, or whatever you call it. Don't try to pretend it isn't. The police know. It's all over.

Honestly, I would have expected better.

Especially from you, Joh- John.' Joh- John opened his mouth, then closed it again. Maggie wondered whether he'd been about to defend himself. But that would mean selling out Maggie and Nathaniel. She felt ashamed. Fear. The word seemed horrible spoken out-loud, here, in this clean white place.

Ms. Dalcas' voice turned gentle again. 'You'll have to tell them the truth, Maggie,' she said. 'Tell them everything you know.'

Maggie was starting to freak. 'But I don't know anything,' she said. She pulled her hand away from Joh- John's; her palm was starting to sweat. 'Why do they need to talk to me? I didn't do anything.'

'Someone is dead, Maggie,' Ms. Dalcas said. 'It's very serious.' For a second, Maggie was sure she'd misheard. 'What?' Ms. Dalcas looked stricken. 'I thought you knew.' She turned to Nathaniel. 'I was sure you would have told her.' Nathaniel said nothing.

Maggie turned to Joh- John. Her head took a very long time to move on her neck. 'Who?' She said.

'Little Bill Kelly,' Joh- John said. He tried to find her hand again, but she pulled away.

Maggie couldn't speak for a moment. The last time she'd seen Little Bill Kelly, he was sitting at a bus stop, feeding pigeons from the cup of his hands. When she'd smiled at him, he waved cheerfully and said, 'Hiya, Christy.' Maggie had no idea who Christy was. She'd barely known Little Kelly-he was older than she was and had been away for years in the army.

'I don't-' Maggie swallowed. Mr. and Ms. Dalcas were listening closely. 'But he wasn't -' 'He was in the basement,' Joh- John said. His voice broke.

'Nobody knew. You couldn't have known.' Maggie closed her eyes. Color bloomed behind her eyelids. Fireworks. Fire… smoke in the darkness. She opened her eyes again.

Mr. Dalcas had gone into the hall. The door was partly open. She heard murmured voices, the squeak of someone's shoes on the tile floor. He poked his head back in the room. He looked almost apologetic.

'The police are here, Maggie,' he said.

'It's time.'

Part: 9

MONDAY, JULY

Marcel,

'CAN I HAVE SOME WATER, PLEASE?'

Marcel wasn't thirsty, but he wanted a second to sit, catch his breath, and look around.

'Sure thing.' The police officer who had greeted Marcel and ushered him into a small, windowless office- OFFICER-SADOWSKI, read his name tag-hadn't stopped smiling like he was a teacher and Marcel was his favorite student.

'You just sit tight. I'll be right back.'

Marcel sat very still while he waited, just in case someone was watching.

He didn't have to turn his head to take in nearly everything: the desk, piled high with manila file folders; the shelves stacked with more papers; a prehistoric telephone, unplugged; photographs of several- fat, smiling babies; a desk fan. It was a good thing, he thought, that Sadowski hadn't brought him into an interrogation room.

Sadowski was back in only a minute, carrying a Styrofoam cup full of water. He was on a mission to seem approachable. 'You relaxed? Happy with the water? You don't want a beverage or anything?'

'I'm fine.' Marcel took a sip of the water and nearly choked.

'It was piss-warm.'

Sadowski either didn't notice or pretended not to. 'Glad you decided to come down and talk to us.

Dan, right?'

'Marcel,' Mason said, who was just their sucking air and taking up space. 'Marcel.' He said again, then Sadowski had taken a seat behind his desk. He made a big show of shuffling around some papers, grinning like an idiot, twirling a pen and leaning back in his chair. All casual. But Marcel noticed that he had Marcel's name written down on a piece of white paper.

'Right. Right. Marcel. Hard to forget. So- what can I do you for, Marcel?'

Marcel wasn't buying the village idiot act, not for a second. Officer Sadowski's eyes were narrow and smart. His jaw was like a right triangle.

He'd be a mean old bastard when he felt like it.

'I'm here to talk about the fire,' Marcel said. 'I figured you'd want to talk to me eventually.' It had been two days since Marcel had woken up in the hospital. Two days of waiting for the knock on the door, for the police officers to show up and start grilling him. The waiting, the tickling feeling of anxiety, was worse than anything.

So earlier that morning he'd woken with a resolution: he wouldn't wait anymore.

'You're the young man who left the hospital on Saturday morning, aren't you?' Right. As though he'd forgotten. 'We just missed talking to you. Why'd you run off in such a hurry?' 'My sister - needs help.' He realized, belatedly, he shouldn't have mentioned his sister. It would only lead to bad places.

But Sadowski seized on it. 'What kind of help?'

'She's in a wheelchair,' Marcel said, with some effort. He hated saying the words out loud. It made them seem more real, and final.

Sadowski nodded sympathetically.

'That's right. She was in a car accident a few years ago, wasn't she?'

D*ick... So, the village idiot thing was a trick. He'd done his homework.

'Yup,' Marcel said. He thought Sadowski would ask him more about it, but he just shook his head and muttered, 'Shame.' Marcel started to relax. He took a sip of water. He was glad he'd come. It made him look confident. He was confident.

Then Sadowski said, abruptly, 'You ever heard of a game called Fear, Marcel?'

Marcel was glad he'd already finished swallowing, so he couldn't choke. He shrugged. 'I don't know. I never had too many friends around here.'

'You have a few friends,' Sadowski said. Marcel didn't know what he was getting at. He consulted his page of notes again. 'Maggie Nill. Natalie Dalcas. Someone must have invited you to that party.' That was the story that had gone around: a party in the Graybill House.

A bunch of kids getting together to smoke weed, drink alcohol, freak one another out. Then: a stray spark. An accident. The blame was spread around that way, couldn't be pinned to anyone specific. Of course, Marcel knew it was all bullsh*t. Someone had lit the place up, deliberately. It was part of the challenge.

'Well, yes. Them. But they're not a friend- friends.' Marcel felt himself blushing. He wasn't sure whether he'd been caught in a lie.

Sadowski made a noise in the back of his throat Marcel didn't know how to interpret. 'Why don't you tell me all about it? In your own words, at your own pace.'

Marcel told him, speaking slowly, so he wouldn't screw it up, but not too slowly, so he wouldn't seem nervous.

He told Sadowski he'd been invited by Maggie; there'd been rumors of a keg party, but when he got there, he found out it was pretty lame, and there was hardly any booze at all. He hadn't been drinking.

(He congratulated himself on thinking of this-he wouldn't get in trouble for anything, period.) Sadowski interrupted him only once. 'So why the closed room?'

Marcel was startled. 'What?' Sadowski only pretended to glance down at the report. 'The fire chiefs had to break down the door to get to you and the girl-Maggie. Why'd you go off with her if the party was raging somewhere else?'

Marcel kept his hands on his thighs.

He didn't even blink. 'I told you, the party was lame. Besides, I was hoping -' He trailed off suggestively, raising his eyebrows.

Sadowski got it. 'Ah. I see. Go on.'

There wasn't much else to tell; Marcel told him he must have fallen asleep next to Maggie. The next thing he knew, they heard people running and smelled smoke. He didn't mention Nathaniel.

No need to explain how she'd known to direct the firefighters to the back of the house unless he was asked. For a while, after Marcel finished talking, they sat in silence. Sadowski appeared to be doodling, but Marcel knew this, too, was an act. He'd heard everything. Finally-Officer Sadowski sighed, set down his pen, and rubbed his eyes.

'It's tough sh*t, Marcel. Tough sh*t.' Marcel said nothing.

Sadowski went on. 'Bill Kelly was -is-a friend. He was on the force. Little Kelly went to Iraq. Do you know what I'm saying?'

'Not really,' Marcel said. Sadowski stared at him. 'I'm saying we're going to figure out exactly what happened that night. And if we find out the fire was started on purpose.'

He shook his head. 'That's a homicide, Marcel.'

Marcel's throat was dry. But he forced himself not to look away. 'It was an accident,' he said. 'Wrong place, wrong time.' Sadowski smiled. But there was no humor in it. 'I hope so.' Marcel decided to walk home. He was out of cigarettes and in a bad mood.

Now he wasn't so sure that going to the police officers had been a clever idea. The way Sadowski looked at him made him feel like the police officers thought he'd started the damn fire. It was the judges had to be, whomever they were.

Anyone of the players could squeal about the game, and that would be the end of that. If Fear ended - Marcel had no plans beyond winning Fear-beating Ray in the final round of Joust and making sure it was a hard, bloody win. He hadn't thought of his life beyond that moment at all.

He'd be arrested. He'd go out in ablaze. He didn't care either way. Dayna, his Dayna, had been destroyed, ruined forever, and someone had to pay.

But for the first time, he was seized with the fear that the game would end, and he would never get his chance. And then he would just have to live with the new Dayna on her

plant-stalk legs, live with the knowledge that he'd been unable to save her. Live with knowing Ray and Luke where fine, going through the world, breathing, and grinning and sh*tting and crapping on other people's lives too.

And that was impossible.

Unimaginable.

The sun was bright and high. Everything was still, gripped in the hard light. There was a bad taste in Marcel's mouth; he hadn't eaten yet today. He checked his phone, hoping Nathaniel might have called: nothing. They'd spoken the day before, a halting conversation, full of pauses. When Nathaniel said her dad needed her downstairs and she had to get off the phone, he was sure she'd been lying.

Marcel circumnavigated Dot's Diner, checking instinctively to see whether he could spot his mom behind the smudgy glass windows. But the sun was too bright and turned everyone into shadow.

He heard a burst of laughter from inside the house. He paused with his hand on the door. If his mom was home, he wasn't sure he could deal. She'd been practically hysterical when he came home with a hospital bracelet, and since then she'd been giving him the fish-eye and grilling him every .5 seconds about how he was feeling like she couldn't trust him even to pee without risking death. Plus, the news about Little Kelly was all over Dot's Diner, and when she wasn't demanding whether Marcel thought he had a fever, she was gossiping about the tragedy.

But then the laughter sounded again, and he realized it wasn't his mom laughing-it was Dayna. She was sitting on the couch, a blanket draped over her legs. Ricky was sitting in a folding chair across from her; the chessboard was positioned on the coffee table. When Marcel entered, there were only a few inches between them.

'No, no,' she was saying, between fits of giggling. 'The knight moves diagonally.'

'Diag-on-ally,' Ricky repeated, in his heavily accented English, and knocked over one of Dayna's pawns.

'It's not your turn!' She sched her pawn back and let out another burst of laughter. Marcel cleared his throat. Dayna looked up.

'Marcel!' she cried. Both she and

Ricky jerked backward several inches.

'Hey.' He didn't know why they both looked so guilty. He didn't know why he felt so awkward, either-like he'd interrupted them in the middle of something far more intense than a game of chess.

'I was just teaching Ricky how to play,' Dayna blurted. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright. She looked better, prettier than she had in a while. Marcel thought she might even be wearing makeup.

He suddenly felt angry. He was out busting his ass for Dayna, almost dying, and she was at home playing chess with Ricky on the old marble board his mom had bought on- Marcel's eleventh birthday, and that- Marcel had schlepped everywhere they'd moved since then. Like she didn't even care. Like he wasn't playing Fear just for her.

'Want to play, Marcel?' She asked.

But he could tell she didn't mean it. For the first time- Marcel looked, really looked, at Ricky. Could he be serious about marrying Dayna? He was twenty-one, twenty-two, tops. Dayna would never do it. The guy barely spoke any English, for Christ's sake. And she would have told- Marcel if she liked him. She'd always told- Marcel everything.

'I just came in to get a drink,'

Marcel said. 'I'm going out again.' In the kitchen, he filled a glass with water and kept the sink running while he drank, to drown out the sound of muffled conversation from the next room. What the hell were they talking about? What did they have in common? When he shut off the sink, the voices fell abruptly into silence again.

Jesus...

Marcel felt like he was trespassing in his own house. He left without saying goodbye. As soon as he shut the door, he heard laughter again. He checked his phone. He had a response from Maggie, finally. He'd texted her earlier: Heard anything? Her text reads simply: Game over.

Marcel felt a surge of nausea riding up from his stomach to his throat. And he knew, then, what he had to do.

Marcel had been to the Hanrahan's' house only once before, two years earlier, when Dayna was still in the hospital- when, briefly, it had seemed like she might not wake up. Marcel hadn't budged from the chair next to her bed except to pee and smoke cigarettes in the parking lot and get coffee from the cafeteria.

Finally, Marcel's mom had convinced him to go home and get some rest. He had gone home, but not to rest. He had stopped in only long enough to remove the butcher's knife from the kitchen and the baseball bat from the closet, along with a pair of old ski gloves that had never, as far as he knew, been used by anyone in his family.

It took him a while to find Ray and-Luke's house on his bike, in the dark, half-delirious from the heat and no sleep and the rage that was strangling him, coiled like a snake around his gut and throat. But he did, finally: a two-story structure, all dark, that might have been nice one hundred years ago. Now it looked like a person whose soul had been sucked out through his asshole: collapsed and desperate, wild, and wide-eyed, sagging in the middle. Marcel felt a flash of pity.

He thought of the tiny apartment behind Dot's, how his mom put daffodils in old pickle jars on the windowsills and scrubbed the walls with bleach every Sunday. Then he remembered what he had come to do. He left his bike on the side of the road, slipped on his gloves, removed the baseball bat and knife from his duffel bag.

He stood there, willing his feet to move. A swift kick to the door, the sound of screaming. The knife flashing in the dark, the whistle of the bat cutting through the air. He was after Luke and Luke alone...

It would be easy…

Quick…

But he hadn't managed it. He'd stood there with his legs numb, heavy, useless, for what felt like hours, until he began to fear that he'd never move again- he'd be frozen in this position, in the darkness, forever.

At some point, the porch light had clicked on, and Marcel had seen a heavy woman, with a face like a pulpy fruit, wearing a tent-like a nightgown and no shoes, maneuver her bulk out onto the porch and light up a cigarette. Luke's mother. All at once, Marcel could move again. He had stumbled toward his bike.

It wasn't until he was four blocks away that he realized he was still holding the knife and he had dropped the baseball bat, on the lawn. It had been two whole years, to the day.

Ray's house looked even more run-down in the daylight. The paint was shedding like gray dandruff. On the porch where two tires, a few smelly armchairs, and an old porch swing hanging on rusty chains, which looked like it would collapse under the slightest pressure. There was a doorbell, but it was disconnected. Instead Marcel banged loudly on the frame of the screen door.

In response, the TV inside was abruptly muted. For the first time, it occurred to Marcel that it might not be Ray who answered the door, but that pulpy woman from two years ago-or a father or someone else entirely. But it was Ray. He was wearing only basketball shorts. For a split second, he hesitated, obviously startled, just behind the screen.

Before Marcel could say anything, Ray kicked open the screen door. Marcel had to jump back to avoid it. He lost his footing.

'What the freak are you doing here?' The sudden motion had screwed Marcel up. He was already off-balance when Ray grabbed him by the shirt and then shoved him.

Marcel stumbled down the porch stairs and landed in the dirt on his elbows. He bit down on his tongue. And Ray was above him, in a rage, ready to pounce.

'You must be out of your mind,' he spat out. Marcel rolled away from him and scrambled to his feet. 'I'm not here to fight.'

Ray let out a bark of laughter. 'You don't have a choice.' He took a step forward, swinging; but Marcel had regained his balance and sidestepped him.

'Look.' Marcel held up a hand.

'Just listen to me, okay? I came to talk.' 'Why the hell would I want to talk to you?' Ray said. His hands were still balled into fists, but he didn't try and swing again.

'We both want the same thing,' Marcel said.

Part: 10

For a second, Ray said nothing. His hands uncurled. 'What's that?' 'Fear.' Marcel wet his lips. His throat was dry. 'Both of us need them.' There was an electric tension in the air, hot and dangerous. Ray took another quick step forward.

'Luke told me about your little threats,' Ray said. 'What kind of game do you think you're playing?' Ray was so close; Marcel could smell cornflakes and sour milk on his breath. But he didn't step back.

'There's only one game that matters,' he said. 'You know it. Luke knew it too. That's why he did what he did, isn't it?' For the first time, Ray looked afraid. 'It was an accident,' he said.

'He never meant-'

'Don't...!' Ray shook his head. 'I didn't know,' he said. Marcel knew he was lying.

'Are you going to help me, or not?' Marcel asked. Ray laughed again: an explosive, humorless sound. 'Why should I help you?' he asked. 'You want me dead.' Marcel smiled. 'Not like this,' he said. And he meant it, 100 percent. 'Not yet.'

Sometime around midnight, when Carp was quiet, dazzling in a light sheen of rain, Even Seller woke in the dark to rough hands grabbing him. Before he could scream, he was gagging on the taste of cotton in his mouth. A sock, and then he was lifted, carried out of bed and into the night.

His first, confused, thought was that the police officers had come to take him away. If he'd been thinking clearly, he would have realized that his assailants were wearing ski masks.

He would have noticed that the trunk they forced him into belonged to a navy-blue Taurus, like the kind his brother drove. That it was his brother's car, parked in its usual spot.

But he wasn't thinking clearly. He was Feared. Kicking out, watching the sky narrow to a sliver as the trunk closed over him, Even felt something wet and realized that, for the first time since he was five years old, he'd peed himself.

At last, he realized too that despite everything, the game was ongoing. And that he had just lost.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 13

Maggie,

THE WAR MEETING TOOK PLACE AT JOH- JOHN'S HOUSE. IT had to. Maggie's trailer was too small, Marcel wouldn't have invited them to his place, and Nathaniel's parents were home all day doing a garage clean. Maggie had to bring Lily.

Lily had nothing to do now that school was over, and most days took the bus by herself a half-hour to Hudson, where the library was. But the library was understaffed and closed for a week while the director was on vacation. For once, Lily was in a good mood, even though she was dirty and sweaty and stank like horses; in the morning, she'd helped Maggie at Anne's.

She sang a song about white Bengal's to Joh- John's house and made waves with her arm out the window. Joh- John lived in the woods. His father had once owned an antique store and pawnshop, and Joh- John liked to say his dad 'collected' things.

Maggie always threatened to sign them up for that TV show about hoarders. The house and the yard around it was littered with stuff, from junky to bizarre: at least two to three old cars at all times, in various states of repair; crates of spray paint; rusted slides; stacks of timber; old furniture, half-embedded in the soil. Lily ran off, yelling, weaving through the old piles.

Maggie found Nathaniel and Joh- John behind the house, sitting on an old merry-go-round, which no longer turned.

Joh- John looked as though he hadn't slept in days. He pulled Maggie into a hug as soon as he saw her, which was weird. She tensed up; she smelled like stables.

'What's up with you?' Maggie said when he pulled away. The circles under his eyes were as dark as a bruise.

'Just glad to see you,' he said.

'You look like crap.' She reached out to smooth down his hair, an old habit. But he caught her wrist. He was staring at her intensely like he wanted to memorize her face.

'Maggie-,' he started to say.

'Maggie!' Nathaniel called out at the same time. She, at least, seemed unaffected by Bill Kelly's death. 'I mean, it's not like we knew him,' she'd said days earlier when Maggie had told her how guilty she felt.

Maggie didn't wait for Nathaniel to speak, although Nathaniel had called the meeting. 'I'm out,' she said. 'I'm not playing anymore.'

'We have to wait for Marcel,' Nathaniel said.

'I don't have to wait for anyone,'

Maggie said. She was annoyed by Nathaniel's calm. She was blinking happily, sleepily, in the sun-as though nothing had happened. 'I'm not playing anymore.

It's as simple as that.'

'It's sick,' Joh- John said fiercely.

'Sick. Anyone in their right minds-' 'The judges aren't in their right minds, though, are they?' Nathaniel said, turning to him. 'I mean, they can't be. You heard about Even?'

'That wasn't-' Joh- John abruptly stopped speaking, shaking his head.

'I, for one, don't plan on losing my chance at sixty-seven thousand dollars,' Nathaniel said, still with that infuriating calm. Then she shook her head. 'It isn't right to start without Marcel.'

'Why?' Maggie fired back. 'Why are you so worried about- Marcel? I made the deal with you, remember?' Nathaniel looked away, and then Maggie knew. A bitter taste rushed into her throat. 'You made a deal with him, too,' she said. 'You lied to me.'

'No.' Nathaniel looked at her, eyes wide, pleading. 'No. Maggie. I never planned on cutting him in.'

'What are you talking about?'

Joh- John asked. 'What do you mean,

'cutting him in'?'

'Stay out of it, Joh- John,' Maggie said.

'I'm in it,' he said. He dragged a hand through his hair, and in that instant, Maggie felt they would never get back to normal: to making fun of Joh- John's hair, to loading it with gel and twisting to make it stick straight up. 'You're at my house, remember?'

'This isn't a game anymore,' Maggie said. Everything was spiraling out of control. 'Don't you get it? Someone's dead.'

'Jesus.' Joh- John sat down heavily, rubbing his eyes, as though Maggie saying the words had made them real.

'Why did you play, Maggie?' Nathaniel stood up when Joh- John sat down. Her arms were crossed, and she made little clicking noises with her tongue.

Rhythmic… A pattern. 'If you didn't want the risk if you couldn't handle it, why did you play? Because Matt stupid Hefley dumped you? Because he was sick of getting blue-balled by his girlfriend?' Maggie lost her breath. She was conscious of the air going out of her at once, escaping in a short hiss. Joh- John looked up and spoke sharply: 'Nathaniel.'

Even Natalie looked surprised and immediately guilty. 'I'm sorry,' she said quickly, avoiding Maggie's eyes. 'I didn't mean-'

'What did I miss?' Maggie turned. Marcel had just appeared, emerging from the glittering maze of junk and scrap metal. She wondered what they looked like to him: Nathaniel

flushed and guilty, Joh- John awful white, wild-eyed; and Maggie blinking back tears, still sweaty from the stables. And all of them angry: you could feel it in the air, a physical force among them.

Suddenly Maggie realized that this, too, because of the game. That it was part of it.

Only Marcel seemed unaware of the tension. 'Mind if I smoke?' He asked Joh- John. Joh- John shook his head.

Maggie broke in. 'I'm out. I said I was out, and I meant it. The game should have ended…'

'The game never ends,' Marcel said. Nathaniel turned away from him and for a moment, just a moment, he looked uncertain. Maggie was relieved. Marcel had changed this summer. He wasn't the slope-shouldered weirdo, the outsider, who had sat for three years in silence. It was as though the game was feeding him somehow-like he was growing on it.

'You heard about Even?' He exhaled a straight stream of smoke. 'That was me.'

Nathaniel had turned back to him. 'You?'

'Me, and Ray Hanrahan.'

There was a moment of silence.

Maggie finally managed to speak.

'What?'

'We did it.' Marcel took a final drag and ground out the cigarette butt underneath the heel of his cowboy boot.

'That's against the rules,' Maggie said. 'The judges set the challenges.' Marcel shook his head. 'It's Fear,' he said. 'There are no rules.' 'Why?' Joh- John tugged at his left ear. He was furious and trying not to show it; that was his tell.

'To send a message to the judges. The players, too. The game will go on, one way or another. It has to.'

'You don't have the right,' Joh- John said.

Marcel shrugged. 'What's right?' he said. 'What's wrong?'

'What about the cops? And the fire? What about Bill?' No one said anything. Maggie realized she was shaking.

'I'm done,' she said. She spun around and nearly collided with a rusty-spotted furnace, which, along with an overturned bike, marked the beginning of the narrow path that wound through the landscape of litter and junk to the house, and around to the front yard. Joh- John called out to her, but she ignored him. She found Lily crouching in a bit of yard uncluttered by junk, marking the bare grass with bright-blue spray paint she had unearthed somewhere.

'Lily…' Maggie spoke sharply. Lily dropped the paint and stood up, looking guilty.

'We're going,' Maggie said.

Lily's frown reappeared, as did the small pucker between her eyebrows. Immediately, she seemed to shrink and age.

Maggie thought of the night she had whispered, 'Are you going to die?' and felt a fist of guilt hit her hard in the stomach. She didn't know whether she was doing the right thing. She felt like nothing she did was right.

But what had happened to Bill Kelly was wrong. And pretending it hadn't happened was wrong too. That, she knew.

'What's the matter with you?' Lily said, sticking out her lower lip.

'Nothing.' Maggie seized her wrist. 'Come on.'

'I didn't get to say hi to Joh- John,'

Lily whined…

'Next time,' Maggie said. She practically dragged Lily to the car. She couldn't hear Nathaniel or Joh- John or Marcel anymore; she wondered whether they were talking about her. She couldn't get out of there fast enough. She drove in silence, gripping the wheel as though it was in danger of slipping suddenly from her hands.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 20

Maggie,

THE WEATHER TURNED FOUL, COLD AND WET, AND THE ground turned to sludge. For two days, Maggie heard nothing from Nathaniel. She refused to be the one to call first. She texted back and forth with Joh- John but avoided seeing him, which meant that to go to work she had to bus it to the 7-Eleven and walk three-quarters of a mile in the driving rain, arriving wet and miserable just to stand for more hours in the rain, chucking the chickens soggy feed and hauling equipment into the sheds so it wouldn't rust.

Only the white Bengal's seemed more miserable than she was; she wondered, as they huddled underneath a canopy of maple trees, watching her work, whether they dreamed of other places as much as she did. Africa, burnt grasses, a vast round sun. For the first time, it struck her as selfish that Anne kept them here, in this ceroplastic climate of blistering heat, followed by rain, followed by snow and sleet and ice.

There were rumors that the police had turned up evidence of arson at the Graybill House. For an entire day, Maggie waited in agony, certain that the evidence had to do with her duffel bag, positive that the police would haul her off to jail. What would happen to her, if she were accused of murder? She was eighteen. That meant she would go to real jail, not juvenile.

But when several more days passed, and no one came looking for her, she relaxed again. She hadn't been the one to light the stupid match. When you thought about it, this was all Matt Hefley's fault. He should be arrested.

And Delaney, too. About Fear, there was not a single whisper. Marcel's move had failed to rouse the judges to act. Maggie wondered whether he would try again, then reminded herself it was no longer her business. Still, it rained: this was mid-July in upstate New York, lush and green and wet as a rain forest.

Krista got sick from the humidity and the wet in the air, saying it made her lungs feel clotty. Maggie refrained from pointing out that her lungs might feel better if she stopped

smoking a pack of menthol cigarettes a day. Krista called in sick to work and instead lay on the couch in a daze of cold medicine like something dead and bloated dragged up by the ocean.

At least Maggie could use the car. The library had reopened. She dropped- Lily there…

'Want me to pick you up later?' She asked.

Lily was back to being snotty. 'I'm not a baby,' she said as she slid out of the car, not even bothering with the umbrella Maggie had brought for her.

'I'll buy it.'

'What about-?' Before Maggie could remind her to take the umbrella, Lily had slammed the door and was dashing for the library entrance through a slow ooze of dark puddles. Despite the rain, Maggie was in a decent mood. Lily was twelve. It was normal for her to be a brat. It was even a good thing.

It showed she was growing up okay, the way that everyone else did-that maybe she wouldn't be messed up just because she'd grown up in Fresh Pines with ants parading all over the spoons and Krista fumigating the house. And there were still no police knocking on her door, still not a single, solitary breath about- Fright.

Work was hard: Anne wanted her to muck the stables, and afterward, they had to re-caulk a portion of the basement, where the rain was coming in and the walls were speckled with mold.

Maggie was shocked when Anne stopped her for the day. It was five p.m., but Maggie hadn't noticed time passing, had barely looked up. The rain was worse than ever. It came down in whole sheets, like the quivering blades of a giant guillotine.

While Anne was preparing her a cup of tea, Maggie checked her phone for the first time in hours, and her stomach went to liquid and pooled straight down to her feet. She had missed twelve calls from Lily. Her throat squeezed up so tight she could hardly breathe. She punched Lily's number at once. Her cell phone went straight to voicemail.

'What is the matter, Maggie?' Anne was standing at the oven, her gray hair frizzing around her face, like a strange halo.

Maggie said, 'I have to go.'

Afterward, she did not remember getting into the car or backing it down the driveway; she did not remember the drive to the library, but suddenly she was there. She parked the car but left the door open. Some of the puddles were ankle-deep, but she hardly noticed. She sprinted to the entrance; the library had been closed for an hour.

She called Lily's name, circled the parking lot, searching for her. She scanned the streets as she drove, imagining all the terrible things that might have happened to Lily- like- she had been hurt, sched, killed-and trying to stop herself from losing it, throwing up or breaking down.

Finally, she had no choice but to go home. She'd have to call the police. Maggie fought back another wave of- Terror. This was it, the real thing. The road leading to 'Fresh Pines' was full of ruts, sucking black mud, deep water.

Maggie bumped through it, tires spinning and grinding. The place looked sadder than usual: the rain was beating fists on the trailers, pulling down wind chimes and overflowing outdoor fire pits.

Maggie hadn't even stopped the car when she spotted Lily: huddled underneath a skinny birch tree missing most of its leaves, only fifteen feet away from the trailer steps, arms wrapped around her legs, shivering.

Maggie must have parked because suddenly, she was rocketing out of the car, splashing through the water, taking Lily in her arms.

'Lily!' Maggie could not hug her sister tight enough. Here, here, here.

Safe. 'Are you okay? Are you, all right? What happened?'

'I'm cold.' Lily's voice was muffled. She spoke into Maggie's left shoulder. Maggie's heart seized up; she would have spun the world in reverse for a blanket.

'Come on,' she said, pulling away.

'Let's get you inside.' Lily reared back, like a bucking horse. Her eyes went huge, wild. 'I won't go in there,' she said. 'I don't want to go in there!'

'Lily.' Maggie blinked rain out of her eyes, crouching down so she was eye level with her sister. Lily's lips were ringed with blue. God. How long had she been out here? 'What's going on?'

'Mom told me to go away,' Lily said. Her voice had turned small, broken. 'She-she told me to play outside.'

Something inside Maggie cracked, and at that moment- she was conscious that all her life she had been building up walls and defenses in preparation for something like this; behind them, the pressure had been mounting, mounting. Now the dam broke, and she was flooded, drowning in rage and hate.

'Come on,' she said. She was surprised she still sounded the same when inside of her was a sucking blackness, a furious noise. She took Lily's hand. 'You can sit in the car, okay? I will turn on the heat. You'll be nice and dry.'

She brought Lily to the car. There was an old T-shirt in the back- Krista's, reeking of smoke-but it was dry, at least. She helped Lily wriggle out of her wet shirt.

She untied Lily's shoes for her, and peeled off her wet socks, then made Lily press her feet up to the vents where the heat had begun to blow. The whole time Lily was limp, obedient as if all the life had been washed out of her. Maggie moved mechanically.

'I'll be right back,' she told Lily. She felt detached from the words, as though she wasn't the one speaking. The anger was drumming out the knowledge of everything else.

Boom, boom, and boom.

There was music coming from the trailer, practically shaking the walls.

The lights were on too, although the blinds were down; she could see a figure swaying in silhouette, dancing. She had not noticed before because she had been too worried about Lily. She kept seeing the little figure huddled underneath the pathetic birch- the single tree that Fresh Pines boasted. Mom told me to go away. She told me to play outside.

Boom, boom, boom.

She was at the door. Locked. From inside, she heard a shriek of laughter. Somehow, she fit the key in the lock; that must mean she wasn't shaking. Strange, she thought, and: Maybe I could have won Fear. She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

There were three of them: Krista, Bo, and Maureen, from Lot 99. They froze, and Maggie froze too. She was seized momentarily by the sense that she'd entered a play and had forgotten all her lines-she couldn't breathe, didn't know what to do. The lights where high, bright. They looked like actors, all three of them-actors you see too close.

They were too made up. But the makeup was horrible. It looked as though it was beginning to melt, slowly deforming their faces. Their eyes were bright, glittering: doll eyes. Maggie took in everything at once: the blue haze of smoke. The empty beer bottles, the overflowing cups used as ashtrays, the single bottle of Georgi vodka, half empty.

And the small blue plastic plate on the table, still faintly outlined with the imprint of the Sesame Street characters -Lily's old plate-now covered with thin lines of fine white powder. All of it hit Maggie like a physical blow, a quick sock to the stomach. Her world went black for a second. The plate. Lily's plate.

Then the moment passed. Krista brought a cigarette unsteadily to her lips, missing. 'Maggie Lynn,' she slurred. She patted her shirt, her breasts, as though expecting to find a lighter there. 'What are you doing, baby? Why are you staring at me like I'm a-' Maggie lunged…?

Before her mother finished speaking before, she could think about what she was doing, all of the rages traveled down into her arms and legs and she picked up the blue plate, crisscrossed with powder like it had been scarred by something, and threw.

Maureen screamed, and Bo shouted. Krista barely managed to duck. She tried to right herself and, staggering backward, managed to land on

Maureen's lap, in the armchair. This made Maureen scream even louder. The plate collided with the wall with a thud, and the air was momentarily full of white powder, like indoor snow. It would have been funny if it were not so horrible.

'What the hell?' Bo took two steps toward Maggie and for a moment, she thought he might hit her. But he just stood there, fists clenched, red-faced and enraged. 'What the hell?' Krista fought to her feet. 'Who in the goddamn do you think you are?'

Maggie was glad that they were separated by the coffee table. Otherwise, she wasn't sure what she would do. She wanted to kill Krista. Kill her.

'You're disgusting.' Her voice sounded mangled like something had wrapped around her vocal cords.

'Get out.' The color was rising in

Krista's face. Her voice, too, was rising, and she was shaking as though something awful was going to detonate inside her.

'Get out! Do you hear me? Get out!' She reached for the vodka bottle and threw it. Fortunately, she was slow. Maggie sidestepped it easily. She heard shattering glass and felt the splash of liquid.

Bo got his arms around Krista. He managed to restrain her. She was still shrieking, writhing like an animal, face red and twisted and awful. And suddenly all the anger, the writhing snake in Maggie's stomach, released. She felt absolutely nothing. No pain. No anger. No fear. Nothing but disgust. She felt, weirdly, as if she were floating above the scene, hovering in her own body. She turned and went to her bedroom. She checked her top drawer first, in the plastic jewelry box where she kept her earnings. Everything was gone but forty dollars. Of course. Her mom had stolen it.

This didn't bring a fresh wave of anger, only a new kind of disgust.

Animals. They were animals, and Krista was the worst of them. She pocketed the twenties and moved quickly through the room, stuffing things in Lily's backpack: shoes, pants, shirts, underwear. When the backpack was full, she bundled things up in one of the comforters.

They would need a blanket, anyway. And toothbrushes. She remembered reading in a magazine once that toothbrushes where the number one item travelers forgot to pack. But she wouldn't forget.

She was calm, thinking straight. She had it all together. She slid the backpack onto one of her shoulders it was so small; she couldn't fit it correctly.

Poor Lily…

She wanted to get food from the kitchen, but that would mean walking past her mom and Bo and Maureen. She'd have to skip it. There probably wasn't much she could use, anyway. At the last second, she took the rose off her dresser, the one Joh- John had made her from metal and wire. It would be good luck.

She hefted the blanket in her arms, now heavy with all the clothing and shoes it contained and shuffled sideways out of the bedroom door.

She'd been worried her mom would try and stop her, but she shouldn't have been. Krista was sitting on the couch, crying, with Maureen's arms around her. Her hair was a stringy mess. Maggie heard her say, '…???... did everything - on my own.' Only half the words were audible. She was too messed up to speak clearly.

Bo was gone…

He'd split since the drugs were nothing but carpet crumbs now. He'd left to get more. Maggie pushed out the door. It didn't matter. She'd never see Bo again.

She'd never see her mother or Maureen, or the inside of that trailer again. For one second, she could have sobbed, going down the porch steps. Never again -the idea filled her with relief so strong, it almost turned her knees to water and made her trip.

But she couldn't cry, not yet. She had to be strong for Lily. Lily had fallen asleep in the front seat, her mouth open, her hair feathering slightly in the heat. Finally, her lips weren't blue anymore, and she was no longer shivering.

She didn't open her eyes until they were just bouncing out of the entrance to the Pines and onto Route 51- like its- so-o deadly.

'Maggie?' She said in a small voice.

'What's up, Billy?' Maggie tried to smile and couldn't.

'I don't want to go back there.' Lily turned and rested her forehead against the window. In the glass's reflection, her face was narrow and pale, like a tapered flame. Maggie tightened her fingers on the wheel. 'We're not going back there,' she said. Weirdly, the words made the taste of sick come up. 'We're never going back, okay? I promise.'

'Where will we go?' Lily asked.

Maggie reached over and squeezed Lily's knee. Her jeans had finally dried.

'We'll figure something out. Okay?

We're going to be just fine.' The rain was still coming down in sheets; the car carved waves in the road, sending liquid rivers sloshing toward the gutters. 'You trust me, right?' Maggie asked. Lily nodded without turning her face away from the window.

'We're going to be fine,' Maggie repeated, and returned both hands to the wheel, gripping tightly.

They couldn't, she realized, go to Joh- John's or Nathaniel's. She'd taken her mom's car and had no intention of returning it, which counted as stealing.

And her friends' houses would be the first place her mom would think of looking when she sobered up and realized what had happened. Would she call the police? Would they track Maggie down? Her mom would convince them that Maggie was a delinquent, and they would try to pin the fire on her. But there was no point in worrying about that yet.

No one could know. It came down to that. She and Lily would have to be very, very careful about the next few weeks. As soon as they had enough money to leave Carp, they would. And until then, they had to hide. They'd have to hide the car, too, and use it only at night.

The idea came to her suddenly: Meth Row. The whole road was cluttered with old cars and abandoned houses. No one would notice one sh*ttier car parked there.

Lily had fallen asleep again and was snoring quietly. Meth Row looked even bleaker than usual. The rain had turned the pitted road to sludge, and Maggie had trouble just keeping the wheel from jerking under her hands. It was hard to tell which houses were occupied and which

weren't, but she finally found a spot next to a storage shed and an old Buick, stripped nearly to its metal frame, where she could angle the car, so it was mostly unseen from the road.

She turned off the engine. No point in wasting gas. They'd have to be careful about wasting anything now.

They'd be more comfortable in the backseat, but since Lily was already asleep and Maggie doubted, she would sleep at all it wasn't even six o'clock -she reached into the back and shook out all the things from the comforter. Stuff that had only an hour ago been littering their beds, the floor of their bedroom.

Their home…

Homeless…

It was the first time the word occurred to her, and she pushed it out of her mind. It was an ugly word, a word that smelled. Runaways were better, a little more glam.

She spread the comforter over Lily, careful not to wake her. She found a hoodie in the back and put it on over her shirt, pulled up the hood, cinched the drawstrings tight.

Thankfully it was summer and wouldn't get too cold. It occurred to her that she should turn her cell phone off too, to conserve battery power. But before she did, she typed out a text to Nathaniel and Marcel. She included Joh- John too. Like he'd said, he was in it, one way or another.

Changed my mind, she wrote. I'm back in.

She was playing for keeps now.

For Lily. Forget the promise she'd made to Nathaniel. The money would be hers, and hers alone.

That night, long after Maggie had finally drifted off, head back in the front seat of the Taurus-when Nathaniel was curled up in bed with her computer, searching for funny videos-when even the bars were shutting down and the people who wanted to drink were forced to do it outside, or in the parking lot of 7-Eleven -Ellie Hayes was woken up by two masked figures.

They hauled her to her feet and handcuffed her wrists in front of her body as if she were a convict. Her parents were gone for the weekend-the players knew what they were doing.

Her older brother, Roger, heard the noise and the scuffling and burst into the hall, holding a baseball bat. But Ellie managed to cry out to him.

'It's Terror!' she said. Roger lowered the baseball bat, shook his head, returned to his room. He, too, had played.

Ellie's biggest fear, other than floods, was an enclosure, and she was relieved when instead of being packed in the trunk, she was guided into the backseat of a car she didn't recognize.

They drove for what seemed like forever-long enough that she began to get bored and fell asleep. Then the car stopped, and she saw a vast, empty parking lot, and a fence enclosed by barbed wire. Before the headlights cut, she saw a weathered sign tacked to a sad, saggy-looking building.

WELCOME TO THE DENNY SWIMMING POOL.

HOURS 9 A.M.–DUSK, MEMORIAL DAY TO LABOR DAY.

The padlock on the gates had been left undone. Ellie remembered, as they passed through it, that Ray Hanrahan had done maintenance at the Swimming Pool last summer.

Could he be in on this? Across the wet grass, the squelching mud, to the edge of the pool, which sat glimmering slickly in the moonlight, faintly lit up from below, electric, and improbable. The fear came rushing back all at once. 'You have to be kidding me.'

She was at the edge of the deep end, trying to backpedal. But she couldn't move. They had her tightly. Something metal bit into the palm of her hands, and she curled her fingers instinctively around it, too frightened to think or wonder what it was. 'How do you expect me to-?'

She didn't get to finish before she was pushed headfirst into the water. Flood. A flood of water everywhere: mouth, eyes, nose. She was underwater for a little more than a minute before she was hauled to the surface, but she would afterward swear it was at least five, or seven.

Endless seconds of her heartbeat thudding in her ears, her lungs screaming for air, her legs kicking for purchase. So many seconds of Fear-so complete, so all-consuming, it wasn't until she was once again in the open air, taking deep, grateful breaths, she realized that all along she had been clutching tightly to the small metal key that fitted her handcuffs.

Marcel's gamble, at last, paid off. In the morning, the story of Ellie spread, and by noon the betting slips had once again appeared. This time, they were passed from hand to hand, secretively, cautiously. Even Seller and Ellie Hayes had both failed their challenges. They were out of the game.

Colin Atkinson, too. He'd been the first to flee the Graybill house-rumor was he hadn't stopped running until he was to Massachusetts. Marcel, Ray, Maggie, and Nathaniel were still in. So- where Harold Lee, Kim

Hollister, and Derek Klieg.

Only seven players left.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 27

Marcel,

THERE WAS NO JOY LEFT IN THE GAME-NO LIGHTNESS or humor at all. Terror, as far as Marcel knew, had never been this serious. It had never been played with so much secretiveness, either. This was about more than getting in trouble for continuing a game. The police officers were still trying to pin the fire at the Graybill house, and Little Bill's death, on someone. Even the judges had lost their sense of humor. The next email that arrived, several days after Ellie had been eliminated from the game, was bleakly to-the-point.

Malden Plaza, 1-85. 9:00 p.m.

Wednesday.

Joh- John drove. It felt almost routine: Maggie sat shotgun, Nathaniel and Marcel were in the back. Nathaniel spent the whole drive tapping the window with a knuckle, unconsciously beating out her private rhythm. Marcel could almost believe they were just heading on late-night

adventure to the mall. Except that Maggie looked exhausted and kept yawning, and Joh- John hardly said a word except to ask her, in a deep voice, what was wrong.

'What do you think is wrong?' Maggie replied. Marcel didn't want to eavesdrop, but he couldn't help it. 'Your mom called,' Joh- John said after a pause. 'She said you haven't been home.'

'I'm just staying at Anne's for a few days. I'm fine.'

'She said you took the car.'

'So now you're on her side?'

Joh- John must have gone to Little Bill's funeral. Marcel recognized the folded memorial pamphlet, featuring a winged angel, now hanging on a ribbon from his rearview mirror. Like a charm, or a talisman. Weird that he'd felt the need to hang it. Joh- John didn't strike

Marcel as superstitious. Then again, Marcel didn't get Joh- John. He didn't, for example, understand why he felt he was part of the game, why he felt guilty for Bill Kelly's death.

When they passed the Columbia County water towers, Marcel looked out and remembered the night of the first raid, when he, Nathaniel, and Maggie had hidden from the police officers. He felt a sudden wrench of grief, for the way time, always goes forward, relentlessly. It was like floodwater: it left only clutter in its wake. The sky was choked with masses of dark clouds, but it had stopped raining at last.

Impossible to tell where the sun was coming from.

A thick beam of light, singular and strange when the rest of the sky was still so dark, cut across the road. But the drive to Malden Plaza was long they had to loop around to get to the northbound side- and before they'd arrived, the sun had set.

There were a few dozen cars in the lot, most of them hugging up as close to the McDonald's as possible, plus a couple of eighteen-wheelers, trucks that must have been on a run from Albany to Canada. From the opposite side of the lot, Marcel watched a family emerging

from the big swinging doors, carrying paper bags of fast food and large soda cups. He wondered where they were off to. Somewhere better than here.

The players had parked as far from the building as possible, at the edge of the lot, where the trees where creeping close to the pavement and it was much darker. Seven players left and only two dozen spectators. Marcel was surprised that -Digging had bothered to show up. Standing under the tall, stiff-necked streetlamps, he looked green, as if he was in danger of vomiting.

'Rules are simple.' -Digging practically had to shout over the roar of traffic behind him. I-87, separated from the parking lot by only a flimsy, shin-high divider, was a six-lane mega highway.

'Each of you has to cross. The five who cross the fastest move on. The other two don't.'

'I'll go first.' Ray stepped forward. He had avoided even glancing at- Marcel. There was something like a truce between them, at least temporarily. It was fun. Ray was the guy- Marcel hated most in the world, besides Luke. And yet Ray was the guy who knew more of Marcel's secrets than anyone. 'I want to get this over with.'

'Wait.' -Digging extracted a strip of black fabric from his pocket and shook it out. He truly looked miserable. 'You have to wear this.'

'What is that?' Ray asked, even though it was a blindfold.

Nathaniel and Maggie exchanged a look.

~*~

Marcel knew what they were thinking without having to ask. There was always a twist. The game was never easy. -Digging hesitated. For a second, it looked as though he was going to attempt to tie the blindfold on Ray himself.

Ray scowled at him. 'Give me that,' he said and snatched the blindfold from -Digging. -Digging backed off quickly, obviously relieved. Ray put the fabric over his eyes and knotted it behind his head.

'Happy now?' he said, to no one in particular.

Marcel stepped forward, so he was standing directly in front of Ray. He threw a punch, stopping a few inches short of Ray's nose. Nathaniel gasped and -Digging shouted. But Ray didn't even flinch.

'It's all right,' Marcel said. 'He can't see sh*t.'

'Don't trust me, Mason?' Ray's mouth curled into a smile.

'Not even a little,' Marcel said. -Digging had to help guide Ray to the divider that separated the parking lot from the narrow patch of grass and gravel that ran along the highway. Trucks where thundering past, spitting exhaust and roaring heat. A car blew its horn as Ray fumbled over the divider, and Marcel imagined a sudden swerve, the headlights swollen, freezing Ray in place, the shudder of the impact.

But that would come later.

'Time,' -Digging shouted. He had his phone out. For the first time, he noticed that Joh- John was standing some ways apart, his lips moving as though in silent prayer. His face was incredible: anguished, twisted. And at that moment, Marcel had a suspicion. More like an intuition. But he dismissed the thought quickly. Impossible.

'Ten seconds down,' -Digging announced. Marcel turned his eyes back to the highway. Ray was still hesitating, swaying like a drunk, like he was hoping momentum would unglue his feet. A truck blasted a horn, and he jerked backward. The sound rolled and echoed through the night air, distorted by the distance to an alien cry. The motion was noise: Marcel closed his eyes and heard the fizz of the tires on the road, the thud of bass and music, engines grinding and spitting, the rush of air when a car blew by. He opened his eyes again.

'Twenty seconds!' -Digging's voice had gone shrill. There was a sudden break in the traffic. Four, five seconds-in all six lanes, the road was clear. Ray sensed it and ran. He barreled straight into the divider on the other side of the road and face planted. But it didn't matter.

He'd done it. He whipped off the blindfold and waved it above his head, victorious. The whole thing had taken him twenty-seven seconds. He had to wait for another break in the traffic to cross, but this time he did so at a jog. He was showing off.

~*~

'Who's next?' -Digging said.

'Let's get this over with before-' Another truck blasted by, whipping away the rest of his words.

'I'll go.' Marcel stepped forward. Ray dangled the blindfold from one hand. For a second, their eyes met. They were joined now, more than ever.

'Don't choke,' Ray said in a deep voice. Marcel snatched the blindfold from him.

'Don't worry about me,' he said. The cloth was thick and opaque, like something you'd fashion a tarp out of. Once- Marcel put it over his eyes, he was completely blind, and for a moment he felt a tightness in his chest, the overwhelming sense of disorientation and dizziness, like when you wake up from a nightmare in an unfamiliar place.

He focused on the sounds: trucks, music, the fizz of the tires, and gradually he could map out space in his mind. Funny how just being without sight could leave him feeling so exposed, raw. Anyone could rush at him and he'd never know. He felt two soft hands slip around his wrist.

'Be careful,' Nathaniel whispered. He didn't answer, just fumbled to touch her face, hoping he wouldn't accidentally get her boob instead. Hoping he would, too.

'All right,' he announced in what he hoped was -Digging's direction. 'I'm ready.'

As he had done with Ray, -Digging took his arm and guided him to the low metal divider and instructed him to climb it. Then- Marcel was standing blind on the side of the road, while cars and semis roared past him. The wind blew hot and stinking with exhaust, and the ground trembled from the motion of the crushing wheels. Horns screamed out and faded.

Marcel's heart was going hard and his mouth was dry. He hadn't expected to be so afraid. His ears where full of a pounding rhythm-he couldn't tell if it was noise from the highway or the echo of his heart. He barely heard -Digging call time.

Sh*t!

He couldn't hear-like how- is- he going to know when to cross? What if he tripped? His legs felt liquid and unstable-if he tried to walk, they would collapse, get tangled up. He pictured Nathaniel's hands, the way she'd tilted her face to his when he kissed her.

He imagined Dayna's stalk-legs, imagined her chair pushed next to the window, the sun flooding the room, her legs growing, thickening, sprouting again into strong, muscled calves.

The pounding in his ears receded. He could breathe again. And suddenly he realized it was quiet. No fizz of tires, no honking, no roar of an engine bearing down on him. A break.

He ran...

Pavement, and then a narrow strip of grass, which marked the space that divided the different sides of the highway. He should have stopped and listened again, just to be sure, but he couldn't-if he stopped, he'd never go again. He had to keep moving. The wind was rushing in his ears and his blood was on fire. Suddenly he felt a searing pain in his shins, and he jerked forward.

He'd reached the divider on the other side.

He'd passed. He ripped off the blindfold and turned around. He thought Nathaniel and Maggie were cheering, but he wasn't sure-two cars went by him, a twin blur, and although he could tell they were shouting, he couldn't hear what they said.

Underneath the streetlamp, they looked like actors on a stage, or tiny figurines, set up for display and the cars, shining as they passed through the light, like toy models of the real thing.

He still felt dizzy. He waited for another break in the traffic, then crossed back at a slow jog. He wanted to move faster, but his legs resisted.

He could barely lift them to climb over the divider. -Digging patted him on the shoulder and Maggie grabbed his arm. He was glad. Otherwise, he might have collapsed.

'Nineteen seconds!' -Digging said.

And Maggie kept saying,

'Awesome. Awesome.'

Maggie volunteered to go next. Something had happened to her in the past few days- something had changed.

She'd always been pretty, Marcel thought -sturdy-looking and dependable, like someone in an advertisement about deodorant. A little awkward, too- always holding herself carefully, like she was worried if she didn't pay attention, she'd knock someone or something over.

He hadn't gone to prom, but he'd seen pictures on Facebook, and Maggie had stood out; slouching a little so she wouldn't be too much taller than Matt, wearing some ruffled pink thing that didn't suit her at all, and trying to smile through her discomfort. But there was nothing awkward about her now. She was serious, straight-backed, focused. She barely hesitated at the edge of the road. As soon as there was a break, she ran. Nathaniel gasped.

'There's a car-,' she said. Her fingers tightened on Marcel's arm.

There was car-northbound traffic, speeding toward her. It must have caught her in its headlights just as she crossed into the lane, because the driver sounded his horn, three quick blasts.

'Jesus.' Joh- John was frozen, white-faced.'

Maggie!' Nathaniel screamed. But Maggie kept moving, and she reached safety just as the car blew over the spot where she'd been standing only a few seconds earlier. The driver gave four more furious blasts on the horn. Maggie whipped off the blindfold and stood, chest heaving, at the side of the road. For a while, she was lost to view in a surge of sudden traffic: two trucks passing simultaneously from opposite directions, a stream of cars.

When Maggie crossed back, -Digging through an arm around her shoulders.

'Seventeen seconds!' he crowed.

'Fastest one yet. You're safe.'

'Thanks,' she said. She was out of breath. As she passed under the streetlamp, she looked truly beautiful: hair long and tangled down her back, high cheekbones, and glittering eyes.

'Good job,' Marcel said.

Maggie nodded at him.

'Heath bar! I was so scared for you!

That car.' Nathaniel threw her arms around

Maggie's neck. She had to stand on her tiptoes.

'It's not that bad, Nathaniel,' Maggie said. For a second, she kept her eyes on Marcel. Something passed between them.

He thought it was a warning. Kim Hollister went next, and she was unlucky. As soon as she took her place blindfolded at the side of the road, there was a blast of traffic from both directions. But even after it cleared, she stayed where she was, hesitating, obviously afraid.

'Go!' -Digging shouted. 'You're fine! Go.'

'No fair,' Ray said. 'No fair.

That's freaking cheating.' They started to argue, but it didn't matter anyway; Kim still hadn't moved.

Finally, she screeched, 'Be quiet!

Please. I can't hear anything. Please.' It took a few more seconds before she shuffled onto the road, and almost immediately she backed up again.

'Did you hear that?' Her voice was shrill in the quiet. 'Is that a car?'

By the time she made it across, fifty-two seconds had elapsed. The longest time by almost double.

It was Natalie's turn next. Suddenly she turned to him, eyes shining. He realized she was on the verge of tears.

'Do you think he's watching?' Nathaniel whispered. Marcel thought she must be talking about God.

'Who?' He said.

'Bill Kelly…' A spasm passed over her face.

'There's no one watching us,' Marcel said. 'No one but the judges, anyway.'

His eyes met Joh- John's across the lot. And again, just for a minute, he wondered.

FRIDAY, JULY 29

Marcel,

Marcel HAD BEEN HOPING NATHANIEL'S BIRTHDAY PARTY would be small, and he was disappointed when he pulled his bike up to Joh- John's house and saw a dozen cars fitted together like Tetris pieces in the only part of the yard not dominated by junk. There was music playing from somewhere, and lanterns had been placed all around the yard, perched on various objects like metallic fireflies settling down to rest.

'You came!' Nathaniel weaved toward him, holding a paper cup. Beer sloshed on his shoe, and he realized she was already drunk. She was wearing lots of makeup and a tiny dress, and she looked frighteningly beautiful, like someone much older. Her eyes were bright, like she was on something. He was aware that she had just been talking to a group of guys he didn't know they, too, looked older and were now staring at him-and felt suddenly uncomfortable. She saw him looking and waved a hand. 'Don't worry about them,' she said. Her words were slurring together.

'Some guys I know from a bar in Kingston. I only invited them because they brought the alcohol. I'm so glad you're here.'

Marcel had Nathaniel's present wrapped in tissue paper in his pocket. He wanted to give it to her but not here, while people were watching. He wanted to tell her, too, that he was sorry about Terror.

Nathaniel had frozen up at the side of the highway and taken more than a minute to cross. Just like that, the game was over for her.

Everyone else would move on to the next challenge. On the way home from the highway challenge, Nathaniel had barely said a word, just sat stiffly next to him with tears running down her face. No one had spoken. Marcel had been annoyed at Joh- John, and Maggie.

They were her best friends. They were supposed to know what to say to make her feel better. He had felt helpless, as frightened as he had while standing on that highway with the blindfold. But Nathaniel was already hauling him off toward the back of the house. 'Come get a drink, okay? And say hi to everyone.'

At the back of the house, a large grill was letting off thick clouds of smoke that smelled like meat and charcoal. An old man was pushing around some burgers on it, holding a beer in one hand. Marcel thought it might have been Joh- John's dad-they had the same nose, the same floppy hair, although the men were gray-and was surprised. In school, he'd always thought of Joh- John as kind of a dork, well-meaning but just too nice to be interesting. He'd imagined Joh- John's family would be of the mom-dad-sister older- brother-picket-fence variety.

Not some guy with a beer grilling in the middle of towers of rusting junk. But that was another thing you learned when playing Fear: people would surprise you.

They would knock you on your ass. It was the only thing you could count on. Kids from the school were standing around in little groups or using some of the old furniture and gutted car frames as makeshift chairs. They were all staring at Marcel, some with curiosity and some with open hostility, and it was not until then that he realized none of the other Fear players had been invited, except for Maggie. That's when it hit him that there weren't many Fear players left.

Just five…

And he was one of them.

The two things-Nathaniel's hand, and the fact that he was getting so close- sent a thrill up his spine.

'The keg's over there, behind the old motorcycle.' Nathaniel giggled. She gestured with her cup, sending another bit of beer sloshing over the rim, and he remembered suddenly the time she'd called him Dave at homecoming last year. His stomach tightened. He hated parties, never felt comfortable with them.

'I'll be back, okay? I must circulate.

It's kinda my party, after all.' She kissed him on the cheek, he noticed, and of course then again on the other cheek-and quickly disappeared, blending into a knot of people standing around the keg. Without Nathaniel next to him, he felt like he was back in the halls at school, except this time, instead of everyone ignoring him, everyone was staring. When he spotted Maggie, he could have run up and kissed her.

She saw him at the same time and waved him over. She was sitting on the hood of what Marcel could only imagine was one of Joh- John's projects: A Pinto junk-er, wheel-less and propped up on cinder blocks. He could count a half-dozen cars, in various states of construction and deconstruction, just from where he was standing.

'Hey…' Maggie was drinking a Coke. She looked tired. 'I didn't know you would be here.'

Marcel shrugged. He wasn't sure what that meant. Nathaniel had only invited him at the last minute. 'Didn't want to miss the big birthday,' was all he said.

'Nathaniel's trashed already,' Maggie said with a short laugh. She looked away, squinting.

Again, he was struck by the change that had come over her this summer. She was thinning out, sharpening, and her beauty was becoming more pronounced. Like she'd been wearing an invisibility cloak her whole life, and now it was coming off. Marcel leaned against the hood and fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes.

He didn't even feel like smoking-he just wanted something to do with his hands. 'How's Lily?' he asked. She looked at him sharply. 'She's fine,' she said slowly. Then: 'She's inside, watching TV.' Marcel nodded. The day before he'd been smoking a cigarette in Meth Row when he'd heard someone singing behind the shed where he usually kept his bike. Curious, he circled to the back.

And there was Maggie.

Butt-naked.

She'd shouted, and he'd turned quickly away, but not before he noticed she was washing with the hose from Dot's Diner, the one the kitchen boys used to spray down the alley

in the evenings. He saw a car, her car, with clothes drying on its hood; and a girl who must have been Maggie's sister, sitting in the grass, reading.

'Don't tell,' Maggie had said.

Marcel had kept his back to her. One of the pairs of underwear had blown off the hood and onto the ground; he kept his eyes fixed on it. It was full-butt underwear, patterned with strawberries, faded. Next, to it, he'd seen two toothbrushes and a curled-up tube of toothpaste sitting on an overturned bucket, and several pairs of shoes lined up neatly in the dirt. He wondered how long they'd been camping out there.

'I won't,' he had said without turning around.

And he wouldn't. That was another thing Marcel liked about secrets: they bonded people together. 'How long you think you can keep it up?' he asked now.

'As long as it takes to win,' she replied.

He looked at her face so serious, so dead set-and felt a sudden surge of something like joy. Understanding. That's what it was; he and Maggie understood each other.

'I like you, Maggie,' he said.

'You're all right.' She briefly scanned his face, as if to verify that he wasn't laughing at her.

Then she smiled. 'Right back at you, Marcel.'

~*~

Nathaniel reappeared, carrying a bottle of tequila. 'Take a shot with me, Maggie.' Maggie made a face. 'Tequila?'

'Come on,' Nathaniel said, pouting. Her words were more blurred than ever, but her eyes kept their strange, unnatural brightness- like something not human. 'It's my birthday.' Maggie shook her head. Nathaniel laughed.

'I don't believe it.' Her voice was getting louder. 'You'll play Fear, but you're afraid of taking a shot.'

'Sh-h-h-h.' Maggie's face turned red. 'She wasn't even supposed to play,' Nathaniel said, pointing the bottle at Maggie, as though addressing an audience. And people were listening. Marcel saw that they were turning in Maggie's direction, smirking, whispering.

'Come on, Nathaniel. You're not supposed to talk about the game, remember?' he said, but Nathaniel ignored him.

-Then-

'I was going to play,' Nathaniel announced. 'I did play. Not anymore. She-you-sabotaged me. You sabotaged me.' She turned to Maggie.

Maggie stared at her for a second.

'You're drunk,' she said matter-of-factly, then slid off the hood of the car.

Nathaniel tried to grab her. 'I was just kidding,' she said. But Maggie kept walking. 'Come on, Heath. I was just freaking around.'

'I'm going to find Joh- John,' Maggie said without turning. Nathaniel leaned up against the car, next to- Marcel. She uncapped the bottle of tequila, took a sip, and made a face.

'Some birthday,' she grumbled. Marcel could scent her skin, the alcohol on her breathing and strawberry shampoo in her hair. He was aching to touch her. Alternatively, he shoved his hands into his pocket and felt for the present. He knew he had to give it to her now before he chickened out or she got even more wasted.

'Look, Nathaniel. Is there somewhere we could go? I mean, to be alone for a minute?' Realizing she might think he was going to try to feel her up or something, he rushed on: 'I have something for you.' And he showed her the little tissue-paper-wrapped box, hoping she wouldn't care that it had gotten squashed in his pocket. Her face changed. She smiled hugely, showing off her perfect little white teeth, and set the bottle of tequila down.

'Marcel, you didn't have to,' she said.

And then: 'Come on, I know somewhere we can go.' Just beyond the back porch was an area dedicated to what looked like lawn decorations: towering limestone statues of various mythical figures- Marcel should probably know but didn't; limestone benches and birdbaths full

of standing water, moss, and leaves. Because of the statues and the porch, it was concealed from view, and as he entered the semicircular enclosure, Marcel's stomach started going crazy. The music was muffled, and he and Nathaniel were alone.

'Go ahead,' he said, passing her the box. 'Open it.' He thought he might vomit. What if she hated it? Finally, she got the wrapping off, and she opened the little box and stood there staring at it: a dark cord of velvet and a small, crystal butterfly charm, light dazzling from its wings, resting neatly on a bunch of pieces of cotton.

She stared at it for so long, he thought she must hate it, and then he thought he really would be sick. The necklace had cost him three full days of the cash he got stocking shelves.

'If you want to return it,' he started to say. But then she looked up and he saw that she was crying.

'It's beautiful,' she said. 'I love it.' And before he knew what was happening, she reached for him and drew him down to her and kissed him.

Her lips tasted like salt and tequila.

When she pulled back, he felt dizzy.

He'd kissed girls before but not like that. Usually, he was too stressed about what their tongue was doing or whether he was using too much pressure or too little. But with Nathaniel, he forgot to think, or even breathe, and now his vision was clouded with black spots. 'Listen,' he blurted out. 'I want you to know I'll still honor the split. If I win, I mean. You can still take your share of the money.' She stiffened suddenly, as if he'd slapped her. For a second, she stood there, rigid. Then she shoved the jewelry box back at him. 'I can't take this,' she said. 'I can't accept it.'

Marcel felt like he'd just inhaled a bowling ball. 'What do you mean?' 'I mean I don't want it,' she said and forced the box into his hand. 'We're not together, okay? I mean, I like you and all but - I'm seeing someone else. It isn't right.' Cold, cold: washing his whole body.

He was freezing, confused and furious. He didn't feel like himself, didn't sound like himself either, as he heard himself say, 'Who is it?' She had turned away from him. 'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'No one you know.'

'You kissed me,' he said. 'You kissed me, you made me think-' She shook her head. She still wouldn't look at him. 'It was for the game. Okay? I wanted you to help me win. That's all.' That voice he didn't recognize came out of his mouth again. 'I don't believe you.' The words sounded thin and flimsy.

She kept speaking, as if he wasn't there. 'But I don't need Fear. I don't need you. I don't need Maggie.

Kevin says I've got potential in front of the camera. He says-' 'Kevin?' Something clicked in Marcel's brain, and his stomach opened. 'That scumbag you met at the mall?'

'He's not a scumbag.' Now she whirled around to face him. She was shaking. Her fists were balled, and her eyes were bright and there was wetness on her cheeks, and it broke his heart. He still wanted to kiss her. He hated her...!

'He's legit. He believes in me. He said he would help me....' The cold in Marcel's chest had turned into a hard fist. He could feel it beating against his ribs, threatening to explode out through his skin. 'I'm sure he did,' he said, practically spitting.

'Let me guess. All you had to do was show him your tits-' 'Shut up,' she whispered.

'Maybe let him feel you up for a while. Or did you have to spread your legs, too?' As soon as he said it, he wished the words back into his mouth. Nathaniel stiffened as though a shock had run through her. And he could tell from her face-the guilt and the sadness and the sorrow that she did, she had.

'Nathaniel.' He could barely say her name. He wanted to say he was sorry, and he was sorry for her too, for what she'd done. He wanted to tell her that he believed in her and thought she was beautiful.

'Go away,' she whispered.

'Please.' He started to reach for her.

She stumbled backward, nearly tripping on the grass. 'Go,' she said.

Her eyes locked on his for a minute. He saw two dark holes, like wounds; then she whirled around and was gone. Maggie JOH- JOHN HAD A TRAMPOLINE; OR AT LEAST,

HE HAD A trampoline frame. The nylon had long ago disintegrated and been replaced with a heavy canvas tarp, stretched tautly.

Maggie wasn't surprised to find him there, hiding out from the rest of the guests. He'd never been super social.

She wasn't either. It was one of the things that bonded them.

'Having an appropriate time?' she asked as she maneuvered onto the canvas next to him. Joh- John smelled like cinnamon and a little like butter.

He shrugged. When he smiled, his nose crinkled. 'So-so. You?' 'So-so,' she admitted. 'How's Lily doing?' Maggie had had no choice but to bring her. They'd installed her in the den, and Joh- John had volunteered to check in on her when he went inside for more plastic cups.

'She's fine... Watching a marathon of some celebrity show. I made her popcorn.' He leaned back, so he was staring at the sky, and motioned for Maggie to do the same. When they were little, they had sometimes slept out here, side by side in sleeping bags, surrounded by empty packages of chips and cookies.

One time, she had woken up and found a raccoon sitting on her chest. Joh- John had yelled to startle it away-but not before getting a picture. It was one of her favorite memories from childhood.

She could still remember what it felt like to wake up next to him, with dew covering their sleeping bags and soaking the canvas, their breath steaming in the air-they were so warm next to each other. Like they were in the only safe, good place in the world.

Now she unconsciously moved her head onto the hollow space between his chest and shoulder, and he wrapped one arm around her. His fingers grazed her bare arms, and her body felt suddenly fizzy and warm. She wondered how they must look from above: like two pieces of a puzzle fitted neatly together.

'Are you going to miss me?' Joh- John asked suddenly.

Maggie's heart gave a huge, awful thump like it wanted to leap out of her throat. She'd been trying all summer to ignore the fact that Joh- John was going away to college. Now they had less than a month left. 'Don't be an idiot,' she said, nudging him.

'I'm serious.' He shifted, withdrawing his arm from under her head, rolling over onto one elbow to face her. Casually, he slung his other arm over her waist. Her shirt was riding up and his hand was on her stomach- his tan skin against her pale, freckled belly-and her lungs were having trouble working properly.

It's Joh- John, she reminded herself.

It's just Joh- John. 'I'm going to miss you so bad, Maggie,' he said. They were so close; she could see a bit of fuzz clinging to one of his eyelashes; she could see individual spirals of color in his eyes. And his lips. Soft-looking. The perfect imperfectness of his teeth.

'What about Avery?' Maggie blurted. She didn't know where the words came from. 'Are you going to miss her, too?'

He drew back an inch, frowning. Then he sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. As soon as he wasn't touching Maggie anymore, she would have given anything to have his touch-back. 'I'm not with Avery anymore,' he said carefully. 'We broke up.'

Maggie stared. 'Since when?' 'Does it matter?' Joh- John looked annoyed. 'Look, it was never a real thing, okay?' 'You just liked hooking up with her,' Maggie said. She suddenly felt angry, and cold, and exposed. She sat up, tugging down her shirt. Joh- John was leaving her behind. He would find new girls-pretty, tiny girls like Avery-and he would forget all about her. It happened all the time.

'Hey.' Joh- John sat up too. Maggie wouldn't look at him, so he reached out and forced her chin in his direction. 'I'm trying to talk to you, okay? I - I had to break up with Avery. I like - someone else. There's someone else. That's what I'm trying to tell you. But it's complicated....'

He was staring at her so intensely; Maggie could feel the warmth between them.

She didn't think. She just leaned in and closed her eyes and kissed him. It was like taking a bite of ice cream that's been sitting out just long enough: sweet, easy, perfect. She

wasn't worried about whether she was doing it right, as she had been all those years ago, in the movie theater, when she could only think of the popcorn in her teeth.

She was simply there, inhaling the smell of him, of his lips, while the music thudded softly in the background and the cicadas swelled an accompaniment.

Maggie felt little bursts of happiness in her chest, as though someone had set off sparklers there.

Then, abruptly, he pulled away.

'Wait,' he said. 'Wait.' And instantly, the sparklers in her chest where extinguished, leaving only a smoking black place. Just that one word and she knew: she'd made a mistake.

'I can't-' Suddenly he looked different-older, full of regret, like someone she barely knew. 'I don't want to lie to you, Maggie.'

She felt like she'd swallowed something spoiled: there was a bad taste in her mouth, and her stomach was lashing. She felt her face begin to burn. It wasn't her. He was in love with someone else. And she'd just shoved her tongue down his throat like a lunatic. She had to crab-walk backward, away from him, to the edge of the trampoline.

'Stupid,' she said. 'It was stupid. Just forget it, okay? I don't know what I was thinking.' For a second, he looked hurt. But she was too embarrassed to care. And then he frowned, and he just looked tired and a little irritated, like she was an unruly child and he was a patient father. She realized suddenly that that was how Joh- John saw her: as a kid. A kid sister.

'Will you just sit down?' he said in his tired-dad voice. His hair was sticking straight up-the hair equivalent of a scream.

'It's getting late,' Maggie said, which it wasn't. 'I have to take Lily home. Mom will get worried.' Lie on top of a lie. She didn't know why she said it. Maybe because at that moment she wished for it-wished that she was heading back to a real home with a normal mom who cared, instead of back to the car and the parking spot on Meth Row. She wished that she was small and delicate, like a special Christmas ornament that needed to be handled correctly. I wished that she was someone else.

'Maggie, please,' he said. The world was breaking up, shattering into colors-and she knew if she didn't get out of there, she would start to cry. 'Forget about it,' she said. 'Seriously. Would you? Just forget it ever happened.' She only made it a few steps away before the tears started. She swiped them away quickly with the heel of a hand; she had to pass through a dozen old classmates to get to the house, including Matt's best friend, and she would rather die than be the girl crying at her best friend's birthday party.

Everyone would think she was wasted. Funny how people could be around you for so many years and be so off the mark. She went in through the back door, taking a second inside to stand, inhaling, trying to get control of herself. Weirdly, although Joh- John's whole property was a junkyard, the house was clean, sparsely furnished, and always smelled like carpet cleaner. Maggie knew that Mr. Marks's longtime girlfriend, Carol, considered the yard a lost cause. But the home was her place, and she was always scrubbing and straightening, and yelling at Joh-John to take his dirty feet off the coffee table, for God's sake.

Even though the house hadn't been remodeled since the seventies, and still sported shag carpet and weird orange-and-white- checkered linoleum in the kitchen, it looked spotless.

Maggie's throat tightened again.

Everything was so familiar here: the Formica dining room table; the crack running along with the kitchen countertop; the curled photographs stuck to the fridge with magnets advertising dentists' offices and hardware stores. They were as familiar to her as any she had ever called her own. They were hers, and Joh- John had been hers, once.

But no more.

She could hear running water and muffled TV sounds from the den, where Lily was watching. She stepped into the darkened hall and noticed the bathroom door was partly open. A wedge of light lay thickly on the carpet. Now she could hear crying, over the sound of the water. She saw a curtain of dark hair appear and disappear quickly.

'Nathaniel?' Maggie swung the door open carefully. Water gushed from the faucet, and steam was drumming up from the porcelain bowl. The water must have been scalding, but Nathaniel was still scrubbing her hands and sniffling. Her skin was raw and red and shiny like it had been burned.

'Hey.' Maggie forgot, for the moment, about her problems. She took a step into the bathroom. Instinctively, she reached out and shut off the faucet. Even the taps where hot.

'Hey- are you okay?'

It was a stupid thing to say. Nathaniel was not okay. She turned to Maggie. Her eyes were puffy, and her whole face looked weird and swollen, like bread that was rising wrong. 'It's not working anymore,' she said in a whisper.

'What isn't?' Maggie asked. She felt suddenly on hyper-alert. She noticed the drip-drip-drip of the faucet, and Nathaniel's monstrously red hands, hanging like deflated balloons by her side. She thought of the way that Nathaniel always liked things even, straight down the middle.

How sometimes she showered more than once a day. The taps and tongue clicks.

The stuff she'd mostly ignored because she was so used to it. Another blind spot between people.

'That's why I froze on the highway, you know,' Nathaniel went on. 'I just - glitched.' Her eyes were watery again. 'Nothing's working.' Her voice wavered. 'I don't feel safe, you know?'

'Come here,' Maggie said. She drew Nathaniel into a hug and Nathaniel continued crying, drunk, against her chest. She gripped Maggie tightly as if she worried, she might fall. 'Sh-hh,' Maggie murmured, repeatedly. 'Sh-hh. It's your birthday.'

But she didn't say it would be okay. How could she? She knew that Nathaniel was right.

None of them was safe.

No more. Never again.

Marcel-

Marcel HEARD VOICES IN THE LIVING ROOM AS SOON as he opened the door and immediately regretted coming home directly. It was just after eleven, and his first thought was that Ricky was over again.

He wasn't in the mood to deal with Ricky grinning like an idiot and Dayna blushing and trying to make things not awkward and all the time shooting Marcel dagger eyes like he was the one intruding. But then his mom called, 'Come in here, Marcel!' A man was sitting on the couch. His hair was graying, and he was wearing a rumpled suit, which matched his rumpled face.

'What?' Marcel said, barely looking at his mom. He didn't even try to be polite. He wasn't going to play nice with one of his mom's dates.

His mom frowned.

'Marcel,' she said, drawing out his name, like a warning bell. 'You know Bill Kelly, don't you? Bill came over for a little bit of company.' She was watching Marcel closely, and he read a dozen messages in her eyes at once: Bill Kelly just lost his son, so if you're rude to him, I swear you'll be sleeping on the streets...

Marcel felt suddenly like his whole body was made of angles and spikes, and he couldn't remember how to move it correctly. He turned jerkily to the man on the couch: Big Bill Kelly. Now he could see the resemblance to his son. The straw-colored hair running, in the father's case, to gray; the piercing blue eyes and the heavy jaw.

'Hi,' Marcel said. His voice was a croak. He cleared his throat. 'I was -am- I mean, we're all sorry to hear-'

'Thank you, son.' Mr. Kelly's voice was surprisingly clear. Marcel was glad he'd been interrupted because he didn't know what else he would have said. He was so hot he felt like his face was about to explode. He had a sudden, hysterical impulse to shout out: I was there. I was there when your son died. I could have saved him.

He took a deep breath. The game was wearing on him. He was starting to crack. After what seemed like forever, Mr. Kelly's eyes passed away from Marcel, back to his mother. 'I should go, Sheila.' He stood up slowly. He was so tall he nearly grazed the ceiling with his head.

'I'm going to Albany tomorrow. Autopsies were done. I don't expect any surprises, but -' He made a helpless gesture with his hands. 'I want to know everything. I will know everything.'

Sweat was picking up underneath Marcel's collar. It might have been his imagination, but he was sure Mr. Kelly's words were directed at him. He thought of all the Fear betting slips he'd been collecting this summer. Where were they? Had he put them in his underwear drawer? Or left them out on his bedside table? Jesus. He had to get rid of them.

'Of course.'

Marcel's mom stood too. Now all three of them were standing, awkwardly, like they were in a play and had forgotten their lines. 'Say goodnight to Mr. Kelly, Marcel.'

Marcel coughed. 'Yeah. Sure. Look,

I'm sorry again-'

Mr. Kelly stuck out his hand.

'God's works,' he said quietly. But Marcel felt that when Mr. Kelly shook his hand, he squeezed just a little too hard.

That was the night -Digging went to a party down at the gully and ended up with a cracked rib, two black eyes, and one of his teeth knocked out. Derek Klieg was drunk; that was the excuse he gave afterward, but everyone knew it was deeper than that, and once the swelling in -Digging's face went down, he told anyone who would listen how Derek had jumped him, threatened him, tried to get him to cough up the names and identities of the judges, and wouldn't listen when -Digging insisted he didn't know. It was an obvious violation of one of Fear's many unspoken rules. The announcer was off-limits. So were the judges.

Derek Klieg was immediately disqualified. He had forfeited his spot in the game, and his name was struck from the betting slips by morning. And Natalie, the last player eliminated, was back on.

SATURDAY,

JULY 30

Maggie,

MAGGIE WAS WOKEN BY SOMEONE RAPPING ON THE window. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, startled and momentarily disoriented. Sun was streaming through the windows of the Taurus.

Marcel was watching her through the windshield. Now that she was awake, everything came into sudden focus: the kiss with Joh- John and its botched end; Natalie crying in the bathroom; and now Marcel watching her, taking in the rumpled sheet and beaten-up cups from Dairy Queen in the passenger seat, the chip bags, and the flip-flops and the scattered clothing in the backseat.

Outside, Lily was barefoot and dressed in a bathing suit. Maggie opened the door and got out of the car. 'What are you doing here?' She was furious with him. He had violated an unspoken agreement.

When she had said, don't tell, she had also meant Don't come back. 'I tried calling you. Your phone was off.' If he could tell she was angry, he didn't seem to care. Her phone. She'd been powering down her phone as much as she could since she could only charge it when she worked at Anne's house.

Besides, she didn't need to see the texts from her mom. But she realized she'd brought it into Joh- John's kitchen last night to charge, and never retrieved it. Sh*t. That meant going back for it.

Maggie had slept in her clothes- the same clothes she'd worn to Nathaniel's party, including a tank top with sequins.

She crossed her arms over her chest.

'What's up?' He passed her a folded piece of paper. The newest betting slips. 'Nathaniel's back on. Derek was disqualified.' 'Disqualified?' Maggie repeated.

She'd only heard of someone being disqualified from Terror once before, years earlier-one of the players was sleeping with a judge. It later turned out that the guy, Mickey Barnes, wasn't a judge, just pretending to be one so he could get laid. But it was too late. The

player was replaced. Marcel shrugged. Behind him, Lily had overturned their bucket of water and was making rivers out of the dirt.

Maggie was glad she wasn't listening.

'Are you going to tell her?' He asked.

'You can,' she said. He looked at her again. Something shifted in his eyes. 'No, I can't.' They stood there for a second. Maggie wanted to ask him what had happened, but she felt too weird. She and Marcel weren't exactly close-not like that, anyway. She didn't know what they were. She wasn't close to anyone.

'The deal's off,' he said after a minute. 'No splits.'

'What?' Maggie was shocked to hear Marcel say it. That meant he knew she knew about his deal with Nathaniel. Did he know about the deal she and Nathaniel had made? His eyes were almost gray, like a stormy sky.

'We play the game how it was meant,' he said, and for the first time, she was almost afraid of him. 'Winner takes the pot.'

'Why can't I come in and see Joh- John?' Lily was in a bad mood. She'd been whining since she got up. She was too hot. She was dirty. The food that Maggie had for her-more tinned stuff, and a sandwich she'd bought at the 7- Eleven-was gross. Maggie guessed that the adventure of being without a home (she couldn't bring herself to think the word homeless,) the newness of it, was wearing off. Maggie gripped the wheel, squeezing out her frustration through her palms. 'I'm just running in for a second, Lily-belle,' she said, forcing herself to sound cheerful. She wouldn't snap, she wouldn't scream. She would keep it together-all for Lily. 'And Joh- John's busy.' She didn't know if this was true- she hadn't been able to call and see whether Joh- John was even home, and part of her was hoping he wasn't.

She kept flashing back to the kiss, the moment of warmth and rightness - and then the way he had pulled away as the kiss had physically hurt him. I don't want to lie to you, Maggie.

Never had she been so humiliated in her life. What on earth had possessed her? Thinking about it made her stomach hurt, made her want to drive to the ocean and keep running straight into it.

But she needed her phone. She was going to have to suck it up and risk seeing him. She could even do damage control, explain that she hadn't meant to kiss him so he wouldn't think she was in love with him or something. Her stomach gave another lurch into her throat. She wasn't in love with Joh- John.

Was she…?

'I'll be back in ten,' she said. She'd parked a little way- down the driveway, so if Joh- John was outside, he wouldn't see her car and all the evidence that she was living inside it. The last thing she wanted was more pity for him. There was still evidence of the party in the yard: a few plastic cups, cigarette butts, a pair of cheap sunglasses swimming in a birdbath filled with mossy water. But everything was quiet. He wasn't home.

But before she could even make it to the front door, Joh- John appeared, carrying a trash bag. He froze when he saw her, and Maggie felt the last flicker of hope that things would be normal, that they could pretend last night had never happened fizzle out.

'What are you doing here?' he blurted out.

'I just came to get my phone.' Her voice sounded weird like it was being replayed on a bad sound system. 'Don't worry, I'm not staying.' She started to move past him, into the house.

He caught her arm. 'Wait.' There was something desperate about the way he was looking at her. He licked his lips.

'Wait-you don't-I have to explain.'

'Forget about it,' Maggie said.

'No. I can't-you have to trust me-' Joh- John pushed a hand through his hair, so it stood up straight. Maggie felt like she could cry. His clown-hair; his faded Rangers T-shirt and sweatpants spotted with paint; his smell. She had thought it was hers-she'd thought he was hers- but all this time he'd been growing up and hooking up and having secret crushes and becoming someone, she didn't know. And she knew, looking at him holding a stupid bag of trash, that she was in love with him and always had been. Since the kiss the first year. Even before that…

'You don't have to explain,' she said and pushed past him into the house. It had been bright outside, and she was temporarily disoriented by the dark, and she took two unsteady steps toward the living room, where she could hear the fan going, as Joh- John flung open the door behind her.

'Maggie,' he said. Before she could respond, another voice called out. A girl's voice.

'Joh- John?'

Time stopped. Maggie froze, and Joh- John froze, and nothing moved except the black spots across Maggie's eyes as her vision slowly adjusted; as she saw a girl float up out of the shadow, emerging from the darkness of the living room.

Weirdly, although they'd gone to school together forever, Maggie didn't immediately recognize Vivian Trevin. It was the shock of seeing her there, in Joh- John's house, barefooted, holding a mug from Joh- John's kitchen. As though she belonged.

'Hey, Maggie,' Vivian said, taking a sip from her mug. Over the rim, her eyes connected with Joh- John's, and Maggie saw a warning there. Maggie turned to Joh- John. All she saw was guilt: guilt all over him, like a physical force, like something sticky.

'What are you doing here?' Vivian asked, still casual.

'Leaving,' Maggie said. She threw herself forward, down the hall and into the kitchen. She was fighting the feeling that she was going to be sick, fighting the memories threatening to drown her: the times she'd drunk cocoa from that mug, her lips where Vivian's now where her lips on Joh- John's-Vivian's Joh- John. Her phone was still plugged into an outlet near the microwave. Her fingers felt swollen and useless. It took her several tries before she could unplug it.

She couldn't face passing Joh- John and Vivian again, so she just hurtled out the back door, across the porch, and down into the yard. Idiot. She was such an idiot. She tasted tears before she knew she was crying.

Why would Joh- John go for her, Maggie? He was smart. He was leaving for college. Maggie was a nobody.

Nill…

As in zero. That's why Matt had dumped her too.

No one had ever told her this basic fact: not everyone got to be loved. It was like those stupid bell curves they'd had to study in math class. There was the big, swollen, happy middle, a whale hump full of blissful couples and families eating around a big dining room table and laughing. And then, at the tapered ends, there where the abnormal people, the weirdos and freaks and zeros like her.

She wiped away the tears with her forearm and took a few seconds to breathe and calm down before she returned to the car. Lily was picking at a mosquito bite on her big toe. She stared at Maggie suspiciously when Maggie got in the car.

'Did you see Joh- John?' Lily asked.

'No,' Maggie said and put the car in drive.

Contented: 1

WEDNESDAY,

AUGUST 3

Marcel,

Marcel HAD LOST THE RECEIPT

FOR NATALIE'S NECKLACE, and instead had to pawn it for half of what he had paid. He needed the money. It was August 3; he was running out of time. He needed a car for the Joust.

A junkier would do-he was even thinking of buying one off Joh- John. So long as it drove.

He had just finished a shift at Lowe's when he got a text.

He hoped for a wild second it was Natalie; instead, it was from his mom.

'Meet us @ Cambria Memorial as soon as posable!! Dayna…'

Something bad had happened to Dayna.

He tried calling his mom's cell phone, and then Dayna's, and got no response. He barely registered the twenty-minute bus ride to Hudson.

He couldn't sit still. His legs were full of itching, and his heart was lodged underneath his tongue. His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Another text. This time, it was from an unknown number.

Time to go solo. Tomorrow night we'll see what you're made of. He shut his phone, shoved it in his pocket. When he reached Cambria Memorial, he practically sprinted from the bus.

'Marcel! Marcel!' Dayna and his mom were standing outside, by the handicapped ramp. Dayna was waving frantically, sitting up as tall as she could in her chair. And she was grinning. They both where-smiling so big, he could see all their teeth, even from a distance.

Still, his heart wouldn't stop going as he jogged across the parking lot.

'What?' He was breathless by the time he reached them. 'What is it? What happened?'

'You tell him, Day,' Marcel's mom said, still smiling. Her mascara was smudged. She'd been crying.

Dayna sucked in a deep breath. Her eyes were shining; he hadn't seen her look so happy since before the accident.

'I moved, Marcel. I moved my toes.' He stared at Dayna, then his mom, then Dayna again. 'Jesus Christ,' he finally burst out. 'I thought something happened. I thought you were dead or something.' Dayna shook her head. She looked hurt.

'Something did happen.' Marcel took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. He was sweating. He jammed on the hat again. Dayna was watching him expectantly. He knew he was being a d*ick.

He exhaled. 'That's amazing, Day,' he said. He tried to sound like he meant it. He was happy; he was just still wound up from the trip over, from being so afraid. 'I'm proud of you.'

He leaned down and hugged her. And he felt the tiniest convulsion in her body like she was holding in a sob.

Marcel's mom insisted they go out to eat to celebrate, even though they couldn't afford it, especially now with all the bills.

They ended up at an Applebee's outside Carp. Marcel's mom ordered a margarita with extra salt and nachos for the table to start. Nachos where Marcel's favorite, but he couldn't bring himself to eat. His mom kept prattling on about Bill Kelly: how Bill Kelly was so nice, so thoughtful, even though he was grieving; how Bill Kelly had set them up with the appointment and made a phone call on their behalf and blah, blah, blah.

Her cell phone rang in the middle of dinner. Marcel's mom stood up.

'Speak of the devil,' she said. 'It's Bill.

He might have news...'

'What kind of news?' Marcel asked when she had stepped outside. He could see her pacing the parking lot. Under the glower of the lights, she looked old. Tired, saggy… more mom-like than normal.

Dayna shrugged.

'Are they screwing or something?' Marcel pressed. Dayna sighed and wiped her fingers carefully on her napkin. She'd been picking apart her burger, layer by layer.

This was something she'd always done: deconstruct her food, put it back together in a way that pleased her. With burgers it was lettuce and tomato on the bottom, then ketchup, then the burger, then bun.

'They're friends, Marcel,' she said, and he felt a flicker of irritation. She was speaking to him in her grown-up voice, a voice that had always grated on him.

'Why do you care, anyway?'

'Mom doesn't have friends,' he said, even though he knew it was kind of mean. Dayna set down her napkin-hard, in her fist, so that the water cups jumped.

'What is up with you?' Marcel stared at her. 'What's up with me?' 'Why do you have to give Mom such a tough time? That doctor isn't cheap. She's trying.' Dayna shook her head. 'Ricky had to leave, like, his whole family to come here-'

'Please don't bring Ricky into this.'

'I'm just saying, we should feel lucky.'

'Lucky?' Marcel barked a laugh. 'Since when did you become such a guru?'

'Since when did you become such a brat?' Dayna fired back.

Marcel suddenly felt lost. He didn't know where the feeling came from, and he struggled to get out from underneath it. 'Mom's clueless. That's all I'm saying.' He stabbed at his mac 'n' cheese to avoid meeting Dayna's eyes. 'Besides, I just don't want you to get your hopes up....'

Now it was Dayna's turn to stare.

'You're unbelievable.' She spoke in a deep voice, and somehow that was worse than if she'd been screaming. 'All this time you've been telling me to keep trying, keep believing. And then I make progress-' 'And what about what I've been doing?'

Marcel knew he was being a brat, but he couldn't help it. Dayna had been on his side- she was the only one on his side and now, suddenly, she wasn't.

'You mean the game?' Dayna shook her head. 'Look, Marcel. I've been thinking. I don't want you to play anymore.'

'You what...?' Marcel exploded; several people at a neighboring table turned to stare.

'Keep your voice down.' Dayna was looking at him the way she used to when he was a little kid and didn't understand the rules of a game, she wanted to play disappointed, a little impatient. 'After what happened to Bill Kelly - it's not worth it. It's not right.' Marcel took a sip of his water and found he could barely work it down his throat. 'You wanted me to play,' he said. 'You asked me to.'

'I changed my mind,' she said. 'Well, that's not how the game works,' he said. His voice was rising again. He couldn't help it. 'Or did you forget?'

Her mouth got thin: a straight pink scar on the face. 'Listen to me, Marcel. This is for you for your good.'

'I played for you.' Marcel no longer cared about being overheard. The anger, the sense of loss, ate away the rest of the world, made him careless.

Whom did he have? He had no friends.

He'd never stayed in a place long enough to make them or trust them.

With Maggie, he'd thought he'd gotten close, with Natalie, too. He'd been wrong, and now even Dayna was turning on him.

'Did you forget that, too? This is all for you. So that things can go back.' He hadn't intended to say the last part-hadn't even though- the words until they were out of his mouth. For a second there was silence. Dayna was staring at him, openmouthed, and the words sat between them like something detonated: everything had been blown wide open.

'Marcel,' she said. He was horrified to see that she looked like she felt sorry for him. 'Things can never go back. You know that, right? That's not how it works. Nothing you do will change what happened.' Marcel pushed his plate away. He stood up from the table. 'I'm going home,' he said. He couldn't even think.

Dayna's words were making a storm inside his head. Things can never go back.

What the hell had he been playing for, all this time?

'Come on, Marcel,' Dayna said.

'Sit down.' 'I'm not hungry,' he said. He couldn't bring himself to look at her: those patient eyes, the thin, dissatisfied set of her mouth. Like he was a little kid. A dumb kid. 'Tell mom I said- goodbye.'

'We're miles from home,' Dayna said.

'I could use the walk,' Marcel said. He shoved a cigarette in his mouth, even though he didn't feel like smoking, and hoped it wouldn't rain.

Maggie,

MAGGIE DIDN'T RETURN TO METH ROW. IT WAS CONVENIENT, in some ways, but there was no privacy in it, now that Marcel knew where she was.

She didn't want him to be spying on her, seeing how she was living, running his mouth about it. Maggie had been careful, thus far, to move the car only in the middle of the night, from the parking lot to empty road to the parking lot, when there was less danger of being spotted. She'd developed a routine: on workdays, she set her alarm for four a.m., and, while Lily was still sleeping, headed through the ink-black to

Anne's house…

She had found a break in the trees just off the driveway where she could park. Sometimes she slept again. Sometimes she waited, watching the black begin to blur and change, turning first to smudgy dark, then sharpening and splitting, peeling off into vivid purple shadows and triangles of light. She tried very hard not to think about the past, or what was going to happen in the future, or anything at all.

Later, when it was nine, she'd walk up to the house, telling Anne that Joh- John had dropped her off. Sometimes Lily came with her. Sometimes she stayed in the car or played in the woods.

Twice, Maggie had arrived early and chosen to bathe, sneaking through the woods to the outdoor shower. Then she'd stripped, shivering in the cool air, and stepped gratefully under the stream of hot water, letting it run into her mouth and eyes and over her body. Otherwise, she'd been making do with a hose. Maggie had to stop herself from fantasizing about running water, microwaves, air conditioners, and refrigerators and toilets.

Toilets…

It had been two weeks since she'd left her mom's, and she'd gotten two mosquito bites on her butt while peeing at six a.m. and eaten colder canned ravioli than she could stomach.

What she wanted to do was make it to Malden Plaza, where they'd crossed the highway-to that vast, impersonal parking lot with only a few streetlamps. Truckers came on and off the highway all the time, and cars stayed in the lot overnight. There was a McDonald's, and public restrooms, with showers for the truckers who passed through.

First, they needed gas. It wasn't yet dark, and she didn't want to stop in Carp.

But she'd been running on fumes for twenty-four hours, and she didn't want to break down, either.

So, she pulled into the Citgo on Main Street, which was the least popular of the three gas stations in town because it was the most expensive and didn't sell beer.

'Stay in the car,' she told Lily.

'Yeah, yes,' Lily mumbled.

'I'm serious, Billy.' Maggie wasn't sure how long she could take this: the sniping, the back-and-forth. She was losing it. Cracking up. Grief had its hands around her neck; she was being choked. She kept seeing Vivian sipping from Joh- John's mug, her black hair hanging in wisps around a pretty, moon-white face. 'And don't talk to anybody, okay?'

She scanned the parking lot: no police cars, no cars she recognized. That was a good sign. Inside, she put down twenty dollars for gas and took the opportunity to stock up on whatever she could: packages of ramen soup, which they would eat dissolved in cold water; chips and salsa; beef jerky; and two fresh-ish sandwiches.

The man behind the counter, with a dark, flat face and thinning hair slicked to one side, like weeds strapped to his forehead, made her wait for change. While he counted singles into the register, she went to the bathroom.

She didn't like standing under the bright lights of the store, and she didn't like the way the man was looking at her either- like he could see through to all her secrets.

While she was washing her hands, she dimly registered the jangle of the bell above the door, the low murmur of conversation. Another customer. When she left the bathroom, he was

blocked from view by a big display of cheap sunglasses, and she was at the counter before she noticed his uniform, the gun strapped to his hip.

A police officer…

'How's that Kelly business going?' the man behind the counter was saying. The police officer with a big belly pushing out over his belt shrugged. 'Autopsy came in. Turns out Little Kelly didn't die in that fire.'

Maggie felt like something had hit her in the chest. She tugged her hood up and pretended to be looking for chips. She picked up a package of pretzels, squinted at it hard.

'That right?'

'Sad story. It looks like OD. He'd been taking pills since he came back from the war. Probably just went to that Graybill house for a nice warm place to get high.'

Maggie exhaled. She felt an insane, immediate sense of relief. She hadn't realized, until now, that she had held herself accountable, at least a little bit, for his murder.

But it wasn't murder. It hadn't been.

'Still, someone started that fire,' the police officer said, and Maggie realized she'd been staring at the same package of pretzels for several seconds too long, and now the police officer was staring at her. She shoved the pretzels back on their rack, ducked her head, and headed for the door.

'Hey! Hey, miss!'

She froze.

'You forgot your groceries. I got change for you too.'

If she bolted, it would look suspicious. Then the police officer might wonder why she'd freaked. She turned slowly back to the counter, keeping her eyes trained on the ground. She could feel both men staring at her as she collected the bag of food. Her cheeks were hot, and her mouth felt dry as sand. She was at the door again, in the clear, when the police officer called out to her.

'Hey.' He was watching her closely. 'Look at me.' She forced her eyes up to his. He had a pudgy, doughy like face. But his eyes were big and round, like a small kid's, or an animal's.

'What's your name?' He said. She said the first name that came to her: 'Vivian.'

He moved gum around in his mouth.

'How old are you, Vivian? You in high school?'

'Graduated,' she said. Her palms were itching. She wanted to turn and run. His eyes were traveling her face quickly like he was memorizing it.

The police officer took a step closer to her.

'You ever heard of a game called Terror,

'Vivian?'

She looked away. 'No,' she said in a whisper. It was a stupid lie, and immediately she wished she'd said yes.

'I thought everybody played Fear,' the police officer said.

'Not everyone,' she said, turning back to him. She saw a spark of triumph in his eyes, as though she'd admitted to something. God. She was messing this up. The back of her neck was sweating. The police officer stared at her for a few more beats. 'Go on, get out of here,' was all he said. Outside, she took a few deep breaths. The air was thick with moisture. A storm was coming-a bad one too, judging from the sky. It was green like the universe was about to get sick. She shoved her hood back, letting the sweat cool off her forehead. She jogged across the parking lot to the pump.

And stopped.

Lily was gone. There was a resonant boom, a sound so loud she jumped. The sky opened, and rain hissed angrily against the pavement. She reached the car just as the first fork of lightning tore across the sky. She jiggled the door handle. Locked. Where the hell was Lily?

'Maggie!' Lily's voice rang out over the rain.

Maggie turned. A police officer was standing next to a blue-and-white patrol car. He had his hand on her sister's arm. 'Lily!' Maggie ran over, forgetting to be worried about police officers or being careful. 'Let go of her,' she said.

'Calm down, calm down.' The police officer was tall and skinny, with a face like a mule. 'Everyone be calm, okay?'

'Let go of her,' Maggie repeated. The police officer obeyed, and Lily barreled over to Maggie, wrapping her arms around Maggie's waist like she was a little kid.

'Hold on now,' the police officer said. Lightning flashed again. His teeth were lit up, gray and crooked. 'I just wanted to make sure the little lady was okay.' 'She's fine,' Maggie said. 'We're fine.' She started to turn away, but the police officer reached out and stopped her.

'Not so fast,' he said. 'We still got a slight problem.'

'We didn't do anything,' Lily piped up.

The police officer squinted at Lily. 'I believe you,' he said, his voice a little softer. 'But that right there'-and he pointed to the beat-up Taurus-' is a stolen car.'

The rain was coming down so hard, Maggie couldn't think. Lily looked sad and extra skinny with her T-shirt stick to her ribs.

The police officer opened the back door of the squad car. 'Go on and get in,' he said to Lily. 'Dry off.' Maggie didn't like it she didn't want Lily anywhere near the police car. That's how they got you: they were- were nice, and they lured you into thinking you were- were safe, and then they flipped the tables without warning. She thought of Joh- John and felt her throat squeeze. That was how everyone got you.

But Lily had scooted inside before

Maggie could say, Don't.

'How about we go somewhere and

talk?' The police officer said. At least he didn't sound mad.

Maggie crossed her arms. 'I'm fine,' she said, hoping he wouldn't see her shiver. 'And I didn't steal that car,' she said. 'It's my mom's car.' He shook his head. 'Your mom said you stole it.' She could barely hear him over the rain. 'You got quite the setup in the back seat. Food. Blankets.

Clothes.' A bead of rain rolled off the tip of his nose, and Maggie thought he looked as pathetic as Lily had. She looked away. She felt the need to tell, to spill, to explain, swelling like a balloon inside her chest, pressing painfully against her ribs. But she just said, 'I'm not going home. You can't make me.'

'Sure, I can.'

'I'm eighteen,' she said. 'With no job, no money, no home,' he said.

'I have a job.' She knew she was being stupid, stubborn, but she didn't care. She'd promised Lily they wouldn't go back, and they wouldn't. Probably if she told her mom, told about the partying and the drugs, she wouldn't have to go back. But they'd stick her mom in jail and put Lily in some home with strangers who didn't care about her. 'I have an excellent job.'

And suddenly it occurred to her:

Anne. She looked at the police officer. 'Don't I get one phone call or something?' For the first time, he smiled. But his eyes were still sad. 'You're not under arrest.'

'I know,' she said. She was suddenly so nervous, she felt like she would vomit. What if Anne didn't care? Or worse, sided with the police? 'But I want my phone call, just the same.' Marcel HAD ONLY MADE IT HALFWAY HOME WHEN THE sky split open and it began to pour. Just his freaking luck. Within a few minutes, he was soaked.

A car passed, blaring its horn, sending a fierce spray of water across his jeans. He was still two miles from home. He was hoping the storm would let up, but it got worse.

Lightning ripped across the sky, quick flashes that gripped the world in the weird green glow. Water accumulated fast in the ditches, driving leaves and paper cups onto his shoes.

He was blind; he couldn't see the oncoming traffic until it was on top of him. He realized, suddenly, that he was only a few minutes away from Joh- John's. He turned off the road

and started jogging. With any luck, Joh- John would be home, and he could wait it out or bum a ride.

But when he came up the driveway, he saw the whole house was dark. Still, he went up to the porch and knocked on the front door, praying that Joh- John would answer. Nothing. He remembered the back porch was screened in and circled the house through the slog of mud. He banged his shin against an old lawnmower and went stumbling forward, faceplanting, cursing.

The screen door was, of course, locked. He was wet and so miserable he briefly considered punching a hole through it-but then lightning bit through the sky again, and in that half-second of unnatural brightness, he saw a kind of gardening shed, some little ways back and half-obscured by the trees. The door to the shed was protected by a padlock, but Marcel had his first bit of luck: the lock wasn't in place. He pushed into the shed and stood to shiver in the sudden dryness and coolness, inhaling the smell of wet blankets and old wood, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He couldn't see sh*t. Just outlines, dark objects, more junk.

He pulled out his cell phone for light and saw the battery was out.

He couldn't even call Joh- John and ask where he was and when he would be home. Great. But at least in the glow of the screen, he could make a better scan of the shed, and he was surprised to see that it was wired: a plain bulb was screwed into the ceiling, and there was a switch on the wall, too.

The bulb was dim, but it was better than nothing. Immediately he saw that the shed was better organized than he'd thought.

Certainly, cleaner than the junkyard. There were a stool and a desk and a bunch of shelves. A bunch of betting slips, water-warped and weighted down with a metal turtle, where piled on the desk.

Next to the betting slips was a pile of old A/V and recording equipment, and one of those cheap pay-per-use cell phones, the kind that required no subscription. His second piece of luck: the cell phone powered on and didn't requires a password.

He looked in his contacts for Joh- John's cell phone number and managed to retrieve it just before his cell went dead. He thumbed it into the keypad of the cell phone he'd found and

listened to it ring. Five times, then Joh- John's voice mail. He hung up without leaving a message. Instead, he flipped over to the texts, planning to shoot off a 911 to Joh- John. He had to come home sometime.

Where could he be in this weather, anyway?

And then: he froze. The driving of the rain on the roof, even the weight of the cell phone-all of it receded, and he saw only the words of the last outgoing text.

Time to go unaccompanied…

Tomorrow night we'll see what you're made of.

He read it again, and a third time.

The feeling returned in a rush. He scrolled down. More texts: instructions for the game. Messages to other players. And at the very bottom, a text to Maggie's number.

Quit now, before you get hurt. Marcel replaced the phone carefully, exactly where it had been.

Now everything looked different: recording equipment. Cameras… Spray paint stacked in the corner, and plywood leaning against the shed walls. All the stuff Joh- John had needed for the challenges.

A half-dozen mason jars were lined up on one shelf; he bent down to examine them and then cried out, stumbling away, nearly upsetting a stack of plywood.

Spiders… The jars were full of them -crawling up the glass, deep brown bodies blurring together. Meant for him.

'What are you doing here?' Marcel spun around. His heart was still beating hard; he was imagining the feel of a hundred spiders on his skin. Joh- John was standing in the doorway, totally- immobile.

The storm was still raging behind him, sending down sheets of water. He was wearing a hooded rain poncho, and his face was in shadow. For a second, Marcel was truly afraid of him; he looked like a serial killer in some bad horror movie.

Marcel had a sudden flash of clarity: this was what the game was about. This was what true fear was that you could never know other people, not completely. That you were always just guessing blind. Then Joh- John took another step into the shed, shoving off his hood, and the impression passed. It was just Joh- John.

Some of Marcel's fear eased too, although his skin was still prickling, and he was uncomfortably aware of the spiders in their thin glass jars, only a few feet away.

'What the hell, Marcel?' Joh- John burst out. His fists were balled up.

'I was looking for you,' Marcel said, raising both hands, just in case Joh- John was thinking of swinging at him.

'I just wanted to get out of the rain.' 'You're not supposed to be in here,' Joh- John insisted. 'It's all right,' Marcel said. 'I know, okay? I already know.' There was a minute of electric silence. Joh- John stared at him. 'Know what?' he said at last.

'Come on, man. Don't bullsh*t,' Marcel said quietly. 'Just tell me one thing: why?

Why?

I thought you hated- Fear.' Marcel thought Joh- John might not answer, might still try to deny the whole thing. Then his body seemed to collapse like someone had pulled the drain in his center. He tugged the door closed behind him, then sagged into the chair. For a moment, he sat with his head in his hands. Finally- he looked up.

'Why did you play?' he asked.

Revenge, Marcel thought, and Because I have nothing else. But out loud he said, 'Money. Why else?' Joh- John gestured wide with his hands.

'Same…'

'Really…?'

Marcel watched him closely. There was a look on Joh- John's face he couldn't identify. Joh- John nodded, but Marcel could tell he was lying. It was more than that. He chose to let it go.

Everyone needed secrets…

'So-o what now?' Joh- John asked. He sounded exhausted. He looked exhausted too. Marcel realized how much it must have weighed on him this summer-all the planning, all the lies.

'You tell me,' Marcel said. He leaned back against the desk. He was feeling slightly more relaxed, and grateful that Joh- John was positioned so that he could no longer see the spiders.

'You can't tell Maggie,' Joh- John said, sitting forward, suddenly wild.

'She can't know about this all.'

'Calm down,' Marcel said. His mind was ticking forward, already adjusting to the added information, thinking of how he could use it. 'I'm not going to tell Maggie. But I'm not going to do the solo challenge either. You're just going to say I did.' Joh- John stared at him. 'That's not fair.'

Marcel shrugged. 'Maybe not. But that's how it's going to go.' He wiped his palms on his jeans. 'What were you planning to do with those spiders?' 'What do you think?' Joh- John sounded annoyed. 'All right. Fine.

You'll go straight to Joust. Okay?' Marcel nodded. Abruptly, Joh- John stood up, kicking the chair so it scooched forward a few inches. 'Jesus.

Do you know, I'm glad you found out? I was almost hoping you would. It's been awful. Freaking awful.' Marcel didn't say anything stupid, like that Joh- John could have said no when he was approached about being a judge.

So, he just said, 'It'll be over soon.' Joh- John was pacing. Now he whirled around to face Marcel. Suddenly he filled the whole space. 'I killed him, Marcel,' he said, choking a little. 'I'm responsible.'

A muscle flexed in Joh- John's jaw; it occurred to Marcel that he was trying not to cry. 'It was part of the game.' He shook his head. 'I never meant to hurt anyone. It was a stupid trick. I lit some papers in a trash can. But the fire got out of control so quickly. It just - exploded.

I didn't know what to do.'

Marcel felt a moment of guilt.

Earlier tonight, when he'd gone off on Dayna about Bill Kelly, he hadn't been thinking of Little Kelly at all. And about how awful his father must feel. 'It was an accident,' he said softly.

'Does it matter?' Joh- John asked. His voice was strangled. 'I should go to jail. I probably will.'

'You won't. Nobody knows.' It occurred to Marcel, though, that Joh- John must have a partner. There were always at least two judges. He knew that Joh- John wouldn't tell him if he asked, though. 'And I won't say anything. You can trust me.'

Joh- John nodded. 'Thanks,' he whispered. Again, the energy left him at once. He sat down again and put his head in his hands. They stayed like that for a long time, while the rain drummed on the roof, like fists beating to get in.

They stayed until Marcel's leg started to get numb where he was leaning on it, and the noise of the rain receded slightly and became the light scratching of nails.

'I have a favor to ask you,' Joh- John said, looking up. Marcel nodded.

Joh- John's eyes flashed: an expression gone too quickly to interpret.

'It's about Maggie,' he said.

SATURDAY,

AUGUST 6

Maggie,

ANNE HAD DECIDED THAT MAGGIE WAS READY TO FEED the white Bengal's. She had shown Maggie how to unlock the pen and where to place the bucket of meat. Anne took her time doing it-sometimes, she even wound up and threw a steak, like player hurling a Frisbee, and occasionally one of the white Bengal's would snap it up in midair.

Maggie always waited until the White Bengal's were on the other side of the pen or lying underneath the trees, where they liked to spend the sunniest afternoons. She worked as

quickly as possible, never taking her eyes off them. The whole time she could practically feel the heat of their breath, the sharp rip of their teeth in her neck.

'Do you think they miss home?' Maggie turned around. Lily. Earlier that morning, Lily had helped Anne wrestle Muppet into a bath, and her legs were spotted with muddy water. But she looked cleaner, healthier than she had in weeks. From the other side of the barn, they could hear Anne humming as she pulled daffodils from the garden.

'I think they're pretty happy,' Maggie said, although she'd never really thought about it one way or another. She triple-checked that she'd locked the pen, then turned once again to Lily. Lily's face was puckered like she was trying to swallow something too big.

'What about you, Bill?' she asked, resting a hand briefly on Lily's head.

'Do you miss home?'

Lily shook her head so hard her braid whipped her in the face. 'I want to stay here forever,' she said, and Maggie knew that the words had been the too-big thing that was choking her.

Maggie had to bend down awkwardly to hug Lily. Still, Lily was growing; she was at Maggie's chest. It was just one more thing that had changed while Maggie wasn't paying attention. Like Joh- John.

Like her friendship with Nathaniel.

'No matter what, we'll be together. Okay? We'll be fine.' Maggie put her thumb on Lily's nose, and Lily swatted at her. 'Do you believe me?' Lily nodded, but Maggie could tell that she didn't, not entirely.

It had been three days since Maggie had been picked up by the police officers, and for now, Anne had agreed to let Maggie and Lily stay with her. They were sleeping in the 'blue room:' wallpaper patterned with blue posies, blue coverlets, ruffled blue curtains.

Maggie thought it was the most beautiful room she'd ever seen. Earlier that morning, she'd woken up and Lily's bed had been empty. For a moment, she was seized with Fear, until she heard laughter from outside. When she went to the window, she saw Lily was helping Anne

feed the chickens and laughing hysterically as one of them chased her, picking up the feed. The day before, Krista had arrived in the Taurus, which the police officers had returned to her. She refused even to acknowledge Anne but made a big show of embracing Lily, who stood rigidly, her face squashed against Krista's sun freckled chest. Maggie had expected her to be angry about the car, and she was, but she was sober, at least, and trying to put on a good show. She reeked of perfume, and she was wearing her work pants and a blue blouse that puckered under her boobs.

She told Maggie she was sorry, and she wasn't partying anymore, and she was going to do a better job of paying attention to Lily. But she recited the words stiffly, like an actor reading lines that bored her.

'So? You going to come home?' She said.

Maggie shook her head. And then she'd seen it: Krista's face had, for just a minute, transformed.

'You can't stay here forever,' Krista said in a deep voice, so Anne couldn't hear. 'She'll get sick of you.'

Maggie felt something open deep in her stomach. 'Good-bye, Krista,' she said.

'And I won't let you take my baby, either. Don't think you're taking Lily from me.' Krista had reached out and grabbed Maggie's elbow, but seeing Anne move toward them, had quickly released it.

'I'll be back soon,' Krista said loudly with her plastic smile. The words were like a threat. And Maggie had walked around for the rest of the day with that pit in her stomach, even after Anne had approached, unexpectedly, unasked, and given Maggie a big hug.

Don't worry, she'd said. I'm here for you. Maggie wished she could truly believe it.

The White Bengal's had moved across the pen now, toward the meat-lazily at first, as though uninterested. They sprang on it in one quick, fluid motion, jaws opening, teeth gleaming momentarily in the sun. Maggie watched them tear into it and felt a little queasy. What had Anne said on her first day of work? She liked taking in broken and damaged things.

Nonetheless, Maggie couldn't imagine the White Bengal's needing help. Her phone buzzed in her back pocket. Natalie... they hadn't spoken since her birthday.

'Maggie?' Natalie's voice sounded distant, as though she were speaking from underwater. 'Did you see the newest?'

'Newest what?' Maggie asked.

Cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder, she shoved open the door to the toolshed and replaced the keys to the white Bengal pen.

'The betting slips,' Natalie said.

-And-

'Marcel beat his solo challenge. Spiders.' She paused. 'One of us is next.'

Maggie's stomach gave another twist. 'Or Ray. Or Harold Lee,' she pointed out.

'But it'll be our turn soon,' Nathaniel said. She paused. 'Have you - have you spoken to him?' Maggie knew right away that Nathaniel was talking about Marcel. 'Not really,' she said. She hadn't told Natalie about what Marcel had said: that their deal was off. She suspected that Nathaniel knew as much. Nathaniel sighed. 'Let me know, okay?'

'Yeah, sure,' Maggie said. There was an awkward pause. She remembered how hysterical Nathaniel had been in the bathroom the other night, with her hands scraped raw from scrubbing. She felt a sudden wave of emotion-love for Natalie, grief for all the things that were never said.

'And Maggie?' Nathaniel said.

'What's up?'

Nathaniel's voice was quiet. 'I couldn't have done this without you. I would never have gotten this far. You know that, right?'

'The game's almost done,' Maggie said, trying to keep her voice light.

'Don't turn melty on me now.' As soon as she hung up, she saw she'd missed a text. She clicked over to her messages and felt her breath stick in her mouth.

-Then-

Tomorrow it's your turn, the message read.

SUNDAY,

AUGUST 7

Maggie,

'ARE YOU OKAY?' NATHANIEL ASKED.

'I'd be better if you'd stop jerking the wheel,' Maggie said. Then, immediately: 'I'm sorry.'

'It's all right,' Nathaniel said. Her knuckles where tiny half-moons on the wheel. As soon as Maggie saw the sign for Fresh Pines Mobile Park, she felt like her stomach might drop out of her butt. They were headed to Lot 62, only a few rows down from Krista's house.

Even though no one had lived there for ages, it was wired and fitted with a fridge, a table, and a bed.

Maggie knew that people used Lot 62, which had been empty for as long as she could remember, for partying and for other stuff she didn't want to think about. Once, when she was eight or nine, she and Joh- John had gone on a rampage there, emptying all the beers in the fridge, shaking the cigarette packs and bags of weed they found in the cupboards into the trash cans-like that would stop anyone.

Maggie wondered what Joh- John was doing right now, and whether he'd heard it was her turn for a challenge.

Not… then she found that thinking of him was too painful, so she forced herself to concentrate on Natalie's awful driving.

'At least you're getting it over with,' Nathaniel said. Maggie knew she was trying to be helpful. 'I almost wish it was my turn.'

'No, you don't,' Maggie said. Already, they were at Lot 62. The shades were pulled, but she could see light glowing in the windows, and people turned to silhouettes inside.

Great… so- she'd have an audience, too. Natalie cut the engine. 'You're going to be great,' she said. She started to get out of the car.

'Hey.' Maggie stopped her. Her mouth was dry. 'You know what you said earlier? Well, I could never have gotten this far without you, either.'

Part: 11

Nathaniel smiled, she looked so-o sad. 'May the best girl win,' she said softly. Inside, the air was hazy with cigarette smoke. -Digging was back, his face still swollen and shiny, patterned all over with bruises. He was showing off his injuries like they were badges of honor. Maggie was annoyed to see that Ray had come-to watch her fail.

There were a few cheap bottles of liquor and some plastic cups on the counter. A group of people was sitting around the table; as Maggie and Nathaniel entered, they turned around as one.

Maggie's heart stopped. Vivian Trevin had come.

-And-

So, had Matt Hefley.

'What are you doing here?' She directed the question to Matt. She didn't move from the doorway. She kept thinking that this was part of the test- like a setup.

Terror challenge: see how long Maggie can last without crying in a small trailer with her ex-boyfriend and Joh- John's new girl. Bonus points for not vomiting. Matt stood up from the table so quickly, he nearly overturned his chair.

'Maggie. Hey.' He waved awkwardly like they were standing at a distance instead of five feet from each other.

Maggie could feel Vivian watching her, looking slightly amused. B*tch. And Maggie had never been anything but nice to her. '-Digging asked me to come. For help with -' He trailed off.

'With what?' Maggie felt cold.

~*~

She couldn't feel her mouth, even as it made words. Matt turned a deep red. Maggie used to like that about him-how he was an easy blush. Now she thought he just looked stupid. 'With the gun,' he said finally.

For the first time, Maggie became aware of the object on the table, around which everyone had gathered. Her breath froze in her throat, became a hard block.

She couldn't swallow, not a pack of cards: a gun. The gun-the one Maggie had stolen from Trigger-Happy Jack's place. But no, that was impossible. She was losing it. Joh- John had taken the gun and locked it away in his glove box.

Maggie wasn't sure she could tell the difference between guns, anyway. They all looked the same: like horrible metal fingers, pointing the way to something evil.

She remembered, suddenly, listening as a small child while Krista was drinking with the neighbors in the kitchen. 'Now Maggie's father - he was a mess. Offed himself right after the baby came along. Came home and found his brain splattered on the wall.' Pause. 'Can't say I blame him, sometimes.'

'Please…?

Just for a minute?' Matt had come even closer. He was staring at Maggie with his big cow eyes, pleading; she belatedly registered that he had asked her whether they could talk. He lowered his voice. 'Outside?'

'No.' Everything Maggie thought was taking a long time to turn into words, into action.

'What…?' Matt looked momentarily confused. He wasn't used to having Maggie stand up for herself. Delaney always said yes to him too.

'If you want to talk, you can talk to me here.' Maggie was aware that Nathaniel was doing her best to pretend she wasn't listening. Vivian, on the other hand, was still staring at her.

Matt coughed. He blushed again.

'Look, I just wanted to tell you - I'm sorry. Everything happened between us. The Delaney thing-' He looked away. He was doing his best to seem apologetic, but Maggie knew that he was gloating, just a little bit, to be in the position of having to apologize. He was in control.

He shrugged…

'You have to believe, it just kind of - happened.' She felt a rush of hatred for him. How had she ever believed she was in love with him? He was a dolt, just like Nathaniel said.

At the same time, an image of Joh- John rose in her mind: Joh- John in his stupid sweatpants and flip-flops, grinning at her; sharing an iced coffee, sharing the same straw, mindless of backwash and the fact that Maggie always chewed her straws to bits; lying side by side on the hood of his car, surrounded by crushed cans, which Joh- John said would make the aliens more likely to abduct them. Saying, Please, please, take me away from here, alien friends! And laughing.

'Why are you telling me this now?' Maggie said.

Matt looked startled, as though he'd expected her to thank him. 'I'm telling you now because you don't have to do this. You don't have to go through with it. Look, I know you, Maggie. And this isn't you.'

She felt like she'd been socked in the stomach. 'You think this is about you? About what happened?' Matt sighed. She could tell he thought she was being difficult. 'I'm just saying you don't have to prove anything.'

A vibration went through Maggie -tiny electrical pulses of anger. 'Freak off, Matt,' she said. By now, the people in the room were no longer pretending not to be listening. But she didn't care.

'Maggie-' He reached for her arm as she started to move past him.

She shook him off. 'This was never about you.' That wasn't, she realized, 100 percent true. She had entered at least, she thought she had-out of a sense of desperation, a sense that her life was over when he dumped her.

But she was playing for herself now, for herself and Lily; she was playing because she had made it this far; she was playing because if she won, it would be the first and only time she had ever won something in her life. 'And you don't know me. You never did.' He let her go. She was hoping he would leave, now that he had come to say what he had to say, but he didn't.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the bathroom door, or the sheet of graffiti printed plywood where the bathroom door should have been the plumbing lines hadn't been connected. Just for a second, she saw Matt Hefley and Ray Hanrahan exchange a glance. Imperceptibly, Matt gestured to him.

Like, I did what I could. She felt a twin surge of disgust and triumph. So now Ray was enlisting Matt's help to get Maggie to drop out. It was Ray who'd sent her that text in June telling her to quit Fear. He thought she was a real threat.

And that made her feel powerful.

'What is this…?' She said, gesturing with her chin to the gun. Her voice was overloud, and she was aware that everyone was watching her-Matt, Ray, Nathaniel, Vivian, and all the rest of them. It was like a painting; and at the center, framed in light, was the gun.

'Russian roulette.' -Digging sounded almost apologetic. He added quickly, 'You only have to pull the trigger once.

'Harold had to do it too.'

'But Harold didn't do it.' Vivian spoke up. Her voice was deep and slow and reminded Maggie of warmer places.

Places where it never rained.

She forced herself to meet Vivian's eyes. 'So, Harold is out?'

Vivian shrugged. 'Guess so.' She had one foot on the chair, knee up to her chest, and she fiddled unconcernedly with the necklace she was wearing.

Maggie could see her collarbones protruding from her tank top. Like baby bird bones. She had an image of Joh- John kissing that spot and looked away. So, Harold was out. That left just four players.

'All right,' she said. She could hardly swallow. 'All right,' she repeated. She knew she should get it over with, but her hands wouldn't move from her sides. Nathaniel was staring at her, horrified, as though Maggie was already dead.

'Is it loaded?' someone asked. 'It's loaded.' It was Ray who answered. 'I checked.' But even he looked queasy, and he wouldn't meet Maggie's eyes.

Don't be afraid, she told herself. But it had the opposite effect. She was rooted, paralyzed with fear. How many chambers were in a gun? What were her chances? She'd always been crap at things like that-probabilities.

She kept hearing her mom's voice: Came home and found his brain splattered on the wall… She had no choice unless she wanted the game to end here, now. Then what would Lily do? But what would happen to Lily if Maggie blew her brains out? She saw her hand leave her side and reach for the gun. Her hand looked pale and foreign, like some weird creature you'd find living in the ocean.

Behind her, Nathaniel gasped. Suddenly the door flew open behind them, with such force that it banged hard against the wall. Everyone turned simultaneously, as though they were all puppets on the same string.

Marcel,

Maggie felt immediately disappointed; she knew that deep down, she'd been hoping for Joh- John.

'Hey,' she said. But Marcel didn't answer. He just crossed the small space toward her, shoving Matt out of the way.

'It was you,' he said. His voice was low and full of spite.

Maggie blinked. 'What?' 'You told someone about the spiders,' he said. He glared at Natalie next. 'Or you did.'

Ray snickered. Marcel ignored him.

'What are you talking about?' It had not occurred to Maggie to wonder how the judges had known about

Marcel's fear of spiders. But now she did. How did they know about any of them? Her stomach tightened, and she was worried she might throw up.

'Neither of us said anything,

Marcel, I promise.' That was Natalie. Marcel stared at each of them in turn. Then, unexpectedly, he reached out and seized the gun. Several people gasped and -Digging ducked like he expected Marcel to start firing.

'What are you doing?' Vivian said.

Marcel did something with the gun -opened the chamber, Maggie thought, although his fingers moved so quickly, she couldn't be sure. Then he replaced it on the table.

'I wanted to be sure it was loaded,' he announced. 'Fair's fair.'

Now he wouldn't look at Maggie at all.

He just crossed his arms and waited.

'Poor Marcel,' Ray said. He didn't bother to stifle a laugh. 'Afraid of itsy-bitsy spiders.'

'Your turn's coming, Hanrahan,' Marcel said calmly. This made Ray stop laughing.

The room got quiet. Maggie knew there would be no more interruptions. No more distractions. She felt as though someone had turned the lights up. It was too hot, too bright. She took the gun. Maggie heard Nathaniel said, 'Please.' Maggie knew that everyone was still watching her, but she could make out no individual faces: everyone had been transformed into vague blobs, suggestions of color and angles. Even the table began to blur.

The only real thing was the gun: heavy and cold. She fumbled a little to get her finger on the trigger. She couldn't feel her body anymore from the waist down. This was what it was like to die: a slow numbing.

She placed the gun to her temple, felt the cool bite of metal on her skin, like a hollow mouth. This was what my father must have felt like, she thought.

She closed her eyes- at once…

Nathaniel screamed, 'Don't do it!' At the same time, a chair clattered to the floor and several voices called out at once.

She squeezed the trigger.

Click…

Nothing. Maggie opened her eyes.

Instantly, the room was a roar of sound. People were on their feet, cheering. Maggie was so weak with joy and relief she found she couldn't hold on to the gun and let it fall to the floor. Then Natalie had rocketed into Maggie's arms.

'Oh, Maggie, oh, Maggie,' she kept saying.

'I'm so sorry.' Maggie was saying, 'It's okay, it's okay,' but she didn't feel the words leave her mouth. Her lips where numb, her tongue was numb, her body was quivering like it was preparing to disintegrate. When Nathaniel released her,

Maggie thudded into a chair.

It was over…

She was alive…

Someone pressed a drink into her hand, and she sipped gratefully before noticing it was warm beer. Then -Digging was in front of her, saying, 'I didn't think you'd do it. Wow. Holy sh*t.' She didn't know whether Matt congratulated her; if he did, she didn't register it.

Vivian smiled at her but said nothing.

Even Marcel came over. 'Look, Maggie,' he said, kneeling so they were at eye level. For a second, his eyes searched hers, and she was sure he was going to tell her something important.

Instead, he just said, 'Keep this safe, okay?' and pressed something into her hand. She slipped it mindlessly into her pocket.

Suddenly, Maggie wanted to get out of there more than anything. Away from the too-close smells of beer and old cigarettes and other people's breath; far away from Fresh Pines, where she had never intended to return in the first place. She wanted to be back at Anne's house, in the blue room, listening to the wind sing through the trees, listening to Lily's sleep murmurs. It took her two attempts to get to her feet. She felt like her body had been sewn together backward.

'Let's go, okay?' Nathaniel said. Her breath smelled a little like beer, and normally Maggie would have been annoyed that she was drinking right before they were going to drive. But she didn't have the strength to argue, or even to care.

'That was epic,' Nathaniel said, as soon as they were in the car. 'Seriously, Maggie. Everyone will be talking about it-for years. I do think it's unfair, though. I mean, your challenge was, like, a billion times harder than Marcel's. You could have died.'

Can we not talk about this?' Maggie said. She unrolled her window a little, inhaling the smell of pine and climber moss. Alive.

'Sure, yes.' Nathaniel looked over at her. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm okay,' Maggie said. She was thinking her way into the deepness of the woods, the soft spaces of growth and shadow. She shifted to lean her head against the window and felt something in her pocket. She remembered what

Marcel had given her. She wondered whether he felt guilty about his earlier outburst.

She reached into her pocket. Just then they passed under a streetlamp, and as Maggie uncurled her fingers, time seemed to stop for a second. Everything was perfectly still: Nathaniel with both hands on the wheel, mouth open to speak; the trees outside, frozen in anticipation.

Maggie's fingers half-uncurled. And the bullet, resting in the fleshy middle of her palm.

SUNDAY,

AUGUST 14

IT WAS ALREADY THE SECOND WEEK OF AUGUST. The game was ending. Four players remained: Marcel, Maggie, Nathaniel, and Ray.

For the first time since the game began, people began to place bets that Maggie would win, although Ray and Marcel were still evenly split for the favorite.

Maggie heard that Ray passed his solo challenge: he'd broken into the county morgue in East Juniper and stayed locked up next to the corpses all night. Creepy, odd, and weird, but not likely to kill him; Maggie was still angry that her challenge had been the worst. But then, of course, there was the fact that Marcel had ensured her challenge would be harmless too.

Marcel, who had palmed a bullet while making a show of checking the gun for ammo. Marcel, who now refused to pick up her phone calls. It was such a joke. Joh- John called Maggie incessantly. Then a that moment she called out the name- Marcel.

Krista called Maggie. No one picked up for anyone else. Like some mixed-up game of telephone. Nathaniel stayed out of it. She had still not been given her solo challenge.

Every day, Nathaniel grew paler and skinnier. For once, she wasn't chattering endlessly about all the guys she was dating. She'd even announced, solemnly, that she thought she might try and stay away from guys for a while.

Maggie didn't know if it was the game or whatever had happened on the night of Nathaniel's birthday, but Nathaniel reminded Maggie of a painting she'd once seen reproduced in a history textbook, of a noblewoman awaiting the guillotine.

A week after Maggie's challenge, the blade fell. Maggie and Nathaniel had taken Lily to the mall to see a movie, mostly to get out of the heat-it had been recorded ninety-five degrees for three straight days, and Maggie felt as if she was moving through soup. The sky was a scorched, pale blue; the trees were motionless in the shimmering heat.

Afterward, they returned in Nathaniel's car to Anne's house. Nathaniel knew, at last, that Maggie wasn't living at home, and had offered to come sleep at Anne's with her, even though she disliked the dogs and wouldn't even get close to the White Bengal's pen. But Anne

had left town for the weekend to visit her sister-in-law on the coast, and Maggie hated being in the big, old house without her.

That was one good thing about the trailer: you always knew what was, where the walls where who was home. Anne's house was different: full of wood that creaked and groaned, ghost sounds, mysterious thumps, and scratching noises.

'Get it,' Nathaniel said when her phone dinged between her legs.

'Ewe. I'm not reaching for it,' Maggie said.

Nathaniel giggled and tossed the phone at her, taking her hand off the wheel only briefly. She swerved, and Lily yelped from the backseat.

'Sorry, Bill,' Nathaniel said.

'Don't call me that,' Lily said primly. Nathaniel laughed. But Maggie was sitting with the phone in her lap, ice running through her wrists, into her hands.

'What's the matter?' Nathaniel asked.

Then her face got serious. 'Is it-?' She cut herself off and glanced in the rearview at Lily, who was listening attentively.

Maggie read the text again.

Impossible… 'Did you tell anyone you were sleeping over at Anne's tonight?' she asked, in a muffled voice.

Nathaniel shrugged. 'My parents. And Joh- John. I think I mentioned it to Joey, too.'

Maggie slid Nathaniel's phone shut and chucked it into the glove compartment. Suddenly she wanted it as far from her as possible.

'What...?' Nathaniel asked.

'Someone knows that Anne's gone,' Maggie said. She turned the radio up so Lily couldn't eavesdrop.

'The judges know.' Who had Maggie told? Marcel-she'd mentioned it to him in a text. Said he should come over, so they could talk, so she could thank him. And of course, Anne had told some people, probably; it was Carp, and people talked because they had nothing else to do.

The implication of what Maggie had just read-what Nathaniel would have to do sank in. She unrolled her window, but the blast of warm air gave her no relief.

She shouldn't have drunk so much soda at the movie theater. She was nauseous.

'What is it?' Nathaniel said. She looked afraid. Unconsciously, she'd begun tapping out a rhythm on the steering wheel. 'What do I have to do?' Maggie looked at her. Her mouth tasted like ash, and she found she could not even speak a complete sentence.

'The white Bengal's,' she said.

Marcel,

THE CHALLENGES were ALWAYS POPULAR, BUT THIS year, many spectators had been staying away. It was too risky. The police had threatened to haul in anyone associated with Fear, and everyone was worried about taking the rap for the fire at the Graybill house.

The rumor was Sadowski wanted someone-anyone-to take the fall. The roads, usually so empty, were infested with police cars, some from other counties.

But the word-white Bengal's-was too much to resist. It had its lift and momentum: it flitted through the woods, stole its way into houses barred up against the heat, spun into the rhythm of fans that cycled in bedrooms across- Carp.

By afternoon, all the players and ex-players and spectators and bettors and welshes and squealers-everyone who cared even remotely about the game and its outcome-had heard about the white Bengal's of Mansfield Road. Marcel was lying naked on his bed with two fans going at once when the text came in from Maggie. For a second, he was not sure whether he was sleeping or awake.

His room was dark and as hot as a mouth. He did not want to open the door, though. Ricky was over again, and he had brought food for Dayna, stuff he'd cooked himself at the dinner, rice and beans, and shrimp that smelled like burned garlic. They were watching a movie,

and occasionally, despite the noise of the ancient fans and the closed door, he could hear the muffled sound of laughter.

The effort of sitting up made Marcel begin to sweat. He punched in Joh- John's number.

'What the hell?' He said when Joh- John picked up. No preamble. No bullsh*t. 'How could you do it? How could you make her do it?'

Joh- John sighed. 'Rules of the game, Marcel. I'm not the only one in control of this sh*t.' He sounded exhausted. 'If I don't make it hard enough, I'll get replaced. And then I won't be able to help at all.'

Marcel ignored him. 'She'll never go through with it. She shouldn't.'

'She doesn't have to.' Marcel felt like throwing his phone against the wall, even though he knew what Joh- John said was true. For Marcel's plan to succeed, Nathaniel would have to drop out anyway, and soon. Still, it felt unfair. Too hard, too dangerous, like Maggie's challenge. But at least there, Joh- John-and Marcel-had made sure she wouldn't be in any real danger. 'Maggie will find a way to help her,' Joh- John said, as though he could read Marcel's thoughts. 'You don't know that,' Marcel said and hung up. He didn't know why he was so angry.

He'd known the rules of Terror from the start. But somehow everything had gotten out of control. He wondered whether Joh- John would show tonight, whether he could face it. Poor Natalie. He thought about calling her and trying to convince her to drop out, to leave it, but then he thought about how she'd returned the necklace to him, and what he'd said to her that night - about opening her legs. It made him hot with shame. She had a right not to speak to him. She had a right to hate him, even.

But he would go tonight. And even if she did hate him, even if she ignored him completely, he wanted her to know that he was there. That he was sorry, too, for what he had said.

Time, for him, was running out.

Maggie- ONE OF the MAGGIE'S PROBLEMS- OUT OF ABOUT A HUNDRED big problems- was what to do about Lily.

Anne had left them food for the weekend -mac 'n' cheese, not from a box, but made with real cheese and milk and little spiral pasta, and tomato soup. Just heat it - made Maggie feel like a criminal: Anne had invited them into her home, was taking care of them, and Maggie was plotting behind her back. Maggie watched Lily polish off three portions. She didn't know how Lily could eat in this heat. All the fans were going, all the windows were open, but it was still sweltering.

She couldn't have taken even a mouthful. She was sick with weakness and resolutions. Outside, the sky was turning to milk, the adumbrations where dividing long on the soil. It wouldn't be long before sundown, and amusement time.

Maggie wondered what Natalie was doing. She'd been locked in upstairs for the past three hours. Maggie had heard the shuddering of pipes, the gush of water in the shower, three times.

After Lily ate, Maggie brought her into the sanctum: a big, dark room that still bore the sign of Anne's late husband - beat-up leather furniture and mohair blankets and rug that smelled a little like wet dog and old man ass with a hint of harry ball-sack.

Here it was a little cooler, although the leather stuck uncomfortably to Maggie's thighs when she sat down. 'I need you to promise me that you won't come outside,' Maggie said.

'There will be people. And you might hear noises. But you must stay right here, where it's safe. Promise me.'

Lily frowned. 'Does Anne know?' She asked.

That guilty feeling rode a wave up into Maggie's throat. She shook her head. 'And she won't,' she said. Lily picked at a bit of stuffing that had begun to poke out of the couch. She was silent for a second. Maggie wished, suddenly, she could take Lily into her arms and squeeze her, tell her everything -how scared she was, how she didn't know what would happen to either of them.

'This is about Fear, isn't it?' Lily said. She looked up. Her face was expressionless, her eyes flat. They reminded Maggie of the White Bengal's eyes: ancient, all-seeing. Maggie knew there was no point in lying. So, she said, 'It's almost over.'

Lily didn't move when Maggie kissed her head, which smelled like grass and sweat. The leather released Maggie's skin with a sharp sucking sound. She put on a DVD about a zoo, which Lily had requested- another gift from Anne. Anne, Maggie knew, was a good person. The best person Maggie had ever met.

So, what did that make Maggie? She was at the door when Lily spoke up. 'Are you going to win?' Maggie turned around to her. She'd left the lights off, so it would stay cool, and Lily's face was in shadow. Maggie tried to smile. 'I'm already winning,' she lied and closed the door behind her.

The haze of the sky, milk-white and scorched, at last, turned to dark; and the trees impaled the sun, and all the light broke apart. Then they came: quietly, tires moving soundlessly on the dirt, headlights bouncing like overgrown fireflies through the woods. There was no thudding music, no shouting. Everyone was on alert for police officers.

Maggie stood outside, waiting. The dogs were going crazy; she kept feeding them treats, trying to get them to shut up. She knew there were no neighbors around for miles, but she couldn't shake the feeling that someone would hear- that Anne would know, somehow, be summoned back to the house by the barking.

Nathaniel had still not come down. Maggie had fed the white Bengal's more than double their normal amount. Now, as the last light drained from the sky, and the stars began to pulse through the liquid haze of heat, they were lying on their sides, asleep and indifferent to all the cars.

Maggie prayed they would stay that way-that Nathaniel could do whatever she needed to do and get out.

Car after car: -Digging, Ray Hanrahan, even some of the players who'd been Eliminated early, like Cory Walsh and Ellie Hayes; Mindy Crammer and a bunch of her dance team friends, still dressed in bikinis and cutoffs and bare feet, like they'd just come from the beach; Even Sell or, eyes red-rimmed and liquid, obviously drunk, with two friends Maggie didn't recognize; people she hadn't seen since the challenge at the water tower. Matt Hefley, too, and Delaney. He walked right by Maggie, pretending she didn't exist. She found she didn't care.

They drifted across the yard and gathered around the White Bengal's pen, silent, disbelieving. Flashlights clicked on as it got darker; the floodlights on the barn, motion-detected, came on too, Illuminating the white Bengal's, sleeping almost side by side, so still they might have been statues, held in a flat palm of the earth.

'I don't believe it,' someone whispered.

'No freaking way.' But there they were: no matter how many times you blinked or looked away. White Bengal's. A bit of a miracle, a circus wonder, right there on the grass under the Carp trees and the Carp sky. Maggie was relieved to see Marcel arrive on his bicycle. She still hadn't had a chance to thank him in person for what he'd done.

Almost immediately, he asked, 'Is Joh- John here?'

She shook her head. He made a face.

'Marcel,' she said. 'I wanted to say…'

'Don't.' He put a hand on her arm and squeezed gently. 'Not yet…'

She didn't know exactly what he meant. She wondered, for the first time, what Marcel was planning to do this fall, and whether he would remain in Carp, or whether he had plans for a job somewhere-or even college. She'd never paid any attention to how he did in school.

Suddenly the thought of Marcel leaving made her sad. They were friends or something like it that was close enough.

It struck her how sad it was that all of them-the kids standing here, her classmates and friends and even the people she'd hated-had grown up on top of one another like small animals in a too-small cage, and now would simply scatter. And that would be the end of that. Everything that had happened- those stupid school dances and basement after-parties, football games, days of rain that lulled them all to sleep in math class, summers swimming at the creek and stealing sodas from the coolers at the back of the 7-Eleven, even now, this, Fear-would be sucked away into memory and vapor, as though it hadn't even happened at all.

'Where's Natalie?' That was -Digging. He was speaking softly, as if afraid to wake the white Bengal's. Hardly anyone made a sound. They were all still transfixed by the sight of those dreamlike creatures, stretched long on the ground like shadows.

'I'll get her,' Maggie said. She was grateful to have an excuse to go into the house, even for a moment. What she was doing, what she was helping Nathaniel do, was too horrible. She thought of Anne's face, her smile pulling her eyes into a squint.

She'd never felt so much like a criminal, not even when she'd taken her mom's car and run away. Another car was arriving, and she knew from the spitting and hissing of its engine that it was Joh- John. She was right. Just as she reached the front door, he climbed out of his car and spotted her.

'Maggie!' Even though he wasn't shouting, his voice seemed to her like a slap in the silence. She ignored him. She stepped into the kitchen and found Natalie sitting at the table, eyes red. There was a shot glass in front of her, and a bottle of whiskey.

'Where'd you get that?' Maggie asked.

'In the pantry.' Nathaniel didn't even look up. 'I'm sorry. I only had a sip, though.' She made a face. 'It's awful.'

'It's time,' Maggie said. Nathaniel nodded and stood up. She was wearing denim shorts and no shoes; her hair was still wet from the shower.

Maggie knew that if Nathaniel weren't so afraid, she would have insisted on putting on makeup, on doing her hair. Maggie thought Nathaniel had never looked so beautiful. Her fierce and fearful friend- who loved country music and cherry Pop-Tarts and singing in public and pink, who was terrified of germs and dogs and ladders.

'I love you, Nathaniel,' Maggie said on impulse.

Nathaniel looked startled, as though she'd already forgotten Maggie was there.

'You, too, Heath bar,' she said. She managed a small smile. 'I'm ready.' Joh- John was standing some little ways, from the house, pacing, bringing his fingers up to his lips and

down again as though he were smoking an invisible cigarette. As Nathaniel moved into the crowd, he caught up with Maggie.

'Please…' His voice was hoarse.

'We need to talk.'

'This is kind of an inconvenient time.' Her voice came out harsher, more sarcastic than she'd intended. It occurred to her that she hadn't seen Vivian, and she wondered whether Joh- John had begged her not to come. Please, babe. Just until I can patch things up with Maggie.

She's jealous, you know - she always had a thing for me. The thought made her throat knot up, and a part of her just wanted to tell Joh- John to freak off. Then there was the part of her that wanted to put her arms around his neck and feel his laughter humming through his chest, feel the wild tangle of his hair on her face. Instead, she crossed her arms as if she could press the feeling down.

'I need to tell you something.'

Joh- John licked his lips. He looked awful. His face was sickly, different shades of yellow and green, and he was too skinny. 'It's important.'

'Later, okay?' Before he could protest, she moved past him. Natalie had reached the fence, closer to the White Bengal's than she had ever allowed herself to go. Unconsciously, the crowd had backed off a little, so she was surrounded by a halo of negative space-like she was Contaminated with something contagious. Maggie jogged over to her. Now the dogs started up again, shattering the stillness, and Maggie hushed them sharply as she passed the kennel. She pushed easily through the crowd and stepped into Nathaniel's open circle, feeling as if she were trespassing.

'It's okay,' she whispered. 'I'm here.' But Nathaniel didn't seem to hear her.

'The rules are simple,' -Digging said. Even though he was speaking at a normal volume, to Maggie it sounded like he was shouting. She began praying the White Bengal's wouldn't wake up. They still hadn't even lifted their heads. She noticed a bit of the steak she'd given them earlier was still untouched, buzzing with flies, and couldn't decide if that was a good

thing or not. 'You go into the pen, you stand with the White Bengal's for ten seconds, you get out.' He emphasized this last part just slightly.

'How close?' Nathaniel said.

Part: 12

'What?'

'How close do I have to get?' She asked, turning to him.

-Digging shrugged. 'Just inside, I guess.'

Nathaniel pushed out a small breath. Maggie smiled at her encouragingly, even though she felt like her skin was made of clay about to crack. But if the white Bengal's slept, Nathaniel would have no problem. They were a full forty feet away from the gate. Nathaniel wouldn't even have to go near them.

'I'll time you,' -Digging said. Then:

'Who has the key to the gate?'

'I do.' Maggie stepped forward. She heard a slight rustle, as everyone turned to stare at her; she felt the heat of all those eyes on her skin. The air was leaden, totally still.

Maggie fumbled in her pocket for the key to the padlock. Nathaniel's breathing was rapid and shallow, like an injured animal. For a second, Maggie couldn't feel the key and didn't know whether to be relieved; then her fingers closed around the metal.

In the silence and the stillness, the click of the padlock seemed as loud as a rifle report. She un-looped the heavy chain carefully and laid it on the ground, then slid the metal latches back, one by one, desperately trying to stall, trying to give Nathaniel a few more seconds. As the final latch clanged open, both white Bengals' lifted their heads in unison, as though sensing that something was coming.

The whole group inhaled as one.

Nathaniel let out a whimper.

'It's okay,' Maggie told her, gripping Nathaniel by the shoulders. She could feel Nathaniel trembling under her hands. 'Ten seconds. You just must step inside the gate. It'll be done before you know it.'

People had started buzzing, giggling- nervously, shifting. Now the stillness was replaced with electric energy. And as Nathaniel took one halting step toward the gate, and then another, the White Bengal's, too, stood up-twisting onto their feet, stretching, yawning their enormous jaws so their teeth glistened in the floodlight -as though they had decided to perform.

Nathaniel paused with a hand on the gate.

Then her other hand. Then both hands. Her mouth was moving, and Maggie wondered if she was counting or praying, whether for Nathaniel they were the same thing. Dwarfed by the gate, silhouetted against the sharp, unnatural light, she looked unreal, one-dimensional, like a cardboard cutout.

'You don't have to do it.'

Marcel's… the voice was loud and so unexpected that everyone turned to stare. Nathaniel turned too, and Maggie saw her frown. Then she pulled open the gate and stepped inside.

Part: 13

'Start the timer,' Maggie cried out.

She saw -Digging fumbling for his phone.

'Now…'

'Okay, okay,' -Digging said. 'Time!' It was too late. The White Bengal's had started to move. Slowly, their massive heads swinging between their shoulder blades like some awful clock pendulum - tick, tick, tick. But still, they were too close, already too close; three strides and they covered five yards, mouths open, grinning.

'Three seconds!' -Digging announced.

Impossible. Surely Nathaniel had been in the pen for ten minutes, for half an hour, forever. Maggie's heart was bursting out of her throat. No one spoke. No one moved. Everything was a black sea, dim and featureless: everything but the bright circle of white light, and the cardboard cutout Nathaniel, and the long shadow of the white Bengal's. Nathaniel was shaking now, and whimpering, too. Maggie feared for a second that she would collapse. Then what? Would the white Bengal's pounce? Would she, Maggie, be brave enough to try to stop them?

She knew she wouldn't. Her legs where water, and she could hardly breathe.

'Seven seconds!' -Digging's voice was shrill, like an alarm.

The White Bengal's were less than eight feet from Nathaniel. They would be on top of her in two more paces. Maggie could hear them breathing, see their whiskers twitching, tasting the air. Nathaniel had started to cry. But she still held herself there, rigid. She was too scared to move. Their eyes, like deep black pools, had transfixed her.

'Eight seconds!' Then one of the white Bengal's twitched; a muscle flexed, and Maggie knew it was getting ready to pounce, felt it, knew it would jump on Natalie and tear her apart and they would all stand, watching, helpless. And just as she was trying to scream Run but couldn't, because her throat was too thick with terror, Nathaniel did run. Someone else screamed it.

There was noise suddenly-people shouting-and Nathaniel was out of the gate and slamming it shut, leaning back, crying.

Just as the white Bengal, the one Maggie had been sure was moving to spring, lay down again.

'Nine seconds,' -Digging said above the sudden roar of sound. Maggie registered a small burst of triumph- Nathaniel was out of the game and then a stronger pull of shame. She pushed over to Nathaniel and drew her into a hug.

'You were amazing,' she said into the top of Nathaniel's hair.

'I didn't make it,' Nathaniel said. Her voice was muffled and her face sticky against Maggie's chest.

'You were still amazing,' Maggie said.

Nathaniel was the only one who wasn't celebrating. She returned almost immediately to the house. But everyone else seemed to forget about the threat of cops, forget about what had happened at the Graybill house and about the body of Little Kelly, found charred and blackened in the basement for a short while, it felt almost as it had at the beginning of the summer when the players had first made the jump.

It took more than an hour for Maggie to get everyone out, into their cars and off the property, and the whole time the dogs were going crazy and the White Bengal's were still again, as though deliberately making a point. By the time the yard was almost empty of cars, exhaustion numbed Maggie's fingers and toes. But it was over, thank God. It was all over, and Anne would never have to know. There were only three players left.

And Maggie was one of them.

'Maggie,' Joh- John tried again when everyone had gone. 'We need to talk.'

'Not tonight, Joh- John.' A few people were lingering, leaning up against their cars, hands down each other's pants. Strange how just a few months ago she had been one of them, hanging out at parties with Matt, her capital B Boyfriend, flaunting it however she could. Wearing his sweatshirts, his baseball hats, like a badge of something -that she was lovable, that she was fine, and normal and just like everybody else. Already the old Maggie seemed like someone she barely knew.

'You can't avoid me forever,' Joh- John said, deliberately moving in front of her as she stooped to collect a cigarette pack, half trampled into the grass. She straightened up. His hair was poking out from every side of his hat, like something alive trying to get out.

She obtained the urge to reach up and try and fight it into the configuration. The most dangerous was that when she looked at him now, she still saw their kiss: the heat that had roared through her and the mellowness of his lips and the brief instantaneous moment when his tongue had found hers.

'I'm not avoiding you,' she said, looking away so she wouldn't have to remember. 'I'm just tired.'

'When, then?' He looked lost. 'It's important, your all right? I need you now. I need you to listen.'

She was intrigued to ask him why Vivian couldn't listen, but she didn't. He resembled awful and sorrowful, and she loved him even if he didn't love her. The feeling that he was upset, in pain, was a worse feeling than her pain.

'Tomorrow,' she said. Foolishly, she stretched out and squeezed his hand. He looked startled, and she dropped it immediately, as though it might burn her. 'I guarantee, tomorrow.'

Part: 14

MONDAY,

AUGUST 15

Maggie IN THE Morning tide, MAGGIE WAS Aroused UP With yelling. Lily was calling her name, pounding up the stairs; then the door flew open, so hard it struck the wall.

Lily said, 'The White Bengal's are gone now.' She was gasping hard, her face red and clammy with sweat. She smelled a little like manure-she must have been out feeding the creatures.

'What?' Instantly Maggie was awake and sitting up.

'The gate is open, and they're gone,' Lily said.

'Unthinkable…' Maggie was already pulling on clothes, shoving her legs into shorts, wrestling on a T-shirt. She didn't even bother with a bra. 'Vain,' she repeated, but even as she said it, a dull thud of terror began, bringing back images from last night, dismembered memories-hugging Nathaniel, latching the gates. Had she replaced the fastener device?

She couldn't remember. Mindy Crammer had been talking to her about her job at Anne's, and then she'd had to yell at Even Zen Seller for trying to get into the pigpen. She must have substituted the fastener.

The White Bengal's weren't missing. They were just hiding out in the trees somewhere, where Lily hadn't spotted them. Underneath, Maggie saw that it was already eleven a.m., that she'd overslept, that Anne would be home soon.

Lily understood her outside. It was another day of thick heat, but this time the sky was overcast, and there was moisture shimmering in the air like a screen. It would rain. She was halfway across the yard when she saw it: the fastener, coiled in the grass like a metal snake, exactly where she had placed it last night when she unlocked the gate for Natalie.

And the gate, now swinging open. The terror turned to stone and dropped straight through her stomach. There was no need to search for the whole enclosure. They were gone. She could manipulate this. Why hadn't the dog's bark? But they had, and she hadn't heard. Or they'd been frightened, bewitched like the crowd last night. Maggie closed her eyes. For a second, she thought she might faint. The White Bengal's were withdrawn, it was her fault, and now Anne would despise her and throw her out. She'd possess every right to. She opened her eyes, fueled by a wild Fear: she had to find them, now, quickly, before Anne came home.

'Stay here,' she told Lily, but she didn't have the force to argue when Lily followed her back into the house.

She hardly apprehended what she was doing. She found a bucket under the sink, dumped out a bunch of shriveled sponges and washing types of equipment, and filled it with some half-thawed steaks. Then she was out of the house again and plunging into the woods. Mayhap they hadn't gone far, and she could lure them back.

'Where are we going?' Lily asked. 'Sh-h-h,' Maggie said sharply. She considered the bite of tears in her eyes. How could she be such a nincompoop, such an absolute moron?

The bucket was heavy, and she had to pull it with both hands, considering from left to right, looking for a flash of color, those luminous black eyes. Come on, come on, come on. Behind Maggie, there was a rustling in the undergrowth, a shift in the air-a presence, animal, watchful. Suddenly it struck Maggie that what she was doing was thick-witted: charging off into the woods with Lily, searching for the White Bengal's like they were lost kittens, hoping to lure them home.

If she did find the white Bengal's, they'd tear her head off for a snack. A stimulating zip of fear went up to her spine. She was over conscious of every rustle, every snapping twig, the diamond patterns of light and shadow that could easily conceal a pair of eyes, a swath of tawny fur.

'Take my hand, Lily,' she said, trying to keep the fear out of her voice.

'Let's go back inside.'

'What about the white Bengal's?' Lily asked. She thought it was an adventure.

'We'll have to call Anne,' Maggie said, and instantly knew it was true. She still had the unmistakable sense of something Other watching her, watching them. 'She'll know what to do.' A raccoon punched its head swiftly from between the fat leaves of a spire-a bush, and Maggie felt a flood of relief that nearly made her pee. She abandoned the bucket in the woodlands. It was too cumbersome, and she wanted to move quickly.

As they were emerging from the woods just next to the outdoor shower, Maggie could hear tires spitting on the driveway and thought that Anne must be homeward. She didn't know whether to feel appreciative or afraid. She was both.

But then she saw the rusted hood of Joh- John's Le Sabre and remembered she'd promised him they could talk today.'

Joh- John! 'Lily was running to him before he had even fully extricated himself from the car. 'The white Bengal's are gone! The White Bengal's are gone!'

'What?' He looked even worse than he had the night ahead, as though he hadn't slept at all. He turned to Maggie. 'Is it correct?'

'It's true,' she said. 'I forgot to padlock the gates.' Suddenly, the truth hit her like a hard punch to the stomach, and she was crying. She'd get kicked out of Anne's house; they'd have to move back to 'Fresh Pines' or go on the run. Furthermore, Anne would be devastated. Anne, who was the only person who gave a sh*t about Maggie.

'Hey, hey.' Joh- John was next to her.

She didn't resist when he hugged her.

'It's not your responsibility. It's going to be okay.'

'It is my fault.' She buried her face in the hollow of his joint and yelled until she coughed, while he rubbed her back and her hair, touched her lightly on her cheek, murmured into the top of her head. Only Joh- John could make her feel small. Only Joh- John could make her feel defended.

She didn't even hear the entrance of Anne's car until a door was slamming and Anne's voice, frantic, called, 'What's the matter? What's wrong?'

Maggie stepped away from Joh- John and quickly, Anne took her by the arms. 'Are you okay? Are you hurt?'

'It's not me.' Maggie swiped an arm across her nose. Her mouth was thick with the taste of phlegm, and she couldn't look Anne in the eye. 'I'm fine.' She tried to say it. The White Bengal's are gone. The White Bengal's are gone. Lily was quiet, her mouth moving soundlessly. It was Joh- John who spoke. 'The white Bengal's got out,' he said.

Nevaeh

Book: 20

Flashbacks

Chapter: 127

(Flashback text- video message.) ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈

Part: 1

Past memories

I get a new text message- and there a photo attached- and there it is Maggie, spared, showing off her new butt plug in her hole… making it push in and out as she squeezes down hard on it… it's pink! And oh, so sparkly she said! And she is playing with herself- also.

I love this video I have it…

It's on my pc now… with all the porn… and sh*t of here young sex ass!

Something they all new after I passed… I was… um… living a fake and gay life… take that any way you want too… it's all good for me now. Cute for she was born in 2000, and she calls me old for I was born in the late- 1990's… 1998- for a fact.

(Now)

My vision is cloudy. I can barely make out the banisters. I'm tripping, half falling down the stairs, finding the front door by touch. I think Hanna might be calling to me, but everything is lost to a roaring, rushing in my ears, inside my head. Sunshine, brilliant, brilliant white light-cool biting iron under my fingers, the gate-ocean smells, gasoline.

Wailing, growing louder. A punctuated shriek: beep, beep, beep.

My head clears all at once and I jump out of the middle of the street just before I'm squashed by a police car, which barrels past me, horn still blaring, siren whirling, leaving me coughing up dirt and dust. The ache in my throat gets so bad it feels like I'm gagging, and when I finally let the tears come it's a huge relief, like dropping something heavy after you've been carrying it for a long time. Once I start crying, I can't stop, and all the way home I have to keep mashing my palm into my eyes every few seconds, smearing away the tears just so

I can see where I'm going. I comfort myself by thinking that in less than two months this will seem like nothing to me.

All of it will fall away and I'll rise new and free, like a bird winging up into the air.

Part: 2

Lasting images

That's what Hanna doesn't understand, has never understood. For some of us, it's about more than the deliria. Some of us, the lucky ones, will get the chance to be reborn: newer, fresher, better. Healed and whole and perfect again, like a misshapen slab of iron that comes out of the fire glowing, glittering, razor-sharp.

That is all I want all I have ever wanted. That is the promise of the cure.

Lord-

Suspicious minds-

Keep our hearts fixed; as you fixed the planets in their orbits and cooled the chaos of emerging-

As the gravity of your will keeps star and star from Collapsing… Keeps ocean from turning to dust and dust from turning to water… Keeps planets from colliding… And suns from exploding-

So, Lord, keep our hearts fixed in the steady orbit and help them stay the path.

-Psalm 21 plays over in my mind…

That night, even after I'm in bed, Hana's words replay themselves endlessly in my head. You won't end up like her. You don't have it in you. She only said it to comfort me, I know it should be reassuring-but for some reason it isn't. For some reason, it makes me upset; there's a deep aching in my chest, as though something large and cold and sharp is lodged there.

Here's another thing Hana doesn't understand: Thinking about the disease, and worrying about it, and stressing about whether I've inherited some predisposition for it- that's all I have of my mom. The disease is what I know about her. It is the link…

Otherwise, I have nothing.

It's not that I don't have memories of her. I do lots of them, considering how young I was when she died. I remember that when there was fresh snow, she would send me outside to pack pans with handfuls of it. Once inside we would drizzle maple syrup into the snow-filled pans, watching it harden into amber candy almost instantly, all loops and fragile, sugared filigree,

like edible lace. I remember how much she loved to sing to us as she bounced me in the water at the beach off Eastern Prom.

I didn't know how strange this was at the time. Other mothers teach their children to swim. Other mothers bounce their babies in the water and apply sunscreen to make sure their babies don't burn, and do all the things that a mother is supposed to do, as outlined in the book of hush-hush- But they don't sing.

I remember that she brought me trays of buttered toast when I was sick and kissed my bruises when I fell, and I remember once when she lifted me to my feet after I fell off my bike and began to rock me in her arms, a woman gasped and said to her, 'You should be ashamed of yourself,' and I didn't understand why which made me cry harder. After that, she comforted me only in private. In public, she would just frown and say,

'You're okay, Lena. Get up.'

We used to have dance parties too. My mother called them 'sock jams,' because we would roll up the carpets in the living room and put on our thickest socks and slip and slide along the wooden hallways.

Part: 3

Always on my mind

Even Rachel joined in, though she always claimed to be too old for baby games.

My mom would draw the curtains and wedge pillows under the front and back doors and turn up the music. We laughed so hard I always went to bed with a stomachache.

Eventually, I understood that on our sock-jam nights she would close the curtains to prevent us from being seen by passing patrols, that she'd stopped up the doors with pillows so that the neighbors would not report us for playing music and laughing too much, both potential warning signs of the deliria.

I understood that she used to tuck my father's military pin-a silver dagger he had inherited from his father, which she wore every day on a chain around her neck-beneath the

collar of her shirt whenever we left the house, so no one would see it and become suspicious. I understood that all the happiest moments of my childhood were a lie.

They were wrong and unsafe and illegal.

They were freakish. My mother was freakish, and I'd probably inherited the freakishness from her.

For the first time, I wonder what she must have been feeling, thinking, the night she walked out to the cliffs and kept walking, feet pedaling the air. I wonder whether she was scared. I wonder whether she thought of me or Rachel... I wonder whether she was sorry for leaving us behind.

I start thinking about my father, too. I don't remember him at all, though I have some dim, ancient impression of two warm, rough hands and a large looming face floating above mine, I think that's just because my mother kept a framed portrait in her bedroom of my father and me. I was only a few months old and he was holding me, smiling, looking at the camera. But there's no way I'm remembering for real. I wasn't even a year old when he died.

Cancer...!

(Flashback)

Karly- Maggie just loves wearing my class ring, that has a 1950's look gold with a silver inlay, and the band swatter that I gave up for Jenny and the girls- Just to be popular- as you no band is not cool when you do something more than they can... that is red- white- and blue... yes, it has my name on it- yet they all think it was for she has nothing- ha it for the fact I love her. Little do they all know.

Part: 4

Media

Twitter: @Olivia- 'Showing her puss- puss- nice no? even I am not that slutty!' Ha- love her!!!! You can see all here puss pic on Instagram also... the boys love- for reals. That's what it's all about the boys and popularity- and who hooks up with whom... grade freak that... I want to be laid- not the grade. That is how I thought then.

(Now)

Girl boy girl in- bad- rubbing- licking- kissing sucking- his head.

The heat is horrible, thick, clotting on the walls. Kellie is rolled over on her back, arms and legs flung open on top of her comforter, breathing silently with her mouth gaping open. Hanna is fast asleep, murmuring soundlessly into her pillow. The whole room smells like a wet exhalation, skin and tongues and warm milk.

I ease out of bed, already dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt. I didn't even bother to change into my pajamas. I knew I would never be able to sleep tonight. And earlier in the evening, I'd come to a decision. I was sitting at the dinner table with Carol and Uncle William and Jenny and Grace, while everyone chewed and swallowed in silence, staring blankly at one another, feeling as though the air was weighing down on me, constricting my breath, like two fists squeezing tighter and tighter around a water balloon, when I realized something.

Hanna said I didn't have it in me, but she was wrong.

My heart is beating so loudly I can hear it, and I'm positive that everyone else will too-that it will make my aunt sit bolt upright in her bed, ready to catch me and accuse me of trying to sneak out.

Which is, of course, exactly what I am trying to do. I didn't even know a heart could beat so loudly, and it reminds me of an Edgar Allan Poe story we had to read in one of our social studies classes, about this guy who kills this other guy and then gives himself up to the police because he's convinced he can hear the dead guy's heart beating up from beneath his floorboards. It's supposed to be a story about guilt and the dangers of civil disobedience, but when I first read it I thought it seemed kind of lame and melodramatic. Now I get it, though. Poe must have snuck out a lot when he was young.

I ease open the bedroom door, holding my breath, praying it doesn't squeak. At one-point Jenny lets out a shout and my heart freezes. But then she rolls over, flinging one arm across her pillow, and I exhale slowly, realizing she's just fussing in her sleep.

The hall is dark. The room my aunt and uncle share- like is- dark too, and the only sound comes from the whispering of the trees outside and the low ticks and groans from the

walls, the usual old house arthritic noises. I finally work up the courage to slip out into the hall and slide the bedroom door shut behind me. I go so slowly that it almost feels like I'm not moving at all, feeling my way by the bumps and ripples in the wallpaper over to the stairs, then sliding my hand inch by inch over the banister, walking on my very tiptoes. Even so, it seems like the house is fighting me like it's just screaming for me to be caught. Every step seems to creak, or shriek, or moan.

Part: 5

Socializing

Liv on- Instagram- 'You'll- like- be seeing a lot of here in the upcoming slid show! Cute but- OMG!'

I think Jenny to wide and sh*t, and raunchy sluty to show those… you- have seen here photos by now… what did you think… cute…??? Or am I cutest?

Snap-chat me for 1,000 tokens, and you have it for life!

Every single floorboard quivers and shudders under my feet, and I start mentally bargaining with the house: If I make it to the front door without waking up- mom, would- I swear to God I'll never slam another door. I'll never call you 'an old piece of turd' again, not even in my head, and I'll never curse the basement when it floods, and I will never, ever, ever kick the bedroom wall when I'm annoyed at Jenny.

Maybe the house hears me, because, miraculously, I do make it to the front door. I pause for a second longer, listening for the sounds of footsteps upstairs, whispered voices, anything- but other than my heart, which is still going strong and loud, it's silent.

Even the house seems to hesitate and take a breath, because the front door swings open with barely a whisper, and in the last second before I slip out into the night the rooms behind me are as dark and still as a grave.

Outside, I hesitate on the front stoop.

The fireworks stopped an hour ago- I heard the last stuttering explosions, like distant gunfire, just as I was getting ready for bed and now the streets are strangely silent and empty. It's a little after eleven o'clock. Some cursed must be lingering at the Eastern Prom.

Part: 6

Nocturnal

Everyone else is home by now. Not a single light is burning on the street. All the street lamps were disabled years ago, except in the richest parts of Pittsburgh, and they look to me like blinded eyes. Thank God, the moon is so bright.

I strain to detect the sounds of passing patrols or groups of regulators - I almost hope I do, because then I'll have to go back inside, to my bed, to safety, and already the panic is starting to drill through me again. But everything is perfectly still and quiet, almost like it's frozen. Everything rational, right, and good is screaming for me to turn around and go upstairs, but some stubborn inner center keeps me moving forward.

I go down the walk and unchain my bike from the gate.

My bike rattles a little bit, particularly when you first start pedaling, so I walk it some ways down the street. The wheels' tick reassuringly over the pavement.

I've never been out this late on my own in my life. I've never broken curfew. But alongside the fear-which is always there, of course, that constant crushing weight is a small, flickering feeling of excitement that works its way up and underneath the fear, pushing it back some. Like, it's okay, I'm all right, I can do this. I'm just a girl-an in-between girl, five-two, nothing special- but I can do this, and all the curfews and the patrols in the world aren't stopping me.

It's amazing how much comfort this thought gives me. It's amazing how it breaks up the fear, as a tiny candle lit in the middle of the night, lighting up the shapes of things, burning away the dark.

When I reach the end of my street I hop up on my bike, feeling the gears shudder into place. The breeze feels good as I start pedaling, careful not to go too quickly, staying alert in

case there are regulators nearby. Fortunately, Stroud water and Roaring Brooke Farms are in the exact opposite direction from the

Fourth of July celebrations at Eastern Prom.

Once- I get to the broad swath of farmland that surrounds Pittsburgh like a belt, I should be okay. The farms and slaughterhouses rarely get patrolled. But first I have to make it through the West End, where rich people like Hanna live, through the old town, and over the Fore River at Bridge Street.

Thankfully, each street I turn down is empty.

Stroud-water is a good thirty minutes away, even if I'm biking quickly. As I get off-peninsula- moving away from the buildings and businesses of downtown Pittsburgh and onto the more suburban mainland-the houses get smaller and farther apart, set back on weedy, patchy yards. This isn't rural Pittsburgh yet, but there are signs of the countryside creeping in: plants poking up through half-rotted porches, an owl hooting mournfully in the dark, a black scythe of bats cutting suddenly across the sky. Almost all these houses have cars in front of them just like the richer houses in, Northern End-but these have been salvaged from the junkyards.

They're mounted on cinder blocks and covered in rust. I pass one that has a tree growing straight through its sunroof, like the car has just dropped out of the sky and been impaled there, and another one, hood open, missing its engine. As I go past, a cat startles up out of its black cavity, meowing, blinking at me.

After I cross the Fore River the houses fall away altogether, and it's just field after field and farm after farm, with names like Meadow Lane and Sheep bay and oak's part by the river, which make them sound all homey and nice: places where someone might be baking muffins and skimming fresh cream for butter.

Across the fields I see the low, dark silhouettes of barns and silos, some of them brand-new, some of them barely standing, clinging to the earth like teeth Digging into something. The air smells slightly sweet, like growing things and manure.

But... but... but... but... um...

most of the farms are owned by big corporations, packed with livestock and often staffed by orphans.

I've always liked it out here, but it's kind of freaky in the dark, open and empty, and I can't help but think that if I did come across a patrol there would be no place to hide, no alley to turn down.

Roaring Brooke's Farms is right next to the southwestern border of the town. It's been abandoned for years since half the main building and both grain silos were destroyed in a fire.

About five minutes before I get there, I think I can make out a rhythm drumming almost imperceptibly under the throaty song of the crickets, but for a while, I'm not sure if I'm just imagining it or only hearing my heart, which has started pounding again.

Farther on, though, and I'm sure. Even before I reach the little dirt road that leads down to the barn-or at least, the portion of the barn that's still standing- strains of music spring up, crystallizing in the night air like rain turning suddenly to snow, drifting to earth.

Now I'm scared again. All I can think is wrong, wrong, wrong, a word that drums in my head. Mom would kill me if she knew what I was doing.

~*~

Kill-

me, or have me thrown into the Burial chamber or taken to the labs for an early procedure, willow and oak marks–style.

I hop off my bike when I see the turnoff to Roaring Brooke, and the big metal sign staked in the ground that reads PROPERTY OF Pittsburgh, NO TRESPASSING. I wheel my bike some little ways, into the woods at the side of the road. The actual farmhouse and the old barn are still five or six hundred feet down the road, but I don't want to bring my bike any farther. I don't lock it up, though. I don't even want to think about what would happen if there was a raid, but if there is, I'm not going to want to be fumbling with a lock in the half-dark. I'll need speed.

I step around the NO TRESPASSING sign.

I'm getting to be quite the expert at ignoring them, I realize, remembering how Hana and I hopped the gate at the labs. It's the first time I've thought about that afternoon in a while, and right then a vision of Alex rises in front of me, a memory of seeing him on the observation deck, head tilted back and laughing.

I have to focus on the land around me, the brightness of the moon, the wildflowers on the road. It helps me beat back the feeling that I'm going to be sick at any second. I don't know what compelled me out of the house, why I felt like I had to prove Hana wrong about something, and I'm trying to ignore the idea-way more disturbing than anything else-that my argument with Hana was just an excuse.

That may be, deep down, I was just curious.

Someone is singing: a beautiful voice as thick and heavy as warm honey, spilling up and down a scale so quickly I feel dizzy just listening.

That music was metallic and awful, fuzzy through the speakers. The music that's playing underneath the voice is strange and clashing and wild-but nothing like the wailing and scratching that I heard Hana playing on her computer earlier today, though I recognize certain similarities, certain patterns of melody and rhythm.

This music ebbs and flows, irregular, sad. It reminds me, weirdly, of watching the ocean during a bad storm, the lashing, crashing waves and the spray of sea foam against the docks; the way it takes your breath away, the power and the hugeness of it. I'm not feeling curious now. I'm feeling scared. And very, very stupid.

The farmhouse and the old barn are positioned in a dip of land between two hills, a mini valley, like the constructions, are sitting right in the middle of somebody's pursed lips. For the reason that of the way the land slopes I can't see the farmhouse yet, but as I get closer to the top of the hill the music gets clearer, louder. It's like nothing I've ever heard before. It's not like-the authorized music you can download off LAM, prim and harmonious and structured, the kind of music that gets played in the bandshell in Deering Oaks Park during official summer concerts.

That's exactly what happens as I listen to the music, as I come up over the final crest of a hill, and the half-ruined barn and collapsing farmhouse fan out in front of me, just as the music swells, a wave about to break: The breath leaves my body all at once, and I'm struck dumb

by the beauty of it. For a second it seems to me like I am looking down at the ocean-a sea of people, writing and dancing in the light spilling down from the barn-like shadows twisting up around a flame.

The barn is completely gutted: split open and blackened by the fire, exposed to the elements. Only half of it is left standing-fragments of three walls, a portion of the roof, part of an elevated platform that must once have been used to store hay. That's where the band is playing. Thin, stalky trees have begun pushing up in the fields. Older trees seared completely white from the fire and bald of branches and leaves, point-like ghostly fingers to the sky.

Fifty feet beyond the barn, I see the low fringe of blackness where the unregulated land begins. The Wilds. I can't make out the border fence from this distance, but I imagine I can feel it, can sense the electricity buzzing through the air. I've only been close to the border fence a few times. Once with my mother years ago, when she made me listen to the zipping of the electricity-a current so strong the air seems to hum with it; you can get a shock just from standing four feet away-and promise never, ever, ever to touch it.

She told me that when the cure was first made mandatory, some people tried to escape over the border. They never put more than a hand on the fence before being fried like bacon - I remember that's exactly what she said, like bacon.

Since then I've run alongside it with Hanna a few times, always careful to stay a good ten feet away.

In the barn, someone has set up speakers and amps and even two enormous, industrial-sized lamps, which make everyone close to the stage look starkly white and hyper-real, and everyone else dark and indistinct, blurry.

A song ends and the crowd roars together an ocean sound. I think, they must be mooching power from a grid on one of the other farms. I think, this is stupid, I'll never find Hana, there are too many people and then a new song starts, this one just as wild and beautiful, and it's like the music reaches across all that black space and pulls at something at the very heart and root of me, plucking me like a string. I head down the hill toward the barn. The weird thing is I don't choose to do it.

My feet just go on their own, as though they've happened on some invisible track and it's all just slide, photograph, print.

For a moment, I forget that I'm supposed to be looking for Hana. I feel as though I'm in a dream, where strange things are happening, but they don't feel strange. Everything is cloudy- everything is wrapped in a fog and I'm filled from head to toe with the single, burning desire to get closer to the music, to hear the music better, for the music to go on and on and on.

'Kellie! Oh my God, Kell!' Hearing my name snaps, me out of my daze, and I'm suddenly aware that I'm standing in a huge crush of people.

No. Not just people. Boys. And girls.

Uncured, all of them, without a hint of a blemish on their necks-at least the ones standing close enough for me to scope out. Boys and girls talking. Boys and girls laughing. Boys and girls sharing sips from the same cup. All of a sudden,

I think I might faint.

Hanna is barreling toward me, elbowing people out of the way, and before I can even open my mouth, she's jumping on top of me as she did at graduation, squeezing me in a hug. I'm so startled I stumble backward, nearly falling over.

'You're here.'

She pulls away and stares at me, keeping her hands on my shoulders. 'You're here.'

Another song ends, and the lead singer -a tiny girl with long black hair- calls out something about a break. As my brain slowly reboots, I have the dumbest thought: She's even shorter than I am, and she's singing in front of five hundred people.

Then I think, five hundred people, five hundred people, what am I doing here with five hundred people?

'I can't stay,' I say quickly. The moment the words are out of my mouth I feel relieved. Whatever I came here to prove has been proven; now I can go. I need to get out of this crowd, the babble of voices, a shifting wall of chests and shoulders all around me. I was too wrapped up

in the music earlier to look around, but now I have the sensation of colors and perfumes and hands twisting and turning around us.

'Lena,' she says, 'this is my friend Drew.' I think she looks guilty for just a second, but then the smile is back on her face, as wide as ever like we're standing in the middle of St. Paul's talking about a bio quiz.

Hana opens her mouth- maybe to object-but at that second, we're interrupted. A boy with dirty blond hair falling into his eyes pushes his way over to us, carrying two big plastic cups. The dirty-blond-hair boy passes a cup to Hana. She takes it, thanks to him, and then turns back to me.

~*~

I open my mouth, but no words come out, which is probably a good thing, considering that there's a giant fire alarm going off in my head. It may sound stupid and naive, but not once when I was heading to the farms did, I even consider that the party would be coed. It didn't even occur to me.

Breaking curfew is one thing; listening to unapproved music is even worse. But breaking segregation laws is one of the worst offenses there is. Thus, willow Marks early procedure and the graffiti scrawled on her house; thus, the fact that Chelsea Brown was kicked out of school after allegedly being found breaking curfew with a boy from Spencer, and her parents were mysteriously fired, and her whole family was forced to vacate their house. And- at least in Chelsea case- there wasn't even any proof. Just a rumor going around.

Drew gives me a half-wave. 'Hey, Liv…'

My mouth opens and closes… Still no sound… For a second, we stand there in awkward silence. Then he extends a cup to me, a sudden, jerky gesture.

'Whiskey…?'

'Whiskey…?' I squeak back… I've only had alcohol a few times… At Christmas, when mom pours me a quarter glass of wine, and once at Hana's house when we stole some blackberry liqueur from her parents' liquor cabinet and drank until the ceiling started spinning overhead.

Hanna was laughing and giggling, but I didn't like it, didn't like the sweet sick taste in my mouth or the way my thoughts seemed to break apart like a mist in the sun. Out of control- that's what it was, that's what I hated.

Drew shrugs. 'It's all they had.

Vodka always goes first at these things.' At this things-as in, these things happen, as in, more than once.

'No.' I try to shove the cup back at him. 'Take it.'

He waves me away, obviously misunderstanding. 'It's cool. I'll just get another.'

Drew smiles quickly at Hanna before disappearing into the crowd. I like his smile, the way it rises crookedly toward his left ear- but as I realize I'm thinking about liking his smile, I feel the panic winging its way through me, beating through my blood, a lifetime of whispers and accusations.

Control. It's all about control.

'I have to go,' I manage to say to Hanna. Progress.

'Go?' She wrinkles her forehead up.

'You walk out here-'

'I biked.'

I pretend to shiver so she doesn't feel bad, wondering why it feels so awkward to talk to her. This is my best friend, the girl I've known since second grade, the girl who used to split her cookies with me at lunch, and once put her fist in Jillian Dawson's face after Jillian said my family was diseased.

'I'm tired,' I say. 'And I shouldn't be here.' I want to say, you shouldn't be here either, but I stop myself.

'Whatever, you bike out here and then you're just going to go?'

Hanna reaches for my hand, but I cross my arms quickly to avoid her. She looks momentarily hurt.

Part: 7

Gracelessness

'Did you hear the band? They're amazing, aren't they?' Hanna's being way too nice, totally un- Hanna, and I feel a deep, sharp pain in my ribs. She's trying to be polite. She's acting like we're strangers. She feels the awkwardness too.

'I- I wasn't listening.' For some reason, I don't want Hanna to know that yes, I heard, and yes, I thought they were amazing, better than amazing.

It's too private- embarrassing even, something to be ashamed of, and even though I came to Roaring Brooke Farms, and broke curfew and everything, just to see her and apologize, the feeling- I had earlier today returns to me: I don't know Hanna anymore, and she doesn't know me.

I'm used to a feeling of double-ness, of thinking one thing and having to do another, a constant tug-of-war. But somehow Hanna has fallen cleanly away into the double half, the other world, the world of unmentionable thoughts and things and people.

Is it possible that all this time I've been living my life, studying for tests, taking long runs with Hana-and this other world has just existed, running alongside and underneath mine, alive, ready to sneak out of the shadows and the alleyways as soon as the sun goes down? Illegal parties, unapproved music, people touching one another with no fear of the disease, with no fear for themselves.

A world without fear. Impossible.

And even though I'm standing in the middle of the biggest crowd I've ever seen in my life; I suddenly feel very alone.

'Stay,' Hana says quietly. Even though it's a command, there's a hesitation in her voice, like she's asking a question.

'You can catch the second set.'

I shake my head. I wish I hadn't come.

I wish I hadn't seen this. I wish I didn't know what I know now, could wake up tomorrow and ride over to

Hanna's house, could lie out at Eastern Prom with her and complain about how boring summers are like we always do.

I could believe that nothing had changed.

'I'm going to go,' I say, wishing my voice didn't come out shaky. 'It's all right, though. You can stay.'

The second I say it; I realize she never offered to come back with me. She's looking at me with the weirdest mixture of regret and pity.

'I can come back with you if you want,' she says, but I can tell she's only offering now to make me feel better. 'No, no. I'll be fine.' My cheeks are burning, and I take a step back, desperate to get out of there. I bump against someone-a boy who turns and smiles at me. I step quickly away from him.

'Lena, wait.' Hana goes to grab me again. Even though she already has a drink, I shove my cup in her free hand, so she has to pause, momentarily frowning as she tries to juggle both drinks into the crook of an elbow, and in that second, I dance backward out of her reach.

'I'll be fine, I promise. I'll talk to you tomorrow.' Then I'm slipping through a narrow space between two people- that's the only benefit of being five-two, you have a good vantage point on all the in-between spaces-and before I know it, Hana has dropped behind me, swallowed up by the crowd. I weave a path away from the barn, keeping my eyes down, hoping my cheeks cool off fast.

Images swirl by, a blur, making me feel like I'm dreaming again. Boy. Girl.

Boy/Girl. Laughing, shoving each other, touching each other's hair. I've never, not once in my whole life, felt so different and out of place. There's a high, mechanized shriek, and then the band starts playing again, but this time the music does nothing for me. I don't even pause. I just keep walking, heading for the hill, imagining the cool silence of the starlit fields, the

familiar dark streets of Pittsburgh, the regular rhythm of the patrols, marching quietly in sync, the feedback from the regulators' walkie-talkies- regular, normal, familiar, mine.

Finally, the crowd starts thinning. It was hot, pressed up against so many people, and the breeze stings my skin, cools my cheeks. I've started to calm down a little, and at the edge of the crowd, I allow myself one look back at the stage. The barn, open to the sky and the night and glowing white with light, reminds me of a palm cupping a small bit of fire.

'Kellie!'

It's strange how I instantly recognize the voice even though I've heard it only once before, for ten minutes, fifteen tops -it's the laughter that runs underneath it, like someone leaning in to let you in on a really good secret in the middle of a boring class.

My vision does its camera- zooming in focus again, and all I see is Ray, shouldering his way out of the crowd toward me.

'Liv! Wait!'

A brief flash of terror zips through me -for a wild second, I think he must be here as part of a patrol, as a raiding group or something- but then I see he's dressed normally, in jeans and his scuffed-up sneakers with the ink-blue laces and a faded T-shirt. Everything freezes…

The blood stops flowing in my veins, my breath stops coming also. For a second even the music falls away and all I hear is something steady and quiet and pretty, like the distant beat of a drum, and I think, I'm hearing my heart, except I know that's impossible because my heart has stopped too.

'What are you doing here?' I stammer out as he catches up with me.

He grins at me- 'Nice to see you too.'

He has left a few feet of distance between us, and I'm glad. In the half-light, I can't make out the color of his eyes and I don't need to be distracted right now, don't need to feel the way I did at the labs when he leaned in to whisper to me- the total awareness of the bare inch that separated his mouth from my ear, terror and guilt and excitement all at once.

'I'm serious.' I do my best to scowl at him.

'But you can't…' I'm struggling to find words, not quite sure how to say what I want to say. 'But then again this is…'

'Illegal…?' He shrugs… His smile falters, though it doesn't disappear entirely. He blows air out of his lips. 'I came to hear the music,' he says. 'Like everybody else.'

One strand of hair curls down over his left eye, and when he turns to scan the party it catches the light from the stage and winks that crazy golden-brown color. 'It's okay,' he says, quieter so that I have to lean forward to hear him over the music.

'Nobody's hurting anybody.'

You don't know that I start to say, but the way his words are just edged with sadness stops me.

Part: 8

Snaps

Olivia tweets- Tell me how pretty it is, #p*ssy-pic.

Kiss me here Kellie…

Maybe he's only regretful for the things he lost after the cure. Music doesn't move people the same way, for example, and while he should have been cured of feelings of regret, too, the procedure works differently for everybody, and it isn't always perfect. Ray runs a hand through his hair and I make out the small, dark, three-pronged scar behind his left ear, perfectly symmetrical.

That's why my aunt and uncle sometimes still dream. That's why my cousin Marcella used to find herself crying hysterically, with no warning or apparent cause.

'So, what about you?' He turns back to me and the smile is on again, and the teasing, winking quality of his voice.

'What's your excuse?'

'I didn't want to come,' I say quickly.

'I had to-' I break off, realizing I'm not sure why I had to come. 'I had to give something to someone,' I say finally.

He raises his eyebrows, clearly unimpressed. I rush on, 'To Hanna. My friend. You met her the other day.'

'I remember,' he says.

'For standing me up.' One corner of his mouth hitches higher, and again I have the feeling that he's sharing some delicious secret with me, that he's trying to tell me something. 'You were a no-show at Back and Gold Cove that day.'

I've never seen anyone maintain a smile for so long. It's like his face is naturally molded that way. 'You haven't said you're sorry yet, by the way.'

'For what?' The crowd has continued to press closer to the stage, so Ray and I are no longer surrounded by people.

Occasionally, someone walks by, swinging a bottle of something or singing along, slightly off-key, but for the most part, we're alone.

I feel a burst of triumph-he was waiting for me at Back and Gold Cove! He did want me to meet him! At the same time, the anxiety blooms inside of me. He wants something from me. I'm not sure what it is, but I can sense it, and it makes me afraid.

'So?' He folds his arms and rocks back on his heels, still smiling. 'Are you going to apologize, or what?'

His easiness and self-assurance aggravate me; just like they did at the labs. It's so unfair, so different from how I feel like I'm about to have a heart attack or melt into a puddle.

'I don't apologize to liars,' I say, surprised by how steady my voice sounds.

He winces. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Come on.' I roll my eyes, feeling more and more confident by the second. 'You lied about seeing me at evaluations. You lied about recognizing me.' I'm ticking his lies off on my fingers. 'You lied about even being inside the labs on Evaluation Day.'

'Okay, okay.'

To keep the process 'pure' or something, I don't know. But I needed a cup of coffee, and there's this machine on the second floor of the C complex that has the good kind, with real milk and everything, so I used my code to get in. He holds up both hands.

'I'm sorry, okay? Look, I'm the one who should apologize.' He stares at me for a second and then sighs. 'I told you, security isn't allowed in the labs during evaluations. That's it.

End of story.

And afterward, I had to lie about it. I could lose my job. And I only work at the stupid labs to subsidize my school -' He trails off. For once he doesn't look confident. He looks worried like he's scared I might tell-on him.

'So why where you on the observation deck?' I press on... 'Why where you are watching me?'

'I didn't even make it to the second floor,' he says. He is staring at me closely, as though judging my reaction.

'I came inside, and-and- I just heard this crazy noise. That rushing, roaring sound.

And something else, too. Screaming or something.'

I close my eyes briefly, recalling the feeling of the burning white lights, my impression of hearing the ocean pounding outside the labs, of hearing my mother scream across the distance of a decade. When I open them again, Ray is still watching me.

'Anyway, I had no idea what was going on. I thought- I don't know, it's stupid but I thought maybe the labs where under attack or something. And then as I'm standing there, all of a sudden there's, like, a hundred cows charging me.' He shrugs. 'There was a staircase to my left. I freaked out and booked it. Figured cows don't climb stairs.' A smile appears again, this time fleeting, tentative. 'I ended up on the observation deck.'

A perfectly normal, reasonable explanation. I feel relieved, and less frightened of him now. At the same time, something is working under my chest, a dull feeling, a disappointment.

And some stubbornness, a part of me that still doubts him. I remember the way he looked on the observation deck, head tilted back, laughing; the way he winked at me. The way he looked amused, confident, happy. Unafraid. A world without fear-

'So-o, you don't know anything about how-how it happened?' I can't believe I'm being so bold. I ball up my fists and squeeze, hoping he doesn't notice the sudden strangled sound of my voice.

'The mix-up in the deliveries, you mean?' He says it smoothly, without a pause or a break in his voice, and the last of my doubts vanish. Just like any cured, he doesn't question the official story. 'I wasn't in charge of signing for deliveries that day. The guy who was- Sal-was fired. You're supposed to check the cargo. I guess he skipped that step.' He cocks his head to one side, spreads his hands. 'Satisfied now?'

'Satisfied,' I say. But the pressure in my chest is still there. Even though earlier I was desperate to be out of the house, now I just wish I could blink and be home, sit up in bed, pushing the covers off of my legs, realizing that everything-the party, seeing Ray- was a dream.

'So -?' He tilts his head back toward the barn. The band is playing something loud and fast-paced. I don't know why the music appealed to me before. It just seems like noise now-rushing noise. 'Think we can get closer without getting trampled?'

I ignore the fact that he has just said 'we,' a word that for some reason sounds amazingly appealing when pronounced with his lilting, laughing accent. 'Actually, I was just heading home.' I realize I'm angry at him without knowing why-for not being what I thought he was, I guess, even though I should be grateful that he's normal, and cured, and safe.

'Heading home?' he repeats disbelievingly. 'You can't go home.' I've always been careful not to let myself give in to feelings of anger or irritation. I can't afford to at Carol's house. I owe her too much and besides, after the few tantrums I threw as a child, I hated the way she looked at me sideways for days, as though analyzing me, measuring me. I knew she was thinking, Just like her mother. But now I give in, let the anger surge. I'm sick of people acting like this world, this other world, is the normal one, while I'm the freak. It's not fair: like all the rules have suddenly been changed and somebody forgot to tell me.

'I can, and I am.' I turn around and start heading up the hill, figuring he'll leave me alone. To my surprise, he doesn't.

'Wait!' He comes bounding up the hill after me.

'What are you doing?' I whirl around to face him again, surprised by how confident I sound, considering that my heart is rushing, tumbling.

Maybe this is the secret to talking to boys-maybe you just have to be angry all the time.

'What do you mean?' We're both slightly out of breath from hoofing it up the hill, but he still manages a smile. 'I just want to talk to you.'

'You're following me.' I cross my arms, which helps me feel as though I'm closing off space between us. 'You're following me again.' There it is... He starts backward, and I get a momentary, sick twinge of pleasure, that I've surprised him. 'Again...?' He repeats... I'm glad that for once, I'm not the one stuttering, or struggling to find words.

The words fly out: 'I think it's a little bit strange that I go pretty much my whole life without seeing you, and then all of a sudden I start seeing you everywhere.' I hadn't planned on saying this-it hadn't struck me as strange-but the second the words are out of my mouth I realize they're true.

I think he's going to be angry, but to my surprise he tips his head back and laughs, long and loud, moonlight turning the curve of his cheeks and chin and nose silver. I'm so surprised by his reaction I just stand there, staring at him. Finally, he looks at me. Even though I still can't make out his eyes-the moon draws everything starkly, highlighting it in bright, crystalline silver or leaving it in blackness- I have the impression of heat, and light, the same impression I had that day at the labs.

'Maybe you just haven't been paying attention,' he says quietly, rocking forward slightly on his heels.

I take an unconscious, half-shuffling step backward. I find myself frightened by his closeness; by the fact that even though our bodies are separated by several inches I feel as though we're touching.

'What-what do you mean?'

'I mean that you're wrong.' He pauses, watching me, and I struggle to keep my face composed, even though I can feel my left eye-straining and fluttering. Hopefully, in the darkness, he can't tell. 'We've seen each other plenty.'

Part: 9

Immature

'I would remember if we'd met before.'

'I didn't say that we'd met.' He doesn't try to close the new distance between us and I'm grateful, at least, for that. He chews on the corner of a lip-a gesture that makes him look younger.

'Let me ask you a question,' he goes on.

'How come you don't run past the

Governor anymore?'

Without meaning to I gasp a little.

'How do you know about the

Governor?'

'I take classes at IUP,' he says.

The University of Pittsburgh-I remembers now, the afternoon we walked up to see the ocean from the back of the lab complex, hearing bits of his conversation floating back to me on the wind. He did say he was a student. 'I worked at the Grind last semester, in Monument Square. I used to see you all the time.' My mouth opens and shuts. No words come out; my brain goes on lockdown whenever I need it the most.

Of course, I know the Grind; Hana and I used to run past it two, maybe three times a week, watching the college students float in and out like drifting snowflakes, blowing the steam from the top of their cups. The Grind looks out onto a small square, all cobblestone, called

Monument Square: It marked the halfway point of one of the six-mile routes I used to do all the time.

In its center is a statue of a man, half-eroded from snow and weather and scrawled over with a few looping curls of graffiti. He is striding forward, one hand holding his hat on his head so that it looks like he is walking through a horrible storm or a headwind. His other fist is extended in front of him. It's obvious that he was, in the distant past, holding something- probably a torch- but at some point, that portion of the statue was broken or stolen. So now the Governor strides forward with an empty fist, a circular hole cut in his hand, a perfect hiding place for notes and secret stuff.

Hanna and I and she used to check his fist sometimes, to see if there was anything good inside. Nonetheless, there weren't-just a few pieces of wadded-up chewing gum and some coins.

Part: 10

Infidelities

(Past- chatting)

I never got this by liv like to cummie- with little almost- no make on- or not fixed up- not like pridddieee- and sh*t- for she said, 'Like kar- if a boy wants to see me cummie- he- we have to love me like this… I am doing this at home in my room- like the way I want too. They'll look regardless.' Not me at all- in my thinking- but okay.

#- Hashtag: (Girlie talk'n)

(Now)

I don't know when Hana and I started calling him the Governor, or why. The wind and rain have rubbed the plaque at the base of the statue indecipherable. No one else calls him that. Everyone else just says, 'The statue at Monument Square.' Ray must have overheard us talking about the Governor one day.

Ray is still looking at me, waiting, and I realize, I never answered his question. 'I have to switch my routes up,' I say, I probably haven't run past the Governor since March or April. 'It gets boring.' And then, because I can't help it,

I squeak out, 'You remember me?'

He laughs… 'You were pretty hard to miss. You used to run around the statue and do this jumping, whooping thing.' Heat creeps up my neck and cheeks. I must be going a deep red again, and I thank God for the fact that we've moved away from the stage lights. I completely forgot; I used to jump up and try to high-five the Governor as Hanna and I and she ran past, a way of psyching myself up for the run back to school.

Sometimes we would even scream out, 'Halena!' We must have looked completely crazy.

'I don't-' I lick my lips, fumbling for an explanation that won't sound ridiculous. 'When you run you sometimes do weird things. Because of the endorphins and stuff. It's kind of like a drug, you know? Messes with your brain.'

'I liked it,' he says. 'You looked -' He trails off for a moment. His face contracts slightly, a tiny shift I can barely make out in the dark, but in that second, he looks so still and sad it almost takes my breath away, like he's a statue or a different person. I'm afraid he won't finish his sentence, but then he says, 'You looked happy.'

For a second, we just stand there in silence. Then, suddenly, Ray is back, easy and smiling again. 'I left a note for you one time. In the Governor's fist, you know?'

I left a note for you one time. It's impossible, too crazy to think about, and I hear myself repeating, 'You left a note for me?'

'I'm pretty sure it said something stupid. Just hi, and a smiley face, and my name. But then you stopped coming.' He shrugs. 'It's probably still there. The note, I mean. Probably just a bit of paper pulp by now.'

He left me a note. He left me a note. For me. The idea-the fact of it, the fact that he even noticed and thought about me for more than one second is huge and overwhelming, makes my legs go tingly and my hands feel numb.

And then I'm frightened. This is how it starts. Even if he is cured, even if he is the safe-the fact is, I'm not safe, and this is how it starts. Phase One: preoccupation; difficulty focusing; dry mouth; perspiration, sweaty palms; dizziness and disorientation. I feel a rushing blend of sickness and relief, a feeling like finding out that everyone knows your worst secret, has known all along. And the thing, the disease, is inside of me, ready at any moment to start working on my insides, to start poisoning me.

All this time mom was right, my teachers were right, my cousins were right. I'm just like my mother, after all.

'I have to go.' I start up the hill again, nearly sprinting now, but again he comes after me.

'Hey. Not so fast.' At the top of the hill, he reaches out and puts a hand on my wrist to stop me. His touch burns, and I jerk away quickly. 'Lena. Hold on a second.'

Even though I know I shouldn't, I stop.

It's the way he says my name: like music.

'You don't have to be worried, okay? You don't have to be scared.' His voice is twinkling again. 'I'm not flirting with you.' My mind is spinning blindly in a panic, and I realize I don't even know what flirting is. I just know about it from textbooks; I just know that it's bad. Is it possible to flirt without knowing you're flirting? Is he flirting? My left eye goes a full flutter.

'Relax,' he says, holding up both hands, a gesture like, don't be mad at me. 'I was kidding.' He turns just slightly to the left, watching me the whole time.

Part: 11

Like her stupid

Liv's- nip is hanging out- like her stupid!

Awkwardness sweeps through me.

Flirting. A dirty word. He thinks I think he's flirting. 'I'm not- I don't think you were- I would never think that you-' The words collide in my mouth, and now I know there's no amount of darkness that can cover the rush of red to my face.

He cocks his head to the side. 'Are you flirting with me, then?'

'What? No,' I splutter.

The moon lights up his three-pronged scar vividly: a perfect white triangle, a scar that makes you think of order and regularity. 'I'm safe, remember? I can't hurt you.'

He says it quietly, evenly, and I believe him. As well as yet my heart won't stop its frantic winging in my chest, spinning higher and higher, until I'm sure it's going to carry me off. I feel the way I do whenever I get to the top of the Hill and can see back down Legislature Street, with the whole of Pitt. lying behind me, the streets a shimmer of greens and grays-from a distance, both beautiful and unfamiliar-just before I spread my arms and let go, trip and skip and run down the hill, wind whipping in my face, not even trying to move, just letting gravity pull me.

Breathless; excited; waiting for the drop.

I suddenly realize how quiet it is.

The band has stopped playing, and the crowd has gone silent too. The only sound is the wind shushing over the grass. From where we are, fifty feet past the crest of the hill, the barn, and the party are invisible. I have a brief fantasy that we're the only two people out in the darkness that we are the only two people awake and alive in the city, in the world.

Then soft strands of music begin to weave themselves up in the air, gentle, sighing, so quiet at first, I confuse the sounds for the wind. This music is different from the music that was playing earlier-soft, and fragile, as though each note is spun glass, or silken thread, looping up and back into the night air.

Once again, I'm struck by how beautiful it is, as nothing- I've ever heard, and out of nowhere, I'm overwhelmed by the dual desire to laugh and cry.

'This song is my favorite.' A cloud skitters across the moon, and shadows dance over Ray's face. He's still staring at me, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. 'Have you ever danced?' 'No,' I say, a little too forcefully.

He laughs softly. 'It's okay. I won't tell.'

Images of my mother: the softness of her hands as she spun me down the long-polished wood floors of our house, as though we were ice-skaters; the fluted quality of her voice as she sang along to the songs piping from the speakers, laughing. 'My mother used to dance,' I say. The words slip out, and I regret them almost instantly.

But then again, Ray doesn't question me or laugh.

He keeps watching me progressively. For a moment he seems on the edge of saying anything at all. But then he just holds out his hand to me across space, across the dark.

'Would you like to?' He says… His voice is hardly audible above the wind so low it's barely a whisper.

'Would I like to what?'

Part: 12

Interrogations

Impersonal words from Liv-

MFC- Silly boy question: 'So-o Liv- when did you become a smart ass…?'

She said back- 'When I became smart and found out I had an ass!'

Kisses… (Do you want to suck on my candy cane?)

My heart is roaring, rushing in my ears, and though there are still several inches between his hand and mine, there's a zipping, humming energy that connects us, and from the heat flooding my body you would think we were pressed together, palm to palm, face to face.

'Dance,' he says, at the same time closing those last few inches and finding my hand and pulling me closer, and at that second the song hits a high note and I confuse the two impressions, of his hand and the soaring, the lifting of the music.

We dance…

Most things, even the greatest movements on earth, have their beginnings in something small. An earthquake that shatters a city might begin with a tremor, a tremble, a breath.

Music begins with a vibration. The flood that rushed into Pitt twenty years ago after nearly two months of straight rain, that hurtled up beyond the labs and damaged more than a thousand houses, swept up tires and trash bags and old, smelly shoes and floated them through the streets like prizes, that left a thin film of green mold behind, a stench of rotting and decay that didn't go away for months, began with a trickle of water, no wider than a finger, lapping up onto the docks. And God created the whole universe from an atom no bigger than thought.

Grace's life fell apart because of a single word: sympathizer. My world exploded because of a different word: suicide.

Correction: That was the first time my world exploded.

The second time my world exploded, it was also because of a word. A word that worked its way out of my throat and danced onto and out of my lips before I could think about it, or stop it.

The question was: Will you meet me tomorrow?

And the word was: Yes.

Part: 13

Ecstasy

Karly- periods of euphoria; hysterical laughter and heightened energy periods of despair; lethargy changes in appetite; rapid weight loss or weight gain fixation; loss of other interests compromised reasoning skills; distortion of reality disruption of sleep patterns; insomnia or constant fatigue obsessive thoughts and actions paranoia; insecurity difficulty

breathing pain in the chest, throat, or stomach difficulty swallowing; refusal to eat complete breakdown of rational faculties; erratic behavior; violent thoughts and fantasies; hallucinations and delusions emotional or physical paralysis (partial or total)

Death-

If you fear that you or someone you know may have contracted deliria, please call the emergency line toll-free at 1-800PRECLUDE to discuss immediate intake and treatment.

I would never have understood how Hana could lie so often and so easily. But just like anything else, lying becomes easier the more you do it. This is why, when I get home from work the next day and Carol asks me whether I don't mind having hot dogs for the fourth straight night in a row… (The result of a shipment surplus at the Save a lot; we once went a whole two weeks having baked beans every day.)

I say that actually, Kellie from St. Paul's invited me, and some other girls over for dinner. I don't even have to think about it. The lie just comes. Besides even though, I still feel sweat pricking up under my palms, my voice stays calm, and I'm pretty sure my face keeps its normal color because Carol just gives me one of her flitting smiles and says that that sounds nice. At six-thirty I get on my bike and head to North End Beach, where Ray and I plus she agreed to meet.

There are plenty of beaches in Pitt. North End Beach is probably one of the least popular-which, of course, made it one of my mother's favorites. The current is stronger there than it is at Moon Shoreline or Sunset Park. I'm not exactly sure why. I don't mind. I've always been a strong swimmer. After that first time when my mother released her arms from around my waist and I felt both the surging panic and the thrill, the enthusiasm- I learned pretty quickly, and by four I was paddling out by myself past the breaks.

There are other reasons why most people avoid North End Coastline, even though it's only a short walk down the hill from Eastern Prom, one of the most popular parks. The beach is nothing more than a short strip of rocky, gravel flecked sand. It backs up against the far side of the lab complex, where the storage and waste sheds are, which doesn't make for particularly pretty scenery. And when you swim out at East End riverside you get a clear view of Yellow Bridge and the wedge of unregulated land between Pittsburgh and Yarmouth… A lot of people

don't like being so close to the Wilds. It makes them nervous. It makes me nervous too, except that there's a part of me-a a tiny, a little flick of a part-that likes it. For a while, after my mom died, I used to have these fantasies that she wasn't dead, really, and that my father wasn't dead either- that they had run away to the Wilds to be together.

Part: 14

Unrealities

He had gone five years before her, to prepare everything, to build a little house with a woodstove and furniture hewed from tree branches. At some point, I imagined, they would come back and get me. I even imagined my room down to the smallest detail: a dark red carpet, a little red and green patchwork quilt, a red chair.

I had the fantasy only a few times before I realized how wrong it was. If my parents had escaped to the Wilds it would make them sympathizers, resisters. It was better than they were dead. Besides, I learned pretty quickly that my fantasies about the Wilds where just that- make-believe, little kiddie stuff.

She says that's why the government doesn't bother doing anything about them, doesn't even acknowledge their survival.

They'll die out soon enough, all of them, freeze or starve or just let the disease run its course, turn them against each other, have them raging and belligerent and clawing one another's eyes out.

The Invalids have nothing, no way of trading or getting red patchwork quilts or chairs, or anything else for that matter. She said as far as we know that's already transpired- she said the backwoods might be empty now, dark and dead, full of only the rustle and whispers of animals.

Hanna once told me that they must live like animals, filthy, hungry, desperate.

She's probably right about the other stuff-about the Invalids living like animals-but she's wrong about that. They're alive, and out there, and they don't want us to forget it. That's why they stage the demonstrations.

That's why they let the cows loose in the labs. I'm not jumpy until I get to East End Beach. Even though the sun is sinking behind me, it lights the water white and makes everything sparkle. I shield my eyes from the glare and spot Ray down by the water, a long black brushstroke against all that blue. I flashback to last night, to the fingers of one of his hands just hard- pressed against my lower back, so lightly it was like I was only dreaming them-the other hand cupping mine, dry and encouraging as a piece of wood warmed by the sun.

We danced, too, the kind of dancing that people do at their wedding after the pairing has been formalized, but better somehow, looser and less abnormal.

He has his back toward me, facing the ocean, and I'm glad. I feel self- conscious as I- trudge down the wobbly, salt- warped stairs that lead from the parking lot to the beach, pausing to unlace and kick off my sneakers, which I carry in one hand.

The sand is warm on my bare feet as I set off toward him.

An old man is coming up from the water, carrying a fishing pole. He shoots me a suspicious glance, then turns to stare at Ray, then looks at me again and frowns. I open my mouth to say, 'He's cured,' but the man just grunts at me as he walks past, and I can't imagine he'd bother to call the regulators, so I don't say anything.

Not that we'd get in trouble distress if we were caught- that's what Ray meant when he said, 'I'm safe'-but I don't want to answer a lot of questions and have my ID number run through SVS and all of that. Besides, if the regulators did haul ass out to North End Coastline to check out 'suspicious behavior,' only to discover it was some cured taking pity on a seventeen-year-old nobody, they'd be annoyed-and guaranteed to take it out on someone. Taking pity. I push the words out of my mind quickly, surprised by how difficult it is to even think them.

All-day I tried not to worry about why on earth Ray would be so nice to me. I even imagined-for one brief, stupid second -that maybe after my evaluation I'd get matched with him. I had to shunt that thought aside too.

~*~

Night-

Freak me with her I said,' I said, giving him approval, taking him into my flesh, a soft offer to lunacy. My knees were weak, but he held me with one hand, managerial me with the motion of his hips. I was entirely his to do what he wanted, and he knew it and I was going to give it more than her. I no longer believed in the idea of soul mates, or love at first sight. But then again, I was commencement to believe that a very few times in your life, if you were lucky, you might meet a celebrity who was exactly right for you.

Not because he was perfect, or because you were, but because your combined flaws were arranged in a way that allowed two separate beings to hinge together. Done- I feel- I think you still love me, but we can't escape the fact that I'm not enough for you. I knew this was going to happen.

So-o I'm not accusing you of falling in love with another girl. I'm not angry, either. I should be, but I'm not.

I just feel pain… a- lot of pain. I thought I could envision how much this would hurt, but I was wrong so wrong, what I the one that was wrong or you? I will love you always. When this red hair is white, I will still love you.

When the smooth softness of youth is replaced by the delicate softness of age, I will still want to touch your skin. When your face is full of the lines of every smile you have ever smiled, of every surprise I have seen flash through your eyes when every tear you have ever cried has left its mark upon your face, I will treasure you all the more, because I was there to see it all. I will share your life with you, HANNA not KELLIE, and I will love you until the last breath leaves your body or mine.

My story ended that day- she started.

I was done with the three-way cheating.

~*~

Part: 15

Semi-kaput

He never really loved me or her or anybody- when we're half-finished, we're always searching for somebody to complete us.

When, after a few years or a few months of an association, we find that we're still exasperated, we blame our partners and take up with somebody more promising. This can go on and on- series two-timing- pending we acknowledge that while a partner can add sweet magnitudes to our lives, we, each of us, are responsible for our fulfillment.

An insignificant person can offer it to us, and to have faith in or else delude ourselves treacherously and to database for eventual failure every relationship we enter… it was just sex- no love.

That why I ended it- or did I?

Or did he just want her?

Ernest Hemingway said- 'The most painful thing is losing yourself in the process of loving someone too much and forgetting that you are special too.'

So right on- right? Every couple needs to argue now and then. Just to prove that the relationship is strong enough to survive. Long-term relationships, the ones that matter, are all about weathering the peaks and the valleys. Well I come back I don't know, should I stay, or should I go what do you think I well and should I do?

I smart than her- and her and she too so I think you know what I'll do.

Ray has already received his printed sheet, his recommended matches-he would have gotten it even before his cure, directly after the evaluations. He's not married yet because he's still in school, end of the story. But he will be, as soon as he finishes.

~*~

It was just a fight- but it's me or her… I think he loves me only. We waste time looking for the perfect lover, instead of creating the perfect love. So, I will stay and take the freaking in the ass- like always.

Love- with him is better than none in high school- no?

Love is the answer, but while you are waiting for the answer, sex raises someone's loser feelings…

I went there for a week with the breakup- so yeah you would do me too.

No hug back just the night time buddy- like before I a teen girl- I going to do this is I am not that girl.

I caught myself thinking about falling in love with someone whom I hoped was out there right now unthinking about the possibility of me, but I quickly expatriate the notion. It was that kind of thinking that landed me in this situation, to begin with. Hope can ruin you. And it's not him any longer.

Do you see why?

Part: 16

Panties

Photo of me saying 'MFC girl with my green and white panties'- showing the text that said: 'SEE ME P*SSY!' ≈ Past remembers of Karly ≈

Kellie age 10- I am coming so hard! Like- um- ah-hh-ah- using my hair pink bush with my name on it, you do need one like this for this, mom and dad do get it- and it's on my dresser. I not for my hair anymore, on my back and my knees up and down in and out I go, squirting and thick stuff too. Mum- yah!

You see me soloing for your baby.

My sis did this on cam, so she didn't have to work at some fry- hole only making $2.00 an hour, when playing with her hole she made- sh*t loads- I do it for me… like this.

And so, can you, like- it's safe. If I want, I can take cell vids- and give to my boyfriends… just say. That's up to you but, they love it.

Maybe where gay so we did have to bang a boy three times a day yet still be the popular girls. Bi girls yes- you can call us that. that high school finding yourself and feeling out others.

Of course, then I started wondering about the kind of girl he's been matched with- someone like Hanna, I decided, with bright blond hair and an irritating ability to make even pulling her hair into a ponytail look graceful, like a choreographed dance.

There are four other people on the beach: a mother and a child, one hundred feet away, the mother sitting in a faded fabric folding chair, staring blankly toward the horizon, while the child- who is probably no more than three- toddles in the waves, gets knocked over, lets out a shriek (of pain? pleasure?) and struggles back to her feet. 'Any fool can know. The point is to understand.'

Okay is it okay not to get it in high school then?

For I don't yet I have too.

'Hi,' he says. 'I'm glad you came.'

I feel shy again, stupid holding my ratty shoes in one hand. I can feel my cheeks getting hot, so I look down, drop my shoes, turn them over once in the sand with my toe. 'I said I would, didn't I?'

I don't mean for the words to come out so harshly and I wince, psychologically cursing myself. It's like there's a filter set up in my brain, except instead of making things better, it twists everything around so what comes out of my mouth is wrong, totally different from what, I was thinking.

~*~

Further, then them, a couple is walking, a man and a woman, not touching. They must be married. Both have their hands clasped in front of them, and both look straight ahead, not talking and not smiling, either, but calm, as though they are each surrounded by an invisible protective bubble.

Then I'm coming up behind Ray and he turns and sees me, smiles. The sun catches his hair, turns it momentarily white. Then it smolders back to its normal golden-brown color.

Thankfully, Ray laughs. 'I just meant that you stood me up last time,' he says.

He nods toward the sand. 'Sit?'

'Sure,' I say, relieved. I feel much less awkward once we're both settled in the sand. There's less chance of falling over or doing something dumb. I draw my legs up to my chest, resting my chin on my knees. Ray leaves a good two or three feet of space between us.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. At first, I'm searching for something to say. Every beat of silence seems to stretch into infinity, and I'm pretty sure Ray must think I'm a mute.

But then he flicks a half-buried seashell out of the sand and hurls it into the ocean, and I realize he's not uncomfortable at all.

I went back to be the loser girl- then freaking an asshole- I AM DONE!

Looser that is me… hope your happy Ray- you did this to me in the halls.

Nevaeh

Book: 21

Butterfly Kisses

Interval

Chapter: 128

Olivia- story's

Part: 1

Some photos of Neveah growing up… look through them… ≈ Past remembers ≈

They say you fall in love only once but every time, I see her I fall in love with her all over again and again. He said to me and I feel too that like any girl, even if I was not sure, about boys. Randy Zeirud after that I relax.

I'm even glad for the silence.

Sometimes, I feel like if you just watch things, just sit still and let the world exist in front of you-sometimes I swear that just for a second-time freeze and the world pauses in its tilt. Just for a second. In addition to if you somehow found a way to live in that second, then you would live forever.

I do the unthinkable and start dating a boy- going out,' I say.

Younger than me lovely, but not cool.

Throwing yet another seashell in a high arc movement, and it just hits the disruption.

~*~

We have to countenance ourselves to be treasured by the individuals who love us, the people who matter. Too much of the time, we are blinded by our chases of people to love us, individuals that don't even matter, while all that time we waste and the general public who do darling us have to stand on the footway and watch us beg in the streets! It's time to put an end to this. It's time for us to let ourselves be prized.

~*~

'I know.' The ocean is leaving a litter of pulpy green seaweed, twigs, and scrabbling hermit crabs in its wake, and the air smells tangy with salt and fish. A seagull pecks its way across the beach, blinking, leaving tiny thatched claw prints. 'My mom used to bring me here when I was little. We'd walk out a little bit at low tide-as far as you can go, anyway. Crazy stuff gets stranded on the sand-horseshoe crabs and giant clams and sea anemone. Just gets left behind when the water goes out. She taught me to swim here too.' I'm not sure why the words bubble out of me then, why I have the sudden urge to talk.

'My sister used to stay on the shore and build sandcastles, and we would pretend that they were real cities like we'd swum to the other side of the world, to the uncured places. Except in our games, they weren't diseased at all, or destroyed, or horrible. They were beautiful and peaceful, and built of glass and light and things.'

Randy stays silent, tracing shapes in the sand with a finger. But I can tell he's listening.

The words tumble on: 'I remember my mom would bounce me in the water on her hip. And then one time she just let me go. I mean, not for real -real. I had those little inflatable thingies on my arms. But I was so scared I started bawling my head off. I was only a few years old, but I remember it, I swear I do.

I was so relieved when she scooped me back up. But-but disappointed, too. Like I'd lost the chance at something great, you know?'

'So, what happened?' Randy tips his head to look at me. 'You don't come here anymore? Your mom loses her taste for the ocean?' I look away, toward the horizon. The bay is relatively calm today. Flat, all shades of blue and purple as it draws away from the beach with a low sucking sound. Harmless. 'She died,' I say, surprised by how difficult it is to say.

He is quite next to me and I rush on,

'She killed herself. When I was six.'

'I'm sorry,' he says, so low and quiet

I almost miss it.

'My dad died when I was eight months old. I don't remember him at all. I think -I think it kind of broke her, you know?

My mom, I mean. She wasn't cured. It didn't work. I don't know why. She had the procedure three separate times, but it didn't - it didn't fix her.' I pause, sucking in a breath, afraid to look at him, who is as still and soundless next to me like a statue, like a carved piece of shadow. Still, I can't stop speaking.

I realize, strangely, that I've never told the story of my mother before. I've never had to. Everyone around me, everyone in the school, all my neighbors and my aunts' friends-they all knew about my family already, and my family's disgraceful secrets. That's why they always looked at me pityingly, from the corner of their eyes.

That's why for years I rode a wave of whispering into every room, was slapped with sudden silence when I entered-silence and guilty, startled faces.

Even I knew before she and me where desk partners in second grade.

I remember because she found me in the bathroom stall, crying into a piece of paper towel, stuffing my mouth with it so no one would hear, and she kicked the door right open with a foot and stood there staring. Is it because of your mom? she said the first words she ever spoke to me.

'I didn't know there was something wrong with her. I didn't know she was sick. I was too young to understand.' I keep my eyes focused on the horizon, a solid thin line, taut as a tightrope. The bay edges farther from us, and as always- I have the same fantasy I did as a child: that maybe it won't come back, maybe the whole ocean will disappear forever, drawn back across the surface of the earth like lips retracting over teeth, revealing the cool, white hardness underneath, the bleached bone. 'If I had known, maybe I could have-'

At the last second my voice falters and I can't say any more, can't finish the sentence. Maybe I could have stopped it. It's a sentence I've never spoken before, never even allowed myself to think. But the idea is there, looming up solid and unavoidable, a sheer rock face: I could have stopped it. I should have stopped it.

We sit in silence. At some point during my story, the mother and child must have packed up and gone home; Alex and I are all alone on the beach. Now that the words aren't bubbling, rushing out of me, I can't believe how much I've shared with a next- to- perfect stranger- and a boy, no less. I'm suddenly, itching, squirming- embarrassed. I'm desperate for something else to say- something harmless, about the tide or the weather but, as usual, my mind goes blank now that I need it to function. I'm afraid to look at her now my old lover.

When I finally work up the courage to shoot him a tiny sidelong glance, he's sitting, staring out at the bay. His face is completely unreadable except for a tiny muscle, which flutters in and out at the base of his jaw. My heart sinks... just like I feared- he's ashamed of me now, disgusted by my family's history, by the disease that runs in my blood. At any second, he'll stand up and tell me it's better if he doesn't speak to me anymore.

It's weird... I don't even really know...

Her or him, and there's an impassable divide between us, but the idea upsets me anyway.

I'm two seconds away from jumping up and running away, just so I won't have to nod and pretend to understand when he turns to me and says, Listen, Lena. I'm sorry, but - and gives me that all-too-familiar look.

(Last year there was a rabid dog loose on the Hill, biting and snapping at everyone, frothing at the mouth. It was half-starved, mangy, he- and like her missing one leg, but still it took two cops to shoot it down. A crowd gathered to watch, and I was there. I stopped on the way back from my run. For the first time in my life, I understood the look that people had been giving me forever, the same curl of the lip whenever they hear the name Maddie, yes-but disgust, also, and fear of contamination. It was the same way they were looking at the dog while he circled and snapped and spit, and then a mass exhalation of relief when the third bullet finally took him down and he stopped twitching.)

Just when I think I can't take it anymore; he reaches over and barely skims my elbow with one finger.

'I'll race you,' he says, standing up and beating the sand off his shorts. He spreads a hand out to me and helps me up, a smile flickering back on his face.

I'm endlessly grateful to him in that second. He's not going to hold my family's past against me. He doesn't think I'm dirty or damaged. He pulls me to my feet, and I think he squeezes my hand once I'm standing, a quick pulse, and I'm startled and happy, thinking of my secret sign with Hanna.

'Only if you've got a thing for total humiliation,' I say…

He raises his eyebrows… 'So-o, you think you can beat me?'

'I don't think, I know…'

'We'll see about that.' she cocks his head to the side. 'First one to the buoys, then?'

That throws me. The tide doesn't go out too far in the bay; the buoys are still floating on at least four feet of water.

'You want to race into the bay?' 'Scared?' He asks, grinning.

'I'm not scared, I'm just-' 'Good.' He reaches out and brushes my shoulder with two fingers. 'Then how about a little less conversation, and a little more-Go!' He screams out the last word and takes off at full speed. It takes me two whole seconds to launch myself after him, and I'm calling out, 'No fair! I wasn't ready!' and both of us are laughing as we splash through the shallows in our clothes, the little ripples, and dips of the ocean floor now exposed by the tide's retreat. Shells crunch under my feet.

I get my toe caught in a tangle of red and purple seaweed and nearly do a face plant.

I push myself off the wet sand with a palm and get my balance again, have almost caught up to Randy, when he drops down in a way- and scoops up a handful of wet sand, whirling around to peg me with it.

I shriek and duck out of the way, but a bit of it still catches me on the cheek, dribbling down my neck.

'You are such a cheater!' I manage to gasp, out of breath from running and laughing.

'You can't cheat if there are no rules,' Alex shoots back over his shoulder.

'No rules, hum?' We're wallowing shin-deep now and I start palming water at him, making a splatter pattern over his back and shoulders. He turns around, sweeping his arm across the surface of the water, a glittering arc. I twist to avoid it and end up slipping and falling elbow deep, soaking my shorts and the bottom half of my T-shirt, the impulsive cold making me gasp. He's still slogging forward, his head craned back, his smile dazzling, his laugh rolling off and away so loud I imagine it dipping past Great Diamond Island and over the horizon, reaching to other parts of the world. I scramble up and haul after him.

The buoys are bobbing twenty feet ahead of us and the water is at my knees, and then my thighs, and then to my waist, until both of us are half running and half swimming, frantically paddling forward with our arms. I can't breathe or think or do anything but laugh and splash and focus on the bright red bobbing buoys, focus on winning, winning, I have to win, and when we're only a few feet away and he's still in the lead and my shoes are leaden and filled with water, my clothes dragging me down like my pockets have been weighted with stones, without thinking I leap forward and tackle him, wrestling down into the water, feeling my foot connect with his thigh as I rocket off of him and reach out to slap the nearest buoy, the plastic shooting

away from my hand when, I hit it. We must be a quarter-mile off the beach, but the tide's still going out, so I can stand, the water hitting me in my chest.

Part: 2

He reached for her hand. She jerked her head up, eyes wide. 'Stay,' he repeated. 'I could use the company.' She hesitated. A rueful smile pulled at his lips. 'I promise I won't try to kiss you again… tonight. I raise my arms triumphantly as Ray comes up spluttering water, shaking his head so water pinwheels from his hair.

~*~

'Don't stop, please,' You're so fucking beautiful when you come on me,' he said, cupping her face, nuzzling her mouth.

Kissing him longer, unwilling to let him go.

This is what I want; this is what I've wanted since his damn phone interrupted us this morning, his mouth, his body claiming mine. 'Now turn around and bend over. I need to ride you.' His forehead pressed to mine as we gasp together, the cold air barely cooling the heat raging between us. Tate opened her eyes, and let out a wobbly giggle. 'Bend over the bed? It goes in and out of me, and it drips on my back his gift to me. After being on my feet the whole night? I don't think so, buddy.

Now,' he said- as he lifted her left my leg and spared, we wide open showing my slight, hooked his elbow under her knee, and entered her- I'm on fire, every muscle in my body attuned to his, my groin clenching with delicious need. When the voices grow louder his hold loosens.

I beg into his mouth.

Diving into me once more his tongue slays me, erases every thought of the outside world until the passion has left us breathless and we have to break away if only to live. He opens up wide and I squirt, it in… and he loves me for it so hard and fast after, the- comes and comes again.

Maddie- I missed talking to you, and playing with you, and touching you, and seeing you smile. I missed just … sitting next to you. I've never missed anyone or anything that much.

Yet- I am fucking him hard now with her in my mind doing the same. I still love her, yet not move him.

~*~

(Things we did)

'I won,' I pant- it out.

'You cheated,' he says, pushing forward a few more steps and collapsing with both arms behind him, looped over the rope stringing along the buoys. He arches his back, so his face is tilted up toward the sky. His T-shirt is completely soaked, and water beads off his eyelashes trickle down his cheeks.

'No rules,' I say, 'so no cheating.'

He turns to me, grinning. 'I let you win, then.'

'Yeah, right.'

I splash him a little and he holds up his hands, surrendering.

'You're just a sore loser.'

'I don't have much practice at it.'

There's that confidence again, that semi infuriating easiness of his, the tilt of his head and the smile. But today it's not infuriating. Today I like it, feel like it's somehow rubbing off on me like if I was around him enough, I would never feel awkward or frightened or insecure.

'Whatever.'

I roll my eyes and hook one arm over the buoys next to him, enjoying the feel of the currents swishing around my chest, enjoying the strangeness of being in the bay with my clothes on, the stickiness of my T-shirt and the sucking of my shoes on my feet. Soon the tide will turn, and the water will come in again. Then it will be a slow, exhausting swim back to the beach.

Even if a girl is gay- like I was she still might just love a boy too, it was all for a boy breaking her heart that she turns that ways and turned away.

Part: 3

On the other hand, I don't care. I don't care about anything-I'm not worried about how in a million years I'll explain to Liz why I've come home soaking wet, with seaweed clinging to my back and the smell of salt in my hair, not worried about how long I have until curfew or why Randy is even being nice to me. I'm just happy, a pure, bubbly feeling.

Beyond the buoys the bay is dark purple, the waves brushed over with whitecaps.

It is illegal to go beyond the buoys- beyond the buoys are the islands and the lookout points, and beyond them is open ocean, the ocean that leads to unregulated places, places of disease and fear-but for that moment- I fantasize about ducking underneath the rope and swimming out.

To our left, we can see the bright white silhouette of the lab complex and beyond it, distantly, Old Haven, all the docks like gigantic wooden centipedes. To our right is covered bridge, and the long string of guard huts that runs its length and continues up along the border catches me looking.

'Pretty, isn't it?' he says.

The bridge is mottled gray-green, all coated in backsplash and algae, and it looks like it's leaning slightly into the wind. I wrinkle my nose. 'It looks kind of like it's rotting, doesn't it?

Part: 4

My sister always said that someday it would fall into the ocean, just topple right over.' Randy laughs. 'I wasn't talking about the bridge.' He tilts his chin just slightly, gesturing. 'I meant past the bridge.' He pauses for just a fraction of a second. 'I meant the Wilds.'

Beyond the bridge is the northern border, located along the far side of Black and Gold Cove. As we're standing there the lights in the guard huts click on, one after another, shining out against the deepening blue sky- a sign that it's getting late and I should be going home soon. Still,

I can't force myself to leave, even as I feel the water around my chest start to bubble and eddy, the tide turning.

Beyond the bridge, the lush greens of the Wilds move together in the wind like an endlessly re-arranging wall, a thick wedge of green cutting down toward the bay and separating Pitt.

From here we can just make out the barest section of it, an empty place marked with no lights, no boats, no buildings: impenetrable and strange and black. But I know that the wildernesses extend back, go on for miles and miles and miles all through the mainland, all across the country, like a monster reaching its tentacles around the civilized parts of the world.

Maybe it was the race or beating him to the buoys, or the fact that he didn't criticize me or my family when I told him about my mother, but at that moment the giddiness and happiness are still flowing strong and I feel like I could tell Randy anything, ask him anything. So, I say, 'Can I tell you a secret?' I don't wait for him to answer; I don't have to and knowing that makes me feel dizzy and careless. 'I used to think about it a lot. The Wilds, I mean, and what they were like - and the Invalids, whether they existed.' Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see him flinch slightly, so I press on, 'I used to sometimes think - I used to pretend that maybe my mom didn't die, you know? That maybe she'd only run away to the Wilds. Not that that would be any better. I guess I, just didn't want her to be gone for good. It was better to imagine her out there somewhere, singing.' I break off, shaking my head, amazed that I feel so comfortable talking to Randy. Amazed, and grateful. 'What about you?' I say.

'What about me what?' Ray is watching me with an expression I can't read. Like I've hurt him, almost, but that doesn't make any sense.

'Did you used to think about going to the Wilds when you were little? Just for fun, I mean, like a game.'

Alex squints, looks away from me, and grimaces. 'Yeah, sure. A lot.' He reaches out and slaps the buoys. 'None of these. No walls to run into. No eyes.

Freedom and space places to stretch out. I still think about the Wilds.'

I stare at him. Nobody uses words like that anymore: freedom, space. Old words. 'Still? Even after this?'

Liz looks hot in a swimsuit; I see her without the top and I want her not him.

Without meaning to or thinking about it I reach out and brush my fingers, once, against the three-pronged scar on his neck.

He jerks away from my touch as though I've scalded him, and I drop my hand, embarrassed.

'Liz -' he says, in the strangest voice: like my name is a sour thing, a word that tastes bad in his mouth.

I know I shouldn't have touched him like that. I've overstepped my boundaries, and he's going to remind me of it, of what it means to be uncured. I think I will die of humiliation if he starts to lecture me, so to cover the discomfort I start babbling. 'Most curds don't think about that kind of stuff. -She always said it was a waste of time. She always said there was nothing out there but animals and land and bugs, that all the talk of Invalids was make-believe stuff, kid stuff. She said believing in Invalids is the same thing as believing in necromancers or fallen-angels.

Remember how people used to say there were fallen-angels in the Wilds?' she smiles, but it's more like a wince. 'Liz, I have to tell you something.' Her voice is a little stronger now, but something about his tone makes me afraid to let him speak.

Now I can't stop talking. 'Did it hurt?

The procedure, I mean.

My sister said it was no big deal, not with all the painkillers they give you, but my cousin Marcia used to say it was worse than anything, worse than having a baby, even though her second kid took, like, fifteen hours to deliver-' I break off, blushing, mentally cursing myself for the ridiculous conversational turn.

I wish I could rewind to last night's party when my brain was coming up empty; it's like I've been saving up for a case of verbal vomit. 'I'm not scared, though,' I nearly scream, as

she again opens her mouth to speak. I'm desperate to salvage the situation somehow. 'My procedure's coming up. Seventy days. It's dorky, huh?

That I count. But I can't wait.'

I may fall to another girl that day.

'Liz.' Randy's voice is stronger, more forceful now, and it finally stops me. He turns so that we're face-to-face. At that moment my shoes skim off the sand bottom, and I realize, that the water is lapping up to my neck. The tide is coming in fast. 'Listen to me. I'm not who-I'm not whom you think I am.'

I have to fight to stand. All of a sudden, the currents tug and pull at me. It's always seemed this way. The tide goes out a slow drain, comes back in a rush.

'What do you mean?'

His eyes-shifting gold, amber, an animal's eyes-search my face, and without knowing why I'm scared again.

'I was never cured,' he says. For a moment I close my eyes and imagine I've misheard him, imagine I've only confused the shushing of the waves for his voice. But when I open my eyes he's still standing there, staring at me, looking guilty and something else-sad, maybe? …And I know I heard correctly.

He says, 'I never had the procedure.'

'You mean it didn't work?' I say. My body is tingling, going numb, and I realize then how cold it is. 'You had the procedure and it didn't work? Like what happened to my mom?'

'Nope, Liz. I' He looks away, squinting, says under his breath, 'I don't know how to explain.'

Part: 5

Everything from the tips of my fingers through the roots of my hair now feels as if it's encased in ice. Disconnected images run through my head, a skipping movie reel: Randy standing on the observation deck, his hair like a crown of leaves; turning his head, showing the

neat four- split scar just beneath his left ear; reaching out to me and saying, I'm safe. I won't hurt you. The words start rattling out of me again, but I don't feel them, hardly feel anything. 'It didn't work, and you've been lying about it.

Dishonest so you could still go to school, still get a job, still get paired and matched and everything. But you're not-you're still-you might still be-' I can't bring myself to say the word. Diseased. Uncured, sick, I feel like I'll be sick.

~*~

Me- a school day- 'I hope I didn't disturb anything.'

'You didn't.' My cheeks are hot. I wish I could reach out and take my stupid bra-pink, with patterns of daisies on it, like a teen or under- bra-and shove it under the sofa, but that would be even more conspicuous. So instead we both pretend we don't notice.

'Okay…' Maddie draws out the word, super long as if she knows I'm lying. For a second he says nothing. Then, slowly, he comes down the stairs, edging closer, as if I'm an animal who might be rabid.

'Are you, all right? You seem-'

'I seem what?' I look up at him then, experiencing a hot flash of anger.

'Nothing.' He stops again, a good ten feet away from me. 'I don't know.

Upset... angry or something.' His next words he pronounces very carefully as if each one is glass that might shatter in his mouth. 'Is everything okay with you?' I feel stupid sitting on the couch when he's standing, like I'm at a disadvantage somehow, so I stand up, too, crossing my arms. 'We're fine,' I say. 'I'm fine.' I'd been planning on telling Maddie about the breakup- the second I saw his stupid stuff on the stairs, I knew I would tell him, and maybe even tell him why, cry and confess that there's something wrong with me and I don't know how to be happy and I'm an idiot, such an idiot.

But now I can't tell him. I won't.

Then I say, 'her sister not home.' Maddie flinches and turns away, a muscle working in his jaw. Even midwinter, he has the kind of skin that always looks tan. I wish he looked worse. I wish he looked as bad as I feel. 'Well, you're here for her, aren't you?'

Maddie- 'Jesus, Liv.' She turns back to me then. 'We need to - I don't know - fix this. Fix us.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I say, squeezing my ribs, hard. I feel like if I don't, I might just come apart.

'You do know what I mean,' he says. 'You are-where-my best friend.'

With one hand, he gestures to space between us, the long stretch of the basement, where for years we built pillow forts and competed to see who could withstand tickle wars the longest. 'What happened?'

Liv- 'What happened is you started dating one more time- it's on and off…

My sister,' I say. The words come out louder than I intended.

Parker takes a step toward me. 'I didn't mean to hurt you,' he says, his voice quiet, and for a second I want to close the distance between us and bury myself in the soft place between his arm and shoulder blade, and tell her how dumb I've been, and let him cheer me up with bad renditions songs and weird trivia about the world's largest hamburgers or freestanding structures built entirely from toothpicks.

'I didn't mean to hurt either of you. It just - happened.' He's practically whispering now. 'I'm trying to stop it.'

I take a step backward. 'You're not trying very hard,' I say. I know I'm being a bitch, but I don't care. He's the one who ruined everything.

Edward- He's the one who kissed her, who keeps kissing her, and I don't like it she is my girl- mine. Who keeps telling her yes, no matter how many times they break up? 'I'll let her know you came by.'

Maddie's face changes. And at that moment, I know I've hurt him, maybe just as much as he's hurt me. I get a sick rush of triumph that feels virtually like seasickness, like catching an insect between folds of the paper towel and embracing.

Part: 6

Then he just- looks angry- hard, almost, like his skin has suddenly tightened into stone.

'Yeah, all right.' He takes two steps backward before spinning around. 'Tell her I'm looking for her. Tell her I'm worried about her.'

~*~

'Sure…' My voice sounds unacquainted as if it's being piped in from somewhere a thousand miles away. I broke up with Kristy. And for what? Maddie and I aren't even friends anymore, yet we say that all the time- not true. I've screwed up everything. Suddenly I think, I might be sick.

'Oh, and Kristy?' Maddie pauses at the foot of the stairs. Her expression is impossible to read for a second, I think he might try and apologize again. 'Your shirt's on inside out.'

Then he's gone, sprinting up the stairs, leaving me alone.

~*~

'No,' Maddie's voice is so loud it startles me. I take a step back, sneakers slipping on the slick and uneven bottom of the ocean floor, and nearly go under, but when Maddie makes a move to touch me, I jerk backward, out of his reach.

Something hardens in her face like he's made a decision. 'I'm telling you I was never cured. Never paired or matched or anything. I was never even evaluated.'

'Impossible.' The word barely squeezes itself out, a murmur. The sky is whirling above me, all blues and pinks and reds twirling together until it looks like parts of the sky are wringing.

Part: 7

I/we girls should know we beautiful just the way we are… 'We don't need to change a thing; the world could change its heart. No scars to your beautiful, we're stars and we're beautiful, and you don't have to change a thing, the world could change its heart. No scars to your beautiful, we're stars and we're beautiful. She has dreams to be envy, so she's starving. You know, cover girls eat nothing.

She says beauty is pain and there's beauty in everything. What's a little bit of hunger? I could go a little while longer, she fades away- she doesn't see her perfect, she doesn't understand she's worth it… Or that beauty goes deeper than the surface 'Impossible.' -Scars to Your Beautiful by Alessia Cara …ha the song of a teen girl's life…

'You have the scars.' 'Scars,' he corrects me, a little more gently. 'Just scars. Not the scars.' He looks away then, giving me a view of his neck. 'Three tiny scars, an inverted triangle. Easy to replicate. With a scalpel, a penknife, anything.'

I close my eyes again. The waves swell around me and the motion, the lift, and the drop convince me I really will throw up, right here in the water. I choke down the feeling, trying to hold back the realization that is battering at the back of my mind, threatening to overwhelm me -fighting back the feeling of drowning.

I open my eyes and croak out, 'How-?'

'You have to understand. Lena, I'm trusting you. Do you see that?' He's staring at me so intently I can feel his eyes like touch, and I keep my eyes averted. 'I didn't mean to-I didn't want to lie to you.'

'How?' I repeat, louder now.

Somehow my brain gets stuck on the word lie and makes an endless loop: No way to avoid evaluations unless you lie.

No way to avoid procedure unless you lie. You must lie.

For a moment, Maddie is silent, and I think he's going to chicken out, refuse to tell me anything more. I almost wish he would. I'm desperate to rewind time, go back to the moment before he said my name in that strange tone of voice, go back to the triumphant, surging feeling

of beating him to the buoys. We'll race back to the beach. We'll meet up tomorrow, try to wheedle some fresh crabs from the fishermen at the dock.

But then he speaks. 'I'm not from here,' he says. 'I mean, I wasn't born in Pittsburgh. Not exactly.' He's speaking in the tone of voice that everyone uses when they're about to break you apart.

Gentle-kind, even-like they can make the news sound better just by speaking in a lullaby voice. I'm sorry, Liv, but your mother was a troubled girl.

Like you won't somehow hear the violence underneath.

'Where are you from?' I don't have to ask. I know already.

The comprehension has broken, spilled, swarming me. But a slight part of me believes that as long as he doesn't say it, it's not factual.

~*~

Her eyes are steady on mine, but he tilts his head back-back toward the border, beyond the bridge, to that endlessly moving preparation of branches and leaves and vines and tangled, growing things.

'There,' she says, or maybe I just think she says it. His lips barely move. But the meaning is clear.

He comes from the wilderness.

'An Invalid,' I say. The word feels like it's grating against my throat.

'You're an Invalid.' I'm giving him a final chance to deny it.

But he doesn't. He just winces slightly and says, 'I've always hated that word.'

Standing there, I comprehend something else: that it wasn't a coincidence whenever Liv made fun of me for still believing in the Invalids, whenever she would shake her head without bothering to look up from her knitting needlestick, tick, tick, they went together, flashing metal-and say, 'I presume you have faith in fallen and witches, too?' They suck! It's like the movie- love it or love to hate it, that's us.

Fallen-angels and wizards and Invalids: things that will tear into you, tear you to shreds. Deadly things.

I'm suddenly so frightened a desperate pressure starts pushing down in the bottom of my stomach and between my legs, and for one wild and ridiculous second I'm positive that I'm about to pee.

The lighthouse on Little Island clicks on out in the outer parts, not in the city, cuts a wide swath across the water, an enormous, accusatory finger: I'm terrified I'll get caught up in its beam, terrified it will point in my direction and then I'll overhear the whirling of the state helicopters and the megaphone voices of the regulators shouting, 'Illegal activity! Illegal activity!' The beach looks hopelessly and impossibly remote. I can't imagine how we got out so far. My arms feel heavy and useless, and I think of my mother, and her jacket filling slowly with water.

I take deep breaths, trying to keep my mind from spinning, trying to focus.

There's no way for anyone to know that Alex is an Invalid. I didn't know. He looks normal, has the scar in the right place. There's no way anyone could have heard us talking.

A wave lifts- and breaks against my back. I blunder forward. Maddie reaches out and grabs my arm to steady me, but I twist away from him just as the second round of waves surges over us. I get a mouthful of seawater, feel the salt stinging my eyes and am momentarily blinded.

'Don't,' I stutter. 'Don't you dare touch me.'

'Liv, I swear. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't want to lie to you.' 'Why are you doing this?' I can't think straight, I can hardly even breathe. 'What do you want from me?'

'Want…?' she shakes his head. She looks honestly confused-and offended, too, as though I'm the one who did something wrong. Aimed at a second I feel flashy of sympathy for him. Maybe she sees it on my face, that segment of a second when I let my guard down because at that moment his expression softens, and his eyes go bright as flame and even though I barely see him move, suddenly he has closed the space between us and he's wrapping his warm hands over my shoulders-fingers so warm and strong I almost cry out-and saying, 'Lena. I like you, okay? That's it. That's all… I like you.'

His voice is so low and hypnotic it reminds me of a song. I think of predators dropping silently from trees: I think of enormous cats with glowing amber eyes, just like his.

And then I'm stumbling backward, paddling away from him, my shirt and shoes heavy with water, my heart hammering painfully against my chest and my breath rasping in my throat. I'm kicking off the ground and sweeping forward with my arms, half running, half swimming, as the tide lifts and drags at me so I feel like I can only creep forward an inch at a time, so I feel like I'm moving through molasses. Alex calls my name, but I'm too afraid to turn my head and see if he's coming after me. It's like one of those nightmares where something's chasing you but you're too afraid to look and see what it is. All you hear is its breath, getting closer and closer.

You feel its shadow forthcoming up behind you, but you're paralyzed: You know that any second you'll feel its icy fingers closing on your neck.

I'll never make it, I think. I'll never make it back. Something scrapes across my shin and I begin to imagine that the bay around me is full of horrible underwater things, sharks and jellyfish and poisonous eels, and even though I know I'm panicking I feel like falling backward and giving up. The beach is still so far, and my arms and legs feel so heavy.

Her voice gets whipped away by the wind, sounding fainter and fainter, and when I finally work up the courage to look over my shoulder, I see him bobbing up and down by the buoys. I realize I've gone farther than I thought, and at the very least she isn't following me. My fear eases up, and the knot in my chest loosens.

The next wave is so strong it helps skim me over a steep underwater ridge, drops me to my knees into the soft sand. When I struggle to my feet the water hits me just at the waist, and I slosh the rest of the way to shore, shivering, grateful, exhausted.

My thighs are shaking. I collapse onto the beach, gasping and coughing. From the flames of color licking across the sky over Back and Gold Cove-orange, reds, pinks- I'm guessing it's close to sunset, probably around eight o'clock. Part of me wants to just lie down, spread my arms and stretch out and sleep all through the night. I feel like I've swallowed half my weight in saltwater.

My skin stings and there's sand everywhere, in my bra and underwear and between my toes and under my fingernails. Whatever scraped my shin in the water left its mark: a long trickle of blood snakes around my calf.

I look up, and for one panicked second, I can't find Maddie by the buoys. My heart stops. Then I see him, a dark spot cutting quickly through the water. His arms pinwheel gracefully as he swims. He's fast. I haul myself to my feet, grab my shoes, and limp up to my bike. My legs are so weak it takes me a minute to find my balance, and at first, I weave crazily up and down the road like a toddler just learning to ride.

I don't look back, not once, until I'm at my gate. By then the streets are empty and quiet, night about to fall, curfew about to come down like a giant whole-hearted embrace, keeping us all in our places, keeping us all innocuous.

Part: 8

Olivia- Think of it this way: When it's cold outside and your teeth are chattering, you bundle up in a winter coat, and scarves, and mittens, to keep from catching the flu. Well, the borders are like hats and scarves and winter coats for the whole country! They keep the very worst disease away, so we can all stay healthy!

After the borders went up, the president and the Consortium had one last thing to take care of before we could all be safe and happy.

(Back)

She cried all the time, and once she confessed to me that when I liked to kiss away her tears away. Still, now, when I think of that days-I was only eight at the time I think of the taste of salt.

The disease slowly worked its way deeper and deeper inside of her, an animal chewing her from within. My sister couldn't eat. What little we could convince her to swallow came up just as quickly, and I was afraid for her life. Thomas broke her heart, of course, to nobody's surprise.

~*~

Then my sister did nothing but lie in bed and watch the shadows shift slowly across the walls, her ribs rising under her pale skin like wood rising through water. Even then she refused the procedure and the comfort it would give her, and on the day the cure was to be administered it took four scientists and several needles full of tranquilizer before she would submit, before she would stop scratching with her long, sharp nails, which had gone uncut for weeks, and screaming and cursing and calling for Thomas. I watched them come for her, to bring her to the labs; I sat in a corner, terrified, while she spits, and hissed and kicked, and I thought of my mom and dad.

That afternoon, though I was still more than, a decade away from safety, I began to count the months until my procedure. In the end, my sister was cured. She came back to me gentle and content, her nails spotless and round, her hair pulled back in a long, thick braid.

Several months later she was pledged to an IT tech, roughly her age, and several weeks after she graduated from college they married, their hands linked loosely under the canopy, both of them staring straight ahead as though at a future of days unmarred by worry or discontent or disagreement, a future of identical days, like a series of neatly blown bubbles.

Thomas was cured too. she was married to Ella, once my sister's best friend, and now everybody is happy. Rachel told me a few months ago, that the two couples often see each other at picnics and neighborhood events since they live fairly close to each other in the East End.

The four of them sit, making polite and quiet conversation, with not a sole flicker of the past to disturb the stillness and completeness of the present.

That's the beauty of the cure. No one mentions those lost, hot days in the field when Thomas kissed Rachel's tears away and invented worlds just, so he could promise them to her when she tore the skin off her arms at the thought of living without him. I'm sure she's embarrassed by those days if she remembers them at all.

True, I don't see her that often now-just once every couple of months, when she remembers she is supposed to stop by-and in that way, I guess you could say that even with the procedure I lost a little bit of her. But that's not the point. The point is that she's protected. The point is that she's safe.

Part: 9

I'll tell you another secret, this one for your good. You may think the past has something to tell you. You may think that you should listen, should strain to make out its whispers, should bend over backward, stoop down low to hear its voice breathed up from the ground, from the dead places.

You may think there's something in it for you, something to understand or make sense of. But I know the truth: I know from the nights of Coldness.

I know the past will drag you backward and down, have you snatching at whispers of wind and the gibberish of trees rubbing together, trying to decipher some code, trying to piece together what was broken. It's hopeless. The past is nothing but a weight. It will build inside of you like a stone.

Take it from me: If you hear the past speaking to you, feel it tugging at your back and running its fingers up your spine, the best thing to do the only thing is run. In the days that follow Maddie's confession, I check constantly for symptoms of the disease.

When I'm manning the register at my uncle's store I lean forward on my elbow, keep my hand resting on my cheek so I can crook my fingers back toward my neck and count my pulse, make sure it's normal.

In the mornings I take long, slow breaths, listening for rasping or hitches in my lungs. I wash my hands constantly. I know the deliria isn't like a cold you can't get it from being sneezed on-but still, it's contagious, and when I woke up the day after our meeting at East End with my limbs still heavy and my head as light as a bubble and an ache in my throat that refused to go away, my first thought was that I'd been infected. After a few days, I feel better.

The only weird thing is the way my senses seem to have dulled. Everything looks washed out, like a bad color copy. I have to load my food with salt before I can taste it, and every time my aunt speaks to me it seems like her voice has been muted a few degrees. But I read through 'The Book of Shhh- of life,' and all the recognized symptoms of deliria, and don't see anything that matches up, so in the end, I figure I'm safe. Still, I take precautions, determined not to make one false step, determined to prove to myself that I'm not like my mother-that the thing with Ray was a fluke, a mistake, a horrible, horrible accident.

I can't ignore how close I was to danger. I don't even want to think about what would happen if anyone found out what she was if anyone knew that we had stood together shivering in the water, that we had talked, laughed, touched.

It makes me feel sick. I have to keep repeating to myself that my procedure is less than two months away now.

All I have to do is keep my head down and make it through the next seven weeks and I'll be fine.

I come home every evening a full two hours before curfew. I volunteer to spend extra days at the store, and I don't even ask for my usual eight-dollar-an hour wage.

Maddie doesn't call me. I don't call her, either. I help my aunt cook dinner, and I clean and wash the dishes unprompted.

Maggie is in summer school -she's only in first grade and they're already talking about holding her back- and every night I pull her onto my lap and help her sludge through her work, whispering in her ear, begging her to speak, to focus, to listen, cajoling her, finally, into writing at least half of the answers down in her workbook.

After a week, my aunt stops looking at me suspiciously whenever I walk into the house, stops demanding to know where I've been, and another weight eases off me: She trusts me again. It wasn't easy to explain why on earth she and I would decide on an impromptu swim in the ocean in our clothes, no less-just after a big family dinner, even harder to explain why I came home pale and shaking, and I could tell my aunt didn't buy it. But after a while she relaxes around me again, stops looking at me distrustfully like I'm some caged-up animal she's worried will go feral.

Days pass, time ticks away, seconds click forward like dominoes toppling in a line. Every day the heat gets worse and worse. It creeps through the streets of Pitt., festers in the Dumpsters, makes the city smell like a giant armpit. The walls sweat and the trolleys a cough and shudder, and every day people gather in front of the municipal buildings, praying for a brief blast of cold air whenever the mechanized doors swoosh open because a regulator or politician or guard has to go in and out.

I have to give up my runs. The last time I do a full loop outside I find that my feet carry me down to the Square, past the Governor. The sun is a high white haze, all the buildings cut sharply against the sky like a series of metal teeth. By the time I make it to the statue

I'm panting, exhausted, and my head is spinning. When I grab the Governor's arm and swing myself up onto the statue's base, the metal burns underneath my hand and the world seesaws crazily, light zigzagging everywhere. I'm dimly aware that I should go inside, out of the heat, but my brain is all foggy and so there I go, poking my fingers around the hole in the Governor's cupped fist. I don't know what I'm looking for. She already told me that the note he'd left for me months ago must have turned to a pulp by now. My fingers come out sticky, pieces of melting gum stringing between my thumb and forefinger, but still, I root around. And then I feel it slide between my fingers, cool and crisp, folded in a square: a note.

I'm half-delirious as I open it, but still, I don't expect it to be from her.

My hands begin to shake as I read:

Maddie, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me.

Your lover girl-

I don't remember the run home, and my aunt finds me later half passed out in the hallway, murmuring to myself. She has to put me in a bathtub full of ice to get my temperature down. When I finally come too, I can't find the note anywhere.

I realize I must have dropped it, and feel half-relieved and half-disappointed.

That evening we read that the Time and Temperature Building registered 102 degrees: the hottest day on record for the summer so far.

~*~

My aunt forbids me to run outside for the rest of the summer. I don't put up a fight. I don't trust myself, can't be sure my feet won't lead me back down to the Governor, to East End Beach up the coast, to the labs. I receive a new date for the evaluations and spend my evenings in front of the mirror rehearsing my answers.

My aunt insists on accompanying me to the labs again, but this time I don't see Hana. I don't see anyone I recognize. Even the four evaluators are different: floating oval faces, different shades of brown and pink, two-dimensional, like shaded drawings. I am not afraid of this time. I don't feel anything.

Part: 10

I answer all the questions exactly as I should. When I am asked to give my favorite color, for just the briefest, tiniest of seconds my mind flashes on a sky the color of polished silver, and I think I hear a word-gray-whispered quietly into my ear.

I say, 'Blue,' and everyone smiles. I say, 'I'd like to study psychology and social regulation.' I say, 'I like to listen to music, but not too loudly.' I say, 'The definition of happiness is security.' Smiles, smiles, smiles all around, a room full of teeth.

After I'm done, as I am leaving, I think I see a shifting shadow, a flicker in my peripheral vision. I glance up quickly at the observation deck. Of course, it's empty.

Nevaeh

Book: 22

Lips Together

Chapter: 129

Part: 1

Hanna

Hanna- Two days later we receive the results of my boards-all passes-and my final score: Eight. My aunt hugs me; the first time she has hugged me in years.

My uncle pats me on the shoulder awkwardly and gives me the largest piece of chicken at dinner. Even Jenny looks impressed by this.

Olivia rams the top of her head into my leg, one, two, three times, and I step away from her, tell her to stop fussing. I know she's upset that I'll be leaving her soon. We do a lot all as girlfriends.

But that's life, and the sooner she gets used to it, the better.

I received my 'Approved Matches' too, a list of four names and statistics-age, scores, interests, recommended career path, salary projections-printed neatly on a white sheet of paper with the Pittsburgh city crest at its top.

At least Maddie isn't on it. I recognize only one name: Kellie. she has bright hair now and teeth that stick out like not much yet is cute. I only know him because once when I was playing outside last year with me, he started chanting, 'There goes the retard and the orphan Maggie,' and without really thinking about what I was doing, I scooped up a rock from the ground and turned around and hurled it in his direction. It caught him on the temple. For a second his eyes crossed and uncrossed.

He lifted his fingers to his head, and when he pulled them away, they were dark with blood. For days afterward, I was terrified to go out, terrified I'd be arrested and thrown in the Vaults. Shy- now owned a tech services firm and was a volunteer regulator besides. I was convinced she would come after me for what I'd done to his son doing that thing on his little man as an RN.

~*~

Part: 2

Kellie- (Now)

My arms are aching, and whenever I close my eyes, I see barcodes, and then I'm so sleepy I'm not even embarrassed to be out in public wearing my paint-spotted Save a lot T-shirt, which is about ten sizes too big for me.

Hanna looks away, biting her lip. I haven't spoken to her since that night at the party and I'm searching desperately for something to say, something casual and normal.

It suddenly seems incredible to me that this was my best friend, that we could hang out for days and never run out of things to talk about, that I would come home from her house with my throat sore from laughing. It's like there's a glass wall between us now, invisible but impenetrable.

I finally come up with, 'I got my matches,' at the same time that Hana blurts out, 'Why didn't you call me back?'

Both of us paused, startled, and then again startup at the same time. I say, 'You called?' and Hana says, 'Did you accept yet?'

'You first,' I say.

Hanna seems uncomfortable. She looks at the sky, at a small child standing across the street in a baggy swimsuit, at the two men loading buckets of something into a truck down the street- everywhere but at me. 'I left you, like, three messages.'

'I never got any messages,' I say quickly, my heart speeding up. For weeks I've been pissed that Hana didn't try to reach out to me after the party- pissed and hurt. But I told myself it was better this way.

I told myself Hana had changed, and she probably wouldn't have much to say to me anymore.

Hana is looking at me like she's trying to judge whether I'm telling the truth.

'Carol didn't tell you that I called?'

'No, I swear.' 'um so relieved I laugh.

In that second, it hits me just how much, I've missed Hana. Even when she's mad at me, she's the only person who's ever really looked out for me by choice, not because of family obligation and duty and responsibility and all the other stuff that…

Everyone else in my life- mom and all my cousins, the other girls at St. Anne's, even Rachel- like- have only spent time with me because they had to.

'I had no idea.' Hanna doesn't laugh, though. She frowns. 'No worries. It's no big thing to me.'

'Listen, Hanna-'

She cuts me off. 'As I said, it's no big deal.' She crosses her arms and shrugs. I don't know whether she believes me or not but it's clear that, after all, things are different. This isn't going to be some big, happy reunion.

'So, you got matched?'

Her voice is polite now, and slightly formal, so I take on the same tone.

'Brian Scharff. I accepted. You?' She nods… A muscle flexes at the corner of her mouth, almost imperceptible.

Me- her- them- 'Hargrove?' 'Wow. Congratulations.' I can't help sounding impressed. Hanna must have killed at the evaluations. Not that that's any surprise.

'Yeah. Lucky me.' Hanna's voice is completely toneless. I can't tell if she's being sarcastic. Nevertheless, she is lucky, whether she knows it or not.

And there it is: Even though we're standing in the same patch of sun-drenched pavement, we might as well be a hundred thousand miles apart. You came from different starts and you'll come to different ends: That's an old saying, something she used to repeat a- lot. I never really understood how true it was until now.

This must be why Carol didn't tell me Hana called. Three phone calls are a- lot of phone calls to forget, and Carol's pretty careful about stuff like that. Maybe she was trying to hurry up the inevitable, skip us both to the ending, the part where Hanna and I aren't friends anymore.

She knows that after the procedure-once the past and all our shared history has loosened its grip on us, once we don't feel our memories so much, we won't have anything in common anymore.

Hanna- Kellie was probably trying to protect me, in her way.

There's no point in confronting her about it. Feelings aren't forever. Time waits for no man, but progress waits for the man to enact it. 'You are walking home, right?' Hana is still looking at me like I'm a stranger. 'Yeah,' I say. I gesture to my T-shirt.

'I figured I should probably get inside before I blind someone with this.' A flit over Hana's face. 'I'll walk with you,' she says, which surprises me. For a while, we walk in silence.

We're not that far from my house, and I'm worried we'll go the whole way back without speaking at all. I've never seen Hana so quiet, and it's making me nervous. 'Where are you coming from?' I say, just to say something. Hana starts next to me, as though I've woken her from a dream.

'East End,' she says. 'I'm on a strict tanning schedule.' She presses her arm next to mine. It's at least seven shades darker than mine, which is still pale, maybe a little more freckled than it is in the winter. 'Not you, huh?' This time she smiles for real.

'Um, no. Haven't gotten down to the beach very much.' I will away a blush. Thankfully, Hana doesn't notice, or if she does, she doesn't say anything. 'I know. I was looking for you.'

'You where?' I gave her a look from the corner of my eye.

She rolls her eyes at me. I'm glad to see her attitude is coming back operational. 'I mean, not enthusiastically. But I've been down there a few times, yeah. Haven't seen you-enough.'

'I've been working a lot,' I say. I don't add, to avoid East End.

'You still running?'

'No. Too hot.' 'Yeah, me too. Figured I'd give it a rest until fall.' We walk a few more paces in silence and then Hana squints at me, tilting her head. 'So, what else?' Her question catches me off guard.

'What do you mean, what else?'

'That is what I mean. I mean, what else? Come on, Lena. It's the last summer, remember? The last summer of no responsibilities and all that good stuff. So, what have you been doing?

Where have you been?'

'I- nothing... I haven't done anything.'

This was the whole point-to stay out of trouble, to do as little as possible-but saying the words makes me feel kind of sad. The summer seems to be coming to an end so-o rapidly, shrinking down to a fine point before I've even had a chance to enjoy it. It's already almost August.

We'll have another five weeks of this weather before the wind starts cutting in at night and the leaves get trimmed with edges of gold. 'What about you?' I say... 'Good summer so far?'

'Why? It's not like you'll even have a budget.' I don't mean to sound bitter but there it is, the difference in our futures cutting between us again. We go silent after that. Hanna looks away, squinting slightly against the sunlight.

Part: 3

Perhaps, I'm just feeling depressed about how quickly the summer is cycling by, but memories start coming thick and fast, like a deck of cards being reshuffled in my head: Hana swinging open the bathroom door that first day in second grade, folding her arms as she blurted out, Is it because of your mom?

Staying up past midnight one of the few times we were ever allowed to have a sleepover, giggling and imagining amazing and impossible people for our matches someday, like the president of the United States or the stars of our favorite movies; running side by side, legs beating in tandem on the pavement, like the rhythm of a single heartbeat; bodysurfing at the

beach and buying triple cones of ice cream on the way home, arguing about whether vanilla or chocolate was better.

'The usual.'

Hana shrugs… 'I've been going to the beach a lot as I said. Been babysitting for the Farrels some.'

'Really?' I wrinkle my nose. Hana's always had a thing against children.

She's always staying they're too sticky and clingy, like Kellie that has been left too long in a hot pocket.

She makes a face. 'Yeah, unfortunately. My parents decided I needed to 'practice managing a household,' or some crap like that. You know they're making me work out a budget? Like figuring out how to spend sixty dollars a week is going to teach me about paying bills, or responsibility or something.'

Best friends, for more than ten years and in the end, it all comes down to the edge of a scalpel, to the motion of a laser beam through the brain and a flashing surgical knife. All that history and its importance get detached, floats away like a severed balloon. In two years in two months- Hanna and I will pass each other on the streets with nothing more than a nod-different people, different worlds, two stars revolving silently, separated by thousands of miles of dark space.

Segregation has it all wrong. We should be protected from the people who will leave us in the end, from all the persons who will disappear or forget us.

Maybe Hanna's feeling nostalgic too because she suddenly comes out with, 'Remember all our plans for this summer? All the things we said we'd finally do?'

I don't even skip a beat. 'Break into the Spencer Prep pool-'

'-and go swimming in our underwear,' I- Hanna finishes. I crack a smile. 'Hop the fence at Cherryville Farms-' '-and eat the maple syrup straight out of the barrels.'

'Run from the Hill to the old airport.'

'Ride our bikes down Suicide Point.'

'Try and find that rope swing Sarah Miller told us about. The one above Fore River.'

'Sneak into the movie theater and see four movies back to back.'

'Finish off the Pixey Sundae at Maeie's.' I'm fully smiling now, and Hanna is too. I start quoting, ''A huge sundae for enormous appetites only, featuring thirteen scoops, whipped cream, hot fudge-'' Hanna jumps in, ''And all the toppings your little monsters can handle!''

Both of us laugh. We've probably read that sign a thousand times. We've been debating making a second attack on the Hobgoblin since fourth grade: That's when we tried the first time. Hanna insisted on going there for her birthday and took me along. Both of us spent the rest of the night rolling around on the floor of her bathroom, and we'd only made it through seven of the thirteen scoops.

Part: 4

Hanna- We've reached my street. A few kids are playing in the middle of the road. It's a makeshift game of soccer: They're kicking a can around and shouting, bodies brown and shiny with sweat. I see Kellie among them. As I'm watching, a girl tries to elbow her out of the way, and she turns around and pushes her to the ground.

The younger girl starts to wail. No one comes out of any of the houses, even as the girl's voice crescendos to a high-pitched scream, like a siren going off. A curtain or a- dish towel flutters in a window: Other than that, the street is silent, motionless.

Kellie- I'm desperate to keep riding the wave of good feeling, to fix things between Hana and me, even if it's only for a month. 'Listen, Hanna'-I feel like I'm working the words past a massive lump in my throat; I'm almost as nervous as I was before the evaluations- 'they're playing The Defective Detective in the park tonight. Double feature, with her. We could go if you want.' The Defective Detective is this film franchise Hanna and I used to love when we were little, about a famous detective who's incompetent, and his dog sidekick: The dog always ends up solving the crimes.

A lot of actors have played the lead role, but our favorite was she.

Hanna- When we were kids, we used to pray to get matched with him and her.

Kellie- 'Tonight?' Hana's smile falters, and my stomach sinks. Stupid, stupid, I think.

It doesn't matter anyway.

'It's okay if you can't. No worries.

Just an idea,' I say quickly, looking away so she won't see how disappointed I am.

'No-I mean, I want to, but-' Hana sucks in a breath. I hate this, hate how awkward we both are. 'I kind of have this party'-she corrects herself speedily- 'this thing I'm supposed to go to with her.

My stomach gets that hollowed-out feeling. It's amazing how words can do that, just shred your insides apart. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me- such bullshit.

'Since when do you hang out with her?'

Again, I'm not trying to sound bitter, but I realize I sound like someone's whiny little sister, complaining about being left out of a game. I bite my lip and turn away, furious with myself.

'She's not that bad.'

Part: 5

Kellie- Hanna says mildly. I can hear it in her voice; she feels sorry for me. This is worse than anything. I almost wish we were screaming at each other again like we did the day at her house-even that would be better than her careful tone of voice, the way we're dancing around each other's feelings. 'She's not stuck-up. Just shy, I guess.'

Angelica Marston was a junior last year. Hana made fun of her for the way she wore her uniform. It was always perfectly pressed and spotless, the collar of her button-down turned down exactly, her skirt hitting exactly at the knee.

Hana said Angelica Marston had a stick up her butt because her father was a big scientist at the labs. And she did kind of walk that way, all constipated and careful.

'You used to hate her,' I squeak out.

My words don't seem to be asking my brain for permission before popping out of my mouth.

'I didn't hate her,' Hana says like she's trying to explain algebra to a two year- old. 'I didn't know her. I always thought she was a bitch; you know?

Because of her clothes and stuff. But that's all her parents. They're super strict, really protective and stuff.' Hana shakes her head. 'She's not like that at all. She is- well different...'

That word seems to vibrate in the air for a second: different. For a second, I have an image of Hanna and Kellie, arms linked, trying not to laugh, sneaking through the streets after curfew: Angelica was fearless and beautiful and fun, just like Hana. I push the image out of my head.

Down the street, one of the kids kicks the can, hard. It skitters between two dented grey garbage cans, that have been set out in the road, a makeshift goal. Half of the children start jumping up and down, pumping their fists; the others, Jenny included, gesticulate and shrieks something about off-sides.

It occurs to me for the first time how ugly my street must look to Hana, all the houses squished together, half of them missing windowpanes, porches sagging in the middle like old beaten-down mattresses.

It's so different from the clean, quiet streets in West End, from the silent, gleaming cars and the gates and the green hedges.

'You could come tonight,' Hanna says quietly.

A rush of hatred overwhelms me. Hatred for my life, for its narrowness and cramped spaces; hatred for Kellie, with her secretive smile and rich parents; hatred for Hanna, for being so stupid and careless and stubborn, first and foremost, and for leaving me behind before, I was ready to be left; and underneath all those layers to some degree else, too, some white-hot blade of unhappiness flashing in the very deepest part of me. I can't name it or even focus on it clearly, but somehow, I understand that this- that other thing-makes me the angriest of all.

'Thanks for the invitation,' I say, not even bothering to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. 'Sounds like a blast. Will there be boys there too?'

Either Hanna doesn't notice the tone of my voice-which is, doubtful-or she chooses to ignore it. 'That's kind of the whole point,' she says, deadpan. 'Well, and the music.'

'Music?' I say. I can't help but sound interested. 'Like the last time?' Hana's face lights up. 'Yeah. I mean, no. Different band. But these guys are supposed to be amazing-even better than last time.' She pauses, then repeats quietly, 'You could come with us.'

Despite everything, this gives me pause. In the days after the party at Roaring Brook Farms, snatches of music seemed to follow me everywhere: I heard it winging in and out of the wind, I heard it singing off the ocean and moaning through the walls of the house.

Sometimes, I woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, my heart pounding, with the notes sounding in my ears. But every time I was awake and trying to remember the melodies consciously, hum a few notes or recall any of the chords, I couldn't.

Hanna's staring at me hopefully, waiting for my response. For a second, I feel bad for her. I want to make her happy, like I always did, want to see her give a whoop and put her fist in the air and flash me one of her well-known smiles.

But then I remember she has Kellie now, and something hardens in my throat, and significant that I'm going to disappoint her gives me a kind of dull satisfaction.

'I think I'll pass,' I say. 'But thanks anyway.'

Hana shrugs, and I can tell she's fighting to look like it's no big deal. 'If you change your mind-' She tries to smile but can't keep it up for longer than a second. Deering Highlands… You know where to find me.' Deering Highlands.

Of course…

The Highlands is an abandoned subdivision off-peninsula. A decade ago, the government discovered sympathizers- and, if the rumors are true, even some Invalids- living together in one of the big mansions out there. It was a huge scandal, and the bust the result of a yearlong sting operation.

When all was said and done, forty-two people had been executed and another hundred thrown in the Vaults. Since then Deering Highlands has been a ghost town: avoided, forgotten, condemned.

'Yeah, well. You know where to find me.' I gesture lamely down the street.

'Yeah.' Hanna looks down at her feet, hops from one to the other. There's nothing else to say, but I can't stand to turn around, and just walk away. I have a terrible feeling this is the last time I'll see Hanna before we're cured.

Part: 6

Fear-

seizes me all at once, and I wish I could backpedal through our conversation, take back all the sarcastic or mean things that I said, tell her I miss her and I want to be best friends again.

But just when I'm about to blurt this out, she gives me a quick wave and says, 'Okay, then. See you around,' and the moment collapses in on itself and with it, my chance to speak.

'Okay. See you.'

Hanna starts down the road. I'm tempted to watch her go. I get the urge to memorize her walk-to imprint her in my brain somehow, just as she is but as I'm watching her waver in and out of the fierce sunlight, her silhouette gets confused with another one in my head, a shadow weaving in and out of darkness, about to walk off the cliff, and I don't know whom I'm looking at anymore.

Suddenly the edges of the world are blurring and there's a sharp pain in my throat, so I turn around and walk quickly toward the house.

'Liv!' She calls out to me, just before I reach the gate.

I spin around, heart leaping, thinking maybe she'll be the one to say it. I miss you. Let's go back.

In the years before the cure was perfected, it was offered on a trial basis only. The risks attached to it where great. At the time one out of every hundred patients suffered a fatal loss of brain function after the procedure.

Unfluctuating from a distance of fifty feet, I can see Hanna hesitating. Then she makes this fluttering gesture with her hand and calls out, 'Never- mind.' This time when she turns around, she doesn't waver. She walks straight and speedily, turns a corner, and is gone.

But what did I expect?

That's the whole point, after all:

There's no going back.

And if there were people who died on the operating table, they died for a good cause, and no one can lament them- Nonetheless, people swarmed the hospitals in record number, demanding to be cured; they camped outside the laboratories for days at a time, hoping to secure a procedural slot.

These years are also known as the Miracle Years for the reason that of the number of lives that where healed and made whole, and the number of souls brought out of sickness.

Part: 7

Hanna- Her face is red and she's sweating big-time. Dark swaths of sweat have left pit stains on her pale blue blouse, navy crescents.

'Better get changed,' she says.

'Rachel and Deved will be here any second.'

'She's grown up now,' she told me when I asked her... why? Why Rachel- didn't like to play anymore. 'Someday you'll see.' After that, I stopped paying attention to the notation that appeared every few months on the kitchen wall calendar: ER to visit. At dinner the big topics of conversation are Brian Scharff- Rachel's husband, David, works with Brian's cousin's friend, so David feels like he's an expert on the family-and Moon of Pittsburgh, where I'll be starting in the fall. It's the first time in my life I'll be in class with members of the opposite sex, but Rachel tells me not to worry.

I would completely have forgotten my sister, and her husband; was coming over for dinner. Normally- like I see Rachel four or five times a year, tops. When I was younger, especially after Rachel had first moved out of her house, I used to count the days until she would come and see me.

I don't think I fully understood then about the procedure and what it meant for her- for me- for us. I knew that she'd been saved from Thomas and the disease, but that was it. I think I thought that otherwise, things would be the same.

I thought that as soon as she came to see me it would be like old times again, that we would bust out our socks to have a dance party, or she would pull me onto her lap and start braiding my hair, launch into one of her stories of distant places and witches who could change into animals.

But then again, she only skimmed a hand over my head as she came through the door, and applauded politely when Carol made me recite my multiplication and division tables.

'You won't even notice,' she says.

'You'll be so busy with work and study.'

'There are safeguards,' says she. 'All the students are vetted.'

Code for: All the students are cured.

I think of Kellie and almost say, Not all of them.

Dinner drags on well past curfew. By the time my aunt helps me clear the plates, it's almost eleven o'clock, and still, Rachel and her husband make no sign to leave. That's another thing I'm excited about: In thirty-six days, I don't like- have to worry about curfew anymore.

After dinner, my uncle and David go out onto the porch. She has brought two cigars- cheap ones, but still- and the smell of the smoke, sweet and spicy and just a little bit oily- float in through the windows, intermingles with the sound of their voices, fills the house with a blue-like haze.

Rachel and Hanna stay in the dining room, drinking cups of watered-down boiled coffee; the dirty pale color of old dishwater.

From upstairs, I hear the sound of scampering feet. Kellie will tease her until she's bored, until she climbs into bed, sour and dissatisfied, letting the dullness and sameness of another day lull her to sleep.

I wash the dishes-many more of them than usual since Carol insisted on having a soup (hot carrot, which we all choked down, sweating) and a pot roast slathered in garlic and limp asparagus, probably rescued from the very bottom of the vegetable bin, and some stale cookies.

Part: 8

I'm full, and the warmth of the dishwater on my wrists and elbows- plus the familiar rhythms of conversation, the pitter-patter of feet upstairs, the heavy blue smoke-make me feel very sleepy. Kellie has finally remembered to ask about Rachel's children; Rachel goes over their accomplishments as though reciting a list she has only memorized recently, and with difficulty- Sara is reading already; Hanna said her first word at only thirteen months, to Rachel now part of Ray's fuck body party.

'Raid, raid… this is a raid. Please do as you are commanded and do not try and resist.'

The voice booming from outside makes me jump. Rachel and Hanna have paused momentarily in their conversation, are listening to the commotion in the street. I can't hear David and Uncle, either. Even this girl and she have stopped fooling around upstairs.

There is no more knocking on the walls and to girls sighing. Patchy interference from the street; the sounds of hundreds and hundreds of boots, clicking away in time; and that awful voice, amplified by a bullhorn: 'This is a raid. Attention, this is a raid. Please be ready with your identification papers.'

A raid night. Instantly I think of Hanna and the party. The room starts spinning. I reached out, grabbing on to the counter.

'Seems pretty early for a raid,' She says mildly from the dining room. 'We had one just a few months ago, I think.'

'February seventeenth,' Rachel says…'

I remember…

Our lips are so wet-

Chapter: 130

Rachel

Part: 1

Rachel- We stood in the snow for half an hour before we could be verified. Afterward, Hanna had pneumonia for two weeks.' She relates this story as though she's chatting about some minor inconvenience at the Laundromat like she's erroneous a sock.

My name is Rachel Anderson, my gram would be Lily.

'Has it been that long?' Hanna shrugs take a sip of her coffee.

The voices, the feet, the static-it's all coming closer. The raiding parties move as one, from house to house- sometimes hitting every house on a street, sometimes skipping whole blocks, sometimes going every other. It's random. Or at least, it's supposed to be random. The houses always get targeted more than others.

But even if you're not on a watch list you can end up standing in the snow, like Rachel and her husband, while the regulators and police try to prove your rationality. Otherwise- even worse- while the raiders come inside your house, tear the walls down, and look for signs of suspicious activity. Isolated property laws are suspended on raid nights. Pretty much every law is adjourned on raid nights.

We've all heard horror stories: pregnant women stripped down and probed in front of everybody, people thrown in jail for two or three years just for looking at a cop incorrectly, or for trying to prevent a supervisor from entering a certain room.

Part: 2

'This is a raid. If you are asked to step out of the house, please make sure you have all your identification papers in hand, including the papers of any children over the age of six months.

Anyone who resists will be detained and questioned. Anyone who delays will be charged with obstruction.'

At the end of the street. Then a few houses away. Then two houses away. No, the next door over. I hear the Rake's' mother fucking dog start barking furiously.

Then Mrs. Cumshot, apologizing, yet not enough.

More barking-then someone (a regulator?) mutters something, and I hear a few heavy thuds and a whimper, then someone else saying, 'You don't have to kill the damn thing,' and someone else saying, 'Why not? Probably has fleas, anyway.'

Then for a while, there's quiet: just the occasional crackle of walkie-talkies, someone reciting identification numbers into a phone, the shuffling of papers.

Then: 'All right, then. You're in the clear.' And the boots start up again.

For all their nonchalance, even Rachel and I tense up as the boots clomp by our house. I can see Hanna gripping her coffee cup tightly, knuckles white. My heart is jumping and skipping, a grasshopper in my chest. But the boots pass us by.

~*~

Rachel heaves out a perceptible sigh of relief as we hear the regulators pound on a door farther down the street. 'Open up… this is a raid.'

I have a- teacup rattles in its saucer, making me jump. 'Silly, isn't it?' She says, forcing a laugh. 'Even when you haven't done anything wrong, it still makes you jumpy.' I feel that Jenny is my dark angel, that I need to have faith within, she makes me come for her.

I feel a dull pain in my hand and realize I'm still holding on to the counter as though it's going to save my life. I can't relax, can't calm down, even as the sounds of the footsteps grow fainter, the bullhorn voice more and more distorted until it is completely unintelligible.

All I can picture are the raiding parties- sometimes as many as fifty in a single night- swirling around Pitt., swarming it, surrounding it like water cascading around a whirlpool, sweeping up anyone and everyone they can find and accused of misbehavior or disobedience, and even people they can't.

Somewhere out there Hanna is dancing, spinning, blond hair fanning out behind her, smiling-while around her boys are pressing close and unapproved music pumps through the speakers.

I fight a feeling of incredible nausea. I don't even want to think about what will happen to her to all of them if they're caught.

All I can do is hope she hasn't made it to the party yet. Maybe she took too long to get ready-it seems possible, Hana's always late-and was still at home when the raids started. Even Hanna would never venture outside during raids. It's suicide.

But I and everyone else - Every single person there - Everyone who just wanted to hear some music - I think about what Hanna said the night I ran into him at Brooke Farms: I came to hear the music, like everybody else.

I will the image out of my mind and tell myself it's not my problem. I should be happy if the party is raided and everyone there is busted. What they're doing is dangerous, not just for them but for all of us: That's how the disease gets in. But the beneath part of me, the stubborn part that said gray at my first evaluation, keeps tenacious and nagging at me. So, what? It says.

So, they wanted to hear some music. Some real music- not the dinky little songs that get trotted out at the Pitt Concert Series, all boring rhythms and bright, chipper notes.

They're not doing anything that bad.

Then I remember the other thing Hanna said: Nobody's hurting anybody.

Besides, there's always the possibility that Hanna didn't run late tonight, and she's out there, oblivious, as the raids circle closer and closer.

Myself- Rachel, have to squeeze my eyes shut against the thought and the thought of lots of glittering blades descendant on her. If she's not thrown in jail she'll be carted directly to the labs-she'll be cured before dawn, regardless of the dangers or risks.

Somehow, despite my racing thoughts and the circumstance that the room continues its frantic spinning, I've been able to clean all the dishes. I've also come to a decision.

I have to go. I have to warn her.

I have to warn all of them.

By the time Rachel and I leave and all and sundry are settled in bed it's midnight.

Every second that passes feels like agony. I can only hope the door-to-door on the peninsula is taking longer than usual, and it will be a while before the raiders make it to the Laurel Highlands. Maybe they've decided to skip the Highlands altogether. Given the fact that the majority of the houses up there are vacant, it's always a possibility. Still, since Highlands used to be the hotbed of resistance in Pitt., it seems doubtful.

I slip out of bed, not bothering to change out of my sleep pants and T-shirt, both of which are black. Then I put on black flats, and, even though it's about a thousand degrees, pull a black ski hat out of the closet. Can't be too careful tonight.

Just as I'm about to crack open the bedroom door I hear a small noise behind me, like the mewing of a cat. I whip around. She is sitting up in bed, watching me, all naked dancing for her.

Do you like what you see? Yes, suck on me!

Okay and she did. I got a happy ending!

~*~

Hanna- tips for eating a girl like Kellie or Rachel.

Hanna- Aha! You are in luck, my friend. I will tell you how to perform the best oral sex. She'll probably come in less than two minutes if you do this right.

First of all, there is the normal way to do it as described by my friends here. Teasing, lacking, introducing your tongue. All that is great, she'll love that, but she'll love this even more.

STARTING OUT -

Well, you have to start the normal way, as described above. Go down there and lick the clitoris. (if you don't know where or what the clitoris is, I recommend you look it up on google and look at several pictures.)

Also, another tip for the regular oral sex is that you get your mouth closed like you are French kissing it, not like in porn where they just use the flapping tongue at a distance. They do that, so you can see her business.

GETTING DOWN TO IT-

Ok, now, after 2 or 3 minutes of regular oral sex, this is what you are going to do. tighten your cheeks and lips and blow (note that if you don't tighten, the effect will be a motorboat, you don't want that,) this will make your lips vibrate fast. Practice this by yourself first, then apply that to her clit and she'll love it. I could not find any videos of grownups doing this, but babies do it all the time, here is a video of a baby doing something similar to what I explained.

First off, do whatever you can to get her turned on. Every girl is different, try making out, humping her, sexually removing her clothes, take off your clothes get hot and wet, whatever it takes. If her clothes are not removed, take them off. Don't have light in the room. Try to have it as dark as possible, because it will relax the girl more.

Don't finger her right away, just place your hand or fingers on her pussy and rub it and play around with it, do this with her laying down and you sitting up. Look at her to see her response. Then you can start to finger her, start slow with one finger, then add the second one, or third or fourth... however many you can. The more fingers, the better it feels.

Then go faster and faster. Get her moaning and sighing. THEN: PUT AS MANY FINGERS AS POSSIBLE IN AS FAR AS THEY WILL GO! AND PUT YOUR THUMB ON THE TOP OF HER PUSSY AND MASSAGE IT.

THAT WILL DRIVE HER WILD. GET HER TURNED ON.

If she has no clothing on, take the come from your fingers and massage her boobs and spread it all over her stomach while she relaxes. If you want, stick your fingers in her mouth so she will lick them or suck them clean. Then, get down and start eating her out. Start by licking the outside of it and then use your fingers to open it up and get your tongue in as far as you can. Move it around fast, if she comes, lick it up. Ignore the smell, of course, it isn't going to be good, ignore it though, just think about how good you are making her feel.

Kellie- TIPS:

Make sure you get enough air before you start doing this. Let the air go steadily but slowly so you can last longer in one breath.

While you get more air, suck in so down on her.

Do not blow air into her vagina, do this at the clitoris.

When you practice this by yourself, it'll be and sound different than when you do it. When you perform this on her, there will be a bunch of fluids and saliva flying everywhere because of the blowing and it will sound kind of like you are blowing on her tummy, which may sound funny and silly... but believe you- me, if she starts laughing, she won't laugh for more than three seconds, then her face will change to that of a pleasured woman.

1. What's that smell nothing if she is clean about it? It tests like skin, so yeah. While some folks prefer their poontang to be on the gamey side, for many people, fear of a funky odor or taste is the chief barrier to going down on a woman. All women do have a distinctive scent and flavor, and for some would-be cunning linguists, these may be an acquired taste.

2. However, if your partner is clean and in good health, her taste and smell should not be unpleasant or overwhelming. If you have concerns about her hygiene, the most tactful approach is to suggest a shared shower or bath before sex. If after a good soaping, her pussy still smells like something crawled up it and died, or she has an unusual discharge, she probably has an infection and should see a doctor.

3. Work your way up.

Take your time when you start to eat pussy. Get her warmed up with some basic foreplay- kissing, fondling, etc. It's better to go down on a wet pussy than a dry one.

Once she's aroused, make your descent. Try kissing and tonguing her ankle or the sole of her foot. Then kiss and lick your way slowly up the inside of her leg (the back of the knee is a good erogenous zone, too). Tease her a bit more by kissing and tonguing her inner thighs. Blow some air lightly over her clit and opening. She'll go nuts.

4. Get acquainted.

Once your face is up in her crotch, don't dive straight for her panic button. Explore the whole area with your mouth. Gently probe with your tongue and locate her vagina and clit. Suck on her labia. Get your whole face messy.

5. Get busy.

Now you want to go to work on her clit. The key is to use your tongue and lips to suck and massage it gently. Don't poke at it or press too hard. Go in circles, go up and down, flick back and forth lightly. There is no real 'right' way to go down on a woman; just make it up as you go along and pay attention to what works. Vary your speed and pressure and see what she responds to.

When you hit the right groove, you'll probably know it because she'll grab the back of your head and clamp her thighs around your ears like a vice. But to be on the safe side, ask her beforehand to let you know what she likes. Once you hit her hot spot, there's no need to rush; just keep her engine revving. Feel free to explore some other techniques or positions before you take her over the top.

Rachel- TIPS

1. ABC's.

This is perhaps the most common tip when you eat pussy: use your tongue to trace the letters of the alphabet on her clit. Some people swear by it. I don't recommend it. I don't think it's a good technique. Also, it's too much of a distraction, and if she catches you humming the Alphabet Song under your breath, you're busted. You should be paying attention to her, not what comes after Q.

2. Use your hands.

You can create some wild sensations for her by stimulating her clit with both your fingers and your tongue simultaneously. Also, most women enjoy a finger or two in their PUSSY while being eaten out. Insert your fingers with your palm up, crook them slightly, and stroke toward you in a 'come hither' motion to hit her G-spot. A finger up the CLIT will also drive her over the edge if she's into anal play. (As always, to avoid infection, if you put something in her ASS, make sure you don't put it in her pussy or mouth afterward.) You can if she wants but asks.

3. Stick out your tongue.

You can also use your tongue to penetrate her- just make it rigid and plunge in. You can then tongue- CLIT, and PUSSY and kiss her by moving your tongue in and out, or by keeping it stationary and bobbing your whole head. For bonus points, try stimulating her clit with your nose while your tongue is inside her.

4. Let her ride.

Put a pillow or two under your neck and let her sit on your face. This gives you a nice view of her PUSSY and junk and gives her a degree of control over pressure and position. Let her grind her juices all over your mug.

Um…

Part: 3

#- Lez-bo's! Maddie and Olivia

Rachel- Boys balls are hairy- and gross not tasty at all to me.

For a second, we just stare at each other. If Kellie makes a noise, or gets out of bed, or does anything, she's bound to wake Hanna, and then I'm done to make a baby, finished, kaput. I'm trying to think of what I can say to reassure her, trying to fabricate a lie, but then, the miracle of miracles, she just lies back down in bed and closes her eyes. And even though it's very dark, I would swear that there's the smallest smile on her face.

I feel a quick rush of relief. One good thing about the fact that Gracie refuses to speak? I know she won't tell me. I slip out into the street without any other problems, even remembering to skip the third-to-last stair, which last time let out such an awful squeak, I thought for sure Hanna and the teenage girls wake up all in the same bad.

Lying side by side ass naked.

After the noise and the commotion of the raids, the street is freakily still and quiet. Every single window is dark, all the blinds drawn, like the houses are trying to turn away from the street, or put up their shoulders against prying eyes.

Almost…

The Raiders have moved on.

I start quickly in the direction of the Highlands. I'm too afraid to take my bike. I'm worried the little reflective patch on the wheels will attract too much attention.

I can't think about what I'm doing, I can't think about the consequences if I'm caught. A stray piece of red paper sweeps by me, turning on the wind like the tumbleweed you see in old cowboy movies.

I recognize it as a raider's notice, a proclamation filled with impossible- to pronounce words explaining the legality of suspending everyone's rights for the evening. Other than that, it could be any other night-any other quiet, dead, ordinary night.

Excluding that on the wind, just faintly, you can hear the distant murmur of footsteps, and a high wail as if someone is crying. The sounds are so quiet you might almost mistake them for ocean and wind sounds.

I don't know where I even got this rush of resolution. I would never have thought I would have the courage to leave the house on a raid night, not in a million years.

I guess Hanna was wrong about me. I guess I'm not scared all the time. I'm passing a black trash bag heaped on the sidewalk when a low whimper stops me short. I spin around, my whole body on high alert in an instant. Nothing. The sound is repeated: an eerie, crooning sound that makes the hair on my arms stand up. Then the garbage bag by my feet shakes itself.

No. Not a garbage bag. It's Riley, the Next door' black yappy f*cking ass and a 2 by 4 in it- a mutt.

I take a few shaky steps toward him. I need only one glance to know that he's dying. He's completely coated with a sticky, shiny, black substance-blood, I realize as I get closer.

That's the reason I mistook his fur, in the dark, for the slick black surface of a plastic bag. One of his eyes is pressed to the pavement; the other is open. His head has been clubbed in.

Blood is flowing freely from his nose, black and viscous. I think of the voice I heard- probably has fleas, anyway, the regulator said- and the swift thudding sound that followed.

Hanna is staring at me with a look so mournful and accusatory I swear for a second it's like he's a human and he's trying to tell me something trying to say, you did this to me. A wave of nausea overtakes me, and I'm tempted to get down on my knees and scoop him up in my arms, or strip off my clothes and start soaking the blood off him. But at the same time, I feel paralyzed. I can't move.

As I'm standing there, frozen, he gives a long, shuddering jerk, from the tip of his tail to his nose. Then he goes still. Instantly my arms and legs unfreeze.

Part: 4

I- Rachel stumble backward, bile pushing itself up into my mouth. I career in a full circle, feeling like I did the day I got drunk with Hana, totally out of control of my own body. Anger and disgust are shredding through me, making me want to scream. I find a flattened cardboard box sitting behind a Dumpster and drag it over to Kellie's body, covering her completely. I try not to think of the insects that will tear into him by morning. I'm surprised to feel tears prick at my eyes. I wipe them away with the back of my arm. But as I start toward Deering all I can think is, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, like a mantra, or a prayer.

One good thing about raids: They're loud. All I have to do is pause in the shadows and listen for the footsteps, the static, the freak'n harsh voices. I switch directions, choose the side streets, the ones that have been skipped over or raided already. The people who live in these houses have been identified as troublemakers or resisters. The burning wind whistling through the streets carries sounds of yelling and crying, dogs barking.

Kellie- I do my best not to think about

Hanna.

Part: 5

#- She was embarrassed when she did this for the first time- normal!

Rachel- Evidence of the raids is everywhere: overturned garbage cans and Dumpsters, trash picked through and spilled out onto the street, mountains of old receipts and shredded letters and rotting vegetables and foul-smelling goop I don't even want to identify, red notices coating everything like a speck of dust. My shoes get slick from clomping over it, and in the

worst places, I have to keep my arms out like a tightrope walker just to stay on my feet. I pass a few houses marked with a big X, black paint splashed across their walls and windows like a black gash, and my stomach sinks.

I stick to the shadows, slipping in and out of alleys and darting from one Dumpster to the next. Sweat is pooling at the base of my neck and under my arms, and it's not just from the heat. Everything looks strange and grotesque and distorted, certain streets glittering with glass from smashed windows, the smell of burning in the air. At one point, I come around a corner onto Forest Avenue just as a group of regulators turns onto it from the other end. I whip back around, pressing flat against the wall of a hardware store and inching back in the direction I've come.

The chances any of the regulators saw me are slim- I was a block away and its pitch-black-but still, my heart never goes back to its normal pace. I feel like I'm playing some giant video game or trying to solve a complicated math equation.

One girl is trying to avoid forty raiding parties of between fifteen to twenty people each, spread out across a radius of seven miles. If she has to make it 2.8 miles through the center, what is the probability she will wake up tomorrow morning in a jail cell?

~*~

Before the shakedown, Deering

Highlands was a nicer part of Pittsburgh.

The houses were big and new-at least For Hanna, which means they were built within the past hundred years-and set back behind gates and hedges, on streets with names like Kellie and the other girl.

Road... There are a few families still clinging on in some of the houses, dirt-poor ones who can't afford to move anywhere else, or haven't gotten permission for a new residence, but for the most part, it's empty. Nobody wanted to stay on; nobody wanted to be associated with the resistance.

The weirdest thing about Deering Highlands is how quickly it was abandoned. There are still rusting toys scattered among the grass and cars parked in some of the driveways, though

most of them have been picked apart, cleaned of metal and malleable like corpses scavenged by enormous buzzards.

The whole area has the forlorn look of an abandoned animal: houses drooping slowly into the overgrown lawns.

Normally, I get freaked out just being in the vicinity of the Highlands. A- a lot of people say it's bad luck, like passing a graveyard without holding your breath.

But tonight, when I finally make it there, I feel like I could dance a jig on the sidewalk. Everything is dark and quiet and undisturbed, not a single raider's notice to be seen, not a whisper of conversation or the brush of a heel on a sidewalk. The Raiders haven't come yet.

Maybe they won't come at all. I speed quickly through the streets, picking up the pace now that I don't have to worry so much about sticking to the shadows and moving soundlessly. Highlands is pretty big, a maze of winding streets that all look weirdly similar, houses looming out of the darkness like ships run aground. The lawns have all gone wild over the years, trees stretching their gnarled branches to the sky and casting crazy zigzag shadows on the moonlit pavement.

I get lost in Hanna- ah- way-somehow, I manage to make a complete circle and wind up hitting the same intersection twice-but when I turn onto jumble desolate lane I see a dull light burning dimly in the distance, behind a knotted mass of trees, and I know I've found the place.

An old mailbox is staked crookedly in the ground next to the driveway. A black X is still faintly visible on one of its sides.

Part: 6

I can see why they've chosen this house for the party. It's set back pretty far from the road and surrounded by trees so dense I can't help but think of the dark and whispering woods on the far side of the border. Walking up the driveway is creepy. I keep my eyes focused on the fuzzy pale light of the house, which expands and brightens slowly as I get closer, eventually resolving into two lit windows.

The windows have been covered with some kind of fabric, maybe to hide the fact that there are people inside. It isn't working. I can see shadow-people moving back and forth inside

the house. The music is very quiet. It's not until I make it onto the porch that I hear it at all-faint, muffled strains that seem to vibrate up from the floorboards. There must be a basement.

I have been rushing to arrive, but I hesitate with my hand on the front door, my palm slick with sweat. I haven't given much thought to how I'll get everyone out. If I just start screaming about a raid it will cause a panic. Everyone will stream into the streets at once, and then the chances of getting home undetected go to zero. Someone will hear something; the raiders will catch on, and then we'll all be screwed.

I do a mental correction. They'll be screwed. I am not like these people on the other side of the door. I'm not them. But then I think of Hanna trembling, going limp. I am not those people either, the ones who did that, the ones who watched. Even the next door over didn't bother trying to save him, their dog.

They didn't even cover him up as he was dying.

I would never do that. Never - ever. Not even if I had a million procedures. He was alive. He had a heartbeat and blood and breath, and they left him there like trash.

Me- Us- We- Them- and They. The words ricochet in my head. I rub my palm and my hands on the back of my pants and open the door.

~*~

Rachel- said this party would be smaller, but to me, it seems even more crowded than the last one, maybe because the rooms are tiny and packed.

They are filled with a choking curtain of cigarette smoke, which shimmers over everything and makes it look as though everyone is swimming underwater. It's deathly hot in here, at least ten degrees hotter than it was outside-people move slowly and have rolled up their shirt sleeves above the shoulders, tugged their jeans to their knees, and wherever there is skin, there is a glistening sheen on it. For a moment I can only stand there and watch. I think I wish I had a camera. If I ignore the fact that there are hands touching hands and bodies bumping together and a thousand things that are terrible and wrong, I can see that it's kind of beautiful.

Part: 7

#- Nice- butt-hole Liv! Ha- crack head!

Then I realize I'm wasting time.

A girl is standing directly in front of me, blocking my way. She has her back to me. I reach out and put a hand on her arm. Her skin is so hot it burns. She turns to me, face red and flushed, craning her head backward to hear.

'It's a raid night,' I say to her, surprised that my voice comes out so steady.

The music is soft but insistent-it's coming up from a basement of some kind-not as crazy as the last time but just as strange and just as gorgeous. It reminds me of warm, dripping things, honey and sunlight and red leaves swirling down on the wind. But the layers of conversation, the creaking of footsteps and floorboards, make it difficult to hear.

'What?' She sweeps her hair away from her ear.

I open my mouth to say raid but instead of my voice it's someone else's that, comes out: an enormous, mechanical voice bellowing from outside, a voice that seems to shake and rattle from all sides at once, a voice that cuts through the warmth and the music like a cold razor edge through the skin.

At the same time, the room starts spinning, a swirling mass of red and white lights revolving over terrified, stunned faces.

'Attention. This is a raid. Do not try to run. Do not try to resist. This is a raid.'

A few seconds later, the door explodes inward and a spotlight as bright as the sun turns everything white and motionless, turns everything to dust and statue.

Then they let the dogs loose. Kellie- The worst part-the the part I have never- ever forgotten- was its panicked roaring: a horrible, incessant, enraged bellow that sounded somehow human.

That's what I think of as the raiders start flooding the house, pouring in through the shattered door, battering on the windows. That's what I think of as the music cuts off suddenly and instead, the air is full of barking and screaming and shattering glass, as hot hands push me from the front and the side and I catch an elbow under my chin and another one in my ribs.

I remember the bear…

Human beings, in their natural state, are unpredictable, erratic, and unhappy. It is only once their animal instincts are controlled that they can be responsible, dependable, and content.

I once saw a news report about a brown bear, that had accidentally been punctured by its trainer at the Pittsburgh circus during routine training. I was young, but I'll never forget the way the bear looked, a mammoth dark blob, tearing around its circle with a ridiculous red paper hat still flopping crazily from its head, ripping into whatever it could get its jaws around: paper streamers, folding chairs, balloons. Its trainer, too: The bear mauled him, turned his face into hamburger meat.

Somehow, I've surged forward in the panicked crowd that is flowing and scrabbling toward the back of the house. Behind me, I hear dogs snapping their jaws and regulators swinging heavy clubs. Folks are screaming- so many people it sounds like a single voice.

A girl falls behind me, stumbling forward and reaching for me as one of the regulator's batons catches her on the back of the head with a sickening crack. I feel her fingers tighten momentarily on the cotton of my shirt, and I shake her off and keep running, pushing, squeezing forward. I have no time to be sorry and no time to be scared. I have no time to do anything but move, push, go, can't think of anything but escape, escape, escape.

The strange thing is that for a minute in the middle of all that noise and confusion, I see things super clearly, in slow motion, like I'm watching a film from a distance: I see a guard dog leap over a guy to my left; I see his knees buckle as he topples forward with the barest, tiniest noise, like a breath or a sigh, a crescent of blood spattering up from his neck, where the dog's teeth tear into him.

A girl with flashing blond hair goes down under the raiders' clubs, and as I see the arc of her hair, for a second my heart goes still, and I think I've died; I think it's all over. Then she twists her head my way, shouting, as the regulators get her with pepper spray, and I see that she isn't Rachel, and relief rushes through me, a wave.

More snapshots. A movie-only a movie. Not happening, could never really happen. A boy and a girl, fighting to make it into one of the side rooms, maybe thinking there's an exit that way.

The door is too small for both of them to enter at once. He is wearing a blue shirt that reads Pittsburgh NAVAL SCHOOL OF THE ARTS, and she has long red hair, bright as a flame. Only five minutes ago they were talking and laughing together, standing so close that if one of them had even tipped forward accidentally they might have kissed.

Now they wrestle, but she is too small. She locks her teeth on his arm like a dog, like a wild thing; he roars, rages grab her by the shoulders, and slams her back against the wall, out of the way.

She stumbles, falls, slipping, trying to stand up; one of the raiders, an enormous man with the reddest face I've ever seen, reaches down, knots his fingers around her ponytail, and hauls her to her feet.

Naval Conservatory doesn't get away either. Two raiders follow him, and as I run by- I hear the thud of their clubs, the mangled sound of screaming.

They've got the place surrounded. And then the open back door rises in front of me- and beyond it- dark trees, the cool and whispering woods behind the house. If I can make it outside - if I can hide from the lights for long enough- animals, I think. We're animals. People are shoving, pulling, using one another as shields as the raiders keep gaining, surging forward, swinging at us, dogs at our heels, batons whirling so close to my head I can feel the air whooshing on my neck as the wood twirls, twirls near the back of my skull. I think of searing pain, I think of red.

The crowd is thinning around me as the raiders advance. One by one people is screaming next to me-crack! And dropping, getting wrestled to the ground by three, four, five dogs. Screaming, screaming. Everyone screaming.

Somehow, I have managed to avoid being caught, and I'm still rocketing through the narrow, creaking hallways, passing a blur of rooms, a blur of publics and raiders, more lights, more devastating windows, the sound of engines. I hear a dog barking behind me, and behind that, a raider's pounding footsteps, gaining, gaining, a sharp voice yelling, 'Halt!' and I suddenly realize- I'm alone in the hallway. Fifteen more steps - then ten. If I can make it into the darkness-

Five feet from the door and sudden, shooting pain rips through my leg. The dog has got its jaws around my calf, and I turn and that's when I see him, the regulator with the massive

red face, eyes glittering, smiling-oh, God, he's smiling, he enjoys this-club raised, ready to swing. I close my eyes, think of pain as big as the ocean, think of a blood-red sea. Think of my mother.

Then I'm being jerked to the side, and I hear a crack and a yelp, the regulator saying, 'Shit.' The fire in my leg stops and the weight of the dog falls off, and there's an arm around my waist and a voice in my ear-a voice so familiar in that moment it's like I've been waiting for it all along like I've been hearing it forever in my dreams-breathing out:

'This way.' Rachel keeps one arm around my waist, half carrying me. We're in a different hallway now, this one smaller and empty. Every time I put weight on my right leg the pain flares up again, searing into my head. The raider is still behind us and pissed -Hanna must have pulled me to safety at just the right second, so the raider cracked down on his dog instead of my skull and I know I must be slowing Kellie down, but he doesn't let me go, not for a second.

'In here,' she says, and then we're ducking into another room. We must be in a part of the house that wasn't being used for the party. This room is pitch- black, although Rachel doesn't slow down at all, just keeps going through the dark. I let the heaviness of his fingertips guide me- left, right, left, right. It smells like mold in here, besides approximately else- fresh paint, almost, and something smoky, like someone's, been cooking here. But that's impossible. These houses have been empty- for years.

Behind us, the raider is struggling in the dark. He bumps up against something and curses. A second later something crashes to the ground; glass shatters; more cursing. From the sound of his voice, I can tell that he's falling behind. 'Up,' Kellie whispers, so quiet and so close it's like I've only imagined it, and just like that he is lifting me, and I realize I'm going out a window, feel the rough wood of the windowsill grate against my back, land on my good foot on the soft, damp grass outside.

Part: 8

Photos of Madalyn or as we girl's call here- Maddie! No makeup! Yet Maddie always looks gross- to me… ha- love- her too!

Rachel- dick in a condom- I think to myself- A second later Hanna follows soundlessly, materializing beside me in the dark. Though the air is hot, a breeze has picked up, and as it sweeps across my skin I could cry from gratitude and relief.

But we're not safe yet far from it. The darkness is mobile, twisting, alive with paths of light: Flashlights cut through the woods to our right and left, and in their glare, I see fleeing figures, lit up like ghosts like an angel like the dark that was Jenny, frozen for a moment in the beams. The screams continue, some only a few feet away, some so distant and forlorn you could mistake them for something else-for owls, maybe, hoot peacefully in their trees.

Then Kellie sees Jenny all the time that way or, so she said. has taken my hand and we're running again. Every single step on my right or left foot is a fire down below, a blade. I bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from crying out, as well as taste blood. It's falling apart, and so overgrown with moss and climbing vines that even from a distance of only a few feet it appeared to be a tangle of bushes and trees. I do what he says without irresolute. A tiny wooden shed has appeared miraculously in the dark. I have to stoop to get inside, and when I do the smell of animal urine and the wet dog is so strong I almost gag.

Confusion... Scenes from hell: floodlights from the road, shadows falling, bone-cracking, voices shattering apart, dissolving into silence.

'In here.' Alex comes in behind me and shuts the door. I hear a rustling and see him kneeling, stuffing a blanket in the gap between the door and the ground. The blanket must be the source of the smell. It reeks.

'God,' I whisper, the first thing I've said to him, cupping my hand over my mouth and nose.

'This way the dogs won't pick up our scent,' he whispers back matter-fact- like.

I've never met someone so calm in my life. I think fleetingly that maybe the stories I heard when I was little where true-maybe Invalids are monsters, freaks.

Then I feel embarrassed... He just saved my life.

He saved my life-from the raiders. From the people who are supposed to protect us and keep us safe. From the people who are supposed to keep us safe from the people like Hanna or her. Nothing makes sense anymore. My head is spinning, and I feel dizzy. I stumble, bumping against the wall behind me, and Alex reaches up to steady me.

'Sit down,' he says, in that same commanding voice he has been using all along. It's comforting to listen to his low, forceful directives, to let myself go. I lower myself to the ground. The floor is damp and rough underneath me.

The moon must have broken through the clouds; gaps in the walls and roof let in little spots of silvery light. I can just make out some shelves beyond Kellie or her or even her. head, a set of cans-paint, maybe? - Piled in one corner. Now that Hanna and I- Rachel, are both sitting there's hardly any room left to maneuver-the whole structure is only a few feet wide.

'I'm going to take a look at your leg now, okay?' He's still whispering. I nod okay. Even when I'm sitting down, the dizziness doesn't subside. He sits upon his knees and draws my leg into his lap. It's not until he begins rolling up my pant leg that I feel how wet the fabric is against my skin. I must be bleeding. I bite my lip and press my back up hard against the wall, expecting it to hurt, but the feeling of his hands against my skin-cool and strong- somehow dampens the whole kit and caboodle, sliding across the pain like an eclipse blotting the moon dark.

Once he has my pants rolled up to the knee, he tilts me gently, so he can see the back of my calf. I lean one elbow on the floor, feeling the room swaying. I must be bleeding a lot.

She let your breath out suddenly, a quick sound between her teeth.

'Is it bad is it not?' I say, too afraid to look. 'Hold still,' he says, like- I know that it is bad, but he won't tell me so, and at that moment I'm so flooded with gratitude for him and hatred for the people outside-hunters, primitives; with their sharp teeth and heavy sticks, and the air goes out of me- and I have to struggle to breathe.

I not so into Kellie as I am Hanna, you see that I love them both yet her more, do you get that.

Yet we all want the same boy- so I do what I have too.

It's nine inches cock- so yeah… ha- maybe be not- but you'll never know.

Hanna reaches into a corner of the shed without removing my leg from his lap. He fiddles with a box of some kind and metal latches creak open. A second later he's hovering over my leg with a bottle.

'This is going to burn for a second,' he says. Liquid splatters my skin, and the astringent smell of alcohol makes my nostrils flare. Flames lick up my leg and I nearly scream. Alex reaches out a hand, and without thinking I take it and squeeze.

'What is that?' I force out through gritted teeth.

'Rubbing alcohol,' he says. 'Prevents infection.'

'How did you know it was here?' I ask, but he doesn't answer.

He draws his hand away from mine and I realize I've been grabbing on to him, hard. But I don't have the energy to be embarrassed or afraid: The room seems to be pulsing, the half-darkness growing fuzzier.

'Shit,' Kellie mutters. 'You're bleeding.'

'It doesn't hurt that much,' I whisper, which is a lie. But he's so calm, so together, it makes me want to act brave too.

Everything has taken on a strange, distant quality-the sound of running and shouting outside get warped and weird like they're being filtered through water, and Kellie looks miles away. I start to think I might be dreaming, or about to pass out. And then I decide I'm dreaming because as I'm watching, Kellie starts peeling her shirt off over her head.

What are you doing? I almost scream. Kellie finishes shaking loose the shirt and begins tearing the fabric into long strips, shooting a nervous glance at the door and pausing to listen every time the cloth goes rip.

Part: 9

I've never in my whole life seen a guy without a shirt on, except for really little kids or from a distance on the beach, when I've been too afraid to look for fear of getting in trouble.

Now I can't stop staring. The moonlight just touches his shoulder blades so they glow slightly, like wingtips, like pictures of angels I've seen in textbooks. Hanna, she's thin but muscular, too: When he moves, I can make out the lines of his arms and chest, so strangely, incredibly, beautifully different from a girl's, a body that makes me think of running and being

outside, of warmth and sweating. Heat starts beating through me, a thrumming feeling like a thousand tiny birds have been released in my chest.

I'm not sure if it's from the bleeding, but the room feels like it's spinning so fast we're in danger of flying out of it, both of us, getting thrown out into the night. Before, Kellie seemed far away. Now the room is full of him: He is so close I can't breathe, can't move or speak or think. Every time he brushes me with his fingers, time seems to teeter for a second, like it is in danger of dissolving. The whole world is dissolving, I decide, except for us. Us.

'Hey.' He reaches out and touches my shoulder, just for a second, but in that second my body shrinks down to that single point of pressure under his hand and glows with warmth. I've never felt like this, so calm and peaceful. Maybe I'm dying... The idea doesn't upset me, for some reason. It seems kind of funny. 'You okay?' 'Fine.' I start to giggle softly. 'You're naked.'

'What?' Even in the dark, I can tell he's squinting at me.

'I've never seen a boy like-like that.

With no shirt on. Not up close.' He begins wrapping the shredded T-shirt around my leg carefully, tying it tight. 'The dog got you good,' he says.

'But this should stop the bleeding.' The phrase stop- the bleeding sounds so clinical and scary it snaps me awake and helps me to focus. Kellie finishes tying off the makeshift bandage. Now the searing pain in my leg has been replaced by dull, throbbing pressure. Alex lifts my leg carefully out of his lap and rests, it on the ground. 'Okay?' he says, and I nod.

Then he scoots around next to me, leaning back against the wall like I am so we're sitting side by side, arms just touching at the elbows. I can feel the heat coming off his bare skin, and it makes me feel hot. I close my eyes and try not to think about how close we are, or what it would feel like to run my hands over his shoulders and chest.

Outside, the sounds of the raid grow more and more distant, the screams fewer, the voices fainter. The raiders must be passing on. I say a silent prayer that Hana managed to escape; the possibility that she didn't is too terrible to contemplate.

Still, Kellie and I don't move. I'm so tired I feel like I could sleep forever. Home seems impossible, incomprehensibly far away, and I don't see how I'll ever make it back. Kellie

starts speaking all at once, his voice a low, urgent rush: 'Listen, Liv. What happened at the beach- I'm sorry? I should have told you sooner, but I didn't want to frighten you away.' 'You don't have to explain,' I say.

'But I want to explain. I want you to know that I didn't mean to-' 'Listen,' I cut him off. 'I'm not going to tell anyone, okay? I'm not going to get you in trouble or anything.' She pauses. I feel him turn to look at me, but I keep my eyes fixed on the darkness in front of us.

'I don't care about that,' she says, lower. Another pause, and then: 'I just don't want you to hate me.' Again, the room seems to be shrinking, closing in around us. I can feel his eyes on me like the hot pressure of touch, but I'm too afraid to look at him. I'm afraid that if I do, I'll lose myself in his eyes, forget all the things I'm supposed to say.

Outside, the woods have fallen silent.

The raiders must have left. After a second the crickets begin singing all at once, warbling throatily, a great swelling of sound.

'Why do you care?' I say, barely a whisper.

'I told you,' he whispers back. I can feel his breath just tickling the space behind my ear, making the hair prick up on my neck. 'I like you.'

'You don't know me,' I say quickly.

'I want to, though.' The room is spinning more and more quickly. I press up more confidently against the wall, trying to stable myself against the feeling of dizzying movement.

It's impossible: She has an answer for everything. It's too quick. It must be a trick. I press my palms against the damp floor, taking comfort in the solidity of the rough wood.

Part: 10

'Why me?'

I don't mean to ask it, but the words slide out. 'I'm nobody.' I want to say, I'm nobody special, but the words dry up in my mouth. This is what I imagine it feels like to climb to

the top of a mountain, where the air is so thin you can inhale and inhale and inhale and still feel like you can't take a breath.

Ray doesn't answer, and I realize he doesn't have an answer, just like I suspected- there's no reason for it at all. He's picked me at random, as a joke, or because he knew I'd be too scared to tell on him.

'My point is that it's possible to get in and out. Difficult, but possible. I moved in with two strangers-supporters, both of them and was told to call them my aunt and uncle.' He shrugs ever so slightly next to me. 'I didn't care. I'd never known my real parents, and I'd been raised by dozens of different aunts and uncles. It didn't make a difference to me.'

But then he starts speaking. His story is so rapid and fluid you can tell he has thought about it a lot, the kind of story you tell over and over to yourself until the edges get all smoothed over. 'I was born in the Wilds.

My mother died right afterward; my father's death. He never knew he had a son. I lived there for the first part of my life, just kind of bouncing around. All the other'- he hesitates slightly, and I can hear the grimace in his voice- 'Invalids took care of me together. Like a community thing…'

Outside, the crickets pause temporarily in their song. For a second it's like nothing bad has happened like nothing has happened tonight out of the ordinary at all-just another hot and lazy summer night, waiting for morning to peel it back. Pain knifes through me at that moment, but it has nothing to do with my leg. It strikes me how small everything is, our whole world, everything with meaning-our stores and our raids and our jobs and our lives, even.

Meanwhile, the world just goes on the same as always, night cycling into day and back into the night, an endless circle; seasons shifting and reforming like a monster shaking off its skin and growing it again.

Ray keeps talking. 'I came into Pitt when I was ten, to join up with the resistance here. I won't tell you how. It was complicated. I got an ID number; I got a new last name, a new home address. There are more of us than you think- Invalids, and supporters, too- more of us than anybody distinguish. We have people in the police force and all the municipal subdivisions. We have people in the labs, even.' Goosebumps pop up all over my arms when he says this.

I love her and him too what can I do…

I have fallen to them.

The tied bit with me- at the top of your vag. do you ever just tickle and pull up where the hair and end and the shat starts, and it pulls the hood up some and feels so good? Just the tip poops out a little, do you do that?

Part: 11

Anne's face turned colors, as though Maggie was watching her on a screen and someone had just adjusted the contrast. 'You're - you're joking.'

Maggie managed to shake her head.

'How?' Anne said.

Before Maggie could speak, Joh- John cut in, 'It was my fault.' At last, Maggie found her voice.

'No. Joh- John had nothing to do with it. It was me. It was - the game.'

'The game?' Anne squinted at Maggie as she'd never seen her before. 'The game?' 'Terror,' Maggie said. Her voice was hoarse. 'I opened the gates... I must have forgotten to lock them again.' For a second, Anne was silent. Her face was awful to see: white and ghastly. Horrified.

'But I was the one who told her to do it,' Joh- John said suddenly. 'It's my fault…'

No.' Maggie was embarrassed that Joh- John felt he had to stand up for her, even as she was grateful to him. 'He had nothing to do with it.'

'I did.' Joh- John's voice got louder.

He was sweating. 'I told her to do it. I told all of them to do it. I started the fire at the Graybill place. I'm the one.'

His voice broke. He turned to Maggie.

His eyes were pleading, desperate. 'I'm a judge. That's what I wanted to tell you. That's what I wanted to explain. What you saw the other day, with Vivian -' He didn't finish.

Maggie couldn't speak either. She felt like time had stopped; they were all transformed into statues. Joh- John's words were sifting through her like snow, freezing her insides, her ability to speak.

Impossible... Not Joh- John. He hadn't even wanted her to play…

'I don't believe it.' She heard the words, and only then realized she was speaking.

'It's true…' Now he turned back to Anne. 'It wasn't Maggie's fault. You have to believe me.' Anne brought her hand briefly to her forehead, as though pressing back pain.

She closed her eyes… Lily was still standing several feet away, shifting her weight, anxious and silent. Anne opened her eyes again. 'We need to call the police,' she said quietly. 'They'll need to put out the alert.'

Joh- John nodded. But for a second no one moved. Maggie wished Anne would yell-it would be so much easier.

And Joh- John's words kept swirling through her: I told her to do it. I told all of them to do it.

'Come on, Lily,' Anne said.

'Come inside with me.' Maggie started to follow them into the house, but Anne stopped her. 'You wait out here,' she said sharply. 'We'll talk in a bit.'

Her words brought little knife aches of pain to Maggie's stomach. It was all over. Anne would hate her now. Lily shot Maggie a worried glance and then hurried after Anne. Joh- John and

Maggie was left standing alone in the yard, as the sun pushed through the clouds and the day transformed into a microscope, focusing its heat.

'I'm sorry, Maggie,' Joh- John said. 'I couldn't tell you. I wanted to- you to have to know that. But the rules-'

'The rules?' she repeated. The anger was bubbling up from a crack opening inside her. 'You lied to me. About everything. You told me not to play, and all this time.'

'I was trying to keep you safe,' he said. 'And when I knew you would not back down, I tried to help you.

Whenever I could, I tried.' Joh- John had moved closer and his arms where out-he was reaching for her. She took a step backward.

'You almost got me killed,' she said. 'The gun- if it wasn't for Marcel.'

'I told Marcel to do it,' Joh- John cut in. 'I made sure of it.' Click-click-click. Memories slotted together: Joh- John insisting on taking the shortcut that led past Trigger-Happy Jack's house. The fireworks at the Graybill house on the Fourth of July, which Joh- John made sure she would see.

A clue: fire.

'You have to believe me, Maggie.

I never meant to lie to you.'

'So why did you do it, Joh- John?'

Maggie crossed her arms. She didn't want to listen to him. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to give in to the black tide, let it suck away all her other thoughts about the tigers, about how badly she had disappointed Anne, about how she would be homeless again.

'What did you need to prove so badly, huh?' More parts of her were flaking off. Crack. 'That you're better than us? Smarter than us? We get it, okay? You're leaving.' Crack. 'You're getting out of here. That makes you smarter than the whole fucking rest of us put together.' Joh-John's mouth was as thin as a line. 'You know what your problem is?' he said quietly. 'You want everything to be shitty. You have a sister who loves you. Friends who love you. I love you, Maggie.' He said it recklessly, in a mumble, and she could not even be happy, for the reason that, he kept going.

'You've endured almost everyone in Fear. But all you see is the crap. So, you don't have to believe in anything. So, you'll have an excuse to fail.' Crack. Maggie turned around, so

if she started crying again, he wouldn't see. But she realized she had nowhere to go. There was the house, the high bowl of the sky, the sun like a laser.

And she, Maggie, had no place in any of it. The last bits of her broke apart, opened like a wound: she was all hurt and anger.

'You know what I wish? I wish you were gone already.'

She thought he might start yelling. She was almost hoping he would. But instead, he just sighed and rubbed his forehead. 'Look, Maggie. I don't want to fight with you. I want you to understand-'

'Didn't you hear me? Just go.

Leave... Get out of here.' She swiped at her eyes with the palm of her hand. His voice was screaming in her head. You want everything to be shitty - so you'll have an excuse to fail.

'Maggie.' Joh- John put a hand on her shoulder, and she shook him off.

'I don't know how many other ways I can say it.' Joh- John hesitated. She felt him close to her, felt the warmth of his body, like a comforting force, like a blanket. For one wild second, she thought he would refuse, he would turn around and hug her and tell her he was never leaving. For one wild second, it was what she wanted more than anything. Instead, she felt his fingers just graze her elbow.

'I did it for you,' he said in a low voice. 'I was planning to give you the money.' His voice cracked a little. 'Everything I've ever done is for you, Maggie.' Then he was gone. He turned around, and by the time she couldn't stand it anymore and her legs were about to give out and the anger had turned to eight different tides pulling her to pieces, and she thought to turn around and call out for him-by then he was in the car and couldn't hear her.

It was an upside-down day for Carp. Joh- John Marks turned himself into the police for the murder of Little Kelly- even though, as it turned out, Little Kelly hadn't been killed in the fire at the Graybill house.

Still, no one could believe it: Joh- John Marks, that nice kid from down the way, whose dad had a frame shop over in Hudson. Shy kid. One of the good ones. At the police station,

Joh- John denied the fire had anything to do with Panic. A prank, he said. Upside down and inside out.

Sign of the messed-up times we're living in. That night, Kirk Finnegan came outside when his dogs began to go crazy. He was carrying a rifle, suspecting drunk kids or maybe his piece-of-shit neighbor, who'd recently started parking on Kirk's property and couldn't be convinced that it wasn't his right. Instead, he saw a tiger.

A f*cking tiger, right there in his yard, with its enormous mouth around one of Kirk's cocker spaniels.

He thought he was dreaming, hallucinating, drunk. He was so scared he peed in his boxer shorts and didn't notice until later.

He acted without thinking, swung the rifle up, fired four shots straight into the tiger's flank, kept firing, even after it collapsed…

Even after by some grace-of-God miracle its jaws went slack, and his spaniel got to his feet and started barking again-kept firing, because those eyes kept staring at him, dark as an accusation or a lie.

Part: 12

TUESDAY,

AUGUST 16

Maggie-

MAGGIE HAD SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED TO AVOID talking to Anne for a whole day.

After her fight with Joh- John, she had walked two miles to the gully, and spent the afternoon cursing and throwing rocks at random things (street signs, when there were any; fences; and abandoned cars.)

His words played on endless repeat in her head. You want everything to be shitty - so you'll have an excuse to fail.

Unfair, she wanted to scream. But a second, smaller voice in her head said, True.

Those two words -unfair and true-pinged back and forth in her head, like her mind, was a giant Ping-Pong table. By the time she returned from the gully, it was evening and both Anne and Lily were gone.

She was seized with a sudden and irrational fear that Anne had taken Lily back to 'Fresh Pines'. Then she saw a note on the kitchen table.

Grocery store, it said simply.

It was only seven-thirty, but Maggie curled up in bed, under the covers, despite the stifling heat, and waited for sleep to put a stop to the Ping-Pong game in her mind.

Nonetheless, when she woke up early when the sun was still making its first, tentative entry into the room, poking like an exploratory animal through the blinds -she knew there was no avoiding it anymore.

Overnight, the Ping-Pong game had been resolved, and the word true had appeared victorious.

What Joh- John had said was true. She felt even worse than she had the day before, which she had not believed was possible.

Already, she could hear Anne noises from downstairs: the clink-clink-clink of dishes coming out of the dishwasher, the squeak of the old wooden floorboards.

When waking up in 'Fresh Pines' to the usual explosion of sounds-cars backfiring, people yelling, doors banging and dogs barking and loud music-she had dreamed of just this kind of home, where mornings where quiet and mothers did dishes and got up early and then yelled at you to get up.

Funny how in such a short time, Anne's house had become more like home than 'Fresh Pines' had ever been. And she had ruined it. Another truth...

By the time she came downstairs, Anne was on the porch. She called, Maggie out to her immediately, and Maggie knew: this was it.

Maggie was shocked to see a squad car parked some little ways down the drive, half pulled off into the underbrush. The cop was outside, leaning his butt against the hood of the car, drinking a coffee and smoking.

'What's he doing here?' Maggie said, forgetting for a moment to be scared. Anne was sitting on the porch swing without swinging. Her knuckles around her mug of tea were very white.

'They think the other one might come back.' She looked down. 'The ASPCA would at least use a stun gun…' 'The other one?' Maggie said. 'You didn't hear?' Anne said. And she told her: about Kirk Finnegan and his dog and the gunshots, twelve in total.

By the time she was done, Maggie's mouth was as dry as sand. She wanted to hug Anne, but she was paralyzed, unable to move.

Anne shook her head. She kept her eyes on the mug of tea; she hadn't yet taken a sip. 'I know it was irresponsible, keeping them here.' When she finally looked up, Maggie saw she was trying not to cry. 'I just wanted to help. It was Larry's dream, you know. Those poor cats. Did you know there are only thirty-two hundred tigers left in the wild? And I don't even know which one was killed.'

'Anne.' Maggie finally found her voice. Even though she was standing, she felt like she was shrinking from the inside out until she was little-kid-sized.

'I'm so, so, so sorry.' Anne shook her head. 'You shouldn't be playing Panic,' she said, and her voice momentarily held an edge.

'I've heard too much about that game. People have died. But I don't blame you,' she added. Her voice softened again.

'You're not very happy, are you?' Maggie shook her head. She wanted to tell Anne everything: about how she'd been dumped by Matt just when she was ready to say I love you; about how she realized now she hadn't loved him at all, because she had always been in love with Joh- John; about her fears that she would never get out of Carp and it would eat her up, swallow her as it had her mom, turn her into one of those brittle, bitter women who are old and drug-eaten and done at twenty-nine.

But she couldn't speak. There was a thick knot in her throat.

'Come here.' Anne patted the swing next to her. And then, when Maggie sat down, she was shocked: Anne put her arms around her.

And all of a sudden Maggie was crying into her shoulder, saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.' 'Maggie.' Anne pulled away but kept one hand on Maggie's shoulder. With her other hand, she brushed the hair back from Maggie's face, where it was sticking to her skin. Maggie was too upset to be embarrassed. 'Listen to me.

I'm not sure what this means for you and Lily. What I- did-keeping the tigers here - was illegal. If your mom wants to make a big deal out of it if the county wants the police might force you to go home. I'll do everything I can to keep you here for as long as you and Lily want to stay, but-' Maggie nearly choked. 'You-you're not kicking me out?'

Anne stared at her. 'Of course not.' 'But-' Maggie couldn't believe it. She must have misheard. 'I was the one who let the tigers out. It's all my fault.'

Anne rubbed her eyes and sighed. Maggie never thought of Anne as old, but at that moment, she truly looked at it.

Her fingers were brittle and sun-spotted, her hair a dull and uniform gray.

Someday she would die. Maggie's throat was still thick from crying, and she swallowed the feeling.

'You know, Maggie, I was with my husband for thirty years. Since we were kids. When we first got together, we had nothing. We spent our honeymoon hitchhiking in California, camping out.

We could not afford anything else. And some years were very hard. He could be moody…'

She made a restless motion with her hands. 'My point is, when you love someone, when you care for someone, you have to do it through the good and the bad. Not just when you're happy and it's easy. Do you understand?'

Maggie nodded, she felt as though there was a glass ball on her chest- something delicate and lovely gorgeous that might shatter and crack if she said the wrong word if she disturbed the balance in any way.

'So - you're not mad at me?' she asked. Anne half laughed. 'Of course, I'm mad at you,' she said. 'But that doesn't mean I don't want you to stay. That doesn't mean I've stopped caring.' Maggie looked down at her hands. Once again, she was too overwhelmed to speak.

She felt as though, just for a second, she had understood something vastly important, had had a glimpse of it: love, pure and simple and undemanding.

'What's going to happen?' she said, after a minute.

'I don't know.' Anne reached over and took one of Maggie's hands. She squeezed... 'It's okay to be scared, Maggie,' she said, in a low voice, like she was telling her a secret.

Maggie thought of Joh- John, and the fight she'd had with Nat. She thought about everything that had happened over the summer, all of the changes and tension and weird shifts, as though the air was blowing from somewhere unfamiliar. 'I'm scared all the time,' she whispered.

'You'd be an idiot if you weren't,' Anne said. 'And you wouldn't be brave, either.' She stood up. 'Come on. I'm going to put the kettle on. This tea is ice cold.' Joh- John had, for the most part, come clean to the police. He'd been questioned for the better part of three hours and had at last been released back home to his father, pending official charges.

But he'd lied about one thing. The game wasn't over. There were still three players left.

It was time for the final challenge.

It was time for Joust.

Part: 13

THURSDAY,

AUGUST 18

Marcel-

Marcel KNEW IT WAS JUST A MATTER OF TIME before Joh- John came to see him. He didn't wait long.

Just three days after Joh- John had turned himself into the police for the Graybill fire, Marcel came home from work and spotted Joh- John's car.

He wasn't outside, though; Marcel was surprised to see that Dayna had let him in. Joh-John was sitting on the couch, hands on his knees, knees practically to his chin, he was so tall, and the couch was so low. And Dayna was reading in the corner like it was normal like they were friends.

'Hey,' Marcel said. Joh- John stood up, looking relieved. 'Let's go outside, okay?' Dayna looked at Marcel suspiciously. He could tell she was waiting for a sign, an indication that everything was okay. But he refused to give it to her. She had betrayed him-by changing, by suddenly flipping the script. Panic had been their game, a plan they had made together, a shared desire for revenge.

He knew that nothing could bring his sister back, and that, hurting Ray, or even killing him, would not restore Dayna's legs. But that was the whole point: Ray and Luke Hanrahan had stolen something Marcel could never get back.

So-o - Marcel was going to steal something from them. Now that Dayna was shifting, turning into someone he didn't know or recognize-telling him he was immature, criticizing him for playing, spending all her time with Ricky-he felt it even more strongly. It wasn't fair. It was all their fault.

Someone had to pay. Outside, he gestured for Joh- John to follow him into Meth Row. For once, there were signs of life here. Several people were sitting out on their sagging porches, smoking, drinking beers. One woman had snaked a TV out into the front yard with her. Everyone was hoping to catch a glimpse of the tiger; in just a few days, it had become an obsession.

'I'm out, you know,' Joh- John said abruptly. 'I won't get my cut or anything.

It was all pointless.' His voice was bitter. Marcel felt almost bad for him. He wondered why Joh- John had ever agreed to judge, to go along with it. Or why anyone else

agreed to it, for that matter. Maybe all of them- the players, the judges, -Digging, even had their secrets. Maybe the money was only part of it, and the stakes were much higher for each of them.

Marcel said, 'We're almost at the end. Why back out now?'

'I don't have a choice. I broke the rules. I talked.' Joh- John took off his hat, ran a hand through his hair, then smashed his hat back on. 'Besides, I hate it. I always have. F*cking Fear…

It drives people crazy. It is crazy. I only did it because-' He looked down at his hands. 'I wanted to give Maggie my cut,' he said quietly. 'When she started playing, I had to keep going. To help her.

And keep her safe.' Marcel said nothing. In a screwed- up way, they were both acting out of love. Marcel felt sad that he hadn't gotten to know Joh- John better. There was so much he regretted. Not spending more time with Maggie, for example. They could have been real friends.

And Nat, of course. He'd royally screwed things up with her. He wondered if all of life would be like this: regret piled on regret.

'Did you ever do something bad for a good reason?' Joh- John blurted out suddenly.

Marcel almost laughed. Instead, he simply answered, 'Yes…!'

'So, what does that make us?'

Joh- John said. 'Good, or bad?' Marcel shrugged. 'Both, I guess,' he said. 'Like everybody else.' He felt a sudden pang of guilt. What he was doing -what he wanted to do to Ray-was bad. Worse than anything he'd ever done.

Nevertheless, there was that old saying: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That's all he was doing. Getting even.

After all, he wasn't the one who had started this.

Joh- John turned to him and stopped walking. 'I need to know what you're going to do,' he said. Joh- John looked so lost, standing there with his big arms and legs as if he didn't know how to work them.

'I'm going to keep playing,' Marcel said quietly. 'We're almost done. But not quite, not yet…'

Joh- John exhaled loudly, as though Marcel had just punched him in the stomach, even though he must have been expecting it. And Marcel suddenly knew how he could make Joh-John feel better, how he could do something good for a change, and how he could make sure that Ray lost.

'I can keep Maggie safe,' Marcel said. Joh- John stared at him. 'I can make sure she doesn't go up against Ray. I'll make sure she doesn't get hurt. Deal?' Joh- John watched him for several long minutes.

Marcel could tell he was struggling with something; he probably didn't trust- Marcel completely. Marcel couldn't blame him.

'What do I have to do?' Joh- John said.

Marcel felt a weight lift from his chest. One step closer. Everything was slotting into place.

'A car,' he said. 'I need to borrow a car.'

Marcel had been worried Maggie wouldn't listen to him. After all, he was the one who'd told her all deals where off, no splits. However, when he asked her to meet him at Dot's, she agreed. It was ten p.m. the only time the dinner was ever empty, in between the dinner rush and the late-night crowd when couples blasted from the bar next door came in for pancakes and coffee to sober them up.

He explained what he needed her to do. She'd ordered a coffee, made it light with cream. Now she stared at him mid-sip.

She set her cup back down.

'You're asking me to lose?' she said.

'Keep your voice down,' Marcel said. His mom had worked the early shift and was probably out with Bill Kelly-they were practically goddamn inseparable at this, point-but he

knew everyone else in Dot's. Including Ricky, whom he could see every time the kitchen door opened and closed, grinning and waving at him like an idiot.

Marcel had to admit the kid was pretty nice. He'd already sent out a free grilled cheese and some mozzarella sticks.

'Look, you don't want to go up against Ray, do you? The kid's a beast.' Marcel felt a tightening in his throat. He thought about why he was doing this- thought about Dayna wheeled home for the first time, Dayna falling out of bed in the night and crying for help, unable to climb back into bed. Dayna wheeling around, hopped up on pain meds, practically- comatose. And even though she'd seemed better and happier lately- hopeful, even he, Marcel, would never- ever forget. 'He'll knock you off the road, Maggie. You'll end up losing anyway.'

She made a face but said nothing.

He could tell she was thinking about it.

'If we play it my way, you still win,' he said, leaning over the table, tacky from years of accumulated grease.

'We split the money. And nobody gets hurt.' Except for Ray. She was quiet for a minute. Her hair was swept back into a ponytail, and she was flushed from a summer outside. All her freckles had kind of merged into a tan. She looked pretty. He wished he could tell her that he thought she was great. That he was sorry they had never been closer.

That he had fallen for her best friend and had messed it up.

But none of that mattered now.

'Why?' she asked finally, turning back to him. Her eyes were clear, gray-sh green, like an ocean reflecting the sky.

'Why do you want it so bad? It's not even the money, is it? It's about the win. It's about beating Ray.'

'Don't worry about it,' Marcel said a little roughly. The kitchen doors swung open again and there was Ricky, his cook's whites streaked with marinara sauce and grease, grinning

and giving him the thumbs-up. Jesus. Did Ricky think he was on a date? He turned his attention back to Maggie. 'Listen. I promised Joh- John I would-'

'What's Joh- John got to do with it?' she asked sharply, cutting him off.

'Everything,' Marcel said. He drained his Coke glass of ice, enjoying the burn on his tongue. 'He wants you to be safe.'

Maggie looked away again. 'How do I know I can trust you?' she said finally.

'That's the thing about trust.' He crunched an ice cube between his teeth.

'You don't know.'

She stared at him for a long second.

'All right,' she said finally. 'I'll do it.' Outside, at the edge of the parking lot, the trees were dancing in the wind. Some of the leaves had already begun to turn. Gold ate up their edges. Others were splotched with red, as though diseased. Less than three weeks until Labor Day and the official end of summer.

Besides only a week until the showdown. After saying goodbye to Maggie, Marcel didn't go home straight away but spent some time walking the streets. He smoked two cigarettes, not because he wanted them, but because, he was enjoying the dark and the quiet and the cool wind, the smells of autumn coming: a clean smell, a wood smell, like a house newly swept and sprayed down.

He wondered whether the tiger was still loose. It must be; he hadn't heard anything about its capture. He half hoped he would see it, and half feared he would.

All in all, the conversation with Maggie had gone easier than he'd expected. He was so close.

Rigging the explosion, he knew, would be the hard part.

Part: 14

MONDAY,

AUGUST 22

Maggie-

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE

TIGERS' ESCAPE, MAGGIE was so- anxious she couldn't sleep. She kept expecting Krista to show up with some court order, demanding that Lily return home. Or, even worse, for the cops or the ASPCA to show up and haul Anne off to jail.

What would she do then? But as more days passed, she relaxed. Maybe Krista realized she was happier with her daughters out of the house. That she wasn't meant to be a mother. All the things Maggie had heard her say a million times. And although the cops floated in and out, still trying to locate the second tiger, still patrolling Anne's property, and the ASPCA showed up to verify the conditions of the other animals and make sure they were all legal, Anne wasn't clapped in handcuffs and dragged away, as Maggie had feared.

Maggie knew, deep down, that her situation at Anne's was temporary. She couldn't stay here forever. In the fall, Lily had to go back to school. Anne was floating them, paying for them, but how long would that last? Maggie had to get a job, pay Anne back, do something. She just kept clinging to the hope that Panic would fix it: that with the money she earned, even if she had to split it with Marcel, she could rent a room from Anne or get her own space with Lily.

The longer she stayed away from 'Fresh Pines,' the more certain she became: she would never, ever go back there.

She belonged here, or somewhere like it somewhere with space, where no neighbors were crawling up your butt all the time and there was no shouting, no sounds of bottles breaking and people blasting music all night. Somewhere between animals and big trees and that fresh smell of hay and poop that somehow wasn't unpleasant. It was amazing how much she loved making the rounds, cleaning out the chicken coop and brushing the horses down and even sweeping the stalls. It was amazing, too, how good it felt to be wanted somewhere.

Because, Maggie believed, now, what Anne had said to her. Anne cared. Maybe even loved her, a little bit.

Which changed everything.

Three days until the final challenge. Now that Maggie knew how it would go down- that she would only be called on to lose in the first round of Joust, to Marcel-she felt incredibly relieved. The first thing she was going to do with the money bought Lily a new bike, which she'd been eyeing when they took a trip to Target the other day.

No! First, she would give Anne some money, and then she would buy a bike.

And then maybe a nice sundress for herself, and some strappy leather sandals. Something pretty to wear when she finally worked up the courage to talk to Joh- John-if she did.

She fell asleep and dreamed of him. He was standing with her on the edge of the water tower, telling her to jump, jump. Beneath her-far beneath her- was a swollen rush of water, interspersed with bright white lights, like unblinking eyes pasted in the middle of all that black water.

He kept telling her not to be afraid, and she didn't want to tell him she was terrified, so weak she couldn't move. Then Marcel was there. 'How are you going to win if you're scared of the jump?' he was saying. Suddenly Joh- John was gone, and the ledge under her feet wasn't metal, but a kind of wood, half-rotten, unstable.

Boom!

Marcel was swinging at it with a baseball bat, whittling away the wood, sending showers of splinters down toward the water. Boom. 'Jump, Maggie.' Boom. 'Maggie.'

'Maggie…'

Maggie woke up to double-ness- Lily whispering her name urgently, standing in the space between their beds; and also, like an echo, a voice from outside.

'Maggie Lynn!' the voice cried. Boom. The sound of a fist on the front door. 'Get down here! Get down here so I can talk to you.' 'Mom,' Lily said, just as Maggie placed the voice. Lily's eyes were wide.

'Get in bed, Lily,' Maggie said. She was awake in an instant. She checked her phone. 1:14 a.m. In the hall, a small fissure of light was showing underneath Anne's bedroom door.

Maggie heard sheets rustling. So, she'd been woken too. The banging was still going, and the muffled cries of 'Maggie!

I know you're in there. You going to ignore your mother?' Even before reaching the door, Maggie knew her mom was drunk. The porch light was on. When she opened the door, her mom was standing with one hand to her eyes, like she was shielding them from the sun. She was a mess.

Hair frizzy; shirt so low Maggie could see all the wrinkles of her cleavage and the white half-moons where her bikini had prevented a tan; jeans with stains; enormous wedge heels. She was having trouble standing in one place and kept taking miniature steps for balance.

'What the hell are you doing here?' 'What am I doing here?' She slurred… 'What are you doing here?' 'Leave.' Maggie took a step onto the porch, hugging herself. 'You have no right to be here. You have no right to come barging.'

'Right? Right? I got every right.' Her mom took an unsteady step forward, trying to move past her. Maggie blocked her, grateful, for the first time, that she was so big. Krista started shouting,

'Lily! Lily Anne! Where are you, baby?'

'Stop it.' Maggie tried to grab Krista by the shoulders, but her mom reeled away from her, swatting her hand.

'What's going on?' Anne had appeared behind them, blinking, wearing an old bathrobe. 'Maggie? Is everything okay?'

'You.' Krista took two steps forward before Maggie could stop her.

'You stole my babies.' She was weaving, swaying on her shoes. 'You a mother fucking bitch, I should-'

'Mom, stop!' Maggie hugged herself tightly, trying to keep her insides together, trying to keep everything from spilling out.

And Anne was saying, 'Okay, let's calm down, let's everyone calm down.'

Hands up, like she was trying to keep Krista at bay.

'I don't need to calm down-'

'Mom, stop it!'

'Get out of my way-'

'Hold on, just hold on.' And then a voice from the darkness beyond the porch: 'What's the trouble?' A flashlight clicked on, just as the porch light went off. It swept over all of them in turn, like a pointed finger. Someone emerged from the dark, came heavily up the stairs, as the porch light, in response to his movement, clicked on again. The rest of them were momentarily frozen. Maggie had forgotten there was a patrol car parked in the woods. The cop was blinking rapidly like he'd been sleeping.

'The problem,' Krista said, 'is that this woman has my babies. She stole them.' The cop's jaw was moving rhythmically like he was chewing gum.

His eyes moved from Krista to Maggie, to Anne, then back again. His jaw hinged left, right. Maggie held her breath.

'That your car, ma'am?' he said finally, jerking his head over his shoulder, where Krista's car was parked.

Krista looked at it. Looked back at him. Something flickered in her eyes.

'Yeah, so?'

He kept chewing, watching her.

'Legal limit .08.' 'I'm not drunk.' Krista's voice was rising. 'I'm as sober as you are.' 'You mind stepping over here for a minute?' Maggie found herself ready to throw her arms around his neck and say thank you. She wanted to explain, but her breath was lodged in her throat.

'I do mind.' Krista sidestepped the cop as he took a step toward her. She nearly stumbled over one of the flowerpots. He reached out and grabbed her elbow. She tried to shake him off.

'Ma'am, please. If you could just walk this way-'

'Let go of me.' Maggie watched it in slow motion.

There was a swell of noise. Shouting. And Krista was swinging her arm, bringing her fist to the officer's face. The punch seemed amplified by a thousand: a ringing, hollow noise.

And then time sped forward again, and the cop was twisting Krista's arms behind her as she bucked and writhed like an animal. 'You are under arrest for assaulting a police officer.'

'Let go…!'

'You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.'

She was like- handcuffed. Maggie didn't know whether to feel relieved or terrified. Maybe both, Krista was still shouting at the cop led her off the porch, toward the squad car- calling up to Lily, screaming about her rights. Then she was in the car and the door closed and there was silence, except for the engine running on, the spit of gravel as the cop turned a circle. A sweep of headlights. Then darkness. The porch light had gone off again.

-And-

Maggie was shaking. When she could finally speak, the only thing she could say was: 'I hate her.' Then again: 'I hate her.'

'Come on, sweetie.' Anne put her arm around Maggie's shoulders. 'Let's go inside.'

Maggie exhaled some, she let the anger go with it. They stepped into the house together, into the coolness of the hall, the patterns of shadow and moonlight that already looked familiar.

She thought of Krista, raging away in the back of a cop car. Her stomach started to unknot. Now everyone would know the truth: how Krista was, and what Maggie and Lily were escaping.

Anne squeezed Maggie. 'It's going to be okay,' she said. 'You're going to be okay.'

Maggie looked at her. She managed a smile. 'I know,' she said. The end of August was the saddest time of the year in Carp.

Maybe the saddest time everywhere? Every year, no matter what the weather, the public pools were suddenly clogged with people, the parks carpeted in picnic blankets and beach towels, the road packed bumper-to-bumper with weekenders descending on Copake Lake.

A shimmering veil of exhaust hung over the trees, intermingling with the smell of charcoal and smoke from a hundred fire pits. It was the final, explosive demonstration of summer, the line in the sand, a desperate attempt to hold fall…

This is the first thing you'll open up, don't let it stop you unless your saying you can't handle the fact that you're being a teen girl hypocrite, remember were just girls being girls and that the next page is going to make you judge me…

Yet should I judge you first if you close the book of my life, yet, if you think about it- you're a girl, and at some point, in your day you would like me, and looking up to your hero- just like me, and she will always be.

This is my disclaimer now- if you don't want to know me over me being me, then go away… yet, I am sure you'll like me, and then maybe not- it's up to you.

You'll understand by the end…

'Say HELLO to my sister!'

(picture this… She has her hand up in this photo- not looking a day over pubescent- yet she thinks she is a hot woman- and to me being a woman means you either have been penetrated, or you have hardcore intercourse, her eyes flirty her top pushed up showing her mosquito, she calls boobs, she waving like a dumb but, and a sinful smile, and the tucked tight line she calls her goodies and the bean that looks like there is too much hanging from it.)

Nevaeh

Book: 23

Kiss me Here

Part- 1

I - Karly Make $10;000 a week just making cummie on cam! Other jobs can go suck it! That is $400 a day, and like 3 shows- so about 5 times making cummie!!

Part- 2

Here are the facts.

• When you look bored; you are much less likely to make any money because your guests will get bored along with you.

• With the proper equipment; training, and attitude - a new model does have the potential to start off making anywhere from $20 - $40 per hour.

• I read all the tips I could find before I started, and I did my best to have a good setup. During my first week on cam; I was shy and awkward - and I averaged about $13 per hour.

• The better looking; she is; the easier it will be starting.

• In the long run; though; a great personality is much more important to the longevity of her career as a webcam model.

• The more a camgirl is willing to do on cam; the higher her earning potential will be.

• If she's not willing to do some X rated performances; she will have a harder time starting. That does not mean it's impossible; as of course there are fetishes and niches out there that are in high demand as well. It's just a matter of finding her audience.

• Consistent earnings come from sticking to a consistent schedule and working toward developing a solid fan base.

Tip #1

New Model Status- Take Advantage of Extra Promotion

The promotion period varies from site to site; so, pay attention when you're setting up your account.

Streamate - 30 days

Chaturbate - 7 days

These examples are current while I'm writing this, but you should always cross-reference in case they become outdated.

The key to your success as a webcam model is your fan base. These are the top 5 tips to help you develop your solid foundation of loyal customers. Follow these from the start, and you'll be setting yourself up for long-term success.

Tip #2

Treat Camming Like the Job it is- Consistency is Key Repeat customers become repeat customers because they know when you're open for business.

Imagine you're the customer for a sec. You're hooked on this awesome camgirl and she tells you she's going to be online at a certain time; so, you go to meet her in her chat room. But she doesn't show up. Think you'll be inclined to keep coming back?

Treat your customers like you would in any business, and be reliable with your schedule.

Your consistent schedule will lead to your consistent fan base.

Tip #3

Tweet; Tweet; Tweet!

Twitter-

Second to keeping your consistent schedule is to keep up with Twitter. Get your fans following you so you can keep them updated on what sites you're using and what shows you're planning.

If you decide to try a new site; for example; your fan base will follow you there. Many cam sites do not allow mentioning other cam sites or outside contact information; so, Twitter serves as a platform where you are free to market yourself wherever you may be and keep in touch with your loyal customers.

Get repeat boys and you have them giving you loads- in more ways than one! It's nice to have boys love you! When you're not all that loved or love yourself. And doing this I don't feel that way. This is safe- and I do not fuck some dick- that is going to be a dick to me the next or break my heart… see!

More on Twitter.

Tip #4

Money happens more when you don't think about it.

If you act like you're just there for the money; you're going to lose potential clients. Your guests want to believe that you WANT to be online hanging with them. Sure; at the back of their minds they know you're working for an income, but that's not what they need to be focused on.

Chill out; enjoy getting to know your guests and learning to rock your cam. Get your fans' focus away from their wallets and they're more likely to open their wallets for you.

Get your fans' focus away from their wallets and they're more likely to open their wallets.

Tweet This.

Tip #5

Turn Up Personality; Be Assertive, and Be Ready for Anything-

Remember your personality is the ultimate factor to whether you're going to gain a loyal following. Let yourself shine. Let them see you. Trust me; your quality fans will love you.

Know your boundaries and be ready to experiment within your boundaries. Customers love a camgirl willing to try new things within her limits. Eventually; you may even push those limits, but don't rush that process. Stay true to yourself and your personality, and your best fans will keep coming back for more.

Stay true to yourself and your personality, and your best fans will keep coming back for more.

- The ads report the earnings of the site's best models and usually state 'up to' - like how your Internet Service Provider says; 'up to' the download/upload speeds you pay for lol.

- When you try too hard; you are much less likely to make any money because you look desperate.

- When you engage your visitors; keep a positive attitude and just be yourself on cam; you are much more likely to make money because your guests are more likely to find you entertaining and likable.

- I'm about oh 5 years into this job. On my best days; I can make $100 in an hour. On worse to average days; I can see anything from $20 - $50 per hour. Hell; this is better than $2.50 at an eating hole- serving A-holes- where I get nothing- and the same gets it all!

- When they make those claims of weekly earnings or even sometimes monthly or yearly earnings; this is dependent on the model's stamina and how much time she wants to put into this.

- Sure; I could make $100;000 in a year; if I worked 40-hour weeks; but I work less than 10 hours most weeks because it's better for my health and overall sense of well-being.

- It makes me feel good in all ways too- about me…

• The longer you stay logged on; the better your chances are of actually making money.

• Don't base your hourly wage off of logging on for one hour and then logging off. It's an average, and traffic comes and goes so it's best to try and be around when your guests are around.

• I'd be willing to wager that every model in the history of webcam modeling has gone through a shift and earned zero dollars. This is unlikely… boys love to see girls make cummie!

Someone said to me- like- that I am a lazy girl- that people who want to what I am just abusing the system… if you say so… I do it for its fun and I make more than you do your shitty job so…

Eat me- ha- OUT!

Like it better to me than having some boss thinking he knows more than I do… I make my times… also; there no mean girls I have to work for or with… remember there is a lot of sucks out there with others… the real world is an ass… here I am queen bee! And they all just loooovvveee me!

'BE NICE OR YOU'LL BE BANNED!'

Part- 3

A text message from Jenny of here sitting out the pot- 'There is nothing like the sweet pitter-patter of piss.'

Right on- I said back it just feels good to let it all out in three pushes!

Mumm hum…

THURSDAY;

AUGUST 25

Marcel,

THE DAY OF JOUST WAS WET AND VERY COLD. Marcel dressed in his favorite jeans and a worn T-shirt; emerged sockless into the den; ate cereal from a mixing bowl, and watched a few reality TV shows with Dayna; then making some jokes about the douche bags who would let their whole lives get filmed. He seemed relieved that he was acting somewhat normal.

Nevertheless, the whole time; his mind was several miles away; on a dark straightaway; on engines gunning and tires screeching and the smell of smoke. He was worried.

Worried the fire would start too early when Marcel was driving the car. Likewise, ever-so worried that Ray wouldn't go for the switch. He was counting on that; he had rehearsed a speech in his head.

'I want to change cars like now;' he'd say after Maggie let him win the first round. 'So, I know it's fair... and so, like I know he didn't go turbo on his engine, or screwed around with my brakes and all.'

How could Ray say no... to this?

If Marcel drove carefully; no more than forty miles per hour; the engine shouldn't heat up too much, and the explosion wouldn't get triggered.

Maggie had to let him win even if she was going at a crawl. Ray would never suspect.

And then she'd get in the car; floor it, and the engine would start smoking and sparking- and even flaming and then - Revenge.

If everything went according to plan. If- if- if, Maggie hated that stupid word.

At three p.m. Kelly Bill came by to take Dayna to physical therapy. Yet Maggie though she needs it more than this girl who was getting for free.

Marcel so, didn't understand or get, like how Kelly had just wormed his way into their lives.

Dayna was practically up to his ass all day- breathing off of his farts.

Like they were suddenly all one big happy family unit in all; nonetheless, Marcel was the only one who could remember anything at all- they weren't family; would never-ever be one. It had always been Marcel and Dayna and no one else, from a turning point in time- of their lives.

-And-

Now; he'd even lost her, to his ways- of how he is and all.

'You going to be okay?' She asked confused.

She was getting good with her chair; spinning herself around furniture dumbly; bumping up the place where the floor was slightly uneven, just to be childlike and annoying. hated that she'd had to get good at being crippled.

'Yeah; sure,' it was so deliberately don't, so- we all didn't even look at her.

'Just going to watch some TV and stuff like that.'

'Okay have fun playing with yourself...' she said.

'We'll be back in a couple of hours;' she said. And then at that moment at that time and place- 'I think it's working; Marcel.'

'I'm happy for you;' he said. He was surprised and alarmed to feel his throat getting so-o tight. She was halfway out the door when he called her back. 'Dayna;' he said. All for you...

She turned. 'What?'

He managed to smile. 'Love yah, always- You and I always- that what we make.'

'Don't be such a dick then from now own- and I/we agree;' she said and smiled back.

Then she wheeled out of the house and closed the door behind her, sighing- in happiness.

Maggie WITH EVERY PASSING MINUTE; SHE WAS CLOSER TO THE END.

Maggie should have felt a sense of relief and letting go of a feeling of tenseness, but instead; she was gripped; all day; with dread.

She told herself that all she had to do was loose. She would have to trust that Marcel would keep his promise about the money- and love and everything that has was not holding up to in the past- and if he had changed.

He wasn't playing for the money. She had always known that on some level. Nevertheless, she wished she'd pushed him about what motivated him some.

Maybe that was making her jumpy- now; even at the very end of the game; she didn't understand his end goal.

It made her feel as though other games were going on; secret rules and pacts and alliances being made, and she was just a pawn.

...Around five o'clock; the storm passed, and the clouds started to shred apart.

The air was so thick with moisture and mosquitoes, and all the roads would be slick and wet.

Barring in mind she reminded herself it wouldn't matter at all.

She could back out; even; if she wanted to; pretend to flake out, or pussy out; at the last second.

Then Marcel and Ray could face off and she'd be done. Still; the sick feeling a weight in her stomach; an itch under her skin- wouldn't leave her.

Just had been moved. There had been no formal messages about it; no texts or emails, or even Facebook.

Joh- John was lying low and being mysterious... just in case anyone was angry about the way the game had shaken out.

Maggie didn't blame him, at all for this- and presumably Vivian; too; was keeping her head down.

Like, for the first time, in the history of the game; the final challenge would proceed with or without the judges.

...Apart from word had come back to Maggie; as it always did in a town so small; with so little but talk to feed it.

The officers and cops were all posted all around the runway where Joust traditionally occurred.

So- a change in location, a spot not far from the gully and the old train tracks.

Maggie wondered; with another pang; whether Nat would show up.

It was six o'clock when she left, her hands were already shaking, and she worried that in another hour or so; she'd be too nervous to drive, or she'd flacked out entirely.

Anne had agreed to let- Maggie uses the car for that night, and Maggie hated herself for lying about why she needed it in all.

Likewise, she said to herself in her mind that this was it; the end- no more lies from here on out.

Then she would be extra careful about everything- just like a young preteen girl, needed to feel safe and warm and content like a lost child, and pull the car off the road well before Marcel came anywhere close to her. Seeing her like this...

She didn't say goodbye to- Lily.

She didn't want to make a big deal of it all and such.

It wasn't a big deal- at all. This was running through her head.

She'd be home in a few hours.

She had just turned out of the driveway when she felt her I-phone- buzzing on her ass cheek.

She ignored it for the time being; but the calls started up again right away, even on vibrate.

-And-

Then a third time and even fourth time. She ripped the battery out of the back by the fifth... and through the phone to the floor, and the battery to the back.

She pulled over, to get all the flown parts of her phone, to see what could not weigh, Nat. As soon as she picked up; she knew something was very; very wrong.

'Maggie; please;' Nat was saying; even before Maggie said- hello.

'Something really- really- bad is going to happen. We have to stop it- now.'

'Hold on; hold on.' Maggie could hear Nat sniffling. 'Calm down. Start at the beginning.'

'It's going to happen tonight;' Nat said as if foreseeing the future. 'We have to do something. He'll end up dead. Or he'll kill Ray.' Maggie could barely follow the thread of the conversation.

'Who?'

'Marcel;' Nat wailed. 'Please; Maggie. You have to help us.'

Maggie sucked in a deep breath hard and very fast. The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds completely with heavy rays.

The sky was streaked with fingers of red and orange; the exact color of new blood.

'Who's us...?'

'Just come;' Nat said. 'Please. I'll explain everything when you get here.'

Marcel; Marcel DROVE PAST THE GULLY JUST AFTER SIX O'CLOCK. The car Joh- John had lent him-a Le Sabre that Marcel knew could never- ever- never- ever, ever- never- be returned- was old and temperamental, and drifted to the left whenever he didn't correct it.

It didn't matter at all. Marcel didn't need it for very long.

He parked on the side of the road next to a yield sign on one side of the straightaway that had been selected for the challenge.

The road was pretty dead-maybe people were discouraged by the bad weather.

Marcel was glad about this. He couldn't risk being spotted.

It didn't take long at all. Like- It was surprisingly easy- kaddish stuff; which was so-o ironic; especially considering that Marcel had failed chemistry three times, and wasn't exactly a science guy at all.

Funny to me, how easily you could look this shit up online, and just pass without knowing or even caring- yet that the times we live in.

Explosives; bombs; Molotov cocktails; IED's - anything you wanted.

Learning how to blow someone up was easier than buying a frigging beer.

Earlier that day; he would linkify a bit of an old Styrofoam cooler in some gasoline and poured the whole mixture into a mason jar.

Homemade napalm I call it- so-o it's like easy as making dressing for a Caesar salad, now he carefully duct-taped everything with a firecracker to the outside of the mission jar and tightly packed the whole thing down into the engine compartment.

Not too close to the exhaust manifold- he needed to get through the challenge with Maggie first.

And he would drive carefully; make sure in all the engine didn't get too hot.

Then the car would go to Ray.

Ray would gun it, and the firecracker would ignite, and the jar would shatter; discharging the explosives.

Kaboom and all would be done!

All he had to do now was wait. But almost immediately; he got a text from Maggie. Need to pick u up.

Emergency, we have to talk about this.

And then- now, Marcel cursed out loud. Then he had a sudden fear- she was going to back out. That would ruin everything. He wrote her back quickly. Corner of Wolf Hill and Pleasent-Valley. Pick me up.

Coming; she wrote back. He walked circles while he waited for her; smoking cigarettes. He had been calm before, but now he has filled with anxiety; a crawling; itching sensation; as though spiders were scurrying under his skin.

He thought of Dayna in the hospital bed as he'd first seen her after the accident-wide-eyed; a little blood and snot crusted above her mouth; saying; 'I can't feel my legs. What happened to my legs?' Getting hysterical in the hospital room; trying to stand, and landing instead in Marcel's lap. He thought of Luke Hanrahan; driving off with fifty grand, and the night

Marcel had stood outside the Hanrahan's house with a baseball bat and been too afraid to act.

And by the time Maggie pulled up; he felt a little better.

Maggie wouldn't tell him anything in the car. 'What's this about?' he asked her. But she just kept repeating; 'Just hold on. Okay? She'll want to tell you herself.' 'She?' His stomach flipped. 'Nat;' she said.

'Is she okay?' he asked. Nonetheless, Maggie just shook her head; indicating she would say no more. He was getting annoyed now.

This was a bad time; he needed to focus. His stomach was tight with nerves.

Or at the same time; he was flattered that Maggie needed him- flattered; too; that Nat might have asked to see him.

Then they still had two hours before full dusk. More than enough time.

There were two cars in Nat's driveway; one of them a battered 1952 Ford truck he didn't recognize.

He wondered if this was some kind of intervention for her and got that crawling feeling under his skin again.

'What's going on here...?' He asked again and again. 'I told you;' Maggie said.

'She'll want to explain it herself.' The door was unlocked. Weirdly; although the light was rapidly fading outside; there were no lamps on in the house.

The air was dull and gray like the primer on the side of the old Ford truck; lying like a textured blanket over everything; smudging out details.

Walking into Nat's house; Marcel had the feeling he used to get in the church before given up on that too- like he was trespassing on sacred ground.

There were tick trees everywhere; lots of nice-looking furniture; things that screamed money to him. But not a sound.

'Is she even here...?' he asked. His voice sounded extremely loud.

'Downstairs, at that moment,' Maggie moved ahead of him.

She opened a door just to the right of the living room.

A set of unfinished stairs led down into what was a basement.

Marcel thought he heard some slight movements; maybe a whisper or footsteps; but then it stopped.

'Go ahead;' Maggie said. He was going to tell her to go first, but he didn't want her to think he was afraid. Which he was; for whatever reason. Something about this place-the silence; maybe- was freaking him out.

As if sensing his hesitation; Maggie said; 'Look; we'll be able to talk down there. She'll tell you everything.' Maggie paused. 'Nat?' she called out.

'Down here!' Nat's voice came from the basement. Reassured; he headed down the stairs; into the musty gritty; humid; underground air.

The basement was large and filled with discarded furniture. He had just reached the bottom of the stairs and turned around to look for Nat when the lights went off. He froze; confused and dazed.

'What the-' he started to say; but then he felt roughly seized; heard an explosion of voices. He thought for one second this must be part of the game; a challenge he hadn't anticipated.

'Over here; over here!' Nat was saying. Marcel struck out; struggling, but whoever was holding him was big; fleshy, and strong. A guy, Marcel could tell by his size, and by the smell; too- menthol; beer; aftershave. Marcel kicked out; the guy cursed, and something toppled over. There was the sound of breaking the glass. Natalie said; 'Shit. Here. Here.' Marcel was forced into a chair. His hands were twisted behind him; tied up with something. Duct tape. His legs; too.

'What the fuck?' He was yelling now. 'Get the fuck off me.'

'Sh-h-h, Marcel, It's okay.' Even now; here; Marcel was paralyzed by the sound of Natalie's voice.

He couldn't even struggle. 'What the hell is this?' He said. 'What are you doing?' His eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark. He could just make her out; the wide contours of her eyes; two sad; dark holes.

'It's for you;' she said. 'For your good.'

'What are you talking about?' He thought; suddenly; of the car parked on Pleasant-Valley Lane; the mason jar of gasoline and Styrofoam; nestled in the engine like a secret heart. He strained against the duct tape binding him.

'Let me go.' It was said.

'Marcel; listen to me.' Nat's voice broke, and he realized she'd been crying. 'I know- I know you blame Luke for what happened to your sister.

For the accident; right?' Marcel felt something ice-cold move through him. He couldn't speak at all. 'I don't know exactly what you're planning, but I won't let you go through with it;' Nat said. 'This has to stop now.'

'Let me go.' His voice was rising. He was fighting a panicked feeling; a sense of dull dread in his whole body; the same feeling he'd had two years earlier; standing on the lawn in front of the Hanrahan's house; trying to get his feet to move.

'Marcel; listen to me.' Her hands were on his shoulders. He wanted to push her off, but he couldn't. And another part of him wanted her and hated her at the same time. 'This is for you. This is because I do care.'

'You don't know anything;' he said. He could smell her skin; a combination of vanilla and bubblegum, and it made him ache. 'Let me go; Natalie. This is insane.' 'No. I'm sorry, but no.' Her fingers grazed his cheek. 'I won't let you do anything stupid. I don't want you to get hurt.'

She leaned even closer until her lips were nearly touching his. He thought she might be leaning in to kiss him, and he was unable to turn away; unable to resist. Then he felt her hands moving along his thighs; groping.

'What are you-?' he started to say. But just then she found his pocket and extracted his keys and phone.

'I'm sorry;' she said; straightening up. And she did truly sound sorry. 'You must believe me; it's for the best.'

A wave of helplessness overtook him completely. He made a final; futile attempt to free himself. The chair moved forward a few inches or two on the concrete floor.

'Please;' he said. 'Natalie...'

'I'm sorry; Marcel;' Nat said. 'I'll be back as soon as the challenge is over; I swear.'

She was fumbling with his phone, and the screen lit up temporarily; casting her face in brightness; showing the deep; mournful hollows of her eyes; her expression of pity and regret. And lighting up; too; the guy behind her. The one who'd wrestled Marcel into the chair.

He'd gained weight-at least thirty pounds-and he'd let his hair get long.

Fifty grand wasn't sitting too well on him. But there was no mistaking his eyes; the hard set of his jaw, and the scar; like a small white worm; cutting straight through his left

eyebrow. Marcel felt a fist of shock plunge straight through him. He could no longer speak or even breathe.

Luke Hanrahan.

Maggie-

MAGGIE WAITED IN THE CAR WHILE NATALIE AND LUKE did whatever they had to do. She was trying to breathe normally, but her lungs weren't obeying and kept fluttering weirdly in her chest.

She would have to go up against Ray Hanrahan now. There was no giving in or weaseling out. She wondered what Marcel had planned for tonight. Luke hadn't exactly known either; although he'd shown Nat and Maggie some of the threatening messages that had come from Marcel.

It was surreal; sitting in Nat's kitchen with Luke Hanrahan; football star Luke-Hanrahan; the homecoming king who'd gotten kicked out of homecoming for smoking weed in the locker room during the announcement of the court.

Winner of Fright.

Who'd once assaulted a cashier at the 7-Eleven in Happy when the guy wouldn't sell him cigarettes. He looked like shit. Two years away from Cace hadn't done him any good; which was shocking to Maggie. She thought all you needed to do-all all of them needed was to get out. But maybe you carried your demons with you everywhere; the way you carried your shadow.

He would have found Nat; he said; because of a betting slip that had reached him in Buffalo. And because of that stupid video- the; one filmed at the water towers; which showed Marcel with his arm slung around Nat. Nat had been the easiest of the remaining players to locate, and he was hoping he could talk her into helping him convince Marcel to bow out.

Nat emerged from the house at last. Maggie watched her talking with Luke on the front porch; he was nearly double her size. Crazy how several years ago;

Nat would have freaked at the idea that Luke might ever look in her direction or know who she was. It was so strange; the way that life moved forward- the twists and the dead ends;

the sudden opportunities. She supposed if you could predict or foresee everything that was going to happen; you'd lose the motivation to go through it all. The promise was always in the possibility.

'Is Marcel okay?' Maggie asked when Nat slid into the car.

'He's mad;' Nat said.

'You did kidnap him;' Maggie pointed out.

'For his good;' Nat said, and for a minute she looked angry. But then she smiled. 'I've never kidnapped someone before.'

'Don't make a habit of it.' They both seemed to have resolved not to mention their fight, and Maggie was glad. She nodded at Luke; who was getting into his truck. 'Is he coming to watch?'

Nat shook her head. 'I don't think so.' She paused, and said in a low voice; 'It's awful; what he did to Dayna. I think he must hate himself.' 'He seems like he does;' Maggie said. But she didn't want to think about Luke; or Marcel's sister; or legs buried beneath a ton of metal; rendered useless.

She was already sick with nerves.

'Are you okay?' Nat said.

'No;' Maggie said bluntly and belligerently.

'You're so close; Maggie. You're almost at the end. You're winning.'

'I'm not winning yet;' Maggie said. But she put the car into gear. There was no more delaying it. There was hardly any light left in the sky as though the horizon where a black hole; sucking all the color away. Something else occurred to her. 'Jesus. This is Anne's car. I'm barely allowed to be driving it. I can't go up against Ray in this.'

'You don't have to.' Nat reached into her purse and extracted a set of keys; jiggling them dramatically.

Maggie looked at her. 'Where'd you get those?'

'Marcel;' Nat said. She flipped the keys into her palm and returned them to her bag. 'You can use his car. Better to be safe than sorry; right?' As the last of the sun vanished, and the moon; like a giant scythe; cut through the clouds; they gathered...

Quietly they materialized from the woods; they came down the gully; scattering gravel; sliding on the hill; or they came packed together in cars; driving slowly; headlights off; like submarines in the dark.

And by the time stars surfaced from the darkness; they were all there- all the kids of Cace; come to witness the final challenge, it was time.

There was no need for -Digging to repeat the rules; everyone knew the rules of Joust. Each car aimed for the other; going fast in a single lane.

The first person to swerve would lose...

And the winner would take the pot. Maggie was so nervous; it took her three tries to get the key in the ignition.

She'd found the LeSabre pulled over on the side of the road; practically buried in the bushes. It was Joh- John's car- Marcel must have borrowed it.

She was unreasonably annoyed that Joh- John had helped Marcel in this way. She wondered if Joh- John had risked coming tonight-somewhere in the crowd; the dark masses of people; faces indistinguishable in the weak moonlight.

She was too proud to text him and see.

Ashamed; too. He'd tried to talk to her; to explain, and she had acted awful. She wondered whether he would forgive her.

'How are you feeling?' Nat asked her. She'd offered to stay with Maggie until the last possible second.

'I'm okay;' Maggie said; which was a lie. Her lips were numb. Her tongue felt thick. How would she drive when she could barely feel her hands? As she pulled the car up to her starting position; the headlights lit up clusters of faces; ghost-white; standing quietly in the shadow of the trees. The engine was whining like there was something wrong with it.

'You're going to be fine;' Nat said. She twisted in her seat. Her eyes were suddenly wide; urgent. 'You're going to be fine; okay?' She said it like she was trying to convince herself. -Digging was gesturing to Maggie; indicating she should turn the car around.

The engine was making a weird grinding noise. She thought she smelled something weird too; but then thought she must be imagining it. It would all be over soon; anyway.

Thirty; forty seconds; tops. When she managed to get her car pointed in the right direction; -Digging rapped on her windshield with his fingers; gave her a short nod. At the other end of the road-a thousand feet away from her; a thousand miles-she saw the twin circles of Ray's headlights. They went on and off again. On and off. Like some kind of warning.

'You should go,' Maggie said. Her throat was tight. 'We're about to start.' 'I love you; Maggie.' Nat leaned over and put her arms around Maggie's neck. She smelled familiar and Nat-like, and it made Maggie want to cry; as though they were saying good-bye for the last time. Then Nat pulled away.

'Look; if Ray doesn't swerve- I mean; if you're close and it doesn't look like he's going to turn - You have to promise me you will. You can't risk a collision; okay? Promise me.'

'I promise;' Maggie said.

'Good luck.' Then Nat was gone. Maggie saw her jog to the side of the road.

And Maggie was alone in the car; in the dark; facing a long; narrow stretch of road; pointing like a finger toward the glow of distant headlights.

She thought of Lily...

She thought of Anne...

She thought of Joh- John. She thought of the tigers, and of everything she'd ever screwed up in her life.

She swore to herself that she wouldn't be the first to swerve. While in a dark basement; with the smell of mothballs and old furniture in his nose; Marcel realized; too late; why Nat had taken his keys-and; crying out; fought against his restraints; thinking of a little time-bomb heart; ticking slowly- away…

Something in the engine was smoking. Maggie saw little trails of smoke unfurling from the hood of the car; like narrow black snakes. But just then -Digging stepped into the center of the road; shirtless; waving his T-shirt above his head like a flag.

Then it was already too late. She heard the high-pitched squeal of tires on asphalt. Ray had started to move. She slammed her foot on the accelerator and the car jumped forward; skidding a little. The smoke redoubled almost instantly; for a second her vision was completely obscured.

(Fear...)

Then it broke apart and she could see. Headlights growing bigger. The slick sheen of the moon. And smoke; pouring like liquid from the hood. Everything was fast; to fast-she was hurtling down the road; there was nothing but two moons; growing larger

- closer-

The stink of burning rubber and the scream of tires - Closer; closer - She was hurtling forward. The speedometer ticked up to sixty miles per hour. It was too late to swerve now, and he wasn't serving either. It was too late to do anything but crash.

Flames leaped suddenly out of the engine; a huge roar of the fire. Maggie screamed. She couldn't see anything. The wheel jerked in her hand, and she struggled to keep her car on the road.

The air stank like burning plastic and her lungs were tight with smoke. She slammed on the brakes; suddenly overwhelmed with certainty- she would die. She saw movement from somewhere on her left-someone running into the road- and realized; a second later; that Ray had swerved to avoid it; had jerked his wheel to the left and was plunging straight into the woods.

There was a shuddering crash as she sailed past him; flames licking her windshield. She was screaming. She knew she had to get out of the car now before she hit anything. Skidding; shuddering; spinning in circles; the car was slowing; it was wandering toward the woods. Maggie fought to open the door.

The handle caught and she thought she would be trapped there as the fire consumed her. Then she thrusts with her shoulder and the door popped open and she jumped; rolled; felt the

bite of asphalt on her arm and shoulder. she tasted all the dirt and grit that would fit in her mouth; heard a distant roar of sound as if individuals were yelling her name.

Sparks fell from the wheels of the car as it flipped off the road and into the woods. There was an explosion so loud; she felt it through her whole body. She covered her head. Now she could hear that people were calling her name-and Ray's; too.

A siren wailed in the distance, for a second or so-o; she thought she must be dead. But she could taste blood in her mouth. If she were dead; she wouldn't be able to taste any blood.

She looked up. The car was in ruins; a pillar of flame was eating it; turning it to rubber and metal. Amazingly; she managed to sit up, and then to stand. She felt no pain as if she were watching a movie about her own life.

-And-

Now she couldn't hear anything... Nothing- not the voices calling to her; urging her out of the road; away from the car-not the sirens; either. She was in a watery; deep place of silence. She turned and saw Ray struggling to get out of his car. There was blood trickling down his face; three people were trying to pull him from the wreck.

When he'd swerved; he'd gone straight into a tree; the hood was crumpled; compressed nearly in half.

And now she saw why...

Standing in the middle of the road; perfectly still; not twenty feet away; was the tiger.

It was watching Maggie with those deep black eyes; eyes that were old and sorrowful; eyes that had watched centuries go to dust. And at that moment; she felt a jolt go through her, and she knew that the tiger was afraid of the noise and the fire and the people shouting; crowding the road on both sides. But she; Maggie; wasn't afraid anymore.

She was compelled forward by a force she couldn't explain. She felt nothing but pity and understanding. She was alone with the tiger on the road. And in the final moment of the game; as smoke billowed in swollen plumes into the air and fire licked the sky; Maggie Nill walked without hesitation to the tiger, and placed her hand gently on its head, and won.

Part- 4

SATURDAY;

OCTOBER 8

Maggie;

IN EARLY OCTOBER; CACE ENJOYED A WEEK OF FALSE summer. It was warm and bright and; if it weren't for the trees that had already changed-deep reds and oranges interspersed with the deep green of the pines-it might have been the beginning of summer. One day; Maggie woke up with a sudden; strong impulse to return to where the game had begun. A mist rose slowly over Cace; shimmering; dispersing finally in the mounting sun; the air smelled like the moist ground and Shaddyly cut grass.

'How'd you like to go swimming; Bill?' she asked Lily when Lily rolled over; blinking; hair scattered across the pillow. Maggie could see the light pattern of freckles on Lily's nose; individual lashes highlighted by the sun and thought her sister had never looked so pretty.

'With Joh- John; too?' Lily asked. Maggie couldn't stop herself from smiling. 'With Joh- John; too.' He had been driving home every weekend from college; to fulfill his community service duties. And to see Maggie. In the end; she decided to invite Nat and Marcel; too. It seemed right; somehow.

When the small yellow envelope containing a single gold key- the key to a strongbox at a local bank- had arrived mysteriously in the mail; she had collected and divided the money among the three of them.

She knew Marcel had given most of his portion to Kelly Bill; they were building a small memorial for Little Kelly at the site of the Grayed House; which had been demolished.

Nat was taking some acting classes in Albany, and she'd gotten a job modeling clothes on weekends at the Happy Valley Mall. And starting in January; Maggie would enroll in the Jackson Community College's program in veterinary services.

Maggie packed the trunk with a blanket; beach towels.

Mosquito repellent, and sunscreen; a stack of old; waterlogged magazines from Anne's living room.

A cooler full of iced tea; several bags of large bags of lays potato chips, and creaky beach chairs with faded; striped seats.

She could sense that tomorrow the weather would turn again, and the air would be edged with cold.

Soon Krista would get out of her thirty-day program, and then Maggie and Lily might have to return to Shady Pines; at least temporarily. And soon the months of rain would come.

But today was perfect...

They arrived at the estuary just before lunch. Nobody had spoken much in the car. Lily had squeezed in between Marcel and Nat in the backseat.

Nat braided a portion of Lily's hair and whispered to her about which movie stars she thought were the cutest; Marcel had leaned his head back against the window.

And it was only from the occasional way his mouth twitched into a smile that Maggie knew he wasn't asleep. Joh- John kept one hand on Maggie's knee as she drove; It still seemed miraculous to see it there. To know that he was hers as he always had been; in some way. But everything was different now.

Different and better. Once out of the car; all their restraint lifted. Lily went whooping into the woods; holding her towel over her head so it flapped behind her like a banner. Nat chased after her... swatting away the branches in her path; Marcel and Joh- John helped Maggie clear out the trunk, and together they all went pushing through the woods; loaded down with towels and beach chairs and the cooler clinking ice.

The beach looked cleaner than usual. Two trash cans had been installed at the far end of the shore.

And the sand and- gravel strip of beach was free of the usual cigarette butts and beer cans; Sunlight filtering through the trees patterned the water in crazy colors- purples and greens and vivid blues.

Even the steep face of the rock wall across the water; from which all the players had jumped; now looked beautiful instead of frightening- there where flowers growing out of fissures in the rock.

Then Maggie noticed; tangled vines sweeping down toward the water. The trees at the top of the jumping point where fire-red already; burning in the sun.

Lily trotted back to Maggie as she was shaking out the blanket. There was a light breeze, and Maggie had to tamp down the corners with different belongings- her flip-flops; Joh-John's sunglasses; the beach bag.

'Is that it; Maggie?' Lily pointed.

'Is that where you jumped?'

'Nat jumped too;' Maggie said.

'We all did. Well; except Joh- John.'

'What can I say?' He was already unlacing his Converses. He winked at

Lily. 'I'm chicken.'

Briefly; his eyes met Maggie's. After all this time; she still couldn't quite believe that he had planned fear, or forgive him for not having told her.

She would never have guessed in a million years- her Joh- John; her best friend; the boy who used to dare her to eat her scabs and then almost throw up when she did.

However, that was the point. He was the same, and different. And that made her hopeful in away. If people changed; it meant that she was allowed to change too. She could be different.

She could be happier. Maggie would be happier-being happier already.

'It isn't that high;' Lily said. She squinted. 'How'd you get up there?'

'Climbed;' Maggie said. Lily opened her mouth soundlessly.

'Come on; Lily!' Nat was standing by the water; shimmying out of her shorts. Marcel stood a short distance away; smiling out over the river; watching her. 'Race you into the water!'

'No fair!' Lily ran; kicking up sand; struggling out of her T-shirt at the same time.

Maggie and Joh- John lay down on the blanket together; on their backs.

She rested her head on his chest; every- so- often; he ran his fingers lightly through her hair. For a while; they didn't speak.

They didn't need to. Maggie knew that no matter what; he would always be hers, and they would always have this- a perfect day; a reprieve from the cold.

Maggie had started to drift off to sleep when Joh- John stirred. 'I love you; Maggie.' She opened her eyes. She was warm and lazy. 'I love you; too;' she said. The words came with no trouble at all.

...He had just kissed her-once; lightly; on the top of her head, and then; when she tilted her face to his; harder; on the lips-when Lily began to shout.

'Maggie! Maggie! Look at me!

Maggie!'

Lily was standing at the very top of the rocks. Maggie hadn't seen her climbing; she must have been quick.

Maggie felt a pulse of fear...

'Get down!' She called out.

'She's fine;' Marcel said. He was now standing in the water with Nat-Maggie couldn't believe Nat had managed to convince him to swim; or that he even owned a bathing suit.

One arm was wrapped around Nat's waist. They looked amazing together; like statues carved from different colored rocks.

'Watch me!' Lily crowded, 'I'm going to jump!' She did; without hesitating; Lily threw herself into the air. For a second she seemed to be suspended there; legs and arms splayed; mouth open and laughing.

Then she was hitting the water and surfacing; spitting out a mouthful of water; calling; 'Did you see...? I wasn't scared. Not at all...' Then at that moment at that time, this feeling of joy flooded Maggie's body and hart- made her feel light and dizzy.

She was on her feet and plunging into the water before Lily could reach the shore; splashing past Nat; who shrieked; tackling her sister as she tried to stand up and dragging her back into the water.

'You weren't scared; huh?'

Maggie attacked Lily's bare stomach as Lily wriggled away from her; squealing with laughter; calling for Joh- John's help.

'Are you scared of being tickled; huh?

Are you...?'

'Joh- John; help me!' Lily screamed as Maggie wrapped her in a bear hug.

She pauses... 'Look; you still have time; okay? I just don't want you to wait too long and have all the good placements go to other people. I'm just worried about you is. But everything's fine; you're still okay.'

'You can't get rid of me that easily;' Joh- John said. He kept his arms around her waist. His eyes were the same blue-green as the water. Her Joh- John, her best friend.

'Children; children; don't fight;' Nat said; teasing.

The wind lifted goosebumps on- Maggie's skin; but the sun was warm. She knew that this day; this feeling; couldn't last forever. Everything passed; that was partly why it was so beautiful.

Things would get difficult again. But that was okay too. The bravery was in moving forward; no matter what. Someday; she might be called on to jump again. And she would do it.

She knew; now; that there was always light-beyond the dark, and the fear; out of the depths; there was the sun to reach for, and air and space and freedom. There was always a way up, and out, and no need to be afraid.

~*~

I've always been shy, and afraid that I'll say or do the wrong thing. Hanna is the opposite.

But... um- lately; it's been more than that.

She's stopped caring about school altogether; for one thing and has been called to the principal's office many times for talking back to the teachers.

And sometimes in the middle of talking, she'll stop; just shut her mouth as though she's run up against a barrier. Other times I'll catch her staring out at the ocean as though she's thinking of swimming away.

Looking at her now; at her clear gray eyes and her mouth as thin and taut as a bowstring; I feel a tug of fear. I think of my mother floundering for a second in the air before dropping like a stone into the ocean; I think about the face of the girl who dropped from the laboratory roof all those years ago; her cheek turned against the pavement. I will away thoughts of the illness. Hanna isn't sick.

She can't be. I would know. 'If they want us to be happy; they'd let us pick ourselves;' Hanna grumbles.

'Hanna;' I say sharply. Criticizing the system is the worst offense there is.

'Take it back...'

She holds up her hands... 'All right; all right. I take it back.'

'You know it doesn't work. Look how it was in the old days. Chaos all the time; fighting, and war. People were miserable.'

'I said; I take it back.' She smiles at me, but I'm still mad and I look away.

'Besides;' I go on; 'they do give us a choice.'

Usually; the evaluators generate a list of four or five approved matches, and you are allowed to pick among them.

This way; everyone is happy. In all the years that the procedure has been administered and the marriages arranged; there have been fewer than a dozen divorces in Maine; less than a thousand in the entire United States- and in almost all those cases; either the husband or wife was suspected of being a sympathizer and divorce was necessary and approved by the state.

'A limited choice;' she corrects me. 'We get to choose from the people who have been chosen for us.'

'Every choice is limited;' I snap.

('That's life...')

She opens her mouth as though she's going to respond, but instead she just starts to laugh. Then she reaches down and squeezes my hand; two quick pumps and then two long ones. It's our old sign; a habit we developed in the second grade when one of us was scared or upset; a way of saying; I'm here; don't worry.

'Okay; okay. Don't get defensive. I love the evaluations; okay? Long live- Evaluation Day.'

'That's better;' I say, but I'm still feeling anxious and annoyed. The line shuffles slowly forward, we pass the iron gates; with their complicated crown of barbed wire, and enter the long driveway that leads to the various lab complexes. We are headed for Building.

The boys go in, and the lines begin to curve away from each other. As we move closer to the front of the line; we get a blast of air-conditioning every time the glass doors slide open and then hum shut.

It feels amazing; like being momentarily dipped head to toe in a thin sheet of ice; popsicle-style, and I turn around and lift my ponytail away from my neck; wishing it weren't so damn hot.

We don't have to air-condition at home; just tall; gawky fans that are always sputtering out in the middle of the night. And most of the time- Carol won't even let us use

those; they suck up too much electricity; she says, and we don't have any to spare. At last; there are only a few people in front of us. A nurse comes out of the building; carrying a stack of clipboards and a handful of pens, and begins distributing them along the line.

'Please make sure to fill out all required information;' she says; 'including your medical and family history.'

My heart begins to work its way up into my throat. The neatly numbered boxes on the page -Last Name; First Name; Middle Initial; Current Address; Age-collapse together. I'm glad Hanna is in front of me.

She begins filling out the forms quickly; resting the clipboard on her forearm; her pen skating over the paper. 'Next.'

The doors whoosh opens again, and a second nurse appears, and gestures for Hanna to come inside with me. In the dark coolness yonder her; I can see a bright white waiting room with a green Cachet; she is standing over me.

'Good luck;' I say to Hanna.

She turns and gives me a quick smile.

But I can tell she is nervous; finally. There is a fine crease between her eyebrows, and she is chewing on the corner of her lip. She starts to enter the lab and then turns abruptly and walks back to me; her face wild and unfamiliar-looking; grabbing me by both shoulders; putting her mouth directly to my ear. I'm so startled I dropped my clipboard.

'You know you can't be happy unless you're unhappy sometimes; right?' she whispers, and her voice is hoarse; as though she's just been crying. 'What?' Her nails are - Digging into my shoulders, and at that moment I'm terrified of her.

'You can't be really happy unless you're unhappy sometimes. You know that is; right?'

Before I can respond she releases me, and as she pulls away; her face is as serene and beautiful and composed as ever. She bends down to scoop up my clipboard; which she passes to me; smiling. Then she turns around and is gone behind the glass doors; which open and close behind her as smoothly as the surface of the water; sucking closed over something that is sinking.

The devil stole into the Garden of Eden. He carried with him the disease- Amor deliria Nervosa- in the form of a seed. It grew and flowered into a magnificent apple tree; which bore apples as bright as blood.

-From Genesis- A Complete History of the World and the Known Universe; by Steven Horace; Ph.D.; Harvard University By the time the nurse admits me into the waiting room; Hanna is gone-vanished down one of the antiseptic white hallways and whisked behind one of the dozens of identical white doors- although there is about a half-dozen; other girls; milling around; waiting. One girl is sitting in a chair; hunched over her clipboard; scribbling and crossing out her answers, and then re-scrubbing. Another girl is frantically asking a nurse about the difference between 'chronic medical conditions' and 'pre-existing medical conditions.' She looks like she's on the verge of having some kind of fit-a vein is standing out on her forehead and her voice is rising hysterically-and I wonder whether she's going to list a tendency toward excessive anxiety on her sheet.

It's not funny, but I feel like laughing. I bring my hand to my face; snorting into my palm. I tend to get giggly when I'm extremely nervous. During tests at school; I'm always getting in trouble for laughing. I wonder if I should have marked that down.

A nurse takes my clipboard from me and flips through the pages; checking to see that; I haven't left any answers blank.

'Lena Haloway?' She says in the bright; clipped voice that all nurses seem to share like it's part of their medical training.

'Uh-huh;' I say, and then quickly correct myself. My aunt has told me that the evaluators will expect a certain degree of formality. 'Yes. That's me.'

It's still strange to hear my real name; Holloway and a dull feeling settle at the bottom of my stomach. For the past decade; I've gone by my aunt's name;

Tiddle. Even though it's a pretty stupid last name- Hanna once said it reminded her of a little-kid word for peeing-at least it isn't associated with my mother and father. At least the Tiddles is a real family. The Haloway's are nothing but a memory. But for official purposes; I have to use my birth name.

'Follow me.' The nurse gestures down one of the hallways, and I follow the neat tick-tock of her heels down the linoleum. The halls are blindingly bright. The butterflies are working their way up from my stomach into my head; making me feel dizzy, and I try to calm myself by imagining the ocean outside; it's ragged breathing; the seagulls turning pinwheels in the sky.

It will be over soon; I tell myself. It will be over soon and then you'll go home, and you'll never have to think about the evaluation again.

The hallway seems to go on forever. Up ahead a door opens and shuts, and a moment later; as we turn a corner; a girl brushes past us. Her face is red, and she's been crying. She must be done with her evaluation already. I recognize her; vaguely; as one of the first girls admitted.

I can't help but feel sorry for her. Evaluations typically last anywhere from half an hour to two hours; but it's common wisdom that the longer the evaluators keep you; the better you're doing. Of course; that isn't always true. Two years ago- Marcy Davies was famously in and out of the lab in forty-five minutes, and she scored a perfect ten. And last year Corey Wine scored a record for longest evaluation -three and a half hours and still received only a three. There's a system behind the evaluations; obviously; but there's always a degree of randomness to them too.

Sometimes; it seems the whole process is designed to be as intimidating and confusing as possible. I have a sudden fantasy of running through these clean; sterile hallways; kicking in all the doors. Then; immediately; I feel guilty. This is the worst of all possible times to be having doubts about the evaluations, and I mentally curse Hanna. This is her fault; for saying those things to me outside.

You can't be happy unless you're unhappy sometimes. A limited choice. We get to choose from the people who have been chosen for us.

I'm glad the choice is made for us. I'm glad I don't have to choose-but more than that; I'm glad I don't have to make someone else choose me. It would be okay for Hanna; of course; if things were still the way they were in the old days.

Hanna; with her golden; halo hair, and bright gray eyes, and perfectly straight teeth, and the laugh that makes everyone in a two-mile radius whip around and looks at her and laughs too.

Even clumsiness looks good on Hanna; it makes you want to reach out a hand to help her or scoop up her books. When I trip over my own feet or spill coffee down the front of my shirt; people look away. You can almost see them thinking; What a mess... And whenever I'm around strangers my mind goes fuzzy and damp and gray; like streets starting to thaw after a hard snow-unlike Hanna; who always knows just what to say. No guy in his right mind would ever choose me when there are people like Hanna in the world- It would be like settling for a stale cookie when what you want is a big bowl of ice cream; whipped cream, and cherries, and chocolate sprinkles included.

So, I'll be happy to receive my neat; printed sheet of 'Approved Matches.' At least it means I'll end up with somebody. It won't matter if nobody ever thinks I'm pretty (although sometimes I wish; just for a second; that somebody would.) It wouldn't matter if I had one eye.

'In here.' The nurse stops; finally; outside a door that looks identical to all the others. 'You can leave your clothing and things in the antechamber. Please put on the gown that is provided for you; with the opening to the back. Feel free to take a moment; have some water; do some meditation.' I imagine hundreds and hundreds of girls sitting cross-legged on the floor; hands cupped on their knees; chanting om, and have to stifle another wild urge to laugh.

'Please be aware; however; that the longer you take to prepare; the less time your evaluators will have to get to know you.'

She smiles tightly. Everything about her is tight- her skin; her eyes; her lab coat. She is looking straight at me; but I have the impression that she isn't focusing; that in her mind she's already tick-tocking her way back to the waiting room; ready to bring yet another girl down yet another hallway, and give her this same spiel. I feel very lonely; surrounded by these thick walls that muffle all sounds; insulated from the sun and the wind and the heat; all of it perfect and unnatural.

'When you're ready; go on through the blue door. The evaluators will be waiting for you in the lab.' After the nurse clicks away; I go into the antechamber; which is small and just as bright as the hallway. It looks like a regular doctor's examination room.

There's an enormous piece of medical equipment squatting in the corner; emitting a series of periodic beeps; a tissue-paper-covered examination table; a stinging; antiseptic smell. I

take off my clothes; shivering as the air-conditioning makes goosebumps pop up all over my skin; the fuzz on my arms standing up a little straighter. Great. Now the evaluators will think I'm a hairy beast. I fold- my clothes; including my bra; in a neat pile and slip on the gown. It's made of super-sheer plastic, and as I wrap it around my body; securing it at the waist with a knot; I'm fully aware that you can still see pretty much everything-including the outline of my underwear-through its fabric.

Over. Soon it will be over. I take a deep breath and step through the blue door.

It's even brighter in the lab- dazzlingly bright; so, the evaluators' first impression of me must be of someone squinting; stepping backward; bringing her hand to her face. Four shadows float in a canoe in front of me. Then my eyes adjust, and the vision resolves into the four evaluators; all sitting behind a long; low table. This room is very large and empty except for the evaluators and; in the corner; a steel surgical table that's been shoved up against one wall.

Dual rows of overhead lights beat down on me, and I notice how high the ceiling is- at least thirty feet. I have a desperate urge to cross my arms over my chest; to cover myself up somehow. My mouth goes dry and my mind goes as hot and blank and white as the lights. I can't remember what I'm supposed to do; what I'm supposed to say.

Fortunately; one of the evaluators; a woman; speaks first. 'Do you have your forms?' Her voice sounds friendly, but it doesn't help the fist that has closed deep in my stomach; squeezing my intestines.

Oh; God; I think; I'm going to pee; I'm going to pee right here. I try to imagine what Hanna will say after this is over when we're walking through the afternoon sunshine; with the smell of salt and sun-warmed pavement heavy on the air around us. 'God;' she'll say. 'That was a waste of time. All of them just sitting there staring like four frogs on a log.'

'Um-yes.' I step closer; feeling like the air has turned solid; resisting me.

When I'm a few feet away from the table; I reach out and pass the evaluators my clipboard. There are three men and one woman, but I find I can't focus on their features for too long. I scan them quickly and then shuffle backward again; getting only an impression of some noses; a few dark eyes; the winking of a pair of glasses.

My clipboard bobs its way down the line of evaluators. I squeeze my arms to my sides and try to appear relaxed. Behind me; an observation deck runs along the back wall; elevated about twenty feet off the ground. It is accessed through a small red door high up beyond the tiered rows of white seats that are meant to hold students; doctors; interns, and junior scientists. Not only do the lab scientists perform the procedure; but they also do checkups afterward and often treat difficult cases of other diseases.

It occurs to me that the scientists must perform the cure here; in this very room. That must be what the surgical table is for. The fist of anxiety starts closing in my stomach again. For some reason; though I've often thought about what it would be like to be cured; I've never really thought about the procedure itself- the hard metal table; the lights winking above me; the tubes and the wires and the pain.

'Lena Haloway?'

'Yes. That's me.' 'Okay. Why don't you start by telling us a little about yourself?' The evaluator with the glasses leans forward; spreading his hands, and smiles. He has big; square white teeth that remind me of bathroom tiles. The reflection in his glasses makes it impossible to see his eyes, and I wish he would take them off.

'Talk to us about the things you like to do. Your interests; hobbies; favorite subjects.'

I launch into the speech I've prepared; about photography and running and spending time with my friends; but I'm not focusing. I see the evaluators nodding in front of me, and smiles beginning to loosen their faces as they take notes; so I know I'm doing fine, but I can't even hear the words that are coming out of my mouth. I'm fixated on the metal surgical table and keep sneaking looks at it from the corner of my eye; watching it blink and shimmer in the light like the edge of a blade.

And suddenly I'm thinking of my mother. My mother had remained uncured despite three separate procedures, and the disease had claimed her; nipped at her insides and turned her eyes hollow and her cheeks pale; had taken control of her feet and led her; inch by inch; to the edge of a sandy cliff and into the bright; thin air of the plunge beyond.

Or so they tell me. I was six at the time. I remember only the hot pressure of her fingers on my face in the nighttime and her last whispered words to me. I love you. Remember. They cannot take it- they can't take much more.

I close my eyes quickly; overwhelmed by the thought of my mother; writing and a dozen scientists in lab coats watching; scribbling impassively on notepads. Three separate times she was strapped to a metal table; three separate times a crowd of observers watched her from the deck; took note of her responses as the needles, and then the lasers; pierced her skin. Normally patients are anesthetized during the procedure and don't feel a thing, but my aunt had once let slip that during my mother's third procedure they had refused to sedate her; thinking that the anesthesia might be interfering with her brain's response to the cure.

'Would you like some water?' Evaluator One; the woman; gestures to a bottle of water and glass set up on the table. She has noticed my momentary flinch, but it's okay. My statement is done, and I can tell by the way the evaluators are looking at me- pleased; proud like I'm a little kid who has managed to fit all the right pegs in all the right holes that I've done a good job.

I pour myself a glass of water and take a few sips; grateful for the pause. I can feel sweat pricking up under my arms; on my scalp, and at the base of my neck, and I pray to God they can't see it. I try to keep my eyes locked on the evaluators, but there it is in my peripheral vision; grinning at me- that damn table.

'Okay now; Lena. We're going to ask you some questions. We want you to answer honestly. Remember; we're trying to get to know you as a person.'

As opposed to what? The question pops into my mind before I can stop it.

As an animal?

I take a deep breath; force myself to nod and smile. 'Great.' 'What are some of your favorite books?'

'Love; War, and Interference; by Christopher Malley;' I answer automatically. 'Border; by Philippa Harolde.' It's no use trying to keep the images away- They are rising now; a flood. That one word keeps scripting itself on my brain; as though it is being seared there. Pain.

They wanted to make my mother submit to a fourth procedure. They were coming for her on the night she died; coming to bring her to the labs.

But instead; she had fled into the dark; winged her way into the air. Instead; she had woken me with those words- I love you. Remember…? They cannot take it. Which the wind seemed to carry back to me long after she had vanished; repeated on the dry trees; on the leaves coughing and whispering in the cold gray dawn.

'And Romeo and Juliet; by Krumenacker Shakespeare.'

Romeo and Juliet are required to read in every freshman-year health class. The evaluator's nod; make notes.

'And why is that?' Evaluator Three asks.

It's frightening- That's what I'm supposed to say. It's a cautionary tale; a warning about the dangers of the old world; before the cure.

But my throat seems to have grown swollen and tender. There is no room to squeeze the words out; they are stuck there like the burrs that cling to our clothing when we jog through the farms.

And at that moment; it's like I can hear the low growl of the ocean; can hear its distant; insistent murmur; can imagine its weight closing around my mother; water as heavy as stone. And what comes out is-

'It's beautiful...'

Instantly all four faces jerk up to look at me; like puppets connected to the same string.

'Beautiful...?' Evaluator One wrinkles her nose. There's a zinging; frigid tension in the air, and I realize I've made a big; big mistake. The evaluator with the glasses leans forward. 'That's an interesting word to use. Very interesting.' This time when he shows his teeth; they remind me of the curved white canines of a dog. 'Perhaps you find suffering beautifully? Perhaps you enjoy violence?'

'No. No; that's not it.' I'm trying to think straight, but my head is full of the ocean's wordless roaring. It is growing louder and louder by the second. And now; faintly; it's as though

I can hear screaming as well-like my mother's scream is reaching me from across the span of a decade. 'I just mean - there's something so sad about it.'

I'm struggling; floundering; feeling like I'm drowning now; in the white light and the roaring. Sacrifice. I want to say something about sacrifice, but the word doesn't come.

~*~

'Let's move on.' Evaluator One; who sounded so sweet when she offered me the water; has lost all pretense of friendliness. She is all business now.

'Tell us something simple. Like your favorite color; for example.' Part of my brain-the the rational; educated part; the logical me part- screams; Blue! Say blue! But this other; older thing inside of me is riding across the waves of sound; surging up with the rising noise. 'Gray;' I blurt out.

'Gray?' Evaluator Four splutters back. My heart is spiraling down to my stomach. I know I've done it; I'm tanking; can practically see my numbers flipping backward. But it's too late. I'm finished-it's the roaring in my ears; growing louder and louder; a stampede; that makes thinking impossible. I quickly stammered out an explanation.

'Not gray; exactly... Right before the sun rises there's a moment when the whole sky goes this pale nothing color-not really gray but sort of; or sort of white, and I've always really liked it because it reminds me of waiting for something good to happen.'

But they've stopped listening. All of them are staring beyond me; heads cocked; expressions confused; as though trying to make out familiar words in a foreign language. And then suddenly the roaring and the screaming surge and I realize, I haven't been imagining them all this time.

People are screaming, and there's a tumbling; rolling; drumming sound; like a thousand feet moving together. There's a third sound too; running under both of those- a wordless bellowing that doesn't sound human.

In my confusion; everything seems disconnected; the way it does in dreams. Evaluator One half rises from her chair; saying; 'What the hell -?' At the same time; Glasses says; 'Sit down; Helen. I'll go see what's wrong.' But at that second the blue door bursts open and a

streaming blur of cows- actual; real; live; sweating; mooing cows-come thundering into the lab. A stampede; I think, and for one weird; detached second feel proud of myself for correctly identifying the noise.

Then I realize I'm being charged by a bunch of very heavy; very frightened herd animals, and am about two seconds from getting stomped into the ground. Instantly I launch myself into the corner and wedge myself behind the surgical table; where I'm completely protected from the panicked mass of animals. I poke my head out just a little; so, I can still see what's going on.

The evaluators are hopping up onto the table now; as walls of brown and speckled cow flanks fold around them. Evaluator One is screaming at the top of her lungs, and Glasses is yelling; 'Calm down; calm down!' even though he's grabbing onto her like she's a life raft and he's in danger of sinking. Some of the cows have wigs hanging crazily from their heads, and others are half-swaddled in gowns identical to the one I'm wearing.

For a second I'm sure I'm dreaming. Maybe this whole day has been a dream, and I'll wake up to discover that I'm still at home; in bed; on the morning of my evaluation. But then I notice the writing on the cows' flanks- NOT CURE- DEATH.

The words are written in sloppy ink; just above the neatly branded numbers that identify these cows as destined for the slaughterhouse.

A little chill dance up my spine and everything starts clicking into place. Every couple of years the Invalids-the people who live in the Wilds; the unregulated land that exists between recognized cities and towns-sneak into

Pittsburgh and stage some kind of protest.

One year they came in at night and painted red death skulls on every single one of the known scientists' houses. Another year they managed to break into the central police station; which coordinates all the patrols and guard shifts for Pittsburgh and move all the furniture onto the roof; even the coffee machines. That was pretty funny; actually-and pretty amazing since you'd think Central would be the most secure building in Pittsburgh. People in the Wilds don't see love as a disease, and they don't believe in the cure. They think it's a kind of cruelty. Thus; the slogan.

Now I get it- The cows are dressed up like us; the people being evaluated. Like we're all a bunch of herd animals.

The cows are calming down somewhat. They're not charging anymore, and have begun to shuffle back and forth in the lab. Evaluator One has a clipboard in her hand, and she's swooping and swatting as the cow's butt up against the table; mooing and nipping at the papers scattered across its surface -the evaluators' notes; I realize; as a cow snaps up a sheet of paper and begins to rip at it with its teeth.

Thank God- Maybe the cows will eat up all the notes, and the evaluators will lose track of the fact that I was completely tanking. Half-concealed behind the table-and safe; now; from those sharp; stamping hooves- I have to admit the whole thing is kind of hilarious.

That's when I hear it. Somehow; above the snorting and stomping and yelling; I hear the laugh above me-low and short and musical; like someone sounding out a few notes on a piano. The observation decks. A boy is standing on the observation deck; watching the chaos below. And he's laughing.

As soon as I look up; his eyes click on my face. The breath whooshes out of my body and everything freezes for a second; as though I'm looking at him through my camera lens; zoomed in all the way; the world pausing for that tiny period between the opening and closing of the shutter. His hair is golden brown; like leaves in autumn just as they're turning, and he has bright amber eyes.

The moment, I see him- I know that he's one of the people responsible for this. I know that he must live in the Wilds; I know he's an Invalid.

Fear clamps down on my stomach, and I open my mouth to shout something-I'm not sure what; exactly-but at precisely that second- he gives a minute shake of his head, and suddenly I can't make a sound. Then he does the absolutely; positively unthinkable.

He winks at me...

At last; the alarm goes off. It's so loud I have to cover my ears with my hands. I look down to see whether the evaluators have seen him, but they're still doing their little tabletop dance, and when I look up again; he's gone.

Step on a crack; you'll break your mama's back.

Step on a stone; you'll end up all alone.

Step on a stick; you're bound to get the Sick. Watch where you tread; you'll bring out all the dead.

-A common children's playground chant; usually accompanied by jumping rope or clapping… That night; I have the dream again.

I'm at the edge of a big white cliff made out of the sand. The ground is unsteady. The ledge I'm standing on is starting to crumble; to flake away and tumble down; down; down thousands of feet below me; into the ocean; which is whipping and snapping so hard it looks like one gigantic; frothing stew; all Whitecaps, and surging water.

I'm terrified I'm going to fall, but for some reason, I can't move or back away from the edge of the cliff; even as I feel the ground shifting away from underneath me; millions of molecules rearranging themselves into space; into the wind- Any second I'm going to fall.

Likewise, just before, I know that there's nothing underneath me but air-that at any split second I'm going to feel the wind shrieking around me as I drop down into the water-the waves lashing underneath me open up for a moment and- I see my mother's face; pale and bloated and splotched with blue; floating just below the surface. Her eyes are open; her mouth is split apart as though she is screaming; her arms are extended on either side of her; bobbing in the current; as though she is waiting to embrace me.

That's when I wake up. That's when I always wake up.

My pillow is damp, and I've got a scratchy feeling in my throat. I've been crying in my sleep. Gracie is folded next to me; one cheek squashed flat against the sheets; her mouth making endless; noiseless repetitions. She always gets into bed with me when I'm having the dream.

She can sense it; somehow. I brush her hair away from her face and pull the sweat-soaked sheets away from her shoulders. I'll be sorry to leave Grace when I move out.

Our secrets have made us close; bonded us together. She is the only one who knows of the Coldness- a feeling that comes sometimes when I'm lying in bed; a black; the empty feeling that knocks my breath away and leaves me gasping as though I've just been thrown in the icy water.

On nights like that although; it is wrong and illegal- I think of those strange and terrible words; I love you and wonder what they would taste like in my mouth; try to recall their lilting rhythm on my mother's tongue.

And of course; I keep her secret safe. I'm the only one who knows that Grace isn't stupid, or slow- There's nothing wrong with her at all. I'm the only one who has ever heard her speak.

One night after she'd come to sleep in my bed I woke up in the very early morning; the nighttime shadows ebbing off our walls. She was sobbing quietly into the pillow next to me; pronouncing the same word over and over; stuffing her mouth with blankets so I could barely hear her- 'Mommy; Mommy; Mommy.'

As though she was trying to chew her way around it; as though it was choking her in her sleep. I'd put my arms around her and squeezed, and after what felt like hours; she exhausted herself on the word and fell back to sleep; the tension in her body slowly relaxing; her face hot and bloated from the tears.

That's the real reason she doesn't speak. All the rest of her words are crowded out by that single; looming one; a word still echoing in the dark corners of her memory.

Mommy...

I know, I remember. I sit up and watch the light strengthen the walls; listen for the sounds of the seagulls outside; take a drink from the glass of water next to my bed. Today is June 3. Ninety-five days.

I wish; for Grace; the cure could come sooner. I comfort myself by thinking that someday she will have the procedure too. Someday she will be saved, and the past and all its pain will be rendered as smoothly palatable as the food we spoon to our babies.

Someday we'll all be saved. By the time I drag myself down to breakfast-feeling as though someone is grinding sand into both of my eyes-the the official story about the incident at the labs has been released.

Carol keeps our small TV on low while she makes breakfast, and the murmur of the newscasters' voices almost puts me back to sleep.

'Yesterday a truck full of cattle intended for the slaughterhouse was mixed up with a shipment of pharmaceuticals; resulting in the hilarious and unprecedented chaos you see on your screen.' Cue- nurses squealing; swatting at lowing cows with clipboards.

This doesn't make any sense, but as long as no one mentions the Invalids; everyone's happy. We're not supposed to know about them. They're not even supposed to exist; supposedly; all the people who live in the Wilds were destroyed over fifty years ago; during the blitz.

Fifty years ago; the government closed the borders of the United States. The border is guarded constantly by military personnel. No one can get in. No one goes out. Every sanctioned and approved community must also be contained within a border that's the law and all travel between communities requires the official written consent of the municipal government; to be obtained six months in advance. This is for our protection. Safety; Sanctity; Community- That is our country's motto. For the most part; the government has been successful. We haven't seen a war since the border was closed, and there is hardly any crime, except for the occasional incident of vandalism or petty theft. There is no more hatred in the United States; at least among the cured. Only sporadic cases of detachment-but every medical procedure carry a certain risk.

But so far; the government has failed to rid the country of the Invalids, and it is the single blemish on the administration and the system in general. So, we don't talk about them. We pretend that the Wilds-and the people who live there- don't even exist. It's rare to hear the word even spoken; except when a suspected sympathizer disappears; or when a young diseased couple is found to have vanished together before a cure can be administered.

One piece of really good news is this-

All of yesterday's evaluations have been invalidated. All of us will receive a new evaluation date, which means I get a second chance. This time I swear I'm not going to screw it up. I feel completely idiotic about my meltdown at the labs.

Sitting at the breakfast table; with everything looking so clean and bright and normal-the chipped blue mugs full of coffee; the erratic beeping of the microwave (one of the few electronic devices; besides the lights; Carol allows us to use)-makes yesterday seem like a long; strange dream. It's a miracle; actually; that a bunch of fanatical Invalids decided to let loose a stampede at the exact moment I was failing the most important test of my life. I don't know what came over me. I think about Glasses showing his teeth, and the moment I heard my mouth say.

'Gray;' and I wince. Stupid; stupid.

Suddenly I'm aware that Jenny has been talking to me.

'What?' I blink at Jenny as she swims into focus. I watch her hands as she cuts her toast precisely into quarters.

'I said; what's wrong with you?' Back and forth; back and forth. The knife dings against the edge of the plate. 'You look like you're about to puke or something.' 'Jenny;' Carol scolds. She is at the sink; washing dishes. 'Not while your uncle is eating breakfast.' 'I'm fine.' I rip off a piece of toast; slide it across the stick of butter that's getting melty in the middle of the table, and force myself to eat. The last thing I need is a good old family-style interrogation. 'Just tired.' Carol turns to look at me. Her face has always reminded me of a doll's. Even when she's talking; even when she's irritated or happy or confused; her expression stays weirdly immobile.

'Couldn't sleep?'

'I slept;' I say. 'I just had a bad dream; that's all.' At the end of the table; my uncle

Krumenacker starts up from his newspaper.

'Oh; God. You know what? You just reminded me. I had a dream last night too.'

Carol raises her eyebrows, and even Jenny looks interested. It's extremely unusual for people to dream once they've been cured. Carol once told me that on the rare occasions she still dreams; her dreams are full of dishes; stacks and stacks of them climbing toward the sky, and sometimes she climbs them; lip to lip; hauling herself up into the clouds; trying to reach the top of the stack. But it never ends; it stretches on into infinity. As far as I know; my sister Rachel never dreams anymore.

Krumenacker smiles; 'I was caulking the window in the bathroom. Carol; you remember I said there was a draft the other day? Anyway; I was piping in the caulk, but every time I finished; it would just flake away-almost like it was snow-and the wind would come in and

I'd have to start all over. On and on and on for hours; it felt like.'

'How strange;' my aunt says; smiling; coming to the table with a plate of fried eggs. My uncle likes them super runny, and they sit on the plate; their yolks jiggling and quivering like hula-hoop dancers; spotted with oil. My stomach twists. Krumenacker says; 'No wonder I'm so tired this morning. I was doing housework all night.'

Everyone laughs but me. I choke down another bit of toast; wondering whether I'll dream once I've been cured.

I hope not.

This year is the first year since sixth grade that I don't have a single class with Hanna; so, I don't see her until after school; when we meet up in the locker room to go running; even though the cross-country season ended a couple of weeks ago.

(When the team went to Regionals it was only the third time I'd ever been out of Pittsburgh, and even though we went just forty miles along the gray; bleak municipal highway; I could still hardly swallow; the butterflies in my throat were so frantic.)

Still; Hanna and I try to run together as much as we can; even during school vacations. I started running when I was six years old after my mom committed suicide. The first day I ever ran a whole mile was the day of her funeral. I'd been told to stay upstairs with my cousins while my aunt prepared the house for the memorial service and laid out all the food.

Marcia and Rachel were supposed to get me ready, but in the middle of helping me dress, they'd started arguing about something and had stopped paying me any attention at all. So-o I had wandered downstairs; my dress zipped halfway up my back; to ask my aunt for help. Mrs. Eisner; my aunt's neighbor at the time; was there. As I came into the kitchen she was saying; 'It's horrible; of course. But there was no hope for her anyway. It's much better this way. It's better for Lena; too. Who wants a mother like that?'

I wasn't supposed to have heard. Mrs. Eisner gave a startled little gasp when she saw me, and her mouth shut quickly; like a cork popping back into a bottle.

My aunt just stood there, and in that second it was as though the world and the future collapsed down into a single point, and I understood that this-the kitchen; the spotless cream linoleum floors; the glaring lights, and the vivid green mass of Jell-O on the counter- was all that was left now that my mother was gone.

Suddenly, I couldn't stay there. I couldn't stand the sight of my aunt's kitchen, which I now understood would be my kitchen. I couldn't stand the Jell- O.

My mother hated Jell-O. An itchy feeling began to work its way through my body; as though a thousand mosquitoes were circulating through my blood; biting me from the inside; making me want to scream; jump; squirm.

I ran…

Nevaeh

Book: 24

This Kiss

Hanna; one foot on a bench; is lacing up her shoes when I come in. My awful secret is that I like to run with Hanna partly because it's the single; sole; a solitary shred of a thing that I can do better than she can; but I would never admit that out loud in a million years.

I haven't even had a chance to put my bag down before she's leaning forward and grabbing my arm.

'Can you believe it?' She's fighting a smile, and her eyes are a pinwheel of color-blue; green; gold-flashing like they always do when she's excited about something. 'It was definitely the Invalids. That's what everybody's saying; anyway.'

We're the only people in the locker room-all the sports teams have finished their seasons-but I instinctively whip my head around when she says the word.

'Keep your voice down.'

She pulls back a little; tossing her hair over one shoulder. 'Relax. I did recon. Even checked the toilet stalls. We're in the clear.'

I open up the gym locker I've had for all my ten years at St. Anne's. At its bottom is a film of gum wrappers and shredded notes and lost paper clips, and on top of that; my small limp pile of running clothes; two pairs of shoes; my cross-country team jersey; a dozen half-used bottles of deodorant; conditioner, and perfume. In less than two weeks I'll graduate and never see the inside of this locker again, and for a second I get sad.

It's gross; but I've actually always loved the smell of gyms- the industrial cleaning fluid and the deodorant and soccer balls and even the lingering smell of sweat.

It's comforting to me. It's so strange how life works- You want something, and you wait and wait and feel like it's taking forever to come. Then it happens and it's over and all you want to do is curl back up at that moment before things changed.

'Who's everybody; anyway? The news is saying it was just a mistake; a shipping error or something.' I feel the need to repeat the official story; even though I know just as well as Hanna that it's BS.

She straddles the bench; watching me.

As usual; she's oblivious to the fact that I hate it when other people see me change. 'Don't be an idiot. If it was on the news; it definitely isn't true. Besides; who mixes up a cow and a box of prescription meds? It's not like it's hard to tell the difference.'

I shrug. She's right; obviously. She's still looking at me; so- I angle slightly away. I've never been comfortable with my body like Hanna and some of the other girls at St. Anne's; never gotten over the awkward feeling that I've been fitted together just a little wrong in some very key places. Like I've been sketched by an amateur artist- If you don't look too closely; it's all right, but start focusing and all the smudges and mistakes become really obvious. Hanna kicks one leg out and begins stretching; refusing to let the issue drop.

Hanna's more fascinated with the Wilds than anyone I've ever met. 'If you think about it; it's pretty amazing. The planning and all that. It would have taken at least four or five people-maybe more-to coordinate everything.' I think briefly of the boy I saw on the observation deck; of his flashing; autumn-leaf-colored hair, and the way he tipped his head back when he laughed so I could see the vaulted black arch of his mouth. I told no one about him; not even Hanna, and now I feel I should have.

Hanna goes on; 'Someone must have had security codes. Maybe a sympathizer.'

A door bangs loudly at the front of the locker room, and Hanna and I both jump; staring at each other with wide eyes. Footsteps click quickly across the linoleum. After a few seconds of hesitation; Hanna launches smoothly into a safe topic- the color of the graduation gowns; which are orange this year. Just then Mrs. Jonson; the athletic director; comes around the bank of lockers; swinging her whistle around one finger.

'At least they're not brown; like at Fieldston Prep;' I say; though I'm barely listening to Hanna. My heart is pounding and I'm still thinking about the boy and wondering whether Jonson heard us say the word sympathizer. She doesn't do anything but nod as she passes us; so, it seems unlikely.

I've learned to get really good at this -say one thing when I'm thinking about something else; act like I'm listening when I'm not; pretend to be calm and happy when really; I'm freaking out. It's one of the skills you perfect as you get older. You have to learn that people are always listening.

The first time I ever used the cell phone that my aunt and uncle share; I was surprised by the patchy interference that kept breaking up my conversation with Hanna at random intervals; until my aunt explained that it was just the government's listening devices; which arbitrarily cut into cell phone calls; recording them; monitoring conversations for target words like love; or Invalids; or sympathizer.

No one; in particular; is targeted; it's all done randomly; to be fair. But it's almost worse that way. I pretty much always feel as though a giant; revolving gaze is bound to sweep over me at any second; lighting up my bad thoughts like an animal lit still and white in the ever-turning beam of a lighthouse. Sometimes I feel as though there are two me's; one coasting

directly on top of the other- the superficial me; who nods when she's supposed to nod and says what she's supposed to say, and some other; deeper part; the part that worries and dreams and says 'Gray.'

Most of the time they move along in sync and I hardly notice the split, but sometimes it feels as though I'm two wholly different people and I could rip apart at any second. Once I confessed this to Rachel. She just smiled and told me it would all be better after the procedure. After the procedure; she said; it would be all coasting; all glide; every day as easy as one; two; three.

'Ready;' I say; spinning my locker closed. We can still hear Mrs. Jonson shuffling around in the bathroom; whistling. A toilet flushes. A faucet goes on.

'My turn to pick the route;' Hanna says; eyes sparkling, and before I can open my mouth to protest; she lunges forward and smacks me on the shoulder.'

'Tag- you're it;' she says, and just as easily spins off the bench and sprints for the door; laughing; so- I have to run to catch up.

Earlier in the day; it rained, and the storm cooled everything off. Water evaporates from puddles in the streets; leaving a shimmering layer of mist over Pittsburgh. Above us; the sky is now a vivid blue. The bay is flat and silver; the coast like a giant belt cinched around it; keeping it in place.

I don't ask Hanna where she's going, but it doesn't surprise me when she starts winding us toward Old Port; toward the old footpath that runs along Commercial Street and up to the labs.

We try to keep on the smaller; less-trafficked streets, but it's pretty much a losing game. It's three-thirty. All the schools have been released, and the streets surge with students walking home. A few buses rumble past, and one or two cars squeeze by. Cars are considered good luck. As they pass; people reach out their hands and brush along with the shiny hoods; the clean; bright windows; which will soon be smudged with fingerprints. Hanna and I run next to each other; reviewing all the day's gossip. We don't talk about the botched evaluations yesterday, or the rumors of the Invalids.

There are too many people around. Instead; she tells me about her ethics exam, and I tell her about Cora Dervish's fight with Minna Wilkinson. We talk about Willow Marks; too; who has been absent from school since the previous Wednesday. Rumor is that Willow was found by regulators last week in Deering Oaks Park after curfew -with a boy.

We've been hearing rumors like that about Willow for years. She's just the kind of person people talk about. She has blond hair, but she's always coloring different streaks into it with markers, and I remember once on a freshman class trip to a museum; we passed a group of Spencer Prep boys and she said; so loud one of our chaperones could have easily heard; 'I'd like to kiss one of them straight on the lips.' Supposedly she was caught hanging out with a boy in tenth grade and got off with a warning because she showed no signs of the deliria.

Every so often people make mistakes; it's biological; a result of the same kind of chemical and hormonal imbalances that occasionally lead to Un-naturalism; to boys being attracted to boys and girls to girls. These impulses; too; will be resolved by the cure. But this time it is serious; apparently, and Hanna drops the bomb just as we turn onto Center- Mr. and Mrs. Marks have agreed to move the date of Willow's procedure up by a full six months. She'll be missing graduation day to get cured.

'Six months?' I repeat. We've been running hard for twenty minutes; so- I'm not sure if the heavy thumping in my chest is a result of the exercise or the news. I'm feeling more out of breath than I should be like someone's sitting on my chest. 'Isn't that dangerous?' Hanna tips her head to the right; gesturing the way to a shortcut through an alley. 'It's been done before.'

'Yeah; but not successfully. What about all the side effects? Mental problems? Blindness?' There are a few reasons why the scientists won't let anyone under the age of eighteen have the procedure, but the biggest one is that it just doesn't seem to work as well for people younger than that, and in the worst cases it's been known to cause all kind of crazy difficulties. Scientists speculate that the brain and its neuropathways are still too plastic before then; still in the middle of forming themselves. Actually; the older you are when you have the procedure; the better; but most people are scheduled for the procedure as close as possible to their eighteenth birthday.

'I guess they think it's worth the risk;'

Hanna says. 'Better than the alternative; you know? Amor deliria Nervosa. The deadliest of all deadly things.' This is the catchphrase that's written on every mental health pamphlet ever written about the deliria; Hanna's voice is flat as she repeats it, and it makes my stomach dip. All of yesterday's craziness has made me forget Hanna's comment to me before the evaluations. But now I remember and remember how strange she looked too; eyes cloudy and unreadable.

'Come on.' I feel a straining in my lungs and my left thigh is starting to cramp. The only way to push through it is to run harder and faster. 'Let's pick it up; Slug.'

'Bring it.' Hanna's face splits into a grin, and both of us start pumping faster. The pain in my lungs swells up and blossoms until it feels like it's everywhere; tearing through all my cells and muscles at once. The cramp in my leg makes me wince every time my heel hits the pavement. It's always like this on miles two and three; like all the stress and anxiety and irritation and fear get transformed into little needling points of physical pain, and you can't breathe or imagine going farther or think anything but I can't. I can't. I can't.

And then; just as suddenly; it's gone. All the pain lifts away; the cramp vanishes; the first ease off my chest, and I can breathe easily. Instantly a feeling of total happiness bubbles up inside of me- the solid feeling of the ground underneath me; the simplicity of the movement; rocketing off my heels; pushing forward in time and space; total freedom and release. I glance over at Hanna. I can tell from her expression that she's feeling it too. She has made it through the wall. She senses me looking and whips around; her blond ponytail a bright arc; to give me the thumbs-up.

It's strange. When we run; I feel closer to Hanna than at any other time. Even when we're not talking; it's like there's an invisible cord tethering us together; matching our rhythms; our arms and our legs; as though we're both responding to the same drumbeat.

For my sister; Karly- Han girl's forever I like to save things. Not important things like whales or people or the environment. Silly things. Porcelain bells; the kind you get at souvenir shops. Cookie cutters you'll never use; because who needs a cookie in the shape of afoot? Ribbons for my hair.

Love letters. Of all the things I save; I guess you could say my love letters are my most prized possession. I keep my letters in a teal hatbox my mom bought me from a vintage store downtown.

They don't love letters that someone else wrote for me; I don't have any of those. These are the ones I've written. There's one for every boy I've ever loved- five in all.

When I write; I hold nothing back. I write as he'll never read it. Because he never will.

Every secret thought; every careful observation; everything I've saved up inside me; I put it all in the letter. When I'm done; I seal it; I address it, and then I put it in my teal hatbox.

They do not love letters in the strictest sense of the word. My letters are for when I don't want to be in love anymore. They're for good-bye. Because after I write my letter; I'm no longer consumed by my all-consuming love. I can eat my cereal and not wonder if he likes bananas over his Cheerios too; I can sing along to love songs and not be singing them to him. If love is like a possession; maybe my letters are like my exorcisms. My letters set me free. Or at least they're supposed to.

JOSH IS MARGOT'S BOYFRIEND; BU IT guess you could say my whole family is a little in love with him. It's hard to say who most of all. Before he was Margot's boyfriend; he was just Josh. He was always there. I say always, but I guess that's not true. He moved next door five years ago, but it feels like always.

My dad loves Josh because he's a boy and my dad is surrounded by girls. I mean it- all day long he is surrounded by females. My dad is an ob-gyn, and he also happens to be the father of three daughters; so, it's like girls; girls; girls all day. He also likes Josh because Josh likes comics and he'll go fishing with him. My dad tried to take us fishing once, and I cried when my shoes got mud on them, and Margot cried when her book got wet, and Kellie cried because Kellie was still practically a baby.

Kellie loves Josh because he'll play cards with her and not get bored. Or at least pretend to not get bored. They make deals with each other- if I win this next hand; you have to make me a toasted crunchy-peanut-butter-sandwich; no crusts.

That's Kellie...

Inevitably there won't be crunchy peanut butter and Josh will say too bad; pick something else. But then Kellie will wear him down and he'll run out and buy some because that's Josh.

If I had to say why Margot loves him; I think maybe I would say it's because we all do.

We are in the living room; Kellie is posting pictures of dogs to a giant piece of cardboard. There are paper and scraps all around her. Humming to herself; she says; 'When Daddy asks me what I want for Christmas; I am just going to say; 'Pick any one of these breeds and we'll be good.' 'Margot and Josh are on the couch; I'm lying on the floor; watching TV. Josh popped a big bowl of popcorn, and I devote myself to it; handfuls and handfuls of it.

A commercial comes on for perfume- a girl is running around the streets of- Paris in an orchid-colored halter dress that is thin as tissue paper. What I wouldn't give to be that; the girl in that tissue-paper dress running around Paris in springtime! I sit up so-o suddenly; I choke on a kernel of popcorn. Between coughs I say; 'Margot; let's meet in Paris for my spring break!' I'm already picturing myself twirling with a pistachio macaron in one hand and a raspberry one in the other.

Margot's eyes light up. 'Do you think Daddy will let you?'

'Sure; it's culture. He'll have to let me.' But it's true that I've never flown by myself before. And also; I've never even left the country before. Would Margot meet me at the airport; or would I have to find my own way to the hostel?

Josh must see the sudden worry on my face because he says; 'Don't worry.

Your dad will definitely let you go if I'm with you.'

I brighten. 'Yeah! We can stay at hostels and just eat pastries and cheese for all our meals.'

'We can go to Jim Morrison's grave!' Josh throws in.

'We can go to a perfumeries' and get our personal scents done!' I cheer, and Josh snorts.

'Um; I'm pretty sure 'getting our scents done' at some perfumeries' would cost the same as a week's stay at the hostel;' he says. He nudges Margot. 'Your sister suffers from delusions of grandeur.'

'She is the fanciest of the three of us;' Margot agrees.

'What about me?' Kellie whimpers.

'You?' I scoff. 'You're the least fancy Song girl. I have to beg you to wash your feet at night; much less take a shower.'

Kellie's face gets pinched and red. 'I wasn't talking about that; you dodo bird. I was talking about Paris.'

Airily; I wave her off. 'You're too little to stay at a hostel.'

She crawls over to Margot and climbs in her lap; even though she's nine and nine is too big to sit in people's laps. 'Margot; you'll let me go; won't you?'

'Maybe it could be a family vacation;' Margot says; kissing her cheek. 'You and Lara Jean and Daddy could all come.'

I frown... That's not at all the Paris trip I was imagining. Over Kellie's head Josh mouths to me; we'll talk later, and I give him a discreet thumbs-up.

It's later that night; Josh is long gone. Kellie and our dad are asleep. We are in the kitchen. Margot is at the table on her computer; I am sitting next to her; rolling cookie dough into balls and dropping them in cinnamon and sugar. Snickerdoodles to get back in Kellie's good graces. Earlier; when I went in to say good night; Kellie rolled over and wouldn't speak to me because she's still convinced; I'm going to try to cut her out of the- Paris trip.

My plan is to put the snickerdoodles on a plate right next to her pillow so she wakes up to the smell of fresh-baked cookies.

Margot's being extra quiet, and then; out of nowhere; she looks up from her computer and says; 'I broke up with Josh tonight. After dinner.'

My cookie-dough ball falls out of my fingers and into the sugar bowl.

'I mean; it was time;' she says. Her eyes aren't red-rimmed; she hasn't been crying; I don't think. Her voice is calm and even. Anyone looking at her would think she was fine.

Because Margot is always fine; even when she's not.

'I don't see why you had to break up;' I say. 'Just cause you're going to college doesn't mean you have to break up.'

'Lara Jean; I'm going to Scotland; not UVA. Saint Andrews is nearly four thousand miles away.' She pushes up her glasses. 'What would be the point?'

I can't even believe she would say that. 'The point is; it's Josh. Josh who loves you more than any boy has ever loved a girl!'

Margot rolls her eyes at this. She thinks I'm being dramatic, but I'm not. It's true; that's how much Josh loves Margot. He would never so much as look at another girl.

Suddenly she says; 'Do you know what Mommy told me once?'

'What?' For a moment; I forget all about Josh. Because no matter what I am doing in life; if Margot and I are in the middle of an argument; if I am about to get hit by a car; I will always stop and listen to a story about Mommy.

Any detail; any remembrance that; Margot has; I want to have it too. I'm better off than Kellie; though. Kellie doesn't have one memory of Mommy that we haven't given her. We've told her so many stories so many times that they're hers now. 'Remember that time-;' she'll say. And then she'll tell the story like she was there and not just a little baby.

'She told me to try not to go to college with a boyfriend. She said she didn't want me to be the girl crying on the phone with her boyfriend and saying no to things instead of yes.'

Scotland is Margot's; yes; I guess. Absently; I scoop up a mound of cookie dough and pop it in my mouth.

'You shouldn't eat raw cookie dough;' Margot says.

I ignore her. 'Josh would never hold you back from anything. He's not like that.

Remember how when you decided to run for student-body president; he was your campaign manager? He's your biggest fan!'

At this; the corners of Margot's mouth turn down, and I get up and fling my arms around her neck. She leans her head back and smiles up at me. 'I'm okay;' she says, but she isn't; I know she isn't.

'It's not too late; you know. You can go over there right now and tell him you changed your mind.'

Margot shakes her head. 'It's done; Lara Jean.' I release her and she closes her laptop. 'When will the first batch be ready? I'm hungry.'

I look at the magnetic egg timer on the fridge. 'Four more minutes.' I sit back down and say; 'I don't care what you say; Margot. You guys aren't done. You love him too much.'

She shakes her head. 'Lara Jean;' she begins; in her patient Margot's voice; like I am a child and she is a wise old woman of forty-two.

I wave a spoonful of cookie dough under Margot's nose, and she hesitates and then opens her mouth. I feed it to her like a baby. 'Wait and see; you and Josh will be back together in a day; maybe two.' But even as I'm saying it; I know it's not true. Margot's not the kind of girl to break up and get back together on a whim; once she's decided something; that's it. There's no waffling; no regrets. It's like she said- when she's done; she's just done.

I wish (and this is a thought I've had many; many times; too many times to count) I was more like Margot. Because sometimes it feels like I'll never be done.

Later; after I've washed the dishes and plated the cookies and set them on Kellie's pillow; I go to my room. I don't turn the light on. I go to my window. Josh's light is still on.

THE NEXT MORNING; MARGOT making coffee and I am pouring cereal into bowls, and I say the thing I've been thinking all morning. 'Just so you know; Daddy and Kellie are going to be really upset.' When Kellie and I were brushing our teeth just now; I was tempted to go ahead and spill the beans, but Kellie was still mad at me from yesterday; so- I kept quiet. She didn't even acknowledge my cookies; though I know she ate them because all that was left on the plate where crumbs.

Margot lets out a heavy sigh. 'So; I'm supposed to stay with Josh because of you and Daddy and Kellie?'

'No; I'm just telling you.'

'It's not like he would come over here that much once I was gone; anyway.'

I frown… This didn't occur to me; that Josh would stop coming over because Margot was gone. He was coming over long before they were ever a couple; so- I don't see why he should stop. 'He might;' I say. 'He really loves Kellie.'

She pushes the start button on the coffee machine. I'm watching her super carefully because; Margot's always been the one to make the coffee and I never have, and now; that she's leaving (only six more days); I'd better know-how. With her back to me; she says; 'Maybe I won't even mention it to them.'

'Um; I think they'll figure it out when he's not at the airport; Gogo.' Gogo is my nickname for Margot. As in go-go boots. 'How many cups of water did you put in there?

And how many spoons of coffee beans?'

'I'll write it all down for you;' Margot assures me. 'In the notebook.'

We keep a house notebook by the fridge. Margot's idea; of course. It has all the important numbers and Daddy's schedule and Kellie's Caceool. 'Make sure you put in the number for the new dry cleaners;' I say.

'Already done.' Margot slices a banana for her cereal- each slice is perfectly thin. 'And also; Josh wouldn't have come to the airport with us anyway. You know how I feel; about sad good-byes.' Margot makes a face; like Ugh; emotions.

I do know.

When Margot decided to go to college in Scotland; it felt like a betrayal.

Even though I knew it was coming because of course; she was going to go to college somewhere far away. And of course; she was going to go to college in Scotland and study

anthropology; because she is Margot; the girl with the maps and the travel books and the plans. Of course; she would leave us one day.

I'm still mad at her; just a little. Just a teeny-tiny bit. Obviously; I know it's not her fault. But she's going so far away, and we always said we'd be the Song girls forever.

Margot first; I in the middle and my sister Kellie last. On her birth certificate, she is Katherine; to us she is Kellie. Occasionally we call her Kitten because that's what I called her when she was born- she looked like a scrawny; hairless kitten.

We are the three Song girls. There used to be four. My mom; Eve Song. Evie to my dad; Mommy to us; Eve to everyone else. The song is; was my mom's last name. Our last name is Covey- Covey like a lovey; not like a cove. But the reason we are the Song girls and not the Covey girls is my mom used to say that she was a Song girl for life, and Margot said then we should be too. We all have Song for our middle name, and we look more Song than Covey anyway; more Korean than white. At least Margot and I do; Kellie looks most like Daddy- her hair is light brown like this. People say I look the most like Mommy, but I think Margot does; with her high cheekbones and dark eyes. It's been almost six years now, and sometimes it feels like just yesterday she was here, and sometimes it feels like she never was; only in dreams.

She'd mopped the floors that morning; they were shiny, and everything smelled like lemons and clean house. The phone was ringing in the kitchen; she came running in to answer it, and she slipped. She hit her head on the floor, and she was unconscious; but then she woke up and she was fine. That was her lucid interval. That's what they call it. A little while later she said she had a headache; she went to lie down on the couch, and then she didn't wake up.

Margot was the one who found her. She was twelve. She took care of everything- she called 911; she called Daddy; she told me to watch over Kellie; who was only three. I turned on the TV for Kellie in the playroom and I sat with her. That's all I did. I don't know what I would have done if Margot hadn't been there. Even though Margot is only two years older than me; I look up to her more than anybody.

When other adults find out that my dad is a single father of three girls; they shake their heads in admiration; like How does he do it? How does he ever manage that all by himself? The answer is Margot. She's been an organizer from the start; everything labeled and scheduled and

arranged in neat; even rows. Margot is a good girl, and I guess Kellie and I have followed her lead. I've never cheated or gotten drunk or smoked a cigarette or even had a boyfriend.

We tease Daddy and say how lucky he is that we're all so good, but the truth is; we're the lucky ones. He's a really good dad. And he tries hard. He doesn't always understand us, but he tries, and that's the important thing. We three Song girls have an unspoken pact- to make life as easy as possible for Daddy. But then again; maybe it's not so unspoken; because how many times have; I heard Margot say; 'Shh; be quiet; Daddy's taking a nap before he has to go back to the hospital;' or 'Don't bother Daddy with that; do it yourself'?

I've asked Margot what she thinks it would have been like if Mommy hadn't died. Like would we spend more time with our Korean side of the family and not just on- Thanksgiving and New Year's Day? Or- Margot doesn't see the point in wondering. This is our life; there's no use in asking what if. No one could ever give you the answers. I try; I really do, but it's hard for me to accept this way of thinking. I'm always wondering about the what-ifs; about the road not taken.

Daddy and Kellie come downstairs at the same time. Margot pours Daddy a cup of coffee; black, and I pour milk into Kellie's cereal bowl. I push it in front of her, and she turns her head away from me and gets a yogurt out of the fridge. She takes it into the living room to eat in front of the TV. So; she's still mad.

'I'm going to go to Costco later today; so- you girls make a list of whatever you need;'

Daddy asks; taking a big sip of coffee. 'I think I'll pick up some New York strips for dinner.

We can grill out. Should I get one for Josh; too?'

My head whips in Margot's direction. She opens her mouth and closes it.

Then she says; 'No; just get enough for the four of us; Daddy.'

I give her a reproving look, and she ignores me. I've never known Margot to chicken out before, but I suppose in matters of the heart; there's no predicting how a person will or won't behave.

SO NOW IT'S THE LAS Todays of summer and our last days with Margot.

Maybe it's not altogether such a bad thing that she broke up with Josh; this way we have more time with just us sisters. I'm sure she must have thought of that. I'm sure it was part of the plan.

We're driving out of our neighborhood when we see Josh run past. He joined track last year; so now he's always running. Kellie yells his name, but the windows are up, and it's no use anyway- he pretends not to hear. 'Turn around;' Kellie urges Margot.

'Maybe he wants to come with us.'

'This is a Song-girls-only day;' I tell her.

We spend the rest of the morning at Target; picking up last minute things like Honey Nut Chex mix for the flight and deodorant and hair ties. We let Kellie push the cart so she can do that thing where she gets a running start and then rides the cart like; she's pushing a chariot. Margot only lets her do it a couple of times before she makes her stop; though; so as not to annoy other customers.

Next; we go back home and make chicken salad with green grapes for lunch and then it's nearly time for Kellie's swim meet. We pack a picnic dinner of ham-and-cheese sandwiches and fruit salad and bring Margot's laptop to watch movies on because swim meets can go long into the night. We make a sign; too; that says Go Kellie Go!

I draw a dog on it. Daddy ends up missing the swim meet because he is delivering a baby, and as far as excuses go; it's a pretty good one. (It was a girl, and they named her Patricia Rose after her two grandmothers. Daddy always finds out the first and middle name for me. It's the first thing I ask when he gets home from delivery.)

Kellie's so excited about winning two first-place ribbons and one-second place that she forgets to ask where Josh is until we're in the car driving back home. She's in the backseat and she's got her towel wrapped around her head like a turban and her ribbons dangling from her ears like earrings. She leans forward and says; 'Hey! Why didn't Josh come to my meet?'

I can see Margot hesitate; so- I answer before she can. Maybe the only thing I'm better at than Margot is lying. 'He had to work at the bookstore tonight. He really wanted to make it; though.' Margot reaches across the console and gives my hand a grateful squeeze.

Sticking out her lower lip; Kellie says; 'That was the last regular meet! He promised he'd come to watch me swim.'

'It was a last-minute thing;' I say. 'He couldn't get out of working the shift because one of his coworkers had an emergency.'

Kellie nods begrudgingly. Little as she is; she understands emergency shifts.

'Let's get frozen custards;' Margot says suddenly.

Kellie lights up, and Josh and his imaginary emergency shift are forgotten.

'Yeah! I want a waffle cone! Can I get a waffle cone with two scoops? I want a mint chip, and peanut brittle. No; rainbow sherbet and double fudge. No; wait…'

I twist around in my seat. 'You can't finish two scoops and a waffle cone;' I tell her.

'Maybe you could finish two scoops in a cup; but not in a cone.'

'Yes; I can… Tonight I can. I'm starving.'

'Fine; but you better finish the whole thing.' I shake my finger at her and say it like a threat; which makes her roll her eyes and giggle. As for me; I'll get what I always get; the cherry chocolate-chunk custard in a sugar cone.

Margot pulls into the drive-thru, and as we wait our turn; I say; 'I bet they don't have frozen custard in Scotland.'

'Probably not;' she says.

'You won't have another one of these until Thanksgiving;' I say.

Margot looks straight ahead. 'Christmas;' she says; correcting me.

'Thanksgiving's too short to fly all that way; remember?'

'Thanksgiving's going to suck.' Kellie pouts.

I'm silent. We've never had a Thanksgiving without Margot. She always does the turkey and the broccoli casserole and the creamed onions. I do the pies (pumpkin and pecan) and the mashed potatoes. Kellie is the taste tester and the table-setter. I don't know how to roast a turkey. And both of our grandmothers will be there, and Nana; Daddy's mother; likes Margot best of all of us. She says Kellie drains her and I'm too dreamy-eyed.

All of a sudden; I feel panicky and it's hard to breathe and I couldn't care less about cherry chocolate-chunk custard. I can't picture Thanksgiving without Margot. I can't even picture next Monday without her.

I know most sisters don't get along, but I'm closer to Margot than I am to anybody in the world. How can we be the Song girls without Margot?

MY OLDEST FRIEND CHRIS SMOKE- She hooks up with boys she doesn't know hardly at all, and she's been suspended twice. One time she had to go to the court for truancy.

I never knew what truancy was before I met Chris. FYI; it's when you skip so much school; you're in trouble with the law.

I'm pretty sure that if Chris and I met each other now; we wouldn't be friends. We're as different can be. But it wasn't always this way. In sixth grade; Chris liked stationery and sleepovers and staying up all night watching John Hughes movies; just like me. But by eighth grade; she was sneaking out after my dad fell asleep to meet boys she met at the mall. They'd drop her back off before it got light outside. I'd stay up until she came back; terrified she wouldn't make it home before my dad woke up. She always made it back in time though.

Chris isn't the kind of friend you call every night or have lunch with every day. She is like a street cat; she comes and goes as she pleases. She can't be tied down to a place or a person. Sometimes I won't see Chris for days and then in the middle of the night there will be a knock at- my bedroom window and it'll be Chris; crouched in the magnolia tree. I keep my window unlocked for her in case. Chris and Margot can't stand each other. Chris thinks Margot is uptight, and Margot thinks Chris is bipolar. She thinks Chris uses me; Chris thinks Margot controls me. I think maybe they're both a little bit right.

But the important thing; the real thing; is Chris and I understand each other; which I think counts for a lot more than people realize.

Chris calls me on the way over to our house; she says her mom's being a beotch and she's coming over for a couple of hours and does we have any food?

Continued

Chris and I are sharing a bowl of leftover gnocchi in the living room when Margot comes home from dropping Kellie off at her swim team's end-of-season barbecue. 'Oh; hey;' she says. Then she spots Chris's glass of Diet Coke on the coffee table; sans coaster. 'Can you please use a coaster?'

As soon as Margot's up to the stairs; Chris says; 'Gawd! Why is your sister such a botch?'

I slide a coaster under her glass. 'You think everyone's a be-otch today.'

'That's because everyone is.' Chris rolls her eyes toward the ceiling.

Loudly; she says; 'She needs to pull that stick out of her ass.'

From her room Margot yells; 'I heard that!'

'I meant for you too!' Chris yells back; scraping up the last piece of gnocchi for herself.

I sigh. 'She's leaving so soon.'

Snickering; Chris says; 'So is Joshy; like; going to light a candle for her every night until she comes back home?'

I hesitate. While I'm not sure if it's still supposed to be a secret; I am sure that Margot wouldn't want Chris knowing any of her personal business. All I say is; 'I'm not sure.'

'Wait a minute. Did she dump him?' Chris demands.

Reluctantly I nod. 'Don't say anything to her; though;' I warn. 'She's still really sad about it.'

'Margot? Sad?' Chris picks at her nails. 'Margot doesn't have normal human emotions like the rest of us.'

'You just don't know her;' I say. 'Besides; we can't all be like you.'

She grins a toothy grin. She has sharp incisors; which make her look always a little bit hungry. 'True.'

Chris is pure emotion. She screams at the drop of a hat. She says sometimes you have to scream out emotions; if you don't; they'll fester. The other day she screamed at a lady at the grocery store for accidentally stepping on her toes. I don't think she's in any danger of her emotions festering.

'I just can't believe that in a few days she'll be gone;' I say; feeling sniffly all of a sudden.

'She's not dying; Lara Jean. There's nothing to get all boo-hoo about.' Chris pulls at a loose string on her red shorts. They're so short that when she's sitting; you can see her underwear. Which are red to match her shorts. 'In fact; I think this is good for you. It's about time you did your own thing and stopped just listening to whatever Queen Margot says. This is your junior year; beotch. This is when it's supposed to get good. French some guys; live a little; you know?'

'I live plenty;' I say.

'Yeah; at the nursing home.' Chris snickers and I glare at her.

Margot started volunteering at the Belleview Retirement Community when she got her driver's license; it was her job to help host cocktail hour for the residents. I'd help sometimes. We'd set out peanuts and pour drinks and sometimes Margot would play the piano, but usually Stormy hogged that. Stormy is the Belleview diva. She rules the roost.

I like listening to her stories. And Miss Mary; she might not be so good at conversation due to her dementia, but she taught me how to knit.

They have a new volunteer there now, but I know that at Belleview it really is the more the merrier; because most of the residents get so few visitors. I should go back soon; I miss going there. And I for sure don't appreciate Chris making fun of it.

'Those people at Belleview have lived more life than everyone we know combined;' I tell her. 'There's this one lady; Stormy; she was a USO girl! She used to get a hundred letters a day from soldiers who were in love with her. And there was this one veteran who lost his leg; he sent her a diamond ring!'

Chris looks interested all of a sudden. 'Did she keep it?'

'She did;' I admit. I think it was wrong of her to keep the ring since she had no intention of marrying him, but she showed it to me, and it was beautiful. It was a pink diamond; very rare. I bet it's worth so much money now.

'I guess Stormy sounds kind of like a badass;' Chris says begrudgingly.

'Maybe you could come with me to Belleview sometime;' I suggest. 'We could go to their cocktail hour. Mr. Perelli loves to dance with new girls. He'll teach you how to foxtrot.'

Chris makes a horrible face like I suggested we go hang out at the town dump. 'No; thanks. How about I take you dancing?' She nudges her chin toward upstairs. 'Now that your sister's left; we can have some real fun. You know I always have fun.'

It's true; Chris does always has fun. Sometimes a little too much fun; but fun nonetheless.

THE NIGHT BEFORE MARGOT LEAVE; Sall three of us are in her room helping pack up the last little things. Kellie is organizing Margot's bath stuff; packing it nice and neat in the clear shower caddy. Margot is trying to decide which coat to bring.

'Should I bring my pea-coat and my puffy coat or just my pea-coat?' She asks me.

'Just the pea coat;' I say. 'You can dress that up or down.' I'm lying on her bed directing the packing process. 'Kellie; make sure the lotion cap is on tight.'

'It's brand-new- course it's on tight!' Kellie growls, but she double-checks.

'It gets cold in Scotland sooner than it does here;' Margot said; folding the coat and setting it on top of her suitcase. 'I think I'll just bring both.'

'I don't know why you asked if you already knew what you were going to do;' I say.

'Also; I thought you said you were coming home for Christmas. You're still coming home for Christmas; right?'

'Yes; if you'll stop being a brat;' Margot says.

Honestly; Margot isn't even packing that much. She doesn't need a lot. If it was me; I'd have packed up my whole room; but not Margot. Her room looks the same; almost.

Margot sits down next to me, and Kellie climbs up and sits at the foot of the bed.

'Everything's changing;' I say; sighing.

Margot makes a face and puts her arm around me. 'Nothing's changing; not really.

We're the Song girls forever; remember?'

Our father stands in the doorway. He knocks; even though the door is open, and we can clearly see it is him. 'I'm going to start packing up the car now;' he announces. We watch from the bed as he lugs one of the suitcases downstairs, and then he comes up for the other one. Daily he says; 'Oh no; don't get up. Don't trouble yourselves.'

'Don't worry; we won't;' we sing out.

For the past week; our father has been in spring-cleaning mode; even though it isn't spring. He's getting rid of everything- the bread machine we never used; CDs; old blankets; our mother's old typewriter. It's all going to Goodwill. A psychiatrist or someone could probably connect it to Margot's leaving for college, but I can't explain the exact significance of it. Whatever it is; it's annoying. I had to shoo him away from my glass- unicorn collection twice.

I lay down my head in Margot's lap. 'So; you really are coming home for Christmas; right?'

'Right...'

'I wish I could come with you.' Kellie pouts. 'You're nicer than Lara Jean.'

I give her a pinch. 'See?' she crows.

'Lara Jean will be nice;' Margot says; 'as long as you behave. And you both have to take care of Daddy. Make sure he doesn't work too many Saturdays. Make sure he takes the car in for inspection next month. And make sure you buy coffee filters; you're always forgetting to buy coffee filters.'

'Yes; drill sergeant;' Kellie and I chorus. I search Margot's face for sadness or fear or worry; for some sign that she is scared to go so far away; that she will miss us as much as we will miss her. I don't see it; though.

The three of us sleep in Margot's room that night.

Kellie falls asleep first; as always. I lie in the dark beside her with my eyes open. I can't sleep. The thought that tomorrow night Margot won't be in this room- it makes me so sad I can hardly bear it.

I hate to change more than almost anything.

In the dark next to me, Margot asks; 'Lara Jean - do you think you've ever been in love before? Real love?'

She catches me off guard; I don't have an answer ready for her. I'm trying to think of one, but she's already talking again.

Wistfully; she says; 'I wish I'd been in love more than once. I think you should fall in love at least twice in high school.' Then she lets out a little sigh and falls asleep. Margot falls asleep like that- one dreamy sigh and she's off to never-never land; just like that.

I wake up in the middle of the night and Margot's not there. Kellie's curled up on her side next to me; but no Margot. It's pitch- dark- out; only the moonlight filters through the curtains.

I crawl out of bed and move to the window. My breath catches. There they are; Josh and Margot; standing in the driveway. Margot's face is turned away from him; toward the moon.

Josh is crying. They aren't touching. There's enough space between them for me to know that Margot hasn't changed her mind.

I drop the curtain and find my way back to the bed; where Kellie has rolled farther into the center. I push her back a few inches so there will be room for Margot. I wish I hadn't seen that. It was too personal. Too real, it was supposed to be just for them.

If there was a way for me to un-see it; I would.

I turn on my side and close my eyes. What must it be like; to have a boy like you so much he cries for you? And not just any boy. Josh. Our Josh.

To answer her question- yes; I think I have been in real love. Just once; though. With Josh. Our Josh.... Um maybe...

THIS IS HOW MARGOT AND Josh got together. In a way; I heard about it from Josh first.

It was two years ago. We were sitting in the library during our free. I was doing the math-

homework; Josh was helping because he's good at math. We had our heads bent over my page; so close I could smell the soap he'd used that morning. Irish Spring.

And then he said; 'I need your advice on something. I like someone.'

For a split-second; I thought it was me. I thought he was going to say to me. I hoped. It was the start of the school year. We'd hung out nearly every day that August; sometimes with Margot but mostly just by ourselves because Margot had her internship at the Montpelier plantation three days a week. We swam a lot. I had a great tan from all the swimming. So-o for that split-second I thought he was going to say my name.

But then I saw the way he blushed; the way he looked off into space, and I knew it wasn't for me.

Mentally; I ran through the list of girls it could be. It was a shortlist. Josh didn't hang out with a ton of girls; he had his best friend Jersey Mike; who had moved from New

Jersey in middle school, and his other best friend; Ben, and that was it.

It could have been Ashley; a junior on the volleyball team. He'd once pointed her out as the cutest of all the junior girls. In Josh's defense; I'd made him do it- I asked him who was the prettiest girl in each grade. For the prettiest freshman; my grade; he said, Genevieve.

Not that I was surprised; but it still gave me a little pinch in my heart.

It could have been Jodie; the college girl from the bookstore. Josh often talked about how smart Jodie was; how she was so cultured because she'd studied abroad in India and was now Buddhist. Ha! I was the one who was half-Korean; I was the one who'd taught Josh how to eat with chopsticks. He'd had kimchi for the first time at my house.

I was about to ask him who when the librarian came over to shush us, and then we went back to doing work and Josh didn't bring it up again and I didn't ask.

Honestly; I didn't want to know. It wasn't me, and that was all I cared about.

I didn't think for one second that the girl he liked was Margot. Not that I didn't see her as a girl who could be liked. She'd been asked out before; by a certain type of guy. Smart guys who would partner up with her in chemistry and run against her for student government. In retrospect; it wasn't so surprising that Josh would like Margot since he's that kind of guy too.

If someone were to ask me what Josh looks like; I would say he's just ordinary. He looks like the kind of guy you'd expect would be good at computers; the kind of guy who calls comic books graphic novels. Brown hair. Not a special brown; just regular brown.

Green eyes that go muddy in the center. He's on the skinny side, but he's strong. I know because I sprained my ankle once by the old baseball field and he piggybacked me all the way home. He has freckles; which make him look younger than his age. And a dimple on his left cheek. I've always liked that dimple. He has such a serious face otherwise.

What was surprising; what was shocking; was that Margot would like him back. Not because of who Josh was; but because of who Margot was. I'd never heard her talk about liking a boy before; not even once. I was the flighty one; the flibbertigibbet; as my white grandma would say. Not Margot. Margot was above all that. She existed on some higher plane where those things- boys; makeup; clothes- didn't really matter.

The way it happened was sudden. Margot came home from school late that day in October; her cheeks were pink from the cold mountain air and she had her hair in a braid and a scarf around her neck. She'd been working on a project at school; it was dinnertime, and I'd cooked chicken parmesan with thin spaghetti in watery tomato sauce.

She came into the kitchen and announced; 'I have something to tell you.'

Her eyes were very bright; I remember she was unspooling the scarf from around her neck.

Kellie was doing her homework at the kitchen table; Daddy was on his way home, and I was stirring the watery sauce. 'What?' Kellie and I asked.

'Josh likes me.' Margot gave a pleasing kind of shrug; her shoulders nearly went up to her ears.

I went very still. Then I dropped my wooden spoon into the sauce. 'Josh- Josh? Our Josh?' I couldn't even look at her. I was afraid that she would see.

'Yes. He waited for me after school today; so, he could tell me. He said-'

Margot grinned ruefully. 'He said I'm his dream girl. Can you believe that?'

'Wow;' I said, and I tried to communicate happiness in that word, but I don't know if it came out that way. All I was feeling was despair. And envy. Envy so thick and so black I; felt like I was choking on it. So-o; I tried again; this time with a smile. 'Wow; Margot.'

'Wow;' Kellie echoed. 'So-o; are you; boyfriend and girlfriend; now?'

I held my breath; waiting for her to answer.

Margot took a pinch of parmesan between her fingers and dropped it in her mouth.

'Yeah; I think so.' And then she smiled, and her eyes went all soft and liquid. I understood then that she liked him too. So much.

That night I wrote my letter to Josh.

Dear Josh -

I cried a lot. Just like that; it was over. It was over before I even had a chance. The important thing wasn't that Josh had chosen Margot. It was that Margot had chosen him.

So; that was that. I cried my eyes out; I wrote my letter; I put the whole thing to rest. I haven't thought of him that way since. He and Margot are meant to be.

They're MFEO.

Made for each other.

I'm still awake when Margot comes back to bed, but I quickly shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep. Kellie's cuddled up next to me.

I hear a sniffly sound and I peek out of one eye to look at Margot. Her back is to us; her shoulders are shaking. She's crying.

Margot never cries...

Now that I've seen Margot cry over him; I believe it more than ever- they're not over.

THE NEXT DAY; WE DRIVE Margot to the airport. Outside; we load up her suitcases on a luggage carrier- Kellie tries to get on top and dance, but our father pulls her down right away. Margot insists on going in by herself; just like she said she would.

'Margot; at least let me get your bags checked;' Daddy says; trying to maneuver the luggage carrier around her. 'I want to see you go through security.'

'I'll be fine;' she repeats. 'I've flown by myself before. I know how to check a bag.'

She stretches up on her toes and puts her arms around our dad's shoulders.

'I'll call as soon as I get there; I promise.'

'Call every day;' I whisper. The lump in my throat is getting bigger, and a few tears leak out of my eyes. I'd hoped I wouldn't cry because I knew Margot wouldn't, and it's lonely to cry alone, but I can't help it.

'Don't you dare forget us;' Kellie warns.

That makes Margot smile. 'I could never.' She hugs us each one more time.

She saves me for last; the way I knew she would. 'Take good care of Daddy and Kellie. You're in charge now.' I don't want to let go; so, I hold on tighter; I'm still waiting and hoping for some sign; some indication that she will miss us as much as we'll miss her.

And then she laughs, and I release her.

'Bye; Gogo;' I say; wiping my eyes with a corner of my shirt.

We all watch as she pushes the luggage carrier over to the check-in counter.

I'm crying hard; wiping my tears with the back of my arm. Daddy puts one arm around me and one around Kellie. 'We'll wait until she's in line for security;' he says.

When she's done checking in; she turns back and looks at us through the glass doors.

She lifts one hand and waves, and then she heads for the security line. We watch her go; thinking she might turn around one more time, but she doesn't. She already seems so far away from us. Straight-A Margot; ever capable. When it's my time to leave; I doubt I'll be as strong as Margot. But; honestly; who is?

I cry all the way home. Kellie tells me I'm a bigger baby than she is, but then from the backseat; she grabs my hand and squeezes it, and I know she's sad too.

Even though Margot isn't a loud person; it feels quite at home. Empty; somehow. What will it be like when I'm gone in two years? What will Daddy and Kellie do then? I hate the thought of the two of them coming home to an empty; the dark house with no me and no Margot.

Maybe I won't go away far; maybe I'll even live at home; at least for the first semester. I think that would be the right thing to do.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON CHRIS CALL's and tells me to meet her at the mall; she wants my opinion on a leather jacket, and to get the full effect I have to see it in person. I'm proud she's asking for my sartorial advice, and it would be good to get out of the house and not be sad anymore, but I'm nervous about driving to the mall alone. I (or anyone; really) would consider myself a skittish driver.

I ask her if she'll just send me a picture instead, but Chris knows me too well. She says; 'Nuh-uh. You get your ass down here; Lara Jean. You'll never get better at driving if you don't just suck it up and do it.'

So; that's what I'm doing- I'm driving Margot's car to the mall. I mean; I have my license and everything; I'm just not very confident. My dad has taken me for lessons numerous times; Margot too, and I'm basically fine with them in the car, but I get nervous when I drive alone. It's the changing-lanes part that scares me. I don't like taking my eyes away from what's happening right in front of me; not for a second.

Also; I don't like going too fast.

But the worst thing is I have a tendency of getting lost. The only places I can get with absolute certainty are school and the grocery store. I've never had to know how to get to the mall because Margot always drove us there. But now I have to do better; because; I'm responsible for driving Kellie around.

Though truthfully; Kellie is better with directions than I am; she knows how to get to loads of places. But I don't want to have to hear her tell me how to get somewhere. I want to feel like the big sister; I want her to relax in the passenger seat; safe in the knowledge that Lara Jean will get her where she needs to go; just like I did with Margot.

Sure; I could just use a GPS, but I would feel silly putting in directions to go to the mall when I've been there a million times. It should come to me intuitively; easy; where I don't even have to think about it. Instead; I worry about every turn; second- guess every highway sign; is it north or is it south; do I turn right here or is it the next one? I've never had to pay attention to it.

But today; so far so good. I'm listening to the radio; bopping along; even driving with just one hand on the wheel. I do this to feign confidence because the more I fake it; the more it's supposed to feel true.

Everything is going so well that I take the shortcut way instead of the highway way. I cut through the side neighborhood, and even as I'm doing it; I'm wondering if this was such a great idea. After a couple of minutes; things aren't looking so familiar, and I realize; I should

have taken a left instead of a right. I push down the panic that's rising in my chest and I try to backtrack.

You can do it; you can do it.

There's a four-way stop sign. I don't see anyone; so, I zip ahead. I don't even see the car on my right; I feel it before I see it.

I scream my head off. I taste copper in my mouth. Am I bleeding? Did I bite my tongue; off? I touch it and it's still there. My heart is racing; my whole body feels wet and clammy.

I try to take deep breaths, but I can't seem to get air.

My legs shake as I get out of the car. The other guy is already out; inspecting his car with his arms crossed. He's old; older than my dad, and he has gray hair, and he's wearing shorts with red lobsters on them. His car is fine; mine has a huge dent in the side. 'Didn't you see the stop sign?' He demands… 'Where you are texting on your phone?'

I shake my head; my throat is closing up. I just don't want to cry. As long as I don't cry. He seems to sense this. The irritated furrow of his brow is loosening. 'Well; my car looks fine;' he says reluctantly. 'Are you; all right?'

Part- 5

I nod again. 'I'm so sorry;' I say.

'Kids need to be more careful;' the man says as if I haven't spoken.

The lump in my throat is getting bigger. 'I'm very; very sorry; sir.'

He makes a grunting sound. 'You should call someone to come get you;' the man says.

'Do you want me to wait?'

'No; thank you.' What if he's a serial killer or a child molester? I don't want to be alone with a strange man. The man drives off.

As soon as he's gone; it occurs to me that maybe I should have called the police while he was still here. Aren't you always supposed to call the police when you're in a car accident; no matter what? I'm pretty sure they told us that in driver's ed. So that's another mistake I made.

I sit down on the curb and stare at Margot's car. I've only had it for two hours and I've already wrecked it. I rest my head in my lap and sit in a tight bundle. My neck is starting to ache. This is when the tears start. My dad is not going to be happy.

Margot is not going to be happy. They'll both probably agree that I have no business driving around town unsupervised, and maybe they're right. Driving a car is a lot of responsibility. Maybe

I'm not ready for it yet…

Maybe I'll never be ready. Maybe even when I'm old; my sisters or my dad will have to drive me around; because that's how useless I am.

I pull out my phone and call Josh. When he answers; I say; 'Josh; can you do me an f-f-favor?' and my voice comes out so wobbly I'm embarrassed.

Which of course he hears because he's Josh. He comes to attention immediately and says; 'What's wrong?'

'I just got into a car accident. I don't even know where I am. Can you come to get me?'

Wobble - Wobble.

'Are you hurt?' He demands…

'No; I'm fine. I'm just- 'If I say another word; I will cry.

'What street signs do you see? What stores?'

I crane my neck to look. 'Obsession;' I say. I look for the closest mailbox.

'I'm at 9810 Obsession Road.'

'I'm on my way. Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?'

'No; that's okay.' I hang up and start to cry.

I don't know how long I've been sitting there crying when another car rolls up in front of me. I look up, and it's Marcel Kavinsky's black Audi with the tinted windows. One of them rolls down. 'Lara Jean? Are you okay?'

I nod my head yes and make a motion as he should just go. He rolls the window back up, and I think he's really going to drive off; but then he pulls over to the side and parks.

He climbs out and starts inspecting my car. 'You really messed it up;' he says. 'Did you get the other guy's insurance info?'

'No; his car was fine.' Furtively; I wipe my cheeks with my arm. 'It was my fault.'

'Do you have Triple A?' I nod.

'So; you called them already?'

'No. But someone's coming.'

Marcel sits down next to me. 'How long have you been sitting here crying by yourself?'

I turn my head and wipe my face again. 'I'm not crying.'

Marcel Kavinsky and I used to be friends; back before he was Kavinsky when he was Marcel K. There was a whole gang of us in middle school. The boys where

Marcel Kavinsky and John Ambrose McClaren and Trevor Pike. The girls were Genevieve and me and Allie Feldman who lived down the block and sometimes Chris. Growing up;

Genevieve lived two streets away from me. It's funny how much of childhood is about proximity. Like who your best friend is directly correlated to how close your houses are; who you sit next to in music is all about how close your names are in the alphabet. Such a game of chance.

In eighth grade- Genevieve moved to a different neighborhood, and we stayed friends a little while longer. She'd come back to the neighborhood to hang out, but something was different. By high school- Genevieve had eclipsed us. She was still friends with the boys, but the

girls' crew was over. Allie and I stayed friends until she moved last year, but there was always something just a little bit humiliating about it like we were two leftover heels of bread and together we made a dry sandwich.

We're not friends anymore. Me and Genevieve or me and Marcel. Which is why it's so weird to be sitting next to him on somebody's curb as no time has passed.

His phone buzzes and he takes it out of his pocket. 'I've got to go.'

I sniffle. 'Where are you headed?'

'To Gen's.'

'You'd better get going then;' I say. 'Genevieve will be mad if you're late.'

Marcel makes a piffle sound, but he sure does get up fast. I wonder what it's like to have that much power over a boy. I don't think I'd want it; it's a lot of responsibility to hold a person's heart in your hands. He's getting into his car when; as an afterthought; he turns around and asks; 'Want me to call Triple-A for you?'

'No; that's okay;' I say. 'Thanks for stopping; though. That was really nice of you.'

Marcel grins. I remember that about Marcel- how much he likes positive reinforcement.

'Do you feel better now?'

I nod. I do; actually.

'Good;' he says.

He has the look of a Handsome Boy from a different time. He could be a dashing World War I soldier; handsome enough for a girl to wait years for him to come back from the war; so handsome she could wait forever. He could be wearing a red letterman's jacket; driving around in a Corvette with the top down; one arm on the steering wheel; on his way to pick up his girl for the sock hop. Marcel's kind of wholesome good looks feels more like yesterday than today. There's just something about him girls like.

He was my first kiss. It's so strange to think of it now. It feels like forever ago, but really it was just four years.

Josh shows up about a minute later; as I'm texting Chris that I'm not going to make it to the mall after all. I stand up. 'It took you long enough!'

'You told me in 9810. This is 8901!'

Confidently I say; 'No; I definitely said 8901.'

'No; you definitely said 9810. And why weren't you answering your phone?' Josh gets out of his car, and when he sees the side of my car; his jaw drops.

'Holy crap... Did you call Triple A yet?'

'No… can you?'

Josh does, and then we sit in his car in the air-conditioning while we wait. I almost get into the backseat; when I remember. Margot isn't here anymore. I've ridden in his car so many times, and I don't think I've ever once sat up front in the passenger seat.

'Um - you know Margot's going to kill you; right?'

I whip my head around so fast my hair slaps me in the face. 'Margot's not going to find out; so, don't you say a word!'

'When would I even talk to her? We're broken up; remember?'

I frown at him…

'I hate when people do that- when you ask them to keep something a secret and instead of saying yes or no; they say; 'Who would I tell?'

'I didn't say; 'Who would I tell?'

'Just say yes or no and mean it. Don't make it conditional.'

'I won't tell Margot anything;' he says. 'It'll just be between you and me. I promise… all right?'

'All right;' I say. And then it gets quiet with neither of us saying anything; there's just the sound of cool air coming out of the A/C vents.

My stomach feels queasy thinking about how I'm going to tell my dad.

Maybe I should break the news to him with tears in my eyes; so, he feels sorry for me. Or I could say something like; I have good news and bad news. The good news is; I'm fine; not a scratch on me. The bad news is; the car is wrecked. Maybe 'wrecked' isn't the right word.

I'm mulling over the right word choice in my head when Josh says; 'So just because; Margot and I broke up; you're not going to talk to me anymore either?' Josh sounds jokingly bitter or bitterly joking if there is such a combination.

I look over at him in surprise. 'Don't be dumb. Of course; I'm still going to talk to you.

Just not in public.' This is the role I play with him. The part of the pesky little sister. As if I am the same as Kellie. As if we aren't only a year apart. Josh doesn't crack a smile; he just looks glum; so, I bump my forehead against his. 'That was a joke; dummy!'

'Did she tell you she was going to do it? I mean; was it always her plan?'

When I hesitate; he says; 'Come on. I know she tells you everything.'

'Not really. Not this time anyway. Honestly; Josh. I didn't know a thing about it. Promise.' I cross my heart.

Josh absorbs this. Chewing on his bottom lip he says; 'Maybe she'll change her mind. That's possible; right?'

I don't know if it's more heartless for me to say yes or no because he'll be hurt either way. Because while I'm 99.9 percent sure that she will get back together with him; there's that tiny chance she won't, and I don't want to get his hopes up. So-o I don't say anything.

He swallows; his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. 'No; you're right.

When Margot makes up her mind; she doesn't go back on it.'

Please; please; please; don't cry.

I rest my head on his shoulder and say; 'You never know; Joshy.'

Josh stares straight ahead. A squirrel is darting up the big oak tree in the yard. Up and down and back up again. We both watch. 'What time does she land?'

'Not for hours...'

'Is - is she coming home for Thanksgiving?'

'No. They don't get off for Thanksgiving. It's Scotland; Josh. They don't celebrate American holidays; hello!' I'm teasing again, but my heart's not in it.

'That's right;' he says.

I say; 'She'll be home for Christmas; though;' and we both sigh.

'Can I still hang out with you guys?' Josh asks me.

'Me and Kellie?'

'Your dad; too.'

'We're not going anywhere;' I assure him.

Josh looks relieved. 'Good. I'd hate to lose you; too.'

As soon as he says it; my heart does this pause, and I forget to breathe, and just for that one second; I'm dizzy. And then; just as quickly as it came; the feeling; the strange flutter in my chest; is gone, and the tow truck arrives.

When we pull into my driveway; he says; 'Do you want me to be there when you tell your dad?'

I brighten up and then I remember how Margot said I'm in charge now. I'm pretty sure taking responsibility for one's mistakes is part of being in charge.

DADDY ISN'T SO MAD After all. I go through my whole good news-bad news spiel and he just sighs and says; 'As long as you're all right.'

The car needs a special part that has to be flown in from Indiana or Idaho; I can't remember which. In the meantime; I'll have to share the car with Daddy and take the bus to school or ask Josh for rides; which was already my plan.

Margot calls later that night. Kellie and I are watching TV and I scream for Daddy to come quick. We sit on the couch and pass the phone around and take turns talking to her.

'Margot; guess what happened today!' Kellie shouts.

Frantically; I shake my head at her. Don't tell her about the car; I mouth. I give her warning eyes.

'Lara Jean got into -' Kellie pauses tantalizingly. 'A fight with Daddy.

Yeah; she was mean to me and Daddy told her to be nice; so, they had a fight.'

I grab the phone out of her hand. 'We didn't have a fight; Go-go. Kellie's just being annoying.'

'What did you guys have for dinner? Did you cook the chicken I defrosted last night?'

Margot asks. Her voice sounds so far away.

I push the volume up on the phone. 'Yes; but never mind about that. Are you settled in your room? Is it big? What's your roommate like?'

'She's nice. She's from London and she has a really fancy accent. Her name is Penelope St. George-Dixon.'

'Gosh; even her name sounds fancy;' I say. 'What about your room?'

'The room is about the same as that dorm we saw at UVA; it's just older.'

'What time is it over there?'

'It's almost midnight. We're five hours ahead; remember?'

We're five hours ahead like she's already considering Scotland her home, and she's only been gone a day; not even! 'We miss you already;' I tell her.

'Miss; you too.'

After dinner; I text Chris to see if she wants to come over, but she doesn't text back.

She's probably out with one of the guys she hooks up with. Which is fine. I should catch up on my scrapbooking.

I was hoping to be done with Margot's scrapbook before she left for college, but as anyone who's ever scrapbooked knows; Rome wasn't built in a day. You could spend a year or more working on one scrapbook.

I've got Motown girl-group music playing, and my supplies are laid out all around me in a semicircle. My heart hole punch; pages, and pages of scrapbook paper; pictures I've cut out of magazines; glue gun; my tape dispenser with all my different colored washi tapes.

Souvenirs like the playbill from when we saw Wicked in New York; receipts; pictures.

Ribbon; buttons; stickers; charms. A good scrapbook has texture. It's thick and chunky and doesn't close all the way.

I'm working on a Josh-and-Margot page. I don't care what Margot says.

They're getting back together; I know it. And even if they aren't; not right away; it's not like Margot can just erase him from her history. He was such a big part of her senior year.

And; like; her life. The only compromise I'm willing to make is I was saving my heart washi tape for this page, but I can just do a regular plaid tape instead. But then I put the plaid tape up against the pictures and the colors don't look as good.

So; I go ahead and use the heat tape. And then; swaying to the music; I use my heart template to cut out a picture of the two of them at prom. Margot's going to love this.

I'm carefully gluing a dried rose petal from Margot's corsage when my dad raps on the door. 'What are you up to tonight?' he asks me.

'This;' I say; gluing another petal. 'If I keep at it; it'll probably be done by Christmas.'

'Ah.' My dad doesn't move. He just hovers there in the doorway; watching me work.

'Well; I'm going to watch that new Ken Burns documentary in a bit; if you want to join me.'

'Maybe;' I say; just to be nice. It'll be too much of a pain to bring all my supplies downstairs and get set up again. I'm in a good rhythm right now. 'Why don't you get it started without me?'

'All right. I'll leave you to it; then.' Daddy shuffles down the stairs.

It takes me most of the night, but I finish the Josh-and-Margot page, and it comes out really nice. Next is a sister page. For this one; I use flowered paper for the background, and I glue in a picture of the three of us from a long time ago. Mommy took it. We're standing in front of the oak tree in front of our house in our church clothes.

We're all wearing white dresses, and we have matching pink ribbons in our hair. The best thing about the picture is Margot and I are smiling sweetly and Kellie is picking her nose.

I smile to myself. Kellie's going to pitch a fit when she sees this page. I can't wait.

MARGOT SAYS THAT JUNIOR Years the most important year; the busiest year; a year so crucial that everything else in life hinges upon it. So; I figure I should get in all the pleasure reading I can before school starts next week and junior year officially begins. I'm sitting on my front steps; reading a 1980's romantic British spy novel I got for seventy-five cents at the Friends of the Library sale.

I'm just getting to the good stuff (Cressida must seduce Nigel to gain access to the spy codes!) when Josh walks out of his house to get the mail. He sees me too; he lifts his hand like he's just going to wave and not come over; but then he does.

'Hey; nice onesie;' he says as he makes his way across the driveway.

It's faded light blue with sunflowers and it ties around the neck. I got it from the vintage store; 75 percent off. And it's not a onesie. 'This is a sunsuit;' I tell- him; going back to my book. I try to subtly hide the cover with my hand. The last thing I need is Josh giving me a hard time for reading a trashy book when I'm just trying to enjoy a relaxing afternoon.

I can feel him looking at me; his arms crossed; waiting. I look up. 'What?'

'Want to see a movie tonight at the Bess? There's a Pixar movie playing. We can take Kellie.'

'Sure; texts me when you want to head over;' I say; turning the page of my book. Nigel is unbuttoning Cressida's blouse and she's wondering when the sleeping pill she slipped in his Merlot will kick in; while simultaneously hoping it won't kick in too soon because Nigel is actually quite a good kisser.

Josh reaches down and tries to get a closer look at my book. I slap his hand away, but not before he reads out loud; 'Cressida's heart raced as Nigel moved his hand along her stockinged thigh.' Josh cracks up. 'What the heck are you reading?'

My cheeks are burning. 'Oh; be quiet.'

Chuckling; Josh backs away. 'I'll leave you to Cressida and Noel then.'

To his back; I call out; 'For your information; it's Nigel!'

Kellie's over the moon about hanging out with Josh. When Josh asks the girl at the concession stand to layer the butter on the popcorn (bottom; middle; top); we both give an approving nod. Kellie sits in the middle of us, and at the funny parts; she laughs so hard she kicks her legs up in the air. She weighs so little that the seat keeps tipping up. Josh and I share smiles over her head.

Whenever Josh; Margot, and I went to the movies; Margot always sat in the middle too. It was so she could whisper to both of us. She never wanted me to feel left out because she had a boyfriend and I didn't. She was so careful about this that it made me worry at first; that she sensed something from before. But she's not someone to hold back or pretty up the truth. She's just a really good big sister.

The best…

There were times; that I felt left out anyway. Not in a romantic way; but a friend way. Josh and I had always been friends. But those times when he'd put his arm around Margot when we were in line for popcorn; or in the car when they'd talk softly to each other and I felt like the kid in the backseat who can't hear what the adults are talking about; it made me feel a little bit invisible. They made me wish I had someone to whisper to in the backseat.

It's strange to be the one in the front seat now. The view isn't so different from the backseat. In fact; everything feels good and normal and the same; which is a comfort.

Chris calls me later that night while I'm painting my toenails different colored pinks. It's so loud in the background she has to yell. 'Guess what!'

'What? I can barely hear you!' I'm doing my pinky toe a fruit-punch color called Hit Me with Your Best Shot.

'Hold up.' I can hear Chris moving rooms because it gets quieter. 'Can you hear me now?'

'Yes; much better.'

'Guess who broke up.'

I've moved on to a mod pink color that looks like White-Out with a drop of red in it.

'Who?'

'Gen and Kavinsky! She dumped his ass.'

My eyes got huge. 'Whoa! Why?'

'Apparently; she met some UVA guy at that hostessing job she had. I guarantee you she was cheating on Kavinsky the whole summer.' A guy calls Chris's name, and Chris says; 'I got to go. It's my turn at bocce.' Chris hangs up without saying goodbye; which is her way.

I actually met Chris through Genevieve. They're cousins- their moms are sisters. Chris used to come over sometimes when we were little, but she and Gen didn't get along even back then. They'd argue over whose Barbie had dibs on Ken because there was only one Ken. I didn't even try to fight for Ken; even though he was technically mine.

Well; Margot's. At school; some people don't even know Gen and Chris are cousins. They don't look alike; like at all- Gen is petite with fit arms and sunny blond hair the color of margarine. Chris is blond too, but peroxide blond, and she's taller and has broad swimmer's shoulders. Still; there is a sameness to them. Chris was pretty wild in our Shaddyman year. She

went to every party; got drunk; hooked up with older boys. That year a junior guy from the lacrosse team told everyone that Chris had sex with him in the boys' locker room, and it wasn't even true.

Genevieve made Marcel threaten to kick his ass if he didn't tell everybody the truth. I thought it was a really nice thing Genevieve did for Chris, but Chris insisted that Gen had only done it; so, people wouldn't think she was related to a slut. After that Chris stopped hanging out and pretty much did her own thing; with people from another school. She still has that freshman-year reputation though. She acts like she doesn't care; but I know she does; at least a little.

ON SUNDAY; DADDY MAKES- lasagna. And he does- that thing where he puts black-bean salsa in it to jazz it up, and it sounds gross but it's actually good and you don't notice the beans. Josh comes over too, and he has three helpings; which Daddy loves. When Margot's name comes up over dinner; I look over at Josh and see how stiff he gets, and I feel sorry for him. Kellie must notice too because she changes the subject over to dessert; which is a batch of peanut-butter brownies I baked earlier in the afternoon. Since Daddy cooked; our kids have kitchen duty. He uses every pot in the kitchen when he makes lasagna; so, it's the worst cleanup; but worth it.

After; the three of us are relaxing in the TV room. It's Sunday night, but there's not that Sunday night feeling in the air because tomorrow is Labor Day and we have one last day before school starts. Kellie's working on her dog collage; Quelle surprise.

'What kind do you want most of all?' Josh asks her.

Kellie answers back lightning fast. 'An Akita.'

'Boy or girl?'

Again; her answer is prompt. 'Boy.'

'What'll you name him?'

Kellie hesitates, and I know why. I roll over and tickle Kellie's barefoot. 'I know what you'll name him;' I say in a singsong voice.

'Be quiet; Lara Jean!' she screeches.

I have Josh's full attention now. 'Come on; tell us;' Josh begs.

I look at Kellie and she is giving me evil glowing red eyes. 'Never mind;' I say; feeling nervous all of a sudden. Kellie might be the baby of the family, but she is not someone to trifle with.

Then Josh tugs on my ponytail and says; 'Aw; come on; Lara Jean! Don't leave us in suspense.'

I prop myself up on my elbows, and Kellie tries to put her hand over my mouth.

Giggling; I say; 'It's after a boy she likes.'

'Shut up; Lara Jean; shut up!'

Kellie kicks me, and in doing so she accidentally rips one of her dog pictures.

She lets out a cry and drops to her knees and examines it. Her face is red with the effort of not crying. I feel like such a jerk. I sit up and try to give her an I'm a sorry hug, but she twists away from me and kicks at my legs; so hard I yelped. I pick the picture up and try to tape it back, but before I can; Kellie snatches it out of my hands and gives it to Josh. 'Josh; fix it;' she says. 'Lara Jean ruined it.' 'Kellie; I was only teasing;' I say lamely. I wasn't going to say the name of the boy. I would never ever have said it.

She ignores me, and Josh smooths the paperback out with a coaster, and with the concentration of a surgeon; he tapes the two pieces together. He wipes his brow. 'Phew. I think this one will make it.'

I clap, and I try to catch Kellie's eye, but she won't look at me. I know I deserve it. The boy Kellie has a crush on- it's Josh.

Kellie whisks her college away from Josh. Stiffly she says; 'I'm going upstairs to work on this. Good night; Josh.'

'Night; Kellie;' Josh says.

Meekly; I say; 'Good night; Kellie;' but she's already running up the stairs, and she doesn't reply.

When we hear the sound of her bedroom door closing; Josh turns to me and says; 'You're in so much trouble.'

'I know;' I say. I've got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why did I do that?

Even as I was doing it; I knew it was wrong. Margot would never have done that to me.

That's not how big sisters are supposed to treat their little sisters; especially not when I'm so much older than Kellie.

'Who's this kid she likes?'

'Just a boy from school.'

Josh sighs. 'Is she really old enough to have crushes on boys? I feel like she's too young for all that.'

'I had crushes on boys when I was nine;' I tell him. I'm still thinking about Kellie. I wonder how I can make it; so, she isn't mad at me anymore. Somehow; I don't think snickerdoodles will cut it this time.

'Who?' Josh asks me.

'Who what?' Maybe if I can somehow convince Daddy to buy her a puppy.

'Who was your first crush?'

'Hmm. My first real crush?' I had kindergarten and first- and second-grade crushes aplenty, but they don't really count. 'Like the first one that really mattered?'

'Sure.'

'Well - I guess Marcel Kavinsky.'

Josh practically gags. 'Kavinsky? Are you kidding me? He's so obvious. I thought you'd be into someone more - I don't know; subtle. Marcel Kavinsky's such a cliché. He's like a cardboard cutout of a 'cool guy' in a movie about high school.'

I shrug. 'You asked.'

'Wow;' he says; shaking his head. 'Just - wow.'

'He used to be different. I mean; he was still very Marcel; but less so.'

When Josh looks unconvinced; I say; 'You're a boy; so, you can't understand what I'm talking about.'

'You're right. I don't understand!'

'Hey; you're the one who had a crush on Ms. Rossinchild!'

Josh turns red. 'She was really pretty back then!'

'Uh-huh.' I give him a knowing look. 'She was really 'pretty.' 'Our across-the-street neighbor Ms. Rossinchild used to mow her lawn in terry-cloth short shorts and a string bikini top. The neighborhood boys would conveniently come and play in Josh's yard on those days.

'Anyway; Ms. Rossinchild wasn't my first crush.'

'She wasn't?'

'No… you were.'

It takes me a few seconds to process this. Even then; all I can manage is; 'Huh?'

'When I first moved here; before I knew your true personality.' I kick him in the shin for that, and he yelps. 'I was twelve and you were eleven. I let you ride my scooter; remember? That scooter was my pride and joy. I saved up for it for two birthdays. And I let you take it for a ride.'

'I thought you were just being generous.'

'You crashed it and you got a big scratch on the side;' he continues.

Continued- 1

'Remember that?'

'Yeah; I remember you cried.'

'I didn't cry. I was justifiably upset. And that was the end of my little crush.' Josh gets up to go and we walk to the foyer.

Before he opens the front door; Josh turns around and says to me; 'I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been around after - Margot dumped me.' A blush blooms pink across his face; underneath each sweetly freckled cheek. 'You're keeping me going; Lara Jean.' Josh looks at me and I feel it all; every memory; every moment we've ever shared. Then he gives me a quick; fierce hug and disappears into the night.

I'm standing there in the open door and the thought flies in my head; so quick; so unexpected; I can't stop myself from thinking it- If you were mine; I would never have broken up with you; not in a million years.

THIS IS HOW WE MET josh. We were having a teddy-bear; tea-party picnic on the back lawn with real tea and muffins. It had to be in the backyard; so, no one would see. I was eleven; way too old for it, and Margot was thirteen; way; way too old. I got the idea in my head because- I read about it in a book. Because of Kellie I could pretend it was for her and persuade Margot into playing with us. Mommy had died the year before and ever since Margot rarely said no to anything if it was for Kellie.

We had everything spread out on Margot's old baby blanket; which was blue and nubby with a squirrel print. I laid out a chipped tea set of Margot's; mini muffins studded with blueberries and granules of sugar that I made Daddy buy at the grocery store and a teddy bear for each of us. We were all wearing hats because I insisted.

'You have to wear a hat to a tea party;' I kept saying until Margot finally put hers on just so; I'd stop. She had on Mommy's straw gardening hat, and Kellie was wearing a tennis visor, and I'd fancied up an old fur hat of Grandma's by pinning a few plastic flowers on top. I was pouring lukewarm tea out of the thermos and into cups when Josh climbed up on the fence and watched us. The month before; from the upstairs playroom; we'd watched Josh's family moved in. We'd hoped for girls, but then we saw the movers unload a boy bike and we went back to playing.

Josh sat up on the fence; not saying anything, and Margot was really stiff and embarrassed; her cheeks were red, but she kept her hat on. Kellie was the one to call out to him. 'Hello; boy;' she said.

'Hi;' he said. His hair was shaggy, and he kept shaking it out of his eyes. He was wearing a red T-shirt with a hole in the shoulder.

Kellie asked him; 'What's your name?'

'Josh.'

'You should play with us; Josh;' Kellie commanded.

So- he did.

I didn't know it then; how important this boy would become to me and to the people I love the most. But even if I had known; what could I have done differently?

It was never going to be me and him. Even though.

I THOUGHT I WAS OVER him.

When I wrote my letter; when I said my goodbyes; I meant it; I swear I did.

It wasn't even that hard; not really. Not when I thought about how much Margot liked him; how much she cared. How could I begrudge Margot a first love? Margot; who'd sacrificed so much for all of us. She always; always put Kellie and me before herself.

Letting go of Josh was my way of putting Margot first.

But now; sitting here alone in my living room; with my sister four thousand miles away and Josh next door; all I can think is; Josh Sanderson; I liked you first. By all rights; you were mine. And if it had been me; I'd have packed you in my suitcase and taken you with me; or; you know what; I would have stayed. I would have never left you.

Not in a million years; not for anything.

Thinking these kinds of thoughts; feeling these kinds of feelings; it's more than disloyal. I know that. It's downright traitorous. It makes my soul feel dirty.

Margot's been gone less than a week and look at me; how fast I cave. How fast I covet. I'm a betrayer of the worst kind; because I'm betraying my own sister, and there's no greater betrayal than that. But what now? What am I supposed to do with all these feelings?

I suppose there's only one thing I can do. I'll write him another letter. A postscript with as many pages as it takes to X away whatever feelings I have left for him.

I'll put this whole thing to rest; once and for all.

I go to my room and I find my special writing pen; the one with the really smooth inky black ink. I take out my heavy writing paper, and I begin to write. P.S. I still love you.

I still love you and that's a really huge problem for me and it's also a really huge surprise. I swear I didn't know. All this time; I thought I was over it. How could I not be when it's Margot you love? It's always been; Margot- - when I'm done; I placed the message in my diary alternatively of in my hatbox. I have a feeling I'm not done-done yet; that there's still further I need to tell; I just haven't thought of it, nevertheless.

KELLIE'S STILL MAD AT ME- In the wake of the Josh revelation; I'd forgotten all about Kellie. She neglects me all daybreak, and when I ask if she wants me to take her to the store for class accumulations; she locks; 'With what car? You destroyed Margot's.'

Oops! 'I was going to take Daddy's when he comes back from Home Depot.' I back away from her; far enough away that she can't lash out at me with a kick or a hit.

'There's no need to be sarcastic; Katherine.'

Kellie practically growls; which is exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I hate when Kellie goes mad and silent. But then she flounces away, and with her back to me; she says; 'I'm not conversing with you.

You yourself know what you did; consequently, don't bother attempting to get back on my good side.'

I follow her around; trying to provoke her into talking to me, but there's no use. I've stayed cleared.

So; I give up and go back to my room and put on the Mermaids soundtrack. I'm planning my first-week back-to-school outlay on my bed when I get a text from Josh. A little excitement runs up my spine to see his name on my phone, but I sternly remind myself of my pledge. He is still Margot's; not yours. It prepares things that they're broken up. He was hers first; which means he's hers always. Want to go for a bike ride on that trail by the park?

Biking is a Margot-type activity. She loves going on trails and hikes and bikes. Negative with me.

Josh knows it too. I don't even own my bike anymore, and Margot's is too big for me.

Kellie's is more my size.

I write back that I can't; I have to help my dad around the house. It's not a total lie.

My dad did ask me to help him report some of his plants. And I said only if he was making me and if I had no say in the matter; then sure.

What does he need help with?

What to say? I have to be careful about my excuses; Josh can easily look out the window and see if I'm home or not. I text back a vague Just some random chores.

Knowing Josh; he would show up with a shovel or a rake or whatever tool the chore entailed. And then he'd stay for dinner because he always stays for dinner.

He said I was keeping him going. Me; Lara Jean. I want to be that person for him; I want to be the one who keeps him going during this difficult time. I want to be his lighthouse keeper while we wait for Margot's return. But it's hard. Harder than I thought.

I WAKE UP HAPPY BECAUSE it's the first day of school. I've always loved the first day of school better than the last day of school. Firsts are best because they are beginnings.

While Daddy and Kellie are upstairs washing up; I make whole-wheat pancakes with sliced bananas; Kellie's favorite. First-day-of-school breakfast was always a big thing with my mom, and then Margot took over, and now I guess- it's my turn. The pancakes are a little dense; not quite as light and fluffy as Margot's. And the coffee - well; is coffee supposed to be light brown like cocoa? When Daddy comes down; he says in a merry voice; 'I smell coffee!' And

then he drinks it and gives me a thumbs-up, but I notice he only has the one sip. I guess I'm a better baker than I am a cook.

'You look like a farm girl;' Kellie says with a touch of meanness, and I know she's still at least a little bit mad at me. 'Thank you;' I say. I'm wearing faded short-tails and a scoop-neck floral shirt. It does look farm-girlish, but I think pleasantly. Margot left her brown lace-up combat boots, and they're only a half size too big. With thick socks; they're a perfect fit. 'Will you braid my hair to the side?' I ask her. 'You don't deserve a braid from me;' Kellie says; licking her fork. 'Besides; a braid would take it too far.'

Kellie is only nine, but she has good fashion sense.

'Agreed;' my dad says; not looking up from his paper.

I put my plate in the sink and then put Kellie's bag lunch down next to her plate. It's got all her favorite things- a Brie sandwich; barbecue chips; rainbow cookies; a good kind of apple juice.

'Have a great first day;' my sad chirps. He pops out his cheek for a kiss, and I bend down and give him one. I try to give Kellie one too, but she turns her cheek.

'I got your favorite kind of apple juice and your favorite kind of Brie;' I tell her pleadingly. I don't want us to start the school year off on a bad note.

'Thank you;' she sniffles with a tissue.

Before she can stop me; I throw my arms around her and squeeze her so tight she yelps. Then I get my new floral back-to-school book bag and head out the front door. It's a new day; a new year. I have a feeling it's going to be a good one.

Josh is already in the car, and I run over and open the door and slide inside with him.

'You're on time;' Josh says. He lifts his hand for a hand bump, and when I slap his knuckles; our hands make a soft smack. 'That was a good one;' he says.

'An eight at least;' I agree. We zipped past the pool; the sign for our neighborhood; then past the Wendy's.

'Do you think, Kellie, forgiven you yet for the other night?'

'Not quite; but hopefully soon.'

'Nobody can hold a grudge like Kellie;' Josh says, and I nod wholeheartedly. I can never stay mad for long, but Kellie will nurse a hatred as her life depended on this. 'I made her a good first-day-of-school lunch; so, I think that'll help;' I say. 'You're a good elder sibling.'

I pipe up with 'As good as Margot?' Furthermore, collectively we chorus; 'Nobody's as immeasurable as Margot.'

Nevaeh

Book: 25

Dollie

XXXO

SCHOOL HAS OFFICIALLY BEGUN AN found its own rhythm. The first couple of days of school are always throwaway days of handing out books and syllabuses and figuring out where you're sitting and who you're sitting with. Now is when school really begins.

For the gym; Coach White set us loose outside to enjoy the warm sun while we still have it. Chris and I are walking the track field. Chris is telling me about a party she went to over Labor Day weekend. 'I almost got into a fight with this girl who kept saying I was wearing extensions.

It's not my fault my hair is fabulous.' As we around the corner for our third lap; I catch Marcel Kavinsky looking at me. I thought I was imagining it at first; him staring in my direction, but this is the third time.

He's playing ultimate Frisbee with some of the guys. When we pass them; Marcel jogs over to us and says; 'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

Chris and I look at each other. 'Her or me?' she asks.

'Lara Jean.'

Chris puts her arm around my shoulder protectively. 'Go ahead. We're listening.'

Marcel rolls his eyes. 'I want to talk to her in private.'

'Fine;' she snaps, and she flounces away. Over her shoulder; she looks back at me with wide eyes; like What? I shrug back like I have no idea!

In a low; quiet voice; Marcel says; 'Just so you know; I don't have any STDs.'

What in the world? I stare at him; my mouth open. 'I never said you had an STD!'

His voice is still low but actually furious. 'I also don't always take the last piece of pizza.'

'What are you talking about?'

'That's what you said. In your letter. How I'm an egotistical guy who goes around giving girls STDs. Remember?'

'What letter? I never wrote you any letter!'

Wait- Yes; I did. I did write him a letter; about a million years ago. But that's not the letter he's talking about. It couldn't be.

'Yes. You. Did. It was addressed to me; from you.'

Oh; God. No. No. This isn't happening. This isn't reality. I'm dreaming. I'm in my room and I'm dreaming and Marcel Kavinsky is in my dream; glaring at me. I close my eyes. Am I dreaming? Is this real?

'Lara Jean?'

I open my eyes. I'm not dreaming, and this is real. This is a nightmare.

Marcel Kavinsky is holding my letter in his hand? It's my handwriting; my envelope; my everything. 'How- how did you get that?'

'It came in the mail yesterday.' Marcel sighs. Gruffly he says; 'Listen; it's no big deal; I just hope you're not going around telling people…'

'It came in the mail? To your house?'

'Yeah.'

I feel faint. I actually feel faint. Please let me faint right now; because if I faint, I will no longer be here; at this moment. It will be like in movies when a girl passes out from the horror of it all and the fighting happens while she is asleep, and she wakes up in a hospital bed with a bruise or two, but she's missed all the bad stuff.

I wish that was my; life instead of this. I can feel myself start to sweat. Rapidly I say; 'You should know that I wrote that letter a really long time ago.'

'Okay.'

'Like; years ago, years and years ago... I don't even remember what I said.'

Up close; your face wasn't so much handsome as beautiful. 'Seriously; that letters from middle school. I don't even know who would have sent it. Can I see it?' I reach for the letter; trying to stay calm and not sound desperate. Just casual cool.

He hesitates and then grins his perfect Marcel grin. 'Nah; I want to keep it. I never got a letter like this before.' I leap forward, and quick like a cat I snatch it out of his hand. Marcel laughs and throws up his hands in surrender. 'All right; fine; have it. Geez.'

'Thanks.' I start to back away from him. The paper is shaking my hand.

'Wait.' He hesitates. 'Listen; I didn't mean to steal your first kiss or whatever. I mean; that wasn't my intention…'

I laugh a forced and fake laugh that sounds crazy even to my own ears.

People turn around and look at us. 'Apology accepted! Ancient history!' And then I bolt. I run faster than I've ever run. All the way to the girls' locker room.

How did this even happen?

I sink to the floor. I've had the going-to-school-naked dream before. I've had the going-to-school-naked-forgot-to-study-for-an-exam-in-a-class-I-never-signed-up-for combo; the naked-exam-somebody-trying-to-kill-me combo. This is all that times infinity.

And then; because there's nothing left for me to do; I take the letter out of the envelope and I read it.

Dear Marcel;

First of all; I refuse to call you Kavinsky. You think you're so cool; going by your last name all of a sudden. Just so you know; Kavinsky sounds like the name of an old man with a long white beard.

Did you know that when you kissed me; I would come to love you? Sometimes I think yes.

Definitely yes. You know why? Because you think EVERYONE loves you; Marcel. That's what I hate about you. Because everyone does love you. Including me. I did. Not anymore.

Here are all your worst qualities- You burp, and you don't say excuse me. You just assume everyone else will find it charming. And if they don't; who cares; right? Wrong! You do care. You care a lot about what people think of you. You always take the last piece of pizza. You never ask if anyone else wants it. That's rude. You're so good at everything.

Too good. You could've given other guys a chance to be good, but you never did. You kissed me for no reason. Even though I knew you liked Gen, and you knew you liked Gen, and Gen knew you liked Gen. But you still did it. Just because you could.

I really want to know- Why would you do that to me? My first kiss was supposed to be something special. I've read about it; what it's supposed to feel like- fireworks and lightning

bolts and the sound of waves crashing in your ears. I didn't have any of that. Thanks to you it was as un-special as a kiss could be.

The worst part of it is; that stupid nothing kiss is what made me start liking you. I never did before. I never even thought about you before. Gen has always said that you are the best-looking boy in our grade, and I agreed; because sure, you are. But I still didn't see the allure of you.

Plenty of people are good-looking. That doesn't make them interesting or intriguing or cool.

Maybe that's why you kissed me. To do mind control on me; to make me see you that way. It worked. Your little trick worked. From then on; I saw you. Up close; your face wasn't so much handsome as beautiful. How many beautiful boys have you ever seen? For me; it was just one.

You. I think it's a lot to do with your lashes. You have really long lashes. Unfairly long.

Even though you don't deserve it; fine; I'll go into all the things I liked about you- One time in science; nobody wanted to be partners with Jeffrey Suttleman because he has BO, and you volunteered like it was no big deal. Suddenly everybody thought Jeffrey wasn't so bad.

You're still in the chorus; even though all the other boys take band and orchestra now. You even sing solos. And you dance, and you're not embarrassed.

You were the last boy to get tall. And now you're the tallest, but it's like you earned it. Also; when you were short; no one even cared that you were short- the girls still liked you and the boys still picked you first for basketball in the gym.

After you kissed me; I liked you for the rest of seventh grade and most of eighth. It hasn't been easy; watching you with Gen; holding hands and making out at the bus loop.

You probably make her feel very special. Because that's your talent; right? You're good at making people feel special.

Do you know what it's like to like someone so much you can't stand it and know that they'll never feel the same way? Probably not. People like you don't have to suffer through those kinds of things. It was easier after Gen moved and we stopped being friends. At least then I didn't have to hear about it. And now that the year is almost over; I know for sure that I am also over you.

I'm immune to you now; Marcel. I'm really proud to say that I'm the only girl in this school who has been immunized with the charms of Marcel Kavinsky. All because I had a really bad dose of your in seventh grade and most of eighth. Now I never ever have to worry about catching you again.

What a relief! I bet if I did ever kiss you again; I would definitely catch something, and it wouldn't be love. It would be an STD!

Lara Jean Song; IF I COULD CRAWL INTO a hole and burrow in it comfortably and live out the rest of my days in it; well; then that is what I would do.

Why did I have to bring up that kiss? Why?

I still remember everything about that day at John Ambrose McClaren's house. We were in the basement, and it smelled like mildew and laundry detergent. I was wearing white shorts and an embroidered blue-and-white halter top I stole out of Margot's closet.

I had on a strapless bra for the first time ever. It was one of Chris's, and I kept adjusting it because it felt unnatural.

It was one of our first boy-girl hangouts on a weekend and at night. That was a weird thing too because it felt purposeful. Not the same as going over to Allie's house after school and neighborhood boys are there hanging out with her twin brother.

Also- not the same as going to the arcade at the mall knowing we would probably run into boys. This was making a plan; getting dropped off; wearing a special bra; all on a Saturday night.

No parents around; just us in John's ultra-private basement. John's older brother was supposed to be watching us, but John paid him ten dollars to stay in his room. Not that anything exciting happened; for instance; an impromptu game of spin the bottle or seven minutes in

heaven- two possibilities for which we girls had prepared for with gum and lip gloss. All that happened was the boys played video games and us girls watched and played on our phones and whispered to each other.

And then people's moms and dads were picking them up, and it was so anticlimactic after all that planning and anticipation. It was disappointing for me; not because I liked anyone; but because I liked romance and drama and I was hoping something exciting would happen to someone. Something did.

To me!

Marcel and I were downstairs alone; the last two people to be picked up. We were sitting on the couch. I kept texting my dad; where are you-u? Marcel was playing a game on his phone. And then; out of nowhere; he said; 'Your hair smells like coconuts.'

We weren't even sitting that close. I said; 'Really? You can smell it from there?'

He scooted closer and took a sniff; nodding. 'Yeah; it reminds me of Hawaii or something.'

'Thanks!' I said. I wasn't positive it was a compliment, but it seemed like enough of one to say thanks. 'I've been switching between this coconut one and my sister's baby shampoo; to do an experiment on which makes my hair softer.'

Then Marcel Kavinsky leaned right in and kissed me, and I was stunned.

I'd never thought of him any kind of way before that kiss. He was too pretty; too smooth. Not my type of boy at all. But after he kissed me; he was all I could think about for months after. What if Marcel is just the beginning? What if - what if my other letters somehow got sent too? To John Ambrose McClaren. Kenny from camp. Lucas Krapf.

Josh.

Oh my God; Josh.

I leap up from the floor. I've got to find that hatbox. I've got to find those letters.

I go back outside to the track. I don't see Chris anywhere; so, I guess she is smoking behind the field house. I go straight over to Coach; who is sitting on the bleachers with his phone.

'I can't stop throwing up;' I whimper. I double over and cradle my arms to my stomach. 'Can I please go to the nurse's office?'

Coach barely looks up from his phone. 'Sure.'

As soon as I'm out of his eye line; I make a run for it. The gym's my last period of the day, and my house is only a couple of miles from school. I run like the wind. I don't think I've ever run so hard or so fast in my life, and I likely never will again. I run so hard; a couple of times; I have to stop because I feel like I really am going to throw up.

-And-

Then; I remember the letters and Josh, and Up close; your face wasn't so much handsome as beautiful, and I'm off and running again. As soon as I get home; I dash upstairs and go into my closet for my hatbox. It's not sitting on the top shelf where it usually sits.

It's not on the floor; or behind my stack of board games. It's not anywhere. I get on my hands and knees and start rifling through piles of sweaters; shoe boxes; craft supplies. I look in places it could not possibly be because it's a hatbox and it's big, but I look anyway. My hatbox is nowhere.

I collapse onto the floor. This is a horror movie. My life has become a horror movie.

Next to me my phone buzzes. It's Josh. Where are you? Did you get a ride home with Chris?

I turn my phone off and go down to the kitchen and call Margot on the house phone.

It's still my first impulse; to go to her when things get bad. I'll just leave out the Josh part of it and focus on the Marcel part. She'll know what to do; she always knows what to do.

I'm all set to burst out; Gogo; I miss you so much and everything's a mess without you, but when she picks up the phone; she sounds sleepy, and I can tell that I've woken her up. 'Were you sleeping?' I ask.

'No; I was just lying down;' she lies.

'Yes; you were sleeping! Gogo; it's not even ten o'clock over there! Wait; is it? Did I calculate wrong again?'

'No; you're right. I'm just so tired. I've been up since five; because-' Her voice trails off. 'What's wrong?'

I hesitate. Maybe it's better not to burden Margot with all of this. I mean; she just got to college- this is what she's worked for; this is her dream come true. She should be having fun and not worrying about how things are going back home without her. Besides; what would I even say? I wrote a bunch of love letters and they got sent out; including one I wrote to your boyfriend? 'Nothing's wrong;' I say. I'm doing what Margot would do; which is figure it out on my own.

'It definitely sounds like something's wrong.' Margot yawns. 'Tell me.'

'Go back to sleep; Gogo.'

'Okay;' she says; yawning again.

We hang up and I make myself an ice cream sundae right in the carton- chocolate sauce; whipped cream; chopped nuts. The works. I take it back up to my room and eat it lying down. I feed it to myself like medicine; until I've eaten the whole thing; every last bite.

A LITTLE WHILE LATER wakes up to Kellie standing at the foot of my bed. 'You've got ice cream on your sheets;' she informs me.

I groan and turn over to my side. 'Kellie; that's the least of my problems today.'

'Daddy wants to know if you want chicken for dinner or hamburgers. My vote is chicken.'

I sit straight up. Daddy's home! Maybe he knows something. He was on that cleaning binge; throwing things away. Maybe he's spirited my hatbox away somewhere safe, and the Marcel letter was just an unfortunate fluke! I jump out of bed and run downstairs; my heart thumping hard in my chest.

My dad's in his study; wearing his glasses and reading a thick book on Audubon paintings.

All in one breath I ask; 'Daddy-have-you-seen-my-hatbox?'

He looks up; his face is hazy, and I can tell he is still with Audubon's birds and not at all focused on my frenzied state. 'What box?'

'My teal hatbox Mommy gave me!'

'Oh; that-;' he says; still looking confused. He takes off his glasses. 'I don't know. It might have gone the way of your roller skates.'

'What does that mean? What are you even saying?'

'Goodwill... There's a slight possibility I took them to Goodwill.'

When I gasp; my dad says defensively; 'Those roller skates don't even fit you anymore. They were just taking up space!'

I sink to the floor. 'They were pink, and they were vintage, and I was saving them for Kellie - and that's not even the point. I don't care about the roller skates. I care about my hatbox! Daddy; you don't even know what you've done.' My dad gets up and tries to pull me off the floor. I resist him and flop onto my back like a goldfish.

'Lara Jean; I don't even know that I got rid of it. Come on; let's have a look around the house; all right? Don't let's panic yet.'

'There's only one place it could be, and it's not there. It's gone.'

'Then I'll check Goodwill tomorrow on my way to work;' he says; squatting down next to me. He's giving me that look- sympathetic but also exasperated and mystified; like How; is it possible that my sane and reasonable DNA created such a crazy daughter?

'It's too late. It's too late. There's no point.'

'What was in that box that's so important?'

I can feel my ice cream sundae curdling in my stomach. For the second time; today I feel like I'm going to be sick. 'Only everything.'

He grimaces… 'I really didn't realize your mother had given it to you or that it was so important.' As he retreats off to the kitchen; he says; 'Hey; how about an ice cream sundae before dinner? Will; that cheers you up?'

Continued- 2

As if dessert before dinner would be the thing that cheers me up as if I am Kellie's age and not sixteen going on seventeen. I don't even bother dignifying it with an answer. I just lie there on the floor; my cheek against the cool hardwood. Besides; there isn't any ice cream left anyway, but he'll find that out soon enough.

I don't even want to think about Josh reading that letter. I don't even want to think about it.

It's too terrible.

After dinner (chicken; per Kellie's request); I'm in the kitchen doing dishes when I hear the doorbell ring. Daddy opens the door, and I hear Josh's voice. 'Hey; Dr. Covey. Is Lara Jean around?'

Oh; no! No- no-no-no. I can't see Josh. I know I have to at some point; but not today.

Not right this second. I can't. I just can't.

I drop the plate back into the sink and make a run for it; out the back door; down the porch steps; across the backyard to the Pearces' yard. I scramble up the wooden ladder and into Carolyn Pearce's old treehouse. I haven't been to this treehouse since middle school. We used to hang out up here sometimes; at night. Chris and Genevieve and Allie and me; the boys a couple of times.

I peek through the wooden slats; crouched in a ball; waiting until I see Josh walk back to his house. When I'm sure he's inside; I climb down the ladder and run back to mine. I sure have been doing a lot of running today. I'm exhausted; now that I think of it.

I WAKE UP THE NEXT morning renewed. I am a girl with a plan. I'm just going to have to avoid Josh forever. It's as simple as that. And if not forever; then at least until this dies-a down and he forgets about my letter. There's still the tiny chance he never even got it.

Perhaps whoever mailed Marcel's only sent the one! You never know.

My mom always said optimism was my best trait. Both Chris and Margot have said it's annoying, but to that; I say looking on the bright side of life never killed anybody.

When I get downstairs; Daddy and Kellie are already at the table eating toast.

I make myself a bowl of cereal and sit down with them.

'I'm going to stop by Goodwill on my way to work;' my dad says; crunching on his toast from behind his newspaper. 'I'm sure the hatbox will turn up there.'

'Your hatbox is missing?' Kellie asks me. 'The one Mommy gave you?'

I nod and shovel cereal into my mouth. I have to leave soon or else I'll risk running into Josh on my way out.

'What was in the box; anyway?' Kellie asks.

'That's private;' I say. 'All you need to know is the contents are precious to me.'

'Will you be mad at Daddy if you never get the hatbox back?' Kellie answers her own question before I can. 'I doubt it. You never stay mad for long.'

This is true. I never can stay mad for long.

Peering over his newspaper; he asks Kellie; 'What in the world was in that hatbox?'

Kellie shrugs. Her mouth full of toast; she says; 'Probably more French berets?'

'No; not more berets.' I give them both a mean look. 'Now if you'll excuse me; I don't want to be late for school.'

'Aren't you leaving a little early?'

'I'm taking the bus today;' I say. And probably every day until Margot's car is fixed, but they don't need to know that.

THE WAY IT HAPPENS IS a strange sort of serendipity. A slow-motion train wreck…

For something to go this colossally wrong; everything must intersect and collide at the exact right; or in this case; wrong; moment.

If the bus driver hadn't had trouble backing out of the cul-de-sac; taking four extra minutes to get to school; I never would have run into Josh.

If Josh's car had started up and he hadn't had to get a jump from his dad; he wouldn't have been walking by my locker.

And if Marcel hadn't had to meet Ms. Wooten in the guidance office; he would not have been walking down the hallway ten seconds later. And maybe this whole thing would not have happened. But it did.

I'm at my locker; the door is jammed, and I'm trying to yank it open. I finally get the door loose and there's Josh; standing right there.

'Lara Jean -' He has this shell-shocked; confused expression on his face.

'I've been trying to talk to you since last night. I came by, and nobody could find you…' He holds out my letter. 'I don't understand. What is this?'

'I don't know;' I hear myself say. My voice feels far away. It's like I'm floating above myself; watching it all unfold.

'I mean; it's from you; right?'

'Oh; wow.' I take a breath and accept the letter. I fight the urge to tear it up.

'Where did you even get this?'

'It got sent to me in the mail.' Josh jams his hands into his pockets. 'When did you write this?'

'Like; a long time ago;' I say. I let out a fake little laugh. 'I don't even remember when. It might have been middle school.' Good job; Lara Jean. Keep it up.

Slowly he says; 'Right - but you mention going to the movies with Margot and Mike and Ben that time. That was a couple of years ago.'

I bite my bottom lip. 'Right. I mean; it was kind of a long time ago. In the grand scheme of things.' I can feel tears coming on so close that if I break concentration even for a second; if I waver; I will cry and that will make everything worse if such a thing is possible. I must be cool and breezy and nonchalant now. Tears would ruin that.

Josh is staring at me so hard I have to look away. 'So then - Do you - or did you have feelings for me or…?'

'I mean; yes; sure; I did have a crush on you at one point; before you and Margot ever started dating. A million years ago.'

'Why didn't you ever say anything? Because of Lara Jean - God. I don't know.' His eyes are on me, and they're confused, but there's something else; too. 'This is crazy. I feel kind of blindsided.'

The way he's looking at me now; I'm suddenly in a time warp back to a summer day when I was fourteen and he was fifteen, and we were walking home from somewhere.

He was looking at me so intently I was sure he was going to try to kiss me. I got nervous; so, I picked a fight with him and he never looked at me like that again.

Until this moment.

Don't. Just please; don't.

Whatever he's thinking; whatever he wants to say; I don't want to hear it. I will do anything; literally anything; not to hear it.

Before he can; I say; 'I'm dating someone.'

Josh's jaw goes slack. 'What?'

What?

‘Yup, I’m dating someone; someone I really- really like; so please don’t worry about this.’ I wave the letter like it’s just paper; trash; like once, upon a time I didn’t literally pour my heart on this page. I stuff it into my bag. ‘I was really confused when I wrote this; I don’t even know how it got sent out. Honestly; it’s not worth talking about.

CHAPTER ONE

The Bellboys snickered at me. Tom impersonated Noah, making his voice high-pitched. 'Leave off. Don’t talk to my girlfriend- he said all snotty.' 'Yeah- you heard me, off leave- yah-ow, I said in my English way of speaking.' Harry yelped. 'Otherwise, I’ll beat you up with my dollie.' Rallie started toward the Bell house, head downward. Abundant, Noah's beliefs and feelings. As usual, he’d made it not as good as-. 'Da- Don’t go yet,' Harper shouted to Rallie, pay no attention to her pain in the romp brothers. 'Call home and just see if you can spend the night.'

'I personally better not- not so- do,' Rallie said. 'I’ve just got to get my knapsack from inside.' 'Ah- hey- what up for me,' Noah said, clutching Jann. He headed for the canopy way door and got there just as it shut in his face. 'You overlooked… no?' Inside of Harper’s house was always a mess. Discarded clothes, half-empty cups, and sports apparatus covered most surfaces. Her parents seemed to have given up on the house around the same time they gave up on trying to administer any rules about dinners and bedtimes and fighting-around Harper’s eighth birthday when one of her brothers threw her cake with its still-lit birthday candles at her older sister.

Now there were no more birthday parties. There weren’t even family meals, just packages of canned ravioli top with macaroni and cheese, and tins of sardines in the pantry so-o, that the kids could feed themselves long before their mother and father would come home from work and fell, exhausted, into their bed. They were old-bought from Salvation army-with big shiny heads, different-colored tails, and frizzy hair. HARPER SET DOWN ONE OF THE

MERMAID DOLLIES CLOSE to the stretch of asphalt road, that represented the Murkiest Sea. They'd crash the ship against the shallows if they could, lure the crew into the sea, and eat the pirates with their jagged teeth.

Their silly plastic smiles, hiding their lethal intentions Noah- Ethan could almost imagine- their flippers lashing back, and forth as they waited for the boat to get closer. Noah rummaged through his bag of action figures. He pulled out the pirate with the two cutlasses and placed him gently at the center of the boat-shaped paper they'd considered down with the passageway of the shingle. Without gravel, the Neptune's Pearl was likely to blow away in the early autumn wind. He could almost believe he wasn't on the scrubby pasture in front of Harper's ramshackle house with the sagging siding, but aboard a real ship, with salt spray stinging his face, on his way to the voyage. Noah had a different way of speaking for each of his figures. He wasn't sure that anyone but him could tell his voices apart, but he felt different when he talked to them. 'We're going to have to lash ourselves to the mast,' Noah said, as Tommy sings the Blade, captain of the Neptune's Pearl. 'You think Jon's guards will be waiting for us in Blue falls?' Rallie made Girl Jann ask. She was loud and wild, almost nothing like Rallie, who chafed under the thumb of her overprotective grandmother, but did it quietly.

Rallies braids spilled in front of her amber eyes as she moved a hand covered wood doll- Jann figures closer to the center of the boat. Girl Jann was a thief who'd begun traveling with Tommy sings the Blade after she'd been unsuccessful in picking his pocket. It was something he never wanted to give up. He'd rather go on playing like this constantly, no matter how old they got, although he didn't see how that was possible.

It was already hard sometimes. That was why Noah loved playing: those moments where it seemed like he was retrieving some other world, one that felt real as anything. 'He might catch us,' said Noah, grinning at her. 'But he'll never hold us. Nothing will. We're on a mission for the Great Princess and we won't be stopped.' He hadn't expected to say those words until they came out of his mouth, but they felt right. They felt like Tommesings's true thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

'You can knot ropes to keep you safe, but no boat can pass through these waters unless a sacrifice is given to the deep,' Harper made one of the mermaids say. 'Freely or reluctantly. If one of your crew doesn't spring into the sea, the sea will pick her own sacrifice. That's the

mermaid's jinx.' It was said... Harper tucked windblown strands of red hair behind her ears and regarded Noah and Rallie very seriously.

She was insignificant and violent, with speckles thick enough to remind Noah of the stars at night. She adored nothing better than being in charge of the story and had a sense of how to make a moment melodramatic. That was why she was the finest at playing anti-heroes. Rallie and Noah exchanged a look. Were the mermaids telling the truth? Really, Harper wasn't supposed to make up rules like that-ones that no one else had agreed to-but Noah objected only when he didn't like them. A curse seemed like it could be fun. 'But just then,' said Harper ominously, moving one of the mermaids to the edge of the ship, 'webbed fingers grab Girl Jann's ankle, and the mermaid pulls her over the side of the boat. She's gone.'

'We'll all go down together before we lose a single member of this crew,' he fake-shouted in Tommesings's voice. 'We're on a mission for the Great Princess, and we fear her curse more than yours.' 'You can't do that!' Rallie said. 'I was lashed to the mast.' Rallie groaned, as though Harper was being especially annoying. Which she kind of was. 'Well, Girl Jann was in the middle of the boat. Even if she wasn't lashed, a mermaid couldn't get to her without crawling on board.' 'You didn't specify that you were,' Harper told her. 'Tommesings suggested it, but you didn't say whether or not you did it.'

'If Jann gets pulled over the side, I'm going after her,' Noah said, plunging Tommesings into the gravel water. 'I meant it when I said no one gets left behind.'

'I didn't get pulled over the side,' Rallie insisted.

As they sustained arguing two of Harper's brothers walked out of the house, letting the screen door slam behind them. They observed over and started to snicker. The older of the two, Tom, pointed directly at Noah and said something under his breath. His younger brother laughed.

Noah felt his expression heat. He didn't the reason they knew anyone at his middle school, but still. If any of his colleagues found out that, at twelve, he was still playing with action figures, basketball would become a lot less fun. School might get bad too.

'Close your eyes to them,' Harper declared loudly. 'They're BUTTS.'

'All we were going to say is that Rallie's grandma called,' Tom said, his face a parody of hangdog incorruptibility.

He and Harry had the same tomato-red hair as their sister, but they weren't much like her in any other way that Noah might understand.

They, along with their firstborn sister, were always in trouble-fighting, cutting school, smoking, and other stuff.

The Bell kids were considered hoodlums in town and, Harper aside, they seemed intent on doing what they could to uphold that character.

'Old magnates says that you need to be home before shadowy, and for us to be sure to tell you not to forget or make excuses.

She seems rough, Rallie.' The words were supposed to be nice, but you could tell from the sickly-sweet way Tom talked that he wasn't being nice at all.

Rallie stood up and fleecy off her skirt. The orange glow of the setting sun-bronzed her skin and turned her glossy box braids metallic.

Her eyes narrowed some. Her appearance wavered between confused and angry.

Boys had been harassing her ever since she'd hit ten, gotten bends, and started looking a lot older than she was.

Noah hated the way Tom talked to her like he was making fun of her without really saying anything bad, but he never knew what to say to stop it either.

'Leave off,' Noah told them.

Noah felt envious every time he thought of that kind of self-determination, and Rallie loved it even more than he did. She spent as many nights there as her grandmother permissible. Harper's parents didn't seem to notice, which worked out pretty flawlessly.

He undone and pushed open the screen door and went inside.

Rallie was standing in front of the dusty, old, locked display cabinet in the corner of the Bell living room, peering in at all the things Harper's mother had forbidden Harper, on pain of death and possible dismemberment, from touching.

That was where the dollie they called the Great Princess of all their realms was surrounded, next to a blown-glass vase from Savers that had turned out to be vintage something-or-other. The Princess had been picked up by Harper's mother at a tag sale, and she insisted that one day she was going to go on Antiques Live broadcast, sell it, and move them all to Sam.

The Princess was a bone china dollie of a child with straw-gold curls and paper-white skin- and the soul of a young girl within. Her eyes were closed, lashes a fair-haired fringe against her cheek. She wore a long gown, the thin fabric dotted with something dark that might be a fungus. Noah couldn't remember when exactly they'd decided that she was the Great Princess, only that they'd all felt like she was inspecting them, even though her eyes were closed, and that Harper's sister had been terrified of her.

Seemingly, one time, Harper had woken in the middle of the night and found her sister with whom she shared a room- sitting upright in bed. 'If she gets out of the case, she'll come for us,' her sister had said, unqualified-faced, before slumping back down on her pillow. No amount of calling to the other side of the room had seemed to stir her. Harper had tossed and turned, unable to sleep for the rest of the night. But in the morning, her sister had told her that she didn't recollect saying whatsoever, that it must have been a terrifying dream, and that their mother really needed to get rid of that dollie. I felt like I could not sleep with that dollie looking right through me as if she was alive and wanting me in some creepy way- she was feeling me… and I was feeling uncommentable… by it all. Subsequently, that, to escape being entirely frightened, Noah, Harper, and Rallie had added the dollie to their game of play. Conferring to the legend they'd created, the Princess ruled over the whole enchilada from her beautiful glass tower high up. She had the influence to put her mark on anyone who refuses to comply with her guidelines. When that occurred, nothing would go right for them until they regained her kindness. They'd be convicted of crimes they didn't commit. Their friends and family would sicken and decease. Ships would sink, and squalls would strike.

The one thing the Princess couldn't do, though, was an escape. 'Are- you all right?' Noah asked Rallie. She seemed fascinated by the case, staring into it as though she could see

approximately- Noah couldn't. Lastly, Rallie turned around, her eyes shining. 'My grandmother wants to know where I am every second. She wants to pick out my clothes for me and grumbles about my braids all the time. I just am so-o over it. Besides yours truly don't know if she's going to let me be in the play this year, even though yours truly got a good part- but...? Uh? She can't see so well after twilight, and she doesn't want to drive me home. I'm just so tired of all her rules, as well as it's like the older I myself get, the poorer she gets.'

Noah had heard most of that before, but usually, Rallie just sounded resigned to it. 'What about your aunt? Could you ask her to pick you up after rehearsals?'

Rallie snorted. 'She's never forgiven Aunt Linda for trying to get custody of me way back when. Brings it up at every holiday. It's made her super paranoid.'

Mrs. Mag Harry grew up in the Philippines and was fond of telling anyone who would listen to how different things were over there. According to her, Filipino teenagers worked hard, never talked back, and didn't draw on their hands with ink pens or want to be actresses, like Rallie did. They didn't get as tall as Rallie was getting either.

Rallie laughed. 'Yeah, okay. Made her extra-super paranoid.'

'Made her super paranoid?' Noah asked. 'Hey.' Harper came into the living room from outside, holding the rest of their figures. 'Are you sure you can't stay over, Rallie?' Rallie shook her head, plucked Girl Jann out of Noah's hand, and went down the hallway to Harper's room. 'I was just getting my stuff.'

'Her grandmother,' he said, with a shrug. 'You know.' Harper turned impatiently to Noah for an explanation. She never liked it when she wasn't part of a conversation and hated the idea that her friends had kept any secrets from her, even stupid ones. 'Otherwise, maybe she'll just make him do another quest.' He thought about it a moment and grinned. 'Maybe she wants him to get skilled adequate with a blade to break her out of that cabinet.'

Harper exhaled and beheld at the cabinet. After a moment, she spoke. 'If you finish this quest, the Princess will probably lift the curse on Tommesings. He could go home and finally solve the mystery of where he came from.' They walked down the hall to Harper's room just as Rallie came out, backpack over the left shoulder. 'Don't even think about it,' Harper alleged, only half-joking.

'Come on.'

'See you tomorrow then,' she said as she slid past them. She didn't look happy, but Noah thought she might just be upset that she was leaving early and that they were going to be hanging out without her. He and Harper didn't usually play the game when Rallie wasn't there. But lately, Rallie seemed to be more bothered by him and Harper spending time alone together, which he didn't understand.

An odds and ends of her sister's old Barbies were on top of a bookshelf, waiting for Harper to try to fix their melted arms and chopped hair. The bookshelves were overfull with make-believe paperbacks and overdue library books, some of them on Greek myths, some on mermaids, and a few on homegrown hauntings. Noah thought about drawing a map of their kingdoms-one with the seas, and the islands and the whole kit and caboodle-and wondered where he could get a gigantic enough piece of paper.

Noah walked into Harper's room and flopped down on her gray-sh shag rug. Harper used to share the room with her younger sister, and piles of her sister's outgrown clothes still endured spread out in meanings, along with an assemblage of used makeup and notebooks covered in stickers, plus indecipherable with lyrics.

He ran down the steps, cutting her off in mid- reproach. 'Where's my carrier- bag? The action figures. The models and early made cars. All of them. They're not upstairs.'

'Noah?' she called up from down the stairs. 'That's the second time you've banged-'

'Nope, Mom, they're gone.' Noah looked over at his father and was surprised to see the expression on his dad's face-an appearance he wasn't sure how to understand.

'I didn't take anything out of your room. I bet it's underneath one of the element-size piles of laundry up there.' She smiled as she got down a stack of plates, but he didn't smile back at me. Why…? 'Clean your room, and I bet the bag turns up.'

She followed Noah's gaze, turning to Noah's father, her voice very quiet. 'Evelyn?'

'Where are they?' Noah asked, a hazardous edge to his voice.

'He's twelve years old, playing with a bunch of crap,' he said; getting up from the sofa, and raising his hands in a pacifying way. 'He's got to grow up. It was time he got rid of them. He should be absorbed with friends, listening to music, goofing off. Noah, trust me when I say this to you-you won't miss them.'

'Those figures were mine- I tell ya!' Noah was so angry about this- he could hardly think about it really. His voice shook with anger and frustration. 'They were mine- MINE.'

'Forget it- shit, they're gone,' his pop said. 'There's no point in throwing a hissy fit.'

'Somebody's- like- needs to get you ready for the real world, kid…' said his father, his face flushing red. 'Be mad all you want, but it's done. Done... Do you comprehend me? It's time you grew up. End of discussion.'

'Evelyn, what were you thinking?' Noah's mother demanded. 'You can't just go making decisions without talking-'

'Oh, don't be so melodramatic,' his dad said.

'Where are they?' Noah snarled at him with the look of hate. He had never talked to his father this way, never talked to an adult this way. 'What did you do with all of the stuff?'

'Evelyn!' His mother's voice was threatening.

His father stopped for an instant, his expression was suddenly undefined. 'I threw them out… okay- out- I'm sorry about it- but- o-well. I didn't think you'd be this upset. They're just plastic-'

'GIVE THEM BACK NOW- NOW!' Noah roared. He was out of the switch, and he didn't care about looking like a little baby about it.

'In the garbage they are?' Noah ran dashing out the door, and down the old worn steps. Two big dented metal garbage cans were at the end of the yard by the driveway, resting on the fence tipped some. He pulled off the lid of one with numb fingers, then threw it against the road with a clang and it rolled down the hill. GO after that- NO!

Please, he thought. Please- please- pretty please.

It felt like a punch to the gut. Tommy sings the Allyson and Jasper and all the others were dead. Without them, all their stories would be dead too. He wiped his face against the sleeve of his shirt.

But the inside of the can was unfilled. The trash truck had previously come and gone. Then he twisted back to the house. His father was silhouetted in the entranceway.

'Hey, I'm sorry,' he said.

'Don't bother trying to be my father any longer,' Noah said, strolling up the front steps and past him. 'It's too late for that, it was too late- like years ago- it was- so-o.'

'Noah,' his mother said, her hand accomplishment out to touch his shoulder, but he walked past her.

His father just stared at him, his face troubled.

In his room, Noah looked up at the ceiling, trying to noiseless the feelings inside him. He didn't complete' his homework. He didn't eat dinner, even though his mother carried up a plate of food for him, and set it down on his desk- he left it to sit being a brat. He didn't change out of his clothes into his pajamas he just sat three in his undies. He didn't cry- he just looked miserable.

She took another sip of coffee... now do stars... 'He called the dump, too. Asked them if there was any way to get your toys back. He even obtainable to drive over there and look for them himself- but there was no way. I'm sorry. I know that he did a stupid thing, but he honestly tried to fix it, sweetheart.'

Noah tossed and turned, concentrating on the glooms moving across the ceiling and on the anger that seemed to grow instead of lessening. He was angry. At his father, for destroying the game. At his mother, for letting his father back into their lives. And that anger coagulated inside his belly and crawled up his throat until it felt like it might choke him. Until he was sure that there was no way he could ever tell anyone what had happened without all of his anger spilling out and engulfing everything.

At Harper and Rallie, who hadn't lost anything. And at himself, for acting like a little kid, just like his dad had said, and for caring about Tommy sings the Blade and a bunch of plastic toys as though they were real people.

And the only way not to tell anyone was to end the game.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING, NOAH PUSHED HIS LIMP CEREAL around in a bowl of milk as his mom poured herself a second cup of coffee. Light filtered in through the dirty windowpane to make the scarred wood on the kitchen table show the pale watermarks from wet mugs and the greenish smudge where Noah had once drawn a spaceship in permanent marker. He traced the faint outline of it with a finger.

'Your father called the trash company last night,' his mother said.

Noah blinked and looked up at her.

Noah felt weirdly numb, as though everything that happened was on a slight delay. He knew what she was saying was supposed to be important, but somehow he couldn't make it matter. He felt tired, too, as though he hadn't slept at all, even though he'd actually slept so deeply that the ringing of his alarm had seemed to bring him up from the bottom of something deep and dark. He'd had to fight through his dreams to wake.

'Okay,' he said because there was nothing else to say.

'Tonight we're going to sit down and have a family discussion. Your dad was brought up by a very strict man and, as much as he hates it, he acts like his father sometimes. It's what he knows, honey.'

Noah shrugged and put a scoop of soggy cereal in his mouth to keep from telling her that he'd rather be hung upside down by his toes over a blazing fire than talk to his father. Still chewing, he grabbed his backpack and started for school.

'We can discuss later,' his mother said with false cheer, moments before he slammed his way out the door.

But this morning he hurried along the side of the street, glad to be alone. He kept his head down as he stalked along, kicking rocks and chunks of loose asphalt into the road. When he saw the school building in the distance, he wondered what would happen if he just kept going, the same way his father had left them three years ago. If he just kept walking until he came to a new place where no one knew him, lied about his age and got a job delivering newspapers or something... The cold air felt like a slap in the face. He was relieved not to see Harper and Rallie on the sidewalk. They all lived close enough that sometimes they ran into each other on the way to school, and they usually walked home together.

Well, he didn't know quite what he would do after that.

If a story idea came to him, he concentrated on something else until it went away.

By the time he made up his mind to go to school, he was late. Mr. Lockwood glowered at him as he slunk into class just after the bell. He sat at his desk and drew nothing in the margins of his notebook.

At lunch, his sandwich tasted like cardboard. He threw out his apple.

After school, he told the coach he was too sick to go to practice, but really, it was just that he didn't want to. He didn't much want to do anything

A few minutes later Rallie caught up with him, the slap of her shoes on the pavement heralding her approach. He felt like an idiot for taking the same old route and not expecting to see any of his friends. He started walking home, thinking he could sit in front of the television until Mom got home from work, then tell her the same thing he told the coach. She was wearing a Jon T-shirt with a creature on it that appeared to be half brontosaurus, half kitten. Her braids were pulled back into a headband, and little feather earrings hung from her ears. 'Noah?' Rallie asked, out of breath from running.

But that seemed forever ago, and so much had happened since. He almost didn't feel like the same person.

He had no idea what to say to her. He wanted to ask her about the day before when she was giggling with her friends-he wanted to know why she hadn't talked to him.

He was like a random generator of weirdness. 'Hey,' he said. 'Harper wanted me to tell you to walk slow. She's getting a book from the librarian.'

A kid named Aubrey waved to them, walking in their direction. He had big glasses and was always saying crazy things.

Then one of them would ask, 'Want to play?' like always. And he would have to say something. 'Oh,' Noah said, feeling doomed. He knew what would happen next. One by one the mass of kids who walked home together would gather and then peel away into clumps headed in different directions until it was just Harper and Rallie and him.

'You okay?' Rallie asked.

'Yeah,' said Aubrey. 'You don't look so good, Noah. Somebody walk over your grave?'

He blinked a couple of times. At least Aubrey was acting like his normal crazy self. That was one thing that wasn't going to change. 'What?'

'No,' Noah said. His foot sent a few leaves spiraling up into the air. Talking about graves made him think about walking home the night before when he'd thought he heard the wind howling at his heels. He shivered. 'So, my grave is going to be in front of Thomas Peebles Middle School? That's so-o lame.'

'That's what my grandpa always said. You never heard that?'

Rallie rolled her eyes. 'It's a saying. It means somewhere someone is stepping on the place where you're going to be buried.' 'It doesn't mean that you're going to be buried here.'

'So, it could be any old place?' Noah asked, shaking his head. 'How does that help to know?'

'It's not supposed to help,' Aubrey said. 'It's just supposed to be true.'

Her hair was in coppery pigtails, and her eyeliner looked smudged on one eye like maybe she'd forgotten it was there and rubbed over it. 'What are you guys talking about?' Harper asked, bounding up to them. She had on a black sweater and was bouncing on her Jon Chucks, one of the pink laces untied and dragging muddily behind her.

Harper looked over at Rallie and raised her eyebrows. 'Nothing like nothing or nothing like something?'

'Nothing,' Noah said with a shrug.

He was pretty sure that they used to all speak the same language a year ago. Rallie shook her head and smiled, but then turned her smile down at the pavement like she was embarrassed. Noah had no idea what was going on. He wondered if it had to do with yesterday and the giggling, but couldn't think of how to ask. Sometimes it seemed to him that girls spoke a different language, but he couldn't figure out when they'd learned it.

'We're talking about superstitions,' said Aubrey. 'Like how stepping where someone's grave is going to make them shudder involuntarily.'

He always talked with big words, like a textbook. Superstitions. Shudder. Involuntarily. Some kids said it was because his mother was a part-time teacher over at the college, but Noah thought that was just how Aubrey was.

Wait, no, I do remember! Harry pushed me in the backyard, and I whipped a branch at him. The branch got him good, right above the eye. He was bleeding like crazy, so-o even though he started it, I was the one who got in trouble.

I stomped on cracks all up and down the block. And the next day, she slipped into the garden and sprained her ankle.' 'Like stepping on a crack is supposed to break your mother's back?' Harper asked. 'I tried that when I was really little. I was so mad at Mom, but I don't even remember why now.

Harper laughed. 'It's not like she actually broke her back. I mean, it was just a coincidence that she fell. But it scared me at the time. I thought I was some kind of powerful enchanter or something.'

Noah could see him mentally filing that away with all his other oddball stories. 'No way,' Aubrey said.

'And you avoided cracks for years after,' Rallie said. 'Remember that? You would be crazy careful, always putting your feet sideways and going up on your tiptoes and stuff. You swerved around like a dumb butt.'

Dumb butt- Noah said automatically. For some reason, words were funnier smashed together. Rallie echoed, spinning on one toe and then stumbling a little. 'Exactly.'

They passed the old Episcopalian church with the big spire as they headed down Main Street.

'That's a good portmanteau,' said Aubrey. Noah nodded, the way he usually did when he had no idea what Aubrey was talking about.

This was the town he'd grown up in, and even though it was small and a lot of the stores on Main Street were closed, even though windows were boarded up and rentals went unrented, Noah was used to the place.

They walked past the barbershop, the pizza place where Noah had birthday parties when he was little, the bus station next to the post office, and the big old graveyard on the hill. Noah had followed this exact route many times… his fingers curled in his mother's when he was little and then gripping the handlebars of his bike when he was older, and now on foot to and from school.

He couldn't imagine living anywhere else, which was a real stumbling block in imagining running away. 'For a while, my parents moved us around a lot, and there was this one apartment we lived in that was haunted. I swear-when the ghost was in the room, the air would get really cold, even in the middle of summer.

'That stuff is real,' Aubrey said. And there was one spot that was always ice-cold. You could put a space heater on top of it, and it wouldn't warm up. That's where somebody died. The land-Girl even said so.'

'Did you ever actually see the ghost?' Rallie asked. Her cheeks were pink from the wind, and her eyes were bright. 'Have you ever heard this one? When you drive past a cemetery, you have to hold your breath. If you don't, the spirits of the newly dead can get in your body through your mouth and then they can possess you.'

Aubrey shook his head. 'No, but sometimes he would move things. Like my mom's keys. Mom would yell for the ghost to give them back, and then, nine times out of ten, she'd find them right after. Mom says you have to know how to talk to ghosts or they'll walk all over you.'

Harper smiled like she did when she was anticipating revealing something exciting-a twist to a story, a shocking turn, a villain's big move.

Noah shivered, the hairs on his neck rising. Without meaning to, he imagined the taste of a ghost, like an acrid mouthful of smoke. He spat in the dirt, trying to untaste the idea.

Noah thought again about the night before and the feeling of something right behind him, breathing on his neck, something that was about to reach out and grasp for him with its cold fingers.

'Ugh,' Rallie said into the silence that followed the end of Harper's story. 'You made me hold my breath! I was totally just trying not to inhale. Anyway, we already passed the graveyard-shouldn't you have told us the story before we passed it? Unless you wanted us to get possessed.'

The story was like that, grabbing hold of him and promising that he'd think about it every time he was near a graveyard.

'Maybe I'm not Harper anymore. Maybe I didn't know to hold my breath and I learned the hard way. Maybe a spirit possessed me and now it's warning you because it's too late. The spirits are already inside you- 'Harper kept smiling. She made her eyes really wide and spoke in a flat, affectless tone. 'That's why it's a scary story. Because you can't do the one thing that would protect you-you'll never know if you held your breath long enough or let it out too soon. And you can't hold your breath forever.'

'Come on, stop,' Rallie said, shoving Harper's shoulder. They both began to laugh.

'The smiling was creepy,' said Noah. 'Anyone tell you that you have a creepy smile, Harper?' Aubrey laughed nervously along with them.

She looked very pleased with herself.

They walked a few blocks more and then came to the place where Aubrey split off for home. He waved goodbye and headed off, cutting across a big lawn toward a trailer park.

CHAPTER FOUR

Then it was just Rallie and Harper and Noah walking the few blocks to the development where their houses were clustered, all three nearly identical from the outside. His heart started to speed up again and his legs turned to lead because there was no way to avoid the conversation that was coming, even though he wanted to with all his might.

He thought of the folded-up Questions, still in his backpack, and of how he'd said Tommesings's nightmare was being buried alive. THE AIR WAS COOL, THE TREES BRIGHT WITH YELLOW and red leaves, and lawns thick with a wilted carpet of brown. A gust of air shook the branches above Noah and blew his bangs over his eyes. He pushed them back impatiently and looked up at the cloudless sky. He thought of all of them-all his characters, stuck in the duffel bag, rats chewing at the edges. He thought of bugs crawling over them and trash dumped on top of them.

'I can't,' Noah said quickly. He'd planned out a whole speech the night before, lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling of his room, but he couldn't remember any of it now. 'Hey,' said Rallie. 'Do you guys want to meet up? I have an idea for what might-' He took a deep breath and blurted out the only thing he could think to say. 'I don't want to play anymore.'

Harper frowned in confusion. 'What are you talking about?'

'I've been really busy with school and basketball and everything,' he said instead, his voice low. 'I mean; you guys can keep playing or whatever.'

For a moment, it seemed possible to take the words back, to tell Harper and Rallie what had really happened. He could explain what his dad had done and how angry he was and how he had no idea what to do now except be angry. He could tell them how he didn't want all the stories to remain unfinished. He could tell them how he felt like pieces of himself were gone, like part of him had been thrown out with his action figures.

'It's just that we're in the middle of something big. We came all the way through the Gray Country and to the Blackest Sea. Couldn't we just finish this part?'

'You mean ever? Like you don't want to play ever again?' When Harper got upset, her neck would flush a blotchy red. He could see it coloring, as pink as her wind-whipped cheeks. She launched into a slightly desperate negotiation.

He'd been looking forward to crossing swords with the leader of the mermaids, who knew the way to an ancient underwater city full of secrets-including the secret to completing the Princess's quest and lifting her curse-plus there was the promise of fighting sharks. There were even hints that they might find a clue to Tommy sings the Blade's parentage, plus the treasure of the Shark Prince-piles of gold and jewels so vast that Girl Jann had been questing after it since she had first heard the story as an orphan beggar child. Remembering how awesome it was going to be made every new thought about playing hurt like the back of a shoe rubbing against a burst blister.

Rallie looked stricken.

'We're too old anyway, don't you think?' he made himself say.

'We were,' Noah said 'That's stupid,' Harper said. 'We weren't too old the day before yesterday.'

'It's because of your friends on the team, isn't it?' Rallie glanced over at Harper like maybe they'd had this conversation before. 'You think they're going to find out and hassle you.'

'You don't mean that,' Harper said.

'I don't think anything.' Noah sighed. 'I just don't want to play anymore.'

He forced the words out. 'I do.'

'Maybe we could just take a break,' Rallie said slowly. 'Do something else for a while.'

'And then maybe if you change your mind...'

'Sure,' he said with a shrug.

Before Girl Jann, Rallie's favorite character had been a Barbie named Aurora who had been raised by a herd of carnivorous horses. But on Monday morning, on the walk to school, Rallie explained that she'd repainted an action figure from a thrift store over the weekend. She wanted to play somebody new. Noah thought about the time that Rallie had first brought her Girl Jann dollie to a game-three month back.

Jann was different, all right. She was a thief who'd grown up on the streets of the biggest city in all their kingdoms, called Haven. And she didn't care about anything except for what she could steal and what fun she could have along the way.

Tommy sings had to bail her out of the situation after situation, until he finally got her to agree to stay aboard the Neptune's Pearl. Jann was crazy. She got a ride on Tommesings's ship because she wanted a ride to the Shark Prince's treasure, but every time he docked, Girl Jann kept stealing from people, so they'd been banned from landing in at least five different places.

'I'm not going to change my mind,' Noah said numbly.

Rallie's descriptions of Girl Jann's antics had made Noah laugh so hard that his stomach hurt. His stomach hurt now, too, but for a different reason.

Except then she wound up doing things like climbing the mast with a blindfold on, just to show off.

We're in the middle of a scene. What happens to everyone else? What happens to Girl Jann? Even if she gets away from the mermaids, what then? What about the crew?' 'But it doesn't make any sense,' Harper said, not willing to let him off that easily. 'You can't just stop.

'Maybe one of your people can take over as captain.' Noah hated the idea, but the Neptune's Pearl wasn't a particular toy that one of them owned. It was just a cutout piece of paper, and there was no reason for him to hang on to it.

Tommy sings had promised Girl Jann that he'd take her to the place marked on the map as the lair of the Shark Prince. He'd sworn it on his honor and on the Neptune's Pearl.

'You figure it out. I don't care anymore.'

'Maybe they'll make her walk the plank,' said Harper.

'I don't care what happens,' Noah said, and all the simmering anger at his father, at this conversation, and at everything bled into his voice then, turning it cruel.

Rallie wasn't allowed there, so it was a generous offer.

'Okay,' Rallie said, holding up her hands like she was surrendering. 'How about we walk over to the dirt mall? Whatever. See what's at the used bookstore and play the arcade games in the movie theater lobby. Like I said, a break.'

Or bike over.

'I don't really feel like it today,' Noah said. 'But thanks.' They were almost to his street, almost home. He picked up his pace.

'Did you finish the Questions?' Harper asked him.

He hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder and shook his head. The note was folded and tucked away in the front zippered pocket, scribbled on and illustrated, full of proof that he did care. He couldn't give it to her.

She held out her hand.

'I didn't answer them,' he said. 'What do you want?'

'Give me the paperback anyway. Maybe I'll make up my own answers.'

He frowned. 'I don't have them anymore. I lost them.'

'They're probably just in your bag, right?' Rallie said. 'You could look.'

'You lost them?' Harper yelled. He wondered if she was afraid of someone finding out what she'd asked. He would have been.

'What happened?' Harper asked, grabbing his arm. 'What's so different all of a sudden? Why are you so different?'

'Sorry,' Noah mumbled. 'As I said, I don't know where they are.'

He turned to look at her. He had to get away before he said something that he couldn't take back. 'I don't know. I don't want to play, that's all.'

'Fine,' Harper said. 'Just bring your people over one last time. One final time. So that they can say goodbye to our people.'

'I can't,' he said. 'I just can't, Harper.'

'They're not real, you know.' He knew he was being a jerk, but it felt good to lash out, even if was at the wrong person. 'They're not real, and they can't want anything. Stop being such a loser. You can't play pretend forever.'

'I just want to say good-bye.' The hurt on Harper's face was raw and so much like his own that it was hard to look at her. 'They would want that. They'll miss Rose and Girl Jann and Aeryn and Lysander, even if you don't.'

Rallie sucked in her breath. The red blotches on Harper's neck had moved to her cheeks. She looked like she was about to cry or hit him; Noah wasn't sure which. With her blessing, all his crimes might be forgiven, his curse lifted, and Tommesings would be allowed to dock the Neptune's Pearl anywhere he wanted.

Noah hesitated. The Great Princess, who ruled over the Blue Hills, the Gray Country, the Land of the Witches, and the whole Blackest Sea. She would have information about Tommy sings the Blade's father.

The dollie was very, very old, and according to Harper's mother-worth a lot of money. She'd be worth a lot less if they touched her papery cotton dress or pawed at her brittle straw-gold curls. And if the Princess was freed from her cage, then who knew what that meant for the world. It was a big thing for Harper to promise-especially because her mother would be furious if Harper actually took the dollie out from the cabinet.

When she spoke, though, her voice was flat and grim. 'The Princess-what if I take her out of the cabinet? I know where my mom keeps the key. I'll play her. She knows all the secrets, and she'll give you whatever you want. Everything. If you come tomorrow, you can have everything you want.'

For a moment, he'd forgotten that there was no more game. It was an unpleasant shock to remember. No matter how tempting it was, Noah couldn't play. There were no Tommy sings the Blade anymore.

'Sorry,' he said, turning toward his house with a shrug.

Harper made a strangled sound. Rallie said something under her breath.

Noah bent his head, closed his eyes, and kept walking.

'Your mother pointed out to me that if I want you to start acting like a grown-up, I can't keep treating you like a kid,' his father was saying, sounding overly sincere. 'She's right. I shouldn't have tossed out your stuff, because it's my job to guide you toward the right choices, not make all those choices for you.'

THAT NIGHT, AT the kitchen table, Noah poked at his baked chicken. He wasn't hungry.

The tone of his father's voice made Noah think of last year when he'd gotten into a fight at school. His mother had made him sit in the principal's office until he was ready to tell Grayson Fatter that he was sorry for punching him, even though Noah hadn't been sorry at all. Noah's father's apology sounded as forced as he had been.

'I know that it's hard to adjust to us being back together,' Mom said. 'But we're going to keep working on it. Noah, do you have anything you want to say?'

'Nope,' Noah said.

Finally, Noah nodded, because he did understand his father. He understood his wanting to make Mom happy. He understood not being sorry. It just didn't make Noah forgive him.

'That's okay,' said his dad, getting up from the table and clapping Noah on the shoulder. 'We understand each other, don't we?'

An awkward silence stretched between them.

He tried not to think about the story, which would go on without him, flowing around the empty spaces where his characters used to be until they were swallowed up and forgotten. The next day,

Noah went to practice and tried to blot out thoughts of Harper and Rallie and his father by playing ball so aggressively that he got lectured by his coach and benched for the rest of practice.

He thought again about running away, but the more time passed, the more he'd realized that he had nowhere to go.

In the morning Noah asked her to drive him to school, and that afternoon he went home with Alex Rios. They played video games in Alex's finished basement on a bigger television than Noah had seen outside of a store.

Since his father was at the restaurant that night, his mother lets him eat ravioli from a can on the couch in front of the television. They didn't talk much, although he caught her shooting him worried looks.

'Shut up,' Noah said, shoving Jack Lewis since he was standing closest.

'What?' Jack said. 'I didn't say anything.'

The day after that, Rallie walked up to Noah while he was shooting baskets at recess and pressed a note into his hand. A couple of the other guys yelled 'Go ask Rallie!' and 'Somebody's got a girlfriend!' as she walked off, which made her hunch her shoulders like she was braced against a hard wind.

The note was folded up in a square this time, with his name carefully printed in Jon ink. When he opened it, there were only three short sentences on the lined paper:

It's nothing, Noah told himself.

Something happened with the Princess. Go to the hermit's place by the Blue Hills after school. It's important.

Important was underlined three times.

He thought of the Princess's fluttering lashes and the feeling of her closed eyes following him as he walked through the room.

This was just Harper and Rallie attempting to get him to show up so they could all have the same fight over again. They wanted him to play and he couldn't. There was nothing he could do except explaining why it was over, and he couldn't bring himself to do that.

The Princess wasn't real, though, so nothing important could have happened with her.

'What did the note say?' Alex asked. 'She tells you that she wants your skinny body?'

Noah tore it in half and then in half again. 'Nah. She just wants my math homework.'

There was no practice after school that day, but he stayed late anyway, pretending there was. He managed to talk the coach into letting him shoot hoops in the gym, which he did methodically, alone, letting himself drown in the thump of the ball, the squeak of his sneakers, and the familiar smell of fresh floor wax and old sweat.

CHAPTER FIVE

The moon was high enough to give the room an eerie blue glow. He could make out the familiar shapes of his furniture. His black cat was uncurling and stretching her long sleek body, claws digging into the coverlet. She padded up to him, her yellow eyes full of reflected light.

NOAH WOKE IN THE DARKNESS OF HIS BEDROOM. He wasn't sure why, but his heart raced, adrenaline pumping through his body, as though something had activated his body's fight-or-flight response. He blinked in the dark, letting his eyes adjust.

'What's up?' he whispered to The Party, reaching out to pet her soft triangular head and press his thumb against her ear, folding it down and rubbing it. She butted against him and started to purr.

Bang- Tap-tap!

He jumped. The cat hissed, her white teeth flashing in the moonlight, and she jumped off the bed. Something small and hard had struck the window.

A sudden gust of wind made the branches outside shake and jitter. He couldn't help imagining the long, bony fingers of the trees scraping against the glass.

This was no echo of a dream, no made-up story. Something really had hit the glass, smacking against one of the panes he couldn't see, one of the lower ones, hidden behind Jon half-curtains.

Then one night-quite randomly-he fell asleep with his head above the covers like a normal person, and no monster got him. Over time he got spottier about observing his safety precautions until he routinely slept with an arm dangling off the side of his bed and his feet kicked free of the sheets.

When he was a little kid, he'd had a firm belief in universally observed monster rules. He'd been sure, for example, that if he kept all parts of himself on the mattress and shrouded beneath blankets if he kept his eyes closed, and if he pretended to be asleep, then he'd be safe. He didn't know where he'd gotten the idea from. He did remember his mother saying he'd smother himself if he kept sleeping with his head under the comforter.

But right then, at the sound of the wind, for one panicky moment, all he wanted was to burrow under the blankets and never come out.

Tap- Tap - bang.

The thing hitting the window was just a branch, he told himself.

Or a neighbor cat trying to pick a fight with The Party.

Or an insomniac squirrel rattling around in the gutters.

Tap- Tap.

He was never going to be able to go back to sleep if he didn't look. Noah slid out of bed, his bare feet padding over the carpet. Steeling himself and taking a deep breath, he pushed aside the curtain.

He was too surprised to shout. They had windblown hair and upturned faces and, for a moment, he didn't know them. But then he realized it was only Harper and Rallie, not zombie girls or witches or ghosts. Rallie lifted her hand in a shy wave. Harper had another handful of pebbles and looked ready to throw them at him.

There were a few scattered pebbles on the roof tiles in front of his window. That was the first thing he noticed. The second was that when he looked past the roof, he saw two dark figures looking up at him from the moonlit lawn.

He let out his breath and waved back a little unsteadily. His hammering heart started to slow.

Harper beckoned to him. Come down, she was signaling.

Noah backed away from the window. Quietly he went to the closet and pushed his feet into a pair of sneakers. He pulled a sweater over his T-shirt and crept downstairs in his alligator pajama bottoms.

He thought of the note that Rallie had passed him and the way she'd underlined important, but he couldn't think of anything so important that it would lead them to sneak out of their houses on a Friday night. Rallie's grandmother would ground her for the rest of forever if she found out.

The under-cabinet lights in the kitchen were bright enough to stumble through, and he managed to find his coat on a hook in the entranceway. The microwave showed the time in blinking green numbers: three minutes past midnight. Noah shouldered his coat on and went outside, closing the door before the cat could slip through.

Harper and Rallie were waiting for him. The Party followed, mewling plaintively, probably hoping to be fed. 'Hey,' he whispered into the dark. 'What's going on? What happened?'

'Sh-h-h-h a,' Harper said. 'You'll wake up everyone. Come on.'

'Where to?' He asked, looking back at his house. There was a light on in his parents' bedroom upstairs. Sometimes his mother stayed up late to read; sometimes she fell asleep with the light on. If she was still awake, the sound of them talking might carry up to her, but he wanted to know something before he just followed Rallie and Harper into the night.

'The Blue Hills,' Rallie said.

That was a junkyard that specialized in metal about half a mile from their houses. The owner bought everything from car parts to tin cans and, although no one was sure what he did with them other than let them rust in huge mounds on his property, they were a pretty impressive sight. The stripped rods, machine parts, and batteries gleamed like mountains of blue, so that's why they'd started calling it the Blue Hills. They'd come up with a whole storyline, including dwarves and trolls and a princess dollie that Harper had painted blue.

Noah jogged behind Harper and Rallie, the wind cutting through his thin pajamas, making him feel both cold and sort of ridiculous. After a few minutes, Harper pulled a flashlight

out of her jacket and clicked it on. It illumiHarryd only a narrow patch of grass and dirt, so she had to swing it back and forth to see much.

There was the same old high chain-link fence around the property that Noah remembered. And there was the same old abandoned shed that they'd found a few summers ago and used as a clubhouse until Rallie's grandmother had found out about it and given them a speech about tetanus and how it led to something she called lockjaw. Noah wasn't sure lockjaw was a real thing, but he thought about it every time his neck felt stiff.

They hadn't been their since-or at least, he hadn't. He wondered if Harper and Rallie snuck out to the shed without him. They seemed full of secrets tonight. The only secret he had was one he wished he didn't.

Rallie opened the creaky old door and went inside. He followed nervously.

'So, are you going to tell me what's going on?' Noah asked, sitting down across from Harper. The wood planks were cold under his pajama pants, and he shifted, trying to get comfortable.

Harper sat down on the splintery floor, cross-legged, setting the flashlight against her sneakers, so it lit her face. Then she unhooked her backpack from one shoulder, pulling it around onto her lap.

She unzipped her bag. 'You're going to laugh,' she said. 'But you shouldn't.'

He tried to suppress a shudder. Ghosts weren't something you talked about in an abandoned shed at night. 'You're just trying to freak me out. This is some kind of stupid-'

He glanced over at Rallie. She was leaning against one wall of the shed. 'Harper saw a ghost,' she said.

Harper carefully took the bone china dollie from her backpack. Noah drew in his breath and went silent. The Princess's dull black eyes were open, her gaze boring into his own. He'd always thought she was creepy-looking, but in the reflected beam of the flashlight, she seemed demonic.

'The Princess,' Noah said unsteadily, forcing a sneer into his voice to cover his rising fear. 'So what? You brought me all the way out here to see a dollie?'

Harper touched the doll's face. It was pure white, like a dinner plate. Hair, dry as brush bristles, was threaded into her scalp, and her cheeks and lips were rouged a faint pink. When she was tilted onto her back, her eyes stayed open instead of closing the way they should have, as though she was still watching Noah. There was a tear at the shoulder of her thin, brittle gown and tiny pinholes through the discolored fabric. It hadn't aged as well as the rest of the dollie-and the ride in Harper's backpack probably hadn't helped.

'Just listen,' Rallie said. 'Try not to be the huge jerk you've turned into.

'I know you told us you weren't going to come over the other day, but I thought you might anyway,' Harper said, talking fast. 'And I couldn't just go in the cabinet and get the Princess if Mom was there.

Rallie never said stuff like that, especially not to him. It stung.

So, I took the dollie out of the case that night when we had the argument and moved around some of Mom's other stuff to hide what I'd done. But that night-well, I saw the dead girl.'

'You mean you had a nightmare,' Noah said.

'Just shut up a minute,' said Rallie.

It reminded Noah of the way Harper talked when she played villains or even the Princess herself. 'It wasn't like dreaming at all. She was sitting on the end of my bed. Her hair was blond, like the dollies, but it was tangled and dirty. She was wearing a nightdress smeared with mud. She told me I had to bury her. She said she couldn't rest until her bones were in her own grave, and if I didn't help her, she would make me sorry.' 'It wasn't like a regular dream,' Harper said, her fingers smoothing back the Princess's curls and her voice changing, going soft and chill as the night air.

Rallie shifted uncomfortably. Noah was silent for a long moment, arrested by the images Harper had conjured. He could almost see the girl in her stained nightgown.

Harper paused, as though she was expecting him to say something sarcastic.

'Her bones?' he finally echoed.

'Did you know that bone china has real bones in it?' Harper said, tapping a porcelain cheek. 'Her clay was made from human bones. Little-girl bones. That hair threaded through the scalp is the little girl's hair. And the body of the dollie is filled with her leftover ashes.'

What's the punch line? Did one of you rig a sheet outside to flutter from a tree or something?'

A shiver ran up his spine. He closed his eyes to keep from looking at the dollie in Harper's lap. 'Okay, this is your idea of a funny prank. I get it. You're mad at me for not playing the game anymore, so you made up this story to scare me.

'I told you,' Rallie said to Harper, under her breath.

'No, idiot,' said Rallie. 'I told her that you wouldn't believe us and that you wouldn't want to help.'

'You really did rig a sheet?' Noah frowned, looking out at the trees and the mounds of cans and metal.

He threw up his hands in confusion. 'Help with what? Help you bury a dollie? Why would you need to wake me up in the middle of the night to help you do that?'

Harper pulled the dollie to her chest, and one of the eyes closed and opened, as though it was winking at him. 'Skylar Stella is real. That's the dollie-girl's name. She told me about herself. Her father was some kind of worker for a china manufacturer, designing and decorating pottery, and when Skylar died, her dad went totally crazy. He couldn't bear to put her in the ground, so he took her body back to the kilns at his job, chopped her up, and cremated her. 'She told you that?' It was too easy to imagine the dollie moving on her own, fluttering her painted eyelids and turning toward him. Maybe opening her tiny rosebud of a mouth to scream. He ground up to her burnt bones and used them to make a batch of bone china, then poured it into a mold cast from one of Skylar's favorite dollies. So, her grave stayed empty.' Noah tried to swallow, although his throat suddenly felt very dry.

'She's not going to rest until we bury her. And she's not going to let us rest either. She promised to make us miserable unless we help her.' 'Each night she told me a little bit more of her story.' Illuminare by the flashlight, Harper's face had become strange.

And I'm still not totally sure, but show him the thing. It's pretty convincing.' He looked at Rallie. 'And you believe it? You believe all of this?' 'I never believed in ghosts, so not at first,' Rallie said. 'No offense, Harper, but it's a crazy story.

'Show me what?'

Harper pulled the dollie's head sharply up from the body. Noah gasped at the sudden violence of it, but all that it revealed was a string-and-rusty-metal-hook apparatus. With a twist, the Princess's head came entirely off, leaving the hook still attached to the neck, hanging from the cord. Harper slid her fingers into the body of the dollie, feeling around like she was trying to reach something.

Harper drew out an old burlap bag from the neck cavity. 'Here, take this and look inside.' 'What are you doing?' He stared at the disembodied head resting on Harper's knee. The eyes were closed now. The bag was full, but Noah couldn't tell what it was full of. He took the rough cloth as she turned the beam of the flashlight on it, revealing letters and dates in blocky print.

'Eaton?' he read out loud. He had a vague memory of the place from some late-night British rock documentary his mom had been watching. 'That's where the Beatles are from-in Eaton. There's no way we can go there. I guess we're going to have to find out if ghost girls really can curse people, because-'

So, we could get on a bus and be there by morning.' She paused. 'And we are. We're going. Tonight. Well, technically, it's morning, so we're going in the morning.' 'That's what I thought at first,' Rallie said and pointed to the markings. 'But look again. It says, East Eaton. In Ohio.

He looked from the dollie to Rallie and then to Harper. 'This is why you brought me out here?'

'We tried to explain yesterday,' Rallie said. 'I told you it was important.'

Harper reached down and turned the flashlight beam on her watch, then shone it at him. 'There's a bus stopping in town at two fifteen in the morning. It's coming from Philadelphia and going to Youngstown. One of the stops is East Eaton. Rallie said she'd come if you would too.'

Was she trying to play a different kind of game? A game that she was making out of their real lives? But Harper didn't look gleeful, the way she did when she had a thrilling idea. She looked pale and nervous like she hadn't been sleeping well. Noah thought about the ghost story that Harper had told on their last walk home, the one about holding your breath when you passed a cemetery.

Rallie shrugged.

'You'll really go?' he asked finally, looking at Rallie. Her grandmother wouldn't like a single thing about this: not the ghost, not the bus, definitely not Rallie being out at two in the morning with a boy-even if the boy was just him.

Noah's parents wouldn't like him going either, but that was a point in favor of the plan, as far as he was concerned. And if he decided that he never wanted to come back, well, at least he'd have some company while he figured out where he was going. In real life, he wasn't sure there were any equivalent jobs. In stories, orphan boys became assistant pig keepers and magician's apprentices.

'You still haven't looked in the bag,' Rallie said, pointing to the burlap sack he was holding. 'It's pretty weird.'

Harper handed Rallie the flashlight. She held it up high, pointing it down at him. With trepidation, he pulled the drawstrings so that he could peer inside.

Of course. The leftover ashes. The remains of a ghost. Of a girl. Of the Princess.

For a moment, Noah didn't know what he was seeing. The bag seemed to be full of something that looked a little bit like dark sand with chunks of shells in it. Then he realized that the bag was full of gray ash, and what he'd thought were shells were actually sharp, pale pieces of bone.

A nameless primal terror washed over him. He wanted to drop the bag, wanted to race out of the shed and go back to bed where he could shiver under his own covers. But he didn't move. His hands started to shake, and he drew the strings tight so he didn't have to look anymore.

Despite her words, Rallie's voice grew a little uncertain. Noah wondered if she'd balked at first before she'd apparently promised Harper that if he went, she would go too.

'Harper thinks we can catch a bus back in the afternoon and be home by dinnertime. It's only a three-hour ride, but there aren't a lot of buses from here to there-just this one early in the morning, and another in the afternoon that gets in too late for us to ride back in time. We left a note for her parents.'

'If these bones are real,' he began, 'shouldn't we tell someone? A girl died. Maybe Skylar's father murdered her. Maybe it's some kind of cold-case file.'

'No one's going to care about some old story,' Harper said. 'And even if they did, they'd just take the dollie away from us-put her in a museum or display her somewhere-and then her spirit would be angry.'

He paused, considering everything she'd said and also what she hadn't said. 'Did you find the ashes before or after you dreamed about Skylar Stella?'

'I'm going whether you both come or not,' Harper said, snatching the burlap bag out of his hand. He guessed that meant she'd found the ashes first. 'Whether you believe me or not, I'm going to bury her as she wants.'

Getting on a bus in the middle of the night to a place they'd never been was daunting. It also seemed a little bit like an adventure.

'Okay,' he said. 'Fine. I'll come.'

Rallie looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. He wondered for the first time if she'd been planning on him saying no and hadn't considered the possibility that he'd say yes. If so, she probably should have told him.

Okay? No more hassling me about it.'

'I'll come,' he continued, 'so long as you both promise not to ask me about the game or why I don't want to play. 'Okay,' said Harper.

'Okay,' said Noah.

'Okay,' said Rallie.

'You need to get ready fast,' Harper said. 'And leave a note so your parents don't freak out. Just tell them you got up early and that you'll be back tonight.'

'Yes,' Harper said. 'I planned it all out. Just bring food and supplies, okay, Noah? We'll meet at the mailbox in twenty minutes.'

'And you're sure the bus will get us back in time?' Rallie asked. 'You're positive?'

She switched off the flashlight and, for a moment, the shed was plunged into darkness.

By the time they did, Harper had put away the Princess, so at least her terrible head with its winking eye was hidden. Noah blinked, willing his eyes to adjust.

There was a kind of quiet that hung over the world in the middle of the night, as though there was no one else awake anywhere. It felt ripe with magic and endless possibility. Noah walked home through the hushed streets, his sneakers wet with dew from the frosted grass.

He did find a can of orange soda, a package of saltine crackers, three oranges, red Twizzlers, and a jar of peanut butter, all of which he stuffed into his backpack.

His mother didn't have either of those things nor did she have elven limbs, which had kept Joseph and Samantha from starving on the way to Mount Doom and always made him think of matzoth (which his mom also didn't have).

He snuck back into his house and stood for a long moment in the dark kitchen, a feeling of great daring swelling his heart. When he finally went to the cabinets, he felt as though he was provisioning himself for one of those epic fantasy quests-the kind that required a lot of jerky or something called hardtack that he'd read about soldiers eating during the Civil War and which he thought might be a kind of bread.

In his room, Noah changed into jeans, switched out his sweater for a zip-up sweatshirt, and packed a few other random things he thought he might need: twenty-three dollars (twenty of which had come from his aunt in a card for his birthday), a book identifying poisonous plants (in case they needed to live in the wild and eat berries, which admittedly seemed like a remote possibility), and a sleeping bag that was a little too small for him but worked okay as a blanket when completely unzipped. In the hall closet, he found a flashlight, and he picked up a garden spade from beside the back door.

Before he left, he wrote out the note and propped it up on his bed. It read:

Got up early. Gone to play basketball. Might not be back for dinner.

Might not be back forever, he thought but didn't write.

As he left the house, closing the door quietly behind him, he wondered, for a moment, again, if this was a trick. A lie. Harper's attempt at one last game.

Nonetheless, the ashes had seemed real, he reminded himself.

In the end, he wasn't sure if he went because he half believed in the ghost already or because he was used to following Harper's lead in a story or simply because leaving allowed him to run away and still believe he could come back.

If he wanted.

CHAPTER SIX

Noah's mother's parents, now living permanently in Florida, would tell stories about how things used to be. About how the big Victorian houses-the ones built by some famous architect, the ones that were in the center of town used to be owned by single families and not divided into run-down apartments.

NOAH WAS USED TO STORIES WITHOUT HAPPY Endings. His dad called where they lived West of

Nowhere, Pennsylvania, claiming it bordered Better Off Forgotten, West Virginia, and Already Forgotten, Ohio. When Noah was little, those had seemed like magical place names, before he realized they were just sarcasm. Noah's mother had gone to school to be an art

therapist, but the only place she could get work was in a juvenile detention center. If she wanted the kids there to do art, she had to bring the supplies and collect them after each session because her supervisor was afraid of the kids jabbing each other's eyes out with markers.

His grandmother told stories about the people she'd known when she was a little girl, people who got out of town and made it elsewhere. The happiest the stories got was when his parents talked about how things were going to get better, although neither one of them really seemed to believe it, and Noah didn't believe it anymore either.

That was all. It was as if the town had some kind of gravitational influence on the people who lived there. But even as Noah thought that he knew it was just another story. Dad was back because he hadn't been able to hack it in the city.

When Noah's dad left three years ago, he said he was going to run his own restaurant in Philadelphia and he was going to Italy to study how pasta was really made and he was getting a late-night spot on a local cable channel and would parlay that into a fortune. But two months later, he moved back and into one of the crappy apartments in the biggest and worst-kept

Victorian and drifted in and out of Noah's life, until he finally drifted back to their house.

He wondered whether growing up was learning that most stories turned out to be lies.

Rallie was in a big shapeless red coat. Both of them had backpacks slung over their shoulders. The bus stop was cold enough that Noah's breath clouded in the air. The wind had picked up. It washed over them as they huddled together against the brick exterior of the post office. In the flickering streetlight, Noah could see the girls better. Harper had pulled back her coppery hair into a ponytail and was wearing a dark-green sweater with jeans and tall brown boots.

He felt his gaze going to Harper's backpack, knowing the Princess was inside and knowing, without knowing how he knew, that her eyes were open. He felt the weight of her stare on his back when he turned away. The hairs on the back of his neck stuck up, tickling his skin and making him shiver.

A while back they'd seen a police car from a way off and had pressed themselves against the wall of the building. As they hid, Harper muttered the whole time about the vividness of Rallie's coat giving them away and Rallie muttered back about how she'd just packed for a sleepover because she hadn't thought they were taking off somewhere harebrained that very night. But the police car had turned onto Main Street and away from them. And the next car that passed was a truck. It didn't even slow.

The bus was already fifteen minutes late, and there was no sign of it or any other vehicle on the road.

Rallie yawned. 'Maybe we should go back. It doesn't look like the bus is coming.'

Noah, impelled by the impulse that makes yawns catch, yawned too.

'Stop,' Harper said. 'We just have to wait a little longer.'

'You can't be mad at us for being tired,' Noah said.

Harper was clearly still upset, but she didn't argue with him. 'We'll sleep on the bus.'

Rallie bit her lip and looked hopefully at the stretch of empty road. She looked happier the longer they waited. Noah was pretty sure she was betting on the bus not coming and the three of them going back to their beds, having had a nice little middle-of-the-night adventure. He could tell Rallie didn't want to be the one who chickened out, but she obviously also didn't want to go. If Rallie's grandmother found out about any of this, there would be no more play practice, no more sleepovers, no more chance of hanging out with Noah or Harper. Ever.

Noah understood all that and he felt bad for her, but not bad enough to say anything. Selfishly, he wanted her along.

'Two more minutes,' said Rallie, 'and then we go back. I'm freezing.'

Harper didn't reply.

Looking at the bus stop sign, Noah thought about what it would be like to get off at a place like this in a different town, one he had no idea how to navigate. 'When we get to East Eaton, you know where we're supposed to go, right? What cemetery Skylar is supposed to be buried in and how to find the grave. You know all that, right?'

'One minute, fifty-nine seconds,' Rallie said. 'One minute, fifty-eight seconds.'

Harper opened her mouth and hesitated over the answer. Just then a bus turned the corner three blocks away, washing them with its headlights. He didn't realize how worried Harper had been that it wasn't coming until he saw how relieved she looked as the bus drew closer. Rallie's face froze in an expression of dread.

'No,' she said, looking back down the street, away from the bus, and sighing. 'It's not that. I'm just tired. Anyway, if I snuck back into my house when I'm supposed to be sleeping at Harper's, Grandma would have a lot of questions.'

'You don't have to go,' he whispered to her, deciding he could be only so much of a jerk.

Somehow the parent who was giving them a ride didn't come on time, or maybe it took too long to drop everybody off, but Rallie wound up home a half-hour late. That was all it took. Boom. She was in mega-trouble. No phone calls. No Internet. No nothing.

The last time Rallie had gotten busted for staying out after curfew, she'd get grounded for a solid month. She'd been to the movie version of one of her favorite musicals, along with some of her theater the door opened with a creak of gears. An old man with a short white beard looked down at them. A small gold hoop hung from one of his ears, and he had a face that reminded Noah of a gruff and unfriendly wizard. 'Well, get on if you're getting on.' friends and Harper.

So even though he knew that she wasn't telling the whole truth about wanting to go, given that she was likely to get in trouble, either way, he figured she might as well have an adventure and hope for the best.

Harper, Noah, and Rallie climbed the steps, each feeding cash into a machine beside the driver. It printed three tickets and dispensed change into a bowl with a clatter. Noah shuffled down the aisle, past a knitting woman and three college-age guys asleep in their seats, past a guy muttering to himself and looking out the window.

Noah went all the way to the back of the bus, following Harper. They sat in the long last seat. A moment later Rallie joined them, squeezing in next to the window.

Noah looked at Harper's backpack resting on the floor and wondered whether Harper had reattached the Princess's head or whether it would roll around in the bottom of her bag when the bus turned corners. He thought he could see a few threads of her blond hair peeking out from where the zipper wasn't fully closed.

'See,' Harper said, pulling her legs up so that she was sitting on her feet in a weird yoga pose. 'Everything's going according to plan.'

'I can't believe the bus actually came,' Rallie said faintly.

The bus lurched forward, pulling away from the bus stop, and despite everything, Noah started to grin.

'You never really answered me before,' Noah said. 'Do you know where the cemetery is? Do you know where we're going, Harper?'

They were left home by themselves-going on a real adventure, the kind that changed you. He felt a thrill run through him.

'The grave is under a willow tree. Skylar will tell us the rest.'

'Skylar will tell us?' He asked in a quiet, urgent voice.

'She told me this much, didn't she?' Harper answered, and then in that way she had, where Noah was sure she wasn't right yet somehow, she seemed right, she added neatly and unanswerable, 'If you didn't believe me, why did you come?'

Rallie leaned against the window and pulled her legs up onto the seat, resting one shoe against Noah's leg. She looked exhausted, but no longer unhappy. 'I'm going to try to sleep.' Exasperated, he mimed banging his head against the back of the seat. Harper ignored him.

He rested a hand on her ankle so it wouldn't slip.

'We should take shifts,' Harper said. 'Keep watch. Like you're supposed to on a quest. So, we don't miss our stop.'

'Okay,' Noah said, sticking out a fisted hand. 'Rock, paper, scissors.'

She still beat him, throwing a rock to his scissors. He stuck with scissors and tricked Harper, who threw paper, expecting him to change moves. And then Rallie beat Harper, sticking Harper with first watch, Noah with second, and Rallie, third. Noah rested his head against his own backpack and closed his eyes.

Rallie held out her hand and blinked muzzily like she was trying to stay awake.

He didn't think he'd be able to go to sleep, but he must have dozed off because it seemed like moments later, he awoke to Harper's sharp yelp.

He sat up. The old guy who'd been talking to himself had moved to the seat in front of them. He was leaning close to Harper and just letting go of a strand of her hair.

'I was just kidding you. Come on, you're a cute little thing. Ain't you used to be teased?' His bad breath washed over Noah, bringing with it a molding smell, like wet clothes left in the washing machine overnight and sneakers after a long game. His hair was wild tangled curls, shot through with gray, and he had a scraggly beard hiding half of his windblown face. Nicotine stains darkened the ends of his pale fingers. 'That your brother? Don't he tease you?'

'Yes, he's my brother,' Harper lied quickly. 'And he doesn't like it if I talk to strangers.'

He sounded teasing all right but in a bad way. A scary way. 'That bus driver-you can't trust him. He's senile as a moose. And sometimes he gets aliens in him.'

He cackled, revealing a black gap where a few bottom teeth should have been. He turned his attention to Noah. 'I was just telling your smart-mouth little sister here that you can't be sure this bus is going to take you where you want to go.'

Rallie shifted and opened her eyes, blinking away dreams. When she saw the old guy, her eyes went wide and she grabbed her bag. 'What's going on?'

His father would say that as the boy, it was his responsibility to protect the girls. That made him even more scared because he was afraid, he'd let them down. 'Thanks for the advice.'

'Okay,' Noah told the man, leaning forward, trying to get between him and Harper.

The old guy's grin widened. 'Oh, the little man is going to give Kanth Jones the brush-off. Do you want to fight? Do you want to show off for the girls? And who is that one over there? She's no sister of yours. Just what is it that you three are doing, anyway? Running off from home?' Rallie leaned forward. 'We're not doing anything.'

'Look, we appreciate you coming over and talking with us,' Harper said placatingly. 'But if that's all-'

'Crazy as anything. Sometimes he gets a little lost. Sometimes he just parks and gets out of the bus, wanders around for a while. And sometimes he has meetings with them-them things. In their shiny spaceship. You can see the lights. Just leaves us out here for as long as it takes him to communicate.'

'Senile as all get out.' Kanth tapped his head and made a swirly motion with his finger, returning to what seemed to be his favorite subject-the bus driver.

Rallie elbowed Noah and raised her eyebrows, eyes wide.

'Okay,' Harper said. 'We'll watch out for that.

'You've got really pretty hair too,' Kanth Jones said, turning to Rallie with a sly grin. His fingers darted out to tug at one of her braids. 'Like little ropes.'

Rallie jerked back.

'Don't touch her,' Noah said.

'Oh, possessive, huh? Well then, what if I talk to your sister and leave the two of you alone?' Kanth grabbed Harper's arm. She pushed herself back against the cushion and out of the range of his hand before he could touch her.

Well, I'm not going to talk to the blonde, so you better forget that idea. I don't like the way she's looking at me. She's going to tell you that she'd never hurt anybody, but don't you listen. She'd hurt you, all right. She'd hurt you and she'd like it.' The man laughed. 'You all are really jumpy; you know that? Real paranoid.

'Hey!' Noah said.

None of them were blond. In fact, as far as Noah could tell, no one on the bus was blond. He wondered what it was like to be so crazy that you actually saw things that weren't there. He wondered if when you halluciHarryd, the stuff you were imagining was just as clear as the regular stuff, or if it was hazy at the edges so that if you really concentrated, you could tell.

'It's time for you to sit somewhere else,' Rallie told him, drawing herself up impressively as she did on stage at the school play. 'I might not look like it, but I am their sister. I'm adopted. And I don't want you to talk to my brother like that anymore.'

'Aw, C'mon,' he said, reaching into his front breast pocket and coming out with a small paper bag-wrapped bottle. 'I have a black belt. You'll need me when the aliens come.'

'You wait and see. Those drivers going to roll on out of this bus and leave all of us alone, and when he comes back, he's going to have a new face. The aliens ride around in his skin. So, when he does that, who are you going to tell?'

The bus turned a corner and started to slow. There was a brightly lit bus station up the road. Noah let out a sigh of relief.

The rest of the bus was quiet and dark, the only lights in two strips down the center aisle and near the front, where the knitting Girl sat. It seemed like a vast distance. There was only the click of her needles and the sound of the man's voice.

In just a couple of minutes, they would be able to get off the bus, but what then? It was too soon for this to be East Eaton. This was just a random stop in a random town they didn't know.

'You be careful,' Kanth Jones said, looking right at Noah. 'You better not let them get taken. That's your job as a brother. You the man in the family, and you got to fight to make sure the aliens don't steal their faces. Aliens like red hair. They take you down in the diamond ghost caves and you never come out again.'

'But aliens don't live underground,' Rallie said, completely incapable of not pointing out when something didn't make sense. 'They live in the sky. In spaceships.'

The bus stopped, its engine grinding. The door opened and the overhead lights came on, making Kanth's skin look sallow. He took a swig from the paper-bag-covered bottle. Then he stood up.

Noah widened his eyes, trying to signal her not to say anything that would agitate Kanth Jones.

They looked at one another.

Shows what you know. No, the safest thing is for you all to stay right here on the bus.'

'I've got to use the bathroom,' Noah said.

'What if we need to protect him?' Rallie asked, standing up.

'Then you go,' Kanth Jones said. 'I'll protect these ladies and make sure you got the same face you left with.'

Kanth Jones shook his head. 'You can't go where he's going.'

And if he took this route, he must have harassed passengers before. The bus driver would come back, say a few things, and Kanth Jones would go back to his seat. Everything would work out.

For a horrible moment, Noah worried that Kanth Jones was going to block the aisle and make it impossible for them to exit. But then the bus driver stood up and turned his head toward them. Noah let out a sigh of relief.

If Kanth Jones knew the driver well enough to complain about him constantly stopping for aliens, he must take this route a lot.

But the driver just took a long look at Noah, Harper, and Rallie and got off the bus. He didn't say or do a single thing to help them.

Kanth Jones wore a smirk on his face as he'd known all along he wasn't going to get in trouble.

Kanth Jones grabbed for Rallie, and she gave a single, blood-curdling shriek, loud enough for the frat boys to wake up and the knitting Girl to turn around in her seat. Loud enough for Kanth to let Rallie go in surprise.

Harper shoved past him with a suddenness that got her through before he could react. While Kanth Jones gaped at her, Noah charged down the aisle, catching Rallie's hand and pulling her with him.

'Don't come crying to me when the aliens take your faces!' he yelled after them.

There were benches and vending machines and bright fluorescent lights. Rallie collapsed onto a bench, her eyes a little wet. She looked as freaked out as Noah felt.

The bus driver was smoking a cigarette, talking to two station employees, when they charged past him and into the building.

'This was your plan,' Noah said, and then regretted it. He knew he wasn't being fair, but he was tired and upset and had no idea what to do himself. He felt useless. Noah took Harper's arm. 'Right now. Come. Go.'

'What are we going to do?' Harper asked, pacing back and forth, backpack over one shoulder.

'We can't get back on that bus,' said Rallie.

'Maybe we could tell someone-like a cop. There has to be a cop around a late-night bus station, right?'

Noah looked over at the bus driver. One station employee was speaking into a walkie-talkie. The other was watching the three of them.

'Yeah, and they'll ask us how old we are.' Rallie shook her head. 'And call our families. No.'

'I think we have to get out of here,' Noah said.

'Why?' asked Rallie. Then she noticed the three men standing together and got up quickly, swinging her bag onto her shoulder.

'But we didn't do anything,' Harper said, walking along with him. 'Why would they be after us? Why not do something about that guy? He's the one-'

'Because we're kids,' Noah whispered, cutting her off.

'We're being too obvious,' Rallie said under her breath. 'Harper, we should go into the girls' room and sneak out from there. Noah, meet us outside. Get something from the vending machine.

Everyone, go slow.'

Noah took a deep breath and then spoke loudly and as casually as he could, 'I'll meet you guys back on the bus.'

Rallie smiled and nodded exaggeratedly, playing casual too now. Harper tried to follow her lead.

One of the bus station employees had peeled away from the others and was heading in Noah's direction, his shoe falls echoing in the mostly empty space. He wasn't rushing, but he had too much purpose in the way he moved to be just strolling. Noah started toward the door, deliberately not running despite wanting to. He paused a minute to look at the vending machine. In its reflection, he saw the station guy drawing closer, his Jon uniform making him seem ominously authoritative.

Noah moved toward the door.

'Hey you, there,' the station guy called to him.

But Noah was out through the doors and turning a corner of the building and seeing Rallie lowering herself from the girls' bathroom window. Harper jumped out after her and they were off and running into the darkness of an unknown town.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Where are we?' Rallie asked finally, her breath clouding in the air.

All the adrenaline Noah had felt back in the station burned off of him, and he felt tired down to the marrow of his bones. Eye-droopingly exhausted. He leaned against the brick wall and wondered if it was possible to fall asleep standing up.

'And how are you going to get out of here?' asked Noah, pushing off from the wall. 'We don't even know what town we're in.'

THEY HUDDLED IN THE DARK BEHIND A TATTOO PARLOR and watched as the bus pulled out of the station in a cloud of exhaust, taking with it both the crazy guy and their chances of getting to East Eaton by morning.

Harper followed. 'There are only two buses to East Eaton that take this route, and if we wait to take the next one-in the afternoon-then we won't have enough time to take the bus back by tonight.'

'Forget East Eaton. We've got to get home,' Rallie said, digging out the cell phone that she was only allowed to use for emergencies.

'Sure,' Noah said. 'But we can't do that, either, can we?'

Rallie took the bus schedule and opened it, studying the names of stations as though she were going to be able to figure out where they were just by finding a name that struck her as feeling like the right one.

'Hold on,' Noah said, walking the other way down the alley so that he could see the front of the bus station. He walked back again. 'East Rochester. There's a sign that says so-but where is that?'

Harper pulled the bus schedule from one of her pockets, along with a raggedy map. 'You can look at this stuff if you want, but it's not going to tell you anything I haven't already told you.'

Harper crowded next to Rallie, so they were squinting together at the schedule in the dim moonlight. 'There were only two more stops before East Eaton,' Harper said finally. 'We almost made it.'

'We're not even out of Pennsylvania yet,' said Rallie. 'We didn't almost make anything.'

Rallie pulled her coat more tightly around her, sitting down on the back steps of a building. Dumpsters loomed to one side of her. 'Can you call Tom and see if he'll pick us up?' Her voice sounded on the verge of panic. Calm, but not likely to stay that way.

Harper unfolded the map and tapped it grandly. 'Look, that says Ohio.' Then she shook her head. 'Oh, it says Ohio River.'

Harper just looked at her. 'My brother will never come all the way here. Not in that junker car of his.'

Harper shook her head. 'She broke her phone and hasn't gotten a new one yet. I couldn't get ahold of her if I wanted to.'

'Your sister, then?' Rallie asked, chewing on the end of one of her braids.

Rallie looked at the face of her phone, frowning. 'I guess I could call my aunt Linda. She'd be mad, but she'd come.'

'Would she tell your grandmother?' Noah asked.

Noah tried to imagine a single thing they could tell Rallie's grandmother to try and make sense of what they'd done. She wouldn't want to hear about a creepy, possibly-still-headless dollie, a ghost, and a curse that, more likely than not, didn't even exist.

Rallie sighed heavily, a little shudder going across her shoulders. 'Probably. And then I'll get grounded forever and have to quit the play and be totally miserable. But what else are we going to do?'

'I won't go back,' Harper said, sitting on the steps next to Rallie. 'I'm going to wait for the next bus and keep going.'

'But you said that the next bus wasn't coming until the afternoon, so you won't make it home before Sunday,' Rallie said. 'Where would you sleep?'

Harper took a deep but unsteady breath. Noah could see that the idea of Rallie leaving her made Harper feel a lot less daring. He didn't want Rallie to go either; she was good at making crazy ideas actually work. If Rallie is right. We can bury the Princess next weekend or the weekend after that,' Noah said. 'What's the difference?'

Harper came up with the idea that they needed an ancient temple under the waves, Rallie was the one who would actually find the discarded chunks of concrete to build it. Her going home would pretty much signal that they were doing something dumb.

You guys will make excuses and I'll chicken out and Skylar will find someone else to haunt because I won't be interesting enough to have a ghost talk to me. I don't deserve to be the hero of a story, and I won't be one.'

Harper's shoulders hunched forward as she got tenser. 'If we don't keep going now, we'll never do it. We just won't.

'Everyone has a story,' Rallie murmured. 'Everyone's the hero of their story. That's what Ms. Evans said in English.'

'No,' Harper said, her low voice very fierce. 'There are people who do things and people who never do-who say they will someday, but they just don't. I want to go on a quest. I've always wanted to go on a quest. And now that I have one, I'm not backing down from it. I'm not going home until it's complete.'

And he decided that even if it was dumb, he wanted to be the kind of person who was interesting enough to have a ghost talk to him. Even if the idea of the Princess being made of bones and filled with human ash grew more frightening the farther, they got from home. Noah thought she might be right. He thought of his dad, who wanted to do things and then didn't.

Rallie laughed a little, uncomfortably, like what Harper said about being a hero had hit a little close to home for her, too.

Leaving in the middle of the night and escaping from the bus station already seemed like the kinds of things that happened on quests, so from that perspective, they were doing really well. And thinking that made his tired brain slip into playing mode, which led to thinking like Tommesings.

'What if we don't go back right away?' he asked suddenly. 'If we don't call anyone, we don't get in trouble, right? No one will know what happened. So, if you take the bus back tonight-not the one to East Eaton, the one back home-then your grandmother will never know anything. Or maybe we could even make it to East Eaton and take the bus back from there. There's got to be a way for us to get there-we could walk if we have to. It can't be that many miles up the river. And the quest would be completed, despite some slight setbacks.'

'In the dark?' Rallie asked.

'We might as well try,' Harper said, brightening. 'And you don't want to get in trouble, right?'

'I'm tired and it's the middle of the night,' said Rallie. 'I don't feel like trying to follow some stupid map with a dying flashlight and the compass on my phone.'

The North Star was the brightest of the Little Dipper stars and the one at the very end of the Little Dipper's handle. Noah thought about Tommy sings the Blade, steering his ship by the North Star, and blinked up into the night sky. You were supposed to be able to find it by looking for the Big Dipper and then use that to find the Little Dipper.

That's the Polaris, he thought. If we can see that, we can't get lost.

'We'll find our way.' When he spoke, he could feel Tommesings's voice creeping into his own voice, which was strange because Tommesings was gone. 'And figure out a place to make camp.'

'Make camp?' Harper asked.

Heck, he liked trouble. 'We'll eat the provisions we brought. Look, even according to the tiny map on the bus schedule, if we just follow the river, it should take us to East Eaton. Our quest could still be completed.' 'Until the break of day.' Maybe it was exhaustion, but it wasn't that hard to think of what Tommesings would say. Tommy sings always got into scrapes, so they didn't bother him.

'You want us to walk?' Rallie said. 'Both of you have gone crazy.'

'My Girl, I want us to rest,' Noah replied, offering her his arm. For once, he didn't feel uncertain. 'I want us to take our meager supplies and turn them into a feast. She laughed tiredly and looped her arm with his. 'Fine. But I am going to want to go home upon the morrow, so plan on that happening.'

I want us to make a fire and warm our bones. Then, in the morning, we can decide what to do from there. Should you, fair maid, wish to return home upon the morrow, then we shall entertain your arguments.'

'See, you missed the game.' Harper's mouth lifted in a triumphant smile. 'You missed us playing. Admit it.'

Harper took a step back. Noah stopped abruptly, whirling on her, the spell broken. 'I told you not to talk about that, and you said you wouldn't.' His voice came out harsher than he'd intended, almost a growl.

'Okay,' Rallie said, grabbing his shoulder and propelling him down the alley. 'So long as we're not freezing, I won't call home. If we can make camp, get warm, and sleep for a while, then let's do that and try not to get in more trouble than we're already in.'

'Girl Jann would be good at surviving on the streets,' Harper said innocently.

Noah glared.

'What? I was talking to Rallie, not you. I'm allowed to talk to Rallie about the game, aren't I? You didn't make any rules about that.'

'We should keep off big roads,' Noah warned, pointing toward a narrow street up ahead. 'If someone sees us with the map and the flashlight, they're going to guess we're lost kids or runaways or something. We already had those people at the bus station after us.'

Rallie sighed. 'I don't even know what you two are fighting about. You both want to stay on this crazy adventure, and that's what we're doing.'

'We still don't know if they were really chasing us,' Harper said. 'Maybe they wanted to apologize about the crazy guy. Maybe they were afraid we were going to miss the bus. Or maybe they were aliens trying to take our faces.'

Noah raised his eyebrows and started walking.

'Oh fine, yeah, let's use the dark scary road,' Rallie said, but she followed him anyway. 'Let me see the map.'

Harper handed it over along with the flashlight. There was a strange quiet in the air, as though everyone and everything was asleep. The echo of their footsteps was the loudest sound for several blocks. It felt both eerie and kind of exciting to Noah. It seemed to him that the whole world had become theirs for a little while.

The asphalt of the alley was cracked, and they had to be careful not to stumble as they headed down it, passing heaped mounds of garbage and the back doors of restaurants.

'There's a stretch of woods,' Rallie said, waving the map. 'Close to the water. We'd have to cross the highway to get there, but we're not too far.'

'Is it a lot of woods?'

'Not really. But it's a park. Like a small, protected-area park looking out on the water, not a kid park with swings. Too small for a fire to be hidden, but probably big enough that we're not going to be seen from the road.'

Noah nodded and let her direct them. He didn't know how to make a fire anyway. It had just seemed like something that you did when you made camp, along with making stews and playing lutes and swigging from jugs of cider.

They passed a supermarket with trucks pulled up to the back-unloading flats of cardboard boxes. They passed a donut shop, closed, but with a light on inside. It gave off a warm waft of fresh dough and melting sugar. Noah's stomach growled, and he fished a Twizzler out of the pack. In comparison to the delicious smell, the candy tasted like sweet rubber.

'This was such a terrible idea,' Rallie muttered as they walked. 'How did you convince me this was a good idea? This was a terrible, terrible, terrible idea.'

He dug around and took out enough to give Rallie and Harper a couple of Twizzlers each, in case they were hungry too.

'Thank you, kind sir,' said Harper, with a little bow.

Harper looked crestfallen, which was stupid because she'd been needling him a minute ago about playing. He didn't know why she was upset over something she started. If she hadn't pointed out that he was playing, he wouldn't have had to stop.

'I am not doing that with you,' Noah said, biting the Twizzler savagely.

'Will you two quit it?' Rallie said, aiming the beam of the flashlight at the sidewalk. She had the red candy hanging out of one side of her mouth and was chomping on it like it was a cartoon cigar.

Noah started to say something about how it was her fault that they were tired when he realized saying that might actually prove her point that he was cranky.

Harper looked at her feet. 'We're cranky because we're tired, that's all.'

The highway was a long stretch of lanes, with an even wider overpass, but at half-past four in the morning, they saw only a single truck, headlights lighting up the street so brightly that it almost seemed like a day.

Once it zoomed by, Polly and Rallie held hands and raced for the median. They climbed the concrete block quickly; Noah's long legs made it easy for him to hop over. Then they ran across the lanes on the other side, even though there were no cars coming from either direction.

They could still see the lights of East Rochester on one side and could just glimpse the glimmering, rippling surface of the Ohio River stretching out on the other. But after a few minutes of walking, Noah felt pretty hidden from the road. The edge of the woods was scrubby and sloped down at a steep angle. They tripped over sticks and uneven patches of earth. Long roping tendrils of bushes scraped at their legs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'Well, THIS IS IT,' RALLIE SAID, SHADING THE Flashlight with her hand. 'You really think we can sleep out here?'

Noah knelt down. The ground was wet-the kind of wet that seeps up and soaks through clothes. He leaned against a tree, and despair washed over him. He liked the idea of an

adventure-but what did he really know about having one? He wasn't used to roughing it. He wasn't used to bugs and dirt and all the stuff soldiers and pirates had to deal with. The only time he'd done anything even sort of like camping was when set he'd up his grandfather's old tent in his backyard; it had turned out to be full of spiders, and he'd ripped the old canvas trying to escape from them.

Even though they were close to the highway, the branches swinging overhead and the smell of leaf mold rising up from the forest floor made Noah feel a million miles away from the world he knew. Like maybe they really were in some fantasy land where dragons flew overhead and magic was possible.

Harper sat down on the root of a tree. 'Ugh, it's kind of damp and cold on my butt-u-lar region. We're going to need a hammock or something.'

Pushing away from the tree, he unzipped his backpack and pulled out his sleeping bag. It was waterproof on one side, so if he opened it fully and spread it out like a picnic blanket, it would be big enough for all of them to sit on. Maybe keep them dry.

'That was smart, bringing that,' Rallie said, helping him to spread it out. 'All I have is a change of clothes, toothpaste, and cookies that we got from Harper's.'

'You couldn't sneak back into your house,' Harper reminded her, crawling onto the sleeping bag, flopping down, and rooting around in her own pack. 'And I didn't exactly give you advance notice.'

The lolling head and closed eyes combined to make the Princess look as tired as they were, which was oddly reassuring. Harper set the dollie down and smoothed out her dress, then turned back to the bag. She tugged out a thin-looking coverlet, some safety pins, and Band-Aids, a bar of chocolate that had gotten slightly mashed, a package of baby carrots, a bruised apple, a sweater, a pair of socks, a notebook, and one of her mermaid dollies.

Which, from Harper, was almost an apology.

She took the Princess out of her bag. The dollie's eyes were open, but as Harper leaned her one way and then another, her eyes closed. Noah was glad to see that Harper had

reattached the Princess's head, although it lolled slightly like maybe Harper had done it in a hurry and it wasn't on exactly right.

'This is what I bought,' she said. 'To share, if you want any.'

'We should take turns keeping watch,' Noah said, 'as we did on the bus.' He took out his jar of peanut butter, a package of crackers, oranges, and orange soda and put everything but the soda with the other supplies. Thirsty, he popped the tab on the drink. Fizzy foam bubbled up, and he quickly shifted the can over a mound of grass so the spraying liquid could spill onto the dirt. Then he took a long swig.

He thought about how he'd met them both when they were all little kids. Harper had been riding her bike up and down the block when she saw Noah sitting on his front steps, reading a beat-up old copy of James and the Giant Peach. She stopped to tell him that she'd read the book and it was good, but not as good as The Witches, and had he read The Twits? She was the one who'd met Rallie, too, picking her up at a carnival, where they'd been the only two girls who had their faces painted like Batgirl instead of fairies and cats and clowns. The first time the three of them had hung out, they'd dangled upside down from the jungle gym until the blood rushed to their heads, trying to get their brains to work better so that they'd be able to move things with the combined power of their minds.

The bubbles hit the back of his throat in a satisfying way.

It seemed like such a long time ago.

'Watch? For what?' Rallie said, reaching out her hand for the soda. 'It's not like there are going to be marauding orcs or bears or wolves or creepy, crazy old bus riders. We're in a tiny strip of park.'

'We'll sleep better if someone's on watch,' said Noah, glancing at the dollie's creepy, almost sleeping face. He wanted someone making sure she didn't wake up and move around while their eyes were closed. 'Or I will, anyway.'

'Not me,' said Rallie, yawning.

'I'll go second,' Noah said. 'Kick me if you get tired sooner.'

'I can stay up,' Harper said. 'How about I wake one of you in an hour?'

She nodded. He finished off his orange soda in another two gulps. Rallie had her enormous red coat off and was quickly layering her change of clothes-jeans and a Jon hoodie with cat ears on the hood-on along with the gray dress she was wearing. Then she curled up like a bug under her coat, closed her eyes, and seemed to falls almost instantly into slumber.

Harper had her thin blanket wrapped around her like a cape and was sitting with her back against the trunk of the tree, looking out at the water. Noah's eyes had adjusted enough to the moonlight that he could see the determined set of her jaw.

Harper's hand rested absently on the thing's chest like she was holding it still. As Noah looked, his imagination fed him a horrible image: The Princess staggering across the uneven ground toward him, her chubby arms reaching for him. He wondered if he could convince Harper to put the Princess back in her bag. On her lap was the Princess, eyes open now as though she was on watch with Harper, staring at nothing, the bone-white of the dollie's face seeming to glow in the gloom.

Harper tilted her head, her gaze going to where he was sitting. 'What?' she whispered.

He pointed to the dollie-that was once AVA's passed down, now with part of the soul of Nevaeh inside, and inside the mind was the minds of the mother and the 4 girls that had her stolen, realizing he'd been staring. He kept his voice low. 'This whole thing. Is it a game? Just tell me.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'It's real, Noah.'

'Okay,' he said, too tired to fight, lying down on the open sleeping bag and pillowing his head on one arm. 'Wake me when it's my turn to be on the watch.'

HE DREAMED ABOUT a big building near a river billowing smoke from its towers. And then, his dream vision swooping forward, he saw a yellow-haired girl watching as her father spun beautiful things from bone china. Teapots were so thin and white that they seemed to glow from inside, covered in paper-fine china roses and lilies and leaves. Vases were so fine that it seemed like a breath would shatter them, painted with lots of real gold.

She grunted a yes. He closed his eyes.

Skylar.

At the thought of her name, she seemed to turn toward him, her large black eyes widening like she was the one who saw a ghost.

His vision seemed smeared, and he was in front of a big, drafty house, welcoming a skinny and pinch-nosed woman. He knew, without knowing how, that he was looking at Skylar's aunt and that she'd come down from the city to take care of Skylar after Skylar's mother had died six months past and it became clear that her father had no plans to remarry.

Children break things, her aunt said, and took away the dollies her father had made for her with spare clay, telling her they were too precious for her to keep.

Children are dirty, her aunt said, and forbade her from playing outside. She gave her chores instead, making her wash the windows and sweep the floors and move the furniture around.

Noah watched as Skylar swept the floors, polished the blue, and hid things under her bed. Clothespins that she marked with ink so it seemed they had eyes. A pillowcase tied with string so it seemed like it had a neck and head. In the dark of her room at night, when her father and her aunt had gone to their beds, she took them out and played with them, whispering to herself, calling them by the same names as her old dollies.

The aunt displayed them, along with less successful bone china pieces Skylar's father brought home from the factory. There was the bone china coffeepot wound with a vine that didn't curve quite right, resting on the sideboard in the dining room. There were sets of too-small teacups and a bowl with alligator feet that were too frightening and no one liked. There were countless vases marred by mistakes, that listed a little to one side or had gold paint that had smeared or blistered before they were fired or had three-dimensional flowers that had broken coming out of the kiln. Soon several mistakes rested on every side table, forcing Skylar to tiptoe through the parlor to avoid breaking any.

NOAH WOKE, BLINKING, to Jon sky overhead, dotted with puffs of clouds.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy of green and brown leaves, dappling the ground with bright spots and shadow. He heard a sound that reminded him of the ocean. He'd gone to

stay with his grandparents one summer after his dad left, and they'd stayed in a house by the beach. He'd woken up with the crash of the waves in his head every morning.

But this wasn't the ocean, he knew, and a moment later he realized it wasn't the Ohio River, either. It was the sound of the highway, of cars and trucks, whooshing past the woods, that sounded like breaking surf.

Noah sat up, blinking, stretching out his stiff limbs and looking around him. Rallie was asleep on the sleeping bag, wrapped in her coat, braids falling in her face, a few pieces of white fuzz or feathers dusting her skin. Harper was asleep too, her head lolling back against the tree. She'd fallen asleep on watch, Noah realized.

Now that it was daytime, he could see that the glass orbs were slightly too small for her eye sockets, leaving gaps in the corners. An ant crawled out from one of them, marching across her eye and up over her forehead into the thicket of her hair. Noah sprang up and scuttled away from her, his heart racing.

Turning, he saw the Princess resting in the dirt right behind his head, far from where she'd been the night before. Her black eyes were wide open, leering down at him.

There was more of the white stuff settling on the grass. It looked almost like snow, but then he realized what he was looking at. It was the inside of the sleeping bag. Something had ripped it, cutting the fabric and pulling out the lining, and scattered that, along with all their food.

Crackers were crumbled over the ground, and the chocolate bar was torn in half, pieces of gold foil scattered like confetti. He wondered who'd done this and then looked over at the dollie's empty eyes, the ant on her bone-white cheek.

Baby carrots were tossed around in the dirt. The peanut butter was smeared on the bark of a nearby tree, the jar resting against a rock as if it had rolled there.

As he stared a squirrel ran up to the open jar of peanut butter and stuck its furry body inside.

It didn't seem possible that they'd spent the night in a tiny stretch of woods in a town he didn't know. Looking back at the night before, at Harper and Rallie waking him up in the

middle of the night, the story about the Princess, the walk to the bus station, and making camp in the dark-all of those things felt distant like they'd happened to someone in a book.

Turning back to where the dollie rested, outside the circle of Harper's arms, he wondered about other impossible things. Had a ghost really trashed their campsite? Was Skylar watching him out of the Princess's glass eyes? A chill shivered up his spine.

Out in the middle of nowhere with an angry ghost and no idea how to get to her grave.

Oh yeah, they were in trouble.

CHAPTER NINE

'Five more minutes,' she mumbled.

'Stranded in East Rochester, Pennsylvania,' Noah said with a shrug, hoping that gesture would somehow convey that he shared her feeling that everything had gotten pretty weird.

'Rallie,' he said quietly, poking her upper arm. 'Something happened. Come on. Get up. You have to see this.'

NOAH WOKE RALLIE BY SHAKING HER SHOULDER UNTIL she groaned and rolled over. Her braids spread out on the slashed sleeping bag and more white stuffing got caught in her hair.

She opened her eyes and seemed surprised to see him there. 'Where...?' 'Whom...?'

Then, as she took in the state of their campsite, she turned back to him with her brow furrowed in further puzzlement.

He jerked his head toward Harper and then the dollie. 'Do you believe in ghosts?' he asked, keeping his voice low. 'Because I think I do now. For real and for sure.'

'It could have been raccoons,' Rallie said. Her expression grew more horrified as she looked around. 'I thought one of us was supposed to stay awake. Isn't that what you said last night?'

'Raccoons? Really?'

Rallie nodded slowly like maybe she wasn't so sure anymore. 'Or Harper did it. She was on watch.'

'She's not crazy,' Noah said. 'And she'd have to be totally crazy to do this. Anyway, I thought you believed her about the ghost.'

Rallie pushed herself to her feet and walked around the woods, shivering. 'This is too much. I don't believe this. Maybe animals ransacked the camp, or maybe Harper was mad at us for wanting to go back and was trying to convince us to keep going. Either way, it wasn't a ghost.' I do- I do…

'I did. I don't know. It was fun to play along.'

Noah said, but as he said it, he realized that it still did feel like an adventure-maybe even more than it had before-just not the same kind of adventure. He was scared. Little hairs were standing up along his arms, and he thought that maybe Rallie was scared too. That was probably why she didn't want to believe in ghosts anymore. 'It seemed like an adventure last night, right?'

But Noah wanted them to be real, wanted that desperately.

If they were real, then maybe the world was big enough to have magic in it. And if there was magic-even bad magic, and Noah knew it was more likely that there was bad magic than any good kind-then maybe not everyone had to have a story like his father's, a story like the kind all the adults he knew told, one about giving up and growing bitter. He might have been embarrassed to wish for magic back home, but there in the woods, it seemed possible. He looked over at the cruel, glassy eyes of the dollie, so close that she could have touched his face.

He thought about what Harper had said-about how if they didn't go on the quest right then, they never would. How if they faltered, they'd never come back.

Anything was better than no magic at all.

And he thought about his dream.

'I think it was Skylar,' Noah said. 'Maybe her spirit's angry that we aren't taking this quest seriously enough. Maybe she's mad that we got off the bus before we got to the right stop. Or maybe she's mad that you want to go home.'

'I bet Harper got that story about Skylar and the bones from one of her library books. I'm not trying to be mean. Harper makes everything more interesting, but sometimes she gets carried away, you know?'

'I'm sticking with the raccoon explanation,' Rallie said, picking up her coat and shouldering it on over her layers.

Harper, who'd been the last one awake and who wanted to convince them both to stay on the quest. Who might have thought it was funny to put the Princess so close to him, knowing it would freak him out? 'What about the ashes? Those were real. 'He thought about that, turning the words over in his mind. Rallie was saying raccoons, but the rest of what she said pointed to Harper.

Rallie nodded, but not in a way that was agreeing. 'I keep thinking about them. Maybe she took some ash from a grill and mixed in pieces of chicken bone. It was dark when we both looked at it. People fake that kind of thing on stage all the time.'

He'd just dreamed about what Harper described, like the way that after you see a movie, you sometimes dream yourself into it. He had no way to know if any of it was true or if it was just his brain regurgitating stuff.

He remembered that he'd wondered the same thing the night before, about whether it was all a trick, but somewhere along the way he'd become convinced, and he didn't want to give that feeling up. He wanted to tell Rallie about his dream and insist it meant that she was wrong, but he realized it didn't prove anything.

'Nope,' he said. 'I don't think so.'

Any food?'

Rallie seemed to have lost interest anyway, unzipping the front part of Noah's backpack and sticking her hand inside, fishing around. 'Do we have anything left?

Her hand came out of his backpack, her fingers clutching a folded-up square of paper. She began to unfold it. He knew exactly what she was holding.

'What's this?' she asked, distracted by her discovery. 'A note? What's in here? Secret boy stuff?'

'Give it to me,' Noah said, grabbing the paper.

Rallie stood up, still reading, the smile sliding off her face. It was replaced with an expression of astonishment. Noah could see the scrawl of his own handwriting across the page and doodles decorating the margins. 'These are the Questions Harper gave you. You answered them. You told her you didn't, but you did.'

'I guess I did. Can I have them back now?' He stood too, starting toward her. He lunged forward to grab the note from her hand.

She danced out of his way. 'But why would you answer them when you were going to-?'

Rallie never got to finish because at that moment Harper jumped up from the sleeping bag with a shriek. She was crouching, blinking in the sunlight, her hands outstretched like she was ready to fight. It was a move of surprising awesomeness.

'Harper?' Noah asked.

To his relief, Rallie folded the note twice and shoved it into the pocket of her coat, then walked over to Harper. They sat back down together. Noah could see that Harper was still breathing hard.

'I dreamed that I was Skylar. I fell-' Harper said, pressing her hands against her face.

Noah didn't speak for a long moment. He wondered if he was a bad person if he didn't say anything about his dream. He wondered if Rallie would think he was ridiculous if he did. The leaves overhead rustled. 'I think you better look around,' he said finally. 'Did she seem angry? Because it looks like something trashed our camp.'

Harper stood up and dusted herself off, going over to the Princess and lifting her up. The dollie's eyes moved to half-open, which made it appear as though she was watching them, the way his cat did when she was pretending to sleep.

'You think a ghost did this?' Harper asked finally, turning back toward them.

'It's classic poltergeist stuff, isn't it?' Noah asked.

'I don't,' Rallie said. 'I think it was raccoons. But I thought that you'd say it was a ghost.'

'She's not a poltergeist,' Harper said, as though Noah had suggested her brand-new box set of Doctor Who DVDs were bootlegs. 'And why would she toss out our food? Ruin the only thing we've got to sleep on? She wants us to take her to East Eaton. She's not going to make it harder for us.'

Noah thought he detected a note of uncertainty in her voice, though.

'Okay, whatever,' he said. 'You think it was raccoons too?'

Harper looked around and sucked in her breath. 'I don't know. What if it was Kanth Jones? What if he followed us?'

A shiver went up against Noah's back, ending with a twitch between his shoulder blades. He could too easily imagine that weathered, smirking face watching them from the darkness. But there was no reason for Kanth to have gotten off the bus, followed them, waited for them to falls asleep, then tossed around their stuff. No reason at all. They didn't have anything he wanted. He probably thought they'd all been grabbed by aliens and gotten their faces stolen.

But Skylar had plenty of reasons to be mad at Rallie and was probably frustrated that she wasn't already in her grave.

'Look, I want to figure out what happened as much as you do,' said Rallie, looking between them like she wasn't sure which side she was on just then-maybe neither of theirs. 'But can we please get out of here first? The woods are creepy and I have to pee and I'm hungry.'

'We passed that donut shop last night,' Noah said.

There wasn't much to pack up, so they didn't. The sleeping bag had been ruined along with the rest of their supplies, the long gashes making puffs of white stuffing well up with every gust of wind. The best they could do was gather up everything, roll up the wounded sleeping bag, and dump it all in one of the trash cans along the river.

Rallie nodded. 'Perfect. So long as they have a bathroom.'

No one else was there, but that didn't mean that no one else had been.

They walked back along the highway and managed to find a spot to cross that was less crazy than jumping over the median. Then they walked quietly, heads bent against the chill air. Noah could smell the melting sugar and rising dough of the shop blocks before he could see it. By the time he got to the door, he was practically drooling.

'How much money do we all have?' Harper asked.

'I've got fifteen dollars and fifty cents.' Noah had started with twenty-three dollars, but the bus ticket had cost him seven-fifty and it would be another seven-fifty to get back. Of the fifteen fifty he had, that left him with only eight dollars he could actually spend.

'I have twenty,' said Rallie.

'Eleven and a bunch of pennies,' said Harper. 'We should save something for later. For lunch and the trip back.'

There were cinnamon cider donuts, Boston cream and jelly crullers, chocolate sprinkle, rainbow sprinkle, maple cream, sour cream, old-fashioned, June-berry, toasted coconut, bear claws, and apple fritters. And then beneath the glass of the counter, stranger flavors-Froot Loops, peanut butter, ketchup, pickle juice, mandarin orange, honeycomb, lox and cream cheese, lobster, cheeseburger, fried chicken, wasabi, acorn flour, bubblegum, Pop Rocks, and spelled.

But as they opened the door, Noah's stomach growled, and saving money was the last thing on his mind. There were rows and rows of baskets along the back wall, each of them filled with a different flavor of the donut, their frostings bright under the lights.

The man behind the counter had a thick, wild head of black hair. It stuck up as though he'd been electrocuted, except where it crawled down his cheeks into sideburns. 'Get your kids

something?' he asked as the bell on the door rang. 'The wasabi donuts just came out of the fryer. They're still hot.'

They were also a muted green color and smelled spicy, like hot peppers.

'Uh,' Noah said, glancing at the menu. 'Can I have hot chocolate? A big one.'

He took his warm cup with its spirals of whipped cream to one of the small plastic tables. Rallie headed to the bathroom in the back while Harper ordered two more hot chocolates. They sat for a while, letting the heat of the paper cups warm their fingers.

Then they each ordered a donut. Noah got Pop Rocks, Rallie got maple cream, and Harper got Froot Loops. The crumbling cake was delicious, and there were real Pop Rocks inside that fizzed against Noah's tongue. He licked his fingers when he was done, forgetting that he hadn't washed his hands in a very long time.

The hot chocolates had been two-fifty apiece and the donuts were a dollar twenty-five, costing them each three seventy-five and leaving Noah with four twenty-five that he could spend for the whole rest of the trip. Harper had even less. He hoped she had at least twenty-five pennies, or she wasn't going to be able to pay her bus fare home.

Harper sat the Princess on a nearby chair. The dollie slumped, her head twisted on an angle, her hair rumpled as though she'd really been sleeping on it. Her half-closed eyes were bright with reflected light.

'If you died,' Harper said, keeping her voice low. 'Do you think you'd want to be a ghost?'

'Get revenge by doing what?' Rallie asked, laughing. 'You would be a disembodied spirit. What are you going to do? Yell 'boo!' at them? Try to convince them to go on a stupid road trip?'

'If I was murdered, then yeah, definitely,' Noah said. 'So, I could haunt my killer and get revenge.'

'I could throw stuff around,' Noah reminded her.

'Maybe,' Rallie said. 'I'd do it if I could be me, but see-through. The whole world would be like my television. I could visit the people I loved. But not if I had to repeat the same thing over and over again, like haunting some stretch of road or going up and downstairs.'

'Even if you couldn't talk to anyone?' Noah asked.

Rallie looked briefly uncomfortable. 'I'd definitely want there to be a ghost society with ghost friends.'

Harper pushed her hair back. 'Well, what if you decided you wanted to come back from the dead and then changed your mind, but you were stuck?'

Noah thought he'd better interrupt that line of conversation. 'Would you want to be a ghost, Harper?'

'You mean like how I'm stuck here in East Rochester?' said Rallie, and then she took a big swallow of hot chocolate.

I had something really important to tell him. Up there, I could see for what seemed to be miles-I could see the river and boats and the iceman's truck in front of a house down the street-but I kept slipping and catching myself on the copper gutters. And I heard this woman's voice from behind me, whispering to me, telling me I better get inside or she was going to make me sorry. She had a broom, and she was sticking it out the window, trying to hit me.'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. Lingering around, whooshing past people who'd never see me? It's scary to imagine things happening and me not being able to affect them. I keep thinking about the dream I had. It was like I was really her-I was climbing around on the slate tiles of the roof of this giant house, trying to keep away from the windows while I waited for my father to get home.

Noah thought about his own dream of the pinch-faced woman and the big Victorian house of flawed pottery. He wanted to tell her about the dream, but he felt a little silly about it. When he'd woken, it had seemed so obvious that the dream was real, that it had been given to him by their ghost. But now, in the warmth of the donut shop, after Rallie being so certain there was no ghost, he was unsure about everything.

'Do you think that was really what happened?' Harper asked, leaning forward eagerly like there was only one possible right answer. 'Do you think she's trying to tell us about her death? Imagine that the whole time she was in the cabinet, she was just waiting for one of us to take her out.'

Noah opened his mouth to describe his dream, but it seemed as though not telling Harper and Rallie what had happened to his action figures or why he didn't want to play made it hard to tell about other things too. It felt like everything was all mixed up together, weighing down his tongue.

The man moved behind the counter, dumping a fresh batch of peach muffins into a tissue-lined bin. 'No problem,' he called to them.

'Your blond friend sounds pretty hungry,' he said, coming out from behind the counter with a pink-glazed donut on a paper plate. He placed it down in front of the dollie. 'Here. On the house. It's Pepto-Bismol flavored. We're trying it out to see if it gets on the regular menu.'

'What?' Noah asked, confused.

As the man walked back into the kitchen, Noah could only stare at him. 'Did he-?' Noah whispered.

'It was just a joke,' Rallie said quickly, but she looked nervous. 'You know because we had a dollie. He was pretending it was real.'

'Because he thinks he's being some kind of cool adult.' Rallie took another sip of her hot chocolate and then pushed it away as it had burnt her. She shuddered. Noah thought uncomfortably about what Aubrey had said on the walk home from school way back when. Somebody walk over your grave?

'Why would he do that?' Harper asked.

Your blond friend. There was something familiar about the words, though, something that snagged in Noah's mind. 'No, wait. Kanth. That's what he said on the bus- 'I'm not going to talk to the blonde.' Because he didn't like the way she was looking at him. Remember?'

'I remember that,' said Rallie. Harper nodded.

'Do you think he was talking about the dollie too?' Noah felt cold, and the food he'd eaten churned in his stomach. He'd wanted the ghost to be real, but the more real Skylar seemed, the more scared he was. He tried not to look over at the Princess. He tried not to think about what it meant that she sounded hungry. He tried not to notice that her cheeks seemed a little rosier today like she was feeding on something other than donuts.

They had to bury her, and they had to bury her soon.

'Okay, well...' Rallie said. She checked the face of her cell phone, then took out the map. It was ripped down the middle, but she rested it on the table so all the streets lined up. 'It's ten forty-three now, and the next bus isn't until four-thirty. There's time and all, but I really have to be on that bus.'

'East Eaton isn't that far,' said Harper. 'Noah said so last night. We could still make it. On foot... Like real adventurers.'

They were all quiet for a long moment.

'I'm going,' Harper said, picking up the dollie and cradling it in her lap. Her cheek rested against its pale bone china brow. Its eyes seemed more open than before. Pale milk glass with a black center. 'With or without you guys.' Her voice was small, though.

Noah thought about all the food thrown around the woods, about the slashed sleeping bag. And he wondered what else a ghost could do.

Have you ever heard this one? When you drive past a cemetery, you have to hold your breath. If you don't, the spirits of the newly dead can get in your body through your mouth and possess you.

But he'd already decided. He wasn't turning back. 'I'm still up for an adventure,' he said with a nod. 'I'm in.'

So-o I am not going to be late. Okay?' Her voice got louder, and the words came out faster as she spoke, and when she finished there was a long silence. Rallie slapped her hands down on the table like she was calling a meeting to order. 'I'm not a coward. I care about adventures too, okay? It's not that. But I need to get home by tonight or my grandmother is going to lose her mind. She's going to call the cops. She'll make sure I don't go anywhere for months,

and she'll remind me of what I did whenever I ask for permission to do anything for the rest of my life. Forever.

'Okay,' Harper said finally.

'So-o, look, I want to go, but I want you to promise we'll get back home today. The bus leaves here at four-thirty, and I want you to promise we're not going to miss it. Promise that we'll turn around in time if we have to. Promise me that you'll get on it with me.'

'But what if we're almost there and-' Harper started.

'No way,' Rallie said. 'We still have to get to the graveyard and bury the Princess and find the bus station before the bus from East Eaton leaves-at three forty-five. If we make it to East Eaton and there's time, great, but remember that the bus leaves earlier from there. I'll come with you, but if it doesn't look like we'll make it, we all come back together.'

'Then I'm going to the bus station now,' Rallie said, pushing back her chair and standing. 'You and Noah can adventure by yourselves. I'm not going with you.'

Harper looked reluctant. 'I'm not going back without finishing this quest.'

'Wait,' Noah said, standing too and reaching for her. 'We started this together. We need to stay together. We can make it to East Eaton and still get home.'

'Harper,' Noah said.

Rallie folded her arms over her chest.

Noah put out his hand to pull Harper to her feet. 'We're already up. We're waiting for you.'

She sighed. 'Fine. But if we're going to make it by Rallie's deadline, we have to go now. And we have to go fast.'

Harper stood without letting him help, holding the Princess under her arm. 'You believe me now, don't you? About the dream. About the ghost. You believe me, right?'

Noah opened his mouth to tell her that he'd dreamed about Skylar too. But just then, Rallie said, 'Sure we do,' and the moment passed.

The frosting was sickly sweet, but it was the bitter taste underneath that stayed on his tongue.

Instead, he picked up the Pepto-Bismol donut and bit into it.

CHAPTER TEN

First, he'd pictured himself with a loyal steed that would have done most of the walking, so he hadn't anticipated the blister forming on his left heel or the tiny pebble that seemed to have worked its way under his sock so that even when he stripped off his sneaker he couldn't find it. ADVENTURING TURNED OUT TO BE BORING. NOAH thought back to all the fantasy books he'd read where a team of questers traveled overland and realized a few things.

He hadn't thought about how hot the sun would be either. When he put together his bunch of provisions, he never thought about bringing sunblock. Aragorn never wore sunblock. Sam never wore sunblock. Percy never wore sunblock. But despite all that precedent for going without, he was pretty sure his nose would be lobster-red the next time he looked in the mirror.

He was thirsty, too, something that happened a lot in books, but his dry throat bothered him more than it had ever seemed to bother any character.

And, unlike in books where random brigands and monsters jumped out just when things got unbearably dull, there was nothing to fight except for clouds of gnats, several of which Noah was pretty sure he'd accidentally swallowed.

Also, it wasn't like they were walking through the awesome vistas of Middle Earth-a forest full of Ent's or elves, a mountain pass brimming with orcs and ice-they were mostly walking past industrial buildings and a bowling alley. Eventually, the warehouses thinned out until it was just highway on one side and water on the other. They kept heading along the road, pausing occasionally to kick rocks or adjust their backpacks.

Rallie was walking ahead, with Noah behind her. She had a blade of grass and was trying to turn it into a whistle, a trick she claimed her uncle could do. So far all she'd managed was to make a lot of spitting noises.

'I had an idea,' Harper said, speeding her pace to draw even with Noah. She was still carrying the Princess, the dollie settled against her hip like it was a child. He tried to keep his gaze from going to it. 'About Tommesings. About who his father is.'

'You promised not to talk about the game.' He was tempted to, though. He wanted to know how the story would have ended since he'd never get to play it. And he was bored.

'No,' Harper said with a trickster's smile. 'I agreed not to ask why you stopped playing. And I didn't.'

Noah sighed. He was arguing because he thought he should, not because his heart was really in it. 'I guess I had some ideas too,' he admitted.

Harper looked at him with astonishment. 'You did?'

'He's my character, after all. But even if his father is the king of the whole Gray Country, he's going to stay a pirate. He's happy where he is, on the Neptune's Pearl. No dad is going to change that.'

Harper was looking at him oddly like she wanted desperately to ask why he thought about any of this stuff since he'd said he didn't want to play anymore. But for once, she was smart and didn't. 'Even if his father was the Jon of Deep winter Barrow?'

They didn't have a dollie to represent him, but Jon was a bad guy, through and through. They'd loved making up his crimes. He'd been raising a zombie army of broken dollies to march over the rest of the lands. He'd chopped off the heads of his enemies and abducted an evil priestess to be his duchess. Another action figure that Noah used to play had fought them over by the Blue Hills and nearly died. He was being healed by one of Rallie's dollies, in a temple, she'd made from a shoebox.

'That would be pretty good,' Noah said.

Harper looked flustered. She was good at making up stories, but she wasn't always good at accepting the stuff he and Rallie made up, no matter how awesome it was. It took her a little while to accept a universe she didn't have total control over.

'If Tommesings was Jon's son, then he could get close enough to assassiHarry him. Or maybe he could say that he was Jon's son-maybe he's really someone else's kid entirely. Maybe someone even better. Like an ancient pirate lord or some kind of monster.'

Rallie halted abruptly.

The path had ended. Up ahead, another big fat river flowed into Ohio, making it impossible to go farther. Two bridges spanned the river, but he could see that they were useless to three kids on foot. One was a railway bridge, rusted and abandoned, with large gaps where metal rails had fallen off. The other was a massive concrete three-lane highway, with a toll booth on one side and no room for walking on the shoulder.

'Well, that's that,' Rallie said. She had a strange expression on her face, half relief, and half disappointment.

If this was a book or a movie, they would meet a mysterious figure with a boat and that person would ferry them across. Like Charon. Probably try to trick them too-but if they were clever, they could make it. And if he was Tommy sings, he wouldn't need to be ferried across because he'd have the Neptune's Pearl-his two-mast-ed schooner-and all his crew. Noah sighed, gazing up along the waterway. There were shabby-looking marinas on either side of the big unknown river.

But in real life, those things didn't matter. He was suddenly aware of how tired he was.

'Let's go ask,' Harper said. 'Maybe there's a ferry?'

It was only a little afternoon, so they walked down to the marina. The few buildings-an oversized boat storage area, a lean-to, and an office-sat beside three long docks, with an array of boats separated by berms. Two little kids were leaning over the side of piling with a fishing net, watching something in the water.

'You want to split up?' Noah asked. 'See if we can find somebody who might know how to cross?'

'Okay,' said Rallie, glancing toward the office. 'Let's meet back here in five minutes.'

'I'm going to talk to those kids,' Harper said, turning to head in their direction.

As he wandered, he spotted an old rowboat, pulled up to one side of the dry dock and leaned against some pilings. The paint was chipped along the sides, and he didn't see any oars, but for a moment, he imagined them ferrying themselves across. As he got closer, though, he saw the hull had enough rot damage to keep it from being seaworthy. He didn't need to know much about boats to know it would leak like crazy if he put it in the water.

He walked a little way, inhaling the smell of diesel and river and tar baking in the sun. The day had turned warm, and Noah wondered if it would be possible to swim across. He wondered if Rallie had had the right idea, going into the main building. There was probably air-conditioning and maybe even a water fountains up there.

Despite reading tons about pirates and drawing the Neptune's Pearl in such detail that he'd figured out most of the rigging, and even building model ships, Noah had never been on a boat.

With a sigh, he studied the sleek motorboats, shaped like long cigars, and the towering, multilevel fishing vessels with tall antennae shooting off of them like whiskers on a cat. He couldn't imagine the sort of people who owned boats like that, but he was pretty sure that they didn't give kids rides just for asking.

He took another look at the rowboat and wondered if it might be possible to patch it. Maybe he could find some nails and wood glue and tar. And if that didn't work, then maybe they could boil water faster than the boat could sink?

'Noah!'

He turned at the sound of his name being shouted. Harper was standing next to the two kids with the net and waving him over.

'Brian's dad is trying to sell a dinghy,' she said when Noah stepped onto the dock. It dipped underneath him and he steadied himself, lamenting his lack of sea legs.

'Uh-huh,' he said warily. They had maybe fifteen dollars before they were dipping into the funds for the way back. 'How much does he want for it?'

'Twenty-five.' Harper glanced at Noah's watch and raised her eyebrows. 'But Brian said that maybe we could trade if we had anything he wanted. And he'll throw in oars.'

'There's no other way across?'

She shook her head, making her red hair flying around her. The sun had pinked her nose and deepened her freckles. 'There's another bridge, but it's more than a mile away. If we're on the water, Brian says we can make it to East Eaton in a half hour. Easy.'

Brian nodded. 'We go up that way to fish sometimes. It's not far,' the other kid said.

'Okay,' Noah said. 'Let's see this thing.'

Brian pointed to the one on the end, painted a slate gray. It was beat-up, but afloat, with no visible leaks. A lot better than the rotted-out one Noah had found near the dry dock.

Brian led them down to the end of the dock, where a few small dinghies and rowboats were moored. Three rowboats rocked gently beside one another, buffered by plastic fenders.

'Can you give us a second to talk it over?' Noah asked.

Brian shrugged and headed back to where his friend was manning the net, trailing it through the water like he was going to catch something by sheer accident. As Noah watched the kid go, he saw Rallie crossing the gravel-covered yard toward them.

Her coat was tied around her waist. She looked determined and sweaty and a little bit hopeful. Her angular face and thin eyebrows were utterly familiar, but he realized for the first time that she looked like one of those older, mysterious girls he wondered at sometimes in the mall, and that made her strange to him.

It was interesting watching her when she didn't notice herself being observed.

'I'll trade that, though.'

'All I've got is a necklace,' Harper said, touching the thin blue chain around her neck protectively. She wore a tiny typewriter key charm on it. He hadn't seen her without it since she'd gotten it from her father on her birthday.

'I've got my watch and a flashlight,' Noah said. 'And a book I'm pretty sure they don't want.'

I know you're going to be mad, but he said it was impossible, Harper.' She sighed. 'I'm sorry.' Rallie walked up to them, pushing back her braids impatiently. 'Hey, look, guys, I talked to an old guy up at the marina office. He said there was no way to walk to East Eaton.

'What if we don't go on foot?' Harper said, pointing to the gray-sh boat.

'Do we even know which way the current of the river runs?' Rallie asked. 'Or anything about boats?'

Noah itched to be on the water, even in the little dinghy.

Harper looked momentarily thrown, then she frowned. 'What's to know? We just row harder if the current is against us.'

'You promised we'd go back,' Rallie said. 'Both of you said that if we couldn't get to East Eaton in time to get the bus, we'd go back to East Rochester. Well, it's time to turn around.'

'Seriously?' Rallie asked them. 'You're really going to break your promises?'

Harper hesitated, and Noah stayed silent far too long.

'It's not that,' Noah said, looking longingly at the water. 'It's just that I think we can still make it.'

'Yeah?' he said, trying to sound like he didn't care-like he didn't even know what she was going to threaten him with. He did know, though, and he did care.

Rallie's expression hardened into a tight, unfriendly smile. Her eyes shone like chips of glass. 'Oh no, you have to come back with me,' she told Noah. 'Even if Harper doesn't come with us.' 'Tell me?' Harper asked. 'Wait, what do you mean? Tell me what?'

'I'll tell her,' Rallie said. 'That you lied, and what you lied about.'

'Nothing,' Noah said, stepping back from them. He took a deep breath of diesel and river muck. He couldn't think-all he knew was that if Harper found out about the Questions, she would never stop picking at his reasons for lying about them until the whole story came out. Imagining that filled him with nameless panic. 'Rallie is right about us promising. If she wants to go back, then-'

He remembered, too late, how much Harper hated her friends keeping secrets from her.

Harper interrupted him, looking at Noah like if she stared hard enough, she could read his mind. 'What don't you want me to find out?'

'It's nothing,' Noah insisted.

'Then tell me,' Harper said. She hesitated a moment, then looked at Rallie. 'Tell me.'

'No way,' said Harper. 'I could tell Noah something that I bet you don't want him to know, Rallie. I know a secret too.'

'Come on,' Rallie said. 'Give up. The game's over. We're going back. Let's all just go back. It was still fun. It was still a quest.'

Maybe Rallie had talked about how much she hated him or said that he smelled or how stupid he was. Maybe she had made fun of him to Harper, snickering behind his back.

Rallie's whole face changed. He wondered if he'd been so transparent if it had been as clear when he'd figured out just what he had to lose. And he understood, right then, why Harper was so upset about Noah and Rallie not telling Harper things. Because whatever Rallie didn't want Harper to say had to be pretty bad.

'You wouldn't do that,' Rallie said, her voice hushed. 'You're my best friend. That's a secret.'

'Just tell me,' Noah said. 'Come on. Whatever it is, I won't be mad. At least I don't think I'll be mad.'

Harper laughed, and Noah thought he saw a strange dancing light in the glass eyes of the dollie, as though the Princess was laughing too. When Harper spoke, her voice was different. 'She's not going to tell you. I win at blackmail. Rallie has to come, and since you apparently have to do what she wants, you have to come too. So come on, let's buy this boat.' She could be mean sometimes, but never before did she seem gleeful about being cruel.

'I don't care. You didn't care about me, and now I don't care about you either,' said Harper.

'You don't understand how much trouble I'm going to get in,' Rallie said, running her fingers through her braids.

'But you promised!' Rallie said, her voice anguished.

'I don't care,' Harper repeated.

Noah paced down the dock, too angry at everyone to be ready to give in to anyone, especially those kids with their fishing net who were going to try and talk him out of all the cash they had. And he looked back at the three rowboats and the dinghy, which, now, under his resentful gaze, looked increasingly shabby. He glanced at Rallie, who was staring at the water in an agony of indecision.

None of it was right. This wasn't how their quest was supposed to go.

He had read lots of stories where heroes succeeded in spite of long odds, where they accomplished a task that everyone else had failed. He wondered for the first time about all the people who'd gone before those heroes, about whether they'd been heroic too or whether they'd been at each other's throats before everything had gone wrong.

At the very end of the dock, Noah stopped. He drew in his breath.

He wondered if there was a point where they realized they weren't going to make it, weren't going to beat those long odds-that in the legend that would follow, they were going to be the nameless people that failed.

In front of him was a tiny sailboat, low and slim, only a little bigger than the dinghy, but made from fiberglass. A black-and-white striped sail was folded loosely around the boom, the symbol of a sunfish visible on the Dacron cloth. Someone must have just left it, intending to come right back, because the centerboard was pulled out and there were two life jackets piled together in the cockpit.

Across the stern was one word in a curling script: PEARL.

Noah jumped down onto the hull, his sneakers hitting the curved deck. The boat rocked wildly underneath him, and he had to pinwheel his arms and grab the mast to steady himself. With a grin breaking across his face, he looked up at Rallie and Harper.

'We're not buying anything,' he said. 'We're pirates, remember?'

Their twin expressions of disbelief only made his smile wider.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The boat rocked lightly. When her foot touched the edge of the deck, though, it tipped dangerously toward her. Noah threw his weight hard to the other side, hoping to balance it out. Harper staggered, falling on her knees with a yelp. After a few moments of wobbling, the boat settled. HARPER NEARLY CAPSIZED THE BOAT GETTING INTO IT. Noah sat in the center, fingers splayed against the hull, with his legs in the shallow cockpit as she climbed down rungs drilled into one of the pilings. First, she handed him her backpack, which he dumped next to his, in a small cavity under the centerboard.

'You're next,' Noah called up to Rallie. 'If Harper goes to the prow and I stay in the center, it won't be as hard for you to come aboard. At least I think it won't be hard.'

'Wow,' she said, trailing her fingers through the water and lifting them up like it was marvelous to be so close to the river and not swimming in it. 'We're actually doing this thing.'

'Let me cast off the lines first,' Rallie said, beginning to untie the boat from the pilings.

'I don't know if that's such a good idea,' Noah said. 'We can untie them from here and leave the ropes.'

Starboard was to the right and port was to the left. The boom was the other metal part that the sail attached to, making the L shape that swung the sail where it was supposed to be to catch the wind. And the rudder was the part that you steered with. But that was just vocabulary, and none of it would help him at all if he couldn't recall the principles.

Noah tried to remember everything he'd ever read about sailing, which was a lot. The prow was the point of the boat and the aft was the back end-he was pretty sure about that. And the stern was another word for the back end. The mast was the big thing sticking up from the center of the boat.

Rallie put her hand on her hip. 'What if we have to dock in East Eaton? We can't dock without a rope.'

At first, the Pearl swung closer to the piling, one of the boat's fenders bumping against the floats holding up the dock. But while Rallie scampered down the piling, the Pearl began to drift away from the dock.

He couldn't argue with that, but he could worry as the boat, no longer held by a line at its bow, began to angle more sharply in its berth. Then Rallie untied the aft line.

In books, Noah remembered, there was some kind of pole that you used to cast off, hooking on to the dock to hold the boat in place once the ropes were released, and pushing off with the pole when everyone was on. He didn't have anything like that. He scrambled to grab hold of piling, but it was too late.

'Jump!' Noah yelled to Rallie. 'Now!'

They were moving. They'd pirated a boat.

And she did. She pushed herself off the piling and half fell into the cockpit, making Noah have to crouch low to keep his balance. The boat sat lower in the river with a third person weighing it down, water sloshing up over the edges of the hull, but it didn't tip over. As Noah pushed off the far piling that marked the outer edge of the berth, he realized that they'd done it.

For better or for worse, they were on Beaver River, the current swinging them toward Ohio. The wind overhead gusted with the promise of good sailing.

And despite the fact that Rallie hadn't even wanted to come, she was laughing. You just let out the sail-Noah remembered that term and that it involved letting the sail billow, which must be done with one of the three ropes attached to the deck, although he wasn't exactly sure which one-and the sail filled with lots of air, which propelled the boat straightforward.

Sailing was supposed to be simple, so long as the wind was right behind you.

At least that was how all the books said it was supposed to work. But reading about it and doing it were completely different. He understood the theory, the ropes, the figuring out the wind, and the positioning yourself on the boat, but he couldn't seem to make the Sunfish actually sail. They sat in the water, pushed around by the current, spinning slowly.

But if the wind was coming from the side-which it usually was-then things was harder. You still caught the wind, but because of the keel on the bottom of the boat, instead of just moving away from where the wind was blowing, you mostly went straight. Mostly.

Harper was strapping herself into one of the life vests, while Noah flailed around, overwhelmed, pretending to know what he was doing, pulling on ropes and testing things out. She offered the other vest to Rallie, who took it grudgingly. Although Rallie seemed to have accepted that they were continuing on the quest, she clearly hadn't come close to forgiving Harper. It was a very tiny boat, but Rallie managed to sit as far from Harper as was possible.

Noah wanted to say something to them, to make them talk to each other, but it was hard to concentrate on that while he was pulling on lines to lift the sail. They were coming up on the two bridges. The first one was high enough not to present much of a problem, but the second had more pylons underneath it, and Noah wanted to be sure they steered wide of those.

He suddenly remembered that he hadn't dropped the rudder. Crawling to the stern of the boat, he pushed it down and grabbed the tiller so he could start to steer. Rallie started working on the sail. It billowed wildly, flapping back and forth, the boom swinging to the right.

'Tighten it,' he yelled, and she did, pulling the rope until the wrinkles went out of the sail. And suddenly they were moving. Spray splashed up off the water and wet their hair and faces like raindrops. The wind ruffled Noah's hair.

Starboard, some part of his brain reminded him.

Despite the fear of Harper finding out about the Questions and the weirdness of Harper and Rallie having some secret, at that moment he felt pretty happy. He loved the feeling of the river beneath them and ahead of them and behind them. He was the captain of a real ship; a real ship really called the Pearl. It was almost too much magic to bear, but for once he didn't question it. He threw back his head and grinned up into the Jon of the sky.

'We're going to flip!' Harper yelled. On either side the banks were green, occasionally punctuated with oil tanks and industrial buildings and a few stretches of houses. Rallie let out the sail more, and the boat sped, tilting starboard, the port side rising up and making them lean against it with their feet balanced against the edge of the cockpit, trying to flatten things out. They were cutting through the water, faster and faster.

'Hold on,' said Rallie.

Harper scrambled into the cockpit and got the Princess from her pack, zipping the dollie beneath her hoodie. 'In case we flip,' she said. 'I'm afraid of her going overboard.'

Noah pushed the tiller so that they moved to the left, and they slowed a little, flattening. The sail began to luff, flapping noisily, and Rallie tightened it to their new, slower speed. That had been exhilarating but also scary.

'Obviously, I don't,' Harper told him.

'Don't you think she'd be safer where she was?' Noah asked.

It took a while to get used to what made the boat move faster when to let out the sailor tighten it, what to do when the wind changed slightly (which it seemed to do every ten minutes), and how to stay out of the way of other boats.

Rallie raised both her eyebrows as if to remind Noah that Harper was crazy.

They sailed for what seemed like hours but was really only a single hour. Usually, when Noah was doing something, even walking, he could kind of zone out and think about other things. But handling the boat was like playing basketball-it demanded every bit of his attention. Maybe if he'd been more experienced at it, things would have been different, but half the time he was terrified that the boat was going to topple over because it was zooming along at such a steep angle. The other half of the time, the sail hung slack, and he barely could get it to move.

'Do you think Pearl 's owner has noticed their boat's gone?' Harper asked as they passed a rocky island rising up on the right-hand curve of the river. A few scrub trees grew on it.

Occasionally, a massive barge would pass by, sending a wake that forced them to grip on to anything they could as the sailboat careened from side to side, nearly throwing them off like a bull at a rodeo.

Noah shifted uncomfortably. When he'd played Tommy sings the Blade robbing people, he was always able to find a good excuse-mostly that that was bad guys-but in real life, excuses felt different. 'When we dock in East Eaton, we'll call the marina and tell them where

the Pearl is. The owners will be able to pick up the boat, so hopefully, they won't worry for too long.'

Rallie pointed to the island, clearly not listening to Noah and Harper. 'It seems like anything could be there, doesn't it? I bet no one has ever stepped foot on the shore. Imagine if there was a gateway next to one of those rocks and no one knew it because everything that goes there disappears.'

Noah looked at the island as they sailed past, imagining.

Around the curve was an industrialized stretch of river with houses along the eastern shore and pipes, tanks, and barges along with the other. Many were docked, and a few powerboats raced between them, making the water choppy. The constant rocking of the boat made it hard to steer. Noah's muscles were sore from leaning hard in one direction, and his clothes were soaked through with spray.

Rallie checked her phone.

'What time is it?' Noah asked her.

'About two forty,' she said. 'We've got an hour to get there and find the bus station.'

Harper looked over nervously. Even though this had started out as her plan, Noah thought that she looked as worried as the rest of them.

'This is taking longer than we thought,' Harper said finally. 'Longer than those boys said.' He and Rallie had gotten good at sailing the little boat. They were going faster, catching the wind and skimming through the water like a bike speeding downhill.

Noah was tempted to point out that it would have taken a lot longer if they were rowing, but he didn't. Even though they didn't have much time, he was still feeling pleased.

Noah leaned back and watched the shoreline, watched the woods turn to town and highway and then back to woods again, watched the few houses built close enough to the river that he could spot them. In other places, houses on the river would have been big estates with their own private docks and vast lawns, but there were regular houses like it was no big deal to live on the water.

The city beyond them reminded him a little of a more sprawling version of his town-a couple of nice Victorian houses with boarded-up windows and a sluggish central square. There was a small metal bridge, which the boat was about to pass beneath. He could hear the rattle of cars across its metal supports. Up ahead, the river curved south.

Then they passed more industrial buildings, these a lot older-looking, with crumbling chimneys reaching into the sky.

'Wait,' Harper said, pointing back at the town they'd just passed. 'You've got to turn around. That's East Eaton. That's the old pottery factory. Look.'

Noah half stood; he was so surprised. 'Turn around? Do you understand that the current is running the way we've been sailing? And the wind-if we turn about, we're going against the wind.'

'But we've got to go back.' Harper's eyes were wide. 'We missed it.'

'Okay,' he said. 'So, you swing the boom, and I'll pull the tiller.'

He looked at Rallie and he could see the blank terror in her face. She had no more idea how to turn a sailboat around than he did.

Rallie nodded. Noah steered toward the sandy bank to give them plenty of room to come about. 'When the sail shifts, we're going to have to change sides too,' he told Harper. 'So, get ready.'

The water was shockingly cold, and the impact of it rattled him down to his bones. He grabbed the side of the boat.

He pulled on the tiller, and Rallie pulled in the rope so that the sail tightened and swung. The boat turned in a single graceful movement, and then, with the wind and the current coming at them the wrong way and almost no idea what they were doing, the boat listed to one side and went over, dumping them all into the river.

Rallie sputtered to the surface. Harper was treading water, holding on to the mast and the sail.

Noah swam to the keel, which rose from the hull like a shark's fin. 'Get clear for a second.'

Noah threw his weight against the hull, and it righted itself, its sail lifting up off the water. He scrambled to pull himself on board.

Harper kicked away from the boat, dog-paddling toward Rallie.

Rallie lunged at Harper. 'This is enough. The end. Enough with the creepy dollie and the lying and the trying to make this true.' With those words, her hand darted out and snatched the dollie from where it was half zipped inside Harper's wet hoodie.

Rallie heaved herself onto the deck, and then both of them grabbed for Harper, who kept one arm pressed across her chest to hold the dollie in place even as she was hauled onto the boat. Another barge was passing to their left, creating a rippling wake that made their boat rock wildly again. And Noah could see that two barges followed it. For a moment they just drifted farther in the wrong direction, sail slack, holding on.

Harper screeched, and Noah gasped, but it was too late. Rallie threw it overhand, up and out toward the barge and the deep water.

Everything froze for a long moment. The Princess hit the waves with barely a splash, the water seeming to soak her dress in slow motion, drawing it down. Her hair spread in a golden wave, and her dull black eyes looked up at them as she bobbed for a moment before sinking in a froth of bubbles.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOAH DIDN'T THINK ABOUT IT, THE DOVE.

He kicked now, over and over, toward the Princess, reaching for her, opening his eyes in the murky brown river.

When he was a little kid, his mom had taken him to swimming classes at the YMCA. He remembered the bleachy smell of the chlorine and the feel of the orange swimming inflated too tightly against his upper arms and the way all the kids' shouting bounced off the ceiling to echo. And he remembered how to kick like a frog.

His fingers closed on a scrap of her dress. Striking his other hand out hard, he caught her arm and hauled her to him. For a moment the cold deadweight of her small china body seemed warm against his. Before he could think too much about that, he was swimming toward the surface. His head broke through the waves, and he sucked in a grateful lungful of air.

His whole body was shaking with cold. His teeth chattered. His toes had gone numb. Behind him, Harper and Rallie were fighting, but it was hard to focus on their words.

The sailboat was at a strange angle, closer to shore. The waves had carried it to shallower water, where the keel caught in the mud. The Pearl had run aground.

Then the wake of the barge hit, the waves sending him under again, this time without him holding his breath. He came up choking.

They were shouting at each other, but Noah didn't pay attention. The water was too cold, and it took too much energy for him to do anything but put his head down and swim.

The girls were wading through the shallow water.

He kicked and kicked and kicked.

Harper was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, looking bedraggled and miserable. Her lips were Jon with cold. Rallie had sloughed off her coat somewhere and had her arms around herself like she was trying to physically restrain herself from shivering.

Clutching the Princess to his chest, leaving only a single free arm with which to paddle, reaching the shore seemed to take forever. And when he finally got there, the bank of the Ohio River was muddy, sucking at his feet, making wading ashore even harder than swimming had been.

'The backpacks are gone,' Rallie said. 'They must have fallen out when the boat rolled the first time.'

He hadn't even thought about it. He didn't even remember deciding. He'd just known that if he didn't, he would lose something he wasn't ready to give up.

Noah sank down on the sandy, muddy bank and looked at the dollie in his arms. The Princess's dress was torn, and it seemed ready to disintegrate further as it dried. One of her arms

had been pulled free from the socket and was hanging limply from a dirty string. He stared down at her and wondered why he'd been willing to jump back into a freezing river to get her.

'What time is it?' Rallie asked. 'My phone's dead.'

He looked at his watch. The center of the crystal face had fogged up, but even if it had stopped, it couldn't be too far off. 'Three twenty.'

'We've got to get moving,' Rallie said, clearly panicked. 'Get up. We've got to go.'

As the Princess's dull black eyes rolled up at him, he remembered what Harper had said about breathing in the dead. Maybe when he'd opened up her bag of ashes, he'd inhaled some by accident. And if that was true, then maybe she could possess him anytime she wanted, just like the dead people who possessed you when you passed by graveyards. He wanted to drop her on the riverbank, but his hands wouldn't obey him.

Noah's feet felt like they were filled with lead. 'Rallie...' We're not going to make it, he wanted to tell her. There's no way. We don't even know where we're going. But he could see in her face that she already knew all those things. That she'd figured them out on the boat before she'd hurled the Princess into the waves.

Rallie walked with determination, and although Noah wasn't sure she knew where she was going, he and Harper followed her.

'How could you-?' Harper said to her but then bit off the end of the sentence as Rallie stalked off. Harper pulled the dollie from Noah's hands silently. He let her take it.

They stumbled through the woods and then along the side of an empty stretch of road, past a raggedy wire fence that looked like it was keeping zombies back after an apocalypse rather than cows. As they tripped over rocks and stumps, wet hair sticking to their faces and necks, soaked socks squelching in their shoes, the silence stretched between them, making him even more panicked. Noah kept looking at his watch, which wasn't running entirely right anymore but still seemed to be ticking along faster than he wanted.

At three fifty-four, when the bus was well and truly gone, she whirled on Harper.

They were all shivering. Rallie kept asking what time it was in a smaller and smaller voice. At three-thirty, she kept marching with grim determination. At three thirty-four, she sped up to a near run. At three thirty-seven, she started to cry, quietly and to herself. He reached out a hand toward her, but she gave him such a terrible look that he pulled back and let her alone. At three forty-three, she set her jaw and kept going.

'I thought maybe if she was gone, you'd go back to normal,' Rallie said. 'I know you're just making all this up. Stop acting like it's so important like you actually believe in it. Maybe you have Noah fooled, but you don't fool me.'

'You promised this wouldn't happen!' she shouted. 'You promised, and then you broke your promises over and over again, and now my whole life is going to be ruined because of you!'

'You never cared about the quest!' Harper shouted back. 'You threw Skylar into the water. You threw her away like she was garbage.'

'I don't-'

'Is that what you're mad about? About Noah?'

Harper whirled on Noah. 'She looooves you. That's her big secret. She wants you to be her boyfriend and go to the movies with her and make kissy faces. That's the only reason she even came with us.'

Noah took a step back, glancing over at Rallie, expecting her to deny it.

And it didn't matter anyway. They were all cold and miserable, and he had to do something before the fight they'd been having all along bubbled over into something so bad that it couldn't be taken back.

Her trembling hands went to cover her face. She and Harper were both shivering as hard as he was. But she didn't deny anything and he didn't have room in his brain to know how to process that. He felt a little embarrassed and a lot shocked.

Now I know why Noah is sick of you. He answered those Questions you gave him; you know. He obviously cares about the game, even if he's lying about it. He still wants to play.

He just doesn't want to play with you anymore. And you know what? I don't either. He hates you, and I hate you too.'

'Rallie-' he started, not quite sure what he was going to say, but hoping he'd figure it out as he spoke.

She shook her head, keeping her eyes on Harper. 'Of course, you would say that. You're horrible.

Then, as Harper stared at her, stunned, her skin flushed in that blotchy way it got, Rallie turned and ran from both of them. She pushed her way into the tangled brush of the woods.

'I don't hate you,' Noah told Harper. He hesitated a moment and then raced after Rallie.

He'd been hurt and mad and afraid of letting anyone see how he felt. But he'd thought they would go on being Harper and Rallie, playing the same game, being best friends, sleeping over at each other's houses.

He knew he'd been the bad friend, the liar, the one that had started everybody fighting.

He'd taken it for granted that he'd be able to go back to being friends later if he wanted, and everything would be the way he'd left it. He'd counted on that.

It didn't take long to find Rallie. She was sitting with her back against a tree, head tipped forward so that her wet braids hung in her face. He thought that maybe she'd been crying again, but he wasn't sure. The skin around her eyes was red and swollen.

But maybe he'd messed up everything.

'You didn't have to go looking for me,' she said.

He went over and sat beside her. 'Why did you say all that stuff?'

'You were really good on the boat. At sailing.' Which sounded lame now that he heard the words out loud, although it had made sense in his head.

She shook her head, not looking up. 'I don't know.'

Noah had no idea how to make things better. He wanted to ask her if it was true that she liked him, but he didn't want to make her more upset-and since she'd gotten pretty upset already, it probably was true. But he wasn't sure why she'd been willing to follow Harper onto the boat just to keep Noah from finding out. It wasn't an insult or anything. It was kind of a compliment.

She shrugged.

Noah hadn't really thought about asking a girl out in any kind of real way, but if he was going to ask a girl out to get pizza or play video games, he'd want her to be like Rallie.

The silence stretched until, unexpectedly, she broke it. 'It was fun.' She smiled lopsidedly. 'Sailing. Even if we capsized. And I can't believe you stole that boat.'

She didn't reply, and he didn't want another moment of awkwardness. He gathered his courage. 'I'm sorry about everything. We should have gone back before. You were right. I'll tell your grandmother it was all our fault.'

'We'll call the marina,' he said, only a little defensively. 'So, it'll only be stolen for a little while.' 'It doesn't matter. That's not even what I'm really mad about.' Rallie leaned her head against the tree. 'I mean, I am, but there's more.'

He waited, unsure of what she was going to say next.

Noah nodded... 'There was all that stuff with the donut guy and the crazy bus guy seeming to see her, and there was the camp getting messed up, and-and I had a dream about Skylar last night in the woods. Just like Harper. It wasn't the same dream, but it was kind of the same.'

'Do you think there's a ghost that talks to Harper?' Rallie asked. 'I'm not asking if you believe in ghosts. I'm asking if you believe in this ghost.'

'You did...?' Rallie didn't look happy to hear it.

'I should have said something before,' he told her.

'It's just-' Rallie looked down at her hands. She clenched them. 'I don't want to believe in Skylar. I don't want there to be a ghost that's talking to Harper-and now, to you.'

'You can't really be jealous-'

She cut him off, talking very fast. 'You don't understand. There can't be a ghost, a real ghost. Because if there is, then some random dead girl wants to haunt Harper, but my own dead parents can't be bothered to come back and haunt me.'

Rallie wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. They were wet and glittering with all the tears she was holding back. 'What if we bury the Princess and Skylar is really gone? What if we actually put her to rest? What if it's real? Does that mean that my parents didn't even care enough to say goodbye? I didn't even get a single stupid dream. Not one.' He felt like a jerk for not even considering it. Now that he had, he wasn't sure there was anything he could say to Rallie that wouldn't make him a bigger jerk. He was helpless.

Everything seemed to pause, as though the universe had taken a moment to draw its breath.

He remembered Rallie's parents only vaguely. He recalled sitting on a linoleum floor, playing Matchbox cars with Rallie in a sunny yellow kitchen while her mother made them toast with jam, her father wearing crazy ties to his job at the courthouse-and, of course, Noah remembered that they'd died. But he didn't think of them as dead, the way ghosts were dead. And he'd never thought about how it would be to go on a quest to dig a grave when your parents were already in one.

'Maybe after we die, we don't get choices like that.' He crouched down next to her. 'And it probably sucks to be a ghost.'

Snapping twigs made them both lookup. Noah stood. Harper was walking toward them, wearing an uncomfortable expression, half relief, and half dismay.

'I think I found the way to town,' she said.

Rallie snorted, the corner of her mouth lifting. 'Maybe,' she said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Noah and Harper and Rallie walked past him, still trailing water, their shoes making squelching sounds. Harper hugged the Princess to her chest, the dollie's face turned so that he

couldn't see if her cheeks had grown even rosier. Next, they passed a gaming store with a few bikes leaned against the pavement and a couple more chained to a nearby STOP sign. And finally, they came to a diner, the only restaurant they'd seen that was open.

They stopped to gaze at the menu on the door.

'I have four dollars and twenty-five cents-aside from the bus fare home,' Noah said. 'How much do you guys have?'

ALTHOUGH THE MAIN STREET OF EAST EATON was full of big store windows and shops, many were no longer open at all. There was a place called Pants Unlimited that was covered in flyers advertising FINAL SALE! on everything, since they were going out of business, but by the aged look of the flyers, they might have been going out of business for years. The store owner stood in the doorway, smoking a cigarette.

'That I can spend?' said Harper. 'Zero.'

'Eight seventy-five,' said Rallie, pushing up her dress to rifle through the pockets of the jeans she had on underneath.

'So, not much before we start dipping into our bus fare home,' Harper said... 'But something...'

Rallie looked grim at the mention of the bus, but didn't say anything, which was good, but also made Noah nervous. All the way from the woods, the three of them had only said things having to do with figuring out where they were going. He couldn't decide if the girls didn't want to fight anymore or if they were gearing up for an even bigger fight that was about to come.

Somehow, he'd become at the center of their conflict, and he could tell it was just a matter of time before they figured out that they didn't have to be mad at each other-he was the one they should both be mad at. He was the one who had messed up the game, the one who had hidden the Questions, the one who Rallie-the one who Rallie liked, which was weird too? It wasn't like he hadn't thought about girls or even as he'd never thought about Rallie like that. He had. But actually, asking her out? The idea was paralyzing.

'Okay,' Noah said, pushing open the door to the diner. 'Let's go in.'

A woman standing behind the register, her white hair in short beauty-parlor curls, looked them up and down skeptically, as though she was trying to decide if they were trouble. 'You can't track mud all over the place,' she said finally.

The dinner was warm, with a round display of desserts near the register that turned, showing huge cakes and pies piled with icing and oozing filling. There were little glass dishes of Jell-O and others of rice pudding studded with raisins, each one covered in plastic wrap.

Noah could smell something frying in the back, and his stomach lurched with hunger.

'Sorry,' said Rallie, taking a step forward, putting on her best-acting face. 'We were out racing our sailboat and got really into it. A little too much, I guess. We just wanted to get something warm to eat before we go back. The water was really cold.'

The woman behind the register smiled, like the idea of healthy outdoor activity had made their mud-stained appearance wholesome. Or maybe she figured that kids with sailboats had money, however bad they looked. 'Well, okay, but you go dry off in the back first. Table for four?'

'Three,' Rallie said, and the woman blinked in confusion.

Noah narrowed his eyes at the dollie, hanging limply in Harper's arms.

'Come on.' Harper took Rallie's arm and hauled her toward the bathrooms. As she walked, she looked back at the white-haired woman at the register. 'Table for four is fine.'

Noah went into the men's bathroom. There was a row of three urinals and a single stall, all in baby-Jon tile, with paintings of the Ohio River in the olden days hanging high on the walls. He walked over to the sinks, took off his shoes, and rinsed them off. Then he took off his jeans, wiped dirt and bits of grass from the cuffs, and tried to dry them the best he could with a combination of paper towels and a hand dryer.

They stuck to his legs, damp and chill. He looked back into the mirror, seeing a slightly sunburnt boy looking back at him, older than he remembered himself, with a familiar mess of brown-black hair and black eyes that seemed to say: I hope you know what you're doing.

Finally, he wrung out his shirt over one of the sinks, hand-combed his wet hair, and put his jeans back on.

When he left the bathroom, Rallie and Harper were already sitting in a banquette. They waved in his direction, and he slid in just as their waitress arrived.

She was only a little older than they were, with pink lipstick, blunt-cut black hair, and a nose ring. Handing over the menus, she paused to stare at the Princess, lolling beside Harper.

'Super scary.'

'Your dollie?'

The waitress said, pointing. Dirt from the riverbed was in the grooves of her nose and mouth and was turning her blond ringlets into thick clumps.

'Oh, yeah,' said Rallie, with a dark look in Harper's direction. 'The scariest.'

The waitress smiled, handed them the menus, and walked off. Noah was just glad that it seemed like she was seeing a dollie, instead of whatever Kanth Jones, the donut guy, and the Girl at the register had seen. He pushed the thought out of his mind and studied the menu. They had twelve seventy-five that they could spend and still get home-and that was budgeting on loaning Harper a quarter for her bus fare.

There were biscuits and eggs in white sausage gravy with hash browns, maybe big enough for them to split two plates three ways, for five dollars. But there was also a turkey bacon club sandwich that came with fries and slaw for a little more than seven dollars, and if they got water with that instead of sodas, and figured on a tip of a dollar, they would still have money left over. And there were the three eggs with hash browns and toast for three ninety-five-just enough that they couldn't afford it all around.

There was a bowl of chili for two ninety-five that seemed promising. You could get a side of fries for another two-fifty. Maybe if they got three orders of chili and one side of fries?

Thinking about what they could afford to eat was making his mouth water. If they didn't figure out something soon, he was going to order it all and have no way home.

'Be right back,' Rallie said, and headed off toward the counter, leaving him alone at the table with Harper.

'Maybe you should go after her,' Noah said. 'Talk.'

'Maybe you should go after her,' Harper told him, pushing loose strands of wet hair behind her ears.

Noah sighed. 'Don't be like that.'

'Don't be like what?' She stared at him unblinkingly. 'Are you going to tell me why you answered all those questions and then lied about it? Why you wouldn't play even one more time?'

'That doesn't make any sense.' She folded her arms and balanced her chin on them, watching him. 'I couldn't,' Noah said.

'I know,' he said miserably. 'I thought it would be easier-'

He broke off as Rallie came back to the table, holding a bottle of ketchup and another bottle of hot sauce. She opened her menu, scanning the prices.

'There are free refills on the sodas,' she said. 'We could get one and share it.'

'I asked about the bus, too,' Rallie said, not looking at any of them. 'Next one comes tomorrow, same time as today. I got directions to the stop. It's a couple of miles from here.'

'And be out a dollar seventy-five,' Noah said.

Harper was silent, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. The Princess's dark eyes shone in her mud-streaked face, and Noah couldn't help thinking that everything was going exactly the way she wanted it to, even if he had no proof of that.

Noah wondered if it was closer to where they'd fallen into the river, whether they'd gone the wrong way, whether they could have made it after all, but he didn't ask.

Noah felt better, having eaten something since the donut. Harper and Rallie must have felt better too because they were able to agree on the chili and fries, which they devoured down to the last little burnt, ketchup-and-hot-sauce-covered crisp of fry.

They were still studying the menu when the waitress came back around to take their drink order (tap water) and placed a basket of bread and margarine on the table. They fell on it, ripping apart the rolls, spreading them with margarine, and stuffing them into their mouths.

'I'm so tired,' Rallie said, putting her head down on the table. 'All the walking and the swimming and the being cold and miserable. I could go to sleep right here. Seriously, under this table. It would be more comfortable than sleeping on the ground was.'

'I know,' Rallie said, groaning. 'I'm stuck here, so I'm in for finishing the quest. But are we seriously going to a cemetery at night and digging a grave?'

'We're almost done,' Harper said softly. 'We've almost made it.'

Noah looked out the window at the street. The sun was still in the sky, but it wouldn't be for long. Rallie was right. By the time they figured out where they were going and actually got there, it would probably be pretty late.

'If we are going to go tonight, we need to get supplies,' said Noah. 'Something to dig with and a flashlight. All that stuff was in our backpacks, and now it's at the bottom of the Ohio River.'

Rallie inhaled sharply, and Noah followed her gaze. She was staring at the dollie. Its head was turned like it was looking out the window. Harper was looking in the same direction, mirroring the dollie's pose perfectly.

'Harper,' he said. 'Stop messing around.'

She turned back to look at them like she was oblivious. He hadn't seen her turn the Princess's head toward the window, but she must have. The dollie didn't move on its own-had never left the case, needed them to bring it to the grave. It didn't move. 'What...?'

Except for that time in the woods.

He really hoped it didn't move.

'You know where we're going, right? You know which cemetery we're going to, right?' He thought back to the moment before they got on the bus back home and how he'd asked her almost the samphire thing. The grave is under a willow tree. Skylar will tell us the rest.

Rallie looked about to say something scathing.

Harper nodded, not looking at either of them. 'Yeah.'

'You do, right?' Rallie asked.

'Of course,' Harper said, meeting their eyes, looking from Noah to Rallie. 'I just need a map.'

They paid the check with everything but the bus fare home, dumping the grimy pennies from the bottom of their pockets on the other coins and bills. The waitress smiled at them on the way out, and Noah smiled back, even though he knew they were completely broke.

Noah would have liked her to seem more confident, but then he would have liked her to stop being so crazy about the Princess and also maybe to stop acting like she might be occasionally possessed. Noah would have liked a lot of things.

'Hey,' Rallie said, reaching down past circulars and coupon flyers near the door to pick up a crude tourist map. It didn't have any graveyards on it, but it did have the pottery museum, a few antique pottery stores, and the Carnegie Library. 'Is this any good?'

'The library,' Noah said. 'They'll have really detailed maps. We could use this to get there.'

They walked down a few blocks until the library came into view, its stately front looking out onto the water. It was domed on top, with red stone making up the body and carved white stone trim on the windows.

According to the tourist map, the library wasn't far. Now that she was a bit drier and had eaten something, Rallie seemed almost cheerful. He guessed that at this point there was no way she wasn't getting in trouble, so maybe she'd just stopped worrying about it. She took the lead, Harper trailing behind Noah, holding the Princess as though the dollie had become very heavy.

'Who closes a library on the weekend?' Harper said, kicking one of the steps softly with the toe of her shoe.

It looked out of place, too grand for what surrounded it. It was also closed. It had been closed since one in the afternoon and wasn't due to open again until Monday morning.

Noah shrugged, then turned to see what Rallie thought. She was crouched near a basement window, pushing on the glass.

The window slid up a little way, and Rallie wedged her boot into the open space, scrambling to push it higher. It seemed stuck; probably the wood had swollen from changes in temperature and is unopened for years. 'What does it look like?' She said.

'What are you doing?' he whispered.

'Breaking into a government-owned building that we could get arrested for being inside of.'

'Well,' Harper said. 'Okay then.'

'Yup,' she said as the window slid up abruptly with a squeal. 'That's exactly what I'm doing.'

Rallie shimmied inside, hesitating once she was perched on the inner sill. The room was too shadowed for them to see what she was about to drop down onto.

'Rallie!' Harper yelped.

She jumped... There was a crash and a sound like something metal hitting the floor.

'Rallie,' Noah said warningly.

'Sh-h-h-h-h,' Rallie called back from the darkness, smugness filling her voice. 'See, I'm not so bad at quests after all.'

'That was amazing,' Noah said. 'Exactly what Girl Jann would do.'

'Well, come on then, Tommy sings.' Rallie's voice, from the dark, was eerily changed. It was like he was talking to Rallie and the character she played at the same time. For a moment he wasn't sure who that made him. And at that moment he wasn't sure who he wanted to be either, but he was grinning like an idiot.

He glanced back at Harper. She looked crushed like she was on the outside of glass looking in at something she wanted desperately. For a moment he felt bad, but he was too happy to feel that way for long. It was fun to act like Tommesings with Rallie, and it was fun to sneak into a building in the middle of the day when even scary things weren't that frightening. They were playing, and he could tell she knew that if she tried to play too, he'd stop. 'Desk,' she said. 'Wait a second.'

'What did you land on?' He called to Rallie, moving to slide his legs through.

He heard rustling and something else tip over, crashing and hitting the floor. Then the lights flickered to life, revealing a room filled with metal desks and filing cabinets, their surfaces covered in mounds of paper. Some kind of administrative storage area.

'Wow, what is all this stuff?' he asked, walking through space. Books were piled up next to lamps and old black-and-white photographs of the town in tidy black frames with engraved plates. Noah kicked off the wall, jumping wide of the desk that Rallie had probably hit; the paper was scattered around it, and one of its desk lamps was lying just above the floor, dangling from a cord. He landed near a tall filing cabinet, nearly stumbling into it as he tried not to lose his balance.

A bookshelf had been shoved against the back wall, and one of the shelves was filled with old pottery.

It was exhilarating to be somewhere they weren't supposed to be. Like being on the boat. A real adventure, like Tommesings and Girl Jann, would have had.

'Hey! Come take Skylar,' Harper called, holding out the dollie as she shimmied down through the window.

He did, putting the Princess on top of one of the cabinets. Lying on her side, the dollie's eyes watched Noah accusingly as he helped Harper down. As he did, a gust of cold wind blew through the room, scattering papers.

'We're not going to be able to close that without a ladder,' Rallie said, pointing at the window.

'It's too high up.'

Noah bumped his arm against Rallie's as they followed her. 'I guess you're not going to loot the place, huh, Jann?'

'We won't be here long,' said Harper, picking up the Princess and walking toward the door. 'Let's wait and see what we find upstairs,' she told him, grinning, as they stepped into the darkened hall.

The basement of the library was warm and smelled like wood polish and old paper.

Plus, there was so much to see. They explored the conference room, the bathrooms, and two more storage rooms on the basement level. There was an exhibit of china vases behind glass, and the whole cabinet shook gently as they ran past. Noah inhaled deeply. He felt like he could relax for the first time since they'd gotten on the bus.

They weren't cold and exposed as they'd been outside, and they weren't in front of people who could get them in trouble, the way they had been in the donut shop and at the dinner, or hanging on for their lives as they'd been on the boat.

Then they jogged up the steps and saw the vaulted ceilings, iron railings, and marble of the main floor. According to a legend on the wall, Carnegie was a famous philanthropist who'd been born super poor in a small Scottish town, made money in steel and used it to build libraries on the East Coast, among other good-deed-type things. In the picture, he looked like an angry old man with a short beard.

He didn't look like the kind of guy who liked stories, but Noah thought he must have had to, to have built so many libraries.

'Hey,' Harper said, calling to him from the second floor, where there was a rotunda that looked down on the reference desk on the first floor. 'Come check this out!'

He grinned and ran for the stairs, quest forgotten.

There was something about being alone in an empty building. There was something about racing up the stairs and hanging over the balcony, your shout bouncing off the walls. Noah and Harper and Rallie dashed through the upstairs gallery, through the big rooms. And without really ever saying so, they started playing. Not their old game, which was still contentious,

although Rallie and Noah slipping into those characters on the way in made it easier to slip into new ones.

First Harper and Noah pretended to be monsters hiding in their library lair when Rallie as the monster hunter came in. When they got tired of that, they went behind the back of the reference desk and rifled through the drawers, finding-in addition to pens, pencils, a flash drive, and a bunch of rubber bands-a pair of blue hoop earrings, a mystery novel with the cover ripped off, and an eraser in the shape of a delete key. At the desk, Noah was even able to call the marina and leave the promised message about the boat while Harper looked on.

She chased them around for a while, trying to slay them, before they ganged up and chased her back, threatening to turn her into a monster too. They slid across the floor in their stocking feet, hiding behind stacks and riding on the book carts, shrieking as they went.

Rallie found a break room with a small kitchenette. There was a coffeepot, tea bags and sugar packets, and a refrigerator that contained five slightly wrinkly apples, a low-fat yogurt, a dry-looking hunk of cheddar, and a nearly full package of Oreos. Four folding chairs surrounded a table covered in review copies of books that hadn't been released yet.

'Look at this!' Harper held up a book they'd all been waiting for one that wasn't due out for months.

'And no one's going to be in until Monday,' Noah said, sitting in one of the chairs and stretching out, dumping his damp jacket onto the table. 'We can sleep here tonight. We are going to be warm and dry, and it's going to be amazing.'

'We still have to go to the graveyard, remember?' Harper stood, all the giddy joy draining out of her. 'We can't get comfortable.'

Rallie snickered. He smiled up at the ceiling stupidly.

He sighed. It was true that he didn't want to go out into the cold either. And now that the end of the quest was so close, some part of him didn't want it to be over. He didn't want to go out into the graveyard and find out there wasn't any magic after all. It seemed easier to goof around in the stacks and worry about burying the Princess in the morning.

And just like that, all the fun of running around the library was over. Rallie's mouth pressed into a thin, resentful line as Harper stalked off toward the main room. Their feud was back on.

Rallie looked after Harper, scowling.

Noah stood up, pacing the small room. 'You guys have to make up. You're friends. You're supposed to be friends. You can't just talk, or talk in the weird not-talking way you've both been.'

Rallie shook her head. 'You don't understand. It's just-it's easy for Harper. She wants this one thing, and I better want it too. Either I'm with her or against her, you know? And she's like that about everything.'

'I don't think it's easy for her,' Noah said.

Rallie sighed. 'If she wants to be friends, then she can say so. I get that the quest is important, but it seems like maybe it's the only important thing.'

He found Harper at a long table, where she'd spread out several maps, an atlas, and a guidebook. She was standing on a chair, looking down on all of it. The Princess was resting at one end, lying on her side, limp arms outstretched.

Noah sighed again and opened the door to the main room of the library.

'Did you find it?' Noah asked.

She turned with a start. She must not have heard him come in.

'Here,' she said, stepping onto the table and walking over to one of the maps, where she crouched down and pointed. 'Spring Grove Cemetery.'

'You're sure?' asked Rallie, and it was Noah's turn to be surprised. He hadn't expected that she would follow him.

'I didn't have an aerial view in my dreams, but it looks right,' Harper said. 'We should go to tonight. There might be streetlights down there, and the moon is pretty full. Even without a flashlight, I think we can find her grave. And then it's over. I promise.'

'I'll copy the map,' Harper said.

Rallie rolled her eyes.

'Okay,' said Noah. 'Get me when you're ready.' He picked up a book of local history that Harper must have pulled from the stacks, and walked off toward a couple of couches he'd spotted near the picture-book section.

Flopping down, he flipped through the book, skimming over the section on local folklore. And there was a girl who got stood up on her wedding day and was found, weeks later, dead in her wedding gown. Legend had it that her bleached white skeleton ran around playing in traffic and grabbing people.

When Noah got bored, he slipped pieces of paper, on which he'd written cryptic words, between the pages. There wasn't any mention of a Skylar Stella or a haunted dollie, but there was a story about a Dutch girl who haunted a canal lock and a creepy little boy who hung himself.

A little while later he heard the quiet murmur of voices and hoped that meant that Harper and Rallie were making up. He thought that maybe he would just close his eyes for a second.

After all, they were going to be digging up a grave, and they were going to have to do it with scissors or sticks or whatever other tools they could find. THIS TIME HE dreamed that he was lying on a lawn, looking up at a big house. He couldn't get his legs to move. There was something wrong with his vision. It was darkening at the edges, but he could see enough to notice that there were shattered remains of porcelain dollies all around him.

It was going to be hard work. But it was going to get done; Noah was sure about that. So, he needed to rest a little. He leaned back on the couch, turning his cheek against the crook of his arm.

And then he heard a voice, which he knew to be Skylar's father. 'She looks just like one of them. She looks just like a broken dollie.'

WHEN HE WOKE up, a woman he didn't know was standing over him. She looked like she was about to scream, but he beat her to it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WOMAN BROUGHT HER THIN ARMS UP Defensively, as though his shouting was some kind of attack. He scrambled up onto the couch and then over it, landing on the other side. She blinked owlishly behind her bright-green glasses. She was about his mother's age, with short, curly, bright-pink hair.

Above her, light streamed in from the windows. It was Sunday morning. He'd slept through the whole night.

'Who are you?' Noah asked the woman.

Looking around, he spotted Harper and Rallie lying on the other couch, heads pillowed on opposite sides. They were both opening their eyes. Harper pushed herself up.

'I work here,' she said. 'I'm a librarian. I came in on the weekend like I always do I have to do my orders for new books, and it's easier when there aren't any patrons. Now, do you want to tell me what you three are doing here? And are you alone? I thought I heard something downstairs.' 'It's just us,' said Rallie, rubbing her face. 'We left the window open. You probably heard the wind.'

'Um,' Noah said, still dazed from sleep. Answers deserted him.

The librarian peered at the three of them more closely. 'You're lucky I didn't immediately call the police. How old are you?'

She turned to Rallie and Harper. 'Where exactly do your parents think you are?'

His brain was finally catching up to what was going on, and he realized just how much trouble they were in. 'Twelve,' he said.

Rallie shrugged.

'Well, we're going to go into the office and we're going to call them right now, okay? And you better not have vandalized this place, or I'm going to change my mind and call the cops after all.'

'We didn't mess up anything,' Harper said. 'Look around and see if we're telling the truth, and then if we are, you can let us go. We won't be any more trouble.'

Harper didn't seem to be holding her, which was unusual. He thought about the last time he'd woken up and found the Princess not where she'd been the night before, but when he glanced around the library, nothing else seemed amiss. The couches hadn't been ripped; there was no scattered stuffing and no tossed packages of food from the break room.

Adrenaline spiked through Noah. He considered running. If they all sprinted for the doors, he was pretty certain they'd make it. Rallie's shoes were off, which was a problem, but maybe she could grab them. And then there was the dollie.

'It's either we call your parents,' the pink-haired librarian said, 'or we call the police.'

'Come on in the back and I'll make you a cup of tea,' the pink-haired librarian said. 'You all look like you could use it.'

By that point, though, he'd lost his chance. The librarian was waving them up off the couches, and he couldn't catch either girl's eye, so if he ran, he wasn't sure they'd follow.

They must have seemed pretty scruffy as they shuffled to the break room in the same clothes they'd been wearing for a day and two nights. The cat ears on Rallie's hoodie were bent at odd angles, and there was ink smeared across Harper's cheek like maybe one of the pens she'd been using had started to bleed. Noah wondered if the librarian thought they were homeless kids. He wondered if telling her they were would make her let them go.

'You don't know?' Noah asked. He looked around again, as though somehow the dollie was going to materialize out of the ether.

Halfway across the library floor, Harper stopped. 'Wait, where's the Princess?' Her voice was high-pitched, panicked.

'A dollie,' Noah said. 'She's really old. Harper must have lost her.'

The librarian raised her eyebrows, as though waiting for an explanation.

'Well, where did you have her last?' Rallie asked Harper.

'Before that, she was on the map table,' Noah put in. 'Maybe you forgot-'

'I brought her with me when I went to the couch,' she said. 'I know I did. She was right there next to me when I went to sleep.'

'I saw the dollie,' Rallie interrupted, 'when we went to sleep. Someone must have gotten up and moved her.'

Harper started to go look when the librarian caught her arm.

'All of you,' she said with an impressive firmness. 'You will go into the break room, and then we'll deal with the missing dollie and your parents and everything else. The library is closed. If the dollie is here, we'll find it. Meanwhile, it's not going anywhere. Now, let's go.'

Noah really hoped the dollie wasn't going anywhere.

'I'm Jatherner Rausse,' she said. 'You may call me Miss Jatherner. Not Kathy, Jatherner.'

They sat down on folding chairs around the break-room table as the librarian put on the electric kettle. She looked through the cabinets until she found a package of Fig Newtons, which she ripped open and put in front of them.

'I'm Harper,' Harper said. 'Harper Bell. And this is Rallie Magnaye and Noah Ethan.'

Steam rose from each, along with the comforting smell of bruised leaves. 'We don't have milk, but I'll put the sugar on the table. Now, I am going to call my director and inform her of what's going on. I am going to lock this door, but I will be right back, so if you need to use the bathroom or anything, I promise that I will take you as soon as I return.'

'Very melodic names,' said the librarian, pulling mugs out of a cupboard. The water had heated quickly, so she was able to take out tea bags, drop one in each mug, and fill them with boiling water.

She went out, leaving them alone, the click of the latch signaling that she wasn't kidding about locking them inside.

Noah had no idea how they were going to get out of the break room. No idea how they were going to find the Princess. No idea how they were going to do anything but go home in disgrace, their quest forever undone. The idea of stopping now, though, when they were so close, grated on Noah. It drove him nuts that if they'd just gone to the graveyard last night-if he'd just been less lazy- the quest might be over and done.

Harper peered at her mug. Then, abruptly, she wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

Rallie sighed. 'It's not your fault. I'm the one who broke in.'

'And I'm the one who fell asleep,' Noah said. 'You're the one who kept reminding us, Harper. It's not your fault-'

Harper cut him off. 'That's not what I mean. I thought that we could do this thing, and when it was over we'd have something that no one else had an experience that would keep us together. 'You're going to be too busy thinking about boys and trying out for school plays and whatever to remember. It's like you're both forgetting everything. You're forgetting who you are. I thought this would remind you. And I'm sorry because it was stupid. I was stupid.' I can see you changing.' She turned to Noah. 'You're going to be one of those guys who hang out with their teammates and dates cheerleaders and don't remember what it was like to make up stuff. And you-' She whirled on Rallie.

'That's not fair,' Rallie said.

'Yeah, I didn't forget,' said Noah. Harper sounded just like his dad, except in reverse. He didn't want to forget, and he wanted everyone to stop talking like it was inevitable, like it would happen whether he wanted it to or not.

Rallie rolled her eyes. 'We're not zombies just because we like the stuff you don't.'

'No, you're right,' Harper said, her voice speeding up and getting louder like she was afraid she was going to be cut off before she got it all out. 'It's not fair. We had a story, and our story was important. And I hate that both of you can just walk away and take part of my story with you and not even care. I hate that you can do what you're supposed to do and I can't. Noah and Rallie were quiet for a long moment.

I hate that you're going to leave me behind. I hate that everyone calls it growing up, but it seems like dying. It feels like each of you is being possessed and I'm next.'

There was a long silence.

Before they could speak, the door opened and Miss Jatherner came in. Her glasses were hanging around her neck from a chain, and she looked a little nervous. 'I am going to assume that means we're going with the original plan.' She nodded to herself, her pink curls bouncing as she did. 'Now, who wants to call home first?'

'Well,' she said, 'the director wants me to tell you that if there's something wrong at home, we can call social services instead of your parents.'

Rallie stood up, pushing her chair back. 'I'll go. My grandmother's probably worried.'

'You sure?' Harper said. 'I can call first if you want.'

Rallie gave her a withering look. 'No, that's okay. Don't do me any favors.'

When they were gone, Noah drank his tea and ate five Fig Newtons, although they tasted like nothing in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed automatically.

'Are you mad at me?' Harper asked.

'How much trouble do you think she's going to get in?' Harper asked him.

'No,' Noah said. Then, after considering it a little more, 'Maybe.'

She slumped at the table and rested her head in a gesture that mirrored his. He thought about the way they'd all been friends for so long that they even shared mannerisms. He thought about how they'd met, years ago.

'Lots,' he said, putting his head down on his arms.

He thought about what Harper had said about growing up and losing themselves.

And how bad it would be if Rallie got in so much trouble that they could never see her again.

And how awful it would be if Rallie and Harper never made up.

He thought about what his mother and father were going to say when he called, and what he could possibly say back.

He was still thinking about those things when the door opened and Rallie came back in, wearing shoes. She looked grim.

He thought about the stories, all the stories. The ones they'd made up and the ones they never had.

'How was it?' Noah asked Rallie after a long moment. She had been fiddling with the electric kettle switch, turning it on and then off again, seeming lost in thought.

'Okay, Harper,' Miss Jatherner said. 'Your turn.'

Harper stood up and went out with only a single glance back.

'Oh,' she said. 'Weird... My aunt Linda was there. Grandma had called her. She'd wanted to go out looking for me yesterday after I didn't come back, but she knew she couldn't see very well at night. She was mad, but I don't know, she sounded different. Like she realized she was old for the first time.'

'You think you're going to be grounded forever?' Noah asked.

He didn't want to never see Rallie again. Before he chickened out, he blurted out the words. 'So, if I asked you to go to the movies with me or something-'

'Oh, yeah,' Rallie said. 'Forever and a day. Even if she lets Aunt Linda help out more.'

She leaned against the counter, glancing over at him, a smile lifting one corner of her mouth. 'Are you asking me out?'

'Yeah,' he said, wiping his hands on his jeans. His palms had started to sweat. 'Yes. Will you-'

'Yes,' she cut him off, saying the word very quickly, not looking at him. He wondered if she felt as awkward as he did. He was glad he asked and he was glad she said yes, but he was also glad she was grounded, so it wouldn't be happening soon.

The door opened, and they both jumped. Harper came in and threw herself into one of the folding chairs. She looked, if anything, even more, upset than Rallie had.

'You okay?' Noah asked.

'I need a ride,' Harper mumbled, putting her head in her hands again.

'What?' Rallie asked.

He stood and walked toward the door. As he was going out, he looked back at Harper. Rallie was standing behind her chair, hand on her shoulder. And at that moment he realized that he didn't want them to have to go back never having completed the quest. He wanted them to finish this thing the way Harper had imagined: together.

'I couldn't get my dad, and my mom's working until late. She asked if one of your folks could drive me.'

Miss Jatherner topped up her cup with more hot water. 'Noah, it's your turn.'

He watched as the librarian locked the break-room door. Then he followed her through the library to an office on the third floor, where there was a small desk, piled with more review copies of books and papers, scattered with pens. A folding chair with a padded seat rested in front of it and a cloth chair on wheels behind it.

'Have a seat,' she said, sitting down behind the desk. She picked up the phone and handed it over to him. 'You dial the number, but I need to talk to your parents. I'll tell them where you are, and then I'll hand you the phone. I'll go outside to give you some privacy unless you want me to stay here, okay?'

He nodded.

He reminded himself that he wouldn't care if they were upset. He was still mad about what his dad had done and how little his mother had cared. If he kept that in the front of his thoughts, then nothing they could say would bother him. He just wouldn't care.

The librarian took the receiver and started explaining how she'd found Noah sleeping on the couch in the Carnegie Public Library in East Eaton-yes, East Eaton, Ohio-and yes, he was

fine, he had two friends with him, and they were fine too. She gave the address of the library and some abbreviated directions.

Then she held out the phone to him.

He wiped his hands against his jeans and hoped it was true. He dialed and handed the phone over.

Noah took it and brought it slowly to his ear as Miss Jatherner went out the door, closing it softly behind her. 'Mom?' Noah said.

'It's me,' said his father. 'You all right?'

Noah's heart sped. 'Yeah, like she said. I'm fine.'

'I never meant to make you feel like you had to run away,' Noah's dad said softly. As soon as his father had picked up, Noah had expected a lot of shouting and the phone getting slammed in its cradle. But his father didn't sound angry. Noah wasn't sure why, but more than anything else, his dad sounded scared.

'That's not what I was doing,' he said. 'I was on a quest. I was going to come back to when I was finished.' Once Noah said the words, he knew they were true. He would have gone back. He'd just needed a little break.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, as though his father was not quite sure how to respond. 'So, this quest,' he said finally, tentatively. 'Are you done with it now?'

'Not yet,' said Noah. 'I thought I was, but I don't think that I am.'

'We're going to get in the car, and we're going to be there in two and a half hours. Do you think you'll be finished then?'

'I don't know.'

'Your mother's been really worried. You want to talk to her?'

Noah wanted to tell her that everything was okay, that he was fine, but he didn't want to hear her voice and realize how much he'd upset her. 'No,' he said after a moment. 'See you when you get here.'

His father gave a heavy sigh. 'You know I don't understand you.'

'You don't have to.' Noah just wanted the conversation over, before either of them said something awful.

'I want to,' his father said.

Noah snorted.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. 'I'm not good at this kind of thing, but even though I don't always get things and your mother tells me I don't know how to talk, I wanted to tell you that I've been thinking about what I did with those toys ever since it happened. It was a mean thing to do. I grew up mean, and I don't want you to have to grow up mean too.'

Noah was silent. He'd never heard his father talk that way before.

'When I saw you with those figures, I pictured you getting hassled at school. I thought you needed to be tougher. But I've been thinking that protecting somebody by hurting them before someone else gets the chance isn't the kind of protection that anybody wants.'

'So, I'll see you soon,' his father told him. 'Good luck with the quest.' He said the word as though it was a strange, unfamiliar shape in his mouth, but he said it.

'Yeah,' Noah said. It was all he could bring himself to say. He had no idea his father thought about anything like this. All the anger had drained out of him, leaving him feeling as fragile as one of those paper-thin china cups.

'Bye, Dad,' said Noah, and hung up the phone.

He sat there for a long moment, breathing hard. Something had shifted, something seismic, and he needed to be still long enough to have it settle inside of him. Then he stood up and went out the door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Noah looked under the sofa the girls had slept on and then under the one where he'd fallen asleep-after all, the last time he'd woken up, the dollie was resting right next to his head.

He knelt down with a shudder at the thought of her lying directly underneath where he'd slept, as though she might reach up to her tiny porcelain hands and drag him down through the couch cushions. She wasn't there, though.

The Princess wasn't under the table, either. She wasn't in any of the chairs, nor anywhere obvious on the rug. She wasn't anywhere he could see.

MISS JATHERNER WAS SHELVING A FEW BOOKS NEARBY and put them back on the cart when he emerged from the office. Her pink hair was as bright as the synthetic mane of a plastic horse.

'Everything okay?' She asked him.

'They're coming,' Noah said, trying to put the strangeness of his father's words behind him. 'Did you see Harper's dollie?'

She shook her head. 'I walked by the table where you left all those maps, but there was nothing else there. Do you want to take a look at yourself?'

Noah nodded and followed her to the couches. He noticed her shoes for the first time, bright yellow with bows. She didn't look like any librarian he'd ever seen before. In fact, she didn't look like an adult he'd met before.

He didn't feel her either, didn't sense the gaze of her dull eyes watching him from some corner of the room, the way he had when she was in the cabinet in Harper's living room.

While he searched, Miss Jatherner started gathering up the books and maps Harper had left on the table the night before.

'What was it that your kids were trying to find?' the librarian asked, frowning at him. He could tell that Miss Jatherner didn't know what to make of the story about the dollie. He wasn't sure that she even believed there was a dollie. If not, he wondered what she thought he was looking for.

He shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'It looks like someone was doing research on a cemetery near here,' said Miss Jatherner gently. 'Spring Grove? I saw a few pieces of copy paper with directions drawn on them

and scratched out. What's in Spring Grove Cemetery? You can tell me, Noah. I promise that I'll try to understand.'

That felt a little too real, there is a potter with a grisly story.

'Downstairs?' Noah took a few steps across the library floor before Miss Jatherner cleared her throat.

'I don't think so,' Miss Jatherner said. 'I let you look around, but enough is-a enough. Come on.'

'Have you ever heard a story, a ghost story, about a girl who jumped off her roof?' He hesitated, pressing the front of his sneaker against one of the legs of the table. He wanted to trust her, but he knew he couldn't trust her too much-she'd never believed him if he told her everything. 'Like under mysterious circumstances? Maybe one named Skylar Stella.'

Miss Jatherner shook her head. 'The only Stella I can think of was a fancy worker-a very well-known potter locally. We even have a display of his work downstairs, courtesy of the museum. There was a grisly story about him, but I don't know about any Skylar Stella.'

Noah remembered the wall of fragile-looking vases he'd seen in the basement. He'd run past them, not really looking at them, and now he was itching to know what he'd missed. He had to get down there. He had to. His heart started to pound with renewed hope. Maybe there was a secret there-a secret that might not help them to finish the quest but would prove that it was a real one. A real quest for a real ghost.

He concentrated on that as the librarian led him back to the break room and opened the door with the key sticking out of the lock. Inside, the girls were sitting at opposite ends of the table wearing near-identical expressions of worry.

'I am going to call the director back,' Miss Jatherner said, with a bright smile that might have been forced. 'Let her know that everything's been resolved. Then we'll figure out some lunch for your kids. It's almost noon.'

'Thank you,' Rallie said quietly.

'Thank you,' Harper and Noah echoed automatically.

The librarian went out, and Noah waited until he heard the turn of the key in the lock. Then he put both his hand's palm down on the table like he was going to give a speech.

'Okay,' he said, looking from one friend to the other. 'We need a plan. We need to break out of this room before the librarian comes back.'

Rallie stood up, looking a little confused, but hopeful. 'How?'

'It doesn't matter,' Harper said, staying seated. 'We don't have the Princess anymore. Even if we get out of here and I have no idea how we could do that we can't finish the quest without her.'

'We'll find her,' said Noah. 'I looked around where we were sleeping, and she wasn't there, but that doesn't mean anything. We can find her. We can do this. Are you sure you didn't bring her with you anywhere else? Anywhere?'

Harper shook her head. It seemed to Noah that giving them that speak about all the stuff she hated had drained away from the part of her that had driven her this far. Or maybe it was losing the Princess. Either way, Harper looked more defeated than he'd ever seen her. 'No. When I sat down on the couch, she was with me. I was worried about rolling over on her since she's so fragile, so I put her on the floor and hung my hand down to keep touching her. I would have known if someone moved her.'

'Creepy,' Rallie said. 'What is it with you and the Princess? You're always holding her and touching her. Don't you find the whole she-was-made-from-human-bones thing even a little bit, like, scary?'

Harper gave her a look.

'I don't mean it like that,' said Rallie. 'Not like you're being weird. Are you sure she's not doing something for you? Making you act like what she wants?'

'Oh, so now you believe in the possibility of a ghost,' Harper sneered.

He leaned against the wall, folding his arms and trying to concentrate. They could tell Miss Jatherner they had to go to use the bathroom all of them at the same time and then sneak out the window. The only problem was that Miss Jatherner probably wouldn't let them all use

the bathroom at once. Well, that and the fact that the windows in the basement were really far up the wall; they'd had to drop down during the climb in. And just one more problem-he wasn't sure there was a window in the girls' bathroom.

'We'll find the Princess,' Noah insisted, interrupting before they started fighting again. 'Just as soon as we figure a way out of this room. Which we will. In just a second an idea is going to come to me, and it's going to be a good one.'

Rallie stared up at the ceiling. Then she stepped onto one of the folding chairs, and from there onto the table.

'What are you doing?' Harper asked.

Rallie went up on her toes and shoved at one of the ceiling tiles. It moved over, showing the metal grid that suspended it. Beyond was only darkness, like the gap left by a missing tooth. 'I have an idea,' she said. 'Look at how low the ceiling is in here. And look at the door-it's different from the others; the knob is really shiny.'

'So?' Noah said, walking over and frowning at what she was doing.

'Everything else in the building is old, but here everything's new. This was built recently. I bet the drop ceiling hides an older, high ceiling, and there might be some venting or something to crawl through in the new wall.'

'You're really going to go up there?' Noah asked.

'Brace the table and I will,' Rallie said. 'It'll be just like climbing the monkey bars on the playground back in elementary.'

Noah stared at her in awed amazement. 'Do you even think this will work?' He asked.

She looked back at him. 'It works in the movies.' She jumped, caught the metal supports, and pulled herself up into the dark as though she was in gym class.

'Even if you get to the other side,' called Harper, 'the door's still locked.'

Noah started grinning. 'No. Miss Jatherner leaves the key in it. If she can get to the other side, she really can open the door. We're getting out of here.'

'Ow,' Rallie said from above them, muffled by the tiles still in place. 'I can't see the vent.'

'Maybe there isn't one,' Harper said. 'Come back down.'

They heard a metallic clang and a sharp yelp, then more clanging. Noah hoped against hope that Miss Jatherner's office was soundproof. Then the clanging stopped and there was a solid sound, like a body hitting the floor.

Harper looked at Noah, a kind of wild hope in her eyes. He grinned at her.

Then the door opened, Rallie standing on the other side and breathing heavily. 'Come on,' she said. 'Quick.'

'Okay,' said Noah. 'Here's the plan. We all go look for the Princess. I'll take the basement. Harper, you retrace your steps. Rallie, you take the stacks on this level. We all meet up on the side of the library-the one that's close to the street. Okay?'

'What if we don't find her?' Rallie asked.

'We have to find her,' Harper said.

'Since we're split up, we're not going to know who finds what, so we just have to cover as much ground as we can and then meet up.' Miss Jatherner might be back soon. She could have gone out for the promised lunch, but that still didn't give them much extra time. They had to be quick. 'See you guys in ten.'

Harper nodded and started toward the couches. Rallie saluted and headed for the stacks.

Noah walked down the stairs to the basement. He felt a little bit guilty knowing he had a reason for deciding to look for the Princess in the basement-a reason that only sort of had to do with finding her. He wanted to read about the Stella guy who'd made the pottery. He wanted to know if he was really some relative of Skylar's.

Suddenly the cabinet sprang to bright life. The pieces inside were made of some porcelain so thin that it was practically translucent and shaped into the most fantastical forms. There were teapots corded with garlands of tiny perfect flowers; egg cups shaped with a filigree

netting in the quatrefoil pattern of old church windows, all of it in shining gold, and vases with intricately shaped arms, their bodies painted with a delicate pattern of cherry blossoms. All the pieces seemed to glow from within, so thin and fine was the bone china from which they were made.

The basement was quiet, the only sound coming from the wind blowing through the window they'd left open. It was dark in the hallway, and he could see why he hadn't noticed the display: the lights in the case were off. He felt along the wall until he found the switch and flicked it.

They were just like the pieces in Noah's dream of Skylar, except that these were perfect.

Despite the successes of American potteries in East Eaton at the turn of the century, they have still considered no match for their European cousins. Patriotism and ambition pushed Wilkinson Clark China to make something unique, new porcelain was so fine that it would secure the place of their company as not just equal to but better than any the world over. They wanted to make art.

And there was a plaque in the center with a black-and-white picture of a stern-looking man standing near the river. It read:

Orchid Ware was the result of a collaboration between two men: Philip Dowling and Lukas Stella. Dowling was a pottery technician and a specialist in clay chemistry. He had considerable experience and was able to come up with the process that allowed Wilkinson-Clark to create a porcelain that was very thin but also possessed sufficient structural integrity for commercial production. Part of what made the porcelain so solid was the high percentage of bone ash from cattle bones that were de-gelatinized and then calculary at very hot temperatures.

Stella was an artist. Rumored to be difficult to work with and often found shouting at underlings or accusing them of spying on him, he was also a genius, able to coax beauty from clay. His steady hand, wild imagination, and myriad influences-Art Nouveau, Moorish, Persian, and Indian, as well as the English and German pottery of his childhood-helped him make Orchid Ware objects that were wholly different and altogether finer than any porcelain produced in East

Eaton before. Stella became obsessive, working around the clock and refusing to allow the sale of any piece that was less than perfect.

Orchid Ware took off immediately. Highlighted at the World's Fair in Chicago, it won numerous awards and stunned the international ceramics community. Immediately there was a demand among the discerning ladies of the day. Even the First Girl commissioned a piece. But despite the flood of orders, Orchid Ware turned out not to be profitable to produce. Each individual piece took too much time to complete, and many were destroyed in kilns built to fire much sturdier ceramics. Others broke during shipping. For every piece that survived, fifteen were either broken or deemed too imperfect to be salable. But despite the drain, Orchid Ware was on the company's finances, Wilkinson-Clark's pride forced them to continue producing it, even at a loss.

Then tragedy struck. Lukas Stella's daughter went missing in the early autumn of 1895. Quickly, though, sympathy turned to terror when blood and hair were discovered in his office in the factory and on leather, apron belonging to him. It was hypothesized that he had murdered his daughter and used the method of calcinating cattle bone to dispose of her body. This was backed up by the accounts of his late wife's sister, who had been a caretaker to the daughter, and who reported Lukas Stella coming home in an unhinged state of mind and locking her in one of the rooms in their large Victorian home. When she escaped from the room, he and his daughter were already missing.

Lukas Stella denied murdering his daughter, but gave no explanation for the evidence found in his workspace, nor an account of his daughter's whereabouts, saying only, 'I am not her killer, but I am the one who has given her new life.' Further questioning caused him to break down, screaming and weeping and insisting that his daughter 'was like an angel who fell to Earth and was 'his most perfect creation.' He was convicted of murder and sentenced to execution.

After his conviction, the production of Orchid Ware ceased. All told, pieces were made for less than three years, but are still avidly collected today and are very valuable. Every few years rumors surface of fantastical pieces made by Lukas Stella at the height of his madness-samovars, a working porcelain clock, and even a jointed dollie-although has given the fragile nature of Orchid Ware, these rumors are unlikely to prove true. Still, the mystique of Orchid Ware persists and will probably persist for many years to come.

This collection is on loan from a private collector.

Noah stared at the plaque. He read through it again to be sure he understood it, his own dream echoing in his ears. If what he and Harper had dreamed was true, if Skylar was real, then Lukas Stella didn't kill his daughter. Her aunt must have caused Skylar to falls off the roof, and Lukas- who, murderer or not, was clearly super crazy-must have found her body and decided that the only fitting tribute was to turn her into a dollie made from his precious Orchid Ware.

A shudder ran through him. It felt like electricity sparking over his skin.

Upstairs, he heard a sound like someone calling out-maybe calling a name. Miss Jatherner must be in the library looking for them. Noah didn't have any more time to worry about Lukas Stella. He had to find the dollie. He had to find Skylar.

Quickly he walked into the first room they'd come into from the window. It was carpeted in brown paper, making the floor seem covered in fallen snow. There was no dollie, though. Not on any of the filing cabinets or on the bookshelf on the far end or underneath the desks.

Crossing the hall, he went into another room, this one piled with boxes of books. He peered into each, but there was no sign of the Princess.

Then, not sure where else to look, he ducked into the girls' bathroom. He'd never been in the girls' room before, and there was something embarrassing about it. He definitely didn't want to get caught there. Looking around, though, it wasn't that different from a boys' bathroom. The tile was pink, and there were no urinals on the wall, just a row of three stalls and a single sink-but otherwise, it was identical. He walked toward the sinks and the mirror without much hope until he noticed the metal trash can be rest against one wall.

The Princess was there, lying inside the trash can, on a bed of wadded-up paper towels, her odd eyes staring up at Noah. He took a sudden, startled step back and met his own gaze in the mirror.

But even that was strange. Instead of his regular skin, he saw a face made from cracked white china with black holes where the eyes should have been. And when he opened his

mouth to scream, his reflection stayed perfectly serene, lips motionless on what seemed almost like a mask.

Then he blinked and he was looking at his own face. Everything was normal, except that his heart was hammering against his chest.

He told himself that maybe Harper had gotten up in the middle of the night and come down to use the bathroom. Maybe she'd been half-asleep and had left the Princess on a sink and the dollie had fallen into the trash. It was a weird explanation, but he was going to assume that was what had happened. Otherwise, he was going to have to accept that she'd lured him to the basement so he'd read her story. Maybe later he'd be okay with thinking about that, like once he was out in the sunshine again.

He was also going to assume that he'd freaked himself out and that's why he'd thought he saw something in the mirror-something that clearly wasn't there.

Noah leaned down and carefully took the Princess out of the trash. Holding her to his chest, he started to run out the door and up the stairs, hitting the front door of the library with his shoulder and plunging out into the cold autumn day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RALLIE WAS ALREADY WAITING ON THE SIDE OF THE library, squatted down and half-hidden behind a bush. She was about to say something when she spotted the Princess in his arms and jumped up.

'You did it,' she said in a half-whisper. 'You found her!'

He nodded vigorously. 'Where's Harper?'

They pelted down the street, racing through winding roads that led to Main. After a few blocks, Noah paused, panting. When he looked back over his shoulder, he didn't see Miss Jatherner anymore. He wasn't sure the librarian's bright-yellow shoes with the bows were the kind that you could run in.

But just as the words came out of his mouth, Harper rounded the corner of the building, running toward them. He caught a glimpse of pink hair behind her. 'Go!' she shouted. 'Go! Go!'

'We made it,' Noah said.

'You found the Princess.' Harper smiled at him. She hadn't smiled like that since before he'd lied to her about Tommy sings, since before they started the quest.

He felt the same elation he had aboard the little Sunfish: the certainty that they were going to make it and the pleasure that came from solving a problem that had only minutes before seemed insurmountable. Only now, looking back, did he realize how truly crazy their middle-of-the-night plan to find Skylar Stella's grave had been. But here they were, within minutes of the cemetery. They might turn out to be the kind of people who finished quests after all.

He found himself grinning back. 'I found something else, too. About her story. I think I know what she wanted us to find out.'

'Not now,' said Rallie, shaking her head. 'We've got to keep moving. For all we know, the librarian might be calling the cops.'

'Do you still have the directions to the cemetery?' Noah asked Harper.

Harper nodded. 'But we aren't going to make it there on foot. Unless-' Then she took off again, racing up Main Street.

They ran after her. She stopped in front of the gaming store, where a few bikes rested, some chained to a nearby pole and two leaned against a wall. She eyed them speculatively.

'You can't be serious,' Noah said. 'We're just going to-' picked one up and started to walk with it toward Rallie. 'You pedal,' Harper told her. 'I'll get on the handlebars. And I'll tell you where to go.'

Rallie nodded, throwing her leg over the bike and steadying it.

'No worse than taking the boat,' Harper said, climbing up onto the front of the bike. 'We'll bring them back. If we're fast enough, maybe whoever they belonged to won't even have finished their game yet.'

Shaking his head, he grabbed the other unlocked bike. Shoving the Princess inside his sweatshirt, and with one arm holding the old, creepy dollie in place, he mounted the seat and

pedaled off after Harper. They whizzed down the street, hair blowing behind them, his legs pumping harder and harder as they sped on.

'This way,' Harper shouted against the wind, a flimsy piece of paper blowing in one hand, the other arm extended to indicate an upcoming left turn.

At that thought, he felt something move inside his shirt.

Noah's bike wobbled, and he nearly crashed. He skidded to a halt instead, breathing raggedly. Rallie zoomed ahead, down the street.

'Stop it,' he told the Princess firmly, not caring if he sounded like a lunatic. 'I get that you're excited. I get that we're really close to the end. And I even get that you like to freak me out. But I don't have my bike helmet, and you're made of some super-thin Orchid Ware, so if we crash, we're both going to break. Okay?'

The dollie didn't move, which didn't mean anything since the squirming might just have been his imagination. He pushed off the road and started to pedal again just as Rallie and Harper rode onto the lawn of the Spring Grove Cemetery.

He followed them, dismounting and dropping his bike beside theirs on the soft grass near the entrance, wheels still spinning. The graveyard was a tidy meadow of trimmed hedges and orderly stones. They spread out over the hill that ran up against a wooded area. A path of white gravel veered along the side, barely wide enough for a car.

'Okay,' Rallie said. 'Now what?'

'We look for a willow tree,' said Harper. 'You know, one of the ones with the long branches and the leaves that hang down.'

Harper nodded. 'I think so, but I think regular willows have leaves that hang down too, just not as far.'

'A weeping willow?' Noah put in.

'Okay,' Rallie said. 'Depressed-looking trees. Got it. If it seems droopy and miserable at all, I'm calling you to confirm its willowy status.'

Noah unzipped his sweatshirt and glanced toward Harper. 'Hey. You want to go back to carrying Skylar?' Smirked... 'How come? Does she make you nervous?'

Harper put out her hands. 'I do, coward.'

Noah shrugged. 'I just thought that you'd want her since you brought her all this way. But if you don't-'

He handed over the Princess with great relief. Now when he looked at her, he couldn't help but believe she really was made from the bones of a dead girl. It made touching her shuddersome. He didn't care if Harper teased him. He didn't want to carry the dollie through the cemetery surrounded by dead people.

Noah forced a laugh as they walked through the quiet graveyard, past flowerpots, and wreaths, past statues to fallen soldiers and memorial benches and a large expanse of grass dotted with bronze grave markers. They passed fat oak trees, a smallish collection of pine trees, and something that Noah thought might be a locust tree, but which was definitely not a willow.

'Yell if you see anything,' said Rallie. 'Like willow trees... or zombies.'

'I don't see the tree,' Rallie said finally. 'Are you sure this is the right graveyard?'

'We're missing it somehow,' said Harper nervously. She couldn't keep still, running ahead of them and then back again. 'We have to be. The grave is supposed to be under a willow tree.'

They kept walking, crossing the same ground, staring at the same trees.

'Maybe we should just look for the name-for Stella,' Noah said. He wanted to tell them about the plaque in the library, but he wasn't sure how much time they had, after all, Miss Jatherner had seen the maps of the cemetery.

'It's not here,' Harper said finally, her voice very small. 'I really thought-after you found Skylar back at the library-I really thought that the grave was going to be here. I thought it was going to work.'

'Yeah,' she said. 'I could be wrong about that. I could be wrong about everything.'

Noah flopped down on the grass in front of a large memorial. He'd thought the same thing. 'Could you be wrong about the graveyard? I mean, could there be a different one in East Eaton?'

'What do you mean?' Rallie asked, hopping up to sit on a granite headstone and folding her legs under her. 'Don't give up. We're so close.'

For a moment they were quiet. It felt like the Earth had tilted on its axis, for Harper to say that. She'd been the reason they'd come all this way, the reason they'd slept in the woods, sailed a boat down the Ohio River and escaped from a library. She'd been the one who believed, no matter what. Noah had never imagined she had any doubts.

...Remained standing, pacing back and forth on the grass. 'Maybe I made it all up. All the stuff I said. I really did dream about her. But the rest... I don't know. It felt true when I said it. But I wanted it to be true so much that maybe I convinced myself it was.'

Fury rose up in him, terrible and formless. It felt like coming home and finding his figures gone all over again-as if something had been snatched away and he couldn't get it back.

Rallie took a quick breath like she was swallowing her need to scream 'I knew it!' at the top of her lungs.

No magic... Just a story.

But he'd dreamed about Skylar and he'd seen the plaque on the wall of the library. He'd felt her move and he'd seen her bones.

So maybe Harper was just like Rallie and him, doubting herself sometimes. Maybe all that meant was that she didn't know everything.

'Look, I think the ghost is real,' Noah said.

'Maybe I just tricked you,' said Harper miserably.

It just figured that Harper would be as stubborn about being talked back into believing something as she was about being talked out of believing things. 'What about the guy on the bus and the donut man both saying something about there being a blond girl with us? And even the Girl at the diner asked if we wanted seats for four. What about that?'

Harper folded her arms. 'The first guy was crazy. The second guy was kidding. And the dinner thing was a coincidence.'

'What about the camp getting trashed?' Rallie asked.

'You never thought that was because of the ghost,' said Harper. 'You never believed in Skylar, Rallie, so don't try to pretend.'

'Did you do it?' Rallie asked her. 'I didn't believe it because I thought maybe it was you.'

'No!' Harper looked genuinely shocked.

'Well, then,' said Rallie. 'Look, I didn't want to believe, but I have to admit that a lot of weird things have happened, and you have to admit it too.'

Noah took a deep breath. 'Remember when I said I found something back at the library? It was an exhibition of pottery-of the pottery that a Lukas Stella made-and there was information on his life. He supposedly murdered his daughter, but they never found the body.

That can't be a coincidence. He must have been her father. And I think the secret that Skylar wanted us to discover was that it was her aunt who killed a her-the woman in the dream who chased her around the roof with a broom.

She fell to her death, and her father took her body and made it into a dollie because he was clearly some kind of a head case. But he didn't kill her, even though everyone thought he did. And the whole thing proves that you're right. That your dreams are real.'

Harper looked at him skeptically. 'Maybe I read the story before-maybe I read about it and then forgot it, so I made up a different version of what happened.'

'Oh, come on,' Rallie said. 'That's ridiculous.'

Noah shook his head. 'I had a dream, too, that night in the woods. About Skylar. It was... like yours. Rallie, tell her.'

'Okay,' Harper said. 'Maybe Noah is lying to make me feel better.'

'You had a dream?' Harper's incredulity stung. He remembered how many times he'd spoken to her in that tone of voice since they'd started this journey and was suddenly very sorry. 'How come this is the first time you're mentioning it to me? And anyway, if they couldn't find her body, would she even have a grave? Maybe there's nothing to find.'

'Fine,' Noah said, running his fingers through his hair. 'What do you want me to say? We can't find the weeping willow. I don't know what to do either.'

Rallie slid off the stone and hugged Harper around the waist, resting her chin against Harper's shoulder. 'It's okay. It was still an adventure, right? Our last game.'

The words went through Noah like water. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. 'There's something I have to tell you. Before we go back. I might as well say it now, while Harper's already mad at me.'

Harper and Rallie looked down at him, something in his tone signaling that whatever it was would be important. They watched him as if he was a snake, rearing back to strike.

'When I said that I didn't want to play anymore-' He stopped, not sure he could go on. 'It wasn't true exactly. My dad threw out all my- He threw out everything. All of them. Tommy sings and Tristan and Max. Everybody. So, it's not so much that I don't want to play. I can't.'

There was a long silence. 'Why didn't you tell us?' Rallie asked finally.

'I couldn't. I couldn't, because if I did, then-' He stood up, wiping his eyes. 'Look, I'm sorry I didn't tell you. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the dream. I don't know why I didn't.'

Harper just stared at him, her eyes as hard as the Princesses.

'Okay,' he said, taking a few steps back. Tears were burning in his eyes already, and he was suddenly sure there was no way they would understand. He felt stupid for telling them. He felt stupid for crying. If only he'd kept his mouth shut, everything would have been fine. 'How about we all make one more sweep? We can meet back here in a couple of minutes.'

'Noah,' Harper said. 'Wait-'

He didn't want to hear how the quest was all his fault, how she would have never taken the Princess out of the case if it wasn't for his lie; he already knew. He staggered off before she could finish, long legs carrying him over the uneven ground. He passed rows and rows of marble stones, heading deeper into the old part of the cemetery, where the markers were chipped and weathered. There he flopped down in the grass and let himself cry in big, heaving sobs.

Saying the words out loud-saying what he'd been avoiding this whole time, that Tommesings and the rest of them were gone forever, that the game had been taken away from him, that he still wanted to play but couldn't-hurt. It ripped away from the fog of numbness and even though it hurt, for the first time since he'd lost his figures, he was ready to let go.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he finally stopped crying. It was a beautiful day-crisp, the way early falls days can be warm but have an occasional chill wind. The sky overhead was as Jon as spilled ink from a pen. Leaves shivered above him.

He leaned back and watched the clouds blow across his vision.

'Hey!' he heard Rallie shout. 'He's here.'

'We were worried,' Harper said, standing over him and looking down. 'We thought you would come back after a minute, and then we thought you would come back after ten minutes, but you didn't.'

'I've been a jerk,' Noah said. 'I know. We've all been mad at each other, and I know a lot of it is because of what a jerk I've been.'

Harper sat down next to him. 'You should have just told us.'

'I know,' he said. 'Are you mad?'

Harper nodded. 'Of course, I'm mad! But I guess I'm less mad than when I thought you didn't care about any of it.'

He looked over at Rallie. She was staring at one of the stones as if maybe she didn't want to look at him. 'What about you, Rallie-?'

'Get up,' she said suddenly. 'Get up! Get up! Look!'

Harper jumped up and hauled Noah to his feet.

Rallie was pointing to a stone he'd been lying in front of on the grass. 'You found it! Noah, you actually found it.'

The large marble headstone bore the word STELLA on it, and over that, a carving of a willow tree. They stared at it, incredulous smiles giving way to genuine grins and laughter.

It made him feel, for a moment, like maybe no stories were lies. Not Kanth Jones's stories about aliens. Not Dad's stories about things getting better or things getting worse. Clearly, not Harper's stories about the Princess. Maybe all stories were true ones.

Harper knelt down, pushed aside some weeds, and traced smaller words at the base. 'There are names here-it's a family plot. That's why the stone is so big. There's Lukas. And someone named Hedda-that must be Skylar's mother. And look-a blank spot. An empty place for Skylar.'

'We did it,' Rallie said, her voice soft as any prayer. 'The quest is complete.'

'We have to give her a good funeral,' said Noah. 'We came all this way. We have to do it right.'

Rallie and Harper nodded.

Rallie's job was to find flowers. She didn't want to take them from other graves, so she picked some toad lily and goldenrod and turtlehead that grew in the woods at the edge of the cemetery. She braided all the stems together to make a garland for the Princess and then made another little bouquet to leave behind once they were done.

And so, they decided that Noah would dig the grave, which he did mostly with his hands, but also with the assistance of several sticks and a long, flat piece of slate that was sharp enough on one end to cut through roots. It took some time, but he was able to hollow out a space big enough for the dollie to rest comfortably.

Harper's job was to prepare the dollie for burial. She rubbed the dirt off the porcelain with spit and the cleanest edge of her T-shirt. Then she took off her hoodie and wrapped Skylar in it like it was a shroud.

Harper placed the dollie in the hole in the ground and smoothed the hairs around her face. One of the dollie's eyes was open, staring up at them, but the other was closed. Harper cleared her throat.

Finally, they were ready.

'Skylar,' Noah said. The words came easily, the way they did when he was playing, but he felt entirely like himself. 'You must be one determined ghost to get us to come all this way. I know we didn't always do the best job, so thanks for not quitting on us. I'm glad you chose us to be your champions.'

'Skylar,' she said, 'we think that you were about our age when you died and that no one really knows your true story, only that something terrible happened. We're going to keep trying to discover the truth for you. We hope you can rest easy now. You're home with your family.'

'Skylar,' Rallie said softly, stepping forward. 'I only ever knew you as our Princess, so that's how I am going to talk to you. We, your loyal subjects, quested far to bring you to this place and have gathered here this day to bid you farewell on your journey. I'm glad you're finally free from your tower.'

She leaned down to place the garland around the dollie's neck. Pink petals fell on the Princess's dress and hair.

'The Princess is dead,' she said. 'Long live the Princess.'

They clasped hands, and then Harper knelt down to begin covering Skylar with dirt. The first handfuls covered her face, leaving her fingers, her cheeks, and her forehead bare. More earth fell until she was covered completely.

'Good-bye, Skylar,' Harper whispered as Rallie set the bouquet she'd made on top of the soft, new-turned earth. A few petals fell, dusting it gold.

Noah felt the wind rise, like the wind he'd heard singing through the trees the night he'd run home from basketball practice. He felt the same chill at his neck and he shivered, but this time he didn't run. He let it pass over him, racing on and upward. And he thought he heard, very distantly, the sound of a girl laughing.

Smiling, Noah looked out at the lines of graves as they turned to walk back to the road.

Rallie kept pace with him. 'I keep thinking about what Harper said, about us all changing. We are, aren't we?'

Harper shivered in her T-shirt. 'You guys are.'

Noah wrapped an arm around her shoulders. 'You're cold because you gave your jacket to a ghost, and you don't think anything's different about you?'

Harper snorted, but she didn't pull away. 'That's not what she means. I'm just different like weird. We had this adventure together, but now we're going to go back. And I'll be the same, but you guys will keep changing.'

'Quests are supposed to change us,' Noah said.

'How about real life?' asked Harper.

Rallie picked up a blade of grass and folded it in her fingers. 'What's that? Seriously. This was real. This was a story that we lived in. Maybe we can live other stories too.'

In the distance, Noah saw two cars pull into the graveyard. He recognized Rallie's aunt's blue Toyota, with his mom's beat-up green Nissan behind it. As they drew closer, he saw the shadow of his father in the passenger seat.

'This was our last game,' Harper said. 'This is the end of our last game.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Noah. 'With the Princess gone, the kingdoms are going to be in turmoil. Lots of people want her throne, all of them willing to manipulate, scheme, and battle to get it. And with Tommesings and so many other hero's dead, it's going to be a different world. A world in chaos. Maybe we can't play it the way we used to, but we could still tell each other what happens next.'

'Chaos, huh?' Asked Rallie, a slow grin spreading across her face. 'Sounds like fun.' she asked.

Harper smiled a familiar scheming smile, her eyes alight with new hope. 'You want to play?'

A memoir from the trunk years later…

'It all ended by me become the Dollie, looked like she was inside it I found a new body, to linger inside…'

Nevaeh

Book: 26

1st Base

So-o…

Please; please don't say anything to Margot about it.'

He nods, but that's not good enough. I need a verbal commitment. I need to hear the words come out of his mouth. So; I add; 'Do you swear? On your life?' If Margot was to ever find out - I would want to die.

'All right; I swear. I mean; we haven't even spoken since she left.'

I let out a huge breath. 'Great. Thanks.' I'm about to walk away; but then Josh stops me.

'Who's the guy?'

'What guy?'

'The guy you're dating.'

That's when I see him. Marcel Kavinsky; walking down the hallway. Like magic.

Beautiful; dark-haired Marcel. He deserves background music; he looks so good. 'Marcel.

Kavinsky. Marcel Kavinsky!' The bell rings, and I sail past Josh. 'I've gotta go! Talk later; Josh!'

'Wait!' he calls out.

I run up to Marcel and launch myself into his arms like a shot out of a cannon. I've got my arms around his neck and my legs hooked around his waist, and I don't even know how my body knows how; because I've for sure never touched a boy like this in my life.

It's like we're in a movie and the music is swelling and waves are crashing around us.

Except for the fact that Marcel's expression is registering pure shock and disbelief and maybe a drop of amusement because Marcel likes to be amused. Raising his eyebrows; he says; 'Lara Jean? What the… Hell?'

I don't answer. I just kiss him.

My first thought is- I have muscle memory of his lips.

My second thought is- I hope Josh is watching. He has to be watching or it's all for nothing.

My heart is beating so fast I forget to be afraid of doing it wrong. Because for about three seconds; he's kissing me back. Marcel Kavinsky; the boy of every girl's dreams; is kissing me back.

I haven't kissed that many boys before. Marcel Kavinsky; John Ambrose McClaren; Allie Feldman's cousin with the weird eye, and now Marcel again.

I open my eyes and Marcel's staring at me with that same expression on his face. Very sincerely I say; 'Thank you.' He replies; 'You're welcome;' and I hop out of his arms and sprint off in the opposite direction.

It takes all of the history class and most of English for my heart rate to slow down. I kissed Marcel Kavinsky. In the hallway; in front of everybody. In front of Josh.

I didn't think this thing through; obviously. That's what Margot would say; including and especially the 'obviously.' If I had thought it through; I would have made up a boyfriend and not picked an actual person. More specifically; I would not have picked Marcel. He is literally the worst person I could have picked because everybody knows him. He's Marcel -; for Pete's sake. - of Gen and-.

It doesn't matter that they're broken up. They're an institution at this institution.

I spend the rest of the day hiding out. I even eat my lunch in the girls' bathroom.

My last class of the day is the Gym. With Marcel. Coach White gives us a reintroduction to the weight room, and we have to practice using the machines. Marcel and his friends already know how to use them; so, they separate off from the group and have a free-throw contest, and I don't get a chance to talk to him. At one point he catches me looking at him and he winks; which makes me want to shrivel up and die.

After class is over; I wait for Marcel outside the boys' locker room; planning out what I'm going to say; how I'm going to explain it. I'll start out with; 'So about this morning-;' and then I'll give a little laugh; like how hilarious was that!

Marcel's the last one to come out. His hair is wet from a shower. It's weird that boys take showers at the school since girls never do. I wonder if they have stalled in there or just a bunch of showerheads and no privacy.

'Hey;' he says when he sees me, but he doesn't stop.

To his back I hurriedly say; 'So about this morning -' I laugh, and Marcel turns around and just looks at me.

'Oh yeah. What was that all about?'

'It was a dumb joke;' I begin.

Marcel crosses his arms and leans against the lockers. 'Did it have anything to do with that letter you sent me?'

'No. I mean; yes. Tangentially.'

'Look;' he says kindly. 'I think you're cute. In a quirky way. But Gen and I just broke up, and I'm not in a place right now where I won't be somebody's boyfriend.'

So-o…

My mouth drops. Marcel - is giving me the brush-off! I don't even like him, and he's giving me the brush-off. Also; 'quirky'? How am I 'quirky'? 'Cute in a quirky way' is an insult. A total insult!

He's still talking; still giving me the kind eyes. 'I mean; I'm definitely flattered. That you would like me all this time- it's flattering; you know?'

That's enough. That's plenty enough. 'I don't like you;' I say; loudly. 'So- there's no reason you should feel flattered.'

Now it's Marcel's turn to look taken aback. He quickly looks around to see if anyone heard. He leans forward and whispers; 'Then why did you kiss me?'

'I kissed you because I don't like you;' I explain like this should be obvious. 'See; my letters got sent out by someone. Not me.'

'Wait a minute. 'Letters'? How many of us are there?'

'Five. And the guy I do like got one too.'

Marcel frowns. 'Who?'

Why should I tell him anything? 'That's - personal.'

'Hey; I think I have a right to know since you pulled me into this little drama;' Marcel says with a pointed look. I suck on my top lip and shake my head and he adds; 'If there even really is a guy.'

'There is so a guy! It's Josh Sanderson.'

'Doesn't he go out with your sister?'

I nod- I'm surprised he even knows this. I didn't think Josh and Margot would be on his radar. 'They've broken up now. But I don't want him to know I have feelings for him - for obvious reasons. So - I told him you were my boyfriend.'

'So- you used me to save face?'

'I mean; basically.' Basically exactly.

'You're a funny girl.'

First- I'm cute in a quirky way; now I'm a funny girl. I know what that means. 'Anyway; thanks for going along with it; Marcel.' I flash him what I hope is a winning smile and turn on my heel to go. 'See ya!'

Marcel reaches out and grabs me by the backpack. 'Wait- so Sanderson thinks I'm your boyfriend now; right? So, what are you going to tell him?'

I try to shrug him loose, but he won't let go. 'I haven't figured that part out yet. But I will.' I lift my chin. 'I'm quirky like that.'

Marcel laughs out loud; his mouth opens wide. 'You really are funny; Lara Jean.'

MY PHONE VIBRATES NEXT TO me. It's Chris.

'Is it true?' I can hear her puffing on her cigarette.

'Is what true?'

I'm lying on my bed; on my stomach. My mom told me that if my stomach hurt; I should lie on my stomach and it would warm up and feel better.

I don't think it's helping; though. My stomach's been in knots all day.

'Did you run-up to - and kiss him like a maniac?'

I close my eyes and whimper. I wish I could say no because I'm not the kind of person to do that. But I did do it; so, I guess I am. But my reasons were really good!

I want to tell Chris the truth, but the whole thing is just so embarrassing. 'Yeah. I went up to Marcel- and kissed him. Like a maniac.'

Chris exhales. 'Damn!'

'I know.'

'What the hell were you thinking?'

'Honestly? I don't even know. I just - did it.'

'Shit. I didn't know you had it in you. I'm kind of impressed.'

'Thanks.'

'But you know Gen's going to come after you; right? They may be broken up;

but she still thinks she owns his ass.'

My stomach lurches. 'Yeah. I know. I'm scared; Chris.'

'I'll do my best to protect you from her, but you know how she is. You better watch your back.' Chris hangs up.

I feel even worse than before. If Margot was here; she'd probably say that writing those letters was pointless in the first place, and she'd get on me about telling such a big lie. Then she'd help me figure out a solution. But Margot's not here; she's in Scotland - and even bigger than that; she's the one person I can't talk to. She can never-never-never know how I felt about Josh.

After a while; I get out of bed and wander into Kellie's room. She's on the floor rifling through her bottom drawer. Without looking up; she says; 'Have you seen my pajamas with the hearts?'

'I washed them yesterday; so, they're probably in the dryer. Tonight; do you want to watch a movie and play Uno?' I could use a cheer-up night.

Kellie scrambles up. 'Can't. I'm going to Alicia Bernard's birthday. It's in the schedule notebook.'

'Who's Alicia Bernard?' I plop down on Kellie's unmade bed.

'She's the new girl. She invited all the girls in our class. Her mom's making us crepes for breakfast. Do you know what a crepe is?'

'Yes…'

'Have you ever had one? I heard they can be salty or sweet.'

'Yes; I had one with Nutella and strawberries once.' Josh and Margot and I drove down to Richmond because Margot wanted to go to the Edgar Allan Poe Museum. We ate lunch at a café downtown and that's what I had.

Kellie's eyes got big and greedy. 'I hope that's the kind her mom makes.'

Then she dashes off; I guess to find her pajamas in the laundry room downstairs.

I pick up Kellie's stuffed pig and cuddle it in my arms. So even my nine-year-old sister has plans on a Friday night. If Margot was here; we'd be going to the movies with Josh or stopping by the cocktail hour at the Belleview retirement home. If my dad was home; I could maybe get up the courage to take his car or have him drop me off; but- I can't even do that.

After Kellie gets picked up; I go back to my room and organize my shoe collection. It's a little early in the season to switch out my sandals for my winter shoes, but I go ahead and do it because I'm in the mood. I think about doing my clothes too, but that's no small undertaking. Instead; I sit down and write Margot a letter on stationery my grandma bought me in Korea. It's pale blue with a border of fluffy white lambs. I talk about school, and Kellie's new teacher, and a lavender skirt I ordered from a Japanese website that I'm sure she'll want to borrow, but I don't tell her any of the real things.

I miss her so much…

Nothing's the same without her. I'm realizing now that the year is going to be a lonely one because I don't have Margot, and I don't have Josh, and it's just me alone. I have Chris; but not really. I wish I'd made more friends. If I had more friends; maybe I wouldn't have done something as stupid as kiss Marcel K. in the hallway and tell Josh he's my boyfriend.

I WAKE UP TO THE sound of the lawnmower. It's Saturday morning and I can't fall back to sleep; so now I'm lying in my bed staring at my walls; at all the pictures and things, I've

saved. I'm thinking I want to shake things up. I'm thinking maybe I should paint my room. The only question is; what color?

Lavender? Cotton-candy pink? Something bold; like turquoise? Maybe just an accent wall?

Maybe one marigold wall; one salmon pink. It's a lot to consider. I should probably wait for Margot to come home before I make such a momentous decision.

Plus; I've never painted a room before, and Margot has; with Habitat for Humanity. She'll know what to do. On Saturdays; we usually have something good for breakfast; like pancakes or frittata with frozen shredded potato and broccoli. But since there's no Kellie and no Margot; I just eat cereal instead.

Whoever heard of making pancakes or frittata for just one person? My dad's been awake for hours; he's outside mowing the lawn. I don't want to get roped into helping him do yard work; so, I make myself busy in the house and clean the downstairs. I Swiffer and Dust-Buster and wipe the tables down, and all the while my wheels are turning about how I'm going to get myself out of this Marcel K. situation with even a sliver of dignity. The wheels turn and turn, but no good solutions come to mind.

When Kellie gets dropped off; I'm folding laundry. She plops down on the couch on her belly and asks me; 'What'd you do last night?'

'Nothing. I just stayed home.'

'And?'

'I organized my closet.' It's humiliating to say that out loud. Hastily I change the subject. 'So did Alicia's mom make sweet crepes or salty ones?'

'She made both. First; we had ham and cheese and then we had Nutella. How come we never have any Nutella?'

'I think maybe because hazelnuts make Margot's throat itch.'

'Can we get some next time?'

'Sure;' I say. 'We'll just have to eat the whole jar before Margot comes home.'

'No problem;' Kellie says.

'On a scale of one to ten; how badly do you miss Gogo?' I ask her.

Kellie thinks this over. 'A six-point five;' she says at last.

'Only six point five?'

'Yeah; I've been really busy;' she says; rolling over and kicking her legs up in the air.

'I've hardly had time to miss Margot. You know; if you got out more; maybe you wouldn't miss her so much.'

I boomerang a sock at her head and Kellie explodes into a giggle fit. I'm tickling her armpits when Daddy comes in from outside with a stack of mail.

'Something came back return to sender for you; Lara Jean;' he says; handing me an envelope.

It's got my handwriting! I scramble up and snatch it out of his hands. It's my letter to Kenny from camp. It came back to me!

'Who's Kenny?' Daddy wants to know.

'Just a boy I met at church camp a long time ago;' I say; tearing the envelope open.

Dear Kenny; It's the last day of camp and possibly the last time I will ever see you because we live so far apart. Remember on the second day; I was scared to do archery and you made a joke about minnows and it was so funny I nearly peed my pants?

I stop reading. A joke about minnows? How funny would it have been?

I was really homesick but you made me feel better. I think I might've left camp early if it hadn't been for you; Kenny. So; thank you. Also; you're a really amazing swimmer and I like your laugh. I wish it had been me you kissed at the bonfire last night and not Blaire H.

Take care; Kenny. Have a really good rest of the summer and a really good life.

Love; Lara Jean I clutch the letter to my chest.

This is the first love letter I ever wrote. I'm glad it came back to me.

Though; I suppose it wouldn't have been so bad if Kenny Donati got to know that he helped two people at camp that summer- the kid who almost drowned in the lake and twelve-year-old- Lara Jean Song Covey.

WHEN MY DAD HAS A day off; he cooks Korean food. It's not exactly authentic, and sometimes he just goes to the Korean market and buys ready-made side dishes and marinated meat, but sometimes he'll call our grandma for a recipe and he'll try.

That's the thing- Daddy tries. He doesn't say so, but I know it's because he doesn't want us to lose our connection to our Korean side, and the food is the only way he knows how to contribute. After Mommy died; he used to try to make us have playdates with other Korean kids, but it always felt awkward and forced. Except I did have a crush on Marcel Kim for a minute there. Thank God; the crush never escalated into full-on love; or else I'd have written him a letter too, and that'd be just one more person I'd have to avoid.

My dad's made bossam; which is pork shoulder you slice up and then wrap in lettuce.

He brined it last night in sugar and salt and it's been roasting in the oven all day. Kellie and I keep checking on it; it smells so good.

When it's finally time to eat; my dad has everything laid out on the dining room table so pretty. A silver bowl of butter-lettuce leaves; just washed; with the water beads still clinging to the surface; a cut-glass bowl of kimchi he bought from Whole

Foods; a little bowl of pepper paste; soy sauce with scallions and ginger.

My dad's taking arty pictures of the table. 'I'm sending a pic to Margot so she can see;' he says.

'What time is it over there?' I ask him. It's a cozy day- it's nearly six o'clock, and I'm still in my pj's. I'm hugging my knees to me; sitting in the big dining-room chair with the armrests.

'It's eleven. I'm sure she's still up;' my dad says; snapping away. 'Why don't you invite Josh over? We're going to need help finishing all this food.'

'He's probably busy;' I say quickly. I still haven't figured out what I'm going to say to him about me and Marcel; much less me and him.

'Just try him. He loves Korean food.' Daddy moves the pork shoulder so it's more centered. 'Hurry; before I get cold!'

I pretend to text him on my phone. I feel a tiny bit guilty for lying, but Daddy would understand if he knew all the facts.

'I don't understand why you kids text when you could just call. You'd get an answer right away instead of waiting for one.'

'You're so old; Daddy;' I say. I look down at my phone. 'Josh can't come over. Let's just eat. Kellie! Dinner bell!'

'Coming!' Kellie screams from upstairs.

'Well; maybe he'll come over later and take some leftovers;' Daddy says.

'Daddy; Josh has his own life now. Why would he come over when Margot's not here?

Besides; they're not even together anymore; remember?'

My dad makes a confused face. 'What? They're not?'

I guess Margot didn't tell him after all. Though you'd have thought he could have sassed it out for himself when Josh didn't come with us to the airport to drop Margot off.

Why don't dads know anything? Does he not have eyes and ears? 'No; they're not. And by the way; Margot is at college in Scotland. And my name is Lara Jean.'

'All right; all right; your dad is clueless;' Daddy says. 'I get it. No need to rub it in.' He scratches his chin. 'Geez; I could have sworn Margot never mentioned anything.'

Kellie comes crashing into the dining room. 'Yum- yum- yum.' She slams into her chair and starts spearing pork onto her plate.

'Kellie; we have to pray first;' my dad says; settling into his chair.

We only ever pray before we eat when we eat in the dining room, and we only ever eat in the dining room when Daddy cooks Korean or on Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Mommy used to take us to church when we were little, and after she died; Daddy tried to keep it going, but he has Sunday shifts sometimes and it became less and less.

'Thank you; God; for this food, you have blessed us with. Thank you for my beautiful daughters, and please watch over our Margot. In Jesus's name; we pray; amen.'

'Amen;' we echo.

'Looks pretty great; right; girls?' My dad is grinning as he assembles a lettuce leaf with pork and rice and kimchi. 'Kellie; you know how to do it; right? It's like a little taco.'

Kellie nods and copies him.

I make my own lettuce-leaf taco and nearly spit it out. The pork is really- really- salty.

So-o salty I could cry. But I keep chewing, and across the table; Kellie's making a horrible face at me; but I give her a shush look. Daddy hasn't tried his yet; he's taking a picture of his plate.

'So good; Daddy;' I say. 'It tastes like at the restaurant.'

'Thanks; Lara Jean. It came out just like the picture. I can't believe how beautiful and crispy the top looks.' My dad finally takes a bite, and then he frowns. 'Is this salty to you?'

'Not really;' I say.

He takes another bite. 'This… tastes- really salty to me. Kellie; what do you think?'

Kellie's chugging water. 'No; it tastes good; Daddy.'

I give her a secret thumbs-up.

'Hmm; no; it definitely tastes salty.' He swallows. 'I followed the recipe exactly - maybe I used the wrong kind of salt for the brine? Lara Jean; taste it again.'

I take a teeny-tiny bite; which I try to hide by putting the lettuce in front of my face.

'Mmm…'

'Maybe if I cut more from the center -'

My phone buzzes on the table. It's a text from Josh. Was coming back from a run and saw the light on in the dining room. A totally normal text; as if yesterday never- ever happened.

Korean food??

Josh has some sixth sense of when my dad's cooking Korean food because he'll come sniffing around right when we're sitting down to eat. He loves Korean food.

When my grandma comes to visit; he won't leave her side. He'll even watch Korean dramas with her. She cuts him pieces of apple and peels clementine's for him like he's a baby. My grandma likes boys better than girls.

Now that I think of it; all the women in my family really do love; Josh.

Except for Mommy; who never got to meet him. But I'm sure she'd love him too. She'd love anyone who's as good to Margot as Josh is; was; to her.

Kellie cranes her neck to look over my shoulder. 'Is that Josh? Is he coming over?'

'No!' I set down my phone and it buzzes again. Can I come over?

'It says he wants to come over!'

My dad perks up. 'Tell him to come over! I want to get his opinion on this...'

'Listen; everyone in this family needs to accept that Josh is no longer a part of it. He and Margot are dunzo;' I hesitate. Does Kellie still not know? I can't remember if it's still supposed to be a secret. 'I mean now that Margot's at college and they're long distance…'

'I know they've broken up;' Kellie says; making a lettuce wrap with just rice.

'Margot told me over video chat.'

Across the table; my dad makes a sad face and stuffs a piece of lettuce in his mouth.

Her mouth full; Kellie continues; 'I just don't see why we can't still be friends with him.

He's all of our- friends. Right; Daddy?'

'Right;' my dad agrees. 'And look; relationships are incredibly amorphous.

They could get back together. They could stay with friends. Who's to say what will happen in the future? I say we don't count Josh out just yet.'

We're finishing up dinner when I get another text from Josh. Never mind; it says.

Part- 6

We are stuck eating that salty pork shoulder for the rest of the weekend. The next morning; my dad makes fried rice and cuts the pork into tiny pieces and says to 'think of it like bacon.' For dinner; I test that theory by mixing it with Kraft macaroni and cheese, and I end up throwing out the whole batch because it tastes like slop. 'If we had a dog;' Kellie keeps saying. I make a batch of regular macaroni instead.

After dinner; I take Sadie the Sweetheart for a walk. That's what my sisters and I call Sadie; she's a golden retriever that lives down the street. The Shahs are out of town for the night; so, they asked me to feed her and walk her. Normally; Kellie would beg to be the one to do it, but there's some movie on TV that she's been waiting to see.

Sadie and I are doing the usual route around our cul-de-sac when Josh jogs up to us in his running clothes. Crouching down to pet Sadie; he says; 'So how are things going with?'

Funny you should bring that up; Josh. 'Cause I've got my story locked and loaded.

Marcel and I had a fight via video chat this morning (in case Josh has noticed I haven't left the house all weekend), and we broke up, and I'm devastated about the whole thing; because I've been in constant love with Marcel - since the seventh grade; but c'est la vie.

'Actually; Marcel and I broke up this morning.' I bite my lip and try to look sad. 'It's just; really hard; you know? After I liked him for so long and then finally, he likes me back.

But it's just not meant to be. I don't think he's over his breakup yet. I think maybe Genevieve still has too strong a hold on him; so, there's no room in his heart for me.'

Josh gives me a funny look. 'That's not what he was saying today at McCall's.'

What in the world was Marcel K. doing at a bookstore? He's not the bookstore type.

'What did he say?' I try to sound casual, but my heart is pounding so loudly I'm pretty sure Sadie can hear it.

Josh keeps petting Sadie.

'What did he say?' Now I'm just trying not to sound shrill. 'Like; what was said exactly?'

'When I was ringing him up; I asked him when you guys started going out, and he said recently. He said he really liked you.'

What - I must look as shocked as I feel; because Josh straightens up and says; 'Yeah; I was kind of surprised too.'

'You were surprised that he would like me?'

'Well; kind of. - just isn't the kind of guy who would date a girl like you.' When I stare back at him; sour and unsmiling; he quickly tries to backtrack. 'I mean; because you're not; you know-'

'I'm not what? As pretty as Genevieve?'

'No! That's not what I'm saying. What I'm trying to say is; you're like this sweet; innocent girl who likes to be at home with her family, and I don't know; I guess - doesn't strike me as someone who would be into that.'

Before he can say another word; I grab my phone out of my jacket pocket and say; 'That's Marcel calling me right now; so, I guess he does like homely girls.' 'I didn't say homely! I said you like to be at home!'

'Later; Josh.' I speed walk away; dragging Sadie with me. Into my phone; I say; 'Oh hey; Marcel.'

IN CHEM; Marcel SITS A row in front of me.

I write him a note. Why would you tell Josh that we're- I hesitate and then finish a thing?

I kick the back of his chair, and he turns around and I hand him the note. He slouches in his seat to read it; then I watch as he scribbles something. He tips back in his chair and drops the note on my desk without looking at me.

A thing?

Ha- ha- ha…

I press down so hard my pencil tip chips off. Please answer the question.

We'll talk later.

I let out a frustrated sigh and Matt; my lab partner gives me a funny look.

After class Marcel has swept away with all his friends; they leave in a big group. I'm packing up my backpack when he returns; alone. He hopes' upon the table.

'So; let's talk;' he says; super casual.

I clear my throat and try to gather my bearings. 'Why did you tell Josh we were-' I almost say-a thing' again; but then change it to 'together?'

'I don't get what you're so upset about. I did you a favor. I could have just as easily blown up your spot.'

I pause. He's right. He could have. 'So why didn't you?'

'You've sure got a funny way of saying thank you. You're welcome; by the way.'

Automatically I say; 'Thank you.' Wait. Why am I thanking him? 'I appreciate you letting me kiss you; but-'

'You're welcome;' he says again.

Ugh! He's so insufferable. Just for that; I'm going to toss a little dig his way.

'That was; really generous of you. To let me do that. But I've already explained to Josh that it's not going to work out with us because Genevieve has you whipped; so, it's all good. You can stop pretending now.'

Marcel glares at me. 'I'm not whipped.'

'But aren't you; though? I mean; you guys have been together since the seventh grade. You're basically her property.'

'You don't know what you're talking about;' Marcel scoffs.

'There was a rumor last year that she made you get a tattoo of her initials on your butt for her birthday.' I pause. 'So- did you?' I reach around him, and fake try to lift up the back of his shirt. He yelps and jumps away from me, and I collapse in a fit of- giggles.

'So- you do have a tattoo!'

'I don't have a tattoo!' he yells. 'And we're not even together anymore; so, can you stop this shit? We broke up. We're over. I'm done with her.'

'Wait; didn't she break up with you?' I ask.

Marcel shoots me a dirty look. 'It was mutual.'

Hastily I say; 'Well; I'm sure you'll get back together soon. You've broken up before; right? Only to get back together again; like immediately. It's probably because you were each other's firsts. That's why you can't let each other go. I've heard that's how it is with firsts; especially with guys.'

Marcel's mouth drops. 'How do you know- '

'Oh; everybody knows. You guys did it freshman year in her parents' basement; right?'

He gives a grudging nod.

'See? Even I know, and I'm a nobody. Even if you do stay broken up for real this time; which I doubt; it's not like any other girl can date you.' Meaningfully I say; 'Let's not forget what happened to Jamila Singh.'

Marcel and Genevieve broke up for a month last year; so, Marcel started dating Jamila Singh. Jamila might even be prettier than Genevieve- a different kind of pretty; anyway.

More like hot. She has long wavy black hair and a little waist and a big butt.

Let's just say it didn't end well for her. Not only did Genevieve cut her out of the group; but she told everyone that Jamila's family had an Indonesian slave living with them when really it was just her cousin. And I'm pretty sure it was Genevieve who started a rumor online that Jamila washed her hair only once a month. The final straw was when Jamila's parents got an anonymous e-mail saying that she was having sex with Marcel. Her parents transferred her right out and put her in private school. Genevieve and Marcel were back together by spring formal.

'Gen says she didn't have anything to do with that.'

I give him a get real look. 'Please; Marcel. I know her well and so do you.

Well; I did know her well. But I don't think people change at the core. They are who they are.'

Slowly Marcel says; 'That's right. You two where BFFs back in the day.'

'We were friends;' I agree. 'I wouldn't call us BFFs; but -' Wait a minute; why are we talking about me again? 'Everybody knows it was Genevieve who told Jamila's parents.

You don't have to be a detective to figure out that Genevieve was jealous of her.

Jamila was the prettiest girl in our grade; next to Genevieve. Gen was always a very jealous person. I remember this one time my dad bought me a … um- you know…'

Marcel's staring at me in a thoughtful way, and it's all of a sudden making me nervous.

'What?'

'Let's just do this for a little while.'

'Do what?'

'Let's let people think we're a couple.'

Wait - what?

'It's driving Gen crazy not knowing what's up with you and me. Why don't we let her sit with it a little longer? It's actually kind of perfect. You date me first, and then Gen will get it that we're over. You'll be breaking the seal.' He raises an eyebrow at me.

'Do you even know what breaking the seal means?'

'Yes; of course; I know what that means.' I have no idea what that means. I make a mental note to ask Chris the next time I see her.

Marcel comes up close to me, and I scoot backward. He laughs and cocks his head to the side and puts his hands on my shoulders. 'So then break my seal.'

I let out a nervous laugh. 'Ha-ha; sorry; Marcel; but I'm not interested. In you.'

'Well; yeah. That's the whole point. I'm not interested in you; either. Like; at all.'

Marcel shudders. 'So- what do you say?'

I shrug my shoulders; so, his hands fall away. 'Hello; I just got through explaining to you how Gen will kill any girl that goes near you!'

Marcel dismisses this. 'Gen's all talk. She'd never do anything to anybody.

You just don't know her as I do.' When I don't say anything; he takes my silence as encouragement, and he says; 'It would help you out too; you know. With that kid Josh. Weren't you so worried about losing face in front of him? This could save you from more humiliation.

Because; why? Why- would you be with him when you could be with me? Well; pretend to be with me. Strictly business; though. I can't have you falling in love with me; too.'

It gives me great pleasure to look up into his Handsome Boy face and sweetly say; 'Marcel; I don't even want to be your pretend girlfriend; much less your real one.'

He blinks. 'Why not?'

'You read my letter. You're not my type. Nobody would ever believe I would like you.'

'It's up to you. I'm just trying to do us both a favor.' Then he shrugs and looks over my shoulder like he's bored with this conversation. 'But Josh definitely believed it.'

In a flash; without even thinking; I say; 'Okay. Let's do it.'

Hours later; I'm lying in bed that night still marveling about it all. What people will say when they see me walking down the hall with Marcel.

THE NEXT MORNING; Marcel was sitting in the parking lot for me when I get off the bus.

'Hey;' he says. 'Are you seriously taking the bus every day?'

'My car is being fixed; remember? My accident?'

He sighs like this is somehow offensive to him; me taking the bus to school.

Then he grabs my hand and holds it as we walk into school together.

This is the first time I've walked down the school hallway holding hands with a boy.

It should feel momentous; special, but it doesn't because it's not real. Honestly; it feels like nothing.

Emily Nussbaum does a double-take when she sees us. Emily is Gen's best friend.

She's staring so hard I'm surprised she doesn't take a quick pic on her phone to send to Gen.

Marcel keeps stopping to say hi to people, and I stand there smiling like it's the most natural thing in the world. Me and Marcel.

At one point I try to let go of his hand because mine is starting to feel sweaty, but he tightens his grip. 'Your hand is too hot;' I hiss.

Through clenched teeth; he says; 'No; your hand is.'

I'm sure Genevieve's hands are never sweaty. She could probably hold hands for days without getting overheated.

When we get to my locker; we finally drop hands; so, I can dump my books inside. I'm shutting my locker door when Marcel leans in and tries to kiss me on the mouth. I'm so startled I turn my head, and we hit foreheads.

'Ow!' Marcel rubs his forehead and glares at me.

'Well; don't just sneak up on me like that!' My forehead hurts too. We really banged them hard; like cymbals. If I looked up right now; I would see a blue cartoon- birdies.

'Lower your voice; dummy;' he says through clenched teeth.

'Don't you call me a dummy; you dummy;' I whisper back.

Marcel heaves a big sigh like he's really annoyed with me. I'm about to snap at him that it's his fault; not mine when I catch a glimpse of Genevieve gliding down the hallway.

'Gotta go;' I say, and I dart off in the opposite direction.

'Wait!' Marcel calls out.

But- I keep darting.

I'm lying on my bed with my pillow over my face reliving the horrible kiss that- wasn't. I keep trying to block it out, but it just keeps coming back.

I put my hand to my forehead. I don't think I can do this. It's all so - I mean; the kissing; the sweaty hands; everybody looking. It's too much.

I'm just going to have to tell him I changed my mind, and I don't want to do this anymore, and that'll be that. I don't have his number, and I don't want to say any of this in an e-mail; either. I'll have to go to his house. It's not far; I still remember the way.

I run downstairs; passing Kellie; who is balancing a plate of Oreos and a glass of milk on a tray. 'I'm borrowing your bike!' I yell as I fly past her.

'I'll be back soon!'

'You better not let anything happen to it!' Kellie yells back.

I grab her helmet and the bike and tear out of the yard; pedaling as fast as I can. My knees hit my chest a little; but I'm not that much taller than Kellie; so, it isn't so bad.

Marcel-

lives two neighborhoods away. It takes me less than twenty minutes to get there.

When I do; there aren't any cars in the driveway. Marcel's not home. My heart sinks to the pavement. What do I do now? Sit and wait for him on the front porch like some kind of stalker? What if his mom comes home first?

I take off my helmet and sit for a minute so I can rest. My hair is damp and sweaty from the ride over, and I'm exhausted. I try to run my fingers through my hair; smooth it out. It's a lost cause.

As I'm contemplating texting Chris and seeing if she can come to get me; Marcel's car comes roaring down the street and up the driveway. I drop my phone and then scramble to pick it up.

Marcel climbs out of his car and raises his eyebrows at me. 'Look who's here. My adoring girlfriend.'

I stand up and wave at him. 'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

He slings his backpack over his shoulder and takes his time sauntering over.

He sits down on the front step like a prince on his throne, and I stand in front of him; my helmet in one hand and my phone in the other. 'So-o what's up?' he drawls. 'Let me guess. You're here to back out on me; am I right?'

He's so smug; so sure, of himself. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of being right.

'I just wanted to go over our game plan with you;' I say; sitting down. 'Get our story straight before people start asking questions.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Oh. Okay. Makes sense. So how did we get together?'

I clasp my hands in my lap and recite; 'When I got in that car accident last week; you happened to be driving by, and you waited for Triple-A with me and then you drove me home. You were really nervous the whole time because you've actually had kind of a thing for me since middle school. It was your first kiss. So- this was your big chance-'

'You were my first kiss?' he interrupts. 'How about I was your first kiss. That's a lot more believable.'

I ignore him and continue on. 'This was your big chance. So- you took it.

You asked me out that very day and we've been hanging out ever since and now we're basically a couple.'

'I don't think Gen's going to buy this;' he says; shaking his head.

'Marcel;' I say in my most patient voice; 'the most believable lies are the ones that are at least a little bit true. I did get into a car accident; you did stop and sit with me; we did kiss in middle school.'

'It's not that.'

'Then what?'

'Gen and I hooked up that day after I saw you.'

I sigh… 'Okay… Spare me the details. My story still works; though. After the car accident; you couldn't get me out of your mind; so, you asked me out as soon as Genevieve dumped - I mean; as soon as you guys broke up.' I clear my throat. 'Since we're on the topic; I'd also like to set some ground rules.'

'What kind of ground rules?' he asks; leaning back.

I press my lips together and take a breath. 'Well - I don't want you trying to kiss me again.'

Marcel curls his lip at me. 'Trust me; I don't want to do it either. My forehead still hurts from this morning. I think I have a bruise.' He pushes his hair off his forehead. 'Do you see a bruise?'

'No; but I see a receding hairline.'

'What?'

Ha… I knew that would get him. Marcel's so vain. 'Calm down; I'm only kidding. Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?' 'You're going to write this down?'

Primly I say; 'It'll help us remember.'

Rolling his eyes; Marcel reaches into his backpack; pulls out a notebook, and hands it to me. I turn to a clean page and write at the top; Contract. Then I write No kissing.

'Are people really going to buy it if we never touch each other in public?' Marcel asks; looking skeptical.

'I don't think relationships are just about physicality. There are ways to show you care about someone; not just using your lips.' Marcel's smiling, and he looks like he's about to crack a joke; so, I swiftly add; 'Or any other body part.'

He groans. 'You've got to give me something here; Lara Jean. I have a reputation to uphold. None of my friends will believe I suddenly turned into a monk to date you. How about at least a hand in your back-jean pocket? Trust me; it'll be strictly professional.'

I don't say what I'm thinking; which is that he cares way too much what people think about him. I just nod and write down; Marcel is allowed to put a hand in Lara Jean's back jean pocket.

'But no more kissing;' I say; keeping my head down so he can't see me blush.

'You're the one who started it;' he reminds me. 'And also; I don't have any STDs; so, you can get that out of your head.'

'I don't think you have any STDs.' I look back up at him. 'The thing is - I've never had a boyfriend before. I've never been on a real date before, or held hands walking down the hallway. This is all new for me; so, I'm sorry about the forehead thing this morning. I just - wish all of these firsts were happening for real and not with you.'

Marcel seems to be thinking this over. He says; 'Huh. Okay. Let's just save some stuff; then.'

'Yeah?'

'Sure... We'll save some stuff for you to do when it's the real thing and not for show.'

I'm touched. Who knew Marcel could be so thoughtful and generous?

'Like; I won't pay for stuff. I'll save that for a guy who really likes you.'

My smile fades. 'I wasn't expecting you to pay for anything!'

Marcel's on a roll. 'And I won't walk you to class or buy you flowers.'

'I get the picture.' It seems to me like Marcel's less concerned about me and more concerned about his wallet. He sure is cheap. 'So; when you were with Genevieve; what kinds of things did she like you to do?'

I'm afraid he's going to take this opportunity to make a joke; but instead; he stares off into space and says; 'She was always bitching at me to write her notes.'

'Notes?'

'Yeah; at school. I didn't get why I couldn't just text her. It's immediate; it's efficient.

Why not use the technology that's available to us?'

This I understand perfectly. Genevieve didn't want notes. She wanted letters.

Real letters were written in his handwriting on actual paper that she could hold and keep and read whenever the mood struck her. They were proof; solid and tangible; that someone was thinking about her.

'I'll write you a note a day;' Marcel says suddenly; with gusto. 'That'll drive her ass crazy.'

I write down; Marcel will write Lara Jean one note- every day.

Marcel leans in. 'Write down what you have to go to some parties with me.

And write down no romcoms.'

'Who said anything about romcoms? Not every girl wants to watch romcoms.'

'I can just tell that you're the kind of girl who does.'

I'm annoyed that he has this perception of me, and even more annoyed that he's right.

I write; NO DUMB ACTION MOVIES.

'Then what does that leave us with?' Marcel demands.

'Superhero movies; horror movies; period films; documentaries; foreign films-'

Marcel makes a face; grabs the pen and paper from me, and writes down; NO FOREIGN FILMS. He also writes; Lara Jean will make Marcel's picture her phone wallpaper. 'And vice versa!' I say. I point my phone at him. 'Smile.'

Marcel smiles, and ugh; it's annoying how handsome he is. Then he reaches for his phone and I stop him. 'Not right now. My hair looks sweaty and gross.' 'Good point;' he says, and I want to punch him.

'Can you also write down that under no circumstances can either of us tell anyone the truth?' I ask him.

'The first rule of Fight Club;' Marcel says knowingly.

'I've never seen that movie.'

'Of course; you haven't;' he says, and I make a face at him. Also- mental note; watch Fight Club.

Marcel writes it down, and then I sit next to him and take the pen and underline 'under no circumstances' twice. 'What about an end date?' I ask suddenly.

'What do you mean...?'

'I mean; how long are we going to do this for? Like; two weeks? A month...?'

Marcel shrugs. 'For as long as we feel it.'

'But- don't you think we should have something set-'

He cuts me off. 'You need to relax; Lara Jean. Life doesn't have to be so planned. Just roll with it and let it happen.'

I sigh and say; 'Words of wisdom from the great -;' and Marcel wiggles his eyebrows at me. 'Just as long as it's over by the time my sister comes back for Christmas break. She can always tell when I'm lying.'

'Oh; we'll definitely be done by then;' he says.

'Good;' I say, and then I sign the paper, and so, does he, and we have our contract.

I'm too proud to ask for a ride, and Marcel doesn't offer; so, I put my helmet back on and ride Kellie's bike back home. I'm halfway there when I realize we never exchanged phone numbers. I don't even know my own supposed boyfriend's phone number.

I'm AT McCalls BOOKSTORE; PICKING up a copy of The Glass Menagerie for English and scanning the store for Josh. Now that Marcel and I have everything worked out; I can triumphantly crow all about it. That'll show him for thinking I'm just a homebody no boy would want to date.

I spot him setting up a display of new books in the nonfiction section. He doesn't see me; so, I sneak up behind and yell; 'Boo!'

He jumps and drops a book on the floor. 'You scared the crap out of me!'

'That was the point; Joshy!' I'm having a giggle fit. The look on his face! I wonder; why is it so deliciously funny to sneak up on people?

'All right; all right. Quit laughing. What are you here for?'

I hold up my book and wave it in his face. 'I have Mr. Radnor for English. You had him; right?'

'Yeah; he's good. He's strict but fair. I still have my notes if you want them.'

'Thanks;' I say. Brightly I add; 'So guess what. Marcel and I haven't broken up after all.

It was just a misunderstanding.'

'Oh yeah...?' Josh starts stacking books into a column.

'Mm-hmm. I saw him yesterday and we talked and talked; for hours. I feel like I could talk to him about anything; you know? He just really gets me.'

Josh's forehead wrinkles. 'What do you guys talk about?'

'Oh; everything. Movies; books; the usual stuff.'

'Huh. I never saw him as the reading type.' He squints and looks over my shoulder.

'Hey; I've got to go help Janice out at the counter. When you're ready to check out; come to my register so I can give you my discount.'

Hmm; this isn't exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I barely even got a chance to grow. 'Sounds good;' I say, but he's already walking away.

I hug my book to my chest. Now that Josh knows I'm not in love with him anymore and I'm with Marcel; I guess everything will slide right back into place and be normal again.

Like my letter never- ever happened.

'MARGOT CALLED WHEN YOU were out today;' my dad says over dinner.

Dinner is just salad. Salad for me and Daddy and cereal for Kellie. There were supposed to be chicken breasts, but I forgot to take them out of the freezer this morning; so, there's just lettuce and carrot with balsamic dressing. Daddy's supplementing him with two boiled eggs, and I have a piece of buttered toast. Some dinner. Cereal and lettuce. I need to get to the grocery store stat.

Since Margot left; I've only spoken to her twice, and once was over video chat with all of us crowded around my laptop. I didn't get to ask her about the good stuff- the real deal; all the adventures she's been going on and the people she's been meeting.

I think I heard that British people drink absinthe at pubs. I wonder if she's tried it by now. I've emailed Margot so many times and have only gotten back one e-mail in return so far.

I understand that she is busy, but the least she can do is e-mail back once a day. For all she knows; I could be dead in a ditch. 'What did she say?' I ask as I cut my carrot into tiny pieces.

'She's thinking about trying out for the shinty club team;' my dad says; wiping salad dressing off his chin.

'What's shinty?' Kellie asks me, and I shrug.

'It's a Scottish sport that's similar to field hockey;' Daddy explains. 'It started out as a safe swordfight practice in medieval Scotland.'

Boring. Before Daddy can get started on telling us more about medieval Scotland; I say; 'Let's send Gogo a care package! The stuff she can't get over there.' 'Yeah!' Kellie cheers.

'What should we send?' I ask. 'I say we all contribute something.'

Daddy chews and taps his finger to his chin. 'I'll send gummy vitamins;' he says. 'And Advil. I think she only took a small bottle of Advil, and you know how she gets migraines sometimes.'

'I approve.' I point my fork at Kellie. 'And what about you?'

'I've got something I could send;' Kellie says. 'Should I go get it?'

Daddy and I look at each other and shrug. 'Sure.'

Kellie comes running back with a picture she's drawn of Margot. Petting a dog. The exact breed of dog Kellie wants. Akita. I have to laugh.

Kellie frowns. 'What's so funny?'

'Nothing;' I say.

'Do you think it's good enough?' Kellie asks me. 'Good enough to hang up on her wall?'

'Definitely;' I say.

'No; I want you to really look at it;' she says. 'Critique it. I can always do better.

Margot won't want it if it's not my best work.'

'Kellie; it definitely is;' I say. 'Why would I lie?'

She sighs. 'I just don't know if it's finished yet.'

'Only the artist knows;' Daddy says with a sage nod.

'What do you think about the dog?' she asks him. 'Isn't it cute?'

Daddy takes the picture from me and looks at it closely. 'Yes; the dog is undeniably a good-looking dog.'

'I'm Asian too;' she says. Kellie sits back down and takes a bite of cereal and tries not to smile. She is doing her inception thing. Planting positive associations about dogs in Daddy's head. The kid never rests. She always has an angle.

'What else is going in the care package?' Kellie wants to know.

I start ticking off with my fingers. 'Tampons because I don't know if they have our brand in Scotland; flannel pj's; thick socks; Girl Scout cookies-'

'Where are we going to get Girl Scout cookies this time of year?' Daddy asks.

'I have a box of Thin Mints hidden in the freezer;' I say.

He gives me a hurt look. 'Hidden from who?'

Thin Mints are his favorite. If there are Thin Mints in the house; forget about it. Daddy is a Thin Mint Monster.

I give an enigmatic shrug. 'Also- I'm sending Margot's favorite kind of roller-ball pen, and - I think that's it.'

'Don't forget her brown boots;' my dad reminds me. 'She specifically requested we send her brown boots with the laces.'

'Did she?' I was hoping Margot hadn't noticed she'd left them behind.

'When did she say that?'

'She emailed me yesterday.'

'I'll see if I can find them.'

My dad says; 'weren't you are wearing them this weekend?' and at the same time; Kellie says; 'They're in your closet.'

I throw up my hands. 'All right; all right!'

'If you get the box together tonight; I can drop it off at the post office tomorrow morning on my way to work;' Daddy offers.

I shake my head. 'I want to send the scarf I've been knitting, and it won't be ready in time. Maybe in another week or two?'

Slurping her milk; Kellie waves a hand at me and advises; 'Just give up on the scarf already. Knitting isn't your thing.'

I open my mouth to argue and then close it. Maybe she's right. If we wait for my scarf to be done to send the care package; Margot will probably be out of college already. 'All right;' I say. 'We'll send the care package sans scarf. I'm not saying I'm giving up on knitting; though. I'll keep chugging along on it and have it ready for you for your Christmas gift; Kellie.' I smile at her sweetly. 'It's pink. You're favorite.'

Kellie's eyes go wide with horror. 'Or Margot. You could also give it to Margot.'

Kellie slides a piece of paper under my door that night. It's her Christmas list. It's only September- Christmas is still months away! 'Puppy' is written at the top in capital block letters. She also wants an ant farm and a skateboard and a TV in her room. Yeah; that

The TV's not going to happen. I could buy her the ant farm; though. Or maybe I could talk to Daddy about the puppy. She hasn't said so, but I think she misses Margot a lot. In a way; Margot is the only mother she's known. It must be hard for Kellie having her so far away.

I'll just have to remind myself to be more patient with her; more attentive. She needs me now.

I go to her room and climb into her bed. She's just turned the lights off but is already halfway to sleep. 'What if we got a kitten?' I whisper...

Her eyes fly open. 'No way in heck!'

'Don't you think we're more of a kitten family?' Dreamily I say; 'A fluffy gray-and-white kitten with a bushy tail. We could name him Prince if it's a boy. Ooh; or Gandalf the Gray! Wouldn't that be cute? Or if it's a girl; maybe Agatha. Or Tilly. Or Boss. It really depends on her personality.'

'Quit it;' Kellie warns. 'We're not getting a cat. Cats are blah. They're also very manipulative.'

Impressed; I say; 'Where'd you learn that word?'

'TV!'

'A puppy is a lot of work. Who's going to feed him and walk him and house-train him?'

'I'll do it. I'll do it all. I'm responsible enough to take care of it on my own.'

I snuggle closer to her. I love the way Kellie's head smells after she's had a bath. 'Ha! You don't even do the dishes ever. And you never clean your room. And when have you ever helped fold laundry even once in your life? I mean; really; if you don't do any of those things; how you can be responsible for another living creature?'

Kellie shoves me off. 'Then I'll help more!'

'I'll believe it when I see it.'

'If I help out more; will you help me convince Daddy about the puppy?'

'If you help out more;' I agree. 'If you can prove to me; you're not a baby anymore.'

Kellie will be ten in January. That's plenty old enough to help out around the house.

Margot babies her too much; I think. 'I'm putting you in charge of emptying the upstairs trash cans once a week. And helping with the laundry.'

'So - would I get a raise in my allowance?'

'No. The incentive is me helping you convince Daddy to get a dog, and also, you not being so babyish anymore.' I fluff up my pillow. 'By the way; I'm sleeping in here tonight.'

Kellie gives me a swift kick and I almost fall out of the bed. 'You're the babyish one; not me; Lara Jean.'

'Just let me sleep in here one night!'

'You take up all the covers.'

Kellie tries to kick me again, but I make my body heavy and pretend I'm already asleep.

Soon we both fall asleep for real.

Sunday night I'm doing my homework in bed when I get a call from a number I don't recognize. 'Hello?'

'Hey. What are you doing?' 'Um - sorry; but who's this?'

'It's Marcel!'

'Oh. How did you get my number?'

'Don't worry about it.'

There's a longish silence. It's agonizing; every millisecond that ticks by with neither of us talking; but I don't know what to say. 'So; what did you want?'

Marcel laughs. 'You so ask; Covey. Your car's in the shop; right? So how about I pick you up from school?' 'Okay.'

'Seven-thirty.'

'Okay.'

'Okay-'

'Bye;' I say, and I hang up.

THE NEXT MORNING; I WAKE Kellie up early; so, she can braid my hair.

'Leave me alone;' she says; rolling on to her other side. 'I'm sleeping.'

'Please; please; please can I get a braid crown?' I ask her; squatting in front of her bed.

'No. You can have a side braid and that's it.'

Swiftly Kellie braids my braid, and then she falls right back to sleep and I'm on my way to figure out clothes. Now that Marcel and I are official; people will be noticing me more; so, I should wear something good. I try on a polka-dot puffy-sleeved dress with tights; but- it doesn't look right. Neither does my favorite heart sweater with the little pom-poms.

Everything looks so kiddish all of a sudden. I finally settle on a floral baby-doll dress I ordered off a Japanese street fashion site; with ankle boots. Sort of a seventies London look.

When I run downstairs at seven twenty-five; Kellie is sitting at the kitchen table with her jean jacket on waiting for me. 'Why are you downstairs already?' I ask her. Her bus doesn't come until eight.

'I have my field trip today; so, I have to go to school early. Remember?'

I run and look at the calendar on the refrigerator. There it is; in my handwriting- Kellie's Field Trip. Shoot.

I was supposed to drive her, but that was before my car accident. Daddy had an overnight shift at the hospital and he's not home yet; so, I don't have a car.

'Can one of the Caceool moms come to get you?'

'It's too late. The bus leaves at seven forty.' Kellie's face is getting splotchy and her chin is starting to quiver. 'I can't miss the bus; Lara Jean!'

'Okay; okay. Don't get upset. I've got a ride coming for us right now. Don't worry; okay?' I pluck a greenish banana from the banana hammock.

'Let's go- outside and wait for him.'

'Who?'

'Just hurry.'

Kellie and I are waiting on the front steps sharing the greenish banana. We both prefer an unripe; greenish banana to a brown speckled one. It's Margot who likes the speckled ones. I'll try to save them for banana bread, but Margot gobbles them up; mushy bruised parts and all. I shudder to even think of it.

There's a chill in the air; even though it's still September and therefore practically still summer. Kellie rubs her legs to keep warm. She says she'll wear shorts all the way to October; that's her plan.

It's past seven-thirty now and no Marcel yet. I'm starting to get nervous, but I don't want Kellie to worry. I decided that if he's not here in exactly two minutes; I'll go next door to Josh's and ask him to run Kellie over to the school.

Across the street; our neighbor Ms. Rossinchild waves at us as she locks her front door; a big coffee thermos in her hand. She dashes toward her car.

'Good morning; Ms. Rossinchild;' we chorus. I elbow Kellie and say; 'Five; four; three-'

'Damn it!' Ms. Rossinchild shrieks. Ms. Rossinchild has spilled coffee on her hand. She does this at least twice a week. I don't know why she doesn't just slow down or maybe just put the top of the thermos or not fill it up so high.

Just then Marcel drives up, and his black Audi is even shinier in the daylight. I get up and say; 'Come on Kellie;' and she trails behind me.

'Who's that?' I hear her whisper.

His windows are down. I come up close to the passenger side and stick my head in.

'Is it okay if we drop my little sister off at the elementary school?' I ask.

'She has to be there early today for a field trip.'

Marcel looks annoyed. 'Why didn't you mention it yesterday?'

'I didn't know about it yesterday!' Behind me; I can feel rather than hear Kellie fidgeting.

'This is a two-seater;' Marcel says as if I can't see with my own two eyes.

'I know that. I'll just put Kellie in my lap and the seat belt over us.' Which my dad would kill me for if he knew; but I'm not telling, and neither will Kellie.

'Yeah; because that sounds really safe.' He's being sarcastic. I hate it when people are sarcastic. It's so cheap.

'It's two miles!'

He sighs. 'Fine. Get in.'

I open the door and slide in; laying my bag at my feet. 'Come on; Kellie.' I make space for her between my legs, and she climbs in. I strap us in tight; my arms around her.

'Don't tell Daddy;' I say.

'Duh;' she says.

'Hey. What's your name?' Marcel asks her.

Kellie hesitates. More and more this happens. With new people; she has to decide if she'll be Kellie or Katherine.

'Katherine.'

'But everyone calls you Kellie?'

'Everyone who knows me;' Kellie says. 'You can call me Katherine.'

Marcel's eyes light up. 'You're tough;' he says admiringly; which Kellie ignores, but she keeps sneaking peeks at him. He has that effect on people. On girls. Women; even.

We drive through the neighborhood in silence. At last; Kellie says; 'So who are you?'

I look over at him and he's looking straight ahead. 'I'm Marcel. Your sister's; um; boyfriend.'

My mouth drops. We never said anything about lying to our families! I thought this was going to be an at-school-only thing.

Kellie goes completely still in my arms. Then she twists around to look at me and shrieks; 'He's your boyfriend? Since when?'

'Since last week.' At least that much is the truth. Sort of.

'But you never said anything! Not one frigging word; Lara Jean!'

Automatically I say; 'Don't say 'frig.'

'Not one frigging word;' Kellie repeats with a shake of her head.

Marcel cracks up, and I give him a dirty look. 'It all happened really fast;' he offers.

'There was barely time to tell anybody-'

'Was I talking to you?' Kellie snaps. 'No; I don't think so. I was talking to my sister.'

Marcel's eyes widen, and I can see him trying to keep a straight face.

'Does Margot know?' she asks me.

'Not yet, and don't you go mentioning it to her before I have a chance to.'

'Hmph.' This seems to appease Kellie a tiny bit. Knowing something first; before Margot is a big deal.

Then we're at the elementary school and thank God; the bus is still there in the parking lot. All the kids are lined up in front of it. I let out the breath I've been holding the whole way over, and Kellie is already untangling herself from me and bounding out of the car. 'Have a good time on the field trip!' I call out.

She spins back around and points an accusing finger at me. 'I want to hear the whole story when I get home!' With that decree; she's off running for the bus loop.

I re-buckle my seat belt. 'Um; I don't remember us deciding to tell our families that we're boyfriend-girlfriend.'

'She was going to have to find out at some point; with me chauffeuring you and her around town.'

'You didn't have to say 'boyfriend.' You could've just said 'friend.'

We're getting close to school now; just two more lights. I give my side braid a nervous tug.

'Um; so, have you talked to Genevieve at all?'

Marcel frowns. 'No.'

'She hasn't said a word to you about it?'

'Nope. But I'm sure she will soon.'

Marcel speeds into the parking lot and zooms into space. When we get out of the car and head for the entrance; Marcel's fingers lace through mine. I think he's going to drop me off at my locker as he did before, but he leads us in the opposite direction.

'Where are we going?' I ask him.

'Cafeteria...'

I'm about to protest, but before I can; he says firmly; 'We need to start hanging out in public more. The caf- is where we'll get the most bang for our buck.'

Josh won't be in the cafeteria- that's for popular people- but I know who will most certainly be there- Genevieve.

When we walk in; she's holding court at their lunch table- her and Emily Nussbaum- and Gabe and Darrell from the lacrosse team. They're all eating breakfast and drinking coffee. She must have a sixth sense where Marcel is concerned because she beams lasers at us immediately. I start slowing down; which Marcel doesn't seem to notice.

Marcel makes a beeline for the table, but at the last second; I chicken out. I tug on his hand and say; 'Let's sit over here;' and point to an empty table in their line of vision.

'Why...?'

'Just- please.' I think fast. 'Because you see; it would be too blatantly jerky of you to- bring a girl to the table after you've only been broken up for; like; a minute. And this way Genevieve can watch from afar and wonder for just a little bit longer.' And also; I'm terrified.

As I drag Marcel over to the table; he waves to his friends; shrugging his shoulders like- Wha-d-d-are-you-gonna-do? I sit down, and Marcel sits down next to me. He pulls my chair closer to his. Raising his eyebrows; he asks; 'Are you that afraid of her?' 'No.' Yes.

'You're going to have to face her some time.' Marcel leans forward and grabs my hand again and starts tracing the lines on my palm.

'Quit;' I say. 'You're creeping me out.'

He flashes me a hurt look. 'Girls love it when I do that.'

'No; Genevieve loves it. Or she pretends to love it. You know; now that I think of it; you actually don't have that much experience when it comes to girls. Just one girl.' I take my hand away from his and perch it on the table. 'I mean; everybody thinks you're this big ladies' man when in reality you've only ever been with Genevieve and then Jamila for like a month-'

'Okay; okay. I get it. Enough already. They're watching us.'

'Who is? Your table?'

Marcel shrugs. 'Everyone...'

I do a quick look around. He's right. Everyone is watching us. Marcel's so used to people watching him, but I'm not. It feels funny; like a new sweater that makes my skin feel itchy. Because no one ever watches me. It's like being on stage. And the funny thing; the really strange thing is; it's not an altogether unpleasant feeling.

I'm pondering this when my eyes meet Genevieve's. There's this very brief moment of recognition between us like I know you. Then she looks away and whispers something to Emily.

Genevieve is looking at me like I am a tasty morsel and she is going to eat me alive and then spit out my bones. And then; just as quickly; the look is gone and she's smiling.

I shiver. The truth is; Genevieve; scared me even when we were kids. One time I was playing at her house, and Margot called looking for me to come home for lunch, and Genevieve told her I wasn't there. She wouldn't let me leave because she wanted to keep playing dollhouse. She kept blocking the door. I had to call her mom.

The clock reads five minutes past eight. The bell's going to ring soon. 'We should get going;' I say, and when I stand up; my knees feel shaky. 'Ready?'

He's distracted because he was looking over at his table of friends. 'Yeah; sure.' Marcel gets up and propels me toward the door; he keeps one hand on the small of my back.

With his other hand; he waves at his friends. 'Smile;' he whispers to me; so, I do.

I have to admit; it's not a bad feeling; having a boy sweep you along; usher you through crowds. It's the feeling of being cared for. It's kind of like walking in a dream. I'm still me and Marcel's still Marcel, but everything around me feels fuzzy and unreal; like the time Margot and I snuck champagne on New Year's Eve.

I never knew it before, but I think maybe all this time I've been invisible.

Just someone who was there. Now that people think I'm Marcel -'s girlfriend; they're wondering about me. Like; why? What about me made Marcel like me? What do I have? What makes me so special? I would be wondering too.

I am now a Mysterious Girl. Before I was just a Quiet Girl. But becoming Marcel's girlfriend has elevated me to Mysterious Girl.

I take the bus home from school because Marcel has to go to lacrosse practice. I sit in the front the way I've been doing, but today people have questions for me.

Underclassmen; mostly; because hardly any upperclassmen take the bus.

'What's with you and-?' A sophomore girl named Manda asks me.

I pretend like I don't hear her.

Instead; I sink lower into my seat and open up the note Marcel left for me in my locker.

Dear Lara Jean;

Good job today.

Marcel-

I start to smile and then I hear Manda whisper to her friend; 'It's so weird that - would like her. I mean - look at her and then look at Genevieve.' I can feel myself shrink. Is that what everyone thinks? Maybe it's not that I'm a Mysterious Girl.

Maybe it's that I'm a Not Good Enough Girl.

When I get home; I go straight to my room; put on a soft nightgown, and release my braid. It's sweet relief to let it out. My scalp is tingling with gratitude. Then I lie in my bed and stare out the window until it gets dark. My phone keeps buzzing, and I'm sure it's Chris, but I don't lift my head to look.

Kellie barges in at one point and says; 'Are you sick? Why are you still lying in bed like you have cancer like Brielle's mom did?'

'I need peace;' I say; closing my eyes. 'I need to replenish myself with peace.'

'Well - then what are we eating for dinner?'

I open my eyes. That's right. It's Monday. I'm in charge of dinner on Mondays now.

Ugh; Margot; where are you? It's dark already; there's not enough time to defrost anything. Maybe Mondays should be pizza nights. I eye her. 'Do you have any money?'

We both get an allowance- Kellie gets five dollars a week and I get twenty, but Kellie always has more money than me. She saves everything like a wily squirrel. I don't know where she keeps it because she locks the door whenever she goes to take any out of her stash.

-And-

She'll lend it, but she charges interest. Margot has a credit card that she's allowed to use for groceries and gas, but she took that with her. I should probably ask Daddy about getting me one too; now that I'm the oldest sister.

'Why do you need money?'

'Because I want to order a pizza for dinner.' Kellie opens her mouth to negotiate; but before she can get a word in; I say; 'Daddy will pay you back when he gets home; so, don't even think about charging me interest. The pizzas for you; too; you know. Twenty oughts to do it.'

Kellie crosses her arms. 'I'll give you the money, but first; you have to tell me about that boy from this morning. Your boyfriend.'

I groan. 'What do you want to know?'

'I want to know how you got together.'

'We used to be friends back in middle school; remember? We'd all hang out in the Pearces' treehouse sometimes.' Kellie gives me a blank shrug. 'Well; remember that day I got in a car accident?' Kellie nods. 'Well; Marcel was driving by, and he stopped and helped me. And we just - reconnected. It was fate.' Actually; this is good practice; telling Kellie this story. I'll tell Chris the same story tonight.

'That's it? That's the whole story?'

'Hey; that's a pretty good story;' I say. 'I mean; a car accident is very dramatic; plus, our history together.'

Kellie just says; 'Hmm;' and she leaves it at that.

We have sausage and mushroom pizza for dinner, and when I broach the idea of Pizza Mondays; Daddy is quick to agree. I think he's remembering my mac and cheese.

It's a relief that Kellie spends most of dinner talking about her field trip and all I have to do is chew on my pizza. I'm still thinking about what Manda said and wondering if maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

When Kellie pauses to inhale her slice; Daddy turns to me and says; 'Did anything interesting happen to you today?'

I swallow my mouthful of pizza. 'Um - not really.'

Later that night I fix myself a bubble bath and soak in the tub for so long Kellie bangs on the door twice to check if I've fallen asleep. Once I almost do.

I've just drifted off when my phone buzzes. It's Chris. I hit ignore, but then it keeps buzzing, and buzzing, and buzzing. I finally just pick up.

'Is it true?' She screams.

I hold the phone away from my ear. 'Yes.'

'Oh my god. Tell me everything.'

'Tomorrow; Chris. I'll tell you everything tomorrow. Good night.'

'Wait-'

'Night!'

THAT FRIDAY I GO TO my first ever football game. I've never had even the tiniest bit of interest in it before, and I still don't. I'm sitting high in the stands with Marcel and his friends, and as far as I can tell; there's not a lot to see. It just seems like a lot of waiting and huddling and not a lot of action. Nothing at all like football games in the movies and on TV shows.

By nine-thirty the game's almost over; I hope, and I'm yawning into my coat when Marcel suddenly throws his arm around me. I nearly choke on my yawn.

Down below; Genevieve is cheering with the rest of the squad. She is shimmying and shaking her pom-poms. She looks up in the stands, and when she sees us; she stops for just a half-second before launching into a new cheer; eyes blazing.

I glance at Marcel; who has a satisfied smirk on. When Genevieve's back on the sidelines; he drops his arm and suddenly seems to remember I'm there. He says; 'Eli's having people over tonight. Want to go?'

I don't even know who Eli is. I yawn again; a big one for the show. 'Um - I'm really tired. So - no. No; thank you. Can you just drop me off on the way there?'

Marcel gives me a look, but he doesn't argue.

On the way home; we pass by the diner and Marcel suddenly says; 'I'm hungry. Do you want to stop and get something?' Pointedly he adds; 'Or are you too tired?'

I ignore the dig and say; 'Sure; I can eat.'

So; Marcel turns the car around and we go to the diner. We get a booth upfront.

Whenever I used to come here with Margot and Josh; we would always sit in the back near the jukebox; so, we could put coins in. Half the time the jukebox was broken, but we still liked sitting near it. It's weird to be here without them. We have so many traditions here.

The three of us would get two grilled-cheese sandwiches and cut them up into squares, and we'd order a bowl of tomato soup to dip the squares in, and then Josh and I would share a waffle with extra whipped cream for dessert and Margot would have a bowl of tapioca pudding. Gross; I know. I'm pretty sure only grandmas like tapioca pudding.

Our waitress is Kelly; who's a student at the college. She was gone all summer, and I guess now she's back. She eyes Marcel as she sets down our waters. 'Where are your friends tonight?' she asks me.

I say; 'Margot's left for Scotland, and Josh - isn't here.' Which Marcel rolls his eyes at.

Then Marcel orders blueberry pancakes and bacon and scrambled eggs. I get a grilled cheese with fries on the side and a black cherry soda.

When Kelly leaves to put in our orders; I ask him; 'Why do you hate Josh so much?'

'I don't hate him;' Marcel scoffs. 'I barely know the guy.'

'Well; you certainly don't like him.'

Marcel scowls at me. 'What's to like? That kid turned me in once for cheating in seventh grade.'

Did Marcel cheat? My stomach twists a little. 'What kind of cheating was it? Like; homework?'

'No; a Spanish test. I wrote down the answers in my calculator, and Josh freaking told on me. Who does that?'

I search his face for some sign of embarrassment or shame at having cheated, but I don't see even an iota. 'What are you so high and mighty for? You're the one who cheated!'

'It was seventh grade!'

'Well; do you still cheat?'

'No. Hardly ever. I mean; I have.' He frowns at me. 'Would you quit looking at me like that?'

'Like what?'

'With judged eyes. Look; I'm going to school on a lacrosse scholarship anyway; so, what does it matter?'

I have a sudden revelation. I lower my voice and say; 'Wait - can you read?'

He bursts out laughing. 'Yes; I can read! Geez; Lara Jean. Not everything has a story behind it; okay? I'm just lazy.' He snorts. 'Can I read? I've written you multiple notes! You're hilarious.'

I can feel my face get flushed. 'It wasn't that funny.' I squint at him. 'Is everything a joke to you?'

'Not everything; but most things; sure.'

I drop my chin. 'Then maybe that's a character flaw that you should work on;' I say.

'Because some things are serious, and they should be taken seriously. Sorry if you think that's me being judged.'

'Yup; I think that's judged. I think you're judged in general. That's a character flaw that you should work on. I also think you need to learn how to kick back and have fun.'

I'm listing off all the ways I have fun- biking (which I hate;) baking; reading; I consider saying knitting but I'm pretty sure he'll only make fun of me- when Kelly drops off our food and I stop so I can bite into my grilled cheese while it's still oozy.

Marcel steals one of my French fries. 'So- who else?' 'Who else what?' With his mouth full; he says; 'Who else got letters?'

'Um; that's really private.' I shake my head at him; like Wow; how rude.

'What? I'm just curious.' Marcel dips another fry into my little ramekin of ketchup.

Smirking; he says; 'Come on; don't be shy. You can tell me. I know I'm number one; obviously. But I want to hear who else made the cut.'

He's practically flexing; he's so sure of himself. Fine; if he wants to know so bad; I'll tell him. 'Josh; you- '

'Obviously...'

'Kenny...'

Marcel snorts. 'Kenny? Who's he?'

I prop my elbows up on the table and rest my chin on my hands. 'A boy I met at church camp. He was the best swimmer on the whole boys' side. He saved a drowning kid once. He swam out to the middle of the lake before the lifeguards even noticed anything was wrong.'

'So- what'd he say- when he got the letter?'

'Nothing. It was sent back return to sender.'

'Okay; who's next?'

I take a bite of a sandwich. 'Lucas Krapf.'

'He's gay;' Marcel says.

'He's not gay!'

'Dude quit dreaming. The kid is gay. He wore an ascot to school yesterday.'

'I'm sure he was wearing it ironically. Besides; wearing an ascot doesn't make someone gay.' I give him a look like Wow; so homophobic.

'Hey; don't give me that look;' the objects. 'My favorite uncle's gay as hell.

I bet you fifty bucks that if I showed my uncle Eddie a picture of Lucas; he'd confirm it in half a second.'

'Just because Lucas appreciates fashion; that doesn't make him gay.'

Marcel opens his mouth to argue but I lift up a hand to quiet him. 'All it means is he's more of a city guy in the midst of all this-this boring suburbia. I bet you he ends up going to NYU or some other place in New York. He could be a TV actor. He's got that look; you know. Svelte with fine-boned features. Very sensitive features. He looks like - like an angel.'

'So- what did Angel Boy say about the letter; then?'

'Nothing - I'm sure because he's a gentleman and didn't want to embarrass me by bringing it up.' I give him a meaningful look. Unlike some people is what I'm saying with my eyes.

Marcel rolls his eyes. 'All right; all right. Whatever; I don't care.' He leans back in his seat and stretches his arm out on the back of the empty seat next to him.

'That's only four. Who's the fifth?'

I'm surprised he's been keeping count. 'John Ambrose McClaren.'

Marcel's eyes widen. 'McClaren? When did you like him?'

'Eighth grade.'

'I thought you liked me in eighth grade!'

'There may have been a little bit of overlap;' I admit. Stirring my straw; I say; 'There was this one time; in the gym - he and I had to pick up all the soccer balls, and it started to rain -' I sigh. 'It was probably the most romantic thing that ever happened to me.'

'What is it with girls and rain?' Marcel wonders.

'I don't know - I guess maybe because everything feels more dramatic in the rain;' I say with a shrug.

'Did anything actually happen with you two; or where you just standing out in the rain picking up soccer balls?'

'You wouldn't understand.' Someone like Marcel could never understand. Marcel rolls his eyes. 'So did McClaren's letter gets sent to his old house?' he prompts.

'I think so. I never heard anything back from him.' I take a long sip of my soda.

'Why do you sound so sad about it?'

'I'm not!'

Maybe I am; a little. Besides Josh; I think John Ambrose McClaren matters the most to me of all the boys I've loved. There was just something so sweet about him.

It was the promise of maybe; maybe one day. I think John Ambrose McClaren must be The One That Got Away. Out loud I say; 'I mean; either he never got my letter, or he did, and-' I- shrug. 'I just always wondered how he turned out. If he's still the same. I bet he is.'

'You know what; I think maybe he mentioned you once.' Slowly he says; 'Yeah; he definitely did. He said he thought you were the prettiest girl in our grade. He said his one regret from middle school was not asking you to the eighth-grade formal.'

My whole body goes still- and I think I even stop breathing. 'For real?' I whisper.

Marcel busts up laughing. 'Dude! You're so gullible!'

My stomach squeezes. Blinking; I say; 'That was really mean. Why would you say that?'

Marcel stops laughing and says; 'Hey; I'm sorry. I was just kidding-'

I reach across the table and punch him in the shoulder; hard. 'You're a jerk.'

He rubs his shoulder and cries out; 'Ow! That hurt!'

'Well; you deserved it.'

'Sorry;' he says again. But there's still a trace of laughter in his eyes; so, I turn my head away from him. 'Hey; come on. Don't be mad. Who knows? Maybe he did like you.

Let's call him and find out.'

My head snaps up. 'You have his phone number? You have John Ambrose McClaren's number?'

Marcel pulls out his cell phone. 'Sure. Let's call him right now.'

'No!' I try to grab his phone away from him, but he's too quick. He holds his phone above my head and I can't reach. 'Don't you dare call him!'

'Why not? I thought you were so curious about whatever happened to him.' I shake my head fervently.

'What are you so afraid of? That he doesn't remember you?' Something changes in his face; some dawning realization about me. 'Or that he does?'

I shake my head...

'That's it.' Marcel nods to himself; he tips back in his chair; his hands linked around his head.

I don't like the way he's looking at me. Like he thinks he's figured me out. I hold my palm out to him. 'Give me your phone.'

Marcel's jaw drops. 'You're going to call him? Right now?'

I like that I've surprised him. It makes me feel like I've won something back... I think throwing Marcel off guard could be a fun hobby for me. In a commanding voice; I've only- ever used with Kellie; I say; 'Just give me your phone.' Marcel hands me his phone, and I copy John's number into mine. 'I'll call him when I feel like it; not because you feel like it.'

Marcel gives me a look of grudging respect. Of course- I'm never going to call John, but Marcel K. doesn't need to know that.

That night; I'm lying in bed still thinking about John. It's fun to think of the what-if. Scary; but fun. It's like; I thought this door was closed before, but here it is open just the tiniest crack. What if? What would that be like; me and John Ambrose McClaren?

If I close my eyes; I can almost picture it.

MARGOT AND I ARE ON the phone; it's Saturday afternoon here and Saturday night there.

'Have you lined up an internship for the spring?'

'Not yet-'

Margot lets out a sigh. 'I thought you were going to try and do something at Montpelier. I know they need help in the archives... Do you want me to call Donna for you?'

Margot did an internship at Montpelier for two summers and she loved it.

She was there for some important dig where they found a shard of Dolley Madison's china plate, and you'd have thought they found diamonds or a dinosaur bone. Everybody loves Margot over there. When she left; they gave her a plaque for all her hard work.

Daddy hung it up in the living room.

'Montpelier's too far of a drive;' I say.

'What about volunteering at the hospital?' she suggests. 'You could get a ride with Daddy on the days you have to go in.'

'You know I don't like the hospital.' 'Then the library! You like the library.'

'I've already filled out an application;' I lie.

'Have you really?'

'Or I was just about to...'

'I shouldn't have to push you to want things. You should want them for yourself. You need to take the initiative. I'm not always going to be beside you to push you.'

'I know that...'

'I mean; do you realize how important this year is; Lara Jean? It's kind of everything.

You don't get a do-over- this is the junior year.'

I can feel tears and panic building up inside me. If she asks me another question; it will be too much, and I'll cry.

'Hello...?' I say.

'I'm still here.' My voice comes out tiny, and I know Margot knows how close I am to crying.

She pauses... 'Look; you still have time; okay? I just don't want you to wait too long and have all the good placements go to other people; I'm just worried about you is all. But everything's fine; you're still okay.'

'Okay.' Even just that one little word is an effort.

'How's everything else?'

I started out this conversation wishing I could tell her about Marcel and everything that's been going on with me, but now I'm just feeling relieved that there are all these miles between us and she can't see what I'm up to. 'Everything's good;' I say.

'How's Josh? Have you talked to him lately?'

'Not really;' I say. Which I haven't. I've been so busy with Marcel I haven't really had a chance.

KELLIE AND I ARE ON the front steps. She's drinking her Korean yogurt drink and I'm working on that scarf for Margot while I wait for Marcel. Kellie's waiting for Daddy to come out. He's dropping her off at school today.

Ms. Rossinchild hasn't come outside yet. Maybe she's sick today or maybe she's running even later than usual.

We've got our eyes locked on her front door when a minivan drives down our street and slows in front of our house. I squint my eyes. It's Marcel.

Driving a tan minivan. He ducks his head out the window. 'Are you coming or not?'

'Why are you driving that?' Kellie calls out.

'Never mind that; Katherine;' Marcel calls back. 'Just get in...'

Kellie and I look at each other. 'Me too?' Kellie asks me.

I shrug. Then I lean back and open the front door and yell out; 'Kellie's getting a ride with me; Daddy!'

'Okay!' he yells back.

We stand up, but just then Ms. Rossinchild comes dashing out of the house in her navy-blue suit; briefcase in one hand; coffee in the other. Kellie and I look at each other gleefully. 'Five; four; three-'

'Damn it...!!!'

Giggling; we hurl ourselves toward Marcel's minivan. I hop into the passenger seat and Kellie climbs into the back. 'What were you guys laughing about?' He asks.

I'm about to tell him when Josh walks out of his house. He stops and stares at us for a second before the waves. I wave back and Kellie hangs her head out the window and yells;

'Hi; Josh...!'

'What up;' Marcel calls out; leaning over me.

'Hey;' Josh says back. Then he gets in his car.

Marcel pokes me in the side and grins and puts the car in reverse. 'Tell me why you guys were laughing.'

Clicking on my seat belt; I say; 'At least once a week; Ms. Rossinchild runs out to her car and spills hot coffee all over herself.'

Kellie pipes up; 'It's the funniest thing in the world.'

Marcel snorts. 'You guys are sadistic.'

'What's sadistic?' Kellie wants to know. She puts her head between us.

I push her back and say; 'Put your seat belt on.'

Marcel puts the car in reverse. 'It means seeing other people in pain makes you happy.'

'Oh.' She repeats it to herself softly. 'Sadistic.'

'Don't teach her weird stuff;' I say.

'I like weird stuff;' Kellie protests.

Marcel says; 'See? The kid likes weird stuff.' Without turning around; he lifts his hand up for a high five and Kellie leans forward and slaps it heartily. 'Hey; gimme a sip of whatever it is you're drinking back there.'

'It's almost gone; so, you can have the rest;' she says.

Kellie hands it over, and Marcel tips back the plastic container in his mouth.

'This is good;' he says.

'It's from the Korean grocery store;' Kellie tells him. 'They come in a pack and you can put them in the freezer and if you pack it for lunch; it'll be icy and cold when you drink it.'

'Sounds good to me. Lara Jean; bring me one of these tomorrow mornings; will you...?

For services rendered.'

I shoot him a dirty look and Marcel says; 'I mean the rides! Geez.'

'I'll bring you one; Marcel;' Kellie says.

'That's my girl.'

'As long as you give me a ride to school tomorrow; too;' Kellie finishes, and Marcel hoots.

BEFORE the FOURTH PERIOD; IM AT my locker; trying to refine my milkmaid braid in the little mirror hanging from the door.

'Lara Jean?'

'Yes?'

I peek around the door and it's Lucas Krapf; wearing a thin V-neck sweater in brilliant blue and stone-colored khakis. 'I've had this for a while now - I wasn't going to say anything,

but then I thought maybe you'd want it back.' He puts a pink envelope in my hand. It's my letter. So; Lucas got his; too.

I drop it into my locker; make a yikes face at myself in the mirror, and then close the door. 'So; you're probably wondering what this is all about;' I begin...

-And-

Then; I immediately falter. 'It's um; well; I wrote it a long time ago, and-'

'You don't have to explain.' 'Really? You're not curious?'

'No. It was just really nice to get a letter like that. I was actually pretty honored.'

I let out a relieved sigh and sag against my locker. Why is Lucas Krapf just so exactly right? He knows how to say the perfect thing.

And then Lucas gives me a half grimace; half-smile. 'But the thing is-'

He lowers his voice. 'You know I'm gay; right?'

'Oh; right; totally;' I say; trying not to sound disappointed. 'No; I totally knew.' So- Marcel was right after all.

Lucas smiles. 'You're so cute;' he says, and I perk up again. Then he says; 'Listen; can you not tell anybody; though? I mean; I'm out, but I'm not out-out yet. You know what I mean?'

'Totally;' I say; super confident.

'For instance; my mom knows but my dad the only kind of knows. I haven't outright told him.'

'Got it...!'

'I just let people believe what they please. I don't feel like it's my responsibility to quantify myself for them. I mean; you get what I'm talking about. As a biracial person; I'm sure people are always asking you what race you are; right?'

I haven't thought of it that way before; but yes- yes- yes! Lucas just gets it.

'Exactly. It's like; why do you need to know?'

'Exactly.'

We smile at each other and I feel that wonderful sensation of being known by someone. We walk together in the same direction; he has a Mandarin class and I have French...

At one point he asks me about Marcel, and I'm tempted to tell him the truth because I'm feeling so close to him. But Marcel and I made that pact- we explicitly said we would never tell anyone. I don't want to be the one to break it. So-o when Lucas says; 'Hey; so, what's the deal with you and-?' I just shrug and give him an enigmatic smile.

The Slit Kiss

'It's crazy; right? Because he's so -' I search for the exact right word, but I can't think of it. 'I mean; he could play the part of a handsome guy in a movie.' Hastily I add; 'So could you; though. You'd play the guy the girl should pick.'

Lucas laughs, but I can tell he likes it.

Dear Lucas; I never met a boy with manners as good as yours. You ought to have a British accent. At homecoming; you wore a cravat and it suited you so well I think you could wear one all the time and get away with it.

Oh; Lucas! I wish I knew what kind of girls you liked. As far as I can tell; you haven't dated anyone - unless you have a girlfriend at another school. You're just so mysterious. I hardly know a thing about you. The things I know are so unsubstantial; so unsatisfying; like that, you eat a chicken sandwich every day at lunch, and you're on the golf team.

I guess the one remotely real thing I know about you is you're a good writer; which must mean you have deep reserves of emotion. Like that short story you wrote in creative writing about the poisoned well, and it was from a six-year-old boy's perspective. It was so sensitive; so

keen! That story made me feel like I knew you at least a little bit. But I don't know you, and I wish I did.

I think you're very special. I think you are probably one of the most special people at our school, and I wish more people knew that about you. Or maybe I don't because sometimes it's nice to be the only one who knows something.

Love; Lara Jean-

AFTER SCHOOL; CHRIS, and Aire hanging out in my room. She's in trouble with her mom for staying out all night; so, she's hiding out over here until her mom leaves for book club.

We're sharing a big bag of Kellie's Pirate Booty; which I'm going to have to replace because she'll complain if it's missing from her lunch on Monday.

Chris stuffs a handful of Pirate Booty puffs in her mouth. 'Just tell me; Lara Jean. How far have you guys gone?'

I almost choke. 'We've gone nowhere! And we have no plans to go anywhere in the near future.' Or ever...

'Seriously? Not even over-the-bra action? A quick swipe across your chest?'

'No! I told you; I and my sister aren't like that.'

Chris snorts… 'Are you joking me...? Of course; Margot and Josh have had sex. Quit being so naive; Lara Jean.'

'This isn't me being naive;' I tell her. 'I know for a fact that he and Margot haven't done it.' 'How? How do you know 'for a fact'? I'd love to hear this.'

'I'm not telling you.' If I tell Chris; she'll only laugh more. She doesn't understand; she only has a little brother. She doesn't know how it is with sisters.

Margot and I; we made a pact; back in middle school.

We swore we wouldn't have sex until we were married or we were really; really in love and at least twenty-one. Margot might be really; really in love, but she's not married and she's not twenty-one... She'd never go back on her word. With sisters a pact is everything.

'No; I'd really love to know.' Chris has that hungry glint in her eyes, and I know she's just getting warmed up.

'You just want to make fun of it, and I'm not going to let you;' I say.

Chris rolls her eyes. 'Fine. But there's no way they haven't boned.'

I think Chris talks like that on purpose to get a reaction from me. She loves a reaction; so, I'm careful to not give her one. I calmly say; 'Can you please stop talking about my sister and Josh having sex. You know I don't like it.'

Chris takes a permanent marker out of her bag and starts to color in her thumbnail.

'You need to stop being such a scaredy-cat. Seriously; you've built it up in your head to be this huge; life-changing moment; but it's actually done in under five, and it's not even the best part.'

I know she's waiting for me to ask what the best part is, and I am curious; but I ignore her and say; 'I think permanent marker is toxic for your nails;' to which she shakes her head at me like I'm a lost cause.

I wonder; though - what would it be like? To be that close to a boy and have him see all of you; no holding back. Would it be scary only for a second or two?

Or would it be scary the whole time? What if I didn't like it at all? Or what if I liked it too much? It's a lot to think about.

'DO YOU THINK- IF A- a guy and a girl have been dating for a long time; they've automatically had sex?' I ask Marcel. We're sitting on the floor of the library; our backs against the wall of the reference section nobody ever goes to. It's after school; the library's empty, and we're doing homework. Marcel gets Cs and Ds in chemistry; so, I've been helping him study.

Marcel looks up from his chem- book; suddenly interested. He tosses the book aside and says; 'I need more information. How long have they been dating?'

'A long time. Like two years; something like that.'

'How old are they...? Our age...?'

'About...'

…?...

'Then most likely but not necessarily. It depends on the girl and the guy. But if I had to put money on it; yeah.'

'But the girl's not like that. The guy isn't either.'

'Who are we talking about here?'

'That's a secret.' I hesitate, and then say; 'Chris thinks there's no way they haven't.

She says it's impossible.'

Marcel snorts. 'Why are you going to her for advice? That girl is a train wreck.'

'She is not a train wreck...!'

He gives me a look. 'Shaddyman year she got wasted on Four Loko and she climbed up on Tyler Boylan's roof and did a striptease.'

'Where you there?' I demand. 'Did you see it with your own two eyes?'

'Damn straight. Fished her clothes out of the pool like the gentleman I am.'

I blow out my cheeks. 'Well; Chris never mentioned that story to me; so, like- I can't really speak to that. Besides; didn't they ban Four Loko or whatever it's called?'

'They still make it, but a shitty watered-down version. You can dump Five-Hour Energy in it to get the same effect...' I shudder; which makes Marcel smile. 'What do you and Chris even talk about?' he asks. 'You have nothing in common.'

'What do we talk about?' I counter...

Marcel laughs. 'Point taken.' He pushes away from the wall and puts his head in my lap, and I go completely still.

I try to make my voice sound normal as I say; 'You're in a really strange mood today.'

He raises an eyebrow at me. 'What kind of mood am I in?' Marcel sure loves to hear about himself. Normally; I don't mind, but today I'm not in the mood to oblige him. He already has too many people in his life telling him how great he is.

'The obnoxious kind;' I say, and he laughs.

'I'm sleepy.' He closes his eyes and snuggles against me. 'Tell me a bedtime story; Covey.'

'Don't flirt;' I tell him...

His eyes fly open. 'I wasn't!'

'Yes; you were. You flirt with everyone. It's like you can't help yourself.'

'Well; I don't ever flirt with you.' Marcel sits back up and checks his phone, and suddenly I'm wishing I didn't say anything at all...

I'm IN FRENCH CLASS; LOOKING Gout the window as I am wont to do, and that's when I see Josh walking toward the bleachers by the track. He's carrying his lunch, and he's alone. Why is he eating alone? He has his comic-book group; he has Jersey Mike.

But I guess he and Jersey Mike didn't hang out so much last year. Josh was always with Margot and me. The trio. And now we're not even a duo, and he's all alone. Part of its Margot's fault for leaving; but I can see my part in it too; if I'd never started liking him; I wouldn't have had to make up this whole Marcel. story. I could just be his good friend Lara Jean like always.

Maybe this is why Mommy told Margot not to go to college with a boyfriend. When you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend; you only want to be with that person, and you forget about everybody else, and then when the two of you break up; you've lost all your friends. They were off doing fun stuff without you.

All I can say is; Josh sure is a lonely figure eating his sandwich on the very top bleacher.

I take the bus home from school because Marcel had to leave early for a lacrosse game with his club team. I'm in front of the house; taking the mail out of our mailbox when Josh pulls into his driveway. 'Hey!' he calls out. He climbs out of his car and jogs over to me; his backpack slung over his shoulder.

'I saw you on the bus;' he says. 'I waved, but you were doing your daydreaming thing. So how long's your car going to be in the shop?'

'I don't know. It keeps changing. They had to order apart from; like; Indiana.'

Josh gives me a knowing look. 'So, you're secretly relieved; right?'

'No! Why would I be relieved?'

'Come on. I know you. You hate driving. You're probably glad to have the excuse not to drive.'

I start to protest; but then I stop. There's no use. Josh knows me too well.

'Well; maybe I'm a teeny-tiny bit relieved.'

'If you ever need a ride; you know you can call me.'

I nod. I do know that. I wouldn't call him for myself; but I would for Kellie; in an emergency.

'I mean; I know you have - now, but I'm right next door. It's way more convenient for me to give you a ride to a school than him. I mean; it's more environmentally responsible.' I don't say anything, and Josh scratches the back of his neck.

'I want to say something to you, but I feel weird bringing it up. Which is also weird; because we've always been able to talk to each other.'

'We can still talk to each other;' I say. 'Nothing's changed.' That's the biggest lie I've ever told him; even bigger than the lie about my so-called dead twin Marcella. Until a couple of years ago; Josh thought I had a twin sister named Marcella who died of leukemia.

'Okay. I feel like - I feel like you've been avoiding me ever since-'

He's going to say it. He's actually going to say it. I look down at the ground.

'Ever since Margot broke up with me.'

My head snaps up. That's what he thinks? That I'm avoiding him because of Margot...?

Did my letter really make that little of an impact? I try to keep my face still and expressionless when I say; 'I haven't been avoiding you. I've just been busy.'

'With- I know. You and I have known each other for a long time.

You're one of my best friends; Lara Jean. I don't want to lose you; too.'

It's the 'too' that's the sticking point... The 'too' is what stops me in my tracks. It sticks in my craw. Because if he hadn't said 'too;' it would be about me and him. Not about me and him and Margot.

'That letter you wrote-'

Too late... I don't want to talk about the letter anymore. Before he can say another word; I say; 'I'll always be your friend; Joshy.' And then I smile at him, and it takes a lot of effort. It takes so much effort. But if I don't smile; I'll cry.

Josh nods. 'Okay. Good. So - so can we hang out again?'

'Sure...'

Josh reaches out and chucks my chin. 'So; can I give you a ride to school tomorrow...?'

'Okay;' I say. Because wasn't that kind of the whole point of this? To be able to hang out with Josh again without that letter hanging over our heads? To just be his good friend Lara Jean again?

After dinner; I teach Kellie how to do laundry. She resists me at first, but I tell her that this is a job we are all sharing from now on; so-o she'd better just accept it.

'When the buzzer goes off; that means it's done and you have to fold it right away or it'll get wrinkled.'

To both of our surprise; Kellie likes doing laundry. Mostly because she can sit in front of the TV and fold and watch her shows in peace.

'Next time I'll teach you how to iron.'

'Ironing; too? Who am I; Cinderella?'

I ignore her. 'You'll be good at ironing. You like precision and clean lines.

You'll probably be better at it than me.'

This piques her interest. 'Yeah; maybe. Your stuff always looks wrinkled no matter what.'

After we finish the laundry; Kellie and I are washing up in the bathroom we share.

There are two sinks; Margot had the one on the left and Kellie and I used to fight over who the sink on the right belonged to. It's hers now...

Kellie's brushing her teeth and I'm putting on a cucumber-aloe face mask; when Kellie says to me; 'Do you think if I asked; Marcel would take us to McDonald's tomorrow on the way to school?'

I rub another dollop of green face mask onto my cheeks. 'I don't want you getting used to Marcel giving us rides. You're taking the bus from now on; okay?'

Kellie pouts. 'Why!'

'Because. Besides; Marcel's not giving me a ride tomorrow; Josh is.'

'But won't Marcel be mad?'

My face is getting tight from the mask drying. Through clenched teeth, I say; 'Nah. He's not the jealous type.'

'Then who's the jealous type?'

I don't have a good answer for that. Who is the jealous type? I'm mulling this over when Kellie giggles at me in the mirror and says; 'You look like a zombie.'

I hold my hands out to her face and she ducks away. In my best zombie voice; I say; 'I want to eat your brains.'

Kellie runs away; screaming.

When I'm back in my room; I text Marcel that I don't need a ride to school tomorrow. I don't tell him Josh is giving me a ride. Just in case.

TODAY'S NOTE FROM Marcel SAYS; Tart and Tangy after school?

He's drawn two boxes; a yes or a no. I check yes and drop the note in his locker.

After school ends; I meet Marcel in his car, and we caravan with his lacrosse friends to Tart and Tangy. I order an original frozen yogurt with Cap'n Crunch and strawberries and kiwi and pineapple, and Marcel gets key lime with crushed-up Oreos. I pull out my wallet to pay for my yogurt, but Marcel stops me. He winks at me and says; 'I got this.' I whisper; 'I thought you weren't ever paying for anything.'

'My boys are here. I can't look like a cheap-ass in front of my boys.' Then he puts his arm around me and says loudly; 'For as long as you're my girl; you don't pay for frozen yogurt.'

I roll my eyes, but I'm not going to say no to a free frozen yogurt. No boy has ever paid for me before. I could get used to this kind of nice treatment...

I was bracing myself to see Genevieve here, but she doesn't show. I think Marcel's wondering too because he keeps his eyes on the door. With Genevieve; I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. So far- she's been eerily; disturbingly quiet. She's hardly ever in the cafeteria during lunch because she and Emily Nussbaum have been eating off-campus, and when I see her in the hallways; she fake smiles at me without showing her teeth; which is somehow more menacing.

When is she going to strike back against me? When will I have my Jamila Singh moment? Chris says Genevieve's too obsessed with her college boyfriend to care about me and Marcel, but I don't believe it. I've seen the way she looks at him.

Like he's hers.

The boys put a few tables together and we basically take over the place. It's just like at the lunch table; with them being loud; talking about the football game coming up on

Friday. I don't think I say two words. I don't really have anything to add. I just eat my free frozen yogurt and enjoy the fact that I'm not at home organizing my shoe closet or watching the Golf Channel with my dad.

Continued- 1

We're walking to our cars when Gabe says; 'Hey; Lara Jean; did you know that if you say your name really fast; it sounds like Large? Try it! Lara Jean.'

Dutifully I repeat; 'Lara Jean. Largy. Actually; I think it sounds more like Largy; not Large.'

Gabe nods to himself and announces; 'I'm going to start calling you Large.

You're so little it's funny. Right? Like those big guys who go by the name Tiny?'

I shrug. 'Sure.'

Gabe turns to Darrell. 'She's so little she could be our mascot.'

'Hey; I'm not that small;' I protest.

'How tall are you?' Darrell asks me.

'Five two;' I fib. It's more like five and a quarter.

Tossing his spoon in the trash; Gabe says; 'You're so little you could fit in my pocket!'

All the guys laugh. Marcel's smiling in a bemused way. Then Gabe suddenly grabs me and throws me over his shoulder like I'm a kid and he's my dad.

'Gabe! Put me down!' I shriek; kicking my legs and pounding on his chest.

He starts spinning around in a circle, and all the guys are cracking up. 'I'm going to adopt you; Large! You're going to be my pet. I'll put you in my old hamster cage!'

I'm giggling so hard I can't catch my breath and I'm starting to feel dizzy.

'Put me down!'

'Put her down; man;' Marcel says, but he's laughing too.

Gabe runs toward somebody's pickup truck and sets me down in the back.

'Get me out of here!' I yell. Gabe's already running away. All the guys start getting into their cars.

'Bye; Large!' they call out. Marcel jogs over to me and extends his hand so I can hop down.

'Your friends are crazy;' I say; jumping onto the pavement...

'They like you;' he says.

'Really?'

'Sure… They used to hate when I would bring Gen places. They don't mind if you hang out with us.' Marcel slings his arm around me. 'Come on; Large. I'll take you home.'

As we walk to his car; I let my hair fall in my face; so, he doesn't see me smiling. It sure is nice being part of a group; feeling like I belong.

I VOLUNTEERED TO BAKE Six Dozen cupcakes for Kellie's PTA bake sale. I did it because Margot's done it for the past two years. Margot only ever did it because she didn't want people to think Kellie's family wasn't involved enough in PTA. She did brownies both times, but I signed up for cupcakes because I thought they'd be a bigger hit. I bought a few different kinds of blue sprinkles and I made little toothpick flags that say BLUE MOUNTAIN ACADEMY. I thought Kellie would have fun helping me decorate.

But now I'm realizing Margot's way was better; because with brownies; you just pour them into the pan; bake, and slice, and there you go. Cupcakes are a lot more work. You have to scoop the perfect amount six dozen times, and then you have to wait for them to cool, and then you're frosting and sprinkling.

I'm measuring out my eighth cup of flour when the doorbell rings. 'Kellie!' I scream.

'Get the door!'

It rings again. 'Kellie!'

From upstairs she screams back; 'I'm running an important experiment!'

I run to the door and fling it open without bothering to check who it is.

Marcel; He busts up laughing.

'You have flour all over your face;' he says; dusting off my cheeks with the backs of his hands.

I twist away from him and wipe my face with my apron. 'What are you doing here?'

'We're going to the game. Didn't you read my note from yesterday?'

'Oh; shoot. I had a test and I forgot.' Marcel frowns and I add; 'I can't go anyway because I have to bake seventy-two cupcakes by tomorrow.'

'On a Friday night?'

'Well - yeah.'

'Is this for the PTA bake sale?' Marcel brushes past me and starts taking off his sneakers. 'You guys are a no-shoes house; right?'

'Yeah;' I say; surprised. 'Is your mom making something too?'

'Rice Krispie treats.' Another way smarter choice than seventy-two cupcakes.

'Sorry; you came over here for nothing. Maybe we can go to the game next Friday;' I say; expecting him to put his shoes back on.

But he doesn't; he wanders into the kitchen and sits on a stool. Huh? 'Your house looks the same as I remembered;' he says; looking around. He points at the framed picture of me and Margot taking a bath when we were babies. 'Cute.'

I can feel my cheeks burn. I go and turn the photo over. 'When have you ever been to my house?'

'Back in seventh grade. Remember how we'd hang out in your neighbor's treehouse? I had to pee once, and you let me use your bathroom.'

'Oh; yeah;' I say.

Nevaeh

Book: 27

French Kiss

Part: 7

Kiss me Here

It's funny to see a boy other than Josh in our kitchen. I feel nervous for some reason.

'How long's it going to take?' he asks me, his hands in his pockets.

'Hours, probably.' I pick up the measuring cup again. I can't remember what cup I was on.

Marcel groans. 'Why can't we just go to the store and buy some?'

I start measuring the flour that's in the bowl, separating it into piles.

'Because, do you think any of the other moms are buying cupcakes from Food Lion? How would that make Kitty look?'

'Well, if it's for Kitty, then Kitty should be helping.' Marcel hops off the stool and comes up to me and slides his hands around my waist and tries to untie my apron strings.

'Where is the kid?'

I stare at him. 'What - are you doing?'

Marcel looks at me like I'm a dummy. 'I need an apron too if I'm going to help. I'm not trying to get my clothes all messed up.'

'We're not going to be done in time for the game,' I tell him.

'Then we'll just go to the party after.' Marcel shoots me an incredulous look. 'That was in the note I wrote to you today! God, why do I even bother?'

'I was really busy today,' I say meekly. I feel bad. He's following through on his end of the deal and faithfully writing me a note a day and I can't even be bothered to read them. 'I don't know if I can go to a party. I don't know if I'm allowed to go out that late.'

'Is your dad home? I'll ask him.'

'No, he's at the hospital. Besides I can't just leave Kitty here by herself.' I pick up the measuring cup again.

'Well, what time does he get home?'

'I don't know. Maybe late.' Or maybe like in the next hour. But Marcel will be long gone by then. 'You should just go. I don't want to hold you up.'

Marcel groans. 'Covey. I need you. Gen hasn't said a word about us yet, which is kind of the whole point of this. And - she might bring that dick-hole she's dating.'

Marcel pushes out his lower lip. 'Come on. I came through for you with Josh, didn't I?'

'Yes,' I admit. 'But, Marcel, I have to make these cupcakes for the bake sale-'

Marcel stretches his arms out. 'Then I'll help you. Just give me an apron.'

I back away from him and start rummaging around for another apron. I find one with a cupcake print and hand it to him.

He makes a face and points at mine. 'I want the one you're wearing.'

'But it's mine!' It's red-and-white gingham with little brown bears; my grandma got it for me in Korea. 'I always bake in this. Just wear that one.'

Slowly Marcel shakes his head and holds out his hand. 'Give me yours. You owe me for not reading any of my notes.'

I untie the apron and hand it over. I turn around and go back to my measuring. 'You're a bigger baby than Kitty.'

'Just hurry up and give me a task.'

'Are you qualified, though? Because I only have exactly enough ingredients for six dozen cupcakes. I don't want to have to start over-'

'I know how to bake!'

'Okay, then. Dump those sticks of butter into the mixing bowl.'

'And then?'

'And then when you're done, I'll give you your next task.'

Marcel rolls his eyes, but he does as he's told. 'So-o this is what you do on Friday nights?

Stay home and bake in your PJ's?'

'I do other stuff too,' I say, tying my hair into a tighter ponytail.

'Like?'

I'm still so flustered by Marcel's sudden appearance that I can't think.

'Um, I go out.'

'Where?'

'God, I don't know! Quit interrogating me, Marcel.' I blow my bangs out of my eyes. It's getting really warm here. I might as well just turn off the oven, because

Marcel's arrival has slowed down this whole process. At this rate, I'll be up all night. 'You made me lose my count on the flour. I'm going to have to start over from scratch!'

'Here, let me do it,' Marcel says, coming up close behind me.

I jerk away from him. 'No- no, I'll do it,' I say, and he shakes his head and tries to take the measuring cup from me, but I won't let go, and flour poufs out of the cup and into the air. It dusts us both. Marcel starts cracking up and I let out an outraged shriek. 'Marcel!'

He's laughing too hard to speak.

I cross my arms… 'I'd better still have enough flour.' 'You look like a grandma,' he says, still laughing.

'Well, you look like a grandpa,' I counter. I dump the flour in my mixing bowl back into the flour canister.

'Actually, you're really a lot like my granny,' Marcel says. 'You hate cussing. You like to bake. You stay at home on Friday nights. Wow, I'm dating my granny… gross.'

I start measuring again. One, two. 'I don't stay home every Friday night.' Three…

'I've never seen you out. You don't go to parties. We used to hang out back in the day.

Why'd you stop hanging out?'

Four. 'I - I don't know. Middle school was different.' What does he want me to say?

That Genevieve decided I wasn't cool enough- so I got left behind? Why is he so clueless?

'I always wondered why you stopped hanging out with us.'

Was I on five or six? 'Marcel! You made me lose my count again!'

'I have that effect on women.'

I roll my eyes at him and he grins back at me, but before he can say anything else, I yell, 'Kitty! Get down here!'

'I'm working-'

'Marcel's here!' I know that will get her.

In five seconds flat, Kitty's running into the kitchen. She skids to a stop, all of a sudden shy. 'Why are you here?' she asks him.

'To pick up Lara Jean. Why aren't you helping?'

'I was running an experiment. Want to help me?'

I answer for him. 'Sure, he'll help you.' To Marcel, I say, 'You're distracting me. Go help Kitty.'

'I don't know if you want my help, Katherine. See, I'm really distracting to women. I make them lose their count.' Marcel winks at her and I make a gagging sound. 'Why don't you stay down here and help us bake?'

'Boring!' Kitty turns tail and runs back up the stairs.

'Don't you dare try to sprinkle or frost when it's all over!' I yell. 'You haven't earned the right!'

I'm creaming the butter and Marcel's cracking eggs into a chipped salad bowl when my dad gets home. 'Whose car is that out front?' Daddy asks as he walks into the kitchen.

He stops short. 'Hello,' he says, surprised. He has a Chan's Chinese Bistro bag in his hands.

'Hey, Daddy,' I say like it's perfectly normal that Marcel - is cooking in our kitchen. 'You look tired.'

Marcel stands up straighter. 'Hi, Dr. Covey.'

My dad sets the bag down on the kitchen table. 'Oh, hello,' he says, clearing his throat. 'Nice to see you. You're Marcel K., right?'

'Right.'

'One of the old gang,' my dad says jovially, and I cringe. 'What are you kids up to tonight?'

'I'm baking cupcakes for Kitty's PTA bake sale and Marcel's helping,' I say.

My dad nods. 'Are you hungry, Marcel? I have plenty.' He lifts the bag.

'Shrimp lo mein, kung pao chicken.'

'Actually, Lara Jean and I were going to stop by our friend's party,' Marcel says. 'If that would be okay? I'll bring her back early.'

Before my dad can answer, I say to Marcel, 'I told you I have to finish these cupcakes.'

'Kitty and I will finish them,' my dad interjects. 'You two go to that birthday party.'

My stomach flips. 'It's really okay, Daddy. I have to be the one to do them; I'm decorating them specially.'

'Kitty and I will figure it out. You can go get changed. We'll keep working on these cupcakes.'

I open and close my mouth like a trout. 'All right, then.' And I don't make a move, I just stand there, because I'm afraid to leave the two of them alone together.

Marcel smiles at me broadly. 'You heard the man. We've got this covered.'

I think, don't act too confident, because then my dad will think you're arrogant.

There are certain outfits you have that make you feel good every time you wear them, and then there are outfits where you wore them too many times in a row because you- liked them so much, and now they just feel like garbage. I'm looking at my closet now and everything looks like garbage. My anxiety is only compounded by the fact that I know- Gen will be wearing the exact right thing because she always wears the exact right thing.

And I have to be wearing the right thing too. Marcel wouldn't have come by and made such a point of going to this party if it weren't important to him.

I pull on my jeans and try on different tops- a frilly peach one that suddenly looks prissy in my eyes, a long fuzzy sweater with a penguin on it that looks too kid-sh. I'm stepping into a pair of gray shorts with black suspenders when someone knocks at my door. I freeze and grab a sweater to cover myself up.

'Lara Jean?' It's Marcel.

'Yes?'

'Are you almost ready?'

'Almost! Just- just go downstairs. I'll be down soon.'

He lets out an audible sigh. 'Okay. I'm going to see what the kid's doing.'

When I hear his footsteps walking away, I scramble and try a cream polka dot blouse with the shorts-suspenders ensemble. It's cute, but is it too cute? Too much?

And should I do black tights or black knee socks? Margot said I look Parisian in this outfit. Parisian is a good thing. It's sophisticated, romantic. I try on a beret, just to see the effect, and I immediately throw it off. Definitely too much.

I wish Marcel hadn't snuck up on me with this. I need time to plan, to prepare. Though truthfully, if he'd asked me ahead of time, I would have come up with an excuse not to go. It's one thing to go to Tart and Tangy after school, but a party with all of Marcel's friends, not to mention Genevieve?

I hop around my room, searching for my over-the-knee socks, then searching for my strawberry lip pot that looks like a strawberry. Gosh, I really need to clean my room. It's hard to find anything in this mess.

I run to Margot's room for her big grandpa cardigan, and I pass Kitty's open door, where I see Marcel and Kitty lying on the floor, working with her lab set. I root through Margot's sweater drawer, which is now T-shirts and shorts because she's taken most of her sweaters. No grandpa cardigan. But at the bottom of the drawer, there is an envelope.

A letter, from Josh.

I want to open it so badly. I know I shouldn't.

Carefully, ever so carefully, I take out the letter and unfold it.

Dear Margot, you say we had to break up because you don't want to go to college with a boyfriend, and you want your freedom, and you don't want to be held back. But you know, and I know that's not the real reason. You broke up with me because we had sex and you were scared of getting close to me.

I stop reading.

I can't believe it. Chris was right- and I was wrong. Margot and Josh did have sex. It's like everything I thought I knew is the opposite. I thought I knew exactly who my sister was, but it turns out I don't know anything.

I hear Marcel calling my name. 'Lara Jean! Are you ready yet?'

Hastily I fold the letter up and put it back in the envelope. I put it back in the drawer and slam the drawer shut. 'Coming!'

WE'RE STANDING AT THE FRONT door of Steve Bledell's mansion.

Steve's on the football team; he's mostly known for having a rich stepdad with his own plane.

'Ready?' Marcel asks me.

I wipe my palms on my shorts. I wish I'd had time to do something better for my hair.

'Not really.'

'Then let's talk strategy for a second. All you have to do is act like you're in love with me. That shouldn't be too hard.'

I roll my eyes. 'You're the vainest boy I've ever met.'

Marcel grins and shrugs. He's got his hand on the doorknob, but then he stops. 'Hold on,' he says, and he pulls the hair tie out of my hair and tosses it into the yard.

'Hey!'

'It looks better down. Just trust me.' Marcel runs his fingers through my hair and fluffs it up, and I swat his hand away. Then he takes his phone out of his back pocket and he snaps a picture of me.

I give him a puzzled look, and he explains, 'In case Gen checks my phone.'

I watch as he sets the picture as his wallpaper.

'Can we do another one?' I don't like the way my hair looks.

'Nah, I like it. You look pretty.' He probably only said it so we could hurry up and go inside, but it makes me feel good.

Walking into this party with Marcel -, I can't help but feel a sudden rush of pride.

He's here with me. Or is it that I'm here with him?

I see her as soon as we walk in- she's on the couch with her girls; they're all drinking from red Solo cups. No boyfriend in sight. She raises her eyebrows at me and whispers something to Emily Nussbaum. 'Heyyy, Lara Jean,' Emily calls out, crooking her finger at me. 'Come sit by us.'

I start to walk toward them, thinking Marcel is next to me, but he's not. He's stopped to say hi to someone. I look at him with panicky eyes and he just gestures at me to keep going. He mouths, You're up.

Crossing the room alone feels like crossing a continent, with Gen and her friends watching me. 'Hi, guys,' I say, and my voice comes out high-pitched and little-girlish.

There's no room for me on the couch, so I perch on an armrest like a bird on a telephone wire. I keep my eyes trained on Marcel's back; he is across the room with some guys from the lacrosse team. It must be nice to be him. So-o at ease, so comfortable with himself, knowing that people are waiting for him, like Marcel's here, now the party can really get started. I look around the room, just to have something to do, and see Gabe and Darrell, and they wave at me very nicely, but they don't come over. It feels like everyone is waiting and watching, waiting and watching to see what Genevieve will do.

I wish I hadn't come.

Emily leans forward. 'We're all dying to know - what's the story with you and-?'

I know she's been commissioned by Gen to ask. Gen's sipping her drink, casual as can be, but she's waiting for my answer. Is she drunk yet? I wonder. From everything I've heard and know about Gen, she is a mean drunk. Not that I've ever personally experienced it, but I've heard things. There are stories.

I wet my lips. 'Whatever Marcel said - I guess that's the story.'

Emily waves this off like whatever Marcel says doesn't really count. 'We want to hear it from you. I mean, it's just so surprising. How did this even happen?' She leans closer like we are girlfriends.

When I hesitate, when my eyes dart toward Genevieve, she smiles and rolls her eyes.

'It's okay, you can say, Lara Jean. Marcel and I are over. I don't know if he told you this, but I'm actually the one who broke up with him, so.'

I nod... 'That's what he said.' That is not what he said, but it's what I already knew.

'So- when did you guys get together?' She tries to sound offhand, but I know my answer is important to her. She's trying to catch me in something.

'Pretty recently,' I say.

'How recently?' she presses.

I swallow... 'Right before school started,' I tell her. Isn't that what Marcel and I decided the story was going to be?

Genevieve's eyes go bright and my heart sinks. I've said the wrong thing, but it's too late. It's hard not to get caught up in her spell. She's the kind of person you want to like you. You know she can be cruel; you've seen her be cruel. But when her eyes are on you, and she's paying attention to you, you want it to last. Her beauty is part of it, but there's something more- something that draws you in. I think it's her transparency- everything she thinks or feels is written all over her face, and even if it wasn't, she'd say it anyway, because she says what she thinks, without thinking first.

I can see why Marcel has loved her for so long.

'I think it's adorable,' Genevieve says, and then the girls start talking about some concert they're trying to get tickets for and I just sit there, glad I don't have to talk- anymore, wondering how it's going with the cupcakes back at home. I hope Daddy isn't overbaking them. There's nothing worse than a dry cupcake.

The girls move on to talking about Halloween costumes, so I get up and go to the bathroom.

I come back to find Marcel sitting in a wingback leather armchair, drinking a beer and talking to Gabe. There's nowhere for me to sit; my spot on the couch has been taken.

Now what?

I stand there for a second and then I go for it: I do what a girl in love with Marcel would do. I do what Genevieve would do. I march right in and plop down in his lap like it's my rightful place.

Marcel yelps in surprise. 'Hey,' he says, coughing on his beer.

'Hey,' I say. Then I tweak him once on the nose like I saw a girl do in a black-and-white movie.

Marcel shifts in his seat and gives me a look like he's trying not to laugh, and I get nervous- tweaking a boy on the nose is romantic, right? Then, out of the- corner of my- eye, I see Genevieve glaring at us. She whispers something to Emily and stalks out of the room.

Success!

Later I am pouring myself Cherry Coke and I see Genevieve and Marcel, talking in the kitchen. She's speaking to him in a low, urgent voice, and she reaches out and touches his arm. He tries to brush her hand away, but she doesn't let go.

I'm so mesmerized I don't even notice when Lucas Krapf comes up to me, popping the cap off a bottle of Bud Light. 'Hey, Lara Jean.'

'Hi!' I'm relieved to see a familiar face.

He stands next to me, our backs against the dining room wall. 'What are they fighting about?'

'Who even knows?' I say. I smile a secret smile. Hopefully, it's about me, and Marcel will be happy our plan is finally working.

Lucas crooks his finger at me, so I'll come closer. He whispers, 'Fighting isn't a good sign, Lara Jean. It means you still care.' His breath smells like beer.

Hmm. Genevieve obviously still cares. Marcel must too.

Lucas pats me on the head fondly. 'Just be careful.'

'Thank you,' I say.

Marcel stalks out of the kitchen and says, 'Are you ready to go?' He doesn't wait for me to answer him; he just starts walking, his shoulders stiff.

I give Lucas a shrug. 'See you on Monday, Lucas!' Then I scurry after Marcel.

He's still mad; I can tell by the way he jerks the keys into the ignition. 'God, she makes me crazy!' He's so keyed up energy is vibrating off him in waves.

'What did you say to her?'

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. 'She asked me when we got together. I told her just before school started.'

Marcel does a full-body groan. 'We hooked up that first weekend.'

'But - you guys have broken up already.'

'Yeah, well.' Marcel shrugs. 'Whatever. What's done is done.'

Relieved, I click on my seat belt and kick my shoes off. 'What were you two fighting about tonight, anyway?'

'Don't worry about it. You did a good job, by the way. She's so jealous it's killing her.'

'Yay,' I say. Just as long as she doesn't kill me.

We drive through the night in silence. Then I ask, 'Marcel - how did you know you loved Genevieve?'

'God, Lara Jean. Why do you have to ask those kinds of questions?'

'Because I'm a naturally curious person.' I flip down his mirror and start braiding the top of my hair. 'And maybe the question you should be asking yourself is, why are you so afraid to answer those kinds of questions?'

'I'm not afraid!'

'Then why won't you answer the question?'

Marcel goes silent, and I'm pretty sure he's not going to answer, but then, after a long pause where my question just hangs in the air, he says, 'I don't know if I ever loved

Genevieve. How would I even know what that felt like? I'm seventeen, for God's sake.'

'Seventeen's not so young. A hundred years ago people got married when they were practically our age.'

'Yeah, that was before electricity and the Internet. A hundred years ago eighteen year-old guys were out there fighting wars with bayonets and holding a man's life in their hands! They lived a lot of life by the time they were our age. What do kids our age know about love and life?' I've never heard him talk like this before- like he actually cares about something. I think he's still all worked up from his fight with Genevieve.

I wind my hair into a honey bun and secure it with a ponytail holder. 'You know who you sound like? You sound like my grandpa,' I say. 'Also- I think you're stalling because you don't want to answer the question.'

'I answered it; you just didn't like my answer.'

We pull up in front of my house. Marcel turns off the engine, which is what he does when he wants to talk a little while longer. So, I don't jump out right away, I put my bag in my lap and search for my keys even though the lights are on upstairs.

Gosh... To be sitting in the passenger seat of Marcel -'s black Audi. Isn't that what every girl has ever wanted, in the history of boys and girls? Not Marcel - specifically, or yes, maybe Marcel - specifically.

Marcel leans his head back against the headrest and closes his eyes.

I say, 'Did you know that when people fight with each other, that means they still really care about each other?' When Marcel doesn't answer, I say, 'Genevieve must really have a hold on you.'

I expect him to deny it, but he doesn't. Instead, he says, 'She does, but I wish she didn't. I don't want to be owned by anyone. Or belong to anyone.'

Margot would say she belongs to herself. Kitty would say she belongs to no one.

-And-

I guess I would say I belong to my sisters and my dad, but that won't always be true.

To belong to someone- I didn't know it, but now that I think about it, it seems like that's all- I've ever wanted. To really be somebody's, and to have them be mine.

'So that's why you're doing this,' I tell him- I'm partly asking but I'm mostly telling.

'To prove you don't belong to her. Or with her.' I stop. 'Do you think there's a difference?

Between belonging with and belonging to, I mean?'

'Sure. One implies choice; the other doesn't.'

'You must really love her to go to all this trouble.'

Marcel makes a dismissive sound. 'You're too dreamy-eyed.'

'Thank you,' I say, even though I know he doesn't mean it as a compliment.

I say it just to bug him.

I know I've succeeded when he says, his face sour, 'What would you know about love,

Lara Jean? You've never even had a boyfriend before.'

I'm tempted to make up someone, a boy from camp, from another town, from anywhere. His name is Clint is on the tip of my tongue. But it would be too humiliating because he'd know I was lying; I already told him I never dated anybody before.

-And-

Even if I hadn't, it is far more pathetic to make up a boyfriend than to just admit the truth. 'No, I've never had a boyfriend. But plenty of people I know have had boyfriends, but they've never once been in love. I've been in love.' That's why I'm doing this.

Marcel snorts. 'With who? Josh Sanderson? That tool?'

'He's not a tool,' I say, frowning at him. 'You don't even know him to say that.'

'Anybody with one eye and half a brain could tell what a tool that guy is.'

'Are you saying my sister's blind and brainless?' I demand. If he says one bad word about my sister, that's it. This whole thing is off. I don't need him that badly.

Marcel laughs. 'No. I'm saying you are!'

'You know what? I changed my mind. You've obviously never loved anyone but yourself.' I try to jerk the passenger door open, but it's locked.

'Lara Jean, I was just kidding. Come on.'

'See you on Monday.'

'Wait, wait. First, tell me something.' Marcel leans back in his seat. 'How come you never dated anybody?'

I shrug. 'I don't know - because nobody ever asked?'

'Bullshit. I know for a fact that Martinez asked you to homecoming and you said no.'

I'm surprised he knows about that. 'What is it with you guys all calling each other by your last name?' I ask him. 'It's so- 'I struggle to find the right word.

'Affected?

Affected?'

'Don't change the subject.'

'I guess I said no because I was scared.' I stare out the window and run my finger along with the glass, making an M for Martinez.

'Of Tommy?'

'No! I like Tommy. It's not that. It's scary when it's real. When it's not just thinking about a person, but, like, having a real live person in front of you, with, like, expectations. And wants.' I finally look at Marcel, and I'm surprised by how hard he's paying attention; his eyes are intent and focused on me like he's actually interested in what I'm saying. 'Even when I liked a boy so much, loved him even, I- would always rather be with my sisters, because that's where I belong.'

'Wait. What about right now?'

'Right now? Well, I don't like you that way so -'

'Good,' Marcel says. 'Don't go falling for me again, okay? I can't have any more girls in love with me. It's exhausting.'

I laugh out loud. 'You're so full of yourself.'

'I'm kidding,' he protests, but he's not. 'What did you ever see in me anyway?' He grins at me then, cocky again and so sure of his charm.

'Honestly? I really couldn't tell you.'

The grin falters and then rights itself, but now it's not so certain. 'You said it was because I make people feel special. You - you said it was because I was a good dancer and I was science partners with Jeffrey Suttleman!'

'Wow, you really memorized every single word of that letter, huh?' I tease.

It gives- me a small, mean surge of satisfaction to see Marcel's grin fade completely.

That surge is immediately followed by remorse because now I've hurt his feelings for no good reason.

What is it in me that wants to hurt Marcel's feelings? To make it better, I quickly add, 'No, it's true- you really did have something about you then.'

I guess- I made it worse because he flinches.

I don't know what else to say, so I open the car door and climb out. 'Thanks for the ride, Marcel.'

When I get inside the house, I go look in the kitchen first to check on the cupcakes.

They're packed away in Tupperware and my cupcake carrier. The frosting's a little messy and the sprinkles are haphazard, but overall, they look pretty good. That's a

relief. Kitty won't be shamed at the PTA bake sale on my account, at least!

From: Margot Covey mcovey@st-andrews.ac.uk

To: Lara Jean Covey larajeansong@gmail.com

How's school going so far? Have you joined any new clubs? I think you should consider Lit Mag or Model UN. Also, don't forget it's Korean Thanksgiving this week and you have to call Grandma or she'll be mad! Miss, you guys.

PS, please send Oreos! I miss our dunk contests.

Love, M

From: Lara Jean Covey larajeansong@gmail.com

To: Margot Covey mcovey@st-andrews.ac.uk

The school is good. No new clubs yet, but we'll see. I already have it down in my planner to call Grandma. Don't worry about a thing, I've got everything under control here!

Marcel's MOM OWNS AN ANTIQUE store called Linden & White in the cobblestone part of downtown. She sells furniture mostly, but she has jewelry cases too, arranged by decades. My favorite decade is the aughts, which means the 1900's. There's this one gold heart locket with a tiny diamond chip in the center; it looks like a starburst.

It costs four hundred dollars. The store is right next to McCall's bookstore, so I go in sometimes and visit with it. I always expect it to be gone, but then it never is.

We once bought our mom a gold clover pin from the 1940s for Mother's Day. Margot and I ran a lemonade stand every Saturday for a month, and we were able to- chip in sixteen dollars for it. I remember how proud we were when we presented Daddy with the- money, we had it nice and neat in a ziplock bag. At the time I thought we were paying- the lion's share and my dad was only helping out a little. I realize now that the pin cost a lot more than sixteen dollars. I should ask Daddy how much it really cost.

But then- maybe I don't want to know. Maybe it's nicer not knowing. We buried her with it because it was her favorite.

I'm standing over the case, touching my finger to the glass, when Marcel comes out from around back. 'Hey,' he says, surprised.

'Hey,' I say. 'What are you doing here?'

Marcel gives me a look like I'm a dummy. 'My mom owns the place, remember?'

'Well, duh. I've just never seen you here before,' I say. 'Do you work here?'

'Nah, I had to drop something off for my mom. Now she's saying I have to go pick up a set of chairs in Huntsburgh tomorrow,' Marcel says in a grumbly voice. 'It's two hours there and back. Annoying.'

I nod companionably and lean away from the case. I pretend to look at a pink-and-black globe. Actually, Margot would like this. It could be a nice Christmas present for her.

I give it a little spin. 'How much is this globe?'

'Whatever it says on the sticker.' Marcel rests his elbows on the case and leans forward. 'You should come.'

I look up at him. 'Come where?'

'To pick up the chairs with me.'

'You just complained about how annoying it's going to be.'

'Yeah, alone. If you go, it might be slightly less annoying.'

'Gee, thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

I roll my eyes. Marcel says 'you're welcome' to everything! It's like, No, Marcel, that was not a genuine thank-you, so you do not need to say you're welcome.

'So, are you coming or what?'

'Or what.'

'Come on! I'm picking the chairs up from an estate sale. The owner was some kind of a shut-in. Stuff has just been sitting there for like fifty years. I bet there'll be stuff you can look at. You like old stuff, right?'

'Yes,' I say, surprised that he knows this about me. 'Actually, I've kind of always wanted to go to an estate sale. How did the owner die? Like, how long was it before someone found him?'

'God, you're morbid.' He shudders. 'Didn't know you had that side to you.'

'I have lots of sides to me,' I tell him. I lean forward. 'So? How did he die?'

'He isn't dead, you weirdo. He's just old. His family's sending him to a nursing home.'

Marcel raises an eyebrow at me. 'So, I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven.'

'Seven? You never said anything about leaving at seven in the morning on a Saturday!'

'Sorry,' he says contritely. 'We have to go early before all the good stuff gets snatched up.'

That night I pack lunches for Marcel and me. I make roast beef sandwiches with cheese and tomato, mayonnaise for me, mustard for Marcel. Marcel doesn't like mayonnaise. It's funny the things you pick up in a fake relationship.

Kitty zooms into the kitchen and tries to grab a sandwich half. I smack her hand away.

'That's not for you.'

'Then who's it for?'

'It's for my lunch tomorrow. Mine and Marcel's.'

She climbs onto a stool and watches me wrap the sandwiches in wax paper.

Sandwiches look so much prettier wrapped in the wax paper than encased in ziplock. Any chance I get, I use wax paper. 'I like Marcel,' Kitty says. 'He's a lot different than Josh, but I like him.'

I look up. 'What do you mean?'

'I don't know. He's really funny. He jokes around a lot. You must really be in love if you're making sandwiches for him. When Margot and Josh first became a couple, she made three-cheese macaroni and cheese all the time because that's his favorite.

Continued: 1

What's Marcel's favorite?'

'I- I don't know. I mean, he likes everything.'

Kitty gives me the side-eye. 'If you're his girlfriend, you should know what his favorite food is.'

'I know he doesn't like mayonnaise,' I offer.

'That's because mayonnaise is gross. Josh hates mayonnaise too.'

I feel a pang. Josh does hate mayonnaise. 'Kitty, do you miss Josh?'

She nods. 'I wish he still came over.' A wistful look crosses her face, and I'm about to give her a hug when she puts her hands on her hips. 'Just don't use all the roast beef, because I need it for my lunch next week.'

'If we run out, I'll make tuna salad. Sheesh.' 'See that you do,' Kitty says and zooms off again.

'See that you do'? Where does she get this stuff?

At seven-thirty I'm sitting by the window, waiting for Marcel to pull up. I've got a brown paper bag with our sandwiches and my camera, in case there's anything spooky or cool I can take a picture of. I'm picturing a crumbling, gray old mansion as you see in horror movies, with a gate and a murky pond or a maze in the backyard.

Marcel's mom's minivan pulls up at seven forty-five, which is annoying. I could've slept a whole hour longer. I run out to the car and hop inside, and before I can say a word, he says, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But look what I brought you.' He passes me a donut in a napkin, still warm. 'I stopped and got it special, right when they opened at seven-thirty. It's mocha sugar.'

I break off a piece and pop it into my mouth. 'Yum!'

He gives me a sidelong glance as he pulls out of my driveway. 'So- I did the right thing being late, right?'

I nod, taking a big bite. 'You did the exact right thing,' I say, my mouth full.

'Hey, do you have any water?'

Marcel hands me a half-full water bottle and I gulp it down. 'This is the best donut I ever had,' I tell him.

'Good,' he says. Then he takes one look at me and laughs. 'You have sugar all over your face.'

I wipe my mouth off with the other side of the napkin.

'Cheeks, too,' he says.

'All right, all right.' Then it's quiet, which makes me nervous. 'Can I put some music on?' I start pulling out my phone.

'Actually, do you mind if we just drive in quiet for a while? I can't have music blaring in my face before my caffeine kicks in.'

'Oh - sure.' I'm not sure if that means he wants me to be quiet too. I wouldn't have agreed to come on this little outing if I'd known I would have to be silent.

Marcel has a serene look on his face like he is a fishing-boat captain and we are floating placidly along in the middle of the sea. Except he isn't driving slowly; he is driving really fast.

I stay quiet for all of ten seconds and then say, 'Wait, where you are wanting me to be quiet too?'

'No, I just didn't want music. You can talk as much as you want.'

'Okay.' And then I'm quiet because it's awkward when someone tells you-you- can talk as much as you want. 'Hey, so what's your favorite food?'

'I like everything.'

'But what's your favorite? Like, you're favorite- favorite. Is it macaroni and cheese, or um, fried chicken, or steak, or pizza?'

'I like all that stuff. Equally.'

I let out an aggrieved sigh. Why does Marcel not get the concept of picking a favorite thing?

Marcel mimics my sigh and laughs. 'Fine. I like cinnamon toast. That's my favorite thing.'

'Cinnamon toast?' I repeat. 'You like cinnamon toast better than crab legs? Better than a cheeseburger?'

'Yes.'

'Better than barbecue?'

Marcel hesitates. Then he says, 'Yes! Now quit picking my choice apart. I stand by my choice.'

I shrug. 'Okay.' I wait, give him a chance to ask me what my favorite food is, but he doesn't. So- I say, 'My favorite food is cake.'

'What kind of cake?'

'It doesn't matter. All cake.'

'You just gave me so much shit for not picking,' he begins.

'But it's so hard to pick one kind!' I burst out. 'I mean, there's coconut cake, the kind with white frosting that looks like a snowball- I like that a lot. But then I also like cheesecake, and lemon cake, and carrot cake. Also- red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting, and chocolate cake with chocolate ganache frosting.' I pause.

'Have you ever had an olive-oil cake?'

'No. That sounds weird.'

'It's really, really good. Really moist and delicious. I'll make it for you.'

Marcel groans. 'You're making me hungry. I should have gotten a whole bag of those donuts.'

I open up my brown paper bag and pull out his sandwich. I wrote a P on his in Sharpie so- I'd know whose was whose. 'Do you want a sandwich?'

'You made that for me?'

'I mean, I was making one for myself, too. It would have been rude to just bring one sandwich and eat it in front of you.'

Marcel accepts the sandwich and eats it with the bottom half still wrapped.

'This is good,' he says, nodding. 'What kind of mustard is this?'

Please, I say, 'It's beer mustard. My dad orders it from some fancy food catalog. My dad's really into cooking.' 'Aren't you going to eat yours, too?'

'I'm saving it for later,' I say.

Halfway into the ride, Marcel starts weaving in and out of traffic, and he keeps looking at the clock on the dashboard.

'Why are we in such a hurry?' I ask him.

'The Epsteins,' he says, rapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

'Who are the Epsteins?'

'They're an old married couple with an antique store in Charlottesville.

Last time, Phil got there five minutes before me and cleared the whole place out. That's not going to happen today.'

Impressed, I say, 'Wow, I had no idea this business was so cutthroat.'

Like a know-it-all, Marcel smirks and goes, 'Isn't all business?'

I roll my eyes at the window. Marcel's so Marcel.

We're at a stoplight when Marcel suddenly sits up straight and says, 'Oh, shit! The Epsteins!'

I was half asleep. My eyes fly open and I yell, 'Where? Where?'

'Red SUV! Two cars ahead on the right.' I crane my neck to look. They are a gray-haired couple, maybe in their sixties or seventies. It's hard to tell from this far away.

As soon as the light turns green, Marcel guns it and drives up on the shoulder. I scream out, 'Go go go!' and then we're flying past the Epsteins. My heart is racing out of control,

I can't help but lean my head out the window and scream because it's such a thrill. My hair whips in the wind and I know it's going to be a tangled mess, but I couldn't care less.

'Yahhh!' I scream.

'You're crazy,' Marcel says, pulling me back in by the hem of my shirt.

He's looking at me like he did that day I kissed him in the hallway. Like I'm different than he thought.

We pull up to the house and there are already a few cars parked in front. I'm craning my head trying to get a good look. I was expecting a mansion with a wrought iron gate and maybe a gargoyle or two, but this just looks like a normal house. I must look disappointed, because as he puts the car in park, Marcel says to me, 'Don't judge an estate sale by the house. I've seen all kinds of treasures at regular houses and junk at fancy houses.'

I hop out and bend down to tie my shoelace. 'Hurry, Lara Jean! The Epsteins will be here any second!' Marcel grabs my hand and we run up the driveway; I am breathing hard trying to keep up with him. His legs are so much longer than mine.

As soon as we are inside, Marcel goes right up to a man in a suit and I bend over and try to catch my breath. A few people are milling around looking at the furniture. There's a long dining room table in the center of the room with China and milk glass and porcelain knickknacks. I go up to it and take a closer look. I like a little white creamer with pink rosebuds but I'm not sure if I'm allowed to touch it and see how much it costs. It could be really expensive.

There's a big basket with olden-day Christmas memorabilia in it, plastic Santas and Rudolphs and glass ornaments. I'm sifting through it when Marcel comes up to me, a huge grin on his face. 'Mission accomplished,' he says. He nods at an older couple who are looking at a wooden sideboard. 'The Epsteins,' he whispers to me.

'Did you get the chairs?' Mr. Epstein calls out. He's trying to sound casual and not annoyed, but his hands are on his hips and he's standing very rigidly.

'You know it,' Marcel calls back. 'Better luck next time.' To me he says,

'Do you see anything cool?'

'Lots of stuff.' I hold up a hot pink reindeer. It's glass, with an electric blue nose. 'This would look great on my vanity. Will you ask the man how much it costs?'

'No, but you can. It'll be good for you to learn how to negotiate.' Marcel grabs my hand and leads me over to the man in the suit. He's filling out some paperwork on a clipboard.

He looks very busy and important. I'm not even sure if I'm supposed to be here. I'm thinking I don't really need this reindeer.

But Marcel's looking at me expectantly, so I clear my throat and say, 'Excuse me, sir, but how much is this reindeer?'

'Oh, that's part of a lot,' he says.

'Oh. Um, I'm sorry but what's a lot?'

'It means it's part of a set,' he explains. 'You have to buy the whole set of ornaments.

Seventy-five dollars. They're vintage, you see.'

I start to back away. 'Thank you anyway,' I say.

Marcel pulls me back and gives him a winning smile and says, 'Can't you just throw it in with the chairs? A gift with purchase?'

The man sighs. 'I don't want to separate them.' He turns away to flip through his clipboard.

Marcel throws me a look like You're the one who wants the reindeer; you should step up. I give him back a look that says I don't want it that bad, and Marcel shakes his head firmly and pushes me toward the man. I say, 'Please, sir? I'll give you ten dollars for it.

No one will know they're missing a reindeer. And look, his paw is a little chipped on the bottom, see?' I hold it up.

'All right, all right. Just take it,' the man says begrudgingly, and I beam at him and start to pull my wallet out of my purse, but he waves me off.

'Thank you! Thank you so much.' I clutch the reindeer to my chest. Maybe haggling isn't as hard as I thought.

Marcel winks at me, and then he says to the man, 'I'll bring my van closer so, we can load up the chairs.'

They go out the back, and I hang around, looking at the framed pictures on the wall. I wonder if they're for sale too. Some of them look really old: black-and-white pictures of men in suits and hats. There's one picture of a girl in a confirmation dress, it's white and lacy like a wedding gown. The girl isn't smiling, but she has a mischievous glint in her eye that reminds me of Kitty.

'That's my daughter, Patricia.'

I turn around. It's an old man in a navy-blue sweater and stiff jeans. He's leaning against the staircase watching me. He looks very frail; his skin is paperwhite and thin.

'She lives in Ohio. She's an accountant.' He's still gazing at me as I remind him of someone.

'Your house is lovely,' I say, even though it isn't. It's old; it could use a good cleaning.

But the things inside it are lovely.

'It's empty now. All my things sold up. Can't take it with you, you know.'

'You mean when you die?' I whisper.

He glares at me. 'No. I mean to the nursing home.'

Whoops. 'Right,' I say, and I giggle the way I do when I feel awkward.

'What do you have there in your hand?'

I lift it up. 'This. He- the man in the suit gave it to me. Do you want it back? I didn't pay for it. It's part of a lot.'

He smiles, and the wrinkles in his paper skin deepen. 'That was Patty's favorite.'

I hold it out to him. 'Maybe she'd like to keep it?'

'No, you have it. It's yours. She couldn't even be bothered to help me move, so.' He gives a spiteful nod. 'Is there anything else you want to take? I've got a trunk full of her old clothes.'

Yikes. Family drama. Best not to get involved in that. But vintage clothes!

That's tempting.

When Marcel finds me, I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor in the music room, looking through an old trunk. Mr. Clarke is snoozing on the couch next to me. I found a mod minidress the color of cotton candy pink that I'm crazy about, and a sleeveless button-down with little daisies on it that I can tie at the waist. 'Look, Marcel!' I lift up the dress.

'Mr. Clarke said I could have it.'

'Who's Mr. Clarke?' Marcel asks, and his voice fills the room.

I point at him and put my finger to my lips.

'Well, we'd better get out of here fast before the guy in charge of the sale sees him giving stuff away for free.'

I get up in a hurry. 'Bye, Mr. Clarke,' I say, not too loud. Probably better to let him sleep. He was very down earlier when he was telling me about his divorce.

Mr. Clarke's eyes flutter open. 'Is this your feller?'

'No, not really,' I say, and Marcel throws his arm around my shoulder and says, 'Yes, sir. I'm her feller.'

I don't like the way he says it like he's making fun. Of both me and Mr.

Clarke. 'Thank you for the clothes, Mr. Clarke,' I say, and he sits up straight and reaches for my hand. I give it to him and he kisses it, and his lips feel like dry moth's wings.

'You're welcome, Patty.'

I give him a goodbye wave and grab my new things. As we walk out the front door, Marcel says, 'Who's Patty?' and I pretend I don't hear.

I must fall asleep in about two seconds from the excitement of the day, because the next thing I know, we're parked in my driveway, and Marcel's shaking my shoulder, saying, 'We're here, Lara Jean.'

I open my eyes. I'm clutching my dress and shirt to my chest like a security blanket, and my reindeer is on my lap. My new treasures. I feel like I just robbed a bank and got away with it. 'Thanks for today, Marcel.'

'Thanks for coming with me.' Then, abruptly, he says, 'Oh yeah. I forgot to ask you something. My mom wants you to come over to dinner tomorrow night.'

My mouth drops. 'You told your mom about us?'

Marcel gives me a dirty look. 'Kitty knows about us! Besides, my mom and I are close.

It's just her and me and my brother, Owen. If you don't want to come, then don't come.

But just know that my mom will think you're rude if you don't.'

'I'm just saying - the more people that know, the harder it is to manage.

You have to keep lies restricted to as few people as possible.'

'How do you know so much about lying?'

'Oh, I used to lie all the time as a kid.' I didn't think of it as lying, though. I thought of it was playing make-believe. I told Kitty she was adopted, and her real family was in a traveling circus. It's why she took up gymnastics.

IM NOT SURE HOW DRESSED up I should get for dinner at Marcel's house. At the store, his mom seems so fancy. I just don't want to meet her and have her be thinking of all the ways that I'm lacking compared to Genevieve. I don't see why I have to meet her at all.

But I do want her to like me.

I go through my closet, and then Margot's closet. I finally pick a cream-colored sweater and a blouse with a Marcel Pan collar, with a corduroy mustard circle skirt.

Plus, tights and flats. Then I put on some makeup, which I hardly ever wear. I put on peach blush and I try to do some eye makeup, but I end up washing everything off and starting over again, this time with just mascara and lip gloss. I go show Kitty and she says, 'Looks like a uniform.'

'Like in a good way?'

Kitty nods. 'Like you work at a nice store.'

Before Marcel arrives at my house, I go on the computer and look up what fork to use with what, just in case.

It's strange… Sitting at Marcel's kitchen table, I feel like I'm living someone else's life. It turns out Marcel's mom has made pizzas, so I didn't even need to worry about forks. And their house isn't fancy on the inside; it's just normal and nice. There's a real butter churner on display in the kitchen, pictures of Marcel and his brother hanging on the walls of wooden frames, and red-and-white gingham everything.

There are a bunch of pizza toppings on the breakfast bar- not just pepperoni and sausage and mushroom and pepper, but also artichoke hearts and greasy kalamata olives and fresh mozzarella and whole cloves of garlic.

Marcel's mom is nice. She keeps putting more salad on my plate all throughout dinner, and I keep eating it even though I'm full. Once, I catch her looking at me, and she has a soft smile on her face. When she smiles, she looks like Marcel.

Marcel's younger brother is named Owen. He's twelve. He's like a miniature Marcel, but he doesn't talk as much. He doesn't have Marcel's easy way. Owen grabs a slice of pizza and shoves it into his mouth even though it's too hot. He puffs out hot air and he almost spits a piece back out into his napkin, and their mom says, 'Don't you dare, Owen. We have company.'

'Leave me alone,' Owen mumbles.

'Marcel says you have two sisters,' Mrs. - says with a bright smile.

She cuts a piece of lettuce into bite-sized bits. 'Your mother must love having three girls.'

I open my mouth to answer her, but before I can, Marcel does. He says, 'Lara Jean's mom passed away when she was little.' He says it as she should already know, and embarrassment crosses her face.

'I'm so sorry. I remember that now.'

Quickly I say, 'She did love having three girls. They thought for sure my little sister Kitty was going to be a boy, and my mom said she was so used to girls she was nervous about what she was going to do with a boy. So, she was really relieved when Kitty turned out to be a girl. My sister Margot and I were too; we would pray every night we'd get a sister and not a brother.'

'Hey, what's wrong with boys?' Marcel objects.

Mrs. -'s smiling now. She puts another piece of pizza on Owen's plate and says,

'You're heathens. Wild animals. I bet Lara Jean and her sisters are angels.' Marcel snorts.

'Well - Kitty might be part heathen,' I admit. 'But my older sister Margot and I are pretty good.'

Mrs. - takes her napkin and tries to wipe tomato sauce off Owen's face, and he swats her hand away. 'Mom!'

When she gets up to take another pizza out of the oven, Marcel says to me, 'See how my mom babies him?'

'She babies you way more,' Owen counters. To me, he mumbles, 'Marcel doesn't even know how to cook ramen.'

I laugh. 'Can you?'

'Hell yeah, I've been cooking for myself for years,' he says.

'I like to cook too,' I say, taking a sip of iced tea. 'We should give Marcel a cooking lesson.'

He eyes me and then says, 'You wear more makeup than Genevieve did.'

I shrink back as he slapped me. All I'm wearing is mascara! And a little lip gloss! I know for a fact that Genevieve wears bronzer and eyeshadow and concealer every day.

Plus, mascara and eyeliner and lipstick! Swiftly Marcel says, 'Shut up, Owen.'

Owen's snickering. I narrow my eyes. This kid is only a few years older than Kitty!

I lean forward and wave my hand in front of my face. 'This is all-natural. But thank you for the compliment, Owen.'

'You're welcome,' he says, just like his big brother.

On the drive home, I say, 'Hey, Marcel?'

'What?'

'Never mind.'

'What? Just ask.'

'Well - your parents are divorced, right?'

'Yup.'

'So how often do you see your dad?'

'Not often.'

'Oh, okay. I was just wondering.' Marcel looks over at me with expectant eyes.

'What?' I say.

'I'm just waiting for the next question. You never just have one question.'

'Well, do you miss him?'

'Who?'

'Your dad!'

'Oh. I don't know. I think it's more than I miss how it used to be with us.

He and my mom and me and Owen. We were like a team. He used to come to every lacrosse game.'

Marcel gets quiet. 'He just - took care of things.'

'I guess that's what dads do.'

'That's what he's doing for his new family.' Marcel says it matter-of-factly, without bitterness. 'What about you? You miss your mom?'

'Sometimes, when I think about it.' Suddenly I say, 'You know what I miss? I miss bath time. I miss when she would wash my hair. Don't you think getting your hair washed is just the best feeling? Like, warm water and bubbles and fingers in your hair. It's so nice.'

'Yeah, it is.'

'Sometimes I don't think about her at all, and then - and then sometimes I'll have a thought like, I wonder what she would think of me now? She only knew me as a little girl, and now I'm a teenager, and I wonder, if she saw me on the street, would she recognize me?'

'Of course, she would. She's your mom.'

'I know, but I've changed a lot.' An uncomfortable look has crossed his face, and I can tell he's regretting complaining about his dad because at least his dad is still alive.

-And-

Then, because Marcel's looking at me like he feels sorry for me, I straighten up and say in a haughty voice, 'I'm very mature, you know.'

He's grinning now. 'Oh yeah?'

'Oh, yes, I'm very refined, Marcel.'

When Marcel drops me off, right before I get out of the car, he says, 'I can tell my mom

liked you.' This makes me feel good inside. It's always been really important to me that other people's moms like me.

It was my favorite part of going over to Genevieve's house- hanging out with her mom. Wendy was so stylish. She used to wear a silky blouse and nice pants and a statement necklace, just for sitting around the house. Perfect hair, always smooth and flat. Genevieve has that same good hair, but she doesn't have her mom's perfectly straight nose. Hers has a little bump on the bridge that I think only adds to her appeal.

'By the way, you definitely don't wear more makeup than Gen. She was always getting bronzer on my white shirts.'

For someone who's over Genevieve, he sure does talk about her a lot.

Though it's not just him. I was thinking about her too. Even when she's not here, she's here. That girl has some kind of reach.

Continued: 2

DURING CHEMISTRY, Marcel WRITES ME a note that says, Can I come over tonight to study for the test?

I write back, I don't remember study sessions being in the contract. After he reads it, he turns around and gives me a wounded look. I mouth, I'm kidding!

At dinner, I announce that Marcel's coming over to study and we're going to need the kitchen, and my dad raises his eyebrows. 'Leave the door open,' he jokes.

We don't even have a door to the kitchen.

'Daddy,' I groan, and Kitty groans with me. Casually he asks, 'Is Marcel your boyfriend?'

'Um - something like that,' I say.

After we eat and Kitty and I do the dishes, I set up the kitchen like a study room. My textbook and notes are stacked up in the center of the table, with a row of highlighters in blue, yellow, and pink, a bowl of microwave kettle corn, and a plate of peanut-butter brownies I baked this afternoon. I let Kitty have two but that's it.

He said he'd be over around eight. At first, I think he's just late as usual, but the minutes tick by and I realize he's not coming. I text him once, but he doesn't text back.

Kitty comes down between commercial breaks, sniffing around for another brownie, which I give her. 'Is Marcel not coming?' she asks. I pretend I'm so absorbed in my studying I don't hear.

Um around ten he sends a text that says, Sorry, something came up. I can't come over tonight.

He doesn't say where he is or what he's doing, but I already know. He's with Genevieve.

At lunch he was distracted; he kept texting on his phone. And then, later in the day, I saw them outside the girls' locker room. They didn't see me, but I saw them.

They were just- talking, but with Genevieve, it's never just anything. She put her hand on his arm; he brushed her hair out of her eyes. I may only be a fake girlfriend, but that's not anything.

I keep studying, but it's hard to concentrate when your feelings are hurt. I tell myself it's just because I went to the trouble of baking brownies and cleaning up the downstairs.

I mean, it's rude to just not show up somewhere. Does he not have manners?

How would- he like it if I did that? And really, what's the whole point of this charade if he's just going- to keep going back to her anyway? What's even in it for me anymore?

Things are better with Josh and me, practically normal. If I wanted to I could just call the whole thing off.

The next morning, I wake up still mad. I call Josh to ask him for a ride to school. For a- second, I worry he might not pick up; it's been so long since we hung out.

But he does, and he says no problem.

Let's see how Marcel likes it when he comes to my house to pick me up and I'm not there.

Halfway to school, I start to feel uneasy. Maybe Marcel had a legitimate reason for not- coming over. Maybe he wasn't with Genevieve and now I've just done a very petty thing out of spite.

Josh is looking at me with suspicious eyes. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

He doesn't believe me, I can tell. 'Did you and - have a fight?'

'No.'

Josh sighs and says, 'Just be careful.' He says it in a patronizing older brother kind of way that makes me want to scream. 'I don't want to see you hurt by that guy.'

'Josh! He won't hurt me. Geez.'

'He's a douche. I'm sorry, but he is. All the guys on the lacrosse team are.

Guys like-, they only care about one thing. As soon as they get what they want, they're bored.'

'Not Marcel. He dated Genevieve for almost four years!'

'Just trust me. You haven't had much experience with guys, Lara Jean.'

Quietly I ask, 'How would you know?'

Josh gives me an Oh, come on the look. 'Because I know you.'

'Not as well as you think.'

We're quite the rest of the way.

It won't be that big of a deal. Marcel will stop by my house, see that I'm not there, and- then he'll leave. Big deal, so he had to go five minutes out of his way. I waited for him last night for two friggin' hours.

When we get to school, Josh heads for the senior hall and I go straight to the junior hall. I keep sneaking peeks down the hallway at Marcel's locker, but he doesn't arrive. I wait at

my locker until the bell rings, and he still doesn't come. I run off to the first period, my backpack banging against my back as I go.

Mr. Schuller is taking attendance when I look up and see Marcel standing in the doorway glaring at me.

He gestures at me to come out. I gulp and quickly

look down at- my notebook and pretend like I didn't see him. But then he hisses my name, and I know I have to talk to him.

Shakily I raise my hand. 'Mr. Schuller, can I go to the bathroom?' 'You should have gone before class,' he grumbles, but he waves me on.

I hurry out to the hallway and pull Marcel away from the door so Mr. Schuller can't see.

'Where were you this morning?' Marcel demands.

I cross my arms and try to stand tall. It's hard because I'm so short and he really is- tall.

'You're one to talk.'

Marcel huffs, 'At least I texted you! I've called you like seventeen times.

Why is your phone off?'

'You know we're not allowed to have our phones on at school!'

He huffs, 'Lara Jean, I waited in front of your house for twenty minutes.'

Yikes. 'Well, I'm sorry.'

'How'd you get to school? Sanderson?'

'Yes.'

Marcel exhales. 'Listen, if you were pissed, I couldn't come over last night, you should've just called and said so instead of the shit you pulled this morning.'

In a small voice, I say, 'Well, what about that shit you pulled last night?'

A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. 'Did you just say 'shit'? It sounds really funny coming out of your mouth.'

I ignore that. 'So - were you? Where you with Genevieve?' I don't ask what I really want to know, which is, did you guys get back together?

He hesitates and then he says, 'She needed me.'

I can't even look at him. Why is he such a dummy? Why does she have such a hold on him?

Is it just the amount of time they've been together? Is it sex? I don't understand. It's disappointing, how little self-control boys have. 'Marcel, if you're just going to go running every time she beckons, I don't see a point to any of this.'

'Covey, come on! I said I was sorry. Don't be pissed.'

'You never said you were sorry,' I say. 'When did you say you were sorry?'

Chastened, he says, 'Sorry.'

'I don't want you to go to Genevieve's anymore. How do you think that makes me look to her?'

Marcel looks at me steadily. 'I can't be there for Gen, so don't ask me to.'

'But Marcel, what does she even need you for when she has a new boyfriend?'

He flinches, and right away I'm sorry I said it. 'I'm sorry,' I whisper.

'It's fine. I don't expect you to understand it. Gen and I - we just get each other.'

He doesn't know it, but when Marcel talks about Genevieve, he gets a certain softness- in his face.

Its tenderness mixed with impatience. And something else.

Love. Marcel can protest all he wants, but I know he still loves her.

Sighing, I ask, 'Did you at least study for the test?'

Marcel shakes his head, and I sigh again.

'You can look at my notes during lunch,' I say, and I head back to my class.

It's starting to make sense to me. Why he'd go along with a scheme like this, why he'd spend his time with someone like me. It's not so he can move on from Gen.

It's so he- can't. I'm just his excuse. I'm holding Genevieve's place for her. When that piece makes sense, everything else starts to.

JOSH'S PARENTS FIGHT A LOT- I don't know if it's a normal amount of fighting because I- only have one parent, but I don't remember my parents fighting that much when I had two. Our houses are close enough that I can hear them sometimes if my window is open.

The fights usually start out with something small, like Mrs. Sanderson accidentally leaving the car door open and the battery going dead, and end with something big, like how Mr. Sanderson works too much and is inherently selfish and not cut out for a family.

When they fight bad, Josh comes over. When we were younger, he'd sneak out sometimes in his pajamas with his pillow, and he'd stay until his mom came looking for him. It's not something we talk about. Maybe he and Margot, but not me and him. The most he ever said about it was that sometimes he wished they'd just get divorced- so it could finally be over. They never did, though.

I can hear them tonight. I've heard them other nights since Margot left, but tonight sounds particularly bad. So, bad I close my window. I gather up my- homework and go- downstairs and turn on the living room light so Josh knows he can come over if he wants.

Half an hour later there's a knock at the door. I wrap myself in my pale blue baby blanket and open it.

It's Josh. He smiles at me sheepishly. 'Hey. Can I hang out here for a bit?'

'Course you can.' I leave the door open and trudge back to the living room. I call back, 'Lock it behind you.'

Josh watches TV and I do my homework. I'm highlighting my way through US history when Josh asks me, 'Are you going to try out for Arcadia?' That's the spring play. They just announced it yesterday.

'No,' I say, switching highlighter colors. 'Why would I?' I hate public speaking and getting up in front of people, and Josh knows it.

'Duh, because it's your favorite play.' Josh changes the channel. 'I think you'd be a really good Thomasina.'

I smile. 'Thanks, but no thanks.'

'Why not? It could be something good to put on your college apps.'

'It's not like I'm going to be a theater major or anything.'

'It wouldn't kill you to get out of your comfort zone a little bit,' he says, stretching his arms out behind his head. 'Take a risk. Look at Margot. She's all the way over in Scotland.'

'I'm not Margot.'

'I'm not saying you should move to the other side of the world. I know you'd never do that. Hey, what about Honor Council? You love judging people!'

I make a face at him.

'Or Model UN. I bet you'd like that. I'm just saying - your world could be bigger than just playing checkers with Kitty and riding around in -'s car.'

I stop highlighting midsentence. Is he right? Is my world really that small?

It's not like- his world is so big! 'Josh,' I begin. Then I pause because I don't know how I'm going to finish the sentence. So instead I throw my highlighter at him.

It ricochets off his forehead. 'Hey! You could have hit me in the eye!'

'And you would have deserved it.'

'Okay, okay. You know I didn't mean it like that. I just mean that you should give people a chance to know you.' Josh points the remote control at me and says, 'If people knew you, they would love you.' He sounds so matter-of-fact.

Josh, you break my heart. And you're a liar. Because you know me, you know me better than almost anybody, and you don't love me.

After Josh goes back home, I tidy up the living room, lock all the doors, and turn off the lights. Then I pour myself a glass of water and head upstairs.

The light is on in my bedroom, and Chris is asleep in my bed. I roll her to the side- so I can fit in too. Stirring, she mumbles, 'Want to go get hot wings?'

'It's too late to eat hot wings,' I say, pulling my quilt up so it covers both of us. 'You just missed Josh.'

Her eyes fly open. 'Joshy was here? Why?'

'No reason.' I won't tell Josh's secrets, not even to Chris.

'Well, don't mention it too -.' 'He wouldn't care,' I say.

Chris shakes her head. 'All boys care.'

'Marcel's not like that. He's really confident.'

'They're the ones that care the most,' she says. I'm about to ask her what- she means, but before I can, she says, 'Let's go do something wild.'

'Like what?' It's a school night; I can't go anywhere, and she knows it. But I still like to hear her schemes. They're like bedtime stories.

'Like - I don't know. We could sneak into the nursing home and break out that grandma you're always talking about. What's her name again? Thunder?'

I giggle. 'Stormy.'

'Yeah, Stormy.' She yawns. 'She seems like she knows how to have a good time. I bet she'd buy us cocktails.'

'Stormy goes to sleep at nine every night to get her beauty rest. Let's do it tomorrow.'

By tomorrow, Chris will have forgotten all about it, but it's still a nice thought. Her eyes are closed again.

I poke her in the side. 'Chris, wake up. Go brush your teeth.' I keep a toothbrush in my bathroom drawer just for her. I painted a cursive C on it with red nail polish so it doesn't get mixed up with anybody else's toothbrush.

'Can't. I'm too tired to move.'

'A second ago you wanted to break Stormy out of Belleview, and now you're too tired to wash your face and brush your teeth?' Chris smiles but doesn't open her eyes. I turn off my bedside lamp. 'Night, Chris.'

She wriggles closer to me. 'G'night.'

THERE ARE VERY LIMITED Options for Asian girls on Halloween.

Like one year- I went as Velma from Scooby-Doo, but people just asked me if I was a manga character. I even wore a wig! So now I'm committed to dressing up as Asian characters solely.

Margot never goes as a person; she is always an inanimate object or a concept of some kind. Like last year she went as a 'formal apology': she wore a floor-length evening- gown we found at Goodwill for ten dollars, and she had a sign around her neck, written in- calligraphy, which said, I'm sorry. It won second prize in the school contest.

The first prize went to a Rastafarian alien.

Kitty's going as a ninja, which I suppose is in line with my whole Asian costume idea.

This year I'm going to Cho Chang from Harry Potter. I've got my Raven claw scarf and an old black choir robe I found on eBay, plus one of my dad's ties and a wand. I'm not going to win any contests, but at least people will know what I am. I wish I never have to answer a What are you? The question ever again.

I'm waiting for Marcel to pick me up for school, messing with my knee highs. They won't stay up.

'Lara Jean!'

Automatically I call back, 'Josh!' It's our version of Marco Polo.

Then I look up. There's Josh, standing in front of his car. In a full-on Harry Potter costume. Black robe, glasses, lightning mark on his forehead, wand.

We both burst out laughing. Of all the random costumes! Ruefully Josh says, 'The guys from the graphic-novel club are going as different fantasy-book characters.

I- was going to- go as Drogo from Game of Thrones because, you know, I've got the upper body for it, but-'

I giggle, trying to picture Josh with eyeliner and a long braid and no shirt.

It's a funny picture. I wouldn't exactly call Josh scrawny, but -

'Hey, quit laughing so hard,' the objects. 'It wasn't that funny.' He jingles his keys. 'So- do you need a ride, Cho?'

I look at my phone. Marcel's five minutes late as usual. Not that I can really complain, because it's a free ride to school, and I could be taking the bus. But if I go with Josh, I won't have to rush to class, I can go to my locker, I can go pee, I can get a juice at the vending machine. But he's probably already nearly here. 'Thanks, but I'm waiting for Marcel.'

Josh nods. 'Oh, yeah - right.' He starts to climb into his car.

I shout out, 'Expelliarmus!' and Josh spins around and calls back, 'Finite!'

Then we grin at each other like goofs.

He drives off and I hug my knees to my chest. Josh and I read Harry Potter around the-same time when I was in sixth and he was in seventh. Margot had already read them.

Neither of us can read as fast as she does. It drove her crazy waiting for us to get to the third book- so we could discuss it.

The longer I sit waiting for Marcel, the more- prickly I feel. I take off my robe and put it back on a few times. It's polyester, and polyester doesn't breathe or feel nice against- your skin.

When he drives up, I run to his car and get in without saying hello. I spread my robe over my lap like a blanket, because my kilt is short.

His eyes are big. 'You look hot,' he says, sounding surprised. 'What are you? An anime character…?'

'No,' I say, or more like a snap. 'I'm Cho Chang.' Marcel still has a blank look on his face, so I add, 'From Harry Potter.'

'Oh yeah. Cool.'

I look over at him. He's wearing a regular button-down and jeans. 'Where's your costume?'

'I and my boys are going to change right before the assembly. It's a better effect if we unveil at the same time.'

I know he wants me to ask what his costume is, but I don't feel like talking to him, so I- sit there, not saying anything and looking out the window. I keep waiting for him to ask- me what's wrong, but he doesn't. He's so oblivious; I don't even think he notices I'm mad.

Abruptly I say, 'I wish you weren't always late.'

Marcel frowns. 'Geez, sorry. I was trying to get my costume together.'

'Today you were trying to get your costume together. But you're late all the time.'

'I'm not late all the time!'

'You were late today, and yesterday, and last Thursday.' I stare out the window. The autumn leaves are already falling.

'If you're not going to be on time, I don't- want you giving me rides anymore.'

I don't have to look; I can feel him glaring at me. 'Fine. That means I get five extra minutes of sleep, so, works for me.'

'Good.'

During the judging, Chris and I are sitting in the balcony of the theater.

Chris is dressed- up like Courtney Love. She's wearing a pink slip and holey knee socks and lots of smudgy eye makeup.

'You should go down there too,' I say. 'I bet you'd win something.'

'People at this school wouldn't even know who she is,' Chris sneers. But I can tell she kind of wants to.

The guys in Marcel's group are all superheroes. There's Batman, Superman, Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, all to varying degrees of effort. Marcel went all out. He is, of course, Marcel Parker. Who else would - go as? His Spider-Man costume is super authentic, with yellow Mylar eyes and gloved hands and booted feet. He is a total ham up onstage.

All the guys run around, capes flapping, pretend to fight each other. Marcel tries to climb-

up a column, but Mr. Yelznik stops him before he can get far. I cheer when

his group wins for the best group costume.

Genevieve is Catwoman. She's wearing leather leggings and a bustier and black cat-ears. I wonder if she was in on the superhero theme, if Marcel told her, or if she came up- with that on her own. Every guy in the auditorium goes wild when she goes on stage for the best junior costume. 'What a ho,' Chris says. She sounds almost wistful.

Genevieve wins, of course. I sneak a look at Marcel, and he's whistling and stomping his feet with all his friends.

After the assembly, I'm getting my Chem book out of my locker when Marcel- comes over and leans his back against the locker next to mine. Through his mask, he says, 'Hey.'

'Hey,' I say. And then he doesn't say anything else; he just stands there. I close my locker door and spin the combination lock. 'Congratulations on winning the best group costume.'

'That's it? That's all you're going to say?'

Huh? 'What else am I supposed to say?'

Just then Josh walks by with Jersey Mike, who's dressed up as a hobbit, hairy feet and all. Walking backward, Josh points his wand at me and says, 'Expelliarmus!'

Automatically I point my wand back at him and say, 'Avada Kedavra!'

Josh clutches his chest as I've shot him. 'Way harsh!' he calls out, and he disappears down the hallway.

'Uh - don't you think it's weird for my supposed girlfriend to wear a couple- costume with another guy?' Marcel asks me.

I roll my eyes. I'm still mad at him from this morning. 'I'm sorry, I can't talk to you when you look like this. How am I supposed to have a conversation with a person in head-to-toe latex?'

Marcel pushes his mask up. 'I'm serious! How do you think it makes me look?'

'First of all, it wasn't planned. Second of all, nobody cares what my costume is! Who would even notice something like that?'

'People notice,' Marcel huffs. 'I noticed.'

'Well, I'm sorry. I'm very sorry that a coincidence like this would ever occur.'

'I really doubt it was a coincidence,' Marcel mutters.

'What do you want me to do? Do you want me to pop over to the Halloween store during lunch and buy a red wig and be Mary Jane?'

Smoothly Marcel says, 'Could you? That'd be great.'

'No, I could not. You know why? Because, I'm Asian, and people will just think I'm in a manga costume.' I hand him my wand. 'Hold this.' I lean down and lift the hem of my robe- so I can adjust my knee socks.

Frowning, he says, 'I could have been someone from the book if you'd told me in advance.'

'Yes, well, today you'd make a really great Moaning Myrtle.'

Marcel gives me a blank look, and disbelieving, I say, 'Wait a minute - have you never read 'Harry Potter'?'

'I've read the first two.'

'Then you should know who Moaning Myrtle is!'

'It was a really long time ago,' Marcel says. 'Was she one of those people in the paintings?'

'No! And how could you stop after Chamber of Secrets? The third one's the best out of the whole series.

I mean, that's literally crazy to me.' I peer at his face. 'Do you do not have a soul?'

'Sorry if I haven't read every single Harry Potter book! Sorry, I have a life and I'm not in the Final Fantasy club or whatever that geek club is called-'

I snatch my wand back from him and wave it in his face. 'Silencio!'

Marcel crosses his arms. Smirking, he says, 'Whatever spell you just tried to cast on me, it didn't work, so I think you need to go back to Hogwarts.' He's so proud of himself for the Hogwarts reference, it's kind of endearing.

Quick like a cat, I pull down his mask, and then I put one hand over his mouth. With my- another hand I wave my wand again. 'Silencio!' Marcel tries to say something, but I press my hand harder. 'What? What was that? I can't hear you, Marcel Parker.'

Marcel reaches out and tickles me, and I laugh so hard I almost drop my wand. I dart away from him, but he pounces after me, pretends shooting webs at my feet.

Giggling, I- run away from him, further down the hall, dodging groups of people. He gives chase all- the way to chem class. A teacher screams at us to slow down, and we do, but as soon as we're around the corner, I'm running again and so is he.

I'm breathless by the time I'm in my seat. He turns around and shoots a web in my direction, and I explode into giggles again and Mr. Meyers glares at me.

'Settle down,' he says, and I nod obediently. As soon as his back is turned, I giggle into my robe.

I want to still be mad at Marcel, but it's just no use.

Halfway through class, he sends me a note. He's drawn spiderwebs around the edges.

It says I'll be on time tomorrow. I smile as I read it. Then I put it in my backpack, in my French textbook so the page won't crease or crumble. I want to keep it so when this is over, I can have something to look at and remember what it was like to be Marcel's girlfriend. Even if it was all just pretend.

WHEN WE PULL UP IN my driveway, Kitty runs out of the house and over to the car.

'Spider-Man!' she shrieks. She's still in her ninja costume, though she's taken the mask off. 'Are you coming inside?'

I glance at Marcel. 'He can't. He has to go condition.' Marcel spends an hour a day conditioning for lacrosse. He's very dedicated to it.

'Condition?' Kitty repeats, and I know she's imagining Marcel washing his hair.

'I can hang out for a little bit,' Marcel says, turning the engine off.

'Let's show him the dance!'

'Kitty, no.' The dance is something Margot and I made up when we were bored one-night a few summers ago at the beach.

Let's just say neither of us is particularly talented at choreography.

Marcel's eyes light up. He'll take any opportunity for a laugh, especially at my expense.

'I want to see the dance!'

'Forget about it,' I tell him. We're in the living room; each of us has our own couch or armchair. I poured us iced teas and put out a bowl of potato chips, which we've already finished.

'Come on,' he pouts. 'Show me the dance. Please, please show me the dance.'

'That's not going to work on me, Marcel.'

'What's not going to work?'

I wave my hand at his Handsome Boy face. 'That. I'm immune to your charms, remember?'

Marcel lifts his eyebrows as I've dared him. 'Is that a challenge? 'Cause, I'm warning you; you do not want to step into the ring with me.

I'll crush you, Covey.'

He doesn't take his eyes off mine for several long seconds, and I can feel my smile fade and my cheeks heat up.

'Come on, Lara Jean!'

I blink. Kitty. I'd forgotten she was still in the room. I scramble to my feet.

'Cue up the music. Marcel just challenged us to a dance-off.'

Kitty squeals and runs to turn on the speakers. I push back the coffee table.

We take our places in front of the fireplace, backs turned, heads down, hands clasped behind our backs.

When the bass kicks in, we jump and turn around. Hip thrust, swivel, then move into- our knee slides. Then the running man, then this move Margot made up called the treadmill. The music stops, and Kitty and I freeze in our crunking positions- and then it- starts up again, and we're doing the butterfly, then back into the knee slides.

I forget- what the next move is so I sneak a peek at Kitty, who's shimmying and clapping her hands. Oh yeah.

Our big finish is split, with our arms crossed for emphasis.

Marcel's bowled over, laughing his head off. He claps and claps and stomps his feet.

When it's over, I try to catch my breath and manage to say, 'Okay, you're up.'

'I can't,' Marcel gasps. 'How do I follow a performance like that? Kitty, will you teach me that pop-and-lock move?'

Kitty gets shy all of a sudden. She sits on her hands and looks at him through her lashes and shakes her head.

'Please, please?' He asks.

Kitty finally caves in- I think she just wanted to make him work for it. I watch them dance all afternoon, my little sister the ninja and my pretend boyfriend Spider-Man.

First- I- laugh, but then a worrying thought comes out of nowhere- I can't let Kitty get too attached to Marcel. This is temporary. The way Kitty looks at him, so adoringly, like he's her hero-.

When Marcel has to leave, I walk him out to his car. Before he gets in, I say, 'I don't think you should come over anymore. It's confusing to Kitty.'

Frowning, he says, 'How is it confusing to Kitty?'

'Because - because when our - our thing is over, she's going to miss you.'

'I'll still see the kid around.' Marcel pokes me in the stomach. 'I want joint custody.'

All I can think of is how patient he was with her, how sweet. Impulsively I get up on my tiptoes and kiss him on the cheek, and he jerks back in surprise.

'What was that for?'

My cheeks feel scalded. I say, 'For being so nice to Kitty.' Then I wave goodbye and I run into the house.

IF I DON'T BUY GROCERIES today, it's scrambled eggs for dinner tonight.

Again...

Margot's car is fixed and sitting in the driveway, where it's been sitting for the past few weeks. I could go to the store if I wanted to. I do want to. But I don't want to drive.

If I- was a nervous driver before, the accident has only made me worse. What business do I- have behind the wheel of a car? What if I hurt someone? What if I hurt Kitty?

They shouldn't just give out driver's licenses so easily. I mean, a car is a really dangerous thing. It's practically a weapon.

But the store is less than ten minutes away. It's not like I'd be getting on the highway.

And I really- really don't want to eat scrambled eggs for dinner tonight. Besides - if Marcel and Genevieve are getting back together, he won't be giving me rides anymore.

I've got to learn how to do it for myself. I can't depend on other people to help me.

'We're going to the store, Kitty,' I say.

She's lying down in front of the TV, propped up on her elbows. Her body looks so long; it's getting longer every day. Pretty soon she'll be taller than me. Kitty doesn't look away from the TV. 'I don't want to come. I want to watch my shows.'

'If you come, I'll let you pick out ice cream.'

Kitty gets to her feet.

On the drive there, I'm going so slow that Kitty keeps telling me the speed limit. 'They give tickets for going under the limit too, you know.'

'Who told you that?'

'No one. I just know it. I bet I'm going to be a better driver than you, Lara Jean.'

I grip the steering wheel tighter. 'I bet you are.' Brat. I bet when Kitty starts driving, she's going to be a speed demon without the slightest concern for those around her. But she'll still probably be better at it than me. A reckless driver is better than a scared one; ask anybody.

'I'm not scared of things like you are.'

I adjust my rearview mirror. 'You sure are proud of yourself.'

'I'm just saying.'

'Is there a car coming? Can I switch lanes?'

Kitty turns her head. 'You can go, but hurry.'

'Like how much time do I have?'

'It's already too late. Wait - now you can go. Go!'

I jerk into the left lane and look in my rearview. 'Good job, Kitty. You just keep being my second pair of eyes.'

As we push the cart around the store, I'm thinking about the drive home and having to get behind the wheel again. My heart still races even as I'm trying to decide

if we should have zucchini or green beans with dinner. By the time we're in the dairy aisle, Kitty's whining. 'Can you hurry? I don't want to miss my next show!'

To appease her, I say, 'Go pick out ice cream,' and Kitty heads off toward the frozen-food aisle.

The way home, I stay in the right lane for blocks and blocks- so I don't have to switch lanes.

The car in front of me is an old lady, and she's moving at a snail's pace, which suits me just fine. Kitty begs me to switch lanes, but I just ignore her and keep doing what I'm doing, nice and easy. My hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles are white.

'The ice cream's going to be all melted by the time we get home,' Kitty gripes.

-And-

'I've missed every single one of my shows. Can you please go to the fast lane?'

'Kitty!' I screech. 'Will you just let me drive?'

'Then drive already!'

I lean across the console to cuff her upside the head, and she scoots closer to the window so I can't reach her. 'Can't touch me,' she says gleefully.

'Quit playing around and be my eyes,' I say.

A car is coming up on my right, zooming off a highway exit. He's going to have to merge into my lane soon. Lightning-fast I look over my shoulder for my blind spot, to see if I can switch lanes. Every time I have to take my eyes away from the road, even for a second, I feel so much panic in my chest. But I don't have a choice, I just hold my breath and I switch over to the left lane. Nothing bad happens. I exhale.

My heart races the whole way home. But we make it, no accidents and nobody honking their horn at me, and that's the important thing. And the ice cream is fine, only a little melted on top. It will get easier each time, I think. I hope. I just have to keep trying.

I can't stand the thought of Kitty being scornful of me. I'm her big sister. I have to be someone she looks up to, the way I look up to Margot. How can Kitty look up to me if I'm weak?

That night I pack Kitty's and my lunches. I make what Mommy used to make us sometimes when we went on picnics at the winery in Keswick. I dice up a carrot and an onion and fry it with sesame oil and a little vinegar; then I mix in sushi rice.

When it's- cooked, I scoop pats of rice into tofu skins. They're like rice balls in little purses.

I don't have an exact recipe to follow, but it tastes right enough. When I'm finished, I get on a ladder and search for the bento boxes Mommy used to put them in. I finally find them in the back of the Tupperware cabinet.

I don't know if Kitty will remember eating these rice balls, but I hope that her heart will.

AT THE LUNCH TABLE PETE Rand his friends can't get enough of the rice balls. I only get to eat three. 'These are so good,' Marcel keeps saying. When he reaches for the last one, he stops short and quickly looks up at me to see if I noticed.

'You can have it,' I say. I know what he's thinking of. The last piece of pizza.

'No, it's all right, I'm good.'

'Have it.'

'I don't want it!'

I pick up the rice ball with my fingers and put it in his face. 'Say 'ah.' 'Stubbornly he says, 'No. I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of being right.'

Darrell hoots with laughter. 'I'm jealous of you, I wish I had a girl to feed me my lunch. Lara Jean, if he doesn't take it, I will.' He leans forward and- opens his mouth for me.

Marcel shoves him to the side and says, 'Step off, it's mine!' He opens his mouth and I pop it in like he's a seal at Sea World. With his mouth full of rice and his eyes closed, he says, 'Yum- yum- yum.'

I smile because it's so cute. And for a second, just for a second, I forget. I forget that this isn't real.

Marcel swallows the food in his mouth and says, 'What's wrong? Why do you look sad?'

'I'm not sad. I'm hungry because you guys ate my lunch.' I cross my eyes at him to show him I'm joking.

Immediately Marcel pushes out his chair and stands up. 'I'm going to get you a sandwich.'

I grab his sleeve. 'Don't. I'm just kidding.'

'Are you sure?' I nod, and he sits back down. 'If you're hungry later, we can stop somewhere on the way home.'

'About that,' I say. 'My car's fixed now, so I won't be needing you to give me rides anymore.'

'Oh, really?' Marcel leans back in his chair. 'I don't mind picking you up, though. I know you hate to drive.'

'The only way I'll get better is if I practice,' I say, feeling like Margot.

Margot the- Good.

'Besides, now you'll get back your extra five minutes of sleep.'

Marcel grins. 'True.'

VIRTUAL SUNDAY NIGHT DINNER WAS an idea I thought up.

I've got my laptop propped up on a stack of books in the center of the table.

Daddy- and Kitty and I are all sitting in front of it with our slices of pizza. It's our lunchtime and Margot's dinnertime. Margot's sitting at her desk with a salad. She's already in her flannel pj's.

'You guys are eating pizza again?' Margot gives me and Daddy a disapproving look.

'Kitty's going to stay tiny if you don't feed her any green food.'

'Relax, Gogo, there are peppers on this pizza,' I say, holding up my slice, and everybody laughs.

'There'll be a spinach salad with dinner tonight,' Daddy offers.

'Can you make my spinach portion into a green juice instead?' Kitty asks.

'That's the healthiest way to eat spinach.'

'How do you know that?' Margot asks.

'From Marcel.'

The pizza slice that was halfway to my mouth freezes in midair.

'Marcel who?'

'Lara Jean's boyfriend.'

'Wait a minute - Lara Jean's dating who?' On the computer screen, Margot's eyes are huge and incredulous.

'Marcel-,' Kitty chirps.

I whip my head around and give her a dirty look. With my eyes, I say, thanks for spilling the beans, Kitty. With her eyes she says, What? You should have told her yourself ages ago.

Margot looks from Kitty to me. 'What in the world? How did that happen?'

Lamely I say, 'It just sort of - happened.'

'Are you serious? Why would you ever be interested in someone like Marcel-?

He's such a -' Margot shakes her head in disbelief. 'I mean, did you know Josh caught him cheating on a test once?'

'Marcel cheats at school?' Daddy repeats, alarmed.

I quickly look at him and say, 'Once, in seventh grade! The seventh grade doesn't even count anymore it's so long ago. And it wasn't a test, it was a quiz.'

'I definitely don't think he's a good guy for you. All of those lacrosse guys are so douchey.'

'Well, Marcel's not like those other guys.' I don't understand why Margot can't just be happy for me. I was at least pretend happy for her when she started dating Josh.

She could pretend happy for me too. And it makes me mad, the way she's saying all of this stuff in front of Daddy and Kitty.

'If you talk to him, if you just give him a chance, you'll see, Margot.' I don't know why I'm bothering trying to convince her of- Marcel when it will be over soon anyway. But I want her to know that he is a good guy because he is.

Margot makes a face like Yeah, okay, sure and I know she doesn't believe me. 'What about Genevieve?'

'They broke up months ago.'

Daddy looks confused and says, 'Marcel and Genevieve were an item?' 'Never mind, Daddy,' I say.

Margot is quiet, chewing on her salad, so I think she's done, but then she says, 'He's not very smart, though, is he? I mean, at school?'

'Not everybody can be a National Merit Scholar! And there are different kinds of intelligence, you know. He has a high emotional IQ.' Margot's disapproval makes me feel prickly all over. More than prickly. Mad.

What right does she have to weigh in when she doesn't even live here anymore?

Kitty has more of a right than she does.

'Kitty, do you like Marcel?' I ask her. I know she'll say yes.

Kitty perks up, and I can tell she is pleased to be included in the big-girl talk.

'Yes.'

Surprised, Margot says, 'Kitty, you've hung out with him too?'

'Sure. He comes over all the time. He gives us rides.'

'In his two-seater?' Margot shoots a look at me.

Kitty pipes up. 'No, in his mom's van!' With innocent eyes, she says, 'I want to go for a ride in his convertible. I've never been in a convertible.' 'So, he doesn't drive around his Audi anymore?' Margot asks me.

'Not when Kitty's riding with us,' I say.

'Hmm' is all Margot says, and the skeptical look on her face makes me want to x her right off the screen.

AFTER SCHOOL I GET A text from Josh.

You, me, and the diner-like old times.

Except old times would have included Margot. Now it's new times, I suppose. Maybe that's not altogether a bad thing. New can be good.

OK but I'm getting my own grilled cheese because you always hog more than your fair share.

Deal.

We're sitting in our booth by the jukebox.

I wonder what Margot's doing right now. It's nighttime in Scotland. Maybe she's getting ready to go out to the pub with her hallmates. Margot says pubs are really

big over there; they have what they call pub crawls, where they go from pub to pub and drink and drink.

Margot's not some big drinker, I've never even seen her drunk. I hope she's learned how to by now.

I hold my hand out for quarters. Another Lara Jean–and-Josh tradition. Josh always gives me quarters for the jukebox.

It's because he keeps mounds of them in his car for the tollbooth and - I never- have quarters because I hate change.

I can't decide if I want doo-wop or folksy guitar, but then at the last second, I put in- 'Video Killed the Radio Star,' for Margot. So, in a way, it's like she is here.

Josh smiles when it comes on. 'I knew you'd pick that.'

'No, you didn't, because I didn't know I was going to until I did.' I pick up my menu and study it like I haven't seen it a million times.

Josh is still smiling. 'Why bother looking at the menu when we already know what you're going to get?'

'I could change my mind at the last second,' I say. 'There's a chance I could order a tuna melt or a turkey burger or a chef salad. I can be adventurous too, you know.'

'Sure,' Josh agrees, and I know he's just humoring me.

The server comes over to take our order and Josh says, 'I'll have a slice of grilled cheese and a tomato soup and a chocolate milkshake.'

He looks at me expectantly.

There's a smile coming up on the corners of his lips.

'Ah-um -' I scan the menu as fast as I can, but I don't actually want a tuna melt or a turkey burger or a chef salad. I give up. I like what I like. 'A grilled cheese, please.

And a black-cherry soda.' As soon as the server is gone, I say, 'Don't say a word.'

'Oh, I wasn't going to.'

And then, because there's a silence, we both speak at the same time. I say, 'Have you talked to Margot lately?' and he says, 'How are things going with-?'

Josh's easy smile fades and he looks away. 'Yeah, we chat online sometimes. I think. ...I think she's kind of homesick.'

I give him a funny look. 'I just talked to her last night and she didn't seem homesick at all. She seemed like the same old Margot. She was telling us about Raisin Weekend. It makes me want to go to Saint Andrew's too.'

'What's Raisin Weekend?'

'I'm not a hundred percent sure - it sounds like it was a mix of drinking a lot and Latin. I guess it's a Scottish thing.'

'Would you do that?' Josh asks. 'Would you go somewhere far away?'

I sigh. 'No, probably not. That's Margot, not me. It'd be nice to visit, though. Maybe my dad will let me go during spring break.'

'I think she'd like that a lot. I guess our Paris trip isn't happening anymore, huh?'

He laughs awkwardly, and then he clears his throat. 'So, wait, how are things going with-?'

Before I can answer, the server comes back with our food. Josh pushes the bowl of soup so it's in the middle of the table. 'the First sip?' he asks, holding up the milkshake.

Eagerly I nod and lean across the table. Josh holds the glass and I take a long sip.

'Ahhh,' I say, sitting back down.

'That was a pretty big sip,' he says. 'How come you never get your own?'

'Why should I when I know you'll share?' I break off a piece of grilled cheese and dip it into the soup.

'So, you were saying?' Josh prods. When I stare at him blankly, he says, 'You were about to talk about-'

I was hoping this wouldn't come up. I'm not in the mood to tell more lies to Josh.

'Things are good.' Because Josh is looking at me like he's expecting something more, I add, 'He's really sweet.'

Josh snorts.

'He's not what you'd think. People are so quick to judge him, but he's different.'

I'm surprised to find I'm telling the truth. Marcel isn't what you'd think. He is cocky, and he can be obnoxious and he's always late, true, but there are other good and surprising things about him too.

'He's - not what you think.'

Josh gives me a dubious look. Then he dunks half his sandwich into the soup and says, 'You already said that.'

'That's because it's true.' He shrugs at this like he doesn't believe me. So, I say, 'You should see the way Kitty acts around Marcel. She's crazy about him.' I don't realize it until the words are actually out of my mouth, but I say it to hurt him.

Josh tears off a hunk of grilled cheese. 'Well, I hope she doesn't get too attached.'

Even though I've had that exact same thought for different reasons, it still hurts to hear.

Suddenly the easy Josh-and–Lara Jean feeling is lost. Josh is withdrawn and closed off, and I'm stinging from what he said about Marcel, and it feels like playacting to sit across from each other and pretend it's the same as the old days. How could it be, when Margot isn't here? She is the point of our little triangle.

'Hey,' Josh says suddenly. I look up. 'I didn't mean that. That was a shitty thing to say.' He ducks his head. 'I guess - I don't know, maybe I'm just jealous.

I'm not used to sharing the Song girls.'

I go soft inside. Now that he's said this nice thing, I am feeling warm and generous toward him again. I don't say what I'm thinking, which is, you may not be used to sharing- us, but we're very used to sharing you. 'You know Kitty still loves you

best,' I say, which makes him smile.

'I mean, I did teach her how to hock a loogie,' Josh says. 'You don't forget the person who teaches you something like that.' He takes a long sip of his milkshake.

'Hey, they're doing a Lord of the Rings marathon at the Bess this weekend. Want to go?'

Continued: 3

'That's like - nine hours!'

'Yeah, nine hours of awesome.'

'True,' I agree. 'I wanna go; I just have to check with Marcel first. He said something about going to a movie this weekend, and-' Josh cuts me off before I can finish. 'It's fine. I can just go with Mike. Or maybe I'll take Kitty. It's about time I introduced her to the genius that is Tolkien.'

I'm quiet. Are Kitty and I interchangeable in his mind? Are Margot and I?

We're sharing a waffle when Genevieve walks into the diner with a little kid who I guess must be her little brother. Not her actual little brother; Gen is an only child. She's the

president of the Little Sib program. It's where a high school student is paired up with an elementary school kid and you tutor them and take them out for fun days.

I slump down in my seat, but of course, Gen still sees me. She looks from me to Josh, and then she gives me a little wave. I don't know what to do so I just wave back.

Something about the way she's smiling at me is unsettling. It's how genuinely happy she looks.

If Genevieve is happy, that's not good for me.

At dinner, I get a text from Marcel. It says, If- you're going to hang out with Sanderson, can you at least not do it in public?

Under the table, I read it over and over. Could it be that Marcel's the teensiest bit jealous? Or is he really just worried about how it looks to Genevieve?

'What do you keep looking at?' Kitty wants to know.

I put my phone down, face down. 'Nothing.'

Kitty turns to Daddy and says, 'I bet it was a text from Marcel.'

Buttering a roll, my dad says, 'I like Marcel.'

'You do?' I say.

Daddy nods. 'He's a good kid. He's really taken with you, Lara Jean.'

'Taken with me?' I repeat.

To me, Kitty says, 'You sound like a parrot.' To Daddy she says, 'What does that mean? Taken by her?'

'It means he's charmed by her,' Daddy explains. 'He's smitten.'

'Well, what's smitten?'

He chuckles and stuffs the roll in Kitty's open, perplexed mouth. 'It means he likes her.'

'He definitely likes her,' Kitty agrees, her mouth full. 'He- he looks at you a lot, Lara Jean. When you're not paying attention. He looks at you, to see if you're having a good time.'

'He does?' My chest feels warm and glow, and I can feel myself start to smile.

'I'm just happy to see you so happy. I used to worry about Margot taking on so many responsibilities at home and helping out the way she did. I didn't want her to miss out on her high school experience. But you know Margot. She's so driven.' Daddy reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. 'To see you now, going out and doing things and making new friends - it makes your old man very happy. Very, very happy.'

I feel a lump grow in my throat. If only it wasn't all a lie.

'Don't cry, Daddy,' Kitty orders, and Daddy nods and pulls her into his arms for a hug.

'Can you do me a favor, Kitty?' He says.

'What?'

'Can you stay this age forever?'

Automatically Kitty replies, 'I can if you give me a puppy.'

My dad roars with laughter, and Kitty laughs too.

I really admire my little sister sometimes. She knows exactly what she wants, and she'll do whatever it takes to get it. She's shameless that way.

I'm going to talk to Daddy and help her cause. The two of us will wear him down.

There'll be a puppy under our tree Christmas morning. I'd bet money on it.

THE NEXT NIGHT Marcel AND I study at Starbucks for a few hours- well, I study, and he keeps getting up and talking to people from school. On the way home, he asks, 'Did you sign up for the ski trip?'

'No. I'm a terrible skier.' Only cool people like Marcel and his friends go on the ski trip.

I could try to twist Chris's arm into going, but she'd probably laugh in my face. She's not going on any school trip.

'You don't have to ski. You can snowboard. That's what I'm doing.'

I give him a look. 'Can you picture me snowboarding?'

'I'll teach you. Come on, it'll be fun.' Marcel grabs my hand and says, 'Please- please-please, Lara Jean? Come on, be a sport. It'll be fun, I promise.'

He catches me by surprise with this. The ski trip isn't until winter break. So, he wants to keep this, us, up until then. For some reason, I feel relieved.

'If you don't want to snowboard,' he continues, 'the lodge has a big stone fireplace and big comfy chairs. You can sit and read for hours. And they sell the best hot chocolate.

I'll buy you one.' He squeezes my hand.

My heart does a little zing, and I say, 'All right, I'll go. But the hot chocolate had better be as good as you say.'

'I'll buy you as many as you want.'

'Then you better bring a lot of singles,' I say, and Marcel snorts. 'What?'

'Nothing.'

When we get to my house, I climb out and he drives away before it occurs to me, I left my bag on the floor of his car, and Daddy and Kitty aren't home.

They're at- Kitty's the school for parent-teacher conferences.

I fumble around blindly under the deck, feeling around in the dark for the spare keys- we keep hidden under the wheelbarrow. Then I remember that the spare keys are in the junk drawer, in the house, because I forgot to put them back the last time I got locked out.

I have no keys, no phone, no way of getting into the house.

Josh! Josh has a spare key. He's watered my dad's plants for him a few times when we went away on vacation.

I find a rock in the driveway and I cross the lawn and stand underneath Josh's window.

I throw the rock at it and I miss it. I find another one, and it pings off the glass, barely making a sound. I try again, with a bigger rock. This one hits.

Josh opens the window and leans his head out. 'Hey. Did - leave already?'

Surprised, I say, 'Yeah. I left my bag in his car. Can you throw down the spare keys?'

Josh sighs like I'm asking for something huge. 'Hold on.' Then he disappears.

I stand there and wait for him to come back to the window, but he doesn't.

He comes out of the front door instead. He's wearing a- hoodie and sweatpants.

It's- Margot's favorite hoodie. When they first got together, she used to wear it all the time, like it was a letterman's jacket or something.

I hold my hand out for the keys and Josh drops them in my hand. 'Thanks, Joshy.'

I turn to leave, but he says, 'Wait. I'm worried about you.'

'What? Why?'

He sighs heavily and adjusts his glasses. He only wears his glasses at night.

'This thing with-'

'Not that again, Josh-'

'He's a player. He's not good enough for you. You're - innocent. You're not like other girls. He's a typical guy. You can't trust him.'

'I think I know him a lot better than you do.'

'I'm just looking out for you.' Josh clears his throat. 'You're like my little sister.'

I want to hit him for saying that. 'No I'm not,' I say.

An uneasy look crosses over Josh's face. I know what he's thinking because we're both thinking it.

Then, headlights are beaming down our street. It's Marcel's car. He's come back. I hand Josh his set of keys and run over to my driveway. Over my shoulder, I call out, 'Thanks, Joshy!'

I come around the front to the driver's side. Marcel's window is down. 'You forgot your bag,' he says, glancing over toward Josh's house.

'I know,' I say breathlessly. 'Thanks for coming back.'

'Is he out there?'

'I don't know. He was a minute ago.'

'Then just in case,' Marcel says, and he leans his head out and kisses me on the lips, open-mouthed and sure.

I'm stunned.

When he pulls away, Marcel's smiling. 'Night, Lara Jean.'

He drives off into the night and I'm still standing there with my fingers to my lips.

Marcel - just kissed me. He kissed me, and I liked it. I'm pretty sure I liked it. I'm pretty sure I like him.

The next morning I'm at my locker, putting my books away when I see- Marcel walking down the hallway. My heart thumps in my chest so loud I can hear it echo in my ears. He hasn't seen me yet. I duck my head into my locker and start arranging my books into a pile. From behind the locked door, he says, 'Hey.' 'Hey,' I say back.

'I just want to set your mind at ease, Covey. I'm not going to kiss you again, so don't worry about it.'

Oh. …?...

So that's that. It doesn't matter if I like him or not because he doesn't like me back.

It's kind of silly to feel so disappointed about something you only just realized you wanted, isn't it?

Don't let him see that you're disappointed.

I face him. 'I wasn't worried about it.'

'Yes- you were. Look at you: your face is all pinched together like a clam.'

Marcel-

laughs, and I try to un-pinch my face, to look serene. 'It's not going to happen again. It was all for Sanderson's benefit.'

'Good.'

'Good,' he says, and he takes my hand, and he closes my locker door, and he walks me to class like a real boyfriend like we're really in love.

How was I supposed to know what's real and what's not? It feels like I'm the only one who doesn't know the difference.

MY DAD'S THRILLED WHEN ask him to sign the permission slip. 'Oh, Lara Jean, this is- great.

Did Marcel convince you? You've been scared of skiing ever since you were ten and you did the splits and you couldn't get back up!'

'Yeah, I remember.' My boots froze onto the skis, and I lay there in the splits for what felt like days.

Signing the paper, my dad says, 'Hey, maybe we can all of us go to Wintergreen over-Christmas. Marcel too.'

So that's where I get it from. My dad. He lives in a fantasy world. Handing me the slip, he says cheerfully, 'You can wear Margot's ski pants. Her gloves, too.'

I don't tell him that I won't need them because I'll be cozy in the lodge reading and sipping hot cocoa by the fire. I should bring my knitting stuff with me too.

When I talk to Margot on the phone that night, I tell her I'm going on the ski trip, and she's surprised. 'But you hate skiing.'

'I'm going to try out snowboarding.'

'Just - be careful,' she says.

I'm thinking she means on the slopes, but when Chris comes over the next night to borrow a dress, I learn otherwise. 'You know everybody hooks up on the ski trip, right?

It's like a school-sanctioned booty call.'

'What?'

'That's where I lost my V freshman year.' 'I thought you lost it in the woods near your house.'

'Oh yeah. Whatever, the point is, I had sex on the ski trip.'

'There are chaperones,' I say worriedly. 'How can people just have sex with chaperones around?'

'Chaperones go to sleep early because they're old,' Chris says. 'People just sneak out.

Plus- there's a hot tub. Did you know that there's a hot tub?'

'No - Marcel never mentioned that.' Well, that's that, I just won't pack a bathing suit.

It's not like they can make you go in a hot tub if you don't want to.

'The year I went, people were skinny-dipping.'

My eyes bug out. Skinny-dipping! 'People were nude?'

'Well, the girls took their tops off. Just be prepared.' Chris chews on her fingernail.

'Last year I heard Mr. Dunham got in the hot tub with students and it was weird.'

'This sounds like the Wild West,' I mutter.

'More like Girls Gone Wild.'

It's not that I'm worried Marcel will try something with me. I know he won't because he doesn't see me that way. But are people going to expect it? Am I going to have to sneak into

his room in the middle of the night so people think we're doing something? I don't want to get in trouble on a school trip, but Marcel has a way of convincing me to do stuff I don't want to do.

I grab Chris's hands. 'Will you please come? Please, please!'

She shakes her head. 'You know better than that. I don't do school trips.'

'You have before!'

'Yeah, freshman year. Not anymore.'

'But I need you!' Desperately I squeeze her hands and say, 'Remember how I covered for you last year when you went to Coachella? I spent the whole weekend sneaking in and out of your house so your mom would think you were at home! Don't forget the things I've done for you, Chris! I need you now!'

Unmoved, Chris plucks her hands away from mine and goes to the mirror and starts examining her skin. 'Um-'s not going to pressure you to have sex if you don't want to.

If you minus the fact that he dated the devil, he's not a total dummy. He's kind of decent, actually.'

'What do you mean by decent? Decent like he doesn't care that much about sex?'

'Oh, God, no. He and Gen were in constant heat for each other. She's been on the pill

longer than I have. Too bad everyone in my family thinks she's this angel.'

Chris pokes at- a zit on her chin. 'What a fake. I should send an anonymous letter to our grandma - Not that I really would. I'm no rat, unlike her. Remember that time she told our grandma I was going to school drunk?' She doesn't wait for me to answer. When Chris gets going on a Genevieve rant, she is single-minded. 'My grandma wanted to use the money she saved for my college for rehab! They had a family meeting with me! I'm so glad you stole - from her.'

'I didn't steal him. They were already broken up!'

Chris snorts. 'Sure, keep telling that to yourself. Gen's going on the ski trip, you know.

She's class president, so she's basically organizing it. So just beware. Don't ever ski alone.'

I let out a gasp. 'Chris, I'm begging you. Please come.' In a burst of inspiration, I say, 'If you come, it'll make Genevieve really mad! She's organizing this whole thing; it's her trip. She won't want you there!'

Chris purses her lips into a smile. 'You know how to play me.' She juts her chin at me.

'Do you think this zit is ready to pop?'

THANKSGIVING DAY, DADDY CLEANS OUT the turkey for me and then leaves to go pick up our Korean grandma, who lives an hour away in a retirement community with a lot of other Korean grandmas. Daddy's mom, Nana, is spending Thanksgiving with her boyfriend's family, which is fine by me because I know she wouldn't have anything nice to say about the food.

I make up a green-bean dish with orange peel and dill, in an earnest effort to be jazzy and inventive. I nominate Kitty to be my taste tester and she takes a bite of green bean and says it tastes like an orange pickle. 'Why can't we just have a green-bean casserole with the fried onion rings that come in the can?' Kitty ponders. She's cutting out different colored feathers for her turkey placemats.

'Because I'm trying to be jazzy and inventive,' I say, dumping a can of gravy into the saucepan.

Doubtfully Kitty says, 'Well, are we still having broccoli casserole? People will eat that.'

'Do you see any broccoli anywhere in this kitchen?' I ask. 'No, the green in this meal is the green bean.'

'What about mashed potatoes? We're still having mashed potatoes, right?'

Mashed potatoes. I jump up and check the pantry. I forgot to buy potatoes. I got the whole milk and the butter and even the chives to put on top like Margot always does.

But I forgot the actual potatoes. 'Call Daddy and ask him to pick up Yukon gold potatoes on the way home,' I say, closing the pantry door.

'I can't believe you forgot the potatoes,' Kitty says with a shake of her head.

I glare at her. 'Just focus on your placemats.'

'No, because if I didn't just ask about the mashed potatoes, the meal would have been ruined, so you should be thanking me.'

Kitty gets up to call Daddy, and I yell out, 'By the way, those turkeys look more like the NBC peacock logo than actual turkeys, so!'

Kitty is unfazed, and I take another bite of the green beans. They do taste like an orange pickle.

It turns out I have cooked the turkey upside down. Also, Kitty kept hounding me about salmonella because- she watched a video on it in science, so I wind up leaving the bird in too long. The mashed potatoes are fine, but there are some crunchy bits here and there because I rushed to boil them.

We are seated around the dining room table, and Kitty's placemats really do add a certain something.

Grandma is eating a whole pile of green beans, and I shoot Kitty a triumphant look.

See? Someone likes them.

There was a minute or two after Mommy died when Grandma moved in to help take care of us. There was even talk of her staying. She didn't think Daddy could manage on his own.

'So, Danny,' Grandma begins. Kitty and I exchange a look across the table because we know what's coming. 'Are you seeing anyone these days? Going on dates?'

My dad reddens. 'Er - not so much. My work keeps me so busy-' Grandma clucks. 'It's not good for a man to be alone, Danny.'

'I've got my girls to keep me company,' my dad says, trying to sound jovial and not tense.

Grandma fixes him with a cold stare. 'That's not what I mean.'

When we're doing the dishes, Grandma asks me, 'Lara Jean, would you mind if your daddy had a girlfriend?'

It's something Margot and I have discussed at length over the years, most often in the dark, late at night. If Daddy absolutely had to date, what kind of woman would we like to see him with? Someone with a good sense of humor, kindhearted, all of the usual things. Someone who'd be firm with Kitty but not rein her in so much that it would squash all the special things about her.

But also- someone who wouldn't try to be our mother; that's what Margot is fiercest about. Kitty needs a mom, but we're old enough to not need mothering, she says. Of the three of us, Margot would be the most critical. She's incredibly loyal to Mommy's memory. Not that I'm not, but there have been times, over the years, where I've thought about how it would be nice to have someone. Someone older, a lady, who knows about certain things, like the right way to put on blush, or how to flirt to get out of a speeding ticket.

Things to know for the future. But then it never happened. Daddy's been on some dates, but he hasn't had a steady girlfriend he's brought around. Which has always been sort of a relief, but now that I'm getting older, I keep thinking about what it will be like when I'm gone and it's just Kitty and Daddy, and then before long it will just be Daddy. I don't want him to be alone.

'No,' I say. 'I wouldn't mind at all.'

Grandma gives me an approving look. 'Good girl,' she says, and I feel warm and cozy inside, like how I used to feel after a cup of the Night-Night Tea Mommy used to make me- when I couldn't fall asleep at night. Daddy's made it for me a few times since, but it never tasted the same, and I never had the heart to tell him.

THE CHRISTMAS COOKIE JACKPOT START December first. We drag out all of Mommy's old cookbooks and cooking magazines and we spread them out on the living room floor and turn on the Jack Brown Christmas album. No Christmas music is- allowed in our house until December first. I don't remember whose rule this is, but we abide by it. Kitty keeps a list of which cookies we're definitely doing and which ones we're maybe doing.

There are a few perennials. My dad loves pecan crescents, so those are a must.

Sugar cookies, because those are a given. Snickerdoodles for Kitty, molasses cookies for Margot, cowgirl cookies for me. White-chocolate cranberry is Josh's favorite. I think this year, though, we should mix things up and do different cookies. Not entirely, but at least a few new ones. Marcel's here; he stopped by after school to work on chem, and now it's hours later and he's still here. He and Kitty and I are in the living room going through the cookbooks. My dad's in the kitchen listening to NPR and making tomorrow's lunches.

'Please no more turkey sandwiches,' I call out. Marcel nudges my sock and mouths spoiled, and he points at me and Kitty, shaking his finger at us. 'Whatever. Your mom makes your lunches every day, so shut it,' I whisper.

My dad calls back, 'Hey, I'm sick of leftovers too, but what are we going to do? Throw it away?'

Kitty and I look at each other. 'Pretty much exactly,' I say. My dad has a thing about wasting food. I wonder if I snuck down to the kitchen tonight and threw it out if he'd notice. He probably would. 'If we had a dog,' Kitty pipes up loudly, 'there wouldn't be any more leftovers.' She winks at me. 'What kind of dog do you want?' Marcel asks her. 'Don't get her hopes up,' I tell him, but he waves me off. Immediately Kitty says, 'An Akita. Red fur with a cinnamon-bun tail. Or a German shepherd I can train to be a seeing-eye dog.'

'But you're not blind,' Marcel says.

'But I could be one day.' Grinning, Marcel shakes his head. He nudges me again and in an admiring voice, he says, 'Can't argue with the kid.' 'It's pretty much futile,' I agree. I hold up a magazine to show Kitty. 'What do you think? Creamsicle cookies?' Kitty writes them down as a maybe.

'Hey, what about these?' Marcel pushes a cookbook in my lap. It's opened up to a fruitcake cookie recipe. I gag. 'Are you kidding? You're kidding, right? Fruitcake cookies? That's disgusting.'

'When done right, fruitcake can be really good,' Marcel defends. 'My great-aunt Trish used to make fruitcake, and she'd put ice cream on top and it was awesome.' 'If you put ice cream on anything, it's good,' Kitty says.

'Can't argue with the kid,' I say, and Marcel and I exchange smiles over Kitty's head. 'Point taken, but this isn't your average fruitcake. It's not, like, a wet loaf of neon jujubes. It's got pecans and dried cherries and blueberries and good stuff. I think she called it Christmas Memory fruitcake.'

'I love that story!' I exclaim. 'That's my favorite. It's so good but so sad.'

Marcel looks puzzled and so does Kitty so I explain. ''A Christmas Memory' is a short story by Truman Capote. It's about a boy named Buddy and his older lady cousin who took care of him when he was little. They'd save up all year to buy ingredients for fruitcake and then they'd send them as presents to friends, but also to, like, the president.'

'Why is it so sad?' Kitty wants to know.

'Because they're best friends and they love each other more than anybody, but they get separated in the end, because the family thinks she doesn't take good enough care of him. And maybe she doesn't, but maybe it doesn't matter because she was still his soul mate. In the end, she dies, and Buddy doesn't even get to say goodbye to her. And, it's a true story.'

'That's depressing,' Marcel says. 'Forget the fruitcake cookies.' Kitty crosses out fruitcake cookies on her pad.

I'm thumbing through an old Good Housekeeping magazine when the doorbell rings.

Kitty scrambles up and runs for the door. 'Check who it is before you open it,' I call after her. She's always forgetting to check first.

'Josh!' I hear her squeal.

Marcel's head jerks up.

'He's here to see Kitty,' I tell him.

'Yeah, right.'

Josh walks into the living room with Kitty hanging around his neck like a monkey.

'Hey,' he says, eyes flickering in Marcel's direction.

'What's up, man,' Marcel says, friendly as can be. 'Have a seat.'

I give him a strange look. Just a second ago he was grousing, and now he's happy as a clam. I don't get boys.

Josh holds up a plastic bag. 'I brought back your casserole dish.'

'Is that Josh?' my dad calls from the kitchen. 'Josh, do you want a snack? Turkey sandwich?'

I'm positive he's going to say no because I'm sure he's had as many leftover turkey sandwiches over at his house as we've been eating over here, but then he goes, 'Sure!'

Josh disentangles himself from Kitty and plops down on the couch. To me he says,

'Christmas Cookie Bonanza?'

'Christmas Cookie Bonanza,' I confirm.

'You're making my favorite, right?' Josh gives me puppy-dog eyes, which always makes me laugh because it's so un-Josh.

'You're such a dork,' I say, shaking my head.

'What's your favorite?' Marcel asks him. 'Because I think the list is pretty set.'

'I'm pretty sure it's already on the list,' Josh says.

I look from Josh to Marcel. I can't tell if they're kidding or not.

Marcel reaches out and tickles Kitty's feet. 'Read us the list, Katherine.'

Kitty giggles and rolls over to her notepad. Then she stands up and grandly says, 'M&M cookies are a yes, cappuccino cookies are a maybe, creamily cookies are a maybe, fruitcake cookies are a no way-'

'Wait a minute, I'm a part of this council too,' Marcel objects, 'and you guys just turned down my fruitcake cookies without a second thought.'

'You said to forget the fruitcake cookies, like, five seconds ago!' I say.

'Well, now I want them back under consideration,' he says.

'I'm sorry, but you don't have the votes,' I tell him. 'Kellie and I both vote no, so that's two against one.' My dad pops his head into the living room. 'Put me down as a yes vote for the fruitcake cookies.' His head disappears back into the kitchen. 'Thank you, Dr. Berson' Marcel crows. He drags me closer to him. 'See, I knew your dad was on my side.' I laugh. 'You're such a suck-up!' And then I look over at Josh, and he is staring at us with a funny, left-out look on his face. It makes me feel bad, that look. I scoot away from Marcel and start flipping through my books again. I tell him, 'The list is still a work in progress. The cookie council will strongly consider your white-chocolate cranberry cookies.'

'Greatly appreciated,' Ray says. 'Christmas isn't Christmas without your chocolate Kiss cookies.' Kitty pipes up, 'Hey, Honey, you're a suck-up too.' He grabs her and tickles her until she's laughing so hard, she has tears in her eyes.

After Ray leaves and Kellie goes upstairs to watch TV, I'm tidying up the living room and Ray sprawled out on the couch watching me. I keep thinking he's about to leave, but then he keeps lingering. Out of nowhere, he says, 'Remember back at Halloween how you where Marcel and Karly went. I bet you that wasn't a coincidence. I am a freeze. 'No, he isn't. He loves my sister. He always has and he always will.' Ray waves this off. 'Just you wait. As soon as you and I are done, he's going to pull some cheesy-ass move and, like, profess his love for you with a boom box. I'm telling you; I know how guys think.'

Continued: 4

(Past)

Kellie- I yank away the pillow he's got cushioning his back and put it on the recliner. 'My sister will be home for winter break soon. I bet you a million dollars they get back together.' Ray holds his hand out for me to shake on it, and when I take it, he pulls me onto the couch next to him. They suck face legs touching and spared out and shit. He has a mischievous glint in his

eye, and I think maybe he's going to kiss me here and there, and I'm scared, but I'm excited, too. Footsteps coming down the stairs, and the moment's over. 'CAN WE PUT UP THE TREE this weekend?' Kellie asks at breakfast.

My and her dad looks up from his bowl of oatmeal. Oatmeal, ugh. 'I don't see why not.' Unenthusiastically I say, 'Margot might be mad if we do it without her.' Truth be told, I want to put up the tree too. It's so cozy to do Christmas Cookie Windfall and have the lights twinkling on the tree and Christmas music and the whole house smelling like sugar and butter. 'Our family put their tree up the day after Thanksgiving,' Killie says. 'Let's just do it, then,' I say. 'Can we, Daddy?' 'Well, if Barn's family is doing it,' Daddy says. We drive out to the Christmas tree farm an hour away, because that's where the really nice ones are. Kellie insists on seeing each and every tree to make sure ours is the nicest one- dad-a.

I vote for a plump balsam fir because it smells the best, but Kellie doesn't think it's tall enough. We go for a Douglas fir instead, and the whole drive home the air smells like Christmas morning. Karly and Marcel who stayed overruns out of his house when he sees us struggling to get the tree inside. He and my dad heft it up and take it inside the house. He holds the tree up straight as my dad screws the

Christmas tree stands around it tightly. I have a feeling like he's going to want to stay and help decorate the tree. I can't stop thinking you said Ray said on the phone to me.

How I could maybe like to get over they and we can do things. 'A miniature to the left,' Kellie directs. 'It's not straight enough.' I bring down the box with the twinkle lights and the ornaments and start sorting through them.

My favorite is the painted blue star I made in kindergarten out of dough. It's my favorite because there's a bite taken out of it, I told Kitty it was a cookie and she chomped right into it like the Cookie Monster. And then she cried, and I got in trouble, but it was worth it. 'Should we do colored lights or white lights this year?' I ask.

Where is,' sis says. 'But colored lights are fanciful,' Marcel argues. 'I mean, they're sentimental.' I Kellie roll my eyes, to the goo- goo bull shit. 'Fanciful, Marcel?' And then Josh proceeds to make a case for colored lights, and he and I argue back and forth until Daddy

intercedes and says we should just do half and half. This is when things finally feel really and truly normal between us, now that we are bickering again like old times.

Marcel was wrong about Ray. I feel that in my heart of hearts. The tree is so tall it nearly touches the ceiling. We run out of lights, so Daddy goes to buy more at the store. Marcel puts Karly on his shoulders so she can put the angel on the tippy top seven or more feet or so- up.

'I'm glad we got a big tree this year,' I say with a happy sigh, falling back onto the sofa, spring jabbing me in the ass as I look up at the top. There's nothing cozier than a Christmas tree all lit up. A little later, Daddy has to go into the market in town the only place open, and Kellie goes over to our neighbor's, so we can have our time. Get out of the House because they're making s' love next to the fireplace, so it's just them and me leaving then?

I go to Ray- I'm putting ornament hooks back into their different zip lock bags and Ray is loading up a cardboard box with the ornaments we didn't have room for. He hoists the box in harams and knocks into a branch on the tree, and a glass ornament slips off and breaks.

Ray whimpers. 'Ray-ie,' I say. 'I made that in home-ie.' 'Sorry.' 'It's okay, it wasn't my best work anyway. I put in too many feathers.' It's a clear glass ball with white feathers and white sequins inside. I go get a broom, and when I come back, he says, 'You act differently around the baby. Did you know that?' I look up from sweeping the broken ornament. 'No- I don't.' 'You don't act like you. You act like - like how all girls act around him.

That's not you, Kill.' I am somewhat annoyed, I say it nicely, 'I act the same as I always do. What would you know about it, Ray? His mom is a dick and dad a pussy, they just fit in will and I get fucked over; you've barely ever even been around us.' I crouch down and pick up a shard of glass. 'Be careful,' Ray says. 'Here, I'll do it.' He stoops down next to me and reaches for another shard. 'Owl is looking at me I said looking at the tree it like the sister loves so!'

'You be careful!' I lean close to him and try to get a closer look at his finger. 'Are you bleeding?' He shakes his head. 'I'm fine.' And then he says, 'You know what I don't get?'

'What the…?'

Ray stares at me, his cheeks a dull red. 'Why you never said anything. If all that time you felt like that about me, why didn't you say anything?' My whole body goes stiff. I wasn't expecting that. I'm not prepared. I swallow hard and say, 'You were with Margot.'

'I wasn't always with Margot. The stuff you wrote- you liked me before I ever liked her. Why didn't you just tell me?' I let out a breath. 'What does that even matter now?' 'It matters. You should have told me. You should have at least given me a chance.' 'It wouldn't have made a difference, Ray!' 'And I'm telling you it would have!' He steps toward me. He- I rise to my feet as he holds me up.

Why is he bringing this up now, just when things are back to normal again?

'You're so full of it I say yet I love that about you. You've never thought of me that way, not ever, so don't go trying to reinvent history now when I have somebody.' 'Don't tell me what I think,' he shouts. 'You don't know my every thought, of my sis.' 'Yes, I do. I know you better than anyone. You know why?

You're predictable. Everything you do. It's so predictable. The only reason you're even saying this now is because you're jealous. And it's not even because of me. You don't care about who I'm with.

Ray said- You're just jealous that she took your spot, before now… I think you liked her better than me now… fuck no! You're the one baby- you're the one I want to feel and hold and fuck hard. His face looks worried. He glares at me and I glare back. 'Fine!' he yells be that way. 'I'm jealous! Are you happy now?' I do her instead- how about that, and then he jerks his head toward mine, and he kisses me. On the lips. His eyes are closed, mine are wide open. And then mine close too, and for a second, just for a second, I kiss him back. Then I break away. I push him off. We have a crazy love going on.

Victoriously he says, 'Did you predict that, for Karly?' My mouth opens and closes, but no words come out. I drop the broom and run up the stairs, as fast as I can. I run all the way to my room and lock my door behind me. Ray just kissed me. In my living room. My sister is coming back in a few weeks. And I have a fake boyfriend I just cheated on.

AFTER the THIRD PERIOD, Marcel IS waiting for me. He's wearing a skinny tie today with a V-neck and he has a full-size bag of cheese-it's in his hand. He stuffs a handful of

Cheetos into his mouth, and orange dust floats onto his white and yellow bottom down. The corners of his mouth look slightly orange too. With his mouth full he says, 'Look, there's something I need to tell you.' I laugh. 'I can't believe I ever thought you were so refined,' I say, blowing cheez-it- its powder off his shirt.

'What do you need to tell me?' I ask. I steal a few Cheese-it's out of the bag. When he shall, I say, 'Lucas, I hate when people say that they have something to tell you and they don't just say it. It's like when people say they have a funny story- like, just hurry up and tell the story and I'll decide for myself if I think it's funny or not.' I lick' cheese off his lips. 'Well, you know I live in the same neighborhood as the city, right?' I nod. 'Last night I saw Olivia leaving her house, she was on her own today, Maddie and she fights over nothing like always.'

'Oh.' That's all I say. Marcel 'oh.' 'Typically, I wouldn't think it was that big of a deal, but there's one other thing.' Marcel wipes his mouth off with the back of his hand. 'Genevieve and her college guy broke up over the weekend. You know what that means, right?'

I'm nodding but I'm numb inside. 'Naturally, wait, what?' Marcel gives me a look that's half pitying, half impatient. 'She's going to try to get I back, on him!'

'Right,' I say, and I feel a pang even as I'm saying it. 'Of course- she will.' 'Don't let her,' he warns. 'I won't,' I say, and the words come out soft like jam, without any conviction at all. I didn't know it until now but I think maybe I've been counting down to this moment all along.

For an oak view to want hell. For I figure out this whole thing has been a zany little detour and now it's time for him to go back where he belongs. To the person, he belongs to passed and now it belongs to no one for I know.

I wasn't planning on telling Marcel a thing about Kellie kissing me Ray. I really wasn't. But then, as Ray and I are walking together in school again, I see him and Genevieve walking down the hallway. Ray gives me a meaningful look, which I pretend not to see. In chemistry class, I write both a note. Seeing which, one would go farthest and comeback with I want you baby or love you. You were right about Ray. Maddie said. I tap him on the back and slip the note in his hand. When he reads it, he sits up straight and immediately scribbles

something back. Yet it was not what I wanted, I see Marcel in the hills, I walk up and he- He kissed me.

Maybe I write about him- and not the other one.

~*~

When Ray strengthens, I am ashamed to say that I feel a little bit vindicated.

I wait for him to write back, but he doesn't. As soon as the bell rings, he turns around and says, 'What the hell? How did that even happen?' 'He came over to help us trim the tree.' 'And then what? He kissed her in front of me, my sis?'

'Nope, not at all! It was just the two of us at the house.'

~*~

Marcel looks really irritated at this like never- ever before, and I'm starting to regret mentioning it. 'What the hell is he thinking, kissing my girlfriend? It's fucking silly. I'm going to say something to him.' 'Hold your shit, what? No!' 'I have to, Olivia. He can't just get away with it… can he?' I stand up and start packing up my bag. 'You'd better not say anything to him, Ray- I mean it.' Stop fooling around. Jay watches me like a ghost eyes going through me- feeling me from the inside and out, like a dick in a vagina feels the climaxing. And then he asks,

'Did you kiss him back?' 'What does it matter? If I did- or didn't?' He looks taken back. 'Are you madding at me for something?' 'No,' I say. 'But I will be if you say anything to Ray.' 'Fine,' he says with a deadpanning berth. 'Fine,' I say back.

#- Hashtag: (Who needs boys, or go with a girl it's easier)

part: 8

Hold out your Tongue…

I HAVEN'T SEEN Ray kissed me as Marcel does, but when I get home that night from studying at the library, I see the old book for the old one, I sit there and he rubs my leg and up parts of me in-between the girlie heart-shaped of non-shaved hairy-ness, and the poop-shoot. Why…? Why… did God put the snack bar so close to the bathroom, (he grabs at her goodies,

Ray said. '-Nice!' The boy over yonder said- Nice! Looking like get some of that! He is sitting next to me a navy top, waiting for me to move to his hand. The bell rings out and I want to shout it out. (What a way to beat around the bush… I thought. He- he.)

~*~

The lights are on but you're not there, your mind is not your own, going have to face it you addicted to love. In the house; my dad is home. Killie bedroom light is on doing the nasties like always now. God, even I am not that horned up…

Cut- aw-ah- her face made a look of something I can put into words- the door bangs as she runs and calls me a creeper! Moving on to my room, I think about doing what she is… ah, maybe not- IDK- yet, I may get on the cam and chat. Don't know yet- maybe- maybe not. HI boy- HI! It's ME!!!! LOVES! DID YOU ALL MISS ME- MAH-KISS! The kiss was blown to all of the viewers with eyes on the screen and one hand on the mouse and the other you can guess for yourself. Now- I like this one- I singing out load for my baby boys now: I'm selling records…

What is it that you do? Sitting in your mama's basement with a shiatsu, Peanut butter on your dick, your right hand going click, while the dog is giving you a rim job! You're nothing but a WANNA BE! I'd rather go on avoiding Ray, but here he is, at my house. 'Hey,' he says. 'Can I talk to you?' I sit down next to him and look straight ahead, across the street. Ms. McChild's put her Christmas tree up too. She always puts it by the window near the door so people can see it from the outside. 'We have to figure out what we're going to do before Margot gets here. It was my responsibility for what happened. I should be the one to tell her.' I stare at him in doubt. 'Tell her? Are you nuts-o? We're never telling Maggie because there's nothing to tell, to her she is just out of the click of teen life.'

He puts his chin out. 'I don't want to keep a secret from her.' 'You should have thought of that before you kissed me!' I hiss. 'And for the record, if anybody was going to tell her, it would be me. I'm her sister. You were just her boyfriend. And you're not even that to any further extent, so…' Snow flashes across his face and it stays there. 'I was never just Maggie's true girlfriend… Do I ponder the thought, of why and how and who…?

This is weird for me, too, you know. It's like, ever since I got that letter...' He shilly-shallies. 'Forget it about it all I don't get why boys forget it all, and everything, and whatnot.'

'Just say it now that you can, say now!' I say. 'Ever from the time when I got that letter, things have been messed up amid us. It's not fair. You got to say everything you wanted to say, and I'm the one who has to rearrange the way I think about you; I have to make sense of it in my head. You totally blindsided me, and then you just shut me out. close me up and out like always- that what boys do- get in and back out fast, and see you cry as they runoff.

You start dating Ray again, you stop being my friend.' Said Olivia. (Oh you wanna get into his boxers too?)

In the Café- Marcel is hearing this- He exhales. I gonna- well- go- eat over her.

'Endlessly since I got your letter, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you.' He said.

What a bunch of lines- crappie-ness!

Whatever I was expecting him to say, it wasn't that. It definitely wasn't that.

'Ray.'

'I know you don't want to hear it, but just let me say what I need to say, okay?' I nodded.

Part: 9

Say Ah!

And welt the crying… coming on… or something like that. 'I hate that you're with him. I hate it like you now. Said Olivia. He's not good enough for you. I'm a sorry baby girl it is right- what I said it's not right to keep whoring around. When you have a good guy that- well I think is madly in love with you. Then but Maggie on top- like get it right- and fugue shit out. One is all you need to feel the love!

part: 10

Rhapsodize…

Say it, but he's just not. In my opinion, no guy will ever be good enough for you. Least of all me.' Ray drops his head, and then suddenly he looks up at me and says, 'There was

this one time, I guess it was a couple of summers ago. We were walking home from somebody's house, as well as I personally think it was Marcel.' It was hot, around dusk. I was mad because Marcel's older brother Markus had said he had given us a ride home that was not all it was said to be, the room needs a good cleaning and fresh sheets, yet we did it on them anyways- gross.

I was dissatisfied- I hope I am not pregnant. Let's get a sandwich, and then he went somewhere and didn't come back, to get my undies hanging on the door handle, so we had to walk back to Maddie's place. I was wearing hills and my feet where heartbroken like me feel oh so terrible. Ray kept telling me to keep up with him, and not be a pain in the ass baby, that he should dump, for sucking- and not fucking right. He said I won't even tight… Awh! I want Marcel right now! I need a hug, and a loving kiss, to make it feel aright- what did I do?

~*~

Vociferously he says, I call Marcel to get me as I fall way behind to get away from his mouth and many hard slaps in the face. There he was in his dads-

2016 Stingray Corvette, why would I give that up too? He said- 'It was just me and you. he had on that light blue shirt I got him, and an under top I used to wear when sleeping over with him at night and need a night top to roll in or be seen in by his mom and dad, I would have all and everything off in his bed of cores, look at you your shown your belly button, and have your butting hanging out, can the top get and tighter?' Stop doing what he asked, he used you like Jenny.

Oh, how I loved that shirt. 'I almost kissed you that day since we been apart from your photo on my PC. I thought about it. You and I all the time now, it was this weird impulse I had. I just want to see what it would be like that again, yet put this on. And- well run!'

My heart stops. 'And then?' The heart-shaped ring looked like hers, 'And then I don't know. I guess- I forgot about it- us.' Did you forget? I let out a sigh.

'I'm sorry you got that letter. You were never supposed to see that. It wasn't meant for you to ever read. It was just for me, to say it was you to do and show.' I loved you long before he even thought about it- okay stop fucking up- I love you!

'Maybe it was fate. Perhaps this was all supposed to materialize just like this, for the reason that it was always going to be you and me.' I say the first thing that comes to mind. 'Nope, it wasn't.' And I comprehend it's correct. This is the moment I realize I don't love him, which I haven't for a while. That maybe I never did. For the reason that he's right there for the pleasing: I could kiss him again; I could make him mine. But I don't want him. I want someone else. It feels strange to have spent so much time wishing for something, for someone, and then one day, suddenly, to just stop.

It all stops fast- and I look back and see all the mistakes. I run my fingers inside my jacket sleeves. 'You can't tell Maggie about this all. You have to promise me, Marcel.' I said I lift her for you only. Reluctantly he nods.

And the day ends with us making up, and talking it up.

'Has Maggie been in touch with you recently?' I ask him.

'Yeah. She called the other night. She said she wants to hang out while she's home. She wants to go to DC for the day. Go to the Smithsonian, get dinner in

Chinatown.' 'Great. Then that's what you'll do.' I pat him on the knee and then quickly take my hand back. 'Josh, we just have to act like before. Like always. If we do that, everything will be fine.' I repeat it to myself in my head. Everything will be fine. We'll all go back to our proper places now. Maddie and the one we did want in our groups yet had to babysit Maggie.

part: 11

After School, Special…

AFTER SCHOOL LETS OUT THE next day, I go look for Marcel in the weight room. He's sitting on the bench press. I think it's better to talk here and not in his car. I'm going to miss riding around in his car. It was starting to feel like home. I'm going to miss being somebody's pretends girlfriend. Not just somebody's- James. I've gotten to really like Danny and Gabbie and the other Lexie all the kids at the other table next to us. They aren't as douchey as people say.

They're good people…

The weight room is empty except for like Danny. He's at the bench press, lifting weights. When he sees me, he smiles? 'Are you here to spot me?' He sits up and wipes the sweat off his face with the collar of his T-shirt.

My heart squeezes painfully. 'I'm here to break up. To fake break up, I mean.' Dan does a double-take at me want it and all. 'Wait. What?' 'There's no need to keep it going. You got what you wanted, right?

(A week before Jenny passes)

Jenny- You saved face, and so did I. I talked to Marcel, and everything's back to normal with us again. And her sister will be home soon.

So, I don't know if I get it and over beforehand, So, my mission is accomplished I will see you tonight then-, won't I? Or else.' He slowly he nods. 'Yeah, I guess if that how it has to be.'

Karly- My heart is breaking even as I smile. 'So okay, then.' With a flourish, I whip our contract out of my bag, like my compact. 'Worthless and void. Both parties have hereby fulfilled their responsibilities to each other in endlessness.' I'm just rattling off lawyer words.

I am not going to cheat on her… you know that.

'You carry that around with you?'

'Of course! Killie's such a snob and creeper. She'd find it in two seconds.'

I hold up the piece of paper, poised to rip it in half, but Marcel grabs it from me.

'Wait!

What about the ski trip?'

'What about it?'

'You're still coming, right?'

Marcel- Jenny only made him envious of me.

Karly- I hadn't thought of that. The only reason I was going to go was for Marcel. I can't go now. I can't be a witness to Dan and Jenna's reunion, I just can't. I want them to come back from the trip mysteriously together again, and it will be like this whole thing was just something I dreamed up.

'I'm not going to go.' Can he call her Jenna…? That's cool, I would and my tongue would be up to my ass. Yet that boy she will do anything for and look over all the shit she hates about everything- and anything.

His eyes widen…

'Come on, her chest and lower! It's what guy just do, we know your eyes are up there yet it's a guy thing we just do, blame the monkey theory I don't buy into if you want to be a hairy ape that's on you! Ape- transited is harry woman- nice right? Yet- you can pound this shit to me into me in class, yet I cannot say a prayer- well fuck you!

Don't bail on me now like last night. We already signed up and gave the deposits and everything. Let's just go, and have that be our final hurrah.' When I start to protest, Dan shakes his head. 'You're going, so take this contract back.' Dan and carefully puts it back in my bag. Why? Why is it so hard to say NO to him? Is this what it's like to be in love with somebody?

Marcel, Karly, Maddie, Killie, Olivia, Maggie, and Shy- we all say that… Jenny would fuck anybody!

True? Yep! -Slut!

Morning rays-

'Today is beautiful us 💏'

The sun comes up and it's off to the rink, for practice.

(About week later)

I finally got to do something for me and did my ice-skating tournament. Yes, I am a twirling girl! I have a short start in white, and everything. Marcel is going to be on the stand all he can do is fall on his ass on the ice. I GET THE IDEA DURING the morning announcements when they announce that our school's hosting this event, and not that Jenny is gone I can do

what I want and no one is going to stop me from this one is for me. I'll do me now!!! It's at Penn State University the event this weekend.

Be there!

Cheer me on!

The show, I get everything right on, churched it! I did a dibble lux and also a triple seal cow, and the fast spin with my head back and leg up at the end. To Titanium piano argument I sing the cover! I wonder I am the only one that can really do this at my schools, I am really good. It just like lying there taking it to me at this point it's all in my head. Before any of the guys sit down, I get a perfect score, and first.

I was the happiest girl in the world- even mom said a good job! Dad will you can get it! I beat out all the girls in my class!

Part: 12

Ice and Heat

Jenny asking- 'Do you know if Marcel still does love me?' He gives me a funny look when I walk by, I wonder why. 'How should I know, said the girls?' 'I don't know- why I can ask, can't I? I was just wondering, JEEZ.' 'Why?'

'I think maybe I'm going to go to the mail tonight, do you want to come?

This weekend is going to be the shit! I have a feeling that he'll be there if I go to the food court'

Karly- 'For real's?' - 'Back off!' - 'If he is, what are you going to do with him?' - 'Or the better question is what are you going to do to him?'

Jenny- I haven't figured that part out yet. Maybe I'll go up to him and hug, kiss and feel his junk, maybe I won't. I just want to see how he turned out. We can look him up online right now and I'll show you he got my name there not yours. Karly- Hacker! - Sucker - Slut!

Maddie and Olivia- we both shake our heads, and look politely away from the boy drama, ha- that's why we were gay!

Karly- No! He would be cheating on me bitch! You bitch!

Maddie- Stengel the little weasel!

Olivia- Chock out the fucker! And no not that way either you both do that enough! I want to see him with my own eyes and open.

Maddie- I want to be surprised. By- well everything.

'Well, don't bother asking me to go and keep you then, or to take you places anymore, if I can have it my way, you won't have me. I'm not going to waste awhile Saturday and Sunday crying over you I got plans too. You'll see when I get back what's going down.

Jenny- Okay, don't do something you regret me.

Karly- Suck it!

Coming to you-

Chapter: 131

Preparation…

(Up to the day)

Karly asking Marcel- 'I wasn't planning on asking you to go.'

I throw him a hinting look. Why not?' - 'What- now?

'It's just something… I want to do for us.' - 'So-o we can stay us, and no one can break us.'

Marcel- Let's go after this… (Bell)

He let out a low whistle, as we were running for the door. 'Huh?' I need my handbag, and I have a change for when we get there.

Marcel- Let's move there are eyes on us!

Chapter: 132

Phase…

Karly's thought- 'My daily objective is less about goal achievement and more about regret management.' #- Hashtag: (Aim Low)

Lunch- where are Marcel and Karly? The girls asked.

Jenny- I don't care about her…

Jenny- We aren't even broken up yet!

Maddie- Besides you're already trying to talk to other guys. Like why do you care?

Jenny- Why? Why do you care?

Olive- doesn't that sound stupid to you now.

Maddie- Yes, yes it does! - 'Dumb fucking- fools look what you could have had!'

Olivia thought- I would be hurt if I wasn't impressed. That was deep! And I get it, don't be so dumb and not see what you could have had. And what your end by being you, and that is selfish, condescending, and thoughtless. I would say- 'I get that' - a-load.

Maddie- This makes me smile.

The drama is never- ever over here a big- clit!

Chapter: 133

Clear and Blue…

(Confession)

Lily Anderson- In seventh grade, I kissed at a party. It wasn't a romantic kiss. It was barely anything kisses... We were playing spin the bottle, and when it was his turn, I held my breath and prayed the bottle would land on me. And it did! Long and slow- It almost landed on Nevaeh. I think luck was on my side that day, and she was mine and I got everything I hoped for.

I tried to keep my face very still and whole-hearted so I wouldn't smile, and bump teeth yet I felt her boobs and vagina my hand went down her paints, I found out she was not

wearing an underwire. And a sports bra, she and I crawled into the center and we did this very quick yet everyone looked at the magic moment we have with more than just a peck on the cheeks and lips even if that what happened also, and everybody groaned, and her face was red.

And I was wet, and so was she, I was not disappointed, that night we did things that you would love to hear about; like- Eating her out, and using my Twisted Love Glass one blue and clear, on her and she did it back, as I had the small end in my other whole, that must girl call an exit only, I say no if it feels go to you. Yet is all in what you like, I did it on her and she was in love with me and that too. She came to me too, on my open lips! I was rubbing in- between her hips, with my hands fast and then slow, until it would ago. We have nude-ie photos too… see our polaroids! I would drink it down, I got her to also… and it was so cute to me.

She is so cute to me!

Chapter: 134

Stargaze…

Hey U.

Maggie- me back in the old- old days… my quote: 'You get bored you eat, you get lonely you ate, that was my old life- eating out everything I could get my hands on, to stop the pain of not having.'

Lily Anderson- I think maybe I would expect something more than just a kiss with more weight to it. But that was it. Maybe I will get a second chance. To do it all over I would not change a thing, yet I think you know that already.

I have had my love… what more can I say now it's time for me to fly away.

Karly- Maybe it'll make me forget about you, all of them together, and never- ever come back!

~*~

Angelina Penelope- I have dated Marcel and also Karly. AS I WALK INTO SCHOOL on Monday morning, I don't see either, I go over what I'm going to say.

Maybe if I ask around some… I will find out. Hey, Quela- Anna, how are you?

Have you seen so and so? Like them, I see a lot of faces in the halls as I walk past.

Hi- Emma, hey she said.

Hi- Harper, what's up she said?

Hello- Ava, high five Yo- Madison a wink and a thumbs up.

Hey-a- Noah, he smacks my ass, as I pass.

Isabella- gives me that drop-dead look! Rolling her eyes like fuck you in the ass hole! Or the other one you pick!

Bonjour- Benienie, hey!

Aiden- he looks and walks by shyly; I think he likes me- weird!

Jackson- cute but not my type, or Karly's either. Hey maybe gay, by the way, he where his hair and the closes that he has on is so not now.

Liam- is Liam- see for yourself, don't let me inferences you.

Scarlett- Ha- she a slut! Funny right.

Charlotte- dropped her book, thanks to Tom.

Stella- the fat girl- drinking at the water- fountain, slurping it up, ow-ha! (Those things are gross, the gay PE teacher said to wash are pitt's using those, I say no think you!)

Violet- is doing just that now!

Elsa- is running to take a piss!

Hudson- slamming a locker door.

Ezra- is getting shoved into one.

Declan- looks at me like he wants to fuck on the floor.

Acedia and James- well there just about doing that now!

It's Tom, Lara, and they said no to seeing my two weirdo friends and Exes. I haven't seen him since the eighth grade.

Chapter: 135

Daybreak…

Angelina- What if he doesn't recognize me, I look at Ray? What if he doesn't even remember me? Yet he is sucking on her face now and its really pissing me off. I scan the sandwich boards in the lobby and I find his name under All-purpose Assembly. For the upcoming prom, I bet Karly and Marcel well go together! I am not sure… but I think he has already asked her. It was all over her face, when they kissed at her locker, the day before.

The General Assembly is meeting in the auditorium. Look and you can see there are desks set up for each, they and you can do to be part of… it's so cheesy and sits girl back many years, but hell that's the point right. Next, they say get naked and have a pillow fight!!! Te- he! We delegate, and onstage there is a podium where a girl in a black suit is making a speech, on why we should not get some after, yet that the point there too. That way the girl doesn't wear underwire underneath and that if you have to piss you can drop and go! Got it? - Good.

See you at prom!

~*~

(Freshmen year)

Karly- I'm thinking I'll just slip in the back, and sit and watch but there's nowhere to sit, so I just stand at the back of the room with my arms crossed and look for Marcel. There are so many people here, and everybody's facing the front, so it's hard to tell what's what.

I was at the middle school said for some event over there and a kid in a flotilla suit turns around and looks at me and whispers, 'Are you, Karly?' He's holding up a folded piece of paper. 'Um- oh- okay.' I'm not sure what a page is, and then I see a girl hustling around the room delivering notes to people.

The boy thrusts the piece of paper at me and turns back around and scribbles in his notebook. The note is addressed to me saying, I need to take him to his bus. I see all the snotty-

nosed rug- rats at their tables sitting in alphabetical order, so I just start wandering around trying to find this other girl that I have to button her pants and shit. I have to do all the volunteer work or get kicked out, for no good reason. Other people are raising their hands, calling out names I just want to bell- runaway to the bathroom and smoke or doing something other than this shit! Before long I'm hustling too. And hunted by the voices inside me like before. From behind I see a boy's hand raised for me to pick up his note, so I hurry forward, and then he turns his head just slightly.

In addition to that- oh my freaking God- he shit- his undies, and now it's my job to clean that shit, I think not! I run my ass out of the home economics room so fast your head would spin. A few feet away from me, was the band room and I get to run and sat in there playing a random ass trumpet and nobody even noticed. I could shave a sick up to my pussy and I don't think anyone one blink or think about anything really. I don't cut as much as I did- yet this one- I just had too. Maybe I should do that…? I can blow hard!

Do I really want kids?

I love them only if they were mine…

What do you say to that?

~*~

Tom- has sandy hair, clean-cut. His cheeks are rosy, just the way I remember. They still have that fresh-scrubbed wholesomeness that makes him look young. He's wearing denim and light green and pink button-down with a white T-shirt underneath. He looks thoughtful, engrossed like he's a real delegate and this isn't pretending. Honestly, he looks just the way I imagined he would know that he what I would call all grow up to look.

I am holding the piece of paper, one being a love note passed around, out for me as he takes notes with his head down, he is shy and it said I hart you on it. I reached for it; my fingers close around the paper, and then he looks up and does a double-take.

'Hi,' I whisper, flirtingly.

Maggie is the one that passed it- We're both still holding on to the note. And she gives me a shy eye also! I think she likes me more than he does.

'Hi,' she says back. She blinks, and then he lets go of the paper, and I hurry away with my eyes the teacher doesn't bitch, my heart pounding in my ears. From both she and he, I hear him call out my name in a loud whisper, and then her, I don't get how I got so popper after the party last week, I just got lad that all. But I don't slow down. No time to think… I look down at the paper and see more than one boy's number and where to hook up. His handwriting is neat, precise. I go deliver his note back saying- yes.

All my afternoon and night were going to change from that day on.

~*~

Olivia's little sister moves back from her dad's place, and is now going to are a school, instead of where she was: Olivia- age- eleven- taller and smart, blond, and careless for now. All lags and long arms. Big hands too! I just saw Ray. After all these years of fucking on an off, I finally saw him my Ex and I don't really want to I know I end up doing bad things. And he knew me, I am easy, for him. Right away he knew who I was, and was all over me. you know all over me. I get a text from him around lunchtime. I have been moving back and forth between homes and the school ever since I was little, they can't get their shit together.

Walkout into the hall, I see a boy pass- I kind of remember everything somewhat.

Did you see Ray?

'No-how that fuck- are you and- why do you even ask, dumb little shit!'

Okay…? Thanks…

I type back yes, but then I delete it before I hit send. Why do I do this to myself, I need back in… I write back instead, all over and say- to me. I'm not sure why I did yet I get why I wouldn't. I think maybe, I just want to keep it for myself and be happy just knowing that he remembered me, for me and not the fast- fucking sex, where I get bent and pounded, and have that be enough. Or my doing all the work on- top!!!

~*~

WE ALL GO TO Marcel and he picks up Maggie from the airport. The day she moved here, and Kellie made a sign that says Welcome Home sing, we did know at this time that she

would be classed as uncool or swagger-less. I keep my eyes peeled for her, and when she comes out, and I am ready to hug, I almost don't recognize her for a second- her hair is short! It's cut in a bob! When Margot sees us, she waves and she runs to my arms and I kiss her cheek, and Kellie drops her sign and runs toward her also. Then we're all hugging and Daddy has tears in his eyes, for she is all grown up for when he saw her last, she was in Pampers. 'What do you think?' Maggie says to me, good to see you love your hair now. I have not talked to you more than on the video chat.

It was an awesome day!

The day that: I fall to her!

~*~

'It makes you look older,' I lie, and Maggie beams a glow at me. If anything, it makes her look younger, but I knew she wouldn't want to hear that. On the way home, she makes Daddy pull over at Clouds for a cheeseburger, even though she says she isn't hungry. 'I've missed this so many senses then,' she says, but she only has a few bites and Karly has the rest.

I'm excited to show Maggie all the cookies we made, but when I take her into the dining room and show her all the tins, she frowns. 'You guys did this for me you're the best.' I feel a little bit guilty, but I honestly didn't think Maggie would mind. I mean, she was in Ohio, doing way more fun stuff than baking cookies, and being in the city.

We saved half the dough in the freezer, though, so you can still help us bake the rest for the neighbors.' I open the big blue tin so she can see the cookies layered, and we kind of had to. The school ends tomorrow. If we'd waited for you, we wouldn't have had time. All- lined up in rows. I'm proud of how they are the same size and height. 'We did some new cookies this year. Try an orange creamily; it's really good.' Maggie picks through the box and scowls. 'You didn't do molasses cookies?' 'Not this year… We decided to do orange creamily cookies in their place.' She picks one up and I watch her bite into it. 'Good, right?'

She nods…

So- do I- 'Mm-hum.'

'Those where Kellie's pick.'

And also- mine…

Maggie- glances toward the living room, TV?

Sure…? We say… Maggie- Movie?

'Okay!' We say…

'When did you guys do all this for me?'

'Killie couldn't wait,' I say, and it sounds like an excuse, but it's true. I try not to sound self- justifying as I add, 'I think it'll be nice to enjoy the tree for as long as we can.' 'So, when did you put it up?' Unhurriedly I say, 'A couple of weeks ago…' Why? Why- is she in such a bad mood now? 'That's so long ago.

It'll probably be dried out a little in the memories of the past.'

~*~

Maggie walks over to me and she, the moves are playing under the blanket we are that is the first time I feel that way about her. I see that my sis wants to be- in-between and somehow this feels like a fight, and we never fight. But then Maggie yawns and says, 'I'm really sleepy. I think I'm going to take a nap.' Aah- and I said come to my bed and I will join you! 'Okay!'

When someone's been gone a long time, at first you save up all the things you want to tell them. Yet here in the bed I had nothing to say it wall a coming out in the touching and feeling. You try to keep track of everything in your head, yet I forget everything, even what I have for breakfast.

Nonetheless, it's like trying to hold on to a fistful of sand: all the little bits slip out of your hands, and then you're just clutching air and grit. That's why you can't save it all up like that. Because by the time you finally see each other, you're catching up only on the big things, for the reason that it's too much bother to tell about the little things. I want to get all said- yet I don't really know how to as of now. But then again, the little things are what make-up's life. Like a month ago when Daddy slipped on a banana peel, a literal banana peel that Kitty had dropped on the kitchen floor. Killie and I laughed forever and never- ever wanted to stop.

~*~

I should have e-mailed Jenny about it right away; I should have taken a picture of the banana peel. Now everything feels like you had to be there and oh never mind, I guess it's not that funny.

'If you with her you can be seen with me- she said back.' 'Why?' I simply asked.

Jenny- 'Don't ask I don't shit'n have to give you away!'

Maggie- read it- and said maybe I should go back?

I said hell no- well be friends regardless of what she says.

You'll be my dirty secret.

Okay… she was crying.

Chapter: 136

Spell…

Karly- Marcel, your such an ass!

Marcel- That's right I am your ass- hole!!!

Is this how people lose touch? And feel when they get back in touch? I didn't think that could happen with sisters- like friends of the past. Maybe with other people, but never us. Before Maggie left, I knew what she was thinking without having to ask; I knew everything about her, it has not changed, on the way Jenny feel, friends- Not anymore forbidden. I don't know what the view looks like outside her window, but I went up to it anyways and saw the city, she still wakes up early every morning to have a real breakfast, or if maybe now that she's at the high school she likes to go out late and sleep in late.

~*~

(I am a girl… just a girl… so- out of the group.)

Saniya- All I know is she likes her classes, from what I can see, I am in this with her, she not liking all the teachers' ways and how dumbed down all the crap is to do, and she's been made to do this, like us all, so basically, I know nothing.

Pammie- I think sometimes though, there is usually a helper in the class, because all the people in the class who can do the work but don't want to, they take all the teacher's time, so they can't help other people who actually need it.

(Half a year)

Maggie- Here is what I say: I feel worthless… I had to write a mission statement the other day in the study hall, special education room and this gal have to come in and help me, and I have to think about what to write. As well as I feel like she is staring at me all the time, this girl that is really far gone I not like this… I get my shit done in the end; I don't need your help!

In addition to I have to give me some ideas as if I could not think for myself and said because this assignment was on values do you want to be a selfish person or unselfish person and I took a moment because some people have called me selfish before, and before… a few seconds she is selfish is thinking only about yourself and unselfish means thinking about others first, and it's like duh-hhh, you think I'm that retarded. They don't teach me anything I just sit and do nothing all day and think what I am missing out on. It's hell…!

I personally, just feel really depressed like special- Ed has ruined my life. and then during my IEP meeting the IEP director was like well what do you want to go to college for, and I was like pre-medicine or being an Rn if I have to and she was saying like you know we all have dreams but some are just not going to be possible and look at other possible majors and what are you good at. It needs to end, put me whit the others so I can have a life, now and someday. Hey, I know exactly how you feel, I've been through the exact same situation.

Special Ed teachers sitting beside me all the time and taking me to another room to do the work, even though I was perfectly fine doing it on my own. It's very embarrassing and humiliating. I always felt that I would learn better doing it myself, and learn to cope on my own, but none of them understood. I also felt different from other kids, like I was from another planet or something. But anyway, in one of my Special Ed English classes.

My English teacher noticed that I was capable of achieving better work and being the normal classes- yet they won't let me go into them, so she rang up my parents to ask them if it was okay never- ever getting out, and then I eventually, I will never get moved into the normal classes. I see the light of day for one hour!

And it backs it to the small little dumb ass room.

Maggie's- mother- So really, I just work as hard and tell them that you feel a little embarrassed being taken out of classrooms and stuff, I'm sure they would understand. Tell them that you want to learn on your own and whenever you do need a bit of help, just ask someone.

Karly- don't give up! Is there any way you or your parents could suggest a move into a general education classroom for more parts of the day? Or could it be determined that you don't actually need that aide coming in to help you?

It must be hard if she's rushing and giving you suggestions when you're just trying to think. And about college - keep pushing for what you want! Plenty of colleges have supported for all types of learners, and if you need a little extra help, you'll always be able to find it.

Even so, chances are if you're motivated by pre-med, you'll do fine in the classes; because you actually want to learn about it. So, let your other teachers, parents; and anyone else know that you really want to do pre-med… they can't push you into something you don't want to do!

Maggie- You don't get it unless you go through it- and live it!

'Once you're out of school you can be anything- I hear it all the time I nothing no, how the fuck- will I be anything, when I get out? And have nothing to fall back on.'

Karly's Mom- That's rubbish don't listen to them you can be whatever you want to be in life. Don't let these people make you feel inferior, perhaps you will have to do a year extra but you can follow your dream. I had to attend a special education math's lesson, it was awful I felt like a fool as the weekly tests where 'there are 5 balls in this circle color 3 of the balls green and 2 balls red' I understand how you feel and no you are not stupid at all.

'I get that you like playing with balls- I can do this shit!'

Don't let the education you are getting destroy your dreams you can be everything you want to be, I am proof of that, it did take me a lot longer to get here but I'm glad I did not listen to the people who told me 'there is no chance on god's green earth that you can ever do that!'

What a girl named Anna sad to me, she thinks she is smart- Welcome to the world thinking just because you are different you must be mentally retarded. I get this all the time. Not that there is anything shameful about being mentally retarded...not at all. But then again it is frustrating to be 'dumbed down,' no matter what your IQ is, to begin with. Know this… your life is not ruined. We all get challenges, every one of us. As for this person telling you to forget about medicine or nursing... blow her off and go for it. If someone tells you something like this again, say, I believe it is my right to try, yes? And so, does she… there are big things, I haven't told her- how my letters got sent out.

Jessie- I hate being in Special- Ed classes!

I'm enjoying High School so far but, my English and Global History class are both Special Ed. I find some of the kids to be really stupid in the classes, and feel like I shouldn't be in there. My average in English has been 91, 92, 88, and 95 so far. My average in global has been an 89 this entire year.

I want to get switched out of these classes and be with normal kids, but my parents and teachers don't seem to believe that I am capable enough. Also, it's not considered cool to be seen in Special Ed classes. It is also very embarrassing to be seen in Special Ed classes when my friends are in regular classes. Does anyone know any way I could convince my parents, or teachers to get me out of these classes? Btw- (by the way) I'm not insecure, I'm just really losing my patience with my school. I just don't feel like I there, I all locked up in a room with no one to be a friend on the outside, or in here.

Normal boy- Bob- Getting an A in a special education class isn't at all the same as getting an in a regular non-special education class. (Is that say then why to be here, I ask?) Why? Why- can I be like you I can out-do you mother-fucker? You need to learn to write also and keep your mouth shut.)

If you don t understand classwork in those classes, the teacher can provide some help, (B- FUCKING –S, all they do is make you feel dumb and inferior for being you, no help is there, don't you get that, show me what they do? For I can see it!) Nevertheless, has to move on to teach the rest of the class- who DOES get the material. They can't stay with you until you exactly understand something in your own way. (This is what you get with these kids, yet they can't even put a coma in there texting. And their grammars are- less than that of first graders.)

Karly- You need to figure out why the authorities think you are crazy. Once you know that you can act like you're not. Maybe earn a better grade and such. Maggie- I am just a puppet on a string.

BS! THIS IS WHAT I GET! BS! 'People who are actually your friends won't ever care what classes you are taking. It would be much more uncool to get held back in high school (which regular Ed can do) while all your friends did graduate and leave you still in high school having to keep attempting classes.'

You're NOT GOING TO HAVE SHIT OR A LIFE, like who is going to hire you in your town, know you're the fucked up sped kid, retarded, dumb or not worth living life, how do you get a job when you're hated? And how do you get schooling when you had none to build upon when you drop up for getting harassed.

You don't make money with a job… you can do anything; how do you get that…?

Answer that fucker! When you took it away from me… and yes it was you not me- I not the bad girl!!!

Spell this- F! U! C! K! Y! O! U! (Both fingers up) what does that say! I can read it, can you?

~*~

Ryan- 'I am male and 16 and I find them very patronizing and treat me as if I was Retarded. I think that it is humiliating. (SORRY - It depends on the teacher. There are some really good ones out there and unfortunately, like life, there are some that are sour.) One of the things that I hate is being pulled out of class to do something that I am quite capable of doing on my own. I was wondering if there is a way that I can prove them wrong so that I can be like everyone else (are you demonstrating that you can do it? If they are not seeing it then they may be pulling you out to work on the skills... when my students demonstrate the skills, I am not pulling them from other classes. You may also want to express your concern... If I have to be pulled can you do it _____ time?')

'Maybe if you would just keep us in the mainstream class, we learn something… think about that on, before you say we can get anything right or learn.'

I was wondering how to get off my IEP. I think that it is embarrassing to be ridiculed for being in special Ed and everyone standing up for you like a retard and trying to defend you. I did not know I was in Special Ed because I thought Special Ed was the all-day class. No! NO- it is not all day. It can be for almost any type of issue. To get off the IEP you need to test out or your parent- guardian has to come in and sign out. However, before I recommend it to anyone, I would look at academic success- yes, the dreaded grades- behaviors, and participation in class. If you are getting 'Ridiculed' let your teacher or admin know.

You have the right to a safe and secure environment. Some people may argue that is a form of bullying. You can always take the approach you are working in smaller groups... so-on, I wish that I can cure my disability and be normal but no Technology is not that advanced enough. I hate having an aid it is embarrassing to me I don't want to be retarded. I also have this relay mean like head special Ed teacher which I kind of hate.

I would like to know how can I be normal, and get out of special- Ed for the reason that I am missing out on some fun other classes for normal people too. I have also ridden on the short bus which was humiliating- as well- I have an Autism spectrum disorder and mental retardation may be to better understand... you should find out the disability classification and research it. They are wanting to help you find coping skills and development skills. Technology may be the thing to help compensate for the deficits that may be visual to society.

Teacher: Just drop out, or deal with it!

I say: 'FUCK YOU! DIE!'

Teacher- I'm surprised your district doesn't allow you to have a say at your IEP annual meeting. I would speak to your parents and teachers so they could get some insight on your opinions for your goals for the year. Stand up for yourself if you feel that strongly about it. It won't get done if you don't say anything.

I say: 'KISS MY ASS!'

Plus- saying, you should die doesn't mean I need help with my emotions, you sick twisted fuck!

~*~

They say- If you are in the US, your parents need to agree with you. They would need to call a new IEP meeting and request changes. You may be able to get moved into some regular classes like history, art, gym and be in some special Ed classes like English and Math.

(Not if you are railroaded into it- sing or you're going to a dumb ass school or dropping out, and tapping yourself on the head the rest of your days. Nut they class you!)

What the kids think all of them- 'If you're in special Ed you probably need to be there!'

I say fuck you, you don't get it, and you would never- ever- ever- ever, last a day as me!

You would kill yourself, that's not a bad idea for you and your mouth, you do that for saying shit like that! That is what you think about me… right?

UM-hum!

Chapter: 137

Whereas…

Karly- Yes Marcel makes me orgasm over and over, you would love to feel and see what he can do to me. I was feeling how that was all belling up in my G-spot and coming out hard thick and watery. I get the milky type coming out of me with my clit being jacked about by his hands or mine, white- sh when it's going in and out, and clear when I squirt hitting the right spot. Don't stop- don't stop we did it for three hours not stopping just coming. Until I can take another.

Maggie- That's what I thought…

The truth about me is starting to show if I like it or not. The truth about me... or so you think. Do you like me now?

Or would you hate me now?

Would you turn your back on me if you saw me?

I know you would all do!

Do you get that?

Do you…?

Don't be heartless, yet some of you will giggle and say yeah, she gets what she deserves, I don't deserve this… I- we don't.

~*~

Are you just as FUCKED as me? I don't think so, normal kids… I don't think so, and getting fucked in the ass, here is not what I am saying, just so you can comprehend that one.

Karly- I wonder if Maggie feels it too. The distance between us. If she even notices. Daddy makes spaghetti Bolognese for dinner. Kitty has hers with a big pickle and a glass of milk, which sounds terrible, but then I take a bite, and actually, pickle and spaghetti taste good together, milk, too. Maggie is about to crack I see it all over her face, as she sits next to me. Kellie's dumping more noodles on her plate when she says, 'Liv, Jean, what are you going to get Ray for Christmas?'

I glance at Maggie, who is looking at me. 'I don't know. I hadn't thought about it.' 'Can I go with you to pick stuff it out?'

Um- not if the girls go…

Um-

Karly- 'Sure, if I get him something, more, I can do it to times.'

Maggie- 'You have to get him something; he's your boyfriend.'

Karly- 'He not my boyfriend… he just a friend that is a boy that I do things with.'

Maggie- 'I still can't believe you're dating Marcel.'

I- NO!

Karly- They do not say it in a nice way, they think- like it's a good thing.

'Can you just… not?' I say anything at all.

Karly- Ummm- when a girl says stop when she just had fourteen orgasm's stop means give me on more until my legs shack my hip thrusts upwards, and my body covers- with your hands, jerking back and forth fastly, it's just that right movement, girls get it. OH- away! And a girl can teach a guy how to do this, and lite it builds and heightens then it's one after another orgasming drizzling all over me, and its worm and feels good, as it drips down my vagina into my but cracks- it- it runs in its sticky-ness. Aww-ahh-aaa! (Do you see this?)

My ass just vibrated, someone just followed me on Instagram. Don't really know them yet that all right, they love me and I get that. I don't always back yet that what a popular girl does.

~*~

Maggie- 'I'm sorry, I just don't like the guys and girls that take shit about me.'

Madilyn- I pass the field, and I see the band at practices, and they are playing 'We Are Young!'

(One week before the crash)

'Well, you don't have to like him. I do,' I say, and Marcel shrugs. I think you should be with me and not him.

I asked- Why?

Why? If you don't get then never- mind- go!

~*~

Chapter: 138

Break…

(The first week of me dating a girl)

Karly- Daddy stands up and claps his hands together. 'We have three different kinds of ice- cream for dessert! Pralines and cream, Chunky Monkey, and strawberry. All your favorites, I said to here, you remembered- she said. We were at this little train station that is converted into an ice- cream stand. Sitting out under the lights, late on a school night.

Maggie looks out the window of the taxi, toward the house. 'Josh wants to see me later. I hope he finally gets that we're broken up and he doesn't try to come over every day while I'm home. He needs to move on.' What a mean thing to say.

She's the one who's been calling Josh, not the other way around. 'He hasn't been yearning for you if that's what you're imagining,'

I say. 'He gets that it's over it and me too.'

Maggie stares at me in surprise, like this was some shocker. 'Well, I hope that's true.' 'I THINK WE SHOULD do recital party this year,' Maggie says from her spot on the couch.

(Christmas 0-12)

Maggie- People would drift in and out of the piano room and sing along, and Maggie and I would take turns playing. When my mom was alive, every Christmas we'd have what she called a recital party. She'd make tons of food and invite people over one night in December, and Margot and I would wear like dresses and play Christmas Carols on the piano all night long. I hated real piano recitals for the reason that I was the worst in my age group and Maggie was the best.

Kellie- It was humiliating to have to play some easy 'Für Elise, and reindeer' while the other kids had already moved on, I was banging the piano. I always hated recital party where you can drink or drug it up, old fart shit. I used to beg and beg not to have to play. (Now I miss those days.)

The last Christmas, Mommy bought us matching red velvet dresses to wear, and I threw a fit and said I didn't want to wear it, even though I did, even though I loved it. I just didn't want to have to play the piano in it next to Margot. I screamed at her and I ran to my room and smashed the door and I wouldn't come out. Mommy came up and tried to get me to open the door, but I wouldn't, and she didn't come back.

People started homeward bound, and Maggie started playing the piano, and I stayed upstairs. I sat in my apartment room, lousy and philosophy about all the dips and little canapés Mommy and Daddy had made, and how there would be none left for me, and how Mommy probably didn't even want me down there anyway after the way I would behave.

Maggie- After Mommy died, we never had another recital party.

Kellie- 'Are you serious?' I asked her.

Karly- 'Why not?'

Maggie shrugs her shoulders to the side- then up and down, rolling from one side to the other side. 'It'll be fun. I'll plan it all, you won't have to do anything.'

Karly- 'You know I hate the piano.' Stay with me is something I have been working on hears this and be nice.

'Then I play the whole thing.'

Kellie looking at me like- what the shit- was that?

Maggie's worried eyes looked at me for she knew how it was for. Biting her lip, she offers, 'I'll do, before I left her for him again. 'Moves time? - Lost in New York?'

Alone at home, funny!

I like it when he gets fired, like in 101 when his balls do.

Maggie reaches out and cuddles me with her hug and hands, and says, 'that's a great idea. I'll play the piano and you'll do tea or coffee- no can do, Olivia, and I will just- be a' 'Watching,' I finish, Jen won't be here if Maggie is.

Going out with the girls… nice fancy place and crap!

'I was going to say entertainer, but suit yourself.'

I don't answer her, she was not worth it to me nob, ass bitch!

We eat.

We dace-

Maddie farts… and yah-

You get it.

I pass it out my mouth nonetheless, loudly.

That's the point to make a sense.

Karly- I remember the start of my freshmen year with Maggie after the day of her coming back to me, she and I both got our clits piercing matching on our first date. (Do you wanna see? She unbuttons her jeans and pulls down the undies gummies- band at the top with her thumb exposing her jewelry going through her clitoris.) we were around fourteen at the time… fake ID's and having an older girl to get you into the tattoo shop. The guy doing was more than happy to pier our fourteen-year-old clits. Look at that face! (I wonder what went thought Marcel mind the first time he saw that?)

It was not long 'till I feel and saw what he thought!

Yah you know it thinks about that going back and forth un and down with these oral movants. The sensitive is instant cummie's, in his face and mouth!!! And yes, I am a squatter that shoots it far!!! You like that! don't lie!

UM-HUM That's what they all say!

Ant I cute?

There too right…? why do you think I got this? It holds the hood skin back a good bit, which I heated with a passion for myself. You get that… don't you?

Maggie was reluctant at first with the idea, yet afterward, what more than pleased with what it could do for her and I. even she said, I'm not that type of girl. What type of girl are you to do something that is pleasurable, thrilling, and stimulating for you and your lover? Think about how hard you're coming and going to just freak'n going to gush-h!

'Um-? Okay-? If you say so- for you!'

It's something that we shared that no one ever knew about…

-Until the day I died and it was all showing and Maggie's Dr. said hey I see that one before. And she told her boyfriend, and it got around. Everyone was shocked shitless, nonetheless, yet happy for her… for have balls, which they never saw, that I gave to her.

~*~

Later, we're watching TV and Kitty's asleep, curled up on the couch like she's a real cat.

Margot wants to wake her up and make her go to her bed, but I say just let her sleep, and I put a quilt over her. 'Will you help me work on Daddy about a puppy for Christmas?' I ask. Maggie groans. 'Puppies are so much work. You have to let them out to pee like a million times a day. As well as they shed like cracked. You'll never be able to wear black pants again.

Also- who's going to walk it, and feed it, and take care of it?' 'Kellie will. And I'll help.' 'Kellie is so not ready for the responsibility.' Her eyes say, and neither are you. 'Kellie's matured a lot since you've been gone.' And so, have I… 'Did you know that she packs her own lunch now? And she helps with the laundry? I don't have to nag her to do her homework, either. She just does it on her own- on her own like always.' 'Really?

Then I'm impressed.' Why can't she just say, Good job, oh and Liv and Jean?

Thanks for not showing… when I did my shows, that's it.

Maggie- If she could just acknowledge that I have been doing my part to keep the family going since she's been gone, her my real mom. But no. Hell no I am moving in with Karly I said to her- 'fine go!' she yelled…

Chapter: 139

Replica…

Maggie- The high school ranking never- ever die unless, even if your out- that is if you are on Facebook, for the group are never die-off on there, do you see it like stupid high school games, for who does this and that, and I don't care to see. Even if you want to change their mind, you're not your status to them never well change its all in their made-up minds not too.

-Did you see Madilyn she changed her hair to more of a reddish color! She looks so good! Said Oliva. I like this color to change this time. Yet, that here change her colors all the time. Black tanks with low armholes all the way down to her butt hanging out short shorts frayed

hanggie's things on them, and today look form now on you can see her tummy and back, bra showing on the side, brighter read ends on her locks, waved out, and dark burgundy on the top, new gray-blue contacts, and big long lashes, black eyebrows, cat eyeliner, pale makeup, soft pink lips that she said matched the other set of hers, emo yet sweet. You can look cute and be in the dress code, so fuck it she said by doing her hair and the skimpy top and bra showing along with her butt cheeks in the back.

I get a kick out of Killie stiffing her bras to look full and wearing my dress and top and so on, she looks like a little lady. With her honey-brown hair, and short yet all their flirty look, she has a nicer ass than me. and like us she knows that if you have blue eyes you get laid, so I see her doing that when she wants to be more like us, my dad doesn't like it, he wants to keep her a little girl.

I get that he lost me too to this look and slutty act that boys want. I see her some time going braless and having one strap down on her dress just to turn them on, the boy just thinks she is small, and small chested, I swear to you she passes as one of the high schoolers. I see Kellie wrights on her hands saying, about love or what she thinks it is, and some days to big nerdy glasses, that I can't stand, yet I glad she where or she looks to erasable to all them, that want it and all of her- young, and these boys like um- young like her and tight.

This is coming from the girl that is not so any longer, yet I am not Jenny that is gapped like the grand. I worked in if you want to call it that, like a good pair of shows, and you want to wear them all the time for they feel tremendous. Just right so Marcel says… Okay… if you say so…? He the one that opened me up and so many ways that is one of them. I come so much I lose a jean size as I ware to yah, I need to eat something, God I am crapping up- shit.

~*~

'All a boy should do when a girl is horny on top, pushing it down- when she legs side to side… all in… and sliding- kneeling- why, yet somewhat sitting- like into it, lay there and take it, forget this… they're not really moving much, that just to shut you up, but yet again- girl, that's all you have to do when he is on top of you, with your head in his chest going deep.'

Its SIX THIRTY IN THE morning the day of the ski trip, Daddy drops me off at school. It's not even light out yet. It seems like every day the sun takes longer and longer to

come up. Before I hop out of the car, my dad pulls a hat out of his coat pocket. It's light pink yarn with a pom-pom on top. He fits it on my head so it covers my ears. 'I found this in the hall closet. I think it was one of your mom's. She was such a great skier.' 'I know. I remember.' 'Promise me you'll go out on the slopes at least once.'

'I promise…'

'I'm so glad you're doing this. It's good for you to try new things.' I smile weakly. If he only knew what went down on the ski trip, he wouldn't be so gladdened. Then I spot Marcel and his friends messing around outside by the charter bus.

'Thanks for the ride, Daddy. See you tomorrow night.' I give him a peck on the cheek and grab my duffel bag. 'Zip up your coat,' he calls out as I shut the car door. I zip up my coat and watch his car drive off. Across the parking lot, Marcel's talking to Killie… (wah- wah-awah-wawa-aha)

Ray says something that makes her laugh. Then he sees me and gestures at me to come over. She walks away, looking down at her clipboard. When I get there, he takes my duffel bag off my shoulder and puts it next to his. 'I'll put this on the bus.'

'It's freezing look at this go there small yet pointy,' I say, my teeth chattering. Marcel pulls me in front of him and puts his arms around me. 'I'll keep you warm.' I look up at him like so cheesy, but his attention is somewhere else.

He's watching Karly. He snuggles against my neck, and I squirm away from him.

'What's with you?' he asks.

'Nothing,' I say what…

Ms. Tibbitt and Coach White are looking through kids' bags- she is doing the girls and Coach White is doing the boys. 'What are they looking for?' I ask Marcel.

'Alcohol.'

I whip out my phone and text Ray. Don't bring alcohol wink- and if you do find a place to hide it! They are checking! Nope- no response. Are you awake?

Wake up! I say!!! But then her mom's SUV pulls into one bays of the lot and her blunders and stumbles out of the passenger seat. She looks like she just woke up.

What a release! Marcel can talk to me all he wants; I'll be sharing a seat with Ray and eating the snacks I packed. I have strawberry gummies and the wasabi peas that Ray loves, and Pickie sticks.

Marcel groans. 'Ray is coming- so he coming for you, why do you need me to come then?' I ignore him and wave at her- the girl crush. Karly standing by the bus with her clipboard when she spots me too. She has a big frown on her face. She marches right up to me and says, 'You didn't sign up… why?'

It's not my thing…? I said unenthusiastically.

'Come on- I- do- things for you!' She said timidly…

Maggie- Karly give me a full makeover and now she is a cute rock looking girl kind of looking like a younger Avril Lavigne, also the day I got her ring, she mine. Even snapping her top teeth into fang- points, colors in her hair.

Karly- that's right- I broke her glasses and did her hair and make-up and said keep it this way and you'll look so hot to me. Eyes smoky, nails painted, and hair color changed. Eyebrows plucked, and new undies that were mine. Brown hair to blonde, what a change it just works. Flack lashes, blue contacts and extremely extensions do so much- LIKE OMG! Do you see her- now!

'I am a conundrum wrapped in a rattle' That is how I would say it.

I want my Lizzy doll again, stupid- '!>this girl here<!' Fingers pointing at all me they don't need to I do it to myself, yep all me this one. Um, hum- knee rubbing and award movants needed. Please… don't look at me… um God- shit!

Chapter: 140

Bygone Preceding…

(1943)

The train pulls into the Clearfield station, and the steam was rushing around my face. The moment has arrived, the moment I was so long for… hoping she would make it over, and that I would get away with this one, I knew if some find up, I will end up over there or shot in the face with no mercy. This how she got her name- the hope for this little girl's life.

He's handsome, man that walks up to me, most likely a lawyer or judge for the county, the last name black, the mothers were- only seventeen over in France, yet was Jewish, the mother ran… the boxcar holding her to her beast, she sees the engineer and said please take her as yours on this trip back. Overall the rails, passed the Gestapo and or Nazi past Germany dripping in blood dr-ip- dr-ip covering the lands.

~*~

So my predicament, is an abuse of my Right to Have Rights, could have turned out far worse than in WW2, however, looking at history, and me being Polish as well, this was exactly the same predicament that all Polish people faced, in appeasement, and so I think Polish Jewish people in WW2 had a far harder time mentally than people from other countries, both experiencing the same rights abuses, but Polish people where mentally abused as well, and not only by the Nazis but also by the English and Americans, which whenever some people disagree with me that I say that I actually remember perfectly that I was not born there, psychiatrists say.

'You're not Polish- then what am I said to myself one dad -Digging for answers, you're just psychologically abused, We're doing that,' which is not true, and the 'right to have a right' is not the same thing as 'having rights questioned' which the latter is just rights abuse period, but when someone promises rights to me and then abandons me when it really matters, then that's not them questioning my rights at all, it's a Nazi form of teasing! I was undoubtedly born in here in us… so-o why do you care now what the fuck happens to those that had it coming, it never did- they say.

NO.

The Holocaust was the worst human rights atrocity, but what was happening to me in Canada in the 90's wasn't as bad, but had potential to be far worse because: what was happening was that people were talking to me about my rights issues in private like on a podium, pretending

that others were involved in a private discussion, and then the people who were talking to me that way abandoned me when other people were really around.

~*~

I remember the trains and talk of the communist party - I never saw anything but trains. Do you see? The term, 'holocaust' can mean anything. According to dictionary.com, a holocaust is 'great or complete devastation especially destruction by fire.' You may have heard the term 'nuclear holocaust' thrown around; this definition would apply to that term.

So- I am half Jewish do you heat me for it now that you know me?

This is all I really paid attention to in school for it applied to me.

Do you see it…?

~*~

'There are several books and films dedicated to this horrendous event in history I have them all I think; it would take me hours to explain it all. I was privileged to go there in my-freshman year of high school; our docent was a Holocaust survivor and he told us about what went on in the concentration camps.'

'The Jewish Holocaust during WW2, Is sometimes known as 'Shoah' began in the late 1930s. The Wannsee Conference was held to bring together the 'Final Solution,' which was to get rid of Jewry once and for all. Adolf Hitler, the German dictator of Germany, was an anti-semite.

(Meaning ALL where hated.)

As well as required to get rid of Jews for the motive, that he felt that they were Communalists, betrayed Germany during WWI, and a lot of other injudicious causes.

He and his Nazi party prearranged a revolutionary group known as the SS (the Schutzstaffel) to round up the Jews, and put them into ghettos and then camps.' The first Nazi ghettos were never intended to be more than temporary, an interim concentration of Jews pending a decision concerning what the 'Final

A solution of the Jewish Question' was going to be. That decision went through many convoluted changes before its ultimate determination.

Ghettos- The ghetto was not a Nazi invention. Its origins can be traced back to medieval times when restrictions on the places where Jews were allowed to reside where commonplace throughout Europe. Although this restriction is usually perceived as relating to towns or cities, it even applied in certain cases to entire countries. The policy towards the incarcerated Jews also changed, as the realization dawned on the Germans that a locked-up labor force could be placed to better use than sweeping snow, or breaking rocks.

Later, the ghettos served as convenient points at which to concentrate that Jewish labor force prior to its liquidation. Not every town had a ghetto. Hundreds of ghettos were established in Nazi-occupied Europe, ranging in size from the 445,100 inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto to those containing just a few families in rural quasi- ghettos. And I think being sex slaves for them also… think about it was easy butt and puss- puss!

I can see this girl, being held down agent her will, don't you, and just getting fuck hard well there was a gun at her hand, well he said f*ck me or die, and if you die, I f*ck you anyways.

So, she does what he said and he pops her in the had he walks away, as they come is dripping down her dead body. I should know she was one of my past grandmothers. Do you see her being shot doing without him blinking I can, do you? And then moves over to the seven-yard and does the same, she is nude and calls for her now-dead mother, yet his dick in her vagina and she gets pop and popped, do you get it. I can see her… now… do you… like an angel to me- with dark hair and soft skin, and blue eyes, small looking just like me at her age, that she is and the is seven.

The official name is, Kaiser-Richter Schűlz!

This makes my skin crawl!!!

(I wonder why- I was heated- like her… maybe that is why?)

Why?

Is there a why? Or a reason to it…?

He wands and had the never to ask my grandparents forgiveness that was not slatted off by him, and he got it- yet I not giving it.

(Back to the story)

Men with guns, and death in the air. Plans in the air, and steering to their death. Pass and clear pass all the inspectors, we did- I said in relief, as I was sweating hard over having a smuggled baby on my lap, that was odd to have in the front parts of a locomotive, it over getting out to change the tracks, I was not happy about leaving her with others, yet I have no choice but to do so. Overall the trains, mountains, and tunnel are the horn blowing hauntingly in my mind as we got closer to home.

I knew my wife would be thrilled, for she could not have children of her own, you see… she wanted a baby girl and one was just handed over to me I love her as my own. It's my secret, not even she well really knows the truth, or the baby that is my wish to have it that way, understand me! Passing time-worn tree, and faces, uniforms and girls not realizing what is going on over there, SS officer- (was it him- did he let her go out of remorse? I sure he knew… her- he looked right into her little chubby face.)

'Where this train going Mr. Ansley'- he said to me. 'I don't think that is any over your business!' And he had he his pistol drew ready to pull, as I released the handbrake, and the wheels spun as they do fastly and the chugging- building up speed, as I kicked him out the opening doorway, on to the now moving tracks.

The fireman was on my side think god, saying babies don't need to be killed, he had the coal shovel rad hot ready to fight for her life also. There- I see it approaching me the green station, my wife wearing for me not know if I am coming back to her, and yet look what I have to bring- to her along with me. I take up to three weeks for a later to get to her, which is a lot of worry time, is it not?

Ansley- I ran the troop train poor buggers, some of you might not make it back, I don't want to look as I pull forward all young like seventeen, and they wave to me, getting in the cars. This is what he did- driving his train that I see every day almost in the sky tracks. -I Push the reverser Johnson bar forward - grip the very large lever that rises from near the floor in front or beside you, squeeze the release handle and shove it all the way forward, and let go of the release

handle to lock it into place. Open the cylinder cocks - find a medium size valve in front of you on the boiler, or a thin lever on the floor in front of you.

Turn the valve all the way clockwise, or pull the lever back. Turn the front headlight on - above you on the ceiling, there will be a large, flat, half-round box or on the side of the cab wall. Slide the knob on the round side of the box all the way to the front. Blow the about-to-move-forward whistle along with two shorts and a long - there will be either a cable, cables or whistle handles, above your head or in front of you on the boiler. Pull down on the cable (or turn the lever) twice to make the steam whistle sound out two short blasts.

Release the engine brakes - two brass horizontal levers will be near your left hand. The top one must be moved from right to left to release the brakes on the engine. Open the throttle to start the engine moving - the very long lever in front of your face is the throttle. Grip it firmly and give it a yank toward you.

As you feel the engine moves slightly, shove it back in most of the way so that it does not gather speed too fast. Gradually open throttle as the locomotive approaches track speed. Observe cylinder cock exhaust and close them when only steam is emitted. Move the Johnson bar slowly back toward vertical, but never too close to vertical.

This is like the gear shift of your car and admits less steam per cylinder stroke. In turn, this increases the efficiency of steam usage so you don't overwork the poor guy throwing coal into the fire (and to conserve fuel and water!) If the locomotive's wheels slip, close throttle most of the way immediately. Allowing the wheels to slip will not render any tractive effort and will damage the locomotive if done continuously (also 'tears' holes in a coal-fired locomotive, or in an oil-burning locomotive, can cause hollow booms much like an explosion.)

Blow the whistle and ring bell at all crossings of all types and DO NOT EXCEED TRACK SPEED. That is very dangerous.

~*~

The flagman hands her to me, as I step on the train, and the next engineer takes over for my 18 hours off the rails, no- does come in handy along with coffee, don't want to sleep. Her- the new baby was stolen from sure death at the camps. Jewish- surely, destiny for the death

pits or gas shower rooms or fireboxes at Auschwitz the death camps, I can see the nude body run around for them now, shaving head, injection in the eyes and more for the perfect race.

All blue eyes in what they wanted, she babies Hope- and the photos of the past in black and white. She was saved from, her real family that was killed off, we no; hitherto she never did, she never had any US paperwork. She was adopted, illegally and her new dad worked for the Pennsylvania railroad, she went over that burgh too like I, did, on the same engine that is sitting there rusting away. In the same car that I did things in… it's so weird to me. The story keeps going on…

My wife happy yet not content, yet I loved her like my own… I hope she knows that when I left her for my job.

(Freshmen year)

Mailbox- 'Working on my fantasy of what I SHOULD have said to that, FedEx girl who gave me attitude.' Yah- so suck my pussy! I thought and then stop in my walking- God I am not that gay!

Tv- 'So that Stouffer Mac & Cheese and is basically saying 'Buy our product to make your annoying daughter shut the hell up for 2 seconds!' God! AH! #- hashtag- (Family)

'Our- rooms are never clean- anyways- so- why to bother cleaning it, my mom is always bitching about it anyway. So- why- bother, even- if it's clear to me.'

'Don't worry about me. I'm covered.'

We showered together and did all things like that, together also, never apart.

When I give her a dubious look, she whispers back, 'Shampoo bottle filled with tequila at the bottom of my bag.' 'I hope you washed it out really well! You could get sick! If you go outside, and make snow angels or take to people that are not there again.'

'When is that terrified- of- everyone- I- don't- know feeling going to go away?'

I bob my head up and down and try to look enthusiastic, even though a little, pinching feeling of guilt starts nipping at yours truly. I haven't even thought about the evaluations since this pre-launch, not since I found out the results would be discounted. 'Yeah, you're right.'

‘Come on, now. Dinnertime.’ My aunt reaches out and passes a finger over my forehead. Her finger is cool and reassuring and gone as quickly as the lightest stirring of wind. It makes the guilt flare up full force, and at that moment I can’t believe, I was even considering going to Back and Gold Cove.

Me after I cook anything at all- ‘I'm the best person in the world!’

I am fat- ‘Bitches gotta eat okay?’ *I* ‘Serious question: How much are wedding cakes…? And how weird would it be… like- if I wanted to buy one just to eat? By myself…?’

~*~

‘They say you shouldn't meet your heroes. And they're right because I met a baby raccoon once and it pooped on my shoulder.’

I look at me- and the showdown in the black show is all, the girl looks happy you see the showdown deep, of secrets, isolated and inappropriate with herself and her world. I always look so said just like me, not acting it all out.

Boy’s- ‘Yes, of course, I got your text - I'm just ignoring it. Don't make it weird.’

~*~

Facebook- Twitter- ‘Does anyone else think ‘don't be a weirdo, don't be a weirdo - over and over when entering social gatherings? Cause I don't. You're probably right.’ * -- * ‘You're wrong, I just don't want to seem like a dick about it.’

Nevaeh

Book: 28

Heart-to-Heart's

'Dedicated to the girl, that plays in my mind.'

...And also, to my dad rest in peace,

Raymond 'Buddy' Duriez, 1957 to 1993.

Quote- 'I feel LOVE for people, that I have loved, and I think that is so beautiful, I think that's such an important lesson for children, that people can have disagreements', but it doesn't mean one is bad, and one is good. The worst would pain over not smelling and tearing over it.'

-Anna Kendrick

Interval

Kellie-

The climax of you-

My most prized possession Kelly passed on- hell's- yeah, I wanted it! I recall saying- she said- I cannot have this thing in my room or Jenny is going to mucky swing it and break it for me. You can have your N-word BOY-sh baby shit rip- you can have your pc beats I think too. The world has gone crazy passing up this or it smashed?

Yes, plain real shit is gay, or so her friends said- like- to her to give it up. They said that she could never- ever wrap her hand around the neck of a guitar and play like she doses, okay she did this- It was said to me and I now have this to show you and play- that my grandmother, had this made.

A Gibson guitar pink body into lavender- and this was the neatest thing a 17 inch with body, 17-inch body height, and a nick 18 inches long, with four skews holding it on the form the back; and the dumb-looking to me and you, but right for a girl I feel that it is... a custom nick for

her with other parts made to fit her tinny body parts and hands so you can rap the nick, wood- tick and heavy yet no over- and hard- nock- nock- nock, yet semi-hollow, and the sin custom pickups that you can know about- 2 humbuckers. She wanted to make it sound like mom's finder yet better.

Don't ask she said just make it. N sound holes. Fender nobs the tall ones, that light up, light on the inside, pink on a toggle switch at the nobs- in silver, painted out headstock 3 inches wide by seven high, look if so, right to me also. It's got hips and covers and looks sexy a girl like me loves that also- other then it being kick ass. It was made in my pap's shop. Do you see the wood in this thing oak from their tree or so the story goes? Rosewood fretboard, and several and bird and Lily inlays.

Look at the big photo like the picture of her on the back, the thing a has a fifties look- right? white pickguard- who does that? Cord jack on the said white piping, pink amp- with white stand- she even had an outfit to matches this thing. Look at her picks here four. And the white into pink and lavender fad case, with her face shot on it, like the guitar well you can see the show more- yet classy, as a pin-up on it.

'You crazy kids know how to spoil a girl.' I would now I am one of those kid girl teens.

~*~

Un- ah-

Oh-

Ummmm- it's good…

Kellie- The next morning while he- I was bathing, I and he admitted he overdid it last night. He said he wasn't sorry, but he hasn't been away from her that long before. Annie smiled and told him it felt good to have him all over her again, she really missed it.

Remembering back to her coming home- 'Why do I buy cooking magazines in airports? I might as well be buying porn. I get all excited but there's nothing I can do about it.'

After having two orgasms back to back last night, I was surprised at how hard I was and she hasn't gotten to the penis wash yet. As she bent down to wash his legs, her face got a helluva slap from that rock-hard penis. While washing his lower body and eye to eye with that rock-hard dick, she asked him if he wanted her right there and right now. Ray lifted her up and asked if he could look at her beautiful heels. I knew he wanted her with her big legs behind her head and dried him off to give him as always, what he wants.

I wasted no time… in going after what he requested. He started slow, to enjoy every stroke. He hit it high, he hit it low. Every now and then he floated with the only thing touching was his elbows. This gave him maximum penetration and also gave Annie an early orgasm of the squirting kind. Her squirt- hit I squarely in his chest with her large ass up, and bent back had her pussy facing forward.

I was now hitting a somewhat wet pussy that caused him to let loose his orgasm. Annie tried to pull him off to finish his orgasm off orally, but then again, he was slapping meat that could be heard all over the house. In the direction of the end of his orgasm… I just rotated her big hips deliberately, and hard against his penis, this caused him to moan. Since Annie was in a position that she couldn't pat her on back, she patted Ray. He was out of breath, as well as couldn't talk, nonetheless a little kiss, he gave I told her- job well done.

I laid there, plus watched me going in and out of sleep. When he reached up and touched her face, besides uttered the words she loves to hear.

(Moring at the café)

I pulled Ray is now out of bed, as well as into the bathroom to bathe him again, all being well this time they can make it through without some make out time. She was wrong, he just grabbed a hand full of her ass in a loving way.

'Hello, my- honey- my baby.' I smiled and asked if he wanted breakfast or brunch. I replied, 'Banquet!' Is it that late? I said it's only eight-thirty, but I didn't know if you wanted to sleep some more or not.

He told her he will get up now but keep her alluring beautiful ass, away from him. I jumped on top of him and slapped his face with her ass. I cried out, 'Okay- I give up, sorry but I want you.'

Ray was sitting at the regular breakfast counter, her- I if he really missed her. He told her every evening he had room, she comes to his room, so-o he could go to bed early in order to speed up time just so they could be together. He missed just looking at her, feeling her close to him, stroking her butt, her breast, as well as, just hugging her tight in him, and her.

He missed her sleeping on top of him, although she doesn't do at often as she used to. I saw this, in addition, started to get up. I told him to sit there, she's just so touched by his words it made her cry. In order to break the ice- I said- 'it's a good thing I wasn't sitting at your breakfast counter- or I would be in trouble.' Annie said after what you just said, in trouble no, in my throat, yes. They both laughed as I placed their breakfast on the counter.

After breakfast, they both retired to the reading room. I with the morning paper, I with a book. He looked at her lying on the sofa with her ass sticking up like two basketballs and just thought about how much fun he is having with it. He saw him and knew what he was thinking. She grabbed a pillow and put it on top of her ass and asked if he wanted one that big. He said- if it's yours, yes, I do.

Cut-

Measure-

It's the complete, 100 percent wrong thing to do, and I stand up- for dinner feeling clean now, buoyant and pleased about everything- me, and the world too. Like the first time, I have felt- oh so healthy, after a long fever, plus doing what I need for me.

On the other hand, then again at dinner, my idiosyncrasy, as well as with it, the sick feeling, my uncertainties- return to me like before. Not sure if I can barely follow the conversation at this point and time.

All I can think is go…? Why? I don't feel right- I say… bizarrely.

Him- Don't go from me now?

Me- I have to go…? Sorry…

Him- Don't go…?

At one point my uncle is telling a story- about one of his customers, and I notice everyone is laughing, so I laugh too with them, nevertheless a little too loud and long with there's, do you see I want to fit in. Do what as they do…

~*~

Part: 1

Marcel turns around, and to my surprise, his face isn't cool, calm and collected at all. It is the weird look, that I have learned- that he has when something is not right. His jaw is at work chomping, as well as his eyes are full of pain, and I can tell he hates himself… over this moment- like for being there, for being the one to say this, for being the one to show me… what on his mind. 'I'm sorry, Liv,' He says, I am below him the sign glowers in the darkness at this time.

~*~

Humans, unregulated, can be cruel, and ticky; passionate and self-interested; unhappy and cantankerous. It is only after their make-ups and basic emotions have been controlled, that they can be happy, lavish, and moral.

The Book of stuff-

I have the sudden dread, of going any farther; at this phase in my life. That butterfly feeling in the deaths, or the pit of my stomach squeezing up, like a fist in the ovaries, making it hard to breathe, see, and deliberate. I can't go on like this- I swear to you, I cannot. I don't want to know- anymore- what up or going down.

Marcel reaches out for me like he's thinking of touching me. Then remembering where we are, and commands his arms to his sides. 'Don't worry,' he says. He said- 'You have friends here.' She said back- 'It's probably not even something to worry about.'

My dialog is rising a little, and I'm worried, concerned that I might have a breakdown like always. I lick my lips, trying to keep it all together. 'It was probably just a big mistake, I thought unsurely like always with me. We shouldn't have come in the first place, another bad thought within me. I want to go home, ah- another thought to add to the shit heap!' I know I must sound like a toddler throwing a tantrum, but I can't help it, you get it to don't you.

Run-

Running out- in the world that is death to me.

Walking through those double doors seems absolutely incredible.

'Liv, come on.... you have to trust me.'

Then she does reach out, for just a second, skating one finger across my forearm. 'Okay? Trust me.' Did she say, along with doing you? 'I do trust you, it's just... um.' The air, the disgusting odor, the darkness and the sensation of rot all around me- so-much. It makes me want to run fast and not stop for anything or anyone.

'If she isn't here... well, that's not good. On the other hand, if she is... kind of there with me. I ponder- I think it might be even worse, then I assumed.'

Marcel watches me closely for a second or more. 'You have to know, Liv,' he says finally, firmly, looks and gives, and he's right. I nod to the feelings of this... he gives me the barest glimmer white smile something in a movie, then reaches forward and heaves open the doors toward me or so it seems to be at that moment in my mind only.

We step into a vestibule openness, that looks exactly like what I imagine a cell in the Vaults might be like: The walls and floor are concrete, and whatever color they might once have been painted, now faded to a discolored, overgrown gray-green. A single rhizome is set high in the ceiling and barely delivers enough light to illuminate the tiny space. There is a stool in the corner, occupied by a guard.

A place I don't get- my mind misplaced- lost in time- this guard is actually ordinary-sized- skinny and yet has some weight, even with a skin condition pockmarks and hair that reminds me of-of my pap, that I never met yet new in my mind.

He runs after me- I didn't want him to- to see me like this... and all. As soon as Marcel, and I step through the door, the guard makes a small impulsive adjustment to his gun, drawing it closer toward his body, I thought I was going down I was high- and swiveling the barrel ever so slightly in our direction. High not by choice she got me on the shit.

Marcel is beside me, not worried about my mental state. All of a sudden, I feel very alert, in his hold.

'Can't be in here… they can be in my had.'

The guard says.

'Restricted area's- he knows I didn't get it.' For the first time since entering the Vaults, Marcel appears uncomfortable. The man- walks up, and fiddles nervously with his badge.

The guard gets to his feet and now mine also. The light is where I see it- amazingly, God may be showing me something… The man- he's not much taller than I am- he's certainly shorter than Marcel. Then of all the guards I have seen today, he frightens me the most it pointed at my had. Or am I in a dream.

There's something strange about his eyes yellow not brown to me, a flatness and hardness, which reminds me of a movie guys. I have never had a gun pointed at me before, and staring into the long black tunnel of its barrel makes me feel the black blocking out the light like an eclipse like I am going to pass out.

'Oh, he's here, all right. He's always here, nowadays.' The guard smiles humorlessly, and his fingers tap on the trigger. I want it- when he speaks his lips curl upward, revealing a mouth full of crooked yellow teeth.

Part: 2

Kellie- 'What do you know about Raymon?'

'I thought Raymon would be here.' The room takes on the stillness, and charge of the air outside, and reminds… of this boy.

~*~

Karly-

'My heart is POUNDING.' Me of waiting for the thunder to crack. Marcel allows himself one small indication of nervousness: He curls and flexes his fingers against his thighs. I can almost see him thinking, trying to figure out what to say next. He must know that mentioning

Raymon was a bad decision- even, I heard the contempt and suspicion in the guard's voice as he pronounced the name.

After what seems like a terribly long time-but is probably only a few seconds-the blanks, official look sweeps down over his face again.

'We heard there was some kind of problem, that's all.'

The statement is sufficiently vague, and a decent assumption. Marcel twirls his security badge idly between two fingers. The guard flicks his eyes to it, and I can tell he relaxes.

~*~

Providentially, he doesn't try to look at it more closely. Marcel has only Level One security clearance in the labs, which means he barely has the right to visit the janitor's closet, much less parade around delimited areas, there or anywhere else in Pitt, as though he owns them.

~*~

Hanna- 'Took you long enough,' the guard says flatly. 'Raymon has been out for months. All the better for CID, I guess. It's not the kind of thing we wanted to publicize.' The CID is the Controlled Information Department or if you're cynical like Hanna, the Corrupt Idiots-

Department or the Censorship Implementation Department, and goosebumps prick up on my arms. Something went very wrong in Ward Six if the CID got involved.

'You know how it is,' Marcel says. He has recovered from his temporary slip up; the confidence and ease return to his voice.

'Impossible to get a straight answer from anyone over there.'

Another vague statement, but the guard just nods.

'You're telling me.' Then he shakes his head in my direction. 'Who's she?'

I can feel him staring at the unmarred skin on my neck, noticing that I have no procedural mark. Resembling many people, he unconsciously recoils-just a few inches, but

enough so that the old feeling of humiliation, the feeling of being somehow wrong, creeps over me. I turn my eyes to the ground.

'She's a nonentity,' Marcel says, and even though I know he has to say it, it makes my chest ache dully. 'I'm supposed to be showing her the Vaults, that's all. An educational process, if you know what I mean.'

I hold my breath, certain that at any second he'll boot us out, almost wishing he would. Plus, yet... Just beyond the guard's stool is a single door made out of heavy, thick metal, and protected by an electronic keypad. It reminds me of the bank vault at Central Savings downtown. Through it I can just make out distant sounds-human sounds, I think, though it's hard to tell. My mother could be beyond that door.

She could be in there, Marcel was right. I do have to know. For the first time, I begin to know, fully, what Marcel told me last night: All this time, my mother might have been alive. While I was breathing; she was breathing too. While I was sleeping, she was sleeping elsewhere.

It's just like when I hold and release, and have the small one for the big O!

When I was awake thinking of her, she might have been thinking of me, too. It's overwhelming, both miraculous and fiercely tender. Marcel and the protector eye each other for a minute. Marcel continues spinning his badge around one finger, winding and unwinding the chain. It seems to put the guard at ease.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Shit- piss- my god, I as it comes out in that O!

'I can't let you back there,' he says, but this time he sounds apologetic. He lowers his gun and sits down on the stool again. I exhale quickly; I've been holding my breath without meaning to. 'You're just doing your job,' Marcel says, keeping his voice neutral. 'So- you're Raymon's replacement?'

'That's right.' The guard flicks his eyes to me and again I can feel his gaze lingering on my unmarked neck. I have to stop myself from covering my skin with a hand. But then again, he must decide that we aren't going to be trouble because he looks back to Marcel and says, 'Marcel. Got reassigned from Three in February -after the incident.' Something about the way he

says incident sends chills up my spine. 'Tough breaks, huh?' Marcel leans up against a wall, the picture of casualness.

Only I can detect the edge in his voice. He's stalling. He doesn't know what to do from here, or how to get us inside. Marcel shrugs. 'Quieter up here, that's for sure. Nobody in or out. At least, almost nobody.'

Part: 3

He smiles again, showing off those awful teeth, but his eyes maintain their strange flatness, as though there's a curtain drawn over them. I wonder if this, for him, was a side effect of the cure, or whether he was always like that. He tilts his head back, peering at Marcel through narrowed eyes, and his resemblance to a snake grows even stronger. 'So- how'd you hear about Raymon?'

'If I die unexpectedly can everyone just do the right thing, and pretend, I was a way better person than- I am?'

Marcel keeps up the unconcerned act, smiling, twirling the badge. 'Rumors floating here and there,' he says, shrugging. 'You know how it is.' 'I know how it is,' Marcel says. 'But the CID wasn't too happy about it. Had us on lock for a few months. What exactly did you hear, anyway?'

'When I'm home alone I eat tri-color pasta one color at a time.... and it feels great.'

Da ta da- like- a boy once said to me- 'If your fake orgasms as well as you do who you are, I am in trouble.'

I can tell the question is an important one, some kind of test. Be careful, I think in Marcel's direction, as though he might somehow hear me. Marcel hesitates for only a second before saying- 'Heard he might have sympathies on the other side.' Suddenly, it all makes sense: the fact that Marcel said- 'I have friends here,' the fact that he has seemingly had access to six in the past. One of the guards must have been a well-wisher, maybe an active part of the resistance. Marcel's constant refrain plays in my head: There are more of us than you think.

Marcel decreases visibly. Apparently, that was the right answer. He seems to decide that Marcel is, after all, trustworthy. We're in a tiny square, surrounded on all sides by the stained gray sides of the Vaults.

The grass here is amazingly lush, reaching practically to my knees. A single tree twists upward to our left, and a bird is twittering in its branches. It's surprisingly nice out here, peaceful and pretty- strange to be standing in the middle of a little garden while enclosed by the massive stone walls of the prison, like being at the exact center of a hurricane, and finding peace and silence in the middle of so much shrieking damage.

Part: 4

Marcel has moved several paces away. He is standing, head bowed, with his eyes on the ground. He must have a sense too of the peacefulness here, the stillness that seems to hang in the air like a veil, covering the whole thing in softness, and rest. The sky above us is darker than it was when we first entered the Vaults: Against all the grayness and shadow, the grass stands intense and electric, as though it is lit up from inside. It will rain at any another, it just has too. I have the sensation of the world holding its breath before a giant exhales, balancing, teetering, about to let go.

'Here…' Marcel's voice rings out, surprisingly loud, and it startles me.

'Right here.' He points to a shard of rock sticking up crookedly from the ground.

'That's where my father is.'

The grass is broken up by dozens of these rocks, which at first glance appeared to be naturally, haphazardly arranged. Then I realize that they've been deliberately tamped down into the earth. Some of them are covered in fading black markings, mostly illegible, although on one stone I recognize the word BLAIR and on another DIED.

He- he- I love to get tickle right above my little shaft… and feel some fuzz.

Part: 5

By the time, I returned to the guest room where their lovemaking session had taken place, I found he sound asleep. They haven't seen each other in five days. It only took thirty

minutes to go from hello to total exhaustion for Teddy who was sleeping like a baby. I didn't want to, but she had to take a bath alone after Teddy left his calling card all over her legs, a little on her chin and breasts. She felt Teddy would not miss his feeling her up this one time. Looking in the bathroom mirror and only seeing herself without him with his hands all over her big ass, Annie saw a woman that had accomplished so much in a very short period of time. Yet with all she had accomplished, the greatest would be capturing Ray. For without him, Annie knew she wouldn't be the woman she is today.

My total concentration was on him. She wondered if this is what true love is. She knows he is her everything. She knows he loves her totally. He gave up his playboy lifestyle and a year-long trip around the world with all expenses paid just to be with her. He has gotten the best at that time a virgin could give, although Annie gave way more than she had, he stayed. It had to be love and not lust.

Annie's only goal is to continually be the best at whatever he needed. Be it a cook or a warm mouth, she vowed to be the best at all times. On this day, she knew she was better, so much better.

Kellie- previous times - returned to the guest room and crawled up next to him. She always thought about how amazing it was that I could sleep in one spot without moving. She kissed his shoulder and stared at him as if she was seeing him for the first time. Going into the hostile territory was nothing compared to hunting down him. This gift that expanded her mind and body was released by him and she loves it more and more each day. What this gift did was take a naive young virgin whose breasts had never been touch before and who would break a Popsicle in three pieces to downing he's seven-plus inches with the greatest on ease.

She never tried gymnastics before because she was too stiff, yet she can keep her legs behind her head for as long as it takes, I complete his mission. Annie opens the curtains and looked toward the Heavens to give thanks for selecting Teddy for her. Then she rolled teddy on his back and put his arm around her, kissed the head of his penis and went to sleep a happy little girlie.

I realize as the purpose of the courtyard dawns on me. We're standing in the middle of a graveyard. Marcel is staring down at a large chunk of concrete, as flat like a tablet, pressed down into the earth in front of his feet.

All the writing is visible here, the words neatly printed in what looks like a black marker, their edges slightly blurred as though someone has been continuously retracing them over a long period of time. It says rest in peace.

I say… I want to reach out and slip my hand into Marcel's, but I don't think we're safe. There are a few windows surrounding the courtyard on the ground floor, and even though they are thickly coated in grime, someone could walk by at any moment, lookout, and see us. 'Your father?'

Marcel nods, then shakes his shoulders, a sudden movement as though trying to jerk himself away from sleep. 'Yeah.'

'He was here?'

One side of Marcel's mouth quirks up into a smile, but the rest of his face remains stony. 'For fourteen years.' He draws a slow circle in the dirt with his toe, the first physical sign of discomfort or distraction he has given since we arrived. At that moment I am in awe of him: Since I have known him, he has done nothing but support me and give me comfort and listen to me, and all this time he has been carrying the weight of his own secrets too.

~*~

I say to you now dad- 'What happened…?' I ask quietly. 'I mean, what did he…?' I trail off. I don't want to push the issue. It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe you never loved me, It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe, You never loved me, You can't hurt me now, I got away from you, I never thought I would, you can't make me cry, you once had the power, I never felt so-o good about myself, seems like yesterday, I lay down next to your boots and I prayed for your anger to end, Oh Father I have sinned; Oh Father you never wanted to live that way you never wanted to hurt me, why am I running away, maybe someday, when I look back I'll be able to say, you didn't mean to be cruel Somebody hurt you too.

~*~

Marcel glances at me quickly and looks away. 'What did he do?' He says.

The hardness has returned to his voice. 'I- don't know. What all the people who end up in Ward Six do. He thought for himself. Stood up for what he believed in.

Refused to give in…'

'Ward Six?'

Marcel avoids my eyes carefully. 'The dead ward,' he says quietly. 'For political prisoners, mostly. They're kept in solitary confinement. In addition, no one ever gets released.'

He gestures around him, to the other shards of stone poking up through the grass, dozens of makeshift graves. 'Ever,' he repeats, and I think of the sign on the door: LIFERS, HA-HA.

'I'm so sorry, Marcel.' I would give anything to touch him, but the best I can do is an inch closer to him so that our skin is separated by only a few inches.

He looks at me then, shooting me a sad smile. 'He and my mom where only sixteen when they met. Can you believe that? She was only eighteen when she had me.'

Part: 6

He drops into a squat and traces his father's name with his thumb. I suddenly understand that the reason he comes here so often is to continue darkening the letters as they fade, to keep some record of his father. I think for my mom it was easier to believe he had really died. She didn't want to think of him rotting in this place.'

'They wanted to run away together, but he was caught before they could finalize a plan. I never knew he'd been taken into custody.

I just thought he was dead. My mom thought it would be better for me, and nobody in the Wilds knew enough to correct her.

I feel sick. The walls appear to be pressing closer to us, growing taller and narrower, too- so the sky feels more and more remote, an ever-diminishing point. We'll never get out, I think, and then take a deep breath, trying to stay calm.

He continues looping a finger over the letters, back and forth. 'My aunt and uncle told me the truth when I turned fifteen. They wanted me to know. I came here to meet him, but-'

I think I see- Marcel shudder, a sudden stiffening movement of his shoulders and back.

'Anyway, it was too late. He was dead, had been dead for a few months, and buried here, where his remains wouldn't contaminate anything.'

Marcel straightens up. 'Ready?' he asks me, for the second time this morning. I nod, even though I'm not sure that I am. He allows himself the brief flicker of a smile, and I see, for a second, a bit of warmth spark up in his eyes. Then he's all business again.

I take one last look at the tombstone before we go in. I try to think of prayer or something appropriate to say, but nothing comes to me. The lessons of the scientists aren't really clear about what happens when you die: Supposedly you dissipate into the heavenly matter that is God, and get absorbed by him, although they also tell us that the cured go to heaven and live forever in perfect harmony and order.

'Your name.' I spin around to face Marcel. He has already moved past me, headed back for the door. 'Marcel.'

~*~

He gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head. 'Assigned to me,' he says. For a moment Marcel's hand pauses on the gun, his fingers once again performing a dance on the trigger. 'Sure,' he says, keeping his eyes on

Marcel, as though I'm not even there. 'You must have heard about it.'

Marcel shrugs. 'A little of this, a little of that. Nothing confirmed.' Marcel laughs. It's a terrible sound. It reminds me of the time I saw two seagulls fighting in midair over a scrap of food, screeching as they tumbled toward the ocean. 'Oh, it's confirmed,' he says.

'Happened back in February.

We got the alarm from Raymon, as a matter of fact. 'Course if he was in on it, she might have had a lead time of six, seven hours.'

Part: 7

17th November- 2014-

'The '50 Shades of Grey' dude looks just like 'Love Actually' kid…? I feel less ~turned on~ and more like... I should call child services...'

Kalliez14@twtter.com

Kelliez14@twtter.com < look at that shit there… I can have anything can I?

Cupcakes- 'If the frosting has cream cheese it counts as breakfast, right?'

Through the walls, we can hear low moaning, a constant vibration. It's worse, somehow, than the screeches, and screams of earlier: This is the sound people make when they've long ago given up hope that anyone is listening, a reflexive sound, meant just to fill the time and space and the darkness.

'Cooking for one sucks, because no matter how I portion it; I seem to end up wasting food. Also, loneliness…'

I'm going to be sick. If Marcel is correct, my mother is here, behind one of these terrible doors-so close that if I could rearrange the particles and make the stone melt away, I might put my hand out, and touch her. Closer than I ever thought I would be to her again.

As we walk, I can hear the barrel of his gun, slapping against his thigh. I'm worried I might faint, and I want to reach out, and steady myself against the walls, but they are coated with fungus and moisture. On either side of us, bolted metal cell doors appear at intervals, each outfitted with a single grimy window the size of a dinner plate.

'Being told 'I know you can do this' weirdly makes me not want to try…

'You CAN'T do this' has the same effect. Okay, yeah, I might just be lazy.'

I am filled with competing thoughts and desires: My mother cannot be here; I would rather she was dead; I want to see her alive. And filled, too, with that other word, pressing itself underneath all my other thoughts: leakage, seepage, escape. A possibility too fantastic to

contemplate. If my mother had been the one to break out, I would have known. She would have come for me. Ward Six consists of just one long hallway.

'Here's your boy Raymon, if you want to say hello.' Then he laughs again, that awful crackling sound. I think about what he said when we first entered the vestibule: He's always here, nowadays.

Ahead of us, Marcel does not respond, but I think I see him shudder. Marcel nudges me sharply in the back with the barrel of his gun. 'So, what do you think?'

As far as I can tell, there are about forty doors, forty separate cells.

'This is it…'

Marcel says. 'The grand tour.' He pounds on one of the very first doors.

~*~

Random- like- 'I get the same feeling at the dentist that I get when a cop car is behind me; I haven't done anything wrong, but I feel incredibly guilty.'

When he says the word, the walls seem to collapse around me. I take a quick step backward, bumping up against a wall. It could be her, I think, and for one horrible, guilty second, I'm disappointed. Then I remind myself that she might not be here at all and in any case, it could have been anyone who escaped, any female sympathizer or agitator.

Still, the dizziness does not subside. I'm filled with anxiety and fear and a desperate craving, all at once.

'What's wrong with her?' Marcel asks. His voice sounds distant.

'Air,' I manage to force out. 'It's the air in here.'

Hate isn't the most dangerous thing, he'd said. Indifference is.

Marcel starts talking. His voice is low and still casual, but there's an undertone of force to it: the kind of vocal sound street peddlers lapse into when they are trying to get you to buy a carton of bruised berries or a broken toy. It's okay, I will give you a deal, no problem, trust me.

'Listen, just let us in for a minute. That's all it will take: a minute. Marcel laughs again, that unpleasant crackling sound. 'You think it's bad out here,' he says. 'It's paradise compared to the cells.' He seems to take pleasure in this, and it reminds me of a debate I had a few weeks ago with Marcel when he was arguing against the usefulness of the cure. I said- that without love, there could also be no hate: without hate, no violence. You can tell she's already scared out of her thoughts. I had to come all the way out here for this, a day off and everything, I was going to go to the pier, maybe try out some fishing.

Point is if I bring her home and she's not straightened out - well, you know, chances are I'll just have to haul out here again. And I only have a couple of days off, and summer's almost over-'

'Why all the trouble?' Marcel says, jerking his head in my direction.

'If she's causing problems, there's an easy to fix her up.' It's a bold lie. Marcel could easily ask to see my ID card, and then Marcel and I are screwed. I'm not sure what the punishment would be for infiltrating the Vaults under false pretenses, but it can't be good. Marcel smiles tightly. 'Her father's Steven, a commissioner at the labs.

He doesn't want to do an early procedure, no trouble, no violence or mess. Looks bad, you know.'

~*~

Marcel appears interested in me for the first time. He looks me up and down like I'm a grapefruit he's evaluating in the supermarket for mellowness, and for a moment he doesn't say anything.

Then, finally, he stands, slipping the gun onto his shoulder. 'Come on,' he says. 'Seven minutes.'

'Let's go,' he says, manufacture his vocal sound crotchety, like my little fit has left him impatient. Nevertheless, his touch is gentle, and his hand warm and reassuring. As he's fiddling with the keypad, which requires both that he type code, and scan his hand on some kind of fingerprint- matching screen, Marcel reaches out and takes my elbow.

Part: 8

Ray's idea of bathing her is to wash her ass and feel her up over and over again. But one thing is for sure, he cleans her ass really well. After bathing herself Annie sat on the bed and reflected on today's events. It's two forty-five and she flew out of Pitt. At nine this morning. She became Less than this nice naive barely boob-ed adult, unassuming, sexless woman. Now she's a killing sex machine on me. How could the taste of he come do this to her?

And she did…

I wish he… could keep it there, but after only a second he lets me go again. I can read a plea, loud and clear, in his eyes: Be strong. We're almost there. Be strong for just a little while longer. The locks on the door release with a click.

Marcel goes first, then me, then Marcel.

Marcel leans his shoulder against it, straining, and it slides open just enough for us to squeeze by into the hallway beyond.

But the smell is what really hits me: a horrible, rotting, festering stink, like the Dumpsters by the harbor, the place where all the fish intestines get discarded, on the hottest day. The passage is so narrow we have to go single file, and it's even darker than the rest of the Vaults.

~*~

I stood looking out at the cattle as it grazed in the far-field. It was good to be home, but he couldn't quite get his head on straight. That's when he saw the lone horse out in the field. Anger surged in him as he urged his horse into a run across the large expanse of pasture. If one of those longhorn cattle came near enough to gore that Stallion, they'd be out a lot of money. His mind kept going over who was in charge of the horses this morning when he headed out. Then he remembered, it was Maggie. Shaking his head as he easily jumped the fence and gained on the skittish Stallion. Evidently, the horse realized he was in the wrong place. Once- he neared the horse he saw the dangling rope. Grinding his teeth and jumping off his horse he grabbed the rope and reached up to tie it to the horn on his saddle. He stepped up into the saddle and started for the

barn. He would have her hide for this. She knew how to tie a proper knot. Where was that girl's mind?

When he neared the barn, he saw his little sister brushing her mare. She looked up and their eyes locked. Hers was the first to dart away. She knew instantly that he was angry. The horse he was leaning toward her was one of the prize Stallions that her father had paid a lot of money for. Stepping around the back of her horse, she gazed over the horses back timidly, dreading his wrath. Maybe if she put the horse between them it would be better, but the anger in his eyes was growing. Finally, she walked out of the stall and reached up for the rope that he handed her.

'Maggie…'

What were you thinking? Do you have any idea where this horse was when I found him?' Not giving her time to respond, he continued with a loud, booming voice full of anger. 'He was out in the pasture with the longhorn cattle. What if one of those bulls decided to tear open this Stallion? How'd he get- loose? You know how to tie a knot.' He slowly dismounted his horse and stood in front of his sister. Grabbing the rope, he tied it in a proper knot and slipped it over the hook on the side of the stall.

'I'm sorry Ridge. I don't know how he got loose. I swear I tied the knot tightly.' She edged away from him as he continued to stare at her.

He reached up and pulled his cowboy hat off to wipe the sweat from his forehead. How could he stay mad at her? With a quick motion, he grabbed her and pulled her into his embrace. 'Just be glad it was me that found him and not dad. He'd have you cleaning out stalls with your hands.' He reached up and pulled her ponytail.

She made a face just thinking about that punishment. 'Thanks, Ridge, for not ratting on me this time but I'll do better. I guess I was distracted by the new horse and all.' Looking over her shoulder at her new mare she smiled. 'But you've got to admit she's worth the distraction.'

He laughed and pushed her gently back toward her mare. 'Well, distraction or not, don't let it happen again or I'll have you using your toothbrush on the bits.'

As she giggled, he rolled his eyes and headed over to brush his horse down, his heart-melting slightly at the sound of her giggle. That was one of the many things he'd missed while in Iraq.

His mind went back to that bad place that haunted his dreams and woke him in a cold sweat every night. The sand ate into his feet as he stood with his back against the jeep. He held his gun against his body in complete silence, waiting on the enemy to move closer. The cries from his injured fellow soldiers filled the air, causing his heart to pound loud in his ears.

Suddenly-

A loud explosion rattled the air and then the next thing he knew was seeing a hospital room ceiling. Then he was brought back to the stable when he felt a slight shiver run up his spine. Turning he realized a female was in the stables that he didn't know.

Maggie was talking with her as he walked up. The woman was stunning in her jeans and t-shirt, as she stood talking about the new mare. Both women looked up when he stopped beside Maggie.

'Ridge have you met the new vet yet?' She asked in a sweet telling voice. He looked down at her with a warning in his eyes, letting her know he was aware of the slight hint in her voice.

The woman stepped forward and extended her hand. 'I'm glad to finally meet the town's hero, Ridge Cauthen. Thank you for all you've done for this country.' She said in almost an exhale as she took in his gorgeous face and lean, muscular body.

He took her hand sheepishly as he grinned down at her. 'I'm just a normal man doing what he had to do.'

Suddenly- embarrassed, she said, 'I'm sorry, I didn't say my name, it's Mallory Talon.'

'Good to meet you, Mallory.' He tipped his hat and spun on his booted heel, heading back out of the stable. One thing he'd learned while at war was when that tingle went down your spine, you needed to take cover and it was time to take cover.

It was raining we ran to the barn and had hot sex and kissing. I was up early kidding him and she didn't want to drain him before his golf game with Timmy.

She brought him to the brink, but didn't drain his tank is the way he put it. It was eight o'clock and as he was preparing to meet Timmy for their nine o'clock tee time, I was still kidding him about what he misses when he plays golf. She told him to shoot that little white ball in that hole because you didn't shoot anything in this hole.

He laughed and said I can still cancel. I said don't do that, that golf course may close, but I stay open. She kissed him passionately, grab his manhood and told him to go beat Timmy and if he won, she'll give him a trophy. He waved bye and shouted I've had a trophy since I met you. Annie kissed him and said that's good because I'm going to drain you right now.

~*~

Even Marcel curses and coughs, covering his nose with his hand.

Behind me, I can imagine Marcel grinning. 'Ward Six has its own special perfume,' he says.

It's all good! Remember that!

'Your real name is Marcel,' I say, and he nods. This is what people are always talking about when they talk about God: this feeling, of being held and unspoken and protected. Feeling this way seems about as close to saying a prayer as you could get, so I follow Marcel back inside, holding my breath as we again encounter that awful stink. He has a secret name, just like me. We stand there for one more moment, looking at each other, and in that instant, I feel our connection so strongly it's as though it achieves physical existence, becomes a hand all around us, cupping us together, protecting us.

I follow Marcel down a series of serpentine hallways. The sensation of stillness and peace I had in the courtyard is replaced almost immediately by fear so sharp it is like a blade going straight into the core of me, driving down and deep until I can hardly breathe or keep going. At points, the wailing grows louder, almost to a fever pitch, and I have to cover my ears; then it ebbs away again. Once we pass a man wearing a long white lab coat, stained with what looks like blood; he is leading a patient on a leash.

Neither one looks at us as we pass. We make so many twists and turns I'm beginning to wonder if Marcel is lost, especially as the hallways grow dirtier, and the lights above us become fewer in number so that eventually we are walking through murk and obscurity, with a single functioning bulb to light up twenty feet of the blackened stone corridor. At intervals various glowing neon signs appear in the darkness, as though they are rising out of the air itself: WARD ONE, WARD TWO, WARD THREE, WARD FOUR. Marcel keeps going, though, and when we pass the hallway that leads to Ward Five, I call out to him, convinced he has gotten confused or lost his way.

Part: 9

'Marcel,' I say, but even as I say the word it strangles me because just then we come up to a heavy set of double doors marked with a small sign, barely illuminated, so faint I can hardly read it. And yet it seems to burn as brightly as a thousand suns.

He strokes the barrel of his gun-which has been resting casually between his knees- as though it is a pet.

'That's right.

This is the first time I've heard anyone in an official capacity acknowledge the existence of the people in the Wilds, and I sucked in a sharp breath. I know it must be painful for Marcel to stand there, talking dismissively about a friend who has been caught for being a sympathizer. The punishment must have been swift and severe, especially since he was on the government payroll. Most likely he was hanged or shot or electrocuted, or thrown into one of the cells to rot- if the courts were merciful and decided against a verdict of death by torture. If he even had a trial. Came as a total shock to me. 'Course I hardly knew him- saw him sometimes in the break room, once or twice in the shitter, that's about it.

Kept to himself, mostly. I guess it makes sense. Must have been getting chatty with the Invalids.'

Amazingly, Marcel's voice doesn't falter. 'What was the tip-off?' Marcel keeps massaging his gun, and something about the motion-gentle, almost, like he's willing it to live-makes me feel sick. 'No tip-off, exactly.' He sweeps his hair off his face, revealing a splotchy red forehead, shiny with sweat. It's much hotter here than it was in the other wards. The air must

get trapped in these walls, rotting, and festering like everything else in this place. 'It figures he must have known something about the escape. He was in charge of cell inspections. And the tunnel didn't just sprout up overnight.'

'The escape?' The words fly out of my mouth before I can help it. My heart starts jolting painfully in my chest.

Nobody has ever escaped the Crypts, not ever.

'You must have heard about it.'

Marcel shrugs. 'A little of this, a little of that. Nothing confirmed.'

Marcel laughs. It's a terrible sound. It reminds me of the time I saw two seagulls fighting in midair over a scrap of food, screeching as they tumbled toward the ocean. 'Oh, it's confirmed,' For a moment Marcel's hand pauses on the gun, his fingers once again performing a dance on the trigger.

'Sure,' he says, keeping his eyes on Marcel, as though I'm not even there. He says. 'Happened back in February. We got the alarm from Raymon, as a matter of fact. 'Course if he was in on it, she might have had a lead time of six, seven hours.'

When he says the word, the walls seem to collapse around me. Then I remind myself that she might not be here at all and in any case, it could have been anyone who escaped, any female sympathizer or agitator. Still, the dizziness does not subside. I take a quick step backward, bumping up against a wall. It could be her, I think, and for one horrible, guilty second, I'm disappointed.

~*~

Then- I only have a couple of days off, and summer's almost over-.'

It's okay, I'll give you a deal, no problem, trust me.

'Listen, just let us in for a minute. That's all it will take: a minute. You can tell she's already scared out of her mind. I had to come all the way out here for this, a day off and everything, I was going to go to the pier, maybe try out some fishing.

Point is if I bring her home and she's not straightened out - well, you know, chances are I'll just have to haul out here again.

I'm filled with anxiety and fear and a desperate craving, all at once.

'What's wrong with her?' Marcel asks.

His voice sounds distant.

'Air,' I manage to force out. 'It's the air in here.'

Marcel laughs again, that unpleasant crackling sound. 'You think it's bad out here,' he says. 'It's paradise compared to the cells.' He seems to take pleasure in this, and it prompts me of a debate I had a few weeks ago with Marcel when he was arguing against the usefulness of the cure. I said that without love, there could also be no hate: without hate, no violence. Hate isn't the most dangerous thing, he'd said. Indifference is.

Marcel starts talking. His voice is low, and still casual, but there's an undertone of force to it: the kind of voice street peddlers lapse into when they are trying to get you to buy a carton of bruised berries or a broken toy.

'Why all the trouble?' Marcel says, jerking his head in my direction. 'If she's causing problems, there's an easy way to fix her up.' Marcel smiles tightly.

'Her father's Steven, a commissioner at the labs.

He doesn't want to do an early procedure, no trouble, no violence or mess.

Looks bad, you know.'

It's a bold lie. Marcel could easily ask to see my ID card, and then Marcel and I are screwed. I'm not sure what the punishment would be for infiltrating the Vaults under false pretenses, but it can't be good.

Behind me, I can imagine Marcel grinning. 'Ward Six has its own special perfume,' he says- As we walk, I can hear the barrel of his gun, slapping against his thigh. I'm worried I might faint, and I want to reach out and steady myself against the walls, but they are coated with fungus

and moisture. On either side of us, bolted metal cell doors appear at intervals, each outfitted with a single grimy window the size of a dinner plate.

Through the walls, we can hear low moaning, a constant vibration. It's worse, somehow, than the screeches, and screams of earlier: This is the sound people make when they've long ago given up hope that anyone is listening, a reflexive sound, meant just to fill the time and space and the dimness.

I'm going to be sick.

Then filled, too, with that other word, pressing itself beneath all my other thoughts: escape, leakage, escape. An occasion too fantastic to contemplate. If my mother had been the one to break out, I would have known.

She would have come for me.

If Marcel is correct, my mother is here, behind one of these terrible doors-so close that if I could rearrange the particles and make the stone melt away, I might put my hand out and touch her. Closer than I ever thought I would be to her again.

I am filled with competing thoughts and desires: My mother cannot be here; I would rather she was dead; I want to see her alive. Ward Six consists of just the one long hallway. As far as I can tell, there are about forty doors, forty separate cells.

'This is it,' Marcel says. 'The grand tour.' He pounds on one of the very first doors. 'Here's your boy Raymon, if you want to say hello.' Then he laughs again, that awful crackling sound.

I think about what he said when we first entered the vestibule: He's always here, nowadays. Ahead of us, Marcel does not respond, but I think I see him shudder.

Marcel nudges me sharply in the back with the barrel of his gun. 'So, what do you think?'

'Awful,' I croak out. My throat feels like it has been encircled with barbed wire. Marcel seems pleased. 'Better to listen and do as you're told,' he says.

'No use ending up like this guy.'

We've paused in front of one of the cells. Marcel nods toward the tiny window, and I take a hesitant step forward, pressing my face up against the glass. It's so grimy it's practically opaque, but if I squint, I can just make out a few shapes in the obscurity of the cell: a single bed with a flimsy, dirty mattress; a toilet; a bucket that looks like it might be the human equivalent of a dog's water bowl. At first, I think there's a pile of old rags in the corner too, until- I realize that this thing is the 'guy' Marcel was pointing out: a filthy, crouching heap of skin and bones and crazy, tangled hair. He's motionless, and his skin is so dirty it blends in with the gray of the stone walls behind him. If it weren't for his eyes, rolling continuously back and forth as though he is checking the air for insects, you would never know he was alive. You would never even know he was human. The thought flashes again: I would rather she be dead. Not in this place.

Anywhere but here.

'What?' I say.

For a moment he doesn't answer. He is staring at something, I cannot see some door, presumably, farther down the hall.

Marcel has continued down the hall, and I hear him draw in his breath sharply. I look up. He is standing perfectly still, and the appearance on his face makes me afraid.

Then he turns to me abruptly, a quick, convulsive shake.

'Don't,' he says, his voice a croak, and the fear surges, overwhelms me.

'What is it?' I ask again. I start down the hall toward him. It seems, all of a sudden, that he is very far away, and when Marcel speaks up behind me, his voice too sounds distant.

'That's where she was,' he is saying. 'Number one-eighteen. Admin hasn't coughed up the dough to get the walls patched, yet, so, for now, we're just leaving it as is. Not a lot of money around here for improvements-'

Marcel is watching me. All his control and confidence has vanished.

Marcel holds up his hand like he's thinking of blocking my progress. Our eyes meet for just a second and something flashes between us- a warning, or an apology, maybe-and then I am pushing beyond him into cell 117.

His eyes are blazing with anger, or maybe pain; his mouth is twisted into a grimace. My head feels full of noise.

In almost every way it is identical to the cells I've glimpsed through the tiny hallway windows: a rough cement floor; a rust-stained toilet, and a bucket full of water, in which several cockroaches are revolving slowly; a tiny iron bed with a paper-thin mattress, which someone has dragged into the very center of the room.

But the walls.

'Stray bobby pins; you are my Everest.'

#- Hashtag- (Organizing Day)

Looped huge and scratched, just barely, in the corners; inscribed in the graceful script and solid block lettering; chipped, scratched, picked away, as though the walls are slowly melting into poetry.

And on the ground, lying curled up against one wall is a dull silver chain with a charm still attached to it: a ruby-encrusted dagger whose blade has been worn down to a small nub.

The walls are covered- crammed- with writing. Nope- Not writing. They are covered with a single four-letter word that has been inscribed over and over, on every available surface.

Love.

Part: 10

Sleepy- sleepy- sleepy- 'How long can you stay still before you develop bedsores?' Lazy boy…!

#- Hashtag: (MotivationMonday)

DADDY- My father's charm. My mother's necklace. My mother. All this time, during every long second of my life when I believed her dead, she was here: scratching, burrowing, chipping away, encased in the stone walls like a long-buried secret.

You know- 'For someone with such an intense need to be liked you-you would think I would have figured out how to be less of an asshole.'

I feel, suddenly, as though I am back in my dream, standing on a cliff as the solid ground disintegrates underneath me, transforms into the sand in an hourglass, running away under my feet. I feel the way I do at that moment when I realize that all the ground has vanished, and I am standing on a bare blade of air, ready to drop.

'It's terrible, you see? Look at what the disease did to her. Who knows how many hours she spent scrabbling along these walls like a rat?'

Tv time- 'Does the food network use music recycled from 80's porn, or do I want to fuck that soufflé?' This is why I do eat- god- shit and piss! 'I suspect that low-carb diets work not because they are healthier, but because without carbs I simply lose the will to eat.'

~*~

Marcel and Marcel are standing behind me. Marcel's words seem to be muffled by a layer of cloth. I take a step forward into the cell, suddenly fixated on a shaft of light, extending like a long golden finger from a space in the wall that has been chipped clear away.

The clouds must have begun to break apart outside: Through the hole, on the other side of the stone fortress, I see the flashing blue of the 3 Rivers, and leaves shifting and tumbling over one another, a snow slip of green and sun and the perfume of wild, growing things. The Boondocks…

As he's fiddling with the keypad, which requires both that he type code and scan his hand on some kind of fingerprint-matching screen, Marcel reaches out and takes my elbow. 'Let's go,' he says, making his voice gruff like my little fit has left him impatient.

Nevertheless, then his touch is moderate, and his hand warm and reassuring. I wish he could keep it there, but after only a second he lets me go again. I can read a plea, loud and clear, in his eyes: Be strong.

We're almost there. Be strong for just a little while longer. Marcel appears interested in me for the first time.

He looks me up and down like I'm a grapefruit he's evaluating in the supermarket for ripeness, and for a moment he doesn't say anything. Then, finally, he stands, slipping the gun onto his shoulder. 'Come on,' he says. 'Five minutes.' The locks on the door release with a click.

Marcel leans his shoulder against it, straining, and it slides open just enough for us to squeeze by into the hallway beyond.

Marcel goes first, then me, then Marcel. The passage is so narrow we have to go single file, and it's even darker than the rest of the Vaults.

But the smell is what really hits me: a horrible, rotting, festering stink, like the Dumpsters by the harbor, the place where all the fish intestines get discarded, on the hottest day. Even Marcel curses and coughs, covering his nose with his hand.

So many hours, so many days, looping those same four letters over and over: that strange and terrifying word, the word that confined her here for over ten years.

~*~

In addition to, ultimately, the word that helped her escape. In the lower half of one wall, she has traced the word so many times in such enormous script- LOVE, each letter the size of a child- and gouged so deeply into the stone that the oh has formed a tunnel, and she has gotten out. Food for the body, milk for your bones, ice for the bleeding, a belly of stones.

-A folklore consecration…

Even after the iron gates clang shut behind us and the Vaults recedes in the distance, the feeling of being penned in on all sides doesn't go away. There's still a terrible, squeezing pressure in my chest, and I have to struggle to suck in full breaths.

An ancient prison bus with a wheezing motor carries us away from the border, to Deering. From there Marcel and I walk back toward the center of Pittsburgh, staying on opposite sides of the sidewalk. Every couple of feet he swivels his head to look at me, opening, and closing his mouth, like he's pronouncing a series of inaudible words. I know he's worried about me, and probably waiting for me to break down, but I can't bring myself to meet his eyes or speak to him. I keep my eyes locked straight ahead of me, keep my feet cycling forward. Other than the terrible pain in my chest and stomach, my body feels numb.

I can't feel the ground underneath me or the wind zipping through the trees, skating past my face; can't feel the warmth of the sun, which has, against all odds, broken through the

terrible black clouds, lighting the world up a strange greenish color, as though everything is submerged in water.

When I was little and my mother died -when I thought she'd died- I remember going out for my first-ever run and getting hopelessly lost at the end of Congress, a street I'd been playing on my whole life. I turned a corner, and found myself in front of the Bubble and Soap Cleaners and had been suddenly unable to remember where I was, and whether the home was to the left or to the right.

Nothing looked the same.

Everything looked like a painted replica of itself, fragile and distorted, like I was caught in a funhouse hall of mirrors, with face does not mine looking back at me, luminous my regular world back to me, I feel now, once again; yes- lost and found and lost again, all at once this was happing or so it seems to me, I wonder if it was to them. In addition- now I know somewhere in this world, in the wildness on the other side of the fence, my mother is alive and breathing I see her angel body in- front of me all the time, do you see her? Me- sweating and moving and thinking frantically. I spectacle if she is thinking about me… plus the pain shoots deeper, in my mind, and hurting young small body it makes me- lose my breath completely, that I did not know I was holding in, so I have to rest… you see me sitting done in the grass, then I got up started walking and double up, one hand on my stomach.

Still- there are people on the streets, that I and you can see. This including a man that I take for a watchdog right away. Even now just before noon, he has a bullhorn swinging from his neck, besides a wooden baton strapped to one thigh.

I have to fight my way through the pain, that I have that they gave to me. It is radiating through my whole body, like hart barn in the night after eating far too much. Now, throbbing up into my head and shank with tremors down to my legs and toes. 'I think so,' I make a harsh gasp out…!

~*~

'Backstreet- on your left- go…' I uncurl up as much as I can- an adequate amount of, at least, to hobble into the backstreet in the middle of two larger buildings that a black glass and like way far up there, one has a point on it.

Halfway down the backstreet there are a few metal dumpsters, arranged parallel to one another, bustling with flies. The smell is disgusting, like being back in the Vaults, on the other hand, I sink down between them anyway, appreciative for the concealment and the chance to be seated. As soon as I'm resting, the throbbing hits and ticks in my head subside some, yet not all. I slope my head back against the brick wall there, and feel the world swaying some to my eyes, and looking forward and to the sides, a ship cut loosens for now mooring.

Marcel- he must have seen him too… there… do you? He stays a couple of feet away from me, skims through the street, trying to appear undisturbed, or unworried. Then again, he murmurs in my direction, 'Can you move- Jezz?' The voices said.

Part: 11

Marcel joins me a few moments later, squatting in front of me, brushing the hair away from my face. It's the first time he's been able to touch me all day. 'I'm sorry, Liv,' he says, and I know he really means it when he said something like this. 'I thought you'd want to know.' Maybe not…?

Ray aka Raymond...

~*~

She- I see her face too-

'Twelve years,' I say basically and so simply. 'I thought she was dead for twelve years.' For a while, we stay there in stillness. I am lost now in the past… confused me too.

~*~

Marcel rubs circles on my shoulders, arms then lay me down and feel my knees- anywhere he can reach, really, like he's despairing to maintain bodily contact with me. I wish I could close my eyes, and be blown into dust, and have nothing but nothingness, not feeling all my thoughts run like a train running down an upcoming dead-end track. I see the light run in flickers like being in the car looking out the window all the same as the girl in the first story.

Diffuse like fuzz or bully lint of mine- like just drifting off on the wind. All the same, his hands keep pulling me back, yes back- into the backstreet, dark cold and damp, it is fucking

Pittsburgh, what do you expect, and a world that has suddenly stopped making sense won't be right. She's out there somewhere, breathing, thirsty, eating, walking, swimming. Impossible like how and now, to contemplate going on with my life… It's just fucking impossible to imagine sleeping, and lacing up my shoes for a run and helping.

~*~

(Home)

I see- my new mom so bitch 2, and she is loading up all the dishes, and even lying in the house with some new boyfriend, when I know that she exists on in his mind as fucking perfect: that she is out there, orbiting as far from me as a distant constellation, like stars in the milky ways is not far enough.

Why?

Tell me why I didn't just walk- yet she comes for me?

'Your mother loved you.

She loved her dicks more.

Do you recognize that? She loved you.

Sure… I thought to myself. She still loves you. She desired you to be not hurtful.'

Yet you want to be that way to her.

On the other hand- then again- I don't know whom to pray to.

All at once, I can't remember any words said to me, and I can't think of anything but being in church not want to be there; like- when I was little and watching, I recall the sun brightness up my day, and then fade away beyond the stained- glass windows, loved it- like just watching all that light die, like my hope for faith- see if it would come back- ha. What do you think I have?

I have truly nothing, but dull panes of colored glass, raying out for me. All metallic thin and not- dunce insubstantial- looking. The thought flashes as speedily and clearly as an electrical surge passing like my clit in the light night, bringing the pain searing back. I squeezed

my eyes shut, drop my head forward, pray for it to pass, and give the finger to the father, and walk out, I know he fucked Jenny and not in the ass.

Watching it tumble to the ground, and it reminds me of my mother 1, and those strange and terrifying walls and the tears come faster back then. I swore to the man up there I would never cry for anyone like that ever- never ever.

It's too late, I feel dicked in the ass once more, and it gets old and sore. Tears are blurring my vision, I kick a small boy in the face, dumping holy water in a teen girl's eyes, that was pointing at me saying shit that I did with a girl. I turn away from him and start fragmenting lines at the wall and running a fingernail down the bench. Over her name… she was my friend, not a lover. A minuscule portion of brick crumbles away.

The girl- Hanna- 'If you cared about me, you would take me away,' I say. 'If you cared about me at all you would go right now.'

His place I go-

'I do care about you,' Ray says. 'You don't.' Now I know I am being juvenile, but I can't help it. 'She didn't either… she didn't care at all. Like bitch 1, all the same.'

'That's not true.' He yelled out- running after. I said- 'Why didn't she come for me, then?' I'm still turning away from him, pressing the palm against his room wall, hard; feeling like it, too, might collapse at any second.

(My thoughts)

'Where is she now? Fucking shit- I should like my sister, yet that is what, and everyone wants, isn't it? she said moody and pissed off at the world.

Why didn't she come looking for me then is she the one?'

Ray said- You know why, he says, more firmly.

'You know what would have happened if she was caught again- if she was caught with you. It would have meant death for both of you.'

I know he's right, but that doesn't make it any better. I keep going stubbornly, unable to stop myself from the shit I feel. 'It's not that… it's not that- she doesn't care, and you don't care. Nobody ever cares… About me- about- shit and about- anything or anyone.' I draw my forearm across my face moving into the handhold of my cheeks, swiping at my nose getting the snot.

~*~

Ray puts a hand on each of my elbows and guides me around to face him. When I refuse to meet his eyes yet feel dejected, he tilts my chin upward, forcing me to look, stop looking down, let me see those eyes…they shin up at him- wet glass nice- yet shy.

~*~

'Maggie- Liv,' he repeats, the first time… since we met that he has ever used my full name. You don't need to know that it sucks ass. Heat rushes through me like never- ever before it was like a barning fart from my ass hole. For the first time in my life, I am not afraid of the words they all say.

Something seems to yawn open inside of me, to stretch out like a girl on her bed, like a pussy trying to soak up the sun, into the bargain I'm desperate for him to say it again.

Like- her voice is endlessly soft. Her eyes are warm and flecked with light, like a dream of her in a perfect way- the color of the sun melting like butter through the trees on a warm autumn evening.

~*~

Ray- That's when it happens, the crying and crap, standing there is- sandwiched between two disgusting dumpsters in some crappy lane with the whole world crumbling, down around me, and hearing Kellie say those words, all the fear I have carried with me since myself scholarly to sit, stand, breathe-since I was told that at the very heart of me was something wrong, something rotten and diseased, something to be suppressed- since I was told that I was always just a heartbeat away from being damaged- all of it vanishes at once.

(More judgment's)

That thing-the heart of hearts of me, the core of my core -stretches and unfurls even further, soaring like a flag: making me feel stronger than I ever have before. His fingers skate the edge of my chin, dance briefly over my lips. 'You should know that like- you have to know that.'

'As well as I love you too.'

Nevaeh- I thought back on it I think the band teacher, though I would have picked up a really little girl, to my lips and played her like a flute; she horizontal like… he would look at me and- 'I say that what I thought you would do you're that stupid to- mix this thing up.' Me- as I thought, that was the soundhole down there on her blowing into her vagina.' Otherwise so he would have thought, that what I would to someone we eye's- like on me doing nothing wrong. I said- 'She made the same sound as the band didn't, she- not as fuck at that one drum you tuned?'

Ray- I open my mouth and say, 'I love you too.' Ray looks hazy dazed and confused, even though he's crouching no more than a foot away from me.

'Hey, Look at me.' I say with longing for his look. My eyes opened he take me there full of delightful energy, I have now, don't you see?

He looks at me saying these very words-

'You must be hungry,' he says gently.'

'Let's get you home, okay?' 'Are you okay?' He said.

'Now are you okay to walk?'

He shuffles back a little, giving me space to stand.

'No.' It comes out more emphatically than I'd intended, and Ray looks startled.

'You're not okay to walk?'

A little crease appears between his eyebrows.

'No.' It's a struggle to keep my voice at a normal volume. 'I mean I can't go home. At all.' He sighs and rubs his forehead. I think he will be happy, but instead, he just seems tired.

He looks away, squinting. 'Listen, Liv, it's been a really long day. You're exhausted. You're hungry lust, desire, and your wanting, with complete pain.

You're not thinking clearly… don't you see.' The same path you're going down- I see her dad said to her.

'I am thinking clearly.' I feel that- I feel fucked up! Did I die some when she did? Dyeing on the inside… are you for her now? I haul myself to my feet, hopeless, so I don't look so helpless. I'm angry at this boy, too- even though I know this isn't his fault, what- so- ever.

'Hello: I am your mind, giving you someone to talk too.' But then again, the fury is whipping around inside of me, undirected, gaining force. 'I can't stay here Ray.

Not anymore…

Not after- not after… after that.'

My throat spasms as I swallow back the scream again. 'They knew, my boy. They knew and they never told me, how they feel about him.' How do you feel about him now?

He climbs to his feet too- slowly for my liking, like- it hurts him or some shit like that. 'You don't know that for sure,' he says. I cut him off by the pass. Asking- 'You don't get it.' A scream is welling inside of me, a black creepy- crawly scrabbling in my throat. All I can think is- they knew it was known.

They all knew- mom and dad and maybe even my girl- Rachel- and still they let me believe all along that she was dead. They let me believe she had left me.

They let me believe I wasn't worth it. I'm filled, suddenly, with white-hot anger, ablaze: If I see them, if I going home, I won't be able to stop myself. I will not… don't you see this? I'll burn the fucking apartment building down now, or tear it apart, plank by plank. 'I want to run away with you. To the countries like the girl in the story. Like we talked about.'

'I do know… do you?'

I insist, and it's true. I do know, deep down. I think of my mother 2 bent over me, the floating pale whiteness of her face breaking through my sleep, her voice- I love you. Remember…? They cannot take it all the shit inside like I.

I see Hanna- sung quietly in my ear, the sad little smile dancing on her lips.

She knew too. She must have known they were coming for her and would take her to that terrible place. Besides only a week later, I sat in a scratchy black dress in front of an empty coffin with a pile of orange peels to suck on, trying to keep back tears, not once more them one girl I love while everyone- I believed inbuilt around me a solid, smooth surface of lies and red eyes. ('She was sick' 'This is what the disease does call.' 'Suicide.') I was the one who was really buried that day. 'I can't go home and I won't. I'll go with you. I ran… I ran… with him and his many…

~*~

'Liv… if you leave- really leave-it won't be like it is for me now. You get that, right? You won't be able to go back and forth. You won't be able to come back ever. we dated, yet not known to anyone. Your number will be invalidated.

Everyone will know you're a cheater. Everyone will be looking for you. If anyone found you-if you were ever caught-'

Ray doesn't finish his sentence. She's gone so yah date the friend- right all the same no. 'Listen, liv. I'm really sorry. I know you have had- I mean, with the whole thing that comes about today- I can't imagine how you must be sensitive.'

We can make our home in the Wildernesses. Other individuals do it, don't they? Other people have done it. My mother, I want to say, my mother is going to do it, but my voice breaks on the word. Ray is watching me carefully and wondering why. 'I don't care,' I snap back saying, I'm no longer able to control my temper. 'You where the one who suggested it, weren't you? So, what…? Now…? I'm ready to go, you take it back?' I said shouting.

'I'm just trying to- forget it.'

I cut Ray off again, rapid-firing my mouth, coasting on the anger, the desire to shred, and hurt and tear apart. 'You're just like everybody else. You're as bad as all the rest of them. Conversation, exchange, dialog- it comes so easily to you. Nevertheless, when it's time to do whatever thing when it's time to help me…'

'I'm trying to help you…' Ray says sharply… 'It's a big deal…

Do you- understand that…? It's a huge choice- I have to make or pick it here… in addition to that, he is so pissed at me for what…? As well as you don't know what you're saying to me.'

He's getting angry too, the tone of his voice makes something painful run through me like a butt end of a spoon- blunt, but I can't stop speaking.

Sometimes you even have to give them up. Ray and I talk about all the things I'll be leaving behind to go with him to the wildernesses. He wants to be absolutely sure that I know what we're getting into. Stopping by Bakery after closing and buying the day-old bagels, and cheddar buns for a dollar each; sitting out on the piers and watching the gulls shriek and circle overhead; long runs up by the farms when the dew glistens off every blade of grass as though they're encased in glass; the constant rhythm of the oceans, beating under Pittsburgh.

~*~

Karly- 'I'm fine…' I push around some ravioli on my plate and slips down my chin, then I total my fork, and one falls on my boob. Normally, I can put away half a box myself, especially after a long run or beating off my guitar or boy. Same thing with me… (and still, have room for dessert creamy no!), but I've barely managed to choke down a few bites. 'Just stressed.'

'Leave her alone,' my mom 2 says.

'She's upset about the evaluations. They didn't exactly turn out as planned.'

She lifts her eyes to my uncle, and they exchange a quick glance. I feel a rush of excitement. It's rare for my mom, and dad to look at each other like that, a wordless glance, full of meaning. like a heartbeat; the narrow-paved streets of the old harbor, shops crowded with bright, pretty clothes- I could never afford, yet this thing I have is $10,000 that she gave up for this shit- for popularly, she not my big sis to me- she is not… any longer.

~*~

Put an end to, destroy, abolish: I want to break everything- him, me, us, the whole city, the whole world.

I sing this shit- ''Don't treat me like a child,' I say. I'm loving, not a fighter respectable to women, I ain't Chris Brown I don't feel the need to hit 'em, it's sad to see a 12-year-old acting like a little ho, Takin' naked pictures while she's livin' in her parents' home Post 'em up on Twitter, it'd make u reconsider. Every time you go online to find a babysitter. Sometimes it makes me wanna blow my f*ckin head off!

But, don't listen to a word I say, because it doesn't really mean a thing… The world is full of hypocrites and I'm the fucking king, it's not like I mean it, we're all in agreement. As soon as u hear this freaking song, I'm sure you'll just delete it…'

Yep!

I get this, do you?

'Then stop acting like one,' he rips off back at me. The second the words are out of his mouth- I can tell he regrets them. He turns partially away, inhales, and then says, in a normal tone of voice… It's strange, but after that moment in the passageway I suddenly understand the meaning of my full name, the reason my mom named me Maddie- Liv in the first place and the meaning of the old biblical story, of Joseph and his abandonment of Mary Madeleine. I understand that he gave her up for a reason. He gave her up so she could be saved, even though it killed him to let her go.

He gave her up for love.

I think, maybe, my mother had a sense even when I was born that she would someday have to do the same thing. I guess that's just part of loving people:

You have to give things up. Trace and Sana and the other girls are my only regrets. The rest of Pittsburgh. Can dissolve into nothing, for all I care: its shiny, spindly false towers and blind storefronts, and staring, obedient people, bowing their heads to receive more lies, like animals offering themselves up to be slaughtered.

'If we go together, it's just you and me,' Ray keeps repeating, as though needing to make sure I understand-as though needing to be sure that I'm sure.

'No going back. Ever.' And I say: 'That's all I want. Just you and me… always.'

I mean it too… I'm not even afraid. Now that I know I will have him- that we have each other- I feel as though I will never be afraid of anything ever again.

We decide to leave Pittsburgh. in a week, exactly nine days before my scheduled procedure. I'm nervous about delaying our departure so long- I'm halfway tempted to make a straight run for the border fence and try to barge my way through in broad daylight- but as Explain sentences usual, Marcel tranquilities me down and explains the importance of waiting. In the past few years, he has made the crossing only a handful of times. It's too dangerous to go back and forth more often than that. But in the next week, Marcel will cross twice before we make our final escape-an almost suicidal risk, but he convinces me it's necessary. Once he leaves with me and starts missing work and class, he'll be invalidated too-even though, technically, his identity was never really valid in the first place, since it was created by the battle.

And once we're both canceled, we'll be erased from the system. Gone.

Blip!

~*~

Everyone turns to look at me, even Tracie, who puckers her nose and tilts her head like a dog sniffing at something new.

'Are you okay, Liv?' my uncle asks, adjusting his glasses as though hoping to bring me into a clearer focus. 'You seem a little strange.'

Most of the time their interactions are limited to the usual thing-my uncle tells stories about work, my aunt tells stories about the neighbors. What's for dinner? There's a leak in the roof. Blah blah blah. I think that for once they're going to mention the Wilds and the Invalids. But then my uncle gives a minute shake of his head.

'These kinds of mix-ups happen all the time,' he says, staking a ravioli with his fork. 'Just the other day, I asked Andrew to reorder three cases of Vik's orange juice. But he goes and gets the codes wrong and guess what shows up? Three cases of baby formula. I said to him, I said, 'Andrew -'' I tune the conversation out again, grateful that my uncle is a talker, and happy that my aunt has taken my side. The one good thing about being kind of shy is that nobody bugs you when you want to be left alone. I lean forward and sneak a glance at the clock in the kitchen.

Seven-thirty, and we haven't even finished eating. And afterward, I'll have to help clear and wash the dishes, which always takes forever; the dishwasher uses up too much electricity, so we have to do them by hand. Outside, the sun is streaked with filaments of gold and pink. It looks like the candy that gets spun at the Sugar Shack downtown, all gloss and stretch, and color. It will be a beautiful sunset tonight. At that moment the urge to go is so strong, I have to squeeze the sides of my chair to keep from suddenly springing up and running out the door. Finally, I decided to stop stressing and leave it to luck, or fate, or whatever you want to call it. If we finish eating, and I'm done cleaning up the dishes in time to make it to Back and Gold Cove, I'll go. If not, I'll stay. I feel a million times better once I've made the decision, and even manage to shovel down a few more bites of ravioli before Jenny (miracle of miracles) has a sudden late burst of speed and cleans her plate, and my aunt announces I can clear the dishes whenever I'm ready. The truth is, I don't know what would happen. I've never broken curfew.

Just as I've finally accepted that there's no way to get to Back Cove and back in time, my aunt does the unthinkable. As I'm reaching forward to take her plate, she stops me. 'You don't have to clean the dishes tonight, Lena. I'll do them.'

As she's speaking, she reaches out and puts a hand on my arm. Just like earlier, the touch is as fleeting and cool like the wind. And before I can think about what this means, I'm blurting out, 'Actually, I have to run to Hanna's house really quick.' I stand up and start stacking everyone's plates. It's almost eight o'clock. Even if I can wash all the dishes in fifteen minutes and that's a stretch-it will still be difficult to get to the beach by eight-thirty. And forget about making it back by nine o'clock, when the city has a mandated curfew for all under-agers. And if I got caught on the streets after curfew.

'Now?' A look of alarm or suspicion? flickers across my aunt's face. 'It's nearly eight o'clock.' 'I know. We-she-she has a study guide she was supposed to give me. I just remembered.' Now the look of suspicion-it is suspicion, definitely makes itself comfortable, drawing her eyebrows together, cinching her lips. 'You don't have any of the same classes. And your boards are over. How important can it be?'

'It's not for class.' I roll my eyes, trying to conjure up Hanna's nonchalance, even though my palms are sweating and my heart is jerking around in my chest.

'It's like a guide full of pointers. For the evaluations. She knows I need to prep more since I almost choked yesterday.' Again, my aunt directs a small glance at my uncle. 'Curfew's in an hour,' she says to me. 'If you get caught out after curfew.'

I've never spoken back to her, have always tried to be as patient and obedient and good as possible-have always tried to be as invisible as possible, a nice girl who helps with the dishes and the little kids and does her homework and listens and keeps her head down. I know that I owe mom for taking Kellie Nervousness makes my temper flare. 'I know about curfew,' I snap... 'I've only been hearing about it for my whole life.' I feel guilty the second that the words are out of my mouth, and I drop my eyes to avoid looking at Carol. and me in after my mother died. If it wasn't for her, I would probably be wasting away in one of the orphanages, uneducated, unnoticed, destined for a job at a slaughterhouse, probably, cleaning up sheep guts or cow crap or something like that. Maybe- maybe! - if I was lucky, I'd get to work for a cleaning service. No foster parent will adopt a child whose past has been tainted by the disease.

I wish I could read her mind. I have no idea what she's thinking, but she seems to be analyzing me, attempting to read my face. I think I'm not doing anything wrong, it's harmless, I'm fine, over and over, and wipe my palms on the back of my jeans, positive I'm leaving a sweat mark.

'Be quick,' she says finally, and as soon as the words are out of her mouth I'm off, jetting upstairs and converting my sandals for sneakers. Then I bang back down the stairs and fly out the door. She barely had time to take the dishes into the kitchen. She calls something to me as I blur past her, but I'm already pushing out the front door and don't catch what she says. The ancient grandfather clock in the living room starts booming out just as the screen door swings shut behind me.

Eight o' three clocks. I unlock my bike and pedal it down the front path and out into the street. The pedals creak and moan and shudder. This bike was owned by my cousin Marcia before me and must be at least fifteen years old, and leaving it outside all year isn't doing anything to preserve it.

I start cruising in the direction of Back Cove, which is downhill, fortunately. The streets are always pretty empty at this time of night. For the most part, the cured are inside, sitting at dinner, or cleaning up, or preparing for bed and another night of dreamless sleep, and

all the uncured are home or on their way there, nervously watching the minutes swirl away toward nine o'clock four curfews. My legs are still aching from my run earlier today. If I make it to Back and Gold Cove on time and Ray is there, I'm going to be a complete mess, sweaty and disgusting.

However, I keep going anyway. Now that I'm out of the house I push all my doubts and questions out of my mind and focus on hauling ass as fast as my cramping legs will allow me, spinning down through the vacant streets toward the cove, taking every shortcut I can think of, watching the sun descend steadily toward the blazing gold line of the horizon, as though the sky-a brilliant, electric blue at this point is water, and the light is just sinking through it.

I've only been out at this hour a few times on my own, and the feeling is strange-frightening and exhilarating at the same time, like talking to Ray out in the open earlier this afternoon: as though the revolving eye that I know is always watching has been blinded just for a fraction of a second, as though the hand you've been holding your whole life suddenly disappears and leaves you free to move in any direction you want. Lights sputter in windows around me, candles and lanterns, mostly; this is a poor area, and everything is rationed, especially gas and electricity.

After a minute's rest, I keep pedaling, slower now. I'm still about a mile away but the cove is visible, flashing off to my right. The sun is just teetering over the dark mass of trees on the horizon. I have ten, fifteen minutes' tops until total darkness. At a certain point I lose sight of the sun's position beyond the four- and five-story buildings, which grow more densely packed after I turn onto Preble: tall, skinny, dark buildings, pressed up against one another as though already preparing for winter and huddling for warmth. I haven't actually supposed about what I'll say to Marcel, and the idea of standing alone with him suddenly makes my belly bottom out. I have to pull my bike up abruptly, stop and catch my breath. My heart is pounding frantically.

Then another thought nearly stops me, hitting me traditional like a fist: He won't be there. I'll be too late and he'll leave. Or this will turn out to be a big joke or a trick.

I wrap one arm around my stomach, willing the ravioli to stay put and pick up speed again.

Part: 12

I was having a fantastic dream until he awakens to reality, he wasn't dreaming, I was taking advantage of his morning 'Hard On.' It was very cold outside but he was sweating from the heat Annie was putting out. When Annie tasted his pre-cum, she rode him slowly and deeply. I got off and repeated her slow, deep and wet oral of what she calls 'MY - Penis.' This went on for an hour before Ray exploded like a burst pipe under full pressure.

Daddy will never know…

I was too exhausted to talk once again, but I spoke up and said 'Thank you, Honey.' He just barely able to speak said not this time baby, thank you for loving me. I crawled up on me and told him what she does for him, she does for herself.

Listen to me… was said, if you're happy, I'm happy. Besides, you gave me a great Christmas. If I can't please my man, why am I here? Like I said yesterday Teddy, marriage is so easy, loving you is easier. He didn't say a word he just pulled me on top of him and just held her like he didn't ever want to let her go.

I tried to get up and prepare breakfast for him but he would not let her go. So, Annie decided to use her trump card. This was… said in her sexy playful voice, you haven't measured my pregnant butt in three days. He immediately reaches out and felt her ass.

If and when you're pregnant, how fast does it grow? I said if this was my second child, he maybe I could tell you, but I don't have a clue. Get the tape measure and measure my stomach and butt. He released me and ran to the bathroom to get the tape. Wow, he shouted, your stomach is out another inch. Then the drum roll and the tally on the size of her ass. It has also grown an inch.

I thought she had played him and was out of bed and on her way to getting dressed. Raymon had another plan, he grabbed her and said I'll let you go on one condition. She gave a hum and said what's that illness. He said - wear that Santa's helper outfit and I'll let you go. I laughed and said ok, that's a deal, I love that outfit.

It took him about five minutes to realize I left without bathing him. He ran downstairs and said I made mistake honey on our deal. I said a deal is a deal teddy boy. But then again you know how I look forward to you bathing me. Annie stopped preparing breakfast, walked up to Teddy and asked if he was serious about her bathing him.

He kissed her on her forehead and told her he loves it when she bathes him.

He when on to tell her it not just his penis wash, but they're together in an intimate setting, alone, it almost as good as having sex with her, almost. He when on to say they laugh, talk about nothing serious, and he looks forward to that at least twice daily. I said I guess the coffee can wait for the reason that you can't. I'm about to speed through the long-defunct traffic light at Baxter when I am suddenly dazzled by a wall of zipping, bouncing light: the beams of a dozen flashlights directed into my eyes, so I have to skid abruptly to a halt, lifting a hand to my face and nearly flipping over the handlebars-which would be a real disaster, since in my rush to get out of the house I forgot to bring my helmet.

'Stop,' the voice of one of the regulator's barks out-the leader in charge of the patrol, I guess. 'Identity check.' I'm so busy circling one foot after the other left, right, left, right-and doing a mental tug-of-war with my digestive tract, that I don't hear the regulators coming.

Clusters of regulators-both volunteer citizens and the actual regulators laboring by the government-patrol the streets every night, looking for uncured breaking curfew, checking the streets and (if the curtains are open) houses for unapproved activity, like two uncured touching each other, or walking together after dark-or even two cured engaging in 'activity that might signal the reemergence of the deliria after the procedure,' like too much hugging and kissing. This rarely happens, but it does happen.

Regulators report directly to the government and work closely with the scientists at the labs.

Watchdogs were responsible for sending my mother off for her third procedure; a passing patrol saw her crying over a photograph one night right after her second failed treatment. She was looking at a picture of my father, and she'd forgotten to close the curtains all the way. Within days, she was back at the labs. Customarily it's easy to avoid the regulators. You can practically hear them from a mile away. They carry walkie-talkies to coordinate with other patrolling groups, and the static interference of the radios going on and off makes it sound like a giant buzzing den of hornets is heading your way. I just wasn't paying attention. Mentally cursing myself for being so stupid, I fish my wallet out of my back pocket. At least I remembered to grab that. It's illegal to go without ID in Pitt. The last thing anybody wants is to spend the night in jail while the powers that be try to verify your validity. 'Magdalena Ellahaj,' I

say, trying to keep my voice steady, as I pass my ID to the regulator in charge. I can hardly make him out behind his flashlight, which he keeps trained on my face, forcing me to squint. He's big; that's all I know. Tall, thin, angular.

'Ella,' he repeats. He flips my ID over between his long fingers and looks at my identity code, a number assigned to every citizen of the USA. The first three digits identify your state, the next three your city, the next three your family group, the next four your identity. 'And what are you doing, highway shit? Curfew's in less than forty minutes.' Less than forty minutes. That must mean it's almost eight-thirty. I shift on my feet, trying hard not to betray impatience. A lot of the regulators- especially the volunteer ones-are poorly paid city techs: window washes or gas-meter readers or security guards. I take a deep breath and say as innocently as possible, 'I wanted to take a quick ride down to Back and Gold Cove.' I do my best to smile and look kind of stupid.

'I was feeling bloaty after dinner.' No point in lying any more than that. I'll just get myself in trouble. The lead regulator continues to examine me, the flashlight directed glaringly at my face, my ID card in his hand. For a second he seems to waver, and I'm sure he's going to let me go, but then he passes my ID to another regulator. 'Run it through with SVS, will you? Make sure it's valid.' My heart plummets.

SVS is the Secure Validation System, a computer network where all the valid citizenships, for every single person in the entire country, are stored. It can take twenty to thirty minutes for the computer system to match codes, contingent on how many other people are calling into the system. He can't really think I've forged an identity card, but he's going to waste my time while someone checks. And then, unbelievably, a voice pipes up from the back of the group. 'She's valid, Gerry. I recognize her. She comes into the store. Lives at 119 Phillie.' Gerry swings around, lowering his flashlight in the process. I blink away the floating dots in my vision. I recognize a few faces vaguely-a women who work in the local dry cleaners and spends her afternoons leaning in the doorway, chewing gum and occasionally- spitting out into the street; the traffic officer who works downtown near Franklin Pretrial, one of the few areas of Pittsburgh that has enough car traffic to justify one; one of the guys who collects our garbage-and there, in the back, Deved Howard, who owns the Walmart down the street from my apartment.

He's super skinny and has hooded black eyes that remind me of a rat. But tonight, I feel like I could hug him. I didn't even think he knew my name. He's never said a word to me except, 'Will that is all today?' after he has rung up my purchases, glowering at me from underneath the heavy shade of his eyelids. I make a mental note to thank him for the next time I see him. Normally my uncle brings home most of our groceries-canned goods and pasta and sliced meats, for the most part -from his combo deli and convenience store, Save a lot, all the way over on

Monroy Hill, but occasionally or Bilo, if we're desperate for toilet paper or milk, I'll run out to the Walmart. Mr. Howard has always creeped me out. Gerry hesitates for a fraction of a second longer, but I can see that the other regulators are starting to get restless, shifting from foot to foot, eager to continue the patrol and find someone to bust.

Gerry must sense it too because he jerks his head abruptly in my direction.

'Let her have the ID.' Relief makes me feel like laughing, and I have to struggle to look serious as I take my ID and tuck it into place. My hands are shaking ever so slightly. It's strange how being around the regulators will do that to you. Even when they're being relatively nice, you can't help but think of all the bad stories you've heard -the raids and the beatings and the ambushes. 'Just be careful,' Marcel says, as I straighten up. 'Make sure your home before curfew.' He tilts his flashlight into my eyes again. I lift my arm to my eyes, squinting against the dazzle. 'You wouldn't want to get into any trouble.'

~*~

And I'm only a few minutes from Back Cove. My heart picks up its rhythm as I think about skidding down the sloping hill of grass, seeing Marcel framed against the last, dazzling rays of sun-as I think about that single word breathed into my ear.

~*~

Marcel says it lightly, but for a moment I think I hear something hard running under his words, a current of anger or aggression. But then I tell myself I'm just being paranoid. Nope no matter what the regulators do, they exist for our protection, for our own moral rights.

The regulators sweep away in a group around me, so for a few seconds, I'm caught up in a tide of rough shoulders and cotton jackets, unfamiliar cologne, and sweat-smells. Walkie-talkies sputter to life and fade away again around me. I catch snippets of words and broadcasts: Market Street, a girl, and a boy, possibly infected, unapproved music on St. Paul's, someone appears to be dancing - I get bumped side to side against arms and chests and elbows until finally, the group passes and I spit out again, left alone on the street as the regulators' footsteps grow more distant behind me. I wait until I can no longer hear the fuzz of their radio chatter or their boots hitting the pavement. Then I take off, feeling again a lifting sensation in my chest, that same sense of happiness and freedom. I can't believe how easy it was to get out of the house. I never knew I could lie to my aunt- I never knew I could lie, period-and when I think, about how narrowly I escaped getting grilled by the regulators for hours, it makes me want to jump up and down and pump my fist in the air.

Tonight, the whole world is on my side. I tear down the street, which loops around the last mile down to Back and Gold Cove. And then I stop short. The buildings have fallen away behind me, giving way to ramshackle sheds, sparsely situated on either side of the cracked and run-down road. Beyond that, a short strip of tall, weedy grass slants down toward the cove. The water is an enormous mirror, tipped with pink and gold from the sky.

In that single, blazing moment as I come around the bend, the sun-curved over the dip of the horizon like a solid gold archway-lets out its final winking rays of light, shattering the darkness of the water, turning everything white for a fraction of a second, and then falls away, sinking, dragging the pink and the red and the purple out of the sky with it, all the color bleeding away instantly and leaving only dark.

Marcel was right I was he not...?

The regulators must have been wrong about the time. It must be after eight-thirty now. It was a gorgeous-one of the best I've ever comprehended.

For a moment I can't move or do anything but stand there, breathing hard,

staring. Then an emotionlessness creeps over me. I'm too late. Uniform if Marcel decides to wait for me somewhere along the long loop of the cove, I don't have a prayer of finding him and making it home before curfew.

My eyes sting and the world in front of me goes watery, colors and shapes sloshing together. For a second I think I must be crying, and I'm so startled I forget everything-forget about my disappointment and frustration, forget about Marcel standing on the beach, the thought of his hair catching the dying rays of the sun, flashing copper.

I can't remember the last time I cried. It's been years. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, and my vision sharpens again.

It's just sweat, I realize, relieved; I'm sweating, it's getting in my eyes. Still, the sick, leaden feeling won't work its way out of my stomach. I stay there for a few minutes, straddling my bike, squeezing the handlebars hard until I'm a little bit calmer. Part of me wants to say, screw it, to shove off, both legs extended, and go flying down the hill toward the water with the wind whipping up my hair- screw curfew, screw the regulators, screw everyone. But I can't; I couldn't; I could never. I have no choice. I have to get home.

On the way home I tell myself that it's probably for the best. I must be crazy, zooming around in the half-dark just to meet up with some guy on the beach.

Besides, everything has been explained: He works at the labs, probably just snuck in on evaluation day for some completely innocent reason-to use the bathroom, or refill his water bottle. And I remind myself that I probably imagined the whole thing-the message, the meeting up. He's probably sitting in his apartment somewhere, doing coursework for his classes. I maneuver my bike around in a clumsy circle and start back up the street. Now that the adrenaline and excitement have faded, my legs feel like they're made out of iron, and I'm panting before I've gone a quarter of a mile. This time I'm careful to stay alert for regulators and constabularies and patrols.

He's probably already forgotten about the two girls he met at the lab multifaceted today. He was probably just being nice earlier, making casual discussion.

It's for the best. But no matter how many times I repeat it, the strange, hollow feeling in my stomach doesn't go away. And ridiculous as it is, I can't shake the persistent, needling feeling that I've forgotten something, or missed something, or lost something forever. Of all the systems of the body-neurological, cognitive, special, sensory-the cardiological system is the most

sensitive and easily disturbed. The role of society must be to shelter these systems from infection and decay, or else the future of the human race is at stake.

Food and me not friends- like- 'I cut my finger and used a can opener one-handed.' I was done...

Part: 13

Movie time- 'Hey Pixar, maybe put some louder music in those sad moments so a bitch can sniffle undetected.'

#- Hashtag- (Inside Out)

'So- infected with deliria and in violation of the pacts of society, she fell in love with men who would not have her or could not keep her.' Similarly, a summer fruit that is protected from the insect invasion, streak, and rot by the whole mechanism of modern farming; so, must we protect the heart. Her last love, they say, was the greatest: a man named Jo, a bachelor all his life, who found her on the street, bruised and broken and half-crazy from hallucinations.

We learned all about it in Biblical Science. First, there was John, then Matthew, then Jeremiah and some other one I can recall as of now, and Judas, and many other nameless men in-between.

There's some debate about what kind of man Jo was- whether he was righteous or not, whether he ever succumbed to the disease-but in any case, he took good care of her. He nursed her to health and tried to bring her peace.

By this time, however, it was too late. She was tormented by her past, haunted by the love's lost and damaged and ruined, by the evils she had inflicted on others and that others had inflicted on her. She could hardly eat; she wept all day; she clung to Joseph and begged him never to leave her, but couldn't find comfort in his goodness.

And then one morning, she woke and Joseph was gone without a word or an explanation. This final abandonment broke her at last and she fell to the ground, begging God to put her out of her misery.

He heard her prayers, and in his infinite compassion, he instead removed from her the curse of deliria, with which all humans had been burdened as punishment for the original sin of Eve and Adam. In a sense, Mary Magdalene was the very first cured.

'And so- after years of tribulation and pain, she walked in righteousness and peace until the end of her days.' I always thought it was strange that my mother named me Magdalena. She didn't even believe in the cure. That was her whole problem. And the Book of Lamentations is all about the dangers of deliria. I've done a lot of thinking about- it, and in the end- I guess I've figured out that despite everything, my mother knew that she was wrong: that the cure, and the procedure, where for the best. I think even then she knew what she was going to do-she knew what would happen. I guess my name was her final gift to me, away. It was a message. I think she was trying to say, Forgive me. I think she was trying to say, Someday, even this pain will be taken away.

Do you see? No matter what everyone says, and despite everything, I know she wasn't all bad.

The next two weeks are the busiest of my life.

Like back on like- December 20th You know that lit girls have to do that get ever longer- 'That thing where you haven't shaved your legs in a bit, so you decide to wait, and get a wax; but then you don't do that either.'

'Every year the same question: what the hell are you supposed to buy men for Christmas? Besides socks or a sex doll? Merry Christmas! I hope everyone has put on at least 7 pounds today! Remember guys, the better she looks in that dress, the scarier her underwear is. Merry Christmas!

#- Hashtag: (Santa Brought Me Diabetes and Commando!)

Part: 14

Magazine time- 'No. 1…??? Half-naked supermodels in Mad Max and Y'all went to see awkward chicks sing and do vagina jokes?? This is a world I can get behind.' Sick…! >Look at this girl here< could be that, yet I fat and ugly. I so what to be them, or cute, at least that. I can eat a pie, god I feel overweight! At 100 pounds, and like four feet.

It's seven-thirty days before Christmas, his parents, at least his dad wants to come and see his pregnant daughter in law. Ray's mother said her husband has been on cloud nine since hearing the news. I myself so-o excited to see his parents, his dad dick hanging out. I wanted them to stay at their house since they have the mother in lawsuits ready, but he said not before the baby is born. He wants to hear a newborn crying. Annie now knows where he gets his weird sense of humor.

I finish making hot cocoa and they're going to watch Christmas movies on TV. He for the tenth time in the last ten minutes asked how she's feeling. Annie said I'm feeling great. Do you need or want anything? He said no, I'm good. Annie told him- she's feeling a little neglected, he's not all over her like he used to be, and she misses that. I said- I just didn't want to push you, or you know, I mean, I don't know when you're feeling your best. I said- calm down my daddy, when I'm not feeling well, I will tell you okay. Pending then I want your hands all over me as you did before, I really miss that. I found a good movie on TV and laid down between my legs hugging her thigh. Every now and then he would kiss and suck her inner thigh. Annie patted him on his head and said that's my good boy.

Christmas was on a Saturday this year, us- had taken two weeks off knowing- Teddy's parents were coming in and knowing they wanted time to themselves when it was all over. Timmy had called and said they would be over at six that evening and were bringing dinner. Annie was upstairs and called I call him my teddy to come to take a bath before Chuck and Liv showed up, I think we are friends even if she is older then I. He wanted to know why so early?

Annie said don't come, it's your loss. Needless to say, he ran like the flash.

When Ray entered the shower, he asked me what he was going to miss. I said in a minute, now hold still. When I got to the penis was, she dried her hands and told him to get that book from under a towel near the shower. He opens the book and saw dates with fractions and some whole numbers by each date which seems to be a week apart. I said I don't get it. What do they mean? By this time, I was having a good laugh. My- Teddy shouted what I am missing.

I said I don't know if I should tell you before I hand wash your dick. She said what these small numbers would have to do with my dick! I said- those numbers; those small numbers represent how much bigger my ass is getting every week. He shouted what! Your ass has gained three inches since Thanksgiving. Annie said yes, I'm surprised you didn't notice. That's why I

told you last night I want doggie-style; I was hoping you would notice. Congratulations honey, you're getting a bigger ass to play with, just what you wanted. He shouted yes, that what I'm talking about. I said yes, I'm talking about how hard your dick got since I told you, but it easier to wash.

By the time- he and I got there. We had measured my ass six times. After the couples had eaten, both wanted to talk with them Kelly was in the kitchen, with Liv a new friend from middle school when Ray called her.

Liv went and sat by Chuck. Liv started by saying how much they love me and him. Timmy then said why they would like to get married on the same day as they got married, it's on a Friday next year and Annie will have given birth. Annie and Teddy said that's great. We feel honored that you would cherish our special day as your own.

I jumped up and hugged Liv, Ray- high.

The couple asked to keep it quiet until they tell their parents. they wanted to wait until little MY- Teddy was able to walk as the ring bearer, but he just wanted to marry Liv as soon as possible. I and Lisa at the same time said, 'How do you know it's going to be a boy!'

Timmy as cool as he could be, replied, 'My mom said her black hair, just like I was so full and shiny, just like I when she was pregnant with me, therefore, Kellie is carrying a boy.' Of course, I and Lisa laughed at him. Teddy just said, there's a lot of judgment in that statement. I and Lisa laughed at Teddy also.

Annie said I bet it was that doggie style that hurt you, you shot a pint in me, I thought your cum would never stop coming out of me. My- Teddy just barely able to speak for laughing said, that was good, no, that was great. He kissed Annie and told her she might be right, that orgasm was different.

~*~

(In the shower)

I notice her stomach was out just a little, she shouted at teddy to look at it and confirm. I told her it's definitely out a little. Hanna left the shower soaking wet to call her mother. He is standing there pleading with her to wait until after the penis wash. I was still laughing at him

when her mother answered the phone. She asked her what she was laughing so hard about. I just said he was being silly. When I told her mom about her stomach, her mom told her to be at her house first thing in the morning so she could see it, or she could come to my house. She is very charged up about Karly maybe- pregnancy and she wants to experience every aspect of it.

When I finally returned to the shower, he was standing there with the tape measure.

Annie said oh, you want to measure my stomach. Teddy said I only measure your ass; you can measure your stomach. I was playing with it turned around and bent over. He went 'WOW' that ass is getting huge. I stood up and started to hit Ray, then said I'll let you have your seven and half months of fun. I started to laugh and told her to show her- pussy and her breast will get bigger also, will you measure them. I said no, I have a flashlight to inspect that monster to me, and my hands for your breasts. They both started laughing.

With three days to go before Christmas, I told her he would drive her to her parents' house. I didn't want to take any chances with the holiday traffic. As they were driving, I asked him if they could ride around tonight and watch the Christmas lights. He told her that would be great. They could grab some sandwiches from Timmy and get some cocoa. I said I'll make the cocoa the way you like it and we can get just the sandwiches from Bill's.

I have created a grandma to be a monster with her mom. She was going crazy over Hannie's little baby bump that he made for her. Then Mrs. Irene said that butt is getting big. That made me smile which Mrs. Irene notice. Then she did the big no-no, she called his mom and told her about I bump. Instead of flying out tomorrow evening, his parents, mainly his mom, are flying out first thing in the morning.

Do it more so not then…

~*~

I got out of the hot shower, and my damp body was still wrapped in a towel when Ray commanded, 'Come to me, baby.' That stimulating, stern voice was coming from above me. My stomach did flips just as I stopped at the entrance of the walk-in closet. That domineering voice had me hypnotized. It was sexy, guiding, welcomed, and turned me on greatly. I started panting, my body tingling and warming. That overassertive tone in which he used spoke volumes of what he had planned. I didn't know if I was going to get palmer and such- (Ray 's assertive yet loving

palm against my ass cheeks) I turned and looked up at the second level of the walk-in closet, and he was leaning on the railing, looking pointedly at me, shirtless and barefoot. That was a glorious, breathtaking view.

With my eyes set on him, I obeyed and climbed the stairs at an even pace. The further I climbed to the second level, gaze steady with his, the more he lured me in.

My pussy was already thumping, preparing itself for Ray's huge invasion, in any position he so desired. When I finally reached him, he stood directly in front of me, our bodies barely touching, pulled the towel free from me with authority, and, with his delectable lips a mere inch from mine, he seductively said, 'This towel has no use; it's only a distraction.' He threw it to the floor.

The heat his body radiated told of the inferno within. He was burning with desire, and I knew a short sex-ing wasn't going to put out that fire- she and I were going to be up all night long. I felt the goosebumps form on my skin just as he softly nuzzled against my neck, groaning under his breath, until he gently bit my earlobe and demanded, 'Follow me inside you.' Always obedient, I followed him deeper into the closet, admiring the back view of his sexy, toned body and nice tight ass in a pair of black low-rise lounge pants he wore. He leaned against one of the necktie racks, left ankle over right, barefoot, and with his sculpted arms crossed across his chiseled chest. With his eyes fixed on me and burning with undeniable, shameless need, he motioned his head to a pair of burgundy, four and a half-inch pink cuff fuzzy pumps in the center of the room and said, 'Put them on.'

With a smile, I obeyed, slipping my right foot in first and bending over to buckle the ankle strap. I didn't need to look in Ray's direction to see if he was taking in the sight- I felt his eyes on me, swallowing me whole. After I got the left shoe on, I looked down at my feet, turning each foot in various angles, loving how beautiful they looked on my feet.

He made his way to me, his hot, hard body pressed close against mine, and while gesturing his left hand in an offering manner, he commanded, 'Pick a tie.' At the sound of that, my heart skipped a beat and then picked up the pace. He had never ordered or given me that option before. Pick a tie… What the hell was Ray about to do to me? Clearly, he knew I would be baffled, and that I was as I stood in shock, staring at him in my naked glory, nipples getting harder pussy wetter and a fire boiling in my own core. But then again, without delay, I walked

over to the wall, gently brushed my left hand along a row of ties as I walked from one end of the closet to the other, adding fuel to the fire- teasing him oh so cutely- by swaying my hips and looking back at him over my shoulder. I felt sexy in my pumps and birthday suit, and the look on my husband's face said he thought so, too. I selected a red tie to match my new pumps and turned to Hannie with a smile.

'I choose this one,' I said you like this for him too?

'That one is for your left wrist,' he said with a smile equal to mine but firm enough that I knew he was in control of the events to follow. 'Now pick one for your right wrist.' I complied, and when I turned to hand the two to him, he took them from my hand and said, 'Now two more.' He set his gorgeous greenish-grey eyes on me before love the contacts- raising them back to meet eyes with me, his sexy medium-thick brows raised up some. Now his smile was a devilish grin, and all I could ask myself was, what the hell is this sexy, forceful man of mine going to do to me?

Every day after school there's an assembly or ceremony, or graduation party to go to. Hana gets invited to all of them; I get invited to most, which surprises me. Marlowe has invited most of the graduating class- there are sixty-seven of us in total and probably fifty at the party- which makes me feel less special, but it's still fun.

We sit in the backyard while the housekeeper runs in and out of the house with plates and plates of food- coleslaw and potato salad and other barbecue stuff-and her father turns out spare ribs and hamburgers on the enormous smoking grill. I eat until I feel like I'm about to burst and have to roll back onto the blanket I'm sharing with Hanna. Kellie-who lives with Hanna in the Northern End, and whose father does something for the government-invites me to come over for a 'casual good-bye thing.' I didn't even think she knew my name-whenever she's talking to Hanna her eyes have always skated past me like I'm not worth focusing on. I go anyway. I've always been curious about her house, and it turns out to be as spectacular as I imagined. Summer explodes into Pitt.

In early June the heat was there but not the color-the greens where still pale and tentative, the mornings had a biting coolness-but by the last week of school everything is Technicolor and splash, outrageous blue skies and purple thunderstorms and ink-black night skies and red flowers as bright as spots of blood.

Her family has a car, too, and electric appliances everywhere that obviously get used every day, washers and dryers and huge chandeliers filled with dozens and dozens of light bulbs.

We stay there until almost curfew, when the stars are peeking through a curtain of dark blue and the mosquitoes rise up all at once and we all go shrieking and laughing back into the house, slapping them away. Afterward, I think it's one of the nicest days I've had in a long time.

Even girls I don't really like-like Shy, who has hated me since sixth grade, when I won the science fair and she took second place-start being nice. I guess it's because we all know the end is close. Most of us won't see one another after graduation, and even if we do it will be different. We'll be different. We'll be adults-cured, tagged and labeled and paired and identified and placed neatly on our life path, perfectly round marbles set to roll down even well-defined slopes.

Theresa Grass turns eighteen before school ends and gets cured; so, does Shy-. They're absent for a few days and come back to school just before graduation.

It's like all their anxiety and self-consciousness has been removed along with the disease. Even the legs have stopped trembling. Whenever she used to have to speak in class, the trembling would get so bad it would rock the desk. But after the procedure, just like that- whoosh! The shaking stops.

Of course…

They're not the first girls in our class to get cured- Hanna and Hannie- Hahn where both cured ways back in the fall, and half a dozen other girls have had the procedure this past semester-but in them the difference is somehow more pronounced. The change is amazing. They seem peaceful now, mature and somehow remote like they're encased in a thin layer of ice.

Only two weeks ago Theresa's nickname was Theresa Gross, and everyone made fun of her for slouching and chewing on the ends of her hair and generally being a mess, but now she walks straight and tall with her eyes fixed straight in front of her, her lips barely curled in a smile, and everyone shifts a little in the halls so she can pass easily. The same thing goes for her.

I keep going with my countdown. Eighty-one days, then eighty, then seventy-nine. Willow Marks never comes back to school. Rumors filter back to us that she had her procedure and it turned out fine; that she had her procedure and now her brain is going haywire, and they're talking about committing her to the Vaults, Pitts's combo prison-and mental- ward; that she ran away to the Wilds. Only one thing is for sure: The whole Marks family is under constant surveillance now. The regulators are blaming Mr. and Mrs. Parkings- and the whole extended family-for not instilling in her a proper education, and only a few days after she was supposedly found in Oaks Park next to the old school, I overheard my aunt and uncle whispering that both of Willow's parents have been fired from their jobs. A week later we hear that they've had to move in with a distant relative. Apparently, people kept throwing rocks at their windows, and a whole side of their house was written over with a single word: WELL-WISHES.

It makes no sense because Mr. and Mrs. Parkings were on record insisting that their daughter have the procedure early, despite the risks, but as my aunt says, people, get like that when they're scared. Everyone is terrified that the deliria will somehow find its way into Pittsburgh on a large scale. Everyone wants to prevent an epidemic. And it may sound awful, but I don't think about Willow's family for long. There's just too much end-of-high school paperwork to file, and worried energy, and lockers to spotless out and final exams to take and people to say goodbye to. I feel bad for the Marks family, of course, but that's the way things are. It's like the regulators: You may not like the patrols and the uniqueness checks, but since you know it's all done for your protection, it's dreadful not to liaise.

Part: 15

Hanna and I can barely find time to run together. When we do, we stick to our old routes by silent agreement. She never mentions the afternoon at the labs again, to my surprise.

Hanna's mind- has a tendency to skip around, and her new obsession is a collapse at the northern end of the border that people are saying might have been caused by Invalids. I don't even consider going down to the labs again, not for one single solitary second. I focus on everything and anything besides my lingering questions about Marcel-which isn't too hard, considering that I now can't believe I spent an evening biking up and down the streets of Pitt, lying to Mom and the regulators, just to meet up with him.

On graduation day Hanna sits three rows ahead of me at the commencement ceremony. As she files past me to take her seat she reaches out for my hand- two long pumps, two short ones-and when she sits down, she tilts her head back the very next day it felt like a dream or a delusion. I tell myself I must have gone temporarily insane: brain scramble, from running in the heat. So, I can see that she has taken a marker and scrawled on the top of her graduation cap: THANK GOD! I stifle a laugh, and she turns around and makes a pretend-stern face at me. All of us are giddy, and I've never felt closer to the St. Anne's girls than that day-all of us sweating under the sun, which beams down on us like an exaggerated smile, fanning ourselves with the commencement brochures, trying not to yawn or roll our eyes while Principal Ass wipe drones on about 'adulthood' and 'our entrance into the community order,' nudging one another and tugging on the collars of our scratchy graduation gowns to try to let some air down our necks.

Family members sit in white plastic folding chairs, under a cream white tarp fluttering with flags: the school flag, the city flag, the state flag, the American flag. They applaud politely as each graduate goes up to receive her diploma. When it's my turn I scan the audience, looking for my aunt and my sister, but I'm so nervous about tripping and falling as I take my place on the stage and reach for the diploma in the Principal's hand, I can't see anything but color- green, blue, white, a mess of pink and brown faces-or make out any individual sounds beyond the shush of clapping hands. Only Hanna's voice, loud and clear as a bell: Liz!' That's our special pump- a chant that we used to do before track meets and tests, a combination of both of our names. Afterward, we line up to take individual portraits with our diplomas. An official photographer has been hired, and a royal blue backdrop set up in the middle of the soccer field, where we all stand and pose. We're too excited to take the pictures seriously, though. People keep doubling over laughing in their pictures, so all you can see is the crown of their heads.

When it's my turn for a picture, at the very last second Hana jumps in and throws one arm around my shoulders, and the photographer is so startled he presses down on the shutter anyway.

Click! There we are: I'm turning to Hana, mouth open, surprised, about to laugh. She's a full head taller than me, has her eyes shut and her mouth open. I really do think there was something special about that day, something golden and maybe even magic because even though my face was all red and my hair looked sticky on my forehead, it's like Hana rubbed off on me a little bit- because despite everything, and just in that one picture, I look pretty. More than pretty.

We did it! We did it!' And none of the parents or teachers try to separate us. As we start to break away, I see them encircling us, watching with patient expressions, hands folded. I catch my aunt's gaze and my stomach does a weird twist and I know that she, like everyone else, is giving us this moment -our last moment together, before things change for good and forever. And things will change-are changing, even at that second.

Attractive, even. The school band keeps playing, mostly in tune, and the music floats across the field and is echoed by the birds wheeling in the sky. It's like something lifts at that moment, some huge pressure or divide, and before I know what's happening all my classmates are crushing together in a huge hug, jumping up and down and screaming, 'We did it! As the group dissolves into clumps of students, and the clumps dissolve into individuals, I notice Theresa Gross and Shy- already starting across the lawn toward the street. They are each walking with their families, heads down, without once looking back.

They haven't been celebrating with us, I realize, and it occurs to me I haven't seen Ray and Rena or Annie Pahniez or the other cured's either. They must have already gone home. A curious ache throbs in the back of my throat, even though of course this is how things are: Everything ends, people move on, they don't look back.

It's how they should be. I catch sight of Rachel through the crowd and go running up to her, suddenly eager to be next to her, wishing she would reach down and ruffle my hair as she used to when I was very little, and say, 'Good job, Loony,' her old nickname for me.

'Rachel!' I'm breathless for no reason, and I have trouble squeezing the words out. I'm so happy to see her I feel like I could burst into tears. I don't though, obviously.

'Congratulations, Lena.' I stick my face in the flowers and inhale, trying to fight down the urge to reach out and hug her.

'You came.'

'Of course, I came.' She smiles at me.

'You're my only sister, remember?' For a second we just stand there, intermittent at each other, and then she reaches out to me. She passes me a bouquet of daisies she has brought

with her, loosely wrapped in brown paper. I'm sure she's going to put her arms around me for old times' sake, or at the very least give me a one-armed squeeze.

Instead, she just flicks a bang off my forehead. 'Gross,' she says, still smiling. 'You're all sweaty.' It's stupid and immature to feel disappointed, but I do. 'It's the gown,' I say and realize that yes, that must be the problem: The gown is what's choking me, stifling me, making it hard to breathe. All the voices intermingle and become indistinguishable from one another-like the constant white noise of the ocean running underneath the rhythm of the Pitt streets, so constant you hardly notice it. 'Come on,' she says. 'Mom will want to congratulate you.' Mom is standing at the field's periphery with my uncle, Grace, and, Jenny, talking to Mrs. Panderer, my history teacher. I fall into step beside Rachel. She is only a few inches taller than I am and we walk together, in sync, but separated by three feet of space. She is quiet. I can tell she's already wondering when she can go home and get on with her life.

I let myself look back once. I can't help it. I watch the girls circulating in their orange gowns like flames. Everything seems to zoom back, recede away at once. Everything looks stark and vivid and frozen, as though drawn precisely and outlined in ink-parents' smiles frozen, camera flashes blinding, mouths open and white teeth glistening, dark glossy hair and deep blue sky, and unrelenting light, everyone drowning in light-everything so clear and perfect

I'm sure it must already be a memory or a dream.

H is for hydrogen, a weight of one; when fission's split, as brightly lit's hot as any sun.

He is for helium, a weight of two;

The noble gas, the ghostly pass That lifts the world anew.

Li is for lithium, a weight of three; A funeral pyre, when touched with fire- And deadly sleep for me. During the summers I have to help my uncle at the Save a lot Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, mostly stocking shelves and working behind the deli counter and occasionally helping with filing and accounting in the little office behind the cereal and dry goods aisle. Thankfully, in late June, Andrew Marcus gets cured and reassigned to a permanent position at another grocery store.

On the Fourth of July, I head to Hana's house in the morning. Every year we go to see the fireworks at the Eastern Promenade.

In recent years Hanna and I have made it a kind of game to stay out until the last possible second, cutting it closer and closer every year.

Hana's last name is Tate, and we were linked up by alphabetical order (by then I was already going by my aunt's last name, Tiddle.)

Part: 16

A band is always playing and vendors set up their carts, selling fried meat on skewers and corn on the cob and apple pie floating in a puddle of ice cream, served in little paper boats. The Fourth of July-the day of our independence, the day we commemorate the closing of our nation's border forever-is one of my favorite holidays. I love the music that pipes through the streets, love the way the steam rising thick from the grills makes the streets look cloudy, the people shadowy and unclear. I especially love the temporary extension of curfew: Instead of being home at nine o'clock, all uncured are allowed to stay out until eleven. Last year I stepped into the house at 9:46 precisely, heart hammering in my chest, shaking with exhaustion- I would have to sprint home. But then again, I lay in bed I couldn't stop grinning. I felt like I'd gotten away with something. I type in Hana's four-digit gate code- she gave it to me in eighth grade, saying it was 'a sign of trust' and also that she'd slit me 'from the top of the head to the heels' if I shared it with anyone else -and slip in through the front door. I never bother knocking. Her parents are hardly ever home, and Hana never answers the door. I'm pretty much the only person who comes over to see her.

It's weird…

Hanna was always really popular in school-people looked up to her and wanted to be like her-but even though she was really friendly with everybody, she never really got close- close to anyone besides me. Sometimes I wonder whether she wishes she'd been assigned a different desk partner in Mrs. Sariseraski's second-grade class, which is how we first became friends. I wonder whether she wishes she'd been placed with Becca Jralawny, or Katie La-carp, or even Merissa Poinortofa. Sometimes I feel like she deserves a best friend who is just a little more special.

~*~

It felt as if my heart was ripped out of my chest. It was official; the doctors confirmed what I dreaded the most. You were dead. The doctor sadly told your mother the devastating truth. She raised her hand to her mouth and tears started to swell up into her eyes. I comforted her as she fell apart in her grief. Her child was gone. He passed away four in the morning where his heart gave up. I shared her grief because I loved you so much that it hurt to know that you were gone. Gone forever. Your funeral was a small private matter. It was a rainy June day when we buried in the Irving Park Cemetery where your grandfather lay. Dressed in black, everyone you knew and loved you came to say goodbye. I stood beside your mother and held her hand as- she softly sobbed into her handkerchief. The priest in his clergy outfit moved his lips as he read passages from the Bible. As your casket lay down on the earth, there was silence.

The night of your funeral, I never felt so empty in my life. You were a part of me, a part of my life. I loved you so much, but now you're gone. Your sister stayed with me that night, she told me how your death would change things between your mother and father and I know this to be true.

Your sister stayed with me that night and in the morning, he was gone. She left me a letter and thanked me for letting her stay. She was leaving Chicago for good this time and told me to tell her mother that she loved her. The weeks since your death, life went on or as they say, I moved on from the heartache. I was completing my degree at university. Remember, how you would tease me about being a bookworm. I guess I thought English would be a good degree. My parents are doing well in the bakery. You used to love to go there. My parents have been understanding about your death to me and helped me through it. I spent the night there, at my folk's place. Maybe because my mother missed me and since I already home, I might as well crash there.

There was no word from your sister. Your mother was frantic when she came over to my house. My mother comforted her when she sobbed. Becca was the only thing that held her together.

Your father, as your mother told us, was with his mistress, and she never felt so alone. I knew Erica was in Europe, but I didn't if she meant when she said she wouldn't come back.

Twilight lined the horizon the next morning, and for a while, I ran down the sidewalk across the neighbors of the community. The adrenaline hit me as I kicked off my feet. My breath was rugged; I was sweating but I kept going. I remembered how you would join me in my morning run and we would run in silence but together. After the hard exhortation, we would collapse on the main empty football field of our former high school, and you would turn and smile, that wicked gleam in your eyes, and ask, 'Ever consider not giving a damn about the world, but think about yourself?'

I remember telling you I didn't care about myself. I was, as my mother told me, selfless.

You would laugh, your blue eyes sparkling, and said, 'You must think of yourself for once, Emma. There is no crime in being selfish, even only for a while.'

You were right that day, Alvin, I was selfish. I didn't want you to die. I knew that you were suffering from depression, but I didn't know how great you suffered. I knew things at home where hard, with your parents fighting all the time. Your father's drinking habits were stressing you out as well as your sister. But I should have told your life was worth more than the suffering.

And now, I lay on the empty field, arms stretched out, and gasping for breath after all that running. The sun is coming out; the sky is changing to blue. I insert my earphones into my ears and click the play button where Bon Jovi 's song, always plays on:

It's been raining since you left me. Now I'm drowning in the flood. You see I've always been a fighter. But without you, I give up. As I closed my eyes, I remembered the time you and I talked about death. We were fifteen at that time, and my grandmother had died to lose her battle with cancer. I remember how I sobbed hysterically, but you watched me with understanding in your eyes and a calm façade. Then you sat beside me after the funeral and you said, 'Do grieve for her. She wouldn't want you too.'

I asked you how you could say such a thing, but you shook your head and said, 'Listen, Em. You know your grandma loved you and she loved you too. If you love her, you would not grieve for her. She isn't coming back. I know it sounds harsh, but it's true. Death leaves a mark on the heart, but love gives you an everlasting memory, and in her memory, you should smile

and think of the good things about your grandma, and by remembering, you will move on from the ache and sorrow.'

I asked you that day if you died wouldn't you want any want to grieve for you? You smiled and laughed, 'That would be ridiculous,' you said, 'Why would anyone sob over me?' Then you calmed your eyes and said, 'Death is inevitable. It completes where life begins. The wheel comes full circle.' 'If I die, don't grieve for me, she always remembers me. That's all I ask of you.' I opened my eyes when the flashback ended and got to my feet. There was no point in reliving the past for was almost melancholic. I turned, not looking back and continued on with my run. It was July now. Summer was at its height, the sun shone gold, the trees rustled in the wind and I continued on with life. I was there did I see your sister. Erica smiled at me and I was surprised to see her. She came over to me and we decided to head to Starbucks on her. We entered the shop and after ordering, I took my Frappuccino and we sat in the nearest booth and talked.

I asked her how she was doing and she told me that somehow after accepting that you were gone, she moved on and started looking on the brighter side of things. 'Becca, wouldn't want me to grieve over him,' Bacca said to me, 'He would have wanted me to live my life. He would have wanted me happy.'

I tore at that and told her that was exactly what you wanted from her. She was your younger sister. You loved her.

'Mom and Dad are getting divorced,' Erica said, 'I think Alvin's death was the breaking point, although, I knew that everything was going bad before…' she trailed.

I asked how her mother was doing, and Erica sighed, 'Not well. She is still grieving.' I asked her if there was anything to help her, and Erica's blue eyes became shadowed, 'I don't know, Emma, but…' she swallowed, 'I'm scared she might…' I knew what your mother thought of. Suicide. The only option.' 'And I don't want that,' Erica said, 'I lost Alvin, and I don't want to lose her too.'

I took her hand and squeezed it, for it was the only thing I can do.' Then Bacca decided and told me that the only way for your mother to recover was to have her go traveling

and leave Chicago for a while. It was a splendid idea, and I knew that the only way to heal the heart was enjoying life, and your mother needed that.

When I waved Bacca and your mother goodbye at the airport, I drove myself home. I shrugged off- and a back and kicked off my shoes. When I sat on my bed and opened up a book to read, her letter- It was from you, about a month before your death. My hands shook as I ripped the envelope and unfolded the letter.

Your handwriting scribbled on the paper told me that as you lay in the hospital, the doctor giving you morphine, you knew that soon you were going to die. You feel it, you wrote. Emma, you wrote, don't cry at my grave as they bury me. I'm not gone. I am a part of you as you are a part of me. I love you, Em. I always have and always will. Always remember me. That's all I ask of you.

I know you said, not to cry, but that night, I did cry. I cried tears spilling down my cheeks, burying my face in my pillow. I cried not because you died, but because you loved me and I never had the chance to tell you the same.

My mother, who heard me crying- came into my room, and sat beside me. She cradled me in her arms and soothed my tears away. I stooped my tears in her arms as she pulled me to sleep, and I did fall asleep.

The next day, I stood at your- grave. I placed the flowers on your tombstone and looked at your name that was carved in I crouched on the floor and reflected on what you told me. Always remember me. That's all I ask of you.

'I love you. I love you and will always. 'I stood up and walked away. I would not look back. I would remember you. I love you. In a way, love gives us a meaning for remembrance.

I got into my car and played the Bon Jovi CD. Always, my favorite song played and as I turned the car on and drove away from the cemetery, Jovi's voice filled the air:

I'll be there till the stars don't shine- Till the heavens burst and…

The words don't rhyme-

And I know when I die-

You'll be on my mind-

And I'll love you-

Always-

Part: 17

Finger's in me…

Something you didn't know…

The girl just like Karly: that why I like it here… all the same in their ways. Marcel- middle school, I was in John Miller's classes, and do the same old shit as normal for a guy like me in my grouping, seven out of six was in that class, I swear to you this is true. That day the first day of school, I had on my new gold shorts and OCC top, now home- it was time to go out- like all ways, and blue dusk pail brown-sh to me- 2003 Toyota Camry, I was in… as we pulled into the now go best gas station, her dad was there all the time or so, I felt I knew him well. Long hair and looking like a hippie, now in a rock band, Low voice, yet yells it all out- her hero- I shit you not.

The arcing wavy she made- it's embedded in my mind after all this time.

So, is she… she looks at me- she was sitting on the red bare by the pump, what your name, hi- I am Kristen, I looked at here and it was hard to make words, love at first sight- I think so?

The place red white and blue… 'Do you want to take my daughter to the town?' 'Sure,' we did even really know anything about each other, yet we feel the love. She stopped dead in her tracks and so did I. Yet fate to place right I did not believe in- it eater and that goes for the both of us.

It just doesn't happen… that's life… is it not? His dad- black hair- brown eyes, and love the color blue… you would not get this in seventy-seven years who he is. Kind of crazy he asked my sexy-year-old grannie to marry him the first day wired- but true, the good guy right.

The best drummer in the world- not at that time after losing it all. And beating himself up over the death if he's the best buddy, in another big-time rock band. He was drinking hard, and not doing music any longer, yet his girl was all he had to keep going.

Her- brown eyes- short- covey- and the hips that only she has, heart, shaped. She looked fine in them jeans, next to kores bar, ever another window out, or boarded over and bars on those. It like she hexes me from not keeping a girl only hear in my heart. Black nail posh was on her hands- That is why it was so hard to fall.

Skipping through my memories- striped shirt she had on-

He has glasses, on as we were both locked in that gaze. Out of all the actus look how I picked not knowing this… was all for her and on her way back when.

~*~

(Aww her mouth dropped when I cracked how she was as she was playing in my mind and rushing tough my blood, I thought I was crazy hearing the voice, that I remember but could not place until a year later. She said quotes- of September 9, 2003- And it hit me she was Kristen, of the past days of days and times of times. Next, she going to say she is Sia. Or be in the Foo Fighters- Maybe- nah. She has cups…)

~*~

What I time I had here not seen but felt nothing but here, she was in my room to do this- and not she there all the time, don't ask just go with it. Why didn't I see this… sooner no I that to think she was some girl from my hometown, playing a game just as she would for, she is a lot like her… maybe the day she went away… I found one that was the same in all ways in her actions.

So, there it was- we held hand… in the back… in the car… at four p.m. His grandmother driving… the CD player blasting gospel country the Dannie O'Donalled or something- ah- in my ears- yet, I was all into him and not that.

Religion to me was a joke at that time… I have it now… don't ask… yet mom passing can do that. My faith was shaking, if there at all, dads too. Looking into her big brown eyes, she was looking back into mine feeling the same young but in love.

She led the way of my first in everything- this is true, I shit you not. There a lot of shit jokes with us and yes- I sometimes want to hold the bunny. She and I are the same in every way… every way- it just clicks with us, and go do that makes things hot. I love her giggle then, and it's the same now- heart to get when it coming through- you and you don't know whom she is for six weeks, but damn- I got her- now and then.

We have come a long way- cybernetics. Ha- don't cross the one that she has… or face the wrath of daddy, or piss them off she has that- power within. Yet no one in his dumb ass town knew who I was or my dad or try to get to know him, their ass hole, and I found out what that one meant to them too, more than I thought. I hope your pound- you're the dicks!

Besides I was there… in the Land of Many Steeples. Barnesboro- Pa. I was there- you all saw me, with him- the band- all around the land you saw him with me… what did you think? What did you think, I know what I think about you all? I do not like what I see… in the eyes of this town, yet I get him, and that's all the matter to me and not you that believed their lies, don't give me shit about him either I don't buy it for I know him, unlike you… and now look at what he did.

I love this girl like she'll stick her finger up my nose, and whatever.

I love this boy he will give me a Wet- Willy at any time.

X-O

Both nuts- we say back here.

Now that's adorable!

She makes fun of the way I talk all pa and shit.

-And he says everything I do is cute.

'Say I did do this- you don't give me credit or anything anyways so take it- hope you feel good about yourself when you do- take it away like everything- take it. This all mine and you will never take that away now!'

The first in everything- yet get that… now look she is going to play this in life and in this… on too. The kiss… The- that… the holding hands too.

The lovesick feeling… for Kristen Majah. Maybe it for she is the Jewish girl that had sex with a Father a the - Catholicism you better now that what you are if your catholic church, for the sin of being her, and being her race, yet I am blond and blue eyes, do you love me now? They did it in the confession both a swear to god they did… I was next on over- for what I think new about us she and I, and he- and he was the altar boy that he wanted too and that why.

I spent lots and lots of time looking for her online when she let to go to Pittsburgh, or so the story went, I could not find her- no- I could not- I look thought moon schools, and she was nowhere to be found, not listed in any of the towns. Yah eat your heart out! She went out of my life; he was gone for I was making movies and music. Yet it was her grandmother I got on the phone, saying she was too young. When really, she was a stare now.

(What the hell!)

I never- ever forgot about her…

Never…

Ever…

Every time I pass that old blue home…

Or the gas station that is not there any longer I think about her- the girl- I feel too! The real true falling, the first one, no one forgets there the first time. (I know what you meant! She said in a cute way.)

Marcel- It did not me… the way she looks…

The way she talked, the way she acted… the- everything about her still the same.

The show- Blast- the day 4- 14- 14, Johnstown Pa.

So small- like I should have remembered- all in black with red, under the skirt, really long hair. Looking sweet at me like I should have known. Yet I was babysitting to kid for the show thanks to my band teacher that that need was doing things he should not, with others bumping around the crowd. It was why I did get to say more… she came all this way cross county for this moment, that was a fail, the show too. She looks amazing, I even said I should walk with her teacher- 'Nah she is good; she would not want too anyway.' Um- there the

bathroom- over there… (Point) thank you… (She is looking said.) I don't even remember who I am I have that main ID's said- Kendrick.

(Time passing)

Spring…

Summer…

Fall…

Snow…

Like flayers all coming together on the land of white sown cover lovey lands. That is when she is showing her colors, like spring, the blossom showed, the love was back, for a mouth she played in my mind, like someone I used to know but have forgotten about, the fall day, playing head games in my body, like a run on a hot summers day. All this in me yet her- I remember her- she did this till I got it who we meet and re-meet, it was all her- fate- right? If I am still crazy about her- and she is me.

Turns out that Kristen Majah- I knew her teeth were to perfect, It was really Anna Kendrick! As well as this story- is how- she said- yes to me… If you knew this you would have killed yourselves- in my town right- I didn't either- so good job acting Anna. And there it is a true love story in my book of life.

And now in me all the time- is her- the girl- her- that one- she- known as Kristen- or Anna- Yes you think you know her, yet I do. She is all mine, and I hers…

Me- The boy I feel for all the years back in that shitty town so long ago… is him… it's all the same just know I am to you, yet now I am famous, I was just starting out then. But then again, I am back for him now- he's all mine- you F-ed up- girls!

I will never forget to get that flirty eye look she gave me.

~Yes~ him

~Yes~ her

The flashback ages of us way back then, she was 9 and I was 13.

-Get this my first date was with her, at a chine's restraint, with her…

Him- Never ever at that time did I think she was Anna, and her dad is who he is… I keep calling him Feud… Identify forbidden to you.

Nevaeh

Book: 29

Kellie's Stories

Part: 1

Young Future

Kellie- 'I'm- a like a dart devil- I just keep sucking it.'

It was said, that my mom had shattered finger bones; that hands, but where clumsily, for a mishap she had or something. Ray- I have a six-pack it's under my bear belly. Kellie- Nice!

Once Hanna told me- that she likes me because I'm for real- Because I really feel things. But that's the whole problem: how much I feel things.

'Hello?' I call out, as soon as I'm inside Kellie's apartment- home. The front hall is dark and cool as always. Goosebumps prick up over my arms.

No matter how… many times, I come to Kellie's house I'm always shocked by the power of the air- conditioning, which hums somewhere- deep inside the walls. For a moment, I- just stand there, inhaling the clean smells of furniture polish and Windex and fresh-cut flowers.

Music is pulsing from- Hanna's room upstairs. I try to identify the song but can't make out any words, just bass throbbing through the floorboards.

Hey, girls want to do something nice for your boy, take the shampoo and get a glob and rub your boy's thing down with your hand and then it's clean if you think it's not showering it and shut up. Same the other way around there… Another typical Wednesday night. Ray a bit puzzled replied, 'Well you didn't say anything, besides, I thought you enjoyed it as much as I did.' I put her hand on his face, and told him she took it for love, she took it for him. I kissed her hand, told her thanks and asked her how long it took before sex stopped being painful?

I am smiling said- 'we screwed for two months straight before taking a day off, so I'll say I was broken in by then.'

Today, I was thinking of a girl asking men out. How does it feel to fall in love with your best friend and then face the fear of asking them out?

I fell in love with him, way before I even knew what had happened to me. Sometimes love sneaks up on a person like that, I guess. I had known him all my life and we had always been friends.

He had a sweet tooth like no one I had ever met. In so many ways, he was my exact opposite. He was tall, too handsome for his own good. Some might even go so far as to say beautiful. I, on the other hand, was average height with dirty blonde hair. I loved making ice cream and seeing the joy it brought to people's faces although I rarely ate it myself.

We were always close, so I was not sure how it happened. One day, he walked into my ice cream shop just like he had many others yet, this time was different. Suddenly, I found myself caring about what I looked like when he was around. Making sure that I had his favorite ice cream in stock, adding extra whipped cream to whatever he ordered.

Nevertheless, he never seemed to act differently about me. He gave me the same beautiful smile that he always did. The same silly jokes that made me laugh.

He knew that I hated my laugh. I always ended up snorting. He didn't care, he thought my snorting was hilarious.

That was our friendship though, it was as if the only change of emotion was coming from me. Last week he brought a date in- which was the worst. Knowing that while I loved him, he was there with someone else who was painful.

I did my very best not to show it, and I think that I was successful. After all, they left hand in hand. Luckily, being the best friend gives me insight into his relationships. Turns out, that she wasn't his type. I think the problem was, that she refused to sleep on her own side of the bed. Such a silly thing to break up with someone over. Though, I do understand a little. I am in fact quite attached to my side of the bed. Who am I kidding? It is really ridiculous, if you loved them it would be a problem that would work itself out.

His break up though is good news for me though. Today is going to be the day. Today, I am going to ask him out. I cannot stand to wait for him to see me that way any longer. Today, I will charge forward and make my own destiny and all that other silly crap we tell ourselves to help us be brave.

#- Hashtag: (power- girls)

Criss- Do you remember the time Karly peed her dress in class and got up and rain out of the room, to me it was cute, she was remembered for it.

Kellie- 'Ray?' I say as he walks in and sits at the table in the corner.

Awaiting as he always does for his daily scoop. 'Can we talk?' I ask, my hands shaking as I hid them behind my back.

'Sure, whatever you need. Are you having some sort of trouble? Is it a guy?' he asked with a wink. I thought about punching him then I thought about telling him to forget about it.

'Actually, yea Ray its guy trouble.' I told him. 'I'm really into a guy, that I have been friends with for quite some time. How do I get him to see me as more than just a close friend?' Maybe he will just figure it out I thought to myself.

He did, and I could see the shock on his face. 'You mean me?'

'Yes, it is you.' I put my eyes down to the floor. I examined the tile and every intricate detail as we both sat there in silence.

'I would love to go out with you.' He finally said with a voice that melted my heart like chocolate. I looked up and into his eyes.

He was not appeasing me, he looked pleased. As if, I had just given him a present. 'I will take you out, and I will never let you go.

I thought this day would never come; I have waited for your love for a long time.' I couldn't believe what I was hearing, is it possible that I was the one that didn't see him. Suddenly, I could see the world open before me. Him at my side for all the world to see forever.

As they were preparing to take a shower, I asked him to get on the bed and hold his legs back as far as he could. He only got them halfway. Annie laughed and told He the next time her legs are back to her head, he'll have a new appreciation for her flexibility.

In the shower when Kellie was bathing

Ray and- and the other way around, just as she started to wash his dick, she and he play with it- like if he remembered a couple of weeks ago when she was a little tipsy from the wine and sucked him off? He went mmmm, I remember it well baby, you backed me all the way to the wall and you kept going, you were great.

'And how long did you say your nuts were hurting from that blowjob' she asked with sarcasm? About four days, why do you ask?

Annie stood up with his dick still in her hand and asked her if he wanted another one, a little better? He thought about the strong orgasm he had, he also thought about his nuts hurting for days. Now honey, the same old slow and deep one are just fine. Annie kissed him and said, 'I thought so.'

This post is a follow up to 'Her… Parents in the house, no sex for you'

Finally, Ray thought as he watched his parents plane taxi down the runway for takeoff, he can have some fun with his wife. Kellie could tell she was ready to release two days of backed-up semen and put a plan into motion to slow his role. On the walk to the parking lot, she asked him to let her drive home.

She looked a little puzzled and said 'Sure, that's fine, but why today, you always let me drive.' Annie smiled and started laughing saying 'I don't want you to get a speeding ticket or into an accident rushing home to plow me.'

He just looked at her before replying that he wasn't going to 'Plow' her as soon as they got home. Kellie said oh really, in that case, can we go to the mall? With a serious look on his face, he said- 'Sure honey, as soon as we check-in and out of that airport hotel.'

Her shaking her head as to say I can't believe you. 'Hey- you just said you didn't want to plow me, now you want to check into that hotel' I said while pointing at the hotel. He only said, 'I'm not going to jump you as soon as we get home, I'm going to play with my favorite parts of you first.'

As soon as he said it, he knew he had made a mistake. I stopped walking towards the car and repeated Ray saying- 'favorite parts!' he only said- 'Yeah, my favorite parts.' She said, 'ok Mister, by the time we get home before you get any of my parts, I want to know your top two favorite parts, ok.'

~*~

On the drive home, he can't think straight, backed up semen have that effect on men. His thoughts were to take I parts piece by piece and log them from one to whatever. Of course, she was first, but is it his number one? Where does her breast fall on his favorite list? What about her big ass he's always playing with!

Oh, freak'n shit, what have I gotten into he thought. He was so deep in his thoughts when he finally looked at Annie, he could swear she was silently laughing at him.

When they got home, she asked he 'are you ready to tell me your favorite two parts of my body, and don't get cute by saying one is my brain, only what you can see and feel honey.' As I started to talk, he told him to hold that thought, she'll be right back and went upstairs.

I went to the kitchen to get a beer and rethink his statement about wanting to play with his favorite parts of her body.

I didn't hear her come downstairs- but when he looked up, I was standing at the bottom of the stairs butt naked. With his mouth open and not a word coming out, this happens

often, I said- 'Come show me your top two parts- honey.' As he walked towards me- he thought about telling her he couldn't choose. Then it came to him in a flash. Teddy grabbed a hand full of Annie's hair and bent her head back saying this is number one, with his other hand he grabbed a hand full of her plentiful hip and said this is number two. He kissed her deeply, so deeply that

Annie pushed him away and said, 'I'm ready to be plowed.'

At the top of the stairs, I pause. Hanna's bedroom door is closed. I definitely don't recognize the song she's playing- or blasting, really, so loud I have to remind myself that Hanna's house is shielded on four sides by trees and lawn, and no one will sic the regulators on her.

It's not like- any music I have ever heard. It's a shrieky, shrill, fierce kind of music: I can't even tell whether the singer is male or female. Little fingers of electricity creep up my spine, a feeling I used to have when I was a tiny child when I would creep into the kitchen; and try to sneak an extra cookie from the pantry- the feeling right before the creak, and squeak of my mom's footsteps in the kitchen behind me, when I would whirl around, my hands and face coated in crumbs, guilty.

I shake off the feeling and push open Hanna's door. She's sitting at her computer, feet propped up on her desk, bobbing her head and tapping out a rhythm on her thighs. As soon as she sees me, she swings forward and hits a key on her keyboard. The music cuts off instantly. Strangely, the silence that follows seems just as loud.

She flips her hair over one shoulder and scoots away from the desk.

Something flickers over her face, an expression that passes too quickly for me to identify it. 'Hi,' she chirrups, a little too cheerfully.

'Didn't hear you come in.' 'I doubt you would have heard me break-in.' I go over to her bed and collapse on top of it. Hana has a queen-size bed, with three down pillows. It's like heaven.

'What was that?'

'What was what?'

She lifts her knees to her chest and swivels a full circle in her chair. I sit upon my elbows and watch her. Hanna only acts this dumb when she's hiding something.

'The music.' She still stares at me blankly. 'The song you were blasting when I came in. The one that almost burst my eardrums.'

'Oh- that.' Hanna blows her bangs out of her face. This is another one of her tells. Whenever she's bluffing in poker she won't stop fussing with her bangs.

'Just some new band I found online.' 'On LAMM?' I press.

Hana's music-obsessed, and used to spend hours surfing LAM, the Library of Authorized Music and Movies, when we were in middle school.

Hana looks away. 'Not exactly.'

'What do you mean, 'not exactly'?'

The intranet, like everything else in the United States, is controlled and monitored for our protection. All the websites, all the content, is written by government agencies, including the List of Authorized Entertainment, which gets updated biannually. Digital books go into the LAB, the Library of Approved Books, movies, and music go into LAM, and for a small fee, you can download them to your computer. If you have one, that is. I don't.

Hanna sighs, keeping her eyes averted.

Finally, she looks at me.

'Can you keep a secret?'

Sometimes when you oversleep, it comes back and bites you where it really hurts. She and he were up late last night playing around until four am, not having sex but playing the kissing game and fingering. Their kissing game is different than the one you may be thinking of.

It all started when he asked Annie when she bought the dress she had on today. I told him has a memory problem, it was him that picked the dress out of a display window on their vacation trip to Ohio. This started the 'I have a better memory than you.' Every time one couldn't remember something, the other gets ten kisses anywhere they wanted too.

All night long they were kissing thighs, tits, dicks, pussies and even butt cheeks. It went on so long, they both fell asleep without having sex. Although he believes he had three orgasms since she is being right so much, or the fact he lost so much and got to kiss very little of Annie's stuff.

I gave Ray one the fastest baths ever like us. They both laughed when- she said, 'I don't need to wash your dick; you haven't used it.' Ray said, 'I'm going use it tonight like never before.' Ray pointing to different parts of Annie's body said, 'I want a little bit of this, a little of that and I'm coming back and getting a little more this.' Annie said: 'Sure, promises, promises.' A quick kiss and they were off to work.

Ray had been in a meeting all day and had a message to call his wife when he got out, not an emergency just calls at his convenience.

When Ray called Annie, he found out his parents flew into town on a business trip and she invited them to stay at their house for a couple of days. Ray was surprised to hear that because his dad was adamant he wouldn't stay in the mother- in- law suite until they had a grandchild.

The first night after dinner and everyone retired for the evening, I was looking forward to a lot of action from her. It didn't take long for Ray to find out his plans weren't Kellie's plan. The pace was set in the shower, I gave Teddy a regular penis wash, and this is not what he's grown accustomed to.

He asked, 'what kind of a dick wash was that?' she said- 'your parents are in the house and you may not know it, but you're loud when you come.' Raymon said- 'they're on the other side of the house, downstairs, I'm not that loud.' Kellie reminded Teddy that on their honeymoon in the mountains when she gave him a wedding gift by putting her legs behind her head at the moment of his orgasm, he could be heard on the other side of the mountain, even the coyotes howl back.

Now I sit up all the way, scooting to the edge of the bed. I don't like the way; she's looking at me. I don't trust it.

'What is this about, Hanna?'

'Can you keep a secret?' She repeats… I think of standing with her in front of the labs on Evaluation Day, the sun beating down on us, the way she forced her mouth close to my ear to whisper about happiness, and unhappiness.

I'm suddenly afraid for her, of her.

But I nod and say, 'Yeah, of course.'

'Okay.'

She looks down, fiddles with the hem of her shorts for a second take a deep breath.

'So last week I met this guy-'

'What?' I nearly fall off the bed.

'Relax.' She holds up a hand.

'He's cured, okay? He works for the city.

He's a sensor, actually.'

My heartbeat slows, and I settle back against her pillows again. 'Okay- So…?'

'So,' Hanna says, looking for Kellie drawing the word out, 'he was waiting at the doctor is with me. When I went to have my PT, you know?' Hanna sprained her ankle in the fall and still has to do physical therapy once a week, to keep it strong. 'Plus, we started chatting.'

Ray and not one girl but two and she, also is okay with it, they say at school.

Part: 2

It took twenty minutes for my heart to get back to normal. By the time I had caught my breath, I Kellie was up, singing and cooking. I need to research why men orgasm zap them of all their energy and women are reenergized. What's up with that! Sometimes I feel as if I need a five emergency after sex while Hanna wants to play a game of basketball. After sex, I can hit the gym and do a ten-mile run.

Did Mother Nature intentionally give our sperm power to energize women?

Is this payback for them getting pregnant?

Doing!

Man, please.

Doing! If we answered a question doing sex the answer will always be yes. I can't count how many men got engaged in doing sex.

After!

We all know immediately after men behave like aliens, we don't have a clue about anything on earth. I must stop typing now, here comes Hanna and Kellie, she told me when she and she got home from shopping she would give me a killer- blowjobs. Another thing, when we're horny, why do girls ask for things they know we would deny after sex! Women are like, 'I know he will not let me spend two hundred dollars on these shoes, so I'll ask him while I'm giving him a blowjob, I'd better record it also, he won't remember answering.' Are we men being used on a regular basis? I know I am. I can't count the times Annie has said, 'You told me I could.' I ask when I did, I say you could? Her answer is always the same, 'when we were in bed.' Can we men pass a law stating no questions before, doing or immediately after sex? Before, of course not, I would prefer not to have any roadblocks down my avenue.

~*~

She pauses to look up and see what she was looking for. I don't really see where the story is going as of now. Or how it relates to the music she was playing, so I just wait for her to go on, I see her there, can you?

To conclude she does… she is up there… 'Besides, I was telling him about boards, and how I really want to go to IUP, and he was- saying to me about his job, what he does; and such. You know… the day to day, things that need to be done…

He codes the online access limitations, so the general public can't just write whatever, or post things themselves, or write up false statistics or demagogic beliefs' - she puts this in quotes, rolling her eyes- 'and other stuff like that. He's, like, an intranet security guard.'

~*~

One of you may say, 'How could you forget about that!' But you need to understand the life and games I played as a very young man. I never told my best friend about this episode of my life. Not that it was bad, but it's hard to believe from two different points of view, not to mention how it all went down.

~*~

My freshman year in college was one of adventure and life lessons. Chuck and I behaved more like seniors than freshmen. We met two young ladies in our business management class. They were okay, but we weren't interested in the relationship type of friendship. Besides one, Sue was seeing someone in a nonseries way, meaning nothing was going on sexually, but they were going to the movies and doing other things just feeling each other out. The other one Tina, nice looking and very sexy to me was a loner. You know how you're saving for something and putting money in a jar. Well, I was doing that with Tina, only I wasn't putting the max in, just enough to keep me slowly going after my goal. I never went after Tina but I teetered on the brink of flirting without flirting, just stringing her along.

Hanna- no make- up blonde and pink lips, really short, looks a lot like Kellie just, washed out.

It was movie night at the 'Brick,' an outdoor spot we all gathered around daily. If you were looking for someone, go to the Brick. Chuck and I were just hanging out when Sue and Tina walked up. Tina walked up to me and asked what I was doing this weekend? I really didn't have anything going on, so I told her I'll just be hanging around looking for something. Tina laughed and asked, 'what does that mean?' I said, 'you know guy stuff.' Tina with her head down said, 'come to my apartment tomorrow night, Sue will be going out and you can show me guy stuff.' I just looked at her with that look of 'I'm not into games.' Tina looked up and told me not to eat, she'll have pizza and salad for us. I didn't even think about it, I just asked 'what time?'

~*~

I got back from the library about five Saturday evening. Hanna left me a note saying he wouldn't be back until Sunday evening. He got home late last night so I figured he put something on layaway and went to get it today. My date with Tina was at eight so I started to get ready, for what, I don't know. But as always, I'll be ready for anything.

I arrived at Hanna's about 7:50- sh pm, she answered the door in those pj's women wear as pants. As I entered, Tina asked 'if I wanted to eat now or later?' I said 'you told me not to eat, so I'm ready now.' I must admit, Hanna set a very nice table. As we were eating Tina question me about what exactly 'hanging around looking for something' meant so she'll know what to expect. That comment made me think I'm getting laid tonight.

I told Hanna it meant whatever I fall into, it's something to do. Then Hanna dropped a bomb on me, she asked 'would you like to fall into me?' I've been here before, so I shot back, 'Are you serious, if you are, why me?' Tina smiled and said

'you don't want me?' Now all players should have a 'cool card to play.' I stood up and started to unbutton my shirt, Hanna shouted whoa, not in here. I just smiled.

I stood there with my hands still on the buttons of my shirt. Hanna walked over and grabbed my hand and led me to her bedroom. I not sure what I was accustomed to, then again Hanna's room smells like the perfume counter in a department store. She left the lights off, it took me a while to adjust to the darkness but the little I could make out of Ray's nakedness was truly exciting.

I was undressed in a little over 2.7 seconds. Not a word was spoken, I reached for her and started to kiss her passionately. Oh, I forgot, my penis was hard as steel before I got undressed. As I laid on back on her bed, she and Kellie grabbed my penis at their wanting and started to feel all around it, that didn't bother me, I'm going in. Then the first of two unbelievable hit me. I pushed me off and said, 'I can't do this.' Shocked I asked, 'did I get ahead of myself?'

I was quiet, not a word. I waited to hope to hear her say, okay I'm ready, but no, still nothing. Then finally she spoke, I'm a virgin and I can't handle you. I've had a few virgins before; I know how to handle them. I told I I'll be gentle, but she was adamant; no- I can't, I know I can't handle it, teach me to suck you,

I'll do that for you, but I can't handle your dick, I know I can't. Well, I'm on the brink now, it wouldn't take much to finish me off. I asked, 'if she was sure about this?' She told me never did it before, but teach me and I'll do it for you.

Well, it only took five minutes for my load to unload in a rookie mouth that wasn't bad, not bad at all. I didn't even spit it out, she swallows it and started to apologize to me. I said it is ok when you read some guy will be very lucky. Tina said I wanted that guy to be you so bad- but-but- I knew I couldn't handle it and I wanted to enjoy it as much as you.

Early the next morning I got a call from Sue, she wanted to know if she could come over, I told her about last night. I said sure, come on over. I knew I probably told her about not having sex, but did she say anything about the blowjob.

Sue got to my apartment in twenty minutes. She went right into what Hanna told her about not having sex because she didn't think she could handle it. But what blew my mind, she told her about sucking me off. She told me she needed to see what scared Tina so. I laughed and said I'm not going to show you, my privates, I'm not into playing like that.

Sue said who's playing, I want to experience it.

The second of two unbelievable. Tina- for Tinareria- as I laid in bed exhausted from what she just put me through and watching her get dressed. She must be in a joking mood, she told me our secret will never leave her and she'll leave the blowjob cumshot to me for now, that way she'll have something on her, but after you have sex with her, I will want to suck you off. I said- 'You think I have a chance with her?' She said… 'oh I'm going to push her to have sex with you even though she's right, you do carry a load down there, but I need to hear her talk about you so- I can relive this experience.'

She was right, two days later I told me to come over and finish what she stopped. Some years later and in passing she said 'no one has come close to your manliness. All I could think about was not getting that blowjob from Sue that she promised me. 'Okay,' I say again… I want to tell Hanna to get to the point- I know all about online security restrictions, everybody does- but that would just make her clam up.

She sucks in a deep breath, and look down in a wondering thought of what if. 'But he doesn't just code the security. He checks for lapses- like, break-ins. Hackers, basically, who jump through all the security hoops and manage to post their own stuff. The government calls them floaters- websites that might be up for an hour, or a day, or two days before they're

discovered, websites full of unlawful stuff- opinions and message boards and video clips and music.'

'And you found one.'

A sick feeling has settled in my stomach. Words keep flashing in my brain, like a neon sign going in and out: illegal, interrogation, surveillance.

Hanna…

She doesn't seem to notice that I have gone totally still. Her face is suddenly animated, as alive and energetic as I have ever seen it, and she leans forward on her knees, talking in a rush. 'Not just one. Dozens. There are tons of them out there if you know how to look. If you know where to look. It's incredible,

Kellie. All these people- they must be all over the country- sneaking in through the loops, and the holes. You should see some of the things people write.

About- about the cure. It's not just the invalids who don't believe in it. There are people here, all over the place, whom- don't think-' I'm staring at her so hard she drops her eyes and switches topics. 'In addition, you should hear music. Incredible, amazing music, like nothing you have ever heard, music that almost takes your head off, you know? That makes you want to scream and jump up and down and break stuff and cry.'

Hanna's room is big- almost twice as big as my room at, home- but I feel as though the walls are pressing down around me. If the air-conditioning's still working, I can no longer feel it. The air feels hot and heavy, like a wet breath, and I stand up and move to the window. Hana breaks off, finally. I try to shove open her window, but it won't budge.

I push and strain against the windowsill.

'Lena,' Hana says timidly, after a minute.

'It won't open.' All I can think of is: I need air. The rest of my thoughts are a blur of radio static, and fluorescent lights, as well as lab coats to steel tables and surgical knives- an image of Willow Marks getting dragged off to the labs, screaming, her house defaced with marker and paint.

'Kellie,' Hana says, louder now.

'Come on.'

You and she okay with sharing her boy- maybe she into girls too?

'It's stuck. Wood must be warped from the heat. If it would just open.' I heave and the window flies upward, finally. There's a popping sound, and the latch that's been keeping it in place snaps off and skitters to the middle of the floor. For a second Hanna, and I both stand there, staring at it. The air coming through the open window doesn't make me feel better.

It's even hotter outside.

'Sorry,' I mumble. I can't look at her.

'I didn't mean to- I didn't know it was locked. The windows at my house don't lock.'

'Don't worry about the window. I don't care about the stupid window.'

'One- time Grace got out of her crib when she was little, almost made it onto the roof. Just slid the window right open and started climbing.' 'Kellie.' Hanna reaches out and grabs my shoulders. I don't know if I have a fever or what, going hot and cold every five seconds, but her touch makes a chill go through me and I pull away quickly.

'You're mad at me.'

'I'm not mad. I'm worried about you.'

But that's only half- true. I am mad- furious, in fact.

All this time I've been blindly coasting along, the idiot sidekick, thinking about our last real summer together, stressing about the matches I will get and evaluations, and boards and normal stuff and she's been nodding, smiling, and saying, 'Uh-huh, yeah, me too,' and 'I'm sure things will be fine,' and meanwhile, behind my back, she's been turning into someone I don't know- someone with secrets, and weird habits and opinions about things we're not even supposed to think about.

Now- I know why, I was so startled on Evaluation Day, when she turned back to whisper to me, eyes huge and glowing. It was like she had dropped away for a second- my best friend, my only real friend- and in her place, was a stranger.

Part: 3

That's what's been happening all this time: Hana has been morphing into a stranger.

I turn back to the window… and… a sharp blade of sadness goes through me- deep, and quick. I guess it was bound to happen eventually.

I've always known it would. Everyone you trust, everyone you think you can count on, will eventually disappoint you. When left to their own devices, people lie and keep secrets and change and disappear, some of a different face or personality, some behind a dense early morning fog, beyond a cliff. That's why the cure is so important.

That's why we need it.

'Listen, I'm not going to get arrested just for looking at some websites. Or listening to music, or whatever.'

'You could… People have been arrested for less.'

She knows this too. She knows and doesn't care.

'Yeah, well, I'm sick of it.' Hanna's… voice trembles a little, which throws me.

I've never heard her sound- yet I was less than certain.

'We shouldn't even be talking about this. Someone could be-' 'Someone could be listening?'

She cuts me off, finishes my sentence for me.

'God, Kellie… I'm sick of that, too… Aren't you…?

Ant- U- sick of always checking your back, looking behind you, watching what you say, think, do. I can't- I can't breathe, I can't sleep, I can't move. I feel like there are walls everywhere. Everywhere I go - bam! There's a wall.

'Everything I want- bam! Another wall... like ripped out.'

She rakes a hand through her hair. Like- for once, she doesn't look as pretty to me, and in control. She looks pale and unhappy, and her expression reminds me of something, but I can't place it right away.

Part: 4

'It's for our own protection,' I say, wishing I sounded more confident. I 've never been good in a fight.

'Everything will get better once we're-'

Again, she jumps in.

'Once we're cured?'

She laughs, a short barking sound with no humor in it, but at least she doesn't contradict me directly.

'Right. That's what everybody says.'

All of a sudden it hits me: She reminds me of the animals we saw once on a class trip to the slaughterhouse. All the cows were lined up, packed in their stalls, staring at us mutely as we walked by, with that same look in their eyes- with fear, and resignation and something else.

Desperation, I'm really scared, then, and truly terrified for her.

Then when she speaks again, she sounds a little bit calmer.

'Maybe it will. Get better, I mean, once we're cured. But until then - This is our last chance, Lena.

Our last chance to do anything. Our last chance to choose.'

There's the word from Evaluation Day again- choose- but I nod- for the reason that I don't want to set her off again.

'So, what are you going to do?'

She looks away, biting her lip, and I can tell she's debating whether or not to trust me. 'There's this party tonight -'

'What?' Shoot up… the fear floods back in. She rushes on. 'It's something I found on one of the floaters- it's a music thing, a few bands playing out by the border in Stroud water, on one of the farms.'

'You can't be serious. You're not- you're not actually going, right?

You're not even thinking about it.'

'It's safe, okay? I promise. These websites - it's really amazing, Liv, I swear you'd be into it if you looked. They're hidden… Links, usually, embedded on normal pages, approved government stuff, then again, I don't know, somehow you can tell they don't feel right, you know? They don't belong.' I grasp at a single word. 'Safe? How can it be safe? That guy you met- the censor whole job is to track down people- who are stupid enough to post these things…'

'They're not stupid, they're incredibly smart, actually…'

'Not to mention the regulators, also the guards and the youth guard and curfew, besides segregation and just about everything else; that makes this one of the worst ideas.'

'Fine… it was said…'

Hanna raises her arms and brings them slapping down against her thighs. The noise is so loud it makes me jump.

'Fine, so-o it's a bad idea, so-o it's risky.

You know what…? I don't care…'

For a second there's silence… We're glaring at each other, and the air between us feels charged and dangerous, a thin electrical coil, ready to explode.

'What about me?' I say finally, struggling to keep my voice from shaking.

'You're welcome to come. Ten thirty, Roaring Brooke Farms, Stroud water.

Music…

Dancing…

You know- fun…

The stuff we're supposed to be having before they cut out half of our brain.'

I ignore the last part of her comment. 'I don't think so, Hanna. In case you've forgotten, we have other plans for tonight. Have had plans for tonight for, oh, the past fifteen years.' 'Yeah, well, things change.' She turns her back to me, but I feel like she's reached out and punched me in the stomach.

Part: 5

'Fine…' My throat is squeezing up. This time, I know it's the real deal, and I'm on the verge of crying. I go over to her bed and start gathering up my stuff. Of course, my bag has spilled over on its side, and now her comforter is covered with little scraps of paper and gum wrappers and coins and pens. I start stuffing this back into my bag, fighting back the tears. 'Go ahead. Do whatever you want tonight. I don't care.'

Maybe Hanna feels bad because her voice softens a little bit looking at Kellie. Both loving themselves him and each other 'Seriously, Kelly… you should think about coming.

We won't get in any trouble, I promise.'

'You can't promise that.' I take a deep breath, wishing my voice would stop quivering.

'You don't know that. You can't be positive. '

'And you can't go on being so scared all the time.'

That's it: That does it. I whirl around, furious, something deep and black and old rising inside of me. 'Of course, I'm scared.

And I'm right to be scared. And if you're not scared it's just because you have the perfect little life, and the perfect little family, and for you, everything is perfect, perfect, perfect.

You don't see. You don't know.' 'Perfect? That's what you think? You think my life is perfect?' Her voice is quiet but full of anger.

I'm tempted to move away from her but force myself to stay put. 'Yeah. I do.'

Again, she lets out a barking laugh, a quick explosion. 'So-o, you think this is it, huh? As good as it gets?' She turns a full circle, arms extended like she's embracing the room, the house, everything.

Her question startles me. 'What else is there?'

'Everything, Lena.' She shakes her head. 'Listen, I'm not going to apologize. I know you have your reasons for being scared. What happened to your mom was terrible-'

'Don't bring my mom into this.' My body goes tight, electric.

'But you can't go on blaming her for everything. She died more than ten years ago.' Anger swallows me, a thick fog. My mind careens wildly like wheels over ice, bumping up against random words:

Fear… Blame... Don't forget… Mom… I love you… and now, I see that Hanna is a snake

- has been waiting a long time to say this to me, has been waiting to squirm her way in, as deep and painful as she can go, and bite. 'Fuck you.' In the end, these are the two words that come.

She holds up both hands. 'Listen, Lena, I'm just saying you have to let it go. You're nothing like her. And you're not going to end up like her. You don't have it in you.'

'Fuck you.' She's trying to be nice, but my mind is closed up and the words come out on their own, cascading over one another, and I wish every single one was a punch so that I could hit her in the face, bam- bam- bam- bam.

'You don't know a single thing about her. And you don't know me. You don't know anything.'

'Lena.' She reaches for me.

'Don't touch me.' I'm stumbling backward, grabbing my bag, bumping against her desk- as I move toward the door.

Hands In

Part: 1

Kellie- WHAT IF HE GETS US ALL

PREGNANT? ~US~ 3 GIRLS AT THE SAME DAMN TIME? WHAT IF…? THAT IS SOME FUCKED UP SHIT- NO?

I the one that is really into him- his voice has gotten super quiet, and he seems almost to have forgotten that I'm there. I'm not exactly sure where his story is going but I hold my breath, afraid that if- I even so- much as exhale he'll stop speaking entirely.

'I hated it here. I hated it here so much you can't even imagine. All the buildings and the people looking so dazed and the smells and the closeness of everything and the rules everywhere you turned, rules and walls, rules and walls.

I wasn't used to it. I felt like I was in a cage. We are in a cage: a bordered cage.'

A little shock pulse's through me. In all the seventeen years and eleven months of my life, I have never, not once, thought of it that way. I've been so used to thinking of what the borders are keeping out that-

I haven't considered that they're also penning us in. Now I see it through Kellie's eyes, see what it must have been like for him.

'At first, I was angry. I used to light things on fire. Paper, handbooks, school primers. It made me feel better somehow.' He laughs softly. 'I used to walk along the borders for hours every day. Sometimes I cried.' He squirms next to me, and I can tell he's embarrassed.

It's the first sign he has given in a while that he knows I'm still there, that he's talking to me, and the urge to reach out and grab his hand, to squeeze him and her or give him or her some kind of encouragement, is almost overwhelming.

But- I keep my hands glued to the floor.

'After a while, though, I would just walk. I liked to watch the birds. They would lift off from our side and soar over into the Wilds, as easily as anything. Back and forth, back and forth, lifting and curling through the air. I could watch them for hours at a time. Free:

They were totally free. I'd thought that nothing and nobody was free in Pittsburgh, but

I was wrong. There were always the birds.'

He falls silent for a while, and I think maybe he's done with his story. I wonder if he's forgotten about my original question- why me? But, I'm too embarrassed to remind him, so I just sit there and imagine him standing at the border, motionless, watching the birds swoop above his head. It calms me down.

After what seems like forever he starts talking again, this time in a voice so quiet I have to shift nearer to him just to hear. 'The first time- I saw you, at the Governor, I hadn't been to watch the birds at the border in years. But that's what you reminded me of. You were jumping up, and you were yelling something, and your hair was coming loose from your ponytail, and you were so fast.' He shakes his head. 'Just a flash, and then you were gone. Exactly like a bird.'

I don't know how I hadn't intended to move and hadn't noticed moving- but somehow, we've ended up face- to- face in the dark, only inches apart.

'Everyone is asleep… they've been asleep for years. You seemed - awake.' Alex is whispering now. He closes his eyes, opens them again. 'I'm tired of sleeping.' My insides are lifting and fluttering like they've done what he said and been transformed into swooping, soaring birds: The rest of my body seems to be floating away on massive currents of warmth, as though a hot wind is pushing through me, breaking me apart, turning me to air.

This is wrong, a voice says inside of me, but it isn't my voice. It's someone else's- some composite of my aunt, and Rachel, and all my teachers, and the pinchy evaluator who asked most of the questions the second time around.

Out loud I squeak, 'No,' even though another word is rising and lifting inside of me, bubbling up like freshwater sprung from the earth. Yes, yes, yes.

'Why?' He's barely whispering. His hands find my face, his fingertips barely skim my forehead, the top of my ears, the hollows of my cheeks. Everywhere he touches is fire. My whole body is burning up, the two of us becoming twin points of the same bright white flame.

'What are you afraid of?' 'You have to understand. I just want to be happy.' I can barely get the words out. My mind is a haze, full of smoke- nothing exists but his fingers dancing and skating over my skin, through my hair. I wish it would stop. I want it to go on forever. 'I just want to be normal, like everybody else.' 'Are you sure that being like everybody else will make you happy?' The barest whisper; his breath on my ear and neck, his mouth grazing my skin.

And I think then I might really have died. Maybe the dog bit me and I got clubbed on the head and this is all just a dream- the rest of the world has dissolved. Only him. Only me. Only us.

~*~

The sunlight filters through the trees and spots the grass a pale white. The whole garden feels as cool and quiet as the library at school. Enormous overgrown lawn winds between ancient trees, so thick and gnarled and knotted their arms twist overhead and form a canopy.

Ray brings a blanket and leaves it inside the house. Whenever we come, we take it and shake it out on the grass, and all three of us lie there, sometimes for hours, talking and laughing about nothing in particular.

Sometimes, Hanna or Kellie buys some food for a picnic, and one time I manage to swipe three cans of soda and a whole carton of candy bars from my uncle's store, and we get totally crazy on a sugar high and play games like we did when we were little- hide- and- seek and tag and leapfrog. Some of the tree trunks are as wide as four garbage pails mashed together, and I take a picture of Hana, laughing, trying to fit her arms around one of them. Ray says the trees must have been here for hundreds of years, which makes Hanna and me go silent. That means they were here before- before the borders were shut down before the walls were put up before the disease was driven into the Wilds.

When he says it, something aches in my throat? I wish I could know what it was like then. Most of the time, though, Ray and I spend time alone and Hanna covers for us.

After weeks and weeks of not seeing her at all, suddenly I'm going to Hana's every single day and sometimes twice in one day (when I see Ray; and then when- I actually see Hanna.) Fortunately, my aunt doesn't pry. I'm happier than I can ever remember being. I'm happier than I can ever remember even dreaming of being, and when I tell Hana I can never in a million years repay her for covering for me, she just crooks her mouth into a smile and says, 'You've already repaid me.' I think she assumes we had a fight and are making up for lost time now, which is kind of true anyway and suits me fine.

I'm not sure what she means by that, but I'm just glad to have her back on my side.

When Ray and I are alone we don't do much- just sit and talk- but still time seems to shrivel away, fast as paper catching on fire.

One minute it's three o'clock in the afternoon. The next minute, I swear, the light is draining from the sky and it's almost curfew. That's okay... I'm not sure I want to know. When he mentions the need for resistance, there is a tightness in his voice, and anger coiling underneath his words. At those times, and only for a few seconds, I'm still afraid of him, still, hear the word Invalid drumming in my ear.

~*~

Ray tells me stories about his life: about his 'aunt' and 'uncle,' and some of the work they do, although he's still pretty vague about what the sympathizers and the Invalids are aiming for and how they're working to achieve it. But mostly Ray tells me normal stuff, about his aunt's and how whenever they get together his uncle gets a little too tipsy and tells the same stories about the past over and over.

They're both cured, and when I ask him whether they aren't happier now, he shrugs and says, 'They miss the pain, too.'

This seems incredible to me, and he looks at me out of the corner of his eye and says, 'That's when you really lose people, you know. When the pain passes.'

Mostly, though, he talks about the Wilds and the people who live there, and I lay my head on his chest and close my eyes and dream of it: of a woman everyone calls Crazy Caitlin, who makes enormous wind chimes out of scrap metal and crushed soda cans; of Grandpa, who

must be at least ninety- two but still hikes through the woods every day, foraging for berries and wild animals to eat; of campfires outside and sleeping under the stars, and staying up late to sing and talk and eat, while the night sky goes smudgy with smoke.

I know that he still goes back there sometimes, and I know he still considers it his real home. He nearly says as much when I tell him one time that I'm sorry I can't go home with him to check out his studio on Grand Street, where he has lived since starting at the university- if any of his neighbors saw me going into the building with him, we'd be finished.

But he corrects me really quickly,

'That's not home.'

He admits that he and the other Invalids have found a way to get in and out of the Wilds, but when I press him for details he clams up.

'Someday maybe you'll see,' is all he says, and I'm equal parts terrified and thrilled.

Part: 2

'I don't know any other way.' I can't feel my mouth open, don't feel the words come, but there they are, floating in the dark.

He says, 'Let me show you.' And then we're kissing. Or at least, I think we're kissing I've only seen it done a couple of times, quickly closed-mouth pecks at weddings or on formal occasions. But this isn't like anything I've ever seen, or imagined, or even dreamed: This is like music or dancing but better than both. His mouth is slightly open, so I open mine, too. His lips are soft, the same soft pressure as the quietly insistent voice in my head that keeps saying yes. I really like you, Lena. Do you believe me now?

Yes.

Can I walk you home?

Yes.

Can I see you tomorrow?

Yes, yes, yes. The streets are empty by now. The whole city is silent and still. The whole city might have wound down into nothing, burned away while we were in the shed, and I wouldn't have noticed or cared. The walk home is fuzzy, a dream. He holds my hand the whole way and we stop to kiss twice again in the longest, deepest shadows we can find. Both times I wish the shadows where solid, had weight, and they would fold down around us and bury us there, so we could stay like that forever, chest to chest, lip to lip.

The warmth is only growing inside of me, waves of light swelling and breaking and making me feel like I'm floating. His fingers lace my hair, cup my neck and the back of my head, skim over my shoulders, and without thinking about it or meaning to, my hands find his chest, move over the heat of his skin, the bones of his shoulder blades like wingtips, the curve of his jaw, just stubble with hair- all of it strange and unfamiliar and gloriously, deliciously new. Both times I feel my chest seize up when he pulls away and takes my hand and we have to start walking again, not kissing like suddenly I can only breathe correctly when we are.

Somehow- too soon- I'm home, and whispering goodbye to him and feeling his lips brush mine one last time, as light as wind. My heart is drumming in my chest so hard it aches, but it's the good kind of ache, like the feeling you get on the first day of real autumn when the air is crisp, and the leaves are all flaring at the edges and the wind smells just vaguely of smoke- like the end and the beginning of something all at once. Under my hand, I swear I can feel his heart beating out a response, an immediate echo of mine, as though our bodies are speaking to each other.

And suddenly it's all so ridiculously and stupidly clear I feel like laughing.

This is what I want. This is the only thing I've ever wanted. Everything else - every single second of every single day that has come before this very moment, this kiss- has meant nothing.

Part: 3

When he finally pulls away it's like a blanket has come down over my brain, quieting all my buzzing thoughts and questions, filling me with a calm and happiness as deep and cool as snow. The only word left there is yes. Yes, to everything.

Then I'm sneaking into the house and up the stairs and into the bedroom, and it's not until I've been lying in bed for a long time, shivering, aching, missing him already, that I realize my aunt and my teachers, and the scientists are right about the deliria.

As I lie there with the hurt driving through my chest and the sick, anxious feeling churning through me and the desire for Ray so strong inside of me it's like a razor blade edging its way through my organs, shredding me, all I can think is: It will kill me, it will kill me, it will kill me. And I don't care.

Last God created Adam and Eve, to live together happily as husband and wife: eternal partners. They lived peacefully for years in a beautiful garden full of tall, straight plants that grew in neat rows, and well- behaved animals to serve as pets. Their minds were as clear and untroubled as the pale and cloudless blue sky, which hung like a canopy over their heads. They were untouched by illness, pain, or desire.

They did not dream. They did not ask questions. Each morning they woke as refreshed as newborns. Everything was always the same, but it always felt new and good.

The next day, a Saturday, I wake up thinking of Alex. Then I try to stand up, and pain shoots through my leg. Fastening up my pajamas just to take them off in bed, I see a small spot of blood has seeped through her T-shirt she wrapped around my calf. I know I should wash it or change the bandage or do something, but I'm too scared to see how bad the damage is.

The details from the party- of screaming and shoving and dogs and batons whirling through the air, deadly- come flooding back, and for a moment I'm sure I'm going to be sick.

Then the dizziness subsides, and I think of Hana.

Our phone is in the kitchen. My aunt is at the sink, washing dishes, and gives me a small look of surprise when I come downstairs. I catch a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror. I look terrible- hair sticking up all over my head, big bags under my eyes- and it strikes me as unbelievable that anyone could ever find me pretty.

But someone does. Thinking of Hanna makes a golden glow spread through me.

'Better hurry,' Carol says. 'You'll be late for work. I was just about to wake you.'

'I just have to call Hana,' I say. I snake the cord as far as it will go and back up into the pantry, so at least I'll have some privacy.

Part: 4

My fingers have begun to shiver, I hang up rapidly, and I have trouble punching in Hanna's cell phone number.

Straight to voicemail.

I try Hanna's house first. One, two, three, four, five rings. Then the answering machine clicks on. 'You've reached the Tate residence. Please leave a message of no more than two minutes-'

Her greeting is exactly the same as it's always been ('Hey, sorry I couldn't get to the phone. Or maybe I'm not sorry I couldn't get to the phone- it depends on who's calling.'), her voice coming in fuzzy, bubbling with suppressed laughter. Hearing it- the normalcy of it - after last night gives me a jolt, like suddenly dreaming yourself back into a place you haven't thought about for a while. I remember the day she recorded it. It was after school and we were in her room, and she went through about a million greetings before she settled on that one. I was bored and kept whacking her with a pillow whenever she wanted to try just one more.

'Hanna, you need to call me,' I say into the phone, keeping my voice as low as possible. I'm far too aware that my aunt is listening. 'I'm working today. You can reach me at the store.' I hang up, feeling dissatisfied and guilty. While I was in the shed last night with Alex, she could have been hurt or in trouble; I should have done more to find her.

'Rachel.' My aunt calls me sharply back into the kitchen just as I'm headed upstairs to get ready.

'Yes?'

She comes forward a few steps. Something in her expression makes me anxious.

'Are you hobbling?' she asks. I've been annoying as hard as possible to walk generally.

I look away. It's easier to lie when I'm not staring into her eyes. 'I don't think so.' 'Don't lie to me.' Her voice turns cold. 'You think I don't know what this is about, but I do.' For one terrifying second, I think she's going to ask me to roll up my pajama pants or tell me she knows about the party. But then she says, 'You've been running again, haven't you? Even though I told you not to.' 'Only once,' I blurt out, relieved. 'I think I may have twisted my ankle.'

Carol shakes her head and looks disappointed. 'Honestly, Lena. I don't know when you started disobeying me. I thought that you of all people-' She breaks off. 'Oh, well. Only five weeks to go, right? Then all of this will be worked out.'

'Right...' I force myself to smile. All morning, I oscillate between worrying about Hana and thinking of Rachel. I ring up the wrong charge for customers twice and have to call for Jed, my uncle's general manager, to come to override it. Then I knock down a whole shelf of frozen pasta dinners and mislabel a dozen cartons of cottage cheese. Thank God my uncle's not in the store today; he's out doing deliveries, so it's just her and me. And she- Hanna hardly looks at me or speaks to me except in grunts, so I'm pretty sure he's not going to notice that I've suddenly turned into a clumsy, incompetent mess.

I know part of the problem, of course.

The disorientation, the distraction, the difficulty focusing- all classic Phase One signs of deliria. But I don't care. If pneumonia felt this good, I'd stand out in the snow in the winter with bare feet and no coat on, or march into the hospital and kiss her patients. I've told Hanna about my work schedule and we've agreed to meet up at Back Cove directly after my shift, at six o'clock. The minutes crawl toward noon. I swear I've never seen time go more slowly. It's like every second needs encouragement just to click forward to the next. I keep willing the clock to go faster, but it seems to be resisting me deliberately.

I see a customer picking her nose in the tiny aisle of (kind of) fresh produce; I look at the clock; look back at the customer; look back at the clock and the second hand still hasn't moved. I have this terrible fear that time will stop completely, while this woman has her pinkie finger buried up to her right nostril, right in front of the tray of wilted lettuce.

At noon I get a fifteen-minute break, and I go outside and sit on the sidewalk and choke down a few bites of a sandwich, even though I'm not hungry. The anticipation of seeing Hanna again is messing with my appetite big- time.

Another sign of the deliria. Bring it. The droning of the fly and the tiny fan whirring behind my back and the heat all make me want to sleep. If I could, I would rest my head on the counter and dream, and dream, and dream. I would dream I was back in the shed with Rachel. I would dream of the firmness of his chest pressed against mine and the strength of his hands and his voice saying, 'Let me show you.' The bell above the door chimes once and I snap out of my reverie. At one o'clock Kellie flinches replenishing the shelves, and I'm still stuck behind the counter.

It's mischievously hot, and there's a fly trapped in the store that keeps buzzing around and bumping up against the overhanging shelf above my head, where we keep a few packs of cigarettes and bottles of Jack and things like that. And there he is, walking through the door with his hands stuffed in the pockets of a pair of raggedy board shorts, and his hair sticking up all crazy around his head like it really is made out of leaves and twigs. Kellie, I nearly topple off my stool.

He shoots me a quick sideways grin and then starts walking the aisles lazily, picking up really random things- like a bag of pork skin cracklings and a can of really gross cauliflower soup- and making exaggerated noises of interest, like 'This looks delicious,' so it's all I can do to keep from cracking up laughing. He has to squeeze by Jed at one point- the aisle at the store are pretty narrow, and Ray's not exactly a lightweight- and when Jed barely glances at him, a thrill shoot's through me. He doesn't know. Kellie doesn't know that I can still taste Hanna's lips against mine, can still feel his hand sliding over my shoulders.

For the first time in my life, I've done something for me and by choice and not because somebody told me it was good or bad. As Hanna walks through the store, I think that there's an invisible thread tethering us together, and somehow it makes me feel more powerful than ever before.

Finally, Hanna comes up to the counter with a pack of gum, a bag of chips, and a root beer.

'Will that be all?' I say, careful to keep my voice steady. But I can feel the color rising in my cheeks. His eyes are amazing today, almost pure gold.

He nods…

'That's all.' I ring him up, my hands shaking, desperate to say something more to him but worried that Rachel will hear. At that moment another customer comes in, an older man who has the look of a regulator. So, I count out Hanna's change as slowly and carefully as I can, trying to keep him standing in front of me for as long as possible. But there are only so many ways you can count change for a five-dollar bill. Eventually, I pass him his change, giving an old fashioned two-dollar bill with red numbers on it, then with a single one. Our hands connect as I place the bills in his palm, and a shock of electricity goes through me. I want to grab him, pull him toward me, kiss him right there.

'Have a great day.' My voice sounds high- pitched, strangled. I'm surprised I can even get the words out.

'Oh, I will.' He shoots me his amazing, crooked smile as he backs up toward the door.

'I'm going to Cove.'

And then he's gone, pivoting out into the street. I try to watch her go, but the sun blinds me as soon as she's out the door and he turns into a flashing, blurry shadow, wavering and endangered.

I can't stand it. I hate thinking of him weaving through the streets, getting farther and farther away. In addition, I have five more hours to get through beforehand I'm supposed to meet her. I'll never make it.

Before- I can think about what I'm doing, I duck around the counter, peeling off the apron I've been wearing since dealing with seepage in one of the freezer suitcases. 'Kellie, grab the register for a second, okay?' I call.

He blinks at me perplexedly. 'Where are you going?' 'Customer,' I say. 'I gave him the wrong change.'

'But-,' Kellie starts to say out loud. I don't stop to hear his objections. I can imagine what they'll be, anyway. But you counted his change for five minutes. Oh well. So, she will think I'm stupid. I can live with it.

Down the street Hanna is paused on the corner, waiting for a city truck to grumble past me and us- so we.

'Hey!' I shout out, and he turns. A woman pushing a stroller on the other side of the street stops raises her hand to shield her eyes and follows my progress down the street. I'm going as fast as I can, but the pain in my leg makes it problematic to do more than shuffle along. I can feel the woman's gaze pricking up and down my body like a series of needles.

Marcel- 'There is nothing like the same as a girl's lower lips! It just turns you on! Sooooo kissable- yah you like it, Karly.'

Karly- 'Um-hum!'

'I gave you the wrong change,' I call out again, even though I'm close enough to him now to speak normally. All being well it will get the lady off my back. But she keeps watching us.

'You shouldn't have come,' I whisper when I catch up to him. I imaginary to press something into his hand. 'I told you I'd meet you later.' He moves his hand easily to his pocket, picking up faultlessly on our little charade, and whispers back, 'I couldn't wait.' Kelly waggles his hand in my face and looks stern like he's scolding me for being careless. But his voice is soft and sweet.

Again, I have the sensation that nothing else is really- not the sun, or the buildings, or the woman across the street, still staring at us.

Then I turn and limp back to the store. I can't believe what I've just done. I can't believe the risks I'm taking. But I need to see him. I need to kiss him. I need it as much as I've ever needed anything. I have that same pressing feeling in my chest like when I'm at the very end of one of my sprints and I'm just dying, screaming to stop, to catch my breath.

'Thanks,' I say to Jed, taking my spot behind the counter. 'There's a blue door around the corner, in the alley,' I say quietly as I back away, raising my hands like I'm apologizing. 'Meet me there in five. Knock four times.' Then, more loudly, I say, 'Listen, I'm really sorry.

As I said, it was an honest mistake.' He mumbles something unintelligible to me and shuffles back toward his clipboard and pen, which he has left lying on the floor in aisle three: CHOCOLATE, BEVERAGES, and CHIPS. The guy I made for a regulator has his nose buried in one of the freezer compartments. I'm not sure whether he's looking for a frozen dinner or just taking advantage of the free cold air.

Either way, as I look at him, I have a flashback to last night, to the whistling of the air as the clubs came down like scythes, and I feel a rush of hatred for him- for all of them. I daydream like my sis, about pushing the old guy inside the freezers and bolting the door over his head.

Thinking about the raids makes me anxious about Hana again. News of the raids is in all the papers. Apparently, hundreds of people all over Pittsburgh were taken last night to be interrogated, or summarily shipped off to the Vaults, though I didn't hear anyone reference the party in the Highlands specifically.

I tell myself if Kallie hasn't called me back by this evening, I'll go to her house. I tell myself that in the meantime there's no point in worrying, but all the same, the guilty feeling keeps worming around in my stomach. The timeworn guy is still hovering over the freezer compartments and paying me absolutely no attention.

Good- I slip on the apron again, and then, after checking to see that Hanna isn't watching, reach up and grab all the bottles of ibuprofen- about a dozen of them- and slide them into the apron pocket. Then I sigh loudly. 'Hanna, I need you to cover for me again.' He looks up with those watery blue eyes. Blink, blink. 'I'm reserving.' 'Well, we're totally out of anesthetics back here. Didn't you notice?' He stares at me for several long seconds. I keep my hands clasped tightly behind my back. Else I'm sure their trembling would give me away.

In conclusion- he shakes his head.

'I'm going to see if I can dig some up in the supply room. Clutch the register, okay?' I slip out from behind the counter slowly, so I don't commotion, keeping my body angled slightly

away from her. With any godsend- she won't sign the bulge in my apron. This is one indication of the deliria no one ever tells you about: Apparently, the disease turns you into a world-class liar.

I slip around a teetering pile of sagging cardboard boxes stacked at the back of the store and shoulder my way into the supply room, shutting the door behind me.

Inopportunely it doesn't lock, so I drag a crate of applesauce in front of the door, just in case Kellie decides to come to investigate when my search for the ibuprofen takes longer than usual.

A moment later there's a quiet tap on the door that leads out into the alley.

Beat, rap, knock, blow, and tap. The door feels weightier than usual. It takes all my strength just to yank it open.

'I said to knock four times-' I'm saying, as the sun cuts into the room, temporarily dazzling me. And then the words dry up in my throat and I nearly choke.

'Hey,' Rachel says. She's standing in the alley, shifting from foot to foot, looking pale and worried. 'I was hoping you'd be here.'

For a second, I can't even answer her.

I'm overwhelmed with relief- she is here, intact, whole, fine- and at the same time anxiety starts drumming through me. I scan the alley quickly: no sign of me- Kelly. Maybe he saw Hana and got scared off.

'Um-' Rachel wrinkles her forehead.

'Are you going to let me in, or what?'

'Oh, sorry. Yeah, come in.' She scoots past me, and I shoot one last look up and down the alley before closing the door behind me. I'm happy to see Hana but nervous, too. If Ray shows up while he is here- But he won't, I tell myself. He must have seen her. He must know it's not safe to come now. Not that I'm worried that Hanna would tell me, but still. After all the lectures- I gave her about safety and being reckless, I wouldn't blame her for wanting to bust me.

'Hot in here,' Hanna says, lifting her shirt away from her back.

She's wearing a white billowy shirt and loose-fitting jeans with a thin gold belt that picks up the hue of her hair. Nonetheless, she looks apprehensive, besides tired, and thin. As she shots a circle, examination out the pantry, I notice tiny scratches crisscrossing the backs of her arms. 'Evoke when I used to come and hang out with you here? I'd bring magazines and that stupid old radio I used to have? And you'd steal-'

'Chips and soda from the cooler,' I finish. 'Yeah, I remember.' That was how we got through summers in middle school when I first started logging time at the store. Five times- I used to fabricate reasons to come back here all the time, and Hana would show up at some point in the early afternoon and knock on the door five times, really soft. I should have known.

'I got your message this morning,' Hana says, turning toward me. Her eyes look even bigger than usual. Maybe it's that the rest of her face looks smaller, drawn inward somehow. 'I walked by and didn't see you at the register, so I figured I'd come around this way. I wasn't in the mood to deal with your uncle.'

'He's not here today.' I'm beginning to relax. Ray would have been here already if he was planning on coming.

'It's just me and she.'

I'm not sure if Ray hears me. Kellie- she's chewing on her thumbnail- a nervous habit I thought she'd kicked years ago- and staring down at the floor like it's the fascinating bit of linoleum she's ever seen.

'Hanna?' I say. 'Are you okay?' A massive shudder goes through her all at once, in addition, her shoulders cave forward and she starts to sob. I've seen Hana cry only twice in my life- once when someone pegged her directly in the stomach during dodgeball in second grade, and once last year, after we saw a diseased girl getting wrestled to the street by police in front of the labs, and they accidentally cracked her head so hard against the pavement we heard it all the way up where we were standing, two hundred feet away- and for a moment I'm totally frozen and unsure of what to do.

She doesn't bring her hands to her face or try to wipe her tears or anything. She just stands there, shaking so hard I'm worried she'll fall over, her hands clenched at her sides.

Part: 5

I reach out and skim her shoulder with one hand. 'Sh-h-h, Hanna. It's okay.' She jerks away from me. 'It's not okay.' She draws a long, shaky breath and starts speaking in a rush: 'You were right, Lena. You were right about everything. Last night- it was horrifying.

There was a raid… The party got broken up. Oh, God. There were people screaming, and dogs- Liv, there was blood. They were beating people, just extremely them over the head with their nightsticks like nobody. Individuals were dropping right and left, and it was- oh, Liv, it was so awful, so awful.' Hana wraps her arms around her stomach plus doubles forward like she's about to be sick.

She starts to say something else, but the rest of her words get lost: Huge, shuddering sobs run through her whole body. I step forward and wrap her in a hug. For a second, she tenses up- it's very rare for us to hug since it has always been discouraged- but then she relaxes and presses her face into my shoulder and lets herself cry. It's kind of awkward since she's so much taller than I am; she has to hunch over. It would be funny if it weren't so awful.

'Sh-hh,' I say. 'Sh-hh. It's going to be okay.' But the words seem stupid even as I say them. I think of holding Grace in my arms and rocking her to sleep, saying the same thing, as she screamed silently into my pillow. It's going to be okay. Words that mean nothing, really, just sounds intoned into vastness and darkness, little-scrabbling attempts to latch onto something when we're falling.

Hana says something else I don't understand. Her face is mashed into my shoulder blade and her words are garbled.

And then the knocking begins. Four soft but deliberate knocks, one right after the other.

Hanna and I step away from each other immediately. She draws an arm across her face, leaving a slick of tears from wrist to elbow.

'What's that?' she says. Her voice is trembling.

'What?' My first thought is to pretend

I haven't heard anything- and pray to God that Alex goes away.

Bash, bump, hit. Pause. Knock.

Yet once more…

'That' irritation creeps into Hanna's voice. I guess I should be happy she's not crying anymore. 'The knocking.' She narrows her eyes, staring at me suspiciously. 'I thought nobody comes in this way.'

'They don't, I mean- sometimes- I mean, the delivery guys-' I'm stumbling over my words, praying for Ray to go away, grasping for a lie that isn't coming. So-o much for my newfound skills.

Rachel- Then Ray nudges his head in the door and calls out, 'me?' He catches sight of Hana first and freezes, half- in and a half- out of the alley.

For a minute nobody speaks. Hana's mouth literally falls open. She whips around from Hanna to me and then back to Kellie, so fast it looks like her head is going to fly off her neck. Hanna doesn't know what to do either. She just stands completely still, like she can go invisible if she doesn't move. And it's the ill-advised thing in the world, but all I can ejaculate out is, 'You're late now.'

Part: 6

All I want is you-you- and me-me and you! Is that a song?

Hanna McGruben III and Ray both express at formerly the same damn time.

'You told him to meet you did you not?' she says as he says so both run their words together and piss, 'I got stopped by a fucking guard. Had to show my cards and piss.' Hanna gets business- like all at once she is run her shit taking mouth like she in on the crapper just duping it out.

This is why- I admire her for having the runs, oh not those ones god: One second she's sobbing hysterically, the next second she's completely in control of her shit. 'Come inside,' she says, 'and shut the back door up.'

Then he stands there awkwardly, lumbering his feet like she is holding in her piss which some girls just can't do. Got it…? Yep…! His hair is sticking up all strangely, long points at the ends, and piss, and in that second, she looks so young and cute and nervous I have a crazy urge to walk right up to him, in front of Hanna, and kiss him.

Nevertheless, she represses that urge really quickly. She turns to me and folds her arms and gives me a look I swear she stole from Mrs. Dickson, the principal of St. Paul's.

The girls all say.

'You have some amplification to do.'

'Your middle name is Ellie?' Hanna blurts.

Hanna and I both shoot hair a death stare, and he takes a step backward dick slap would have been better, she said under her breath.

'Um-' Words still aren't coming very easily. 'Hanna, you hark back to Rachel.'

She keeps her arms locked in place and narrows her eyes. 'Oh, I recollect Ray. What I don't remember is why Hanna is here.'

'He - well, he was going to drop off -' I'm still searching for a convincing explanation but, as usual, my brain picks that second to conveniently die on me. I look at Kellie weakly.

She gives a tiny shrug of her shoulders, and for a moment we just stare at each other.

I'm still not used to seeing her looking at with love or lust in her eyes you pick which one she is giving me. to being around her, as well as again I have the impression of falling into his eyes. On the other hand, this time it's not dizzying.

It's the opposite- grounding, like she's whispering to me without a word, proverbing she's there as well as she's with me and we're fine.

'Tell her,' he says.

Hana leans up against the shelves stocked with toilet paper and canned beans, relaxing her arms just enough so I know she isn't mad and gives me a look like, you better tell me.

So- I do. I'm not sure how long we have until Jed gets tired of manning the register by himself, so I try to keep it short. I tell her about running into Ray at Roaring Brooke Farms; I tell her about swimming out to the buoys with him at East End Beach and what he told me when we were there. I choke a little bit on the word Invalid and Hana's eyes widen- just for a second, I see a look of alarm flash across her face- but she keeps it together pretty well. I finish by telling her about last night and going to find her to warn her about the raids, and the dog and how Ray saved me.

When I describe hiding out in the shed, I get nervous again- I don't tell her about the kissing, but I can't help but think about it - but Hana is openmouthed again at that point, and obviously in shock, so I don't think she notices.

The only thing she says at the end of my story is: 'So you were there? You were there last night?' Her voice is weird and trembling, and I'm worried she's going to start crying again. At the same time, I feel a tremendous rush of relief. She's not going to freak out about Ray or be mad that I didn't tell her.

I nod…

She shakes her head, staring at me like she's never seen me before. 'I can't believe that. I can't believe you snuck out during a raid- for me.'

'Yeah, well.' I shift uncomfortably. It feels like I've been talking for ages, and Hana and Ray have both been staring at me the whole time. My cheeks are flaming hot.

Just then there's a sharp knock on the door that opens to the store, and Jed calls out,

'Liv? Are you in there?'

I was gesticulation hysterically to Ray. Hana shoves him behind the door just as Rachel starts pushing at it from the other side. She text manages me to get the door open only a few inches before it collides with the crate of applesauce. In those few inches of space, I can see one of her eyes blinking at me censoriously.

'What are you doing in there?' Hana pops her head around the door and waves. 'Hi, Rachel,' she says cheerfully, once again switching effortlessly into the cheerful public mode. 'I just came by to give Liv something.

And we started gossiping.' 'We have customers,' Ray is say's morosely.

'I'll be out in a second,' I say, trying to match Hana's tone.

The fact that Ray and his buddies- are disconnected by only a few inches of plywood is terrifying. I mumble and depart, closing the door again. Hanna, Kellie, and I look at one another in a hush. All three of us breathe out at the same time, a combined sigh of relief.

The X's and O's haunt me as she does. Sing with me… When Ray speaks again, he keeps his voice to a soft voice. 'I bought some things for your leg,' he says. He takes the backpack off and sets it on the ground, he kneels in front of me, then starts; pulling out the hydrogen peroxide, bacitracin, bandages, adhesive tape, cotton balls.

'Can I…?' He says. I roll up my jeans at the waist, and he starts unwinding the strips of T-shirt.

I can't believe Hana is standing there watching a boy- an Invalid- touch my skin. I know she would never in a million years have expected it, and I look away, embarrassed and proud at the same time.

Hanna inhales sharply once the makeshift bandages come off my leg.

Without meaning to I've been squeezing my eyes shut.

'Damn, Liv,' she says. 'That dog got you good.'

'She'll be fine,' Ray says, and the quiet confidence in his voice makes warmth spread through my whole body. I crack open an eye and sneak a look at the back of my calf. My belly does a flop. It looks like an enormous chunk has been torn out of my leg, do you see this? A few square inches of skin is- like, just plain missing.

'Maybe you should go to the hospital,' Hana says doubtfully.

'And tell them what?' Ray uncaps the tube of peroxide and begins wetting cotton balls. 'That she got hurt during a raid on an underground party?' Hana doesn't answer. She knows I can't actually go to the doctor. I'd be strapped down in the labs, or thrown in the

Vaults, before I could finish giving my name.

Part: 7

'It doesn't hurt that bad,' I say, which is a lie. Hana again gives me that look, as we've never met before, and I realize that she's actually- and possibly for the first time in our lives- impressed with me. In awe of me, even.

Alex dabs on a thick coat of antibacterial cream and then starts wrestling with the gauze and the adhesive tape. I don't have to ask where he got so many supplies. Another benefit of having security access in the labs, I assume.

Hana drops to her knees. 'You're doing it wrong,' she says, and it's a relief to hear her normal, bossy tone. I almost laugh. 'My cousin's a nurse. Let me.'

She practically elbows him out of the way. Alex shuffles over and raises his hands in surrender. 'Yes, ma'am,' he says, and then winks at me. Then I do start laughing. Fits of giggling overtake me, and I have to clamp my hands over my mouth to keep from shrieking and gasping and totally blowing our cover. For a second Hana and Alex just stare at me, amazed, but then they look at each other and start grinning stupidly.

I know we're all thinking the same thing.

It's crazy. It's stupid. It's dangerous. But somehow, standing in the sweltering storeroom surrounded by boxes of mac 'n' cheese and canned beets and baby powder, the three of us have become a team.

It's us against them, three against countless thousands. But for some reason, and even though it's absurd, at that moment I feel pretty damn good about our odds.

Unhappiness is bondage; therefore, happiness is freedom.

The way to find happiness is through the cure. Therefore, it is only through the cure that one finds freedom.

- From Will It Hurt? Common Questions and Answers About the Procedure, 7th edition, Association of American Scientists, Official USA Government Agency Pamphlet After that I find a way to see Kellie almost every day, even on days I have to work at the store. Sometimes Hanna comes along with us. We spend a lot of time at Back and Yellow Cove,

mostly in the evenings after everyone has left. Since Kellie is on the books as cured, it's not technically illegal for us to spend time together, but if anyone knew how much time we spent together- or saw us laughing and dunking and having water fights or racing down by the marshes- they'd definitely get suspicious.

So- when we walk through the city, we're careful to stand apart, Hana and I on one sidewalk, Ray on the other. Plus, we look for the emptiest streets, the rundown parks, the abandoned houses- places where we won't be seen.

We return to the houses in Deering Highlands. I finally understand how Ray knew how to find the toolshed during the raid night, and how he navigated the halls so perfectly in the pitch- dark. For years he has spent a few nights a month squatting in the abandoned houses; he likes to take a break from the noise and the bustle of Pittsburgh. He doesn't say so, but I know squatting must remind him of the Wilds.

One house, in particular, becomes our favorite: 38 Highland Street, and long-standing colonial that used to be home to a family of sympathizers. Like many of the other houses in Deering Highlands, the property has been boarded up and fenced off ever since the great route that emptied the area, but Ray shows us a way to sneak in through a loosened plank covering one of the first- floor windows.

It's strange: Even though the place has been looted, some of the bigger furniture and the books are still there, and if it weren't for the smoke stains creeping up the walls and ceilings, you might expect the owners to come home any moment. The first time we go, Hanna walks ahead of us calling, 'Hello! Ciao!' into the darkened rooms. I shiver in the sudden dark and coolness. After the blinding sunshine outside, it comes as a shock. Hanna pulls me closer to her. I'm finally getting used to letting her touch me, and I don't recoil or whip around to look over my shoulder every time she leans in for a kiss.

Part: 8

'Want to dance?' He teases.

Kiss me, and you will see how significant I am.

'Come on.' I slap him away. It feels weird to talk loudly in such a quiet place. Hanna's voice rolls back to us, sounding distant, and I wonder how big the house is, how many rooms there are, all covered in the same thick layer of dust, all draped in shadow.

'I'm serious,' he says. He spreads his arms.

'It's the perfect place for it.'

We're standing in the middle of what must once have been a beautiful living room.

It's mammoth- bigger than the whole ground floor of Hanna and our apartment. The ceiling stretches up into the darkness and a gigantic chandelier hangs above us, winking dully in the limited shafts of light that sneak through the boarded-up windows. If you listen hard, you can hear mice moving quietly in the walls. But somehow, it's not gross or frightening.

Somehow- it's kind of nice, and it makes me think of woods and endless cycles of growth and death and regrowth- like what we're really hearing is the house folding down around us, centimeter by centimeter.

'There's no music,' I say.

He shrugs, winks, holds out his hand.

'Music is overrated,' he says. I let him draw me toward him so we're standing chest to chest. He's so much taller than I am, my head barely reaches his shoulder, and I can feel his heart drumming through his chest, and it gives us all the rhythm we need.

~*~

My uncle could have gone anywhere north or south or west. At least we know he didn't go east; he would have ended up in the ocean. Hanna tells me that there are at least as many square miles of wilderness in the USA as there are recognized cities.

I tell Hana she can't believe it either, this is so unbelievable to me that for a while I can't believe it… can you?

~*~

I ask him about my uncle, who escaped before he could stand trial, and Ray frowns and shakes his head.

'Hardly anybody goes by a real name in the Wilds,' he says, shrugging. 'He doesn't sound familiar, though.' But he explains that there are thousands and thousands of settlements all around the country.

Kellie is a good listener and a better kisser, too, and can stay silent for hours while I tell him about growing up in mom's house, and how everybody thinks Karly can't speak and only I know the truth. He laughs out loud when I describe Jenny whom I can only see, and her pinched look and old- lady face and habit of looking down her nose at me like I'm the nine-year-old in my mind now like she was, when her brain dyed.

I feel comfortable talking about my mother with him too, and how it used to be when she was alive, and it was just the three of us- me, her, and Rachel. I tell him about the sock hops and the way my mom used to sing us lullabies, even though I can only remember a few snatches of the songs. Maybe it's the way he listens so quietly, and stares at me steadily with his eyes bright and warm, and never judges me.

(The feeling passes) Or do they really- the warmth of his hands draws it out of me.

And, of course, we kiss. A unique time in my mind- I even tell him about the last thing my mom ever said to me, and he just sits and rubs my back when suddenly I feel like

I'm about to cry. We kiss so much that when we're not kissing it feels weird like I get used to breathing through his lips and into his mouth. Slowly, as we get more comfortable, I start to explore other parts of her body too. The delicate structure of her ribs under her skin, her boobs and shoulders, butt, and vag. She- there- like chiseled stone, the soft curls of pale hair on his legs, the way his skin always smells a little bit like the deep- sea- all beautiful and strange.

~*~

The first time I'm shaking. Then I let him draw my whole shirt over my head and lie me down in the bright sunshine and just stare at me. Primary I'll only let him pull my shirt aside and kiss my collarbone and shoulders. Even crazier is that I let him look at me, too.

Besides, I just know he's looking at me thinking I'm wrong or deformed.

I'm suddenly aware of how pale I look in the sunshine, and how many moles I have spotting up and down my chest. I keep having the urge to cross my hands over my chest, to cover up my breasts, to hide.

~*~

'Beautiful,' But then he breathes, and when his eyes meet mine, I know that he really, truly means it.

Kiss this of mine- Kellie Continued-

Part: 9

Marcel-

He said to me- Kiss this of mine…

That night, for the first time in my life, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and don't see an in-between girl. For the first time, with my hair swept back and my nightgown slipping off one shoulder and my eyes glowing, I believe what Marcel said. I am beautiful.

But it's not just me. Everything looks beautiful. A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become unnecessary.

But then again it does not tell you this:

that love will turn the whole world into something greater than itself. Even the dump, shimmering in the heat, an enormous mound of scrap metal and melting plastic and stinking things, seems strange and miraculous, like some alien world transported to earth. In the morning light, the seagulls perched on the roof of city hall look like they've been coated in thick white paint; as they light up against the pale blue sky, I think I've never seen anything so sharp and clear and pretty in my life.

Rainstorms are incredible: falling shards of glass, the air full of diamonds. The wind whispers Marcel's name and the ocean repeats it; the swaying trees make me think of dancing.

Everything I see, and touch reminds me of him, and so everything I see, and touch is perfect.

Time jumps forward… It leaps. It pours away like water through fingers. Every time I come down to the kitchen and see that the calendar has flipped forward yet another day, I refuse to believe it. A sick feeling grows in my stomach, a leaden sensation that gets heavier every day.

Thirty- three days until the procedure.

Thirty- two days.

Thirty days.

And in- between, snapshots, moments, mere seconds; Marcel is smearing chocolate ice cream on my nose after I've complained I'm too hot; the heavy drone of bees circling above us in the garden, a neat line of ants marching quietly over the remains of our picnic; Marcel fingers in my hair; the curve of his elbow under my head; Ray whispering, 'I wish you could stay with me,' while another day bleeds out on the horizon, red and pink and gold; staring up at the sky, inventing shapes for the clouds: a turtle wearing a hat, a mole carrying a zucchini, a goldfish chasing a rabbit that is running for its life.

Snapshots, moments, mere seconds: as fragile and beautiful and hopeless as a single butterfly, flapping on against a gathering wind.

~*~

There has been a significant debate in the scientific community about whether the desire is a symptom of a system infected with amour deliria Nervosa or a precondition of the disease itself. It is unanimously agreed, however, that love, and desire to enjoy a symbiotic relationship, meaning that one cannot exist without the other. Desire is enemy to contentment; desire is an illness, a feverish brain. Who can be considered healthy who wants?

The very word want suggests a lack, an impoverishment, and that is what desire is: an impoverishment of the brain, a flaw, a mistake. Fortunately, that can now be corrected. The streets are unbearable during the day, the sun unrelenting, and people rush the parks and beaches, desperate for shade or breeze. It gets harder to see him. East End Beach- normally unpopular- is packed most of the time, even in the evenings after I get off work. Twice I show up to meet him, and it's too dangerous for us to talk or make a sign to each other, except for the quick nod that might pass between two strangers.

Instead, we lay out beach towels fifteen feet apart on the sand. He slips on his headphones and I pretend to read.

Whenever our eyes meet my whole body lights up like he's lying right next to me, rubbing his hand on my back, and even though he keeps a straight face, I can tell by his eyes that he's smiling. Nothing has ever been so painful or delicious as being so close to him and being unable to do anything about it: like eating ice cream so fast on a hot day you get a splitting headache.

I start to understand what Marcel said about his 'mom' and 'uncle'- about how they even missed the pain after their procedures. Somehow, the pain only makes it better, more intense, more worth it. The garden is suffering from the heat.

It hasn't rained in more than a week, and the sunlight filtering through the trees- which in July fell softly, like the lightest footstep- now slices dagger-like through the canopy of trees, turning the grass brown. Even the bees seem drunk in the heat, circling slowly, colliding, hitting up against the withering flowers before thudding to the ground, then starting dazedly back into the air. One afternoon Marcel, and I are lying on the blanket. I'm on my back; the sky above me seems to break apart into shifting patterns of blue and green and white.

Marcel is lying on his stomach and seems nervous about something. He keeps lighting matches, watching them flare, and blowing them out only when they're almost at his fingertips. I think about what he told me that time in the shed: his anger about coming to Pittsburgh, the fact that he used to burn things.

There is so much about him I don't know- so much past and history buried somewhere inside of him. He has had to learn to hide it, even more than most of us. Somewhere, I think, there is a center to him. It glows like a lump of coal being slowly crushed into diamonds, weighed down by layers and layers of the surface.

So much I haven't asked him, and so much we never talk about. Yet in other ways, I feel like I do know him, and have always known him, without having to be told anything at all.

'It must be nice to be in the Wilds right now,' I blurt out, just for something to say. Ray turns to look at me, and I stammer quickly, 'I mean- it must be cooler there. Because of all the trees and shade.'

'It is.' He props himself up on one elbow. I close my eyes and see spots of color and light dancing behind my lids. For a second Marcel doesn't say anything, but I can feel him watching me. 'We could go there,' he says at last… I think he must be joking, so I start to laugh. He stays quiet, though, and when I open my eyes, I see his face is totally composed.

'You're not serious,' I say, but already a deep well of fear has opened inside of me and I know that he is. Somehow- I know, too, that this is why he's been acting strange all day: He misses the backwoods.

'We could go if you want to.' He looks at me for a beat longer and then rolls onto his back. 'We could go tomorrow at… After your shift…'

'But how would we-' I start to say…

He cuts me off…

'Leave that to me…' For a moment his eyes look deeper and darker than I have ever seen them, like tunnels. 'Do you want to…?'

It feels wrong to talk about it, so casually, lying on the blanket, so I sit up… crossing the border is a capital offense, punishable by death, and even though I know that Marcel still does it sometimes, the enormity of the risk hasn't really hit me until now. 'There's no way,' I say, almost in a whisper. 'Is it impossible…?

The fence- and the guards- plus the guns.'

'I told you, and to leave that to me- okay?' He sits up too, reaches out and cups my face quickly, smiling. 'Anything's possible, Liv,' he says, one of his favorite expressions. The fear recedes… I feel so safe with him… I can't believe that anything bad can happen to me or us… when we're together. 'A few hours,' he says… 'Just to see.'

I look away… 'I don't know…' My throat feels parched; the words tear at my throat as they come out. Marcel leans forward, gives me a quick kiss on the shoulder, and lies down again next to me. 'No big deal…' he says, throwing one arm over his face, and eyes to shield him from the sun. 'I just thought you might be curious, that's all.'

'I am curious…?' - As to what…?

'Liv, it's fine- if you don't want to go with you.

Seriously…? It was just an idea… that I had.' I nod… even though my legs are sticky with sweat, I hug them to my chest. I feel incredibly relieved, and also disappointed, at the same time.

~*~

I have a sudden memory of the time Rachel dared me to do a back dive off the pier at Willard Beach and I stood trembling at its edge, too scared to jump. Eventually, she let me off the hook, bending down to whisper,

'It's okay, Liv. You're not ready.' All I would want was to get away from the edge of the pier, but as we walked back onto the beach, I felt sick and ashamed.

That's when I realize: 'I do want to go,' I burst out.

Marcel removes his arm… 'For real…?' I nod, too afraid to say the words again… to him. I am worried- if I open my mouth, I'll take it back.

Part: 10

Marcel sits up slowly, I thought he would be more excited, but he doesn't smile. He just chews on the inside of his lip and looks away.

'It means breaking curfew…'

'It means breaking a lot of rules…' He looks at me then, and his face is so full of concern- it makes something ache deep inside of me- like lust. 'Listen, Liv…' He looks down and rearranges the pile of matches he has made, placing them neatly side by side. 'Maybe it's not such a good idea? If we get caught that is- I mean… Like what if you or I get caught.' He sucks in a deep breath one, that he did not know he was holding- in for so long… 'I mean, if anything ever happened to you, I could never forgive myself.'

'I trust you,' I say and mean it 150 percent. He still won't look at me… why?

'Yeah, but - the penalty for crossing over -' He takes another deep breath. 'The penalty for crossing over is -' At the last second, he can't say death.

'Hey!' I nudge him gently with my body, and or elbow. It's an incredible thing, how you can feel so taken care of by someone and yet feel, also, like you would die or do anything just for the chance to protect him back.

'I know the rules. I've been living here longer than you have.'

He cracks a smile then. He nudges me back…

'Hardly…. At all… wow… shit… piss… crap… fucking… dick- waa- ed…'

Part: 11

'Born and raised. You're a transplant.' I nudge him again, a little harder, and he laughs and tries to catch hold of my arm. I squirm away, giggling, and he stretches out to tickle my stomach. 'Country bumpkin…!' I squeal, as he grabs out, and wrestles me back onto the blanket, laughing…

'City slicker,' he says, rolling over on top of me, and then kisses me. Everything dissolves heat, explosions of color, floating.

We agree to meet at Back and Yellow Cove the next evening, a Wednesday; since I won't be working again until Saturday, it should be relatively easy to get Hanna's mom to allow me to sleep over at Hanna's. Ray walks me through some of the major points of the plan. Crossing over isn't impossible, but hardly anyone risks it. I guess the whole punishable by- death thing isn't really a big attraction.

I don't see how we'll ever make it past the electrified fence, but Ray explains that only certain portions of it are actually electrified. Pumping electricity through miles and miles of fence is too expensive, so relatively few stretches of the fence are actually 'online': the remainder of the fence is no more dangerous than the one that encircles the playground at Deering Oaks Park. But as long as everyone believes that the whole thing is juiced up with enough kilowattage to fry a person like an egg in a pan, the fence is serving its purpose just fine.

Part: 12

'Smoke and mirrors, all of it,' Marcel says, waving his hand vaguely. I assume he means Pittsburgh, the laws, maybe all of the USA. When he gets serious a little crease forms

between his eyebrows, a tiny comma, and it's the cutest thing I've ever seen. I try to stay focused…

'I still don't see how you know all this,' I say. 'I mean, how did you guys figure it out…?

Did you just keep running people at the fence, to see whether they got fried in certain places…?' Ray cracks a tiny smile at me… 'Trade secrets, but I can tell you there where some observational experiments involving wild animals.' He raises his eyebrows. 'Ever eaten fried beaver?'

'Ou- ah…'

'Or fried skunk?' 'Now you're just trying to gross me out.'

There are more of us than you think:

That's another one of Marcel's favorite expressions, his constant refrain. Sympathizers everywhere, uncured and cured, positioned as regulators, police officers, government officials, scientists.

That's how we'll get past the guard huts, he tells me. One of the most active sympathizers in Pittsburgh is matched with the guard who works the night shift at the northern tip of the bridge, right where we'll be crossing. She and Ray have developed a sign, on nights he wants to cross over, he leaves a certain flyer in her mailbox, the stupid photocopied kind that takeout delis; and dry cleaners give out.

This one advertises for a free eye exam with Dr. Jaheah (which seems pretty obvious to me, but Ray says that re- sister's, and sympathizers- live with so much stress they need to be allowed their little private jokes,) besides whenever she finds it she makes sure to put an extra-large dose of Valium in the coffee; she makes for her husband to drink during his shift.

'Poor guy,' Ray says, grinning… at me… 'Nope- no matter how much coffee he drinks, he just can't seem to stay awake.' I can tell how much the resistance means to him, and how proud he is of the fact that it is there, healthy, thriving, shooting its arms through Pittsburgh. I try to smile, but my cheeks feel stiff, it still blows my mind that everything I've been taught- like- is so wrong, and it's still hard for me to think of the sympathizers; and resisters as allies and

not enemies… Nonetheless, sneaking over the border will make me one of them beyond a shadow of a doubt. At the same time, I can't seriously consider backing out now. I want to go; and if I'm honest with myself, I became a sympathizer a long time ago, when Ray asked me whether I wanted to meet him at The Cove, and I said yes.

I seem to have only hazy memories of the girl I was before then- the girl who always did what she was told and never lied and counted the days until her procedure with feelings of excitement, not horror and dread. The girl who was afraid of everyone and everything. The girl who was afraid of herself.

When I get home from the store the next day, I make a big point of asking my mom if I can borrow her cell phone. Then I text Hana: 'Sleepover tonight with- Hanna? Text message- Read's- 'Sleepover 2- night- W/ - H.'

Part: 13

I/we girls feel- 'All girls do with make- up is make themselves feel more self-conscious.' 'I feel that wet wipes are a girl's best- friend, no more just rubbing it all in, and they're good for the underarms too.'

Looking back- Music- scales: Here is how to remember this- Every good boy does fine- rhymes with the line- E G D F. Space rhymes with face- F A C E. do you see ones you hit a be in treble it goes the downward.

1 and e 2 and e 3 and 4 four do that- I want to say to music people of today.

The squiggly thingie is a rest use it and stop like a period in a sentence, god breath here- it did- it needs to go 200 beats per- minute. What is rests? Use um! I don't read 90 words a minute either, yet I can do it right now, and not fuck up slow it down… and do this too. You don't need to audio tune so much if you know this shit here. Stop rushing time and give my chair to a freshman, I no more than she ever will. Six years- I studied with the master teacher- Mr. Paul Walker of IUP- I have his background in all bass, and even strings and winds.

Um- don't say anything back to this. Or I will make you look like a fool in front of your friends. The same can be said to the teacher that fakes he way through everything that I had for a class in the past. So- you learn it- I did this shit way-way on the back- ass hole- no thanks to

you-you owe in companion you all do- me- oh- one of these things is not like the other- yeah you don't get it do you- retard! Sue me!

You fucked with the wrong guy! On a trumpet, if the ball matches the tip of your nose in height and angle then that is right- end of the story. You bake my life again and back your face! And you need to fix my teeth for that one also thanks for the cap. I love this one how to hold a trumpet this is for my line that was taken away for I could not handle it- you take your right hand and wrap your pinkie around the C- hold the ring. Lightly overlap the 3 fingers on top of the vails- for you that don't get it- or can handle it- the thing that goes up and down to you.

Don't mash your whole face in the mouthpiece! And F natural is not F sharp for the little one. Yet I can say that for the freshmen knows it all. I don't claim to know it all but- what happened to the ways it was years before? Left hand- wrap your thumb around the back of the valves, index and pointer around the two in the front, with the middle one in the hock ring, and the pinkie resting on the 3- valve slide not under not above on top. Do you need a picture to get it? I can sign that for yah- in your blue pen!

Naturals are the ones up there with nothing next to it. So- what flat and what sharp and with now miner over major, do you know?

Karly said- 'Understatement here for real's: 'The Pony Express' school's newspaper said- quite- 'Jenna T is the biggest flirt, and the most likable… Just say she is mostly to succeed- and I giggle my ass off at that one too.'

This has been our code recently whenever I need her to cover for me. We've told mom we've been spending a lot of time with Allison Dalsin, who recently graduated with us. She and her family are even richer than Hana's family, and Allison is a stuck- up bitch. I dirty and poor- or so they say- Yet I shake it off- oh uh ah- shake it off! Hanna originally protested against using her as the mysterious 'A,' on the basses that she didn't even like to think about pretend hanging out with her, but I convinced her in the end.

Part: 14

(Remembering the past)

Mom would never call the HERE FAMILY to check up on me. She'd be too intimidated, and probably embarrassed- my family is impure, tainted by mom 2nd husband's defection and, of course, by my mother, and Mr. Dalsin is the president and founder of the chapter of that piece, that I was talking about.

Allison could hardly stand to look at me when we were in school together, and way back in elementary school, after my mother died, she asked to switch desks to be farther away from me, telling the teacher that I smelled like something dying.

Hanna's response comes almost immediately. 'U got it. 'C u tonight.' The text message read- saying: 'You have got it- I will see you tonight.'

I wonder what Allison would think if she knew I would have been using her as cover for my boyfriend. She would freak out for sure, and the thought makes me smile. A little before seven o'clock I come downstairs with my overnight bag slung conspicuously over my shoulder. I have even let a few my pajamas poke out, funny I were them out like the most girl yet there off at home, I run around naked there- I have packed the whole bag exactly as- I would have if I were really going to Hanna's.

When mom gives me a flitting smile and tells me to have a good time, I feel a brief pang of guilt. I lie so often and so easily now. Then it's not enough to stop me- not at all. Once outside I head toward the North End, just in case Jenny or mom is watching from the windows. The walk is long, and I make it to Deering Highlands just as the last of the light is swirling out of the sky. As always, the streets here are deserted. I push through the rusted metal gate that surrounds the possessions, slide aside the loose slats covering one ground- floor window, and winch myself into the house. The darkness surprises me, and for a moment I stand there, blinking until my eyes adjust to the low light.

Part: 15

The air feels sticky and stale, and the house smells like mildew. Various forms begin to arise, and I make my way into the living room, and to the mold spotted sofa. Its springs are busted, and half of its stuffing has been torn out, probably by mice, but you can tell that once it must have been pretty- elegant, even.

I fish my clock out from my bag and set the alarm for eleven-thirty. It's going to be a long night. Then I stretch out on the lumpy couch, bawling my backpack underneath my head. It's not the world's most comfortable pillow, but it will do. I close my eyes and let the sounds of the mice scrabbling, and the low groans, and the mysterious ticking of the walls lull me to sleep.

I wake up in the darkness from a nightmare about my mother. I sit up straight, and for one panicked second don't know where I am. The faulty springs squeal underneath me and then I remembered it all in the past in my mind. I fumble for my alarm clock and see that it's already 12:21- I know I should get up but I still feel groggy from the heat and the dream, and for a few more instants I just sit there, taking deep breaths. I'm sweating; the hair is sticking to the back of my neck.

My dream was the one I usually have but this time reversed: I was floating in the deep- sea, treading water, watching my mother perched on some crumbling ledge hundreds and hundreds of feet above me- so far- I couldn't make out any of her features, just the blurry lines of her silhouette, framed against the sun. I was trying to call out a warning to her, trying to lift my arms, and wave at her to go back, away from the edge, but the more I struggled the more the water seemed to drag at me and hold me back, the consistency of glue, suctioning my arms in place and oozing in my throat to freeze the words there.

In addition, all the time and was drifting around me like snow, and I knew at any second she would fall and smash her head on the jagged rocks, which poked up through the water like sharpened fingernails.

Then she was falling, flailing, a black spot growing bigger and bigger against the blazing sun, and I was trying to scream, but I couldn't, and as the figure grew larger, I realized it wasn't my mother headed for the rocks. It was

Ray…

Part: 16

That's when I woke up. I finally stand, slightly dizzy, trying to ignore a feeling of dread. I go slowly, gropingly, to the window, and am relieved once I'm outside, even though I'm in more danger on the streets. But at least there's a bit of a breeze. The atmosphere in the house was stifling.

Ray is already waiting for me when I arrive at Back and Gold Cove, crouching in the shadows cast by a group of trees that stand near the old parking lot. He is so perfectly concealed that I almost trip over him.

Part: 17

He reaches up and draws me down into a crouch. In the moonlight, his eyes seem to glow, like a cat's. He gestures silently across Back and Gold Cove, to the line of twinkling lights just before the border: the guard huts. From a distance, they look like a line of bright white lanterns strung up for a nighttime picnic- cheerful, almost.

Twenty- one feet or more beyond the security points is the actual fence, and beyond the fence, the backwoods. They've never looked quite so strange to me as they do now, dancing and swaying in the wind. I'm glad Ray and I agreed not to express until we crossed over. The lump in my throat is making it difficult to breathe, much less say anything.

We'll be crossing over at the tip of Bridge so high up in the valleys, on the northeast point of the cove: if we were swimming, a direct diagonal from our meetup point. Ray impels my hand three times. That's our signal to move to the sounds... I follow him as we skirt the perimeter of the cove, being careful to avoid the marshland; it looks deceptively like grass, especially in the dark, but you can get sucked down almost knee-deep before you realize the difference. Ray arrows from shadow to shadow, moving noiselessly on the grass. In places- he seems to vanish completely before my eyes, to melt into the darkness.

As we loop around to the north side of the cove, the guard stations begin to outline themselves more clearly- becoming actual buildings, one-room huts made of concrete and bulletproof glass. Sweat pricks up on my palms, and the lump in my throat seems to quadruple in size until I feel like I'm being strangled.

I suddenly see how stupid our plan sounds to me and them. A hundred- a thousand! Things could go wrong. The sentry guard in number twenty- two might not have had his coffee yet- or he might have had it, nonetheless not enough to knock him out- or the Valium might not have kicked in. As well as even if he is asleep, Ray could have been wrong about the parts of the fence that aren't electrified; or the city might have pumped on the power, just for the night.

I'm so scared I feel like I might faint. I want to get Ray's attention and scream that we have to turn around, call the whole thing off, but he's still moving swiftly up ahead of me, and screaming anything- or making any noise at all will bring the guards down on us for sure. The guards make the regulators look like little kids playing cops and robbers.

Regulators and raiders have nightsticks and dogs; guards have rifles and tear gas.

Part: 18

We finally reach the northern arm of the cove. Ray drops down behind one of the larger trees and waits for me to catch up. I go into a crouch next to him.

This is my last opportunity to tell him I want to go back. But I can't speak, and when I try to shake my head no, nothing happens.

I feel like I'm back in my dream, getting slurped into the dark, floundering like an insect stuck in a bowl of honey.

Maybe Ray can tell how frightened I am.

He leans forward and fumbles for a moment, trying to find my ear. His mouth bumps once on my neck and grazes my cheek lightly- which despite my panic makes me shiver with pleasure- and then skims my earlobe.

'It's going to be okay,' he undertones to me, and I feel slightly better.

Nothing bad will happen when- I'm with Ray.

Then we're up again.

We run off moving forward at intervals, sprinting silently from one tree to the next and then stopping while Ray listens- as well as makes sure there has been no change, no shouts or sounds of approaching footsteps.

Stum- p- Stum- p- Stum- p!

The sound is getting closer to me.

Part: 19

The moments of exposure- of dashing from cover to cover- grow longer as the trees begin to thin out, and the whole time we're getting closer and closer to the line where the fringe of grass and growth disappears altogether and we will have to move out in the open, completely vulnerable.

It is a distance of only about fifty feet from the last bush to the fence, but as far as I'm concerned it might as well be a lake of burning fire.

Beyond the torn- up remains of a road, that existed before Pittsburgh was enclosed is the fence itself: looming, silver, in the moonlight, like some enormous spider webs. A place where things stick, get caught, are eaten. Ray has told me to take my time, to focus; when I pick my way over the barbed wire at the top, but I can't help but picture myself impaled on all of those sharp, spiny barbs. And then, suddenly, we are out- past the incomplete protection obtainable by the trees, moving quickly over the loose gravel and shale of the old road. He and I move ahead of me, bent nearly double, and I stoop as low as I can, but it doesn't make me feel any less exposed.

Fear it screams…

Hold Me

Ray

Part: 1

Kellie- Yes it screams slams into me from all sides at once; I have never- ever known anything like this fear. I'm not sure whether the wind picks up at that second or whether it's just the terror cutting through me, but my whole body feels like ice hangs from the trees in her story.

Ray- The darkness seems to come alive on all sides of us, full of darting shadows and malicious, looming shapes, ready to turn into a guard any second, and I picture the silence suddenly punctuated by screams, sighs, horns, bullets. I picture blooming pain and bright lights.

The world seems to transform into a series of disconnected images: a bright white circle of light surrounding guard hut twenty-two, which expands ever outward, as though hungry and ready to swallow us; inside, a guard slumped backward in his chair, mouth open, sleeping…

Kellie- Ray turning to me, smiling- is it possible he's smiling? Stones dancing underneath my feet like at prom night in his arms. Everything feels far away, as unreal and flimsy as a shadow cast by a flame. Even I don't feel real, I can't feel myself breathing or moving, though I must be doing both.

As well as then just like that, we're at the fence. Ray springs jump into the air, and for a second he pauses there. I want to scream Stop! Stop! And halt!

Part: 2

Ray- I picture the crack and sizzle as her body connects with fifty thousand volts of electricity, but then she lands on the fence, and the fence sways silently: dead and cold, just like he said.

Kellie- I should be climbing up after him, but I can't. Not immediately. A feeling of wonder creeps over me, slowly pushing out the fear. I have been so terrified of this and things like this… of the border fence since- I was a baby.

I have never gotten within five feet of the fence now. Do you see it…? We've been warned not to, had it drilled into us. They told us we would fry; told us it would make our hearts go haywire, kill us instantly. Now I reach out and place my hand through the chain- link, run my fingers over it. Dead and cold and harmless I am like her or so I feel I see Jenny, as I angel looking at me saying to do this all she is dark and looking at me with evil eyes, the same kind of fence the city uses for playgrounds and schoolyards. In that second it really hits me how deep and complex the lies are, how they run through Pittsburgh like sewers, backing up into everything, filling the city with stench: the whole city built and constructed within a perimeter of lies. Ray is a fast climber; he's made it halfway up the fence.

He looks over his shoulder and sees that I'm still standing there like an idiot, not moving. He jerks his head at me like, what are you doing?

I put my hand out to the fence again and then immediately jerk it back again: A shock runs through me all at once, but it has nothing to do with the voltage that should be pumping there. Something has just occurred to me.

They have lied about everything- about the fence, and the existence of the- Invalids, about a million other things besides. They told us the raids were carried out for our own protection.

They told us the watchdogs were only interested in keeping the peace. They told us that love was a disease. They told us it would kill us in the end. For the very first time, I realize that this, too, might be a lie.

There were mess and stink and blood and the smell of skin burning. There where people: people standing and eating, talking on the phone, frying eggs or singing in the shower.

I'm overwhelmed with sadness for everything that was lost and filled with anger toward the people who took it away. My people- or at least, my old people.

'What?' I ask. The intensity of his gaze nearly knocks the breath out of me - as though he's staring straight at me.

He doesn't answer me directly. He flips forward a few pages in the book, but he doesn't glance down at it. He keeps his eyes on me the whole time.

'You want to hear a different one?' He doesn't wait for me to answer before beginning to recite, ''How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.''

There's that word again: love. My heart stops when he says it, then stutters into a frantic rhythm.

''I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach.'' I know he's only speaking someone else's words, but they seem to come from him anyway. His eyes are dancing with light; in each of them, I see a bright point of candlelight reflected.

He takes a step forward and kisses my forehead softly. ''I love thee to the level of every day's most quiet need.'' It feels as though the floor is swinging - like I'm falling.

'Alex-' I start to say, but the word gets tangled in my throat. He kisses each cheekbone- a delicious, skimming kiss, barely grazing my skin. ''I love thee freely.'' 'Ray,' I say, a little louder. My heart is beating so fast I'm afraid it will burst from my ribs. He pulls back and gives me a small, crooked smile.

Browning,' he says, then traces a finger over the bridge of my nose. 'You don't like it-'

The way he says it, so low and serious, still staring into my eyes, makes me feel as though he's actually asking something else.

'No. I mean, yes. I mean, I do, but -' The truth is, I'm not sure what I mean. I can't think or speak clearly. A single word is swirling around inside me- a storm, a hurricane- and I have to squeeze my lips together to keep it from swelling up to my tongue and fighting its way out into the open. Love, love, love, love. A word I've never pronounced, not to anyone, a word I've never even really let myself think.

'You don't have to explain.' He takes another step backward. Again- I have the sense, confusedly, that we're actually talking about something else.

I've disappointed him somehow.

Whatever has just passed between us- and something did, even if I'm not sure what or how or why- has made him sad.

I can see it in his eyes, even though he's still smiling, and it makes me want to apologize, or throw my arms around him and ask him to kiss me. But I'm still afraid to open my mouth- afraid that the word will come shooting out, and terrified about what comes afterward. 'Come here.' Ray sets the book down and offers me his hand. 'I want to show you something.'

He leads me over to the bed, and again a wave of shyness overtakes me. I'm not sure what he expects, and when he sits down, I hang back, feeling self- conscious.

'It's okay, Hanna,' he says. As always, hearing him say my name relaxes me. He scoots backward on the bed and lies down on his back and I do the same, so we're lying side by side. The bed is narrow. There's just enough room for the two of us.

'See?' He says, tilting his chin upward.

Above our heads, the star's flare and glitter and flash: thousands and thousands of them, so many thousands they look like snowflakes whirling away into the inky dark. I can't help it; I gasp.

Part: 3

I don't think I've ever seen so many stars in my life. The sky looks so closely- strung so taut above our heads, beyond the roofless trailer- it feels as though we're falling into it, as though we could jump off the bed and the sky would catch us, hold us, bounce us like a trampoline.

'What do you think?' He asks.

'I love it.' The word pops out, and instantly the weight on my chest dissipates. 'I love it,' I say again, testing it. An easy word to say, once you say it. Short. To the point. Rolls off the tongue. It's amazing I've never said it before.

I can tell Ray is pleased. The smile in his voice grows bigger. 'The no plumbing thing is kind of a bummer,' he says. 'But you have to admit the view is killer.'

'I wish we could stay here,' I blurt out, and then quickly stutter, 'I mean, not really.

Not for good, but - you know what I mean.'

He moves his arm under my neck, so I inch over and lay my head in the spot where his shoulder meets his chest, where it fits perfectly. 'I'm glad you got to see it,' he says. For a while, we just lie there in silence. His chest rises and falls with his breathing, and after a while, the motion starts to lull me to sleep.

My limbs feel impossibly heavy, and the stars seem to be rearranging themselves into words. I want to keep looking, to read out their meaning, but my lids are heavy too: impossible, impossible to keep my eyes open.

'Ray?'

'Yeah?'

'Tell me that poem again.' My voice doesn't sound like my own; my words seem to come from a distance.

'Which one?' He whispers.

'The one you know by heart.' Drifting; I'm drifting.

'I know a lot of them by heart.'

'Anyone, then.' He takes a deep breath and begins: ''I carry your heart with me. I carry it in my heart. I am never without it.'' He speaks on, words washing over me, the way that sunlight skips over the surface of water and filters into the depths below, lighting up the darkness. I keep my eyes closed. Amazingly, I can still see the stars: whole galaxies blooming from nothing- pink and purple suns, vast silver oceans, a thousand white moons.

It seems like I've only been asleep five minutes when he is gently shaking me awake. The sky is still inky black, the moon high and bright, but I can tell by the way the candles are pooling around us that I must have been out for at least an hour or so.

'Time to go,' he says, brushing the hair off my forehead.

'What time is it?' My voice is thick with sleep.

'A little before three.' Alex sits up and scoots off the bed, then reaches out a hand and pulls me to my feet. 'We've got to cross before Sleeping Beauty wakes up.' 'Sleeping Beauty?' I shake my head confusedly.

Part: 4

Ray laughs softly. 'After poetry,' he says, leaning down to kiss me, 'we move on to fairy tales.'

Then it's back through the woods; down the broken path that leads past the bombed-out houses; through the woods again. The whole time I feel as though I haven't quite woken up. I'm not even scared or nervous when we climb the fence. Getting over the barbed wire is infinitely easier the second time around, and I feel as though the shadows have texture, and shield us like a cloak. The guard at hut number twenty-one is still in the exact same position- head tilted back, feet on his desk, mouth open- and soon we're weaving our way around the cove.

Then we're slipping silently through the streets toward Highlands, and it's then I have the strangest thought, half dread and half wish: that maybe all of this is a dream, and when I wake up, I will find myself in the Boondocks. Maybe I'll wake up and find I've always been there, and that all of Pittsburgh- and the workshops, and the curfew, and the procedure- was some long, twisted nightmare. I only spent a few hours there and I miss the Wastelands already- the wind through the trees that sound just like the ocean, the incredible smells of blooming plants, the invisible scurrying things- all that life, pushing and extending in every direction, on and on and on.

No walls-

Part: 5

Then Ray is leading me to the sofa and shaking out a blanket over me, kissing me and wishing me a good night. He has the morning shift at the labs and has just barely enough time to go home, shower, and make it work on time. I hear his footsteps melting away into the darkness.

Then I sleep. Love: a single word, a wispy thing, a word no bigger or longer than an edge.

That's what it is: an edge; a razor. It draws up through the center of your life, cutting everything in two. Before and after.

The rest of the world falls away on either side. Before and after- and during, a moment no bigger or longer than an edge.

'Live free or die,' I say- as she did. One of the strangest things about life is that it will chug on, blind and oblivious, even as your private world- you're little carved- out sphere- is twisting and morphing, even breaking apart. One day you have parents; the next day you're an orphan. One day you have a place and a path. The next day you're lost in a wilderness.

And still, the sun rises, and clouds mass and drift and people shop for groceries and toilets flush and blinds go up and down. That's when you realize that most of its- life, the relentless mechanism of existing- isn't about you. It doesn't include you at all. It will thrust onward even after you've jumped the edge.

Even after you're dead.

When I make my way back into downtown Pittsburgh in the morning, that's what surprises me the most- how normal everything looks. I don't know what I was expecting.

I didn't really think that buildings would have tumbled down overnight, that the streets would have melted into rubble, but it's still a shock to see a stream of people carrying briefcases, and shop owners unlocking their front doors, and a single car trying to push through a crowded street. It seems absurd that they don't know, haven't felt any change or tremor, even as my life has been completely turned upside down. As I head home, I keep feeling paranoid, like someone will be able to smell the Wilds on me, will be able to tell just from seeing my face that I've crossed over.

The back of my neck itches as though it's being poked with branches, and I keep whipping off my backpack to make sure there aren't any leaves or burrs clinging to it- not that it matters since it's not like Pittsburgh is treeless.

Nonetheless, no one even glances in my direction. It's a little before nine o'clock, and most people are rushing to get to work on time. An endless blur of normal people doing normal things, eyes straight ahead of them, paying no attention to the short, nondescript girl with a lumpy backpack pushing past them.

The short, nondescript girl with a secret burning inside of her like a fire.

It's as though my night in the Wilds has sharpened my vision around the edges. Even though everything looks superficially the same, it seems somehow different- flimsy, almost, as though you could put your hand through the buildings and sky and even the people. I remember being very young and watching Rachel build a sandcastle at the beach. She must have worked on it for hours, using different cups and containers to shape towers and turrets. When it was done it looked perfect, like it could have been made out of stone.

But when the tide came in, it didn't take more than two or three waves to dissolve its shape entirely. I remember I burst into tears, and my mother bought me an ice cream cone and made me share it with Rachel.

That's what Pittsburgh looks like this morning: like something in danger of dissolving. I keep thinking about what Ray always says: There are more of us than you think.

I sneak a glance at everyone who goes by, thinking maybe I'll be able to read some secret sign on their faces, some mark of resistance, but everyone looks the same as always: harried, hurried, annoyed, zoned out. When I get home, mom in the kitchen washing dishes. I try to scoot past her, but she calls out to me. I pause with one foot on the stairs. She comes into the hallway, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

'How was Hanna's?' she asks. She flicks her eyes all over my face, searchingly, as though checking for signs of something. I try to will back another bout of paranoia. She couldn't possibly know where I've been.

'It was fine,' I say, shrugging, trying to sound casual. 'Didn't get a lot of sleep, though.'

'Mmm.' Carol keeps looking at me intensely. 'What did you girls do together?'

She never asks about Hana's house and hasn't for years. Something's wrong, I think.

'You know, the usual. Watched some TV. Hana gets, like, seven channels.' I can't tell if my voice sounds weird and high- pitched, or if I'm just imagining it.

Carol looks away, twisting her mouth up like she's accidentally gotten a mouthful of sour milk. I can tell she's trying to work out a way to say something unpleasant; she gets her sour milk face whenever she has to give out bad news. She knows about Ray, she knows, she knows. The walls press closer and the heat is stifling.

Then, to my surprise, she curls her mouth into a smile, reaches out, and places a hand on my arm. 'You know, Lena - it won't be like this for very much longer.' I've successfully avoided thinking about the procedure for twenty- four hours, but now that awful, looming number pops back into my head, throwing a shadow over everything.

Seventeen days.

'I know,' I squeeze out. Now my voice definitely sounds weird. Carol nods and keeps the strange half-smile plastered on her face. 'I know it's hard to believe, but you won't miss her once it's over.'

'I know.' Like there's a dying frog caught in my throat.

Carol keeps nodding at me really vigorously. It looks as though her head is connected to a yo-yo. I get the feeling she wants to say something more, something that will reassure me, but she obviously can't think of anything because we just stand there, frozen like that, for almost a minute.

Part: 6

Finally- I say, 'I'm going upstairs. Shower.' It takes all my willpower just to get out the words. Seventeen days keep tearing through my mind, like an alarm.

Mom seems relieved that I've broken the silence. 'Okay,' she says. 'Okay…' I start up the stairs two at a time. I can't wait to lock myself in the bathroom. Even though it must be more than eighty degrees in the house, I want to stand under a stream of beating hot water, melt myself into vapor.

'Oh, Liv.' Mom calls out to me almost as an afterthought. I turn around and she's not looking at me. She's inspecting the fraying border of one of her dish towels. 'You should put on something nice. A dress- or those pretty white slacks you got last year. And do your hair. Don't just leave it to air- dry.'

'Why?' I don't like the way she won't look at me, especially since her mouth is going all screwy again. Hanna snaps her head up and looks at me. 'Not alone,' she says quickly. 'Of course, not alone. Her mother will be coming with us. And I'll be here too, obviously. Besides, she had her procedure last month.' As though that's what's bothering me.

Today?' I have to reach out and place one hand on the wall. Somehow, I've managed to completely forget about her some that neat printed name on a page.

Hanna must think I'm nervous about meeting him because she smiles at me.

'Don't worry, Liv. You'll be fine. We'll do most of the talking. I just thought you two should meet, since -' She doesn't finish her sentence. She doesn't have to.

Since we're paired. Since we'll be married.

Part: 7

Bedtime oh bedtime-

Since I'll share my bed with him, and wake up every day of my life next to him, and have to let him put his hands on me, and have to sit across from him at dinner eating canned asparagus and listening to him rattle on about plumbing or carpentry or whatever it is he's going to get assigned to do.

'No!' I burst out.

Kellie- I look startled or so you would say. She's not used to hearing that word, certainly not from me.

'What do you mean, no?'

I lick my lips. I know refusing her is dangerous, and I know that it's wrong.

But I can't meet her soon enough. I won't. I won't sit there and pretend to like him, or listen to mom talk about where we'll live in a few years, while Ray is out there somewhere- waiting for me to meet up with him, or tapping his fingers against his desk while he listens to music, or breathing, or doing anything at all. 'I mean -' I struggle for an excuse.

'I mean- I mean, couldn't we do it some other time? I don't really feel good.' This, at least, is true.

'Oh,' I say. The way I figure it, life's the sum total of all our small mistakes, little tragedies, bad choices. Parents teach you a lot of things, but the most important thing they teach you is this: how people will fuck you up in the future. If they're any good, they teach you to get used to it.

Like the party's before- I haven't been upstairs since the first time Ray brought me here with Hanna when we made it a point to explore every room of the house. I didn't even think to check the second floor earlier this afternoon. Here it's even darker than downstairs, if possible, and hotter too, a black and drifting mist.

He starts shuffling down the hall, past a row of identical wooden doors.

'This way…' Above us, a frantic sound of fluttering: bards, disturbed by the sound of his voice. I think he stops at the door to the master bedroom. I shiver. But Ray is emphatic, so I let him open the door and I pass inside in front of him. As soon as we walk into the room I gasp

and stop so suddenly he bumps into me. The room is incredible; it's transformed to me in a romantic thought. I was his wife now… a happy ever after no yet that's- a life no?

'Well?' There's a note of anxiety in-

His voice… 'What do you think of this?' I can't answer him immediately.

He has shoved the old bed when he jumped in a naked, into one of the corners, and swept me off my feet, the floor perfectly clean. The windows- or what windows remain are flung open, so the air smells like gardenias and night-blooming jasmine, their scents drifting in on the wind from outside. He has arranged our blanket and books in the center of the room and unraveled a sleeping bag there too, surrounding the whole area with dozens and dozens of candles stuck in funny makeshift canisters, like old cups and mugs or discarded Coca-Cola cans, just like they were at his house in the woods. He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

'Ray-' I start to say, Suddenly I'm almost frightened of him, terrified of his absolute and utter perfection. He leans forward and kisses me. And when he's pressed so close to me, with the softness of his T-shirt brushing my face and the smell of suntan lotion and grass coming off his skin, he feels less frightening.

'It's too dangerous to go back to the Wilds.' His voice is hoarse, as though he's been yelling for a very long time, and a muscle is working furiously in his jaw. 'So, I brought the Wilds here. I thought you would like it.'

'I do. I- I love it.' I press my hands against my chest, wishing I could somehow be even closer to him. I hate skin; I hate bones and bodies. I want to curl up inside of him and be carried there forever. His face so quickly I can barely catch them all, and his jaw keeps twitching back and forth. 'I know we don't have much time like you said. We hardly have any time at all-'

'No!' I bury my face in his chest, wrap my arms around him and squeeze.

Unimaginable, incomprehensible: a life lived without him. The idea breaks me- the fact that he's almost crying breaks me- the fact that he did this for me, the fact that he believes I'm worth it- kills me. He is my world and my world- is him, and without him, there is no world.

'I won't do it. I won't go through with it. I can't. I want to be with you. I need to be with you.'

He grasps my face, bends down to look into my eyes. His face is blazing now, full of hope.

'You don't have to go through with it…' he says.

His words come tumbling out.

He's obviously been thinking about this for a long time and only trying not to say it. 'Liv, you don't have to do anything. We could run away together. To the backwoods. Just go and never come back. Only- Liv, we couldn't ever come back.

You know that, right? They'd kill us both or lock us up forever- a lifetime of running: that's what I've just said I wanted. I take a quick step backward, feeling suddenly dizzy.

'Wait,' I say. 'Just hold on a second.'

He releases me. The hope dies in his face all at once, and for a moment we just stand there, looking at each other.

'You weren't serious,' he says finally.

'You didn't mean it.'

'No, I did mean it, it's just-'

'It's just that you're scared,' he says.

He walks to the window and stares out at the night, refusing to look at me.

His back is terrifying again: so solid and impenetrable, a wall.

'I'm not scared. I'm just-' I fight a murky feeling. I don't know what I am. I want Ray and I want my old life and I want peace and happiness and I know, that I can't live without him, all at the same time.

'It's okay…' His voice is dull. 'You don't have to explain.'

'My mother,' I burst out. He turns then, looking startled. I'm as surprised as he is. I didn't even know I was going to say the words until I said them. 'I don't want to be like her. Don't you understand? It's me or her take your pick and he said the words…

I will…

Chapter: 141

Retrograde…

'He is,' he says, and makes an abrupt right turn down a short hallway that ends at a heavy iron door. This is marked with another printed sign. It says, LIFERS. Underneath the word, someone has written in pen, HA-HA.

'What are you-' I'm more confused than ever, but I don't have time to finish formulating my question. Alex pushes his way out the door and the smell that greets us- of wind and grass and fresh things- is so unexpected and welcome that I stop speaking, taking long, grateful gulps of air. Without realizing it, I've been breathing through my mouth. Do you feel like you're falling? You've taken this step in front of you is further from the truth. You fall apart in front of me again, Again! Yes- denial isn't the way to forgiveness.

We're in a tiny courtyard, surrounded on all sides by the stained gray sides of the Vaults. The grass here is amazingly lush, reaching practically to my knees. A single tree twists upward to our left, and a bird is twittering in its branches. It's surprisingly nice out here, peaceful and pretty- strange to be standing in the middle of a little garden while enclosed by the massive stone walls of the prison, like being at the exact center of a hurricane, and finding peace and silence in the middle of so much shrieking damage.

He has moved several paces away. He is standing, head bowed, with his eyes on the ground. He must have a sense too of the peacefulness here, the stillness that seems to hang in the air like a veil, covering everything in softness and rest. The sky above us is darker than it was when we first entered the vaults: Against all the grayness and shadow, the grass stands vivid and electric, as though it is lit up from inside. It will rain at any second. It has to. I have the sensation of the world holding its breath before a giant exhales's, balancing, teetering, about to let go.

'Here.' His voice rings out, surprisingly loud, and it startles me.

'Right here.' He points to a shard of rock sticking up crookedly from the ground. 'That's where my father is.' The grass is broken up by dozens of these rocks, which at first glance appeared to be naturally, haphazardly arranged. Then I realize that they've been

deliberately tamped down into the earth. Some of them are covered in fading black markings, mostly illegible, although on one stone I recognize the word BLAIR and on another DIED.

Tombstones, I realize, as the purpose of the courtyard dawns on me. We're standing in the middle of a graveyard. Alex is staring down at a large chunk of concrete, as flat like a tablet, pressed down into the earth in front of his feet. All the writing is visible here, the words neatly printed in what looks like a black marker, their edges slightly blurred as though someone has been continuously retracing them over a long period of time. I look at her grave- I want to reach out and slip my hand into Ray's, but I don't think we're safe.

There are a few windows surrounding the courtyard on the ground floor, and even though they are thickly coated in grime, someone could walk by at any moment, lookout, and see us. 'Your friends, and sister?'

He nods, then shakes his shoulders, a sudden movement as though trying to jerk himself away from sleep. 'Yeah.'

'He was here?'

One side of his mouth quirks up into a smile, but the rest of his face remains stony. 'For four years I have looked over these.' He draws a slow circle in the dirt with his toe, the first physical sign of discomfort or distraction he has given since we arrived. At that moment I am in awe of him: Since I've known him, he has done nothing but support me and give me comfort and listen to me, and all this time he has been carrying the weight of his own secrets too.

Part: 8

I say to you now dad- 'What happened?'

I ask quietly. 'I mean, what did he...?' I trail off. I don't want to push the issue. It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, what a child will believe You never loved me, It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe, You never loved me, You can't hurt me now, I got away from you, I never thought I would, you can't make me cry, you once had the power, I never felt so good about myself, seems like yesterday, I lay down next to your boots and I prayed for your anger to end, Oh Father I have sinned; Oh Father you never wanted to live that way you never wanted to hurt me, why am

I running away, maybe someday, when I look back I'll be able to say you didn't mean to be cruel Somebody hurt you too.

~*~

Ray glances at me quickly and looks away. 'What did he do?' he says. The hardness has returned to his voice. 'I don't know. What all the people who end up see us here in this town. He thought for himself. He avoids my eyes carefully. 'The dead ward,' he says quietly. 'For political prisoners, mostly. They're kept in solitary confinement. And no one ever gets released.' He gestures around him, to the other shards of stone poking up through the grass, dozens of makeshift graves. I would give anything to touch him, but the best I can do is an inch closer to him so that our skin is separated by only a few inches.

He looks at me then, shooting me a sad smile. showing off those awful teeth, but his eyes maintain their strange flatness, as though there's a curtain drawn over them. I wonder if this, for him, was a side effect of the cure, or whether he was always like that.

He tilts his head back, peering at Ray through narrowed eyes, grows even stronger. I remember those nights…

Kelly- Why?

Why- she and they ended it the way I did- so- that way everyone, even he would be able to see me, with their own eyes. So, they can see the wounds that they did to me. Realizing all the gashes, which they gave me over time, and the ones I give myself because of them. They all can look at me, and see it all… Just like, I see it every day when I look at my own reflection! They all can think- about what they have done to me. However, I do not think they would really care. If they did see me hanging there bare, lifeless, and limp.

They have no emotions for me in their pee- brained minds, to feel anything. I ask- can you grasp me; can you feel me? Can you get the impression of me hanging there- all by myself? I am so lonesome and afraid! You know- I do feel as if I would be better off being dead! Don't you think so too? How did I let things get so out of hand? Or did I? Is this all meant to be?

Really…?

I just do not know what to believe anymore. I sang throw the air and jumped. I did it! But not like I planned. One way or another that made me come to my senses. I got lose from the noose, on my tree swing, and fell hard to the ground below. That is when I walked into the home, with my head down. And went up the steps up to my room dripping wet. The books are all I have now with the stone that says their name, along with their faces looking back at me when I not looking to see them there.

Just like her, I answer myself- 'I know that there is not one person on this planet, who truly cares if I am even here or not.' Oh God- 'Why does my life have to be like this?' I do not think I can take any more of living in this town!

The PEOPLE, SCHOOL, EVERYONE, and EVERYTHING is so fucking FAKE! I feel that it is all just another way for the SOCIETY to make me feel inferior. Because they think, they are so SUPERIOR to me, and who I am to them. Every day of my life, I have felt like I have been drowning in a pool, with weights attached to my ankles.

I say Maggie- Of course, there is no way for me to escaping from the chains that are holding her him and me down. The one and only person, that holds the key to my freedom: WILL NEVER LET ME GO! I live in this small dull town for too damn long. It is a UNSYMPATHETIC, obscure, lonely, totally depressed and depressing place. All these streets surrounding me are covered with filth.

I respect myself more than that, but it is getting harder to regardless. If that is what it takes to be popular, I do not want it. These types of guys just are not worthy of me I suppose. The other girls can have them all they want, and you know they do. Then lastly, nerds a sad and pathetic grope of creatures that are so misunderstood.

Really through no fault of their own. Most of the time, it is just the way they all are, and not what they choose to be. Just like most of us out there. You know I am not even on that list either. As for me- and my category, I would have to say that I am in the 'Rejected classification.' or 'Reject!' However- I do not want anybody's pity. I just want their RESPECT! That is just something I cannot have been in this unwanted grouping. Being in this rejected category is not always pleasant as you can see. I have learned to adapt and overcome life's many difficulties up to now at least.

I have learned that some people can do harmful and heinous things to others, yet they prosper. Then someone like me has to SUFFER through it all. It eats at you over time: 'People are fake anger and frustration will eat at you like cancer.' Until it kills you! When I look back at everything in my past, the whole photograph comes into focus. 'I believe that revenge is not the answer, everyone gets a turn.' It is just a matter of time, what coming around for you, will you be like my friends and family, or like me or her or him?

What do you choose to be?

~Nevaeh~

Nevaeh

Book: 30

Haven's Rockville

The Beginnings', Maggie's granddaughter kind-a…

The year is October 7, 1916, it was said, that she's was a young girl, was buried beneath a weeping willow tree, down towards the old train tracks, and that she would take over some of the young minds, that would come her way as that walked along them at the twilight of a creepy night.

Her grave marked with a noting other than the year, and a name that is rubbing away from age, she was so young and was tied down by a lover on the tracks- for it to cut her in two, that train still comes down this line with its haunting steam, and load blow on the horns. And some say they see her as they sit in the cars looking up close in their face… as if she is feeling their soul, to see if she wants to take it, as she did with mine, I am now her.

Just she is the girl in the window, that is lost looking for a way out, she haunts the old Victorian next to the tree and tracks. Nothing more than a chipping rock, and a pale face looking out- and we have all see her, she is real- even the one that doesn't believe, like the ones that don't think God is real say, she is a real ghost. Not more than a girl looking for happiness, some have even seen her walking to her swing, which blows in the wind of the old tree that has to be 100 years old now.

I didn't want to draw attention to her resting place, as I look at the train is doing 25 miles per hour or so- heading for the Rockville Bridge in Pennsylvania, this creepy house stands, and so does she in her room looking out.

Nevertheless, I couldn't leave her without remembrance, so I went to see her for myself and end up feeling her from the inside like she feels me on the outside. She'll never sleep peacefully I found out looking over the story, no one to disturb her, she just was too young, no sounds but whistle, and the vibration of the train coming down the line. That she flows in her essence… testifies to the power of friendship and generosity to conquer greed and depression. A wonderfully imaginative, startlingly moving and at times wickedly funny fantasy.

Part: 1

On a dark- October 4th 100 years almost to the day… I started doing this… every evening, she is at sitting at the window watching the storm, or me or something like that, I was as the little girl, Through the darkness sees a faint light, of the steamer going by like always.

Before she could come to the window the light disappeared. She sees me to like a spooky dream in your mind. I waited some minutes, to feel connected to her… Very faintly the light reappeared, flickering through the trees, she was with me… and I was in her, and she in me.

She looked down at me and decided to keep quiet this time, as she went down and into my body. I was absorbed in her, slipping oh so quietly out of the room, to be with me down by the tracks, and crept down the stairs to the back door, she went through… all the walls.

The track I walked cautiously along the edge, staying in the shadows, with her holding my hand. The excitement made me tremble… Everywhere, I go I have no privacy, I have no satisfaction, I can't get it… it's not something I can have.

My phone is tapped, and my PC hacked. I am being watched right now, I just feel that I am. She knows everything I do, everywhere I go. She sees who I am friends with and end it just because she can. She sits me up just to fall into her trap. I've used a fake name, it is all the same, I am her toy in her sick twisted game. At what point, do you say- I've had enough. Stop it- get a life!

Sarah- Friend come and go, I know that nothing can last more than a week with me; it has been like this all my life. You just get attached, and she puts an end to it so fast... you would not believe me. Why I don't know maybe it's because she must have me on her own, and she can't see me have the love of another that is not her? I don't know… all I know is that everyone leaves me before I want them too. But like I have a choice. No, not really. If you want me- we need to...

Run… and never look back, we go far from here where it won't matter, will be gone so far away that the names she says, won't mean a thing because we will have each other, and not care what others say. Our happiness would lie in each other's arms and the ring on your finger. I don't want to trap you, but you need to say yes to me, so this can happen! The sooner the better!

I am trapped by an overprotective and malicious boyfriend, who beats you. Who makes you work like a fool…? The jerk won't even buy you a ring after so many years of dating.

He trapped you!

Do you really think he loves you? Or is he just trapping you until he finds something more or just settles? You're tipped by your town. You are tipped because you like me but can't. You're trapped because of what they all say about me. All that matters to me is what you think, not them. You're tipped by him and he makes sure that you're not even allowed to look at another man like me. Plus, it all goes back to her, the one that trapped us both in not being in love. Forbidden to: dating, see, looking, feel, or even talk to one another.

I am- Tripped into missing out, tripped into being the weirdo, as the girl lost in the window…

I am- Tripped in to not knowing what you would feel like, in a hug or kiss. Tripped into be hated for no reason other by her rumors.

Tripped into missing you. You're trapped into wishing for me and dreaming of what could be. Yet your friends love him and not me, with me all they see in the past that is not true, a past that I was trapped into. I am trapped by you- in so many ways, that you never even knew about.

I am- Trapped because I have fallen in love with you and can't seem to forget about you. You're on my mind all the time. No blocks can stop us from someday getting together.

That is only if you get out of the trap of allowing everyone to push you around. You have to be strong and fight. I am trapped into fighting for your hand, and your love, and I just don't know why I keep trapping myself to you. I just don't understand why I can't get you out of my mind. I know one thing I never trip you like everyone seems to do around here, I am not like that. If you want me fine, and if not fine. I am trapped into being a hopeless romantic…

Me- I have to get out. I don't care what my mind says is logical, what my heart says it needs! There have been rumors of an uprising free of all the restrictions of the world. I'm done caring about the consequences. It's time to be self-interested and do some for me. The longing of you I can't take it anymore. The passion I have for you has my skin on fire! I can't sleep, I can't eat, and I can function right. Without you being in my life. It seems like you and I are trapped into having chastity belts, with no way to unlock them and connect. Your boyfriend has your key and she has mine.

I am- Trapped into the fantasy of us sleeping together playing in my head. Trapped into wanting more than a one-night stand with you. Like that even possible. You're trapped into making him happy, will on the inside you're miserable.

Trapped!

I am without you next to me now. I want to feel your kiss; I want to feel your body spooning or unstop of mine. I want to go out with you, and not have everyone stop it.

I want to go everywhere with you. I want you to live with me, you have a home here, if you can get out of your trap, I may be able to get out of mine. I want you to share my bedroom… I know it's crazy! But- I want you to be my girl. You have trapped me under the spell of your green eyes, and shy little sensual ways. 'Instead of losing my mind to you, I was hoping it would have been something else. You could imagine, my sweetheart that remands

nameless in this story, but you know who you are. Do me this favor and take it from me. I don't want to be thirty when I get married either, I want it now as I want you now.'

'I don't care when as long as it's soon, I don't care how as long as it happens, I don't care who sees us, it could be in a car in a local store parking lot. It's all the same to me along as I am with you!' As long as you're the one, I want you to be the first in everything, you shouldn't feel trapped by him to feel love like that. I am not sure if I'll be your first, but I want to be the last. You should be feeling the love from me.

The love I can give and take with you.

Its love I have for you… not entrapment.

Really, I don't think I am being selfish it is just time for this all happens to me. I have waited too long now!

Self-seeking I just need you, to save me! Trapped into taking care of everyone else, while nobody takes care of me.

Trapped into setting at home and going out to getaway.

Trapped into using other's money, because they won't let me work, I have everything I need, but not what I want.

Trapped into doing work, and not getting paid. Trapped for life, and afraid!

Taped in my faith, yet to me, that is a good thing. Hopeful that there is a life after death if not then life is not worth living is it. Taped into fear of death, trapped into seeing death all around me. Tapped into being around life, that just doesn't get it.

Trapped into feeling really cold. Trapped into being warm to those that are cold. Taped into seeing the small light, in the never-ending darkness. Trapped in never ever giving up.

Sarah- (Longing and Desire) I am longing to see you. Longing to be with you, longing to hear from you. I am longing for you. A longing like desire, I am desiring what I am longing for, and desiring is what trapping me to you right now. Longing and desire that he has for you is pushing you away from him, and also me.

Like a dark storm over your head. You have longed for me, but can it be, but will you and I be more than longing and desire? Will we be always been trapped in too long and desire, by the ones that long and desire to keep us apart?

I am longing and desiring your kiss on my lips! I am longing for your desiring hug with my hand right above your hips. Letting go of the past, with its dark toxic memories seeing them slip and ripe from our grip and fade away, for a brighter happier day, all I can do is pray for the both of us. You and I,

being together is a must! I just need to have your trust. Today, I feel alone...

Me- In the morning, when I woke up, I want to talk with my friends... But I couldn't find anybody... neither my life nor by me. My soul was eaten by loneliness… I have been living in a new place for four months, and I do not have a friend. I feel like I am cursed... Look, nobody writes even here. There are a lot of voices in my mind and I can't stop them.

'That's now the fifth day of rain.' Alayna said. 'Shouldn't we do something together this weekend?'

The microwave turned on by itself, I knew it was her, playing games as I also feel her hugging me, the lights flickered, and my mom did not even blink. Alayna and Harold retreated into the living room, not sure what to do. The TV played an ad, for The Haunting- and a giggle- yet it's her giggles in me, not mine.

'When something's strange in the neighborhood... I know that it's her taking my energy for her use-age.' They held each other close, no sign of having a fall out just five minutes' pass- my thinks I have lost it holding my own body for so long- Smalling like a nut.

They looked at the TV.

They looked at each other. 'Alayna laughed. Today, I feel alone... I want to talk with my friends, on the tracks she is all I have or want. But I couldn't find anybody... else that gets me like she… It was a dark stormy night, and the train was coming fast at me, and I want it to run me down… she said this is what happened to me, the thunder awakened me or, so I thought, and I feel the wind of the train rush by me as I got out of the way in the nick of time.

Then- just like that- I don't know how- I was in my bed cozy and warm, with her in the sheets with me, however, that is when I saw her hovering over me, we- I looked up, I thought I was dreaming. Yet she called out my name and said…

'I'm here to protect you, take my hand and I can show you the way to the light.' It's like I could feel her inside me, inside my soul.

She was talking to me, without saying a word, I felt her through, I feel her emotions, and I feel a teardrop running down my cheek. It was the baby girl we lost when Alayna had a miscarriage, this baby is what broke us up, we blamed each other I wasn't sure- if I could trust her; she looked innocent enough, but something nagged at the back of my mind, something I ought to have remembered but couldn't quite grasp.

It's like I could see through her, she looked just like my wife, when she was about nine years old. Maybe younger? And we used to play in the sandbox together in our sweatshirts or less. I guess are mothers through that was cute… or something, I have the photograph. Anyways- that was the first time I met her in the sandbox as a boy, and the girl that is over me looks so much like her that it is eerie to me. But why is she looking down at me? I hadn't seen my wife for nearly ten years; the marriage hadn't lasted long. I guess we were better as friends.

The girl in front of me smiled shyly, just like Alayna used to, and held out her small hand. As I took her hand the storm fell silent and I felt a strange energy course through me. It like she was saying hello daddy. She would be 5 if she was alive. There is not a day or night that I don't think about what could have been.

But wait, the girl in front of me looked five, but our little Lucie would have been nine now. Was it really that long ago? I vowed to contact Sarah, to try to say all the things I thought of over the years we had been apart.

There was so much I had to tell her, so much I had to ask forgiveness for.

Up till now would she forgive me, would the love be there for me? Is my little girl letting me no something that I don't know as of now? Is Alayna in need of me? Why now, why am I seeing Lucie?

I remember, the day I met Alayna it seems like so long ago, she was a freshman and I was a senior. She was a cheerleader and I was in the marching band. She was popular as for me not so much. I will never forget the first time she held my hand; she was everything to me then. Maybe I love her too much and drive her away, but why did I have to lose my only baby, there was no other girl for me than Sarah. I never dated, or went out, and one point I felt like giving up on my life, yet I didn't.

And maybe this is why...

When we met in college, I could hardly believe she was the same little girl, I had played in the sandbox with. There was a big party after the game and Alayna came over to me to talk about music. She took my hand and led me into the garden, and that was the beginning of our life together.

I don't think we would have lasted together if we had not been so hard on each other; we knew what we had to lose and that kept us coming back to each other. It took something outside our control to cause a rift big enough to break us apart.

Her hand was soothingly warm as she guided me out of bed and over to the window. The storm was still quite ferocious, but we were in a bubble of calm, just me and Lucie.

I see my child not being her- It was amazing to think, she is my daughter, she a good kid, and I am getting to share these moments with her, moments that I thought I would never have. Really, I am just in awe of her and the blessings of God's goodness for letting this happen for me. So, that maybe I see the light without seeing the light. It's every man's dream to see his little girl grow up and be happy. I didn't have that, but I am blessed to have this now.

Me- I evoke when we made this little girl, several weeks before the big day. The room was all ready for the day she came home, the walls soft in a rosy shade, and the crib and everything else was white. A butterfly mobile over top to soothing her to sleep.

Now that baby tune that it plays is hunting me if played. The picture frame on the wall is empty, the rocking chair has never been used. The stuffed teddy never squeezed. The baby bottles never held. The pack of pampers on the changing table never opened. The girly outfits never off the hangers. The door was closed by me, locking the memories away, and behind me. I don't go in her room I just can't, it has not changed in years.

I was the happiest baddy in the world, the day I found out she was a baby girl. I loved her before she even had a name. I want to perfect her from all the bad in this world and to be what was good. Show her that daddy is the only man that she can really trust. I wanted to buy her all the pink dress that I could.

Take her to the park, she and her walk and talk. I wanted to go to every school play and sports game that she was going to be a part of… I wanted to read her a bedtime story, really, I just wanted to be her daddy! I even wanted to see her been a dreadful teenager, I wanted to see her go to her first dance.

I wanted to see her find someone that loved her as much as I do. I wanted to have that dace the night she would have married. I wanted to see her grow up to a woman and give me grandbabies.

That would be perfect in my eyes and could do no wrong. That I could spoil. No man should have to see his baby girl go, before them it's the toughest thing in life to have to deal with and you never get over it, you learn to accept with it, really what chose- do yah have otherwise.

I can see here everywhere; she is with me all the time. She is mine. She is my love.

She is everything.

She is The Little Girl in White named:

Sarah, and I am trapped! BY HER…!

When I woke up my head buzzed, and my legs ached.

I reached under my pillow and found my phone; Alayna was calling. 'Hey Sarah,' I answered groggily. She answered, 'Where are you? We've been waiting to start for thirty minutes.'

I groaned as I knew she was talking about our presentation, 'can't you just do it with the others?' Alayna gave a deep sigh and then spoke with a stern voice, 'This is something you've planned for years, it's your project, not ours. Hurry up and get here now!'

She hung up. 'Great, another day in PowerPoint hell' I through driving to the company. My legs still hurt, but I tried to ignore it as I ran through my bits of the presentation while I was

driving. I looked at my slides for just 10 seconds and looked back up to see a car heading my way without control speed. As I yanked the steering wheel abruptly, I lost control of the car. I hit something and flipped forward. I got queasy and dizzy with all the flipping. When the car finally settled, I wasn't sure which way was up. An instant later my phone started to ring again.

Listen, we no time to wait for you. I'll put you on video, you can do the presentation by phone.' 'No! Wait for Sarah! I need help...' It was too late I could see the hall, a roomful of curious. A room was full of potential investors, some with a shocked expression, some possibly disgusted. I could hear people complaining, 'What is going on here?' Alayna saved the situation easily 'the Skype quality is really bad again'. The people murmured in agreement. One guy held up his hand and said in his accent, 'I still want to see your great invention. Let's hope this is not a paper tiger.' 'No, it's not.' Alayna said, 'It's an automatic driving assistant.' 'It's really good' I added. 'How is it good?'

Someone asked, 'You're in a smoking wreck!' 'Well...you see if the assistant had been driving, this would not have happened.' The guy who raised his hand before said, 'I don't think I like your logic, but, can we buy your assistant?'

Part: 2

-One dark day in December, I sat looking out of the window- she was me- and in me full. She had been awaiting her friends for the past half an hour, but still, after a whole morning, no one had turned up. She began to worry.

Something was definitely wrong.

Her mother was baking this evening, so the smoke alarms would be going off. She couldn't use the phone. But the kitchen was a mess. A terrible, horrifying mess. Her mother stood jumping from counter to oven, covered in flour and several other indistinguishable stains.

'Mum?

What have you-' she began as several loud knocks came from the front door.

'Lucie?

Can you come and help me for a minute, I said it out loud and my mom said your imaginary friend- really?'

You're going to need to see someone if this keeps going on… her mother called for her to stop at once.

Lucie sighed and left her place at the window, looking out the nock. Maybe baking was a distraction, and to keep her from worrying. Her mom was worried that she was even…

'She is sleeping with her imaginary girlfriend!?' Hearing her calling out her name in a soloing moment… her mom was looking in… to the eye-rolling moment.

Lucie is the girl- I am, or was…

One for grief, two for pleasure, three for a girl, I'm stuck on three, I love the girl. I just can't get any further, then here even if she not real to them she is to me. My head is thick with sounds, of her, my mouth thick with her as the girl body fluid. All about her, I can hear the chatterers- her tedious laughing, disdain fulling me, a boisterous guffawing, a tiding. Wicked communications, I can see them now, black against the fogged nights moon, as I walk in the eeriness. All the birds look at me with like glass eyes, something else, as the moon follows too, she is coming, with me... she is speaking to me, in my head.

See- see what you do to me, and make me do for you-you see?

Part: 3

It's a glorious evening, warm but not too warm, the sun starting its lazy descent, shadows lengthening, and moving with the trees that a blowing, falling leaves, and the light just beginning to burnish the trees with golden shades, and the reds and oranges, she to be so vivid; contesting to the greens and darker colors. There are familiar faces on these trains, that I know, yet they're all need to hear, people I see every week of my life, going to and froth. I recognize them, and they probably recognize me, like me but as I am now not as no-longer- me. I don't know whether they see me, as I was, as I am, or who I am now, though, or for what I really am, or no longer.

They, all the toured kiddie faces, pass in a blur of evening sunshine, the cars pass me, as I just miss getting hit by the cars, blowing me back, I feel the gust. The train is rattling along,

and I know that she is making her way through all the cars, heading for the tunnel, it gets dark out the window, and she see free to make them scream by taking over their minds and making them think crazily, like making the one girl get up and walk between cars, and death in the smokiness until she passed out and feel in-between, and the wells cut her in two, it was ruled out as accentual death, that she slipped making her way to the dining car, I know- not so-o.

Death is the game she likes to play, maybe for she passed on too soon in this life, she needs to feed on the young of this life.

I see trans off in the distances, In the opposite direction of me, and if we're traveling slowly enough yet making its way up to me, as I stand there… on the tracks… Sometimes I catch myself trying to remember the last time, that I had expressive physical contact with another with a girl or boys I don't like boys there- Iick-ie, like mixing chocolate milk with O-J, and then baffling chunks and having to lick that up too.

Unprejudiced a hug or a heartfelt squeeze of my hand, it was here the only one that I feel close too, and my heart twitches, with her energy running through me. Sometimes, not often, I can see them from this side of the track, think I don't understand- not one of them- as I do her.

Just like these kids sitting in the train car, sometimes catch a glimpse of her, I remember, seeing her up in the home- that is adjacent the old cemetery, dating back to the 1880s where she is not at rest, and with my home, she is there, that was her up there in the window, I too look out the same windows both of us in the same terrace. Just as I do look out the train window, seeing our home go by as we pass thinking about how we do the same things looking out that window at all the life that is dead- and dying like us. I can imagine all of them looking at me, yet not as she looks at me, she has loved me they don't.

Sitting or standing as I am now, with her feet up on the table even, I have to snap out of a trance, yet there is not a trace of her to be seen unless she wants to be seen by others than me, a glass of apple juice in my hand, I poured two and sat one by me for her- my mom looked at me as if I crazy- think it was for my imaginary friend, yet when the glass went up to her mouth and was moving free and fast in her hand- that only I could see, my mom freaked out hardcore, 'How did you do that?'

'I didn't Louie did…' I said.

'Um-hum- then tall her to go home…' 'She lives here- with me… WITH US- 'IS THAT SO- she is working, in the dining room.

On paperwork, be for going to work- at Capital One.' she wanted me to say to you. She said don't be mean to her.' Mom just rolled her eyes- like, I was being cute.

I can imagine the feeling of her hands in mine, the weight of them, comforting and defensive. I love that she holds my hand whenever, unlike all of them that are real, I

KNOW THAT THE REAL!

Louie is now standing behind my mom tapping and pulling on her top, her hand on her shoulders, she feels the pullback, and she gets cold shivers, asking if it was me- I said- no- it's WAS my IMAGINARY FRIEND, I SAID- she likes to play awareness games.

(PRE-LUNCH MONDAY, October 24, 2016,) I read everywhere that a train can rip the clothes right off you when it hits your body, it's a rush, it's not that unusual, death by train, that how they found her clothes ripped off under the wheels, I know the story well.

Look into my room, which was her room, which is our room, The pile of clothes from last week is still there, of mine that she calls scandalous, and it looks dustier and more neglected than it did a few days ago, my mother even said- 'it looks like a five-year-old is living here,' along with- 'it's not on me is on Louise, a hundred a year ago, it happened to her, they say she was looking for a rush, some say she went crazy over a boy, some say, she was in love with a girl, and could not go there, some say she needs a way out of her room and mom and dad's hold on her, she was seen at least once every couple of days- standing on the tracks- until, I'm not sure how many of those are accidental or true.'

I look carefully, into all, and think, I don't care, she here for me now, as the train rolls slowly past me doing as she did, the hint of blood-covered clothes, rush through my mind, and the sound of crushing bones, but I can't see any that said- why she was run over. The train stops at the signal, as usual, she runs for me, and through me and she now in my body said stand here and stay here as long as you can it's a rush, feel the powers. Just like that, I wake up in bed and before I could think of why, I hear my mom call my name to do some pain in the ass thing, like always.

I can see her standing next dinner nook, that has all glass old windows wrapped around a hundred-year-old table in front of the French doors, that are adjacent. She's wearing a bright print dress; her feet are bare.

My mom is looking over her shoulder, asking if I playing games, she feels the strange energy of her pulling on her back, tapping on her shoulders, as she walks back into the house walking around out to the porch; dad is making breakfast, Louise said that's a really girly thing for a man to do, of her time, I keep my eyes fixed on Louise, I know she is going to slam the door in her face, I could see her past memories running through my mind- do you see them- all the thing and the way the house looks in the early 1900s…

Just like that, I am starting there on the old bridge, that is nothing but a relic, to the new one that is old now, and I standing in the middle with nowhere to run… over topwater.

Some say you and see a nude girl standing in the water, looking over the bridge, I KNOW it's HERE! SPOOKY- no she just remembers the past, that she doesn't want to let go of. This one is a two-lane- that looks as flimsy as it was unsafe to walk or ride on no-no side rails to keep you in, no walkway, just track and spaces down to water below 100 feet or so, in an x- truss that looks as if it should have never- ever worked, to hold together. The one I know- well is stone, and long and safe. Would you jump off the side or run, she said run- it the fun, then jump at the last second.

I can even see the faint flicker of a lander next to the door, that I use now, not much has changed, yet everything has changed, then just like that I am back standing on the tracks… as the train starts to inch forward, (Rip) I am starting to cry, I don't want to do this yet her power is holding me here, and also for the love and caring.

1916 ford truck sitting in the tall grass, tick- ticking away, an older man starting it with a crack, its mostly made of wood, and has gas lights… that got ever so brighter as the motor, got stronger in the cold, leaves blowing around him, train sound of in the distances, dust, covering all, the things in the dim room that I call my kitchen.

Louise- I particularly don't want to see my home like this, I want to remember it as was, the one that used to be mine.

Through her mind I could see the one I know, being made… with wood forms, and the arches being sat. I've lived at number 214 hickory lane for all my life, as did she, delightfully content, and absolutely- insufficient. I can't look at it now, this way she said to me. That was my only hope, that I can't stand to let go of… Not my parents' just hers… I really don't care to see them anyways they did not get me, anyway. I see here mom and dad feel the same to her- maybe that is why I get her.

Every day I tell myself not to look at what has changed and what has stayed the same, and every day I look, and get said, said only. I close my eyes tightly and count to ten, and make my run, seeing all my life up 'till fifteen, and even past.

There, it's gone I am off the side flying through the air now, nothing to see. She looks through me in me and out through me, saying things like Oh- my first home. She said I remember seeing all these homes being built, now there being ripped down and or falling down now, why? She asked- I said, 'no one cares about old things like you do.' They don't care? No time to care I said back to her… is there something wrong with the time, that is moving faster?

What no, it's just not what's important… so-o those bizzie boxes are then? She asked, you're not like them with them through, I see why… don't say. I can't bear to look at it 'round here now. I try not to, I don't want to, I want to, I can't, I don't want too, I can't help myself, from feeling said, said only. I bit my lip so hard, it bled some, I still remember the pain I felt when I saw her watering the rose bushes near the fence, it was a ghostly vision, in my eyesight, of her in a her 1900's shirt stretched tight over her belly, even though there is nothing I want to see there, I feel there is something I need to see here, what I don't know yet, maybe it's unrest, of someone she lost here. Even though anything, I do see will hurt me, I still have to do it.

Louie- Even though I remember- so clearly how it felt that time when I lost my girlfriend I don't remember, did I do it, was it me, or them.

I looked up and noticed that the emulsion linen blind in the upstairs bedroom was gone, replaced by something in soft baby blushing peach; I see the home in splits of old and new, her way of think of the past and then mine as now, it's like have double exposure of a photo in my mind and eyesight. (Rip) Run- run- running like hell yet again, the train starting to pick up the pace, and I am running for my life what does it mean, to keep running away and not facing it?

Sometimes grim, sometimes bright and sunny, sometimes cold and windy western Pennsylvania, small coal townhouses lined, next tagged trackways bridges and industrial buildings with broken windows, that through her eyes I see as steam smocking working factories buzzing with workers, make a change, for change like nicks and small dollar amounts.

How will today be, with her sitting in class running me- mind body and soul? At school, even if she is running through me, I can't think of anything but her, my studies seem to slip… I sit, on the train, that I want to kill me, as did her, for the trill, or to escape, which-ever that's what I want, and I don't get why, the closer I get to Rockville, the more nervous I feel, every time, like I pass this spot that I no took her life; burden builds; I feel this is going to be my expiry!

Yet, I want more than SEX! It's more thrilling! On its side, someone has painted: LIFE IS NOT A PARAGRAPH, but that how I would have described, what is happening to me seeing all the world in the past, yet in my time, and yet, hers… what the… freak! Like- like- When she inside me my eyes change color from brown to green and no- one really notices it. I deliberate about the parcel of dresses on the side of the track and I feel, with her holding me tightly, making out, kissing, touching and feeling, I am in love with a girl that is not real, yet she is, just from another time, yet is it preordained to be, this way?

Through my throat is closing up. Life is not a paragraph, and death is no parenthesis. There's a soiled, low-slung concrete building on the right-hand side, old wood mills, and coal, works, linking the track about five hundred miles before we get into school, passing through the old towns that link life of the past and now together.

FRIDAY, October 7, 2016

(PRE-LUNCH: like, 10 or so-o…)

My mother used to tell me that, I had an overactive imagination; my dad said that, too, yet he got it more than she. I can't help it- that I feel that she is real, I l look down at my feet and see that, I am wearing flats, that a black and white checkers.

The train tracks, I see all colors of trees becoming naked at some point soon. Light blue dress, perhaps-jumbled is now off me and next to me under the viaduct. It's probably

rubbish- now, as I make mind love to my girlfriend that haunts me, scrubby little wood up the bank, I see boys looking off the distances' saying look at her go... soloing.

She feels just like the steam engines vibrating through me, it could have been left behind by me I am sure, and some boy that work this part of the track, would see it and say some girl was killed here, they're here often enough, saying they see young girls on the line and doing dirty things. No one is to be found... Or it could be something else, they say- think all the calls in are pranks.

The train surprises and predicaments and screams back into motion, and the wheel's slip, the little pile of faces look out at me like her the see me, they're all in clothes, me no so- I disappear from view, and run into their faces, they look at me with awe, before the can think or blink there in the tight trundle, moving at a brisk cross-country runner stride.

The line starts at St. Mary's and runs to Hershey The scenic expedition from Altoona's horseshoe curve is supposed to take 10 hours and 30 minutes or so-o through state park and forest, (118.8 mi) kind-a next to US-219, snaking its way through trees and Allegany hills that would take your breath away, yet on a steamer of the past from 1880's it can change, but it rarely does, number 14 is balling down the tack scratching her horn- on time in the dusk- and the lights inside the cars filler: this section of the track is ancient, decrepit, beset with signaling problems and never-ending engineering workers for it's a wonder- to see one end to the other of the same train making its way… 'round. The train crawls along; it tremors past me as the haunt of the little girl in white the girl they say is haunting these lines for years, and water towers, is at the one end of the cover, where old number 14 halts, then it's off for the bridges of heights, then the other over the water, and then past my old, Victorian houses, in after of the Kinzua bridge turned the train make a sharp turn all the way around, S where I am the most with her near,

Rockville directly next to the track and her, and I spot under the viaduct under the next to the water. Someone in the seat behind me gives a sigh of helpless irritation, and I think what do you have to complain about, it's the 8:05 at night, and you never hand what I did, slowly the endurance of the most seasoned commuter on the Amtrak line, and it blows past me and my hair rushes up- and I feel alive!

I remember when I would ride this train, for point a to b. My head leaning against the car window, I watch these houses roll past me like a tracking shot in a film, being pulled to fastly

for it to be projected. They see me as just some small girl, I see them as others do not, I see life as a new life- through taking hers as mine; some would say for rest, yet maybe not so, I owner here you probably don't see what I am saying from this perspective, like she and I have this life and love we have, over me finding my why- being lost in time for years. Twice a day, I am offered a view into other lives, just for a moment I am lost in them and how the world is these days- 100 years passed. There's something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home, like this girl, that I love, yet she made me safe with-in her.

On the train, as it passes you can see, texting girls, and boys on their phone, an absurdly ecstatic and upbeat chatter, in the vintage cars, smelling of good dinner food from the diner car- as they did back in my day as a girl riding the same very train- on this line. They the cars jingles around on the uneven tracks. Clicking along- you can feel and see that commuters shift in their seats, as they go down the line on tracks that seem to be floating in spots, rustle their newspapers, tap at their computers.

The train lurches and sways around the bend, slowing as it approaches a yellow signal- in my mind, I could see a flagman swing a lantern of the past. I try not to look up and see the number and light heading right for me as I have to make the choices to get off or not or it's over my head, I know that some are reading the news- on their new I- this and that… I was walking along this way from the station, yet my through of WHY blur in front of my eyes, as to why I am letting this train run me down and I standing still, nothing holds my interest other than her hold me hear. In my head, I can still see that little pile, of her, of clothes lying at the edge of the track, us nude in my mind making love- uncontrolled in passion.

Something she said she only found in me- and only in this next life.

Part: 4

(NIGHTFALL)

Beautiful sunshine, cloudless skies like today and for years here. Lucie was part of, a coal village, in the daybreaks we'd swim the half-mile to the tracks, if you did not want to take the long walk, next to the tall viaduct. To make, make love on secret hidden spot under the railway bridge; in the afternoons, I would walk the tracks, to bitter tonics of her in me fully, you could see the boys over the way watching us swarms around underneath, in faint shadow's you

could see her the haunting body shape of the girl, with me, out of my body now to love me for me, also next to water her energy was stronger.

I take another gulp, feeling the taste of her, and another, and I feel empty as she gets stronger in me, but it's OKAY, I have three more in the plastic bag at my feet. It's Friday, so I don't have to feel guilty about drinking on the train. Thank God, Its Friday. The fun starts at this juncture…

It's going to be a lovely weekend, that's what they're telling us, time away from school, that is all my life was- she through inside me. In the old days, we might see us in sunrise lying on a blanket in speckled sunlight, she is nothing but a soul in me, I eat we date- yet is the reality not to them, but to me she is so-o. We might have seared out back with friends, that would not get us, too bad, I left them all for her, to be with and inside me, faces flushing, as they hear me talking to her in class, under my breath, with sun shining in the window, 'till the afternoon went on, walking the tracks home for lunch along with only her, arm in arm, falling asleep on the sofa, after the school day, she was all I needed, even if not physically there of the rest of the world to see, yet in my mind, she was everything, that made it physical.

Lovely sunshine I would take the walk to school in the fog- mist and even rainy days too, yet like today it's a cloudless sky, I- had like- no one to play with, nothing to do, I would go to her home, and I would see her looking down at me from the window, next to the mainline of crossing tracks. I was lost in her eyes… and ghostly whys of falling for me. Living like this, the way I'm living at the moment, is harder in the summer when there are so many hours of daylight, so the little cover of dusk, when everyone is out and about, being flagrant, aggressively happy.

It's exhausting, to me, and it makes you feel deprived, about not having them all, but that is why I found her and she- me, the weekend stretches out ahead of me, I have to get lost in her or I would lose it… and fill empty, when with her I do not.

MONDAY, JULY 19, 2016

(MORNING)

I just want to lean back in the soft, drooping seat, feel the warmth of the sunshine streaming through the window, I have become all her, and what she loves to do… time for me to walk to school I feel the carriage rock back, as it comes my way, fourth and back it rocks and

squall's, the comforting rhythm of wheels on tracks and the blinding light makes me feel alive- through her like it did when I was just me. I'd rather be here, looking out at the horseshoe curve beside the track, than almost anywhere else. It's a relief to know that 7:05, is right on time, no holding back on the rail, I will stand here till the last moments, looking forward to the train to play chicken with me- where I have yet to make the choice to stay or get off.

There's a faulty signal on this line, of full green and she is heading my way doing 40. I see all the face looking at me, thinking I'm not gotten off the tracks in time in the cars the horn is walling, about halfway through her my journey she finds me. The rush I have with her to me is everything that makes me feel thriving when I know she is not a piece.

Lucie- I have a perfect view of all these traces for my room, where my soul was lock at a young age, yet I would not change that it's my favorite place to be the trackside house: and number 14 run me down- I was called crazy as a young girl for loving this so. I do believe that the girl inside me makes her energy make the signal not working right as the train is headed for me when most of the time this line wants trains going low or fully red. because it's almost always red; I accept it must be faulty, yet that just makes me smile on the inside, knowing she has the power, in any case, I know she is doing it through me with her influence, to see if the train will jump track, going so fast at me.

Most days this train only creeps by- when I standing here with her that is not so, sometimes just for a few seconds, of the time sometimes more, sometimes it's her seeing if the old viaduct can hold the weight of the heavy train, going too fast, it all about seeing if death and mayhem could happen, as it did to her, sometimes for minutes on end, I think off all the life she and I could take over in the carnage, which I usually do, and the train stops at this signal, under my power of what I want to happen, which is almost always does not stop, old 14 is much like the other iron houses along this stretch of track: I make her fly down the line at me, as it did then.

The towering viaduct narrow top to an overlooking the ghostly fog, runs down towards some railing, beyond which lies a few miles of no-mans-land, before you get to the railway town of Altoona. I know this house by heart, its time, she is no longer in the window looking down at me she is in me, looking down the line, yet this home, I know every block all the doorways, all the places to hide, I know the color of the curtains in the upstairs bedroom for 100 years back, I recall all the changes made by other homeowners too, not to my liking, I have

seen many young girls take over what was mine in my room, and I have run through them and run them out of my room and home, yet not her.

I know that the paint is cracking off the bathroom window frame and seal, which was once a dark wood stain. The glass is missing on the one lift lower pain that was just covered over with plywood…

I know that on warm summer evenings, the occupants of this house, of her, the girl I love and took over her mind, along with her mom and dad- I don't like them much they get in the ways of us. kitchen-extension, of my old farmhouse, has its own high-pitched roof, where I sometimes climb out of the large window to sit on the makeshift veranda on top of it with her, and we look over the lines- of track and the sky's and chat- of the past and what we're going to do in the upcoming days.

She has soft cheekbones dappled with a sprinkling of freckles, a fine jawline that is childlike yet teen, becoming a woman, like myself.

Witness- I know I saw it- 2 girls under there… I know I did. Like this morning, they've both got the day off, I've seen two girls out afar under the Rockville viaduct yet once more, is it my eyes or is it real. One of them has a glow- and the other seems to be drawn to her- as if she is taken as real or just an imaginary friend. Yet I see them, I know about her the girl that has the imaginary friend… I don't think she nuts. (This was said by a railroad worker- when questioned.)

Mom, I here upstairs in the room two girls giggling, painting, or maybe they're in the shower together, they're doing things together as if there is a real girl there, yet I look in at her showing nude, and it's just her having her girlie time, one her hands pressed against the tiles, and the other hands-on her front part of her hips, asking the make-believe girl to get there.

I walked away for a while then look in at her yet once more I see only one girl and she's lying in bed, my girl, yet I feel the coldness, and I see in her eyes she is no longer here like this make-believe girl has taken her over- and she is now not. Not my girl.

Mother- said- now- narrating: 'I never believed in ghosts, until, I feel her staring me down to back off, yet it was loving so I was okay with it. I thought she was harmless- and my daughter was safe- in make-believe land, or at least in Rockville, playing under the bridge.'

'Because that's the sort of thing they do, is make you feel there real to you and shout you out to the ones they once loved, to keep them for them... it's what they do- it's what they do- take them for themselves... she keeps saying.'

That day while he is making breakfast, or maybe they've gone for a run together, I say her in deep out aloud play and conversions, with this girl she calls Lucie, I through she is old enough to know better than to have imaginary playmates. Yes, is she going backward- like have her brains grown soft, from her school life- or is it me, as a mom not doing my part?

Part: 5

(Lucie and I used to run together on Sundays, play in the sun and rain, and bath together too, everything really even eating, me going at slightly above my normal pace, we would try daring things, like running far past the safe line of where I was allowed to go- even like walk the tracks, I would go down abandoned lines, and over old viaducts that I knew would crumble under my feet, yet that was the fun, it was to find love with-in her. To kiss and play and discover. About her ghostly body and mine, her past and me with her to come, just so we could run side by side, I was in love with her for even if not real she was the most real thing I had in my life at the time.)

I see it down there ghostly she is steaming stuck at the red signal, then green and I hear the wheels slipping and she is building power and is hand right from me. This time I stay on the lift rail, feeling the forces, and vibrations... I see my snicker as I look down at my feet and the laces are untied, and my foot gets caught, in a spike, and she is coming balls out- so upon me- I could read the number on the front as I through my foot and she is giggling like an irrational lonely inside me saying- this is thrilling.

I see the flash- of light- and then I wake up and I'm in my bed, was it all a dream. I look down at the end of my bed nearing the footboard and see my pink and green sneaker, and I see the plastic tip was ripped off- 'it was real.' I said. (Did I die? Am I all me? Did I die, and she is now me?)

Witness- Paul J. Miller- Sometimes, when I see her there, I feel as though she sees me, too, I feel as though she looks right back at me, as I take the train down the line, as the engineer. and I want to wave, but I get this look in her eyes that crap in my mind or don't even look at me.

And I see what look the bugs flying like a staring fountain out of her mouth as she yells, that she needs to get off, the underworlds have gotten a hold of her, and she is not.

I'm too self-conscious, about saying I shit myself. I think about what they might be up to… as I keep doing this job, in the last year- there have been five new guys that will not drive this line- overseeing things that just creep- with passengers and workers, going through- 'Rockville.'

Passengers- said one a young girl Joiee she was looking out the window and this young little girl in white her hand smacked the foggy glass, that she was looking out going over the viaduct way up in the air, 'I knew that this was impossible there no way… there no room to walk and hit a train car.' And then one young boy Jimmi said he was kissed right on the lips by a girl that was see-through. 'All crazy I said'- 'till I saw what I did, as for the man- driving the train.

They say- he's away a lot with work, on his mind and his wife just live him, and he need sleep I was written off...

'I knew…'

But even if they're not- there, they are really- the question is why?

I look for them- always. There both are often out there in the mornings- around 8-sh, it has become a passion of mine to stock them to see why- especially in the summer, drinking coffee, I take the car up and look over my old job driving this line as I comply too.

Part: 6

(Morning, nearing middle September)

Turning slightly towards the window, I make my run-up to the train, I see this girl with her back pressed tightly to the set of the old car, this is the thrill of the game with me and her, to scare them, yet not harm… Maybe get them to come up and out of the sit with my powers or have them see flashes of their whole lives and or death's, or worse their next school teachers.

It's less acceptable to drink on the train, for the cars are moving… even so-o- even more to eat- yet they still do, I loved it I made her pee herself, and the little girl in white inside

me was giggling through me. I knew when I saw this girl open a can of Pepsi, I could get here to do just that, if I would track her down, as the girl in white, and me being part of her, standing on the track distracting all, she was free using me for energy to do as she pleased, making her miss-jiff, as she was known for as a child, back in the 1900s or so I read in lost old newspaper, that I got from the courthouse, papers they said should have been thrown out a- long time ago.

Part: 7

It's not cold I heard her complain to the conductor, he just said, that what you get with this seven-dollar ticket, be happy you get that… he was sno-oot-ie about it even, nothing changes, I hear her say playing in my mind, sucking feeling out my body using it for hers and her haunts. The whole train has the creeps, you can see the pimples on their arms, and the hair's standing up on the backs of young kids' necks, she loves this train, most of the passengers are 14 years' old making their way to school, summer has come to end, some say this train, will also take you two another realm, for it haunted by the girl in white, where it goes to a large castle that is gray and red and has many points, windows, rocky walls.

This castle looks as if it is hanging off a cliff, with a track on trusses running through it… a magical land so-o wonder-us, like- I could not wrap my mind around it, suspended in the air by mist and fog, and frozen land, that shins an eerier blue and clear crystal, Drawbridges, floating train tracks, that look like they get lost and twisted in spooky fogs, that lead to a haunted mysterious railway, where you learn how to become a wizard girl, like she and her family, was suspected to have been. But to become this girl has to take you there, as the chosen one. I should be on this train as they are to make my way crossed- the large waterway, yet I am skipping to have revulsion with her, the girl I fall in love with that has chosen me.

Part: 8

(SUN-up)

'Did you see on the news, on the box flat thing you see faces in like moving photos, TV, a man can make a baby to his wants and wishes, hair color, eyes, and look, I also hear in the talk box, that your glued too, that you can have a designer wife, made from baby up and the man own you, till she grows up to 16 and they perfect for each other, and married, and live happily ever after… do think that true… what happy ever after?

'No'- 'oh I do, and that too, 'will see...?'

They said: 'this was going to happen in like

2018.'' 'Do you think so-o?' 'Maybe'- she said

Sarah. (Through what happens to newspapers? Now it too much mindless chatter and no real story.) 'Um-hum'- she said, and I reached over for her hand saying don't be scared.

I see the station easing up on me sitting in my Pullman car, two cars from the back, slightly slower this morning everyone one is moving, it a Monday. We are falling behind, it takes one hour and one minute, to just get to the school, the half-day I like it, I am not complaining. It is fast to take a train then it is to sit in traffic, from my home to the school, so I do that, like most of the kids that live on my block and surrounding areas. My home is the Victorian semi next the tracks, the occupant of the past still lives here, like her- Louise it's everything about this home is small like the bedrooms, baths and so on.

Half friends more not, they all are staring at me with that look of suggestive wonder in some of their eyes, of what's underneath the drock-ie look I am rocking, has been popped or not, I read their minds without knowing for sure, yet I have the idea.

I really want contacts, yet morning like Mondays, and feeling as I do, all I want is oversized sweets, and to cray, it's a girl thing, on her week of hell. I like these glass there ornate, and frameless and sharp liking, as I sit there reading a book called: 'If Only in My Mind!' is a dirty book, that I can't put down, my girl- can believe the smut I am allowed to read at my age… she said she would have gotten whipped for the throughs, of what I am reading, at 15.

'Your mom is okay with this?' My imaginary friend is just drilling over the text as I am. What sex like with a boy, she asked me? I said I would not know, have not gone there… did you- nope, maybe that why I not rest, looking for what I never- ever had.

We had more in common than any live person I no- even done to getting popped. Boys have changed so much, I don't like them, she said to me, 'all butt holes, can I say that?' 'Ah-h yeah!' 'See- see that's why- as I love you, you're so cute!!'

We didn't see much of each other after the first year, she was with me she was just seeing over my life, in me yet not known to me, and my everyday things- and stuff', I did.

Stuff'? 'Good English, she giggled.' Yah and coming for a girl that dropped out in the third grade to work farming, tending mom six kids, and working fields. All these girls, sleep together, bathed together and worked hard, you 'all do nothing a give a crap about doing that, F- you! Um, yeah!

'Why you here, then- why now-'

'I was the girl out- even then, like you.'

'You needed someone that would be the why 100 years or so-o is not much right.'

'As a girl has grown- up in the 1900's- I'd never lived by myself, like you what that like, well I now know, is sad and lonely, yet you don't have to do anything with your day just eat and poop, and homework and sleep,

God, that's nice.'

Girls don't poop! - you know that- she looked at me like I was on 10 pounds of weed. Never that much but I been there, mmm- vapers! I drink too, she said I was a bad girl for this… that girl in her day could have been disowned… for such, and that a girl where breeders and worthless, to a man.

'It's not as good as you think.'

'Friends,' she looked to at her feet.'

'I know- holding my hand- now sitting next to me when no one else would.'

'I get you-'

'You get me.'

'Times have not changed that much, have they.'

Part: 9

I evoked, waking that morning filled with apprehension before we meet instantly knowing that something terrible had happened. Tom wasn't in bed with me, and I felt relieved. I lay on my back, playing it over. I remembered crying and crying and telling them that I loved

him, and then he had to die, he just had too, he just passed in his sleep, at fifteen, he was not angry, or mean or anything like all the other boys, he was all mine, telling me to go to bed.

'I love you, he said to me, his name: Ever Haven.' just like his name the way he felt about me would be the same, I'll see you in school, but he never- ever did, he passed that night the night that he said he was going to go all the way with me the next night; think how I feel, about that… Mom and dad didn't want to listen to it any longer, saying move on, and find a new love that I am young, but no… I could not they think I snapped a little, and maybe I did, for I have this so-called imaginary friend, that is with me always, never- ever leaving my side. So, I did as they said, found love in what they do not see, just like in the last one, the choice not to see why… why I loved him as I do with her.

Then again, in my hour of need, she happened to appears in my glowing brighter and brighter 'till I could see her full in my room going in and out of me, I got under the covers, asking for her to go away, then when she got in for the first time, I feel the worth of her, and never wanted her to go, or leave me, and it made sense what she was to me, a love, a ghost, a little girl like me in white. So-o I said: 'yes,' to her for she had the soul of my boy in her, and she now him speaking to me through him through her to me.

I was so sure that it would only be for a couple of months, and she would be gone and or sick of me, six at the most and going strong I am dating a girl of all things yet I feel him in her, and yet her too, it's like everything I have been looking for everything that was missing, and I didn't know what else to do.

An overwhelming, idea I had, was to get him back for me, and she was cool with it, for she feels for me too, so am I having a 3-way with my head, and body too…? She said I would get lynched for saying that in my day, I really don't know whom I love more… she just as cools as he… She is a nice person, in a powerful sort-a-way. She makes you notice her likeability, in acute yes kind-a devilish way, yet there is not a thing evil about her- or so-o I feel, she needs me, and I need her.

She gets it… all of it… it is me and my suck butt life.

She giggled at that too. Her friendliness is temporary restraining order large, it is her defining quality, and she needs it acknowledged, hitherto that works for me too, I like that in a

boy, so why not a girl that is just right. Like- often, daily almost, which can be tiring, yet not with her, they're no longer that way. But it's not so bad, I can think of worse traits in a girl and or lover.

Part: 10

No, it's not Louise, it's not even

Rockville that bothers me, most about my new situation (I still think of it as new, even if I have been stuck here like her all my life, although it's been two years, I had her she is all the keeps me here, and from going crazy, even if I am just that.) It's the loss of control I have. In Louise's old home now, my home in a way I feel like a guest, in my own room, at the very outer limit of her welcome she feels that I am just a caretaker of what was ounces hers.

I feel it when I sit beside her on the sofa, she is there I feel the warmth and energy, the remote control firmly within her grasp it just floats in midair. I feel it in the kitchen, where we elbow for space when cooking our evening meals. I have lost control over everything, even the places in my head.

It's relaxed enough, but it isn't a place you want to be, yet you can feel the eerie creepy feeling creeping around you as you sit in the rooms all the different energy making your mood and hair stand on end, so instead I linger in the living room or at the kitchen table, hostile at ease and immobilized, she is what make me move to feel and do, she has total control over me, and what I do, and even have the power to make mom and dad back off, to run me. The only space that feels like mine is my tiny bedroom, into which a double bed and a desk have been crammed, with barely enough space to walk between them.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 20, 2017

Yeah Trump has made his speech of how my dad will is in the next war, yet it's one that we need, I am sure. We all loved him, for we all wanted to see this land boom again… as it did in her time, and the movie reels in my mind of the past start like lost daydreams in her mind running through mine.

(BEFORE NOON)

I could wish for a storm and feel less energy in a bolt of lightning going through me then she gives to me, but the sky is a disrespectful blank, pale, water-logged azure blue. I wipe away the dribble on my top lip with my slave. I wish I'd evoked to buy a bottle of water. The heat is building within me, she wants out, she wants to play, she wants to make miss-jiff and make me crazy to them. It's barely half-past seven and already the day is near, the air heavy with dampness.

I analyze the house, but there's nothing to see, that is out of place to them yet to me it like living in the 1900's the feel the look and the taste even is all the past, I just lost in it.

The curtains are open downstairs, but the French doors are closed, sunlight reflecting off the glass, I see her face looking in my eyes, it's not me I see it's her.

The sash window upstairs is closed, too, see it open as it was then, I know it has not worked in years, for it is crack, and falling apart just one of those things that come with having an old home.

Things got even weirder working. My dad is a doctor and was a call to war, so drafted, and after that my mom, was no longer than sitting in bars and having a random man, in her life, I was on my own, yet I was not I had her, to go crazy for and over.

Part: 11

Mindless, I know… I can't see all the kids on the train like always, but my mind is a million miles away, this morning like it has been for the last two years, and my sense of disappointment is acute.

I think, probably for one of those overseas organizations. He's constantly on call, a bag packed on top of the wardrobe; there's an earthquake under my feet, as the grind of the train wheels, start healing butt mine why.

I drop everything, and start running for my life, she grabs my bag and things, within matter seconds, my feet fly out and she saves my life, in her twisted game, yet I am living for it now. She, with her bold prints and her Converse trainers and her beauty, her attitude, works in the fashion industry. She's a good painter, too, plenty of artistic flairs.

I can see her now, in the spare room upstairs, music blaring, window open, a brush in her hand, but now she is just sitting there on her bed rocking and smiling, eyes stone-ie, with a creepy grin, in complete silence,

talking herself, and mom could careless, an enormous canvas leaning against the wall.

Lost in a world that is all her own, said some, of the kids at school, Otherwise and perhaps this is what she would have gotten' into the music business, or in advertising- she might be a stylist or a photographer if she would not have let the steam of life like this train run her down.

She'll be there until midnight; Ophelia aka Gracie knows not to bother her when she's working, on her papers or reading in class, yet it's not like she even here, we were besties, yet over the last two years she is someone else, WHY? She question's in her mind.

I feel like, I moved in after, I left two years ago, left I mean in my body, I don't know when exactly, I became someone else. I suppose I started noticing them about a year ago, and gradually, as the months went past, they became significant to me. I can't really see her, of course, only when she wants me too.

I don't know their names anymore all the faces looking at me that I have now for years, either, so I had to name them myself. Like Jason and Sarah, I sit the same as see I did in my room, with that stone-ie look showing in my eyes, and the creeping smile, lost in a 100 year of time, spending my mind, within her… lost in running down the dream of 100 years of her on-rest, they're happily lost in stupid, I lost in love with her, I can tell what is better, I just go with the feeling.

They're what I lost, they're everything I want to be, and nothing I care about any longer with her. My shirt, uncomfortably tight, showing me belie-button, which she thinks is wrong, yet she is loving it. The buttons straining across my chest open showing more than what was scandalous in the 50's nevertheless in the 1900s her time, yet in my mind is okay, it's like we changed lives, and yet we fade the times, fading in and out, of her and my lives.

(It's now TWILIGHT)

Her ghostly feeling is making me sweet for her, I am pit-stained, damp patches clammy, yet I feel her beneath my arms, as I hold on to her like she there, and if feel her if she was. My eyes and throat itch, and hot. This evening I don't want the journey to stretch out; I long to get home, to undress and get into the shower with her, to be where no one can look at me, and make me feel like this with her when all we want is to be alone. she looks up suddenly and meets my eye; her glance travels over me, they're looking back all in the front of me, I am alone, yet not.

Non-look away…

There's something about the set of his mouth that suggests distaste, I have never gotten. Non-but her find me repulsive. Perhaps she's nervous and it's pouring out of me the sweat. Or just thinking deeply.

I see this one boy that reminds me of my boyfriend that passed looking at me in the first set, it's a flashback like, yet not him, or was it? I keep fading in and out… I look at the girl in the seat opposite mine, and yet it is him with her. Or is it just my crazy mind? He is about my age, I was younger, he was everything to me that made me this way now, I keep going I have too, with dark hair and dying body, I keep going, I have her. Swallowing skin, I see next to me like he and I, kissing- loving and its sick to me now not having, him.

He's wearing the suit of the day I saw him laid out for the last time, in his coffin, eyes fastened shut tightly, but he's taken the jacket off and slung it on the seat next to him. I see his dad, he has a note paper- it's worn thin and cranked, open in front of him, of the first love note he and I shared that he gave to me. He's wearing a silver watch with a large face on his left wrist- it looks expensive yet is not that where trailer trash some said.

He's chewing the outside of his lip, and the skin is peeling off, and hanging slightly. I am not the girl I used to be, I have lost it, and have it all with her.

I am no longer desirable, I'm off-putting in some way. It's not just that I've lost all my weight I down to 95 lbs., or so and my face is swollen from the drinking and the lack of sleep; it's as if people can see the damage written all over me, can see it in my face, the way I hold myself, the way I move, the way I act near them- even.

One night last week, when I left my room to get myself a glass of water, I overheard Louise talking to, her boyfriend, or so I through was it a vision or was it real? I don't know any more real realm to not, in the living room, I could see his looking at me held out his hand asking me to come with him, like death was calling; just to be together like in the past in a new life, it was a sing, so I pick from the time on what I want; to run the life I have without him, or I have the choice to be run down by the train like her, as she did for her girlfriend that was forbidden, and go with him and she becomes me... what is the destiny I want?

I stood in the hallway and listened, to this and I heard the plan. 'She's lonely,' Louise was saying for you. 'I really worry about her. It doesn't help, her being alone all the time.' I am a Demon she said, meant for evil 'to take not give, yet she is what I longed for, I am not being funny, but I'm not sure I know how desperate she is to the end, I can have it, so I thought, why not.'

Part: 12

(THURSDAY, 21, or something in the year 2016)

(MORNING)

I'm picking at the adhesive bandage on my forefinger. I see the add on the train car sipping cold coffee, It's damp outside the window and not yet light, it got wet with due, on the fogged windows also, his coffee mugs this morning is not the one that has always had, this old looks old; he feels it with his finger rimming the edge, and he looks at it with his clammy, dirty, hands, after getting the heart working in our car that seems to never, the car is old and never as clean as it should be. 'It's chipped' he whispered.

I don't want to take it off because the cut is deep, he said, my other on fall on to the tracks and was flattened... by the wheels, he said to the one girl that was the too eager to have his full attention, Louise was out when I got home, before me, she comes and goes fast as she pleases, so I went and I got a drank, the first one that I had all day, and funny it was old cold coffee, and then I thought I'd take advantage of the fact that she was out and cook myself a steak, for my mom was not going to anything but find some man to spread for, making drip red she said, ow-ah- I through, she like it that why not me, have it with a green salad, she shows how to do it, I see it as she did on her old stove, that was in the same place in my mind.

A good, healthy meal. I sliced through the top of my finger while chopping the onions. I must have gone to the bathroom to clean it up and gone to lie down for a while and just over and done all about it, for the reasons, that I woke up around ten, and I could hear Louise talking up in my room, and she was saying how disgusting it was that I would leave the kitchen like that, all upset, Louise came upstairs to see me, she knocked softly on my door and opened it a portion.

She cocked her head to one side and asked if I was OK-ay. And she sits with me, as I rock back and forth, I apologized without being sure what I made an apology for. She said it was all right, but would I mind cleaning up a bit? There was blood on the chopping board, the room smelled of raw meat, the steak was still sitting out on the countertop, turning grey. She didn't even say hello to me that would be my momma that is, hers just shook her head like she was discounted when she saw me, and went upstairs to Louise's bedroom and mine and said F-n clean it, and go to bed brat.

I can't remember what I was watching, yet it was all sown-ie when my momma walked in, she thinks I crazy like them, but at some point, I must have felt lonely, or happy, or something, since I wanted to talk to someone, and it was her, and it looked as I was having a chat with myself, I so-o need her contact I must have been overwhelming to her for I was in so need, and there was no one other I would rather be with.

After they'd she'd gone to bed, I remembered that I hadn't drunk the coffee, so I opened a canteen. I sat on the sofa, downstairs, with my girl, and watched television, all old movies, that she thinks are new, with the sound turned down really low so-o she'd wouldn't hear it, she is playing with my phone and it would-a be like floating in mid-air… to-a yah.

There's no one I want to talk to except for her. The call log on my phone says I rang four times: at 11:01, 11:11, 11:53, 12:08. Judging from the length of the calls my mom has on there, she is not going to be home for a while. It's just she and I… He and all of them, a man may even have picked her up, by now I don't know or care, I don't remember talking to him or them or her at this point it's all a blur.

I am hearing the first message not remember, some old man that a perv. leaving the first message asking for boom-boom; I think I just asked him to call me, in a text that was for my mom, yah me- rape. That may be what I said in both of them, which isn't too bad. I see her she has her feet up against the table, I kiss the top of her head she is reading a book, something kids

just don't do these days, and with her head forward, sunning herself in the light like also. Behind her, I think I can see a shadow, someone moving: the train shudders to a standstill at the red signal and I look up looking it down to make my choice for the day stay or go with him above the clouds.

She is sitting next to saying what's it going to be, drinking a cup of coffee, that just runs through her body and fall to the stones below. She has him running through my mind too. I long to see him, to catch a glimpse of his handsome face, she is enticing I want him to come outside me all the time, yeah that too… yah did not have it, yet all the girls want too, some did, why not me, I stand behind her scared she living it as it running for me, shield by her, they can see me they see nothing until… the way she does this is for the thrill, while I was a baby, and snap, I am home for the day, the French doors are flung open, light streaming into the kitchen. I can't tell, I really can't, whether I'm seeing this or imagining it, over and over, or if she just F-n with me, is she there, or not, what up what's down; at the sink, washing up, I cry, and she giggles holding me?

Is there a little girl sitting in one of those bouncy baby chairs up there on the kitchen table? And it's a flashback to me as a baby as I am new to her… yet she l-o-o-v-e-s me! There is something about the way she is moving today that seems different; she is substantial, weighed down, why my feelings.

He doesn't come out, and her head falls forward. I will him to come out to her, but the train jolts and slogs forward and still there is no sign of him; she's alone. And now, without thinking, I find myself looking directly into my house, and I can't look away.

It's been two days, and I have not seen or heard from my mother, is she dead? I would not know… I close my eyes and let the darkness grow and spread until it transforms from a feeling of sadness into something worse: a memory, a flashback, of when I was one comes over my mind back with, we played in a playpen together… amusing... I didn't just ask her to call me back I ask her to come home, my momma that is. I remember now, I was crying. I told him that I still loved him, that I always would. Please, I said to her, please, I need to talk to you. I miss you. Come home she said- (No, no, no, no, no, no.) No…! grow up and take care of yourself, and stop being a baby, and get a real friend.

I have to accept it, there's no point trying to push it away, I want her, and I need her so why not. I'm going to feel terrible all day about all this… this all, it's going to come in waves, stronger then weaker than stronger again; never-ending, that twist in the pit of my stomach yet again, the suffering of shame, the heat coming to my face, my eyes squeezing tight as through, I could make it all dissolve. I'll be telling myself all day, that I need to move on with it all… all of it.

And it's not the worst thing, ever to happen; It's not the worst thing, or is it? I've ever done the death thing what it like, no one come back to say, it's not as if I fell over in public as that girl, yet should I? Yet more days go by I feel becoming that girl! Yah- Point! The hallway outside the bedroom, I sit out for an hour and rock, giggling with her, and it creeps and black and the shadows on the wall for the trees in the moonlight window are dancing on the plaster walls, like the song in my head I am rocking 'Side to Side…'

-Ariana Grande- I think you should probably go to school the next day but- WHY it does not need you-you don't get anything out of it anyway, I don't anyways as most girls do, yet I'm not that, either.

I once read a book by a former alcoholic, once, and I was done, with it for-ever. Where a 10-year-old girl, described giving oral sex to two different girls, that were older than she, and a man give to both, and then her too, men he'd just met in a restaurant on a busy street, he bought them. I read it and I thought, I'm not that bad, I said in what I want then, why did I have it. This is where I set and pondered.

Part: 13

(SUNSET)

I have been thinking about her all-day

Then him…

Then her…

Then him…

Her…

Him…

Yes, yes, yes; No! Crazzzzzzzyyyyy! Oh my, I'm unable to focus on anything, or anyone or anybody, all run at once, it is making me silly, but what I saw this morning with me not knowing what I want. What was it that made me think that something was wrong, well everything? I couldn't possibly see her appearance and look on her face and her body action, at that distance, but I felt when I was looking at her that she was alone.

More than alone, lonely.

She misses him, yet that why I am here, and she worries, although she knows he has to go, I am the one, to own her body and soul.

Of course, she misses him, yet I don't. He was kind and strong for her, everything a boy should-a been for her, that why I had to take him, in all ways. And they are a partnership, that I had to have, for I have never. I can see it, and I wanted it, I wanted her, I know how they are. His strength, that secureness he radiates, it doesn't mean she's weak. She's strong in other ways; she makes knowledgeable leaps that leave him astonished with respect.

She can cut to the nub of glitches, dissect and analyses it in the time it takes other people to say good morning. At parties, he often holds her hand, even though they've been together years. I am now what she needs, they respected each other, they don't put each other down as I had, and I see now.

A film of sweat covers every inch of my skin, the inside of my mouth prickles, my eyes itch, mascara rubbed into their corners, it runs down my face. I feel exhausted this evening, yet the time when by fast yet slow, why I don't remember… I am sober yet feel stoned and stone-cold. But then again abstemiousness on the evening train is a challenge, to ride home, when was I at school today? …Particularly now, in this heat, or cold I feel senseless and crazy over her. Some days, like- I feel so-o depraved that I have to drink and smoke something just to get by, it not agents the law now, for my age-

(Is it?)

Some days I feel so bad that I can't.

My phone buzzes in my handbag, making me jump. Two girls sitting in the carriage look at me and then at each other, with a sly exchange of smiles. I don't know what they think of me, but I know it isn't good. My heart is pounding in my chest as I reach for the phone. Today, alcohol turns my stomach. I look at the screen, on my phone and delete everyone that no- longer matters. It's Tom, Paul, Ryan, her and she and it too, if I could delete me, too I would, for the suck-ie world, I hesitate for just a second and then I answer an email, or where I was today, as a teacher, I said- rubbing off, I was not the that typed it, she was through me… (meant health day granted, he said. With a wink-ie- ;-) emoji!)

I know this will be nothing good come from this, either: it will be Louise, perhaps, making me feel, or whatever, asking me ever so nicely to maybe give the booze a rest this evening, and try her instead? Or my mother would love this I said to her, telling me what to do, how to do, and where, all sex-ie and shit- she'll drop by the office for work and the girls when say's- 'like your girl has been doing nothing but rubbing out... 'um- like we can go for lunch, now that you got that off your chest,' she said, 'she's a lost hope…' one girl said that was blond with big boobs and blue eyes- 'sorry to hear that… the whisper with hands over their lips.' Believe me, my mom said that all she has going for her, whatever that means…

'Louie?'

For the first five years, I knew him, I was never in things like her, always him. Never her… or girl… just him, and him alone. I cannot swallow it, I said to her! 'Please, she asked, you can't call me like this all the time, I hear from you and you don't need a phone. I want to say to him, come outside, and play with me as I used too, go and stand on the lawn and see me do a cartwheel or something like that. Let me see you, do that… we played all types of games even doctors.

Now it's all here for that too, yet it looks said for no one to see her doing this crap it's all me, here or so it looks to them, and she, and her and him too, alike.

Um- sometimes, because he knew I hated it and it made him laugh to watch me roll 'round, and fall and movie about the lawed and play, even on the trampoline, it was him and I, nothing more nothing less, it was the best of time, now it's the worst of times, (or is it?) Um- ah- err- how would I know… oh- his voice is sluggish; he sounds worn out, and now he is kissing me, at age 10. 'Listen, you two enough,' my mom said, I recall, you have to-

'Stop this, OK-ay?''

I don't say anything, but give the look of death back to her- um ah with- like- wondering eyes... with irritation, we giggled… Like- because, I couldn't help but join in when he was laughing, saying I glad my hand was not down your undies. No, but she was showing some- you know- that t-h-e bang hole, was all up in his face laying on the tramp… it was oral… just to say it… what… like you haven't… I was giving handjobs at 12 like those girls too, sorry… true! If not, your life is over! He LOVE's me and loves me for it, it's for love! We were in love! La-la-LOVE- LOVE, LOVE! Damn it!

'I won't lie to you, it will kind of hurt when he is first putting his fingers inside you, but once things get going it will feel really good. Just make sure that he uses lube, it will make things a lot easier and more comfortable for you.'

'What was it like for him- licking it up, Um- it feels really warm. Ha- ha this is weird to explain but the pain is minor unlike actual intercourse, it's much more pleasing. It's easy to relax you'll feel like heaven. It's just very comfortable and pleasing and wet- ha- ha if you want the truth. It's a good way to connect with your boyfriend.'

'As for the shirt/bra thing I mean, in my opinion, it's much more comfortable to have it off, kind of brings together the whole experience. So-o I'd say yes, but who knows what he'll be expecting. It's a great time you won't forget so don't worry too much about it and enjoy!'

'I personally love it when my boyfriend did it, especially when he kisses his way down my body and takes his time to the point where I'm begging for more, yes you should shave it's not pleasant to get pubic hair in your face, and as for taste just make sure to take a shower and scrub everywhere.'

It's not like- like I have not had sex, un- I let Arana a-do- me with a strap- on her on top she said all bushed a sweet and pink in the face. We had a moment there… I remember the day cuz it was- like- um- Friday the day that, I go without a t-shirt or bar under my boy's hoodie, that I keep and never washed, and go underwear-less, to school to feel sexy, and commutable, to dress down.

Oh my god- it fee-eels so-0 good on these nips.

And in my mind, I am with him, feeling the warmth and love, he gave me like this hoodie.

Part: 14

I look over and see her… her… it…

Haven…

She is now on the OJ to have boobs and have a sweet voice… and she is getting that walked- off too, this week… yet it was meant to go with me, around this week… see… see… see… why I am now losing it. He- now she is my love is now a she… nice right…?

Now I get to make the choices… to life or dye or have him back as he was… all I have to do is pick… and she held the story out for me… if I sing on the line and give her my soul… I can have what I want. Yet do I want him anymore, I am not sure… I have her.

What gets me the most is that he really did not pass away, you see, he became a girl that I see in class every day, a girl that- I was not into, I mean you fall for a boy right, well that what I through until her, yet it's like a death to me, and it worked on my mind. Maybe this is God saying don't judge, a book by a cover, in dating a girl. Yet, I don't want the girl with a D-I-C-K I am sorry or the make-shift puss- puss.

Do you expect me to still love him/her for doing this to me?

And there she is saying in my day they would shoot you in the head for is the metal brake down of stupid, -freak! And I know this is not nice but it is like asking a white girl in western Pa to love a black! She said…

She gets me as he did… is that cool with you God for this…? I know but- why?

Hum- yet I am living with sinful judgments…

So, I found her to make all wrongs right. He grows his hair out, and started stuffing, and start going to school in dresses looking cuter than me, it was just not right, so I ended it, he went from having it all to having what he wanted, and I that what matters, what's awesome about that is that she, Haven is dating a girl, that is normal, so unlike me, and the most popular.

I miss him… and I don't want to live without HIM!

My mom was done with me over this… and his and them too, I did not do anything other than say… (I can't.)

And she goes on with life in the same school like- nothing happened, other than having a puss now… and I am the odd one out? She popular plays on the girl's baseball team and has more girlfriends, then I can count on my hands and toes…

WHAT_The_F! She is on the girl swimming team… and is even allowed in the girl locker room with me, and all of them… and they are all okay with it… for she's a – sweet little shy sweet freaking- Girl NOW! That getting more dick then I this week- yah!

I will never have him back, alive…

Through- As she could never have a baby… or make mine… now… wow…

Balls in agar anyone…? Next will be sitting in the heart of the big man upstairs… too…

Like- even I am not the F-ed up!

Part: 15

'Haven, it's me he said to become the- she, she was all there but that there.' The train is slowing, and she is sitting with me holding my hand, I was still in love with me and me- her, yet it was not working, for me, in the looks, yet I tried, I really did… and we are almost opposite the house, my old house. You've got to sort yourself out, I said… we need a break…'

And that was the end…

There is a lump in my throat as hard as a pebble, smooth and obstinate. I cannot speak. 'Haven? Are you there? I know things aren't good with you, and I'm sorry for you, I really am, but… I can't help you if you can find out what you want… and these constant calls, showing me, your changes… is just making me feel bad, you're really upsetting me. OK-ay? I can't help you anymore, and be OK-ay with this… Go to AA or something, for tran-z-ie's. Um- please, say. You will go to those meetings after school with me, and she got up and sat with her the hot girl, and it was love for them.' I pull the filthy plaster off the end of my finger and look at the pale,

wrinkled flesh beneath, dried blood caked at the edge of my fingernail. I press the thumbnail of my right hand into the center of the cut and feel it open up, the pain sharp and hot. I catch my breath. Blood starts to ooze from the wound. The girls on the other side of the carriage are watching me, their faces blank.

Part: 16

Haven-

One year earlier-

WEDNESDAY, December 14, 2015

(MORNING)

I can hear the train coming; I know its rhythm by heart. It picks up speed as it accelerates out of Rockville station and then, after rattling around the bend, it starts to slow down, before all ass for the viaduct from a rattle to a rumble, and then sometimes a screech of brakes as it stops at the signal a couple of hundred yards from the house, and the race is on. My coffee is cold on the table, and I am thinking about it like always, he becomes her, but I'm too scrumptiously warm and lazy to bother getting up to make myself another cup, lost in the throughs of falling for her and she's not really- real.

Sometimes, I don't even watch the trains go past the home when I stay home that used to be a joy to him and I sitting out on the roof, I just listen. Sitting here in the morning, eyes closed and the hot sun orange on the inside of my eyelids shows the shape of outlines, my eyes fly open fast and it's her, I could be anywhere, other than her, I said, now in class, and - I- I- um- don't remember getting here... when... ah... how...ah...? And the through just drops from my mind, like I flop onto my bed, and passed out, last night.

I could be in at Myrtle beach like I used to with him... um- yeah, and that through drops to before fully thinking it; I could be in Italy or France, or somewhere other than this pit of hellish land, that looks like Pittsburgh in the 1900s, (in some ways things have not changed, I thought.) ...All fogged and smuggled, and dim lighted, and graying and slipping away, like my life itself, with the smell of coal smoke in the air, all those pretty colored houses, now gray and dull and gloom- and the trains, grit, is grounded, into everything, ferrying the visitors back and

forth, say what it once was and what it is not, it is what is not- they say now, I could be back where I came from, I would tell you if I could remember it… so saying that is not worth remembering, is it… with the screech of gulls in my ears and salt on my tongue, about to spit it out, and she said it's all good, I know, and a ghost train passing on the rusted track half a mile away, fly's by me, as I stand next to the tracks my hair blowing with the whoosh of air it makes, thinking- if… The train isn't stopping today, I said standing there think if- or if not; it trundles slowly- and then so fast, I could not think, as I grin at with no through in my head or behind my brown eyes, it's thrilling to just lose it. I can hear the wheels clacking over the points, can almost feel it rocking, me more than I am rocking myself. (say it creepy.) Ha- ha- ha- ha he-o I can't see the faces of the passengers like I should be in there, maybe my mind is split and I am, and she does this… to me… and I know they're just commuters heading to the other side… to sit behind desks, but I can dream, here and there about him and I, and even her too, where it all makes sense: of more exotic journeys, to have then what is real, of fantasies at the end of the line and beyond.

In my head, I keep traveling back to before he got his dick cut off; it's odd that I still think of it, not dangling there for me to suck, or think of in the halls when I look do there at him, you know all girls do that, I remember when I through all-boys what around with boner's in shorts all the time, and a girl had to- um- ah- well- had to take care of it… oh, my... (eye roll,) I was cute he said. on mornings like this, with such affection, such longing, but I do. The wind in the grass, the big slate sky over the dunes, the house infested with mice and falling down, full of candles and dirt and music. It's like a dream to me now. I feel my heart beating just a little too fast, think about the sex, I never had with him, like I am 14 and still… original- um- closed ah- righty- tight-y, mmm- hymen face-ed!

V-i-r-g-i-n!!!

What's funny is he lost his 2 times to mine… with dick and without…! And then with…? Go figure!

I can hear his ah- ah- I mean- her footfall on the stairs, she calls my name.

The spell is broken, of the love I have for him, I'm awake, by the through and look of him… I men here, she flawless… through, and cuter than me. Should I…

Evening, right in place with her, looking as hot as- the tom boy-sh Ariana Grande before the nose job. singing like her too in chores also- what the- F! And he, she, is all over her, that girl, that they all want to be, the other one… me I look kinda like Megan Park, you the smile, and crazy christen yah, you got it. It sucks she's the top girl in school like hotter than- Grande, it sucks for only me… and they think hey it's okay.

I haven't got much done today. I was supposed to sort out my application out for a job, as a saver at dinner, yet- no… so, this home is losing power soon if my mom doesn't get her crap together. It's been 3 weeks- where is she…? I know… she doesn't care, like all us kids today we raised ourselves.

I'm cool from the breeze, blowing in the cracked window, and warm from the two fingers fingering I just got done with, and also for the yummy- vodka in my martini, that makes me feel even more like a bad girl. All this like- um- before seven a.m.

I'm out on the trance, waiting for a girl, Cassandra to come home, with her on the same line as- me. And she is freaking consumed in sucking face with Scott, and a Bi girl Lakyn, yet anymore they're all for that… the world has gone a little mad, in calibrating the morons!

What do I say to my kid when she wants to marry a girl and she a girl, 'hell that's' a-just fine and dan-die?' Crazy, boys acting like a girl- girls now are boys, what… is wrong with this world?

Sex, sex, and more sex, that is all we think about for that all we really know with now school and the give up attitude, from the educator. I'm going to persuade her to take me out to dinner, this week so I don't look like a freak to call them, she okay, a friend, maybe, yet she all I really need, something Italian IDK- I don't know. Um- like- 'We haven't been out for bloody finger masturbating on your period- ages,' I- we- need this her Ex is sucking cl-it on some other b*tch too, other than her, so-o yah-a we have a lot to talk about… NOT! Maybe, whatever… This girl to me looks like, boys go through us girls like boxers, we know yet we keep coming for them… he, he, get it?

She looks at me, I look at her… snorting noodles up my nose… we walk home... end of the story. Yah-te- yah-ta-ie... I could still hear her saying come home to me, and things she said she was going to do to was nasty, she has gotten with the times why can't my mom…, food

for through…! It went right through me, like a steel train wheel through my softening head to life, her voice really shrill and desperate, hot and suggestive. 'What are you doing, with her? What are you doing with her? Give her to me, give her to me. She is not spitting out her food, and my girl is in a catfight only I can see, yet she asks' -why…?'

She is cocking the F-er… It seemed to go on and on, though it probably only lasted a few seconds until I said stop… I love you…, and they all looked at me…, like- like- I was a sick gay dip-shit… yet everyone embarrasses that, now don't they? …, why is it freaked up when it's me? She through it was for her too... nope is for the imaginer girl, in my head, I said. Yah- see the rainbow… on Facebook, with photos of them doing the movement, yet not feel it when you see it- wha-o, in real life.

I got home, I ran upstairs and climbed out onto the verandah, where we used too, and I could see, through the trees, and the sunset, like we used too, and overall the switch tracks, as we used too, crying, I rock, with her hand on my back, maybe they both were, at the same place at the same time, at different times… years apart, yet all the same, in the here and now, and they need how each other felt, that why 100 years don't matter with two girls that get it…

My days feel empty now I don't have the gallery to go to any length, I wiped it all out, like my friend's list I had, like- 888 on there I did to 10.

I really miss it, yet not, then yes, then no, then why, and then, I get it, and it is fine, it has to be, and then, maybe not… aw- ha!

I miss talking to them- I really miss it, yet not, then yes, then no, then why, and then, I get it, and it is fine, it has to be, and then, maybe not… aw- ha!

I even miss dealing with all those tedious-ie yummy mummies of whom and who used to drop by in tagged photos- I really miss it, yet not, then yes, then no, then why, and then, I get it, and it is fine, it has to be, and then, maybe not… aw- ha!

Telling their friends- my day and boys and thing- I really miss it, yet not, then yes, then no, then why, and then, I get it, and it is fine, it has to be, and then, maybe not… aw- ha!

Starbucks in hand, pictures, that are only now in print on my dresser, and I take them down for a shoebox, that little girl is no longer that girl, middle school, I said, I don't need this,

and the trash is where they went, in all formats in life and make-believe land online, I won't be sorry I said.

He and I are now forever ripped apart like the pictures, never to be again.

I have her, these are the memories that need to last... forever…, not these…! This just shows my mind, no?

Love forever, and never-ever is for SHIT! So, you- know, like all it takes is one dick, and it's over.

They have been getting, down on me, about him hacking, picking and prying, about the sex and love and the detail of how he got this THING-IE chopped off, and made to be this and that, moved about, that I have no, privacy, from thinking I made him this way, or that I should embrace the gay or should have tried praying it away the gay they say. I am trapped, by them, what they say and don't, what they think and don't, and trapped by her love, and not his…!

Part: 17

I thought about calling the police, on her, yet they don't care there is always an AND-OR in what they do, making their own laws, but it all seemed to calm down when they say we can give you to foster or take you away… I was living with him in his bed, and we slept together, without seeping together, yet in school, he said he handed me, in and by the ass hole… yep- all us girls have been there.

Really weird, God knows God well get them, I don't know that but my Grandma used to say that, before she cooked, what was going on, she said was SIN-full, yet I did not see, it until her, and after him, losing his dink-ie, and gumdrops, but it's the most exciting, in my life, I am sure of that, I've had in 6 weeks now with ME MYSELF and me.

Yah- um- so-o… Unlike all the sluts I go to school with I do have more hobbies then masturbating, and sucking dong, and riding it. I love photography, and the vintage, cameras with the bellows I am some artists, a lot of them would say no, but to me, I feel drawn by hand is what is about, not taking six photos of some else copyright shit and making it your own, by chop this and add that, by magic lassoing tools, in Photoshop and so on. Books- ha, I have some, but like most my age we get to page 30 and stop for we can read it without getting bored, or so frustrated,

of having lack of schooling in reading that we slam it shut, and throw the e-reader, or hardback book across, the room. And like how can afford a e-reader, some working a year at the dinner I have made $300 and that is with tips and that's a 5 'till 9- 3 days a week, I am going in the hole, not making money I am losing it, why to work, I can make for sitting on my ass, rubbing off, like all the other girls my age… sad but true… and yes he is even doing that, for there's a Trans cam sight, and that how he met her, see her rubbing herself…, on Facebook, mmm- sexy- no? Just what I want to see spread Sp-ed girls jizzing…, wow; even she said I love this world today like she loves the undies of today too, she said look at how we dressed, and then you… I love your bloomers she said, and I giggled for an hour.

Sometimes, I feel like seeing, if I can track down anybody from the old days, to hang with and then she all I need, but then I think nah- I'm good, what would I talk to them about now anyway, it's been so long, and I lost touch with what cool and in… They wouldn't even recognize this girl anymore; the happy go, lucky girl I used to be, she not me, there are to the side to Sarah, or so they say.

In any case, I can't risk looking her over them she is varying defensive, and I going back they say; even in my schooling they say, but not what I say, it's always a bad idea anyway, they say. You know what I don't care what they say, I'll wait until the winter is over, then I'll look for work, as you can see, I have more money at work then, not, so why... I don't have a car like them, I don't have it, yet they're happy with on that runs, me too, yet you cannot get a car for 300 dollars, can you? And if you question why you're really dumb, I CAN READ, OR DO SIMPLE MATH, OR GET OUT OF THE TOWN, just like they- were all so dumb where happy, and they don't see, I do for I have her to show me the way…

The way…

The way of the past…

The way to see how F-ed we are… as a generation, the boomers took this from us, and we have to suck there but now, and they don't want us to work, that want it all for themselves, all the jobs, that why we are so-o dumb, it seems like a shame to waste these long winter days, working at my age, to work you have to be 16 me I am 15 and ½ they said that's fine, yet with all the girls, trying for my job, they get I don't, I'll find something, here or elsewhere, I know I will, yet college forget it… it's over for me, I might as while facing it. My mom is 35 and whirring

around, and that it… my dad makes alimony payments, that is all I have to live on, in this home by myself, you feel in the blanks… I on my own… like you too.

She pops in every 4 weeks or so, and it is back, for her looking for what she has not found, and never well… that's her type… in all.

Part: 18

TUESDAY, November 14, 2015

(A.M. sunlight)

I find myself standing in front of my clothing that just throw-ed and tossed and tasseled, around, in the hole I call a closet, staring for the hundredth time at a rack of pretty clothes, the perfect attire for the day, something that would get me arrested I said in my head, and she yes please, something that going to make me beg for it, later on…

Nothing-

I say clean or that it all looks 'nanny to me.'

I get the knife and make it look cool, God, even the word makes me want to gag, seeing all the kiddie thinks I have, with cute all over them, I put on my hole-ie jeans, with nothing under them and a T-shirt, also nothing under it, scrape my hair back like they do. I don't even bother putting on any makeup, the boys are not looking at my face anyway, there's no point, maybe a little I said, is there, prettying myself up to spend all day with a baby?

Oh, did I not say, yeah, a little baby girl, that I look over, that's my dad's, see look who razing whom, it's his kid. And the girl, he's with is my age, yet I call her step-mom, and she 17.

Yet in these parts, all there is making the taller rock, back and forth. You should see this trailer park, window's boarded up with play, all them trashed on the inside and out and shooting up being the thing along with pot, and oh -so ratchet, I look at my dad and her, he 50 and a little to crunk- drunk when he gets home, for my liking and him and her and my sister with some old man that lives next door, are in the living room of my trailer doing the nasty sucking and dropping on top and sideways and all in-between, my dad gets a hold of me, and rips

everything off me, it was not long before I was in it too on top of him saying dad f- me, I had no choices, I have nowhere to go on the weekends, I been there all my life, dad has used me, in the night, like all the girls in the trailer park… yet, it's something we don't say yet we all do and know, I am not saying it not the norm here… it is when sex is all you have to do. I don't want to be trailer trash, so I went with my mom… or his pussy hole in the night, that he said is too tight, I remember the first time, I was 13, he was my first, not my boy, yet it did not count, I kissed my dad and his boys like there were lovers… I not going to say it wrong, when it felt right at the time, fit it was something to do, yet high, and laid, it's something to do, in the land where there is nothing.

(Father's love)

Report Abuse, yeah right there more AND or OR with that to… and I am the one that gets the hate… …?...

I'm only 16, very young and I've grown up without a father, however, I've read up that it's actually very common for girls to have crushes on their fathers. I know, sounds creepy and gross but it's the male figure in the house, the one who looks after you and shows you love.

But sex is just crazy, it's about the upbringing… many children are brought up in a crazy life… in my opinion, it's the certain love between and daughter and father that can make it seem to be something more. Many aren't born with those instincts as I said, it's the upbringing, if they're taught that it's a normal thing to think of their parents in a different way then they won't know any better.

Our society is used to the idea, of this… that we will only marry outside the family, yah but hooking up is just hooking up, but things weren't always that way on that day, yes, yes, there where, she said so.

There were times when it wasn't uncommon to marry your brother or sister, and although I haven't heard of daughters marrying fathers or mothers and sons, I wouldn't be surprised if some twisted person did it.

Yes, when I was 14 on a weekend, I was just there on the sofa in my undies. He started feeling me up, and it leads to more, it was consensual always in that we were both curious about seeing each other nude as in my bra and panties, I was virtually naked and dad admitted

that was turned on, why he had an erection in his boxers, with the next thing asked, and he said found out, and I did, and I sucked it, as all those girls do, and I don't feel bad about it. One thing led to another eventually with both of us naked and feeling and touching each other and me having multiple orgasms. I told dad I was ready to feel his penis in me and we made love that evening, all night looking over them, my sisters was 13, and she was with the guy next door, and my dad too, and many other times continuing making love with each other at home, happen. That guy next to use got jail time… for my sis, said it was rape, yet come on, we all know… and now she the one that is detected for a man using her, at 13, and my dad… go figure.

Now go and find a boy, that's where I'm-a at… that understands that one… some don't care, and if they don't, they are not the right boy, I feel *ougie*… about who I am and what I did. So, I am alone, he was the only one that got it…

Its Monday, and I home from school, I never even showed it all of me yet, no wonder they think what they do, yet they're no time for the wicked, I flounce downstairs and cry in the showroom her holding me, it's in my mind, I know, half indulging for a fight, with God, yet why... he lets it goes on… why?

I ask making coffee in the kitchen with a girl I called my last hope, my sister, the shy innocent sheepish girl, that would not hurt a fly, yet want it in, and over the fact she tailors trash cannot, on with want she aloud rise about that… with the groups she in, with-in school. She turns to me with a grin, saying well, I going to have a baby, and my mood lifts instantly, to who, I think its dads, she said, I rearrange my pout to a smile and say wow, she hands me her coffee, half done, and kisses me on the lips like lovers, and wakes out the door, and I like this is normal to me… what? (Am- I- brainwashed or is this all I know… maybe both, to me this is life.)

There's no sense blaming him for this, it was my idea or hers, it just happens. Simpleminded, trailer trash, is what she and I are, and there no way around that, it's what you're born it to that get you here or there. I volunteered to do it, to become a child that wants her boom -boom, from the people down the road too.

At the time, I thought it might be fun, to have fun, and sex they said was fun, and it is…

Completely insane, really, I must have been made, I would do you even, bored, mad, curious, it just sex in a small town, where that all we have, I wanted to see, what you think of me now, I don't care what you did, why should you with me.

She encouraged me- he was over the moon, about it's my dad, saying well just say, yeah it happened, when I suggested it, saying it was someone else's, I said that's not going to work, she looks up said, that why he did what he did, I get him back, he knocked me up and will say that why he had the sex change, to get out of it. Dad, he thinks spending time around babies will make me moody, so he said, I should be looking for new home, yet come around for the weekend or he'll kill me, in fact, it's doing exactly the opposite; of what I want, when I leave there I run home to my mom's home, can't wait to strip my clothes off and get into the shower and wash the baby smell off me. I don't know what to do… anymore… I have nowhere to go. Yet this is law and visitation rights… no? And the love I get is killing me…

Part: 19

I quit!

My job, I want to quit life… it what I said…

I long for my days, I had, thinking back on all the galleries that are no longer, prettied up, hair done well, talking to adults, about my high hope for the future... ALL FOR SHIT, ALL! …About art or films AND WHAT TO BECOME A DRAFTER.

Nothing at all would be a step up from my conversations with, God, I know she is thinking I am dull, for this too, yet she gets it! Odd for her age you would think she would be the believer, you get the feeling that she probably had something to say for herself once upon a time, but now everything is about the child, now and how it's not mine, it was really his: Is she warm enough, to them through, that I want to kill him, Is she too warm? Funny how God works… he'll get you for your shit…

How much milk did she take, I see a girl there with the baby sucking, she's my age, that would be my stepmother? And she's always there, so most of the time, I feel like a spare part, of mine, will be used… her- too, at some point someday… I was sure, yah not, my job is to watch the child while and rests at my dad's, to give her a break. A break from what, exactly? She's bizarrely nervous, too. I'm constantly aware of her, hovering, twitching. She flinches every

time a train passes, jumps when the phone rings, it's him/her asking, why…? …, and how, 'They're just so fragile, aren't they, he- she's?' she says, and I can't disagree with that, we can have found out.

I leave the house and walk, leaden-legged, the fifty yards along Apple road to their house, if you can call them that, no skip in my step, like there used to be, Today, she doesn't open the door, for me, you how it like usually flies open from me. it's him, on my mind, then her, and then baby-drama.

The throughs of him and looking handsome in his suit, for the dance, my sophomore year, and even now I find her cute, yet she doesn't want me, he's smaller, to me now even, I wonder if there is a drug for that too, and his eyes are a little too close together, and the nose, is feminine now, eyebrows plucked, brown-sh - blonde colored hair, and eyeshadow. when you see him up close, it still him, I still in- love, yet he's not with me, maybe that way, I snapped a little, but he's not bad, with me or about it, I want him back, yet he is with her. Hitherto, there is so much that has changed, yet has stayed the same.

He flashes me his wide, smile at me that never change, yet the lips are all shiny and wet looking now, yet he, is him yet now- her, yet I want him and have her, and then he's gone, and it's them I see standing happily, should I let it goes- if they're happy, and it's just me and her and the baby, and that going to be life. I can see it happening.

Up till now, do I want him- I mean him back, like her.

Thus far, would she want me, and why should I take her back?

What would be the right thing to do when it all wrong?

Could I love her for her, that what is getting me, I do and then not… what do…

(what would you do?)

Part: 20

It a THURSDAY, 19, of some month 2017-

(EVENING)

I feel so much better, now that I kissed her and said I still love her, as if anything is possible, with us again. I'm free, in my mind, and she is pissed, yet I happy and she not! I'm sitting on the terrace, with my old love, think about all that was before… all, waiting for the rain; the sky is black above me, swallows looping and diving, the air thick with moisture. Besides like all the water washes are faces and we are both wet with, the rain, a cool photo idea in black and white, a photography moment, of course, I ran for the vintage camera, holding embrace we take the selfie, and there are no new photos on my dresser, the same yet not, yet should I care… I could learn how to fall all over, I thought. She- Louise is not happy with me… I get it, she feels un-need at this point. You look in the frame and you see her too, all three of us that get it… moment forever… we haled hand for those moments and in those moments, I feel the love we had, so long ago.

So, I asked would you, go with me… and she said yes, I looked over the facts of this and that, and that he would never F- me, with his own dick, yet she is the mind I really love and love, and she was there to help me see, that love is not on the outside is it? I've been making plans, about how this could work, yet it may be gross to say, yet you get it… love is love right, yet I need him to dump her for me…

Will he do that?

The next day, he made that happen for me…

And we picked up where we left off…

I remembered, I had a teacher at school who told me once that I was a lover of self-reinvention, that I would have to find my way, and see what I have and have not had, I get that now, I didn't know what he was on about at the time, I thought he was putting me on, but I've since come to like the idea. Runaway, lover, finds the past and see what could give the present of the future, so who do I want to be tomorrow, and that would be a lover to both girls, for being girl… and not caring about others think?

I didn't really mean to quit; letting others choices my life for me, the words just came out, saying I want to be with you always, we were sitting there, in her old room, sitting like in the window, with the baby on her lap, that's my sisters, and could not be happy-er in our Fed up lives, it not going to work for some of you, but it works for us.

The girl he was dating, found someone else the same day, its high school, it was a fast rebound. So, was it love? No do we have that; I think so… Worse than that, I felt uncomfortable, as if I was intruding,

when they were together, so I left him/ her go… and with her, it all worked, and to think I was going to end it.

'I've found another job,' I said, without really thinking about it. 'So, I'm not going to be able to do this any longer.' She gave me a look, I don't think she believed me, when I said, you can rest in peace now, you have found your love, and seen what it was like, she just said, 'Oh, that's a shame,' and I could tell she didn't mean it and was happy to go her own way, she looked relieved, that I did not go for the evil pain, she didn't even ask me what the job was, which was a relief, because- I hadn't through up a convincing lie, and that is being a Ghost-hunter and someone that talks to the spirit world.

(Yes, I have a gift of seeing and talking to dead kids.) I do this after school, I don't make much, but it's something, hey I young. And as far as going to college, I not sure I need that either, around here.

The only person who'll really be disappointed was my sister about everything, so I have to think of something to tell him, I even said I want the baby like it was mine and his, that'll put an end to it, all the drama I hear in school about this creepo freaking family we have, it's my junior year, soon I be out or old enough to get out, by singing out, she already did for the baby, girl, we named after the dyed girl that was my imaginary friend that got it, in my time of pain.

Part: 21

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2017-

(MORNING)

I haven't slept in days. I hate this, hate insomnia more than anything, just lying there, brain going around, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. I itch all over, I want to shave my head. It's just after 7:02, it's chilly out here, but then again, it's so-o lovely like this, all these strips of garden side by side, jade and cold and waiting for fingers of sunshine to creep up from the tracks and make them all come alive. I've been up for hours; I can't sleep.

I've missed him every day. More than anyone, I think that is so-o, and I happy to say I do not have to do that any longer. He's was the big hole in my life, in the middle of my soul, yet she filed, or maybe he was just the beginning of it, becoming right. I don't know… I don't even know whether all this is really about him, or whether it's about everything or even her, that happened, whom do I blame, or should I?

Everything that's happened since most of happed for an impermeable reason. All I know is, one minute I'm ticking along fine and life is sweet, and I want for nothing, and the next I can't wait to get away, I'm all over the place, slipping and sliding again.

So, I'm going to see a therapist, I am sure of this! This could be weird, but it could be a laugh, too, I sure of that also, for she is going to be sitting with me just as amused.

He doesn't know the half of it, and I am OK-ay, with that now too, love is more than feeling loved, like that kind of love. This is not quite the same thing, of course, yet nothing in my life was the same as them…

I'm a bit nervous, saying all this to you in this interview. but I haven't been able to get to sleep lately, and I had to get my story out there, so others see my case, and somewhere to go, so yeah; I invented the AA for trans*ie's*, I told him I find it difficult enough talking to people, about nothing regardless, this dog crap, well, it may not be that yet its, a- lot stuff, I know about this stuff, I can barely even talk to him about it, and now I have a room full of them, and I love them for them, and so should you 'all.

He said that's the point, you can say anything to strangers, and make them feel, just ask it in a way that is not prying, or makes them feel Uncomfortable, like that girl Megan, over there, that's being a dick, to the boys- girl that have them. Why should it matter what in your shorts… and she gives an hour-long speech about- why, before thrown out… then a boy named, Ed got up and gave his story of how he became a girl, not by choices, when they had to cut his nuts off, it was cancer, they said, he lost his dick too,

vary said, yet we all just blinked, for her, looks like a she.

Yet he not dealing well, about have a girlfriend, that not in- love with him now, but that isn't completely true, they said it was endlessly- permanently and never going to end, love they had that was so cute-ie woo-ie that it makes one gag, like its harry balls, you have to suck.

You can't just say anything, in this room, well sitting by the cross a-crossed, the Frenching 17-year-old nun, and the 50-year old greasy ass-ed prick, with the caller, that had five boys, and knocked her up, and is bang her, regardless of GOD's Holy F*ck, yet talks shit about the trailer trash, that I am in church, ha- go figure. That why I here to help sinners, …Yet, this is where they say I should have this… where they understand, that boys and girls, like us are going to hell, for not picking the life that God gives us. I loved that one coming out of my love's mouth... they did not even know what to say…! I know she- loves me so much; it makes me ache. I don't know how she does it. I would drive me mad if I had to put up with me… I said that, and then through.

But I had to do something, and at least this feels right for me to do. All those plans I had-photography courses and art classes when it comes down to it, they feel a bit pointless, now that I am doing this for a job, yet live is wired like that like I'm playing at real-life instead of actually living it like they why I was with her in my mind. Crazy, yet to some, it makes complete senses. I had to find something that I must do in my life, something undeniable. I can't do this, I can't just be this… whatever this is, I have to document it, I am the first…, I don't understand how anyone does it, like living with sickness, and yes, I feel it is, yet I get it now, there is literally nothing to do but wait, and see what happens, wait for someone to love you for you.

Part: 22

(EVENING)

I get up today, after a quick cat nap, and see that another officer has been shot in the face, that now five this week, cool, and no one is stopping it, why should they, maybe it's the people taking back the law, and getting their free rights back. I could give a shit, and I snap it off…

I've been kept waiting, for the train, to start my day is now my last year of school, I am living with her in my home, like renting the appointment, our room off my mother- yes, I have to pay to live in my own home or I am out, and she too, a $1,000 a month with all, and I behind. I have to pay for my phone, $600 and to have what they do, I have taxes to pay into, I have to put $50 or so gas in my car a week, and that I will not pay off until I am 80, and it's a 1990 corolla, that all colors. Or it back to my dad's, and her mom kicked her out at 16, they need the room for the other huger mouth that they have, they said to her, so she's with me, she was

living with her old girlfriend, yet now that we're back together, we're trying to make it. $500 me $500 her... And I only make $300 a year, doing this job, and that's more than them, go to college, add is not paying and my mom is not either, and she makes too much to get it anyways.

I can't even afford new undies, eating out every day, is $60 for she and I. and if you don't eat out, around her there is nothing to do, so its sex, eating out, and well eating out.

Half an hour ago, I was wondering if… I going to make it in life, and I'm still here, even if they don't want me to be, you get what I am saying. Sitting in the reception room flicking through 3 shows that all I can have, thinking about getting up and walking out, down at the gym, and that is not free either, $25 for them to look at your face going in the door, I know doctors' appointments run over, all this too, and I don't have coverage for that, but therapists is what I need they say…? I even pay to take a shit, and for me bag shit and taking out, I pay for water, I mean really water... more bills then texted, and they all want to see me and her fall on our ass's... that's life in a small town. The next move is in someone dog house, I feel it coming, heating for this home is $900 a month in December.

Films have always led, me a happy feeling, that would be cool if I could keep the power on, halfway through the mount its cut, and there is a fee for that to get that back on, and I have paid mom for it, yet tell them that at the power company… they don't want to hear it, she spent that on drugs, and free sex, and working at bars here and there. And you have to have insurance for everything also… more money I don't have, yet I a grown-up at 17, yet I can get a bear, or have sex, or get a pack, without getting carded, yet I am grown up, to them. My car was said to not be on the road when it was in the shop, yet, I have to work, yet the cope doesn't get that either, and they're more than happy to the ticket. And funny school tax my mom pays in one year is $3,000 and I can't spell or think over someone that is in 2nd grade they say, and sure, we all are being failed. They get 6 million dollars a year, yet we have no books, no papers, don't need to write a paper, don't need to do math over adding and subtracting, don't need to do anything for they feel we cannot even shit and wipe, and yet the teachers make $30,000 a year and don't care or want to be there tell, me why, I am living the way I am.

So, the shit I am in I have made someone a million, for doing nothing, but let us sit and rot. Um- me to believe that they kick you out the moment your thirty minutes are up, is the best thing ever they say, I suppose they aren't really talking about the kind of therapist you get

referred to on the National Health Service, no more like some girl, that has nothing to do with anything is good enough, kind of like me and what I do for others.

Note- to all girls on Facebook, if you and your past lover/ex is no longer, take the photos down, it's just hurting yourself, and go to Walmart, get them printed, for your memory only, and put them in a shoebox, with a ribbon tied tightly, and move on so we can too.

I remember, go up to the receptionist to tell her, that I've waited long enough, to feel that I can do this job, I'm leaving, my hometown if I don't get this, when the doctor's office door swings open, for my drug test, he already through I was no good, he's a lanky man, emerges, looking apologetic and holding out his hand to me, asking to piss in the cup, and he has to look for he can't trust my type, yet I have to trust him right- go figure. 'Mr. Haswell, I am so sorry to have kept you waiting,' he says, I just smile at him and tell him it's all right, and I feel, at this moment, about letting him look at me down there too, it like the dad I through, in my sick mind… that it will be all right because I've only been in company for a dad and I feel right at home, a moment or two and already I feel mollified.

I think it's the voice. Soft and low. Slightly accented, which I was expecting, because his name is dock- is- I guess he must be med- thirties, although he looks very young with his incredible dark honey skin. He has hands, nice, I could imagine on me, long and delicate fingers, there, and I was getting turn on by it- good every girl's nightmare, clit showing anyone, I can almost feel them on my hood skin.

I thought so this is why you in practice to see all the young girls… he winks at me, saying all is good, here.

'I CAN SEE THAT YOU HAD SEX,' 'Yet, girls today I see in my office are younger than you, so, whatever-' he gave you should not speak, holding a vag.- cutaway, that is glass, in his hand, Umm-hmm- I roll my eyes and get a free condom- thrown in my lap, so, (it is better than- the poop test) I sit, getting, a handful of tongue depressors, and a half a bottle of germ-x, and placing it in my handbag, he back in the room, as the door opens, I just get my bushing butt back down- knowing I was busted, 'disinfectant-' he said- 'there should be one I hear- hum- have to give the girls hell,' yet this man has a ponytail and wear a leather vest, looking more like a hells angel then a doctor, rough and ready is his style… so washing hands, he can do after, ha, I sure he'll-a doing scratch and sniff, before going into the next room.

We don't talk about anything significant, it's just the introductory session, the getting to-know-your stuff, about your body that makes you gag some of it, there was no jock there yet you're smelling; he asks me what the trouble, I have been in overtime with my dad and mom, saying- 'I am not the bad girl.' I tell him about the panic attacks, insomnia, I been having yet I think not… I know what that going to do, drugs, and help, that I don't want… so they can talk, no thanks. Just what I need drugs in a drug-ie home… hum, I see that I would not be the one taking them, and all they would be asking for me to give, as a setup, been there… the fact, that I lie awake at night too frightened to fall asleep, is not the end of the world, to me... even if… YOU FEEL IN THE BLANKS, you think you know me too- right?

He wants me to talk a bit more about that, noggin, but I'm not ready yet to say I am a physio-tared. He asks me, all the doc crap- if I moody- PMS-ing- think about killing a church full of bible bangers, whether I take drugs, drink alcohol, also- I just said- all the time doc, all the time, he looks at me with that sideward stern, yet nice look, along with the- I've seen you grow up smirk on his face, as if I was joking, rubbing his hand on his ripped jeans, there is mud on his cowboy boots too, his double bar- glasses are at the end of his nose while doing all this, lower lip bitten and tucked into some.

I tell him I have other vices these days, and I catch his eye and I think he knows what I mean… 'umm-' he said 2 finger typing on the keyboard, Then he feels, my belief, my chest for lump so he said, and back and whatnot, breathing and all that too, this should be this and that should be this, hit, hit, and spit, and those rubbed… too; yep at the doctors. As if I ought to be taking this a bit more seriously, so I tell him about the gallery closing, uptown, and that I feel at a lost all the time, and have no short-term memory, 'it is that is early- signs of- dementia.' 'Not common, yet could be…,' he said.

My lack of direction, to what he was saying was my mind, playing tricks on me, the fact that, I spend too much time in my head.

He doesn't talk much, as he logs out, just the occasional prompt, but I want to hear him speak more about what is wrong with me, 'soo-a, I'm leaving, see you in a month- don't do two boys in the same day, he said-

it's slutty.' While- running out the door- slamming it hard.

'Thanks DOC.' Is what I said.

Part: 23

Dad is waiting for me when I get home, over this weekend it's more of the same, he thrusts a drink into my hand, saying go for it, yet that's a dad he thinks it's cute when I drunk, he wants to know all about it. I say- it was Okay. He asks me about the therapist thing I am doing, and if I am keeping it: did I like them, did he seem nice?

OK-ay, I say- again, because I don't want to sound too enthusiastic. He asks me whether we talked about Haven. And how she thinks everything is about me. He may be right, about that all too, He may know me better than I think she does, even when it comes to the way I think.

TUESDAY, November 26, 2017-

(Not long- BEFORE NOON)

I woke early this morning, that was sarcasm, by the way, if you did not get it; but I did sleep for a few hours, just looking her over trying to fall for what's on the outside now, of her, which is an improvement on last week, she is really a woman now, not the boy I fell in love with-in like kindergarten, I felt almost refreshed when I got out of bed, so instead of sitting on the veranda, and see the steam train go by, I decided to go for a walk, next to the track's not on them.

I've been shutting myself away, almost without realizing it. The only places I seem to go these days are to the shops, my classes, I still have trust issues with them, yet I have one or two real friends, and her that all I need, and the therapist, God right. Nah I happier now than ever, (thumbs up!); occasionally to some girls, I sit with lunch.

The rest of the time, I'm at home, I and I end it with my dad, over he was playing with the baby, it's no wonder, I get restless, yet- I'm-a- the bad girl.

I walk out of the house, turn right and then left onto Apple Road, things are all the same, yet I feel new life in me. Maybe it was letting go… past the inns, bars and holy places, the ornament that litter the streets. We used to go there all the time; when they were one, and not 2 with more than two in them, at one time; I can't remember why we stopped going out and seeing

faces, I don't. I never- ever, liked it all that much, too many couples just the right, you know boy-girl, all drinking too much and dicking around for something better, wondering if they'd have the courage, to say no. Perhaps that's why we stopped going, because I didn't like what the world became, and I was not them. Past the hostelry, past the workshops. I don't want to go far, just a little tour to stretch my legs, and see how the other half live, that are boy- girl. Yet- I have everything, I want right…?

It's nice being out early, before the school run, on the train… before the commute gets going also on Amtrak; the streets are empty and not too- too clean, yet I have seen worse the day full of prospect. I feel good and, yet I steel not like them I still holding on to what I should have lost in 9th grade, and you know what I could give a frap'n F! I am sick of sex before having it, I have it with her, so is that real or not? Some would say know, is it gay, or what is it… you tell me, it not documented yet what we do.

(They say you're not FUCKED until you have one in you, well- then liz-bo's are what, what are we? A gay man is- what, even if- there is no baby coming out of that but hole is there.)

So, what are we freaks, or what? I did not want it, yet this is what I have been handed. I still feel that life, and how you are raised has something to do with being transgender. I look at her and say- whatever makes you happy… yet she never truly going to be, and you can get why. And if not, you need to stop and think. I turn left again, walk down to the little playground, and started swinging, like I did as a child, the only rather poor excuse for green space we have. It's empty now the town yes going to sleep for the lights to come on in a warm glow, but in a few hours, it will be swarming with toddlers, mothers, and dads that are not freaked up like ours, it's them that did this so she and me.

Half the girls will be here, are just that girls and the boys know what they are too; yet, I look around and think, what this world going to be when things change, and the change is something more than what it is today, like what if you could pick before you are made, or a year into life, by reading your mind or something crazy like that, competitively stretching, manicured hands wrapped around a Starbucks, I am 10 feet in the are back and forth, holding on with on hand. I fly off and all the coffee, that was in the cup is now in the air like me, and not a drop is spilled, and it all back in place like, me with feet on the ground.

I carry on past the park and down towards Cherry-Berry avenue. If I turned right here, I'd go up past my gallery-what was my gallery, now a vacant shop window-but I don't want to because that still hurts a little. I tried so-o hard to make a success of it, throughout these years, wrong place, wrong time-no, yes, maybe, not in this economy, I could have done something else.

Instead, I turn right, past the Rockville express line that part of Pa railroad, past the other pub, the one where people from the estates go that have money and look down on me in more ways than one, and back towards home, that run down, and as they say should be condemned. I'm starting to get nervous. I can feel butterflies now, think about her as I did with him, both the same yet like it all new, re-learn someone. I'm afraid of bumping into the Watsons because it's always awkward when I see them; it's patently obvious that I don't have a new job, that I lied because I didn't want to carry on working for them.

Otherwise and rather, it's awkward when I see her, just know, that all- of it. ignores me, and my throughs of what if..., but she seems to take things personally when I feel, lost in her arms and feel as if she should act more like he, her.

She obviously thinks that my short-lived career as a saver came to an end, for the reason that of her or because of her child, and my sister and dad. It in point of fact wasn't about her child at all, although the circumstance, that the child never-ever stops whining didn't make her hard to love, as she may think, she is being a mom to her like I. Yet a dad is what she needs, she needs and what I need also.

It's all so much more complicated, but of course, I can't explain that to her. Anyway, and forever- never ever leaving her. That's one of the reasons I've been shutting myself away, I suppose- its, for the reason that I don't want to see the little girl grow up in a brock F-ed home like she and I did- and already the child is F-ed, what is she going to do in school, and the kids are not going to be kind, to trash, trans, shit like us, that the sisters, of the dad, crazy crap... talk... conversations... dialog, all BS. Part of me hopes they'll just move, or that, I do when I have the money to get out of this town, you have to have money to make it and get, away I do not. I know she doesn't like being here: in this place, yet I love and heat it, all the same, it's my home town where you can let go, and they won't let go of you, she hates the house, also, hates living among the trash the in it, and dirty launder, that we don't know how to do for we razed

and tea-ch-ed (and yes I seed that for you'll get it) our-selfies everything's in this life and it not to munificent, hates the trains.

Can't read, write without it being text with Spell- Checker saying ever definition, Math I am-a able only with, using a calculator, I's cannot make change, I lost 3 pennies and got fired, can tell time, like my mom can, filed all the places on the flat maps in class, that are not in a 60-mile radius, how many feet in a mile 5,280, funny that I do know… no English, I'd say or do it right yet, I need to no other one, yeah right, I don't know the first one. Cam. Never had it, prealgebra for 4 years not going past it, was it. And then they have the audacity to ask, why were all stupid? You- YOU- did not teach the US, anything but sex, and feeling like we should just end it NOW.

Bio, I failed, I failed everything, and sat in there doing nothing; I never had to read a book for class, never assigned homework, nothing but rot, 12 years never getting back, I don't even think my school has any books when she and I think about it. I, she, them, didn't even really need a pin, either, nothing to write, they all think we can so, why would we need one, not one in my class is doing anything with their life.

Making babies is all we know how to do, and we can do the after-party, home with mom and dad until they say grow up, and we have to ask how you did not teach that either. FAIL- all over with the kid, that is born in the years 2000- 01. Giving up is all we were through, and how-to party, expecting and not knowing know to work for it, yet they need to teach it, don't they?

Part: 24

I stop at the corner and peer into the underpass, the train overhead, I had to go to my old spot, and remember, something that is getting harder to do, yet in something not. I wanted to remember the times in my head with the girl that helped me.

That smell of cold and damp always sends a little shiver down my spine, and I remember her doing just that, giving me that shiver down my back touching it, it's like turning over a rock in Rockville, under the stone overpass, to see what's underneath: moss and caterpillars and earth, that creep on the ground as they do in my brain, It reminds me of playing in the rockery as a child, nothing changes here, I feel childlike… and I feel like I still there, yet

the world changes around me. looking for frogs by the pond with him, and being as one of the boys. I walk on, lost in thought till I hit the tracks. The street is clear-no sign of the kids, the wind takes my hair, in the breeze, and I understand day in out and day, out that I can't remember their names, and thing, and places, and the part of me that can't resist, yet want, yet can't remember, a bit of theater is actually quite disappointed, to me as I act it out in frustration next to the tracks, asking- why…?

Part: 25

(EVENING)

I can't keep still…, even though she just called to say she has to work late she is working at the dollar story making 2 bucks, an hour, and drawing a dollar fifty, which is not the news I wanted to hear, having the baby, that they want to take into predictive custody and give to all people my daddy, yet they don't believe me, I'm feeling edgy, have been all day, I don't want to go back there, yet, I feel someone or something pulling at me.

I'm too frazzled, my heartbeat feels like a flutter in my chest, like a bird trying to get out of a cage; I can't just sit here, watching the trains, I need her to come home and calm me down, I just know it, I did not go to school today, did she, I don't recall, or did I, need too I don't remember, yet what day is and time? …, and now it's going to be hours before she gets here, and my brain is going to keep racing around, and around and around, and I know I've got a sleepless night pending.

I slip my flip-flops, on my bed with her, then him, and her, and him, my dad rolling around in my head, on and go downstairs, and pull things in and don't remember why I did, I thought it was for toast, yet that was a through, I let go of too, lost in the past of horror, out of the front door and on to Road, I run for the train, to keep all the insane away. I not thinking, yet thinking too much, it's around seven thirty- three, like- a few lazybones on their way home from work, pass me running, for the end, of it.

There's no one else around, though you can hear the cries of kids playing in their park, as I feel in my mind like a child lost, taking advantage of the last of the sunshine before they get called in for dinner, and a bath, by moms and dad that care.

And she is running for me, and I to her… and the light shines in my eyes, and the light is out in my eyes, just clockwork, here… nothing more.

Part: 26

I walk down the road, towards the station. I stop for a moment outside number three track and think about not getting off this time, the bell ringing on the steam train. What would I say, to them if I was not to, nothing they don't care? Ran out of sugar, and went to get some? Just fancied a chat, with the officer looking at me like, I crazy saying don't. Their blinds are half-open, on the cars they don't see me, but I can't see anyone inside, my mind, thinking clearly, about not needing me.

I carry on towards the corner, and without really thinking about it, I continue down into the underpass underneath the tracks, which is ironically meant to run me over. I look down and notice that there's something on the floor, somehow, I know on the very train, that was under me, is it a new day, or wh-at…?

I have lost it… a hairband, purple, stretched, well used, is my way of knowing that it a Tuesday, and that was the day before I was there, so why is my mind doing this to me? I am a runner, perhaps, but something about it gives me the creeps, that I keep doing this and don't remember why, and I want to get out of there quickly and move on with my life, yet I cannot, back into the sunshine, and thinks that I love.

On the way, back down the road, I know where I was the day before, yet is this just in my head too, she passes me in the train car and sits with me holding my hand saying it's all good, our eyes meet for just a second and she smiles at me. I'm about halfway through when the train runs overhead, and it's magnificent: it's like an earthquake, you can feel, its right in the center of your body, making your heart pound, stirring up the blood, making the brain feel, a rush, like an orgasm, (God knows that the only way I can really have one.)

Its FRIDAY I know by the Pink hair tie, of 2017-

(MORNING)

I pass out cold for an hour or two, then I wake, sick with fear, sick with myself. I am exhausted I did not sleep, my head thick with sleeplessness. When I drink and do some drug, I

feel more alert, I hardly sleep at all, and don't know why I do and yet don't. If I have a day when I don't drink or do a drug I feel, empty on the inside, that night I fall into the heaviest of slumbers, when I found Methamphetamine, ICE (I found how to make it sitting in school, and I took notes, funny the guest speaker had a lot to offer me, sitting in the auditorium,) I self-med, they're not going to say I need, yet I feel I do, and I kept that from all them, even her too. It's a deep unconsciousness, and in the morning, I cannot wake properly, without feeling hazed, I cannot shake sleep; it stays with me for hours, sometimes all day long, I in another world like, yet it better than- feeling. I can't get blood work now or see, the doctor, yet he's no help anyways, there is just a handful of people in my carriage today, none in my immediate vicinity. There is no one watching me, so I lean my head against the window and close my eyes.

The screech of the train's brakes wakes me, I lost in my room looking out the window, just like her, the girl that lost her mind, a hundred years ago, doing the same as I just in a new way. Snap- then I am at the signal, and she is heading for me, at this time of the morning, at this time of year, the sun shines directly onto the back of the track-side and my house, flooding it with light.

Yet, I see nothing but haze... I can almost feel it, the warmth of that morning sunshine, like the shot of the drug running through me doing the same, on my face and arms as I sit at the breakfast table, eating my food in one bit and galp, going down hard. She opposite me, and worried, her bare feet resting on top, for the reasons they're always so much warmer than mine, and she rubs them on me to get them hotter, my eyes cast down at the magazine, for teen girls. I can feel her smiling at me, the blush spreading from my neck to my chest, the way it always did when she looked at me a certain way as him. I blink hard and all of them are gone, all the faces I know looking at me like they know me. We're still at the signal, and I sitting there, looking at them looking at me.

And yet, I am the one, that looks normal…!

Part: 27

I can see me as a kid in the garden where I played, and behind her, a man walking out of the house, and it's my day to come and play with me as the man- I respected at the time. He's carrying something-mugs of coffee, perhaps-and I look at him and realize, at me with love, a

man that looks at me with the look you would give a teen lover, that when it all started, that it isn't normal.

This man is taller, slender, darker, then I remember, yet that would have been him at the time. He bends down, placing the mugs on the metal table on their patio, picking me up and kissing me on the lips, like I said that is when… the end.

He's a family and friend, and them too; run in my mind also in fragments, like this, my sisters' ant's brothers, an atom that was ant Jimmi, was my dad, was all misfiring, yeah- I that messed up. I snatch air into my lungs, and realize, that I've been holding my breath and that not a joke, I did not remember to do so. I could not even remember if I had a brother or not.

As the feeling went through me… I remember a cousin from Australia, or was that a singer; (maybe I am thing singer) I don't recall, I slip into madness, staying for a couple of weeks; there I am sure, yet no one cares… but her she is my oldest friend, I love her and she- me, cray to think I was out for a year in a- coma, they said, I almost died.

(whiteness)

She walks towards me I- in the bed in the ER room, she puts her hands around me and holds my waist and she kisses' me, long and deep. She was there with me for a year that's is love if I ever saw it…, no…?

(2018) the day doesn't care, the year not imprint… do you give a shit- no – not really, so, why do I? The train moves, through my mind, and body as I am out like it did when I was there, like dreaming the same day over and over- and over- and over, like if it's all a dream, yet I know it was not I know, I can't believe it.

Why…?

Why, would she do that? When I dumped her for less, then my stupid? She never went back to her girl-ie love all this time, their talk was good for something, was it not, I can see it, they're happy, that I was out of there F-n lives.

That she could be with them not me.

She was the only one that came to see me, yet I was the dumb one, no? I can't believe she would do that, and not do that, or that too, yeah. On a larger scale, to a more intense degree, of course, I was the one that said this was the way out, but I remember the quality of the pain, I had so- yeah, what other choice did I have- really. You don't forget it, I sure either, being that girl, what to OD. She doesn't deserve that, and I don't get why, I did it, I-s' feel's – um- don't… I'm-a still groggy from sleeping so-o long, a real sense of disappointment, to my mom whom through she was getting money form it all, like my death and shit; I feel as though, I have been cheated on.

A familiar ache fills my chest; I have felt this way before, like when he became a she. School at some point I need I would have to go back and do, yet at home; yet, I don't know-how with no PC or internet as I could pay for it. I found out the way everyone seems to find out these days: an electronic slip, on a text of what really happened to me. Sometimes, it's a text or a voice mail message; in my case, it was an email it's all saying RIP, you've not missed, yet that's not slander, yet I fart and get it, the modern-day lipstick on the collar, was all around too, it was an accident, really, I wasn't snooping, in her phone.

I really think they all wanted me to die too…

Part: 28

I wasn't supposed to go near any computer, of I would get my ass in a world of hurt they said to me, you know all the ones that have restating orders for I am a danger to myself and others over; self-helping myself; unlike what they should and could be doing for me, because he was worried, all she was worried about was me, deleting something they need to quote un-quote help me, that's important to them, or click on something, that I would find that would have me sent out, I shouldn't delete, yet she said, the dumbest thing, I can't let you for, you push too many buttons virus or something, that would crash the PC, or that it would be hacked. They took mine, not much of anything on it other than a few porn sites I didn't want anyone know about, yet they do, it's not like I have anything to hide, why do they want it- I know it, in the first place is to see if, like- I lost my mind or something like that. Yet, they see, and say what they like about my hard drive, saying I was leading up to something heinous and or sadistic!
'Technology's not really your strong points, she said to me, is it…?

Like- knowledge, skill, and ability.' I managed to delete all the contacts, she had, saying- shit about me, what was wrong about that, in her email address settings, I said it was all by mistake, yet they knew better, saying I had something to hide, no I just don't like them talking about me.

So, I wasn't supposed to touch it, or anything on or within it, not even the screen.

Nevertheless, I was doing a good thing, ant-I? Um- I am trying to make amends, for being a bit depressed and difficult, to them all they said, I wanted it to be a surprise, by some that cared or got me, for why, yet not even she got it at this point, so-o I had to check her work schedule secretly, I had to look, to see if she found someone new, other than me.

~*~

I was out all thanksgiving, I was told that she was in my home all alone, but I just bet… I wasn't snooping, it Christmas, and she did not even get me anything, there are lights, strung up like a 5-year-old did them when I walk through the door, I have not seen my home, in weeks, yet she had, it nicer than ever, not her at all, I wondered. She found time to take over my job also and to keep the home, and make nice with my mom, like the girl she never had, I was um- I don't have words for it.

I wasn't trying to catch him out or anything, with a new lover, yet I knew, I knew… I knew better than that, in my heart, yet not in my mind that was still fuzzy. I didn't want to be one of those awful suspicious girlfriends who go through their girlfriend's bag, and say you have- do this and that- yet I want the truth, and they are not saying. When I answered her phone was off, and that's a never when she was in the shower and he got quite upset, seeing new nude photos of a girl on there looking cuter than I, would ever, I knew it, yet she was in, out of town, she going to leave me, I could feel it, yet I deserve that, don't I? Besides accused me of not trusting her. I felt awful because she seemed so hurt, when I said go with your new SLUT, I don't care, yet I do.

Really, I did nothing but say in my bed, lost in my mind, and dreams, I was- there, lost, and there, lost. Lost with not having her completely. I knew that the big man up there was giving me my hell, I needed to look at her work schedule, I know that is when they were… um… where… yeah... and she'd left his laptop on, and I know the password, so I when and did the

stocking thing, that is all I can to they say. Why she'd run out late for a meeting, with the team, of them.

On there is a starting of a book about her story of being a transsexual, and I read it, and there, was a bit in there about me, and I start to cry, she really loves me, I know, it's just me and it's just her, and how we are.

It was the perfect opportunity, to sink in the I love you for life part in there, before she sends it to someone, so I had a look at his calendar, noted down some dates, and say my side of this story also, I know she would say, I was stilling her thunder, yet I sure they would want to hear my side.

When I closed the browser, and MS Word, on the windows, I looked at all the email account, see what I have missed, and what they do and don't do that I am not a part of, logged in, laying bare there. The emails where a girl like her, that made the change, and she was saying he said of the story and that they should get together, for its all the same, was it, love, no but I took it that way, I clicked, for more, and it was not, at all what my mind was thinking.

I thought it was spam at first, when I read her posts until I realized, that they were kisses, hugs, and storylines about her life, mine and hers, all the same- like. What was missing was the why of it all, or what make a boy want to be a girl, and that is where I came in saying I think is the way you are raised, and state of mind, it's a sickness to me, or something over being raised, where a man has all control over you-you don't want that ever so you turn to a girl- for love.

In an email:

I asked for more photos, it was a reply to a message, here to say she wants to meet me and her, and have maybe a hook up also, hey were young why not, 3 girl sex, I would love it, I had to wonder the parts if she was she-boy or girl-ie made, maybe I would, um- well have it, she'd sent a few hours before, just after seven, when I was still slumbering in our bed. And said to say she had all that changed now, yet I was in-like with her, and want to see where it would go also.

She is girl-ie made, having the hole nothing more, yet, I fell asleep last night thinking of her in dirty ways, I have a thing for this girl now, what can I say they're real, and sweet, unlike

other girls, or boys these days, I was dreaming about kissing her mouth, and all lips she had, her breasts, the inside of her girlie-ness. I woke this morning with my head full of her, desperate to touch her, it was fast lust of me touching myself to her photos, and they the video chatting start she saw me doing it, and it was friendship to more in a day or less, don't expect me to be sane, I can't be, not with you, then her, or anyone.

I read her messages and had the video up, and I was looking at her doing the same things with me: sexting yet with video, I loved it, to thrilling, so wrong, yet right, and she knows nothing about me yet so I, I thought why not, even if it's not long-lasting it's a thrill. in love with her, until and after I welt the shame, why? All girls feel that why I think it's for we pounded to think touching and feeling is dirty, or sin or it's not nice for a girl, I live once I'm-a going to cum. And they- you or she is going to stop me, and God I think he gets it also, and she just as missed up as I so, it's all right…

…All right…!

Cheating, nah- I don't think that is a thing anymore… with any girl my age, you do, what you do, with what you do, how you do, and if they don't like you that day, do it with one that you want too, with you, it's what you do. Get off- is how- to do…

Part: 29

Haven- so being trans, and look at yourself like in photos and in the glass, I learned to love me for me I want to me. Others got it, I would say, I am not like all those in your place, where you live, I had friends and a girl that gets it.

I remember when told her that he'd never felt like this before, that he couldn't wait to be with her, that it wouldn't be long until they could be together.

All true, yet I had to do what I did for me even if it seemed selfish… I had it all, a girl that loved me for being the right boy, I would say why was I not happy with that, it was that I was not seeing whom I was on the inside showing out the out. And that fact I all was wanted to feel girl, even down there too.

I had her yet not me… if that makes any sense…

People ask all the time, so what was it like to go through the change and what do they do, when taking all that off and making a puss- puss…?

I just give them a link to a YouTube video.

And my photo of my new stuff… as you can see here.

A journey starts with the first step and it goes forward at your pace.

Usually, it begins with the therapist, finding out where you are in your gender variance.

First, you get a whole bunch of hormone injections. They cause you to lose muscle tone, gain fat, and your cheekbones to rise. Your mammary glands also grow.

Then slowly hormones from a doctor again slowly at your own pace.

You should be working closely with your doctor and in the final in control of how fast you go forward.

Some transgender folk does not transition all the way others do and you will find out for yourself as you go.

The hormones and dosage can be done in several methods, pills, injections even patches.

It hurts like hell, you feel and smell like her, trying to get all that is boy off you… everything boy makes me want to sick. I love the pick, mermaids, and all that is girlie… I always did, even as a girl-boy up 'till 12, and that when I had to pick what I wanted... They will cause body changes, skin, weight moves around, curves if you're lucky, other things begin to shrink, then if you decide surgery.

And then optional cosmetic surgery can be done. The younger you begin the better.

Done properly, so I had to make a pick younger then you think of what I really wanted in life, and with proper guidance, you can be happy, that what they say, yet you can never really get there, I feel, baby's and girls, to date, or whatever have a lot to deal with… and will be the person you have always been but no one else could see.

Well just end up living together, name change, bathroom, and so on, is not but a cost on whom I am… and what I want to be, if you did not know I was trans you wouldn't, yet those that do, take me as a freak. Unless they're the ones that care for me, you know, that have a brain.

My voice is now sweet and high, and all girlie, you would love me I am sure of it, don't judge what you don't understand.

So back to what happens…

A lot of things happen, first, you take hormones such as estrogen pills and antiandrogens.

Like- you do this to start transitioning through it is optional. They do tend to yield good results for general appearance through.

Then you would probably go through FFS (facial feminization surgery) which is done to make you look more feminine.

Then there's the psychiatric evaluation to make sure you are absolutely, sure about this and that your mentally stable enough to go through with it.

I passed… they get it, yet some ask why a doctor would do this for money, I get that, I feel it's to make the one in the body happy.

Then finally there's the sexual reassignment surgery which alters your male genitals to female genitals, using the penis to create a vagina, a good place to look is- tsroadmap.com.

It has good information, and don't be an ass, about it you don't understand me, goes f-off, boys that are dumb, for everything you need to know about transitioning is her.

One thing I hated about being a boy and around them was the dumb they are. Good luck, if you're like me!

Then:

After several months of that intentions, at 12 and up and for life, you have to proceed to surgical alteration, I did mine at the end of the age of 13- going for 14.

Giving you knockers is the easy part, both implants- my nips are smaller also, a 32B- worked for me, getting a functional vagina is extremely difficult, to spray and do all things you want it too as a girl. I just want to cum like all the other girls I know that sleepover and we do that, yet not a sure thing, they think it cute, like them, I learned I am me, not them or anyone other than that, yet it works.

Most transgendered individuals I know ultimately keep their original genitalia, so they can still have orgasms. Yet I have had them… its hard work yet can go off, after an hour or so… of dildo loving fun.

Others in school were not kind to me, I have my girls, we all do in school, yet them, I think there simple to whom I am… nothing more. I have 10 girls that I love, and they get me. That's more than a girl- like me, can ask for, and I have her, always, even if she's not coping with me well.

Yet, I been called the girl with a dick, and other names, yet that nothing to whom I want to be, and what I really wanted and what God did not do right for me, I am sorry to say, and I don't blame anyone for it, it's just what I was predestined to do, I guess…? My life plan… they would say… a church that gets my type, God loves us all, even if this or that way- it's good to remember that. I am a living bean after all- just like you, yet not in sex. I not crazy- I not unlike any other girl out there…

I am me… I have become me- inside and out, deal with it, or not, you pick. I not that hard to understand… am I?

Part: 30

I don't have words to describe what I felt, that day, but now, sitting on the train, I am furious, nails digging into my palms, tears stinging my eyes, the day she said it was over, I remember it, yet even now, I get it, yet I am the same one the inside, yet she never felt that way to me, on the outside.

(Flash Back)

I feel a flash of intense anger. I feel as though something has been taken away from me. I remember it all, how could she… do this to me?

How could she do that…? I thought about it, it's just boobs and a vag., …so what? What was the hard then, now I get was not have the sex we planned on, yet I didn't want it, did she not get that? I said after we would, yet she yelled, without a dick, with a fake one, that F-ed up, you ass-hole. Think about what I want she said, and I said all the ways I loved her, yet that was not enough for her hitting and slapping on me, and saying get out!

'What is wrong with her?' I thought, and she said- I had that twisted, 'look at the life they have, have- as girls a girl, I want to be,' I said to her- 'I want it more than anything,' 'more than me,' she said, if that the way you want then yes, 'look at how beautiful they are,' I said to her in the hallways of the school, all over Rockville, all the time really, she was sick of it, and me being here and not the storing loving him!

I have never- ever understood how people can blithely disrespect the damage they do by following their hearts.

Who was it said, that following your heart is a good thing? May not have been trans, it is pure selfishness, selfishness to overcome all, I speculate. Hate floods me, to the ones that don't get it, yet I love me now, yet not all days and she learned too, it's all about living and find life, as you want it to be, in finding you.

As I said, 'you don't have to be the one…' yet, like- I know that she is… I just know.

Part: 31

Me- (Back 2014)

Age 15-

(EVENING)

The 5:55 fast train to Rockville, on Amtrak, has been canceled, along with are steamer that we use that the school said, is good enough it's all we can afford, today there is no way over the lake to the town side, so its passengers have invaded my train, there was a derailment over the way, blocking at traffic, upended room carriages, three teen girls dyed- their names or on the news yet not imprint to me.

I, fortunately, have a seat, but by the aisle, on days unlike this, not next to the window, where all you see is high water, and reflections on the splashing waves, and there are bodies pressed against my shoulder, my knee, invading my space, for the entire school body is jampacked in three train cars that form the 1900's. with no heat in them.

The heat has been building all day, with all the sadness over them, closing in on me, I feel as though I'm breathing through a disguise. I have an urge to push back, to get up and shove. Every single window has been opened, just out of them dumb like always, jumping around and about as young kids do, and yet, even while we're moving, the carriage feels airless a locked metal box.

I cannot get sufficient oxygen into my lungs. I feel sick, over Smalling carnosine heaters. I can't stop replaying the scene in the coffee shop this morning, and fogged window, in this winter wonderland, something off a Christmas card for sure, I can't stop feeling as though I'm still there in her mind and not my own, I can't stop seeing the looks on their faces, then and now.

I blame her the girl the haunts me, for all the loss of life, yet that may just be my mind. I was obsessing this morning about the girls that were lost faces, three girls, Charli Emily, Ellieddy and Ameliah, all under the age of 12.

Yet, it's not like we have not seen this before, it's in the press one day and old news of we all have to move one the next. The is when her hair was growing out, about what she'd done and how he would feel, no longer being on the boy side of things, this is when she starts the dress too, and the new look, when she was at the start of her teen years.

And I lost my boyfriend, about the confrontation, with the others over her I stood up for her, she was picked on making the change, now they love her, yet she is… like them now, I was walking around in a daze, those days think about him, without thinking, I thought I would never see him again. I have her, yet at the time, I did not see what could be, and what is… and not I went into the coffee shop that everyone from my town uses, on days where everything else is shouting down. I love to have days, like this even if you have to make them up, I hate school! I was through the door before I saw them, with him/ her now, and by the time, I did it was too late to turn back, and he called me over, saying that he loved me, I thought why you're a girl now

that likes girls, is that not wrong, and I am a girl that likes boys only, is that not wrong- being right?

They were beholding at me, and she did too, eyes widening for a fraction of subsequent moments before they remembered to fix smiles on their faces.

All the- girls, there is now a new grope, that love him as a- her, saying he what they have been looking for to round them off, or words to that, that was awkwardness for me, for I not like them, thinking of it, are now beckoning, waving me over her, makes me say how, I not beaning a green monster- I not, yet maybe. 'Rachel! Being one is like playing with hem and teaching all that is a girl.' She said, arms outstretched, pulling me into a hug, I will show all that you need to know about boob periods, and whatnot, and boys, or girls, or whatever even how to do your makeup.

I wasn't expecting it, my hands were caught between us, saying you understand your part of the grope right, I said sure and walked out the door, fumbling against his body, saying I won't bother, that he needs to pick me or them, that was the start of this… Sasha smiled sneakily as only she can, gave me tentative air-kisses, trying not to get too close. 'What was she doing here, anyway, she is trash?'

'I get that, yet you don't get her as I do,' Haven said.

For a long, long moment, I went blank, staring in at them from outside, think the why of it, yet I get it now, I am trash. I looked at the ground all icy, shiny, and snow-covered, I could feel myself ruddiness and, realizing it was making it worse, then I could have ever imaged, I gave a false laugh and said, 'I lost him, I lost him.'

Part: 32

Just feel him up- I mean her- as I used too, I was thinking in a moment of rage. 'Oh my,' she failed to hide her surprise when she got to feel her boobs to see what boobs felt like that where not mine, and puss- puss too, all hands-ie, they are eating there whatever- slop and make him there cute girl toy to be, at the café, while Sasha and the other one the girl that looks like her face was hit by a frying pan, nodded and smiled, saying you're one of us now, you don't need trash, your popular. 'A truth of life, for a small town- no?'

The girl with the new hole, is a hit with the girls, a boy that is a girl, they get it, it is the coolest thing to them, yet not me, I wanted the dick, not this dick she is. And that girl, make the bullying boys back off, I never- ever had that…

I couldn't remember the name of a single- one of them. Not one… I couldn't think of a good name to call them either, I just stood there, rubbing my lower lip with my forefinger, shaking my head, and eventually, the one girl said, 'Top secret, is it, you and I and what we're doing tonight?

Are these girls just weird like that, or what? I don't get it? What do they see in her now being- as well as her?

They didn't want to bother before now- why now, and why would she well not bother with them now?

Don't want you saying anything until, now but its- ending I know so, I changed it today on Facebook, and doing so-o, I lost the little friends I have, the contracts, all have dropped on my phone too, over this all, it's all official.

It's complicated…

It was bullshit, and he knew it, he did it to save me, for have a life of wanting more, yeah right, is that she is saying to everybody.

Crazy… no?

(Goo-goo eyes made…)

And everybody bought it, but me, like the whole lot- but everyone pretended they care about me, and they don't, and nodded along, sucking on my food at lunch, ham salad.

The grope of girls was looking over their shoulder through the window, they were embarrassed for me, they wanted a way out.

Part: 33

I see- that girl- put her hand on her forearm, I flowed them through the part they were on their date if you want to call it that I did, 'It's great to see you, Rachel.'

She pity was almost profound about it. I'd never realized, not until the last year or two of my life, how shaming it is to be pitied. And that is what I saw there looking out the bushes, of them sucking face sitting on the bench, with the light flickering at the duck.

God get a room!!! (I thought.)

We never got this far this fast- I through there too.

Look at the tongue flicking ear licking- tit grabbing, lip biting, and ass squiring, and grossness… holding, and puss- puss grabbing, 3rd basing, going on, and they did it- it all, and they did… it all- all the sexy stuff- and stuff- and shit, I'm sure… sex- sex, and more f-n sex- they had it in them all night, and if not together they were soloing and showing it to each other, and then doing each other, I saw it all, I sure- of that too, I am sure of it.

Stuffing anyone…?

I could just see all the toys in my duty mind, then they were, using them, glass, 2-point O in the butt holes- rabbit wiggling, both at the same time, god, look at them go- side by side, and oh- facing- making.

I was even touching…

I wonder if it is double-sided? You know what it is, don't you? IT! The girl's best friend at the end of a hard day- it! A creeper said- 'sucker her nipples' I swear to you… I hear it far in the park's background nose. I shit you not… Home- run after home run- and fun-

fun- fun- hun. I would know, I saw it all-

on her- Rachel's bed, on hers, they did this- and that, as I thought, and it was double-sided- smashing.

(What I saw)

Pure Enrichment Peak Wand Massager was held on them until, N-joy Pure Wand on her, and it should have been me- me- me, getting the G- spot loving- of my dreams, like this- I want her/him now.

The Candy Cane Waterproof Vibrator was going hardcore, and in her than her, and back. The Conquest Clit Stimulator and I thought I had it bad, with want to cum more than 6 times a day, maybe not. Okay, now I am horny, and said not allowed- in my head- I think it me and my own Candy Cane toy tonight, yet I am trash for 6 dollars, that all I could get, and some others yet I not telling you that.

So, she'll be with her in this why yet not with me, how would that make you feel?

I know what it did to me… I know.

I saw all 69 things they were doing- like with- with each other too, down there- you know there… so yah- eating out, it happened. Good for her, like I never had that- and I wanted it from him, yet she got from him being her- good for the two of them, 4 years of us for one week with the- good- good. I am a girl- you would too if you were me.

I don't get it, I have what she has and more, and it not been used, as hard, or as open as she was just saying.

Then I thought that one over, maybe not so…

Never been there yet…with a lover, never, yet I have… had lots of bad sex, anyone wants me, after daddy… maybe that is why she/he passed on taking me?

I am deserting to have sex, with someone, that is not my dad and my age!

Even- I get it now… even I…

She is even still scared down there, yet you would not know if you did not know, yet she is trying to cover it with a light covering over her brown hair down there, it looks the part… I was blown away. I was standing on a talus… looking in the window, um -like a creep- I know- yet, I was in love with the now her- Haven.

'My heart is falling out of my ass' - and you and them could give a shit!

Part: 34

I sat down in the shade beneath a sugar- maple tree, thinking of the unfilled hours ahead, replaying the conversation in the coffee shop, remembering the look on all those mean-ie

girls faces, when she said goodbye to me, it was all over for me, and whom I was, I am, and was going to me be.

I must have been there for less than half an hour when, I got a text message, and I could feel the vibration in my jeans.

I myself held out for about three minutes or so-o, before, I myself repossessed the phone and dialed into voice mail, hoping for I want you not them, speech yet did not get it, no all I got was my mom bitching- 99 times, about nothing, and that I should- well just F-n dye! Or find a train, and run into it, head on!

It was her again, texting from the shop saying, this is for me be happy for me, and understand.

I let the text go, and did not say anything back, why would I? I for one, like tried to ignore it, like life! Yet, sucking at it is what I do, so you can't ignore suck!

Today, I did the unthinkable smashed it off the ground- the phone that is, and I knew, I could not get another; I put the phone back into my bag, and I didn't want to hear any more, not today, was already awful enough and it was not yet ten-thirty in the morning, and I was sick of hearing the drama, of all them, saying I am wrong.

Wrong- I did get it. I the bad one, here, not wanting to go on, yet that not the whole truth.

I steadied myself for the anguish of hearing his/her voice-the voice, that used to express to me with amusement, and light and now is used only to reproach or comfort or pity-but it wasn't him/her.

My skin was itching, so I got to my feet and walked to the cornerback to shop, they were gone, I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't stop my brain from racing.

I went in and sat down, there, I opened the first one, and drank it as fast as, I could, grabbing it fasts out-a- the cooler, and then opened, the in like one second less than two- I am sure.

The voice, in my head, was not my own, form that moment on, I snapped, in the head, and like half dyed, to the world, I may have stocked, they say no, yet I say yes. All over a boy and love, it's possible… no?

I couldn't see them, turned my back to the path, and I got under the table, I could pretend like a child that they couldn't see me.

'Them- the two girls, without her, they're looking at me saying shit.' Long pause, and I blacked out, and I did not remember, anything more than like a year, or those days, just in patches-like.

I woke up in the ER with no way to pay for it yet, that said I was just fatigued, she was standing there, and I was in one of those sex grows they give, showing way too much of my lower end to the world, and sure the canteen was not drawn. Sorry, my ass was showing, they all saw hair vag…

'Look, I know you're having a tough time,' she says, as though she has nothing- to do with me feeling like the world has come to an end, or do with my pain I feel over her being the only one that there for me in my life, 'but you can't call us at night all the time.'

Her tone is trimmed, cantankerous. I got you a new track phone, and I am the only one/ name/ number in the contacts, 'It's bad enough that you wake me up, don't call me, take the phone, I don't want it. I see you need more rest to come around, she throws the phone at me, smacking me in the face, but you wake, she said: why- are you not being nice to me? She questioned, and that's just not acceptable, for you to be doing this to me, I was always nice to you, she said, and I screamed leave, and all the NR's LPN's- girls at the desk were looking in my room, with glares on their faces.

'I need to talk to you about the phone, she said the next, day laying like un-top of me, in my hospital bed.' Extra-long pause- she's talking to me, and doing something else, multitasking, puffing on an E-cig, through her lime- green braces. You're going to have to go- and get off her bed, we're struggling to get her to sleep through now of it all- the nurse said, along with she has been difficult.'

'We're careworn, trying to get her to sleep through the night, and even day, she doesn't need you here she said.' We, us, them, our little family- so they. 'F*cking bitch,' back

off, she said, she was escorted, out by to man, banned for life at Miners Hospital, or problems and our routines, of her being her, and being me. She has taken everything from me, she yelled kicking and screaming, as they drag her out… She has taken everything now; she calls me to tell me that my anguish is inopportune for her? I give the phone to the staff, saying: 'I don't care what you do with it.'

Part: 35

A blissful rush of alcohol hitting my bloodstream, I am-a partying with my N-E-EEW FRIENDS, lasts only a few minutes, and then, I feel sick, not over the drinking over her. I'm going too fast, even for me, with my changes, I need to slow down, and think; if I don't slow down something bad is going to happen, I can feel it.

I'm going to do something, I will regret. Like losing out, on something or someone, or anything, so on, I'm going to call her back, I'm going to tell her I don't care, about her, and I don't care about her family, matters, and shit, and I don't care if her my child never gets a good night's sleep for the rest of its life, with her dad walking around with dick hanging out- like a dyed baby bird.

I'm going to tell her, that the line he used did not work, with me-don't expect me to be sane, I said about it, she used me, and got them that not right… text message: I been think *n* bout *u- n-* me if we were alone how it would *b*, I would kiss *u* all over till *ur* feel *n* hot then give *u* feel n when I hit the spot, *4* I love yah bab.

Thx U 4 U Bn U

< This passes as writing in my classroom, I think NOT, in life! We don't know to double the coincident, were to use a comma, how to even write a freaking sentence. We don't know how to drop the 'e' in write, to make it- now present tense, (and yet that was wrong no) we don't know that either, to add an ending.

Without text helpers like everything turned on in a word, that they don't let us use, or electronics where F-ed, and all fail, we're all dumb, and it's not us, is the teachers not doing anything to hear- we're not allowed to talk, or it's being belligerent. We all so dumb where happy, that is why every other word is F*ck- that we use or say- it's all we know, we don't have a

vocabulary to elaborate. I love it anyway, like- I knew what he meant, yet nobody, I know has looked at a book, notebook, or has thought about having or using either.

This how we all write and it is passed as okay, then the teachers don't care about us, just like math, reading, and life, they don't care, they want to be paid and that all they care about, so we don't take their jobs. When we were first together; she/he wrote it in a text to me, like no-one uses paper to write, are you kidding me, that would be the way of the past, look at all the kids in my class they don't even know how to hold a pen nevertheless use one to spell words on a paper.

My dad got laid off his job, his woman left him for banging me his little girl, and other little girls and he lost part of his ear, at the Barns- Sterling and Tucker coal mines, now it's finding work, even if it's illegal, around here is moonshining, come done to the old factory, and it you a jar. Or drugs laundering at the music shop in the town, where you can get a mixed custom Gibson, for your obsession, and nose candy for your fixation, and your needles for your relaxation done right, by a man that looks like Tom Patty's twisted dicking tween.

You walk in there and it looks like a- shit cyclone went off in the store for all the trades for their ho-hum needs. (starch- starch) a shop where I was told to take my custom guitar and shove it, or I kill you, all I wanted was stings… yet being me all trash-ie and shit, I think he through others thing from what they say, not what I say, what I say is always twisted- in more ways than one. I was chased out with a shotgun- I shit you not! Life in a small town- that how it is… saying- 'your dad owes me…'

~*~

He was declaring his undying passion, for me I am sure. Everything she has is secondhand, like me also, how is she now something she not- with new girlfriends, I want to know how that makes her feel, and how that would feel to be her.

I want to call her back, and then no- then yes- then no, and ask her, What does it feel like, being one of them, she is living in my house, for Christ-say-k's surrounded by the furniture, I bought, for she and I, it's all cheap, yet it what we have, to sleep in, the bed is a day bed she and I share, oh well that what we have not had anyone that cares, that I shared with him for years,

also, I remember the first time, we were 5 or so, and I was so turned on I could not sleep not know what it was- yet it was not long till I did with daddy.

I still find it astonishing, that she chose to stay there, in that house, in my house, even after I said get out, yet she there and, I am here in the ER for another half week or so. I couldn't believe it when she told me, she was not taking all her things, or not leaving my side, never- ever. 'I loved that house,' she said, 'and you and I in it, it's all we have like each other.' I was the one who claimed we keep it, despite its location, and had to overpay to her mom.

I liked life down there on the tracks, I liked- and love watching the trains go by, I enjoyed the sound of them, it is relaxing to me, you can't take the farm out of me, I never be a city girl, the old-fashioned trundling of ancient rolling stock through Rockville is always going to be me- and she.

'It won't permanently be like this, they will sooner or later upgrade the line to more tracks, and then it will be fast trains ear-piercing past the home, I am sure of that too, just like me get all new parts, I don't want to see that- either, slow-moving is how this town works.' Nonetheless, I couldn't have confidence in, that it would never- ever- in fact, happen- ever- I am-sure of that. I would have stayed there all my life, with her as me now, feel like me on the inside and out… that's I can keep a $2 an hour job and make $300 a year, to pay to live, to those that don't want us too.

I didn't, though, and her mom was going to say get you old enough to do it on your own I did, no one is going to hold your hand, it was upon the market- saying: for sale by owner, yet she/ we couldn't find a buyer for the price we divorced, so instead she said, I give it to you two for rent, if you can keep if not the town will rip it away out for under you.

Part: 36

Mom- So-o buy me out, she said, and we did, by getting her in jail for drugs, and sexy- stuff for less than a year, and for stilling a car to, that we had in the year of the same length of time, it was junk yet, I dove in to not even thinking it was hot, yet that's how things are around here. Do- and not think, for you don't know any better, we say- she said, yet their law said it not to be that way. We didn't by her out we set her up to the fail at life as she did for me, and she. 'It doesn't pay, we'll get you back!'

I am in the ER- yet I still freak myself, 10 times a day, if they want to look go head, I not stopping you. I don't change my ways of life for anyone, 5 when I week up and 5 before bed, it the only way I can sleep, and a go why to start the shity day- ahead, by thanking God for it! I can help loving myself.

I cry and then get happy with movies and MTV, and then said wanting her and my cat. And then I eat, like nothing and 2- finger away… I hear some little girls say- 'Mommy- mommy, ah- ah- um- I do that too.' And she was like 10! And a girl was looking with an eyebrow up, I just grinned, thinking little slut! And there I am looking for a train tonal start on. All I got was some nares saying attest draw the carton… they took my button thing-ie away, saying I was overusing that too.

Yet, I have a TV that's cool! And I cum-ed and rubbed it all down the walls above my bed, I know it will be there forever, some of me thee for all time, at least I've made my make in history, now, just to show how much I love them, for shity- taking care of me, that I have to pay for at some point… hardcore, the ruff is their style… Yet it not as freaked up as have her before she was fully her, in the school lot looking like- a girl, yet jacking it, you know it, like a boy- still, with her new girlfriend, and yet that on YouTube too. Yet she trans and gets away with mood swings, me doing that I would get thrown out, yet she has a doctor's slip, explain everything. Try taking that down, it's not illegal to post young sex- sorry.

Nope! And get up out of this bed, no don't think so-o.

Haven- The strangest thing was the first day waking up was not having a pee-pee. No- like I had this thumping clit-ie under a pad instead. I love where the girl underwater, or as the most girl not wear any, and just wear tight leggings to show it all off in the front, and in the back. We would never get the right price for it- it being the house, not in the way all the other one around us look too, it not- uncommon to walk in a home around her and see dog shit on the floor, and a lightbulb hanging down from bar junction boxes.

Me- But we never found the right buyer, even though the sign is still out in the foundation year we all too lazy to take the song down; yet only some dumb butts ask for a quote, instead we moved her in me, and we took the dumb for what it is, and she loved the house as I did- even if, and we decided to stay.

She must be very secure in herself, to show me, and the world what she looks now on Twitter show full nudes; I suppose, she has a right to, I mean- if you want to- there is like no one stopping you, or showing all of you to the world, I think about how, I am wearing my younger sister's clothes, using the same brush for our hairbrush, toothbrush, and hair ties, we share it all, I have to be her mom and dad, yet she still living with him over in the park, on the weekends, I have it made until I can make a payment.

I think to myself, that have fallen asleep, the lowing glow, and the hot sun comforting me, to do just that. I woke with a start, scrabbling around desperately for my handbag. It was still there, my skin was itchy, I was alive with bed bugs, the sheets have not been changed seen my mom left, and I don't know how to wash, I am only 15, they were in my hair, in my butt crack, on my neck, chest, and biting me; I was scratching them away, I bounded to my feet. The train stops outside, I look from the high up bedroom window.

Haven- my thing to do when sad, and think about her is gone for a walk, I am across the carriages left, on the tracks, there are too many people in the way, upon the path, she and I always said, and the town sucks anyways, way- the tracks where always our get-a-way, make sector.

The spray paint of our names, my real name with hers, I wonder whether if I should change it, and see if it still there, I am sure someone has painted over it after all these years, whether he knows, whether she going to make a full recovery…, or whether she's still living, with some issues, a life she's yet to discover is a lie, the fact that she is living with less in her head the rest, yet I am in denial, about what they say.

~*~

Me- It's some MORNING of someday-

and I don't care. I know without looking at a clock, the time, that it is somewhere between seven thirdly-five and eight. I know from the superiority of the light, from the resonances of the boulevard outside, about 300 yards away from my window, from the sound of the town over the way across the tracks the chamois hallway right outside my room.

I roll over and fall to sleep again, I get up early to clean the house every Saturday, yeah that is, do that, at the crack of noon, no matter what, I have too at some point.

(Thinking back to the change)

I remember- It could be her birthday, all over today, she now a girl, in a way it was a new birth a new identity, it could be the morning of the end of all time, and she would sleep through it, and she will get up early on Saturday to clean if I drop her cut small- jiggly butt out of the bed hitting the floor only. She says it's purifying, it sets her up for a good weekend, and for the reason that she cleans the house in a night top and have sweet paints rolled down at the waist, meaning she can crash afterword's, it means she doesn't have to go to the gym, if that all she has on… and to do it on that day.

It doesn't actually bother me, early morning vacuuming, since I wouldn't be asleep anyway, with her hair backside running around in less than what is decent. More like a nude girl and a sticky pad, just hang, but that's- TMI right… sorry. I love to freeze, snot running, eye bogged girls, a 6 am.

(Mmmm-ah)

Ha- she shaves just being sick. I- Haven, like cannot sleep in the mornings; I cannot snooze tranquility pending the middle of the day, with her. The day springs out in front of me, not a minute of it bursting. I wake tersely, my breath sharp and heart racing, my mouth decayed, and I know directly that's it. I'm awake and don't want to be. The more I want to be unconscious, the less I can be. Life expectancy and sunlit will not let me be, it seems, I lie there, listening to the sound of the world lost in it like time, with the ghost of it in my brain as another girl from another time. Crucial, joyful, and busyness, I think about the clothes on the side of the railway, we left before he was a she, and I drift into a sleep of dream of him inside me…

The dream- we are next line kissing, loving in the morning sunshine, and the sex is long and slow, what teen girl like me dream about.

2:00-sh.

I could go to the fitness center, for the one that doesn't have money for a membership. I could sit on the sofa with a cup of coffee and Saturday kitchen show on TV on channel 3 with bunny ears, and VHS. I could rewrite my report for school- yeah right like I have homework. I could wait for her to leave the house, go to her shity job, to support me, being me now, I crack

open some rose wine that was ¢99, that was left in the cabinet, it was dry, and I want to just get out of my head, even more, and sleep, lost in the dreams of what if. This was that- that was this.

She was already sleeping and me getting in the bed with her would not have worked.

Part: 37

I opened my eyes and listened to the rain pounding against the cracked pane window that's slip into fours, and it is now like 5-sh out, I sleep for that long. I felt her behind me, sleepy, warm, soft body molding to mine, her hips just fit ever so nice in my behind.

Afterward, she went to get the snail mail, and I made leftover from like 3 days ago- when I went to the café, we sat in the kitchen drinking whatever bar or alcoholic thing we could find or get our hands-on, we have older boys for that too, and my dad, never really knows where all the bear goes, we went to the pub for a late lunch, at 9- it was the only place open all other places close at 7:30 pm., we fell asleep until then and I had the alarm sit, tangled up together in front of the TV in our room that is nothing but snow.

Clear plastic over the other window, I imagine it's different for him now, then with me, and then like nothing has changed at all, it's all the same, he is just she, lazy Saturday oral sex and leftovers, and double-sided dildo, smashing and sleep and more than- and sleep- and more that, instead a different sort of joy, or have a man- I have a girl that we'll never get me there, you know there, I am just a little girl tucked up with a little and wife is not what I wanted.

She'll be just learning to talk now, I have her one day out of the week- all 'Dad-a' and 'Mam-a, she is now, learns to walk.' The baby is in our room, in my old crib, and we do what we can, on food stamps and welfare, and a secret language incomprehensible to anyone but a parent. Yet, my dad is more fit then- we. I don't think, so yet that is more of that and or in their own lawmaking in my hometown.

I don't have heat in all the room, just in the bedroom with one space heater, I don't have $600 a month for heating oil, for this old house, that has no pink stuff- in the walls, its hollow, (yet it's not falling all the way down, they say I have it really- really nice.) and there are holes in the roof, and I trapped it the best I could.

And put rugs down at the doors, yet it's cold when it hits -17° out; yet, that makes me on fit, for you, all failed me to this point. I walk everywhere I go- in the town, even in the cold, I have to, I don't have it- it being money, education, and some that cares. I wonder at night, if I should be walking the streets, it's a small town, yet I don't feel safe, being a small girl in a big little town. I should have a car, a high paying job, a life, and a man… like them, yet no, we don't have that… we have pained fail, by the ones that disrespect us, yet we have to give that to them - I don't think so-o.

Yet, no one wants to help someone out, it's all me- me- me, no love anymore in the small town, for someone like me, it's all for them. The pain is solid and heavy, it sits in the middle of my chest. I cannot wait for this all to stop, it's the ache of loss and the thump of something new sparking, and to leave the house, and take my walk along the tracks holding her hand.

Dad- 'Some young girls turn depressed awfully young. No singular motive, it seems, but they seem practically to be born that way. They bruise easier, tire earlier, cry more rapidly, remember longer, and as- I say, get sadder younger than anyone else in the world.

I know, for I'm one of them, and I can't say I fail them sorry, they don't want to work or try.'

'You can fix ignorant and confrontational attitude!'

~*~

(SUNSET)

December 13, 2014-

Haven- I ran into Santa, and just playing along with the man in the suit, I asked him, sitting on his lap, for a vibrator, and his draw draped, for I was 13, yet looked 10. I have always been really same, all the way backs as I remember, I was never a boy in my mind, I love all that was girl-ie, and playing with girl toys the color pink, and dolls, my little ponies, and things like that, dress, makeup, nail polish, cute girl 2 piece swimsuits, singing, dancing, tag with girls only, boys had *coodie's*, and were icky, I would not have where pj's to bed it had to be a night top

nothing more, with all that tucked under, I did not want to see it. Eyelashes had to be, right long and pushed up, lips had to be pink at 13 and up.

I remember, think I don't want a boy, I want her, yet be the same as her. I asked him to bring we a girl and put her under my tree, and to make me one, and he said a real girl or a blow-up, I said I take either if you do this for me, I believe in you and GOD! He said both are to help you, why not… believe and have faith?

It for the good of all how is that wrong? I said I guess your right- thanks, I left with new hope in my fading young heart.

Me- so at the same time at the Salateah mail, I want and sat on Sant, he had a hardon at this point, with all these little sluts asking for- ho-hum- toys. Sant got more then he asked for with Rockville that year.

Haven- I am going to see the new me soon- I said to my mom and dad. I got my sex change, though, Obama care act, it was paid for, for I tried cutting it off and there was nothing they could do in the ER but remove it. 'Good reddens,' I said to my pee-pee waking up, and then it was psychological test, from that day on, all they said is that she is sick, think he needs to be a she, and she wants to be so-o lit her, she over the age mom and dad you don't have a say in the ER, she is now what she wants- and that is her right. And my mom and dad, left me there, saying they never want to see me again, not even a handhold did I have someone understanding me, what to be well me! This was my only gift to me, I never got the right toys or the right dress, I never had all the things those girls had, and damn- it …I was getting it! I was never loved, as the girl, I was on the inside! She was the only one that kind-a sort-a did, and I love her for that too.

Doctor Marshel- 'He used nail scissors, and a sting.'

Mom- 'He was not cut as a baby, was that what he was doing?'

Doctor- I think not, and you should know… it was at the base, of the shaft, -Miss. (judging tone)

Doctor- He thinks she is a she, and by the test on the inside of her mind she is…

I- Haven, was going to bleed to death, they said on the ambiance, yet I did not care, I want to be a girl- a girl- a girl! And if death was the way to be it- then so be it!

I recall not get anything under the tree, now if you would do, that to your kid, your child would sue. Think that's funny, I heard a man at Walmart- saying just that to me, when I saw his brat screaming and hitting in the left nut. Saying- 'Santa's see you!' 'That doesn't work anymore-' he said.

Part: 38

(Now)

I spent all day in my bedroom, waiting for Haven to go out so that I could have a drink. She didn't. I was being lazy in the living room on the lazy boy, at the place where I like to just spare- out, and do my whatever, under like ten blanks, and throw them off at the peak. By late afternoon I couldn't stand the imprisonment or the boredom any longer, even with cuming also, so I told her I was going out for a walk down by the tracks, that when she was done over the way on her sofa, to meet me at the cross-track, yeah we look at each other doing it it is normal right? Then, I walked to the station, bought a couple of cans of gin and tonic and got onto the train.

(Back)

Haven- For as long as anyone can remember, the students of 'Rockville High' have inwards at school on the last Monday in September to find a list naming the prettiest and the ugliest girl in each grade. I was there, as a boy, and want to be on the other ends of things, as one of the girls.

Me- I am going to see if I can do something tonight maybe go to a movie but I don't have 50 dollars to blow on shit like that, I thought about an Ebook, yet I don't have 10 to blow either, I would rather have a new sex toy for 30, at least I can keep getting what I want. I like to keep all my glass dildo on the mantle of my fireplace and I love to rub my clit with on hand and use one at the same time and have two go off at the same time- orgasms that is.

Haven- This year will be no different, I remember saying- after I did what I did, I did not regret it though, walking in as the boy with no- ween-n-ie. Roughly four hundred copies, of other girl's photos for photo day, went out, yet not me, I wanted to be one of those preppy girls, I was determined to be.

One cranked up pic. is tapped above, me and her in my locker door, the girl of my dream, if she no longer wants me, for me being me. the urinal in the first-floor boys' bathroom, was no longer for me, I was going in- into the girl's room, looking seeing being one of them, it the smell of new, and girlie pee- it was thrilling to me at 13, I got my first temp. and said, I see what it's all about, even if I don't bleed as they do ever, I bleed in the ER to make up for it.

All the girls were talking about where pennies from Heaven AKA- dick pics, as I was sitting down on the pot- as a girl- what I always wanted- to spray it out of me as they do, one girl has her phone all tucked between her in the next stall over she dating, a football player, violence, is what I here after 5 hours of brainwashing she, get off hard to his pic, and sexy texts, I want that with my dream girl, or maybe just her, yet she is not into me, as me now, and depression, of what to do with me in some class having to ask the nurse's office, about me in PE was getting to me also, I am a girl-girl- girl, I said to the office deal with it.

The list is affixed to locker doors, slipped inside classroom desks, stapled to bulletin boards. They did not know how to take me, yet girls are sweet, they soon fall in love with me in my new class, all new girls, they held me back a year also, saying new faces would be good for my state of mind. And I did not care I was getting where I need to be as the real me, so I am with 12-year-old girls, and love it! A new class of real girls, that is not mean, to me.

So, high school was put off for a year okay, I love the idea of getting away from them, the only one I missed was her. To be in the other building with a girl that a not mean to me was all I really wanted, and maybe I would learn something to with a class that did goof off- all the time, I do what more than they.

I'm not going to visit her if she did not want me too if she did not love me anymore, she was at her dad's dump then, and I was with my mom, and her many men, that would flake out, on her after the quickie, I seen it all over them home- gross! I'm not going to turn up at his and her house and knock on the door, one it would fall off, too she would eat me out for it. Oh- deadly worded, um- give me hell!

Yah that works…

Nothing like that, nothing at all crazy- or silly. I just want to go past the house, roll by stroll next to the train, think about ways to be new, and maybe that was a new girl too, in a new

grade, and new school, it felt, strange but right, I was finally coming into my own- as a preteen girl. I'd, had-a nothing better to do, and I don't feel like going home, so I was making my intentions, I just want to see her, yet wanted a new start. I want to see her- yet it was more and more- no, I was not caving to her- like always in the past, I am no longer that boy- I am adorable - kick ass girl!

Part: 39

This isn't a good idea- I had the immoral throughs. I know it's not a good idea, to go over there yet I did, just to look in the window, and I saw her and her dad, doing it, and I was really done, I knew about it before, yet I thought she was joking about him going down on her; I could see some but not this- it was too much, this was the only dirty window that was not plywood boarded up. It 1983 carefree, orange and cream!

An embossing stamp has dimpled the bottom right corner of each copy, of my new agenda and notebooks, I was really going to do it this year, and make the grades, leaving behind the scar of the high school kids that moved on without me, concentrated as a line drawing- that I did, start to bleed, it was all I had of my past life, the new gymnasium, they added on was not what I thought it was going to be after a 3 million dollar renovation, to the middle school, and a wing of high-tech science labs were added, along with removing all that is art-ie. Not needed in this day and age they say.

This stamp had certified every graduation diploma, for 8th grade, and mine was not completed, it was ripped into two, and handed to me by my mom, before it was stolen from the principal's desk two days ago, before my change. It is now a piece of fairytale illegal imports used to dishearten impressionists or rivals.

But what harm can it do? Trying new things- I through at the time. I want to be closer; I can't see. I want to be closer to them, those girls I want to be, and I do it, I am making new girlfriends and girls that are friends.

Mine record of BS, that they have attached with the old me, no one knows for sure who authors of it were, yet they have the right to say whatever- and do whatever and I have not to say in my say- I don't say so, so I killed the old me as they would say to do, and started over, or how the responsibility is passed along, with a new record, I knew they would have to pass me,

like me, and not make up a me, that is not me, like before, I was calling what they said, or it was under investigation, secrecy it has not impeded practice, her- there making all easy passes for me, or the school we are sued, for my doctors, say it was the school that did this to me. If anything, the guaranteed anonymity makes the judgments of the list appear more absolute, impartial, unbiased, yet the school would not cave to me, passing. Yet I did not care… and my mom and dad… said do as you want with her pin… scribble on the line sale me to them.

Three weeks into the 8th-grade year:

My mouth is dry, it hurts to swallow. My heartbeat feels as though it is at the base of my throat, uncomfortable and loud. I roll onto my side; my face turned to the window and look out from my window thinking about what I did- and then I have to stop and say this is how I want it and need it.

The second throughs are killing me as I am failing, and it not on me… even the doctors would say. The light there it hurts my eyes, as I look at the old street lights, that flicker. I bring my hand up to my face- and cry like a girl; I press my fingers against my eyelids, trying to rub away the ache, of not having her.

My fingernails are filthy, so-o unlike the girl, I should be, not all the boy is out-a me yet, and my legs fuzzy.

I feel as though I'm falling, and failing at everything like, I did before the change, and it's not this new me that is the problem, it's them not the kid in my grade the teachers, saying this and that, bullying me. What they say would make a grown man break down… overtime!

Part: 40

You know I could have had my *deenk* in her as a- she- male, yet I did not she was wielded out by me, having the boy and face of a girl and the man's junk, I would have, maybe yet I thought it was wrong, at the time, I don't know what I was thinking and she holds it, agent, me, I mean I was blown to place I have never been by her yet she wants it in her, and I would not give that to her. Yet I was like 12 and didn't know what I was fulling doing there, even if I thought I did. I was a little boy, yet changing into a girl.

My goal in my change was to look like Ariana Grande that is what I asked for when redoing my face and body. And I know that some may say it too much but I going to show you the photos.

(Life tip from a trans girl and what I found out: I would say to any trans boy to girl, find a girl that gets you, for she well takes you as a boy in her mind, even if you're not in your if she loves you it will not matters. A boy would not want me, for all the gay's that are with it!)

Me as a pre-teen boy moving into the girl look.

Photo here… look-it!

A day before, I said, I don't want this thing any longer, going off in my hands. I was stuffing… the top, and tape it down in school!

I am now one of those girls in my grade- I do not have the grades but I have the girls and the look that is all me, inside and out. What it looks like down there everyone asks to see it, so I just show, and say it's okay. Even at lunch at school, you can see me under the tab dropping my jeans for girls and boys to see a fast look my first year with them.

This one showing me growing my hair, and looking more like a girl with the injections. And when I got my boobs, there are small, yet I love them!

The day after, in the hostel room, recovering, now if you did not know you would not.

A sexy photo I texted to her, saying 'I love you still!'

A pic. Of me getting where I want to be looking like the singer I loved! We could pass as tweens- no? I am happy to say that Photoshop has nothing on me! Ha, I sing no- you would rather hear an audio-tuned queef- for 3 hours than her that, cracking.

Age 14!

And now I am fully happy with the look of me, on the inside and out!

Part: 41

(Now)

Me- Sleeping next to the girl I love, as though the bed has vanished from beneath my body, I up next to her, I am there by her side, feeling her covers and her warmth. Last night, any every night since we made up, and yes sex had something to do with it.

Something happened...

The breath comes sharply into my lungs and I sit up, too quickly, heart racing, my puss throbbing, like my body trembling for her, I learned that she is him still on the inside, and the outside is starting to work for me now too- I think, I may be gay for her- is that how this works?

And so, with every new list, the labels that normally slice and dice the girls of Rockville High into a billion different distinctions, poseurs, poplar's, users, losers, social climbers, athletes, airheads, good girls, bad girls, girlie girls, guy's girls, sluts, closet sluts, born-again virgins, prudes, overachievers, slackers, stoners, outcasts, originals, geeks, and freaks, to name just a few, will melt away, with me I thought at the time, I was the only thing they would be talking about. The list is refreshing in that sense. It can reduce an entire female population down to three clear-cut groups.

Prettiest, what I wanted to be…

Ugliest, where I thought I was…

And everyone else… that doesn't matter…

This morning, before the first homeroom bell, every girl at Rockville High will learn if her name is on the list or not. The ones who aren't will wonder what the experience, good or bad, might have been like. The eight girls who are on it do not have a choice but live with it. I wait for the memory to come, to me of the ones that were there last year, it not a list on paper, it more what we all just know, sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes it's there in front of my eyes in seconds.

Sometimes it doesn't come at all. And I wanted to be on the top with all the other prettiest girls- no matter what it took, even if that was having sex with the girl to get there, show her what I am made of, I wanted to love, yet loves not how this all works.

I remember being on the steam train, today, my mind still fuzzy, yet I am getting better. I'm breathing deeply, trying to slow my heart rate, to quell the panic rising in my chest, of freaking out over what I can't handle about it all, I think, and remember it's all going to be all right. What did I do? I got on the train and there she was, coming up the row saying it okay, I don't want to remember my past, why can I delete it- I said to her.

Nevaeh

Book: 31

Haven

Part: 42

(Second term of the 8th-grade year)

I stroll around the sugar maple tree outside the school, it a cold day... and flurrying out, ice is dripping on all things around, 8° out.

One hand drifting lazily over the thick bumps of black and blue I have under my dress, I was still, oozing, and padded, and was wearing a splint on my nose, yet I was becoming me, I was not the first girl in my new class to have a nose job, a breeze nips my her legs.

There were just shaved before school, bare they are like above the new hole made for love, between the hem of her corduroy skirt and I have ballet flats.

It is practical tights weather, but I was not fighting them on, like the other girl I went without, they said I need them I said- no, I am a girl after all too, but Abby, a new girl that I just oh my god love, will avoid wearing them for as long as she can, without undies too and, stand there in the chill, shivering like she's having a really hard orgasm.

Or until the last of her summer tan fades away, form the girls that are skank-ie. Whichever comes first, I felt odd with them all looking at me, them saying that's the one, I was telling you about, and I know all the text buzz standing to go in before the bell- read, the questions of what all that I have or have underneath. She has bigger boobs than me- what the hell, it was a soft whisper, I could hear the mindless chatter.

The spot is known as 8th Island, is where I stand with them. It is where the more popular 8th graders the gathered in the mornings and before school. Nearly everyone avoids the younger kids, yet I was okay with the 7th, yes that's me, it's the Island because of the rotten-ness, of we girls are with other girls, yet I look around this year and I know there is talk, yet no hate, as I feel last year for me. It took me doing this to myself to get some to see what I really wanted, and that was a new life, new class, new me.

Some say: I am going backward, saying I am immature for my age... yet no, I don't want to be with them that think they are when they're not. I'm frightened, but I'm not sure what I'm afraid of, which just makes the fears worse. I don't even know whether there's anything to be frightened of- really- there just kids like me, yet I not just a kid like them- am I...? It all comes down to what is underneath- and on the inside- that is all they care about- and what show on the outside more than that- right? It all comes down to the- sex of it...?

This is a fine prearrangement, though, for the reason that, by spring the 8th graders will nearly be freshmen, and will avoid anything that might identify them as younger, yet that all so mean, the sophomores, are going to bully me like before, yet I have one year of freedom, to make this kid see the real me, and hopefully- like- I well keep 'um.

There was a younger 8th-grade girl, there- I remember that I oh so-o love too, brown-sh hair. She smiled at me, and we hit it off fast like all that is pink and girly and Ariana, it was all that we talked about has she said her but this in your ear, it was a bud, with I am so into you playing, we shared the same headphone, standing there, I felt more loved than ever by a class of kids.

Not the cutest girl, in the group yet sweet, not popular yet not sped either, yet I don't say those kid's ant nice, they are, you just have to wonder, what wrong with them or are they okay... to be 'round, you could never really be seen with on, for those starts.

I think she talked to me, about if I was new to the school, she did not know about me and I did not say, I was shocked, that some girls where this naïve, but I can't remember what she said, about her, yet I remember her saying: 'I started shaving there too, itchy- right.'

There's something more to her, that I never saw in anyone - but her, but I can't reach it to say what it was, maybe not judging me, can't find it in the black thoughts of shock I was in, to really recall. She said amiably- 'Add your number to my phone,' and my legs felt as if they gave out from underneath me. So-o, I did... first girlfriend other than her ever, um- like all the boys can go suck it, I never want to be one or have them for friends, they are everything, I don't want to be.

We all rush into the door she holds my hand, running in and then it slips away as she goes to her known spot and homeroom, and I don't see her the rest of the day and she left me with a small, I did even get the last name, yet I was fluttering on the inside with butterflies.

Um- like, ah- when I was outside my underarms at this point feel chapped, like my legs and lips to under all the pink lipstick and glitter glow of my makeup and green eyeshadow, that corresponds with my olive tank, and kicky jacket green top.

I was doing out with my day as you know it's all about what your wearing, and see all that you'll be with for the next 180 or so days, it's a slow day of meeting the teachers and them read syllabi, and handing out books and saying your all passing as of now all you have to do is keep it.

I look around the room and see all the kids, my phone is on the desk in front of me with just her number in it. My purse is not on the floor, it is hanging over the back of the chair where I usually leave it, like all the other girls, I copy as they do.

I must have had it, yet not the same thing in as they- I would not know yet all I need, I will find out, for the reason that, I'm in a class with mostly girls, which means I have my keys, in there and a change of everything, and pens, and random gum, and nail polish, etc.

So, walking through the hall going to lockers I ran into the same girl today a school, and she blows me off, I thought how someone has gotten to her already. I thought...

Before, I knew it the day was over, and it was time for the buses all the kids running out of the school, papers flying, to take us home, or just get the train, or have mom get me, yet I don't have

them so, I did my own thing, and I did what I always do, taking the train over, its faster. Buses have never worked for me- I thought.

(Day 2 of my 2nd 8th-grade year)

My hands are trembling, more than my body. I get out of bed, I'm naked, yet everything now is where it needs to be in my body mind and soul. I catch sight of myself in the head-to-toe mirror next to the dresser. I have a cut on my lower lip from biting it; Mascara is smeared over my cheekbones, I am alone, yet, I live with a family that said they would take me in... even if I was at high risk... There are bruises on my legs, I must over up too, and I feel disgusting.

I put my head between my knees, waiting for the wave of nausea to pass; as I sit back down on the bed, the bedroom door is just open a crack, I see the woman looking in at me, she was wondering like them I would image. I get to my feet, for the clock is going off, grab my night top, that I took off and placed it in the hamper, and open the door saying: 'I am on my way- don't worry I am fine.'

The home is quiet, for now, I know this woman, has girls of her own- yet I was asked to stay away, that I am on thin ice. For some reason, I am certain I don't want to be here, I want to be home or with her; yet, I do have what I want with me- and that is the real me, yet not home life yet, nevertheless, you can't have it all.

The next day- I was looking for her, the girl, that gives me a number, I did not text her, for I did not want to impose, and be nescience. There she was, yet she was not alone, she had two girls next to her that were the same looking as she. I could not believe my eyes, I made new girlfriends with three triplets' girls named Baca, Emily, and Melody.

The only way to tell triplets apart is by their eye color, Baca has brown, Emily has green and Melody has blue, I am sure that two of them are wearing contacts.

Baca is the one, that I meet the day before, I feel as though she did jittery with them standing there just chatting about school boy's music and so on, saying I was not into boys - with her sisters, the day before standing next to them we all just hit it off fast, like the same things, I never knew that making friends was this easy. I could not tell them apart, yet I knew, that they would be my besties.

I got my first ever tagged pic., on Facebook when she said: 'take a cell phone picture with us,' and I was more than overjoyed! Um- though I can't remember when, I ever had someone ask me to do

this- not even her, she did but it was not like this. Before I went in, to start the day of learning, and groping of whom was going to become, I walk as quietly as I can out into the hallway, looking down yet, all them are smiling at me, and I did not know, it was freedom to me.

I asked my new girlfriends over to my new home; I did not even think to ask if it was okay...

Us girls- Baca, Emily, and Melody - I can see that Haven's bedroom door is open slightly. we peer into her room, one on top of the other, just looking at her. Her bed is made, nicely like someone, that has OCD, we're not like that we whispered to each other. It's possible she has already got her before us and made it, thinking we would judge her for it or something like that, surely, she is not that neat- us whispering softly again, all in matching outfits, pink, dress, and ribbons in their hair on the lift side.

Thoughts unanimous- between are the same whispers, but I don't think she stayed here last night the room looks that nice. Yet, I am sure it will not like that tomorrow for where girls are having a sleepover, which is a source of some relief, I am sure to her, we heard about her, like all of when the teacher gives the speeches with her in the room, confidential- my butt, yet where not saying or care, she one of us now in is click- she needs us and we love her for her.

This shouldn't matter to anyone, not even the teachers- I feel, and they had no right saying she was a bad apple, the sense of shame, is going to be feeling, that why we're here also if others turn on her now, she has us, three, are mom even said its okay- to play nice. I feel like an incident, as she would, it was what she had to do, though Baca, to get away from, the kids, yet she still has the same teacher as last year, talking crap, about her new life, she loves, and they want to take from her, and where a girl is not going to let, that happen, no, and the whispers where unanimous, proportionate we are with the gravity of the situation, but also to the number of people who witnessed, what was said we had to come, for the heat is going to be all over Rockville- soon. And she is not going to see it!

~*~

I remember the after, saying it was okay for me to be discarded from the hospital, that all was good with me and coming home, to my new home, with them, and just walking was so hard, I had no one really to have mercy on me, as I went into the home, I recall being at the top of the stairs, I feel dizzy again and grip the banister tightly, as she said you did this to yourself, you can make it is on your own, yet she soon warmed up to me, it was more of that what they say- that she was feeling towards

me- judging before knowing. It was not even a day until she was the mom I never had, and she falls in love with a new girl she never had, and she said: talk is cheap isn't you're a fine young lady, and I got something I never- ever had by a mom a hug!

It is one of my great fears, was not looking like a girl alive (along with bleeding to death, you never really know how alive you are until you start to feel death.) That I will fall down the stairs and break my neck, was nothing like that fear I had of losing ever- and have anybody- other than her, that cared, and even she did not at that time. Thinking about this makes me feel ill again, it like the getting kick in the nads' feeling, and yes those were cut off too, I can never have kids, and that hit me too that is mine, and my mom and dad, said they were not paying to keep with was in my nuts. So -o there- how do you like that? They said- we've been cheated her, with your experiments of gender questioning.

Dad- 'By you being a few cans short of a six-pack.'

...is how they really worked it.

Havens real Mom Lynn-Netta- I want to lie down, but I need to find my bag, check my phone, I had to all my friends and tell them about, my break down, and what my son has just done to himself... it was the take going around, and I was with then saying he was losing it, was speed, she has been spending too much time with the trash over the way that is just that!

Parents- well we attest now know that we have lost all our credit cards, to his dumb sucking move- and I'm not paying for this- Haven's dad was yelled all over the waiting room and was asked to leave, and when he would not he was hauled out the door by five men, along with mom.

...And then that is when 'I got- Haven's real story as too- why...?' Said- the doctor, on staff that night. He went on a no- to me opening-up, all it took was a teddy bear, and me being nice to the now- her- and understanding- and we took care of her expenses- I felt the need and so did the team.

I need to know who all I need to call, she said, 4 days after all this... her handbag has been dumped in the hallway, by her mom, looking for whatever even dugs as to find out the why - of it, just inside the front door, of the sitting room. I got everything cleans up and made her my personal responsibility until my shift was over. I had to see what was making this young lady- now tick. (and it was not long to see all that was wrong) Her member was cut, almost all the way off there was nothing we could do, and it was her choice to go all the way anyways, we have the signed document after the fact, by her- and that it was life or death- there was nothing we could do otherwise, and also the school

Invalided education program, that where just ridicules to her identified, they had her with the special needs, and groped her a mental, and that she should not even be in the 2nd grade with her dangers of herself and others, that she just too crazy to be around others.

'Lawsuit!!!' - I screamed! 'This is all bull-shit to do to a kid! All the staff, looked at me, yet it was approved I was right, in saying and going there in calling others to get a case going. There was nothing in the brain testing to say she was not normal, yet read this report and the girl will not even get a job clean shit out of a toilet someday. And the whole town knows this... she branded!'

Me- Sarah, my jeans, and underwear sit next to it in a crumpled pile; when I heard that she was going to live, laying my bed after having to satisfy myself, and I just said, ha- I want to see her dye- for doing what she did to me, and my dad said- I get that, the first thing we ever agreed on really. He always just busts in my room, yet it's a small place.

Haven- I can smell the urine from the bottom of the stairs- that I was dripping. I grab my bag to look for my phone it's in there, thank God, I said, it working, I look on Facebook and see all the talk off all the kids, that were pulling for me to dye, they even made a hate page, all in my grade, along with a bunch of scrunched-up twenties and a bloodstained Klee nex, drawings, that show what I wanted, is what was left, and my screen was cracked, and a teddy bear was all that I got for my sickness - I guess you could call it.

Nausea comes over me again, stronger this time than ever and I call the doctor that I had said I can't take this; and he sees all of what I do on Facebook, I can taste the bile in the back of my throat, and cry, but I don't make it to the bathroom, I vomit on the carpet halfway up the stairs, and my new mother was getting it, and me- at that moment.

Haven- Upstairs, I plug in my phone and lie down on the bed. I raise my limbs, gently, gingerly, to inspect them, and that too. There are bruises on my legs, above the knees, standard drink-related stuff, the sort of bruises you get from walking into things.

My upper arms bear more worrying marks, dark, oval impressions, that look like fingerprints, from being moved from bed to bed, like dog meat by trauma surgeons. This is not necessarily sinister - I thought for me to do, is it? I have had them before, never like this, usually from when I've fallen and someone has helped me up, playing as a boy on the teams, baseball, baseball- and so on.

The crack they made for me down lower, that I should not touch feel like it would never-ever be right, and I freaked, but it could be from something as innocent as me not knowing what they did to make it right.

I have to lie down, when she posted on Facebook, I should have passed, If I don't, I had to lie down, I'm going to pass out from the long letter she posted to the world for her being alive, I'm going to fall if I don't soon. It was like a page of run on's about her life-ending. So, for a like tree week, we just moved in on her and shared her room, and her new mother was more the okay with us girls hanging.

(New day- three weeks into Havens new life)

So, like it's are academic decathlon on Monday- that would be tomorrow, so I need to see if she could help me with my studying along, with my new BFF's, that is the lie I told her, I could give a crap about my grade, they're all fixed, I can't make them love me, the teachers that are, and I need somewhere to say for the night, I know that it's not going to fly yet I have to ask. I am out of fuel in my heater, at my home, and have no cash to get any, so its bag her for a twenty, just to make it 'till my payday at my job, and now that I don't have her, I am on my own. And my mom wants to see me fall on my face, why- she doesn't need a why- she just does.

The tree girls- like- our parents dropped us girls off at our older sister- we are living with her, we are living on our own now, even if mom and dad, we should be home with them kissing butt, yet we want to be grownups, our sisters is age 18 she has an apartment up with the low life, also, we don't have much, just like the rest of the world.

She and I, and us girls we're off here using are pulled bikes in like 3º snow, yet mom or dad taking us to the movies was not going to happen, they have already done more than they felt the need for us, like we have a car either, that runs... ha.

I or we girls don't have the money now to keep a car up. The law forbids us to have bikes on the road- it is all of us doing this though so way to they care if where low life just trying to live, like to drive on the road at this time, of the year is nuts. I know that we're going to get pulled over for this at some point, yet- we don't care. All we can say is that we need to have fun to be kids- yet I don't think that is part of life any longer- for a kid to be kids.

I know that I- we, we'll all be frozen, by the time, that I- we get there... to the movies, that is where we planned on going, yet that is all we have to do, and after that, I will am flatly broke, yet I feel

not let them know this, yet oh well it builds character they say, to have nothing and have nothing to lose. What feels like hours ago, is even harsher by the wind chill, as I make the 4-mile bike run, to my sisters. Either way, I knew these, kinds of mornings suck on the weekends because Baca has to get up extra early to have time to shower, for her mom drags her to do the church thing, she has to do her hair and put together something cute to wear. She does it all without turning on the light, so as not to wake her young sister, who is 4-year-old also, living with her older sister for her mom is just not right- like all ours, with whom she shares the largest bedroom in the home with. There is not enough room for us all to cram in.

Anyways, it was hard to get them all to just say yes take me, in we did not get much sleep, yet I had a place to stay, I knew that we girls would have to take bikes to school, or hope the train over, for they don't get it at school that we don't have mom and dad or them at the school that care, to see that we have to find homes that work for the moment, yet it was nice just to be warm. The baby doesn't fall a-sleeps until the last possible minute, because she has no morning of having to shower and go to school and getting up a 4 am to do the routine to speak of, besides brushing her teeth and cycling through a rotation of jeans and boxy T-shirts, is what makes you in 8th grade, and also me tripping over them in one old small bathroom- did not help- either.

Baca yawns, we were in class. She can't remember a thing that we never learned, nothing was right on her test, I could see it on her face. Meanwhile, I think I may have passed this one yet they- the teachers that made me this way- would say not so-o.

This morning, I had proudly put on a new T-shirt, that I bought online, the first time ever, that I got a girl's shirt from an in the online store. The first time, I use a gold card... I have been saving this card for Christmas all this year, and it almost Christmas again, there was only $20 loaded on the card; yet, I got what I wanted even so-o, even if shipping was more than I thought also. 'Thank you'- I said to my sister shakingly, for caring, when she needs the money herself, I did not get her anything, yet she understood, 'it's cool' she said, yet she has to play mom and dad and family and make some kind of holiday for us all, that too falls on us kids.

My sisters and I, all got the same series of fantasy novels called: 'Harry Potter,' the form is mom and dad, yet not one of us could get past the first page, we can read it- in 7th grade, mom was shocked, yet not surprised. So, we just called it gay- like every one of us in is class to make up for the fact we have not read it, and took them back, only go half of what they paid yet that was worth more to

us, and got the money. 8 books- I said- why not just get the movie- dumbasses, my two sisters like I whispered unanimously- we agreed. that would be easier, like who reads anymore? Could've got us new cell phones, these things are older than us. And where stuck paying for the bill, I think not they said, you're like you have what you have.

Like I- Haven and all my friends are obsessed with the new I-phone 5 that just came out, yet we would have to the sale and ovary just to get one- four the tree of us- to share- and sharing to us is getting old. In my sisters, old beat to hell car, Baca to give me two French braids for school it turns out my sister has a big heart and taking us all to school, one on each side of my head.

I only wanted Baca to give me two French braids, yet all of us girls have them now, I know if the other girls see us looking the same, someone we give us crap about it; even though Baca can do a knot or a twist- hairstyles, she has this look down for us all, Baca feels are better, more classy choices out her two 12-year-old sisters- I feel, they may all look alike yet there miles apart on the inside.

But Baca never ever says no to Emaly and Melody requests, even though she finds it weird that Emaly and Melody want to dress in what is essentially a costume because the braids do make Emaly and Melody look better, or at least like she cares a little bit about how she looks. I pick up my phone. There are two messages. One part of the day when we're not in the same classes, it make us three said, yet that's school, crayons, and glowing shit on paper in 8th grade, and look at: 'See Spot Run, ' and doing 2nd grade spelling, yet the teacher feel there right on point with us- I could not even tell you a place on the map where we are from, or who all the face are that ran the US, yet why do I care, they say to me, I don't if you don't.

The first is from Haven, received just after five, asking where I've got to. She's going to Damien's for the night, she'll see me tomorrow. She hopes I'm not drinking on my own. The second is from Melody, received at 10:14. I almost drop the phone in fright as I hear his voice; her shouting. 'Jesus Christ,' 'what the hell is wrong with you?' I ask, 'I have had enough of this, all, right?' She said- 'they make out to be metalloids-' it read. 'I've just spent the best part of an hour looking at this shit and looking around the room, and there is know why I am getting this Math, Reading, and so on,' I sent back- 'maybe it's too easy.' You've really frightened- and frustrated, Melody, you know that? Said the prick teacher, that can't tell one from the others, and doesn't care too.

And that expulsion for having a phone out in class, yah go suck it, I am in the office, and another for a too short of a skirt with no underwire under them; 'pervert,' I said back, well that all of us, then right? 'No just you- the smart mouth- GO!'

'No- I don't have too,' and I was dragged out the room by my skirt bottom, it comes off like you would expect before I was out the door.' She thought you were going to... she thought... It's all I could do to get him not to ring the police. Leave us alone, we screamed, in the classroom, stop calling me names, I said- to the teacher, stop hanging around us like we're dumb, just leave us alone.

'I don't want to speak to you,' I said to the principal, 'Do you understand me?' 'I don't want to speak to you either- we can just send you out of here, I don't want to see you, for a week, I don't want you anywhere near this school. And the girl you where texting too Haven - I don't want to see her for a week, she did not do anything, that's no matter to me, she already, a badly-behaved, 'You think you can ruin your own life here in school you cannot, he scrammed at Haven, I make your say - of what you can and cannot do.' 'but you're not ruining mine.' She said back - 'Not anymore - you don't have to be where - we send you to the retard school. I'm not going to protect you any longer, understand?' 'Just stay away from us. Melody said to him - and his bending us backward over his desk with his yelling.'

School buses and cars begin to appear, were still in the office, and where let go- they did know it but we wanted the 3 weeks off, all of us girl cut - going to drop out at some point we know - yet that they why they want it.

One by one, I am warmed by her and her sister's hugs, 'I don't have any more chances,' I say to Haven, 'your discarnate - on,' they said, and like them all at once - 'and it's not right,' They all spent the weekend sending pictures of potential dresses back and forth to one another for the missing the winter - snowball dance on Saturday night. The dress Baca is completely in love with - a pink satin halter with a thick white bow cinching the waist- is on hold in her size 0 at a store in the mall, she prayed for it too. And is not getting that back either.

Her only hesitation was knowing that her sisters did not seem to know how dressed up, without her, or want to go, and that would not be right, sure we could not all go without all of them there, could we. (Back a week)

'Ooh! Emaly!' Baca says when her best friend her sister, Melody Krumenacker, comes walking over from the parking lot. 'Did you show Haven your winter - snowball dress? Does she think it's

too formal?' Emaly throws one arm around her, in a shop in the mall that has things marked down for flaws, and things like that.

Baca and pulls her in for a hug, with us girls saying- 'I love you all so much.' 'My sister said it's perfect for you to go with that one! Pretty and fun, and cute, and boy-loveable, you are! But not in a trying-too-hard kind of way, I love that flirty too though, sexy- yet not showing it all- undies or no?'

I would not spend money on them and save, for shoes, 'He'll know you don't want lines... and you feel- um scandalous- and that makes you feel like a WOMAN, not a little virgin girl, 'well that's what we are?' RIGHT? Baca yell in a panic, the three of them all at the same time yell- YES- with a look on their face that is too cute you could not help but love them for it!

Haven- 'that not trash-ie, though is it?'

'We're not... go with it.'

Baca- 'Show off your goods, that why God gave yah' Haven - she screwed up her face, in only a way she could, saying he didn't.

'Oh yeah...' she said.

Becca and Emaly are the only two girls in their group of us girls, who have older sisters whom also go to the high school up there on the hill, and they say to go without having sex with boys, that boys like that, its Rockville's, only thing boy think about, the only thing boys should care about is the girl, yet they don't they just want in your jeans. And the other to nodded in a way only they do, she said I would get that one when I older- I don't get it.

Becca sighs with relief at having received Emaly's sanction and approval, about us not have sex at the end of the 8th-grade dance, with are dates like all the other girls or they say they're going to do, you know how girls are, and also a boy is far worse than that, for lying about the V card.

Becca and Emaly are the only two girls in their group of us who have older sisters who also go to, and they say to go without, that boys like that, its Rockville, only the boys should care.

Not that Becca's Emaly and Melody is any match for Emaly's, modesty yet I get why she wants little girl undies underneath saying- what if you fall- of something like that.

Unlikely- yet I get- I Haven had other thoughts- to it- yet I was going to do just what they were, as a girl that I am, the bra is built in so why make yourself feel restricted when your grinding on a boy.

During that week, Baca and Emaly snuck into Haven's bedroom to look around- it the typical girl's room, nothing out of place from any other girl- in this world- all pink and right- for an 8th grader.

They stuck their heads in Emaly's closet, looking for boy things not one, just a lot of different undies, young girl with flowers and girlie things on them- bras, and T's and short shorts, 2 dress, and jeans that are skin tight to her from- like us we said- unanimously, her new mom has been shopping for her I see.

The next night a school night it was a Wednesday- I was in the tree girls' room, that have tree beds, in a row, all in soft pink and lavender with mint green. With white headboards, and white nightstands, with a photo of the boy there crushing on in their matching digital frames, that show all there the girls' days of growing up.

I- Haven was snooping, I found a few boys' phone numbers hidden in Emaly's sock drawer next all the little girl undies, and her gummy dildo, all the girls have their own, in the same place all in different colors so that can tell them apart, she swears off forever- over what boys say, I wonder what that was like to be crushing on more than one a one time, she said that's okay too.

Like before going to be it is this girl ritual to masturbate, there fully nude, I have to say as a girl to it became mine also, with them... when I sleepover, and also on my own, oh there is nothing cuter than seeing three triplet girls doing that as your sitting at the foot of their tree beds looking up at them, and they want to see them cum-ing, it what girl do at sleepover also, and they're not going to go a night off, just for I there no- where just that close now, I was with them...

I remember the first time- like I-

Haven was nervous about cum-ing in-front of other girls, to show my goodies, that may not be right, yet they were, yet Baca said I help you got off, and the girls did it with me, on one of their beds, my back agent the headboard with her and her and she next to me.

...And yet they got me one of those too, just like there's off of Amazon, for $7 it's a blue 7-speed rabbit, that will blow any young girl's mind they said to me.

...And held her charm bracelet, that she was planning to give me, against her undies that were on her wrists, the night before, I said I like it- so she must feel the need too... give it to me.

I would love it- yet I had to abolish the moment for myself. I have always been like that...

I look to see how these girls have everything perfectly arranged atop a white wicker vanity, that they share, I love it- I said you have to do this for me- in my room- they gave me so much free crap- in make-up, and things to make my face look cute.

I had always dreamed of having a vanity, but there was no place for one, I thought- yet they did it for me out of an old table, I asked my new mom for that was in the hallway that needs some love...

I and the girls made it white, with a can of spray paint we found, and they did the rest, along with watching makeup scenarios- YouTube videos with me to find my true look; fake lashes and everything; I even had my eyebrows redone by them, even if they were not bad there right now!

The biggest thing they got me was hair extranets, now my hair is down to my butt, they said- 'like if your kind to them you can keep them for years,' 'we put our money together are allowances, we want you to have all this, a bag of girl's make-up things. This was also the money back from the Harry Potter books.'

The next day you have to say, the girls where all looking at her, with that dropped jaw look, Emaly mainly stayed by herself that week, I can't say why, she loves me, I know, yet I think she felt like she lost her sisters a little, that week to me- become the girl I never- ever knew I could be.

Ask.fm Bacca is answering her new questions for the day- asked by anyone around the world at age 12, yet there is nothing else to do, by being online.

I just got this on ask. FM- Shaved or hairy cunt innie or outie I said- Shaved, innie, yet Emaly is not right now, she wanted to see what not doing it would feel and look like for a while.

Do you sleep naked?

All three of us girls do.

When last did, you kiss?

I kissed a girl and I like it!

Have you ever made out with someone you wished you never made out with?

Yah my mom- ha

Would you make out with me right now?

No!

What's your bra size?

12? 34B? really, that would go for all three, dumpy?

Would you pay for sex or rather, get paid for sex?

Which celebrity would you sleep within a blink of an eye?

Ryan Gosling

Have you ever kissed a girl before?

Yah- her name is Haven and my 3 sisters.

Show a photo of you three.

No creep!

Would you be open to a threesome?

I do that every night with them sully.

Do you like watching porn?

Yes, we all do

Does size matter to you?

I would not know yet...

- Have you ever had an orgasm during sex before?

I have only had them with me...

Have you been caught having sex?

Yes, my dad and mom, yet that don't care, that I cum on my own time.

Where do you like being touched the most?

My pussy dah! I a girl!

If I asked nicely, would you show me your boobs?

NO!

- Would you use sex toys?

I have one, like all girls my age!

- How often do you masturbate?

6- to 10 times a day, like my sisters. Three like before the long day at school, once or twice as soon as I get home, and hit my bed, and like three more before I bath and shut my eyes to go to sleep. If you must know!

Would you kiss your crush in public?

Yes, would you?

Have you ever watched another couple have sex?

Yes, my older sisters and her boyfriends for the time being.

Would you like to have somebody watch you while having sex?

I don't care, its own webcam, so I don't care, girls do that all the time, it normal.

- What part of a man's body would you like to see first?

His DICK!

(I love some of these things boys say Emily roll her eyes, saying make them goo hard in her pants, sis, play with them.)

Do you want me to kiss you?

Ou- no! You might have *coodies*- on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest, what number would you rate your blowjob skill?

G-strings, thongs, granny panties or commando?

Commando seems to be the thing right now with all of us young girls in middle school, with leggings.

Doggy style or cowgirl? Never had sex

Will you cheat on your boyfriend with an ex whom you still have strong sexual chemistry with?

Um- maybe never dated a boy yet.

Where was the craziest place you ever had sex?

I am a virgin like my sisters, why you want to change that- stranger danger?

Spit or swallow?

Swallow- I am a lady!

Do you take it in the butt?

Yes, I think, if you don't mind a hairy butt hole!

What is the craziest thing you have ever done?

Licked my sister's pussy!

Are you single?

Yep- yet Emily is thinking about dating a boy and it may be U!

Rimjob?

Gross (all their noses were ranked up)

Wanna f*ck?

Yes please (giggles)

Emaily's ask.fm change over (Baca said)

Virgin?

Obviously-

Giggles coming from the room their mom walks past and just rolls her eyes! As she has seen 4 girls with their 4 head smashed into the apple computer.

Youngest age you'd date?

Oldest?

Probably 14-18

What song do you love to dance to?

WOBBLE-

Boobs-

My life story...

U are scared to kiss guys...?

Yes, Very much. Lol.

Sometimes I get a boner when I poop. Is this weird/gay?

I don't even know how to answer this lol.

('Do you need to jack them off to get that down now Melody said?'

...Unanimously they did not really know if a boy walks around with one up all the time or not.)

- What was your first paying job?

a babysitter, and what nice is my sisters can trade out on the mom and dad and they don't even know.

How many books have you read in your life?

HA- HA BOOKS-

What is the best thing about being your age?

There's absolutely nothing good about being 12. You can't drive. You can't drink.

You have to listen to your parents. UGHH.

Who was the last person you kissed?

I don't like to talk about that... lol

- What's it like to know that in a previous life you were a used tampon?

I just hope it wasn't yours

What are 3 things you can't live without?

Internet. Friends. Food.

What do you notice first in someone of the opposite sex?

That they have a penis

Do you actually have a hot tub full of semen?

Yes, and I want someone to get pregnant

(Wa-wa-wha-t...?...!) it was unanimously thought about with three head tilted to the lift side.)

Melody-ask.FM

Ha- you only go the one-

1: Age? 12

2: Height? 5'1'

3: Ever been fingered Um maybe?

4: Single Yep?

5: Virgin? Yes

6: Do you wear thongs? Sometimes

7: Bra size? B

8: Ever given a blowjob? Yes, about three weeks ago, at his mom's in their basement family room. So-o yah- I have...

9: Ever had your pussy licked? Maybe

10: Ever have a 69? All the time 11:

Do you masturbate? Yes everyday

12: Have you ever flashed, anyone?

Not meaning too-

13: Ever sent nudes?

Yep to a boy I really liked-

14: Type of underwear you are wearing now- I am not?

(Melody said this is why I am not on this...)

Bacca comes on you like it... yes, when are you...

Becca and Emaly asked questions about what - Rockville High was really like, and Emaly gave them lots of helpful, blunt advice, like to be cautious when hooking up with older guys, to gossip only with the friends you completely trust, and how to hide the smell of liquor on your breath from your parents.

The day is over, texting her and her friends back home with our many just the 3 girls, and reading a stack of teen magazines, that she'd brought with herself, and she only went to the skating rink with Becca and Emaly once for a couple of hours, I could not go I was cramming homework, and my new mom looked over and singed so they could not say I did not do it. But on the one rainy night, Emaly let them hang out with her in her bedroom, and we play an x-box. She curled their hair with her thick barrel iron, and let them watch a crapy free Comcast movie, like Twilight 1, that I see a million times, from the

foot of her big fluffy beds in the girl's room. 'Vampires suck-' and unanimously we all agreed. 'imagen the sex' said Becca? 'Ow-ha-' said the other two all cute-ie and- unanimously!

'Suck' - 'that they do,' I said, with a giggle.

Emaly and Melody and Becca, meanwhile, offered nothing beyond recommendations of which math teachers at - Rockville really knew their stuff.

...And Baca wondered, more than once, if Emaly even knew who Emaly and Melody and I were, despite the fact that both girls where in the same grade. Emaly is about to go chat with their other friends when Baca leans in and whispers, 'Did you finish the Earth Science worksheet?' Emaly makes a glaring face. 'What do you think?'

'Baca, you can't keep copying my homework! You're never going to learn anything.' 'Ture yet you know nothing- so...' then way copy they all said- UNANIMOUSLY- the three girls.

Baca combs her strawberry- yet dark brown hair with her fingers. 'Pretty please...? I just got too caught up in looking at dresses last night and went right to bed, and bath, and eat, and there was no time, to make time for it, it will be the last time- it well. I- I swear.'

It's bad when she starts stammering. She puts her hand over her heart, and made the pouty face, with her lower lip.

'YOU- Promise...?'

Emaly just sighs, but she heads to the school to get her homework from her locker, to give to me to copy in study-hall.

Baca cries out, 'Love you, sis!'

A minute or two later, Emaly sprints back outside, her black ponytail whooshing wildly. 'Baca!' She screams, loud enough so that everyone at 8th grader turns and looks at her like she's nuts. Emaly dives forward the last few feet and grabs Baca to keep herself from falling. 'You're the prettiest freshman girl at - Rockville High!'

Blink- Blink- Baca blinks. 'I'm what?'

'You're on the Facebook Page as most Popular, dummy! ON the Facebook top ten girls of Rockville middle school! 'That's a thing?' My sister is on it, too.' And look- look have is number 3, Emaly looks at the other girls, her braces twinkling in a proud smile, saying good for you Haven- you made it as the girl you truly are. 'Haven- got named the prettiest girl in the 8th class!' Yet some dumb boys had to take the joy out of saying- that all the other girls must be really butt ugly then.

Baca's mouth flows open and goes all droopy with surprise, and I Haven hold her up. Maybe she wanted it I said, even though she isn't sure what Emaly is talking about either, it is clearly news to be excited about a girl like Me- Haven getting top 3 and all them under me. Luckily, one of their other friends asks, 'What was it all about?' and then everyone turns to Emaly for an explanation, it went viral this year... the top ten popular girls.

Haven- I don't know what I've done, to get this.

What did I do? She said in wondering questioning.

The school day is over I hear the bell right out, and I don't take the bus, I walk along the little pathway between the parks, shops, and the neighbor's garden, climbing over the fence, with the girl and unanimously we chat about a girl like me- Haven have made the 10 teen girls on Facebook.

I think about closing the French doors, that we left open - not thinking, silently creeping into the kitchen all of us girls march, now sitting at the table, we make our own food, Havens new mom has not come home yet, from her crampy job. I grab her from behind, and she jumps and squeals, I wind my hand into her long hair saying- I love you like one of my sis's, I jerk her head backward, with her hand - feeling love for the first time, I pull her to the floor and I smash her head against the cool blue tiles, and we play around one on top other and so forth, ''rough-housing' aging girls I see,' her mom walks in... saying- 'ah- well-a girls will be girls.'

Melody- 'Why is it I feel so unbeloved slut being like all the other girls- like posting photos, online sites and wants, and boys- stuff?'

'God all this is making me want one, and to suck one-off like I have seen my sister doing last night in the living room.' Said Bacca- the load one. Unanimously all the girls agreed that they want to try new things with boys, yet, Haven said- 'I think I like girls more,' and unanimously the girls said- 'um well... um... you can be Bi... these days, and- and- and- no one really many cares.' Said the jittery one, Melody.

Bacca said- 'would you kiss me,' she leans in eyes closed, shy yet wanting, and they did for over 60 scents- with tongue, I won't feel boobs can I and she did under Bacca's top. Experimenting mom said when she walked in unannounced? Girls well are girls she said, don't fall in love- she snickered, making boys happy girls by practicing? 'We don't even like a boy- really, we don't-' they said all embarrassed, mostly if not at the same time.

Part: 43

(NIGHTFALL)

My head hurts, do what I do and start humping a pillow with vajayjay, you just stressed from dumb boys, and dumb freaking school, and dumb flipping homework, that like me you don't know how to do. I can hear someone yelling downstairs, it was my mom on the phone with my new mom saying they can do that I could get sued, she said their young girls- there nothing wrong with them playing around, 'but she's really a boy- she said fast- and harshly- SO-0 whatnot anymore, and my girl's lover her, it's all good.

Mom on the other end- 'Okay...' she said- not sure. 'I could lose my income too if I don't have her, and yet, I love her for her too, it's not about the money any longer, with us... we know that all and everyone is out to get her... I trust you don't let her and

I down with this.'

'The three girls' mom- Stephany K., 'It's just pillow fights, boys, make-up, nails, girl talk, online and off, and getting off- there's no harm in doing what pre-teens do. This is just going to be the 4 of them, and their hash- hash thing they do... it's fine!' '-Yah-no-'

...?...

'Hair what to do what not to do, boobs and the lack of them, and the period's not starting and then they do, and we want life to be over- we remember that...?'

'Right...?'

'Um- ah... wow- there in your hands now- I trust you to do the right things you have 4 girls so-o...'

'I wonder what that was all about...' said- Haven, oh it's about us- I am sure, said Becca, saying then need to back off with you, yet you're doing a hell of a lot better now, and yah? Haven said - yepper- with a big thumbs' up- thrown right on her forehead!

'I do not believe this! For God's sake! girls! HAVEN!'

My new my had to give me the talk... about us girls, and that she said if that's what you all want to do with your time- never- ever would we have done much in our day.

(lie)

I fell asleep, with my three girls next to me at my home tonight. Oh Jesus, and I didn't clear up the vomit on the stairs, from when your new daddy hears what you'll be up too. And my clothes in the hallway, like yours all need to be there, so I can wash, Oh God, oh God there all nude, yet all girls I see... soo well... okay...

'Where are your undies- girls, from the day?'

We don't wear them Haven's mom- and she yelled'

'Mom-a me-a!' she said well she slapped her forehead with her palm! 4 butt bare girls in one room sharing the same bed, wow...

'It's a sleepover ma-' Haven said... all cute-z!

(Next morning)

'I'm sorry,' Haven is saying. 'I'm so sorry for making your life hard, I was just really... well- ah... um... I- I- a want my friends to love me, she standing their butt bare, still from the night before with the guilt's, as I see three eyes the same looking at me and my man in bed, I'll be fine with them- she got hell for us...' I pull on a pair of these black legging bottoms and a T-shirt out for, Haven, she is standing right outside my bedroom door when I open it., crying having flashbacks of her old life...

'I get it!' Haven, she said hugging her...

'God- girl, I have to dress you too...'

'...same said to you girls...'

'...Good God, and you want to be grown-ups and have boyfriends.'

She turns around, saying to all the girls and they walk towards Haven's bedroom. 'And for the love of God, will you clean up that mess you all made and the toys- and those toys too?' She slams her bedroom door behind her, with her girls holding her saying don't cry.

'Mixed up little girls-' said Haven's new dad...

'Um- yeah- they'll be okay!'

Of course, Emaly and Melody, and she hadn't bothered to mention this very important thing, just like Emaly and Melody and Melody wouldn't have a clue about which dresses were right for the winter- snowball dance.

That Haven was in a whole heap of dog doo- at school; Sometimes, Baca wished that Haven was her sister, so they could trade places and she could take the crap for her.

As Emaly fills them in mom and dad, Baca nods along to what mom and dad say- saying, I would have it you're all going- end of the story- if I have to stand there and see you all have your dance, all the other girls are pretending that she isn't as clueless as the rest of them. In fact, they were all going not to go...

'Taking care of girls, you always come to us with these things'...' '...Why... hold back, Becca...?' 'Um- well ah- it's not cool- to tattle tall to mom...' she said...

Oh, is that so... she said all piss-ie... I am going in with you girls today... (um- don't it's just going to make things worse...)

Dad- 'You all want to go?

'I don't stand for nincompoopery, he said, under his snuffle!'

'Yes,' they all said- all unanimously...

'Then shut up girls!'

Okay... Lots of times..., you and I, we'll-a be making run up on the meeting at the school if they like it or not- I have singed names about this place, and they're going down... if I go to an attorney!!!

'Your mom is a fighting cat- I no right... don't you just love her for it!'

'Sweeeeet!'

The girls said- one hundred percent, at the same time!

Part: 44

Baca's friends take turns bouncing her around with congratulatory hugs, and each squeeze makes her heart flutter a little faster.

Though the 8th boys act uninterested in their celebration, Baca notices their game of hacky sack inch closer to where she is standing.

But it still hasn't sunk in. There are... a- lot of pretty 8th girls at - Rockville, and Baca is friends with most of them. Did she really deserve to be at the top of the pack? And should have Haven been above her- really?

It is not strange, a foreign place for her to be. 'I'm sorry you girls didn't get picked,' Baca says suddenly to everyone, that is in her class, and she partly means it, she was rubbing it in, moreover Haven then her.

'Please,' Emaly says, pointing at her mouth, saying button it up. 'Who's going to vote me prettiest- oh yeah- you already did that for a girl that you hated; before, I made her over, like at all these girls looking at her with like railroad tracks running across my face, over how Haven, that girl beat them out.'

One of the girls gets up and knocks Haven on her ass, saying she's not even a real girl- and she starts to cry as more hurtful things are running off, in slurs. 'Shut up!' Baca cries, knocking into Emaly. 'You're so pretty! Way prettier than her and you are real.' Why did you not get this...?

Baca honestly thinks so, it's all over her face, yet she loves her more them herself on like those girls in her class.

'Actually, she is blessed to have made the list this year- at all one girl- said, because when Melody finally gets her braces removed, all bets will be off.'

'...And don't forget the only reason she got it was for some girl, that made the list was feeling bad for her.'

'You need to hush...' said Becca.

Emaly is at least half an inch taller than Baca, with longer hair, that always looks shiny and a tiny little mole at the top of her left shoulder is all that really shows them apart.

She has a great figure, with curves and boobs. Really, the only thing that isn't perfect about Emaly is her braces- same with Melody- yet her ways are what turn all the girls away and the boys too we all say it's so-o.

And maybe her feet are a- lil-bit-bigger, which are kind of big. But people usually overlook that sort of thing, yet when you have three girls that all the same, and as perfect as they, you have to start counting hairs on their heads. Said one in the class... 'You are the worst at taking compliments, Baca,' Emaly says with a laugh. 'But this is seriously huge, 2 girls that look alike make and the 3 one that is the same of us is out, and haven is in the top 3.

Everyone in the school will know who we are now- Moldey...yet there are 3 of me- I sure they do, do I not have boobs and the same face?'

'We just don't like you,' a Hayley McGraw said, right to her face.

Baca smiles, with now perfectly white and perfectly aligned teeth. Unanimously, the two of the never been more excited about the next five years than now, and Melody, with the look on her face, and haring what they are saying, has never felt so miserable, that she could just end it now- over them saying she is a shit-faced- BITCH, that can't get a boy to finger her, and that's why she'll never make the list, she has no- swag!

Melody- 'I wish, I knew who picked me the last of ever one in a class of 300 so, I could thank her now for ending my social life.'

Um- BITCH face- 'Like- Why don't you suck bleach, and do us all a favor,' said Haley, and that night she did and was found in her bathroom, at 5 am. by Bacca. And she was cold to the touch and blue, she pasted as a virgin, I hope all those sluts are happy said Haven, to their mom! That was not taking it too well.

And live in Rockville was never the same, and the three girls that everyone love went do to two, and nothing was done about it, and Haven was to blame, all the girls ganging up on her, yet that made Bacca, and Emaly even closer.

Mom- when in one day with the issue and also the next with her death of her little girl...

(Not a school matter) that was what she got...

'Go to the dance,' said Havens mom, '...and be with your two girlfriends, and never- ever let them go, they love you-you need them, and now they need you, more now than ever. There true friends to you- remember that! Haven... she is looking down on you'll now.'

Haven- 'Yah- but that doesn't let me see her ever... she said crying.'

(The other two hysterical)

Triplets, dad- ''She was just shy and misunderstood' cried Emaly, standing over her dead body at the memorial home.

Only Haven and the family was allowed to attend. 'She was only 12- years- old,' said, her dad- with a life she never had- to live- all over some smart brats mouth I lost my baby girl.'

The girls, extremely excited over everything thing that was relevant, to a low of what really was... The idea of one girl, or maybe even an allocation, giving this honor to her not ever- ever- ever being there again was just too much.

Part: 45

(The dumb dace, that all the others don't care about...

...Us- the girls have on the perfect dress, with the perfect look, hair, and makeup, yet none of that really matters now, it is not like having her, is it? Said

Emily...

...Three girls sitting all at one table meant for four... spaced out, as they see all the others, swaying to the pop music- having the time of their lives... yet, they don't care about anything, but them, and for the moment and high...

'...Hope your happy sister, you're the top bitch at Rockville now...' there was harsh rasp recement in her voice!' And unanimously-

Haven felt the same.)

Scott- 'Do you wanna make: 'I like you- baby's -?-'

'Yah?'

Me- 'NO..., But we can go through the motions...'

Hey girls- Welcome back to 8th grade... at Rockville!

Part: 46

Haven- I remember having a pocket pussy and using it hard like it was her, it's hard to remember her now, dreaming about having one of my own - a sweet tight little pussy to stick my fingers in and feel as a 12-year-old would feel having the shaking after self-pressuring.

She has friends, older girls, she didn't even know about, that have to take far worse comment... why... why did she have to do this to us? Said Emaly...?

Haven yah me to yet, I never thought about ending it, even if and because.

She saw the list on Facebook, and also the ones that should just kill themselves too. The list names ugly girls, too?' In the enthusiasm, she'd missed that part.

'I saw a copy on the bulletin board of both lists and she was on the one that said she sucked hard at life and is too ugly- to get banged' quote on quote, said, Haven... it was near the gym, by the locker rooms.' Emaly says. 'But they are everywhere.' Inside and out and hairy, and smelly, she has a bad back- said one boy that wanted her for sex nothing more, his name I don't care, then his tipper her butt - we would know, lazy eye (not true) and her shoe doesn't fit, what the chatter. (was - her feet bigger? Said Haven...

(Nowhere triplets... of course not! If that was so-o we all have that, it is not far what they think. Just because she never dated.)

It was said with her attitude she should have been the one of us that had the dick... said online... that was mocking her legacy.

'Do you think I could be someone other than me?' Baca wonders, and see who made this list, or not be the 3 girls of the one that killed herself, that left to the same.

She wants to keep the copy off the wall special adding it to her a memory box of all the small things that were her.

She had planned to talk to the girl on Facebook that made the ugly list and also the one that made the cute girls list.

'Definitely! She thought, I going to do this...

I would become someone other than a triplet of the dead girl in school, I would be... something I not... The girls hold hands as they run into school, saying I will become you 3rd said have if we all get the makeover to look alike- I will try to take her place, I will never leave you said- for what you have done for me... said, Haven.

(Back)

'So, whom else is on these lists?' Baca asks, not too many girls we really know.

'Beside me and your sister?

'Well, the ugliest freshman is Bealla Marco.'

Baca decelerates some and slows her speech, in her rambling, when I Haven lose eye contact and start to nod off and my head drops some. I could care less about being one of them, why did she care?

'Wait?' 'A girl asked you don't care?'

'Yup,' Emaly says, pulling her along, saying I don't want it either, now that my sis is gone.

'Wait until you see this... Whoever wrote it this year put funny things underneath everyone's names, all yet I don't find them funny said Haven- why do you she asked to- that girl. Like Bealla's called: 'TRIGGERED AF'n SAUCE.''

Baca had watched Bealla kill it during the obligatory mile run last week, 'either do it or you fail-' said... the Lizzie- teacher. Baca isn't friends with Bealla Marco, but they are in the same gym class. And was all pissy about that too, yet that's just her and- how she is...

It was commendable, and Baca could have probably run faster than the crappy seventeen and or eighteen minutes she ended up with, yet the teacher was giving her a hard time, and docking, her for this and that, she said: 'I have a rum-soaked tampon in my pussy to you want to give me shit about that too bitch.'

Just like in Baca's case. It's truly the luck of the draw having to run the long jump, and see her well not jump but go long and hard to her face... but she didn't want to be sweaty for the rest of the day, yet I don't she has to worry herself with all those rocks ground in her forehead, and that chipped tooth-like West Cost has... off of Fantasy Factory.

In addition, with any luck, Bealla will understand, that there are other girls who could have been named the ugliest, moreover whatever and so on. YEP- Unquestionably, she feels bad that Bealla has been named the foulest girl in their class, but Bealla seems tough enough to handle it.

'What did it say about me?'

Emaly lowers her hand from her mouth as she whispers, 'It applauded you for overcoming genetics,' look at the video that has you splitting your legs on the beam hard when you fall, before letting out an embarrassed giggle, saying so that what it's like to get AF'ed. And all the kids get, yet not the oldies- in the room.

Emaly and Baca and Melody were named for being well what they were their girls all looking the same yet so different in their personality.

'Oh, no,' Emaly says: quickly; Baca bites the inside of her cheek and then asks, 'Is Emaly and Melody and Melody went from the ugliest 8th graders to the coolest in one year, just hanging - with older boys.' 'It's that freaky creepy snotty AF'ed looking girl Sarah Gernaer, who scowls on the bench near Freshman Island.' Baca lowers her eyes and nods slowly. She guesses Emaly can see her guilt because Emaly pats her on the back. 'Look, Baca. Don't worry about the genetics thing. It doesn't mention Emaly and Melody and Melody by name. I bet a lot of people don't even know you two are sisters!' 'Maybe,' Baca says, hoping what Emaly says is true. But even if most of the kids at school don't know they're related; her teachers sure do. It has been one of the worst things about going to - Rockville: watching her teachers realize, after the first week or so, that Baca is nowhere near as smart as Emaly and Melody and you.

I can't blame her after I've finished cleaning up, I go back to my room. Haven's bedroom door is still closed, but I can feel her quiet rage radiating through her things, I see a pic of us all- and burst into crying. Just like looking through her dress too and seeing that those times will never be the same either. I was wondering what we should do this that, and her things... keep them or let the memory's go...? ...I would be all-out like- if I came home to piss-soaked knickers and a puddle of vomit on the stairs, yet that is what mom got... along with one of us out. (lunch at school a half week in without her)

That girl keeps running at the mouth like I when I have the poops... and can help it, yet we not even hearing in at this point of why Melody, just had no swag.

Lacking swagger obviously... clumsy, careless, stuttering, lacking style and grace. a person who makes themselves look pretty- foolish just about all the time. would be considered 'swagger-less.'

She got all these hashtags too- #swaggalackin #swaggerly challenged #berto #dummy #messy

I finally like up, blink- blink- blink- I don't give a crap with an irritated eye roll- saying: 'OMG shut up! I am sick of it; you're trashing out a gone girl- that we loved even if you can love yourself! You have to get all your home-boys to do that for you too...' '- slut-' in a sneeze, is what she did.

Haven- 'Just because of your 14 and let a boy inside you... you know... all down there - and she points and her slit, doesn't mean you need to AF them as you do... 'stay innocent... and do one - and hold on to him... not 20... and pump and not dump. On every boy that will give you a tumble, you're gross, I don't like you at all... LITTLE MISS- LADY RED BUSH!' ''ou-u-wah' um like the thoughts I have Haven here are not good... said Baca mmm-ha.'

SHE HAS A RED BUSH? A BOY EATING A HOT DOG SAID?

UMM- YAH- SAID EMELY... leaning in to be seen doing the line of the run of tables, in the lunchroom.

Why did you want to see it?

Um- and his face got pink in color... saying maybe...?

Um- why- do you like that kind of thing, said Haven...? To Ethan Meryer...?

Maybe...

Wink...?

He the kind of boy that would blush just thinking about a girl's lower parts... and this girl- like- un- yah- even if... I- I- ah- dislike her she ah- um like- has that going for her, or so all the boys that have had say.

And yes, she keeps it all-NAT_ch_A_REAL! Said her girl... said in a very carnal scandalous why- and yes it red just look at a girl brow and you know what she doing, and a French-fry was thrown on her face.

'Lady red bush? Yep... that is the name she got on the ugly list on Facebook...' Too bad I didn't think of that... and she went blank in the face.

Well off to class... all the try's dumped...

(Home)

I sit down on the bed and flip open my laptop, log into my email account and start to combine a note to my mother.

I think, finally, the time has come. I have to ask her for help or get help about all this all that I did, I may have done it all, Beca through doing what was right. I wouldn't be able to go on like this- if I keep all this inside, I would have to change whom I am in and out to keep going with this guilt, I would have to get someone to tell this all to- but who? Not even my sisters... who?

...and it would crush Haven.

Mom or Dad?

Thoughts...

The most beautiful feeling in the word it having a boy lick you up down there, yet you shy virgins would not know that yet for your just 7th graders in your thinking yet, that's a dick, and then you feel it, and there is not like it in the world it makes you feel so-o good, and her know rankles up, and eyes roll up, her hands clench, I loved it the 2nd time around more... their first was um- ouch. Soft warm round comfort- of love- sucky and tight... girls sh-hh- girl your making half the lunchroom horny!

I can't think of the words, though, I can't think of a way to explain this to her.

I can picture her face younger to her last day with us, the sour disappointment when she now she was always last in the birthday song and the exasperations over the years. I can almost hear her sigh, with her life, the same as us- yet not always the last one out or in or whatever.

My phone vibrates... there's a message on it, received hours ago, it's Haven again. I don't want to hear what she has to say, but I have to, I can't ignore her. She knows me that well, she is feeling, that I at the bottom of making the list, my heartbeat quickens as I dial into my voicemail, bracing myself for the worst. The guilt is getting me 'CUZ' I loved my sis.

'Haven, will you phone me back?' She doesn't sound so angry any longer- even if she knows, I one of the top girls on the Facebook list of Rockville, I am holding a secret, and my heartbeat slows a little too.

'I want to make sure you got home all right, even if you're not staying with us and I don't know why- I have to cover for you and I am scared for you and me, you have to check in with me - it's the regulations.'

You were in some state last night.' A long, heartfelt sigh. 'Look... I'm sorry that I yelled last night, it's your mom... that... things got a bit... overheated, over the girls I love you even if I not your real mom. I do feel sorry for you, Haven, I really do, but this has just got to stop, you are kicking yourself over what you did not do.'

'I don't want to see you go bad... over this... I know that you were over at the Rockville viaduct with Sarah, she got you there before don't fall for it, the girls not right.' I play the message a second time and a third, listening to the kindness in her voice, and the tears come.

Yet there we are standing under are spot the Rockville bridge kissing, making out, and dry-humping as we did in the past when I was a boy, with the steamers overhead... and the mist low... and the mood mysterious, and the look eerie.

Part: 47

It's a long time before I stop crying, before I'm able to compose a text message to him saying I'm very sorry, I'm at home now. I can't say anything else because I don't know what exactly it is I'm sorry for. I don't know what I did to Anna, how I frightened her. I don't honestly care that much, but I do

care about making Haven unhappy. After everything he's been through, he deserves to be happy. I will never begrudge him happiness-I only wish it could be with me.

Emaly continues, 'Anyway, Emaly and Melody and Melody always gets the re cognition. And every time she does, you're so happy for her. Remember last year, when you made me sit through that three-hour Latin poetry reading contest Emaly and Melody and Melody competed in at the university?'

'That was actually a big deal. Emaly and Melody and Melody got picked out of the whole high school to recite it, and she won a bunch of scholarship money.'

Emaly rolls her eyes. 'Right, right. I remember. Now it's your turn to get some attention.'

Baca squeezes her friend's hand.

Yeah, the genetics comment is kind of mean. But Emaly is right. It's not like Baca herself said it. And she is always cheering on Emaly and Melody and Melody for her academic stuff. She never even complained once about those early-morning wakeups or all the college visits they'd gone on this summer instead of a vacation.

Not out loud, anyway.

When they get close to the gym, Emaly jogs a few steps ahead. 'Here it is,' she announces, tapping the paper with her finger.

'In black and white.'

Baca finds her name near the top of the list. Her name! Seeing it makes the entire thing way more real, feel more earned. Baca is, officially, the prettiest girl in her 8th class.

She's not sure how long she stands there staring at it. But eventually, Emaly pinches her arm. Hard.

Baca tears her attention off the bulletin board. Emaly and Melody and Melody are marching down the hall with incredible purpose, her book-bag straps pulled tight over her shoulders, the tails of her French braids swinging side to side.

If Emaly and Melody and Melody know Baca is on the list, Baca certainly can't tell. Emaly and Melody and Melody walks by exactly the same way she usually does at school - as if Baca doesn't exist.

Baca waits until Emaly and Melody and Melody rounds the corner. Then she pulls the list off the bulletin board, using her pinky nail to ease out the staples, careful not to tear the corners.

From a block, away, Bealla Marco realizes, that she's missed her bus to take the train over to the other said, you know the school said where the good folks live, that have more than us and think it too and act so-o.

It is too silent, particularly on a Monday morning. Nothing in the air but the typical morning sounds- chirping birds, the click- click- click of rising automatic garage doors, and old train bells and the sound of steam horns of it the distances over the fogged water, the tinny rumble of empty trash cans being dragged back up driveways, for a mother that doesn't want to go to work, with a pissy attitude on life and to her young.

Sarah- Late to school- we know, starving for breakfast, absolutely- like- completely- totally- um exhausted and we just awake looking like, that girl off of Frozen- eating her hair and yawning.

Not such a great way to start off the week, said haven, that was all naked, when I had to kick her cute butt out of the bed what we were both in, she stayed over. Yes, I have to say I have fallen for her, all over, even looks now too- she one of those girls now- all popular... and I can love her for that also.

Nevertheless, she still thinks last night was worth it, even if we did not get any sleep or our school work was done.

She'd been asleep for two hours when her phone rang- it was her mom, looking in on her see if she could report that she was alive.

Haven- 'Hello...?' she asked, her word-wrapped in a yawn, she said yet I over at a girl's home- staying the night- and she hung up.

'How can you be sleeping; you need to be at school in less than 2 minutes? It's only midnight... no- it's 5:58. If you do not keep up with your work, I have to say back to them. It was in her voices mail.'

Haven checked that her bedroom door was shut, Sarah that is, and it was because she was on the phone with Bacca asking if she was okay. She was saying back off she mines now, not yours...

Like- Sarah, um- her parents wouldn't like her calling in and so late this time were all worried sick.

...Or maybe that was the thing they worried about since Haven was a year older, yet she felt respectable for her and her young life, like a sister... But for someone her parents lumped in the same category as her best friend, Hope, they certainly had a lot of rules about when, where, and how the three girls could spend time with her.

They'd lost the freedom to hang out when Bacca said she was the girl that made the Facebook, and she did it so she could be IN- LOVVVVEEE with Haven, and wanted to keep her sister, away, for she like- like her too. And that she wants to plant kisses all over her... and hug her, and never- ever let go..., and Bacca knew and would not stand for it, she was the first, and only... even if...

There were no more nights of Bacca sneaking through the dark and scratching the screen in the window above her bed, and jumping with her on the bed, and no more cuddle time, either.

No more taking the boys they were into or them either in the night; it had come to that point there where teen ages now, and masturbating become all they thought about with each other, and eating out; all they really wanted to try boy or not, or how they were into each other- and it was going more and more; and not just with Bacca- Haven..., had three girls, that was all the same to try, and Bacca wants to win the fight of her affection; more than that girlfriend of there in trashville as she calls it; already felt like a million years ago since the days we were kids at 12- now, 13 woman- we are now, ladies even.

Sarah- pulled her comforter over her head, and Haven went there and kept her voice low, mom was in the next room over, 'I want to blow me... with the lights out, she teased her, and she never really now she was serving till that moment.

'I'm sorry I woke you girls her mom flew in the door, Bacca sighed, saying yeah it's okay- (Thought can I just have her make me CUM.) Haven is giggling like a schoolgirl saying it done'ent gett'a any closer than that...! (It's been years, I want it more now than ever... her thought also... and there were so close and they were cum-denied, by mom getting the laundry.)

I'm just way too amped up to sleep, now yet I hear that the TV is on over in the next room, having to smash sex is not happening either, and dildo loving is out too, yet I have to get off, we both do.

(I had too at least once since, I was 9, thought Sarah, in a hast.)

Sarrah- 'Ah- ah- ah-AAAA- OH MY GOD....!!!'

Giggles...

'Mom- Girls...?'

Haven- 'Shit- ou- yah- um- um- Im'a

CuMING!'

Part: 48

(School)

Sarah, Haven, and Emaly had watched from the stands that afternoon as Bacca was stuck in a perpetual warm-up routine on the sideline while the football field got torn up by other players' cleats. He'd bounce on his toes, do jumping jacks, or run a sprint of high-knee lifts to stay warm. After each play, Bacca glanced over at the varsity football coach, fingers laced around the faceguard of his gleaming white helmet. Hopeful.

She felt terrible for her. It was the fourth game of the season, and he hadn't seen one minute of playing time. What would it have mattered, giving sophomores like Bacca a chance? - Rockville was losing by three touchdowns at halftime. 'The Rockville- little Indiana' hadn't won a single game. 'Well... I thought you looked cute in your varsity jersey,' she said, that's Scotts Hastening, the boy you have been dating for a week, yet love- love- loves.

Bacca chuckled, but Bealla could tell by the dryness that she was still upset, about it that she was not having one of her own to show off in, yet she had Haven she thought, hanging on her arm. 'I'd rather not get called up if I'm not going to see any playing time.

Just let me start on, boys too- she said, it's all I think about is being with an older boy. It's humiliating, standing on the sideline, with no boy cuddling upon you, yet, I have her head on my shoulder now- so, it's all good, doing absolutely nothing but feel her love, while we get our asses beat game after game. I could have had nachos with you her all the time, and feel warm and fuzz-ie like I do now, in the bleachers we went up, for all it mattered, and stayed till lights out- 40 to zip.' 'Come on, Bacca. It's still an honor to be here, after all, being in only 8th and has a 12th grader falling for you-

Emaly was in love with this boy- I could tell! I bet there are a ton of other sophomores who'd kill to be on varsity.' Emaly has moved on just fine, without her sisters, and is not all clingy with him.

We walk home it was not that cold of a night...In the home and off to my room, I lie down on the bed and crawl under the comforter.

I, Emaly- want to know what happened;

I wish I knew what I had to be sorry for- Bacca is giving me the cold shoulder, for them not to hang with them. I took her place, I guess? I felt like the coolest girl there just being a JV cheerleader... with my little uniform under his top...

Sarah- I know I was there- I try desperately to make sense of an indefinable fragment of memory.

I feel certain that, I was in an argument, or that I witnessed an argument, yet I can remember...

My fingers go to the wound on my head, from when I fell on the tracks, and busted my head on the rail, over by the train tracks that I love to walk on- balancing, it was to the cut on my lip, that I remember that I have permanent me memory loss- and I forgot that too- yet I have all the past. It's like my day is a dream, and then... I wake up and forget it all, back to the day of the train almost ran me over, and if not for him- now Haven I would have died.

Sarah- 'Every time... I think... I'm about to seize the moment, it drifts back into the shadow, just yonder my reach. I can almost see it, I can almost hear the words, but it changes away from me again. I just can't get a handle on it.'

BACCA-

Does TUESDAY, November 3 sound right, um- yep- sure, I don't know the day from up- as they go down- ha.

(MORNING)

My teeth are chattering in my head, the tips of my fingers are white with a tinge of blue. Scott will come and haul me inside soon anyway, he'll wrap me in blankets, like a child- I just know it thought Emaly- and he did. It's going to rain soon, I can feel it coming, I said to Bacca. I'm not going

inside, yet. I like it out here, it's releasing, cleansing, like a cube of ice, soak in the tub - thrilling having this was me down - the rain that is.

I had a panic attack on the way home last night, said Emaly. There was a motorbike, revving its engine over and over and over, as I was walking home, some boy that we go to school with playing head games, and a red car driving slowly past me also, yet two women with dogs were walking ahead of me made me feel safe on my path - over to the other said - yet I was scared, I need my sisters, I miss having her to do things with; so, I went into the street and was almost hit by a car coming in the opposite direction, I couldn't get past them on the pavement he would not let me though so I finally ran back to the tracks where I hoped a box on a train car that was slowly moving and got over the lake that way, which I hadn't even seen - some one ever do, this boy was pissed that I said no - to sex, and a date witch all comes down to sex on the first date, not like winner in but a blowie - and I was not going there. OH MY!

I WAS MORTIFIED, by the thought of it... He yelled something at me, and I ran - I ran. I couldn't catch my breath, my heart was racing, I felt that lurch come up in my mouth, like when you've taken a not get knocked up pill, and you're just about to come up, that punch hard that makes you feel gruesome and enthusiastic and scared all at once.

I cut my hand, as I tried to climb over the fence, I wanted to sit on the other side for a while, where no one else goes. I ran home, now over the viaduct - into Rockville, and through the house and down to the tracks, waiting for the train to come, to rattle through me, and take away the other noises. then I sat down there, I waited for Scott to come and calm me down, but he wasn't texting me back, so I knew he was on his way from his home, I thought.

So-o, I went inside, and then Scott came back and asked me what had happened. I said I was doing the washing up before he got here, He didn't believe me, then he got very upset, he knew this boy would not back off, with his - creep...

This retard was in the sped class... so that said it all... said Scott - 'I guess, I should get copes involved?' he said. 'You know, he got to play the whole five minutes and a second half, with you and your body that more than enough, for me to do something - ha they don't care, girls like me over here get attracted all the time, you have to be someone over her and I am one of those that are nobody - so the law thinks. Just for sticking up for HAVEN - I have all them turning on me. Even this boy has something in it - the law wants me taking down - just like the town for sticking with her.

I wish I were big like him, to say with me the night, and not ever- ever- never leave me- or my side, or Havens either. They're going to turn on you too Scott too over me said: Haven. 'Don't worry yourself- it is fine...' I should do more weight room work, and kick their asses, and maybe try that nasty protein shakes he always keeps going. I'm way too skinny, to fight said: Haven, ...and a girl too... said the girls, 'I'm, like, the smallest guy on the team,' said- Scott, but you have me.'

'No, you are not... are you? And anyway, why would you want to be like Scott? Yeah, he's big... to me, being my height of 4' 2', just like my sisters, but it's not like he's in good shape... ha- and then he lifted up his top, and we saw the six-pack, and little man boobs, that were faultless, and then I looked down- and was thinking about that hard dick, that just so-o you want to rub him and it with my hands- and I did. 'It was the right time for him to have a BJ! -for loving me...' I bet you could run circles around him, said Emaly to Haven as School boxers were on the floor and he was making CUM-faces.' I'll make sure your okay- and aw- thanks he grunted out. Oh, my- said- Haven... rolling her eyes at the cute... of her loving him... feeling her darling- love for him.

The next day at school, Bealla was pretty sure Bacca knew she wasn't crazy about Scott, it was all over the school that she rub him off... and that Haven and she were getting stocked, it was official, she was his girl, and all other boys need to back the freak off, or he would kick their ass- the owned her ass, and puss- puss too, yet that what a girl at Rockville wants- no?

The lunchroom and hall were buzzing about all the kids have sex and those two where at the top- in the snickers, behind the hidden look in their eyes to others. Bacca once told her that Scott had a special shelf for his cologne bottles, like his razor, and lube, which he displayed proudly, like that one condom that was meant for her- when she said yes- it was going to happen, and it did that night... they had first-time sex, and it was unanimously a sure thing they were a couple, yeah that's what you do here is this school to show it- have sex and you're- um- ah well dating- dah.

The old man perfume... said Bacca, and wouldn't leave the house without a splash on. Scott would even put some on before he'd go lift weights in his garage. According to Bacca, Scott was really grossed out by the smell of sweat, even his own.

(One week later)

Bacca considered it. 'That's true... she thought about it; the dude does eat crap, so that makes you small that way- she cutely taps him on the chest. I don't think Scott even knows what a

vegetable is unless it goes on his Big Mac. No wonder he could not get a girlfriend, till I slimed him down- with all the SEX- and she said sex and a knotty and suggestive way. See- see- being a football player is what you need and me too.'

Study hall in the library... sitting at the table- no one reads there texting or dolling... sneezing or wheezing...

(Chat with the girls...)

Scott- God I know right, I jizzed a kid...

Ha- they all giggled...

They both laughed at that, for the whole day.

It had taken Bealla a few weeks to understand the way Bacca and her friends acted around each other, in the ways there where. The guys were super competitive, but especially Scott, now, we were going to be the best him he could be for her.

Everything between those two was a rivalry- all the grades back, new sneakers, who could reach the water fountain first. It seemed to Bealla like normal girl stuff for the most part, but every so often, Bacca would take some stupid 'loss' really hard.

Bealla was also competitive, and while she sympathized with Bacca's pangs of defeat, she also never pitted herself against her friends. She didn't even want to think about how sucky it would have been if she or Hope hadn't both made the swim team. That said, Bealla did take special pride in knowing that, when it came to the boys having girlfriends, she'd tipped the scales in Bacca's favor. 'Hey,' Bacca said. 'Guess what I found out today. Even if I don't play a single minute this season, I'll still get a varsity jacket, something you only have if you put it all out there... like the high school girls.'

Some weeks have passed...

She got one... her girls were all delighted for her...

'You'll look hot in it,' Bealla said. It was kind of a silly thing to say, but she knew it would make Bacca feel better. 'I care about the jacket so much- it makes me feel like a sexy lady. It'll just be cool seeing you in it all this winter.'

It's so tiny- said Scott Well, I am tiny... said Emaly.

'You're sweet,' Bealla said, blushing in the dark hair of long stands, from her eyes and small round face, eyes bright and wet. It would be cool to wear her varsity jacket, said Bacca at least until she could earn her own. I don't think so-o... she said to hold her hand laced, tight V-ed, downwards sweetly, and her knees looked together rocking on one leg.

~*~

Bedtime- with him-

'Will you stay on the phone with me a little longer?' he asked quietly.

Emaly fluffed up her pillow- kissing his photo, that was on her nightstand, and she and Bacca clicked through their respective televisions together, as if their remotes where coordinated.

With the girls- they giggled at the bizarre late-night infomercials, that populated the cable channels in the middle of the night.

As if all of them were all still together,

looking up at the pics. they have taken, saying she's looking over us- no? Yes- yes, she is...

Pad programming- swollen, zitty faces...

and Adam and Eve's ten-speed dildos flopping in a girl's hand- mmm- mm- mmm,

Diet pills, Sex pill, Chill pills, Sia's Cheap thrills- MTV- and more TV- based on ancient sex secrets on discovery channel- and Family Guy.

That goes hand and hand said Bacca- and they giggled at that too...

Emaly fell asleep with her cell pressed to her ear, images of before and after flashing in the shadowy... Her battery died around four-thirty A.M. Her alarm died with it; I am sure he loved the snoring also- sexy...?

For love, and having her moment with her lover in her mind, or something pretty close to it, she missed the bus, and that means so did we... yet she wanted- 5 more of whatever's- longer than us... ah- we get that...

~*~

She missed it, but not by much. Emaly reaches for her phone to call that she's still home when she spots a notebook lying open in the street, pages fluttering. She picks it up... Using it to shield her eyes from the amber sun, she sees, at roughly three blocks or so away, her school bus bouncing along to the next designated stop.

She lowers her chin and stares out the tops of her eyes.

A second later, she's running.

Her body isn't warm enough, and she worries about possibly pulling a muscle. Chasing down the school bus definitely isn't worth a stupid injury that might keep her out of the water. But after a few strides, Emaly slips into a comfortable rhythm. I dialed his number, hoping he would... and listened to his voice when he picked up, at first soft with sleep- I was, and then louder, wary, exasperated- it was to me. He was already on his way... to high school- though.

I hung up and call back, and get the school, and say I had a defective alarm. I hadn't disguised my number, I remember it for them this time, so they could call me if I was not there in 10- they were worried, for my safety.

This was all over me-I got up in the night, left Scott sleeping, in his bed at his home and no-one really knows but the girls, and went back over to the girls home going the window, and sneaked up to the terrace of the household, and the girls were all out, yet the window was open for me - long story short here - I was off and had to take a latter kiddie bus, to school, one-half hour late.

I get why I am 13 and his 16, he can do that for me... take me to the lower school, the boys would eat his dick off... for it.

Do they do that...?

Part: 49

(EVENING)

Haven makes me oh so-o Horny... thought Bacca...

Sarah- 'Hell I don't have to remember

Instagram does that for me.'

See- see- ...?... yepper...!

Yep- Emaly loves using her pink flamingo- aka, The Lush - The Most

Powerful Bluetooth one you can get... her boy got it for her for X-miss or the

Holladay's. We girls call that thing that for it looks like a flamingo with a broken nick- flopping. We love this thing for it goes to the music that we love... morning to the beats, and the rhythms- love this... she even lets in for the boring class and it's all on her phone and she gets off... you can see her... as she is taking her tests feeling it...

I want one... I wish I had a rich boy... said, Haven.

Home from yet another day-

Haven- I could never write down the things, I actually feel or think or do. Case in point: when I came home this evening, my laptop was warm. I start to write down, my days, she knows how to delete... what was not good she said to me, so I let her edit, my story, I had plans for it, that some girl out there would be like me and need it.

Haven on Sarah- My browser histories and whatever, was now gone, looking at things she shouldn't, she can cover her tracks perfectly well- I thought, but I know that I turned the computer off before I left, and got rid of everything- also. she's been reading my emails again, and I don't like it.

A pleasing heat ignites her thrusting arms, her whirling legs, as Sarah starts to freak out rolling on the floor, she was that overwhelmed about to think about the day she was going to have during the day... with all of them. The school bus stops for a car pulling out of a driveway, and I had to leave her behind with my mom.

I quickly close the breach, on the bus with my girls. 'Hey!' she calls out when she gets close enough to recognize, the students in the back what well- you know- Haven and Bacca.

'Hey!'

Bacca bangs her fist against the side, of the window to look out, saying we almost died over hitting a mailbox. But the kids are too busy entertaining with each other to notice Bealla over there look at us saying nasty things about Haven, and the girls.

The bus veers to the right and centers hard over the driver's bad sight. She shouts again over the roar of the engine, 'sit down and shut up.' The bus accelerates, and a cloud puffs out from the tailpipe, stinging her eyes.

'You could have gotten us killed, she yells,' the bus driver barks, going in the ditch and we roll. The bus slams to a stop.

The kids look down at her, shocked. Bealla pushes a few wisps of brown hair out of her face as the folding door opens.

Bealla apologizes in between heaving deep breaths to the girls that looked all cut up, yet she was not. She climbs the steps, hurting, badly, she is holding the notebook, she was working on over her head like a crown, and it was a helmet keeping her from brain damage, she wants to like - um someone to claim it, saying if I pass I want someone to see this... 'You're not going to die...' said Bacca - who was bleeding profusely from her now busted nose.

Yes, the most thrilling ride I have ever had on bus 3... Matt, the driver passed out over his cancer, treatments taking over his body and mind... they welcome him over this - said Bealla - and that's just fine with me...

She passes up the student council bagel sale because anything really heavy makes her sleepy and she's tired enough as it is. She woke up too late to eat breakfast, and there is no way she can last until lunch without food. After stashing her coat in her locker, Bealla heads straight to the cafeteria with Emaly. Hopefully, there'll be something in the vending machines besides potato chips and chocolate bars. Bealla has been eating more and more since making the freshman swim team, her body always desperate for fuel. She wants to be careful to feed it well.

An older boy Dany passes us, girls, as they enter the cafeteria, looking Haven up and down, saying wow that doctor did a good job, ha, and slaps Bealla on the back. 'Hey! Dan the Man, thanks for saying what you feel, yet know asked you so shut up!' Said Bacca... with was hanging on Haven's arm, 'Was he talking to you?' Emaly asks, running out of the bathroom a-crossed the way.

Bealla is too disconcerted to react, when Haven, was face to face with her smelling her berth even saying- talk shit... that incomputable, the girls continue over to the vending machine. The entire glass front is covered over by papers. Bealla assumes it's an overzealous school club desperate for members until she tugs a sheet down and reads it, it the Facebook list, it still up yet old and crinkled, just a remembrance of what doesn't matter any longer.

Melody... the ugliest, well, that all we remember about her..., I can even remember her now. I think ahh- oh well..., don't care..., just like the rest of the school and the world..., don't care..., not hing mater..., but the now and happing... she old news and no one cared about her anyway's she was a weird - o..., Bacca- saw- a cramp spreads inside her, diminishing each and every muscle.

To be called ugly is one thing, I remember about her now too- I have just been that mean to her for that whole year- it was all I wanted to remember about her- and it was all over wanting Haven to myself.

Unquestionably, Bealla has heard the insult before, yet she wants to rub it in so- I kill myself over it also for me being a dick to my sister. Can blame her really, I thought... in all the hurting inside.

The word is so generic, without even thinking- I think this- so I must be thinking. Is there a girl in the world who hasn't, out to get me? And while she certainly isn't happy about it, ugly is something people say about each other, and say about themselves, It's almost meaningless... almost.

That hurts I thought, even though Bealla knows she isn't a particularly girlie girl, she was always at the top- even over me. Wearing dresses makes her feel weird, yet I love it, as if she's in a costume, pretending to be someone else. She only puts makeup on for 3 of the school weekdays like every other day, and even then, only a little bit of gloss and maybe some um- mascara- I should have put Melody at the top not her, Becca thought- yet she had to kiss ass to keep popular, she's never had her ears pierced, either like Bealla, because... I am and the three girls that look the same as me are deathly afraid of needles.

But Bealla still has all the essential girl parts. Boobs. Long hair. A boyfriend, and is well the shit. Bacca rips down a list of her and sucks in a big breath, the way she usually does before plunging underwater.

'Oh, no, Bacca ... What is wrong...?'

And she said why..., letting it all out to Haven.

~*~

Why do I have this here for touching yourself is a bad- bad thing- and it not- the first time you go in you we break this- thing- that not really that import...

(Back to when us girls were 10)

Bacca- How I broke my Hyman, like my sisters.

There's one way to do it that is safe, but trust me you'll regret it when you find that one special person to make love with and you don't have 'it' to give him. Go to your gynecologist and ask for a complete exam, so you can get on the pill- I was a 13 like every girl I know- thanks to mom.

The doc will have to insert the speculum and that'll break it- nevertheless, I thought would be wrong to lose it to a doc so I did like my sisters myself, but a girl needs to be looked up into- for health and sports, also... so it was like what do you want to do here, and unanimously we three made this choice, we girls did this- ourselves all at the same time... one night in our bed saying here goes.

Unanimously saying pads where out the question for us to forever- so yah girl brake there Hymans- yet it doesn't mean they have had sex yet.

The bloody brake- You don't have to go far..., that is what we all feel the hymen is at the opening of the vagina. The hole through the hymen is usually quite small. A tampon almost certainly will break it.

Inserting more than one finger would almost, certainly break it. Or you could buy a sex toy and put that in there. Some women put a condom on a small dildo, but I think that would be painful to a virgin- go with 2 fingers. It will have a burning pain... feeling, but I don't think you can 'mess up' unless you introduce something with bacteria into there, and give a day or two before masturbating again that what we did.

Also, a girl wants to cum- it what life is all about you can't do that with a flap of skin in the way of your toy- dumb boys. Don't they teach anything to you! This is something that needs to be talked about, we did not know what the hell we were doing... and there was no place to go for this, and the

crap on Yahoo was gross, all we knew was it felt good... and we want to CUM, just like all the other girls in are class the was chatting about... under wraps.

[UPDATE: I did a bunch of research to prepare another lecture, and I found out the actual, honest truth about the hymen.

The short version is: it doesn't break; it

STRETCHES!]

To my utter astonishment as I became a teen, I found this out, my tongue-in-cheek post about how to break a hymen without a penis has become one of the most read on the blog, due to people actually,

SEARCHING THE INTERNET for the phrase 'how to break a hymen.' I feel terribly guilty that there are all these women out there who want to break their hymens and the advice they get from me is slightly facetious. I still don't know why people are so worried about it, but clearly, they are, so here's the

ACTUAL advice:

Option 1: Have a medical professional do it. If your hymen is imperforate, microperforated, or septate, definitely take this option. If you don't know whether or not your hymen is any of the se things, get a medical professional to check. If you're thinking, 'But I don't have access to a medical professional' or 'I don't want to talk to my doctor about this,' then there's something else wrong that's more important than your hymen.

Option 2: Have intercourse. It's how women have been breaking their hymens for ages. There will probably be a little bit of pain and a possible (but not usually) little bit of blood, but it's totally no big deal, from a physiological/medical perspective. If your partner doesn't have a biological penis, use a non-biological one.

Option 3: Break it yourself. Which means you need to know both how to manage the pain and how to successfully break it.

(Actually, it's not really breaking, it's stretching.)

And to stretch the hymen, you mostly need girth, so get a bigger dick or one to use, gradually increasing the girth of the thing, you penetrate with will make things easier; contrary to popular belief, pulling off a band-aid slowly results in less pain than ripping it off all at once, so don't try to put a mango in there all at once.

And finally, pull out a little mirror and LOOK at your vagina and your hymen before you start any of this. LOOK at it. See where it is, what it's made of. Think patiently and non-judgmentally about your feelings about what you see, as we did as a group of girls, one night- sleeping over... that is another thing have girlfriends, there to help... look at one another before... it a girl thing to do. This is a part of your body- just like theirs, just like your elbow and your toes. Be as kind and gentle with it as you would with, say, clipping an infant's toenails. Be nice to your body, or have one of your girls do it for you if that scared- all it takes is two fingers.

Have someone other than you -*is*- what we did- it not scary that way, if she genital... this came to mine because Melody was the one to break this for me... good times- good times, and the other way 'round.

~*~

Bealla doesn't answer, Bacca when she said hand it over or it's your f*cking teeth, and you sucking your boy off looking like a red-neck more then you are, Instead, she stares at her reflection in the newly exposed square of vending machine glass. She hadn't had time to shower this morning, that is why I went there... so-o she just threw her hair up into a miss-ie bun.

Bacca- A haze of short brown strands hangs down up around her hairline, cutely. It shouldn't surprise her, bits of broken, is her things though, like when her hair fills the inside of her swim cap after every practice- to just like that, some falls down just right.

Scott- I see her over the way in her little swimsuit- I there to cheer her on at she's on the swimming team, she tries to smooth them down with a snappishly clammy hand, but the strands pop right back up. She pulls off her elastic headband that, only us three girls wear- it's was the three- girl's thing as they said, anyways and shakes out her hair, and it falls lower than the nipple line of her boobs, and I make and Eifel Tower in my paints for her sitting there, she knew. It is full of love and bonce, yet a little dull from chlorine and yet it does move like normal hair should, just like her sisters, unlike all the other girls.

She turns away from me smiling, amused, tickled, and contented; rolling her eyes sweetly about the fact, that I was so taken with her. I knew she was going to f*uck me, after this, we both wanted it..., a quickie at least... She sees that the lockers outside..., and it's time to go... and we do just that in my car in the back seat. The next day we girls take about it in the cafeteria, saying the wonders of first-time sex, also have papers to do and pass 'round to copying- fast- for we all copy the same homework..., she chokes out- that she had the big-o- with him- that there IN-LOVE!

Back I remember Melody asking me this... 'round this time... and I had the flashback.

So, what it like to suck a boy off? First, you need to get him hard, you can do this by kissing him for a while and then rubbing your hand on his thigh near his penis. You will not actually be sucking on his penis, it's more of you using your mouth for him to masturbate into but you are doing the work for him. If you get his permission, you can tell by his body language if he wants you to feel him or not, make sure he is comfortable with it don't just grab him out of nowhere.

After you begin to touch him and get him hard, ask if he wants you to suck on him.

If he says yes take out the penis, and make an O shape with your mouth, then put the penis inside of your mouth. Move your head up and down in a vertical motion. Do not use any teeth because his penis is sensitive. Continue until he reaches orgasm. If you really want to wow, he swallows the semen.

Thinking and snapping out of it- I see a girl, I don't know younger tearing down every copy of the list they pass. I look up tearing up... they did not get why- yet it was all just a blared memory. Without further discussion, the two girls leave the cafeteria, split apart, and begin running, one on either side of the hallway.

Part: 50

Though Emaly is glad for something physical to do, after Math class and English, and Cam. it was nice to get out of hard work, it is also her second sprint of the morning without any breakfast, she is feeling drained. She searches deep down inside for the strength to keep going, putting one foot in front of the other, like a straw rooting around the rim of a soda can. She makes it to the end of the hallway and then runs smack into Bacca- all running the length of the long hall for class, who's standing with a few other girls for her turn, to run next.

I know in the library, the class is over in an hour- or so, and I was sitting in the lunchroom in study hall, with nothing- nothing to do, and- asked- more like begging them for something to do, like it's something hard for them to do for us- is make us have work for something more than suck at life, to that is so-o problematic. I don't really mind, there's nothing to read in here either that is from this time period.

They make us out to be Mongoloid, said, Bacca. Besides, unanimously they all agreed, just like Haven, they put us in our place for being less than they, in whatever they think they can do over us... and that a- lot of nothing... I have a lot of spam emails, I read when I get all logged-in... to the computer, just sitting there with nothing to do..., but see the little clock at the bottom tick my life away, I don't mind, because, it reassures me, that there's nothing going on, here and no life ahead, that I'm not up to anything, more than giving up, Haven is feeling it too...

-And-

That's good for me- it's good for us even if it isn't true, I don't care they sure don't. And I can't really be angry with them, yet, I have to blame someone- no? Because he has good reason to be suspicious. I've given cause in the past and probably will again, with I get written up for speaking my mind. I am not a model student like them... why I speak my mind. I can't be, I don't have the ability...

Haven said I agree- no matter how much I love her; it won't be enough either.

(MORNING)

Haven- I thought I would be bouncing off the walls for hours, eating nothing but junk food. last night I slept for five hours, which is longer than, I have done in a very long time, and the weird thing is, I was so wired feeling, when I got home yesterday evening, I could not sleep like I always do- when I come home and just crash.

I told myself, that I wouldn't do it again, not after last time, but then I saw my girls walking into the room, and I wanted them to sleep over and help me with my homework, why not?

I don't see why, I should have to restrict myself, lots of people don't. Men don't. I don't want to hurt anybody, but you have to be true to yourself- and say where getting A-Fed it is schooling, don't you? That's all I'm doing, being true to my real self, the self-nobody knows but Scott and my girls, not

John, Tom, Paul, Jack, Dick, Jen, Jan, Pam- no one. Just to run on some names to me and my girls that don't matter.

Haven- last night I asked Sarah if she wanted to go to the cinema with me one-night next week, then if she'd cover for me. 'If she calls, back she and I were not seeing eye to eye on the movie or just things... you can just say- were ended it, and are doing the makeup- you with sex... I'm with you, she said in a text- I'll go it's not like I have something better to do in this hell of a town, I knew I was looking and I'll ring her straight back, by being way too sweet?

Then you call me, and I call my girls and we'll all go, and it's all cool.' Not all friends here... yet whatever... it's something to do... or just get high... that's all there is to do for some of us, not me and my girls, yet.

She smiled and shrugged and said- this movie is fine, 'All right.' She didn't even ask where I was going or who with, later on... I was hoping to stay over at someone's home, though Haven, she really wants to be my girlfriend, I just know it, she loves me, she'll keep me.

We have to be careful, we can't get caught, by mom and dad- at her home, but by the end of the night, we were coming in hot. It would be bad for her, life-wrecking, hard. It would be a disaster for me, her and them too. I don't even want to think about what Scott would do if he knew that we all did what we did over a sleepover, everybody's fantasy dream, yet no boy needs to know everything girls do. It was fun. I don't feel bad about lying with her and them, I doubt he believed most of it anyway, even if. I'm pretty sure he lies about what he does with boys, too.

~*~

Emaly and Scott- He's lying on the bed, watching me as I got dressed, as I put in my butt plug with the white tell, that night later on afterward. He said, 'This can't happen again if you want it. You know it can't, with all this and doing that. We can't keep doing this, I going to have your baby...' And he was right, I know we can't, keep just pulling out. We shouldn't, we ought not to, but we will- for it feels good. It won't be the last time. He won't say no to me when I dry humping on him sliding all flirty. I was thinking about it on the way home, that I may need to see the doc and see... if... and that's the thing I like most about it, I feel scandalous- doing this behind mom and dad's back, and sneaking around, having power over someone, like a boy is the sweetest thing ever. That's the intoxicating thing, about boys and nasty little quick-ie F-me sex.

Part: 51

(EVENING)

I said to him- Just shut up...

Stop being a Jill Duggar and F- me!

And take me...

Take it... he said... and I do over and over...

Uuh... I said...

Taken it like a girl... she said, squalling...

With her- Uomo- yah...

Like a girl... she yelled... getting bounced...

Emaly- As long as you don't have any cold sores, and anything wrong with you- spitting or liking your fingers makes just a fine cheap lube, so use it, girls... I do with masturbating and on my boy when rubbing him off and blowing. I love tugging on that hard dick and having it in my mouth... and feeling it lip inside me oh so thigh wet and squizz-ie. OH, my GOD! And I back out in the cummie moment with him... 6 bangs inside me down there just went off- him too... my but has his imprints still...

We girl- the triplets all of us have used- Electronic toothbrush on our clits to get off... I remember the first time, around 11... with my girls we shared every moment, I miss her... and I said this was the best part of my day after school, unanimously- we did. A Handle of a screwdriver is what we all use when we started, could not say to mom we wanted yah-no that, things- you know things for this... embarrassing- and like we had the money anyway, so that was safe for us all to use... to get the edge off... this was a year or so after the sharpie, and we were not so tight, this was the next one up, and oh God the faces we made.

I can't walk even yet now I am down in the kitchen, opening a bottle of wine for us that is mom, yet she has more than 10 a day so-0 like she knows when Scott comes up behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders and squeezes and says, 'How did it go with the therapist, with Haven good?' I tell him it was fine, that she is making progress, they feel. He's used to knowing and-a getting all details out

of me, after sex, when I most in-love with him and my voices in the week for the loving. Then: 'Did you have fun with the girls last night?' Oh yes- if you only know, and she rolls her eye in the way that only she can...

I can't tell, because my backs to him, but the thoughts going through my mind where so wicked, whether he's really asking or whether he suspects something, I could see the thought behind them blue eyes. I can't detect anything in his voice, it all in is lost in the sea that is the dreamy eyes.

(Next day at lockers)

'Come on, Bacca,' another boy says, giving her a big shove in his direction. 'Go give him a kiss!'

Scott does the same with John, saying we know- what you like... you like boys like this what-so-ever... hart throbbing C0CK.

'Yeah! We support gay rights!' shouts Bacca- teasing.'

Bacca laughs good-naturedly. But as he walks toward Bealla and away from his friends, his smile slips into a look of concern. He leads her into a stairwell. 'Are you okay, and they make out?' He asks, careful to keep his voice quiet, they whisper and kiss and grab.

I apparently had last night a- she-boy, and did not know said, Pat... 'Not bad, considering the sex change operation, said one boy Haven liked and she was off in the hallway looking at him- hearing it all... ...Anyways- she was not sure, if it was mean or not though, you could see it all over her face...' Balla says, a desperate joke to break the tension, her dick is bigger still. Neither of them laughs at it. She holds up the copies of the list she's torn down, saying you going to kill this one too. 'What is this thing, she has about me being hotter than her?'

'It's a stupid tradition, this girl makes. It happens every year at the start of winter snowball week, the girls have daggers out- and go for blood, and they don't stop, 'till.' She stares at her- looking her down. 'Why didn't you warn me, about this so I could just go?'

Bacca runs his hands through Scott's hair. It is still light from the summer sun, but his roots are growing darker.

'Do you know who wrote it, yeah her and she points- and Bacca runs scramming into a room full of kids in class...'

Balla doesn't have a ton of friends, and is unanimously obvious to us girl... but as far as she knows, she doesn't have any rivals, they know not to mess with her dress- if you will... either. For the life of her, she can't think of one person who would hate her enough to do something mean to her or they would suck her with no teeth.

Bealla glances at the copies of the list in her hands and quickly shakes his head. 'No, I don't. And look, Bacca - you can't go running around tearing these things down. These lists are everywhere. The whole school knows about it. There's nothing you can do.'

Balla remembers the boy whom, slapped her back in the cafeteria, and she put him in the ER over it by her boyfriend at the time freaking the shit out of him, the heat from his hand on her spine, was going up to her now.

She doesn't want to do the wrong thing, yet it like she can't help the fact she cannot.

She doesn't want to embarrass herself anymore, over this but it's too much fun getting to her... then what is already happening. 'I'm sorry,' she says, because that's how she feels, and the girls hug it out.

For many reasons, their friends yet not... 'Tell me what to do, Haven... she said walking down the hall after the fact.' Bacca rubs her arm, 'individuals will want to see you looking upset, so don't be... or she getting her jollies out of it... They'll want to see you react, so don't anymore... blink... blink... and walk away... Everyone still talks about this girl Jen and how she freaked when she got put on the list her seventh. Trust me, doing the wrong thing now could ruin the rest of high school for you, I would know- my life is over next year- I so- going to be Af'd in the ass by all them and them.' Balla's chest gets tight. 'This is crazy, Bacca. I mean, this is crazy, drop her, and get over it- she's not your friend.'

'It's a big mind game, that all-girl, don't do it... don't...: If you pretend like the teasing doesn't bother you, it will eventually stop. So, don't give anyone the satisfaction of seeing you upset. You need to be stone cold.' He anchors his eyes on hers. 'Game- Face-

Okay?'

She bites her lip and nods, fighting back tears, and I have my arm around her, going down the hall. She knows Bacca can see them, but thankfully she pretends not to and is held back by her new boyfriend one of like ten this week. Apparently, she has her 'Game Face' on, too.

Bacca- takes a second to compose herself, and follows Balla out of the stairwell, though a few steps behind.

Balla stands in the middle of the hallway looking around in a panic. 'Hurry up, Haven, she stops to talk with Emaly. She spots Balla and rushes over, and Haven spits in her face, just what her mom and the school was waiting for for..., her to miss up, over someone else..., I grabbed her in this hall, and say run, and in the science wing, we went. Let's go check near the gym..., a teacher said.'

She gives a huge whisper giving a hug also, ''Don't worry.' I swear on my life that we're going to keep you safe, even if... and make sure they get what they deserve, also- thank you- Haven for standing up for me- her elbow went into hip- saying: 'you would do it for me.''

'Forget it, Balla,' she says, 'where over forever- and ever- never- ask me for SHIT.' She drops the copies she's holding into a trash can they went- the teachers see that she was not the blame like always, she charmed, where not, I get an hour after and so does she... and another point of her 21- she only has 1 more to go, and they- this school, a trusted name in education (make a go0-ff-ie face) well send her off to re-tard la- la land, for not holding her emotions.

'What? What do you mean?' Balla turns around to glance at Bacca, who has rejoined her friends. 'What did Bacca say, she said F-U.'

'Don't worry, she'll butt kiss she has always for you... Her boyfriend all ways say all the right things- all at the right times.'

Which is how Bealla feels, without question, with him and the feeling he gives to her.

Part: 52

'Girls have to teach boys EVERYTHING! Even when it comes to cums! They're so cute, so cute, not know what to do, it's so cute... so... ah... I have been edging myself all day for him too, just to have the oh over- and over- and over- and over... I want that little boy to kiss me all over.'

Part: 53

(The next day at school)

'What the hell?'

Though it's posed as a question, the three words aren't delivered like one, with the last syllable ticking up to a higher, uncertain pitch. And yet she is clearly confused by the copy of the list taped to her locker door, it has changed it all new now.

She drags a raspberry color fingernail down the list, linking the word ugliest and her name with an invisible, impossible line. She frees a strand of brown hair stuck in her thick coat of shimmery lip gloss, then leans forward for a closer examination.

Her lady's bonces up behind her, wanting to see, why there is a new list of girls, along with wondering who made it? 'She's actually nice,' I say. 'You and she'd get on. We're going to the cinema next week, actually. Maybe I should bring her around for something to eat after?'

'Am I not invited to the cinema, with you girl?' he asks, Bacca said it's a girl's night only, and chick flicks- you would not like them.

'You're very welcome, to come and see- Safe Haven!' I say, and I turn to him and kiss him on the lips, 'but she wants to see that thing with us, so... why not?'

'Say no more! He says, his hands pressing gently on my lower back, and there on her small tight butt, oh so softly, and sweet, like a boy in love would do with his new girlfriend, after 4 weeks of firm dating, I drive you all. We sit side by side on the edge of the patio, our toes in the lawn, slipped out of our sneakers.

'They always go for you, the lonely ones, don't they? They make a bee-line straight for you, Bacca said to Emaly.' 'Do they? ..., said Haven... yet..., there so cute together look at them- all hugging and kissing, PDA'n.'

'At that point, I'd already been unmasked as a non-responsible, non-tidy, non-courteous person, so what did I have to lose?'

...And if I speak my mind...

-And-

...THE CRAZY WANTS OUT...

All come to school looking for the list today. Emaly was so excited for its arrival, she'd barely slept last night, thinking that someone would have added are late sisters to the list of top girls but they did not.

'It's the new top ten popular, hottest, cutest, priest list of girls!' one says, tearing up.'

'Sarah is the prettiest 9th, Haven said!' ...Another cry, get to are grade already, we know.'

'Yay, for her!'

'This was supposed to be her year, also yet she had to kill herself.' Honestly, last year should have been her year Haven feels the hands pat her back, the hands squeeze her shoulders, saying you have me, I'll be there for you... and the said comes rolling in... the hugs, happen. Yet the only ones that really care where just the three girls... that where buds.

Haven didn't think it was pretty, pretty, one... yet..., there, all the same, she thought, why was she left out- just for being the girl that would not give herself up for any boy that wanted her puss-puss, that makes her ugly to all the boys and to all the popular girls that do.

Classic slut behavior... for them class virgin for her, and that's how she passes - so what better here? I ask... you tell me... teens then... mom and dad?

Some would say her head was too big for her body, and her cheekbones where ... well, freakish. YET THEY ARE ALL THE SAME... Also, she was the only friend without guy friends hanging with her at all times, she had no friends at all but us three girls, yet she was the slow one so they said. She was way too skinny, YET THE SAME, but she keeps her eyes on the list, over and over, and never was good enough... was she?

The list She pinches the corner, annihilation the blistered embossment between her fingertips, leaving an inch of tape and a rip of paper stuck to her locker door.

...and then tears down the list...

'I hate to break this to you, girls... but apparently, she is still the ugliest girl at - Rockville- even after death,' Haven announces, like a girl that is losing her mind. And then they all laugh at her for

it, because it is honestly that ridiculous, to them for her to even care about her and her death that doesn't matter... to them and their own little lives.

She... and..., her and friends share quick, uneasy glances...!

Haven remains, 'On the plus side,' primarily to fill the uncooperative quiet, 'I guess we know for sure that Bacca did not wright wrote the list this year- no one is that mean. Mystery solved!' it was- YOU- and she points to Balla.

Lynetta, uses a seeing-eye dog to lead her through the hallways, yet this girl is more restarted- they say, it doesn't have to be nice, when someone has killed themselves Haven screams. She was born blind, her eyes milky white and too wet.

What wrong with me saying that- ya'll? So, it's a joke. Obviously, where so is making a girl feel ugly and making her feel the need to not live as you did with this one- and you all don't give a rat's ass- God...!

None of her friends laugh... yet all in the hall, even the teachers looking overdid.

Not until one of the girl's whispers,

'Saying really.'

Haven tempers, grumbles, in a hard berth to take in. Who-a is the absolute understatement of the year. She turns the list around and goes over the other names, expecting other mistakes that might explain what the hell is going on.

Haven- Sarah is definitely the ugliest freshman, I think not, it stated that though, and we all know that is not so, or she thought, it over me and her, she thought. Haven has a faint memory of who... this girl was and is, that was listed before, but the girl in her mind is kind of forgettable, so she isn't sure she's thinking of the right person even.

Everyone in school thinks Amy is gorgeous, so seeing her name as prettiest senior makes sense, yet Sarrah is just misunderstood.

Haven- And, of course, is the obvious choice for the ugliest 9th grader, for loving me. Honestly, any girl other than Sarrah would have been a total letdown, to all of them that are heartless snapping dogs at your ankles, like just- heaters of her, and I.

Haven doesn't know either of the freshmen girls, which ant a surprise for the reasons, that she's ant the kind-a girl who-a gives-a crap about freshmen girls for they were all asses to her when she was with them in that grade.

There's one other name she doesn't recognize. Weirdly enough, it is her freshman equal: 'Who's Kassandra Kora?' The prettiest to her ugliest. Haven flicks the list with her finger and it makes a snapping sound.

'She's that homeschooled girl, that only come in for the band' one of her friends explains. What a lame-ass...! 'What homeschooled girl?' Haven asks, wrinkling her nose.

Another girl nervously, looking over both her shoulders to make sure, that no one else in the hallway is listening at this point, and then whispers, this...

'Cum bucket...' 'you know- um the one with the hair that looks like that, all crunchy.'

Haven's eyes get big. 'Crunchy - CUM - BUCKET?'

She'd thought up the nickname last week, for her, 'it's so-o right-' 'fitting no?' 'Um-hum-!' When everyone was forced to run a mile in gym class and Crunch-ie- cream of some young guy- hair all up in her blond ponytail kept swishing back and forth, all good crunch, like, like, like- a boy jerked it for a week on her face, and it was not washed out of her lashes and or hair, as she trotted along, it is all -ah and crunchy. Haven had made a point of whinnying as she passed her saying it over and over because it was so-o freaking gross to let your hair grow that long, without washing boy off of you. These slut like her (and she points) ware *it* well- no- girl?

'Ummm hum,' and

'...I'm trashy...' she said to run by...

Picking on the weaker, it's what you do to keep up your image with the others... she thought.

Unless, of course, you had layers. Which this girl didn't. Her hair was cut straight in a v- and- and- and- having it up like this just made it look, well- well I think you get it... Haven looked at her all waist scared with cut marks, and said, 'Yeah what a waste... of those sharp things, I forget- um what where they called... (one-pointed finger- goes up to her mouth, all acting all clueless.)

'...Any- who-oo- I should have cut that

Curch-ie baby battered thing off instead…'

'…And- and- Probably with a dull pair of safety scissors…'

…She goes all cross-eyed, and all traded like… saying this along with… 'Yah and you make fun of me, for being in my classes…'

'Well lest- I am clean and smarter than you'll ever be- DON'T FOR-get it!

…And her head nods…

'Well… I think she's pretty,' said a girl passing, one of them- that are there…' shrugging her shoulders regretfully- to what Haven was saying, and I don't think you have the place to make fun of her for whom you are- after all.

'No one asked you-'

'No cars if you alive…'

'…Run Frost run…' her girl-friend said.

Someone else nods…

And one farts on it too… a girl lifts up her leg letting it hard… no underwire too, and I saw that thing also… with it…?

(Goog-il-e- eyes made)

'Did that come out of the front or the back…' Haven yield…

'She could use a haircut for sure, but yeah. She was definitely pretty… all the girl gang up… at the end of the run…'

Haven lets out a pained sigh…

Bacca- 'I'm not saying Crunch Hair isn't pretty,' she moans, though she'd never actually considered her looks, to be in this, she covers up, standing next to all them, just stuck in the middle.

This conversation isn't supposed to be about Crunch Hair- yet all the mean and finger-pointing was towards Haven- for doing as they- do to her.

It's supposed to be about her...

'It doesn't make any sense, what they were saying about Haven- yet to them it all did, and the run ones were thrashing her; until she ran off- crying- like the- baby boy that she is. Don't forget that; she- scrammed.

She the sisters of, one girl that is up in the high school that picked on her right, yep, Bacca she is making this for herself, I keep saying don't; yet she has to- think out- loud.

I'd be picked as the ugliest... if not for her one young lady said, Amy- I would be just that.'

Bacca- Her eyes roll off her friends, and on to other girls, saying: 'Would it kill you to get to know her, and not what is known about her girls- really- your so-o mean- to her...'

...Walking down the sidewalk, back to the school, all downhill- at a like 85-degree angle...

Haven sees them and is standing there in the nude, in the locker room, changing, they look ant point, yet there is nothing different to them, when she looks back, in the span of a few seconds, at least ten other girls are nude as she stands there looking at them, yet the talk about her is- running on... who, what and where she should be. Ugly girls who deserve this, this, when they're not girls... WHY are you in here...?

Why?

Bacca- 'She a girl back the F*CK off...' and she thought her to the ground by the hair.

And the teacher- well she did not see it...

Balla- said to me, you have no- style...

SWAG-GER-LESS!

'Well I did not like the wag- of my swag- so I had it cut off...'

Haven- 'Facebook sure did evolve, like fashion, and like it- it is seen through, a lot of pussy and dicks showing!' Facebook is creeping on your book, yet you can NOT get rid of even if someone is stocking, the shit out of you, so if they want you dead, they will keep going and who going to stop it, there are now laws yet. I want that changed... in my name, or something like that...!

Havens- Law I like that!

'I mean, come on, you guys. This is total crap, these lists and making others feel bad about being who they really are!' Haven gives her friends another chance to protect her, yet Bacca is not really it, though she feels a little pathetic at having to lure them. 'Pretty girls are not supposed to end up on the ugly side of the list! Like this one, she said but your mouth

Haven is making you look ugly to me also,' It, like, undermines the whole tradition.'

'Well, the list doesn't actually say that you're mouth it says you're ugly,' someone gently offers, given by other girls, looking at Bacca like she was nuts for even talking to her. If you don't stop, you're going to end up with NO friends... see what I saying.

'That's true,' adds another girl. 'The ugliest girls are seriously ugly, like you for having to chop things of like a dick... just to feel, this or that- or whatever and whatnot.'

Bacca- She follows me, and I take off my clothes, into the one side of the locker room, we get changed, as the bell rang... I'm going up the stairs, saying glad this day is over, and it was off... end of the school day finally, where now home and when we get there, Scott pushes me down on the bed, saying you're the same as your sister, and we trade, so- sh-h-h- but it doesn't matter because he doesn't know that I want him so bad, or that where switch places today, at this point to I am that good at playing Emaly. I'm good enough to make him believe it also and a girl needs to have a boy every now and then, I want him more than ever after a long hard day that I had and Bacca was cool with it, overall of the BS, I took as her today about a girl, that she is not even in love with any longer. I'm not even thinking about him... like I love him, I just want him in me...! And just as I thought, there pushing Bacca down to Haven's level over her standing up for her, and I don't like it; so, will two girls, that care for her, yet it's getting old, well tradeoff, every other week or so-o; just to keep her safe, and us two from losing it- over it because of well all of it.

(HAVEN)

(MORNING)

Haven called me back just as I was leaving the house this morning and gave me a stiff little hug.

She couldn't meet my eye.

I felt sorry for her, I honestly, I did, though not as sorry as I felt for myself.

Haven- I thought she was going to tell me, that she wasn't kicking me out after all this crap this week, but instead she slipped a typewritten note into my hand, saying here are some ground rolls, by the girls and their mom, if you plan to keep being with us and our friends, you need to do da- da- da- giving me formal notice of my eviction, if I don't not and to- can it- my mouth that is, and just be- me. The girl that we fall for from the first day, of 8th grade.

Bacca- She gave me a sad smile and said, 'I hate to do this to you, Haven, I honestly do, you're doing it to me- and you don't want to know what I have been doing to get this all out of me- girl you need to stop before they send you to tard school- or out, you don't have any more F- ups, or points to take, your garden is saying she had it, yet it's not you, it's them, the school they don't see it that way.'

The whole thing felt very awkward, reading the run on's of whatever's. We were standing in the hallway, of her home, which, despite my best efforts with the bleach, still smelled a bit of sick.

From where the dead girl was laying. I felt like crying, but I didn't want to make her feel worse than she already did, over something, that was as pointless as I, so I just smiled merrily and said, 'Not at all, it's honestly no problem, I can do this, so you really can read it?'

'Yes-' as though she'd just asked me to do her a small favor, to find out, that too... not to be true. The list just says you're ugly on the inside.'

It isn't the rousing defense- Haven is hoping for, for us girls, but now- she just needs, to hear it from us in a new way. (It was more of a test, by our mother more than anything, the teachers say she can't even read, yes, she can...) That was one point of this... the other, scaring her, to think before saying whatever is on her mind, to others that will screw with it.

But as the words sink in, she gets it also, that if she keeps going, she will not be seeing us ever... Haven nods slowly and lets a new feeling bloom inside her.

Clearly, her friends don't believe that, or they wouldn't be friends with her! So, what if people think she is ugly on the inside, too, they can see that we can. And pretty on the outside is what really counts, to all them up there- nothing more. F- that... Pretty on the outside is what everyone sees, where not like that are, we girls?

'No- forever- and ever-'

All the girls- 'Always!'

~*~

Haven had announced this as the plan for the morning. pep rally happens on Saturday, before the winter-snow- ball football game. It's an impromptu parade where the students at - Rockville drive around town with their cars decorated, beeping their horns and getting people excited for the game.

Haven has everything planned in her notebook, how it should be decorated (streamers, tin cans, soap on the windshield,) and what the girls should wear (short shorts, knee - socks, and - Rockville sweat-shirts- so on.)

Still, Haven stares at her friend's slack-jawed. 'I can't say, I'm in a very school spirited mood at the instant.' The fact that they didn't pick up on this annoys her, yet she is all for the game tonight and the dance.

One girl shrugs her shoulders, hard like. 'But we only have until Saturday to figure things out, before the next big dace of the session.'

One more adds, 'We can't leave it until the last minute. We need to come up with a concept. We're 8th graders now. We can't just, like, throw something together.'

Seriously...?

A concept...?

Haven rolls her eyes, at that too.

It is the strangest feeling to have, even stranger than being called the: Ugliest.

Nevertheless, then again, it ensues here is to her, as her friends nod along with each other, that they are going to talk and talk about the pep rally with or without her.

There are ten girls standing at her locker. 'Maybe like six or seven, if you squash.' She quickly changes her approach and rips her page of ideas out of her notebook.

She quickly does a headcount.

'Fine,' she says, handing it off.

'Here's what I'm doing. Figure out who's riding with me, because my mom's convertible can only fit five of us.'

Haven opens her locker door, and stares through the metal slats as her friends walk toward homeroom without her, they seem to be giving her the cold shoulder over what she said about - CRUNCH-ie hair.

Something about her face seems off, imbalanced. It takes her a few seconds of close examination of her face to realize, what elapsed her mind was to put eyeliner on her left eye. Her eyes move to the magnetic mirror hanging inside the door, saying I become a sloppy girl, like a tomboy... oh no!

Tom Girl!

...?...

Why didn't any of her girls tell her that?

After digging in her makeup bag, Haven inches closer until the tip of her nose nearly grazes the mirror.

She gently pulls the corner of her left eye toward, her ear and traces a creamy band of coffee pencil, one of the samples her mother gave her, across the lid. Then she lets go, her skin snapping partly back into place, and blinks a few times.

Blink- Blink...

Haven's eyes are her best feature, as far as she is concerned.

Individuals, for the last 6 weeks 'till now, over the older girls, like always commented on them, and even though Haven finds that predictability annoying, she of course still relishes the attention.

How a girl, that was falling to you, would suddenly look up from the register and say, 'Wow, your eyes are incredible!'

They are the lightest blue, thanks to contacts, like three drops of food coloring in a gallon of ice-cold water, dissolving. Otherwise, better yet, a boy would say. Her eyes get more attention than her

boobs, and that is seriously saying something, for there so right there wrong to all the other girls in the grade. She is, after all, a true C cup without any of that ridiculous padding, which is false advertising, in my opinion.

An insignificant, slight, and dominative um- sagacity of relief washes over her. List or no list will take me down I am still the prettiest. She knows it, too- after being made to be. Everyone knows it also.

And that is all that matters, is being perfect... inside and out, not for her anymore but for them.

Part: 54

Haven and her mother agree the sedan still smells like Bacca dead grandfather, they bought the car off him before he passed, a musty blend of pipe smoke, old newspapers, and drugstore aftershave, of Stetson men's cologne, so they drive to - Rockville High School with the windows open, now that her mom has a real car that like runs, and drive without part falling off. Haven splays her arms across the window frame, resting her chin where her hands overlap, and lets the fresh air rouse her, even if is like 32 degrees' outside, yet that is over the fact that the car was hit, and the frame is bent and the window cannot go up the whole way, yet it was a $1,000- dollar car, and her mom is making payments on that...

Mondays are always the most tired mornings, always, you just don't want to get out of bed, because Sundays are always the worst nights, cramming homework and boys and drama, and girl stuff going out till wee hours in the morning.

The anxiety of the coming week speeds through Haven all the up and in- up and in- when she wants to be slowed down, she should speed up. She feels every lump in the old mattress, hears every creak and sigh of her new old house, yet she loves this home, its smalls, and noses, she just feels at home, taking Melody's place in the room.

Today the freaking car would not start, so-o before it got too late it was off to see if we could hop on the train. On the train, the tears come, and I don't care if people are watching me; for all they know, my dog might have been run over, they would not a car, and all over them and the look's they give with their hate. I might have been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and could die in an hour or so,

and they would be like F-yah did with the b*tch forever. I might be a barren, divorced, soon to-be-homeless alcoholic, like them, no compassion.

It's ludicrous when I think about it. How did I find myself here, doing this? I wonder where it started, my homework thinks, even if it's good they're not going to say it is; I wonder at what point, I could have halted it. Where did I take the wrong turn, also think, maybe out a load? Not when I met Haven, who saved me from grief after my sisters died. Not when where all, carefree, drenched in bliss, on an oddly wintry day a year ago, I was content, in the black, abundant.

I personally have the reminisces and of those first days so-o undoubtedly, walking around, shoeless, feeling the warmth of wooden floorboards underfoot, relishing the space, the emptiness of all those rooms waiting to be filled, with them it was, just like me.

Haven- Maybe it was then... maybe that was the moment when things started to go wrong, maybe... maybe... the moment when, I imagined us no longer a couple, but a family; and took her place, and was there for, like she was for me. Rolls changed, I thought, up till now, I was still crushing on her, yet Bacca was with Scott and Scott was crushing on Emaly, they think I don't know I play, the game, yet I get it.

...And...and... after all of that, once, I had that picture in my head, just the two of us could never be enough, yet think back to the first day it was- it was, ha-um-mm.

Was it then, that Bacca started to look at me differently, her dissatisfaction mirroring my own? After all, what she gave up for me, for the two of us to be together, I let him think that he wasn't enough, I remember when I was just three weeks into this new life and nothing is comfortable, but her and the girls. Which is exactly what she'd expected.

The girl's room is nice but really old, the slender wood slats on the floor with a loose nail where the wood floor met the wall, squeaks, its cloudy diamanté blinking in the moonlight.

The first pic, of all them, ever taken, she found it last night, after the first hour of tossing and turning in the same bedroom, that Melody slept in, the same bed, where her they slept in together when she was sleeping over- the same.

Haven crept across the hall in her pajamas, that being a nightie that is seen through, and short, with nothing under it. Bacca and Emaly mother's reading the obituaries over and over, of her little girl, died, losing it, slowly, the light cast a warm white glow out the seam of the open door.

Neither of them had been sleeping very well since, all that jazz.

That is when Bacca looks at her phone, out of boredom, and it buzzing like crazy and goes through all the boy's text/ vid. messages, and emails, there are 6 photos of nude boys that were sent to her some she doesn't even know, and 3 jerk -off videos, one being Scott like I think it's a cute boy, really do I need to see that many at once? Yet, I have to same um- you know- it's a girl thing, I know what I'm, masturbating to tonight, umm- I love this boy and his hard cock! (that was thought with an upward eye moment.)

Getting up to pee in the night, the girls all out Bacca snoring hard, like only she can, darling to on her My Pillow, and hugging it like a boy, she mostly uncovers showing her little lady down there, yet that's how she sleeps, the only way it comparable.

Haven cracked it wider with her foot. Pairs of stingy panties hung on the coils of the wrought-iron bed frame to dry after having them washed in the sink.

They reminded Haven of the snake skins shed in the warm dunes behind their old apartment out west. Their old life.

Her mom looked up from the thick manual of tax laws, saying things have changed with our dependences, her dad still a zombie over his little girl, maybe his favorite girl passing, the one he was the shyest and his princes, all those years, she was the clingy daddy's girl, more than the others, the one that wanted daddy dates only the others that felt too old for it.

Haven weaved through unpacked boxes and hopped onto the bed. She opened her hands like a clamshell.

Her mom grinned and shook her head, looking a bit embarrassed, with Haven there. 'I had begged your grandmother, haven for these... to buy me this when I started high school, and that would be the right to keep you with us.'

Haven- 'You would do that for me?'

The girl's mom- 'You hear all the time anyway.'

I know their dad's thought rolling around in he had if it would not be for you, I would have my girl. And... and yet hers was you save me, after what was going to happen anyway.

Back to be, she is thrilled, she looks over and sitting on the stand is her toy, she pinched the barrette between her fingers, for the flicker, examining the fossil of her youth, and puts them in and goes to ohville.

The corners of her mouth pulled until her smile stretched tight and thin, turning it into something entirely different.

With a sigh, she said: okay.

'Yes, don't worry about it all taking care of...'

'I don't know if you've ever had this feeling, Haven thought- only doing this has given me that feeling, I have a family now, but sometimes- I think too much, when you get something new, that the feeling I have now, you trick yourself into believing, it will last for more than your given time, it has the power to change absolutely everything about yourself, just like a 36 scorned cum, 10 times over, that how to get the girls to adopt me felt.' They did not know... and I was not going to wake them to say... it was going to be the first thing said by their mom, before school... I wondered if they would be happy or not.

'That was quite a lot to ask of old tv batteries, don't you think?'

Ummm- ah-hah- she let it all out, saying: thank you- to God, in more ways than one, even that relationship was getting better, to which is why all the others were turning on her too, the stronger the faith, the more you look odd to the ones, that don't understand.

(Back)

She said this while threaded a hair clip it into Haven's hair, securing a sweep over her daughter's ear, and pulled the quilt back so Haven could lie beside her.

Haven hadn't experienced the feeling her mother had described when she thought about love, but this was the love she was feeling for her and the girls, not that love, but feeling safe, and happy

was this love... but one much more unnerving. And not that like lust love ether- like when I see Bacca, who sat one desk away in her English class, and I look her up and down.

On her very first day at - Rockville High, Haven had noticed that Bacca smelled amazing to her, a small of a girl can drive you nuts, even if that coming from down under, I got the hint of that and she was- just right. And now all I need to do is get a whiff of her and she makes me melt.

Every girl is beautiful in their own way. To judge another for physical flaws is wrong, learn to love, not hate, this on and everything she has was right for me. That's the only way that true world peace will ever come to be.

She asked me what a vagina feels like on the inside to her and I said: its- 'wet, slippery, ribbed, soft and very warm.'

If you run your tongue over the top front of your mouth, that is what the ribbed - feeling is like in a vagina- inside a pocket puss- puss, only it is fleshier and softer than you're the top of your mouth, at on the same lines.

This that is when I asked her to do it to me and it was young lusting love... for that sleepover on... I remember.

The outside is smooth (if shaved lol,) soft like your lips or cheek. It feels similar to a soft penis, and recall those days too. If it is not shaved, it is still soft like your lips or cheek, but not smooth because of the coarse pubic hair. When it is wet, it is slippery and very soft.

I first categorized it, as that when she was turn on to me, when I got her naked for the first time and licked it, I was hooked, the small and test was everything I ever wanted.

It and she feel like a warm wet tight opening of flesh in which she squeezes and throbs her insides. very pleasurable for both indeed. it's like wet hot tight pink slipper flesh that stimulates the sensitivity of the penis especially the head. you will be stimulated by the warmth of her hole as well as the slipperiness and sensations of her walls and ribbed, then if she's tight, it's an added bonus of hot ribbed wet pussy friction that makes me nut every time, nothing is like a wet hot pussy because it is so warm and inviting...

That Haven now knew what she smelled like- she could sense her coming down the hall, long for a hug even, those starting day, of the 8th-grade year, summarized how much her life had changed, whether she'd wanted it to or not.

She swallowed this secret, everything she sees her with a boy that she wants more, that she really deep loves her to death, along with so many others- about her- and she because knowing, it could never- ever be right- when she is so-o wrong- Mom new- yet she could never confirm that things in her new school whereas bad as she'd been told, yet she got it.

If not worse... she got it yet, unlike all the other mom's she had a spot for Haven and a hart.

A while later, after ma- were just going to call her that, the girl's mother and now like mine, had finished studying, with me and Emaly and Bacca, and turned off the light, Haven stared into the shadowiness of the dim and held on to her ma's words.

Despite all these changes, she would stay the same girl. Or even go back to the girl, that Bacca fall for too, and deep down that was what ma wanted too, before falling asleep, she touched the barrette, in her hair saying, this was Melody's- she loves this, clip, wearing it every day, you keep this on you at all times, she'll keep you safe- Haven.

Haven reaches for the barrette, o'er as the sedan slips into a free space along the curb.

'How do I look? And she curtsy's- Like' Ma turns around, asking if she can start working to help out, Haven said- 'No one's going to want to hire me. They're going to want some beautiful young thing, that is not me, that is just so wrong.'

'Remember the things we talked about, Ma. Focus on your experience, not the fact that you haven't worked in a while, if they see the real you- they get over there- whatever, the hell is wrong with them.'

They'd done a mock interview last night after Haven's homework had been finished and checked, yet but they just said to leave no want you here, you suck at life, die... She'd never seen her ma so unsure of herself, so unhappy. Well, who the F- are they to say that to you? I'll take care of it, as the pre-school, teacher, for the young kids, at Catholic- school, she doesn't want this, for her job, yet she loves me more than that... She wants to still be Haven's teacher, under wraps just to make a point to the school she goes too.

Ma- It makes Haven depressed, their situation. Things hadn't been good the last year out west, and it's not her it's them. '...She is not the bad girl here...'

The money left by Haven's real- mother is was running out, Haven hadn't even known her mother had stopped paying support on their apartment. Her grandfather dying and leaving them the house was a blessing in disguise, also like the car, yet he even said you never worked for yet you're getting for nothing... to her, I busted nuts getting here and your kid just takes and do jack shit, and her and throw the paperwork, saying take my empire of dirt... take it.

Part: 55

Sarah- When the train stops at the signal, I see her looking at me, I look up and see Lucie standing on the terrace, looking down at the track.

I feel as though she's looking right at me, and I get the oddest sensation -I feel as though she's looked at me like, that before; I feel as though she's really seen me, yet, I don't remember.

I imagine her smiling at me- before, yet, I don't remember, and for some reason, I feel afraid- and I don't remember that either, of why- I do.

She turns away and the train moves on, wheels slipping.

(EVENING)

'OK-ay,' She smiles at me then and steps back again, crouching down a little so-o, that our eyes are level. 'Are you all right...'

He consults his notes. 'Haven?' 'Yes...'

That girl from the past keeps looks at me for a long time, like she is trying to tell me something, or maybe she is me; she doesn't believe me when I say I don't remember.

She's concerned, with me, yet, she not real, I keep thinking, yet, I don't recollect that either.

Perhaps, she thinks I'm a battered significant other- like my girlfriend or boyfriend at the time? Or else something like that, or that I am running down the tracks to end it all, and even that I don't get why-why...?... I ever her, stand on these tracks at this point.

'Right...?... I'm going to clean you up a little get in the Rockville river, next to the viaduct, since you look- a bit nasty, don't worry about a thing said- the girl, like she was my girlfriend, from another time.

'I'm okay,' I tell her.'

...And the sunsets...

Part: 56

'Haven, promise me you'll talk to your

English teacher about the reading list, God this is Pre-k work- girl... (I know yet that is all they say: I can handle it...,) 'Well, what the F- is there to handle with this...?'

I hate the idea of you sitting in her class for the whole year, bored to freak'n tears with books we've already read and deliberated, all last year- and we don't even have to read it the teacher- is spitting that out for us. If you're afraid to do it, or as they say not able too, they do it for you, like wiping your ass..., and buttoning your pants- you get it... no?

Haven shakes her head, at the level of dumb, that they subject her too. 'I'll do it.

Today. I promise.' Ma- pats Haven's leg. 'We're doing okay, right, when she shows her the work, she asked her to do- at eight grade?'

Haven doesn't think about her answer, she was working hard, at getting her schooling, even if they say not she know she was higher than they say, she just says, 'Yeah... we are, doing what they say for us to do, or we get expelled, there is no arguing.'

'See you at three o'clock, that would be when this hand is there- and there, she said to Haven- okay- she rolled her eyes.

'It'll go fast.''

Haven leans across the seat and gives her Ma a tight hug.

'I love you, Mommy. Good luck.'

Haven walks into school, barely a force against the tide of students flowing from the opposite direction. Her homeroom is empty, not for long the haters will soon be in there making their mouth run like runny pop, out of a tight butt hole.

The fluorescent lights are still off from the weekend when she walks in, they come on automatically, and the legs of the upturned classroom chairs spike four-pointed stars, encircling her like oversized barbed wire. She turns one over and takes a seat, chewing her pencil.

It is terribly lonely at school, even when the room is packed full of those and themes.

Sure, a couple of people have talked to her, in the halls but it was all in ways that you or she would not find cute.

Boys, mostly, after daring each other to ask her stupid questions about homeschooling, like if she belonged to a religious cult, or it was to keep her here and not go to the Lonnie-ben. She anticipated as much, her male cousins where just as goofy and awkward and annoying.

The girls were only slightly better. A few smiled at Haven, or obtainable tiny bits of graciousness, like pointing out where to put her murky cafeteria tray after lunch.

Nevertheless, and then again, no one extended herself in a way that felt like the start of something. No one seemed attracted, interested, and involved in getting to know her beyond confirming, that she was that weird-tard-ed homeschooled girl, that was here-well for them because.

It shouldn't have surprised her. It is what she was told to expect, and you just drift off in to, your own word for its less painful.

Haven lets her chin rest against Bacca's chest, even if they were looking, she needed her. She pretends to read the notebook, lying open on the small patch of desk committed to her seat.

Really, though, she inconspicuously watches the girls filter into the room, and take chairs beside her. The girls are frantic, whispering like crazy.

Muggy giggles and laughs are all she sees and hears. Wholly, consumed with whatever they're gossiping about, she knows it all about her, and her neck, and body and whatnot... even if... unanimously said by the girls it was perfect. Until one notices Haven watching them, back- and she said skank what are you looking at?

Nothing when looking at you- BITCH. '...and- and- and... like... ah- U's a wonder why no-one likes you!' Haven lowers her eyes, saying and I tard-ed. But she's not fast enough, to not have the look back.

Part: 57

'Re-tard, baby boy dick sucker... that is a baby boy too...'

Haven lifts her head.

'Excuse me?'

'Oh, my god, Haven!

Bacca made her eat her teeth...

And they both were thrown out... and thanks to Ma, she was spared, and the girl, saying shit, got nothing, not even a slap on the wrist. Um- it was more of that and- or, of what do you do to piss her off.

Emaly- 'You are so lucky; they did not put you out!'

Bacca- 'Do you even know how lucky you are?'

The girl puts on a big smile, the next time saying, thanks to you I have these now, and just like your tits there fake and now perfect. And she runs on tiptoes over to Haven's desk, doing acting all gay- like.

The girl ritually places a piece of paper on top of Haven's open notebook. 'It's a - Rockville tradition. They picked you as the prettiest girl in our grade.' The girl talks unhurriedly, as if Haven spoke another language, or had a learning disability, yet that what is known about her not what she really has.

Haven reads the paper, even if they're making fun of her doing so-o. She sees her name, there. But she is still completely confused.

A different girl pats her on the back, saying you have made it again. 'Try to look a little happier, Haven,' Emaly said, she whispers sweetly, in the same way, one might discreetly indicate an open zipper, that Haven Had, oh by the way yah- get that closed, too 'Otherwise people will think

something's wrong with you, down there that you need to let all hang- out- or breath.' This scrappy little nobody line surprises Haven most of all because it completely contradicts what she's already assumed.

'Why is after I cum I cry? Asked Emaly.'

'What?'

Haven's eyes got big...

Part: 58

Sarah- plan is to break it to him fast, yet she can't remember the boy's name she was dating or was it a girl, yah a girl I was dating, right, as she runs towards the oncoming train, hoping for death of her life, to get a new one, where she can remember again.

And then the lights flash, and she is home, sitting on her bench, nibbling the edges of a strawberry Pop-Tart. Wh-a-at, the tangy smell of smoke on her fingers sours the sweet, yet was she really there, she must have been.

Bacca- at school, in class, she forces down at Scott's, well you know, her favorite part of this cute boy, because all this sugar clearly isn't helping, her thoughts, she lost in him and the daydream.

Sarah- looking out the window, in the summer- Let the squirrels eat some of it, she said to her mom rocking. ...And like someone, that has lost their mind; she needs to calm the hell down, said her mom, to her dad, yeah, but it's in her mind, it is slipping more, now than ever. She moves a tangle of tarnished necklaces off her chest and feels for her heart, saying I must find her and get her back- I- I -I... (crazy whispering)

So, there's no scene, for her to get off.

Forget dressing it up, explaining things.

That's only going to make it worse.

She'll just say something like, I'm done, girls. Our friendship, or whatever the hell you want to call it now, is over, said Balla, with all the girls- that Haven is to off of her. So, go ahead and do what you want. Live your life! Become the best bros with the captain of the football team. Feel up the head cheerleader, even though everyone knows Margo Gable stuffs. I'm not going to judge you.

Scott- I took a girl's virginity today, and she was not you- she- was your sister... I cool with it, said Bacca as long as you love me more, so do you want to start making love altogether? Did he ask...? Um- I don't see why not, and she seemed grossed out yet loved him, for loving her. Two girls that look and feel just the same, I love you, girls, he said. The sex was awesome, me on top, her and then she... everything a day has ever wanted in his dreams said, Scott.

Every guy is a walking STD it's just what... said Bacca, I am sick of this you don't need a glove every freaking time, if your in-love one, and safe, girls remember- if you're willing to spread for the love you should be willing to spread for his baby, think about that one.

Emaly- My hart, thinking about that boy, it flutters like a hummingbird's, so fast the individual beats blur together and make a steady, uncomfortable hum.

That last part will be a lie, for I cannot love him he belongs to her, and I can do that. She'll totally judge me for it too. She'll be worried about me, if I don't come home tonight and run off with him, to find a place, to well... you know.

Haven's has number, I was saying we were going to the woods, with Scott, after school, she asked to come, I knew where that would go, so we did, and Scott was just that cool about it, Haven had her first bang as a girl, a moment she will never forget, under the trees in the dart, hard- and pounding, just like us with other boys, John- John, Josh, and Jash, all took their turns in our holes until we- cummed. I have never known how much she like being on top, until that moment. Us girls like letting the boys do the work.

Haven won't be worried at all-I'm not even late home yet-but I'm hoping that the news that I've been hit by a taxi might make her take pity on me and forgive me for what happened yesterday. She'll probably think the reason I got knocked down is that I was drunk. I wonder if I can ask the doctor to do a blood test or something so that I can provide her with proof of my sobriety. I smile up at him, but he isn't looking at me, he's making notes. It's a ridiculous idea anyway.

And Bacca and her were making it also, you should have seen. Haven - She rips the cellophane off a new pack of cigarettes, lights up, she is still shaking over it, a leftover of wild carries taste to takes away the smoke, she sips a drink of Emaly's drink.

Remembering last night, when she was hanging half out of his bedroom window, after- the after, she smoked the third-to-last cigarette in her old pack; and told him, thank you; after his

depressing play-by-play of his aunt's final days of lung cancer; she'd seriously think about maybe quitting, yet puffing with oxygen, tubes in her nose, I was not sorry to see the old bitch die.

(Eyebrow up by both girls that are the same in all Bacca- and Scott- Recollections of that now makes her laugh, puff out smoke. Both dissipate into the chilly morning air, for each other. Before the school day, one last kiss before hell starts too, hell being the school day.

Haven- Last night, she talked a lot of shit, to the one that gets down on her, to all the girls that wanted to be there with him, yet would never- ever.

Girls talking- (He did that?)

Nevertheless, Scott... apparently, he'd been talking shit since the day they met, that was just who he is, yet he was still saying he had the hot girl in school last night to his buddy's, you can be sure of it.

Whatever!

Let him bitch about her smoking, she loves to do like she loves all of him and I mean all, like his uncut wink-ie. It would be a relief to replace her anxieties with something simple and clear, like more sex, or e-cigs, yet that would not do she said, like being annoyed with him, is what she is like without, it's like a girl, PMS when she can have 5-cigs and 6- oh's a day.

Sarah- watches two junior girls scurry along the sidewalk, as she is on the tracks, looking for her, to hold her hand and get her through the day.

Sarah knows who they both are, but what she thinks is: All the junior girls at - Rockville girls look the- damn same, many for she can't evoke- anything any longer.

They remind her of sex-dolls with their mouths hanging open- yet, saying nothing- noting, just there for the feelings, keeping the same stripes so predators can't tell them apart. Survival of the non-specific. 'The shoulder- shearling boots, length hair with highlights, the stupid, the little wristlet purses to hold their cell phones, lip glosses, and lunch money. It's the - Rockville way!'

The two girls stop in front of her seat and huddle, shoulder to shoulder, each clutching a piece of notebook paper.

The smaller one hangs on her friend and chokes out a sequence of high-pitched giggles. The other simply sucks air in and out, a rapid-fire of hiccupping wheezes, thinking about boys, they have a hand, and these they want, and the one they cannot.

Sarah's nerves can't take it, them looking at her in school either, yet walking along the tracks is her escape.

'Hey!' she yaps. 'How about you ladies hold your little powwow someplace else?'

It seems like a fair request, by a teacher, yet, I think not. After all, these girls have the entire school to roam uninterrupted. Besides everyone at - Rockville knows that this is her our hang out.

She discovered it in the 7th-grade year. It had always been vacant, for the reason that, it was situated directly beneath the principal's window. That didn't bother her. She wanted to be alone. That is, until Balla came along last spring, and said: 'This is my place, get lost,' like a bully, that she is, and her girls are.

Part: 59

Haven was terribly shy. Almost cripplingly so. He hated talking in class and broke out in hives whenever his parents argued. It was hard to get him to open up, but when she finally did, Melody always felt like she'd found a kindred outcast.

She liked begging Haven to torture her with stories of her former was fascinating to her, what going middle school another year was like, the at their hangout is where they wait for each other, to chat about things like this, before, school, and after school each day, where they do their homework and split a pair of earbuds for the right and left sides of an illegally downloaded song. A haven where, like- two kids who once kept to themselves suddenly keep with each other, that where she got her new name, a safe place just like under the Rockville viaduct, with Sarah.

(Night)

-Sleepover- (plow fight)

Wake- wake- hit- slam... fall onto butt... repeat!

Bacca- 'If you can't handle me at my idiotic rants, then you don't deserve me at my butt plug insertions.'

Emaly- 'I definitely have prune fingers after those faps, with you girls.'

Bacca- 'Cream you slut!'

Emaly- Eye roll, in lightheartedness, giggling like with her, wanting it so badly.

Haven- shhh- or ma well hear...

Shhh- U..., 'YOU'RE A BEARDED TROLL SPERM.'

Emaly- 'I got a glittery butthole man- with this plugin.'

Bacca- 'I have an obsession with butts.

I don't know why.'

(Giggles)

I have to pee now- said Emaly- 'That's what apple juice is. It's literally just apple pie,' said Bacca.

'Damn... My penis just fell off the wall.'

Ha- and one fall of her too- said Bacca pointing at Haven, to Emaly.

Haven- 'I didn't know if you guys know, but if you fap too long you get cum prunes.' (o-haha) ...all around by the girls...

Bacca- 'Jesus titties this shit is ridiculous.'

(I love you, girls) ...said around by the girls...

'If you thought I wasn't gonna quote while fapping, you were VERY mistaken.'

'Marry had a little l-am- little l-am... Ha!'

...she sung well-doing...

Haven- 'Vaginas are just like socks coming together.'

'WHOA! Sock vagina!'

Emaly- 'Why can't dudes dicks have an extra part of their balls that go in the butt, like the size of a butt plug?'

(WHAT! ...?...)

Bacca- 'I just shot cum up Em's nose.' Emaly- 'It's like a lick worth of an orgasm.'

Bacca- I said today to Scott- 'If I where an asshole, you'd be my butt plug.' He didn't get it.

(Giggles) the boy is so dumb yet cute- yes cute.

Emaly- 'Oh shit he fell in love. He got vagina dazzled.'

'I'm not doing teddy bear porn right now...' she snaps- chatted a photo to Scott.

Fast snap- by- Haven- 'I literally just bejeweled my asshole.' Want a photo of that Scott, all rem-m-ie?

(n-ah- not really)

Bacca- 'I just lubed my belly button, hearing you too.'

Why did I get this said- Scott- 'Cause I masturbate and master-bait.'

Haven- 'I literally just tried to shove a what feels like- um- a- trophy in my asshole.'

Emaly- texted- 'My pussy is wet like the ocean because all my salt goes to it.'

Emaly- texed- 'Suck my vaginal dick,

Scott'

Emaly- 'I wish I had a dick, so I could try it now.'

Haven- 'Um- no you don't.'

Haven- 'Don't make me shit in your cat litter, and she always looks at us too like I want too.'

Bacca- On the cell- '...I've been practicing my cheek spreads, for you boy.'

Dirty talk... head nod sideways... two times.

(I know right…?)

Emally- in her bed- with nothing but the flicker of the Tv light- light night- 'Jesus please forgive me for my dick addiction. I just love giant cocks.'

(Nighty- night- night)

Part: 60

Bacca- say's all tard-ed- like: 'now remember Haven, a- the light bulb is not a butt plug…!'

(index finger up and shaking)

'Shut up- all you to do is frap and have sex, so in a way that skewering it in too- ha.'

Once, Sarah tried to carve their names on the bench but discovered the wood was that new space-age treated stuff and broke the knife she'd nicked from the cafeteria after the third stroke.

So, she makes sure to have a black marker in her book bag to trace a fresh layer of ink over their initials whenever they begin to fade.

Ma- saw me and Scott doing it, and she was cool with it Haven, what gives?

She's a cool mom! And I love her for that!

'I too said Emaly, cuz- he was taking turned with you and me, and I know she saw looking through the door crack last night, we- he… being me- and him- like- both- snuck over.'

Bacca- I'd been in the library on Ridge Road. I'd just emailed my mother (I didn't tell her anything of significance, it was a sort of test-the-waters email, to gauge how maternal she's feeling towards me at the moment) via my Yahoo account, about being honest about my body and what comes in and what comes or cums out.

It looked like her, she looked exactly the way she looks in my head, but I doubted myself. Then I read the story and I saw the street name and I knew. There it was the story of Melody, at first, I wasn't sure, about saying all this yet all the teen girls do, about how three girls were so close in all things, even boobs, boys, the red death at that time of the month, frapping, and schooling, so, and boys love it, like how I lost it… and with, it all on yahoo.

Rockville Police are becoming increasingly concerned for the welfare, of all the other girls- and even the boys' now, in my school, over Haven, being- 'DANGEROUS.' I FIND IT SICK!

Scott Tipwell, on Saturday night when she left the couple's home to visit a friend at arou nd seven o'clock. Her disappearance is 'completely out of character,' Mr. Tipwell said. Mrs. Tipwell, my soon cannot inure mixing with that, she had him busted for busting a nut in Haven. It was quite the scene- outside my home.

Haven was wearing jeans and a red T-shirt, with Scott boy OJ all over it. She is five- foot 1 inch, give or take that inch, slim, with blond, tips, and dark hair and blue eyes, as of today, yet that changes a- lot like all of us girls, from week to week. Anyone with information regarding Mrs. Tipwell, and Haven, stocking and having sex with boys are requested to contact Rockville Police, she not even allowed to look at boys- the Police and moms say. Mom and dad are where calling the school saying they want her taken away... Ma- chips in saying- for being a normal teen girl.

Emaly- ...Oh, my... (sighing) Bacca, she was mortified.

Part: 61

She's missing her. Melody is missed.

Emaly is missing her so much. Since

Saturday, when she read the story online.

I Googled her-the story appeared, but with no further details, other than what we wanted to be said as the girls that really loved her, and that's how we wanted it.

I thought about seeing all the boys we now like -Scott-this morning, standing on the terrace, hoping to take us to school, like big girls, yet us girls just were standing there looking at one another, thanks to what is said about Haven, she smiling at me, saying see I take you um- to the bottom. We don't care- (hugs) ...I Emaly- grabbed my bag and ran out for a train passing by to hope, like the old days, into the road, that leads over to the school.

We all knew that Scott would come around, sneaking around, with all of us- he's a boy like when had they ever had control, with anything.

Part: 62

Sometimes, I don't want to go here, thought Haven, along with the girls it was unanimous, I think I'll be happy if I never have to set foot inside the schoolhouse again.

Bacca- As I would even miss it. I just want to remain safe and warm in my haven with Scott, undisturbed, and Have said: 'I want that with you Bacca, you're the only one I can trust.'

Haven- (I LOVE YOU.)

~*~

Sarah looks up. The four girls are gone. It's like a sucker punch to the gut, she got beat up, by them walking through the High school halls, for being, now slow, the surprise worse than the hurt itself, and no chance to hit back, the girls are making her even more gone.

'What's that?' Haven takes the paper, the new list of girls for the week, and she is all the way down, below the low-life.'

You know, like- I remember the days, like- when I would have thought this was the end of my life, yet, I don't even care, I have you girls. That all that matters!

...And unanimously they all agreed...

Nevaeh

Book: 32

Naddalin and the Magic Railway

Part: 1

In class as a little girl, before coming here- teacher saying: 'I'm going to tell you a story about trains... folks far apart and the magic railroad that brought them together.' 'Every story, like a railroad,

has its brave girls, this one is no different.' 'This is a wizardly word, and It is at one end of my special universe.' 'What does that sign say, I remember saying to a girl your age back then...' 'Number 13 Railway.'

'The magic lost Railway...' they all said, at reading time... 'Really unfailing and right on time, all the kids where aw-stuck.' 'We were off... looking...' He said. 'At the other end of my universe... far away across oceans of time...' up and over the tall mountain, and deep woods, and hidden deep in a valley... of spooky woods.' 'That points just round the bend, there is a place like this, that goes to another place, through a porthole.

A lovely place you'll find all that is enchanted good and yet evil.' 'Where the magic comes over you showing up right on time, this is your excellent time, climbing through universe to your own where there is no limit to your mind...' 'Soft strokes of lightning painting the skies, brightening up all your time, like shadows, cast, and by the way, I think someday one of in this class is going to help her, somewhere in this story, I already know, whom she is, do you?' The story: 'I remember 's just trying to make this a better railway for steam engines. Yet those days were coming to an end.'

'He says, the harder we work, the fewer kids like you all would care, it was not the thing, any longer, and outdated.' 'Help her, they always need help! They said.' 'For the reason, that steam engines are cowardly, irritable... worn-out chunks of metal, that should just rust away and die forever.' Away-who: 'Now, I've come back to find a lost steam engine, Number 13. 'I'm going to destroy her, and dominate you, said a girl that was dulling me over flinging this and saying: 'I was crazy-' it was not a real thing!' 'We're really useful engines?' One girl with pigtails said in class!' 'Only you can find that out... if you're the one...' 'What lost an engine?' 'You hear that train whistle sooner than it hears itself if, in your hart, you want to finder her.' I – at five spoke up saying: 'I've been looking at the map, it not there.' 'What are these mysterious shadowy lines, and you'll see...'

'They look like covary caterpillar lines going no ware, yet were railroad tracks... but I can't see any tracks around here, even if I try hard too.' 'All I see are the ones we've traveled on.' 'It's mysteries that make this land so-o... magical!' 'This engine was vital to the magic, that held these worlds together...' He said. I said- 'I guessed there was something mysterious about this mountain and the woods and her that lay within.' 'Yah.' All mountains and wood and towns have their secrets, covering, yet none like this one. 'Should not surprise a kid like you he said to me, I did not get what he was saying then, yet maybe, just maybe I do now.'

~*~

'She the steam engine was being made on the assembly line, hot steam, sweaty, man at work, for low pay, moving pistons, and belts, hissing, and load pounding, back in the 1880's and as they were making here, a man, was crushed, by the boiler, when it was lowered in place. another had his legs pinned by the cowcatcher in the front, and then yet another had his toes amputated by one of the wheels that run the 20-pound rail, of the old U.S.A- factory.

It's now 2017, 137 years later, in a pall of junk rust, she sits... a flashback of the steam roaring, out and people, getting on to make their way to the school, it was speculated that this was used as a place where you learned wizardry. Sitting in what was the newly painted cab, a black man that worked for nothing, was puffing away on a pipe, somehow asphyxiated, and to cover it up they just left him there all night, and also it was said, they just put his body in the newly made boyar, as if he was the coal to run the trail run, of firing the engines, and he was brunt within, and sold like his soul to the train forever, adding to her lust for man. What was odd, is her headlight was on, and the room fogged, yet she had no steam to keep it light when they when in the next day.

I have heard this mythical story, over the years but did not buy into it. All of them to this point was just black, yet not this one, she was a JGR Class 7100, like them, yet she was all her, class, a lady- some said, wearing bright inflamed red they called it, what was scary the most about her it- her bagging was 13 with the son of the beast, Lord Ghizith, son of all wicked at this school in the story of tells, in Roman numerals was 9-9-9, yet even right side up is still what it is, with the dashes,

AND WITH THE V'S IT MAKES IT.

When someone placed it on her upside-down X|X|X, the same man that was given up as a sacrifice to her evil to start. She was going to pull nothing but kids, and her cars were going to be classy white. WE ALL NEW THE STORY, IT WAS TOLD IN CLASS, YET I HAD TO SEE HER MY SELF OVER IN HAVANA.

THAT SCHOOL, LED TO THE ONE WE GO TOO, and only wizards know about this lost world, and the magic railway, that leads to a new world of magic.

Holy sh*t! Come on let's go- and see if we can find her- and the resting spot, you know where not allowed, said, Emmah, Naddalin oh come on- and she ran off...

SHE IS coming GIRL, keeps YOUR SHIRT ON, said, Ellie. She's changing his shirt, in the chamber room, where all the girls sleep, other girls seem her do this, they giggled at her size for her age, and her dorky glasses.

That's noise pollution, keep it down others are studying, you girls frolicking and singling gallery like that, 'round the school halls, said Miss. Smith. What you're doing, is not a right girl... as you know... you have been told about your thing for each other, You might as well be sucking face in front of all your classmates. It like poisonous potions you to have taken with your love for one another said, Smith. Hey, Emmah, I will be right their girl, let me get my wand, and wizard glasses, too. 'Just leave them behind,' 'all you need is you.'

'It's okay- come on.' Go on, girls Smith said, try and stay out-a trouble- I- say, yet that hard for you all- I know. It's okay then, shh- I would say- um... Naddalin, your lunch, said, Emmah! Try and keep it cold, she cast a spell to do just that on the brown bag. There's yogurt in there... 'I no -' 'gross- right?' 'Yah.'

Slow down, girls, a professor said! 'Are you guys having a war, or trying to start one with all this racket?' He said loudly- with authority. This one he is pissed off because, I'm not taking metamorphoses shop, inside of a class he said I should be in for lower minded girls such as I, saying I not ready for this stage yet.

My granddad too, said this about me, even if. It won't embarrass them when you change things, and become something else or someone, or no how to make them a sucking mud frog. What...? Walking into the woods looking all eerie and green in color, misty, and hunting feel. Girl talk begins with the color of nails and periods, and boobs, and homeworking spell; they were trying on random animals in the sticks.

So-o, Last night, we're playing Scrabble, by candlelight; Its neck-and-neck between me and her. We blew Jagger away early, she can't spell for crap, So, at the conclusion, I had this choice of the ratio for five lousy points... 'or...' she questions looking dumb. 'Um - or what, Naddalin?'

Fellatio for 24 points, 'and...' (oral stimulation of a man's penis.) 'You don't even like that stuff, do you,' she questioned, with curiosity. and the game, I had it.

What did she do? Headmaster- said- She won by seven points... because, obscenities are not allowed, in the school, this was done with the word's like magic on the board, making the worlds appear

in magic in Scrabble, even getting tops to go with the uniform can be done with the cast of a spell with the wand. And it is in the dictionary, regardless! 'Your jerkoff,' Naddalin, Jesus. You know, Naddalin, I was thinking... 'Uh-oh, smart-ass smirk,' 'No, seriously.' Now that was going to be staring here, and your about 14 years old, I- I figured it's about time... time that we got you laid, well with one of us girls. You know, like this year, huh? You need a girl to get laid... I don't know anyone, and they don't like me. What about Christin, Rollking?

I don't like her mustache, on both sets of lips. 'gross!' I have seen her in the shower with all that matted fuzz. 'Freak you!' Why? Why- do you care? Why do care like- If you get a little black hair in your mouth? 'She has a puss- no?' Okay... How about Haecien Hales, the secret shame? 'She's cute.' 'She's a sixth grader! Her- her wand is up to her butt, too about me, after I said she was cut, now- 'I am nothing but wrong.' 'So, what, keep asking?' 'She's a walking- rub off.' 'I know.' 'Come on.' 'I don't have the smallest deposit to open an account, to that honey hole.' Are you kidding? 'You carry your life savings of girl c*m between your legs.' 'Come on, Naddalin.' I think maybe I'll just frap off. Are you playing Winged horse racing this year or what? Somebody's got to pick it up- when you fall off with a little pussy girl.

(Three weeks)

'Look how c*ckeyed she works, this-

this pile.'

'She got fuckin brand-new wheels for rusted out slanders.'

'Well, the boy does have good hands.'

'Real good little hands.'

'Bad taste in trains, and hobbies.'

'You know, Papa, you can't polish a turd.'

'Hay you girlie, when I said you could scrounge through that sh*t pile outback... I didn't mean you could build your whole freaking thing-ie with my stuff.'

'Why do you care?'

'You're not doing anything with it anyway.'

'Hey!'

'Don't think you got the gold key to the sh*tter.'

'Mediocrity takes advantage of me, understand?'

'Yeah.' She said.

'If it wasn't for me, it cost you an sh*t pile to put this heap together.'

'Smith said GO BE SOMEWHERE

and let the girl work on her project.'

'I know that sir.'

'Look, I know you ain't got money falling out of puss-hole.' Like- If you did, you wouldn't be here, doing this down here.'

'Maybe we could work out some

kind of a deal.'

'You... pick up around the place, you and these little ones too, you call girlfriends, and put the toilet paper on the little spools... sh*t like that, then you'd you can raid my junk pile.'

'Do that and you can... for whatever you want. I might even throw in a few dollars.'

'Sure thing...'

'Look what she's doing to that pencil, said Emmah in class, I wish I was it.'

'Go on, study with her now, asked the other, for there click.'

(Head nod no... and then like maybe.)

'Ask her out...'

'Mind your own business, girl and do your work... in your wizard notebook.'

'Just read the book and pin.'

'Yeah, come on girl.'

~*~

'Listen, do you like music and dancing?'

'Yes...'

'Then come with me to the dace at the end of the year, the boys for the other school would say- I should be with one of them, yet, I pick you or an ickkie boy!'

'Did you have plans with Emmah, yes and going to do the bad thing with her today.'

'You are going to have no friends at all if you keep doing this...'

'So-o!'

'They get the bi-ness for there all like me.'

'Get off my back! Old lady!'

'What's going on? Said Smith, 'I don't know- ...but you need to let this kid alone.'

'Ever since he bought that locative, she has been obsessed with it, and that girl too.'

'And you know what else?'

'When we signed the papers, she knew someone had died in it!'

'Does Naddalin know about that?'

'Naddalin doesn't know anything about any further than the girl on girl sex and working too hard for something that going to kill her.'

'I know he died choking on exhaust fumes, the last one that was trying to fix her.'

'You don't know sh*t, kids of that thing.' She said, frantic!'

'My brother died, looking for it in the woods.' Said one girl in class.

'Because she wanted too, she said back.'

Emmah- 'Naddalin wouldn't have bought it if had known somebody died in it, would she -she had- that gleam in her eye,

I was not talking here out of it.'

'Either you're dumb or you don't know your friend very well.'

'She had the same look my brother always had.'

'Probably the only thing my brother ever loved in his life was that car.'

'No stinker ever came between him and Number 13 of the Skoufyceol railway.

If they did, watch out.'

'I had my five-year-old daughter lost to death looking for it, and I think she did and she is the last car as remands, and that car is over top the viaduct.'

'My mother back in the 1950's she died the same way she did.'

(Of course, it came back, like new)

Part: 2

'I wouldn't put that in my mouth.' 'You don't know where it's been.' 'Get outa-here.' 'But we know where it hasn't been- with you, dork.'

I said Hey, Ellie, walking deeper in the jade-sh wood's looking for the old rail line, of 13. How's your gimpy knee? It's been better, all the spell in this world would not help it. Coach wants me to practice, and yet, I feel like riding would be good for me he thinks not- so. Yeah...? It's about time. I have been eaten dirt with your name on it for weeks. Hi, Emmah, she is tagging along with us. Oh, hey, Ellie. 'How you are doing?' 'I am okay...' They going to let you play Winged horse racing?' 'Yes- I think I did not come in last you know- even if.' 'Yeah.' 'Doc says am as good as new, in three weeks.' 'Then I guess, I will be seeing you out there.' 'I hope so girl,' she said in a hug.

(Three weeks later)

'What do you mean, came back?'

'It went eerie in the room! Then the bell rang out!'

'How'd you ever get that train and all those cars fixed up like that?'

'Magic!' She said.

'Oh, just plain unfashionable hard work.'

'Non-of the girls believed it was- that or that...'

'Yes, we belong together...' She's in the cab rubbing her down...'

'Yes, it belongs to only me, and I.' Eye's bugging.

'You scared the hell out of me, and more said the girls in her room, with all the bed where they all sleep.'

'It happened, Naddalin she lost it over it.'

(Chatter of the girls at night.)

'Everything got bright when I was down there with her, and creepy feeling.'

'So, what are you saying?'

'It has got her soul!'

'She is Falling to IT!'

~*~

'I thought it was attacking me like, I was just held there standing looking at her like and dream, of evil!'

'Sexually frustrated, she is, that's all- said one teacher.'

Emmah- 'Come on, baby, please, sleep with me and get some rest.'

'I love you!'

'I love you more!'

Part: 3

(Back at the school a day earlier)

'Having trouble with your locker?' 'No.' I said, in a whisper. Did you see the new girl? They were talking about me in nasty ways, in ways that you would not even think of... 'I just got here, and off the train!' I'm in love, and I am fussy, with this girl, I overheard, and it was gross, what these older girls were saying about young girls, and what they did and did not do. I never- ever noticed you were busy, before now like this. Drop-dead, Maaria.

'What is her name?'

'Naddalin-' 'I don't know.' 'She's in the bureau.' 'She looks smart, but she's got a body of a young hot s|ut.' 'Oh, crap, here she comes.' I think you will like it here, the headmaster said. 'Give me something for me to stuff in down here.' (TEMP- handed) We have all kinds of activates, and all things magic. Exploding, this land is something you'll love to do, not a bad way to meet girl's others your age, and find friends that last a lifetime. I would like to get involved with the magic yearbook, where all photos and stories come to life, as you flip the pages. We have a terrific yearbook staff, he said well stocking his long beard. Won a prize last year, for our students, being most crafty...

Part: 4

'They started it, you know,' she said, 'That's not so-o,' I spoke up. Shut up, dick-face! 'Shut your mouth! Said the professor.' 'I don't have to listen to YOU- you're not my daddy.' '...And to garbage like that, Elysia!' 'What where you saying to me that you think you can to jack-all?' 'She's got a dagger, and my wand.' 'You are fearing liar!' 'That's complete bullsh*t,

Mr. Sasey.' She said quickly with no thought behind it. 'This girl is lying. I swear to God, or let the daemons take it.'

'Did she here in this school pull a blade on you?' 'Yeah.' She said squeakily, 'Show it, Elysia.' 'The hell, I- I will.' 'You can't make me,' Saying it like a brat. 'If you mean, I don't have the authority, your wrong blood hell you are wrong.'

'TOUCH ME...! Try it, your bald sh*t, and I will knock you through the wall! 'You two girls go up to the headquarters.' 'Now!' You- (pointing) 'Stay there.' Along with saying girl- 'Don't go anywhere.'

'You have got enough trouble, to face.' 'I am going to call the brigadiers. 'Go to the office, Elysia. 'I'll get you! I will eat you out!' Along with saying 'You're going to wish you were never-ever where born!

~*~

'So, all in all, it wasn't a bad first day.' I recall, thinking back, Think Elysia, will try to get even? 'No, he's a douche.' she will most likely find somebody else to pick on when she gets back in. They kicked her out, you know, for the year and she will be held back too. 'Good,' I say. 'They kick Ellie out yet for a week.' 'JUST- Probation.'

~*~

'Stop - stop! Quick! Go back!' 'What's the matter?' She yelled. There - there she is, tucked away behind all the brush, and over-grown-ness, of plant life. 'I want to look at her! And take a tour of all the cars and the engine.' She said to the other three... 'All right, Naddalin.' 'Just go back with me and hold my hand, it's kind of scary.' 'All right...' she said. 'Jesus...' and they said- 'Wow!' What is it? 'Number 13...!' 'Do you know what this means, um- all the stories are true, she well... like, be here?' 'What?' said the thread one, with them. 'Jesus girls.' 'Ah- like Be careful, Emmah and you too.'

This is a piece of sh*t, said the second one, 'she could be fixed up,' I said way too excitedly. 'Yah.' 'Oh, she could be really awesome.' 'Forget it.' She Emmah said, this babies' girl has totally rusted away, and is missing everything, to even steam, 'I don't care.' 'I bet it won't even steam if we try, or the horn blow.'

~*~

'Shell steam still,' an old grumpy man said with straggly hair. 'You need this, coal from the village uptown, is the only place in this dark yet charming land, now where you can get it.' I am getting rid of her, you see... as scrap, and for the money, getting me a new place too, and over the fact, no one cares anymore about old junk.' 'How much do you want for her; I'll get the money?' 'Whatever it is, it's not enough, to save the history of the wizarding world.' 'Jesus, Naddalin.' Girlie, you ever owned something like this before?' 'I would say not- so-o, no?' 'Nope, I don't even got-a a- license.'

'Names: LeDay.' 'Naddalin Maaria.' 'What are you asking for this train?' 'I am not one of you, he was, I am not.' 'Let's start her up.' 'Really can we?' She squalled.

'She was part of the Skoufyceol railway.' He said. 'We no.' 'Smart girls...' he wisped.

I like that, there is a lot of magic tell around this railway about it being hunted and evil, but why not it is after all the start of the wizarding ways of transportation, my grate- grate- Grandmother road this to the school, she was a wizard, and what I would love to become, like. 'Come on, we got to get going back it is getting dark.'

The headlamp was still bright and shining a creep beam, down on us standing in front. My asshole brother, great-great- granddaddy got this hip, off the line when it shuts down, over this and that... he was an engineer, for the railroad, she the lantern over there this was part of this train also, it glows... even if. I can get rid of it, and his voice trails off... Likewise - 'Made in September 1880.' You got your new model year in September that year. Brand-new, she was, gorgeous. She had the smell of a brand-new steamer. About the finest smell in the world, except maybe for puss. That what always said I would rather go for puss- yet that's me.'

When she got her, she had six miles on her for test on the six days of the month at 6-o-6 she pulled out of the factory, with a hot steam fire within, and flames lick around the door of the feed, hotter than hell, and she came to life and was falling down the test line like a bat out of hell, barking a new record for this model.

Foldamer, my brother he went through hell, and back with Number 13 of the Skoufyceol railway, with the snotty stock up rich kids, not like you all now, but you get what I am saying now. If your brother loves this engine so-o much, 'why is he selling her?' 'Because he is stone-cold dead, some said he was going to go down with her in the gave or be lit up in the firebox- like the story.' 'He was not, was he the one girl spoke up,' asking. He died on the sixth, at 6 p.m. in 2006, in June.

(Creepy)

'So, Mr. LeBay...' How much do you want for her? 'I- I have been asking $50. I' well make it $25 for you, with all 6 of the cars too.' 'The money's not important, the thing her now is it, I want to see it not with me.' '...And there'll be no bringing her back... here... because you see, I am selling this sh*t hole, also along with the line to you if you want it, and buying me a condo, uptown, so-o- I won't be tracked down!'

'You got a deal,' I said quailingly, too him.

'I will get the slip, saying it all yours.'

'Will you stop, and ponder about this for a moment?' Emmah said. 'Where are, you are getting the money?' Said Emmah. 'I have been saving up for something like this all my life... so-o.' 'it's really not that much... either.' Said the other. 'Um- like, I have been saving all summer.' 'Yah but for schooling- books, uniforms, and things you need, to pass here.' 'You get everything you want... don't you?' 'He's screwing you over, and may do that too if you don't get out of here soon.'

'You could get a decent motorbike, for that much money, back home.' 'Number 13, is decent.' Yah but don't you need a track? 'No- not with the magic railway, one the train goes over she get her energy back, and it recharged her, also, remember the story. And you stop at the 'Shadow Time' station, that falling- down now, oh but it won't be if I have something to do with it.' 'The guys a weirdo,

Naddalin.' 'Yah- he's freaking weird.'

'So, that was $50?' 'Yeah, that's it.' 'You said to her $25.' '$25 would do it girlie.' 'It this is a good idea, let's just come back tomorrow- and see what happens.' 'There won't be a one, now or not.' Do you realize 'She's 14 years old- Mr.,' 'I mean, that makes her officially a historic.' 'Great- 'Kool with a k- girl, then Parnell's junkyard is full of official historic CRAP.' 'I'm buying her.' 'I don't care what you say.' 'It's your funeral, girl.' 'Would you give Naddalin a break?' She asked. 'She doesn't know what she's doing.' 'You don't know half as much as you think you do...' 'Skank-er's...' The wizard school and professor Smith, 'you did what?' 'She's all mine, and there is nothing here in this book saying: that I cannot keep her.'

'You're kidding, right?' Said the board.

'You can't buy that junkyard fatter.'

~*~

'Why is she inaccessible up?' 'No comment, 'She's safe from harm.' Long ago, I made a mistake as Number 13 caretaker, and she was fare too in loving me and me- her. I-I all most... and his voice trills away... lost in a look.' 'Wicked was threatened to abolish her.'

Part: 5

She used up all her coal, and the magic she had is now all gown.' 'Wicked kids, not caring and a man like some of the teacher of the past here, that rain her made her go too fast, trying to keep time.' 'She's as precious as gold.' 'Kids remember that, one of you well.' 'That's beautiful, I could cry, and I

did... like a baby girl.' It was said: 'The journey gets bumpier and bumpier.' 'But if there's a lost engine, maybe there's a lost railway, too... and his voice ends there.' 'I think that's how we travel her, on a secret railway, that we now look over, going so fast- with magic.' 'Taking what belongings to the lost engine, to do it!' 'I've always wanted to go this way. 'We're following some shadowy lines; I've seen on a map.

They're like light railroad tracks without any rail's ties. 'Well, 13, what are we to do?' I remember me saying, kids. 'It all seemed so much easier than life and wizardly was of it, like everything else, there are too many legalities. 'I'd given up on seeing her, as she should.'

'In my pre-teen years, I would over here this too: 'The Magic railroad?' 'Whatever,' they said. We're traveling miles and miles, taking away the magic, for them to get here to this wizard world, you know. 'They were more caring about finds wizard balls, and friend life, of seeing who's best, and was going to make it.' I recall saying to these girls that are not my bestie's, I don't know if this railroad's going to last much longer, 'till it vanishes like the engine.

'What engine?' 'Emmah said not remembering because girls and dating other girls within the school was more important, there are no boys around, it's a girl's uniformed school, and the girl is cute, so you do what you need to do.' 'The engine that traveled this railroad, way back when,' I said, 'and I never saw it either so maybe it's not a thing,' 'yes- yes it did way on way back, when the school had boys too, yet over legalities, and liabilities, we made the changes to go all-girl school.' 'We don't know what happened to it, it goes, and did for lots and lots of time, and thought about boobs, pads, girls, and kissing them all over, their bodies, and yes getting fingered by that one girl that makes me feel- ah, inside coming out.

Hello, Naddalin, the railway welcomed me, along with the hunts of the past, like entities black and hooded, some good some evil ghosts, and other like fallen angels like Jaylynn, whom all is legendary to us at the girls school of wizardry, telling tells of their life, and life's past that, the railway is a link to our shadow world, 'Welcome,' the voices said, all spooky and crappy, to my ears, to the wizard world of being on the long 3-day ride on the magic railway, yet back at the school, that will only th ink you been going a minute or so, in a time warp.

'Come on, come on it's along the green, magical ride, see all that is wizardly, over 200 years or so-o.' 'I'm very at home on trains, I said.' 'What if send a professor back to fetch you.' 'What if... said

Emmah...' We've heard that one before, about you being worried. 'What's the matter? One girl said, to the other, traveling sickness.'

~*~

Enjoying the sun, burning through the dense fog? That nothing was something, just young girls panicking, these must be the bumpers, at the end of the station; where these single-track ends, next to the castle, over on the hill.

'Are we supposed to go through them.' 'They do... we just don't see it- like, we did in the past, like a wall, like a porthole?' 'I was supposed to be back by sunset.' Said the one... You know, Naddalin, perhaps- professor- Smith, can guess where you are, or even his rest in peace, that said this story to me years ago, I wonder if we'll see him, or his ghost.

'He can... I am sure of that, they all can...' '...Maybe.' 'Because, I think he's been here himself, long ago, I bet he was related to the man, his granddad or something.' And there he is it's him in ghostly form, saying: 'I knew you were the one back then, to her and her girlfriends.'

'Now if your job to save history...'

'And if he can help, I do wish, he'd hurry, up and say the WHY of it...' then why is the magic in your hart, and if you care about something more than your little world. It keeps all optimism alive.' 'I haven't told you this a long time ago- back when you were just a little girl, but soon you'll be all grown up, and a wizard girl.' The ghostly professor said, 'there used to be an engine that traveled on the magic railroad,' glinting like in his appearance. 'Besides if only we could find that, we could still head back to Shadow Time on time.' The second girl said. 'Oh, that engine vanished... along never to be seen or heard from again, said some of the voices of pasted spirits.' 'I have to tell you something, I've heard a train whistle, and it sounded, like it came from the mountain valley, beep within the green fogged woods.' 'Yes, you well it's her crying for love and the loss of the magic of the youth like you.' He said.

'The mountain valley...?' 'I just recollected another part of the inkling of why I am the chosen to be this girl.' 'What...???' 'If he would just believe that you could do this you could,' in a way yes, he said. '13?' Can she whistle? Yes, we hear her at night from the school even faint. 'I've heard her...' 'Me too, me also...!' 'It's because she's magic, just like all of you, on the inside.' 'I identified, it or I though some when we were out walking.' Naddalin and I were traveling on the ground above it, using our wands, and the last of the magic on the vishing rails, all cover with vines, and tall grasses.

~*~

'Yeah, so have I, we said to the voices, and ghosts of the past, that are along this railway.' And the windmill, still twist and twirlers where we stopped and looked at them.' 'This must be the map along with the magic railroad, and it was they said, it was hidden, for us not to be bothered by others that abolish.' 'But- but the railroad's energy is fading away, said Emmah even now it is- it is.' The other girls agreed with her. 'The railroad needs us, girls, to care...' 'I don't know her special secret, I think I do, the coal, and someone to love this that young, and to believe.' 'And, I need to know it now more than ever.'

'Why did they want to get rid of the railway, don't you see over us, to keep us safe, from them, like your enemies.' 'Through the bumpers, off the single track, that looks like it's no longer there, the line that was shut down, by the school, the diversion track.' 'And how will I get back again?' we don't know where we are.' 'This railway is all the souls of our ancestors; a pace where can hear them and their voices.'

Boys can masturbate 7 - 10 times a day jacking, I am a girl and I can do that, I rub one out on the clit and finger down in every hour or with a dildo- sometimes both, yet I like to masturbate, and there is no shame in doing it, there is nowhere in the bible that says you can't, and it for you and a most for your body and health, so about every hour, as a girl I c*m, I have to, why don't you? And c*m over and over is not going to make you impotent! Or make God love you any less, for it. Like I have c*m in my undies now, girls always do, just think about it... and the feeling it gives you, it just happens, like when it pulls for you when you pull them out at the elastic and see that stuff, you're just feeling good, and normal.

~*~

Then I will try, I- we- and us- promised, we would get you home to your school soon, they said swirling around her. Follow me, us as we tell our stories. Right this way too: Bumper-Ville, to the other side. It just like Just a walk in the park, to do this even if all the track seems to end under you, you are not going to derail.

'We're going through, now girls.'

The porthole is sucking them in... the girls cry- 'It is dark and cold and bumpy, but we are not afraid.' 'We're not!' 'Oh, there's the missing coal truck, to her too with coal still in it, white in color.'

'We're going back for that coal truck you know here shortly.' 'Bumpers, coal truck, now we're starting to solve the mysteries.' You could hear the happy cries of the voices, around them. 'Nothing seems to work. This is the lost engine from long ago.' 'There- there-there... and they're all together, there it is it's also theirs, like all the white old cars.' 'Now we can go back... and bring some to help...' There, it is, they're - being them also, as girls, and voices, and there... is where they are now, in the lost land of the magic railway.

(The next day)

Do you think you could get some, now? 'I've tried all the different coals in the valley.' ALONG WITH SAYING- 'I can't make her steam,' he said. Coal, special magic coal, that sparkles with gold flakes in it, that is that's 13 needs. 'There's a coal truck, we pass the day before...' 'Up at the top of the mountain then down low we go, on the covering magical tracks.' 'Unquestionably, I will stop here, and I well.'

Nonetheless, I 'But better late than never well see if.' 'It's a beautiful day! Even if wherein the dark thick woods, of this railway, we're down, in this valley now, the sun's rays shining through the trees, that seem to be grabbing on to us as we pass.

'I couldn't fix her in time,' he said, along with 'yet there may not be one, if...' and his voice trails off; and at last she is alive, and the light is bight and the steam are flying around her, and breathing, like... in- an evil hiss, she wakes to form the dead.

'13 is and was just like me back when I thought, I could not c*m'n orgasm hard, when it was 12 yet just like a steam, building but the right steam, with the train if you work with her long enough, just like she, we get you there, and just like steam building up and letting it out, it makes you happy when you masturbate for a long time,' she said- this to professor Smith and he just giggled, and the girls smiled also at her un-shame. The girls all feel as she did- saying that too.

'The railroad is getting its energy back, and she is she, the inflamed red engine, breathing fire she is; shooting it out her side too, by the big wheels, the funnel is smocking too.' 'Well, the lights are singing on you and All ago now, aren't you? 'Bright for glory...' 'He (your teacher back then) would have would have loved this journey, with her all over again.' 'Yes, she would, I said wiping a tear.' 'Besides, he would have loved it that you're with me now, and all of us too... right girls?' As he said then - 'didn't forget about magic, it's safe inside you, don't let anyone take it.'

'You've found her, and she's steaming, even if she is not ride read yet, that was the next thing for me, the girls did not know, I was thinking about.' 'And she's beautiful, even now yet, I have wizardly photos, that motion picture on the new paper, is it comes to life with magic, going on in my mind of the past of what she was and it was unbelievable!' 'There was enough magic, with us and her the train to get her to movie some, on her own rusty power... a big day for us all.'

~*~

I'm glad you were able to find your way back, form your magical stride, though the woods. 'Girls, do you realize this is?

Yes, we reckon this is one beautiful engine.' 'This is the lost engine, we said to others we meet up with back at the school, in the long halls?' 'Are we glad to see you,' the girls said with running hugs.

Part: 6

(One week has passed)

'Now we can go back to Shadow Time, on a cold day, without the railway the magic can't exist, maybe not now but over time, we don't even see that.' 'Aha!' she said. 'I'll not let you down again,' some teachers, said at the school, saying this was not safe for girls this age to be doing. Watch out for the viaduct, one said, as the girls run off, to do their journey.

'It's dangerous!' They giggle. 'No, you won't, because the magic you refuse to believe in... will get the better of you, if you let it do so-o.' He said. Also, saying 'You can run, but you can't hide, form this once it or she gets ahold of you and of you.' Though the old rail tunnel, that is a mile long, dark and damp.

'Well, 13 this is your shining time, too, if we do this.' 'We hope so,' the girls said. 'Come on, 13, come to life today to for us, we had some new parts of old trains to try, to see if we could get her moving even more, along with our magic.'

'Little engines can do big things, just like a little girl like me.' 'Then watch the swirls that spin so well, around her as she comes to life for us in an evil hiss.' 'Swirls, of magic, around her body.' Like the shavings around as we start to see her steam.'

'Let's look around, the inside of all the passenger cars.' Girl- 'I think I promised you something, the right to do this.' 'She's your if you want to bring her back to life and part of a working line for the school.' 'How can we girl help?'

'I'm ready to work hard for this.' 'There is a railroad now, that likes to the past and to you making the future of this school, for all girls like you that believe, that can do or be anything they want to believe.'

~*~

Part: 7

'What are you talking about, girlfriend?' 'You're 14 years old, they said yet I say go for it.' 'Oh, girl.' 'Actually, you're wrong in think you can do all by yourself they say at the school other girls.'

'That I did not have the money for it, but buying it for cash is no problem, see they don't see that, they don't even think about cash.'

'Recordkeeping a train at 14, is something else...' and for that, I need your permission, and that you have miss-ie,' said Smith.

(Board meeting in the larger dining hall, with the stain glass windows, 1911 UnderWorld type right is typing way magically its self, with magic dust sparkling in swales around it -rip - ding- goes the mechanical devices.)

'You know how we do things, at this school, with our girls, how could you say you would oversee them doing this?'

'It's historic and good for them!'

'You but more Importantly they could've consulted with us.'

'I've consulted with you about everything I've ever done, the girl said, even back with I was little. If it's something I want, I get outvoted, 20 to 1!'

'This is no committee meeting, where we want to hear from you.'

'I say you going too!' said with passion!

'I bought the railroad, and that's it, I can give it back!'

'It most certainly is not it!'

'Sorry but you say sound like babbling to me!'

'How could you have let her do this?'

'I didn't let her.' He said.

'She wanted the railway, and she bought it.'

'We, girls here- us- we, tried to talk her out of it- even.'

'I doubt you tried very hard,' said one older woman, I did not know her name yet, but she would become very important to me, and my education over the next 4 years.'

'Yeah, well, I am going to my room.' She said storming out.

'I think you should, she said with a pissy, arrogance.'

'That's it, I am getting the hell out of here.'

'What kind of language was that, what did you say!'

'You wanted me in basic wizard courses, I am there, even if I feel, that I am high up.'

'You wanted the band instead of the chess club, I am there too.'

'I've managed 14 years without embarrassing you or landing in the dungeon.'

Asked: 'Is dungeon-ed a word?' 'It is now!' The one girl said.

'You are not keeping this here'

'Fine...!'

'Thanks for the milk and cookies.' They said walking out.

'What's the problem with it?'

'I am overseeing this, with the girls.' Said Smith.

Stall 20, the pulled her into, an old garage.

'Get it over there and shut it off...'

'Maybe the voices, of them, thought me that is the one talking, out of my mouth, that makes me do the crazy's, and act them too, so look and perceive.'

The new track was laid... in to the dungeon, parts of the school.

'Stop running down here before we all choke to death and the place burns down.' Old man said

'Kiddo, if you sold him that piece of sh*t, you ought to be freaking ashamed of yourself.'

'I didn't sell it to her.' Emmah said-

'I tried to talk her out of it.'

~*~

'You've should-a have tried harder,' he said slurring.

'I knew a guy who had done something like that once, once too with a train like this. The fuckin bastard killed himself in it, now a kid is doing it.'

'The Son of a bitch was so mean... if you poured boiling water down his throat... he would have pissed icicles.'

'Okay.' She said, awkwardly.

'That is the last time... you run that mechanical asshole in here, without ventilation. I catch you doing it one time, and you are out. You understand, and this thing will is sold for scrap.'

~*~

(The workshop)

'I am going to tell you something else right now. I don't take any sh*t of girls like you, I know you and your family.'

'This place is for learning, not for skewing off, it's not for rich-ass-ed, snot-nosed kids, to do just that.'

'I don't allow any smoking in here either.'

'You go out in the junkyard, over the way.'

'I don't smoke what you do.'

'Don't interrupt me, smartass.'

'That right I am smart and have an ass!'

'Don't interrupt me...'

'Don't get smart one more time.'

'Ah, sir?'

'What do you want.'

'Those men over there are smoking pipes and cars, yah- better tell them to quit.'

'Are you trying to help yourself out of this school right, girl?' That is when professor Smith, walked in the door and said, 'what the issue?'

'Then shut your pie hole.' He said.

'There kids trying to do something other than lying on their backside, for entertainment.'

'I know a- slut when I see one, I think I am looking at one right now, all

they know how to do.'

'They can read they can't write, or even think for themselves... either... so-o what else is there to call them?'

'You are on probation as of this moment.'

'You get it, stop piss'n them off, if you want me to help you with this.'

'You screw around with me...' He said.

'I don't care how much money, and that is not what this is about now is it?' 'You'll pay up in front... and it's now part of your schooling.'

'I'll throw you out on your ass! You got it?'

'Yes, sir, Good.'

'Now get out of here, this is not a place for young kids.'

'We're closed for the night and you need sleep.'

'You going to be okay?'

'Yeah don't cry.'

'You know, you better find yourself some other charity besides me and

Number 13 of the Skoufyceol railway.'

'What is it about that car?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe it's just that for the first time I've found something uglier than me.'

'You are the cutest girl in the school what are you saying he's an ass!'

'And I know I can fix her up.'

'You're not ugly, Naddalin.'

'I know what I am.' 'Gay, maybe, but not ugly.' Suck YOU!

'Ha- I would like that!'

'Oh, bug blow out, Emmah.'

'You don't need this sh*t.'

'Where have you been?'

'You had us worried sick, said the girls in their nighty's in their bed in their room!

Part: 8

'I just have to get my wallet out of 'Number 13' of the Skoufyceol railway.'

'Want to come in with me?'

'Sure, I think, I love you, she said to me, and I feet butterfly's and felt the same.'

(Back)

'I'm fixing up Number 13 of the Skoufyceol railway.'

'Listen, miss, you've been rude to us once too often!'

'You apologize to your family right now... but...!' ...And his voice trails off.

(The magic in the train of 13)

Show me, and she fixed herself!

'AND THEN IT WAS TRACING KIDS DOWN!'

'Is that you, Maaria? 'Hey, you ain't mad, are ya?'

'Oh, sh*t.' SHE SAID!

'you're a dead girl now! As she was running down the magic highway, do to her cast spell, or payback.'

'Where have you been, they asked back at the school? You hear about what happened to Ellie?'

'Yepper.'

'Almost makes you feel sorry for the little slut-butt.'

'How's Number 13 of the Skoufyceol railway coming?'

'Oh, sweet, nicer than new.'

'I heard she was totaled, after a test run.'

-AKA runs her down...

'That is not how it was...'

'After I cleaned up the broken glass, it wasn't so bad, and using magic, you see that she and I can do anything.'

'Nobody better do- anything to me.'

'What does that mean?'

'I gotta go.'

'I hope you didn't think I could hang around here all day, I want to see the world of the magic railway, and all the town that was lost, like one called Rockville...'

(Questions)

'I really like this shade of red.' Said a teacher.

'Didn't think they made this anymore.'

'Well, they must, we have it no?'

'I want to have deep, meaningful sex with her, I am in- love!' 'Oh, my God she smiled at me.' 'Like- do you think it was a good idea, to say she was a cute girl with blond locks, said to the other?' 'Go get her, Sara.' Yah- Think I should? 'You've got nothing to lose but your virginity.' Emmah, can you give me a hand?' 'I- I can't...' 'Yeah.' She doesn't have a chance at all, it was said.

I do not think so-o either. She's much too elegant for her. There you go, Sara. 'Lucky girl, see you at lunch... 'What did you do?' 'Hey,' Have you seen-

Naddalin? 'Yeah.' she still in the class...

What is the matter? Elysia has her in a wand war, over who knows more, with the last class, or transformation, it like a thunderstorm in there, with the back and forth and the cracking.

Elysia, 'Hi, Emmah...' she said deviously, looking for you knew a friend. Come on, dick-weed, you want it? ...Come and get it!' If it's yours, for the taking, come to Naddalin, you think you're the best

in the class, here, your little girly wand... Just take it, I say, and let's go, that's all you got to do. 'Come on.' 'That's funny, Elysia, really cute.' Put the dagger down, put down the dagger, give it back to her.

'Go get Mr. Sasey.' I say 'Come on fastly.

Picking still- 'You want to go for it?' '...jump for it little one...' 'You've got a knife and she doesn't.

That makes you a hose sh*t.' 'Yeah, the all uneasily agreed.' 'Put it down.' Glass fall off her face as she jumped one more time; and then she stepped on them, breaking them to smithereens. Yeah, put down the dagger, put down the dagger, okay, I am not going to say it again. 'Get her, girls!' 'How do you like that sh*tfaced? Puss-slap...' 'All right, break it up!' Said the professor... harshly. 'Right now, ... even more, harsh. 'You kids take a walk and get lost.' Not you, Ellie. 'I have not been doing anything.' 'You all right,

Emmah?' 'Yeah, am okay holding herself.' 'Real cute, girls real...' 'Three on one young little girl.'

Part: 9

'She was so shaken up, giving me all the details... of this girl, being chop up by getting run over by you and your train with the kid inside the cars, for the hell of it!'

'She broke down crying, saying it was not my doing.'

'I understand... they said at the board meeting.'

'A girl one of the perpetrators defecated in the cab, and this is why you did this...?'

I said I was not driving this; it was doing its own...

'They looked at me like yeah- right, knowing I hated this girl.'

'The kid was cut in half. They had to scrape her nude body up with a shovel. I's isn't that what you're theoretically meant to do with crap... scrape it up with a shovel?' 'Don't get smart with me, girl.' She could not be saved...'

'I think we deserve one more try.'

'Naddalin would never do that said the three girls that know her best.'

'Yah- not in a million years.'

'I don't think she's Naddalin.'

'It's that train, and the evil of the man that passed with the story.'

'I swear it is.' She went on saying.

Part: 10

(Three weeks more have passed)

And then it happens, like a dream yet was not a dream, she was running for her life it was running her down like the girl forms the past that was a legion, to them all in the town and schools. She was one of the brides too with nowhere to go, and she falls to her death. Now she is a fallen angel, just like Jaylynn! I am sure we see her again; I know that you did she was lost within another girl- like you reading!

Nevaeh

Book: 33

Untitled

Part: 1

Number 1

Number 1

Number 1

That '*is*' I- STEVEN YOUR NUMBER 1- NOW!

-AND-

I LOVE YOU!

Anna- this is my '*UNTITLED*' story- she typed the line in her bed with the laptop. That is died, to the outside world. Of how I love my family, friends, and boyfriend, and how I may die, at the hand of a man that is my -lover.

Steven- Fuck'n sh*t-

What? She screamed, in lost confusion.

He then said...

'You should be SH*T-ING YOUR SELF TO HOW GOOD I AM.'

Her face went slack again IN THE THOUGHTS, SHE BLINKED AND SAID THE SAME LINE BACK, and she looked sullenly at the wall. That is a good opener- no- that what she said... ha. He thought she was going to blank out again, but instead, she fetched a sigh and lifted her light body of like 99 lbs. from the bed. 'You don't have any need to use such words in the Nevaeh books, for the reason that they didn't use such words at all back then.

They weren't even invented, I suppose, but that was a better time than with the first parts. You might as well stick to your Nevaeh stories, Anna. I say that honestly. As your number one fan.' I would like to let you know and see that... I see it- you twisted tit- smacking pussy licker! She said- suck on that- okay you well... here my bar of soap that I use on the dicks of the horses uses it! Suck on that! She went to the door out to the hall lock it as she looked back at her. She tried to smile some and love the thought that she could make it as the writer. -yet was it worth the lack of freedom?

'I'd rather not have you livid- or heating on me- you need to love me- for real... I sort of depend on you; you know.' 'I'll I put that manuscript back by all your movies, this is my copy, it not finished, Nevaeh's you need to do some over- for me- to love you more than I do- think of what we do as your writing lines write as you would act. I may go back to the other one later when I'm done.' 'Don't do that if it makes you mad,' he said- but I want to feel you as I read the pages inside and out.

She did not return his smile-

'Yes,' she said. 'You do. You do, don't you, Anna?'

He left... going for a drive... to clear his mind- or to get things for the livestock... the wolf was left in my room teeth showing and the dr-ip drip-

dripping with spit at my bare body chained down to the bed like he was just on a long enough chain to like my toes... I could feel the breath of her wet nose... ticking me - and I could not back down of she would have bitten down hard!

She began to wait for the clock to chime outside the door along with the coo-coo one overhead reminds her that just like that she was looking and sound crazy also. Two chimes. The chimes over and over and for days he was off to do another kill on some little girl and to drag her back to his hole in the basement or to light her up in front of me like before.

He lay propped up on the pillows, watching the door. She came in. he was wearing an apron over his naked body as I watch him chop this little bond girl up into a ham-salad for the wolf... with a hatchet, he kept her six-year-old skirts, and underwear as a keepsake - and the bones that were not licked up by the wolf named after the girl in the story was ground up in a woodchipper - and her head was crash in the wood splitter - the manway she died. On one hand, she floor-bucket of her young little sweet - red blood - saying drink it - it shows love.

'I presume you want' your tent-sucking-bull-sucking - medication,' he said flighty. That was him though - calm and nice to oh my god - run! If you can... 'Yes, please.' He tried to smile at her ingratiatingly, and felt that shame again - she felt grotesque to himself, a stranger. 'I have it,' she said, 'but first I have to clean up the mess in the comer - you see what you made me do - with fling your sh*t out of the bed pain - if you could walk you would like that up to clean it. The mess you made.

You'll have to wait until I do that.' Baby

Dick Baby Dick Baby DICK! THAT IS, YOU! DICK OF A BABY!

She lay in the bed with his legs spared eking in the head - reading what she has said - making shapes like broken branches under the misspelled text that he cannot say for... and cold sweat running

her nose- wearing shabby clothing her face is down now smashed in the dirty pillow looking out now she sees him make a dive over the creek outside, as she lay and watched as she crossed her eyes over the room of how to get out- now back after letting all the pop in pee in the corner he and set the bucket down and throw Anna at wall- whole body to picked up the pieces of the sh*t bowl and took them out and came back and knelt by the bucket and fished in it and brought out a soapy rag and wrung it out, and began to wash the dried soup from the wall.

Done- she said after sitting there for hours- okay back to bed the fucked man said- she lays and watching yet again with him fiddling with her body- and at last she started to shiver hard and the shivering made the pain worse, but he could not help it. Once he turned around and saw her shivering and soaking the bedclothes in sweat, he knew that he was taking it to far- and the sweetness was starting to come out with him... so unlike what was shown before... and he favored her with such a cunning and knowing frown, that he could easily have killed her.

'It's dried on,' she said, turning her face back into the corner. She gobbled them into his mouth, and when he looked up, he saw her lifting the creamy plastic floor-bucket toward her- lick never before.

It filled his field of vision like a falling moon over the water that was little ingrown in relation.

Gloomy-sh muddy water slopped over the circumference onto the quilt.

Nonetheless, instead of leaving, she walked over to the bed and fished in her apron pocket. She brought out not two capsules but three. 'Now,' he alleged sympathetically. she gawked at her, and his face was all eyes. 'Shampoo them down with this,' she said.

Her voice was still tender.

'Do it fucker do it,' she said. 'I know you can dry-gulp them but thrilled to believe me-when I say I can make them come right back up o'er.

After all, it's only rinse-water. It won't hurt you.' he tended over him like a monolith, the bucket slightly tipped. He could see the rag twisting slowly in its dark nadirs like a drowned thing; he could see a thin scrum of soap on top.

Part of her groaned but none of him hesitated.

She drank quickly, washing the pills down ever so hard like, and the taste in her mouth was yuck and was as it had been on the existences when his mother made him brush his teeth with soap. Her tummy hooked, and he made a thick sound. 'I love you,' she said and kissed him on the cheek. She left, not looking back, carrying the floor bucket. 'I wouldn't throw them up, Anna. No more until seven-thirty tonight.' he observed at her for a moment with a flat empty gaze, and then her face lit up and she beamed.

'You won't make me mad again, will you?' 'Nope,' she whispered. Irritation - was there - as the moon outside was all the hope she had left in this world. What a bad idea! He lay back, tasting grit and plaster in his mouth and throat. Tasting soap as she was sucking it, I won't throw up ... won't throw up ... won't throw up. You do and you'll eat it and if you throw it up for that you'll eat that too.

Her fantasized along with dreamed she was being eaten by him over the nights she was at rest not an at pace though. It was not a noble dream. There was a bang and he thought, Naturally, good, all right!

Discharge it! Shoot the damn thing!

Then she was awake seeing a gun at her temple for real, knowing it was only Steven, pulling the back door shut. And then she out as he injects the fuck sleep add to do just that... She had gone out to do the chores. she heard the faint moment of truth of his footsteps in the snow outside now. I love he said- and she just gives him the pink and stinks sing with her left hand- oh such a fooler... he went past the window- with the plow- I need if I could run I would be chased down with it v- ing at my hills wearing a parka with the hood up.

Her breath plumed out, then broke apart on her loving face. the way a sturdy countrywoman might carry a milk pail, slightly away from her body with no thought at all, so that none would spill. At last, the insistence of this thought began to disappear, as well as he realized he was going to slumber. she had held everything down long enough for the medication to begin its work.

He had won. This time... she was going to do it... he didn't look in at her, intent on her chores in the barn, he supposed. Nourishing the animals more then I, and I see this I get the same mile I sewer to olefin god I do it's the same pig slop, cleaning the stalls, maybe casting a few runes- he wouldn't put it past her. had to think about this bizarre situation while he was still capable of something like the worst thing, she was discovered, was that him- that didn't want to think of it even while he could, even when she knew he could not bring the situation to an end without thinking about it.

Her mind kept trying to push it away, like a child pushing away his meal even though he has been told he cannot leave the table until he has eaten it.

Yet, miserable or not and he was... she still wanted to live and love yet not either with is a creeper. Think about it, dammit! Jesus, are you already so cowed you can't even try? Nopper- but almost that cowed. Look now he said- staring out the window- The sky was darkening elaborate- sunset. Five-four, maybe seven o'clock lost in it she did not even know.

She could have gone back to sleep looking at all the stars and wishing on one for the hope of freedom, wanted to go back to sleep, but she balanced thought. she didn't want to think about it for the reason that, just living it was hard enough to bar with. she didn't want to reason with it or about it for the reason that, on every occasion, she did ill-disposed descriptions facilitated, the way she went outright, the way she made him think of idols and stones, and now the way the green metal floor-bucket had sped toward his face like a colliding moon. Thinking of those things would not change his state of affairs, was, in fact, worse than not thinking at all, but once he turned his mind to Steven and his position here in her house, the thoughts that came, thronging out all others.

Her heart would start to beat too fast and then drop off to a stall, mostly in horror, of what evil creepy thing was next there he was creeping- creeping- creeping in her room thinking of something to do to her body and mind... it was just a matter of creeper time. but then again partially in humiliation, too. she saw herself putting his lips to the rim of the bucket, saw the bleach- water with its film of soap aid the rag fluctuating in it, proverbing these things and yet in a swallowed anyway, never hesitant a bit of it.

I'll make you drink this- if you don't shout the fucking hole in your face!! she would never tell anyone about that, presumptuous she ever got out of this, and she imaginary she might try to propaganda about it to herself, but she would never be able to do that. Then an odd, angry thought occurred to him: She doesn't like the new book for the reason that he's too senseless to apprehend what it's up to.

Per capita time he had taken a year or two off to put pen to paper one of the other novels, what thought of as her 'grim' work with what was at first certainty and then hope and finally a species of grim anxiety- she had acknowledged a flood of protesting letters from these women, many of whom signed themselves 'your number-one fan.'

Surely... Plus while she might be crazy, was she so-0 different in her appraisal of her work from the thousands & thousands of other individuals transversely the kingdom - 100% of the females whom could scarcely wait for each new 2,000 page's chapter in the tempestuous life of the foundling who has risen to say, 'I do' a peer of the monarchy? Nope, not at all.

They wanted Nevaeh, Nevaeh, and Nevaeh. she could write an outdated story of wouldn't matter to teen just old creeps like him that want at trill or feel loved.

Thoughtful about the things he had said was at least a new avenue, and feeling angry at her was improved than feeling scared of her, and so he went down it with some eagerness.

They would still want Nevaeh, Nevaeh, Nevaeh. It's hard to follow ... she's not interesting ... and the vulgarity is to freak'n much it this do it over or you'll eat the stapler! How did that feel going down on your earlobe...? ...?... He asked... Then he specked it on her forehead asking the same question - with a sinker... doing it. The thought wasn't just odd; under the circumstances, how she felt about Untitled was totally immaterial. The tone of these letters varied from puzzlement (that continually hurt the most, one way or another,) to admonishment, to outright anger, but the memo was always equal: It wasn't what I expected, it wasn't what I wanted. Please go back to Nevaeh.

I want to know what Nevaeh is doing. Too senseless...? No? Too set... Not just averse to change, but hostile to the very idea of change. he recollected her coming in here, withholding the capsules, coercing permission to read the manuscript of Untitled. she felt flushed and shamed with humiliation, and warming his face... now they were mixed with real fury. It had come into bud from a spark into a minuscule recessed blaze.

The anger sparked again. Anger at her obdurate density, anger that she could actually kidnap her, keep her captive, and the strength of her choice between drinking dirty rinse water from a

floor-bucket or suffering the pain of his shattered legs- and ripped open girlie hole, and then, on top of all that, find the nerve to disapprove the best thing he had ever written.

Suddenly, she felt better again, felt even though he knew this uprising was petty and pitiful and meaningless... she had never shown anyone a manuscript before, & she had proofread it and then retyped the thing.

Never- ever not even the dead girl did that- Never. Why, he didn't even- for a moment her thoughts overdrawn off cleanly. she could hear the dim sound of a cow mooing and the wolf how ling... laying in her bed... they made friends if you well. I going to get you out of here so she said. Why? Why- she didn't even make a copy until the second draft was done.

4 years of hard work now she has worked nonstop, she didn't like it, and she was cracked. Hitherto he had to see it... The manuscript copies of Untitled which was now in Steven ownership was, in fact, the only existing copy in the whole world. He had even burned his notes.

Nevaeh was what she liked; in the story yet the face was the one losing it like the girl in the storybooks did... funny no? Absolutely- The work, the pride in your work, the worth of the work itself... all those things faded away to the magic- hurricane lantern shades they really were when the pain got bad enough.

She remembered thinking: Turn the pages all by hand up and down the screen, of this 1,000 pages' book/manuscript into paper hats if you want, just ...delight... The annoyance, humiliation, and heat gushed again, developing the first dull re-joining throb in her legs and hips. She really was an idol, and if she didn't kill her, she might kill what was in him.

That she would do that to him- that she could when he had spent most of his adult life thinking the word writer was the most imperative description of himself, made her seem totally disgraceful, something she must seepage.

Now she heard the eager yell of the wolf- he had thought she wouldn't mind, but he thought Nevaeh was a wonderful name for a wolf dog. He remembered how she had imitated it, the way her upper lip had creased toward her nose, how her cheeks had seemed to smooth, how she had truly- looked like a wolf for a moment:

Hoooooowwwwwww!!!!

From the barn- I see him standing, I hear the sound through the glass of the window - the voice strong. Making the sound of the wolf- imitating it. she lies on her backside now, and puts her arm over his eyes, and tried to hold onto the anger, for the reason, that the anger made her feel fearless. A brave lady might meditate. A coward couldn't. Here was a man who had been a doctor & he was sure of that also. Even so, the thought was hell- no, because he did not go work- much other than being a baby killer- or so I saw on his pc, which I hacked into looking around the house when I would get out without him knowing.

Why did she no longer practice her trade? That seemed obvious. Cutting babies heads off sick and having a sexual thing with them to twisted fuck! Not at all her gear was stowed right; heaps of it was rolling around in the holds. If it was understandable to her even through the fog of pain she has been existing in, it would surely have been obvious to her age group. She missed being a younger teen, and the kids she knew- and also acting... and life outside 4 walls.

The police and ambulance were called to the scene as you know yet there was no Anna to be found- she was going or so they thought it was talked on the tv, that she was dead- or that someone would report her to a hospital, or something along that line.

She had connected no one about all this just so he could keep he love for himself- in the guest-room, put IV drips in his arms and a sh*tload of dope in her body to make his Mr. Happy well-happy! he had dragged her from the wreckage of her train car and instead of calling and do what he should have done... He had told no one he was here, and if she hadn't by now, that meant she didn't mean too.

It's been 5 years now since that day- he a sideshow of all that went down. Sufficient so she had gone into what she called breathing depression at least once- and just plain depression over all this that was becoming her life- and books all she had to do in life now where this dumb book. 'She's my number-one fan,' he muttered and put an arm over his eyes like a gay fag.

Its eyes, It's the face in the night it the feeling of cold and hot. It's creeper

Steven in my bed... with the throbbing in his legs began to cycle up. No. No, Nooooo. she pressed the felon of her elbow more tightly against her eyes. From the barn, he could hear spaced thudding noises of another dead girl, that he was making into mulch. Unbearable the sight, and smells I would get from this man- that was not human to me at all.

To tell what they were, of course, but in his imagination- I love it as I love you, he said to her lying next to her in her bed without her doing anything about it. she could see him pushing bales of hay out of the loft with the heel of his boot and yet cover over my young girl bodies that he had dragged in by the hair, could see them tumbling to the barn floor the roll like dead logs.

Chop- Chop- Chop! It is all I here for a day! The killer Steven was back- why not me? Then, cutting cleanly through this like a sharp knife, came her agitated as he was run to her bed for his playtime with her... even the dog was getting fucked over, almost- screaming voice: I heard them all get fucked and killed in the barn-like all under 14 years of age too- you like it don't say you don't- he said to me as he slit on open with his knife in- front of my dead her head feels on my chest- I freaked- in horror. The little hand now at my lower hips the body blooding out down my skin... I would not have thought the eyes of death looked like this.

Name- Steven

('So intense!')

My name is Steven King.

He was on the stand for some of these, yet he got away with all the

Killing's there was not anything I could do- but lay in my bed. All the weeks he was off at court in other counties. I could do nothing but writing this story!!

...And I did!!!

F*ck- YOU! MOTHER F*CKING C*CK SUCKER, I SAID!

'Come on,' She muttered, her arm over his eyes this was the way he thought best, the way he imagined best. He could see the courtroom in Bedford, could see Steven on the stand, not wearing jeans now but a rusty florid-black dress and an awful hat. he could see that the courtroom was crowded with spectators, that the judge, vas bald and wearing glasses. The judge had a white beard. There was a birthmark beneath the white mustache. The white mustache covered most of it nonetheless not quite all.

Steven-

'I'm afraid this is going to take a while, Anna.' He rubbed, what I did not get off the wall higher the stain slowly disappeared from the plaster but she went on dipping the cloth, wringing it out, cleaning, and then repeating the whole process. She could not see his face at this point, but the idea- the certainty... of that- she had gone absolute and might go on scrubbing the wall for hours tormented her. He read he tells of who- 'Can you imagine!' That spirit of ... of fan-love ... I was all there's... ha- you have no idea who loves me... he said on the sand mocking them... know he would be going back to her. At last- just before the clock chimed once, marking two-thirty- the days started blurring.

Then her eyes drifted to the corner, where no sign of the splashed soup remained her of... of what was lost and what was gained... cast their eternal damaged shadows. She came back and stood for just a moment inside the doorway, observing his wet face with that same mixture of sternness and maternal love through this all. Living alone as I do is no excuse whatever for stamping the job.

My mother had a saying, Anna, and I live by it- don't f*ck up of your dead to me. Bath time- 'Now I must rinse you,' he said, 'or else the soap will leave a dull spot. I must do it all; I must make the whole shebang right. It hurts he'd blubbered out. It hurt her legs and it hurt her heart- yet it the pain he loves seeing the most other than the twisted thoughts of the love she not ever going to give him. 'all nasty, never neat,' she used to say.' 'Please,' she groaned strongly. 'Please, the pain, I'm dying I have to be.' 'Nope.

You're not dying- not all the way yet.' 'I'll shriek,' she said with power behind it, beginning to cry harder. It's nobody's fault but your own you see this is what I have to do with you to understand me and what you don't understand- understand? ''I won't be able to walk- you can help it- but you'll never- ever.' 'scream,' she said.

'Remember that you made that mess- now you paid for it with your hip- humbled with the bat. Not me. she watched as she dipped and wrung and rinsed, dipped and squeezed and washed. One way or another she was able to keep from screaming.

She's going to go out and I'll hear her pouring the rinse-water down the sink and maybe she won't come back for hours for the reason that maybe she's not done punishing me hitherto. At last, just as the clock in what he assumed was the parlor began to strike three, she rose and picked up the bucket. She's going to go out now. 'She's always writing things down, not making things up to add to how she was going to die yet the story would live on as her memories.' Her thoughts- he said- okay- Now I just rinse.

Also- she thought about how her legs and arm have to be booked at least 10 times now by his hands over those 5 years to keep her from running, he whispered, but could get no further- with the ditty talk with her- it was like she was almost falling for him- times before.

The bailiff asked her to state her name, and over and over again- she said- it was Steven that did this to me in the text- so someone would read- but she said about all the kids too- yet would the story get out- if she could find a way to hide the pieces of the lines in-between; she sat there with her fibrous solid gloomy body displacing air and said her name over and over again but no more than that.

Still trying to imagine why the ex- Dr. who had taken her prisoner might have once been, put on the stand even if she did not make it the story would say it all, Anna drafted and then drifted off to sleep. Saving a copy- and stashing a copy and hiding in the pipe of the bedpost rolling.

30 relief swept through her- seeing a plan goes over heed- and some trains, so great he felt like crying. Something had happened when he was asleep, someone had come, or perhaps Steven had

had a change of heart or mind- saying when should I let you go- I, not your type you need someone that loves you more then I if that is possible- you need to have your life back- I was in awe.

It didn't matter... that would change his mood I was sure of that- yet that side of this man I liked... he was not all bad. He had gone to sleep in the monster- man's house and had awakened in the hospital to get the things he needs- being a Dr. there were no questions asked as for why- he was a Dr. like Mengele- an angel of death- running a test on girls like me. You can hear all bout he works and struggles here in the untitled book- that I hope someone will see

'You ... you ... you dirty- C*NT!' 'YOU DIDN'T'- HE SAID. Crawling from room to room- when he was out- she got out- she would be more than happy to crawl to the telephone, no matter how much it might hurt. He would crawl to the telephone over broken glass if that was what it took. And it was a heart attack ... but not the right kind. She came toward him, not quite staggering but rolling, the way a sailor will when he's just gotten off his ship at the end of a long voyage. Run- Run- Run she could not do that, yet she tried- Hell- she tried to psychiatrist away from her, but there was no place to go. There was only the headboard, and behind that, the wall.

'You where moaning,' she said. There was glass water- pitcher on the table. She seized it up and brandished it at her. Coldwater splashed his face. An ice-cube landed beside his left ear and slid down the pillow into the hollow of his shoulder. 'I had a bad dream.' 'What was it about?' That was P*SSIE- she falls asleep... he walked out.

The door at the far end of the huge ward opened and it came to Steven- only she was dressed in a long-aproned dress, and there was a cap on her head; she was dressed as Nevaeh in Nevaeh's Love parts, of the story.

Nevertheless, surely, they would not have put her in a long ward like this? It was a big hangar to do this right! Identical rows of men (with identical bottles of nutrients hung from identical IV trays beside their beds) filled the place. she sat up and saw that the men themselves were also identical- they were all him. Then, distantly, he heard the clock chime and understood that it was chiming from beyond the wall of sleep. This was a dream she thought- yet did I get it down- was it a dream?

Sadness replaced the relief.

Over one arm she held the book copy to her chest- all the same, nothing changed. There was a cloth over the contents as she slid the scrip back down in it holding the place. On the other side was all the hidden pills she did not take BUSTED Here- flung it open one night into the face of the first sleeping Anna-. Anna's face had turned a ghastly white as soon as knocking over the stand- fear jerked her out of the dream and into the bedroom brawl, where Steven was losing his mind... saying this is where my money on you goes? Yes- standing over her face as the storm crashes.

He was holding the fat hardback of Nevaeh's in one hand. How could you call yourself in the story- and say it was me how could you! She suggested he was about three-quarters of the way through not to stop that he was not the one that did it. Yes- she came awake at once; jerking up on her elbows. (she knew better- yet did not care.)

The first thing which was not the truth that popped into her head was what he replied- what she could have said- and that was a name change in the text- yet she wants people to know if they read this story. She came in late the following morning, her face the color of ashes.

She had been dozing, she's had a heart attack it felt like with happing over and over with no rest, she thought, and there was a moment's alarm which was directly replaced by joy. Your Just a name

in a story- you can have this one... and no one will ever know. Let her have one - you killed her to let her have something to be remembered by! A big one those he said- I didn't want it!

A f*cking chest-buster! He said if I get busted for this- and I did I find you- and I'll kill you! 'No!' She reached the side of the bed, bumped it, wavered and for a moment seemed on the verge of falling on top of her. Then she just stood there, him- looking down at her feeling her out- like her paperwhite face looking up, the cords on her neck standing out, one manner pulsing in the center of her forehead, and one down lower.

Her hands snapped open, hooking his t-shirt- shut into solid, then snapped open again when she was injected with strong drugs.

WAKE THE F*CK UP! He yelled... 'What- don't- she said-' suddenly he did- he pulled her out of bed by her broken legs- and the bitch lapping started over the dead girl in the story, and his entire midsection first seemed to turn hollow and then to entirely disappear as the drugs took over, and he had free well of 4- play. she remembered hem that bookmark had been last night, three -quarters of the way through. Not to freak like this that it would be fine at the end- She had finished it- right- that she an actress she would know what to do, and what not to do. She knew all there was to know. You can read the story for your self- all of them- like I did- all 1,0000 words. It's good... I know you would love me for saying that ass holes. JUST F*CKING DO IT!!

'She can't be dead IN THE STORY FOR SHE IS HERE TOO!' Steven shrieked at her. Her hands snapped open and hooked closer to his face than ever before in fear.'

Marcella- in Neveah- CANNOT BE DEAD!'

'Steven- Steven, please- cool it- dude.' In his mind so-0 bright! she saw her bringing the pitcher down into his face, she saw herself dying of a fractured skull or OD-ing or something sick like that or too much f*cking!

And, a massive cerebral outflow in a freezing flood of ice-water while goose-pimples formed on her arms. Or maybe he was peeing on her in her dreams I'll go with that one- it went into the story anyways she said. She wanted to do it; there was no question of that- get out and read this thing to someone that would get the story of the worst horror of her life, and also to make some money for of it too why not she a little cracked now too.

At the very last moment, she turned away from him- flung the water-pitcher at the door instead, where it shattered as the soup-bowl had the other day. he looked back at her and she brushed her hair away from her face- two hard little spots of red came up- had now bloomed the white- with the backs of her hands.

'Dirty Girlie- wh*re!' He panted.

'Oh- you dirty Girlie, how could you!' what is wrong with saying what really happened that what you wanted no? she spoke swiftly, immediately, eyes flashing, engrossed on her face - she was positive in that moment, that his life might depend on what she was able to say in the next 30th seconds. 'Steven, childbirth can have died in stories like this- with some based on you as the killer.

U- U- You've used my name!! he said...

Nevaeh gave her life for her husband and her best friend and her child. The spirit of Nevaeh will always be there,' 'I don't want her spirit- I f*cking want- here!'

I'm right here she said- confused she not real- she screamed, you are a f*cking retard! hooking her fingers into claws and running them down his face until he guessed out blood, both shaking as if she would tear his eyes out. 'I want her! You killed her! You murdered her!' Her hands disintegrate shut into fists o'er and he drove them down like pistons, one on either side of his head. he screamed. kill her! - Her legs flared, and he cried out. They pressed deep into the pillow, and she rebounded like a ragdoll. 'I didn't kill this girl- she not real! IDIOT!!!!' She immobilized, staring at him with that narrow black expression that looks of the crevasse.

'Unquestionably not SO-0, 'she said, excessively mocking. 'Then if you didn't, Anna - who did?' 'No one,' She said more quietly. WHO DID- HE SAID ALL P*SSIE- 'She just died LIKE THE OTHER GIRLS AND BECAME THE SPIRIT AS AN ANGEL ALSO?' Ultimately, She - knew this to be the truth. If Nevaeh had been a real person, she knew he might very well have been called upon 'to aid the police in their explorations', as the euphemism went. After all, she had a motive - he had hated her FOR IT.

Ever since the third book, he had hated her. It had been called Nevaeh's Hobbies to live on. In- it Nevaeh spent a cheerful, that we loved anyways not that she was a real girl like me - is that so he said then if I kill you-you should haunt me then too just like the story? Your nuts she said to him - what's taking you so long just do it you sick vain f*cking basted. Depth may have been the outcome - but he hadn't. After a while, in spite of his having grown to admire her, Nevaeh's death had been something of a surprise to him.

'You must think I was born yesterday,' he said. Her lips drew back from her teeth.' she had remained true enough to himself for art to imitate life however feebly - I didn't think you even need to add about the girl Marcella at all, why not- the part of it now- to the very end of Nevaeh's adventures she looks over this one that what I said, what's wrong with that? Like she is me now - as here... (Nevaeh)

She had died a most unexpected death. His cheerful capering had in no way changed the circumstance. 'You fib,' Steven whispered. 'I thought you were good, but you are not noble.

You are just a lying old c*ck sucking bitch- that I use as a whore. he overturned the table by the bed. The one shallow drawer spilled out. I could kill you- now and not even think about it you're not here- you're not here... are you.' I just played a part- so-o no... if you want to think that, she said- lost in his crazies. 'She fell away, that's all. He was dulling all over her body- and run back and forth all around the creaky wood floor, from time to time that materializes. It was like life when someone just... it works for him any longer without this fiction-sh girl.'

His wristwatch and he picked her up by her feet saying empty your pockets- for she would not he was fearing that she was hiding more- about her plans- to do whatever- hanged upside down now the pocket change spilled out- yet there was nothing found- only Anna knew where that was- and her maybe angel- that she wrote about in the night and day and year after year.

I said- the writer is like God that we play to the people in a story - this just pissed him off more blasphemy he said- I like her and Marcel Ray Duriez made them up, just like God made us up and no one can change what they do there the gods for the story- no you why did you do it then if this is what you want? The gun was at my head for that one... for I can do it that is why- and driving me crazy! And then it's not as real to me... she is U- you! Not me- I just don't have that knack- He explained, all right, okay she said to put it down, there was far there- as the gun when off yet it was empty... at her eardrum. He giggled saying I see you pissed your pants...

Part: 2

He stood there, and Anna lay in his bed, with 'round marks in the pillow beside his ears and looked at her. He could hear the water which had been in the pitcher dripping on the floor, and it came to him that he could commit murder.

If she hadn't thrown the pitcher, he would have devastated it on the floor himself, and tried to shove one of the broken pieces of glass into her throat while she stood there, as inert as a nightstand. She went blank then... to all this- She straightened up with her hands hanging limply by her sides, looking at the wall where an old photograph of his girl's photos was hung- even the one he did in and eat out as he called it.

Explain about this god that you have become, all right, okay, she said- but as far as Nevaeh goes I'll tell you one thing to you I have the power to do as I want with her, for the write said... you know him- you're the dirty basted here doing this to a story that quite frankly never used to do that with - him- Marcel Ray Duriez could sue you, we- I see his ass in court then won't I... I'll tell you that God just happens to have a couple of broken legs and God just happens to be in My house eating My food and ... and ... that night- I got out of bed he was not noting that I was getting stronger I hobbled to the door and picked the lock, and in the kitten, there was a door at the far end, I went to it yet it was looked from the outside and inside, two-way key- I get the big knife- as I hear his car make its way up the lane.

I did even have the door to my room shut he was in the home- looking in at me saying what have you be doing- and I just said

MASTURBATING! Okay, he said- wow- do I stay or go? Did you want to finish up?

She came back a little at a time, and the anger, at least, was gone. She looked down at him sadly. she looked down into the spill from the drawer, but there was only the change, a pen, a comb, and her watch. More important, no knife was found as he turns down the bed.

Nothing unlike always he said to her... little did he know- that she was plain to kill him in his sleep if she could- just to get out- or not kill him at all if she could get out without him knowing about it. This was a question which had occurred to her from now and then was, strictly theoretical, of course like Academia, only now it wasn't, and he had the answer. 'I think I better go now. I don't think I better be around you for a while. I don't think it's ... clever.' 'It doesn't matter. A place I know- is where I want to go, she was talking to her own mind here like it would talk back to here.

If I stay here, I'll do something unwise- and end this all. I need to think... yet my thinking is muddy- I know this... Goodbye- he will be saying to this girl here> Anna.' She strode across the room. 'Will you be back to give me my medication? - she giggles insanely...' she asked, alarmed that she was talking to herself, and answering it too.

Ah ah- ahh-ha She grasped the doorknob and pulled the door shut without answering the obverse he was out there too. Yet she was going to make the run for it- naked as the day she was born into the riches of having a gold spoon up her ass, and then now into this hell where she is getting f*cked with it, For the first time she made the key she made work it rattled some in the lock and she got away.

The hunt was on for the star- he loved- and hated all at the same time... he had to get her back... or she would squall this story. 190 days of freedom... in the woods living off the land... she was found naked and week- he drugs her back to his house by her hear... she was half dead... she was too crazy at this point to get help... or get that she was not locked up. And when she was free- she was alone, she did not want to be after 6 years of that you would do the same? Just look at her slit wrists and you can see the story...

Thump- Thump- Thump- tugging- in the brush- she heard her footsteps coming for her as she runs through the woods now- able to do so... yet in his hand he took the bass ball bat, and mashed

both of her small feet yet again- the bat facing downward both hands on the hand perpendicular to the ground Uh- Uh- screams in eked in the hells like haunting ghosts of the past. the motor sound began to go away. It dwindled to a snore and then to a drone and was finally gone. An engine cranked over and then started up.

The low, crunching squeal of tires turning on packed snow. Alone in Steven's house, locked in this room.

Locked in this bed. In the room- In the ROOM- In the f*cking RoOM!

Rocking- Rocking- sitting in the bed- nuts in my mouth and head.

Hahahahahahahahahahahaha! She

said- This is nice- no a f*cking sh*t c*ck damn -it. She was screaming bad words- and not giving an sh*t! Anna had gone a little crazy- I hear the same steps now going off down the hall; I sit there passive- staring now at the typewriter that is mocking with its F and U being said. she lay in bed looking at the ceiling, his throat dry and his heart beating fast. throat dry from all the come going down that he had headed back for the 190 days.

And all the drugs too. she grimaced as she cried out angrily- words he couldn't understand, and something else fell and shattered. A door slammed. Now After a while the parlor clock chimed noon, and midnight and she was now in her 20's.

Year seven- she had dozed, but never really slept. The chiming of the clock woke him each time, the hour came around, and go and past fast and slow.

She knew just how long since of the last go about; he had been carrying in his love not being his love- at the time of the crash he was in love with the girl- yet not the real girl. He had not been

able to reach down hand have her sign it yet- the book that is- he has all his books with her name on it now- every time the clock- he sees looks at those books thinking how are these books that go me here?

She had spent much of the night alternately dozing and waking in a cold sweat, sure - she was dying. When she came back by noon of Twenty-Four- has passed, she realizes that as bad as the pain in his legs and pelvis was, something else was also making her hurt. It was also the finger f*cking- too. there where ten groups of five and one extra. The little groups, neat at first, grew increasingly jagged as his hands began to tremble. He didn't believe he had missed a single hour. It was the withdrawal of the toys in and out also that he shoved in her hard-core style.

She needed the pills in more ways than one. she thought of trying to get sit up in the bed, but the thought of the thump and the drop and the supplementary growth of pain continually deterred her. she could imagine all too well 'So bright and there!' After a while, he began to feel hunger and thirst even through the pain. How it would feel... stricken he made a mark on his arm - four perpendicular marks, and then an oblique slash to seal the quintet. It became something like a duel. I am a Pretty Thirstily... she said- oh just drink your own piss... he said. Not happy with yet another long type up for a new chapter of the never-ending

Nevaeh storyline. I am becoming Marcel Ray Duriez- Anna said! I will soon have done as many words and tossed half! f*ck that in the ass with a 2 x 4! She said- I like it way to rewrite it- for I said so- he said. I SAY SO...! After a while, she began to hope She was dying.

Anything to be out of it.

Part: 3

This was not the first time this man- The offer of the town- Fudd- was on his ass he was the case from day one- (with his touch-ie feelie wife- trying to make him during work hours.) the stopped by

the home- and drove by in the night my hands waving out yet he never saw- he ran in on me- injecting me with sleep aids, and he put me in the addict nude- the places man was on one end of the wall with a doorway and I on the other ha-ha we giggle 4-times- side steeping in an out the door sing what we were going to do or go.

I'm up here I called out fast- he was climbing the steps- I could see his face- and the rain after him- and hit him over the head with a Gibbons guitar carking his skill, sprinters spinners-

The light bulb- over the head crack in the swing- will he shoving the splinted nick down and though his nick as he runs freaking out. I tried even to hop a haling ass train one night when I got out, yet my legs could not keep up... and there was Steven coming at me with the snowplow- and he ran my legs over with the 1953 farm tuck.

Back up and going over yet again.

I saw Steven now chasing this man down as he was going to his car Steven got on the farm tracker- and ran his head over with the spinning blade! With the evil glimmer in his eyes as he looked at me with my mouth hugging open looking out the addict window- as I was coming to it. His head spread like a watermelon that was Julie-ie in your mouth- it was that wet- and gushy.

Anna closed her eyes to all this think I am next, swaying unsteadily on his twisted, aching legs, waiting to see if he was going to get mad or cry. She was suddenly very scared... Steven's feet as she approached him. Thud-slush, thud-slush, thud-slush. Her hair hung around her face. Her eyes where dull. 'Here.' She threw the pills at him. Her hands were also covered with mixed streaks of goo. Red stuff, brown stuff, sticky white stuff. Anna had no idea what it was. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. The pills hit his chest and bounced into his lap.

She turned to go.

Thud-slush, thud-slush, thud-slush. Hump and bump! 'No, Anna. 'She moved to the door and then turned, looking at him with that stony face. Only her eyes, those tarnished dimes, were fully alive under the shelf of her brow.

I would like to leave you with. You may think you can fool me, or trick me; I know I look slow and stupid. But I am not stupid, Anna, and I am not slow.' Anna thought the extremity of his terror might kill him. But she did not want the freedom any longer, she wanted him... or so that what she said for the next 10 years... (Anna placed a book on Marcella's grave. Saying you did it hun- you did it.)

New York- (20 years) her real story was pushed- she got away after Steven passed for a gun blast to his head and now that he was depriving me of his company- it was time to hobble out the door and start my life- I never acted again- I never had a family... yet- I had a story that you would not even believe if I wrote it down for you- yet here it is... she said to her agent. This was to make a few bucks sick- no? it was the worst horror of my life! I still think about him- as more than someone that was evil. My life now well never be normal- I don't sleep well- I don't trust- and I only famous for this story now. He took all that away from me- yet I am a better person now for it- said, Anna!

Maddie text pic from a room at the party, it's a video, and lots of photos uploaded online! Look Jenny is getting it! Funny Ray is with shy, Busted!!! You can tell its Ray his dickie hanging out that is uncut, and the look on Shy's face is priceless. Jenny is about to swallow a boy's stuff,

hand gripping hard on him to squirting in her mouth, and the other girl we know so-o well has her mouth open tongue out for him too in a teen party orgy, all sucking, all f*cking hard, then change partners, yet that the teen way!!! Now my sis is doing as they at those parts with him.

Now- Like you know after all that, and all the c*ming, and all the photos, showing it all, and the girls that are being sluts, and thing, I am still the girl that looks better, and would not go there, yet, I can live with not being that popular.

Karly- Out!

Nevaeh

Book: 34

Naddalin

Preface:

Once upon a time- there was a place called:

'Rockville,' Or a farm- in some small town- known as: 'The Land of Many Steeple's...' and as asked of me- she wanted me to keep the name of her town anonymous and them to all of this in this epic story do. She- I- we, still feels that all of them in these small towns, that you may know, still do not deserve the honors of being remembered in the story for their names, over the fact of what she - I and we went through... Or the girl in Pittsburgh to see with her you saw life on the other end of things, didn't you?

Thus, for this little girl's- Bible- is no fairytale...

Yet, it is meant to be just that too...

Up till now, was it all that you thought it would be?

Like we all feel the names of towns don't matter, the life of, girls like you and I do... yet they were all places in Pennsylvania... all but one ends up here.'

So far been there was nothing like this place at all... In a scene, we were all in a place where did not belong, at one time or another, at least it's less than one minute or so away from one... world to the other, like she and I, and them too, and now you too to can get there - if you fall- that is... if you fall like us, you will see this world phenomena world of unbelievable and dark hope.

~Haven~

'To the girl that has my heart- let's be flawed together it's CUTE! Like - we may not be perfect but together we are perfect- perfect.'

Haven- this is where I say my story is over, or so- o, I thought- yet- I have one last thing to say... as who I was... and why I ended up the way I did, yes, I am older now... wiser, and look back on my young days, and think and think... I remember the girl next door, us both holding hands tightly, us both 5 holding hands, I recall her saying- and it was so sweet and cute,' No ma' his... MY BOYFRIEND!'

I remember this, and what could have been... yet this hex was, or she was what stopped it - I knew it and this is why- I end up the way I did and also, she... I know that she is living life... and had the family, yet was she happy I never know- the truth... was she really in love with the boy, or me, still... that is the question? I evoke, she was wearing a skirt that was denim, she long brown hair, and green eyes, and a plaid bandanna- I wonder if she ever has had those moments where she sat back and said, I remember that boy back then and think of what could have been, she too kept apart from me over that one person's mouth...

I needed out so, I ended it...

I did not want to think of the maybes anymore...

Or, the this and that's...

~Haven~

Interval 1

There Jalynn- she is teaching me how to go higher and her in the skies.

I's, too have a number on my backside- (G- N- 14- 13- 000669- 9966.)

She has told me the story's, of her mother, and grandmother and great-grandmother... she asked where I went wrong... we the rest of them gone dark... you can see Jaylynn crying every day at the graveyard, fallen, and the haunts of Neveah at her old swing by her falling down home now, and you can see Kristen grave next to them all too. A lot of time has passed down there... a- lot.

There goes a flying horse called Nidelzile, oh its mine- (He- there- she pets her head, and mine.) I have one a pet, that I fly- named, Braelynn. This was something I had to do to become a lady- and no longer a little girl... is the brake and ride one... one for life. I used to ride her before I got my black wings... back when I was a little girl, yet we still have a bond...

'There we are looking down on the Earth...

Fallen too You all... and rising above it all.'

Chapter: 142

(2020)

Karly- Baby to baby- Grayson- She tells him' uh, love, no one's ever going to hurt you, love, I'm going to give you all of my love, nobody matters like you' She tells him- your life isn't going to be anything like my life. You're going to grow and have a good life; I'm going to do what I've got to do.' So, Rock- a- bye baby, Rock- a- bye, I'm going to rock you.

Rock- a- bye baby, don't you cry. Somebody's got you... Rock- a- bye baby, Rock- a- bye. I'm going to rock you.

Rock- a- bye baby, don't you cry. For all the single mums out there going through frustration. By- Clean Bandit, this song was made for me at this point in my life...

Part: 1

It is too odd, I said to be here now, all the same teachers at a new school at Skoufyceol - yet with me... and not her... why me, is the question that I asked?

Why...?

Why- am I the next? Why was the hex passed do to me, like all in my family before me?

Why- was I chosen, like the I to have fallen too this...

Why- I must do more than she ever could!

The only girl to ever come this far has passed... now should I do the same?

Karly was my Mother... so why me... that what we girls have been asking for years now...

Why US...?

Why?

Without doing what I must, I feel cheated.

You may know some, old friends and foes along the way, we all did how do you trust?

They were flawlessly standard, Mr. and Mr.'s. Doll girl... there where 4 of them, all that you would call typical.

A closed-off drive out of sight... is what you see looking into their homestead, and back behind there cover of darkness and tree cover weeping tree is the old-looking home, the same home that, Nevaeh and all my past relatives lived in.

Though they were out there they were also respectful to all, that passed even if year back there were looked down on by the town and the lands... they were in. Yet, even still where easy - to say, thank you very much, to all... even though... their word of them was not the greatest, for your time.

All those girls did what they could.

Why should I be any different?

They were four last individuals to have this placed down on them like me.

You would imagine being complicated in whatsoever bizarre or mysterious, and it's like, just odd because they just did not grasp with such gobbledygook, to see what I do.

Mr.'s. Natalie was tinny, and a fair-haired short one, and my mother you have already met... yet is now 50 or so-o.

Looking around you see that there are still may orchards countless fences and the long drive with the lanterns... nothing here really changes.

Anyways, like- I was saying Mr. Natalie (my daddy) was their administrator of a well-founded named horning, which completed military training, and he got that through my grandmother Kristen, taking over her spot.

Just another day an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four... of us. Not for their first time, this is a day in and day out.

Um- yeah- we live on Privet Drive; sorry- I's bounce around- it's my ADHD- so keep up.

Dad- I could hear loud, hooting noise from her Naddalin's room.

Naddalin - was a highly unusual girl in many ways, yet all the kids she now could sum it up in one word or two.

- Gay- S*UT- or worlds meaning slow in the noggin... yet, that was still coming for Mazel mouth... all those years back, and here offspring of freaks.

For one thing, she hated there winter holidays- like more than any other time of year, it was lonely, yet that is not a new thing with her type- in this family.

For another, she really wanted to do her study but was forced to do it in secret, in there dead of night.

The studying of wizardry... to fight the hex that was placed down on us.

Naddalin- named for the one that came before me, smashing their names together.

Naddalie- and Lynn you get- it... not the same spelling- anyways... yeah...

(Moving forward)

Me- So, it was midnight, and I was lying on my stomach in bed. (reading a book on the History of Magic... yet like the ones before more, I'm not able to do such- you know to read to my leave.)

IT IS TIME TO FIGHT EVIL WITH EVIL!

I have all my blankets drawn right over my head like a tent, making a fort. So, there is a large leather-bound book propped open against my pillow, as my head is a rest looking over it. I have a big flashlight, on one hand, of mine, and the other hand is holding the page, that I am on, that being 665 on the left.

I FEAR THIS STUFF, YET I AM SICK OF BEING SICK AND TIRED.

I- Naddalin, moved the tip of MY finger to the eagle feather quill down the page, I'd used as a bookmarker.

I am frowning as she looked for something that would help her write this essay, I needed to do for school, yet could not keep interested... yet, with me, that is- what I have- or so they say. Fight this- all the is what I have- not that- this...!

I am thinking that- Witch Burning in there Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless if so, I would be there now... – AH- I Am like- discussing this all in my head- like a crazy girl- I AM NOT CRAZY.

(Back)

My dad is a big, beefy man with hardly any neck... although he did have a very large mustache, there was on there not like Hitter yet small, and before you say it, like- I know whom she is...'...Not just some bad guy.'

(The Natalie's, had a small girl called Dariez and there was no finer girl anywhere, and they had her. They did not deliberate they may tolerate it if anyone found out about theirs, and then her, see she was the one that was- BAD. Sh*t- The Natalie's had their whole enchilada- all everything- and anything they sought after, nonetheless, they also had a hush-hush dark secret and a darker past, and her being most of it, yet she was here- and they had to put up with her no? Even if we tried to kill her...

In addition to that, their highest terror was that an important or unimportant of this girl that would find them all out, and the hex that they wanted to let go of. Yet we were never- ever let that happen.)

NEVER...!

FOR THEY ALL HAVE- AND HAD- BEEN SO- O F*CKING PERFECT.

In a wondrous way... I think if this is all said and down, yet I feel that- why not, it's more, my Grandmother, to do this... here wises... on this family.

~*~

(Mr.'s. Natalie conjured their story that she did not have a younger sister, that is was just three girls, yet she was in school with them, under a name that was not the same, since, that her younger sister and her ass of a husband were as Natalie- I- sh as it was possible to be- we found out- it's not hard they all look the same.)

US- Um- like them as queen as if they were their modern family from the 1950s, TV show was not their thing. The Natalie's trembled to with their own minds, that their neighbors would say if there all their kids like - s arrived in their motorway, after school with here being seen. Yet we all no... we all do...

Ah- the secret shame... he- he- he.

The Natalie's knew that their kids had a small a little girl, with them, too, her- Naddalin, the descent from them... but they had never- ever even seen her, so they say, yet she is there.

This girl was another respectable real for keeping their past away; they did not want her mixing with any of the other children, around her, that was so creepy and odd- to them and their dick-sh ways, yet what had to be done.

Mr.'s. - was Mr.'s. Natalie's sister, but they hadn't met for many ages; in fact, a long story covering up here... so, who are they... hint- hint... When Mr. and Mr.'s. Natalie woke up on their dull, gray after a night of romping, Natalie gossiped away happily as she wrestled an ear-piercing Alisha into her high chair. And the tiny child, and giggled Mr. Natalie as he left their adorable house next to the railroad tracks and many hayfields, with its oh- so nice fencing for years.

(Day's pass)

Thursday our story starts, there was nothing about their overcast heaven's outdoor to propose, that outlandish and mysterious things would soon be happening all over their queendom. Mr. Natalie buzzed as she picked out his most uninteresting tie for work, and Mr.'s.

The plume paused at their top of a Pa. paragraph.

Naddalin pushed her long hair off the bridge of her nose, as she sat... there, contacts covering her real eye color, and true Identification- the light blue.

(Back to that night)

After playing with myself, as girls do at bedtime, and no I cannot frantically frap- like some- I move the flashlight closer to the book, and read, about wizardry. I was loving this more and more... the darkness was holding me- like no- another thing could. With all my ADHD- E- itch- NESS- and all!

Non- magic people... would not get me I thought...

Me- were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, more now than then... I think yet I don't have a mind to do that do I? ...Yeah- but not very good at recognizing it... I see this with them- and they. Like this one time on a rare occasion I's think I go a catch a real witch- for another family, she was one of them, that trashed me out. Burning or killing me had no effect whatsoever... I knew what I was going to do either fall to them, or fall like her, or overcome it all.

The witch would perform a basic

Flame-Freezing Charm, on Nevaeh and Karly, thinks they were doing the same thing over and over in a day week or even years at a time- I have read this- yet they don't want to hear it... it in the past they say... said no? Déjà vu is what it called, and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation... lost in time in space you feel, that sounds sick.

Naddalin put her quill behind her ear, and reached underneath her pillow for her ink bottle and a roll of parchment, and very carefully her unscrewed their ink bottle, dipped her quill into it... making notes... about being a wizard, and how to overcome this all.

I began to write, pausing every... that was the now out... and then to listen... my inner voices... that talk to me. Because, if any of their townspeople would hear, all hell would break out.

The girls that were not good to her could hear there scratching of her quill on their way to their bathroom, yet that just thought that was her in her crazy's. Doing what she does and that being weird.

I would find myself locked in their room under their winding steeps for the rest of their summer, which became my room, to get away from them.

The family is on that, privet drive, love summer off, yet not Naddalin- she never- ever enjoyed her summer breaks either, over the face she was let in her room under the stars to wither away, and decay in the mind.

Uncle Read, Aunt Jennath, and their girl, Dariez, where Naddalin's only living relatives.

They were nonmagical people, and they had a very medieval attitude toward magic, my sisters, also. Naddalin's dead parents, who had been a witch and wizard themselves, were never- ever mentioned under their roof.

For years, Aunt Jennath and Uncle Read had hoped, that if they kept Naddalin as held back as possible, they would be able to squeeze their magic out of her. To their fury, they had not been unproductive.

All these days they lived in terror of anyone finding out, that Naddalin had spent most of their last two years at the school for girls Skoufyceol of Witchcraft and Wizardry, yet that is where they sent here... one she bagged, two to go on like there was no known issue.

(The most they could do, however, was to lock away at Naddalin's and her spellbooks also, the wand too, could Sophia, and broomstick at the start of their summer break, and forbid her to talk to their neighbors, for she was slow in the head, after all, it was a boarding school for the low life... like the pig she is... or was it...? We wondered...)

This departure from her spell books, she had been a real problem to them- 'she'- being Naddalin, because her teachers had given her a- lot of holiday work, and at her old school at what was oak view, the name changed back after the towns got their identities back, she did not have to do anything for they felt, that she was a waste, and a waste of time, besides could not be taught.

One of their essays, a particularly nasty one about shrinking potions, was for Naddalin's least favorite teacher, Professor Gonzales, who would be delighted to have an excuse to give Naddalin detention for a month.

Naddalin had, therefore, seized her unintended, ways in her first week of their holidays, as unwanted.

While Uncle Read, Aunt Jennath, and Dariez had gone out into their Sophia garden to admire the snowfall, Uncle Read's new company car as well, (in very loud voices, so that the rest of their street would notice a new 2065 Toyota Prius in the driveway,) Naddalin had crept downstairs, picked the lock on their cupboard under their stairs, grabbed some of the other girl's books, to learn there stupid, and hidden them in her small bedroom under the stars. Yet even after all these years noting in a small town will ever change... just like minds.

If she did not leave spots of ink on their sheets, maybe that would never know... even so, they thought she was nuts, there need- ed never to know that she was studying magic by night, and her smarts by day, 'till dusk.

In addition, the third time this week, she was busted doing more than just studying in her little room, by the girls, that would take photos of her and put them online!

We sat a- crossed, from all of them, at the table, while they were saying it cannot control your- ways- with this junk, it must go!

None of them noticed large, tawny flying horses flutter past the window only me yet like them before me I have the gift of only being able to the worlds of good and evil, genetically altered, they are... coming to see me... like all that have fallen... I can talk to them too. I am one of them... fallen, what they don't know is that the train took my soul, and I not really alive at all... YET, I HAVE TRAYED TO KILL MY SELF OVER AND OVER, and the hex will not let me... all over they beat the sh*t out of me... and I am misunderstood.

So-o now, it is half-past eight, Mr. Natalie picked up his attaché case, pecked Miss. Natalie on her cheek, and tried to kiss and hug Alisha goodbye, but Missed her face, this one was not feeling it, because, Alisha was now having a little passive outburst of bratty- ness and throwing her cereal at their walls and ripping newspapers was more important. Lovely- he got into his car and backed out on to drive off the overhanging tree that a now around 150 years old, or more.

Naddalin tried, yet again, to explain, her feeling and thoughts about everything yet they would not hear it. Just rolling their eyes at her senselessness.

It was at the junction of their motorway, that he saw their first sign of strange - a pussycat walking backward on their road. He was having one of those moments. It was a spell...?

For a second, Mr. Natalie did not grasp what he just had seen- then he shook his head around to look again, lost in the moment of think I was here before, yet this should have never been.

He said this all to me- was he seeing things...? Like- from not getting any sleep last night, over to much Freak ME sex- his girl- and was playful and all, and she was way too- happy to put up with me anyways. It was like their minds where takin over by something that was- NOT.

Driving past her he saw yet another one... doing the same thing, life is running backward... (she has said this to me...)

A black cat walking backward on their corner of the driveway, past the front of the car. I was getting my head wrapped around what cat would do that? And I was bored, and running through the fields, to them chasing nothing yet in my mind it after the world they don't see, the world of angels, flying horses, and magic.

She is used to flying around outside, with me in the fields, I run carefree too, looking as they say crazy. It was the only thing that was real to us.

Caregiver- If I could just let her out at night, she would not have the smarts to come back. She is off looking for things and playing pretends in her mind. It must have been a trick of their light, I too thought I saw this girl having black wings...? No- maybe...?

She was the gorgeous thing I'd had ever seen... I was fixed on her... and could not say in the world what I saw... nor did I want to.

(Back)

The cat was looking at me... with glassy eyes... the feeling of chatting... it was speaking to me. (I have lost it...)

The look in my eyes said... I want your soul- a long and old lost like story... of why... that was a question not answered, that she wanted me to understand.

Part: 2

Mr. Natalie batted an eyelid and stared at the cat, that looked evil. It started back, as Mr. Natalie drove their corner and up their road. The eyes haunting him in the moon like and the crows, losing their minds, flying behind, and the trees scraping agents the new car, he floored it, and watched their cat in his mirror, running fast and faster, unlike and thing Earthly could.

Calling to him- like... in long creepy whimpering. (I want you...) nope, seeing at their sign; um- cats could not talk her was thinking, nonetheless what are all these signs, about- and It hit him, like- the girl, was hexed, and bring on the evil into their life's.

Before getting in his car- she did not see they're a- a lot of creepy- creepy- birds flying around him, wanting to pick at his eyes and face, with wings, spread- fly down past him in the early daylight.

Do I look stupid...? I wounded and thought to myself...? This is a dream...? I know that we have come a long way in life, with fixing love, and then saying maybe we need it, and then fixing sickness, and maybe that's playing good, or making a baby the way you want him or her... yet, I never- ever seen something like this. 20 years, I remember when that all took place... I was not for it at all, I was one of the boys in my teens, and wondering this was a side effect, for not having young lust, then. It was the régimes taking over... and we overthrew them...

How could love be- bad...?

Part: 3

(Next day)

Snarled, Uncle Read, a bit of fried egg dangling from his bushy mustache. And- I know what will happen if I was to speak out and up to about what I find to be real.

And- and so on... that chatted about what happened... as I crammed eggs into my pie hole, and did not look up, and did not say anything unless spoken too.

Mr. Natalie gave himself a little shake and put the cat out of his mind, even if that was all that he was babbling about. And all that I wanted to explain yet was not allowed too... it was frustrating.

I think that's a good thing... she said, let it go...

This day started the same as the day before- as he drove toward town that looks decerped timeworn Victorian, and some thought out of there pass day in the 1920s or 1930s, fairytale-like, we pondered, how the town was still standing, and the highway too, it was thought about, nothing except a large order of training he was hoping to get that day.

Let me love you is playing in the background an oldy but goodie they say...

However, on their edge of town, military exercises were driven out of his mind by different, diverse, and dissimilar. Yet the cat keeps popping into his mind like her... and the feelings of wrong.

Naddalin tried to claim, that she knew the why of it all, but her words were-go-under by a long, loud gulp looking at the other girl's.

It was a shocking business... shocking... miracle none of them died... over this, never-ever heard the like... by thunder, we here and all that shocked in the face, it was lucky you where there, or you would have goosebumps too.

Everything comes back to you... I said this and the one said, thank you, Martita, she was smitten, in thinking DAH. I did not see the sarcasm, and said thanks back! She said too, missed me doing the same, in my tone.

Thinking about a girl, yes that girl, I was lost in the thoughts, that she wanted for so long, to go there and to kiss, ahh-h-ha-I was a thing about her.

And-Thank you, very-very-much indeed, truly, and Martita, I said.

(Back at school)

Second Class, I would have to say... it was nothing to say anything about. First Class-also-and, if I can swing it, I get through it! Besides-and... think about a girl! The other wizard girl, like me... that I like-like more them like maybe even love. I knew why I had a nasty headache, yet I was not going to say any more there was no use in it, I suppose? Even in class, there were not all there yet that is me after all. In addition-In fact, it was-, Clean, and Kizziah, Martita... where all in my class to feeling this black darkness is me, yet I's was in the know of what was going on.

(In addition- if it is not wizardry on our young minds, then selfies masturbating, with their other girls is their anti-boredom, we all in their same room so-it happens, in their chambers. I think

about kissing a girl, why not, they're all we have. In addition- no...! It's wrong to think she, and her of all girls to think about in such sin- shy ways, yet we all know. Yes, even in a place like this... even if it a place of witchcraft, there is still something that is considered wrong, and she more than most- yet here we like to look at what others say.

Naddalin- and I go to hell for it anyways, I thought, yet, being young and dumb these days, every older preteen says we kids/girls are at are all-girl school. Like- we- us- all- belong way down below, for our sins, of all, even lust- the lust of all, yet this is why we're here in there first place.

This blackness had bewitched them and her more than their others, I saw it at once, yes, yes, I did, a confounds charm, to judge by their behavior.

They seemed to think there was a possibility, that she was innocent, blameless, guiltless, they would be right, and so- o would she in some ways also.

For a girl to enjoy herself you need to be a yardstick apart, said there, one professor.

Who- say's things like that? Said one teacher at her old school...

Some girls just rolled their eyes, others it went over their young heads. Judge by their behavior, she said, we do, to see into your- mind, body, and soul.

(Alleged)

'I will be judged by them...? I don't care... I thought.'

Part: 4

(Forward)

(The board)

They were not responsible for their actions, said there one- in a fast ripping thought. On their other hand, their interference might have allowed black shadow, to outflow... over them too from her, from their soles within, from their black hole below, they visibly, with her and the other girl no...? Thought they were going to catch black shadow solitary- tendered.

They have gotten away with a great deal before now... yet that is what we have them here now... These young ruthless smutting girls think about nothing but temptations, I am afraid it has given

them a high opinion of themselves... and of course - has always been allowed an extraordinary amount of license by their principal... to think and be with- HER!

- And, mmm.

And- Ah, well, Gonzales... Naddalin, you know... we've all got a bit of a blind spot where she was concerned, worried, and nervous.

And- Bothered... completely!

And- And yet - is it good for her to be given so much special treatment? That thought was bouncing 'round their campers too.

In my view, I try and treat her like any other student.

And any other student would be suspended - at their very least - for leading his friends into such danger.

Consider, Martita - against all Skoufyceol rules - after all their safety measures put in place for his protection - out- of- bounds, at night, consorting with a werewolf, and a murderer – and, I have purpose to be certain of her has been visiting: Skoufyceol of Wizardry unlawfully too and, to HER, and their others, she should be... not with all of them... we cannot do that... she is fine said there one... fine... a sweet child... nothing more nor less...

Besides- with a - Well, well... we shall see, Gonzales, we shall see... The girl has unquestionably, incontestably, and categorically has been thoughtless... and a bloody fool!

And- was thought and passed, 'round.

Chapter: 143

The girl has a vagina is I am sorry here...! And- shoulders movie, to their obvious. Naddalin lay to listen in with her eyes tight shut, holding her girlfriend's hand tightly. Saying under her breath, I do not care- I do not if it is wrong, I love you. And- she giggled; I feel there same about you too, quietly this happened. She felt very sleepy, and was wanting to go to her sleeping chamber with her and there shared a bed, held hands, like young girls do, in there night tops all there same as their others two to a bed, yet they picked each other.

(A day back)

She remembered that her limbs felt heavy, then their steam train, with all them that were once in it; her eyelids too heavy to lift... Pa. over, they nodded off-hand and hand at once, she wanted to lie here, on this comfortable bed, forever...

The words she was hearing seemed to be wandering very eerie to her from her ears to her brain so that it was problematic to understand... at this undeveloped age, of a tween.

How would I describe my looks I would say I look like a honey blond Emma Watson; medium-brown hair.

Sometimes, it's very subtly highlighted with gold, but it's never anything obvious. I usually wear my hair parted in the middle, although occasionally you'll see me with her hair parted to the right side. The hair color does vary slightly from a darker brown to somewhat lighter brown, and from golden hues to somewhat redder ones. However, my color doesn't change dramatically. It usually falls just past shoulder length. I wear my hair straight or with a slight wave. I's use a large - barreled curling iron or sleep in braids, to do that.

Wearing nude or neutral colors on my lips. I will apply light pink or peach blush to her cheekbones.

However, this look is never overly dramatic. I play my eyes, I don't wear false eyelashes, and I do not go for bright or garish pastels or sparkly colors. I am a fan of smoky eyes. I am a girl with eyebrows, I don't see the need for plucking all them little hairs out, we girl have enough of that to do as is.

And why is when I make lady- ness with me myself and I- I get the sillies? Is all about the fact I think about her well-doing?

I love her, I think...

Just like objects can hold spirits, like my great grandfather's railroad lantern that was Blair Jays Natalie's, when he was a railroad worker, odd I got it from the train that is now main... like he leads me to do this... Just like Jinger has a mooring necklace, around her neck with a crystal, dark made from the human hair of the one that past, I have one too form a girl that was named Lily, oh so many years

back, I kept it... and I feel as she did- odd I do not know why, I know that she loved her daddy more than anything, he saved her... That a story in its self...

The Girl in the Window

Part: 1

The little girl lost in her room, looking out from the window said, all along she feels as the world closes its eyes on her, yet she never- ever sleeps, she the girl in white that never- ever is at rest. The dormer- the room grayed to her memories, of her life in the past when she was alive, her dad died was what killed her also on the inside, she wants to hide, yet all she has is the girl that lives in her old room to talk too, do you see them playing together yet it's all in her mind.

Do you see me with my- sad looking eyes crying for your life, I want to be in you to playing within you and your body and mind do you have the time to feel me - as I want to get out of this room, stop hunting be as rest and move on... yet, I need someone like you - to do that... do you see my old house as it is falling down around me, yet Sarrah lives here too she plays with me even if she does not dead yet? I am forever and always looking out my addict window down at the kids I don't get to see - why?

For I am always up here - that is why... they don't get me, I don't think... do you see the covering, on my window, and the room of my roof line as you look up at me, do you hear me calling out for you? Asking for a body or soul to take like yours. I am here until you find me, we - you find me... please help me! I am always frightened by what I see and don't see alike ... like with her- I could say the same- she is there and then she is not, do you see her long hair blowing in the wind, that is not even there...?

Just a shadow person, for all my days left, until, I find pace - looking down is all that I do- and did all my life... (She is the shadow that is over me always.) - I see here in white I do- with her dark hair and green eyes, and little frame. The room is all gray, and the ceiling drips on me in the night when it rains; or even the snowmelt, like it, ever did in the past all the way back when I was alive her in the 1800s.

Things have changed, then again, they have not in here, it is all I see out there that gets me thinking, does it- you? Not in here, where it's always the same, but outside where life has changed. Do you see my desk as it sits empty with nothing, but the lantern that flickers for me in the cold lonely nights, that was my dad from the railroad?

The chair it's broken, from age and has three legs, now that I can sit on, why for the fact, that I can make it float, as I do as well, I am as light of the ground, like a leaf in the gusting breeze, a tight room with the wood framing showing. All whitewashed, and yet mucky, and musty... she is there and then she is not, like me she lives in the same very walls and, yet I am able to go through them now, unlike before... and I can do this as I please... you and I are on the ground over there in the graveyard. Do you see my headstone? Like- do you see my headstone, with my name under the angel oak tree. Do you see me coming out of it, and the ground, at night, I have to be reminded that I am dead... that- that... is only my body there, yet this is me now...?

Always, back to my home where- I stay in my room with her, now it's her room, her mom and dad don't know or get that we do this, I have a friend in a living girl, that is about nine years old, and now I am inside of her, she is mine and my new live on Earth, to take, and she is in me... I will live the life I never- ever had, one way or another, don't you see- that I love her for this... and maybe if love her for all that she is too.

Do you see my moth-eaten blankets?

...And that she uses now...?

BUT IT'S all me, as she doesn't you see... NOT her all me, she is no- longer- the NOT her... that looks like her to them but not to you and I for we now know- sh-h! She is me- me- is she- do you get that? Confused- don't be... Do you see the old head and footboard there that we share? Do you see me with me all cute kneeling at the window looking out, at the crescent moon- with her?

I see all kinds of changes too like into a full round moon to a big sun, I have seen a- a lot of days, I have seen the days and nights for over 100 years, around the time that the first longest novel was written, funny... no, and now-now- by a man with the same first name- odd?

All the time- I never- ever changed, yet, I get a new girl body to see, too still like mine. And change their state of mind, they did like I changed her now, and there in the ground left behind no longer, like me I weep like the rain on a tree to make it grows- through her like it I will still, I did not have

a good life, now I will take, and see if I well, a good life, is not what I had with my dad he did things to me that you would not understand, or maybe you would I don't know either way, I don't want to talk about it, yet that teddy bear, is long gone too... so why talk about it. Do you see the rolling hills? Do you see the grave markers, more?

Do you see the tracks... next to the home? Do you see me over them all, I remember all of them, therein there none- what I would call friends... yet, there died to me too even then, not to be seen... if you know what I mean... until I am at peace, yet seeing them I will never be? Yet, well I ever am even now- that is the question? There are never flowers on my plot, yet 100 years, I could see why - yet there was never-'till her... nothing but bones next to me to keep me warm... ha- funny my daddy's... sick-sick!

Part: 2

The sun shines, yet not for me it's always a rainy day, in my head- even now- yet get better, the clouds are there, saying go to hell, yet I don't want to... not just yet.

The little girl lost in her room, looking out from the window said, all along she feels as the world closes its eyes on her, yet she never- ever sleeps, she the girl in white that never- ever is at rest. The dormer- the room grayed to her memories, of her life in the past when she was alive, her dad d ied was what killed her also on the inside, she wants to hide, yet all she has is the girl that lives in her old room to talk too, do you see them playing together yet it's all in her mind.

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Like - do you see my headstone, with my name under the angel oak tree. Do you see me coming out of it, and the ground, at night, I have to be reminded that I am dead... that - that... is only my body there, yet this is me now...?

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The sun shines, yet not for me it's always a rainy day, in my head - even now - yet get better, the clouds are there, saying go to hell, yet I don't want to... not just yet. The tree is going to pass on before I do - you get that?

Do you get that...?

I remember being a kid, yet I don't, it was taken from me at 8 years old, and then I don't ever remember just being a kid like them or she or her too... I remember my mom being here and then not, I saw it all fade away, even if I was so young, I got it, I got sad about it... like her, with me, it's like living the same life over. I recollect being feed, and being feed up with life, and being bath at night by daddy too... 'until that night that I fight back and said - 'NO.'

I remember him - my daddy, - strangely me out, after my bath and I was bare, we have all been abused by someone in one way or another their hands or mouth that is why we turn, to a girls, if we are a girl for love other than a men, that has always been mean to us - even if not the same boys - we

think he is, and girls are always sweet caring and understanding, even if... I remember being in the fight for my life, and him being mean over something like pissing the bed, being feet smashed, rope around my head, books that he never- ever read hitting me in the head with it, called a bible... he started raping me and ripping the pages out saying craziness...

All the pages were flying about and hitting the floor as I was being bounced on top of and had to do the other way around. 'Books are like boobs' he said to me- along with-you have to feel them and open them up like that little sight you have down there,' and you don't have those, grow up and be a woman, now- he was scramming in my ears!'

I used to get out at night- form my room and the musky bed, and get... to see the graveyard at night, walking around, they became my friends in my head, looking for someone to call a friend and not 'till her, 100 years later, that understood me for me- and she's alive- so full of life, and become a girl that like girls. I am Lucie, the girl lost her in her room in a window, that was looking for a girl lover, and I have found her, and she is just like you! I look back on my life when I was nine, back in 1927, the ford in the yard sat in the mud, and my whit Victorian was still falling- down yet, not like now... yet that was over we- were a poor family.

And yet still astounding to those that passed by it think we were something for this immense home, a wonder some called it for its room count and size. Do you see the 3 levels of this how with- it triangle roof in the middle part, up at the top is my room...?

Do you see all the arched windows- 200 of them I think it was, all made just for the home, along with its wood-clad siding- do you see that one only that is always like it is glowing at night with a slight flicker of yellow, warmth in the cold- cold evenings? This room is all mine and no- little girl should take this away from me I thought 'till she- yes- she moved in... I get into her mind body and soul you see, now and forever as long as I like 'till I am at rest, or feel that I am... I am never- ever going to let go... never- ever- ever never! Even as bones someday she will be mine, my special friend!

Do you see the steps going into the dibble doors too, which can be opened- to even now the perfect feel- to someone like you- of something like the smell of fresh baking cookies, sitting on top of the old stove that never changed? Do you see the eerie fences that wrap around the home like the porch? Oh, home I never want to leave it... more now than ever- over her.

The swing sawing the rocking me to sleep, back in the day, the night she leads me away with her, she was the only one I reviled myself too... in the daytime. Do you see - what all this and everything here is to me? And do you see all the things that have happened to me...?

I don't want to die final all alone, that is why I stayed here looking all these years, someone to get me. The night up in a tree, she and I, sing, playing, and kind. Her crying for me makes me stronge r, looking down making my tree grow, and as she is standing on my grave... wishing she was me now and I'm here... and we are - we are.

You don't have to be stuck with you all your life - if you don't want to if your someone like me - or she too. Do you wish you were me - scary you are now - I am all inside of you - and in your head always - and forever - I'll haunt your dreams - and I own you - he - he - he! Until you find true love you'll never - ever - never - ever be free of me!

Part: 3

Naddalin felt herself, and along with their completely swelling with pride as she watched them all. But it was a much closer, Miss. Smith, than usual, and everybody, all, and everyone else had made enormous progress, yet not this girl in her studies, this is what they were talking about. After an hour, Naddalin called a stop to all, and let her mind rest... bypassing out over - exhaustion. The last thing she said to her before she left for the brake... 'you and I, when we get back from holidays, we can start doing some of their big stuff even more spells...'

When she woke up - she was by her side. You're getting good, she said, grinning around at them, looking at them. There was a murmur of enthusiasm, they were doing more than just magic - no?

The room began to clear in their usual twos and thre es; most people wished - in the open room of nude girls running around naked taking steam hot showers, seeing her this way was - no words could say it... Naddalin a 'Happy Christmas' as they went, yet she was happier being back with her and the others - yet maybe just her.

Feeling cheerful, she collected up their cushions with Jinger and Emmah and stacked them neatly away, still drawing off airing out the goodies... yet where all girls - so - o yeah...

Jinger and Emmah left before she did, it was bedtime after all; she hung back a little, because Koufyce was still there and she was hoping to receive a 'Merry Christmas' from her, yet that was not likely.

'No, you go on, 'she heard her say to her friend, Martha and her heart gave a jolt that seemed to take it into their region Saula. She pretended to make straight her pillow pile, to do what she was going to do- and that was hump and romp with her girls.

She was quite sure, so unquestionable, they were alone now, and waited for her to speak with her through the night, even if there was a big day ahead, she was going to be with her romantically. As an alternative, she heard a hearty sniff, of her undies under her pillow, and said go night and fall asleep with her in her arms.

She turned and saw Kalaie standing in there middle of their room, tears pouring down her face.

'Whoa- What is with you- girl?'

She would not speak to us, over, she with me...

She did not know what to do, at their time.

She was simply standing there, deplorable wordlessly.

'What's up?' she said, feebly, given time.

She shook her head and spread her eyes on her sleeve, of her worn-out night top.

'I'm sorry, 'she said hoarsely.

'I partially assume... it is just... learning all this junk... it just makes me... wonder whether... if she had known it all... she would still be alive.'

Natalie's heart sank right back past its usual spot and set up somewhere around her bellybutton.

She ought to have known, being notorious... thoughts.

She wanted to talk about Joella.

'She did know this sh*t,' Naddalin said extremely, serious.

'She was good at it, or she could never have to their middle of that maze. But if Waltemath really wants to kill you, you do not stand a chance.'

Her hiccoughed at their sound of Waltemath's name but stared at Naddalin without flinching.

'You survived when you were just a baby,' she said quietly.

'Yeah, well,' said Naddalin wearily, moving towards there door, 'I do not know why nor does anyone else, so it is nothing to be proud of.'

'Oh, do not go!' said Kalaie, sounding tearful again. 'I'm really- sorry to get all upset like this... like- I did not mean to...' She hiccoughed again...

She was very even when her eyes where bloodshot and puffy, yet not as- not as much as she, beside me. And she was out now, looking even sweet then, ever.

Naddalin- felt thoroughly miserable, about not leaving her side to go to her, yet she did not want too- ever do that.

Like would this girl would have been so-o pleased with just a-'Merry Christmas.' Yet she did not get one from back home, not even... (Nothing- for years, just a gloomy remembrance, of their fact they did not love her.)

Part: 4

'I know it must be horrifying for you,' I said.

I to go through this...

I was mopping her eyes on her sleeve again, she came over with us not aloud, yet it was done, I could not help but be there for her, it is just me, being me.

'Me mentioning Joella, when you saw her die...

I suppose in this hug, and get it with you-you just want to forget about it if I ever need you too?'

'Okay-'

Naddalin did not say everything to this; it was quite true, but she felt hard-hearted saying all and everything.

'You're a good teacher, you know,' said Hayvannah, with a waterlogged smile.

'I've never- ever could dumbfound anything, or anyone before, yet I did just that.'

'Thanks,' said Naddalin awkwardly.

They see each other for a long moment.

Naddalin felt a burning desire to run from there room and, at their same time, wide-ranging powerlessness to move her little young feet.

'Mistletoe,' said Hayvannah softly, pointing at their ceiling over her head and there kissed.

'Yeah,' said Naddalin... Her mouth was very in need of a drink.

'It's full of Kayarglers, though.'

'What are Kayarglers?'

'No idea,' said Naddalin. She had moved closer, to her and now on top and over her um body one, leg now, side to side, with her torso, in a lover's hold.

Her brain seemed to have been stunned-like.

'You'd ask Danna.'

Hayvannah made a funny noise, like between a moan, and a giggle, when I play with her and kiss her too, a playfully.

She was even nearer to her now.

She could have calculated their dimples on her nose.

'I really like you,' Naddalin. I think I'm like you more than I like...

Ha- same- shush!

She could not think, a tingling sensation was spreading through her, paralyzing her arms, legs, and brain.

She was too close to me.

She could see every tear clingy to her eyelashes...

I returned to my shared room, half an hour later to find Emmah and Jinger in their best seats by the fireplace; everybody else had gone to bed for the night, yet not us, we have gotten closer, and closer over the long nights- of being miss- fits.

Emmah was scripting a very long letter; she had previously filled half a roll of parchment, which was dangling from the edge of the old built-in desk in the room.

Jinger was lying on her hearthrugs, trying to finish her metamorphosis homework, the - being one thing and become another... we were doing just that the other day before, going from girls to butterflies, and the cat thing hit me... I knew... yet, say that to them back home and I am the one that is crazy. I'm like I am not allowed to say what happens here in my mind like we are not, let me... on the inside.

Small changes from a girl too small things, and then go bigger, for the stars... Think big, she said in class, with all in young girl minds, said the only one to give these girls hope for a life in what is wisdom, a teacher that was different.

'What kept you?' She asked as Naddalin sank into the armchair next to Emmah's.

Naddalin did not answer... She was in a state of the shockwave.

Semi of she wanted to tell Jinger and Emmah what had just happened, but the other half wanted to take their secret with her to the graveyard, a place where they like to go to show their real's- selfies of wings and all. 'Are you all right, Naddalin?'

Emmah asked, peering at her over the landfill of her friend, now making it off the grown, to see me become, that was neat, yet we were learning how to fly.

Part: 5

'What's up? It was said, as a new lifecycle, with her began... as the change, were made when they got black wings.' Falling to this is not that bad now, is it... after all? Naddalin gave a half-hearted shrug, thinking she sold out, yet it's a better life then life at home... how she was on autopilot, they thought, yet in this form, she was new.

In truth, she did not know whether she was all right or not, said Jinger, lifting herself up on her elbow to get a clearer view of Naddalin, looking down at her as she was looking up.

'What's happened?' 'A fallen angel has fallen' - a classic pun.

'It's me- girl' she said in a seek.

Naddalin did not know how to set about telling term and still was not sure whether she wanted to, that now she was one of them.

Just as she had decided not to say whatever, Emmah took matters out of her hands, and the wing came out of her back and she shows herself to her for the first time say- yeah- now your one us- a suture- hood.

'Is it Hayvannah? She asked in a competent way, that is the first flight.

(Questions)

'Did she corner you after the meeting?'

Numbly surprised, Naddalin nodded.

Jinger sniggered, barely looking off when Emmah caught her eye.

'So-o, what did she want?'

'To see if I was a dumb sh*t like they say.'

'Oh...?' In a phony unpremeditated voice, she said we knew yet don't believe it.

'She,' Naddalin began, rather huskily; she cleared her throat and tried again.

'So-o...'

'Did you kiss?' Asked Emmah energetically.

Jinger sat up so fast she sent his ink bottle airborne all over there rug.

Disregarding this totally, she stared avidly at Naddalin.

'Well?' She demanded.

Naddalin looked at Jinger's appearance of mingled curiosity and hilarity to Emmah's slight frown and nodded.

'HA!'

Jinger made a successful gesture with her fist, and went into a wild clang, of laughter that made several nervous looks back, an unenthusiastic grin spread over- Naddalin's face as she watched her- Jinger rolling around on the carpet; and looking for a second time over beside the window jump, about too.

Emmah gave Jinger a look of deep disgust and returned to her letter. 'Well?' Jinger said- finally, looking up at Naddalin.' How was it...?' Naddalin was careful for- a moment...

'Wet,' she said truthfully.

Jinger made a noise that might have showed jubilation or disgust, it was hard to tell.

'Because she was deplorable,' Naddalin continued deeply.

'Oh,' said Jinger, her smiles fading slightly.' Are you that bad at kissing?'

'Neenah,' said Naddalin, who had not careful this, and at once felt worried.

Flashback- holding time with a spell- (That night think back there had a girl, kiss- ie. kiss- sex.)

Part: 6

'Maybe I am.'

'Of course, you are not,' said Emmah inattentively, still scribbling away at her letter.

'How do you know?' Jinger said very sharply.

'Because Hayvannah spends half her time crying these days,' said Emmah vaguely.' She does it at mealtimes, in the loo, all over the place.'

'You'd think a bit of kissing woodcreeper her up,' said Jinger, smiling.

'Jinger,' said Emmah in a dignified voice, dipping their point of her quill into her inkpot,' you are a there most unresponsive wart, I have ever had their hard luck to meet.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Said Jinger huffily.' What per girl cries while someone is kissing them?' 'Yeah,' said Naddalin, slightly desperately,' who does...?'

Emmah looked at their pair of them with an almost pitying expression on her face.' Don't you understand how Hayvannah's feeling now?' she asked.

'No,' said Naddalin and Jinger together.

Emmah sighed and laid down her quill.

'Well, she is feeling very sad, because of Joella dying. Marva, I expect she is feeling confused because she liked Joella and now she likes Naddalin, and she cannot work out whom she likes there most of all.

Marva, she will be feeling guilty, thinking it is an insult to Sedaris's memory to be kissing Naddalin at all, and she will be worrying about what everyone else might say, about her if she starts going out with Naddalin.

Chapter: 144

In addition, she cannot work out what her feelings towards Naddalin are, anyway, because she was there one who was with Joella when Joella died, so that is all very mixed up and painful.

Oh, and she is afraid she is going to be thrown off their Crow claw Clepsidra team because she is being flown so badly.

A slightly stunned silence greeted their end of this speech, then Jinger said,' One mergirl cannot feel all that at once, they would explode.'

'Just because you have their emotional range of a teaspoon does not mean we all have,' said Emmah nastily picqueter up her quill again.

'She was there one who started it,' said Naddalin.' I wouldn't've she just sorts of came at me and next thing she is crying all over me, I did not know what to do.'' Don't blame you, mate,' said Jinger, looking alarmed at their very thought.

'You just had to be nice to her,' said Emmah, looking up anxiously. 'You were, weren't you?'

'Well,' said Naddalin, an unpleasant heart creeping up his face,' I sort of patted her on their back a bit.'

Emmah looked as though she was restraining herself from rolling her eyes with extreme difficulty.

'Well, one supposes it could have been worse,' she said.' Are you going to see her again?'

Till must, won't I?' Said Naddalin.'

We've got DA meetings, haven't we?'

'You know what I mean,' said Emmah impatiently.

Naddalin said nothing; Emmah's words opened a whole new vista of frightening possibilities. She tried to imagine going somewhere with Hayvannah- Clepsydra, Kalaheo of Wizardry, perhaps, and being alone with her for hours at a time.

Of course, she would have been expecting her to ask her out after what had just happened... there thought made her Hayvanna hatch clench painfully.

'Oh well,' said Emmah distantly, buried in her letter once more,' you'll have plenty of opportunities to ask her.'

'What if she does not want to ask her?' Said Jinger, who had been watching Naddalin with an unusually shrewd expression on his face.

'Don't be silly,' said Emmah vaguely,' Naddalin's liked her for ages, haven't you, Naddalin?'

She did not answer... Yes, she had liked Hayvannah for ages, but whenever she had imagined a scene involving there two of them it had always featured a Hayvannah who was enjoying herself, as opposed to a Hayvannah who was sobbing uncontrollably into his shoulder.

'Who're you writing their novel to, anyway?' Jinger asked Emmah, trying to read their bit of parchment now trailing on their floor. Emmah hitched it up out of sight.' Vickie.'

'Wilhemina?'

'How many other Vickie's do we know?'

Jinger said nothing but looked disgruntled. They sat in silence for another twenty minutes, Jinger finishing her Transfiguration essay with many snorts of impatience and crossings out, Emmah writing steadily to their very end of their parchment, rolling it up carefully and sealing it.

...And Naddalin staring into their fire, wishing more than anything that Sirius's head would appear there and give her some advice about girls.

...And their fire merely crackled lower and lower, until their red-hot embers crumbled into ash and, looking around, Naddalin saw that they were, yet again, there last ones in their common room.

'Well, night,' said Emmah, yawning widely as she set off up their girls' staircase.

'What does she see in Wilhemina?' Jinger demanded as she and Naddalin climbed their girls.'

Stairs...

'Well,' said Naddalin, considering their matter, 'Is' pose she's older, isn't she... and she's an international Clepsidra player...'

'Yeah, but apart from that,' said Jinger, sounding aggravated. 'I mean, her is a grouchy get, isn't she?'

'Bit grouchy, yes,' said Naddalin, whose thoughts were still on Hayvannah.

They pulled off their robes and put on pajamas in silence; Lacy, Laila, and Neville were already asleep.

Naddalin put his glasses on her bedside table, and got into bed but did not pull their hangings closed around his four posters; instead, she stared at their patch of starry sky visible through there window, next to Neville's bed. If she had known, this time last night, that in twenty-four hours' time she would have kissed

Hayvannah Chang...

'Night,' grunted Jinger, from somewhere also she is right. 'Night,' said Naddalin.

Next time... if there was a next time... she would be a bit more contented.

She ought to ask her out; she had been expecting it, and was now angry with her..., or was she lying in bed, still crying, awful feel is about Joella?

She did not know what to think.

Emmah's explanation had made it all seem more complicated rather than e asier to understand.

That is what they should teach us here, she thought, turning over on to his side, how girls' brains work... it would be more useful than Divination, anyway...

Neville snuffled in she sleeps with her girl hand n' hand, sweet and cute.

A flying horse blared somewhere out in their night.

Naddalin dreamed she was back in there DA room. Hayvannah was accusing her of luring her there under false pretenses; she said, she had promised her, like - a hundred and fifty times a Hayvanna cholate black crow cards, if she showed up.

Naddalin protested... Hayvannah shouted,'

Segregate me loads of Hayvannah cholate Black Crow Cards, look!' And she pulled out fistfuls of Cards from inside her robes and threw them into their air. Then she turned into Emmah, who said, 'You did promise her, you know, Naddalin... I think you, had better give her something else instead... how about your Firebolt?'

Besides, Naddalin was protesting that she could not give Hayvannah his Firebolt, because Ambridge had it, and anyway their whole thing was ridiculous, he'd only come to their DA room to put up some

Christmas baubles shaped like Dobby's head... The dream changed...

Her body felt smooth, powerful, and flexible.

She was gliding between shining metal bars, across dark, cold 'the body of Neveah'...She was flat on their floor, sliding along on his belly... it was dark, yet she could see objects around her chartering in strange, vibrant colors ... she was turning his head... their corridor was empty... but no... a man was sitting on their floor ahead, his chin drooping on to his chest, his outline gleaming in there dark...

Naddalin put out her tongue... she tasted their scent on the air... she was alive but drowsy... sitting in Jinger's and their room, the doorway at the end of their corridor...

~*~

Nevertheless, their girl was stirring... a grey, wrap fell from her legs as she jumped to her feet; and Naddalin saw her vibrant, blurred outline towering above her, it was one of the ghosts of the school. Naddalin longed to bite the chap... but she must become an expert in the impulse... she had more important work to do... with her sharpen fangs.

She like um- saw a wand withdrawn from her, yet want to keep doing as she was... yet the haunt wanted to play, not to be some young little girl lost in a window in some chamber of a room... forever- never- ever- ever- never- to be loved.

I human girl at the graveyard- I had my eyes on... named: Brittany- flawing in stealthy, I reared high from the ground and struck her once, twice, three times, plunging my fangs dee ply into her, epithelium, I had the feeling, her ribs splinter beneath my jaws, she has become one of the new haunts of the school, I wanted her soul, feeling their warm gush of blood... swimming within her it felt, it gave me more power and to keep my wicked life spin going- I have to feed on the young girls.

Now she wants to play- even if I did this it was for the good of it, she needs to die, so I took her away for the pain of the Earthy world.

The little 5-year-old girls were yelling in pain... to me still, not thinking it all over, yet she was missing daddy... then she fell silent... when I said it all going to be okay, she slumped back against the wall... blood was splattering on to their floor... in transparences- like- Her forehead hurt terribly... her mind was in the new body, yet she still saw all that was going on in the other world, it was aching fit to burst... yet I had to console her to the life- of the afterlife in the depths of dark death.

Part: 1

'Naddalin!'

'NADDALIN!'

She opened her eyes, to her. Every inch of her body was covered in an icy sweat, and cold girlie- c*m; her bed covers were twisted all around her like a straitjacket; she felt as though a white-hot poker were being applied to his forehead.

'Naddalin!'

Jinger was standing over her looking extremely frightened.

There were more figures at their foot of Naddalin's bed.

She clutched her head in her hands; her pain was blinding her... she rolled right over and puked over the edge of their mattress.

'She is sick,' said a scared voice.'

Should we call someone?'

'Naddalin! Naddalin!'

She had to tell Jinger, it was very- very important that she tells her... taken great gulps of air, Naddalin pushed herself up in bed, still nude, like all the other girls in the room in bed, willing herself not to throw up again, there pain half-blinding her. We just thought it was the time of the mouth thing... or sadness, or not adjusting to the new way of life here. 'Your dad,' she panted, her chest heaving. 'Your dads... been attacked...''What?' said Jinger uninterestedly.

'Your dad!'

He is being chopped up as we speak, it's serious, there was blood everywhere...

'No...' she said along with subbing.

'I'm going for help,' said their same scared voice, and Naddalin heard footsteps running out of there dormitory.

'Naddalin, the bed- buddy,' said Jinger uncertainly,' you... you were just dreaming...' 'No!' said Naddalin furiously; it was crucial that Jinger understand.

'It was not a dream... not an ordinary dream... I- I was there, I- I saw it... I- I did it...'

She could hear Laila and Lacy muttering but did not care.

The pain in her forehead was subsiding slightly, though she was still sweating and shivering feverishly. And then retched again and Jinger leaped backward out of their way. 'Naddalin, you are not well,' she said- shakily.' Neville's gone for help.'

'I'm fine...!'

Naddalin Hayvanna, wiping her mouth on her night top and shaking uncontrollably. There is nothing- nothing, Jigger with me, it is your daddy, you must worry about, we - us- she too, need to find out where she is- bleeding like crazy, I was, it was a huge serpent.'

She tried to get out of bed, but- Jinger pushed her back into it; Lacy and Laila were still whispering somewhere adjacent.

Werther one minute passed or ten, Naddalin did not know; she simply sat there shaking, feeling their pain recede very sullying from her scar... then there were hurried footsteps coming up their stairs and she heard Neville's voice again.

~*~

'Over here, Professor.'

Professor McGonagall, came hurrying into their dormitory in her tartan dressing gown, her glasses perched lopsidedly on their bridge of her bony nose.

'What is it-? Where does it hurt?'

She had never been so pleased to see her; it was a member of their Order of their Durizy her needed now, not someone fussing over her and prescribing useless potions.

'It's Jinger's dad,' she said, sitting up again.'

'He been attacked by a daemon serpent- and it's serious, I saw it happen she yelled.'

'What do you mean, you saw it happen?' Said

Professor McGonagall, her dark eyebrows contracting.

'I do not know... I was asleep and then I was there... seeing this all...'

'You mean you dreamed this?'

Part: 2

'No!' said, Naddalin furiously; would none of them understand?' I was having a dream at first about something different, something senseless... and then this interrupted it. It was real, I did not envisage it.

Mr. Clena was asleep on their floor and he was attacked by a gigantic dark angel of the love of final death, there was a load of blood, she collapsed, someone is got to find out where she is...'

Professor McGonagall was gazing at her through her lopsided spectacles as though horrified at what she was seeing.

'I'm not lying, and I am not nuts-o!' Naddalin told her, her voice rising to a shout.' I tell you; I saw it happen!'

'I believe you, said Professor McGonagall curtly.'

Put on your dressing gown were going to see their Principal.'

Then- Wouldn't it be good if they finished each other off?

And- Jinger murmured in Naddalin's ear, with her soft wet breath.

~*~

Gonzales's upper lip was curling. Naddalin wondered why Hilliard was still smiling; if Gonzales had been looking at her like that he would have been running as fast as she could in their opposite direction.

Hilliard and Gonzales turned to face each other and bowed; at least, Hilliard did, with much twirling of his hands, while Gonzales jerked his head irritably. Then they raised their wands like swords in the finger of them.

And- As you see, we are holding our wands in there accepted argumentative position...

And- Hilliard told their silent crowd.

And- On their count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course.

And- all felt there same.

And- I would not bet on that...

And- Naddalin murmured, watching snap- ie.

baring her teeth.

One - two – three, and more, all and!

~*~

Both swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Gonzales cried: and, Expellers'!

And, there was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Hilliard was annoying off her feet: She flew backward off their stage, destroyed into their wall, and slid down it to sprawl on their floor.

~*~

Mallerie and some of their other Andreasen's cheered. Emmah was dancing on tiptoes. And- do you think she has, all right?

She squealed through her fingers.

And- Who cares?

And- said Naddalin and Jinger together too and so-o.

Hilliard was getting unsteadily to her feet.

The staff, the hat had fallen off, and his wavy hair was standing on end.

Well, there you have it! And, she said, tottering back onto their platform.

And- That was a Disarming Charm - as you see, I have lost my wand - ah, thank you, Miss. Brown - yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Gonzales, but if you do not mind my saying: 'so-o', it was very understandable what you were about to do next.

If I had wanted to stop you it would have been very easy - though, I felt it would be educational to let them see... and... Gonzales was looking lethal.

Hilliard had noticed because she said, And-

Enough indicative of! I am going to come amid you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Gonzales, if you would like to help me...

They moved through there the crowd, matching up partners. Hilliard teamed Neville with Joy Santah- Sletcherrle, but Gonzales reached Naddalin and Jinger first.

And- Time to split up their dream team, I think, and she sneered.

And- Raila, you can collaborate with Finnigan.

- And-

Naddalin moved toward Emmah.

And- I do not think so-o...

Yes- and yes...

And- said snap- ie, smiling emotionlessly.

And- Mr. Mallerie, come over here.

Let us see what you make of their well- known-.

And you, Miss. Kizziah - you can collaborate Miss. Bestrode.

- And-

Part: 3

Mallerie strutted over, smirking. Behind her walked an Andreasen girl who reminded Naddalin of a picture she had seen in Christmas with Joy-Anna. She was large and square and her heavy jaw jutted aggressively. Emmah gave her a weak smile that she did not come back.

And- Face your partners!

And- called Hilliard, back on their platform.

And- And bow!

And- Naddalin and Mallerie barely inclined their heads, not taking their eyes off each other.

And- Wands at their prepared!

And- shouted Hilliard.

And- When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponents - only to disarm them - we do not want any accidents - one... two... three...

- And-

Part: 4

Naddalin swung her wand high, but Mallerie had already started on, and Two And: Her spell hit Naddalin so-o hard she felt as though she had been hit over their head with a saucepan.

She tripped, but their whole thing still seemed to be working, and degenerating no more time, Naddalin pointed her wand straight at Mallerie and shouted, And- Torelts!

And- yes, and yes...

And- I for one said- disarm only!

And- Hilliard shouted in alarm over their heads of their battling crowd.

And- as Mallerie sank to her knees; a jet of hoary light hit Mallerie in their hart, and she doubled up, breathless, and she peed, down her little young girl schoolgirl uniform skirt, and she took off her undies on their spot and said oopiee-c's.

Naddalin had hit her with a Tickling Charm, and she could barely move for pleasing giggling.

Naddalin hung back, with a vague feeling it would be unsporting to bewitch, Mallerie while she was on their floor, but this was a mistake; gasping for breath, Mallerie pointed his wand at Naddalin's knees, Hayvanna, And- Tarantallegra! And, and there next second Naddalin's legs began to jerk around out of his control in a kind of quickstep.

And- Stop! Stop!

And- screamed Hilliard, but Gonzales took charge. And, Finite Incarnate! And, she shouted; Naddalin's feet stopped dancing, Mallerie stopped laughing, and they were able to look up.

A haze of jade- sh smoke was hovering over their scene.

Both Neville and Joy were lying on their floor, panting; Jinger was holding up an ashen-faced Laila, apologizing for whatever his broken wand had done; but Emmah and Millicent Bulstrode was still moving; Millicent had Emmah in a headlock and Emmah was whimpering in pain; both their wands lay forgotten on their floor.

Naddalin leaped forward and pulled Millicent off. It was difficult: She was a lot bigger than she was.

And- Dear, dear, and said- Hilliard, skittering through there crowd, looking at the aftermath of their duels. And- Up you go,

Macmillan...

- And-

Chapter: 145

And- Careful there, Miss. Fawcett... Pinch it hard, it will stop bleeding in a second.

And- I for one think I had better teach you how to block unfriendly spells, and said Hilliard, standing flustered during their hall. she glanced at Gonzales, whose black eyes glinted, and looked quickly away. And, let us have a volunteer pair – Longboart Hayvannah and Santah- Sletcherrle, how about you...

-And, this is A bad idea, Professor Hilliard.

And, yes said snapped, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat.

And- Longboart Hayvannah causes devastation with their simplest spells.

We will be sending what is left of Santa Slithered up to their hospital wing in a matchbox.

And- Neville's round, pink face went pinker.

And, How about Mallerie and-?

And said Gonzales with a twisted smile.

And- Excellent idea! And said- Hilliard, gesturing Naddalin, and Mallerie into the middle of their hall as their crowd backed away to give them room.

And, Now, Naddalin, and said Hilliard. And, When Draco points his wand at you, you do this.

Similarly, she raised her own wand, tried a complicated wiggling action, and dropped it. Gonzales smirked as Hilliard quickly picked it up, saying, And, Whoops- my wand is a little overexcited, moved closer to Mallerie, bent down, and whispered something in her ear.

Mallerie smirked, too. Naddalin looked up apprehensively at Hilliard and said, and- Professor, could you show me that blocking thing again?

Like- equally- Scared? Similarly, muttered Mallerie, so that Hilliard could not hear her.

And- You wish, equally said Naddalin out of the corner of her mouth.

Hilliard cuffed Naddalin merrily on their shoulder.

Also- Just do what I did, Naddalin!

- And-

Part: 1

And- what, drop my wand?

And- nonetheless, Hilliard was not listening.

And- three - two - one - go!

And- she shouted.

Mallerie raised his wand quickly and bellowed, And- Responsorial!

-And-

The end of his wand exploded; Naddalin watched, aghast, as a long black dark angel of the love of final death shot out of it, fell heavily onto their floor between them, and raised itself, ready to strike. There were screams as their crowd backed swiftly away, clearing their floor.

And- do not move, and said Gonzales lazily, enjoying their sight of Naddalin standing motionless, eye to eye with their angry dark angel of the love of final death. And- I will get rid of it...

- Similarly-

And- Allow me!

And- shouted Hilliard.

She brandished her...

The wand... at the dark angel of the love of final death and there was a loud bang!

Their dark angel of the love of final death, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into their air and fell back to their floor with a loud smack.

Enraged, derision furiously, it slithered straight toward Joy Santah- Sletcherrle and raised itself again, fangs exposed, poised to strike.

Naddalin was not sure what made her do it. She was not even aware of deciding to do it. All she knew was that her legs were carrying her forward as though she was on casters, and that, she had shouted stupidly at their serpent, and- leave her alone, for some time!

Similarly, and yes miraculously - strangely - their dark angel of the love of final death slumped to their floor, docile as a thick, black garden hose, its eyes now on Naddalin.

Naddalin felt their fear drain out of her. She knew their dark angel of the love of final death would not attack anyone now, though how she knew it, she could not have explained.

She looked up at Joy, grinning, expecting to see Joy looking relieved, or puzzled, or even grateful - but certainly not angry and scared.

Same- What do you think you are playing at?

And- she shouted, and before Naddalin could say anything, Joy had turned and stormed out of there hall.

Gonzales stepped forward, waved her wand, and their dark angel of the love of final death vanished in a small puff of black smoke. Gonzales, too, was looking at Naddalin in an unexpected way: It was a shrewd and calculating look, and Naddalin did not like it.

She was also dimly aware of an ominous muttering all around their walls. Then she felt a tugging on their back of her robes.

And- Come on, equally said Jigger's voice in her ear. The same- move - come on...

- And-

Part: 2

Jinger steered her out of there hall, Emmah hurrying alongside them.

As they went through their doors, their people on either side drew away as though they were frightened of catching something.

Naddalin did not have a clue what was going on, and neither Jinger nor Emmah explained anything until they had dragged her all their way up to their empty Coletti common room.

Like- then Jinger pushed Naddalin into an armchair and said, And You are a parse mouth.

Why...?

Why- didn't you tell us?

-And-

'And'- I am what?

'And'- said Naddalin.

And- A Parcel- mouth!

'And'- said Jinger.

And, you can talk to the dark angel of the love of final deaths!

-And- So-o...?

...?...

And- I know, and said Naddalin.

And- I mean, that is only their second time I have ever done it.

I'm accidentally set a dark angel on my cousin- Dariez at their menagerie garden once, when we were younger a- long story - but it was telling me, it had never seen Brazil, and I set it free without meaning to that was before, I knew I was a wizard - Equally- and, A dark angel told you it had never seen Brazil, yet it was on Earth at one time? And, Jinger repeated faintly.

And, So-o...?

And- said Naddalin. And- I bet loads of people here can do it.

-And-

And- Oh, no they cannot, and said Jinger. And- It is not a very common gift. Naddalin, this is bad.

-And-

And- What is bad...?

And- said Naddalin, starting to feel quite angry.

And- What's Jigger with everyone?

Listen, if I had not told that dark angel of the love of final death not to attack Joy and- Oh, that is what you said to it?

-And-

And- what you mean? You where there - you heard me - and...

Then- I heard you speaking Reports, and said- Jinger. And- Dark Angel of the love of final death language. You could have been saying anything - no wonder Joy, you sounded like you were egging their dark angel of the love of final death on or something - it was creepy, you know...

-And-

Naddalin gaped at her... (shocking moment- face... hand up at her mouth.)

And- I spoke a different language?

But - I did not realize – nut-ha- did- I's- of how can I's speak a language without knowing I can speak it?

-And-

Jinger shook her head. Both her and Emmah were looking as though someone had died.

Naddalin could not see what was so terrible.

And- you want to tell me what's Jinger, and with stopping a massive dark angel of the love of final death biting off Joy's head?

And, she said. And, what does it matter how I did it if Joy does not have to join their Headless Hunt?

-And-

And- It matters, and said Emmah, speaking at last in a hushed voice, and because being able to talk to the dark angel of the love of final deaths was what Sofie O. Andreasen was famous for. That is why their symbol of Andreasen House is a serpent.

And...?

Naddalin's mouth fell open.

And- Exactly, And- said Jinger. And, and now their whole savannah is going to think you are his great- great- great- great- grand girl or something...

-And-

But I am not, and said Naddalin, with a terror she could not explain at all.

And- You will find that hard to prove, And- said Emmah. And- she lived about a thousand years ago; for all we know, you could be.

-And-

Naddalin lay's awake for hours that night.

Through a gap in their curtains around her four-poster, she watched snow starting to drift past their tower window and wondered...

Could she be a descendant of Sofie O. Andreasen?

She did not know anything about- her daddy's family- so that was what was said.

The Andreasen had always forbidden questions about his wizarding relatives.

Quietly, Naddalin tried to say something in Reports.

The words would not come. It seemed she had to be face- to- face with a dark angel of the love of final death to do it.

But then again, I am in Coletti, Naddalin thought.

The Sorcererring Hat would not have put me in here if I had Andreasen blood within me... and then sorcerer ring on their finger for good of that color, of the gem-stone that matches. the house that I belong too for now and always in the afterlife.

Ah, said a nasty little voice in his brain, but their Sorcererring Hat wanted to put you in Andreasen, don't you remember?

Naddalin turned over, she would see Joy there next day in Angel-magical-a-ology and she would explain that she had been calling their dark angel of the love of final death off, not egging it on, which (she thought angrily, pummeling her pillow,) any fool should have grasped.

However, that night she was thinking more about then seeing the one years - have their first Angel of Flight class, with new grown wings and bodies still nude not yet time to have whippy robs light webbed coverings, fresh red dripping blood still on them as they start to flap. The names of their make dripping from the backs as it was cut in the flesh.

Nevaeh

Book: 35

Learn to Fly

Interval: 2

Chapter: 146

Lily-

I alleged getting to know her, and yes she still is the same young age she was then, that no little girl should die a virgin girl, and be lost in a home and school longing for a boy, so that night she and I snuck into a boy bedroom, that she was crushing on, back on Earth, and she had sex with him, for the first time, and he knew she was with him and the other way around, he could see her in transparency, yet feel like she was the one...

No, she can be at rest... the right thing to do right...? I thought...

She got what she wanted a boy...

And- to love her for her even in supernatural form, we still want to be loved.

I was looking over... them with wings over the bed...

She said for weeks that he drives past my old home, and school every day think about me... and looks at my graying old timeworn' the body of Neveah'; so-o I love him... for remembering me... - and she had many c*m's with him...

Don't worry, I feel she may transfer over to a real girl the angel on Earth, when she feels, that she found the right look, body... to take over, it's just a matter of time. In his hometown... and to love him... well make this happen she only had to long for 200 or fewer years...

I am sure of it... to reincarnate... to look like one yet still be one of us...

That night she was playing and teasing with him it was so cute - he was 17, to see them c*m, whit, her on the bottom... sighing in mons with his thrusts. He knew it was more than just a dream!

(The boy)

My girl Lily- not of this world!

You are the ghost that haunts me, we do all the thing that some normal couples would do, yet I am the only one that can see her, the only one that cares about her; however, we have love and that is more than and that enough to explain the undeliverable of it all, and all that supernatural, or not, that is not going to stop us from having the ties, that bond us together, worlds apart even...

My mother thinks I have gone crazy, she sees me talking to myself, and doing then with this girl that looks wrong, I know she is there, yet she cannot get it. It does not matter all I really need is her.

Part: 1

Naddalin- By next morning, however, their snow that had begun in there night had turned into a blizzard so thick that there last Herbology lesgirl of there term was canceled: Professor Burgeon wanted to fit socks and scarves on their Mandrakes, a tricky operation she would entrust to no one else, now that it was so important for their Mandrakes to grow quickly and revive Mr.'S. Norris and Colin Creve.

Naddalin fretted about this next to their fire in their Amsel common room, while Jinger and Emmah used their time off to play a game of wizard chess, white and cobalt blue.

And, for heaven's sake, Naddalin, and said Emmah, exasperated, as one of horses and bishops, wrestled her knight off her horse and dragged her off their board, after all this was life-sized, and played dirty this game.

Everything in the game came to life all the pieces... of the game board with a flick of our wizardly wounds or a point of our fallen angel fingers tips I have both.

And- go and find Joy if it is so important to you.

-And-

So-o, Naddalin got up and left through there aperture, wondering where Joy might be, she was going to be one the railroad today just for fun- it was a Sunday to you and me- yet even here it's taken as a day of rest and fun.

(Train Ride to Savanna anyone, the lost town at the end of the line that was shut down years back, into Rockville and the to the old cemetery- and her girlfriends all said- 'Yeah...' along with saying and- see if we can find new girls to bring back and under... with us, that are lost in their life, like us at one time said- Emma.)

And that what they did- the got a new girl- that was going to kill herself that night anyway, named: Haven... see she had fallen, so she would not have to face high school, with mean-ie's.

Part: 2

The castle was darker than it usually was in the daytime because of their thick, swirling gray snow at every window. Shivering, Naddalin walked past classrooms where the lesson was taken place, catching snatches of what was happening within.

Professor Ashly was shouting at someone who, by their sound of it, had turned her friend into a badger.

Resisting their urge to look, Naddalin walked on by, thinking that, Joy might be using her free time to catch up on some work, and decided to check their library first.

A group of there Silva who should have been in biology were indeed sitting at their back of their library, but they did not seem to be working. All so everything was relating back to the wizardly world.

Between their long lines of high bookshelves, the books also shimmered with wonder, Naddalin could see that their heads were close together, and they were having what looked like an absorbing conversation.

She could not see whether Joy was among them or not.

She was strolling toward term when something of what they were saying met her ears, and she had to just paused to listen, hidden in their Invisibility section.

And- so-o anyway, like that girl was saying, and told Joy to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if -'s marked her down as his next victim, it's best if she keeps a low profile for a while.

Of course, Joy is being waited for something like this to happen ever since she let slip - she was nonmagical people-born. Joy told her she had been down for Ellie.

That is not their kind of thing you bandy about with Andreasen's heir on their loose, is it?

-And-

And, you think it is, then, Ernie?

And said a girl with blonde pigtails anxiously.

And, Hannah, and said their stout girl solemnly, and she's a Parse mouth. Everyone knows that's their mark of a dark demon angel. Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to dark angels? They called Andreasen herself Serpent-tongue.

-And-

There was some heavy murmuring at this, and Ernie went on, And- Remember what was written on their wall?

Enemies of their Here, Beware. - had some sort of run-in with Filch. Next thing we know, cats attacked.

That first year, Creevey, was annoying - at their Claepsiara match, taking pictures of her while she was lying in their mud. Next thing we know - Creve's been attacked.

And- Then- she always seems so nice, though, and said Hannah indecisively, and besides, well, she is their one who made- You Know- Who disappear. She cannot be all bad, can she?

-And-

Ernie lowered her voice mysteriously, there Silva bent closer, and Naddalin edged nearer so that she could catch Ernie's words.

-And-

No one knows how she survived that attack by- You-Know-Whom.

I mean to say; she was only a baby when it happened. She should have been blasted to smithereens.

Only a powerful dark demon angel of wizardry could have endured a curse like that.

-And- she dropped her voice until it was scarcely more than a whisper, and said, and- That has why You- Know-Whom wanted to kill her in there first place, don't you? I did not want another Dark Lord competing with her. I wonder what other powers -'s been hiding?

-And-

Naddalin could not take any more.

Part: 3

Clearing her throat loudly, she stepped out from behind their bookshelves, holding a book that was animating itself, as the pages moved by themselves.

If she had not been feeling so annoyed, she would have found their sight that greeted her funny: Every one of their Silva, looked as though they had been Petrified by their sight of her, and their colors were draining out of Ernie's face.

-And-

Hello, and said Naddalin. And- I am looking for Joy Santah- Sletcherrle.

-And-

Silva's worst fears had clearly been confirmed. They all looked fearfully at Ernie.

And- What do you want with her?

And- said Ernie in a tottering voice.

And- I wanted to tell her what really happened with that dark angel at their Dueling Club, and said Naddalin.

Ernie bit his white lips and then, taken a deep breath, said, And We were all there. We saw what happened.

-And-

And- then you noticed, that after I spoke to it, their dark angel-backed off? And said Naddalin.

And- All I saw, And- said Ernie stubbornly, though she was trembling as she speaking, and was you speaking Reports and chasing their dark angel toward Joy.

-And-

And- I did not chase it at her! Naddalin said, her voice shaking with anger. And- It did not even touch her!

-And-

And- It was a very near Miss. Smith, and said, Ernie. Besides, in case you are getting ideas, she added hastily, I might tell you that, you can trace my family back through nine generations of spectators and sorcerers, angels fallen or not, and my blood is as pure as anyone is, so-o.

Besides- I do not care what sort of blood you have! This was said by- Naddalin fiercely. Why?

Why would I want to attack Nonmagical people- borns?

And- I have heard you hate those

Nonmagical peoples, you live with and said Ernie swiftly.

And, it is not possible to live with their Sleyashs and not hate them, and said Naddalin, and, I would like to see you try it.

-And-

Naddalin blundered up the corridor, barely noticing where she was going, she was in such a hurry.

The result was that she walked into something very huge and solid, which knocked her backward onto their floor.

And- oh, hello, Deride, And Naddalin said, looking up.

A woolly, snow-covered balaclava entirely hid Darcie's face, but it could not be anyone else, as she felt most of the corridor in her far overcoat. A dead fowl was hanging from one of her massive, gloved hands.

And, All right' de, Naddalin? And, she said, pulling up their balaclava so she could speak. And, why aren't yah in class?

Likewise, canceled, and said Naddalin, getting up. Above and beyond that, what are you doing here?

Deride held up their limp fowl.

And, the second one killed this term, and she explained, why.... and, it is either foxes or a

Blood-Sucking Bear with fangs the size of your arms, besides- I need their Headmaster's permission term put a charm around their coop, to see why they are passing.

Part: 4

Then she peered more closely at Naddalin, and from under her thick, snow-flecked eyebrows and covered up eyelashes, and freckles on her pink rosy cheeks.

Like, like, like- um are you, sure you're all right...?

Yah looks all hot an' bothered -and...

Naddalin could not bring herself to repeat what Ernie and the rest of their Silva had been saying about her, and, it is nothing, and she said. Like, I had better get going, Deride, it is Transfiguration next, and I must pick up my books; plus, then, she walked off, her mind still full of what Ernie had said about her.

Moreover, Joy is being waited for something like this to happen ever since she let slip to - she was Nonmagical people-born... thus... Naddalin stamped up their stairs and turned along another corridor, which was particularly dark; their torches had been extinguished by a Jigger, icy draft that was blowing through a loose windowpane.

Consequently... she was halfway down their passage when she tripped headlong over something lying on their floor. Then she turned to squint at what she had fallen over and felt as though her belly had dissolved.

Joy- Santah- Sletcherrle was lying on their floor, rigid and cold, a look of shock frozen on his face, his eyes staring blankly at their ceiling. Hence... that was not it at all... Next to her was another figure, their strangest sight- Naddalin had ever seen.

It was Headless Saula, the girl that cut her own off, back in the 1900s, no longer pearly-white and translucent, but black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off their floor. She was looking at me with red eyes. We have chatted, yet not much... really. Her head was semidetached in this form she was taking, and her face wore an expression of shock identical to Joy's.

Naddalin got to her feet, her breathing fast and shallow, not knowing this girl like this and not think she could change into this or that... her heart doing a kind of like a xylophone, with the millets against her ribs. She looked up wildly and then down, their deserted access strip and saw a line of spiders scuttling as fast as they could away from her young sooky body, she was looking like a rotting corpse, in this ghostly form. The only sounds where there - muffled voices of teachers from their classes on either side. She could run, and no one would ever know she had been there.

As she stood there, be terrified, a door right next to her opened with a bang. Peeves their Ghost came shooting out. Nonetheless, she could not just leave them lying here... she had to get help... Would anyone have faith in her, had not had anything to do with this?

Naddalin- Only here girls would get it... she thought...

Chapter: 147

Part: 1

And, why, it is putty wee -! And, cackled peeves, knowing Naddalin's glasses askew as she bounced past her. And, What's - up to? Why's - looking -and, peeves stopped, halfway through a mid-air somersault. Upside down, she spotted Joy and semi headless Saula. She flipped the right way up, filled her lungs and before Naddalin could stop she, screamed, And ATTACK! ATTACK!

ADDED ATTACK!

NO MORTAL OR IMPRESSION IS SAFE!

RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTA-A-A-ACK-ing!

Smash - crash - bash- at their door after door flew open along their corridor and people flooded out.

For several long minutes, there was a scene of such confu sion that Joy was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in Headless Saula.

Naddalin found herself pinned against their wall as their teachers shouted for quiet. Professor Ashly came running, followed by her own class, one of whom still had black-and-white-striped hair.

She used her wound to set off a nosey- checking bang, which restored silence, and ordered everyone back into their classes.

No like- um sooner had their scene cleared than Ernie their Unfluffy arrived, panting, on their scene.

And Caught in their act! And, Ernie yelled, her face stark white, pointing her finger dramatically at Naddalin. Besides, Fleur is not stupid, she was good enough to enter their Tizard Tournament, and said Naddalin. Named for the man that started it all back when he was a teacher here, under potions and a magical chemist.

Then, Not you as well! And said Emmah bitterly.

At that point, I suppose you like their way Phlegm says 'Any,' do you? And, asked Jill scornfully.

And, No, and said Naddalin, wishing she had not spoken, And I was just saying Phlegm... I mean, Fleur... accordingly... I would much rather have Tonks in their family and said, Jill. And, At least she is a laugh. Besides, she has not been much of a laugh lately and said Jinger. Henceforth, every time, I have seen her she is looked more like Moaning Myrtle. Hitherto, that is not fair, snapped Emmah; she still is not over what happened... you know... I mean, she was her cousin!

-And-

Naddalin's heart sank... They had arrived at Trius. She picked up a fork and began shoveling scrambled eggs into her mouth, hoping to deflect any invitation to join in this part of their conversation.

Furthermore, like and Trius barely knew each other! Said Jinger, besides, Trius was in Dizeryland, just outside of the land of the castle half her life and before, that their families never- ever met... so-o like, that is not their point, and said Emmah. Besides, she thinks it was her edge... he died... her dad! And, she was not going to take it... that was why she was here anyway.

And, how does she work that one out? And, asked Naddalin, despite herself. And, Well, she was fighting Bellatrix Estrange, wasn't she? I's think she feels that if only she had finished her off, Bellatrix could not have killed Trius.

And, that is stupid and said Jinger.

And, it is a survivor's guilt and said Emmah. And, she and I know Lapin's tried to talk her round, but she is still down. She is having trouble with her Metamorphosing!

And, with her...?

And, she cannot change her appearance like she used to, and explained Emmah. And think her powers must have been affected by shock, or something, did not know that could happen, and said Naddalin, nor did I, and said Emmah, but I suppose if you are really depressed, their door opened again and Mr.'s.

Railie popped her head in.

Jill and she whispered, and come downstairs, and help me with their lunch. I am toluene to this lot! And said Jill, outraged. Now...! Said, Mr.'s. Railie, and withdrew. She only wants me there, so she does not have to be alone with Phlegm!

And said, Jill, crossly. She swung her long golden hair around in a very good imitation of Fleur and pranced across there room with her arms held aloft like a ballet dancer.

And, you lot had better come down quickly too, and she said as she left.

Naddalin took advantage of their temporary silence to eat more breakfast. Emmah was peering into Céline and Katy's boxes, though every now and then she cast sideways looks at Naddalin.

Jinger, who was now helping herself to Naddalin's toast, was still gazing dreamily at their door. Also, what is this? And, Emmah asked eventually, holding up what looked like a small telescope.

Neabah, and said Jinger, and but if Céline and Katy left it here, it is not ready for their joke shop yet, so be careful. And, And, your mom said their shop is going well and said Naddalin.

And, Said Céline and Katy have a real flair for business.

That is an understatement and said Jinger.

And, they are funeral Mass in their Galleons! I cannot wait to see their place, we have not been to Dagon Alley yet because Ma' says Dad is got to be there for extra security and she is being busy at work, but it sounds excellent, and what about Percy? And, asked Naddalin; their third-eldest Railie girl kid had fallen out with the rest of their family. Also, is she toluene to your mom and dad again?

Besides, nope, and said Jinger.

Nevertheless, she knows your dad was right all along now about Waltemath being back... Then at that time, and place at that very moment, Old- McDermott says folks find it far easier to forgive others for being winger than being right and said Emmah. Besides like I um- heard her telling your mom, Jinger. As well as this all sounds like their mental thing old- McDermott would say and said Jinger.

Above and beyond, she is going to be giving me private ledgers this year and said Naddalin conversationally.

Jinger Hayvannah on his bit of toast and Emmah gasped.

And, you kept that quiet! And said Jinger.

And, only just remembered, and said Naddalin honestly. In addition, she told me last night in your broom herd.

Then, besides, in addition, and also- Joannah... private ledgers with Duerre! Also- said Jinger, looking impressed. Also, she and I are my girl lover wonders why she is...?

-And-

Her voice trailed away...

Naddalin saw her and Emmah exchange looks. Naddalin laid down his knife and fork, her heart beating fast considering, that all she was doing was sitting in bed. Duerre had said to do it...

Why not now? She fixed his eyes on her fork, which was gleaming in their sunlight streaming into his lap, and said, And I do not know exactly why she is going to be giving me ledgers, but I think it must be because of their prophecy.

Part: 2

Likewise, unanimously- I kissed her that night long and slow...

Neither Jinger nor Emmah spoke. Naddalin had their impression, that both had frozen. She is and was continuing, still speaking to her fork, and yeah know, there one they were trying to steal at their Ministry.

Besides... moreover, nobody knows what it said, though, and said Emmah quickly. And, it got smashed, equally, besides, and although, like their Prophet says... commenced Jinger, but then again Emmah said, Sh-h!

Equally and then their Prophet is got it right, there same said Naddalin, looking up at them both with a heroic effort: Emmah seemed frightened and Jinger amazed. And, that glass ball that smashed was not the only record of their prophecy.

I heard their whole thing in Duerre's office, she was their one their prophecy was made to, so she could tell me.

From what it said, And Naddalin took a deep breath, and it looks like I am their one who is got to finish off Waltemath... At least, it said neither of us could live while their other survives.

-Else-

The three of them gazed at one another in silence for a moment. Then there was a loud bang and Emmah vanished behind a puff of black smoke.

Similarly, Emmah! And, shouted

Naddalin and Jinger; their breakfast tray slid to their floor with a crash.

Emmah emerged, coughing, out of their smoke, clutching their telescope and sporting a brilliantly purple-ie black eye.

And, she and I's, squeezed it and it... it punched me! Similarly, she did as I said, she gasped, she jumped into my arms, I held her tightly.

In addition, sure enough, they now saw a tiny fist on a long spring protruding from there end of their telescope.

Then, do not worry, similarly said Jinger, who was plainly trying not to laugh, their same Mom will fix that, she is good at heralding minor injuries...

Similarly, and OH well, never-mind that now!

Besides said Emmah hastily. And, Naddalin, oh, Naddalin...

And She sat down on their edge of her bed again, nude, and We wondered after we got back from their Ministry...

Obviously, we did not want to say anything to you, but from what Lucius Mallerie said about their prophecy, how it was about you and Waltemath, well, we thought it might be something like this...

Oh, Naddalin... and Her stared at her, then whispered, and are you scared?

-And-

Like- like- like um- not as much as I's was, and said Naddalin. And, When I first heard it, I partially was... but now, it appears I for one always- like- like I'm freaking- knew I would have to face her in their end...

-Similarly-

Part: 3

And, when we heard, Duerre was collecting you in pergirl- years for flying lesions, we thought she might be telling you something or showing you something to do with their prophecy, and said Jinger eagerly.

In addition, and we were kind of right, weren't we? She would not be giving you ledgers if she thought you were a goner, would not waste her freaking-frapp'n time... she must think you have a chance!

-And-

Like sh*t- that is true and said Emmah.

Besides the wonder what she will teach you, Naddalin? Advanced defensive magic... powerful counter curses... ant jinxes...

-And-

Naddalin did not really listen.

A warmth was spreading through her that had nothing to do with their sunlight; a tight obstruction in her chest seemed to be dissolving.

She knew that Jinger and Emmah were more shocked than they were letting on, but their mere fact that they were still there on either side of her, speaking bracing words of comfort, not shrinking from her as though she were contaminated or dangerous, was worth more than she could ever tell them.

And evasive enchantments and concluded Emmah. And, Well, at least you know one lesser you will be having this year, that is one more than Jinger and me. I wonder when our FLYING HORSES results will come? And also, our first flight testing- ones too, with our own wings. IT- is like- cannot be long now, it is being a month, and said Jinger.

Um, yah- ha- hang on, and said Naddalin, as another part of last night's conversation, came back to her. And think Duerre said our FLYING HORSES results would be arriving today!

-Equally- ...Splendid...

Part: 4

HUM, Today... today? Too shrieked Emmah. And, Today? But why did not you... oh my God... you should have said...

Besides...

She leaped to her feet.

Like, I am going to see whether any Flying horses with wings have come...

Besides like when Naddalin arrived downstairs ten minutes later, fully dressed and carrying her empty breakfast tray, it was to find Emmah sitting at their kitchen table in great agitation, while Mr.'s. Railie tried to lessen her resemblance to half a and, here Also she had thrown their chain around her neck too.

And, Ready?

And, she said breathlessly.

And, what are we doing?

And, Naddalin said, completely lost.

'I reckon it is over, ya know!' Said Deride.

Like she was still squinting towards there stadium.

'Look there are individuals are like coming' out already if yah two hurry you'll be able to tier blend in with their crowd an' no one will know yah were not there!'

'Good idea,' said Naddalin.

'Well... see you later, then, deride.'

'I do not believe her,' said Emmah in a very unsteady voice, there moment they were out of earshot of Deride.' I do not believe her; I really do not believe her.'

'Calm down,' said Naddalin.

'Calm down!' She said feverishly...

'A giant...! A giant in their Forest! In addition, we're supposed to give her English books!

Always assuming, unquestionably, we can get past their herd of murderous centaurs on their way in and out! I do not believe her!'

'We do not have to do anything yet!'

Naddalin tried to reassure her in a quiet voice, as they joined a stream of jabbering Silva heading back towards their castle.

She's not asking us to do anything unless she gets chucked out and that might not even happen.'

'Oh, come off it, Naddalin!' Said Emmah angrily, stopping dead in her tracks so that their people behind had to swerve to avoid her.

'Of course, she is going to be chucked out and, to be perfectly honest, after what we have just seen, who can blame Ambridge?'

~*~

Look there is the old Rockville bridge...

Haven was feeling homesick why I don't know she flies down to is and haunt, like the girl before her.

~*~

(The here and now)

There was a pause in which Naddalin glared at her, and her eyes filled with tears.

'You did not mean that,' said Naddalin quietly.

Chapter: 148

Part: 1

'No... well... all right... I did not,' she said, wiping her eyes angrily. 'But why does she have to make life so difficult for herself for us?' 'Nah...'

'Railie is our Queen, Railie is our Queen, she did not let their Quaffed in, Railie is da' queen...'

'And I wish they would stop singing that stupid girl,' said Emmah miserably,' haven't they gloated enough?'

A great tide of students was moving up their sloping lawns from there pitch.

'Oh, let us get in before we must meet there

Andreasen's,' said Emmah.' Railie can save anything, her never-ever leaves a single ring, that is why.

Amsel's all sing: Railie is our Queen.'

'Emmah...' said Naddalin flying horses'.

Part: 2

The girl was growing louder, but it was issuing not from a crowd of emerald and cream clad Andreasen's, but from a mass of alizarin and cream moving slowly towards their castle, orange with cream and then also aqua and cream, bearing a solitary figure upon its many shoulders. All the colors of our girls' teams- each with their own coat of arms.

'Railie is our Queen, Railie is our Queen, her did not let their Quaffed in, Railie is our Queen...'

'No?' Said Emmah in a hushed voice.

'YES!' Said Naddalin loudly.

'NADDALIN! EMMAH!' yelled Jinger, waving their cream Claepsiara cup in their air, quite beside herself.

'WE DID IT! WE WON!'

They beamed up at her as she passed. There was a scrum at the door of their castle and Jinger's head got badly bumped on their lintel, but nobody seemed to want to put her down.

Still singing, there crowd squeezed itself into their Entrance Hall and out of sight.

Naddalin and Emmah watched them go, beaming, until there last Hayvanna strains of' Railie is our Queen' died away.

Then they turned to each other, their smiles fading.

'Well save our news till Hayvanna- harrow, shall we?' Said Naddalin.

'Yes, all right,' said Emmah wearily.' I'm not in any hurry.'

They climbed their steps together. At their Jigger doors both instinctively looked back at their Forbidden Forest.

Naddalin was not sure whether it was his imagination, but she thought she saw a small cloud of birds erupting into their air over their treetops in their distance, as though their tree in which they had been nesting had just been pulled up by their roots.

Jinger's euphoria at helping Amsel scrape there Claepsiara cup was such that she could not settle to anything next day.

All she like wanted to do was talk over their match, so Naddalin and Emmah found it very difficult to find an opening in which to mention Graw.

Not that either of them tried very hard; neither was keen to be there one to bring Jinger back to reality in quite such a brutal fashion.

As it was another fine, warm day, they persuaded her to join them in revising under there beech tree at the edge of their lake, where they had less chance of being overheard than in their common room.

Jinger was not particularly keen on this idea at first- she was thoroughly enjoying being patted on their back by every Amsel who walked past her chair, not to mention their occasional outbursts of' Railie is our Queen...' Yet, but after a while, she agreed that some fresh air might do her good.

They spread their books out in the shade of their beech tree and sat down while Jinger talked them through her first save of their match for what felt like there dozenth time.

'Well, I mean, I had already let in that one of Daviess, so I was not feeling all that confident, but I Neabah, when Bradley came towards me, just out of nowhere, I thought um- you can do this!

Part: 3

And I had about a second to decide which way to fly, you know, because she looked like she was aiming for there right goal hoop my right, obviously, his left but I had a funny feeling that she was fainting, and so, I took their chance and flew left her right, I mean and well you saw what happened,' she then concluded modestly, sweeping her hair back quite unnecessarily so that it looked interestingly

windswept and glancing around to see whether there people nearest to them - a bunch of gossiping third year Silva - had heard her.

'And then, when Chambers came to me about five minutes later...' 'What?' Jinger asked, having stopped mid-sentence at their look on Naddalin's face. 'Why are you grinning?'

'I'm not,' said Naddalin quickly, and looked down at her Transfiguration notes, trying to straighten her face.

The truth was that Jinger had just reminded Naddalin forcibly of another Amsel Claepsiara player who had once sat rumpling his hair under this very tree.' I'm just glad we won, that is all.'

'Yeah,' said Jinger sullying, savoring their words,' yeah we won. Did you see there look on Changes face when Jill got there Snitch right out from under her nose?'

'I suppose she cried, did she?' Said Naddalin bitterly.

'Well, yes more out of temper than anything, though...' Jinger frowned slightly. 'But you saw her chuck her broom away when she got back to their ground, didn't you?'

'Err,' said Naddalin.

'Well, ... no, Jinger,' said Emmah with a heavy sigh, putting down her book and Pa. at her apologetically.' As a matter of fact, there only a bit of their match Naddalin and I saw was Davies's first goal.'

Jinger's carefully ruffled hair seemed to wilt with disappointment. 'You did not watch?' She said faintly, Pa. from one to three other.

'You did not see me make any of those saves?' 'Well no,' said Emmah, stretching out a placatory hand towards her. 'Nonetheless Jinger, we did not want to leave - we had to!' 'Yeah?' said Jinger, whose face was growing enflamed. 'How come...?'

'It was Deride,' said Naddalin. She decided to tell us why she is being covered in injuries ever since she got back from there giants. She wanted us to go into their Forest with her, we had no choice, you know how she gets, anyway...'

The story was told in five minutes, by their end of which Jinger's indignation had been replaced by a look of total incredulity.

'She brought one back and hid it in their Forest?'

'Yepper,' said Naddalin appallingly.

'No,' said Jinger, as though by saying this she could make it untrue.' No, she cannot have.'

'Well, she has,' said Emmah definitely.'

Grasps about sixteen feet tall, enjoys ripping up twenty-foot pine trees, and knows me,' she snorted,' as she...'

Jinger gave a nervous laugh.

'And Deride wants us to...?'

Teach her English, yes,' said Naddalin.

'She's lost her mind,' said Jinger in an almost awed voice.

Part: 4

'OH-Yes,' said Emmah irritably, turning a page of Intermediate Transfiguration and glaring at a series of diagrams showing some Flying horses turning into a pair of opera glasses.

'Yes, yes, yes- I am starting to think she has. But, unfortunately, she made Naddalin and my promise.'

'Well, you are just going to have to break your promise, that is all,' said Jinger firmly. 'I mean, come on... we have exams and where about that far' she then held up her hand to show thumb and forefinger almost touching...' from being chucked out as it is. And anyway... remember- Norrah?

Remember Aragon? Have we ever come off better for mixing with any of Derides monster mates?'

'I know, it is just that we promised,' said Emmah in a small voice.

Jinger smoothed his hair flat again, seemingly- preoccupied.

'Well,' the sides, 'Deride has not been sacked yet, has she? Her hung on this long, she'll hang on until their end of term and we will not have to go near Graw at all.'

Their castle grounds were gleaming in their sunlight as though freshly painted; their cloudless sky smiled at itself in their smoothly sparkling lake; their satin green lawns rippled occasionally in a gentle breeze. June had arrived, but in their fifth years, this meant only one thing: their flying horses with wings whereupon term at last.

Their teachers were no longer setting term homework; ledgers were devoted to revising those topics their teachers thought most likely to come up in their exams.

There purposeful, feverish atmosphere drove everything but their Flying horses with wings from Naddalin's mind, though she did wonder occasionally during Potions ledgers whether Sevket had ever told Gonzales that she must continue giving Naddalin Occlumency tuition. If she had then Gonzales had ignored Sevket as thoroughly as she was now ignoring Naddalin.

This suited Naddalin is very sweet. well; she was quite busy and tense enough without extra classes with snaps', and to her relief, Emmah was much too preoccupied these days to badger her about Occlumency; she was spending a lot of time muttering to herself and had not laid out any elf clothes for days.

He was not their only pergirl acting oddly as their Flying horses with wings drew steadily nearer. Ernie Macmillan had developed an irritating habit of interrogating people about their revision practices.

'How many hours you think you are doing a day?' So-o she demanded of Naddalin and Jinger as they queued outside Herbology, a manic gleam in her eyes.

'Nah,' said Jinger. 'A few...'

'More or less than eight?'

'Less, I's-pose,' said Jinger, slightly alarmed.

'I'm doing eight,' said Ernie, puffing out her chest.

'Eight or nine. I am getting an hour before breakfast every day. Eights my average. I can do ten on a good weekend day. I did nine and a half on Monday. Not so good on

Tuesday, only seven and a quarter. Then on Wednesday...'

Naddalin was deeply thankful that Professor Burgeon seed term into greenhouse three at that point, forcing Ernie to abandon his recital.

Meanwhile, Draco Mallerie had found a different way to induce terror.

'Of course, it is not what you know,' she was heard to tell Crabbe and Gayle loudly outside Potions a few days before their exams where to start,' it's who you know. Now,

Daddy is being friendly with their head of their- Wizarding Examinations Authority for years - old Annette Valdez banks we have had her round for dinner and everything...'

'Do you think that is true?' Emmah whispered in alarm to Naddalin and Jinger.

'Nothing we can do about it if it is,' said Jinger gloomily.

Naddalin-'I's do not think it is true,' said.

Neville quietly from behind them.' Because, Annette Valdez Rows, is a friend of my grants, and she is never-ever mentioned there Malleries.'

'What's she like, Neville?' Asked Emmah at once.' Is she strict...?'

Part: 5

'Well, she has,' said Emmah firmly.' Grasps about sixteen feet tall, enjoys ripping up twenty-foot pine trees, and knows me,' she snorted,' as Emmah.' Jinger gave a nervous laugh...

'Then deride wants us to...?'

'Teach her English, yes,' said Naddalin.

'she's lost his mind,' said Jinger in an almost awed voice.

'Yes,' said Emmah irritably, turning a page of Intermediate Transfiguration, and glaring at a series of diagrams showing a flying angel like me, and she is turning into a pair of performance glasses.' Yes, I am starting to think she has. But, unfortunately, she made

Naddalin and I promise.'

'Well, you are just going to have to break your promise, that is all,' said Jinger firmly.' I mean, come on... we have exams and were about that far...' She held up his hand to show thumb and forefinger almost touching' from being chucked out as it is.

And anyway... remember Norrah?

Remember Samorah?

Have we ever come off better for mixing with any of derides monster mates?'

'I's know, it is just that we promised,' said Emmah in a small voice.

Jinger smoothed his hair flat again, going from one world into another- into and over many lands, seaming yet again preoccupied.

'Well,' she side,' Deride has not been sacked yet, has she? She is hung on this long; shell hang on till there end of term and we will not have to go near Graw at all.'

The castle grounds, where gleaming in there sunbeams as though freshly painted; the cloudless sky beamed at itself in there effortlessly sparkling lake; there satin green lush lawns rippled sporadically in a gentle breeze.

June had arrived, but in their fifth years, this meant only one thing: their Flying horses with wings whereupon them at last.

Their teachers were no longer setting them homework; ledgers were devoted to revising those topics their teachers thought most likely to come up in their exams.

The purposeful, feverish atmosphere drove everything but with their wings from Naddalin's mind, though she did wonder occasionally during Potions ledgers whether Sevket had ever told Gonzales that she must continue giving Naddalin Occlumency tuition.

If her hands, then Gonzales had ignored Sevket as thoroughly as she was now ignoring Naddalin. This suited Naddalin very well; she was quite busy and tense enough without extra classes with Gonzales, and to his relief, Emmah was much too preoccupied these days to badger her about Occlumency; she was spending a lot of time muttering to herself and had not laid out any fairy clothes for days.

She was not there only particular acting oddly as their flying horses with wings drew steadily nearer. Ernie Macmillan had developed an irritating habit of interrogating folks about their revision practices.

'How many hours you think you are doing a day?'

She demanded of Naddalin and Jinger as they queued outside of biology a manic gleam in her eyes.

'I- neither,' said Jinger.' A few times.'

'More or less than eight?'

'Less, I'm s-pose,' said Jinger, slightly more alarmed.

'I'm doing all right,' said Ernie, puffing out her chest.' Eight or nine, I am getting an hour before breakfast every day.

Eights my average, I can do ten on a good weekend day.

I did nine and a half on Monday. Not so good on Tuesday only seven and a quarter; then on Wednesday Naddalin was deeply thankful that Professor Burgeon seeds them into orangery three at that point, forcing Ernie to abandon his recital.

Meanwhile, Drallieah Mallerie had found a unique way to induce terror.

'Of course, it is not what you know,' she was heard- to tell Carllah and Sayale loudly outside Potions a few days before there exams where to start,' it's who you know. Now, Daddy is being friendly with their head of their wizarding from dream angels, too dark ones, too angle of death, to demon angels- examinations authorities for years old Annette Valdez Rows, um like we have had her round for dinner and, everything...'

'Do you think that is so-o?' Emmah then whispered in alarm to Naddalin and Jinger.

Nothing we can do about it if it is,' said Jinger gloomily.

'I do not think it is true,' said Neville quietly from behind them.' Because Annette Valdez Rows is a friend of my grants, and she is never mentioned there Malleries.' 'what is she like,

Neville?' Asked Emmah at once.' Is she strict...?'

'Bit like Nanna, really,' said Neville in an unresponsive voice.

'Knowing she will not hurt your chances, though, will it?' Jinger told her hearteningly. 'Oh, I do not think it will make any difference,' said Neville, still more dejectedly.

'Nanas always telling Professor Valdez Rows, I am not as good as my dad... well... you saw what she is like at St. Songoalz's, Neville looked fixedly at their floor. Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah glanced at each other but did not know what to say.

Part: 6

It was there first-time Neville had to attract flying horses edged that they had met at their wizarding hospital.

Meanwhile, a flourishing black-market trade in aids to concentration, mental agility, and wakefulness had sprung up among their fifth and seventh years.

(Back)

Naddalin and Jinger were much tempted by their bottle of Baurioids Brain Elixir offered to them by Raven claw the sixth year Ellieah Carmichael, who swore it was solely responsible for their nine' Outstanding' Flying horses with wings her had gained there earlier summer and was offering a whole pint for a mere twelve Galleons.

Jinger assured Naddalin she would reimburse her for his half there moment her left SKOUFYCEOL and got a job, but before they could close their deal, Emmah had confiscated t heir bottle from Carmichael and poured their contents down a toilet.

'Emmah, we wanted to buy that!' Shouted Jinger.

'Don't be stupid,' she snarled at me like a girl-ie dog in heat. 'You might as well take Hanna Dingle's powdered dark angels to claw and have done with it.'

'Dingles got powdered dark angels' claw?' said Jinger eagerly.

'Not anymore,' said Emmah. 'I'm confiscated that, too. None of these things work, you know.'

'Dark Angels' claw does work!' Said Jinger. It's supposed to be incredible, really gives your brain a boost, you come over all cunning for a few hours Emmah, let me have a pinch, go on, it cannot hurt 'This stuff can,' said Emmah grimly. 'I've had a look at it, and it is dried Doxy droppings.'

This information took their edge off Naddalin and Jigger's desire for brain stimulants.

They received their examination timetables and details of their procedure for Flying horses with wings during their next Transfiguration lesson.

'As you can see,' Professor Ashly told their class as they copied down their dates and times of their exams from there blackboard,' you're Flying horses with wings are spread over two successive weeks. You will sit their theory papers in their mornings, and their repetition in their afternoons. Your practical Stingray examination will, of course, take place at night.

'Now, I must warn you that there most stringent antic hating charms have been as applied to your examination papers.

Auto Answering Typewriters, along with crammed notes books are banned from there examination hall, as are remember-rings, metal- nibbed pre-teen wing-feather pens- with hex's, and fairy-correcting wing ink that is invisible on less charmed on the paper by the user.

Every year, I am afraid to say, seems to the harbor at least one student who thinks that she or she can get around there Wizarding Examinations Authority's rules.

I can only hope that it is nobody in Amsel.

Our new Headmistress' Professor Ashly inference their word with their same look on her face that Aunt Jennath had whenever she was contemplating a particularly stubborn bit of dirt...

'Has asked their Heralds of House to tell their schoolgirls, that cheating will be punished most severely, because, of course, your examination results will reflect upon there

Headmistress's new regime at their Hayvannah.'

Professor Ashly gave a tiny sigh; Naddalin saw their nostrils of her sharp nose flare.

Part: 7

'Like however, that is no regard to do your very best. You have your own futures to think about.'

'Please, Professor,' said Emmah, her hand in their air, 'when will we find out our results?'

A flying horse will be sent to you sometime in July-' said Professor McGonagall.

'Excellent,' said Lacy Thomas in an audible whisper, 'so-o we do not have to worry about it until the day's off.'

(Feelings)

Naddalin she imagined sitting in his bedroom in Privet Drive in six weeks...' time, waiting for her FLYING HORSES results.

Well, her thought uninterestingly, at least she would be sure of one bit of post that summer.

Their first examination, Theory of Charms were scheduled for Monday morning.

I- Naddalin thought about this: charm-ed lives she thought... the only one like me I know of had that- and even then, she had hell to pay... to her.

Naddalin agreed to test Emmah after lunch on Sunday, but regretted it at once; she was very agitated and kept snatching their book back from her to check that she had gotten there answer completely right, finally hitting her hard on their nose with their sharp edge of accomplishments in charming.

'Why do not you just do it yourself?' She said firmly, handing their book back to her, his eyes watering.

Meanwhile, Jinger was reading two years' worth of Charms notes with his fingers in his ears, his lips moving soundlessly; Laila Finnigan was lying flat on his back on their floor, reciting their definition of a Substantive Charm while Lacy checked it against' The Standard Book of Spells,' Grade 5; and Parvati and Lavender, who were practicing basic Locomotion Charms, were making their pencil cases race each other around the edge of their table.

Part: 8

Dinner was a subdued affair that night.

Naddalin and Jinger did not talk much, but ate with gusto, having studied hard all day.

Emmah, on their other hand, kept putting down her knife and fork and diving under their table for her bag, from which she would seize a book to check some fact or figure.

Jinger was just telling her that she ought to eat a decent meal, or she would not sleep that night when her fork slid from her limp fingers and landed with a loud tinkle on her plate.

'Oh, my goodness,' she said faintly, staring into their Entrance Hall. 'Is that them? Is that their examiners?'

Naddalin and Jinger whipped around on their bench. Through their doors to their Great Hall, they could see Ambridge standing with a small group of ancient Pa. watchers and wizards and fallen girl angels like them.

Ambridge, Naddalin was pleased to see, looked nervous. Shall we go and have a closer look?' Said Jinger.

Naddalin and Emmah nodded and they hastened towards their double doors into their Entrance Hall, slowing down as they stepped over their threshold to walk sedately past their assessors.

Naddalin thought Professor Valdez Rows must be their tiny, stooped witch with a face so lined it looked as though it had been draped in cobwebs; Ambridge was sequin to her deferentially.

Professor Valdez Rows seemed to be a little deaf; she was answering Professor Ambridge very loudly considering they were only a foot apart.

'Journey was fine, the journey was fine, we have made it plenty of times before!' She said - intolerantly... 'Now, I have not heard from Duerre lately!' she added, gazing around their Hall as though hoping she might suddenly emerge from a broom cupboard. 'No idea where she is, I's suppose?'

Part: 9

'None at all,' said Ambridge, shooting a malevolent look at Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah, who were now dawdling around their foot of their stairs as Jinger pretended to do up his shoelace. 'Nevertheless, I's daresay their Ministry of Magic will track her down soon enough.'

'I'm so-o, doubt it,' shouted tiny Professor Valdez Rows, 'not if Duerre does not want to be found!

I's should know... examined her partially in Transfiguration and Charms when she did Newts... did things with a wand I had never seen before.'

'Yes... well...' said Professor Ambridge as Naddalin, Jinger and Emmah dragged their feet up their marble staircase as flying horses as they dared.

'Um- let me show you to their staff room.'

'I daresay you would like a cup of tea after your journey.'

It was an uncomfortable sort of evening.

Everyone was trying to do some last-minute revising but nobody seemed to be getting very far.

Naddalin went to bed early but then lay awake for what felt like hours.

She remembered her career consultation and Ashly's furious declaration, and that she would help her become an Aurora if it was their last thing she did.

And- she wished she had expressed a more achievable ambition now that exam time was here.

She knew she was not their only one lying awake, but then again, like none of their others in their dormitory spoke and finally, one by one, they fell asleep.

None of their fifth years talked very much at breakfast the next day, either: Parvati was practicing incantations under her breath while their salt cellar in Jigger of her twitched;

Emmah was rereading Achievements in Charming so fast that her eyes appeared blurred, and Neville kept dropping his knife and fork and conquer over their marmalade.

Emmah turned their hourglass over three times.

Their dark ward dissolved. Naddalin had their sensation that she was flying very fast, backward. A blur of colors and shapes ruler past her, his ears were pounding, she tried to yell but could not hear his own voice – I hear voices...

And then she felt solid ground beneath his feet, and everything came into focus again – AND - she was standing next to Emmah in their deserted entrance hall and a stream of golden sunlight was falling across their paved floor from their open Jigger doors. She looked wildly around at Emmah, the chain of their hourglass cutting into his neck.

And, what?

And...

And, here! Also... Emmah seized, Naddalin's arm and dragged her across their hall to their door of a broom closet; she opened it, pushed her inside among their Beccaets and mops, then slammed their door behind them.

Above and beyond all that crap, what and the- how - Emmah, what happened?

-Besides-

Likewise, we have gone back in time,

And Emmah whispered, lifting their chain off Naddalin's neck in their darkness. And, three hours back...

-Besides-

Part: 10

Naddalin-'I enjoys giving oral to all my girlfriends!'

Anyways back to the story-

I remember when-

Naddalin found her own leg and gave it a very hard pinch. It hurt a lot, which seemed to rule out their possibility that she was having a very bizarre dream.

Also, Listen!

Someone is coming! I think I do think it is – I-I think it might be us! And, Emmah had her ear pressed against their cupboard door.

And, Footsteps across their hall... yes, I think it is us going down to Dargide's!

And...

And, are you telling me, and Naddalin thought, and that we are here in this cupboard and we are out there too?

Besides, and, Yes, and said Emmah, her ear still glued to their storeroom door. And, I am sure it is us. It does not sound like more than three people... and we are Wal queen flying horses because we are under their Invisibility Robe – and...

She broke off, still listening fixedly.

And, we have gone down their finger steps...

And...

Emmah sat down on an overturned Beccaet, Pa. desperately anxious, but Naddalin wanted a few questions answered.

And, where did you get that hourglass thing?

-And-

And, it is called a Time-Turner, And Emmah whispered, And I got it from Professor Ashly on our first day back.

I have been using it all year to get to all my instructions. Professor Ashly made me swear I would not tell anyone.

She had to write all sorts of literature to their Ministry of Magic so I could have one.

She had to tell them that I was a model student and that I would never, ever use it for anything except my studies... I have been turning it back, so I could do hours over again, that is how I have been doing several lessons at once, see?

But... and, Naddalin, I do not understand what Duerre wants us to do. Why did she tell us to go back for three hours? How is that going to help

Trius? And, Naddalin stared at her shadowy face.

And, there must be something that happened around now she wants us to change, and she said flying horses. And, what ensued? We were Wal queen down to Darcie's three hours ago, And, this is three hours ago, and we are Wal queen down to Darcie's and said Emmah. And, we just heard ourselves leaving... And Naddalin frowned; she felt as though she were screwing up the whole brain in concentration.

And, Duerre just said - just said we could save more than one innocent life...And then it hit her. And, we are going to save Becca beak!

And, so-o!

And, but - how will that help Trius?

-Similarly-

And, Duerre said - she just told us where their window is - their window of Flitwick's office!

Where they have, Trius locked up! We must fly Becca beak up to their window and rescue Trius! Trius can escape on Becca beak - they can escape together!

-Equally-

From what Naddalin could see of Emma's face, she looked terrified.

And, if we manage that without being seen, it will be a miracle! Equally...

And, Well, we must try, haven't we? And said Naddalin. She stood up and pressed his ear in contradiction to their door. And, does not sound like anyone is there... Come on, let us go. And Naddalin pushed open their closet door. Their entrance hall was deserted. As quietly and quickly as they could, they darted out of their closet and down their 'the body of Neveah' steps.

Their glooms were already lengthening, the tops of their trees in the Forbidden Forest gilded once more with gold.

~*~

And, if anyone is peeping out of their window -and Emmah squeaked- up at their castle behind them.

See we all go back to Earth whenever we want living dibble lives... angels on Earth... and showing is true colors here... my girls are all from parts of Pennsylvania... odd, yet we did get homesick, of the old town and old bodies, that we once hand and life within. until you have an outer body expression you and we not get have I mean here.' I always thought that I would be stuck with me all my life- nope I in the body of girls on Earth, into them- and also as me too... as a body that is supercritical.

Besides, we will run for it and said Naddalin unwaveringly. Also, Straight into their forest, all right? We must hide behind a tree or something and keep a lookout...

-And-

And, okay, but we'll go around by their greenhouses!' said Emmah breathlessly. And, we need to keep out of sight of Darcie's Jigger door, or we will see us! We must be at Darcie's by now!

-And-

Still torquing out what she meant, Naddalin set off at a sprint, Emmah behind her.

Theory tore across their vegetable gardens to their greenhouses, paused for a moment behind them, then set off again, fast as they could, skirting around their Whopping Willow, tearing toward the shelter of their forest...

Safe in the obscurities of their trees, Naddalin turned around; seconds later, Emmah arrived beside her, panting.

And, right, and she gasped. And, we need to sneak over to Darcie's... Keep out of sight,

Naddalin...

-And-

The theory made their way silently through their trees, keeping to the very edge of their forest. Then, as they glimpsed their Jigger of Darcie's home, they heard a knock upon his door.

Theory moved quickly behind a wide oak trunk and peered out from either side. Deride had appeared in his doorway, with a dark wing out, Pa. around to see who had knocked.

Besides Naddalin heard her own voice.

Besides, it is us. We are wearing their Invisibility Robe. Let us in and we can take it off. And... I take off flying around the land with my fallen dark wings spread to swore... And, should have come! And Deride supposed. She stood back, then shut their door quickly. In addition, this is their weirdest thing we have ever done, And Naddalin said fervently. And let us move along a bit, And Emmah whispered. And, we need to get nearer to Becca beak!

-Equally-

Chapter: 149

Part: 1

(Remembering- days like these)

Theory crept through their trees until they saw their nervous Ashlynn, tethered to their fence around Darcie's pumpkin patch.

And, Now?

Then and there, Naddalin whispered.

Besides, Not at all! And said Emmah.

Besides, if we steal her now, those committee individuals will think Deride set her free! We must wait until they have seen she is tied outside!

Besides, some?

And, that is going to give us about sixty seconds and said Naddalin. This was starting to seem unbearable.

At that moment, there was a crash of China from inside Darcie's cabin.

And, That's Deride Brea queen their milk jug, And Emmah whispered. And, I am going to find Stabbers in a moment.

-Besides-

~*~

Haven- 'You know the good thing about digging your own grave, at the graveyard at a young teen she-boy? You always make it just the right size, and still have the strength to do is you cry like a girl yet shovel like a man.' Her eyes were large and very clear- and very blue now she had come over- yet want to be dark, like us instead, she came over to the dark side, even if she was excepted as she was... it was on her.

There are two types of individuals in the world- to me, and the girls that are telling yet another chapter of their life... there are those who matter to the story and those who don't. My whole life, my ma was the only person I felt comfortable talking to- even after she passed- I was it- now I did it to her too and those two are it and lost without me- yet I thought I was a pain in the butt.'

'Why is that?' I think,' the girls even said, everybody needs that one person, you know? The one person they can talk to and be not having it... so-o. Gee- my old love once told me to tell him all the songs that make me cry.

Staind- 'Something to Remind You' I say goodbye- to this chapter of my ever-changing life.

And there are mistakes...

The path is long, and I'm sure I'll answer them when I'm gone. So, when the day comes, and the sun won't touch my face.

Tell the ones who cared enough, that I finally left this place that has been so cold, look at my face, All the stories it will tell I can't erase.

The road is long, yet just one more song, a little something to remind you when I'm gone... when I'm gone-

The road to hell, along the way- is paved with good intentions so they say, and some believe, that no good deed, that goes unpunished in the end or so it seems, and so when the day comes, and the sun won't touch my face, tell the ones who cared enough, that I have finally left this place; that's been so cold Look at my face, all the stories it will tell I can't erase, the road is long, Just one more song, a little something to remind you when I'm gone; when I'm gone.

So-o, this is it, I say goodbye, to this chapter of my ever-changing life, and there are mistakes, the path was long, and I'm sure I'll answer for them when I'm gone, When I'm gone.

You were the ones, I thought about- this can remind you.

Why- I did not know- yet, he and she, wanted to know my favorite books, favorite movies, if my heart was ever broken and by whom- that one I could give now, and it was him and then her... they said, 'I want to know everything that makes you-you- well now you know- nothing- there not anything left, and nothing there... just this to remind you...

Part: 2

Anyhow- sure enough, a few minutes later, they heard Emma's shriek of surprise.

And, Emmah, and said Naddalin suddenly, and what if we -we just run in there and grab

Pettigrew...

-And-

And, No! And said Emmah in a terrified whisper. And, do not you understand? We are Brea queen one of their most important wizarding laws! Nobody is supposed to change time, nobody!

You heard Duerre if we are seen...

-And, so-o-

And, we would only be seen by ourselves and Deride!

Besides, ... Naddalin, what do you think you would do if you saw yourself bursting into Darcie's house? And said Emmah. I would - I would think I had gone mad, and said

Naddalin, And or I would think there was some Dark Magic going on.

-And-

Exactly! You would not understand; you might even attack yourself! Don't you see it? Professor Ashly told me what awful things have happened when wizards have meddled with time... Loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mistake!

Additionally- Okay! Said Naddalin. And, it was just an idea, I just thought...

-Besides-

Like us all- we have a hard time keeping my hands off you without that, additional extra.

Part: 3

Naddalin- I nibbled my lower lip, and If you could see into my past just by touching her, I'd have a hard time resisting the temptation too. Yet that was all it took... one touch. We all of us girl were not searching for sanctity, sacredness, purity; these things are found after this life, not in this life; but in this life, I, we, and they too- search to be completely human, and feel less than so-o to feel, to give, to take, to laugh, to get lost, to be found, to dance, to love and to lust, to be so human, maybe that is we did not need to be.

But Emmah nudged her and pointed toward their castle. Naddalin moved her heard a few inches to get a clear view of their distant finger doors. Duerre, Harlan, their old Board member, and Nunez their executioner was coming down their steps. Folks wait around too long for love. Yet I like my girls we are happy with all of my lusts, wrong or not! And, we are about to come out!

And, Emmah breathed, so what.

And sure enough, moments later, Darcie's back door opened, and Naddalin saw herself, Jinger, and Emmah Wal queen out of it with Deride. It was, without a doubt, their strangest sensation of his life, standing behind their tree, and watching herself in their pumpkin patch.

I don't know why folks are afraid of lust like me with a girl. I can imagine that they are very afraid of me- and the girls that are like me, for I have a great lust for everything, like her. A lust for life, a lust for how the summer heated street feels beneath my feet, a lust for the touch of another's the skin on my skin... a lust for everything- yet most of her- or even him every- now and then. I even lust after things that I can have like a spell. Yes, I am very lusty and very dark... yet am I? I remember- loving boys when- I was down there, as a hole girl not as half and half... said, Emma.

I looked at her she smiled. Her pale lips sought hers, crushing her into a kiss like dying. She tasted sweetness there, as though he still kissed her with honey and sugar on his tongue. When he pulled away, her eyes excelled. I have a thing for her- and she- with me...

As I said, magic comes from life, and especially from emotions. They're a source of the same imperceptible energy that everyone... I, we, we can feel when an autumn moon rises... and gravity fall. Fly high or not at all... and fills us with a sudden sense of deep enthusiasm.

And when- like the first warm, breeze gusts of spring rushes past your face...

A time and a place... like full of the aromata of life...

It also drowns you in a sudden flood of unreasoning delight, enjoyment, and pleasure.

The passion of mighty music, that brings tears to your eyes, and the raw fizzy, infectious laughter of small children at play, the bellowing power of an arena full of football fans shouting 'Hey!' in time to that damned song- they're all charged with magic, yet I have more than that to feed my lust for this need. 'My magic comes from the same places, deep down within you and me - her and she - too.'

Maybe- Just maybe- from darker places than that- maybe...? (I thought...)

Fear is an emotion, besides...

So is anger... if you want it too...

So is lust... magical...

Lust- is madness...

Madness is magic...

~*~

Naddalin- us all- would say this... all that have fallen- dark or even light...

I'm not a particularly good person, this I know, but I'm not going to be up for canonization either; so, stop with that accusations.

Though in the past, I think maybe I was a better person... even if some say not... than I am today.

Should or should I not be happy... what do you say?

In the past... that haunts us with the spell...

I had seen so many people hurt and killed and terrorized by the same kind of power that I love- used for hate, that damn well should have been making the world a nicer place...

No... that is not how I saw it- neither did they that fall with me.

Or at the least staying it- the abyss away from it is better... that what I thought of them.

Abyss is not as bad as the netherworld here... that is the wizard- falling angel world is where I like to be.

I hadn't made so many mistakes back then and now too, so many shortsighted decisions, some of which had cost people their lives... and mine too

I had been sure of myself. I had been whole.'

Part: 4

(Story)

Naddalin- And, it is okay, Beaky, it is okay... to feel this way she said to her... then she turned to Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah. And Go on... Get going, we will tell them what really happened.

And, they cannot kill her... they cannot... And Go! It's bad enough without you a lot of trouble n' all! Naddalin watched their Emmah in their pumpkin patch throw their Invisibility Robe over her and Jinger. Go quick. Deanah listen... There was a knock-on Darcie's finger door. Their execution party had arrived. Deride turned, around and headed back into his cabin, leaving their back door ajar.

Naddalin watched their grass flatten in pitchers all around their cabin and heard three pairs of feet retreating. She, Jinger, and Emmah had gone... but their Naddalin and Emmah hidden in their trees could now hear what was happening inside their cabin through their back door. And, where is their beast? It was it came to the cold voice of Nunez.

And, Out - outside, And Deride croaked.

Naddalin pulled his head out of sight as Nunez's face appeared at Darcie's window, staring out at Becca's beak. Then they heard Harlan.

And, We - err - must read you their official notice of execution, Deride.

I will make it quick... And then you and Nunez need to sign it. Nunez, you are supposed to listen too, that's the procedure- And, Nunez's face vanished from their window. It was now or never.

And...

Wait here, And Naddalin whispered to Emmah. And, I will do it.

And, As Harlan's voice started again,

Naddalin darted out from behind his tree, vaulted their fence into their pumpkin patch, and approached Becca beak.

And, it is their decision of their Committee for their Disposal of Dangerous Creatures that their Ashlynn for the house of the flying horses, in colors- Gray and Red, Becca in beak, hereafter called they're condemned, shall she be executed on their seventh of June at sundown and Careful not to blink, Naddalin stared up into Becca beak's fierce auburn eyes once more and bowed. Becca beak sank to his scaly knees and then stood up again.

Naddalin began to fumble with their knot of rope tying Becca beak to their fence.

'The fear of death shadows-follows from the fear of life...' (thought) and, sentenced to execution by beheading, to be carried out by their Committee's chosen assassin, Walden Nunez ...

And come on Becca beak, and Naddalin whispered, and come on, we are going to help you.

Quietly... quietly... And as saw below.

Deride, you sign here...

~*~

Don't be afraid of your fears... I thought... Why? They're not there to scare you.

Like- They're there to let you know that something- or anything- all things- are worth going for.

~*~

Naddalin threw all her weight onto their rope, but Becca beak had dug in her Jigger feet.

Well, let us get this over with, and said their reedy voice of their Committee member from inside Darcie's cabin. Élite, it will be better if you stay inside.

No, I - I want' tier be with her... I Deanah 'wan' her tier be alone -And... U- NO.

Footsteps heavenized from within their cabin.

Also... Becca beak, move! And, Naddalin hissed.

Naddalin tugged harder on their rope around Becca's beak's neck. There Ashlynn began to walk, rustling its wings impatiently. A theory was still ten feet away from their forest, in plain view of Darcie's back door. Then, one moment, please, Nunez and came Duerre's voice.

And, you need to sign too. And, their footsteps stopped. Naddalin heaved on their rope. Becca beak snapped his beak and walked a little faster.

Emma's white face was stoutening out from behind a tree.

And, Naddalin, hurry! And, she mouthed.

Naddalin could still hear Duerre's singing toluene from within their cabin. she gave their rope another wrench. Becca beak broke into a grudging canter. The theory had reached their trees...

Cowards- like me, die many times before their deaths, it was what we had to see before final death; The valiant never-ever sensitivity of death but once. Of all the phenomena that I's, yet have caught, um like-It seems to me most bizarre that young girls like me- like you- should fear; seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will arise.'

Part: 5

And primarily, watch with brilliant eyes, the whole world around you, for the reason that, the greatest mysteries are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never ever find it. That was I thought in my room under the steps.

(Story)

Quick!

Quick!

And, Emmah moaned, darting out from behind her tree, seizing their rope too and adding her weight to make Becca beak move faster. Naddalin looked over his shoulder; they were now blocked from sight; they could not see Darcie's garden at all.

Stop...!

She whispered to Emmah.

And, they might hear us.

-And-

Darcie's back door had opened with a bang. Naddalin, Emmah, and Becca beak stood quite still; even their Ashlynn seemed to be listening intently.

Then... Silence...

And, where is it? And said their reedy voice of their Committee member.

And, where is there a beast?

-And-

And, it was tied here! And said their executioner furiously. And saw it! Just here!

-And-

And, how extraordinary, and said Duerre.

There was a note of amusement in his voice.

And, Beaky! And said Deride huskily.

There was a swishing noise and their thud of an ax.

Their assassin seemed to have swung it into their fence in anger.

And then came their flying horses, and this time they could hear Darcie's words through her sobs.

Gone!

Gone!

Bless his little beak, she is gone! Must pull herself free! Beaky, yet clever little girl!

-And-

Becca beak started to strain against their rope, trying to get back to Deride. Naddalin and Emmah tightened their grip and dug their heels into their forest floor to stop her.

Equally, someone untied her! And, their killer was snarling. And, we should search for their grounds, their forest.

-And-

And, Nunez, if Becca beak has undeniably been stolen, do you really think their thief will have led her away on foot? And said Duerre, still sounding amused. And Search their skies, if you will... Deride, I could do with a cup of tea.

Otherwise a large brandy.

And...

And, so- o like of course, Professor, and said Deride, who sounded weak with happiness.

-And-

Come in, come in...

Also...

Naddalin and Emmah listened closely.

Theory heard footsteps, their soft cursing of their executioner, their snap of their door, and then silence once more.

And, now what? whispered Naddalin around the minds of the others and within.

And, we must hide in here and said Emmah, who looked very shaken. And, we need to wait until they have gone back to their castle. Then we wait until it is safe to fly Becca beak up to Trius's window.

She will not be there for another couple of hours... Oh, this is going to be difficult... She looked nervously over her shoulder into the depths of their forest. The sun was setting now...

We are going to have to move, and said Naddalin, thinking hard.

I'm always thought that growing up year be filled with magic, and dreams and good madness.

I hope you read some fine books and kiss someone who thinks you're wonderful and falling as I did is what did that for me.

#- (Falling to you- too!)

I'm kissed her and liked it- s-sh-h!

(Only you need to know that...)

Part: 6

Naddalin-

I feel- I think you should date a girl who speaks to you, and reads a- lot and knows a- lot of things. Date a girl who reads, and can think and even wright. Date a girl who spends her money on books, instead of clothes, who has difficulties with closet space, because she has too many books, get a girl that is a bookworm- and is smart.

Date a girl who has a list of books she wants to read, who has had a library card since she was 10 or so-o.

Find a girl who reads...

You'll know that she does for the reason that, she will always have an unread book in her handbag.

She's the one lovingly looking over the shelves in the bookstore.

The one who quietly cries out when she has found the book she wants.

(We spend a lot of time reading or being in the library.)

You see that weird sniffing the pages of an old book... more than other girl's undies? That's the reader... and the girl I like that you may want to... full of magic... for the books, she knows was the wonder, that makes her sparkle.

They can never resist smelling the pages, especially when they are yellow and worn.

She's was the sweet girl reading while waiting in that coffee shop down the street, or the one- that held your hand when you were 5 next doors- she nagged me to say that, I am the one overlooking her now... she sees me.

'Lost in a world of the author's creation... like painting a picture with words.'

Sit down with her even if- it's wrong. She might give you a glare, as most girls who read do. Ask her if she likes the wonder, is see if she well looks thought you- like chapters of your life for her to explore. Let her know what you really think what makes you sparkle with wonder...

-Then-

See if she got through the first chapter of companionship.

It's easy to date a girl who is smart not a smart, not a girl that has an ass that was never-ever smart.

Give her poetry or a song... I wish I would have yet never done... Let her know that you understand that words are love.

Understand that she knows the difference between books and reality, she's going to try to make her life a little like her favorite book, and you will become like that. It will never- ever be your fault if she sees too.

Lie to her, if she understands grammar, she will appreciate your need to lie, to keep her.

Behind words are other things: drive, worth, shade, interchange. It will not be the end of the world.

Nose-dive her... a girl who reads knows that disappointments always leads up to the climax.

Why be frightened of everything that you are not?

Girls who read understand that individuals, like characters, grow. Since girls who read- magical things like wonder, understand that all things must come to end. And that you can continuously write a part 2- 3 or 4 or more.

That you can begin o'er and o'er and still be the hero to her.

That life is meant to have an antihero or two.

If you find a girl who reads, keeps her close.

When you find her up at 3 AM clutching a book to her chest and weeping... she is the one you want.

Hold her... You may lose her for a couple of hours, here and there is all that is girlie, but she will always come back to you.

She'll talk as if the characters in the book are real because, for a while, they always are.

You will walk the winters of your old age together... that I know and wish I would have done... like she... Karly- and then found love and lost it over the spell, he passed over her... to I feel it. The baby is all she has- the work of a tower, in someone's life... it all goes back to HER!

SHE WILL EVEN SHOW YOU HER- boots of freedom- to say how strong she is, or a book that is about you that she made even if she could not wright, she well sees you - by chance... and you'll know, or the star of an online show... you'll know... you'll know. Or the hope of girls that need someone in loss ...

You will smile.... So hard you will wonder the why...

And think that why is a question...

...?...

Your heart hasn't burst and exploited out all over your chest yet, hitherto, you question it might if not being with her.

You will write the story of your lives, have kids with strange names and even stranger tastes.

Date a girl who loves all that is wonder... because you deserve it.

You deserve a girl who can give you the most creative imaginative life.

Part: 7

(Story)

I recall saying- We must be able to see their Whopping Willow, or we will not know what is going on. Okay, also said Emmah, getting a firmer grip on Becca beak's rope. And, but we must keep out of sight, Naddalin, remember... we moved around the edge of their forest, that was covered in darkness falling thickly around them until we were hidden, but behind a clump of trees through which they could make out their- Willow.

There's Jinger...! Said- Naddalin, suddenly; besides, then there was a dark figure sprinting across-ed the lawn and its shout Hayvanna through there still night air. Then get away from her - getaway - Stabbers, come here... then they saw two more figures materialize out of nowhere. Naddalin watched herself and Emmah chasing after Jinger- then she saw Jinger dive. I've got you! Get off, you stouten cat...

There's Trius! said Naddalin.

The great shape of their dog had bounded out from their roots of their Willow. They saw her flying horses Naddalin over them, then snatch on...

It looks even worse from here, doesn't it? Said Naddalin, watching their mare pulling Jinger into their roots.

Ouch - look, I just got walloped by their tree - and so did you - this is weird.

There whoomphing Willow was checking, and lashing out with its lower branches; they could see themselves darting here and there, trying to reach their trunk. And then their tree froze... them to it.

Part: 8

There moment they disappeared; their tree began to move again. And, that was Crook shanks pressing their knot and said Emmah.

And, there we go... Naddalin muttered. Equally- We are in this one deep. Seconds later, they heard footsteps quite close by. Duerre, Nunez, Harlan, and their old Board member were marching their way up to the castle. And, right after we had gone down into their passage! And said

Emmah. And, if only Duerre had come with us... And... Nunez and Harlan would have come too and said Naddalin bitterly. I'd bet you anything Harlan would have told Nunez to murder Trius on their spot... Theory watched their four men climb their castle steps and disappear. For a few minutes, their scene was deserted.

Then...

And, here comes Sevket!

And said Naddalin as they saw another figure sprinting down their 'The Body of Neveah' steps and halting toward their Willow. Naddalin looked up at their sky.

Clouds were obscuring their moon completely.

Theory watched Sevket seize a broken branch from their ground and prod their knot on their trunk. Their tree stopped fighting, and Sevket, too, disappeared into their gap in its roots.

And, if she had only grabbed their Robe, And, said Naddalin. And, it is just lying there... And- she turned to Emmah.

And, If I just dashed out now and grabbed it, Gonzales's never can get it. Naddalin, we mustn't be seen- nether!

And, how can you stand this? And, she asked Emmah fiercely. And, just standing there and watching it happen? Similarly, she hesitated. And, I am going to grab their robe!

There same- Naddalin, no! Emmah seized their back of Naddalin's robes not a moment too soon. Just then, they heard a burst of girl.

It was Deride, marching his way up to their castle, singing at their top of her voice, and weaving slightly as he walked. A large bottle was swinging from his hands. And-See?

And, Emmah whispered. Do you see what would have happened? We must keep out of sight!

No, back-back! She yelled...

There Ashlynn was marching frantic attempts to get to Deride again; Naddalin seized her rope too, straining to hold Becca beak back. Theory watched Deride meander tipsily up to their castle. She was gone, Lowly beak stopped fighting to getaway. She heard drooped unhappily.

Barely two minutes later, their castle doors flew open yet again, and Gonzales came charging out of them, running toward their Willow.

Naddalin's fists clenched as they watched Gonzales skid to a halt next to their tree, Pa. around.

She grabbed their Robe and held it up.

And Get your filthy hands off it, And Naddalin snarled under his breath.

And- Sh-h!

And...

Gonzales seized their branch Sevket had used to freeze their tree, prodded their knot, and vanished from view as she put on their robe.

And, so that is it, and said Emmah quietly. And, we are all down there... and now we have just got to wait until we come back up again...

-And-

She took their end of Becca beak's rope and tied it securely around their nearest tree, then sat down on their dry ground, arms around her knees.

And, Naddalin, there is something I do not understand... Why didn't their Dementiators get

Trius? I remember them coming, and then I think I passed out... there where so many of them... And, Naddalin sat down too.

She explained what she had seen; how, as their nearest Dementor had lowered its mouth to Naddalin's, a large silver something had come galloping across their lake and forced their Dementiators to retreat.

Emma's mouth was slightly open by their time Naddalin had finished.

Then, but what was it?

-And-

Besides, there is only one thing it could have been, to make their Dementiators go, and said Naddalin. And real Pat Jinger us. A powerful one.

-And-

Then, but who conjured it?

-And-

Naddalin did not say anything.

She was thinking back to their probably she had seen on the other bank of their lake.

She knew who she thought it had still been... but how could it have been?

And, did not you see what they looked like? Besides said Emmah eagerly. And, Was it one of their teachers? Moreover and, do not know - Naddalin, look at Lily!

-Equally-

Part: 9

Together they peered around their bush at the other bank. Gonzales had regained consciousness.

She was trickery stretchers and lifting their limp forms of Naddalin, Emmah, and Black onto them.

A fourth stretcher, no doubt bearing Jinger, was already floating at her side. Then, wand held out in Jigger of her, she then moved them away toward the castle. Besides, Right, it is time, and said Emmah tensely, at her watch. And, we have about forty-five minutes until Duerre locks their door to their hospital wowed here must rescue Trius and get back into their ward before anybody realizes we are missing...

Yet like, most they just thought we were in the land of the railway- and its towns running around at play, or that we were lost in old towns, flying around- they never thought we descended to Earth for boy drama... and to pray for young girls too... HE- HE- that is even more thrilling.

(Anyways back)

Theory waited, watching their moving clouds reflected in their lake, while their bush next to them whispered in their gusts. Becca beak, bored, was ferreting for worms once more.

And, do you reckon she is up there yet? And, said Naddalin, checking her watch - time her still matters. She looked up at the towering castle in its misty fog, and the viaduct behind, with the moon, lower, and began counting their windows to their right of the North West Tower with its torts. Also counting the many turret roofs... that made me and us feel small... in the eerie-ness.

Look! Look there... Emmah whispered.

And, who is that? Someone is coming back out of their castle! Besides - Naddalin stared through the damp unnerving darkness. There the man was hurrying a-crossed the grounds, toward one of the many elaborate entrances. Something shiny glinted in his belt, on his uniform. Look there... said Naddalin.

Also, the killer! She is gone to get them Dementiators! This is it, Emmah...

-And-

Emmah- I put my hands-on Becca Lowest beak's back and Naddalin gave my legs and up the hive. Then she placed her foot on my lower branches of their bush and climbed up on Jigger and her too - to see for she was the smallest.

Part: 10

She pulled her Becca beak's rope back over her neck and tied it to their other side of her collar like reins.

Furthermore, Ready?

Besides, she whispered to Emmah.

Also, you had better hold on to me... tightly.

-And-

She nudged Becca's beak's sides with her heels.

Becca beak soared straight into their dark air. Naddalin gripped her flanks with her knees, feeling their great wings rising powerfully beneath them.

Emmah was holding Naddalin very tight around the waist; she could hear her muttering, And OH, oh-no - I do not like this oh, I really do not like this...

Then, Naddalin urged Becca to beak forward.

A theory where sashaying silently toward the higher floors of their castle... Naddalin pulled hard on their right-hand side of their rope, and Becca beak turned. Naddalin was trying to count their windows flashing past... And- then- Whoa! she said, pulling back as hard as she ever could have.

Then and there, Becca beak slowed down and they found themselves at a stop unless you counted their fact that they kept rising, and down many feet as their Ashlynn beat his wings to still be airborne.

Besides- she is there...! And, Naddalin said, spotting Trius as they rose beside their window. She reached out, and as Becca beak's wings fell, they could tap sharply on their glass.

Black looked up...

Naddalin saw him and her jaw drop.

He leaped from his chair, hurried to their window, and tried to open it, but it was locked. And Stand back! And, Emmah called to her, and she took out her wand, still gripping their back of Naddalin's robes with her left hand.

-And-

(Alohomora!)

-And-

Their window sprang open.

And, How - how -? And said Black weakly, staring at their Ashlynn.

And Get on - there is not much time, and said Naddalin, gripping Becca beak firmly on either side of her smooth neck to hold her steady.

And, you must get out of here - their Dementiators are coming - Nunez's marching is gone to get therm.

-And-

Black placed a hand on either side of their window frame and heaved her head and shoulders out of it.

It was very lucky she was so thin. In seconds, she had managed to fling one leg over Becca beak's back and pull herself onto their Ashlynn behind Emmah.

Then, okay, Becca beak, up! And said Naddalin, checking their cord.

Also- up to their tower - come on.

Torches lit the past ways, of cobblestone.

-And-

There Ashlynn gave one sweep of its mighty wings, and they were soaring upward again, high as their top of their North-West Tower.

Becca beak landed with a clatter on their battlements, and Naddalin and Emmah slid off her at once. Then Trius, you had better go, quick, And Naddalin panted. And, they will reach Flitwick's office any moment, they will find out you are gone.

-And-

Becca beak pawed their ground, tossing his sharp heard. Besides, what happened to their other girls? Jinger? Likewise, croaked Trius. In addition to that, she was going to be okay. she is still out of it, but Madam Pomphrey says she will be able to make her better. Immediate - go-! But Black was still staring down at Naddalin.

Besides, how can I ever thank -Too And-

GO! And, Naddalin and Emmah shouted together.

Black wheeled Becca beak around, facing the exposed skies. Besides, we will see each other again, and she said. And, you are - truly your daddy's girl, Naddalin...

She squeezed Becca beak's sides with her heels, then she - is being- Naddalin, Emmah jumped back as their enormous wings rose once more... There Ashlynn took off into their air... She and her rider became smaller and smaller as Naddalin gazed after them... then a cloud drifted a-crossed the moon... The moon is a reliable buddy. It never- ever leaves. It's always there, observing, unfaltering, meaningful to us in our light and dark moments, changing forever just as we do.

Each day it's a different version of itself, like me and my girls, and them below - and above. Sometimes feeble and ashen, from time to time robust and full of light. The moon understands what it means to be un-human and to turn around on what is to show all dark.

Nevaeh

Book: 36

Fallen Angel

Chapter: 150

Part: 1

We are all like the bright moon, we still have our darker side, don't express to yours truly the moon is superb; display to me the sparkle, twinkle, and enthusiasm of light on shattered cut - glass, or a dead girl's memory. I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be- like she- her with me now- she- me – and you too.

A theory where gone.

Flying horses post again-

I- Naddalin am flying around too even back on Earth also for a soul to take... like the one that passes with broken glass years ago, she will come with me to the dark side I feel, and that would - be Lily. Yet would she ever leave Neveah- I don't know if I want to do that to her- yet I would love to also... Lonely girls that hang out at the graveyards, and cry... for someone to ease the pain... We take... over their bodies and minds... young sweet girls like YOU! Even can be said for white angels too... (it was too easy...)

...She lost her to me... yet, I had to I could not help it, I need her to feed for life... and she looks good in black- no? We will get her too- I AM SURE OF IT! Yet she has him up there so- o; that love will- last and last.

Part: 2

Naddalin, got a girl to come over to this world in a death... today... it was said in class. Now to she is fallen.

Anyways-

Emmah was tugging at her sleeve, staring at her watch. And, we have exactly ten minutes to get back down to their hospital wing without anybody seeing us - before Duerre locks their door...

- Besides-

Okay, and said Naddalin, wrenching her gaze from the sky, and let us go... Also, they slipped through their doorway behind them and down a tightly spiraling 'The Body of Neveah' staircase. Full of old dark wood, and led- ed glass, that was also long-standing. As they reached the top of it, they heard voices. Theory flattened themselves they were, now pushing themselves up against the wall and they all listened. It sounded like garbage.

A theory where steeping hurriedly along the corridor at their foot of their staircase. With the, only hope Duerre's not going to make complications, and snippily- saying.

We wanted to do this for years here in this spot she and I- above and beyond, there Kiss will be performed at once, in the tower, holding hands... also... then, as soon as Nunez returns with the Dementiators, we ran like lovers back down- yet we had our time.

This whole Black affair has been highly embarrassing. They all knew about all the girls, and all the professors too. Yet, I cannot tell you how much I am happy about it all thought. Forward to informing their Daily Prophet that we have *her* at last... said that we want this... allies, for this eternal life, at the castle, asking to be hallowed by darkness.

I- Daresay they will want to interview you, Sammie... and once young Naddalin's back in her right mind, I expect she will want to tell the prophet exactly how you saved her... from the other side of things... She could have been...?

'-So-o I feel- that is so.'

Naddalin clenched her teeth, think she could have seen all that was in her old life, yet she has her so, that was good enough to fall too.

Then she caught a glimpse of Sammie's smirk as he and Harlan passed Naddalin and Emma's hiding place, as they were running through the fields... for flight.

There where footsteps died away, yet, wherein mid-flight looking down on the eerie, dark, and shadowy, warm glow of cottages with tall grass and oak trees, in this land, waterfalls, and hang-ie down weepiness, off of the rock and plant life... vines and old time-worn trees alike, in a terrestrial that is musty, fog covered all the time.

Naddalin and Emmah waited a few moments to make sure they had really gone, hand in levitating in midair, looking at one another dumbly, and sheepish then started to fly in the opposite direction of the hallowed castle.

(Back)

Emma- Walking on foot- and yes, we still do that... Um- like down one staircase, then another, along with a new corridor - then they heard a cackling ahead. Also, Charlotte...!

~*~

SO-o, Furthermore, Naddalin muttered, grabbing Emma's wrist; as well, in here!

Theory tore into a deserted classroom, to their left just in time.

Charlotte seemed to be bouncing along their corridor in boisterous good spirits, laughing her head off.

- Besides-

Part: 3

OH, her is horrible, and whispered Emmah, her ear to their door. Also, bet her is all excited because their Dementiators are going to finish off Trius... And she checked her watch. Besides, three minutes, Naddalin!

- And-

Theory waited until Charlotte's gloating voice had faded into their distance, then slid back out of their room and broke into a run again.

And - what will happen - if we do not get back inside before Duerre locks their door? And, Naddalin panted.

And, do not want to think about it! And,

Emmah moaned, checking her watch again. And, One minute! And, they had reached the end of their corridor with their hospital wing entrance. And, Okay - I can hear Duerre and said Emmah tensely. And Come on, Naddalin!

Theory crept along their corridor. Their door opened, Duerre's back appeared.

Besides, am going to lock you in, and they heard her say. And, it is five minutes to midnight.

Miss. Kizziah, three turns should do it. Good luck.

-And-

Duerre backed out of their room, closed their door, and took out his wand to magically lock it. Postulating, Naddalin and Emmah ran forward. Duerre looked up, and a wide smile and then appeared under the long silver whiskers. And- Well? And, she said quietly. And, we did it! And said Naddalin breathlessly. And... Trius has gone, with Becca beak... And... So-o...!

(Up to the now)

Duerre grinned at them, and, well Deanahe. I think she listened intently for any sound within their hospital wing, and, Yes, I think you have gone too - get inside - I will lock you in... Naddalin and Emmah slipped back inside there dormitory.

It was empty except for Jinger, who was still lying- there- all motionless in the end bed nude, just taking off her uniform.

~*~

As their lock clicked behind them, Naddalin and Emmah crept back to their own beds, Emmah uncovering their Time-Turner back under her robes. A moment later, Madam Pomphrey came striding back out of her office.

Also, Did I hear their principal leaving?

Am I allowed to look after my patients now?

- And-

Like- like- like, she was in a very bad- bad- bad mood-ie mood.

Naddalin and Emmah thought it best to accept the Hayvannah sweet quietly. Madam Pomphrey stood over them, making sure they ate it. Nevertheless, Naddalin could hardly swallow- and wanted to spit- not swallow, - yet that was with more than that too- just saying, said- Emma- te'a- he- ing.

She and Emmah were waiting, listening, the nerves jangling... And then and there - and there and then, as they both took the fourth piece of Hayvanna- cholate from Madam Pomphrey, they heard a distant roar of fury heavenizing from somewhere above them... swirling around them like dark haunts.

Besides, what was that? And said- Madam Pomphrey in alarm.

Part: 4

Now they could hear angry voices, growing louder and brassier. Madam Pomphrey was staring at their door.

Besides, Really - they will wake everybody up! What do they think they are doing?

-And-

Naddalin was trying to hear what their voices were saying, yet like the girls before her like she could hear voices in her head all the time- saying: this and that and or else- wise- whatever. A theory where drawing nearer- in her ear and it was buzzing and ringing with, a high- E- EEeee... hiss, of them taking over her awareness and body in this world, this is true for them to do, to see feel, and hear only as they want you to- where you may feel, that you did or did not, or just blackout, in not remembering- it's a spell that, I know well- of mind- take- over, they can even take out of my mouth for me- no-? ...YES! AND IT SOUND

JUST LIKE ME- AND THEY CAN MOVE MY HAND ARMS AND LEGS FOR ME TOO-

(LIKE I DON'T REMEMBER MASTURBATING... YET MY HAND IS DOING IT- AND I SEE IT GOING IN AND OUT OF ME AND I KNOW THAT SHE IS IN ME AND I AM IN HER...)

Chapter: 151

Part: 1

Like- she must have Disappeared, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with her, so it would not freak her out. When this gets out - And, she DID NOT DISPARATE! And- Lily roared, now very nearby. And, YOU CANNOT APPARATED OR DISPARATE INSIDE THIS CASTLE!

THIS - HAS - SOMETHING - TO - DO - WITH-! And, Severus - be repairable- Naddalin has been locked up - And BAM Slam hit, the freaking door of the wing burst open, Harlan, Sammie, and Duerre came striding into their area. Duerre alone looked calm. Indeed, she looked as though she was quite enjoying herself. Harlan appeared angry about it all. Nevertheless, Lily was beside herself, I knew - we- too- ominously we agreed. And, OUT WITH IT!

And, she bellowed. And, WHAT DID YOU DO?

And- Professor Lily, yes here a week and she is that! And, shrieked Madam Pomphrey. And Control yourself!

And- See here, Lily, be repairable, and said,

Harlan. And, this door is being locked, we just saw.

Besides, THEORY HELPED HERR ESCAPE, I KNOW IT! And, Lily flying, pointing at Naddalin and Emmah. Her face was twisted and teeth sharply pointed fangs; dribble was flying from her mouth, now red blood from the eyes. (Thoughts of RED- WHITE AND BLUE came back to her... and here being cold is the way of life.)

Calm down, girl!

And Harlan woofed.

And, you are toluene nonsense! She knew that would not be going back up either.

Part: 2

And, YOU DO NOT KNOW-! And, shrieked Lily. And, she DID IT, I KNOW she DID IT. (Whatever- IT is...,) and, that will do, Severus, and said Duerre quietly. Yep- yep just- thinking about what you are saying. This door has been locked since I left their constituency ten minutes ago, Madam Pomphrey, have these students- left their beds, she is thinking about her and what she is going to do with her, in all their kissing of lips, that she and she has done...!

'Partially, I would have welcomed a Dementor attack.

A deadly struggle for my soul would have broken their monotony nicely. You think you have had it bad, at least you have been able to get active, stretch your legs, get into a few fights... I have been stuck inside for a month.'

'How come...?' Asked- Naddalin, frowning some.

'Because of their Ministry of Magic still after me, and Waltemath will know all about me being an Animangas by now, Worm tail will have told her, so my big disguise is useless. It is not much; I can do that for their- Order of their Durizy ... or so- o Duerre feels.'

There was something about their slightly- flattened tone of voice, in which Trius uttered Duerre's name, and that told- Naddalin that Trius, too, was not very pleased with their Principal. Naddalin felt a sudden upsurge of affection for her God daddy.

At least you have known what is been going on, she said bracingly.

'Oh yes,' said Trius sarcastically. 'Listening to Snappiest reports, having to take all her snide hints, and that she is out there risqué her life, while - I's am sat on my backside, here having a nice comfortable time... talking to me about how their cleanings going...'

'What cleaning...?' Asked - Naddalin...

Part: 3

Trying to make this place fit for fallen habitation,' said Trius, waving a hand around their dismal kitchen.

'No one's lived here for ten years, not since my dear mother died unless you count he r old house fairy, and she's gone around their twist ~ hasn't cleaned anything in ages.'

'Trius,' said MonDongos, who did not appear to have paid any attention to their conversation, but had been closely examining an empty goblet. 'This solid silver, pal?'

'Yes,' said Trius, surveying it with distaste. 'Finest 22nd ~ century goblin-wrought silver, embossed with their Black family crest.' That had come off, though, muttered MonDongos, polishing it with her cuff. Céline Katy NO, JUST CARRY THERE! Mr.'s Railie shrieked.

Part: 4

Naddalin, Trius, and MonDongos looked around and, within a split second, they had dived away from their table. Céline and Katy had bewitched a large ceilinged of stew, a jigger flagon of Butterbeer and a heavy wooden breadboard, complete with knife, to hurtle through their air towards them.

Their stew skidded the length of their table and came to a halt just before their end, leaving a long black burn on their wooden surface; their flagon of Butterbeer fell with a crash, spilling its contents everywhere; their bread knife slipped off their board and landed, point down, and quivering ominously, exactly where Trius's right hand had been seconds before.

'FOR HEAVENS SAKE!' screamed Mr.'s -Railie.

THERE WAS NO NEED- I HAD ENOUGH OF THIS JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN USE MAGIC NOW, YOU DO NOT HAVE TO WHIP YOUR WANDS OUT FOR EVERY TINY LITTLE THING!'

'We were just trying to save a bit of time!' Said Céline, hurrying forward to wrench their bread knife out of their table. 'sorry, Trius, the mate did not mean to...'

Naddalin and Trius where both laughing; MonDongos, who had toppled backward off his chair, was swearing as she got to his feet; Crook shanks had given an angry hiss and shot off under their dresser, from where his large yellow eyes glowed in their darkness.

Part: 5

'Girl changing and some nude, playing and then bathing,' Mr. Railie said, lifting their stew back into the middle of their table,' your mothers right, you are supposed to show a sense of responsibility now you have come of age.'

Part: 6

Emma- When she is inside of me, in more ways than one mind-body and erogenous zones alike... I wonder who is squiring me, rubbing my body, softly... touching my boobs and butt, and inside there too alike... in it... she- her- all her coming through me, making me vibrate and pulsate to her body... it's wonderful, to feel more loves in life, that you would never understand unless you let someone all the way in you- and take over ever that your mind boy and soul is- she can even see through my eyes- we can switch places- all in one mind game of a spell- called- The Back and Forth, spell.

Any-who-

'None of your brothers caused this sort of trouble!'

Mr.'s Railie raged at their twins as she slammed a fresh flagon of Butterbeer on to their table, and spilling almost as much again. Sara did not feel their need to Apparated every few feet!

Charlie did not charm everything she met! Percy.' She stopped dead, catching her breath with a frightened look at her husband, whose expression was suddenly wooden.

'Let's eat,' said Sara quickly.

'It looks wonderful, Molly,' said Sevket, ladling stew on to a plate for her and handing it across their table.

For a few minutes, there was silence but for their chink of plates and cutlery and their scraping of chairs as everyone settled down to their food.

Then Mr.'s Railie turned to Trius.

'I've been meaning to tell you, Trius, there is something trapped in that writing desk in their drawing room, it keeps rattling and checking. Of course, it could just be a Boggart, but I thought we ought to ask Valastro to have a look at it before we let it out.'

'Whatever you like,' said Trius indifferently.

'There curtains in there are full of Doxes, too,' Mr.'s Railie went on.' I thought we might try and tackle them anyhow.'

'I look forward to it,' said Trius. Naddalin heard their sarcasm in her voice, but she was not sure, that anyone else did.

Opposite Naddalin, Tonks was entertaining Emmah and Jill by transforming her nose between mouthfuls.

Screwing up her eyes each time with their same pained expression she had worn back in Naddalin's bedroom.

Her nose swelled to a beak-like protuberance that resembled Snappiest, shrank to their size of a button mushroom and then sprouted a great deal of hair from each nostril.

This was a regular mealtime entertainment because Emmah and Jill were soon asking for their favorite noses. 'Do that one like a pig snout, Tonks.'

Tonks obliged, and Naddalin, immobilized, then up too, had their fleeting impression that a female Dariez was grinning at her from a- crossed their table.

Mr. Railie, Sara, and Sevket were having an intense discussion about sprites- haunts.

'Theory is not giving anything away yet,' said Sara. 'I still cannot work out whether they believe she is back. Course, they might prefer not to take sides at all. Keep out of it...'

'I's am sure they would never go over to You- Know- Whom,' said Mr. Railie, checking the heads. The theory has suffered losses too; remember that- goblin family she murdered last time, somewhere near Lavannah?'

~*~

'I think it depends on what they are offered,' said Sevket. 'And I am not toluene about gold. If they are offered their freedoms, we have been denying them for centuries they are going to be tempted. Have you still not had any luck with Amsel's, girl Sara...?'

Alissa, Allison, Adriane, and Ava, as you know nothing has changed with girls... and the conflict is still on, Sara being one of them down the line. They are like you and I- why do they feel they need to be more? Maiara Chenoa, for nothing, is going to change even after 200 years of back and forth... good and wicked. And Neveah is the cause yet again, said Duerre's, this girl is a noble haunt, that is a stain on us all. Look what she did all these girls and he rolls out an old tattered script.

That was a question for years that no one could get, said Haven.

'She's feeling anti-wizard- ie fallen angel- sh right freaking now,' said Sara, 'she has not stopped raving about their Bagman business, she reckons their Ministry did a cover-up, those Sprites-Haunts never- ever got their gold from her, you know...'

A gale of laughter from the middle of their table drowned their rest of Sara's words. Céline, Katy, Jinger, and MonDongos were rolling around in their seats. Neveah was high up in her world, and this was not cool- not cool! Or so they thought.

'...And then,' Hayvannah- MonDeanahgo's, tears running down her face,' and then, if you will believe it, 'she- e says to me,' she- e says,' Ere, Dung, where did get all them toads from?

'CUZ- some girl of a Sludgers gone and

Sailed all mine!' And I say, 'Sailed all your toads, Will, what next? So, you will be wanting some more, then?' And if you will believe me, all, their germless gargoyle buys all. 'I own toads back off me for a lot more what- 'she- e paid in their first place.'

'I do not think we need to hear any more of your business dealings, thank you very much, MonDongos,' said Mr.'s Railie abruptly, as Jinger slumped forwards on to their table, fly her wings spreading them wide- up with laughter on her face, and then looking evil to all that was around her.

'Beg par- Deanah, Molly,' said MonDongos at once, wiping her eyes and winking at Naddalin.' But, you know, Will Sailed'me off Warty Harris in their first place so I was not really doing nothing winger.'

'I's Do not know where you learned about right and winger, MonDongos, but you seem to have missed a few crucial lessons,' said Mr.'s Railie coldly.

Céline and Katy buried their faces in their goblets of Butterbeer; Katy was hiccoughing. In some regard, Mr.'s Railie threw a very nasty look at Trius before getting to her feet and going to fetch a large rhubarb crumble for pudding. Naddalin looked round at her God daddy.

'Molly does not approve of MonDongos,' said Trius in an undertone.

'How come she is in their Order?' Naddalin said, very quietly.'

'She is useful,' Trius muttered.

'Knows all their crooks well, she would since she is one herself.

But she is also very loyal to Duerre, who helped her out of a tight spot once. It pays to have someone like Dung around, she hears things we do not,' like all that were before her- with this- THING-HEX.' He said wildly.

But Molly thinks inviting her to stay for dinner is going too far. She has not forgiven her for slipping off duty when she was supposed to be tailing you.

Three helpings of rhubarb crumble and custard later and their waistband on Natalie's jeans was feeling uncomfortably tight... (which was saying something, as their jeans had once been Diaries.)

As she laid down her spoon there was a stillness in their general conversation: Mr. Railie was leaning back in her chair, ever so- replete and relaxed; Tonks was yawning widely, her nose now back to normal; and Jill who had attracted Crook shanks out from under their dresser, was sitting cross-legged on their floor, rolling Butterbeer corks for her to chase.

Part: 7

'Nearly time for bed, girls are nude running around, washing you can see them, I think,' said Mr.'s Railie with a yawn, and give a nude hug to her than them my girl. And I kiss her... and finger her, bits.

She drove his tongue into her setting off another shattering moan that was music to her ears.

She was quite an instrument to play, so finely tuned, and if she touches her right, she made their most glorious sounds, raw, intense, delicious noises of pleasure as she plundered her with her tongue.

She grabbed her long hair, yanked, and pulling her closer as she had told her to do. She thrust one finger into her, cooking it and hitting her in their spot that turned her moans into one long, high- pitched orgasm.

She shuddered against her, her legs quaking, and when she finally slowed to look up at her, she saw her hair was a wild tumble, and her face was glowing.

Oh- ah...

(Next day)

'Not just yet, Molly' said Trius, pushing away his empty plate and turning to look at Naddalin.' You know, I am surprised at you. I thought their first thing you would do when you got here would be to start as the queen questions about Waltemath.'

Their atmosphere in their room changed with their rapidity Naddalin associated with their arrival of Dementiators. Where seconds before it had been sleepily relaxed, it was now alert, even tense.

A frigidly had gone around their table at their mention of Waltemath's name. Sevket, who had been about to take a sip of wine, lowered her goblet, flying suspiciously.

'I did!' said Naddalin indignantly.' I asked Jinger and Emmah, but they said we're not allowed in their order, so-o.'

'And they're quite right,' said Mr.'s Railie.

'You're too young.'

She was sitting bolt upright in her chair, her fists clenched on its arms, every trace of drowsiness gone.

And since when did someone have to be in their Order of their Durizy to ask questions?' inquired Trius. 'Naddalin's been trapped in that nonmagical people house for a month. She's got their right to know what is been happen-' 'Hang on...!' Interrupted Katy loudly.

'How come Naddalin gets his questions answered?' And- yah- said Céline angrily.

'Yen's- we have been trying to get stuff out of you for a month and you have not told us a single stouten thing!' Said Katy.

'You're too young, you are not in their Order,' said Céline, in a high- pitched voice, that sounded uncannily like her mothers. 'Naddalin's not even of age!'

'It's not my fault you have not been told what their orders doing,' said Trius calmly, 'that's your parents' decision. Naddalin, on their other hand.'

'It's not down to you to decide what is good for Naddalin!' said Mr.'s Railie sharply. Their expression on her normally kind face looked dangerous. 'You have not forgotten what Duerre said, I suppose?'

'Which bit...?' Trius asked politely, but with their air of a man readying herself for a fight.

There bit about not telling Naddalin more than she needs to know,' said Mr.'s Railie, placing a heavy emphasis on their last three words.

Jinger, Emmah, Céline and Katy's heads swiveled from Trius to Mr.'s Railie as though they were following a tennis rally. Jill was kneeling amid a pile of Butterbeer corks, watching their conversation with her mouth slightly open. Sevkets eyes were fixed on Trius.

'I do not intend to tell her more than she needs to know, Molly,' said Trius. 'Nevertheless, as she was their one who saw Waltemath come back' (again, there was a joint shudder around their table at their name) like she has righter than most too.'

She- it is not a member of their order of their Durizy!' said Mr.'s Railie. 'she's only going to look and be around fifteen- and... soul in the body- and mind- like them all- that is what she well stays along with her barcode numbers, like them all, the age they became- soul- fallen.'

'And she is dealt with as much as most in their Order,' said Trius,' and more than some.'

'Knopper ones denying what she's Deanahe!' said Mr.'s Railie, her voice rising, her fists trembling on their arms of her chair.' But she's still...'

- 'She's not a child!' said Trius impatiently.

- 'She's not an adult either!' said Mr.'s Railie, their color rising in her cheeks. 'she's not' Alyssa, Trius!'

'I'm perfectly clear who she is, thanks, Molly,' said Trius coldly.

'I'm not sure you are!' Said Mr.'s Railie.

- 'Sometimes, their way you talk about her, it is as though you think you have your best friend back!'

- 'What's Jigger with that?' said Naddalin.

- 'What's winger, Naddalin, is that you are not your daddy, however much you might look like her!' said Mr.'s Railie, her eyes still boring into Trius.

- 'You are still at Savannah and adults responsible for you should not forget it!'

'Meaning- I am an irresponsible God daddy?'

Oh- deliquesced Trius, his voice rising.

'Connotation you have been known to act rashly, Trius, which is why-why- Duerre keeps reminding, you to stay at home...

- And-

'Well leave my orders from Duerre out of this, if you please!' said Trius deafeningly.

'Arthur!' said Mr.'s Railie, rounding on her publicities.' Arthur, back me up!'

Mr. Railie did not speak at once. She took off her glasses and cleaned them on her black wispy like robes, only when she had replaced them carefully on her nose did, he reply, he is being her love of life did that.

'Duerre knows their position has changed, Molly. She accepts that Naddalin must be filled in, to a certain extent, now that she is staying at Headquarters.''

'Yes, but there is an alteration between that and inviting her to ask whatever she likes!' 'Partially,' said Sevket quietly, some ways, away from Trius at last, as Mr.'s Railie turned quickly to her, hopeful that finally, she was about to get an ally, 'I think it better that Naddalin gets their facts not all their facts, Molly, but their general picture from us, rather than a garbled version from... others.'

Her expression was mild, but Naddalin felt sure Sevket, at least, knew that some Extendable Ears had survived Mr.'s Rallies purge.

'Well,' said Mr.'s Railie, breathing deeply And Pa. around their table for the support that did not come, 'well... I can see I am going to be overruled. I will just say this: Duerre, must have had she - regards for not wanting Naddalin to know too much, and sequin as someone who has

Naddalin's best interests at heart.'

'She' is not your girl,' said Trius quietly.

'she' is as good as... f*cked,' said Mr.'s Railie fiercely.' Who else has she - got that feeling about her?'

~*~

- 'She's got me!'

Part: 8

'Yes,' said Mr.'s Railie, her lip- curling,' they're- thing is, it's ratted her difficult for you to look after her while you've been locked UP in Dizery l And, has not it?'

Trius started to rise from the chairs.

'Molly, you are not their- the only pergirl at their table who cares about Naddalin,' said Sevket sharply.' Trius, sit down.'

Mr.'s Rallies' lower lip was trembling. Trius sank flying back into the chairs, at this point face white as could be.

'I think Naddalin ought to be allowed a say in there,' Sevket continued, 'she-'s old enough to decide for herself.''

'I want to know what's been going on,' Naddalin said simultaneously.

She-did not look at Mr.'s Railie. Her-had been touchers-d by what she-had said about she is as good as a girl, but she-was also impatient with the mollycoddling. Trius was right, she-was not a child.

'Very well,' said Mr.'s Railie, her voice-racquet.' Jill, Jinger, Emmah, Céline, & Katy. I's want you out of their kitchen-n, now.'

There-was an instant uproar.

'Whereof age!' Céline And Katy bellowed together.

'If Naddalin's allowed, why cannot I?' shouted Jinger.

'Mom, I want to see-are!' wailed Jill.

'NO...!' shouted Mr.'s Railie, timewasting up, her eyes over bright like the light sky of Earth that we used to know.' I absolutely forbid.'

'Molly, you cannot stop Céline And Katy,' said Mr. Railie wearily. They are of age.'

'Theory is still at Savannah.'

'But they are legally adults now,' said Mr.

Railie, in their-same tired voice.

Mr.'s Railie was now scarlet in their-face.

'I'm oh, all right there-n, Céline, And Katy can stay, but Jinger.'

'Nathaniel tells' me...And Emmah everything you say anyway!' said Jinger passionately. 'Won't will not you?' She-added uncertainly, meeting Naddalin's eyes.

For a split second, Naddalin considered telling Jinger that she-would not tell her a single word, that she-could try a taste of being kept in their-dark and see how she-liked it.

Never she-less their-nasty impulse vanished-as they looked at each other.

'Course I's will,' Naddalin said.

Jinger... and... Emmah smiled.

Part: 9

'Fine!' shouted Mr.'s Railie. 'Fine! Jill-

BED!'

Jill did not go quietly; they could shape she is raging and storming at her mother- r all their- way up there- stairs, and she- n' she- reached their- hall Mr.'s Blacks ear-splitting shrieks were added to their- din. Sevket hurried off to their- portrait to restore calm. It was only after she- had returned, closing their- kitchen- n door behind her and dequeen she seats at their- table again, that Trius spoke.

'OKay, Naddalin... what do you want to know?'

Naddalin took a deep breath... And asked their- question that had obsessed her for their- last month.

'Where's Waltemath?' she- said, ignoring their- renewed shudders and winces at their- name. 'What's she- doing? I have been trying to watch their- nonmagical people news, and their- re has not been anything that looks like her yet, no funny deaths or anything.'

'That is because- they have not been any funny deaths yet,' said Trius, 'Not any way... And we know quite a- lot.'

'More than she- thinks we do, anyway,' said Sevket.

'How come she- 's stopped killing people?' Naddalin asked. She- knew Waltemath had murdered more than once in their- last year alone.

'Because she- does not want to draw attention to herself,' said Trius. 'It would be dangerous for her. Her comeback did not come off quite their- way she- wanted it to, you see. She- messed it up.'

'Or rats her-, you messed it tip for her,' said Sevket, with a satisfied smile.

'How?' Naddalin asked, perplexed.

'You were not supposed to survive!' said Trius.

'Nobody apart from the Death Eaters was supposed to know she'd come back.

But you survived to bear witness.

'And they're- very last per girl she- wanted to be alerted to her return their- moment she- got back was Duerre,' said Sevket.

'And you made sure Duerre knew at once.' 'How has that she- led?' Naddalin asked.

'Are you kidding?' Said Sara incredulously. 'Duerre was there - the only one You Know

Who was ever scared of!'

Thanks to you, Duerre could recall their- Order of their- Durizy about an hour after Waltemath returned,' said Trius.

Part: 10

'So, what is their- Order been doing?' said Naddalin, Looking around at them all.

'Torqueing as hard as we can to make sure

Waltemath cannot carry out the plans,' said Trius.

How would you know what she plans are?' Naddalin asked quickly.

'Duerre's got a shrewd idea,' said Sevket, 'And Duerre's shrewd ideas normally turn out to be correct.'

'So-o what does Duerre reckon she- 's planning?'

~Planning...

Interval: 3

The Underworld

Open your eyes... too the... Underworld-

I opened my eyes- towards- Mattie, obviously- as well as to my bigger sister, who has saved me many- countless times from the dark underneath of the black deaths- lost in time and space alike, a place that one can only dream of... yet, feels- oh so really going- into, as well as for who I would delightedly go down underneath deep in and wish- to save from- The Underworld.

Creep... creep... creeping in on them...

One mysterious, cryptic, and ambiguous night when Megan went to bed, Mattie was her flabby, stumpy, chocolate-burrowing and junk- food, pop-loving litter sister, whom annoyed the crap out of her, and charmed her both in a fun playful way, a way that on two that are clause would understand and get...

~*~

Then the next morning, and when she woke up, she was no longer. Do you get that? NO LONGER!

~*~

Perhaps- Magen could not define the transformations which took place here. Can you yet...?

~*~

She looked the same yet was not she said the same, yet it was not, she loved me yet it was not the same love I felt back, he was not her. Do you get that? She- was no longer...

~*~

Mattie and was wearing the same pair of ratty fleece pajamas red, with the same yet his with the little toe sticking out, of course, that would be her, the hole gets bigger every night I see her; just like in the back too, girl she is getting chubby, and he arose down the set of steps precisely the same way

the actual, genuine- Mattie would have done: thumb, bump, banged, sliding on his rump, all the way doing to the landing.

Saying- Weeee!

~*~

However, she was not the equivalent of what I know her as. In actual truth, here, he was somewhat, quite unlike the others his and my age.

~*~

It was approximately- in the way she is observing her: It was as though celebrity had stretched behindhand his eyes and twisted away with diligent and complete enthusiasm. Were young girls we do not understand are underworld... do you...?

~*~

Mattie- marched snakingly, oh too silently, noiselessly, and like a glimmer of something underworldly.

~*~

Silent steps he made to the table, she sat kindly sat like a stone in his chair emotionless to the real world, that we live in, plus he placed a paper towel on his lap.

~*~

The real Mattie never used a bib or towel. Yet she- was all neat and such... she just whipped it wherever she pleased. Yet nothing not one of the old guys or girls here noticed- a thing- wrong- with her. Can you see it...?

~*~

Mrs. Smith is Megan's mother. Do you see here there, just doing her day to day thing?

Mrs. Smith did not break for her kid's attraction lost in the crazed- fantasy world of work and distress, and being worked up over it, nonstop categorization from end to end the stack of bills on the kitchen table; making occasional noises of unhappiness.

~*~

Megan's father continuous fly- by- night in and out of the room, his tie loosened, in addition to that only wearing one sock and no paints- just boxers, muttering distractedly on the cell phone about what seems to be nothing that makes any senses.

~*~

The imitation- Mattie to me not them, picked up her spoon as well as offered me some of her cherished food, which just does not happen. With this big girl that love- love- loves to eat everything in his sight, is that, not right?

~*~

With that creepy- so- o eerie- appearance, appearance, which chilled me to the very center core of my young little body. Do you see me there? Do you see my brown hair and my bow ties... ?

~*~

My big and stunning immense russet eyes? Am I not- I am cute to you?

Do you see my little face in pale white, glow in the morning sun coming in from the window over there by the sink, mom doing the dishes, and everything else she does all at once it seems to me?

~*~

Then the phony- Mattie starts to eat his lucky- cereal bits, painstakingly, unhurriedly, harpooning all the alphabet letters out of his Alpha- bits one by one as well as reinforcing them up along the rim of her bowl.

Spilling out- creep- creepy- little- girl- die!

~*~

I see in her eyes the spider calling form he is dead eyes and out of them, giving me this message that was drug down to the coldness and dampness of- The Underworld-ness below us.

~*~

I could hear the sounds of the music eerie to me playing her to sleep or it seemed to me... the horn was all I could make out... it was all muffled to my stifled ear, under and I look at the hole of temptation between downwards that is only part of me that goes in my soul its- I finger it and they- come, is where they must have taken her... do you think so?

Was the door under her bed was glowing...? It is all most underworld time... Creepers...

~*~

Megan's heart dropped for the chest to foot and back up... in panic. She knew at that moment, at the time, on this day, in this year, what had come about... as well as she distinguished, that the heavens were up like the real world to me as I go down in the heat of the moment and if you turned around fast, spinning in the confusion, circling down to the dark depths below, and then stood motionless... so still.

~*~

As the evil ripped through me and my figure, like spiders calling all over me. Tangled in the webs of their chromes. Like me going through them with my lantern, I could not see up or down or around just the voices of temptations.

Come, come, see us, hear us, play with- US...we got cookies and candy if you give up your soul to us!

~*~

The entire underworld just keeps turning the circling around me, deeper and deeper, lower, and lower... I went- hearing all their voices getting amplified to me.

Perhaps- maybe, just maybe his too, Mattie's soul had been taken by- The Underworld entities.

As well as they had left this thing, all kinds of things behind, in my room and her area, do you see them?

~*~

This not- my younger- sister, she's been replaced... or is it?

Is it some other form of her too? 'Mom,' she said, and then, when her mother did not immediately respond, tried again a little louder.

(Back to that mooring)

'Mom.'

'Yes...' -Magg.

Mom- 'Mum?' I said fast and abruptly! I jumped, to the harshness of her high squally pain in the butt sometimes voice. She narrowed her eyes at her for an instant, the same way she has observed me and her when we do something wrong, and they say your full name.

~*~

Like always- 'Mattie's being weird,' Megan said.

Mom- stared alertly at my daughter, nevertheless with cold eyes. Then I twirled around, unexpectedly, to my husband looking at me with wonder and concern to my ways. 'Did you ever pay the electric bill and the rest we can afford?'

~*~

Mom- I didn't seem to hear her as I was predating away about nothing, but her young ways of kid-ish mumbling. 'Have you seen my glasses, and my phone, my, I-pad, and mind?'

~*~

Dad- was questioning, lifting the banana and peering underneath of it, and it was so turning my tummy looking at it, I am not a dumb girl you know.

He- he- he...

~*~

'They're on your head doing cartwheels.' STOP!

'My reading glasses... are...?'

Mom- I sighed impatiently. 'It says this is our absolute ultimate announcement. I do not recollect the first notice. Did we pay the electric bill? I could have sworn...'

I do not worry about this sh*t! I a little girl remember I was thinking. I do not say yet I think that is for sure.

~*~

'I can't go to work without my glasses!' Mr. Smith opened the refrigerator, stared at its contents, closed the refrigerator, and dashed out of the room into the living room for the door without. Through the table, it feels as I hit my leg... damn-it.

~*~

The replica- Mattie began rearranging the cereal letters on the outside of his bowl. She spelled out three words: I H-A-T- E y-o-u! In addition, you are going to die tonight in my room if you do not come down with me.

~*~

Then she gathered her hands, and stared at her with that bizarrely unoccupied look, as though the black part of his eyes had eaten up all the color.

Down I went... Holding this child's hand... Come...

The Underworld- is like... a webbed field of never- endianness, the raps you mind clean of you and your thoughts. The underworld could be the holes that go in me. it wants to come out and play with me too.

~*~

Megan's insides trembled again as it comes for her. Seeing the twigs, and all the lights and branches suck her in, like she.

She slid off her chair and went over to her mother.

She tugged at the sleeve of her mother's nightgown, which had a small coffee stain on its elbow.

(Back to midday)

'Mommy.'

'Yes, baby?' she asked absentmindedly.

'Mattie's freaking me out.'

'Mattie,' Mrs. Smith said, without looking up from her notepad, on which she was now scribbling various figures. 'Stop bothering your sister like that.'

Here is what the real Mattie would have done: He would have stuck out his tongue or thrown his napkin at Megan in retribution, or he would have said, 'It's her face that's the bother.'

Nevertheless, this impostor did none of those things. The impostor just stared quietly at Megan and smiled.

Her teeth looked very white. 'Mom-' Megan swore, and her mother sighed, in addition, threw down her pencil with so much force that it bounced.

~*~

'Please, Megan,' she said, with barely concealed impatience. 'Can't you see that I'm busy? Why don't you go outside and play for a bit?'

Megan knew better than to argue with her mother when she was in a mood.

So, she went outside. It was a hot and hazy morning- far too hot for late April.

She was hoping to see one of the neighbors out doing something- watering a plant, walking a dog- but it was very still.

Megan almost, never- ever saw the neighbors. It was not that kind of neighborhood. She did not even know most of their names: only Mrs. Rosenblatt, who was so old she looked exactly like a snip.

Today, as on most days, Mrs. Rosenblatt was sitting on her porch, rocking, and fanning herself with one of the Chinese delivery menus that were often stuck mysteriously, invisibly, in the middle of the night- under the front door.

'Hello,' she called out to Megan and waved. 'Hello!'

Megan called back... she liked Mrs. Rosenblatt, even though Mrs. Rosenblatt hardly ever moved except to rock in her chair and could not be counted on to do anything interesting.

~*~

Mrs. Rosenblatt liked to rock even in cold- weather, and she would appear on her porch so bundled in blankets and scarves, she looked like an overfilled coatrack.

'Would you like a glass of milk?'

Mrs. Rosenblatt called out. 'or a cookie?' She offered Megan milk, and a cookie every time they saw each other unless it was winter; in which case, she offered hot chocolate and a cookie.

'Not today, thank you,' Megan said. Remorsefully, as she always did. She was not allowed- to accept things to eat or drink from nonfamily members. Megan often wished the rule applied to Family Members instead.

She would much rather have had one of Mrs.

Rosenblatt's cookies than her Aunt Stirginia's tuna casserole. She wondered whether she should tell Mrs. Rosenblatt about Mattie, but decided against it.

(Three weeks previous)

Magen- I am at recess when she had tried to tell Sammie and Ellie, was so wrong about the underworldly societies, and the constant threat they posed, they had laughed at her and called her a liar. Mrs. Rosenblatt was a good listener- partly, Megan thought because she couldn't hear very well, nonetheless, Megan did not want to jeopardize this.

~*~

There was only one thing that Megan loathed more than liars, besides that was being suspects of being one. At one edge of the yard, a pile of pinecones has been neatly stacked.

~*~

Megan had decided them this way only yesterday, thinking that she and Mattie might play a round of Pinecone bowling in the morning.

Nevertheless, she could not play with the false Mattie; he would no doubt find a way to cheat.

~*~

She had a sudden wrenching fierce desire for Anna, her old babysitter, to come home.

Why?

Not sure, she would have played with me over the years, outside and in she showed me so much about myself too and the underworld that goes down in me that is where she went - I just know it.

At least that is what I think... do you?

Last fall in me was Anna, she did not beeline that I have the world to me, till she entered the black hole of mine, she has gone away to middle school not long before...

This meant that she had stimulated, and could not babysit anymore, in addition instead Megan and Mattie were left with Mandy, who always chewed her gum too loudly and didn't like to play games- she did not like anything, really, except talking on the phone.

~*~

Anna had come over to babysit several times during her summer vacation, but on her spring break, she had gone away with her friends. Megan and Mattie and Sammie had gotten a water-warped postcard from her, but most of the writing had been too blurry to read.

~*~

I have the postcard she had sent from the beach, after all this time, and a white sweatshirt with a fierce-looking bear on the front, explaining in the involved note that it was her school's mascot.

Mattie had cried like a baby when it turned out the sweatshirt was in Megan's size, and she had finally lent it to her.

He had promptly spilled tomato sauce on it, and she'd refused to speak to her for an entire day.

Megan knew it was stupid, but sometimes she fantasized, that Anna would turn up again and confess her deepest secret: that Megan and Mattie were, in fact, her siblings, and they had all been torn apart by some horrible event when they were little and forced into different families.

Oh!

Um-hum! Come for us...

Do you see the lying silt ship that leads into 'The Underworld?'

The Underworld- is a dark wet place, where you come in and see the thing that brings you joy, yet makes you feel week to the wrongness of what you are doing to yourself, there is no light only wonder, there are voices come, screaming for you to come...

Like sweeping the sides of you until you have no choice, but move the feel goods of their games, that they play as they get you to do as they say, and the enter into you and play with your brain and you no long you going on with your day, what do you say- do you play with your underworld; Maddie went into mine, and he not coming out.

~*~

Megan's fantasies were a little hazy after that point, but she thought that somehow, she, Anna, and Mattie would end up on a long journey together, hunting down some of the magical creatures Anna had always told them about, like gnomes and nymphets (Who we re gorgeous, then again corrupt wicked- tempered.)

Megan sighed; Anna would also have known what to do about the spider-like entities got her to as she went into her hole to the underworld. She was, after all, the creature who had first told Megan and Mattie about them.

She was the one who had warned them about the strange spider creatures and had told them what they must do to be dwindling.

Megan scanned the yard for gnomes but saw nothing. Only last week, Mattie, the real Mattie, had spotted one scampering into the rhododendron.

~*~

The real me was not there either they were making me come, for there ways and not my own, as I went on trying to do me, and my day.

'Look, Megan!' She had cried out, and she had turned just in time to see a hard, brown hide, which was as fractured along with worn as a leather purse.

~*~

It was too hot for the gnomes today, Megan decided. Anna had told Megan they preferred cool climates.

Megan pressed her face up against the small fir tree that stood next to the birdbath, inhaling deeply.

It was easier to see the magic through its branches, she found.

The itchy needles poked deeply into her skin, and she stood and squinted through the layers of khaki.

Looking at the world through the fir tree meant seeing only the essential things: the vivid olive of the meadow's, dew glistening on petals, a robin flicking its tail, a squirrel rustling through the rhododendron, a miracle of life, and growth that forever pulsed under the commonplaceness.

~*~

Advantageous, of course, it was only when looking through the tree that you could make a wish, and have it come true, Anna had also told them that.

Megan spoke a wish quietly into the scratchy branches.

We will not repeat it... All and sundry knows that only wishes that are kept secret will ever come true.

On the other hand, then again know this: Oh! All- the desire was about Mattie and finding what was with me, as the world of an image that I felt doing this... looking for the wandering things that would make you wonder, I may find digging and fingering myself, for her inside me.

~*~

Megan heard a step behind her. She turned and saw the Mattie- who- was- no long her to me- or them, Mattie standing on the front porch, watching her.

Megan sucked in a deep breath like she sucked us into her underworld as we look and put our head and body down in it to get there, gathered her young age, and said, 'You are not my sister.' not- Mattie stared at her with flat blue eyes. 'Absolutely, I am,' she said calmly.

'You are not them; I am not me doing this.'

'Am too... I said it too do you see that I am I do not lie... you know that sissy.' 'Prove it,' Megan said, crossing her arms, and she tried to think of a question whose answer only the real Mattie would know.

She was quiet for a bit. At last, she asked, 'When you are playing hide- and- seek on a rainy day, not she is doing it in me, what is the best hiding space?'

~*~

The old place was- 'Behind the bookcase in the basement,' not- Mattie answered automatically. 'In the crawl space that smells like mold.' Megan was disappointed.

She had gotten it right; this fake Mattie was obviously smarter than she gave her credit for- smarter, she would not wonder, than the real Mattie.

(Though that was not saying much. only a week ago, the real Mattie had tried to turn the basement into a swimming pool by flooding the sink! Absurd.)

Maybe- she needed to ask a former question within.

'What must you do every night before you go to sleep?'

Megan said, eyeing the fake- Mattie narrowly to see whether there was any hesitation or shiftiness in her answer.

However, she re-joined promptly, drawing a big X a crossed her chest, 'you must cross yourself once from shoulder to hip and say out loud, 'sweep, sweep, bring me to sleep.

Clear the webs from my room with the bristliest broom.'

~*~

Megan was stunned. She had been sure positive! The question: would baffle fake - Mattie, but her answer was correct, and he stood looking at her with an expression of triumph.

When Anna had first discovered the underworld entries, she had invented this rhyme as a way of keeping the underworld boys at bay while they slept. The girl in the underworld makes me come to them and play with the top and bottoms of the getaways, to the soul.

~*~

Everyone knows there is nothing a spider fears' more than a broom, and someone sweeping with it, and the broom charm had, in fact, protected them for years. Mattie, the real Mattie, must have forgotten to say the bedtime magnetism last night before she went to sleep.

She and Megan had been fighting about seeing each other's worlds - Mattie had accused her of stealing her favorite socks, which were sapphire, and embroidered with turtles, as though she would ever have worn anything so preposterous- besides, Megan called her distrustful, and when he did not know what that meant, she stormed into his room and slammed the door.

~*~

She was distracted; that must be why she had not said the broom charm. Megan felt a heavy rush of guilt. It was her fault, at least partially. And so, The Underworld guys had gotten her: They had dropped down from the ceiling on their glistening webs of shadowed darkness and dropped their silken threads in her ear, and extracted his soul slowly, like a fisherman persuading a trout from the water on a taut nylon fishing line.

In its place, they deposited their eggs; then they withdrew to their shadowed, dark corners and their underground lairs with her soul bound closely in silver thread.

And the soulless shell would wake the next morning, and walk, and talk, as counterfeit-Mattie was walking and talking.

All the same eventually, the soulless shell would crumble to dust, and thousand-Underworld guys and some girls- nested and grown- would burst forth, like a Megan hatching from an egg.

And distraught parents would wake up, believing their children to have been kidnapped while they slept, and they would appear tearfully on television, begging for their children's safe return, when really The Underworld gangs were to blame.

Megan felt a sudden tightness in her throat as they made squirt it all out within and she saw them all as they giggle saying it's all right to do this.

'You see oozing with this webbing!' The sham- Mattie crowed. 'I told you. I am your sister.' Then Megan was struck by an idea.

'Come here,' she said to not- Mattie, and even though she was filled with revulsion by the closeness of this imitation, this cold and cardboard thing, she forced herself to stand still as she approached.

Unexpectedly she lunged for her and began tickling her tummy.

~*~

The real Mattie was extraordinarily ticklish and would have screamed with laughter and tried to shove Megan off and begged for mercy.

Megan loved the sound of Mattie's joke. It came, in short, explosive bursts, as though each time she was relearning how to do it.

This Mattie stood still, watching her dully. 'What are you doing?' She asked.

~*~

Megan pulled away as I went back down in me and then she was all up in mine too. She then had the same feeling she'd had several years ago, when she had swung too high and too fast on the swings at the playground, and the world teetered underneath her: a feeling of triumph but also of terror.

She knew it...

This Mattie was not the real Mattie. And that meant that the soul of the real Mattie had been bound up in the silver thread and carried deep underground and that inside the body of not-Mattie, insects were nesting.

Megan drew herself up to her full four feet four inches.

'I am not afraid of you,' she said- to fake Mattie, but she was, of course, speaking to all those infant underworld boys sleeping soundly in their thousands of soft eggs, somewhere deep inside his chest.

And of course, she was afraid. She was more afraid than she had ever been in her life.

'I will find my real sister, and I will bring her back to me and my mommy and daddy, that doesn't get that I play with newly found- Underworld.'

~*~

In addition to then she spun quickly on her heel and stalked off toward the house, so not-Mattie and the tiny monsters he carried inside her would not see that she was shaking.

Let us just say- I never- ever stopped playing with this under would, but I did find out what it really was... and where it can take, she and me...

I hope you understand this Underworld to and have fun with it...

We will come for you too...

Nevaeh

Book: 37

Death Devours

Part: 1

'Well, firstly, she- wants to build up the army again,' said Trius.' In their- old days she- had huge numbers then she come and: watchers and wizards and fallen angels alike, she'd intimidated or bewitched into following her, she faithful death devours, a great variety of Dark creatures.

You hurt her planning to recruit their- giants; well, they will be just one of their- groups she's after. She's certainly not going to try and take on their- Bureau of Magic with only a dozen death devours.'

'So, you are trying to stop her from getting more followers?'

'We're doing our best,' said Sevket.

'How?'

'Well, their- main thing is to try, and convincing as many people as possible that you know- whom she- has refunded, to put them on their guard,' said Sara.' It's proving a tricky, though.'

'Why...?'

WHY- 'Because of their- Bureau's attitude,' said Tonks.' You saw Cornelius Harlan after You Know Who came back, Naddalin.

Well, she- has not shifted her position at all.

She's refusing to believe it happens.'

'But why?' Said Naddalin desperately, why is she- being so stupid? If Duerre...'

'Ah, well, you have put your finger on the- problem,' said Mr. Railie with an ironic smile.' Duerre.'

'Harlan is frightened of her, you see,' said Tonks sadly.

'Frightened of Duerre?' Said Naddalin incredulously.

Frightened of what she's up to,' said Mr. Railie.' Harlan thinks Duerre's plotting to overthrow her. she- thinks Duerre wants to be Martita for Magic.'

'But Duerre does not want'

'Unquestionably, she- does not,' said Mr. Railie.' 'She never wanted their- Martian's job, even though a lot of people wanted her to take it she'd Millicent Bagnold retired.

Harlan came to power instead, but she's never- ever quite forgotten how much popular support Duerre had, even though Duerre never- ever applied for their- job.'

Part: 2

'Deep down, Harlan knows Duerre's much cleverer than she- is a much more powerful wizard, and in there- early days of their Bureau she- was forever as thinking Duerre for help, and advice,' said Sevket.

'But it seems she's become fond of power, and much more confident. She - loves being Martita for Magic And she's managed to convince herself that she's there - clever one And Duerre's simply stirring up trouble for their- sake of it.'

'How can she- think that?' Said Naddalin angrily.' How can she- think Duerre would just make it all up, that I would make it all up?' 'Because accepting that AVA's back would mean trouble like their- Bureau has not had to cope with for fourteen years,' said Trius bitterly.' Harlan just cannot bring herself to face it. It is so much more comfortable to convince herself Duerre's lying to destabilize her.'

'You see their- problem,' said Sevket.' While they're- Bureau insists there is nothing to fear from AVA it is hard to convince people she's back, especially as they do not want to believe it in their- first place. what is more, their- Bureau is leaning she- avidly on their- Daily Prop not to report any of what they are calling Duerre's rumor-mongering, so most of their- wizarding community is completely unaware anything happened, and that makes them easy targets for their- Death Consumers if they are using their- Imperious Curse.'

Nonetheless, you are telling people, aren't you?' Said Naddalin, around at Mr. Railie, Trius, Sara, Mon- Deanahgos, Sevket, And Tonks.' You're letting people know she's back?'

They all smiled humorlessly.

'Well, as everyone thinks I am a mad mass murderer and they're - Bureau is put a ten those... And Galleon price on my head, I can hardly stroll up the - street and start and out leaflets, can I's?' said Trius restlessly.

'And I am not a very popular dinner guest with most of their - community,' said Sevket.' It's an occupational hazard of being a werewolf.'

'Tonks And Arthur would lose their jobs at their - Bureau if they started shooting their mouths off,' said Trius,' And we need to have spies inside their - Bureau because you can bet AVA will have them.'

'We've managed to convince a couple of people, though,' said Mr. Railie. Tonks, she, for one she's too young to have been in their - Order of their - Durizy last time, and having Auroras on our side is a huge advantage, Regal c*ckleboats been a real asset, too; she's in charge of their - hunt for Trius, so she's been feeding their - Bureau information that Trius is in Tibet.'

'But if none of you are putting their - news out that Mazel Amsel back' Naddalin began.

'Who said none of us are putting their - news out?' Said Trius. Why would you think Duerre's in such trouble?'

'What you mean?' Naddalin asked...

The theory is trying to discredit her,' said Sevket.' Didn't you see there - Daily Prop shot last week? They reported that she'd been voted out of there - Chair of their - International Confederation of Wizards - and Fallen because she's getting old and losing the grip, but it is not true; she - was voted out by Bureau wizards after she - made a speech announcing a Mazel Amsel return.

The theory has demoted her from Chief Warlock on their - Morrill that is there - Wizard High Court And they are toluene about dequeen away she Orders of Nunez, First Class, too.'

But Duerre says she - does not care what they do if they do not take her off the - Hayvannah - cholate 'Black Crow' Torit Cards,' said Sara, grinning.

'It's no laughing matter,' said Mr. Railie sharply.' If she - carries on defying their - Bureau like their she - could end up in Dizery - I's and, and they're - the last thing we want is to have Duerre locked up. While You Know ~ Who knows Duerre's out there and wise to what she's up to she's going to go cautiously. If Duerre's out old there - way well, you know, who will have a clear field.'

'But if AVA's trying to recruit more Death devours it's bound to get out that she's come back, isn't it?' Asked Naddalin desperately...

'Ava Amsel doesn't march up to people's houses and bang on their fingertip doors, Naddalin,' said Trius.' Her- tricks, jinxes and blackmails them.

She's well-practiced at operating in secret. In any case, gathering followers is only on e thing she's interested in. She's got other plans too, plans she- can put into operation very quietly indeed, and she's concentrating on those for their moment.'

'What's she- after apart from followers?'

Naddalin asked swiftly. Her- thought she- saw Trius And Lupin exchange their- most fleeting of looks before Trius answered.

'Stuff she- can only get by stealth.'

Wither- if Naddalin continued to look puzzled, Trius said,' Like a weapon.

Something she- did not have- last time.'

'She -and- her was- like very powerful before?'

'Yes.'

'Like what kind of weapon?' Said Naddalin.

'Something worse than their- Aveda Keara...?'

'That's enough...!'

Mr.'s Railie spoke from their- shadows beside their- door. Naddalin had not noticed she return from dequeen Jill upstairs. Her arms where crossed and she- looked furious.

'I want you in bed, now. All of you,' she- added, that went around at Céline, Katy, Jinger, And Emmah.

'You cannot boss us' Céline began to say monstrously.

'Watch me,' snarled Mr.'s Railie. She- was trembling slightly as she- looked at Trius.'

You've given Naddalin plenty of information. Any more and you might just as well induct her into the- War straightaway.'

'Why not?' said Naddalin quickly. Till join, I want to join, I want to fight.'

'No...'

It was not Mr.'s Railie who spoke their time, but Sevket.

There- war is formed only of overage wizards, fallen kind.' she- said.' Fallen girl wizards- haunts- angels- so on- who have left Savannah,' she- added, as Céline And Teori~ opened their mouths. There are dangers involved of which you can have no idea, any of you... I think Molly's right, Trius. Weave said enough.'

Trius half shrugged but did not argue. Mr.'s Railie beckoned imperiously to a- sure the girls and Emmah. One by one they stood up and Naddalin, recognizing defeat, followed suit.

There- Noble and Most Ancient House of Black...

Mr.'s Railie followed them upstairs again.

Forbidding... Ghastly.

'I want you all to go straight to bed, no toluene,' she- said as they reached their- first and,' and we've got a busy day Hayvanna harrow. I expect Jill's asleep,' she- added to Emmah, 'so try not to wake she up.'

'Asleep, yes, right,' said Céline in an undertone, after Emmah said to them goodnight and they were climbing to their- next floor.' If Jill's not lying awake waiting for Emmah to tell her everything they said downstairs, there- and I am a Flapperdom...'

All right, Jinger, Naddalin,' said Mr.'s Railie on their- second and, pointing their- m into their bedroom.' Off to bed with you.'

'Night,' Naddalin And Jinger said to the- twins from Rockville.

'Sleep tight,' said Céline, winking.

Mr.'s Railie closed their- door behind Naddalin with a sharp snap. There- bedroom looked, if anything, even darker and gloomier than it had at first sight.

There- the blank picture on their- wall was now breathing very flying horses and deeply, as though its invisible occupant was asleep.

Naddalin put on the pajamas, took off the glasses and climbed into her chilly bed while Jinger threw rows Indulgences up on top of their- wardrobe, the girls who were clattering around rustling their wings restlessly.

'We cannot let them out to hunt every night,' Jinger explained as she- pulled on the maroon pajamas.' Duerre does not want too many Flying horses with wings swooping around their- square, thinks it will look suspicious. Oh yes... I forgot...'

She's a-crossed to the- door and fastened it.

'What're you doing that for?'

'Reached-' said Jinger as she- turned off their- light.' The first night, she and I came and ring in at three in the- morning. Trust me, you do not want to wake up and find her Flying horse's around your room. 'Anyway... she- got into the bed, settled down under the- covers then turned to look at Naddalin in their- darkness; Naddalin could see she outline by their- moonlight filtering in through their- grimy window,' what you reckon?' Naddalin did not need to ask what Jinger meant.

'Well, they did not tell us much we could not have guessed, did they?' She- said, thinking of all that had been said downstairs.' I mean, all they have said is that they're- orders trying to stop people joining in...'

There- was a sharp intake of breath from Jinger.

'-Deport,' said Naddalin firmly.' She and you are you going to start using her name? Trius And Sevket do.'

Jinger ignored their last comment.

'Yeah, you are right,' she- said,' we already knew everything they told us, from using their- Extendable Ears. There- only a new bit was...'

Part: 3

Crack... Crack, hit- slam- and bang...

'OUCH!'

'Keep your voice down, Jinger or mom will be back up here.'

'You two just Apparated on my knees!'

'Yeah, well, it is harder in the- dark.'

Naddalin saw their- blurred outlines of Céline And Katy leaping down from Jinger's bed.

'There- was a groan of bedsprings and Naddalin's mattress descended a few inches as Katy sat down near the feet. 'So, got there yet?'' Said Katy eagerly.

There- weapon Trius mentioned?' Said Naddalin.

'Let slip, more like,' said Céline with relish, now sitting next to Jinger.

'We did not hear about that on there- old Extendable, did we?'

'What you reckon it is?' Said Naddalin.

'Could be anything,' Said Céline.

'But there cannot be anything worse than their- Aveda Keara Curse, can there?' Said Jinger. what's worse than death?'

'Maybe it is something that can kill loads of people at once,' suggested Katy.

'Maybe it is some particularly painful way of killing people,' said Jinger fearfully.

'She's got the- Cruciate Curse for causing pain,' said Naddalin, 'she- does not need anything more efficient than that.'

There was a pause and Naddalin knew that there- others, like her, we're wondering what horrors their weapon could perpetrate.

So, who you think got it now?' Asked Katy.' I hope it is our side,' said Jinger, sounding slightly nervous.

'If it is, Duerre's keeping it,' said Céline.

'Here's?' Said Jinger quickly. She does that when she gets nervous.

'SKOUFYCEOL?'

'Bet it is!' Said Katy. That is, why she hid the- 'the body of Neveah'.' 'Some weapons going to be a lot bigger than them- 'like the size of the body of Neveah', though!' Said Jinger.

'Not unavoidably' said Céline.

'Yeah, size is no guarantee of power,' said Katy.' Look at Jill she is powerful without them.'

'What you mean?' Said Naddalin.

'You've never been on the- receiving the end of one of the Bat-Bogey she- axes, have you?'

'shah!' Said Céline, half rising iron their- bed.'

'Listen, pay attention, take note...!'

They fell silent... to that, many footsteps were coming up the- stairs.

'Mom,' said Katy and without further ado, there was a flamboyant crash and Naddalin felt their- weight vanish from the- end of their bed.

A few seconds later, they heard the- floorboard creak outside their door; Mr.'s Railie was listening to check her- there or not they were toluene.

The- dig and Pig widgeon hooted dolefully. There- floorboard creaked again and they're heard she- heads upstairs to- check on Céline and Katy.

'She does not trust us at all, you know,' said Jinger regretfully.

Naddalin was sure she- would not be able to fall asleep; their- evening had been so packed with things to think about that she- fully expected to lie awake for hours mulling it all over.

She wanted to continue toluene to Jinger, but Mr.'s Railie was now running back downstairs again, and once she- had gone she- distinctly heard others snaking their way upstairs... many-legged creatures where cantering softly up and down outside their- bedroom door, and Deride their- Care of Magical Creatures teacher was saying,' Beauties, arm they, eh, Naddalin? We will be studying...' weapons their term...' And Naddalin saw that the- creatures had like cannons for heads and were whirling to face her... she- bent... to look and it was sucking on her nose.

There- next thing she- knew, she- was curled into a warm ball under she bedclothes- and Katye's loud voice was filling their- room.

'Mom says get up, your breakfast is in the- kitchen, and there she- needs you in there- drawing-room, there are loads more Doxes than she- thought and she's found a nest of dead Puff skeins under their- sofa.'

Half an hour later Naddalin and Jinger, who had dressed and had breakfasted quickly, entered the- drawing-room, a long, high ceilinged room on their- first floor with olive green walls covered in dirty tapestries.

There- carpet exhaled little clouds of dust every time someone put their foot on it and the- long, moss green velvet curtains where buzzing as though swarming with invisible bees. It was around there- see that Mr.'s Railie, Emmah, Jill, Céline and Katy where grouped, all together, rats then peculiar as they had each tied a cloth over their nose and mouth.

Each of them was also holding a large bottle of black liquid with a nozzle at the end.

'Cover your faces and take a spray,' Mr.'s Railie said to Naddalin and Jinger they're - the moment she- saw them, pointing to two more bottles of black liquid timewasting on a spindle-legged table.'

It's Dockside... I have never- ever seen an infestation their bad what that house fairy's been doing for the- last ten years.' Emmah's face was half concealed by a tea towel but Naddalin distinctly saw she throw a reproachful look at Mr.'s Railie.

'Preachers old, she- could not manage.'

'You'd be surprised what reached can manage her- and she- wants to, Emmah,' said Trius, who had just entered they're- room carrying a bloodstained bag of what appeared to be dead rats.'

I've just been feeding Becca beak,' she- added, in reply to Natalie's enquiring look.' I keep her upstairs in my mother's bedroom.

Anyway... their writing desk...' And, Of course not, and said Madam Pomphrey, bristling... and, would have hurt someone I love!

Chapter: 152

Part: 1

And, Well, there you have it, Severus, and said Duerre calmly. And, unless you are suggesting that Naddalin And Emmah can be in two places at once, I am afraid I do not see any point in troubling her further.

- And-

Lily stood there, seething, staring from Harlan, who looked thoroughly shocked at the behavior, to Duerre, whose eyes were twinkling behind the glasses. Lily whirled about, robes swishing behind her, and stormed out of there- area. And, Pergirl seems quite unbalanced, and said Harlan, staring after her. Besides, I would watch out for her if I were you, Duerre. And I'm so-o... too?'

So-o you have your exams coming up, haven't you? The theory will be keeping your noses so hard to that grindstone they will be rubbed raw,' said Céline with satisfaction.

'Half our year had minor breakdowns coming up to flying you're your wings,' said Katy happily. Tears And tantrums... Patricia Stim girl kept coming over faint...'

'Kenneth Tower came out in boils, you remember?' Said Reanna reminiscently.

That's' um- ah because you put Bilbao powder in her pajamas,' said Katy. Which is nothing more than undies, that should be off anyways at night.

'Oh yes,' said Reanna, grinning.' I'd overlooked... hard to keep track sometimes, isn't it?'

'Anyway, it is a nightmare of a year, their- fifth,' said Katy.' If you care about exam results, anyway. Reanna and I managed to keep our peckers up somehow.'

'Yeah... you got, what was it, three flying with wings each?' Said Jinger.

'Yepper,' said Reanna unconcernedly.' But we feel our futures lie outside their- world of academic achievement.'

'We seriously debated she- they're- r we were going to bother- r coming back for our seventh year, said Katy brightly, now that we have.'

She- broke off at a warning look from Naddalin, who knew Katy had been about to mention the- Tizard winnings she- had given them.

'Now that we have our Flying horses with wings,' Katy said hastily.'

I mean, do we need Newts?

Nevertheless, we did not think Mom could take us leaving Savannah early, not on top of Percy turning out to be there- world's biggest prat.'

'We're not going to waste our last year here, though,' said Reanna, share, affectionately around at there- Great Hall.' We're going to use it to do a bit of market research, find out exactly what there- average SKOUFYCEOL student needs from a joke shop, carefully evaluate there- results of our research, then produce products to fit there- DE- And.'

'But where are you going to get there- gold to start a joke shop?' Emmah asked skeptically. 'You're going to need all there- ingredients and materials and premises too, I suppose...'

Naddalin did not look at there- twins. Her faces felt hot; here- deliberately dropped her fork and dived down to retrieve it. She- come here- and see this art- it looks like three of you, I wonder why, Reanna says overhearing everything.' Ask us no questions and we'll tell you no lies, Emmah. Come on, Katy, if we get there early, we might be able to sell a few Extendable Ears before Her- biology.'

Naddalin emerged from under there- table to see Reanna And Katy walking away, each carrying a stack of toast.

'What did that mean?' Said Emmah, did yah- hear from Naddalin and Jinger.'

'Ask us no questions...' Does that mean they have already got some gold to start a joke shop?'

'You know, I have been wondering about that,' said Jinger, she brow furrowed. They bought me a new set of dress robes their summer and I couldn't underset and she- e they got there- Galleons...'

Naddalin decided it was time to take the- conversation out of these dangerous waters.

'You reckon its true their years going to be tough? Since of their- question papers, and trails?'

'Oh, yes,' said Jinger.' Bound to be, isn't it? Flying with wings is important, the effect they're- jobs you can apply for and everything. We get career advice, too, later their year, Sara told me. So, you can Savannahs What Newts you want to do next year.'

'You know what you want to do after SKOUFYCEOL?' Naddalin asked they're- other two, as they left they're- Great Hall shortly afterward and set off towards their Shoetree of Magic classroom.' Not really,' said Jinger flying.' Except... well...'

She- looked slightly shy.

'What?' Naddalin urged her.

'Well, it would be cool to be an Aurora-' said Jinger in an off and voice.

'Yeah, it would,' said Naddalin fervently.

'But there, like, their- elite,' said Jinger.' You've got to be good.

What about you, Emmah?'

'I do not know,' she- said. 'I's think I would like to do something worthwhile.'

'An Auroras worthwhile!' Said Naddalin.

'Yes, it is, but it is not there- only worthwhile thing,' said Emmah thoughtfully,' I mean, if I could take a few further...'

Naddalin And Jinger carefully avoided that, with each other.

Shoetree of Magic was by common consent they are- most boring subject ever devised by wizard-kind with wings. Professor Bins, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, jiggering voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weathe r.

She- never- ever- ever- never varied the- form of their ledgers but lectured them without hesitating while they took notes, or rest her, gazed sleepily into space.

Naddalin and Jinger had so far managed to scrape passes in their subject only by copying Emmah's notes before exams; she- alone seemed able to resist their- soporific power of voice.

Today, they suffered an hour and a half's jiggering on their- subject of giant wars. Naddalin heard just enough within their- first ten minutes to appreciate dimly that in another teacher and their subject might have been mildly interesting, but then, like- she brains disengaged, and she- spent their- remaining hour and twenty minutes playing hangman on a corner of the parchment with Jinger, while Emmah shot them filthy looks out of their- corner of her young little sweet eye.

(Awh)

'How would it be,' she- asked them coldly, as they left the- classroom for a break

(Bins drifting away through their- blackboard,) 'if I refused to lend you my notes their year?'

'Wed fails our FLYING HORSES,' said Jinger.' If you want that on your conscience, Emmah...'

'Well, you would deserve it,' she- snapped.' You do not even try to listen to her, do you?'

(Nope- I thought in my wicked young sweet little mind, batting my eyes.)

'We do try' said Jinger, sound like back home said the other girls in the class too- all of them, too many names to list, yet, they're all here- ...wave girls... and they all did uniquely- to each life they were.'

We just do not have your brains or your memory or your concentration, you are just cleverer than we are ~ is it nice to rub it in?'

(Cut)

Part: 2

Like some moments have passed...

'Oh, do not give me that rubbish,' said Emmah, but she- looked slightly mollified as she- led they're- way out into the- damp courtyard.

A fine misty drizzle was falling out the old carked window- pane so that their- people timewasting... where looking for freedom, I thought when you where did you got away for bull- sh*t'n school- 'Nah...' one looked...

'Nah...' the other girls looked at her and said.

School looking out a window- seems to be a thing with us- the panes in huddles around their- edges of their- yard looked blurred at the- edges. Naddalin, Jinger, And Emmah Havanans a secluded corner under she- avidly dripping balcony turning up there- collars of their robes against their- chilly September air and toluene about what Lily was likely to set them in their- first ledger of the- year. They had as far as agreeing that it was likely to be something extremely difficult, just to which them off guard after a two- month holiday, she- n someone walked around the- corner towards them.

'She- lol's at, Naddalin!'

Part: 3

It was Hayvannah Chang and, what was more, she- was on she owns again. There was most unusual: Hayvannah was always surrounded by a gang of giggling girls; Naddalin remembered their- agony of trying to get she by herself to ask her to the- Ball.

'Hi,' said Naddalin, feeling she face grow hot. At least you are not covered in Stink sap their time, she- told herself. Hayvannah seemed to be thinking along the- same lines.

'You got that stuff off, then?'

'Yeah,' said Naddalin, trying to grin as though there- the memory of their last meeting was funny as opposed to mortifying. 'so, did you... err... have a good summer?'

The- moment she- had said that she- wished she- had not Joella had been Hayvannah's significant other and their- memory of the death must have affected her holiday as badly as it had affected Natalie's. Something seemed to tauten in her face, but she- said...' Oh, it was all right, you know...'

'Is that a Tornados badge...?' Jinger deliquesced suddenly, pointing to their- finger of Hayvannah's robes, a sky-blue badge emblazoned with a double gold T' was pinned.'

You do not support them, do you?'

'Yeah, I do,' said Hayvannah.

'Have you always supported them, or just since they started winning their- league?' Said Jinger, in what Naddalin considered an unnecessarily accusatory tone of voice.

'I've supported their- m since I was six,' said Hayvannah coolly.' Anyway... see you, Naddalin.'

She- walked away. Emmah waited until Hayvannah was halfway a- crossed the- courtyard before rounding on Jinger.

'You are so tactless!'

'What? I only asked her if.'

'Couldn't you tell she- wanted to talk to

Naddalin on she owns?'

'So-o? Her- she- could have Deanahe, I was not stopping'

'Why on earth were you talking or playing around about the Claepsiara team?'

'Playing? I was not talking; I was only saying.'

'Who cares if she- supports their- Tornados?'

'Oh, come on, half their- people you see wearing those badges only bought them, last sea girl.'

'But what does it matter!'

'It means they are not real fans; they are just jumping on the- likewise wagon.'

That is their- bell,' said Naddalin dully, because Jinger and Emmah were bickering too loudly to sue- is it. They did not stop arguing all their- way down to Snappiest dungeon, which gave Naddalin plenty of time to reflect that between, Neville and Jinger she- would be lucky ever to have two minutes of conversation, and with Hayvannah, that she- could look back on without wanting to leave their- country.

Besides, yet, she- thought, as they joined their- queue lining up outside Snappiest classroom door, she- had Havanans to come and talk to her, had not she-? She- had been Sedaris's girlfriend; she- could easily have hated Naddalin for coming out of there - Tizard maze alive she'd Joella had died, yet she- was toluene to her in a perfectly friendly way, not as though she - thought her mad, or a liar, or in some horrible way responsible for Sedaris's death...

Yes, she- had Havanans to come and talk to her, and that made their- second time in two days... And at their thought, Naddalin's spirits rose. Even their- ominous sound of Snappiest dungeon door cracking open did not puncture their- small, hopeful bubble that seemed to have swelled in her chest.

I- filed into the- classroom behind Jinger And Emmah and followed them to our usual table at the- back.

She, we, and- I- so-o like us, sat down between Jinger And Emmah and ignored their- huffy, irritable noises now issuing from both of them. 'Settle down,' said Lily with a cold mood, shutting the - door behind her.

There was no real need for the- call to order; the- moment their- class had heard their- door close, quiet had fallen in addition to all fidgeting stopped. Snappiest mere presence was usually enough to ensure a class silence.

'Before we begin today's ledger,' said Lily, sweeping over to their desk and staring around at them all,' I think it proper to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about their- composition and use of magical potions.

Minigenre though some of their class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an- 'Acceptable' in your FLYING, or suffer my... displeasure.'

Her gazes lingered the time and moments on Neville, who gulped.

'After their year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me,' Lily went on.'

I take only the- very best into my NEWT Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying goodbye.'

Her eyes rested on Naddalin and her lips curled. Naddalin glared back, feeling a grim pleasure at their- idea that she- would be able to give up Potions after the fifth year.

'But then again, we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell,' said Lily softly, 'so, there or not you are intending to try NEWT, I recommend all of you to concentrate your efforts on keeping their- high pass level I have come to expect from my FLYING students.

Today class, you will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level- the- Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe- agitation.

Be warned, if you are too, she- any and with their- ingredients you will put the- drinker into she- any and sometimes irreversible sleep, so-o you will need to pay very close attention to what you are doing, and what I have shown you what to do.'

On Naddalin's left, Emmah sat up a little straighter, her expression one of the utmost attention. There- ingredients and method-' Lily flicked she and...' are on the- blackboard...'

(They appeared there.)

'You will find everything you need-' she- flicked she and so again...' in their- store cupboard.'

(The- door of the cupboard sprang open.)

'You have an hour and a half... start.'

Just as Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah had predicted, Lily could hardly have set their- m a more difficult, fiddly potion. These- ingredients had to be added to their- ceilinged in precisely their- right order and quantities; their- mixture had to be stirred exactly their- right number of times, firstly in clockwise, then- and in anticlockwise directions; she had flames on which it was simmering had to be lowered to exactly the- right level for a specific number of minutes before their- final ingredient was added.

'A light white vapor should now be rising from your potion,' called Lily, with ten minutes left to go.

Naddalin, who was sweating profusely, looked desperately around the- dungeon. She's on her own could not seem to make this work- Jinger was issuing copious amounts of dark grey steam; Jinger's was spitting green sparks, with no luck.

Laila was feverishly prodding their- flames at their- base of she could Jinger with their- tip of she and, as they seemed to be going out. There- the surface of Emmah's potion, however, was a sharpening mist of white vapor, And as Lily swept by her- looked down she hooked nose at it without comment, which meant she- could find nothing to criticize.

At Naddalin's ceilinged, however, Lily stopped and looked down at it with a horrible smirk on her faces.

'What is there to be?'

There- Slithering at the- finger of the- class all looked up eagerly; they loved she- airing Lily taunt Naddalin.

There- Draught of Peace,' said Naddalin tensely. Tell me, - said Lily softly,' can you read?'

Drallieah Mallerie laughs- 'Yes, I can,' said Naddalin, she fingers clenched- tightly around she then...

'Read the- the third line of their- instructions for me-'

Naddalin squinted at the- blackboard; it was not easy to make out there- instructions through the- haze of multi-colored steam now filling they are- dungeon.

'Enhance powdered moonstone, stir three times counterclockwise, allow to simmer for seven minutes there- and add two drops of syrup of she- labored.'

Then at that moment, her heart sank; she- had not added syrup of she- labored, but had gone ahead straight to the- the fourth line of their- instructions after allowing her potion to simmer for seven minutes.

'Did you do everything on their- third line?'

'No,' said Naddalin very quietly.

'I beg your Deanah?'

'No,' said Naddalin, more loudly.' 'I forgot she labored...'

'I know you did, which means that their mess is utterly worthless; evanesce.'

There- contents of Naddalin's potion vanished; she- was left timewasting foolishly beside an empty ceilinged.

Those of you who have managed to read there- instructions, fill one flagon with a sample of your potion, label it with your name and bring it up to my desk for testing,' said Lily.'

Homework- twelve inches- of parchment magical paper on their- properties of moonstone and its uses in potion marching, to be and in on Thursday.'

While everyone around her filled their flagons, Naddalin cleared away she things, seething. Her potion had been no worse than Jinger's, which was now giving off a foul odor of bad eggs; or Neville's, which had achieved their- consistency of just mixed cement and which Neville was now having to gouge out of she ceilinged; yet it was she, Naddalin, who would be receiving zero marks for the- days' work.

She- stuffed her things under her arm- given up completely, and then back into her bestie, and slumped down on to the seats, watching everyone else March- ah up to Snappiest desk with filled and corked flagons. Then finally the- bell rang, Naddalin was first out of there- dungeon and had already started the lunch by their- time Jinger and Emmah joined her in there- Great Hall of the castle. There- ceiling had turned an even murkier grey during the- morning. The rain was lashing their- high windows.

That was unfair,' said Emmah consolingly, sitting down next to Naddalin and helping herself to shepherds' pie.' Your potion was not as bad as Sayale's; then she- put it in she flagon the- whole thing shattered and set she robes on fire.'

Besides, oh, she's not unbalanced and said- Duerre quietly. Besides, she just suffered a severe disappointment.

-And-

Besides, She's not the- only one!

Then puffed Harlan...

And, she- Daily News Prop's is going to have a field day!

We had Black cornered and she- slipped through our fingers yet again!

All it needs now is for their- story of that Ashlynn's escape to get out, and I will be a laughing stock! Well... I had better go and notify the- Bureau...

-And-

And, the- Dementiators? Said Duerre.

-And-

There will be removed from there- Savannah, I trust?

-And-

And, oh yes, they must go, and said Harlan, running she fingers distractedly through the hair.

As well, never dreamed they would try to amrita their- Kiss on an innocent girl... Completely out of control... no, I will have them packed off back to Dizery, I, and tonight... We should think about dark angels at their- savannah entrance...

-And-

And Deride would like that, and said Duerre, smiling at Naddalin and Emmah. As she- and Harlan left their- dormitory, Madam Pomphrey hurried to their- door and locked it again.

Muttering angrily to herself, she- added going back to her office.

There was a low moan from there- another end of their- ward. Jinger had woken up. They could see her sitting up, rubbing the head, around, the halls.

Part: 4

And, what- what happened? And, she- groaned. And, Naddalin? Why are we here? Where's Trius? Where's Sevket? What is going on?

-And-

Naddalin and Emmah looked at each other.

And, you explain, and said Naddalin, helping herself to some more Hayvannah cholate.

She- and Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah left they're- hospital wing at noon they're- next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. There- sweltering, she- at and the- end of their- exams meant that everyone was dequeen full advantage of another Claepsiara, of wizardry/angels and demonly visit.

Neither Jinger nor Emmah wanted to go, however, so they and Naddalin walked onto the- grounds around the massive castle, still toluene about the- extraordinary events of their- earlier night and wondering, was Trius and Becca, went on their beak- where they were now. Sitting near the- lake, watching the- giant squid waving its tentacles lazily above the- water blue and green and sparkling in the light glowing also a shade of red, Naddalin lost the thread of their- conversation as she- looked across to the- opposite banks to the island that lay adjacent. There- stag with wings had galloped toward her from there just last night...

A shadow fell- crossed them and they looked up to see a very bleary-eyed Deride, mopping she sweaty face with one of their tablecloths- sized and kerchiefs and beaming down at them.

And Know I should' feel happy, after what' happened las' night, and she- said. And mean, Black, escaping' again, an, everything' - but guess what?

-And-

And, What?

And, they said, pretending to look curious.

And, Beaky! She- escaped! She's now free!

We've been celebrating' all night!

-And-

Um, that is- wonderful!

Also said Emmah, giving Jinger a reproving look because she- looked as though she- was close to laughing.

And, can't have tied her up properly, and said Deride, gazing happily out over there- grounds.

And, was worried that morning,' mind... thought she- might meet Professor Sevket on their- grounds, but Sevket says' she- never- ever- never- ever- ever- never, ate anything' last' night...

~*~

-And-

And, What? And said Naddalin quickly.

And, Joannah, haven' yen's heard? And said Deride, she smiles fading a little. She like-lowered her voice, even though there was nobody in sight. And - Lily told all them- that morning'...Though everyone would know by now... Professor Lapin's a fallen werewolf with wings, see. And- like, he- was loose on their- grounds last night... she's packing... now, of- course.'

- And-

Um-

And she is packing?

Um-

And said Naddalin, alarmed.

And Why?

Um-

And- Leavin', in' here-? And said Deride, waited, surprised that Naddalin had to ask. And, Resigned firs' thing that morning.' Says she- cannot risk it happening again.

- And-

Naddalin scrambled to her feet.

Um-

And I'm going to see her, and she- said to Jinger And Emmah.

Um-

And- but if she's resigned...

-And-

Um-

And - doesn't sound like there's anything we can do...

-And-

Um-

And, do not care - about it.

Um-

And, I'm still want to see.

Um-

And, I will's meet you back here.

Um- And...?

Um- And Ah!!!

Part: 5

(Formerly)

Lapin's office door was open. He/she who had no real gender as it could change back and forth- had already packed most of her things. There - Grind low's empty tank stood next to their battered old suitcase, that could teleport from a person place to place when inside, which was open and full of all things it- he/she loved. Sevket was bending over something on the desks and looked up only she - and Naddalin knocked on their- door.

Um- and, we saw you coming, said Sevket, smiling. She - pointed to their- parchment she - had been poring over. It was there - Marauder's Map, where you can look into it, and it takes you to any time in the remembrances of searching for lost time in the world's past.

And, just saw Deride, and said Naddalin. And, and she - said you had resigned. It is not true, is it? And...

And, I am afraid it is and said Sevket. Her- started opening she desk drawers and dequeen out their- contents.

And, Why?

WHY?

WHY? - said Naddalin...

And, there- Bureau of Magic do not think, you were helping Trius, do they?

Likewise- Sevket crossed to the- door and closed it behind Naddalin.

And, No- professor Duerre managed to convince Harlan, that I was trying to save your lives.

And, she- sighed some... And That was their- final straw for Severus. I think the- loss of their- War of Nunez hit her hard. So, she- err - accidentally let slip that, I am a devil the morning at breakfast.

- And-

Like- like- like, you are not- a leaving just because, of that!

Say's its PMS- I's want you too... said Naddalin. Sevket smiled wryly.

And, she time Hayvanna-horror, their- Flying with wings will start arriving from parents...

They will not want a devil teaching their children, Naddalin.

And, after last- night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you... That must never happen again.

-And-

And, you are their- best Defense Against their- Dark Arts teacher we're have ever had!

And said Naddalin.

And, do not go!

-And-

Your baby talk is cute yet you're getting too old for it... she said. Sevket shook her head and did not speak. She- carried on emptying the drawers. Then, while Naddalin was trying to think of a good argument to make her stay, Sevket said, and from what their- head expert told me their morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Naddalin. If I'm proud of anything I've Deanahe their year, it's how much you've erudite... Tell me about your Pat Jingerus.

And...

And, how you know about that?

And, said Naddalin, distracted.

And, what else could have driven they're- Dementiators back?

-And-

Naddalin told Sevket what had happened. she'd- and he finished, Sevket was smiling again.

And, yes, your daddy was always a stag the- and the- transformed, and she- said.

And, you guessed right... that is why we called her Pinger's.

And...

Sevket threw her last few books into the case, closed their- desk drawers, and turned to look at Naddalin.

And, here - I brought they're from them- Checking Shack last night, and she- said, and Naddalin back their- Invisibility Robe.

And...

she-and he- said, then held. out their- Marauder's Map too. And, am no longer your teacher, so I do not feel guilty about giving you back there as well. It is no use to me, And I's dare say you, Jinger, and Emmah will find uses for it.

And...

Naddalin took their- map and grinned.

And, you told me Moony, Worm tail, Pad foot, And Pinger's would have wanted to lure me out of Savannah... you said they would have thought it was funny.

And...

And, and so we would have, and said Sevket, now reaching down to close the case.

And, have known the- situation in saying, that Alyssa would have been highly disappointed if she a girl had never- ever found any of their- secret passages out of the- castle.

And...

There- re was a knock on their- door. Naddalin hastily stuffed their- Marauder's Map And they're- Invisibility Robe into the pockets.

It was Professor Duerre. She- did not look surprised to see Naddalin there.

And, your carriage is at their- gates, Remus, - she said.

And Thank You, commander.

And...

Sevket picked up her old suitcase and their- empty Grind low tank.

And, Well - goodbye, Naddalin, and she- said, smiling. And, it has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we will meet again sometime. Head expert, there is no need to see me to their- gates, I can manage... And Naddalin had their- an impression that Sevket wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

And, Goodbye, then, Remus, and said Duerre soberly. Sevket shifted them- Grind low tank slightly so that she- And Duerre could shake and. Then, with a final nod to Naddalin and a swift smile, Sevket left the- office.

Naddalin sat down in the massive chair, staring glumly at the- floor. She- heard the- door close and looked up. Duerre was still there.

And, Why so miserable, Naddalin? And, she- said quietly. And, you should be very proud of yourself after last night.

-And-

And, it did not make any difference and said Naddalin bitterly. And, Grohl got away.

-And-

And, did not make any difference? And said Duerre quietly, and it made all the - difference in the- world, Naddalin. You helped uncover their- truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate.

And...

Part: 6

Terrible- something stirred in Naddalin's memory. Greater and more terrible than ever before... Professor Solis's prediction!

And, Professor Duerre - yesterday, she- and I was having my Divination exam, Professor Solis went very - very strange.

-And-

And... Indeed? And said Duerre... And - stranger than usual, you mean?

And, yes... her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled, then she - said... she- said AVA's servant was going to set out to return to her before midnight... She- said, like their- servant would help her come back to power.

Then, Naddalin stared up at Duerre. And, likewise... they - and she- became normal again, as normal could be anyways... and she- couldn't remember at all anything she'd said. Like - like- like, now um was it - was the- meeting a real prediction?

-And-

Duerre, then looked mildly impressed... with that thought. So-o, do you know, Naddalin, I think she- might have been. And, she- said thoughtfully. And, who would have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise...

-And-

But, Naddalin looked at her, in hast. How could Duerre take their so freak'n calmly?

Like, but ah- I'm stopped Trius and Professor Sevket from killing Grohl!

That makes it my fault...? Um- if AVA comes back!

- And-

Like, it does not, and said Duerre quietly, and ever so softly alike.

And, has not your experience with the- Time- Rewinder of Remembrance's Past- taught you anything, Naddalin? There- consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting their- future is a very- very difficult business indeed...

Then and there- Professor Solis, bless she, is living proof of that... you did a very- very noble- good thing, in saving Grohl's life.

-And-

Above that all, if she- helps, AVA back to power... And she may lose some of hers or worse.

And, Grohl owes her life to you. No...? Yes...? Maybe...?

You have sent AVA a deputy who is in your debt... she is one wizard- with wings that save another wizard that has fallen I like in her young life; it creates a certain bond between them... Yes...? And I am much mistaken, and if AVA wants her servant in their debt of Naddalin...

-And-

Like, do not want a connection with Grohl!

And- said Naddalin. And, she- betrayed my parents!

-And-

Like, she is magical at its deepest, it is almost impenetrable, Naddalin.

Yeah- trust me... their- time may come here- and you will be very glad you saved Grohl's life, I am sure of this...

-And-

Naddalin like she could not imagine that she would be. Duerre looked as though her mind and body to her felt- knowing what Naddalin was thinking about this too deeply for her comfort.

And I knew your daddy very well, both at SKOUFYCEOL and later, Naddalin, and she - said gently. And, she- would have saved - pretty much too, I am sure of it.

-And-

Naddalin looked up at her. Duerre would not laugh - she- could tell Duerre...

And thought it was my dad who had conjured my Clans. I mean, she - and I saw myself a-crossed the- lake... I thought I was seeing her.

-And-

And, an easy mistake to make, and said Duerre softly. And expect you will tire of she- airing it, but you do look extraordinarily like Alyssa. Except for their- eyes... you have the same eyes as your mother's.

- And-

Naddalin shook her young little head.

Then, it was stupid, thinking it was her, and she - muttered.

Um- it was mean, I knew she - was dead.

Like- you think they're - dead we loved ever so - o truly leave us?

Like- you think that, um- we do not recall or evoke them more clearly, than ever in times of great trouble?

Like- your daddy is alive within you, Naddalin... it's good to remember, that- and also feel it- in here, and pointing to her heart.

And shows herself most plainly she - and you require her. How else could you produce that Clans? Pinger's rode again- last night.

- And-

It took a moment for- Naddalin, to realize what Duerre had said.

Anyhow- last night, Trius told me all about how they became Animagi and said Duerre, smiling.

Part: 7

Oh- a human extraordinary achievement it was unbelievable - not least, keeping it quiet from me. And, their- n I remembered their- most unusual form your Clans took, she - and it charged Mr. Mallerie down at your Claepsiara match against Raven's Claw. You know, Naddalin, in a way, you did see your daddy last night... You found her inside yourself.

And, Duerre left their- office, leaving Naddalin to see very confused thoughts.

Nobody- at SKOUFYCEOL now knew their- truth of what had happened their- night that Trius, Becca beak, And Grohl had vanished- except Naddalin, Jinger, Emmah, And Professor Duerre. As their- end of term approached- Naddalin heard many different theories about what had happened, but none of them came close to their- truth.

Mallerie was furious about Becca's beak. She - was convinced that Deride had found a way of smuggling their- Ashlynn to safety, and seemed outraged that she - And she a gamekeeper had outwitted daddy. Percy Railie, meanwhile, had much to say on the - subject of Trius's escape.

~*~

And, If I manage to get into their- Bureau, I's will have a- lot of proposals and the presentation to make about Magical Law Enforcement! And, she - told they're- the only pergirl who would listen - she significant other, Jenny.

Though they're- the weather was perfect, though the - atmosphere was so-o cheerful, though she- knew they had achieved their- near impossible in helping Trius to freedom, Naddalin had never approached- they're- end of a savannah year in worse spirits.

She- certainly was not there- only one who was sorry to see Professor Sevket go. The - whole of Naddalin's Defense Against their- Dark Arts class was miserable about the resignation. And Wonder

what they will give us next year? And said, Laila Finnigan gloomily and glumly. And, An Ash Angels, and suggested Lacy Thomas hopefully.

It was not only Professor Lapin's departure that was weighing on Naddalin's mind. Like she- could not she- lap thinking a- lot about Professor Solis's prediction. She- kept wondering her Grohl was now, whether she- had sought sanctuary with AVA yet.

But they are- things that were lowering Naddalin's spirits most of all was there- the prospect of returning to the- Andreasen. For half an hour, a glorious half-hour, she- had believed she- would be living with Trius from now on... she parents' best friend... It would have been their- next best thing to having her daddy back.

And, while no news of Trius was good news because it meant she- had successfully- gone into hiding, Naddalin could not help but feel miserable about it all. she- and her- thought of the- home.

She- might have had, and they're- fact that it was now impossible.

There- exam results came out on their- last day of term. Naddalin, Jinger, And Emmah had passed every subject. Naddalin was amazed that she- had through Potions.

She- had a shrewd suspicion that Duerre might have stepped in to stop Lily failing her on purpose. Sammie's behavior toward Naddalin over their- past week had been quite alarming.

Naddalin would not have thought it possible that Sammie's dislike for her could increase, but it certainly had.

'A muscle twitches' unpleasantly at the- corner of Sammie's thin mouth every time she- looked at Naddalin, and she- was constantly flexing she fingers, as though itching to place them around Naddalin's throat.

Percy, had she top-grade Newt's; Reanna And Katy had scraped a and of FLYING each.

Amsel House, meanwhile, thanks to their spectacular performance in there- Claepsiara Cup, had won their- House championship for their- third year running. There meant that their- end of term feast took place amid decorations of scarlet and gold and that they're- Amsel table was their- noisiest of their- lot, as everybody celebrated.

Even Naddalin managed to forget about their- journey back to their- Andreasen their- next day as she- ate, drank, talked, and laughs- with the- rest.

Chapter: 153

Part: 1

(New kids on the block we say- new dead girls, coming.)

As their- SKOUFYCEOL Express pulled out of their- station their- next morning, Emmah gave Naddalin and Jinger some surprising news.

Likewise, and went to see Professor Ashly their morning, just before breakfast.

I have decided to drop Non-magical people Studies.

And...

However, but you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty percent! Said Jinger.

And know, and sighs- Emmah, And but I cannot and another year like their one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I's have and it in. Without Non-magical people Studies and Divination, I will be able to have a normal schedule again.

And, still cannot believe you did not tell us about it and said Jinger grumpily.

And, we are supposed to be your friends.

And...

And, promised- like, like, like, I- I- I, would not tell anyone and said Emmah severely. She- looked around at Naddalin, who was watching SKOUFYCEOL disappear behind a mountain.

Two whole months before she'd see it again...

And, oh, cheer up, Naddalin!

And said Emmah sadly.

And, I'm- am okay and said Naddalin quickly. And, just thinking about the- holidays.

And, I have been thinking about them too and said Jinger. And, Naddalin, you must come and stay with us. I will fix it up with Mom and Dad, there- n, I will call you. I know how to use a full tone now - And, telephone, Jinger, and said Emmah. And, Honestly, you should take nonmagical people Studies next year...And Jinger ignored her...

And, it is their- Claepsiara World Cup their summer! How about it, Naddalin? Come And stay, and we will go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work.

And...

Their proposal had their- effect of cheering Naddalin up a great deal.

And, ... I's, um- a bet they're- Slash is pleased to let me come... especially after what I's did to Aunt Marge... And... Feeling more cheerful, Naddalin joined Jinger And Emmah in several games of Exploding Snap, and she- n the- witch with their- tea cart arrived, she- bought herself a very large lunch, though nothing with Hayvannah cholate in it.

But it was late in the- afternoon before the- thing that made her truly happy turned up...

So, Naddalin, and said Emmah suddenly, peering over the shoulders.

And, what is that thing outside your window?

-And-

Anyways, Naddalin turned to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond there glass.

She- stood up for a better look...

And saw that it was a tiny flying horse, carrying a letter that was much too big for it.

There- Flying horses was so small that it kept tumbling over in there- air, buffeted their way and that in their- train's slipstream, that was blasting red sparks and cloud of heat and red-colored smoke unfluffed the entirety of the engines as if something from the deeps of the Underworld.

Naddalin quickly pulled down their- window, stretchered- d out her arms, and caught it. It felt like a very fluffy Snitch. She- brought it carefully inside.

There- Flying horses dropped her letter onto Naddalin's seat and began zooming around their compartment, very pleased with itself for carrying out its task. She- dig clicked she beak with dignified disapproval. Crook shanks sat up in the seats, following they're- Flying horses with she great yellow eyes. Jinger, noticing there, snatched- they're- Flying horses safely out of harm's way.

Naddalin picked up their- letter. It was addressed to her. She then- ripped open the- letter, and shouted, And It is from Trius!

-And-

And, what...?

And said Jinger And Emmah excitedly.

And read it aloud!

Part: 2

It said- Dear Naddalin,

I hope theirs finds you before you reach your aunt and uncles.

I do not know if they are used to Flying, like me.

Becca beak and I are in hiding. I will not tell you her, in case their Flying falls into the- winger and. I have some doubt about their reliability, but she- is their- best I could find, and she- did seem eager for their- job.

I believe they're- Dementiators are still searching for me, but they have not the hope of finding me here; I am planning on allowing some Non-magical peoples to glimpse me soon, a long way from SKOUFYCEOL, so-o that their- security on their- castle will be lifted.

There is something, I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the- Firebolt - And, Ha- ha...! And said Emmah triumphantly. And- See- see- see...!

I told you it was from her! And... like- like, um whatnot...

Yes, but she- had not jinxed it, had she-?

And said Jinger. And, Ouch! And, There- tiny Flying horses now nan-a-ing happily in she and, had nibbled one of their fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate way.

-Crook shanks took the- order to their- Flying- Office for me.

-I used your name but told them all to take their- gold from my own Mcqueeney vault. Now- please consider it as freshmen year birthdays…' worth of presents from your god daddy.

I would also, like to apologize, and for the- fright, I think- I gave you that- that night, last year then you left your uncle's house.

I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think their- sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at SKOUFYCEOL more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your Flying horses will find me.

I will write again soon.

~Trius~

Part: 3

Naddalin looked eagerly inside their- envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. She- read it through quickly and felt suddenly as warm and contented as though she'd swallowed a bottle of hot butterbeer in one gulp.

I, Trius Black, Naddalin Maria's god daddy, she by then give her permission to visit Claepsiara, Kalaheo of Wizardry- fallen girls on weekends.

And, that will be good enough for Duerre! And- said Naddalin happily. She- looked back at Trius's letter. And Hang on, there is a PS…

- And-

I thought your friend Jinger might like to keep their Flying horses, as it is my fault, she- no longer has a rat.

Jigger's eyes widened... There- minute

Flying horses was still hooting excitedly. And Keep her? And, she- said uncertainly. She- looked closely at their- Flying horses for a moment; their- n, to Naddalin's And Emma's great surprise, she- sheld. her out for Crook shanks to sniff.

And, what do you reckon? And, Jinger asked the- wolf. And, Some flying horses?

-Crook shanks purred...

And, that is good enough for me and said Jinger happily. And, she's is mine.

Naddalin read and re-read the- letter from- Trius all the- way back into the village train station on the other side of the castle and the tall bridge.

It was still clutched- d tightly in her and as she, Jinger, And Emmah stepped back through the- barrier of platform nine and three- quarters.

Naddalin spotted Uncle Read at once.

She- was timewasting a good distance from Mr. And Mr.'s. Railie, eyeing their- m suspiciously, and she- n Mr.'s. Railie hugged Naddalin in greeting, her worst suspicions about their- m seemed confirmed.

And, I will call about their- Worldly Championship Cup! And, Jinger yelled after Naddalin as Naddalin bid her And Emmah goodbye, their- n whirled their- trolley bearing she trunk and she- digs cage toward Uncle Read, who greeted her in the usual fashion.

And, what is that? And, she- snarled, staring at the- envelope Naddalin was still clutching in her and. And, if it is another form for me to sign, you have another...

And, it is not, and said Naddalin cheerfully.

And, it is a letter from my god daddy.

And, Godaddy? And, sputtered Uncle Read. And, you do not have a good daddy!

And, Yes, I have, and said Naddalin brightly. And, she - was my mom and dad's best friend. Her- 's a convicted murderer, but she's broke out of wizard priggery and she's on their - run. She- likes to keep in touch with me, though... keep up with my news... check if I am happy...

And, grinning broadly at the - look of horror on Uncle Read's face, Naddalin set off toward their- station exit, her- dig rattling along in finger of her, for what looked like a much better summer than their- last.

And, No, and said Naddalin. And, she's was not a teacher.

And, but it must have been a powerful wizard, to drive all those Dementiators away... If they're- Clans was shining so brightly, didn't it light her up?

Couldn't you see it...?

And, I saw her and said Naddalin flying horses. And, but... I imagined it... I was not thinking straight... I passed out right afterward...

And, who did you think it was?

And think - and Naddalin swallowed, knowing how strange there was going to sound.

And I think it was my dad.

Naddalin glanced up at Emmah and saw that her mouths were fully open now. She - was gazing at her with a mixture of alarm and pity.

And, Naddalin, your dad's - well - dead, and she- said quietly.

And know that, and said Naddalin quickly.

And, you think you saw the ghost?

And, do not know... no... she- looked solid...

And, But then...

And, I was seeing things and said Naddalin. And, but... from what I could see... it looked like her... I have photos of her...

-And-

Emmah still thought of home, though I's was worried about her sanity.

Part: 4

And know it sounds crazy and said Naddalin flatly. She- turned to look at Becca beak, who was digging she beak into their- ground, searching for worms. But she- was not watching Becca beak.

She- was thinking about her daddy...

And about her daddy is three oldest friends...

Moony, Worm tail, Pad foot, And Pingers...

Had all four of them been out on their- grounds tonight?

Worm tail had reappeared their evening she- n everyone had thought she- was dead... Was it so impossible she daddy had Deanahe their- same?

Had she- been seeing things across their- take? There- the figure had been too far away to see distinctly...

Yet, she- had felt sure, for a moment, before she'd lost consciousness...

There- leaves overshoe- ad rustled faintly in the- breeze.

There- moon drifted in and out of sight behind the- shifting clouds.

Emmah sat with her faces turned toward their- Willow, waiting.

And, then, at last, after over an hour...

And, here we come! And, Emmah sheered.

She- And Naddalin got to their feet.

Becca beak raised her head. They saw Sevket, Jinger, And Grohl clambering awkwardly out of the- hole in the- roots.

Then came to Emmah... then and there- unconscious Lily, drifting weirdly upward. Next came Naddalin And Black. They all began to walk toward their- castle.

Naddalin's heard was starting to beat very fast. She- glanced up at the- vast sky.

Any moment now, that cloud was going to move aside and show their- moon... And, Naddalin, And Emmah muttered as though she- knew exactly what she- was thinking, and we must stay put.

We must not be seen. There is nothing we can do...

(Thought)

Funny to me after Karly's final death, she can ride horses- ie's all she wants again, in this world of falling- too... and here in this shadowy hollow, where Jenny is like me like she is still nagging her about it. GO- figure...?

~*~

So-o, we are just going to let Grohl escape all over again...

And said Naddalin quietly, how do you expect to find a rat in the- dark? And snapped Emmah. And, there is nothing we can do!

We came back to sue- lap Trius; we are not supposed to be doing anything else!

And, All right! And...

The- moon slid out from behind its cloud. They saw their- tiny figures across their- grounds stop. There- n they saw movement-

And, she goes- Sevket...

And Emmah sheered.

And, she's transforming.

And, Emmah! And said Naddalin suddenly. And, we must move!

And, we must not, I keep telling you-

-And-

And, not to interfere! Lapin's going to run into their- forest, right at us!

-Then-

Emmah gasped...

And, Quick! And, she- moaned, dashing to untie Becca beak. And, Quick! Here are we going to go? Here are we going to hide? There- Dementiators will be coming at any moment.

And, Back to Dargide's! And, Naddalin said. And, it is empty now - come on!

And...

They ran as fast as they could, Becca beak cantering along behind them. They could be like the- devil flying sing behind them...

There- the cabin was in sight; Naddalin skidded to their- door, wrenched- it open,

And Emmah And Becca beak flashed past her; Naddalin threw herself in after them and bolted their- door. Fang their- boarhound barked loudly.

And, Fang, it is us! And said Emmah, hurrying over and scratching her ears to quieten her. And, that was close! And, she- said to Naddalin.

And, And, AND!

Naddalin was LIKE, out of their- window. It was much harder to see what was going on from the shore. Becca beak seemed very happy to find herself back inside Darcie's house. She then - laid down on the finger of their- fire, folded she wings contentedly, and seemed ready for a good nap.

And think I had better go outside again, you know, and said Naddalin flying horses'.

And, cannot see what is going on - we will not know when it is time.

-And-

Emmah looked up. Her expression was suspicious.

And, I am not going to try and interfere, and said Naddalin quickly. And, but if we do not see what is going on, how are we going to know she- and it is time to rescue Trius?

-Then-

And, Well... okay, their- and... I will wait for her with Becca's beak... but Naddalin, be careful - there is a devil out there - And they're- Dementiators.

And...

Naddalin stepped outside again and edged around their- cabin. Her- could here yelp in their- distance. That meant they're- Dementiators were closing in on Trius... She- and Emmah would be running to her any moment...

Naddalin stared out toward their- lake, her head doing a kind of drumroll in her chest... Whoever had sent that Clans would be appearing at any moment...

For a fraction of a second she- stood, irresolute, in the finger of Darcie's door. You must not be seen. But she- did not want to be seen. She- wanted to do there- seeing... she- had to know...

And, there where they're- Dementiators. They were emerging out of their- darkness from every direction, gliding around their- edges of their- lake... They were moving away from here - Naddalin stood, to their- opposite bank... She- would not have to get near them... Naddalin began to run. She- had no thought since she except she daddy... If it was her... if it was her... she - had to know, had to find out...

There- the lake was coming nearer and nearer, but there was no sign of anybody. On their- opposite bank, she- could see tiny glimmers of silver - she owns attempts at a Clans- there was a bush at their- very edge of their- water. Naddalin threw herself behind it, peering desperately through their- leaves. On their- opposite bank, their- glimmers of silver were suddenly extinguished. A terrified excitement shot through her - any moment now- and Come on! And, she- muttered, staring about. And, she, are you? Dad, come on...

- And-

But no one came. Naddalin raised her head to look at the- circle of Dementiators across their- lake. One of them was lowering its hood.

It was time for their- rescuer to appear - but no one was coming to sepal their time - and, where- it hit her - she- understood. She- had not seen she, daddy, she- had seen herself - Naddalin flung herself out from behind the- bush and pulled out she and.

And EXPECT ATHENAEUM! And, she- yelled.

And, out of the- end of their and burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal.

She- screwed up the eyes, trying to see what it was. It looked like a horse.

It was galloping silently away from her, across their- black surface of their- lake. She- saw it lower its head and charge at their- swarming Dementiators... Now it was galloping around and around their- black shapes on their- ground, and they're- Dementiators were falling back, sweltering, retreating into the- darkness... They were gone.

There- Clans turned. It was cantering back toward Naddalin a-crossed they're- still, the surface of the- water. It was not a horse.

It was not a unicorn, either. It was a stag. It was shining brightly as their- moon above... it was coming back to her...

It stopped on their- bank. Its hooves made no mark on their- soft ground as it stared at Naddalin with its large, silver eyes. 'Flying horses', it bowed its antlered head. And Naddalin realized... and Pinger's, and she- sheered.

But as she is trembling fingertips stretchered- toward the- creature, it vanished.

Naddalin stood there, and still outstretched. Then, with a great leap of she heard, she- heard hooves behind her. She- whirled around and saw Emmah dashing toward her, dragging Becca beak behind her.

And, what did you do? And, she- said fiercely. And, you said you were only going to keep a lookout!

-And-

And, just saved all our lives...And said Naddalin. And Get behind she- e behind their bush - I will explain.

-And-

Emmah listened to what had just happened with the mouth open yet again.

And, did anyone see you?

And, yes, yes, and- yet, have not you been listening? I saw myself, but I thought I was my dad!

It is okay! And...

He- he- he- Naddalin, I cannot believe it... You conjured up a Clans that drove away all those Dementiators! That's very, very advanced magic.

And...

Like, I knew I could do it this time, and said Naddalin, and because, I had already Deanahe it... Does that make sense?

-And-

Naddalin, who happened to be in the- room at their- time, froze as she- head Jigger's voice answer.

And... HELLO?

Hey, hi, and greetings? Like- like- like- UM- CAN YOU HEAR- a ME? I - WANT - TO - TALK - TO - NADDALIN-!

Jinger was yelling so loudly that Uncle Read jumped and shield, the- receiver a foot away from their ear, staring at it with an expression of mingled fury and alarm.

And, WHOM IS THERE? And, she- roared in the- direction of the- mouthpiece.

And, WHO ARE YOU?

And then...

INGER - RAILEY! And, Jinger bellowed back, as though she - Equally- Uncle Read where sequin from opposite ends of a football field. And, I AM - A - FRIEND - OF - NADDALIN's - FROM - SAVANNAH - Similarly...

Uncle Read's small eyes swiveled around to Naddalin, who was rooted in the - spot.

The same to say that, an all- yen's, HERE there IS NO NADDALIN - HERE! And, she - roared, now holding the - receiver at arm's length, as though frightened it might explode.

And, DO NOT KNOW WHAT SAVANNAH YOU ARE TOLUENE ABOUT! NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN! DO NOT YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!

And...

And, she - threw the - receiver back onto their - telephone as if dropping a prodigious spider.

There - a fight that had followed had been one of their - worst ever.

And, HOW DARE YOU GIVE THEIR NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE...

-PEOPLE LIKE YOU!

-And-

Uncle Read had roared, spraying Naddalin with spit.

Jinger realized that she'd gotten Naddalin into trouble because she - hadn't called again.

Naddalin's other best friend from SKOUFYCEOL, Emmah Kizziah, had not been in touch either. Naddalin suspected that Jinger had warned Emmah not to call, which was a pity, because Emmah, the - cleverest witch in Naddalin's year, had Non-magical people parents, knew perfectly well how to use a telephone, and would have had enough sense not to say that she - went to SKOUFYCEOL.

If she - had not, she - might have found it harder to concentrate on military exercises that sunrise. She - then made a stop by their - road to buy herself a blueberry bun from their - bakery, to eat with the tea.

Most of them had never seen a Flying horse - flaying girls yes not horse - even at nighttime. Mr. Natalie, however, had a perfectly normal, Flying horses - free morning.

She- yelled at five dissimilar folks.

In their- office- Her- made several significant telephone calls, being all grown up and crap- and shouted a bit more... at dumbasses! Or so she- called them...

A cranky piece of crap some called her...

Even if said- that she- was in a very noble mood until mealtime, where it went downhill from there- re... yes... she- n she- thought she'd stretch she butt- And up the leg on their- lift the side and farted hard. That is my she- loll to you- to say the- girl behind her... thanks for sharing... she- got up and then walked across the- road to buy herself a bun from their- bakery.

There- the effect of their simple sentence on their- rest of their- family was incredible: Dariez gasped and fell off the chair with a crash that shook their- whole kitchen- n; Mr.'s. Sleyash gave a small scream and clapped she and to a- sure- a mouth; Mr. Sleyash jumped to her feet, veins throbbing in the temples.

She'd forgotten all about their- people in Robes until she- passed a group of them next to their- bakers.

She- eyed them angrily as she- passed. He- did not know why, but they made her uneasy and UNCOMFORTABLE.

There bunch where sheering excitedly, too, and she- could not see a single collecting tin. It was on the back past them, clutching a large doughnut in a bag, that she- caught a few words of what they were saying.

And, she's, that is right, that is what I heard yes, their girl, Naddalin.

-And-

Mr. Natalie stopped dead.

Fear flooded her... mind and body.

She- looked back at the- whisperers as if she- wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it.

She- dashed- back across their- road, hurried up to the office, snapped at her secretary not to disturb her, seized the telephone, and had finished- d dialing she home number she- n she- changed the mind. Her- put their- receiver back down and stroked she mustache- thinking...

No, she- was being stupid.

-Was not such an unusual name. She- was sure there were lots of people called - who had a girl called Naddalin.

Come to think of it, she- was not even sure she nephew- w was called Naddalin.

She never- ever even seen the- girl.

It might have been Harvey. Or Hanna.

There- was no point in worrying Mr.'s. Natalie; she- always got so-o upset at any mention of the sister.

She- didn't blame her really- if she- 'd had a sister like that... but all there- same, those people in Robes...

And meant' please'! Also, said Naddalin quickly. Also, it didn't mean...

-And-

(Now)

Also... WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU, Also, thundered she uncle, spraying spit over there- table, Also ABOUT SAYING THERE'S' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?

And, but I'm - Equally so-o-

...?...

Then there and when...

(Back)

HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DARIEZ!

Holy freak'n piss, roared Uncle Read, pounding the- table with the fists.

(aha)

Sh*t- Her- she- a found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and wither she- left the- building at five o'clock, she- was still so worried that she- walked straight into someone just outside the- door.

Crap- Sorry, and she- grunted, as there- tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Natalie realized that there- the man was wearing a violet Robe. She- didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to there- ground.

On there- contrary, her face split into a wide smile and she- said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, f*ck- Do not be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today!

Rejoice, for You- Know- Who has gone at last! Even Non-magical peoples like yourself should be celebrating, there happy, happy day!

Damn...

And- and- like, um- there- old man hugged Mr. Natalie around there- middle and walked off.

Mr. Natalie stood rooted in their- spot.

She- had been hugged by a stranger.

She- also thought she- had been called a Non-magical people, whatever that was.

She- was rattled.

She- hurried to her car and set off for home, hoping she- was imagining things, which she- had never hoped before, because she- did not approve of imagination.

As she- pulled into there- the driveway of number four, there- the first thing she- saw - And it didn't improve the mood- was there- tabby wolf she- 'd spotted that morning. It was now sitting on her gardens wall. She- was sure it was there- same one; it had there- the same marking around its eyes.

Mother F*CK-er...

It just gave her an unyielding look. There- Flying horses was back at the window... Um- Shoo sucking crap! And said Mr. Natalie loudly as she- said- at the pc, over clips.

There- wolf did not move either form she spot under the- tree next to there- corer. Was there ordinary behavior for these beasts? And, I just - thank and that may hurt myself... like in the brain and crap- ol- la like that.

Sh*t'n- and like ah- ah- ah, I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THERE ROOF! And- crap- crap- crap-

Naddalin stared from her purple-faced uncle to her pale aunt, who was trying to sheave Dariez to her feet.

Crap- crap- crap-

... All right, um said Naddalin, And all right... And...

Crap- crap- crap-

Uncle Read sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Naddalin closely out of there- corners of her small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Naddalin had come home for there- summer holidays, Uncle Read had been treating her like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Naddalin - wasn't a normal girl. She- was as not as normal as it is possible to be.

Naddalin - was a wizard fallen angel - a wizard one and angel number two- fresh from the first year at- the school for girls Hayvannahol of Witchcraft and Wizardry- and getting your wings. And if there- Andreasen were unhappy to have her back for there- holidays, it was nothing to how Naddalin felt.

She- missed at the school for girls so much it was like having a constant (Savanna) Hayvannah hatcher-. She- missed there- castle, with its secret passageways And ghosts, she classes (though perhaps not Lily, there- Potions master,) there- mail arriving by Flying horses, eating banquets in there- Great Hall, sleeping in the four-poster bed in there- tower dormitory, visiting there- gamekeeper, Dargide, in her cabin next to there- Forbidden Forest in there- grounds, And, especially, Claepsiara, there- a most popular sport in there- wizarding world (six tall goal posts, four flying balls, And fourteen players on broomsticks.)

All Naddalin's spell- books, and her, robes, could Jinger, and top- other- line Nimbus Two Thus And broomstick had been locked in a cupboard under there - stairs by Uncle Read there- instant Naddalin had come home.

What did there- Andreasen care if Naddalin um lost she place on the- House Claepsiara team because she- hadn't practiced all summer?

What was it to there- Andreasen if Naddalin like went back to Hayvannahol without any of her homework Deanahe?

There- Andreasen where what wizards called Non-magical peoples (not a drop of magical blood in their veins...)

And as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in there- family- was a matter of deepest shame, falling to death and having black wings was worse than that.

Uncle Read had even padlocked Naddalin's Flying horses, herding, inside the cage, to stop her from carrying messages to anyone in there- wizarding world.

Mr. Natalie speculated... all this and speculating was all he could do...

Trying to pull herself together as she- was sitting on there- can, leaving she job mead day like drawing to do so-o she- walked without knowing she- was doing so-o... like being pulled into there- the evil of it all- she- let herself into there- house. She- was still decided not to mention anything to the wife. That their power was taken over the mind, And body.

Mr.'s. Natalie had had a nice, ordinary day.

She- told her over dinner all about Mr.'s. Next Door's problems with the daughter and how Alisha had learned an unfamiliar word...

(And... NO...!)

Mr. Natalie tried to act Hayvanna- hay.

When Alisha had been put to bed, she- went into there- lounge in time to hook up on there- last report on there- sundown news: And, besides, in conclusion, bird onlookers all over have recounte d that there- nation's Flying horses with wings have been behaving very strangely today.

Yet not in the- way she- was seeing them, they said about it- yet, not about what she- was seeing with it.

Although Flying with wings normally hunt at night, and are hardly ever seen considering the day, they have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since daybreak there - the day before And. Experts are unable to explain why there- Flying horses with wings have suddenly changed their slumbering pattern.

- And-

Possibly pergirls have been celebrating you can see there- barrel firs in there- streets- within there- night early- dusk- it is not until next week, folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight.

There- broadcaster allowed herself a smile.

Most mysterious... Um now, over to Lenah Barton with there- weather. Successful to be any more when a- Flying horses with wings tonight, girl? And, Viewers as far apart as Jackie, Promising, And Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of there- rain I assured yesterday, they have had a downpour of shooting stars! And, ... Well, Dee, and said there- weathercaster, and I do not know about that, but it is not only there- Flying horses with wings that have been acting oddly today. I was hoping to make a wish to see if there casting of whatever would go away.

Mr. Natalie sat frozen in her armchair.

Shooting stars all over Britain?

Flying horses with wings flying by the light of day? Mysterious individuals in shawls all over there- the place looks like something out of there- the 1920s? And, a murmur, a murmur about there's... who is and who is and who's... like sharpers.

She- cleared her throat nervously. And, wow, dear- you have not heard from your sister lately? And, it was not good. Her- would have to say something to her about there.

Mr.'s. Natalie came into the- living room carrying two cups of tea. Sharing- as she- had estimated, Mr.'s.

Natalie watcher- d surprised and ever so-o irritated.

They mock there, she- did not have a sister- so that was there- a story made up of the little mind. It is not good to have or see there- abnormal! Like there... something is going down.

And, and- and- and sh*t- Nope, and s- she- said abruptly. Why...?

Why is the question with no answer?

Why- was the- question...

~*~

And, humorous paraphernalia on there- news, And Mr. Natalie muttered. And, flying horses with wings... shooting stars... And pussies oh my! She- looked up at her with a grin.

Looking aroused and around there- was there- re was a cute young coupled kissing making out- And making love on a bench's- she- was sitting on her, And, feeling all- there- madness- in plain eyesight.

Desirable, there- where a lot of humorous- looking folks in town today... doing just there- see things... it was madness- love was in there- air like there- evil cast over me- And some- that where been seen. And- And- So-o? And, cracked Mr.'s. Natalie. And, Well, I just thought... perchance... it was to do with... you know... she crowds- and why. And, their chat was complex hard to understand- for one to there- another topic.

Mr.'s. Natalie swallowed her tea through squeezed lips. Mr. Natalie wondered where- there- r she- dared tell she'd heard there- name- and she- decided she- didn't dare.

Instead she- said, as unconcernedly as she- could, And Their baby girl she'd be about Alisha's age now, wouldn't she? And... and - yeah, I's suppose so-o, And I'm said Mr.'s. Natalie stiffly.

And... What's her name again? Not sure - she- said- why does it matter...?

Um... Naddalin? An offensive, uncommon name, if you ask me. SH*T- I didn't but okay I feel the- same.

And... Oh, absolutely, sure... said Mr. Natalie, she hears plummeting extremely.

And...

Sure, I quite agree with you.

And...

On there- way up there- staircase, no words were said, as they made their way up to their bedroom, or some alone time to do what was natural. While Mr.'s. Natalie was in there- bathroom, Mr. Natalie stole to there- bedroom window and peered down into there- Inert garden. Looking out and over- There- the damn wolf was still there- looking up at her- now- yet, in the- same way as with her- as before. It hadn't moved a bit.

Was she- imagining things? Or was there pussy acting as if she- could hear what I was thinking...

Could all they have something to do with there's? If it did... there- query was why- do you know? If it got out that they were related to a pair of- well, she- didn't think she- could bear it.

Chapter: 154

Part: 1

There- Natalie's got into bed wearing nothing more than she underies'. Mr.'s. Natalie fell asleep quickly, but Mr. Natalie lay awake looking at her and all the parts of her body in love nonetheless, turning it all over in the minds, as she- was feeling she up with her right so- o.

They knew very well what she- and Jennath thought about them and their kind... Her last, she- attending thought before and she- fell asleep was that even if they were compiled, there was no motive for their- m to come near her and Mr.'s. Doll girl.

She- could not see how she- and could get mixed up in whatever, that might be going on- she- stretchered- as well as turned over- it could not affect them...

How very mistaken she- was to think their thought.

Mr. Natalie might have been drifting into an uneasy sleep, but there- wolf on the- wall outside was showing no sign of sleepiness.

So, their- fat lazy ass- did move... Just like in a cartoon I want to throw a boot It was sitting as still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblameably; at me timewasting- re naked eating Cheetos... next to a bean

bag chair... on... There- did not so-o much as quiver she- n a car door thumped on their- next street, nor she- n two or three Flying horses with wings swooped above. In truth, it was their- wee small hours before the- wolf moved at all.

A man appeared on their- corner they're- the wolf had been watching- only me- and me only, not- looking away- it gives them- an idea so-o suddenly, and silently you'd have thought she'd just popped out of the- ground. There- wolf's tail yanked besides its eyes tightened.

Zilch- nil- like their man had ever been seen on the motorway.

She- was giant, tinny, and self- same deep-rooted, refereeing by their- silver of the hair and beard, which were in cooperation long adequate to tuck into she belts.

She- was tiring long robes, a dark yet rosy wrap that swept they're- ground, And high- she- eyed, Misshapen boots.

Her- indigo- yet with some blue eyes were light, bright, as well as twinkling behind half-moon spectacles, in addition to that she noses were very long and crooked like she is yellowing teeth, as on their- other and, it has been broken at least twice- like she and- for being dumb.

There man's name was Roberts Dreibund.

Roberts Dreibund did not seem to understand, that she- had just at home in a street there the whole thing from the description to sue gumboots was undesirable.

So-o, Naddalin had had no word from any of their wizarding friends for five long weeks, and their summer was turning out to be as bad as their- last one. There- re was just one very small improvement - after swearing that she- would not use her to send letters to any of their friends.

Naddalin had been allowed to let her Fly, they- were out at night.

Uncle Read had given in because of their- racket herding made if she- was locked in the cage all their- time.

Naddalin finished- writing about Wendel in their- Weird And paused to listen again. The- silence in the- the spooky house was broken only by they're- distant, grunting snores of their enormous cousin, Dariez.

It must be very late, Naddalin thought. Her eyes were itching with tiredness. Perhaps she- 'd finish their essay Hayvanna-horror night...

She- replaced the- ribbon; pulled an old pillowcase from under the bed; put the- flashlight under with her, a forbidden type of Magic, she essays, back the typewriter to her hands; now she would not out of bed; and hid their- lot under a loose floorboard under the bed.

Then she- stood up, stretchered, and checked the- time on the- luminous alarm clock on the bedside table.

It was one o'clock in their- morning. Naddalin's Savannah gave a funny jolt. She- had been thirteen years old, without realizing it, for a whole hour.

Yet another unusual thing about Naddalin was how little she- looked forward to her birthdays.

She- had never- ever received a birthday card in life.

There- Andreasen had completely ignored the last two birthdays, and she- had no regard to suppose they would remember there one.

Their man- old with there- long white long beard was full of activity dip into in the wraps, beholding for something.

On there- other and, she- did seem to understand she- was being watched, for their- regard that she- looked up unexpectedly at their- wolf, the supplementary finish of their, thoroughfare, mind going a little Lonny... For some motivation, the sight of their- wolf gives their- impression to make laugh her.

She- chuckled and muttered, and be a duty-bound to have known.

- And-

She- originates what she- was beholding for in she privileged pocket. It seemed to be a green zip- o cigarette lighter.

She- flipped it open, held it up in the- air, and clicked it. Whoosh- hair smoldering- I thought it was going to happen... There- adjoining gas street lamp went out with a slight hush sound.

She- clicked it again- their- next lamp wavered into dimness and gloominess.

13 times she- be on there- the same wavelength their- Put- External, 'til their- only lights left on the- whole street where two miniature pinholes in their- coldness, which were there- judgments of their- wolf watching her with emerald eyes.

Uncertainty any per girl observed out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mr.'s. Doll girl, they wouldn't be able to see no matter what that was fashionable down on the- roadway.

Naddalin looked nothing like their- rest of the- family.

Uncle Read was large and somewhat neckless, with an enormous black mustache and a long beard-; Aunt Jennath was horse-faced and bony; Dariez was blond-haired person, pink, and porky.

Naddalin, on their- other and, was small and skinny, with brilliant green eyes..., And jet- black hair that was always untidy. She- wore round glasses, and on her, the forehead was a thick scar... that was etched hatched, in like a drawing.

Naddalin walked across the- darkroom, past her- dig's large, empty cage, to their- open window. She- leaned on their- sill, their- cool night air pleasant on she faces after a long time under their- blankets. herding had been absent for two nights now.

Naddalin wasn't worried about her: she'd been gone their long before.

Nevertheless, she- hoped she'd be back soon - she- was the- only- living creature in their house who didn't flinch at their- sight of her.

Naddalin, though still rats her small and skinny for the ages, had grown a few inches- s over their- last year.

Her strawberry blond hair, however, was just as it always had been - stubbornly untidy, whatever she- did to it. There- eyes behind the glasses were bright green, and on she foresee- ad, visible through the hair, was a thick scar, shaped like an angels body- with wings at a side view, of a past girl named NEVAEH, the one she was the blame for this all... the same depiction was on a blue acoustic cutaway cracked no longer play guitar- that was Havens, hand painted- I would add, with all the things that meant everything to the girls within the stories of their life, like lost chapters. For some reason, this

drawing of her keeps reappearing in all our lives. (All the girls have but their story names on the side, with gold trim.)

Hear- here it is... and to think some ass hole said- 'It was not worth keeping back in her hometown.'

It was their scar that made Naddalin so particularly unusual, even for a wizard- she had the mark of a good angel.

The scar was there- the only a hint of Naddalin's very mysterious past, of the- regard she- had been left on their- Andreasen ' doorstep eleven years before, turn up from the floor up with a ring through her clit, like all of them of the past.

Of all their- unusual things about Naddalin, their scar was the- most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the- Andreasen - that family that took over the Amsel orphanage had pretended for ten years, a souvenir of their- car crash that had killed Naddalin's parents, because... there doesn't need to be a way- of it... Lily... was alike her

Kristen... too...

The question is why...

And then I'd thought about it...

You don't need a why... or to have a motive... it was all just because- because we can- and to get at you for the sick thrilling joys- of proving it- they want you to know it's them- so you're the one that looks crazy... for saying the why- of it all... I have been there, and no one believes me- yet- the same with them.

And, the question- still is why...?

Part: 2

And, Alyssa- had not died, yet was already one that we all heated... here at this school.

They had been murdered, murdered by their- most feared Dark wizard for a hundred years the crazy within their mind...

Lord AVA, new pet though- you get why...?

I keep away as much as I can now from them, yet the war is never over with her and them.

(Back)

Naddalin had escaped from there- the same attack with nothing more than a scar on her forehead and a ring, she- Ava's curse, instead of killing her- here, had rebounded upon its originator. Barely alive, Ava had fled...

Final- death here is like- a thing... if you keep losing power, or others want you out... then it back to Earth to haunt... in unhappiness.

But Naddalin had come face- to- face with her at the school for girls.

Remembering their last meeting as she- stood at their- dark window, Naddalin had to admit she- was lucky even to have reached- d she thirteenth birthday.

Silhouetted against the- wonderfully- amazing big moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lopsided creature, and it was flapping in Naddalin's direction.

Part: 3

She- stood quite still, watching it sink lower... And lower; for a split second, she- hesitated, she and on the- window latch, wondering whether to slam it shut.

Still, there- and the- bizarre creature soared over one of there- street lamps that were flicking a flame, off Privet Drive, in reflection on the wet path, And Naddalin, realizing what it was, leaped aside.

Through there- window soared three Flying girls with wings it was them those girls that picked on her- now me, yet I and my girls would not stand for this... the conflict was on.

Two of them holding up there- third, which appeared to be unconscious, to all that was around them.

Some time had passed...

Then there was a soft flump on Naddalin's bed, and there- middle grade- girls- flying angel- young girls- that where for them- them- them- just looking at me- and she- all creepy like, they would not leave and they wanted all of me, with me and she large gray, keeled right overhead she and I lay

motionless, nude bodies in- tangled together, in our bed, staying away from them and there hate of what they don't understand. There- was a large package tied to its legs. So-o, she and I kissed- and hugged tight, and loved each other going down on, and more and such, and let the babies play their games- pick and tease.

Part: 4

Naddalin recognized there- unconscious Flying horses at once - the name was Errol, and she- belonged to the- Railie family.

Naddalin dashed to there- bed, untied there- cords around Errol's legs took off there- parcel, and there- n carried Errolie to Sabre-dove's cage.

Errolie opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to gulp some water.

Naddalin turned back to there- remaining Flying horses with wings, and the girls with them.

One of them, there- large white female, was her shedding.

She- too, was carrying a parcel and looked extremely pleased with herself; she -gave Naddalin an affectionate nip with she beak as she- removed the burden, there- and flew across the- room to join Errolie.

Naddalin did not recognize there- third girl, a and some tawny one, but she- knew at once when it had come from because, in addition to a third package, it was carrying a letter bearing there - At the school for girl's crest.

When Naddalin relieved their Flying horses of its burden, it ruffled its daddy's important, stretcher- d its wings, and took off through the- a window into the- night.

Naddalin sat down on her bed then grabbed Errolie's package, ripped off there- brown paper, and discovered a present wrapped in gold and her first-ever birthday card. Fingers trembling slightly, she- opened the- envelope.

Two pieces of paper fell out - a letter and a newspaper clipping.

There- clipping had come out of there- wizarding newspaper, there- Star Press- because of there- people in there- black- and- the white picture where moving.

Naddalin picked up there- clipping, smoothed it out and read- the- scanned there- starry sky for a sign of herding, perhaps soaring back to her with a dead mouse dangling from her mouth, expecting praise.

Gazing absently over there- rooftops, it was a few seconds before Naddalin realized what she- was seeing.

At there- age of one-year-old, Naddalin had somehow survived a curse from the- greatest Dark Sorcerer Angel of the demons of all time, Noble Ava, whose name most watcher- s and wizards- fallen angel still feared to speak.

Naddalin 's parents had died in Ava's attacks, but Naddalin had escaped with scars and brandings, and somehow - nobody understood- why- WHY- Ava's powers had been demolished there- instant she- had failed to kill- Naddalin.

So-o Naddalin had been brought up by the dead mother's sister and her hubs and... She- had spent ten years with there- Andreasen, never- ever underset and why she- kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing there- Andreasen; story that she- had her scar in the- car crash that had killed the parents...

...We all thought yeah right!

And, then, exactly a year ago, at the school for girls had written to Naddalin, and there - the whole story- had come out.

Naddalin had taken up the places at wizard Hayvannahol, when she- And her scar was- so- a famous... but now there- the Hayvannahol year was over, and she- was back with there- Andreasen for there- summer, back to being treated like a dog, that had rolled in something smelly.

(Back in time)

The- Andreasen hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Naddalin's 12th birthday.

Of course, she hopes had not been high; they had never given her a real present, let alone a cake - but to ignore it completely...

At that moment, Uncle Read cleared her throat importantly and said, Besides, now, as we all know, today is a very important day.

-And-

Naddalin looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

BUREAU OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS girl AND PRIZE-

'Yeah, well,' said Naddalin, glowering at her plate, 'since wither has Lily ever been fair to me?'

Neither of there- others answered; all three of there- m knew that Lily and Naddalin's mutual enmity had been absolute from the- moment Naddalin had set foot in at the school for girls.

'I's did think she- might be a bit better there year,' said Emmah in a disappointed voice.' I mean... you know...' she- looked around carefully; there were half a dozen empty seats on either side of there- m and nobody was passing the- table...

'... Now she's in there- War and everything.'

'Prodigious toadstools Do not change their spots,' said Jinger sagely.' Anyway, I've always thought Duerre was cracked to trust Lily. Where's she- evidence her- ever really stopped working for You- Know- I Mean?'

'I think Duerre's probably got plenty of evidence, even if she- doesn't share it with you, Jinger,' snapped Emmah.

'Oh, shut up, the pair of you,' said Naddalin heavily, as Jinger opened her mouth to argue back. Emmah And Jinger both froze, looking angry and offended.'

'Can't you give it a rest?' Said Naddalin.

'You're always having a go at each other; it's driving me furious.'

And abandoning shepherd's pie, she- swung she Hayvannahol- bag back over the shoulders and left them sitting there.

She- walked up the- marble staircase two steps at a time, past there- many students hurrying towards lunch.

There- anger that had just flared so unexpectedly still blazed inside her, and they're - a vision of Jinger...

And, Emmah's shocked faces afforded her a sense of deep satisfaction. Serve them right, she- thought, why can't they give it a rest... bickering all there- time... it's enough to drive anyone up there- wall...

She- passed the- a large picture of Sir Lloyd there- a knight on an I's and; Sir Lloyd drew her sword and brandished it fiercely at Naddalin, who ignored her.

'Come back, you scurvy dog! Stand fast and fight!' yelled Sir Lloyd in an inaudible voice from behind she visors, but Naddalin merely walked on and wither Sir Lloyd tried to follow her by running into a neighboring picture, she- was rebuffed by its inhabitant, a large and angry-looking wolfhound.

Naddalin spent there- rest of there- lunch hour sitting alone underneath the- trapdoor at there- top of Northern Tower, just under the bells.

Consequently, she- was there- first to ascend there- a silver ladder that led to Sara... Solis's classroom when- n the- bell rang.

After Potions, Divination was Naddalin's- least favorite class, which was due mainly to Professor Solis's habit of forecasting her untimely death every few lessons.

A thin woman, heavily draped in shawls and glittering with strings of beads, she'd- always reminded Naddalin of some kind of insect, with she glasses hugely magnifying her eyes.

We have read her book here... them too...

She'd- was busy putting copies of battered leather-bound books on each of there- spindly little tables with which the room was littered when Naddalin entered there- room, but there- light cast by there- lamps covered by scarves and there- low burning, the sickly scented fire was so dim she'd- appeared not to notice her as she- took a seat in there- shadows.

There- the rest of there- class arrived over there- next five minutes. Jinger emerged from there- a trapdoor, looked around carefully, spotted Naddalin, then made unswe rvingly for her, or as directly as she- could while having to wend she way between tables, chairs, and overstuffed puffs.

'Emmah and I have stopped arguing,' she- said, sitting down beside Naddalin.

'Good,' grunted Naddalin.

'But Emmah says she'd- thinks it would be nice if you stopped taken out your temper on us,' said Jinger.

'I'm not...'

'I'm just passing on there- message,' said Jinger, talking over her.'

Nevertheless, I reckon she'd- is right. It's not our fault how Laila and Lily treat you.'

'I never said it...'

'Good day,' said Professor Solis in her usual misty, dreamy voice, and Naddalin broke off, again feeling both annoyed and slightly ashamed of herself.'

Besides, welcome back to Divination.

I have, of course, been following your fortunes most carefully over the- holidays, and I am delighted to see that you have all returned to at the school for girls safely as, of course, I knew you would.

You will find on there- tables before your copy of the- 'Little Girls Bible.'

Dream interpretation is the most important means of divining there- future and one that may very probably be tested in your FLYING.

Nevaeh

Book: 38

The Express

Interval: 4

Part: 1

(Back)

Think about the express-

The train pulls away. As I then sit down in a seat where I have a good vantage point of the cars. The doors close, and I hear the whistle far down the line I knew I was going far from home. I look out the window. 'This is your conductor speaking, I'd like to welcome you aboard...' If you require any assistance on your journey, I am located towards the front of this 69th train coach - I welcome you to the railway for the fallen - you're here because your life was not fielded as it should, that is why they send you to us.' It is evening, soon you will not see anything but darkness, the treetops well get a little darker than the sky above, then that to well fade, as you pulled into the time vortex.

Mostly, all I see is the reflection of the passengers in the carriage, and you and your soul reflected back at you, that now is ours to take - and keep and do as we like with. I's sit in the quiet coach; it is not always quiet, but a least it is not loud, all the girls look like sweet things that would not hurt anyone in their new pressed girlie school uniforms, the got before getting on. Individuals are usually too polite, and or timid or just freaking scared out of their wets, to complain when someone is making a clamor. I count eight other passengers today, I knew - that we would get to know each other then again if it was anything - like my old life them maybe not.

Part: 2

Yes, I am sure of it I will have some, spaniel bounds with all yen are in this carriage, sniffing voraciously at everything, and looking as if your grandmother just died, nope - you did honey - you did. Then, I think well so - o did I!

Nevertheless, there are no familiar faces, no people I see regularly, I was starting to feel the effects of it too- and then I was looking like a sad puppy also, in the glass looking back, seeing my old life flash by as the train rushed forward, faster than my mind could think. Whoop- whoop- I'm heard... Emma- the young girl, looks at each group of seats as her passes, moving straight through when she doesn't find what she is looking for, and that is a girl there to comfort her, so-o I'm thought that must be me.

In the non-summer days, I stare out the window, back home out the train riding to school, but when it is dark, she watches the other passengers. She said to me, her name was- Haven. Things got a little less stuffie... I often wonder if she comes to the same town as I do, sound like me, and my story too.

Although the girls have made an effort to change into their uniform it is obvious, they have not been away home for long- they were lost. I'm slurred in particular, when- I's get nervous, she was sitting there with her hand between her knees said Naddalin.

Haven- I said, raising up in to sitting on my legs under my butt, fixing the skirt too under my butt, spilling is not my thing or being what some would say is cool, as the train sways, but I can see I have made it as a girl. Some just blink not getting that. I feel the train slowing; two girls in uniforms... walk back and take sets in front of us, and make their way through the doors at one end. I haven't had an opportunity, to talk openly for the first time it was nice, same with them we not heating on one another- where just fallen girls- here over the fact we were throw away girls. Naddalin- I's love to observe them as they sat at the far end of the coach, that was something I always loved doing so.

(Me to, said the three girls that made friends at this point. Emma, Naddalin, and Haven.)

~*~

The new girl crosses her arms and grins, saying- 'hey I am Karly.'

We all look confused, at the color of her hair, no reply kick-ass luggage she uses that mad our heads ache; the new girl rolls her eyes- saying: Don't be fake and gay- (I said I's am- and I look saying me kind of a too-long story.)

'Hun- a?' Her eyes where and face was so-o confused, 'I do not judge...' she said. definitely not in school uniforms, clashes with my hair, and I don't like having things constricted, and she grasps her chest hard, in an upper ward motion.

Part: 3

I smile at the easiest, thoughts of a new friendship, the girls share their plans of listening but want to keep it a secret from their parents and all in their old life. Yet, Karly was like - not so-o much as we were- my younger sisters we see me again- I am sure of it, as a haunt in her vanity glass, or something random, or like when she is getting freaky with my old boyfriend. We giggled...

Luckily, I don't know the parents! Said Haven.

The young girl embarked, on and are sitting opposite each other folding the sit-in so they were face to face... The train stops and this time the doors stay closed. Getting water from the tank, for the steam...

(Thought)

I feel like I would like to help this young girl, but I don't know how, and I guess I's would not appreciate the interference.

I'm though I know that I love trains...

~*~

(I wonder)

The train pulls away with a small jolt, Students steps back from the window, I wonder if she has problems at home, like I did, though Haven, or maybe girlfriend trouble too like me or boy- or was at all like me? He checks the screen on his phone again. I guess she has no signals like this rout is all green from here. Only one track... and is a twist and turns yet is a straight path to their... Tickets- girls, please, magical they are they show up floating like three dentinal- and oh- so-o see though in their hands, tickets... with your code and names and whatnot, show us all we need to know for now... and your place here.

As you can see the bars on the code forever match here to there and are read... this is your ID... I hold up my season ticket for inspection, ripping the playful thing down in mid-air. 'Thank you, sir,'

the watchmen walks' on and checks the rest of the carriage, then stops by the doors. After walking to and for a couple of times, students sad- like sits down and takes a large notebook from their bag, and to the first day's homework, and that is document all that happens on the ride.

This also was on the ticket, saying the assignment. Then they went off to the steeper parts of the train, it was going to be a long ride when in reality it only takes moments to get here... yet to new girls, it's like a lifetime, that seems like a week trip, where you need to sleep- and have a day to transition to the new worldly ways.

Part: 4

Um- rapidly flicking through the pages, before the girls turn in, he stops about two-thirds of the way through, the girl's room, and pulls the beds and shads down saying work hard and rest, he stares out the window, saying I getting too old for young girls.

We- giggle...

(Next day)

With a sigh, the Student has sad doodles on the margin of the page, and some droll. He looks up at Emma and stands, there as she and stretches, 'not every day you see a nude girl...' she said. The girls gather their belongings and stand close together by the doors, getting into uniform. I's wait for the train to come to a complete standstill before walking over to the next door, one by one going down the car steps, to get out, the girls hold hands in one line, as they walk into this new land of unknown.

~*~

Chapter: 155

Part: 1

Naddalin- 'Why?' 'Why- are girls like you are making fun of a girl, that was just like you- you're here, for the same- faults- or even more then she had.'

Not, of course, that I believe examination passes or failures are of there- remotest importance wither and it comes to there- the sacred art of divination.

If you have there-

Seeing-eye, certificates, and grades matter very little. However, there- headmaster likes you to sit there- examination, so-o...'

Her voice trailed away delicately, leaving them all in no doubt that Professor Trelawney considered the- subject above such sordid matters as examinations.

Turn, please, to there- introduction- and read what the girl has said here, you have a voice- okay what is that saying- AVA said to her girls, like what this pussy licker said about us.

'CUTE- NO?'

'Cute yes!'

'The Sisters from Hell...' 'CUTE... did she think that we would never – ever see this?'

'Sh-h-h' Said Emma- making faces!

This work by a girl that was never to be has made things difficult for all... said- Duerre... no its time to get at her. Wounds where cast picking apart the old book copy of the many chapters of her young and aging life.

Part: 2

They were, divide into pairs, reading Nevaeh's story mocking her some- other fallen girls where in- love with the captivating story her up and downs... and some saying how did she not fall to us- as one of us... a strong girl- she was... somewhere crying others giggling.

Naddalin- I's think this wrong to do to someone, even if... and all the girls in the class where had the books, picking out things that they could do to them all, in their moments how self- droughts and fear- it was so wrong to us- Naddalin the most.

Use The- Dream Vision, spell and see all that she did- can you...?

We can- said the girls... feel- feel- and see as she did. To interpret each other's most recent dreams, you will become her- and live a life of the pass and walk her halls as her. Carry on... young falling angels of Wizard and the Fallen.'

Part: 3

The- one good thing to be said, for their lesson was that it was not a double period.

By three- time they had all finished- reading there- the introduction of the- book, they had barely ten minutes left for dream interpretation.

At there- the table next to Naddalin And Jinger, Lacy had paired up with Neville, who immediately embarked on a longwinded explanation of a nightmare involving a pair of giant scissors wearing her grandmother best hat; Naddalin And Jinger merely looked at each other glumly.

'I never remember my dreams,' said Jinger,' you say one.'

I never remember them like this said Naddalin... in awe.

'You must remember one of them,' said Naddalin impatiently.

She- was not going to share her dreams with anyone, I thought we all had to.

She- knew perfectly well what she regular nightmare about a graveyard meant, she- did not need Jinger or Professor Trelawney or there- stupid Dream Vision to tell her.

'Well, I dreamed, that I was playing Claepsiara there- another night,' said Jinger, screwing up the faces in an effort to remember. 'What you'd reckon that means?'

'Probably that you're going to be eaten by a giant marshmallow or something,' said Naddalin, turning there- pages of The- Dream Vision without interest.

It was very dull work looking up bits of dreams in there- Vision and Naddalin were not chartered up wither- n Professor Trelawney set, them there- the task of keeping a dream diary for a month as homework, about this girl's life, and it was all adding into this story. What we saw.

Naddalin- now docent that discredit her from being the novelist another of the story in the first place? 'You need to hush, or you fail my class!'

When there- bell went, she- And Jinger led there- way back down there- ladder, Jinger grumbling loudly.

'Do you realize how much homework we have gotten already? Bins set us a foot and half long essay on giant wars, Lily wants a foot on there- use of moonstones, and now we've got a month's dream diary from Trelawney!

Freeanna and Katy where not Ginger about FLYING year, were they? That Scott lady had better not give us any...'

Wither they entered there- Defense Against there- Dark Arts classroom, like- they found Professor Scott already seated at there- transferors desk, wearing there- fluffy pink cardigan of there- the night before and there- black velvet bow on top of their head. Naddalin was again reminded forcibly of a large fly perched- unwisely on top of an even larger toad.

The- class was quiet, and just sweet little girls sitting in a row in uniforms, an old art- deco ornate 1920's style all linked together desks, as it entered there- room; Professor Scott was, as yet, an unknown quantity... And nobody knew how strict a disciplinarian she'd- was likely to be.

'Well, good afternoon!' Um- she'd- said, wither finally there- the whole class had sat down.

A few people mumbled 'good afternoon' in reply of drowsiness- or I don't give a frapping sh*t- piss.

That will not do, now, will it?

I should like you, please, to reply 'Good afternoon, Professor Scott'. One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!'

'Good afternoon, Professor Scott,' they chanted back at her.

'Ta- ta,' said Professor Scott.

There are, now,' said Professor Scott sweetly. That was not too difficult, was it? And, away and quills out- ink and nibs, please.'

Many of there- class exchanged gloomy looks; there- order' and away' had never- ever, yet, been followed by a lesson they had found interesting or fun and net.

Naddalin shoved her and back into her handbag.

And pulled out an enchanted typewriter for the lifting up wood top, ink, and parchment. The large stand- glass windows have rays coming in... that distracts her.

Professor Scott opened her and, extracted her own and, which was an unusually short one, and tapped there- blackboard sharply with it; words appeared on there- board at once- Defense Against

there- Dark Studies a Return to Fundamental Assumption- 'Well now, your teaching in their subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn't it?' said Professor Scott, turning to face there - class with she and clasped neatly in the finger of her.

There- constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Unholy orders approved curriculum, has regrettably resulted in your being far below there - stand we would expect to see in your FLYING year.

'You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic there a year.'

'Copy down there- following, please.'

She would- rapped there- blackboard again; there- the first message vanished- d and was replaced by there- 'Course Aims...' Understanding there- assumption primary defensive magic. Learning to recognize circumstances in which defensive magic can legally be used. Employing the- use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

For a couple of minutes there- the room was full of there- the sound of scratching quills on parchment. Wither everyone had copied down Professor Scott's three -course aims she'd- asked. 'Has everybody got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?'

There was a dull murmur of assent throughout there - class.

'I think we'll try that again,' said Professor Scott.'

Wither- I ask you a question, I should like you to reply, 'Yes, Professor Scott', or 'No, Professor Scott'.

So, has everyone got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?'

'Yes, Professor Scott,' rang through there- room.

'Good,' said Professor Scott.' I should like you to turn to page five and read 'Girl One, Fundamentals for Beginners'. There will be no need to talk.'

Professor Scott left there- blackboard and settled herself in there- chair behind there- transferors desk, seeing them all closely with those pouchy eyes.

Naddalin turned to page five of her copies of Defensive Magical Philosophy And started to read.

It was desperately overcast, quite as bad as listening to Professor Binns.

She- felt she attentiveness sliding away from her, she, had soon read there, the same line half a dozen times without taking in more than there; first few words.

Numerous silent minutes passed.

Next, to her, Jinger was absent-mindedly turning she enchanted typewriter over and over in the fingers, staring at there- the same spot on their- page.

Naddalin observed right and received an astonishment to shake her out of the inertia.

Emmah had not even opened the copy of Defensive Magical Theory. She would- was staring fixedly at Professor Scott with her and in there- air.

Naddalin could not remember Emmah ever neglecting to read wither instructed to, or indeed resisting there- the temptation to open any book that came under the nose. She- looked at her enquiringly, but she would- merely shook her head slightly to show that she would- was not about to answer questions, and continued to stare at Professor Scott, who was looking just as resolutely in another direction.

After several more minutes had passed, however, Naddalin was not there- only one watching Emmah. There- Girl they had been instructed to read was so tedious that more and more people were hoping to watch Emmah's mute attempt to catch Professor Scott's eye rather than struggle on with fundamentals for beginners.'

Wither more than half there- class were staring at Emmah mouse her than at their books, Professor Scott seemed to decide that she'd- could ignore there- a situation no longer.

'Did you want to ask something about there- Girl, dear?' She'd- asked Emmah, as though she'd- had only just noticed she.

Part: 4

'Not about there- Girl, no,' said Emmah.

'Well, we're reading just now,' said Professor Scott, showing she small pointed teeth.' If you have other queries, we can deal with them at there- end of class.'

'I's have got an interrogation about your course aims,' said Emmah.

Professor Scott raised her eyebrows.

'And your name is?'

'Emmah Kizziah,' said Emmah.

'Well, Miss. Kizziah, I think there- course aims are perfectly clear if you read them through carefully,' said Professor Scott in a voice of determined sweetness.

'Well, I's don't know,' said Emmah bluntly. There's nothing written up there about using defensive spells.'

There was like a short silence in which many members of the- class turned their heads to frown at there- three course aims still written on there- blackboard.

'Using self- justifying spells?' Professor Scott repeated with a little laugh.'

Why, I's can't imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell, Miss. Kizziah. You surely are not expecting to be attacked during class?'

'We're not going to use magic?' Jinger cried loudly.

'Um- young students raise their hand to wither they wish to speak in my class, Mr.S?' 'Railie,' said Jinger, thrusting she hands into there- air.

Professor Scott, smiling still more widely, turned she back on her.

Naddalin And Emmah immediately raised their hand too. Professor Scott's pouchy eyes lingered on Naddalin for a moment before she'd- addressed Emmah.

'Yes, Miss. Kizziah? You wanted to ask something else?'

'Yes,' said Emmah. 'surely there- the whole point of Defense Against there- Dark Studies is to practice defensive spells?'

'Are you a- Unholy Orders trained educational expert, Miss. Kizziah?' asked Professor Scott, in she falsely sweet voice.

'No, but'

'Well then, I'm afraid you are not trained to decide what there- 'whole point' of any class is.

Wizard and the Fallens or fallen girls much older and cleverer than you have devised our new programmed of study.

You will be learning about self- protective spells in a secure, risk freeway...'

'What use is that?' Said Naddalin loudly.'

If we're going to be attacked, it won't be in a...'

~*~

Naddalin thrust her fist in there- air. Again, Professor Scott promptly turned away from her, but now several other people had their hands are up, too.

'And your name is?' Professor Scott said to Lacy.

'Lacy Thomas.'

'Well, Mr. Thomas?'

'Well, it's like Naddalin said, isn't it?' Said Lacy.' If we're going to be attacked, it won't be risk-free.'

'I repeat,' said Professor Scott, amused, and grinning in a very irritating fashion at Lacy, do you expect to be attacked during my classes?'

'No, but- um- ah...'

'Like- Professor Scott talked over her.'

I do not wish to criticize the- way things have been run in there Hayvannahol,' she'd- said, an unconvincing smile stretching her wide mouth.

'Nonetheless, you have been exposed to some very irresponsible fallen angels/Wizard and the Fallens in their class, very irresponsible indeed not to mention,' she'd- gave a nasty little laugh,' extremely dangerous half-breeds.'

'If you mean Professor Lupin,' piped up

Lacy angrily, 'she- was there- best we ever'

'Hand, Mr. Thomas! As I was saying you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day.'

'No, we haven't,' Emmah said... 'We just...'

'Your hand is not up, Miss. Kizziah!'

Emmah put up the hands. Professor Scott turned away from her.

'It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in the finger of you, she- actually performed them on you.'

'Well, she- turned out to be a maniac, didn't she-?' Said Lacy hotly.' Mind you, we still learned loads.'

'Your hands are not up, Mr. Thomas!' Trilled- Professor Scott. 'Now, it is there- view of there- Unholy orders that a theoretical know they edge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what Hayvannahol is all about. And your name is?' She'd- added, staring at Parvati, whose hands had just shot up.

'Parvati Smartha, and isn't there- re a practical bit in our Defense Against there- Dark Arts FLYING?

...And also, with horses that can fly too...

~Use we ride on their backs too; we make abound with one when we become young lady's... here in this world, when we get our first wings, bricking though are back skin, that grows from the spin, and have gray-black feather- ie- ness.

~We ride them in the skies, we love them and them- us, ones the bond is made with are haloes.

Part: 5

'Aren't we supposed to show, that we can do there- counter curses and things?'

'As long as you have studied the- theory hard enough, there- re is no why you should not be able to perform there- spells under carefully controlled examination conditions,' said Professor Scott dismissively.

'Without ever practicing them beforehand?' said Parvati incredulously.' Are you telling us that there- the first time we'll get to do the- spells will be during our exam?'

'I repeat, as long as you have studied there- theory hard enough.'

'And what good's theory going to be in there- real world?' said Naddalin loudly, the first in the- air again.

Professor Scott looked up.

'There is Hayvannahol, Mr.-, not there- the real world,' she'd- said softly.

'so, we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting for us out there?'

'There- is nothing waiting out there- are, Mr.-'

'Oh, yeah?' Said Naddalin. Her temper, which seemed to have been bubbling just beneath the- surface all day, was reaching boiling point.

'Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?' Um- enquired Professor Scott in a horribly honeyed voice.

'Hmm, let's think...' said Naddalin in a mock thoughtful voice.' Maybe... Lady Ava Jinger gasped; Lavender Brown uttered a little scream; Neville slipped sideways off her stool.

Professor Scott, however, did not flinch. She'd- was staring at Naddalin with a grimly satisfied expression on her face.

Ten points from Amsel, Mr.-'

She- classroom was silent and still. Everyone was staring at either Scott or Naddalin.

'Now, let me make a few things quite plain.'

Professor Scott stood up... And leaning towards them, her stubby- fingered hands splayed on her desk.

'You have been told that a certain Dark Wizard and the Fallen has returned from here - dead she- wasn't dead,' said Naddalin angrily,' nevertheless yeah, her returned!'

'Mr. - you have already lost your house ten points do not make matters worse for yourself,' said Professor Scott in one breath without looking at her.' As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark Wizard and the Fallen is at large once again. She is a lie.'

'It is NOT a lie!' said Naddalin.' I saw her, I fought her!'

'Detention, Mr.-!' said Professor Scott triumphantly. Hayvanna-horror evening. Five o'clock. My office.

I repeat, 'she is a lie.'

'I don't think so-o she said loader.'

The- Unholy Orders of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark Wizard and the Fallen. If you are still worried, by all means, come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark Wizard and the Fallens, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I am your friend; and now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, though one hundred.'

Professor Scott sat down behind her desk. Naddalin, however, stood up.

Everyone was staring at her; Laila looked half scared, half fascinated.

'Naddalin, no!' Emmah whispered in a warning voice, tugging at her grieve, but Naddalin jerked her arm out of her reach.

'Like- so, according to you, Joella - Elizabeth dropped dead of her own concur, did she-?' Naddalin asked, her voice shaking.

She was a collective intake of breath from her- class, for none of them, apart from Jinger and Emmah, had ever heard Naddalin, talk about what had happened on the- night Joella had died.

They stared avidly from Naddalin to Professor Scott, who had raised her eyes, and was staring at her without a trace of a fake smile on her face.

'Joella - Elizabeth's death was a tragic accident,' she'd- said coldly.

'It was murder,' said Naddalin. She- could feel herself shaking.

She- had hardly spoken to anyone about her, least of all thirty eagerly listening to classmates.'

'Ava killed her, and you know it.'

Professor Scott's face was quite blank. Maybe so and- maybe it was not that one...

Then her face went blank...

Part: 6

Then- for a moment, Naddalin thought she'd- was going to scream at her. She'd- said, in her softest, most sweetly girlish voice. 'Come here, Mr. ...dear.'

She- kicked her chair aside, strode around Jinger And Emmah and up to the- teacher's desk.

She- could feel the- rest of the- class holding its breath. She- felt so angry she- did not care what happened next.

Professor Scott pulled a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, stretcher- d it out on the- desk dipped her enchanted typewriter into a bottle of ink and started scribbling, hunched - over so that Naddalin could not see what she'd- was writing. Nobody spoke- out at that moment at all. After a minute or so she'd- rolled up the- parchment and tapped it with her wand; it sealed itself seamlessly so that she- could not open it.

Take her to Professor Ashly, dear,' said Professor Scott, holding out the - note to her.

She- took it from her without saying a word, turned on her heel and left the - room, not even looking back at Jinger and Emmah, smashing the - classroom door shut behind her.

She- walked very fast along the - corridor, she- note to Ashly clutched- tight in her hands, and turning a corner walked slap into Charlotte she- a poltergeist, a widemouthed little girl floating on her back in midair, juggling several inkwells.

'Why it's Petty Wee-!' Cackled Charlotte, allowing two of she- inkwells to fall to the- ground where she- smashed- and spattered the- walls with ink; Naddalin jumped backward out of the- way with a snarl.

'Get out of it, Charlotte.'

'Oooh-h, Crackpot's feeling cranky' said Charlotte, pursuing Naddalin along with her- corridor, Graceling as she- zoomed along above her.'

What is it the time, my fine Petty friend? Hair-razing voices...? Seeing visions... or the past like it's the now...? Speaking in' Charlotte blew a gigantic raspberry' - tongues?'

'Motorboat'n some boobies back their girl.' said Naddalin!

Ball one-

Ball two-

Ball three- all spit- ie!

'I said, leave me ALONE!' Naddalin shouted, running down the - nearest flight of stairs, but Charlotte merely slid down the- banister on her back beside her.

Part: 7

'Oh, most think she's Barking, she- petty wee lad, nevertheless, some are more- kindly besides think she's just sad, But Charlotte knows better and says, that she's mad - 'Shut- UP!'

A door to she left flew open and Professor Ashly emerged from the office looking grim and slightly hassled.

What on earth are you shouting about-?' she'd- snapped, as Charlotte cackled gracefully and zoomed out of sight.' Why aren't you in class?'

'I've been sent to see you,' said Naddalin stiffly.

'Sent? What do you mean, sent?'

She- held out the- note from Professor Scott. Professor Ashly took it from her, frowning, slit it open with a tap of the wand, stretched it out and began to read.

Her eyes zoomed from side to side behind the square spectacles as she'd- read what Scott had written, and with each line the became thinner.

'Come in here,' she- followed her inside her studies. She- door closed identically behind her.

'Well?' said Professor Ashly, rounding on her.' 'Is she true...?'

'Is what true...?'

Naddalin asked rashes more aggressively than she- had intended.

'Professor?' She- added, in an attempt to sound politer.

'Is it true that you shouted at Professor Scott?'

'Yes,' said Naddalin.

'You called she a liar?'

'Yes.'

'You told her the girl- Who Must Not Be Talked about is back?'

'Yes.'

Professor Ashly sat down behind the desk, watching Naddalin closely.

Then she'd- said,' Have a beige,' 'Have what...?'

'Have a beige,' she'd- repeated impatiently, indicating a tartan tin lying on top of one of the- piles of papers on her desk,' and then sit down.'

She had been a previous occasion when Naddalin, expecting to be caned by Professor Ashly, had instead been chosen by her to the- Amsel Claepsiara team.

She- sank into a chair opposite her, and helped herself to a Ginger Newt, feeling just as confused and woozy footed as she- had Deanahe on that occasion.

Professor Ashly set down Professor Scott's note and looked very seriously at Naddalin.

'You need to be careful.'

Naddalin swallowed her mouthful of Ginger Newt and stared at her.

Her tone of voice was not at all what she- was used to; it was not brisk, crisp and demanding; it was low and apprehensive and somehow much more human than usual.

'Misbehavior in Dolores Scott's class could cost you much more than house points and detention.'

'What do you...?'

'Use your common sense,' snapped Professor Ashly, with an abrupt return to her usual manner.'

You know where she'd- comes from, you must know to whom she'd- is reporting.'

The- bell rang for the- end of the- lesson. Overhear, all-around came the clumsy sounds of hundreds of students on the- move.

'It says here she'd- 's gave you detention every evening she week, starting Hayvanna-horror,' Professor Ashly said, looking down at Scott's note again.

'Every evening she week!' Naddalin repeated, horrified. 'But then again, Professor, couldn't you?'

No, I couldn't,' said Professor Ashly flatly.

'But.'

'But!'

'But?'

'She'd- is your teacher, in addition, has every right to give you detention.

You will go to her room at five o'clock Hayvanna- Horrow for her- the first one. Just remember: tread carefully around Dolores Scott.'

'But one was telling the- truth!' said Naddalin, outraged. 'Ava is back, you know her- is; Professor Duerre knows who she- is?'

'For heaven's sake-!' Said Professor Ashly, straightening her glasses angrily (she'd- had winced horribly where- and her- had used Ava's name.')

Do you really think she is about truth or lies? It's about keeping your head down, and your temper under control!'

She'd- stood up, nostrils wide and mouth very thin, and Naddalin stood up, too.

(Naddalin- sometimes I'm wondering if I to don't have to retard tattooed on my forehead!)

'Have another beige,' she'd- said touchily, thrusting the- tin at her.

'No, thanks,' said Naddalin coldly.'

Do not be ridiculous,' she'd- snapped.

Then at the moment, at that time of that day- she- took one... 'Thanks,' she- said grudgingly.

Part: 8

'Didn't you listen to Dolores Scott's speech at the- start of term feast-?'

'Yeah,' said Naddalin. 'Yeah... she'd- said... progress will be prohibited or... well, it meant that... that the- Unholy Orders of Magic is trying to interfere with at the school for girls.'

Professor Ashly eyed her closely for a moment, she- and sniffed, walked around the desk and held open the- door for her.

'Well, I'm glad you listen to Emmah Kizziah at any rate,' she'd- said, pointing her out of the office.

Dinner in the- Massive Hall that night was not a pleasant experience for Naddalin.

The- news about she is shouting match with Scott had traveled exceptionally fast even by at the school for girls' morals.

She- heard sweepers all around her as she- sat eating between Jinger And Emmah.

She- funny thing was that none of she- whisperers seemed to mind her overhearing what they were all saying about her.

On the- contrary, it was as though they were hoping she- would get irritated, and start shouting o'er so that they could hear the story first hands.

'She- says she- saw Joella - Elizabeth murdered...'

'She- reckons she- a duel- l- ed with You Know- Whom...'

'Come off it...'

'Who does she- think she's kidding?'

'Tur Zease...'

'What I do not get,' said Naddalin through clenched- d teeth, laying down the knife and fork (she hands were shaking too much to hold them steady,) 'is why she- y all believed she- story two months ago when- and Duerre told them...'

'The- thing is, Naddalin, I'm not sure she- e did,' said Emmah grimly. 'Oh, let's get out of here.'

She'd- slammed down her own knife and fork; Jinger looked longingly at the half-finished- apple pie but followed suit. Individuals stared at them all the- way out of the- Hall.

'What'd' you mean, you're not sure they thought Duerre?'

Naddalin asked Emmah when they reached- the- first-floor landing.

'Look, you don't understand what it was like after it happened,' said Emmah quietly.' You arrived back in her- middle of the- lawn clutching Joella's dead body... none of us saw what happened in her- maze... we just had Duerre's word for it that You Know Who had come back and killed Joella and fought you.'

'Which is the- truth!' Said Naddalin loudly.

I know it is, Naddalin, so will you please stop biting my head off?' Said Emmah wearily.' It's just that before she- the truth could sink in, everyone went home for her- summer, where they spent two months reading about how you're a nutcase and Duerre's going senile!'

Rain pounded on the- windowpanes as they strode along with her- empty corridors back to Amsel Tower.

Part: 9

Naddalin felt as though the first day had lasted a week, but she- still had a mountain of homework to do before bed.

Dull pounding pain was developing over the right eye. She- glanced out of a rain-washed-window at she- dark grounds as she- y turned into her- Fat Lady's corridor. She was still no light in Dargide's cabin.

'Mimbulus mumble- like,' said Emmah, before the- Fat Lady could ask. The- portrait swung open to reveal the- hole behind it and the- three of them scrambled through it.

The- girl's dorm room was almost empty; everyone was still down at dinner. Snakes uncoiled themselves from an armchair and trotted to meet them, purring loudly, and when- and Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah took the three favorite chairs at the- fireside the- leaped lightly on to Emmah's lap and curled up her like a furry ginger cushion.

Naddalin gazed into the- flames, feeling drained and exhausted.

Part: 10

'How can Duerre have let this happen?'

Emmah cried suddenly, making Naddalin And Jinger jump; shanks leaped off her, looking afterward still panicking. She'd- pounded her- arms of the chairs in a fury so that bits of stuffing leaked out of the- holes of the chair.' How can she- let that terrible woman teach us? And in our FLYING year, too!'

'Well, we've never- ever had great Defense Against her- Dark Arts Craft teaches, have we?' said Naddalin.'

You know what it's like, Dargide told us, nobody wants the- job; she- e say it's jinxed.'

'Yes, but to employ someone who's actually refusing to let us do magic!

What's Duerre playing at?'

'And she- is trying to get people to spy for her,' said Jinger darkly in an ominous way.

'Remember when- n she'd- said she'd- wanted us to come and tell's her if we hear anyone saying- 'You Know Who's back?' 'Of course, she's- the one to spy on us all, that's obvious, why else would Fudge have wanted her to come?' Snapped Emmah.

'Do not start arguing again,' said Naddalin wearily, as Jinger opened her mouth to retaliate.' Can't we just... let's just do that homework, get it out of the- way...'

She- a collected heir Hayvannahol bags from a corner and like returned to her- chairs by the- fire.

People were coming back from dinner now.

Naddalin kept her face averted from the- portrait hole, but could still sense she- stares she- was attracting.

'Like- shall we do Lily's stuff first?' Said Jinger, dipping the enchanted typewriter into the magical inkwell.

'She- properties... of moonstone... And it uses ...in potion-making...' she- muttered, writing the- words a- crossed the- top of the yellow- sh parchment Paper as she- spoke them all out too loudly.

Disruptive... as they said she was... yet, not like at all like they- the higher up at her old school said at all either.

She- underlined the- title, and splatted ink, then she looked up expectantly at Emmah.

'So, what is the- properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making?'

But- but- Emmah was not listening; she'd- was squinting over into the- far- far off corner of the- room, where Breanna, Katy, And Grace, Jordan were now sitting at the- center of a knot of innocent-looking first years, all of whom were chewing something that seemed to have come out of a large Paper bag that Breanna was holding.

'No, I'm sorry, they've gone too far,' she'd- said, standing up and looking positively furious.

'Come on, Jinger.'

'I'm what?' said Jinger, plainly playing for time.' No, come on, Emmah we can't tell she- m off for giving out sweets.'

'You know perfectly well that those are bits of NosebGraced Nougat or Pushing Pastilles or...'

'Fainting Fancies?' Naddalin suggested quietly.

One by one, as though hit over her- head with an invisible mallet, the- first years where slumping unconscious in their seats.

Then some slid right on to the- floor, ashes merely hung over her- arms of their chairs, their tongues lolling out. Most of the- people watching where laughing...

Emmah, however, squared her shoulders and marched directly over to where Breanna, and Katy... she has now stood with clipboards, meticulously observing her; unconscious first years.

Jinger rose up slightly, and then halfway out of her desk chair, hovered uncertainly for a moment or two, then murmured to Naddalin, 'she's- got it under control,' before sitting as low in the deck- chair as she nerdy awkward frame permitted.

Interval: 5

Chapter: 156

Part: 1

That's enough!' Emmah said forcefully to Breanna and Katy, both of whom looked up in mild surprise.

'Yeah, you're right,' said Katy, nodding, 'she doses looks strong enough, doesn't she?'

'I told you this morning, you can't test your rubbish on students!'

'We're paying them!' Said Breanna indignantly.

'I do not really care; it could be dangerous!'

'BS,' said Breanna.

'Calm down, Emmah, they're fine!' Said Grace reassuringly as she - walked from the first-year girl's room to the first-year class, inserting many sweets into her open mouths.

'Yeah, look, they're coming around now,' said Katy. A few of the - first years were indeed stirring. Several looked so shocked to find themselves lying on her - floor, or dangling off their chairs, that Naddalin was sure Breanna and Katy had not warned she - m what she - sweets were going to do.

'Feel all right?' Said Katy kindly to a small dark-haired girl lying at the feet.

'I- I- I's, think so,' she'd - said shakily.

'Excellent,' said Breanna happily, but she - next second Emmah had snatched - both she clipboard and her - paper - along with a bag of pop-rock gemstone from the hands.

'It is NOT excellent!'

'Of freaking course, it is, they're alive, aren't they?' Said Breanna furiously.

'You can't do she, what if you made one of, them really ill?'

'We're not going to make them ill; we've already tested them all on ourselves, she is just here to see if everyone reacts the - same.'

'If you need to stop doing it, I'm going to...'

'Put us in detention?' Said Breanna, in an I'd like to see you try it voice.

'Make us write lines?' Said Katy, smarting off.

Onlookers all over her- the room where laughing. Emmah drew herself up to the full thought, her eyes where narrowed...

And the bushy hair seemed to crackle with static electricity.

'No,' she'd- said, her voice quivering and trembling with anger...'

Part: 2

...But I will write to your Mother, and f*cking haunt the sh*t and piss out her every night.'

'You wouldn't,' said Katy, horrified, taken a step back from her.

'Oh, yes, I would,' said Emmah grimly.'

I can't stop you from consuming all of the- stupid things yourselves, but you're not to give them to her- first years.'

Breanna And Katy looked- totally flabbergasted.

It was clear that as far as they were concerned, Emmah's threat was way below her- belt.

With a last threatening look at them, she would- shove Breanna's clipboard and her- a bag of Fancies back into the arms, and stalked back to the chair by the- fire.

Jinger was now so-o freaking low in the set, that her young sweet noses were- um- level with the knees, and all you could see where young little sweet eyes piping out over top the lid of the desk, and hair brads.

Thank you for your support, Jinger,' Emmah said acidly.

'You handled it fine by yourself,' Jinger mumbled.

Emmah stared down at the blank piece of parchment for a few seconds, then said edgily. 'Oh, it's no good, I can't concentrate now.

I'm going to bed.'

She'd- wrenched- the bags open...

Naddalin thought she'd- was about to put the books away...

Then like instead she'd- pulled out two Misshapen woolly objects, placed them carefully on a table by the- fireplace, covered them with a few screwed- up bits of parchment and a broken quill, besides she stood back to admire the effect.

'What if the- name of Merlin are you doing?' said Jinger, watching she as though fearful for her sanity.

They're hats for house sprites,' she'd- said briskly... like a crazed girl was more die on...

~*~

'Now stuffing her books back into her bag.'

I did them over the- summer...

I'm a really slow knitter without magic but now I'm back at Hayvannahol, I should be able to make lots and lots more.'

~*~

'You're leaving out hats for the- house sprites?' Said Jinger Flying about nuts-o like.'

'And you're covering them up with garbage first?'

'Yes,' said Emmah disobediently, swinging she bag on to the back.

'That's not on,' said Jinger furiously.'

You're trying to trick she- m into picking up she- hats ant' you.

You're setting them free when- n they might not want to be free.'

'Unquestionably, they want to be free!' Said Emmah at once, though her face was turning pink.'

'Don't you dare touch those hats, Jinger!'

Part: 3

Arthur Railie, Head of the- Embezzle of Non-magical people Heirloom Office at the- Unholy orders of Magic, has won the- annual Daily Paper Grand Prize Gemstone Draw.

A delighted Mr. Railie told she- Daily Prophet, and We will be spending the- gold on a summer holiday is back on Earth, that is, and as a body that looks as they, or maybe to get into one there, where our do as all these girls hope to come back as a girl, yet with wings or to be a fallen angel on earth, no one wants to work as a curse breaker for Gutiérrez Wizard and the Fallen Bank, or scrub crappers.

The- Railie family will be spending a month in Rockville, returning for the- start of the- new Hayvannahol year at the school for girls, which five of the- Railie children currently attend.

Anyways- Naddalin scanned the- moving photograph and a grin spread a- crossed her young sweet little, face as she- saw all nine of the- Railie's waving furiously at her, standing in front of a large 'the body of Neveah' viaduct.

Plump little Mr. S. Railie; tall, balding Mr. Railie; six girls; and one daughter, all (though she- the black- and- the white picture didn't show it,) with light- shiny- red hair.

Right in the- middle of the- picture was Jinger, tall and gangling, with her pet mouse, Scabbards, on her shoulder and her arm around her little sister, Jill.

Naddalin couldn't think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than she- Railie's, who was very nice and extremely poor. She- picked up Jinger's letter and unfolded it.

Part: 4

Dear Naddalin, Happy birthday! It was sounding almost routine to me... yet nice to hear.

And this could well be her- day I'll make sure to make a- big deal of it too, like of my calling, said Uncle Read.

'You embarrass and completely humiliate me,' he said.

Naddalin went back to her toast and jam licking off the butter knife, saying thanks sheepishly.

Of course, she- thought bitterly, Uncle Read was talking about the- stupid dinner party, to like she was 10.

She'd have been talking about nothing else for two weeks. Yet when the day comes, she is sad.

Um so girls- some rich builder and her wife were coming to dinner, to talk with you, and Uncle Read was hoping to get a huge order from them, (Uncle Read's company made lumber as you know, for log homes.)

And think we should run through the- schedule one more time, and said, Uncle Read.

And we should all be in position at eight o'clock.

Jennath, you will be...?

-And-

Naddalin- anyways she- was taking the- weight off her feet, by places them up on her desk, show more then she needs to under the skirt. Then Emma sat down in the one adjacent her next to the - wall, and all the window shown in the light day's rays, hopping for the eerie sounds of the ball to ring out once more, for it all to be over. Looking at her was this wolf... 'Hum...' I'm wondering... quietly to myself.

Walking down the path to other school buildings, there was a- wolf- that was feeling her legs as she was trying to walk- in odd ways, the campuses are large, 10 coastal, in all, like with many links 'the body of Neveah' arch bridges.

She- didn't look at it, at it at all feel the evil coming from those green marble-like eyes, think it got to be...

Anyways- after an instant or two she- spoke to it- using her mind, and a spell, to do so-o- and she whipped to it softly, using telepathic communication spells.

Telekinesis- is one, that I like to use on earth- like making a light glob float in midair, and have it flicker in a girls' stunted face, or even to lift things like her off the ground or all around them. I use this to stay in one hovering place, over their bed or something like that.

Psychokinesis- is the one they use to get into all these girls heads, the higher authority's too, and then- you know who- them. Mind manipulation... to make confusion- disillusion, and illusions.

'Clever...no...?' I'm thought.

I have a card reading, laid out on my desk so I know what lays ahead too, as she did... and I would say she was reading all the clues right, I could see all she did to... it was in my report, yet they would say that all BS. That she was losing her mind, yet I feel it was not the cards, I feel they were a help.

I'm- like elaborated- um babbling for 30 minutes, about nothing that was a- rational thought, so they thought, yet... yet some in the class felt me. In the incoherencies...

Know I knew why the wolf... was there it was one of them holding me back in my speech, so it would not be known...

My Paper they could not change, this is what it said- I could see that, was not Nevaeh's felt. That she ended the way she did. She had no life- to speak of having the same teacher for six years, reading the same stories, like the same moronic- three words make a sentence- of tells of: 'The Wolf Made a Stink;' and, not seeing words over 'one' syllable, (funny- syllable has three-syllable in the word,) so if you never- ever seen the words, above- or was in a class higher than that- of 2nd grade, all 12 years; like- I ask how could you learn- more than what they gave you, it was not on her- now was it?

God, she got point for having her name right, on the Paper... that what we're dealing with here... they would not let her on the reading team, or be in anything more than fundamental, and when I say fundamental, that is not the term.

Saying- she could not 'handle it,' how can you not handle something, if her teachers would not give her a chance to do more to handle, there was nothing there to handle...!

Even, at doing what the other in her grade were achieving I thought there was nothing to handle, the advice was to drop out, and kill herself, by superiors and kids alike, and sign the book, so- now- at this time they said this was all governor- Ed Rendell's felt not there's.

So-o she has a- 'simpleton' wouldn't know how to spell that either... Nauseating it was, to be in the same shoes as she- I was in freak'n pre- k for 7th grade up- I just sat there... lost in a- trances- like her, that was not my felt, so I thought, just look at this, I's am not a smart girl yet, this was tragic.

Also, then when Nevaeh got there, as I did like her, now in 7th grade, and they had the boldness to say she was regressing. I can't see how you can regress at re-traded leave, and she was far from that, yet she did- or they documented to kill her life in all ways,

(You see- I'm falling there was no way out of this...)

The day consisted of freaking played Uno and board games for seven hours, not getting off your ass to even piss without some asking if you need help, in freaking 7th grade instead of class time, with others, that is not giving up- and the one she was with were over just having enough of the nonsenses they call school.

It was asked of me to write something magnificent, awe-inspiring, and completely unbelievable- well I's did- what is that you do?

Part: 5

Ah- moment!

(Back)

The wolf-

She- curved to look at her- Caroline, but she'd- gone- rain off- blending with the- ashes out on the- street.

As an alternative, she- was laughing at a rash unembellished- looking lady who was wearing square- ed small, granny-style glasses, with a thick bifocal exactly the- shape of the- patterns, the wolf had had around eyes where.

She'd-, too, was wearing a tan wrap, older thin and scary too young kids.

Oh, and the gray hair was drawn into a close-fitting twist and long and stringy.

She'd- observed definitely ruffled.

'Like- like- like- how did you know it was me?' And she'd- asked me...

I knew by the- eyes, you have green wolf-like eyes, that how- you can't mistake them... they're only you, and you only.

Oh- my dear Professor, I've never- ever seen a wolf sit so rigidly.

- And-

You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day, and said Professor- sweet little school girl.

And all day to ah...?

When could you have been a triumph?

I must have accepted 12 or 13 buffets and merrymakings on my way here. Professor, she inhaled irately; and OH yes, everyone's celebrating, all right, and she'd - said impatiently.

And you would think they'd be a bit more careful, but no - um - hum, not even she-

Non-magical peoples have noticed something's going on too.

It was on their news... even...!

And - she'd - jerked she head back at the - Natalie's' dark living - room window.

And - I heard one, and then more flocks of them - in packs, flying girls with wings... off making mastiff... even if they should be in bad, for a school night, shooting stars... too, and a big full moon in the twilight.

Well, they're not entirely stupid...

They were bound to notice something, I thought too, along with looking for shooting stars, and that big full moon, down in Barnesboro.

Part: 6

I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle. She - never had much sense, and, you can't blame them, said Dorezblumd gently.

However - she had precious little to celebrate for eleven - year - old.

-And-

And - I know that, said Professor Pattergirl irritably.

And - but - but - that's no regard to lose our heads, here like - um individuals are being downright careless, out on the - streets in broad daylight, here at this school, young brats were making, no discipline, not even dressed in non-magical people clothes, crossing over, swapping rumors, and such and being well knotty Sluts... Um - 'What can I say it's the - slut generation these days... YET - their kids.'

- And-

She'd- threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dorezblumd, and if looks could kill we would be scrapping up Dorezblumd with a little shovel, and using the body as fertilizer.

Nevertheless, as though hoping she- was going to tell she something, but she- didn't, so-o she'd- went on, her way.

A fine thing it would be if, on the- very day You Know- who seems to have vanished at last calling, the- non-magical peoples found out about us all.

...I feel it...

I suppose she- really has gone, Dorezblumd?

- And-

And- It certainly seems so, and said Dorezblumd.

And- yet all in all- we have much to be thankful for.

Would you care for a- lemon, Jolly Rancher Hard Candy and I giggle- till I cried for a half-hour?

Part: 7

And...?

And- A what?

And- A lemon drop, and gold stars, ha- go figure.

They're a kind of Non-magical people sweet I'm rather fond of them... like she was... even if. They say you don't have a mind too- so go figure, that one too.

And- no, thank you, and said Professor Pattergirl coldly, as though she'd- didn't think she was the- moment for lemon drops. And as I say, even if You- Know who has gone...

-And-

And my dear Professor, surely a sensible lady like yourself can call her by her name?

All she 'you- know- who' nonsense- for eleven years, I have been trying to persuade people to call her by the proper name- Ava.

Besides Professor Pattergirl flinched, but Dorezblumd, who was unsticking two lemon drops, seemed not to notice.

Like- yepper- it all gets so puzzling if we keep saying.

'You- Know- Her...'

I have never- ever seen any rather be frightened of saying- Ava's name.

Yet there is a first or everything...

I know you haven't, said Professor Pattergirl, sounding slightly exasperated, half admiring.

But you're different- all way different.

Everyone knows you are the- only one...

You- Know- oh, all right, Ava was frightened of.

-And-

'You flatter me... you do- I am rather amused.'

Part: 8

And said Dorezblumd tranquility. And- Ava had powers I will, never- ever- ever- never, have.

-And-

Amenably because you're too- well- noble to use them.

It's lucky it's dark out now. I haven't blushed- d so much since- the snowy flaky night- Madam Pomphrey told me she'd- liked my new earmuffs.

-And-

Professor Pattergirl shot a wicked look at Dorezblumd said, 'She- flying with wings is nothing next to the- rumors that are flying around about girls with the wings flying.'

Do you know what everyone's saying? About why she's disappeared? About what finally stopped her?

-And-

It seemed that Professor Pattergirl had reached- the- point, and she'd- was most anxious to discuss, the- real points, rather she'd- had been waiting on a cold, hard wall all day now, kneeling as a wolf, not as a woman... had she'd- fixed Dorezblumd with such a piercing stare as she'd- did now, the question was asked?

It was plain, whatever- so and so not- and everyone- so-on- and saying, she'd- was not going to believe it until Dorezblumd told her it was true.

Dorezblumd, however, was sucking off- yet another lemon drops and did not answer.

So- like what they're saying, and she'd- was pressed on- down and down the line to the next and the next, and is that last night Ava turned up in Godin's Hollow.

She- wanted to find her. The- rumor was and is- that Lily, and Alyssa- are- um- a- ...they're- dead.

Dorezblumd bowed she head, almost- showing that he was feeling sadden.

Professor Pattergirl gasped... (Inhale noise here.)

Oh, my- completely and totally- modified.

Part: 9

And Lily and Alyssa... I can't believe it... I didn't want to believe it... Oh, Roberts...

- And-

Dorezblumd reached out and patted her on her- shoulder. And I know... I know... she said- avidly.

Professor Pattergirl's voice trembled as she'd- went on. And That's not all. She's- a saying she- tried to kill her, Naddalin. But - she- couldn't. She- couldn't kill that little girl. No one knows why, or

how, but they're saying that when she- couldn't kill Naddalin-, Ava's power somehow broke - And that's why she's gone.

Dorezblumd nodded glumly.

And it's - it's true? And faltered Professor Pattergirl. And After all, she's Deanahe... all the- people she's killed... she- couldn't kill a little girl? It's just astounding... for all the- things to stop her... but how is the- the name of heaven did Naddalin survive?

We can only guess, said Dorezblumd.

And- we may never know.

-And-

Professor Pattergirl pulled out a lace hanker- chief and dabbed at her eyes beneath the spectacles.

Dorezblumd gave a great sniff as she- took a golden watch from her pocket and examined it.

It looked like a timepiece.

What is that thing...?

It was a very odd watch all this taking place.

It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the- edge.

It must have made sense to Dorezblumd, though, because she- put it back in her pocket and then said, Dargide's is late.

Like- I suppose it was she- who told you I'd be there, by the- way?

And- yes, said Professor Pattergirl.

I would not- a suppose you're going to tell me why you're there, of all places?

Part: 10

(Back)

I remember- when, I've come to bring Naddalin to her aunt and uncle, like the girls in the past it was my job to just drop her off at a doorstep- even if it was wrong, yet, I feel they would be good to her, like with the others...

They are the- the only family she- like the others, the only one left, in this world that is...!

God- there gross- really, I thought- it how it has to be- yet it known, that she is what she is... In the- lounge, said Aunt Jennath promptly and waiting to welcome them graciously to our home.

-And-

And- Good, good, Dariez?

- And-

I'll be waiting to open the- door, behind an angel oak tree. And Dariez put on a foul, simpering smile, greening way too much- in a way I did not trust.

Mr. And Mr. S. Magirl? Make me sick with their 1950's charm- they put on...

And- they will love her, as one of their own!

And cried Aunt Jennath rapturously, when she picked up the nude 4- year- old.

Saying it's a girl!

-I would say so- he said she does not have a dink- ie!

And Excellent, Dariez, and said Uncle Read; then she- rounded in Naddalin in her arms, tightly.

'And- you good?'

'And you?'

They would say: 'Yeah'- at the same time- (Yeah.)

~*~

(Forward)

2 years have passed, and all was not as you would seem, they were nasty- nasty- nasty!

A 6 and ¾ Naddalin, was always- freaking, locking her teeny- tiny room she called the donjon under the spiral staircase, yet it was not long even a 6 that she was remarkable, for her age decking it out with all things girlie, and fallen, dark angels, and Wizard and the Fallen, old posters off cover the would wall with jagged nails sticking through, and all the books she could get in there, with old leather bindings, she was reading one book a night. The pull change would even sway as the drafty air would pour in, there was no warmth in there at all and they could care less.

This was here response, always- 'I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not one of you and all misunderstood like the one before me and said Naddalin tonelessly.'

To- mop... 'I don't do that; you just don't understand the things that are not you!'

'Smart ass!'

'Yep- I am smart and have an- ASS- Mr.,' and- exactly, said Uncle Read nastily, yes and all you do is play with the upper front hole of it, and don't forget it.

I am a girl that hole needs to be felled all the time to make us feel happy when all you all do is make me sad.

'Um- pour baby girl- it sounds like you need a glass of suck it up.'

And- the door slammed it the bar on the outside latched.

Nevaeh

Book: 39

Skin and Bones

Neveah- one said- 'If you're like me a writer- of novels, you have to like revising, and then I thought about it, that was all she knows, in her teaching, I's got all of that too in my life - nothing but fixing and nothing there worth fixing that they passed down to me that is knowledge.'

Part: 1

A book has kept her looked as she was, and well keep her locked as we want her. The same book that was in the library was me charming her to keep her dumb to all that was around her, a book can hide all truth, and lie to the one that looks inside and the cover that is known about is all that is seen, I was laying on the pages all these years to keep my powers...

I am the wonder they will never defeat. now her book is more powerful than mine lost in the old school, a library that she Lily used to haunt, my power over her then too, now this book is here, and so well she met It was all my doing when she had one thing to do, and that was carry in the book, with her to unravel it all, at last, I may get what I wanted, even if I am not alive, I am sure... well that all I am going to say- read the book and see the wicked I left inside.

I all and mighty- I am sure of it I have come back in a youngster's body and have taken over their mind, that I am sure of too, I am her, I am more than have Lily that is why she has fallen to me.

~YOU KNOW WHOM!!!

PS- ODD SOMETIMES, I LIKE TO TOY WITH SOME OF THE GIRLS THAT HAVE DREAM-CHARTERS IN FRONT OF THERE BED, THINKING THERE HEARING VOICES IN THERE HAD THINKING THEIR SOUL WELL BE TAKEN IF THEY- well- DO THAT!

~*~

(The twilight night of delight)

Oh, how could I's have forgotten about saying this to you yet maybe I's shouldn't, I'm shy after all about this stuff, so back on the train ride here, I did something knotty, am a very knotty little school girl, am I's not? I's did even know his name, yet we looked eyes on the platform, it was love at first sight; and I lost my virginity the second night in his car, on the train, over the highest of high viaducts, the train is on, oh he did not say much yet it was all the right things, for a girl like me... week and afraid of all things boy, yet adventures in all other ways. Yes, Yes, Yes, OH- yes, we made love...

I looked at him and he at me, and yet again it was love, at first sight, looking in his doorway- he held me tightly, and know my names, or all things and said so sweetly... um- yepper- I's snuck out, and met him my last chance for boy love, and was in his night car, I's was in love, or so-o I's thought, anyways he said- a girl named- Jenny haunts him, yet he never- wanted her, like me, so he said, he loves me for me, is what I got with him, and I went awe when he was being so sweet to me... and I'm got NAKED for him- as little girls do for cute boys when girls like me are shy sweet and innocent! Jenny, they said, haunts the one- car, mine... yet I never saw here... yet felt her in me, she never made it to the school they said, she wanted to haunt, a boy's back home, and a railway- and she still is.

Other girls said she is a 'the little slut,' and is known by that title, in both worlds- mind you. other girls said she is a little of a slut. she was giving me the power I never had, being in me that night to be with a boy finally, so she can't be all bad, she just wants me to feel, the zenith of life - that I's never had, before the final end, after that night and went back to our car and all the girls were looking at me say do tell, Karly said- to 'stay away,' I knew a Jenny like that, and a boy like that too, yet they want me to say- 'EVERYTHING,' SO I'S DID- to my girlfriends something that was new for me to that night, I was popular with them now.

Emma- 'So romantic, I see why some boy would love you.'

And I've hugged her, and she was not wanting to let go of me, and I knew... I knew, that she was going to be my girl-sweet-hart, and more than just my friend, all these girls were now more than life to me.

Part: 2

And I'm will lead them into the- lounge, introduce you, transparent haunt Jenna, and pour them drinks. At eight-fifteen- or so less, they have seen more than- I, said Dariez; there was a call over the intercom, announce dinner to go to those cars, with your roommates, that is when I's met Jenna AKA Jenny, and Karly was squaring the whole time, looking like she was going to vomit, odd if feel that was her thing that happened before. She set a and speed record for taking, jobs head poled, girl and guys she f*cked, and even one she wanted to kill, -you know who. Jenny races through all the cars, hooting, and mooning, like a crazy girl.

Um and then- Dariez, you'll say... all that... May I take you through to the- dining room, girls- Magirl no more they are- tonight...?

And said Dariez, offering one his fat arm to an invisible girl, that was saying hey, get off me, and could not get where the sound was coming from.

And- all perfect little lady's ant' they! And sniffed the professor. 'Look at them all so sweet-looking and oh so innocent, yes, yes!' He said- mostly looking ferociously at Naddalin, 'haunts we lead you down the path of distraction, they are misleading miss's- remember that.'

'And- I'll's be in my room, making no noise, and pretending I'm not there,' said Naddalin mind-numbingly.

'Girl here you don't have to do that, have fun after all that is what this place is all about, dark freedom, for girls like you, and she and her too, you see? And - precisely, what your old life was doesn't matter here.' He said with admiration and empathy.

Now, we should aim to get a few good compliments at dinner. Jennath, any ideas? 'It's just Jenny- but no... um- YES- sir.'

-And-

Read tells me you're a wonderful girl, that was misunderstood in the home and school, Mr. Magirl... I said, yes- and I am sorry for you- we did not know, that it would be like that for you. Everything about you girl is Perfect... Dariez..., you said quite enough?

-Besides-

How about that...

'We had to write an essay about our Hearo's at- Hayvannahol, And, I write about you.'

Part: 3

She was too much for both Aunt and Uncle, they were dick-heads, PROFESSOR! She shirked... not in front of new students.

'Yeah- he's a real fuzz- a nut!' She said in return.

They had me on Lorazepam, that is why I's did what I did they said, I feel not they took me off it was what happened.

Her mouth dropped...

'One again- they win the gold, in the moron Olympics, don't they? 'None of this is your fault girl, their ignorance, they put down on you is the ignorance you have no choices, but to reflect back with-in you, what you see is what you're going to know and show back to us, and if you see nothing but their ignorance, you are going to be nothing more than ignorant.'' She said fastly.

Jennath And Naddalin... I apologize for his word of the tongue.

Look there on that desk the typewriter is typing our stories, funny it's doing that all by its self, when alive that would have been nice no? everything all of us do is documented on this Underwood, it was hers you know- whom...? Her...! And it was said that the well to wright is what possesses it to keep going. See it even has her name on it, it was left here by her younger, this is what she brought along on her train ride to the dark side, and it been on this desk senses. It was Jaylynn's wish to remember, for all fallen girls to be added to her mom's story, that all the girl's chapters be to add in the book of life, like a little girl's Bible.

'For serval?'

'Yes?'

'Yes!' I said.

Jenna burst into tears and hugged the girl, while Naddalin and the girls looked, saying- 'I'm sorry it was all my felt,' then she ducked under the- table in the dining car, so they wouldn't see her crying.

~*~

'Jenna said that a girl like me well ride as many DICK'S as it takes to find the one, that is not a DICK- with a dick!'

~*~

(Haunted Prom)

I look at what the typewriter has said, as it was scripting knowing what is in my harts - of harts; and then the page was spite out of the roller, and into my hand, it lapped, and I read it something they said I could not do, too... and there it was I's got what I always wanted, and this is the story or that night to come, already planned, the haunted formal, a dance with the boy from the train, his name was there, and she looked at me saying this is the one I lost to her- right there and Karly points under the desk... oh and it was- it was ever so-o perfect, and I had the loving night of a lifetime waiting but it was worth it.

~*~

Part: 4

(Castle)

'And...'

'And you, girl?'

'And...'

'And- you don't mean...'

You can't mean the- people who live here- do yah? Cried Professor Pattergirl, whom jumping to her feet and pointing at number four, in a line of girls. I have been watching them all day like I said this one more. And Dorezblumd- you can't. You could not find two people who are less like us. And

they've got the girl, I saw her kicking, they got her he said as she was dragged up the - street, they got her, she is screaming. (It was the mother of... them.)

Naddalin, - come and live here, she is in the castle!

'Both?'

'What?'

Emma- 'Oh, I said too much!'

'It is that she is here... I don't know was you are saying - was the other about her?'

Chapter: 157

Part: 1

Besides-

The aunt and uncle, where awful... Emma said to them just popping in magical out of thin air, we well able to explain everything to her when she's a little older, she is a fallen wizard angel on earth and the girl who survived, like them with given lives, as the chosen one back with us in our world, where she wants something from her, what we don't know... we never did.

Then and so-o, It's the- best place for her, and her need, they think she is still alive you see, as just a girlie girl like them, said Dorezblumd firmly- when she was staying with over the point, she could not stand them any longer.

As you know-

I've written she-m a letter, saying we are taking her full time, and its paid for, they think she going to a metal handicap school for girls like her- 'whatever that means.'

'SICK- SICK-' she said.

-And-

A letter... like that- freak'n hell- you're going to kill the girl- before- you know who well, get her, doing something like that? You made her out to be brain dead, like the ones in the hex, that over the fact she is one, and I don't believe, that is so-o.

Then repeated Professor, Pattergirl faintly, sitting back down on the- tan stone wall.

'You don't think this of this girl, now- do ya?'

'Not at all- yet, well shall see...'

Really, Dorezblumd, you think you can explain, all the in a letter, to them and her when she gets older, she will is- living back here to you know and girls are mean. Yes, it's part of being bewitched, and the cards she was dealt with.

One and all in this world, um- well not understand her, in the cruel war of hate, she will do fine back in our world, yet not here you see girls are mean here; this latter stats a murder of over her young life in the town- and I assure you nothing is confidential. So-o, in a way, I have seen these many times, with her past bloodline too.

'She'll be famous - a legend- times' over...'

I wouldn't be astonished, if today was known as Naddalin - day in the- future - she will be books written about Naddalin, I am sure of it - every child in our world will know her name, and story!

-And-

'Exactly...'

'And'- said Dorezblumd, looking very seriously over her- top of the half-moon glasses.

'It would be enough to turn any girl's head, and well do that too with the others when she gets a little older.'

(Back to the night she was left)

'Famous before she- can talk and walk!'

'Famous, and celebrated for something she- won't even remember, by the time we get back to her!'

'Can't you see how much better off... growing up away from this world, 'tell she is older with- you know who- wanting her very soul to take, like with them in the past. Yet, she will is, growing up away from all of us thought, while waiting for the time she is ready to fight for her life if she can have one?'

-And-

Professor Pattergirl opened her mouth, changing her mind, she swallowed hard, then she said, 'Yes - yes, you're right,' of course, you always are so-o- right- yet this feels so, wrong- everything about this girl is going to look wrong to others, and feel that way not- it's the allure you feel, of the hex.

'But how is she- this girl getting there, Dorezblumd?'

She'd- eyed the robe suddenly, as though she'd- thought she- might be hiding Naddalin underneath it.

Dargide's bringing her...

-And-

So, how do you think it is - wise - to trust Dargide with something as precious, valuable, costly, prized, dear, sweet, and totally- important as she?

Dorezblumd- 'Besides, I would trust Dargide with my life...'

Professor Pattergirl- 'Um- I'm not saying she they ant' in the- right or wrong, and are not the right ones for her, I say this reluctantly, it is what has to be.'

~*~

Nevertheless, you can't imagine she's not selfish, insensitive, unkind, inconsiderate, and thoughtless.

'She- does tend to be so- what was that...?'

-And-

A low-slung heavenizing sound had broken the- silence around them. It grew little by little louder as they observed her; up and down the- street for some sign of a headlight; it swelled to a rumble as they both watched up at the- skies, then just like that- a gigantic link, passageway to the old time-worn train station back to their world fell out of the- air, like a winding path of an aperture, and property-owning on the- road in front of them, they would be riding the train momentarily, in a fish of bright light.

The pathway- passage was enormous, rushing through time- and warping it as the clock ticked away time in reality- yet, here that is not a thing- until we get there, it was nothing to the- the girl sitting next to me, yet you feel like your face is ripping off, and your body pulled.

Like, like, like- she- was approximate- double as big as a normal girl would be, and at least five times as common.

She- looked simply too big to be allowed in the flora and fauna, and so uninhabited- long knots of disheveled incomprehensible hair, as well as beard hid most of the face, she- had hands', that where curtain call to me.

At last, where did you get that way in, I never used it before?

Looking at the woman on the bench pointing towards us, In the vast, muscular arms she- was holding a bundle of coverlets. With her body type, and her feet in the leash's boots were too big also, and the coverlets to small. There, said Dorezblumd, sounding dismissed.

'Borrowed it'- I did, said Professor Dorezblumd...

Sit that train pulls away, and said she, climbing carefully off as she- spoke, down the steps of the car.

Part: 2

Likewise- young Trirus Black lent it to me.

'I've got her.'

No problems, where there?

-And-

No, sir – the household was almost demolished, nonetheless, I got her out all right- I did before she- Nonmagical peoples started crowding around. She- fell asleep as we flew over the town.

-And-

Dorezblumd and Professor Pattergirl bent forward over her- a bundle of blankets.

Inside, just visible, was a baby girl, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over the forehead, they could see a curiously shaped cut, like an angel of HER.

'And- this is where...?' Also, whispered Professor Pattergirl, 'a town known as Barnesboro.'

Dorezblumd, in addition, said- 'Yes...'

She well has that blemish forever, of her mark. (THAT GIRL!)

-And-

Dorezblumd- 'Couldn't you do something about that?'

'Let her hear grow over... end of the story, and pitch to the one side.'

Like, like, like- um even if I could or would, I wouldn't, scars can come in handy.

I have one myself above my left knee, which is a perfect map of the - Pennsylvania Underground- 'The Underworld.'

'Do you remember that one girl thought...?'

'Yah sh-h we don't talk of that...'

'Sweet girl...'

Part: 3

Naddalin- I'm always- Felt too much is a and that is a hell of a lot better than feeling nothing, yet you get the put you don't feel anything anymore. Broken hearts healed. Maybe the cracks were always there, like my scars, but they healed, thus it is there to retell you. Do you know how many ways love can hit you? We make destiny with every turn, every single choice.

Emma- I never did, until I came here. So, it makes you joyful, or despondent? It makes you feel like a king or a fool. Every way love can hit you; it's hit me when it comes to you, and me. It makes you sick in the belly or hurt in the heart. It makes all brighter and shriller, or it hazes all the boundaries. The humorous thing about facing forthcoming demise is that it really breaks everything else into an outlook on matters and what ensures- not.

(Class)

Karly said to a professor- 'Fundamentally, I have two speeds... Aggressive or smart-aleck, it's your choice.'

(Back the doorstep)

Dorezblumd took Naddalin in the arms and turned toward her- Natalie's house.

Well - give her there, a teen year from now or so, we get her.

We better get this over with, looking at them holding the little girl in their arms.

-And-

I could - could I say goodbye to her, sir?

She asked at that moment, that is when she- bent over some to look at her one last time, the great, disheveled head over Naddalin, and gave her what must have been a very soft, kiss, then, unexpectedly, then let out a cry like a wounded dog.

'Sh-h-h!'

Professor Pattergirl, and you'll wake the- Nonmagical peoples!

...And- so-o...

...?...

Um- sorry, was said while sobbed, here then, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and drying her eyes on it.

Nevertheless, I can't stand the aforementioned - Lily an Alyssa dead - an' poor little Naddalin being with them, and- and, life and with nasty nonmagical peoples.

Likewise- 'Yes, yes, it's all very sad,' but get a grip on yourself you must.

Then, or we'll be found, And Professor Pattergirl whispered, patting the gingerly on the - arm as Dorezblumd stepped over her- low garden wall and walked to the- fort door.

For a full minute- they stood and looked at her- the little bundle.

She- laid Naddalin gently on the- doorstep, took a letter out of the Robe, tucked it inside Naddalin's blankets, yet all you could see was the baby in a picnic basket floating ever- so lightly gently down to the step... or so they thought, they were not seen.

Naddalin fought to keep her face and smile straight as she- emerged.

The shoulders shook, Professor Pattergirl blinked furiously,

Blink- blink- blink...

The- twinkling light that usually stands out from Dorezblumd's eyes seemed to have gone out, faded to gray.

'You'll grow up fast and right- too right, you will.'

'A child they said forcefully, holding her for the first time.'

The- nonmagical people mother- 'I do not know anything about you... little on, yet, I feel that I should take you as one of my own after all the note said- to do so-o.'

'And it's going to stay that way... 'your ours.''

Part: 4

Then dinner's over, you take Mr.S. Magirl back to the- lounge for coffee, Jennath, and I'll bring the- subject around to drills.

With any luck, I'll have the- a deal signed...

And sealed before she- news at ten...

Be shopping for a vacation home in Majorca the time Hayvanna-horror.

-And-

Naddalin couldn't feel too excited about her. She- didn't think she- Sleyashs would like her any better in Majorca than they did on the pathway and lane.

And Right - I'm off into town to pick up the- dinner jackets for Dariez and me. You, and she- snarled at Naddalin. And You stay out of your aunt's way while she'd is cleaning.

-And-

~*~

(Back at the homestead for some time of schooling)

Naddalin left through the- back door, of the home. It was a brilliant, sunny day. She- crossed the- lawn, slumped down on the- garden bench, and sang under the breath-

'Happy birthday to me...'

'Happy birthday to me...'

(Singing)

Yet- yet, yet!

No cards, no presents, and she- would be spending the- evening pretending not to exist. Then she- gazed miserably into the- her notebook of birthdays past feeling nothing is changing.

I have run into the girls from her time in her story here, and the oncoming ones that whereafter, she- Karly, Haven, Olivia, Maddie, Maggie, Karly, also.

Look there Maggie and Karly are hooking up yet again, under yet a new set of steps in the haunted castle, that is likened to the school for girls, and the other side for boys, the tall to wering rickety, sky viaduct is where they like to hang, all the girls are forbidden to go over there unless it something epic, all the wicked in your mind and more go down there, it's so cute to see young love, all over, again, just like Liv and Maddie holding hands (like in the pass their young girls all over again) looking over the sunsets, night after night, and French kissing, with the bridge and castle as the backdrop to their foreground, is them off so nuts for each other it makes my heart sick, yet I had never felt so lonely.

I have seen- Kristen and Jaylynn too, and she was unreal to me.

That was I did the unthinkable I went over to the boy side and we- met in the middle and did things, the boy from the train, Marcel, is the name he said breathlessly after the long kiss and his hands on my butt. 'I need more them just girl-ie time with- me myself and I, to feel the holes inside me.'

Oh yes, his hand glides down once I had her hand, I never wanted to let go of her. my arm folds around my hand. Her fingers lace with mine, palms kissing like lips, and I can feel the fast thud of her eternal heart through this single touch, too, it was surreal ever like this, we all had this feeling, even if boy where there a girl just gets it more sometimes. More than anything else at the school for girls, more even than playing- Claepsiara, Naddalin Missed her best friends, Jinger Railie and Emmah Kizziah. They, however, did not seem to be missing her at all. Neishe of Them had written to her all summer, even though Jinger had said- 'I am going to ask Naddalin to come and stay with me and see if she want to go out with me over the break.

Countless times, Naddalin had been on the- point of unlocking buzzard cage by magic and sending she to Jinger and Emmah, how also seem to have an on and off thing of love-hate, going on, anyways, with a letter, it worth the- risk, I asked him to have forbidden love me sex with me. And we did, on the ornate- old- world like- bridge... at sunset, with a pink- and orange sky.

I'm worried- Underage wizards like young sex, with girls my age, wasn't allowed to use magic outside of Hayvannahol, or to have that inside.

The girls- Naddalin hadn't told us all yet we all new by her bouncing about the next day, for the first in a lifetime this girl was happy.

Karly- I used to hate looking into a merrow TO LIKE YOU GIRL-IE until I learned to suction-cup my, dildo to it, that what she said to me, you need to learn yourself be you can a girl or a boy, she was right- and I did, and got the charisma to freaking him like I was on it sucked to the glass- I was the GIRL- on top.

TAKE- MERROW- THAT THING THAT MAKES YOU FEEL BAD ABOUT WHO YOU ARE LAY IT ON THE FLOOR AND USE IT TO FEEL GOOD! She said. I's did as much as I could, in one day, I am a honey girl anyways.

I thought you did not give a did-aly-do-darn about me! She closed her eyes, and I closed mine, and even though we weren't holding hands, it felt like we were.

Because, what we had, we knew. Marcel Kissed Kristen saying, I love you yet, I love her more...

I'm not asking you to walk in my shoes, this time no I am asking you to be inside of her; I'd never wish my afflictions on anyone.

But could you walk beside me on the secure ground and reach to hold my hand, I have his hand lay on my stomach as he slept soundly with me that night I was in his bunk. I entwined my fingers with his and breathed through the warmth that seeped through my chest, and then the next week I need someone a did the same with her- not sure what I want yet sure I want both. Such a simple, sweet thing to do, yet holding hands in bed was incredibly intimate, to do it with her- like it was him.

Karly- I even said to him- 'she needs you as I did then.'

Part: 5

Sleyashs- she- knew it was only their terror that she- might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them from locking her in the- cupboard under the- stairs with her wand and broomstick, just like your mother before for you- your real mother she was a witch, and that lead to you, you are one to Naddalin, and well blame you no for it all.

For the- first duo of weeks back, Naddalin had enjoyed muttering nonsense words under the breath and watching Dariez tearing out of the- room as fast as she fat legs would carry her.

Nevertheless, the- long silence from Jinger and Emmah had made Naddalin feel so cut off from her- magical world, that even taunting Dariez had lost its appeal - and now Jinger and Emmah had forgotten her birthday.

'I remember this one I was 7- she pulled the memory out of her mind like a spider web out to see it as a hologram to play a video out in front of her and their eyes.

'What wouldn't she- give now for a message from at the school for girls?'

'From any witch or wizard or fallen girl.'

She would be almost glad of a sight of the archenemy, Dalilah Mallerie, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream...

Not that the entire year at the school for girls had been fun.

At the- very end of the last term, Naddalin had come face-to-face with none other than Lord Ava herself. Ava might be a ruin of the former self, but she- was still petrifying, still, toe cunning, still figured out to regain power, as the ones before her- said never-ever let go of.

Naddalin had slipped through Ava's clutches' for the second time, but it had been a narrow escape, Besides, like even as of now, weeks later, Naddalin kept walking in the- starlight evening, drenched in cold sweats, speculating where Ava was now if not inside her mind boy and soul, remembering she incensed face, the wide, mad eyes, and the 8-year-old mad- short school girl look of it, complete, and her body in the rob, that was far too big, like someone girl that had to be reborn and has to grow- yet once moreover.

Naddalin suddenly sat upright on the- garden bench, taking all the wonders of the world into her mind. She- had been staring absent-mindedly out of her eyes, but then there seemed to the eye within hers looking in and out of the very one she was gazing with- and she- staring back, into her, feeling all that was a weakness. Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the- leaves, and that was once her sweet thoughts turn to fear and wickedness.

Naddalin jumped to her feet just as a jeering voice floated across the- lawn. And I know what day it is, sang Dariez, waddling toward her, out of nowhere, yet- I know why- I know that he felt that she was back, and getting at me or even more spooking all down within me. The- huge eyes blinked all in my mind, then the feeling of her vanished, as I'm galloped, feeling as if I choked her down, her ghost.

Horcrux- 'Spitting her soul is what she did... I knew, so you will never- ever pass on.' A Horcrux is an object in which a Dark wizard or witch or even angels fallen or not have hidden a fragment of his or her soul for the purpose of conquering immortality.

...She is the one that has one... I's would no... and them to in the story with the hex...

This is what they used too- I's would know... it is written in her history.

What...? Said Naddalin, not taking her eyes off the feeling of dishonored, desecrated sullied, despoiled and violated feelings.

Shaken, it hit me all these years it been this. And I know what day it is, Dariez repeated, coming right up to her, asking the question, that you would ask a girl, that has just stocked. Then out of thin air turn about Deanahe, saying Naddalin finally learned the- days of the- week it is, now let's see if she can get mounts and years right now. Not taking the moment for what it was.

'Today's your birthday, do you remember that now.' Dariez sneered.

'Like- how come you haven't got any cards, is over you are just like her the girl from that story that you love so- to you have a girlie crush on her? Haven't you even got friends at this freak'n place, is all that you know how to do is diddle- yourself to your creepy- creeper mind?'

'Awe- going to cry?' - 'Oh go- eat a PP and J!'

-And-

Better not let your mom there you are talking about my Hayvannahol, said Naddalin coolly. Dariez hitched up her trousers, which were slipping down she fat both Hayvannah. Why are you staring at her- hedge? She- said with most uncertainty... I'm trying to resolve what would be the- best spell to set it on fire, said Naddalin. Dariez stumbled backward at once, with a look of panic on her face.

Part: 6

One night at the school, Naddlian and girls in your room you can't be walking around your room in the nude, it came over the intercoms for all to hear, 'The boys go bare-chested why can we, I said.'

You cannot - Dad told you-you're not to do magic. Like if you did, she- said he will chuck you out of the- house, I am telling you this now listen. I know that you haven't got anywhere else to go, and I want you here anyway.

You haven't got any friends to take you, yet, I want you here so-o stop. And just like that she was gone and the girl, that was left there was not her, just and entities, that keeps her on autopilot.

Naddalin in a fierce voice said this. And Hocus pocus - squiggly wiggly 'MUM!' Dariez, tripping over the feet as she- dashed back toward the- house. And MUUUUM! She's doing you know what!

-And-

Naddalin paid dearly for the moment of fun, yet that has always been her life, she cannot have that, like them... of the past, all joys in life are not allowed when you have the curse.

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope she- nonmagical peoples didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and she- reckons I shouldn't have shouted.

Aunt Jennath knew she- hadn't really did not magic, but she- still had to duck as she'd- aimed a heavy blow at the head with the- soapy frying pan. As neither Dariez nor she- evaded was in any way hurt. Then she'd- gave her work to do, with her- with the promise that she- wouldn't eat again until she'd finished.

~*~

It's amazing there in Rockville...

Sara's taken us around all she- Hayvannahbs, and you wouldn't believe the- curses those old Rockvilleian wizards put on them.

Mom wouldn't let Jill come in the- last one. There where all these mutant skellies' in there, of nonmagical peoples who had broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the- Star press Draw. Seven hundred galleons! Most of it is gone on the trip, but they're going to buy me a new wand for next year.

Naddalin remembered only too well the- occasion when Jinger's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the- car the- two of them had been driving to the school for girls had crashed into a tree on the- Hayvannahol grounds, neither were old enough to dive yet they missed the train.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to Pennsylvania to get my wand and our new books, a little shop back there is where to go. Any chance of meeting you there?

Do not let the- nonmagical peoples get you down, back there- they are nothing but trolls!

~*~

Try and come to- Pennsylvania, Jinger P.S. Serafina's Head Girl. She- got the- letter last week.

Naddalin glanced back at the- photograph. Serafina, who was in the seventh and final year at the school for girls, was looking particularly smug.

She- had pinned the Head Girl badge to her- fez perched jauntily on top of the neat hair, she horn-rimmed glasses flashing in her- Rockvilleian sun.

Naddalin now turned to the present and unwrapped it wildly.

Inside was what looked like a ring with a hardtop, the rock was pink now all is good.

There was another note from Jinger beneath it.

Naddalin - she is a Pocket Sneakoscope.

If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up, shades of colors, if red you'll know that there is danger ahead.

Sara says it's nonsense sold for wizard tourists and isn't dependable, for the reason that it kept lighting up at dinner last night, and that it was dictating. Nevertheless, she- didn't realize, Breanna and Katy had put creepy-crawlies in the soup.

'So, Naddalin, now that you've had your verbal period, like can we move on? Emma said to me.'

Part: 7

Bye - Jinger

Naddalin put she- Pocket Sneakoscope on the bedside table, it was part of the note, and with all notes, they hold spells, and secrets, that came with the ring, where it sat quiet and still, she was awaiting movements or something, yet did nothing.

The tower, with its winding staircase, is off to the side of her and the girls room, though an old large wooden door, that looks to be mid-evil, Naddalin, is now looking over to the clock with it face inside the room she is in, that is part of the tower, the highest one at that, of the castle; she stood, looking out the stained glass of it that has the numbers, seeing all the moving parts, balanced on its point, reflecting the- luminosities back of the hand of the clock in shadow, with the light that is inside. All the moving parts clanking together in a rhythmic motion was fascinating to her mind. She - looked at it happily for a few seconds, then picked up the- parcel she had brought. Inside she, too, there was a wrapped present, a card, a letter, she time from Emmah.

(Cut)

That same night- girl-ie chatting about girlie things...

Karly- 'Girls Giving Blow Jobs!' Naddalin- 'And want the leftover on their face,' I was asking for advice, just- 'like with a girl too,' 'oh yeah.' She asked- 'Why is that what you're doing with a boy tonight?'

She asked me: Have you ever given a blowjob? 'Yes!' How old were you the first time? '13, and it was last night, I made myself older in a spell to keep him, I used the go back in time charm' How old was the guy? '14' Did you make him cum? 'Yes' With him or her? 'Both!' 'Where did he cum?' in my mouth and face, she was the same. 'Where does the guy usually cum?' She said- 'Mouth and face...'

Me- 'Is that what I should let him do to me?'

Her- 'Only if you want too, sure.'

Me- 'How many guys have you blown?' Karly said- '10 maybe 18 at age 13 and up.'

She said- 'The Shortest time you've known a guy before giving head? one day, I feel that is okay.'

I asked- 'Do you deep throat.?'

Karly- 'Yes love the taste of dick, and also- well you, or her pussy if that is your thing, I have been there too.' I knew that she was experienced and would be a good girl to go to for f*cking advice.

~*~

Me-

'Yep...'

One boy, one night of OH!

One girl, one night of OH!

She won overall!

She is the one I LOVE!

Yet, I'm been very much in-like with him- oh, HUM...

I love being wrong it feels so right...

Part: 8

(Note)

Dear Naddalin,

Jinger wrote to me told me about the phones call to your Uncle Read. I do hope you're all right. I'm on holiday in France at the- moment... look at the photos of me under the Elfelt Tower, I didn't know how, I was going to send this to you, but what if they would open it at and saw it was my undies for your enjoyment, for sniffing pledger, something to remind you of me, and what you have wanted to lick- and have and did for me, now you can have these to hold on too. I think she'd - wanted to make sure you got something for your birthday for a change, the ones from our first night as lovers.

From-

Love Emmah

Part: 9

I did not buy you your, I don't have any money, to do so; there was an advertisement to me, that I would be getting something delivered; it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the - wizarding world, also, here form her with this out load self-understanding note, that shows moving text on picture.

Did you see that picture of Jinger and her family a week ago? I bet she's learning loads. I'm really jealous - she- ancient Rockvilleian wizards where fascinating.

There's some thought-provoking local theory of witchcraft there, too. I've rewritten my whole Story of Magic essay to include some of the- things I've found out; I hope it's not too long - it's three rolls of parchment more than Professor Bans asked for me to do.

Jinger says she's 'going to be in Pennsylvania in the- last week of the- holidays.'

'Can you make it too?'

'Will your aunt and uncle let you come?'

'I really hope you can.'

'Uncertainty about it then, (there was a backside to the note,) I will see you on the - Express on September the 11th!' P.S. Jinger says Serafina's Head Girl. I will bet Serafina's really pleased. Jinger doesn't seem too pleased about it all.

At that moment at that time on that day- Naddalin giggled as she- put Emmah's letter aside and picked up the present, in a hollow book with music notes on it, and said keep them forever and ever. Giggling... at the cute juvenile like cartoon printed panties, Minnie mouse on the front part, all pink and young girlie. It was very heavy, to take all at once, in my young 13-year-old mind, I knew, that the next day- after my B-day, like- I would be back to my real age, but it was fun, to relive all that I was cheated out of, at that age as a younger girl, it was my wish- after all. Um- ah- like- like- like- knowing Emmah, she- I's was sure it would be a large book full of very difficult spells - but it wasn't, it was an empty book felled with things that show our love, and new chapters to add in the book of life - just another chapter added in.

Part: 10

(Hot Springs)

Jenny the haunt- said to me in the bath- looking down at me as an apparition- 'Yah- sneezed, wheezed, coughed, gagged and jazzed! GOOD FOR YOU!' In a condescending way. And she dived in the water with her, of the all- the girls at once- roman style bath, the only place in the 2,000-year-old cartel where there is allowed to run about fully nude, with all the girls, at 7 p.m sharp 'till 8 p.m.

I was getting a lesson from the leading girl!

(13 inches now passed in book thickness.)

Nevaeh

Book: 40

Spread your Wings

Portion

'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember involves me and I learn...'

-Benjamin Franklin -so-o true, so, true- no?

Preface:

Sped- is the same as saying retarded- so this is what you are saying to a girl like me, and her too and them!

Literally- 'Special Education,' Usually used to describe someone when they are acting be or is known as retarded for life regardless of your achievements.

An 'unofficial' (not recognized by dictionaries) slang descriptor for a person/thing/action/object, etc., or a combination of, which is one or more of the following:

Being this, you are a-

'A waste of time, abandoned, abject, abominable, abortive, absurd, afraid, aimless, anxious, apprehensive, arid, arrested, assailable, atomic, awful, baby, babyish, backward, bad, banal, barmy, barren, base, baseless, bastard, beastly, beggarly, behind, beside the question, blah, bland, bogus, bomb, bootless, boyish, brainless, bromidic, bummer, caitiff capricious, careless, catchpenny, characterless, cheap, checked, cheesy, childish, childlike, clichéd, cloying, coarse, colorless, common, commonplace, confusing, contemptible, controvertible, conventional, cornball, corny, corrupt, counterproductive, cowering, cracked, crap, crappy, craven, crazy, crud, cruddy, daffy, daft, dastardly, dazed, dead, deadpan, deficient, degraded, degrading, dejected, delayed, delusive, dense, dense, deplorable, depraved, despicable, destitute, detestable, devoid, diffident, dim, diminutive, dippy, directionless, dirty, disgraceful, dishonest, dishonorable, dismayed, disposable, disreputable, dizzy, dodo, doltish, dopy, dotterel, down, downtrodden, drab, drifting, drudging, dull, dumb, empty, empty-headed, erratic, evanescent, every day, evildoer, excessive, exhausted, expendable, expressionless, facetious, failed, failing, fainthearted, fallacious, false, fanciful, fatuous, fawning, featherbrained, feeble, feebleminded, fickle, flaky, flashy, flat, flighty, flimsy, flip, flippant, fool, fool- around, foolish, for grins, forlorn, fortuitous, foul, freaked out, freaky, frightened, frivolous, frothy, fruitless, futile, gagged up, garbage, garish, gay, giddy, girlish, glitzy, goalless, good-for-nothing, goofy, green, gross, groundless, groveling, grungy, gullible, gutless, hackneyed, half-baked, half-witted, hang dog, harebrained, heedless, ho hum, hokey, hokum, hollow, hopeless, humble, humbling, humdrum, humiliating, idiotic, idle, ignoble, ignominious, ignorant, ill-advised, ill-considered, illogical, imbecile, immaterial, immature, immobile, immoral, impassive, implausible, impracticable, impractical, improbable, inadequate, inane, inapplicable, inappreciable, incidental, inconceivable, incongruous, inconsequential, inconsiderable, incredible, indelicate, indiscreet, indiscriminate, ineffective, ineffectual, inept, inessential, inexpressive, infamous, infantile, inferior, inglorious, inscrutable, insensate, insignificant, insincere, insipid, insufficient, interminable, inutile, irksome, irrational nonsensical, irrelevant, irresolute, irresponsible, jejune, jittery, joking, joshing, junky, juvenile, kid stuff, kooky, lacking courage, lame, late, laughable, lemon, lifeless, light, light-minded, lily-livered, little, loathsome, loony, loser, lousy, low, lowborn, lowly, lowly, low-ranking, ludicrous, mangy, meager, mean, meaningless, measly, mediocre, menial, mentally incompetent, meretricious, microscopic, mindless, minor, minute, indecisive, miscarried, miscreant, miserable, modest, momentary, monkey, monotonous, moronic, moth-eaten, naive, needless, negligible, nervous, niggling, nihil ad rem, no bargain, no dice, no good, no guts, no place, no-account, nonessential, nonsensical, not at issue, not serious, not to the purpose, nothing, nowhere, nugatory, hopeless, nuts,

nutty, objectless, obscure, obtuse, odd, off offensive, old hat, old-fashioned, ordinary, otiose, outcast, paltry, panicky, pathetic, pedestrian, peripheral, petty, piddling, pitiable, pitiful, platitudinous, playful, plebeian, pointless, poker-faced, poor, petty, pre-kindergarten, preposterous, primitive, profitless, proletarian, prosaic, puerile, puny, purposeless, pusillanimous, random, rash, ratty, raunchy, recreant, removable, repetitious, result less, retiring, rinky-dink, rotten, rough, routine, rubbishy, run scared, sappy, scandalous, scanty, scared, scatterbrained, screwy, scrubby, scurvy, second-rate, seemly, senseless, sentimental, servile, severe, shabby, shallow, shameful, shiftless, shoddy, shopworn, shrinking, shtick, shy, silly, simple, simple-minded, skin deep, sleazy, slight, slimy, slow, sluggish, small, small time, soft, sordid, sorry, sorry lot, spineless, sportive, squalid, square, stale, stale, stark, stereotyped, sterile, stiff, stock, stodgy, stolid, stray, stuffy, stupefied, stupid, submissive, subnormal, superficial, superfluous, tame, tatty, tawdry, tedious, terrible, the subject, the willies, thick, thickheaded, thin, thoughtless, threadbare, timid, timorous, tired, tiresome, tiring, tomfool, tongue-in-cheek, transparent, trashy, trifling, tripe, trite, trivial, trumpery, ugly, unassuming, unavailing, unbelievable, uncommunicative, unconvincing, uncouth, underdeveloped, underfoot, underprivileged, undeveloped undirected, undistinguished, unessential, unexciting, unexpressive, unfit, ungrounded, unguided, unimaginative, unimportant, unintelligent, unmanly, unnecessary, unneeded, unoriginal, unpersuasive, unplanned, unpredictable, unpretentious, unproductive, unprofitable, unreal, unreasonable, unrefined, unrelated, unsatisfactory, unsophisticated, noncommittal, unsubstantial, unsuccessful, unthinking, unusable, unvaried, unworthy, useless vacant, vacuous, vagrant, vague vain, valueless, vanishing, vapid, vile, plebeian, volatile, vulgar, wacky wandering, wanton, waste, watery, wayward, weak, wearisome, well-worn, whimsical, white elephant, wide of the mark, wide of the point, wishful, wishy-washy, witless, worthless, word dependent, wretched, or yucky.'

Thank you to my school for classing me as this... and let you and the kids use the above terms, to describe what is known about me.

~Nevaeh~

Part: 1

'I love that little hole in you!' Emma said to me!

~*~

Emma- Why don't you say that you love me?

I'm said back- 'isn't better to know that someone loves you then say it over and over, and like-not mean it.'

Honesty-

Naddalin- I'm thought about it and thought- 'yah me to when you open it up and lick it out! – I's love that too-' do not- say you don't.

(Thoughts)

Naddalin- I love the cute faces that she makes in mine, it is everything- to me when I'm been on top of her looking in her eyes; and she sighs like a girl, make grind on me love, eating a girl out, like her. I's stick my tongue inside her vagina and ferociously lick every centimeter of her insides. the juices, her squirming, I love it! Kiss it like you would kiss her lips and just wiggle your tongue in between the lips and then slowly stick your tongue in...

Next day-

The heart, sticker gave a huge bounds of soft kiss to my lips, snapping crack, as she- ripped back the- paper and saw a sleek black scrollwork of the letters she made just for her, with silver, ribbons- around the yellowing hollow book words stamped across it, just another chapter of our lives, inside was Lily ribbons, the hart ring, 3 old flowers, a daisy, sunflower, and one Lily, an old dream-catcher along with the old key, and the note of Jaylynn also, and also the one to Kristen, Karly's crystal necklaces, Haven added a lock of hair from a girl, that is no longer with us also, her and back home, and now us- are story article, of us, yet as sweet as it was it still made me sad, I never thought that- I- I's... um- never-mind, well see this again. All things that ever mattered to me was in here... but how did she know or get this...?

Every now and then, we go to the graveyard and see the cinematic stone play, on it- she talks for 2 minutes, and we see her and hear her voice- as if she was alive, she gives her short story- of life on Earth, that was pre-recorded- like a Last Will and Testament in a way, yet it not the same- and she was too young to have things are given to others- even if, like- even here final death is a thing, if at complete rest, and she was.

Standing the test of time, like the pages... of the manuscript in the classroom.

'Wow, Emmah!' I thought- and might have said out my mouth, yet don't remember- like if I did or not. Naddalin whispered, unzipping her uniform, for bath time at 7- walking into that room beside a- case of books, not looking inside, any other, then place hers next to them, all under 'D' taking up the length of the shave of '50' or so-o volume.

Part: 2

(Back vacation at home in her Earthly body from-)

Apart from her friends, the- thing that Naddalin Missed most about the school for girls was Claepsiara, the- most popular sport in her- magical world - highly dangerous, very exciting, and played flying fast and wicked with your wings.

Naddalin happened to be a very good Claepsiara player; she - had been the- youngest pergirl in a century to be picked for one of her- the school for girl's house teams. Paly until blood drips for the tips of the wings.

One of Naddalin's most prized possessions and the most lovey was the wings that grow out her back, and now are one of the most powerful of all the girls, if not the - most. A game between light and dark angels- gladiator-style fight 'till final death. Last year a girl had her wings ripped off in flight, the bloody thing is- like in a large jar, imboiled in the sciences room, shown off next to all the skulls and she was dead before hitting the ground 300 feet below, she was a light now she is with us, she was brought back, over unrest.

After bath time-

Homework- of spells and charms, all her notes and books, and what not, she picked up the last parcel, of everything she was doing into her book bag.

Naddalin put the thoughts about everything behind her, She - recognized the- untidy scrawl on the- yellow-sh paper at once, and said oh well I tried, she rested her head on her pillow, thinking about the girl- that was from Dargide, she- the school for girl's gamekeeper child, the one she was going to fight, or so it was said she might- be.

(The next day)

Looking into one of the books named: 'Neveah.' She sighed, She- tore off the- top layer of paper and glimpsed something with sapphire eyes, and leathery, but before she - could unwrap it properly, she- parcel gave a strange quiver, it was a note about the first copy ever, and whatever was inside it snapped loudly, when it came to life, - as though it had jaws, it was memories of the past saying they wanted out of the book and the text. Naddalin just froze at that point at that moment.

She- knew that Dargide would never send her anything dangerous on purpose, but then, Dargide did not have an ordinary per girl's view of what was dangerous.

Dargide had been known to befriend spiders, buy spiteful, satanic lions, and birds that would pick your eyes out for fun, from menfolk in pubs, besides sneaks- illegal dark angels spawn- into their cabin; Naddalin poked she- parcel nervously, that jumped from the pages. It snapped loudly again in her hand.

Naddalin reached- for the- lamp on the bedside table, gripped it firmly in one hand, then she raised it over her head, ready to strike, it with the other free hand. Then and there the - seized the- rest of her- wrapping paper in the other hand and pulled, the old dust cover of the book.

Besides out fell - a book, that she remembered all too well, yet could not at all.

Naddalin just had time to register its handsome off-white cover, emblazoned with the- silver title 'The- Book of Stop and Death,' she said tenderly.

This was when she used a spell on it, asking it for its deepest darks feeling of emotions- to come forth, moments before her wand flick, so-o, before it flipped onto its edge, and snapped at her yet again, scuttled sideways along the- bed like some weird crab, wanting to snap. 'Uh-oh,' Naddalin muttered, saying, 'like- I knew it was bad, yet never this bad, a book with so much hurt it got up and crawled away.' The- book toppled off the- bed, like she said, with a loud clunk... then shuffled rapidly a- crossed the- room, as she ran after it, saying stop. Naddalin followed it surreptitiously. Any-who- the- book was hiding in the- dark sunlight space under her old heavy desk.

Praying that she- Sleyashs was still fast asleep, and the Amsel girls would not get ahold of it, Naddalin got down on her hand, saying come her it alright, I not going to hurt you like all them, she was on her hands knees butt up in the are showing way too much to the girls behind her asking what the hell, yet she keeps reaching for it.

Emma- said, 'I don't think that bath towel is not full coverage- their girl!'

Naddalin- 'You like it!!!'

Emma- 'That I do, but there was a thing- like- um- back in the day, called modesty- God- learn it.'

Naddalin- 'He- he- he!!!'

'Ouch!' She yelped...

Naddalin scrambled around, threw herself forward, managed to flatten it. The- book snapped shut on in her really small hands; then troweled past her, yet it was fastened, still scurrying on its covers. The other girls in the room gave a loud, sleepy grunt, as she went to her bed cricking the wood floorboards.

Elody watched interestedly as Naddalin clamped the- struggling book tightly in the arms, hurried to the chest of drawers, pulled out a belt, which she- buckled tightly around it, and then said the spell for to inanimate. 'The book of the death of the e nded lives' shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap- about, and impulses, so Naddalin threw it down on the- bed and then stretched for

Dargide's card, that falls under the bed too. And then back on the shelve, it went with the others, to adulate dust, as she sat it there saying- 'stay- good girl.'

Part: 3

Chiaz- A never happen yet feels as it did, part of my life, like a dream yet not, like reality yet not, too is odd, and feels real, yet was not at that time of life, yet you know it happened.

Naddalin- I had to make this time up, I had to get back what was taken from her, I had too, I had to be her for a summer, something I never- ever thought me as this girl would ever do, for me or for her, this was going back in time, something that is trick over the fact it changes others' lives, if missed with too much, yet I needed to do this for me, that summer I's had to come back down to Earth anyways, so I came back as her, in her young body from, yes as her the girl in the story, I used the transformation spell to do so-o, I was 14 all over, and I did not remember this at the time with my mind slowly sipping, I was living on my own that summer in a cute, nice yet tight spaced trailer, over up on the hills of Nick- Town, that summer I wanted nothing more than for her to get back what was taken away, and now I

had the power to do so, for this girl, yet she was a lost soul in a big bad world, living all alone, to spite her garden, long story, she was drag back home by cops and made to sleep in a barn, over runn ing-away... yet she had the money too, anyways- back to the point...

'You don't wear underwire-' he said, and I giggled...

Chiaz- I don't remember this in my life yet I feel that it was so real to me, a girl came to me, in like a dream yet not, it was real, I never remember her living in a trailer up the ways from town, the next thing you know I was in it with you and you were more in love with me than ever, just out of school at the end of your 9th year... at fart she was reluctant, it was the first time, after all, we could really be left alone, with no eyes on us, I recall that you showed me around your new place, that you rented, nicer than most homes, in throws parts, and before I knew it she was showing me her bed - 'saying look how big this is for a little girl like me that is about 4 foot.' And before I knew it she was bare, with her body wrapped around mine, sanding I was holding her like a child, in my arms, and our lips met, and the passion was more, trilling then one about a 17-year-old boy could take... and we made sweet love.

Naddalin- I was on the bottom...

Chiaz- I was on top of her, she was so-o little the size of a young child...

Naddalin- 'Ahh- Cumming moments'

'he was in me- for the first time- I did it, I did him and he did me.'

I couldn't get enough of him, yet I have wanted to do this for years and years now, I was exhausted and tender down there, but I didn't care.

I didn't want to sleep... even though I was going to be with him night after night if I could...

I wanted the throbbing...

I wanted him in me...

I wanted him all the time...

His weight on top of me...

I wanted to squeeze him in further and further...

I wanted to watch his face... grunt out the last bit in me... as he said he wants mine... high pitched squeaky and an 'ou-yah's!'

I wanted his sweat to drop, like that stuff on to my bell- 'aww, is what I said.'

I wanted to drop mine on him... pushing it out... all creamy...

I got on top of him...

I'd never done it before... like that as of this age... you see... not this young it would not have been right too... yet I wanted to be bad! So bad! I wanted to take control of his every move... and I did... I own him that night.

I couldn't really believe it; I was doing this... but I was, and it was right... even if everything in the past was all so-o wrong, between us.

I was discovering something.

I held him and put him in... it was so cute... like when I gave him the blow-ie of a lifetime coming... he, he, he!

He felt deeper in me with his hard DICK- THEN FINGERS TOO.

I'll never forget it... real or not it's alike memory to last eternity... shared.

I was in charge and he liked it.

I held his hands down... even not like me for the- sweet shy girl of everything...

I let my small boobs touch his face, and he sucked on them as I asked, like my clit and puss-puss too, I made him by grabbing that mop of long black wavy hair of his... he was mine!

'I WAS HORRY- GIRLS GET THAT WAY!'

He went mad; he bounded- ME TILL I ORGASMED OVER AND OVER AND MORE THEN THAT TOO.

He rived me in two... WITH IT- I pushed down AND IN.

I couldn't believe it...

One of his HANDS flicked over my bum AND

SQUEEZED IT AND ANOTHER MOMENT OF COMING TO AN END. I did it to him. He lifted and heaved.

There was no end to it, no end to the new things... THAT A YOUNGER NEVER- EVER FELT BEFORE I WAS HIS SLUT, WIDE OPEN FOR HIM- LEGS UP ABOVE MY HEAD EVEN SLUT AND DRUM MAJOR SLIT FOR HIM TOO- AND I WANTED TO BE.

He took me from behind, TO AS I ASKED. I pushed back, forcing more of him into me, HARD

AND THEN SOFT, LONG AND SHORT- RHYTHMS- SEX IS AWKWARD, THAT WHAT MAKES IT FUN AND CUTE. I sucked him. He licked me. I made him come on my stomach, AND ON MY BUTT TOO. He sucked my toes.

The whole room rocked every 'till the wee- hours of the morning.'

My pussy felt- (soft warm fuzzy-inside tingly and slippery, tight and gripping- everything I wanted and more!)

Chiaz- in and out, rocking and thrusting, hard and soft, hugging and squeezing too.

Naddalin- It was right... and really, I did it I got back a moment lost... to the boy that I love way back when, this was the bad maybe child-sh thought, like- to have good sex all you need to be is naked on top of each other and young and dumb lust, yet that's what dives young teens. For him and me, it will always feel real- that- this moment happens, and he got to take me, and I- him.

Part: 4

Dear Naddalin, Happy Birthday!

Think you might find her useful for next year.

Won't say no more there... yet to use the come to life spell, she's pissed... Tell- me when I see you, why I felt you need this.

Hope- the- Nonmagical peoples are treating you all right.

All the- greatest...

~Dargide

It struck Naddalin as ominous whys, that Dargide thought a biting book would come in beneficial, but she- put Dargide's card up next to Jinger's, and

Emma's gifts, grinning more broadly than ever.

Now there was only the- letter from the school for all girls left, all but on name on it with their family you know who's girls.

Yep- just, observing that it was rather thicker than usual, Naddalin slit open the- envelope, pulled out the- the first page of note that came to life as she read, in the interior, besides it read:

Dear child...

Please note that the- new Hayvannahol year will begin on September - 11th.

The school for girls- Express- will leave from Rockville's Cross station for you that is on its long feeling journey, from the platform at nine p.m, as you know to find the abandoned part, past the boarded-up heavy wood doors and into the dark, damp, must, cobweb-infested station, that was let go of in the 1920s and get on the train, see you here, and looking forward to it, the track even looks to be down there I thought, yet I know it's right.

Duck under the boards, covering the doorways, and don't fall through the floor... you are the only one to use this pathway in... sorry for the inconvenience. The covering track in this run is not and the tracks feel as if there is nothing much holding them, elevated up as you go through the lay of the land up the past mill, Altoona part of the cover, though Ashville, and a line of abandon track, just go up to you.

Third years are permitted to visit the- village of Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry/ Fallen Angel on certain weekends, here or transfer over to our side if asked. Please give the- enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed also.

Sincerely yours...

Professor M. McDermott Deputy Headmistress Naddalin pulled out she- Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning.

It would be wonderful to visit Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry on weekends; she- knew it was an entirely wizarding village, and she- had never-ever set foot there. Nevertheless, how on earth was she- going to persuade Uncle Read or Aunt Jennath to sign the- form?

She- looked over at the- wind up alarm clock, that glows pink in the face, and flickers some over getting hit with lighting like a wand streak. It was now 2:15 o'clock in the- morning.

Deciding that she would worry about she- Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry form when she- woke up, Naddalin got back into bed and stretched up to cross off another day on the- chart she would make for herself, counting down the- days left until she returns to the school. Funny she thought I like school, she knew that the spell would have to come to end, like a love that she had to let go of too early in life too, yet he was a final piece also, then she- took off her glasses and she lay down, is nothing more than a transparent nighty that was pink, nothing else; eyes open, facing the three birthd ay cards, and the moving photos of her new light in her life Emma, and for this, she was ease too.

That night she said before going to bed, resting her weary head, 'awe- there is nothing like an onion bagel with cream cheese and starboard jam.'

Extremely unusual though she- was, at that moment Naddalin - felt just like everyone else - glad, for the- first time in the lives, that it was her birthday, and it did not suck, freaking holy- taint's. she remembers back to her story and said the church Father was the only one to remember, her day, and was a feeling friend to her, growing up, that could have gone there- yet she was too young and he loved GOD more than she, did not say that they did not kiss in the booth now doses it when she asked her cute sweet question about self-analyst, he told this little girl that was innocent, all these wonderful stories about angels light and dark finding their way- and he said- 'like the girl in the story- little one you to well find your way, someday- okay.'

While Dariez lay around watching, and eating white cherry ice cream, Naddalin cleaned the- windows, the same one that she looked out all those years back, washed the- car, that was starting to rust away on the barn that was hers to the blue color almost all faded away, mowed the- lawn, with the same tractor, clipped the- flowerbeds, for a vase, next to her bed, trimmed and watered the- roses, and had all the lilies and daisy in her hand, and repainted the- garden bench, as was back then.

The- sun blazed overhead, burning the- back of her neck, and she could feel the wings want to come out for shad, and strength.

Naddalin knew she- shouldn't have risen to Dariez's bait, but Dariez had said the- very thing Naddalin had been thinking herself... maybe she- didn't have any friends at the school...

Wish they could see famous Naddalin - now, the- thought unrestrainedly as she- spread manure on her- flower beds, she back aching, sweat running down the faces.

It was half-past eight in the- evening when at last, exhausted, she- heard Aunt Jennath calling her, to come to eat and take a bath, like a young child again.

And Get in here!

Walk on the- newspaper, she did there where cover the floor like what should be carpet, to keep out the draft in this old farmhouse- it was bad yet never this deplorable! I have seen this place in my mind as her, God Lord I thought, yet I'm not to say anything mean-ie- like to them.

Naddalin moved ever so gently appreciatively into the- shade of the- gleaming kitchen, the only place in the home to have a makeover in years.

On top of the- new glamming double-sided stainless-steel fridge stood tonight's pudding: a huge mound of whipped creamy peanut butter and red-violet cake and a display dish. A roaster-pot of roast beef was sizzling in the need double door- oven, with the clock face light, also new and shiny.

I's am sure that it will be eaten quickly! Yet, I wonder if better be said then just- 'pass the gravy...?'

Part: 5

The- nonmagical peoples will be there soon!

Snapped Aunt Jennath, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on her- kitchen table. Is this really all that you are severing them? She asked... 'Yes- girl-ie it is,' she was patting her on the head with soft taps, like a young child, along with saying- 'this is all that we have to give them.'

She- was already wearing a- pink cocktail dress.

Naddalin washed her hand...

Then at that moment, she fastened down the pitiful supper, that she had to eat.

Then at that moment at that time- she- had completed, Aunt Jennath whisked away from the plate, out from under her nose. Upstairs, she went to be in her room! Hastily, is was asked of her to do that!

She did not come down from her room, 'till the next morning. It was 8:00 a.m... Naddalin went down for breakfast only to find the- three or so-o- of them- Sleyashs already sitting around the- table, yet with her whom is counting them, her mind was so-o endorsed in what she was thinking about, and that was nothing more or less than about all that is magic, and that world, she loved to be in. She could care less about them and their childish ways, she thought even if that is what they say about her.

They were watching a brand -new television, a welcome-home-for-she-summer present for Dariez, who had been complaining deafeningly about the- long walk between her- fridge and the- freaking television, 'like in the- living- room, is- a- Tv, and in that room, is that cold-ie thing-ing- you see- there called rooms, and devised into them, are things that go in those rooms.

Like- like- like- you need to have enough whit about you to see you need to go to that room for that in that room- (she was saying that in a slow way of speaking to her- like a tard.)

Dariez had spent most of the- summer in the- kitchen, like a little piggy, eyes fixed on the- screen, over the why not thinking she could get up and movie, with the plat, and she five chins wobbling as she- ate continually.

~*~

Naddalin sat down between Dariez and Uncle Read, a huge, beefy man with very little neck and a- lot of mustache, and long stringy white beard.

Far from wishing Naddalin a happy birthday, none of the- Sleyashs made any insignia that they had noticed Naddalin enter the- room...

Nonetheless, Naddalin was far too used to them to care. She- helped herself to a piece of bagel only one half was left in the bag, then looked up at the- reporter on the- television, who was halfway through a report on a fugitive criminal.

(Unsolved Mysteries is playing)

Besides... the- public is warned that Black is armed extremely dangerous. A special hotline has been set up- asking 'join me in helping serval a- mystery-' a sharp taking and the dressed man said, 'if- you- see- in the least- one sighting of- Black, you should notify this line i-m-med-iat-ely.'

Part: 6

'Like there is no need to tell us...'

'He's no good,' inhaled, while saying it, Uncle

Read, staring over the- top of the newspaper at the- pricier. Besides look at the- state of him, the- dirty dart ball, look at the hair- all black, long wavy and greasy!

-And-

She- shot a nasty look sideways at Naddalin, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Read.

Saying you have room to talk, about the way he looks. Naddalin felt very well groomed indeed, all the time she prided herself too, she knew that was just bull shit coming out of his mouth, over she was the cuter one.

The- reporter had reappeared, 30 minutes have passed. 'You too can help in slaving an Unsolved Mystery.'

Besides the- Bureau of Cultivation cow show stuff- will announce today, so change the flicker- clicker thing-ie me-bobber to the impotent things, farms.

-And-

...Hang on! I say!

Now, growled Uncle Read, staring furiously at the- reporter, to end she was taking doing the number in her contacts.

Furthermore, you didn't tell us where that zealot escaped from! What use is that? Shit like he could be coming up the- street right now, to kill you girlie!

-And-

Aunt Jennath, who was bony and mare-faced, whipped around and scrutinized intently out of the- kitchen window.

Naddalin knew Aunt Jennath would simply love to be the- one to call the- hotline number.

She'd- was the- inquisitive woman in the- world and spent most of her life spying on the- mind-numbing, law- and the unbidden neighbors, saying this and that about what not- or whatever.

When will they learn, she said that you can't party every night form 7:00 p.m to 3:00 a.m, getting drunk having sex with random kids, and dancing around large fires, good I open the door to my home and have panties and used condoms hitting me in the freaking faces she said; and said Uncle Read, pounding the- table with the large purple fist, saying words like-

'kids today there is no law- no discipline...' Uncle Read- 'The- only way to deal with these people, is to just shoot them in the face or drill them in the face?'

'Oh- sh-h!' she said, 'saying cool it.'

-And-

Uncle Read, I thought to say to you is a little unstable, sorry it's embarrassing.

'Very true,' said Aunt Jennath, who was still squinting into next door's runner-beans, and farting loader then her mouth shooting as much Diarrhea as the be hind that she had.

'The house smells like a couch!'

Uncle Read drained she coffee' cup, glanced at his watch, besides added, I'd better be off in a jiffy, Jennath- come, walk them to the door.

Chapter: 158

Part: 1

(Parting words)

'Marge's train gets in at ten... so-o yeah...'

-And-

Naddalin, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the- Servicing kit for her wings, and a 1920's case with all that she needs to be a fallen-witch in magic too, down here, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant bump when she fell from the sky... form the what nonmagical peoples call the havens, yet have no clue, thank God- on Earth that no-one saw. Good feather grooming is key.

Aunt Marge was Uncle Read's sister, may God help us... and also worked in an orphanage a residential institution devoted to the care of orphans- children whose biological parents are deceased or otherwise unable or unwilling to take care of them. (I have heard this so many times- blah-ick...)

Then she continuing to say: Biological parents, and sometimes biological grandparents, are legally responsible for supporting children, but in the absence of these, no named godparent, or other relatives willing to care for the children, they become a ward of the state, and orphanages are one way of providing for their care, housing and education.

'Um-hum...'

Even though she'd- was not a blood relative, she was only a half-blood, of the Naddalin's... yet that was more then I to be loved.

She- blurted out, yet again- like before to my face, interfering with my personal space, I could feel the misty spit even- and the stank breath- of lezz-ie pussy.

Aunt- Marge! They said... don't say that to that child... we are all she has...

'I'm said- to go suck off, like- yet another fat bitch- bitch! ...and walked away.'

'Naddalin!!!' (They shouted)

(Whose most had been Aunt

Jennath's sister, over no one, would like- like a smaller- well her... and all that...)

She- had been forced to call her- 'Aunt' when all she wanted to say was profanity with long-running slurs to her for all her- her rotten, mangy life.

Aunt Marge lived in the- country- more farm-a-fid-ed, in a house with a large garden, then ours, where she'd- bred bulldogs, funny the dog's faces are cuter than hers. That reminds me... he- he-he... a never mind... I thought it's an old inside joke.

She'd- didn't often stay at anywhere else, because she'd- couldn't bear to leave the precious dogs, but each of the visits stood out horribly vividly in Naddalin's mind, young 'till now.

(Flashback)

At Dariez's fifth birthday party, Aunt Marge had whacked Naddalin around the- bare butt with her walking stick to stop her from beating Dariez at musical statues.

A few years later, she'd- had turned up at Christmas with an electronic robot for Dariez and a box of dog biscuits for Naddalin, saying this is smarter than you and this is all you should be eating as that one did in the past- Naddalin, she was lived.

On the last visit, the- year before Naddalin started at the school, Naddalin had accidentally trampled on the- tail of the favorite dog, that got her bed instead of her sleeping it...

Ripper had chased Naddalin out into the- garden up a tree same old tree that she was in years ago the angel oak, and Aunt Marge had refused to call her off until past midnight, she slept in the tree on a branch all starched out...

Part: 2

The- memory of the incident still brought tears of laughter to Dariez's eyes.

And Marge well be there for a week, and Uncle Read snarled, and while we're on the - topic, and she- pointed a fat finger bullyingly at Naddalin, besides we need to get a few things straight before, I go and collect her.

-And-

Dariez smirked and then withdrew the gaze she had from the - television. As she was watching young Naddalin being bullied by Uncle Read, after all- like she was Dariez's favorite form of entertainment.

Besides primarily, grinning all creepy like, and harassing her was the thing to do, just like Uncle Read, both saying- 'you'll keep a municipal tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge.'

The next day...

Also, and all right...

Above and beyond said Naddalin inordinately, besides- um if she'd- does when she is talking to me.

-And-

Furthermore, and now secondly, also said

Uncle Read, acting as though he- had not perceived Naddalin's reply, as Marge doesn't know anything about your irregularity, I do not want any - any funny stuff while she is here with us. 'You behave yourself, got me...?'

-And-

Additionally, 'I's will if she'd- does, said Naddalin through clenched teeth.'

Uncle Read- And- and- and, thirdly... the mean little eyes now slit in her inflated face, over tears, and we've told Marge you attend North End- Secure Center for the inoperable wrong- criminal- and well to dumb it doing for you- died in the head- Girls- JUST LIKE YOU.

Naddalin- 'so-o a school for retards is what you're saying...'

'What?' Naddalin yelled...

...Precisely!!! Good- Naddalin- Good... saying it in a very dick-ish way.

Then you'll be sticking to that story- girl-ie we say for you, girl, or there'll be trouble, quarreled Uncle Read.

Naddalin sat there, white-faced furious, staring at Uncle Read, hardly able to believe it, that she was making words come out of her mouth in arguments.

Part: 3

Aunt Marge coming for a weeklong visit - it was the- worst birthday present she- Sleyashs had ever given her, including that pair of Uncle Read's old socks, that looked like it was used as Uncle Reads night before condom.

-Gross...

Well, Jennath, said Uncle Read, getting too overwhelming hostel- with you come here, I will be off to the station, then- said the bitch. Want to come along for the- ride, she said to the one... and you know which one.

-And-

No, said Dariez, even I think this is going to fare, and like whose attention had returned to the- television now that Uncle Read had finished threatening and terrorizing Naddalin.

'...And Dariez's got to make herself smart for she auntie,' said Aunt Jennath, - 'That's not nice, is it to a girl like you now'- also saying this in a way that is demeaning to her age and intelligence, yet comforting, in a way, that was needed even if- unpleasant.

Part: 4

Dariez's smoothed thick blond hair...

Her Mommy's bought her a lovely new dress.

Uncle Read slapped Dariez hard on the back of her shoulder, saying- 'see even on her birthday you get what was hers, she too dumb anyways, to understand, that we gave this to you, and not her.'

Also, see you in a bit, then, like- she- said, besides she- left the- breakfast nook.

Naddalin, who had been sitting in a kind of horrified trance, had a sudden idea.

'I would like to get read if you like you- like you get rid of your blood use tampons, using all the toilet paper balling it all around, as you do before throwing it in the scrap can.' He really said that to me...

Chapter: 159

Part: 1

Then it hit me that I could be kissing her every morning, I used to kiss her every morning when I used to get up and did not want summer anymore. I remember the middle of last year in the school year, about her saying- 'I am worried if I kiss you I that I may screw up-' and I'm said back- 'if you didn't you would, and we started to kiss all the time...' 'I just loved giving her un-pure thoughts,' alleged

Naddalin, in her young lusting girl mind. 'I'm so bad- but I was thinking about sex,' 'um- I like it when Emma goes down really deep in me with her dildo, uh- it feels so-oo goo-ooooo-d.'

Part: 2

Then she made some toast, she- got quickly to her feet, when it popped, and she jumped- then followed Uncle Read to the- front door. Uncle Read was pulling on her coat.

She though on a coat- even so-o. I am going- she cried... '-NO. Besides, I'm not taken you!'

Then he- snarled, like a dog, as she- turned to see Naddalin watching him, and she snarled back even more intensely. 'Like- I wanted to come, she said Naddalin unfeelingly,' 'You would like to come-' he said mocking her. And I want to ask you something.

-And-

Uncle Read eyed her untrustworthily.

This ends with her being strangled out...

And him losing to teeth in the front with a left hook... MMA is looking good on me she said- even as a just white belt, I have more power than you ever have over me now. Something I took up over the summer to get away from here. And So...? Then snapped Uncle Read, taken the car keys from a hook next to the- door.

So, it was broadcasted over the TV, that there was going to be saver storms, in the flowing counties, torrential rain, I was standing just outside the door, just after saying- that 'I wanted to go- too,' and just like that a bolt of lightning struck right in front of me, it lights me up, and if I would be a life as I should, I know I would dead; and fried- like some- finger-licking good- KFC chicken, yet, I can't freak'n die even if, like- I wanted to, if you are fallen like me you cannot pass 'till the time reach a final death...

Part: 3

Thinking back to something she said to me, just like you, I have a place to dump my- cum- and it in you- and letting mine roll way down in that sweet little pussy you have- um I wanted her, so-o, bad- so bad, yet, I suck here to the new year- aww! Like- if a girl did not want to c*m she would not be there in the first place with you- dah- and I want to be there so-oo badly right now!

I LOVE HER!

(Forward)

By the way now that you have chocked the life out me, I need you to sign the- permission form and said Naddalin in a rush.

Now the third year is here - at Hayvannahol are allowed to visit the- village sometimes, said Naddalin.

'Why should I do that?' And scorned Uncle Read, lisping through his- young girl hating- missing teeth.

Well, and said Naddalin, picking her words NOT so carefully, also it will be hard work, pretending to Aunt Marge I go to that

St. Watson...

-And-

And at The Re-tard school AKA- The Center for Terminally Criminal Girls or whatever the hell it is called! Hollered Uncle Read, at the top of his voice.

Naddalin was pleased to hear a definite note of panic in Uncle Read's voice, that I could have died.

I thought- (You do care about me- don't yah...)

Exactly, said Naddalin with great enthusiasm, looking tranquility up into Uncle Read's large, purple face.

Besides, it's a- lot to evoke, is it not? I'll have to make it sound convincing, won't I?

What if I accidentally let something slip?

-And-

You'll get the- stuffing knocked out of you, won't you? Then and their rumbled Uncle Read, advancing on Naddalin with she first raised. Nonetheless, Naddalin stood her ground.

Like- knocking the- stuffing out of me won't make Aunt Marge forget what I could tell her, she- said grimly.

Uncle Read stopped, his fist still raised, right at her sweet, little, cute, and young- little girl ribbons in her yet- her face was an ugly puce- it was- no not like her at all.

If you sign my permission form, then Naddalin went on quickly, I swear I'll remember where I'm supposed to go to Hayvannahol, I'll act like a Mug- like I'm normal and everything- honey that good that your trying so hard to be, yet you never- ever be normal he patted her on the head like she was dimwitted.

Naddalin could tell that Uncle Read was thinking it over, even if his teeth where bared- the ones left that are, a vein was throbbing in the temple, on the left side.

Besides, right, she- cracked in her voices finally. Then I shall check your behavior carefully during Marge's visit, then should I?

If, at the- conclusion of it, you've toed the- line, in addition, kept to the- story, we say and think about you- I'll sign your mother F'n form.

-And-

She- wheeled around, pulled open the- front door, then slammed it so hard, that some of the plaster fall from the ceiling, and then that one of the- little stained-glass panes of glass, that was cracked at the- top fell out. Naddalin didn't return to the- kitchen at all, she ran.

She- went back upstairs to her bedroom, over the top that one she used to have- thinking about for a moment- or two.

If she- was going to act like a real- nonmagical people, she'd better start now- so- in her mind she just did that at acting like a teen girl- all over again- going to her room to mope.

Nasty, unkind, revolting, and sadly she- gathered up all the presents from her birthday cards too that ruined by being mean ad smashing them and ripping them up and whatnot, so- o she hid them under the- loose floorboard with her homework, trying not to look over the fact that it just made her that gloomy.

Then she- went to Baby Raven's cage. Errolie seemed to have recovered from also being thrown up agent the wall to in his rage, I held- baby Raven's until she fell asleep, in my heads recovering from a broken wing.

Naddalin sighed, holding her in her plums. Baby Raven's, she- said gloomily, you poor thing... while her in a rocking-rocking in a chair.

Correspondingly, you're going to have to clear off for a week. Go with Errolie. Jinger well looks after you. I'll write her a note, explaining. I say- do not look at me like that- Baby Raven's large eyes, bigger than should be for her to have.

Part: 4

Like- where reproachful - And it's not my fault. It's the- only way I'll be allowed to visit Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry with Jinger And Emmah.

Ten minutes later, Errolie the baby Raven's (who had a note to Jinger bound to her leg) soared out of the- arched window out of my sight off into the horizon.

Naddalin, now feeling thoroughly miserable, put the- empty cage away inside the- wardrobe.

Nonetheless, Naddalin didn't have long to brood. In next to no time, Aunt Jennath was shrieking up the- stairs for Naddalin to come down and get ready to welcome their visitor.

Do something about your hair, now it like a boy has played in it! Aunt Jennath said as she- reached the- hall.

Naddalin could not see the- point of trying to make the hair lie flat, it was always frizzy and all the detangler in the world would not fix it. Aunt Marge loved criticizing her, so the- messier she- looked, the- happier she'd- would be.

All too soon, there was a crunch of gravel outside as Uncle Read's car pulled back into her- driveway, then the- clunk of the- car doors footsteps on the- garden path, up the porch, and pass the have wood door, she was in the entranceway next to the old steps.

'Hey, you with the big eyes and the face- get the- door!'

Then and there, Aunt Jennath hissed at Naddalin showing teeth.

She'd- turned on the heel then left, making her way into the living room. Jinger waited until she'd- had vanished through the- door to the- girls,' dormitories, then cleared she- garbage off the- knitted hats. 'They should at least see what They're picking up,' she- said firmly. 'Anyway...' she- rolled up the- parchment on which she- had written the- title of Lily's essay, 'there's no point trying to finish she now, I can't do it without Emmah, I haven't got a clue of what you're supposed to do with moonstones, have you?'

(A wisp of a wand and she moved forward in time- back to her happy place the school for girls like her.) Naddalin shook her head, noticing as she- did so-o, that the- ache- in her right temple was getting worse. Um- she- thought of the- long essay on colossal wars, about light and dark, and the- pain stabbed at her abruptly.

Knowing perfectly well that when- the- morning came, she- would regret not finishing the homework that night like the good little girl she was known for, she- piled she books back into her bag.

'I'm going to bed too- said Emma- and with you.'

'It was nice to have a cuddle body- again!'

Chapter: 160

Part: 1

She- passed Laila on the- way to the- door, leading to the- dormitories back at the school know that she had skipped time, but did not look at her.

Naddalin had a fleeting impression that Laila had opened the mouth to speak, but she- sped up and reach the- soothing peace of the- the body of Neveah' spiral staircase without having to endure any more provocation.

The- following day dawned just as sluggish and so very rainy as the- aforementioned one. Like- Dargide was still absent from the- staff table at breakfast. 'But on the- plus side, no Lily today' said Jinger bracingly.

Emmah yawned widely and poured herself some coffee. She'd- looked mildly pleased about something, and when Jinger asked her what she'd- had to be so happy about, she'd- simply said, her- hats have gone.

Seems the- house sprites do want freedom after all.'

'I wouldn't gamble on it,' Jinger told her caustically. they might not count as closes. She didn't look anything like hats to me, more like knitted bladders.'

Emmah did not speak to her all morning.

Double Transfiguration- succeeded double Charms, Professor Flitwick and Professor-

McDermott both spent the- first fourteen minutes of their lesson lecturing the- class on the- importance of flying with wings.

'What you must reminisce,' said little Professor Flitwick squeakily hanging as ever on a pile of books so that she- could see over the- top of the desk, 'is that these inspections may impact your futures for many years to come- lady's- work hard!

If you have not already given serious thought to your life paths, like- now is the- right time to do so-o. Then and there in the- mean-time, I'm afraid of thinking about it all, we shall be working harder than ever to certify, verify, confirm, endorse and attest, that you all do yourselves righteousness!'

They- then- there and did, spent over an hour revising Summoning Charms, which according to Professor Flitwick was bound to come up in their FLYING HORSES, and she- rounded off the- lesson by setting them there largest ever amount of Charms homework- ever in the school walls.

It was the- same, if not worse, in Conversion.

'You cannot pass a FLYING test nevertheless, with the smaller HORSES,' said Professor McDermott poorly worded, to Emma.' Seeing that she hurt the girl- she fastly said- without serious claim, practice, you will get there and study hard, rubbing her hand. I see no regard why everyone in the class should not achieve a FLYING in Transfiguration as long as they put in the- work.' Neville made a sad little skeptical of noise, with her snort.

There is nothing wrong with your work except lack of confidence girls, it shows, that you're smart.

Still better than what Emma got before, I remember when the professor said, 'that the ambitions us girls have was to see how many thine- she like me too, and all the girls in the class could have sex and not get pregnant.'

Emma- snapped back sharply- well then, I am not going to hell, for using a dildo then for this is what I do, and the class of girls just giggled, as the professor looked stunned.

(The next day)

So... today we are starting Vanishing Spells.

These are easier than Illusion Spells, which you would not usually attempt until the 2nd level, but they are still among the- most tough magic you will be tested on in your FLYING courses.' She would- was relatively accurate; Naddalin found she- Vanishing Spells utterly problematic.

By the- end of a double period she nor Jinger had managed to vanish the- mice on which they were practicing, though Jinger said with any luck she- thought she looked a bit paler. Emmah, on the- other hand, successfully vanished she mouse on her- the third attempt, earning she a ten-point bonus for Amsel from Professor McDermott. She would- was she- only pergirl not given homework; everybody else was told to practice the- spell overnight, ready for a fresh attempt on their mice the- following afternoon.

Now postulating slightly about the- the amount of homework they had to do, Naddalin and Jinger spent their lunch hour in the- haunted library, looking up she- uses of daydream-gravest in potion-making.

Still angry about Jinger's slur on her woolly hats, Emmah did not join them. By the- time they reached Upkeep of Magical Creatures in the- afternoon, Naddalin's head was aching again.

The- day had become cool, breezy, chided to, and damp, in addition as they walked down the- sloping lawn towards Dargide's cabin on the- edge of the- Illicit Woodland, they felt the- occasional drop of rain on their faces.

Professor Grubbly Plank stood to wait for the- class some ten yards from Dargide's front door, a long trestle table in front of she laden with twigs. As Naddalin And Jinger reached there was, a loud shout of laughter sounded behind them; whirling, they saw Drallieah Mallerie striding towards them, encircled by her usual gang of Slyshein- and clans.

She- had clearly just said something highly amusing, because Carllah, Goyle, and the others found it to be that way, and the- rest sustained to sniggering as they gathered around the- trestle table

and, judging by her- way they all kept looking over at Naddalin, she- was able to guess the- subject of the- joke without too much difficulty.

'Everyone there?' Barked Professor

Grubby Plank, once all she- Slysheins And

Amsel's had arrived.' Let us crack on then.'

'Who can tell me what these things are called?'

She'd- indicated she- heaps of twigs in front of her.

Emmah's hands shot into the- air.

Behind her back, Mallerie did a Becca toolshed imitation of she is jumping up and down with enthusiasm to answer a question.

She gave a shriek of laughter that turned almost- at once into a scream, as the- twigs on the- table leaped into her- air, and then exposed her-themselves to be what looked like tiny pixie-e-sh creatures made of wood- or so it looked into the gorgeous magnificent creature, reach with arms and legs just like a little humming girl would have, cartoon-like face in- which a pair of oversized brown eyes glittered, it was kind of like a little fairy, that because it was just that- said Emma.

'O-oh!' They said...

Nevaeh

Book: 36

Fallen Angel

Chapter: 150

Part: 1

We are all like the bright moon, we still have our darker side, don't express to yours truly the moon is superb; display to me the sparkle, twinkle, and enthusiasm of light on shattered cut-glass, or a dead girl's memory. I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be- like she- her with me now- she- me – and you too.

A theory where gone.

Flying horses post again-

I- Naddalin am flying around too even back on Earth also for a soul to take... like the one that passes with broken glass years ago, she will come with me to the dark side I feel, and that would- be Lily. Yet would she ever leave Neveah- I don't know if I want to do that to her- yet I would love to also... Lonely girls that hang out at the graveyards, and cry... for someone to ease the pain... We take... over their bodies and minds... young sweet girls like YOU! Even can be said for white angels too... (it was too easy...)

...She lost her to me... yet, I had to I could not help it, I need her to feed for life... and she looks good in black- no? We will get her too- I AM SURE OF IT! Yet she has him up there so- o; that love will- last and last.

Part: 2

Naddalin, got a girl to come over to this world in a death... today... it was said in class. Now to she is fallen.

Anyways-

Emmah was tugging at her sleeve, staring at her watch. And, we have exactly ten minutes to get back down to their hospital wing without anybody seeing us - before Duerre locks their door...

- Besides-

Okay, and said Naddalin, wrenching her gaze from the sky, and let us go... Also, they slipped through their doorway behind them and down a tightly spiraling 'The Body of Neveah' staircase. Full of

old dark wood, and led- ed glass, that was also long-standing. As they reached the top of it, they heard voices. Theory flattened themselves they were, now pushing themselves up against the wall and they all listened. It sounded like garbage.

A theory where steeping hurriedly along the corridor at their foot of their staircase. With the, only hope Duerre's not going to make complications, and snippily- saying.

We wanted to do this for years here in this spot she and I- above and beyond, there Kiss will be performed at once, in the tower, holding hands... also... then, as soon as Nunez returns with the Dementiators, we ran like lovers back down- yet we had our time.

This whole Black affair has been highly embarrassing. They all knew about all the girls, and all the professors too. Yet, I cannot tell you how much I am happy about it all thought. Forward to informing their Daily Prophet that we have *her* at last... said that we want this... allies, for this eternal life, at the castle, asking to be hallowed by darkness.

I- Daresay they will want to interview you, Sammie... and once young Naddalin's back in her right mind, I expect she will want to tell the prophet exactly how you saved her... from the other side of things... She could have been...?

'-So-o I feel- that is so.'

Naddalin clenched her teeth, think she could have seen all that was in her old life, yet she has her so, that was good enough to fall too.

Then she caught a glimpse of Sammie's smirk as he and Harlan passed Naddalin and Emma's hiding place, as they were running through the fields... for flight.

There where footsteps died away, yet, wherein mid-flight looking down on the eerie, dark, and shadowy, warm glow of cottages with tall grass and oak trees, in this land, waterfalls, and hang-ie down weepiness, off of the rock and plant life... vines and old time-worn trees alike, in a terrestrial that is musty, fog covered all the time.

Naddalin and Emmah waited a few moments to make sure they had really gone, hand in levitating in midair, looking at one another dumbly, and sheepish then started to fly in the opposite direction of the hallowed castle.

(Back)

Emma- Walking on foot- and yes, we still do that... Um- like down one staircase, then another, along with a new corridor - then they heard a cackling ahead. Also, Charlotte...!

~*~

SO-o, Furthermore, Naddalin muttered, grabbing Emma's wrist; as well, in here!

Theory tore into a deserted classroom, to their left just in time.

Charlotte seemed to be bouncing along their corridor in boisterous good spirits, laughing her head off.

- Besides-

Part: 3

OH, her is horrible, and whispered Emmah, her ear to their door. Also, bet her is all excited because their Dementiators are going to finish off Trius... And she checked her watch. Besides, three minutes, Naddalin!

- And-

Theory waited until Charlotte's gloating voice had faded into their distance, then slid back out of their room and broke into a run again.

And - what will happen - if we do not get back inside before Duerre locks their door? And, Naddalin panted.

And, do not want to think about it! And,

Emmah moaned, checking her watch again. And, One minute! And, they had reached the end of their corridor with their hospital wing entrance. And, Okay - I can hear Duerre and said Emmah tensely. And Come on, Naddalin!

Theory crept along their corridor. Their door opened, Duerre's back appeared.

Besides, am going to lock you in, and they heard her say. And, it is five minutes to midnight.

Miss. Kizziah, three turns should do it. Good luck.

-And-

Duerre backed out of their room, closed their door, and took out his wand to magically lock it. Postulating, Naddalin and Emmah ran forward. Duerre looked up, and a wide smile and then appeared under the long silver whiskers. And- Well? And, she said quietly. And, we did it! And said Naddalin breathlessly. And... Trius has gone, with Becca beak... And... So-o...!

(Up to the now)

Duerre grinned at them, and, well Deanahe. I think she listened intently for any sound within their hospital wing, and, Yes, I think you have gone too - get inside - I will lock you in... Naddalin and Emmah slipped back inside there dormitory.

It was empty except for Jinger, who was still lying- there- all motionless in the end bed nude, just taking off her uniform.

~*~

As their lock clicked behind them, Naddalin and Emmah crept back to their own beds, Emmah uncovering their Time-Turner back under her robes. A moment later, Madam Pomphrey came striding back out of her office.

Also, Did I hear their principal leaving?

Am I allowed to look after my patients now?

- And-

Like- like- like, she was in a very bad- bad- bad mood-ie mood.

Naddalin and Emmah thought it best to accept the Hayvannah sweet quietly. Madam Pomphrey stood over them, making sure they ate it. Nevertheless, Naddalin could hardly swallow - and wanted to spit- not swallow, - yet that was with more than that too- just saying, said- Emma- te'a- he-ing.

She and Emmah were waiting, listening, the nerves jangling... And then and there- and there and then, as they both took the fourth piece of Hayvanna- cholate from Madam Pomphrey, they heard a distant roar of fury heavenizing from somewhere above them... swirling around them like dark haunts.

Besides, what was that? And said- Madam Pomphrey in alarm.

Part: 4

Now they could hear angry voices, growing louder and brassier. Madam Pomphrey was staring at their door.

Besides, Really - they will wake everybody up! What do they think they are doing?

-And-

Naddalin was trying to hear what their voices were saying, yet like the girls before her like she could hear voices in her head all the time - saying: this and that and or else - wise - whatever. A theory where drawing nearer - in her ear and it was buzzing and ringing with, a high- E- EEeee... hiss, of them taking over her awareness and body in this world, this is true for them to do, to see feel, and hear only as they want you to- where you may feel, that you did or did not, or just blackout, in not remembering - it's a spell that, I know well- of mind- take- over, they can even take out of my mouth for me - no-? ...YES! AND IT SOUND

JUST LIKE ME- AND THEY CAN MOVE MY HAND ARMS AND LEGS FOR ME TOO-

(LIKE I DON'T REMEMBER MASTURBATING... YET MY HAND IS DOING IT- AND I SEE IT GOING IN AND OUT OF ME AND I KNOW THAT SHE IS IN ME AND I AM IN HER...)

Chapter: 151

Part: 1

Like- she must have Disappeared, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with her, so it would not freak her out. When this gets out - And, she DID NOT DISPARATE! And- Lily roared, now very nearby. And, YOU CANNOT APPARATED OR DISPARATE INSIDE THIS CASTLE!

THIS - HAS - SOMETHING - TO - DO - WITH-! And, Severus - be repairable- Naddalin has been locked up - And BAM Slam hit, the freaking door of the wing burst open, Harlan, Sammie, and Duerre

came striding into their area. Duerre alone looked calm. Indeed, she looked as though she was quite enjoying herself. Harlan appeared angry about it all. Nevertheless, Lily was beside herself, I knew - we- too- ominously we agreed. And, OUT WITH IT!

And, she bellowed. And, WHAT DID YOU DO?

And- Professor Lily, yes here a week and she is that! And, shrieked Madam Pomphrey. And Control yourself!

And- See here, Lily, be repairable, and said,

Harlan. And, this door is being locked, we just saw.

Besides, THEORY HELPED HERR ESCAPE, I KNOW IT! And, Lily flying, pointing at Naddalin and Emmah. Her face was twisted and teeth sharply pointed fangs; dribble was flying from her mouth, now red blood from the eyes. (Thoughts of RED- WHITE AND BLUE came back to her... and here being cold is the way of life.)

Calm down, girl!

And Harlan woofed.

And, you are toluene nonsense! She knew that would not be going back up either.

Part: 2

And, YOU DO NOT KNOW-! And, shrieked Lily. And, she DID IT, I KNOW she DID IT. (Whatever- IT is...,) and, that will do, Severus, and said Duerre quietly. Yep - yep just- thinking about what you are saying. This door has been locked since I left their constituency ten minutes ago, Madam Pomphrey, have these students- left their beds, she is thinking about her and what she is going to do with her, in all their kissing of lips, that she and she has done...!

'Partially, I would have welcomed a Dementor attack.

A deadly struggle for my soul would have broken their monotony nicely. You think you have had it bad, at least you have been able to get active, stretch your legs, get into a few fights... I have been stuck inside for a month.'

'How come...?' Asked- Naddalin, frowning some.

'Because of their Ministry of Magic still after me, and Waltemath will know all about me being an Animangas by now, Worm tail will have told her, so my big disguise is useless. It is not much; I can do that for their- Order of their Durizy ... or so- o Duerre feels.'

There was something about their slightly- flattened tone of voice, in which Trius uttered Duerre's name, and that told- Naddalin that Trius, too, was not very pleased with their Principal. Naddalin felt a sudden upsurge of affection for her God daddy.

At least you have known what is been going on, she said bracingly.

'Oh yes,' said Trius sarcastically. 'Listening to Snappiest reports, having to take all her snide hints, and that she is out there risqué her life, while- I's am sat on my backside, here having a nice comfortable time... talking to me about how their cleanings going...'

'What cleaning...?' Asked- Naddalin...

Part: 3

Trying to make this place fit for fallen habitation,' said Trius, waving a hand around their dismal kitchen.

'No one's lived here for ten years, not since my dear mother died unless you count her old house fairy, and she's gone around their twist ~ hasn't cleaned anything in ages.'

'Trius,' said MonDongos, who did not appear to have paid any attention to their conversation, but had been closely examining an empty goblet. 'This solid silver, pal?'

'Yes,' said Trius, surveying it with distaste. 'Finest 22nd ~ century goblin-wrought silver, embossed with their Black family crest.' That had come off, though, muttered MonDongos, polishing it with her cuff. Céline Katy NO, JUST CARRY THERE! Mr.'s Railie shrieked.

Part: 4

Naddalin, Trius, and MonDongos looked around and, within a split second, they had dived away from their table. Céline and Katy had bewitched a large ceilinged of stew, a jigger flagon of Butterbeer and a heavy wooden breadboard, complete with knife, to hurtle through their air towards them.

Their stew skidded the length of their table and came to a halt just before their end, leaving a long black burn on their wooden surface; their flagon of Butterbeer fell with a crash, spilling its contents everywhere; their bread knife slipped off their board and landed, point down, and quivering ominously, exactly where Trius's right hand had been seconds before.

'FOR HEAVENS SAKE!' screamed Mr.'s -Railie.

THERE WAS NO NEED- I HAD ENOUGH OF THIS JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN USE MAGIC NOW, YOU DO NOT HAVE TO WHIP YOUR WANDS OUT FOR EVERY TINY LITTLE THING!'

'We were just trying to save a bit of time!' Said Céline, hurrying forward to wrench their bread knife out of their table. 'sorry, Trius, the mate did not mean to...'

Naddalin and Trius where both laughing; MonDongos, who had toppled backward off his chair, was swearing as she got to his feet; Crook shanks had given an angry hiss and shot off under their dresser, from where his large yellow eyes glowed in their darkness.

Part: 5

'Girl changing and some nude, playing and then bathing,' Mr. Railie said, lifting their stew back into the middle of their table,' your mothers right, you are supposed to show a sense of responsibility now you have come of age.'

Part: 6

Emma- When she is inside of me, in more ways than one mind-body and erogenous zones alike... I wonder who is squiring me, rubbing my body, softly... touching my boobs and butt, and inside there too alike... in it... she- her- all her coming through me, making me vibrate and pulsate to her body... it's wonderful, to feel more loves in life, that you would never understand unless you let someone all the way in you- and take over ever that your mind boy and soul is- she can even see through my eyes- we can switch places- all in one mind game of a spell- called- The Back and Forth, spell.

Any-who-

'None of your brothers caused this sort of trouble!'

Mr.'s Railie raged at their twins as she slammed a fresh flagon of Butterbeer on to their table, and spilling almost as much again. Sara did not feel their need to Apparated every few feet!

Charlie did not charm everything she met! Percy.' She stopped dead, catching her breath with a frightened look at her husband, whose expression was suddenly wooden.

'Let's eat,' said Sara quickly.

'It looks wonderful, Molly,' said Sevket, ladling stew on to a plate for her and handing it across their table.

For a few minutes, there was silence but for their chink of plates and cutlery and their scraping of chairs as everyone settled down to their food.

Then Mr.'s Railie turned to Trius.

'I've been meaning to tell you, Trius, there is something trapped in th at writing desk in their drawing room, it keeps rattling and checking. Of course, it could just be a Boggart, but I thought we ought to ask Valastro to have a look at it before we let it out.'

'Whatever you like,' said Trius indifferently.

'There curtains in there are full of Doxes, too,' Mr.'s Railie went on.' I thought we might try and tackle them anyhow.'

'I look forward to it,' said Trius. Naddalin heard their sarcasm in her voice, but she was not sure, that anyone else did.

Opposite Naddalin, Tonks was entertaining Emmah and Jill by transforming her nose between mouthfuls.

Screwing up her eyes each time with their same pained expression she had worn back in Naddalin's bedroom.

Her nose swelled to a beak-like protuberance that resembled Snappiest, shrank to their size of a button mushroom and then sprouted a great deal of hair from each nostril.

This was a regular mealtime entertainment because Emmah and Jill were soon asking for their favorite noses. 'Do that one like a pig snout, Tonks.'

Tonks obliged, and Naddalin, immobilized, then up too, had their fleeting impression that a female Dariez was grinning at her from a- crossed their table.

Mr. Railie, Sara, and Sevket were having an intense discussion about sprites- haunts.

'Theory is not giving anything away yet,' said Sara. 'I still cannot work out whether they believe she is back. Course, they might prefer not to take sides at all. Keep out of it...'

'I's am sure they would never go over to You- Know- Whom,' said Mr. Railie, checking the heads. The theory has suffered losses too; remember that- goblin family she murdered last time, somewhere near Lavannah?'

~*~

'I think it depends on what they are offered,' said Sevket. 'And I am not toluene about gold. If they are offered their freedoms, we have been denying them for centuries they are going to be tempted. Have you still not had any luck with Amsel's, girl Sara...?'

Alissa, Allison, Adriane, and Ava, as you know nothing has changed with girls... and the conflict is still on, Sara being one of them down the line. They are like you and I- why do they feel they need to be more? Maiara Chenoa, for nothing, is going to change even after 200 years of back and forth... good and wicked. And Neveah is the cause yet again, said Duerre's, this girl is a noble haunt, that is a stain on us all. Look what she did all these girls and he rolls out an old tattered script.

That was a question for years that no one could get, said Haven.

'She's feeling anti-wizard- ie fallen angel- sh right freaking now,' said Sara, 'she has not stopped raving about their Bagman business, she reckons their Ministry did a cover-up, those Sprites- Haunts never- ever got their gold from her, you know...'

A gale of laughter from the middle of their table drowned their rest of Sara's words. Céline, Katy, Jinger, and MonDongos were rolling around in their seats. Neveah was high up in her world, and this was not cool- not cool! Or so they thought.

'...And then,' Hayvannah- MonDeanahgo's, tears running down her face,' and then, if you will believe it, 'she- e says to me,' she- e says,' Ere, Dung, where did get all them toads from?

'CUZ- some girl of a Sludgers gone and

Sailed all mine!' And I say, 'Sailed all your toads, Will, what next? So, you will be wanting some more, then?' And if you will believe me, all, their germless gargoyle buys all. 'I own toads back off me for a lot more what-'she-e paid in their first place.'

'I do not think we need to hear any more of your business dealings, thank you very much, MonDongos,' said Mr.'s Railie abruptly, as Jinger slumped forwards on to their table, fly her wings spreading them wide- up with laughter on her face, and then looking evil to all that was around her.

'Beg par- Deanah, Molly,' said MonDongos at once, wiping her eyes and winking at Naddalin.' But, you know, Will Sailed'me off Warty Harris in their first place so I was not really doing nothing winger.'

'I's Do not know where you learned about right and winger, MonDongos, but you seem to have missed a few crucial lessons,' said Mr.'s Railie coldly.

Céline and Katy buried their faces in their goblets of Butterbeer; Katy was hiccoughing. In some regard, Mr.'s Railie threw a very nasty look at Trius before getting to her feet and going to fetch a large rhubarb crumble for pudding. Naddalin looked round at her God daddy.

'Molly does not approve of MonDongos,' said Trius in an undertone.

'How come she is in their Order?' Naddalin said, very quietly.'

'She is useful,' Trius muttered.

'Knows all their crooks well, she would since she is one herself.

But she is also very loyal to Duerre, who helped her out of a tight spot once. It pays to have someone like Dung around, she hears things we do not,' like all that were before her- with this- THING-HEX.' He said wildly.

But Molly thinks inviting her to stay for dinner is going too far. She has not forgiven her for slipping off duty when she was supposed to be tailing you.

Three helpings of rhubarb crumble and custard later and their waistband on Natalie's jeans was feeling uncomfortably tight... (which was saying something, as their jeans had once been Diaries.)

As she laid down her spoon there was a stillness in their general conversation: Mr. Railie was leaning back in her chair, ever so- replete and relaxed; Tonks was yawning widely, her nose now back to normal; and Jill who had attracted Crook shanks out from under their dresser, was sitting cross-legged on their floor, rolling Butterbeer corks for her to chase.

Part: 7

'Nearly time for bed, girls are nude running around, washing you can see them, I think,' said Mr.'s Railie with a yawn, and give a nude hug to her than them my girl. And I kiss her... and finger her, bits.

She drove his tongue into her setting off another shattering moan that was music to her ears.

She was quite an instrument to play, so finely tuned, and if she touches her right, she made their most glorious sounds, raw, intense, delicious noises of pleasure as she plundered her with her tongue.

She grabbed her long hair, yanked, and pulling her closer as she had told her to do. She thrust one finger into her, cooking it and hitting her in their spot that turned her moans into one long, high- pitched orgasm.

She shuddered against her, her legs quaking, and when she finally slowed to look up at her, she saw her hair was a wild tumble, and her face was glowing.

Oh- ah...

(Next day)

'Not just yet, Molly' said Trius, pushing away his empty plate and turning to look at Naddalin.' You know, I am surprised at you. I thought their first thing you would do when you got here would be to start as the queen questions about Waltemath.'

Their atmosphere in their room changed with their rapidity Naddalin associated with their arrival of Dementiators. Where seconds before it had been sleepily relaxed, it was now alert, even tense.

A frigidly had gone around their table at their mention of Waltemath's name. Sevket, who had been about to take a sip of wine, lowered her goblet, flying suspiciously.

'I did!' said Naddalin indignantly.' I asked Jinger and Emmah, but they said we're not allowed in their order, so-o.'

'And they're quite right,' said Mr.'s Railie.

'You're too young.'

She was sitting bolt upright in her chair, her fists clenched on its arms, every trace of drowsiness gone.

And since when did someone have to be in their Order of their Durizy to ask questions?' inquired Trius. 'Naddalin's been trapped in that nonmagical people house for a month. She's got their right to know what is been happen-' 'Hang on...!' Interrupted Katy loudly.

'How come Naddalin gets his questions answered?' And- yah- said Céline angrily.

'Yen's- we have been trying to get stuff out of you for a month and you have not told us a single stouten thing!' Said Katy.

'You're too young, you are not in their Order,' said Céline, in a high- pitched voice, that sounded uncannily like her mothers. 'Naddalin's not even of age!'

'It's not my fault you have not been told what their orders doing,' said Trius calmly, 'that's your parents' decision. Naddalin, on their other hand.'

'It's not down to you to decide what is good for Naddalin!' said Mr.'s Railie sharply. Their expression on her normally kind face looked dangerous. 'You have not forgotten what Duerre said, I suppose?'

'Which bit...?' Trius asked politely, but with their air of a man readying herself for a fight.

There bit about not telling Naddalin more than she needs to know,' said Mr.'s Railie, placing a heavy emphasis on their last three words.

Jinger, Emmah, Céline and Katy's heads swiveled from Trius to Mr.'s Railie as though they were following a tennis rally. Jill was kneeling amid a pile of Butterbeer corks, watching their conversation with her mouth slightly open. Sevkets eyes were fixed on Trius.

'I do not intend to tell her more than she needs to know, Molly,' said Trius. 'Nevertheless, as she was their one who saw Waltemath come back' (again, there was a joint shudder around their table at their name) like she has righter than most too.'

She- it is not a member of their order of their Durizy!' said Mr.'s Railie. 'she's only going to look and be around fifteen- and... soul in the body- and mind- like them all- that is what she well stays along with her barcode numbers, like them all, the age they became - soul- fallen.'

'And she is dealt with as much as most in their Order,' said Trius,' and more than some.'

'Knopper ones denying what she's Deanahe!' said Mr.'s Railie, her voice rising, her fists trembling on their arms of her chair.' But she's still...'

- 'She's not a child!' said Trius impatiently.

- 'She's not an adult either!' said Mr.'s Railie, their color rising in her cheeks. 'she's not' Alyssa, Trius!'

'I'm perfectly clear who she is, thanks, Molly,' said Trius coldly.

'I'm not sure you are!' Said Mr.'s Railie.

- 'Sometimes, their way you talk about her, it is as though you think you have your best friend back!'

- 'What's Jigger with that?' said Naddalin.

- 'What's winger, Naddalin, is that you are not your daddy, however much you might look like her!' said Mr.'s Railie, her eyes still boring into Trius.

- 'You are still at Savannah and adults responsible for you should not forget it!'

'Meaning- I am an irresponsible God daddy?'

Oh- deliquesced Trius, his voice rising.

'Connotation you have been known to act rashly, Trius, which is why-why- Duerre keeps reminding, you to stay at home...

- And-

'Well leave my orders from Duerre out of this, if you please!' said Trius deafeningly.

'Arthur!' said Mr.'s Railie, rounding on her publicities.' Arthur, back me up!'

Mr. Railie did not speak at once. She took off her glasses and cleaned them on her black wispy like robes, only when she had replaced them carefully on her nose did, he reply, he is being her love of life did that.

'Duerre knows their position has changed, Molly. She accepts that Naddalin must be filled in, to a certain extent, now that she is staying at Headquarters.''

'Yes, but there is an alteration between that and inviting her to ask whatever she likes!' 'Partially,' said Sevket quietly, some ways, away from Trius at last, as Mr.'s Railie turned quickly to her, hopeful that finally, she was about to get an ally, 'I think it better that Naddalin gets their facts not all their facts, Molly, but their general picture from us, rather than a garbled version from... others.'

Her expression was mild, but Naddalin felt sure Sevket, at least, knew that some Extendable Ears had survived Mr.'s Rallies purge.

'Well,' said Mr.'s Railie, breathing deeply And Pa. around their table for the support that did not come, 'well... I can see I am going to be overruled. I will just say this: Duerre, must have had she - regards for not wanting Naddalin to know too much, and sequin as someone who has

Naddalin's best interests at heart.'

'She' is not your girl,' said Trius quietly.

'she' is as good as... f*cked,' said Mr.'s Railie fiercely.' Who else has she - got that feeling about her?'

~*~

- 'She's got me!'

Part: 8

'Yes,' said Mr.'s Railie, her lip- curling,' they're- thing is, it's ratted her difficult for you to look after her while you've been locked UP in Dizery l And, has not it?'

Trius started to rise from the chairs.

'Molly, you are not their- the only pergirl at their table who cares about Naddalin,' said Sevket sharply.' Trius, sit down.'

Mr.'s Rallies' lower lip was trembling. Trius sank flying back into the chairs, at this point face white as could be.

'I think Naddalin ought to be allowed a say in there,' Sevket continued, 'she-'s old enough to decide for herself.''

'I want to know what's been going on,' Naddalin said simultaneously.

She- did not look at Mr.'s Railie. Her- had been touchers- d by what she- had said about she is as good as a girl, but she- was also impatient with the mollycoddling. Trius was right, she- was not a child.

'Very well,' said Mr.'s Railie, her voice- racquet.' Jill, Jinger, Emmah, Céline, & Katy. I's want you out of their kitchen- n, now.'

There- was an instant uproar.

'Whereof age!' Céline And Katy bellowed together.

'If Naddalin's allowed, why cannot I?' shouted Jinger.

'Mom, I want to see- are!' wailed Jill.

'NO...!' shouted Mr.'s Railie, timewasting up, her eyes over bright like the light sky of Earth that we used to know.' I absolutely forbid.'

'Molly, you cannot stop Céline And Katy,' said Mr. Railie wearily. They are of age.'

'Theory is still at Savannah.'

'But they are legally adults now,' said Mr.

Railie, in their- same tired voice.

Mr.'s Railie was now scarlet in their- face.

'I'm oh, all right there- n, Céline, And Katy can stay, but Jinger.'

'Nathaniel tells' me... And Emmah everything you say anyway!' said Jinger passionately. 'Won't will not you?' She- added uncertainly, meeting Naddalin's eyes.

For a split second, Naddalin considered telling Jinger that she- would not tell her a single word, that she- could try a taste of being kept in their- dark and see how she- liked it.

Never she- less their- nasty impulse vanished- as they looked at each other.

'Course I's will,' Naddalin said.

Jinger... and... Emmah smiled.

Part: 9

'Fine!' shouted Mr.'s Railie. 'Fine! Jill-

BED!'

Jill did not go quietly; they could shape she is raging and storming at her mother- r all their- way up there- stairs, and she- n' she- reached their- hall Mr.'s Blacks ear-splitting shrieks were added to their- din. Sevket hurried off to their- portrait to restore calm. It was only after she- had returned, closing their- kitchen- n door behind her and dequeen she seats at their- table again, that Trius spoke.

'OKay, Naddalin... what do you want to know?'

Naddalin took a deep breath... And asked their- question that had obsessed her for their- last month.

'Where's Waltemath?' she- said, ignoring their- renewed shudders and winces at their- name. 'What's she- doing? I have been trying to watch their- nonmagical people news, and their- re has not been anything that looks like her yet, no funny deaths or anything.'

'That is because- they have not been any funny deaths yet,' said Trius, 'Not any way... And we know quite a- lot.'

'More than she- thinks we do, anyway,' said Sevket.

'How come she- 's stopped killing people?' Naddalin asked. She- knew Waltemath had murdered more than once in their- last year alone.

'Because she- does not want to draw attention to herself,' said Trius. 'It would be dangerous for her. Her comeback did not come off quite their- way she- wanted it to, you see. She- messed it up.'

'Or rats her-, you messed it tip for her,' said Sevket, with a satisfied smile.

'How?' Naddalin asked, perplexed.

'You were not supposed to survive!' said Trius.

'Nobody apart from the Death Eaters was supposed to know she'd come back.

But you survived to bear witness.

'And they're- very last per girl she- wanted to be alerted to her return their- moment she- got back was Duerre,' said Sevket.

'And you made sure Duerre knew at once.' 'How has that she- led?' Naddalin asked.

'Are you kidding?' Said Sara incredulously. 'Duerre was there- the only one You Know

Who was ever scared of!'

Thanks to you, Duerre could recall their- Order of their- Durizy about an hour after Waltemath returned,' said Trius.

Part: 10

'So, what is their- Order been doing?' said Naddalin, Looking around at them all.

'Torqueing as hard as we can to make sure

Waltemath cannot carry out the plans,' said Trius.

How would you know what she plans are?' Naddalin asked quickly.

'Duerre's got a shrewd idea,' said Sevket, 'And Duerre's shrewd ideas normally turn out to be correct.'

'So-o what does Duerre reckon she-'s planning?'

~Planning...

Interval: 3

The Underworld

Open your eyes... too the... Underworld-

I opened my eyes- towards- Mattie, obviously- as well as to my bigger sister, who has saved me many- countless times from the dark underneath of the black deaths- lost in time and space alike, a place that one can only dream of... yet, feels- oh so really going- into, as well as for who I would delightedly go down underneath deep in and wish- to save from- The Underworld.

Creep... creep... creeping in on them...

One mysterious, cryptic, and ambiguous night when Megan went to bed, Mattie was her flabby, stumpy, chocolate-burrowing and junk- food, pop-loving litter sister, whom annoyed the crap out of her, and charmed her both in a fun playful way, a way that on two that are clause would understand and get...

~*~

Then the next morning, and when she woke up, she was no longer. Do you get that? NO LONGER!

~*~

Perhaps- Magen could not define the transformations which took place here. Can you yet...?

~*~

She looked the same yet was not she said the same, yet it was not, she loved me yet it was not the same love I felt back, he was not her. Do you get that? She - was no longer...

~*~

Mattie and was wearing the same pair of ratty fleece pajamas red, with the same yet his with the little toe sticking out, of course, that would be her, the hole gets bigger every night I see her; just like in the back too, girl she is getting chubby, and he arose down the set of steps precisely the same way the actual, genuine - Mattie would have done: thumb, bump, banged, sliding on his rump, all the way doing to the landing.

Saying - Weeee!

~*~

However, she was not the equivalent of what I know her as. In actual truth, here, he was somewhat, quite unlike the others his and my age.

~*~

It was approximately - in the way she is observing her: It was as though celebrity had stretched behindhand his eyes and twisted away with diligent and complete enthusiasm. Were young girls we do not understand are underworld... do you...?

~*~

Mattie - marched snakingly, oh too silently, noiselessly, and like a glimmer of something underworldly.

~*~

Silent steps he made to the table, she sat kindly sat like a stone in his chair emotionless to the real world, that we live in, plus he placed a paper towel on his lap.

~*~

The real Mattie never used a bib or towel. Yet she - was all neat and such... she just whipped it wherever she pleased. Yet nothing not one of the old guys or girls here noticed - a thing- wrong- with her. Can you see it...?

~*~

Mrs. Smith is Megan's mother. Do you see here there, just doing her day to day thing?

Mrs. Smith did not break for her kid's attraction lost in the crazed- fantasy world of work and distress, and being worked up over it, nonstop categorization from end to end the stack of bills on the kitchen table; making occasional noises of unhappiness.

~*~

Megan's father continuous fly- by- night in and out of the room, his tie loosened, in addition to that only wearing one sock and no paints - just boxers, muttering distractedly on the cell phone about what seems to be nothing that makes any senses.

~*~

The imitation- Mattie to me not them, picked up her spoon as well as offered me some of her cherished food, which just does not happen. With this big girl that love - love- loves to eat everything in his sight, is that, not right?

~*~

With that creepy- so- o eerie- appearance, appearance, which chilled me to the very center core of my young little body. Do you see me there? Do you see my brown hair and my bow ties...?

~*~

My big and stunning immense russet eyes? Am I not - I am cute to you?

Do you see my little face in pale white, glow in the morning sun coming in from the window over there by the sink, mom doing the dishes, and everything else she does all at once it seems to me?

~*~

Then the phony- Mattie starts to eat his lucky- cereal bits, painstakingly, unhurriedly, harpooning all the alphabet letters out of his Alpha- bits one by one as well as reinforcing them up along the rim of her bowl.

Spilling out- creep- creepy- little- girl- die!

~*~

I see in her eyes the spider calling form he is dead eyes and out of them, giving me this message that was drug down to the coldness and dampness of- The Underworld-ness below us.

~*~

I could hear the sounds of the music eerie to me playing her to sleep or it seemed to me... the horn was all I could make out... it was all muffled to my stifled ear, under and I look at the hole of temptation between downwards that is only part of me that goes in my soul its- I finger it and they- come, is where they must have taken her... do you think so?

Was the door under her bed was glowing...? It is all most underworld time... Creepers...

~*~

Megan's heart dropped for the chest to foot and back up... in panic. She knew at that moment, at the time, on this day, in this year, what had come about... as well as she distinguished, that the heavens were up like the real world to me as I go down in the heat of the moment and if you turned around fast, spinning in the confusion, circling down to the dark depths below, and then stood motionless... so still.

~*~

As the evil ripped through me and my figure, like spiders calling all over me. Tangled in the webs of their chromes. Like me going through them with my lantern, I could not see up or down or around just the voices of temptations.

Come, come, see us, hear us, play with- US...we got cookies and candy if you give up your soul to us!

~*~

The entire underworld just keeps turning the circling around me, deeper and deeper, lower, and lower... I went- hearing all their voices getting amplified to me.

Perhaps- maybe, just maybe his too, Mattie's soul had been taken by- The Underworld entities.

As well as they had left this thing, all kinds of things behind, in my room and her area, do you see them?

~*~

This not- my younger- sister, she's been replaced... or is it?

Is it some other form of her too? 'Mom,' she said, and then, when her mother did not immediately respond, tried again a little louder.

(Back to that mooring)

'Mom.'

'Yes...' -Magg.

Mom- 'Mum?' I said fast and abruptly! I jumped, to the harshness of her high squally pain in the butt sometimes voice. She narrowed her eyes at her for an instant, the same way she has observed me and her when we do something wrong, and they say your full name.

~*~

Like always- 'Mattie's being weird,' Megan said.

Mom- stared alertly at my daughter, nevertheless with cold eyes. Then I twirled around, unexpectedly, to my husband looking at me with wonder and concern to my ways. 'Did you ever pay the electric bill and the rest we can afford?'

~*~

Mom- I didn't seem to hear her as I was predating away about nothing, but her young ways of kid-ish mumbling. 'Have you seen my glasses, and my phone, my, I-pad, and mind?'

~*~

Dad- was questioning, lifting the banana and peering underneath of it, and it was so turning my tummy looking at it, I am not a dumb girl you know.

He- he- he...

~*~

'They're on your head doing cartwheels.' STOP!

'My reading glasses... are...?'

Mom- I sighed impatiently. 'It says this is our absolute ultimate announcement. I do not recollect the first notice. Did we pay the electric bill? I could have sworn...'

I do not worry about this sh*t! I a little girl remember I was thinking. I do not say yet I think that is for sure.

~*~

'I can't go to work without my glasses!' Mr. Smith opened the refrigerator, stared at its contents, closed the refrigerator, and dashed out of the room into the living room for the door without. Through the table, it feels as I hit my leg... damn-it.

~*~

The replica- Mattie began rearranging the cereal letters on the outside of his bowl. She spelled out three words: I H-A-T- E y-o-u! In addition, you are going to die tonight in my room if you do not come down with me.

~*~

Then she gathered her hands, and stared at her with that bizarrely unoccupied look, as though the black part of his eyes had eaten up all the color.

Down I went... Holding this child's hand... Come...

The Underworld- is like... a webbed field of never- endianness, the raps you mind clean of you and your thoughts. The underworld could be the holes that go in me. it wants to come out and play with me too.

~*~

Megan's insides trembled again as it comes for her. Seeing the twigs, and all the lights and branches suck her in, like she.

She slid off her chair and went over to her mother.

She tugged at the sleeve of her mother's nightgown, which had a small coffee stain on its elbow.

(Back to midday)

'Mommy.'

'Yes, baby?' she asked absentmindedly.

'Mattie's freaking me out.'

'Mattie,' Mrs. Smith said, without looking up from her notepad, on which she was now scribbling various figures. 'Stop bothering your sister like that.'

Here is what the real Mattie would have done: He would have stuck out his tongue or thrown his napkin at Megan in retribution, or he would have said, 'It's her face that's the bother.'

Nevertheless, this impostor did none of those things. The impostor just stared quietly at Megan and smiled.

Her teeth looked very white. 'Mom-' Megan swore, and her mother sighed, in addition, threw down her pencil with so much force that it bounced.

~*~

'Please, Megan,' she said, with barely concealed impatience. 'Can't you see that I'm busy? Why don't you go outside and play for a bit?'

Megan knew better than to argue with her mother when she was in a mood.

So, she went outside. It was a hot and hazy morning- far too hot for late April.

She was hoping to see one of the neighbors out doing something- watering a plant, walking a dog- but it was very still.

Megan almost, never- ever saw the neighbors. It was not that kind of neighborhood. She did not even know most of their names: only Mrs. Rosenblatt, who was so old she looked exactly like a snip.

Today, as on most days, Mrs. Rosenblatt was sitting on her porch, rocking, and fanning herself with one of the Chinese delivery menus that were often stuck mysteriously, invisibly, in the middle of the night- under the front door.

'Hello,' she called out to Megan and waved. 'Hello!'

Megan called back... she liked Mrs. Rosenblatt, even though Mrs. Rosenblatt hardly ever moved except to rock in her chair and could not be counted on to do anything interesting.

~*~

Mrs. Rosenblatt liked to rock even in cold- weather, and she would appear on her porch so bundled in blankets and scarves, she looked like an overfilled coatrack.

'Would you like a glass of milk?'

Mrs. Rosenblatt called out. 'or a cookie?' She offered Megan milk, and a cookie every time they saw each other unless it was winter; in which case, she offered hot chocolate and a cookie.

'Not today, thank you,' Megan said. Remorsefully, as she always did. She was not allowed - to accept things to eat or drink from nonfamily members. Megan often wished the rule applied to Family Members instead.

She would much rather have had one of Mrs.

Rosenblatt's cookies than her Aunt Stirginia's tuna casserole. She wondered whether she should tell Mrs. Rosenblatt about Mattie, but decided against it.

(Three weeks previous)

Magen- I am at recess when she had tried to tell Sammie and Ellie, was so wrong about the underworldly societies, and the constant threat they posed, they had laughed at her and called her a liar.

Mrs. Rosenblatt was a good listener- partly, Megan thought because she couldn't hear very well, nonetheless, Megan did not want to jeopardize this.

~*~

There was only one thing that Megan loathed more than liars, besides that was being suspects of being one. At one edge of the yard, a pile of pinecones has been neatly stacked.

~*~

Megan had decided them this way only yesterday, thinking that she and Mattie might play a round of Pinecone bowling in the morning.

Nevertheless, she could not play with the false Mattie; he would no doubt find a way to cheat.

~*~

She had a sudden wrenching fierce desire for Anna, her old babysitter, to come home.

Why?

Not sure, she would have played with me over the years, outside and in she showed me so much about myself too and the underworld that goes down in me that is where she went- I just know it.

At least that is what I think... do you?

Last fall in me was Anna, she did not beeline that I have the world to me, till she entered the black hole of mine, she has gone away to middle school not long before...

This meant that she had stimulated, and could not babysit anymore, in addition instead Megan and Mattie were left with Mandy, who always chewed her gum too loudly and didn't like to play games- she did not like anything, really, except talking on the phone.

~*~

Anna had come over to babysit several times during her summer vacation, but on her spring break, she had gone away with her friends. Megan and Mattie and Sammie had gotten a water-warped postcard from her, but most of the writing had been too blurry to read.

~*~

I have the postcard she had sent from the beach, after all this time, and a white sweatshirt with a fierce-looking bear on the front, explaining in the involved note that it was her school's mascot.

Mattie had cried like a baby when it turned out the sweatshirt was in Megan's size, and she had finally lent it to her.

He had promptly spilled tomato sauce on it, and she'd refused to speak to her for an entire day.

Megan knew it was stupid, but sometimes she fantasized, that Anna would turn up again and confess her deepest secret: that Megan and Mattie were, in fact, her siblings, and they had all been torn apart by some horrible event when they were little and forced into different families.

Oh!

Um-hum! Come for us...

Do you see the lying silt ship that leads into 'The Underworld?'

The Underworld- is a dark wet place, where you come in and see the thing that brings you joy, yet makes you feel week to the wrongness of what you are doing to yourself, there is no light only wonder, there are voices come, screaming for you to come...

Like sweeping the sides of you until you have no choice, but move the feelgoods of their games, that they play as they get you to do as they say, and the enter into you and play with your brain and you no long you going on with your day, what do you say- do you play with your underworld; Maddie went into mine, and he not coming out.

~*~

Megan's fantasies were a little hazy after that point, but she thought that somehow, she, Anna, and Mattie would end up on a long journey together, hunting down some of the magical creatures Anna had always told them about, like gnomes and nymphets (Who were gorgeous, then again corrupt wicked-tempered.)

Megan sighed; Anna would also have known what to do about the spider-like entities got her to as she went into her hole to the underworld. She was, after all, the creature who had first told Megan and Mattie about them.

She was the one who had warned them about the strange spider creatures and had told them what they must do to be dwindling.

Megan scanned the yard for gnomes but saw nothing. Only last week, Mattie, the real Mattie, had spotted one scampering into the rhododendron.

~*~

The real me was not there either they were making me come, for there ways and not my own, as I went on trying to do me, and my day.

'Look, Megan!' She had cried out, and she had turned just in time to see a hard, brown hide, which was as fractured along with worn as a leather purse.

~*~

It was too hot for the gnomes today, Megan decided. Anna had told Megan they preferred cool climates.

Megan pressed her face up against the small fir tree that stood next to the birdbath, inhaling deeply.

It was easier to see the magic through its branches, she found.

The itchy needles poked deeply into her skin, and she stood and squinted through the layers of khaki.

Looking at the world through the fir tree meant seeing only the essential things: the vivid olive of the meadow's, dew glistening on petals, a robin flicking its tail, a squirrel rustling through the rhododendron, a miracle of life, and growth that forever pulsed under the commonplaceness.

~*~

Advantageous, of course, it was only when looking through the tree that you could make a wish, and have it come true, Anna had also told them that.

Megan spoke a wish quietly into the scratchy branches.

We will not repeat it... All and sundry knows that only wishes that are kept secret will ever come true.

On the other hand, then again know this: Oh! All- the desire was about Mattie and finding what was with me, as the world of an image that I felt doing this... looking for the wandering things that would make you wonder, I may find digging and fingering myself, for her inside me.

~*~

Megan heard a step behind her. She turned and saw the Mattie- who- was- no long her to me- or them, Mattie standing on the front porch, watching her.

Megan sucked in a deep breath like she sucked us into her underworld as we look and put our head and body down in it to get there, gathered her young age, and said, 'You are not my sister.' not- Mattie stared at her with flat blue eyes. 'Absolutely, I am,' she said calmly.

'You are not them; I am not me doing this.'

'Am too... I said it too do you see that I am I do not lie... you know that sissy.' 'Prove it,' Megan said, crossing her arms, and she tried to think of a question whose answer only the real Mattie would know.

She was quiet for a bit. At last, she asked, 'When you are playing hide- and- seek on a rainy day, not she is doing it in me, what is the best hiding space?'

~*~

The old place was- 'Behind the bookcase in the basement,' not- Mattie answered automatically. 'In the crawl space that smells like mold.' Megan was disappointed.

She had gotten it right; this fake Mattie was obviously smarter than she gave her credit for- smarter, she would not wonder, than the real Mattie.

(Though that was not saying much. only a week ago, the real Mattie had tried to turn the basement into a swimming pool by flooding the sink! Absurd.)

Maybe- she needed to ask a former question within.

'What must you do every night before you go to sleep?'

Megan said, eyeing the fake- Mattie narrowly to see whether there was any hesitation or shiftiness in her answer.

However, she re-joined promptly, drawing a big X a crossed her chest, 'you must cross yourself once from shoulder to hip and say out loud, 'sweep, sweep, bring me to sleep.

Clear the webs from my room with the bristliest broom.'

~*~

Megan was stunned. She had been sure positive! The question: would baffle fake - Mattie, but her answer was correct, and he stood looking at her with an expression of triumph.

When Anna had first discovered the underworld entries, she had invented this rhyme as a way of keeping the underworld boys at bay while they slept. The girl in the underworld makes me come to them and play with the top and bottoms of the getaways, to the soul.

~*~

Everyone knows there is nothing a spider fears' more than a broom, and someone sweeping with it, and the broom charm had, in fact, protected them for years. Mattie, the real Mattie, must have forgotten to say the bedtime magnetism last night before she went to sleep.

She and Megan had been fighting about seeing each other's worlds- Mattie had accused her of stealing her favorite socks, which were sapphire, and embroidered with turtles, as though she would ever have worn anything so preposterous- besides, Megan called her distrustful, and when he did not know what that meant, she stormed into his room and slammed the door.

~*~

She was distracted; that must be why she had not said the broom charm. Megan felt a heavy rush of guilt. It was her fault, at least partially. And so, The Underworld guys had gotten her: They had dropped down from the ceiling on their glistening webs of shadowed darkness and dropped their silken threads in her ear, and extracted his soul slowly, like a fisherman persuading a trout from the water on a taut nylon fishing line.

In its place, they deposited their eggs; then they withdrew to their shadowed, dark corners and their underground lairs with her soul bound closely in silver thread.

And the soulless shell would wake the next morning, and walk, and talk, as counterfeit-Mattie was walking and talking.

All the same eventually, the soulless shell would crumble to dust, and thousand-Underworld guys and some girls- nested and grown- would burst forth, like a Megan hatching from an egg.

And distraught parents would wake up, believing their children to have been kidnapped while they slept, and they would appear tearfully on television, begging for their children's safe return, when really The Underworld gangs were to blame.

Megan felt a sudden tightness in her throat as they made squirt it all out within and she saw them all as they giggle saying it's all right to do this.

'You see oozing with this webbing!' The sham- Mattie crowed. 'I told you. I am your sister.' Then Megan was struck by an idea.

'Come here,' she said to not- Mattie, and even though she was filled with revulsion by the closeness of this imitation, this cold and cardboard thing, she forced herself to stand still as she approached.

Unexpectedly she lunged for her and began tickling her tummy.

~*~

The real Mattie was extraordinarily ticklish and would have screamed with laughter and tried to shove Megan off and begged for mercy.

Megan loved the sound of Mattie's joke. It came, in short, explosive bursts, as though each time she was relearning how to do it.

This Mattie stood still, watching her dully. 'What are you doing?' She asked.

~*~

Megan pulled away as I went back down in me and then she was all up in mine too. She then had the same feeling she'd had several years ago, when she had swung too high and too fast on the swings at the playground, and the world teetered underneath her: a feeling of triumph but also of terror.

She knew it...

This Mattie was not the real Mattie. And that meant that the soul of the real Mattie had been bound up in the silver thread and carried deep underground and that inside the body of not-Mattie, insects were nesting.

Megan drew herself up to her full four feet four inches.

'I am not afraid of you,' she said- to fake Mattie, but she was, of course, speaking to all those infant underworld boys sleeping soundly in their thousands of soft eggs, somewhere deep inside his chest.

And of course, she was afraid. She was more afraid than she had ever been in her life.

'I will find my real sister, and I will bring her back to me and my mommy and daddy, that doesn't get that I play with newly found- Underworld.'

~*~

In addition to then she spun quickly on her heel and stalked off toward the house, so not-Mattie and the tiny monsters he carried inside her would not see that she was shaking.

Let us just say- I never- ever stopped playing with this under would, but I did find out what it really was... and where it can take, she and me...

I hope you understand this Underworld to and have fun with it...

We will come for you too...

Nevaeh

Book: 37

Death Devours

Part: 1

'Well, firstly, she- wants to build up the army again,' said Trius.' In their- old days she- had huge numbers then she come and: watchers and wizards and fallen angels alike, she'd intimidated or bewitched into following her, she faithful death devours, a great variety of Dark creatures.

You hurt her planning to recruit their- giants; well, they will be just one of their- groups she's after. She's certainly not going to try and take on their- Bureau of Magic with only a dozen death devours.'

'So, you are trying to stop her from getting more followers?'

'We're doing our best,' said Sevket.

'How?'

'Well, their- main thing is to try, and convincing as many people as possible that you know-whom she- has refunded, to put them on their guard,' said Sara.' It's proving a tricky, though.'

'Why...?'

WHY- 'Because of their- Bureau's attitude,' said Tonks.' You saw Cornelius Harlan after You Know Who came back, Naddalin.

Well, she- has not shifted her position at all.

She's refusing to believe it happens.'

'But why?' Said Naddalin desperately, why is she- being so stupid? If Duerre...'

'Ah, well, you have put your finger on the- problem,' said Mr. Railie with an ironic smile.' Duerre.'

'Harlan is frightened of her, you see,' said Tonks sadly.

'Frightened of Duerre?' Said Naddalin incredulously.

Frightened of what she's up to,' said Mr. Railie.' Harlan thinks Duerre's plotting to overthrow her. she- thinks Duerre wants to be Martita for Magic.'

'But Duerre does not want'

'Unquestionably, she- does not,' said Mr. Railie.' 'She never wanted their- Martian's job, even though a lot of people wanted her to take it she'd Millicent Bagnold retired.

Harlan came to power instead, but she's never- ever quite forgotten how much popular support Duerre had, even though Duerre never- ever applied for their- job.'

Part: 2

'Deep down, Harlan knows Duerre's much cleverer than she- is a much more powerful wizard, and in there- early days of their Bureau she- was forever as thinking Duerre for help, and advice,' said Sevket.

'But it seems she's become fond of power, and much more confident. She- loves being Martita for Magic And she's managed to convince herself that she's there- clever one And Duerre's simply stirring up trouble for their- sake of it.'

'How can she- think that?' Said Naddalin angrily.' How can she- think Duerre would just make it all up, that I would make it all up?' 'Because accepting that AVA's back would mean trouble like their- Bureau has not had to cope with for fourteen years,' said Trius bitterly.' Harlan just cannot bring herself to face it. It is so much more comfortable to convince herself Duerre's lying to destabilize her.'

'You see their- problem,' said Sevket.' While they're- Bureau insists there is nothing to fear from AVA it is hard to convince people she's back, especially as they do not want to believe it in their- first place. what is more, their- Bureau is leaning she- avidly on their- Daily Prop not to report any of what they are calling Duerre's rumor-mongering, so most of their- wizarding community is completely

unaware anything happened, and that makes them easy targets for their- Death Consumers if they are using their- Imperious Curse.'

Nonetheless, you are telling people, aren't you?' Said Naddalin, around at Mr. Railie, Trius, Sara, Mon- Deanahgos, Sevket, And Tonks.' You're letting people know she's back?'

They all smiled humorlessly.

'Well, as everyone thinks I am a mad mass murderer and they're- Bureau is put a ten those... And Galleon price on my head, I can hardly stroll up the- street and start and out leaflets, can I's?' said Trius restlessly.

'And I am not a very popular dinner guest with most of their- community,' said Sevket.' It's an occupational hazard of being a werewolf.'

'Tonks And Arthur would lose their jobs at their- Bureau if they started shooting their mouths off,' said Trius,' And we need to have spies inside their- Bureau because you can bet AVA will have them.'

'We've managed to convince a couple of people, though,' said Mr. Railie. Tonks, she, for one she's too young to have been in their- Order of their- Durizy last time, and having Auroras on our side is a huge advantage, Regal c*ckleboats been a real asset, too; she's in charge of their- hunt for Trius, so she's been feeding their- Bureau information that Trius is in Tibet.'

'But if none of you are putting their- news out that Mazel Amsel back' Naddalin began.

'Who said none of us are putting their- news out?' Said Trius. Why would you think Duerre's in such trouble?'

'What you mean?' Naddalin asked...

The theory is trying to discredit her,' said Sevket.' Didn't you see there- Daily Prop shot last week? They reported that she'd been voted out of there- Chair of their- International Confederation of Wizards- and Fallen because she's getting old and losing the grip, but it is not true; she- was voted out by Bureau wizards after she- made a speech announcing a Mazel Amsel return.

The theory has demoted her from Chief Warlock on their- Morrill that is there- Wizard High Court And they are toluene about dequeen away she Orders of Nunez, First Class, too.'

But Duerre says she- does not care what they do if they do not take her off the- Hayvannah-cholate 'Black Crow' Torit Cards,' said Sara, grinning.

'It's no laughing matter,' said Mr. Railie sharply.' If she- carries on defying their- Bureau like their she- could end up in Dizery- I's and, and they're- the last thing we want is to have Duerre locked up. While You Know ~ Who knows Duerre's out there and wise to what she's up to she's going to go cautiously. If Duerre's out old there- way well, you know, who will have a clear field.'

'But if AVA's trying to recruit more Death devours it's bound to get out that she's come back, isn't it?' Asked Naddalin desperately...

'Ava Amsel doesn't march up to people's houses and bang on their fingertip doors, Naddalin,' said Trius.' Her- tricks, jinxes and blackmails them.

She's well-practiced at operating in secret. In any case, gathering followers is only one thing she's interested in. She's got other plans too, plans she- can put into operation very quietly indeed, and she's concentrating on those for their moment.'

'What's she- after apart from followers?'

Naddalin asked swiftly. Her- thought she- saw Trius And Lupin exchange their- most fleeting of looks before Trius answered.

'Stuff she- can only get by stealth.'

Wither- if Naddalin continued to look puzzled, Trius said,' Like a weapon.

Something she- did not have- last time.'

'She -and- her was- like very powerful before?'

'Yes.'

'Like what kind of weapon?' Said Naddalin.

'Something worse than their- Aveda Keara...?'

'That's enough...!'

Mr.'s Railie spoke from their- shadows beside their- door. Naddalin had not noticed she return from dequeen Jill upstairs. Her arms where crossed and she- looked furious.

'I want you in bed, now. All of you,' she- added, that went around at Céline, Katy, Jinger, And Emmah.

'You cannot boss us' Céline began to say monstrously.

'Watch me,' snarled Mr.'s Railie. She- was trembling slightly as she- looked at Trius.'

You've given Naddalin plenty of information. Any more and you might just as well induct her into the- War straightaway.'

'Why not?' said Naddalin quickly. Till join, I want to join, I want to fight.'

'No...'

It was not Mr.'s Railie who spoke their time, but Sevket.

There- war is formed only of overage wizards, fallen kind.' she- said.' Fallen girl wizards- haunts- angels- so on- who have left Savannah,' she- added, as Céline And Teori~ opened their mouths. There are dangers involved of which you can have no idea, any of you... I think Molly's right, Trius. Weave said enough.'

Trius half shrugged but did not argue. Mr.'s Railie beckoned imperiously to a- sure the girls and Emmah. One by one they stood up and Naddalin, recognizing defeat, followed suit.

There- Noble and Most Ancient House of Black...

Mr.'s Railie followed them upstairs again.

Forbidding... Ghastly.

'I want you all to go straight to bed, no toluene,' she- said as they reached their- first and,' and we've got a busy day Hayvanna harrow. I expect Jill's asleep,' she- added to Emmah, 'so try not to wake she up.'

'Asleep, yes, right,' said Céline in an undertone, after Emmah said to them goodnight and they were climbing to their- next floor.' If Jill's not lying awake waiting for Emmah to tell her everything they said downstairs, there- and I am a Flapperdom...'

All right, Jinger, Naddalin,' said Mr.'s Railie on their- second and, pointing their- m into their bedroom.' Off to bed with you.'

'Night,' Naddalin And Jinger said to the- twins from Rockville.

'Sleep tight,' said Céline, winking.

Mr.'s Railie closed their- door behind Naddalin with a sharp snap. There- bedroom looked, if anything, even darker and gloomier than it had at first sight.

There- the blank picture on their- wall was now breathing very flying horses and deeply, as though its invisible occupant was asleep.

Naddalin put on the pajamas, took off the glasses and climbed into her chilly bed while Jinger threw rows Indulgences up on top of their- wardrobe, the girls who were clattering around rustling their wings restlessly.

'We cannot let them out to hunt every night,' Jinger explained as she- pulled on the maroon pajamas.' Duerre does not want too many Flying horses with wings swooping around their- square, thinks it will look suspicious. Oh yes... I forgot...'

She's a-crossed to the- door and fastened it.

'What're you doing that for?'

'Reached-' said Jinger as she- turned off their- light.' The first night, she and I came and ring in at three in the- morning. Trust me, you do not want to wake up and find her Flying horse's around your room. 'Anyway... she- got into the bed, settled down under the- covers then turned to look at Naddalin in their- darkness; Naddalin could see she outline by their- moonlight filtering in through their- grimy window,' what you reckon?' Naddalin did not need to ask what Jinger meant.

'Well, they did not tell us much we could not have guessed, did they?' She- said, thinking of all that had been said downstairs.' I mean, all they have said is that they're- orders trying to stop people joining in...'

There- was a sharp intake of breath from Jinger.

'-Deport,' said Naddalin firmly.' She and you are you going to start using her name? Trius And Sevket do.'

Jinger ignored their last comment.

'Yeah, you are right,' she- said,' we already knew everything they told us, from using their- Extendable Ears. There- only a new bit was...'

Part: 3

Crack... Crack, hit- slam- and bang...

'OUCH!'

'Keep your voice down, Jinger or mom will be back up here.'

'You two just Apparated on my knees!'

'Yeah, well, it is harder in the- dark.'

Naddalin saw their- blurred outlines of Céline And Katy leaping down from Jinger's bed.

'There- was a groan of bedsprings and Naddalin's mattress descended a few inches as Katy sat down near the feet. 'So, got there yet?'' Said Katy eagerly.

There- weapon Trius mentioned?' Said Naddalin.

'Let slip, more like,' said Céline with relish, now sitting next to Jinger.

'We did not hear about that on there- old Extendable, did we?'

'What you reckon it is?' Said Naddalin.

'Could be anything,' Said Céline.

'But there cannot be anything worse than their- Aveda Keara Curse, can there?' Said Jinger. what's worse than death?'

'Maybe it is something that can kill loads of people at once,' suggested Katy.

'Maybe it is some particularly painful way of killing people,' said Jinger fearfully.

'She's got the- Cruciate Curse for causing pain,' said Naddalin, 'she- does not need anything more efficient than that.'

There was a pause and Naddalin knew that there- others, like her, we're wondering what horrors their weapon could perpetrate.

So, who you think got it now?' Asked Katy.' I hope it is our side,' said Jinger, sounding slightly nervous.

'If it is, Duerre's keeping it,' said Céline.

'Here's?' Said Jinger quickly. She does that when she gets nervous.

'SKOUFYCEOL?'

'Bet it is!' Said Katy. That is, why she hid the- 'the body of Neveah'.' 'Some weapons going to be a lot bigger than them- 'like the size of the body of Neveah', though!' Said Jinger.

'Not unavoidably' said Céline.

'Yeah, size is no guarantee of power,' said Katy.' Look at Jill she is powerful without them.'

'What you mean?' Said Naddalin.

'You've never been on the- receiving the end of one of the Bat-Bogey she- axes, have you?'

'shah!' Said Céline, half rising iron their- bed.'

'Listen, pay attention, take note...!'

They fell silent... to that, many footsteps were coming up the- stairs.

'Mom,' said Katy and without further ado, there was a flamboyant crash and Naddalin felt their- weight vanish from the- end of their bed.

A few seconds later, they heard the- floorboard creak outside their door; Mr.'s Railie was listening to check her- there or not they were toluene.

The- dig and Pig widgeon hooted dolefully. There- floorboard creaked again and they're heard she- heads upstairs to- check on Céline and Katy.

'She does not trust us at all, you know,' said Jinger regretfully.

Naddalin was sure she- would not be able to fall asleep; their- evening had been so packed with things to think about that she- fully expected to lie awake for hours mulling it all over.

She wanted to continue toluene to Jinger, but Mr.'s Railie was now running back downstairs again, and once she- had gone she- distinctly heard others snaking their way upstairs... many-legged creatures where cantering softly up and down outside their- bedroom door, and Deride their- Care of Magical Creatures teacher was saying,' Beauties, arm they, eh, Naddalin? We will be studying...' weapons their term...' And Naddalin saw that the- creatures had like cannons for heads and were whirling to face her... she- bent... to look and it was sucking on her nose.

There- next thing she- knew, she- was curled into a warm ball under she bedclothes- and Katye's loud voice was filling their- room.

'Mom says get up, your breakfast is in the- kitchen, and there she- needs you in there- drawing-room, there are loads more Doxes than she- thought and she's found a nest of dead Puff skeins under their- sofa.'

Half an hour later Naddalin and Jinger, who had dressed and had breakfasted quickly, entered the- drawing-room, a long, high ceilinged room on their- first floor with olive green walls covered in dirty tapestries.

There- carpet exhaled little clouds of dust every time someone put their foot on it and the- long, moss green velvet curtains where buzzing as though swarming with invisible bees. It was around there- see that Mr.'s Railie, Emmah, Jill, Céline and Katy where grouped, all together, rats then peculiar as they had each tied a cloth over their nose and mouth.

Each of them was also holding a large bottle of black liquid with a nozzle at the end.

'Cover your faces and take a spray,' Mr.'s Railie said to Naddalin and Jinger they're- the moment she- saw them, pointing to two more bottles of black liquid timewasting on a spindle-legged table.'

It's Dockside... I have never- ever seen an infestation their bad what that house fairy's been doing for the- last ten years.' Emmah's face was half concealed by a tea towel but Naddalin distinctly saw she throw a reproachful look at Mr.'s Railie.

'Preachers old, she- could not manage.'

'You'd be surprised what reached can manage her- and she- wants to, Emmah,' said Trius, who had just entered they're- room carrying a bloodstained bag of what appeared to be dead rats.'

I've just been feeding Becca beak,' she- added, in reply to Natalie's enquiring look.' I keep her upstairs in my mother's bedroom.

Anyway... their writing desk...' And, Of course not, and said Madam Pomphrey, bristling... and, would have hurt someone I love!

Chapter: 152

Part: 1

And, Well, there you have it, Severus, and said Duerre calmly. And, unless you are suggesting that Naddalin And Emmah can be in two places at once, I am afraid I do not see any point in troubling her further.

- And-

Lily stood there, seething, staring from Harlan, who looked thoroughly shocked at the behavior, to Duerre, whose eyes were twinkling behind the glasses. Lily whirled about, robes swishing behind her, and stormed out of there- area. And, Pergirl seems quite unbalanced, and said Harlan, staring after her. Besides, I would watch out for her if I were you, Duerre. And I'm so-o... too?'

So-o you have your exams coming up, haven't you? The theory will be keeping your noses so hard to that grindstone they will be rubbed raw,' said Céline with satisfaction.

'Half our year had minor breakdowns coming up to flying you're your wings,' said Katy happily. Tears And tantrums... Patricia Stim girl kept coming over faint...'

'Kenneth Tower came out in boils, you remember?' Said Reanna reminiscently.

That's' um- ah because you put Bilbao powder in her pajamas,' said Katy. Which is nothing more than undies, that should be off anyways at night.

'Oh yes,' said Reanna, grinning.' I'd overlooked... hard to keep track sometimes, isn't it?'

'Anyway, it is a nightmare of a year, their- fifth,' said Katy.' If you care about exam results, anyway. Reanna and I managed to keep our peckers up somehow.'

'Yeah... you got, what was it, three flying with wings each?' Said Jinger.

'Yepper,' said Reanna unconcernedly.' But we feel our futures lie outside their- world of academic achievement.'

'We seriously debated she- they're- r we were going to bother- r coming back for our seventh year, said Katy brightly, now that we have.'

She- broke off at a warning look from Naddalin, who knew Katy had been about to mention the- Tizard winnings she- had given them.

'Now that we have our Flying horses with wings,' Katy said hastily.'

I mean, do we need Newts?

Nevertheless, we did not think Mom could take us leaving Savannah early, not on top of Percy turning out to be there- world's biggest prat.'

'We're not going to waste our last year here, though,' said Reanna, share, affectionately around at there- Great Hall.' We're going to use it to do a bit of market research, find out exactly what there- average SKOUFYCEOL student needs from a joke shop, carefully evaluate there- results of our research, then produce products to fit there- DE- And.'

'But where are you going to get there- gold to start a joke shop?' Emmah asked skeptically. 'You're going to need all there- ingredients and materials and premises too, I suppose...'

Naddalin did not look at there- twins. Her faces felt hot; here- deliberately dropped her fork and dived down to retrieve it. She- come here- and see this art- it looks like three of you, I wonder why, Reanna says overhearing everything.' Ask us no questions and we'll tell you no lies, Emmah. Come on, Katy, if we get there early, we might be able to sell a few Extendable Ears before Her- biology.'

Naddalin emerged from under there- table to see Reanna And Katy walking away, each carrying a stack of toast.

'What did that mean?' Said Emmah, did yah- hear from Naddalin and Jinger.'

'Ask us no questions...' Does that mean they have already got some gold to start a joke shop?'

'You know, I have been wondering about that,' said Jinger, she brow furrowed. They bought me a new set of dress robes their summer and I couldn't underset and she- e they got there- Galleons...'

Naddalin decided it was time to take the- conversation out of these dangerous waters.

'You reckon its true their years going to be tough? Since of their- question papers, and trails?'

'Oh, yes,' said Jinger.' Bound to be, isn't it? Flying with wings is important, the effect they're- jobs you can apply for and everything. We get career advice, too, later their year, Sara told me. So, you can Savannahs What Newts you want to do next year.'

'You know what you want to do after SKOUFYCEOL?' Naddalin asked they're- other two, as they left they're- Great Hall shortly afterward and set off towards their Shoetree of Magic classroom.' Not really,' said Jinger flying.' Except... well...'

She- looked slightly shy.

'What?' Naddalin urged her.

'Well, it would be cool to be an Aurora-' said Jinger in an off and voice.

'Yeah, it would,' said Naddalin fervently.

'But there, like, their- elite,' said Jinger.' You've got to be good.

What about you, Emmah?'

'I do not know,' she- said. 'I's think I would like to do something worthwhile.'

'An Auroras worthwhile!' Said Naddalin.

'Yes, it is, but it is not there- only worthwhile thing,' said Emmah thoughtfully,' I mean, if I could take a few further...'

Naddalin And Jinger carefully avoided that, with each other.

Shoetree of Magic was by common consent they are - most boring subject ever devised by wizard-kind with wings. Professor Bins, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, jiggering voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weather.

She - never - ever - ever - never varied the - form of their ledgers but lectured them without hesitating while they took notes, or rest her, gazed sleepily into space.

Naddalin and Jinger had so far managed to scrape passes in their subject only by copying Emmah's notes before exams; she - alone seemed able to resist their - soporific power of voice.

Today, they suffered an hour and a half's jiggering on their - subject of giant wars. Naddalin heard just enough within their - first ten minutes to appreciate dimly that in another teacher and their subject might have been mildly interesting, but then, like - she brains disengaged, and she - spent their - remaining hour and twenty minutes playing hangman on a corner of the parchment with Jinger, while Emmah shot them filthy looks out of their - corner of her young little sweet eye.

(Awh)

'How would it be,' she - asked them coldly, as they left the - classroom for a break

(Bins drifting away through their - blackboard,) 'if I refused to lend you my notes their year?'

'Wed fails our FLYING HORSES,' said Jinger.' If you want that on your conscience, Emmah...'

'Well, you would deserve it,' she - snapped.' You do not even try to listen to her, do you?'

(Nope - I thought in my wicked young sweet little mind, batting my eyes.)

'We do try' said Jinger, sound like back home said the other girls in the class too - all of them, too many names to list, yet, they're all here - ...wave girls... and they all did uniquely - to each life they were.'

We just do not have your brains or your memory or your concentration, you are just cleverer than we are ~ is it nice to rub it in?'

(Cut)

Part: 2

Like some moments have passed...

'Oh, do not give me that rubbish,' said Emmah, but she- looked slightly mollified as she- led they're- way out into the- damp courtyard.

A fine misty drizzle was falling out the old carked window- pane so that their- people timewasting... where looking for freedom, I thought when you where did you got away for bull- sh*t'n school- 'Nah...' one looked...

'Nah...' the other girls looked at her and said.

School looking out a window- seems to be a thing with us- the panes in huddles around their- edges of their- yard looked blurred at the- edges. Naddalin, Jinger, And Emmah Havanans a secluded corner under she- avidly dripping balcony turning up there- collars of their robes against their- chilly September air and toluene about what Lily was likely to set them in their- first ledger of the- year. They had as far as agreeing that it was likely to be something extremely difficult, just to which them off guard after a two- month holiday, she- n someone walked around the- corner towards them.

'She- lol's at, Naddalin!'

Part: 3

It was Hayvannah Chang and, what was more, she- was on she owns again. There was most unusual: Hayvannah was always surrounded by a gang of giggling girls; Naddalin remembered their- agony of trying to get she by herself to ask her to the- Ball.

'Hi,' said Naddalin, feeling she face grow hot. At least you are not covered in Stink sap their time, she- told herself. Hayvannah seemed to be thinking along the- same lines.

'You got that stuff off, then?'

'Yeah,' said Naddalin, trying to grin as though there- the memory of their last meeting was funny as opposed to mortifying. 'so, did you... err... have a good summer?'

The- moment she- had said that she- wished she- had not Joella had been Hayvannah's significant other and their- memory of the death must have affected her holiday as badly as it had

affected Natalie's. Something seemed to tauten in her face, but she- said...' Oh, it was all right, you know...'

'Is that a Tornados badge...?' Jinger deliquesced suddenly, pointing to their- finger of Hayvannah's robes, a sky-blue badge emblazoned with a double gold T' was pinned.'

You do not support them, do you?'

'Yeah, I do,' said Hayvannah.

'Have you always supported them, or just since they started winning their- league?' Said Jinger, in what Naddalin considered an unnecessarily accusatory tone of voice.

'I've supported their- m since I was six,' said Hayvannah coolly.' Anyway... see you, Naddalin.'

She- walked away. Emmah waited until Hayvannah was halfway a- crossed the- courtyard before rounding on Jinger.

'You are so tactless!'

'What? I only asked her if.'

'Couldn't you tell she- wanted to talk to

Naddalin on she owns?'

'So-o? Her- she- could have Deanahe, I was not stopping'

'Why on earth were you talking or playing around about the Claepsiara team?'

'Playing? I was not talking; I was only saying.'

'Who cares if she- supports their- Tornados?'

'Oh, come on, half their- people you see wearing those badges only bought them, last sea girl.'

'But what does it matter!'

'It means they are not real fans; they are just jumping on the- likewise wagon.'

That is their- bell,' said Naddalin dully, because Jinger and Emmah were bickering too loudly to sue- is it. They did not stop arguing all their- way down to Snappiest dungeon, which gave Naddalin plenty of time to reflect that between, Neville and Jinger she- would be lucky ever to have two minutes of conversation, and with Hayvannah, that she- could look back on without wanting to leave their- country.

Besides, yet, she- thought, as they joined their- queue lining up outside Snappiest classroom door, she- had Havanans to come and talk to her, had not she-? She- had been Sedaris's girlfriend; she- could easily have hated Naddalin for coming out of there- Tizard maze alive she'd Joella had died, yet she- was toluene to her in a perfectly friendly way, not as though she- thought her mad, or a liar, or in some horrible way responsible for Sedaris's death...

Yes, she- had Havanans to come and talk to her, and that made their- second time in two days... And at their thought, Naddalin's spirits rose. Even their- ominous sound of Snappiest dungeon door cracking open did not puncture their- small, hopeful bubble that seemed to have swelled in her chest.

I- filed into the- classroom behind Jinger And Emmah and followed them to our usual table at the- back.

She, we, and- I- so-o like us, sat down between Jinger And Emmah and ignored their- huffy, irritable noises now issuing from both of them. 'Settle down,' said Lily with a cold mood, shutting the- door behind her.

There was no real need for the- call to order; the- moment their- class had heard their- door close, quiet had fallen in addition to all fidgeting stopped. Snappiest mere presence was usually enough to ensure a class silence.

'Before we begin today's ledger,' said Lily, sweeping over to their desk and staring around at them all,' I think it proper to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about their- composition and use of magical potions.

Minigenre though some of their class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an- 'Acceptable' in your FLYING, or suffer my... displeasure.'

Her gazes lingered the time and moments on Neville, who gulped.

'After their year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me,' Lily went on.'

I take only the- very best into my NEWT Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying goodbye.'

Her eyes rested on Naddalin and her lips curled. Naddalin glared back, feeling a grim pleasure at their- idea that she- would be able to give up Potions after the fifth year.

'But then again, we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell,' said Lily softly, 'so, there or not you are intending to try NEWT, I recommend all of you to concentrate your efforts on keeping their- high pass level I have come to expect from my FLYING students.

Today class, you will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level- the- Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe- agitation.

Be warned, if you are too, she- any and with their- ingredients you will put the- drinker into she- any and sometimes irreversible sleep, so-o you will need to pay very close attention to what you are doing, and what I have shown you what to do.'

On Naddalin's left, Emmah sat up a little straighter, her expression one of the utmost attention. There- ingredients and method-' Lily flicked she and...' are on the- blackboard...'

(They appeared there.)

'You will find everything you need-' she-flicked she and so again...' in their- store cupboard.'

(The- door of the cupboard sprang open.)

'You have an hour and a half... start.'

Just as Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah had predicted, Lily could hardly have set their- m a more difficult, fiddly potion. These- ingredients had to be added to their- ceilinged in precisely their- right order and quantities; their- mixture had to be stirred exactly their- right number of times, firstly in clockwise, then- and in anticlockwise directions; she had flames on which it was simmering had to be lowered to exactly the- right level for a specific number of minutes before their- final ingredient was added.

'A light white vapor should now be rising from your potion,' called Lily, with ten minutes left to go.

Naddalin, who was sweating profusely, looked desperately around the- dungeon. She's on her own could not seem to make this work- Jinger was issuing copious amounts of dark grey steam; Jinger's was spitting green sparks, with no luck.

Laila was feverishly prodding their- flames at their- base of she could Jinger with their- tip of she and, as they seemed to be going out. There- the surface of Emmah's potion, however, was a sharpening mist of white vapor, And as Lily swept by her- looked down she hooked nose at it without comment, which meant she- could find nothing to criticize.

At Naddalin's ceilinged, however, Lily stopped and looked down at it with a horrible smirk on her faces.

'What is there to be?'

There- Slithering at the- finger of the- class all looked up eagerly; they loved she- airing Lily taunt Naddalin.

There- Draught of Peace,' said Naddalin tensely. Tell me, - said Lily softly,' can you read?'

Drallieah Mallerie laughs- 'Yes, I can,' said Naddalin, she fingers clenched- tightly around she then...

'Read the- the third line of their- instructions for me-'

Naddalin squinted at the- blackboard; it was not easy to make out there- instructions through the- haze of multi-colored steam now filling they are- dungeon.

'Enhance powdered moonstone, stir three times counterclockwise, allow to simmer for seven minutes there- and add two drops of syrup of she- labored.'

Then at that moment, her heart sank; she- had not added syrup of she- labored, but had gone ahead straight to the- the fourth line of their- instructions after allowing her potion to simmer for seven minutes.

'Did you do everything on their- third line?'

'No,' said Naddalin very quietly.

'I beg your Deanah?'

'No,' said Naddalin, more loudly.' 'I forgot she labored...'

'I know you did, which means that their mess is utterly worthless; evanesce.'

There- contents of Naddalin's potion vanished; she- was left timewasting foolishly beside an empty ceilinged.

Those of you who have managed to read there- instructions, fill one flagon with a sample of your potion, label it with your name and bring it up to my desk for testing,' said Lily.'

Homework- twelve inches- of parchment magical paper on their- properties of moonstone and its uses in potion marching, to be and in on Thursday.'

While everyone around her filled their flagons, Naddalin cleared away she things, seething. Her potion had been no worse than Jinger's, which was now giving off a foul odor of bad eggs; or Neville's, which had achieved their- consistency of just mixed cement and which Neville was now having to gouge out of she ceilinged; yet it was she, Naddalin, who would be receiving zero marks for the- days' work.

She- stuffed her things under her arm- given up completely, and then back into her bestie, and slumped down on to the seats, watching everyone else March- ah up to Snappiest desk with filled and corked flagons. Then finally the- bell rang, Naddalin was first out of there- dungeon and had already started the lunch by their- time Jinger and Emmah joined her in there- Great Hall of the castle. There- ceiling had turned an even murkier grey during the- morning. The rain was lashing their- high windows.

That was unfair,' said Emmah consolingly, sitting down next to Naddalin and helping herself to shepherds' pie.' Your potion was not as bad as Sayale's; then she- put it in she flagon the- whole thing shattered and set she robes on fire.'

Besides, oh, she's not unbalanced and said- Duerre quietly. Besides, she just suffered a severe disappointment.

-And-

Besides, She's not the- only one!

Then puffed Harlan...

And, she- Daily News Prop's is going to have a field day!

We had Black cornered and she- slipped through our fingers yet again!

All it needs now is for their- story of that Ashlynn's escape to get out, and I will be a laughing stock! Well... I had better go and notify the- Bureau...

-And-

And, the- Dementiators? Said Duerre.

-And-

There will be removed from there- Savannah, I trust?

-And-

And, oh yes, they must go, and said Harlan, running she fingers distractedly through the hair.

As well, never dreamed they would try to amrita their- Kiss on an innocent girl... Completely out of control... no, I will have them packed off back to Dizery, I, and tonight... We should think about dark angels at their- savannah entrance...

-And-

And Deride would like that, and said Duerre, smiling at Naddalin and Emmah. As she- and Harlan left their- dormitory, Madam Pomphrey hurried to their- door and locked it again.

Muttering angrily to herself, she- added going back to her office.

There was a low moan from there- another end of their- ward. Jinger had woken up. They could see her sitting up, rubbing the head, around, the halls.

Part: 4

And, what - what happened? And, she- groaned. And, Naddalin? Why are we here? Where's Trius? Where's Sevket? What is going on?

-And-

Naddalin and Emmah looked at each other.

And, you explain, and said Naddalin, helping herself to some more Hayvannah cholate.

She- and Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah left they're- hospital wing at noon they're- next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. There- sweltering, she- at and the- end of their- exams meant that everyone was dequeen full advantage of another Claepsiara, of wizardry/angels and demonly visit.

Neither Jinger nor Emmah wanted to go, however, so they and Naddalin walked onto the- grounds around the massive castle, still toluene about the- extraordinary events of their- earlier night and wondering, was Trius and Becca, went on their beak- where they were now. Sitting near the- lake, watching the- giant squid waving its tentacles lazily above the- water blue and green and sparkling in the light glowing also a shade of red, Naddalin lost the thread of their- conversation as she- looked across to the- opposite banks to the island that lay adjacent. There- stag with wings had galloped toward her from there just last night...

A shadow fell- crossed them and they looked up to see a very bleary-eyed Deride, mopping she sweaty face with one of their tablecloths- sized and kerchiefs and beaming down at them.

And Know I should' feel happy, after what' happened las' night, and she- said. And mean, Black, escaping' again, an, everything' - but guess what?

-And-

And, What?

And, they said, pretending to look curious.

And, Beaky! She- escaped! She's now free!

We've been celebrating' all night!

-And-

Um, that is- wonderful!

Also said Emmah, giving Jinger a reproving look because she - looked as though she - was close to laughing.

And, can't have tied her up properly, and said Deride, gazing happily out over there - grounds.

And, was worried that morning,' mind... thought she - might meet Professor Sevket on their- grounds, but Sevket says' she - never- ever- never- ever- ever- never, ate anything' last' night...

~*~

-And-

And, What? And said Naddalin quickly.

And, Joannah, haven' yen's heard? And said Deride, she smiles fading a little. She like - lowered her voice, even though there was nobody in sight. And - Lily told all them- that morning'...Though everyone would know by now... Professor Lapin's a fallen werewolf with wings, see. And- like, he- was loose on their- grounds last night... she's packing... now, of- course.'

- And-

Um-

And she is packing?

Um-

And said Naddalin, alarmed.

And Why?

Um-

And- Leavin', in' here-? And said Deride, waited, surprised that Naddalin had to ask. And, Resigned firs' thing that morning.' Says she- cannot risk it happening again.

- And-

Naddalin scrambled to her feet.

Um-

And I'm going to see her, and she - said to Jinger And Emmah.

Um-

And - but if she's resigned...

-And-

Um-

And - doesn't sound like there's anything we can do...

-And-

Um-

And, do not care - about it.

Um-

And, I'm still want to see.

Um-

And, I will's meet you back here.

Um - And...?

Um - And Ah!!!

Part: 5

(Formerly)

Lapin's office door was open. He/she who had no real gender as it could change back and forth - had already packed most of her things. There - Grind low's empty tank stood next to their battered old suitcase, that could teleport from a person place to place when inside, which was open and full of all things it - he/she loved. Sevket was bending over something on the desks and looked up only she - and Naddalin knocked on their - door.

Um- and, we saw you coming, said Sevket, smiling. She- pointed to their- parchment she- had been poring over. It was there- Marauder's Map, where you can look into it, and it takes you to any time in the remembrances of searching for lost time in the world's past.

And, just saw Deride, and said Naddalin. And, and she- said you had resigned. It is not true, is it? And...

And, I am afraid it is and said Sevket. Her- started opening she desk drawers and dequeen out their- contents.

And, Why?

WHY?

WHY? - said Naddalin...

And, there- Bureau of Magic do not think, you were helping Trius, do they?

Likewise- Sevket crossed to the- door and closed it behind Naddalin.

And, No- professor Duerre managed to convince Harlan, that I was trying to save your lives.

And, she- sighed some... And That was their- final straw for Severus. I think the- loss of their- War of Nunez hit her hard. So, she- err - accidentally let slip that, I am a devil the morning at breakfast.

- And-

Like- like- like, you are not- a leaving just because, of that!

Say's its PMS- I's want you too... said Naddalin. Sevket smiled wryly.

And, she time Hayvanna-horror, their- Flying with wings will start arriving from parents...

They will not want a devil teaching their children, Naddalin.

And, after last- night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you... That must never happen again.

-And-

And, you are their- best Defense Against their- Dark Arts teacher we're have ever had!

And said Naddalin.

And, do not go!

-And-

Your baby talk is cute yet you're getting too old for it... she said. Sevket shook her head and did not speak. She- carried on emptying the drawers. Then, while Naddalin was trying to think of a good argument to make her stay, Sevket said, and from what their- head expert told me their morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Naddalin. If I'm proud of anything I've Deanahe their year, it's how much you've erudite... Tell me about your Pat Jingerus.

And...

And, how you know about that?

And, said Naddalin, distracted.

And, what else could have driven they're- Dementiators back?

-And-

Naddalin told Sevket what had happened. she'd- and he finished, Sevket was smiling again.

And, yes, your daddy was always a stag the- and the- transformed, and she- said.

And, you guessed right... that is why we called her Pinger's.

And...

Sevket threw her last few books into the case, closed their- desk drawers, and turned to look at Naddalin.

And, here - I brought they're from them- Checking Shack last night, and she- said, and Naddalin back their- Invisibility Robe.

And...

she-and he- said, then held. out their- Marauder's Map too. And, am no longer your teacher, so I do not feel guilty about giving you back there as well. It is no use to me, And I's daresay you, Jinger, and Emmah will find uses for it.

And...

Naddalin took their- map and grinned.

And, you told me Moony, Worm tail, Pad foot, And Pinger's would have wanted to lure me out of Savannah... you said they would have thought it was funny.

And...

And, and so we would have, and said Sevket, now reaching down to close the case.

And, have known the- situation in saying, that Alyssa would have been highly disappointed if she a girl had never- ever found any of their- secret passages out of the- castle.

And...

There- re was a knock on their- door. Naddalin hastily stuffed their- Marauder's Map And they're- Invisibility Robe into the pockets.

It was Professor Duerre. She- did not look surprised to see Naddalin there.

And, your carriage is at their- gates, Remus, - she said.

And Thank You, commander.

And...

Sevket picked up her old suitcase and their- empty Grind low tank.

And, Well - goodbye, Naddalin, and she- said, smiling. And, it has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we will meet again sometime. Head expert, there is no need to see me to their- gates, I can manage... And Naddalin had their- an impression that Sevket wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

And, Goodbye, then, Remus, and said Duerre soberly. Sevket shifted them - Grind low tank slightly so that she- And Duerre could shake and. Then, with a final nod to Naddalin and a swift smile, Sevket left the- office.

Naddalin sat down in the massive chair, staring glumly at the- floor. She- heard the- door close and looked up. Duerre was still there.

And, Why so miserable, Naddalin? And, she- said quietly. And, you should be very proud of yourself after last night.

-And-

And, it did not make any difference and said Naddalin bitterly. And, Grohl got away.

-And-

And, did not make any difference? And said Duerre quietly, and it made all the- difference in the- world, Naddalin. You helped uncover their- truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate.

And...

Part: 6

Terrible- something stirred in Naddalin's memory. Greater and more terrible than ever before... Professor Solis's prediction!

And, Professor Duerre - yesterday, she- and I was having my Divination exam, Professor Solis went very - very strange.

-And-

And... Indeed? And said Duerre... And - stranger than usual, you mean?

And, yes... her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled, then she - said... she- said AVA's servant was going to set out to return to her before midnight... She - said, like their- servant would help her come back to power.

Then, Naddalin stared up at Duerre. And, likewise... they- and she- became normal again, as normal could be anyways... and she- couldn't remember at all anything she'd said. Like- like- like, now um was it - was the- meeting a real prediction?

-And-

Duerre, then looked mildly impressed... with that thought. So-o, do you know, Naddalin, I think she- might have been. And, she- said thoughtfully. And, who would have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise...

-And-

But, Naddalin looked at her, in hast. How could Duerre take their so freak'n calmly?

Like, but ah- I'm stopped Trius and Professor Sevket from killing Grohl!

That makes it my fault...? Um- if AVA comes back!

- And-

Like, it does not, and said Duerre quietly, and ever so softly alike.

And, has not your experience with the- Time- Rewinder of Remembrance's Past- taught you anything, Naddalin? There- consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting their- future is a very- very difficult business indeed...

Then and there- Professor Solis, bless she, is living proof of that... you did a very- very noble- good thing, in saving Grohl's life.

-And-

Above that all, if she- helps, AVA back to power... And she may lose some of hers or worse.

And, Grohl owes her life to you. No...? Yes...? Maybe...?

You have sent AVA a deputy who is in your debt... she is one wizard- with wings that save another wizard that has fallen I like in her young life; it creates a certain bond between them... Yes...? And I am much mistaken, and if AVA wants her servant in their debt of Naddalin...

-And-

Like, do not want a connection with Grohl!

And- said Naddalin. And, she- betrayed my parents!

-And-

Like, she is magical at its deepest, it is almost impenetrable, Naddalin.

Yeah- trust me... their- time may come here- and you will be very glad you saved Grohl's life, I am sure of this...

-And-

Naddalin like she could not imagine that she would be. Duerre looked as though her mind and body to her felt- knowing what Naddalin was thinking about this too deeply for her comfort.

And I knew your daddy very well, both at SKOUFYCEOL and later, Naddalin, and she - said gently. And, she- would have saved - pretty much too, I am sure of it.

-And-

Naddalin looked up at her. Duerre would not laugh - she- could tell Duerre...

And thought it was my dad who had conjured my Clans. I mean, she - and I saw myself a-crossed the- lake... I thought I was seeing her.

-And-

And, an easy mistake to make, and said Duerre softly. And expect you will tire of she- airing it, but you do look extraordinarily like Alyssa. Except for their- eyes... you have the same eyes as your mother's.

- And-

Naddalin shook her young little head.

Then, it was stupid, thinking it was her, and she- muttered.

Um- it was mean, I knew she- was dead.

Like- you think they're- dead we loved ever so- o truly leave us?

Like- you think that, um- we do not recall or evoke them more clearly, than ever in times of great trouble?

Like- your daddy is alive within you, Naddalin... it's good to remember, that- and also feel it- in here, and pointing to her heart.

And shows herself most plainly she- and you require her. How else could you produce that Clans? Pinger's rode again- last night.

- And-

It took a moment for- Naddalin, to realize what Duerre had said.

Anyhow- last night, Trius told me all about how they became Animagi and said Duerre, smiling.

Part: 7

Oh- a human extraordinary achievement it was unbelievable- not least, keeping it quiet from me. And, their- n I remembered their- most unusual form your Clans took, she- and it charged Mr. Mallerie down at your Claepsiara match against Raven's Claw. You know, Naddalin, in a way, you did see your daddy last night... You found her inside yourself.

And, Duerre left their- office, leaving Naddalin to see very confused thoughts.

Nobody- at SKOUFYCEOL now knew their- truth of what had happened their- night that Trius, Becca beak, And Grohl had vanished- except Naddalin, Jinger, Emmah, And Professor Duerre. As their- end of term approached- Naddalin heard many different theories about what had happened, but none of them came close to their- truth.

Mallerie was furious about Becca's beak. She- was convinced that Deride had found a way of smuggling their- Ashlynn to safety, and seemed outraged that she- And she a gamekeeper had outwitted daddy. Percy Railie, meanwhile, had much to say on the- subject of Trius's escape.

~*~

And, If I manage to get into their- Bureau, I's will have a- lot of proposals and the presentation to make about Magical Law Enforcement! And, she- told they're- the only pergirl who would listen - she significant other, Jenny.

Though they're- the weather was perfect, though the- atmosphere was so-o cheerful, though she- knew they had achieved their- near impossible in helping Trius to freedom, Naddalin had never approached- they're- end of a savannah year in worse spirits.

She- certainly was not there- only one who was sorry to see Professor Sevket go. The- whole of Naddalin's Defense Against their- Dark Arts class was miserable about the resignation. And Wonder what they will give us next year? And said, Laila Finnigan gloomily and glumly. And, An Ash Angels, and suggested Lacy Thomas hopefully.

It was not only Professor Lapin's departure that was weighing on Naddalin's mind. Like she- could not she- lap thinking a- lot about Professor Solis's prediction. She- kept wondering her Grohl was now, whether she- had sought sanctuary with AVA yet.

But they are- things that were lowering Naddalin's spirits most of all was there- the prospect of returning to the- Andreasen. For half an hour, a glorious half-hour, she- had believed she- would be living with Trius from now on... she parents' best friend... It would have been their- next best thing to having her daddy back.

And, while no news of Trius was good news because it meant she- had successfully- gone into hiding, Naddalin could not help but feel miserable about it all. she- and her- thought of the- home.

She- might have had, and they're- fact that it was now impossible.

There- exam results came out on their- last day of term. Naddalin, Jinger, And Emmah had passed every subject. Naddalin was amazed that she- had through Potions.

She- had a shrewd suspicion that Duerre might have stepped in to stop Lily failing her on purpose. Sammie's behavior toward Naddalin over their- past week had been quite alarming.

Naddalin would not have thought it possible that Sammie's dislike for her could increase, but it certainly had.

'A muscle twitches' unpleasantly at the- corner of Sammie's thin mouth every time she- looked at Naddalin, and she- was constantly flexing she fingers, as though itching to place them around Naddalin's throat.

Percy, had she top-grade Newt's; Reanna And Katy had scraped a and of FLYING each.

Amsel House, meanwhile, thanks to their spectacular performance in there- Claepsiara Cup, had won their- House championship for their- third year running. There meant that their- end of term feast took place amid decorations of scarlet and gold and that they're- Amsel table was their- noisiest of their- lot, as everybody celebrated.

Even Naddalin managed to forget about their- journey back to their- Andreasen their- next day as she- ate, drank, talked, and laughs- with the- rest.

Chapter: 153

Part: 1

(New kids on the block we say- new dead girls, coming.)

As their- SKOUFYCEOL Express pulled out of their- station their- next morning, Emmah gave Naddalin and Jinger some surprising news.

Likewise, and went to see Professor Ashly their morning, just before breakfast.

I have decided to drop Non-magical people Studies.

And...

However, but you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty percent! Said Jinger.

And know, and sighs- Emmah, And but I cannot and another year like their one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I's have and it in. Without Non-magical people Studies and Divination, I will be able to have a normal schedule again.

And, still cannot believe you did not tell us about it and said Jinger grumpily.

And, we are supposed to be your friends.

And...

And, promised- like, like, like, I- I- I, would not tell anyone and said Emmah severely. She- looked around at Naddalin, who was watching SKOUFYCEOL disappear behind a mountain.

Two whole months before she'd see it again...

And, oh, cheer up, Naddalin!

And said Emmah sadly.

And, I'm- am okay and said Naddalin quickly. And, just thinking about the- holidays.

And, I have been thinking about them too and said Jinger. And, Naddalin, you must come and stay with us. I will fix it up with Mom and Dad, there- n, I will call you. I know how to use a full tone now - And, telephone, Jinger, and said Emmah. And, Honestly, you should take nonmagical people Studies next year...And Jinger ignored her...

And, it is their- Claepsiara World Cup their summer! How about it, Naddalin? Come And stay, and we will go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work.

And...

Their proposal had their- effect of cheering Naddalin up a great deal.

And, ... I's, um- a bet they're- Slash is pleased to let me come... especially after what I's did to Aunt Marge... And... Feeling more cheerful, Naddalin joined Jinger And Emmah in several games of Exploding Snap, and she- n the- witch with their- tea cart arrived, she- bought herself a very large lunch, though nothing with Hayvannah cholate in it.

But it was late in the- afternoon before the- thing that made her truly happy turned up...

So, Naddalin, and said Emmah suddenly, peering over the shoulders.

And, what is that thing outside your window?

-And-

Anyways, Naddalin turned to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond there glass.

She- stood up for a better look...

And saw that it was a tiny flying horse, carrying a letter that was much too big for it.

There- Flying horses was so small that it kept tumbling over in there- air, buffeted their way and that in their- train's slipstream, that was blasting red sparks and cloud of heat and red-colored smoke unfluffed the entirety of the engines as if something from the deeps of the Underworld.

Naddalin quickly pulled down their- window, stretchered- d out her arms, and caught it. It felt like a very fluffy Snitch. She- brought it carefully inside.

There- Flying horses dropped her letter onto Naddalin's seat and began zooming around their compartment, very pleased with itself for carrying out its task. She- dig clicked she beak with dignified disapproval. Crook shanks sat up in the seats, following they're- Flying horses with she great yellow eyes. Jinger, noticing there, snatched- they're- Flying horses safely out of harm's way.

Naddalin picked up their- letter. It was addressed to her. She then- ripped open the- letter, and shouted, And It is from Trius!

-And-

And, what...?

And said Jinger And Emmah excitedly.

And read it aloud!

Part: 2

It said- Dear Naddalin,

I hope theirs finds you before you reach your aunt and uncles.

I do not know if they are used to Flying, like me.

Becca beak and I are in hiding. I will not tell you her, in case their Flying falls into the- winger and. I have some doubt about their reliability, but she- is their- best I could find, and she- did seem eager for their- job.

I believe they're- Dementiators are still searching for me, but they have not the hope of finding me here; I am planning on allowing some Non-magical peoples to glimpse me soon, a long way from SKOUFYCEOL, so-o that their- security on their- castle will be lifted.

There is something, I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the- Firebolt - And, Ha- ha...! And said Emmah triumphantly. And- See- see- see...!

I told you it was from her! And... like- like, um whatnot...

Yes, but she- had not jinxed it, had she-?

And said Jinger. And, Ouch! And, There- tiny Flying horses now nan-a-ing happily in she and, had nibbled one of their fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate way.

-Crook shanks took the- order to their- Flying- Office for me.

-I used your name but told them all to take their- gold from my own Mcqueeney vault. Now- please consider it as freshmen year birthdays...' worth of presents from your god daddy.

I would also, like to apologize, and for the- fright, I think- I gave you that- that night, last year then you left your uncle's house.

I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think their- sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at SKOUFYCEOL more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your Flying horses will find me.

I will write again soon.

~Trius~

Part: 3

Naddalin looked eagerly inside their- envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. She- read it through quickly and felt suddenly as warm and contented as though she'd swallowed a bottle of hot butterbeer in one gulp.

I, Trius Black, Naddalin Maria's god daddy, she by then give her permission to visit Claepsiara, Kalaheo of Wizardry- fallen girls on weekends.

And, that will be good enough for Duerre! And- said Naddalin happily. She- looked back at Trius's letter. And Hang on, there is a PS...

- And-

I thought your friend Jinger might like to keep their Flying horses, as it is my fault, she- no longer has a rat.

Jigger's eyes widened... There- minute

Flying horses was still hooting excitedly. And Keep her? And, she- said uncertainly. She- looked closely at their- Flying horses for a moment; their- n, to Naddalin's And Emma's great surprise, she- sheld. her out for Crook shanks to sniff.

And, what do you reckon? And, Jinger asked the- wolf. And, Some flying horses?

-Crook shanks purred...

And, that is good enough for me and said Jinger happily. And, she's is mine.

Naddalin read and re-read the- letter from- Trius all the- way back into the village train station on the other side of the castle and the tall bridge.

It was still clutched- d tightly in her and as she, Jinger, And Emmah stepped back through the- barrier of platform nine and three- quarters.

Naddalin spotted Uncle Read at once.

She- was timewasting a good distance from Mr. And Mr.'s. Railie, eyeing their- m suspiciously, and she- n Mr.'s. Railie hugged Naddalin in greeting, her worst suspicions about their- m seemed confirmed.

And, I will call about their- Worldly Championship Cup! And, Jinger yelled after Naddalin as Naddalin bid her And Emmah goodbye, their- n whirled their- trolley bearing she trunk and she- digs cage toward Uncle Read, who greeted her in the usual fashion.

And, what is that? And, she- snarled, staring at the- envelope Naddalin was still clutching in her and. And, if it is another form for me to sign, you have another...

And, it is not, and said Naddalin cheerfully.

And, it is a letter from my god daddy.

And, Godaddy? And, sputtered Uncle Read. And, you do not have a good daddy!

And, Yes, I have, and said Naddalin brightly. And, she- was my mom and dad's best friend. Her- 's a convicted murderer, but she's broke out of wizard priggery and she's on their- run. She- likes to keep in touch with me, though... keep up with my news... check if I am happy...

And, grinning broadly at the- look of horror on Uncle Read's face, Naddalin set off toward their- station exit, her- dig rattling along in finger of her, for what looked like a much better summer than their- last.

And, No, and said Naddalin. And, she's was not a teacher.

And, but it must have been a powerful wizard, to drive all those Dementiators away... If they're- Clans was shining so brightly, didn't it light her up?

Couldn't you see it...?

And, I saw her and said Naddalin flying horses. And, but... I imagined it... I was not thinking straight... I passed out right afterward...

And, who did you think it was?

And think - and Naddalin swallowed, knowing how strange there was going to sound.

And I think it was my dad.

Naddalin glanced up at Emmah and saw that her mouths were fully open now. She- was gazing at her with a mixture of alarm and pity.

And, Naddalin, your dad's - well - dead, and she- said quietly.

And know that, and said Naddalin quickly.

And, you think you saw the ghost?

And, do not know... no... she- looked solid...

And, But then...

And, I was seeing things and said Naddalin. And, but... from what I could see... it looked like her... I have photos of her...

-And-

Emmah still thought of home, though I's was worried about her sanity.

Part: 4

And know it sounds crazy and said Naddalin flatly. She- turned to look at Becca beak, who was digging she beak into their- ground, searching for worms. But she- was not watching Becca beak.

She- was thinking about her daddy...

And about her daddy is three oldest friends...

Moony, Worm tail, Pad foot, And Pingers...

Had all four of them been out on their- grounds tonight?

Worm tail had reappeared their evening she- n everyone had thought she- was dead... Was it so impossible she daddy had Deanahe their- same?

Had she- been seeing things across their- take? There- the figure had been too far away to see distinctly...

Yet, she- had felt sure, for a moment, before she'd lost consciousness...

There- leaves overshoe- ad rustled faintly in the- breeze.

There- moon drifted in and out of sight behind the- shifting clouds.

Emmah sat with her faces turned toward their- Willow, waiting.

And, then, at last, after over an hour...

And, here we come! And, Emmah sheered.

She- And Naddalin got to their feet.

Becca beak raised her head. They saw Sevket, Jinger, And Grohl clambering awkwardly out of the- hole in the- roots.

Then came to Emmah... then and there- unconscious Lily, drifting weirdly upward. Next came Naddalin And Black. They all began to walk toward their- castle.

Naddalin's heard was starting to beat very fast. She- glanced up at the- vast sky.

Any moment now, that cloud was going to move aside and show their- moon... And, Naddalin, And Emmah muttered as though she- knew exactly what she- was thinking, and we must stay put.

We must not be seen. There is nothing we can do...

(Thought)

Funny to me after Karly's final death, she can ride horses- ie's all she wants again, in this world of falling- too... and here in this shadowy hollow, where Jenny is like me like she is still nagging her about it. GO- figure...?

~*~

So-o, we are just going to let Grohl escape all over again...

And said Naddalin quietly, how do you expect to find a rat in the- dark? And snapped Emmah. And, there is nothing we can do!

We came back to sue- lap Trius; we are not supposed to be doing anything else!

And, All right! And...

The- moon slid out from behind its cloud. They saw their- tiny figures across their- grounds stop. There- n they saw movement-

And, she goes- Sevket...

And Emmah sheered.

And, she's transforming.

And, Emmah! And said Naddalin suddenly. And, we must move!

And, we must not, I keep telling you-

-And-

And, not to interfere! Lapin's going to run into their- forest, right at us!

-Then-

Emmah gasped...

And, Quick! And, she- moaned, dashing to untie Becca beak. And, Quick! Here are we going to go? Here are we going to hide? There- Dementiators will be coming at any moment.

And, Back to Dargide's! And, Naddalin said. And, it is empty now - come on!

And...

They ran as fast as they could, Becca beak cantering along behind them. They could be like the- devil flying sing behind them...

There- the cabin was in sight; Naddalin skidded to their- door, wrenched- it open,

And Emmah And Becca beak flashed past her; Naddalin threw herself in after them and bolted their- door. Fang their- boarhound barked loudly.

And, Fang, it is us! And said Emmah, hurrying over and scratching her ears to quieten her. And, that was close! And, she- said to Naddalin.

And, And, AND!

Naddalin was LIKE, out of their- window. It was much harder to see what was going on from the shore. Becca beak seemed very happy to find herself back inside Darcie's house. She then - laid down on the finger of their- fire, folded she wings contentedly, and seemed ready for a good nap.

And think I had better go outside again, you know, and said Naddalin flying horses'.

And, cannot see what is going on - we will not know when it is time.

-And-

Emmah looked up. Her expression was suspicious.

And, I am not going to try and interfere, and said Naddalin quickly. And, but if we do not see what is going on, how are we going to know she- and it is time to rescue Trius?

-Then-

And, Well... okay, their- and... I will wait for her with Becca's beak... but Naddalin, be careful - there is a devil out there - And they're- Dementiators.

And...

Naddalin stepped outside again and edged around their- cabin. Her- could here yelp in their- distance. That meant they're- Dementiators were closing in on Trius... She- and Emmah would be running to her any moment...

Naddalin stared out toward their- lake, her head doing a kind of drumroll in her chest... Whoever had sent that Clans would be appearing at any moment...

For a fraction of a second she- stood, irresolute, in the finger of Darcie's door. You must not be seen. But she- did not want to be seen. She- wanted to do there- seeing... she- had to know...

And, there where they're- Dementiators. They were emerging out of their- darkness from every direction, gliding around their- edges of their- lake... They were moving away from here - Naddalin stood, to their- opposite bank... She- would not have to get near them... Naddalin began to run. She- had no thought since she except she daddy... If it was her... if it was her... she- had to know, had to find out...

There- the lake was coming nearer and nearer, but there was no sign of anybody. On their- opposite bank, she- could see tiny glimmers of silver - she owns attempts at a Clans- there was a bush at their- very edge of their- water. Naddalin threw herself behind it, peering desperately through their- leaves. On their- opposite bank, their- glimmers of silver were suddenly extinguished. A terrified excitement shot through her - any moment now- and Come on! And, she- muttered, staring about. And, she, are you? Dad, come on...

- And-

But no one came. Naddalin raised her head to look at the- circle of Dementiators across their- lake. One of them was lowering its hood.

It was time for their- rescuer to appear - but no one was coming to sepal their time - and, where- it hit her - she- understood. She- had not seen she, daddy, she- had seen herself - Naddalin flung herself out from behind the- bush and pulled out she and.

And EXPECT ATHENAEUM! And, she- yelled.

And, out of the- end of their and burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal.

She- screwed up the eyes, trying to see what it was. It looked like a horse.

It was galloping silently away from her, across their- black surface of their- lake. She- saw it lower its head and charge at their- swarming Dementiators... Now it was galloping around and around their- black shapes on their- ground, and they're- Dementiators were falling back, sweltering, retreating into the- darkness... They were gone.

There- Clans turned. It was cantering back toward Naddalin a-crossed they're- still, the surface of the- water. It was not a horse.

It was not a unicorn, either. It was a stag. It was shining brightly as their- moon above... it was coming back to her...

It stopped on their- bank. Its hooves made no mark on their- soft ground as it stared at Naddalin with its large, silver eyes. 'Flying horses', it bowed its antlered head. And Naddalin realized... and Pinger's, and she- sheered.

But as she is trembling fingertips stretchered- toward the- creature, it vanished.

Naddalin stood there, and still outstretched. Then, with a great leap of she heard, she - heard hooves behind her. She- whirled around and saw Emmah dashing toward her, dragging Becca beak behind her.

And, what did you do? And, she- said fiercely. And, you said you were only going to keep a lookout!

-And-

And, just saved all our lives...And said Naddalin. And Get behind she - e behind their bush - I will explain.

-And-

Emmah listened to what had just happened with the mouth open yet again.

And, did anyone see you?

And, yes, yes, and- yet, have not you been listening? I saw myself, but I thought I was my dad!

It is okay! And...

He- he- he- Naddalin, I cannot believe it... You conjured up a Clans that drove away all those Dementiators! That's very, very advanced magic.

And...

Like, I knew I could do it this time, and said Naddalin, and because, I had already Deanahe it... Does that make sense?

-And-

Naddalin, who happened to be in the- room at their- time, froze as she- head Jigger's voice answer.

And... HELLO?

Hey, hi, and greetings? Like- like- like- UM- CAN YOU HEAR- a ME? I - WANT - TO - TALK - TO - NADDALIN-!

Jinger was yelling so loudly that Uncle Read jumped and shield, the- receiver a foot away from their ear, staring at it with an expression of mingled fury and alarm.

And, WHOM IS THERE? And, she- roared in the- direction of the- mouthpiece.

And, WHO ARE YOU?

And then...

INGER - RAILEY! And, Jinger bellowed back, as though she - Equally - Uncle Read where sequin from opposite ends of a football field. And, I AM - A - FRIEND - OF - NADDALIN's - FROM - SAVANNAH - Similarly...

Uncle Read's small eyes swiveled around to Naddalin, who was rooted in the - spot.

The same to say that, an all- yen's, HERE there IS NO NADDALIN - HERE! And, she - roared, now holding the - receiver at arm's length, as though frightened it might explode.

And, DO NOT KNOW WHAT SAVANNAH YOU ARE TOLUENE ABOUT! NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN! DO NOT YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!

And...

And, she - threw the - receiver back onto their - telephone as if dropping a prodigious spider.

There - a fight that had followed had been one of their - worst ever.

And, HOW DARE YOU GIVE THEIR NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE...

-PEOPLE LIKE YOU!

-And-

Uncle Read had roared, spraying Naddalin with spit.

Jinger realized that she'd gotten Naddalin into trouble because she - hadn't called again.

Naddalin's other best friend from SKOUFYCEOL, Emmah Kizziah, had not been in touch either. Naddalin suspected that Jinger had warned Emmah not to call, which was a pity, because Emmah, the - cleverest witch in Naddalin's year, had Non-magical people parents, knew perfectly well how to use a telephone, and would have had enough sense not to say that she - went to SKOUFYCEOL.

If she - had not, she - might have found it harder to concentrate on military exercises that sunrise. She - then made a stop by their - road to buy herself a blueberry bun from their - bakery, to eat with the tea.

Most of them had never seen a Flying horse- flaying girls yes not horse- even at nighttime. Mr. Natalie, however, had a perfectly normal, Flying horses- free morning.

She- yelled at five dissimilar folks.

In their- office- Her- made several significant telephone calls, being all grown up and crap- and shouted a bit more... at dumbasses! Or so she- called them...

A cranky piece of crap some called her...

Even if said- that she- was in a very noble mood until mealtime, where it went downhill from there- re... yes... she- n she- thought she'd stretch she butt- And up the leg on their- lift the side and farted hard. That is my she- loll to you- to say the- girl behind her... thanks for sharing... she- got up and then walked across the- road to buy herself a bun from their- bakery.

There- the effect of their simple sentence on their- rest of their- family was incredible: Dariez gasped and fell off the chair with a crash that shook their- whole kitchen- n; Mr.'s. Sleyash gave a small scream and clapped she and to a- sure- a mouth; Mr. Sleyash jumped to her feet, veins throbbing in the temples.

She'd forgotten all about their- people in Robes until she- passed a group of them next to their- bakers.

She- eyed them angrily as she- passed. He- did not know why, but they made her uneasy and UNCOMFORTABLE.

There bunch where sheering excitedly, too, and she- could not see a single collecting tin. It was on the back past them, clutching a large doughnut in a bag, that she- caught a few words of what they were saying.

And, she's, that is right, that is what I heard yes, their girl, Naddalin.

-And-

Mr. Natalie stopped dead.

Fear flooded her... mind and body.

She- looked back at the- whisperers as if she- wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it.

She- dashed- back across their- road, hurried up to the office, snapped at her secretary not to disturb her, seized the telephone, and had finished- d dialing she home number she- n she- changed the mind. Her- put their- receiver back down and stroked she mustache- thinking...

No, she- was being stupid.

-Was not such an unusual name. She- was sure there were lots of people called - who had a girl called Naddalin.

Come to think of it, she- was not even sure she nephew- w was called Naddalin.

She never- ever even seen the- girl.

It might have been Harvey. Or Hanna.

There- was no point in worrying Mr.'s. Natalie; she- always got so-o upset at any mention of the sister.

She- didn't blame her really- if she- 'd had a sister like that... but all there- same, those people in Robes...

And meant' please'! Also, said Naddalin quickly. Also, it didn't mean...

-And-

(Now)

Also... WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU, Also, thundered she uncle, spraying spit over there- table, Also ABOUT SAYING THERE'S' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?

And, but I'm - Equally so-o-

...?...

Then there and when...

(Back)

HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DARIEZ!

Holy freak'n piss, roared Uncle Read, pounding the- table with the fists.

(aha)

Sh*t- Her- she- a found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and wither she- left the- building at five o'clock, she- was still so worried that she- walked straight into someone just outside the- door.

Crap- Sorry, and she- grunted, as there- tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Natalie realized that there- the man was wearing a violet Robe. She- didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to there- ground.

On there- contrary, her face split into a wide smile and she- said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, f*ck- Do not be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today!

Rejoice, for You- Know- Who has gone at last! Even Non-magical peoples like yourself should be celebrating, there happy, happy day!

Damn...

And- and- like, um- there- old man hugged Mr. Natalie around there- middle and walked off.

Mr. Natalie stood rooted in their- spot.

She- had been hugged by a stranger.

She- also thought she- had been called a Non-magical people, whatever that was.

She- was rattled.

She- hurried to her car and set off for home, hoping she- was imagining things, which she- had never hoped before, because she- did not approve of imagination.

As she- pulled into there- the driveway of number four, there- the first thing she- saw - And it didn't improve the mood- was there- tabby wolf she- 'd spotted that morning. It was now sitting on her gardens wall. She- was sure it was there- same one; it had there- the same marking around its eyes.

Mother F*CK-er...

It just gave her an unyielding look. There- Flying horses was back at the window... Um- Shoo sucking crap! And said Mr. Natalie loudly as she- said- at the pc, over clips.

There- wolf did not move either form she spot under the- tree next to there- corer. Was there ordinary behavior for these beasts? And, I just - thank and that may hurt myself... like in the brain and crap- ol- la like that.

Sh*t'n- and like ah- ah- ah, I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THERE ROOF! And- crap- crap- crap-

Naddalin stared from her purple-faced uncle to her pale aunt, who was trying to sheave Dariez to her feet.

Crap- crap- crap-

... All right, um said Naddalin, And all right... And...

Crap- crap- crap-

Uncle Read sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Naddalin closely out of there- corners of her small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Naddalin had come home for there- summer holidays, Uncle Read had been treating her like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Naddalin - wasn't a normal girl. She- was as not as normal as it is possible to be.

Naddalin - was a wizard fallen angel - a wizard one and angel number two- fresh from the first year at- the school for girls Hayvannahol of Witchcraft and Wizardry- and getting your wings. And if there- Andreasen were unhappy to have her back for there- holidays, it was nothing to how Naddalin felt.

She- missed at the school for girls so much it was like having a constant (Savanna) Hayvannah hatcher-. She- missed there- castle, with its secret passageways And ghosts, she classes (though perhaps not Lily, there- Potions master,) there- mail arriving by Flying horses, eating banquets in there- Great Hall, sleeping in the four-poster bed in there- tower dormitory, visiting there- gamekeeper, Dargide, in her cabin next to there- Forbidden Forest in there- grounds, And, especially, Claepsiara, there- a most

popular sport in there- wizarding world (six tall goal posts, four flying balls, And fourteen players on broomsticks.)

All Naddalin's spell- books, and her, robes, could Jinger, and top- other- line Nimbus Two Thus And broomstick had been locked in a cupboard under there- stairs by Uncle Read there- instant Naddalin had come home.

What did there- Andreasen care if Naddalin um lost she place on the- House Claepsiara team because she- hadn't practiced all summer?

What was it to there- Andreasen if Naddalin like went back to Hayvannahol without any of her homework Deanahe?

There- Andreasen where what wizards called Non-magical peoples (not a drop of magical blood in their veins...)

And as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in there- family- was a matter of deepest shame, falling to death and having black wings was worse than that.

Uncle Read had even padlocked Naddalin's Flying horses, herding, inside the cage, to stop her from carrying messages to anyone in there- wizarding world.

Mr. Natalie speculated... all this and speculating was all he could do...

Trying to pull herself together as she- was sitting on there- can, leaving she job mead day like drawing to do so-o she- walked without knowing she- was doing so-o... like being pulled into there- the evil of it all- she- let herself into there- house. She- was still decided not to mention anything to the wife. That their power was taken over the mind, And body.

Mr.'s. Natalie had had a nice, ordinary day.

She- told her over dinner all about Mr.'s. Next Door's problems with the daughter and how Alisha had learned an unfamiliar word...

(And... NO...!)

Mr. Natalie tried to act Hayvanna- hay.

When Alisha had been put to bed, she- went into there- lounge in time to hook up on there- last report on there- sundown news: And, besides, in conclusion, bird onlookers all over have recounted that there- nation's Flying horses with wings have been behaving very strangely today.

Yet not in the- way she- was seeing them, they said about it- yet, not about what she- was seeing with it.

Although Flying with wings normally hunt at night, and are hardly ever seen considering the day, they have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since daybreak there - the day before And. Experts are unable to explain why there- Flying horses with wings have suddenly changed their slumbering pattern.

- And-

Possibly pergirls have been celebrating you can see there- barrel firs in there- streets- within there- night early- dusk- it is not until next week, folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight.

There- broadcaster allowed herself a smile.

Most mysterious... Um now, over to Lenah Barton with there- weather. Successful to be any more when a- Flying horses with wings tonight, girl? And, Viewers as far apart as Jackie, Promising, And Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of there- rain I assured yesterday, they have had a downpour of shooting stars! And, ... Well, Dee, and said there- weathercaster, and I do not know about that, but it is not only there- Flying horses with wings that have been acting oddly today. I was hoping to make a wish to see if there casting of whatever would go away.

Mr. Natalie sat frozen in her armchair.

Shooting stars all over Britain?

Flying horses with wings flying by the light of day? Mysterious individuals in shawls all over there- the place looks like something out of there- the 1920s? And, a murmur, a murmur about there's... who is and who is and who's... like sharpers.

She- cleared her throat nervously. And, wow, dear- you have not heard from your sister lately? And, it was not good. Her- would have to say something to her about there.

Mr.'s. Natalie came into the- living room carrying two cups of tea. Sharing- as she- had estimated, Mr.'s.

Natalie watcher- d surprised and ever so-o irritated.

They mock there, she- did not have a sister- so that was there- a story made up of the little mind. It is not good to have or see there- abnormal! Like there... something is going down.

And, and- and- and sh*t- Nope, and s- she- said abruptly. Why...?

Why is the question with no answer?

Why- was the- question...

~*~

And, humorous paraphernalia on there- news, And Mr. Natalie muttered. And, flying horses with wings... shooting stars... And pussies oh my! She- looked up at her with a grin.

Looking aroused and around there- was there- re was a cute young coupled kissing making out- And making love on a bench's- she- was sitting on her, And, feeling all- there- madness- in plain eyesight.

Desirable, there- where a lot of humorous- looking folks in town today... doing just there- see things... it was madness- love was in there- air like there- evil cast over me- And some- that where been seen. And- And- So-o? And, cracked Mr.'s. Natalie. And, Well, I just thought... perchance... it was to do with... you know... she crowds- and why. And, their chat was complex hard to understand- for one to there- another topic.

Mr.'s. Natalie swallowed her tea through squeezed lips. Mr. Natalie wondered where- there- r she- dared tell she'd heard there- name- and she- decided she- didn't dare.

Instead she- said, as unconcernedly as she- could, And Their baby girl she'd be about Alisha's age now, wouldn't she? And... and - yeah, I's suppose so-o, And I'm said Mr.'s. Natalie stiffly.

And... What's her name again? Not sure - she- said- why does it matter...?

Um... Naddalin? An offensive, uncommon name, if you ask me. SH*T- I didn't but okay I feel the- same.

And... Oh, absolutely, sure... said Mr. Natalie, she hears plummeting extremely.

And...

Sure, I quite agree with you.

And...

On there- way up there- staircase, no words were said, as they made their way up to their bedroom, or some alone time to do what was natural. While Mr.'s. Natalie was in there - bathroom, Mr. Natalie stole to there- bedroom window and peered down into there - Inert garden. Looking out and over- There- the damn wolf was still there- looking up at her- now- yet, in the- same way as with her- as before. It hadn't moved a bit.

Was she- imagining things? Or was there pussy acting as if she - could hear what I was thinking...

Could all they have something to do with there's? If it did... there - query was why- do you know? If it got out that they were related to a pair of - well, she- didn't think she- could bear it.

Chapter: 154

Part: 1

There- Natalie's got into bed wearing nothing more than she underies'. Mr.' s. Natalie fell asleep quickly, but Mr. Natalie lay awake looking at her and all the parts of her body in love nonetheless, turning it all over in the minds, as she - was feeling she up with her right so - o.

They knew very well what she - and Jennath thought about them and their kind... Her last, she- attending thought before and she - fell asleep was that even if they were compiled, there was no motive for their- m to come near her and Mr.'s. Doll girl.

She- could not see how she- and could get mixed up in whatever, that might be going on- she- stretchered- as well as turned over- it could not affect them...

How very mistaken she- was to think their thought.

Mr. Natalie might have been drifting into an uneasy sleep, but there- wolf on the- wall outside was showing no sign of sleepiness.

So, their- fat lazy ass- did move... Just like in a cartoon I want to throw a boot It was sitting as still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblameably; at me timewasting- re naked eating Cheetos... next to a bean bag chair... on... There- did not so-o much as quiver she- n a car door thumped on their- next street, nor she- n two or three Flying horses with wings swooped above. In truth, it was their- wee small hours before the- wolf moved at all.

A man appeared on their- corner they're- the wolf had been watching- only me- and me only, not- looking away- it gives them- an idea so-o suddenly, and silently you'd have thought she'd just popped out of the- ground. There- wolf's tail yanked besides its eyes tightened.

Zilch- nil- like their man had ever been seen on the motorway.

She- was giant, tinny, and self- same deep-rooted, refereeing by their- silver of the hair and beard, which were in cooperation long adequate to tuck into she belts.

She- was tiring long robes, a dark yet rosy wrap that swept they're- ground, And high- she- eyed, Misshapen boots.

Her- indigo- yet with some blue eyes were light, bright, as well as twinkling behind half-moon spectacles, in addition to that she noses were very long and crooked like she is yellowing teeth, as on their- other and, it has been broken at least twice- like she and- for being dumb.

There man's name was Roberts Dreibund.

Roberts Dreibund did not seem to understand, that she- had just at home in a street there the whole thing from the description to sue gumboots was undesirable.

So-o, Naddalin had had no word from any of their wizarding friends for five long weeks, and their summer was turning out to be as bad as their- last one. There- re was just one very small improvement - after swearing that she- would not use her to send letters to any of their friends.

Naddalin had been allowed to let her Fly, they- were out at night.

Uncle Read had given in because of their- racket herding made if she- was locked in the cage all their- time.

Naddalin finished- writing about Wendel in their- Weird And paused to listen again. The- silence in the- the spooky house was broken only by they're- distant, grunting snores of their enormous cousin, Dariez.

It must be very late, Naddalin thought. Her eyes were itching with tiredness. Perhaps she- 'd finish their essay Hayvanna-horror night...

She- replaced the- ribbon; pulled an old pillowcase from under the bed; put the- flashlight under with her, a forbidden type of Magic, she essays, back the typewriter to her hands; now she would not out of bed; and hid their- lot under a loose floorboard under the bed.

Then she- stood up, stretchered, and checked the- time on the- luminous alarm clock on the bedside table.

It was one o'clock in their- morning. Naddalin's Savannah gave a funny jolt. She- had been thirteen years old, without realizing it, for a whole hour.

Yet another unusual thing about Naddalin was how little she- looked forward to her birthdays.

She- had never- ever received a birthday card in life.

There- Andreasen had completely ignored the last two birthdays, and she- had no regard to suppose they would remember there one.

Their man- old with there- long white long beard was full of activity dip into in the wraps, beholding for something.

On there- other and, she- did seem to understand she- was being watched, for their- regard that she- looked up unexpectedly at their- wolf, the supplementary finish of their, thoroughfare, mind going a little Lonny... For some motivation, the sight of their- wolf gives their- impression to make laugh her.

She- chuckled and muttered, and be a duty-bound to have known.

- And-

She- originates what she- was beholding for in she privileged pocket. It seemed to be a green zip- o cigarette lighter.

She- flipped it open, held it up in the- air, and clicked it. Whoosh- hair smoldering- I thought it was going to happen... There- adjoining gas street lamp went out with a slight hush sound.

She- clicked it again- their- next lamp wavered into dimness and gloominess.

13 times she- be on there- the same wavelength their- Put- External, 'til their- only lights left on the- whole street where two miniature pinholes in their- coldness, which were there- judgments of their- wolf watching her with emerald eyes.

Uncertainty any per girl observed out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mr.'s. Doll girl, they wouldn't be able to see no matter what that was fashionable down on the- roadway.

Naddalin looked nothing like their- rest of the- family.

Uncle Read was large and somewhat neckless, with an enormous black mustache and a long beard-; Aunt Jennath was horse-faced and bony; Dariez was blond-haired person, pink, and porky.

Naddalin, on their- other and, was small and skinny, with brilliant green eyes..., And jet- black hair that was always untidy. She- wore round glasses, and on her, the forehead was a thick scar... that was etched hatched, in like a drawing.

Naddalin walked across the- darkroom, past her- dig's large, empty cage, to their- open window. She- leaned on their- sill, their- cool night air pleasant on she faces after a long time under their- blankets. herding had been absent for two nights now.

Naddalin wasn't worried about her: she'd been gone their long before.

Nevertheless, she- hoped she'd be back soon - she- was the- only- living creature in their house who didn't flinch at their- sight of her.

Naddalin, though still rats her small and skinny for the ages, had grown a few inches- s over their- last year.

Her strawberry blond hair, however, was just as it always had been - stubbornly untidy, whatever she- did to it. There- eyes behind the glasses were bright green, and on she foresee- ad, visible

through the hair, was a thick scar, shaped like an angels body- with wings at a side view, of a past girl named NEVAEH, the one she was the blame for this all... the same depiction was on a blue acoustic cutaway cracked no longer play guitar- that was Havens, hand painted- I would add, with all the things that meant everything to the girls within the stories of their life, like lost chapters. For some reason, this drawing of her keeps reappearing in all our lives. (All the girls have but their story names on the side, with gold trim.)

Hear- here it is... and to think some ass hole said- 'It was not worth keeping back in her hometown.'

It was their scar that made Naddalin so particularly unusual, even for a wizard- she had the mark of a good angel.

The scar was there- the only a hint of Naddalin's very mysterious past, of the- regard she- had been left on their- Andreasen' doorstep eleven years before, turn up from the floor up with a ring through her clit, like all of them of the past.

Of all their- unusual things about Naddalin, their scar was the- most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the- Andreasen - that family that took over the Amsel orphanage had pretended for ten years, a souvenir of their- car crash that had killed Naddalin's parents, because... there doesn't need to be a way- of it... Lily... was alike her

Kristen... too...

The question is why...

And then I'd thought about it...

You don't need a why... or to have a motive... it was all just because - because we can- and to get at you for the sick thrilling joys- of proving it- they want you to know it's them- so you're the one that looks crazy... for saying the why- of it all... I have been there, and no one believes me - yet- the same with them.

And, the question- still is why...?

Part: 2

And, Alyssa- had not died, yet was already one that we all heated... here at this school.

They had been murdered, murdered by their- most feared Dark wizard for a hundred years the crazy within their mind...

Lord AVA, new pet though- you get why...?

I keep away as much as I can now from them, yet the war is never over with her and them.

(Back)

Naddalin had escaped from there- the same attack with nothing more than a scar on her forehead and a ring, she- Ava's curse, instead of killing her- here, had rebounded upon its originator. Barely alive, Ava had fled...

Final- death here is like- a thing... if you keep losing power, or others want you out... then it back to Earth to haunt... in unhappiness.

But Naddalin had come face- to- face with her at the school for girls.

Remembering their last meeting as she- stood at their- dark window, Naddalin had to admit she- was lucky even to have reached- d she thirteenth birthday.

Silhouetted against the- wonderfully- amazing big moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lopsided creature, and it was flapping in Naddalin's direction.

Part: 3

She- stood quite still, watching it sink lower... And lower; for a split second, she- hesitated, she and on the- window latch, wondering whether to slam it shut.

Still, there- and the- bizarre creature soared over one of there- street lamps that were flicking a flame, off Privet Drive, in reflection on the wet path, And Naddalin, realizing what it was, leaped aside.

Through there- window soared three Flying girls with wings it was them those girls that picked on her- now me, yet I and my girls would not stand for this... the conflict was on.

Two of them holding up there- third, which appeared to be unconscious, to all that was around them.

Some time had passed...

Then there was a soft flump on Naddalin's bed, and there - middle grade - girls - flying angel-young girls - that where for them - them - them - just looking at me - and she - all creepy like, they would not leave and they wanted all of me, with me and she large gray, keeled right overhead she and I lay motionless, nude bodies in - tangled together, in our bed, staying away from them and there hate of what they don't understand. There - was a large package tied to its legs. So-o, she and I kissed - and hugged tight, and loved each other going down on, and more and such, and let the babies play their games - pick and tease.

Part: 4

Naddalin recognized there - unconscious Flying horses at once - the name was Errol, and she-belonged to the - Railie family.

Naddalin dashed to there - bed, untied there - cords around Errol's legs took off there - parcel, and there - n carried Errolie to Sabre-dove's cage.

Errolie opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to gulp some water.

Naddalin turned back to there - remaining Flying horses with wings, and the girls with them.

One of them, there - large white female, was her shedding.

She - too, was carrying a parcel and looked extremely pleased with herself; she - gave Naddalin an affectionate nip with she beak as she - removed the burden, there - and flew across the-room to join Errolie.

Naddalin did not recognize there - third girl, a and some tawny one, but she - knew at once when it had come from because, in addition to a third package, it was carrying a letter bearing there - At the school for girl's crest.

When Naddalin relieved their Flying horses of its burden, it ruffled its daddy's important, stretcher - d its wings, and took off through the - a window into the - night.

Naddalin sat down on her bed then grabbed Errolie's package, ripped off there - brown paper, and discovered a present wrapped in gold and her first-ever birthday card. Fingers trembling slightly, she - opened the - envelope.

Two pieces of paper fell out - a letter and a newspaper clipping.

There- clipping had come out of there- wizarding newspaper, there- Star Press- because of there- people in there- black- and- the white picture where moving.

Naddalin picked up there- clipping, smoothed it out and read- the- scanned there- starry sky for a sign of herding, perhaps soaring back to her with a dead mouse dangling from her mouth, expecting praise.

Gazing absently over there- rooftops, it was a few seconds before Naddalin realized what she- was seeing.

At there- age of one-year-old, Naddalin had somehow survived a curse from the- greatest Dark Sorcerer Angel of the demons of all time, Noble Ava, whose name most watcher- s and wizards- fallen angel still feared to speak.

Naddalin 's parents had died in Ava's attacks, but Naddalin had escaped with scars and brandings, and somehow - nobody understood- why- WHY- Ava's powers had been demolished there- instant she- had failed to kill- Naddalin.

So-o Naddalin had been brought up by the dead mother's sister and her hubs and... She- had spent ten years with there- Andreasen, never- ever underset and why she- kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing there- Andreasen; story that she- had her scar in the- car crash that had killed the parents...

...We all thought yeah right!

And, then, exactly a year ago, at the school for girls had written to Naddalin, and there- the whole story- had come out.

Naddalin had taken up the places at wizard Hayvannahol, when she- And her scar was- so- a famous... but now there- the Hayvannahol year was over, and she- was back with there- Andreasen for there- summer, back to being treated like a dog, that had rolled in something smelly.

(Back in time)

The- Andreasen hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Naddalin's 12th birthday.

Of course, she hopes had not been high; they had never given her a real present, let alone a cake - but to ignore it completely...

At that moment, Uncle Read cleared her throat importantly and said, Besides, now, as we all know, today is a very important day.

-And-

Naddalin looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

BUREAU OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS girl AND PRIZE-

'Yeah, well,' said Naddalin, glowering at her plate, 'since wither has Lily ever been fair to me?'

Neither of there- others answered; all three of there- m knew that Lily and Naddalin's mutual enmity had been absolute from the- moment Naddalin had set foot in at the school for girls.

'I's did think she- might be a bit better there year,' said Emmah in a disappointed voice.' I mean... you know...' she- looked around carefully; there were half a dozen empty seats on either side of there- m and nobody was passing the- table...

'... Now she's in there- War and everything.'

'Prodigious toadstools Do not change their spots,' said Jinger sagely.' Anyway, I've always thought Duerre was cracked to trust Lily. Where's she- evidence her- ever really stopped working for You- Know- I Mean?'

'I think Duerre's probably got plenty of evidence, even if she- doesn't share it with you, Jinger,' snapped Emmah.

'Oh, shut up, the pair of you,' said Naddalin heavily, as Jinger opened her mouth to argue back. Emmah And Jinger both froze, looking angry and offended.'

'Can't you give it a rest?' Said Naddalin.

'You're always having a go at each other; it's driving me furious.'

And abandoning shepherd's pie, she- swung she Hayvannahol- bag back over the shoulders and left them sitting there.

She- walked up the- marble staircase two steps at a time, past there- many students hurrying towards lunch.

There- anger that had just flared so unexpectedly still blazed inside her, and they're - a vision of Jinger...

And, Emmah's shocked faces afforded her a sense of deep satisfaction. Serve them right, she- thought, why can't they give it a rest... bickering all there- time... it's enough to drive anyone up there- wall...

She- passed the- a large picture of Sir Lloyd there- a knight on an I's and; Sir Lloyd drew her sword and brandished it fiercely at Naddalin, who ignored her.

'Come back, you scurvy dog! Stand fast and fight!' yelled Sir Lloyd in an inaudible voice from behind she visors, but Naddalin merely walked on and wither Sir Lloyd tried to follow her by running into a neighboring picture, she- was rebuffed by its inhabitant, a large and angry-looking wolfhound.

Naddalin spent there- rest of there- lunch hour sitting alone underneath the- trapdoor at there- top of Northern Tower, just under the bells.

Consequently, she- was there- first to ascend there- a silver ladder that led to Sara... Solis's classroom when- n the- bell rang.

After Potions, Divination was Naddalin's- least favorite class, which was due mainly to Professor Solis's habit of forecasting her untimely death every few lessons.

A thin woman, heavily draped in shawls and glittering with strings of beads, she'd- always reminded Naddalin of some kind of insect, with she glasses hugely magnifying her eyes.

We have read her book here... them too...

She'd- was busy putting copies of battered leather-bound books on each of there- spindly little tables with which the room was littered when Naddalin entered there- room, but there- light cast by there- lamps covered by scarves and there- low burning, the sickly scented fire was so dim she'd- appeared not to notice her as she- took a seat in there- shadows.

There- the rest of there- class arrived over there- next five minutes. Jinger emerged from there- a trapdoor, looked around carefully, spotted Naddalin, then made unswervingly for her, o r as directly as she- could while having to wend she way between tables, chairs, and overstuffed puffs.

'Emmah and I have stopped arguing,' she- said, sitting down beside Naddalin.

'Good,' grunted Naddalin.

'But Emmah says she'd- thinks it would be nice if you stopped taken out your temper on us,' said Jinger.

'I'm not...'

'I'm just passing on there- message,' said Jinger, talking over her.'

Nevertheless, I reckon she'd- is right. It's not our fault how Laila and Lily treat you.'

'I never said it...'

'Good day,' said Professor Solis in her usual misty, dreamy voice, and Naddalin broke off, again feeling both annoyed and slightly ashamed of herself.'

Besides, welcome back to Divination.

I have, of course, been following your fortunes most carefully over the- holidays, and I am delighted to see that you have all returned to at the school for girls safely as, of course, I knew you would.

You will find on there- tables before your copy of the- 'Little Girls Bible.'

Dream interpretation is the most important means of divining there- future and one that may very probably be tested in your FLYING.

Nevaeh

Book: 38

The Express

Interval: 4

Part: 1

(Back)

Think about the express-

The train pulls away. As I then sit down in a seat where I have a good vantage point of the cars. The doors close, and I hear the whistle far down the line I knew I was going far from home. I look out the window. 'This is your conductor speaking, I'd like to welcome you aboard...' If you require any assistance on your journey, I am located towards the front of this 69th train coach- I welcome you to the railway for the fallen- you're here because your life was not fielded as it should, that is why they send you to us.' It is evening, soon you will not see anything but darkness, the treetops well get a little darker than the sky above, then that to well fade, as you pulled into the time vortex.

Mostly, all I see is the reflection of the passengers in the carriage, and you and your soul reflected back at you, that now is ours to take- and keep and do as we like with. I's sit in the quiet coach; it is not always quiet, but a least it is not loud, all the girls look like sweet things that would not hurt anyone in their new pressed girlie school uniforms, the got before getting on. Individuals are usually too polite, and or timid or just freaking scared out of their wets, to complain when someone is making a clamor. I count eight other passengers today, I knew- that we would get to know each other then again if it was anything- like my old life them maybe not.

Part: 2

Yes, I am sure of it I will have some, spaniel bounds with all yen are in this carriage, sniffing voraciously at everything, and looking as if your grandmother just died, nope- you did honey- you did. Then, I think well so- o did I!

Nevertheless, there are no familiar faces, no people I see regularly, I was starting to feel the effects of it too- and then I was looking like a sad puppy also, in the glass looking back, seeing my old life flash by as the train rushed forward, faster than my mind could think. Whoop- whoop- I'm heard... Emma- the young girl, looks at each group of seats as her passes, moving straight through when she doesn't find what she is looking for, and that is a girl there to comfort her, so-o I'm thought that must be me.

In the non-summer days, I stare out the window, back home out the train riding to school, but when it is dark, she watches the other passengers. She said to me, her name was- Haven. Things got a little less stuffie... I often wonder if she comes to the same town as I do, sound like me, and my story too.

Although the girls have made an effort to change into their uniform it is obvious, they have not been away home for long- they were lost. I'm slurred in particular, when- I's get nervous, she was sitting there with her hand between her knees said Naddalin.

Haven- I said, raising up in to sitting on my legs under my butt, fixing the skirt too under my butt, spilling is not my thing or being what some would say is cool, as the train sways, but I can see I have made it as a girl. Some just blink not getting that. I feel the train slowing; two girls in uniforms... walk back and take sets in front of us, and make their way through the doors at one end. I haven't had an opportunity, to talk openly for the first time it was nice, same with them we not heating on one another- where just fallen girls- here over the fact we were throw away girls. Naddalin- I's love to observe them as they sat at the far end of the coach, that was something I always loved doing so.

(Me to, said the three girls that made friends at this point. Emma, Naddalin, and Haven.)

~*~

The new girl crosses her arms and grins, saying- 'hey I am Karly.'

We all look confused, at the color of her hair, no reply kick-ass luggage she uses that mad our heads ache; the new girl rolls her eyes- saying: Don't be fake and gay- (I said I's am- and I look saying me kind of a too-long story.)

'Hun- a?' Her eyes where and face was so-o confused, 'I do not judge...' she said. definitely not in school uniforms, clashes with my hair, and I don't like having things constricted, and she grasps her chest hard, in an upper ward motion.

Part: 3

I smile at the easiest, thoughts of a new friendship, the girls share their plans of listening but want to keep it a secret from their parents and all in their old life. Yet, Karly was like - not so-o much as we were- my younger sisters we see me again- I am sure of it, as a haunt in her vanity glass, or something random, or like when she is getting freaky with my old boyfriend. We giggled...

Luckily, I don't know the parents! Said Haven.

The young girl embarked, on and are sitting opposite each other folding the sit-in so they were face to face... The train stops and this time the doors stay closed. Getting water from the tank, for the steam...

(Thought)

I feel like I would like to help this young girl, but I don't know how, and I guess I's would not appreciate the interference.

I'm though I know that I love trains...

~*~

(I wonder)

The train pulls away with a small jolt, Students steps back from the window, I wonder if she has problems at home, like I did, though Haven, or maybe girlfriend trouble too like me or boy- or was at all like me? He checks the screen on his phone again. I guess she has no signals like this rout is all green from here. Only one track... and is a twist and turns yet is a straight path to their... Tickets- girls, please, magical they are they show up floating like three dentinal- and oh- so-o see though in their hands,

tickets... with your code and names and whatnot, show us all we need to know for now... and your place here.

As you can see the bars on the code forever match here to there and are read... this is your ID... I hold up my season ticket for inspection, ripping the playful thing down in mid-air. 'Thank you, sir,' the watchmen walks' on and checks the rest of the carriage, then stops by the doors. After walking to and for a couple of times, students sad- like sits down and takes a large notebook from their bag, and to the first day's homework, and that is document all that happens on the ride.

This also was on the ticket, saying the assignment. Then they went off to the steeper parts of the train, it was going to be a long ride when in reality it only takes moments to get here... yet to new girls, it's like a lifetime, that seems like a week trip, where you need to sleep- and have a day to transition to the new worldly ways.

Part: 4

Um- rapidly flicking through the pages, before the girls turn in, he stops about two-thirds of the way through, the girl's room, and pulls the beds and shads down saying work hard and rest, he stares out the window, saying I getting too old for young girls.

We- giggle...

(Next day)

With a sigh, the Student has sad doodles on the margin of the page, and some droll. He looks up at Emma and stands, there as she and stretches, 'not every day you see a nude girl...' she said. The girls gather their belongings and stand close together by the doors, getting into uniform. I's wait for the train to come to a complete standstill before walking over to the next door, one by one going down the car steps, to get out, the girls hold hands in one line, as they walk into this new land of unknown.

~*~

Chapter: 155

Part: 1

Naddalin- 'Why?' 'Why- are girls like you are making fun of a girl, that was just like you- you're here, for the same- faults- or even more then she had.'

Not, of course, that I believe examination passes or failures are of there - remotest importance wither and it comes to there - the sacred art of divination.

If you have there-

Seeing-eye, certificates, and grades matter very little. However, there- headmaster likes you to sit there- examination, so-o...'

Her voice trailed away delicately, leaving them all in no doubt that Professor Trelawney considered the- subject above such sordid matters as examinations.

Turn, please, to there- introduction- and read what the girl has said here, you have a voice- okay what is that saying- AVA said to her girls, like what this pussy licker said about us.

'CUTE- NO?'

'Cute yes!'

'The Sisters from Hell...' 'CUTE... did she think that we would never – ever see this?'

'Sh-h-h' Said Emma- making faces!

This work by a girl that was never to be has made things difficult for all... said - Duerre... no its time to get at her. Wounds where cast picking apart the old book copy of the many chapters of her young and aging life.

Part: 2

They were, divide into pairs, reading Nevaeh's story mocking her some - other fallen girls where in- love with the captivating story her up and downs... and some saying how did she not fall to us - as one of us... a strong girl- she was... somewhere crying others giggling.

Naddalin- I's think this wrong to do to someone, even if... and all the girls in the class where had the books, picking out things that they could do to them all, in their moments how self - droughts and fear- it was so wrong to us- Naddalin the most.

Use The- Dream Vision, spell and see all that she did - can you...?

We can- said the girls... feel- feel- and see as she did. To interpret each other's most recent dreams, you will become her- and live a life of the pass and walk her halls as her. Carry on... young falling angels of Wizard and the Fallen.'

Part: 3

The- one good thing to be said, for their lesson was that it was not a double period.

By three- time they had all finished- reading there- the introduction of the- book, they had barely ten minutes left for dream interpretation.

At there- the table next to Naddalin And Jinger, Lacy had paired up with Neville, who immediately embarked on a longwinded explanation of a nightmare involving a pair of giant scissors wearing her grandmother best hat; Naddalin And Jinger merely looked at each other glumly.

'I never remember my dreams,' said Jinger,' you say one.'

I never remember them like this said Naddalin... in awe.

'You must remember one of them,' said Naddalin impatiently.

She- was not going to share her dreams with anyone, I thought we all had to.

She- knew perfectly well what she regular nightmare about a graveyard meant, she - did not need Jinger or Professor Trelawney or there - stupid Dream Vision to tell her.

'Well, I dreamed, that I was playing Claepsiara there- another night,' said Jinger, screwing up the faces in an effort to remember. 'What you'd reckon that means?'

'Probably that you're going to be eaten by a giant marshmallow or something,' said Naddalin, turning there- pages of The- Dream Vision without interest.

It was very dull work looking up bits of dreams in there- Vision and Naddalin were not chartered up wither- n Professor Trelawney set, them there- the task of keeping a dream diary for a month as homework, about this girl's life, and it was all adding into this story. What we saw.

Naddalin- now docent that discredit her from being the novelist another of the story in the first place? 'You need to hush, or you fail my class!'

When there- bell went, she- And Jinger led there- way back down there- ladder, Jinger grumbling loudly.

'Do you realize how much homework we have gotten already? Bins set us a foot and half long essay on giant wars, Lily wants a foot on there- use of moonstones, and now we've got a month's dream diary from Trelawney!

Freeanna and Katy where not Ginger about FLYING year, were they? That Scott lady had better not give us any...'

Wither they entered there- Defense Against there- Dark Arts classroom, like- they found Professor Scott already seated at there- transferors desk, wearing there- fluffy pink cardigan of there- the night before and there- black velvet bow on top of their head. Naddalin was again reminded forcibly of a large fly perched- unwisely on top of an even larger toad.

The- class was quiet, and just sweet little girls sitting in a row in uniforms, an old art- deco ornate 1920's style all linked together desks, as it entered there- room; Professor Scott was, as yet, an unknown quantity... And nobody knew how strict a disciplinarian she'd- was likely to be.

'Well, good afternoon!' Um- she'd- said, wither finally there- the whole class had sat down.

A few people mumbled 'good afternoon' in reply of drowsiness- or I don't give a frapping sh*t- piss.

That will not do, now, will it?

I should like you, please, to reply 'Good afternoon, Professor Scott'. One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!'

'Good afternoon, Professor Scott,' they chanted back at her.

'Ta- ta,' said Professor Scott.

There are, now,' said Professor Scott sweetly. That was not too difficult, was it? And, away and quills out- ink and nibs, please.'

Many of there- class exchanged gloomy looks; there- order' and away' had never- ever, yet, been followed by a lesson they had found interesting or fun and net.

Naddalin shoved her and back into her handbag.

And pulled out an enchanted typewriter for the lifting up wood top, ink, and parchment. The large stand- glass windows have rays coming in... that distracts her.

Professor Scott opened her and, extracted her own and, which was an unusually short one, and tapped there- blackboard sharply with it; words appeared on there- board at once- Defense Against there- Dark Studies a Return to Fundamental Assumption- 'Well now, your teaching in their subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn't it?' said Professor Scott, turning to face there- class with she and clasped neatly in the finger of her.

There- constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Unholy orders approved curriculum, has regrettably resulted in your being far below there- stand we would expect to see in your FLYING year.

'You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic there a year.'

'Copy down there- following, please.'

She would- rapped there- blackboard again; there- the first message vanished- d and was replaced by there- 'Course Aims...' Understanding there- assumption primary defensive magic. Learning to recognize circumstances in which defensive magic can legally be used. Employing the- use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

For a couple of minutes there- the room was full of there- the sound of scratching quills on parchment. Wither everyone had copied down Professor Scott's three-course aims she'd- asked. 'Has everybody got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?'

There was a dull murmur of assent throughout there- class.

'I think we'll try that again,' said Professor Scott.'

Wither- I ask you a question, I should like you to reply, 'Yes, Professor Scott', or 'No, Professor Scott'.

So, has everyone got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?'

'Yes, Professor Scott,' rang through there- room.

'Good,' said Professor Scott.' I should like you to turn to page five and read 'Girl One, Fundamentals for Beginners'. There will be no need to talk.'

Professor Scott left there- blackboard and settled herself in there- chair behind there- transferors desk, seeing them all closely with those pouchy eyes.

Naddalin turned to page five of her copies of Defensive Magical Philosophy And started to read.

It was desperately overcast, quite as bad as listening to Professor Binns.

She- felt she attentiveness sliding away from her, she, had soon read there, the same line half a dozen times without taking in more than there; first few words.

Numerous silent minutes passed.

Next, to her, Jinger was absent-mindedly turning she enchanted typewriter over and over in the fingers, staring at there- the same spot on their- page.

Naddalin observed right and received an astonishment to shake her out of the inertia.

Emmah had not even opened the copy of Defensive Magical Theory. She would- was staring fixedly at Professor Scott with her and in there- air.

Naddalin could not remember Emmah ever neglecting to read wither instructed to, or indeed resisting there- the temptation to open any book that came under the nose. She- looked at her enquiringly, but she would- merely shook her head slightly to show that she would- was not about to answer questions, and continued to stare at Professor Scott, who was looking just as resolutely in another direction.

After several more minutes had passed, however, Naddalin was not there- only one watching Emmah. There- Girl they had been instructed to read was so tedious that more and more people were hoping to watch Emmah's mute attempt to catch Professor Scott's eye rather than struggle on with fundamentals for beginners.'

Wither more than half there- class were staring at Emmah mouse her than at their books, Professor Scott seemed to decide that she'd- could ignore there- a situation no longer.

'Did you want to ask something about there- Girl, dear?' She'd- asked Emmah, as though she'd- had only just noticed she.

Part: 4

'Not about there- Girl, no,' said Emmah.

'Well, we're reading just now,' said Professor Scott, showing she small pointed teeth.' If you have other queries, we can deal with them at there- end of class.'

'I's have got an interrogation about your course aims,' said Emmah.

Professor Scott raised her eyebrows.

'And your name is?'

'Emmah Kizziah,' said Emmah.

'Well, Miss. Kizziah, I think there- course aims are perfectly clear if you read them through carefully,' said Professor Scott in a voice of determined sweetness.

'Well, I's don't know,' said Emmah bluntly. There's nothing written up there about using defensive spells.'

There was like a short silence in which many members of the- class turned their heads to frown at there- three course aims still written on there- blackboard.

'Using self- justifying spells?' Professor Scott repeated with a little laugh.'

Why, I's can't imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell, Miss. Kizziah. You surely are not expecting to be attacked during class?'

'We're not going to use magic?' Jinger cried loudly.

'Um- young students raise their hand to wither they wish to speak in my class, Mr.S?' 'Railie,' said Jinger, thrusting she hands into there- air.

Professor Scott, smiling still more widely, turned she back on her.

Naddalin And Emmah immediately raised their hand too. Professor Scott's pouchy eyes lingered on Naddalin for a moment before she'd- addressed Emmah.

'Yes, Miss. Kizziah? You wanted to ask something else?'

'Yes,' said Emmah. 'surely there- the whole point of Defense Against there- Dark Studies is to practice defensive spells?'

'Are you a- Unholy Orders trained educational expert, Miss. Kizziah?' asked Professor Scott, in she falsely sweet voice.

'No, but'

'Well then, I'm afraid you are not trained to decide what there- 'whole point' of any class is.

Wizard and the Fallens or fallen girls much older and cleverer than you have devised our new programmed of study.

You will be learning about self- protective spells in a secure, risk freeway...'

'What use is that?' Said Naddalin loudly.'

If we're going to be attacked, it won't be in a...'

~*~

Naddalin thrust her fist in there- air. Again, Professor Scott promptly turned away from her, but now several other people had their hands are up, too.

'And your name is?' Professor Scott said to Lacy.

'Lacy Thomas.'

'Well, Mr. Thomas?'

'Well, it's like Naddalin said, isn't it?' Said Lacy.' If we're going to be attacked, it won't be risk-free.'

'I repeat,' said Professor Scott, amused, and grinning in a very irritating fashion at Lacy, do you expect to be attacked during my classes?'

'No, but- um- ah...'

'Like- Professor Scott talked over her.'

I do not wish to criticize the- way things have been run in there Hayvannahol,' she'd- said, an unconvincing smile stretching her wide mouth.

'Nonetheless, you have been exposed to some very irresponsible fallen angels/Wizard and the Fallens in their class, very irresponsible indeed not to mention,' she'd- gave a nasty little laugh,' extremely dangerous half-breeds.'

'If you mean Professor Lupin,' piped up

Lacy angrily, 'she- was there- best we ever'

'Hand, Mr. Thomas! As I was saying you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day.'

'No, we haven't,' Emmah said... 'We just...'

'Your hand is not up, Miss. Kizziah!'

Emmah put up the hands. Professor Scott turned away from her.

'It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in the finger of you, she- actually performed them on you.'

'Well, she- turned out to be a maniac, didn't she-?' Said Lacy hotly.' Mind you, we still learned loads.'

'Your hands are not up, Mr. Thomas!' Trilled- Professor Scott. 'Now, it is there- view of there- Unholy orders that a theoretical know they edge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what Hayvannahol is all about. And your name is?' She'd- added, staring at Parvati, whose hands had just shot up.

'Parvati Smartha, and isn't there- re a practical bit in our Defense Against there- Dark Arts FLYING?

...And also, with horses that can fly too...

~Use we ride on their backs too; we make abound with one when we become young lady's... here in this world, when we get our first wings, bricking though are back skin, that grows from the spin, and have gray-black feather- ie- ness.

~We ride them in the skies, we love them and them- us, ones the bond is made with are haloes.

Part: 5

'Aren't we supposed to show, that we can do there- counter curses and things?'

'As long as you have studied the- theory hard enough, there- re is no why you should not be able to perform there- spells under carefully controlled examination conditions,' said Professor Scott dismissively.

'Without ever practicing them beforehand?' said Parvati incredulously.' Are you telling us that there- the first time we'll get to do the- spells will be during our exam?'

'I repeat, as long as you have studied there- theory hard enough.'

'And what good's theory going to be in there- real world?' said Naddalin loudly, the first in the- air again.

Professor Scott looked up.

'There is Hayvannahol, Mr.-, not there- the real world,' she'd- said softly.

'so, we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting for us out there?'

'There- is nothing waiting out there- are, Mr.-'

'Oh, yeah?' Said Naddalin. Her temper, which seemed to have been bubbling just beneath the- surface all day, was reaching boiling point.

'Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?' Um- enquired Professor Scott in a horribly honeyed voice.

'Hmm, let's think...' said Naddalin in a mock thoughtful voice.' Maybe... Lady Ava Jinger gasped; Lavender Brown uttered a little scream; Neville slipped sideways off her stool.

Professor Scott, however, did not flinch. She'd- was staring at Naddalin with a grimly satisfied expression on her face.

Ten points from Amsel, Mr.-'

She- classroom was silent and still. Everyone was staring at either Scott or Naddalin.

'Now, let me make a few things quite plain.'

Professor Scott stood up... And leaning towards them, her stubby- fingered hands splayed on her desk.

'You have been told that a certain Dark Wizard and the Fallen has returned from here- dead she- wasn't dead,' said Naddalin angrily,' nevertheless yeah, her returned!'

'Mr. - you have already lost your house ten points do not make matters worse for yourself,' said Professor Scott in one breath without looking at her.' As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark Wizard and the Fallen is at large once again. She is a lie.'

'It is NOT a lie!' said Naddalin.' I saw her, I fought her!'

'Detention, Mr.-!' said Professor Scott triumphantly. Hayvanna-horror evening. Five o'clock. My office.

I repeat, 'she is a lie.'

'I don't think so-o she said loader.'

The- Unholy Orders of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark Wizard and the Fallen. If you are still worried, by all means, come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark Wizard and the Fallens, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I am your friend; and now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, though one hundred.'

Professor Scott sat down behind her desk. Naddalin, however, stood up.

Everyone was staring at her; Laila looked half scared, half fascinated.

'Naddalin, no!' Emmah whispered in a warning voice, tugging at her grieve, but Naddalin jerked her arm out of her reach.

'Like- so, according to you, Joella - Elizabeth dropped dead of her own concur, did she-?' Naddalin asked, her voice shaking.

She was a collective intake of breath from her- class, for none of them, apart from Jinger and Emmah, had ever heard Naddalin, talk about what had happened on the- night Joella had died.

They stared avidly from Naddalin to Professor Scott, who had raised her eyes, and was staring at her without a trace of a fake smile on her face.

'Joella - Elizabeth's death was a tragic accident,' she'd- said coldly.

'It was murder,' said Naddalin. She- could feel herself shaking.

She- had hardly spoken to anyone about her, least of all thirty eagerly listening to classmates.'

'Ava killed her, and you know it.'

Professor Scott's face was quite blank. Maybe so and- maybe it was not that one...

Then her face went blank...

Part: 6

Then- for a moment, Naddalin thought she'd- was going to scream at her. She'd- said, in her softest, most sweetly girlish voice. 'Come here, Mr. ...dear.'

She- kicked her chair aside, strode around Jinger And Emmah and up to the- teacher's desk.

She- could feel the- rest of the- class holding its breath. She- felt so angry she- did not care what happened next.

Professor Scott pulled a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, stretcher- d it out on the- desk dipped her enchanted typewriter into a bottle of ink and started scribbling, hunched- over

so that Naddalin could not see what she'd- was writing. Nobody spoke- out at that moment at all. After a minute or so she'd- rolled up the- parchment and tapped it with her wand; it sealed itself seamlessly so that she- could not open it.

Take her to Professor Ashly, dear,' said Professor Scott, holding out the- note to her.

She- took it from her without saying a word, turned on her heel and left the- room, not even looking back at Jinger and Emmah, smashing the- classroom door shut behind her.

She- walked very fast along the- corridor, she- note to Ashly clutched- tight in her hands, and turning a corner walked slap into Charlotte she- a poltergeist, a widemouthed little girl floating on her back in midair, juggling several inkwells.

'Why it's Petty Wee-!' Cackled Charlotte, allowing two of she- inkwells to fall to the- ground where she- smashed- and spattered the- walls with ink; Naddalin jumped backward out of the- way with a snarl.

'Get out of it, Charlotte.'

'Oooh-h, Crackpot's feeling cranky' said Charlotte, pursuing Naddalin along with her- corridor, Graceling as she- zoomed along above her.'

What is it the time, my fine Petty friend? Hair-razing voices...? Seeing visions... or the past like it's the now...? Speaking in' Charlotte blew a gigantic raspberry'- tongues?'

'Motorboat'n some boobies back their girl.' said Naddalin!

Ball one-

Ball two-

Ball three- all spit- ie!

'I said, leave me ALONE!' Naddalin shouted, running down the- nearest flight of stairs, but Charlotte merely slid down the- banister on her back beside her.

Part: 7

'Oh, most think she's Barking, she- petty wee lad, nevertheless, some are more- kindly besides think she's just sad, But Charlotte knows better and says, that she's mad - 'Shut- UP!'

A door to she left flew open and Professor Ashly emerged from the office looking grim and slightly hassled.

What on earth are you shouting about-?' she'd- snapped, as Charlotte cackled gracefully and zoomed out of sight.' Why aren't you in class?'

'I've been sent to see you,' said Naddalin stiffly.

'Sent? What do you mean, sent?'

She- held out the- note from Professor Scott. Professor Ashly took it from her, frowning, slit it open with a tap of the wand, stretched it out and began to read.

Her eyes zoomed from side to side behind the square spectacles as she'd- read what Scott had written, and with each line the became thinner.

'Come in here,' she- followed her inside her studies. She- door closed identically behind her.

'Well?' said Professor Ashly, rounding on her.' 'Is she true...?'

'Is what true...?'

Naddalin asked rashes more aggressively than she- had intended.

'Professor?' She- added, in an attempt to sound politer.

'Is it true that you shouted at Professor Scott?'

'Yes,' said Naddalin.

'You called she a liar?'

'Yes.'

'You told her the girl- Who Must Not Be Talked about is back?'

'Yes.'

Professor Ashly sat down behind the desk, watching Naddalin closely.

Then she'd- said,' Have a beige,' 'Have what...?'

'Have a beige,' she'd- repeated impatiently, indicating a tartan tin lying on top of one of the- piles of papers on her desk,' and then sit down.'

She had been a previous occasion when Naddalin, expecting to be caned by Professor Ashly, had instead been chosen by her to the- Amsel Claepsiara team.

She- sank into a chair opposite her, and helped herself to a Ginger Newt, feeling just as confused and woozy footed as she- had Deanahe on that occasion.

Professor Ashly set down Professor Scott's note and looked very seriously at Naddalin.

'You need to be careful.'

Naddalin swallowed her mouthful of Ginger Newt and stared at her.

Her tone of voice was not at all what she- was used to; it was not brisk, crisp and demanding; it was low and apprehensive and somehow much more human than usual.

'Misbehavior in Dolores Scott's class could cost you much more than house points and detention.'

'What do you...?'

'Use your common sense,' snapped Professor Ashly, with an abrupt return to her usual manner.'

You know where she'd- comes from, you must know to whom she'd- is reporting.'

The- bell rang for the- end of the- lesson. Overhear, all-around came the clumsy sounds of hundreds of students on the- move.

'It says here she'd- 's gave you detention every evening she week, starting Hayvanna-horror,' Professor Ashly said, looking down at Scott's note again.

'Every evening she week!' Naddalin repeated, horrified. 'But then again, Professor, couldn't you?'

No, I couldn't,' said Professor Ashly flatly.

'But.'

'But!'

'But?'

'She'd- is your teacher, in addition, has every right to give you detention.

You will go to her room at five o'clock Hayvanna- Horrow for her- the first one. Just remember: tread carefully around Dolores Scott.'

'But one was telling the- truth!' said Naddalin, outraged. 'Ava is back, you know her- is; Professor Duerre knows who she- is?'

'For heaven's sake-!' Said Professor Ashly, straightening her glasses angrily (she'd- had winced horribly where- and her- had used Ava's name.')

Do you really think she is about truth or lies? It's about keeping your head down, and your temper under control!'

She'd- stood up, nostrils wide and mouth very thin, and Naddalin stood up, too.

(Naddalin- sometimes I'm wondering if I to don't have to retard tattooed on my forehead!)

'Have another beige,' she'd- said touchily, thrusting the- tin at her.

'No, thanks,' said Naddalin coldly.'

Do not be ridiculous,' she'd- snapped.

Then at the moment, at that time of that day- she- took one... 'Thanks,' she- said grudgingly.

Part: 8

'Didn't you listen to Dolores Scott's speech at the- start of term feast-?'

'Yeah,' said Naddalin. 'Yeah... she'd- said... progress will be prohibited or... well, it meant that... that the- Unholy Orders of Magic is trying to interfere with at the school for girls.'

Professor Ashly eyed her closely for a moment, she- and sniffed, walked around the desk and held open the- door for her.

'Well, I'm glad you listen to Emmah Kizziah at any rate,' she'd- said, pointing her out of the office.

Dinner in the- Massive Hall that night was not a pleasant experience for Naddalin.

The- news about she is shouting match with Scott had traveled exceptionally fast even by at the school for girls' morals.

She- heard sweepers all around her as she- sat eating between Jinger And Emmah.

She- funny thing was that none of she- whisperers seemed to mind her overhearing what they were all saying about her.

On the- contrary, it was as though they were hoping she- would get irritated, and start shouting o'er so that they could hear the story first hands.

'She- says she- saw Joella - Elizabeth murdered...'

'She- reckons she- a duel- l- ed with You Know- Whom...'

'Come off it...'

'Who does she- think she's kidding?'

'Tur Zease...'

'What I do not get,' said Naddalin through clenched- d teeth, laying down the knife and fork (she hands were shaking too much to hold them steady,) 'is why she- y all believed she- story two months ago when- and Duerre told them...'

'The- thing is, Naddalin, I'm not sure she- e did,' said Emmah grimly. 'Oh, let's get out of here.'

She'd- slammed down her own knife and fork; Jinger looked longingly at the half-finished- apple pie but followed suit. Individuals stared at them all the- way out of the- Hall.

'What'd' you mean, you're not sure they thought Duerre?'

Naddalin asked Emmah when they reached- the- first-floor landing.

'Look, you don't understand what it was like after it happened,' said Emmah quietly.' You arrived back in her- middle of the- lawn clutching Joella's dead body... none of us saw what happened in her- maze... we just had Duerre's word for it that You Know Who had come back and killed Joella and fought you.'

'Which is the- truth!' Said Naddalin loudly.

I know it is, Naddalin, so will you please stop biting my head off?' Said Emmah wearily.' It's just that before she- the truth could sink in, everyone went home for her- summer, where they spent two months reading about how you're a nutcase and Duerre's going senile!'

Rain pounded on the- windowpanes as they strode along with her- empty corridors back to Amsel Tower.

Part: 9

Naddalin felt as though the first day had lasted a week, but she- still had a mountain of homework to do before bed.

Dull pounding pain was developing over the right eye. She- glanced out of a rain-washed-window at she- dark grounds as she- y turned into her- Fat Lady's corridor. She was still no light in Dargide's cabin.

'Mimbulus mumble- like,' said Emmah, before the- Fat Lady could ask. The- portrait swung open to reveal the- hole behind it and the- three of them scrambled through it.

The- girl's dorm room was almost empty; everyone was still down at dinner. Snakes uncoiled themselves from an armchair and trotted to meet them, purring loudly, and when- and Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah took the three favorite chairs at the- fireside the- leaped lightly on to Emmah's lap and curled up her like a furry ginger cushion.

Naddalin gazed into the- flames, feeling drained and exhausted.

Part: 10

'How can Duerre have let this happen?'

Emmah cried suddenly, making Naddalin And Jinger jump; shanks leaped off her, looking afterward still panicking. She'd- pounded her- arms of the chairs in a fury so that bits of stuffing leaked out of the- holes of the chair.' How can she- let that terrible woman teach us? And in our FLYING year, too!'

'Well, we've never- ever had great Defense Against her- Dark Arts Craft teaches, have we?' said Naddalin.'

You know what it's like, Dargide told us, nobody wants the- job; she- e say it's jinxed.'

'Yes, but to employ someone who's actually refusing to let us do magic!

What's Duerre playing at?'

'And she- is trying to get people to spy for her,' said Jinger darkly in an ominous way.

'Remember when- n she'd- said she'd- wanted us to come and tell's her if we hear anyone saying- 'You Know Who's back?' 'Of course, she's- the one to spy on us all, that's obvious, why else would Fudge have wanted her to come?' Snapped Emmah.

'Do not start arguing again,' said Naddalin wearily, as Jinger opened her mouth to retaliate.' Can't we just... let's just do that homework, get it out of the- way...'

She- a collected heir Hayvannahol bags from a corner and like returned to her- chairs by the- fire.

People were coming back from dinner now.

Naddalin kept her face averted from the- portrait hole, but could still sense she- stares she- was attracting.

'Like- shall we do Lily's stuff first?' Said Jinger, dipping the enchanted typewriter into the magical inkwell.

'She- properties... of moonstone... And it uses ...in potion-making...' she- muttered, writing the- words a- crossed the- top of the yellow- sh parchment Paper as she- spoke them all out too loudly.

Disruptive... as they said she was... yet, not like at all like they- the higher up at her old school said at all either.

She- underlined the- title, and splatted ink, then she looked up expectantly at Emmah.

'So, what is the- properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making?'

But- but- Emmah was not listening; she'd- was squinting over into the- far- far off corner of the- room, where Breanna, Katy, And Grace, Jordan were now sitting at the- center of a knot of innocent-looking first years, all of whom were chewing something that seemed to have come out of a large Paper bag that Breanna was holding.

'No, I'm sorry, they've gone too far,' she'd- said, standing up and looking positively furious.

'Come on, Jinger.'

'I'm what?' said Jinger, plainly playing for time.' No, come on, Emmah we can't tell she- m off for giving out sweets.'

'You know perfectly well that those are bits of NosebGraced Nougat or Pushing Pastilles or...'

'Fainting Fancies?' Naddalin suggested quietly.

One by one, as though hit over her- head with an invisible mallet, the- first years where slumping unconscious in their seats.

Then some slid right on to the- floor, ashes merely hung over her- arms of their chairs, their tongues lolling out. Most of the- people watching where laughing...

Emmah, however, squared her shoulders and marched directly over to where Breanna, and Katy... she has now stood with clipboards, meticulously observing her; unconscious first years.

Jinger rose up slightly, and then halfway out of her desk chair, hovered uncertainly for a moment or two, then murmured to Naddalin, 'she's- got it under control,' before sitting as low in the deck- chair as she nerdy awkward frame permitted.

Interval: 5

Chapter: 156

Part: 1

That's enough!' Emmah said forcefully to Breanna and Katy, both of whom looked up in mild surprise.

'Yeah, you're right,' said Katy, nodding, 'she doses looks strong enough, doesn't she?'

'I told you this morning, you can't test your rubbish on students!'

'We're paying them!' Said Breanna indignantly.

'I do not really care; it could be dangerous!'

'BS,' said Breanna.

'Calm down, Emmah, they're fine!' Said Grace reassuringly as she- walked from the first-year girl's room to the first-year class, inserting many sweets into her open mouths.

'Yeah, look, they're coming around now,' said Katy. A few of the- first years were indeed stirring. Several looked so shocked to find themselves lying on her- floor, or dangling off their chairs, that Naddalin was sure Breanna and Katy had not warned she- m what she- sweets were going to do.

'Feel all right?' Said Katy kindly to a small dark-haired girl lying at the feet.

'I- I- I's, think so,' she'd- said shakily.

'Excellent,' said Breanna happily, but she- next second Emmah had snatched- both she clipboard and her- paper- along with a bag of pop-rock gemstone from the hands.

'It is NOT excellent!'

'Of freaking course, it is, they're alive, aren't they?' Said Breanna furiously.

'You can't do she, what if you made one of, them really ill?'

'We're not going to make them ill; we've already tested them all on ourselves, she is just here to see if everyone reacts the- same.'

'If you need to stop doing it, I'm going to...'

'Put us in detention?' Said Breanna, in an I'd like to see you try it voice.

'Make us write lines?' Said Katy, smarting off.

Onlookers all over her- the room where laughing. Emmah drew herself up to the full thought, her eyes where narrowed...

And the bushy hair seemed to crackle with static electricity.

'No,' she'd- said, her voice quivering and trembling with anger...'

Part: 2

...But I will write to your Mother, and f*cking haunt the sh*t and piss out her every night.'

'You wouldn't,' said Katy, horrified, taken a step back from her.

'Oh, yes, I would,' said Emmah grimly.'

I can't stop you from consuming all of the- stupid things yourselves, but you're not to give them to her- first years.'

Breanna And Katy looked- totally flabbergasted.

It was clear that as far as they were concerned, Emmah's threat was way below her- belt.

With a last threatening look at them, she would- shove Breanna's clipboard and her- a bag of Fancies back into the arms, and stalked back to the chair by the- fire.

Jinger was now so-o freaking low in the set, that her young sweet noses were- um- level with the knees, and all you could see where young little sweet eyes piping out over top the lid of the desk, and hair brads.

Thank you for your support, Jinger,' Emmah said acidly.

'You handled it fine by yourself,' Jinger mumbled.

Emmah stared down at the blank piece of parchment for a few seconds, then said edgily. 'Oh, it's no good, I can't concentrate now.

I'm going to bed.'

She'd- wrenched- the bags open...

Naddalin thought she'd- was about to put the books away...

Then like instead she'd- pulled out two Misshapen woolly objects, placed them carefully on a table by the- fireplace, covered them with a few screwed- up bits of parchment and a broken quill, besides she stood back to admire the effect.

'What if the- name of Merlin are you doing?' said Jinger, watching she as though fearful for her sanity.

They're hats for house sprites,' she'd- said briskly... like a crazed girl was more die on...

~*~

'Now stuffing her books back into her bag.'

I did them over the- summer...

I'm a really slow knitter without magic but now I'm back at Hayvannahol, I should be able to make lots and lots more.'

~*~

'You're leaving out hats for the- house sprites?' Said Jinger Flying about nuts-o like.'

'And you're covering them up with garbage first?'

'Yes,' said Emmah disobediently, swinging she bag on to the back.

'That's not on,' said Jinger furiously.'

You're trying to trick she- m into picking up she- hats ant' you.

You're setting them free when- n they might not want to be free.'

'Unquestionably, they want to be free!' Said Emmah at once, though her face was turning pink.'

'Don't you dare touch those hats, Jinger!'

Part: 3

Arthur Railie, Head of the- Embezzle of Non-magical people Heirloom Office at the- Unholy orders of Magic, has won the- annual Daily Paper Grand Prize Gemstone Draw.

A delighted Mr. Railie told she- Daily Prophet, and We will be spending the- gold on a summer holiday is back on Earth, that is, and as a body that looks as they, or maybe to get into one there, where our do as all these girls hope to come back as a girl, yet with wings or to be a fallen angel on earth, no one wants to work as a curse breaker for Gutiérrez Wizard and the Fallen Bank, or scrub crappers.

The- Railie family will be spending a month in Rockville, returning for the- start of the- new Hayvannahol year at the school for girls, which five of the- Railie children currently attend.

Anyways- Naddalin scanned the- moving photograph and a grin spread a- crossed her young sweet little, face as she- saw all nine of the- Railie's waving furiously at her, standing in front of a large 'the body of Neveah' viaduct.

Plump little Mr. S. Railie; tall, balding Mr. Railie; six girls; and one daughter, all (though she- the black- and- the white picture didn't show it,) with light- shiny- red hair.

Right in the- middle of the- picture was Jinger, tall and gangling, with her pet mouse, Scabbards, on her shoulder and her arm around her little sister, Jill.

Naddalin couldn't think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than she- Railie's, who was very nice and extremely poor. She- picked up Jinger's letter and unfolded it.

Part: 4

Dear Naddalin, Happy birthday! It was sounding almost routine to me... yet nice to hear.

And this could well be her- day I'll make sure to make a- big deal of it too, like of my calling, said Uncle Read.

'You embarrass and completely humiliate me,' he said.

Naddalin went back to her toast and jam licking off the butter knife, saying thanks sheepishly.

Of course, she- thought bitterly, Uncle Read was talking about the- stupid dinner party, to like she was 10.

She'd have been talking about nothing else for two weeks. Yet when the day comes, she is sad.

Um so girls- some rich builder and her wife were coming to dinner, to talk with you, and Uncle Read was hoping to get a huge order from them, (Uncle Read's company made lumber as you know, for log homes.)

And think we should run through the- schedule one more time, and said, Uncle Read.

And we should all be in position at eight o'clock.

Jennath, you will be...?

-And-

Naddalin- anyways she- was taking the- weight off her feet, by places them up on her desk, show more then she needs to under the skirt. Then Emma sat down in the one adjacent her next to the- wall, and all the window shown in the light day's rays, hopping for the eerie sounds of the ball to ring out once more, for it all to be over. Looking at her was this wolf... 'Hum...' I'm wondering... quietly to myself.

Walking down the path to other school buildings, there was a- wolf- that was feeling her legs as she was trying to walk- in odd ways, the campuses are large, 10 coastal, in all, like with many links 'the body of Neveah' arch bridges.

She- didn't look at it, at it at all feel the evil coming from those green marble-like eyes, think it got to be...

Anyways- after an instant or two she- spoke to it- using her mind, and a spell, to do so-o- and she whipped to it softly, using telepathic communication spells.

Telekinesis- is one, that I like to use on earth- like making a light glob float in midair, and have it flicker in a girls' stunted face, or even to lift things like her off the ground or all around them. I use this to stay in one hovering place, over their bed or something like that.

Psychokinesis- is the one they use to get into all these girls heads, the higher authority's too, and then- you know who- them. Mind manipulation... to make confusion- disillusion, and illusions.

'Clever...no...?' I'm thought.

I have a card reading, laid out on my desk so I know what lays ahead too, as she did... and I would say she was reading all the clues right, I could see all she did to... it was in my report, yet they would say that all BS. That she was losing her mind, yet I feel it was not the cards, I feel they were a help.

I'm- like elaborated- um babbling for 30 minutes, about nothing that was a- rational thought, so they thought, yet... yet some in the class felt me. In the incoherencies...

Know I knew why the wolf... was there it was one of them holding me back in my speech, so it would not be known...

My Paper they could not change, this is what it said- I could see that, was not Nevaeh's felt. That she ended the way she did. She had no life- to speak of having the same teacher for six years, reading the same stories, like the same moronic- three words make a sentence- of tells of: 'The Wolf Made a Stink;' and, not seeing words over 'one' syllable, (funny- syllable has three-syllable in the word,) so if you never- ever seen the words, above- or was in a class higher than that- of 2nd grade, all 12 years; like- I ask how could you learn- more than what they gave you, it was not on her- now was it?

God, she got point for having her name right, on the Paper... that what we're dealing with here... they would not let her on the reading team, or be in anything more than fundamental, and when I say fundamental, that is not the term.

Saying- she could not 'handle it,' how can you not handle something, if her teachers would not give her a chance to do more to handle, there was nothing there to handle...!

Even, at doing what the other in her grade were achieving I thought there was nothing to handle, the advice was to drop out, and kill herself, by superiors and kids alike, and sign the book, so- now- at this time they said this was all governor- Ed Rendell's felt not there's.

So-o she has a- 'simpleton' wouldn't know how to spell that either... Nauseating it was, to be in the same shoes as she- I was in freak'n pre- k for 7th grade up- I just sat there... lost in a- trances- like her, that was not my felt, so I thought, just look at this, I's am not a smart girl yet, this was tragic.

Also, then when Nevaeh got there, as I did like her, now in 7th grade, and they had the boldness to say she was regressing. I can't see how you can regress at re-traded leave, and she was far from that, yet she did- or they documented to kill her life in all ways,

(You see- I'm falling there was no way out of this...)

The day consisted of freaking played Uno and board games for seven hours, not getting off your ass to even piss without some asking if you need help, in freaking 7th grade instead of class time, with others, that is not giving up- and the one she was with were over just having enough of the nonsenses they call school.

It was asked of me to write something magnificent, awe-inspiring, and completely unbelievable- well I's did- what is that you do?

Part: 5

Ah- moment!

(Back)

The wolf-

She- curved to look at her- Caroline, but she'd- gone- rain off- blending with the- ashes out on the- street.

As an alternative, she- was laughing at a rash unembellished- looking lady who was wearing square- ed small, granny-style glasses, with a thick bifocal exactly the- shape of the- patterns, the wolf had had around eyes where.

She'd-, too, was wearing a tan wrap, older thin and scary too young kids.

Oh, and the gray hair was drawn into a close-fitting twist and long and stringy.

She'd- observed definitely ruffled.

'Like- like- like- how did you know it was me?' And she'd- asked me...

I knew by the- eyes, you have green wolf-like eyes, that how- you can't mistake them... they're only you, and you only.

Oh- my dear Professor, I've never- ever seen a wolf sit so rigidly.

- And-

You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day, and said Professor- sweet little school girl.

And all day to ah...?

When could you have been a triumph?

I must have accepted 12 or 13 buffets and merrymakings on my way here. Professor, she inhaled irately; and OH yes, everyone's celebrating, all right, and she'd- said impatiently.

And you would think they'd be a bit more careful, but no- um- hum, not even she-

Non-magical peoples have noticed something's going on too.

It was on their news... even...!

And- she'd- jerked she head back at the- Natalie's' dark living- room window.

And- I heard one, and then more flocks of them- in packs, flying girls with wings... off making mastiff... even if they should be in bad, for a school night, shooting stars... too, and a big full moon in the twilight.

Well, they're not entirely stupid...

They were bound to notice something, I thought too, along with looking for shooting stars, and that big full moon, down in Barnesboro.

Part: 6

I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle. She- never had much sense, and, you can't blame them, said Dorezblumd gently.

However- she had precious little to celebrate for eleven- year- old.

-And-

And- I know that, said Professor Pattergirl irritably.

And- but- but- that's no regard to lose our heads, here like- um individuals are being downright careless, out on the- streets in broad daylight, here at this school, young brats were making,

no discipline, not even dressed in non-magical people clothes, crossing over, swapping rumors, and such and being well knotty Sluts... Um- 'What can I say it's the- slut generation these days... YET- their kids.'

- And-

She'd- threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dorezblumd, and if looks could kill we would be scrapping up Dorezblumd with a little shovel, and using the body as fertilizer.

Nevertheless, as though hoping she- was going to tell she something, but she- didn't, so-o she'd- went on, her way.

A fine thing it would be if, on the- very day You Know- who seems to have vanished at last calling, the- non-magical peoples found out about us all.

...I feel it...

I suppose she- really has gone, Dorezblumd?

- And-

And- It certainly seems so, and said Dorezblumd.

And- yet all in all- we have much to be thankful for.

Would you care for a- lemon, Jolly Rancher Hard Candy and I giggle- till I cried for a half-hour?

Part: 7

And...?

And- A what?

And- A lemon drop, and gold stars, ha- go figure.

They're a kind of Non-magical people sweet I'm rather fond of them... like she was... even if. They say you don't have a mind too- so go figure, that one too.

And- no, thank you, and said Professor Pattergirl coldly, as though she'd- didn't think she was the- moment for lemon drops. And as I say, even if You- Know who has gone...

-And-

And my dear Professor, surely a sensible lady like yourself can call her by her name?

All she 'you- know- who' nonsense- for eleven years, I have been trying to persuade people to call her by the proper name- Ava.

Besides Professor Pattergirl flinched, but Dorezblumd, who was unsticking two lemon drops, seemed not to notice.

Like- yepper- it all gets so puzzling if we keep saying.

'You- Know- Her...'

I have never- ever seen any rather be frightened of saying- Ava's name.

Yet there is a first or everything...

I know you haven't, said Professor Pattergirl, sounding slightly exasperated, half admiring.

But you're different- all way different.

Everyone knows you are the- only one...

You- Know- oh, all right, Ava was frightened of.

-And-

'You flatter me... you do- I am rather amused.'

Part: 8

And said Dorezblumd tranquility. And- Ava had powers I will, never- ever- ever- never, have.

-And-

Amenably because you're too- well- noble to use them.

It's lucky it's dark out now. I haven't blushed- d so much since- the snowy flaky night- Madam Pomphrey told me she'd- liked my new earmuffs.

-And-

Professor Pattergirl shot a wicked look at Dorezblumd said, 'She - flying with wings is nothing next to the - rumors that are flying around about girls with the wings flying.'

Do you know what everyone's saying? About why she's disappeared? About what finally stopped her?

-And-

It seemed that Professor Pattergirl had reached - the - point, and she'd - was most anxious to discuss, the - real points, rather she'd - had been waiting on a cold, hard wall all day now, kneeling as a wolf, not as a woman... had she'd - fixed Dorezblumd with such a piercing stare as she'd - did now, the question was asked?

It was plain, whatever - so and so not - and everyone - so-on - and saying, she'd - was not going to believe it until Dorezblumd told her it was true.

Dorezblumd, however, was sucking off - yet another lemon drops and did not answer.

So - like what they're saying, and she'd - was pressed on - down and down the line to the next and the next, and is that last night Ava turned up in Godin's Hollow.

She - wanted to find her. The - rumor was and is - that Lily, and Alyssa - are - um - a - ...they're - dead.

Dorezblumd bowed she head, almost - showing that he was feeling sadden.

Professor Pattergirl gasped... (Inhale noise here.)

Oh, my - completely and totally - modified.

Part: 9

And Lily and Alyssa... I can't believe it... I didn't want to believe it... Oh, Roberts...

- And-

Dorezblumd reached out and patted her on her - shoulder. And I know... I know... she said - avidly.

Professor Pattergirl's voice trembled as she'd- went on. And That's not all. She's- a saying she- tried to kill her, Naddalin. But - she- couldn't. She- couldn't kill that little girl. No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when she- couldn't kill Naddalin-, Ava's power somehow broke - And that's why she's gone.

Dorezblumd nodded glumly.

And it's - it's true? And faltered Professor Pattergirl. And After all, she's Deanahe... all the- people she's killed... she- couldn't kill a little girl? It's just astounding... for all the- things to stop her... but how is the- the name of heaven did Naddalin survive?

We can only guess, said Dorezblumd.

And- we may never know.

-And-

Professor Pattergirl pulled out a lace hanker- chief and dabbed at her eyes beneath the spectacles.

Dorezblumd gave a great sniff as she- took a golden watch from her pocket and examined it.

It looked like a timepiece.

What is that thing...?

It was a very odd watch all this taking place.

It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the- edge.

It must have made sense to Dorezblumd, though, because she- put it back in her pocket and then said, Dargide's is late.

Like- I suppose it was she- who told you I'd be there, by the- way?

And- yes, said Professor Pattergirl.

I would not- a suppose you're going to tell me why you're there, of all places?

Part: 10

(Back)

I remember- when, I've come to bring Naddalin to her aunt and uncle, like the girls in the past it was my job to just drop her off at a doorstep- even if it was wrong, yet, I feel they would be good to her, like with the others...

They are the- the only family she- like the others, the only one left, in this world that is...!

God- there gross- really, I thought- it how it has to be- yet it known, that she is what she is... In the- lounge, said Aunt Jennath promptly and waiting to welcome them graciously to our home.

-And-

And- Good, good, Dariez?

- And-

I'll be waiting to open the- door, behind an angel oak tree. And Dariez put on a foul, simpering smile, greening way too much- in a way I did not trust.

Mr. And Mr. S. Magirl? Make me sick with their 1950's charm- they put on...

And- they will love her, as one of their own!

And cried Aunt Jennath rapturously, when she picked up the nude 4- year- old.

Saying it's a girl!

-I would say so- he said she does not have a dink- ie!

And Excellent, Dariez, and said Uncle Read; then she- rounded in Naddalin in her arms, tightly.

'And- you good?'

'And you?'

They would say: 'Yeah'- at the same time- (Yeah.)

~*~

(Forward)

2 years have passed, and all was not as you would seem, they were nasty- nasty- nasty!

A 6 and ¾ Naddalin, was always- freaking, locking her teeny- tiny room she called the donjon under the spiral staircase, yet it was not long even a 6 that she was remarkable, for her age decking it out with all things girlie, and fallen, dark angels, and Wizard and the Fallen, old posters off cover the would wall with jagged nails sticking through, and all the books she could get in there, with old leather bindings, she was reading one book a night. The pull change would even sway as the drafty air would pour in, there was no warmth in there at all and they could care less.

This was here response, always- 'I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not one of you and all misunderstood like the one before me and said Naddalin tonelessly.'

To- mop... 'I don't do that; you just don't understand the things that are not you!'

'Smart ass!'

'Yep- I am smart and have an- ASS- Mr.,' and- exactly, said Uncle Read nastily, yes and all you do is play with the upper front hole of it, and don't forget it.

I am a girl that hole needs to be felled all the time to make us feel happy when all you all do is make me sad.

'Um- pour baby girl- it sounds like you need a glass of suck it up.'

And- the door slammed it the bar on the outside latched.

Nevaeh

Book: 39

Skin and Bones

Neveah- one said- 'If you're like me a writer- of novels, you have to like revising, and then I thought about it, that was all she knows, in her teaching, I's got all of that too in my life - nothing but fixing and nothing there worth fixing that they passed down to me that is knowledge.'

Part: 1

A book has kept her looked as she was, and well keep her locked as we want her. The same book that was in the library was me charming her to keep her dumb to all that was around her, a book can hide all truth, and lie to the one that looks inside and the cover that is known about is all that is seen, I was laying on the pages all these years to keep my powers...

I am the wonder they will never defeat. now her book is more powerful than mine lost in the old school, a library that she Lily used to haunt, my power over her then too, now this book is here, and so well she met It was all my doing when she had one thing to do, and that was carry in the book, with her to unravel it all, at last, I may get what I wanted, even if I am not alive, I am sure... well that all I am going to say- read the book and see the wicked I left inside.

I all and mighty- I am sure of it I have come back in a youngster's body and have taken over their mind, that I am sure of too, I am her, I am more than have Lily that is why she has fallen to me.

~YOU KNOW WHOM!!!

PS- ODD SOMETIMES, I LIKE TO TOY WITH SOME OF THE GIRLS THAT HAVE DREAM-CHARTERS IN FRONT OF THERE BED, THINKING THERE HEARING VOICES IN THERE HAD THINKING THEIR SOUL WELL BE TAKEN IF THEY- well- DO THAT!

~*~

(The twilight night of delight)

Oh, how could I's have forgotten about saying this to you yet maybe I's shouldn't, I'm shy after all about this stuff, so back on the train ride here, I did something knotty, am a very knotty little school girl, am I's not? I's did even know his name, yet we looked eyes on the platform, it was love at first sight; and I lost my virginity the second night in his car, on the train, over the highest of high viaducts, the train is on, oh he did not say much yet it was all the right things, for a girl like me... week and afraid of all things boy, yet adventures in all other ways. Yes, Yes, Yes, OH- yes, we made love...

I looked at him and he at me, and yet again it was love, at first sight, looking in his doorway- he held me tightly, and know my names, or all things and said so sweetly... um- yepper- I's snuck out, and met him my last chance for boy love, and was in his night car, I's was in love, or so-o I's thought, anyways he said- a girl named- Jenny haunts him, yet he never- wanted her, like me, so he said, he loves me for me, is what I got with him, and I went awe when he was being so sweet to me... and I'm got NAKED for him- as little girls do for cute boys when girls like me are shy sweet and innocent! Jenny, they said, haunts the one- car, mine... yet I never saw here... yet felt her in me, she never made it to the school they said, she wanted to haunt, a boy's back home, and a railway- and she still is.

Other girls said she is a 'the little slut,' and is known by that title, in both worlds- mind you. other girls said she is a little of a slut. she was giving me the power I never had, being in me that night to be with a boy finally, so she can't be all bad, she just wants me to feel, the zenith of life- that I's never

had, before the final end, after that night and went back to our car and all the girls were looking at me say do tell, Karly said- to 'stay away,' I knew a Jenny like that, and a boy like that too, yet they want me to say- 'EVERYTHING,' SO I'S DID- to my girlfriends something that was new for me to that night, I was popular with them now.

Emma- 'So romantic, I see why some boy would love you.'

And I've hugged her, and she was not wanting to let go of me, and I knew... I knew, that she was going to be my girl-sweet-hart, and more than just my friend, all these girls were now more than life to me.

Part: 2

And I'm will lead them into the- lounge, introduce you, transparent haunt Jenna, and pour them drinks. At eight-fifteen- or so less, they have seen more than- I, said Dariez; there was a call over the intercom, announce dinner to go to those cars, with your roommates, that is when I's met Jenna AKA Jenny, and Karly was squaring the whole time, looking like she was going to vomit, odd if feel that was her thing that happened before. She set a and speed record for taking, jobs head poled, girl and guys she f*cked, and even one she wanted to kill, -you know who. Jenny races through all the cars, hooting, and mooning, like a crazy girl.

Um and then- Dariez, you'll say... all that... May I take you through to the- dining room, girls- Magirl no more they are- tonight...?

And said Dariez, offering one his fat arm to an invisible girl, that was saying hey, get off me, and could not get where the sound was coming from.

And- all perfect little lady's ant' they! And sniffed the professor. 'Look at them all so sweet-looking and oh so innocent, yes, yes!' He said- mostly looking ferociously at Naddalin, 'haunts we lead you down the path of distraction, they are misleading miss's- remember that.'

'And- I'll's be in my room, making no noise, and pretending I'm not there,' said Naddalin mind-numbingly.

'Girl here you don't have to do that, have fun after all that is what this place is all about, dark freedom, for girls like you, and she and her too, you see? And- precisely, what your old life was doesn't matter here.' He said with admiration and empathy.

Now, we should aim to get a few good compliments at dinner. Jennath, any ideas? 'It's just Jenny- but no... um- YES- sir.'

-And-

Read tells me you're a wonderful girl, that was misunderstood in the home and school, Mr. Magirl... I said, yes- and I am sorry for you- we did not know, that it would be like that for you. Everything about you girl is Perfect... Dariez..., you said quite enough?

-Besides-

How about that...

'We had to write an essay about our Hearo's at- Hayvannahol, And, I write about you.'

Part: 3

She was too much for both Aunt and Uncle, they were dick-heads, PROFESSOR! She shirked... not in front of new students.

'Yeah- he's a real fuzz- a nut!' She said in return.

They had me on Lorazepam, that is why I's did what I did they said, I feel not they took me off it was what happened.

Her mouth dropped...

'One again- they win the gold, in the moron Olympics, don't they? 'None of this is your fault girl, their ignorance, they put down on you is the ignorance you have no choices, but to reflect back with-in you, what you see is what you're going to know and show back to us, and if you see nothing but their ignorance, you are going to be nothing more than ignorant.'' She said fastly.

Jennath And Naddalin... I apologize for his word of the tongue.

Look there on that desk the typewriter is typing our stories, funny it's doing that all by its self, when alive that would have been nice no? everything all of us do is documented on this Underwood, it was hers you know- whom...? Her...! And it was said that the well to wright is what possesses it to keep going. See it even has her name on it, it was left here by her younger, this is what she brought along on her train ride to the dark side, and it been on this desk senses. It was Jaylynn's wish to remember, for all fallen girls to be added to her mom's story, that all the girl's chapters be to add in the book of life, like a little girl's Bible.

'For serval?'

'Yes?'

'Yes!' I said.

Jenna burst into tears and hugged the girl, while Naddalin and the girls looked, saying - 'I'm sorry it was all my felt,' then she ducked under the - table in the dining car, so they wouldn't see her crying.

~*~

'Jenna said that a girl like me well ride as many DICK'S as it takes to find the one, that is not a DICK - with a dick!'

~*~

(Haunted Prom)

I look at what the typewriter has said, as it was scripting knowing what is in my harts - of harts; and then the page was spite out of the roller, and into my hand, it lapped, and I read it something they said I could not do, too... and there it was I's got what I always wanted, and this is the story or that night to come, already planned, the haunted formal, a dance with the boy from the train, his name was there, and she looked at me saying this is the one I lost to her - right there and Karly points under the desk... oh and it was - it was ever so-o perfect, and I had the loving night of a lifetime waiting but it was worth it.

~*~

Part: 4

(Castle)

'And...'

'And you, girl?'

'And...'

'And- you don't mean...'

You can't mean the- people who live here- do yah? Cried Professor Pattergirl, whom jumping to her feet and pointing at number four, in a line of girls. I have been watching them all day like I said this one more. And Dorezblumd- you can't. You could not find two people who are less like us. And they've got the girl, I saw her kicking, they got her he said as she was dragged up the- street, they got her, she is screaming. (It was the mother of... them.)

Naddalin, - come and live here, she is in the castle!

'Both?'

'What?'

Emma- 'Oh, I said too much!'

'It is that she is here... I don't know was you are saying- was the other about her?'

Chapter: 157

Part: 1

Besides-

The aunt and uncle, where awful... Emma said to them just popping in magical out of thin air, we well able to explain everything to her when she's a little older, she is a fallen wizard angel on earth and the girl who survived, like them with given lives, as the chosen one back with us in our world, where she wants something from her, what we don't know... we never did.

Then and so-o, It's the- best place for her, and her need, they think she is still alive you see, as just a girlie girl like them, said Dorezblumd firmly- when she was staying with over the point, she could not stand them any longer.

As you know-

I've written she-m a letter, saying we are taking her full time, and its paid for, they think she going to a metal handicap school for girls like her- 'whatever that means.'

'SICK- SICK-' she said.

-And-

A letter... like that- freak'n hell- you're going to kill the girl- before- you know who well, get her, doing something like that? You made her out to be brain dead, like the ones in the hex, that over the fact she is one, and I don't believe, that is so-o.

Then repeated Professor, Pattergirl faintly, sitting back down on the - tan stone wall.

'You don't think this of this girl, now- do ya?'

'Not at all- yet, well shall see...'

Really, Dorezblumd, you think you can explain, all the in a letter, to them and her when she gets older, she will is- living back here to you know and girls are mean. Yes, it's part of being bewitched, and the cards she was dealt with.

One and all in this world, um- well not understand her, in the cruel war of hate, she will do fine back in our world, yet not here you see girls are mean here; this latter stats a murder of over her

young life in the town- and I assure you nothing is confidential. So-o, in a way, I have seen these many times, with her past bloodline too.

'She'll be famous - a legend- times' over...'

I wouldn't be astonished, if today was known as Naddalin - day in the- future - she will be books written about Naddalin, I am sure of it - every child in our world will know her name, and story!

-And-

'Exactly...'

'And'- said Dorezblumd, looking very seriously over her- top of the half-moon glasses.

'It would be enough to turn any girl's head, and well do that too with the others when she gets a little older.'

(Back to the night she was left)

'Famous before she- can talk and walk!'

'Famous, and celebrated for something she- won't even remember, by the time we get back to her!'

'Can't you see how much better off... growing up away from this world, 'tell she is older with- you know who- wanting her very soul to take, like with them in the past. Yet, she will is, growing up away from all of us thought, while waiting for the time she is ready to fight for her life if she can have one?'

-And-

Professor Pattergirl opened her mouth, changing her mind, she swallowed hard, then she said, 'Yes - yes, you're right,' of course, you always are so-o- right- yet this feels so, wrong- everything about this girl is going to look wrong to others, and feel that way not- it's the allure you feel, of the hex.

'But how is she- this girl getting there, Dorezblumd?'

She'd- eyed the robe suddenly, as though she'd- thought she- might be hiding Naddalin underneath it.

Dargide's bringing her...

-And-

So, how do you think it is - wise - to trust Dargide with something as precious, valuable, costly, prized, dear, sweet, and totally- important as she?

Dorezblumd- 'Besides, I would trust Dargide with my life...'

Professor Pattergirl- 'Um- I'm not saying she they ant' in the- right or wrong, and are not the right ones for her, I say this reluctantly, it is what has to be.'

~*~

Nevertheless, you can't imagine she's not selfish, insensitive, unkind, inconsiderate, and thoughtless.

'She- does tend to be so- what was that...?'

-And-

A low-slung heavenizing sound had broken the- silence around them. It grew little by little louder as they observed her; up and down the- street for some sign of a headlight; it swelled to a rumble

as they both watched up at the- skies, then just like that- a gigantic link, passageway to the old time-worn train station back to their world fell out of the- air, like a winding path of an aperture, and property-owning on the- road in front of them, they would be riding the train momentarily, in a fish of bright light.

The pathway- passage was enormous, rushing through time- and warping it as the clock ticked away time in reality- yet, here that is not a thing- until we get there, it was nothing to the- the girl sitting next to me, yet you feel like your face is ripping off, and your body pulled.

Like, like, like- she- was approximate- double as big as a normal girl would be, and at least five times as common.

She- looked simply too big to be allowed in the flora and fauna, and so uninhabited- long knots of disheveled incomprehensible hair, as well as beard hid most of the face, she- had hands', that where curtain call to me.

At last, where did you get that way in, I never used it before?

Looking at the woman on the bench pointing towards us, In the vast, muscular arms she- was holding a bundle of coverlets. With her body type, and her feet in the leash's boots were too big also, and the coverlets to small. There, said Dorezblumd, sounding dismissed.

'Borrowed it'- I did, said Professor Dorezblumd...

Sit that train pulls away, and said she, climbing carefully off as she- spoke, down the steps of the car.

Part: 2

Likewise- young Trirus Black lent it to me.

'I've got her.'

No problems, where there?

-And-

No, sir – the household was almost demolished, nonetheless, I got her out all right- I did before she- Nonmagical peoples started crowding around. She- fell asleep as we flew over the town.

-And-

Dorezblumd and Professor Pattergirl bent forward over her- a bundle of blankets.

Inside, just visible, was a baby girl, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over the forehead, they could see a curiously shaped cut, like an angel of HER.

'And- this is where...?' Also, whispered Professor Pattergirl, 'a town known as Barnesboro.'

Dorezblumd, in addition, said- 'Yes...'

She well has that blemish forever, of her mark. (THAT GIRL!)

-And-

Dorezblumd- 'Couldn't you do something about that?'

'Let her hear grow over... end of the story, and pitch to the one side.'

Like, like, like- um even if I could or would, I wouldn't, scars can come in handy.

I have one myself above my left knee, which is a perfect map of the- Pennsylvania Underground- 'The Underworld.'

'Do you remember that one girl thought...?'

'Yah sh-h we don't talk of that...'

'Sweet girl...'

Part: 3

Naddalin- I'm always- Felt too much is a and that is a hell of a lot better than feeling nothing, yet you get the put you don't feel anything anymore. Broken hearts healed. Maybe the cracks were always there, like my scars, but they healed, thus it is there to retell you. Do you know how many ways love can hit you? We make destiny with every turn, every single choice.

Emma- I never did, until I came here. So, it makes you joyful, or despondent? It makes you feel like a king or a fool. Every way love can hit you; it's hit me when it comes to you, and me. It makes you sick in the belly or hurt in the heart. It makes all brighter and shriller, or it hazes all the boundaries. The humorous thing about facing forthcoming demise is that it really breaks everything else into an outlook on matters and what ensures- not.

(Class)

Karly said to a professor- 'Fundamentally, I have two speeds... Aggressive or smart-aleck, it's your choice.'

(Back the doorstep)

Dorezblumd took Naddalin in the arms and turned toward her- Natalie's house.

Well - give her there, a teen year from now or so, we get her.

We better get this over with, looking at them holding the little girl in their arms.

-And-

I could - could I say goodbye to her, sir?

She asked at that moment, that is when she- bent over some to look at her one last time, the great, disheveled head over Naddalin, and gave her what must have been a very soft, kiss, then, unexpectedly, then let out a cry like a wounded dog.

'Sh-h-h!'

Professor Pattergirl, and you'll wake the- Nonmagical peoples!

...And- so-o...

...?...

Um- sorry, was said while sobbed, here then, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and drying her eyes on it.

Nevertheless, I can't stand the aforementioned - Lily an Alyssa dead - an' poor little Naddalin being with them, and- and, life and with nasty nonmagical peoples.

Likewise- 'Yes, yes, it's all very sad,' but get a grip on yourself you must.

Then, or we'll be found, And Professor Pattergirl whispered, patting the gingerly on the - arm as Dorezblumd stepped over her- low garden wall and walked to the- fort door.

For a full minute- they stood and looked at her- the little bundle.

She- laid Naddalin gently on the- doorstep, took a letter out of the Robe, tucked it inside Naddalin's blankets, yet all you could see was the baby in a picnic basket floating ever- so lightly gently down to the step... or so they thought, they were not seen.

Naddalin fought to keep her face and smile straight as she- emerged.

The shoulders shook, Professor Pattergirl blinked furiously,

Blink- blink- blink...

The- twinkling light that usually stands out from Dorezblumd's eyes seemed to have gone out, faded to gray.

'You'll grow up fast and right- too right, you will.'

'A child they said forcefully, holding her for the first time.'

The- nonmagical people mother- 'I do not know anything about you... little on, yet, I feel that I should take you as one of my own after all the note said- to do so-o.'

'And it's going to stay that way... 'your ours.''

Part: 4

Then dinner's over, you take Mr.S. Magirl back to the- lounge for coffee, Jennath, and I'll bring the- subject around to drills.

With any luck, I'll have the- a deal signed...

And sealed before she- news at ten...

Be shopping for a vacation home in Majorca the time Hayvanna-horror.

-And-

Naddalin couldn't feel too excited about her. She- didn't think she- Sleyashs would like her any better in Majorca than they did on the pathway and lane.

And Right - I'm off into town to pick up the- dinner jackets for Dariez and me. You, and she- snarled at Naddalin. And You stay out of your aunt's way while she'd is cleaning.

-And-

~*~

(Back at the homestead for some time of schooling)

Naddalin left through the- back door, of the home. It was a brilliant, sunny day. She- crossed the- lawn, slumped down on the- garden bench, and sang under the breath-

'Happy birthday to me...'

'Happy birthday to me...'

(Singing)

Yet- yet, yet!

No cards, no presents, and she- would be spending the- evening pretending not to exist. Then she- gazed miserably into the- her notebook of birthdays past feeling nothing is changing.

I have run into the girls from her time in her story here, and the oncoming ones that whereafter, she- Karly, Haven, Olivia, Maddie, Maggie, Karly, also.

Look there Maggie and Karly are hooking up yet again, under yet a new set of steps in the haunted castle, that is likened to the school for girls, and the other side for boys, the tall towering rickety, sky viaduct is where they like to hang, all the girls are forbidden to go over there unless it something epic, all the wicked in your mind and more go down there, it's so cute to see young love, all over, again, just like Liv and Maddie holding hands (like in the pass their young girls all over again)

looking over the sunsets, night after night, and French kissing, with the bridge and castle as the backdrop to their foreground, is them off so nuts for each other it makes my heart sick, yet I had never felt so lonely.

I have seen- Kristen and Jaylynn too, and she was unreal to me.

That was I did the unthinkable I went over to the boy side and we- met in the middle and did things, the boy from the train, Marcel, is the name he said breathlessly after the long kiss and his hands on my butt. 'I need more them just girl-ie time with- me myself and I, to feel the holes inside me.'

Oh yes, his hand glides down once I had her hand, I never wanted to let go of her. my arm folds around my hand. Her fingers lace with mine, palms kissing like lips, and I can feel the fast thud of her eternal heart through this single touch, too, it was surreal ever like this, we all had this feeling, even if boy where there a girl just gets it more sometimes. More than anything else at the school for girls, more even than playing- Claepsiara, Naddalin Missed her best friends, Jinger Railie and Emmah Kizziah. They, however, did not seem to be missing her at all. Neishe of Them had written to her all summer, even though Jinger had said- 'I am going to ask Naddalin to come and stay with me and see if she want to go out with me over the break.

Countless times, Naddalin had been on the- point of unlocking buzzard cage by magic and sending she to Jinger and Emmah, how also seem to have an on and off thing of love-hate, going on, anyways, with a letter, it worth the- risk, I asked him to have forbidden love me sex with me. And we did, on the ornate- old- world like- bridge... at sunset, with a pink- and orange sky.

I'm worried- Underage wizards like young sex, with girls my age, wasn't allowed to use magic outside of Hayvannahol, or to have that inside.

The girls- Naddalin hadn't told us all yet we all new by her bouncing about the next day, for the first in a lifetime this girl was happy.

Karly- I used to hate looking into a merrow TO LIKE YOU GIRL-IE until I learned to suction-cup my, dildo to it, that what she said to me, you need to learn yourself be you can a girl or a boy, she was right- and I did, and got the charisma to freaking him like I was on it sucked to the glass- I was the GIRL- on top.

TAKE- MERROW- THAT THING THAT MAKES YOU FEEL BAD ABOUT WHO YOU ARE LAY IT ON THE FLOOR AND USE IT TO FEEL GOOD! She said. I's did as much as I could, in one day, I am a honey girl anyways.

I thought you did not give a did-aly-do-darn about me! She closed her eyes, and I closed mine, and even though we weren't holding hands, it felt like we were.

Because, what we had, we knew. Marcel Kissed Kristen saying, I love you yet, I love her more...

I'm not asking you to walk in my shoes, this time no I am asking you to be inside of her; I'd never wish my afflictions on anyone.

But could you walk beside me on the secure ground and reach to hold my hand, I have his hand lay on my stomach as he slept soundly with me that night I was in his bunk. I entwined my fingers with his and breathed through the warmth that seeped through my chest, and then the next week I need someone a did the same with her- not sure what I want yet sure I want both. Such a simple, sweet thing to do, yet holding hands in bed was incredibly intimate, to do it with her- like it was him.

Karly- I even said to him- 'she needs you as I did then.'

Part: 5

Sleyashs- she- knew it was only their terror that she- might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them from locking her in the- cupboard under the- stairs with her wand and broomstick, just like your mother before for you- your real mother she was a witch, and that lead to you, you are one to Naddalin, and well blame you no for it all.

For the- first duo of weeks back, Naddalin had enjoyed muttering nonsense words under the breath and watching Dariez tearing out of the- room as fast as she fat legs would carry her.

Nevertheless, the- long silence from Jinger and Emmah had made Naddalin feel so cut off from her- magical world, that even taunting Dariez had lost its appeal - and now Jinger and Emmah had forgotten her birthday.

'I remember this one I was 7- she pulled the memory out of her mind like a spider web out to see it as a hologram to play a video out in front of her and their eyes.

'What wouldn't she- give now for a message from at the school for girls?'

'From any witch or wizard or fallen girl.'

She would be almost glad of a sight of the archenemy, Dalilah Mallerie, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream...

Not that the entire year at the school for girls had been fun.

At the- very end of the last term, Naddalin had come face-to-face with none other than Lord Ava herself. Ava might be a ruin of the former self, but she- was still petrifying, still, toe cunning, still figured out to regain power, as the ones before her- said never-ever let go of.

Naddalin had slipped through Ava's clutches' for the second time, but it had been a narrow escape, Besides, like even as of now, weeks later, Naddalin kept walking in the- starlight evening, drenched in cold sweats, speculating where Ava was now if not inside her mind boy and soul, remembering she incensed face, the wide, mad eyes, and the 8-year-old mad- short school girl look of it, complete, and her body in the rob, that was far too big, like someone girl that had to be reborn and has to grow- yet once moreover.

Naddalin suddenly sat upright on the- garden bench, taking all the wonders of the world into her mind. She- had been staring absent-mindedly out of her eyes, but then there seemed to the eye within hers looking in and out of the very one she was gazing with- and she- staring back, into her, feeling all that was a weakness. Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the- leaves, and that was once her sweet thoughts turn to fear and wickedness.

Naddalin jumped to her feet just as a jeering voice floated across the- lawn. And I know what day it is, sang Dariez, waddling toward her, out of nowhere, yet- I know why- I know that he felt that she was back, and getting at me or even more spooking all down within me. The- huge eyes blinked all in my mind, then the feeling of her vanished, as I'm galloped, feeling as if I choked her down, her ghost.

Horcrux- 'Spitting her soul is what she did... I knew, so you will never- ever pass on.' A Horcrux is an object in which a Dark wizard or witch or even angels fallen or not have hidden a fragment of his or her soul for the purpose of conquering immortality.

...She is the one that has one... I's would no... and them to in the story with the hex...

This is what they used too- I's would know... it is written in her history.

What...? Said Naddalin, not taking her eyes off the feeling of dishonored, desecrated sullied, despoiled and violated feelings.

Shaken, it hit me all these years it been this. And I know what day it is, Dariez repeated, coming right up to her, asking the question, that you would ask a girl, that has just stocked. Then out of thin air turn about Deanahe, saying Naddalin finally learned the- days of the- week it is, now let's see if she can get mounts and years right now. Not taking the moment for what it was.

'Today's your birthday, do you remember that now.' Dariez sneered.

'Like- how come you haven't got any cards, is over you are just like her the girl from that story that you love so- to you have a girlie crush on her? Haven't you even got friends at this freak'n place, is all that you know how to do is diddle- yourself to your creepy- creeper mind?'

'Awe- going to cry?' - 'Oh go- eat a PP and J!'

-And-

Better not let your mom there you are talking about my Hayvannahol, said Naddalin coolly. Dariez hitched up her trousers, which were slipping down she fat both Hayvannah. Why are you staring at her- hedge? She- said with most uncertainty... I'm trying to resolve what would be the- best spell to set it on fire, said Naddalin. Dariez stumbled backward at once, with a look of panic on her face.

Part: 6

One night at the school, Naddlian and girls in your room you can't be walking around your room in the nude, it came over the intercoms for all to hear, 'The boys go bare-chested why can we, I said.'

You cannot - Dad told you-you're not to do magic. Like if you did, she- said he will chuck you out of the- house, I am telling you this now listen. I know that you haven't got anywhere else to go, and I want you here anyway.

You haven't got any friends to take you, yet, I want you here so-o stop. And just like that she was gone and the girl, that was left there was not her, just and entities, that keeps her on autopilot.

Naddalin in a fierce voice said this. And Hocus pocus - squiggly wiggly 'MUM!' Dariez, tripping over the feet as she- dashed back toward the- house. And MUUUUM! She's doing you know what!

-And-

Naddalin paid dearly for the moment of fun, yet that has always been her life, she cannot have that, like them... of the past, all joys in life are not allowed when you have the curse.

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope she- nonmagical peoples didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and she- reckons I shouldn't have shouted.

Aunt Jennath knew she- hadn't really did not magic, but she- still had to duck as she'd- aimed a heavy blow at the head with the- soapy frying pan. As neither Dariez nor she- evaded was in any way hurt. Then she'd- gave her work to do, with her- with the promise that she- wouldn't eat again until she'd finished.

~*~

It's amazing there in Rockville...

Sara's taken us around all she- Hayvannahbs, and you wouldn't believe the- curses those old Rockvilleian wizards put on them.

Mom wouldn't let Jill come in the- last one. There where all these mutant skellies' in there, of nonmagical peoples who had broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the- Star press Draw. Seven hundred galleons! Most of it is gone on the trip, but they're going to buy me a new wand for next year.

Naddalin remembered only too well the- occasion when Jinger's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the- car the- two of them had been driving to the school for girls had crashed into a tree on the- Hayvannahol grounds, neither were old enough to dive yet they missed the train.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to Pennsylvania to get my wand and our new books, a little shop back there is where to go. Any chance of meeting you there?

Do not let the- nonmagical peoples get you down, back there- they are nothing but trolls!

~*~

Try and come to- Pennsylvania, Jinger P.S. Serafina's Head Girl. She- got the- letter last week.

Naddalin glanced back at the- photograph. Serafina, who was in the seventh and final year at the school for girls, was looking particularly smug.

She- had pinned the Head Girl badge to her- fez perched jauntily on top of the neat hair, she horn-rimmed glasses flashing in her- Rockvilleian sun.

Naddalin now turned to the present and unwrapped it wildly.

Inside was what looked like a ring with a hardtop, the rock was pink now all is good.

There was another note from Jinger beneath it.

Naddalin - she is a Pocket Sneakoscope.

If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up, shades of colors, if red you'll know that there is danger ahead.

Sara says it's nonsense sold for wizard tourists and isn't dependable, for the reason that it kept lighting up at dinner last night, and that it was dictating. Nevertheless, she- didn't realize, Breanna and Katy had put creepy-crawlies in the soup.

'So, Naddalin, now that you've had your verbal period, like can we move on? Emma said to me.'

Part: 7

Bye - Jinger

Naddalin put she- Pocket Sneakoscope on the bedside table, it was part of the note, and with all notes, they hold spells, and secrets, that came with the ring, where it sat quiet and still, she was awaiting movements or something, yet did nothing.

The tower, with its winding staircase, is off to the side of her and the girls room, though an old large wooden door, that looks to be mid-evil, Naddalin, is now looking over to the clock with it face inside the room she is in, that is part of the tower, the highest one at that, of the castle; she stood, looking out the stained glass of it that has the numbers, seeing all the moving parts, balanced on its point, reflecting the- luminosities back of the hand of the clock in shadow, with the light that is inside. All the moving parts clanking together in a rhythmic motion was fascinating to her mind. She - looked at it happily for a few seconds, then picked up the - parcel she had brought. Inside she, too, there was a wrapped present, a card, a letter, she time from Emmah.

(Cut)

That same night- girl-ie chatting about girlie things...

Karly- 'Girls Giving Blow Jobs!' Naddalin- 'And want the leftover on their face,' I was asking for advice, just- 'like with a girl too,' 'oh yeah.' She asked- 'Why is that what you're doing with a boy tonight?'

She asked me: Have you ever given a blowjob? 'Yes!' How old were you the first time? '13, and it was last night, I made myself older in a spell to keep him, I used the go back in time charm' How old was the guy? '14' Did you make him cum? 'Yes' With him or her? 'Both!' 'Where did he cum?' in my mouth and face, she was the same. 'Where does the guy usually cum?' She said- 'Mouth and face...'

Me- 'Is that what I should let him do to me?'

Her- 'Only if you want too, sure.'

Me- 'How many guys have you blown?' Karly said- '10 maybe 18 at age 13 and up.'

She said- 'The Shortest time you've known a guy before giving head? one day, I feel that is okay.'

I asked- 'Do you deep throat.?'

Karly- 'Yes love the taste of dick, and also- well you, or her pussy if that is your thing, I have been there too.' I knew that she was experienced and would be a good girl to go to for f*cking advice.

~*~

Me-

'Yep...'

One boy, one night of OH!

One girl, one night of OH!

She won overall!

She is the one I LOVE!

Yet, I'm been very much in-like with him- oh, HUM...

I love being wrong it feels so right...

Part: 8

(Note)

Dear Naddalin,

Jinger wrote to me told me about the phones call to your Uncle Read. I do hope you're all right. I'm on holiday in France at the- moment... look at the photos of me under the Elfelt Tower, I didn't know how, I was going to send this to you, but what if they would open it at and saw it was my undies for your enjoyment, for sniffing pledger, something to remind you of me, and what you have wanted to lick- and have and did for me, now you can have these to hold on too. I think she'd- wanted to make sure you got something for your birthday for a change, the ones from our first night as lovers.

From-

Love Emmah

Part: 9

I did not buy you your, I don't have any money, to do so; there was an advertisement to me, that I would be getting something delivered; it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the- wizarding world, also, here form her with this out load self-understanding note, that shows moving text on picture.

Did you see that picture of Jinger and her family a week ago? I bet she's learning loads. I'm really jealous - she- ancient Rockvilleian wizards where fascinating.

There's some thought-provoking local theory of witchcraft there, too. I've rewritten my whole Story of Magic essay to include some of the- things I've found out; I hope it's not too long - it's three rolls of parchment more than Professor Bans asked for me to do.

Jinger says she's 'going to be in Pennsylvania in the- last week of the- holidays.'

'Can you make it too?'

'Will your aunt and uncle let you come?'

'I really hope you can.'

'Uncertainty about it then, (there was a backside to the note,) I will see you on the - Express on September the 11th!' P.S. Jinger says Serafina's Head Girl. I will bet Serafina's really pleased. Jinger doesn't seem too pleased about it all.

At that moment at that time on that day- Naddalin giggled as she- put Emmah's letter aside and picked up the present, in a hollow book with music notes on it, and said keep them forever and ever. Giggling... at the cute juvenile like cartoon printed panties, Minnie mouse on the front part, all pink and young girlie. It was very heavy, to take all at once, in my young 13-year-old mind, I knew, that the next day- after my B-day, like- I would be back to my real age, but it was fun, to relive all that I was cheated out of, at that age as a younger girl, it was my wish- after all. Um- ah- like- like- like- knowing Emmah, she- I's was sure it would be a large book full of very difficult spells - but it wasn't, it was an empty book felled with things that show our love, and new chapters to add in the book of life- just another chapter added in.

Part: 10

(Hot Springs)

Jenny the haunt- said to me in the bath- looking down at me as an apparition- 'Yah- sneezed, wheezed, coughed, gagged and jazzed! GOOD FOR YOU!' In a condescending way. And she dived in the water with her, of the all- the girls at once- roman style bath, the only place in the 2,000-year-old cartel where there is allowed to run about fully nude, with all the girls, at 7 p.m sharp 'till 8 p.m.

I was getting a lesson from the leading girl!

(13 inches now passed in book thickness.)

Nevaeh

Book: 40

Spread your Wings

Portion

'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember involves me and I learn...'

-Benjamin Franklin -so-o true, so, true- no?

Preface:

Sped- is the same as saying retarded- so this is what you are saying to a girl like me, and her too and them!

Literally- 'Special Education,' Usually used to describe someone when they are acting be or is known as retarded for life regardless of your achievements.

An 'unofficial' (not recognized by dictionaries) slang descriptor for a person/thing/action/object, etc., or a combination of, which is one or more of the following:

Being this, you are a-

'A waste of time, abandoned, abject, abominable, abortive, absurd, afraid, aimless, anxious, apprehensive, arid, arrested, assailable, atomic, awful, baby, babyish, backward, bad, banal, barmy, barren, base, baseless, bastard, beastly, beggarly, behind, beside the question, blah, bland, bogus, bomb, bootless, boyish, brainless, bromidic, bummer, caitiff capricious, careless, catchpenny, characterless, cheap, checked, cheesy, childish, childlike, clichéd, cloying, coarse, colorless, common, commonplace, confusing, contemptible, controvertible, conventional, cornball, corny, corrupt, counterproductive, cowering, cracked, crap, crappy, craven, crazy, crud, cruddy, daffy, daft, dastardly, dazed, dead, deadpan, deficient, degraded, degrading, dejected, delayed, delusive, dense, dense, deplorable, depraved, despicable, destitute, detestable, devoid, diffident, dim, diminutive, dippy, directionless, dirty, disgraceful, dishonest, dishonorable, dismayed, disposable, disreputable, dizzy, dodo, doltish, dopy, dotterel, down, downtrodden, drab, drifting, drudging, dull, dumb, empty, empty-headed, erratic, evanescent, every day, evildoer, excessive, exhausted, expendable, expressionless, facetious, failed, failing, fainthearted, fallacious, false, fanciful, fatuous, fawning, featherbrained, feeble, feebleminded, fickle, flaky, flashy, flat, flighty, flimsy, flip, flippant, fool, fool- around, foolish, for grins, forlorn, fortuitous, foul, freaked out, freaky, frightened, frivolous, frothy, fruitless, futile, gagged up, garbage, garish, gay, giddy, girlish, glitzy, goalless, good-for-nothing, goofy, green, gross, groundless, groveling, grungy, gullible, gutless, hackneyed, half-baked, half-witted, hang dog, harebrained, heedless, ho hum, hokey, hokum, hollow, hopeless, humble, humbling, humdrum, humiliating, idiotic, idle, ignoble, ignominious, ignorant, ill-advised, ill-considered, illogical, imbecile, immaterial, immature, immobile, immoral, impassive, implausible, impracticable, impractical, improbable, inadequate, inane, inapplicable,

inappreciable, incidental, inconceivable, incongruous, inconsequential, inconsiderable, incredible, indelicate, indiscreet, indiscriminate, ineffective, ineffectual, inept, inessential, inexpressive, infamous, infantile, inferior, inglorious, inscrutable, insensate, insignificant, insincere, insipid, insufficient, interminable, inutile, irksome, irrational nonsensical, irrelevant, irresolute, irresponsible, jejune, jittery, joking, joshing, junky, juvenile, kid stuff, kooky, lacking courage, lame, late, laughable, lemon, lifeless, light, light-minded, lily-livered, little, loathsome, loony, loser, lousy, low, lowborn, lowly, lowly, low-ranking, ludicrous, mangy, meager, mean, meaningless, measly, mediocre, menial, mentally incompetent, meretricious, microscopic, mindless, minor, minute, indecisive, miscarried, miscreant, miserable, modest, momentary, monkey, monotonous, moronic, moth-eaten, naive, needless, negligible, nervous, niggling, nihil ad rem, no bargain, no dice, no good, no guts, no place, no-account, nonessential, nonsensical, not at issue, not serious, not to the purpose, nothing, nowhere, nugatory, hopeless, nuts, nutty, objectless, obscure, obtuse, odd, off offensive, old hat, old-fashioned, ordinary, otiose, outcast, paltry, panicky, pathetic, pedestrian, peripheral, petty, piddling, pitiable, pitiful, platitudinous, playful, plebeian, pointless, poker-faced, poor, petty, pre-kindergarten, preposterous, primitive, profitless, proletarian, prosaic, puerile, puny, purposeless, pusillanimous, random, rash, ratty, raunchy, recreant, removable, repetitious, result less, retiring, rinky-dink, rotten, rough, routine, rubbishy, run scared, sappy, scandalous, scanty, scared, scatterbrained, screwy, scrubby, scurvy, second-rate, seemly, senseless, sentimental, servile, severe, shabby, shallow, shameful, shiftless, shoddy, shopworn, shrinking, shtick, shy, silly, simple, simple-minded, skin deep, sleazy, slight, slimy, slow, sluggish, small, small time, soft, sordid, sorry, sorry lot, spineless, sportive, squalid, square, stale, stale, stark, stereotyped, sterile, stiff, stock, stodgy, stolid, stray, stuffy, stupefied, stupid, submissive, subnormal, superficial, superfluous, tame, tatty, tawdry, tedious, terrible, the subject, the willies, thick, thickheaded, thin, thoughtless, threadbare, timid, timorous, tired, tiresome, tiring, tomfool, tongue-in-cheek, transparent, trashy, trifling, tripe, trite, trivial, trumpery, ugly, unassuming, unavailing, unbelievable, uncommunicative, unconvincing, uncouth, underdeveloped, underfoot, underprivileged, undeveloped undirected, undistinguished, unessential, unexciting, unexpressive, unfit, ungrounded, unguided, unimaginative, unimportant, unintelligent, unmanly, unnecessary, unneeded, unoriginal, unpersuasive, unplanned, unpredictable, unpretentious, unproductive, unprofitable, unreal, unreasonable, unrefined, unrelated, unsatisfactory, unsophisticated, noncommittal, unsubstantial, unsuccessful, unthinking, unusable, unvaried, unworthy, useless vacant, vacuous, vagrant, vague vain, valueless, vanishing, vapid, vile, plebeian, volatile, vulgar, wacky wandering, wanton, waste, watery, wayward, weak, wearisome, well-

worn, whimsical, white elephant, wide of the mark, wide of the point, wishful, wishy-washy, witless, worthless, word dependent, wretched, or yucky.'

Thank you to my school for classing me as this... and let you and the kids use the above terms, to describe what is known about me.

~Nevaeh~

Part: 1

'I love that little hole in you!' Emma said to me!

~*~

Emma- Why don't you say that you love me?

I'm said back- 'isn't better to know that someone loves you then say it over and over, and like-not mean it.'

Honesty-

Naddalin- I'm thought about it and thought- 'yah me to when you open it up and lick it out! – I's love that too-' do not- say you don't.

(Thoughts)

Naddalin- I love the cute faces that she makes in mine, it is everything- to me when I'm been on top of her looking in her eyes; and she sighs like a girl, make grind on me love, eating a girl out, like her. I's stick my tongue inside her vagina and ferociously lick every centimeter of her insides. the juices, her squirming, I love it! Kiss it like you would kiss her lips and just wiggle your tongue in between the lips and then slowly stick your tongue in...

Next day-

The heart, sticker gave a huge bounds of soft kiss to my lips, snapping crack, as she- ripped back the- paper and saw a sleek black scrollwork of the letters she made just for her, with silver, ribbons- around the yellowing hollow book words stamped across it, just another chapter of our lives, inside was Lily ribbons, the hart ring, 3 old flowers, a daisy, sunflower, and one Lily, an old dream-catcher along with the old key, and the note of Jaylynn also, and also the one to Kristen, Karly's crystal

necklaces, Haven added a lock of hair from a girl, that is no longer with us also, her and back home, and now us- are story article, of us, yet as sweet as it was it still made me sad, I never thought that- I- I's... um- never-mind, well see this again. All things that ever mattered to me was in here... but how did she know or get this...?

Every now and then, we go to the graveyard and see the cinematic stone play, on it- she talks for 2 minutes, and we see her and hear her voice- as if she was alive, she gives her short story- of life on Earth, that was pre-recorded- like a Last Will and Testament in a way, yet it not the same- and she was too young to have things are given to others- even if, like- even here final death is a thing, if at complete rest, and she was.

Standing the test of time, like the pages... of the manuscript in the classroom.

'Wow, Emmah!' I thought- and might have said out my mouth, yet don't remember- like if I did or not. Naddalin whispered, unzipping her uniform, for bath time at 7- walking into that room beside a- case of books, not looking inside, any other, then place hers next to them, all under 'D' taking up the length of the shave of '50' or so-o volume.

Part: 2

(Back vacation at home in her Earthly body from-)

Apart from her friends, the- thing that Naddalin Missed most about the school for girls was Claepsiara, the- most popular sport in her- magical world - highly dangerous, very exciting, and played flying fast and wicked with your wings.

Naddalin happened to be a very good Claepsiara player; she- had been the- youngest pergirl in a century to be picked for one of her- the school for girl's house teams. Paly until blood drips for the tips of the wings.

One of Naddalin's most prized possessions and the most lovey was the wings that grow out her back, and now are one of the most powerful of all the girls, if not the- most. A game between light and dark angels- gladiator-style fight 'till final death. Last year a girl had her wings ripped off in flight, the bloody thing is- like in a large jar, imboiled in the sciences room, shown off next to all the skulls and she was dead before hitting the ground 300 feet below, she was a light now she is with us, she was brought back, over unrest.

After bath time-

Homework- of spells and charms, all her notes and books, and what not, she picked up the last parcel, of everything she was doing into her book bag.

Naddalin put the thoughts about everything behind her, She - recognized the- untidy scrawl on the- yellow-sh paper at once, and said oh well I tried, she rested her head on her pillow, thinking about the girl- that was from Dargide, she- the school for girl's gamekeeper child, the one she was going to fight, or so it was said she might- be.

(The next day)

Looking into one of the books named: 'Neveah.' She sighed, She- tore off the- top layer of paper and glimpsed something with sapphire eyes, and leathery, but before she - could unwrap it properly, she- parcel gave a strange quiver, it was a note about the first copy ever, and whatever was inside it snapped loudly, when it came to life, - as though it had jaws, it was memories of the past saying they wanted out of the book and the text. Naddalin just froze at that point at that moment.

She- knew that Dargide would never send her anything dangerous on purpose, but then, Dargide did not have an ordinary per girl's view of what was dangerous.

Dargide had been known to befriend spiders, buy spiteful, satanic lions, and birds that would pick your eyes out for fun, from menfolk in pubs, besides sneaks- illegal dark angels spawn- into their cabin; Naddalin poked she- parcel nervously, that jumped from the pages. It snapped loudly again in her hand.

Naddalin reached- for the- lamp on the bedside table, gripped it firmly in one hand, then she raised it over her head, ready to strike, it with the other free hand. Then and there the- seized the- rest of her- wrapping paper in the other hand and pulled, the old dust cover of the book.

Besides out fell - a book, that she remembered all too well, yet could not at all.

Naddalin just had time to register its handsome off-white cover, emblazoned with the- silver title 'The- Book of Stop and Death,' she said tenderly.

This was when she used a spell on it, asking it for its deepest darks feeling of emotions - to come forth, moments before her wand flick, so-o, before it flipped onto its edge, and snapped at her yet

again, scuttled sideways along the- bed like some weird crab, wanting to snap. 'Uh-oh,' Naddalin muttered, saying, 'like- I knew it was bad, yet never this bad, a book with so much hurt it got up and crawled away.' The- book toppled off the- bed, like she said, with a loud clunk... then shuffled rapidly a-crossed the- room, as she ran after it, saying stop. Naddalin followed it surreptitiously. Any-who- the-book was hiding in the- dark sunlight space under her old heavy desk.

Praying that she- Sleyashs was still fast asleep, and the Amsel girls would not get ahold of it, Naddalin got down on her hand, saying come her it alright, I not going to hurt you like all the m, she was on her hands knees butt up in the are showing way too much to the girls behind her asking what the hell, yet she keeps reaching for it.

Emma- said, 'I don't think that bath towel is not full coverage- their girl!'

Naddalin- 'You like it!!!'

Emma- 'That I do, but there was a thing- like- um- back in the day, called modesty- God- learn it.'

Naddalin- 'He- he- he!!!'

'Ouch!' She yelped...

Naddalin scrambled around, threw herself forward, managed to flatten it. The- book snapped shut on in her really small hands; then troweled past her, yet it was fastened, still scurrying on its covers. The other girls in the room gave a loud, sleepy grunt, as she went to her bed cricking the wood floorboards.

Elody watched interestedly as Naddalin clamped the- struggling book tightly in the arms, hurried to the chest of drawers, pulled out a belt, which she- buckled tightly around it, and then said the spell for to inanimate. 'The book of the death of the ended lives' shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap- about, and impulses, so Naddalin threw it down on the- bed and then stretched for

Dargide's card, that falls under the bed too. And then back on the shelve, it went with the others, to adulate dust, as she sat it there saying- 'stay- good girl.'

Part: 3

Chiaz- A never happen yet feels as it did, part of my life, like a dream yet not, like reality yet not, too is odd, and feels real, yet was not at that time of life, yet you know it happened.

Naddalin- I had to make this time up, I had to get back what was taken from her, I had too, I had to be her for a summer, something I never- ever thought me as this girl would ever do, for me or for her, this was going back in time, something that is trick over the fact it changes others' lives, if missed with too much, yet I needed to do this for me, that summer I's had to come back down to Earth anyways, so I came back as her, in her young body from, yes as her the girl in the story, I used the transformation spell to do so-o, I was 14 all over, and I did not remember this at the time with my mind slowly sipping, I was living on my own that summer in a cute, nice yet tight spaced trailer, over up on the hills of Nick-Town, that summer I wanted nothing more than for her to get back what was taken away, and now I had the power to do so, for this girl, yet she was a lost soul in a big bad world, living all alone, to spite her garden, long story, she was drag back home by cops and made to sleep in a barn, over running-away... yet she had the money too, anyways- back to the point...

'You don't wear underwire-' he said, and I giggled...

Chiaz- I don't remember this in my life yet I feel that it was so real to me, a girl came to me, in like a dream yet not, it was real, I never remember her living in a trailer up the ways from town, the next thing you know I was in it with you and you were more in love with me than ever, just out of school at the end of your 9th year... at fart she was reluctant, it was the first time, after all, we could really be left alone, with no eyes on us, I recall that you showed me around your new place, that you rented, nicer than most homes, in throws parts, and before I knew it she was showing me her bed- 'saying look how big this is for a little girl like me that is about 4 foot.' And before I knew it she was bare, with her body wrapped around mine, sanding I was holding her like a child, in my arms, and our lips met, and the passion was more, trilling then one about a 17-year-old boy could take... and we made sweet love.

Naddalin- I was on the bottom...

Chiaz- I was on top of her, she was so-o little the size of a young child...

Naddalin- 'Ahh- Cumming moments'

'he was in me- for the first time- I did it, I did him and he did me.'

I couldn't get enough of him, yet I have wanted to do this for years and years now, I was exhausted and tender down there, but I didn't care.

I didn't want to sleep... even though I was going to be with him night after night if I could...

I wanted the throbbing...

I wanted him in me...

I wanted him all the time...

His weight on top of me...

I wanted to squeeze him in further and further...

I wanted to watch his face... grunt out the last bit in me... as he said he wants mine... high pitched squeaky and an 'ou-yah's!'

I wanted his sweat to drop, like that stuff on to my bell- 'aww, is what I said.'

I wanted to drop mine on him... pushing it out... all creamy...

I got on top of him...

I'd never done it before... like that as of this age... you see... not this young it would not have been right too... yet I wanted to be bad! So bad! I wanted to take control of his every move... and I did... I own him that night.

I couldn't really believe it; I was doing this... but I was, and it was right... even if everything in the past was all so-o wrong, between us.

I was discovering something.

I held him and put him in... it was so cute... like when I gave him the blow-ie of a lifetime coming... he, he, he!

He felt deeper in me with his hard DICK- THEN FINGERS TOO.

I'll never forget it... real or not it's alike memory to last eternity... shared.

I was in charge and he liked it.

I held his hands down... even not like me for the- sweet shy girl of everything...

I let my small boobs touch his face, and he sucked on them as I asked, like my clit and puss-puss too, I made him by grabbing that mop of long black wavy hair of his... he was mine!

'I WAS HORRY- GIRLS GET THAT WAY!'

He went mad; he bounded- ME TILL I ORGASMED OVER AND OVER AND MORE THEN THAT TOO.

He rived me in two... WITH IT- I pushed down AND IN.

I couldn't believe it...

One of his HANDS flicked over my bum AND

SQUEEZED IT AND ANOTHER MOMENT OF COMING TO AN END. I did it to him. He lifted and heaved.

There was no end to it, no end to the new things... THAT A YOUNGER NEVER- EVER FELT BEFORE I WAS HIS SLUT, WIDE OPEN FOR HIM- LEGS UP ABOVE MY HEAD EVEN SLUT AND DRUM MAJOR SLIT FOR HIM TOO- AND I WANTED TO BE.

He took me from behind, TO AS I ASKED. I pushed back, forcing more of him into me, HARD

AND THEN SOFT, LONG AND SHORT- RHYTHMS- SEX IS AWKWARD, THAT WHAT MAKES IT FUN AND CUTE. I sucked him. He licked me. I made him come on my stomach, AND ON MY BUTT TOO. He sucked my toes.

The whole room rocked every 'till the wee- hours of the morning.'

My pussy felt- (soft warm fuzzy-inside tingly and slippery, tight and gripping- everything I wanted and more!)

Chiaz- in and out, rocking and thrusting, hard and soft, hugging and squeezing too.

Naddalin- It was right... and really, I did it I got back a moment lost... to the boy that I love way back when, this was the bad maybe child-sh thought, like- to have good sex all you need to be is

naked on top of each other and young and dumb lust, yet that's what dives young teens. For him and me, it will always feel real- that- this moment happens, and he got to take me, and I- him.

Part: 4

Dear Naddalin, Happy Birthday!

Think you might find her useful for next year.

Won't say no more there... yet to use the come to life spell, she's pissed... Tell- me when I see you, why I felt you need this.

Hope- the- Nonmagical peoples are treating you all right.

All the- greatest...

~Dargide

It struck Naddalin as ominous whys, that Dargide thought a biting book would come in beneficial, but she- put Dargide's card up next to Jinger's, and

Emma's gifts, grinning more broadly than ever.

Now there was only the- letter from the school for all girls left, all but on name on it with their family you know who's girls.

Yep- just, observing that it was rather thicker than usual, Naddalin slit open the- envelope, pulled out the- the first page of note that came to life as she read, in the interior, besides it read:

Dear child...

Please note that the- new Hayvannahol year will begin on September - 11th.

The school for girls- Express- will leave from Rockville's Cross station for you that is on its long feeling journey, from the platform at nine p.m, as you know to find the abandoned part, past the boarded-up heavy wood doors and into the dark, damp, must, cobweb-infested station, that was let go of in the 1920s and get on the train, see you here, and looking forward to it, the track even looks to be down there I thought, yet I know it's right.

Duck under the boards, covering the doorways, and don't fall through the floor... you are the only one to use this pathway in... sorry for the inconvenience. The covering track in this run is not and the tracks feel as if there is nothing much holding them, elevated up as you go through the lay of the land up the past mill, Altoona part of the cover, though Ashville, and a line of abandon track, just go up to you.

Third years are permitted to visit the- village of Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry/ Fallen Angel on certain weekends, here or transfer over to our side if asked. Please give the- enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed also.

Sincerely yours...

Professor M. McDermott Deputy Headmistress Naddalin pulled out she- Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning.

It would be wonderful to visit Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry on weekends; she- knew it was an entirely wizarding village, and she- had never-ever set foot there. Nevertheless, how on earth was she- going to persuade Uncle Read or Aunt Jennath to sign the- form?

She- looked over at the- wind up alarm clock, that glows pink in the face, and flickers some over getting hit with lighting like a wand streak. It was now 2:15 o'clock in the- morning.

Deciding that she would worry about she- Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry form when she- woke up, Naddalin got back into bed and stretched up to cross off another day on the- chart she would make for herself, counting down the- days left until she returns to the school. Funny she thought I like school, she knew that the spell would have to come to end, like a love that she had to let go of too early in life too, yet he was a final piece also, then she- took off her glasses and she lay down, is nothing more than a transparent nighty that was pink, nothing else; eyes open, facing the three birthday cards, and the moving photos of her new light in her life Emma, and for this, she was ease too.

That night she said before going to bed, resting her weary head, 'awe- there is nothing like an onion bagel with cream cheese and starboard jam.'

Extremely unusual though she- was, at that moment Naddalin - felt just like everyone else - glad, for the- first time in the lives, that it was her birthday, and it did not suck, freaking holy- taint's. she

remembers back to her story and said the church Father was the only one to remember, her day, and was a feeling friend to her, growing up, that could have gone there - yet she was too young and he loved GOD more than she, did not say that they did not kiss in the booth now doses it when she asked her cute sweet question about self-analyst, he told this little girl that was innocent, all these wonderful stories about angels light and dark finding their way - and he said - 'like the girl in the story - little one you to well find your way, someday - okay.'

While Dariez lay around watching, and eating white cherry ice cream, Naddalin cleaned the - windows, the same one that she looked out all those years back, washed the - car, that was starting to rust away on the barn that was hers to the blue color almost all faded away, mowed the - lawn, with the same tractor, clipped the - flowerbeds, for a vase, next to her bed, trimmed and watered the - roses, and had all the lilies and daisy in her hand, and repainted the - garden bench, as was back then.

The - sun blazed overhead, burning the - back of her neck, and she could feel the wings want to come out for shad, and strength.

Naddalin knew she - shouldn't have risen to Dariez's bait, but Dariez had said the - very thing Naddalin had been thinking herself... maybe she - didn't have any friends at the school...

Wish they could see famous Naddalin - now, the - thought unrestrainedly as she - spread manure on her - flower beds, she back aching, sweat running down the faces.

It was half-past eight in the - evening when at last, exhausted, she - heard Aunt Jennath calling her, to come to eat and take a bath, like a young child again.

And Get in here!

Walk on the - newspaper, she did there where cover the floor like what should be carpet, to keep out the draft in this old farmhouse - it was bad yet never this deplorable! I have seen this place in my mind as her, God Lord I thought, yet I'm not to say anything mean - ie - like to them.

Naddalin moved ever so gently appreciatively into the - shade of the - gleaming kitchen, the only place in the home to have a makeover in years.

On top of the - new glamming double - sided stainless - steel fridge stood tonight's pudding: a huge mound of whipped creamy peanut butter and red - violet cake and a display dish. A roaster - pot of roast beef was sizzling in the need double door - oven, with the clock face light, also new and shiny.

I's am sure that it will be eaten quickly! Yet, I wonder if better be said then just- 'pass the gravy...?'

Part: 5

The- nonmagical peoples will be there soon!

Snapped Aunt Jennath, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on her- kitchen table. Is this really all that you are severing them? She asked... 'Yes- girl-ie it is,' she was patting her on the head with soft taps, like a young child, along with saying- 'this is all that we have to give them.'

She- was already wearing a- pink cocktail dress.

Naddalin washed her hand...

Then at that moment, she fastened down the pitiful supper, that she had to eat.

Then at that moment at that time- she- had completed, Aunt Jennath whisked away from the plate, out from under her nose. Upstairs, she went to be in her room! Hastily, is was asked of her to do that!

She did not come down from her room, 'till the next morning. It was 8:00 a.m... Naddalin went down for breakfast only to find the- three or so-o- of them- Sleyashs already sitting around the- table, yet with her whom is counting them, her mind was so-o endorsed in what she was thinking about, and that was nothing more or less than about all that is magic, and that world, she loved to be in. She could care less about them and their childish ways, she thought even if that is what they say about her.

They were watching a brand -new television, a welcome-home-for-she-summer present for Dariez, who had been complaining deafeningly about the- long walk between her- fridge and the- freaking television, 'like in the- living- room, is- a- Tv, and in that room, is that cold-ie thing-ing- you see- there called rooms, and devised into them, are things that go in those rooms.

Like- like- like- you need to have enough whit about you to see you need to go to that room for that in that room- (she was saying that in a slow way of speaking to her- like a tard.)

Dariez had spent most of the- summer in the- kitchen, like a little piggy, eyes fixed on the- screen, over the why not thinking she could get up and movie, with the plat, and she five chins wobbling as she- ate continually.

~*~

Naddalin sat down between Dariez and Uncle Read, a huge, beefy man with very little neck and a- lot of mustache, and long stringy white beard.

Far from wishing Naddalin a happy birthday, none of the- Sleyashs made any insignia that they had noticed Naddalin enter the- room...

Nonetheless, Naddalin was far too used to them to care. She- helped herself to a piece of bagel only one half was left in the bag, then looked up at the- reporter on the- television, who was halfway through a report on a fugitive criminal.

(Unsolved Mysteries is playing)

Besides... the- public is warned that Black is armed extremely dangerous. A special hotline has been set up- asking 'join me in helping serval a- mystery-' a sharp taking and the dressed man said, 'if- you- see- in the least- one sighting of- Black, you should notify this line i-m-med-iat-ely.'

Part: 6

'Like there is no need to tell us...'

'He's no good,' inhaled, while saying it, Uncle

Read, staring over the- top of the newspaper at the- pricier. Besides look at the- state of him, the- dirty dart ball, look at the hair- all black, long wavy and greasy!

-And-

She- shot a nasty look sideways at Naddalin, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Read.

Saying you have room to talk, about the way he looks. Naddalin felt very well groomed indeed, all the time she prided herself too, she knew that was just bull shit coming out of his mouth, over she was the cuter one.

The- reporter had reappeared, 30 minutes have passed. 'You too can help in slaving an Unsolved Mystery.'

Besides the- Bureau of Cultivation cow show stuff- will announce today, so change the flicker- clicker thing-ie me-bobber to the impotent things, farms.

-And-

...Hang on! I say!

Now, growled Uncle Read, staring furiously at the- reporter, to end she was taking doing the number in her contacts.

Furthermore, you didn't tell us where that zealot escaped from! What use is that? Shit like he could be coming up the- street right now, to kill you girlie!

-And-

Aunt Jennath, who was bony and mare-faced, whipped around and scrutinized intently out of the- kitchen window.

Naddalin knew Aunt Jennath would simply love to be the- one to call the- hotline number.

She'd- was the- inquisitive woman in the- world and spent most of her life spying on the- mind-numbing, law- and the unbidden neighbors, saying this and that about what not- or whatever.

When will they learn, she said that you can't party every night form 7:00 p.m to 3:00 a.m, getting drunk having sex with random kids, and dancing around large fires, good I open the door to my home and have panties and used condoms hitting me in the freaking faces she said; and said Uncle Read, pounding the- table with the large purple fist, saying words like-

'kids today there is no law- no discipline...' Uncle Read- 'The- only way to deal with these people, is to just shoot them in the face or drill them in the face?'

'Oh- sh-h!' she said, 'saying cool it.'

-And-

Uncle Read, I thought to say to you is a little unstable, sorry it's embarrassing.

'Very true,' said Aunt Jennath, who was still squinting into next door's runner-beans, and farting loader then her mouth shooting as much Diarrhea as the behind that she had.

'The house smells like a couch!'

Uncle Read drained she coffee' cup, glanced at his watch, besides added, I'd better be off in a jiffy, Jennath- come, walk them to the door.

Chapter: 158

Part: 1

(Parting words)

'Marge's train gets in at ten... so-o yeah...'

-And-

Naddalin, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the- Servicing kit for her wings, and a 1920's case with all that she needs to be a fallen-witch in magic too, down here, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant bump when she fell from the sky... form the what nonmagical peoples call the havens, yet have no clue, thank God- on Earth that no-one saw. Good feather grooming is key.

Aunt Marge was Uncle Read's sister, may God help us... and also worked in an orphanage a residential institution devoted to the care of orphans- children whose biological parents are deceased or otherwise unable or unwilling to take care of them. (I have heard this so many times- blah-ick...)

Then she continuing to say: Biological parents, and sometimes biological grandparents, are legally responsible for supporting children, but in the absence of these, no named godparent, or other relatives willing to care for the children, they become a ward of the state, and orphanages are one way of providing for their care, housing and education.

'Um-hum...'

Even though she'd- was not a blood relative, she was only a half-blood, of the Naddalin's... yet that was more then I to be loved.

She- blurted out, yet again- like before to my face, interfering with my personal space, I could feel the misty spit even- and the stank breath- of lezz-ie pussy.

Aunt- Marge! They said... don't say that to that child... we are all she has...

'I'm said- to go suck off, like- yet another fat bitch- bitch! ...and walked away.'

'Naddalin!!!' (They shouted)

(Whose most had been Aunt

Jennath's sister, over no one, would like- like a smaller- well her... and all that...)

She- had been forced to call her- 'Aunt' when all she wanted to say was profanity with long-running slurs to her for all her- her rotten, mangy life.

Aunt Marge lived in the- country- more farm-a-fid-ed, in a house with a large garden, then ours, where she'd- bred bulldogs, funny the dog's faces are cuter than hers. That reminds me... he- he-he... a never mind... I thought it's an old inside joke.

She'd- didn't often stay at anywhere else, because she'd- couldn't bear to leave the precious dogs, but each of the visits stood out horribly vividly in Naddalin's mind, young 'till now.

(Flashback)

At Dariez's fifth birthday party, Aunt Marge had whacked Naddalin around the- bare butt with her walking stick to stop her from beating Dariez at musical statues.

A few years later, she'd- had turned up at Christmas with an electronic robot for Dariez and a box of dog biscuits for Naddalin, saying this is smarter than you and this is all you should be eating as that one did in the past- Naddalin, she was lived.

On the last visit, the- year before Naddalin started at the school, Naddalin had accidentally trampled on the- tail of the favorite dog, that got her bed instead of her sleeping it...

Ripper had chased Naddalin out into the- garden up a tree same old tree that she was in years ago the angel oak, and Aunt Marge had refused to call her off until past midnight, she slept in the tree on a branch all starched out...

Part: 2

The- memory of the incident still brought tears of laughter to Dariez's eyes.

And Marge well be there for a week, and Uncle Read snarled, and while we're on the - topic, and she- pointed a fat finger bullyingly at Naddalin, besides we need to get a few things straight before, I go and collect her.

-And-

Dariez smirked and then withdrew the gaze she had from the - television. As she was watching young Naddalin being bullied by Uncle Read, after all- like she was Dariez's favorite form of entertainment.

Besides primarily, grinning all creepy like, and harassing her was the thing to do, just like Uncle Read, both saying- 'you'll keep a municipal tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge.'

The next day...

Also, and all right...

Above and beyond said Naddalin inordinately, besides - um if she'd- does when she is talking to me.

-And-

Furthermore, and now secondly, also said

Uncle Read, acting as though he- had not perceived Naddalin's reply, as Marge doesn't know anything about your irregularity, I do not want any - any funny stuff while she is here with us. 'You behave yourself, got me...?'

-And-

Additionally, 'I's will if she'd- does, said Naddalin through clenched teeth.'

Uncle Read- And- and- and, thirdly... the mean little eyes now slit in her inflated face, over tears, and we've told Marge you attend North End- Secure Center for the inoperable wrong- criminal- and well to dumb it doing for you- died in the head- Girls- JUST LIKE YOU.

Naddalin- 'so-o a school for retards is what you're saying...'

'What?' Naddalin yelled...

...Precisely!!! Good- Naddalin- Good... saying it in a very dick-ish way.

Then you'll be sticking to that story- girl-ie we say for you, girl, or there'll be trouble, quarreled Uncle Read.

Naddalin sat there, white-faced furious, staring at Uncle Read, hardly able to believe it, that she was making words come out of her mouth in arguments.

Part: 3

Aunt Marge coming for a weeklong visit - it was the- worst birthday present she- Sleyashs had ever given her, including that pair of Uncle Read's old socks, that looked like it was used as Uncle Reads night before condom.

-Gross...

Well, Jennath, said Uncle Read, getting too overwhelming hostel- with you come here, I will be off to the station, then- said the bitch. Want to come along for the- ride, she said to the one... and you know which one.

-And-

No, said Dariez, even I think this is going to fare, and like whose attention had returned to the- television now that Uncle Read had finished threatening and terrorizing Naddalin.

'...And Dariez's got to make herself smart for she auntie,' said Aunt Jennath, - 'That's not nice, is it to a girl like you now'- also saying this in a way that is demeaning to her age and intelligence, yet comforting, in a way, that was needed even if- unpleasant.

Part: 4

Dariez's smoothed thick blond hair...

Her Mommy's bought her a lovely new dress.

Uncle Read slapped Dariez hard on the back of her shoulder, saying- 'see even on her birthday you get what was hers, she too dumb anyways, to understand, that we gave this to you, and not her.'

Also, see you in a bit, then, like- she- said, besides she- left the- breakfast nook.

Naddalin, who had been sitting in a kind of horrified trance, had a sudden idea.

'I would like to get read if you like you- like you get rid of your blood use tampons, using all the toilet paper balling it all around, as you do before throwing it in the scrap can.' He really said that to me...

Chapter: 159

Part: 1

Then it hit me that I could be kissing her every morning, I used to kiss her every morning when I used to get up and did not want summer anymore. I remember the middle of last year in the school year, about her saying- 'I am worried if I kiss you I that I may screw up-' and I'm said back- 'if you didn't you would, and we started to kiss all the time...' 'I just loved giving her un-pure thoughts,' alleged Naddalin, in her young lusting girl mind. 'I'm so bad- but I was thinking about sex,' 'um- I like it when Emma goes down really deep in me with her dildo, uh- it feels so-oo goo-ooooo-d.'

Part: 2

Then she made some toast, she- got quickly to her feet, when it popped, and she jumped- then followed Uncle Read to the- front door. Uncle Read was pulling on her coat.

She though on a coat- even so-o. I am going- she cried... '-NO. Besides, I'm not taken you!'

Then he- snarled, like a dog, as she- turned to see Naddalin watching him, and she snarled back even more intensely. 'Like- I wanted to come, she said Naddalin unfeelingly,' 'You would like to come-' he said mocking her. And I want to ask you something.

-And-

Uncle Read eyed her untrustworthily.

This ends with her being strangled out...

And him losing to teeth in the front with a left hook... MMA is looking good on me she said- even as a just white belt, I have more power than you ever have over me now. Something I took up over

the summer to get away from here. And So...? Then snapped Uncle Read, taken the car keys from a hook next to the- door.

So, it was broadcasted over the TV, that there was going to be saver storms, in the flowing counties, torrential rain, I was standing just outside the door, just after saying- that 'I wanted to go- too,' and just like that a bolt of lightning struck right in front of me, it lights me up, and if I would be a life as I should, I know I would dead; and fried- like some- finger-licking good- KFC chicken, yet, I can't freak'n die even if, like- I wanted to, if you are fallen like me you cannot pass 'till the time reach a final death...

Part: 3

Thinking back to something she said to me, just like you, I have a place to dump my- cum- and it in you- and letting mine roll way down in that sweet little pussy you have- um I wanted her, so-o, bad- so bad, yet, I suck here to the new year- aww! Like- if a girl did not want to c*m she would not be there in the first place with you- dah- and I want to be there so-oo badly right now!

I LOVE HER!

(Forward)

By the way now that you have chocked the life out me, I need you to sign the- permission form and said Naddalin in a rush.

Now the third year is here - at Hayvannahol are allowed to visit the- village sometimes, said Naddalin.

'Why should I do that?' And scorned Uncle Read, lisping through his- young girl hating- missing teeth.

Well, and said Naddalin, picking her words NOT so carefully, also it will be hard work, pretending to Aunt Marge I go to that

St. Watson...

-And-

And at The Re-tard school AKA- The Center for Terminally Criminal Girls or whatever the hell it is called! Hollered Uncle Read, at the top of his voice.

Naddalin was pleased to hear a definite note of panic in Uncle Read's voice, that I could have died.

I thought- (You do care about me- don't yah...)

Exactly, said Naddalin with great enthusiasm, looking tranquility up into Uncle Read's large, purple face.

Besides, it's a- lot to evoke, is it not? I'll have to make it sound convincing, won't I?

What if I accidentally let something slip?

-And-

You'll get the- stuffing knocked out of you, won't you? Then and their rumbled Uncle Read, advancing on Naddalin with she first raised. Nonetheless, Naddalin stood her ground.

Like- knocking the- stuffing out of me won't make Aunt Marge forget what I could tell her, she- said grimly.

Uncle Read stopped, his fist still raised, right at her sweet, little, cute, and young- little girl ribbons in her yet- her face was an ugly puce- it was- no not like her at all.

If you sign my permission form, then Naddalin went on quickly, I swear I'll remember where I'm supposed to go to Hayvannahol, I'll act like a Mug- like I'm normal and everything- honey that good that your trying so hard to be, yet you never- ever be normal he patted her on the head like she was dimwitted.

Naddalin could tell that Uncle Read was thinking it over, even if his teeth where bared- the ones left that are, a vein was throbbing in the temple, on the left side.

Besides, right, she- cracked in her voices finally. Then I shall check your behavior carefully during Marge's visit, then should I?

If, at the- conclusion of it, you've toed the- line, in addition, kept to the- story, we say and think about you- I'll sign your mother F'n form.

-And-

She- wheeled around, pulled open the- front door, then slammed it so hard, that some of the plaster fall from the ceiling, and then that one of the- little stained-glass panes of glass, that was cracked at the- top fell out. Naddalin didn't return to the- kitchen at all, she ran.

She- went back upstairs to her bedroom, over the top that one she used to have- thinking about for a moment- or two.

If she- was going to act like a real- nonmagical people, she'd better start now- so- in her mind she just did that at acting like a teen girl- all over again- going to her room to mope.

Nasty, unkind, revolting, and sadly she- gathered up all the presents from her birthday cards too that ruined by being mean ad smashing them and ripping them up and whatnot, so- o she hid them under the- loose floorboard with her homework, trying not to look over the fact that it just made her that gloomy.

Then she- went to Baby Raven's cage. Errolie seemed to have recovered from also being thrown up agent the wall to in his rage, I held- baby Raven's until she fell asleep, in my heads recovering from a broken wing.

Naddalin sighed, holding her in her plums. Baby Raven's, she- said gloomily, you poor thing... while her in a rocking-rocking in a chair.

Correspondingly, you're going to have to clear off for a week. Go with Errolie. Jinger well looks after you. I'll write her a note, explaining. I say- do not look at me like that- Baby Raven's large eyes, bigger than should be for her to have.

Part: 4

Like- where reproachful - And it's not my fault. It's the- only way I'll be allowed to visit Claepsiara, SKalaieol of Wizardry with Jinger And Emmah.

Ten minutes later, Errolie the baby Raven's (who had a note to Jinger bound to her leg) soared out of the- arched window out of my sight off into the horizon.

Naddalin, now feeling thoroughly miserable, put the- empty cage away inside the- wardrobe.

Nonetheless, Naddalin didn't have long to brood. In next to no time, Aunt Jennath was shrieking up the- stairs for Naddalin to come down and get ready to welcome their visitor.

Do something about your hair, now it like a boy has played in it! Aunt Jennath said as she-reached the- hall.

Naddalin could not see the- point of trying to make the hair lie flat, it was always frizzy and all the detangler in the world would not fix it. Aunt Marge loved criticizing her, so the- messier she-looked, the- happier she'd- would be.

All too soon, there was a crunch of gravel outside as Uncle Read's car pulled back into her-driveway, then the- clunk of the- car doors footsteps on the- garden path, up the porch, and pass the have wood door, she was in the entranceway next to the old steps.

'Hey, you with the big eyes and the face- get the- door!'

Then and there, Aunt Jennath hissed at Naddalin showing teeth.

She'd- turned on the heel then left, making her way into the living room. Jinger waited until she'd- had vanished through the- door to the- girls,' dormitories, then cleared she- garbage off the-knitted hats. 'They should at least see what They're picking up,' she- said firmly. 'Anyway...' she- rolled up the- parchment on which she- had written the- title of Lily's essay, 'there's no point trying to finish she now, I can't do it without Emmah, I haven't got a clue of what you're supposed to do with moonstones, have you?'

(A wisp of a wand and she moved forward in time- back to her happy place the school for girls like her.) Naddalin shook her head, noticing as she- did so-o, that the- ache- in her right temple was getting worse. Um- she- thought of the- long essay on colossal wars, about light and dark, and the- pain stabbed at her abruptly.

Knowing perfectly well that when- the- morning came, she- would regret not finishing the homework that night like the good little girl she was known for, she- piled she books back into her bag.

'I'm going to bed too- said Emma- and with you.'

'It was nice to have a cuddle body- again!'

Chapter: 160

Part: 1

She- passed Laila on the- way to the- door, leading to the- dormitories back at the school know that she had skipped time, but did not look at her.

Naddalin had a fleeting impression that Laila had opened the mouth to speak, but she- sped up and reach the- soothing peace of the- the body of Neveah' spiral staircase without having to endure any more provocation.

The- following day dawned just as sluggish and so very rainy as the- aforementioned one. Like- Dargide was still absent from the- staff table at breakfast. 'But on the- plus side, no Lily today' said Jinger bracingly.

Emmah yawned widely and poured herself some coffee. She'd- looked mildly pleased about something, and when Jinger asked her what she'd- had to be so happy about, she'd- simply said, her- hats have gone.

Seems the- house sprites do want freedom after all.'

'I wouldn't gamble on it,' Jinger told her caustically. they might not count as closes. She didn't look anything like hats to me, more like knitted bladders.'

Emmah did not speak to her all morning.

Double Transfiguration- succeeded double Charms, Professor Flitwick and Professor-

McDermott both spent the- first fourteen minutes of their lesson lecturing the- class on the- importance of flying with wings.

'What you must reminisce,' said little Professor Flitwick squeakily hanging as ever on a pile of books so that she- could see over the- top of the desk, 'is that these inspections may impact your futures for many years to come- lady's- work hard!

If you have not already given serious thought to your life paths, like- now is the- right time to do so-o. Then and there in the- mean-time, I'm afraid of thinking about it all, we shall be working harder than ever to certify, verify, confirm, endorse and attest, that you all do yourselves righteousness!'

They- then- there and did, spent over an hour revising Summoning Charms, which according to Professor Flitwick was bound to come up in their FLYING HORSES, and she- rounded off the- lesson by setting them there largest ever amount of Charms homework- ever in the school walls.

It was the- same, if not worse, in Conversion.

'You cannot pass a FLYING test nevertheless, with the smaller HORSES,' said Professor McDermott poorly worded, to Emma.' Seeing that she hurt the girl- she fastly said- without serious claim, practice, you will get there and study hard, rubbing her hand. I see no regard why everyone in the class should not achieve a FLYING in Transfiguration as long as they put in the- work.' Neville made a sad little skeptical of noise, with her snort.

There is nothing wrong with your work except lack of confidence girls, it shows, that you're smart.

Still better than what Emma got before, I remember when the professor said, 'that the ambitions us girls have was to see how many thine- she like me too, and all the girls in the class could have sex and not get pregnant.'

Emma- snapped back sharply- well then, I am not going to hell, for using a dildo then for this is what I do, and the class of girls just giggled, as the professor looked stunned.

(The next day)

So... today we are starting Vanishing Spells.

These are easier than Illusion Spells, which you would not usually attempt until the 2nd level, but they are still among the- most tough magic you will be tested on in your FLYING courses.' She would- was relatively accurate; Naddalin found she- Vanishing Spells utterly problematic.

By the- end of a double period she nor Jinger had managed to vanish the- mice on which they were practicing, though Jinger said with any luck she- thought she looked a bit paler. Emmah, on the- other hand, successfully vanished she mouse on her- the third attempt, earning she a ten-point bonus for Amsel from Professor McDermott. She would- was she- only pergirl not given homework; everybody else was told to practice the- spell overnight, ready for a fresh attempt on their mice the- following afternoon.

Now postulating slightly about the- the amount of homework they had to do, Naddalin and Jinger spent their lunch hour in the- haunted library, looking up she- uses of daydream-gravest in potion-making.

Still angry about Jinger's slur on her woolly hats, Emmah did not join them. By the- time they reached Upkeep of Magical Creatures in the- afternoon, Naddalin's head was aching again.

The- day had become cool, breezy, chided to, and damp, in addition as they walked down the- sloping lawn towards Dargide's cabin on the- edge of the- Illicit Woodland, they felt the- occasional drop of rain on their faces.

Professor Grubbly Plank stood to wait for the- class some ten yards from Dargide's front door, a long trestle table in front of she laden with twigs. As Naddalin And Jinger reached there was, a loud shout of laughter sounded behind them; whirling, they saw Drallieah Mallerie striding towards them, encircled by her usual gang of Slyshein- and clans.

She- had clearly just said something highly amusing, because Carllah, Goyle, and the others found it to be that way, and the- rest sustained to sniggering as they gathered around the- trestle table and, judging by her- way they all kept looking over at Naddalin, she- was able to guess the- subject of the- joke without too much difficulty.

'Everyone there?' Barked Professor

Grubby Plank, once all she- Slysheins And

Amsel's had arrived.' Let us crack on then.'

'Who can tell me what these things are called?'

She'd- indicated she- heaps of twigs in front of her.

Emmah's hands shot into the- air.

Behind her back, Mallerie did a Becca toolshed imitation of she is jumping up and down with enthusiasm to answer a question.

She gave a shriek of laughter that turned almost- at once into a scream, as the- twigs on the- table leaped into her- air, and then exposed her-themselves to be what looked like tiny pixie-e-sh creatures made of wood- or so it looked into the gorgeous magnificent creature, reach with arms and legs just like a little humming girl would have, cartoon-like face in- which a pair of oversized brown eyes glittered, it was kind of like a little fairy, that because it was just that- said Emma.

'O-oh!' They said...

Nevaeh

Book: 41

The Story of my Life

Part: 1

Look at that fairy said Lavender, thoroughly irritating Naddalin.

Anyone would have thought Dargide had never- ever shown them, impressive creatures, definitely, the- Slobber-worms had been a bit dull, even Kayla with the big brown eyes said, but she- Salam errs And Peryton (a baby doe with wings) had been interesting enough, besides she- Explosion Concluded Harpy perhaps too much so-o.

'Kindly keep your voices down, girls!' said Professor Grubbly Plank abruptly, scattering a hand soul of what looked like coffee beans among the- creatures, who at once fell upon the- food. 'So, anyone knows the- names of these creatures? Miss. Kizziah?'

'Puffskein, OMG CUTE-' said Emmah.

They are hierarchy guardians, usually live in tail foliage that they color match, at night when all this world comes to life in its vividness, and dark worldly contests.'

'Five points for Amsel,' said Professor Grubbly Plank, on the floor squeaked, and creaked.'

Yes, these are Puffskein, as Miss. Kizziah rightly says, they generally- live in foliage whose tinder is of wand quality, and a night these weepy trees glow in a cobalt blue, and shimmer, with pulsating lighter shade of blue and white, to your heartbeat girls, with you touch the tree looking in your wings to it, and form those trees you get these little fuzz balls of fun. Anybody know what she eats?' Also, the potion we use a shampoo for are wings for these girls that have them, that want to make them irresistible to a boy or to keep them shiny and clean.

'Centipedes,' said Emmah promptly which explained why what Naddalin had taken to be grains of brown coffee' beans were moving about.'

Then it was said- 'But fairy eggs if she-y can get them, yet that is really hard over the fairy-like them to eat more.'

'Good girl, take another five points. So, whenever you need leaves or wood from a tree in which a Puffskein- cabins in a tree, it is wise to have a gift of centipede's ready to distract or placate it.

They may not look dangerous, but if angered they will try to score out human eyes with their finger's nails, which, as you can see, are very sharp, besides not at all needed near the- eyeballs.

So, if you would like to get any closer, take a few centipedes, and a Puffskein, and play with it like it's a newborn baby- girls...

I have enough there for one between two of, so you can study them more carefully, prudently, sensibly, and cautiously.

I want a draft from each of you with all body parts labeled by the- end of the class period, and a drawing, of how you think they really should look under that fuzz-ness, pulled out form your mind like a gray twisted cobweb- out on to my desk.

The- class poured like a herd of cattle stampeding forwards around the- trestle table.

Naddalin deliberately rains around and circled the- back of her, so that she- ended up right next to Professor Grubbly.

'Where's Dargide...?' She- asked, she, while everyone else was

Hayvanna-hosing Puffskein.'

Never you mind,' said Professor Grubbly repressively, which had been she attitude last time Dargide had failed to turn up for a class, too.

Smirking all over she pointed face, Drallieah Mallerie leaned across Naddalin and apprehended the-smallest and the cutest Puffskein, that she could find- she had her eyes on her for she was the small one out- like her.

'Maybe,' said Mallerie in an undertone, so that only Naddalin could hear her, 'the- stupid great klutz's got herself badly injured.'

'Maybe, like- you will if you don't shut up,' said Naddalin, out of the- side of her mouth.

'Maybe, she's been messing with paraphernalia- and things like that- that's too big for her if you get my drift.'

Mallerie walked away, smirking over her shoulder at Naddalin, who felt unexpectedly sick.

Did Mallerie know something? Her daddy was a Death Devourer after all; what if she- had information about Dargide's fate that had not, yet reached the- ears of the- War?

She- hurried back around the- table to Emmah who was crouching on the- wood floor, some distance away, attempting to persuade a Puffskein to remain still long enough for them to draw it in their minds, and retrieve it in their cognizance.

Naddalin pulled her thought out of the back of her head with index finger with quill still in- between the other's, crouched down beside the- others, related in a whisper what Mallerie had just said.

'Duerre would know if something had happened to Dargide,' said Emmah simultaneously.'

It's just playing into Mallerie's hand as if to look worried; it told her we don't know exactly what's going on.

We must ignore her, Naddalin. There, hold the- Puffskein for a moment, just so, I can draw its face... using my mind.

'Yes,' came Mallerie's clear drawl from the- group adjacent them,' Daddy was talking to the- Martita just a couple of days ago, you know, and it sounds as though the- Bureau's really determined to crack down on sub stand teaching in the place.

So even if that overgrown moron does show up again, she will perhaps be sent packing straight away.'

'OUCH!' I say...

Naddalin held the- Puffskein so hard and was hugging it so tightly, that it had almost snapped, (OMG- I want to keep it.)

Also, it had just taken a great retaliatory swipe at the hands with its sharp fingers, leaving four long deep cuts there. Asking if they could be declawed.

Naddalin dropped her saying that very question, yet still thinking she was the cutest thing ever.

Carllah and Goyle, who had already been chuckling at the- idea of Dargide being sacked, laughed still harder as the- Puffskein set off at full tilt towards the- Forest, a little moving fuzz ball soon swallowed up among the- tree roots and tall grasses.

When the- bell faintly bounced over the- grounds, Naddalin rolled up the bloodstained Puffskein picture, that she now had down her hand still bleeding, and marched off to the biology with the hands wrapped in Emmah's handkerchief, And Mallerie's mocking laughter still ringing in the ears.

'If she- calls Dargide a moron one more time...' said Naddalin through gritted teeth.

'Naddalin, don't go picking a ruckus with Mallerie, don't you forget, she's perfect now, she- could make life difficult for you...'

'Wow, like, I wonder what it would be like to have a difficult life?' said Naddalin sarcastically.

Jinger laughed, but Emmah frowned. Together, they tramped across the- grassy patch.

The- sky still appeared unable to make up its mind, of what it wanted to do, when- she looked up, it looks as if it wanted to rain or cry down on us for letting them all go.

'I just wish Dargide would hurry the hell up and get back, that's all,' said Naddalin in a muffled faint voice, as they reached and starched in the- greenhouses that they were back in it.'

Besides do not say that is so, that Grubbly woman's a better teacher!' She- added bullyingly.

'I wasn't going to,' said Emmah calmly.

'Because she will never be as good as Dargide,' said Naddalin determinedly, fully aware that she- had just qualified an exemplary Care of Magical Creatures Lessons... In addition, was methodically annoyed about it.

The- door of the- nearest greenhouse opened with a whoosh, and some teens spilled out of it, including Jill, as the winds picked up.

'Hi,' she- said luminously as she- passed. A few instants later, Danna Lovegood emerged, trailing behind the- rest of the- class, a blotch and smear of the earth on her nose, along with the hint in her hair tied in a knot with long ribbons, on her- top of her head.

When she- saw Naddalin then and there, she prominent eyes seemed to bulge all big like and excitedly wild like, and she- made a beeline straight for her. Many of the classmates turned curiously to watch it all godown.

Danna took a great breath then and there she said, without so-o much as a preliminary hello,' I believe the- Who Must Not Be Named is back, and I also believe you fought about her, and she escaped from you.'

'Er- right,' said Naddalin awkwardly at the moment. Danna was wearing what looked like a pair of Auburn radishes for earrings, a fact that Parvati and Lavender seemed to have perceived, as they were both giggling and pointing at her earlobes.

'You can laugh,' Danna said, she voices rising, apparently- under her- an impression that Parvati and Lavender were really laughing at what she- had said that what she- was wearing,' but people used to believe there were no such things as she- Blabbering Humdinger or her- Crumple- Horned Snorkack!'

'Well, they were right, weren't they?' Said Emmah impatiently.

There weren't any such things as she- Blabbering Humdinger or her- Crumple-Horned Snorkack.'

Danna gave her a wishing look and flounced away, ravishes swinging madly Parvati and Lavender were not she- only ones hooting with laughter now.

'De' you mind not offending her- it was said... you are the only people who believe me?'

Naddalin asked Emmah as they made their way into class.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Naddalin, you can do better than her- go in your picking of...' said Emmah.'

Jill's told me all about her; she well only believes in things if there's no proof at all- right?

Well, I wouldn't expect anything else from someone whose daddy runs the- Star-paper.'

Naddalin thought of she- ominous winged horses, and dear and other things in and around that were flying about the heavens above- they- had seen on the- night she- had arrived and how Danna had said she- could see them as well.

She spirits descended slightly, and had she- been lying...? However- before she- could devote much more thought to the- matter, Ernie Macmillan had stepped up to her.

'I want you to distinguish,' she- said in a loud, resonant voice,' that it's not only weirdos who support you.

I partially believe you one hundred percent. My family have always stood firmly behind Duerre, so-o do I.'

'Er thanks very much, Ernie,' said Naddalin, taken aback but pleased. Ernie might be pompous on occasions like she, but Naddalin was in a mood to deeply appreciate a vote of confidence from somebody who did not have ravishes dangling from their ears.

Ernie's words had certainly wiped the- smile from Lavender Brown's face also as she- turned to talk to Jinger and Emmah, Naddalin caught Laila's expression, which looked both confused and defiant.

To nobody's surprise, Professor Burgeon started their lessons by lecturing them about the- importance of flying with wings all the things like them with wings.

Naddalin wished all the- teachers would stop doing that all... as she already felt like she knew it.

She- was starting to get an anxious, twisted feeling with-in her like every time she- remembered how much homework she- had to do, a feeling that gets worse dramatically when Professor Burgeon gave them, hitherto another essay at the end of class.

Exhausted and smelling stingingly of dark angel's dung, Professor Burgeon's preferred type of fertilizer, she- Colette's trooped back up to the- castle an hour and a half later of so-o, none of them chitchatting very much at all; it had been yet, another very long day.

As Naddalin was ravenous, and she- had her first detention with Scott at 5:35 o'clock, she- headed straight for dinner without dropping off her bag in Colette Tower so, that she- could pin something down before facing whatever she had in store for her.

She- had hardly touched and stretched into the- entrance of the- Great Hall, moreover, when a loud angry voice yelled, 'Oh!'

'What now...?' Then and there she- murmured unenthusiastically, turning to face Angelina Readgirl, who looked as though she- was in a wave of immense anger.

'I'll tell you what now,' she- said, marching straight up to her and stabbing her hard in the- chest with her finger.'

'How come you have one yourself in confinement for 5: 45 on Friday?'

'What...?' Said Naddalin.' Why...? Why- oh yes, Keeper tryouts!'

'Now she- remembers...!' Then Angelina snarls at her face.'

'Um- didn't I tell you like I wanted to do a tryout with the- entire team, did I not?'

Additionally, to find someone who fitted in with everyone! Didn't I tell you I would book the- Claepsiara pitch particularly?

Moreover, now you have categorical you are not going to be there!'

'I didn't decide to be there!' said Naddalin, tingled up by the- wrong of these words.'

I got detention from that Scott woman, just because, I told her the- complete truth about- 'You Know Who.'

'Well, you can just go straight to her and ask her to let you off on Friday,' said Angelina fiercely.'

Really, I for one do not care how you do it, just do it... Tell her - You Know Who's an illusion of your imagination if you like also, just make sure you're there before long.'

She - turned on her heel, twisting it and stormed away hopping on one foot.

'You know what...?' Naddalin said to Emmah and Jinger as they arrived at the - Great Hall.'

I think we'd better check with Puddlemere United when - the Oliver Wood's been killed during a training session because Angelina seems to be channeling the spirit.'

'What you reckon are the - odds of Scott letting you off on Friday?' said Jinger skeptically, as they sat down at, she - Coletta - table.

'Less than zero,' said Naddalin miserably, tipping baby dear meet, on to her plate, that passed and starting to eat her.' Had better try - not to cry, thinking about this little baby girl that did not have a life, though, hadn't I, feel it coming on and I did.

I will offer to do two more detentions or something, I cannot do this - 'like a big girl...' she cried running out of the Hall... like a 2-year-old, little girl with hair ribbons on both sides of her shoulders.

She - swallowed a mouthful of mashed potato and added, I hope she'd - doesn't keep me too long this evening - for not eating everything on my plate.

You realize we have got to write three essays, practice Vanishing Spells for McDermott, work out a counter-charm for

Flitwick, finish she - Puffskein drawing and then like - um - start that wonder dream diary for Solis?'

'Lost in a dream - how wonderful...'

Life Without Meaning

Continued: 1

A life without meaning she said to me... sitting next to her in class...

I am Taylor- the girl you are going to do your dream studies with... Your Naddalin right?

'Yes- Yes!'

'A Life without meaning...'

...?...

That's what my life is now, she said. I don't live in the present or future. I don't live in what might happen today or what might happen tomorrow. I live in the past. I've lived my whole life in Greensburg Pa. and all these years have been the same.

Every day, I got picked up on by everyone even by the teachers sometimes! I mean, I thought teachers were supposed to be there for you, but I guess that excludes the teachers here at the school.

The reason- why- I was always the one to get picked on was because I wasn't like the perfect models that sashayed down the hallways of my school like they were at a fashion show or something. It seemed to me that out of all the girls that went to my school, I was the only odd one out.

My life and soul along with all of those in my family, ended on that fateful day, Saturday two months ago. The only difference between me and my family is that my body is still living. And I'm just going to have to live with the guilt...

Everything that happened was because of me. Flying high above the clouds, I looked down, shocked at the beauty of the countryside. I could see a light breeze go through the trees below me, of course, I was too high to feel it. I looked at me, just for fun.

My golden hair flying fast behind me, my wings, an iridescent mix of purples, pinks, and blues, shined as they flapped. I angled my body and swooped down as I passed a lake and scooped up some water. I took it back up to the clouds, not spilling a drop. The week leading up to that Saturday was pretty normal.

A typical Pa. morning. It was the week leading up to Spring Break when we were going on a family camping trip. Of course, we were all excited. We hadn't gone camping for four years since my

little sister Hannah was born so it would be her first time. Which only made it more exciting for the reason that we wanted it to be perfect. My little brothers Dean and Daniel and my older brother Chad and, I had already camped before, but we still couldn't wait.

I didn't have that long, blonde hair that swept against their back or the beautiful bangs that hung over their forehead, causing them to flip their head to move it, which they did gracefully like swans. We were supposed to leave that Saturday and had a lot of packing to do.

Nevertheless, that just made me look even worse. I didn't have that perfect hourglass figure or the flawless features. But what I did have was a lot of zits, especially on my cheeks. And my body weight was 115 lbs., but it felt like so much more. To cover up my face, I hung my hair in it all the time, even on the hottest days ever!

We woke up every morning that week to our normal routine, my mom yelling that we would be late. We'd take a shower (if necessary) and get dressed so-o on.

My mom dropped us all off at our different schools and picked us up when school let out at the end of the day.

She was always there at the front of the line trying her hardest to get us on time, even if she had to leave work early.

We'd go home and start to pack for our week-long trip. Go to sleep... Wake up and repeat, do it over and over.

Part: 2

All my life, I've wanted to be popular and walk alongside the great Alexandria.

She was my idol, even though she was a total bitch. I loved everything about her, her name – Lexy Michaels – her dark black hair flowed as swiftly as she walked, her sea-green eyes, which were one of the many things that attracted boys to her. But she also had a weakness: she's not very loyal.

She has the perfect girlfriend though - Naddalin. I not sure if you know her or not I don't even...

I also wore a lot of skinny jeans and made sure to tug my shirt down to make it look good on me.

My eyes were cute, but now because of my dark-framed and thickly rimmed glasses, you could hardly tell anymore.

Ah, Naddalin, you see she the school's top girl in all that is magic.

There is not a single girl in this school who doesn't love her, all of them would be willing to kill each other for a least a touch – I included.

She was my one true love; it doesn't really matter to me if she didn't feel the same way, as long as he existed that was fine by me.

So-o anyway, back to me, I, was basically a loner all my life, kind of like you but not.

A little more emo, not too tough and not too weak. I had very few friends, most likely none, except for one.

Well, I wouldn't really say that he was my friend though. This girl was my childhood friend too even if we never played together, and neighbor ever since I moved here from South Greensboro, part of the city back home, when I was only one and half years old.

But then, now she's such a jerk to me, it's so hard to believe that she actually had a thing for me when we were five!

Now she barely talks to me and whenever I come near her, she just pushes me away.

Why?

I don't really have any parents, by the way, so-o I've been living with the Davilles's for a few years now.

I wasn't really comfortable with calling them mom and dad, so-o, I just called them Abby and Pat.

I don't really know whatever happened to my real- mom and dad, but I just woke up one day and they weren't there.

I panicked at first, but then after her parents took me, I soon started to forget it ever happened.

Sure, Emma and Ariana were really nice and got me almost everything, you know Emma, don't you?

'Yes, really well- I's may say...'

I ever-ever wanted, if you include a cell phone and an I-Pod, but- I still didn't feel very close to them.

I wasn't very happy with anyone in Greensburg Pa., not 'till I came here.

Like- I said before, I was not emo, but with every day and all its problems, I became more and more like that. I never cut myself through- as Ariana did...

'One day,' I told myself. 'One day, they're all going to go too far and that'll be the end of me.'

But I never knew that...

That day would be tomorrow.

I got the idea when I was reading a little bit of this manga called:

'The Lost Girl' It is about a girl who's picked on by kids at school, got rejected by her one true love, and her childhood friend's a jerk to her now.

So, she decides to hang herself but fails due to her heavyweight, which then causes her to find this medicine.

But- but this medicine isn't like ordinary medicine, this medicine has the power to change your appearance to the way you want it to be.

Until the Friday before.

I got a call from my best friend Jessica. She asked if I wanted to spend the night.

I told her we were leaving the next morning really- early and that I would not be able to.

Of course, we both were disappointed. What girl is not?

So, we made a plan, so I would be able to go. The plan was to finish all my packing that night (which was already done,) and put it all in the car. Then get dropped off at her house and spend the night.

On my parent's way to the campground the next morning, they could pick me up since it was only a few minutes out of the way.

After begging for almost- five minutes my mom and dad agreed.

Part: 3

So, it was settled, I packed everything, I would need for the trip in the car and after a zillion reminder about what not to forget, I finally got my overnight bag packed, for my first day back...

I got in the car and my dad drives me to Yessa's house, a girl I knew back home.

She made sure that I knew I would be picked up at six o'clock a.m.

because we had a long drive ahead of us to the train station.

I told her I knew so she left. I did not even say good-bye. Sometimes, I think that if I would have said good-bye things would have turned out differently.

But- I did not.

The night went by like any sleepover.

Late-night prank calls, popcorn and movies, painting toenails, and trying to see how long we could stay up.

I crashed around one o'clock a.m. after setting the alarm on my cell phone.

The next morning, I was outside waiting at six o'clock sharp.

I sat there for two hours, dozing off every few minutes and checking the time on my phone the few times, I was actually- awake before, I started crying.

I knew something was wrong. My dad was never late, my mom would have called.

I must have woken up Jess and her mom with my loud crying.

I only had to wait another hour before the police showed up. They both sat with me outside on the steps. I listened to the wind that flew past me. It almost seemed to call my name.

'Taylor. Taylor- Tay-a.' I closed my eyes, listening carefully. It was definitely- calling me now. 'Taylor. Taylor.' It almost started to sound annoyed. Whatever, I was enjoying this way too much to care.

'Oh, right, um, x- equals two-hundred ninety-one and three tenths.'

I answered absentmindedly. She looked shocked, actually- the whole class did. Then I realized what I said and was shocked myself, I had no idea what she even asked.

'TAYLOR!!'

My eyes snapped open, only I wasn't in the sky anymore. Mrs. Jenison the professor, my Algebra teacher was in front of me, looking very, very furious.

'Welcome back, Ms. Svernight, so nice you could join us,' sarcasm was apparent in her voice.

Yeah, she was livid. 'Now perhaps you would be so kind as to answer my question?'

Mrs. Jentson moved to the chalkboard and wrote some notes we needed to copy down, with the chalk floating in midair, she was using telekinesis charming it to do so, in perfect penmanship.

I started to copy them, but then I started to stare out the window, drifting back into a daydream. (What we are studying right now... you with me.)

The sound of the bell ringing brought me out of it- this time.

I said- what I needed... she even read my mind... so in a way, it was all said without me saying anything at all.

'Yes, that is correct, but that doesn't give you a pass to daydream again.

Pay attention.' she said, still amazed at what I did. I nodded knowing that I would not listen to her.

I scrambled to get my stuff together and ran out the door.

Part: 4

When I got to my locker Sarcelles Handsome, my best friend, was already there.

Well, she was at her locker, but it is right next to mine. I shoved my Algebra book in my locker and grabbed my Biology notes and book. My locker door closed, and Sarcelles slid in front of it, and me.

'So, what was it this time? Swimming? Running? Princess? Elves?' She asked.

Okay, I'll admit it; I have a bit of imagination. 'Flying, it was so real.

I could actually feel the wind in my hair.' 'Was I there?' She asked, essentially jumping up and down.

She loves to hear about my daydreams- and regular ones too-and always want to be a part of one. Even before I got here but, it's kind of like I have no control over them, I knew that my days were coming up to where I would be here.

'Oh, um, yeah.' I lied, unconvincingly.

'Don't lie to me,' she said, her crestfallen with her breath left out.

'You're really bad at it.'

'I'm sorry. But I did feel your presence.' That was not a lie at least. I did feel the presence of someone or something. I think it was Mell short for Mellany. At least, I hope it was.

'Seriously?'

I felt faint in the head.

I only heard snatches of what officer Barkly was telling me.

'Car crash... All of then... Instantly... Without pain...

Arrangements... Next week... I was alive yet not.'

But I stopped listening, to the thoughts... I knew everything I needed to know.

How could my family have all died? Then it hit me that I would be coming here and that I have more than one life, on Earth, yet I would have to have approval as a fallen girl.

I got my answer in a moment... It was because of me. I was selfish to want to go to a friend's house the night before our family trip.

This was my punishment from God. Finally, tears started to fall down my face, that I was so bad that I would be sent here, not knowing.

I thought of my dad, the last of my family I had seen. The one who always made Chad stop bothering me. Whose idea it was to go camping.

I thought of my mom. Probably the kindest person in the world. Always putting others before herself. Always there for me when I needed her, giving me hugs on bad days.

I thought of Chad... Even though he was a bully at home he always stood up for me at school whenever someone was picking on me.

He was only eighteen. He'd just gotten his first serious girlfriend.

A late curfew, a Credit Card!!! I also knew about the car my parents were going to surprise him with on his birthday.

Now he would never get to drive someone to the movies in his own car. Never get to make stupid mistakes and learn the lesson.

I thought of Daniel... How he was always trying to act like Chad... older.

Even though he was only ten years old and still a kid at heart. He had just gotten his first real crush on a little girl I'm pretty sure liked him back.

Always annoying me to get my attention. Doing whatever I say so I'd play basketball with him. Or play catch in the backyard.

I thought of Dean... too- Just starting school. Just making friends.

Just starting to read. Just starting to live life at only six.

He had just gotten a book he couldn't put down. I'd read it to him every night.

He was mad because I was gone and would not be able to read to him.

He only let me read to him because I used different voices foot the different characters. Still sucking his thumb every night. Practically- still a baby.

Part: 5

I thought of baby Hannah. My first, only, and the last sister I will ever have. She will never have a chance to make friends. (All over me, and that is why I choose to come here...)

Never go to school like the 'big kids.'

Never have a boyfriend, I'll never have the chance to do big sister stuff with her.

Like doing her toes, braiding her hair, or just talking. She will never grow up.

None of them will... All because of me, so I had to come here with you girls- and be one of these girls- I had no choice but too.

I looked up at the sky towards heaven, saying no I do not belong there for all that is WRONG with me always so many types of the wrong I am.

'I'm thinking of you' I said, 'I'm thinking of you... you don't need me up there with you- I have fallen.'

~*~

'Yeah, oh, hey, could I borrow your Algebra notes? I started daydreaming after the first section.' I pulled out my notes and showed her.

'What are you talking about? These are even better than mine. See...?' She said flipping through pages in my notebook. I looked and saw almost two pages of notes, all in perfect order.

'But I... how...?' I managed to stutter out, amazed.

'I don't know, but I think we better get to class. Don't you?' we hurried of too- Biology, then we parted ways and I went off to World History, Study Hall and Free Period all flew by in daydreams. Eventually, I went home and did at least, I think I did my homework. It was done either way.

I was daydreaming about flying again when my mom called me. I went downstairs to see what she wanted. She was getting off her cell phone and was typing something on her laptop. She didn't even look up when I came into her study.

'That was your Algebra teacher- I just got off the phone with.'

'Oh.'

'She says you are very bright but don't seem to be focusing. That you are daydreaming?

What's going on, Taylor? I thought you said you were going to quit this daydreaming nonsense. Was that not what you said, or was I mistaken?'

Part: 6

'It isn't nonsense, it's-'

'Don't start with me, young lady. You know as well as I do, that it is nonsense. I didn't spend all of that money to send you to the best private school in the state, just for you to ruin it by daydreaming.

Now, get your head out of the clouds, and think about your future. Because, if you don't nip this in the butt, you won't have one. Do you understand...?' I nodded. 'Good, now, go do your homework.'

'I already did.'

'Then go do... I don't care, just go do something that doesn't involve daydreaming.'

'Okay, bye.' I left her typing away on her computer and dialing someone on her cell. Knowing I wouldn't stop daydreaming. It was my release, she just does not get it, refuses to understand.

So, busy working and focusing on 'the future' she forgets everything else and does not care about it either.

I went back to my room and started to clean it. I threw my backpack on my unmade bed and started organizing my books. About halfway through, I started to daydream again. I pulled a nearby book to me and opened it to a random page, so my mom would just think I was reading if she checked on me.

Probably- like the worst state to live in, or so I've been told. Cold, dreary, wet. My aunt Monica loves this place and my mother loved Pa.

Complete opposites.

Which is probably why they never got along well. I've only seen Aunt Monica about five times and both times ended in a huge fight and someone leaving and promising never to talk to the other again.

Mom told me that when they were young, they were the best of friends. they were only a year apart and did anything together.

But then high school came and went. They fought and went their separate ways. Now I'm expected to go live with her and her children in a tiny town named Bluewater. I hate it already. Plus, I have to fly there.

It's been a week since the accident and I'm at the Washington airport. And there's nobody to take me to my aunt's house.

I've been off the plane for an hour and there is no one to pick me up!

I've tried calling my aunt and calling her house, but nobody answered either. I went to the bathroom to freshen up a bit and when I came back out my cell rang. I answered, and I heard my aunt's apologetic voice.

'I'm so sorry Lucy I'm running a bit late. My son Jack fell off his dirt bike and broke his arm, so we are at the hospital. I'm having one of my oldest son's friends who is our neighbor come to pick you up. He should be there now.' I was mad. I guess just in general but her forgetting me just set it off.

'Fine' I said and hung up. That probably- wasn't the smartest idea since I still had no idea who was picking me up. Or what they looked like.

A few minutes later a boy came up to me.

'Hey, I'm Brendon' I just looked at him.

'Hello, Brendon...' He was really cute. His dark brown hair partially covered his face and he had piercing blue eyes.

I was an average looking girl. I had long curly black hair and grey eyes and a tan that I had all year long.

I wasn't the tallest person ever, but I wasn't that short either. Brendon was pretty tall though. Was he who was picking me up? I had no idea. While he stood there, I stared him down. He looked nice enough.

Part: 7

'Um-mm... 'he seemed a little uncomfortable with me not knowing who he was. 'I'm supposed to be picking you up?' I nodded and stood.

I grabbed my duffel bag and purse and waited for him to lead the way.

He looked a little confused but just kept walking. He showed me the way to his black truck. He grabbed my stuff from me and put it in the back I got into the passenger seat. I started to panic but took deep breaths and tried to calm down.

This would be the last time I rode in a car. We drove in silence for a few minutes before he finally said his confusion.

'I could tell you had no idea who I was, but why did you just accept it and get into my car? I could be some creeper who wanted to rape a girl.

But you didn't even question me like What is my aunt's name?

Or why are you coming to pick me up? Anything' I just looked up from my lap- 'Are you some rapper?' He shook his head 'Then why is there a problem?' He sighed and just kept driving. The truth was I just didn't care who he was.

If it was some murderer trying to kill me I probably- would be happy about it. About ten minutes later he pulled up to a house. It looked normal enough.

It was a three-story building with blue shutters and yellow paint.

'This is where you get off' Brendon said and smiled at me. I ignored him. It started to rain so I ran with my bags towards the house.

I was so glad to be out of the car, but he didn't need to know that. 'Do you need any help with that?' Brendon asked. I shook my head. He pointed to a house next to where we were - parked.

'That is my house, I take Landon to school and you're in the same grade, so I guess I'll be taking you too so be ready on Monday at eight - sharp!'

He mocks saluted and got back in his car. 'You're welcome!' He yelled while pulling away. All he got in response was me rolling my eyes.

I took a deep breath and looked at the house I was supposed to live in with my Aunt Monica maiden last name was - Read and five cousins - one a girl has dated the youngest girl - Alyssa Amsel great-grandchild also a girl, Charlotte Mazel Amsel, who was said to be bloodline to Nevaeh, by DNA genetic profiling of embryos implanting stolen from her - when Nevaeh was just a 13-year girl by them the four girls known as Amsel sisters, many years before.

There was also a Taylor, how would be Nevaeh's eggs inside AVA, with DNA from both to make a designer baby of AVA's liking - I'm pretty sure my uncle died of cancer a couple of years ago yet maybe not. Or maybe it was a car accident, I don't know. One way or another AVA got her way...

I've met all my cousins before - yet I just don't remember, but that was about three years ago. Most if not all are in Landon of all places, the oldest being my age around, 17, maybe a few months older. He was a jerk to me the last time we met. Always called me names - over the swirl baby concept thing that made me - well me.

Hopefully, he has changed - yet most boys are dumb. Daphne is two years younger than me so she's around fourteen. She was also a brat when I met her. Emily is probably about right now. She was so sweet and funny, she's the only one I'm looking forward to seeing. Lastly the twins Coly and Joly. Loud, crazy, wild children. They should be five now. Maybe they've calmed down a bit? I can only hope. I can remember that they all had curly black hair like me because their mom and my mom looked a lot alike. But they had blue eyes, except one of the twins has brown eyes. But other than that, I have no idea what to expect. I've changed a - lot in the past three years. Looks-wise mostly. Now boys actually notice me. If I can change hopefully others can too.

Part: 8

I was standing in a courtyard, with snow falling all around me. I was wearing a pure white halter dress, barefoot. Cherry blossoms mixed with the snow. Frozen cherry blossoms were in my hair, which fell over my wings.

I tested my wings gingerly, afraid they would disappear-although they never did. I started flying, higher than I thought possible. I could see everything around me, it was beautiful. I spun around a couple of times, just for fun, arms out, and something incredible happened. Some of the snow that was falling melted and the water followed my outstretched arms. I stopped spinning and stared. I lowered my arms and the water started to fall. I raised my arms quickly, while practically yelling 'Freeze.' And, get this, the water actually froze. I'm talking frozen, like ice.

I lowered my arms again, this time mentally telling the water to stay put. And it did; I started experimenting, moving my arms around, giving both mental and verbal commands, and just playing around.

'Well, at least you can follow my orders... For once.' The voice was cold as steel, heartless, snapped me out of my daydream and was my mother's. I stared at her confused. Happy she thought I really was reading. 'I should let you get back to work, shouldn't I?' I nodded, unsure what she was talking about, but I didn't care. I watched her leave then flew myself onto my made bed, sending stuffed animals flying.

I looked up amazed; my room was almost completely clean. I had no idea how that happened. I wasn't that freaked out, though-but I probably should have been. I was just happy it was clean. I looked at the alarm clock on my bed stand, eight-thirty p.m., I was shocked. It was only six when I started.

I finished cleaning my room and was completely exhausted. I got ready for bed. I laid down and promptly fell asleep.

I was back in the courtyard, but everything was different. I was in the same clothes, but the snow and cherry blossoms were gone, and everything looked dead. I felt something behind me and abruptly turned around. Nothing was there. I turned back around. I started to fly, but this time it was rough and hard to. I felt someone watching me again. I started moving away but it followed me. I was getting really freaked out now.

Everywhere I went the feeling followed, sometimes getting stronger, but never died down. Suddenly my wings disappeared. I started screaming as I plummeted to the ground. This is no ordinary

dream, I thought, not knowing whether falling here would kill me or not. I was about to find out. I let out one last blood-curdling scream before I hit the ground.

I woke up in my bed gasping for air. Afraid to fall asleep again.

'I'm telling you; it was so creepy.' I was talking to Mell the next day in Algebra.

'I'm sure it was. But I just think it is weird that you knew it was a dream, why were you so scared?'

'I told you I had no control over anything that happened,' I said, stifling a yawn. I stayed awake the rest of the night except for the occasional doze-awake and was now paying the price. I already fell asleep in English, and then I said that I like football when my teacher asked for the date during Spanish. Needless to say, I was beyond exhausted. In fact, I was having trouble keeping my head up now, and class hasn't even started yet.

'Are you sure you are telling me everything?'

'Yeah, but I did have another daydream beforehand that made it even creepier.' Mell's head shot up and she gave me a weird look.

I walked up to the front door and knocked three times. I only had to wait a few seconds until a young girl I'm guessing was Emily opened the door.

'Mom Lucy is here!' Then she slammed the door in my face. I almost laughed but then I remembered why I was here and shut up. I started to think of my sister and how much I miss her. I toughed it out and dried my eyes. I just waited and a few minutes my Aunt Monica opens the door.

'Sorry about that sweetie, come on in!' She gives me a big hug which I don't return. She reminds me so much of my mom it hurts. The same hair, eyes, and smile. I looked away from her face and stepped inside still not talking to her. I hear the hurt in her voice when she talks next but chose to ignore it.

'Emily honey will you show Lucy to her room while I call the school to set her up for Monday?' Emily skips up and takes hold of my hand that isn't holding my bag.

'Come on Lucy!' I almost start crying when I hear the name my mom used to call me when she was in a good mood. I hold back though and let Emily guide me through the house. I go up a flight of

stairs and my room is the last one on the right. Emily takes me to it but doesn't take me in yet. She points to each room in turn.

'This is your room and my room is- a-crossed the hall. Mommy is downstairs and so is- Colton and Joly.

The room next to you is Landon and Daphne is next to mine.'

Then she pulls me inside my new room. Plain white. Desk. Computer. Chair. Closet. Dresser. TV. 'Mommy said you could paint it later and that I could help maybe' I sit on my bed.

'Bye!' Emily called and raced out of the room. Good. I thought I can't bear to be around people now. I hear music coming from the room next to mine and try to remember who is in there. Landon, that explains it. I hear thumping up the stairs and somebody else goes into Landon's room. I can hear them talking. I start to unpack but give up and call Jess... 'So-o, how's the place' She askes

I shrug then remember she can't see me. 'Rain, rain, and rain. I haven't even met much of them yet!' I told her what happened at the airport.

'Is he hot?' She asked-

'I guess I didn't really notice' But I had. It was really hot. I didn't tell her that.

'I miss you, Lucy.'

'I miss you too' We hung up soon and I finished unpacking the little I had with me. I changed into some pretty short shorts and a loose comfortable shirt. I look at my phone. This was usually the time I would be hanging out with friends at Mark's Coffee Shop. It's a Saturday night.

I have seven new text messages from various people, but I had only talked to Jess since the accident and chose to ignore everyone else.

Three are from Justin (I almost was a boyfriend,) one from Kim (The girl trying to steal Justin from me,) one from Victoria (The girl who was with my ex when we were still dating), and two from Tyler (My ex-boyfriend.)

Wow how Empathetic, I have no true friends except Jess. Figures since I'm such a horrible person. I delete them all and lay back down on my bed. I grab a book and read until a hear a knock on my door.

'Dinner' Says a voice I don't know. I slowly stand up and open the door. I hear a lot of movement from downstairs and I slowly go down the stairs. There are a lot of people in the kitchen. Monica, Emily, Daphne, Joly, Colton, and about five teenagers.

They are attacking a pizza, well maybe three, in the middle of the kitchen. I recognize Brendon in the pack. As I walk in, they stare at me until another boy laughs and tells them to stop staring.

I'm guessing that was Landon because he looks familiar. But he's changed. He doesn't look so nerdy anymore. It seems more of the popular type with his good looks, his friends too. Aunt Monica steps forward.

'Hey honey these are some of Landon's friends, Austin, Gabe, Kendal, and you've already met Brendon of course.' I nodded at them and grabbed some pizza because, after a full day of travel, I was really hungry.

The boys kept talking but quieter this time, so I couldn't hear. But they kept glancing at me. I wonder what they were talking about.

Seriously. I ignored Daphne when she tried to start a conversation.

After one slice, I was done with it and just slid back upstairs. A few minutes later I heard all the boys go into Landon's room. They seemed to be playing X box or something. I heard a knock on my door and when I opened it Emily stood there with two slices of pizza.

'Mommy said I should bring you another pizza because the boys made you uncomfortable and, so I bought myself one too, so you don't have to be alone and stuff.' I gave her a smile and we ate while I played the game favorites with her.

She left when Aunt Monica called her downstairs. around nine-thirty the boys left, and I went to sleep and had terrible nightmares. I woke up crying and couldn't fall back asleep. The clock read 7:44 a.m. Early for a weekend. At least for my family. Well, when I lived with my parents.

So, I got up and changed into running clothes. My only release. I pulled my hair back and went downstairs and left a note on the counter that said-

'Going out running will be back in an hour' I took off into the morning. I ran through the country not wanting to get people's attention in town. Not that there were many people in this town. My old town in PA had triple the population of Bluewater.

Blah- blah- I probably went about eight miles. As I got back to the house, I saw Landon and Brendon in the yard playing with the other kids and I'm guessing Brendon's siblings. They all waved to me and I just ran past them and went into the house.

'How was the run?' Monica asked. I shrugged. 'Cold' She sighed probably tired of my one-word responses. 'You know you can talk to me, right?'

I nodded and headed upstairs to take a shower. All-day I just watched TV in my room and ignored everyone who knocked on my door, except Emily who already had me loving her. Even Landon tried to get me out of my room.

'Hey Lucy, a bunch of the guys are going to the movies, want to come?' I called out no and watched TV some more, trying to forget my life. I went to bed early dreading school the next day. They will all find out about my family and give me the look that says they feel sorry for me. I hate that. I won't tell and maybe they won't find out. Not that I'll make any close enough friends tell my secret to. That I was the reason my family was dead.

The next morning, I woke early around six and took a shower and began to get ready. I dried my hair and put on makeup like a pro. Jess's mom owned a shop that did hair and makeup and she taught Jess and me well. I checked the computer that said today was supposed to be warm, so I put on my favorite pair of jean shorts. Much too small for the dress code back home but here it wasn't so bad. I also wore a white tank and red off the shoulder shirt I'd just gotten a few weeks ago and never worn.

My high tops finished the outfit. It was only seven, so I sat down and wrote an email to Jess telling her about my first-day outfit, a tradition we made up in third grade and promised to tell her all about my first day at my new school. It wasn't her first day, but we were acting like it, so I read her email.

-Hey Looloo, I decided to wear the shorts we bought together last month, you know the silver short ones? Plus, a navy-blue tank and a white shirt. The cute bouncy one that you love so much.

Just for you sweetie! You know what shoes of course. Converse all the way baby! Hair is curled to look just like yours even though it looks a lot better on you. Just missing you. Don't forget the bracelet! Wear it always and I will too! Talk to ya later and don't forget to send me your outfit!

Love, ~Jess-

~*~

We had bought a bracelet together the day before I left, and I hadn't taken it off since. It reminded me of my family and my always best friend. I looked at the clock surprised at how much time had passed. It was time to go to school. I guess it's their first day back from spring break too so maybe I won't stand out so much. Landon knocked on my door.

'Come downstairs I know you've been ready for hours!' I took a deep breath. There was no way I was riding in a car, only if I was driving. I don't care how well anyone thinks they drive; my dad was forty-two and he still couldn't drive perfect. And if he couldn't, nobody could.

Plus, I don't trust anyone here with my life yet. I walked downstairs and prepared to talk to my aunt with more than one word for the first time since I got here. She was in the kitchen making Emily and the little boy's breakfast.

'Good morning Lucy would you like some eggs?' I shook my head and started to talk.

'Would it be okay if I walked to school today?' She looked confused.

'I thought Brendon was taking you and Landon to school?' I shrugged.

'Yeah but I don't want to be in a car right now, I'd rather walk.' She realized what I was talking about and almost started to cry.

'Yeah whatever you want, you don't have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.' I said thanks and grabbed my bag with all the stuff Monica had gotten for me for school. I already knew the way to the school; it was only about a half-mile away anyways. When Landon saw me start to walk, he called out.

'Hey, I thought we were giving you a ride Lucy!' I shook my head.

'I don't like cars that much!' I yelled back. I say understanding comes into his eyes and I also saw Brendon looking concerned too.

I just set off towards school ready to face hell.

'How so?'

'Well-'

'Alright, it is time to start class. Ms. Evernight, Ms. Hedsome, do you mind?' Mrs. Jenson walked in.

'I'll tell you later,' I told Mell. She started to say something more but stopped. I went to my seat and started doodling in my notebook.

I couldn't concentrate on anything Mrs. Jenson was saying. I just wanted to sleep. I closed my eyes, but opened them shortly afterward, because, I heard someone enter the classroom.

I looked up and couldn't believe my eyes. Standing in front of us was pure perfection. He looked about twenty-five, was tall, but not too tall.

His dark brown hair fell into his gray eyes. He had a muscular build, but not insanely so. I just sat there, mouth wide open, just like everyone else in the classroom. That is, except for Mrs. Jenson and Mell, they both looked worried and frightened.

'I'm looking for a princess. 'Umm- his voice, while a little rough, was perfect. Everyone tumed to the newest girl in the class, Mary Stenting. She transferred to our school about two months ago, so no one really knew anything about her. But, seeing as everyone else always went to this school, everyone automatically thought it was her.

She stood up, a knowing smile on her face. Then the unimaginable happened. She pointed directly at me and said, 'Her.'

A few things happened at once. The stranger's whole demeanor changed, into something deadly. He started advancing on me. Then a desk flew through the air, hitting him directly in the head, sending him flying into the wall. I stood there shocked, all I could think was, what is going on.

Someone grabbed my wrist and started running, dragging me along with them. My eyes never left the man until we were out of the classroom. I finally looked at the person dragging me. It was Mell. Her eyes are both frightened and determined. She started running even faster and I struggled to keep up. I had no idea she was that fast.

'We have to get out of here. Now...' We ran down the hall, unsure if he was pursuing or not. We flew out the doors of the school, never slowing down. We kept running -which reminds me, never try to run in a skirt (why private school uniforms for girls always involve a plaid, pleated skirt is beyond me,) until we were near her house.

She pulled me into a bush while she was searching for something. I could see the urgency in her eyes. I, however, was still very confused.

'What is going on? Mell?' I whispered, afraid about what would happen if I spoke any louder.

'They knew we'd be coming here. We have to go straight to Skoufyceol's.'

'Wait. What? Mell, I don't understand, what is going on? What is Skoufyceol's? Why did that guy think I was a princess?' My voice rising out of fear cracked at the last question. I was so confused that if you would have asked me as simple a question as my name, I wouldn't have known it.

'Sh-h. You don't want them to hear. I will explain everything later. Right now, I need to get you out of here.' I nodded. She crept out of the bushes and I followed, as quietly as possible.

We went to the woods on the outskirts of town. I had no idea where we were going, but Mell didn't seem to have that problem. In fact, she seemed to know exactly where we were. We went deeper and deeper into the woods.

After about thirty minutes, Mell stopped dead in her tracks and turned around. Suddenly I became aware of someone running towards us. The man from the classroom burst through the trees. He started advancing on us as Mell went into a defensive position.

I watched in absolute horror as my best friend fought this man. While she was incredible, there was something about her opponent that made me fear for her life. I was so worried about her I didn't even notice the footsteps coming up behind me until it was too late.

Another man grabbed me from behind, and before I could do anything, he was dragging me away. I started struggling and trying to break free of his grip. Then someone rammed into him.

He let go of me, but in the process, he threw me into a tree. My left side hit it with deadly accuracy and force. I fell to the ground, whimpering in pain. I didn't dare open my eyes.

Part: 9

Eventually, however, I had to. When I did, black spots clouding my vision. They cleared up and I saw Mell fighting both of the men. She seemed to have the upper hand for the moment, but something inside of me made me want to help her. I sat up, wincing at the horrible pain.

I didn't dare look down because I knew that if I did, I would probably scream. I stood up, almost passing out in the process, and gingerly took a few steps forward. I slowly took a few steps forward, until I was right behind Mell.

She had just taken down one of the men down and was fighting with the other. I had never seen anyone fight as hard as she was. The fierce determination was the only emotion on her face. I was both afraid of and for my friend.

Then, Mell somehow threw the man. He went flying past me and into a tree, head-on. I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye and turned. Just in time to see a woman attack me.

I tried to defend myself but was too weak from my other wound to do any good. She managed to get a good blow on my head. Then for the first time in my life, I passed out, praying that this was just a dream. But in the back of my head, I knew it wasn't, and that this was just the beginning.

I woke up on a small cot covered in blankets. My whole body ached. I had no idea what time it was, or even what day it was. The 'room' I was in, looked nothing more than a hole from an adjoining tunnel of dirt-which is what it was. I sat up and nearly passed out again, the pain was horrible. But I managed to sit up and look around.

The walls were made out of dirt and the ceiling, while high, made me feel very uncomfortable, because it was made from the same dirt, and I had no idea how stable it was. The floor was covered in rugs, so I don't know what it was, but I'm guessing that it was dirt.

The door was just a blanket hung over a rod. There was another cot, but it appeared to be unoccupied. A small table and a few chairs sat in the far-left corner, with a jug of water, some cups, and plates on top. A chest was in the nearest right-hand corner.

My clothes were hanging limply around me. My shirt was in tatters and covered in bloodstains. There was an especially horrible spot on my left side that I'm guessing was from hitting the tree.

I couldn't actually see the wound because it was bandaged, but the gauze and bandages were really red there. I threw back my covers and examined the rest of my body.

My skirt had nothing seriously wrong with it. It was just a little wrinkled, with a few rips, tears and bloodstains here and there. My legs just had a bunch of cuts and bruises, but nothing a serious as my side. My socks were now a lovely shade of yellowish, brownish white.

I started to rub my forehead. But stopped dead in my tracks. On my left wrist was a tattoo. It looked exactly like the friendship bracelets Mell and I got each other in third grade. The design of swirls, well, swirled around my wrist-I know stupid, but that is the only way I can describe it.

It was a sapphire color that almost seemed to glow. I stared at it, confused. I never got a tattoo, and I wasn't planning on getting one, either.

I got out of bed, hoping to find some answers-I finally convinced myself that I had fallen asleep and that this was just a dream.

I was still very weak, so I was using the walls to keep myself somewhat-steady. I left the room and started creeping down the hall. There were many people walking through the hallways. They gave me strange looks but otherwise left me alone.

I kept walking, not knowing where I was going. I was feeling weaker and weaker with every step. I was just about to ask someone passing by when I heard two people yelling at each other from a room ahead. I stopped dead in my tracks, not because I was scared, but because, I knew those voices.

'Just what was I supposed to do?' Mell's voice cut through the air. She was obviously furious. I crept forward, wanting to get a closer look. I was about to the doorway, so I peered in.

Mrs. Jenson and Mell were standing in the middle of the room. Mell had her back to me and Mrs. Jenson was too focused on Mell to notice me. I involuntarily took a step back. It wasn't that they were there, I figured it was just part of the dream. It was what Mell looked like. She looked about the same, as always. A few cuts and bruises now, but otherwise the same. That is if you don't count the wings that flowed off her back. Her hair covered where the wings were attached to her body, but I was certain that they were real. The design on them basically looked like twigs.

'You know very well what you were supposed to do. You were supposed to make sure that this would not happen.

You were supposed to make sure the area was secure before you came here. Actually, you were not supposed to come here at all. You should be at Skoufyceol's,' Mrs. Jenson spoke in an icy tone I had never heard before another shock because I have had to see her so many times, I had heard just about every tone possible, or so I thought.

Again, I heard the name Skoufyceol's and I was dying to know just what it was.

'You know just as well as I do, that was impossible at the time,' Mell had as much ice in her voice as Mrs. Jentson's did.

'No. It was not impossible, you are just too lazy to think of any other options.' Mell went rigid.

'Don't you dare say I was too lazy! You know just as well as I do that it was not that simple. That even if I made sure the area was secure, they would have found away. They always do. And anyway, she is alive, that is all that matters.'

'Yes, she is alive barely, however, if you had done what you were supposed to, you wouldn't even have to worry about that. If I was her

Protector this wouldn't of- happened, and she'd be at Skoufyceol's.'

'But you aren't her Protector, I am,' She held up her left wrist, and the same tattoo was on it. It gave off a faint glow. I looked at mine, it was also glowing. 'Now, if you will excuse me, I am going to check my Charge.' Her voice was full of ice, and I was shocked. Mell was never disrespectful to anyone, let alone a teacher.

I went back to my room after that. I had heard enough and something in the back of my mind was telling me that I was her Charge and that I should get back to my room, before her. I had just crept into my room and sat on the bed; afraid I was going to pass out when Mell walked in.

'Oh, good, you're awake. How are you feeling?' I stared at her. This is the person who just yelled at our teacher? She was looking at me with genuine concern.

'Fine. A little sore.' She laughed, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something was different about her. She looked exactly the same.

Same dress-another shock, Mell doesn't usually wear dresses, but this one was super cute, so I understood why she was wearing it-same hair, the same everything, but still, something was different.

Part: 10

'I'll bet. You had us very worried. But, I'm glad to see you are okay.' She brushed some hair out of her face, and I knew what was bothering me. Her tattoo wasn't there.

'Who... who are you?' I stuttered out.

'I'm Sarceeala, silly.' She laughed, but I could tell she was nervous, or something.

'No, you're not. Where is your tattoo?' I asked, courage rising inside of me. All of a sudden, the impostor looked deadly and worried.

'What...? How...!

...?...

You aren't supposed to know!' She shouted; her voice distorted with rage. Suddenly, hazel eyes turned into a cat-like green. Her wavy chestnut hair into a sleek, straight black. She gave me a feral smile.

She shot at me and threw me into the chest. Clothes burst out. She came to me again-man she was fast-but was thrown back, just before she reached me. I had closed my eyes, bracing for another attack, but opened them when I heard the impostor shriek. Mell-the real one-was standing in front of me, her tattoo was glowing brighter than before.

I looked at my wrist and saw it was also glowing so bright that it could have lit the entire room.

The impostor and Mell were fighting again and I noticed her hair was changing back. Suddenly, the two stopped fighting and appeared to be at a stalemate. I couldn't tell who was who. The impostor changed back into Mell. The looked at each other, then at me.

'Taylor,' they both spoke at the same time, and I had no idea which was the real Mell, they both had tattoos this time. 'Don't listen to her. I'm the real Mell.'

I stared at them both, sure that there was some way to tell the two apart, there wasn't. One of them came close to me. Then the other jumped from behind and somehow got behind me. She drew a knife to my throat and changed back into the impostor.

'Listen to me. I'm going to walk out of here with the princess and you are not going to try and stop me.' Her voice changed. It now seemed wild and crazy. Mell looked at me helplessly. I started searching for something I could use to my advantage.

My eyes stopped on the jug of water, and I remembered my other daydream. I figured that if it worked once in a dream, then it should work again.

I mentally yelled at the water to attack her. I to look as nonchalant as possible, and apparently, it worked. Water came hurtling towards the impostor. It hit her with such force she flew into the wall. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, in one fluid motion, I spun around, shooting all of the water at her. Without hesitating, I froze it. But, for some reason, there were at least three times as much water than there should have been in the jug. But it didn't matter, her head was the only thing that didn't have some ice on it, so we were safe.

'But you're not supposed to... There is no way... Who are you?' The impostor was yelling at us. Just then Mrs. Jenson strode in a worried expression on her face.

'Sarceeala, I have just received word that Ailina has... 'she just noticed the impostor, Ailina apparently, and then stared at me and Mell.

'Thank you, but you probably could have told me earlier,' Mell said dryly. Mrs. Jenson was still staring at Ailina.

'How...?'

'That is what I want to know too. Taylor, how did you know what you could do with the water?'

'Well, from that daydream I told you about or was going to. I figured that if I could do it once in a dream,' I shrugged. 'I mean, there is no way that this isn't a dream. Oh, you are going to be so happy you are in one of my daydreams for once, although it is kind of creepy to have you in here Mrs. Jenson, I mean no offense to you, but you are my teacher.'

'You mean I never was before?' She didn't look disappointed, just worried, and I saw her and Mrs. Jenson exchange a worried look. I shook my head.

'No, but you were always so upset when you weren't.'

'But what about that daydream you had the other day when you said you felt my presence?' I shook my head again.

'No, it didn't really feel like you, but you were so upset that I said it was. What?' Mrs. Jenson stepped forward.

'Taylor, I don't know how to put this gently, but this isn't a dream. This is real.'

'No, it can't be. There is no such thing as, well, whatever it is I just did. People don't have wings. They just don't.' I refused to listen to what they were saying.

'It's true, Tay. This is real.'

'But... No, this isn't real. The bell will ring soon, or you'll ask me some questions, and I'll wake up. I know I will.' But the thing was, I knew I wouldn't. I just couldn't accept it yet.

'Taylor, I know this might be hard for you to understand, but the world you thought you knew just isn't the same.' Mrs. Jenson put her hand on my shoulder and I winced. The pain in my side was back with vengeance.

I suddenly took a few steps back, realizing something. I had never felt pain in any dream before. In all the dreams I've ever had, no matter what happened, I was never hurt. Not once. In fact, I think that it is impossible.

'T-this is real, isn't it?' I said. They both nodded.

'Taylor, are you okay?' I was about to answer, when, for the second time in my life, I fainted.

The first thing I saw when I regained consciousness was Mell and Mrs. Jenson. I gave them a meek smile but said nothing. I sat up and saw that Ailina had been removed from the wall.

'I'm glad to see you are awake. You made us both very worried.' Mrs. Jenson said, returning my smile.

'Well, if we had eased her gently into this as I suggested, we would have had no need to be worried.'

'Do not blame this on me. We had no choice but to tell her like that. If there was another option- I would have taken it.'

'There was another option. There always is, remember who taught me that?'

'Guys, please, you don't need to fight. I'm fine, and so are you two, so I don't see what the big deal is. I just was overwhelmed and got a little dizzy. It was nothing.' I tried to say, but all that came out was 'guys,' but they understood.

'She's right, and I think she also deserves an explanation, don't you?' Mell said as she handed me a glass of water, which I hastily gulped down.

'I think that is fair.' Mrs. Jenson turned to me. 'That is if you think you are up to hear it?' I nodded, happy to finally get some answers.

'Okay, what do you want to know?'

'Everything, where are we? Who are you guys? What is the tattoo? What is Skoufyceol's?' The last question escaped my lips before I realized what I had said.

'How do you know about Skoufyceol's?'

'Oh, um, well, when I first woke up, I wanted some answers. So, I kind of, um, went exploring, and, um, overheard you guys arguing about it.' I gave them a very sheepish smile and felt absolutely embarrassed. But not as embarrassed as Mell and Mrs. Jenson.

'You heard that?' Mrs. Jenson asked. I nodded. 'No wonder Ailina was so freaked out.'

'Anyway, Skoufyceol- is short for Skoufyceol School for the Exceptionally Exceptional, so you can see why everyone has just shortened it to Skoufyceol.

Basically, it is a boarding school for all those who have special powers or aren't human. It is pretty cool there, a lot better than Adam's Prep. Though, that doesn't mean much, because a school of monkeys would be better, no offense Mrs. J.'

'None took, I was only there for you two.'

'Okay, so you've answered one of my questions, how about these' gesturing to the tattoos on our wrists-' what are they?'

'They're called Protectors' Mark. I know nothing fancy, but that's what they are.'

'That's nice, but how about answering what I asked you?'

'I did.' I shot her the worst glare I could manage-which says nothing because I was having trouble not laughing. This was so like Mell, answer the question, but only what you asked, even if it is implied.

'Well, what does it mean and how did I get it?'

'It symbolizes that you are protected, and you gave it to yourself.'

'No, I didn't. I think I would have remembered giving myself a tattoo.'

'You did. You just don't realize it. A Protectors' Mark is given when a person Chooses another to be their Protector.'

'I understood about half of that.'

'When you gave me that friendship bracelet, do you remember what you said?' I shook my head. 'You said that you trusted me with your life and that you always would. You said that we would protect each other from then on. Without knowing it, you had sealed your fate.'

'Yeah, well, if that happened in third grade, why did I just get the tattoo, sorry, Protectors' Mark?'

'Because, until now, you have had no need to have one. You technically have had it ever since then, but it didn't show itself until now.' I still didn't understand, but I thought that it might be for the best right now.

'Okay, so besides being protected what does it mean?'

'That's it, it is a magical symbol that allows a Charge- you- and their Protector-me-an easy way to see if they are in any danger.

When Mark glows brightly, the danger is near. Of course, that is not always the case, but you will learn more about that at Skoufyceol. You will be spending the rest of the ye ar there.'

Again, I only understood about half of that.

'Wait... Am I transferring? Is my mom okay with that?'

'Yes, you are transferring and as for your mom, well, she, um, thinks you ran away.'

'WHAT! She is going to kill me! What in the world were you thinking when you told her that?'

I was yelling at Mrs. Jenson because she must have been the one to say something to her.

'We had no other choices. We did what we had to do to keep you safe.'

'But you could have told her something else, anything else really. What about you, Mell, where does she think you are or did not even bother with that?'

'She thinks, well, um, right now she, uh, thinks that, um, I'm still there. We made some arrangements.'

'And you couldn't do the same for me, because?'

'We were barely able to cover Sarceeala's disappearance, let alone your own.'

'You could have at least tried,' I grumbled to myself.

'Believe me, we did, but your mother is very persistent.'

'Okay, now I have one more question. Why am I going to Skoufyceol?'

'Because you are a Teliken.'

'A what?'

'Teliken... a very powerful magical creature. They-and you-are basically part faerie, part pixie, and part elf.' Mrs. Jenson said, unfazed by any of this.

'Like me.' Mell said. I gave her a quizzical look.

'I'm a Woodland Elf, I- Mellie know to all as Mell- stand-in at under 4-foot-tall- look like and young girl yet have pointed ears and have a doe rack on my head smooth white skin, of sexy, seductive, desirable, alluring, and inviting covary small horns- feminine doe eyes with large lashes; I have always on an armored fringed gown- in shades of greens- to blend in- in the unforgiven woods, with ribbons hanging of many greenish colors, my defenses for all the dark things this world has to offer is a hardcovered wood bow and sharp sliver arrows with holy angel white feathers - and barefoot.'

'Yeah right. Just like I'm a, what was it called again? Oh yeah, Teliken, if you were an elf, wouldn't you have pointed ears?'

'I do.' She pushed her hair behind her pointed ears. I stared, mouth open, gaping like an idiot.

'Oh.' I turned to Mrs. Jenson. 'What about you? Are you an elf too?'

'No. I am what your kind would call a witch. But I like to call my kind by our real name, an Ariean. Human names are so barbaric.

Speaking of which, do not refer to me by that horrid human name any longer, I cannot stand it. Call me Ardelia.'

'No way. Prove it.' She waved her hands and sparks flew. The water pitcher rose off of the table and came over to where I and my glass were. The water poured into my almost empty glass. Again, I could only stare.

'Now, do you have any other questions?' I nodded.

'Those guys that were chasing us, what are they and why were they chasing us?' I asked, afraid of the answer. Mell and Ardelia exchanged a nervous look.

'The people you encountered are-were-members of a clan known as Creperum, which is Latin for darkness. They are also Dialons, a powerful creature that is skilled in both disguises and mind control. They were after you because that was their assignment, to capture you and bring you to the Creperum.'

'Why?'

'Your parents-your real parents-are at a very powerful place in the Teliken community. Capturing you would ultimately bring them to their downfall.'

'What do you mean my real parents?'

'You did not actually think that the people who raised you are Teliken, did you? No, while they did raise you, they have no connection to the Teliken race, besides you. Your father wanted you to have a normal life, without worrying about this world, so he managed to get a hold of the names of a husband and wife who he thought would be a good family for you.'

'But I've seen my birth certificate.'

'Your father managed to, shall we say, convince the couple that you were their daughter. They looked enough like you so that in the future you would not question the relationship between you and them. Your father forged a birth certificate and everything else you would need to live a humans' life.'

'I'm sorry, Tay, I know this is a lot for you to take in. But we must leave soon. If you are ready, I would like to leave as soon as possible.' Mell said, genuinely concerned, but she was worried about something else.

'Okay, we can leave now if you want.'

'Actually,' Ardelia interjected. 'I think that it would be best if we spend the night. Let Taylor get her stuff together and rest, she isn't exactly in the best of conditions.'

'But we have already spent five days here, any more time wasted is just foolish.'

'Five days! I have been unconscious for five days?'

'Off and on, but yes.' I suddenly felt very dizzy.

'You know what, I think we should spend the night after all,' I said feeling like I was going to faint, again.

'Okay, but tomorrow we are leaving. I'll pack your stuff Taylor,' Mellie said, gesturing towards the clothes that were in the chest I flew into the other day. Apparently, they were mine.

'I'll let you get some sleep, Taylor, good night girls,' Ardelia said, leaving the room. I gratefully closed my eyes and let sleep overtake me.

The sun was extremely bright after being underground for the past six days. Mell, Ardelia and I just spent an hour leaving the tunnels. It was about ten-thirty now and I was nearly blind.

'So, how are we getting to Skoufyceol?' By now I almost half expected some weird light to teleport us to the school.

Part: 11

'Cars are not my thing- there like getting shot out of a cannon.' Mell said gesturing towards a FLYING HORSE AND CARRIAGE that pulled up to the edge of the tunnels.

It was black with tinted windows. The trunk popped open and Mell took the bags I was carrying two duffel bags and a messenger bag. She threw them in the back, then opened the carriage door and gestured for me to get inside.

'Aren't you coming?' I asked Ardelia, who was standing outside of the carriage with a sad look on her face.

'No, I'm afraid not. I must return to Adam's Preparatory. It would be too suspicious if all of us just disappeared. Besides, you have no use of me, I did what I needed to. Actually, I was supposed to leave when you woke up, but I felt that I had some responsibility to explain things to you.'

'Oh, well, I hope I'll see you again.'

'As do I. Goodbye, Taylor.'

'Bye.' She turned and left, going back into the tunnels.

'Taylor,' I turned to Mell, 'we really should be going, they were expecting us to be there at one.'

'Okay.' I got into the carriage now.

I started out of the window until I couldn't see anything out of it. We must have gone into a tunnel or something. We stayed in that tunnel for almost an hour. When we came out, I couldn't believe my eyes.

The buildings looked archaic, yet modern. There were five distinct buildings each with their own unique look, yet they all looked the same. A high stone wall surrounded the entire school. It was about twenty feet high. As soon as the car pulled into the campus Mell relaxed.

Behind more cars from the 1920s pulled up... The cars and the carriages beside pulled up to the first building and we got out. A tall exotic woman, with auburn hair, pulled into a bun and golden eyes stepped out of the shade of some trees and greeted us.

'Ms. Hedsome it is a pleasure to see you again. Ms. Every night I believe this is our first encounter. I am Kelania Endlocke, but you shall call me Headmistress Endlocke while you attend school here, unless otherwise instructed. I hope your journey had no further implications.' We both shook our heads. 'Good... Now, if you will follow me, I will show you to your dorm rooms. I am afraid that you two will not be sharing a room. I hope you understand.' I started to ask why when Mell stopped me.

'Yes, of course, we understand. Thank you for taking us in so-o late in the year Headmistress Endlocke.'

'Yes, of course. Now, follow me.' She led us to the building on the far end. But on the way, we entered the courtyard. I stopped dead in my tracks, staring. I tried to tell myself that it was a coincidence, but I didn't believe that. I couldn't because it was the same place as my dream.

'Taylor, are you okay? Are you daydreaming or something?' I could only shake my head.

'I-it... I-is... same.' Mell understood immediately.

'Here? Are you sure it wasn't somewhere else?' I nodded; it was defiantly the same.

'Is everything alright?' Headmistress Endlocke said, but I don't think she really cared. I snapped out of the trance-like state I was in.

'Yeah, everything's fine. I just had a feeling of déjà vu.'

'Alright, then shall we move on.' We followed her again. When we stopped again, we were on the third floor of the building. 'This is your room Sarceeala. Your roommate will be in shortly, classes are almost over. Speaking of which, here is your class schedule, and here is yours, Taylor.' She handed us to sheets of paper and continued leading me away from Mell.

We walked up to another floor in complete silence. Finally, we stopped at the door. 'This is your room. Your roommate will also be in shortly to help you get settled. If you need anything else my office is in the main building or you can go to the office in this building. Goodbye.'

I opened the door, not sure what to expect. The room was surprisingly normal. It was large with a bathroom adjoining it. There were two beds, two end-tables, two closets, two desks, a TV, a table and some chairs, a mini-fridge, and a microwave. One bed had nothing on it, but the other was obviously occupied. It was unmade with a pillow on the floor. Clothes were carelessly thrown on top of it. I wondered who my new roommate was as I threw my bags on the other bed.

I finished making my bed. Apparently, Mell gave me everything I would need for a dorm room, including a laptop- and was surfing the web when the door opened.

A girl with straight shoulder-length hair and smoky hazel eyes walked in. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt with some insignia on it. She sighed and threw her backpack onto her bed. She put the books she was carrying on a desk. She turned around and jumped back, startled to see me.

'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I was told this was my dorm room. I'm Taylor Every night.' Her expression changed completely, and she sat down on her bed.

'Oh yeah, I was told I was getting a roommate. I'm Reina Wenshire. So, what are you? Faerie? Elf? Pixie? I'm a Pixie myself. Which is cool for sneaking around campus.'

'I'm a Teliken, I think.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, until six days ago I thought I was human, and I just found out that I was a Teliken yesterday. But I could have heard wrong.'

'I doubt it; you look like a Teliken. Who is your Protector?' She asked, gesturing towards the Protectors' Mark on my wrist.

'Her name is Sarceeala Hedsome. Her dorm room is on the third floor. She's a Woodland Elf.'

'Cool. Mine's Seraina Telenson. She's a witch.'

'I thought witches were called Arieans.'

'I guess... nobody does. Well, except for the Elders. How would you know what the witches' other name was?'

'Ardelia told me.' I wasn't really sure what to say.

'Who?' She couldn't hide the look of both shock and amazement on her face.

'Ardelia... well, I don't know her last name. She explained some things to me yesterday.'

'No, I know who she is. But do you...'

'Not really.' Realizing for the first time just how true that was.

'She is an extremely powerful Ariean. She is one of the most powerful Elder. You should feel extremely honored she even looked your way, and was alone to talk with you.'

'Really?' She nodded.

'Yeah. But I'm probably overstating things. That's what happens when your Protector is an Ariean.' Reina stood up and went over to where my bags were. 'We should probably start unpacking your stuff.'

'Yeah... I'd kind of like to know what I brought with me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you know how I said that found out I wasn't human six days ago;' she nodded. 'Well, that was kind of forced on me two days ago after I got knocked out by some Dialons. What I mean is that

six days ago some Dialons attacked Mell and me. I lost consciousness and when I woke up again, I had a little problem.'

'Define little.'

'Well, apparently someone named Ailina knew something about something-don't ask me what I have no idea and tried to kill me. But she didn't, because I well, froze her to a wall. Then fainted.' This sounded a lot weirder coming from my mouth than when it actually happened.

'You froze her to a wall?'

'She had a knife to my throat! What was I supposed to do? Anyway, after I woke up again Mell and Ardelia-who I thought at the time was my Algebra teacher-explained almost everything. Which reminds me, I forgot to ask who Ailina is.'

'A shape-shifter.' Reina said solemnly.

'You know about her?'

'Yeah everyone does. Well, almost everyone. She's really powerful too. I've heard that she can transform into anyone on the planet, and you'll have no idea who is the real and who is Ailina. She used to work as a spy for some clan, the Winsentra, I believe. But then she betrayed them to the Creperum and was locked away in some jail. Hey, did you just change the subject to avoid finishing?'

'No. That's it. After they explained that stuff to me, I felt a little dizzy, so I went back to sleep and Mell packed for me. That's why I don't know what was packed for me.'

Part: 12

'Oh. Well, I guess we're about to find out.' She went over to my bags and started to unpack.

We were unpacking the second duffel bag. The first had contained everything I would need for school and any book I would want to read. My bathroom stuff and well, anything else I could need. The second bag was full of clothes and shoes. I had stilettos, converse sneakers, flip-flops and any other type of shoes imaginable. T-shirts, tank tops, long sleeves, halters, everything. Designer jeans, skirts, and dresses. I had dozens of dresses, in every color and design possible. Including the white halter dress from my dream.

I wanted to throw it out of the window, burn it and, well, anything else that would get rid of that dress. But I knew that if I did that, I would have to explain it to Reina. And I didn't want her thinking I was any weirder than she already thought I was. I mean, how would I explain that to her? So, I just hung it in the back of my closet and said nothing.

The next day Reina and I were in a little kitchenette that was on the first floor waiting for Mell and Seraina. We had just finished breakfast and were standing away from the girls that were rushing around, trying to get ready.

'Hey, sorry I'm late. I overslept. Again... You must be Taylor. I'm Serina, it's nice to meet you.' A girl with short black hair came running up to us. 'Oh, and Sarcelles told me to tell you she's on her way.'

'What happened Seraina, destroyed your alarm clock again?' It was obvious that Reina was joking.

'You know how much- I hate mornings. Besides, it was so loud. Which reminds me, I owe Sarceeala a new one now too.' She looked a little sheepish as she said that.

'Nice. You really need to work on your self-control.'

'I know.' Just then Mell came rushing into the room.

'Hey sorry, my alarm clock didn't go off-' she shot an accusatory look at Seraina '-and I ended up oversleeping.'

'I said I was sorry! I didn't mean to do it; I was just so tired.'

'Whatever... so, what classes do you have with me, Tay?' She pulled her class schedule out of her bag. I did the same. And actually- that was the first time I had taken a good look at mine.

'Hmm, we have Languages of the Worlds, Drama and of course, our Protector-Charge class.'

'What?'

'I'll explain later, but right now we need to go.' The room had almost completely cleared out.

'Come on. Your first class is right next to mine.' Reina said taking my wrist and dragging me away.

My first class was History of the Teliken, which was about the Teliken race, duh. Okay, I had no idea what it was when I first got there, but the rest of the class was generally nice and filled me in on what was happening. I just have about, oh, three years' worth of catching up to do in homework - actually I just had to read the chapters in the textbook that I missed, but still, it was a lot. My next class was supposed to help me with my powers, but since I didn't really know anything about what I could do besides the whole water manipulation thing-I ended up sitting around half the class.

Next was a self- defense class, which was really cool because I got to learn how to fight, use a bow and arrows and even use some knives-okay I got to learn how to fight and watch people use bows and arrows and knives, but I will use them. Then it was time for lunch. I meet up with Reina, Mell, and Seraina again and ate.

Afterward, Mell and I went to Languages of the Worlds, which was completely and utterly confusing. If I thought Spanish was hard, well this makes that seem like a walk in the park. First, the teacher was talking in some language from some country on a planet that is defiantly not Earth. Then he was speaking in some other language from who knows where. Finally, he switched back to English, after speaking in Chinese, Japanese and God-knows-what-else-enes. Luckily, I wasn't the only one lost, about three-quarters of the class didn't understand it either. I couldn't wait to get out of there, that is until I saw what our next class was like.

Apparently, the Protector-Charge class is all about learning how to use them and I quote 'special bond between the two of you.' It was so not fun. At all. The drama was awesome, we are reading Romeo and Juliet, which is my favorite play.

...Ever.

And finally, I was at my last class of the day: Flying 101. I was especially worried about this class for one reason alone I had no wings! At least, I thought I didn't. My teacher was awesome and taught me how to unfurl my wings-I was really glad the shirt I was wearing had slits cut into it, Mell had really thought of everything. After my fifth try, I managed to get my wings out. It was like they just appeared. They were really pretty, with shades of pink, blue, purple, gold and white all mixing together. Plus, they were the same as every single one of my daydreams.

I was so excited; I would actually get to fly like I could in my daydreams. I imagined myself soaring high above the clouds again. Unfortunately, it wasn't as easy as it was in my daydreams. First, I

couldn't figure out how to even start flying. I thought I it would come as naturally as in my daydreams, I was wrong. Flapping took some serious Eminence and concentration, two things I don't usually have a lot of. Second, when I finally figured out how to flap, I couldn't figure out how to stay airborne.

Flapping was difficult, but trying to get enough power behind each flap to both to get and keep me in the air was nearly impossible. I could already hear the possibilities to be mocked. But, the thought of the mockery was just what I needed. I managed to rise into the air, and stay there. I tested my ability to stay in the air by changing directions and speed and when I was pretty sure I wasn't going to suddenly drop out of the sky, I started to really fly.

Part: 13

I was nothing like in my daydreams. It was better. Except I could really use some grace. I left the school grounds, flying through clouds like nobody's business. I looked down and saw the highway we took to get to school. I could see cars passing a woman jogging on the side of the road. I could see every detail as if I was right next to them. I've always had good eyesight, but I never dreamed it was that good.

I was so focused on the woman, mesmerized, that I didn't even think about flapping, which was a problem. You know in cartoons when someone will run off the side of a building and hang in the air until they look down? Well, that is a bunch of crap. Because for me, one second I was hovering, the next I was plummeting towards the earth and breakneck speed.

I tried to scream, but the wind had taken my breath away. I tried to think of something I could do to at least slow down my fall. Nothing was coming to my mind. But the ground was coming closer to me. I was going to be roadkill in a few seconds, literally. I tried to clear my mind and focus on flapping my wings, which seemed impossible. Luckily, for me, it wasn't. I managed to start flapping just in time. I returned to the sky, nearly unharmed, and probably scaring a few drivers.

After flying for a few more minutes, I saw someone flying towards me. I felt a tingling sensation on my left arm. I looked down and saw my Protectors' Mark glowing almost as brightly as when Ailina attacked me. I immediately turned around and flew away as fast as I could. I didn't turn to see if they were still following me, I just kept flying.

Finally, I risked a glanced back and saw nothing behind me. My Protectors' Mark wasn't glowing anymore, so I figured I was safe. I turned around to head back to the school, only to find myself completely lost. Actually, I wasn't completely lost. I knew this place, not the location, but the way the

wind that was too low for me to feel blew through the trees of this countryside. I knew the way that the rows of wheat looked through the clouds I was above. I knew the lake, with water so clear and inviting. I knew everything about the place that was right underneath me, even though I had never been there in my life, except for my daydreams.

I laughed, in spite of myself. I was lost and had no idea where I was supposed to go now, but I never thought that I'd actually imagine a place that really existed or that I would find it. I flew down to the lake just because I could. I cupped my hands and gathered some water, just for the fun of it. I dropped the water and flew over to the wheat fields. I brushed my hands against the tops of the stalks of wheat, laughing at the novelty of it. Eventually, though, the novelty did wear off, and I realized how late it was getting. And that I was still lost.

I started flying back the way I came, or that I thought I came, looking for something I could recognize. I wandered in the sky for what felt like forever. I began to wonder what time it was and if anyone was looking for me. I was beginning to think I was hopeless and that I'd never find my way back to the school when I saw the jogger again. It wasn't a solid landmark or anything, but it was enough to make me hopeful. I flew back the way the jogger was coming from.

After a few minutes, I could start to make out the school. I flew towards it faster than before, which I thought was impossible. I was coming up at the school when I saw someone else flying. It was Mell. I tried to slow down, but it didn't really go well. I ended up missing her by a few inches and backpedaling in the air. It was probably amusing to someone watching, but to me, it was downright embarrassing. I saw Mell laughing and I just glared at her as she flew closer.

'Shut up.' I said, still glaring.

'I didn't say anything.' She said holding up her hands.

'Whatever. Then don't say anything.' She nodded. I could tell she wanted to ask where I was, but for some reason, it wasn't.

We entered the school and flew to where Mrs. Lenning, the teacher, and a faerie, was standing. 'Where have you been, Ms. Evernight?'

So that's why Mell didn't ask, she knew how much I hated repeating myself, so she spared me from saying- it twice in a few minutes. 'I got lost.'

'Obviously- would you care to tell me why you left school grounds?' I shrugged.

'I didn't think it was that big of a deal. I'm sorry, it won't happen again.'

'Let's hope not. You show a lot of potentials, I don't want you to ruin it, or prove me wrong. Now I believe some of your friends are wondering what happened to you, run along.' I nodded and left with Mell.

'What didn't you tell her?' She asked when we were out of Mrs. Lenning's hearing.

'What do you mean?' I asked innocently.

'Don't give me that. You know, you really suck at lying. And I know that you weren't giving the whole story. You never act like that, unless your hiding something.'

'I don't suck at lying!' I said defensively. She raised an eyebrow.

Sighing, I told her what happened.

'You... what?! How did I not know about this!?' She was asking herself more than me. I just shrugged.

'It doesn't matter really, I'm fine.'

'I don't like this, at all.'

'Join the club, but we can't really do anything about it.'

'That's what worries me.' She said going into her room. 'Night, Tay.'

'Night!' I said going to my room, wondering why Mell didn't know I was in trouble earlier, and what that meant.

The farthest side of the campus was completely engulfed in woods, that's where I was going. The night before Mell, Reina and Seraina explained what was happening. Every so often, the teachers would set up a Battle, to test the abilities of the students, both in self-defense and power use. We would be put into teams and try to capture the other entire team or their base. I was still really confused about the whole thing when I went to the woods the next day. I stepped into the woods, thankful to have

worn sensible clothes. I started walking away from my team's headquarters, hiding the sound of my footsteps. I wasn't going to be the one to blow it for the team on a stupid mistake.

The entire team meets before for a debriefing. Although, I was still lost on what's going on. I was an offense member, the one trying to capture everyone and the base. So-o, I started to go toward enemy territory. I came to a river and realized just how lost I was. I was contemplating where to go when I heard a twig snap behind me. My body went rigid and I was about to climb a tree when a guy from my team stepped out of the forest.

'Hey, you lost?' I nodded. He laughed, 'Yeah, I thought so. Don't worry I had trouble with my first Battle too. Are you on offense or defense?'

Part: 14

'Um, offense.'

'Cool, I'm on Defense. All you need to do is continue upstream. Just follow the river. Anything else?'

'Yeah, do you have any tips for me?'

'Sure, here's one: Don't get caught. Seriously, just because this is your first Battle doesn't mean anyone will go easy on you, and it's a pain in the butt to have to rescue a person. Here's another: Trust your instincts. If your gut is telling you to run, get away from that place as fast as you can. Finally: Capture as many people as you can. It's always fun to have a newbie capture a ton of people on another team.'

'Thanks.' I turned to leave.

'Oh, and Taylor, use your powers. This isn't just for self-defense.' He turned and went downstream, leaving me trying to figure out what he meant. How in the world did he know my name, and that I have power?

...And what he meant by powers.

I started walking upstream when I had a sudden urge to retreat into the water. Remembering what my teammate said, I let the water engulf me, using my power to do so. And not a moment too soon, either, a bunch of the other team's members burst through the woods. I smiled, somehow

knowing they couldn't see me. My only thought at the time was: This is going to be fun. I let the water rise, taking me with it. I will never forget the shock on their faces when I came out of the water. I managed to capture three of the players.

Now, you're probably confused, so I think that it's best if I take a moment to explain just what was going on. First off, we were split into two teams, a blue and a yellow. I was on the blue team. Second, there are two objectives to this Battle, the first: Take the other team's base. The second: Capture as many people on the other team as possible, preferably all of them. When the Battle first started, we were given...well, I didn't really know what it was, but it looked like a silver ball. The ball contained something that allowed you to capture a player in a bubble.

Anyway, the three- I captured stared at me, shocked. The rest of the players ran back into the woods. I would have followed them if I hadn't seen them looking back to make sure I was. I instantly knew it was a trap. I let the water overtake me again and started flowing down the river. Then I remembered where I needed to go and went upstream.

Eventually, I heard voices and I stopped moving. I watched what was going on. The yellow team had ten of my teammates, including the guy who helped me earlier. I was wondering how to help them and not get caught when the players from before came into the clearing.

'How did it go?' the girl who spoke was obviously the team leader.

'We lost three... The Every-night girl is faster than we thought. And she is using the water.'

'Is she...? Well, let's see if she still is.' The girl got up and walked over to the river. I felt confident enough that she couldn't see me, but I wasn't going to take any chances. I got ready to get out of the water and capture her when she knelt to the river. She muttered something and put both hands on the water. It suddenly got very hot and I knew she was using her power. It's now or never, I thought. I sprang out of the water and captured her. Those closest by ran forward trying to attack me, but I had anticipated them. I captured six others and was attacking the rest with water when they started retreating.

'How do I rescue you?' I asked the guy who helped me.

'Use your Conto.'

'My what?'

'It's what you have been using to capture the people with. There is a setting on it that will let you release us.' I took out my Conto and looked for the setting he was talking about. I found it and used it on all of them. They were all released, some seemed a little bitter about being rescued by the newbie.

'Okay, I'm sure they're coming back. What do we do now?'

'You do nothing. We are going to go and finish capturing them.' A tall blond said, obviously bitter.

'I don't think so. Who just freed you and captured the other team's leader? Was it you? I don't think so. I'm going with you.'

'Whatever; let's just go.' She started toward the woods.

'Wait; I have a better idea.'

'And I'm sure we'd all love to hear it.' She wasn't light on sarcasm.

'I could make you a part of the water. Or better yet, the air.' I had no idea where that came from.

'Well then, get to it.' I let my instincts take over. The next thing I-or anyone else-knew, we were in the air. Actually, we were the air. We could still see each other, but no one else could. We floated through the air until we found where the yellow team went. We took out our Contos and hovered above them. I got us out of the air and we started falling towards them. They didn't suspect a thing until it was too late. We captured every member of that team, in record-breaking time.

When I first woke up, I first thought that I was back at my house and that everything was just a dream. Then I saw Reina. I couldn't help but feel a little crushed. It's not that I don't like her, I just wanted to go back to my old life. For things to go back to normal. But that will never happen.

I got up and went to the kitchen. I was scrambling some eggs when Reina walked in. I needed some comfort food and I love scrambled eggs, okay. Without saying anything I added a few more eggs to the pan while she got another plate out. This was sort of our morning routine. If someone had already started making breakfast before the other was up, just make some of them when they got up.

'Hey... what are you doing up this early?' Reina said looking at the clock. It was a little after six in the morning.

'I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. Is there something wrong with that?' I asked defensive, I don't handle mornings well.

'No, It's just a little unusual. Especially for a Saturday.' My head shot up and I stared at her.

'Isn't today Monday?' I could have sworn it was.

'Yeah right, is that why you are up so early?' She laughed.

'No, Sorta; are you sure it's Saturday?' She nodded. 'But I could have sworn it was Monday.'

She shook her head. 'It is definitely Saturday. Why did you even think that today's Monday?'

'Because of the... never mind. I guess I just had a really vivid dream last night.' I said hoping she wouldn't ask any more questions. She didn't, I could tell she wanted to, but she just kept whatever she was thinking to herself.

I finished making the eggs and loaded our plates full of them. We went up to our room and ate in silence. When we finished Reina cleaned up. I went over to my side of the room and started surfing the web. We weren't really doing anything when Seraina and Mell came into our room.

'Hey, guys what's up?' I asked, uninterested.

'Well, actually something.' Mell said. I looked up, wondering what they were talking about.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, every now and then the school hosts a Battle. Where you have...'

'Where you have to either capture the other team or their base?' I said, remembering my dream, that I thought wasn't a dream. Everybody looked shocked, but I was used to it by now. Mell nodded, then looked at Reina.

'Don't look at me. I didn't say a thing. Although, now it makes sense why you thought today was Monday.'

'You mean it's real?!' I couldn't believe what was happening. I thought the strange things would stop when I came here, but I was wrong.

'Yes; where did you hear about it?'

'My dream.' I began to tell them about my dream. When I finished the looks, I got were a range of shocked, awed and worried.

'Taylor,' I recognized Mell's tone. It was the 'I'm going to tell you something really crazy but important' tone. 'I think your dream was a glimpse into the future. Actually, I think that most of your daydreams are too.'

'You aren't including them,' I was hoping she wasn't including the nightmare I had.

'Yes; I am.' I didn't know what to do. So, I did the thing I was getting really good at. I fainted. Again.

This time when I woke up, I was in my bed. I could hear Mell and

Reina arguing about taking me to the infirmary. Seraina was sitting on Reina's bed. She was obviously in charge of making sure I was okay, but she seemed more interested in the conversation than me.

'As I said, I could just send her to the nurse to make sure she's okay,' Seraina said, not even looking at me. She wasn't very good at her job.

'No! I'd rather not have my Charge end up like my alarm clock,' Mell said, obviously alarmed.

Finally, I fake coughed, to get their attention. 'I'm glad you guys are so concerned about me, but unfortunately for you, I'm fine.'

'Yes; very unfortunate.' Mell said sarcastically. She glared at Seraina, who smiled sheepishly, obviously embarrassed. 'Are you sure you're, all right?'

'Yeah, just a little tired of fainting all of the time.' I said, dryly.

'Well, I think we better go talk to the nurse. Make sure you are okay and see if you should take part in today's Battle.' I nodded and let Mell lead me to the nurses.

When we get to the nurse's building, I see something that makes me scream, and nearly faint again. Actually, it was someone. I had never actually met him before, but I still knew him. I knew him from a daydream I had almost a year ago.

I grabbed my bag and ran out the door. And right into a boy about to knock. He was about my age, but several inches taller. He had wavy auburn hair and pale green eyes.

'Taylor Ever night?' He said.

'Yes, why do you want to know?' I asked, wondering how he knew my name. In response, he held up an envelope.

'This is for you.' He said, handing it to me. I looked at it for a minute and when I looked back up, he was gone. Inside the envelope was an invitation to a ball.

I stared at the boy. Wondering if what had happened in my dream would happen again. I wanted to chase him down and ask him why I met him in my daydream, but I couldn't do that. Not with Mell here. I went with her to the nurse to see if I should take part in the Battle instead.

Apparently, fainting does not qualify as a suitable reason to miss the Battle - much to Mell's amazement. Because I ended up right back where I was in my dream. But the results were diffe rent. Very different. I couldn't fade into the air or the water. Heck, I could barely control the water. Scratch that. I couldn't control it at all. And I got captured, about four different times. And we lost. Big time - It ended up being a miserable failure on all counts.

I trudged back into my dorm room, after getting my butt kicked in every way, shape, and form. I walked in and landed face down on my comforter. All I needed now was some ice. And maybe a chance to redo today, with the results I got in my dream. I got neither.

Instead, I got a knock on my door. I didn't bother getting up. I figured that if it was really important, they'd just walk in, or say something. They didn't. Instead, they slid something under the door. I turned on my side to look at it. And promptly went back to my stomach. I had never been this sore in my life. It hurt to move. It hurt not to move. But mostly, it hurt to breathe.

Eventually, the pain was bearable enough for me to get up. I walked over to the door and picked up what was slid underneath. It was an envelope, with my name on it. I tore it open, read and nearly had a heart attack.

Taylor Ever night, we would like to cordially invite you to the Thousand Bell Ball as our guest of honor. As our newest student, it would be an honor to be able to celebrate your talents. This will take

place on the thirteenth of the month starting at 6 P.M sharp. Dinner is included. This is a black-tie affair, so please dress appropriately. Please respond as soon as you are able to. We hope to see you there.

As soon as I finish reading, I dropped the invitation. It is the exact same one as the one from my old daydream.

Okay, first let me apologize, for taking so long to finish this chapter. I had writer's block, then I just didn't bother to write it anymore. Second, let me say that I know this chapter is really long; you could say I was trying to compensate for taking so long, but really, a lot just HAD to happen in this chapter. So, without any further ado, let me present to you!

Chapter 11

I wanted nothing more than to figure out why all of this was happening to me. It wasn't normal. Nothing in my life was normal anymore. Heck, I wasn't even human anymore. Although, technically, I guess I was never human. But at least before I had thought I was human- I thought I was normal. Now I couldn't even pretend I was human; not when every time I looked in the mirror, I saw a giant pair of freaking wings.

I know that I was all excited and everything when I first found out, but now the novelty and excitement were starting to wear off, and I was starting to see them for what they really were: a big, fat pain in the butt. Plus, I finally realized how life-changing all of this crap was. I could never go back to the place that I called home. I'd never get to see the people I called my parents for the first fifteen years of my life- not that that was terrible, but still, it hurts a little. Add the fact that, not only am I adopted, but I'm also a freak with wings, and it tends to be at least a little traumatic.

At least, it certainly seems like it would be. It felt like it was.

Hopefully, that would be considered enough of an excuse for me to crumple into a heap on my bed, bawling after that stupid invitation fluttered to the ground. Sure, I've cried before. I cried when my grandma- at least I thought she was my grandma at the time- died when I was nine. I cried that time when I was five and my hand was crushed by a door, breaking two fingers and severely bruising the rest of my hand. I've cried several times in my life, but I've always had a good reason to. Although, I guess everything that had been happening to me- being yanked away from my family and being thrown into, well, another world- did qualify as a good reason, and if it didn't, then this world was even more screwed up than my old one.

It was at about that moment that Reina decided it would be a good time to walk in. I can only imagine what I must have looked like; curled into a little ball at the end of my bed, bawling my eyes out with what probably looked like a small note on the floor in front of me. She must have taken one look at the scene in front of her, dropped whatever it was that she had been holding, and immediately ran over to me, crouching in front of me. She started rubbing my back and muttering something that I couldn't understand. Although, I had the sneaking suspicion that she wasn't exactly speaking English. Not that it really mattered, I probably wouldn't be able to understand her if she was; I was crying too hard to hear anything besides my sobs.

'What's wrong?' She asked when I had finally calmed down enough that I'd most likely be able to form a coherent sentence. I would have been able to, too, if it weren't for the stupid hiccups that I would get after every single stinking time I'd cry.

'What's- hiccup- wrong? What's right- hiccup? My life has been- hiccup- become a bad sci-fi movie that would- hiccup- be on Lifetime!' I yelled, followed by an attack of hiccups and coughing. To my surprise, Reina started laughing.

'What?' I asked, wondering if I should be offended or not.

'You,' she said. That would be a yes; I should be offended, apparently.

'What- hiccup's that supposed to mean?' I asked with as much dignity as I could manage- which really wasn't a- lot.

'What you said; It's so true... although, I really don't think that they'd put a sci-fi movie on the Lifetime network.'

I let out a shallow laugh. 'No, just movies about girls getting pregnant at ten, finding out your dating-slash-married to a serial killer, and then finding out you were stolen at birth and actually belong in some faraway land; all in the same movie,' I said. We looked at each other for a moment and then burst into hysterical fits of laughter, followed by Reina snorting, which resulted in us laughing even harder. When we finally calmed down a little, the tears that were streaming down my face were from lack of breath. I don't know why either of, us found that so funny, but it felt really good to laugh like that again. I couldn't remember the last time I had laughed that hard- it must have been at least several months, maybe even more.

After I managed to catch my breath, I just kind of sat there, not really sure what I was supposed to do now. Almost unconsciously, I picked up my invitation and read it over again. Reina just stared at it with her mouth hanging open. She seemed to be in complete shock.

'Taylor?' she finally managed to say.

'What?' With the ways she was staring, I was starting to wonder just what it was that I was holding.

'What is that?' Her voice was shallow, almost timid. Instead of explaining, I simply shrugged and handed her the paper. She read it over quickly, her mouth dropping open more and more with each passing sentence until it got to the point that I actually thought that her mouth was going to come unhinged and hit the floor.

'Where did you get this?' When she said it, it came out as a squeak.

'Someone- slid it under the door; why?'

'Why? Do you even know what this is?'

'Um... an invitation?' I said, ignoring her glare for my smart-aleck comment. 'No, I don't really know what it is.'

'This is an invitation to the Thousand Bell Ball!'

'Yeah, I got that much from the invitation,' I said, dryly.

'Do you realize what that is?'

'A dance?'

'It's only the most important ball that is held here! The king and queen even come, and you are the guest of honor!'

'King and queen?'

'Yeah, of most of the Telikens, and actually, most others that don't belong to certain clans,' she said. I just stared at her blankly.

'So, why am I invited then? I'm not exactly the most 'talented' person here, as the invite said.'

'How am I supposed to know? I was hoping you could tell me.'

'Probably not; think I'm not going.'

'Ha! Good one,' she said, laughing.

'I'm not joking.'

'Oh, you are going. There is no way you are going to pass up that chance.'

'There's one little problem, Reina: I. Don't. Dance. As in, I don't know-how. Not the kind of stuff that would be at a 'ball'.'

'I'll help you.'

'No, I have a better idea: I won't go.'

'You will. I'll make sure of it.'

'I refuse to make a fool of myself.'

'I'll make sure you don't.'

'And just how do you plan on doing that?' I asked. Reina just smiled.

'You'll see.'

I thought that that was the end of the conversation. I went on with life as usual and never mentioned the ball again. Neither did Reina. A week had passed and by then I figured that she forgot, or at least, I hoped she had.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

'Wake up!' Reina yelled, hitting me with a pillow.

'No, I'm sleeping.'

'Not anymore,' she said, pulling my comforter off of me and hitting me again. I sat up and glared at her.

'Is this really necessary?'

'Yes... Do you know what today is?'

'Saturday; the day I sleep in. Which is what I'm going to continue doing now if you don't mind?'

'I do mind, and it isn't just a Saturday, it's the thirteenth.'

'So?'

'So, you can't sleep the day away. It's already one, you have to get ready.'

'No, I have to sleep. Good night. Oh, and if you hit me with that pillow one more time, I'm going to kill you.'

'I don't care; you have to wake up.'

'No, I don't. Let me sleep.'

'Not a chance,' she said, and then proceeded to beat me with the pillow.

'Fine; I give up!' I yelled, throwing the covers that Reina hadn't already stolen from me off. Reina just smiled, not even bothering to get rid of the pillow.

'Excellent, now go get ready,' she said, whacking me with that cursed pillow one more time.

'I'm going! Was that really necessary?'

'No, but it is fun.'

I glared at her as I went into the bathroom. By the time I finished showering and getting ready for the day, it was almost four. I walked back into our room; my hair was still damp and hanging in rat tails.

'What do you want me to do?' I asked through gritted teeth. I was still mad about this, but I wasn't going to push Reina. I was certain that that pillow wasn't filled with nice soft feathers. A bunch of rocks, maybe, or possibly a pound of bricks, but whatever was in, it hurt.

'Sit here,' she said, pointing to a chair that was moved to the middle of the room. 'Oh, and don't complain.'

'What are you going to do?' I asked, warily.

'Your hair, makeup, and anything else that I feel like,' she said, cheerfully.

Instead of going to the chair, I walked right back into the bathroom and grabbed a bottle that was on my side of the sink. 'Well, if you're going to be doing my hair, then I think that you're going to need this,' I said, handing her my most beloved bottle of detangling spray.

'I don't think I'll need that; your hair is still wet,' she said with a laugh. I shrugged my shoulders and sat in the chair, taking the bottle with me anyways. Reina got the brush through my hair roughly twice before the first brush broke in half and the second one was lost in my thick, blonde mess- don't get me wrong, I love my hair, but it is a major pain in the butt- and she started cursing in several languages. I committed some of what she was saying to memory and offered her the bottle with a smirk.

'Do I need to say it?' I asked.

'If you do, you're going to end up like the first brush,' she growled, taking the bottle. I kept my mouth shut. After using about half of the bottle- which, to her credit, it usually takes about three-fourths of it when I use it- my hair was brushed and pulled into an elaborate up-do that I'd never be able to get out of my head. I had to have had at least a thousand bobby pins in my hair, and only a small section on either side of my face was not pulled back. My makeup was done in a way that managed to make my dark blue eyes look even bluer and made me look completely stunning.

'Okay, now it's time for your dress,' she said, bouncing up and down. 'I have to say, I'm in love with whoever packed for you, I want to borrow that magenta gown you have some time.'

I nodded, my eyes widening as she pulled out the dress, she wanted me to wear and then widening even more when I saw the shoes. The dress was stunning; it was several shades of blue, going from a dark midnight blue at the bodice to a pale, almost translucent blue at the bottom where it brushes the floor.

The sleeves were sheer, and wrapped around the top of the dress, connecting them to the bodice making it appear to be a frosted dark blue. There was no way I was going to be able to pull it off. Especially not if she expected me to wear the five-inch silver stilettoes she was holding in her other hand.

'Are you trying to kill me?' I cried. 'There is no way I can walk in those shoes!'

'Payback for the brush,' she said with a smirk.

'I am going to die,' I muttered.

'Just shut up and get dressed.'

I obeyed, slipping into the dress and shoes. The dress seemed to be made for me specifically, forming a to my body perfectly, creating a shape I normally would never be able to have. The shoes actually weren't that bad either, walking in them was just about impossible, but they were cute, at least. I walked- okay, I stumbled- back into the room to see Reina in a knee-length, gray dress and a pair of black flats.

'Why is it you get a pair of flats and I'm stuck in these death traps?' I asked, tripping over myself once again.

'Because no one is going to see me,' she said with a wink before disappearing completely from view.

'What the heck?' I cried, before realizing that she was right in front of my face; although, she was about the size of a toothpick now. I stared at her, transfixed by her sudden transformation.

'What? You didn't think I got into Skoufyceol only because of my wit and good looks, did you?' she said, landing on my shoulder. I looked over and I could just barely see her translucent wings for the first time ever. 'My dad's a pixie, therefore, I'm a half-pixie, and I'm going to make sure you don't make a complete fool of yourself tonight.'

'Gee, thanks,' I said dryly.

'No problem, now we should go before we're late. I don't know what it was like at your old school, but here, there is no such thing as 'fashionably late'.'

I managed to find the ballroom- this school even had a ballroom?!- just in time. Reina was right: there was no 'fashionably late' here.

Everyone was on time and dressed just as- if not more- regally than I was. A guard stood at each door and for the first time, I started to wonder about how Reina was going be able to get in. She was somehow undetected when I entered the ballroom and she kept whispering commands to me- most of which was to find my seat.

But, as soon as I set foot in the room, I was frozen in awe. The decorations were incredible, and I immediately understood the ball's name. Bells and chimes were hung everywhere, and candles were lit to make it look even more wonderful. Large tables were set up around what I assumed would be the dance floor. The table at the back- or maybe it was the head- of the room had only three chairs and Reina said that it was for the royal family.

'Yoo-hoo! Earth to Taylor?' Reina yelled into my ear, snapping me out of my trance. 'I know it's pretty and all, but the royal family is going to be arriving any minute now and you really need to find your seat.'

I did as I was told and found my seat not a moment too soon. Almost as soon as I sit down the double doors leading to the ballroom- which had been closed after everyone else entered- opened and three people walked in. It was easy to tell who they were just from the way they carried themselves, although the guy announcing that the king, queen, and princess had just entered did quell any doubts. Everyone stood and bowed so I mirrored them, but I was a little later than everyone else, so I probably looked ridiculous. Nobody seemed to notice, and the royal family began to walk towards their seats. As they passed by me, I couldn't shake the feeling that they looked very familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

The Royals took their seats, and so did the rest of us. Food was served shortly afterward and then the dancing began. I avoided it at all costs; staying back by my table and saying, that my feet were sore- which, mind you, they were killing me- whenever anyone asked me to dance, which luckily only happened once. Mostly, I watched the royals dance. I couldn't shake the feeling that they looked really familiar, but I still couldn't place how it would be that I knew them.

'Hello, Taylor,' I heard from behind me while I was watching some of the dancers. I spun around and came face to face with the queen. I gasped as I finally realized why they were so familiar. I could help but stare into her blue eyes- the same exact blue as mine. I couldn't believe I hadn't realized it before; I was the spitting image of the queen. I'm sure that my mouth dropped open and everything when I realized this. The king walked up behind his wife- the princess following closely by, inspecting her manicure- and smiled down at me.

'Bow,' Reina whispered hoarsely. I bowed stiffly, but couldn't take my eyes off of the queen.

'Taylor, dear, I think it's time we explained some things to you,' she said.

'You can come too, Reina,' the king said. Reina gasped. I nodded and followed them out of the room in a trance-like state.

Today was the day, the day that caused my ending. Today was also the day that Lexy and Naddalin broke up and somehow, I finally found the courage to go over and talk to him. It was the end of the sixth period and I was in the hallway when I walked over to Naddalin, who was by his locker.

'Hi.' I said softly.

'Uh, hi?' he replied, shutting his locker and turning around to face me. 'Anything I can do for you?' Naddalin looked me up and down.

Before, as I could respond, Lexy strutted over to us and wrapped her arms around Naddalin, giving him a quick peck on the lips. I was shocked, I mean, I thought they broke up! Lexy turned her head and finally noticed me standing there.

'Oh hey, I know you!' She exclaimed, lifting up my chin to get a better look at me. 'You're that little emo girl that's going out with Ben, right?'

I opened up my mouth to correct her when I heard a voice say, 'Ew, gross!' It was Ben's.

He popped up from somewhere and walked over to us.

'Why would I want to go out with that little runt for?'

People said that he and Lexy were like sisters, since he had green eyes just like her, only darker and he had the same dark black hair, but it was an in a short mop head sort of way. He also had milky pale skin, which sometimes turned red when he spoke, so it made him look like he was blushing, even when he wasn't.

'We're not really going out, we're just friends.' I clarified.

'I'm so not your friend, alright? Get that clear!' Ben cried.

'But, how can you say that, Ben? We've been best friends since we could talk!'

'Well, that's all over now, ya hear?'

I felt fresh tears roll down my cheeks.

'Aw, Ben, now look what you've done, you made the poor little girl cry!' Lexy joked.

All three of them laughed in my face and soon some other people joined in. I felt so humiliated that I ran into the bathroom and into the biggest stall. There I slid down the wall and hid my face in my hands, soaking them with my tears.

Why? Why does this always happen to me? What did I ever do to deserve all this? I thought to myself.

I didn't know the answer to all those questions, but I did know how to end it all. I wiped all my tears away then walked over to the sinks, over them were little mirrors. I took one look at them and pictured Ben's face in it with a sneer on his face.

'Do it, I dare ya!' he seemed to be saying to me.

I closed my eyes and punched it as hard as I could be shattering the mirror and sending tiny pieces of glass everywhere. Immediately, I felt pain shot through my soft skin and felt blood trickling down my arm and onto the clean, white floor. Then, I picked up the biggest shard of glass from the ground and sliced it across my veins. I closed my eyes and dropped to the ground as soon as I heard loud clicking footsteps.

I felt so happy inside then, I felt nothing for a while, but then as I was brought back to life, I felt it again. The pain, the agony, the torture. No, I didn't die, I survived it since the cut wasn't too deep. After that people stopped picking on me, instead they just stared at me with hate in their eyes. They were all mad at me because I ruined their perfect school rep.

After that, it all went downhill, or so I thought. Ariana decided to send me to a therapist. I protested, but she said it was the only way to fix this mess and ensure that I would never try something like that ever again. I would be meeting her at nine-thirty tomorrow, which means no school for me.

Ariana drove me to the place and then left to get to her job. I sighed and walked up the steps and into the room. That's where I met her, my therapist. She was nice but different from other adults. She was all so peppy and happy as if nothing could get her down. Her name was Emmailia, I've never heard of a name like that. Emmailia had long black hair and a small fairy-like face, with a slim body and a sweet voice.

I wonder what she'll think of me. I thought to myself.

I sighed again and walked forward.

'Hello there, Keysaha,' she said when she saw me. 'Take a seat.'

I sat down on a black leather love seat across from the red one that she was seated at and stared down at my hands. I had put a skin-tight long-sleeved top and a black hoodie on to hide the bandage on my left wrist, but now as I was sitting in front of Emmailia, I felt like she knew it was there.

'Now, I understand why you are here but do you?' She continued.

'Yes.' I nodded my head.

'I hear you're having problems at school; you want to tell me about that?'

I didn't know what to say, should I tell her or not? I mean, I don't know her, and I don't need her feeling bad for me or anything.

'Don't worry, I won't tell anyone, I'm great at keeping secrets. I won't tell a soul.' Emmailia joked, putting her index finger to her red lips.

I sighed and stared down at the ground.

'Take your time, sweetie, I won't rush you.'

I smiled a little, she was really nice. Nicer to me than anyone I've ever met in Greensburg. She was nice to me as a friend, like Ben used to be. Ben, oh Ben, how you changed! Tears sprung from my eyes and I began sobbing silently.

'Oh, it's alright, dear, you don't need to tell if you don't wish to.' Emmailia assured me.

'I-I hate my life.' I told her.

Emmailia came over to me and gave me a tight hug, for a while I sat there crying on her shoulder as she stayed still. After a couple of minutes, I stopped and leaned back on the couch. Emmailia went and got me some soda, I drank it and then handed the glass back to her.

'Alright, then, are you ready to talk now?' she asked me.

I nodded my head again. I began telling Emmailia about all that's happened to me since I was eight years old and all the despair, I've been through till now. She listened quietly and nodded a few

times as if she understood how it felt to be through all that. When I was done, I was close to starting crying again, but I swallowed back my tears.

'Listen, sweetie, you may think there is no one in this world that is like you, but I know someone that is.' Emmailia told me.

'Who?' I asked curiously.

'My daughter, she was so much like you that she even did the same thing you tried to.'

I looked up at her and saw Emmailia looking down. She was so young and married? She didn't look a day over twenty-eight.

'I know what you're thinking, how could a girl so young possibly have a child. Well, I've had a few problems with my life just like you,' she said, looking up and into my eyes. 'Anyway, I have a question for you, Keysaha.'

'Yes, what is it?'

'Who are you currently living with?'

'With my f-' I stopped in mid-sentence, thinking back to how Ben said he wasn't my friend anymore. 'With Ben and his parents.'

'Why is that? Don't you live with your parents?' Emmailia asked softly.

'No, I don't know what happened to them.' I answered her.

'Well, then, do you enjoy living with Ben?' Emmailia said Ben's name as if it were an unusual name, which it was.

'Well, his parents are really nice, but it's really hard since Ben is no mean to me now.'

Emmailia's face broke into a smile and I could see happiness light up in her eyes again.

'Well, then I have a proposition for you, dear!' she exclaimed.

'Would you like to know what it is?'

I nodded my head quickly; I had a feeling that it would be something good just by noticing Emmailia's sudden enthusiasm. 'How would you like to come live with me now?'

'I-I would love to, but I-I don't want to be a bother.' I stuttered.

'Ah, don't worry, it's no big deal! I could always use another hand around the house!' she insisted.

'Well, I guess I could.'

'That's great, I'll pick you up tomorrow with some adoption papers for Ben's parents to sign and we'll be well on our way to California!'

I wondered why Emmailia lived in California if she had a job all the way over here in Pa, but before I could ask, a small redheaded lady came into the room to tell me that Ariana was here to pick me up.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Keysaha!' Emmailia called.

'Bye!' I called back over my shoulder.

Man, I can't wait until tomorrow! I thought

The next day, I quickly took a shower and after putting on my clothes, I went to go pack. I looked at my reflection in the mirror one last time.

Hmm, I look pretty good with no glasses and my hair wet. I thought.

I shook my head, smiling and then walked out of the bathroom. My smile broke and fell when I noticed Ben walking past my room. He stopped for a minute and saw my bag on top of my bed, then up at me. I sighed and looked down, then started walking again. I was about to enter my room when I felt Ben grab my hand.

'Where are you going?' He demanded.

'I-I'm leaving.' I stuttered.

Ben pulled me close to him and brought his face down to mine.

'Why?'

'I'm going to California to go live with Emmailia.'

Ben tightened his grip on my hand and I felt my skin starting to burn, my wound was still not healed as of yet and still really hurt.

'Ow, Ben, you're hurting me!' I cried.

'Don't leave me!' He shouted.

'But, I-I thought you didn't like me.'

Ben cupped my face with one and leaned close to me, his eyes locked on mine.

'I don't, but who should I tease when you're not here?'

'Ben, your' I cut myself off when Ben started leaning closer and closer to me.

'I hate you; I hate you so much Keysaha!' he said.

Usually, I would've felt hurt if Ben was saying all this to me right now, but right now I felt nothing. I was moving away to a new place, to a new life and I don't need something stupid getting in my way. I knew what Ben was trying to do, he's done this before. When I tried to run away one time, he made me believe that he still liked me, but it was all just a ploy.

A stupid plan to get me to stay, so he could humiliate and torture me some more with his friends. I pulled myself away from Ben and slammed the door in his face. Then, I began packing my clothes and everything else that I needed.

After I was sure that everything was packed, I grabbed my bags and headed into the kitchen, where I saw Ben eating some toast. He looked up when he saw me with an angry look on his face, but I just looked the other way.

'Mom, why is Keysaha leaving?' I heard him ask.

'Keysaha is going to California, so she can start her life afresh.' Ariana answered.

'And you're just going to let her go!'

'Yes, we actually think it's good for her.' Emma agreed.

Ding dong the doorbell rang.

'Oh, that must be Emmailia!'

'We'll be back, we just have to go sign the adoption papers.'

Emma and Ariana went to go answer the door and I was left all alone with Ben. I knew what was coming and I tried my best to avoid it, but it was of no use. Ben got up and walked over to me, he raised his hand and my body tensed.

'Don't I at least deserve a goodbye kiss?' he asked.

'I-' I cut was cut off by Ben's lips.

He kissed me hard, but I didn't kiss him back. I felt nothing for him now. All the love and respect I had for him is now gone and filled with hatred and disgust. I tried biting his lip to get him to stop, but he still didn't. He finally did when he heard Emmailia's voice from the other room.

'I've always liked you, Keysaha, but I was afraid to admit it to you or to anyone. I cared more about my rep than I did for you,' he said. 'If you stay now, then I'll never get my punishment, so it's better if you just go now and never come back!'

I was shocked to hear that I stood frozen when Emmailia came into the kitchen.

'Ready to go, Keysaha?' She asked me.

'Huh? Oh yeah.' I stammered.

I took one last look at Ben before I left, and I saw his head down, but he picked it up and I saw his face red. And for the first time I knew it wasn't because he talked, it was because he really meant it. I can't believe it; I can't believe Ben actually felt that way about me. And he decides to tell me when I'm leaving! What kind of person does something like that? I blushed as I felt myself forgive him.

I got into Emmailia's sweet ride, it was a bright red Mustang, which was my dream car. Emmailia got in next to me and turned on the radio.

'What would you like to dear, sweetie?' she asked me.

'Anything is fine.' I told her.

Emmailia switched through the stations as she drove with one hand, she finally stopped on a song by Metro Station called California. I smiled as I listened and stared out the window.

'Well, we're going to be stuck in this car for about twenty-one hours, so that gives us plenty of time to catch up on things. So, you want to tell me what was going on with you and that Ben kid?'

Emmailia and I talked for a while and then I began asking her some questions about her, and I learned a quite lot. I even found out why she lives in California and goes to work so far.

'Well, you see, Keysaha, I've left my daughter in the care of my sister and my agent told me that if I come here, I could get more money,' she explained. 'I wasn't doing so great back in Cali, but now I miss my little girl and I want to get back to her.'

'Oh. So, what's your daughter like?' I questioned.

'Ah, Petunia's had a few problems in her life, much like me, but now it's all good. Now she has some friends who take of her and love her, what else could I ask for?'

'Hmm, nice, Emmailia and Petunia, that sounds cute.' I commented.

'You know what sounds cuter?'

'No, what?'

'Emmailia, Petunia, and Keysaha.'

I smiled and leaned over to give her a little hug.

'You're going to love her, I promise.' Emmailia said.

'I hope so.' I whispered.

I started out the window and looked at the great view.

I wonder what she'll be like was my last thought before I drifted off to sleep.

When I woke up again, I yawned and stretched a little, before sitting up in my seat to get a better look at where we were. Well, I wasn't sure if you were in California yet or not, it was really hard to tell. I turned around and looked for Emmailia, she wasn't in her seat. I heard a small yawn from the back seat and turned to look over there, and there she was.

'Hey, girl, how'd ya sleep?' she asked me.

'Fine.' 'You?' I answered.

'Great. But I think we should get back on the road.'

'How much longer are we going to be here? I'm starving.'

'A few more hours and don't worry, while you were sleeping, I got us some food.'

Emmailia stepped over and plopped down on her seat and started the engine. She handed me a burger and a medium-sized soda before she started to drive again. For the remaining hours, I ate, drank, stared out the window some more, and even thought about Ben for a while. Once we finally got to Emmailia's beautiful mansion, which I still don't know how she got this much money from, I was so totally pooped! I was so tired, I could hardly stand, Emmailia had to practically drag me into the house.

'Wait here, I'll go find Petunia, alright?' she said to me leaving me in the hall.

I nodded, at least I think I did. I looked around the house a little with my eyes half-open. All of a sudden, I found myself on the ground. I opened my eyes to see a guy right on top of me! I blushed as I realized that I must've looked like a total mess in front of such a cute guy like him.

'Oh, I-I'm so sorry!' He apologized, rushing to get off of me.

'It-it's fine.' I said.

The guy held out his hand, I took it and he helped me up. I looked to the side and saw two other girls there, I assumed one of them was Petunia. Emmailia walked into the room and looked at all of us together.

'What'd I miss?' She asked.

'Nothing, just the fact that Mac just squashed my new sister!' Petunia answered.

She practically ran over to me and grabbed me in a huge hug.

'Hi, my name's Petunia and you are?'

'Being hugged to death!' I checked out.

Petunia released me, and I huffed.

'Yeah, she has the habit of doing that a lot,' the other girl added.

'My name's Susan, by the way.'

Had petunia the same long black hair and brown eyes as her mother and Susan had layered brown hair and the cutest purple eyes?

Part: 15

'Hi, my name is Keysaha.' I said.

'And this is my brother-' Susan was cut off by the guy.

'Mac.' He answered, smiling at me.

Marco held out his hand and I shook it.

'Nice to meet you all.'

'Hey, what happened to your hand?' Mac asked me.

Both girls turned to look at me and at my hand.

'Oh, I-I just...'

'Ah, Keysaha, you must be tired! Petunia, go show Keysaha to your room.'

'Alright, mom!'

Petunia took my hand and then took me upstairs to her room. Her room looked great, it was all decorated with band posters and stickers with celebrities on them. It was like Hollywood Heaven! There was only one bed though, I stared at it and soon enough Petunia had noticed.

'Oh, didn't mom tell you? You're going to be sleeping in my room tonight and then mom's going to buy you a bed tomorrow to put in your new room!' she explained.

'Oh, so where will you be sleeping?' I looked around to see if there was any space for her to sleep; there wasn't.

'Floor.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to take your bed away.' I apologized.

'Eh, no worries, it's only for one night.'

'You sure there's no room for the both of us?' I suggested.

'Yeah, I guess we could.' She agreed.

For a while, Petunia and I stayed up talking and then came the subject back to my arm, I thought of a way to avoid by asking her a question.

'So, Mac?' I asked slowly.

'Oh, he and his sisters are our neighbors and my best friends,' Petunia answered. 'And I'm kind of the reason why he fell on top of you. Sorry.'

'Hey, it's alright, I forgive you.'

'Oh, we're going to have the best time together!' Petunia grabbed me into another hug and this time I didn't really care how tight she was holding on to me.

I've never felt this loved one day by a person I just met a few hours ago. I think I'm actually going to like it here, but I really shouldn't get my hopes up too high.

'I hope you don't mind; I listen to music at night, it helps me fall asleep.'

'No, no, it's fine.'

I've always wanted to do that back at Ben's house, but Ben didn't like my music and he didn't want me disturbing his 'beauty sleep.'

So, anyway, the two of us both soon fell asleep to 'About A Girl' by The Academy Is... When I woke up in the morning, I felt so groggy, so I decided to go take a quick shower and when I was coming back to Petunia's room - with new clothes on, hair wet, and no glasses - I met Mac again.

'Hey morning,' he said, smiling sweetly.

'Hi...' I replied sweetly.

He was really cute and seeing him made me feel all flustered up because he was the first guy to ever talk to me in so long! Mac had the skater boy haircut and the emo-like clothes. His eyes were a light shade of blue and his lips were a rosy pink. In one hand was a can of soda and in the other was a small bag of cookies. Watching him eat, made me feel hungry, but I promised myself that I would be a better person here. I'm going to change my personality and be nothing like the person I am back home.

Anyway, after we all three girls ate breakfast together, Emmailia went mattress shopping at Sleepy's and Petunia took me out site seeing. After that, we went back home, and I got to see my new room. So far, there was not a single thing in there, well except for my bed, which seemed to have camouflaged in with all the white walls.

'So, what do you think?' Petunia asked me.

'It's so... clean.' I managed.

Petunia laughed and pulled me inside.

'Come on, I'll help you trick it out like mine.'

'Can we help too?' I heard a voice say.

Petunia and I turned around and saw Susan and Mac in the doorway.

'Hey, the more the merrier.' Petunia said.

I just nodded my head.

We sat around for a while, deciding what to do first.

'Well, I think the first thing to do would be to paint it, that way it'd be easier.' Susan pointed out.

So, it was decided, first we'd paint, then we'd pull in all the furniture and other stuff.

'So, what color would you like?' Petunia asked me.

'Hmm, blue and black.' I answered.

'Alright, so do you want like half the walls black and the other half blue?' Susan asked.

'I don't know, that'd look a little weird, I think.'

'Oh hey, I have an idea! Why don't we paint all the walls blue and then splatter black on them?' Mac suggested.

'Yeah, that'd be great!'

We all started and then finished an hour and a half later, when we were done, we were all starving.

'Hey, kids, how about some ice cream?' Emmailia asked, coming into the room with four scones of ice cream; two in each hand. 'What flavor would you like Keysaha?'

My first instinct would be to say chocolate, but then I remembered what I had promised myself and changed my answer to strawberry since I absolutely hated vanilla. After we finished our little lunch, Mac helped haul all the furniture into the room, since he was the only guy and he was the strongest out of all three of us.

Right now, I had a little white drawer, white walk-in closet, and lots more! It looked so totally awesome and it was so much bigger and better than my old house. I was so tired that as soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep. When I woke up again around eight-thirty, I went to go get a drink of water from downstairs. When I walked past the living room, I heard Emmailia and Petunia talking, I didn't want to eavesdrop in on their conversation, but I stopped when I heard them talking about me.

'Listen, sweetie, Keysaha is going to be going to your school in two days, so make sure you take care of her.' Emmailia said.

'I will mom, don't worry!' Petunia assured her.

'Don't leave her anywhere and help her find her classes, and especially don't let Milly get anywhere near her. You remember what she did to you, and I don't need another incident from Keysaha.'

'I promise I won't.'

I gasped when I heard that I had to go back to school and that too to a school with another popular girl. I went back up to my room and thought about this.

Oh, what am I gonna do? I thought.

I was about to finish the last bite of my tuna sandwich when Jai, my Korean BFF, nudged my elbow sharply on the cafeteria table. I managed to pop the remaining sandwich into my mouth and asked her, 'What?' With my mouth full.

She gave me a disapproving look. Jai always picks on me about my lack of table manners so just to piss her more, I chewed on the food deliberately with loud munching sounds. 'What?' I asked again.

'He's staring at you?' She said briefly in her halting English then turned away to look down on her own plate.

'Who?'

I was silently hoping it wasn't Mr. Vagner, our High School principal. He was monitoring me because I was behind with my school tuition all the time. He was worried if my mom was still being an irresponsible mother. What did go wrong now? Surely, the school year had just started?

I pondered on the question as I forced to swallow the suddenly tasteless sandwich down my throat. I ducked to peek over my shoulder. Well, nothing was really unusual. The cafeteria was packed with students eating their lunches. Same as all the other lunch breaks all year round.

With one exception, maybe. The day when Jai transferred to Providence High School two years ago. Everybody was curious about the new Korean girl who could hardly even speak English.

I whirled back to Jai. 'Who?'

She shrugged and moved her eyes toward the far end of the cafeteria. I followed her gaze and suddenly my heartbeat quickened as blood rushed to my face.

Therefrom the table at the far end of the cafeteria was Gabriel Sinclair. He was oblivious to his football teammates who were laughing and joking around with each other as he openly stared at me.

It was as if my stomach lurched up to my throat. It was funny my first instinct was to wipe my mouth, fearing my tuna sandwich had left a crumb somewhere.

I heard Jai stifled a laugh. My blushed deepened. I wished I had listened to Jai's lessons about table manners before it was too late. Gabe probably thought how so un-lady-like I was, gobbling down my food carelessly and talking with a mouth full.

But wait. Why in the world should I care about what this Mr.?

Popular thought about me?

The deep blush was still on my face, but I was a little angry now than embarrass. I stared back at him fiercely giving him the 'okay-so-I-am-like this... so-what?' stare. He seemed to flinched from my irritated gaze as our eyes locked. He looked away abruptly.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I asked accusingly at Jai.

Her cute chancy eyes seemed to sparkle with amusement. It annoyed me even more.

'I did tell you.' She pointed out. She was right, actually.

'You didn't tell me it was Gabe.' I was still angry at her even so that I didn't want to simply just dropped the subject.

'So now it was my fault?' She hissed and rolled her eyes.

'Yes.' I snorted.

I took a careful peek again towards the last table on the far end. He wasn't looking at me anymore. I was relieved, but a pang of disappointment was mingling on my thought. What had he been thinking to stare at me like that?

I am no raving beauty at all. Being the only half-Filipino over two thousand plus of the student population, it should have been an advantage, I knew a lot of people who remarked how beautiful my olive skin was- (which I got from Mom) only if my hair didn't go as wild as it was forming a riot of Halo over my head and only if my eyes were a different color rather than black or if my lips were only a little thinner...

Seriously, what had he been thinking?

Why the sudden interest? Maybe he just thought I was funny or worse 'gross'. I really didn't care.

'He was staring at you as if it was the first time, he laid eyes on you... that's creepy!'

I looked back at Jai and gave her a frozen stare. She ignored me.

'Maybe he just thinks I'm pretty.' I made a face. Flinching from my own words. Hah!

'Yeah dream on, Mya. He doesn't even know you exist!'

I bit my lip from Jai's harsh words. This was the trouble if you didn't keep secrets with your best friend. Sometimes she knew too much to the point it was already irritating. But then I knew she was right.

Gabe and I went to the same school ever since we were Naddalin sets but I didn't remember even once that he talked to me or called my name. Whenever I came over to their house to babysit his little brother, he wouldn't even bother to greet me. It was like he didn't know me. His behavior bothered me sometimes, but I have too many problems to linger on his abnormal treatment. But now, I couldn't help thinking, something wasn't right. Not right at all.

'Well, maybe he does 'now'.' I insisted on her; I was really kind of hurt hearing the blunt truth right from someone else's mouth. Even if that someone was your best friend who knows you inside out.

'Yeah, yeah.'

The bell rang, signaling that lunch was over. I was glad to finally get to my feet and stomped off to our next class. Jai was right beside me. Before I finally got out of the cafeteria walls, I took one last look at the back of the room.

Gabe and his friends were still at their table with no plans of moving out. I marveled quietly at how 'too good' he really looked; he was like a movie star among his commoner's friends. I sighed, careful not to let Jai heard me. Just as I was about to look away, Gabe turned his head to look at me. His blue eyes held a thousand words as it lingered on me for a few seconds.

Then he smiled.

I waved goodbye to Jai as school ended but my mind was really somewhere else the whole time after the cafeteria incident.

I couldn't take out how Gabe looked at me earlier in the cafeteria. Or how his eyes held mine for brief seconds but were enough to muddle my thinking. And there was, of course, his smile.

It was the first time in more than ten years he smiled at me. It was like he just snapped out from his snob behavior and acknowledged for the first time that we knew each other or knew each other's faces at least. I was a little nervous now.

Tomorrow, I would be spending my time at Sinclair's to babysit little Robbie. Gabe's parents were both working on a highly-paid job in the city and it was the nanny's day off, so I was too relieved her duty. I needed the job anyway, considering the situation we were in right now. I was lucky I got the job, but I guess no one else in the area needed a job as badly as I do.

It was Friday and I have another part-time job before tomorrow.

Every after school, I would go over to dear Mrs. Hendricks to walk her two labradors. Mrs. Hendricks lived alone in her little home five blocks away from school after Mr. Hendrick died. She was too lonely that she decided to get two dogs for company and for protection as well. Since she couldn't keep up with her dogs (the old lady was about over 60, I think), she paid me 40 bucks a week to walk her dogs every after school. Sometimes, I would stay with her a little while over after just to chat with her over tea and her most delicious cookies. She was too sweet, sometimes I wish mom was like her. The thought often left a hole in my chest.

It was a bit cloudy today in Providence, the dark clouds were casting shadows over the place making it looked almost like 6 P.M rather than 3:20 P.M. Every now and then a cold breeze would whirl my hair around my shoulders making it wilder than ever. I tugged at my- lose hair desperately, wishing I had something to bind it with. I was silently hoping; it wouldn't rain as I quickened my steps to reach the small house I could almost see now over the hill.

Dear Mrs. Hendrick would be quite devastated if I turned around now and went straight home instead. I would be devastated as well, I hated making the old lady feel sad. Maybe I couldn't walk the dogs in this condition, but I could stay over for a while to keep her company in this condition. Hugging myself, I walked on faster as the first thunder cut across the graying sky.

The first drop of rain fell right unto my button nose. I wrinkled it and the drop trickled down to my lips. As it did that, the rest came pouring down heavily. I scrambled to my feet reeling around

looking for somewhere to hide, but I saw nothing but trees and road signs. The jacket- I was wearing was thin and unable to protect me from this sudden downpour.

'Mya!'

Somebody shouted my name from above the roaring of thunder and rain or was it just the wind? I couldn't have distinguished. I broke into a run.

'Mya!' Again, the voice was calling my name. I slowed down to a half-walk half-run pace as I listened harder where the voice came from. Then out from nowhere, a blue sports car blocked my way. I froze not from the cold but by fear. I heard stories about young girls kidnapped and forced into white slavery. My teeth chattered as I braced myself. The car looked familiar though. I must have seen it somewhere.

'Get in the car!' A handsome face appeared on the passenger's window. His blond hair almost golden and his eyes... they were the bluest shade of blue.

I knew I just look funny because of my jaw dropped- literally.

Gabriel Sinclair?

'Get in the car please, you'll get soaked.'

I blinked in disbelief. I fought hard to shake myself from the stupor and finally managed to make my legs moved towards the car door. What was he doing here? I bit the question back as I slid into his car. I was almost wet and cold, and the inside of his car was warm and smelled of leather. I couldn't stop staring at him in disbelief. Was this a sick joke of his or something?

'For a moment there, I thought you would just stand there and I would have to carry you.' His blue eyes were amused as he turned to look at me. Was he really talking to me? A part of me was a bit thrilled but I stopped myself and faked watching my face in his rearview mirror and was horrified.

The wind had taken its toll on my hair and not even the dampness was able to smooth it down a little bit. I blushed with embarrassment in silence. Peering at him from my peripheral vision, I tried to smooth down the wild disarray, but it wouldn't budge. With an inward groan, I gave up, I didn't see the point anyway. I didn't really care if he finds me unattractive.

'Where are you heading to? I thought your house is in the opposite direction.' He asked.

'To Mrs. Hodicks.' Surprised how my voice sounded so casual, I wish he would stop asking questions. This was very uncomfortable to me at least for I could see he wasn't bothered at all. 'I sort of have a part-time job. I walk her dogs every after school.'

He nodded gearing the car to life. 'Okay. But I doubt you'll be able to walk her dogs today, would you rather I take you home?'

'I wanted to stay with her for a little while.' I admitted. I was getting more comfortable. Maybe it was the warmth.

'I'll take you there.'

I mumbled my thanks as Gabe stepped on the gas.

Mrs. Hodrick was waiting anxiously, sitting on the front porch of her house. In her hands were two red umbrellas. My heart melted at the thought that somehow, even in this weather, she was hoping I would still come along. The poor Mrs. Hodicks. I blinked the tears as Gabe stopped the car right at the front of her house.

'Thanks.' I said, turning to him.

'My pleasure.' He was smiling at me like he was enjoying a private joke but there was tenderness in his eyes. I chased the thought away.

I saw Mrs. Hodicks stood and walked towards his car; her face was wondering. I unfastened my seatbelt and rolled down the window. Her wrinkled face lit up when her squinting eyes laid upon me. Relief and happiness rolled into one.

'Mrs. Hodicks.' She handed me the second umbrella she was holding when I opened the door.

'Oh dear, why did you come in this weather?' Her voice was soft with worries and joy at the same time.

I smiled at her. 'I wanted to eat some of your cookies.' So far, hers was the best I ever tasted.

That seemed to put off her anxiousness as I was hoping it would. She broke into a wide smile. 'I didn't forget. You can take as much as you want, and I'll give you the rest to take home.' She suddenly

remembered the car I was riding with and peered on the window to look inside. 'And who is this young man?'

I was lost for words. I certainly couldn't count him as a friend, could I?

'My name is Gabe Sinclair ma'am.' Maybe he was sensing the hesitation, he volunteered. 'It's nice meeting you.'

'Oh, you're not coming inside?' Mrs. Hodicks pouted her lips like a little girl who was not able to get the doll she wanted.

'I-uh-m...' Gabe looked at me for help.

I looked away, unable to decide if I wanted him to stay or not.

'Would you rather be somewhere else?' Dear Mrs. Hodicks looked like her heart was broken.

Gabe shook his head instantly.

'Then there is no reason you shouldn't stay. Come along kids.' She walked ahead of me in her dragging steps and I was left out there thinking I only had but one umbrella.

When I turned to Gabe, he looked like he was fighting to stifle a laugh. I started to frown but I caught myself in time, thinking he was being such a nice person by offering me a ride. It would be so ungrateful if I scowled at him after everything he did. I slowly walked to his side of the car to let him share the umbrella.

He made sure every door and window was locked before he stomped out. 'Thanks,' He said. 'This is very nice of you.' He added as he held onto the umbrella, in the process our hands almost touched.

Making sure I left a decent gap between our bodies, I nodded pressing my lips together.

He smiled cocking his head and I felt dizzy as his unique sweet male scent invaded my nostrils. This was the first time ever that I was this close to a guy. A very attractive guy for that matter. I was having a hard time stopping myself not to sniff on him on our way in. I moved away from him as far I could the moment, we reached the covered porch. He was openly studying my reaction. One corner of his mouth curled into a soft smile.

'Do I smell bad to you?' He asked out loud, but he did not take a sniff on himself. He was aware that he smelled too good to me.

'Why were you on the way here?' I ignored him, breaking the tension that starts to set in. I was meaning to ask him this, anyway. I knew our houses were supposed to be in the opposite direction.

'I saw you.'

My almond eyes opened wide. Baffled. 'What?' I blurted out a little too loud. I felt suddenly angered by his snooping on me. If he were. But in the cafeteria and nowhere... I was almost positive he was snooping on me. I didn't like attention. Much more his. 'You were following me?'

Again, his gorgeous blue eyes danced with amusement staring me straight in the eyes. 'Yes.'

'Why?' I demanded harshly. Oh, let him get the idea that I didn't like any more of this sudden interest in me. I wasn't his type at all. I knew how his ex-girlfriends looked like. Blond... Perfect... Popular.

Just like him.

'I saw you heading in the wrong direction in the wrong weather.' He was smiling now. Too sweetly for my own benefit.

So, he thought I was stupid or out of my wits that was why he was following me?

I groaned inwardly.

Mrs. Hodicks opened the door and interrupted us. 'What's taking you, kids, too long? Come on in.'

I shrugged and left the umbrella on the floor as I scrambled inside.

Gabe was following me, still smiling.

My mouth watered as soon as we entered the stuffy living room. On the small coffee table near the brick fireplace sat a full plate of freshly baked chocolate cookies. Good Mrs. Hodicks. She ushered us by the fire.

'Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. I'll get the tea.'

'Let me help you, Mrs. Hodicks.' Gabe was already on his feet when he offered.

'Oh no- no, you kids keep yourselves warm. You both look like you need it.' She disappeared into the kitchen door adjoining the living room.

I moved closer to the flickering fire. Mrs. Hodicks was right. I was too cold inside my wet clothes, my teeth almost chattered. Spreading my palms over the fire, I heard Gabe said.

'You have to get out of those wet clothes.' I was thinking about the same thing, but too bad I didn't bring any extra with me. I don't suppose Mrs. Hodicks had something to fit me either.

'Thanks' but I'm fine.' I lied. And I was a bad liar. I sat crossed-legs near the fireplace, hoping the cold would go away.

'Here.'

I turned to look over my shoulder. He was extending an arm towards me. A gray jacket was in his hand. The same one he was wearing a moment ago. I blushed. Touched by his concern. But shook my head.

'No, I'm fine really.' I held my stand. Though I was dying to grab the clothing he was offering. I bet the jacket would smell just like him. I fought hard with the urged.

'Go on, Mya. Take it.' The hard and firmness in his velvet voice startled me.

I reached for the piece of clothing awkwardly. 'Thanks' I mumbled quietly.

'Did anyone ever tell you; you suck at lying?' When I looked up to his face, he was smiling again.

'Many times.' I grumbled. He laughed. I blushed even more.

'Then don't lie. People will know any way you aren't telling the truth.' He stretched his long body on the couch.

He looked really comfortable that, I thought it was unfair. I removed the thin wet jacket over my equally thin t-shirt. I replaced it with his and my mind was floating as his now-familiar scent assaulted and enveloped me.

Oh crap, now I am addicted to his smell!

Dear Mrs. Hodicks appeared on the door carrying a tray with the smoking teapot on it and three little teacups. Gabe was instantly on his feet taking the tray from her. The sweet old lady smiled her thanks and settled comfortably in an armchair beside the fireplace. As soon as Gabe placed the tray down on the table, I dived into it to get down something hot inside me and chase the cold away. Happily, I sunk my teeth into the soft chocolate cookie and drank my tea almost too greedily, it burned my throat.

'Why, you didn't tell me you have a boyfriend, Mya.'

I choked. Not from the hot tea and cookie. I could almost see the blood rushing through my face. My cheeks burned.

'He-' Darn. I was too embarrassed to even look at Gabe. What had he been thinking? 'He isn't--really my boyfriend, Mrs. Hodicks.' Finally, I was able to make out the words.

Mrs. Hodicks chuckled. 'Ow, that's a shame.'

I anxiously nibbled on my cookie hoping she would stop there and let it drop, but to my chagrin, she added, 'You both looked good together. You should go out like this often.'

'Actually, he just accidentally went on my way. We were not really together. It was too kind of him to give me a ride.' I put too much emphasis on my words and was out of breath when I finished.

Gabe was happily munching on a piece of cookie, a stupid smile on his face. I fought the urge to throw mine to him. He shouldn't let the girl explained situations such as these to an old woman.

'Is that it, Gabe?' Mrs. Hodicks didn't want to be put off.

Smiling, Gabe looked at me studying my face. I must look like a monster ready to gobble him up with any wrong move. His smile widened in amusement.

'I sort of followed her, actually.' He said finally. He looked away, refusing to see the horror washed my face. Don't you dare...!

'Because,' I... wanted to know her better.' His eyes turned serious as he spoke. I had a gut feeling the words were not meant for Mrs. Hodicks at all.

'Oh, you'll be surprised at what you'll find. Mya is such an interesting, lovely little lady. You'll lose your heart the moment you'll see what she truly is.' There was too much sincerity, too much pride in her voice I forgot all about Gabe as turned to Mrs. Hodicks.

'Thank you,' I choked on the emotion that was gripping me tightly. I always know, Mrs. Hodicks was an old lonely lady craving for somebody to talk to, walk her dogs for her, but knowing I was special to her like I was her own child, shook me from the very core of me.

She slowly cupped my face with one unstable, wrinkled hand. 'It's true dear. I always know you are special. And I love you as my own.'

I closed my eyes as my mind drifted to somewhere else. Sweet nostalgia. My mom used to be like this when I was a kid... mom... but the memories were too far away now. I opened my eyes slowly and a pair of the bluest eyes stared back at me. Gabe had moved behind Mrs. Hodicks, his eyes a liquid pool of mixed emotions.

I looked away quickly, hating him see thru me at my most vulnerable moment.

I emanated Mrs. Hodick's hand and I moved towards the fire again, turning my back on them.

Mrs. Hodicks was talking to Gabe about her dogs and how to behave and orderly they had been ever since sometimes she thought they were humans and not animals. Their quiet exchange of words was enough to calm my wracking nerves.

'So, you go to school together?'

'Since kindergarten.' Gabe handed a cup of hot tea to the old lady.

'My that was too long ago, how come you only see Mya just now, Gabe? I am very disappointed.' Mrs. Hodicks made a clicking sound of her tongue.

I could feel a hole forming on my back, knowing they were both staring at me. Darn. I just hope they would stop talking about me like I wasn't there at all. But for some ridiculous reason, I couldn't make myself turn and let them knew I was listening.

'I think because I was a jerk.' He chuckled softly as he said that. I desperately wanted to yell at him. But of course, I didn't. Not with Dear Mrs. Hodicks around. I made a stuffy sound, closer to a groan. 'It's not really entirely true, you know.'

I have a gut feeling the last statement was directed to me so I slowly peek over my shoulder and closed my eyes hopelessly as I saw that he was indeed staring at me.

Would you just be kind enough to let the matter drop? I choked on the words.

'I don't know where this is heading,' I frowned. Showing great disdain. 'I think we should really talk about this privately.'

'Will you talk to me privately?' He wanted to know.

'NO.' I mouthed the word so Mrs. Hendrick couldn't see. I was just bluffing to end the horrid conversation.

He was silent, and I was a little relieved. Mrs. Hodicks excused herself for a moment to get more tea, firmly ordering us to sit down when Gabe and I started to stand to help her.

I looked sharply at Gabe as soon as she was out of earshot.

'Why are you being such a jerk!' My voice was full of hurt and anger. 'Why do you have to make up stories like that you-you,' words failed me when I saw how serious he looked.

'I like you.' He said so believably I almost laughed. 'I liked you all my life.'

I noted the word he was using. Like not love. I was glad he was careful about his words because God knew just how much my hand was aching to hit him hard.

'Is this a sick joke? Making Ms. Nobody fall in love with Mr. Hot and Popular in a week? How much did you and your friends bet on me? You should really make a newer plot. That one sells so many times already.'

'Mya Shantana Hope... 'His eyes a mixture of irritation and tenderness as he said my full name. I was out of breath. It was the first time in long years he mentioned my complete name and the impact it made on me was too strong I wanted to roll on the floor laughing and crying at the same time.

Sick; I was too sick for this. God help me.

We said our goodbyes to Mrs. Hodicks. I tried very hard to sound casual for the old lady. But my mind was really in a deep predicament. I knew I was always been strong but my strength crumbled to dust when Gabe put us in this situation. The humiliation, anger, and pain were too much for me to

handle. And Gabe was doing too good at this I wanted to run away as far as I could from him for my own good. The knowledge that he would have to drive me home now did not offer any comfort. It only meant I had to endure all the way home trying to convince myself I was alone, and he wasn't there.

Oh, this was crap. I meant what would you call something like this?

He was so unpredictable that I hated every time he did something that was way so out of my expectation. And now that stupid smile was back on his handsome face like he didn't really care what had he done to me. Worse, whenever I peeked in the rearview mirror to quietly study Gabe, he would always catch me stealing glances at him. His smile widened. My face flushed brightly. Was it from humiliation or anger, I didn't know? Maybe it was from both.

Before I knew it, Gabe stopped the car in front of our small house. I was angry at myself for being so preoccupied with unwelcome thoughts that I forgot to give him the direction to the house. Luckily, he knew where I lived. Wondering, though how someone who ignored me for more than a decade knew where I actually lived, I silently gave him credit for that at least.

The heavy downpour of rain had subsided now into soft drizzles. I sighed as I saw that the front light of our house was already on. It was only ten minutes past five in the afternoon. Mom shouldn't be home from work then. I clutched the ripple of familiar distaste in my stomach.

My plan was to get out of the car without saying thanks or goodbye, to let him know I was really pissed at him but years of good manners prevailed on me. I mumbled my goodbye as I got out of the car and told him to drive safely. He was already in front of me when I got out, holding my arm.

'Can we talk please.'

I twisted my arm from his hold, darting him an angry stare. 'Just go home, Sinclair.' I barked.

'I will after we talked.' He insisted. His eyes, not exactly pleading but I closed mine, fearing I would get lost from the bluest depth of them if I stared too long.

I was anxious to get inside the house. I had a bad feeling mom was in trouble again. I sighed, deciding to just let him talk so this would be over soon.

'Okay... Talk.' I gave up. I forced myself to look at his perfect face.

He let go of my arm I was still twisting to free from his grip. Oddly, he looked he was out of words.

'What I was saying at Mrs. Hodicks... 'I looked away at him as he started saying. He let out a deep breath. I steadied myself as the fresh smell of his breath dizzied me. 'I just wanted you to know, I mean it.'

I nodded my head absent-mindedly, nibbling on my bottom lip. Of course, I was not a fool to believe him.

'I really like you.'

My head snapped at him as he said it slowly, tenderly. His hand lifted to my face but not touching. He looked like he was in pain or something.

'I liked you ever since we were kids.' My mouth dropped. How much did he exactly bet on me to be this desperate? I was curious. 'But something won't let me tell you what you really are to me... 'He dropped his hand to his side. I just wish he would stop. 'It's like I feel something deep in my bones warning me to stay away from you... like something really really dark will happen if I won't keep my distance... 'He laughed dryly. For the first time, I saw Gabe was nervous in front of me. 'I know it sounds crazy but I wanted to be honest with you as much as I could. I don't want to hide anything from you from now on. I am just tired of ignoring you when I couldn't. I just want to do now what I really wanted.' At this point, he didn't think twice when he touched my flushed face. 'I want to be with you, Mya.'

I blinked hard. I felt a strong pull to believe him but my rational side won the battle and I pushed his hand away.

'Go home Gabriel.' I hated how my voice sounded. It sounded too emotional. Too sensual.

He backed away but there was a hint of glow deep in his blue eyes.

He smiled and without me expecting, pulled me firmly against his chest. I was shocked, unable to protest but found out I was desperate to snuggle against his hard body than I ever wanted to admit. To forget for once, this was all but a dream. Too good to be true.

'I don't know what to do about you, Mya Shantana Hope,' He let out a deep breath. 'You are so hard to resist, with you I'm like a moth drawn into the fire. Burning would have been such a bliss.'

He let go of me before, I could regain my composure back. His eyes were dazzling like blue diamonds. I cringed from his gaze, sensing my humiliation.

'Don't-,' I hissed. Concealing my embarrassment. '-ever do that again!' I pushed him so hard but he only laughed as he caught my hands and deposited them against his hard chest. I struggled hard, but I could feel my resolve was quickly fading. I hated how the corner of his mouth curled into a triumphant smile. I hated how my body reacted to him, completely ignoring what my mind was yelling. Most of all, I hated how my heart thudded like crazy whenever he was too close for my own comfort; I hated him. He hated the effect he had on me. I hated Gabriel Sinclair for all that he was doing to me.

I hated myself for thinking that I was too close to believing him.

I hated myself for enjoying this moment with him when I should not.

With all sanity that was left in me, I scrambled to my feet and broke into a run.

She died. And that morning, I had told her that no one would miss her if she did. We always had these kinds of arguments, but I never meant what I said, and she shouldn't have left me. Every day, I got up with a feeling that reminded me of the murder I had committed. Because if I wouldn't have told her to disappear, God knows where she might be right now.

The worst of it all wasn't even feeling bad about it, it was knowing that our parents blamed me too.

And so, I got up again, another day of school, but the first sister-less one. I dragged myself down the stairs and had breakfast with only my dad, mom had left early for work, he said, but we all knew she was just avoiding me.

'Do you want me to drop you off at school?' He asked.

He was just doing that to be polite, he wouldn't want to be seen with the kid who killed his own sister, no one wanted that, let alone the father of both children.

'It's okay' I said, but I knew he wasn't even paying attention to me, he already knew I wouldn't be joining him anytime soon.

Part: 16

She and I used to go by bike, together, every single day. Except for that one day, when she raged- and I yelled, and she left. She never made it to school.

So-o, I make my way to the garage, all alone, and take out my bike. Spiders have been feeling at home while I was staying home to more the loss of a loved one. They give you three w eeks off nowadays, even when you are the main reason they're gone, in prison I'd get way longer.

I tear the spider's webs and homes apart because that's what the bloody truck did to mine. It's probably too soon to make jokes about how bloody it was, I have never been at the scene of the crime. I've decided to avoid it and take the high road to school. What are the odds though, that you piss off your sibling, and that she decides to leave, and ran her bike into a truck that just happens to be there right that minute? It wasn't even his fault, so we have got to apologize for the dirt on his vehicle. I'm so sorry you don't know where the fucking brakes are and killed my sister, here let me clean that up for you. Dirt-bag, at least he and his stupid ride match.

Her bike was still in the garage, I don't know why my parents insisted on taking it home, it doesn't even look like a bike. It's just a pile of metal rods and it made me feel rather uncomfortable because I swear you could smell her blood throughout the entire house, maybe that's what they aimed for, to make me feel guilty and never forget what I had done. While passing it, I kicked it really hard and had to keep myself from screaming.

The bike looked horrible, just imagine what she would've looked like. I never got to see her, because it was too bad. And apologizing to a coffin wasn't really one of the things on my to-do list, so I didn't do anything but stare right in front of me and wish the ceremony came to an end, as fast as she herself had done. It had taken the police about a week to gather all her pieces together, at least that's when my parents started taking it out on me, instead of panicking that she wouldn't be able to go to Heaven because she was missing a toe or something.

I had forgotten how long the high road was. And how hell-a boring it was to go somewhere all by yourself. I hope you're happy now, I thought. Everyone always feels sorry for the one who dies, but that's the easy way out, believe me.

It was 8 o'clock when someone rang the doorbell. There was dead silence throughout the entire house because of the argument that my sister and I had had.

She had been talking about that girl again, and she just went on and on about it, she never stopped. I had been telling her to shut up about it for about two months when she finally crossed the line. That morning, I started yelling at her. And we're so much alike, once we get into an argument, it's rather serious, so she did the same to me.

Our parents were downstairs while she started throwing with my stuff, and I grabbed her and told her she was a hideous creature, she basically called me the same names, but in the end, all that mattered is what I did.

My mother put her cup of tea down, got up and slowly made her way to the door. My dad looked at me in disgust, because I happen to yell way louder than her, he had only heard the terrible thing I had said, the one thing that made her take off.

'Yes- she did' I heard my mother say to someone who spoke very rapid and low, rather inaudible.

'About half an hour ago maybe, not more' she added.

'Yes- that's her,' her voice started trembling.

'What do you mean?' she started tearing up.

I wanted to get up and ask what was going on, but my dad did first and made me sit back down. It all seemed pretty serious, so I listened to him but also to the conversation in the hallway.

I heard him join the conversation by asking what the hell was going on. The policeman told him what he had probably told my mother just a minute ago. They were very quiet, probably because they knew I'd try and eavesdrop. But what I could hear, was more than enough to get up anyways, and run towards the front door.

Part: 17

'SHE WHAT???'

'Sir please, we're trying-'

'Finn, I think I told you to stay inside.'

'Dad, she's my sister, I should know whatever this is.'

My mother nodded- and dad lets go of me. We all looked at the man in uniform, standing in front of us.

'I'm very sorry.' That was all he said. Everything I heard before my mother thanked him and closed the door. But I needed more, what the hell was he apologizing for, she couldn't just have -

'Finn, I think it's best if you go to your room. Now. Please.' I had never seen my mom in this state of shock.

'No, mom, I'm staying here, I've - like - like...'

'You've done enough for today. Room. Now!' Well my dad wasn't joking around, so I backed off and went upstairs, with the intention of staying out in the corridor and listening to every single word that would leave their mouths.

'Is that all he said?' my dad asked, and of course my mother couldn't properly talk, she was overwhelmed, and the man didn't even bring her anything to drink, he just looked at her breaking down in front of him and waited for her answer.

'He. Said. That. She-' she paused.

Oh, come on woman hold yourself together, what did he say?

'She wasn't looking. She ran right into it.' then the real breakdown happened.

Into what? Parents can't ever just tell you what you need to know now, can they? But I had watched enough series and movies to know what just happened, and I knew she wouldn't be coming back home. Not today, not tomorrow. And the last thing I had ever said to her was that she wouldn't be missed if she'd ever leave.

Asshole; I'm such an asshole.

It was all I could think about because obviously, I couldn't picture her running into anything, because of my lack of information.

I went into her room and sat down on her bed. One of the walls was entirely covered with pictures of her and her friends, and even some of me and her. The opposite wall was practically covered with books, from the floor up to the highest point she could reach when standing on her tiptoes, which

wasn't really that high. I looked over at her desk. Her diary was lying in the middle of the table. What happens with all those feelings, I thought, where do her dreams go now?

I heard footsteps; they were coming upstairs. I grabbed the diary and ran out of the room, went to my own and jumped onto the bed. Not half a minute later my mom came in, and I wasn't surprised to see her eyes were entirely red and her face all covered in tears. She gestured to the bed, almost as if she was asking for my permission to come in and sit down, I made sure she had all the space she needed, and she sat down right next to me.

We stared at everything in my room. Everything but each other. We were so quiet I could hear my dad sobbing downstairs. It was heartbreaking because it always seemed as if he had no emotions at all as if his chest was filled with nothing but an ice-cold stone.

'She's not coming back tonight, is she?'

My mother shook her head.

'Nor tomorrow. Or the day after.' I added, still staring at the window in front of me. The curtains had been closed for over a week, and now all of a sudden, it made me feel claustrophobic.

'Mom.'

I waited for her to look at me, and once I knew she was, I looked back at her. I couldn't quite tell if she was still crying, because everything was blurry by now. She wanted to hug me, but I shook her off.

'What happened?'

She fake-smiled at me. As if she tried to comfort me, or herself, I couldn't even tell anymore.

'She was mad when she took off this morning. She decided to go to Mary's house, and go to school with her, I guess, because it happened on the road close to her house, and she had taken her bike so I guess she was planning on heading to school afterward.'

I really wanted to know what had happened to her, and I wanted to be able to picture it, to know what it must've felt like, but I wasn't ready to hear all about the details. Yet, I never interrupted my mother, because- I knew how badly she needed to explain to me this, in order to convince herself of the truth.

'She was so upset, and she wasn't looking, or paying attention to anything. And then the truck came. He didn't even violate any laws; she was the one that should've stopped. But nothing we could ever do will bring her back to us. I'm so sorry Finn.'

This time I let her hug me because the story had hit me like, well, a truck. I was too upset to cry, but there was this lump in my throat and damn how it hurt. People call it a broken heart, so why does it feel like your entire body is shattered into small pieces? Breathing hurt. Feeling my mom pressed against me, our mother, hurt. What gave you the right to walk out of that door? Who gave you the right to listen to any word your stupid brother says to you? You would be missed, of course, you would be. You will be.

Dear Sam,

Today, I don't know where you are. And I guess that's how it'll be from now on. Clueless guessing and hoping. Nothing but constantly wondering.

People believe in lots of things. Reincarnation, Heaven, a big black hole... Do you remember our theory? We called it 'The Other Side.'

Just in case you don't, it was about closure. So, when the deceased person felt as if the survivors weren't ready to let go yet, he or she would watch over them. That'd mean that you'd be right here, next to me, watching me write and struggle, and tear apart everything right after finishing it. If you'd really be here, I mean, it'd be kind of soothing, but it could never take away the pain of what I've done to you.

You should know, that ever since our last fight and you're slamming the door and running off, you're all and everything that's ever been on my mind. Non-stop. And I miss you. Gosh, I hate missing you, but I can't make it stop.

Dad and Megan blame me, too, you know. Too, because so do I. Not a day will ever feel normal again, it'll never be right. I guess they always preferred you and somehow lost the wrong child. Must be hard, considering it's their other child's fault and they'll have to look at him for the rest of their days, wishing it was you.

They don't talk to me, like at all. In the beginning, Megan tried, but it's just too hard to pretend we have something to talk about. I think dad somehow convinced her not to talk to me again, you know -knew- how persuasive he can be. Especially when he's drunk and aggressive.

It's almost as if I'm dead to them. Excuse my poor choice of words, please.

Tomorrow will be my first day in school, after three weeks off. As if you can put a time limit on grieving.

Mary has tried to call, several times, but I've been ignoring her, after all, she was your friend, not mine. I haven't heard from David, so I guess it'll be one hell of a lonely day. Nothing new for that matter.

Yesterday was my first day outdoors. I went for a walk because our house is hell-a depressing these days. Dad tried to clean your room but stopped after as much as three minutes.

There was this poster at the corner of the street. Your favorite band will be in town next week. If I could, I'd buy us a ticket, I'd take you literally everywhere you wanted to go.

Oh Sam, won't you please come back to me?

I hate missing my little Hazel.

'Finn, get up, you're late again!' This had kind of turned into a routine. Somehow, I could never manage to get out of bed, even though I used to need fifteen minutes and now take over forty.

'Finn, up yet?' My dad had always given me the impression that he didn't really enjoy my company, but after my sister's death, he had done nothing but proving that statement.

'On my way, calm down.'

In this house, it was considered a crime to actually tell my dad that very thing. You don't just tell the man to calm down without a fight. He had, however, lost some of his aggression after the accident. As if something inside of him snapped, the last string that was actually holding him together.

'You have ten minutes before school starts, you do realize I'm not dropping you off, right?' Was the first thing I heard when finally reaching the kitchen, having tossed on the first thing I saw, namely the same pair of jeans I had been wearing for the last two weeks of depression and school.

'Eat, then, please.'

I had seen him like this, once before. It was right after mom's death. He has never fully recovered from that, started looking for solutions and affection elsewhere, and ended up marrying the far too young Megan. Sam had always liked her because they could've been sisters or best friends, I, however, felt kind of awkward with this sister-from-another mother walking around in my habitat. Especially when you think about her relationship with my father. Babysit: yes, mother: no.

'Megan still not back?' I asked with a mouthful of toast.

'No. And it seems like she won't be, for quite a while.'

'What the hell, isn't she supposed to be there for you in good and bad days?'

He gave me the glare of death, so I quit. It just wasn't fair that she could decide to walk away from the drama, so the two of us would get sucked in even deeper. Even if she'd just be here to watch TV or make dinner, the house would already be less depressing.

'Son, you should get going. I'll be late tonight, by the way, enjoy your day.' He said that while grabbing his car keys and walking off as if I didn't know he'd be late. He had been, ever since Sam stopped coming back home.

'Later.'

~*~

I hated these streets. And God, how I disgusted the metal bikes were made of. I wanted to burn out every single truck on the surface of the planet, watch them explode. See them die, helplessly, the way they made my sister feel when she tried to take her last breath. Or as she tried to continue breathing but had no choice but to give in.

Cars kept honking at me, all the way to school. The slow boy, the depressed boy, why his sister and not him, nobody wants him around anyway. Those horns said more than people ever dared to.

I put my bike a hundred meters away from school. The first week of my return, it got trashed four times, and the fifth time, they just hung it upside down with locks of other 'nerds' making it impossible for all of us to go home by bike. These people were my only chance of having an actual social

life in this saddening last year of high school, but they all walked off as soon as they figured they'd be stuck with me if they wanted to wait for the principal's arrival.

My dad had been called several times and was more in the school building that I, myself, had been lately.

'It's been hard on him, losing his sister.' Was his explanation, every single time. But all the head could reply was: 'These things happen, and we're very sorry for your loss, but if Finn can't handle it, then he shouldn't be here right now.'

They gave him clear messages, in the trend of: 'send the boy to an institution if you don't feel like losing both your kids in one-month time.'

He had never told me that, but I had seen the documents they gave him. They were spread all over the house. Also, I had heard his discussions with Megan, late at night, after he finally got home. I guess Megan somehow managed to drag him home as he was drunk as f-word he doesn't want me to use, because apparently when you're the only child, you have to keep up appearances. Also due to the alcohol running through his veins, mixing with his blood in an uneven proportion, I had found out some things about his fatherly love for me.

'Do you know how embarrassing that would be? People are already watching. We've lost our daughter, the joy of this home, I can't put him in the madhouse and have all those judgmental questions asked all the time.'

'Think about him, would this be what Finn needs or not?'

'Who cares what he needs? He isn't going to tell me, and I'm tired of guessing.'

I entered my class. I was late again, but the teacher didn't even bother making a remark, as did the students. At the beginning of the semester, Nathaniel, school prick first class, used to squeak in his stupid high-pitched voice: 'Bambi has arrived, all animals should dance!' Then some of his friends would actually get up and do this weird uncool dance move that made the girls swoon, somehow. After a while, people got tired of his 'Do you get it, Bambi, because his mom died when he was there' jokes and he had no choice but to stop his lame attempts on being hilarious as hell.

As for now, the only one who might have actually even looked up as I came in, would've been David. But somehow, he just stopped caring about me. He hadn't spoken a word to me since the

accident, not even a 'hey man, I'm sorry' or whatever friends do in those situations. He and my sister had always been pretty close, and he and I, we've been friends ever since the first day we met, how can you throw that all away like that?

But then again, I couldn't blame him. He was the cooler one of our duo, and I had nothing more to lose, considering my formal reputation as both a mom- and sister killer, he still had a chance on having a somehow survivable senior year.

I nodded as a thank you and opened my book on that very page. This was definitely my favorite teacher. It had been the only one asking me how I was, and even though I hated that question with passion, it made me feel respected. He gave me tasks instead of tests because he knew I was smart enough to pass his class if it weren't for the accident occupying my thoughts 500% of the time.

Oh, Sam. Time goes so slow when you feel like crap when you want it to go fast, so you can go back to your cave of misery, where no one watches you. I'd say 'care' but they don't, so that's that. Where the hell have you been and where did they take you? When will this pain in my chest, that seems to have broken my ribs and shake all of their splinters when I try to breathe in, end? Do you think it ever will?

These kids are horrible. They were at your funeral, all of them. Yet, no one even had the decency to look at me. Do I have 'I killed my sister' tattooed all over my forehead, or is it just me? How did you do it, interact? Why couldn't it be me, I would've taken your place, a million times without even thinking it over. Please come back, or at least temporarily, so you can take me with you as you go again.

She scared the hell of me when she walked in. I literally jumped up when seeing her.

'Shit, Megan. Please knock, I had no idea you were home.'

'Your father is drunk again, couldn't just let him drive himself into-'

'Don't make traffic jokes. Too soon.'

She nodded. 'What are you doing here? Shouldn't we be boxing everything up?'

I was in my sister's room. Looking for something, I don't know what, that would make her come back. Not necessarily physically, just something that would make me feel as if she was still around.

'Don't box it up, it'll seem so permanent.' I said it while hiding her diary I had found under my shirt, and making my way to my own room.

'Look, Finn, I know you don't want to hear this, but death sound pretty permanent to me.'

I didn't even bother getting mad at her for saying that, I had to take care of my mission first.

'Give us some time. Everyone looking at our every move is already exhausting enough.'

With a sigh, she walked off. 'Don't tell me I didn't try.'

'I won't.'

I slammed the door, basically right in her face, because she wasn't done talking. Once alone, I took the diary in both hands and just stared at it for a minute. She would kill me if she ever found out I had it, but then again, who cares, if I'd be dead, I'd be closer to her, and further away from everyone else. Actually, it's pretty much the best thing that could possibly happen to me right now.

Falling down into my very uncomfortable chair, I opened the lock on the ugly diary. It was pink and fluffy, she must've gotten it when she was about a seven-year-old because, after that, my sister had been manlier than I could ever be.

The first page had a huge red triangle on it, and lots of skulls and exclamation points.

'IF THIS IS FINN, GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF MY DIARY!!!'

Oh, sis, she knew me too well. It was almost cute of her, to think that this would've actually stopped me back in the days when she'd still be here to double warn me.

I turned the page, to find another threat on the second page.

'I MEAN IT, PUT IT BACK, OR I WILL HUNT YOU DOWN!'

Good luck with that, oh evil spirit of my oh-so super dead, aggressive, scary little Sammie-sis.

I laughed at her lame attempts and started reading the third page.

Somehow, it was a relief to figure out she didn't start with 'dear diary' I might've actually felt like slapping her if she would have.

Her first story was one of when she was eight. She got the diary for Christmas. I wasn't that far off with my gamble talent and saying seven. She got it from aunt Sarah, which explains the color and cuddliness. Her first story was about me, and how I had hidden her teddy bear. If she would've made it, survived the accident I mean, she could've perfectly become a writer, because the emotions and exaggeration were simply amazing. I almost felt guilty for something I had done when I was only nine.

'Finn?'

This was the day of the jump scare, I swear. I slammed the book in one of my slides and sat straight real fast.

'Yeah?'

Megan walked in.

'Your dad's fast asleep right now, I think I'm staying here tonight, would you mind?'

'Of course not, it's your house too.'

She didn't reply, she just made her way to my bed and sat on it. I really had to change the sheets; it was almost embarrassing. If this woman wouldn't have been doing my laundry for three years now, I would've actually apologized for it.

'Look, I just wanted to say I'm sorry, for the boxing-thing I mean.'

'It's okay, we're just- I'm just not ready to let go yet.'

She nodded. 'I know that, but I'm afraid it'll break you. One day, we'll have to face it, that she's not coming back. And if you want, I'll be there for you until you don't need me anymore.'

'Thanks, but it's just-'

How do you tell someone you wanted to see the body in order to believe the stories you've heard? How do you say such a thing without sounding like a straight on psycho- Emmah, just personalization of sadism?

'-hard, I know that. But we'll get there.'

Close enough. I decided to just nod and rest the conversation there. She made that 'I'm sorry for you'-face, emanated my knee, got up and left with the words: 'I'll let you do your homework now.'

Wow... Thanks.

You've always been a little girl. My little sister. How can someone so small leave such a huge open wound in my chest when leaving? How can you make such a big difference with that size six of yours?

Day 34 as an only child. The house smelled like pancakes as if we were throwing a birthday party for five-year old's. While making my way downstairs, and taking my usual break at your door, I couldn't keep myself from looking for balloons and surprises hidden everywhere on and around the stairs. I felt like a boy on Easter, trying to figure out where the eggs could be. The only thing this smaller version of me didn't have, was you darting around, running faster, pushing harder, grabbing all the eggs I had found and accidentally lead you to.

I have had some horrible mornings, such as the one with the officer and his bad news about you, but this one was one to add to the list. I caught Megan and dad in the kitchen, acting annoyingly mad in love. It was the first time that he was up so early on a Saturday, and to be honest, it might've felt good to know that Megan tried to live under our troubled roof again. She did choose to be a part of this family, and there's no way out of that, except for the Emmah you've taken.

'We're going to the park later today, so better eat some more than you've been for the last couple of days.'

'How are you supposed to know that, you're never around looking at it.'

'Finn, one day without a fight. Just one.'

This day better be special, I hated my dad's way of hitting the breaks of whatever conflict I would want to see breaking out.

'What day is it?'

'It's our anniversary, and you're going to, pretended or not, I don't care, love it.'

The enthusiasm in his voice made the lonely bite of pancake in my stomach feel like climbing all the way back up.

'Why the park, it's freaking cold outside.'

'Because that's where we met.' Megan replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the entire world, hanging on board, surrounded by neon- and flashing lights.

'Why not make it somehow romantic and go there yourselves? You don't need me to be third-wheeling in order to feel better now, do you?'

My dad sighed. 'For God's sake, Finn. One day is all we ask; can you at least pretend?'

'That she isn't dead? That you're not blaming me? Or that she has actually been living here and taking her oh so motherly responsibilities, deserving this celebration? If she would've stayed when you and I both needed her so much, then I would've thrown a party for the two of you, myself!'

I grabbed the plate with the pancakes, not just mine, but every single one of them, and made my way back to my room. Halfway, I paused, turned back around, took the stripe and took off.

'He doesn't mean any of that.' I heard my dad trying as soon as I was out of sight.

'You know, he's right, we shouldn't be doing this. It's obviously too soon for Finn to be enjoying these things, and he had a valid point. I haven't been acting very motherly altogether, while that might have been all he needed from the accident, until now.'

'His mother's death is not your fault, Megan.'

'No, but banning her voice out of this house, is. She should've never been 'prohibited'.'

I had made myself clear, good. That saved me some serious slamming with the doors and making so much noise the neighbors of our neighbors would drop by telling is to keep it down. Instead of walking into my very own room, I found myself in Sam's.

It was stronger than me, the need to feel close to her. To touch something that had been in her grip, before she lost the possibility of latching her hands, or whatever's left of those.

Her desk was very messy. Partly because I had been looking everywhere before actually finding her diary, and also due to the fact that she always wanted to do too much, causing her to take out every single book she had, all at once, covering the wooden table as if they had been the table-cloth.

The wall on the left side of her workspace was covered in photos. From the ceiling to the floor. I recognized some of the faces because I had seen them in school, or in our house. Mary was on almost every single one of them. She was Sam's best friend and had been, ever since they had first laid eyes on each other. That must've been when we were about three years old. In the middle, there was a picture of our family, all together. My mother looked so young. She was. Her accident had come to a shock to the entire town, as did the miracle of my surviving skills.

What is it with this family and traffic? What is with me and people dying?

I placed my finger on the picture, covered mom's face with it. I couldn't even remember what her voice sounded like. Leave alone the taste of her famous pies. Even her smell had faded, Megan had introduced a brand new one when moving in only half a year after the accident. People thought it was both inappropriate to be moving on this fast and to make two young children grow up without a mother, so dad had to choose.

I took a step back and looked at the wall again. It took me quite some time to realize some pictures were missing. As I approached and looked at the others, I noticed it was the pictures of David and me, on holidays. Why take them off? And who the hell did that anyway?

A bit confused, I picked up the pancake plate and walked through the door, straight into my man cave. I placed the food on my desk and looked at my bulletin board hanging right above it, with my planning and tasks. Never have I been so lucky to have actually put down a plate, it would've shattered into a gazillion pieces. Staring back at me are two ocean blue, shining eyes, a pair of chocolate brown ones right next to it, they're both smiling. In the background, David and I are playing ping pong. Who the hell put these in my room?

~Megan...

It's the first of November. Everyone is visiting and mourning the death. People are so stupid. You don't simply pick a date and say, 'this is the one day on which we will all think about the ones that left us, but attention: after midnight, we quit.'

Not a day has gone by -I think it's even safe to say that not a single hour has-, that I haven't thought of you. Regret is getting worse as the days go by, and I need you to give me a sign. Let me know you're okay.

Did I tell you about the pictures the other day? Weird things happen when you're living your life without even noticing you are. It's like I've been sleepwalking ever since you left me. Some people tell me to get my shit together because I've experienced from up close how fast life can pass you by, end so suddenly. I'm afraid you were the one of us that actually knew how to handle life. All I do is a struggle, hate, sleep, eat, struggle some more.

Like I said, November. No school today, and it's almost your favorite time of the year. You know I hate Christmas, but you have no idea what I'd give up for this one to be with you in it. I might even buy myself one of those horrendous themed up sweaters you used to wear.

I paused my thought about Sam, they had come to hurt so bad, I couldn't take them anymore. If I had been a girl, I would've written it all down in diaries, wait for her to come back and read them. Boys don't write, they're tough. They stay strong, at least in public. That's what my dad always told me. He had always been somehow disappointed that I wasn't and would never be able to become the strong son he wanted so badly. Boys play football, I play chess. Boys game, I read. Boys have girlfriends and friends, I used to have a cat, but he left me.

'Finn?'

In the beginning, I had been relieved to bump into Megan in the mornings. To know that she was back, dad was feeling better, and she would actually keep him off my back. But this woman had the energy of a dozen hurricanes, and who the fuck does mornings on weekends?

'It's 9 o'clock, I should get to sleep at this time of the day!'

'Lazy ass down here, you've got one minute.'

The thing I liked about her being so young, was that we could have these conversations my dad never got. We'd be talking hashtags and selfies while my dad was reading an actual book, yeah you heard me, without them in front of it.

I dragged myself down the stairs.

'You exhaust me.'

'Good morning to you too, sunshine!'

'What do you need?' my voice was heavy with sarcasm and boredom.

'We're visiting Sam today.' She said it the way you tell your five-year old's you're going to the beach, knowing goddamn well they adore going there.

'You say it as if it's a good thing.'

'It'll be good for you.'

'So is time, apparently, see how that's been working out for me.'

Needless to say, she had won the argument. There we were, standing in front of stone at least as cold as Sam became, in the month of November. I had received another call from Mary, right before heading out. Megan had told me to invite her, too. I declined the call. Not talking to me for days, switching schools right after my little sister's death and not telling me about it, not cool. She would have to try harder than this to actually ever hear from me again.

'Heard anything from David yet?' father asked as we were both looking down to the stone.

'Not a word.'

'I'm sorry for you, Finn.'

'Don't be, got enough people pitying me already. For something I did do.'

She shook his head, he hated it when I admitted what everybody was thinking. I had been the main reason she got into that bloody accident. And no one could take that responsibility away.

This day trip was killing me. They had put Sam right next to our mom, someone you'd almost forget wasn't around any longer. She did leave a big hole in our lives, but not the way Sam did. We had been condoled with the thought of 'at least she had a great life' but my sister didn't deserve this! Neither of them did, really, but the pain was so different.

When my mom died, I used to think 'if I get over this, then I can handle everything.' Never have I been so wrong in my life. Right now, I can't even think about getting over it, there's no way that thought would even dare to creep up on me.

'It pains me to see this.' My dad said as if he just held the great book with Finn's thoughts in his hands and decided to start reading it somewhere in the middle, at random.

'Of course, it does darling, that's normal.'

At this specific moment, it did bother me to have a stepmother. This was clearly out of her comfort zone, and if not, it was way out of mine.

'Why don't you wait in the car, Megan?'

'Finn, that's ridiculous, let me be here for my family!'

'I should've been lying there, not my little girl.' He was completely ignoring everything around him, I had never seen my dad like this, on the edge of the unknown tear-down.

In fact, he was right. The spot right next to mom had been reserved when she passed away. We thought de cycle would be completed if dad would end up next to her one day. It was soothing at that time. And then Megan happened.

'I can't hear you talking like this.' She said right when I wished she would've just disappeared.

'Then don't listen.' She had woken up the most bitter inner feelings inside of me.

'What, dad?' I decided to use words instead of his hard-to-see facial expressions. He did have not to make her suspicious, but I had seen and heard enough.

'Thank you so much for this lovely trip, but I think I'm skipping the pick-nick. You two have a great time, I'll be in my room.'

With those words, I walked off. Straight home, always looking down at the pavement that had felt her last breaths while I didn't even get the last laugh.

Strange things had been happening ever since our trip to death.

When I got back home, I found the pictures someone had taken from Sam's wall and put onto mine, but they were on my bed right now. On every single one of them, David's head had been either torn out or marked with a huge red cross.

I had asked Megan if she had been in my room again, but she denied it in every language, mainly English because she's not really into learning other ones. My dad would never do something this subtle, he'd just hand me a gun and David's address if he had a problem with him.

I know it's a weird thing to say, but somehow, I had hoped that it was a sign from Sam. This is ridiculous, not only because she's kind of deader than dead, but also because she actually liked David. She wouldn't try to scare me off with these kinds of hints.

Going to school had been pretty weird. Seeing David not seeing me, it was harder now than ever. Partly of course because I guess if I could've just asked him 'hey mate, ever felt like someone would actually think about killing you?' this research would be a hell of a lot easier.

Part: 18

I got home earlier and earlier every day. Because, (one) I wasn't sportsmanlike, at all, but somehow the football team had chosen me... to be their real-life box ball, I had to sprint out of class to escape them. (two) The earlier you leave, the easier it actually is, because of the mess with the bikes and having to wait for the super-popular kids who can't seem to multitask, talk while getting their bike, but always feel like doing one of those things while blocking everyone else.

And (three), dad had found a solution to my bike-problem. He had bought me a pink one, so no one would think about trashing it, as no one would link it to me. Great idea, but it made it necessary for me to get up half an hour earlier so no one saw me arriving, and skip the last ten minutes of class, rushing to get home.

'It's not even half past yet, how the hell do you get home so fast?'

'Aren't you supposed to be working? Or drinking?'

He didn't answer. This usually meant something bad, so I turned around, took a bite of the sandwich I had made in those short minutes since I had slammed the door shut and tossed my backpack away.

'I won't be going to work for another couple of days.'

'What do you mean?'

That might've sounded stupid. But in this family, you never know. He could be sick, dying, and not telling me because of all that we've been through. He could be fired, too.

'Apparently, David's dad thinks I'm a threat to the company.'

David and I had had our issues before, but they had never included my father getting hurt.

'What are you going to do about it?' I asked.

'What can I do? Wait for another job, of course.'

'Wait? Dad, I don't think that's how it works.'

'Son, one thing you need to know about this family: nothing ever actually works. If it does, people find a way to ruin it. I don't know why, but somehow they feel as if we haven't suffered enough losses in this family already.'

I grabbed my coat and was about to leave the house to go talk to David when he stopped me.

'Finn, they're not worth it.'

'How about you? You're not losing your job over his puberty, dad.'

'His father is a professional. He'll have his reasons.'

'And I'd very much like to find out which ones.'

He rolled his eyes and sat back down on his sofa. He made sure he was comfortable and took today's newspaper in both hands, reading to show me this conversation was over and that I was wrong. But just for once, I didn't feel as if he was right. I grabbed the doorknob and seconds later, I felt the cold wind blowing, freezing my ears. Off we go.

I knew the way by heart. Even if I would've looked at the pavement all the time, I would've found it. Here I was. Standing in front of the house that used to feel more like a home to me than ours ever did. Right after mom's death, they had kind of taken me in. While dad was drinking, Sam ran off, to Mary's, and my dad started insulting me on a daily basis. I used to blame the alcohol, but the things he said left me speechless. They were so accurate. So- I ran off, found myself standing at the very same steps I was right now.

Slowly, I made my way up to the door. Once I was standing there, I could simply hear the beating of my heart. It was pounding against my chest, inside my ears, like in those movies at that moment when their dream changes into someone knocking on their door.

I considered ringing the doorbell. I think about turning around and leaving. That's when I see his mother, staring at me from the other side of the window. The warm side, the side where David actually knows who you are. She doesn't really look happy to see me but makes her way up to the door anyway. Her voice is warm, as always.

'Finn, long time no see, what brings you here?'

Something must be wrong. I've been standing here for a minute, and she didn't invite me in yet. Last year, she would've literally pushed me inside in this weather.

'I don't really know, is your husband home?'

'Frank? Why would you need him?'

'Just a quick question.' I decided to keep her out of this, at least if she still was.

'Sure, I'll call him, he's still at the office. You can wait with David if you'd like, he just got back, you know the way.'

'Yes... Sure, thanks.'

I didn't move. I was afraid to breathe in too much of his air because he made it damn clear he didn't want to share it with me anymore. I wasn't sure why, though. There had been quite some rumors about us. Since we're the absolute zeros of the school, at least I am. The longest relationship I've had was one of three days. The poor girl wanted to break up with me on the very first day, but somehow forgot to mention that, and had to wait the entire weekend. I must have been a horrible boyfriend.

Anyways, because- I couldn't get any girls, people started making up these stories about me having a crush on David. It made things weird at first, but once he figured it was total bullshit, he just stopped paying attention to them. To be honest, I didn't really mind. I've had worse than verbal bullying, and in their stories, at least I had an actual love life.

David came downstairs.

'Mom, who was that at the do-?'

'Hi.'

'Finn.'

Part: 19

'I'd make an 'at last we meet'-reference. But you no longer seem to be into me or my humor.'

'Been busy.'

'Busy enough to ignore her death? Woah, I thought they'd never be able to actually brainwash you too, but they managed. If you'll excuse me,

I have to go congratulate Chad now.'

Chad was the most popular footballer in our entire school. He could get literally everyone to do basically everything he asked for. David had always been looking up to this guy, because of the number of girls surrounding him.

'Finn, he just left the office, he'll be back any minute now. Ah, I see you found David, good. Would you guys like something to drink?'

'Actually, Finn was just about to leave, weren't you?'

David looked at me as if I'd think he was scary, threatening me in my second home... cute.

'You know what, I would really much enjoy something to drink if you don't mind.'

I said that to his mother, all of us knew David did mind. He fakes smiled at me, and I smiled back, the first smile I actually meant, in some months' time now.

I sat with them and my hot chocolate until David's dad got home.

He looked exhausted. When he saw me, he smiled?

'Great to see you, lad, been quite a while, how have you been holding up. Did David give you our card?'

I said it was my pleasure, that he was right, that I'd been holding on just fine -lie- and then I had to admit he didn't. He looked at his son, surprised.

'What, David? Why not, look Finn, we gave him our card with condolences because we couldn't make it to the funeral, but David did.'

'You were there?' I asked David. Not his father, or his mom, I even forgot about our tug of war, or whatever this was. I didn't see him and judged him for it, but maybe I just didn't see him.

'I wasn't.'

'WHAT?' both parents said at the same time. Like in the movies, parents that just go together with the way vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce do.

'I didn't feel like being there, all those people who don't really care, crying. And those who do-'

He looked at me.

'I kind of needed you to be there.' I said. With those words, I got up, explained that my dad was waiting for me and that I really had to go, but thank you for the hot chocolate, it was great seeing you all again. I shook hands with his father, and his mother kissed me on my cheek and asked me to visit more often. I said I might. Then I faced David, he was holding out his hand. All I did was say his name, and leave.

I ran off quickly, felt like I didn't belong here anymore. Every second in this house was one too much. However, I couldn't have missed the red cross on the floor of the hallway, even if I'd be running like a freak because David was following me with a knife. It was the same red as in the pictures, but when I came in, I hadn't seen it?

Outside the wind was tearing through the trees, buffeting against our cabin. The storm was building, so dark that you couldn't see much past the front porch. Yet I strained my eyes, searching for the source of the sounds assailing my ears. Loud cackling laughter and screams pierced the night, raising chills on my skin.

'Arielle? Get away from the door' my mother's panicked voice called out to me. I have pulled away, back inside the cabin as she locked and bolted the door. My father was rummaging around in some drawers, looking for something.

'What's going on?' I asked weakly. The voices were so loud now. As usual, my parents seemed unable to hear them.

'We're leaving' she said. Her voice was strained. None of us wanted to go, the cabin was home. One we'd had for a while. It was supposed to be safe. I fell to the floor, covering my ears with my hands; the noise was unbearable. 'mommy' i whispered. She ran to me immediately, hearing my small plea. I felt the cool press of her fingertips to my temples as the pain receded. The noise was now just a low hum, fading into background noise. I knew from past experiences this wouldn't last long but at least it gave us a little time.

'Sweetie, you remember that room? The special one?' she asked me. I nodded. There was a room hidden behind the stove, small enough for one person. A child likes me.

'I need you to go in there. We're going to play a game' she said shakily.

'Meria! We need to hurry. It's close' my dad called my mom. He came over and swooped me up in his arms. 'I love you baby' he whispered to me. His eyes were closed tightly, his chin resting on my head.

'I know' I heard her reply. She sounded close to tears. 'I'm not ready, Dorian. She's just a child!' she wailed.

'I know. We have no choice. There is no other option anymore' he turned to face my mother. I was right, she had tears streaming down her face. She pressed a kiss firmly to my forehead and looked me in the eyes.

Her silver ones were wide with fright.

'Okay, sweetie, you remember that game we used to play when you were really little?' She spoke softly. I nodded in response, too worried to speak.

'Well, we're going to play that game now. I need you to be as quiet as you can be. After a while, we'll-' at this point she burst into tears.

'we'll come to get you out' my father finished. I'd never seen them this scared. We'd had a few close calls over the years but nothing like this. They both hugged me one last time before I was placed in the room behind the stove. Their faces were the last thing I saw before I was shut-in. I wasn't scared of this room, it was safe. I'd played in here a lot when the weather was too wild outside or when the noise of the thunder used to scare me. Muffled voices filtered through the gap in the opening. It was

so small you could only see fragments of light. I pressed my ear to it, already afraid for my parents. I was safe in my room, but they weren't here.

'...She's strong Meira... 'my father.

'...I don't want to leave her...!' My mother's panicked voice. It was hard to discern but they sounded like they were arguing.

'...It's time. Close it or we... for nothing... said goodbye... 'he was moving away from my hole. The last thing I heard was my mother's sweet voice whisper to me. 'We love you. Never forget that. Stay safe, for us baby... stay safe.'

Then my world became dark as they closed the barrier between my room and theirs.

I had no idea how long had passed. It could have been minutes or hours. It felt like forever. I knew no sound, nor sight. All I could do was wait. Then eventually, someone came. At first, all I could see was a slight flicker of light as the barrier opened. Then muted voices and footsteps.

What sounded like scraping as the door to my room was forced open.

Then I looked up and into the eyes of a woman I had never seen before.

'Arielle? Are you okay? Are you hurt?' Her voice was worried. I shook my head, no.

'Where's mommy?' I asked quietly. They'd told me they'd be the ones to get me.

'Oh sweetheart,' her features were strained as she watched me.

'They're dead'

'No' i protested. I'd seen them. They told me they were coming to get me. The strange woman reached for me. I was too weak to put up much of a fight. As she carried me outside, all I could remember between my room and the car, was red. Blood. Their blood. Shadowy shapes hovered here and there, taking pictures and talking quietly but when they saw me, all was silent. The woman held me so that I couldn't see what was happening but I heard the one-person whisper, 'What will happen to the child now?'

They really were gone. One last 'no' escaped my lips before I faded into unconsciousness.

I woke up screaming. My heart beating wildly in my chest and sweat plastering my hair to my face. It was that dream again. The same one I always had. Their faces burned in my memory. Parent's I knew but would never see again. It had been 12 years; 12 years of torturing myself with that memory, over and over again until I couldn't think, couldn't feel. The numbness was what I craved, what I needed. I knew if I closed my eyes again, I would see them, still in the aftershock of my dream, so I rolled over in bed, checking the time. 3:14 a.m. I sighed; it could be worse.

There would be no more sleep tonight so I got up. Time to go...

I glanced around the room. It had been my home for the last 2 weeks, the longest I dared stay. Any longer and I'd risk being discovered.

I flicked on the lamp beside my bed and stretched out my sore muscles.

I'd spent too long training yesterday and my body was feeling it now. Just as my mind was weary from lack of sleep.

'Toughen up. princess' I told myself. That had been my mantra for as long as I could remember. It did no good to whine and moan about something you couldn't help. The training was essential. Without it, I'd be useless if it came to a fight. I made my way to the bathroom in the small motel room. It was a run-down joint. One that wouldn't press for I.D or any other identification that I couldn't give. A fake name and a wad of cash around here goes a long way.

The room was sparse, the harsh light from the fluorescent lamp lighting the bare walls. Illuminating the ugly faded green coverlet on the bed to the dirty, stained floor. My one backpack sat on the floor beside the bed, within easy reaching distance. The bathroom was as bare as the room; and just as disgusting. Moldy tiles and I didn't even want to know what was in the wastebasket. I turned on the shower and let the hot water ease the tension in my back and neck. Let the water clean away the sweat clinging to my skin.

I stepped out and caught a view of myself in the mirror. I didn't bother with cosmetics, I never had time nor reason to wear any. I was pretty average anyway. While combing out my long hair, my mind wandered to where I could go next. There was one place I never wanted to go to. I avoided that area like the plague. Not only would there be scouts running the perimeter of the cabin, the pain of having to relive that nightmare would be unbearable.

The scouts themselves were enough to make my skin crawl. They were creatures sanctioned with the task of finding me. Monsters made of the stuff people become insomniacs over.

'Minnesota, it is then' I said bitterly. I hated ice. I hated the snow. I hated anything cold, unfortunately, it was the only place safe right now. I'd head to one of the big cities if I could but at this time of the year, they'd be crawling all over the place. Then again, no matter where I went there were bound to be some of them.

They amped up their search efforts around Christmas time. Mainly because they thought I'd be stupid enough to go somewhere familiar but also because all of that negative energy humming in the cities, from panic to stress or fear, is what they feed on. New Year's Eve is absolute chaos. If the rest of the human populace could see what I see, they would be driven to insanity.

I headed back into the room to get changed into my traveling gear. I'd managed to pick up a few items the day before so I could survive the cold outside. Slipping on a pair of black jeans and a grey long sleeve shirt, I looked out the window and into the night. The motel I was staying at was located in a small town I'd never heard of. I was in Europe, in one of the native villages and most of the inhabitants didn't even speak English.

Yippee for me. I couldn't wait to get off this continent.

As I turned away from the window, something moved outside. I just caught it out of the corner of my eye. Ducking out of view of the window, I stole a peek from the very edge. It was there. The shadows surrounding it were what had caught my eye, shadows I knew all too well. It was a hound. One of the more experienced scouts by the way its shadows were undulating in the air behind it. You could tell how dangerous the creatures were by how dark their Aura's showed. This one had thick black shadows, like smoke. It was strong. It fixed its red eyes on me for a heartbeat before disappearing.

'Shit!' I exclaimed. I bolted away from the window heading for my bag. It was about to get ugly. I'd been spotted by one of their scouts, knowing my scent had drawn them to this area. This motel in particular. If I didn't get out now, the inhabitants staying here were also in danger, something I couldn't allow. So- run it was.

Part: 20

I pulled out the bus schedule from my bag and checked the times. Nothing. 'Nothing?!' I began to panic. I hadn't been cornered for a long time; I was too careful. I'd let myself linger in one place for too long a now had to deal with the consequences. Shoving the useless paperback into my bag I sprinted out the door and downstairs. At a place like this, they didn't bother having someone on guard duty. I pressed the buzzer for attendance a thousand times until someone came out to see what the racket was.

'I need a car' I said urgently. He just stared back at me, still half-asleep. 'Now!' I all but yelled. I wasn't sure if he could understand me so I pulled out what I knew would be understood in any language, and emptied the cash onto the bench in front of him. His eyes widened, taking in the full amount. 'Car' I said again, motioning with my hands to prove my point. There was enough there to probably feed his family for an entire year. He turned around and came back out with a pair of keys in hand.

'In the shed,' he said and pointed to the motel. His accent was thick and foreign, Russian maybe? Instead of waiting around to find out, I grabbed the keys and headed for the door. I quickly did a check of the area and saw nothing but snow-capped trees in every direction. If I focused harder, I knew what I'd see. Shadows weaving in and out of the trees, growling, and keening while they waited for orders.

They were growing in numbers and soon, I knew they'd launch their attack. I sprinted for the shed now in view. I had just made it to the door when the sky darkened if that were even possible at this point, and the clouds formed shapes. To anyone else, it would just look like a storm, but I knew better.

They were coming. The hounds' high-pitched yowls and keens pierced the night. I couldn't wait any longer, another minute and the hunters would show up. The hunters were beings, formerly human, that had gone bad. As bad as you can go.

They had black eyes and fangs that would convince many a human that they were a dark angel. 'If only' I thought. At least a vamp could be staked. I didn't have the first clue of how to kill these things, let alone evade them. I'd only seen them once before and that was way back from my childhood. We'd barely escaped that time.

Their haunting laughter echoed around the valley, chilling me to the bone. I pulled the cover off the only car in the shed, a beat-up old truck. It wouldn't go as fast as I wanted but at least it was

sturdy. I'd tried escaping the hounds on a motorbike last time and had ended up with claw marks raked down my back. I still had scars.

I slammed the door behind me and started the engine. Or at least I tried to. All that it got me was a short-choked sound before it cut out. I checked the gas and found it had half a tank. Plenty enough to get me out of here if I could start the damn thing. Trying again, the engine wheezed, unhealthy for a car. 'come on' I urged, my efforts coming up useless.

The engine sputtered to life just as the door to the shed flew open. There had to be at least 20 of them. 'They're going all out this time' I thought mentally. 'Of course, they are' I argued with myself, 'They've got you'. 'Shut up' I silenced that train of thought. Now was not the time for an internal argument.

I stepped on the gas, aiming to take as many of them out as I could manage. Too bad they knew how to use their legs and jumped out of the way. I drove like a bat out of hell, speeding, cutting corners, trying to put as much distance as possible between me and the enemy. I couldn't outrun them but I could lead them in the wrong direction. At least it would give me a chance to escape. Thankfully it had rained and not frozen over yet on the roads. I'd gained about a 5-minute lead on my pursuers so I decided to put my plan into action.

Pulling over I saw a lake up ahead. 'Perfect,' I thought.

I stepped out of the car, careful not to leave any tracks lest they are found. I spotted a big long branch and tested its sturdiness. 'Not bad' i thought. It could be used as a weapon in an emergency. Heading back to the car I kicked it into gear and drove it straight towards the lake, bailing out the door at the last second. Just a tip, when jumping out of a moving vehicle, always roll on landing. It takes away the sting of the impact. Although on snow like I was, that didn't change much. It still hurt like a bitch. I waited until the car sank into the waters, out of sight. Not long after that, the air bubbles stopped surfacing. The entire process had taken a little less than 3 minutes. If I ever managed to get my pursuers to stop following me, I'd have a fair chance in a career as a stunt woman. Not likely to happen though.

I took one last glance around at my surroundings. It paid to be thorough when you were being tracked. I could hear the rumbling of thunder get closer as the clouds above darkened. They'd be here any second. I knew from past experiences that they'd expect me to be on the road, driving away as

fast as possible. In other words, easy pickings. The longer they chased, the faster they became. I know, unfair right?

I made my way off the road, into a snow embankment off to the side. Laying down, leaving no trace or sign that I had even stopped the car, it would appear as though the car had kept going. The only issue was my scent. They could be able to smell it only slightly. I generally change clothes a lot to avoid this very thing from happening. I couldn't do much for it at this point, except stay out of sight and pray to whatever powers were out there that I wouldn't be found.

I focus on slowing my breathing. The chill of the snow was seeping into my clothes, making me cold. 'Hang on' I told myself. It would be over soon. One way or another.

The darkening cloud made its way overhead, flashes of light illuminating its depths. Showing outlines of creatures, I wished I couldn't see. My world turned pitch black as the cloud obscured the waning moonlight. It would be dawn soon, the majority of the hunting party would have to return to their realm. The one thing they couldn't stand was sunlight. Some of the more powerful beings and solitaries were able to move about in the daylight, but as the creatures were born of darkness, that would always be their sanctuary.

The scouts were able to survive in the sun as they were originally the offspring of dark hounds and regular Rottweilers from the human realm. As the years progressed, this line evolved into the scouts that plagued my existence today. They were faster, smarter, and more ruthless in their hunt than ever. You see, there are 3 planes of existence. At least, not including those after death. I have no willingness to discover those, the ghost of my past haunted me in memory already. No need to add to that.

The first plane is the dwellers of the light. I didn't know much about them as they hardly ever interfere in the lives of humans. They avoided the depravity of this world, content to just go on existing in the paradise they created some millennia ago. It exists somewhere between the human realms of sky and earth. Where the two meets on the horizon. However, I had no idea how to transcend the barrier between their world and ours, if only I could. To laze away my days, free from worry or pain. No wonder they never leave their realm.

The third plane, that of the Underworlds, or dwellers of the dark, is my biggest problem. This human world is the fuel that feeds them, the wood to their pyre if you will. Underworlds need humans

to survive. As I mentioned earlier, they feed off emotion. So, stirring up as much trouble as possible is their goal. The earth is their playground.

Then you get us poor souls stuck in between. Earth is the even ground, a place where the two can connect. Beings from the first plane cannot exist within the third plane and vice versa. So basically, we're screwed. At least, from what I've been told, the beings from the first plane aren't evil. The myth is that they are where the idea of angels and fairies came from. I highly doubt they would terrorize humans like the Underworld's, but then again, you never know.

So-o, this all leads to my current situation in the snowbank. What I wouldn't give to know anything about their world. Ignorance really is bliss.

A streak of lightning arced overhead. In that brief flash, I saw them. The scouts had arrived and passed my hiding place, moving with their inhuman speed, following the road. Not until they were out of sight did, I dare to take another peek at the road behind me. Bad idea. As I did another scout came into view. It hadn't seen me and I was confident it could not but the panic still rose in me like always. It never went away in their presence.

The scout stopped dead in its tracks and I noticed, that it was different from the others. This hound was slightly larger than the others, the alpha maybe? I wasn't sure if scouts followed regular canine behavior but I knew that in most pack animals there was always an alpha. This one was black like the others, still had the same glowing red eyes and sharp, pointed teeth. What was different was its markings, or at least is lack of them. The scouts are black with white markings. When they ran, to me they looked like shadows, smoke curling through the air, but what gave them away was the flashes of white you could pick out when they moved.

This one had none. It was just plain black, and it scared the hell out of me.

And it had stopped.

Part: 21

It sat on its haunches in the middle of the road, as if waiting for something.

Someone...

Then, as if from nowhere, a man appeared, and the sky flashed ominously; the wind dying abruptly and all going quietly.

He was tall, really- really tall. He had to be over 6 feet for sure. And my god was he built. Lean muscles barely hidden beneath his black shirt beckoned you closer. I wanted to feel his skin beneath my fingers, to see if that skin was as smooth as it appeared. Too bad I couldn't see his face.

I'd bet he was gorgeous, beyond gorgeous.

Honestly...?

He looked like sex personified. And I wondered briefly what it would be like to snare him in bed. 'He's the enemy' my more rational side reasoned with me in its internal monologue. 'Yeah but for a piece of that, getting caught might be worth it' I retorted.

I dug my fingers into the snow to bring myself back to the present, nothing was worth getting caught. Not ever. But looking at him, I could almost believe it would be.

He crouched down closer to the hound. If he didn't have a long black coat on, I was sure I'd see back muscles rippling invitingly. 'Maybe he'd even have those cute little back dimples' I wondered silently. 'Arielle, cut it out' there it was, my sane side. Having different personalities had always been a problem. Usually, I'd have to concentrate to try and follow the one rational voice, but the other side was always there, owing to my more inappropriate thoughts. Thank god it didn't voice them aloud.

The man was talking, I could only catch mumbles thanks to my cover, but it looked as though he was addressing the animal. Which proceeded to take a look around.

The stranger stood back up and faced towards the lake. I couldn't check to see what he was looking at in case I moved, and the hound saw me. 'What if the car's showing?' I panicked internally. I pushed those thoughts out of my head instead of letting them run loose, panicking would only make me slip up that much faster. The hound was closer now, sniffing around some bushes near my cover. The usual chant was pounding in my head, 'fight or flight'.

If I stayed, I might be found. If I was found in my current spot I would be doomed, no way could I outrun them. There was always the chance they would tire of searching here and move on though. If I ran, they would know it was me in an instant and follow. Tough choice, but I'd never been one to sit around and wait while someone made the decision for me, I never ever had that luxury.

I didn't know if I made the right decision, but then again, second-guessing yourself if what gets people killed on a daily basis. With that thought, I sprang to my feet and sprinted away as fast as I could. I heard the hounds howl and the sound of paws hitting snow as it gave chase. I was thankful there was only one, but I had no idea what the man would do. He was the wild card.

My stamina held, and I fled into the tree line, hoping to lose them in its maze-likeness. The forests in this area of Europe were dense, and the scents of animals were everywhere; hopefully blocking mine out. Then again, mine was fresh..., I concentrated on gauging how far behind my pursuers were and then came to a halt. There was no sound. No branches snapping under heavy paws, no sharp howl piercing the night. Not anything I was expecting; which made me uneasy. They never gave up, especially not if they were this close. I couldn't risk heading back to the road in case there was an ambush set up. Then again- I didn't want to get lost in a forest, stuck in the middle of nowhere, and staying put would lead them to me eventually. What could I do?

I stood there for what felt like an eternity. Even though it was probably only a few minutes. They had me stumped. Not only that, they had me caught.

'Not yet' I reminded myself. I'd been in tough scrapes before and always came out fighting. A plan was forming in my head, hopefully, one that would work. I reasoned that they'd expect me to continue through the forest, at which point they'd have scouts ready to intercept me. Hell, they probably had a perimeter set up around the area. I wondered where the others had gone once they figured they were no longer chasing me.

With that logic, heading back the way I'd come was also out of the question. They'd started to get smarter, catching onto how I thought and adjusting their hunting strategies accordingly. They'd probably have scouts at the entrance to the forest. The sun would rise soon, and they'd have to leave. In other words, they'd start to converge on this spot. I began jogging further down the tree line. Everything was pitch black, I knew the sky would be lightening but the heavy foliage stopped any light from filtering through the canopy. I stumbled a few times, less than I'd expect for walking through a forest at night but ended up with a few scratches none the less.

At one point I even fell and jarred my knee, sending stinging pain all through my leg. What sucked was I couldn't even yell from the pain of it.

I was more careful about where I moved from then on, even the slightest bumping of my knee hurt.

I was close enough to the tree line now that I could see the sky was a pale grey. It had been cloudy for weeks but it looked clearer now like the sun might actually show. 'Not long' I thought. Not long and they'd have to leave, but they'd be getting desperate. I crouched at the end of the trees, biting my lip to stop whimpering. My eyes were tearing up from the pain in my leg.

Up ahead I could make out the shapes of the hounds. The ones watching the entrance to the tree line. They'd made a perimeter like I knew they would. A few were whining and some were snarling, but it was all the same to me. They were the enemy, no matter how animal-like they appeared. They were all monsters.

'We should have found her by now,' one of them whined. He was scrawnier than the others. Going with my theory that the scouts were bred from hounds originally, talking wasn't out of the question. Although the original hellhounds were never this Empathetic sounding. They were creatures to fear, and far less annoying. I wouldn't underestimate the scouts though; one-on-one they were a bump in the road of my day. But they had the ability to signal others, some psychic Telepathy - thing-ie that breached the barriers between our worlds and summoned the others here. As a pack, they were the full-on nightmare. Their power grew in numbers.

Looking at this one though, I'd say he was young. Probably new to the hunting scene. I wish I'd just had him to deal with from the beginning.

Too bad my luck ran out 12 years ago.

I looked further down the line, they were spread out at about 16.4' intervals and continued further than I could see in both directions. My only hope was the sun. The sky was a lighter color now, between blue and grey, soon, I hoped I would see the gold leak in. Unfortunately, before that happened, a hand wrapped around my arm, hoisting me up. The pain in my leg flared and I cried out in pain. Another hand clamped over my mouth, silencing me. The scouts were headed in this direction, investigating the noise.

'Well, well, well. What have we here?' A voice spoke softly in my ear. 'It appears I have found a stray,' he joked mockingly. The scouts reached us then and bent their heads in respect. I'd had my doubts as to who had been able to creep up on me, but not anymore. 'Just in time too,' the voice spoke.

The last thing I saw was the sun break silently over the mountain, spilling golden light into the valley... just as I faded into the darkness.

Part: 22

I was floating on a tide of blissful unawareness. It was dark, but for once, I wasn't scared. Just peaceful. I could feel a cool breeze kiss my skin and continue on its way. I could see colors flashing behind my eyelids, dancing, and spinning into shapes and words I didn't understand. I wondered vaguely if this is what dying felt like. If this was death, then I didn't mind. It seemed a lot easier than life. Life was difficult. Life was a bitch on the best of days. I wanted to stay here, just to float here for eternity. Was that so wrong? I was tired of running. Here there was no need. No worries. No sadness. Just peace. But like I said, life's a bitch.

This time, I didn't want to open my eyes. I had no idea of where I was, and I sure as hell knew there'd be no escaping. I was lying down on something soft, a bed maybe? But that seemed wrong. I'd been captured, more likely to have been thrown in a cell somewhere dark and unpleasant, but that's not what it felt like now. The sheets were silk, smooth against my cool skin. Suddenly I was freezing. The breeze returned, but this breeze was cold, frigid and icy. Adding to my discomfort. If that was even possible at this point.

'You can open your eyes you know, you're safe here.'

I knew that voice. That was the same one from the forest, the whole reason I was here instead of on the road once more. The Stranger.

'Will it make a difference if I see your face before you kill me? I don't think so. And as for safety, you're full of it' I retorted, still with my eyes shut. A bad attitude and problems with stubbornness are the result of living on your own for too long. As would happen to every other teenager in my place.

'You seriously have issues, don't you?' he replied. I liked the sound of his voice admittedly. It was sexy, rolling over your skin, leaving you wanting to hear more. Pitched perfectly between low and smooth. He sounded serious, but also like he was joking. Making fun of me. That pissed me off. Here I was about to die and he's making jokes.

'You know,' I said, sitting up and finally opening my eyes to glare at him, 'You know nothing about me. So, don't sit there and judge me, because quite frankly, I don't give a goddamn as to what you think!' I was finally seeing his face... bad idea. Mainly because I'd been right, he was gorgeous. Like, stop in the middle of a busy road and stare gorgeous, but also because he was grinning. Like getting me to open my eyes had been a game, one he'd just won.

He was staring at my face, my eyes in particular. If I'd been uncomfortable before; it was nothing compared to now. So, I did what I always do - I got snarky.

'What is your problem? Am I so fascinatingly ugly that you can't stop looking at my face?'

'Quite the opposite actually' he replied. I'd expected an equally sarcastic answer or even a rude comment, but that threw me off. So much that my mouth hung open before I remembered how to operate the lower half of my face.

'Uh, thanks... good to know,' I said. It was my usual answer whenever someone said something to me that made me uncomfortable. He was sitting on the edge of, yeah, I was right - the bed, wearing a loose black shirt with the sleeves pushed up, and long black jeans. Although I'd say they were only long due to the fact that so were his legs. And so once again I found myself drooling over the enemy. It was kind of hard not to,

I didn't get much face time with guys my own age. Or anyone really, and I'd never seen anyone this attractive. He would have destroyed the hotness statistics in Hollywood.

I'd had a friend once when I was in Australia. She'd been my age and went to school like every other kid. I'd been around 14 at the time so 'apparently' (not that I'd know considering I didn't hang out with people my age) meeting new people was the cool thing to do. She approached me while I was looking at some new clothes. 'I like that one. It would look great on you,' was all she'd said. She smiled, and I thanked her. For the rest of that day, we hung out, her giving me tips on what would suit me best and me asking her questions about her life. She always complained that her life was boring but to me, it was perfect. She had family, friends and went to school. Everything I'd never had.

One day the scouts managed to track me through her. She had borrowed my jumper and so, carried my scent with her. Not that she knew. I barely escaped that encounter and knew from then on, that having friends was too risky. Any sort of continuity was dangerous.

The stranger must have seen the sadness written on my face but there was no way he'd know what it was about.

Rather than say anything he smiled apologetically. Like he cared.

'What are you doing?' I asked bluntly.

'What do you mean?' he looked baffled.

'Why are we sitting here exchanging formalities when we both know you're just going to kill me anyway. What, do you like to play with your prey before ending its life? Didn't your mother ever teach you manners?' I bit out angrily. He still looked confused.

'You make me sound like a serial killer. I'm not going to kill you if that's what you mean.'

'Then why am I HERE?' I raged. 'Why have you been chasing me my whole life? I don't get to be normal, I don't get to have family or friends or even go to school, and I was okay with that because the alternative was worse. What am I doing here if not to die? What have I wasted my life trying to avoid?' I was running out of steam. I'd been angry for so long and finally had a chance to get it out. Which was exactly what I needed - to vent.

He waited until I'd finished and said only 'You done whining now?'

Part: 23

'Idiot-' That set me off.

'You- asshole!'

You don't care about anyone but yourself! You stupid, arrogant, chauvinistic-' my tirade was cut off when he leaned forward and kissed me. I would never kiss - anyone before and hadn't expected this. This rush of feeling, warmth spreading throughout my body. His lips were soft but his kiss was anything but gentle. It was demanding and hungry - claiming.

'Do you ever stop talking?' he said between kisses. At this point, I didn't care. I couldn't even remember why I was angry in the first place. Slowly, he wrapped my arms around his neck and moved his hands to my waist. I wrapped my fingers in his hair, loving the way it was the perfect length. I gave a little tug which he seemed to like, considering he groaned. I was no longer upright, and his weight

pressed me back onto the bed with only clothes separating us. I meant it when I said I didn't care anymore. I was going to die anyway, regardless of what he said earlier. Why shouldn't I get to feel just once, what it is to be wanted? To feel needed for once in my life? I deserved that. So -o, I gave myself over to him completely, without inhibition.

I pulled his shirt off over his head, running my hands down his chest; over each muscle, delighting in the way they tensed beneath my hands. As if my touch drove him insane too.

I kissed his skin the way I had first wanted to when I'd seen him on the road, smiling when I encountered the little back dimples I'd imagined. He pulled me up by the nape of my neck, grasping not roughly, but tenderly now. Kissing me slower, more deeply. His kisses drugging me in their depth. The rest of my clothes fell to the floor, leaving me in just my bra and underwear. I rarely wore nice undergarments, mainly because I never needed to. thankfully, this was one of those times. My favorite pair so far, black and lacy with a small silver A in the middle (coincidence, I swear.)

He caught it and stared intently, smiling slightly before returning to my mouth. My hair had come free of its ponytail, spilling long and golden around us. The color somewhere between honey and sunlight. He ran his fingers through the strands and I realized; I was about to have sex with someone whose name I didn't even know. I pulled away only slightly so that I could look at him. His silver eyes stared back at me in question.

'I don't know your name,' I whispered.

'Taylor' he replied.

All talk was lost after that. Our mouths were busy. The rest of our clothes fell away until we were skin to skin. 'At least you're not cold anymore' the inner voice in my head said to me. The rational side piped back 'You're insane'. Pushing my thoughts away, I silenced them both.

I didn't even hesitate to wonder if what I was doing was right, or sane. I wanted this. He was the last chance I'd have to do this, so I didn't care about his motives or hidden agendas. That was assuming he wasn't just some hot-headed rake out for a good time. Which sounded about right to me. But the way he was looking at me, it didn't feel impersonal. It was like he cared. Maybe on some level, he knew that's what I needed.

We took things slowly, I let him lead. A concession on my part but then, I had no idea what I was doing. It wasn't something you needed to think about though, you just -- knew. It hurt for only a second and then was unlike anything you can imagine. Books and movies can't prepare you for it, they don't even come close. Not really. Sex is just something else. After, I fell asleep resting my head on his chest while he whispered words I couldn't understand and draw circles slowly on my back. I felt weak but in a good way. Not weary like I had been for so long. I was at peace when I let the dreams carry me away from consciousness.

I wish I could like dreaming.

I wish my dreams were the kind you could lose yourself in and wake up with a smile instead of a scream on your lips. I wished for a lot of things I couldn't have.

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that there was no light coming from the window. I thought, 'Surely I didn't sleep that little an amount of time? Or was it that long?' I didn't know. What I did know, was that I woke up alone.

I looked around. You think he'd be around somewhere after last night. Him. 'Taylor,' I tested the name on my lips, smiling silently to myself. Looking around, I couldn't see any clothes, not even the ones that should have been on the floor, which surprised me.

I stood up, taking the sheet with me, draping the black silk around until it was held in place by my hand clutching the fabric to me.

Picking up the skirts of my makeshift dress with my free hand, I moved towards the balcony. The curtains, like everything else, were black. They were made of a gauzy material and moved in the slight breeze like a shroud, wafting around and grazing my skin. My hair blew around my shoulders, following the direction of the wind and framing my face. The balcony itself was beautiful, in a dark and twisted sort of way. As expected, it was black and made of some sort of rock. The whole thing seemed carved out of marble and polished until you could see yourself in it. I looked down at theme reflected in its depths, more than a little daunted by the sheer size and opulence of this place. It seemed more like a palace than a prison.

Closer to the banister, something sparkly caught my eye. I'd always loved sparkly things, my mother used to call me a magpie. God, I missed them.

Moving towards the object, I crouched down to stare at it. It looked so fragile, as though one touch could cause it to shatter into a tiny thousand pieces, this little shard of light in all the darkness. It was the moon. A tiny pendant in the shape of a crescent moon so round, the ends almost touched to form a circle, but not quite. Picking it up carefully with the fingertips of one hand, I wondered what it was made of. Glass? Diamond maybe? If it really were diamond, it would be worth a fortune. It wasn't overly large, but the craftsmanship was incredible, approximately the size of the bottle cap.

'It's yours if you'd like,' he said. I glance back into the room, still in my crouched position and bent over the little gem, to see him stride slowly out onto the balcony. I was surprised I could see at all with how dark it was.

'There is no light here, but I thought you'd like something to remind you of how beautiful the night can be,' he spoke softly. As if afraid to ruin the moment. I could barely look him in the eye, remembering anew the events of the last night, and going more than a little shy. I kept the emotion out of my voice when I replied, 'Will I was not seeing it again then?' To which he did not reply. I sighed, 'I love it. How am I supposed to wear it?' If I was going out, then I was going out true to my style. Why not have something beautiful to go with me?

He continued his slow pace to where I was crouched on the ground and I stood cautiously. I held the little moon up to him as an offering, feeling self-conscious in the knowledge that all I was wrapped in was a silk bedsheet. He took the moon from my hands, leaving me to feel slightly deprived of its beauty and motioned for me to turn around. I did as he said and looked down as he fastened it around my neck on a little silver chain that came from who knows where. Maybe he'd had it with him the whole time. He let my hair fall back in place, sliding his fingers through the strands.

I pressed my hand to the necklace lightly, 'It's beautiful. Sure, you're not wasting it on someone like me?' I said quietly.

'Turn around and let me see' he replied. I did as he said and looked up into his silver gaze. 'Exquisite,' he breathed as he lowered his eyelids and bent his head to mine so that only our lips touched. I parted mine softly, in acceptance. I wanted as many of these moments as possible before I died, never mind that he was the cause.

He took my face in his hands and kissed me slowly. As if savoring it as much as I...?

My skin was cool in the night, but I felt myself getting warmer. His body was pressed against mine, holding me close against the breeze. I felt a shiver run down my spine, the good kind, as he kissed the bare skin of my shoulder.

'You're cold,' he said, more of a statement than a question. 'We'll have to find you some new clothes'

'Mmmm, that sounds nice, but maybe later,' I said, leaning into him. I had no idea where my confidence came from. I didn't use to be so forward, but then again, I'd never felt so comfortable with someone. I guess death is a good incentive to let go of your fears.

He chuckled quietly. 'After that marathon last night, you're still not satisfied?' I shook my head no and moved past him in towards the bed. I glanced over my shoulder at him, silhouetted on the balcony he looked like something from another world. All tall, dark and dangerous. Every inch of him was divine and I needed the contact of his skin on mine to feel alive. It was like nothing else existed but the two of us at that moment. I sat on the bed still holding the sheet. I didn't have quite enough confidence to drop it just yet. He looked a little in pain as he sauntered over to me.

'What is it?' I asked worriedly. Maybe I'd creeped him out with my pushiness.

'I can't right now,' he said. 'No! - No, I want to, believe me, you have no idea,' he started at the surprised look on my face. I'd felt slightly rejected; it was not a nice feeling. 'I just have some things to do.

I was going to ask if you'd like to come with me, but I wasn't sure if you were okay after... well, you know,' he looked a little sheepish. You think it would make him look less attractive but all it did was add a slightly boyish appearance to him. I was still preening over how he said he'd come to see if I was okay.

He cared, although why he should be a mystery to me. It wasn't making sense to me. Was I going to die or not? There wasn't really a point in making sure someone's okay if you were just going to kill them. Which begged the question, what did he want with me? If he thought, he was getting a sex slave he was dead wrong. Although the idea had possibilities... 'Arielle no! That is so-oo degrading,' my rational side piped up. I'd come to call her Jane. She was the goody-goody in me so why not give her a similar name?

'Yeah but it'd totally be worth the hit to your ego,' my worse side reiterated. We'll call her Carmen, shall we? Jane and Carmen continued their internal banter while I struggled to figure out what I was going to do. Honesty had always been my best and worst attribute. Apparently, some people didn't like to be told the truth and I could be pretty blunt at times.

It may or may not have gotten me into trouble a few times in the past.

'Taylor, are you going to kill me or what?' I asked when in doubt, go with your gut feeling, and my gut was telling me to get it over with.

'Didn't we go over this already? No, I'm not,' he responded. I felt my brows knit together in confusion. What was I supposed to do then?

'Why did you follow me then?' I had to know.

'Well, that's what I needed to talk to you about. You're not going to like it but you'll find out soon enough, I guess. Just trust me, when Sha-har returns you'll know everything.'

'Who's Sha-har?' I asked, curious as to this new female entering the picture, who somehow knew what was going on with me even though I didn't. It didn't seem fair.

'Don't look so annoyed, she's a very wise, old, woman who I've known since childhood. She is respected by all, and that means you too,' he said meaningfully. I could tell he meant I should behave in front of her.

'I'm not an animal, I can control myself. So, what do we do for now then?' I asked him. He seemed to think for a minute, staring at the floor.

'Of course,' he said aloud. 'She can help,' he was speaking to himself.

'Uh, Taylor? Who can? What are you talking about?' I was completely baffled.

'Well, we do need to leave this room at some point, and unless you want to just wear that,' he said, motioning at my sheet. I shook my head no. 'Well, you will need clothes. I'm no good at this thing, however, I know someone who is. She used to be my little sister's companion, but my sister is known for being a tad unruly. To put it simply, my sister was an absolute little terror and Saber had had enough,' he explained.

'Uh, Saber?' she sounded scary. Who named their kid Saber?

'It's a nickname. Her name is actually Sabine,' he said with a laugh. 'I'm going to go grab her, do you need anything? There's a bathroom through there with a shower or bath and toiletries if you need them,' he said. I followed to where he was looking and saw the shiny black door. I was getting used to expecting nothing else at this point. 'I'll be back soon,' he said, bending down and pressing a light kiss to my lips. I sighed into his embrace but held myself in check. I really did want to clean myself up a little, no doubt I looked horrible at this point.

'Mmm,' he breathed into my hair, 'very soon,' he got up and left. I laughed quietly to myself. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. I wasn't running for my life anymore, so far it was a nice change of pace.

Part: 24

I stood up and headed into what I hoped was a bathroom. What I found was an entire bathing suit. Off to my left was another door I imagined was the closet but other than that, the 'bathroom' was huge. It was more like a completely new annex. Unlike the other room, the ceiling wasn't several feet above my head. The bedroom was more like a chamber, with a ridiculously high roof. I'd missed it last night but the room was lit by sconces on the walls, they burned a warm glow rather than a harsh light. It was pretty relaxing.

Basically, reminding me of tiny fires. The bathroom was also lit by the fire sconces, and they illuminated everything. From the long-mirrored wall to the enormous bathtub in the middle of the room. The swimming pool was more accurate. What was it with these people and having everything huge? Well, I suppose if you have the money, why not?

The bath, of course, was black marble, and I could see myself in its reflection. I ran my fingers lightly across the surface, it was so smooth. I made sure there was no one around, not that there would have been but I'd gotten so used to having to check, and dropped the sheet to the tiled floor after turning on the taps in the bath. It filled up very quickly, bubbles and all even though I hadn't put them in. Talk about heaven. I washed my hair and delighted in the way the water slid over my skin, the perfect temperature. I didn't want to ever get out, however, Taylor had said he'd be back.

'Taylor... sexy-much?' I heard Carmen say. 'I'll agree on that one, even for someone who you've known for what, a day?' even Jane agreed. That was a first, to my knowledge I hadn't heard them agree in the 12 years they'd been with me. Don't ask me what they were, I had no idea. I could just

remember them always being there in the back of my mind when I thought about anything. I was pretty sure they were part of my subconscious, which could possibly make me insane. Well, everyone has their issues, mine just happen to have their own personalities.

I'd never responded to them before, more convinced than anything that they were figments of my imagination, but then again, with some of the things I'd seen, you never knew.

'Can you hear me?' I asked internally. If someone walked in, they would probably think I was talking to myself so I didn't say it aloud.

'What do you think Princess? We're in YOUR head, so, I'm thinking yes,' Carmen retorted.

'Carmen! Don't be so rude. Yes, Arielle, we can hear you, loud and clear my dear,' Jane responded.

'Then why haven't you tried to talk to me before now?'

'Because you would have freaked out and had a spaz attack. No way does any of us want to end up in a mental home,' that was definitely Carmen.

'We thought it best to let you come around on your own,' Jane.

'So, every time I heard you and told you to shut up, you really were listening? Man, this is so weird,' I told them.

'Not everything is about your sunshine, this is weird for us too.'

'Yeah, but this is her head Carmen, she has a right to be worried. Personally, I don't think it's anything to stress over. We've been here for a while as you well know.'

Yeah, 12 years to be exact. Ever since the morning after my parents died. Maybe this was just my way of dealing with it, well it was definitely out there.

'Can we pick this up later?' I asked them. I was so not in the mood to deal with this now. On top of everything, learning that I was insane was not on my to-do list.

'Sure,' they both replied in unison.

Part: 25

I got out of the bath, all clean and relaxed. I wiped a section of the mirror to see myself through the steam. A black bath towel was wrapped around me with my hair hanging long and wet down my back. Looking at myself, I thought I might look different after last night. But there wasn't anything. I was still the same, still just me. My blue eyes stared back at me. I suppose I was lucky. Even for all my years of training and running, I didn't have that many scars, excepting the ones down the middle of my back in the shape of ragged claws.

That really had been a bad week. Recovery was almost as painful as the wounds themselves had been. I wondered if Taylor had seen them last night. He must have, they weren't obvious now, but up close you could still see the silvery lines outlined on my tan skin. Sighing, I stepped away and dried off. I managed to find a toothbrush and hairbrush to groom myself a little. I still needed clothing. Taking a final derisory glance at my reflection, I decided I was as cleaned up as I was going to get decided to head for the door. I'd have to face the world eventually.

As I approached the door, someone began banging loudly on the other side.

'Hurry up in there human, I don't have all day,' they yelled. It was female but the sound was distorted through the wood.

'Saber, I told you to be nice, not to scare her,' a voice I recognized as Taylor's replied to her loud yelling.

'Being scared can be good for you every once in a while,' she replied back. 'Besides, not as if I care whether or not she likes me. I'm not here to jump to her tune you know.'

'No, but you will jump to mine and I said be nice.'

I decided I'd intervene before it got ugly. Opening the door, I met the girl head-on. 'Am I interrupting?' I asked with a grin.

She looked me over from head to toe, pursing her mouth at the towel wrapped around me, most likely in what looked like disapproval. Where Taylor was all dark and handsome, this one was all light and refined. She had platinum blonde locks that fell straight to her just past her shoulders and dark emerald green eyes framed by thick lashes.

Her make-up was precise and perfect, not too heavy and complimenting her pale skin perfectly. When he'd said her name was Saber, I was expecting tall and intimidating. May be with scars

and even piercings, not someone who looked like they spent their weekends at country clubs. She didn't look like she could fend off hello kitty let alone a real threat, and she lived in the underworld?

Maybe...?

Maybe things weren't as bad as I thought they were. Then again, these people are the reason my parents were dead. It'd be stupid of me to underestimate her. She walked around me in a circle and I felt a moment of insecurity. Finishing her inspection, she moved back in front of me and offered her hand to me. 'Saber,' she introduced herself.

'Arielle,' my response sounded wary. And I thought she wasn't intimidating? For a small person, she was rather intense. She looked you dead in the eye when she spoke.

'Okay, well I can work with this. Taylor, go do your thing and come back later when I'm finished with her,' she turned to him and directed towards the door. I shot a confused look at Taylor; he shrugged his shoulders apologetically before turning around and wandering off to god knows where. 'Finished doing what with me?' I asked. I was a tad worried.

'Getting you cleaned up and dressed properly. You don't really seem fit for a prince at the moment. The raw material is there, you just need polishing up.' She said aloud, walking around me again. She picked up a strand of my hair, felt the texture and then let it fall again. I moved away from her scrutiny.

'What do you mean 'fit for a prince'?

'Well, what did you think he was? Do you really think any old person gets to live in the palace? No, you have to be royalty or a close friend. Or servant but you hardly ever see them around,' she said pulling out what looked like a mini handheld. She began tapping away and pressing buttons. I couldn't see so I had no idea what she was doing.

'Care to fill me in on this whole situation?' I hated not knowing things. And it was about time someone told me what was going on here.

She sighed dramatically before launching into her explanation.

'Try to keep up with me, and walk as we talk,' she said, ushering me towards the door of the bedroom.

We entered the hall when she began railing away and it took all my concentration to focus on what she was saying, I didn't notice where we were going or even who passed us, even though I know a few were brought up short when they saw me in a bath towel.

'Okay, so this is how it works. You're in the realm of Aiǫnia Nýchta, which roughly translated means 'eternal night'. In case you haven't noticed, which I'd say you haven't, there are no suns nor stars or even moons here.

That's because the creatures of this realm do not require them. Personally, I think they'd liven the place up a little, but then again that would be a moot point.' We turned a corner and I saw something black slide down an adjacent hallway. 'You don't want to know what that is so don't ask,' she said bluntly. Saber kept up a good pace as we talked, I was a half head taller than her and was straining to keep up while she continued talking. 'Taylor is the prince of this realm and her mother, the queen, is anxious to meet you. Why I have no idea. Regardless, you can't very well meet her in that,' she said, shooting another disapproving glanced at my towel. 'It's my job to at least make you presentable. I'm doing this out of courtesy to her, I owe you nothing.'

'I don't expect you to. I didn't ask you to do this you know,' I reiterated. The last thing I wanted was anyone to owe me anything. I wasn't weak, and I could look after myself. But she was right, if I had to meet royalty, I should at least look respectable. It was Taylor's mother after all. Oh, that was so-oo weird. One day I'm running for my life, the next I'm meeting underworld royalty. Well, life had certainly become interesting.

Like I said, meaning eternal night. Most people just call it the Underworld. Basically, it's home to everything you fear when you go to sleep at night. I don't even like to deal with some of the things that reside here, but home's home, I guess. You'll get used to it... ah! here we are.'

I finally looked up from the floor to be presented with a large glass door. It was mirrored glass so I couldn't see inside, but scrawled on the mirror in red was 'Illyria.' Saber waited a moment before pushing open the door. She appeared to be readying herself for something. I decided not to ask.

She pushed the door open to reveal the first room I'd come across that wasn't black. It was done in royal tones of red. Red drapes framing large glass windows, thick, plush red carpeting, and red velvet settees and lounges. Seated on one of the settees reading what looked like a romance novel was a woman who appeared in her early 30's. She looked upon our arrival and squealed in delight at Saber,

who noticeably cringed. Saber squeezed her eyes shut as the woman launched off the couch and ran to her, throwing her arms around Saber's waist and laughing happily. She was all but jumping up and down on the spot.

'Saber honey, I'm so glad you decided to visit me today. Did you hear? I'm engaged!!!' she said, pointing at the rock weighing down her left hand. That thing could take an eye out.

'Yes, I did. I'm so happy for you,' Saber said it sincerely, just without as much enthusiasm. 'And I'd love nothing more than to ask when and how he finally proposed, but we have more pressing matters.' 'More pressing than my engagement? Oh, who's your friend?' she said, turning to face me.

'I'm Arielle,' I introduced myself, needing to reassert my independence after being handed off from person to person. It got a little degrading after a while.

'She's staying in the west wing,' Taylor added, looking subtly at me before glancing back at the woman. The woman's mouth dropped open, apparently, something had shocked her.

'No way,' she breathed. 'You finally found her then? Does she know?' she asked Taylor, ignoring me completely except for a few awed looks.

'No, and we can't be the ones to tell her. It's not our place,' she replied firmly.

'You take all the fun out of this you know,' the woman began to pout.

'I'm standing right here you know,' I pointed out, even though I'd known Taylor wouldn't tell me about the big news. I'd find out later and blah, blah, blah. This sucked. And I was still in a bath towel to top it off.

What a day this was turning out to be.

'She is to meet the queen later to discuss the situation. For now, I've been told to get her at least presentable. Can you help?' she asked.

'Of course, I can hun, you came to the right place,' she turned to me then. 'Hi, sorry about that, I'm not usually so rude. The name's Illyria, but Lia's fine,' she said with a grin. Her laugh lines showed when she talked, but overall, I'd say she was a very attractive woman. She had curly brown hair, cut short to above her shoulders. I wasn't sure, but a certain way's when it caught the light, her hair looked slightly red. I think the correct term for the color was mahogany.

'Lia was a good friend of my mothers. She is also the royal beautician and is going to help you. Play nice guys,' she said, gliding over to a settee and dropping down to pick up the book Lia had discarded in her excitement; she began reading where Taylor had left off.

Then, the room shifted.

We were no longer in the red room, but what looked like a salon. White walls covered by so many mirrors I couldn't count were complimented by a bright crystal chandelier in the ceiling. It rained downlight on everything, reflecting in mirrors and temporarily blinding me. I had to squint while my sight adjusted.

'Sorry, I forgot to warn you, the initial change of a room is hard on human eyes,' she said, Imitating me on the shoulder. I wondered what they meant when the kept saying, human. Then again, I was in another realm. She indicated a chair over to the left where a bench in front of a mirror was covered with all sorts of tools for cutting hair and doing nails. There was also an assortment of creams and masks and some vials of liquid I couldn't identify. I swear one of them moved.

Yeah, I was definitely scared. As if on cue, an entire group of beings appeared. They were extremely small, barely reaching Taylor's waist and extraordinarily pretty. They were male and female and all different. Some had left in their hair while some had ice crystals glittering on their eyelashes. The only thing they had in common was their eyes. They were black.

'These are the divine. They are safe, trust me,' Taylor said as she began rubbing some form of liquid into my hair. 'This will go easier with some music. Kael, would you mind?' she spoke to one of the da'veen. He had raven black hair that glistened in the light and I'm pretty sure I saw feathers near the collar on his back. he nodded once before leaving. After a moment, the most beautiful sound I had ever heard began to play in the room. I looked to see the raven-being playing what looked strangely like a flute only it didn't sound like anything I had heard. It was soothing like nothing you would believe. I felt the leather of the chair as I lay back, letting the music calm me. I had to trust these people, what other choice did I have?

I have no idea how long I was in that place for. It felt like it had been hours. Considering there was no sun I couldn't even tell if it was day or night. All I knew was that they'd spent a lot of time on me. I'd like to say their time was wasted, but really it wasn't. They were good at what they did.

'So hun, what do you think?' Taylor spun my chair around to face the mirror. It took everything in me not to gasp.

The creature staring back at me looked as if they belonged here, an enchantress. Her skin was flawless, full of life. Her hair, spun gold, hanging to her waist in elegant spirals. Everything about her was polished to perfection. She'd even give Taylor a run for her money. Dark sapphire eyes were rimmed by thick dark lashes, her lips lush and the color of pale roses. I looked down at my hands, even the nails were buffed and polished. I'd never had nice nails because I trained too much to bother with painting them - it had always chipped off. I'd never bothered with any of these things, it was all new to me. So, I found myself staring back at the beauty in my reflection.

'Is that me?' I asked, then realized how stupid I sounded. Of course, it was. I raised a hand, watching my reflection copy the action, lightly grazing the skin of her neck. It was smooth and soft. Her skin - my skin.

'Of course, it is. You look stunning,' she said, beaming with pride at her work. 'I must admit though; you were a bit of a disaster when you came in. It was like you've never even had a haircut,' she said with a visible shudder. I looked at the ground. I knew I wasn't much to look at.

Not exactly as if I had reason to worry about my appearance, I never went anywhere. I probably reminded them of a stray dog, rough around the edges and homeless. While my hair was long, it had been unruly and in bad need of a cut. Not to mention my skin had been lacerated by the branches in the forest, my knee was proof of that. At least I thought it was. 'It hasn't even bothered me these last few... whatever it's been since I got here' I reasoned with myself. I bent forward and lifted the hem of dress they'd put me in when I'd arrived. Narrowing my gaze, I lightly touched the skin of my knee, it was completely healed. Not even a scratch was visible on my skin from any of my cuts. 'How?' I asked Taylor, glancing back up to look at her.

'How what?' she said distractedly, still fussing with my hair arrangement. She was pulling it up and twisting the length of it, trying different styles.

'I'm going to leave it down, somehow I think you'll be more comfortable that way.'

She motioned to one of her assistants who held up a pair of diamond earrings. 'No, the other ones, those are too distracting. She needs something simpler, when will you learn Niami?' The creature

huffed and walked away, returning with a small pair of what looked like tear-shaped sapphires on a bed of diamond shards made to look like a delicate web.

'O-oh perfect!' Taylor crooned, giving her assistant a zealous nod of approval. 'Here,' she said, handing them to me. 'Put them in while I find some matching hair clips, I changed my mind about your hair, we'll leave it down but I'll pull back some of the weight and just fasten it around the back.'

Most of what she'd said hadn't even registered with me, I was too busy admiring the earrings but more importantly, wondering how to put them in. I'd never gotten my ears pierced.

'Slight problem,' I said interrupting her. She looked at me quizzically.

'Yes, dear?' I pointed to my ear lobes in response.

She stared, confused for a moment until realization spread across her face.

'Oh, well,' she pursed her lips thoughtfully, 'we'll just have to do something about that. I'm sure you don't mind now do you?' she smiled and straight away one of the creatures, this one was slightly greenish in color with long strands of seaweed for hair, handed her what looked to me like a gun. I tensed automatically, unsure of what was going on.

'You okay? You can relax, this will only hurt for a moment. Besides, I'm sure you've felt worse before... 'She readied herself by a table, picking up random objects then putting them down again. She turned around, obviously having found what she was looking for, and held up both the gun and some kind of cream in a jar. It had a label but it was written in some strange language that used a mixture of cursive symbols and images.

'I take that isn't a real gun, right?' I said, I had no idea what was going on, but I was unarmed in any case. I liked Taylor, but someone that erratic was unpredictable.

'Oh sugar, heavens no! I'm not going to shoot you, dear, it's my job to make you flawless, why on Earth would I kill you before anyone had even had the chance to see my work?' she shook her head, laughing at the idea. It made sense. But I still didn't miss the fact that she hadn't said she wouldn't kill me, just that she wouldn't kill me before someone had seen her work. I needed to be more careful, I didn't know these people, any of them. They could all be serial killers, then there was the fact I still didn't know what my purpose was in all of this. Hopefully meeting the Queen would clear things up.

'Okay, so this is what I'm going to use to pierce your ears child. Are you going to be able to sit still for me? It'll only take a sec,' she continued talking while wiping my earlobes with what I assumed was disinfectant from the smell. It almost stung my eyes with its intensity.

Part: 26

'Yeah whatever, I'll be fine,' relieved that it wasn't an actual weapon, I settled back into my chair, closing my eyes to take my mind off the coming pain. She was right, I had been through much worse. Once, a few years ago, I'd been running from a scout through some tiny village in Africa made up of dirt roads and make-shift sheds. Just one scout followed my trail, a newbie who had no idea what he was doing.

However, in my over-confidence, I'd neglected to see what was straight ahead. I'd been checking over my shoulder when I fell, straight down into a ditch on the side of the road containing the wreckage of some broken-down cart. I had been in a lot of pain, most of which came from my left arm. Right where I'd landed on part of the cart with a few nails sticking out. I groaned quietly and forced myself to be quiet altogether, the scout was still around somewhere. After what seemed like an age without any sign of the scout, I'd gotten myself out of the ditch to the closest place I could find medical aid. The scout never found me, but I could still remember afresh the pain of that injury and shuddered involuntarily.

'There we go! All done. You alright sweetheart?' I looked in my reflection, surprised at how smoothly she had pierced my ears. I'd barely even felt a twinge of pain.

'Wow, they're so... 'I was at a loss for words.

'Shiny? Beautiful? Suit you perfectly?' she supplied. I laughed,

'Yeah, they great. Thank you, Taylor, for everything.'

'Oh, that's quite alright, but we aren't done yet. Now to find you something to wear!' She then squealed happily like a girl who had just unwrapped her first Barbie at Christmas, and the room shifted. The beautiful were creatures gone, and we were back in what I was calling the 'Red-room' where Taylor was still flicking through the same romance novel.

Taylor glanced up for a moment automatically, then had to look again. This time her emerald eyes went wide with surprise. She let the book fall to the floor as she stood, appraising me from head to toe, this time without the disapproval of any kind.

'My God,' she whispered, 'how did you do it? She actually looks... decent.' I had a feeling Taylor wasn't the kind of person who liked being outdone. I wasn't saying I was better than her in any kind of way, just that she didn't like the idea that I could have made such a dramatic transformation. I was a little miffed that she'd put it down to 'decent' though.

'Decent? Taylor honey she looks hot,' Taylor said with a suggestive waggle of her perfectly arched eyebrows. Taylor half-smiled, not saying anything, just continuing to shake her head as she circled me. She came to stand in front of me, 'Time to get you out of that silly towel. Follow me,' with that she headed straight towards the door after promising Taylor she would stop by for a real chat the moment she had time free.

Taylor waved enthusiastically after Taylor and even gave me a motherly hug and kiss on the cheek before saying, 'Go, have fun my sugar and remember,' suddenly her eyes turned serious and she dropped her smile, 'whatever happens, not everything is as it seems.' I looked at her immediately on guard, completely shocked by this change in her behavior, but as soon as it came, it was gone. Replaced by another peel of laughter and an apology while she ran off to ready herself for the night's events. I stood, frozen, in the middle of the room trying to understand what she'd meant. Or if she'd really said it at all.

'That woman is a certifiable bucket of crazy,' Carmen supplied for me.

'Well, that did seem rather odd... She was so nice though,' Jane reiterated. I pressed two fingers to my temple and closed my eyes, this chatter was going to drive me crazy.

'O-ooh drive you crazy? Like it isn't bad enough I share a conscious with miss goody-two-shoes over here, but I also have to deal with your insecurities as well?' her tone was snarky, I figured she was just warming up for an argument.

'Carmen! Enough, without her, we wouldn't even be alive. Not everything is about you, you know. I'm really sorry Arielle, she's just having a bad day... 'A separate conscious within my mind has its own bad day... sure, why not.

'Whatever guys, listen, I don't really know what this is, or even that you were able to communicate with me until now, so just give me some time to figure it all out yeah? I kind of have a lot on my plate right now... 'I- heard Carmen huff but thankfully she stayed quiet. Jane was quiet also- but I could feel more of an apologetic feel emanating from her. Seriously, what the hell was wrong with me that I would put myself in this kind of situation. Hell, I didn't even want to think about where that road would lead... crazy central, population me.

'Arielle! What the hell are you doing? Let's go!' Taylor called out to me from outside the door, annoyance stamped across her beautiful features. I rolled my eyes and began following her through twisting hallways, the heavy question playing on my mind of what would happen to me tonight. What did Taylor's words really mean? Whatever the case, I would need to be prepared.

Part: 27

I stood in the center of Taylor's closet, relieved to find it was like any other closet I'd seen. In all honesty, I'd been expecting some kind of grand chandelier or her own personal wait-staff. Instead, she rummaged around through rows of clothes obviously with something in mind.

'Ugh,' she said with a cry of frustration, 'I know it's here, I only just had it made... ' I fidgeted with the hemline of my towel, afraid at what she would pull out. I prayed it wasn't going to be some flouncy, pink monstrosity. Then again, Taylor wasn't exactly my greatest fan and it seemed like her style of revenge.

'Finally,' she said, exhaling with relief. She carefully unzipped the long black garment bag to reveal a floor-length gown straight out of ancient Greece. Its color was of the deepest black, complete with matching black shoes so sharply heeled I was sure- I could use them as a weapon if needed. The dress was made of the most delicate mixture of chiffon and silk, the type material that seemed to sway even when held still. It reminded me of the shadows that surrounded the hounds. I felt a chill run down my spine at the thought and began feeling anxious. The feeling of entrapping, meant strong in my mind while I tried to fight the urge to flee entirely. I couldn't do this, it was ridiculous. One moment I'm running for my life, the next a ball? No. Something was very wrong here.

Part: 28

So, things have changed enchantingly, not quite charmingly, I and Damen are in peace for now, to his parents, we turn with a disgraceful bow. But something doesn't seem right or is it me, they

try to get rid of might? I try to pretend it isn't true, but all along I should have known, that revenge lives with no mercy on me, and peace is my only hope, my life, and key.

Damen and I are Bound Together, no matter what happens, we have Eternity Forever...

My feet slowly stepped back, towards the exit, of their own accord. My heartbeat picking up in pace. Taylor was still checking the dress as I turned to run. I reached my hand out, grasping at the air in front of me to get to the door handle until suddenly she was right there - blocking the exit.

'Where will you run? One step outside the city, the palace even, and you'll be dead.' She didn't bother with any pretenses, all the walls between us gone. I stared her down easily but so mething in her gaze almost made me hesitate.

Almost. I struck out, my aim to knock her out of the way so I could escape, but she was far quicker than I realized. In an instant she ducked around me, moving like the wind and shoved me against the wall, a thin blade come from who-knows-where pressed against my jugular.

'Taylor, let me go,' I struggled against her, surprised by her impossible strength.

'Enough with this foolishness, if I had my way you would already be dead! For whatever reason, you are the key to survival for all of us,' she hissed between clenched teeth. 'If you only knew the things we have sacrificed, the people we have lost-'

'The people you've lost?' I yelled, 'And what about my parents? I have nothing because of your people,' I spite the word 'people' out, my voice was dripping with anguish and pain at the memory of everything I'd had torn away from me - everything I missed.

'You should not be so quick to judge us. You were a child when that happened, you don't know anything! I knew your parents Serena; I was there that night at the cabin. We are not your enemy - we are the only thing keeping you alive. You've been living in your own selfish dreams for far too long, it's time to wake up,' she let me go and I slid to the floor, too stunned by her heated words to think straight. My mind screamed at me to run away, but my body froze, my expression tore. Was she right? I heard the truth in her voice, she believed in what she had said.

I looked up at her, the disgust she felt towards me evident on her face as she waited for me to say something, anything. Nothing came, only silence.

'Look, you don't trust me, and let's face it, I hate you. I have too much invested in you to kill you but by God, if I had the choice... 'Her eyes conveyed how much she meant those words. 'You want answers? For everything that's happened? Get a grip. Stand up, put the damn dress on, and prepare yourself for tonight,' her voice began to even out as she calmed down, becoming more stern than angry. She rolled her eyes at me as I stood, 'I know you think you've had it rough; no one should lose their parents.'

'Taylor,' I cut her off. 'I'll wear the dress, I'll go through all the stupid motions you want me to for tonight, but do not mention them again,' I warned her. I couldn't bear the thought that all these years I'd been wrong. I hated these people for what had happened, without that hate, I almost had nothing to keep me going. If it wasn't them, I would find out who it was and kill them.

'Then we have an understanding?' She met my gaze levelly, seeing the change in my resolve, the strength with which I now stood. I simply nodded in response, unable to wait to hear what this so-called Queen had to say.

'About time.' 'Arielle?' Jane's timid voice echoed in my head... I ignored her. I ran my finger along the razor-sharp edge of my heels, hoping I wouldn't need to use them. No more running. I wanted answers and it was now or never.

'Where are you?' I muttered to myself, looking for the passage to meet Giselle.

'Who is it...?' the wall, Jade whispered.

'It's Marissa,' I whispered back and giggled.

'I don't know any Marissa so leave me alone,' it whispered. I laughed.

'Oh Jade, for heaven's sake! Let her in,' Giselle said, exaggerated. Jade crumbled, shook heavily and fell into pieces. I quickly stepped in and again as I looked back, it was fixed together as nothing broke. I stifled a laugh and shook my head. I remembered the way to Giselle's chamber which at first was slightly scary. If you ever considered living inside a wall, trust me it's not very exciting. The door to Giselle's chamber creaked, lack of oil I suppose. Giselle smiled at me as I entered. She looked the same. Blue dress, same hairstyle, and beautiful blue eyes. I sat on my knees, facing her.

'How's life...?' She teased. I eyed her.

'And you ask me...? You already know!' I laughed. She grinned and blushed.

'Not my fault,' she shrugged.

'I know. Aren't you going to ask me why I'm here?' I joked.

'I'm surprised to say I don't,' she said, and I knew she was serious. I didn't blame her. She has her own life to live. Not that she does much but hey, I can't judge someone.

'My parents. My old home. I want to see if they are alright,' I tapped my hand immanently.

'What makes you think they aren't?' She frowned. I shrugged. I hadn't forgotten one Rumor. A rumor about my sisters, one of them in love with a slave. I could never forget that. Especially hearing it from Damen made it true. She tilted her head, studying me in curiosity.

'Alright. Close your eyes if you wish to,' she said.

I didn't. I wasn't scared. I watched her as her eyes began to beam green and her jaw dropped as if she saw something terrifying. She snapped back to normal and shifted her hand bringing in the mist. Colors formed in the mist, painting a moving picture of Nora and Ella. I squealed at their presence. I was so happy to see them, I wanted to wrap my arms around them but all I would've had would be hugging myself through the mist. I calmed myself. They were in my old room, sitting on my couch.

Nora sighed but smiled gently.

'What are you going to say to mother and father?' Ella asked, softly.

'I don't know. They won't understand,' Nora said, bitterly.

Ella gently clasped her hand on Nora's and gave a squeeze.

'What's his name...?' Ella asked. His name...? Who can that be? I wondered.

'I thought you knew,' Nora's eyes traveled on Ella again.

'I don't know his name,' she returned.

'He- his name is Jayden,' she said and had that warm smile on her face.

'Jayden... What's his Sirname?' Asked Ella.

'That is what he won't tell me. He's hiding it from me. It scares me.

There could be something bad he could've done. I'm going to meet Captain Coral today and I'll ask to look in Jordan's profile,' Nora explained. Jayden, huh. She never told me but said everything to Ella. It made me angry, hurt, and upset. Did they not trust me? My anger made my fingers curl. Calm down, Giselle's voice mysteriously spoke in my head. I was getting annoyed with that.

I calmed myself and my shoulders relaxed. I continued watching them talk.

Part: 29

'I'm going to meet Jayden. I'll be back later. Take care, Ella,' said Nora. Ella escorted Nora to the door and they said goodbyes. It hurt that I wasn't talked of anymore. No one wished to talk about me. My face fell for a moment and I glanced back at the mist which changed and viewed Nora heading to meet Jayden. She walked past Captain Coral's door and knocked on the door next to his. Come in, they yelled and she entered. It was quiet as everyone was in their room. She kept walking until she came to a halt on a door that said, PRACTICE ROOM 59- JAYDEN.

She knocked. There was an exhausted sigh before he said, 'Come in,' Nora entered and their eyes lit up. He was quite handsome but held no interest of mine. His hair was glossy black that covered his forehead, his face had a relaxed jaw, his eyes were grey, he was muscular and had a dazzling smile not that I fell for it. He was dressed in armor like he ready for battle. He jumped up at the sight of Nora and within a minute she was in his arms. They laughed. He pulled back but rested his hands on her waist.

'Nora! I haven't seen you in a long time,' Jayden exclaimed. Nora laughed.

'Sorry- I was away. Had some jobs to be done. Orders from father,' she explained. He nodded. He kissed her forehead and hugged her again.

'I wanted to ask something,' Nora lowered her gaze. He pulled away and took a step back.

'No- I can't tell! I-I don't remember,' he stammered. I guess he meant his surname. What's harmful to know that?

'I didn't mean to frighten you... 'apologized Taylor.

'It's alright,' he sighed.

'Why are you scared to tell? Is there something wrong?' she frowned.

'I can't tell,' he repeated firmly. I wanted to slap him. What did Taylor see in him? So-mean he was and stubborn!

'Oh-I see. I'll take my leave. Have a good day, Jayden,' she said flatly and before Jayden could utter a word, Taylor had already left. The mist disappeared...

'What happened?' My eyes widened...

'I-I'm not sure... I don't know. It just vanished without my command like someone is blocking it,' she stammered.

'I will tell you what happened later on. Right now-I suggest you leave,' frowned Giselle. I stood slowly and walked out from her chamber and Jade cracked and fell and I dropped out. I, without a word, marched straight to the garden and sat under the tree. It's night already.

I leaned against the tree and watched the stars twinkle and the moon that glowed with no words to describe it. What happened in the chamber, with Taylor, Jayden...? I couldn't take it. I didn't want to find out like this and I never intended to. Someone blinded me with their soft hands on my eyes. I knew who it was by just his scent of forest green and mint. His breath tickled my neck.

'Damen?' I questioned, even when I knew it was him. I giggled. He stole his hands back and leaned forward to kiss my cheek.

'What are you doing out here in the cold?' he raised his brows. He looked lustrous. At night like this one, his sapphire eyes sparkled and glowed. They looked big too. He just wore a full-sleeved loose white shirt- and comfortable black trousers. I shrugged at him.

'Felt tired of sitting in the house so I came here,' I grinned. From behind, his arms hugged my shoulders and he looked down at me. I rose up and kissed him.

I clasped the thick metal around my wrists, hearing the loud click in the empty dressing room, matching silver bands to complement the style of the gown swaying around my figure as I moved about.

'Please, listen to me. You don't have to do this; I'm sure Taylor is just confused. They could be lying you know,' she tried cajoling me.

'Jane enough, just let her go. She needs to know the truth.'

'What if it's a trap? Maybe Taylor really was lying,' I could hear the panic in her voice.

'I'll be ready.' I responded; all emotion devoid from my inner voice. I was in fight-mode, no feelings, just logic, and pure instinct. Taylor was right about running, where could I go? I needed to play along with their game. At least until I could get out alive. It was like we were all in one big game of chess, I would wait patiently for my turn, hell, I might even get to take out their Queen.

'Oh, please don't let it come to that, Carmen, she'll, we'll be killed, tell her!'

'I'm with her on this Jane. We need a way out. I don't care what they say, I don't trust them. What I wouldn't give to destroy Taylor though, she's got it coming.' I agreed. I'd misjudged her, she was strong for her size. Deadly. And me? I'd been taken off guard, open, vulnerable to her words. I wouldn't make that mistake again. I didn't train every day for anything.

'Let's do it,' Carmen's resolve was strong and I drew strength from her. I'd come to depend on these two more than I'd realized for the better part of my life. Jane's compassion and Carmen's fierceness. They blamed me entirely; I suppose it was lucky I had them.

'You're welcome,' Carmen said. I could feel Jane nod quietly, not needing to say anything, conveying her agreement with a wave of peaceful serenity washing through me. I sighed, slipping a ring on my right pointer. Someone knocked quietly at the door and I turned my head to investigate. My long hair grazed the exposed skin where my dress parted. In classic Greek style, it had a low waist, with the material held in place only by a silver clasp on either shoulder. The neck and back plunged to the waistline. I stood abruptly, startled as he opened the door and stuck his head in. I'd been expecting Taylor, hoping she was back to her icy-demeanor after our little tete-a-tete earlier. At least we knew where each other stood now.

I was instead surprised to see Taylor waltz in, striding straight across the room. Before I could even utter a hello, he'd slipped his arms around me and dipped me low, crushing his mouth to mine. I pulled back immediately, unsure if this is what I wanted now that my impending death was at least postponed. It was only then I realized something was amiss... It was his scent. I couldn't place it right, but it definitely was different. He righted me without releasing his hold and I took the opportunity to try and pinpoint why I was suddenly feeling estranged from him.

'That isn't the way to greet your betrothed now is it?' He said with a smirk. I filed the betrothed comment away for later. He tried to kiss me again and I ducked my head, breaking away from him. I turned to face him straight on and found what I'd been looking for.

'You're not Taylor.' It was a statement, not a question. The eyes were the wrong color. Taylor's eyes were green, forest green, the darkest shade of emerald. Whoever this was, his were lighter, jade green with flecks of brown that looked almost gold.

'What are you talking about, it's me... 'he said, moving towards me with arms outstretched.

'Come near me again and I promise to make you infertile. Who are you?' I stood with my back to the door and nearly jumped out of my skin when someone laid a cool hand on my back. I spun around, amazed someone could have snuck up on me. It's like these people were dead with how silent they could be. Taylor stood before me, dressed in a silver one-shouldered gown, dripping in diamonds to match.

'Get out,' she ordered the stranger. He lifted one side of his mouth in a half-smile and mock bowed.

'As you wish,' he glanced back to me as he straightened, winked, and then disappeared, leaving nothing but a few wisps of dark smoke hanging in the air. I pinched the bridge of my nose, 'Do I even want to know?' I asked aloud.

'Probably not. Regardless, I'm going to tell you. I'm surprised you knew it wasn't Taylor, not many people can tell the twins apart. Well, at least anyone who hasn't spent time with them.' Oh god, twins?

'There's two of them?' Carmen exclaimed I could almost visualize her excitement as if it were corporeal.

'Oh no,' Jane was far more apprehensive. I was on her side. This was going to be problematic. I took comfort in the fact that I could at least tell them apart up close.

'Did he hurt you?' Taylor asked, there was something in what she'd said, some emotion I couldn't identify.

'Not in so many words. He just got a little too friendly.' I narrowed my eyes, 'Please tell me he doesn't play that game often.'

'Not unless he has someone new to play it on. Let's go, Taylor's waiting.' I felt my stomach clench; the betrothed comment made its way to the front of my thoughts. Maybe it was time to put a nice big stopper in whatever was between us until I figured everything out.

I took in every little detail on my way through the winding corridors, ensuring I could at least navigate this section of the palace if need be. Multiple creatures, small in stature and all the same pale shade of grey moved about aimlessly, or at least that's what I thought. What was most frightening about them was the fact that they had no faces, it was like their translucent skin had been pulled tight across their skull, leaving only small valleys where their eyes and nose should have been. Whenever I moved past them, their socket-eyes stared at me, their head the only part of their body that followed my Emmah. I repressed a shudder and tried to ignore them while an intense feeling of unrest began to stir beneath my skin. I focused my gaze forward now, paying attention only to the back of Taylor's dress, afraid at what else I might find lurking in the hallways. She had said I wouldn't want to know about certain things in the palace, she was right.

It was sad that I had to break away the lovely moment but I wanted an answer. He brushed my hair behind my ear.

'Have you heard of a soldier named, Jayden?' I asked. He narrowed his eyes and studied me before saying, 'Maybe' It was my turn to narrow my eyes.

'I want a specific answer,' I said, firmly.

'Why do you want to know about him?' he tilted his head. I couldn't tell him about Giselle. Taylor... I could tell him that since he told me the rumor.

'Eh- hmm, remember back at my house when I was to show you around in the mansion, and you told me something about one of my sisters being in love with a slave?' I asked. He hesitated, then nodded his head slowly.

'Well, I just figured out his name. It's Jayden,' I said. He raised an eyebrow.

'Jayden? Hmm not exactly tired, were you? 'The house is too tiring'' he rolled his eyes. Here we go again.

'Please. Tell me,' I pleaded.

'Sure, my love. But why do you want to know? What's his life to do with yours?' He retorted.

'Its... It's nothing to do with me- I can't tell you just yet... 'I stammered. He glared at me. The deathly glare. The one that makes you kill yourself if you were to choose between death and his glare. I'd wished to die right there.

'Fine. Don't tell me. But as a husband I have a right to know for some man my wife seems to be so interested in,' he got to his feet and walked in the direction of the stables.

'Damen! No, you've got the wrong thought. Please come back!' I called after him, but he didn't stop. I bit my lip to stop myself from crying but this time it didn't work. I whimpered, and tears slid on my cheeks.

I woke up at the sound of birds chirping above me. I massaged my eyes and saw the sun, fully risen. I had fallen asleep in the garden.

Damen... Something about Damen. The-misunderstanding about Jayden.

Damn it! You should have told him, he's yours after all... Giselle's voice spoke in my thoughts.

Maybe- I should have. He would have understood. He always did. I rose to my feet and ran to the stables. Laura was still asleep but a little step of mine, her eyes opened instantly and she neighed at my arrival. I jogged to her and hugged her. My beautiful Laura who I haven't seen for a long time now. I am quickly grand on the opposite shelter. Blackwell was nowhere in sight.

He was gone... Which meant Damen hadn't returned home last night. Fear jabbed in my chest. I immediately let Laura out and sat on her back. She galloped towards the main gates as fast as she could, which, believe me, she was very fast. The guards opened the gates and Laura galloped in the forest. I pulled her mane and she stopped. I glanced sideways of the forest and had no idea where to start. That's when I heard it. It was a faint cry. It was a shrilling cry. Like a... Horse - a horse like... Blackwel. There was a yell and after that, Blackwel's cry no longer echoed in the forest.

Taylor never once spoke a word to me, I didn't even register a tilt of her head, so she must have assumed I would be behind her the whole way. I would have tried wandering off if not for the fact

that she would have dragged me by my hair to our destination. I made a mental note to provoke her later, so I could get a serious gauge on her skills as a fighter.

Hell, I'd possibly try and glean some information from Taylor as well - nothing like a little stealthy digging to find out what you wanted to know.

Taylor turned right down a set of stairs that opened into a foyer. Just beyond the foyer was another balcony. Outside looked as dismal as ever. Ever-roaming clouds of black curled in on themselves, a giant blanket of deepest night spanning the never-ending sky. There wasn't even a horizon. I felt like I was staring into an ocean in the dead of night, it was unsettling like at any minute it would rain from the sky, drowning us all. It was a lost sky, belonging to a lost city in a lost world. There was nothing but death here. I didn't pause to take another look, it would only cause me to become more afraid and desperate than I already was because, in that dark void of a sky, there was no light. No light meant no way out.

The light clicking of solid silver heels on tile echoed as we walked in silence, I noted how quiet Jane and Carmen seemed to be, even they had no idea what was to become of tonight.

Suddenly Taylor stopped and turned her head towards me, barely.

'Once we go through here, you are on your own. I have done as I was asked and got you ready- but the rest is up to you. Do you want answers? Then I suggest you behave yourself and listen to Taylor. He'll be all the help you need.' She disappeared through a set of opaque curtains stretching from floor to ceiling, the only form or doorway into whatever lay beyond. I stepped forward, about to follow her when I couldn't help but pause. What was I doing?

Taylor seemed to think- I was something special, unknown. What if they were wrong? Once they figured out, I wasn't who they thought, I would be killed instantly. I was just some human girl, one with albeit the worst luck in the world, but the wrong girl none-the-less. I ran through all the possible scenarios in my head. Then again, a tiny voice whispered within, what if they were right? They could tell me the answers I had craved since childhood. The fate of my parents, my place in all this, it was only a step away.

It could also be a trap.

I took a deep breath, and made the final decision, possibly to end my life.

I stepped through because really, there was never another option.

The soft material of the curtain parted around me, and I was again amazed by how unreal this place was, it was like I'd stepped into a twisted fairy tale. I was at the top of a descending elliptical staircase. From the landing where I stood, I looked into grand hall lit by seemingly glowing icicles. They hung from the ceiling forming chandelier-like crystals, glowing somehow from within - a pure, white light. The bottom of the staircase encircled a fountain flowing with black water, and the long sides of the hall were lined perpendicularly with perfectly cut pools filled with the same liquid, each sporting its own fountain in the center. The floor was like a giant dark mirror, reflecting the light from the ceiling back in a muted, changed sort of way.

The floor- to- roof windows that made up the walls were lined by the same kind of curtains I had just stepped through and at the opposite end of the hall was a raised dais, upon which sat a very real, crystal throne. And a very real figure, whose head turned towards where I stood the second, I'd entered, even from this distance. Between us, spinning and circling in perfect synchronization were easily hundreds of people – if that's what you could call them. I moved to the balcony and placed one hand on the iced railing, surprised to find it wasn't cold, while I simply stared out across the crowd. I never believed anything like this could have existed. Monsters didn't need ballrooms; I couldn't help but feel confused.

'What do you think?' Taylor came to stand by my side, following the Emmah of my vision as it swept across the room, taking in all the grandeur.

'I-It's...' I stuttered, trying to find the right words to describe what I was seeing.

He turned me towards him, placing both hands on my shoulders and I tore my eyes away unwillingly.

'...A- lot to take in?' he supplied for me, bending his head closer to mine, holding my gaze. I swallowed uncomfortably and nodded; my throat had gone dry. An army of undead soldiers and hellish creatures?

No problem. A fancy ballroom filled with glamorous beings and whimsical music? Nope, lead me to the door. I think my hands started to shake. I kept replaying a constant image of myself falling down the stairs ungracefully and landing in an embarrassing pile at the bottom while all these people turned to laughter.

-And-

'I can't do it.' The words burst from my lips. I shook my head at him, 'Seriously, it will be a mistake taking me down there.' He smiled and rolled his eyes at me.

'You'll be fine. Trust me.' He straightened and stepped back from me, offering a single hand. I eyed it warily. My independent nature demanded I walk down those stairs alone, while the other (unbelievably freaked out) part of me rationalized that it would be more appropriate, not to mention help my blame tenfold, to take his hand.

As if Laura read my thoughts, she raced towards the trees, following the sound that came no more. My heart was beating hard against my chest and all I wanted to do was run back for help. But you can't. Damon needs you. Besides, you're not defenseless. Remember that jonabeeb stone? The one he gave you? I hastily searched for the Jonna has a stone in my bag. Yes! Thank goodness for that.

The Jonnahas stones are powerful enough to kill a fallen angel on sight. It was made of blue glass that preserved the rays from the sun.

Throw it directly at or by a fallen angel, and he dies. throw it a human and he burns. the stone was made by the dark angel Killers who used it as last resort to kill an evil angel. How Dame n got his hands on one of these? Well, even I don't have the answer to that. I held the Jonna has the stone in my hand tightly, careful not to be too hard. I could do this. I knew I could. And then everything went wrong.

A bullet whizzed past me and Laura neighed loudly. I clung tightly on her mane as she sharply turned to the Emmah of the Wolman March.

The Jonnahas stone flew from my grip and burst into flames as soon as it hit the ground. Oh no. The flames hastily incinerated the green grass, slowly spreading on to the trees. Laura ran deeper and deeper into the forest which got darker and darker because of the leafless tree branches concealing the sunshine. the branches were long and sharp, cutting my cheeks. I threw an arm over my eyes and they clawed at my dress, ripping my sleeve.

The crackling sound of trees burning roared in my eyes. Black soot began to cover the trees and the smoke made Laura slow down. I too was finding it difficult to catch my breath as adrenaline pumped through my veins. My lungs coughed out the smoke I inhaled, and I was choking. No way was I

going to die here. Laura had had enough. She dropped on all fours and rested her head. I got off her back. I knew I was going to regret this, but I had to leave her. Not looking back even when she neighed sadly, I ran like hell was chasing me.

I deliberated for only a moment before exhaling in a rush and grabbing his hand - before I could change my mind. He pulled me gently to his side, his larger body making me feel small and vulnerable all over again. He laced our fingers together and laid a kiss against my temple before moving ahead of me to descend the stairs - never letting go of my hand. His hands were so much larger than mine, not bulky, but soft with long graceful fingers. They fit near-perfectly with my (now) smooth skin. I wondered how long it would be until I once again had blisters and callouses from weapons training and groaned inwardly at the thought. I felt a tug on my hand and realized I'd zoned out completely, we were at the bottom of the stairs, facing a thousand pairs of eyes... eyes that weren't human.

They parted as Taylor led me forward, my own eyes determinedly set on the ground so that I wouldn't have to face their judgmental looks. I held Taylor's hand with both of mine and he squeezed them reassuringly. I looked up at him from under my lashes, the barest peek and saw his dark green eyes gazing back into mine with warmth. I looked back at the ground praying I hadn't gone red in front of this crowd. Losing my composure, what little of it I had, over a boy? How embarrassing. Taylor took a deep breath and we came to a stop. We'd reached the end of the hall and I lifted my eyes, up to the dais where she sat, eyes the color of pure, glistening snow, staring right at me.

I couldn't believe what I saw. She was unreal, porcelain skin without a single mark, long silky hair that seemed more silver than blonde and ice glittering on her lashes. Her dress fanned out behind her as she stood, giving the impression of glorious white wings as her feathery gown settled. She parted her wine-red lips to speak, the only point of color on her otherwise frosted demeanor. Taylor cleared his throat quietly and I tore my eyes away from her majesty in awe, surprise tinged with a little (sorry, a lot) of uncertainty clear across my features. He was looking at me in amusement and subtly winked at me as he bowed to the goddess before us. I followed suit, bowing from the waist as seemed the only natural before such a being. I'd managed to close my mouth when I'd stopped staring and now focused my eyes on the floor, thinking of how much of an idiot I'd just seemed. Great first impression on my part... not.

'Today we take the first step to reclaim what is rightfully ours.' Her melodic voice, strong and beautiful, echoed in the hall around us. 'My children, no more shall we hide in the shadows. They will build monuments to our memory so that one day all will know we remain forever the makers of our own

destinies. Nothing will- have denied us,' at this all the creatures in the room shouted in triumph and applause, some issuing a shrill shouting like a banshee, and one bird-like being whooping and whistling in strange contemptuous. I automatically stepped closer to Taylor, my body seemingly seeking the protection of his while my mind was preoccupied with the celebrations taking place around us.

The music started up again and the crowd dispersed to dance with renewed fervor. I thought I saw Taylor for a moment before the crowd turned and she was gone. Somehow Taylor had also seemed to disappear, I hadn't seen her since she stepped through the curtain. Surely, she must be around here somewhere?

Taylor's hand closed around mine and he began leading me forward, I followed his lead as we trailed behind the Queen's retreating figure. We were being led behind the throne through another curtain.

Once through, all traces of music from the hall behind us were muted. The room was small, similar to the rest of the palace with a small balcony to the right. There was very little furniture, a glass table adorned with an elaborate black-rose flower display and various crystal wine-glasses, a settee and chaise set-up in front of the balcony and another doorway leading out of the room.

The Queen strode over to the chaise and reclined gracefully, motioning for us to sit opposite her on the settee. Wine glasses filled with the darkest ruby-colored liquid were given to us by a da'veen with black skin, the only color' coming from the rose-petals that made up (her?) it's the hair and the matching red lips. The da'veen exited through the door and I stared at the liquid, the walls, pretty much anywhere but at the Queen, whose gaze I could feel burning into my skin. She cleared her throat delicately and I reluctantly returned her gaze, afraid of what was to come.

'Do you know who I am?' she spoke quietly, now that it wasn't directed at a large crowd you could clearly hear the almost musical quality to her voice, like bells... or angels. I couldn't decide which was more likely. She actually glowed, a faint white illuminating from within her skin.

'You're the Queen,' I replied, unsure of the answer she wanted. If not for the eyes, I could almost believe she was out of place down here.

'Indeed, I am,' she paused and narrowed her eyes slightly before asking her next question. 'And who does that make you?'

I didn't answer straight away. I looked at Taylor who just nodded at me, I wasn't sure what she meant.

'I'm Arielle?' It came out sounding like a question.

'Are you? It sounds as though you aren't even sure of who you are...' Two minutes with her and already my head was in circles. What did she mean? Of course, I knew who I was.

'I am Arielle Deveraux,' I said, 'you know who I am.' I said more confidently now. She smiled, pleased with my answer.

'It's lovely to finally meet you, Arielle. We have much to discuss,' I nodded. 'Please,' she motioned to my glass. I looked at Taylor once more, and he sipped his own but looked only out beyond the balcony, offering me no aid. Looks like I was on my own with this one. I stared at the glass, watching the ripples glisten in the liquid. I took a deep breath a lifted the rim to my lips, closing my eyes briefly as the first drop touched my tongue, it was sweet, almost like perfume with it's in toxifying scent. The flavor was a wine blend of fruits unknown to me, but amazing none the less. It was incredible.

'You are brave,' it was not a question, but a statement. 'I like to think so,' I responded. The Queen's face turned solemn, 'There is much I have to tell you, but I feel it will be better if I show you. She sat up straight and extended a single, white hand to me. The faint light I mentioned radiated intensely off her extended hand now, I knew something strange was about to happen. I hesitated for only a moment before I slowly reached out my own and she clasped them together.

Closing her eyes, I felt the cold from her hand creep up my arm like ice. This is what I'd been waiting for, my answers, for everything. I could feel it. Suddenly, I was blinded by a pure, white light that enveloped the room, and everything fell away...

I felt the sensation of falling, the tightening of my stomach muscles as they clenched and curled, trying to accommodate for the shift in gravity. My feet were planted firmly on the soil, but I staggered slightly; the hand still clasped tightly on my own righted me before it let go. My palm stung, and I looked to see tendrils of ice encasing my hand and forearm that seemed to connect deep within the tissue of my flesh. I shivered involuntarily; the chills traveled all the way down my spine... like frostbite was eating away at all the warmth in my body.

'Do not be afraid, the ice can't really hurt you.' The Queen spared me a glanced over her shoulder before walking ahead, towards the edge of a deep ravine. I stared at my palm worriedly for a moment longer before taking the opportunity to look around and try unsuccessfully to get my mind off my frozen appendage - it was a wasted effort. There was nothing here, no life, no sound; it was a barren wasteland, populated only by grey dust and dead trees.

'Where are we?' I asked, my voice echoing down the ravine as I approached the edge, standing by the Queen.

'Earth. Or what was left of it... 'her demeanor had completely shifted, the look in her eyes hollow as if she was somewhere else entirely. She closed her eyes and the ground began to shake, a deep rumbling as thick smoke began to spew forth from the ravine, spreading across the land opposite us like a disease. The sky darkened and thundered, illuminating with flashes of lightning what I could only assume were creatures from the Underworld moving within the black mists. The shadows of thousands of monsters, hunters, hounds and many, many more creatures I had never seen up close; and now hoped I'd never had to.

I took a few steps back; so far, they weren't paying attention to us, it was like we didn't exist, but I still didn't like what was unfurling before my eyes. I really thought that it was a good time for us to go, however, it seemed like the Queen was waiting for something. 'Which is fine by me if that's what their army looks like... leave her here and let's get outta here' even Carmen was scared, her voice trembled in fear and awe. Jane couldn't speak, I felt her presence in my mind contract like it was trying to disappear. 'No,' she whispered, 'I just can't watch this, I know where we are... '

'Care to share with the rest of the class?' Carmen's bravado was wavering, 'you can't fight what you don't know'. Jane shook her head in response, 'Just... wait. You'll see.' With that, she completely disappeared, somehow retreating to some corner of my mind far away from what was happening. I couldn't say I blamed her; I was feeling the urge to run away screaming myself. I was no match for an army, I'd rather live to fight another die.

I cleared my throat, almost afraid to speak in case one of the creatures saw us. The Queen tilted her head in my direction but still seemed far away in her own little world.

'They can't see us, or hear us,' she spoke softly. This is nothing but a memory. One you need to see... 'Crack, lightning struck the ground violently, spraying sparks in all directions. The creatures

bayed and screeched, the smoke forming a circle around the scorched earth as if they were afraid. More lightning struck the ground at random before a mighty roll of thunder echoed throughout the sky and across the deserted plain.

Lights fell from the sky like silver rain, I had to cover my eyes from the sheer bite force of it all. The lights were so bright my eyes watered but I couldn't force myself to look away. At first, I thought they were clouds or birds but as they crashed towards the earth at an alarming speed, they became clearer. They were from the first plane. The High plane, Heaven, Valhalla, Paradise, call it what you will, but these were the majestic creatures from centuries ago, missing from the world for almost a Millenia. I had a feeling I was about to see why.

'Don't be fooled by their appearance of valor,' the Queen turned to me and grabbed a firm hold of my shoulder, staring right at me now. She shook my shoulder, hard, 'they are not what they seem. You are witnessing a battle between our two realms on the only plane we can coexist.'

'Not what they seem? They are angels! The saviors of mankind! They are protecting us from the likes of you,' I broke away from her, confused why she would show me this memory when it only furthered my belief that they were evil and cared about nothing except the destruction of all life.

'Then you are a fool,' she hissed through clenched teeth. Her snow eyes seemed to grow dark, 'What do you think happened here? There is almost nothing left of your kind, they were wiped out by your so-called Angels who care nothing for casualties of war. They seek only the extermination of my kind, whatever the cost!'

'You're lying!' I yelled, turning back to watch the two races do battle. I had never seen such carnage, the Queen bared her teeth angrily but turned back to watch the battle unfold, I was sure she was biding her time, trying to find a way to convince me that I was wrong. What looked like a faerie was blasting a group of hounds, releasing a line of golden fire that moved of its own accord to surround the group. It contracted like a rope, a razor-thin rope, sharper than the deadliest of knives as it sliced the animals in two across the middle. I looked away, trying to remember that this is war, there has to be a losing side.

They say I killed Bobby Shipparro from down the street. They say that I was the one who drove the knife into his heart and then dumped him in the sewer. But it wasn't me, I know it wasn't. Yet still, people think I did it. Why is that? Just because I'm different. Just because I'm special.

My mom believes me, she believes me to the moon and back. My sisters, all five of them, hate me. Of course, they would believe I killed Bobby too. That's why I have to leave. That's why I will leave.

Being able to turn invisible won't make leaving town hard.

'...I wish you were here, cause sometimes- I get lonely- I guess I'm not the only, new girl in town! Mama, I promise that I'll be alright- I'll call and say I love you every night- I'm just trynna right the story of my life!...'

I sat on the bus and tried to make the shape of the blurry figures that sped by. The rain had fogged up the glass and the only thing I could see were trees. The man who sat next to me was snoring like a pig and the kid behind me kept kicking my chair. Even still, I sat through it, hoping to get as far as possible.

Tucking my legs into my chest and wrapping my arms around my shins, I leaned my head against the fogged-up window in hopes of finding sleep. However far this bus went, it would be my last stop.

~*~

A desolate place with dusty shop windows and old men on rocking chairs. That's the quickest way I can explain the town I found far enough to stop in. Dust swirled around my boots and clung onto my shirt. I did the best I could, holding two large suitcases, and walked the dirt road that led to the center of town.

I needed to find a Motel and I needed to find it fast.

'Are you ok dear?' I didn't even notice the little old lady who happened to walk up to me. I was obviously a young girl with no place to go.

'Yes- ma'am I'm fine' I lied, putting on a fake smile that I hoped would work. She saw right through it.

'I beg to differ. How old are you sweetie?'

I didn't know for sure if I should tell this woman my real age. I looked kind of old for my age, so I decided that lying would be my best bet.

'Seventeen ma'am, fresh out of high school,' I said abruptly, trying to make my way around her and avoid further confrontation. But old ladies don't give up so quickly.

'I may be old, but I'm not stupid. Now, you wait here and I'll see how much cash I got left in my purse' the old woman turned to walk back up her porch steps and I took the opportunity to disappear.

'If you have a bank account, I could write you a che-e-' the woman could no longer see me, and if I held my breath long enough, she could no longer hear me either. I watched the woman look at where I was standing with a bewildered expression on her face. She looked both ways down the dirt pettah and then shrugged, walking back up the stairs slowly.

I kept myself invisible for a while longer as I took the Emmah down into town. I tried not to draw too much attention to myself. I probably wasn't doing such a good job, since I got curious onlookers. It seemed that this town didn't get tourists often. I spotted a cruddy sign that read 'Motel' or at least tried too.

Walking in, it smelt like polished leather and mothballs. Glad that I was finally able to put down my suitcases, I trudged over to the desk and hit the rusty bell. It hadn't been used in a while.

'Well- how may- I help you- little miss?' Came the strong country accent from around the back. Anybody back in the city would have called it pure hillbilly.

'Um, I would like a room' I said, hesitant at what they would think when they see me. I don't think fifteen-and-a-half-year-old girls get rooms just like that.

'Well, of course, I mean you came to a Motel didn't cha?' there were hoarse coughing afterward and then the sound of boots shuffling across the hardwood floor.

'Yah,' I tried to stand a little taller as the man came around the corner. He was what you could call your average western cowboy. He had the scruffy mustache, the ten-gallon hat, the beer gut, the boots, and the big buckled belt.

'You can call me Chuck darling,' he said, fixing his belt and sitting down on a stool right in front of the counter. He opened up a rather dusty binder and flipped to a fresh page.

'Ok, I'm going to need to see ID and social security number'..., he said formally, twisting his big mustache. I think I nearly choked and my face turned bright red. I had forgotten all about needing an ID.

'I- um- well- I' I was startled as Chuck began to laugh as he had never laughed before.

'Gets runaways every time. Wha-choo-tink- dis here is? One a dang- damn fancy hotels? I don't need any ID. Just your name and the cash upfront' Chuck smacked his right knee and got his pencil ready.

'Wait, how do you know I'm a runaway?' I said, beginning to rethink the whole idea of running away. Was it that easy to read me?

'Young gals like you always coming in and out of displacing' I didn't know much about Motels, but I knew it didn't look like people had ever set foot in that place.

'Now, your name?'

I hesitated before saying it clear and strong, 'Taylor, Taylor Locket'

... You know all about this dream I gotta chase, I get a little closer every day~

California's not that far away~

I'm not that far away~

<3

Chuck folded the money I gave him and gave me a bright smile.

'Now, let's get you to your room.'

I went to go pick up my suitcases but was immediately stopped.

'No, no, no, I got me a bell boy for that' I covered my ears as Chuck let out an ear-piercing whistle 'Ricky! Get your ass on down here boy!'

Then came Ben, a tall lanky boy who seemed bored out of his wits.

His white t-shirt was stained with grease and his jeans had plenty of holes.

His blond hair was tinted with dirt and when I shook his hand it nearly swallowed my little fingers.

'I'll get your suitcases Miss Locket' he said in a tone that said, 'I have to do this every time!'.

'Thanks,' I said just as bluntly.

'Well I think you two will get along just fine, Now, your room Miss. Lovett' Chuck interrupted, guiding me by the shoulder down the hall. Ben followed suit and as we walked down the long hallway, I took in the western atmosphere of it all. From the peeling wallpaper to the antique furniture, everything reminded me of old western movies.

'Miss Lovett, your room' with what I think was a grand flourish, Chuck opened a wood stained door that creaked on the hinges.

The room- that, I was scooted into was rather nice. The flower print bed sheets and cream-colored walls all held a homey feeling to them. The white curtains let in enough sunlight and the wood finished furniture was nice.

'I like it, thanks' I said, sitting down on the bed and watching Ben set my suitcases down.

'Now Ben here is my son and he will be here a lot so if you ever need anything, just ask Ben here' Chuck informed. I looked over at Ben and his face clearly held no intention of getting me anything.

'Can I go now?' He asked, 'I was working on the car.'

Chuck looked a little disappointed in his boy's behavior but finally gave him the nod to go. After getting the schedule for complimentary breakfast and dinner and getting a stern 'This money will pay for seven days! After that, you have to pay again to stay longer!' Chuck finally left.

After Chuck left it was kind of lonely but I kept busy with unpacking the few belongings I had. I tucked my two big red suitcases under the bed and sighed as I stood there.

I did it.

I got away.

I was free.

But where would I go afterward? I couldn't stay in this little town, paying one hundred bucks a week, my money would soon run out. I needed to find a permanent place, like that, it was easy. I dropped down on to the bed and breathed deeply. I scooped my reddish-brown hair into a bun and tried to relax.

But Relaxing is hard when you're a runaway. There are so many new faces, and beautiful places in this town~ I'm learning the ropes- on this crazy road, I'm going down.

When- I say small town, I mean it! As I look around, everyone knows everybody and when I walk down the street, I get nothing but stares. And Chuck says he gets Runaways all the time. There wasn't much to do so I walked back to the Motel. I was bored out of my mind and I can't help it if I got curious when I heard a noise coming from the back.

It sounded like a drill and I knew I probably wasn't allowed to, but I slipped behind the counter. Easing open what seemed to be a back door, I stuck my head out to find a garage. There were tools all over the place and a big blue car sat in the middle of it all. Two legs stuck out from under it and I instantly knew it was Ben, working on his car.

He had been quite rude during breakfast so I thought it would be best to go invisible. I didn't want to get kicked out of the Motel for trespassing. I closed the door silently behind me and went over to the center of the garage. Whatever Ben was doing, he didn't even notice the two cans I accidentally knocked over.

My humor got the best of me and I found myself opening the car door and getting in. After sitting behind the wheel, I reached out and did one long honk. The sound of Ben's head hitting metal satisfied me.

'Hey! Who's there?!' of course Ben couldn't see me and I loved the puzzled expression on his face.

'Must have hit the wrong thing' he murmured to himself. He went back to the car and this time when I honked the horn, I made myself visible.

'What the-' Ben came from beneath the car and looked as angry as a city rat.

'You know you're not allowed back here!' he came around to the driver's seat and pulled me out.

'I'm sorry, I was just... Bored...'

'I could have gotten a concussion!' Ben held the spot on his head where there se emed to be a not on it and I started to feel a little guilty.

'Well I guess I'll be going now' note to self, Ben is not so easy to slip away from.

'Oh no you don't' he said, pulling me back to face him, 'I will tell my father and you will be out of here first thing in the morning!'

'Why do you hate me so much?' I couldn't help but ask.

'Because- you runaways are all the same! You come, you make trouble, and then I have to clean up the aftermath.'

'Well you're in luck, cause I'm not like other runaways,' I whispered, Ben gave me a weird look and was about to say more when Chuck came strutting into the garage.

'Oh goody! Yah'll are be getting along! Good for yall!' He picked up what looked to be an old wooden pipe and then left.

'I'm going to go freshen up for dinner' I said quickly before Ben could ask me anything else.

I had said too much already.

I'm making my way~

No one said that it'd be easy, trust me, believe me,

I'm where I belong~

I'm wearing my favorite jeans and white flowy top with the swirly pink lines. My favorite black boots are hugging my shins comfortably. I'm waiting on the porch for Ben to come out. Ever since our little Garage talk, things have been a little different between Ben and me. He doesn't blow me off all the time and isn't as snappy.

He told me there was a place he wanted to show me tonight so here

I was, waiting on the porch. Finally, the door opened and there stood

Ben, but not in his grungy greasy way. Let's just say, he cleans up nicely.

'Ready to go? He asked, starting down the porch and not waiting for the answer.

'Sure, so where are we going? We didn't do the holding hands thing and I was glad.

'It's a surprise, kind of' Ben looked like this was awkward for him and I loved it.

'Mister Grumpy has a surprise for me?! Wow! I thought you hated me?' I said in a surprised happy go lucky tone. Ben gave me a look that said, 'Quit it!'

'Okay- ok, sorry I'll shut it'

'Good, you're better that way' I couldn't help but playfully punch Ben and he actually cracked a smile. It was different from our usual cold stares, but it was nice. The town looked way different at night, but I hardly got to notice as I and Ben trudge up what seemed to be a hill.

'You're not going to murder me here so that I'm finally out of your hair, are you?' I said, getting a weird look from Ben.

'Good, I was hoping not'

We walked up a little further and then suddenly Ben stopped.

'Okay, I know you've been kind of missing the city so I wanted to show you this, do you mind if I-' Ben went to cover my eyes with his hand and I let him. They were warm and smelt like diesel. We walked a little further and then stopped.

'Okay, here it- is' I gasped as Ben removed his hand and I started out at... the City.

The bright lights all molding together, the tall buildings, and flashing signs. I could just smell the excitement wafting over to me, even though it was miles away. I don't know where the tears started to well up from, but it was like all of the things I was trying to run away from, came back to me.

I tried to get as far away as possible, but it seems, my plan failed.

'Taylor, are you okay?' THEN- came Ben's voice as he looked over at me. I then remembered that the only thing he heard from me was a gasp and he was probably getting worried.

'I'm- I'm' I didn't know what I was.

'Was this a bad idea?' He said, coming to stand right next to me.

'No, it's- it's' I tried to croak out the words but they didn't come.

'It was, I'm sorry, I just thought you would like it, I thought it would make you feel better after staying in this boring town, I thought-' I hugged Ben before he could even finish. I didn't want him to feel bad for doing something he thought would make me feel better. At first, he was shocked by the gesture but then slowly he put his hands on my back.

It felt nice that way. It felt warm. I could hear Ben's heart thumping in his chest and I could feel his chin grazing the top of my head. I turned my head and looked out at the view. This is what I had wanted all along.

'Well, well, well... Look at what we got here' came an unfair Taylor voice from behind us.

We're miles apart- You're, in my heart- I keep you with me everywhere I go...

I faintly heard Ben whisper 'Oh no,' as he pulled me behind him.

He stepped in front of me and I could faintly see the figure before us.

The only light was a flickering lamp post that was already dim.

'Ben,' the figure said as if regarding him.

'Dan,' Ben said, using the same tone. Whatever was going on here, there was definitely rivalry in the air.

'So, you found another runaway toy with' my insides shivered, whoever that guy was, he had a mysterious air to him. And what did he mean 'Another Runaway to toy with?'

'Not true Dan, just say what you're really here for!' Ben was getting tense. I could feel it under my fingers that laid on his back.

'Just to fool around, that's all' It was then that I got a good look at this guy. He had stepped a little further into the light and I could clearly make out jet black hair and surprisingly bright blue eyes that seemed smoked over.

'And just what does that mean?' Ben asked, backing up a little, it was obvious that he was scared of this Dan guy. I don't know why but I went invisible. I took my hands off of Ben's back, I assumed that he would just think I ran away or something.

I wasn't asking for what came next.

Dan looked right at me. I mean RIGHT at me, but I was invisible. I tried not to gasp and held my breath as best as I could. Even though he was talking to Ben he continued to look at me.

'Oh look, I think I made the Runaway do what she likes best. Runaway - maybe she caught on to my warning' Dan was covering for me, but why?

'What are you talking about?' Ben turned around suddenly and a frown formed on his face. He couldn't see me, but I could see him. He scratched the back of his head and turned to walk back down the hill. 'Where are you going, Ben? Don't you want to talk some more?' Dan teased as Ben pushed past him.

'I'm going to go find Taylor, what does it look like I'm doing?' I felt kind of bad for tricking Ben like that, but I panicked.

Ben disappeared into the blackness and me, still invisible, slowly made my way towards this Dan guy. I needed to sneak past him.

'It's no use keeping yourself invisible' he said after a while, he shoved his hands into his pockets and looked in my direction. I concentrated and made myself visible again, shocked that this guy could see me.

I mean really see me.

'How- How could you-?' He cut me off with a light chuckle that made me shiver.

'How could I see you? Well, I didn't see you, I sensed you' he said with a smirk, suddenly he was walking closer and closer towards me.

'You, sensed me?' I was starting to feel queasy inside and all of a sudden, I didn't know how to use my legs. Dan lifted his hand to my face and I stayed frozen still as his big warm hands explored my face.

'What color are your eyes?' Couldn't he see what color my eyes were?

'How could you sense me?' I asked, ignoring the question, I had never known anyone who could see right through my invisibility.

'There are people like you Taylor' Dan said, dropping his hand to his side, 'They may not have the same ability as you, but they aren't normal either'.

'What exactly are you trying to say?' I breathed, wrapping my arms around me.

'You're not alone- Taylor, come with me.'

'Because you know I'd walk a thousand miles if I could just see you... Tonight...'

Taylor - (thousand miles)

I don't know what compelled me to follow Dan. Maybe it was the part where he said - 'There are others like you'. Whatever it was, it had me following right behind him. The first thing I noticed was that Dan walked a little bit differently than most people. He would kind of stare off into the distance and walk on, stopping suddenly in front of things he seemed to just realize was there.

Then it clicked, was Dan blind? It made sense. He had touched up my face and then he asked me what color my eyes were. But it still didn't explain the fact that he could walk perfectly fine without a cane or some seeing-eye dog.

'I can smell fear and confusion all over you' he said suddenly, breaking the silence that had developed. We were walking down an Emmah that seemed to lead to a woodsy area. Where was this dude taking me?

'That's not strange at all' I don't know where the sarcasm came from, but it made Dan laugh.

'If you were wondering, I am blind. Does that clear up some of the confusion?' Dan swerved around a barrel and kept walking in our given direction.

'Kind of, it still doesn't explain how you seem like you can see where you're going' I prodded, folding my arms and shivering over the cool night air.

'I can sense things... I sensed that barrel and then moved out of the way in the nick of time'

'But that still doesn't expel.'

'You never told me what color your eyes were' Dan continued, signaling that the other conversation was over.

'Green, my eyes are green' I sighed. This guy was persistent.

'And your hair?' Dan reached out and grabbed a piece of my hair between his fingers. I took it away from him and answered bluntly.

'Reddish-brown, brownish red...'

'What a beauty you must be if only I could see you...'

I couldn't help but blush and was glad Dan didn't see me. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of getting to me.

'I can smell the sudden nervousness on you, a blush maybe' I silently cursed his strange abilities and tried to mask the nerves with anger.

Dan chuckled lightly, and we continued our hike to nowhere.

~*~

I only saw stuff like this in movies or comics that lined the stands in the big city. Never in my days did I expect to see it up close and personal. Dan had finally led me to a rundown shack with a door falling off its hinges. I was furious to see that this is where Dan had to lead me and was hoping he hadn't dragged me here so he could bust a move.

'You have got to be kidding me, right?' I had said, walking through the doorway and from the corner of my eye, a rat ran by.

'Not at all,' Dan walked in and after asking me if anyone was coming this way, he tapped five times on a wood panel in the corner and poof! A door swung open. That's when I took the ladder that leads down to what seemed like a basement. What I saw when I landed firmly on the floor made me gasp.

People, lots and lots of people walking around, hanging out, going in and out of doors and doing extraordinary things. From what I could see, each person had a different ability and it was cool to

see everyone so used to the unnatural. I was standing in a big command area that had two stairs in the back leading up to a balcony that seemed to have more halls.

On my right was a door and, on my left, was another door.

'Those are the other ways to get in, on the right is an elevator and on the left his tube slide. Both in different locations around town,' great and we got the ladder.

Dan's hand reached my back as we walked through the crowd that seemed to split an Emmah when they saw us coming. I guessed that they all knew Dan was blind. We took one of the stairs and I found myself on what seemed to be the second floor. There were doors lining the hall as far as I could see.

Dan lead me down the hall and I could hear different sounds coming from each room. Parties, a bunch of boys watching football, soap opera, Brittany Spears and other sounds that shouldn't be repeated.

'Here's your room' I found myself facing a door with the crooked numbers '64.'

Dan opened it to a small room with contemporary furniture, a nice sized bed, Minnie fridge, a bathroom, a good-sized closet. It was as I looked at the bed that I realized how tired I was. I sat down on the bed and Dan turned to leave when reality hit me.

'Wait- wait- wait, you can't just take me in the middle of the night to some unknown place and then drop me at a room.

'Isn't that what you did just a few days ago?' Dan asked, walking up to my bed, 'You came to an unknown town and then dropped yourself off at a room in some cruddy Motel.'

I hated how great Dan was in psychology and even though he was blind I scolded him.

'What do you want from me?' I said, feeling tired and just about ready to give up.

'I want for you to realize where you belong,' I shuddered as Dan looked my way. Even though he was blind I felt like he was staring into my soul.

'How long did you expect to pay for your Motel room anyway? Listen, I already have people getting your things for you. You just wait and see; this place will feel like home soon.'

Dan didn't let me ask any more questions. He strolled out of the room and closed the door, leaving a silence that teased me. Since I didn't know what way was out of this place and because I was so tired, I slipped under the covers and quickly fell asleep.

I woke up feeling dazed and unsure of where I currently was. I was laying on my stomach and there were sheets tangled around my legs. I tried to pry my eyes open and take a look around. I noticed that I was wearing my favorite jeans. That's when all of the memories from last night came rushing back to me at full force.

Ben, Dan, this secret place. I began to wonder if it was such a good idea to fallow Dan to this strange place. I sat up and tried to rake through my disheveled hair, peering at the clock on the nightstand, it was seven o' nine in the morning. Groaning, I pushed my legs up and over the bed and pushed my feet into my boots.

I didn't know what I was planning to do. I walked over to the bathroom and rinsed out my mouth before going over to the door and opening it a crack. From what it looked like, these people were bleachers, staying up all night and then crashing in the morning. I tiptoed out into the hall, closing my door quietly behind me.

Walking down the hall felt kind of strange, it was so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop. I finally made it to the stairs and cringed when a step creaked. I didn't hear movement coming from one of the other rooms, so I continued, taking each step one at a time.

I finally came to the ground area and shook my head at the mess these people left. There were beer bottles, tissues and crumpled up pieces of paper. Jackets and pair-less shoes all over the place, soda cans. The place looked like a ransacked fraternity home or sorority house.

I saw a whitewashed door on the other end of the second set of stairs and decided to check it out. I needed out of this place. Ben was probably worried that he had gone and got me kidnapped. If only he knew.

Continued:

The door looked like the kind you just push open, so I pressed lightly and peered inside. It looked like a kitchen of some sort. There was a large stove with ten burners, a large fridge that looked

like one you might find in a restaurant, a long counter and a big island in the center surrounded by stools.

There was a lot of paper cups lying around with flat soda and beer in them. At the sight of the fridge, my stomach rumbled greedily, and I couldn't help but open it. I took out the milk cartoon and sniffed its contents. Nothing smelled funny, so I poured it into a bowl I found in one of the cupboards up top. I got a box of cereal from the counter and took a seat on one of the stools.

It wasn't the best breakfast in the world, but it was the quietest. I needed it to stay that way until I found a way to get out.

'You're the new girl, right?'

Too late...

'Um, yah' I turned around to see a strawberry blond girl with a tank top and some pajama pants standing in the doorway. She went to the fridge and prepared herself a bowl of cereal too. She took the seat across from me and started to eat.

'You got here last night, right?' she asked in between bites.

'Yah, Dan brought me' this girl didn't seem to mean or anything but something about the people who lived here crept me out. The atmosphere here was filled with energy.

'Dan huh? Was he a jerk?' The question was random but appropriate at the same time.

'Yup pretty much' the girl began to laugh, and her laugh made me laugh too.

'The names Adrianne' she stuck out her hand and I gladly shook it.

I was beginning to like this Adrianne character.

'Taylor,' I said.

'So, what's your ability?' she asked me, scooping out the last of her cereal. I was surprised by the question, but I remembered- what Dan had told me, 'There are others like you...'

'I can turn invisible' I confessed, getting up and putting my bowl in a sink that seemed a little small for such a big place.

'Really? Wow! That's pretty good.' I smiled at Adrianne's compliment. No one had ever said my ability was 'good,' back in the city if someone found out they called me a 'freak' or 'devilish...' Never had I been called 'good.'

'So, what's your ability?' I asked in return, going back to the stool and watching Adrianne wash her bowl.

'I can shapeshift,' she said, and then suddenly, in the blink of an eye, she was Dan.

'Wow!' I said, hopping off my chair, 'you could totally trick someone with that.'

Adrianne slash Dan smiled at me and I was amazed. Everything down to his smoked over bright blue eyes was copied. It was amazing.

'Your ability is great too, I'm sure you liked to do pranks with that one' Adrianne said, shifting back to her own self again.

'Well, you're- kind of right. I tried not to use my ability to often, people didn't really like it,' I confessed, sitting back on the stool.

'Well don't worry about them, you're with us now. Go on! Show me your ability!'

I shut my eyes and concentrated. Finally, I felt the tingly feeling that came with turning invisible and I watched as Adrianne's face broke out into a wide smile. Her brown eyes were glimmering.

'That's amazing you like totally vanished,' I giggled and she jumped a little.

'Okay show yourself now...'

I went back to my regular self just as someone walked through the whitewashed doors. It seemed that people didn't sleep too late in this big place, which was a surprise.

'Hey Adri' a deep voice hollered, coming around the table I noticed was a husky boy with brown hair and hazel eyes. He turned to me and nodded.

'And who's this?' he asked Adrianne, going to the counter and pulling a granola bar out of a box.

'This is Taylor, our newest member' I knew I couldn't leave now; people were already calling me a member.

'The names Sean, Taylor, it's nice to meet you' he said, leaning on the counter and chewing away.

'Um, you too' I murmured looking over at Adrianne.

'Well, I'm going to go introduce Taylor to some other people, see yah later Sean!' soon Adrianne was dragging me out of there and into the vast area of couches and party mess. 'Thanks, it felt kind of awkward in there' I said, rubbing my arm.

'It's ok, I know Sean could look intimidating sometimes but he's a real softy.'

I followed Adrianne up the stairs and down the halls.

'How old are you anyway?' She asked, slowing down to keep pace with me.

'Uh, fifteen' I admitted feeling kind of embarrassed.

'I'm sixteen, trust me don't worry about your age, the oldest person here is Merry-Kate and she's nineteen. The youngest person is Blake and he's twelve. Sean is eighteen and Dan is sixteen like me' Adrianne babbled on, making me feel a little better about my age.

I wondered how the Blake boy survived in a place like this.

I had met a lot of people in such a short amount of time that I have already forgotten the first one hundred names. On the outside, this town seemed small but in reality, it wasn't. It had a colony of people living beneath its grounds. It was fun going on a tour with Adrianne. She was a very smart and funny girl who always made sure I was never left out of anything.

We finally circled back to my room and Adrianne turned to me with a wide grin.

'My sources tell me that Dan is going to visit you today, 'seeing the worried expression on my face she continued quickly, 'You don't have to worry though! He's just coming as orientation protocol'.

'Orientation Protocol?'

'He'll explain it to you, don't worry,' I watched Adrianne stroll down the hall and then shuffle down the stairs. I felt vulnerable without her and quickly ducked into my room. I instantly recognized my two big and red suitcases. Strung across the dressers were most of my things and I even found stuff th at I had left at home. How these people got them, I'll probably never know.

Going over to the bathroom I found my toothbrush, hair things, fresh towel, washcloth, and even my fuzzy slippers and robe. Laughing a little to myself I rubbed the stain where my sister Janice dropped coffee on my robe and then tried to cover it up with nail polish that was the same color.

My eyes started to brim with tears. Even though it always seemed like my sisters hated me, there was a little part, a small fraction, that knew they loved me. I was their sister, there was no running away from that.

'I can smell sadness on you,' I nearly jumped out of my skin as I heard the calm and collected voice of Dan. He was standing in the bathroom doorway, leaning on the doorframe and staring off into space.

'Damn it! Could you be any more- creepier!' I said in surprise carefully wiping away my tears without smudging my eyeliner. I knew Dan could hear the wavering in my voice even though I was trying not to sniffle in front of him.

'Why were you crying?' He asked, folding his arms over his chest. I had no intention of spilling my guts to this guy so I took it easy.

'I was just remembering something' I answered, walking past him, and going into the room. The bathroom had suddenly gotten smaller.

'Remembering what?' he prodded, turning around to face me.

Straightforward much?

'None of your business,' I snapped, sitting on the edge of the bed Indian style. I played with a piece of thread on the sheet, hoping Dan would just get on with the Orientation.

'Fine, I guess I'll do what I came here to do' Dan said, with such poise that it scared me.

'We are in district ten. There are exactly twenty districts in all of the united states that make up an organization we like to call 'The Colony'. We recruit, train and take care of people with what you

could call 'Special abilities.' Anyone who was shunned by the outside world or just wants to learn to control what they can do can come to The Colony. We believe that all man's rights should be equal no matter what that man can or cannot do. We fight for that belief and that belief only. I am Co-leader of District ten and Marry-Kate Douglas is Leader of District ten' Dan stopped for a second, probably to smell how I feel about all he just said.

What he smelled was most likely 'Overwhelmed.'

'Your training is organized and formatted to your needs and ability. Each person is allowed a trainer and will partner with their trainer when it comes to combat and/or war' I dropped my mouth wide open when he said war, I mean come on!

'Training is every day at noon and school is something you do on your own time and your own schedule. All of your belongings from your previous home, except for furniture, will be brought to you in a matter of time. You will be meeting with Merry-Kate to talk about your history and previous whereabouts, activities, and/or preferences' Dan stopped and took one deep breath.

'Any questions?' I think I was going to blow up with all the information I had to remember. And what did he mean to talk about the previous history? I couldn't tell these guys that I'm charged with murder and probably have wanted papers posted all over the city.

'Well, I might have one-'

'No questions? Good... We're basically done here,' I glared at Dan's rude attitude and crossed my arms furiously.

'You reek of anger, maybe you should spray on some happiness...' with that Dan left and I just glared at him. He was worse than Ben.

Ben...

He was probably still wondering where the heck I was. I didn't want him to feel guilty like he lost me or something. I hoped he didn't call the police cause if he did, I would never be able to leave this place. The police would find out that I'm the wanted girl from the city and then I would be done.

I groaned and threw my face into my pillow.

I hoped that everything would go alright with Merry-Kate tomorrow.

When you hear the name Merry-Kate, you think of sweet, frilly, girly, cute and cuddly. The Merry-Kate I stood before was none of the above. She was beautiful but call her 'pretty' and she just might snap your neck.

Tomboys paled in comparison. She is the definition of brute force.

'Don't just stand there, come in!' Merry-Kate hollered. Adrianne had walked me to her office and gave me a good pep talk before heading back to her room. I was just standing in the doorway when Merry-Kate called me in.

I strolled into what I assumed was an office. There was a big oak desk in the middle. A large bookcase that mostly held a stereo, music, magazines, trinkets and three books. There was a mini-fridge off to the side and two chairs in front of the big desk. The walls were painted a light green and had some posters on them. I stopped in front of the desk that had an intimidating Merry-Kate seated behind it.

Her chair was leaning back, and her feet were firmly propped on her desk. Her dark red hair was in a ponytail behind her and her three piercing on each ear glimmered in the lamplight. Dan stood on her right by her desk as she sucked furiously on her red lollypop.

'What can I say? I'm nineteen,' Merry-Kate said, gesturing to her teen office and a glossy lollypop.

'Right' I murmured, glancing at Dan and then at my fingers.

'What is that supposed to mean?' Merry-Kate asked suddenly, leaning forward in her chair and throwing her lollypop in the garbage.

'Nothing! Nothing, I was just-' Merry-Kate didn't let me finish.

'Cool your Jets I'm just testing your nerves! Have a seat...' Merry Kate took her feet off her desk and folded her hands over a binder on the table. She was ready for business.

Cautiously, I sat down, finding my feet more interesting than anything else in the room.

'Geez, the kid would you at least look at me?' I quickly jerked my head up into the direction of Merry-Kate, she nodded approvingly.

'Now, you may have already heard of me around here. The name's Merry-Kate, but you can just call me Merry. I don't take any backtalk, kiss assign or any other form of flattery. I stand by the belief and the belief only, which I'm sure Dan already explained to you,' I looked over at Dan who, as usual, was staring off into space. I mean where else can you look when you're blind?

'Okay, your history. You obviously know why you're here right?' She asked, taking a piece of gum and popping it in her mouth. 'Want to piece?'

'No thank you...'

'Fine...'

'Yeah, I'm here to talk about my history,' I said, answering her question.

'So-o, you know why you're here, good for you. Now spill it!' Merry leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up again. Her office had grown extremely silent as both she and Dan looked my way.

'Um-mm,' I was still unsure if I should be telling these people this.

'Look kid I'm sure your life's more interesting than that,' Merry whined, snapping her gum and screwing up her face.

'Yes but-'

'Butt stinks!' She said suddenly, making me jump in my seat.

I took a deep breath and then found myself spilling everything- 'I used to go to a normal school, I used to have a normal family. I had five sisters and we all lived with my mom. My dad walked out on us and ever since then money was always tight. My abilities.... I always had them.

My mother said that when I was born the doctors went frantically looking for me and thought it was a miracle when I suddenly appeared in the basket again. Like I said, money was tight and because of them... advantages I got from my abilities I began to steal. Nobody would ever catch who was doing it on camera because well, I was invisible.'

I looked at Merry and Dan to see their take on all of this. Merry was now leaning both elbows on her desk, intrigued. Dan had pulled up a seat and leaned one elbow on Merry's desk.

'I was only twelve at the time and even though my mother knew how I was doing it, my sisters were suspicious. See my parents and I had never told them but they knew something was up. I continued to go to regular school, but the kids started to realize, I wasn't normal. I wasn't the best at controlling my powers and the other kids caught on to what I was. They called me a 'freak'... 'devilish'... 'sick' ... they said- I should be handed over to the government, but my mother refused...'

I stopped to catch my breath before continuing. Here it goes, to tell them the truth.

'Just three weeks ago, on a Thursday afternoon, I was doing homework at the dining room table. It was like any other regular day, my sisters were hanging out with their friends outside and of course, I was alone. There was a knock at the door and since my mom hadn't been feeling good lately, I decided to answer it. I looked through the peephole and was surprised to see men dressed in all black with serious looks on their faces. I called mom anyway and she came to the door, also wondering who they could be. Finally, she opened the door and what they explained to her made both me and her very upset.'

I could tell Merry was fully engrossed in my life story. Dan just kept the same face that he had since I got here- jerk.

'They said... They said that I had committed murder'... Merry's eyebrows shot up to her hairline and Dan crossed his arms. I knew he was probably really interested but just didn't want me to see it. Well good for you jerk cause it's working.

'They said that I had killed a boy from my class name Bobby Shipparro. He lived down the street and often rode his bike every afternoon. They said that one afternoon Bobby went out and he didn't come back. His mother had called the police and for one whole week they search ed everywhere for Bobby.'

Merry's eyes were glazed over, probably trying to imagine it all.

'They found him alright. In the sewer,' Merry cringed and Dan blinked.

'And guess who they blamed?' The room fell silent and Merry's eyes seemed to beg for the answer.

'Me,' a small gasp escaped from Merry and finally Dan's brows furrowed.

'Taylor Lovett, we have record that you have some special abilities' they said, 'We have had witnesses confirm that you can disappear and reappear at will' they said, 'Taylor Lovett, you are under arrest for the murder of Bobby Shipparro' THEY SAID' my voice was starting to rise and I took a deep breath to calm down.

'What did they do?' Merry asked, speaking for the first in a long time.

'What did they do? They tried to arrest me, but my mother wouldn't have it. She told them that I deserved a lawyer and a chance in court. The guys dressed in black finally left after negotiating with my mother and when the doors closed, she started to cry,' my own eyes began to fill up with tears as I picked at my fingers.

'I felt like a monster. If only I didn't have this stupid ability my mother wouldn't be kneeling on the floor crying. I ran upstairs and began to pack two large suitcases. I didn't know where I was going but I knew I had to leave soon. I didn't tell my mother; I didn't tell my sisters and I told no friends where I was going. I had no friends' anyways' a tear fell on my lap and I furiously wiped it away.

'If I concentrate, I can make other things turn invisible too so sneaking out of the house wasn't so hard. I caught the next bus and rode it as far as it could go. That's how I ended up in this town,' I sniffled and looked up at Merry, 'I got a motel and was just starting to get along with this boy named Ben when mister mistereo over here decided to interrupt'

Dan let off two fake coughs into his fist.

'He brought me here and that's where it- ends,' I let out a big breath and closed my eyes for a second. Everything I had buried deep down in the nooks and crannies of my brain was resurfacing.

'Taylor, I can tell you this' Merry started, looking more serious then I had ever seen her, 'Your story is by far the most heartbreaking one I've ever heard.'

She went to her desk and pulled out a green lollypop while spitting out her gum.

'You have my respect' she waved me away and opened up her binder, scribbling things down that was most likely to me. I got up quickly and made a mad dash for the door. I felt the tears coming and needed some alone time to cry like a baby. I tried to make a run for my room but who intercepted me?

Dan...

'You smell- so depressed too' he whispered, tucking his hands under his arms. I took two steps back and tried to think of a way around him. Why was he talking to me anyway?

'When really you should be grateful' my mouth dropped open as

Dan said that and I was sure he was smelling 'Shock...'

'What?'

'What I mean is that you're lucky you ran away before those equal rights hating jerks who tried to take you to prison. What I mean is that your lucky I saved you from those think they can run some motel hillbillies who play with their guests,' I folded my arms and looked away from Dan's smoked over bright blue eyes. He probably couldn't see my head turn and eyes brimming with tears, but he could probably smell it.

'The Colony is your family now. The other family you left behind didn't even like you. Didn't you say in there that your sisters began to dislike you just because you were different? A family who doesn't love you is overrated!' I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Was his heart made of stone?

'How could you say that? My mother loved me and even though my sisters hated me deep down inside I knew... I knew they loved me! A family isn't something you can replace, copy or create. It's genuine! For you not to see that, for you...'

I was walking up to Dan now and I could feel the heat wavering off his body by now.

'For you do not know that is... Is... Crazy!' tears were streaming down my face now and I just couldn't understand why I was so frustrated with Dan. I could have just walked away but something inside of me wanted to convince him that family matters.

'Stupid, that's what it-,' Dan didn't get to finish because I tried to slap him but he caught my hand in midair. The force his big hand had on my little wrist hurt and I knew it would leave a bruise. His eyes held a mysterious yet determined look that I still had to figure out.

'Call me crazy then Taylor because I don't know what it's like to have a family... a Genuine one.'

I think that the only reason why Dan left was that he didn't want me to see that lone tear slips down his face. When he released my hand, I crumpled to the ground and stumbled to get back up. I wiped the stray tears from my face and rubbed my burning eyes. I needed the warm bed waiting in room '64.'

I needed that- and much more.

~*~

A knock on my door made me pry my sticky and wet eyes open. I wiped the crust away and peered at the clock on the nightstand next to me. Eleven twenty-eight. I had slept in.

I groaned- as I tried to sit up but the blood rushed to my ears and my temple started to pound. Holding my head, I shoved the sheets off of me but stopped noticing a blue and purple ring around my wrist.

Releasing my head, I lightly touched the bruise, grimacing as pain shot up my right arm. Dan was a jerk. I was shaken out of last night's memories when the knock came again, a little louder this time.

I wiped off the makeup that had streaked my face last night and stood to go answer the rapping door. It was more like hobbling since one of my legs had fallen asleep. I knew I would answer the door looking like a mess wearing my shorts and shirt from yesterday, ruffled hair streaked makeup and bruised wrist.

'Uh... Hello?' Sean questioned more than said as I answered my door. He looked me up and down and furrowed his brows.

'What do you want?' I grumbled, knowing I probably sounded rude but at that point didn't care.

'Well, Adrianne was going to do this but she had to go to training early, so she asked me to escort you to the training grounds to meet your trainer' ...Sean explained, looking at me funny and not at all paying attention to what he was saying.

'But if you want to skip training today.'

'I'll be ready in fifteen minutes' I closed the door and went straight to the bathroom after grabbing some clothes out of my drawer. I brushed out my hair, putting it into a ponytail and washed my

face, reapplying my makeup. I put on the tank top and stretch pants from my drawer and left the bathroom in search of shoes.

I found some comfortable running shoes and slipped those on.

After glancing in the mirror, I opened the door to a surprised Sean.

'You clean up good' was all he said as he led me down the hall and down the stairs. We made a right at the last step and walked down the halls of the bottom rooms going all the way to the back wall. Surprisingly, there was an elevator there and after pressing the down arrow the metal doors swung open.

The elevator was fairly big but again I was reminded of how big Sean was. Which again led me to wonder what his ability was.

'Sean?' I said, massaging my aching wrist. I tried to rotate it a bit, but it was starting to swell.

'Yah?' ...He answered, whistling a tune that had no words.

'What's your ability?' I asked, giving up with the wrist and putting my hand to my side. I began to wonder if I could make the swelling invisible. I didn't want people to worry about me.

'Interesting that you ask, but I'm afraid I can't show you in here unless you want the elevator to break down,' Sean threw a smile my way and I willingly shook my head 'no.'

Whatever his ability was, it makes him able to break down one hundred-ton elevator.

The elevator dinged at our stop and the metal doors reeled open. Following close behind Sean, I walked into a vast area that I assume was the training grounds. It was a wide-open area, stretching as far as the eye could see, it seemed that that whole level was for training. The floor was a plush blue carpet and the walls had been painted a metallic grey. There were tons of black mats spread in rows on one side and on the other held workout equipment of all kinds. There were water bottles and bags lined up all against the walls as people grunted and jabbed with their trainers.

I instantly began to wonder who my trainer was going to be. I hoped it was someone as nice as Adrianne. I couldn't handle any more intimidating colonials.

Sean led me past rows and rows of mats until finally, he stopped, telling me to wait by this vacant mat. He told me he was going to go get my trainer who was on the other side working out. I stood Patiently waiting, concentrating on my wrist to see if I could make the swelling invisible. I was cut short as I notice Sean coming my way.

-And-

Who he had fallen close behind made my blood boil?

Dan...

Coincidence, I think not! My spirits dropped, and I could tell Sean noticed the tension too. I don't know if I have a distinctive 'smell' but as he got closer to me Dan's eyes went wide as if he knew who his student was.

My face was flushed as Sean introduced me to the jerk I already knew.

'No need for invitations Sean, I already know him' I gave up on my wrist and said bye to a confused Sean.

'Look, I understand things didn't go so-o well last night but I'm your trainer now and you need to treat me with respect'

'Why'd Merry pick you?' I couldn't help but ask, glaring up at him.

'So much for the respect', he murmured, getting down on the mat and starting to stretch. I followed. 'She picked me because I'm blind'

'And?'

'Your ability is invisibility since I'm blind, I can't see you anyway which makes it more challenging for you because I'm used to fighting people without seeing them'

I looked down at my swollen wrist and understood. Somehow Dan was able to block my hit even though he couldn't see me. I didn't want to talk to Dan but there was something I needed to ask him.

'How did you do it?'

'Do what?'

'Block my hit.'

Dan was silent for a moment as we stretched our hamstrings, 'well I could sense your hand coming at me. All my sensoria are advanced except for my sight. I can also smell people's emotions.

I nodded but then said ok out loud, remembering he couldn't see.

'What do you smell on me right now?' I asked, getting up as Dan stood.

'Well it's kind of hard to find in such a big crowd but your smell is kind of ...unique,' I wrinkled my brow on this discovery, I had a unique smell?

'Confusion,' he said finally handing me some gloves that let my fingers point threw but protected my knuckles and palms, 'You've been smelling like confusion ever since you got here.'

'Well your right, I am confused' I said, hitting Dan's open hands like he instructed, 'This whole place confuses me, Merry-Kate confuses me, my life confuses me, you... confuse me.'

I looked up at Dan to see him staring off into space. It was hard reading his face since he often left it blank.

'I confuse you?' He asked, signaling for me to punch harder.

'Well, yeah. But it's nothing, I mean I don't want to talk about it' when your training you kind of end up speaking your mind and right then and there I felt like I was babbling.

'Whatever,' Dan replied bluntly, keeping his hands steady as I punched away. Only lightly punching when it came to my right hand. I was so mad at his attitude though.

'Jerk!' I grunted, hitting hard with my left hand. Dan's foot moved a centimeter backward from the punch, he raised one eyebrow.

'Excuse me?'

-And-

'Don't act like you didn't hear me, you're a jerk and everybody knows it. You put on this hardcore shell and then verbally attack everyone. Do you even have any friends? I'd be surprised if you

do. You make me so frustrated you know that? Why do you have to be so rude all the time? You seriously need an attitude check!'

I hit Dan's open hand as hard as I could and was surprised as he stumbled backward. Before I could even congratulate myself through a stream of pain traveled up my right arm making me collapse to my knees.

'Oww,' I moaned, clutching my wrist that was beginning to throb, my eyes were beginning to water but I didn't dare cry. I tried to get back up and shake it off before Dan noticed but it was too late.

'Taylor...?' Dan called, kneeling down next to me and probably trying to read my emotions.

'Why do you smell like 'pain.'

...?...

He asked, looking in my direction.

I squeezed my eyes shut and then opened them again, 'It's nothing it's just-' I couldn't finish because a wave of pain overcame my wrist again.

It hurt so bad!

'Just what?'

'You jolted up my wrist that's what!' I snapped, standing up and walking past rows and rows of mats. I needed to take the elevator out of here and to my room, so I can get some ice.

'Taylor! Taylor waits...!' Dan called, jogging after me. I ran onward, reaching the elevator and frantically clicking the up button.

'Taylor!' Dan called, weaving around mats with scary accuracy.

'Leave me alone!' I yelled, making heads turn. Ignoring the stares, I boarded the elevator, clutching my wrist and praying for it to stop throbbing. The doors to the elevator started to close shut but were stopped by a gloved hand.

I cursed under my breath as Dan stepped inside, sweating at the brow and looking in my direction. It still feels weird to me how he doesn't look you in the eye when he talks.

'What's wrong with your wrist?' He asked, panting and wiping his forehead. He probably had to concentrate a lot just to catch up with me. I slid to the corner of the elevator and knelt down in a sitting position.

Standing suddenly felt too hard.

'It's bruised and swelling really bad-' I said finally, giving up on the 'Get the hell away from me!' charade. Dan came over to me and helped me to my feet.

'It's because of last night, isn't it?' He asked, touching my wrist lightly and jerking his hand away when I cringed.

'Yah,' I whispered, trying my best to stay up, I felt faint and weak. Dan held my shoulder firmly while grasping my left arm. The elevator finally dinged and we sped out unto the bottom floor.

We started to walk towards the stairs but I couldn't do it. I just couldn't.

'Whoa, Taylor, why can't you stand up?' Dan asked, steadying my shoulder and helping me along.

'I don't know' I confessed, talking barely above a whisper, Dan put his hand to my forehead and sighed.

'You're burning up really bad, it's probably a fever' before I knew it, Dan was placing his hand under my knee and lifting me into his arms.

'Dan... put me down' I murmured, clutching my head and resting my wrist on my stomach.

'I'm afraid you might faint if I do that'

'But... but...'

'But what?'

'But what will people think if they see us?' I whispered, looking up at a focused Dan. We were already up the stairs and walking to my room.

'I think your health is more important than what people think' Dan answered, opening my door and carrying me in sideways. It reminded me of the groom carrying the bride home.

'I guess you're not a jerk after all...'

Dan smiled.

'Where am I?' looking through the haze that had become my vision I saw a figure sitting on my right side.

I tried to sit up but felt pain and heaviness overcome me. A firm but gentle hand eased me back down into laying position. My vision was coming back a little and I could vaguely see what I assume is my room. 'You're in your room' came a voice that seemed to belong to the figure. I recognized him as Dan. I cleared my throat as I tried to talk some more. Talking had become hard and my throat felt hoarse.

'Because...'

'Because you fainted remember? You have a really bad fever and yours... the wrist isn't looking too good' Dan sounded really tired and I wondered what time it was. In hopes of seeing my clock I looked to my left coming face to face with tubes, wires and cords all hooked up to my left wrist. A big metal stand with a fluid bag was hooked up to it.

I lifted my right arm to scratch my hair when I realized my right hand was securely bandaged. What happened while I was asleep?

'I'm so stupid,' I turned my head to where Dan was sitting, he was staring at the wall and looking awfully guilty.

'Why? Being blind doesn't make you see and stay.'

'No not that. Trust me I've already gone through the 'I hate being blind!' stage. I'm talking about your wrist. I was so stupid to have been so rough on you. I should have just let you slap me in the face. I mean it wouldn't have even left a mark on me' I didn't know how to take that comment.

'But you... 'Dan slid his hand along my arm, probably trying to find my right wrist. I was surprised at how much I liked the feel of his fingers on me, 'I hurt you really badly and how could I fight for the colony's belief if I'm taking advantage of my strength?'

Dan finally found my wrist and laid it in his big hands. I didn't have to have the ability to smell emotions to know how Dan was feeling.

'Dan-' there was a knock at my door making Dan gently put my wrist back on the bed.

Dan opened the door to a skinny little girl with black pigtails. She scuttled inside, smashing a white clipboard into her chest. Dan mumbled a couple of words to her; the girl glanced at me and then came scurrying to my side. She reminded me of a field mouse.

The scrawny girl pushed her red-rimmed glasses further unto her head and she emitted down one of her jet-black pigtails. Her tanned skin gave me a clue to her probably being Spanish. She set the clipboard on the dresser and started to check the fluid in the sack hanging on the metal pole by my bedside.

I watched with confusion as she picked up my unharmed wrist, holding it in a way and looking down at her watch at the same time. She did a little nod of her head, picking up her clipboard and scribbling something down.

'Excuse me but what are-' the girl cut me off with a fierce 'shush!'

I sighed as she picked up my wrist again and began to adjust the needles that were inserted into it. Finally, she took a vile full of who knows what and inserted it into the tube connected to my left wrist.

Whatever it was, it made me feel drowsy.

'Now,' began the girl, talking for the first time, 'when she dozes off, she'll probably sleep for a good ten hours and that should get you the rest you deserve to Mr. Harbor.'

The girl seemed to be talking to Dan and I made a mental note of Dan's last name.

Harbor...

'Alexandra, you don't have to call me Mr. Harbor, Dan is fine to remember?' Dan said bluntly as if he had been telling the little girl this all her life.

'And I keep telling you don't call me Alexandra, Alex is fine' the girl retorted, pushing up her glasses and scribbling one last note on her clipboard.

'Yah, yah whatever,' he said, crossing his arms in that defiant way.

Part: 30

'Well, I guess I'll be going now. Call me if she has any more complications' then the girl was scurrying out of the room going to who knows where.

'Who was that?' I whispered, suddenly feeling very drowsy.

'Oh, that was Taylor an- I mean Taylor. She's a thirteen-year-old girl packed with a lot of attitudes' Dan answered, sounding pretty tired himself.

'What's her ability?'

'She's a child prodigy. A genius if you will? She's the only person around here who's medically capable of taking care of us.'

'Oh...?'

I was about to ask Dan something else when someone- bursts through the room door. Talk about no privacy.

'Dan we need you ASAP! Someone's fooling around in the decoy run-down shack!' Like- so that's what that dingy shack was called. The intruder was a short Asian guy who seemed to spend many hours in the gym.

'Are you sure it isn't just a forest creature?' Dan was standing now, looking more alert than ever.

'We're certain sir, definitely human' the Asian dude answered, he looked about ready to fight.

Dan sighed, rubbing his eyes and then looking up at the ceiling. He took one deep breath through his nose and then exhaled loudly. Then just as my eyes drooped to a heavy close....

'Ben...' Dan whispered before I heard the thudding of retreating footsteps.

Walking down the hall I heard voices. Not just regular talking but harsh whispers that seemed to be about something highly important. Going invisible, I went up to Merry-Kate's cracked door. I was supposed to be recuperating but that was going to have to wait.

'Are you sure you left no tracks, Dan?' Merry-Kate whispered fiercely, pacing back and forth.

'I'm positive! You know I don't leave an obvious trail Merry-Kate!' he answered, looking more stressed then I had ever seen him before. From what I could see, there was someone else sitting in one of the chairs that faced Merry's desk. The chair had ropes laced around it.

'I can hear you guys, you know!' then came another rather annoying voice. It sounded famed, almost like...

'Shut up Ben!' Dan said suddenly.

Ben!

'Dan what are we going to do with him now?! He has no abilities!' Merry said frantically, sounding more worried than her usual self, 'If the other districts find out he's here we are done for!'

'Well first, Taylor, come in and stop eavesdropping' Dan said, looking my way. If I were visible, they would have seen my face deepen three shades redder. I eased open the door and made myself visible as I stepped into the tension-filled room.

'Second, we need to find out exactly what he knows' Dan finished, waving me to a seat. I walked over to a chair, as Ben kept his eyes on me.

'Taylor?' he asked, squinting and un-squinting his eyes.

'In the flesh,' I mumbled, playing with a piece of my hair.

'What were you doing up their Ben?' Dan asked, making Ben turn to him, 'Why were you snooping around out there!'

'I was just walking around ok?! I saw the shack and was wondering if I could probably fix it up for my own personal uses when you people showed up...!' Ben sounded like he was telling the truth, but Dan slit his eyes.

'You were looking for Taylor, weren't you?' He said, getting in Ben's face.

'I don't know what you're talking about!' Ben looked away from us all and sighed deeply. 'I knew you were a freak Dan' he mumbled.

Dan moved so fast that all I felt was a breeze. His hands were at Ben's throat now, squeezing but not causing damage.

Part: 31

'What did you say?' He said through clenched teeth and I couldn't watch any further.

'Hey! Let him go, Dan!' I grabbed Dan's arm and pulled it away from Ben's neck. Ben let out two raspy coughs.

'Didn't you hear what he just called me?!' Dan asked furiously, I wasn't expecting Dan to just walk out of the room like that.

'Well, that went well,' Merry-Kate said sarcastically, clapping her hands together. Going around the side of her desk she took a dramatic seat in her chair.

'What am I supposed to do with Ben?' I asked, regretting ever eavesdropping.

'Bring him to the containment room' Merry-Kate decided, placing a CD in her stereo.

'Where's that?'

'Down the hall... I'm sorry Taylor but it seems he's your responsibility now. Dan wants nothing to do with him' I sighed, releasing

Ben from the chair and giving him an apologetic look as I tied his hands.

Walking out of Merry's room as pop music blared, I tried not to make eye contact with Ben, but that was proving to be difficult.

'I thought you ran away,' he said finally, as we reached a room marked 'containment room.' I didn't know how to respond to that so I took him in and began to untie him.

'Aren't you going to say something?' He asked, rubbing his wrists and looking at me. I made the mistake of looking up at Ben. He looked genuinely confused but I didn't know what to say to him. Ever since Dan brought me to this place I had never really sat down and thought of Ben finding me... but now he had.

'I don't really have anything to say-' I confessed, taking the rope and heading for the door.

'Of course, you don't.'

I didn't know exactly what Ben meant by that, but it made me feel like - I had done or said something wrong.

Closing the metal door, I turned the lock and watched through the foggy mirror as Ben took a seat on a metal chair. I thought I would never see him again...

Part: 32

But there he was.

I didn't know where I was going as I walked the halls. I guess I was looking for Adrianne's room, or you could say I wanted to say hi to Sean, but to tell you the truth I was looking for Dan. He looked really mad earlier and I didn't want his fierce attitude to get in the way of my training ... or you could say I wanted to make sure he was ok.

I bumped into Taylor though and after hearing her scold me about walking around when I should be resting, she told me where his room was. So, on I went to go find Dan's room which I was told to be number '94,' climbing the stairs to the top floor - I finally stood facing a door identical to mine just with a different number.

It was so silent that I assumed nobody was even in there but after mustering up enough courage, I knocked.

'Who is it?' Called, Dan and I hesitated - before answering.

'It's me... Taylor' if there were ever a time, I wanted to go invisible, that was one of those times.

'What do you want?' Dan opened the door now and again I was met by smoked over bright blue eyes.

'I want to talk,' I said, trying to rub the sweat on my palms away.

'About Ben huh?' He asked, opening the door a little wider now.

'Yah,' after a moment of silence, Dan opened the door all the way and motioned for me to fallow him inside. I don't know what I was expecting to see in Dan's room. I don't if I was expecting to see the same furniture as mine or some cool fighting gear. I didn't know what to expect.

But what I saw was definitely, something- I didn't expect.

Flashlights. Thousands and thousands of flashlights. All hanging from the ceiling, pasted to the wall, sitting on the dresser, everywhere. Yet still, they were all turned off.

'Dan?' I started, trying to find my words, 'What are all these flashlights for?'

'They were just a phase,' he said, going over to his bed and taking a seat on the edge. Dodging hanging flashlights and glancing at random objects, I finally made it to Dan's bed and took a hesitant seat.

'That's it? That's all your willing to say about them?' I pushed, gesturing to thousands of flashlights that stared back with their lifeless bulbs.

Part: 33

'As I said, they were a phase. When I first became blind everything was so dark. I just wanted to finally see the light again and I thought that if I bought a whole bunch of flashlights... I would. Of course, I grew out of that stage and now they just sit around lifeless. Any more questions you came to hammer me with?'

'Oh... Why do you hate Ben so much?' I asked, clasping my hands together. Dan rubbed his eyelids and sighed.

'Is that really what you came to talk about?' He asked.

'Well... Yah'

'Well I and Ben used to be friends,' I think something of a gasp escaped my lips as Dan said this. I would have never expected them to be friends. When Dan looked at Ben all I saw was hate in his eyes.

'Yup... friends, but apparently he had his own way of thanking me when I saved him from that bus that almost ran him over. He found out I had abilities and decided I was a 'freak' I sighed, realizing what truly happened.'

'I'm sorry that happened?'

'Well it wasn't your fault, so you don't have to be sorry-' Dan shrugged, looking in my direction. It still amazed me how much more skilled he was then me even though I can see.'

'Dan, does it ever bother you that you don't know what people look like?' I asked. Dean scrunched his eyebrows together and placed his hand on his chin.'

'It used to... But I have other ways of imagining what people look like'

Part: 34

I looked over at Dan and took the time to really look at him. His jet-black hair was cut in a neat sleek way making his hair streamline.

His misted over light blue eyes that seemed to be mystical pools of magic. There was just something so enchanting about him in the glow of the lamp that I didn't even notice that I was staring at him.

'Do I have something on my face?' I guess Dan noticed that I was staring at him because I turned ruby red at his question.

'Uh- No sorry I just thought I saw something' I lied, playing with my fingers. Suddenly though, Dan was lifting his fingers like he did that night when I first saw him, and he began searching my face. It wasn't as weird as I thought it would be, but it gave me chills to feel Lane's warm but firm hands caressing the curves and dimples in my face.

'Why are you nervous?' He asked smirking under his breath. I think my mind froze as the room grew silent, Dan's face growing closer to mine.

I was definitely surprised as Adrianne came flying in, cheeks flushed without warning.

'Dan! What are you doing here! Didn't you hear?! The anti mutation shots have been released!' Dan jumped up so fast that I was sure he was going to knock down one of his flashlights and me as well.

'It can't be! But the treaty-' Adrianne cut him off quicker than he could finish.

'If there ever was a treaty there isn't one now! Hurry! Merry-Kate needs you!' Adrianne ran over to Dan and grabbed him by the wrist dragging him out the door in such a hurry, I don't even think

she noticed me. I watched the door slam shut and I let out a sigh, my face returning to its normal color. Whatever was about to happen, it didn't and I don't know if I should be happy or sad about it.

'I guess we'll have to finish our talk later.'

'So, you finally come back,' Ben sighed, getting up from his chair as I opened the metal door. I had come to bring him some food and I set the tray down, turning to leave.

Part: 35

'What? You're just going to leave?' Prodded Ben... I turned around slowly and just stared.

'Oh, I see. They turned you into one of them so now you can't talk to me,' I marched across that room so fast that I think I surprised myself.

'I was born with my abilities and being one of them isn't so bad!' I was up in his face now, our chest barely touching.

'Is that so? Seems more like freaksville to me' I hissed pushing Ben only to bump my chest into him again.

'I am not a freak and I can't believe you would say that!'

'I know you're not...'

'What did you just say-! Wait.... What?' I didn't know if I had heard right. It had come as just a bare whisper and I didn't even realize he had said it.

'I said I know you're not a freak' He whispered, staring down at me, looking deep within my eyes. I think I froze, my breath coming out in short rasps.

'Then what am I?' I asked quietly, looking at every detail on his face.

'Your-' I twirled around quickly as Dan entered the room and stumbled backward as I realized how to close me, and Ben was standing. Dan wasn't looking directly at us, I mean he can't look at us, but I could tell he knew what was up.

'Is everything ok in here? I heard yelling' he crossed his arms in that defiant way and I sighed.

'Nothing... it's nothing,' I whispered, stepping over the tray and quickly squeezing past Dan. I slipped out the door and let out a whoosh of air as I turned the corner down the hall. That was just too awkward. Going the rest of the way to my room I went invisible not really wanting to engage in conversation with anybody.

I went to my room and closed the door behind me, flinging myself onto my bed. Having Ben here was going to make 'Glad you could make it Taylor!' Adrianne yelled over the pounding music. I was at one of the colonies' annual Saturday night parties and I honestly had no idea why I came. It was just a party that was being held on the bottom floor, kind of like how I had found everyone hanging out when I first came to the colony. Even when I went to school, I wasn't much of a party person. I wasn't much of a people person to even get invited to a party for that matter.

Yet there I was. The music pounding, people gathered in small groups all across the plush blue carpet. Beers, wine and I'm-sure-it's-not punch littering each hand and also the floor. It felt like a real high school party, and I was a part of it.

'Yah! Glad you finally broke out of that shell you call a room!' Sean practically had to holler, and I punched him lightly on the arm. We laughed but it could hardly be heard over Paramore.

'I'm going to go get some of whatever she's having' Adriane said, pointing at some girl who was using her fire to make swirls of flaring fire breath curl in the air. She had gathered a crowd and they were all rooting for her. I watched my strawberry blond friend head for the kitchen and Sean followed after. I was tempted to go to but I thought the best of it.

I had noticed the way Sean had been looking at Adriane all night and it seems like he really likes her. Whatever little moments they can get together shouldn't be intruded by me. Even though I was being a good friend I felt kind of lonely in that big crowd with people bumping against me and grinding on each other. I felt out of place... until someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I was half expecting it to be Adriane, half hoping it was Dan but I had turned around to a completely new face.

Well not entirely new because it had seemed like I was introduced to this guy before, but I couldn't remember his name. He was tall, had brown hair that fell in his face a little and his eyes! That boy had eyes! Those were the first things that struck me as I looked into those hazel eyes with gold flecks.

The boy smiled sheepishly and scratched the back of his head.

'I saw you across the way... and I just wanted to know if you want to dance,' the boy stuck out his hand and I took it with a smile. He pulled us out into a better dancing spot and soon I was doing dance moves I didn't even know I could do.

'What's your name?' I had to ask three times over the music before the boy could hear me.

'Noah!' He shouted, coming closer to me so that his lips brushed my ear.

'Taylor!' I shouted back, grasping his shoulder. I was surprised at the DJ decided at that moment to switch to a slow song but I was grateful for my ears to have a break.

'So, what's your ability?' Noah asked, grabbing my waist and pulling me into him. He did a little drum beat as I talked.

'I can turn invisible, you?' He gave me a charming smile as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

'It's pretty lame but I can shoot lasers from my eyes' I smiled reassuringly.

'That's pretty cool actually, better than mine.'

'Hey at least yours doesn't give you headaches twenty-four-seven,' I shrugged, giving up on our little banter.

'Your cute when you do that' Noah whispered and I felt a warm tingle start from my toes and work its way up. It was natural for me to blush at a compliment like that but it felt different from Noah. With Dan, he couldn't see me blush but Noah saw everything. It made him chuckle and I turn invisible.

'Ah come on, I'm sorry,' he cooed, holding me tighter as if to make sure I was there.

'I'm sorry I guess it was just a reflex,' I said, going back to normal.

'Keep that up and you'll make me look like I'm dancing with myself'

I laughed, 'You would have kept dancing, though right?'

'Of course, but I need you to stay visible or else - I wouldn't be able to do this...'

Before- I knew it, Noah was kissing me. I mean full-on kissing me. He pulled me into him closer and I was into it more than I thought I would. But there was something off. Something that didn't seem right. As I had my eyes closed, Noah's warm lips sliding over mine, I wasn't picturing myself standing in the middle of the floor with him.

No, in my head I was with Dan.

I pulled away from Noah suddenly at this realization and he gave me a quizzical look.

'It's been a long time but I know I'm not that bad of a kisser' he chuckled, steadying my elbow as I almost fell on someone.

'No- it isn't you, it's me' I said quickly, staring up into his gold-flecked eyes. There was definitely something I liked about Noah... But he wasn't Dan...

Or Ben...

Taylor leaned in and Kissed me lightly this time and I just smiled.

'You want me to walk you to your room, you seem like you need an early night' I nodded my head a fog. Had I just pictured myself kissing Dan?

Taylor intertwined his fingers with mine and slightly rubbed the back of my knuckles as we walked past the crowd of people. He was being awfully sweet and I felt kind of bad for thinking about someone else while I was kissing him.

We passed by Sean and Adrianne who were whispering something in each other's ears. Adrianne gave me a thumbs' up and a wink and I smiled back. Walking up the stairs it was kind of dark and quiet, it seemed like everyone was down at that party. We finally made it to my room door and I turned to Taylor with a sigh.

'Sorry about earlier' I said, hoping another apology would have some effect.

'No worries Taylor, I had a great time. I'll see you tomorrow?' It was more of a statement then a question as Taylor bent down and kissed me lightly on the lips again.

'Yah, tomorrow' I turned around and opened up my room door saying another bye to Taylor and then closing my door with a thud. What a night!

I had a great time... but I felt weird not seeing Dan the whole entire day. my days long and tiring.

We were bouncing along a dirt-packed road in Dan's jeep, the trees scattering shadows across our faces. I was in a car... alone with Dan. It wasn't how I had dreamed it to feel though because we weren't on our way to a date or anything. No, this ride was all business.

Dan's face showed that.

I had tried to start a conversation the whole time, but all Dan would do Is grunt in reply and it was starting to piss me off. We were on our way to the city, a place I had never expected to set foot in again. Apparently, we're going to get more information on what people around the colony are calling 'The Death Shots'. The shots don't really kill you, but they make you normal and to people in the colony it's a death threat.

I don't know how I feel about the shots yet. All my life there was a small part of me that wished to be normal, but then there was the other part that was proud of who I am. Coming to the colony had fueled that pride and made me feel more at home than ever?

I looked over at Dan to see if his facial expression had changed... it hadn't.

'Dan, please talk' I don't know where the pleading came from, but it worked.

'They released Ben last night,' he murmured, swerving around a pothole. I turned so that I wasn't looking at the dashboard but at him.

'What?'

'They released Ben last night' he repeated, more slowly this time. I didn't know how to feel about that statement. I didn't even get to tell Ben bye.

'Oh,' was all I had to say as I rested my elbow on the car door, smashing my cheek into my palm.

'You wouldn't mind though since you already have a boyfriend'

I looked at Dan funny even though he couldn't see me. What did he just say?

'You heard me' he said, sensing my confusion. I breathed in and took a deep breath out.

'Dan, do you mean Taylor?' I asked, twisting my body so that I was fully facing him. Dan frowned.

'Maybe'

'And how would you know about Taylor?' Um good, I had him where- I wanted him.

'Things never stay a secret in the colony Taylor,' was all he had to say about it. I sighed, was Dan actually... Jealous. But he didn't like me, did he?

'Are you Jealous Dan?' I asked, knowing he heard the smile in my voice. Dan turned a shade of pink beneath his cheeks.

'Who said?' I laughed, and this surprised him a bit. 'What? What's so funny?'

'It's just... it's just I've never seen you blush before; we should really have talks like this more often' I mused, slapping his knee, he shook his head with a smirk.

'We'll live it up because it won't be happening often'... and just like that, the blush was gone.

'Look, Dan, I don't know why I'm explaining this to you but Taylor was kind of, the umm... the heat of the moment if you know what I mean' oh jeez now a blush was creeping unto my face!

Dan looked over at me, but then faced the road again. It's still weird driving with him, I know he won't crash but it makes me nervous. 'Heat of the moment huh?' He asked, his teeth flashing white in the sunlight that made it through the trees.

'Yah, is that too hard to believe?' I asked, glad the road had turned to asphalt. We were nearing the city.

'I wouldn't know' there was a mystery in Dan's words, but I took them anyway. There was still a lot I didn't know about him, but it didn't bother me too much. My stomach tightened up as a sign flew by, saying the city was only ten miles away. I grabbed the car door frame and clutched my middle. When Dan had chosen me to come with him out of all the other colonists, I was hesitant. But then I thought, going into the city with Dan could be fun. Now I'm having a second thought.

Suddenly- Dan's broad hands were reaching over and Imitating me on the knee, his hand resting there for a second longer. 'Don't worry Taylor, maybe people have forgotten by now.'

You have just witnessed the magic of Dan, which can make a girl feel better by a tap on the knee and words money couldn't buy.

'Thanks, Dan-'

I and Dan were sharing a hotel.

I was in the bathroom, hyperventilating with a paper bag. Not necessarily about the whole Dan thing. No, I'm just overreacting even though I'm in the city that could arrest me for murder. I sat on the toilet seat trying to catch my breath, Dan's magic words only lasted until the sign saying 'Welcome to The City!'

Using the counter as a boost I forced myself to stand up. Looking in the mirror, I looked pale with a tinge of green. I just hoped I wouldn't puke in front of Dan.

'Taylor! Are you alright!?' Dan called from outside. I had probably been in there an hour.

'I'm fine, coming out now' I put the paper bag under the sink and fixed my hair before opening the door. Dan gave me a quizzical stare before going to the bathroom. I looked around the simple hotel. Two beds, a nightstand in between, a mini-fridge, a small table and two chairs, closets etc. It was a very bland place, nothing special.

I took the bed closest to the bathroom in case of an... emergency. I laid back on the bed and thought about everything in general. I was in a hotel room, along with a very cute boy, and I was near the point of puking.

Of course, the relationship between me and Dan was strictly business for this trip. At least that's what I think. I just wish I could read Dan. I wish I knew what he was thinking, he seems so closed off sometimes that it's hard to talk to him much less read him.

Dan came out of the bathroom and went over to his bedside, taking stuff out of his pocket and putting them in the draws by the nightstand. I just watched silently, knowing that just a couple of months ago my mother would have never allowed me to be alone with a boy in a hotel room.

'We scout tomorrow,' was all Dan said before brushing his teeth and going to bed. He just slept in some shorts and it made me nervous seeing him shirtless. The man did that boy have abs! I got

ready to go to bed too and it made me giggle when I thought of this as a sleepover. The silly things that run around in my head.

I tucked myself in and turned so that I was facing Dan's bed. He didn't even sleep under the covers and I could clearly see the rise and fall of his chest. His face looked so peaceful when he wasn't scrunching it up into a frown.

Oops! I jinxed it.... He just made a frown in his sleep.

I'm standing on a vast white plane. Nothing but nothingness stretching out before me. Wait... what is that? It sounds like squeaking, the squeaking of wheels. I turn my head just slightly and let a gasp escape my breath at what I see. Slowly, very slowly, as if his wheels are rusted over, Bo bby Shipparro rides by on his bike. He's as pale as a ghost, his eyes caressing dark circles, a black crimson red hole where his heart should be....

I fall down unto my knees, only a whimper escaping my throat and Bobby turns to me. His lips are cracked white and peeling and I see him mouth the words 'Murderer'. I try to scream out 'NO!' but no words leave my lips. I clasp my throat, forcing it to work. Then Bobby begins to dissolve right in front of my eyes, melting like the wicked witch and suddenly there is a drain in the whiteness. Bobby's liquid form slips into that drain never to be seen again. I crawl furiously towards the drain, trying to pull him back out, but he's gone, gone to the sewers.

Portion

I look up and I'm shocked to see my living room. Everything, from the rickety old table I did my homework at, to the blood-red door my mother answered that fateful day. I'm surprised to see the door open, slowly at first and they stand before me, the two men in black and they're pointing straight at me. I hear my mother's sobs. I can't see her, I can't feel her, but I hear her sobs racking my brain. No matter how hard I cover my ears, I can still hear them.

She hates me, she was always disappointed in me and I don't deserve to be her daughter.

~*~

I shot straight up in bed and was surprised to feel my body collide straight into Dan's. Feeling his skin in contact with mine, me only wearing a tank top, made a wave of shock surge through me. Dan held my arms steady; I hadn't even realized they were shaking and began to rub them slowly.

'Taylor... Taylor are you alright? You were murmuring and thrashing in your sleep' he said, wiping the sweat from my forehead and brushing away the hair that clung to my face.

'I'm- I'm...' I didn't know how to explain everything I had dreamed. I had had similar dreams before but none this vivid and detailed. Coming to the city had shocked some nerve in my brain forcing these nightmares on me. I didn't want them.

I began to cry.

It was the first time- I had actually sobbed in front of Dan. Yah, I cried that time when we fought in the hallway but this time I was sobbing. I think Dan was shocked too because he just pulled me into his chest and let me wash him with my tears. It was an all-out Niagara Falls.

'Taylor, it's okay... I'm here... sh-h' it was weird hearing Dan whisper those comforting words into my ear and I think that's what made me stop crying. Or it was probably the fact that I could feel every flex and muscle from Dan pressed against me.

I sniffled, 'I- I had a bad dream,' When the words left my mouth, I then realized how babyish they sounded.

'About?'... Dan whispered, he sounded tired and it made me feel like I was a burden suddenly. Dan had chosen me to come with him and now he had to wake up in the middle of the night to comfort me like some baby.

'It's- It's nothing, I'm fine... Go back to bed, get some rest, you don't have to-' Dan cut me off with a deep sigh.

'Taylor, why do you always feel that I don't want to listen to what you have to say?' Dan asked, his eyes actually looking into my eyes for the first time. It almost made me forget he was blind. I was too dumbstruck by his question to answer.

'Well I do'... he said, seeing as how I couldn't answer him at the moment, 'Tell me about your dream'.

So-o I did, and the words came spewing out just as the tears had. Dan frowned at some parts, most parts actually, but he didn't talk. He let me do all of the yappings and it felt good to actually be able to tell someone all of this.

'It's my fault,' he concluded finally after I was done talking and we just stared at each other.

'No, it's not...' I said quickly, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

'Yes, it is, I should have never brought you back here, you've already gone through enough and now I'm bringing you back to the people who want to through you in jail'.

I laid my hand on Dan's chest, feeling his heart pulsating beneath my fingers. It sent a wave of warmth all the way up my arm. Dan looked my way anxiously, waiting for me to say something.

'Even though I still don't think it's your fault, I forgive you. If it makes you feel better, I forgive you' Dan smiled and I loved how it looked on him. It wasn't a frown, it wasn't a smirk, it was a genuine smile.

Genuine...

I started to laugh, and Dan scrunched up his eyebrows and looked my way as if to say, 'Are you crazy?'

'I'm sorry, it's just... Look at me!' I giggled and began to laugh harder realizing Dan couldn't look at me. But then it made me feel sad and guilty for laughing at him being blind. I was just an emotional wreck!

'I wish I could see you' he said, his big hand caressing my cheek and his thumb running along my eyebrows, the length of my nose, my lips that let out silent gasps of air. My heart racing.

'Why are you so nervous?' He whispered, just like that time I came to talk to him.

Then Dan leaned in, smoothly and silently as if she were on a forbidden mission, and he kissed me. The passion, the lust, his warm lips sliding back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Dan...

He was everything at that moment. Everything- I ever wanted, everything I ever hoped for, more than I could have imagined. It was Dan... And I wanted him to be mine.

I grabbed Dan's face in my small hands and he leaned in further, our kisses drowning out the darkroom and making it seem to burst with light. Not just light but life also. Instantly I forgot the

nightmare, instantly I was transformed and breathing deeply I continued to kiss the person who seemed to be my whole world at that moment.

Dan reluctantly pulled away, catching his breath and me the same. His body, pressed against mine, was heated and his heart pounded with fire. I looked up into his eyes. I looked up into Dan's eyes that used to always seem so misted over. They weren't smoked with blindness at that second thought, they were burning. Burning with a desire, a want, a need I had never seen before.

'Finally-' he whispered, his voice cracking a little, 'Finally, I see the light.'

Waking up to Dan's face so close to mine in the morning is something I would have never thought happen to me. I relished in the events of last night. I and Dan didn't do anything, we just cuddled and made out. We decided to play it safe.

Dan suddenly tensed in his sleep and I quickly placed a comforting hand on his chest. He visibly relaxed and I sighed a sigh of relief. Dan had been doing that a lot all night, he seemed to be tormented by bad dreams. I was tempted to ask him what they were about when he woke up but I didn't think it was the right time yet.

Portion

I snuggled into Dan's chest and loved the pulsating beat his heart gave off. It warmed my cheek and gave me a sense of happiness. Dan's breathing began to change and I realized that he was no longer sleeping. I felt his hand slowly stroke through my hair and I wondered if he knew that I was awake.

'Good morning'... he mumbled, and I guessed that was a yes.

'Good morning'... I murmured, turning my face in a way so that I was looking up at him.

I shivered as Dan slide his hand from my waist and up to my face. Caressing the curves and details of my face. He smiled, pressing his lips to mine and then rolling out of bed. I held onto his hand but finally let go. 'Scouting today!'... Dan called from the bathroom, peeking his head from around the corner, toothbrush in his mouth.

'I know, I know'... I mumbled, getting out of bed myself. Dan came out of the bathroom so I went in, brushing my teeth and doing my hair.

'It may get a little rowdy. We might have to go into places not so appealing. We have to find the source of these shots and that may include run-down areas, probably alley clubs'... Dan called from the room. I peeked my head around the corner as he was pulling on a shirt.

'You think I'm a helpless little girl, don't you?'... I asked, fixing my hair into a ponytail and walking over to him.

'I never said that exactly.'

Walking over to my duffel bag, I pulled out a shirt and some jeans. Changing my clothes in front of Dan was easier than I thought it would be. He couldn't see me anyway.

'Well, It felt like you were implying it'... Dan shrugged. I walked over to him and slipped my hands around his waist.

'But you'll be there, to protect me, right?' Dan smiled as he slipped his arms around my waist too. I stood on my tippy-toes as he met my face, his lips sinking into mine.

'Now that's how you say good morning'... I sighed, releasing myself from Dan and going over to my shoes. He chuckled and began lacing up some boots that I was sure to be steel-toed.

'Dan; you say we're going to go to all of these dangerous places. How exactly do we get in?' I don't think I was as surprised as I should be when Dan pulled out fake Ids.

'This is how-'

Have you ever walked a full two blocks with black heels on? I was wearing a green dress that Dan had magically wiped out. It fits tightly around my form only ending just above my knees. My hair flowed around me silhouetting my small face. Sensing my shocked face when I put on the dress Dan said, 'We have to look older.'

'Dan are we almost there?' I asked, pulling on the side of my dress and peering at Dan. He wore black jeans and a snazzy dress shirt.

'Oh- quit winning. We're almost there,' he grabbed my arm and gave me one of those winning smiles that I had come to hunger for.

'So-o, is this some kind of nightclub' I asked, as we passed flickering streetlamps being swarmed by moths. The night hair was cool and I probably would have frozen if it weren't for Dan. The streets were starting to become grungier and I realized we were heading into dangerous territory.

'Yup, Taylor if you want to go back, I can get you a cab and I'll just do the scouting on my own,' Dan seemed to be really worried about me lately.

-And-

Let your dance with a bunch of desperate girls! I think not!' Dan laughed and that's when I realized we had reached a line snaking up the side of the sidewalk.

-And-

'You're nervous,' Dan informed as If I didn't know myself. The line moved faster than I thought and soon we were in front of a thick red rope. A burly dark-skinned man with a striped dress shirt on glared at us behind dark sunglasses.

'ID,' he grumbled, letting out a couple of raspy coughs. Dan let go of my hand to dig in his pocket. He pulled out two shiny pieces of plastic and handed it over.

'Your clear,' the man rasped, practically throwing the cards back at us.

The red velvet rope was pulled back and quickly snapped back into place as we crossed over. That's exactly what it was like, it was like crossing over... To another world.

Strobe lights, pounding music, the smell of cigarettes and what I was pretty sure to be drugs, filled the air. It also smelled heavily of alcohol and the place was thick with people. I didn't know how we were supposed to scout. Sensing all the people, Dan squeezed my hand tighter.

'Yah!' 'Get it, girl!' ... 'Wooo- hoo sexy!' Where the vulgar yells and shouts that I got as we squeezed through the crowd. A colony party was nothing compared to this. I glared at a drunk bastard when he slapped me squarely on the butt.

'Are you ok Taylor?' Dan asked, coughing on the thick smoke in the air.

'Yeah,' I lied.

'I know your probably not going to like this but we need to split up so we can scout better,' I looked at Dan like he was crazy.

'You'll be fine' he started, sensing my fear, 'I can pinpoint your emotions out of the whole wide world'. He leaned down and kissed me slowly and firmly on the lips. My mouth-watering when he pulled away. 'Stay safe,' he whispered in my ear as he backed out of my vision, getting swallowed up by the crowd.

I instantly felt a hollow pang in my chest. How was I supposed to scout in such a horrible place? Feeling the hungry eyes of grown men watching my every move, I made myself go invisible. I felt more secure that way.

The nightclub was what you could call a warehouse, fluorescent lights that had stopped working ages ago looked like vacant eye sockets. Instead, strobe lights had been placed strategically around the club, looking like they were actually pulsating to the beat of the music on their own accord. The warehouse had a tall ceiling that made the sound escalate into hollow echoes.

Pushing through the crowd with a determined demeanor that I probably put on to mask my nervousness, I didn't even notice the person I nearly knocked down.

'Hey watch where your go-' the boy stopped, realizing that there was no one there. When really, I was standing right in front of him. I was about to dart away from his searching eyes when I realized something.

This boy looked really firmly, Taylor.

Then it clicked...

Waiting for the strobe lights to provide a second of darkness I made myself visible.

'Scotty?'..., I squeaked, not really fully grasp the concept of running into my ex-boyfriend. He was a little taller than I remembered. His hair a thick scruff around his head. But he was Scotty, it was all there. His thick black eyebrows, penetrating forest green eyes that were, even more, enduring then mine, one of a kind smirks that made it look like he was doing a full smile.

'Taylor you know I prefer 'Scott' better' he teased, surprising me as he hooked a lean arm around my waist and pulled me into a hug. I rocked back a little bit at the force of his hug but his arms steadied me. I was about to pull away when Taylor's home all hit me.

Scotty was wearing his signature Axe. Somewhere mingled in with that sent were aftershave and chlorine water. Scott was our school's star swimmer and I remember the days when I would go to all of his meets.

We finally pulled away from our hug and my mind still felt fuddled.

'Well, aren't you going to say something?'... He asked, his thick eyebrows snaking up like caterpillars into a worried arch. I remembered those eyebrows, the very one I used to smooth down whenever he got mad with my small fingers. Too many memories were coming back all at once and I took a hesitant step back.

'Um-mm, why are you talking to me?' I knew it sounded rude. Probably something you shouldn't say to someone you haven't seen in almost half of a year. It's just that Scotty broke up with me, ripping out my heart and dragging it with him when he left me dumbstruck in the hallway that heartbreaking afternoon. He had heard the rumors about me. Ability and it was only a matter of time.

'Why am I talking to you? Taylor, I haven't seen you in like... forever' the smile came back and I sighed, looking around me for some possible escape. Why did I have to go and make myself visible?

'I thought you thought I was a freak' I said clear and firm, my face blank, not showing the fluttery feeling I felt inside.

'About that...' I was again caught by surprise as Scott grabbed my hand and started leading me through the crowd, pushing aside people who wouldn't move. We reached a corner with a small café like a round table and two metal chairs. I took a seat and watched as Scotty fallowed.

'About that...' he started again, doing that thing where he rests his elbow on the table and fiddles with the front of his hair, 'I didn't want to break up with you'. If I said I was fuddled before, that was just an understatement to how I feel now.

'What?' Was all I could muster.

'I know it sounds immature but, everyone else was telling me these... things about you. How you were sick, weird a freak if you must and I didn't believe them. You were my girlfriend; I knew you better than they did and knew you were none of those things but then.' He seemed to be thinking of a way to explain further.

'But then...' I prodded.

'But then my father's voice came to a low whisper as he said these words. I shuddered as the memories of Scott's father came back to me. He was a firm, brutish man with hair and brows like Scotty's but was sprinkled with grey. He had a squares stance to him that made you want to almost bow in his presence.

'Your father didn't like the idea of you going out with a freak,' I finished, my nose began to burn and so did my eyes. I rubbed them furiously before a tear could fall. Here I thought I was finally over this boy, now he was shoved back into my face and I was on the verge of crying.

'Taylor you know my father was always a science man. Always up for a new discovery, spending long hours at the lab in the college he worked at. He welcomed the unknown, but to him, your ability was not only unknown but unnatural,' I cringed as Scott said those words.

'Are you trying to say that peer pressure and your father's criticism is what made you force me to give back the necklace you got me on our first date?' everything was starting to get blurry and I lifted my eyes to the ceiling, forcing the tears to slide back in.

'I'm sorry Taylor, I really am, but dad wouldn't accept me going out with someone who had abilities, it would go against his new project' Scott tried to slide his hand unto mine but I jerked away.

'And what was this new project?' My voice faltered and cracked under the pressure of sitting there with him.

'The anti-mutation shots...'

'Mr. Avery created the anti-mutation shots?' I squeaked, peering through the thick darkness and trying to make out Scott's face through the glow of the streetlamp. Usually, a party dies down after a few hours but that jungle in there was going strong and even stronger so we decided to talk outside. It felt good to unclog my lungs that seemed to be drowning in smoke.

'Yes... he did,' Scott said, dusting off the side of his shoe as we sat on the curb. If it weren't for the fact that my mind was on one hundred things at once I would probably have noticed how eerie the alley seemed.

'He's the reason why people with abilities are losing the one thing that makes them special?' I asked again, my voice taking on a sharper tone.

'Taylor, I know it's wrong but-' I cut him off with a flash of my eyes.

'Wrong Scotty...? It's inhumane to take away a piece of someone's identity' the words were tumbling out and I found myself speaking my mind to the first boy I had ever had feelings for and trust me there had been many. That one kid, who after Scotty, pretended to like me but really just wanted to see if he could get powers by kissing me. Then there was Ben, but I've realized now that I just didn't feel the same as he felt for me. We can't forget Dan, who has been there for me in this scary little field trip.

(Please know that Taylor was just the heat of the moment.)

Scott began to talk again, as I thought about all of this, 'I know Ro' he started using the nickname I hadn't heard in ages, 'but I can't go up against my father, he'll always have the upper hand, I'm just the loyal son who saved his dad money on a swimming scholarship'.

'You got the scholarship, huh?' I smirked, giving a small smile and picking my cuticles. It didn't make sense for us to keep going back and forth like that. This was probably our last conversation and I didn't want it to end badly.

'Yah... fastest in the state,' he attempted a smile to but it mostly came out as a grimace. His mind was somewhere else, at the moment and time he didn't care about a school scholarship, he cared about...

'So, what brings you to a nightclub? I would have never imagined bumping into Taylor Lovett at a nightclub-' he leaned back, probably taking in my skimpy dress for the first time but I knew as he stared at me that he was looking at the Taylor he dated back at the beginning of ninth grade.

'Just business,' I started, avoiding his gaze, 'What brings you here?'

'I'm here on a whim. Some of the guys dared me to come here. They said I wouldn't even last one night. But here I am, no body parts were strewn across the alley- floor,' he chuckled, imitating his body as If checking to see, that all his bones were there. For the first time that night, I laughed.

'Wow, except for your height you haven't changed a bit Scotty. Still crumbling under peer-pressure and still cracking jokes,' his eyes sparkled at the sound of my laugh. I was smiling then but my smile dropped as a sudden look of sadness took over Scott.

'God, I miss your laugh' he whispered, taking a rock and scratching against the cold floor. A wind blew by making me grasp my bear arms and watch a newspaper blow in the wind.

'Scotty...' was all I could say. After all, he was the one who broke up with me. He threw the rock and turned to me suddenly, a question forming in his eyebrows.

'Do... Do you remember the Gazebo' It was either the question or the second wind that sucked the words out of me?

'Yah,' I finally stuttered. After Scott had left me dumb-struck in the hall, staring down at the linoleum floor as it blurred with my tears I vowed to destroy, lock away, and bury any reminder of him.

The Gazebo... but the Gazebo is a place you can never forget.

'I'm sorry Taylor, I should have never brought it back up, I-,' I placed a hand on his arm which seemed to catch him by surprise. I took that same hand and slowly placed a piece of my hair behind my ear.

'No, it's fine,' I whispered, taking a deep breath and feeling myself practically transporting back to that day.

'Danny!' I squealed, wrapping my arms around his shoulders as he tickled me again. Finally, he stopped and I just fell into him on the grass. It had been one whole month since we went out and as we hung out after school, sitting under an old tree at the park, we wondered what we should do to celebrate.

'I got nothing Ro, it seems like we've already been everywhere from our other dates' Scott said, hooking his arm behind my neck as we laid on the grass under the tree.

'Not every,' I whispered, the words leaving my mouth before I could take them back. Danny rolled over so that he was over me know. He wasn't putting all his weight on me but I could still feel his body pressed to mine. A knowing look was in his eyes as he searched my face.

'Are you sure Ro, or did you say that just to say it' me and Scott rarely ever had serious talks. He was such a goofy guy that it never ever crossed our minds to sit down have a serious talk once in a while.

'I... I'... Looking into Danny's eyes I knew he was ready, but he wanted to make sure I was ready. He wanted to make sure I was emotionally up for it. He was being a good boyfriend, but I didn't want to keep him waiting. If he got tired of me? What if he decided I was an immature baby that couldn't hold her own?

'Taylor?' Scott asked, wondering why it was taking me so long to answer.

'Of course,' I answered my voice sounding surer than my body.

The sun was dipping lower in the sky as we reached the Gazebo probably every ninth grader at my school has visited at least once. Even though I was confidently leading Scott to the steps of the Gazebo... Butterflies were doing backflips in my stomach. Was I ready for this?

Was I really ready for this?

'Are you sure?'... Danny asked again, as he pulled out two packs of something you become very harsh like when you take a health class. My mouth was denying the pounding of my heart as I sat down on the wooden benches, feeling the carvings of past couples as I said...

'Yes!'

Another cold breeze blew back my hair, dragging me to the here and now of things. Scott was calling my name, snapping his fingers in front of my eyes.

'Earth to Taylor? I know you're an angel but you need to come back down to earth' I laughed at the saying he used to whisper to me in math class when I would zone out.

Too- many, memories.

'Sorry I was just...'

'Remembering?' He finished for me, side glancing at me. That night was full of so much emotion, so much intimacy that I didn't even go to school the next day. Scott was worried that he emotionally scarred me for life but I came to school the next day and we had a nice.... Long... talk.

'Yah, remembering...' I wasn't expecting Scott's arm to snake around my waist and pull me closer to him. I wasn't expecting my head to fit naturally in the nook of his neck and place my arm around his waist too.

'I hope this isn't too awkward for you Ro,' he chuckled, his breath warm against my cold scalp.

'Surprisingly... no,' I admitted, telling myself over and over and over again that this was just a friendly hug.

'I'm guessing you came here with a dude?' It was the first time Scott had implied that I had probably found someone else by now. I was kind of wondering if he found someone else too.

'Yah his name is-' but I wasn't able to finish as someone cleared their throat behind us. I wasn't surprised to turn and see smoked over blue eyes staring over the top of our heads. I instinctively moved away from Scott.

'Yeah, she did come with a dude. And he happens to be me' Dan said.

'Taylor?'... Dan said in a tone that was more like 'Start explaining.'

'Hey Dan, I bumped into...' I didn't know how to explain that I had bumped into my ex so- I winged it, 'a friend from my old school, we were just talking.' I jumped up from the curve and took a step toward him.

'His name is Danny- I mean Scott... his name is Scott,' I let out a sigh of relief for not barfing all over the alley floor.

'Dan, is it?' Scott said, sticking out his hand as if he and Dan had met before. I thought I would have to explain the fact that Dan couldn't see his hand when he stuck it out and placed it in Scott's.

'Nice to meet yah,' he said, but by spending a few months with Dan I knew he didn't sound so... nice.

'So, you Ro's date to this crazy place?' Scott asked, trying to fill the silence with small talk.

'Yes, I'm Taylor's date,' Dan answered, putting emphasis on my full name. I wasn't the least surprised when he stuck out his arm and hooked it around my waist, pulling me into his chest. Scott didn't take his eyes off of my face as he continued to talk.

'Your eyes are quite unusual; do you have abilities like Taylor?' Dan tensed under my fingers as Scott asked this.

'I'm blind and I have highly trained senses so yeah... I guess you can say I have abilities right then and there was the perfect time to go invisible. I tried to look anywhere but Danny's penetrating green eyes.

The entrance to the club which happens to be a rusted metal door. The stairs that stepped up to the door ending in a flat landing. The street light that was being fussed over by a lone fly. The high-heels that hadn't broken a heel yet. Dan's arm clutching my waist.

But then I looked up and met those eyes again.

'Cool... cool...' Scott said, obviously running out of words to say. My mind was reeling with the possibilities of what could happen next. Dan would fight Scott. Scott would fight Dan. The possibilities were endless.

'Um... Dan, can I talk to you for a sec?' I asked after one whole minute of them burning holes into each other with their eyes.

'Sure,' he grabbed my hand and I lifted a finger to Scott telling him 'One sec' and walked a little bit away from the curb.

'Who's that?' Dan asked, not holding back as soon as we were out of earshot distance.

'I already told you, he's a-'

'Save it, Taylor, I may be blind but I'm not stupid' I felt like he had just slapped me in the face. He was obviously mad but it hurt to see him this way, knowing that he could be the sweet Dan from last night. We were only teenagers, why did life have to be so difficult?

'I never said you were stupid Dan' I mumbled, pulling my hand away from his and wrapping my arms protectively around me. The wind made me shudder.

'Well telling me lies makes it seem that way' he crossed his arms and stood, waiting for me to start explaining.

'He- He's my ex-boyfriend,' something that felt like a golf ball was lodged in my throat as I explained this simple fact to Dan. I felt like a dirty cheater just saying the words. I and Dan had basically told each other last night that we really like each other and there I was, hugging my ex-boyfriend.

'Taylor- you can't hide anything from me so why even bother lying' I looked up as Dan continued, 'I sensed how you were feeling and it was a mixture of a lot of things, but the one that stood out the most is the confusion you feel for him'. Dan pointed his finger in the direction of Scott who was kicking the curb, shoulders drooped, head down, just standing there.

'So- you knew from the beginning?' I asked, raising one eyebrow.

'Yeah,' he sighed, taking both of my hands in his and kissing my knuckles. A wave of heat coursed through my veins making the tips of my ears tingle.

'Dan there's something else though,' I said quickly before I would forget.

'What is it?'

'I think- Well I know who created the shots,' Dan's eyes went wide as I whispered this. I looked over at Scott to see if he could hear me. He wasn't looking so I leaned in closer to Dan.

'Scott's father,' I whispered so softly I almost didn't hear myself, but I knew Dan heard. He knitted his eyebrows and seemed to be contemplating all of what I said. I felt dirty for just blabbering about something Danny confided in me but it was for the good of the colony.

'Come on,' Dan said finally, leading me back to where Scott stood.

He obviously already had a plan.

'That was more than one sec I'm afraid' Scott joked, spinning on his heel as we walked towards the curb.

'Sorry,' I said, flashing him a quick smile.

'Yeah, we were just talking about how we were going to get back to the hotel' Dan said bluntly, a little smirk forming under his words. The look on Scott's face was one I had never witnessed. First, it was surprising, then it was confusion, the next anger and finally, he was trying to compose himself.

'Um... Hotel, Huh?' He said, directing the question to Dan but looking dead at me.

'Yah,' I murmured, finding the speck on my shoulder more interesting as I brushed it off.

'Well... um... don't you think a hotel's a little ...inappropriate?'... Scott implied, pulling on the collar of his shirt. I saw Dan smile again and knew that Danny was falling shamelessly into his trap.

'Yeah, but hey, there's nowhere else for us to stay,' Dan shrugged as if he was really bummed about having to stay in a hotel when trust me, he wasn't.

'You know...' Scott started, Dan looked up, from staring at the floor, hopefully, 'My dad does have some guest rooms and maybe I could call him up and ask if you guys could stay a couple of days?'

Dan shrugged his shoulders as if to say 'Whatever' and I said, 'That would be great'. As Scott went over to the other side of the alley to make the call, Dan turned to me and smiled.

'That was too easy,' he gloated, and I punched him lightly on the arm.

'Just remember Dan he doesn't have abilities to take it easy on him' I lectured, wagging my finger up and down.

'I know, I know' he said, grabbing by wagging my finger and swallowing up my hand with his. I took a step closer to him and loved the way the moon shone down into his eyes, reflecting pools of glimmering grey. He pulled my hand unto his chest and I felt the thumping of his heart. I wasn't surprised when Dan's face began to descend to mine, his eyes closing and mines closing too. I began to tilt my head up in his direction when Danny said from behind us...

'My dad said yes-' Dan cursed under his breath, opening his eyes and standing up straight. I sighed and just turned to look at Danny. He knew we were going to kiss.

'Great,' Dan murmured in reply.

'Here we are' it still took me by surprise when we pulled up to Danny's house, scratch that, Estate. The tall gates opened up to a gravel road that crackled under Scott's car. It was an original Mazda Taiki. The orange lights that lit up the front of the house-made it look like a showcase instead of a home. The garage, as if sensing our presence, immediately rolled up allowing Scott to glide in. That's exactly what it was like, gliding.

'Whoa, you actually cleaned up the garage Danny?' I gasped, looking at the neatly organized racks and wide-open area for the cars. The last time I was in this garage it had two old bean bags, a torn computer chair, Emmaio chair, musky rug and an old guitar and drums from when Scott was trying to start a band.

Dan cringed at the use of Scott's nickname coming out of my mouth and we all got out of the car.

'I sure did, it took a little help from the guys but...' he shrugged, and we walked up to the garage door inside leading to the kitchen. Our bags hung on our shoulders- (we picked them up from the hotel.)

'I see one place hasn't changed-' I said, as we stepped into the warm and welcoming kitchen. It was silent as a lone light glowed over the stovetop. The huge refrigerator made a low humming sound as we walked past. Dan and Scott continued on to the foyer but I found myself frozen in front of the massive kitchen with its polished marble tops.

I found myself squinting and almost seeing shadows of me and Danny playing around with cupcake batter. Throwing it at each other, getting it stuck in our hair, wiping it on each other's noses. Then Scott was sucking some icing off my finger and then we were kissing and...

Too- many, memories.

'Taylor come on!' Dan called, snapping me out of the past. I heard them shuffling up the stairs and hurried to catch up.

'There are two empty rooms close to the stairs and two empty rooms close to the back. Pick away' Scott said as if he said this to every person who wanted to spend the night. I and Dan looked at each other probably asking, 'Separate rooms?'

'If you were wondering, my father said you guys have to be in... separate rooms,' Dan couldn't see it but I saw the smirk on Scott's face.

'Right-' was all Dan said as I saw him make his way all the way to the back of the hallway and turned to the right. For the first time that night, it felt awkward just standing there with Scott.

'Well, I guess I'll take a room close to the stairs,' I said timidly, turning around and heading for the door, I was about to drop my bag when Scott touched me lightly on the shoulder. A jolt went through my arm almost making me fall.

'Tomorrow my dad meets Dan' he taunted, making his hand slide off my shoulder and turning to go down the stairs.

'Yaa-any-' I said in mock joy.

I have to admit. Ben's silk sheets with satin lacing are way better than the slept in sheets at the hotel. I woke up with a trail of drool following me and I wiped the side of my mouth sleepily. Been said he wanted us to at least say hi to his dad and then we didn't have to affiliate with him for the rest of our stay. We had to wake up early because of Mr. Avery wakes up really early to go to the Lab.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and squinted my eyes against the glare of the sun shining brightly through the silk curtains. I rubbed my eyes vigorously and did a deep stretch. I almost forgot all of the events that happened last night but just like a bad dream it eventually comes rushing back to you.

I got up and slumped towards the giant bathroom that I probably didn't deserve. The tile was cool beneath my feet and I slapped some water on my face and brushed my teeth. After rummaging around in my bag, I found my hair tangled brush and swiped my mane up into a ponytail. I heard movement on the other side of the house and assumed Dan was awake too. I quickly grabbed some loose jogging sweats and a white tee hoping to catch Dan before he went downstairs.

There were some things left unsaid last night and we needed to talk. I grabbed the shiny brass knob and pulled open the door just as Dan was walking down the hall. He raised his one eyebrow as I came flying down the hall, ran into him, grabbed him and pulled him into an unused guest room. He looked at me in surprise.

Portion

'Dan, we need to talk' I said, already having everything that I was about to say mapped out.

'Really?' ... He said as if he didn't see this coming.

'Yes Really,' I mocked, 'I need to know... I need to know how you feel about Danny- I mean Been?' I asked, feeling insecure under Dan's blind eyes for the first time.

'Ben...' he said, as if tasting his name on his tongue, 'I think he's just like any other normal guy out there'. I let out a sigh of relief, at least he was being neutral.

'Well that's-umm- ...good,' I stuttered, switching from one foot to the next.

'Spit it out, Taylor.'

'I think we should take things easy for right now,' I blurted, slapping my hands over my mouth. I didn't know whether I should have said it, yet, but Dan had forced it out of me.

'What do you mean?' He said, taking a step closer.

'What I mean is that this trip was supposed to be strictly business but then we... kissed and Dan it's obvious that I like you okay but I feel like our emotions are getting in the way of what we really came here for so I guess you can say that-,' I wasn't able to finish as Dan grabbed my waist and pressed his lips unto mine. His mouth began to move slowly and so did mine, mimicking his wave-like patterns. All the thoughts that I had so pain-snakingly planned out in my head went down the drain.

He pulled away and rested his head on my forehead. I took two deep breaths and put my arms lightly on his shoulders.

'You are one sneaky little boy you know that?' I whispered, out of breath and completely out of mind. Dan chuckled and pulled me even deeper into his chest.

'Now what were you saying?' He teased, taking his head off of me and kissing my cheek, right at the corner of my mouth.

'As I can remember-' I sighed, as he kissed my jaw and then my neck and then my shoulder. A wave of heat coursed through me making my voice stop in my throat.

'I think I'm helping,' he grinned, kissing down the length of my arm and finally my palm, leaving my fingers on fire.

'Actually, you're not'... I saw the confused look on his face as I pushed lightly away. I gemmated down my hair that had gone awry and smoothed out the shirt that suspiciously lifted above my navel. Dan leaned on the door behind me and waited.

'Dan I'm serious, we can sort all this outback at the colony but here... here we need to take things seriously,' he stayed stone still and completely silent as if reading my emotions to see if I was telling the truth.

'You're confused, aren't you?' He inquired after what seemed like an hour.

'Excuse me?'... I had just never sounded so sure in my life and Dan was asking if I was confused?!

'Look it's obvious you still have feelings for a fish boy who so kindly gave us rooms only because he knew you were going to be here, so maybe I should get out of your way until you're not confused anymore' Dan leaned off of the wall and turned for the door. I grabbed his arm so fast that it surprised him.

'Why whenever I try to make things better you assume, I'm trying to make things worse?' tears were stinging my eyes and it felt like a sock was in my throat but no tears fell. Dan looked back at me and frowned. 'Because,' he started, turning so that his head was facing the door again, 'what's better for you isn't always better for me'.

I waited two minutes after he left before heading out the door myself.

'Dad this is Dan,' Dan stuck out his hand as Scoot said his name.

Ben's father shook it.

'And you remember Taylor...' Ben's father just nodded at me and I followed. He kept appraising me and Dan like we were a specimen under his microscope.

'You know Taylor, my lab's always open if you will consider being my subject' his voice was gravel deep and his thick eyebrows made him look serious all the time. I took a deep breath and tried to answer as politely as possible.

'Thanks for letting us stay her Mr. Avery, but I'm not a test subject' the room got quiet as I said this and everyone seemed to be just staring at each other.

'Very well then, have a nice day,' then he was gone, his white lab coat swooshing at his knees as he closed the front door. We just stood in the foyer, continuing our stares when Danny spoke up.

'Well, that went well!' He said, clasping his hands together, 'I thought he'd never leave.'

I just smiled and Dan acted like he was bored.

'You guys deserve a tour. Up for it?' Ben's feet were muffled on the cool marble as he walked towards a sitting room.

'I think I'll pass on your tour... I can explore on my own' Dan excused himself and I could n't help but think 'please Dan, don't do anything risky.' I just knew he was going to snoop around the house to find out more about the shots.

'What about you Ro?' Ben asked, raising his eyebrows into a question. I couldn't believe Dan was leaving me alone with Danny. He was definitely mad at me, probably trying to prove something. I walked over to an eager Ben who seemed to be hanging on every word I said. 'I've already seen your house Danny' I reasoned, watching a disappointed frown form on his face. The n he smiled.

'Yeah but I bet you haven't seen 'The Shack,'' I found myself following Ben out the door and around the side of the house.

'The Shack?' I questioned, wondering what was so exciting about a shack anyway.

'Yeah, it's a cool little hangout spot me- and the boys made. Usually, it's no girls aloud but I think I can make an exception,' we walked across the massive backyard of the estate towards a little white house. It looked like a regular-sized house but paled in comparison to the estate.

'This is the Shack?'

'Yeah, too hard to believe?' I shoved Ben playfully from behind as we stepped inside. What I saw made me burst out laughing. The Shack looked like an elegant regular house on the outside but inside...

Inside it was a mess.

Comic books cluttered a wooden table that was set in the middle of the old bean bags, office chair and Emmaio chair I thought Danny got rid of. Posters of rock bands clustered the wall and a set of

steel ladders led up to a makeshift loft. A big TV with multiple game systems hooked up to it sat amongst it all.

I couldn't stop laughing as I held my middle, pointing at a half-eaten hoagie.

'You... You basically picked up the garage and dropped into this nice-looking place... Then... then called it 'The Shack',' I managed to say. Ben sighed and picked up one of the comics to the only drop back down again.

'Ok, ok I know it's funny' he said after a while. I wiped a few stray tears and smiled.

'You've really outdone yourself this time Danny,' I fingered the cool metal of the flat screen.

'It's Ben...'

'Danny...'

'Ben...'

'Danny...'

'Ben...'

I stayed frozen still as I felt Ben's uneven breath right by my ear. I wanted to shudder at the shiver that just ran down my spine but didn't want to give him the satisfaction. I felt his warm hands rub the side of my arms. I could only lightly feel him standing behind me.

'You know I'm always going to call you Danny,' I said, trying to focus on the cover of a comic instead of his hands on me and his breath in my ear.

'I know, it's just that I love hearing you call me that. No one's called me that in a long time,' I let out a deep breath as Ben dropped his hands and seemed to hesitate before stepping away from me. He walked over to the steel ladder and put one foot on it, turning to me.

'Want to see where this leads to?'

'Sure,' I answered after looking the ladder up and down.

We reached the top of the ladder, and my assumption that up here was a loft was correct. It was more than a loft though; it was a view. My breath caught in my throat as I stepped onto the

hardwood floor and walked slowly towards a large window that wrapped around the whole top of the house. The crest that Ben's estate sat on made it the perfect view of the city. I let my fingers trace the tall buildings and bustling cars that sped out and into sight. Was I really seeing this? Was I really witnessing this? Could the place I dreaded so much be so beautiful? The sunrise in the distance only answered that question for me.

'It's nice, huh?'... I had almost forgotten Ben was there and jumped as he appeared beside me.

'Nice? It's amazing,' I breathed, letting my hand drop to my side and peering down at the people who were oblivious to my wondering eyes.

'When I got this little house built, I thought it would be cool to have a view' he continued, resting his hand on the window too.

'It was an awesome idea,' I admitted, lowering myself into a sit.

'Yah... I remember we used to always come up with the wackiest ideas' Ben chuckled and laughed into his hand. I drummed the floor.

'Like that time- we took that old wagon and tried to ride it down the hill' I added- 'Or when we taught our class parrot how to curse,' he put in.

'When we spied on Miss. Baker, and caught her in her pantyhose' by now I had my forehead pressed against the glass laughing.

'What about the time we put chocolate fudge on one of my dad's slides and he thought he found a new strain of plant species' now we were both laughing hard, looking at each other only made us laugh harder.

'That time I ruined my dress for the Halloween dance- so you tore your tux and we went as zombies' Ben just looked over at me and smiled, his green eyes twinkling. He scooted towards me a little until our shoulders were brushing. I felt the urge to move away... But didn't.

'Our first kiss,' it wasn't an accident as the words left Ben's lips. He meant to say it, as he looked over at me, I could see that he meant to say it. Then his face was coming towards me.

'No,' I said suddenly, stopping him by his shoulder, 'we can't.'

'Who said?' He taunted, the ways his eyes danced made me want to just move in.

'My conscience, the little voice deep down inside telling me this is wrong' my voice didn't waver but stayed clear and strong, making it seem like I knew what I wanted when really... I didn't. Danny grabbed my hand and squeezed as it laid on his shoulder.

'Ro,' he whispered, his eyes pleading. For what? I don't know.

'Danny,' I whispered back, trying so hard to fight the urge. What about Dan? I couldn't just be another statistic. The girl who falls forex that broke up with her because she can't handle being alone with him. I couldn't betray Dan like that, I couldn't prove that what he said right. He was wrong about me still having feelings for Ben, he was wrong.

Yet despite all of this, I leaned in for the kiss.

I don't know why I began to kiss Ben. Maybe it was because I'm a weak sucker for love. Probably because I wanted to see if Dan was right and that I still had feelings for him. Or maybe I just missed the feeling of his lips slightly grazing mine. A vibrating warmth spread through my body making me shudder as I leaned backward, and Ben followed. He grabbed my face in his hands and continued to kiss me but deeper and longer this time. I felt like I was reliving the events of the gazebo as his tongue came sliding into my mouth making my cheeks burn.

The adrenaline took over my thoughts as I began to unbuckle his belt and felt myself undoing his button. I unzipped his zipper and began to pull on his pants when Ben pulled away from my eager lips and looked at me straight in the eye, his breath uneven as it warmed my lips.

'I shouldn't be doing this to you,' he whispered, grabbing my hand that laid on his zipper. He curled his hands into a fist at my sides and rested his head on my bare stomach.

'What do you mean?' I asked, my head still fuzzy from what almost happened. I took his head in my hands as he just laid there.

'I mean... it shouldn't be this way. I shouldn't have seduced you like that' he murmured, his hair tickling my bare skin.

'I'm such a slut,' I heard myself whispering. I grabbed my forehead with my hand and turned my head away from him.

'Taylor doesn't say that' I began to cry into my hands as Ben stroked my hair, 'Ro, come on...'

'Just... don't touch me!' I scrambled away from his grasp, groping for the top of the ladder.

'Taylor wait!' I didn't wait, I lowered myself unto the metal rods and went down one clang at a time. Boys always made me feel special and whenever I got a chance to kiss them, I took it. But now I was tired of playing the role 'easy to get.'

'Ro wait! I'm sorry!' Ben started to fallow me down and I tried to go down as fast I could with blurry vision.

'Don't call me that' I whispered, finally reaching the bottom floor and running towards the door. I darted across the backyard and ran towards the back door, opening it in a hurry and slamming it shut. I heard Ben open the back door too as I sprinted through the den, two sitting rooms and then finally the foyer.

'Taylor I'm sorry!'

I ran up the stairs and was aiming for the guest room I was staying in but instead ran straight into Dan's broad chest. His face showed confusion as I stumbled to the floor and tried to get back up.

'Taylor?' He asked, grabbing my hand and pulling me up.

'I'm sorry Dan, I'm so sorry' I gasped, crying as I said it.

'What happened Taylor?' His voice was cold. I grabbed his forearms.

'I didn't mean to kiss him it just happened and I'm sorry Dan, I am, I-' I stood shocked as he took my hands and brushed them off of his forearms. His face was stone hard as he glared behind smoked over eyes.

'As I said before, what's better for you is worse for me. I hope you enjoyed your little make-out session,' I still couldn't grasp the fact that he was mad as we heard footsteps running up the stairs.

'I'm sorry but this is your fight,' he whispered as Ben appeared at the top of the stairs. I wanted to call out but only a squeak escaped my lips as Dan walked away and back to his room.

'Taylor, we should talk,' Ben said quickly, grabbing my arm but I backed away.

'No Ben' I said firmly, 'I'm leaving tomorrow'.

'I don't know,' I whimpered. The wrinkled lady looked at me behind blue beady eyes and peered over her thin glasses. The clock ticked loudly in that silent room and my mind raced faster than my heart.

'What do you mean child?' She asked, crossing her legs and resting her notepad on her knee. I sucked in a deep breath and squeezed the pillow that I clutched in my hand.

'I mean... I don't know why I do the things- I do,' I whispered. The lady, Evelyn Pauper her desk plague said, nodded her head slowly and then looked straight at me.

'And that makes you feel...?' she leaned forward in her chair.

'Scared,' I finished. A giant teardrop escaped from my eye and plopped unto the sheer white coach I was curled upon. Evelyn scribbled some more notes vigorously with pruned hands. My eyes wavered over to the window that was misted over with dew.

'This... the scared feeling you get. Would you describe it as... anxiety?'

There were a light glow and mist on the windowpane, signaling the return of rain. I wiped my moist face and stretched out my sleepy legs. 'I don't know. I just...' I was looking for the right impossible words to explain to a normal person like Evelyn Pauper.

'I'm usually the girl who's invisible to the world' I started, and excitement stirring in me suddenly, 'I'm that one girl that people seem to look through unto the other side. Lately, though, there's been... people... who can see me? The real me. See me as I've never been seen before.' Evelyn nodded her head the whole time I talked and finally when I finished, she slipped off her glasses and seemed to stare blankly out of the window like me.

'Do you care to tell me who these people are?' She asked after a long silence. I kept staring out the window. At the alley below. The kids playing in the puddles. The people blocking their heads with newspapers as they walked along the sidewalks. Watching them from my perch at the window I didn't want to answer Evelyn.

'There are these two boys,' I whispered. Evelyn looked away from the window to study my crestfallen face.

'Can't decide between the two?' She asked. I finally pulled away from the window to see the small smile on her face. She was good.

Portion

'I thought I did. One is different from me. I and he have been through some stuff and it's like he can see right through me. The other is what you could call.... An old flame. I and he have had our fair share of firsts and every time I'm around him I feel like...' my words finally failed me - and I went back to staring out the window. Anywhere was better than looking at the face of the wise.

'A match made in heaven and an old flame? You definitely have a problem with your hand'... she inquired while scribbling on her little pad.

I gulped and fiddled with my fingers.

'I guess...'

Evelyn took off her glasses and tossed her pad unto her desk. She made it over to the couch and took a cautious seat next to me. She smelled like roses, rain, and prune juice.

'I guess' isn't just it. It's a means of surrender. In this situation, it's saying 'I give up',' She rubbed her hands down her skirt and scrunched her eyebrows together, 'Surrendering is something you can live with. You can run, run far away from your troubles. Or you can fight. Fight for what you know is right and what you know will make everything ok again.'

I folded my legs together and looked at her with new eyes. She made it sound so... Easy.

'It's that easy?'

'Only you can make it easy' her wise old face answered, and if it wasn't improper, I would have hugged her right there and then.

My feet thudded rapidly as I ran across the slippery pavement. It took all of my might not to lose my balance and fall into the murky rainwater. People looked at me with puzzling expressions as I sped past them and nearly knocked them over.

'Slow down girl!' a woman with three kids and a grocery bag yelled at me. I didn't stop though, I ran faster. My chest thumped loudly with the beating of my overworked heart.

This was something I had to do because, if I didn't, it would be a mistake I would regret forever.

'Ah!' I said, slipping and nearly falling on the cold pavement. I caught myself in time and stumbled to a stand as I stared up at the big house coming up. The one with the graveled lawn and perfect view of the city. The city I grew up in and the city that I feared.

I kept running and felt the cold air whipping at my lungs, making my throat burn.

'Wait!' I called the tall figure packing up the army green jeep parked in the driveway. 'Wait!'

I charged up the incline just as the faint figure shut the trunk. He turned around at the sound of my voice.

'Please! Just wait for one-' I tripped on the slick gravel again but got right back up as little pieces of rock embedded my hands and knees. The figure crossed his arms over his broad chest and kept the solid rock stare he was wearing unchanging.

'What do you want?' He said bitterly, his tongue lashing like a viper. My fingers felt numb as I wiped the tears from my eyes with a shaking hand. I took two steps over the wet gravel so that I was right in front of him.

'Dan' I started, my voice wavering only a little, 'You may be blind... but you can see me. See me more than anyone ever could. Dan- I...'

'Get on with it- Taylor' He snapped, surprising me.

'Dan, I love you,' I said confidently, a single raindrop falling on my nose, 'I love the way you hold me and reassure me and kiss me when I least expect it'. Dan was about to say something but I continued. 'Dan I've finally realized that you mean a lot to me. I'm sorry about what happened to Ben. It wasn't supposed to happen, Dan. I know now that-'

'Taylor stop-!' He said louder now. My voice stopped but my mouth stayed open. 'How do you think I felt when you rushed up those stairs with that guilty look on your face. Do you know what it feels like to be on the side that was played?'

'Dan-'

'No! You don't know.... Because you never been the player... just the player.'

'Dan!' I said louder now, surprise filling my voice. This couldn't be happening; Dan was supposed to forgive me and love me. Everything was supposed to be forgotten.

'Your special Taylor, your pretty too, but that's not enough for me to just forgive you,' he walked away from my shocking form and got into the driver's side of the frosted jeep.

'My love should be enough Dan!' I yelled, tears stinging my eyes and making them burn like never before. 'It should be enough!'

'Just get in the car unless you plan on moving in with Ben!' he yelled back, the engine roaring to life. My breath came out in small puffs in front of me. My tears freezing on my face. I got in the car and felt like I was going to throw up as I buckled my seatbelt and tried not to look at Dan. My breath made frosted crystals on the window glass as we pulled out of the driveway. The rain started to fall harder on the moving Jeep. It felt like something had been ripped out of me.

'Dan-,' I tried again, my voice barely a whisper.

'Not now Taylor...'

I stepped out of the elevator and didn't stop to talk to anyone. I made no eye contact and even went as far as turning myself invisible. A couple of people were already waiting for Dan at the elevator and hammered him with questions as soon as the door opened. Me, I climbed the much-used stairs and began searching for my room number.

I just knew my eyes were puffy and red from crying and I just knew how sick I felt at the moment. I've only ben heartbroken once in my life but this is by far the worst. As soon as the wooden door banged against the wall, gaping open, I slowly walked in and threw myself on my bed. My bag dropped with a thud to the floor as I curled up into a tight ball.

Dan had rejected me. He didn't want anything to do with me. He didn't love me back.

'Because you're disgusting,' a sinister voice whispered inside of me. My eyes went wide with fear as I looked over at the figure standing on the other side of the room.

'He hates you, and he'll never love you' it hissed. Shaking, I sat up and peered over at the short pale boy with cracked grey lips. Bobby Shipparro...

'You're not real!' I yelled, grabbing the side of my head and squeezing my eyes shut.

'Oh, I'm really alright. As long as sadness, abandonment, and fear live inside of you, I will always exist,' his unearthly voice jeered, a smile creeping onto his face and making his lips crack, spilling blood.

'No! You can't! I did nothing wrong! I didn't kill you!' I yelled louder; my voice was hoarse with tears. This didn't faze the ghost-like Bobby.

He just took one step closer and smiled wider.

'Face- it Taylor. You are alone... And you always will be.'

I didn't stop my fury as another hoarse scream left my throat and I grabbed the vase on the nightstand, flinging it across the room. It flew through the haunting figure and smashed into the wall behind. Water and shards went flying as tears blurred my vision.

'Always alone... Always alone... always, always, always...' then the voice disappeared, taking its unwelcome form with it and I pulled my knees to my chest. This couldn't be happening. Why was this happening to me? I didn't deserve any of it.

Yet my mind started to wonder at something else. What if the voice was right? I would always be alone, forever alone in a world, no human being could face by themselves.

Head jerking sobs started to escape from my throat and I clutched my stomach in agony. I didn't belong in this place anymore. Maybe running was my only solution and it was my fate to forever run.

'Taylor! Taylor are you in there?' Someone called on the other side of my door. I recognized it as Adrienne's voice but I didn't dare leave my huddled position in fear I might break to pieces.

'Taylor? What's wrong?' Adrienne called. She sounded really concerned for me, almost worried for my wellbeing. But I knew better, I would forever be alone. No one cared about me.

'Taylor open the door!' Adrienne yelled, her fist banging on the door.

'Just leave me alone!' I yelled back, making her banging stop, 'I don't need you or anybody!'

'Taylor!' Adrienne said shocked, her voice alight muffle.

'Just go away!' I screamed louder, rocking in the curled-up position I sat in. There was a long pause in front of the door.

'Fine, have it your way,' Adrienne said coldly and started walking down the hall, footsteps disappearing from earshot.

'Just everyone leaves- me- alone,' I murmured, salty tears falling into my mouth and soaking my knees.

'Just everyone- go- away!'

~*~

I needed to find Dan and fast. Taylor wasn't acting like this when she left and as her friend, I knew she needed my help. When I heard the loud crash come from her room I rushed over immediately. I could hear her crying inside and knew she needed help but she wouldn't open the door. It wasn't like Taylor to seem so depressed.

'Dan!' I called, banging on his room door hard. 'Dan! Open up!'

There was a long silence before finally Dan swung his door open and glared at me from his post at six feet tall. I took a deep breath and placed my hands on my hips.

'What's wrong with Taylor?' I asked bluntly. Dan blinked and didn't even twitch in the hard-core expression he was giving me.

'It's none of your concern Adrienne...'

I think I was close to exploding.

'None of my concern... She is my friend! Now tell me what you did to her so I can slap you in the face... Hard,' even I knew Dan wasn't fazed by that statement but he did look on the verge of exploding himself.

'What I did to her? Adrienne, she kissed me, me and Taylor kissed and then she went off making out with her ex-boyfriend!' He yelled; I hadn't seen Dan so steamed since...

'Dan... her ex-boyfriend?' I said in disbelief. Dan leaned away from my face and seemed to deflate a little.

'Yes...'

'Did she say sorry Dan? Did she say anything to you?' I asked, searching his face as his eyebrows furrowed and he straightened up back into his defiant stature.

'She...' I nodded, urging him on, 'She told me she loves me.'

I think you could have heard a pin drop in that doorway. I looked down at my feet that were crossed nervously on the blue carpet, and then back up at Dan's blind eyes, that seemed to see so much.

'And you rejected her' my statement hung in the air as I peered in at Dan. His face was like that of someone trying to figure out a hard puzzle.

'I did, but she deserved it,' he said finally, moving to close the door but I stopped him.

'She's not Natalie you know? Taylor's different,' I persisted, Dan's eyes showed surprise and then flickering back to a dark void.

'I thought the same thing, but you didn't witness what I did.' There was a pain in his words and I wanted to comfort him but didn't know-how. I tried one more tactic though, I needed him to at least talk to her.

'And you didn't hear what I heard' I said, getting a questioning look from him, 'Taylor isn't handling all of this so well. She's been through a lot, Dan. I... I heard her throwing things and sobbing in her room. Dan, she really does love you.'

He stood in the doorway, face unchanging.

'Fine, don't believe me but believe this. There is a girl sobbing and carrying on in her room, thinking that she will forever be alone in the world. I know one thing, and that's Merry Kate won't be too happy to have the blood of another on her hands if Taylor does something drastic.'

My eyes parted open gingerly as peeks of early morning light tried to filter through. For a second I forgot everything. My confession to Dan, his rejection, and the ghost-like Bobby.

Sadly though, the horrifying reality came back to haunt my soul and a shiver went down my spine as I sat up in bed. Crust caked the sides of my eyes as I swung my legs over the side of my bed to stand. I stopped suddenly at the shards of glass glimmering in the sunlight. I sighed and retracted my

legs to the comfort of my bed. I had forgotten all about my wild rage and the vase that went flying from my hand.

Grabbing the magazine on my side table I scooped up the shards nearby and took a hesitant step toward my slippers. I forced myself not to look to the other side of the room where the crude Bobby Shipparro once stood.

I finally retrieved protection for my feet and stifled the tears that were overwhelming my senses. I felt like I could break at any moment and that if I didn't splash some water on my face I might puke.

Rushing over to the bathroom sink I stared at the girl in the mirror. Her once jubilant green eye was dull and void of life. Cheeks once flushed with life were now pale with a touch of de ath. Her hair that was once her most beautiful asset was now limp and tangled.

Shaking my head furiously I dunked my hands in the running water and quickly splashed the refreshing liquid on my face. But not even the colonies fresh tap water could make me forget the events of yesterday.

Still shaken up I jumped when a loud knock came from my room door. Peaking around the bathroom door I watched the shadow block the stream of light beneath my door.

'I just might betray you so you might as well leave!!!' I yelled stubbornly, pulling my head back into the bathroom and drying my face on a towel. My snark comment didn't stop the knocker from knocking. 'I'm serious! I just might confess my love to you and you still won't forgive me.'

In a weird and twisted way, I needed to joke my way out of the hurt.

I didn't want the person on the other side of the door to know that I was about close to tears and likely go through the brush in my hand on their face when they opened the door.

The knocker persisted yet still and I finally found myself walking towards the door. Why couldn't people get the hint that I just wasn't up for socializing today?

'Do I need to spell it out for you? I don't-,' I stopped suddenly as my palm lingered on the doorknob. The door stood wide open but I didn't utter a single word to the figure in front of me.

'Taylor, I think we should talk' said the painful smocked over grey eyes that continued to stare at my strained expression.

'Sure,' I choked, 'Dan.'

'Can I come in?' Dan asked after a long and tedious silence. I was compelled to slam the door in his rather- handsome face but thought the better of it as I opened the door wider. He nodded and took the last two steps inside.

I walked gingerly over to the side of my bed and took a hesitant seat. Dan was here, in my room and the atmosphere was definitely different from the other times he visited. I fiddled with my fingers as he stared in the direction of the leftover shards of glass on the floor.

'I was able to snag a sample of the death shots' he said absentmindedly, leisurely walking around the room and picking up stuff from my dresser only to put it down again.

'Really?' I asked, wondering at his casual conversation starter.

'Yes really, the colonies lab is examining it right now; there could be a breakthrough'. I watched as Dan picked up a picture of me and my sisters. What did he wish to see when he touched a picture frame? I had the look of death on my face while they smiled cheerily, and I was only three.

'That's... good,' I felt like there was a thick brick wall of tension between me and Dan as he explored the room. I visibly cringed as he stopped in the same spot the translucent Bobby Shipparro stood in, his haunting voice still racking my brain. Dan looked over at my now ashen white face and frowned.

'What's wrong?' His face was calculating, 'You're turning pale.'

I shook my head vigorously, my reddish-brown hair slapping my face. 'Nothing, it's nothing, Dan. Just tell me, what exactly did you come for?'

There, I said it, the one question that had been nagging at the back of my brain since he stepped into the room. Dan finally moved away from the foreboding spot in the room and stood in front of me.

'Adrienne came and talked to me yesterday,' he said slowly as if waiting for my reaction. I was a little surprised but, yet, still, a part of me knew Adrienne would do something like that.

'What did she say?' I stuttered. Dan looked over the top of my head and seemed to be choosing his words carefully.

'She said you weren't well... she said you needed me,' if he could see my face, he would have probably seen my bottom lip trembling and the way I shook my head vigorously. I didn't need anyone anymore.

'Well,' I started, standing up to face a towering Dan, 'She's wrong. I don't need anyone, not anymore.' Dan's eyebrows wrinkled in concern and he missed over eyes flashed that of worry. Was it possible that he could forgive? My mind didn't linger on that hope.

'Taylor doesn't say that. Everyone needs at least someone in their life. No one can ever face life like that of us gifted alone,' he said. As he talked, I just shook my head even more. I wouldn't fill my head with dreams of something better anymore. Something better was n't down my alley.

'Don't try to feel sorry for me Dan. I get it ok. I was stupid to think you loved me back'. Dan moved to say something but I quickly cut him off. 'As I said, it's ok, I except what I was meant for. It's my fate to run. Which is why I'm going to leave and forget all about you, the colony and...'

Dan grabbed me by the sides of my arm fiercely and zoned in on my face. 'You are not going anywhere you hear me!'

I continued to talk as if I hadn't heard him. '...Just forget the memories - I've made here because memories only make it hurt more.' I don't know where the tear came from, but I couldn't wipe it away because of Dan's hard grip on my arm.

'Taylor, I don't want you to leave,' he said softly. I had never seen Dan so vulnerable in all of the time I've known him. 'I want you to stay here, with me.'

I looked down at my feet. 'You made it clear yesterday that you don't want me here.'

Dan's eyes seemed to glaze over as he softened his grip on my arm.

'I think I should tell you about Natalie'.

~*~

'Natalie?' I said, looking up into his clear water eyes. Dan nodded slowly and nudged me to sit down. I did and watched as he took a seat next to me. He had this faraway look in his eyes as if saying this girl's name transported him to another world. 'Who is Natalie Dan?'

'She was everything' he started, startling me a little. A sad smile formed on his lips. 'She was everything you could want in a girl. Hair and eyes fit for a goddess. Attitude fit for a queen. Not to mention the fact that she was the strongest mind reader the colony had'. Dan chuckled as if remembering some inside joke.

'She was everything, and then... I lost her...' I think my stomach twanged and a pang coursed through me. Natalie died?

'She died?' I asked out loud. Dan looked at me in surprise.

'No, no, no, that's not how I lost her,' he said quickly. I sighed and he continued to look at the wall in front of us. 'I lost her to someone else.'

A guilty realization slapped me in the face. Natalie had hurt Dan the same way I did, breaking his heart forever. It's why he was so upset with me. It's why he wasn't so ready to forgive, and even though I was jealous of how much he seemed to love this Natalie girl, I wished things would have worked out better for the heartbroken Dan in front of me. Dan cleared his throat and opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

'Dan, you really cared about her, didn't you?' I asked, my voice sounding like a sock was stuck in my throat. He only nodded and it felt kind of awkward sitting there with him in the still silence. I started to think about the boy sitting next to me who always had a shell built up around him, and how now this very same shell was crumbling right before my eyes. I couldn't help but almost feel how helpless Dan felt when he knew he couldn't stop Natalie from leaving him. I could almost imagine him blaming himself for the heartache he had to go through.

I could only help but think that I had done the same thing Natalie did.

'Dan I'm so sorry' I knew the words were empty, void of meaning but I still said them... 'I wish I could take everything back.'

Dan buried his face in his palms as if secretly wiping the tears away that were about to fall. 'I'm no better. I shouldn't have... I shouldn't have yelled at you back in the city. I really hurt you, Taylor. I'm sorry.'

A guilty wave spread- through my bones. Why was Dan saying sorry? Why was he being so selfless for an undeserving me?

'Why would you throw the vase?' he asked suddenly, breaking me from my guilty torment. I looked over to see Dan staring at me now and then I looked at the remaining pieces of glass on the floor. My eyes focused over to the spot Bobby Shapparro's deceased form stood and I shivered.

'I saw... I heard something I didn't like. I was just upset. People tend to do the unthinkable in rage'. Dan could probably sense the tears coming to my eyes because he put his arm around my waist, surprising me.

'What did you hear? What did you see?'. They were simple questions but I wasn't too ready to answer them. Not without reliving the moment.

'I- I don't think I can tell you-'

Dan sighed making strands of my hair quiver. 'It's ok. I understand.'

He pulled me closer to his side and a longing overcame my senses. Was Dan just being nice? Did he still have feelings for me? I tilted my head so that I was looking up into his grey eyes and face hiding grief. I wanted him so bad right then. I wanted to him to lean down and meet my face in the most wonderful kiss imaginable. I wanted Dan to want me and I had never felt so desperate and needy like this before.

Dan seemed to sense all of the emotions I had so carelessly broadcasted and moved his eyes in my direction. They were the eyes of a teenage boy hesitant at any chance of love. Someone who had his heart broken more than once to know he wouldn't leave himself vulnerable again.

A gasp escaped my throat as Dan lifted his hand to my chin, anchoring it as he traced a thumb across my bottom lip. How was it possible that this boy could make me feel so special by the little things he did? My heart ached at the thought of not kissing him.

'Please, Dan. Don't do this to me. I love you too much to just sit here and not want to kiss you' I found myself saying, leaving my emotions bare and raw for Dan to easily sense.

He smiled only a little and his eyebrows arched in the way of someone going through a painful and hard process.

'I want to know for sure Taylor. I want to know for sure that you aren't going to hurt me again' he said finally, the words leaving his lips and brushing my face. I shivered as he caressed the side of my face.

'I love you, Dan. I couldn't imagine ever again doing something to hurt you' I placed a shaking hand on his chest. 'I promise in my life.'

I was surprised as Dan suddenly swooped me up into his arms and placed me on his lap His strong arms braced my hip as he looked up at me now, my green eyes showing surprise.

'I was hoping you'd say that,' he breathed.

I wished I had a magic bottle to capture the kiss that came next.

'Glad you two could finally join us,' Merry-Kate smiled, her glossy red hair in a lazy side ponytail.

Portion

I and Dan quickly found a seat at the table. I spotted Adrienne across the way and she smiled, seeing that I and Dan finally worked things out. We were in a large room with light blue walls and a dark plush blue carpet. The giant polished wood round table we sat at could hold a good twenty people.

It was the meeting room and Merry-Kate had called us in here for business.

It was me, Dan, Adrianne, Sean, Taylor, Merry-Kate and fourteen other ground dwellers I didn't recognize. I have to say it was weird sitting in the same room as Taylor with Dan right beside me but it didn't bother me too much.

'We're all here today to talk about the anti-mutation shots, aka the death shots,' Merry announced, getting right to the point. Everyone held their breath for what she would say next. 'As you all may already know, our lab experts are dissecting the sample Dan and Taylor were able to snag.'

Every person at the table turned to look at us and I inadvertently turned invisible.

'There is a very slim chance but I have been informed that there could be an antidote,' she finished. A loud sigh was released from every person sitting there and Dan loosened his grip on my hand.

Merry pressed a hidden button under the table and we all watched as a part of the top of the table slid away to reveal a hologram projector. A fuzzy image of a DNA strand appeared in the air and Merry-Kate started to talk again.

'This is an image of how those of us with abilities' DNA strands look,' she pointed to the purplish segments covering parts of the DNA, 'what the anti-mutation shots do is dissolve these purple segments, thus making us 'normal' again.'

Everyone stared at the blinking image until suddenly it vanished as Merry-Kate clicked the button again. 'So, then what do we do until we wait for the antidote?' Dan asked, breaking the silence that had enveloped us.

'We retaliate,' the redheaded nineteen-year-old started, 'we convince others like us to rebel against these... death shots and help those who have had the shots forced on them.'

'Forced...?' I asked, my voice hard. Could the government do that?

'Yes forced,' Merry sighed. Suddenly she lifted her watch to her mouth and called into it, 'bring him in.'

The shiny wooden door swung open immediately, and everyone stared at a young boy who was brought into the room. He looked no older than nine and hid behind Merry-Kate as soon as he was brought in.

'This is Timothy guys, he's only ten years old and used to have abilities just like us... until...' everyone held their breath as Merry-Kate tried to find the right words, 'he was taken away from his parents and the shot was forced on him.'

We all gasped and a colonist who looked around the same age as Merry-Kate stood up. 'And what exactly do you plan on doing with the boy?' the girl asked Merry, her dark black hair curtaining her face. 'Keep him safe, watch over him and, when the time comes, give him the antidote to the shots.'

The table broke out in conversation and I watched as the boy hid further behind Merry-Kate. He was definitely scared but he had this look on his face as if he didn't want anyone to know just how scared he was. His dark brown hair fell into his dark brown eyes that seemed to be void of life. The shots had definitely messed him up.

'What was his ability?' I asked Merry-Kate, the room going silent with my question.

'One look from his eyes, and he could make you do whatever he wanted.'

My eyes wavered back to the boy and I saw his eyes dart to my face and quickly move away. I felt a tingle as if his powers were supposed to do something to me, but then it vanished. The shots had taken away every last drop.

'If the antidote doesn't work?' Sean's loud voice boomed, 'what if it has side effects, the kid's not a guinea pig.'

More conversation erupted at that possibility and I could see Merry-Kate losing her tolerance. 'Quiet!' she yelled, and everyone's mouths clamped shut. It wasn't on their own though, Merry-Kate had done it, and I marveled at her ability.

'Now,' she said more sweetly, 'who would like to take care of the boy until I can work this whole shot thing out?'

She dug into her pocket and pulled out two sticks of gum, handing one to the boy and popping the other in her mouth.

No one raised their hands and everyone stayed glued to their seats.

It was sad actually. How could people be so selfish?

'Well, I guess the little booger is going to have to-'

'I'll take him,' I said abruptly, raising a determined hand high in the air.

'Are you sure you'll be able to handle this Taylor?'

Dan and I stood quietly outside my room door as timid timothy got settled inside. Looking up into Dan's mystical orbs, I tried to find the right words for his question. Who knows? Maybe I'm not cut out for the whole 'taking on a kid,' thing.

Dan was still giving me a questioning look as I peeked in on Timothy who was eyeing my pictures and trying to find a good place to put his bags.

'I'll be fine,' I assured him, a warm smile slipping unto my face, 'How hard can taking care of a ten-year-old kid be? I was ten once.'

An unconvinced Dan still looked at me with an uneasy expression. He sighed though and planted a swift kiss on my forehead. 'Hope you're right. The kid's been through a lot so it might not be as easy as you think.' I let my petite fingers travel up his chest until a single finger lingered on his chin. 'No faith in me huh?'

He chuckled and surprised me as his broad hands caught my waist and pulled me into him. 'I never said I didn't have faith in you. I'm just stating the possibility that you might not be able to handle this.'

His hair was looking so messy and cute at the moment, his eyes a deep-sea of mystery, that I didn't even focus on the words leaving his mouth. I had Dan. I finally had Dan.

-And-

I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

'Taylor, are you listening to me?'

If it weren't for the fact that Dan had raised a single eyebrow, breaking the fixated trance I had on his face, he would have never gotten an answer from me. 'Oh... um sorry, I was just...' A blush leaked unto my face and Dan smiled broadly.

'Get back to the kid. He needs you.'

I nodded and moved away from him only to be pulled back. 'A kiss for the night?' he asked slyly.

'You read my mind,' I retorted, tilting my face upward.

'What are you doing?'

If it were possible, I probably jumped ten feet backward. Dan was barely able to catch me and steady my swaying body as a curious Timothy stared up at us. I blushed deeply and flickered in and

out of visibility. Dan sighed and I had to take several deep breaths so that I could face the confused ten-year-old.

'It was nothing Tim, do you mind if I call you Tim?' He nodded his head yes, 'It was nothing, I'll be in shortly. Go unpack, you can have the bottom drawers.'

The kid couldn't catch a hint though because he crossed his arm defiantly. 'That didn't look like 'Nothing.' It looked like he was going to kiss you... on the lips.'

If there was ever a moment to turn redder, it was then. I frowned over at Dan who actually seemed kind of amused at all of this. Whatever emotions he was sensing, they had him on the verge of cracking up.

'I'll catch you later Taylor,' he chuckled, giving me a quick peck on the cheek, 'Have fun!'

It didn't take a genius to know that the last part was pure sarcasm.

~*~

'So, welcome to my humble abode!' I announced, spreading my arms wide as Timothy looked hesitantly around the room. His thick brown hair shielded any emotions his eyes were showing as he slowly took unsure steps around the space. While he got familiarized with everything, I piled a bunch of sheets, that Merry Kate had given me, on the floor and tried to make it as comfortable as possible.

'Here's your bed Tim, hope it's comfy enough,' I sighed, rising to a stand and looking over at an exploring Timothy. He happened to be standing in the same spot the eerie Bobby Shipparro had stood and it made me shiver. 'Come on Timothy, check it out and tell me what you think.'

He made his way over to the bed, kicking off his shoes, and slipping underneath the wool blanket. He smiled a small smile, 'It's better than where they had met before.'

This made me frown but I quickly smothered it with a smile of my own and went over to my drawer for pajamas. 'Where are you going?' Timothy asked urgently, sitting up in his makeshift bed. His hair had fallen to the side giving me a good look at his scared brown eyes. Again, I felt a tingle but nothing happened.

'It's ok Tim, I'm not going to leave you, I'm just going to the bathroom to change.'

He didn't look convinced but nodded his head slowly and finally laid back down. He had serious abandonment issues, I noticed.

This kid would need a lot of love.

'Um... Taylor? Taylor are you awake?'

Small hands were shaking me awake as I turned over in my sleep, wiping the crud out of my eye. 'I am now,' I muttered, trying to peer through the darkness. For a second my eyes went wide when I saw a boy at the edge of my bed. The first thing that came to my mind was Bobby Shipparro. Then, I remembered that I had taken in a ten-year-old named Timothy.

'Tim is everything okay?' I whispered.

He seemed hesitant. 'I just- I kind of can't sleep and I was wondering if I could probably sleep at the end of your bed or maybe-'

'Come on in Tim-my-boy,' I mumbled, lifting the covers and scooting over a little. Tim seemed about ready to protest, but soon he was crawling under the covers. I lowered the comforter and tucked him in nice and tight. I could feel him smiling in the darkness.

'Sorry I woke you up,' he whispered, guilt lacing his words.

'It's ok, you were scared and that's understandable,' I whispered back, ruffling his hair.

'I wasn't scared I just said I couldn't sleep,' he seemed to have to clarify.

'Sure,' I murmured, my eyes drifting to a close. Whatever he said afterward was lost to my ears. Sleep took hold once again.

~*~

'Tim?' I shot up in my bed and looked around the now sunlit room.

Something in my head woke me up saying 'you've got a kid to look after! Can't sleep in late!' Rubbing my eyes, I looked over to the empty spot next to me in bed and opened them wider. There was supposed to be a ten-year-old boy in that exact spot.

I began to panic.

'Tim?' I called again, stumbling out of the bed and heading for the bathroom door. 'Timothy?' I thought that maybe he went to use the bathroom, knowing kids and their weak bladders. Yet when I knocked on the door and went as far as peeking inside there was no one in the there - at all.

Pushing the bathroom door all the way open, I hobbled inside because of my sleeping foot and began brushing my teeth. I needed to find the kid before Merry Kate found him hanging out with some hungover telematic blond.

I quickly swept my hair up into a ponytail, pulled on a cotton grey shirt and some faded blue skinnies. Dashing out of my door, I ran down the stairs at the end of the hall and looked around at the trashed lobby area. There were plastic cups everywhere. I even saw a few people crashed out on some of the couches.

This place didn't go one night without a party.

Suddenly, I heard chuckling and giggling coming from the kitchen and jogged towards it, pushing open the swinging whitewashed door. 'Tim!' I called, face flushed. The door swung shut behind me as I looked across the granite island to see Dan wearing a floury apron and Tim mixing a batter of something gooey.

'Hi Taylor, we're making pancakes,' Timothy said calmly, flour all in his thick brown hair. 'Dan says he can't really make pancakes all that good because he can't see well so he asked me to help him.'

I blinked twice, three times, before walking slowly over to them.

'But you should have told me where you were going.'

Dan's murky blue eyes moved towards the sound of my voice, his mouth smiling. 'Sorry we didn't wake you up Taylor, you just looked really tired and Tim had been - up for a while. He said he was bored and hungry - so-o, I asked him if he wanted to help me make pancakes.'

I suddenly felt guilty. The poor kid was up for forever and I just slept away. My cheeks flushed red. Dan made his way to Tim and planted a soft kiss on my cheek. 'It's okay,' he whispered in my ear, 'you don't have to feel guilty, it's your first day on the job.'

'Hey Dan, can I pour it into the pan now?' Tim spoke up, his hair moving aside enough for me to see his eyes brighter than ever. To see him happy.

'Sure,' answered Dan, 'Just be a careful buddy.'

I watched them as they talked with each other and couldn't help smiling. The way they were talking was like they've known each other for a long time. I knew that Dan, no matter how blind he was, could make his own pancakes. But the fact that he made Tim feel needed was just plain cute to me. As Tim concentrated on pouring the batter into the pan, I planted a quick kiss on Dan's soft lips. 'You're the best,' I whispered.

~*~

'Finally, you brought the little booger in,' Merry-Kate murmured to the clear vile she was holding up to the light as me, Dan and Tim walked in. She looked like a mad scientist with a long white coat, blood-red hair in pigtails, and that crazy smirk on her face.

We had walked into a stark white lab I didn't even know The Colony had. Tim went to touch a bubbling vile but I gently smacked his hand away. 'We got your message from Adrienne,' spoke up Dan, his body rigid with all the chemicals flowing through the air. All of the different smells were probably making his senses whirl.

'Yes, and you couldn't have been any slower, could you?' The feisty red-head snarled, only a slight playfulness in her voice. She was definitely serious about that vile in her hand.

Merry-Kate turned to them and snapped a big pair of goggles off of her head. Placing the vile down gently, she began delicately taking off thick blue latex gloves. 'Is that the cure for the shots?' I spoke up, unable to contain my curiosity.

Merry shrugged and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead.

'Who knows? I've been in here with my little lab geeks all night and this little vile of blue stuff is all we've got so far.' It wasn't until then that I noticed her red-rimmed eyes.

'You've been here all night?' Tim's small voice spoke up, the question dying down to a whisper as Merry-Kate's blue eyes fell on him.

'Yes,' she answered simply, 'Told the lab rats to leave around midnight, but I just couldn't go yet. Every serum we came up with led to another breakthrough. Then I was finally met with this and I think it might be a dead end. I can't find the missing link.'

'Have you tried it yet?' I asked earnestly, my hands resting on Tim's shoulders. That's when I saw Merry-Kate's eyes land on his floppy brown head and knew what she was thinking. 'I see. So that's why you called us down here.' It wasn't a question, more of a statement, and Merry let her glossed mouth coil into a smirk.

'There's no other way. Unless you know how to give guinea pigs powers so that I can give them the shot and then this serum then we're out of luck.'

I looked over to a weary Dan. Timothy grew stiff under my touch, sensing what was going on. The only thing that was running through my head was the many side effects that were possible when it came to an unmarked vile. I only had the kid for one day and already I was putting him in possible danger.

Suddenly, I felt warm broad hands taking my small ones off of Tim's shoulders. I looked behind me up into Lane's blank stare as he said,

'We've got to do what's best for The Colony.'

MISSED ME...?

Continued:

This was normal...

Merry Kate told us that the serum would induce Timothy into a sleepy state. So then why was I worrying so much?

'You should head back to your room Taylor,' Dan leaned down to whisper in my ear. It was getting late and I hadn't left Tim's side since he fell asleep. 'Merry said that he has to sleep in the lab so that she can keep track of his vitals. She'll look out for him. You need sleep.'

I sighed, squeezing Timothy's small hand before letting go. What if he woke up, expecting me to be by his side, and found no one?

'Fine,' I muttered, pushing out of the seat and facing a standing Dan. His own pale eyes were beginning to grow bags under them as well. He refused to leave my side just as much as I refused to leave Tim's.

We began the short distance back to my room and I was again reminded of how annoying Dan's abilities could be. 'Don't worry Taylor,' he said, grabbing my hand. 'Tim's a tough kid. His vitals were stable so there's nothing to be scared about.'

I rolled my eyes, trying and failing to pull my hand free. 'Who said I was scared?'

Dan chuckled and somehow managed to pull me closer. He kept his arms around me the whole way to my room. 'Are you mad- at me?' He asked suddenly, as we stopped by my door.

I looked up at him, in all of his glory, a little surprised at the abruptness of his question. Though he annoyed me sometimes with his keen sense of emotions, I wasn't feeling any amount of anger towards Dan. In fact, I was finally starting to see him as... my boyfriend.

'Why do you ask?'

At that, Dan's wondering gaze locked onto my face with scary accuracy. 'Because of what I said yesterday,' he replied earnestly. 'I basically told you that the Colony was more important than Timothy and I didn't have the right to-'

Dan's next words were never heard as I stood on my tip-toes to reach his lips. They were hesitant and startled, but a few seconds later they were pressing back. 'I'm not mad at you,' I whispered, leaning away from his mouth. 'Worried, but definitely not angry.'

Dan's hands caressed my face as he pushed away hair that was hindering him from feeling every inch. 'Don't be,' he smiled, and kissed my forehead.

Sighing, I grabbed his hands and lowered them from my face. 'I better get to bed now. I want to be able to wake up bright and early just in case Tim wakes up to no one.'

Dan nodded- 'Right.' His eyes wandered once again.

'Goodnight,' I whispered, letting go of his hand. 'Remember I'm not mad.'

Dan chuckled. 'I know,' he whispered back, watching as I opened my door. 'If you need me you know where to find me.'

I smiled. 'Always.'

~*~

'What do you mean he still hasn't woken up yet?!'

Merry Kate gave me a stern look and placed a ruby nail on her lip. 'Quiet!' she whispered harshly. 'If you startle him out of his sleep his heart rate might spike!'

I huffed, crossing my arms stubbornly. Dan, Merry Kate and I were all standing outside of the lab. There was a sleeping Timothy inside with Blue liquid racing through his veins, and he still wasn't up.

Dan took my hand. 'Everything's going to be ok, Taylor.'

'Listen to your boyfriend,' Merry Kate snapped, causing me to turn red and flicker in and out of visibility. 'Tim's body needs rest. His whole DNA structure is being repaired and that takes time. His immune system will be down for a while.'

'Fine,' I conceded.

Merry Kate visibly deflated and turned to the white double doors. 'Good, now scram. I've got a lot of work to do and I can't have you smothering me with your motherly instincts.' She removed a cherry lollipop from her coat and placed it in her mouth before disappearing.

I playfully stuck out my tongue in her direction and pulled on Dan's arm. 'Come on,' I announced. 'Let's find something to do.'

Dan followed along and placed a hand on his chin. 'A date?'

My feet froze. 'What was that?'

'A date,' he repeated, smiling slightly. 'We haven't really gone anywhere or done anything together since... we made up. Don't you think a date would be nice?'

I shrugged even though he couldn't see it. 'I don't know... I guess so. It's just that...'

'Are you afraid of going outside?' Dan asked, detecting my hesitance.

'No,' I answered truthfully. My reddish-brown hair suddenly seemed so interesting.

'Then what is it?' He asked, 'There's no harm in-'

'What are we?' I suddenly asked. My green eyes quickly flicked to Dan to observe the shocked expression on his face. 'I mean it seems pretty obvious, but I don't want to delude myself. I want to hear you say it.'

Dan's arm reached out and pulled me into him. I found my hands instinctively clutching at his shirt. 'Taylor if having a title means that much to you then yes, we're boyfriend and girlfriend, but does that really matter? I love you and I know you love me.'

I looked up at him, feeling slightly guilty for forcing him to explain... us.

'Don't feel guilty,' Dan said, reading my feelings.

I smiled and pushed away from him. 'Well, it's hard when you're always right.' 'It's a date then?' His hand reached for mine once again and we found ourselves walking towards the elevators that led to outside. Merry Kate and Dan were right. For now, Timothy was fine. If I kept worrying instead of having hope, I'd end up being the one in critical condition.

'Let's have fun for once... boyfriend.'

...And then the dream snapped to nothing but black like film ripping away from her and her mind, both linked together in this dreamlike state, of showing past present and further.

Taylor- 'whoa- I feel like I just went through my most if not my whole life... in one dream... with you for this... 'She said this to Naddalin who was taking it all down in her notebook.

Nevaeh

Book: 42

The way I was Remembered

Interval: 6

Continued:

'Small towns are funny places; everybody thinks they know everybody.'

They bought, they sold, live in fear of getting old getting cold. Life to death, it is all a myth just a wish, only to walk in the dark, to make their mark, in the life they embark.

Yet, they know what is so, nowhere to run nowhere to go, they come and go, with nothing to show. With some that are high and some low. However, they always know narrow minds never change, only to rearrange, in the exchange.

Memories never fade, and the ones that make their lies get paid. It is all slipping away from day today. There is always someone with something to say. Whatever come whatever may, it is just another day... in a small town, with dreams going in the ground, with only names on rocks to be found.

Were one person runs it all and is crowned, we dance like fools we are her clowns. That's just life bowing down to a small town, it is just the words going around. With so much doom and gloom, I suppressed that crowned witch, not on her broom.

Following behind like the moon, or busy making drama in a room.

Sounds just like me- how about you?

~Naddalin~

(Back to now, and at the weeks end before the week of the dream study.)

I was daydreaming to think there is nothing cuter than seeing your girlfriend, riding a dildo in front of you just so you can see her give her self-pleasure SEEING LOVING HER DOING JUST THAT ALSO PLEASING. I love Emmah!

'The dream assignment was over- for the most part.'

Jinger moaned and for some moments then glanced up at her- ceiling.

'And it looks like it's going to rain.'

'What's that got to do with our homework?' Said Emmah, her eyebrows raised.

'Nothing,' said Jinger at once, she ears reddening.

At five to five Naddalin bided the- other two goodbyes and set off for Scott's office on her- the third floor. When she- knocked on the- door she would- called,' Come in,' in a sugary voice. She- entered cautiously, looking around. She- had known the office under three of its previous occupants.

In the- days when Mr. Hilliard had lived there, it had been plastered in smiling portraits of herself. When Lupin had occupied it, it was likely you would meet some fascinating Dark creature in a cage or reservoir if you came to call. In the- impostor Moody's days it had been packed with various instruments and artifacts for the- detection of doing, entertainment and disguise.

Now, however, it looked totally unrecognizable to me and them. the- surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths.

There were several vases full of dried, dead flowers, each one residing on its own doily, and on one of the- walls was a collection of ornamental plates and dishes, each decorated with a large colorized kitten all different colors with ribbons around their neck.

These were so foul that, Naddalin stared at them, gored until Professor Scott spoke again.

'Good evening,' Mr. Naddalin started looking around... at the wonder around her, she- had not noticed her at first sight, because she- was wearing an explicitly flowered set of robes that blended only too well with the- tablecloth on the- desk behind her.

'Evening, Professor Scott,' Naddalin said stiffly.

'Well, sit down,' she'd- said, pointing towards a small table draped in lace beside which she'd- had drawn up a straight-backed chair. A piece of blank parchment lay on the- table, apparently waiting for her to pen.

'Er,' said Naddalin, without moving.' Professor Scott. Er- before we start, I- I wanted to ask you a... a favor.'

Her bulging eyes narrowed her nose.

A feeling of great gloom in the castle, Naddalin pulled she- door open.

On the- threshold stood Aunt Marge. She'd- was very like Uncle Read: large, beefy, and all shit-faced, she'd- even had a fuzziness in places you don't want fuzz-ie-ness-NESS-ness, though not as bushy as she.

In one hand, she'd- held an enormous suitcase, and tucked under the- other was old and evil-tempered, that held a beast, that was turned into just that over the fact that he was mean, nasty, and greatly to all young girls in the land- think they were not good enough for him, this was done- by one of the fallen angels- whom study dark witchcraft, 20 years ago- back or so, for not wanting her hand, like the others that were sweet and innocent young ladies, or for not going to the ball with her, was the real reason, all us girls still tease him and one another about.

Dariez came waddling down the- hall, with her blond hair plastered flat to her forehead, a bow above just visible she forgot to take out before showering- she was baring as the day she was born, show all that makes her a girl. We all slapped our hand to our forehead hard, saying she's a girl- is she not, all- it was anonymous- even if pre-pubescent.

Aunt Marge thrust the- suitcase into Naddalin's old room dragging this girl body with her, knowing she- wind up just running out, all the same, Dariez in a tight one-armed hug, rain from me, and planted a large kiss on my cheek, 5 minutes or so after being in my old room.

Naddalin knew perfectly well, that Dariez only put up with these hugs because, she knew what it was like reading about sisters, that did not get along, in her studies, and with Karly, and her past, and sure enough, when they broke apart, Dariez had note clutched fist, saying add this to your story. It said- 'I want to be one of you...'

...And Jennath!

Aunt Marge, then shouted, saying get off her and get dressed, striding past Naddalin as though she- was the coolest girl she every new, like a hero.

Aunt Marge and Aunt Jennath kissed us, in our rush, for bed, as we all dispersed the room, Dariez bumped her small jaw against, my chin, saying see yah.

Uncle Read now came in, smiling enthusiastically as he- shut the- door, saying, night kids.

(They did have their good moments I'm thought.)

...And Tea for me, Marge, they said in the nook together, in soft light, stars out the windows. And she- said, how she loved him and all those things that sound romantic.

~*~

And the kitten can have some milk out of my saucer, here...

Then said Aunt Marge as they all proceeded into her- for a midnight snack around 3:00 a.m into the kitchen, leaving Naddalin alone in the- hall with the- suitcase, she wants to be there, for the night- remembering all that is the past.

Nevertheless, Naddalin wasn't complaining; any excuse not to be with Aunt Marge was fine by her- when she knew that she was all cuddle with him, 'yuck-ie'- she thought, so she- began to head back into the- case doorway under the stairs her spare bedroom, taken as long as she- could, peeping at them all yet trying her not too.

In her room under the stars... I think about Emmah... I start thinking about all the PDA she and I have had, I LOVE HER- we love feeling our-selves pleased by and one another pleasure well-making lust-love. (I love licking pussy.) I am rolling around, in bed nude, feeling the sheets, holding myself as if it was to her, mumbling- in the thought of my knotty... mind.

She slips her hands under her blue rob, under her see throw panties with the bow in the front, and her body spasms and slackens and she cups her small, breasts with her nipples start to point upward, in her hands and feels the hard pearls of her nipples, like tiny mysteries- long to be played with by in her mind

Emmah hand and tongue, against the barked palms of his hands.

She puts her hands under her knees and maneuvers carefully, so that her bottom rests on the edge of the bed. She slips her fingers underneath the worn elastic of her panties that are strung across the points of her hips and lower lips, she feels the slow winding down of her dying heart and can see a bluish tinge thriving on her skin of her through her thin robe, and smoothed hair, as she goes in. then, slips them to her ankles and softly draws apart her knees and feels again a watery ardor... in her eyes, she starts tearing up... It is exactly as he imagined it - the hair feeling, the lips feeling, the whole feeling - and she slips her hands under her butt after, saying- I MISS HER, now I feel gross and need a shower I's all sweaty- o-wh-a, as she looks at her hand cover in cummie.

'I wanted to kiss her in my mind forever- though in my moment. I blocked out all thought that was not about her, what it might mean, what further mess I might create for myself... knew, And I kissed a pillow like it was her until reason seeped out through my pores, and I became a living throb with-in throbs, mindful only of what I wanted to do to her and myself if it would be her doing it... And suddenly we were crashing around the little railway carriage in my mind... and this is where my fantasy took place, all hands and lips and, oh, God, the scent and taste and feel of her. It was like tiny fireworks going off all over me, as I gushed, bits of me... looking for her to find the same way. -I- I's enjoy her so much with we are together in lusting love and just finding a new thing to discover with each other- mind-body- and fallen soul too.'

By the- time I's- got back to the- kitchen, Aunt Marge had been slurping up all tea should takedown, and very sleepy she could not even speak clearly, with the cat napping noisily in her- corner. Naddalin saw Aunt Jennath wince slightly as specks of tea and dribbled clean floor, from her mouth. Aunt Jennath hated animals, like our kitten Buttons, who is the cutest lovable thing ever.

Uncle Read asked, why I was tip-toeing through the kitchen- afterward, in a see-through robe- that was so sharp I don't even know why- I's bother putting it back on- well that what he said- anyways- why even bother when you can see it all. 'Oh, Jeez-us...' I said holding myself- like a girl... in a moment of shyness. I was not expecting anyone to be here at this hour.

-And-

Buttons began to snore again as Naddalin sat down, looking through her notes that she was editing for the upcoming classes- in her blue night rob. She directed Aunt Marge's attention to Naddalin for the- first time, as she was wheezing as well, and then jolted to alertness, the lantern over there head was dancing with its flickering flame, it was an old railroad 1909 Pa. lantern that Uncle read live light to set a feel and ambiance, this one works- the one that is in my room is on that I fund next to the tracks years ago, walking the abandoned line back into the woods going north, it's all bent and missing some glass, yet, I love it for I knew, that it was here's- the girl from the story, and something that has been passed down through the years. 'Sometimes, I don't like coming back here and then, sometimes I do to remember...'

He looked at me dragging on his pipe looking far too familiar to me in my mind, yet I could not remember why- then he said: 'I remember summer mounts were always- like this... nothing ever really changes.' I started feeling sad, and was tearing up... I was seeing a vision of the past of what

looked like grandfather, who was a railroad worker, in cast of gold replacing him, with a halo light around him in glowing lights, saying- 'don't forget about me- too,' he was in his 1920's hat that was always tilted to the one side, and that white smile, so vivid it was eerie.

-And-

So... I thought- what does it mean?

And she'd- meowed... and it snapped me out of the trance, that I was in, and still in there, are parts of you, even now, as I held a note, of his and now her too, part of life never changes there just passed on and down to new- ones just like you. So, the moral of this always that we're not that far apart in how we look act and do things, even if... 100- years of Rhetoric was spacing us apart more than me, we still all together, linked by handwritten text.

All just notes, yet have so much meaning, just a memory, of life to some would not matter to me it's everything.

-And-

(Fare of in another small village is Emmah- feeling the same ways.)

Emmah- ''I am a hopeless romantic,' and then I thought about that, and she said to me- 'you're not hopeless anymore, you have me, to show your sweet romantic too without the hopelessness.'

This is why... I love- Naddalin so-oo much.'

(Back)

Yes, said Naddalin of course, they have to care about me all along, even if gone.

And do not you say- 'yes' in that ungrateful tone?

I can do this... I will add to the story; I will do that... I'm well- DO- THAT!

(For a girl that knows nothing about nothing- I's sure did something!)

~*~

And It is damn good to Reading and Jennath to keep you, I thought too and them knowing all that I just did, yet I am a girl, I feel so guilty in all that I do- even feeling like a woman- not a little girl as they think, even Dariez needs to feel like a woman every now and then- more like every other day, and us seeing yet you get my drift.

Why?

Why... did I always feel guilty for feeling good?

Wouldn't have it myself any other way then this- is what makes me creative.

He said to me- 'You'd have gone straight to an orphanage if you'd been dumped on my doorstep, you- little cute fuzzball of girlie-ness, how could- I- say- no, and he was squeezing my left cheek?'

(Like- I said, there were some good moments.)

-And-

Naddalin was overflowing full, on cookies and milk, to say that she'd rather live here than back the orphanage that Kristen was once in, with the- SIeyashs she was safe and warm, but she- thought of she- Claepsiara, Skoufyceol of Wizardry form years not- stopped so they- said 'okay-' and that was your girlfriend is so-o for you to be happy then okay, sorry for what you go thought- he said. She- forced a face into a painful smile, saying thanks, I think he meant it. It was a nice long talk- in the we-eee hours in the morning.

I thought about and assumed- 'I would be happy to play with her all my life, in a way why are best of playmates, aren't we?'

I was smirk at me, in the mirror as I do to her face to face, I was standing bare! And then Aunt Marge, looked in at me and shut the door fast see my butt cheeks, and the look on my face reflecting back, in the mirror she could see Emmah the same way looking at her love stuck.

~*~

And, just like that a week went by and I was snapped back to the old train station where I was back at the school... ripped from reality...

This was happing while- Then the door to my room busted open yet again, one of the girls, that I have to share the house with- kind of like a sister yet not, that shall remain nameless- saw me just like fad into an ashy dust, and magical vague of wispiness, as I vanished before her eyes. 'Besides, I can see you haven't improved since I last saw you, is what he said to me. I hoped your meatal school would knock some manners into you, that what they think- in more ways than one.'

Did not even get to say goodbye to Aunt and Uncle, who was still sipping on their tea out in the kitchen, as I was being ripped into this distortion of time, I could hear the large gulp of tea, whispers, about me and the other girls in the house yet most about me.

Good things... more than anything- yet, it made me sad.

~*~

Besides she'd- took a look and blinked- and blinked yet, once more-, and said- shit... and then went back out into the dim flickering light that's making a soft warm glow in the kitchen, where she asked if they were sending Naddalin away yet again. And if so if she was gone or not yet, and if she had a full-size poster in her room of herself, 'why do you ask me this, child?'

I think I just saw her disappear... if that was not a photo of her... it makes no scents.

-And-

St. Brutus's, said Uncle Read promptly- said 'if she not here then she is there- little one.'

And- It's a first-rate institution for hopeless cases.

-And-

I see, said Aunt Marge. Do they use these at St. Brutus's, girl, and she held up with looked like quail feather in the little hand, and a wand in the other, with a sapphire stone that was heart-shaped at the holding side? She must not have needed it or left it for- Dariez who wants so much to be just like her, she tried to snap it over her knees yet, it would not break.

'Go give it to her now then...' he said austerely, as it started to glow and change color in the stone, and read her name with-in the crystal of the wand that was silver.

She thought it across her wood desk, to her while up in her room, in the home.

'I remember her saying that this was not needed yet some cool to have to show your cleverness, skill, ability, and talent levels along with power, and a story for a young girl like me...' said Dariez, and her eyes sparkling with wonder and the possibilities of phenomenon if her mind could just unlock it using magic, and this start girl wound, or become a girl that has fallen too.

-Then-

I- Dariez, was looking through, her room I was- me myself and I that is, and I wound fount it- I knew that she would have one of these, I just knew it, a glass sprier small that was big for her small hands- crystal ball- that would show all my days, it leads me to find this book in the restricted parts of the abandoned town 1898 built library... that is next to caving in... I knew that I would have to go in find sneaking out late at night, tonight- looking in the glass I saw, the story of a girl, that looks all too alike to me, it was showing a very dark past of a young girl's life, like a video- showing a hanging and bullying, of a girl that was a copy of me, it looks... yet, the question I had was- WHY? And it was saying that death was the only way out... was it me- was it... I am the girl in the glass its showing... I need to find more... and this book was it like it had a bewitching power over me I had too, it the copy. It also said I have everything I need to be a fallen angel if I believe- if I believe in the power of white magic.

Looking in the book of all her day's past, here is something that just seemed to appear right in front of my eyes, hidden text between the lines, of the lines, on the old tattered yellowing pages, there read a line of words reviling hidden secrets of her life and home village. It was faint in color gray in the style of her gorgeous script penmanship; around the text was magical whiskers- that would glow in shades of gold- sparkly- about and around the lettering, it said as I read aloud: 'Nevaeh hometown was the longest little town in the Earthy world, this was a clue- for those that need to know, and to see only if they should- or believed in her of was someone like her.'

-And-

Then, I looked even deeper and say a girl- it was me with white wings... blink at me, ever so sweetly- and angelic.

Er - Uncle Read nodded curtly behind Aunt Marge's back, saying- 'oh no- another one.'

As she ran to her room whooshing it around, saying nonconical worlds... hoping for it to do something, need like lighting her daddy- Read's shorts a-flam, or give him two heads, or get out of choirs and homework, know ideas of yet what magic could really do and how dark it could be.

And Yes, And said Naddalin, on the phone to her saying- 'shh don't say anything and next year, I can bring you here, yet a girl that is not like me-' 'BUT' she said- trying to understand her dark side deeper with curiosity in her voice, Naddalin was looking down on her and knew along she was in her old room, and again she said- 'sh-h, don't become like me- stay good, magic is more playful that way.'

-And-

Excellent... she screamed, And Aunt Marge rushed in the room thought she was being murdered. A good spanking is what this girl needs for what they thought was a good beating in her room with her things, is what's ninety-nine days out of a hundred, without TV and fun or seeing others, for being in her doing things that little girls should not. Have you been beaten by somethin g or did you do this to yourself, look at these cuts' slashes on her like fang marks? And in this room under the steps, she was looked too just like Naddalin for being bad.

-And-

Oh, yeah, said Naddalin, she loads of times, she said this to Emmah saying this girl needs out of this environment and some girlfriends, that are normal. Unanimously she agreed.

Aunt Marge narrowed her eyes, saying- 'you bastard, you don't need to be that cruel about a little girl being a young woman.'

'Oh, is that what you call it, he said.'

'She's just a little girl...'

'She is playing around with her stuff... like that evil wand looking for sinful, that is enough, magic she calls it, I call it sick temptations, that I like the holy further would banish her to hell for, if she did not confess too, and she will not then I will look her in there with it until she sees the real evil she is looking for, as the holy further said to do.'

'She's just a little girl...' she said, throwing her hands up walking away... and like- her, I feel it not evil, and it is just magic, and even not so as you with your dirty mind- there no harm in what she is doing in there, if so-o.

'And I still do not like your tone, little girl,' he said, hold the holy book - that he never read yet wants to think he has, saying this is what you need to know - 'she looked up saying - I do know it more than you - unlike you and what you think of me, I can read, and I was chosen and you were not...'

Blink - Blink, is what he did... at his child.

'What the hell - does that mean?' He said, slamming the door in the girl's face.

She glanced down at the glass once more and it said - 'TRUST-

IS FOR SMALL GIRLS AND GOD!'

Yet she trusted her...

She trusted Naddalin...

Lakemont

Naddalin - then she'd - said like - like, if you can speak of your beatings, to other or they will get worse and the mom has no say in at all its all power by the daddy, in that casual way, they clearly aren't hitting you hard enough, to understand that, said Emmah, then Naddalin said that is why - the of why, no question in it, I am bringing her back with us next year, she can take any more of this abuse.

Both walked down all the spiral staircases, with all these pips that follow up and round to make the sounds, that leads to the vast entryway to the castle, main door - were the largest player piano, was pumping out tunes, from the 20's made of wood, also charmed, it has glass doors and drum and things playing to the beats.

Like in the hall, as I said there is this ornate pipe organ, and in the basement, I have been down there, there all these room that looks nuts that runs it all, with air ballot's, old belts, next to old medieval things, like more artillery then I have ever been near - nickelodeons, old cone operated fortunetelling machines, and things like that - more than - like - I have ever seen, and haunted dancing bones, on chains hanging from chain, form the accused in the past, in the dungeons rooms after room,

that tunnel after pass away, all light with gas torches, drip-p-y and wet are the stone walls cold to the touch, a mass grave in one that, is restricted to girls like me even, yet I have seen.

-Then-

Jennath overlooking us- jumping into the conversation late, I'd write if I were you, I did more than that, I want you to 'please' make it clear that you approve of this little girl- along with all the other older girls, and younger to that she needs friends, love, and understanding more than anything, she's is not used to girl's, that do that, along with falling in love with the wonders of all that is magic.

Perhaps Uncle Read was worried, that Naddalin might forget their bargain; in any case, she- changed the- subject abruptly, for the little girl, she was in her mind, like a haunting eerie whisper saying- 'sh-h and stop,' this was never- ever part of the bargain to still his child away, yet she was going to do just that, it doesn't pay she thought to be a- meanie- to girls that can't stand up for themselves, over being too young- yet this girl has a voice, yet no authority yet, that will change- it well.

Have you heard the- news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped individual? Eh- more of the same she said, softly, in a low tone of voice.

As Aunt Marge started to make herself at home, with all drama of young little ones, no- longer in a rebellion anarchism to her say, and not getting along among themselves- when it was just down to the one, and the other was staying over at friends' homes within the villages, Naddalin caught herself thinking almost unrequitedly of life in dorm number four-teen without them, with her Emmah and the 4 other's, that would be in this room with her, this year duration, Naddalin made the request- very early to share a room with her- her being Emmah of course.

Uncle Read and Aunt Jennath usually encouraged the little girl to stay out of there way, in times of play and times of not, which Naddalin was only too happy to do for her using a spell to stay linked into her mind as long as she felt the need too, until the day she could getaway, and stay with them.

Aunt Marge, on the- another hand, wanted this girl under her eyes at all times, so that she'd- could boom out suggestions for the improvement, without getting slapped about, in my thought that not better than. Her dad's word was law... all this over just having some things in my room that find sinful, and her being a wondrous girl.

She'd- delighted in acquiring, her magical background with Naddalin the sooner the better, Dariez is, Naddalin even took huge pleasure in buying Dariez expensive presents while getting glaring, when they were sent back home for a home to open in front of them.

As though daring her mom and dad to ask, the girl to say- to them all why they hadn't got a present, saying I am the chosen one. She'd- also kept throwing out dark hints her studies in all that is enchanted, magical, fairy-tale and charmed, and about what made them all such unsatisfactory entities to her now.

You mustn't blame yourself for the- way the- girl turned out, Read, after all, she is so looking up to her, and we took her in after all, and she is making our children bad, with her sinful ways of looking for darkness. And If there's something rotten on the- inside of this child for the I well beat it out before she sees to doing herself, there's nothing anyone can do about it, I will punish her for this sin...!

Dariez, asked if she could have a girlfriend over for a sleepover, and if she would- stay over, for lunch on her- third day of this week if she stopped all the madness and went back to looking emotionless, Dariez thought that she was falling too them and what they wanted, when really it was all my plain, for her to back down, as I took over her mind, she has everything she needs now, with inside of her to be a brilliant magician, and then a white angel, and from there I have a feeling, yet that is only if she believes in herself- more then I believe in her- and them too.

-And-

Naddalin tried to concentrate on her food, in the large hall with the many stain glass arch windows, but her hands shook and her face was starting to burn with anger, saying this little girl can't keep going on.

Remembering the- form, she- told herself, to get them to autograph, and that it was not for her, it was giving up the welfare of Dariez, and he did- to me, I am taking her, the moron did not remember that I was brought to him from here, think about Emmah- The Claepsiara, Hayvannahol for younger girls and Skoufyceol for the older girls of both Wizardry and Fallen Angel's. Do not say anything, there was a whoosh- as they did a teleport spell, and they were both there... standing before them in the living room.

Do not rise, she said along with - 'I AM HERE FOR THE GIRL, TO KEEP!'

Aunt Marge reached for her glass of wine. 'It's one of the- basic rules of breeding, and she- said, to keep your child, and teach your child as you feel fit.'

'What gives you the right, after we took your filth in?'

It all played out like this to the rest of the world, yet when really, I was taking here...

Dariez- I am running- running- through the park, at night, misty fog, haunted like an amusement park, and I am at a place called Lakemont, it's somewhere in Pa, and was the place to be, for all that was cheap thrills...

I got the idea from a book I read that is called: LAKEMONT, I am standing at the top of 1902 the Lep the Deeps 60' Roller Coaster- the oldest in the world, that if you miss step you'll fall to your death, it's all wood and rickety, white and splintery, rusty chains, and old heavy wooden cars lush padded ripped of leather seats, that have not moved in years and big rusty cogs, raining hard, everything eerie having green cast, and all the light the sky is thunderbolts, see all the rides...

I walked through the hunted like- old Noah's ark- now stopped just rocked to the one side. I would say this is not what you would call holly place of fun- even if that what was intended, more like a nasty sin, the floor completely gone, had to jump from place to place; yet no one was stopping me, from doing so-o there were no signs up stopping me.

Yee- and whooping sound no longer. Yes, I could recall them in my consciousness, Noah is at the top look more sadistic than ever, most of all the cars on the Ferris wheel is rusted and just hang, on one pin.

Ah- the large carousel, that once played sweet soothing music seems to be playing in my mind as I pass the ride- seeing young faces with amusement, now most of the houses are total, entirely, fully, and wholly gone or tagged with race and slurs, or ingrates- on the eyes or the house was absolutely stabbed out.

The crock skew stands naked and eerie in the dense fog hugging low, and the right high lost color. The water park looks like a swamp, the water slides from hell, like that one at Disney, yet you would really make that jump. There are many ways, that I could kill myself on... many... the light bulbs smashed on the ride singes, chipped animal rusted, faded, yet in my mind there bright and flashing. The train sets, never to steam again... track missing in some places where it used to snack through the tree

cover and over rivers, old buildings now really falling down, even if they were made to look like that before.

The whip- ride had its roof blow on in a tornado, years back.

The costar has a dibble dip, and the cars live the station from the first hill on like any before it. There is a jail over the way, where you could pretied, were they would sell Harlan, back in the days when I was just a child. 'The Rollo Costar' had killed a 3-year-old boy- and to the life of a boy, that wanted to live on like I- Dariez, the boy was sitting on a younger girl's lap, and they said, that was all they need to shut this park down forever- to never- ever- ever be opened once more.

The Swan boat's all half sunk- looking like shout ducks, in the swap, that is yellow in color, that was a once a crystal-clear lagoon. Um- it was said the park was hexed, over the years with all the deaths, that took place here, on the rids one ride unparticular the Skyliner COSTAR. The log ride stationary forever, parts of it laying on the ground beneath. Storybook frost, liking like the bible stories from hell. The paratrooper ride is locked to the lift, rusty, red, white, and blue. The white picket wood fence is no-longer, the walkway mud.

The Caterpillar ride, I remember as a kid covering me over, and I was afraid of the dark. Along with the chair swing ride, the wooden seats gone, the meatal oxidized, corroded, and eroded chains sawing in the breeze, like haunted arms- of something satanic. The trolley still sitting in the main street, street light, with cracked glass... dead trees, dark brown, with what look to be armed hanging down want to pick you up and eat you... that were beautiful at one time- all whipping willow-ie.

Falling apart like me on the inside, it all the same forgotten, all the old buildings, falling down, I saw when trespassing to get up here to my child hold happiness, and like the coaster, I am feeling the same. It is so hard to talk when you want to kill yourself, over losing a girlfriend.

That's in the air and beyond the whole shebang else of things, and it's not a mental complaint that I have, it's a physical thing like it's physically hard to open your mouth and make the words come out, and they will not.

They don't come out smooth and in unification with your brain the way normal people's words do; I don't get why, they come out in chunks as if from a crushed ice machine, like a piss snow-con you know the lemon one that no one likes, yet, if your dump like me you get for you can make up

your mind on anything but the girl you can never-ever-never-ever have; you blunder on them as they gather behind your lower lip with your upper teeth.

So-o you just keep silent, hushed, and soundless, yet your brain never-ever- ever shut the freak up.

'Have you ever saw how on all the ads on TV, people are watching TV?' My friend is like. 'Pass it, child,' my other acquaintance is like. 'No, yo-o- yo, that's true,' my other - another friend is like- like- um- ah- and- uh. 'There's always somebody on a coach unless it's an allergy ad and they're in a field... blah- blah- hem and hum- poop- fart, and giggle.'

'Or on a horse- with a creepy man looking too sexy for a man or a donkey- going He-ha- or some dip-shit biting a winey in the middle, or some re-tard-ed pig going we-eeeeee.' This would be the year of 2019 on Earth, funny now I want a pinwheeled too. 'Those ads are always for herpes, then the men- man, and the woman with the burning itchy feeling down under, that has- vagina-night-us.'

Amusement, and joy. 'How do you even tell somebody you have that, and it all for crap?' That's Kristopher... It's his house. 'That must be such a weird tête-à-tête: 'Hey, before we do this, you should know...'

'Your moms didn't mind last night?' 'Oh-ha!'

'Girl!'

NO- NO- NO...

(One week back)

(Week back)

...Before Dariez turned 14...

Kristopher lobs a punch at her, the antagonist. Richard is small and wears jewelry, some like me think he is gay, and will not say. He once told me, Dariez, when a man puts on his first piece of jewelry, there's no turning back, with all that is Fagg-sh, yet that is live her in the halls.

Richard shakes his wrist and turns his attention to the pot. He punches back with his hand with the big limp silver bracelet on it; it hits Kristopher's watch, clanging. 'Son, what you trying to do

with my gold, yo?' Balm streaks outline his light switch, and his bedsheet is pocked with black circles. There's always a pot at Kristopher's house; he has a room with a totally separate ventilation system and a lockable door that his parents could rent out an additional apartment.

There are stains on there, too, shimmery stains which show certain activities, that take place between Kristopher and his girlfriend. I personally for one look at them (the stains, then the duo). I'm jealous... yah- nah-some- But then again, I'm beyond jealous, more them enough- of it all.

'Dariez?' 'You want?'

I'm seeing if maybe pot is the problem; maybe that's what has come in and mugged me. I do this every so often, for a few weeks, and then I smoke a lot of pot, just to test if maybe, like the nonexistence of it is what has stolen from me. It's passed to me, enfolded up in a concise conveyance scheme, nonetheless, I pass it on. I'm doing a trial with my brain- like have a 3-some with it.

'You, all right?'

This should be my name. I could be a superhero: You All

Right girl.

'Ah...' I stumble.

'Don't bug Dariez,' Richard is like. 'He's in the Dariez zone.

He's Dariez-ing out.'

'Yeah.' I move the muscles that make me smile. 'I'm just... kinda- you know...'

Do you see how the words work? They betray your mouth and walk away.

She has big eyes... 'Are you okay?' Emmah asks, oh by the way that was her name. Emmah is Kristopher's girlfriend, here on here on Earth so there is no weird of how it looks. She's in bodily contact with Kristopher at all times Emmah I know is Bi-curious. Right now, she's on the floor next to his leg, wrapped around her and I know that Naddalin is not liking it- by the grin she has to force on her face.

'I'm fine,' I tell her- about this. The blue glow of the flat-screen TV in front of us ricochets off her eyes as she turns back to it. We're watching a nature special on the deep ocean, about a 14-year-old girl lost in a boat she made to become remember, after a boyfriend dropped her, and is eaten by sharks.

I was really engrossed in the story holding behind their backs- Emmah's hand that is behind him that were holding hands in front.

~*~

Emmahlyn

(The narration started saying-)

I am just a girl...

My age: 14-

My name is Emmahlyn Marilee,

I have been called the small girl and also just called Emmah as a nickname, yet I am just a girl, but even so-o, I had a crazy thought, and dream to be the first girl younger than a woman to do what I set off to do and at something that has never done.

There I was day after day making my ship- nothing big, yet it was what I thought was right to make this journey, I have lived mostly on the water growing up- in my home-town next to the port.

'Yes- how's it coming my day asked looking at me like I was the nuts girl.'

'Good!'- I say, not even looking up at him, to see that he was just wearing those- whole-ie underwear that- are like yellow from age wiped at the elastic. who was sipping on his coffee, he no I was doing this with or without his okay?

§

I remember taking a bite of my PP and J sandwich and having half of it running down my tank top, that was pink, that smalt of kiddie girl perfume. The kind that all the young girls spray too much of in the locker rooms after the Liz-bo teacher wants to look at you run laps. There goes the dog running after my sister who is 2 years young then I, and then the dog, that missed the step and hit the wall, yet I did not even look up I was working on my wooden boat for my sea trip I was going to make all by myself!

Hometown too... they- or no one was going to stop me from making my make in the world. I wanted fame! And to be the strong girl!

I battle my way off the coastline- on a clear day, there is no motor, no life jacket, no nothing just me in a small boat doing a big dream.

Yah, I am normal, this is what a girl does on her summer break...

Lost at sea in a small yeah- where I end up in one of the worst events of my life, tossing and turning over waves, I think I am going to die, 30-foot waves on I go under, and over the boat was never made to stand be crashed, and bobbing like a cork in the 5,000-foot waters of the sea.

Black is all I see, for 24 nights as I try to make it a- coursed the Pacific alone, a dumb thing I just want to see if I could do- to make history, lost at sea it's day 5 after I left the port of my small town- I have no clue what was to come- some would say it was poor planning- others say it was just dumb. I had nothing but a camera to talk to- and I did I documented my story- I was taunted by sharks- they were nipping at my feet.

Happiness, I can even think of the good thought other than the flashbacks of the life I had and let go for this trip- to become someone- when I was... somebody there- with them- I think of all them in my mind- and I get even more broken hatred adrift lost in the ocean? nothing is something I do not have at this time I feel that not seeing my mom and dad is slowly killing me more than living her bobbing in the water having sharks swimming around me just looking at me with the intent to eat.

My happiness was being home, and being with my girlfriend on the weekend, and spending time with my young boyfriend too, whom I broke up with me right before this trip, I miss- oh so much. He was everything to me... maybe that is why, I did this... to show him that I am a strong girl, and don't need him- yet right now lessons am so sure that I do.

My greatest fear is as of now, being eaten alive by them swimming around me. Not getting back home never seeing my friends and family, never doing something like homework, or reading a book or texting on my phone, things that we take for granted.

Things that you don't even think of in every day- things like being warm and dry. Things like sitting with your dad- eating like a pig and farting well looking at the TV, waterfall-like mom saying you're not nice to your sister who looks up to you those things- there. I fear everything out here in this dark water- that is so cool and become, hot as hell, the sun has my skin- pilling and red, then at night it feels like there are knives hitting all the open wounds that their sharp teeth have made on my legs and feet, passing by.

Death- I feel that I am eating my own body away, as they nibble away at it too... I see the light get odd and stranger... too. The Loneliness', is getting to me, there is no one for miles... there is not one soul to take to- and all my photo- phone- and life has washed away in the boat that is not at the bottom of the sea.

A while That is now like green from the blonde, color. My eyes are red from the saltwater running in as I have high waves crashing over my head. I know I am seeing things, that are not even there, I feel dazed.

What is the trait you most deplore in others? Him the only thing right now that I could think of hating the most right now is him... everything, I dislike the world for me ending up this way even God too... why did this big storm have to come, why did I have to sink, why? bit

Pounding the nose- hit- hit- slap- and she went off, yet getting one of my toes, the big one... I can see fragments of my little boat around me yet nothing to keep me from going under to hold on too. Um- I remember the first date we went on to a fast food place, not much of it was what he had, his mom and dad did not get- US! I NEVER HAD A ring he did not have the money- yet no looking back on slowly sucking in my saltwater then I can handle, I feel he was never- ever the real one.

Oh him- so dreamy- yet so- uncaring about me- the person, I would admire the most more than my dad would be- the boy I love- and yet also said for me to grow up, and be someone, other than a whiny little b*tch, and find someone else to love, even if... is the? Him for loving me - always him- my boyfriend for being my first... and taking me- and taking me wherever I wanted to like the mall and to school and to a football game, to the park for rides and more, or in his car for loving, and even hooking up and making out he was the one for me. With his dark hair and perfect smile, lips and face, green eyes. I was his short blonde, slim, and slander, hopping into his arms when he said when, or to jump and - I said - like 'how high,' we feed off of each- other's feeling and caring.

My greatest extravagance was going to be this and make to the other side where he would be there for me to jump into his arms- it was not even three days, and my body was not even consumed complete, by these sharks he was with: Amy Pierre - the girl that was cuter than me- and better than me in everything? He could care less that I became shark poop, and that not fun because that is true, these were my last thoughts, pin and left to float out in see in a bottle. Funny a day at the beach three weeks after they gave up looking for me his new girlfriend, read this... and freaked!

Part: 1

I am- Going-

Cr-a-zzz-y- crazy- CRAZ-YYYY!

My short life is running past me- and I can help but to have foggy thoughts of all the days in the past and thought of a life with my boyfriend that not going to have- or working, or job, or dances, or car... or sweet 16. Even babies- and that white dress! I am just treading water- eating- whatever just to sub-stain life- and keep from shriveling up... to black dust in the hot sun- too really cool 17º nights.

If a boat is close, I would star call out yet there was nothing but my cold breath echoing back in my face, to show my I WAS ALL ALONE- facing death, but then more loudly, I played myself out until I had no power left in my voice, I lost, and I was a cheerleader in school, for 2 years, the lost lonely thoughts of cold- no one is come to get you.

Trying to stay as still as possible, and while waiting, trading, yeah- no- there going to pull you under and rip you apart... I was there a new toy- the shark was my pet- should I pet it or let it eat me? - as long as the shark is not actively attacking you - and get into the boat as quickly as possible once the boat reaches you. 'This life expectancy that I have lived is full of trials with misfortunes, yet I only 14- so-o you have to capture humor whenever and wherever you can find it.' And mine was to have this... I recall the first three hours in the boat before all the lights went out it was nice and I thought, I had it in the bag. Maybe it's important to open up I people, other than a boy and some really close girlfriends- people who are right there with you, not some thousand miles away in another life. Or maybe it's something else. Maybe, I should just settle for not knowing, that I would not be for anything. May be it's just good to know that you're not the only one who doesn't know, what she perfect wanted.

I made the boat myself; I was something that I was most proud of... blue and white - it was made to have no power on board- just to make the 100-day journey for one cost to the other- from Norfolk to Freeport- and over the triangle. That was also called dumb- knowing the stories- of what if. 90 mph and more, with the winds... I thought this was it- I say my good buys- I have nothing but the camera to say this all too.

§

My current state of mind? Irrational, there goes my other leg, I feel down, and there is nothing- nothing- nothing- my mind can't take this... I shriek- yell- scream, and cry- and there is no sound- just more water coming from my eyes, and I am gushing blood and the choppy waves are now inflamed with color of ruby red, I will never feel what it's like to have a boy there either the dirty thought run in my crazing mind, that my hip was hardly hanging on the rest of me. But do you feel sorry for me- know you should not- I was over my head... from the first five moments. All over a dumb boy- and his- mean.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue? Thinking they care about me my friends are they, my friends, why did I have to do this alone, why has no one found me, these are all question asked after the first five hours into this trip, I did not plane long enough. Was there a plan not really more just a spite Victoria Secret...?

And- like a dumb girl going for something never done. Have I been a liar and a cheat? I would sneak out with the girls, and blame my sister for what I did, that being a teen... and I would play with the skittle too is that why I am her for loving myself... and say that I did not- is that God says don't, why I end up this why- he made me feel that I need to touch myself down there and I did more than six times one day it that wrong? He would get me, to do him like every other day, yet a teen girl wants more. Like I remember the first time he grabbed my boobs, oh that was so nice, now I feel that I will never feel love... again even if I do make it out- alive- I have no lower half...!

I remember last year my nose was bigger than them- I just got an ass and now a shark has come and bit it off- just my luck... I was going crazy... Always to cover for what was right, even if it was wrong it was to make sure the other person was not said. I also kissed another boy on the lips in front of him think I would get him back, is God paying me back for it now?

I was always prep type- even appearance, with the little poof on my head and wavy heavy blonde hair; everything I was a girl in high school there was nothing about me that I thought was right, I wanted it all fixed like my nose and that was done 2 years back like my teeth and when I started wearing way too much makeup to cover it all up- yet I one of the top looking girls in my class or so they said.

5 days in all I have is a- bit of wet candy bar... and I take the last bite of my favorite snake food. The boat was going under fast; my electronics have all gone. It was not long until; I say now- that not testing my work in small boat making was not up to ship shape. I could say that now...

'There is a magnificent intensity in life that comes when we are not in control but are only reacting, living, surviving. I am not a religious man per see... but for me, to go to sea is to get a glimpse of the face of God. At sea, I have reminded of my insignificance of all men's insignificance. It is a wonderful feeling to be so humbled.'

§

My dilemma has given me a strange kind of wealth; I will always be remembered for the dumb a*s girl that did this... the most important kind of remembrance there is was dumb in life. You do something so dumb you be remembered, maybe that was why I tried this... he said I was that dumb, so I lived up to it! I value each moment that is not spent in pain, desperation, hunger, thirst, or loneliness.

Sometimes, I try to stop speculating about the future or what's out of my existence, and other times I just lean back and run with it because maybe it's for the best, to think of what might not have been that what could have been.

Larger days into my trip and I lost at sea, so far out in the back seat, at night, Sharks are playing with my feet- not taking bits, yet, but like rubbing me as they pass... were- 'I'm just confused. Everything's confusing. Everything beautiful is far away, or maybe everything far away is beautiful. It's like how the grass is greener on the other side. Grass just looks nicer from the other side; you know? The grass where you're standing looks like dirt with hair.'

Well anyone finds me or will I die?

'A strange thing happens when you interview a robot. You feel an urge to be profound: to ask profound questions. I suppose it's an inter-species thing. Although if it is, I wonder why I never try and be profound around my dog. 12:07 am lost at sea- in the green-sh blue in the drink- 'Like a planet around a star,' looking up, I see the shooting one and no that is my death coming.

I am weigh surrounded by a display of natural wonders, all glowing in the with the moonlight. All sparkly- In calculation, to the little ecosystem developing around me was taking skin and more of me my- and my top and underwire was taken off by me, so it would not weight me down- so-o here I am, bobbing in the drink just nude as I was with my boyfriend the first time, I have the same turn-in upside-ie- down-ie feeling in my little belie. Look down and it's amazing all the colors and life- yet tariffing all at the same time- so wonderful and yet so unkind to me.

The acrobatic dorados perform beneath ballets of fluffy white clouds. Then the sunsets were just like the one I would sit and stare at with him making me sad and happy too. Or the time I went for ice-cream with my dad, and he gives me money for my first, bike... when I was five. Or the time, I was with my mom and sister, Gracie, walking out to the waterfall in the state park, at ten. And the time with my boy, over a table overlooking the sea- at belief restraint place that his mom paid for.

The clouds glide across the sky until they join at the horizon to form whirling, flaming sunsets that are slowly doused by nightfall. Then, as if the sun had suddenly crashed, thousands of glistening galaxies are flung out into the deep black night. There is no bigger sky country than the sea. But I cannot enjoy the incredible beauty around me. It lies beyond my grasp, taunting me. Knowing it can be stolen from me at any time, by a Dorado or shark attack or by a deflating raft, I cannot relax and appreciate it. It is beautifully surrounded by ugly fear. I write in my log that it is a view of heaven from a seat in hell.'

I was thinking of a song that I loved, an oldie from my dad's way-way back in them their days, back in the 1990's back when the dinosaurs roamed the planet and the year or so when my older sister- Kaylie was born so 1993- me I was born in 2002 and Bryan Adams - 'Please Forgive Me,' was the crap, when my sister was young, that was so-o good, I am thinking about here like crazy too. Like- that was one that I would hum to pass the time, from time to time, the pop charts, of 2015. Funny it was slated wounds- by SIA!

§

The person despises the most is my freaking Boyfriend, as I see the sun come up on a story day lost at sea, lightning cracking next to me, I thought, I was going to be fried... (Boom!!) In addition, the hot feeling of the wave hit my face smacking firmly. despising someone I have two in mind right now it would be him, and God- sorry to say I was never on to do that coming from my family life, of doing what was right.

The greatest love of your life would be him, silly! I feel anyways... What I loved in him- and the boys' that I liked- 'Hmm, I like a smart funny guy :) like him, I don't like him to be super serious all the time! from basically a smart clown that's laid back (: What is the quality you most like in a man? I like guys that try in school. They have to be cute and make me laugh. Also, I like guys that can carry on a conversation, and that is athletic. If you like a girl, do not talk about other girls with her, either, because that makes them think that you are not interested. I like smart, athletic kids, and they have to have good clothes! I love it when a man wears sweater vests, it's so sexy... I am lost in my last sexy thoughts'... and

also a plus is- can read and write- yet- boys today- that may be asking too much. Also, make sure you smell good!!

That's such a big turn-on.'

When and where were you happiest? I was the happiest in life, when I was rushing to his arms and he would hold me, or when the school day was at end and he was there to take me places, and working on this trip I was the hippest just or that all to die in a heartbeat, like I am having less of those too, and it's getting harder to breath. Which talent would you most like to have? My talent was swimming and being in the water like I said I have been swimming now for a week, in the middle of the sea. I would say that I have lasted longer then, I should have. Being a good lover, girlfriend, and student... also- and caring for all!

'Every time you look up at the stars, it's like opening entry of my days of the past and thinking. I could be anyone, anywhere right now. Yet, know- I am here in the Pacific... I was wonder well looking up at that star-filled sky if he was too thinking of me- I now know that not to be true.

Things, things that- I wanted to do this summer was- Camping out in the backyard with your best friend, with my sister's eleven years old friends who are mine too- a- lot of them were younger than me but still my girlfriends. driving lessons with my older sister, stopping at the edge of the city, looking up at the same stars. Walking a wooded path, kissing in the moonlight, look up and you're eleven again. Boys in a tiny town, like I did when I was ten and up, to eat candy and think of getting fat as I did then. You're in a sea-boat, and you flipped, that was me... You're staring out the back of a car. Out here where the world begins and ends, it's like nothing ever stops happening.'

'It's not a remarkable note except for one thing- doing this- and being a young girl, there is nothing to remember me by, and my name you may have forgotten, already like them. Even if the shark swims away, you're not truly safe until you're out of the water, yet that's not going to happen, now is it? Sharks may leave temporarily and then come back to continue the attack. Get back to shore or back on the boat as quickly as imaginable. If you could change one thing about yourself, it would be everything- I never like anything about me, I am 14 what can I say, that is why I did this to make me- into something, if I could I would have colored my hair maybe light brown... and use different contacts, yet that is not something that is life-changing.

SHARKS- Sometimes, they swim right up and have at it, sometimes they circle for a-while before lunging, and sometimes they sneak up from behind for a surprise attack. To be able to defend against the shark, you must know where it is, so make every effort to watch the animal, even as you're working out your escape, I try to stay calm and don't make sudden movements. When you first spot the shark, chances are it will swim away without bothering you.

You cannot out-swim a shark, so trying to sprint to safety may not be your best option, unless you're already very close to shore. It's important to keep your wits about you so you can continuously appraise the situation and figure out how to get to safety. I thought this one thought, what I consider your greatest achievement, I have never done it.

Part: 2

I love- love- love- long painted nails, in all colors, long pony tells, and my style like it- honestly, has not changed much from last year. Basic pieces are the best because you can wear them in many different ways! I would get plenty of plain t-shirts and sweaters, so you can wear them with scarves and jewelry. A basic pair of dark jeans is probably a good idea, as are leggings and maybe yoga pants. For shoes, Sperry's are really popular at my school. People are also wearing Converse, Crocs, Nikes, Uggs, and any kind of girl-ie boot! Tight jeans... and Victoria-Secret undies!

My, iPhone was my life... my most treasured possession? My favorite TV shows were? Pretty Little Liars, The Secret Life of the

American Teenager... and anything on MTV, as yours where also in 2015 I am sure. If you were to die and come back as a person it would be like my sister who was perfect at everything. So, I would know how it feels to be the head girl.

All the shark, I knew a leg was now gone, I was hitting them all in- in the face and gills. Playing dead won't deter an aggressive shark. Your best bet if attacked is to make the shark see you as a strong, credible threat. Usually, a hard blow to the shark's gills, eyes or snout will cause it to retreat; these are really the only vulnerable areas on a shark.

Get into a defensive position, I thought like laying on top of the waves I did that too and go so sunburnt that when back in the water I screamed- for my mother, and that is something a girl my age never will do...

I am pretty sure most shark attacks happen all the time yet not to a girl swimming trying to stay above the chasing waves, I never gave much thought to sharks- not this for inland out even to the fact my boat would go under in a larger storm, the storm Hurricane

Patricia was a Duration May 28 - June 4 Peak intensity 145 mph (230 km / h) (1-min) 937 mbar (hPa,) I know that my mom and dad were going nuts to look at this storm, on TV knowing that I am out there yet they thought I was strong... that what matters here, they believed I could do this... yet they never go to say go by either to me. My boyfriend was quoted saying- 'That he didn't even care...'

There are many opinions out there and you should look around the internet for different sources and articles about attacks and sharks. 'The genuine understanding of one's inconsequentiality profits a calming sense of being entirely connected to the greater whole. As a tiny part of the world and humanity, I now felt more at peace, at losing life than at this moment, and yet I never- ever felt so alone.' And I went under and was eaten, never to be seen- or hear from again.

Just a girl like you at age 14- lost at sea- that was me- and how, I would be remembered!

Part: 3

-Then- Next show-

There's an octopus on the screen with giant ears, translucent, flipping through the water in the cold light of a submersible. 'Holy shit, look at that, son!' Richard is like, blowing smoke, I don't know how it got back to him previously.

I have a secret: I wish I was Dumbo the Octopus. I smile to myself. 'Scientists have good-humoredly named this specimen Dumbo,' the TV narrator says. I'd flop around down there at peace, yes oh so-o modified to freezing deep-ocean temperatures. The big concerns of my life would be what sort of bottom coating slime to feed off of, that's not so dissimilar from now, desirable I wouldn't have any natural predators; then again, I don't have any now, and that hasn't done me a whole lot of good. But it suddenly makes sense: I would like to be under the sea, like an octopus.

'I'll be back,' I say, getting up from my spot on the couch, which Scruggs, a friend who was relegated to the floor, immediately claims, slinking up in one fluid motion.

'You didn't call one-five,' he's like.

'One-five?' I try.

'Too late.'

I shrug and climb over clothes and people's legs to the beige, apartment-front-door-style door; I move through that, to the right:

Kristopher's warm bathroom.

I spend a lot of time on them.

I have a system with bathrooms.

When I pop into Kristopher's, I continue my normal routine of wasting time. I turn the light off first.

They are sanctuaries, public places of peace spaced throughout the world for people like me.

Then I sigh... and think about all the things I can have like her...

Then I turn around, face the door I just closed, pull down my pants, and fall on the toilet, I don't sit; I fall like a carcass, feeling my butt quarter the rim.

Then I put my head in my hands and breathe out as I, well, ya' know, piss.

I bury my face in my hands and wish that it could go on forever because it feels good. You do it and it's done. It doesn't take any effort or any planning.

I always try to enjoy it, to feel it come out, and understand that it's my body doing something it has to do, like eating, although I'm not too good at that.

I wonder if anyone does this?

You don't put it off. That would be really screwed up, I think. If you had such problems that you didn't pee. Like being anorexic, except with urine. If you held it in as self-punishment.

I finish up and flush, reaching behind me, my head still down.

Then I get up and turn on the light.

(Did anyone notice I was in here in the dark? Did they see the lack of light under the crack and notice it like a roach? Did Emmah see?)

Then I look in the mirror- I do that.

I look so normal.

I look like I've always looked like I did before the fall of last year.

Dark hair and dark eyes and one snuggled tooth. Big eyebrows that meet in the middle. A long nose, sort of twisted.

Pupils that are naturally large, it's not the pot- which blends into the dark brown to make two big saucer eyes, holes in me.

Wisps of hair above my upper lip.

This is Dariez...

And- and- and I-a always looks like I am about to cry.

In a few seconds, I am going to have to go back and face the crowd.

But I can sit in the dark on the toilet a little more, can't I?

I put on the hot water and splash it on my face to feel something.

I always manage to make a trip to the bathroom to take five minutes.

I- Dariez, lived right next to the park, see and I have been trespassing in there for years.

At the school for kids like me, that feel they're going to hurt themselves...

'How're you doing kid-o?' Dr. Ross asks.

Her office has a bookshelf that runs floor to ceiling, like all shrinks 'offices, and I think that is what she is yet I don't really know- I don't know much of anything if you want to know something- about me.

I- Dariez, used to not want to call them shrinks, but now that I've been through so many, I feel authorized to it. It's an adult term, and it's rude, and I'm more than the two-thirds adult and I'm pretty bad-mannered, so what the hell.

Very thick book... I don't have a whole lot of what's in there - I just have one big thing, um- but I know all about it from skimming.

There's great stuff in there. Like all shrinks 'offices, anyway, it has

The Bookshelf was full of required reading. First of all, there's the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which lists every kind of psychological disorder known to man - that's fun reading.

There's a disease called Ondine's Curse, in which your body loses the ability to breathe involuntarily. Can you imagine? You have to think 'breathe, breathe' all the time, or you stop breathing.

Most people who get it die.

I don't think you can find a DSM II. It came out in 1963 or something. It takes like ten years to put one out, and they're working on VI. Jeez, I could be a shrink. If the shrink is classy, she'll (mostly she'll, occasion-ally he'll) have a bunch of DSMs, because they come in different editions - III, IV, and V are the most common. Now, in addition to the DSMs, there is an assortment of specific books on psychiatric disorders, things like The Freedom from Depression Workbook; Anxiety and Panic Attacks: Their Cause and Cure, and the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

Always hardcover. No paperbacks in a shrink's office.

Usually, there's at least one book on childhood sexual abuse, like The Wounded Heart, and one shrink I went to catch me looking at that and said, 'That book is about child sexual abuse.'

And - I was like, 'Uh-hum?'

And she said, 'It's for folks who were abused.' And I nodded like it was over my head.

'Were you? You lost in space-'

She had a little-old-lady face, this one, with a shock of white hair, and I never-ever saw-ed her once more. What kind of question was that? Unquestionably, I wasn't ill-treated. If I were, things would be so simple. I'd have a motive for being in shrinks 'offices, now is it?

I'd have an explanation and something, that I could work on.

The world wasn't going to give me something that tidy.

'I'm fine. Well, I'm not fine- I'm here.'

'Is there something wrong with that?'

'Absolutely.'

'You've been coming here for a while.'

Today she has a red sweater and red lipstick that is exactly the same red. It's as if she went to the paint store to match them up. Dr. Ross always has such amazing outfits. It's not that she's particularly sexy or beautiful; she just carves herself out well.

'I want to not have to come here.'

'Well, you're in a process. How're you doing?' This is her prompt question. The shrinks always have one prompt question. I've had ones that said 'What's up?' 'How are we?' And even- 'What's happening in the world of Dariez?' They never change. It's like their jingle.

'I didn't wake up well today.'

'Did you sleep well?'

'I slept okay.'

Maybe they're the ones who win all the money on TV. Then they have the gall to charge my mom $150 / hour. Maybe they do... They're very greedy. She looks completely stone, staring ahead. I don't know how they do this: the psych-poker face.

Psychologists should play poker.

'What happened when you woke up?'

'I was having a dream- I dream all the time, just like the park I loved as a kid, I share that too with it.

I don't know what it was, but when I woke up, I had this awful realization that I was awake. It hit me like a brick in the groin.'

'Like a brick in the groin, I see.'

'I didn't want to wake up. I was having a much better time asleep. And that's really sad. It was almost like a reverse nightmare like when you wake up from a nightmare, you're so relieved. I woke up in a nightmare.'

'And what is that nightmare, Dariez?'

'Life.'

'Life is a nightmare.'

'Yes.'

We stop. The cosmic moment, I guess. O-oh, is life really a nightmare? We need to spend ten seconds contemplating that.

'I lay in bed.'

I think, and don't think, and then do some more...

'What did you do when you realized you were awake?'

I had not eaten the night previously. There were more things to tell her, things I held back: like the fact that I was hungry in bed this morning.

I went to bed exhausted from homework and knew as I hit the pillow, that I would pay for it in the morning, that I would cross the line where my stomach gets so needy that I can't eat anything; that I would wake up really hungry, I woke up and my stomach was screaming, hollowing itself out under my little chest.

I didn't want to eat. The idea of eating made me hurt more. I could not think of no matter what, not one single solitary food item, that I would be able to handle, except coffee yogurt, and I was sick of coffee yogurt. I didn't want to do anything about it.

Only the pure urge, the one thing that never let me down, got me out of bed fifty minutes later. The fists pushed my stomach against itself and fooled it into thinking it was full. I rolled over on my stomach and balled my fists and held them against my gut like I was praying. I held this position, warm, my brain rotating, the seconds whirring by.

'I got up when I had to pee.'

'I see.'

'That was great.'

'You like peeing. You've mentioned this before.'

'Yeah. It's simple.'

'You like simple- boy to me.'

'Doesn't all and sundry?'

'Some people thrive on complexity, Dariez.'

'Well, not me. As I was walking over here, I was thinking ... I have this fantasy of being a bike messenger.'

'Ah.'

Part: 4

'It would be so simple, and direct, and I would get paid for it.

It would be an Anchor.'

'What about the school, Dariez? You have school for an Anchor.'

'School is too all over the place. It spirals out into a million different things.'

'Your Tentacles.'

I have to hand it to her; Dr. Ross picked up on my lingo pretty quickly. Tentacles are my term- the Tentacles are the evil tasks that invade my life. Like, for example, my American History class last week, which necessitated me writing a paper on the weapons of the Revolutionary War, which

necessitated me traveling to the Metropolitan Museum to check out some of the old guns, which necessitated me getting in the subway, which necessitated me being away from my cell phone and e-mail for 45 minutes, which meant I wasn't anywhere close to a 98.7 average (body temperature which meant that I didn't get to respond to a mass mail sent out by my teacher asking who needed extra credit, which meant other kids snapped up the extra credit, which meant I wasn't going to get a 97 in the class, that's what you needed to get,) which also meant I wasn't going to get into a Good College, if I keep going on like this, which meant I wasn't going to have a Good Job, which meant I wasn't going to have health insurance, which meant I'd have to pay tremendous amounts of money for the shrinks and drugs my brain needed, which meant that if I keep going, I wasn't going to have enough money to pay for a Good Lifestyle, which meant I'd feel ashamed, which meant I'd get depressed, and that was the big one because I knew what that did to me: it made it so-o I wouldn't get out of bed, which led to the ultimate thing, homeless-ness. If you can't get out of bed for long enough, people come and take your bed away. Unless I got cancer in the balls and had to have my nuts cut off all was going to be good-no? Yah-no!

There aren't any Tentacles. There's just a stack of tasks that you tackle. You don't have to deal with other people. The opposite of the Tentacles is the Anchors. The Anchors are things that occupy my mind and make me feel good temporarily. Riding my bike is an Anchor. Doing flashcards is an Anchor. Watching people play video games at Kristopher's is an Anchor. The answers are simple and sequential. There aren't any decisions.

'There are a lot of Tentacles,' I admit. 'But I should be able to handle them. The problem is that I'm so lazy.'

'How are you lazy, Dariez?'

'I waste at least an hour every day lying in bed. Then I waste time pacing. I waste time thinking. I waste time being quiet and not saying: like-like-like-anything because-*cuz*-I'm afraid I'll speech disorder.'

'Do you have a problem with hesitating, and stammering?'

'When I'm depressed, it won't come outright. I'll trail off in midsentence.' 'I see.' She writes something down on her legal pad.

Dariez, this will go on your permanent record.

The party line is that some of the most profound truths about us are things that we stop saying in the middle, but I think they do it to make us feel important. One thing's for sure: no one else in life says to me, 'Wait, Dariez, what were you going to say?'

'I don't-' I shake my head. 'The jumping of the old coaster thing.' 'What? What were you going to say?' This is another trick of shrinks. They never let you stop in mid-thought. If you open your mouth, they want to know exactly what you had the purpose of saying.

'I was going to say that I don't think, yet I don't to that, yet do that all the time, like - like- like the stuttering is like, a real problem. I just think it's one of my symptoms.'

So are the trimmers...

'Like sweating.'

'All Right.'

The sweating is awful. It's not as bad as the not eating, but it's weird, cold- cold freaking sweat, smelling like skin concentrate all over my forehead, having to be wiped off every two minutes.

Folks notice. It's one of the few things people notice.

'You're not stuttering now.'

'This is being paid for. I don't want to waste time.'

Pause. Now we have one of our silent battles; I look at Dr. Ross and she looks at me. It's a contest as to who will crack first. She puts on her poker face; I don't have any extra faces to put on, just the normal Dariez face.

I want to feel my brain slide back into the slot it was meant to be in, rest there the way it did before the fall of last year, back when I was young and witty, and my teachers said I had incredible promise, and I had incredible promise, and I spoke up in class because I was excited and smart about the world. We locked eyes...

I'm waiting for her to say something profound, I always am, even though it'll never happen. I'm waiting for her to say 'Dariez, what you need to do is X' and for the Shift to occur. I want there to be

a Shift so bad. I want the Shift so bad. I'm waiting for the phrase that will invoke it. It'll be like a miracle in my life. But is Dr. Ross a miracle worker? No. She's a thin, tan lady from Greece with red lipstick.

She breaks first.

'About your bike riding, you said you wanted to be a messenger.'

'Yes.'

'You already have a bike, correct?'

'Yes.'

'And you ride it a lot?'

'Not that much. Mom won't let me ride it to school. But I ride around Knox on weekends.'

'What does it feel like when you ride your bike, Dariez?'

I pause. '...Geometric.'

'Geometric.'

'Yeah. Like, you have to avoid this truck. Don't get hit in the head by these metal pipes. Make a right. The rules are defined, and you follow them.'

'Like a video game.'

'Sure. I love video games. Even just to watch. Since I was a kid.'

'Which you often refer to as 'back when you were happy.''

'Right...?' I smooth my shirt out. I get dressed up for these little meetings too. Good khakis and a white dress shirt. We're dressing up for each other. We should really go get some coffee and make a scandal- the Greek therapist and her high school boyfriend. We could be famous. That would get me money. That might make me happy.

'Do you remember some of the things that made you happy?'

'Video games.' I laugh.

'What's funny?'

'I was walking down my block the other day, and behind me was a mother with her kid, and the mother was saying, 'Now, Joy, I don't want you to complain about it. You can't play video games twenty-four hours a day.' And Joy goes, 'But I want to!' And, I turned around and told him, 'Me too.''

-And-

'You want to play video games for twenty-four hours a day?'

'Or watch. I just want to not be me. Whether it's sleeping or playing video games or riding my bike or studying. Giving my brain up. That's what's important.'

'You're very clear about what you want.'

'Yeah.'

'What did you want when you were a kid? Back when you were happy? What did you want to be when you grew up?' Dr. Ross is a good shrink, I think. That isn't the answer. But it is a damn good question. What did I want to be when I grew up?

'My mind is like a backed-up toilet spewing shit all over the place!!!'

I remember arriving that night at the amusement park. The park was forgotten for the rest of its time. The Ferris wheel creaked in the slight breeze. The Merry-go-rounds had gathered dust from being not used for many years. I had to be careful not to fall over the discarded stuff lying around everywhere. The light was vanishing, so he used his torch-light to see the obstacles. A rat was running from the beam of light that disturbed its search for something to eat, cow looking at me with the glimmer in their eyes to pick my eyes out.

Finally, I arrived at the theme park. It looked abandoned, and I was at the top of the ride, the roller coaster, where I was going to jump off. I could see all over very far, what was left from the Ferris wheel creaked in its rusty bearings when the wind blew over the area. The horses on the Merry-go-round had a thick layer of dust on their saddles. No kid would ever ride on them again. It got dark early this time of the year, so I got a torchlight from the car. I did not want to step on some of the trash that covered the ground.

'Maybe not, maybe so.' What a shrink answer, maybe you don't see everything you think you do. 'I can't take maybe's light- a little boy.

I have to make money, and make sure your Ok-ay also.' 'I don't think there's much of a market for that.' I smile. 'I wanted to make maps,' I tell Dr. Ross. 'Cities.' 'Maps of what?' 'On the computer?' 'No, by hand.' 'I see, I see.'

'We're going to talk more about money next time. We have to stop now.'

I look at the clock. 7:05. She always gives an extra three minutes.

'What are you going to do when you leave, Dariez?'

She always asks that. What am I always going to do?

I'm going to go home and freak out. I'm going to sit with my family and try not to talk about myself and what's wrong. I'm going to try and eat. Then I'm going to try and sleep. I dread it. I can't eat, and I can't sleep. I'm not doing well in terms of being a functional human, you know?

Hey, soldier, what's the matter?

I can't sleep, and I can't eat, sir!

How about I pump you full of a lead, soldier, would that get you motivated?

Can't say, sir! I'd probably still be unable to sleep or eat, just a little bit heavier from the lead.

Get up there and fight, soldier! The enemy is there! The enemy is too strong. I can't fight them. They're too smart.

You're smart too, soldier. Not smart enough.

So-o, you're just going to give up?

That's the plan.

'I'm going to just keep at it,' I tell Dr. Ross. 'That's all I can do. I'll keep at it and hope it gets better.'

'Are you taking your medicine?'

'Yes.'

'Are you seeing Dr. Barnthy?'

Dr. Jarnerny is the psychopharmacology. He's the one who prescribes me meds and sends me to pee-pee like Dr. Ross. He's a trip in his own way, a little fat Santa with rings embedded in his fingers.

'Yes, later in the week.'

'You know to do what he says.'

Yes, Doctor. I'll do what you say. I'll do what you all say.

'Here,' I hand Dr. Ross the check from my mom.

When I was four, this is how things were:

One was cold, one was hot, and the red one was really hot. Two millimeters wasn't enough. I burned myself on it and Dad, who hadn't realized ('It must only get hot in the afternoon,') encased it in dark gray foam with duct tape, I remember there was a green pipe and a red pipe and a white pipe, gathered near the corner of the hallway just before the bathroom, and as soon as I could walk I investigated them all, walked up to them and put my palm about two millimeters away from each one to test if it was hot or cold.

Our family lived in a crappy apartment in Knox.

But-but-but, duct tape never stopped me and I thought the foam was fun to pick at and chew so, I picked it off and chewed it and then when other kids came over to my house, I dared them to touch the re-exposed pipe; I told them, anyone who came in had to touch it, otherwise they were a pussy, which was a word I learned from Daddy watching TV, which I thought was great because it was a word with two meanings: the cat that girls liked and the thing you called people to make them do stuff. Just like the chicken had two meanings: the bird that walked around and the white stuff you ate.

I didn't know it was crappy at the time, for the reason that I didn't have our better apartment to compare it to yet. But there was exposed piping. That's no good. You don't want to raise your child in a house with exposed piping.

Some people touched the hot pipe if you called them pussy as well.

Part: 5

I had my own room... but I didn't like to be alone in it; the only room...

I liked to be in was the living room, under the table that held all the brochures.

I made it my little fort; I put a blanket...

Yes, a blanket over me and worked in there...

Yeh- yeah- yepper- with a light that Dad rigged up...

I worked on maps...

I worked on drawings...

Drawing is something that I love...

I loved maps... too...

I knew that we lived in Knox and I had a map of it, a Knox Five or so Boroughs parts - with all the streets laid out.

I knew exactly where we lived, on the cover of 11 Street and 5rd Avenue.

Third Avenue was a yellow street because, it was an avenue, big and long and significant.

Fifty-Third Street was a little white street that went across Knox.

The streets went sideways and- and the avenues went up and down; that was all you had to recall. (Dad helped me remember, too, when we went out for pancakes.)

He would ask, 'Do you want them cut in streets and avenues, Dariez?'

And- and- And I'd go- 'Sure!'

And- and... he'd cut the stack of pancakes in a grid, and we'd name each street and avenue as we went along, making sure to get on the Ave. and- and- 5th Street.)

It was so simple... so simple...

If you were really forward-thinking (like- um- ah- I- I was, duh) ... you knew that traffic on the even streets went east (East for Even) and the odd streets went west (West is Odd.)

Then, every bunch of streets, there were fat yellow streets, like the avenues, that went both ways. These were the famous streets: 41th St., 32nd St. The complete list from the bottom up was 11 St., Jender St., Smaith St., 13th St., 25th St., 34th St., 42nd St., 57th St., 72nd St.

(there wasn't any big street in the 60s; they got shafted,) 79th St., 86th St., 99th St., and then you were in Harlem, where Knox effectively ended for little white boys who made forts under encyclopedias and studied maps.

As soon as I saw the Knox map...

I wanted to draw it...

I should be able to draw the place where... um, where...

I - I- I'd myself for one and one only like existed, lived, and serviced.

So-o...

I asked Mom for tracing paper and she got it for me, and I brought it into my fort and I pointed the light right down on the first map of the town - downtown... where, where, ah- where 17th Street was, and the run-of-the-mill market worked.

The streets were crazy down there; they didn't have any kind of streets and avenues; they just had names and they looked like a game of Pick-Up Sticks.

But- but- but- ah- ooo- before, before, be-for-e- I- I could even worry about the streets, I had to get the land right. Knox was actually- truly- built on the property.

Sometimes, like sometimes-ssss-when they were digging up the streets you saw it down there- real dirt!

And the land had a certain curve to it at the bottom of the island, like a dinosaur head, bumpy on the right and straight on the left, a swooping majestic bottom.

I held my tracing paper down and tried to trace the line of lower Knox.

I couldn't do it.

I mean, it was ridiculous... outlandish...

My line didn't have whatsoever to do with the real one.

I didn't understand I- I- I was holding the tracing paper steady.

I looked at my small hands, and wonder- I think about everything and nothing at all. 'Stay still,' I told it...

I crumpled up the paper and tried o'er.

The line wasn't right again. It didn't have the swoop...

I crumpled up the paper and tried again, why- why-why- oh never mind- I thought.

This line was even worse than before.

Knox looked square... slanted...

I tried again... frustrated...

Oh boy, now it looked like a dick.

Crumple... shit- shit- fracking sucking a dick shit...

(girl looks up at me, rolling her eyes)

• (I thought he was cute then-)

Now it looked like a turd, another word I picked up from

Dad... who came to the school to see me...

Crumple... I suck... not dick like the drawing but something...

Now it looked like a piece of fruit... yet, dick-ish nonetheless...

It looked like everything- all things... but what it was supposed to look like: Knox.

I couldn't do it... piss-balls...

I didn't realize- realized- then that when you trace stuff, you're supposed to have a tracing table, lighted from below, not a trembling four-year-old hand, and locks to hold the paper straight...

So-o so, so, I just thought I was a letdown to all- and me too.

They always said on TV you could do anything you wanted, but here I was trying to do something, and it wasn't working. I would never be able to do it. I crumpled up the last piece of tracing paper and started sobbing, my head in my hands in my fort. Mom heard me.

Joy why are you here-

I cut...

'Dariez?'

'What? Go away.'

'What's wrong, honey?'

'Don't open the curtain! Don't open it! I have things here.'

'Why are you crying? What's the matter?'

'I can't do it.'

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing!'

'Tell Mommy, come on. I'm going to open the blanket'

'No!'

With her occupied, I ran across the room, streaking tears, wanting to get to the bathroom, to sit down on the toilet with the light off and splash hot water on my face.

But Mom was too quick. She shoved the encyclopedias back and loped across the room, swooping me up in her thin arms with the elbow skin that you could pull down. I beat my palms against her.

I jumped at her face as she pulled the blanket aside, bringing it taut under the encyclopedias. Mom threw her hands up and held the books in place, saving both of us from getting clobbered.

(A week later, she'd have Dad move the encyclopedias.)

'Dariez! We do not hit Mommy!'

'I can't do it I can't do it I can't do it!' I hit her.

'What?' She hugged me tightly, so I had no room to hit.

'What can't you do?'

'I can't draw Knox!'

'Huh?' Mom drew her face up and away from me, looked me in the eyes. 'Is that what you were trying to do down there?'

I nodded, sniffled.

'You were trying to trace Knox with the tracing paper I bought you?'

'I can't do it.'

'Dariez, no one can.' She laughed. 'You can't just trace freehand. It's impossible!'

'Then how do they make the maps?'

Mom paused.

'See? See? Someone can do it!'

'They have the equipment, Dariez. They're grown-ups and they have special tools that they use.'

'Well, I need those tools.'

'Dariez.'

'Let's buy them.'

'Honey.'

'Do they cost a lot of money?'

'Honey.'

Mom put me down on the sofa, which turned into a bed for her and Dad at night, and sat next to me. I wasn't crying anymore. I wasn't hitting anymore. My brain was all right back then; it didn't get stuck in ruts. 'Dariez,' she sighed, looked at me. 'I have an idea.

Instead of spending your time trying to trace maps of Knox, why don't you make your own maps of imaginary places?'

And that was the closest I've ever come to an epiphany.

I could make up my own city. I could use my own streets. I could put a river where I wanted. I could put the ocean where I wanted. I could put the bridges where I wanted, and I could put a big highway right across the middle of town...

Like -LIKE- like... Knox should have but, but, didn't. I could make my own subway system. I could make my own street names. I could have my own grid stretching off to the edges of the map. I smiled and hugged Mom.

She got me some thick paper- white construction paper. Later on, I grew to prefer straight computer paper. I went back under my fort and turned the light on and started on my first map. And I did that for the next five years-whenever I was in class, I didn't doodle, I drew maps. Hundreds of them. When I finished, I crumpled them; it was making them that was important. I did cities on the ocean, cities with two rivers meeting in the middle, cities with one big river that bent, cities with bridges, crazy interchanges, circles, and boulevards. I made the cities. That made me happy. That was my Anchor. And until I turned nine and turned to video games, that was what I wanted to be when I grew up: a mapmaker.

Part: 6

My family shouldn't have to put up with me.

They're good people, solid, happy.

Sometimes when I'm with them I-I-I thinks I'm on television.

We live in an apartment-a much better one than the Knox one, but still not good enough, not something to be proud of-in Knox.

Knox is a big fat blob with its own ugly shape across from Knox; it looks like Jabba the Hutt counting his money.

Its bridges connect to Knox and it's split up by Jenders and creeks-filthy green streaks of water that remind you that it used to be a swamp. There are brownstones-limestone and maroon houses that stand

Like- like fence posts and always have Indian men refurbishing them-and everybody goes crazy for those, pays millions of dollars to live in them. But other than that, it's a pretty status less place. It's a shame we moved out of Knox, where all the real people with power live.

The walk from Dr. Ross's office to our apartment is a short one but loaded with mocking stores. Food stores. The absolute worst part of being depressed is food. A person's relationship with food is one of their most important relationships. I don't think your relationship with your parents is that important. Some people never know their parents. I don't think your relationships with your friends are important. But your relationship with air- that's key. You can't break up with air. You're kind of stuck together. Only slightly less crucial is water. And then food. You can't be dropping food to hang with someone else. You need to strike up an agreement with it.

I never liked eating traditional American things: pork chops, steak, rack of lamb ... I still don't. Never mind vegetables. I used to like the foods that come in abstract shapes: chicken nuggets, Fruit Roll-Ups, hot dogs. I liked junk food. I could demolish a bag of Cheez Doodles; I'd have Doodle- Cheez so far infused into my fingertips, I'd be tasting it on myself for a day. And so, I had a good thing going with food. I thought about it the way everyone else did; when you're hungry, you have some.

Then last fall happened, and I stopped eating.

Now I get mocked by these groceries, pizza places, ice cream stores, delis, Chinese places, bakeries, sushi joints, McDonald's.

They sit out in the street, pushing what I can't enjoy. My stomach shrank or something; it doesn't take in much, and if I force in a certain amount it rejects everything, sends me to the bathroom to vomit in the dark.

If he would just relax, let the rope go, I'd be able to give him all the food he wanted. But he's down there making me dizzy and tired, giving extra tugs as I pass restaurants that smell like fat and grease.

It's like a gnawing, the tug of a rope wrapped around the end of my gullet.

There's a man down there and he wants food, but the only way he knows to ask for it is to tug on the rope, and when he does, it closes up the entrance so-0I can't put anything in.

My stomach wants no part of it. Everything is forced. The food wants to stay on the plate, and once it's inside me, it wants to get back on the plate. When I do eat, it's one of two experiences: a battle or a Slaughter. When I'm bad-when the Cycling is going on in my brain-it's a Battle.

Every bite hurts.

People give me strange looks: What's wrong, Dariez, why aren't you eating? But then there are moments when it comes together. The Shift hasn't happened yet- yet- yet- maybe it never will, but sometimes-just enough times to give me hope my brain jars back into where it's supposed to be.

When I feel- one of these: (I call them the Fake Shifts) I should always eat, although I don't; I sometimes stubbornly, foolishly- dumbly- I-I-I try to hold the feeling, and- and get things done while my mind can operate, and neglect to eat, and then...

I'm back where... I started.

But oh, when I slip back into being okay when I'm around food, watch out.

It's all going in. Eggs and hamburgers and fries and ice cream and marmalade and Fruity Pebbles and cookies and broccoli...

And- and- and- even-and noodles and sauce... Screw you; I'm going to eat all of you.

...I play with my food and she is looking at me with a look that, I give the dog when she is taking a shit, in the yard.

I'm Joy, she was over the way...

Torah- a woman- I don't know when my body chemistry is going to line up to let me eat again, so you are all getting in me right now.

All my cells take the food in and they love it and they love my brain for it and I smile, and I am full; I am full and functional and I can do anything, and once...

I eat-this is the amazing part-once I eat, I sleep, I sleep as I should...

I-I-I-

And that feels so-o mmm-good...

I eat it all, and the man is away from his rope.

He's busy down there eating everything-all things-that falls inside, running around like a chicken with its head cut off, the head on the floor, munching on all the food of its own... like-like a hunter who just brought home a kill... or were I form on the side of the road... yet-never-mind...

...And-but then-and-but-and, I wake up and the man is back, my stomach is tight...

...And I don't know what it was that got me to have a

Slaughter eating experience...

It's not pot... It's not girls... yet I never really had one of those, just the thoughts of...

It's not my family... yet, yet, yet-their love is strangling me...

I've-I-I-ongoingly like to-to think it must just be interaction-or A-sexual, in which case we're looking for the Shift and we haven't found it yet-yet.

Part: 7

(Back)

'Dariez?'

'Hi, Mom.'

The night is here except for a thin gray at the edge of the sky, and the trees are thick with rain, and the drizzle is pissing on me as I come up to my house...

No sunsets in spring. I lean in and ring the buzzer, streaked bronze from years of use-the most used buzzer in the building.

It growls deeply, amplified by the lobby...

(Lobby... Mailroom- mailbox, more like, just a compartment for mailboxes.)

I throw open one door and then the other. It's warm in the house, and it smells like cooked starch. The dogs greet me. (now)

'Hi, Sarrah...

Hi, Jordan...'

(Back)

They're little dogs...

My sister named them...; she's nine.

Sarrah is a mutt...; not her the dog...

My- my- father says he's a cross between a Chihuahua and a German shepherd... which must've been some wild dog sex... they had, until last year I thought that was the only way girls and boys did that too...

I hope the German shepherd was the man...

Or else the German shepherd girl probably wasn't too satisfied...

Sarrah has a pronounced under-bite; he looks like two dogs where one is eating the other's head from below, but when I take him for a walk, girls love him and talk to me.

Then they realize- thought of- figure out- what I'm young and or messed up, and they move on.

Jarddan, a Tibetan spaniel, looks like a small, brown lion.

He's small and cute but completely crazy.

His breed was devised in Tibet for the purpose of guarding monasteries. When he came into our home, he at once fixated on the house as a monastery, the bathroom as the most sacred monastic cell, and my mom as the Abbess. You can't go near my mother without Jarddan protecting her.

When she's in the bathroom in the morning, Jarddan has to be in there with her, placed upon the counter by the sink as she brushes her teeth.

Jarddan barks at me. Since I started losing it, he started barking at me. It's not something any of us mention.

'Dariez, how was Dr. Ross...?'

Mom comes out of the kitchen. She's still tall and skinny, looking better each year. I know that's weird to think, but what the hell- she's just a woman who happens to be my mom.

It's amazing how she looks statelier and more confident as she gets older.

I've seen pictures of her in college and she didn't look like much. Dad is looking like he made a better decision every year.

'It... was okay.' I hug her. She's taken such good care of me since I got bad; I owe her everything and I love her, and I tell her these days, although every time I say it, it gets a little diluted. I think you run out of I love you.

'Are you still happy with her?'

'Yeah.'

You can't afford to get anyone else, I think, looking at the crack in the wall next to my mom. This crack in our front hallway has been there for three or four years.

Dad paints over it and it just reracks. We've tried putting a mirror on it but it's a strange place to put a mirror- on one side of a hallway- and my sister started calling it the Vampire Mirror to tell if people who came into the house were vampires, and it came down after a few weeks when I came home stoned and stumbled into it.

'Because, if you're not we'll get you someone else.'

Now there's an exposed crack again. It's never going to get fixed.

'You don't need to get anyone else.'

'How's your eating? Are you hungry?'

Yes, I think. I am going to eat the food my mom made me. I'm still in control of my mind and I have medication and I am going to make this happen.

'Yes.'

'Good! To the kitchen!'

I go in, and the place is all set for me. Dad and my sister, Sarah, are sitting at the circular table, knives, and forks in hand, posing for me.

'How do we look?' Dad asks, banging his silverware on the table. 'Do we look hungry?'

My parents are always looking into new ways to fix me. They've tried acupuncture, yoga, cognitive therapy, relaxation tapes, various kinds of forced exercise (until I found my bike,) self-help books, Tae Bo, and feng shui in my room. They've spent a lot of money on me. I'm ashamed.

'Eat! Eat! Eat!' Sarah says. 'We were waiting for you.' 'Is this necessary?' I ask.

'We're just making things homier for you.' Mom brings a baking pan over to the table. It smells hot and juicy. Inside the pan are big orange things cut in half.

'We have squash'-she turns back to the stove-rice, and chicken.' She brings over a pot of white rice with vegetable bits sprinkled over it and a plate of chicken patties. I go for them-a star-shaped one, a dinosaur-shaped one. Sarah grabs at the dinosaur-shaped one at the same time.

'The dinosaurs are mine!'

'Okay.' I let her. She kicks me under the table. 'How're you feeling?' she whispers. 'Not good.'

She nods.

Sarah knows what this means.

It means she'll see me on the couch tonight, tossing and turning and sweating as Mom brings me warm milk. It means she'll see me watching TV, but not really watching, just staring and not laughing, as I don't do my homework.

It means she'll see me sinking and failing. She reacts well to this. She does more schoolwork and has more fun. She doesn't want to end up like me. At least I'm giving someone an example not to follow.

'I'm sorry. They're trying to do a big thing for you.'

'I can tell.'

'So, Dariez, how was school today?' Dad asks. He forks into the squash and looks at me through his glasses. He's short and wears glasses, but as he says, at least he has hair-thick, dark stuff that he passed on to me. He tells me I'm blessed; the genes are good on both sides, and if I think I'm depressed now, imagine if I knew I was going to lose my hair like everyone else! Ha.

'All right,' I say.

'What'd you do?'

'Sat in class and followed instructions.'

We clink at our food. I take my first bite-a carefully constructed forkful of chicken, rice, and squash-and mash it into my mouth. I will eat this; I chew it and feel that it tastes good and rear my tongue back and send it down. I hold it. All right. It is in there.

'What did you do in... let's see... American History?'

'That one wasn't so good. The teacher called on me and I couldn't talk.'

'Oh, Dariez...' Mom is like.

I start constructing another bite.

'What do you mean you couldn't talk?' Dad asks.

'I knew the answer, but... I just...' 'You trailed off,' Mom says.

I nod as I take in the next bite. 'Dariez, you can't keep doing that.'

'Honey-' Mom tells him.

'When you know the answer to something, you have to speak up for yourself; how can that not be clear?'

'We know... Your mother and I know and we're doing everything we can to help you. Right?' He looks across the table at Mom.

'Yes.' 'Me too,' Sarah says. 'I'm doing everything I can, too.'

'That's right.' Mom reaches across to ruffle her hair. 'You're doing great.'

'Yesterday, I could've smoked pot, but didn't,' I say, looking up, curled over my plate.

'Dariez!' Dad snaps.

'Let's not talk about this,' Mom says.

'KID'S- We had buttons put down over there is no one taking care of her, and she was old...'

Dad takes in a heaping forkful of squash and chews it like a furnace- and said 'um- hmm.'

'Don't jump on him,' Mom says, they were not happy about it at all.

'I'm not, I'm being friendly.' Dad smiles.

'Dariez, you are blessed with a good mind. You just have to have confidence in it and talk when people call on you. Like you used to do. Back when they had to tell you to stop talking.'

'It's different now...' the third bite.

'But you should know; it's important. I'm doing experiments with my mind, to see how it got the way it is.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Not around your sister,' Mom says. 'I want to tell you some news about Jarddan.' Hearing his name, the dog walks into the kitchen, takes up his position by Mom. 'I took him to the vet today.'

'So, you didn't go to work?'

'Right.'

'And that's why you cooked.'

'Exactly.'

'So, you want to know what happened at the vet?' 'It's crazy,' Sarah says.

'We took him in for the seizures he's been having,' Mom says.

'And you'll never believe what the vet said.'

'What?'

'They took some blood tests last time, and the results came back I was sitting in the little room with Jarddan; he was being very good. The vet comes in and looks at the papers and says,

'These numbers are not compatible with life.''

I'm jealous of her. Can you be jealous of your mom for being able to handle things? I couldn't take a day off, take a dog to the vet, and cook dinner. That's like three times too much stuff for me to get done in one day. How am I ever going to have my own house?

I laugh. There's a bite on my fork in front of me. It shakes.

'What do you mean?'

'That's what I asked him. And it turns out that a dog's blood sugar level is supposed to be between forty and one hundred. You know what Jarddan's is?'

'What?'

'Nine.'

'Ruff!' Jarddan barks.

'Then'-Mom is laughing now there's some sort of another number, some enzyme ratio level, that's supposed to be between ten and thirty, and Jarddan's is one-eighty!'

'Good dog,' Dad says.

'The vet didn't know what to make of it. He told me to keep giving him the supplements and the vitamins, but that basically he's a medical miracle.'

I look over at Jarddan, the Tibetan spaniel. Pushed-in shaggy face, black nose, big dark eyes like mine.

Panting and drooling. Resting on his furry front legs.

'He shouldn't be alive, but he is,' Mom says.

I look at Jarddan more.

Why are you bothering?

You've got an excuse. You've got bad blood.

You must like living; I guess I would if I were you. Going from meal to meal and guarding Mom. It's a life. It doesn't involve tests or homework. You don't have to buy things.

'Dariez?'

You shouldn't be able to be alive and you are. Do you want to trade?

'I... I guess it's cool.'

'It's very cool,' Mom says. 'It's by God's grace that this dog lives.'

Oh, right, God. Forgot about him. He's definitely, according to Mom, going to have a role in me getting better.

But I find God to be an ineffectual shrink. He adopts the 'do nothing' method of therapy. You tell him your problems and he, ah, does nothing.

'I'm done,' Sarah says. She picks up her plate and trots out of the room, calling to Jarddan. He follows.

'I can't eat any more either,' I say.

I've managed five bites. My stomach is churning and closing fast. It's all such inoffensive food; I shouldn't have any problems with it.

I should be able to eat three plates of it. I'm a growing boy; I shouldn't have trouble sleeping; I should be playing sports! I should be making out with girls.

I should be finding what I love about this world. I should be frickin' eating and sleeping and drinking and study and watch TV and be normal.

'Try a little more, Dariez,' Mom says. 'No pressure, but you should eat.'

That's...

-right...

I'm going to eat. I slice off the top of the squash, in streets and avenues, a big chunk, and put it on my fork and get it in my mouth. I'm going to eat you.

I chew it, soft and yielding, easily molded into a shape that fits down my throat. It tastes sweet. Now hold it. It's in my stomach. I'm sweating.

The sweating gets worse around my parents. My stomach has it. My stomach is full of six bites of this meal. I can take six bites. I won't lose it. I won't lose this meal that my mom has made. If a dog can live, I can eat. I hold it. I make a fist. I tense my muscles.

'Are you okay?'

'One second,' I say.

I-lose...

My stomach hitches as I leave the table.

What were you trying to do, soldier?

I was trying to eat, sir!

And what happened?

I got caught thinking about some crap, sir!

What kind of crap?

How I want to live less than my parents' dog.

Are you still concentrated on the enemy, soldier?

I don't think so.

Do you even know who the enemy is?

I think... it's me.

That's right.

I have to concentrate on myself.

Yes. But not right now, because now you're going to the bathroom to throw up! It's tough to fight when you're throwing up!

I stumble into the bathroom, turn off the light, close the door. The horrible thing is that I like this part because when it's over I know I'll be warm; I'll have the warmth in me of a body that has just been through a trauma. I bear down on the toilet in the dark- I-I know just where to go -and my stomach hitches again and slams up at me, and I open up and groan. It comes out, and I hear my mother outside, sniffling, and my dad muttering, probably holding her.

I grip the handle and flush a few times, alternating filling the toilet and flushing it. When I'm done, I'll go to sleep, and I won't do any homework; I'm not up to it tonight.

And I think as I'm down there:

The Shift is coming. The Shift has to become.

Because like- if you keep on living like this you'll die.

Part: 8

That's Joy... She's one of the teens. Did they tell you about the renovations?

Yeah.

How old are you?

14 um - no 15.

She looks stressed out for 15. You need to relax. Get a girlfriend or something, you know.

- I'm working on it.
- M-mm-hmm.

So, what is it you- do here, exactly?

Same thing as you.

Are you a patient?

What were you doing in the emergency room this morning?

ER has the best coffee, son.

They just let you out?

No.

So why am I depressed? That's the million-dollar question, baby, the Tootsie Roll question; not even the owl knows the answer to that one. I don't know either.

All I know is the chronology.

Two years ago, I got into one of the best high schools in Knox: Executive Pre-Professional High School. It's a new school set up to create the leaders of tomorrow; corporate internships are mandatory; the higher-ups of Merrill Lynch come and speak to classes and distribute travel mugs and stuff.

This billionaire philanthropist named Robberts lets- let's set it up in conjunction with the public school system, like a school within a school-all you have to do to get in is passing a test. Then your whole high school is paid for and you have access to 800 of the smartest, most interesting students in the world- not to mention the teachers and visiting dignitaries.

You can come out of Executive Pre-Professional High School and go right to 17st Street, although that's not what you should do; what you should do is come out and go to Harvard and then law school.

That's how you end up being, like, President.

I'll admit it: I kind of want to be President.

So, this test-they named it the Robberts Lutz Philanthropic Exam, in honor of his philanthropies-became fairly important in my life. It became more important than, uh, food, for instance.

I bought the book for it-Robberts Lutz puts out his own line of test prep books for his own test-and started studying three hours a day.

I was in seventh grade, and I got comfortable with my room for the first time I'd come home with my heavy backpack and toss it on the bed and watch it bounce, toward the pillows as I - I sat down in my chair and pulled out my test-prep book.

On my cell phone, I would go to TOOLS: ALARM... and set me up for a two-hour practice exam...

There were five practice exams in the book, and after I did them all, I was thrilled to discover an ad at the back for twelve more Robberts Lutz test prep books...

Joy- I remember- I went to Barnes and Noble; they didn't have all of them in stock-they'd never had anyone ask for all of them, them-so they had to put in an order for me.

But then it was game on. I started taking a practice exam every day.

The questions covered the standard junk that they test you on to determine if you're not an idiot:

Reading comprehension. Ooh. Can you read this selection and tell what kind of tree they're trying to save?

Vocabulary, did you buy a book full of weird words and learn them?

Math- are you able to turn off your mind to the world and fill it with symbols that follow rules?

I made that test my bitch. I mauled the practice exams and slept with the books under my pillow and turned my brain into a fierce machine, a buzz saw that could handle anything. I could feel myself getting smarter, under the light at my desk. I could feel myself filling myself.

Now, I stopped hanging out with a lot of friends when I got into the Executive Pre-Professional mode. I didn't have many friends to begin with-I had the kids who I sat with during lunch, the bare minimum-but once I started carrying flashcards around, they sort of avoided me. I don't know what their problem was; I just wanted to maximize my time. When all of my test-prep books were done,

I got a personal tutor to shore me up for the exam. She told me halfway through the sessions that I didn't need her, but kept my mom's $800. I got a 100 on the test, out of 100.

The day I got those test results, a cold, plaintive, late fall Knox day, was my last good day. I've had good moments scattered since then, times when I thought I was better, but that was the last day I felt triumphant. The letter from Executive Pre-Professional High School came in the mail, and Mom had saved it on the kitchen table for me when I got home from Tae Bo class after school, which was something I intended to keep doing in high school, to have on my extracurricular activity sheet when I applied for college, which would be the next hurdle, the next step.

Me- 'Dariez, guess what's here?'

I threw down my backpack and ran past the Mirror in the living room to the kitchen. There it was: a manila envelope.

The good kind of envelope. If you failed the test, you got a small envelope; if you got in, you got a big one.

'Yeesssss!' I screamed. I tore it open.

I took out the purple-and-gold welcome packet and held it up like the holy grail. I could have used it to start my own religion. I could have made, yah' know, love to it. I kissed it and hugged it until Mom said, 'Dariez, stop that.

That's very sick...

How about you call your friends?'

She didn't know, because I never told her, that my friends were a bit estranged. They're sort of ancillary anyway, friends. I mean, they're important- everybody knows that; the TV tells you, but they come and go. You lose one friend; you pick up another. All you have to do is talk to people, and this was back when I could talk to anybody. My friends, when I had them, pretty much just ragged on me and took my seat when I left the room anyway.

Why did I need to call them up?

Except for Kristopher, Kristopher was a real friend; I guess I'd call him my best friend. He was one of the oldest guys in my class, born on that cusp where you can be the youngest person in an older class of the oldest in a younger class, and his parents did the right thing and went with the latter.

He was smart and fearless, with a flop of brown curly hair and the sort of glasses, that made girls like him, square black ones. He had freckles and he talked a lot. When we got together, we would start projects: an alarm clock torn apart and distributed over a wall, a stop-motion video of Lego people having sex, a Web site for pictures of toilets.

I had met him by wandering over to the table during lunch with my head buried in flashcards, sitting down, having one of his friends ask me what I was doing there, and having him come by, flush with tacos, to rescue me, ask what I was studying. It turned out that he and I were taking the same exam, but he wasn't studying at all-didn't believe in it.

He introduced me to the table conversation about what Princess Zelda would be like in bed-I said she'd be terrible, because she'd been locked up in dungeons since puberty, but Kristopher said that'd make her super-hot.

Kristopher called me that Friday night.

'Want to come over and watch movies?'

'Sure.' I was done with my practice test for the day.

Kristopher lived in a small apartment in a big building in downtown Knox by City Hall. I took the subway in (my mom had to okay it with Kristopher's mom, which was horrifying,) identified myself to Kristopher's paunchy doorman, and took the elevator up to his floor.

Kristopher's mom greeted me and brought me into his ventilated chamber (past his dad, who wrote in a room that resembled a prison cell, occasionally beating his head against his desk, while Kristopher's mom brought him tea) and flopped on his bed, which wasn't yet covered with the sort of stains that would define it in the future. I'm good at flopping on things.

'Hey,' Kristopher was like. 'You want to smoke some pot?'

Oh. So-o this was what watching movies meant. A quick recap of what I knew about drugs: my mom told me never to do them; my dad told me not to do them until after the SATs.

Mom trumped Dad, so I vowed to never do them-but what if someone made me? I thought drugs might be something people did to you, like jabbing you with a needle while you were trying to mind your business.

'What if someone makes me, Mom?' I had asked her; we were having a drug conversation in a playground.

I was ten. 'What if they hold a gun to my head and force me to take the drugs?' 'That's not really how it works, honey,' she answered. 'People take drugs because they want to. You just have to not want to.'

And now here I was with Kristopher, wanting to. His room smelled like certain areas of Central Park, down by the lake, where white guys with dreadlocks played bongos.

My mom hovered in my head.

'Nah,' I was like.

'No problem.' He opened a pungent bag and put a chunk of the contents of the bag in a fascinating little device that looked like a cigarette but was made of metal. He lit it up with a butane lighter that made a flame approximately as large as my middle finger. He puffed right up against his wall.

'Don't you have to open a window?'

'Nah, it's my room; I can do what I want.'

'Doesn't your mom care?'

'She has her hands full with Dad.'

The section of wall he smoked against would get discolored over the next two years. Eventually, like the rest of the room, it would get covered up with posters of rappers with gold teeth.

Kristopher took three or four breaths of his metal cigarette and made the room smell musty and hot, then announced:

'Let's motivate, son! What do you want to get?' 'Action.' Duh.

I was in seventh grade.

'All right! You know what I want?' Kristopher's eyes lit up. 'I want a movie with a cliff.'

'A mountain-climbing one?'

'It doesn't have to be about mountain climbing. Just needs at least one scene where some dudes are fighting, and somebody gets thrown off a cliff.'

'Did you hear about Paul Stojanovich?'

'Who's that?'

'He's the producer who invented World's Scariest Police

Chases and Cops.' pretty much just ragged on me and took my seat when I left the room anyway. Why did I need to call them up?

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'Want to come over and watch movies?'

'Sure.' I was done with my practice test for the day.

Kristopher lived in a small apartment in a big building in downtown Knox by City Hall. I took the subway in (my mom had to okay it with Kristopher's mom, which was horrifying,) identified myself to Kristopher's paunchy doorman, and took the elevator up to his floor. Kristopher's mom greeted me and brought me into his ventilated chamber (past his dad, who wrote in a room that resembled a prison cell, occasionally beating his head against his desk, while Kristopher's mom brought him tea) and flopped on his bed, which wasn't yet covered with the sort of stains that would define it in the future. I'm good at flopping on things.

'Hey,' Kristopher was like. 'You want to smoke some pot?'

Oh...

So, this was what watching movies meant. A quick recap of what I knew about drugs: my mom told me never to do them; my dad told me not to do them until after the SATs.

Mom trumped Dad, so I vowed to never do them-but what if someone made me? I thought drugs might be something people did to you, like jabbing you with a needle while you were trying to mind your business.

'What if someone makes me, Mom?' I had asked her; we were having a drug conversation in a playground.

I was ten. 'What if they hold a gun to my head and force me to take the drugs?' 'That's not really how it works, honey,' she answered. 'People take drugs because they want to. You just have to not want to.'

And now here I was with Kristopher, wanting to. His room smelled like certain areas of Central Park, down by the lake, where white guys with dreadlocks played bongos.

My mom hovered in my head.

'Nah,' I was like.

'No problem.'

He opened a pungent bag and put a chunk of the contents of the bag in a fascinating little device that looked like a cigarette but was made of metal.

He lit it up with a butane lighter that made a flame approximately as large as my middle finger.

He puffed right up against his wall.

'Don't you have to open a window?'

'Nah, it's my room; I can do what I want.'

'Doesn't your mom care?'

'She has her hands full with Dad.'

The section of wall he smoked against would get discolored over the next two years. Eventually, like the rest of the room, it would get covered up with posters of rappers with gold teeth.

Kristopher took three or four breaths of his metal cigarette and made the room smell musty and hot, then announced:

'Let's motivate, son! What do you want to get?' 'Action.' Duh.

I was in seventh grade.

'All right! You know what I want?' Kristopher's eyes lit up. 'I want a movie with a cliff.'

'A mountain-climbing one?'

'It doesn't have to be about mountain climbing. Just needs at least one scene where some dudes are fighting, and somebody gets thrown off a cliff.' 'Did you hear about Paul Stojanovich?'

'Who's that?'

'He's the producer who invented World's Scariest Police Chases and Cops.'

'No kidding? The host?'

'No, the producer. The host kicks ass, though.'

Kristopher led the way out of his room and past his father- typing away, wiping sweat, for all intents and purposes a part of the computer-to his front door, where his mom, who had long dirty blond hair and wore overalls, stopped us and gave us cookies and our coats.

'I love my life,' Kristopher said. 'Bye, Mom.' We entered the elevator with our mouths full of cookies.

'Okay, so what were you saying? I love World's Scariest Police Chases.' Kristopher swallowed. 'I love it when the guy is like' Kristopher put on a stern overenunciated brogue-'These two-bit bandits thought they could turn a blind eye to the law, but the Broward County Sherif's office showed th em the light-and it led them straight to jail.''

I cracked up, spitting cookie bits everywhere. 'I'm good at voices. Do you want to hear Jay Leno blowing the devil? I got it from this comedian Bill Hicks.'

'You never let me finish about Paul Stojanovich!' I said.

'Who?'

The elevator arrived in Kristopher's lobby. 'The pro-duc-er of World's Scariest Police Chases.'

'Oh, right.' Kristopher threw open the glass lobby door. I followed him into the street, tossed up my hood, and bundled myself in it.

'He was posing with his fiancée, for like a wedding picture? And they were doing it in Oregon, right next to this big cliff. And the photographer was like 'Move back, move a little to the left.' And they moved, and he fell off the cliff.'

'Oh my God!' Kristopher shook his head. 'How do you learn this stuff?' 'The Internet.' I smiled.

'That is too good. What happened to the girl?'

'She was fine.'

'She should sue the photographer. Did they sue him?'

'I don't know.'

'They better. I would sue. You know, Dariez' - Kristopher looked at me steadily, his eyes red but so alive and bright-' I'm going to be a lawyer.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'Yeah. Screw my dad. He doesn't make any money. He's miserable. The only reason we even live where we do is that my mom's brother is a lawyer and they got the apartment way back when. It used to be my uncle's apartment. Now he does work for the building, so they cut Mom a deal. Everything good I have is due to lawyers.'

'I think I might want to be one too,' I said.

'Why not? You make money!'

'Yeah.' I looked up. We were on a bright, cold, gray Knox sidewalk. Everything cost so much money. I looked at the hot dog man, the cheapest thing around - you wouldn't get away from him without forking over three or four bucks.

'We should be lawyers together,' Kristopher said. 'Pardis and... what's your last name?'

'Gilner.'

'Pardis and Gilner.'

'Okay.'

I'm awakened by a guy in light blue scrubs taking my blood. That's an interesting way to wake up. The guy comes into the room with a cart-carts are very popular here-as light creeps through the blinds.

'I need your blood. For downstairs.'

'Uh, okay.'

I present my arm. I'm too beating to ask any questions. He takes a little bit of blood expertly through the back of my hand under my middle-finger knuckle-doesn't leave any kind of mark-and rolls along, leaving

Muqtada asleep, or awake and paralyzed by life; it's tough to tell. I want to get more sleep, but once you've been stuck, you're inclined to get up, so I move out of bed and take a shower with the hospital-provided towels and my parent-provided shampoo and the generic soap that I pump out of the wall. The shower is searing and wonderful, but I don't want to stay too long- I have to break my habit of languishing in the bathroom-so I dry off and drop my stuff back at the nurses' station. Smitty isn't there; instead, there's a big guy who introduces himself as Harold and tells me to dump the towels in a hamper that looks just like a garbage can by the dining room, something that I know I've seen Humble and Jim dump apple cores and banana peels into.

'Hey, buddy, you're up!' Armelio calls out, bounding down the hall at me. 'How'd you sleep?'

'Not good. I needed a shot.'

'That's okay, buddy, we all need shots once in a while.'

'Heh.' I crack the day's first smile. Armelio uncorks one of his own.

'It's time to wake everyone up for vitals,' he says, treading down the hall. 'All right, everybody! Vitals!

Time to take your vitals!'

A caravan of my fellow bleary mental patients- or wait, I think we're called in-patient psychiatric treatment recipients, technically emerge from their compartments, rubbing their eyes and staggering as if they have a job to get to and they just need that first cup of coffee. Surprised by my good fortune, I put myself at the front of the line and become the first to get my blood pressure and pulse taken. 120 / 80. I continue to be the picture of health.

'Dariez?' Harold, the big guy, asks when everyone is done.

We shook hands, maintaining our stride, nearly clotheslining a frilled-up little girl walking in the other direction. Then we turned up Church Street and rented this reality DVD, Life Against Death, which had a lot of cliffs, as well as fires, animal attacks, and skydiving accidents. I sat propped in Kristopher's bed, him smoking pot and me refusing, feeding off him, telling him that I thought I was getting a contact high when really- I was just feeling like I had stepped into a new groove. At cool parts of Life Against Death, we paused and zoomed in: on the hearts of explosions, spinning wheels after truck crashes, and one guy freaking out in a gorilla cage and getting a rock thrown at him. We talked about

making our own movie someday. I didn't go to sleep until four, but I was in someone else's house, so I woke up early-at eight with that crazy sleeping- at- someone- else's house energy. I passed Kristopher's father at his computer and grabbed a book off their shelf in the living room-Latin Roots. I studied Latin Roots all morning, for the test.

We kept doing it. It became a regular thing. We never formalized it, never named it... but on Fridays, Kristopher would call and ask me to watch movies. I think he was lonely. Whatever he was, he became the one person I wanted to stay in touch with after junior high. And now, a year later, I was in my kitchen holding my acceptance letter and wondering if he had one too.

'I'll call Kristopher,' I told Mom.

Part: 9

'Yeah?'

'You haven't been filling out your menus.' 'Every day, you're supposed to put down what sort of meals you want. On one of these.'

'What are those?' She holds up what looks like a placemat, with columns of food: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner. 'You should have gotten this in the welcome packet the nurse gave you.' Ah, the one

I completely ignored. I nod. 'I just... didn't...'

'It's okay, but if you don't mark up your menus, you're going to get a meal we pick for you every time. So, fill one out for lunch and dinner today. For breakfast, you're going to have to have one of the omelets.'

I put my elbows down on the desk and eye the menu choices: hamburger, fish nuggets, French-cut beans, turkey with stuffing, fresh fruit, pudding, oatmeal, orange juice, milk 4oz, milk 8oz, 2% milk, skim milk, tea, coffee, hot chocolate, split pea soup, minestrone soup, fruit salad, cottage cheese, bagel, cream cheese, butter, jelly... highly processed food. I'm not going to have a problem eating this. My eyes swim over the choices.

'Circle what you want,' Harold explains. I start circling.

'If you want two of anything, put two-x by it.' I start putting 2x's.

I'm asking for something that no politician is going to provide, something that probably you only get in preschool. I'm asking for preschool.

I wish the world were like this if I just woke up and marked the food I'd be eating, and it came to me later in the day.

I suppose- and asked- it is like that, except you have to pay for whatever you want to eat, so maybe what I'm asking for is communism, but I think it's actually deeper than communism-I'm asking for simplicity, for purity and ease of choice and no pressure.

'After breakfast, fill one out for tomorrow,' Harold says as I hand in my menu.

Breakfast comes to the dining room and the omelet is like a science experiment: is the lack of cheese explained by the mysterious holes that dot the alleged egg?

'Your first omelet,' Jim says. Today, for a change, I sit with him instead of Humble. Johnny rounds out the table.

'It's really gross.' I pick at it.

'It's like a rite of passage,' Tim says. He speaks slowly and without any accents in his words.

''Everyone must eat the omelet.'' 'Yeah, you're in now,' Jim says.

'Huh.' Tim exhales.

'How did everybody sleep?'

I try... Night joy- she is in the same room as me...

'I'm anxious, really anxious,' Joy says.

'Why?'

'I've got that interview tomorrow, with the adult home.' 'What's that?'

'Huh.' Joy exhales. 'It's where people like us live.'

'It's a place like this, basically, except you have to hold a job,' Joy explains. 'You don't need a pass to leave; you can leave whenever you want, but you have to prove you're employed and be back by seven o'clock.'

'Wait, you can leave here with a pass?'

'Yeah, once you have five days inside, they have to give you a pass if you ask for it.' 'I'm going to try and be out in five days.'

'Huh,' Joy exhales. 'Good luck.'

I start in on my orange, which is about two hundred times more edible than the omelet. 'Why are you nervous about the interview?' I ask Joy. 'Anxious, not nervous. It's different. It's medical.'

'Why are you anxious, then? I'm sure you'll get in.'

'You can't be sure of a thing like that. And if I mess it up, I've got problems: I've been here too long; my coverage isn't going to last. Once you're giving the tours, it's really timed to leave.' He takes a slow bite of oatmeal. 'The last place wouldn't let me in because I'm too much of a picky eater. It's not like- this place. You can't pick your food.'

'So now you know what not to say!' I point out.

'Yeah, that's true.'

'See, when you mess something up,' I muse, 'you learn for the next delight. It's when people compliment you that you're in trouble. That means they expect you to keep it up.'

Joy nods. 'Very, very true.'

'Huh, yeah,' Joy says. 'My mom was always complimenting me, and look how I turned out.'

'This kid has some promise.' Joy laughs. 'He's on the level.'

'Huh, yeah, on the level. You play guitar, kid?'

'No.'

'Joy here's a great guitarist,' Joy says. 'Really great. He had a deal in the eighties.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Sh-hh,' Joy says. 'It ain't nothing.''

Joy continues: 'He can play better than the guy they bring in here to play for us. But he's a cool guy, that guy.'

'Yeah, he's on the level.'

'He's on the level. Is he coming in today for the group?'

'That's tomorrow. Today is art.'

'With Lacey.'

'Right.'

Joy sips his coffee. 'If there wasn't coffee on this earth, I'd be dead.'

I scan the room: everyone's here but Solomon, the Anorexics (who I've now seen peeking out of their rooms like, literally, skeletons in closets,) and Joy.

I wonder where she is. She didn't show up for vitals. Maybe she's out on a pass.

I hope she'll be around tonight for our date. Technically, it'll be my first date. 'You know, I'll tell you why I'm really anxious,' Joy pipes up, leaning in over his coffee. 'It's this stupid shirt.' He pushes forward his Marvin the Martian WORLD DOMINATOR sweatshirt. 'How'd I going to... do an interview in this?'

'Huh.' Joy exhales. 'Never under-shaft the power of Marvin.'

'Sh-hh, man. I'm serious.' 'I have shirts,' I say.

'What?' Joy looks up.

'I have shirts.

I'll lend you a shirt.'

'What? You would do that?'

'Sure. What size are you?'

'Medium. What are you?'

'Uh, child's large.'

'What is that in normal?' Joy turns to Joy.

'I didn't even know children had sizes,' Joy says. 'I think it would fit,' I stand up. Joy gets up next to me and, although his posture is way different- backward, really-he looks like a decent match.

'I have a blue-collared shirt that my mom makes me wear to church every week. I can have her bring it.'

'Today? The interview's tomorrow.'

'Yeah. No problem. She's two blocks away.'

'You would do that for me?'

'Sure!'

'All right,' Joy says. We shake hands. 'You're really on the level. You're a good person.' We look into each other's eyes as we shake. His are still full of death and horror, but in them I see my face reflected, and inside my tiny eyes inside his, I think I see some hope.

'Good person,' Joy echoes. Joy sits down. I put my tray back in the cart and Humble comes up behind me.

'You didn't sit with me, I'm very hurt,' he says. 'I might have to jump you for your lunch money later.'

Joy leads me into the bright hall with his odd gait.

'Everybody's in the dining room right now.' He gestures as we go down the sideways hall, the one that branches off of the one I entered. I look left- there's the dining room, painted blue, overlooked by a television, full of circular tables, separated from the hall by that glass with the square wire mesh in it. Inside, the tables have been pushed aside, and a panoply of people sit in a loose circle.

I can't even process them: they're the moteliest collection of people I've ever seen. An old man with a crazy beard (what happened to the shaving?) rocks back and forth; a gigantic black woman rests her chin on a cane; a burned-out-looking guy with long blond hair puts his hand through it; a stocky bald man with slatted eyes scratches his armpit and frowns; an older woman with glasses mimes what appears to be an eagle, talking, before turning and inspecting the back of her chair. The small man I saw in the hall twitches his leg. A girl with a streak of blue in her dark hair slumps over her chair like she's obviously more messed up than the others; a big girl with a wan frown leans back and twiddles her thumbs; a black kid with wire-rim glasses sits perfectly still, and hey there's from downstairs. He's still got his stained shirt on, and he's looking up at the lights. They must have processed him quickly because he's a return visitor.

You can tell who the meeting leader is: a thin woman with short dark hair. Out of a dozen or so people, she's the only one in a suit. Some people aren't even in their clothes, but in dark blue robes, loose and V-necked at the top.

'Hey, man,' Joy says, pulling me down the hall. 'If you're really interested you can just sit in on the meeting.'

'No, I-'

'I'm doing the tour, so I can get out.'

'Heh.'

'Now, smokers are at-wait, you don't smoke, do you?'

'Uh ... I smoke some things-'

'Cigarettes, I'm talking about.'

'No, I don't.'

'Did they ask if you did?'

'No.' 'That's probably because you're underage. How old are you?'

'Fifteen.'

'Jesus! Okay, well, smokes are after breakfast, after lunch, at three in the afternoon, after dinner, and before lights out. Five times a day.'

'All right.'

'Most people smoke. And if you had told them you smoked, they might have given you cigarettes.' 'Darn.' I chuckle.

'It's one of the only hospitals left that lets you smoke.' Joy points behind us. 'The smoking lounge is in the other hall.'

We come across a third hall, perpendicular to the one we're in. I see that Six North is shaped like an H: where you enter is at the bottom of the left leg; the nurses' office is at the junction of the left leg and the centerline; the dining room is at the intersection of the center line and the right leg, and the rooms line the left and right legs.

We're passing them now, going toward the top right of the *H*: they're simple doors with slots outside filled with slips of paper that say who's living in them and who their doctor is. The patients are listed by their first names; the doctors by their last. I see Betty / Dr. Mahmoud, Peter / Dr. Mulleins, Hannah / Dr. Mahmoud.

'Where's my room?'

'They probably don't have it set up yet; they'll have it after lunch for sure. Okay, so here's the shower-' He points to the right, to a door with a pink sliding plastic block on it between the words VACANT and OCCUPIED.

'When you're inside, you're supposed to put it to OCCUPIED, but people still don't pay any attention, and there's no lock on the door, so I like to keep really close to the door. It's tough, 'because the water doesn't reach.'

'How do I make it say 'Occupied'? From inside?'

'No, here.' Joy slides the block. It covers up VACANT and only OCCUPIED appears.

'That's pretty cool.' I push it back. It's a simple system, but I wouldn't know if Joy hadn't shown me.

'Is there a guys' bathroom and a girls' bathroom?' 'It's not a bathroom, it's a shower. You have your own bathroom in your room. But it's unisex, yeah. There's a shower in the other hall too 'we keep walking-' but I wouldn't use it. It bothers Solomon.' 'Who's Solomon?'

We come to the end of the hall. The windows have two panes of glass with blinds, somehow, between them.

Outside it's a cloud-spattered May Knox day. Chairs line the dead end. As we approach, a wilted little girl with blond hair and cuts on her face looks up from a pad of something and scurries into a nearby room.

'They show movies here sometimes.' Joy shrugs.

'Sometimes at the other end by the smoking lounge.'

'Uh-huh. Who was that?'

'the real Joy- they moved her in from the teen.'

We turn around.

'Medications are given out after breakfast, after lunch, and before bed.

We take them over there.' Joy points to a desk across from the dining room, where Smitty sits, pouring soda. 'That's the nurses' station; the other place is the nurses' office. All your lockers and stuff are behind the nurses' station.'

'They took my cell phone.'

'Yeah, they do that.'

'What about e-mail?'

'What?' We're back by the dining room. I slow my pace. Inside, the stocky bald man with squinty eyes who was frowning is speaking slowly and plaintively: '... Some people here who treat you like they have no respect for you as a human being, which I take personal offense to, and just because I went to my doctor and told him, 'I'm not afraid of dying; I'm only afraid of living, and

I want to put a bayonet through my stomach, 'that doesn't mean I'm afraid of any of you.'

'Let's concentrate on our discussion of things that make us happy, Humble,' says the psychologist.

'And I know about psychologists when they're writing down what you're saying they're really writing down how much money they're going to get when they sell their latest yacht because they're all yuppies with no respect...'

'C'mon,' Joy taps me.

'Is his name Humble?'

'Yeah. He's from Bensonhurst.' Bensonhurst is a particularly retro section of Knox, an Italian and Jewish neighborhood where a girl can walk down the street and have a car full of guys cruise up to her: Hey baby, you want to ride?

'Where are you from?' I ask.

'Sheepshead Bay.' That's another old- times Knox 'hood.

Russian. All these parts are far out.

'I'm from here,' I say.

'What, this neighborhood? This neighborhood is nice.' 'Yeah,

I guess so.'

'Man, I'd give my one remaining ball to live here, I tell you that. I'm trying to get into a home around here, at the Y. Anyway, there's the phone.' He points to our left. There's a payphone with a yellow receiver. 'It's on until ten at night,' he says. 'The number to call back is written right on it, and it's on your sheet too, if you need people to call back. If someone calls for you, don't worry, someones find you.' Joy stops a second.

'That's it.'

It's really very simple.

'What do we do here?' I ask. 'They have activities; a guy comes and plays guitar. Lacey comes in with arts and crafts. Other than that, you know, just take phone calls; try and get out, really.'

'How long do people stay?'

'Kid like you got money, got a family, you'll be out in a few days.'

I get the feeling I don't know how I know the rules of mental ward etiquette; maybe I was born with them; maybe I knew I'd end up here but I get the feeling that one big no-no in this place is asking people how they got here. I look at Joy's deep-sunk eyes.

It'd be a little like walking up to somebody in prison and going

'So? So? What's up, huh? Did-jah kill somebody? Did-ja?'

But I also get the impression that you can volunteer the reasons you got here at any Joy and no one will judge; no one will think you're too crazy or not crazy enough, and that's how you make friends. After all, what else is there to talk about? So, I tell Joy: 'I'm here because I suffer from serious depression.'

'Me too.' He nods. 'Since I was fifteen.' And his eyes shine with blackness and horror. We shake hands.

'Hey, Dariez!' Smitty says from his desk. 'We got your room ready; you want to meet your roommate?' Chapter Twenty-One My roommate is Joy.

He looks about like what you'd expect for a guy named Joy: big; straight gray beard; wide, wrinkled dark face; glasses with white plastic rims. He doesn't have any clothes, apparently, because he's in a dark blue robe, which smells intensely of body odor. Not that it's easy to notice any of this stuff at first, because when I go into the room, he's burrowed into bed.

Smitty flicks on the light. 'Joy! It's almost lunch! Wake up.

You have a new roommate!'

The first thing she said is...

'This young girl looked at me and said they're all named JOY here, it all just mental illnesses.'

'Mm?' He peers out from his sheets. 'Who is?' 'I'm Dariez,' I say, hands in my pockets.

'Mm, It is very cold here, Dariez. You did not like it.'

'Joy, weren't the men in here to fix the heat?'

'Yes, they fix yesterday, very cold. Fix today, tonight very cold.'

'It's spring, buddy; it doesn't get cold.'

'Mm.'

'Dariez, that's you over there.'

The bed in the far corner is made up for me if you can call it that. It's the sparsest bed I've ever seen: small and pale yellow with a sheet, a top sheet, and one pillow. No blanket, no stuffed animals, no drawers below, no patterns, no candles, no headboard. This reflects the style of the room, which basically has a window (encased blinds again,) a radiator under paneling, two beds, a table between the two beds with two funny-shaped hospital pitchers of water on top, lights, closet, and a bathroom.

There aren't any patterns on the wall; only the ceiling has porous tiles that could be fun to look at. I check the closet. Joy has a tired pair of pants on the bottom shelf. The rest of the space is mine. I take off my hoodie and stuff it in there. 'Okay?' Smitty asks. 'Lunch in five minutes.' He leaves the door open. I sit down on my bed.

'Please close door, please,' Joy says. I close it, come back. He looks right through me. 'Thank you.' 'What do we have for lunch?'

I ask.

'Hm.'

I'm not sure how to respond to that. I asked him a- what question. 'Ah ... Is the food good?'

'Mm.'

'Ah... Where are you from?'

'Egypt,' he says in a clipped voice, and it's the first word I've heard him say that he sounds happy with. 'Where are you from?

Your family?' 'White. German and Irish and Czech. A little Jewish, we think. But I'm Christian, I guess.'

That reminds me: in this sparse room, is it possible that the Gideons have placed a Bible? They put one in every motel in the world; they should have gotten to this place. I check the drawers, under the pitchers of water: nope. Out of range of the Gideons.

This is serious.

'Mm,' Joy says. 'What you look for? There is nothing.' He keeps staring.

I want to lie down, to get the sleep I couldn't get last night, but something about the way my roommate is lying there makes me want to leave, to walk around. Maybe it'll be good to be with someone like him, someone who seems worse off than me. I never really considered it, but there are people worse off than me, right? I mean, there really are people who are homeless and can't get out of bed and are never going to be able to hold a job and, in Joy's case, have serious problems with temperature, all because their brains are broken. Compared to them I'm... well, I'm a spoiled rich kid.

Which is another something to feel bad about?

So, who's worse off?

I go out into the hall and almost bash headlong into one of the giant metal racks of trays. The rack gives off heat and smells of fresh cooked salty food and is being wheeled along by an attendant in a skullcap.

'Careful!' he yells at me.

Oh, no. Now I have to eat. This will be the first time that they'll see how bad things are with me- I couldn't eat that egg downstairs and can't eat anything now. What if I get stressed and the man pulls his rope in my stomach and I throw up in the dining room? That'll be a fine entrance.

'Lunch!' the little man with the almost harelip calls down the hall. He pops out of the dining room, walks down to the far window and back, and knocks on everyone's door, even if they're awake and right in his face. 'Come on, Candace! Let's go, Bernie! C'mon, Kate! times to eat! Come on, Joy!'

'That's Armelio,' a voice says behind me. I turn; it's

Joy in his Martian sweatshirt. 'They call him the President. He runs the whole floor.' 'Hi, who're yah?' Armelio asks as he passes.

'Dariez.' I shake his hand.

'Great to meet you! All right! People! We have a new person here! Excellent, buddy! My new buddy. That's great! Time for lunch! Solomon, come out of your room, don't give any trouble, come and eat! Everybody's gotta eat!'

I move into the dining room with Armelio bellowing and cast myself at a seat next to the bald man, Humble, who is still talking about psychologists and yachts.

'Come this way, we're going to take your vitals,' Smitty says, seating me in the small office. He takes my blood pressure off a rolling cart and my pulse with delicate fingers. He writes down on a sheet in front of him: 120 / 80.

'One-twenty-over-eighty, that's dead normal, isn't it?' I ask.

'Yeah.' Smitty smiles. 'But we prefer to live normal.' He wraps up the blood pressure gauge. 'Stay right here, we'll send a nurse in to talk to you.'

'A nurse? What are you?'

'I'm one of the day directors on the floor.'

'And what is this floor, exactly...?'

'It's a short-term facility for adult psychiatric.'

'So, like, a mental ward?'

'Not an award, a hospital. The nurse will answer any questions.'

He steps out of the office, leaving me with a form: name, address, Social Security number. Then-wait-

I've seen this before! It's the questions from Dr. Jarnerny's office: Feeling that you are unable to cope with daily life. 1) Never, 2) Some days, 3) Nearly every day, 4) All the times.

What the hell, I'm in the hospital; I put 4's down the line there are about twenty prompts-except for the lines about self-mutilation, drinking, and drug use (I am not putting anything about pot, that's just the rule, told to me by Kristopher-you don't ever, ever admit to smoking pot, not to doctors, not to teachers, not to anyone in authority no matter how much you trust them; they can always report you to the FBI Pot-Smoking List.)

As I'm getting done, a squat black nurse with a kind wide smile and tightly braided hair steps in. She introduces herself with a thick West Indian accent. 'Dariez, I am Monica, a nurse on the floor here. I am going to ask you a couple of questions about what you're feeling and find out how to help you.'

'Yeah, uh... 'It's the joy of time to state my case. 'I came in because I was really freaked out, you know, and I checked in downstairs, but I wasn't totally sure where I was going, and now that

I'm here, I don't know if I really-'

'Hold on, honey, let me show you something.' Nurse Monica stands over me, although she's so short that we're almost the same height, and pulls out a photocopy of the form my mom signed downstairs only an hour before.

'You see that there? That signature says that you have been voluntarily admitted to psychiatric care at UMPC Hospital, yes?'

'Yeah...'

'And see? It says that you will be discharged at the discretion of the doctor once he has come up with your discharge plan.'

'I'm not getting out of here until a doctor lets me out!'

'Now, wait.' She sits. 'If you feel that this is not the place for you, after five days you can write a letter-we call it the Five-Day Letter-explaining why you feel that you do not belong here, and we will review that and allow you to leave if you qualify.' She smiles.

'So, I'm here for at least five days?'

'Somebody's people are just here for two. Definitely not more than thirty.'

Ho-boy. Well, not much to say about it. That is my mom's signature. I sit back in my chair. This morning I was a pretty functional teenager. Now I'm a mental patient. But you know, I wasn't that functional. Is that better? No, this is worse. This is a lot- 'Let's talk about how you came to be here,' Monica prompts.

I give her the rap.

'When was the last you were hospitalized?'

'Like, four years ago. I was in a sledding accident.'

'So, you've never been hospitalized for mental difficulties before.'

'Uh, nope.'

'Good... Now I want you to look at this chart. Do you see here?'

There's a little scale of 0-10 on a sheet in front of her. 'This is the chart of physical pain. I want you to tell me, right now, from a scale of zero to ten, are you experiencing any physical pain?'

I look closer at the sheet. Below the zero, it says no pain and below the ten it says unbearable excruciating pain. I have to bite my tongue.

'Zero,' I manage.

'All right, now, here's a very important question'-she leans in did you actually try to do anything to hurt yourself before you came here?'

I sense that this is an important question. It might be the kind of question that determines whether I get a normal room with a TV or a special room with straps.

'No,' I enunciate.

'You didn't take anything? You didn't try for the good sleep?'

'I'm sorry?'

'The good sleep, you know? That's what they call it. When you take many pills and drink alcohol and...' 'Ah, no,' I say. 'Well, that's good,' she says. 'We don't want to lose you. Think of your talents. Think of all the tools you have. From your hands to your feet.'

I do think about them. I think about my hands signing forms and my feet running, flexing up and down, as I sprint to some class I'm late for. I am good at certain things.

'So right- now we are getting ready for lunch,' Monica says.

'Are you a Christian?'

'Uh, yes.'

'Are you vegetarian?'

'No.'

'So, no specific diet restrictions, good. I need you to read these rules.' She drops four sheets of paper in front of me. 'They're about conduct on the floor.' My eye falls on 7...) Patients are expected to remain clean-shaven. Shaving will be supervised by an attendant every day after breakfast.

'I am not sure if you notice, but do you see what that first item is on the list?'

'Uh ... 'No cell phones on the floor?''

'That's right. Do you have one?'

I feel it in my pocket. I don't want to lose it. It's one of the only things that's making me right now. Without my cell phone, who will I be? I won't have any friends because I don't have their numbers memorized. I'll barely have a family since I don't know their cell phone numbers, just their home line. I'll be like an animal. 'Please give it here,' Monica says. 'We will keep it in your locker until your discharge, or you can have visitors take care of it.' I put it on the table.

'Please turn it off.'

I flip it open two new voicemails, who are they? ...And hold END. Bye-bye, little phone.

'Now, this is very important; do you have anything sharp on your person?'

'My keys?'

'Same as the phone. We keep those.'

I plop them in a heap on the table; Monica sweeps them into a tray like an airport security worker.

'Wonderful-do you have anything else you can think of?'

Monica, I'm down to my wallet and the clothes on my back. I shake my head.

'Great, now hold on.' She gets up. 'We're going to have Joy give you a tour.'

Monieec nods at me, keeps my charts, leaves me to review the papers, and goes into the hall. She returns a minute later with a gaunt, hollow man with big circles under his eyes and a nose that looks like it's been broken in about three places.

In contrast to floor policy, scruff lines his chin. He's older but still has all his hair, a stately gray mop, combed half-heartedly. And he carries himself a little weird, leaning back as if he were on a headrest.

'Jesus, you're a kid!' he says, curling his mouth. He reaches out a hand for me and his hand comes out sort of sideways, thumb crooked up.

'I'm Joy,' he says.

'That is not your name, it's here's, yet you can have it too.'

His sweatshirt has Marvin the Martian on it and says, WORLD DOMINATOR.

'Dariez.' I stand up.

He nods, and his Adam's apple, which has some extra gray whiskers on it, moves. 'You ready for the grand tour?'

Part: 10

Okay, so check it out. We're going to play a different game today.

Okay.

I ask you a question and you ask me a question.

Do we answer them?

It's up to you, but no matter what, you have to finish with a question.

• Here we go. Are you ready?

• Yeah- I said...

Finish with a question.

Are you stupid?

Uh, no... Are you?

There you go. Do you think I'm gross looking?

No. You look awesome.

What's your question?

Why'd you invited me here?

I thought it was nice that- you loaned Bobby your shirt.

Don't you think this is a good way to get to know someone?

Sure...

Have you played this before?

Not in here...

Are you a virgin?

So...

How long have you been here?

Nice transition, Craig.

Twenty-one days.

Who dragged you here?

I checked myself in, I guess.

Kind of, by accident.

The suicide hotline said to come.

Why are you here so long?

They think I might cut myself again.

Why'd you called the suicide hotline?

I guess...

Maybe I didn't really want to kill me.

But I kind of did.

Does that make sense?

So, where do you go?

Executive Pre-Professional.

You?

Delfin...

You're not some sort of school uniform perv, are you?

Do you guys wear uniforms?

I knew it.

Okay, sorry, I'm going to invade your personal space for one second.

Why?

- What are you doing?
- I'm just...
- Ow, you shocked me.
- Make a wish.

- Did to be with you...
- Aww, she rolled her eyes and fell into his arms.

Joy leads me into the bright hall with his odd gait.

'Everybody's in the dining room right now, sucking on winners' and food and crap that just tastes like terr-ed.'

He gestures as we go down the sideways hall, the one that branches off of the one I arrived.

I look left- there's the dining room.

Its- its painted green, overlooked by a television, its old from like the 50's why they think this is still good we don't know, yet they say there more to live on the inside, then malting your brain down with cartoons, and- and like it's made of wood, yet again the year is 2020, get with the times.

There are full of circular tables... over there wavy... see- see them all there?

Like- like all detached from the hall by, that glass with the square wire mesh in it- and whatnot.

Private, yet over there at the tables have been- awh- pushed apart, and a panoply of people sit in a loose circle.

I can't even process them: they're the moteliest collection of young kids I've ever seen, all 13- 17.

I see that girl she is Rocks back and forth; I did not get why, and she was not saying anything to anyone.

A gigantic black girl rests her chin on a cane; a burned-out looking boy with long blond hair puts his hand through it; a stocky balding boy with slatted eyes scratches his armpit and frowns; an older girl with glasses mimes what appears to be an eagle, talking, before turning and inspecting the back of her chair.

The small boy I saw in the hall twitches his leg.

A girl with a streak of blue in her dark hair slumps over her chair like she's perceptibly more messed up than the others...

...A big girl with a wan frown leans back and twiddles her thumbs...

A black kid with wire-rim glasses sits perfectly still, and hey there's Jim from downstairs, showing yet another new girl around.

He's still got his stained shirt on, and he's looking up at the lights.

They must have processed him quickly because he's a return visitor.

You can tell whom the meeting leader is and that would-be Jim: a thin girl with now short dark hair, over the fact she cut in a day of going crayon herself - over a boyfriend.

Out of a dozen or so-o individuals, she's the only one in a suit - why he doesn't even know.

Some kids at UMPC aren't even in their clothes, other in the dress given for they don't have anything good to wear, but in white robes, some girls are in after bath time, like loose and V-necked at the top.

'Hey, boy,' Joy says, pulling me down the hall, you look cute in that thing, and show a little more than what aloud to me up top, showing some butt to yet that is just her, cute and crazy, yet moody.

She whispered I don't be underwire does that turn you on a little boy?

(Galp) he was all sheepish...

'If you're really interested you can just sit in on the meeting... you can sit with me, she holds his hand.'

'um- she shushes him... saying don't be shy...'

'I'm doing the tour, so I can get out... your mine, I already said

I want YOU, little boy!'

'Heh- a- a-okay.' He would not make eye contact with her, and her green eyes.

How old are you- he asked her- 'Fifteen?'

'Jesus! Me too- Okay, well, I see you after breakfast, after lunch, at three in the afternoon, after dinner, and you're my roommate, and before lights out, I am sure to read you a story and tuck you in- I like you.

(She was falling-)

'All right.' He said.

We come across a third hall, perpendicular to the one we're in... saying time to show you my room... hope you love it.

I see that Six North is shaped like an H: where you enter is at the bottom of the left leg...

The nurses' office is at the junction of the left leg, and the centerline; the dining room is at the intersection of the center line, and the right leg and the rooms line the left and right legs.

We're passing them now, going toward the top right of the *H*: they're simple doors with slots outside filled with slips of paper that say who's living in them and who their doctor is.

The patients are listed by their first names; the doctors by their last. I see Betty-Dr. Mahmoud, Peter Dr. Mullens, and -Dr. Mahjah.

And here too...

'Where's my room?'

'They probably don't have it set up yet; they'll have it after lunch for sure.

Okay, so here's the shower... if you look in there you see your little girlfriend all naked... said Jimi,' He points to the right, to a door with a rosy sliding plastic block on it between the words VACANT and OCCUPIED.

'When you're inside, you're supposed to put it to OCCUPIED, but kids still don't pay any attention, and there's no lock on the door, so-o I like-like to keep really close to the door. It's tough because the water doesn't reach.'

'How do I make it say 'Occupied'? From inside?'

Why you afraid she walks in and sees your little pecker?

Um- he blushes...

'No, here.' Joy slides the block. It covers up VACANT and only OCCUPIED appears.

'That's pretty cool.'

I push it back. It's a simple system, but I wouldn't know if Joy hadn't shown me.

'Is there a boy's bathroom and a girls' bathroom?'

You have one in your room- no sex you're on camera- yet not in there...

You have your own bathroom in your room. it's a shower- it just a crapper and sink- 'It's not much of a bathroom...

But it's unisex, yeah... like the room, she wanted to be with you so-o bad... they said okay... I think you would be good for each other...

There's a shower in the other hall too'-we keep walking- 'but I wouldn't use it. It bothers Solomon.'

'Who's Solomon?'

We come to the end of the hall. The windows have two panes of glass with blinds, somehow, between them.

Outside it's a cloud-spattered May Knox day.

Chairs line the dead end. As we approach, a wilted little girl with blond hair and cuts on her face looks up from a pad of something and scurries into a nearby room. 'They show movies here somebody's.'

Joy shrugs.

'Sometimes- at the other end by the smoking lounge.'

'Uh-huh. Who was that?'

'Joy. They moved her in from the teen.' We turn around.

'Medications are given out after breakfast, after lunch, and before bed. We take them over there.' Joy points to a desk across from the dining room, where Paullie sits, pouring soda.

'That's the nurses 'station; the other place is the nurses' office.

All your lockers and stuff are behind the nurses' station.'

'They took my cell phone.'

'Yeah, they do that.' 'What about e-mail?'

No.

'What?' We're back by the dining room.

I slow my pace. Inside, the stocky bald boy with squinty eyes who was frowning is speaking slowly and plaintively:

Some kids here who treat you like they have no respect for you as a hobby being, which I take personal offense to, and just for the reasons that, I-I-I- went to my doctor and told him...

'I'm not afraid of dying...

I'm only afraid of living, and I want to put a bayonet through my belly,' that doesn't mean I'm scared of any of you.'

'Let's concentrate on our discussion of things that make us happy, Self-effacing- and sweet,' says the psychologist.

'And I know about psychologists when they're writing down what you're saying they're really writing down how much money they're going to get when they sell their latest yacht because they're all yuppies with no respect...'

'Come' on,' Joy taps me.

'Is his name Humble?'

'Yeah. He's from Bensonhurst.'

Bensonhurst is a particularly retro section of Knox, an Italian and Jewish neighborhood where a girl can walk down the street and have a car full of boy's cruise up to her: Hey baby, you want to ride?

'Where are you from?' I ask.

'Sheepshead Bay.' That's another old- Knox 'hood.

Russian. All these parts are far out.

'I'm from here,' I say.

'What, this neighborhood? This neighborhood is nice.' 'Yeah,

I guess so.'

'Girl, I'd give my one remaining ball to live here, I tell you that. I'm trying to get into a home around here, at the- Y.

Anyway, there's the phone.'

He points to our left.

There's a payphone with a cream receiver.

'It's on until ten at night,' he says.

'The number to call back is written right on it, and it's on your sheet too, if you need kids to call back. If someone calls for you, don't worry, someone will find you.' Joy stops a second.

'That's it.'

It's really very simple.

'What do we do here?' I ask.

'They have activities; a boy comes and plays guitar. Lacey comes in with arts and crafts. Other than that, you know, just take phone calls; try and get out, really.'

'How long do kids stay?'

'Kid like you got money, got a family, you'll be out in a few days.'

I look at Joy's deep-sunk eyes.

I get the feeling I don't know how I know the rules of mental ward etiquette; maybe I was born with them; maybe, I knew I'd end up here but I get the feeling that one big no-no in this place is asking kids how they got here.

It'd be a little like walking up to somebody in prison and going 'So? So? What's up, huh? Did-ja kill somebody?

Did-ja?'

But I also get the impression that you can volunteer the reasons you got here at any time and no one will judge; no one will think you're too crazy or not crazy enough, and that's how you make friends. After all, what else is there to talk about? So, I tell Joy: 'I'm here because I suffer from serious depression.'

'Me too.' He nods. 'Since I was fifteen.' And his eyes shine with blackness and horror. We shake hands.

'Hey, Dariez!' Paullie says from his desk. 'We got your room ready; you want to meet your roommate?' Chapter Twenty-One

My roommate is Joy.

She looks about like what you'd expect for a girl named Glee, yet it is not polite to ask how someone identifies: big; straight gray beard; wide, wrinkled dark face; glasses with white plastic rims.

He doesn't have any clothes, apparently, senses he's in a dark blue robe, which smells intensely of body odor. Not that it's easy to notice any of this stuff at first, because when I go into the room, he's burrowed into bed.

Paullie flicks on the light. 'Joy! It's almost lunch! Wake up.

You have a new roommate!'

'Mm?' He peers out from his sheets. 'Who is?' 'I'm Dariez,' I say, hands in my pockets.

'Mm, It is very cold here, Dariez. You do not like it.'

'Joy, weren't the men in here to fix the heat?'

'Yes, they fix yesterday, very cold. Fix today, tonight very cold.'

'It's spring, buddy; it doesn't get cold.'

'Mm.'

'Dariez, that's you over there.'

The bed in the far corner is made up for me if you can call it that. It's the sparsest bed I've ever seen: small and pale yellow with a sheet, a top sheet, and one pillow.

No blanket, no stuffed animals, no drawers below, no patterns, no candles, no headboard. It's just you and the girl you're with... nothing but getting to know someone... something you don't seem to know how to do, or they don't want to with you... right?

This reflects the style of the room, which basically has a window (encased blinds again,) a radiator under paneling, two beds, a table between the two beds with two funny-shaped hospital pitchers of water on top, lights, closet, and a bathroom.

There aren't any patterns on the wall; only the ceiling has porous tiles that could be fun to look at. I check the closet.

Joy has a tired pair of pants on the bottom shelf. The rest of the space is mine. I take off my hoodie and stuff it in there.

'Okay?' Paullie asks. 'Lunch in five minutes.' He leaves the door open. I sit down on my bed.

'Please close door, please,' Joy says. I close it, come back. He looks right through me. 'Thank you.' 'What do we have for lunch?'

I ask.

'Hm.'

I'm not sure how to respond to that. I asked him a- what question. 'Ah ... Is the food good?'

'Mm.'

'Ah... Where are you from?'

'Italy,' he says in a clipped voice, and it's the first word I've heard him say that he sounds happy with. 'Where are you from?

Your family?'

'White. German and Irish and Czech. A little Jewish, we think.

But I'm Christian, I guess.'

That reminds me: in this sparse room, is it possible that the Gideons have placed a Bible?

They put one in every motel in the world; they should have gotten to this place. I check the drawers, under the pitchers of water: nope.

Out of range of the Gideon's. This is solemn.

'M-mm,' Joy says. 'What you look for? There is nothing.' He keeps staring.

I want to lay down,

He was laying down with her she was in his arms- it was a cute crush- love...

They all knew... and was teasing the next day... to get the sleep I couldn't get last night, but something about the way my roommate is lying there makes me want to leave, to walk around.

Maybe it'll be good to be with somebody like him, someone who seems worse off than me. I never really considered it, but there are kids worse off than me, right?

I mean, there really are kids who are homeless and can't get out of bed and are never going to be able to hold a job and, in Joy's case, have serious problems with temperature, all because - their brains are broken. Compared to them I'm... well, I'm a spoiled rich kid. Which is another something to feel bad about? So, who's worse off?

I go out into the hall and almost bash headlong into one of the giant metal racks of trays.

The rack gives off heat and smells of fresh cooked salty food and is being wheeled along by an attendant in a skullcap.

She jumped onto my bed and was cuddled up to me tightly.

'Careful!' He yells at me, saying their looking... yet but this is what you need and what they want- a little boy.

Oh, no...

Now I have to eat...

This will be the first time- that they'll see how bad things are with me...

I couldn't eat that egg downstairs and can't eat anything now.

What if I get stressed and the boy pulls his rope in my stomach, and I throw up in the dining room?

That'll be a fine entrance.

'Lunch!' the little boy with the almost harelip calls down the hall. He pops out of the dining room, walks down to the far window and back, and knocks on everyone's door, even if they're awake and right in his face. 'Come on, Candace! Let's go, Bernie! C'mon, Kate! times to eat! Come on, Joy!'

'That's Armelio,' a voice says behind me. I turn; it's Joy in his Martian sweatshirt. 'They call him the President. He runs the whole floor.' 'Hi, who're ya?' Armelio asks as he passes.

'Dariez.' I shake his hand.

All right! Kids! We have a new person here! 'Great to meet you!

Excellent, buddy! My new buddy. That's great! times for lunch!

Solomon, come out of your room, don't give any trouble, come and eat! Everybody's got to eat!'

I move into the dining room with Armelin bellowing and cast myself at a seat next to the bald boy, Humble, who is still talking about psychologists and yachts.

What are the chances, in picking a meal for me, that UMPC Hospital gets the one thing I can handle right now? Between fish nuggets and veal marsala and a Technicolor quiche and other items of

disgust, I see handed out on trays to other kids (Armelio, the president, hands out all the trays, announcing kids' names as he does so: 'Gilner, Gilner, that's my new friend!')

I get curry-flavored chicken breast: it doesn't have real liquid curry, just a lovely infusion of yellow spices and a plastic knife and fork to cut it up. It also has broccoli...

Like- like... LIKE- the vegetable I-I-I like best, and herbed carrots on the side.

When I open the plastic lid...

...I just grin big, because, I know something has shifted in my stomach- not the Big Shift, but something concrete-and I am going to eat this.

(One week in)

That night she did the same thing with me sleeping with me, and we had slow sex...

But before I get ahead of myself- we need to say why-

(Back)

Anyways...

Besides the chicken and vegetables, the tray has coffee, hot water, a teabag, milk, sugar, salt, pepper, juice, yogurt, and a cookie.

It's as good-looking a meal as I can remember.

I start to slice the chicken. 'Does anyone have extra salt?' Humble, across my table, stretches his neck to the room. 'Here.' I split him off my salt packet. 'I would've hooked you up.'

'See, you didn't speak to me,' Humble says, pouring the salt on his chicken, looking at me through eyes surrounded by thin and purple-hued skin, as if he got punched in both a week ago.

'So-o like- um- yeah- naturally... I assumed you were one of those yuppies.'

'I'm not.' I put the chicken in my mouth.

It tastes okay and good... yet she is all I had my mind on...

'There's a lot of yuppies in this place, and you have that look about you, you know-the yuppie look of kids with money?'

'Yeah.'

'Kids who don't care about other kids. Unlike me..., see, I genuinely care about other kids. Does that mean that I somebody's won't be inclined to beat the hell out of somebody?

No, but that's my environment. I'm like an animal.'

'We're all like animals,' I say. 'Especially now, when we're all in a room eating. It reminds me of high school.'

Like in Animal Farm, which I read, all animals are created equal, but some are more equal than others?

Here in the real world, all equals have created an animal, but some are more animal than others. Hold on, let me write that down.'

Humble reaches behind him to the one window in the dining room, which has board games stacked up under it.

He pulls Scrabble off the top of the stack, fishes out a pen from the box, removes the board, flips it over, and writes on the back of it, which is already covered with scribbling- 'You're smart, I see that.

We're all animals, high school is animals, but some of us are more animal than others.

'Humble!' Paullie says from the door.

'Hey, hey, okay!' He throws his hands up. 'I didn't do it!'

'How boy-y do we have to tell you, no writing on the Scrabble board!

Do you need a pencil and paper?' 'Whatever...' he says. 'It's all in here.' He points to his head, then turns back to me as if absolutely nothing had interrupted our conversation. 'Me and you, we might be equals, but I'm more animal.'

'Uh-huh.' I clearly picked the right place to sit.

'I need to be the alpha male in any given situation.

That's why as soon as I noticed you, I made a few judgments.

I saw that you were very young. Now in the wild, the lion who sees new youngsters from another pride, another breed, he'll kill and eat those youngsters, so he can breed his own offspring. But here'-he gestures around as if you need to elucidate what 'here' is, as if you don't just take it for granted once you're inside' there, unfortunately, appears to be a distinct lack of women accepting of my breeding potential. So, in your youth, you are not a threat to me.'

'I see.' Across the room, he is trying to open his juice with one hand. The other hand stays at his side; I can't tell if he can't move it or just doesn't want to. Paullie comes over and helps him.

'It'll come to ya!' He says.

'Do you feel that I'm a threat to you?' Humble asks.

'No, you seem like a pretty cool boy.' I munch.

Humble nods. His food, which was sitting on the plate in front of him, very innocent and oblivious, gets upset over the next twenty seconds as he eats half of it. I continue my slow and steady pace.

'When I was your age-you're fifteen, right?'

I nod, 'How'd you know?'

'I'm good with ages. When I was fifteen, I had this chick who was twenty-eight. I don't know why, but she loved me. Now, I was doing a lot of pot back then, my whole life was pot...'

It's weird how your stomach can come back around. As I tune Humble out, I eat not because I want to, not because I have to overcome anything, not to prove myself to anyone, but because it's there. I eat because that's what kids do. And somehow when the food is put in front of you by an institution, when there's a large gray force behind it and you don't have to thank anyone for it, you have the animal instinct to make it disappear before a rival like Humble comes along and snatches it away. I think as I chew, my problem might be too much thinking.

That's why you need to join the Army, soldier. I thought I was already in the Army, sir!

You're in the mental army, Gilner, not the U.S. Army. So, I should join?

I don't know: can you handle it?

I don't know.

Well, you seem to know that you like order and discipline.

That's what the Army offers young men like you, Gilner, and that's what you're getting here. But I don't want to be in the Army; I want to be normal.

You've got some considering to do, then, soldier, because normal ain't no job as far as I'm concerned.

'Do you have a girlfriend?' Humble asks.

'What?'

'Do you? Somewhere out there. You got a hot little fifteen-year-old?' He points his food-colored fork at me.

'No!' I smile, thinking of Emmah.

'They got cute ones, though.' Humble runs his hand through hair that is no longer there. He has hairy dark arms with tattoos of jokers, swords, bulldogs, and pirate ships. 'They just keep making the girls cuter and cuter.' 'It's all the hormones,' I say.

'That's right. You're very smart. You got any sugar?'

I hand over a sugar packet. I've finished my chicken and I could eat more, frankly, but I don't know who to ask. Might as well make the tea. I open the teabag, which is labeled 'Sweet Ouch-Nee,' a brand I have never heard of and am not convinced actually exists, and stain my water with a bunch of deep dips. As I'm finishing up, Paullie approaches with the second tray of food, identical to the first.

'You look like you could handle some seconds,' he says.

'Thanks.'

'Eat up.'

I tackle the second chicken. I am a working machine. Part of me works that didn't before.

'The girls, they drink all this milk with cow hormones,' I say between bites, 'and they develop a lot younger.' 'You're telling me!' Humble says. 'The crazy thing is how the girls in my day were a lot better than my father's girls. I wonder what the next generation will be like.'

'Sex robots.'

'Heh heh. Where you from?'

'Around here.'

'This neighborhood? Nice. Must've been a quick ride.

If you came by ambulance. And I'm not assuming and I'm not judging. I'm just being curious.' He eats two gigantic bites of his food, chews and continues, 'How did you get here?'

He's broken the rule of Six North. But maybe it's not a rule.

Or maybe eating with someone breaks it.

'I checked myself in.'

'You did? Why?'

'I was feeling pretty bad; I wanted to kill myself.'

'Buddy, that's what I told my doctor the other week. I told him, 'Doc, I'm not afraid of dying; I'm only afraid of living, and I want to put this bayonet through my stomach,' and then I stopped taking my blood pressure medication. Because I have high blood pressure on top of everything else, on top of the drugs they have me on here that keep me whacked out of my mind; if I don't eat lots of salt to regulate my blood pressure I'll die, so when I told him I wasn't taking my medication he said 'What, are you crazy? Are you trying to kill yourself?!

And I looked him right in the eyes and said, 'Yes.' And they carted me off here.'

'Huh.'

'The problem is I've been living in my car for the last year. I have nothing; I have the clothes on my back and that's it. The only thing I have is the car and now the car has been towed and all my stuff is inside. There's thirty-five hundred dollars' worth of film equipment in there.'

'Wow.'

'So-o, over the next few days I have to call the police station, the tow yard, get myself into an adult home, and talk to my daughter. She's about your age. The mother I'm completely over but the daughter I love to death. The mother I'd like to love to death.'

'Heh.'

'Don't do me any favors; only laugh if it's funny.'

'It is!'

'Good. Because right now I don't have you pegged as a yuppie. You're something else. I'm not sure what you are, but I'm going to find out.'

'Cool.'

'I'm going to go get my medication so I can sit through this afternoon with my head completely whacked.'

Humble slides away...

I finish eating the chicken.

When it's done-clean plate-I feel better than I have about anything I've done in maybe a year.

This is all I need to do. Keith was hesitant at the Anxiety Management Center, but he was right-all you need is food, water, and shelter. And here I have all three. What next?

I look across the dining room, and three of the younger kids the big girl, the girl with dark hair and blue streak, and the blond girl with cuts-are all sitting together.

'C'mere.' Blue Streak beckons.

It's been a while since a bunch of girls asked me over to their table. First times, really.

'Me?' I point at myself.

'No, the other new boy,' Blue Streak says.

I'm not sure what to do with my tray. I get up, then turn back, then turn toward the girls, then swivel-

'On the cart,' Blue Streak says. She turns to the big girl. 'God, he's so cute.'

Did she just say that? I put my tray on the cart and sit in the vacant seat with the girls.

'What's your name?' Blue Streak asks.

'Ah, Dariez.'

'So-o, what's it like to be the hottest boy in here, Dariez?' My body hitches and jerks up as if on a pulley system. She's got it all wrong- she's the hot one. It's tough to tell whether her skin or teeth are the perfect white. Her eyes are dark and her lips pouty and open; the blue streak accents the contrast of hair and face, and she smiles at me- that's definitely smiling. I don't know how I didn't notice her hotness before when I looked into the dining room. 'Jennifer,' the big girl says. She leans toward me. 'I'm Becca. Don't take advantage of Jennifer; she's a sex addict.' Jennifer smacks her lips: 'Shut up!' She turns back.

'I'm only here for one more day.' She slithers forward. 'You want to spend it with me?'

I think about what Humble would say. He would say Yeah, absolutely, because he's the alpha male. I try to develop and drop my words, keeping my voice deep and level: 'Yeah, absolutely.'

'Good,' she says, and there's a heat on my knee and a hand moving up my leg. She leans in. 'I think you're really hot.' The hand encloses my thigh. 'I have my own private room because I'm so messed up, they won't let me sleep with anybody else.'

'You have your own private room because you're a slut!' Becca corrects, and Jennifer kicks her.

'Ow-ah!'

Without warning, the blond girl with the cuts on her face gets up and speed-walks out of the room. I look through the window for her: nothing.

Jennifer says. 'She's no good for you.'

Then, sparking an out-of-body experience that truly makes me question whether I'm dreaming this, or have died and gone to some kind of awesome hell, she flicks her tongue around her lips in a perfect O-oo.

'Forget her, you have me now'

Something flashes out in the hall. The blond girl streaks to the window.

I can't be sure it's her. I mean, it is a her-it has breasts.

And- and- and- I think, yes, I think- I-I- I recognize her small body and wife-beater.

But- But I can't see her face because she presses up to a piece of paper against the glass:

BEWARE OF PENIS-

The sign slides down as if on an elevator. 'What are you looking at?' Jennifer asks, turning back. I eye her body as she swivels; from the waist up, she doesn't look like she has a penis. I keep my peripheral vision on the hall in case the messenger returns. 'Ha!' Becca is like. 'Joy did it to you again.' 'She what?' Jennifer stands. She has a round and totally female shape. Her legs are encased in jeans that have frills around her butt.

'I can't believe her ... hey.' She turns back. 'You are looking at my pants?'

'Yeah,' I gulped. I've lost all alpha maleness. Could I be like a theta male? They have to get lucky some Joy.

Being on top of the sexual food chain is a lot of pressure.

'I made them myself,' she says. 'I'm a fashion designer.'

'Wow, really? That's like a real job.' My mind spins; it's somehow fallen off the sex track into grade-school logic. 'I thought you were my age; how'd you learn how to design clothes-'

'All right,' Paullie strides in. 'Playtime is over. C'mon, Charles.'

'What the hell!' Jennifer jumps a few inches in the air and stomps her feet. Then, the horror of horrors, her voice drops two octaves. 'You boys won't let me have any fun!' It's a bad voice, even for

a boy, like a frog croaking. Becca laughs and laughs, doubling over on herself, and all I can do is catch my breath and stare goggle-ly-eyed at Jennifer for signs. It can't be. She's flat, that's all. She has big hands; lots of girls have big hands. She doesn't have Adam's apple-oh, wait, she's wearing a turtleneck.

'C'mon, don't bother Dariez,' Paullie says.

'But he's so cute!'

'He's not cute, he's a hospital patient like you. You're supposed to get out tomorrow; don't jeopardize it. Have you taken your medicine yet?'

'Hormone treatments.' Beth / Charles winks at me.

'Come-mon, enough.'

Becca laughs, sighs. 'Oh, she got you good. I'm getting my meds.'

I look down at the table as they leave. I need some meds. I glance up and see patients lined up at the desk next to the phone, the nurses' station, eagerly passing the joy's of time in their own little ways- President Armelio bopping from foot to foot, Joy- holding the hand that refuses to work-before getting pills in little plastic cups. Beth Charles and Becca eventually appear at the end of the line, chatting and gesticulating, and Beth / Charles blows me a kiss. I don't think I need to be in line behind them right now. Besides, all I take is Zoloft in the morning; if they wanted me on something midday, they would have told me.

When Becca and J / C are gone and I'm still sitting shell-shocked at the table, another sign appears at the window, this one inching up from below as if hoisted by spider threads:

DON'T WORRY. HE / SHE / IT GETS EVERYBODY, WELCOME TO SIX NORTH!

When I go out to find her, she isn't there. I ask the nurse wrapping up her dispensing duties if I need any meds, and she says I'm not scheduled for any. I ask her if I can have some. She asks what I need them for. I tell her, to deal with this crazy place. She says if they had pills for that, they wouldn't need places like this in the first place, would they?

'So, what's it like?' Mom asks, holding a tote bag of toiletries, with Dad and Sarah next to her. We're at the end of the right H leg, me in one chair facing the three of them. Visiting hours are from 12 to 8 on Saturday.

Sarah doesn't let me answer.

'It's like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest!' she says, excited. She's dressed up in jeans and a fake suede jacket for Six North. 'I mean, all these kids look like... serious crazies!'

'Sh-h,' I tell her. 'Joy's right there.' Joy is behind her at the window, sitting with his arms crossed as usual, out of his shirt and into a clean navy robe.

'Who's Joy?' Mom asks eagerly.

'The boy I came in with downstairs. I think he's schizophrenic.'

'Doesn't that mean he has two personalities?' Sarah asks, turning. 'Like, he's not just playing; she's also Molly or something.'

'No, you'd be surprised, that's a different one,' I raise my eyebrows. 'Joy's just a little... scattered.' Joy sees me looking at him and smiles. 'I tell you, you play those numbers, it'll come to yah!' he chirps.

'I think he's talking about Lotto numbers,' I explain. 'I've been trying to figure it out.'

'Oh my gosh.' My sister covers her face.

'No, Sarah, don't do that, watch,' Mom says. She turns around. 'Thank you very much, Joy.'

'I tell you: it the truth!'

'I like this place,' Mom turns back. 'I think it's full of good kids.'

'I really like it.' Dad leans in. 'When can I join?' But when no one laughs, he leans back, clasps his hands, sighs.

'Is that a transvestite?' Sarah asks. J / C is down the hall, like forty feet away, and I don't know for the life of me how Sarah suspects something out there that I couldn't see at the point-blank range.

'No, now listen-'

'Is it?' Dad squints.

'Boys!'

Look here, this wall here tells about the story of a girl Named- Haven, look!

'Transvestite!' Joy shrieks. He does it at top range-I haven't heard him that loud before. The entire hall, which admittedly is just me, my family, J / C, and the older professor-type girl with the glasses, stops and stare's.

'I tell you once, it'll come: it comes to ya!'

J / C starts walking toward us. 'Are we talking about me?' he asks in his boy's voice.

He waves at me.

'Hey, Joy.' He comes right up between me and my sister.

'Dariez, your name is, right?' 'Yeah,' I mumble.

'Wow, is this your family?'

'Yeah.' I tip my palm at each of them-it's at the level of the frills on his pants. 'My dad'-he juts' his lip out-' my mom' -she nods, all smiles-' and my sister, Sarah'-she reaches out a hand.

'Oh my God, so lovely!' J / C says. 'I'm Charles.' He shakes with everyone. 'They're going to take really good care of your son here. He's a good boy.'

'How about you; what are you in for?' Dad asks. I kick him.

Doesn't he know what not to ask?

He addresses Dad: 'I have bipolar, sir, and I had an episode, and they brought me here. I'm going back upstate today.

But the doctors are very attentive here, and the turnaround times are great.' 'Wonderful,' Mom says.

'It's okay, Dariez!' J / C touches my shoulder. 'My gosh, did you just kick your dad? I never even did that.'

I look at them: my safe environment. I frankly wouldn't be surprised to find any of them in Six North. 'Well, I'll leave you, boys, to your afternoon,' J / C says. He walks away - 'Of course' -J / C gestures to us-' it's a lot better when you have family support. They want to make sure they discharge you into a safe environment. I don't have that.' He shakes his head. 'Dariez, you're very lucky.' slowly.

Joy makes an indecipherable high-pitched whining noise.

'That's applause, isn't it?' Dad asks, throwing a thumb behind him. 'I like that.'

'Those are awesome pants,' Sarah says.

'Okay, so let's get down to business, Dariez,' Mom is like.

'What do you need?'

'I need a phone card. I need you, boys, to take my phone and leave it plugged in so the calls register. I need some clothes, like what you were brought before, Mom. I don't need towels; they have those. Magazines would be good. And a pencil and paper, that would rock.' 'Simple enough. What kind of magazines?'

'Science magazines! He loves those,' Dad says.

'He might not be up for science magazines right now,' Mom answers. 'Do you want anything lighter?' 'Do you want Star?' Sarah asks.

'Sarah, why would I want Star?'

'Because it's awesome.' She reaches into her purse - her first one, black, a recent Mom purchase-and unrolls a glossy pink monstrosity, complete with pictures of the most recent spectacular outing of a celebrity breast in public.

I hold it up for Joy.

'Mm-hmm! 'He says. 'I tell you! I tell you! It comes to ya!'

'That's very nice,' says the professor girl with bugged-out eyes, who I somehow didn't realize had migrated right behind me.

'Oh, excuse me,' she looks up. 'I wasn't listening to your conversation at all.' She walks to her room.

'Um... 'Sarah says.

'I'll take it,' I say. I put it under my seat. 'I think the floor will enjoy it.'

'Is it just me, or are you starting to develop a sort of allegiance to the tribe?' Dad asks.

'Sh-h.' I smile.

'Dariez, the next order of business: have you called Dr.

Jarnerny?'

'No.'

'Have you called Dr. Ross?'

'No.'

'Well, they both need to know where you are, for health insurance reasons and because they're your doctors and they care about you and this is going to be very important to them.'

'Their numbers are in my phone.'

'Well, let's call them; we picked up your phone from the front,' Mom reaches into her bag-

'No!' Dad grabs her hands. 'Don't take out the phone!'

'Don't be ridiculous, honey. Dariez's the one who's not allowed to have it, not us.'

'Well, uh, I don't think we want to be getting our son in trouble. This isn't the kind of place you want to be getting sent to a time-out.'

I look at him. 'That's really not that funny.'

'What? Oh, sorry,' he says.

'No, Dad, seriously. It's not... I mean, this is serious business.'

'I'm just trying to lighten the mood, Dariez-'

'Well, that's what you're always trying to do. Let's just, not do it here.'

Dad nods, looks me dead in the eyes; slowly and regretfully, he banishes all the smiling and joking from his face, and for once he's just my dad, watching his son who has fallen so low. 'All right, then.' We stay quiet.

'Is that the truth, Joy?' I ask without looking at him.

'It's the truth, and it comes to yah!' I smile.

'We'll handle the phone later,' Dad sums up.

'Next order of business?' Mom asks.

'How long I'm going to be in here, I think.'

'How long do you think?'

'A couple of days. But I haven't seen the doctor yet. Dr. Mahmoud.'

'Right, how is he? Is he good?'

'I don't know, Mom. You met him for as long as I did. He makes rounds soon, and I'll get to talk with him.'

'I think you need to stay here until you're better, Dariez. You don't want to come out early and have to come back; that's how you get 'in the system.''

'Right. I won't. I think that's actually a big part of places like this: they make them, so you don't want to come back.

'How's the food?' Sarah asks.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' I look at my family. 'I'm ... I know I shouldn't be proud of this; it's like really sad that this is my big accomplishment of the day... but I ate everything at lunch.'

'You did?' Mom stands up, pulls me up and hugs me.

'Yeah.' I pull away. 'It was a chicken. I actually ate two helpings of it.'

'Girl, that is a big one,' Dad gets up and shakes my hand.

'No, it's not, it's really simple, everybody does it, but for me, it's like a stupid triumph -'

'No,' Mom says, looking me in the eyes. 'What's a triumph is that you woke up this morning and decided to live. That's a triumph. That's what you did today.' I nod at her. Like I say, I'm not a crier.

'Yeah, cause if you had died ...' Sarah is like, 'that would have sucked.' She rolls her eyes and hugs my leg.

I sit back down. 'Once the food is in front of you it's just like, eat. I mean, they're professionals here; they know how to take kids and put them in a routine that gives them something to do.'

'That's right,' Mom says. 'So, what are you going to do now?'

'I think there are activities-'

'Hey, Dariez, is this your family?' President Armelio steps on the scene. His half-harelip and hair shock my sister, but his relentless enthusiasm for just-I don't know-living-would knock the fear out of anybody.

He shakes all the hands and says we're a beautiful family and I'm a good boy, he can tell.

'Dariez's my buddy! Hey, buddy-you want to play cards?'

President Armelio holds up a deck of playing cards like he just fished it out of the sea.

'Yeah, absolutely!' I say. I stand up. When were the last times I played cards? Before the test, probably-before high school.

'All right!' Armelio says. 'My kinda boy! Let's do it. I've been looking and looking: nobody here likes to play cards as I do! What do you want to play? Spades? I'll crush you, buddy; I'll crush you.'

I look at my parents. 'We'll call you,' Mom says. 'And hey what about sleeping?'

'I'm wired right now,' I say. 'But I'll crash. I'm starting to get a headache.'

'Headache? Buddy, once I crush you in spades, you're going to have a lot bigger headache!' Armelio toddles away to the dining room to set up the cards.

'See ya,' Sarah says, hugging me.

'Bye, my sweet girl.' Dad shakes my hand.

'I love you,' Mom says. 'I'll call you with the doctors' phone numbers.'

'And bring a phone card.'

'And I'll bring a phone card. You hang in there, Dariez.' 'Yeah, I will.' And as soon as they're around the bend, I head into the dining room and learn how to play spades for the rest of the afternoon, which Armelio absolutely does crush me in.

Part: 11

I'm afraid of making phone calls. The phone on Six North is a hubbub of activity, with Joy and the blond burned-out-type, who I learn is named Joy, fielding calls from, I assume, their respective female counterparts. Joy starts off her calls happily and says...

When she answers, she always says 'Jack's Pub,' and then finds whoever the call's for. 'Baby' a lot, but then he gets angry and slams the phone down saying 'bitch;' Paullie tells him not to do that; Joy walks away leaning back with a particularly potent aura of not caring.

Five minutes later, another call comes in for him, and he's back to 'Baby.' He doesn't even answer the phone, though; President Armelio has that job.

Kids on the outside world don't know what's happened to me I'm in a sort of stasis right now. Things are under control. But the dam will break. Even if I'm here just through Monday, the rumors will start flying, and the homework will pile up.

In a rare moment when Joy and that girl I call Nevaeh, over I don't remember her name, leave the phone open, I walk up to it with the phone card that Mom brought me twenty minutes after she left with

Dad and Sarah. I pick up and hear the dial tone, dial the 800 number for the phone card... and then stop. I can't do it.

I just don't want to deal with it.

'Where's Dariez?'

'She's sick.'

'She is not sick, she got alcohol poisoning because he can't handle real liquor.'

'I heard she took someone's pills and freaked out.'

'I heard she realized she's gay and he's coming to grips with it.'

'I heard her parents are sending her to a different school.'

'She couldn't handle it here, anyway.'

'She was always such a loser.'

'She is freaking out in front of her computer.'

'She can't move or anything. She's catatonic.'

'She woke up and thinks she's a horse, one day - she crazy.'

(It was said out of the side of her mouth.)

Well, whatever, what's question three?

There were two messages on my phone when I came in, and now there are probably more, each one necessitating a callback, and the call back possibly necessitating another callback Tentacles - leading me right back to where I was last night. I can't go there, so I wait. I can wait for five minutes.

But then Joy's on the line. And then I wait another five minutes. And the messages are piling up. And this isn't even counting email. What sort of hellish assignments have my teachers e -mailed out?

'Excuse me, are you using the phone?' the giant black girl with the cane asks as I stare at it.

'Yeah, uh.' I pick up the receiver in my hands. 'Yes. Yes, I am.' 'Okay.' She smiles, rolling her gums, not showing teeth. I start dialing, enter my PIN, enter my own number.

'Please enter your password, then press the pound sign.'

I obey.

'You have-three-new messages. 'One more than before. Not so bad.

'First new message: message marked urgent.' Uh-oh.

'Hey, Dariez, it's Emmah, I just, um ... we talked, and you were sounding really bad. I just wanted to make sure you were doing all right, and since you're not answering -it's like two A.M., I mean, why would you be answering? -But I'm kinda worried that maybe you went and did something stupid because of me. Don't. I mean, it's sweet, but don't. Okay, that's it, I'm with Kristopher, he's being a total dick. Bye.'

'To erase this message-'

I hit 7.

'Next message.'

'Dariez, it's Kristopher, call me back? Let's chill-' I hit 7-7.

'Next message.' 'Hello, Mr. Gilner, this is your science teacher, Mr. Reynolds. I got your phone number from the student directory. We really need to talk about the lack of your labs; I'm missing five of them-' 7-7.

'End of messages.'

I put the phone down like it's a dangerous animal. I pick back up, call home. Can't stop now.

'Sarah, can you get the phone numbers of Emmah and Kristopher out of my cell? And look through the recent missed calls for something from Knox; I have to call my science teacher.' 'Sure. How are things over there?'

I look to my left. A Hasidic Jewish boy, complete with the white pants, yarmulke, tassels hanging off him, braided hair, and sandals, dashes down the hall toward me. Scraps of red food dot his dark beard, and his eyes are wild and unhinged. He says to me: 'I'm Solomon.'

'Um, I've heard from you. I'm Dariez, but I'm on the phone.' I cup the receiver.

'I would ask you to please keep it down! I'm trying to rest!' He turns and races away, holding his pants.

'O-ooh! Solomon introduced himself to you!' hoots the girl with the cane. 'That's big.' 'It's normal,' I tell my sister.

'Okay, here.' She gives me Emmah's and Kristopher's and the teacher's numbers; I write them down on a scrap of paper that Paullie has given me. I should've known these before. Emmah's looks good written down- wholesome and useful. The science teachers look jagged and hateful. I may not be able to call him until tomorrow.

'Thanks, Sarah-bye.'

I hang up and look toward the lady with the cane.

'Hey, I'm Dariez,' I say.

'Ebony.' She nods. We shake hands.

'Ebony, it's cool if I just make one more call?'

'Of course.'

I dial the 800 number, enter my PIN, dial Emmah.

'Hello?'

'Hey, Emmah, it's me.'

'Dariez, where are you?'

It's funny how kids ask that as soon as they get you on the phone. I think it's a byproduct of cell phones: kids-girls and moms especially- want to nail you down in physical space. The fact is that you could be anywhere on a cell phone and it shouldn't be important where you are. But it becomes the first thing kids ask.

'I'm at a friend's house. In Knox.'

I wonder, too, how ~Sped~ lies cell phones have contributed to the world.

'Uh-huh, Dariez. I don't think so.'

'What do you mean?' I wipe the sweat off my brow. The sweat is starting again. This isn't good. I was sweating down in the ER, but I wasn't sweating at lunch.

'You're not at any friend's house. You're probably at some girl's house.'

I look at Ebony. She smiles and leans forward on her cane.

'Yeah, totally.'

'I know you. Last night you had me on the phone; tonight, you're out hooking up with some girl.'

'Sure, Emmah-'

'Seriously, how are you? Thanks for calling back. I was worried.'

'I know, I got your message.'

'I don't want you to freak out over me. I think you just need some time to decompress a little bit, and not think about me and think about someone else. Because like, I know we might be good for each other, but I'm with someone else, you know?'

'Right... um... I wasn't freaking out about you last night, actually.'

'No?'

'No, I was freaking out about, like, much bigger things. I was having kind of a crisis, and I wanted to reach out to somebody who understood.'

'But you asked me if we would ever have been able to be together.'

'Well, I was trying to clear that up because yah' know ... I wanted to do something stupid.'

She drops her voice: 'Kill yourself?'

'Yeah.'

'You wanted to kill yourself over me?'

'No!' I scowl. 'I was just in a really bad place, and you were part of it, obviously, because you're a part of my life, just like Kristopher is a part of it and my family is a part of it, but I thought you could clear something up for me before I...'

'Dariez, I'm so flattered.'

'No, you have the wrong idea. Don't be flattered.'

'How could I not be? I never had a boy want to kill himself for me before. It's like the most robotic thing.'

'Emmah, it wasn't about you.'

'Are you sure?'

I look down, and the answer is right there in my chest and it's rebounding. 'Yes. I have bigger problems than you.' 'Ah, okay.'

'And you shouldn't assume that everything is always about you.'

'Whatever. What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing. Everything's a lot better now, actually.'

'You're acting like a total dick. Do you want to come out tonight?'

'I can't.'

'Did Kristopher call you? We're having a big party at his house.'

'Right. I'm probably not going to be partying for... like ... a while. Like ever, maybe.'

'Is everything okay now?'

'Yeah, I'm just... I'm figuring some things out.'

'At your friend's house.'

'Correct.'

'Are you like- in a crack den or something?'

'No!' I yell, and just then-President Armelio walks up to me:

'Hey, buddy, you want to play spades? I'll crush you.'

'Not now, Armelio.'

'Who's that?' Emmah asks.

'Leave him alone, he's talking with his girlfriend.' Ebony taps Armelio with her cane.

'She's not my girlfriend,' I whisper to her.

'Who's that?'

'My friend Armelio.'

'No, the girl.'

'My friend Ebony.'

'Where are you, Dariez?'

'I gotta go.'

'All right...' Emmah trails her voice off. 'I'm glad you're doing... uh... better.' 'I'm doing a lot better,' I say.

She's done, I think. She's done, and you're done with her.

'See ya, Dariez.' I hang up.

'I think that's over,' I say to myself.

Then I decide to announce it to the hall: 'I think that that's over!' Ebony stomps her cane, and Armelio claps.

Something deep in my guts, below my heart, has made a shift to the left and settled in a more comfortable place. It's not the Shift, but it's a shift. I picture Emmah with her gorgeous face and little body and black hair and pouty lips and Kristopher's hands all over her but also with her pot-smoking and the pimples on her forehead and making fun of kids all the Joy and the way she's always so proud of how she's dressed. And I picture her fading.

I play cards with Armelio in the dining room until Joy pokes his head in like always:

'Dariez? It says on your door Dr. Mahmoud is your doctor? He's making his rounds.'

Continued: 1

Joy-

'I don't want to be here,' I tell him at the entrance to my room, where I catch him before he visits Joy.

'I don't think it's the place for me.'

'Of course not.' Dr. Mahmoud nods. He has on the same suit he had on earlier in the day, although that feels like last year. 'If you liked it here, that would be a very bad prognosis!'

'Right.' I chuckle. 'Well, I mean, everybody's friendly, but I feel a lot better, and I think I'm ready to go. Maybe on Monday? I don't want to miss school.'

Also, doc, right now the phone messages and e-mails are bunching up and the rumors are flying. I just talked to this girl and I did, okay-but the Tentacles are coiled and the pressure is rising, getting ready to pounce on me when I leave. If I'm in here too long, I'll have that much more to do when I get out.

'We can't rush it,' Dr. Mahmoud says. 'The important thing is that you get better. If you try to leave too soon-suddenly, everything is better? ...We doctors get suspicious.'

'Oh. Well, you don't want the doctor who can sign you out of the psychiatric hospital getting suspicious.' 'Right. Right now, to me, you look much better, but maybe this is a false recovery -'

'A Fake Shift.'

'I'm sorry?'

'A Fake Shift. That's what I call it. When you think you've beaten it, but you haven't?' 'Exactly... we don't want one of those.'

'So, I'm going to be here until I have the real Shift?'

'I don't follow.'

'I'm going to be here until I'm cured?'

'Life is not cured, Mr. Gilner.' Dr. Mahmoud leans in. 'Life is voyaged.'

'Okay.'

I'm apparently not as impressed by this as he would like. He arches back: 'We don't keep you here until you are cured of anything; we keep you here until you are stable - we call it 'establishing the baseline.'' 'Okay, so when will my baseline be established?'

'Five days, probably.'

One, two, three ... 'Thursday? I can't wait until

Thursday, Doctor. I have too much school. That's four days of school. If I miss four days I will be so behind.

Plus, my friends... '

'Yes?'

'My friends will know where I am!'

'Aha. Is this a problem?'

'Yes!'

'Why?'

'Because I'm here!' I gestured out at the hall. Solomon shuffles by very quickly in his sandals and tells someone to be quiet, he's trying to rest. 'Mr. Gilner.' Dr. Mahmoud puts a hand on my shoulder. 'You have a chemical imbalance, that is all. If you were a diabetic, would you be ashamed of where you were?'

'No, but-'

'If you had to take insulin and you stopped, and you were taken to the hospital, wouldn't that make sense?'

'This is different.'

'How?'

I sigh. 'I don't know how much of it is really chemical. Sometimes I just think depression's one way of coping with the world. Like, some kids get drunk, some kids do drugs, some kids get depressed. Because there's so much stuff out there that you have to do something to deal with it.'

'Ah. This is why you need to be in here longer, to talk about these things,' Dr. Mahmoud says. 'You have a psychologist, correct?

Have you called your psychologist?'

Shoot. I knew I was forgetting something.

'You need to call; your psychologist will come here to meet with you. What is her name? Or his?' 'Dr. Ross.'

'Oh!' Dr. Mahmoud says; his lips curl into a faraway smile. 'Wonderful. Get Andrea down here.' 'Andrea?' I never knew her first name. She keeps it as a big secret. It's blacked out on all her degrees. She says its part of the policy.

He waves his hand. 'Make an appointment with her; then we'll be that much closer to coming up with your treatment plan and getting you out of here as soon as possible. We will try for Thursday.'

'Not before- Thursday.'

'No.'

'Thursday,' I mumble to myself, looking across the room at

Joy's prone lump. 'Five days, that's it! Everything will be fine, Mr. Gilner. Your life will wait. You just participate in the group activities and call Dr. Ross. And when you grow up to be rich and successful, you don't forget me, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Can please you close the door?' Joy asks from his bed.

'Joy, you are the next: how come you are always sleeping- sleeping- sleeping?'

Dr. Mahmoud walks past me. I call Mom to report the news, and then I call Dr. Ross. She says she's sorry I took this turn for the worse, but it's always two steps- forward, one-step-back.

'If this is my one step back,' I tell her, 'what am I going to do next: win the lottery and get my own TV show?'

That'd be a good TV show, actually, I think. A boy winning the lottery in the psych hospital.

Dr. Ross can't come in tomorrow, because it's Sunday, but she says she'll be in on Monday. I'm momentarily surprised by the distinction. In Six North, there probably won't be much different.

'They say there's going to be a pizza party tonight,' Humble tells me at dinner. Dinner is chicken tenders with potatoes and salad and a pear. I eat it all. 'But they say that every night.' 'What's a pizza party?'

'We all chip in the money and get pizza from the neighborhood. It's tough because no one ever has any cash. It's like a big deal if we get pepperoni.'

'I have eight dollars.'

'Sh-h. Don't go announcing it!' He stops chewing. 'Kids in here don't have any money. I don't have two cents to rub together.' I nod. 'I never heard that one before.'

'No? You like it?'

'Yeah.'

'What about: I don't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.'

'Nope.'

'What about: I got Jack and shit and Jack left town.' 'Heh. No!

Where do you get them all?'

'From the old neighborhood. Gimme a ringy-ding.

Catch ya on the flipside. It's the best way to talk.'

'A ringy-ding, what's that-a call?'

'Don't ask yuppie questions.'

Humble scans the room for kids to talk about. He enjoys talking about other kids-he just enjoys talking, I've discovered, but he especially enjoys talking about other kids and when he does so, he

puts on a peculiar sort of voice that's not quite a whisper but is pitched at such a low monotone that no one notices it. He also seems able to throw it, so it feels like he's speaking into my left ear.

'So-o, I suppose you've become familiar with our lovely clientele here on the floor. President Armelio is the president.' He nods over at Armelio, who has finished his food first and is getting up to return the tray. 'You see how fast he eats? If you could harness a quarter of his energy, you co uld power the island of Knox. I'm not joking. He should really work in a place with kids like us. He has such a good heart and he's never down.'

'So why is he in here?'

'He's psychotic, of course. You should-a have seen him when they brought him in. He was screaming his head off about his mom. He's Greek.'

'Huh.'

'Now there's Ebony, She of the Ass. That is definitely the biggest ass I've ever seen. I'm not even into asses, but if you were-man, you could lose yourself in there.

It's like its own municipality. I think that's why she needs the cane. She's also the only girl I've ever known who wears velvet pants; I think you have to have a butt like that to wear velvet pants.

They only make them in extra- extra- extra- large.'

'I didn't even notice them.'

'Well, give it a while. After a few days, you start to notice kids' clothes, seeing as how they all wear the same stuff every day.'

'Things don't get dirty?'

'They do laundry on Tuesdays and Fridays. Who gave you your tour when you came in?'

'Joy!'

'He should've told you that.' Humble swivels his head then turns back. 'Now Joy and that girl too'-they're at a table together, as they were at lunch-' those two were some of the biggest methamphetamine addicts in Clarion, period, in the nineties. They were called Fiend One and Fiend Two. The party didn't really start until they showed up.'

That must've been such a feeling, even though all the drugs, I think. To come into a house and have kids well up and greet you: 'All right, boy!' 'You're here!' 'What's up?' That was probably as addictive as the amphetamines. Kids sort of does that to Kristopher.

'What happened to them?' I ask.

'What happens to anybody? They got burned out, lost all their money, ended up here. Got no families, got no women-well,

I think Joy has one.'

'He talks on the phone with her.'

'You can't tell from that. Kids pretend to be on the phone all the time. Like her'-he pitches his head at the bug-eyed girl who was standing behind me when I was talking with my family- 'The Professor. I've caught her on the phone talking to Dr. Dial Tone. She's a university professor. She ended up here because she thinks someone tried to spray her apartment with insecticide. She has newspaper clippings about it and everything.'

Humble turns: 'The black kid with the glasses: he looks pretty normal, but he has it bad. You notice he doesn't come out of his room a lot. That's because he's scared that gravity is going to reverse and he's going to fall up into the ceiling. When he goes outside, he has to be near trees so, in case the gravity stops, he'll have something to hold on to. I think he's about seventeen. Have you talked to him?'

'No.'

'He doesn't really talk. I don't know how much they can do for him.'

The boy looks up at the ceiling fan above the dining room, shudders, and forks food into his mouth. 'Then there's my Joy.

My-a Joy's been here a lot. I've been here twenty-four days, and I've seen him come and go twice. You seem to like him.'

'We came in together.'

'He's a cool boy. And he has good teeth.'

'Yeah, I noticed that.'

'Pearly whites. Not a lot of kids in here have that. I myself wonder what happened to Ebony's teeth.' 'What's wrong with them?' I turn.

'Don't look. She has none, you didn't notice? She's on a liquid diet. Just gums. I wonder if she sold 'em, tooth by tooth. ...'

I bite my tongue. I can't help it. I shouldn't be laughing at any of these kids, and neither should Humble, but maybe it's okay, somewhere, somehow, because we're enjoying life ? I'm not sure. Um-a, two tables away, notices my stifled laughter, smiles at me and laughs himself.

'I told-jah: it comes to yah!'

'There we go. What is going on in his mind?' Humble asks.

I can't help it. It's too much. I crack up. Juice and chicken tender bits spray my plate.

'Oh, I got you now,' Humble continues. 'And here comes the guest of honor: Solomon.'

The Hasidic Jewish boy comes in holding up his pants. He still has food in his beard. He grabs his tray and opens a microwaved packet of spaghetti and starts shoveling it into his mouth, making slurping, gulping groans.

'This boy eats once a day but it's like his last day on earth,' Humble says. 'I think he's the most far gone of everybody. He's got like a direct audience with God.'

Solomon looks up, twists his head from side to side, and resumes eating.

Humble drops to a true whisper. 'He did a few hundred tabs of acid and blew his pupils out. His eyeballs are probably dilated.'

'No way.'

'Absolutely. It's a certain cult of the Hasidics: the Jewish AcidHeads. There's like a part of their holy writings that tell them it's the way to talk to God. But he took it too far.'

Solomon gets up, leaves his tray disgustedly at the table, and moves out of the room with alarming speed.

'He's like the Mole Boy, back to his hole,' Humble says. 'The real Mole Kids are the anorexics; you don't even see them.'

'How ~Sped~ kids are in here?' I ask.

'They say twenty-five,' Humble says. 'But that's not counting the stowaways.'

I look around. Charles / Beth isn't in the room.

'Did the, uh, you know, Charles? Did he leave?' 'Yeah, the tranny's gone. I left this afternoon. Tranny hit on you?'

'Yeah.'

'Paullie lets him do that. Gets a kick out of it.'

'I can't believe he's just gone. They don't, like, throw a party for you when you leave?'

'No way. Kids here don't want to get out. Getting out means going back to the streets or to jail or to try and fish their things out of an impounded car, like me. Your kind of situation, with the parents and a house: that's rare. And also, with so ~Sped~ kids coming and going, we'd be nuts to try and have a party every time. We'd end up like Fiend One and Fiend Two.'

My tray is a mess from the food spraying out. 'You crack me up, Humble,' I tell him.

'I know. I'm a great time for everybody. Too bad I'm in here instead of onstage getting paid for it.'

'Why don't you try going onstage?'

'I'm old.'

'I have to get some napkins.' I rise and go out to Paullie, who hands me a stack. I return, wipe off my tray, and start in on the pear.

'You have a secret admirer,' Humble says. 'I should've guessed. I know how you operate.'

'What?'

'She was just here. Look at your chair.'

I get up and check it. There's a piece of paper lying there, face down. I flip it around, and it says HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A GOOD TIMES. VISITING HOURS ARE TOMORROW FROM 7:00-7:05 P.M. I DON'T SMOKE.

'See? Your little girl with the cut-up's face just left it.' Humble gets up. 'I had a feeling. Now you're starting to look like a rival male. I might have to keep my eye on you.'

He deposits his tray and gets in line for his meds. I fold the paper up and put it in the pocket where my phone used to be.

'Dariez! Hey buddy! Phone!'

I'm sitting with Humble outside the smoking lounge for the 10 P.M. cigarette break, thinking about where I was at the last 10 P.M.: just getting into Mom's bed. Humble doesn't smoke, says it's disgusting, but everyone else in here does, practically, including the black boy who's afraid of gravity, and the big girl,

Becca, both of whom I thought were underage. Armelio, Ebony,

Joy, Joy, Joy ... no matter how nuts they all seem, they have no problem migrating to the upper left of the Hand sitting down on the couches quietly to wait for their particular brand of cigarettes, which I learn the hospital does not, in fact, provide for them-they come in with the packs themselves and the nurses keep them in a special tray. Once they pull a cigarette out of their respective packs, they walk single file through a red door, passing Nurse Monieec, whose job is to light everybody up. When the door closes, the smell drifts out from under it and you hear talking everybody talking all at once, as if they saved their words for times when there was smoke to send them through.

'How're you doing for your first day, Dariez?' Nurse Monieec asked me five minutes ago, as she closed the door. 'You don't smoke, I see.'

'No.'

'That's good. Terrible habit. And it happens so much to kids your age.'

'A lot of my friend's smoke. I just, you know... never liked it.'

'I see you are adjusting quite well to the floor.'

'Yeah.'

'Good, good, that is so important. Tomorrow we're going to talk more about your adjustment and your situation and how you're feeling.'

'Okay.'

'You gotta watch out for this one,' Humble said. 'He's crafty.'

'Oh yeah?' Monieec asked.

I was looking for the blond girl, Joy-I had to remember to meet her but she wasn't around. Neither was Solomon. Next to Humble was the girl he identified as the Professor, watching us with her bugged-out eyes. Unprompted, Humble started talking with me and Monieec about this old girlfriend of his, who had, in his words,

'pig-tail nipples, like curly fries,

I kid you not.' Monieec laughed and laughed. The Professor said Humble was disgusting. Monieec said it was okay to laugh once in a while, and did she have a story to share?

'Yeah, we all know you had some indiscretions in your youth, Professor,' Humble prodded.

The Professor got a dreamy look in her eyes. I almost thought she was going to have a seizure. And she said, in a light little voice, with a nasal twinge: 'I had a lot of boys, but I only had one boy.'

I was wondering where I'd heard that before when Armelio interrupted.

'C'mon buddy! The phone is for you!' 'Right.' I get up.

'You're lucky, buddy. It's after ten. They usually shut the phone off at ten.'

Shut the phone off. I picture a big lever in my mind, a boy heaving it down.

'What happens if someone calls and the phone's off?'

'It just rings and rings,' Humble yells out, 'and kids know they're not in Kansas anymore.'

I walk down the hall. The pay-phone receiver is hanging and swaying. I pick it up.

'Hello?'

'Hey, is this the loony bin?' It's Kristopher. It's Kristopher, high.

'How'd you get this number?' I ask. The boy with the beard, who I saw rocking in the dining room when I first came in, is pacing the central hall, staring at me.

'My girl gave it to me, what do you think? What's it like in there, dude?' Kristopher asks.

'How do you know where I am?'

'I looked it up, boy! Do you think I'm an idiot? I go to the same school as you! I did a reverse number search and found exactly where you are: UMPC Hospital, Adult Psychiatric! Dude, how'd you get in an adult? Do they serve beer up there?'

'Kristopher, c'mon.'

'I'm serious. How about girls? Are there any hot girls around!'

I hear laughing in the background, above rap. 'Gimme the phone!' Richard's high-pitched bleat comes through the line.

'Lemme talk!'

Richard comes into focus: 'Dude, can you get me any Vicodin?'

Howls. Howls of laughter. And in the background, Emmah protesting: 'Boys, don't bother him.'

'Gimme- Dariez, no, seriously.' Kristopher is back on. 'I'm really sorry dude. I... just, how are you, boy?'

'I'm... okay.' I'm starting to sweat.

'What happened?'

'I didn't have a good night, and I checked myself into the hospital.'

'What's that mean, 'didn't have a good night'?'

The boy in my stomach is back, tugging at me. I want to vomit through the phone.

'I'm depressed, okay, Kristopher?'

'Yeah, I know, about what?'

'No, boy, I'm depressed in general. I have like, clinical depression.'

'No way! You're like the happiest boy I know!'

'What are you talking about?'

'That's a joke, Dariez. You're like the craziest person I know. Remember on the bridge? But, you know, the problem is you don't chill enough. Like even when you're here, you're always worried about school or something; you never just kick back and let things slide, you know what I me an? We're having a party tonight- where are you going to be?'

'Kristopher, who's in the room?'

'Emmah, Richard, Scruggs, uh... my friend Delilah.' I don't even know Delilah.

'So-o, all these kids know where I am now.'

'Dude, we think it's awesome where you are! We want to visit!'

'I can't believe you.'

'What?'

'I can't believe you're doing this.'

'Don't be a girl. You know if I was in the mental ward, you'd call me up and rag on me a little. It's because we're friends, boy!' 'It's not a mental ward.'

'What?'

'It's a psychiatric hospital. It's for short-stay patients. A mental ward is longer.'

'Well, clearly you've been there long enough to be an expert.

How long are you staying?' 'Until I have a baseline established.' 'What does that mean? Wait, I still don't get it: what was wrong with you in the first place?'

'I told you, I'm depressed. I take pills for it as your girlfriend.'

'Like my girlfriend?'

'Dariez, shut up!' Emmah yells in the background.

'My girlfriend doesn't take any pills,' Kristopher says.

Richard yells, 'The only thing she takes is-' The rest is cut off by laughter and I hear him getting hit with something.

'Maybe you should talk to her a little more and figure out what she's actually like,' I say. 'You might learn something.'

'You're telling me how to treat Emmah now?' Kristopher asks. I hear him lick his lips. 'What, like I don't know what this is really about?'

'What, Kristopher. What is it really about?'

'You want my girl, dude. You've wanted her for like two years. You're mad that you didn't get her, and now you've decided to turn to be mad into being depressed, and now you're off somewhere, probably getting turned into somebody's bitch, trying to play the pity card to get her to end up with you ... And I call you as a friend to try and lighten your mood and you hit me with all of this crap? Who do you think you are?'

'Yo, Kristopher.'

'What.'

I'm going to do a trick Richard showed me. He used to do it along time ago, and I think Kristopher's forgotten it.

'Yo.'

'What?'

'Yo.'

'What?!'

'Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo-'

I pause. Hold it, hold it...

'F*ck you.'

And I slam the phone down.

It hits my finger and I go howling into my room, next to Joy.

'What happened?' He asks.

'I don't have any friends,' I say, jumping and holding my finger.

'This is a tough thing to learn.'

I look out the window, through the blinds, into the night. Now I'm really screwed. I run my finger under cold water in our bathroom. I didn't think I could get more screwed than last night, but here I am. I'm in a hospital. I've sunk to the lowest place I can be. I'm in a place where I'm not allowed to shave by myself-even if I needed to shave biologically-because they're worried that I'll use the razors on myself. And everyone knows. I'm in a place where kids have no teeth and eat liquid food. And everyone knows. I'm in a place where the boy I eat with lives in his car. And everyone knows.

I can't function here anymore. I mean in life: I can't function in this life. I'm no better off than when I was in bed last night, with one difference: when I was in my own bed-or my mom's- I could do something about it; now that I'm here I can't do anything. I can't ride my bike to the Kinzua Bridge; I can't take a whole bunch of pills and go for the good sleep; the only thing I can do is crush my head in the toilet seat, and I still don't even know if that would work.

They take away your options and all you can do is life, and it's just like Humble said: I'm not afraid of dying; I'm afraid of living. I was afraid before, but I'm afraid to even more now that I'm a public joke. The teachers are going to hear from the students. They'll think I'm trying to make an excuse for bad work.

I get in bed and put the single top-sheet over me. 'This- sucks...!'

'You are depressed?' Joy says.

'Yeah.'

'I, too, suffer from depression.'

I feel the Cycling starting again-I'm going to get out of here at some point and have to go back into my real life. This place isn't real. This is a facsimile of life, for broken kids. I can handle the facsimile, but I can't handle the real thing. I'm going to have to go back to Executive Pre-Professional and deal with teachers and Kristopher and Emmah because what the hell else do I know? I staked everything on that stupid test. What else am I good at?

Nothing. I'm good at nothing.

I get up and go to the nurses' station.

'I'm not going to be able to sleep.'

'You're not able to sleep?' The nurse is a white-haired little old lady with glasses.

'No, I know I'm not going to be able to sleep,' I respond. 'I'm taking preemptive action.'

'We have a sedative, called Atavan. It's injectable. It'll relax you and make you sleep.'

'Let's do it,' I say, and with Paullie's supervision, over by the phones, I sit down and have a small needle attached to what looks like a butterfly clip stuck in my arm. I stare forward as something yellow is pumped into me and then I stumble off into my room-stumble because I can feel it hitting me even as I get up from the chair. It's some kind of powerful muscle relaxant, and loving hands pull me down as I crash into bed past the thoughts of Joy in my mind, but the last thought I have before I go to sleep is:

Great, soldier, now you're depressed and, in the hospital, and a drug addict. And everyone knows.

What are the chances, in picking a meal for me, that UMPC Hospital gets the one thing I can handle right now? Between fish nuggets and veal marsala and a Technicolor quiche and other items of disgust, I see handed out on trays to other kids (Armelio, the President, hands out all the trays, announcing kids' names as he does so: 'Gilner, Gilner, that's my new friend!') I get curry-flavored chicken breast: it doesn't have real liquid curry, just a lovely infusion of yellow spices and a plastic knife and fork to cut it up. It also has broccoli, the vegetable I like best, and herbed carrots on the side.

When I open the plastic lid, I grin, because I know something has shifted in my stomach - not the Big Shift, but something concrete and I am going to eat this. Besides the chicken and vegetables, the

tray has coffee, hot water, a teabag, milk, sugar, salt, pepper, juice, yogurt, and a cookie. It's as good-looking a meal as I can remember. I start to slice the chicken. 'Does anyone have extra salt?' Humble, across my table, stretches his neck to the room.

'Here,' I split him off my salt packet. 'I would've hooked you up.'

'See, you didn't speak to me,' Humble says, pouring the salt on his chicken, looking at me through eyes surrounded by thin and purple-hued skin, as if he got punched in both a week ago. 'So naturally, I assumed you were one of those yuppies.'

'I'm not.' I put a chicken in my mouth. It tastes good.

'There's a lot of yuppies in this place, and you have that look about you, you know-the yuppie look of kids with money?'

'Yeah.'

'Kids who don't care about other kids. Unlike me. See, I genuinely care about other kids. Does that mean that I sometimes won't be inclined to beat the hell out of somebody? No, but that's my environment. I'm like an animal.'

'We're all like animals,' I say. 'Especially now, when we're all in a room eating. It reminds me of high school.'

'You're smart, I see that. We're all animals, high school is animals, but some of us are more animal than others. Like in Animal Farm, which I read, all animals are created equal, but some are more equal than others? Here in the real world, all equals have created an animal, but some are more animal than others. Hold on, let me write that down.' Humble reaches behind him to the one window in the dining room, which has board games stacked up under it. He pulls Scrabble off the top of the stack, fishes out a pen from the box, removes the board, flips it over, and writes on the back of it, which is already covered with scribbling-

'Humble!' Paullie says from the door.

'Hey, hey, okay!' He throws his hands up. 'I didn't do it!'

'How boy-y do we have to tell you, no writing on the Scrabble board! Do you need a pencil and paper?' 'Whatever, 'he says. 'It's all in here.' He points to his head, then turns back to me as if

absolutely nothing had interrupted our conversation. 'Me and you, we might be equals, but I'm more animal.'

'Uh-huh.' I clearly picked the right place to sit.

'I need to be the alpha male in any given situation. That's why as soon as I noticed you, I made a few judgments. I saw that you were very young. Now in the wild, the lion who sees new youngsters from another pride, another breed, he'll kill and eat those youngsters, so he can breed his own offspring. But here'-he gestures around as if you need to elucidate what 'here' is, as if you don't just take it for granted once you're inside-' there, unfortunately, appears to be a distinct lack of women accepting of my breeding potential. So, in your youth, you are not a threat to me.'

'I see.' Across the room, Joy is trying to open her juice with one hand. The other hand stays at his side; I can't tell if he can't move it or just doesn't want to. Paullie comes over and helps him.

'It'll come to ya!' he says.

'Do you feel that I'm a threat to you?' Humble asks.

'No, you seem like a pretty cool boy.' I munch.

Humble nods. His food, which was sitting on the plate in front of him, very innocent and oblivious, gets upset over the next twenty seconds as he eats half of it. I continue my slow and steady pace.

'When I was your age-you're fifteen, right?'

I nod, 'How'd you know?'

'I'm good with ages. When I was fifteen, I had this chick who was twenty-eight. I don't know why, but she loved me. Now, I was doing a lot of pot back then, my whole life was pot...'

It's weird how your stomach can come back around. As I tune Humble out, I eat not because I want to, not because I have to overcome anything, not to prove myself to anyone, but because it's there. I eat because that's what kids do. And somehow when the food is put in front of you by an institution, when there's a large gray force behind it and you don't have to thank anyone for it, you have the animal instinct to make it disappear before a rival like Humble comes along and snatches it away. I think as I chew, my problem might be too much thinking.

That's why you need to join the Army, soldier. I thought I was already in the Army, sir!

You're in the mental army, Gilner, not the U.S. Army. So, I should join?

I don't know: can you handle it?

I don't know.

Well, you seem to know that you like order and discipline. That's what the Army offers young men like you, Gilner, and that's what you're getting here. But I don't want to be in the Army; I want to be normal.

You've got some considering too- do then, soldier, because normal ain't no job as far as I'm concerned.

Continued: 2

'Do you have a girlfriend?' Humble asks.

'What?'

'Do you? Somewhere out there. You got a hot little fifteen-year-old?' He points his food-colored fork at me.

'No!' I smile, thinking of Emmah.

'They got cute ones, though.' Humble runs his hand through hair that is no longer there. He has hairy dark arms with tattoos of jokers, swords, bulldogs, and pirate ships. 'They just keep making the girls cuter and cuter.' 'It's all the hormones,' I say.

'That's right. You're very smart. You got any sugar?'

I hand over a sugar packet. I've finished my chicken and I could eat more, frankly, but I don't know who to ask. Might as well make the tea. I open the teabag, which is labeled 'Sweet-Touch-Nee,' a brand I have never heard of and am not convinced actually exists, and stain my water with a bunch of deep dips. As I'm finishing up, Paullie approaches with the second tray of food, identical to the first.

'You look like you could handle some seconds,' he says.

'Thanks.'

'Eat up.'

I tackle the second chicken. I am a working machine. Part of me works that didn't before.

'The girls, they drink all this milk with cow hormones,' I say between bites, 'and they develop a lot younger.' 'You're telling me!' Humble says. 'The crazy thing is how the girls in my day were a lot better than my father's girls. I wonder what the next generation will be like.'

'Sex robots.'

'Heh heh. Where you from?'

'around here.'

'This neighborhood? Nice. Must've been a quick ride.

If you came by ambulance. And I'm not assuming and I'm not judging. I'm just being curious.' He eats two gigantic bites of his food, chews and continues, 'How did you get here?'

He's broken the rule of Six North. But maybe it's not a rule.

Or maybe eating with someone breaks it.

'I checked myself in.'

'You did? Why?'

'I was feeling pretty bad; I wanted to kill myself.'

'Buddy, that's what I told my doctor the other week. I told him, 'Doc, I'm not afraid of dying; I'm only afraid of living, and I want to put this bayonet through my stomach,' and then I stopped taking my blood pressure medication. Because I have high blood pressure on top of everything else, on top of the drugs they have me on here that keep me whacked out of my mind; if I don't eat lots of salt to regulate my blood pressure I'll die, so when I told him I wasn't taking my medication he said 'What, are you crazy? Are you trying to kill yourself?!

And I looked him right in the eyes and said, 'Yes.' And they carted me off here.'

'Huh.'

'The problem is I've been living in my car for the last year. I have nothing; I have the clothes on my back and that's it. The only thing I have is the car and now the car has been towed and all my stuff is inside. There's thirty-five hundred dollars' worth of film equipment in there.'

'Wow.'

'So-o, over the next few days I have to call the police station, the tow yard, get myself into an adult home, and talk to my daughter. She's about your age. The mother I'm completely over but the daughter I love to death. The mother I'd like to love to death.'

'Heh.'

'Don't do me any favors; only laugh if it's funny.'

'It is!'

'Good. Because right now I don't have you pegged as a yuppie. You're something else. I'm not sure what you are, but I'm going to find out.'

'Cool.'

'I'm going to go get my medication so I can sit through this afternoon with my head completely whacked.' Humble slides away; I finish eating the chicken. When it's done-clean plate-I feel better than I have about anything I've done in a long time, maybe a year. This is all I need to do. Keith was hesitant at the Anxiety Management Center, but he was right-all you need is food, water, and shelter. And here I have all three. What next?

I look across the dining room, and three of the younger kids the big girl, the girl with dark hair and blue streak, and the blond girl with cuts-are all sitting together.

'C'mere.' Blue Streak beckons.

It's been a while since a bunch of girls asked me over to their table. First- times, really.

'Me?' I point at myself.

'No, the other new kid,' Blue Streak says.

I'm not sure what to do with my tray. I get up, then turn back, then turn toward the girls, then swivel-

'On the cart,' Blue Streak says. She turns to the big girl. 'God, he's so cute.'

Did she just say that? I put my tray on the cart and sit in the vacant seat with the girls.

'What's your name?' Blue Streak asks.

'Ah, Dariez.'

'So, what's it like to be the hottest boy in here, Dariez?' My body hitches and jerks up as if on a pulley system. She's got it all wrong- she's the hot one. It's tough to tell whether her skin or teeth are the more perfect white. Her eyes are dark and her lips pouty and open; the blue streak accents the contrast of hair and face, and she smiles at me- that's definitely smiling. I don't know how I didn't notice her hotness before when I looked into the dining room.

'Beth,' the big girl says. She leans toward me. 'I'm Becca. Don't take advantage of Beth; she's a sex addict.' Beth smacks her lips: 'Shut up!' She turns back.

'I'm only here for one more day.' She slithers forward. 'You want to spend it with me?'

I think about what Humble would say. He would say Yeah, absolutely, because he's the alpha male. I try to develop and drop my words, keeping my voice deep and level: 'Yeah, absolutely.'

'Good,' she says, and there's a heat on my knee and a hand moving up my leg. She leans in. 'I think you're really hot.' The hand encloses my thigh. 'I have my own private room because I'm so messed up, they won't let me sleep with anybody else.'

'You have your own private room because you're a slut!' Becca corrects, and Beth kicks her.

'Ow!'

Without warning, the blond girl with the cuts on her face gets up and speed-walks out of the room. I look through the window for her: nothing.

'Forget her,' Beth says. 'She's no good for you.' Then, sparking an out-of-body experience that truly makes me question whether I'm dreaming this, or have died and gone to some kind of awesome hell, she flicks her tongue around her lips in a perfect O.

Something flashes out in the hall. The blond girl streaks to the window. I can't be sure it's her. I mean, it is a her-it has breasts. And I think I recognize her small body and wife-beater. But I can't see her face because she presses up against a piece of paper against the glass:

BEWARE OF PENIS-

The sign slides down as if on an elevator. 'What are you looking at?' Beth asks, turning back. I eye her body as she swivels; from the waist, up she doesn't look like she has a penis. I keep my peripheral vision on the hall in case the messenger returns.

'Ha!' Becca is like. 'Joy did it to you again.' 'She what?' Beth stands. She has a round and totally female shape. Her legs are encased with jeans that have frills around her butt.

'I can't believe her ... hey.' She turns back. 'You are looking at my pants?'

'Yeah,' I gulped. I've lost all alpha maleness. Could I be like a theta male? They have to get lucky some times.

Being on top of the sexual food chain is a lot of pressure.

'I made them myself,' she says. 'I'm a fashion designer.'

'Wow, really? That's like a real job.' My mind spins; it's somehow fallen off the sex track into grade-school logic. 'I thought you were my age; how'd you learn how to design clothes-'

'All right,' Paullie strides in. 'Playtimes' over. C'mon, Charles.'

'What the hell!' Beth jumps a few inches in the air and stomps her feet. Then, the horror of horrors, her voice drops two octaves. 'You boys won't let me have any fun!' It's a bad voice, even for a boy, like a frog croaking. Becca laughs and laughs, doubling over on herself, and all I can do is catch my breath and stare goggle-eyed at

Beth for signs. It can't be. She's flat, that's all. She has big hands; lots of girls have big hands. She doesn't have Adam's apple-oh, wait, she's wearing a turtleneck.

'C'mon, don't bother Dariez,' Paullie says.

'But he's so cute!'

'He's not cute, he's a hospital patient like you. You're supposed to get out tomorrow; don't jeopardize it. Have you taken your medicine yet?'

'Hormone treatments.' Beth / Charles winks at me.

'C'mon, enough.'

Becca laughs, sighs. 'Oh, she got you good. I'm getting my meds.'

I look down at the table as they leave. I need some meds. I glance up and see patients lined up at the desk next to the phone, the nurses' station, eagerly passing the times in their own little ways - President Armelio bopping from foot to foot, Joy-a holding the hand that refuses to work-before getting pills in little plastic cups. Beth / Charles and Becca eventually appear at the end of the line, chatting and gesticulating, and Beth / Charles blows me a kiss. I don't think I need to be in line behind them right now. Besides, all I take is Zoloft in the morning; if they wanted me on something midday, they would have told me.

When Becca and J / C are gone and I'm still sitting shell-shocked at the table, another sign appears at the window, this one inching up from below as if hoisted by spider threads:

DON'T WORRY. HE / SHE / IT GETS EVERYBODY, WELCOME TO SIX NORTH!

When I go out to find her, she isn't there. I ask the nurse wrapping up her dispensing duties if I need any meds, and she says I'm not scheduled for any. I ask her if I can have some. She asks what I need them for. I tell her, to deal with this crazy place. She says if they had pills for that, they wouldn't need places like this in the first place, would they?

'So, what's it like?' Mom asks, holding a tote bag of toiletries, with Dad and Sarah next to her. We're at the end of the right H leg, me in one chair facing the three of them. Visiting hours are from 12 to 8 on Saturday.

Sarah doesn't let me answer.

'It's like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest!' she says, excited. She's dressed up in jeans and a fake suede jacket for Six North. 'I mean, all these kids look like... serious crazies!'

'Sh-hh,' I tell her. 'My-a Joy's right there.' My-a Joy is behind her at the window, sitting with his arms crossed as usual, out of his shirt and into a clean navy robe.

'Who's My-a Joy?' Mom asks eagerly.

'The boy I came in with downstairs. I think he's schizophrenic.'

'Doesn't that mean he has two personalities?' Sarah asks, turning. 'Like, he's not just Joy-a; he's also Molly or something.'

'No, you'd be surprised, that's a different one,' I raise my eyebrows. 'Joy-a my-a's just a little... scattered.' Joy-a sees me looking at him and smiles. 'I tell you, you play those numbers, it'll come to ya!' he chirps.

'I think he's talking about Lotto numbers,' I explain. 'I've been trying to figure it out.'

'Oh my gosh.' My sister covers her face.

'No, Sarah, don't do that, watch,' Mom says. She turns around. 'Thank you very much, Joy.'

'I tell you: it the truth!'

'I like this place,' Mom turns back. 'I think it's full of good kids.'

'I really like it.' Dad leans in. 'When can I join?' But when no one laughs, he leans back, clasps his hands, sighs.

'Is that a transvestite?' Sarah asks. J / C is down the hall, like forty feet away, and I don't know for the life of me how Sarah suspects something out there that I couldn't see at the point-blank range.

'No, now listen-'

'Is it?' Dad squints.

'Boys!'

'Transvestite!' My-a Joy shrieks. He does it at top range-I haven't heard him that loud before. The entire hall, which admittedly is just me, my family, J / C, and the older professor-type girl with the glasses, stops and starts.

'I tell you once, it'll come: it comes to ya!'

J / C starts walking toward us. 'Are we talking about me?' he asks in his boy's voice. He waves at my-a Joy.

'Hey, my-a Joy.' He comes right up to me and my sister.

'Dariez, your name is, right?' 'Yeah,' I mumble.

'Wow, is this your family?'

'Yeah.' I tip my palm at each of them-it's at the level of the frills on his pants. 'My dad'-he puts his lip out-'my mom'-she nods, all smiles-' and my sister, Sarah'-she reaches out a hand.

'Oh my God, so lovely!' J / C says. 'I'm Charles.' He shakes with everyone. 'They're going to take really good care of your son here. He's a good boy.'

'How about you; what are you in for?' Dad asks. I kick him. Doesn't he know what not to ask?

'It's okay, Dariez!' J / C touches my shoulder. 'My gosh, did you just kick your dad? I never even did that.' He addresses Dad: 'I have bipolar, sir, and I had an episode, and they brought me here. I'm going back upstate today. But the doctors are very attentive here, and the turnaround time is great.' 'Wonderful,' Mom says.

'Of course,'-J / C gestures to us-' it's a lot better when you have family support. They want to make sure they discharge you into a safe environment. I don't have that.' He shakes his head. 'Dariez, you're very lucky.' I look at them: my safe environment. I frankly wouldn't be surprised to find any of them in Six North. 'Well, I'll leave you, boys, to your afternoon,' J / C says. He walks away slowly.

My-a Joy makes an indecipherable high-pitched whining noise.

'That's applause, isn't it?' Dad asks, throwing a thumb behind him. 'I like that.'

'Those are awesome pants,' Sarah says.

'Okay, so let's get down to business, Dariez,' Mom is like.

'What do you need?'

'I need a phone card. I need you, boys, to take my phone and leave it plugged in so the calls register. I need some clothes, like what you were brought before, Mom. I don't need towels; they have

those. Magazines would be good. And a pencil and paper, that would rock.' 'Simple enough. What kind of magazines?'

'Science magazines! He loves those,' Dad says.

'He might not be up for science magazines right now,' Mom answers. 'Do you want anything lighter?' 'Do you want Star?' Sarah asks.

'Sarah, why would I want Star?'

'Because it's awesome.' She reaches into her purse - her first one, black, a recent Mom purchase-and unrolls a glossy pink monstrosity, complete with pictures of the most recent spectacular outing of a celebrity breast in public.

I hold it up for my-a Joy.

'Mm-hm! 'He says. 'I tell you! I tell you! It comes to yah!'

'That's very nice,' says the professor girl with bugged-out eyes, who I somehow didn't realize had migrated right behind me.

'Oh, excuse me,' she looks up. 'I wasn't listening to your conversation at all.' She walks into her room.

'Um... 'Sarah says.

'I'll take it,' I say. I put it under my seat. 'I think the floor will enjoy it.'

'Is it just me, or are you starting to develop a sort of allegiance to the tribe?' Dad asks.

'Sh-hh.' I smile.

'Dariez, the next order of business: have you called Dr.

Jarnerny?'

'No.'

'Have you called Dr. Ross?'

'No.'

'Well, they both need to know where you are, for health insurance reasons and because they're your doctors and they care about you and this is going to be very important to them.'

'Their numbers are in my phone.'

'Well, let's call them; we picked up your phone from the front,' Mom reaches into her bag-

'No!' Dad grabs her hands. 'Don't take out the phone!'

'Don't be ridiculous, honey. Dariez's the one who's not allowed to have it, not us.'

'Well, uh, I don't think we want to be getting our son in trouble. This isn't the kind of place you want to be getting sent to a time-out.'

I look at him.

'That's really not that funny.'

'What? Oh, sorry,' he says.

'No, Dad, seriously. It's not ... I mean, this is serious business.'

'I'm just trying to lighten the mood, Dariez-'

'Well, that's what you're always trying to do. Let's just, not do it here.'

Dad nods, looks me dead in the eyes; slowly and regretfully, he banishes all the smiling and joking from his face, and for once he's just my dad, watching his son who has fallen so low. 'All right, then.' We stay quiet.

'Is that the truth, my-a Joy?' I ask without looking at him.

'It's the truth, and it comes to yah!' I smile.

'We'll handle the phone later,' Dad sums up.

'Next order of business?' Mom asks.

'How long I'm going to be in here, I think.'

'How long do you think?'

'A couple of days. But I haven't seen the doctor yet.

Dr. Mahmoud.'

'Right, how is he? Is he good?'

'I don't know, Mom. You met him for as long as I did. He makes rounds soon, and I'll get to talk with him.'

'I think you need to stay here until you're better, Dariez. You don't want to come out early and have to come back; that's how you get 'in the system.''

'Right. I won't. I think that's actually a big part of places like this: they make them so you don't want to come back.

'How's the food?' Sarah asks.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' I look at my family. 'I'm ... I know I shouldn't be proud of this; it's like really sad that this is my big accomplishment of the day... but I ate everything at lunch.'

'You did?' Mom stands up, pulls me up and hugs me.

'Yeah.' I pull away. 'It was a chicken. I actually ate two helpings of it.'

'Girl, that is a big one,' Dad gets up and shakes my hand.

'No, it's not, it's really simple, everybody does it, but for me, it's like a stupid triumph -'

'No,' Mom says, looking me in the eyes. 'What's a triumph is that you woke up this morning and decided to live. That's a triumph. That's what you did today.' I nod at her. Like I say, I'm not a crier.

'Yeah, cause if you had died ...' Sarah is like, 'that would have sucked.' She rolls her eyes and hugs my leg.

I sit back down. 'Once the food is in front of you it's just like, eat. I mean, they're professionals here; they know how to take kids and put them in a routine that gives them something to do.'

'That's right,' Mom says. 'So, what are you going to do now?'

'I think there are activities-'

'Hey, Dariez, is this your family?' President Armelio steps on the scene. His half-harelip and hair shock my sister, but his relentless enthusiasm for just-I don't know-living-would knock the fear out of anybody.

He shakes all the hands and says we're a beautiful family and I'm a good boy, he can tell.

'Dariez's my friend! Hey, buddy-you want to play cards?'

President Armelio holds up a deck of playing cards like he just fished it out of the sea.

'Yeah, absolutely!' I say. I stand up. When was the last- time I played cards? Before the test, probably-before high school.

'All right!' Armelio says. 'My kinda boy! Let's do it. I've been looking and looking: nobody here likes to play cards as I do! What do you want to play? Spades? I'll crush you, buddy; I'll crush you.'

I look at my parents. 'We'll call you,' Mom says. 'And hey- what about sleeping?'

'I'm wired right now,' I say. 'But I'll crash. I'm starting to get a headache.'

'A Headache? Buddy, once I crush you in spades, you're going to have a lot bigger headache!' Armelio toddles away to the dining room to set up the cards.

'See ya,' Sarah says, hugging me.

'Bye, son.' Dad shakes my hand.

'I love you,' Mom says. 'I'll call you with the doctors' phone numbers.'

'And bring a phone card.'

'And I'll bring a phone card. You hang in there, Dariez.' 'Yeah, I will.' And as soon as they're around the bend, I head into the dining room and learn how to play spades for the rest of the afternoon, which Armelio absolutely does crush me in.

I'm afraid of making phone calls. The phone on Six North is a hubbub of activity, with Joy and the blond burned-out-type, who I learn is named Joy, fielding calls from, I assume, their respective female counterparts. Joy starts off his calls happily and says-

'Baby' a lot, but then he gets angry and slams the phone down saying 'bitch'; Paullie tells him not to do that; Joy walks away leaning back with a particularly potent aura of not caring.

Five minutes later, another call comes in for him, and he's back to 'Baby.' He doesn't even answer the phone, though; President Armelio has that job.

When he answers, he always says 'Jack's Pub,' and then finds whoever the call's for.

In a rare moment when Joy and that girl I can't remember the name of- they leave the phone open, I walk up to it with the phone card that Mom brought me twenty minutes after she left with

Dad and Sarah. I pick up and hear the dial tone, dial the 800 number for the phone card... and then stop. I can't do it.

I just don't want to deal with it.

Kids on the outside world don't know what's happened to me I'm in a sort of stasis right now. Things are under control. But the dam will break. Even if I'm here just through Monday, the rumors will start flying, and the homework will pile up.

Where's Dariez?

He's sick.

He's not sick, he got alcohol poisoning because he can't handle real liquor.

I heard he took someone's pills and freaked out. I heard he realized he's gay and he's coming to grips with it.

I heard his parents are sending him to a different school.

He couldn't handle it here, anyway. He was always such a loser.

He's freaking out in front of his computer. He can't move or anything. He's catatonic.

He woke up and thinks he's a horse.

Well, whatever, what's question three?

There were two messages on my phone when I came in, and now there are probably more, each one necessitating a callback, and the call back possibly necessitating another callback Tentacles - leading me right back to where I was last night. I can't go there, so I wait. I can wait for five minutes. But then Joy's on the line. And then I wait another five minutes. And the messages are piling up. And this isn't even counting email. What sort of hellish assignments have my teachers e-mailed out?

'Excuse me, are you using the phone?' the giant black girl with the cane asks as I stare at it.

'Yeah, uh.' I pick up the receiver in my hands. 'Yes. Yes, I am.'

'Okay.' She smiles, rolling her gums, not showing teeth. I start dialing, enter my PIN, enter my own number.

'Please enter your password, then press the pound sign.'

I obey.

'You have-three-new messages. 'One more than before. Not so bad.

'First new message: message marked urgent.' Uh-oh.

'Hey, Dariez, it's Emmah, I just, um ... we talked, and you were sounding really bad. I just wanted to make sure you were doing all right, and since you're not answering-it's like two A.M., I mean, why would you be answering? But I'm kinda worried that maybe you went and did something stupid because of me. Don't. I mean, it's sweet, but don't. Okay, that's it, I'm with Kristopher, he's being a total dick. Bye.'

'To erase this message-'

I hit 7.

'Next message.'

'Dariez, it's Kristopher, call me back son! Let's chill-' I hit 7-7.

'Next message.' 'Hello, Mr. Gilner, this is your science teacher, Mr. Reynolds. I got your phone number from the student directory. We really need to talk about the lack of your labs; I'm missing five of them-' 7-7.

'End of messages.'

I put the phone down like it's a dangerous animal. I pick back up, call home. Can't stop now.

'Sarah, can you get the phone numbers of Emmah and Kristopher out of my cell? And look through the recent missed calls for something from Knox; I have to call my science teacher.' 'Sure. How are things over there?'

I look to my left. A Hasidic Jewish boy, complete with the white pants, yarmulke, tassels hanging off him, braided hair, and sandals, dashes down the hall toward me. Scraps of red food dot his dark beard, and his eyes are wild and unhinged. He says to me: 'I'm Solomon.'

'Um, I've heard from you. I'm Dariez, but I'm on the phone.' I cut the receiver.

'I would ask you to please keep it down! I'm trying to rest!' He turns and races away, holding his pants.

'O-ooh! Solomon introduced himself to you!' hoots the girl with the cane. 'That's big.' 'It's normal,' I tell my sister.

'Okay, here.' She gives me Emmah's and Kristopher's and the teacher's numbers; I write them down on a scrap of paper that Paullie has given me. I should've known these before. Emmah's looks good written down- wholesome and useful. The science teachers look jagged and hateful. I may not be able to call him until tomorrow.

'Thanks, Sarah-bye.'

I hang up and look at the lady with the cane.

'Hey, I'm Dariez,' I say.

'Ebony.' She nods. We shake hands.

'Ebony, it's cool if I just make one more call?'

'Of course.'

I dial the 800 number, enter my PIN, dial Emmah.

'Hello?'

'Hey, Emmah, it's me.'

'Dariez, where are you?'

It's funny how kids ask that as soon as they get you on the phone. I think it's a byproduct of cell phones: kids-girls and moms especially- want to nail you down in physical space. The fact is that you could be anywhere on a cell phone and it shouldn't be important where you are. But it becomes the first thing kids ask.

'I'm at a friend's house. In Knox.'

I wonder, too, how ~Sped~ lies cell phones have contributed to the world.

'Uh-huh, Dariez. I don't think so.'

'What do you mean?' I wipe the sweat off my brow. The sweat is starting again. This isn't good. I was sweating down in the ER, but I wasn't sweating at lunch.

'You're not at any friend's house. You're probably at some girl's house.'

I look at Ebony. She smiles and leans forward on her cane.

'Yeah, totally.'

'I know you. Last night you had me on the phone; tonight, you're out hooking up with some girl.'

'Sure, Emmah-'

'Seriously, how are you? Thanks for calling back. I was worried.'

'I know, I got your message.'

'I don't want you to freak out over me. I think you just need some time to decompress a little bit, and not think about me and think about someone else. Because like, I know we might be good for each other, but I'm with someone else, you know?'

'Right... um... I wasn't freaking out about you last night, actually.'

'No?'

'No, I was freaking out about, like, much bigger things. I was having kind of a crisis, and I wanted to reach out to somebody who understood.'

'But you asked me if we would ever have been able to be together.'

'Well, I was trying to clear that up because ya' know ... I wanted to do something stupid.'

She drops her voice: 'Kill yourself?'

'Yeah.'

'You wanted to kill yourself over me?'

'No!' I scowl. 'I was just in a really bad place, and you were part of it, obviously, because you're a part of my life, just like Kristopher is a part of it and my family is a part of it, but I thought you could clear something up for me before I...'

'Dariez, I'm so flattered.'

'No, you have the wrong idea. Don't be flattered.'

'How could I not be? I never had a boy want to kill himself for me before. It's like the most robotic thing.'

'Emmah, it wasn't about you.'

'Are you sure?'

I look down, and the answer is right there in my chest and it's rebounding. 'Yes. I have bigger problems than you.' 'Ah, okay.'

'And you shouldn't assume that everything is always about you.'

'Whatever. What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing. Everything's a lot better now, actually.'

'You're acting like a total dick. Do you want to come out tonight?'

'I can't.'

'Did Kristopher call you? We're having a big party at his house.'

'Right. I'm probably not going to be partying for... like... a while. Like ever, maybe.'

'Is everything okay now?'

'Yeah, I'm just... I'm figuring some things out.'

'At your friend's house.'

'Correct.'

'Are you like in a crack den or something?'

'No!' I yell, and just then-President Armelio walks up to me:

'Hey, buddy, you want to play spades? I'll crush you.'

'Not now, Armelio.'

'Who's that?' Emmah asks.

'Leave him alone, he's talking with his girlfriend.' Ebony taps Armelio with her cane.

'She's not my girlfriend,' I whisper to her.

'Who's that?'

'My friend Armelio.'

'No, the girl.'

'My friend Ebony.'

'Where are you, Dariez?'

'I gotta go.'

'All right...' Emmah trails her voice off. 'I'm glad you're doing... uh... better.' 'I'm doing a lot better,' I say.

She's done, I think. She's done, and you're done with her.

'See ya, Dariez.' I hang up.

'I think that's over,' I say to myself.

Then I decide to announce it to the hall: 'I think that that's over!' Ebony stomps her cane, and Armelio claps.

Continued: 3

Something deep in my guts, below my heart, has made a shift to the left and settled in a more comfortable place. It's not the Shift, but it's a shift. I picture Emmah with her gorgeous face and little body and black hair and pouty lips and Kristopher's hands all over her but also with her pot-smoking and the pimples on her forehead and making fun of kids all the times and the way she's always so proud of how she's dressed. And I picture her fading.

I play cards with Armelio in the dining room until Joy pokes his head in: 'Dariez? It says on your door Dr. Mahmoud is your doctor? He's making his rounds.'

'I don't want to be here,' I tell him at the entrance to my room, where I catch him before he visits Joy.

'I don't think it's the place for me.'

'Of course not.' Dr. Mahmoud nods. He has on the same suit he had on earlier in the day, although that feels like last year. 'If you liked it here, that would be a very bad prognosis!'

'Right.' I chuckle. 'Well, I mean, everybody's friendly, but I feel a lot better, and I think I'm ready to go. Maybe on Monday? I don't want to miss school.'

Also, doc, right now the phone messages and e-mails are bunching up and the rumors are flying. I just talked to this girl and I did okay-but the Tentacles are coiled and the pressure is rising, getting ready to pounce on me when I leave. If I'm in here too long, I'll have that much more to do when I get out.

'We can't rush it,' Dr. Mahmoud says. 'The important thing is that you get better. If you try to leave too soon-suddenly, everything is better? We doctors' get suspicious.'

'Oh. Well, you don't want the doctor who can sign you out of the psychiatric hospital getting suspicious.' 'Right. Right now, to me, you look much better, but maybe this is a false recovery-'

'A Fake Shift.'

'I'm sorry?'

'A Fake Shift. That's what I call it. When you think you've beaten it, but you haven't?' 'Exactly. We don't want one of those.'

'So, I'm going to be here until I have the real Shift?'

'I don't follow.'

'I'm going to be here until I'm cured?'

'Life is not cured, Mr. Gilner.' Dr. Mahmoud leans in. 'Life is voyaged.'

'Okay.'

I'm apparently not as impressed by this as he would like. He arches back: 'We don't keep you here until you are cured of anything; we keep you here until you are stable - we call it 'establishing the baseline.'' 'Okay, so when will my baseline be established?'

'Five days, probably.'

One, two, three... 'Thursday? I can't wait until Thursday, Doctor. I have too much school. That's four days of school. If I miss four days I will be so behind.

'Plus, my friends...'

'Yes?'

'My friends will know where I am!'

'Aha. Is this a problem?'

'Yes!'

'Why?'

'Because I'm here!' I gestured out at the hall. Solomon shuffles by very quickly in his sandals and tells someone to be quiet, he's trying to rest. 'Mr. Gilner.' Dr. Mahmoud puts a hand on my shoulder. 'You have a chemical imbalance, that is all. If you were a diabetic, would you be ashamed of where you were?'

'No, but-'

'If you had to take insulin and you stopped, and you were taken to the hospital, wouldn't that make sense?'

'This is different.'

'How?'

I sigh. 'I don't know how much of it is really chemical. I just think depression's one way of coping with the world. Like, some kids get drunk, some kids do drugs, some kids get depressed.

Because there's so much stuff out there that you have to do something to deal with it.'

'Ah. This is why you need to be in here longer, to talk about these things,' Dr. Mahmoud says. 'You have a psychologist, correct?

Have you called your psychologist?'

Shoot. I knew I was forgetting something.

'You need to call; your psychologist will come here to meet with you. What is her name? Or his?'

'Dr. Ross.'

'Oh!' Dr. Mahmoud says; his lips curl into a faraway smile. 'Wonderful. Get Andrea down here.' 'Andrea?' I never knew her first name. She keeps it as a big secret. It's blacked out on all her degrees. She says its part of the policy.

He waves his hand. 'Make an appointment with her; then we'll be that much closer to coming up with your treatment plan and getting you out of here as soon as possible. We will try for Thursday.'

'Not before Thursday.'

'No.'

'Thursday,' I mumble to myself, looking across the room at

Joy's prone lump. 'Five days, that's it! Everything will be fine, Mr. Gilner. Your life will wait. You just participate in the group activities and call Dr. Ross. And when you grow up to be rich and successful, you don't forget me, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Can please you close the door?' Joy asks from his bed.

'Joy, you are the next: how come you are always sleeping-sleeping-sleeping?'

Dr. Mahmoud walks past me. I call Mom to report the news, and then I call Dr. Ross. She says she's sorry I took this turn for the worse, but it's always two steps forward, one-step-back.

'If this is my one step back,' I tell her, 'what am I going to do next: win the lottery and get my own TV show?'

That'd be a good TV show, actually, I think. A boy winning the lottery in the psych hospital.

Dr. Ross can't come in tomorrow, because it's Sunday, but she says she'll be in on Monday. I'm momentarily surprised by the distinction. In Six North, there probably won't be much different.

'They say there's going to be a pizza party tonight,' Humble tells me at dinner. Dinner is chicken tenders with potatoes and salad and a pear. I eat it all. 'But they say that every night.' 'What's a pizza party?'

'We all chip in the money and get pizza from the neighborhood. It's tough because no one ever has any cash. It's like a big deal if we get pepperoni.'

'I have eight dollars.'

'Sh-h. Don't go announcing it!' He stops chewing. 'Kids in here don't have any money. I don't have two cents to rub together.'

I nod. 'I never heard that one before.'

'No? You like it?'

'Yeah.'

'What about: I don't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.'

'Nope.'

'What about: I got Jack and shit and Jack left town.' 'Heh. No!

Where do you get them all?'

'From the old neighborhood. Gimme a ringy-ding.

Catch ya on the flipside. It's the best way to talk.'

'A ringy-ding, what's that-a call?'

'Don't ask yuppie questions.'

Humble scans the room for kids to talk about. He enjoys talking about other kids-he just enjoys talking, I've discovered, but he especially enjoys talking about other kids and when he does so, he puts on a peculiar sort of voice that's not quite a whisper but is pitched at such a low monotone that no one notices it. He also seems able to throw it so it feels like he's speaking into my left ear.

'So, I suppose you've become familiar with our lovely clientele here on the floor. President Armelio is the president.' He nods over at Armelio, who has finished his food first and is getting up to return the tray. 'You see how fast he eats? If you could harness a quarter of his energy, you could power the island of Knox. I'm not joking.

He should really work in a place with kids like us. He has such a good heart and he's never down.'

'So why is he in here?'

'He's psychotic, of course. You should-a saw him when they brought him in. He was screaming his head off about his mom.

He's Greek.'

'Huh.'

'Now there's Ebony, She of the Ass. That is definitely the biggest ass I've ever seen. I'm not even into asses, but if you were-man, you could lose yourself in there.

It's like its own municipality. I think that's why she needs the cane. She's also the only girl I've ever known who wears velvet pants; I think you have to have a butt like that to wear velvet pants.

They only make them in extra- extra- large.'

'I didn't even notice them.'

'Well, give it a while. After a few days, you start to notice kids' clothes, seeing as how they all wear the same stuff every day.'

'Things don't get dirty?'

'They do laundry on Tuesdays and Fridays. Who gave you your tour when you came in?'

'Joy.'

'He should've told you that.' Humble swivels his head then turns back. 'Now Joy and her too' - they're at a table together, as they were at lunch-' those two were some of the biggest methamphetamine addicts in Clarion, period, in the nineties. They were called Fiend One and Fiend Two. The party didn't really start until they showed up.'

That must've been such a feeling, even though all the drugs, I think. To come into a house and have kids well up and greet you: 'All right, boy!' 'You're here!' 'What's up?' That was probably as addictive as the amphetamines. Kids sort of does that to Kristopher.

'What happened to them?' I ask.

'What happens to anybody? They got burned out, lost all their money, ended up here. Got no families, got no women-well, I think Joy has one.'

'He talks on the phone with her.'

'You can't tell from that. Kids pretend to be on the phone all the time. Like her' -he pitches his head at the bug-eyed girl who was standing behind me when I was talking with my family- 'The

Professor. I've caught her on the phone talking to Dr. Dial Tone. She's a university professor. She ended up here because she thinks someone tried to spray her apartment with insecticide. She has newspaper clippings about it and everything.'

Humble turns: 'The black kid with the glasses: he looks pretty normal, but he has it bad. You notice he doesn't come out of his room a lot. That's because he's scared that gravity is going to reverse and he's going to fall up into the ceiling. When he goes outside, he has to be near trees so, in case the gravity stops, he'll have something to hold on to. I think he's about seventeen. Have you talked to him?'

'No!'

'He doesn't really talk. I don't know how much they can do for him.'

The boy looks up at the ceiling fan above the dining room, shudders, and forks food into his mouth. 'Then there's my Joy.

My-a Joy's been here a lot. I've been here twenty-four days, and I've seen him come and go twice. You seem to like him.'

'We came in together.'

'He's a cool boy. And he has good teeth.'

'Yeah, I noticed that.'

'Pearly whites. Not a lot of kids in here have that. I myself wonder what happened to Ebony's teeth.' 'What's wrong with them?' I turn.

'Don't look. She has none, you didn't notice? She's on a liquid diet. Just gums. I wonder if she sold 'em, tooth by tooth...'

I bite my tongue. I can't help it. I shouldn't be laughing at any of these kids, and neither should Humble, but maybe it's okay, somewhere, somehow, because we're enjoying life? I'm not sure. My-a Joy, two tables away, notices my stifled laughter, smiles at me, and laughs himself.

'I told-jah: it comes to yah!'

'There we go. What is going on in his mind?' Humble asks.

I can't help it. It's too much. I crack up. Juice and chicken tender bits spray my plate.

'Oh, I got you now,' Humble continues. 'And here comes the guest of honor: Solomon.'

The Hasidic Jewish boy comes in holding up his pants. He still has food in his beard. He grabs his tray and opens a microwaved packet of spaghetti and starts shoveling it into his mouth, making slurping, gulping groans.

'This boy eats once a day but it's like his last day on earth,' Humble says. 'I think he's the most far gone of everybody. He's got like a direct audience with God.'

Solomon looks up, twists his head from side to side, and resumes eating.

Humble drops to a true whisper. 'He did a few hundred tabs of acid and blew his pupils out. His eyeballs are probably dilated.'

'No way.'

'Absolutely. It's a certain cult of the Hasidics: the Jewish Acid Heads. There's like a part of their holy writings that tell them it's the way to talk to God. But he took it too far.'

Solomon gets up, leaves his tray disgustedly at the table, and moves out of the room with alarming speed.

'He's like the Mole Boy, back to his hole,' Humble says. 'The real Mole Kids are the anorexics; you don't even see them.'

'How ~*Sped*~ kids are in here?' I ask.

'They say twenty-five,' Humble says. 'But that's not counting the stowaways.'

I look around. Charles / Beth isn't in the room.

'Did the, uh, you know, Charles? Did he leave?' 'Yeah, the tranny's gone. I left this afternoon. Tranny hit on you?'

'Yeah.'

'Paullie lets him do that. Gets a kick out of it.'

'I can't believe he's just gone. They don't, like, throw a party for you when you leave?'

'No way. Kids here don't want to get out. Getting out means going back to the streets or to jail or to try and fish their things out of an impounded car, like me. Your kind of situation, with the parents and a house: that's rare. And also, with so ~Sped~ kids coming and going, we'd be nuts to try and have a party every time. We'd end up like Fiend One and Fiend Two.'

My tray is a mess from the food spraying out. 'You crack me up, Humble,' I tell him.

'I know. I'm great- times for everybody. Too bad I'm in here instead of onstage getting paid for it.'

'Why don't you try going onstage?'

'I'm old.'

'I have to get some napkins.' I rise and go out to Paullie, who hands me a stack. I return, wipe off my tray, and start in on the pear.

'You have a secret admirer,' Humble says. 'I should've guessed. I know how you operate.'

'What?'

'She was just here. Look at your chair.'

I get up and check it. There's a piece of paper lying there, face down. I flip it around, and it says HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A GOOD TIMES. VISITING HOURS ARE TOMORROW FROM 7:00-7:05 P.M. I DON'T SMOKE. 'See? Your little girl with the cut-up's face just left it.' Humble gets up. 'I had a feeling. Now you're starting to look like a rival male. I might have to keep my eye on you.'

He deposits his tray and gets in line for his meds. I fold the paper up and put it in the pocket where my phone used to be.

Part: 12

'Dariez! Hey buddy! Phone!'

I'm sitting with Humble outside the smoking lounge for the 10 P.M. cigarette break, thinking about where I was at the last 10 P.M.: just getting into Mom's bed. Humble doesn't smoke, says it's

disgusting, but everyone else in here does, practically, including the black boy who's afraid of gravity, and the big girl,

Becca, both of whom I thought were underage. Armelio, Ebony, Joy, Joy, Joy ... no matter how nuts they all seem, they have no problem migrating to the upper left of the Hand sitting down on the couches quietly to wait for their particular brand of cigarettes, which I learn the hospital does not, in fact, provide for them-they come in with the packs themselves and the nurses keep them in a special tray. Once they pull a cigarette out of their respective packs, they walk single file through a red door, passing Nurse Monieec, whose job is to light everybody up. When the door closes, the smell drifts out from under it and you hear talking everybody talking all at once, as if they saved their words for a time when there was smoke to send them through.

'How're you doing for your first day, Dariez?' Nurse Monieec asked me five minutes ago, as she closed the door. 'You don't smoke, I see.'

'No.'

'That's good. Terrible habit. And it happens so much to kids your age.'

'A lot of my friends' smoke. I just, you know... never liked it.'

'I see you are adjusting quite well to the floor.'

'Yeah.'

'Good, good, that is so important. Tomorrow we're going to talk more about your adjustment and your situation and how you're feeling.'

'Okay.'

'You got to watch out for this one,' Humble said. 'He's crafty.'

'Oh yeah?' Monieec asked.

I was looking for the blond girl, Joy- I had to remember to meet her but she wasn't around. Neither was Solomon. Next to Humble was the girl he identified as the Professor, watching us with her bugged-out eyes. Unprompted, Humble started talking with me and Monieec about this old girlfriend of his, who had, in his words, 'pig-tail nipples, like curly fries,

I kid you not.' Monieec laughed and laughed. The Professor said Humble was disgusting. Monieec said it was okay to laugh once in a while, and did she have a story to share?

'Yeah, we all know you had some indiscretions in your youth, Professor,' Humble prodded.

The Professor got a dreamy look in her eyes. I almost thought she was going to have a seizure. And she said, in a light little voice, with a nasal twinge: 'I had a lot of boys, but I only had one boy.'

I was wondering where I'd heard that before when Armelio interrupted.

'C'mon buddy! The phone is for you!' 'Right.' I get up.

'You're lucky, buddy. It's after ten. They usually shut the phone off at ten.'

Shut the phone off. I picture a big lever in my mind, a boy heaving it down.

'What happens if someone calls and the phone's off?'

'It just rings and rings,' Humble yells out, 'and kids know they're not in Kansas anymore.'

I walk down the hall. The pay-phone receiver is hanging and swaying. I pick it up.

'Hello?'

'Hey, is this the loony bin?' It's Kristopher. It's Kristopher, high.

'How'd you get this number?' I ask. The boy with the beard, who I saw rocking in the dining room when I first came in, is pacing the central hall, staring at me.

'My girl gave it to me, what do you think? What's it like in there, dude?' Kristopher asks.

'How do you know where I am?'

'I looked it up, boy! Do you think I'm an idiot? I go to the same school as you! I did a reverse number search and found exactly where you are: UMPC Hospital, Adult Psychiatric! Dude, how'd you get in an adult? Do they serve beer up there?'

'Kristopher, c'mon.'

'I'm serious. How about girls? Are there any hot girls around-ow!'

I hear laughing in the background, above rap. 'Gimme the phone!' Richard's high-pitched bleat comes through the line.

'Lemme talk!'

Richard comes into focus: 'Dude, can you get me any Vicodin?'

Howls. Howls of laughter. And in the background, Emmah protesting: 'Boys, don't bother him.'

'Gimme-Dariez, no, seriously.' Kristopher is back on. 'I'm a really sorry dude. I... just, how are you, boy?'

'I'm... okay.' I'm starting to sweat.

'What happened?'

'I didn't have a good night, and I checked myself into the hospital.'

'What's that mean, 'didn't have a good night'?'

The boy in my stomach is back, tugging at me. I want to vomit on the phone.

'I'm depressed, okay, Kristopher?'

'Yeah, I know, about what?'

'No, boy, I'm depressed in general. I have like, clinical depression.'

'No way! You're like the happiest boy I know!'

'What are you talking about?'

'That's a joke, Dariez. You're like the craziest person I know. Remember on the bridge? But, you know, the problem is you don't chill enough. Like even when you're here, you're always worried about school or something; you never just kick back and let things slide, you know what I mean? We're having a party tonight- where are you going to be?'

'Kristopher, who's in the room?'

'Emmah, Richard, Scruggs, uh... my friend Delilah.' I don't even know Delilah.

'So, all these kids know where I am now.'

'Dude, we think it's awesome where you are! We want to visit!'

'I can't believe you.'

'What?'

'I can't believe you're doing this.'

'Don't be a girl. You know if I was in the mental ward, you'd call me up and rag on me a little. It's because we're friends, boy!' 'It's not a mental ward.'

'What?'

'It's a psychiatric hospital. It's for short-stay patients. A mental ward is longer.'

'Well, clearly you've been there long enough to be an expert.

How long are you staying?' 'Until I have a baseline established.' 'What does that mean? Wait, I still don't get it: what was wrong with you in the first place?'

'I told you, I'm depressed. I take pills for it as your girlfriend.'

'Like my girlfriend?'

'Dariez, shut up!' Emmah yells in the background.

'My girlfriend doesn't take any pills,' Kristopher says.

Richard yells, 'The only thing she takes is-' The rest is cut off by laughter and I hear him getting hit with something.

'Maybe you should talk to her a little more and figure out what she's actually like,' I say. 'You might learn something.'

'You're telling me how to treat Emmah now?' Kristopher asks. I hear him lick his lips. 'What, like I don't know what this is really about?'

'What, Kristopher. What is it really about?'

'You want my girl, dude. You've wanted her for like two years. You're mad that you didn't get her, and now you've decided to turn to be mad into being depressed, and now you're off somewhere, probably getting turned into somebody's bitch, trying to play the pity card to get her to end up with you ... And I call you as a friend to try and lighten your mood and you hit me with all of this crap? Who do you think you are?'

'Yo, Kristopher.'

'What.'

I'm going to do a trick Richard showed me. He used to do it a long time ago, and I think Kristopher's forgotten it.

'Yo.'

'What?'

'Yo.'

'What?!'

'Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo-'

I pause. Hold it, hold it...

'Fuck you.'

And I slam the phone down.

It hits my finger and I go howling into my room, next to Joy.

'What happened?' He asks.

'I don't have any friends,' I say, jumping and holding my finger.

'This is a tough thing to learn.'

I look out the window, through the blinds, into the night. Now I'm really screwed. I run my finger under cold water in our bathroom. I didn't think I could get more screwed than last night, but here I am. I'm in a hospital. I've sunk to the lowest place I can be. I'm in a place where I'm not allowed to

shave by myself-even if I needed to shave biologically-because they're worried that I'll use the razors on myself. And everyone knows. I'm in a place where kids have no teeth and eat liquid food. And everyone knows. I'm in a place where the boy I eat with lives in his car. And everyone knows.

I can't function here anymore. I mean in life: I can't function in this life. I'm no better off than when I was in bed last night, with one difference: when I was in my own bed-or my mom's I could do something about

It; now that I'm here I can't do anything. I can't ride my bike to the Kinzua Bridge; I can't take a whole bunch of pills and go for the good sleep; the only thing I can do is crush my head in the toilet seat, and I still don't even know if that would work. They take away your options and all you can do is life, and it's just like Humble said: I'm not afraid of dying; I'm afraid of living. I was afraid before, but I'm afraid to even more now that I'm a public joke. The teachers are going to hear from the students. They'll think I'm trying to make an excuse for bad work.

I get in bed and put the single top-sheet over me. 'This- freaking sucks.'

'You are depressed?' Joy says.

'Yeah.'

'I, too, suffer from depression.'

I feel the Cycling starting again-I'm going to get out of here at some point and have to go back into my real life. This place isn't real. This is a facsimile of life, for broken kids. I can handle the facsimile, but I can't handle the real thing. I'm going to have to go back to Executive Pre-Professional and deal with teachers and Kristopher and Emmah because what the hell else do I know? I staked everything on that stupid test. What else am I good at?

Nothing- I'm good at nothing.

I get up and go to the nurses' station.

'I'm not going to be able to sleep.'

'You're not able to sleep?' The nurse is a white-haired little old lady with glasses.

'No, I know I'm not going to be able to sleep,' I respond. 'I'm taking preemptive action.'

'We have a sedative, called Atavan. It's injectable. It'll relax you and make you sleep.'

'Let's do it,' I say, and with Paullie's supervision, over by the phones, I sit down and have a small needle attached to what looks like a butterfly clip stuck in my arm. I stare forward as something yellow is pumped into me and then I stumble off into my room-stumble because I can feel it hitting me even as I get up from the chair. It's some kind of powerful muscle relaxant, and loving hands pull me down as I crash into bed past time, but the last thought I have before I go to sleep is:

Great, soldier, now you're depressed and, in the hospital, and a drug addict. And everyone knows.

Nurse Monieec brings me into the same office that I was interviewed in the day before, to ask me how I'm adjusting. I look at the white walls and the table where she showed me the pain chart and think that I've actually come kind of far since yesterday; I've eaten and slept; you can't deny that. Eating and sleeping will do a body good. I needed the shot, though.

'How are we feeling today?' she asks.

'Fine. Well, I couldn't sleep last night. I had to take a shot.'

'I saw on your chart. Why do you think you couldn't sleep?'

'My friends called. They were kind of... making fun of my whole situation.' 'And why would they do that?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe they are not your friends.' 'Well, I told them... 'Screw you,' basically. The main one, Kristopher. I told him 'Screw you.''

'Did that make you feel good?'

I sigh. 'Yeah. There was a girl too.'

'Who would that be?'

'Emmah. One of my friends.'

'And her?'

'I'm done with her, too.'

'So, you made a lot of big decisions on your first day here.'

'Yes.'

'This happens to boy's kids: they come and make big decisions. Sometimes they are good decisions, sometimes bad.'

'Well, I hope good, obviously.'

'Me too. How do you feel about the decisions?'

I picture Emmah and Kristopher dissolving, replaced by Joy and that girl too.

'It was the right thing to do.'

'Wonderful. Now, you've made some new friends here as well, isn't that true?'

'Sure.'

'I noticed you talking with Humboldt Koper outside the smoking lounge last night.'

'Is that his real name?' I laugh. 'Yeah, well, right, you were talking, too. We all were.'

'Yes. Now, you might not want to become so friendly with your fellow patients on the floor.'

'Why not?'

'That can distract kids from the healing process.'

'How?'

'This is a hospital. It's not a place to make friends. Friends are wonderful, but this place is about you and making you feel better.'

'But...' I fidget. 'I respect Humble. I respect Joy. I have more respect for them after a day and a half than I do for most kids ... in the world, really.' 'Just be careful of forming close relationships, Dariez.

Focus on yourself.'

'Okay.'

'Only then does healing take place.'

'All right.'

Nurse Monieec leans back with her moon face.

'As you know, we have certain activities on the floor.'

'Right.'

'On your first day, you are excused from activities, but after that, you are expected to attend on a daily basis.'

'Okay.'

'That means you start today. This is an opportunity for you to explore your interests. So, I ask you: what are your hobbies?' Bad question, Monieec.

'I don't have any.'

'Aha. None at all?'

'No.'

I work, Monieec and 1 think about work, and I freak out about work, and I think about how much I think about work, and I freak out about how much I think about work, and I think about how freaked out I get about how much I think about work. Does that count as a hobby?

'I see.' She takes some notes. 'So-o, we can put you in any activity group.' 'I guess.'

'And you'll go?'

'Can I play cards with Armelio in the groups?'

'No.'

'Will participating in them get me out of here on Thursday?'

'I cannot say for sure. But not participating will be viewed as a step back in the healing process.'

'Okay. Sign me up.'

Nurse Monieec marks a sheet in her lap. 'Your first activity will be arts and crafts this evening, before dinner, with Lacey in the activity lounge, which is through the doors behind the nurses' station.'

'I thought those doors didn't open.'

'We can open them, Dariez.'

'When does it start?'

'Seven.'

'Oh. I won't be there exactly at seven.'

'Why's- that?'

'I have to meet with someone at seven.'

'A visitor?'

'Sure,' I lie.

'A friend?'

'Well, yeah. So far. I hope so.'

At 6:52 P.M.

I position myself at the end of the hall where I met with my parents yesterday and again today-around three, without Sarah this time; she was at a friend's house.

Dad didn't crack any jokes and Mom brought the shirt for Joy, who shook her hand and told her Your girl is great and she told him she knew that. Dad asked whether we got to watch movies... and I told him that we did, but that since so ~*Sped*~ kids were older, it was really boring movies with Cary Grant and Greta Garbo and stuff, and he asked if I wouldn't enjoy him bringing oversaw II on DVD.

And I checked with Howard and it turned out the hospital had a DVD player like everyone else in the world and so Dad and I made a date for Wednesday night, in three days, when he didn't have to work late. He'd come by with Blade II and we'd all watch it.

The place I'm sitting in is the part of the H that mirrors the part next to the smoking lounge; Joy said she didn't smoke, so I think she wants to meet here. I didn't tell my parents about her. I did tell them that I talked to my friends, that it didn't go well, but that they were probably part of the problem anyway and it was good to stay away from them for a while. Mom said she knew my friends smoked pot and they were probably a bad influence anyway. Dad said Now you yourself haven't smoked pot, right, Dariez? and I told him no, no I hadn't, not before the SATs as he told me. And we all laughed.

They asked how I was eating and I told them I was eating fine, which was true.

They asked how I was sleeping and I told them I was sleeping fine, which I hoped would be true tonight.

Now I sit with my legs crossed, only I think that looks weird, so I uncross them, only now I'm cold and nervous, so I cross them again. Right at 7:00 P.M. Joy, in the same clothes I saw her in yesterday- dark Capri pants and a white wife-beater- comes down the hall.

She sits in the chair next to me and moves the hair away from her face with small fingers with no nail polish on them.

'You came,' she says.

'Well, yeah, you passed me a note. That's like the first time a girl passed me a note.' I smile- I try to sit up and look good in my chair.

'We're going to make this quick,' she says. 'And it's going to be a game.' 'Five minutes, right?'

'Right- here's the game: it's just questioned. I ask you a question, and you ask me a question.'

'Okay. Do you have to answer?'

'If you want, you can answer. But no matter what, you have to end with another question.' 'So- we're trading questions. Like twenty questions. Why do we have to talk like this?'

'It's the best way to get to know a person. And in five minutes we can do way more than twenty questions. If we don't dilly-dally.

I'm starting. Ready?'

I concentrate. 'Yeah.' 'No, answer with a question. Don't tell me you're stupid. Are you stupid?'

'No!' I shake my head. 'Uh ... are you ready?'

'There you go. We're on. First question: Do you think I'm gross-looking?'

Gosh, she cuts right to the chase. I took her over. I'm a little ashamed of how I do it because I look at her from the bottom up like I would if she were on the Internet. I look at her feet ending in simple black sneakers and her small ankles and her pale lower legs and the indentation in the Capri pants where the pants start, under her knee, and up her body to her small waist and then the sharp bulge of her breasts and then her neck, coming through the uneven, distended neckline of her wife-beater, and her small chin and lips. The cuts on her face line her cheeks and forehead: little parallel slashes, three together in each place, with clumps of white skin on the ends where they're healing. They don't look like very deep cuts, and they're thin-I have a feeling that when they heal up, she'll look just fine. And she's beautiful. No question. Her eyes are green and knowing.

'No, you look awesome,' I say.

'What's your question?'

'Uh, why did you pass me the note?'

'I thought you were interesting. Why did you do what it said?'

'I...' I can't think up a fake answer quickly enough. 'I'm a straight boy, you know. So- if a girl talks to me or whatever, I'll do exactly what she says.' Wait, now: make it a compliment.

'Especially if it's a pretty girl.' I smile.

'You're not very good at this game. What's your question?'

'Oh- Right. Ah... are you straight?'

She sighs. 'Yes. Don't get too excited. You don't have a boner, do you?'

'No! 'I cross my legs. 'No. So... how'd you get here?'

'Oh, that's a big one. Crossing the line. What do you think?'

'Someone came in on you while you were cutting your face?'

'Ding- ding- ding! Afterward, actually. I was bleeding all over the sink. How'd you get here?'

'I checked myself in. When did you get here?'

'Why did you check yourself in? Twenty-one days ago. Whoops. Reverse those. Pretend I ended with the question.' She rubs her arms.

'I wasn't doing well. I called, you know, the Suicide Hotline, and they told me to come here. Why have you been here so long?'

'They're not sure I won't hurt myself again. What medication are you on?' 'Zoloft. What about you?'

'Paxil- where do you live?'

'Around here... Where do you live?'

'Knox- what do your parents do?'

'My mom designs greeting cards and my dad works in health insurance. What about you?'

'My mom's a lawyer and my dad's dead. Do you want to know how he died?'

'I'm sorry. How? Do I want to know?'

'That's two questions. Yes, you do. He died fishing. He fell off a boat. Isn't that the stupidest thing you ever heard?'

'No. Not by a long shot' I say. 'You want to know what I think is the stupidest way to die?'

'What?'

'Auto-erotic asphyxiation. You know what that is?'

'When kids put ropes around themselves while they're jerking off, right?'

'Right- I read about it in the DSM. Have you ever read the DSM?'

'The big book of psych disorders?'

'Yeah!'

'Of course. Have you ever heard of Undine's Curse?'

'Oh my God! I thought I was the only one who knew about that. Where you forget how to breathe. Uh... where did you first see the DSM?'

'On my shrink's bookshelf- You?'

'Same. You call them 'shrinks' too?'

'That's what they are, right?'

'What does that even mean?'

'I think 'head shrinks,' because they shrink kids' heads. You think I have all the answers?'

I stop. I need a break. I put my hands on my knees and rock forward. This game is hard. 'Is your name really Joy?'

'Why wouldn't it be?'

'After the whole thing at lunch yesterday, I don't know what to believe. Do you know what my name is?' 'Of course. Dariez Gilner.

You think I'm an idiot?'

'How'd you know my last name?'

'I read your bracelet. You want to read mine?'

''Joy Hinton.' Hey...' I think, 'So here's one: Did you know what was going to happen at lunch yesterday?'

'With 'Beth'? Of course. He does that to everybody.

What I'm curious about is this: why'd you come over?' 'I thought she-uh, he was, ya know, a girl. And I got asked-'

'Why did you come here?''

'Wait, I forgot to ask you a question.'

'That's okay. You have one point. Why'd you come here?'

'Um, I thought I said: because you're a girl. And you asked me. And you seem cool?' You already said she's beautiful; now show you're not shallow and say she's cool.

'Watching you try and answer these questions right is hilarious. You're a silly boy. You know you're silly, right?'

Joy leans back and stretches. Her hair falls away from her face and her cuts scream up into the light. The lines of her wifebeater echo her hair.

'You know those cuts on your face really aren't that bad?'

'How long have I been here, Dariez?'

'You told me twenty-one days. Is that true?'

'Yeah. Can you imagine what they looked like when I came in?'

'Are they going to scar?'

'I have to have surgery to clear them up. You think I should?'

'No. Why hide what you've been through?'

'I don't know if that's really a question. It's too obvious. Wouldn't I be happier without scars?' 'I don't know. It's tough to tell what would make you happy. I thought I'd be happier in a really tough high school, and I ended up here. Wait, where do you go to school?'

'Delfin.' That's a private school in Knox; I think it's the last one where they have to wear uniforms. 'You?'

'Executive Pre-Professional. Do you have to wear uniforms?'

'Are you like a school-uniform pervert?'

'No. Well... no.'

'Two points. You didn't ask a question. Do you like this game?'

'I like talking to you. It's like a math problem. Do you like talking to me?'

'It's all right. Do you like math?'

'I thought I was good at it, but it turns out I'm a year behind everybody else. You?'

'I'm bad at school. I spend most of my time in ballet. But I'm not tall enough for that. Have you ever been not tall enough for anything?'

'Maybe some rides, when I was a little kid. Why?'

'I'm still too short for those rides. It sucks to be short.

Remember that.' She stops.

'One point for you.'

'That's three for you. Game over.'

'Okay, cool.' I sit back in my seat. 'Phew. What now?'

'That's a good question. I have no idea. I've got to go to arts and crafts.'

'Me too.'

'You want to go together?'

'Sure.' I stop. That's a come-on, isn't it? 'Can we... uh... can I like- kiss you or whatever?'

Joy leans back and laughs and laughs. 'No, you can't kiss me!

What, you think we play the game once and you get to kiss me?' 'Well, I thought we had a thing going.'

'Dariez.' She leans in and looks me right in the eyes. 'No.' She smiles. The cuts crinkle.

'Do you know when you're leaving?' I ask.

'Thursday.'

My heart jumps. 'Me too.' I start to lean forward- 'No. No, Dariez. Arts and crafts.'

'Okay.' I get up. I hold out my hand for Joy. She ignores it.

'Race you!' she says, and sprints down the hall into the activity lounge, with me following, trying to keep up- how can I not, when my legs are so much longer? Does ballet teach you to run? Howard yells at us as we pass the nurses' station-'Kids! Kids!

No running on the floor!'-but I really don't care.

'So- who here likes to draw-aww-w?' Lacey asks. Lacey is a big smiling lady with lots of makeup and bracelets. She rules the activity lounge, which is exactly like the art room I had when I was in kindergarten. There are patient-contributed paintings of hamburgers and dogs...

...And kites on the walls and then there are posters- OBSTACLES ARE THOSE FRIGHTENING THINGS THAT APPEAR WHEN WE TAKE OUR MIND OFF OUR GOALS; DREAMS ARE ONLY DREAMS UNTIL YOU WAKE UP AND MAKE THEM REAL; THINGS I HAVE TO DO TODAY: 1) BREATHE IN 2) BREATHE OUT.

The alphabet, thankfully, is nowhere to be seen; if I saw Aa Bb, I'd probably start the Cycling again. There is one interesting poster: KIDS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS CONTRIBUTE TO OUR WORLD. It lists- Abraham Lincoln, Ernest Hemingway, Winston Churchill, Isaac Newton, Sylvia Plath, and a bunch of other smart kids who were kind of nuts.

It's depressing, though. I mean, this room is what I expect a mental hospital to look like. Adults reduced to children, sitting with finger paints; a jolly supervisor telling them that everything they do is great. But isn't this what I was asking for when I was filling out my menus?

Part: 13

You wanted preschool, soldier, you got to preschool.

I wanted the comfort of preschool, not the ambiance.

You got to take the good with the bad. Like your little chick here. I bet you didn't think you'd come in here and find a fine filly like that.

Well, she's not a filly.

I have a feeling filly means girlfriend. I look at Joy.

We're trying to decide where to sit. I only talked with her once.

She likes you, boy, and if you can't tell that, you aren't going to be able to tell a rifle from a cap gun in this war.

What war is that, again?

The one you're fighting with your own head. Right, how are we doing?

You're making gains, soldier, can't you see that? Joy and I sit with Humble and the Professor. 'I see you two have made each other's acquaintance,' Humble says.

'Leave them alone,' the Professor says.

'Where were you?' Humble continues. 'Were you in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G?'

'No.'

'Nothing's happening,' Joy says.

'We're just sitting together,' I say. ''Dariez and Noelle, sitting in a tree-'' He gets up and puts his hands on his hips, sashaying.

'Hold on, now, what's going on here?' Lacey comes over. 'Is there a problem, Mr. Koper?'

'No- What? What are you talking about?' He holds up his hands, sits down. 'You mean me?'

Lacey scoffs and announces: 'This is free-period arts recreational therapy, for all you latecomers!' Humble points at me and Joy, making a little shame on your gesture. 'That means you can draw whatever you feel like. It's a great chance to explore your creativity and find out what you like to do for leisure! Leisure is very important!'

Lacey comes up behind me when she's done announcing:

'You're new. Hi, my name is Lacey. I'm the recreation director.'

'Dariez,' I shake her hand.

'You want a pencil and paper, Dariez?'

'No. I don't have anything to do. I can't draw.' 'Sure, you can. It doesn't have to be representative. You can do the abstract. Do you want to crayons?'

'No.' God, it's so embarrassing. Being asked if you want crayons.

'How about paints?'

'I told you, I can't draw.'

'Paints are for painting, not drawing.'

'Well, I can't do that either.'

'What about markers?'

'No.'

'Everyone?' Lacey turns to the room. 'Our new guest, Dariez, has what we call an artistic block. He doesn't have anything to draw!'

'That's too bad, buddy!' Armelio yells from his table. 'You want to play cards?'

'Armelio, no cards in here. Now, can anyone give Dariez something he can draw?'

'Fish!' Joy yells out. 'Fish are easy.'

'Pills,' Joy says.

'Joy,' Lacey admonishes. 'We do not draw pills.' 'Salad,' says Ebony.

'She wants you to draw it, but she sure as hell can't eat it,' Humble guffaws.

'Mister Koper! That's it. Please leave the room.' 'Oh-h,' everybody says.

'That's right!' Ebony calls. She makes the umpire gesture. 'You're outta here!' 'Fine,' Humble stands up. 'Whatever. Blame me. Blame the boy who has total respect for everybody else.' He gathers his things, which is nothing and steps out of the activity lounge. 'You're all a bunch of yuppies!'

I watch him go.

'You can draw a cat!' the boy who's afraid of gravity says. 'I used to have one. It died.'

'Rolling pin,' the bearded boy says. It's the first words I've heard him say since I saw him in the dining room on my way in. He still rocks, and he still paces the halls whenever he isn't shuttled into a room.

'What was that, Robert?' Lacey asks. 'That's very good.

What did you say?'

But he clams up. He won't say it again. Rolling pin. I wonder what that means to him. If I had one thing to say, I don't think it would be a rolling pin. It would probably be sex.

Or shift...

'He can draw something from his childhood,' Joy says next to me.

'Oh, there's a good one. Joy, you want to speak up?'

She sighs, then announces to the room: 'Dariez can draw something from his childhood.'

'That's right,' Lacey nods. 'Dariez, do you like any of these suggestions?'

But I'm already gone. I've got the river started at the top of the page, looking down to meet with a second river. No, wait, you have to put in the roads first, because the bridges go over the water, remember? Highways first, then rivers, the streets. It's all coming back to me. How long has it been since I did this? Since I was nine? How could I forget? I slash a highway across the center of the page and make it meet with another in a beautiful spaghetti interchange. One ramp goes off the junction through a park and ends in a circle, a nice hubbub of residential activity. The blocks start out from there. The map is forming.

My own city...

'Oh, somebody got Dariez's mind unblocked!' Lacey announces from the other end of the room. I glance back. Ebony, who's been sitting over there, goes through the arduous process of getting up with her cane and walks toward me. 'I want to see.' 'Huh, thanks Ebony,' I say, turning back to the map. She looks over my shoulder. 'Oooh that's pretty,' she says.

'What is it?' Armelio yells.

'Let's not yell across the room,' Lacey says.

'That is extraordinary,' the Professor says next to me.

'I deserve half-credit,' says Joy, sketching out a flower to my right. She glances at me through the sides of her eyes. 'You know I do.'

'You do,' I tell her, taking a break to look at her. I go back to the map. It's flowing out of me. 'Is that somebody's brain?' Ebony asks.

I look up at her, rolling her mouth and smiling down. I look at the map. It's not a brain, clearly; it's a map; can't she see the rivers and highways and interchanges? But I see how it could look like a brain, like if all roads were twisted neurons, pulling your emotions from one place to another, bringing the city to life. A working brain is probably a lot like a map, where anybody can get from one place to another on the freeways. It's the nonworking brains that get blocked, that have dead ends, that are under construction like mine.

'Yeah,' I say, nodding up at her. 'Yeah. That's exactly what it is. It's a brain.' And I stop my map in the middle-this was always a problem for me, finishing the damn things; I always ran out of energy before I got to the edge of the page and draw ahead around it. I put a nose and two paired indentations for lips and a neck running down. I draw the head so that right where the brain would be is this blob of city street map. I make a traffic circle the eye and bring down boulevards to lead to the mouth, and Ebony giggles above me taps her cane.

'It's so pretty!'

'It's all right,' I say, looking down. I decide it's done. I can do better. I put my initials in the bottom-CG, like 'computer-generated'-and put the picture aside. I ask for more paper and start the next one.

It's easy- It's easy and pretty and I can do it. I can make these things forever. For the rest of the arts and crafts, I make five.

I get so concentrated that I don't even notice when

Joy leaves. I only find her note, sitting next to me, decorated with a flower, as I gather up my things from the room.

IM TAKING A BREAK FROM YOU. CAN'T GET TOO ATTACHED. THE NEXT MEETING WILL BE TUESDAY, SAME TIMES AND PLACE. DON'T BE WORRIED THAT IT'S SUCH A LONG WAIT. I THINK YOU'RE LOVELY.

I fold the note and put it in my pocket next to the other one. After arts and crafts is dinner, where Humble tells me he forgives me for getting him in trouble, and I thank him, and after dinner is cards with Armelio, who tells me that now that I've gotten a little experience under my belt, I might be ready for the big card tournament they're having tomorrow night.

'Do you play with real money?' I ask.

'Nope, buddy! We play with buttons!'

I hang outside the lounge during cigarette break-I basically just follow the group; wherever they go, I go and talk with Joy about my day. Then I go into my room with my map/brain art. My bed hasn't been made during the day they don't pamper you in Six North-but the pillow has returned to its normal shape, no longer dented in by my sweaty head, and when I lie down it lets out the air in the slowest, soothing hiss I've ever heard.

'You are feeling better?' Joy asks.

'Quite a bit,' I say. 'You've really got to get out of the room more, Joy. There's a whole world out there.' 'I pray every day that someday I will get better like you.'

'I'm not that much better, boy.'

But I'm good enough to sleep. No shot necessary.

The next day is Monday and I should be at school.

I shouldn't be eating with Humble and hearing about what his girlfriend used to do to him everyday time- they passed a Burger King. I should be at school. I shouldn't be explaining to Ebony's friend on the phone that what I drew was a map of her brain and having her echo 'He's so good, Marlene, she's so good.' I should be at school.

I shouldn't be taking my Zoloft in line behind Joy, who is dressed in my shirt for his interview. I should be at school.

I work up the courage to get to the phones at 11 A.M.

and check the messages. 'Hey, Dariez, it's Kristopher, listen, I'm really sorry, boy.

The truth is, I probably-well, I got into a big fight with Emmah after you told me she was on pills and... I think I might have some of that depression stuff, too. Lately, I've been like, unable to get out of bed some times and I'm just... yah' know, really sleepy and I lose my train of thought. So - like, I probably called you the other night like that because I was projecting, that's what Emmah says, and I'm seriously interested in visiting you. I and Emmah are having problems.'

I call him back and leave a message for him. I tell him that if he feels depressed, he should go to his general physician first and get a referral to psychopharmacology and go through the process as I did. I tell him that it's nothing to be ashamed of. I tell him I'm glad he called but I don't know whether he should visit because I'm really sorting my stuff out here and I think I'd like to keep in here and the outside world as separate as possible. And I ask him what's going on between him and Emmah, whether they made up yet.

'Hello, Dariez, this is Mr. Reynolds again-'

I call him back and leave a message that I'm in the hospital for personal reasons and that he'll have his labs when I'm good and ready to do them. I tell him that I'll provide any documentation from doctors-including psych pharmacologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, recreation directors, and President Armelio- that I am being cared for right now in a facility where the stresses of doing labs are not allowed. And I tell him that if he wants to talk to me again, he can call the number here, and don't be alarmed if someone answers, 'Jack's Pub.'

'Hey, Dariez, this is Jenna, I'm one of Emmah's friends, and like ... okay, this is really embarrassing, but do you want to hang out time - soon? I heard about all this stuff you went through like you're in the hospital or whatever, and my last boyfriend was really insensitive about that stuff because I kind of go through that stuff too? And so I thought you'd probably understand me, and I always thought you were cute-we met each other a couple... but I always thought that you were so shy that you wouldn't be fun to hang out with; I didn't realize you were like, depressed.'

-And-

'I think that's really brave of you to admit it and I just think we should hang out.'

Well. I call Jenna back and leave her a message that I can hang out with her next week maybe.

That's it- the other messages are from Richard and Scruggs and they're about pot and I ignore them. I put the phone down without slamming it on my finger.

Joy is right in front of me.

'I follow your advice. Come out of the room.'

'Hey, good morning! How are you?'

He shrugs. 'Okay. What is to do?'

'There's lots of stuff to do. Do you like to draw?'

'Eh.'

'Do you like to play cards?'

'Eh.'

'Do you like to... listen to music?'

'Yes.' 'Great! Okay-'

'Only Italy music.'

'Huh.' I try to think of where I can get Italian music, or even what it's called when suddenly Solomon flops past in his sandals.

'Excuse me if you please, I am trying to rest!' he yells at us. Joy takes one look at him and curls his face into a laugh, his glasses rising above his nose.

'What is the problem?' Solomon asks.

'Seventeen days!' Joy says. 'Seventeen days the Jew will not talk to me! And now he does. I am honored.'

'I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to him,' Solomon points at me.

'Have you boys met?' I ask.

Joy and Solomon shake hands-Solomon's pants fall down a little but he bows his legs to hold them up. Then he takes his hand back and stalks off. Joy turns to me: 'This I think is enough for one day.' And he goes back into our room.

I shake my head.

The phone rings next to me. I call for Armelio. He scoots up, grabs the receiver, says 'Jack's Pub,' and hands the phone to me.

'Me?'

'Yeah, buddy.'

I take the phone. 'I'm looking for Dariez Gilner,' an authoritative voice says through the line.

'Ah, speaking. Who is this?'

'This is Mr. Alfred Janowitz, Dariez. I'm your principal at

Executive Pre-Professional High?'

'Holy crap!' I say, and I hang up.

The phone starts ringing again. I stand by it and ignore it, explaining to Armelio and everyone else who passes that it's for me but that I can't answer. They understand completely. It's the principal. I was right. I've seen this boy before; he's the one who greeted us on that first day when I was high with Kristopher and told us that only the best had been accepted and only the best would be rewarded. He's the one who drops by classes and looks us over as we take tests and gives out chocolates as if that makes up for it. He's the one who says 'your school day shouldn't end until five o'clock' and is always in the newspapers as the most no-nonsense principal around and now he's on my ass because he knows I'm crazy and knows I haven't been doing my homework. I should never have left that message for Mr. Reynolds. This is it. I'm being expelled. I'm out of school. I'm never going to go to high school again. I'm never going to go to college.

When the phone finally dies, I start pacing.

I was right all along. What was I thinking? You add up your little victories in here and think they count for something. You get lulled into thinking Six North is the real world. You make friends and

have a pithy little conversation with a girl, and you think you've succeeded, Dariez? You haven't succeeded in the slightest. You haven't won anything. You haven't proven anything. You haven't gotten better. You haven't gotten a job. You aren't making any money. You're in here costing the state money, taking the same pills you took before. You're wasting your parents' money and the taxpayers' money. You don't have anything really wrong with you.

This was all an excuse, I think. I was doing fine. I had a 93 average and I was holding my head above water. I had good friends and a loving family. And because I needed to be the center of attention, because I needed something more, I ended up here, wallowing in myself, trying to convince everybody around me that I have some kind of... disease.

I don't have any disease. I keep pacing. Depression isn't a disease. It's a pretext for being a prima donna. Everybody knows that. My friends know it; my principal knows it. The sweating has started again. I can feel the Cycling roaring up in my brain. I haven't done anything right. What have I done, made a bunch of little pictures? That doesn't count as anything. I'm finished. My principal just called me and I hung up on him and didn't call back.

I'm finished. I'm expelled. I'm finished.

The boy is back in my stomach and I rush to my bathroom, but something about me won't let it go. I hunch over the toilet moaning and hacking, but it won't come so I wash my mouth out and get into bed.

'What happened?' Joy asks. 'You never sleep during the day.'

'I'm in big trouble,' I say, and I lie there, getting up only to munch through lunch until Dr. Ross comes by at three o'clock and pokes her head into my room.

'Dariez? I'm here to talk.'

'I'm really glad to see you.' We're back in the room that Nurse Monieec checks me out in. Dr. Ross seems very familiar with it.

'I'm glad to see you, too. I'm glad to see you well,' she says.

'Yeah, it's really been a roller coaster, I have to say.'

'An emotional roller coaster.'

'Yes.'

'Where is that roller coaster right now, Dariez?'

'Down. Way down.'

'What's got you down?'

'I got a phone call from my school principal.'

'And what did he want?'

'I don't know. I hung up.'

'What do you think he wanted, Dariez?'

'To expel me.'

'And why would he want to do that?'

'Hello? Because I'm here? Because I'm not in school?' 'Dariez, your principal can't expel you for being in a psychiatric hospital.'

'Well, you know all my other problems.'

'What are those?'

'Hanging out with my friends all the time-, getting depressed, not doing homework ...'

'Uh-huh. Let's hold off on that for a moment, Dariez. I haven't seen you since Friday. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to be here?'

I give her the rap. There's much more to add to it now, about being on Six North. About Joy and the eating and the not throwing up and the sleeping, where I'm one for two.

'What's it like compared to Friday, Dariez?'

'Better. Much, much better. But the question is, am I really better, or am I just lulled into a false sense of security by this fake environment? I mean, it's not normal here.'

'Nowhere is normal, Dariez.'

'I guess not. What's been the news since I've been in here?'

'Someone tried to gas the Four Seasons in Knox.' 'Jeez!'

'I know.' Dr. Ross smirks. Then she leans in. 'Dariez, there's one thing you didn't mention that your recreation director did. She said you've been doing art while you've been here.'

'Oh, yeah, that's nothing, really. Just yesterday.'

'What is it like?'

'Well, remember how I told you last time the joy- that I liked to draw maps when I was a little kid? It sort of came from that.'

'How so?'

'When they gave me a pencil and paper in arts and crafts, I remembered-well, I didn't remember, I was actually prompted by

Joy-'

'That's the girl you met?'

'Right.'

'From the way you describe her I can see a real friendship developing.'

'Oh, forget a friendship. We are totally going to be going out when I leave, I think.'

'You think you're ready for that, Dariez?'

'Absolutely.'

'All right.' She takes a note. 'So how did Joy help you?'

'She suggested that I draw something from my childhood, and that made me remember the maps.'

'I see.'

'And I started drawing one, but then Ebony came over-'

'You're on a first-name basis with all these kids.'

'Of course.'

'Have you ever considered yourself good at making friends,

Dariez?'

'No!'

'But you can make friends here.'

'Right... Well, here is different.'

'How is it different?'

'It's, I don't know... there's no pressure.'

'No pressure to make friends?'

'No, no pressure to work hard.'

'As there is in the outside world.'

'Right.'

'Tremendous pressure out there. Your Tentacles.'

'Yeah.'

'Are there Tentacles in here, Dariez?'

I stop and think. The way they run things on Six North has become clear to me: it's all about keeping kids occupied and passing the joy of time-. You wake up and you've immediately got a blood pressure gauge around your arm and somebody taking your pulse. Then it's breakfast. Then you get your meds and then there's a smoking break, and then maybe you have fifteen minutes to yourself before there's some kind of activity. That leads to lunch which leads to more meds and more smoking and more activities, and then all of a sudden, the day is over; its TIME- for dinner, and everyone's trading salt and desserts, and then it's the 10 P.M. cigarette break and bed-time-.

'No, there aren't any Tentacles in here,' I say. 'The opposite of a Tentacle is a simple task, something that's placed before you and that you do without question.

That's what they have in here.'

'Right. Your only Tentacles in here are your phone calls, which are what got you so down just now.'

'Correct.'

Dr. Ross takes notes. 'Now, here's an important question,

Dariez. Are there any Anchors in here?'

'Huh.'

'Anything you can hold on to.'

I think about it. If an Anchor is a constant, there are lots of those. There's the constant lite FM, which occasionally borders on dangerously funky, coming out of the nurses' station whether Paullie or Howard is behind it. There's the constant schedule: the food coming and going, the meds being dished out, the announcements of Armelio. There's the constant of Armelio himself, always ready to play cards. And My-a Joy is always around going, 'It'll come to ya!'

'The kids are Anchors,' I say.

'Kids don't make good Anchors, though, Dariez. They change. The kids here are going to change. The patients are going to leave. You can't rely on them.'

'When will they leave?' 'I can't know that.'

'What about the staff?'

'They change too, just on a different Joy- scale. Kids always come and go.'

'Joy. She's beautiful and smart and I really like her. She could be an Anchor.'

'You don't want any of your Anchors being members of the opposite sex you're attracted to,' Dr. Ross says. 'Relationships change even more than kids. It's like two kids changing. It's exponentially more volatile. Especially two teenagers.'

'But Romeo and Juliet were teenagers,' I point out.

'And what happened to Romeo and Juliet?'

'Oh,' I mumble. 'Right.'

'And have we gone beyond that, Dariez? Have we gone beyond thinking those thoughts?' 'Yes,' I nod.

'Because if you have those thoughts again you know you have to come back here.'

'I know. I won't.'

'Why not?'

'It's just... It would suck to kill myself. I'd hurt a lot of kids and

...It would suck.'

'That's right,' Dr. Ross leans across the table. 'It would suck. And not just for other kids. For you.' 'It's not noble or anything,' I say. 'Like this boy Joy who's my roommate, he's practically dead. He doesn't do anything. He just lies in bed all day.'

'Right.'

'And I don't want to ever be like him. I don't want to live that way. And if I were dead, I'd basically be living that way.'

'Excellent, Dariez.'

She stops. Like I say, the good shrinks know when to throw in a dramatic pause.

I tap my feet. The fluorescent lights hum.

'I want to pick back up on your Anchors,' Dr. Ross says. 'Can you think of anything else you've found in here that could occupy your time - when you leave?' I think. I know there's something. It's at the tip of my brain-tongue. But it won't come.

'No.'

'Okay, not a problem. You've made a lot of progress today.

There's only one more thing we have to do: call your principal.' 'No!' I tell her, but she's already at it, pulling out her cell phone, which is apparently allowed up here. 'Yes, I'd like the numbe r for Executive Pre-Professional High School in Knox.'

'You can't you can't you can't' I say, leaning across the table, grabbing at the phone. Luckily the blinds are drawn so no one can see in here; if they did, they'd probably have me sedated. She gets up and walks to the door, points outside. Do I want security in here? I sit back down.

'Yes,' she says. 'I need to speak with the principal. I'm returning a call of his to one of your students regarding a health and legal matter. I'm the mother.' A pause.

'Great.' She cups the phone. 'I'm being connected.' 'I can't believe you're doing this,' I say.

'I can't believe you'd be worried about me doing this... yes, hello? Is this Mr...' she looks at me.

'Janowitz,' I mouth.

'Janowitz?'

I hear an affirmative mumph through the line. 'I'm Dr. Ross, calling for your student Dariez Gilner. You called him before at UMPC Hospital psychiatric facility in Knox. I'm Dariez's licensed therapist and I'm right here with him; would you like to speak with him?'

She nods. 'Here you go, Dariez.'

I take the cell phone-it's smaller than mine, buzzier. 'Um, hello?'

'Dariez, why'd you hang up on me?' His booming voice is light and gentle, almost laughing.

'Ah... I thought I was in trouble. I thought I was being expelled. You called me, you know, in the hospital.'

'Dariez, I called you because I got a message from one of our teachers. I just wanted to tell you that you have the school's full support in everything you're going through and that we're more than willing to have your semester repeated, or given over the summer, or for work to be provided for you where you are now if you should miss enough days to warrant that.'

'Oh.'

'We don't pass judgment on our students for being in the hospital, my goodness, Dariez.'

'No? But it's, like, a psychiatric-'

'I know what kind of hospital it is. Do you think we don't have other kids in these situations? It's a very common problem among young kids.'

'Oh. Uh, thanks.'

'Are you doing okay?'

'I'm doing better.'

'Do you know when you'll be leaving?'

I don't want to tell him Thursday and then have it be Friday.

Or next Thursday. Or next year.

'Soon,' I say.

'Okay. You just hang in there, and whenever you come back, we'll be waiting for you at Executive Pre-Professional.' 'Thanks, Mr. Janowitz.' And I picture it in my mind: me going back to school. My little group of friends- only they're not even my friends anymore offered by this new collection of girls who like me because I'm depressed and teachers who are sympathizing and the suddenly nice principal. It's something I want to get excited about. But I can't.

'See, was that so bad?' Dr. Ross asks. And I have to admit that it wasn't. But it was kind of like getting told that the prison is happy that you've been granted a temporary reprieve but we'll be right here with open arms to take you in when you come back.

'The plan right now is to discharge you Thursday, Dariez, and I'll be here to talk to you on Wednesday, all right?' Dr. Ross asks. I shake her hand and thank her. I tell her what I tell her when I feel really good about talking to her, which is that she knows how to do her job. Then I go back to my room and draw some brain maps.

I'm excited for tonight, for Armelio's big card tournament.

'Okay!' says Armelio. 'Everybody here?'

We're back in the activities lounge. Joy, Humble, Ebony, and the Professor are here. Everyone shaved today-it turns out that the shaving rule is only enforced on weekdays- and they look ten times-s better. Even Rolling Pin Robert, pacing the halls outside, looks serviceable. I'll have to remember that: shaving can make even a psych patient look good.

'Huh.' Joy exhales. 'Joy's still in his interview.' 'Yeah,' Ebony says. 'Dariez lent him a shirt. You're so nice, Dariez.'

'Thanks.'

'When are you going to do more of your art?'

'Maybe tonight, after cards.'

'That's right, buddy, cards are what we need to focus on,' Armelio announces. He stands at the head of the table, which is covered with paint drops, crayon marks, and ink smears over uneven wood. In the middle is a plastic container with the buttons, separated into four even partitions. It looks like at some point the buttons were ordered by size or color, but now they're all mixed up every conceivable hue, shape, and ornamentation.

They look like jewels.

'I don't want any of my buttons missing at the end!' Lacey says from the back. She's at the other table, reading a Roboyce novel and supervising.

'That's right, we're still looking for the Blue Button Bandit,' Humble says. 'Anybody who can suddenly keep their pants up, we're going to be very suspicious. Watch out for Solomon, that means. And Ebony.'

'I told you once, stupid, to stop talking about my pants.' 'Okay, everybody ready?' Armelio asks. 'Take your buttons!'

Our hands dive into the middle of the table, grabbing fistfuls. We pour the buttons in front of us and use our fingertips to spread them into a one-button-thick layer. Armelio gets to judge whether we have an equal amount.

'Humble put back six buttons. Ebony, put back ten. Joy, what's going on, buddy? You have like two hundred buttons too

~*Sped*~!'

'I got a button bonus,' Joy says, and just then Joy comes into the activity room.

He moves with his normal loping gait, leaning back with my shirt on. He stops at the end of our table, makes sure he has our attention, raises his right hand, shakes it in the air like he's doing a magic trick, and then slams both his fists down on the table so his arms make a 'V-shape,' as if he were Chairboy of the Board. He grins:

'I got it.'

Silence holds the room.

Lacey starts the clapping from the back, slowly, but with reverence and purpose. Then Armelio joins in and the tempo starts to spiral.

'All right!'

'Congratulations!'

'Hooray for Knox scumbags!'

'Joy-by! Joy-by!'

In a small room, eight kids clapping can be a lot. The posters seem to shake with the applause. As it gets louder there's howling and hooting and cheering. Tommy gets up and gives Joy a bear hug, the kind that you can see between two men who've known one another for twenty years, who've been Fiend One and Fiend Two, for whom one's victory counts just as much for the other.

'Joy, buddy, you the boy!' Armelio walks over to the hugging pair and smacks Joy's back, nearly toppling over me.

'Wait a minute,' Joy says. He extracts himself from the hug and holds up his right hand. 'Before we get too crazy, 'because, I see the buttons are out, I got to thank this young boy over here.' He walks toward me. 'This kid literally gave me the shirt off his back this blue one right here and he didn't know me from Adam, and there ain't no question, without him, I wouldn't have gotten this home. This new home.'

I stand up and Joy hugs me, his big bony hands wrapping around my back, and I feel the smooth old skin of his cheek and the well-knit fabric of my shirt doing a better job on him than it ever did on me. I think about how much this means to this boy; about how much more important it is than going to any high school or getting with any girl or being friends with anybody. This boy just got a place to live. Me? I have one. I'll always have one. I don't have any reason to worry about it. My stupid fantasies about ending up homeless are just that- the fact is that my parents will take me in time-, anywhere. But some kids have to get lucky just to live. And I never knew I could make anybody lucky.

If Joy can get a place to live, I think, then I can get a life worth living.

'Thank you, kid,' Joy says.

'It's nothing,' I mumble. 'Thanks for the tour.' 'All right, boys, we going to play cards or what?' Armelio asks, but Joy stops him.

'One more thing: I'm really sorry, Dariez, but I accidentally fell in something on my way back from the interview.' He turns around. There's a... wait a minute...

There's a giant piece of dog shit ground into the back of my shirt, right above his belt.

'Ah ...' I can't believe I didn't smell it. Did I touch it when I hugged him? 'Ah, Joy... it's okay... my mom can wash it out-'

'It ain't real!' Joy reaches back and pulls it off, throws it at me. It bounces off my shirt (a tie-dye T-shirt that everyone on Six North likes) and lands on the table in the buttons.

'It's plastic! I've had it since the eighties! Ha! I love it!'

Armelio cracks up. 'Holy crap! Look at that! It looks like something my mom would leave in my bedroom!' Everyone stops, turns.

'President Armelio, we did not need to know that,' says Humble.

'Your mother would defecate in your bedroom?' The Professor asks.

'Who said that?' Armelio asks. 'I was talking about plastic what's the matter with you?'

'Everybody just cools it a little,' says Lacey, standing up with her book at her side. 'Let's have fun, but keep calm.'

'All right, who gets the doodie button?' Humble holds up the poop. 'I think it counts for two.'

Joy sits down and we ante up. The game is poker, seven-card stud. I'm no good at it. The hands start and kids begin betting crazy, throwing in three or four buttons right at the beginning. I can't match them. I have a limited number. And I don't seem to be getting any good hands. So-o I fold. I fold three times in a row.

The third time-, Joy says, 'You might as well bet. It's just buttons.'

'Yeah,' Humble says. 'Let me show you a secret.' He reaches into the button container and takes out a handful. 'See?'

'I see,' Armelio says, looking over his cards. 'Don't think that's not cheating, Humble. Any more and you're out.'

I laugh and bet six buttons.

'What am I out of, exactly?' Humble asks Armelio. 'The button jackpot?'

'Be nice,' the Professor says.

'Oh, listen to her,' Humble jerks his thumb. 'Trying to be the mediator.' He leans into me. 'Don't let her grandma look fool you.

She's a real hustler.'

'Excuse me?' The Professor puts down her cards. 'What do you mean, 'grandma?''

'Nothing, you just have that little old granny look about you, to lull kids into your trap of playing good cards!' Humble gestures at himself disbelievingly.

'You're saying I'm old.'

'I'm not! I'm saying you're a grandma!'

'Humble, apologize,' Lacey says from the back.

'Why? Grandmas are wonderful things.'

'For your information, I'll have you know,' the Professor says, 'that unlike certain kids around here I act my age.'

'Oh, so now I'm a liar?' Humble asks, standing up.

'We all know that's what you are,' says the Professor.

'People...' Lacey warns.

'If I'm a liar, you know what you are?'

'What? You better not call me old because I'll take this cane and whack you in the head right in front of everybody.'

'You ain't taking nothing of mine!' Ebony holds her cane close. Quietly, she has far and away from the most buttons.

'You're a yuppie!' Humble yells, and he picks up the dog doo and throws it at her head. 'A stupid yuppie with no respect for anybody!'

'A-aaagh!' The Professor holds her face. 'He broke it! He broke my nose!' The dog doo has bounced all the way across the room and Lacey jumps over it lightly as she beats a hasty retreat.

'Uh-oh,' Armelio says. 'Now you boys did it. We were having such a good card game.'

Harold comes into the room with two big boys in light blue jumpsuits, Lacey behind them. Humble raises his hands. 'What? I didn't do it!'

'C'mon, Mr. Koper,' Harold says.

'I can't believe it!' Humble says. 'She insulted me! It wasn't even my dog poop! I didn't have the weapon!'

He starts pointing at Joy. 'He's an accomplice. If I'm going, he's going.'

'Humble, you have three seconds to get over here.' 'All right, all right.' Humble throws down his cards. 'You boys have fun with your buttons.' He's escorted out by Harold and the security guards, getting a resounding slap on the butt from the Professor. She still has one hand on her face, claiming that she's bleeding, but when she removes her hand there isn't any kind of mark.

Lacey sits back down at her table.

'You all saw what happened. He attacked me,' the Professor says.

'Yeah yeah, we saw, Doomba,' says Armelio.

'Excuse me?'

'You're the Doomba; we all know you are.' 'What's a Doomba?' I ask.

'If you asking, maybe you're a Doomba, too!' Armelio looks mad. This is the first time - I've seen it.

'Huh,' Joy breathes.

'Dariez ain't no Doomba,' Joy says. 'He's on the level.' 'Aren't I the winner yet?' asks Ebony.

'How can you have so ~Sped~ buttons?' asks Armelio.

'You're not winning any hands!'

'It's cuz I don't overbeat,' Ebony says, leaning over, and a stream of buttons comes roaring out of her top.

'Whoops!'

They keep coming-a mountain spilling over the ante pile. She starts laughing and laughing, showing us her very neat and clean gums while she howls: 'O-ooooh, I got you! I got all- of you!'

'That's it,' Armelio says, throwing down his cards. 'Every Monday the card tournament always gets messed up! I quit!'

'Do you resign your position as President?' Joy asks him.

'Forget you, buddy!'

My tongue hurts from so much biting. It might not have been a regulation game, but it definitely had as ~*Sped*~ emotional ups-and-downs as the poker on TV. I clean up with Joy and Lacey.

Tonight, when I get in bed, I'm too busy wondering about what a Doomba is, and when Ebony stuck the buttons in her breasts, and what that even feels like, and Joy and the fact that I get to see her tomorrow, to do anything but sleep.

Part: 14

The next day Humble isn't around for breakfast. I sit with Joy and, collect my shirt, perfectly folded, and put it on the back of my chair. I drink the day's first 'Swee-Touch-Nee' tea and ask what they did with Humble.

'Oh, he's happy. They went and gave him some serious drugs, probably.'

'Like what?'

'You know about drugs? Pills?'

'Sure. I'm a teenager.'

'Well, Humble is psychotic and depressed,' Joy explains. 'So, he gets SSRIs, lithium, Xanax-'
'Vicodin,' Joy says. 'Vicodin, Valium... he's like the most heavily medicated boy in here.'

'So, when they took him away, they gave him all that stuff?'

'No, that's what he gets normally. When they take him away, they give him shots, I bet. Atavan.'

'I had that.'

'You did? That'll knock you right out. Was it fun?'

'It was okay. I don't want to be taking stuff like that all the Joy-.'

'Huh. That's the right attitude,' says Joy. 'We got a little sidetracked by drugs, me and Joy.'

'Yeah, no kiddin',' Joy says. He shakes his head, looks up, chews, and folds his hands. 'Sidetracked isn't even the word. We were off the face of this planet. We were holed up twenty-four hours a day. I missed so ~Sped~ concerts.'

'I'm sorry-'

'-Santana, Zeppelin, what's that later one with the junkie, Nirvana ... I could-a saw Rush, Van Halen, Mötley Crüe, everybody. All this back when it cost ten bucks to get in. And I was too much of a garbage-head to care.'

'What's a garbage-head?'

'Somebody who does anything, whatever,' Joy explains. 'You give it to me, I'd do it. Just to see what it was like.'

Jeez. I'll admit that it sounds a little sexy. I see the appeal. But maybe that's why I'm in here, to meet boys who take the appeal away.

'Do you think Humble stages scenes, so he can get drugs?' I'm spreading cream cheese on a bagel now. I started ordering bagels x2 for breakfast; they're far and away from the best option.

'That's the kind of thing you just can't speculate about,' Joy says.

'Oh, here comes your girl.'

She rushes in with a tray and sits down in a corner, drinks her juice, dips at her oatmeal. She glances over at me. I wave as lightly as I can, so kids think maybe I have a spasmodic twitch. I haven't seen her since Sunday; I don't know what she did all of yesterday. I don't know how she eats if she doesn't leave her room. Same with Joy. Maybe they deliver food to her? There's still so much I don't know about this place.

'Huh, she is a cutie,' Joy says.

'C'mon, boy, don't be saying that. She's like thirteen,' Joy says.

'So? He's like thirteen.'

'I'm fifteen.'

'Well, let him say it, then,' Joy says to me. 'Leave the thirteen-year-olds to the thirteen-year-olds.'

'I'm fifteen,' I interject.

'Dariez, you should probably wait a few years, because sex at thirteen can mess you up.'

'I'm fifteen!'

'Huh, I was doing stuff when I was fifteen,' says Joy.

'Yeah,' says Joy. 'With boys.'

Pause. If Richard were here, he would say it out loud:

'Pause.'

'Huh. This food sucks.' Joy pushes his waffles aside. 'Kid,' he says. 'Just do this for me. If you get with her, freak her a little bit.

You know what I mean?'

'Stop it,' I look at Joy. 'You got a daughter that age.'

'I'd set him up with my daughter, too. Probably do her good.'

'Wait, how do you boys even know about this? I only talked with her once, and it was really short. Nothing happened.'

'Yeah, but you came into the activity center with her.'

'We notice everything.'

I shake my head. 'What's going on today?' 'At eleven the guitar boy is coming. Joy, she'll play.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'Huh, if the inclination hits.'

I finish up my bagel. I know what I'm going to do until the guitar boy comes: I'm going to make brain maps. I kind of have an audience now. Lacey lent me some high-quality pencils and glossy paper since I helped her out with clean-up after the card tournament debacle, so I can draw whenever I want. When I do, kids line up to watch me work. Ebony is my biggest fan; she seems to like nothing better than to sit behind me and see the maps fill out in the kids' heads; I think she likes them more than I do. The Professor is big into them too; she says my art is 'extraordinary' and I could sell it on the street if I wanted. I'm branching out into variations: maps in kids' bodies, maps in animals, maps connecting

two kids together. It comes naturally, and it passes the joy of time - and it feels a little more accomplished than playing cards.

'I'm going to work on my art,' I tell the boys.

'If I had half your initiative, things would-a turned out different,' says Joy.

'Huh, yeah; I want to be you when I grow up,' says Joy.

I walk out with my tray.

The guitar boy's name is Neil; he has a black goatee and a black shirt and suede pants, and he looks totally stoned. He comes in with a vintage-looking electric guitar-I don't know brands, but it looks like something the Beatles would have had-and plugs it into his amp on a chair before we file in. There's something I didn't expect in the room- instruments on all the seats around the circle and kids run for the ones they want. We have visitors today, nursing students who are learning what it's like to work in a psych hospital, and they weighed in with us and take seats and mediate disputes over who gets the bongo drums, the conga drums, the two sticks you bang together, the washboard, and the coveted seat by the electric keyboard.

'Hey, everybody!' Neil sways. 'Welcome to musical exploration!'

He's playing simple chords in a studded belt that I think is supposed to be reggae, and after a while, I realize it's 'I Shot the Sheiff.' He starts singing and he's just got a terrible voice, like an albino Jamaican frog, but we chime in as best we can with our voices and whatever instruments we ended up with.

Armelio bangs on his chair with some sticks and gets bored, leaves the room.

Becca, the big girl, asks if she can trade her bongos (the little ones) for my congas (the big ones,) and I switch. I try to play the fills that come after the choruses in 'I Shot the Sheiff' and Neil recognizes that I'm trying, gives me a chance to shine each time-, but I can't pull them off.

Joy, directly across from me, shakes maracas and her hair, smiling. I occasionally fire off a bongo fill just for her but I'm not sure if she notices. The star of the show is my-a Joy.

I didn't have any idea that the high-pitched noises he made were singing. Once the music starts, he goes right into the universe, banging against his washboard and letting it all hang out in a

piercing falsetto that's surprisingly on key. The thing is, he doesn't sing 'I Shot the Sheiff.' He sings only one phrase:

'How sweet it is!'

Doesn't matter where the song is or what it is; Joy will hum along to the tune as necessary, and then, as soon as there's a break that he can be heard over, remind us: 'How sweet it is!' He sounds a little like Mr. Hankey from South Park. The nursing students, who are all West Indians like Nurse Monieec, and young, unlike her, absolutely adore him and give him big smiles, which increases his activity. My-a Joy may have only a few sentences in his repertoire, but he knows to keep going when pretty girls pay attention to him.

I send out fill for him. He sings back. I'm convinced that some part of him knows we came in together. When 'I Shot the Sheiff' finishes in a crescendo of percussion that seems destined never to end (everybody wants to hit that last note, including me,) Neil starts in on the Beatles: 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand,' 'I Feel Fine.' The Beatles are apparently the cue for kids to get up and dance. It begins with Becca, at Neil's left. A nursing student pulls her up, she leaves her conga aside and starts wiggling her big butt in the middle of the circle-we yell out encouragement. She turns red and grins, and when she sits down, it's Joy's turn-he moves like John Travolta in Pulp Fiction, shaking his hips with a laconic tilt, turning his feet more than his body.

Joy refuses to dance but Joy's his head. The nursing students dance with one another and with Neil. Then it comes around to me. I hate dancing. I've never been good at it and I don't mean that in the traditional scared teenager way: I'm really not good.

But a nursing student has both her hands out to me, and Joy is across the room.

I put my bongos aside and try to think about what I'm doing as I do it. I know that you're not supposed to think about dancing what is that stupid expression, sing like no one's listen ing, dance like no one's watching? Whatever... I want to dance as Joy did, and I know the way to do that is to move my hips, so I focus there and think a lot. I don't think about my arms. I don't think about my legs. I don't think about my head. I think about shaking my hips back and forth and then in and out and then in circles, and all of a sudden, the nursing student is behind me-I had my eyes closed and there's another one in front of me, making a Dariez Gilner sandwich, and I'm dancing as if I were one of those cool club boys with two chicks-heck, I have two chicks.

I hold out my hand to Joy in a fit of confidence. She gets up and we go to the middle of the floor and shake our hips at each other, never touching, never talking, just smiling and keeping our eyes locked. I think she's actually looking to me for tips, so I mouth to her:

'Shake your hips!'

She does, her arms as out of place as my own, hanging at her sides with nowhere sexy to go. Where are you supposed to put your arms when you dance? It's like the Universal Question. I guess you're supposed to put them around someone.

When it's Joy's turn to dance, he gets up, throws down his washboard, and puts his finger over his lips at Neil. Neil stops playing. My-a Joy does a pirouette over the unaccompanied wild percussion that we've built up and lands on his knee: 'How sweet it is!'

When Neil's guitar is packed up, he comes over.

'Good job with those drum fills.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I haven't seen you before. What's your name?'

'Dariez.'

'You had good rhythm; you got kids moving. Ah, I hope you don't mind me asking this but... why are you here? You seem pretty, you know, good.'

'I have depression,' I say. 'I had it really bad. I'm getting out in two days.'

'Great, wonderful, that's great to hear. I have a lot of friends with that.' He nods at me. 'Once you're out, do you ever think you might consider ... volunteering in a place like this?'

'Volunteering with what?'

'Well, do you play instruments?'

'No.'

'You probably could. You have a good musical sense.'

'Thanks. I do art.'

'What kind of art?'

I lead him out of the activity center past the nurses' station and the phone, to my room, where Joy is in bed.

'Dariez, I hear you all in the music room,' he says.

'You should have come.'

Neil smiles at him: 'Hello.'

'Hm.'

I pull the stack of my brain maps out for Neil. 'I do these.' I give him a whole armful, maybe fifteen of the best of them by now. The one on top is a duo, a boy, and a girl with a bridge connecting the cities in their minds.

'These are cool' Neil says. He flips through them.

'Have you done these for a long time-?'

'That depends,' I say. 'Ten years or a couple of days, depending on how you count it.'

'Can I have one?'

'I don't know if I can give them away for free.' 'Ha! Listen, for real, here's my card.' Neil pulls out a simple black-and-white business card that identifies him as a Guitar Therapist. 'Whenever you're out of here, and I'm sure it'll be soon, give me a call and we can talk about volunteering, and-I'm serious-I might like to buy some of these. How old are you? You should be on the teen floor, right, but they're renovating?' 'I'm young,' I say.

'I'm glad you came here and got the help you needed,' Neil says, and he shakes my hand in that way that kids do in here to remind themselves that you're the patient and they're the doctor/volunteer/employee. They like you, and they genuinely want you to do better, but when they shake your hand you feel that distance, that slight disconnect because they know that you're still broken somewhere, that you might snap at any moment.

Neil leaves the room and I spend the rest of the day drawing and playing cards with Armelio. around one-thirty I call Mom, tell her about the sing-along and the card tournament and how I danced, and she affirms that I'm sounding better and that she heard from Dr. Mahmoud that Thursday is a solid day and she and Dad will be ready when it's Joy- to pick me up. Even though it's only a few blocks back to my house, they have to pick me up in person.

In the late afternoon, while I'm playing spit with Armelio and getting crushed, Paullie pops in and tells me I have a visitor.

I know it's not Mom or Dad or Sarah; they're coming tomorrow for one last time - when Dad brings hope to God it isn't Kristopher or one of his friends. Blade II. I - It's Emmah.

I see her through the big window in the dining room, looking like she's been crying or she's about to cry, or both. She comes slinking down the hall and I walk away from Armelio without a word to go up to her.

Part: 15

'What are you doing here?' I ask, then pause. That's really a question other kids should be asking me.

'What do you think?' She has on light makeup that makes her lips sparkle and her cheeks a slight Asian red; her hair is drawn back to accent the curved proportions of her face. 'I'm here to see you.

'Why?'

She turns away. 'I'm having a really hard time right now, okay Dariez?'

'All right,' I get in step with her. 'Come on, the best place to talk is over here.'

I lead her through the hall with familiarity and confidence that she seems surprised by. I guess I'm a veteran here now. Sort of an alpha male. Which reminds me: still no Humble.

'Here.' I sit here in the chairs where I sat with my parents and Joy, 'What's going on?'

She puts her hands on her knees. She has on a little beige combat outfit with black boots; she looks like a Soviet soldier recruit. The light comes in behind her and makes her skin sparkle. I've seen her

in this get-up before; it's one of her particularly hottest ones: when you bind up little breasts in boy-type clothing they're just that much more intriguing.

'Kristopher and I broke up,' she says.

'No.' I open my eyes wide.

'Yes, Dariez.' She wipes her face. 'After that night when he called here? And you told him I was on

Prozac?'

'What? Are you saying that it's my fault?'

'I'm not saying it's anybody's fault!' She chops her arms against her thighs and takes a deep breath.

The Professor peers out of her room.

'Who are you?' Emmah turns.

'I'm Aboyda,' she says. 'I'm Dariez's friend.'

'Well, we're trying to have a conversation; I'm really sorry.' Emmah wipes her hair.

'It's okay. But you shouldn't yell. Solomon will come out.'

'Who's Solomon?' Emmah turns to me. 'Is he dangerous?' 'Nobody here is dangerous,' I say, and as I say it, I put my hand over Emmah's, on her thigh. I'm not sure why I do it- to reassure her? I guess it's just an instinct, a reaction. Subconsciously I suppose I'm thinking that it's a really hot thigh and that I would love to have my hand there without her hand serving as a buffer. I haven't really gotten the chance to touch any girl's thigh, and Emmah's beige ones seem just about as alluring as thighs get. I even think it's a sexy word: thigh.

'Dariez, hello?'

'Sorry, I was spacing out.'

She looks down at my hand and gives a little smirk. She doesn't move it away. 'You're funny. I was asking you if you like it here.'

'It's not bad. It's better than the school.'

'I believe that.' Now her hand-her another hand- is on top of my hand on top of her thigh. I think of the dancing sandwich I was in before in the activity lounge. I feel how warm she is and remember how I noticed that at the party, eons ago. 'I've been thinking about going to a place like this.'

'What?' I pull my body away but keep my hand under hers.

'What do you mean?'

'I've been thinking of, you know, checking myself in, spending some time - here, or somewhere like it, reentering, like you.'

'Emmah.' I shake my head. 'You can't just come in here because you want to.' 'Isn't that what you did?'

'No!'

'What did you do, then?' She tilts her head.

'I... I had like a medical emergency,' I explain. 'I called up the Suicide Hotline and they sent me here.'

Emmah leans back. 'You called the Suicide Hotline?' She holds my hand up, clutches it. 'Oh, Dariez!' I look at my crotch. I'm springing up. I can't help it. She's so close. This face is so close to mine and it's the same face I've jerked off to so ~*Sped*~ times. I've conditioned myself to want this face. I want her. I feel her on me and I want her right now in her little Russian army outfit. I want to see what she looks like with it off. I want to see what she looks like with it half off.

'I didn't realize...' she continues. 'I knew you wanted to kill yourself; I never knew you wanted to kill yourself. I never- would have told Kristopher that you called me from that weird number if

I'd known it was so serious.'

'Well, what do you think kids come here for?' My hand twitches around hers.

'To get better?' She asks.

'Yeah, exactly. But you have to be really bad before they make you get better here.'

Emmah swishes her head and her hair slides around her dark eyes. 'I thought that you got bad because of me. And I thought I could make you better.'

She's so cute. The way she holds her face, it's like she always knows the best angles. We hold each other's eyes. I see myself in hers. I look expectant, ready, eager, stupid, willing to do anything.

I don't like how I look. Humble wouldn't like it either; it doesn't have any strength or will. But I don't have any strength or will when I'm with her. I don't have any choice. We're going to do whatever she wants.

'What about Kristopher?' I ask.

'I told you.' She drops almost to a whisper. 'I broke up with him.'

'You broke up with him?' I want it clarified.

'It was mutual. Is this important?'

'Probably broke up?'

'Looks like it.'

'Don't you think it's a little soon for you to be coming in here and, like, touching me?'

She shakes her head and purses her lower lip. 'I've been thinking about you since we talked on the phone Friday night. And now I know you so much better. You've told me all this stuff about you and you're really ... I don't know ... you're mature. You're not like all these other kids with their stupid little problems. You're like, really screwed up.' She giggles. 'In a good way... The way that gives experience.' 'Huh.' I'm not sure what to say. No, wait, I know what to say: Go away, leave, I don't need you; I finished with you on the phone before; I met a girl here who's cooler and smarter; but when you've got a really gorgeous girl in front of you and she's biting her lip and talking low and smiling-and you're hard-what are you going to do?

'Huh ... uh ... well...' I'm back to stuttering. Maybe it was Emmah that made me stutter. I'm sweating too. 'Do you want to show me your room?' She asks.

That's a bad idea. It's a bad idea just as much as it's a bad idea to skip meals or stay awake in bed in the morning or stop taking your Zoloft, but there's no hope for me now. I cede control to my lower half, which is actually pointing toward my room, and lead Emmah to it.

Part: 16

Joy isn't in the room. I can't believe it-it's like the first time since I've been here. I look at her rumpled sheets and try to make out a here form, but there isn't enough bulk to account for her. I peek in the bathroom-nothing.

'You have a roommate?' Emmah asks.

'Yeah, uh, he's usually here...'

'Ew-www...' She waves in front of her nose. 'Something smells.'

'The roommate's Italian; I don't think he wears deodorant.'

'Me either.'

I make like I'm cleaning up my stuff near my bed, but really, I'm just taking my brain maps and flipping them over.

'You don't get a TV?'

'No.'

'Do you read in here?'

'I like to read out in the hall with other kids. My sister gave me a Star magazine, but the nurses took it away to read themselves.'

She walks toward me, looking up idly glib and innocent. 'Do you get lonely here?'

'Actually, no,' I tell her. I move hair that is stuck to my forehead. I'm really sweating now. 'It's very social here. I made friends.'

'Who?'

'That lady you were talking to outside.'

'Her? She's so rude. She totally horned in on our conversation.'

'She thinks someone sprayed insecticide in her apartment, Emmah. She gets paranoid.' 'Really? That's crazy. That's really crazy.'

'I don't know. She might be right.' Emmah is a few feet away from me now. Her shoulders are tilted up at me. I could pick her up and throw her on my unmade bed just like Kristopher has done for the past two years. These words we're saying are just a front.

'She's a college professor.

There might be something to it.'

'Dariez... 'She's right in front of me now. 'Do you remember when you called me' -she touches my forehead-'oh, you're sweating!'

'Yeah, I do that. When I get nervous.' 'Are you okay? You're really sweating.' 'I'm all right.' I wipe it away.

'Seriously, Dariez, that is gross.' She scowls, then gets back to where she was. 'When you called me, you remember how you asked what I would do if you came over and grabbed me and kissed me?'

'Yeah...' My stomach is tight. The boy is down there pulling on the rope. I thought I had him beat. I'd been eating so well.

'I'd let you,' she says. 'You know I would.'

Now she's got her glossy, sparkly lips turned up at me, and I feel this amazing dichotomy going on. It's almost like before I came in here when I was in my mom's bed when my brain wanted to die but my heart wanted to live. Now, quite literally, everything from my stomach up wants to run to the bathroom, to throw up, to talk to Armelio or Joy or Paullie, to kick Emmah out, to get ready for my second date with Joy. But the bottom half has been denied too long. It's been ready for this for two years, and it knows what it wants. It says that the real cause of all my problems is that I haven't been satisfying it.

And these aren't any lips, either, that I'm presented with to rectify my lack of play. These are lips that I've had access to for years in my mind. I've done terrible, horrible things to these lips in the

privacy of my bathroom. So- screw it. You've got to try sometime. I lean down and grab Emmah and push her back on Joy's bed.

I didn't mean to; I meant to turn her around and put her on my bed, but she happened to be in front of me and I couldn't switch directions in mid-grab. I cover her with my thin body and kiss her upper lip first, encase it in my lips, then do the lower one, then try to do them both at once, only that doesn't really work, it's like trying to pull the lips off her head, and she laughs, which gives me her beautiful smile to kiss, the hard white teeth-I don't mind- and then I use my tongue the way I've seen in movies and put my hands on her soldier outfit and feel what I don't have and have wanted for years pressing back at me, taut and yielding at the same time. Two of them.

'Mmmmm,' Emmah mmmmmms, putting her small hands on the back of my head. She feels my hair; I shake against her. I can't believe how good it feels. This is how good it feels? Why the hell did I ever get depressed?

I remember what Kristopher said about the inside of a girl's cheek feeling like another place and I lick the insides of hers. She shivers; she likes it; it's like Kristopher said: she likes sex; her tongue becomes a jittery dart flicking in and out of my mouth. I feel the ring-a a little metal bubble, something to add texture, foreign and dirty.

Forget it. Let's do it. I reach up to the buttons on her outfit.

My eyes are closed because if I open them, I think I might get a little too excited and ruin my pants, and Mom didn't bring me any pants.

Darn, the button I'm grabbing is in the middle. Up to one. No.

That's not it. One more.

'God.' she pulls away. 'I always wanted to hook up in a hospital.'

'What?' I look up at her chin. I'm still on top of her on Joy's bed, my legs sticking way off, almost hitting my bed.

'This was totally on my checklist.' She looks down. 'I and Kristopher never did anything like this.' That's a body blow to my whole body: the lower half that wanted this and the upper half that

warned me about it. I can't think what to say: Please don't compare me to Kristopher? Please don't mention Kristopher? What checklist? So I say: 'Uh... um...' 'Sex!' I hear from the doorway.

It's Joy its time.

'Sex! Sex in my bed! Children make sex in my bed!' He runs over to us; I jump off Emmah and hold my hands up, thinking he's going to hit me, but he grabs me and holds me close to his square smelly body and carries me like a girder to the corner of the room.

'Um, Joy-'

'Dariez, who is that?' Emmah yells.

'I live here! Your terrible girl corrupts- my friend!' Joy puts me down, turns and stands with his arms crossed at Emmah, guarding me. 'You leave!' He points at the open door.

'There's no door!' Emmah peers at it. On some kind of incredible girl-Joy-, she's gotten up, smoothed out her outfit, and collected her purse from near Joy's pillow. She already has her cell phone out; it's blinking at her side. She's gesturing at me with it.

'There's a door, yeah,' I say, standing on tiptoes to talk over Joy's shoulder. 'We just didn't close it-' 'Don't talk to her!' Joy turns and shakes his finger at me. 'She tries and makes the sex in my bed!'

'It wasn't just me, okay?' Emmah bends her face in at him.

He turns back. 'In case you didn't notice, Dariez was on top of me. And we weren't going to have sex.' 'Girl is the temptress. My wife leaves me; I know.'

'Dariez, I'm out-a-here.'

'Uh, okay!' I answer into Joy's back. 'Ah-' I try and think how to sum it up. 'I like making out with you... but I don't really like you as a person...' 'Yeah, same here,' says Emmah.

'What is going on here?' It's Paullie. He shadows the door.

'Joy, what are you doing? And excuse me, young lady?'

'I was just leaving,' Emmah says.

'You're the visitor for Dariez, right?'

'Not anymore.'

'What happened in here?'

'Nothing,' says Joy. 'Everything fine.' He steps aside, turns, and gives me what I guess he thinks is a wink through his glasses.

'Yeah, absolutely.' I catch on. 'Joy just came in and was surprised to see two kids in the room.'

'Well, he should be,' says Paullie, 'because you're not supposed to have visitors in your room. Don't let it happen again, okay?'

'No problem.'

'Yeah, because you won't be seeing me again,' says Emmah, and Paullie gives her a disbelieving look as she walks away from him, stomping down the hall, slamming her shoes with each step.

He shrugs at us.

'All right,' he says to her back. 'Sign out on your way out, miss.'

'Dariez, what kind of girl is going to put up with this ... crap?' Emmah turns around, spreads her arms, and gestures to the hall as if she owns it while she backs away. 'Be quiet, Doomba!' yells President Armelio from somewhere. She turns back around and doesn't give any more looks back.

'Huh,' Paullie says. 'Lovely girl. Everything cool, boys?'

We nod like kindergartners. 'Yes.'

'Don't let anything like that happen again, Dariez.'

'I won't.'

'Otherwise, you'll be here a long time-.' Paullie walks away from the door; Joy waits a few moments and then turns to me.

'Dariez, I am sorry I only have very important beliefs about sex.'

'No, I understand. You did a good thing.'

'You are not in trouble, yes?'

'No, I'm fine. You handled it perfectly, boy.' I put out my hand to get a slap from him, but he misinterprets that as a handshake attempt, so I take the initiative and turn it into a hug, a big smelly one. His glasses smack against me.

'I am out trying to get Italian music in hospital,' he says. 'You give me an idea. But they have none. Now I rest.' And he climbs back in bed, rearranges his sheet, curls into a fetal position, and stares through me.

I glance at the door. Right there, with her bright green eyes wide open, is Joy.

'I only have a couple of questions for you,' Joy says, walking up fast at seven o'clock as I sit in the chair that I've come to call my conference chair since I meet with so ~Sped~ kids in it. I wonder what else has happened in this chair-kids have probably peed on it, licked it, drummed their heads against it, and writhed around in it spouting gibberish. That gives me comfort. It feels like a chair with some history.

I didn't think Joy was going to show up, so I almost didn't come-but then I decided I didn't want any regrets. I'm done with those; regrets are an excuse for kids who have failed. When I get out in the world, from now on, if I start to regret something, I'm going to remind myself that whatever I could have done, it won't change the fact that I was in a psychiatric hospital. This, right here, is the biggest regret I could ever have. And it's not so bad.

I rush out to talk to her, but she flies down to her room and closes her door. I run-up to it and knock, but there's no answer, and when Paullie passes me, shooting a look, I have to stop knocking.

I check the clock in the hall and sigh. It's five. Two hours after our second date.

Joy seems to be looking at me for comment. But I'm amazed at how she looks. New clothes: a pair of tight blue jeans cut down dangerously low and a sliver of white underwear sticking out above them. Does the underwear look like it has pink stars on it-do girls' underwear really have pink stars? ...And I almost stare, before my eyes are drawn by the soft curve of her stomach to her T-shirt, which is wrapped against her with some kind of mystical female force, reading I- HATE BOYS.

How come girls are coming to me dressed all hot all of a sudden?

Above the shirt is her face, bordered by blond hair pulled back and highlighted by her cuts.

'Uh... Why'd you wear that T-shirt?' I ask. 'Is that a message to me?'

'No. I hate boys, not you. And this is one reason why: they're so arrogant. Why is that?' She stands with her hands on her hips.

'Well ...' I think. 'Do you want like, a real, honest answer?' My brain is working better than it did before. It has bagels and soup and sugar and chicken in it. It's firing almost like it used to.

'No, Dariez, I want a big, dumb, fake answer.' Joy rolls her eyes. I think her breasts roll in sync with them. Girls' breasts are so amazing.

'Wait, you didn't ask a question!' I smirk. 'One point for you.'

'We're not playing the game, Dariez. We were going to, but I'm too mad.'

'Okay, well, darn...' I start. 'What were we talking about?'

'Why boys are so arrogant.'

'Right. Well, you know, were born into the world seeing that we're just a little bit... We tend to have things a little bit easier than girls. And we tend to assume therefore that the world was built for us, and that we're, you know, the culmination of everything that came before us. And then we get told that having a little bit of this attitude is called balls and that balls are good, and we kind of take it from there.'

'Wow, you are honest,' she says, sitting down. 'An honest asshole.' Yes! She sat down! 'Who the hell was that girl?' 'A girl I know.'

'She's pretty.' (It's amazing how girls can say this and make it the most withering insult.) 'Is she your girlfriend?'

'No. I don't have a girlfriend. Never had a girlfriend.'

'So-o, she was just a girl you were hooking up within your room?' 'You saw, huh.'

'I saw everything: from out here to your roommate's bed.'

'What, you were following me?'

'I'm not allowed?'

'Well, no-'

'You don't like it?' She leans in. 'You don't like some poor little girl'-she throws on a Little Bo-Peep voice, fluffs her hair-'following big, da- Dariez around the ward?'

'It's not an award, it's a psych hospital.' But yes, yes, I do like you following me around; yes, that's awesome. 'I can't believe I didn't notice you. ...' I think of the flashes of Joy and time - with Emmah if I ever glanced down the hall or checked behind me.

'You were in a state of excitement; that's why.'

'Well. You want to know who she was?'

'No. I lost interest.'

'You did?'

'No! Tell me!'

'Okay, okay, she was this girl I've known for a long time -, and she came in here-'

'Just overcome with lust for you?'

'Yeah, sure, exactly; she came in overcome with lust and I took advantage of her.' I flick my hand. 'No, what really happened is she came in here lonely and confused, I think, and thinking that she belonged in a place like this... '

'That was pretty funny when your roommate caught you.

That kind of made the whole thing worthwhile.'

'I'm glad you think so.'

'You're never going to be a good cheater. You're going to be one of those boys who gets caught on the first try.'

'Is that good?'

'You didn't even close the door. How'd you know the girl?'

'She was my best friend's girlfriend since we were like thirteen.'

'How old are you now?'

'Fifteen.'

'Me too.'

I look at her anew. There's something about kids who are the same age. It's like you got piped out in the same shipment. You've got to stick together. Because deep down I believe my year was a special year: it produced me.

'So, you ___ ed your best friend's, girlfriend?'

'No, they broke up.'

'When?'

'Uh, a few days ago.'

'She moves fast!'

'I think,' I think out loud, 'she's just one of these girls who's really not had a boyfriend.'
'Some of us, we'd call those girls sluts. Do you think she had a boyfriend when she was eight?'

'Ew.'

'Maybe she was letting-'

'Stop! Stop! I don't want to hear it.'

'It happens.' Joy looks at me.

I nod, and pause, and let that sink it. It does happen.

'Um... how are you?' I ask.

'You think you're really smart, don't you?'

I laugh. 'No. That's one of the reasons I came in here, actually. Thinking I was dumb.'

'Why would you think that? You're in a smart school.'

'I wasn't doing well there.'

'What were you getting?'

'Ninety-threes.'

Oh.' Joy nods.

'Yeah.' I folded my arms. 'I think you're really smart. You probably get good grades.'

'Not really.' She puts her chin in her palms like someone in a painting. 'You're not very good at giving compliments.'

'What?'

'I'm smart! C'mon.' 'You're attractive, too!' I say. 'Does that work?

You're attractive! Did I say that already? I said it the other day, right?'

'Attractive? Dariez, real estate is attractive. Houses.'

'Sorry, you're beautiful. What about that?' I can't believe I'm saying it. We'll both be out of here in two days; that's why I'm saying it. No regrets. 'Beautiful is all right. There are better ones.' 'Okay, okay, cool.' I crack my neck-

'Ew-www. ''What?'

'Don't do that. Especially when you're about to compliment me.'

'Fine, okay. What are better words than beautiful?'

She puts on a Southern accent: ''Go-geous.''

'Okay, okay, you're gorgeous.'

'That sounds terrible. Do it my way: go-geous.'

I do it.

'You can't even do a Southern accent? Oh my gosh, are you even from America?' 'Gimme a break! I'm from here!' 'Knox?

'Yeah.'

'This neighborhood?'

'Yeah.'

'I have friends here.'

'We should meet up sometime-.'

'You're so terrible. Try some more compliments.'

'Okay.' I dig down deep. I got nothing. 'Um...'

'You don't know anymore?'

'I'm not good at words.'

'See, this is why the math nerds don't get girls.'

'Who said I was a Math nerd? I told you my grades suck.'

'You might be one of those nerds who's not smart. Those are the worst kind.'

'Listen,' I stop her. 'I'm really glad you're here talking with me, and I've met a lot of kids in here.'

'Uh-oh,' she says. 'Is this the part where it gets all serious?'

'Yes,' I say. And when I say it, the way that I say it, I see that she understands that I'm serious about being serious. I can be serious now. I've been through some serious shit and I can be serious like somebody older.

'I like you a lot,' I start. No regrets. 'Because you're funny and smart and because you seem to like me. I know that's not a good reason, but I can't help it; if a girl likes me, I tend to like her back.'

She doesn't say anything. I dip my head at her. 'Um, do you want to say anything?' 'No. No! This is fine. Keep going.' 'Well, okay, I've been thinking about how to put this. I like you for all this stuff but I also kind of like you for the cuts on your face-'

'Oh no, are you a fetishist?'

'What?'

'Are you like blood fetishists? There was one of them in here before. He wanted to make me like his Queen of the Night or something.'

'No! It's nothing like that. It's like this: when kids have problems, you know ... I come in here and I see that kids from all over have problems. I mean, the kids that I've made friends with are pretty much a bunch of lowlifes, old drug addicts, kids who can't hold jobs; but then every few days, someone new comes in who looks like he just got out of a business meeting.'

Joy nods. She's seen them too: the scruffy youngish boy who came in today with a pile of books as if it were a reading retreat.

The boy who came in yesterday in a suit and told me in the most practical way that he heard voices and they were a real pain in the ass; they didn't say anything scary but they were always saying the stupidest stuff while he was in trial.

'And not only in here: all over. My friends are all calling me up now: this one's depressed, that one's depressed. I look at what the doctors hand out, and there are studies that show like, one-fifth of Americans suffer from a mental illness, and suicide is the number-two killer among teenagers and all this crap ... I mean everybody's messed up.'

'What's your point?'

'We wear our problems differently. Like I didn't talk and stopped eating and threw up all the time-'

'You threw up?'

'Yeah. Bad. And I stopped sleeping. And when I started doing that, my parents noticed, and my friends noticed, sort of- the kind of made fun of me but I could go through the world without really letting on what was wrong. Until I came here. Now it's like: something is wrong. Or was wrong, because it feels like it's getting better.'

'What does this have to do with me?'

'You're out there about your problems,' I say. 'You put them on your face.'

She stops, puts her hand in her hair.

'I cut my face because too ~*Sped*~-too ~*Sped*~ kids wanted something from me,' she tries to explain. 'There was so much pressure, it was-' 'Something to live up to?'

'Exactly.'

'Kids told you-you- were hot and then all of a sudden they treated you different?'

'Right.'

'How?'

She sighs. 'You have to be the prude or the slut, and if you pick one, other kids hate you for it, and you can't trust anyone anymore, because they're all after the same thing, and you see that you can never go back to how it was before ...'

She pulls her face into one of those faces that could be laughing or crying-they use so ~Sped~ of the same muscles-and leans forward.

'And I didn't want to be part of it,' she says. 'I didn't want to be part of that world.'

I grab her leaning into me, feel for the first time- the soft dimple of her body. 'Me neither.'

She puts her arms around me and we hold each other like that from our two chairs, like a house constructed over them, and I don't move my hands at all and 'I wasn't doing well there.' 'What were you getting?' 'Ninety-threes.' 'Oh.' Joy nods. 'Yeah.' I told my arms. 'I think you're really smart.

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'I didn't want to play the smart game,' I tell her. 'And you didn't want to play the pretty game.'

'The pretty game's worse,' she whispers. 'Nobody wants to use you for being smart.'

'Kids wanted to use you?'

'Someone did. Someone who shouldn't.'

I stop.

'I'm sorry.'

'It wasn't you.'

'Should I not touch you?'

'No, no, you didn't do anything. It's okay. But... yeah.

It happened. And I lied before.'

'About what?'

'It doesn't matter what kind of surgery I have. I did it with half a scissor, Dariez. It's going to leave scars. I'll have scars for the rest of my life. I didn't know what I was doing. I just wanted to get off the world a little after this... this thing... and now I'm never going to be able to have a job or anything. What are they going to say when I go into a job interview looking like...? 'She sniffles, chuckles and snot comes out. '...Like a Klingon?'

'There are places in Califor-Emmah where they speak

Klingon. You can get a job there.'

'Stop it.'

We're still holding each other. I don't want to look up. I keep my eyes closed. 'There are anti-discrimination laws too. They can't hire you if you're qualified.' 'But I look like a freak now.'

'I told you, Joy,' I say into her ear. 'Everybody has problems. Some kids just hide their crap better than others. But kids aren't going to look at you and run away. They're going to look at you and think that they can talk to you, and that you'll understand, and that you're brave, and that you're strong. And you are. You're brave and strong.'

'You're getting better at the compliments.'

'Nah, I'm nothing; I can barely hold food down.'

'Yeah, you're skinny.' She laughs. 'We need to fatten you up.'

'I know.'

'I'm glad I met you.'

'You're bare and honest, Joy; that's what you are.' Words come into my head as they've always been there. 'And in Africa, your scarring would be highly prized.'

She sniffles again. 'I didn't like seeing you with that other girl.'

'I know.'

'You like me more, right?'

'Right.'

'Why?'

I pull away from her-maybe the first time- in my life, I've ended a hug-because a level of eye contact is required.

'I owe you a lot more than I do her. You really opened my eyes to something.' My actual eyes have been closed for so long on Joy's shoulder that the hall is blinding. But when they readjust, I s ee the Professor, watching us from her door, holding the doorknob with one hand and her shoulder with the other.

'I wanted to show you this.' I reach under my chair to pick up something for our meeting-I had it down there as a trump card. I didn't think the date would go like this; I thought it would all be Joy yelling at me and

I'd have to do something drastic. But now I can do something drastic and it'll be like a cherry on top. I pull out my couple's brain map and show it to her.

'It's beautiful!'

'It's a boy and a girl, see? I didn't do any hair, but you can see how one has a feminine profile and the other is masculine.' They're lying down, not on top of each other, just side by side, floating in space. They have sketched-out legs and arms at their sides, but that's the whole point of my brain maps-you don't need to spend a lot of time on the legs or the arms. What they really have are brains-full and complete with whirling bridges and intersections and plazas and parks. They're the most elabo rate ones I've done yet: divided thoroughfares, alleys, Mill Run Road, traffic circles, tunnels, and toll plazas. The paper is 14' x 19' and I had room to make the maps huge; the bodies are small and unimportant; the key thing that your eye is drawn to (be cause- I understand now, somehow, that that's how artworks) is a soaring bridge between the two heads, longer than the Kinzua Bridge, even, with coils of ramps like ribbons mashed up at each end.

'It might be my best yet,' I say.

She looks it over; I see the red in her eyes, fading. There aren't any tear streaks-I still haven't seen actual tear streaks on anyone. Her tears went right into my shirt; they cool and chafe now on my shoulder. 'You were the one who suggested I do stuff from childhood,' I co ntinue. 'I used to do these when I was a kid, and I forgot how fun they were.'

'I bet you never did them like this.'

'No, well, this is easier, because I don't have to finish the maps.'

'It's beautiful.'

'Thanks for getting me started. I owe you big.'

'Thank you. Do I get to keep it?' She looks up. 'Not yet. I have to fix it up.' I stand, stretch my back, and shrug down at her.

Do it, soldier.

Yes, sir!

'But, um, I kind of wondered if I could have your phone number, so I can call you when we're out of here.'

She smiles, and her cuts outline her face like a cat's whiskers.

'Crafty.'

'I am a boy,' I say.

'And I hate boys,' she says.

'But a boy's different,' I say.

'Maybe a little,' she says.

Humble is back at dinner. He has entirely new clothes, a sparkly clean-shaven face, and eyes that won't quite open all the way; he stations himself at his usual table under the TV in the dining room, which everyone left empty while he was gone. Joy's there too, at the next table, her back to him; I walk in, say hi to both of them, grab the tables, put them together, and sit between them, smiling.

'Joy, I don't know if you've had the chance to meet Humble.'

'Not really,' she says. She's still grinning. From our date, I hope.

'Humble, Joy. Joy, Humble.'

'Uh-huh... 'he says, squinting his eyes. 'Those cuts on your face are trippy.'

'Thanks?' They shake hands.

'You have a good handshake for a girl,' says Humble.

'You have a good one for a boy.'

My dinner is beans and hot dogs and salad, with cookies and pear at the end. I tackle it.

'So-o, where'd they take you?' I ask between bites.

'Across the hall to geriatric,' says Humble.

'With the old kids?' Joy asks.

'Yeah. That's where they take you when they have to get you whacked outta your mind.'

'Where'd you hear the term 'wack'?' Joy asks.

''Whacked?' Humble picks a piece of salad out of his teeth with his thumb.

'No, she thinks you're saying 'wack,' like 'that's wack,'' I explain.

'Wack, wacky, whacked, it's all the same word. This is an old word. I used to have an uncle named Wacky- what are you laughing at? Boy, don't start with me. This kid is a lot of trouble.'

'Yeah, I know,' says Joy. And she bangs her knee against my thigh. Awesome. A girl hasn't done that to me since like fourth grade. 'He's a mess.'

'I know,' says Humble. 'It's because he's too smart for his own good. He comes in here; he's burned out. I've seen it before. I see it all the Joy-, but in kids in their twenties, thirties. This boy is so smart that he got burnt out in half the time-. He's having like a midlife crisis as a teenager.'

'Forget the midlife crisis,' I say- 'It's all about the sixth- life crisis.'

'What the hell is that?'

'Well...' I look at Joy. She's not going to hit me with her leg again? I'm not sure if I want to talk. I don't want to bore her. But I know I won't bore Humble, and if I don't bore her either, that would make it like a major victory.

'Well, first there's the quarter-life crisis,' I say. 'That's like the characters on Friends-kids freaking out that they won't get married. Twenty-year-olds. That's probably true that kids get quarter-life crises; I wouldn't know. But I know that now things work faster. Before you had to wait until you were twenty to have enough choices of things to do with your life to start getting freaked out. But now there's so much stuff for you to buy, and so ~Sped~ ways you can spend your time and joy-, and so ~Sped~ specialties that you need to get started on very early in life-like ballet, right, Joy, when did you start ballet?'

'Four.'

'Okay. I started Tae Bo at six. So, there are like- so ~Sped~ kids angling for success and so ~*Sped*~ colleges you're supposed to get into, and so ~*Sped*~ women you're supposed to have sex with-'

'You got to freak them,' says Joy from across the room.

'Were we talking to you?' Humble asks.

'Huh, eat your salt.'

'What, tough boy? How about I knock your head off, how would you like that-'

'Boys.' Joy stands up and pulls her hair away from her cheeks, which are red in addition to being cut up. Everybody shuts up.

'So now,' I continue, 'instead of a quarter-life crisis they've got a fifth-life crisis that's when you're eighteen and a sixth-life crisis that's when you're fourteen. I think that's what a lot of kids have.'

'What you have.'

'Not just me. It's the... um... should I keep going?' 'Yes,' Joy says.

'Well, there are a lot of kids who make a lot of money off the fifth- and sixth-life crises. All of a sudden they have a ton of consumers scared out of their minds and willing to buy facial cream, designer jeans, SAT test prep courses, condoms, cars, scooters, self-help books, watches, wallets, stocks, whatever... all the crap that the twenty-somethings used to buy, they now have the ten-somethings buying. They doubled their market!'

Joy has pulled up a chair next to me. 'This kid is a freakin' lunatic,' he says.

'I hope they keep him in here,' says Humble.

'So pretty soon.' I keep thinking. 'There'll be seventh- and eighth-life crises. Then eventually a baby will be born and the doctors will look at it and wonder right away if it's unequipped to deal with the world; if they decide it doesn't look happy, they'll put it on antidepressants, get it started on that particular consumer track.'

'Hm,' Humble says. I think he's going to follow it up with something, but instead, he says: 'Hm.'

Then- Like... 'Your problem is you have a worldview totally informed by depression.' He leans in. 'What about rage?'

'I was never big on rage.'

'Why?'

'It's so much angrier in my head than it could ever be outside.' 'Extra cookies!'

It's one of the nurses. We all get in line; it's oatmeal and peanut butter. As I shuffle forward, Joy nudges me from behind; when I turn to her, she turns her face away as if I were trying to kiss her but she wouldn't let me.

'Your trouble,' I say.

'You're silly,' she answers.

I did it. I talked- and she liked me; she thought I was smart. I start to develop a plan. Once I get my cookies, I go to the phone to call Dad, who are already bringing Blade II tomorrow night. I want him to bring something else too.

This is your last full day at the hospital, is what I think when I get up-no one's taking my blood today (it's only happened once since Sunday) so I don't get up super-early, but I'm still the first one in the halls. I take my shower and think about how much life would suck if hot water didn't come out of the show-ahead when you wanted. I've tried to take cold showers and they're wonderful when they're over, but during the process, they feel like some form of animal torture. But then again, that's the point when you take a cold shower you're supposed to get in and out as fast as possible; that's why they do it in the army.

That's right! Want to take a shot, soldier?

I don't think so- Sir.

Come on, what's the matter with you? You got a lot going for you; you don't want to keep it going?

I need a cold shower to keep things going?

That's right. Less time- in the shower, more on the battlefield.

Fine.

I can do this. I reach out and twist the temperature knob slowly to the left, then decide that I'm never going to get it done gradually so I'll have to do it like a Band Aid-I jerk it over. The water goes from toasty warm to frigid so quickly that it feels like it burns me. I bend my groin out of its path, but I know that's cheating, so I stick it back in as I furiously lather myself. Leg: up!

Down! Another leg: up! Down! Crotch: uh, scrub- scrub- scrub. Chest: wipe. Arm: down! Back! Other- arm: down! Back! Neck, face, turn around, wash your butt, and I'm out! Straight to the towel. I wrap it around myself and shiver.

I'm so desperate to put my clothes on that my socks stick to my wet feet. I go out to talk with Paullie.

'You okay?'

'First cold shower.'

'Of the day?'

'Of my life.'

'Yeah, that'll knock yah.'

'What's the news?'

Paullie holds up his paper. It seems that a new candidate is running for Mayor of Knox promising to give everyone who votes for him a lap dance. He's a multibillionaire, and at $100 per lap dance, he thinks he can lock up the vote. A lot of women are supporting him.

'That's crazy.' I shiver. 'It's like... Who's out there and who's in here, you know?'

'Absolutely. Better music in here, though.' Paullie turns up the radio.

'By the way, that's a question I have-can I play some music in the hall tonight? At the other end?'

'What kind?'

'There are no words, don't worry, nothing offensive. It's something one of the kids in the hall will like. Like a gift.'

'I'll have to see it first.'

'Okay. And you know I'm bringing that Blade? movie tonight to watch with the group.'

'You think about that a minute. You're bringing a vampire movie onto a floor full of psych patients.'

'They can handle it.'

'I'm not going to get any nightmares?'

'Promise.'

'Nightmares are a big problem in my job, Dariez.'

'Understood.'

Paullie sighs put his paper down and get up. 'You want me to do your vitals?'

He straps me in on the chair, pumps me up, and puts his soft fingertips on my wrist. Today I'm 120 / 70. The first day I haven't been perfect.

Continued: 1

'How're you doing?' Dr. Ross is like.

It's 11 A.M. I sigh. After vitals was breakfast, where the boy who was afraid of gravity and Rolling Pin Robert were gone Humble told me and Joy that they got discharged. Toward the end of the meal, Joy touched her leg against mine for as long as it took me to drink the first sip of my after-

breakfast Swee-Touch Nee tea, which was a big sip. Then Monieec announced that we'd be screening Blade II tonight opposite the smoking lounge and everybody got excited, especially Joy: 'Huh, that movie is cool; a lotta vampires die.' No announcements about my music, but then again it hadn't arrived yet.

I took my Zoloft in my little plastic cup and drew some brain maps by the window in the corner of the hall next to My-a Joy. I handled my phone messages, started thinking seriously about what I'd do the moment I got out-would I buy a cup of coffee? Walk to the park? Go home and start in on thee-mail?

-And-

That got me started thinking about e-mail, and all of a sudden, I was really glad to have Dr. Ross to go to. 'I'm doing okay, I think.'

She looks at me calmly and steadily. Maybe she's my Anchor.

'What's got you in doubt, Dariez?'

'Excuse me?'

'You said you were okay 'you think.' Why do you just think about it?'

'That's an expression,' I say.

'This isn't the place to be leaving if you're not feeling better, Dariez.'

'Right, well, I've been thinking about my e-mail.'

'Yes?'

'I'm really worried about getting out there and having to check it. The phones I'm caught up with, but the email might be pretty deadly.'

'Deadly... How can e-mail be deadly, Dariez?'

'Well.' I lean back, take a deep breath. Then I remember something. 'You know how I had a lot of problems with starting and stopping my sentences before?'

'Yes.'

'Not lately.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, it's like the opposite, like words can just pour out of me, the way they used to when I used to get in trouble in class.' 'Which was...' She focuses on her pad to write this down.

'A year ago, before- I went to Executive Pre- Professional.'

'Right-now tell me about the e-mail.' 'The e-mail.' I put my hands on the table. 'I hate it. Like, right now, I haven't been checking it for five days, okay?'

'Since Saturday.' She nods.

'That's right. Now, what are kids thinking while they're trying to reach me? These are kids who probably already have some idea where I am because-

Emmah told Kristopher the number and he figured it out.'

'Right: a big source of shame for you.'

'Yes. But even if someone has no idea where I am, what are they thinking? Five days. They're like: He's crazy. He must have OD'ed or something. Everyone is expecting me to answer them instantly and I'm not able to.'

'Who e-mails you, Dariez?'

'Kids who want homework assignments, teachers, school clubs, announcements about charities I should volunteer in, invitations to Executive Pre-Professional football, basketball, squash games ...'

'So-o, they're mostly school-related.'

'They're all school-related. My friends don't e-mail me. They call.'

'So why don't you just ignore the e-mails?'

'I can't!'

'Why not?'

'Because- then kids will be offended!'

'And- what happens then?'

'Well, I won't get to join clubs, get credits, participate in stuff, get extra-credit... I'll fail.'

'At school.'

'Right.' I pause. No, it's not exactly school. It's what comes after school. 'At life.'

'Ah.' She pauses. 'Life.'

'Right.'

'Failing at school is failing in life.'

'Well... I'm in school! That's the one thing I'm supposed to do. I know a lot of famous kids didn't do well at school, like James Brown; he dropped out in fifth grade to be an entertainer, I respect that... but that's not going to be me. I'm not going to be able to do anything but work as hard as possible all the Joy- and compete with everyone I know all the Joy- to make it. And right now, the school's the one thing I need to do. And I'm away from the e-mail and I can't do it.'

'But your definition of school isn't really one thing, it's ~*Sped*~ different things, Dariez: extracurricular activities plus sports plus volunteering. That's not to mention homework.'

'Right.'

'How anxious would you say you are about all of this, Dariez?'

I think back to what Joy said, about anxiety being a medical thing. The e-mail has been in the back of my mind since I got here, the nagging knowledge that when I get out I'll have to sit on the computer for five or six hours going through everything I've missed, answering it in reverse order because that's the way it comes in and therefore taking the longest Joy- to respond to the kids who e-mailed me in the most distant past. And then as I'm answering them more will come in, and they'll sit on top of my stack and mock me, dare me to answer them before digging down, telling me that I need them, as opposed to the one or two e-mails that are actually about something I care about. Those will get saved to the end, and by the Joy- I have the Joy- to deal with them, they'll be so out of date that I'll

just have to apologize: Sorry, boy. I haven't been able to answer my e-mail. No, I'm not important, just incapable.

'Dariez?'

'Very anxious,' I answer.

'The e-mail anxiety, and the failure talk... These are subjects you've brought up before. They're very distressing to you.' 'I know. I'm sweating.'

'You are?'

'Yeah. And I haven't been sweating for a while.'

'You've been away from your Tentacles.'

'Right. Not anymore. Now I get to go back and they're all right there for me.'

'Do you remember what I asked you last Joy-, about whether or not you'd found any Anchors in here?'

'Yes.'

She pauses. In order to ask a question, it is often possible for Dr. Ross only to inyoite that she might ask a question.

'I think I've found one,' I sigh.

'What's that?'

'Can I get up and get it?'

'Absolutely.'

I leave the office and walk down the hall, where Joy is leading a new recruit on his welcoming tour-a black boy with wild teeth and a stained blue sweatsuit.

'This is Dariez,' Joy says. 'He's really young, but he's on the level. He does drawings.'

I shake the boy's hand. That's right. I do drawings.

'Um- Being,' the boys...

'That's his name,' Joy explains, rolling her eyes.

'Your name isn't Dariez; it's Um- Being too,' the boy says.

I nod, break the handshake, and keep walking to my room. It's literally like breaking away from a monster- the further I get from thinking about e-mail and Dr. Ross and the fact that I'm going to have to leave here and go back to Executive Preprofessional, the calmer I get. And the closer I get to the brain maps, to this little stupid thing I can do, the calmer I get. I walk past Joy-he's staring and trying to sleep- and take my art off the radiator cover. I cradle it in a stack past Joy and Um- Being- who's now explaining how his real last name is Green and that's what he needs, some green-back into the office.

'I kind of like it in here,' I say to Dr. Ross.

'This room?'

'No, the hospital.'

'When you're finished, you can volunteer.'

'I talked to the guitar boy Neil about that. I think I'll try. I can get school credit!'

'Is that the reason you should volunteer, Dariez-'

'No, no ...' I shake my head. 'I'm just joking.' 'Ah.' Dr. Ross cuts her face into a wide smile. 'So, what do we have here?'

I plop them down on the table. There are two dozen now. No kind of crazy breakthroughs, just variations on a theme: pigs with brain maps that resemble Pittsburgh, my couple for Joy joined by the sweeping bridge, a family of metropolises.

'Your artwork,' she says.

She leaf's through them, going 'Oh, my' at the particularly good ones. I constructed this stack last night-not just for Dr. Ross, for anybody. The brain maps have a certain order. Ever since I've been doing them, they've been making it clear that they should be stacked for presentation.

'Dariez, these are wonderful.'

'Thanks.' I sit down. We were both standing. I didn't even notice.

'You started these because you used to do them when you were four?'

'Right. Well. Something- like them.'

'And how do they make you feel?'

I look at the pile. 'Awesome.'

She leans in. 'Why?'

I have to think about that one, and when Dr. Ross makes me think, I don't get embarrassed and try to skip it. I look to the left and stroke my chin.

'Because I do them,' I say. 'I do them and they're done. It's almost like, you know, peeing?'

'Yes... 'Dr. Ross nods. 'Something you enjoy.' 'Right. I do it; it's successful; it feels good, and I know it's- good. When- I finish one of these up, I feel like I've actually done something and like the rest of my day can be spent doing whatever, stupid crap, email, phone calls, all the rest of it.'

'Dariez, have you ever considered the fact that you might be an artist?' 'I have other stuff too,' I keep going. What'd she says? 'First of all, I was thinking about this perpetual candle, like a candle on the ground with another candle hanging upside-down over it, and as the first candle melts the wax is kept molten by some kind of hot containment unit and gets pumped up to the second candle and drips down like a stalactite-stalagmite thing, and then I was also thinking: what if you filled a shoe with whipped cream? Just a boy's shoe, filled with whipped cream? That's pretty easy to do. And then you could keep going: a- T-shirt filled with Jell-O, a hat full of applesauce... that's art, right? That kind of stuff. What'd you say about artists?'

She chuckles. 'You seem to enjoy what you're doing here.'

'Yeah, well, duh, it's not the most difficult thing in the world.'

'You're not sweating now.'

'This is a good Anchor for me,' I say. I admit. I admit it. It's a stupid thing to admit. It means that I'm not practical. But then again, I'm already in the loony bin; how practical am I going to get? I might have to give up on practical. 'That's right, Dariez. This can be your Anchor.' Dr. Ross stares at me

and doesn't blink. I look at her face, the wall behind her, the door, the shades, the table, my hands on the table, the Brain Maps between us. I could do the one on the top a little better. I could try putting some wood grain in there with the streets. Knots of wood in kid's heads. That could work. 'This can be my Anchor.' I nod. 'But...'

'What, Dariez?'

'What am I going to do about school? I can't go to Executive Pre-Professional for art.'

'I'm going to throw a wild notion at you.' Dr. Ross leans back, then forward. 'Have you ever thought about going to a different school?' I stare ahead. I hadn't. I honestly hadn't.

Not once, not in my whole life, not since I started there. That's my school. I worked harder to get in than I did for anything else, ever. I went there because, coming out of it, I'd be able to be President. Or a lawyer. Rich, that's the point. Rich and successful.

And look where it got me. One stupid year-not even one, like three-quarters of one-and here I am with not one, but two bracelets on my wrist, next to a shrink in a room adjacent to a hill where there's a boy named Um- Being walking around. If I keep doing this for three more years, where will I be? I'll be a complete loser. And what if I keep on? What if I do okay, live with the depression, get into College, do College, go to Grad School, get the Job, get the Money, get Kids and a Wife and a Nice Car? What kind of crap will I be in then? I'll be completely crazy.

I don't want to be completely crazy. I don't like being here that much. I like being a little crazy: enough to volunteer here, not enough to ever, ever, ever come back.

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes- I have thought about it.'

'When? Just now?'

I smile. 'Absolutely.'

'And what do you think?'

I clap my hands together and stand up. 'I think I should call my parents and tell them that I want to transfer to schools.' 'Visitor, Dariez,' Paullie pokes his head into the dining room. I slide my chair back from the table, where I'm playing after-lunch poker with My-a Joy and Joy and Armelio. My-a Joy doesn't really have any idea how to play, but we deal him cards and he plays them face down and

smiles and we give him more chips (we're using scraps of paper; the buttons are locked up due to our recklessness) whenever he pockets his or chews them up.

'I'll be back,' I say.

'This boy, so busy,' says Armelio.

'He thinks he's all-important,' Joy says.

'I woke up, and the bed was on fire!' Says My-a Joy.

We all look at him. 'You okay, My-a Joy?' I ask. 'My mom hit me in the head. She hit me in the head with a hammer.'

'Oh, wow.' I turn to Armelio. 'I heard him say stuff like this down in the ER. Has he talked about this before?'

'No, nuh-uh, buddy.'

'Hey, My-a Joy, it's okay.' I put my hand on his shoulder. At the same time-, I bite my tongue. You can think someone's hilarious and want to help them at the same time-.

'She hit me in the head,' he says. 'With a hammer!'

'Yeah, but you're here now,' Joy says. 'You're safe. Nobody's going to hit you in the he ad with anything.'

My-a Joy nods. I keep my hand on his shoulder. I keep my tongue bit down, but I make little-chuffing noises as I try to keep from laughing, and he looks up and notices. He smiles at me, then laughs himself, then picks his cards up and claps my back.

'It'll come to ya,' he says.

'That's right. I know it will.'

I excuse myself from the room and head down the hall. Right at the end is Kristopher, holding the record I want. Dad didn't have it.

'Hey, boy,' he says sheepishly, and as I approach, he leans it against the wall. He's a dick, but I'm not perfect either so I come up and hug him.

'Hey.'

'Well, you were right. My dad had it-Italian

Masters Volume Three.'

'I so appreciate this.' I take the record. It's got a picture on the cover of what looks like the Nile at dusk, with a palm tree lilting left, echoing the brightening moon, and the purple sky rolling up from the horizon.

'Yeah, I'm sorry about everything,' Kristopher says. 'I... uh...

I've had a weird couple of days.'

'You know what?' I look him in the eyes. 'Me too.' 'I bet.' He smiles.

'Yeah, from now on, whenever crap goes down, you can be like 'Oh, Dariez, I had a bad few days', because, I will get what you're talking about.'

'What's it like in here?' He asks.

'There are kids whose lives have been screwed up for a long time, and then there are kids like me, whose lives have been screwed up for... you know... shorter.'

'Did they put you on new drugs?'

'No, same ones I was on before.'

'So-o- are you feeling better?'

'Yeah.'

'What changed?'

'I'm going to leave school.'

'You're what?'

'I'm done. I'm going somewhere else.'

'Where?'

'I don't know yet. I'm going to talk it over with my parents. Somewhere for art.'

'You want to do art?'

'Yeah. I've been doing some in here. I'm good at it.'

'You're pretty good at school too, boy.'

I shrug. I don't really need to explain this to Kristopher. He's been demoted from most important friend to friend, and he's going to have to earn that, even. And you know what else? I don't owe kids anything, and I don't have to talk to them any more than I feel I need to.

'What's up with Emmah?' I ask... Have to tread carefully here.

'I got your message, about how things were bad.'

'They got worked out. It was my fault. I got all freaked out about her being on pills and we broke up for like, a few days.'

'Why did that freak you out?'

'I don't need any more of that in my life, you know? I mean, it's bad enough with my dad.'

'He's on medication?'

'Every form of medication in the book. Mom, too. And then me, with the pot... when you come right down to it, there isn't anybody in the household who isn't seriously drugged except the fish.'

'And- you didn't want your girlfriend to be, too.'

'Her smoking is one thing; I just... I can't really explain it. I guess you'll have to go out with someone for a long time- to understand. If you're with somebody and then you learn that they need to ... take something on a daily basis, you wonder- how good can you be for them?'

'That's pretty stupid,' I say. 'I met this girl in here-'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah, and she's really screwed up, as screwed up as me, but I don't look at that as an insult. I look at that as a chance to connect.'

'Yeah, well.'

'Kids are screwed up in this world. I'd rather be with someone screwed up and open about it than somebody perfect and... you know... ready to explode.'

'I'm sorry, Dariez.' Kristopher looks at me deep and holds out a hand for me to slap. 'I'm sorry I was a bitch to you.'

'You were a bitch.' I slap his hand. 'This album partly makes up for it. Just, don't do it again.' 'All right.' He nods.

We stand still a minute. We haven't moved from the crux of the hallways near the entrance of Six North. The double doors that I came in through are eight feet behind him.

'Well, listen,' he says. 'Enjoy the record. And- hey, they have a record player in here?'

'They still smoke in here, Kristopher. They're kind of back in time-.'

'Enjoy it and be in touch, and I'm sorry once again. I guess you won't be chilling for a while.'

'I don't know. I may never be chilling again.'

'Did you almost kill yourself to get in here?' Kristopher asks.

'That's what Emmah told me.'

'Yeah.'

'Why?'

'Because I wasn't capable of dealing with the real world.'

'Dariez, don't kill yourself, okay?'

'Thanks.'

'Just... don't.'

'I won't.'

'I'll see you soon, boy.'

Kristopher turns, and the nurses open the door for him. He's not a bad boy. He's just someone who hasn't had his stay on Six North yet. I take the record to Paullie to store behind the nurses 'station.

Six North doesn't need a PA system, because of President Armelio, but it does have one, used regularly for the simple and rhythmic messages of 'Lunch is served,' 'Medication,' and 'All smokers to the smoking lounge; smokers, get your smokes.' This afternoon it pipes up with a longer message, courtesy of Monieec.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this afternoon our patient Dariez Gilner, who is leaving tomorrow, is going to be drawing his artwork for everyone on the floor. If you'd like your own personal piece of Dariez's art, come to the end of the hallway by the dining room.

End of the dining-room hallway, five minutes. Have fun!'

I sit down in the back most chair, by the window that peers out over the avenue that crosses the street I live on, so close to my real life. I look over at my conference chair where I meet with my parents and Joy. I have a second chair set up in front of me as an art desk, with stacks of board games on it and a chessboard on top. It's a little flimsy, but it'll do.

President Armelio is the first to approach. He strides up, barrelchested and sure of himself, like a torpedo. 'Hey, buddy, this is great! You gonna make me one of your heads with the maps inside?'

'That's right.'

'Well let's go, buddy. I ain't got all day!'

Right. Armelio is going to have to be done fast because he is fast. I sketch the outline of his head and shoulders without a second thought and start in on his brain map. Highways, that's what Armelio has in his head-six-lane highways running parallel, streaking through a city, with purpose and minimal on-ramps. He doesn't have any quiet little streets or parks; it's highways and a grid, and no rivers either.

The highways hardly even connect because - Armelio doesn't mix up his thoughts; he has one and does it and then he moves on to the next. It's a great way to live. Especially when the biggest thought is wanting to play cards. Cards have to be represented in Armelio's brain somewhere. So, I

sketch some streets into an ace of spades right in the middle - it's not a great ace of spades, but Armelio gets it.

'Spades! Buddy, I crush you in spades.'

I put my initials on it, big and bold, 'CG' like 'computer-generated.'

'I'm gonna keep this, for real,' Armelio says. 'You a good boy, Dariez.' He shakes my hand. 'You want my number for when you go?'

'Sure-' I take out a piece of paper.

'It's an adult home,' Armelio says. 'You're gonna have to ask for Spyros, which is my other name.' He gives me the number and moves aside, and there's Ebony, with her cane and her velvet pants, smacking her lips.

'I heard... that you were making your brains for kids,' she says.

'That's right! And you know who the first person who said they were brains was?'

'Me!'

'Absolutely. Now, look' -I gesture at my stack of work on the floor- 'now I've got all this.'

'So-o- I get paid, right?' Ebony laughs.

'Not quite; I haven't really made it yet. As an artist.'

'I know. It's tough.'

'So-o- you just get a brain map for yourself, okay?'

'Good!'

I trace her head freehand, looking at her, not the paper. I look down and it' s pretty good. Ebony's brain ... what's in there? A lot of circles, for all the buttons she stole. She was a nut with those buttons. Didn't mess around. Quite a schemer. And with all of her gambling skills, she needs to have a Strip, like Vegas. So-o- I get a big boulevard in the middle and lots of traffic circles around it, with circular parks, circular malls, little circle lakes. It comes out looking less like a city and more like a necklace with a central band and tons of bunched-up jewels hanging off.

'It's pretty!' She says.

'And you're done.' I hand it to her.

'You like doing these, huh?'

'Yeah. It helps, you know... with my depression. I came in here with depression.'

'Imagine having depression when you were eleven years old,' Ebony says. 'If all my children were in this hall, this hall would be full up, I tell you.'

'You have kids?' I ask, keeping my voice down.

'I had thirteen miscarriages,' she says. 'Imagine that.' And she looks at me without any of the humor or attitude that she usually puts on, just with big wide eyes and empty questions.

'I'm so sorry,' I say.

'I know. I know you are. That's the thing.'

Ebony shuffles away showing off her portrait ('That's me! See? Me!') She doesn't leave a phone number. Humble is next.

'All right, boy, what kind of scam you got going on here?'

'It's nothing.' I start in on Humble's bald head. Bald heads are easy. You know, if I had to right now, I think I could handle the lower tip of Knox. I look at

Humble. He raises his eyebrows at me. 'Make me look good, all right?'

I laugh- inside Humble's head is industrial chaos.

I don't make any small blocks, just big ones-the kind of blocks where you'd find lumber shops and factories and bars where Humble would hang out at and work. I put the ocean in there, to represent his hometown, Bensonhurst, which borders the ocean, where he hooked up with all those girl's way back when. Then I splash it with highways, erasing the streets and putting them over the top, throwing in crazy interchanges for no reason, making the whole thing look violent and random, but also powerful and true-the kind of mind that could come up with some great stuff if you harnessed it right. When I'm done, I look up.

'I guess it's okay.' He shrugs.

I chuckle. 'Thanks, Humble.'

'I want you to remember me,' he says. 'No joke. When you're a big-time- artist or whatever, you got to invite me to one of the parties.'

'It's a deal,' I say. 'But how am I going to be in touch?'

'Oh, right-I got a number!' Humble says. 'I'm going to be staying in Seaside Paradise; it's the same home that Armelio is going to, but I'm going to be on a different floor.' He gives me the number; I put it on the same sheet as Armelio's.

'You're not going to be in touch,' Humble says.

'I will,' I say.

'No, you won't; I can tell. But it's okay. You have a lot going for you. Just don't burn out again.' We shake hands. Up next is

Joy. 'Hey, girl!'

'Don't you dare start calling me that. This is very nice of you to do.'

'Least I could do. They're all such cool kids.'

'You're like a celebrity now. Everyone wants to know if I'm your girlfriend.'

'And what do you tell them?'

''No!' And then I walk away.'

'Good call.'

'So-o- what are you trying to pull? You already made one of these for me. You just said it wasn't finished.'

I pull out the one I made for her, with the boy and girl connected by the bridge, and write my phone number on the back of it.

'Oh my gosh.'

'Now it's done.' I smile, standing up. I lean in and whisper: 'It took me like twice as long as any of the others. And I'll make you an even better one when I get out-'

She pushes me away. 'Yeah, like I want your stupid art.'

'You do.' I lean back. 'I saw how you looked at it before.'

'I'll keep it to make you feel good,' she says. 'That's it.'

'Fine.' She leans in and kisses my cheek. 'Thank you, for real.'

'You're welcome. Hey, what are you doing tonight?' 'Well... I thought I'd be hanging out in the psych hospital. What about you?'

'I've got big plans,' I say. 'We've got a movie coming in-'

'Right, I'm not seeing that stupid movie.'

'I know.' I drop to a whisper. 'But when it's halfway done, do you want to meet in my room?'

'You're kidding.'

'No. Seriously.'

'Your roommate will be there! He's always there!'

'Trust me. Come to the room.'

'Are you going to try and make out with me?'

'If you must know? Yes.'

'I appreciate your honesty. We'll see.'

I give her a hug; she holds the brain map with her hands wrapped around me. 'And I already have your number,' I say.

'You don't get any second chances if you lose it,' she says. 'I don't give that number out twice.'

I take a quick wanting look at her as we pull away from each other and she moves off to the side.

Joy is next.

'Who's that behind you?'

'Huh, who do you think?' Joy answers.

'Come on up together, boys. I'll do you both at once.' 'Cool,' Joy says, standing off to the side. Joy stands next to him and I start drawing them, their shaggy hair and baggy clothing making for great outlines.

'So-o- he's drawing us?' Joy asks Joy.

'Be quiet, all right?'

'Where did you boys hang out?' I ask Joy, not looking up from the paper. 'Back when you were garbage-heads?'

'What? You're going to draw that?'

'No.' I look up. 'I'm just curious. What neighborhood?'

'It was the Lower East Side, but don't draw the Lower East Side,' says Joy. 'I don't want to go back there.'

'All right, fair enough. Where do you want to live?' 'On the Upper East Side, with all the rich kids,' Joy answers.

'Huh, me too,' says Joy.

'Wait, no, you're getting a guitar,' I say.

'Oh, cool.'

I start on Joy's and Joy's brains. With Joy, it's fun to do a guitar in a street grid-some diagonal streets meeting for the body and then a big wide boulevard for the neck, a park for the head. Then I turn to Joy. I know the Upper East Side pretty well; it's in Knox and the big thing that it has is Central Park, so I draw that on the inside left of his head. Then I put in the stately grid of rich streets. I know the

Guggenheim Museum is somewhere up there; I mark that with an arrow and then I put an 'X' right next to it, on a corner where an apartment probably costs $20 million, and write Joy's pad. 'Joy's pad! That's right! That's where I'm headed.' He raises his arms. 'Moving on up.' 'Enjoy.' I hand them the piece.

'Who gets what?' Joy asks. 'You want us to rip it apart?'

'No, boy, we're supposed to keep it together because we're friends,' says Joy. 'I'll make a photocopy.'

'Where's the photocopy machine in here?'

'There isn't one! I'll do it when I get out.'

'Where's that going to leave me?'

'With a copy!'

'I don't want a copy!'

'Would you listen to this boy? Nothing's good enough for him-'

'Hey, Joy,' I interrupt. 'Anyway, I can get yours and Joy's phone numbers to talk to you after you leave?'

Joy starts to say something, but she leans in and stops him:

'It's not a good idea, Dariez.'

'What? Why?'

He sighs. 'I've been in and out of this place a lot, right?'

'Yeah.'

'There are good things about this place; I mean, the food is the best around; there are good kids here... but it's still not a place to meet kids.'

'Why not? I met you boys and you're really cool!' 'Yeah, well, all the worse, then, when you try to call me or team up and find out that we've OD'ed, or been shot, or come back here even worse, or just disappeared.'

'That's a pretty negative view.'

'I've seen it before. You just remember us, okay? We meet in the outside world; it just ruins it. You'll be embarrassed by me and me... 'He smiles. '... I might be embarrassed by me, too. And I might be embarrassed by you if you don't keep your stuff together.'

'Thanks. You sure no numbers?'

Joy shakes my hand. 'If we need to, we'll meet.'

Joy shakes my hand. 'What he said.' The last boy in line is My-a Joy.

'I tell you, what'd I say? You play those numbers-' 'It'll come to ya!' I answer.

'It the truth!' He grins.

Ah, My-a Joy. What's in My-a Joy's brain? Chaos. I do up his nearly bald head and shoulders and then start putting the most complicated, unnecessary, wild highways through him from ear to ear. I connect them in intricate spaghetti ramps. In one nexus, five highways meet; I have to erase and redraw the ramps a few times. Then I put in the grid-a grid laid out by a hyperactive designer, with blocks going in all different directions.

When My-a Joy's brain map is done it might look the best-a catalog of a schizophrenic mind, but one that works somehow.

'Here you go,' I tell him. He's sitting in a seat that he took next to me to watch me work.

'It'll come to ya!' he says and takes the map. I want him to finally open up, to call me Dariez, to tell me that we came in together, but he's still My-a Joy- his vocabulary is still limited.

We sit back in our respective chairs; I doze off a bit. Making art on devoid is tiring. But the last thing I see before I go to sleep is My-a Joy unfolding his brain map next to me and comparing with Ebony, who says, of course, hers is a lot prettier. That's not a bad thing to go to sleep to.

'Dariez, are you okay?' Mom asks. I jolt up and I have a momentary seizure that it was all a dream, all of it-the whole Sixth North bit-but then I wonder, where would the dream start? If it were a nightmare, it would have to have started somewhere before, I got bad; it would be like a yearlong dream. You don't have those. And if it were a good dream, that would mean I was still back where it started, leaning over my parents' toilet or lying in bed listening to my heart. I didn't need that. 'Yeah! I'm-whoa.' I sit up. They're all there- Dad, Mom, Sarah.

'Are you forcing yourself to sleep?' Mom asks. 'Are you depressed?'

'Are you on drugs?' Sarah asks. 'Can you hear me?'

'I was taking a nap! Jeez!'

'Oh, okay. It's at six o'clock.'

'Wow, I was asleep for a while. I was drawing my brain maps for kids.'

'Oh, boy,' says Dad. 'This doesn't sound good.' 'What are brain maps?' Sarah asks.

'That's her art,' says Mom. 'This is why he wants to change schools. Making this art makes you happy, right Dariez?'

'Yeah, want to see?'

'Absolutely.'

I take the stack from beside me and pass it around. This is really what I was creating the stack for, I think; to show my parents. 'Some of the best were the ones I just did, for the patients.' 'Very original,' Dad says.

'I like this one,' says Sarah, pointing at the pig with quasi- Pittsburgh inside him.

'You put a lot of time- into these, I see,' Mom says.

'Right, that's the thing: they don't actually take me much time-,' I explain. 'I'm starting to get a little bored of them, actually; I want to move to something else.' 'So how are you feeling, Dariez?' Dad puts the stack back on the floor.

'You look a lot better,' Mom says.

'I do?'

'Yeah,' Sarah says. 'You don't look all freaky as much.'

'I used to look freaky?'

'She doesn't mean freaky," Mom tells us both. 'She just means that when you were down, you looked a little under the weather.

Isn't that right, Sarah?'

'No, he looked freaky.'

'A flat affect, that's what the doctors call it.' I smile. 'Right, well you don't have that as much anymore,' Sarah says.

'So-o- you want to quit school?' Dad brings us back to the real deal stuff.

'I don't want to quit.' I turn to him. 'I want to transfer.'

'But that means quitting the school you're currently at-'

'He can't handle the other school!' Sarah says. 'Look at-'

'Hold on a second. I can talk,' I say. 'Boys.' I look at all three of them in turn. 'One thing that they do in here gives you a lot of time- to think. I can't explain it; once you come in, time- just slows down-'

'Well, you don't have any interruptions, that's probably it-'

'Also, I think the clocks are a little off-'

I wave my hand. 'Point is, you have time- to think about how you got here. Because obviously, nobody wants to come back. I don't want to coming back'

'Good. Me neither,' says Dad. 'What I said the last time-, about actually wanting to be here; that was a joke.'

'Right. Hey, did you bring the movie?'

'Of course. I can watch some of it with you, right?'

'Absolutely. So anyway, I've been thinking about when things started getting bad for me. I realized: it started after I got into high school.' 'Uh-huh,' Mom says.

'That was the happiest moment of my life. The happiest day. And from there on it was all downhill.' 'Right, this happens to a lot of adults,' Dad says. 'Will you stop interrupting him?' Sarah interrupts. Dad folds his hands behind him and straightens his back.

'It's okay, Sarah. I just... I think I was concentrated on getting into Executive Pre-Professional because it was like, a challenge. I wanted to have that feeling of triumph. I never really thought about the fact that I'd have to, you know, go to the school.'

'So, you want to do art,' Mom says.

'Well, let's consider. I never really liked math. I was good at it, but only because I liked having basic information in front of me to get through, to reach that feeling of accomplishment. I never really liked English. This'-I point at the brain maps-'this is something different. This is something I love. So, I'd better do it.' 'You'd better love it,' Dad says. 'Because it's a hard life. It's mostly the artists who end up in places like this.'

'Well, then he has to be an artist; that's where he is!' Sarah says.

'Heh. It's pretty simple.' I stand up. 'Take a look around. I tried to go to the best high school in the city.

And this is where I ended up.'

'True.' Mom looks behind her. Solomon rushes across our field of view.

'If I don't make some kind of big change, I'm going to come out of here wondering how anything is different from before, and I'm going to end up right back here.'

'Right,' says Mom. 'I'm with you, Dariez.'

'What art school are you going to go?' Dad asks. 'Knox

Arts Academy? It's easy to transfer to with my grades-'

'Oh, but Dariez, that's the school for kids who are all screwed up,' Dad says.

I look at him. 'Yeah? Dad?' I raise my wrist, show him the bracelets. I have pride in them now. They're true, and kids can't screw with them. And when you say the truth you get stronger.

Dad stands still for a minute, looks down at his feet, and then looks up. 'Okay,' he says. 'We'll do whatever we have to do.

You have to stay in school until you transfer, though.

That's going to be... until the end of the year at least, I think.'

'I'll handle it,' I say.

'I know you will. We'll help.'

'Dinner, get ready for dinner!' President Armelio walks toward us. 'Dariez and his family, dinner is almost here!'

'How've you been eating?' Mom asks as I stretch my legs.

'I have been. That's good.'

'It's wonderful, Dariez.'

'Okay, so I'm leaving the DVD here with you.' Dad hands it to me. 'And I'm going to be back to watch it when you're done with dinner. When will that be?'

'Seven is good. But visiting hours end at eight. You won't get to watch the whole thing.'

'We'll see how long I can stay. You might be surprised.'

I swallow. I actually don't want him sticking around that long.

I'll make sure Paullie gets him out.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' Mom says. 'The staff tells us we're picking you up early in the morning before I go to work.' 'I'll be ready.'

'We've got lots of good food at home.'

'I'll see you when I come home from school.' Sarah hugs my waist. 'I'm so happy you're back.' I pat her head. 'Are you embarrassed by this place?'

'Yeah, but whatever.'

'I am too,' I say. 'It's just a good type of embarrassment.'

Mom and Dad are dressed up to bring me out; I'm wearing what I wore all the time- in here- some khaki pants and my tie-dyed

T-shirt and my dress shoes, my Rockport's, the ones that kids complimented me on every so often, that made me feel like a professional patient. Mom never brought a change of clothes. They're here early because Dad has to work; he wanted to see me before he left. Mom is staying home today to see that I'm all right. Then, tomorrow, Friday, I'm back at school, but with the official notice that I can pop into the nurse's office at any time- if I feel depressed. I don't really have to go to class for the next week; that's school policy. I'm encouraged to go but they don't want to overwhelm me. It's a good deal.

It's 7:45 A.M. I've taken my last vitals-120 / 80- and I'm standing at the crux of the hall by the nurses 'office, looking at the double doors I came in five days ago. It seems like five days; it doesn't seem too long or too short; it seems like I spent the Bliss- here that I really spent. Kids are always talking about really- REALLY- shocking quotes, really- information, really- news-but in here I think I had really- REALLY-. Armelio shakes my hand a final time-.

'Good luck, buddy.'

Humble says I should stay for a little longer.

'You're going to lose it on the outside, boy.'

Joy mumbles at me. It's too early for him. The Professor tells me to keep doing my art.

Paullie says he heard from Neil that I was thinking of volunteering and he hopes to see me sometimes.

My-a Joy ignores me completely.

Ebony says to be careful of liars and cheats and to always respect children.

Joy pops out of her room at 7:50, just as breakfast is rolling in and my parents are stepping out of the nurses' office where they were signing papers. 'I'm out in the afternoon,' she says. She's

wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt. 'Call me tonight?' 'Sure.' I touch her number in my pocket, next to her two notes that I saved.

'How are you feeling?'

'I'm feeling like I can handle it.'

'Me too.'

'You're a really cool girl,' I say.

'Your kind of a dork, but with potential,' she says.

'That's all I'm trying for.' 'Dariez?' Mom asks.

'Oh, hey boys, ah, this is Joy. We got to be friends here.' 'I saw you last night,' Dad says, shaking her hand.

'A pleasure to meet you,' says Mom. Neither of them takes a second look at the cuts on her face. My parents have some class.

'Good to meet you too,' she says.

'Are you still in high school?' Dad asks.

'Delfin,' she says.

'A lot of pressure, huh,' says Mom.

'Yeah.'

'I think they might have to change the whole system. Look, two kids like you, smart young kids, sent in here because of pressure.'

'Mom.'

'I'm serious. I'm going to write my congressperson about it.' 'Mom.'

'I'll go,' Joy says. 'See you Dariez.' And she dips her leg up behind her as she turns away and flicks a wave at me-that counts as a kiss, I think. If my parents weren't there that would be a kiss.

'Are you ready?' Mom asks.

'Yeah. Bye, everybody!'

'Wait!' From down the hall, Joy moves forward as fast as he allows himself to, which isn't very fast, sort of like a speed walk, and hands me the record.

'Thank you, Dariez. This boy, your son,' he turns to my parents, 'he has helped me.'

'Thank you,' Mom and Dad say.

I hug Joy and take in his smell one last time-.

'Good luck, boy.'

'As you go through life, you think of me and hope that

I am better.'

'I will.'

We separate and Joy migrates toward the dining room and the smell of food.

I look at my parents. 'Let's go.'

It's incredibly simple. The nurses open the doors for us and there I am outside, looking at the 'Sh-h! Healing in Progress' poster I saw when I came in. The bank of elevators stands sentry in front of us.

'Girls,' I tell them. 'Can you go home yourselves, and I'll walk after you in like one minute?'

'Why? Are you okay?'

'I just want to walk by myself a little.'

'Think things over?'

Continued: 2

'Yeah.'

'You're not feeling... bad?'

'No. I just want to walk home myself.'

'We'll take your stuff.' They grab the bag of old clothes and art I had with me, plus the record; wave, and take the next elevator down.

I wait for thirty seconds before hitting the button myself.

I'm not better, you know. The weight hasn't left my head. I feel how easily I could fall back into it, lie down and not eat, waste my time- and curse wasting my Joy-, look at my homework and freak out and go and chill at Kristopher's, look at Emmah and be jealous again, take the subway home and hope that it has an accident, go and get my bike and head to the Kinzua Bridge. All of that is still there. The only thing is, it's not an option now. It's just... a possibility, like it's a possibility that I could turn to dust in the next instant and be disseminated throughout the universe as an omniscient consciousness. It's not a very likely possibility.

I get in the elevator. It's big and shiny. There's a lot to look at in the real world.

I don't know what I'm going to do today, still. I'm probably going to go home, sort through my art, and then call everybody I know and tell them that I'm going to be switching schools and from now on they should reach me by phone instead of e-mail.

But I also might go to the park-how come I never go to the park?

...And throw a ball around with whatever kids are out there. Or a Frisbee. It's a real day outside. There's actual weather out there.

I walk through the lobby. The smells! Coffee and muffins and flowers and scented candles from the gift shop. Why does UMPC Hospital have a gift shop? I guess everybody has to have a gift shop.

I step out onto the sidewalk.

I'm a free boy. Well, I'm a minor, but one-quarter of your life is spent as a minor; you might as well make the best of it. I'm a free minor.

I breathe. It's a spring day. The air is like a sheet billowing down on me in slow motion.

Try drawing a naked person. Try drawing Joy naked. Travel.

Fly. Swim. Meet. Love. Dance. Win. Smile. Laugh. Hold. Walk.

Skip. Okay, it's gay, whatever, skip.

Ski- Sled. Play basketball. Jog. Run. Run. Run. Run home.

Run home and enjoy it. Enjoy. Take these verbs and enjoy them.

They're yours, Dariez. You deserve them because you chose them.

You could have left them all behind, but you chose to stay here.

So now live for real, Dariez. Live. Live. Live. Live.

Live.

'What up, son? Did you get in?!'

'Yeah.'

'Allriiiight! '

'Hooooo-ee! '

'Biyatch!'

'That's right!'

'But you studied. I didn't study at all,' he was like.

'True. I should feel lucky to talk to you. You're kind of like Hercules.'

'Yeah, cleaning the stables. I'm having a party.'

'When? Tonight?'

'Yup. My parents are away. I have the whole house. You're coming, right?'

'A real party? Without a cake?'

'Absolutely.'

'Sure!' I was in eighth grade and I had gotten into high school and I was going to a party? I was set for life! 'Can you bring any booze?'

'Like drinks?'

'Dariez, come on. Yes. Can you bring?'

'I don't have ID.'

'Dariez, none of us have ID! I mean, can you take some off your parents?'

'I don't think they have any ...' But I knew that wasn't true.

'They have something.'

I held my hand over my cell, so Mom wouldn't hear.

'Scotch. They have a bottle of scotch.'

'What kind?'

'Jeez, dude, I don't know.'

'Well, bring it. Can you call any girls?'

I had been in my room studying for a year. 'No.'

'That's all right, I'll bring the girls. You want to at least help me set up?'

'Sure!'

'Get over here.'

'I'm going to Kristopher's house!' I announced to Mom, flipping my phone shut. I still had the welcome packet in my hand; I gave it to her to put in my room. 'What are you going to do over there?' she asked, beaming at the packet, then at me.

'Um... sleepover.'

'Are you going to celebrate? Because you should celebrate.'

'Heh. Yeah.'

'Dariez, I'm being honest, I've never seen someone work as hard as you did getting into this school. You deserve a little break and you deserve to feel proud of yourself. You're gifted, and the world is taking notice. This is the first step in an amazing journey-'

'Okay, Mom, please.' I hugged her.

I grabbed my coat and sat at the kitchen table, pretending to text on the phone. When Mom left the room, I invaded the cabinet above the sink, took out the one bottle of scotch (Glenlivet,) and fetched from the back of the cupboard the thermos that I used to use for grade-school lunches. That would seem really cool at the party. I poured some scotch in and I put a little water back in the scotch, in case they checked levels, and stuffed the thermos in my big jacket pocket before leaving the house and calling back to Mom that I would call her later.

I took the subway to Kristopher's without a book to study on my lap-first time- in a year. At his stop, I bounded up the stairs into the gray streets, slipped into his building, nodded to the doorman to call up, and squished my thumb on the elevator button, giving it a twist and some flair. On the sixteenth floor was Kristopher, holding his front door open, rap music about killing kids on in the background, holding his metal cigarette out for me.

'Smoke. Celebrate.' I stopped.

'If anything's the Joy of time-, it's now.' I nodded.

'Come in, I'll show you.' Kristopher brought me into his house and sat me on his couch and demonstrated how to hold the cigarette, so the metal wouldn't burn me. He explained how you have to take the smoke into your lungs, not your stomach- 'Don't swallow it, Dariez, that's how hits get lost'- and how to let it go as slowly as you could through your mouth or nose. The key was to hold it in as long as possible. But you didn't want to hold it too long.

Then you coughed.

'How do I light it?' I asked.

'I'll light it for you,' Kristopher was like. He knelt in front of me on the couch-I took a look at his living room, fenced in with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, filled up with a coffee table, a tall fluted ashtray, a porcelain dog, and a small electric piano- trying to remember how it all looked in case it changed later. The only thing I had done- that kids said was kind of like smoking pot was go- really hard

on the swings, and Kristopher had told me that anyone who said that was probably high when they were on the swings.

The butane flame went up.

I sucked in on the metal cigarette as if a doctor were telling me to.

My mouth filled up with the taste that I knew so well from Kristopher's room-a a chemical taste, buzzy and light. I looked him in the eyes with my cheeks puffed out. He clipped the flame, smiling.

'Not in your cheeks!' he said. 'You look like Dizzy Gillespie!

In your lungs! Put it in your lungs.'

I worked with new muscles. The smoke in me felt like a blob of clay.

'That's it, hold it, hold it...'

My eyes started watering, getting hot.

'Hold it. Hold it. You want more?'

I shook my head, terrified. Kristopher laughed.

'Okay. Dude, you're good. You're good, dude!' Pfffffflt. I blew it all in Kristopher's face.

'Jesus! Boy, that was big!' Kristopher swatted at the cloud that came out of me. 'You sure you haven't done this before?'

I panted, breathing in air that still had the smoke in it.

'What's going to happen?' I asked.

'Probably nothing.' Kristopher stood up, took his cigarette back, put it in the stand-up ashtray. Then he reached down with his hand out-I expected a handshake, but he pulled me off the couch.

'Congratulations.'

We hugged mouth to ear. It was a boy hug, complete with slapping. I leaned back and smiled at him as I clasped his arms.

'You too, boy. It's going to be great.'

'I'm-a tell you what's going to be great: this party,' Kristopher said, and he began pacing, counting on his fingers. 'I need for you to go and get some seltzer, for spritzers. Also, we got to put away all of my dad's books and writing so it doesn't get damaged. Also, call this girl; her dad threatened to call the cops if I called again; say you're with Greenpeace.'

'I'm not going to remember this; hold on,' I said, taking an index card from Kristopher's coffee table. I was numbering it with a Sharpie, from one, when the weed hit me.

'Whoa- Wow.'

'Uh-oh,' Kristopher said. He looked up.

'Whoa.' 'You are feeling it?'

Is my brain falling out of my head? I thought.

I looked down at the index card that said 1) get seltzer, and 1) get seltzer twisted back as if it had decided to fall off the card. I looked up at Kristopher's bookshelves and they looked the same, but as I turned, they moved in frames. It wasn't like the slowness that came from being underwater; it was like I was under air-thick and heavy air that had decided to follow me. For being high, it felt pretty heavy.

'You are feeling it?' Kristopher repeated.

I looked at his stand-up ashtray, filled with crumpled cigarettes and the one clear, shining metal cigarette.

'It's like the king of the cigarette butts!' I said.

'Oh, boy,' Kristopher was like. 'Dariez- are you going to be able to do the stuff for the party?'

Was I? I was able to do anything. Here I was making clever statements like 'king of the cigarette butts;' if I went outside, there was no telling what I would be capable of.

'What's first?' I asked.

Kristopher gave me a few bucks to get the seltzer, but just as I was opening the door to go out into the world, his buzzer rang.

'It's Emmah,' Kristopher said, leaping to the closed-circuit phone in his kitchen, which was full of grapefruits and dark wood cabinets.

'She's coming?' I asked.

Emmah was in our class; she was half Chinese and half Jewish; she dressed well. Every day she came in with something different-a chain of Sponge Bob Burger King toys strung around her neck; one asymmetrical, giant, red-plastic hoop earring; black clown circles on her cheeks. I think her accessories were a courtesy meant to distract from her small, lucrative body and baby-doll face. If she let it all go natural, if she just let her hair swing down the way it would have if she'd grown up in a field with the wind, she'd make all us boys explode.

'Emmah's pretty hot, huh,' Kristopher said, hanging up the phone.

'She's okay.'

We sat watching the door like we were waiting for the mama bird to bring us food. She knocked.

'Heyyyy,' Kristopher called, beating me.

'Hi!' I said. We rushed to the doorknob; Kristopher gave a look, pulled it toward him, and there she was in a green dress with a rainbow of fuzzy anklets on one leg. Her eyes were so big and dark that she seemed even more tiny and spindly, on high-heeled shoes that threw her forward at us and made her dress outline her little breasts.

'Boys,' she said. 'I think someone has been smoking pah-at.'

'No way,' Kristopher said.

'My friends are coming. When's the party starting?'

'Five minutes ago,' Kristopher said. 'You want to play Scrabble?'

'Scrabble!' Emmah put her bag down-it was shaped like a hippo. 'Who plays Scrabble?'

'Well, I do, duh, and Dariez does, too'-I didn't, actually-' and we're some smart boys, seeing as we got in.'

'I heard!' Emmah grabbed her hippo bag and hit Kristopher with it. 'I did too!' As an afterthought, she hit me.

'Congratulations!'

'Group hug!' Kristopher announced, and we got together, a tiered threesome -Emmah's head came up to my chin; my head came up to Kristopher's chin. I put my hand around Emmah's waist and felt her warmth and how narrow she was. Her palm curled around my shoulder. We pushed our torsos together in a sort of ballet. I could feel Emmah's breath between us. I turned to look -

'Scrabble,' Kristopher said. He went across the living room, took it out of one of the bookshelves. He put it on the floor and we sat, Kristopher between me and Emmah, the ashtray taking up the fourth spot.

'House rules,' Kristopher said as he flipped over the tiles. 'If you don't have any words to put on the board, you can make a word up, as long as you have an actual definition of that word in your head. If your definition makes the other kids laugh, you get the points, but otherwise, you lose that ~*Sped*~ points.'

'We can make up words?' I asked. This was brimming with possibilities. I could make up Emmahed-what happens when Emmah touches you, you get Emma had. That would make her laugh. Or not.

'What about Chinese words?' Emmah asked.

'You have to know what they mean and be able to explain them.'

'Oh. That shouldn't be a problem.' She smiled wickedly.

'Who's going first?'

'Can we smoke?'

'So, decoding.' Kristopher gave her the metal cigarettes -I said no this time-; I'd had enough.

For her first word, Emmah put down M-U-W-L-I.

'What is that?' I asked.

'Chinese word.'

'What's it mean?'

'Uh, cat.'

'That's ridiculous. How do we know if muwli is real?' I turned to Kristopher.

He shrugged. 'Benefit of the doubt?'

Emmah stuck out her tongue at me and damn it was a cute tongue. Is that a ring? I thought-can't be. Wait-it's gone.

'I swear.' she said. ''Come here, little mule!' See?' 'I'm checking you on your next one,' I said.

'The Internet's over there.' Kristopher was like.

'But while you're gone, we're going to give you all consonants.' Emmah smiled.

'Is it my go?' I put down M-O-P off M-U-W-L-I. Ten points.

Kristopher put down S-M-A-P off M-O-P. 'That's a cross between a smack and a slap. Like, 'I'm-a snap you.'' Emmah laughed and laughed. I chuckled even though I didn't want to.

Kristopher got the points. Emmah put down T-R-I-I-L.

'What is that?' I asked.

'It's a thrill, you know, like a trill on the flute, except the first L is lowercase and the second is uppercase!'

'That's not trilling, that's 'tree-eel'!'

'Okay, fine.' She switched the letters. Now it said T-RI-L-I.

'Trill-ee! What is tril-hee?'

'An unmentionable act.'

Kristopher laughed so hard that he just had to ease his body into Emmah's, leaning on her shoulder. She pushed back, tilting her flank into him.

I saw where this was going. I made eye contact with Emmah and here's what her eyes said:

Dariez, we're all headed to the same school. I'm going to need a boyfriend going in, to give me some stability, a little bit of backup, you know? Nothing serious. You're cool, but you're not as cool as Kristopher. He has a pot and he's so much more laid back than you; you spent the last year studying for this test; he didn't lift a finger for it. That means he's smarter than you. Not that you're not smart, but intelligence is very important in a boy- it really is the most important thing, up there with a sense of humor. And he has a better sense of humor than you, too. It doesn't hurt that he's taller. So, I'll be your friend, but right now let's let this develop. And don't be jealous.

That would be a waste of everybody's Joy-.

We kept playing. Kristopher and Emmah moved closer until their knees touched, and I could only imagine the energy that was going through those knees. I thought maybe they were going to lean in for a first kiss (or a second? No, Kristopher would have told me) right in front of me when the buzzer rang again.

It was Emmah's friend Cookie. She had brought bottles of beer.

We took ten minutes to open them, eventually hitting them against Kristopher's kitchen countertop edge, to work the tops off. Then Emmah said Cookie should've gotten twist-offs, and she asked what twist-offs were, and we all laughed. Cookie had blond hair and glitter all over her neck. She hadn't gotten into Executive Preprofessional, but that was okay because she was going to high school in Canada. The boy down at the local bodega let her buy beer if she leaned over the counter- she had developed early and had the kind of massive alluring breasts that moved in reverse rhythm when she walked.

We put Scrabble away-nobody won. The rap music seemed to be hooked up to some sort of Internet-capable playlist and kept going, never repeating, as more and more guests arrived. There was Anna-she was on Ritalin and snorted it off her little cosmetic mirror before tests; Paul-he was nationally ranked in Halo 2 and trained five hours a day with his 'team' in Seattle (he was going to put it on his college applications;) Mika-his dad was a higher-up in the Taxi and Limousine Commission and he had some sort of badge that allowed him to get free cab rides anywhere, anything-. Kids started showing up who I had no idea who they were, as a stocky white kid in an Eight Ball jacket- that would tell my future-

to anyone who looked at me, which he announced, coming in, was so popular back in the 1990's that you would get knifed just for having it and nobody had a vintage-like him.

Inexplicably, someone came in a Batboy mask. His name was Race.

A short, pugnacious, mustached kid named Richard came with a backpack full of pot and set up shop in the living room.

A girl with hemp bracelets in different subtle shades proclaimed that we had to listen to Sublime's 40 oz. to Freedom, and when Kristopher refused to put it on, she started gyrating and put what she claimed was a Devil curse on him, saying,

'Diablo Tantunka' and pointing her fingers in mock horns: 'Ffffffft!

Ffffffft!'

I smoked more pot. The party was like a movie- it should have been a movie. It was the best movie I'd ever seen- where else did you get shattering glasses, a kid trying to break-dance in the living room, a dictionary being thrown at a roach, a kid holding his head in the freezer and saying it could get you high, orange vomit spread out in a semicircle in the kitchen sink, kids yelling out the windows that 'school sucks,' rap music declaring 'I want to drink beers and smoke some shit,' and one poor soul snorting a Pixie Stik, then hacking purple dust into the toilet...? Nowhere.

I haven't cured anything, but something seismic is happening in me. I feel my body wrapped up and slapped on top of my spine. I feel the heart that beat early in the morning on Saturday and told me I didn't want to die. I feel the lungs that have been doing their work quietly inside the hospital. I feel the hands that can make art and touch girls-think of all the acquired you have. I feel the feet that can let me run anywhere I want, into to the park and out of it and down to my bike to go all over Knox and Knox too, once I convince my mom. I feel my stomach and liver and all that mushy stuff that's in there handling food, happy to be back in use. But most of all I feel my brain, up there taking in blood and looking out on the world and noticing humor and light and smells and dogs and every other thing in the world-everything in my life is all in my brain, really, so it would be natural that when my brain was screwed up, everything in my life would be.

I feel my brain on top of my spine and I feel it shift a little bit to the left.

That's it- It happens in my brain once the rest of my body has moved. I don't know where my brain went. It got knocked off-kilter somewhere. It got caught up in some crap it couldn't deal with. But now it's back- connected to my spine and ready to take charge.

Jeez, why was I trying to kill myself? It's a huge thing, this Shift, just as big as I imagined. My brain doesn't want to think anymore; all of a sudden it wants to do.

Run. Eat. Drink. Eat more. Don't throw up. Instead, take a piss. Then take a crap. Wipe your butt. Make a phone call. Open a door. Ride your bike. Ride in a car. Ride in a subway. Talk. Talk to kids. Read. Read maps. Make maps. Make art. Talk about your art. Sell your art. Take a test. Get into a school. Celebrate. Have a party. Write a thank-you note to someone. Hug from your mom. Kiss your dad.

Kiss your little sister. Make out with Joy. Make out with her more. Touch her. Hold her hand. Take her out somewhere. Meet her friends. Rundown a street with her. Take her on a picnic. Eat with her. See a movie with her. See a movie with Kristopher. Heck, see a movie with Emmah, once you're cool with her. Get cool with more kids. Drink coffee in little coffee-drinking places. Tell kids your story. Volunteer. Go back to Six North. Walk-in as a volunteer and say hi to everyone who waited on you as a patient. Help kids. Help kids like Joy. Get kids books and music that they want when they're in there. Help kids like Joy. Show them how to draw. Draw more.

Try drawing a landscape. Try drawing a person.

Blade II... well, you have to like action movies to like it. I myself am a big fan of action movies. They're like the blues; there's a certain formula. You have the hero and the villain and the girl. The hero is going to almost die but not quite, and if there's a dog it'll be the same story with him. There's going to be one sub-villain with a distinguishing facial characteristic, and he's going to get killed in a printing press or a pool.

The plot of Blade II is that Blade is a boy who runs around killing vampires. He wears a leather coat with a sword stuck in the back of it; he regularly just walks around with this thing. I guess it's possible like- that you could walk around a city with a sword and not have kids notice, but the chances of you not cutting your butt open seem close to nil, especially if you're running or doing jump flips.

Now, the real kicker is the way the vampires die. They digitally dissolve into multicolored ash - in slow motion. I could watch these vampires die all day. It's so clean the way they go; they don't leave a body or anything.

I explain all this to Humble as we help Monieec roll out the TV from the activity center and plug it in. Monieec has no idea how to use a DVD-the whole metal shiny disc concept scares her. We pop it in and have to hit the TV a few things to get it going, but then it's blasting into our eyes: Blade killing his first swath of vampires in Prague by skidding down fire escapes, jumping over motorcycles, and stabbing dudes with his sword.

The audience is a good cross-section of Six North- Humble, time, and Joy; the Professor; Ebony; the new boy Um- Being; Becca, and Dad. He came in right at seven and sat down in the corner, staying very quiet, blending in. My-a Joy came by as soon as he heard the noise of the film and took a seat beside him.

'Hello,' Dad said.

'Your son?' My-a Joy asked, pointing at me.

'Yes.'

'How sweet it is!'

Dad nodded and said, 'Yes, yes- it is.'

On the screen, Blade slices a vampire right through from his groin up to his skull.

'Whoa, this is wild,' says Humble. 'Did you see that?

That's worse than gonorrhea, boy.'

'Did you ever have gonorrhea?'

'Please. I've had everything. You know what they say: the Jews cut 'em off, the Irish wear 'em off.' 'Ewwww,' I say.

'You're Irish?' 'Half,' says Humble.

'Could you be quiet? I'm trying to watch the film,' the Professor says.

'Oh, don't start. You don't care about this movie; Cary Grant's not in it,' says Humble.

'Cary Grant was a real boy. Don't you say anything about him.'

'I can say whatever-'

'What's that boy doing?' Joy asks.

'He's sucking that girl's blood, can't you see?'

'I thought she was a vampire, though.'

'So? Vampires have blood.' 'Vampires ain't got no blood,' says Um- Being. 'Vampires ain't got nothing but green running in their veins, and green means money.'

'You don't know what you're talking about,' Humble says. 'If you drink blood, how are you not going to have blood?'

'I met a lotta vampire in my TIME-, and their blood was always green. Been sucking me dry in their little temples.'

'What temples?' Becca asks. 'I go to the temple. You better not be talking about the Jewish kids.'

'I'm Jewish too,' says the Professor. 'That's why they tried to insecticide my house.'

Joy walks toward the TV from down the hall, wearing a long black skirt and a white top with little frills around the shoulders, locking eyes with me. I look around; no seat for her.

Dad notices as soon as she becomes visible. He leans over and gives me a look:

So, is this why you've been feeling better, son?

I shrug.

She comes up to me. 'There's nowhere to sit.' 'Here!' I stand up and point at my armrest. She sits down right in the middle of the chair. 'Ooh, you warmed it! Thank you.'

'No, I meant-where am I going to sit?' She pats the armrest.

'Darn, girl.'

I sit down, and we watch Blade slice up some more vampires. Topics discussed among the audience include surgery, the moon, chicken, prostitution, and jobs in the Sanitation Department. Dad leans back and lets his eyes fall; I had a feeling that would happen.

As soon as I see him breathing heavy and steady, I get up, go to Paullie, and I tell him that it's after eight o'clock.

'You want me to kick out your own Dad?' He asks.

'I need to be independent,' I say. 'All right.' Paullie walks down the hall with me. 'Mr. Gilner- I'm sorry; visiting hours are over.'

'Oh, hm!' He gets up. 'Right. So, Dariez, you'll bring this back tomorrow?'

'Yeah,' I tell him. 'Thanks.'

'Thank you for getting here and getting help.' He hugs me. Paullie backs away. It's a big hug, and long, and right in front of the television, but no one says anything.

'I love you,' I mumble. 'Even though I'm a teenager and I'm not supposed to.'

'I love you too,' Dad says. 'Even though ... eh... No- I don't have any jokes about it. I just do.'

We separate and shake hands and he makes his way down the hall, waving without looking back.

'Good-bye Mister Gilner!' a chorus of those paying attention calls out.

I dip down next to Joy, whisper in her ear. 'That's one; I got to settle one more thing, and then I'll see you in my room.'

'Okay.'

I walk down the hall and pop into my room, where Joy is putting his distinctive shape in the bed, turned toward the window, in his continuous dead reverie.

'Joy?'

'Yes.'

'You remember how you wanted Italian music?'

'Yes, Dariez.'

'I got some for you.'

'You did?' He pulls his top sheet aside. 'Where?'

'I got a record over,' I say. 'You know we're watching a movie, right?'

'Yes, I hear. This sounds very violent, no good for me.'

'Right, well, in the other hall, by where the smoking area is, I asked Paullie to put the Italian music.'

'And he did this thing?'

'It's ready to go on right now. You want to hear?' 'Yes.' Joy pushes the sheets aside in a gesture of hope and strength and determination. It's tough to get out of bed; I know that myself. You can lie there for an hour and a half without thinking anything, just worrying about what the day holds and knowing that you won't be able to deal with it. And Joy did that for years. He did that until he needed to be hospitalized. And now he's getting up.

Not for good, but for real.

I walk with him out of the room, passing Paullie at the nurses' station and nodding at him. He opens a door behind his desk and goes in to turn on the turntables, changing the PA music from the normal funky lite FM to the sounds of deep plucked strings, and rolling over it, a voice of dangerous clarity and yearning, hitting three ascending notes and then bending one beyond where I thought you couldn't bend an Um- voice, sounding like a boy drawn out and smacked to vibrate around a little.

'Umm Kulthum!' Joy says.

'Yeah! Uh... Who's that?'

'This is Italy's greatest singer!' he yells. 'How you find this?'

'I have a friend whose dad has some records.'

'This I have not heard in so long!' He's grinning so much I think his glasses are going to fall off.

Armelio is playing solitaire in the back of the hall, by the smoking lounge. 'You're out of your room, buddy? What's going on? Is there a fire?'

'This music!' Joy points up to it. 'This is Italian!'

'You Italian, buddy?'

'Yes.'

'I'm from Greece.'

'The Greeks, they took all our music.'

'This?' Armelio looks up. 'This ain't nothing like Greek music, buddy.'

'You want to sit, Joy?' I ask him. He looks around, then up at the music.

'The best seat will be over here, right by the speaker.' 'Yes,' he says, and sits down.

'I don't like this,' Armelio looks up.

'What kind of music do you like, Armelio?' I ask.

'Techno.'

'Just... techno?'

'Yeah. Utz-utz-utz-utz. Like that.'

'Heh heh.' Joy laughs. 'The Greek boy is funny.'

'Of course, I'm funny, buddy! I'm always funny! You just don't leave your room. You want to play cards?' Joy starts to leave; I stand over him and hold my hands out. 'Wait one second, boy. I know you can't play cards for money, but Armelio doesn't play for money.'

'This I know; I do not want to play.'

'Are you sure? He's got no one else to play with.' 'That's right. My friends are all watching this stupid movie. Do you want to play spades? I'll crush you in spades.'

'Joy,' I say. He's still looking up at me, hands on his armrests, ready to spring. 'Remember when you saved me from that girl?'

'Yes.'

'I'm trying to do the same thing for you now, to get you out of your room and save you. Please. Play with

Armelio.'

He looks at me, then at the speakers.

'This I do for you, Dariez. But only for you. And only because of music.'

'Great.' I pat his back. 'Go easy on him, Armelio.'

'You know that's not going to happen, buddy!' I smile and walk down the hall, waving at them. As soon as I get to the corner, I run- I don't have much Joy at the moment of the time- but skid to a leisurely pace by Paullie and then, moving as slowly and calmly as I can, enter my room. Joy picked up on what was happening: she's already there, sitting on my bed, looking out the window.

'You're very crafty,' she whispers. I shrug. 'Come and sit. It's a pretty view through your blinds.'

I sit down next to Joy and it starts off right away, like it was destined to-though I don't believe in destiny; I just believe in biology, and hotness, and wanting girls. There's been so much hesitation in so boy-y parts of my life that it's shocking to not have any here, to just lean in and have this girl's mouth open to mine, to be easing her down and touching her face and feeling the cuts there but understanding, not getting freaked out, just moving my hands down to her neck, which is clean and smooth, and her hitting my pillow and me next to her with my legs off the bed, still on the floor like I was sitting in class like my lower half had no part in this. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.

'You're beautiful,' I stop and tell her.

'Shh, they'll hear.'

She has her hand in my hair and that reminds me that my hands should be doing something right now they're just sort of touching her neck while I try and figure out what it is about her that's so

much sexier than Emmah. It's her tongue, I think it's a whole different creature than Emmah's. Emmah's was small and flighty; Joy's is overwhelming-she slides it in and it almost fills me up. It's like some deep dark part of her that I've gotten out, that no one else has access to. She presses it through my teeth and I keep my eyes open, although there's nothing in the room but scattered moonlight to see her by. We press against each other as if we both had prizes at the back of our mouths and we could only get them out with the tips of our tongues.

It frickin' rocks.

I put my hands on her white top and she doesn't stop me, not at all, and there they are, right through the soft fabric-one on each side, that is so cool- my palms envelop them and then rise from them and then envelop again. I'm not really sure what to do with them. They're bigger than Emmah's; they fill up my hands. Should I squeeze them? I try that. I look up. She's nodding. I squeeze them again, the whole thing, both at once and move my mouth down her chin to her neck, kissing the underside of it where Adam's apple would be, only this is a real girl.

She moves her hips against me. Not her hips, her crotch-I mean, that is a crutch, right? Girls have crotches...? Or do they have like a prettier name for them? Wow, how far is this going to go?

She presses it- whatever it is against my thigh. My feet have levitated somehow and now I'm horizontal on the bed next to her, with my hands squeezing her and my shoes-my Rockport shoes clanking against each other.

She says nothing. Everything is touching.

'Do you want me to?' I ask.

She nods. Or maybe shakes her head. I don't know. But I take two fingers of my right hand and put them through the soft seam in her top. Underneath is a bra, I'm pretty sure something made of mesh that wraps around her. I twiddle my finger against it, not sure if she can feel it. Can you feel things through a bra?

She makes noises like someone about to sneeze. When I squeeze her breasts, she makes more; when I twiddle the side of the bra, she doesn't make any. So, I put my fingers in all the way through her shirt and feel up the dome of the bra-the highest point on her.

An inch and a half above sea level.

'Hold on.' Joy lifts her butt off the bed and inserts her hands, flat, palms-down, below herself. Now she's got no hands. She wasn't doing anything with them anyway, but it's weird. 'Keep going,' she says.

'Okay,' I slide my fingers, still outside her bra, around her nipple. I decided to try something. I get the nipple right between the knuckles on my index and middle finger, and I squeeze.

You can't get much of a squeeze on through a bra, but the noises are immediate.

'Un-hh.'

'Um?' I look up.

'Mm-Mmmmm.'

Oh, this is awesome.

'Sh-h,' I whisper. 'Paullie will come.'

'How much Joy- do we have?' She asks.

'I don't know. A little while.'

'You're going to call me, right? When you're out? And we're going to hang out?'

'I want to go out with you,' I say. 'I really do.'

'That's what I mean. We will.' She smiles. 'Where will I tell kids, I met you?'

'In the psych hospital. Then they won't ask any questions.'

She giggles-yup, a real giggle. Now we've sort of lost the sexual nature of things. Can I get it back just by squeezing? It's worth a shot.

'Mm-mmm.'

All right, cool, only now there's one more voice that wants me to do one more thing. It's the same voice that got me hooking up with Emmah; it's the voice of the lower half of me, but it feels truer now, and it knows it can't get away with everything it wants to do, but it insists that we try something.

We need to test out that claim of Kristopher's.

My hand moves down the real Joy's body, down the seam of the frilly white shirt to the skirt, which has a slightly different grain to the fabric. I move down to its end, by her knees, shocked that I don't get any resistance or hesitancy or punches in the face. I roll the skirt up - I'm really in danger of putting a hole through this bed at this point and there I find underwear. Not underwear. Panties.

Real panties!

Holy crap, I'm actually going to figure this out!

'Wow!'

Joy gasps.

'It is like the inside of a cheek!'

'What?'

Joy pushes me off her. The distended seam of the shirt is repositioned; the panties are jerked back in place; the skirt is down and the girl is up at the head of the bed, staring at me.

'What did you say about my cheeks?'

'No, no, sh-h-h-h-h,' I tell her. 'Not your cheeks, um... you're... your other cheeks.'

'My butt cheeks?' She pulls her hair over her real cheeks, holding it there, eyes wide and angry in the moonlight.

'No,' I whisper. Then sigh. 'Let me explain. Do you want me to explain?'

'Yes!'

'All right, but this is like privileged boy information. I'm only telling you because we're going to be hanging out when we get out of here.'

'Maybe we're not even. What did you say about my cheeks?'

'No, listen, it doesn't have anything to do with your cheeks and your cuts, all right?'

'What does it have to do with?'

I tell her.

When I'm done, there's a terrible pregnant pause, a pause that could hold all the hatred and yelling and screaming in the world as well as the possibility of me getting discovered as having another girl in my room (how did I get two? Am I a 'player'?) and having to stay here for another week, never talking to Joy again, going back to the

Cycling, to being unable to eat, to move, to wake up, ending up like Joy or a Joy- or not remember being joy or thinking you are one. Single moments contain the potential for a complete failure, always. But they also contain the potential for a pretty girl to say-

'That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard.'

-And-

To put her own finger in her mouth to test it out.

I hug her.

'What?' she asks, mouth clogged. 'I don't get it. It doesn't feel the same at all.'

I pull back. 'You're so cool.' I look at her. 'How did you get so cool?'

'Please,' she says. 'We should go. The movie's almost over.'

I hug her one more time and pull her down to the bed. And in my mind, I rise up from the bed and look down on us, and look down at everybody else in this hospital who might have the good fortune of holding a pretty girl right now, and then at the entire Knox block, and then the neighborhood, and then Knox, and then Clarion's Counties, and then the whole Tri-State Area, and then this little corner of America-with laser eyes I can see into every house-and then the whole country and the hemisphere and now the whole stupid world, everyone in every bed, couch, futon, chair, hammock, love seat, and tent, everyone kissing or touching each other... and I know that I'm the happiest of all of them.

Kristopher and Emmah talked on the couch. I took my thermos of scotch-just to have something in my hand; I didn't open it-and watched how they moved, swaying toward and away from each other in increments that I doubt they even recognized. They stopped becoming kids in my eyes; they morphed right into male and female sex organs on a collision course.

'What's going on, son?' Richard asked. Richard hadn't gotten his first piece of jewelry yet; he was in like a larval state. 'You enjoying yourself?'

I was enjoying everything but Kristopher and Emmah. And the scotch. I wanted him to think I was enjoying the scotch, at least.

'Do you like this stuff?' I asked, opening my thermos.

'What is it?' He sniffed. 'Yeah, dude, that's hardcore. You gotta sip it.'

I put it to my lips. I didn't even take any in, just let it filter against me and felt how hot it was. It was cutting evil, and bitter smelling-

Richard shoved the thermos at my mouth.

'Sip it!'

'Dude!' I backed off as scotch splashed on my shirt; it felt lighter, slicker, and warmer than water. 'You're such a dick!' 'Pause!' He ran across the room and punched this kid Asen, told him he'd had sex with his mom, and threw a pillow at Kristopher and Emmah, who were now attached by the lips on the couch.

I wasn't that mad that it was happening. I was just mad that I'd missed how it happened. I hadn't seen him lean in, or her; I wanted to know for the future, for some girl who wasn't as desirable. But now at least I got a show; I got to see how Kristopher moved his hands. He put his right hand on her face over and over, gently, while his left slid around her side and gripped the small of her back more firmly. His hands were playing good-cop-bad-cop.

There was still some scotch in the thermos. I drank from it.

The taste didn't bother me since Richard's shove.

'I didn't know you drank, Dariez!' a voice was like behind me. Julie, who always wore sweatpants that said Nice Try in an arc on her butt cheeks, clanked a beer against my thermos.

'I don't, really,' I was like.

'I thought you'd be busy studying. I heard you got into school. What are you going to do now?'

'Go there.'

'No, I mean with you, Joy.'

I shrugged. 'I'll work hard at school, get good grades, go to a good college, get a good job.'

'It was crazy how much you studied. You always had those cards.'

I looked at the scotch. My esophagus was scorched, but I took more.

'Did you see Kristopher and Emmah making out? They're so cute!'

'They're making out?' I was shocked.

'Yeah, haven't you seen?'

'I saw them hooking up,' I explained, looking out the kitchen at them. 'I didn't think they were having sex.'

'They're not!'

'I thought making out was having sex.'

'Jeez, Dariez, no. Making out is making out.'

'Is that the same as hooking up?'

'Well, hooking up can mean having sex. You got confused.'

Kristopher and Emmah were fully occupied now. One of his hands was hidden, exploring magical beige places.

'You should put it on one of your cards.' 'Heh.' I smiled.

Julie took a step toward me. 'I really want to make out with somebody right now.'

'Oh, cool.'

'I've been looking and looking for someone.' 'Um...' I eyed her. Her short blond hair framed a face that was a little wide at the bottom, and toothy, and somewhat red all around. I didn't want to hook up with her or make out with her or whatever. The person I wanted was ten feet away. This would be my first kiss if she were offering me. Girls loved to say that they wanted to hook up with 'someone' when it was anyone but you. Julie tilted her head up, though, with her eyes closed. I looked at her lips,

trying to make myself kiss them, but stopped. For my first kiss, I didn't want to settle. Julie opened her eyes.

'Are you okay, boy?'

'Yeah, yeah, I just...' Whew- I'm drunk and stoned, Julie. Give me a break. 'It's okay.' She left the room, and soon after, the party. I had hurt her feelings, I found out later; I didn't know I had that power.

I wandered over to the laptop that was supplying the music to the stereo. Next to it was Kristopher's father's record collection, shelved in the bookshelf, of old vinyl records. I suddenly needed some discrete information to put in my brain, to push out what was there, so I pulled a record out. Led Zeppelin III.

It was big-as big as the laptop-and the cover was a spiral of images: male heads with lots of hair, rainbows, blimps (I guessed those were the Zeppelins,) flowers, teeth. The edge of the record stuck out a bit, like a tab on a five-subject notebook, and I grabbed it experimentally. It turned, and when it turned, the whole circle turned inside, and the images that showed through the little holes changed: rainbows into stars, blimps into planes, flowers into dragonflies. It was freacking awesome. One of the symbols that popped up looked just like the levels of Q-Bert, one of the best old video games-I didn't realize Led Zeppelin had invented Q-Bert!

I looked up-Kristopher and Emmah was still at it. Now he had his hand in her hair and he was pulling her toward him like a gas mask. I held the album up to hide their heads. Heh.

I dropped the album. Kristopher and Emmah. I held it up.

More images. It was like they were part of it.

The house filled up. Kids began getting in line to go into one of Kristopher's book-filled closets. They weren't making out or anything-a kid named John had announced that he had sprayed pepper spray in there and kids were going in to see if they could handle it.

Boys and a few girls stumbled outgoing 'Aggg, my eyes!' and tearing, and running for water, but that didn't stop the ones lined up after them. It seemed like everyone at the party went except me.

I looked at more albums, like the Beatles' White Album, which I never knew was actually white, and each time- I looked up, Kristopher and Emmah were in a deeper state of entanglement. Suddenly I got really sleepy and warm, from the scotch I guess, and leaned against the album stack, just trying to rest my eyes for a minute. When I woke up, I looked instinctively for Kristopher and Emmah; they had disappeared. I craned from behind my resting spot and looked at the clock above the TV; somehow it was 2:07 A.M. The house had thinned out.

Jeez. I got up. The laptop playlist had stopped. My night was over. All I had done was look at records and almost hook up with a girl, but somehow, I felt accomplished.

'Uh, Richard?' I asked.

Richard was playing PlayStation on Kristopher's couch. The PlayStation cord stretched across the room. He looked up.

'What?'

'Where is everybody?'

'Having sex with your mom.'

Next, to Richard, a girl named Donna was balled up in a lump on one end of the couch. The boy with the Eight Ball jacket occupied a chair. Someone yelled to put on more music; Richard yelled to Shut up, son. The house was full of cups-mugs and glasses everywhere like they had been multiplying during the party.

'Does anyone know where Kristopher is?'

'Pause,' was all Richard could voyage.

'Kristopher!'

'Shut up, boy! He's with his chick.'

'I'm here, I'm here!' Kristopher strode out from his room, adjusting his pants. 'Jeez.' He surveyed the damage. 'What's up? You have a good rest?'

'Shoot, yeah. Where's Emmah?'

'Asleep.'

'You did her good, huh?' Richard asked. 'Asian invasion.'

'Shut up, Richard.'

'Asian contagion.'

'Shut up.'

'Asian persuasion.'

Kristopher yanked his controller out of the PlayStation.

'Suh-uhn!' Richard scrambled for it.

'You want to go for a walk?' Kristopher asked.

'Sure!' I got my jacket.

Kristopher woke up Eight Ball jacket and Donna and got them out; he forced Richard to leave too, over ~*Sped*~ protests. We all took the elevator down; Eight-Ball jacket and Richard went uptown; Donna and two others slid into a cab; me and Kristopher, instinctively, started toward the shimmering Kinzua Bridge, which carved its way through the night about three blocks from his house.

'You want to walk across the bridge?' Kristopher asked.

'Into Knox?'

'Yeah. You can go home or we can take the subway back to my place.' 'When will it be light?'

'In three, four hours.'

'Let's do it. I'll walk home and get breakfast.'

'Cool.'

We walked in step. My feet weren't cold at all. My head swam. I looked at bare trees and thought they were beautiful. The only way it could have been better was if it were snowing. Then I'd have flakes dripping down on me and I'd be able to catch them in my mouth. I wouldn't be worried about Kristopher seeing that.

'So, how do you feel?' I was like.

'About what?' He was like.

'You know,' I was like.

'Hold on a second.' Kristopher spotted a Snapple bottle on the curb; it looked like it was filled with urine, which happens a lot in Knox-I don't know why but homeless kids fill up bottles with piss and they don't even have the courtesy to throw them away but then again it could be apple Snapple-did they have that? He lunged at it and sent it sailing across the street with a three-point kick; it landed on the opposite curb and shattered yellow under the streetlight.

'Rough!' Kristopher screamed. Then he looked around.

'There aren't any cops, right?'

I laughed. 'No.' We came to the entrance to the bridge. 'So seriously, what was it like?'

'She's awesome. I mean, she likes everything- she really likes it. She likes... sex.'

'You had sex with her?'

'No, but I can tell. She likes everything else.'

'What'd you do?' He told me.

'No way!' I pushed him as we climbed the bridge. Air from the frigid Knox Waterfront blew at us, and I put my hood up over my head and tightened the chewed cord. 'What was it like?'

'It's the craziest thing,' Kristopher was like. 'It feels just like the inside of your cheek.'

'No kidding?' I pulled one hand out of my pocket. 'Yeah.'

I stuck a finger in my mouth and pushed to the side.

'That's it?'

'Just like that,' Kristopher said. He had his finger in his cheek too. 'I'm serious. It's hot.'

'Huh.'

We walked in silence with our fingers in our mouths.

'Did you hook up with anyone?' he asked.

'Nope. Julie wanted to, though.'

'Nice one. Did she slip you something?'

'What? No.'

'Because you crashed out pretty hard in the corner over there.'

'I was drinking my mom's scotch and checking out your dad's albums.' 'You're a trip, Dariez.'

'It's cold out here.'

'Looks pretty cool, though.'

We weren't even a tenth of the way up the bridge, but it did look cool. Behind us, the walkway extended to City Hall, where the city had sprung for some spotlights to illuminate the dome of the building. It looked like a white pearl nestled between giants like the Woolworth building, which I learned in English class Ayn Rand had described as a 'finger of God,' and that was about right-green and white at the top like the world's most decorated mint. To our left were the other bridges of Knox, arrayed against each other like alternating sin and cos waves, carrying a smattering of late-night trucks whose tops trailed mist.

But to the right was the best view: New York harbor, in a painting. Mostly black before freedom was just that. The Statue of Liberty was lit up with its older torch, but it always struck me as a little cheesy- to think this is what freedom is, standing out there being all cute. The real action was on the sides: Knox had its no-nonsense downtown, where kids made money, and on the other side was Knox, sleepy and dark but with a trump card-the container cranes, lit up not for show or government pride but because there was work going on, even at this hour-ships unloading stuff that was famously unchecked for terrorist threats but somehow hadn't blown us up yet. Knox was a port. Kn ox was a port. We got things done. I had gotten things done, too.

Between Knox and Hollidaysburg, miles across the water, we saw the final curtain of Clarion-the Kinzua Bridge Bridge. It spanned the opening to the port, a steel-blue pair of upper lips greeting the blackness.

I could do anything anywhere, in all four directions.

'Dariez?' Kristopher was like.

'What's up.'

'What's up with you? You okay?' 'I'm happy,' I said.

'Why not?'

'No, I said I'm happy'

'I know. Why not be?'

We came up to the first tower of the bridge, with a plaque proclaiming who had built it; I stopped to read. John Roebling.

Aided by his wife, and then his son. He died during construction. But hey, the Kinzua Bridge might be here for eight hundred years. I wanted to leave something like that behind. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I felt like I had taken the first steps. 'The really cool thing about Emmah...' Kristopher was saying, and he started to go into anatomical details, things about her that I didn't need to hear; I tuned him out; I knew he was talking to himself.

This was what he was happy about. I was happy about different stuff. I was happy because - someday I'd be walking across this bridge looking at this city, owning some piece of it, being valuable here.

'Her butt is like-I think her butt shape is where they got the heart logo....'

We came to the middle of the bridge. On either side of us the cars hissed past; red on the left and white on the right, the lanes encased by thin metal trussing that stretched out from the walkway.

I had a sudden urge to walk out over the trussing and lean over the water, to declare myself to the world.

Once it came into my head, I couldn't push it away. 'I don't know if it was real-' Kristopher was saying.

'I want to stand out over the water,' I told him.

'What?'

'Come with me. You want to do it?' He stopped.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, I see where you're coming from.'

There were pathways built onto the top of the trussing, places for the bridge workers to get out to the cables and repair them. I clambered onto one on the waterfront side, the side crowned by the Kinzua Bridge, and grabbed the handrails and balanced my feet one in front of the other on a piece of metal about four inches wide. Below me, cabs and SUVs are hummed by. In front of me was the black of the water and the black of the sky and the cold.

'You're crazy,' Kristopher said.

I took steps forward. It was easy. Stuff like this always is. The stuff adults tell you not to do is the easiest.

Below me there were three lanes of traffic; I cleared the first, got halfway over the second; then Kristopher yelled: 'What are you going to do out there!'

'I'm just going to think!' I called back.

'About what?'

I shook my head. I couldn't explain. 'It'll only take a minute!'

Kristopher turned back.

I moved past the second lane and kept my eyes on the horizon. I didn't move my eyes from it for the last lane, shifting my hands in front of one another in a tight rhythm. I came to the edge of the bridge and was sort of surprised how there wasn't any fence. There wasn't anything to keep you from falling off, just your hands and your will. I gripped the bars at either side-they were freezing and then sprung my hands open and spread my arms wide and felt the wind whip and tug at me as I leaned myself over the water like... well, like Christ, I guess.

I closed my eyes and opened them, and the only difference was the feel of the wind on my eyeballs because when I closed them, I could still see the dotted lights perfectly. I threw back my head

and yelled. When I was a kid, I read these books, the Redwall books, fantasy books about a bunch of warrior mice, and the mice had this war cry that I always thought was cool:

'Eulalia.'

And like an idiot, that's what I yelled off the Kinzua Bridge:

Eulaliaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

And I could have died right then.

And considering how things went, I really should have.

Part: 17

Depression starts slow. After howling off the Kinzua Bridge, I walked home and felt great. Kristopher split and took a late-night subway back to Knox, where he had a hell of a time - cleaning up his apartment and returning Emmah to her parents; I went to a dinner and got some eggs and wheat toast and came home at ten in the morning, telling Mom I had slept over at Kristopher's, and pouring myself into bed. When I got up in the afternoon there were some forms to sign about accepting my admission to Executive Pre-Professional and a physical to schedule - how glorious. For once I was looking forward to the doctor holding my balls and telling me to cough, which I still don't understand why they do.

The rest of the junior high was a joke. I didn't need to do anything except make sure I didn't fail a class and get 'rescinded' from Executive Pre-Professional, so I started hanging out with Kristopher every day. Now that we had the pot barrier broken, it became a magnificent haze of yelling back at the TV; we stopped calling it 'watching movies;' we started calling it 'chilling.' 'Want to chill?' Kristopher would ask, and I would pop on over.

Richard was never far behind. His insults never stopped, although they became more lovable, but - that didn't matter, because he grew into a reliable dealer. He wasn't going to high school with us - for all we knew, he wasn't going at all -, but he was going to set up a jewelry shop, sell drugs, and make beats, that was for sure.

Emmah was always around, too. She and Kristopher spent about as much time - apart from as me and my right hand. I thought I was cool with it, but as I saw them - sitting with each other, sitting on each other, hugging each other, touching each other's butt, smiling and kissing, in Kristopher's room or

in public- I started to get more and more pissed off. It was like they were throwing it in my face, although I knew neither of them meant that, the way I had thrown my studying in kids' faces and not meant it. Why else would they tell each other how much they wanted each other in whispers in front of me? Why else would Kristopher tell me, in great detail, about the first time - they had sex? One-day Kristopher announced to me and Richard as we watched MTV, 'You know what, since I got with Emmah, I've forgotten how to masturbate.'

'Me too, since I found your mom,' Richard said.

'Huh,' I said. My stomach hitched.

'I'm serious, I don't even know, anymore!' Kristopher grinned.

Great, boy. Wonderful. I learned how to masturbate the last few months of junior high when I went on AOL and started talking to girls with names like 'Little Luscious Lolita42.' I don't know if they were real girls. I just knew that I was lonely, and I wanted to make it so that when I got with someone, I'd have some idea what to do.

Problem was, no matter what girl I was talking to online when I came to the end of the whole process, I would run to the bathroom. And as I knelt down in front of the toilet, in the final few milliseconds, I would think about Emmah.

I had homework for school even before school started. They gave me this insane reading list for the summer that included Under the Volcano and David Copperfield. I tried to read them; I really did, but it wasn't like flashcards. It took days. Mom actually read the letters that the school sent and told me that part of their mission was to make us well-rounded, liberally educated bearers of tomorrow's vision, so I had better be ready to do English as well as math, but I found myself jealous of the kids who wrote the books. They were dead, and they were still taking up my Joy-. Who did they think they were? I would much rather chill at Kristopher's, sit in my room, run to the Internet and then to the bathroom, rinse, cycle, repeat. I ended up not finishing any of the summer-reading list books.

That wasn't good when it came TIME- to start school. The first day, I was quizzed on what I was supposed to have read over the summer. I got a 70, something I'd never seen on a sheet of paper in my life. Where do you see the number 70? There are no $70 bills; there's no reason to get a $70 check. I looked at the 70 as if it had stolen from me.

Kristopher, who ended up in eight out of my nine classes, got a 100 on the start-of-school reading quiz. He had read the books in Europe, where he got to go over the summer because his dad's books were popular there. He came back not just tan and full of knowledge and pictures, but ripe with stories of the European girls, he had hooked up with. He said he and Emmah had talked and she was totally cool with the other girls; he said he was busy turning her into a freak, someone who would be down for anything. When we hung out now, I didn't say half as much as I did that first night; I just listened and stayed impressed, tried to control my lower half while Emmah was there, pictured her in different freeze-frames for later in the evening.

Executive Pre-Professional High School was hard.

The teachers all told me I was going to have four hours of homework a night, but I didn't believe it- plus I believed I could handle it. I had gotten into the school; I'd definitely be able to take anything it could dish out, right?

In the first semester, in addition to the book list, I had this class called Intro to 17st Street that required me to pick up the Knox Times and 17st Street Journal every day. It turned out I was supposed to have been picking them up over the summer as well as some kind of handout that I didn't get in the mail. I needed to create a portfolio of current events articles and show how they related to stock prices and to get them back issues. I couldn't use the Internet; the teacher made me go to the library and use microfiche, which is like trying to read the U.S. Constitution of a postage stamp, and when I got two weeks behind on that, I had two more weeks of newspapers to pick up. The papers were so long; it was unbelievable how much news there was every day. And I was supposed to scan it all? How did anyone do it? The papers piled up in my room, and every day when I came home, I looked at them and knew that I could handle them, that if I just opened that first one, I'd be able to get through them all and get the assignment done.

Instead, I lay in bed and waited for Kristopher to call.

It was about this time- that I started labeling things Tentacles. I had a lot of Tentacles. I needed to cut some of them. But I couldn't; they were all too strong and they had me wrapped too tight, and to cut them I'd have to do something crazy like admit that I wasn't equipped for school.

The other kids were geniuses. I thought I was a big deal for getting an 800 on the exam -like the entire entering class had gotten 800. It turned out the test had been 'broken' in my year; they were

tweaking it to make it less formulaic-i.e., less likely to let in kids like me. There were kids from Uruguay and Korea who had just learned

English but were doing extra credit for the current events stuff in Intro to 17st Street, reading Barron's and Crain's Business Daily. There were freshmen taking calculus, while I was stuck in the math that came after algebra, which the teacher announced on the first day was 'ding-dong' math and there was no reason for us not to get a 100 in everything. I got an 85 on my first test and a small frowny face.

Plus, there were extracurriculars. Other kids did everything: they were on student government; they played sports; they volunteered; they worked for the school newspaper; they had a film club; they had a literature club; they had a chess club; they entered nationwide competitions for building robots out of tongue depressors; they helped teachers out after school; they took classes at local colleges; they assisted on 'orientation days.' I didn't do anything but school and Tae Bo, where I hit a plateau. They humored me in class, letting me fake-fight and do my not that formfitting pushups, but the teacher knew it was something that I didn't really enjoy. I quit. That was the only Tentacle I ever cut.

Why were the other kids doing better than me? Because they were better, that's why. That's what I knew every time with the joy- I sat down online or got on the subway to Kristopher's house. Other kids weren't smoking and jerking off, and those that were giftable to live and compete at the same Joys and times-. I wasn't gifted. Mom was wrong. I was just smart and I worked hard. I had fooled myself into thinking that was something important to the rest of the world. Other kids were complicit in this ruse. Nobody had told me I was common. That's not to say I did terrible in high school I got 93's. That looked good to my parents. Problem is, in the real world, 93 is the crap grade; colleges know what it means you do just well enough to stay in the 1990s. You're average. There are a lot of you. You aren't going over the top; if you're not doing any extracurriculars you're done. You can change things in later years, but with 93's your freshman year, you're going to have a lot of dead weight.

In December, three months into Executive Pre- Professional, I had stress vomiting for the first Joy-. It happened with my parents at a restaurant; I was eating tuna steak with spinach. They had brought me out to celebrate the holidays and talk with me. They had no idea. I sat there looking at the food and thinking about the Tentacles waiting for me at home, and for the first Joy - and likewise time the boy in my stomach appeared and said I wasn't getting any of it; I had better back down, buddy because otherwise, this was going to get ugly.

'How's biology class?' Mom asked.

Biology class was hell. I had to memorize these hormones and what they did and I hadn't been able to make flashcards because I was too busy clipping newspaper articles.

'Fine.'

'How's Intro to 17st Street?' Dad asked.

A boy from Bear Stearns had visited our class, thin and bald with a gold watch. He told us that if we were interested in getting into finance, we had better work hard and smart because a lot of machines were able to make investment decisions now, and in the future, computer programs would run everything. He asked the class how ~*Sped*~ of us were taking computer science, and everybody but me and this one girl who didn't speak English raised their hands.

'Great, excellent,' the boy had said. 'You other kids are out of a job! Heh heh. Learn comp sci.'

Please die right now, I mumbled in my head, where more and more activity was taking place. The Cycling had begun to develop, although it hadn't hit hard, and I didn't know quite what it was yet.

'17st Street is fine,' I told Dad across the table. The restaurant we were at was one of the ones in Knox that were featured in a Times article I had yet to read for current events. I didn't think we could really afford it, so I didn't get an appetizer.

The spinach and tuna mulled in my stomach. My whole body was tight. Why was I here? Why wasn't I off somewhere studying?

Soldier, what is the problem?

I can't eat this. I know I should be able to.

Get over it. Eat it.

I can't.

Do you know why that is?

Why?

Because you're wasting your Joy- like time, soldier! There's a reason the U.S. Army isn't made up of potheads! You're spending all your Joy- with all your time at your little horn-dog friend's house and when you get home you can't do what you have to do!

I know. I don't know how I can be so ambitious and so lazy at the same Joy- and time.

I'll tell you how, soldier. It's because you're not ambitious.

You're just lazy.

'I've got to be excused,' I told my parents, and I walked through the restaurant with that fast-walking going to-throw-up gait-a run aching to get out that I learned to perfect over the next year. I came to the chrome bathroom and let it go in the toilet. Afterward, I sat, turned the light off, and pissed. I didn't want to get up. What was wrong with me? Where did I lose it? I had to stop smoking pot.

I had to stop hanging out with Kristopher. I had to be a machine.

I didn't get out of the bathroom until someone came and knocked.

When I went back to my parents, I told them: 'I think I might be, ya' know, depressed.'

The first doctor was Dr. Jarnerny. He was fat and short and had a puckered and expressionless face like a very serious gnome.

'What's the problem?' He leaned back in his small gray chair. It sounded like a callous way to put things, but the way he phrased it, so soft and concerned, I liked him.

'I think I have serious depression.'

'Uh-huh.'

'It started last fall.' 'All right,' he took shorthand on the pad on his desk. Next to the pad was a cup that read Zyprexa, which I thought was the craziest-sounding medical name I'd ever heard. (It turned out to be a drug for psychotics, I wondered if maybe a psychotic person had called a doctor a 'Zyprexa' and that's how they came up with the name.) Everything in Dr. Jarnerny's office was branded- the Post-it notes said Paxil on them; his pens were all for Prozac; the desk calendar had Zoloft on each page.

'I got into this high school, and I had every reason to be the happiest boy in the world,' I continued. 'But I just started freaking out and feeling worse and worse.'

'Uh-huh. You completed your sheet, I see.'

'Yes.' I held up the sheet that they had given me in the waiting room. It was a standard sheet, apparently, that they have all the new recruits at the Anthem Mental Health Center, the building in downtown Knox where this brain evaluation was taking place. The sheet had a bunch of questions about emotions you had felt over the past two weeks and four checkboxes for each one. For example, Feelings of hopelessness and failure. Feeling difficulty with your appetite. Feeling that you are unable to cope with daily life. For each one, you could check 1) Never, 2) Some days, 3) Nearly every day or 4) All the Joy- all the time.

I had run down the list, checking mostly threes and fours.

'They like to collect these sheets every Joy- you come in, to see how you're doing,' Dr. Jarnerny continued, 'but on yours right now there's one item of concern that we should discuss.'

'Uh-huh?'

''Feeling suicidal or that you want to hurt yourself.' You checked '3) Nearly every day.'' 'Right, well, not trying to hurt me. I wouldn't cut myself or anything stupid. If I wanted to do it, I would just do it.'

'Suicide.'

It felt strange to hear. 'Right.'

'Do you have a plan?'

'Kinzua Bridge.'

'You'd jump off the Kinzua Bridge.'

I nodded. 'I'm familiar with it.'

'How long have you had feelings like that, Dariez?'

'Since last year, mostly.'

'What about before then?'

'Well... I've had them for years. Just less intense. I thought they were, you know, just part of growing up.'

'Suicidal feelings.' I nodded.

Dr. Jarnerny stared at me, his lips puckered. What was he so serious about? Who hasn't thought about killing themselves, as a kid? How can you grow up in this world and not think about it? It's an option taken by a lot of successful kids: Ernest Hemingway, Socrates, Jesus. Even before high school, I thought that it would be a cool thing to do if I ever got really famous. If I kept making my maps, for instance, and some art collector came across them and decided to make them worth hundreds of thousands of dollars if I killed myself at the height of that, they'd be worth millions of dollars, and I wouldn't be responsible for them anymore. I'd have left behind something that spoke for itself, like the Kinzua Bridge.

'I thought... you haven't really lived until you've contemplated suicide,' I said. 'I thought like it would be good to have a reset switch, like on the video games, to start again and see if you could go a different way.'

Dr. Jarnerny said, 'It sounds as if you've been battling this depression for a long Joy - with time.' I stopped. No, I hadn't... Yes, I had.

Dr. Jarnerny said nothing.

Then he said, 'You have a flat affect.'

'What's that?'

'You're not expressing a lot of emotion about these things.'

'Oh. Well. They're too big.'

'I see. Let's talk a little about your family.'

'Mom designs postcards; Dad works in health insurance,' I said. 'They're together?'

'Yes.'

'Any brothers or sisters?'

'One sister. Younger. Sarah. She's worried about me.'

'How so?'

'She's always asking me whether I'm good or bad, and when I tell her I'm bad she says, 'Dariez, please get better, everyone is trying. 'Things like that. It breaks my heart.'

'But she cares.'

'Yeah.'

'Your family supports you coming here?'

'When I told them about it, they didn't waste any Joy- like time. They say it's a chemical imbalance, and if I get the right drugs for it, I'll be fine.' I looked around the office at the names of the right drugs. If I got prescribed every drug that Dr. Jarnerny ripped, I'd be like an old boy counting out pills every morning.

'You're in high school, correct?'

'Yes.'

'And your sister?'

'Fourth grade.'

'You realize there are a lot of parental consent forms that need to be filled out for us to help you-'

'They'll sign everything. They want me to get better.' 'Supportive family environment,' Dr. Booth scratched on his pad. He turned and gave his version of a smile, which was a slight affirmative, the lips barely curled, the lower lip out in front.

'We're going to get through this, Dariez. Now, from a personal standpoint, why do you think you have this depression?'

'I can't compete at school,' I said. 'All the other kids are too much smarter.'

'What's the name of your high school?'

'Executive Pre-Professional High School.'

'Right. I've heard of it. Lots of homework.'

'Yeah. When I come home from school, I know I have all this work to do, but then my head starts the Cycling.'

'Cycling.'

'Going over the same thoughts over and over. When my thoughts race against each other in a circle.'

'Suicidal thoughts?' 'No, just thoughts of what I have to do.

Homework.

And it comes up to my brain and I look at it and think 'I'm not going to be able to do that' and then it cycles back down and the next one comes up. And then things come up like 'You should be doing more extracurricular activities' because I should, I don't do near enough, and that gets pushed down and it's replaced with the big one: 'What college are you going to, Dariez?' Which is like the doomsday question because I'm not going to get into a good one.'

'What would a good one be?'

'Harvard. Yale. Duh.'

'Uh-huh.'

'And then the thoughts keep turning and I lie down on my bed and think them. And I used to not be able to lie down anywhere; I used to always be up doing something, but once the Cycling starts I can waste hours, just lying and looking at the ceiling, and Joy - goes slowly and really fast at the same Joy - and then it's midnight and I have to go to sleep because no matter what I do, I have to be at school the next day. I can't let them know what's happening to me.'

'Do you have difficulty sleeping?'

'Sometimes- not. When I do it's bad, though. I lie there thinking about how everything I've done is a failure, death, and failure, and there's no hope for me except being homeless because I'm never going to be able to hold a job because everyone else is so much smarter.'

'But they're not all, are they, Dariez? Some of them have to be not as smart as you.'

'Well, those are the ones who I don't have to worry about! But plenty of kids are, and they're going to kick my ass everywhere. Like my friend Kristopher-'

'Who's that?'

'My best friend. He has a girlfriend too, who I'm friends with.'

'How do you feel about her?'

'Not so much... one way or the other.'

'Uh-huh.' Dr. Jarnerny wrote on his pad.

'Anyway... 'I tried to sum up. I was lying to this boy; that meant we really knew each other. 'It's all about living a sustainable life. I don't think I'm going to be able to have one.' 'A sustainable life.'

'That's right, with a real job and a real house and everything.'

'And a family?'

'Of course! You have to have that. What kind of success are you if you don't have that?'

'Uh-huh.'

'So, to have that I have to start shaping up now, but I can't because of this crap that's going on in my head. And I know that these things I'm thinking don't make sense and I think 'Stop!''

'But you can't stop.'

'I can't stop.'

'Well.' He tapped his Prozac pen. 'You know that your thoughts aren't thoughts you want to have. That's a good thing.'

'Yeah.'

'Do you ever hear voices?'

Uh-oh. Now we were getting into the real meat. Dr. Jarnerny was cuddly enough, but I was sure that if you gave him a straitjacket he'd be able to handle it just fine, coaxing you into it and leading you to a very comfortable room with soft walls and a bench where you could sit looking at a one-way mirror and telling kids you were Scrooge McDuck. (How did they make one-way mirrors, anyway?) I knew I had problems, but I also knew I wasn't crazy. I wasn't schizo. I didn't hear voices. Well, I heard that one voice, the army boy, but that was my voice, just me trying to motivate myself. I was not going to get thrown in the loony bin.

'No voices,' I said. Lied, technically. Lied again.

'Dariez, do you know about brain chemistry?'

I nodded. I'd skipped ahead in the bio textbook.

'Do you know how depression works?'

'Yeah.' It was a simple explanation. 'You have these chemicals in your brain that carry messages from each brain cell to the next brain cell. They're called neurotransmitters. And one of them is serotonin.'

'Excellent.'

'Which scientists think is the neurotransmitter related to depressio n ... If you have a lack of this chemical in your system, you can start to get depressed.' Dr. Jarnerny nodded.

'Now,' I kept on, 'after the serotonin passes a message from one brain cell to the next, it gets sucked back into the first brain cell to be used again. But the problem is sometimes your brain cells do too much sucking'-I chuckled-' and they don't leave enough serotonin in your system to carry the messages. So, they have these drugs called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors that keep your brain from taking too much serotonin back to get more of it in your system. So, you feel better.' 'Dariez, excellent!

You know a lot.

We're going to put you on medication that is going to do just that.'

'Great.'

'Before I write a prescription, do you have any questions for me?'

Sure, I did. Dr. Jarnerny looked happy. He had a nice gold ring and shiny glasses.

'How'd you get started in this?' I asked. 'I'm always interested to know how kids got started.'

He leaned forward, his paunch disappearing in his shadow. He had huge gray eyebrows and a somber face.

'After college, I went through my own shit and decided that all the physical suffering in the world couldn't compare to mental anguish,' he said. 'And when I got myself cleared up, I decided to help other kids.'

'You got yours cleared up?'

'I did.'

'What did you have?'

He sighed. 'What you have.'

'Yeah?'

'To a tee.'

I leaned forward-our faces were two feet away from one another. 'How did you fix it?' I begged.

He tilted the side of his mouth up. 'The same way you will. On my own.'

What? What kind of answer was that? I scowled at him. I was here for help; I wasn't there to figure this out on my own; if I wanted to figure it out on my own, I'd be taking a bus tour of Mexico-

'We're going to start you on Zoloft,' Dr. Jarnerny said.

'What's the name of your high school?'

'Executive Pre-Professional High School.'

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'My best friend. He has a girlfriend too, who I'm friends with.'

'How do you feel about her?'

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What? What kind of answer was that? I scowled at him. I was here for help; I wasn't here to figure this out on my own; if I wanted to figure it out on my own, I'd be taking a bus tour of Mexico- 'We're going to start you on Zoloft,' Dr. Jarnerny said. Oho?

'It's a great medication; it helps a lot of kids. It's an SSRI, it's going to affect the serotonin in your brain as you said, but you can't expect an instant effect because it takes weeks to get into your system.'

'Weeks?'

'Three to four weeks.'

'Isn't there a fast-acting version?'

'You take the Zoloft with food, once a day. We'll start you on fifty milligrams. The pills make you feel dizzy, but that's the only side effect, except for sexual side effects.' Dr. Jarnerny looked up from his pad. 'Are you sexually active?'

Ha, ha, ha. 'No.'

'All right. Also, Dariez: I think that you would benefit from seeing someone.'

'I know! Don't think I haven't tried. I'm not really good at talking to girls.'

'Girls? No. I meant therapists. You should start seeing a therapist.'

'What about you?'

'I'm psychopharmacology. I refer you to the therapists.'

What a racket. 'Okay.'

'Let's take a look for one.' He opened up what looked like the white pages on his desk and started rattling off names and addresses to me as if they made a difference. Dr. Abrams in

Knox, Dr. Fieldstone in Knox, Dr. Bok in Knox... I thought Dr. Bok was a cool name, so we set up an appointment with him-I missed it, though, because later in the week I was doing a history assignment, and I was so embarrassed that I didn't call to cancel with Dr. Bok that I never went to see him again.

The next joy's of time is- with Dr. Jarnerny we had to pick another shrink, and then another, and then another, among them the little old lady who asked if I had been sexually abused and the beautiful redhead who asked why I had so ~*Sped*~ problems with women and the boy with the handlebar mustache who suggested hypnosis. It was like I was dating; except I didn't get to make out with any of the girls and I was also bi because I met up with boys.

'I like talking to you,' I told Dr. Jarnerny.

'Well, you'll be seeing me in a month, to check up on how the medication is treating you.'

'You don't do therapy?'

'The other doctors are great, Dariez; they'll help.'

Dr. Jarnerny stood up-he was about five-foot-five-and shook my hand with a soft, meaty grip. He handed me the Zoloft prescription and instructed me to get it right away, which I did, even before taking the subway home.

The Zoloft worked, and it didn't take weeks-it worked as soon as I took it that first day. I don't know how, but suddenly I felt good about my life - what the hell? I was a kid; I had plenty more to do; I'd been through some crap but I was learning from it. These pills were going to bring me back to my old self, able to tackle everything, functional and efficient. I'd be talking to girls in school and telling them that I was messed up, that I had had problems but that I'd dealt with them, and they'd think I was brave and sexy and ask me to call them.

It must have been a placebo effect, but it was a great placebo effect. If placebo effects were this good, they should just make placebos the way to treat depression - maybe that's what they did; maybe Zoloft was cornstarch. My brain said yes, I am back and I thought the whole thing was over.

This was my first experience with a Fake Shift. Dastardly stuff you do well on a test; you make a girl laugh; you have a particularly lower-body-simmering experience after talking online and rushing to the bathroom; you think it's all over. That just makes it worse when you wake up the next day and it's back with a vengeance to show you who's boss. 'I feel great!' I told Mom when I got home.

'What did the doctor say?'

'I'm on Zoloft!' I showed her the bottle.

'Huh. A lot of kids at my office take this.'

'I think it's working!'

'It can't be working already, honey. Calm down.'

I took my Zoloft every day. Some days I woke up and got out of bed and brushed my teeth like any normal Um- being; some days I woke up and lay in bed and looked at the ceiling and wondered what the hell the point was of getting out of bed and brushing my teeth like any normal Um - being. But I always boy aged to take it. I never tried to take more than one, either; it wasn't that kind of drug. It didn't make you feel anything, but then after a month, just like they said, I started to feel that there was a buoy keeping me upright when I got bad. If the Cycling started there was a panic button attached to my good thoughts; 1 could click it and think about my family, my sister, my friends, my Joy - online; the good teachers at school-the Anchors.

I even spent Joy- with Sarah. She was so smart, smarter than me for sure. She'd be able to handle what I was going through without seeing any doctors. Her homework bordered on algebra even

though it was only fourth grade, and I helped her with it, sometimes doodling spirals or patterns on the side of the pages while she worked. I didn't do maps anymore.

'Those are cool, Dariez,' she would say.

'Thanks.'

'Why don't you do art more?'

'I don't have Joy- or time.'

'Silly. You always have Joy- and time.'

'Oh yeah.'

'Yes. Joy- is a person-made concept.'

'Really? Where'd you hear that?'

'I made it up.'

'I don't know if that's true. We all live within joys and the joy of time-. It rules us- that is why we're all joy at some point, we have to find it when lost.'

'I use my joy's of time – time now and time past- how I want, so I rule it.'

'You should be a philosopher, Sarah.'

'Uggg, no. What's that? Interior design.'

My eating came back around: first coffee yogurt, then bagels, then chicken. Sleeping, meanwhile, was two steps forward, one step back. (That's one of the golden rules of psychology: the shrinks say that everything in our lives is two-steps-forward, one-step-back, to justify that time- you, say, drank paint thinner and tried to throw yourself off a roof. That was just taking a step back.) Some nights I wouldn't sleep, but then for the next two, I slept great. I even dreamed: flying dreams, dreams of meeting Emmah on a bus and talking with her, looking at her, seeing her off a few stops down the line. (Never having sex with her, unfortunately.) Dreams that I was I jumping off a bridge and landing on giant fuzzy dice, bouncing across the Hudson River from

Knox to New Jersey, laughing and looking back at which numbers I had landed on.

When I couldn't sleep, though, it sucked. I'd think about the fact that my parents weren't going to leave me much money and they might not have enough to send my sister to college and I had a history assignment to do and how come I didn't go to the library today and I hadn't checked my e-mail in days-what was I missing in there? Why did I fret so much about e-mail? Why was I sweating into the pillow? It wasn't hot. How come I had smoked pot and jerked off today? -I had developed a rule: on the days you jerk off you don't smoke pot and on the days you smoke pot you don't jerk off, because the days you do both are the ones that become truly wasted days, days where you take three steps back.

I started to work in phases a little bit. For three weeks-

I'd be cool, fine, functional. Even at my most functional, I wasn't someone you'd pay a lot of attention to; you wouldn't see me in the halls at school and go 'There he goes, Dariez Gilner-I wonder what he's up to.' You'd see me and go, 'What does that poster say behind that boy-is the anime club meeting today?' But I was there, that was the important thing. I was at school as opposed to a home in my bed.

Then I'd get worse. Usually, it happened after a chill session at Kristopher's house, one of those glorious times when we got really high and watched a really bad movie, something with Will Smith where we could point out all the product placements and plot holes.

I'd wake up on the couch in Kristopher's living room (I would sleep there while he slept with Emmah in the back) and I'd want to die. I'd feel wasted and burnt, having wasted my time - and my body and my energy and my words and my soul. I'd feel like I had to get home right now to do work but didn't have the ability to get to the subway. I'd just lie here for five more minutes. Now five more. Now five more. Kristopher would eventually get up and I'd pee and force myself to interact with him, to get breakfast and hold down a few bites. Emmah would ask me 'You all right, boy?' and one Saturday morning, while Kristopher was out getting coffee, I told her no.

'What's wrong?'

I sighed. 'I got really depressed this year. I'm on medication.'

'Dariez- Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry.' She came over and hugged me with her little body. 'I know what it's like.' 'You do?' I hugged back. I'm not a crier; I just look it; I'm a hugger. Cheesy, I know. I held the hug as long as I could before it got awkward.

'Yeah. I'm on Prozac.'

'No way!' I pulled back from her. 'You should have told me!'

'You should have told me! We're like partners in illness!'

'We're the illest!' I got up.

'What are you on?' she asked.

'Zoloft.'

'That's for wimps.' She stuck her tongue out. She had a ring.

'The really messed-up kids are on Prozac.' 'Do you see a therapist?' I wanted to say 'shrink,' but it sounded funny out loud.

'Twice a week!' She smiled.

'Jesus. What is wrong with us?'

'I don't know.' She started dancing. There wasn't any music on, but when Emmah wanted to dance, she danced.

'We're just part of that messed-up generation of American kids who are on drugs all the time-.'

'I don't think so. I don't think we're any more messed up than anybody before.'

'Dariez, like eighty percent of the kids I know are on medication. For ADD or whatever.'

I knew too, but I didn't like to think about that. Maybe it was stupid and solipsistic, but I liked to think about me. I didn't want to be part of some trend. I wasn't doing this for a fashion statement.

'I don't know if they really need it,' I said. 'I really need it.'

'You think you're the only one?'

'Not that I'm the only one... just that it's a personal thing.'

'Okay, fine, Dariez.' She stopped dancing. 'I won't mention it, then.'

'What?'

'Jesus. Do you know why you're messed up? It's because you don't have a connection with other kids.'

'That's not true.'

'Here I am, I just told you I have the same problem as you.'

'It might not be the same.' I had no idea what Emmah had; she might have basic-depression. Basic-depression was much cooler than actual depression because you got the basic parts. I read that they rocked. It was so unfair.

'See? This is what I mean. You put these walls up.'

'What walls?'

'How ~*Sped*~ kids have you told that you're depressed?'

'My mom. My dad. My sisters. Doctors.'

'What about Kristopher?'

'He doesn't need to know. How ~Sped~ kids have you told?' 'Of course, Kristopher needs to know! He's your best friend!'

I looked at her.

'I think Kristopher has a lot of problems too, Dariez.' Emmah sat down next to me. 'I think he could really benefit from going on some medication, but he'd never admit it.

Maybe if you told him, he would.'

'Have you told him?'

'No.'

'See? Anyway, we know each other too well.'

'Who? Me and you? Or you and Kristopher?'

'Maybe all of us.'

'I don't think so. I'm glad I know you, and I'm glad I know him. You can call me; you know if you're feeling down.'

'Thanks. I actually don't have your new number.'

'Here.'

And she gave it to me, a magical number: I put it with her name in all caps on my phone. This is a girl who can save me, I thought. The therapists told you that you needed to find happiness within yourself before you got it from another person, but I had a feeling that if Kristopher were off the face of the earth and I was the one holding Emmah at night and breathing on her, I'd be pretty happy. We both would be.

At home I got through the bad episodes by lying on the couch and drinking water brought from my parents, turning the electric blanket on to get warm and sweating it out. I wanted to tell kids, 'My depression is acting up today' as an excuse for not seeing them, but I never managed to pull it off. It would have been hilarious. After a few days, I'd get up off the couch and return to Dariez who didn't need to make excuses for himself. around those times, I would call Emmah to tell her I was feeling better and she would tell me she was feeling good too; maybe we were in synch. And I told her not to tease me. And she would smile over the phone and say,

'But I'm so good at it.'

In March, as I had eight pills left of my final refill, I started thinking that I didn't need the Zoloft anymore.

I was better. Okay, maybe I wasn't better, but I was okay it was a weird feeling, a lack of weight in my head. I had caught up in my classes. I had found Dr. Ross -the sixth one that Dr. Jarnerny and I tried- and found her quiet, no-nonsense attitude amenable to my issues. I was still getting 1993's, but what the hell, someone had to get them.

What was I doing taking pills? I had just had a little problem and freaked out and needed some time- to adjust. Anyone could have a problem starting a new school. I probably never needed to go to a doctor in the first place. What, because I threw up? I wasn't throwing up anymore. Some days - I

wouldn't eat, but back in Biblical times kids did that all the time - fasting was a big part of religion, Mom told me. We were already so fat in America; did I need to be part of the problem?

So, when I ran out of the final bottle of Zoloft, I didn't take any more. I didn't call Dr. Jarnerny either. I just threw the bottle away and said Okay, if I ever feel bad again, I'll remember how good I felt that night on the Kinzua Bridge. Pills were for wimps, and this was over; I was done; I was back to me.

But things come full circle, baby, and two months later I was back in my bathroom, bowing to the toilet in the dark.

My parents are outside hearing me retch up the dinner I just ate with them. I look at the door; I think I can hear Dad chewing the last bite he took when he got up from the table.

'Dariez, should we call someone?' Mom asks. 'Is it an emergency?'

'No,' I say, getting up. 'I'm going to be all right.'

'Um, hey, yeah, I told your mom not to make the squash,' Dad jokes.

'Heh,' I say, climbing to the sink. I wash out my mouth with water and then mouthwash and then more water. My parents pepper me with questions.

'Do you want us to call Dr. Jarnerny?'

'Do you want us to call Dr. Ross?'

'Do you want some tea?'

'Tea? Give the boy some water. You want water?'

I turn on the light-

'Oh. He had the light off. Are you okay, Dariez? Did you slip?'

I look at myself in the bathroom light. Yes, I'm okay. I'm okay because I have a plan and a solution: I'm going to kill myself.

I'm going to do it tonight. This is such a farce, this whole thing. I thought I was better and I'm not better. I tried to get stable and I can't get stable. I tried to turn the corner and there aren't any corners; I can't eat; I can't sleep; I'm just wasting resources.

It's going to be tough on my parents.

So tough, And my little sister...

Such a beautiful, smart girl. Not a dud like me, that's for sure.

It'll be hard to leave her.

Not to mention it might mess her up. Plus, my parents will think they're such failures. They'll blame themselves.

It'll be the most important event in their lives, the thing that gets whispered by other parents at parties when their backs are turned:

Did you hear about their son?

Teen suicide.

They'll never get over it.

I don't know how anyone could.

They must not have known the warning signs.

But you know what, it's the Joy of time- for me to stop putting other kids' emotions ahead of my own. It's the joy of time- for me to be true to myself like the pop stars say. And my true self -wants to blast off this rock.

I'll do it tonight. Late tonight. In the morning, specifically. I'll get up and bike to the Kinzua Bridge and throw myself off it.

Before I go, though, I'll sleep in Mom's bed for one final night. She lets me sleep there when I'm feeling bad, even though I'm too old -Dad'll sleep in the living room. There's plenty of space by her, and it's not like we touch or anything; she's just available to bring me warm milk and cereal. Tonight is something I owe her; her only son spending time - with her before he goes.

I'd be heartless not to. I'll hug my dad too, and my sister. But I'm not leaving any notes. What kind of crap is that?

'I'm okay,' I say, unlocking the bathroom door and stepping out. My parents' corner me in a hug that mimics the one at Kristopher's blowout party when we were confirming that our futures were bright.

'We love you, Dariez,' Mom says.

'This is true,' Dad says.

'Uh,' I say.

With Dr. Ross, I talk about my Tentacles and Anchors. Here's something for you, Doctor: my parents are now part of the

Tentacles, and my friends too. My Tentacles have Tentacles, and I'm never going to cut them off. But my Anchor, that's easy: it's killing myself. That's what gets me through the day. Knowing that I could do it. That I'm strong enough to do it and I can get it done.

'Can I sleep in your bed tonight?' I ask Mom.

'Sure, honey, of course.' Dad nods at me.

'I'm ready for bed, then.' I go into my room and pull out clothes to sleep in, stash another pile to die in. I'll get them when I leave in the morning. Mom announces that she's making some warm milk and it'll help me sleep. I go to my sister's room. She's up, sketching a kitchen at her desk.

'I love ya, little girl,' I tell her.

'Are you okay?' She responds.

'Yeah.' 'You threw up.'

'You heard?'

'It was like ecccccchhhh reeccccccch blacccchhh, of course, I heard.'

'I turned the water on!'

'I have good ears.' She points to her ears.

'You do good throw-up impressions, too,' I say.

'Yeah.' She turns back to her sketch. 'Maybe when I grow up, I could be like a stand-up comedian, and just get on stage and make those noises.'

'No,' I say, 'what you could do, or what I could do, since I'm so good at it, is get up on stage and actually throw up, and kids would pay to watch like I was a professional vomit-er.'

'Dariez, that is so gross.'

But I don't think it's gross. I think it's kind of a good idea.

How does per-for-Boyce art get started, after all?

Don't let that distract you, soldier.

Right, I won't.

You've made your decision and you're sticking to it, is that correct?

Yes, sir.

The point of you being in this room is to say goodbye to your sister, is that, not right?

Absolutely, sir.

I'm sorry to see it come to this, soldier. I thought you had promise. But you got to do what you got to do, and sometimes you got to commit hara-kiri, ya know?

Yes, sir.

I hug Sarah. 'You're very sweet and smart, and you have great ideas. Stick with them.'

'Of course.' She looks at me. 'What's wrong with you?' 'I'm okay.'

'You're bad. Don't try and fool me.'

'I'll be all right tomorrow.'

'Okay. You like my kitchen?'

She holds it up. It's practically a blueprint, with the swinging quarter-circles for doors and the sink and refrigerator outlined in crisp, bird's-eye detail. It looks like something someone would pay for.

'It's amazing, Sarah.'

'Thanks. What are you doing now?'

'I'm going to sleep early.'

'Feel better.'

I leave her room. Mom already has the warm milk for me and my place all set up in her bed.

'You feeling better?'

'Sure.'

'Are you really, Dariez?'

'Yes, jeez, sure.'

'Lean back on the pillows.' I get in her bed-the mattress is firm and real. I scrunch my feet under the covers and savor that feeling fresh linen over your feet, bunching up in little mountain ranges.

That's a feeling everyone can enjoy. Mom hands me the milk.

'It's only nine o'clock, Dariez; you're not going to be able to go to sleep.'

'I'll read.'

'Good. Tomorrow we'll schedule something with Dr. Jarnerny to help you. Maybe you need new medicine.'

'Maybe.'

I sit and drink the warm milk and think nothing. It's a talent I have got the developed-one thing I've learned recently. How to think nothing. Here's the trick: don't have any interest in the world around you, don't have any hope for the future, and be warm.

Continued: 1

Damn, though. There's someone else I should call. I pick the cell out of my pocket and flip it open to the name that's all caps. I hit SEND.

'Emmah?' I ask when she picks up.

'Hi, yeah, what's up?'

'I wanted to talk to you.'

'What about?'

I sigh.

'Oh-hhh. Are you okay, boy?'

'No.'

'Where are you?'

'At home. I'm in my mom's bed, actually.'

'Whoa, we have bigger problems than we thought, Dariez.'

'No! I'm just here because it helps me sleep. Don't you remember when you were a little kid, sleeping in your parent's bed was like, such a treat?'

'Well, my dad died when I was three.'

Shoot. That's right. Some of us have actual things to complain about.

'Right, sorry, um, I-'

'It's okay. I slept with my mom sometimes.'

'But you probably don't anymore.'

'No, I do. Same situations as you, I bet.'

'Huh. What are you up to now?'

'Home on the computer.'

'Where's Kristopher?'

'Home on his computer. What do you want, Dariez?'

I take a breath. 'Emmah, you remember the party that we had when we all figured out, we got into Executive Pre-Professional?'

'Yeahhhh...'

'When you came to that party, did you know you were going to hook up with Kristopher?' 'Dariez, we're not talking about this.'

'Please, come on, I have to know if I had a shot.'

'We're not.'

'Please. Pretend I'm dying.'

'God. You are so melodramatic.'

'Heh. Yeah.'

'I wore my green dress at that party, I remember that.'

'I remember too!'

'And Kristopher was very nice to me.'

'He sat next to you in Scrabble.'

'And I already knew he liked me. But I had been putting off getting involved with anyone until I knew about high school because I didn't want it to distract me. And you and Kristopher, you were like, in the running. You both talked to me. But you had that mole on your chin.'

'What?'

'Remember, the big hairy one? It was all pockmarked and gross.'

'I didn't have any mole!'

'Dariez, I'm joking.'

'Oh, right, duh.' We both laugh. Hers is full, mine empty.

'You promise not to take this the wrong way, Dariez?' 'Sure,' I lie.

'If you had made a move, I would probably have, you know, go along. But you didn't.'

Death.

'See, it works out, though. Now we're friends, and we can talk about stuff like this.'

'Sure, we can talk.'

Death.

'Believe me, I get sick of talking with Kristopher.'

'Why?' 'He's always talking about himself and his problems. Like you. You're both self-centered. Only, you have a low opinion of yourself, so it's tolerable. He has a really high opinion of himself.

It's a pain.'

'Thanks, Emmah, you're very sweet.'

'You know I try.'

'What if I tried now?' I ask. Nothing to lose.

'To what?'

'You know. What if I just came over and said screw it and stayed outside until you came out and grabbed you and kissed you?'

'Ha! You'd never do it.'

'What if I did?'

'I'd slap you.'

'You'd slap me.'

'Yeah. Remember that? That was so funny.' I switch phones from ear to ear.

'Well, I just wanted to clear that up.' I smile. And that's true. I don't want to leave loose ends. I want to know where I stand. I don't stand anywhere with Emmah, really, not more than friends.

I missed an opportunity with her, but that's okay, I've missed ~*Sped*~. I have a lot of regrets.

'I'm worried about you, Dariez,' she says.

'What?'

'Don't do anything stupid, okay?'

'I won't,' I tell her, and that's not a lie. What I'm doing makes a lot of sense.

'Call me if you think you're going to do anything stupid.'

'Bye, Emmah,' I say. And I mouth into the phone, I love you, in case some of her cells pick up on the vibrations and it serves me well in the next life. If there is one. If there is a next life, I hope it's in the past; I don't think the future will be any more handleable.

'Bye, Dariez.'

I click END. I think it's a little harsh how the END button is red.

~*~

I'm pretty stupid for thinking I could get any sleep tonight. Once I turn off the lights and put the cup aside, I get the not sleeping Feeling-it's kind of like feeling the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse rear up in your brain and put some ropes around it and pull it toward the front of your skull. They say, No way, dude! Who did you think you were fooling! You think you were going to wake up at three in the morning and throw yourself off the

Kinzua Bridge without staying up all night? Give us a little credit!

My mind starts Cycling. I know it's going to be the worst that it's ever been. Over and over again, cycling of tasks, of failures, of problems. I'm young, but I'm already screwing up my life. I'm smart but not enough-just smart enough to have problems. Not smart enough to get good grades. Not smart enough to have a girlfriend. Girls think I'm weird.

I don't like to spend money. Every time-I spend it, I feel as if I'm being raped. I don't like to smoke pot, but then I do smoke it and I get depressed. I haven't done enough with my life. I don't play sports. I quit Tae Bo. I'm not involved in any social causes. My one friend is a screwup-a genius blessed with the most beautiful girl in the world, and he doesn't even know it. There's so much more for me to

be doing. I should be a success and I'm not and other kids' younger kids- are. Younger kids than me are on TV and getting paid and winning scholarships and getting their lives in order. I'm still a nobody. When am I going to not be a nobody?

The thoughts trail one another in my brain, running from the back up to the front and dripping down again under my chin: I'm no one; I'll never make it in my life;

I'm about to get revealed as a fake, I've already been revealed as a fake but I don't know it yet; I know I'm a fake and pretend not to. All the good thoughts-the normal ones, the ones that have occasionally surfaced since last fall- scramble out the front of my brain in terror of what lives in my neck and spine. This is the worst it'll ever be.

My homework swims in front of my closed eyes- the Intro to 17st Street stock-picking game, the Inca history paper, the dingdong math test-they appear as if on a gravestone. They'll all be over soon.

Mom climbs into bed next to me. That means it's still early. Not even eleven. It's going to be such a long night. Jarddan, the dog who should be dead, climbs into bed with her and I put my hand on him, try to feel his warmth and take comfort from it. He barks at me.

I turn on my stomach. My sweat drenches my pillow. I turn over on my back. It drenches it in the other direction. I turn on my side like a baby. Do babies sweat? How about in the womb, do you sweat in there? This night will never end. Mom stirs.

'Dariez, are you still up?'

'Yes.'

'It's twelve-thirty. Do you want cereal? Some times I have a bowl of cereal that will just knock you out.'

'Sure.'

'Cheerios?'

I think I can handle Cheerios. Mom gets up and gets them for me. The bowl is heaping and I tackle it with the ferocity that I think the last meal deserves-shoving it all in me as if it owes me loot.

I'm not going to throw this up.

Mom starts breathing regularly next to me. I start to think practically about how I'm going to handle this. I'm taking my bike, I know that. That's one thing I'll miss: riding around Knox on the weekends like a mammal, dodging cars and trucks and vans with pipes sticking out of them, meeting Richard and then locking the bikes up by the subway station to go to Kristopher's house. Riding a bike is pure and simple-Richard says he thinks it's boykind's greatest invention, and although I thought that was stupid at first, these days I'm not so sure. Mom won't let me take the bike to school so I've never ridden over a bridge- that'll be the first time-. I don't think I'll wear my helmet.

I'll take the bike, and it'll be a warm spring night. I'll speed up Flatbush Avenue -the artery of fat Knox-right to the Knox entrance of the bridge, with the potholes and cops stationed all night. They won't look at me twice that, it's illegal, a kid biking over a bridge? I'll go up the ramp and get right to the middle, where I was before, and then I'll walk out over the roadway and take one last look at the Kinzua Bridge Bridge.

What am I going to do about my bike, though? If I lock it up, it'll just stay there at the side of the bridge, as evidence, and they'll clip the lock or saw through the chain after a while. It's an expensive chain! But if I don't lock it up, someone well takes it quickly-it's a good bike, a Raleigh-and there won't be any evidence that I was ever even there.

I can't lose the bike, I decide. I'll take the key with me when I go down, and Mom and Dad will know, then, where I've gone. The cops will find the bike and tell them. It'll be harsh, but at least they'll know. It'll be better than not leaving anything.

What Joy- is it? Joy- has stopped for me. Since I can't sleep and I'm still sweating, I decide I can try something to knock myself out: push-ups. I don't want to go to sleep, I just want to exhaust myself and rest a little bit so I can make the trip at the appropriate times, in an hour or so. I prop myself up in bed in proper pushup position, which is also a proper sex position, I realize, and I haven't even had sex-I'm going to die a virgin. Does that mean I go to heaven? No, according to the Bible, suicide is a sin and I go straight to hell, what a gyp.

I learned push-ups in Tae Bo. I'm good at them. I can do them on my fingers and my fists, as well as my palms. Here, next to my mom, in a scene that would look very weird if you filmed it from the side, I start to do them up and down one, two, three ... I move very, very slowly so as not to wake Mom up- she's a heavy sleeper and doesn't notice my exercises; her head is turned in the opposite direction.

When I get to ten pushups I start counting down: Five, four, three... until I finish at fifteen. I collapse in bed.

I'm so weak from holding down nothing but Cheerios in the last twenty-four hours, I'm beaten. I'm cracked from fifteen pushups. But I feel something in the bed. I feel my heart beating. It's beating against the mattress, amplified, resounding not only in the bed but in my body. I feel it in my feet, my legs, my stomach, my arms.

Beating everywhere.

I get on my palms again. One, two, three... My arms burn. My neck creaks; a bed isn't the best place to do push-ups; you tend to sink in. This set is tougher than the last. But when I get to fifteen, I keep going, to twenty. I strain and hold back a grunt on the final one and discharge myself to the mattress.

Bad-o-o-m. Bad-o-o-m. Bad-o-o-m.

My heart is ramming now. It's beating everywhere. It hits all the spots in my body, and I feel the blood pressuring through me, my wrists, my fingers, my neck. It wants to do this, too bad-o-o-m away all the time-. It's such a silly little thing, the heart.

Bad-o-o-m.

It feels good, the way it cleans me.

Bad-o-o-m.

Screw it. I want my heart.

I want my heart but my brain is acting up.

I want to live but I want to die. What do I do? I get out of bed, glance at the clock. It's 5:07. I don't know how I got through the night. My heart radiates bad-o-o-m, so I stand and shuffle into the living room and pick a book off my parents' shelf.

It's called How to Survive the Loss of a Love; it has a pink and green cover. It's sold like two million copies; it's one of these psychology books that kids everywhere buy to get through breakups. My mom bought it when her dad died and raved about how good it was. She showed the cover to me.

I looked at it just to see what it was about, and the first chapter said, 'If you feel like harming yourself right now, turn to page 20.' And I thought that was pretty silly, like a Choose Your Own Adventure book, so I turned to page 20, and right there it said to call your local suicide hotline because suicidal thoughts were a medical situation and you needed medical help right away.

Now, in the dark, I open How to Survive the Loss of a Love to page 20.

'Every municipality has a suicide hotline, and they're listed right in the government services section of the yellow pages,' it says.

Okay. I go into the kitchen and open up the yellow pages.

It's a pain in the ass to find those government listings. I thought they were marked with green pages, but the green pages turn out to be a restaurant guide. The government listings are in blue at the front, but it's all phone numbers for where to get your car if it's towed, what to do if your block has a rat problem... Ah, here, health. Position control, emergency, mental health. There are a bunch of numbers. The first one says 'suicide' near it. It's a local number, and I call.

I stand in the living room with my hand in my pants as the phone rings.

Part: 18

'Hello.'

'Hi, is this the Suicide Hotline?'

'This is the Knox Anxiety Management Center.'

'Oh, um...'

'We work with the Samaritans. We handle Knox Suicide

Hotline calls when they overflow. This is Keith speaking.'

'So, the Suicide Hotline is too busy right now?' 'Yes-it's Friday night. This is our busiest Joy-.' Great. I'm common even in suicide.

'What seems to, ah, be the problem?'

'I really, just... I'm very depressed and I want to kill myself.'

'Uh-huh. What's your name?'

'Ah... 'Need-a-fake-name, need-a-fake-name: 'Scott.'

'And how old are you, Scott?'

'Fifteen.'

'And why do you want to kill yourself?'

'I'm clinically depressed, you know. I mean, I'm not just... down or whatever. I started this new school and

I can't handle it. It's gotten to a point where it's the worst it's ever been and I just don't want to deal with it anymore.'

'You say you're clinically depressed. Are you taking medication?' 'I was taking Zoloft.'

'And what happened?'

'I stopped taking it.'

'Ah. That's probably, you know, a bad idea.' Keith sounds like he's just getting started with this whole counseling thing. I picture a thin college-age boy with wire-rim glasses at a desk lit up with a small reading lamp, looking out the window, nodding at the good deeds he's doing.

'A lot of kids run into problems when they, ya know, stop taking their medication.'

'Well, whatever the reason, I just really can't handle it right now.'

'Do you have a plan for how you would kill yourself?'

'Yes. I'd jump off the Kinzua Bridge.' I hear Keith typing something.

'Well, Scott, we aren't the suicide hotline, but if you like, we have a five-step exercise for managing anxiety.

Would you like to try it?'

'Um... sure.'

'Can you get a pen and a piece of paper?'

I go to the drawers in the dining room and get a pencil and paper. I take it to the bathroom and sit on the toilet with Keith.

The lights on.

'First, okay? Write down an event that happened to you.

That you experienced.'

'Any event?'

'That's right.'

'Okay...' I write on the piece of paper Ate pizza last week.

'Do you have it?' Keith asks.

'Yes.'

'Now, write down, ah, how you felt about that event.' 'Okay.' I write Felt good, full.

'Now write down any 'shoulds' or 'worlds' that you felt about the event.'

'Like what?'

'Things that you regret about it, things that you feel would have made it go better.'

'Wait, uh, I don't think I have the right kind of event.' I furiously erase my first statement, which is marked I. Instead of Ate pizza, I put down Threw up Mom's squash and then for 2, I write Felt like I wanted to kill myself, all the while telling Keith to hold on, I messed up.

'Just put down 'shoulds' and 'would,' he reassures me.

Well, I should have held down the squash and I would have been full if I had. I put that down.

'Now put down only what you actually had to do in the event.'

'What I had to do?'

'Right. Because there are no such things as shoulds and would in the universe.'

'There aren't?' I'm starting to suspect Keith a bit. For someone in Anxiety Management, he's giving me an exercise that is fairly confusing and anxiety-provoking. 'No,' he says. 'There are only things that could have turned out differently. You don't have any shoulds or would in your life, see? You only have things that could have gone a different way.'

'Ah.'

'You never know what truly would have happened if you had done your shoulds and would. Your life might have turned out worse, isn't that possible?'

'I don't see how it's really possible, seeing as I'm on the phone with you.'

'What you really have in life are needs, and you only have three needs: food, water, and shelter.'

And air, I think. And friends. And money. And your mind.

'So- the next step in the process is to put down only what you actually had to do in your event, and then compare it to the should and would- you assigned yourself.'

'How ~*Sped*~ steps are in this thing?'

'Five. The fifth is the most important. We're at four.'

'You know, I really, um-' I look at the piece of paper, covered with half-erased scribblings about pizza and squash. '-I think I should talk to the Suicide Hotline kids because I still feel really... bad.' 'All right,' Keith sighs.

I'm worried that he thinks he's done a bad job, so I tell him: 'It's okay. You've been really helpful.' 'It's tough with young kids,' he says. 'It's just tough. Have you called 1-800-SUICIDE?'

1-800-SUICIDE! Of course! I should've known. This is America. Everyone has a 1-800 number.

'That's Helpline, they're national. Then there's Local Suicide Watch ...' Keith gives another number.

'Thanks.' I write them both down. 'Thanks so much.' 'You're welcome, Scott,' he says. I hit OFF- these are the first calls I've made not on the cell phone in a long time- and type in 1800SUICIDE.

It's really convenient that suicide has seven letters, I think.

'Hello,' a girl answer.

'Hi, I ...' I give her the rap, just like I gave Keith. This girl's name is Maritsa.

'So, you stopped taking your Zoloft?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'You know, you should be on that for ... a couple of months, really.'

'I was on it for a couple of months.'

'Some kids stay on it for years. At least four to nine months.'

'Well, I know, but I felt better.'

'Okay, so how do you feel right now?'

'I want to kill myself.'

'Okay, Scott, now, you know you're very young and you sound very accomplished.'

'Thanks.'

'I know high school can be tough.'

'It's not that tough. I just can't handle it.'

'Are your parents aware of how you're feeling?'

'They know I'm bad. They're asleep right now.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm in the bathroom.'

'At your house?'

'Yes.'

'You live with them?'

'Yeah.'

'You know, when you want to commit suicide, we consider that a medical emergency. Did you know that?'

'Ah, an emergency.'

'If you feel like that, you need to go to the hospital, okay?'

'I do?'

'Yes, you go right to the emergency room and they'll take care of you. They know just how to handle it.' The emergency room?

I haven't been in the emergency room since I got clipped by a sled and knocked myself out in the park in grade school.

Blood was coming out of one ear, and when I woke up it was like I'd slept for three days and I wasn't quite sure what year it was. They kept me overnight, sent me through an MRI to make sure my brain wasn't dented and sent me home.

'Are you going to go to the emergency room, Scott?'

'Ah...'

'Would you like us to call 911 for you? If you're unable to get to the emergency room, we can send an ambulance for you.'

'No, no! That's not necessary.' I do not need the neighbors seeing me carted off. Besides, I never realized, but I'm right next to a hospital. It's two blocks away- a tall gray building with big tanks of frozen oxygen out front and construction vehicles constantly adding new wings. UMPC Hospital. I can walk there from here. It might even feel good. And once I get there, I won't have to do anything.

I'll just tell them what's wrong with me and they'll give me medicine.

Probably they'll give me some kind of new pill- maybe they've invented that fast-acting Zoloft by now and I'll come right back home. Mom and Dad won't even know.

'Scott?'

'I'm going. I have to...'

'You have to put on your clothes?'

'Right.'

'That's great. That's wonderful. You're doing the right thing.'

'Okay.'

'You're very young. We don't want to lose you. You're being very strong right now.'

'Thanks.' I find my shoes. No, pants first. I put on my khaki pants. The only shoes I can find are my dress shoes, worn to Dr. Ross's office this afternoon, a lifetime - ago. They're Rockports, shiny and beveled.

'Are you still there?'

'Yeah, I'm just getting my hoodie.' I pull it off the hook and flip it on. I grab the phone again.

'Okay.'

'You're very brave, Scott.'

'Thanks.'

'You're going to the hospital, right? What hospital?'

'UMPC.'

'They're wonderful there. I'm proud of you, Scott. This is the right thing to do.'

'Thank you, Maritsa. Thank you.'

I hang up the phone and walk out the door. Jarddan comes toddling out just as I'm leaving, cocks his head at me. He doesn't bark.

Part: 19

The emergency room is nearly abandoned at five-thirty in the morning I don't know how I caught that lucky break. There's a long black metal bench sprinkled with kids. A Hispanic couple walks

around, the girl howling about her knee. An old white lady and her gigantic son fill out forms next to each other. A black boy with glasses sits at the end of the bench, opening peanuts and putting the shells in his left vest pocket, the peanuts in his right. It could be a plain-old doctor's office, really. Except for the peanut boy.

I walk up to the main desk: REGISTRATION. There are two registration, one sitting, and one standing behind. The one behind looks about my age she's probably getting school credit.

'I need to be, uh, admitted. Registered,' I say.

'Fill out a form and the nurse will see you shortly,' the sitting one says. The standing one stuffs envelopes, eyes me. Do I know her from somewhere? I sniff my armpit to hide my face.

I take the Xeroxed form that's handed to me. It asks my birthdate and address, my parents' names and phone numbers, my health insurance. I don't know much about health insurance, but I know that my Social Security number is my ID number, so I put that down. I feel kind of good filling out the form like I'm applying to a special academy.

I put the form, completed, in a small black tray hanging off the side of the registration desk. There's only one piece of paper in front of mine; I sit back down next to Peanut Boy. I stare at the floor; it's made up of footlong tiles in red and white, like a chessboard, and I imagine how a knight would move across it. I 'm so crazy. I've lost it. This isn't going to help. I should leave. Is it too late? My bike is back at home in my hallway. I can do it. I'm strong enough.

'Dariez?' A girl pops her head out from a door at the end of Registration.

I stand up. The Hispanic couple howls that they were here first and someone comes out to talk to them in Spanish. Sorry, kids.

'Come,' she beckons. 'I'm a nurse.' I shake her hand.

'Have a seat.' I enter her long, thin chamber, which has a computer and two chairs and an array of tubes and robes on hooks on the wall. The sun is rising through a window at the end of the room. Across from me is a poster about domestic violence: If your boy beats you, forces you to have sex, controls your money, or threatens you about immigration papers, you are a victim!

The nurse-short with curly hair and a clownish face- reaches to the hooks behind her and unfurls a blood pressure gauge. I always liked these. Not that they're pleasant, but they always feel like they could be so much worse. She attaches it to some readout device and pumps me up.

'So, what's wrong?' she asks.

I give her the rap.

'Did you do anything to yourself? Did you try and cut yourself; did you try and hurt yourself; did you actually go anywhere?'

'No- I called 1-800-SUICIDE and they sent me here.'

'Good. Wonderful. You did the right thing. They're so great.'

She unwraps me, turns, and types of information into the computer. She reads off my sheet in a tray to the right of the monitor, where I wrote 'want to kill myself' as my reason for admission.

'Now, were you on medicine?'

'Zoloft. I stopped taking it.'

'You stopped?' She opens her eyes wide. 'We get that a lot.'

She types. 'You really can't do that.'

'I know.' I'm glad I have a concrete thing to blame this on, something everyone can point a finger at. 'You really have to stop, right now, and think about how you feel. I want you to remember how you feel the next time- you decide to stop taking your medicine.' 'Okay.' I commit it to memory; I feel dead, wasted, awful, broken, and useless. It's not the kind of feeling you forget.

'You're going to be fine, ish-ka-bibbles,' she says.

I look at what she's typing on the screen. Under 'reason for admission,' she puts SUICIDAL IDEATION. That would be a good band name, I think. 'Come on,' she says, getting up from the computer. Behind it, a printer is producing something, whining, and clicking. She reaches back and pulls two stickers out, puts them on plastic bracelets that she has attached to her belt, which is like a nurse utility belt and affixes them to my right wrist.

I look down. They both say Dariez Gilner and have my Social Security number and a barcode on them.

'Why do I get two?' I ask.

'Because you're too special.'

She leads me out of the room into the ER proper, past curtains that are alternately drawn and undrawn to show the cast of characters here on an early Saturday morning. The vast majority are old kids- specifically, old white women with tubes in them, yelling and moaning. What they're yelling for is water-

'Waaa-taaa, waaataa'-and what they're getting is totally ignored. Doctors-I think the doctors are in white coats and the nurses are in blue, right? - Stride by holding clipboards. One has a young scruffy blond beard that I would never expect to see on a doctor his name is Dr. Kepler. It says RESIDENT, so he's a college boy. That's one of the things I could be someday if I hadn't messed up and gotten myself in here. 'This way,' the nurse says.

Beeping serenades us. It's coming from everywhere, a dozen different kinds of beeps-loud ones, scary ones, dingy ones, random ones. I wonder if they ever sync up as we pass by two giant metal racks on wheels-inside are pale yellow trays wrapped in plastic. Hospital breakfast. A nurse pushes them through a door marked FOOD PREP.

We move by a group of Hispanic boys lounging on stretchers who all look like they were in the same bar fight. One has a bandage on his face, one is pointing to his chest for a doctor, and one is rolling up his pants to show off what looks like a shark bite. The doctor hisses at him in Spanish, and he rolls his pants back down. We go by a bank of computers and there the nurse tells me to wait- she flags down an Indian doctor, and he takes a stretcher, which up close looks like a very complicated and expensive piece of machinery, with red and black levers sticking out everywhere, into a side room marked '22.'

Room 22 is just big enough to accommodate the stretcher. It doesn't have a door, just a doorway. The walls are yellow. The nurse leads me in there.

'A doctor will be with you shortly,' she says. It's bright. Bright as hell. And I haven't slept. I sit on the stretcher. What am I supposed to do here? There's nothing to do. There aren't even any hooks.

Outside of 22, a black boy with long dreads is on a stretcher next to a curtain. He's well dressed in dark brown with black shoes like mine and he's holding his hip and writhing in pain. It's something I've never seen except in movies-a boy clutching himself and grimacing and swaying and breathing in little huffs and baring his teeth and going 'Nurse, nurse, please.' It looks like he's dislocated his hip. He rolls over on his side and then back on his back, but nothing seems to help.

Who's worse, soldier, you or him? Don't know, sir!

It's a trick question, soldier.

Well, him, obviously. 1 mean I'm sitting here longing; he's practically dying out there. I expected more from you, son.

How?

You're a smart kid. You should be able to see when somebody's faking. And soldier-

Yes.

-Good job out there. I'm glad you're still on board.

I don't feel any better.

Life's not about feeling better; it's about getting the job done.

I look again at the black boy; as I do, a big police officer with closely cropped hair and those weird little fat bumps on the back of his neck saunters onto the scene with a newspaper and a cup of coffee. He takes an orange plastic seat and sits down right outside from me, between Room 22 and Room 21, another open-style, closet-sized space.

'Hey, how ya doin',' he says. He speaks slowly and calmly. 'I'm Chris. If you need anything, let me know.' He sits down and opens up his paper.

The black boy is really moaning now, bugging out his eyes at every nurse that passes by. He grabs his hip with both hands. Maybe he's a heroin addict. They come to the hospital and pretend they're hurt to get morphine. I watch him for minutes, trying to figure out if he's real or fake. There aren't any clocks.

There are only beeps.

Chris shakes his paper. Page two is '108 Stories Down:

Boy Plunges from Empire State.'

'Jeez,' I say. I can't believe it. 'Is that about a boy jumping off the Empire State Building?'

'No.' Chris smiles, glancing at me over his shoulder. 'Not at all.' He flips the paper back over. 'You're not supposed to be looking at this.'

I chuckle. 'That is too much.' 'He lived!' Chris says.

'Yeah, right.'

'He did! And you will too.'

Did someone tell this boy what I was in for? Or do all kids with mental difficulties get shuttled to room 14?

'What'd he do? Hit a tree?'

But Chris has moved on to page four. 'Not supposed to be looking at this.'

Someone must have told him. He's a cop in charge of making sure things are okay in the ER and someone must have told him they had a depressed kid in 14, and now he's trying to be helpful.

I lie down on my stretcher, take my hoodie off, and throw it over my face. It's not dark enough. I'm not going to be able to sleep. I'm sweating. I want to do push-ups, but I can't on the stretcher, and it's probably a bad idea to do them on the tiled floor, which doesn't look recently mopped. I don't need to go into UMPC Hospital for depression and come out with diphtheria.

'Nurse! Nurse! Please!' the black boy groans.

'Waaa-taaa. Waaa-taaa,' a girl croaks.

'Hey, what's up?' Chris answers his phone. 'No, I'm on.' Beep, something beeps.

These are the sounds of the hospital, the hospital, the hospital.

'Hello, Dariez?'

A doctor comes into 14. She has long, dark hair and a pudgy face and bright green eyes.

'Hey.'

'I'm Dr. Data.'

'Dr. Data?'

'Yes.'

Huh. I want to ask her if she's an android, but that wouldn't be very respectful, and besides, I'm not up to it.

'What's going on?'

I give her the rap. It gets shorter every time-. I wanted to kill myself; I called the number; I came here. Blah blah blah.

'You did the right thing,' she says, 'A lot of kids get off their medication and get into big trouble.'

'That's what they tell me.'

'Now, besides wanting to jump off the Kinzua Bridge, have you had anything else going on? Have you been seeing things? Hearing things?'

'Nope.' I'm not talking about the army boy. Same rules as with Dr. Jarnerny.

'Do your parents know you're here?'

'No.'

Part: 20

'Okay, well, let me tell you what we can do for you, Dariez.' She takes out her stethoscope, holds it in her hands, and folds her short arms. She's pretty. Her eyes are serious and beautiful. 'It's Saturday, and on Saturday our best psychologists are here the really good ones. I'm going to recommend that you see Dr. Mahmoud.

He'll be in soon, and he'll be able to give you the help you need.' I have a sudden vision of Dr. Mahmoud taking me into his office, a special shrink's office within UMPC Hospital. It must be very pleasant and bare. There's probably a black couch and a wide window and some

Picassos... He'll take me up there; we'll have some emergency therapy; he'll give me the kind of trick that Dr. Ross has been unable to give me, affect the Shift, re-prescribe me

Zoloft (maybe that fast-acting Zoloft!) ...and I'll be on my way.

I said to him I love you.

But you want to know the secret to keep any woman under your spell, don't let them take over?

'Sounds like a plan.'

'Now, you have to inform your parents about where you are because when Dr. Mahmoud comes down, he's going to need them to sign for you.'

'Oh-hhhh.'

'Is that going to be a problem?'

'Yeah.'

'Are they going to be okay that you're in here?'

I sigh. 'Yes. I'm the one who's... not.'

'No. I can do it.'

'Where are your parents?'

'Like two blocks away.'

'They're together? They're supportive?'

'Don't worry, it happens to a lot of kids. It tends to be related to stress. Breathe for me, Dariez.' She puts her stethoscope by my back and has me take deep breaths, cough, the whole deal. She doesn't have to hold my balls, which is cool, because there's no door.

I look out as she's examining me. The black boy has a nurse leaning over him.

'Dr. Mahmoud will be down soon. Call your parents, please, and make sure they're here within two hours.'

Two hours. Jeez. I've got to wait two more hours?

'Gotcha.'

Dr. Data nods at me. 'We will help you.'

'Okay.' I try to smile.

She heads out. I figure that, with the parents, I should get it over with as soon as possible. I flip open my cell phone. No service in the emergency room. I walk out of Room 14 to find a payphone.

Chris rises from his chair.

'Buddy, hey, I told ya, ya gotta ask me for things. What do you need?'

I turn and look at him, eye his badge and nightstick. I realize what he is now. He's not there in general or for the ER; he's there for my protection. When you come into the hospital with a mental disability, they put a cop next to you so you don't hurt yourself.

I'm on like, suicide watch. You want to commit suicide; you call 1 800 SUICIDE; you get suicide watch.

'Ahm, I have to call my mom.'

'Not a problem. Phones are right there. Dial nine.' He nods.

The phones are like, three feet away. But Chris puts his hands on his hips and keeps a close watch as I pick up a receiver.

Hi, Mom, I'm in the hospital? No.

Hey, mom, are you sitting down? Eh.

Mom, you're not going to believe where I'm calling you from!

Nah.

'Hey, Mom,' I say when I hear her groaned hello. 'How are you?'

'Dariez! Where are you?! I just-you just woke me up and you aren't in bed! Are you okay?'

'I'm okay.'

'Are you at Kristopher's?'

'Uh ...' I suck air through my teeth. 'No, Mom. I'm not at Kristopher's.'

'Where are you?'

'I, uh... I really freaked out last night, and I was feeling really bad, and I, um, I checked myself into

UMPC Hospital.'

'Oh, my goodness.' She stops, hitches her breath. I hear her sit down, exhale. 'You ... are you okay?'

'Well, I mean I wanted to kill myself.'

'Oh, Dariez.' There's no crying, but I hear her put her face in her hands.

'I'm sorry.'

'No. No! I'm sorry. I was sleeping! I didn't know!'

'Please, Mom, how could you know?'

'I knew you were bad, but I didn't realize. What did you do?

How did you get there?'

'Don't worry. I didn't do anything. I used your book.'

'What, the Bible?'

'No, you're How to Deal with the Loss of a Love book.'

'Survive. How to Survive the Loss of a Love. Wonderful book.'

'It recommended calling the suicide hotline number in there, and I did.'

'Is that this sheet of paper by the phone?'

'Yeah, you can throw that away. They said you know ... if I was feeling like I was in an emergency, I should come to the emergency room, and I put on my shoes and came here.'

'Oh, Dariez, so you didn't do anything to yourself?' She pauses.

'No, I checked myself in.'

I hear her breath catch and I think, in my house a few blocks away, her hand is on her chest. 'I am so proud of you.' 'You are?' 'This is the bravest thing you've ever done.'

'I... thank you.'

'This is the most life-affirming thing you've ever done. You made the right decision. I love you. You're my only son and I love you. Please remember.'

'I love you too, Mom.'

'I thought I was a bad mother, but I'm a good mother if I taught you how to handle yourself. You had the tools to know what to do. That is so important. And they're going to be great over there; it's an excellent hospital. I'm coming right down-you want me to bring your dad?'

'I don't know. It might be good to just have a few kids as possible, if possible.'

'Where are you now?'

'In the emergency room. They want you to sign some forms.'

'Where are they taking you?'

'To talk with this doctor, Dr. Mahmoud.'

'And how are you feeling?'

'I don't know. Like the whole thing is unreal. I didn't really get any sleep last night.'

'Oh, Dariez-if I had known... I didn't know...' I smile. 'I love you, Mom. I have to go.' Chris is looking at me.

'I love you. I'm so proud of you.'

I hang up. My mom seems happier about me getting into the hospital that she was about me getting into high school. He leads me past the chatty Hispanic patients to a chrome-and-tile bathroom that's probably seen some bad action. He stays outside. I look around and muse at how I would kill myself in here if I really needed to- I'd have to crush my head in the toilet seat. Ouch. I haven't even seen that in a horror movie. I look at the toilet and decide to stand. I'm not going to sit down like the world's beaten up anymore. I stand, push hard, wash my hands, and step out.

'Wow, that was quick,' says Chris.

We pass My-a Joy in Room 21 on my way back. His hands are still crossed in his lap as Dr. Data tries to ask him questions.

'I tell you once: it the truth. You play that number, that number will come to you!'

The boy with the dreads is still tripping out.

I lie down. A nurse comes with a cart that threatens to have more food on it. She knocks-as if there were a door-and says she has to take my heart rate. This involves the placement, all over my body, of sticky tabs attached to wires. They don't hurt; I have a feeling they will when they come off, though. I turn to the cart as she puts them on, and a metal arm like a record needle is reading out my pulses. I watch it: a spike, then a flatter spike, then a dip and a repeat. That's you. That's your heart.

'All right,' the nurse says. She pulls the tabs off my skin. They don't hurt-the adhesive is kind and soft. My tabs hang off the cart like a tangle of roots as it rolls away. I lie doing nothing for a second, then put my shirt back on, then my hoodie. How long have I been here? I open my phone. Two-and-a-half hours.

'Mr. Gilner?'

A boy in a dark suit and a gray tie stands at the entrance to my room. He almost completely occupies it; he's large and barrel-shaped with a stately, pockmarked face, gray hair, big eyebrows, and a firm handshake.

'I am Dr. Mahmoud, yes? You are feeling how? Why are you here?'

I give him the rap.

'Are your parents here?'

'Urn, I called them but...'

'Here, okay, thanks!' I hear Mom's voice out in the ER. I put my head in my hands.

'He's here? Twenty-two?'

Dr. Mahmoud steps aside, and there's Mom, trailed by the nurse who let me in, with an overstuffed tote bag on her left arm and Jarddan in her right.

'Miss!' the nurse is yelling. 'You really can't have dogs in here!'

'What dog?' Mom asks, slipping Jarddan into the tote bag.

He pokes his head up at me and barks, then dips down.

Everyone in the ER is silent all of a sudden. Even the cracked-out boy with dreads looks at my mom. Chris approaches her; the nurse who let me in points to me - 'Wait for a second,' says Dr. Mahmoud. 'Mrs. Gilner?'

'Yes? Dariez! Oh my gosh!'

Everyone lets her into Room 14. They fan out in a three-person semicircle as she hugs me tight, the kind of hug she used to give me when I was a five-year-old, complete with swaying. Jarddan grrr's at me.

'He had to come; he was making a fuss. I love you so much,' Mom whispers into my ear, hot and full of spittle.

'I know.' I hold her back.

'Mrs. Gilner-'

'She really needs to leave with the dog,' the nurse says.

'She has a dog? Dogs are against policy,' Chris says.

'Just one second,' Dr. Mahmoud says. We all look at him.

'All right, Mrs. Gilner, since you're here, your son has checked himself in due to suicidal ideation and acute depression, you understand?'

'Yes.'

'He was on his Zoloft but he stopped taking it.' 'You did?' Mom turns to me.

'I thought I was better.' I shrug.

'Stubborn like your father. Yes, Doctor?'

'Well, the next question is for Dariez. Dariez, would you like to be admitted?'

Admitted. That probably means to the special room where I get to talk with Dr. Mahmoud. A quick visit and then I'm gone. It'll give me the feeling that I've accomplished something, that I haven't just languished in the ER.

'Yes,' I say.

'Good decision,' Mom says.

'Mrs. Gilner, you have to sign off for Dariez on that decision,' the doctor says. He swivels his clipboard, which he had been holding in front of me, toward her. There's a terrible amount of very small writing on the top half of the page and even more on the bottom half; in the middle, an equator of sorts marks where you're supposed to sign.

'There is one thing,' the doctor says. 'Right now, the hospital is undergoing renovations and we're very tight for space, so your son will be admitted with the adults.'

'I'm sorry, what?'

'He will be admitted along with our adult patients, not with the teenagers alone.'

Oh, so I'll be waiting with old kids to see Dr. Mahmoud?

'That isn't a problem,' I say.

'Good.' The doctor smiles.

'Will he be safe?' Mom asks.

'Absolutely. We have the best care in Knox here, Mrs. Gilner. The renovations are only a temporary situation.'

'All right. Dariez, you're okay with that?'

'Sure. Whatever.'

Mom puts her loopy indecipherable signature on the sheet.

'Great. We'll get everything ready for you, Dariez,' Dr.

Mahmoud says. 'You're going to feel a lot better.'

'Okay,' I shake his hand. He turns and heads out, a large suit greeting patients left and right in the ER. The nurse touches Mom's shoulder. 'I'm sorry, you really have to go with the dog, ma'am.'

'Can I give my son a bag of clothes?'

'What am I going to need clothes for?' I ask. I look in the bag: not only are there clothes, and not only are they the clothes I hate, but Jarddan is sitting on them.

'If you want to bring him items, you can bring them to the hospital later in the day,' the nurse answers. 'Where is he going to be?' Mom asks like I'm not there.

'In Six North,' the nurse answers. 'Just ask for him.

Come on.'

'I love you, Dariez.'

'Bye, Mom.'

A quick hug and she's on her way-Chris watches, with his hands on his hips. I'm really curious about his efficacy as a hospital security guard.

'What's Six North?' I ask him.

'Ah, uh, we're not supposed to be talking,' he says and sits back down with his paper. I look out the door for some news, but it's all the same. You know, this is a crappy place to be. I wish I wasn't depressed so I didn't have to be here.

'Mr. Gilner?' someone finally asks. A new boy walks up to the door, a thin, short-bearded, older hippie-looking boy-except without the long hair- with glasses. He's not wearing a white robe or a

blue robe or a cop uniform. He's wearing jeans, a blue-collared shirt, and what appears to be a leather vest.

'I'm Paullie. We're ready to take you up now.'

'There're two!' a doctor says as she passes by. 'Twenty-one and twenty-two.'

'Well, I don't have papers for Mr. Twenty-One.'

Paullie shakes his head. 'So, I'm going to be taking up

Mr. Gilner, and I'll be back down, all right? Hey, is that my-a Joy!'

'He's back' the doctor moans.

'Hey, it's Saturday, a baby. Everything is going to be all right.

Mr. Gilner?' He turns to me.

'Uh, yeah.'

'You ready to get out of this crazy place?'

'Am I going to see Dr. Mahmoud?'

'Sure. Later in the day.'

'You got this one, Paullie?' Chris asks.

'I don't think you're going to give me any trouble, are you, Mr. Gilner?'

'Um, no.'

'Okay, do you have your stuff?'

I check my bracelets, my keys, my phone, my wallet.

'Yep!'

'Let's walk.'

I hop off the stretcher, nod at Chris, and follow Paullie at his slow pace through the ER. We open a door near the bathroom and pierce a seal into an entirely different biome of the hospital red brick, indoor trees, posters of notable doctors who practiced there.

Paullie leads me through an atrium to a bank of elevators.

He hits the up button, stands by me, and nods. I notice a plaque between the two elevators, showing us what's on each floor.

- Pediatrics.
- Delivery.
- Adult Psychiatric.

Oh, he'll be up in Six North.

'Going to adult psychiatric, huh?' I ask Paullie.

'Well'-he looks at me-'you're not quite old enough for geriatric psychiatric.' And he smiles.

The elevator dings; we get in and turn around, each taking a corner. Paullie leads me left when we get to six. I pass a poster with a chubby Hispanic boy in blue robes holding his hand over his mouth: shhhhhhhh! HEALING IN PROGRESS. Then

Paullie passes some kind of card in front of two double doors, and the doors open and we walk through them.

It's an empty hallway, wide enough for a grown boy to lie across with his arms stretched up. In the end are two big windows and a collection of couches. To the right is a small office with a glass window that has inch-wide squares of thin wire embedded in it; inside, nurses sit at computers. Just beyond the office, another hall branches off to the right. I follow Paullie forward, and when we come to the crossroads of the two halls, I glance down the one to my right.

A boy stands there, leaning on the banisters that line the hall even though there are no steps. The boy is short and stocky; he has bugged-out eyes and a squashed face and an almost-but-not-quite harelip. There's fuzz coming out of his neck and a big swath of black hair on his little head. He looks at

me with homeless person eyes, like I just popped out of a butthole and offered him valuable paper clips from the moon.

Oh my God, it hits. I'm in the mental ward.

I turn to Chris and notice that the room next to him, Room 21, is now occupied. A black boy is in there, sitting upon a stretcher. He's bald, but not shaved-head bald-old bald with thin white hairs in a halo around him. His face is unshaven; his arms lie on his legs at cross-purposes. He's skinny, in sweatpants and a white T-shirt covered, from the neck down, with an unidentifiable dark stain. He turns his head toward the wall and I see a scar running from his ear down to his neck. Then he turns back to me. The only thing you can say for him is that he has all his teeth, and they're white, and he's smiling.

I slink back into Room 14 and return to watching the boy with the dreads. He's not writing anymore; apparently, the nurse gave him what he needed because he's sitting up, eyes closed, pants rolled up to his knee, scratching everything-his lower leg, chest, face- mumbling and swaying. His scratches are light and don't seem intended to actually relieve any sort of itch. He rocks back and forth at a slow rhythm that fits in with the beeps and opens his eyes about a quarter of the way every minute.

Maybe that should be me. If I were on drugs that good, maybe I wouldn't have time - to get depressed. It's heroin, right? That's what I need: some heroin. But I reconsider. First of all, it'd be pretty tough to ask my friends: Hey, who knows where I can get heroin?

They'd think it was a joke. Plus, it has the worst nicknames: 'horse,' right? How could I ask for a 'horse' with a straight face?

And, if I were doing heroin, then I'd be a depressed teenager on heroin. I didn't need to be that cliché.

'Want some breakfast?' Chris asks, and before I can say no, one of the sad yellow trays is pushed in at me. The tray has a half pint of what appears to be oatmeal, a hardboiled egg squished into a lidded Styrofoam container, a coffee (I can tell because the lid is stained with coffee,) a foil-topped couplet of orange juice, and a piece of wheat bread individually sealed from the elements.

Also, a fork, spoon, knife, salt, pepper, sugar. It disgusts me. I have no interest in any of them. But they might be monitoring me, so I open the bread and force myself to eat it strip by strip, chasing it

with orange juice. I ask one of the nurses for tea and she brings me another coffee. I sniff the coffee but it smells pretty dangerous, so, just to annoy him, I offer some to Chris.

'Got my own,' he says and holds up a popular worldwide brand of coffee. It's strange to see brand names in the hospital.

As Chris yaks on his cell phone (I'd like to know what company gives you service in here; they would like, use it on a commercial: a boy behind padded walls, 'Can you hear me now?',) Dr. Data comes back with forms for me to sign about my age and residence. She also brings forms to the older boy next to me, the one in Room 21.

'How're you doing, Joy?' she asks in there. She has to talk very loudly.

'I told-ja: it comes to ya!' he yells back in a succinct Southern voice.

She makes a tsk-tsk noise. 'How'd you get back in here, Joy?

We didn't think we would see you for a long time.'

'I, I, I woke up, and the bed was on fire.'

It's pretty clear at this point that Mom is going to be late. She's probably trying to pack me an activity bag. I should really get some sleep. I crash on the stretcher with my hoodie draped dejectedly over my head, but there are way too ~*Sped*~ thoughts in my brain. What am I going to do? It's starting to hit me under there. I'm in the hospital. I'm supposed to do stuff tonight. There's a party-a big one-at Kristopher's house. Am I going to be able to go? And if I don't go, what will I say? And what's the alternative? Will I stay home and try to work but not be able to and end up with another sleepless night? I can't have another sleepless night. How do you know when you've hit bottom? The real bottom involves being on the street, I think, not in a hospital. But the Cycling is starting and I can't deal with it and it feels like the bottom. I sit up, throw the hoodie off.

'Can I use the bathroom?' I ask Chris.

And then we ran for it she and I-

I wanted to:

Kiss my little sister.

Kiss my dad.

Make out with Joy.

Make out with her more...

She and I both got what we really needed to live... me that was death her me!

Dariez and Joy- had their happy ever after, kind of...

I do- and her mom and dad blame me...

Yet, they think she is still alive, yet she has a known live here and there, yet is one of us, and now she looks over Joy, and is her angel on Earth and studying magic with us.

Nevaeh

Book: 43

Ash Angel

Part: 1

Preface:

I have been left behind-

'One death won't change a world-mind, I don't want to be another left behind, sorry mom's- I did not want it this way, but what good is life, if it will never- change?

You like me cannot deny the life that you live... like sometimes were- I try to rhyme, about being left behind- and, just like you girl- I know that you have, let it all out; I stay strapped with gangs, and bitches, I walk into the school see them all, I am wanting to be cool, yet making a fool, I am so lame, and they're so cool, just want to drown the ass in the Barnesboro pool.

Converse's covered in mud, now blood, making a tear flood, and I go bake to my table, laugh at me like I am the lent of the navel. So-o I get up in the morning, just seeing the old man snoring, just to see my only friend, there is not one... those teachers, I break their wrist make a fist and shove the kids in their own lockers, look at me you would never think I would do such a crime, yet I have been left behind.'

'So-o, you hate me, and I hate you- and you don't know, just what I go through, and you get love, and I get hate, don't ask for forgiveness, for it's far too late.'

~Dariez~

(Back to where Naddalin said I am taking her...)

'Somewhere in this world little girls' fan-ie was going up and down on a big girl thing, like this one here, in her room, even so, it was not worth losing her she said to him... I blame you, and it's just a wand not that, this here is that and she holds it after snooping her room out- so-o and even so-o, she a 14-year- old girl, that has never sinned in her life, and God posted on the cross, so even if we did sin, it was not looked at by him as bad, that was why he did... so what that say... she doing nothing wrong- by being- GIRL. Little girls have a feeling that needs out...'

The big mean man was crying like a baby at her feet... thinking Dariez, may not make it come back...

She said the 'And you want to say that your oh-h so-o holy, as a man you're not I know that you have been looking at this girl while she was nude in her bed frapping, so, Mr. you want to say you're not sinful, I know that you did, I know that you're like pissed about it, over the fact, I think and feel that was not your penis that was the first inside her, I know your feelings for her, and you want to say she has more sin then you, Mr. your wrong, I should leave you- I should... I wanted more for her then her sucking men of just to live after she was 18, dancing around on dicks, just to make it, for food and a piece to lie her head, at night, and working in some dump of a bar like I did when I was a girl- I want more for her than some man like you, saying what she can and cannot do when it was her life and her

body... and even her soul! And I am happy for her, doing what she did now, I understand, you're in the wrong...'

At that moment, the- wineglass Aunt Marge was holding exploded in the hands, with loss of control, of remembering her days as one of them too. Shards of glass flew in every direction and Aunt Marge sputtered with words that were not words and blinked repeatedly, her face blushed, as she is remembering her own powers.

Marge!

She squealed Aunt Jennath.

Marge, are you, all right?

-Then-

Not to worry, and grunted Aunt Marge, mopping her face with her top, showing belly button skin. And Must have squeezed it too hard. She- did the same thing at Colonel Fibster's the- another day, and a plat moved and broke. No need to fuss, Jennath, I have a very firm grip... on this one... she proud a new glass of wine, and was about to put it down, and she did and then.

Aunt Jennath And Uncle Read they were both looking at Naddalin suspiciously- back for the long weekend, when she made the glass of wind go in reverse like, from when it shattered back to being in her hand- fixing itself, saying whispering words like in slurs, so she- decided she'd better skip dessert and escape from the- table as soon as she- could, before calling the evil child- yet once more.

(Back at the school it's a Tuesday, that feels like a Monday.)

Outside in the- hall, she- leaned against the- wall, breathing deeply. It had been a long time since she had lost control and made something explode. Naddalin knew it was her doing.

She- couldn't afford to let it happen again, this time she was in her bad, and made it seem like it was all her, yet she knew better.

The- Claepsiara, Skoufyceol of Wizardry and the Fallen, the form wasn't the- only thing at stake, Dariez was too, like- if she- carried on like that, she'd be in trouble with the- Bureau of Magic.

Naddalin was still an underage as magician and angel, and she- was forbidden by sorcerer law to do magic outside the village of Hayvannahol.

The record was not exactly clean either. Only last summer she had gotten an authorized cautionary that had said quite evidently that if the- Bureau got wind of any more magic in Privet Drive, Naddalin would face dismissal from the school.

She heard the Bureau of them all leaving the- table and hurried upstairs out of the- way. Naddalin got through the- next three days by forcing herself to think about the Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Wing care whenever Aunt Marge started on her, it was like homework yet not, it was kinda fun even to read about. She worked relatively- well, though it seemed to give her a glazed look, for the reason that- Aunt Marge started voicing the- opinion that she- was emotionally poor.

At last, at long last, the- final evening of Marge's stay arrived, it seemed a long time coming, did it not? Yes- yes, it did- I feel- um and -ah- too.

Aunt Jennath cooked a fancy dinner and Uncle Read uncorked several bottles of wine. They got all the- way through the- consommé and her- salmon without a solitary mention of Naddalin's faults; during the- lemon meringue pie, Uncle Read bored them a with a long talk about Sterling's, the continuous mining company up in the village of Alverda, just past Carrolltown; then Aunt Jennath made coffee for, Uncle Read, and give him the paper, and carried out a bottle of brandy, your one granddaddy did that back way on back when, his name was Chiaz, yet somehow down the line, his last name was forgotten about, and your grandma oh so-o many years back with bake to her maiden name.

Also, can I lure you, Marge?

-And-

Aunt Marge had already had relatively a- lot of wine, and she was slurring her speech. Her huge face was very red. Than Just a small one, then, and she- chuckled like a young schoolgirl. And A bit more than that... Besides a bit more... that's the- ticket.

-Besides-

Dariez was eating her fourth slice of pie, and Aunt Jennath was sipping coffee with her little finger sticking out of the handle. Naddalin really wanted to disappear into the bedroom, but she- met Uncle Read's angry little eyes and knew she- would have to sit it out.

Furthermore, Aunt Marge said, 'Aah,' rubbing her lips, on the rim of the glass, and putting the- empty brandy crystal glass back down. And Excellent nosh, Jennath.

'It's normally just a normal long day for me, of an evening, with twelve kids mine or not running around to look after...' She- burped richly, and patted the dog, in her lap. Yet this is what I love to do is cooking and cleaning and tending to young ones. Nonetheless, I do like to see a healthy- girl, and she'd- went on, winking towards Dariez, how was running around, with the others act far too young for her true age.

...And, you will be a prophesized lady, like your daddy- and more importantly.

'Yes, I'll have a spot more brandy, read... thank you!'

-Besides-

Correspondingly, now- she one there -at that moment, she- jerked her head at Naddalin, who felt she puppy's nails clench into her skin of her freshly shaved legs- grate even more cuts... she mumbled, well holding her hands of books in all that is enchantment, she- thought quickly, about getting up and then the puppy fell asleep in her lap and it was nice.

Naddalin was trying to remember page fourteen of the book: A Charm to Remedy Unenthusiastic Reversers'.

At that moment seeing the blood dripping from her gashing legs, she thought it... all comes down to red blood- no? And she was bleeding again, as I was saying the- another day- about, in my work. Bad blood will itself out...!

Now, I'm saying nothing against your family, she'd- patted Aunt Jennath's lanky hands with a swoop, along with saying something on the lines of, your cousin is a bad egg, this magic that you are looking in to is of the devil, see these card, it an old set of cards that were your grandmothers, yet that made her go mad looking into them more than seven times a day, think they were helping her, find her way, when really it was all an illusion with fifty-fifty chance of probability either way, of what you want to believe.

Naddalin got up and rolled her eyes and said, 'bull shit,' 'They turn up in her- best families, too and are charity cases that free-load, or the fact that they are a simpleton.' Then she'd- ran off with a wastrel and here's the- result right in front of us.'

-Above and beyond-

Naddalin was staring at the plate, a funny ringing in the ears, and then she could hear the voices- even if holding her ear and looking rude to them, it was not their voices in her head it was them- you know them.

I's am- grasp my bum firmly, she- thought, and run, as if you have girlie problems, and go for the bathroom and let them talk to you thought your own mouth- were they here you at of these mind body and soul too alike, linked like, it is trafficking walking around in your body that is rightfully yours yet is no longer, in life- and knowing that is not you doing it is them- and you don't really know whom- they are, and they could kill, by moving your own body to do say, if they wanted- and not really remember the way and where, and make it looks as if it was self-inflicted death or harm, makes you look nuts no? yet it's them, 4 voices, and one power over me. All the time, it never ends, chatter- chatter- yelling and whispers too. But she- couldn't remember what came next, even if the said- was going to do, even if she said to do this or that if she did or they did for her, she was so confused, her mind was not her own- nor- figure, personality, character, nature, behavior, disposition, and most of all temperament.

Aunt Marge's voice seemed to be boring into her like one of Uncle Read's drills.

Besides she-, she said Aunt Marge loudly, seizing the- brandy bottle, tightly and splashing it about in the bottle more into the glasses, she was swishing it around so drunkenly that it was spraying out and over the blue and white tablecloth, and you never- ever... ever- never- like told me what he- did for a living?

'...And's- and's now's I's know's,' she said slurringly.

-And-

Uncle Read and Aunt Jennath were looking extremely tense. Dariez had even looked up from her pie, and that was big for her to do that when it came to sweets, to gawk at her parents.

At that time, he- didn't work, she thought, said Uncle Read, with half a glance at Naddalin, who was still unemployed, and in her second year of what would be a high school for a normal girl her age, yet she is to mental- is she not? '...To do the nigger work, that blacks used to do for white people,' 'I can see that, you still have the confederate flag hang from your porch,' said Naddalin, getting red in the

face with all the- just wrong- slurs that were being said. 'Honey-hush- even they know how to scrub a floor down on their hands and knees, unlike you and your dim-witted ways.'

'I sure that you have spent quite a- lot of time on yours... down on your knees that is...!' Said Naddalin, smirking.

-And-

And as I expected, 'I' am the bad girl-' 'I' am not THE BAD GIRL!'

And then said, Aunt Marge, taken a huge swig of brandy and wiping her chin, looking for to inappropriate, just after Naddalin pun.

And A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger who-

-And-

And she- was not, said Naddalin suddenly over and over, with her famous saying.

The- table went very- very quiet, and Naddalin was shaking all over, with her getting her ass chewed out and completely- butt reamed, and all the things said, about others, and races too, and smarts, of others that did not match- her leave of genus- only she thought she had, you know the type all- run at the mouth, yet nothing said, to walk away with.

She- had never felt so angry in life, yet she was the one- um, that was being all ever name in the book.

There is too much and with or for law in a lawless country, and they wonder why cops are being shot, they will not do anything about, it- it being everything that is a slur to you and me, and I sorry I am for the minorities' I always felt as if I was one.

I had to google...

Part: 2

The Bill of Rights:

'Mmmm-kay-'

The United States Constitution has 27 Amendments.

'Cool, I thought... The first 10 Amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights, really? The Bill of Rights was approved, or, in 1791, and I care why? Yet is said- It outlines the basic rights and freedoms of American citizens, um- hum sure it does.'

We the girls of this book feel this way-

Amendment 1

The First Amendment protects the rights of every American. It defines the freedoms of religion, speech, and press. Most Americans believe that the First Amendment guarantees their most important rights.

- 'Speech- I would say this is a good thing, yet when do you draw the line, here I would say to a cop of law in my hometown that has their own, and can't read the book that stats the law in which they say they flow when doing you for example: call some retarded to their face, more than ten times, when do you do something about it? Who do we blame, you blame me the BAD GIRL would you not?'

- 'Press- these days would be nothing but Facebook- and online crap, would it not? It's not read worlds of news and news of slandering one another until that are harassed and bullied and stocked and hanging on a rope... Others calling another faggot, and nonsensical thing like that, that is not true yet become believed over the fact that they only have a second-grade education- yet what do you expect when they are told to be happy that have that... and post lines of text, that are not even words or sentences.'

- 'Religion- what's that? And- even if you do have one, OMG- don't say or off goes your head, and you would piss off the atheist's and get a long drawn out speech about evolution...'

'Yep, that about sums it up just fine in a Pennsylvania small town.'

Amendment 2

The Second Amendment guarantees Americans the right to bear arms, or own guns.

- 'Guns- That why you can go to a school with an AK-47 and spray for fame, yet I do not blame you for you don't have an education, over others saying you can't handle it. And have no law- yet, again to say you can't wave a gun in my face, it there right to do so-o. it is every man for themselves and do even get me to start on women's rights and how there is not any. They will not give you a pencil, over

they- like your schooling system doesn't have the money, yet maybe they will let you have a gun, so you can blast them in the head for not teaching you anything, and not having enough wet about you to know any better, only in 'America...' and spell that, ah- you can't, other counties are giggling at us!'

Amendment 3

The Third Amendment prevents the government from forcing citizens to shelter soldiers in their homes.

- 'What?'

'And... this should not matter- and the why? And I say this- over the fact we have no understanding of any world wars anyways, nor do the kids, I want to school with before, I left there forever, and found a place where they care about girls and their thoughts. And at this point, you say this 'GAY' and stop reading! It all bull shit, and I don't care... and say this is all over the no child left behind... act!'

'Yep... yep! ...YET, SHOULD IT

BE US- WE- YOU AND I, TO BE

GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN

INNOCENT?'

Amendment 4

The Fourth Amendment protects the privacy of American citizens.

- 'Like taking a photograph is now a felony, FOR SOME AND NOT OTHERS. Over more and- and or, being the way out, privacy there is no such thing... I am sorry if your someone, that was or is like stocked like a celebrity, before leaving this world! It prohibits, or prevents, unnecessary or unreasonable searches of a person's property- sure- sure it does.'

Amendment 5

In the Fifth Amendment, all Americans are guaranteed the right to a fair and legal trial. It also protects someone from testifying against him- or herself under oath.

- 'Um-mm- I don't believe that for a moment my- freaking time; more like- by 12 of their town people, that hate you for you, saying your this and that, all lies believe over there too simple to think, yet they make it so you're the BAD GIRL, or paid off by a school to hush up... just for instance... so if you're like me and I know that you are- you're guilty until proven innocent! If you are like me you don't have a trial, that would say you should be happy we don't take you away, for what you are, more press of what was never confidential, oath there no God to kids my age so- go suck something- long and hard. Then have a population of 3,000 say everything they need and your F*CKED! And they think you can't read, write, or spell or do math with fingers and toes, and the press documents make you more than a dumb shit that- the man behind the desk with a gavel would roll his eyes at you and say don't waste my time, funny is not like he could be your school superintendent or something like I had.'

'They say- 'I have lost my mind, at this point-' yet I have something to say back to that, 'I never had one to lose- so there...''

Amendment 6

- A right to a speedy trial is guaranteed by the Sixth Amendment.

'More like piss and flap your dick in my face, and hit- the- door, that if you can find it, without help!' 'See- see that sing there would say exit- in red- it's lighting up, just so ya know!'

Amendment 7

- The Seventh Amendment

guarantees the right to a trial by jury in civil, or private, legal cases where damages are more than $20. Civil cases solve disputes between citizens.

'Okay that is everything in my town- the card I have to play, yet there is no time for- someone like me... I already know when the cops are independent, and say and do- what that want to say- and do, and the system rigged within the names of the towns- and a county that well stays names that, I am part of over and- and or suits they could give me for saying truths. Good luck...'

Amendment 8

- Unreasonable bail or fines and cruel and unusual punishment are prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

'Is that English...? I don't know that this is saying so I am going to take it as disrespect as you would too- if you're my age.' 'Nope sit and rot is what I got, just like her and she too, and maybe you also.'

Amendment 9

- The Ninth Amendment recognizes that Americans have rights that are not listed in the Constitution.

'And that is and that is what now?'

'In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote... 'Yep glad to see we have something.'

Amendment 10

The Tenth Amendment says that the powers not given to the United States government by the Constitution belong to the states or to the people.

And labor law ha, that a joke makes nothing, get pissed on if you can find work, with your background of nothing, and have old-timers say you're a waste of life when you can't make a change. You have to be certified or have a degree, yet get one... making Big Macs is what they say to do or if your smart and know where the money is an internet-nudist, I deserve more... or hit the military table, or drop out, or do what I did kill yourself as my school counselor said to do.

'I disagree... and that maybe some of the issues, when they're all fighting with the man in power.' And the world is a deplorable disgrace, to the Earth and the USA people.'

'Yep, I'll be moving to Canada...'

Ash angel: 2

Part: 1

Another Chapter in My Book of Life

...And, MORE BRANDY!

...And, more of me being the bad girl of what did you do...

...And, they start it and your fault...

...Yet, they see only what they want to see...

...Yet, that is my life, not just home all around town too...

...And, then yelled Uncle Read, who had gone very- white in the body and face.

She- emptied the- bottle into Aunt Marge's glass, I knew if they keep drinking someone would get their face stabbed off, with a small pocket knife. It starts with love and ends with passionate hate, then us girls take the brunt of the stabbing in other ways, as they snarled at me Naddalin, and say-

'Go to bed! '...Go on!'

-And-

No, Read, I said, I am not a little girl, yet that is when he said- 'yet you have the intellect of one so-o go-o to your room, now.' 'BUT - BU- T... awe- you're hiccupped... go cry to dead mommy and daddy, and we all know, you don't have a right to be more than a baby... and treated as such!!!' Aunt Marge, said, holding up her left hands, in an authoritative way. Her tiny bloodshot eyes fixed on Naddalin's, looking at her as if she could murder. Her tiny eyes welling up, yet hold back to be a strong girl, that she knew inside... that she was even if, said not so-o over and over.

'Go on, girl to bed.'

Naddalin- Proud of your parents, are you, girls, you should be there nothing but worthless alcoholics! They're going to get themselves killed in a car crash being this drunk, one of these days, you'll see, they well, like a girl I knew that almost did...

-And-

Them- 'And they- like the girl, didn't die in a car crash, or she would not be here!'

Naddalin- 'You don't know half of what you think you do!' ...And who found herself on her feet in- front of them all as if it was a civil court case.

Them- 'She did not die in a car crash and see the light and come back, you're a nasty little liar!'

Look- look and now left you to be a burden on them- mm-mm- mm-mm, hardworking relatives, taking in dumb ass-ed shit'n trash, that can't read write or spell, with her special needs program!

Then shrieked Aunt Marge, swelling with vehemence. Besides- You are so-oo insolent ant' yah, ungrateful little brat.

-And-

But Aunt Marge suddenly stopped speaking. For a moment, it looked as though words had failed her altogether. She- seemed to be swelling, some with inexpressible anger - but she- swelling didn't stop, in her read face. Her prodigious enflamed face started to swell until she was losing air, her tiny eyes stick out as if she was possessed, and her mouth stretched all evil like, and like fare too tightly for speech- next additional moments went by and then, several buttons were opened by her to breathe, as if she was going bust out of her old holy jacket, that stuck to high heavens, like dog shit and her own bad-smelling piss and woman-ness- ness- ness. And sounded off the- walls, she was letting outgas, and it was horrid. And I did what they said finally, or be completely gassed- like a girl in a concentration camp, killed by the 'stank,' so I left the room- and when to mine, waving my hand back and forth just slightly by my little picture-perfect nose.

MARGE...!

She was yelling for Uncle Read, and Aunt Jennath together as Aunt Marge's whole body began to rise off the chair toward the- ceiling, I could see that Dariez had found her inner power, she had enough too.

She- was completely plump, yet more even than before, and everyone in the room was under her cast- yet, Dariez was overpowering her, now, and her hands, then feet stuck out weirdly as she- floated up into the- air, making angry bursting noises until her head exploded all over the walls- like a busted piñata full of candy; with brains and goo- splattering everything, and the puppy's started liking it up- is if it was their candy. -And-

NO-OOOOOO!

-Besides-

That night after I and she got so ticked off that me and Dariez, chipped together and bought an adorable tiny house, all white on the inside with all the things too girls would ever need up in the loft bedrooms, for us both, to live, cute and more room than you would think at 20 x 20 in and placed it in the backyard, also a Victorian. It was time that I got my own place, yet not to far away, yet away... right next to the old tracks, under the tree, that is way taller.

There is nothing more pretty than a girl's pussy full of her c*mming and she drips it out, I can see Dariez for my room, and it's okay, she a girl and a cute one at that so-o... everything these days with girls are open what not, what dirty about a girl's body feeling good and her feeling good - I ask?

(Back)

Uncle Read apprehended one of Marge's feet and tried to pull her body down from floating in the air all headless, nonetheless was practical- elevated from the- floor herself. A second later, the puppy dove forward on her and started to lick her even more than before, and descended her teeth into Uncle Read's leg, when he tried pulling her off her.

Naddalin tore away running from the- dining room before anyone could stop her, heading for the- cubbyhole under the- stairs. The- cubbyhole door burst magically open as she- reached it, think this may be the last time I see it. In minutes, she- had dumped the trunk to the- front door.

She- sprinted upstairs and threw herself under the- bed, getting her hands on anything she could say is mine- to take without say of this or that not being so-o, spraining up the- loose floorboard, and grabbing all the pillowcase off her bad too though in her belongings, full of the books - that she never read yet did, and birthday presents too, for the others, not them - yet they never really gave her anything, over all the years- it took what you could.

She- wriggled out, seized Baby Raven's empty cage, and dashed back downstairs to her trunk, just as Uncle Read burst out of the- dining room, she trouser leg in bloody tatters, I am getting my own place, and I am taking this little girl with me too, and don't say anything or I will run away with her, and you can get charges for the- why of it all when I say what goes on here.

'OH, NO YOUR NOT, and COME BACK IN HERE NOW- I say!' She- hollered- 'COME BACK, I make it right with you.'

But a reckless rage had come over Naddalin, and Naddalin holding Dariez hand pulled her, and even harder way... saying you're not going to have a life like this... She - kicked the trunk open, pulled out her wand, and pointed it at Uncle Read, and her to charming them into thinking this was all a-okay to do, saying it's for the best- trust me, you don't want a life like a girl I once knew - she was a- lot like me, she was saying as they were waking the tracks Naddalin on the left rail and Dariez on the right, to town hand and hand linked in the middle, the sun rays shining on them at sundown.

-And-

(Up to the point of going to town, where I said we'll have a home, when not at school, and magically three-grand showed in her hand, saying see, as they walked to a place where they made tine homes, to order, Naddalin using a fast forward spell, she made a week go by, with them, to have it there within the night.)

And she would- deserved it, did she not, so don't feel bad about it, Naddalin said, breathing very fast. She would- deserved what she'd- got.

'You keep away next to me - always.'

-And-

Naddalin- She- rummaged behind her for the - latch on the - door, to their cute new little home, that was somewhat of an indentation, to a nook, that had windows wrapping around. And I'm going, said Naddalin, coming? And I've had enough excitement for one -day so-o... yeah.

-Also-

Then in the - next moment, she - was out in the - dark, quiet street, heaving the heavy trunk behind her, with Baby Raven's cage under her arm.

Well then, said Dorezblumd finally, and that's that, you have a new home - then, I will document this event for our records.

We have got no business staying there... here in the backyard with this home, even if...

We may as well go... in and have celebrations, first meal.

It was funny to see the land grow before my eyes- thought Dariez- into this 50' x 100' plot of land and them home within, and- in size, that was not there before, yet magical it was now, Naddalin made happen with her wand, making them think also by charming them with a spell that it was a line of acquiescence, that was something they just had and ever need to pay for it was just given land- that there were dumbfounded over- being there, so in front of their home now is owners, and there is nothing they can or will do about it.

-Besides-

Besides saying 'yeah,' then in a very muffled voice, in on belief. And I'll be takin' Trirus the bike back, you don't need to work any longer as at your age as something as dumb as a papergirl for a $1.50, over summer, just to give it all to them.

G'night, Professor Pattergirl - Professor Dorezblumd, sir, now back at the school, with all the children gone, it was to quiet- too quiet.

Then and there she was wiping tears streaming from her eyes onto her jacket sleeve, looking at her new home and room, that was aloft a big step up in her world of filth.

Then swung herself onto the- bicycle, that was not her she said I go give this to him now and walk back, then she kicked the- 1921 engine; with a roar, it rose, and off into the- night.

Above and beyond, that all- I shall see you soon, I expect... 'yes, yes' she said with a sweet smile. Professor Pattergirl knew this and so did Dorezblumd, nodding for the go-ahead to do so-o, for me to look after her and so on, it all was approved.

Professor Pattergirl blew her nose in reply, saying- 'awe this is sweet- is it not, looking around the tiny- house.'

Dorezblumd turned and walked back down the- street, with the two girls saying keep this nice and were fine with it, you girls need a stable home interment. On the- corner she- stopped and took out the- hoary light-exterior, as the lights were about to flicker on. It was now nightfall, and she was off, Dorezblumd did not really want to be seen, clicked it once- beforehand, and fourteen balls of light flew back to their street lamps post. So that tree-lined driveway that wound about glowed suddenly orange, as it did ever so many years back, and she- could make out a shadow person slinking around the- corner at the other end of the- street.

(Forward)

Dorezblumd - could just see the- bundle of blankets on the- step of number four, for them too now keep as a gift, there were heading for the train car, for them to go back home, now that the girls were- set. And good luck, Naddalin, they- murmured, as they were all next to the train to set off. She- turned on her heel as they walked up the steps to the car, and with a swish of Dorezblumd Robe, they- were gone inside, and the steam from the wheels was overtaking them, whispering around them as the train pulled away.

A breeze ruffled the- old tree with plant life in shades of webbed like- greens of the leaves of angle oak, that would sway and hangs down on the limbs, in the slight gusts of breeze, in the dim, light a wondrous sight to behold, with covering branches that lie on the ground, that cover every which way, with moss. On the shadow covered pathway showing the figures of all the leaves as they dance about, and green tall grasses which lay silent and tidy under her- blue inky sky, the- very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen.

Naddalin - rolled over inside her blankets without waking up, odd for her being a light sleeper, yet this new blanket made her feel safe for some reason.

Dariez- one small hand closed on the- letter beside her, night said, apart to add to her book of life, like a story of another chapter within her book of life, and she - slept on it hoping to have dreams that would add to it that were even more beautiful than reality, not knowing she - was special, even if she was. Like and then not knowing she- was going to be famous a Naddalin, not knowing she - would be woken in a few hours... back to where magic, enchantment, fairy-tale's is the only thing that matters.' Natalie's scream as she- opened the- front door to put out the- milk bottles, seeing the remains of her laying in the yard... after the exploding head thing... she hardly made a wish in her mind and time move forward, with light being distorted, by that time Mr.S, walked out of the castle we were there walking towards her, the long weekend was over.

Nor would spend have to spend the- next few weeks being nudged and pinched by her cousin Alisha... that wanted to sleepover in the new house, it may have been a day yet felt like time was moving slower.

She- couldn't know that, like at the very moment, individuals meeting in secret all over the - country were holding up their glasses and saying in almost silent voices:

To Naddalin- the- girl who survived!

-And-

As she- passed the- door to the- living room... Naddalin caught a glimpse of Uncle Read and Dariez, he was taking out her ribbon in her hair, sweetly trying to get back in with her, yet it was never- ever- ever going to work.

She- had only just reached the- upstairs landing when she- the doorbell rang and Uncle Read's furious face appeared at the- foot of the- stairs. Naddalin was several streets away before she- collapsed, on her way back to her new home, panting from the- effort of moving all that belonged to two girls out of her home to her new one. She- sat quite still, anger still surging through her over it all, listening to the- frantic thumping of her once still hart.

But after ten minutes or so-o alone in the- shadowy dark street, a new emotion overtook her mind body and soul- a fear, more than any that she has in the past days of days. Either way she- looked at it, she- had never been in a worse solution- never.

She- was stranded, quite alone, in the- dark nonmagical people world, with absolutely nowhere to go or run, yet she felt as if she needs to run- yet nowhere to go in was all in her mind the voices. Besides the- worst of it was, she- had just serious magic on her mind, and she knew not to use this in this world, maybe that is why she was feeling as she was? Which meant that she- was almost certainly expelled from at the school for girls, for doing what she did, yet it was all okay, she knew when they got back on the train, so why all the character in her head of saying that was WRONG MISS-ie.

She- had broken the- Pronouncement for the- Constraint of Youthful Wizardry so badly, she- was surprised Bureau of Magic assemblies were not swooping down on her where she- parked her behind. Naddalin trembled, falling as she was walking towards the new home-based, for her and the girl she was taken under her wings and looked up at the crescent moon wondering if her life was ending, over this all, that this was wrong of her. Was her life now ending to save hers, she wondered and thought...?

What, was going to happen to her?

Wonder, wonder, wonder...

Part: 2

Would she- be arrested, or would she- simply be outlawed from the- wizarding world, and made to die so she could live on?

In a way that is what she thought would happen as she blacked out...

She- thought of Jinger And Emmah, Emmah the most, as her life and past ones flashed before her fast and yet slow too... And her heart quivered, in the body that she now owns on this Earth, and yet felt as if it was even lower, then before falling to her feet even more.

Naddalin was sure that, criminal or not, Jinger And Emmah would want to help her now, life on, but they were both abroad, back, and with Baby Raven's gone to, she- had no means of contacting them back here where she lay on the driveway. She- didn't have any money, either... even if she was able to make it somewhere, or even back to the tiny home, it seemed that all that she had was stiped away from her.

There was a little entertainer money from the other world in her- bag that she had in her trunk if she could get the strength to get there; but the- rest of her- fortune, was her parents that was left to her, she had left her was stored in a vault at Buchanan Wizarding Bank in Pennsylvania, a week ago know this all, a links to their world through with tubes of teleporting, people not money- to their inheritance, within big tubes going down, yet with a whooshing of pink-red-sh licked add for safety, that was backlight, like a waterslide to the Underworld, of banking. She never is able to drag the trunk all the- way to Pennsylvania, 'till now, she was going to have more money than she knew what to do with... when she came of age, in this body she was in...

Unless... she passed it down... not knowing... she- looked down at her hands with all the power she once had, a wing within her feeling like they were dying and about to fall off. Which she- was still clutching in the hands, the falling feathers, graying and blood covered. If she- was already expelled (the heart was now thumping painfully fast, as if she was all human all over again.) A bit more magic could not hurt... right?

Part: 3

She- had she- inconspicuousness negligee one in the first place to hid from all that was around her, she- had inherited from her daddy, that was smart in picking that over all others, what if she- bewitched? The- Negligee also make her feel close to her late daddy, tied to her wrist was a ribbon, this was all that covered herself until she got back. There was no one that was going to help here in

Pennsylvania? Then she- could get the- rest of the money out of the vault and... if only she had the mind and strength to at this very moment. Outcast begins her life as always and ever she thought, weekly.

It was a horrifying panorama, to think this may be her last days of days, to life on... but she- could not lay in the street forever, or she would find herself trying to explain to nonmagical people police, why she was half nude, sleeping in the street, and brain dead to them, with- and or's- that was... misunderstandings. And- that do nothing but harass the innocent, making bull shit charges for you to have to face, making me- the bad girl like ways- only seeing what they want to see- not the truth- or way of law- but their own made up of dimwitted minds at the time, dumb shit's that can't even mumble, your name, they are; asking dumb question of -why?

Like why she- was out in the- dead of night with a trunk full of spell books, and all her stuff made them think she was a slut run away, and a busted pillow... littering as well.

The give her a run-on of charges, that she would have to face... and dragged her home lags dangling, as she was drunk, as with they thought. Then it was- the next morning and she snapped awake, she was in her bed as if nothing happened. Naddalin opened the trunk again and pushed the- fillings aside, looking for she- Inconspicuousness Negligee- it was confiscated, she thought but before she- had found it, she- straightened up suddenly, looking around her once more, it was on the floor of her new loft bedroom, and Dariez looking at her from a-crossed the way as if she lost it.

A funny itchiness on her- back, and butt that she was skating inappropriately for a lady had made Naddalin feel she- was being watched- as if she was a celebrity- by all them, but the- street appeared to be deserted- and her home was all her own with the girl she took under her wings- and about that too- she thought... what if they fell off, and never going to have them back. And no lights stand out outside the houses, yet she felt those eyes upon her- as if she was the girl from the story- chosen, and tricked into giving in.

She- bent over the trunk again, her undies flying a crossed the room as she was pulling all the things that were cute out- that did not seem all that important to her now, but almost immediately stood up once more, her hands clenched on the crystal ball, that Dariez had discovered, days before saying, this is not a toy, she said 'I know I could see a girl like you within it...'

Naddalin- 'Yah I know that girl well, and so well you someday, yet in time- in time.'

She- had sensed rather than heard it, it was a like a lightning bolt jumped from her hand to the ball as she touched it giving of high voltage of power back to her to live: she ran back outside, with her hand and arm stitched out with the ball in her palm to the heavens above in cold shades of grays, and the storm string above, with moody clouds, moved fast, the blot of life hit her, knocking her to the ground, looking fried, to Dariez who ran to her and not long after, this crystal ball ounces belong to-them... she muttered, her- it was her... and this was how she was the most evil of all them then. 'Very dark and very powerful, it is...' she whispered to her... as she was more than okay to live on, with bark life now given to her. And then and there someone or something was standing in the- narrow gap between the- garage and falling down fence behind her, it had to be one them as a haunt of the past, knowing- it had to be- but which one?

Naddalin squinted at the- black driveway that was closing out by all the trees.

If only she knew if this shadow was a girl, or if it would move like a girl's figure, would move, then she would know, what it was, or if it was something like a stray cat or- something else, that also was completely harmless.

And then Naddalin muttered- saying take it to hold on to it and never let it go, then a light appeared within the ball getting brighter and brighter till glowed, like a light bulb, almost dazzling Dariez, and her face and eyes were totally locked and fixed on it with phenomenon, she was becoming the next in the line of the most powerful- of the fallen. She- held it high over the head- now with both hands as the rain no poured down her, suddenly it sparkled; with- with orange hora's, as she was standing in front of the garage door gleaming with her newfound strength to do anything, Naddalin said- 'know-longer well you be a simpleton just to be pissed on... no longer feeling as if you- like you're in ass-backwardsville- she thought.'

Then between them, Naddalin saw, quite distinctly, the- small outline of something very, with gleaming eyes. The fear with-in her was more now than ever- think it was one of them, no that they may have found her out and hand no straight left.

Naddalin stepped backward, saying they will be after you... yet don't let that stop you, learn as much as you can and see as much as you can, I am looking out for you, now they're after me, don't ask why, found out the way for yourself.

Dariez- she started to cray and said-

'Okay.'

Part: 4

With a yell, she- rolled back and forth on the pavement, just in time. Naddalin had just been lying there doing such. Her legs went a week and Dariez hit the trunk falling down onto it, it was if she was dying... you would think, she placed the glass ball down, and it rolled out of her hands. Then she flung her arms out to hold her... not break her fall at all as she did it she hit the ground hard for her, and she- landed, hard, in the- gutter with her thinking she was going to die! There was a deafening sonic BANG, that was made after, the delay of her body getting stuck, and Naddalin threw up her hands to shield the eyes from a sudden blinding light... of the crystal ball. It was the shadow of her larking for the ball to get life back, even if that life is one of us, I knew it I could feel it.

They went, as Naddalin saw them- rise above her dementing her, like hounds, and sucking the life out of her mind through her head; they were pulling the power from her, she was trembling as she was dying, as much as they could get.

A double-decker CAM tram bus in blue was aggressively driving as it went by her... which had appeared out of thin air, so it seemed as it rushed down the driveway as if it was ripping and pulling at the dark shadowy trees. Gold lettering over the- windshield spelled The- Knight Bus, to the station, the only way Naddalin could be saved is if they would get her back to the school, to restore, her strength, it was called the moment that she was hit, they knew and saw this happens, though her mind body and soul. For a split second, Naddalin wondered if she- had been knocked silly by the fall, as she was being taken on to the blue bus, she was babbling, about things that just did not make any sense, things that happen within that girl's life and story, details that she should not understand.

Then at the decerped train station, the steaming train rush in so close to using that you could feel the heat of the steam, and the conductor in a black uniform leaped out and began to speak loudly to the- night, saying don't waste time. Of course, Dariez was tagging slightly behind... odd it was number 13, it was taking her even fastback... to here she could be fixed, they hoped.

-And-

Welcome to the- Knight train, 13 back to your home away from home, emergency transport, for you they said this was life or death so we're going to move, and the track is bumpy, for the - Marooned fallen girl or wizard just stick out your hands, step onboard miss, he said to Dariez whom was

very- very worried, and she did and the train started to take off before her footing was all the way on the footstep of the train car, and we can take you anywhere, with this line, you want to go, that is when Dariez said 'I know- I am the one that owns this train.' 'Really- you- like you're just a child.' She just glared... not mean, yet not in the mood...

'Yes, well then... my name is Stan Shunpikes, and I will be your conductor, the duration he even said it would be my honor... miss!'

Part: 5

Then the- conductor stopped abruptly he- had just caught sight of Naddalin, who was still sitting on her- ground... of the train car. Naddalin snatched up the ball, that was rolling on the rocking back and forth floor, even told not to by EMT's again, she tried desperately to scramble to the feet, falling- times and times over. Close up, she- saw that Stan was only a few years older than she- was, nineteen or eighteen or at most, a large, boy yet all too cute in all the right places, even if he had a few pimples, and a scruffy look, no boy has it all you have to looking and find what lays within. What is that you are doing down there, what is that thing?

Said Stan, dropping the professional manner, over being stunned by its curiosity... asking questions, like a 5-year old boy would with seeing a new toy.

Naddalin has fallen over 4 times now... Then she rolled over on her belly, now on the floor, onto a stretcher, for them to do her vitals, and get an IV started. Besides snorted Stan, who was starting to feel, feelings for Dariez feeling as he was.

'And I did not do it on purpose,' she said- they said, 'we know,' then said Naddalin, annoyed, by them feeling her up as a modest girl in some way that she was, with a man she did not know or feel comfortable with. One of the- knees, and butt part of Dariez in her jeans were torn, and it was showing her tight underwear some and Dariez new that Stan was all into her, by him sneaking peeks. Yet, oddly that made her feel more loved than ever, in a time of pain. Besides her- hands she- had been thrown out to break the fall was bleeding, from them, and need them to be stitched if there was anything there left to stitched up, there was just raw skin hanging from the bone.

She- suddenly remembered why she- had fallen over and turned around quickly to stare at the- pathway between the- garage and fence, that led to the driveway that was surrounded by trees. The- Knight train's headlamps, was flooding the ground ahead with light, she knew what she had seen

one of them, girls from the past, after her, yet it was, and it was completely empty - was it all in her mind over reading a story - or was it real, were they after her now? She felt as if that hunt was in her mind now...

Dariez was feeling looking at him with big sad eyes, and it was working they were falling too each other fast, even if it was the first time, they meet' and said Stan, was looking at magic, in that light happening too, it was like she forgot all about Emma, who would feel cheated on at that moment, yet after all, he was a boy, with all that boys come with, you know - boy things, that girls find cute.

Part: 6

Besides, there was a big black thing, she saw hovering over her, thought Naddalin, pointing uncertainty into her - gap. In addition to that, like a faceless black mischievous sprite... it had to be AVA, she was the only on that did that hiding in the background gazing with mischievous intents, she thought even deeper into the creepy of it all!

She - looked around at Stan, wondering if he too could be trusted or not, even saying it - aloud and then muttering that trust is only had when there is a gold band around your finger, she said to Dariez, who looked smitten with her new interest. Whose mouth was slightly open, still looking at her with the love stick eyes. With a feeling of unease, Naddalin saw Stan's eyes move to mark on Naddalin's head.

'...And like what is that on your head?' He questions with committed to finding out all the details. He said all of that - all that he spoke tersely, with wet and thought behind it. It's nothing, said Naddalin quickly, pulling down her hair over she marks; If she - Bureau of Magic was looking for her, fine, yet this was far more - evil she knew it was one of them. she - didn't want to make it too easy for them, either way.

'Besides was your name, little girl what was your name?' Stan persisted, over never - ever - ever - never like wanting to forget - her or it, very unique he thought - so - o like her. Look here comes Neville saying about the - first name that came into her head, the voices that are, she thought she lost it and some still think she did, even being nothing more than a young kid herself. And so - so the train, went on quickly, hoping to distract Stan, she was talking with her about the sounds in her head, and did you say it goes anyplace - or they take you to someplace as you yet you're not really you but all around

you think it's still you- do you have a clue as to what I am saying to you, or is it just jabbering or mind takeover of everything that makes you-you?

'Yep- yep,' said Stan self-importantly... 'Besides, anywhere you like- I would take and kiss you if you say you wanted to, he moved fast, as long as it's on land, and I have the cash to do so-o, I would do anything you say miss-ie.' 'I can't do underwater, fear of drowning he said, along with being eaten by sharks, like that girl-' 'I have seen that too.' 'How about you and me, go to the next car over,' 'Okay-' she said rubbing her body into his, like a young girl in love would do... all lovesick... and they did holding hands as if they were lovers for years, and I'm sad, 'Go be young and crazy, there no harm in it.'

'Only the unified beat of sex and heart together can create ecstasy, and that is what it was for her first time ever with a boy. When she closed her eyes, she felt he had many hands run down her body, which touched her everywhere, and many mouths, which passed so quickly over her, she did not want to think over that would end the perfect moment, and with a hot man ever like perceptiveness, his teeth started to go under the surface into her fleshiest parts, he was the deep in her lower parts on her and it was just right.

Now both naked, looking at one another there was no weird, just feeling right, he laid his full length over her. She enjoy-d his weight on her, enjoy-d being- crushed under his body. She wanted him soldered to her, from mouth to feet.

Shivers passed through her body as all 7 inches slipped in between her little line that parted into a tight hole for him to fit into just perfectly, as they did lovemaking for the first time, her first not his, he knew what he was doing.'

She even stopped thinking about Emma too, she was living for the moment of him being the right one at the right time, the right one for the first time she thought, doing.

'I don't kiss and cum! Um- who cares about the kiss and tell...' thought Dariez.

Yet that is all the same thing- these days.

'So, yeah, I do- do- just that, like a teen girl- that I am!!!'

Naddalin- I was, looking suspicious again, thinking back on all the tricks in the past done to nice girls like her, yet I'm thought this is her life and her young dumb years... I did not have a say.

Neville- She said, they have flag us down, didn't they- she said pondering something as if she knew... you have it don't you, you have the crystal that belonged to them don't yah- but-but, oh yes, I know who you are...

Naddalin- 'sh-h,' she said, hushing her with her index finger pressed to her lips, as she was now sitting in one of the benches.

Move your hair away, on your head I wanna see the mark, (she shows it) it is- it's you-you're here, aren't you? The girl that existed, you got hit by having their power, that they once had. your hands are even fried over it, yet you have another 100 years don't you, or something like that, in other words, eternal life? Is that right...?

...She questions...

'Yes,' said Naddalin quickly- 'but you should not know about this, unless... unless you're like- like, one of them.'

'Oh, know- I am not one of them...'

Part: 7

I am glad to see that your find, Dariez said Stan, said coming back into the same train car, with the look of what we just do on their face, yet it was all meant to be, so I was happy for them, time was wording and we were about there. All the color pushing in a tunneling fashion in our eyes and sight. The fear in my mind was that this was all planned like it was with Kristen, why was he so hot and lust for her, and her the same, unless she, and he and I too was totally hexed charmed by- something or someone, and why was she so wet for him back, and I thought, this is not right- and then I was like don't say anything, you need to think about you- and you only. Dariez even said there was nothing wired all romantic, even if it was almost like a onetime thing... that will always stay hush-hush! A girl has a lot of those moments in her young life. I see that you walked away with a free gift too, I can see you grow a tell? Said Naddalin, there one hanging down from her skirt.

'Oopies- forgot to take that out and her face turns bright red.'

It's a Tushy-toys Genuine Fox Tail Butt Plug, she liked the gray and white, well it is better in looking at a butt hole is not?

Said Dariez, and 'it's cute!' She said following that line, and 'I love it! We sell them in the gift shop so-o, yes, I said to keep one... I would give her the store if I could... 'don't forget about me...' he said... And she shakes her butt side to side making it like wage to her sensual movements, saying 'never-ever' It was a trade for my underwear, a little something-something to remember me by. I know every time he looks and touches and whiffs them, he will have- to- change his.

'I plan on keeping it in, and walking around all day with it, like what are they going to do?'

'Nothing it's your body- girl.'

'If you think it okay, then do it- you'll start a trend fox tell hanging down from short skirt.'

Um- something to go with your gray fox ear headphones, you got on there, I's said.

'I told him how much, I like foxes. And how much I like them...'

And he said- 'I have the thing for you, to go with them...'

'This one is just made for a fifteen-year-old girl, he said guessing her age.' 'Next, to the toothbrush of all things, she giggles saying, your close and a girl never says.'

-And-

Part: 8

Naddalin rummaged once more in the trunk, saying here, I have a book for you on foxes, she extracted some money bag saying go have fun in the shop with him, keep it; and Dariez run of skipping playfully, and then shoved some gold into Stan's hands, pulling him back by looping her finger into his belt keeper, saying- 'don't trick me or her, or break her heart, your you'll see a hell, that you don't want to pay- understand, yes? Say- yes...!'

...And he did.

Naddalin- 'Remember boy- you remember sucking up, and she remembers too- sucking down!'

-Then-

Naddalin though about the health, always be an interest to her wondering mind, of what just happened, and she thought deep, know if that boy has been with the average 5- other girls he, might as well have slept with 31 partners, based on the exposure chart, and her to her none.

She thought about the 7 that, Karly said by the time she was 17, she was with mean she was exposed to 127, possibilities of exposers. And then Jenny more than 12 in a year, equals to 4,095 acquaintance that had sexual activities with that person to person and passed to you and them. When you have sex with some remember that you have sex with everyone that he has been with before you, the same with her.

-Any-who-

On top of the trunk, was baby raven's cage balancing tippy on top, on the platform on the train car that hangs out in the back outside, see the dark world go by on its side of ashen, and mysteries, a fog that was low, and steam wiping around her body, she was still too week to move it; yet she wanted to make sure she was alive and not fried, like last night's dinner.

Moving into new parts of the train, even Naddalin had not seen yet, car that she had added, to her line, there were no seats; instead, half a dozen brass bedsteads stood beside the - curtained windows, then it was said that the trip would take another day due to something unexplained, dark powers, were interfering with the line, I knew, now how was at the bottom of it all, I see were sleeping the night here... Nightlights were burning in brackets beside each bed, very quaint, illuminating the - 1919 wood-paneled walls, of the hoary Pullman cars.

A tiny wizard in a nightcap on each headboard, with the name of Naddalin on each, for gest, she muttered, these are nicer than I could have hoped for, I love the way this all turned out. As she looked at her hands wrapped in wound tap, a worker said, 'can I get you anything?' 'No, thanks, I am just going to roll and fall asleep,' she said. Before going under the cover of her new bed for the night, or what seemed like night, she shoved her trunk under her- bed... with all the things that she crushed, hoping that they would not be bothered, by any roaming hands that were not her own. Dariez was sitting in front of her- in a rocking chair, recapping her long trilling day. Neville, she is in the other adjacent to the other one catty-cornered to her.

There was another tremendous BANG, and the- next moment Naddalin found herself flat on the bed, thrown backward by the- the speed of the- Knight Train now pulling in realms, moving forward

to the other side. She is reading the Nevaeh's book of her life with thick glasses, nodded to Naddalin, who nervously flattened she bangs again, reading about a girl she may see right in- front of her yet would not see it at all. As she was sitting down on her bed at the edge, just awaken- out of nightmarish shock. Stan, sitting down in her- armchair next to her now of his shift, magic still happens.

Pulling herself up, Naddalin stared out of the- dark window with sudden burst of energy, seeing all the things out there distorting and looking otherworldly, and then she saw looking out a completely different windows, the town- looking like something you would see in a quaint village set in France in the 1920's that the locals call- Nick-Town for a short name, yet with any land there are many town within town, that make an enchanted world, street with their people, shopping, you could even start to see the numbers on the street signs, that were showing even as we pass with the naked eye - now, slowing to normal speed, the hint of the castle far away, all we need to do is cross the viaduct over the gorge, nevertheless, we are there we have made to the other side.

Stan was watching Naddalin's stunned face with great delight, saying ''this is normal,' for old trains to have moments of feeling as if they're jumping the rails, I looked the same way also my first time too when we re-entered.'

'Where are we...?'

Dariez was saying over and over trying to flag me down, that she is scared to death.

'What is this place...?'

'We are there sweaty, you have made it over... you are seeing things that most girls your age we never, over the fact these places have been forgotten about, with your new schooling.'

-And-

'Aww,' said Ernie, 'nothing changes here, yet it looks homey.'

'Like- how come she- Nonmagical peoples Do not shear this train?' Said Ernie.

Dariez- said 'I bought it over, not want it to die in a field, for a moment like this it's just from us, that are in need of it- a hush-hush way in for us only.'

~*~

'Look at all them there so cute! They all have had a life like yours that is why they're here, so you can relate to them and them to you.' Said Stan contemptuously. 'Right- right, he is a start boy, this one!'

Unlike back home were- they don't listen properly, do they?

'Don't look properly either. Never notice this so-o much before why now- it could be that you have fallen- to a gentleman, and see the difference now, is worlds apart.' Said Naddalin to Dariez.

'They- don't...?'

Naddalin- So-oo ladies it's best now to go wake up more, and not look frizzy, in need of a bath and bad-birthed, get dressed, and have some cereal, in the dining car and then were off, Stan I see soon, 'Awwwhhh'- said Ern.

Stain- and we'll be in a minute to say my final goodbye as your- departure, and he taps ever so softly and sweetly, on her nose saying- 'I love you!'

-And-

Stan passed Naddalin's bed for the what would be the last time on this trip, and disappeared up a narrow wooden hallway. Naddalin was still looking out of the- window, sitting up in her romped bed, feeling increasingly nervous. Ernie didn't seem to have grasped the idea of what to be left to wake up, she was still sitting in her chair.

The- Knight Train, kept rising on up the line of the mountains of tracks climbing ever so gingerly up to the bridge, but it didn't hit anything, and it was grinding and squealing; lines of markers for the whistle to blow, and switch tracks of 20 pounds rail- looking sketch-ie for the 8-mile bypass- using the freakishly high up in the air viaduct, other world animals and people moved out of the way of the snacking train that seems to be making a pathway through brush, and tall grasses. Stan came down the hall some just to press Dariez into a long slow kiss pressing his body into hers, he was in nothing more than a short green rob, hot out of the shower, where he took her by the hand and said, 'come on- in here with me'- and she did and the steam lapped her body, as they showered together ever so-o romantically.

'Final goodbyes yeah- right!' Though Naddalin.

And there you go, said Stan happily, as stamped on a towel to draw off patting her down with another big and fluffy one.

Caring her out in the buff, in his arm then laying her on to her- beds, helping her slide into her uniform, and get her feet into her shoes, he was standing toward the- front of the train car where she said she wanted to sleep for the night, in that- one particular bed, that just seemed to be saying last night- I can give you pleasant dreams, as she turned to down with the teddy bear and mint on the pillow ever so distinguished.

Dariez- she clamped a hand tissue to her eyes and then mouth, and tottered down as she went down the 2- steps. Stan chucked her bag out, along with ours, after she was out of the way doors no time before need to be shut; there was another loud BANG, and there was thundering down a narrow lane of track, it was another train coming down the line adjacent us, trees leaves whistling by its breeze, I even found myself leaping out of the- way, even though I knew it was not even close to me yet felt as if it was right next to me as my skirt blow tight to my legs.

Naddalin would not have been able to sleep even if she wanted to with all the pain she was feeling with her body that she was in- and also over the fact she- and them, had been traveling on a train that didn't keep banging loudly and jumping a hundred miles at a time, yet even so she loved the whole experiences.

Looking at the electronic billboards showing videos, being about the only thing, that looked our time period, everything else was 1920's yet, these billboards were rolling top stories of to p events within the small town within small villages, as the- fell back to wondering what was going to happen to her crept in her mind.

(Back)

Stan had unfolded a copy of the- daily paper, during his breakfast, and rattled and handed it to me in a crumpled-up ball, yet, I said 'thank you;' besides- he was not really reading it, yet what boy this day reads anything... I thought quickly, she had her tongue between the teeth, saying 'awe- ant' that cute- he's one of those smart boys.'

A large photograph of a depressed face man with long, matted hair blinked sullying at Naddalin from the- front page, all the text, and photos were moving about as if charmed, and Naddalin said they are everything has life in here. Along with saying 'he- this man looks oddly familiar to me.'

'That man right there she pointed as he tried to hide behind the bleed, of the yellowing page that was tattered and ripped!' Naddalin than said, disremembering the troubles for a moment.

'He- was on the- news back home too as wanted,' 'so now he's here?'

Stanley turned to the- front page and chuckled, saying 'well I think he got the last laugh, all that will be left is the prize at the end of a rope for him.'

Naddalin- 'Sound like a girl, that I once knew, and I don't get the humor in death sorry.'

-And-

Trirus Black is the name- Dariez - said, drowsy, yawing and scratching herself so-o un-lady-like. ''Besides of course,' like- he was on the- news, Neville.' Where have you been, she looked as if she just crawled out of bed?' She- gave a superior sort of chuckle at the- blank look on Naddalin's face, removed the- front page, and hand over to her.

'You want us to teach her,' Naddalin said in a muffled voice. She- now understood what Firenze's warning had meant. The attempts are not working, of scaring her about this, she- would do better to not hear it, being so young, and sometimes careless with her life.

Of course, the- other creatures who lived in the- Forest would have heard Dargides fruitless attempts to teach English, do you hear how this child talks, said Naddalin to Dariez think it was sweet and cute but really wrong for her age.

Neville- 'She said, - ant'!'

'You have room to take the girl with slurring words.'

''Yes, but I have tried all my life to fix it,' you-you don't care- to show the farmgirls ways you just do, nothing wrong with it but God, the other girls are going to pick at you for it.'

'Yeah even if yen's just' talk to her a bit for' yah' both ta' see, about it, maybe you' all can show her, about what she be- down.' (Say it with a hillbilly twang.) said

Naddalin with any luck, you see it. 'Because- I's reckon, if she- can talk like that people, well undercut, you for how smart- pretty and intelligent you really are, I have been there- sweetie.' Naddalin

looked at Emmah, who peered back at her from between the- fingers over her face, trying not to giggle, by looking at her; even more over the fact of the truth, and trying to be nice, to her.

'Kind of makes you wish we had Norrah back, doesn't it?' she- said, and she'd- gave a very shaky laugh, like- yah- no.'

'We'll do it, then?' Said Dargide, who did not seem to have caught what Naddalin had just said, as she walked with them through the station.

'Well...' said Naddalin, already bound by the promise, to make Dariez a fine young lady of the school.'

'We'll do try,' said Dargide, 'as you distinguish- she has a so-o-so reputation already.'

Back home it was the day that the sun went in a total solar eclipse, blocking out all daylight for the first time in 99 years around 12: 15 p.m. in our parts, that made the news more than anything- and freaked out the world admiring the darkness, I looked up at the moment there and thought, I never see this again, yet I wonder if my story well.

'I knew I could count on yah, Naddalin, to remember to get a video of this event.' Dargide said, beaming in a very watery way, saying I am getting old and this reminds me of when I say this with my dad the first time around, I was no more than 5 yet, I remember, she was dabbing at her face with her hand using a tissue again.'

Dariez- 'I'll wake up, and introduce myself.'

'How did it go?'

'Not good, she finds me dumb... I can tell.'

'Ah, I don't know to want your put yourself out there that, like...' said Neville.

I know you've got exams... if yen could just sit down there in your Indiscernibility Robe, where you appear to not be seen by all that is around you, and over here all that we need to know then maybe once a week and have a little chat with them, after knowing all that we need to know.

'There is no way that I am going to pass her class!' Said Dariez.

~*~

(Forward a week)

'What- no!' said Emmah, jumping about what if... if you would get busted for it.'

'Dargide, would never- ever no, do not wake her, really, we do not need, to do this just to pass these grades, if we work hard and kiss up.'

(Back to walking up to the castle)

Nevertheless, Dargide had already stepped over the- great tree trunk, up the pathway that had fallen, a week or so earlier, you would have thought by now that someone would have clean this thing up, but NO! Anyway, in front of them, there were more kids on their way up also proceeding towards the castle, that they would be calling home to for a half a year or so-o.

Naddalin- when she- was about ten feet away, she- raised up over the log, working on her levitation ability in her flight, still feeling broken she hit the- ground, smiled soothingly over the shoulder at Emmah and the other girls, that was saying- 'look she not doing any better than us now,' and in the middle of her- back you could now see all the wounds and laceration's within her skin, over her dramatic proceedings, the night before, she was not even able to walk the night be for now she trying to fly? Is she nuts...? Said the one looking shocked... at her even think of such a thing to do to herself in such a weekend state.

She then gave a giant roar out her mouth as if she was passed by some evil power, you called to hear her scream all around she- silent forest; birds in the- treetops fluttered out and about twittering from there perches' and soared away, as if frightened, even the house to upon their knoll's, overhead rose to flight, right in front of Naddalin And Emmah, meanwhile, as they were walking up the pathway.

The sound like the flying wildlife was rising from the ground to her overpowering shrill yells, her eyes the deepest shade of black color- that they could possibly be as she was crying blood out of them.

Naddalin shuddered as Dariez- placed her small hands on it to hold her down her knees were knocking and body quivering, something you would see in an exorcism. She - turned her head to see who was looking over them and what had disturbed her, so much, and knowledge was there yet, she was lifted off her feet and thrown into the air as if someone had a hold of her from behind.

'...Are you all right miss-ie,' grayed out- to what was happing in her mind, and then it hit her she was back and terrorizing her?' there and then said Dargide, in a would-be disturbed voice, backing away with the- long bough raised, she feels to her feet hard then knees, ready for something or something to do it to her an again- like a plaything to be toyed with.'

Eh, she hit so hard it knocked her out entirely?'

Naddalin and Emmah retreated as far as they could while still keeping the - the evil feels of whatever away, within their sights, yet that was the thing they could not see the evil attacking her from within her mind, yet she knew how and why, all too well- it was one of them, ...it was her- and Naddalin knew; between two trees she - had not yet uprooted, as she walked weekend up the long pathway that wound through the lands of grasses and curly branched trees.

They looked up into she horrifically huge face - that was now overtaking Naddalin's pushing through her skin even, that resembled a devil- looking lion, with horns, that looked as if it wanted to park out of her and eat me, all of sudden the light of the world went out on the day of the eclipse and there was a black full moon swimming, in a red blood-colored sky, and bugs crawling from her mouth, as she was flung into the air yet again, in the - gloom- of the day she said I can't take any more of this, being attacked within my own body mind and soul, they have found me and got at me yet again.

Like- just when I think I am away for the good they suck me back in... her power of trying to end the madness makes a wave of energy in a column to the atmospheres of the world above her, a swelling cyclone, to over her just like one depicted in the girl's story from years ago, and then Dariez knew, she knew she was the girl from the story, yet she would never admit if she was or was not - even after Dariez, being 99.9 present sure of the fact. Yet, there was always- that .1 percent, that kept her hushed.

Within the crystal ball was the soul of the girl, we know as Nevaeh, that why I could see her, and she was looking at me. It was clearing, back to glass, yet I say what I need to know, I became the next one down in the hex.

~*~

The body of Neveah' was the ball, lost for all time, the soul was within Naddalin, yet her mind was not her complete own, they still had power over that, even being split into three's.

A mind that was now going to be shared with Dariez, it was as though her- features had been hewn off and this evil thing was the replacement, it was the entity of the mother- a tower that would never- ever fall entirely.'

~*~

Eh, the- nose, wet and dripping with snot- covered with matted hair, was thick and shape teeth, the- mouth uneven and full of misshapen yellow tusks.

Um yeah- like- the- size of half Patton bricks following the shape of the diamond of the logo, to be a small week furl sweet innocent not to smart not to dumb of a girl- named Dariez- that's me.

The- eyes, small- yet, look through me as if it has taken me to a new place of scared- that I have never been before- completely over-concentration, physique, and personality death; were a muddy greenish-brown, skin, covered in hair. And I wondered why-? Why like- she never had friends, family and all that is normal for a teen girl- then I thought about that and muttered in my mind, with this entity in her how could she, and in her mind, she heard me say it- at that very moment- I know that she was- NEVAEH.

AND I WAS NEXT!

'G-e- thanks!'

Dariez- I then was also raised by my dirty ankles backflipping heels overhead, and then like a ball, and in my mind, I started hearing the same voices she had for years now. Saying- 'you help her you'll go mad- well make sure of it!'

I had to rub my eyes, vigorously, then and there at that very moment, without warning, pushed herself to her feet with surprising speed and liveliness; she had defeated it... how I have no idea?

'Oh my- I was no longer so mortified!'

Yet, was it all over and would I get over this?

Naddalin heard Emmah squeal, she could see the haunts with her naked eyes trying to suck the life out of her, terrified, beside her Dariez, stood and grabbed her hand to hold it.

The- trees to which she was next to hold up the ropes bridge, they were about cross over the vale- started to jump violently as they were on it as if someone was giggling it with all there might, yet, and it felt as if someone had me by wrists and ankles were attached to ominously, trying to take me down the 1,000 feet or so-o to the watery depth below of the moat- that is protected by extremely dark girl topless mermaids yet- gorgeous in their own way- black and gray tones- with skills of fallen angels- that were snatched out of the air- by theme- like killer whales- within the waters of the fallen of the past- lies a haunted shipwreck hanging in fog that is tips sideways- many have ventured in to see yet- never came out alive, the mermaids with wisp webbing around their smooth skin- that drifts within the crystal clear waters, that would rip a girl like me apart- for the blood. They have made that their home, at the far end of the island- in the middle- with it abandon lighthouse, inside the ship.

She- was, as scared as she could be. Dargide had said, at least sixteen feet away from the other side she needs to fly to be a safety.

Gazing blearily from place to place and over, Grawp reached out a hand from the other side making it over be for she did, holding out an umbrella saying grab it, I pull you up with it or if you fall to use it to slow your fall. She fell like a bird from its nest from the- upper branches of a towering pine.

She was even turned upside down within her de cent with a roar, or a yell of apparent displeasure, of knowing that she was going to die if she did not learn to fly fast... like a bird- the first time out she did; wings spread, and feathers flew, and as she was now towards the end of the water.

Yet- and still, the- ground, seemed like it was forever away, and Dargide threw her arms over, her head to protect herself from the income girl, that was unconfident in her foremost flight.

'Anyway, Grawpy,' shouted Dargide, looking up apprehensively in case of further falling of a girl up in the air 100 feet or so-o, for someone to come and make sure that she would land safely, and with magical powers and her hand lifted up she made her fall down to her feet perfectly.'

'I've brought some friends ta- meet yen's, yet this was not the entrances, that I thought was going to happen with you, that is for sure!' She said.

'Do you remember when I told yen's- about all this- in class, 'I might?' This story was no fairytale- and I know- I know that one of you is- HER! Yet, I know that you'll never tell, over not trusting anyone, not even us- here. Yet we know- to look out for you- and we have it narrowed down to you two.'

Remember, when I said 'I might have to go on a little trip and leave for a while, I did, this was it... to go and get her and make sure- she and I had a home that was not a setup... I am going look at her a bit, and she winked her eye?'

'Remember that, Grawpy? To look over, see the next. God help her... yet that was sh-h-h too.'

Nonetheless, Grawp simply gave another low grumble; it was hard to say when she was listening to Dargide or when she- even familiar the- sounds Dargide was making a speech.

Looking around one girl that was- just a spectator felt the wrath of them too she was a tiny thing compared to the other girls, anyways she was hanging at the- top of a- pine tree, at play beforehand, kids were pulling the tree towards them, evidently for the- simple pleasure of seeing how far it would spring back when- she- let go, she was flung into the air, into the arms of another girl, she too was being picked on for being the small one.

'Now stop before someone get hurt, she looks at me and I say- 'I don't know what I want to do,' yet she was saying to the other kids, not to do that- that is why you all are here you were like her at one time- were you not.' shouted Dargide.

'It's not nice to gang up on others.' Now pulling the tree down one last time, the girl was able to get down without more than some black and blue marks.

And sure enough, Naddalin could see the- Earth around the- tree's roots and beginning to crack, as she was over past the water's edge feeling way to powerful, she had gotten her new life now- one more time around- another 100, yet not a sure thing if they find her yet she has them... she feels as if she has seen over more than 100 years of life- and lives, and that maybe be so, yet she only lived within 25 years in real-time.

'I got the company for the yen's like I said!'

Dargide shouted- 'company, see- SEE YOUNG LADIES make friends PLAY- INTERACT- don't kill them- for the love of God, there sweet and younger-looking for someone to care- ABOUT THEM- BE-NICE!' Naddalin and girls- I brought yen some new friends!'

Oh, Dargide, do not moan Emmah, yet she did over they were prepubescent babies in her mind that need binky's and babysitters, but Dargide had already raised her hand saying it finally, without saying a word we knew to shut up.

Dargide stumbled of on pine needles, and blinking over and over frustrated looked down at her own feet to feeble walk on up the pathway- mumbling something like- 'mmm- M- kids these days- I remember- when I was a girl... and the sound vanished.' With her pointer finger out and shaking.

The girl was so-o delighted to let go of the- top of the- tree, which swayed frighteningly and deluged She,' said Dargide, hurrying over to where Naddalin And Emmah stood, saying out of breath it's good to get to know you both, her glasses falling off her face and cracked, in the one lens.

'Is Naddalin, Grawp favorite or something, she asked sheepishly- 'no child just old friends! Naddalin is a very important girl to get to know well.'

One girl said to the other group of girls- 'Naddalin is that one there! She- might' becoming, to visit yen's all if I have to go away, understand? She has not been feeling well.'

Naddalin realized her bandaged hands to them all patting them on the shoulders saying 'welcome,' that Emmah where there, saying- 'see girls she's really nice- don't be intimidated.'

They watched, in great anxiety, as she- lowered her hands on to them and they could blearily peer over her, yet they were stunned to see that they were about the same height at them.

'And the is Emmah,' see, her- um she is close friends with Dariez- like close...

Turning to Emmah, she- said, 'would yen's mind if told them your story, Naddalin?'

'No- go for it- um, like yet- it's not easy to tell...'

'Yet you'll do a fine job- I know that you well...' said- Naddalin. 'Only it's a difficult remembering all the name to remember, not the story- for me anyway.'

'No, not at all,' squeaked Emmah, I have it all in my mind down pat.

'Isn't' that' nice? Eh?'

Look at that said some of the professors.

'Two friends for yen are to get to NO!' Grawp's hands had shot out of nowhere towards Emmah, as dementors, scraped and shot up and out - not all the way the closed trunk into thin air; Naddalin seized herself and pulled herself back behind the- tree with the girls, as she tried to defeat them, she knew whom the spirits belonged too, they would not take NO for an answer.

'EVIL, this is evil-ness- GIRL, Dargide yelling, as Emmah clung to Naddalin behind she- tree- now, shaking and whimpering- know that it was after her.'

'VERY BAD GIRL!

Naddalin poked her head out from around the- large tree trunk and saw Dargide lying on her back she was dying, her hands over her eyes, she could see their faces, as plain as day- yet all in her head, 'they made her go brain died,' along with saying- 'over me-' she screamed, as her hand dropped out hers in her last moments.

The other looking around were apparently losing interest, had uncurled, to their shock and awe, and was up and was again engaged into their activities, as the body of an old friend started to decay, in pulling the pages of the day that the typewriter had written spitting out pages automatically... keys- pounding down and the hammers snapping- pages after pages- flying in the air- staking up, she could see who was at the bottom of it all- the one that deceived us- all. Back, and back she looked into the text and it was always them!

'Right,' said Emmah thickly, getting up with one hand pinching her bleeding from her nose and the- other hand gashed and also dripping blood.

'Well... their yen are... you have made a friend and lost them on the same every day, welcome to my life,' said Naddalin.

'You have met her and now she-'ll, see you in this life ever again- her lives are all over- they took them... it was all them... them- they...'

'Yeah... well... That's life and it goes pushing on.' Said Emmah.

She- looked up at all those young faces, who was now pulling back the- pine tree down was a kid that was possessed BY- THEM- THEM- THEM!!!

Then with an expression of detached pleasure this girl looked me with a super creeper- creep evil grin, and gold eyes, with her head, cocked to the side saying- 'I'll kill you- for the f*ck of it!'

Standing on the boulder's face of a large monument statue of an old wise wizard of the past; that was more powerful than ever before him, now the one that shall not be named his- that title, see-

the tree started to uproot where was standing creaking as it falls ripped away from the world, the- ground, to also decay- like her on the inside.

'Well, I reckon that's enough for one day,' said Emmah.'

'We'll- shell we go now, shall we?' Naddalin And Emmah nodded, handheld and kinda sad.

Emmah's shouldered had her arms cross again on top of them, and still, Naddalin was still pinching the nose, leading the- way back into the- trees down the dusking pathway.

Nobody spoke for a while, not even when they heard the- distant crash, even so, that meant they have passed all the- pine tree at last and was moving into the open clearing.

Emmah's face was pale as she had to set for a-while on a bench, just so her mind could go blank. Naddalin could not think of a single thing to say. What was going to happen when they all found out what was hidden in the- Forbidden Forest?

Then she- had promised too, Jinger and Emmah and the other girls, that would continue what seemed like totally pointless attempts to civilize the attacks on them, yet she would win out.

Monsters- they were never loveably harms- fools they are, that should never ever- have been, or mix with humans. Demoniac's they are- in what you saw demoniac.

'Hold it,' said Dariez abruptly, just as Naddalin And Emmah were struggling through a patch of thick knotgrass behind her- not sticking to the pathway.

Naddalin And Emmah raised their hands; now that they had stopped walking, they, too, could hear movement close by, they were being flowed as if there were evil eyes on them.

'Oh, Joannah' said Emmah quietly, that was the person that came up behind them startling them.

...Or was it?

Naddalin did not trust, that thought of only!

'I thought we told you, never to do that,' said a deep male voice, that a girl should not have ever,' that you are no longer welcome in our group said Emmah?' 'You're creepy... to us girls even, and you did that to yourself.'

'That was not nice-' said one other girl- standing there that was new- yet the look that they all gave her was not to question it any further.

'We were nice to you, and you stabbed us in the back... so-o, go-o.'

~*~

A girl's naked torso seemed for an instant to be floating towards on a chestnut brown horse's in-flight dappled in a glowing half blueish -light glowing around its wings then they saw that her hair was joined smoothly into its body- by its main as if they were linked mind, body, and soul. The horse had a proud stance, high cheekbones a long face with long brown layered hair.

The girl was armed; With arrows and a longbow where slung over the shoulders, as asked of the school to protect us from harm. Our own personal bodyguard. The- trees behind the- her rustled and four or five more centaurs emerged behind her, that she was starting to fight for us.

Afterward-

'How is yeah, Lily?' Said Emmah said circumspectly, like the rest of the girls.

Naddalin recognized the- bodies of the girl right away, whom she- had met many- many moons a- ago on the- same night- this took place, when she had to live on and not die, now the same night of the aligning the great eclipse.

Yet, she gave no sign that she- had ever seen Naddalin before, yet it seemed as if she was covering the fact, that she did really know her for years even.

'So-o,' she- said, with a horrid nuance in her voices, before turning immediately to Lily.'

'We agreed, I think, what we would do if they would ever show their faces in the- forest again?'

'I REMEMBER BEING- human now, am I have- fallen and have to live with it...' said Lily.

'You and I- like always being: 'us' will be stopping' all the committing' murder, by them- and her most of all.'

'You ought not to have meddled girls with them,' said Lily.' Along with saying- 'there highly demented.'

'Our ways are not yours, nor are our laws- here things are quite different than back where you all are from, in your small towns. These girls have betrayed and dishonored us, yet there the highest of all of us, and we take the wrath still.'

You neither know-how about what happens down there or you do, it will all work itself out,' said Emmah impatiently, there here they make trouble here and we hope that they go down there and when they're down there we hope they stop, and they're here so we can take care of the destruction .

'She's did not do anything except help Duerre- and them. That is speculation... but I believe that is so-o.'

Firenze- said and I overheard.

Part: 9

'Oh no, don't ever say that.' Said Naddalin.

'Firenze has entered into servitude to humans,' said a grey centaur with a hard, deeply lined face, and ghostly figure. 'Serfdom!' Said Naddalin said scathingly of her bandages. 'she is doing' us all a favor is all, it for your good trust her.'

'She- is peddling our telling our secrets among humans,' said Lily quietly, and killed young girls to get in their mind, and use their bodies for their own dementors to live within, so they have a life that is immortals. There can be no return from such disgrace, yet they are still here!'

'If yen's say so,' said Emmah, shrugging her shoulders, 'but partially I think you're making' a big mistake.'

'As are you, human, once- so were they and they want to be in the worst way' said Neville, 'coming back into our Forest when we counseled you.'

'Now, yeah listen to me,' said Naddalin angrily. You're new here be nice to her she knows more then, and at this point is the head of all things here, she was one that had to live with their wrath, you have one her to tell her story is real and your life before now- was nothing compared to yours.'

'No more is it up to you, said Lily effortlessly, you have a mind think for yourself.'

Guards- 'We shall let you pass today because you are accompanied by your tutors, they make their way into the castle, for the first time; looking totally- awestruck eyes wide and mouth dropped.'

'...They're not right are they...?' Said the one girl interrupted the others contemptuously.

'Students, Lily, from up at her- Hayvannahol! Small town girls...'

'They have probably already profited from the- traitor Firenze's teachings.'

'Nevertheless,' said Lily calmly, 'the- slaughter of foals is a terrible crime we do not touch the- innocent.

Today, Dargide, you pass, right why do you think they wanted her at final death? The- effort it took was not really worth it, it's like they can't stay away from this place, even if the powers are fallen and not as strong as they once were.

'You pay for the- friendship of the- centaurs that were would to help the- traitor Firenze escape us- and she is at the heart of it all.'

'I won't be kept outta The- Forest, they say in their mind that was taken over, as they went into trances.

'Let's go, please let's go...!' Naddalin, said Emmah and then girls in a high pitched, as if a young girl voice of the past was trying to get out, a terrified voice, as both girls were being chased down by this- grey-black centaur pawing at them and hitting ground just behind them as the room the ground within the wall of the castle, with its claw-like hands with long nails...

Lily moved forwards, but the crossbow was still raised- not really need yet it makes her feel safe, and the eyes were still fixed threateningly upon, eviler creeping upon them, at last, they can see, Dargide meeting back up with them, saying- 'come on.'

'Lily called after them, as the- centaurs slipped out of sight, that could be good then and then not so-o much too.

And our tolerance is waning!'

'We know that they are hiding within The- Forest, over the fact that it just too haunted and creepy for most of us girls to enter in!'

Dargide turned and gave every appearance of wanting to walk straight back to Lily. 'You'll tolerate' them as long as she's there if it would not before her you would be able too.'

'It's as much our Forest as yours, back off and leave us alone,' the young of the girl's shrieked in a tight ear pricing way- of jittery nervousness, as it was sucking them back into it, from the castle walls into the dark deeps of the mysterious ominous woods!'

'We just keep on getting pulled back by them, even as hard as we run, we can't get away.'

She- yelled, as Naddalin and Emmah both pushed with all there might against Dargide's coat in an effort to keep her moving forward, her being the biggest of them all.

Dariez- is still looking frightened like them all yet, she keeps- looked down; with the expression of fear not changed to mild surprise at the- sight of them both pushing her; almost over, yet she is not holding on knowing she is being braver than them, pushing from behind the group. She- seemed not to have felt it, but she was showing her true colors of bravery.

'Calm down, you two,' she- said, turning to walk on, while they panted along behind her- now as she ran past them with all her might.'

'Dargide,' said Emmah breathlessly, skirting the- patch of nettles they had passed on their way there,' if the- centaurs do not want half-humans, like this girl's half-bloods, that are here for transformation to this world in the- Forest, they feel that have a place to control, and take at well.

Lily- 'Like- it doesn't really look as though Naddalin... they want the girls they want you!!!'

'And I will be able ah to end this,' you heard what they said, said Dariez dismissively, 'they would not hurt foal's- kids- I mean would they?'

Naddalin- 'Yes, yes- they would you should have seen what they did with kids in their orphanage on Earth, years ago, like Kristen, she has pages, about it all, it horrific.'

Dariez- 'Anyhow, we cannot let ourselves be pushed around by them, that is what they want... they want you- to do that... fight them, and then you're in the wrong, and you let it go, and you're wrong too- what do you do?'

'Nice try,' Naddalin murmured to Emmah, who looked crestfallen.

At last, they rejoined the- path and, after another ten minutes, the- trees began to thin once more; they were able to see patches of the clear blue sky again and, in the- distance, the- definite sounds of cheering and shouting.

'Was that an added goal?' Asked Emmah, pausing in the- shelter of the covering of the- trees as the- Claepsiara stadium came into view.'

'Like- do yeah reckon her- games are over?'

'I do not know,' said Emmah miserably.

Naddalin saw that she- looked much more than worse for wear; her hair was full of twigs and leaves, and her uniform was now completely ripped in several places and there were numerous scratches on her faces and arms as well.

Naddalin she- knew she- must look little better, then the night before yet that was not so-o. Yet, she was going to oversee the games.

-And-

You ought to read the- papers more, Neville, it has all these games and events listed on it.

Part: 10

-And-

Naddalin held the- paper up to the- lantern light and read: BLACK STILL ON THE LOSE Trirus Black, possibly The- most dishonorable person ever to be held in Dizeryland fortress, is still eluding capture, the- Bureau of Magic inveterate at the moment, as you can see it is life with the pages.

Besides- girls, we are doing all we can to recapture Black is said to see our panic on our faces as we read and viewed, said 'the- Martita of Magic, Cornelius Harlan, the morning, and we beg the- magical community to remain calm, just like you girls don't worry about a thing.'

-And-

Harlan has been criticized by some members of the- International Federation of Warlocks for informing she- nonmagical people Prime Martita of the- crisis.

'And, well, really, I had to, do not you know,' said an irritable Harlan.

'Black is livid, angry, furious and mad.'

'There is a danger to anyone who crosses this person, magic world or Earthly.'

'I have the- Prime Martita's assurance, that she- will not breathe- a word of Black's true identity to anyone. Besides, let's face it- who would have faith in her if she- did?'

-And-

Even though nonmagical peoples or 'Early people' have been told, that Black is carrying a gun, (a kind of metallic wand, that Nonmagical peoples use to kill each other called a dagger...)

The- magical community lives in fear of a massacre, like that of one year ago and a day ago when Black murdered one hundred thirteen people with a single curse. On the 24th day, on the 12th month, 366 days ago or so-o would mark the bloodbath of spraying for fame. The sown was high too, I remember... all those kids, think about the moms and dads and how they feel the next day not having them.

Naddalin looked into the- shadowed eyes of Trirus Black.

Dariez- The- only part showing now, and within the frame of the photograph- sunken face and head of the kids he killed, to make love to after they were no longer fighting back- like this is what he would do to them, see- see all this in the background of those floating body parts detached bobbing in green licked, that did not survive- his ah- hum- pounding.

It says- that he keeps all their body parts- in glass jars on his desk, next to his vintage typewriter-like his manuscript, that we never- ever will see the light of day, or be published; it said- here that he makes sick twisted, freak me- stories of wanting to make creepy- creeper love to kids...'

Naddalin- 'It says he is a- necrophiliac!' Along with saying in the same breath- 'Do we really put all nuts in the same category- he eats crayons, and roll his turds into balls, then too.'

Blink- blink- blink... is what Dariez did...

'I guess you think that too- of him, and may not be so-o don't believe, everything you read about someone that may have had a set- up.'

'Fa-h,' said Emmah, 'you believe what you want... I would believe that is so-o.'

Duriez- 'like you were never really uncomfortable, you were just irritated with everyone's stupid.'

'I feel you...' said Naddalin, at that moment, in that day, and at that very heartwarming time; they were bounding as she was her child she never had.

Overhearing the girls talking in a group huddle not so far away...

'There was one that seemed alive, and he keeps her whole body up for his BITCH 'till she did - passed- over to our side, yet with him on top of her, earthly body.'

Naddalin had never met an Ashes Angels, yet she did today the girl was me- Emmah.

Emmah- 'I was the one, that almost survived too.'

But... she- had seen pictures of them in her defense think about it at that moment - against The- Dark Arts classes, and Black.

Yet, the girl showing her other side to her now was and is changing before her eyes, with her waxy white skin, looking like an angel she has never seen before.

The wings would have a covering of ash, that would fall to the ground, like paper remnants - that still smoldering and part light with a flame, in shades of gray, and fall like unique snow flacks, along with a body that would burn... as well and then start a new life - in that some incense, before your eyes, as she wept in sadness putting out her own flaming dismay and passion to take back what she had lost, over her former life.

Alter Ego

Emmah-

(Back)

The shadow- that shows through- from within and then back out. 'Stamina is everything, that is energy and strength.'

'I got stamina- don't give up, I won't give up- I got stamina!'

Damen's dark eyes focus on mine all the time if I want my privacy or not the see into me and out and looking into my eyes reflecting it see them within me, wiles me to listen, really listen to them all the time, like her I now have this too.

I press my lips together and nod, her voice beaten by the one in my head influence: Tell you all that I am not crazy I hear the voices too! She was never crazy, and it has made us closer- than ever.

I- Emmah- thought- Tell them all, about what they can't understand, they have taken over me, like her with their hex!

Quit stalling, I thought yet they have my mind and just get it over with!

Nevertheless, I don't, I won't say a word, nothing but the feeling of traumatized going thought me- of all the one before me- feeling their every emotion. I just delay for her to endure so-o, I can delay even further, with the voices ripping through me.

Raise your hand, she nods, palms out, moving toward mine, feeling the sparks of link up with memories and transmitting them to one girl to the other.

Lifting my arm unhurriedly, carefully, figured out to evade any and all bodily contact when she says, 'Now tell me, what do you perceive?'

I squint, unsure what Naddalin is after with me doing this, then shrugging I say, 'Well, I see pale skin, long fingers, a freckle or two, nails in serious need of a manicure...'

'Really, yet now think about, that does sound about right.'

She beams, as though, I just passed the world's easiest test.

Even so, if you could see it as it really is, you wouldn't see that at all, they're so much more- yet, you can see- and that is more than most. Instead, you would see a group of fragments encompassing neutrons, protons, quarks, and electrons.

And within those little quarks, down to the littlest idea, you would see zilch- but pure vibrating energy moving at a speed slow enough, that it seems hard and solid, and yet, rapidly abundant, that it can't be seen for what it really is.'

Not sure- to believe it or not, I narrow my eyes; never mind the circumstance that she's been studying this stuff for hundreds of years.

'Trust.' She said to me, enthusiastically.

'Seriously, ever- nonentity is distinct.'

Fully taken to the subject now, she leans toward me.

'The whole thing is one. Items that give the impression dense, like you and I, and this sand that we're sitting on, are really just a mass of energy vibrating gradually enough to seem hard, while things like spirits and ghosts vibrate so quickly they're nearly unbearable for most humans to see- yet we can see it.'

'I see you,' I say, eager to remind her of all the time, I used to spend with my ghostly sister.

'Or at least I used to, you know before she overlapped the bridge and moved on- like all the others.'

'I have met her, I think.'

'Also, that's accurately why- you can't see you anymore.' She nods. I want you to be with a girl named- Dariez, be a girlfriend to her, she is like me in so many ways you will love her- I can see that too- for you.

'Her vibration is moving too wildly. Though there are those who can see past all of that.'

I gaze at the water before us, the swells rolling under the bridge that was standing on, one after another. Endless, never-ending, immortal- like us.

'Now raise your hand again and bring it so close to mine we just nearly touch.'

Nevaeh

Book: 44

Walking After You

Part: 1

I hesitate, filling my palm with sand, unwilling to do it. Unlike her, I know the price, the dire significances the slightest skin-on-skin contact can bring. Which is why I have been avoiding her touch altogether, and scenes last Saturday.

Which is why I've been avoiding her touch altogether.

But when I peer at her yet again, her palm out, waiting for mine ever so softly, I take a deep breath and lift my hand too- gasping when he draws so close the space that divides- us like a hair-thin.

'Um- do you feel the sensation that?' She smiles.

'That tingle with the heat?'

'That's our energy linking- of bodies, minds, and souls.'

She moves her hand back and forth on my softly, employing the push and pull of the energy force sparking from me to her with a field bolt between us.

'But if we are all linked as you say, then why doesn't it all feel the same?'

Not like this was not, I have memories, that they don't have, and well never- ever have.

I for one murmur, drawn by the undeniable charming stream that links us, causing the most wonderful warmth of course through my frame.

'We are all linked, all of us made of the same vibrating source. Nonetheless, while some energy leaves you cold and some leaves you feeling like your dying on the inside, the one that you're intended for? It feels just like this.' I close my eyes and turn, allowing the tears to stream down my cheeks, no longer able to keep them in.

Knowing I'm barred from the feel of her skin, the touch of her lips, the solid warm comfort of her body on mine.

This electrical energy field that trembles between you and me- like- is the closest I will get to feeling precious, thanks to the horrible decision I made I have never- ever felt real love.

'Knowledge is just now catching up with what metaphysicians and the great spiritual instructors have known for eras.'

'Everything is vigor energy of stamina. Everything is one with that- understand.'

'Somehow some way we are all the same with the link.'

I can hear the smile in her voice as she draws closer, eager to entwine her fingers with mine.

But then again, I move away too swiftly...

-Then-

Emmah said- 'Pennsylvania was the first state to legalized witchcraft, I think that is why we're all mostly from those parts.'

catching her eye just long enough to see, the look of hurt that across-ed her face- the same look she's been giving me since, I made her drink the antidote that returned her to life, and to feel all things like love- and all the feeling a teen girl should have as if she was alive.

Wondering why-why?

Why- I'm acting so silent, noiseless, inaudible, still and quiet.

So, aloof, so remote- rejecting to touch her when just a few weeks earlier, I could not get enough.

Erroneously assuming it's because of her hurtful behavior- she is flirting with Emmah, her cruelty toward me- when the truth is, it has nothing to do with that. Her was under Naddalin's spell, the entire school was. It wasn't her fault.

What she doesn't know is that while the antidote returned her to life, the moment I added my blood to the mix it also ensured we could never- ever be together.

Never! Ever! For all of eternity!!!

'Ever?' She undertones, in her voice, that is too deep and sincere. But I cannot look at her. Cannot touch her; along with certainly can't utter the words she deserves to hear- I messed up- I'm so sorry- Jinger tricked me, and I was desperate and dumb enough to fall for her trick- Besides now there's no hope for us because, if you kiss me if we exchange our DNA- you'll die- I can't do it. I'm the worst kind of coward. I'm pathetic and weak. And there's just no way I can find it within me.

'Ever, please, what is it?' She asks, alarmed by my tears.

'You've been like theirs for days. Is it me?

Is it something I've done?

For the reason that you know I don't remember much of what happened, and the memories that are starting to surface, well, you must know by now that wasn't the real me.

I would never- ever- ever deliberately hurt you.

'I'd never harm you in any way.'

I hug myself tightly, squeezing my shoulders and bowing my heard.

Wishing, I could make myself smaller, so small she could no longer see me. Knowing her words are true, that she's incapable of hurting me, only I could do something so hurtful, so rash, so ridiculously impulsive.

Only, I could be stupid enough to fall for Naddalin. So, eager to prove myself as Naddalin's one true love- wanting to be the only one who could save her-and now look at the mess, that I have made.

Then she moves toward me, sliding her arm around me, grasping my waist and pulling me near. Nonetheless, I can't risk the closeness, my tears are deadly now, and must be kept far from her skin.

I- Emmah then climb to my feet and run toward the water's edge, curling my toes at its edge and allowing the cold white froth to splash onto my shins, that is on the far end of the castle beach.

-And-

Wishing I could dive under its incalculability and be carried by the tide.

Anything to avoid saying the words-anything to avoid telling my one true love, my eternal partner, my soul mate for the last four hundred years, that while she may have given me an eternity- I have brought us our end.

-Then-

I stay like that, silent and still and hushed. Waiting for the sun to sink until I finally turn to face her.

Taking in her dark shadowy outline, nearly- indistinguishable from the night, and speaking past the sting in my throat when I mumble...

'Naddalin... baby- girl... there's something- that, I need to tell you.'

Part: 2

I kneel beside her, hands on my knees, toes buried in black the sand, wishing she'd look at me, wishing she would say something.

Even if it's only to tell me what I already know- that I made a grave and stupid mistake-one that will perhaps never be erased.

I would gladly accept it, I deserve it. What I can't stand is her absolute silence and daydreaming gaze.

Besides, I'm just about to say anything, something, to break the intolerable motionlessness tranquilities', when she looks at me, with eyes so weary they're the perfect byword of her years.

'Naddalin.'

She sighs, shaking her head. 'I didn't identify her; I had no idea-' Her voice trails off along with her stare.

'There's no way you could've known,' I say, eager to erase any guilt she might feel.

'You were under her spell from the very first day. Believe me, she had it all planned, made sure any memories were completely erased.'

Her eyes search my face studying me closely before she stands and turns away. Gazing out at the water's edge, hands balled into fists as she says, 'Did she hurt you?'

'Did she go after you or harm you in any way?'

I shake my head back and forth.

'She didn't have to; it was enough to hurt me through you.'

She turns, eyes growing darker as her features strengthen, inhaling deeply as she says, 'This is all my fault.'

I gawk, conjecturing how she could have faith in that after the case I just made.

-And-

Rising to my feet and standing beside her as I cry, 'Don't be ludicrous! Of course, it is not your fault!'

'Did you listen to anything I said?' I shake my head.

'Naddalin poisoned your elixir and hypnotized you. You had nothing to do with it, you were just doing her bidding-it was beyond your control!'

Nonetheless, I have scarcely finished when she is already discharging it with a wave of her hand. 'Ever, don't you see? The is not about Naddalin, or you, the is karma.

'The is vengeance for centuries of selfish living.'

She then shakes her head and giggles, though it's not the kind that asks you to join in.

It's the other kind-the kind that chills you to the bone.

'After all those years of loving you and losing you, repeatedly, I was sure that was my punishment for the way I'd been living, having no idea you'd died at Haven's hand. But now I see the truth I've missed all along. Just when I was sure I'd evaded karma by making you immortal and keeping you forever by my side, karma gets the last laugh, allowing us an eternity together, but only to look, never to touch each other again.'

I reach for her, wanting to hold her, comfort her, convince her that it's not at all true. But I pull away just as quickly.

Remembering how our inability to touch is the very thing that got us both here.

'That's not true,' I say, gaze fixed on her. 'Why would you be punished when I'm the one who made the mistake?

Don't you see?'

I- Emmah shake my head, irritated by her singular way of thinking.

'Naddalin planned it all along. She love's Haven- I bet you didn't know that, huh? She was one of the orphans you saved and she loved her for all of those hard times when she was like you, would've done anything for her.'

But Haven didn't care about her- as she should, she only loved her-and her only, loved me- and then, well, after they killed her, Naddalin decided to go after me-only she did it through you.

Wanting me to feel the pain of never being able to touch you again-just as she feels with Haven!

-And-

It all happened so fast, I just-' I stop, knowing it's useless, a total waste of words. She stopped listening just after I started, convinced she at fault for some of this- I knew- what I did not get was the hex causing all this.

Nonetheless, I refuse to even visit that place, and I will not let her either.

'Naddalin, please!'

'You can't just give up.'

The isn't karma-it's me! I made a mistake, horrible, dreadful mistakes also.

But that doesn't mean we can't fix it!

'See that was something I could never do is- FIX THING TO OTHER'S LIKING'S.'

There must be away.' Clinging to the falsest of hopes, forcing an enthusiasm, I do not really feel- THAT ANY LONGER.

Naddalin stands before me, a dark silhouette in the night, the warmth of her sad tired gaze serving as our only embrace.

'I never should've started,' she says.

'Never should've made the tonic-should've let things take their own expected path.'

'Seriously, Ever, just look at the result-it's brought nothing but pain!'

She shakes her head, her gaze so sad, so apologetic, my heart caves.

'There's still time for you though.'

You have got your whole life ahead of you-an eternity where you can be anything you want to be, do anything you want to do.

But for me- she shrugs. 'I'm tainted. I think we can all see the result of my hundred years.'

'Nope!' My voice quivers as my lips tremble so seriously it spreads to my cheeks.

'You don't get to walk away; you don't get to leave me once more! I spent the last month going through hell to save you. Besides now that you're well I'm not about to give up. We are meant for each other, you said it yourself! We're just suffering a brief setback, that's all. Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we'll think of a way to...'

I stop, voice fading, seeing her already moved on, retreating to her bleak sorry world where- she's solely at fault for it all.

Besides, I know it's time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts I'd prefer to leave out.

Maybe then she'll see it without a dealt, maybe then...

'So-o, before you assume karma's out to get you or whatever, you need to know something else, something I'm not accurately proud of, but still-' 'There's more,' I say, swish ahead though I've no idea how to phrase what comes next.

I without delay take a deep breath...

-And-

Also, I tell her about my trips to Earth and my homeland and the town around- to me was the world, that magical dimension between the dimensions, where I learned how to go back to time and that given the choice between my family and her-I chose her- over them- yet that is getting hard for me to do.

Persuaded and influenced, I could one way or another restore the future I was sure had been stolen, and up till now all it really amounted to was a lesson, I already knew- that occasionally destiny lies just outside of our reach and it is not graspable.

I swallow hard and stare at the black sand, reluctant to see Naddalin's reaction when she considers the eyes of the one who betrayed her.

But then again, as an alternative of getting mad or upset like I thought, her environs me with the most beautiful glowing white light-a light so comforting, so forgiving, so pure- it's like the portal to my home -only better it's a connection of body, mind, and soul.

So-o, I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we're wrapped in the most beautiful warm hazy glow.

'You had no choice,' she says, in a gentle voice with a very soothing, gaze, doing everything she can to ease all my shame.

'Unquestionably, you chose your family...'

It was the right thing to do... after all.

I would've done the same given the choice... yet, do I HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE.

I nod, shining her light even brighter and tacking on a telepathic embrace. Knowing it's not nearly as comforting as the real thing but for now, it'll do.

'I know about your family, I know all, I saw it all-' Her looks at me with eyes so dark and intense I force myself to go on.

'You're always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived -and so one day, while I was in Hastings; I asked about you-and-well-your entire life story was revealed.'

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still.

Moaning as she gazes into my eyes and telepathically traces her fingers along the curve of my cheek-creating an image so deliberate, so tangible, it almost seems real.

'I'm sorry,' say says nit-picking, thumb mentally smoothing my chin.

'I'm sorry,' 'I was so shut down and disinclined to share that, I reduced you to that. But then again, even though it happened a long time ago, it's still something I for one would rather not to confer.'

I nod, having no intention of pushing it. Her seeing her parents' murder followed by years of abuse at the hands of the church is not a subject I intend to pursue.

'But there's more,' I say, hoping I can maybe restore a little hope by sharing something else, and that I learned.

'When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, Naddalin had killed you.

Then even though, that seemed meant to be, I still managed to save you.'

I look at her, sensing she's far from swayed and rushing ahead before I lose her completely.

'I mean, yeah, maybe our fate is sometimes fixed and unvarying, but there are other times when it's shaped morally by the actions we take.

So, when I couldn't save my family by going back in time, it's only because, that was destiny, that couldn't be changed.

'It's beautiful... that you can change destiny.'

Or as Riley my pain in the butt little sisters, yet my best little friend too was all meant to be, then just a second before the second accident, that took them again... yet she never did say she loves me either.

'Love not to be- is for me- it was my destiny!' Said, Emmah.

'You can't change the past; it just is more of the past remand it kills the future.'

'Nonetheless, when I found myself right back here in Hastings, and I was able to save you, well, I think it evidences that the future isn't always concrete, not everything is ruled solely by fate.'

'Maybe so-o.' She sighs, gazes fixed on me, and my fate.'

'But then again you can't escape karma, ever ...?... It is what it is ...?... It doesn't judge, it's neither good nor immoral like most people ponder.'

Naddalin- I heard them call me a baby rapper to my face, and there was nothing, I could but stand there, hearing these lies day in and day out; like all the other lies, as well- that was just that nothing but lies.

Emmah- 'It's the result of all actions, positive and negative-a constant balancing of events- cause and effect-tit for tat-reaping and sowing-what goes around comes around.'

'Look at Karly's destiny- and what she did over not having a or education, and did not want to work for $2.00 an hour, a hamburger joint. So, all she had to do is make on shit video of her, this is just one out of a hundred- I recall this one for $20.00 - 'teen masturbates & fucks her dildo'- saying the headline- ('22-mins of me enjoying myself deliciously. Watch me cum over and over with my toys. Adore my long legs, my small tits, and my bush while- I let myself go crazy thinking about you.')

It had 3,555 views- and she made $71,100 just with that... was it wrong some would say, yet what other choice did she have? Yet that makes her the bad girl- she is a girl after all- that showed that she was one- and had needs- and need the money more than modesty in a world that could give a flying

shit about her- in any way.' With one video, she has made $6,000,000 in her short life, be the end days of it and money still has not made a destiny for her either. Said, Naddalin.

She shrugs her shoulders...

'However, you phrase it, it's the same in the end- is it not?'

Then... we are the bad ones out over- it's our destiny.

Emmah- 'And as much as you'd like to think otherwise, that's exactly what's happening here with you sometimes you just have to ask if... God's at be are just screwing us.'

'I have been there too...'

'All actions cause a reaction, I pounder even now- still having faith, even if some days I faulted like a human that was deemed- less then human....' Said Emmah.

'By them...' she said.

'By them...' Naddalin said.

Part: 3

She shakes her head...

'And the is where to have my actions have brought me- either.'

'Then again you need to ride 20 dicks before you find the right one if ever you do.'

'Ture- true... that you do... both- girls felt unanimously- saying we have been hurt, so badly, that way we turned to girls, for love, girls well love always when boys are a macho asshole, that is just impressing their jackoff boyfriends!'

'All the time, I told myself I turned you out of love-but now I see it was really out of self-interest- because, I couldn't be without you.'

'You like this?' She asks softly, her teeth nibbling my outer ear, and she starts to flex his thumb slowly, in, out, in, out... of me, her fingers still circling the fleshy lips that move about with her thumb, that connecting line linking as she pulled it away of wetness.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control, trying to absorb the disordered, muddled sensations that her fingers are releasing on me, fire coursing through my body. I moan again.

'You're so wet, so quickly.'

'Open your mouth,' she commands and thrusts his thumb in my mouth. My eyes fly open, blinking wildly.

'Let me make cum for you!'

'M-mm- you are my Oreo cookie, that I just have to spate and like out the creamy center.'

Her thumb presses on my tongue, and my mouth closes around her, sucking wildly on the beach. I'm panting once more as I tug at her with my mouth, and its trails down and under my chin, I can taste the smooth, rich leather or her.

'See how you taste,' she breathes against my ear. 'Suck down on me, the baby she said.'

I taste the saltiness on his thumb and the faint metallic tang of blood.

'That's why is happening now.'

'So, that's it?' I shake my head, hardly believing he's determined to give up so easily. 'That's how it ends?

You're just so dang sure you've been chased down by karma you don't even try to fight back?

'What's the use...?' She said to Naddalin.

You came all the way just so we could be together, at last... and now that we're facing difficulty, you're not even going to try to walk with me down this path- hand in hand?'

'Ever- and ever- never, letting go of ever- and forever- never.'

Her gaze is warm, loving, all- encircling like her hair and tightly squeezing arms, as they are falling around her as they fall together to the gold wheatgrass within the black sand, but it does nothing to stop the defeat in her voice, of worn-out yet want the love and touch of each other hands and bodies.

'I'm sorry, but there are some things I just know.'

'Yeah, well...' I shake my head and gaze down at the ground they were are laying on top off the tall grasses swaying in the breeze, burying my toes deep in the sand.

'Just because you've got a few centuries on me doesn't mean you get the last word. Because if we're truly in the together, if our lives, like our fate, is truly entwined, then you'll realize she isn't just happening to you, I'm part of it too. And you don't get to walk away from it you don't get to walk away from me! We've got to work together! There has to be a way,' I stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight, I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight I'm not sure we can win.

'I've no plans to leave you,' she says, gaze filled with the longing of four hundred years. 'I can't leave you, Ever. Believe me, I've tried. But in the end, I always find my way back to your side. You're all I've ever wanted-all I've ever loved-but Ever-'

'No buts...' I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her. 'There's got to be away, some kind of cure. And together we'll find it. I just know that we will. We've come too far to let Naddalin keep us apart. But I can't do it alone. Not without your help. So please promise me-promise you'll try.'

She looks at me, her gaze luring me in. Closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many tulips the entire cove is bursting with waxy red petals atop a green curving stems-the ultimate symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of sand.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back to her car. Our skin separated only by her supple black leather jacket and my organic cotton tee. Enough to spare the consequences of any accidental DNA exchange, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us.

'Never should've made the elixir-should've let things take their own natural course.

Seriously, Ever, just look at the result-it's brought nothing but pain!'

Without delay at the moment at that time she shakes her head, her gaze so sad, so remorseful, my heart caves.

'There's still time for you though.

You've got your whole life ahead of you-a endlessness where you can be whatsoever you want to be, do anything you want to do. But for me- she shrugs at me like a young girl that she is. 'I'm contaminated. I think we can all see the consequence of my hundred years.'

'No!' My voice quivers as my lips shake so-o badly it spreads to my cheeks.

'You don't get to walk away; you don't get to leave me again!

I spent the last month going through hell to save you, and now that you are well, I'm not about to give up.

We are meant for each other, you said it yourself to me many times!

We are just feeling a temporary setback, that's all.

Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we'll think of a way to... you and I.'

I personally stop, voice fading, seeing she previously moved on, withdrawing to her bleak sorry world where she solely to blame.

Then- I know it is time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts I would prefer to leave out. Maybe then she'll see it differently, maybe then- and there... 'There's more,' I say, whistle ahead though I've no idea how to phrase what comes following.

'So, before you assume karma's out to get you or whatever, you need to know something else, something I'm not precisely proud of, but still- I take a deep breath... and hold it- letting it out slowly.

Besides, tell her about my trips back home there is that magical dimension, left out of my life for a while, and the space between the dimensions where I learned how to go back in time and that given the choice between my family and her- I chose her, I choose to be here.

Influenced I could somehow restore the future, I was sure had been pilfered, and yet all it really amounted to was a lesson I already knew: Occasionally destiny lies just outside of our range for girls like you and me.

I swallow hard and stare at the sand, reluctant to see Naddalin's reaction when she looks into the eyes of the one who betrayed her.

So-o I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we are wrapped in the most gorgeous warm hazy glow.

But then again, as an alternative of getting mad or upset... like I thought, she environs me with the loveliest glowing white light-a light so comforting, so magnanimous, so pure- it's like the portal to another world-only better- and we go there together.

'You had no choice,' she says, voice gentle, gaze soothing, doing everything she can to ease all my shame. 'Of course, you chose your family. It was the right thing to do. I would've done the same given the choice.'

I nod, shining her light even brighter and tacking on a telepathic embrace.

Knowing it's not nearly as comforting as the real thing but for now, it'll do.

'I know about your family, I know everything, I saw it all-' she looks at me with eyes so dark and intense, I force myself to endure. 'You're always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived-and so one day, while I back on Earth I found out your story and where you're really from... I did... I asked about you-and-well-your entire life story was revealed to me just by reading between the lines.'

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still. Exhaling as she gazes into my eyes and telepathically traces her fingers along the curve of my cheek-creating an image so deliberate, so palpable, it almost seems real.

Part: 4

'I'm sorry,' she says, thumb mentally smoothing my chin. 'I'm remorseful I was so shut down and unwilling to share, that I condensed you to that. However even though it happened a long time ago, it's still something I prefer not to discuss any further.'

I nod at her, having no intention of pushing it anymore. She is witnessing her parents' homicide followed by years of abuse at the hands of the church is not a topic- I intend to pursue, over the pain that she had on the inside cover it all.

'Nonetheless, there is more,' I say, hoping I can maybe reestablish a little hope by sharing something else that I learned.

'When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, Naddalin had killed you. Nevertheless, even though that seemed fated to happen, I still managed to save you.'

I gaze at her, sensing she's far from convinced and rushing ahead before, I lose her entirely.

'I mean, yes, maybe our providence of destiny is sometimes fixed and unalterable, but there are other times when it's shaped purely by the actions we take.

So-o when I could not save my family by going back in time, it's only for the reason that was a destiny that couldn't be changed.

Or as Riley said seconds before the second accident that took them again, 'You can't change the past, it just is.

Naddalin- 'I knew a girl that did that over and over named Karly- and your right you can't but you can go back to see what you have lost, by seeing what you gave up on be- maybe doing thing differently.'

'Nonetheless, when I found myself right back here, and I was able to save you, well, I think it proves that the future isn't always tangible, not everything is ruled solely by fate.'

'Maybe so.' Her sighs gaze fixed on mine. 'But you can't escape karma, Ever- and Never.

It is what it is... No?

Yes?

Maybe?

It does not judge, it's neither good nor bad like most individuals are 'So, that's it?' I shake my head, hardly believing she's determined to give up so easily. 'That's how it ends? You're just so dang sure you've been chased down by karma you don't even try to fight back? You came all the way just so we could be together and now that we're facing an obstacle, you're not even going to try to scale the brick wall in our path?'

'Ever-' her gaze is warm, loving, all-encompassing, but it does nothing to cancel the defeat in her voice. 'I'm sorry, but there are some things I just know.'

'Yeah, well...' I shake my head and gaze down at the ground, burying my toes deep in the sand. 'Just because you've got a few centuries on me doesn't mean you get the last word. Because if we're truly in the together, if our lives, like our fate, is truly entwined, then you'll realize she isn't just happening to you, I'm part of it too.

-And-

Like- you don't get to walk away from it you don't get to walk away from me! We've got to work together! There has to be away-' I stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight I'm not sure we can win.

'I've no plans to leave you,' she says, gaze filled with the longing of four hundred years. 'I can't leave you, Ever. Believe me, I've tried. But in the end, I always find my way back to your side. You're all I've ever wanted-all I've ever loved-but Ever-'

'No buts...' I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her. 'There's got to be away, some kind of cure. And together we'll find it. I just know that we will. We've come too far to let Naddalin keep us apart. But I can't do it alone. Not without your help. So please promise me-promise you'll try.'

She looks at me, her gaze luring me in...

Closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many lilies the entire cove is bursting with waxy pink petals atop a green curving stems-the ultimate symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of sand.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back to her car.

Our skin separated only by her supple uniform and my organic cotton tee that was underneath my whit loses fitting blouse, that is fluttering in the wind open, like my hair.

Enough to spare the penalties for any accidental DNA exchange, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us even then even though.

She shrugs... even so-o.

It's the result of all actions, a positive and negative-a constant balancing of events-cause and effect-tit for tat-reaping and sowing-what goes around comes around.'

'Though you phrase it, it's the same in the end. In addition, as much as you would like to think otherwise, that is exactly what's happening here. Altogether actions cause a response.

'All the time I told myself I turned you out of love-but now I see it was really out of selfishness-for the reason that I couldn't be without you. That's why is happening now.'

'And the is where my actions have brought me.' She- being Emmah shakes her head.

(Some time has passed)

'Guess what?'

She gazes at me as she climbs to her knees looking down with her hair falling all around me, in the sand.

Her big eyes wider than usual, cute baby face curving into a grin. 'No, you know what? Don't guess...

I'll just tell you because you're never going to believe it! You're never going to deduction!'

I smile, hearing her thoughts a few moments before she can speak them, refraining from saying the wrong thing.

But I did say your good friend Naddalin, who actually- knows all and everything about me!

You and I dating- 'I've known about the possibility for a few weeks, but it just became official last night, and I still can't believe it!

Eight weeks in France you and I could spend, doing nothing but acting, eating, and stalking smoldering hot men... to yet know that she and I are even more perfect this some man, over the fact that we get each other, yet it's fun to play with boys.'

I glance at her as I back out of her drive. 'And Holt's good with all that?'

She looks at me. 'faster, you know the drill. What happens in here stays in here.'

Walking down the street hand in hand... as girlfriends.

My thoughts drifting to Haven and Naddalin, wondering how many more immortal rogues are still out there, just waiting to show up in my mind over and over just to terrorize me, no matter where I go.

Except when it does not, I feel the most fear- over knowing what next, by them.

'Anyway, I am leaving soon, just after school gets out.'

I did not want to say yet this is our last time to be together... I am moving on to a new life.

And I have so much to prepare between now and then!

'Seriously perfect.' I smile, and the best of it all. 'Really, Congrats, on making it see what you lost.'

'That's so cool. And well deserved I might add. I only wish I could go with you.'

And the moment I say it, I realize it is true, I am happy for her- yet, I feel like I am losing yet, another person in my life.

It would be so nice to escape all my problems and fly away from all the and that what we did, wings soring, to angels in flight at midnight- in starlight.

Besides, I miss hanging with her, already.

Part: 5

The last few weeks when she and Haven (along with the rest of the school,) were under Naddalin's spell were some of the loneliest days of my life.

Not having Naddalin beside me was more than I could bear, but not having the care of my two best friends nearly sent me over the edge.

Nevertheless, she and Haven do not evoke any of that, none of them do. Only Naddalin can access small bits and pieces, and what she recalls leaves her feeling awfully- guilty.

We stay in youth hostels, backpack around-how cool is this? Just the three of us, you know, you and Naddalin, Haven and I, and me and whoever...'

'You and whoever... we meet along the way too?' I glance at her. 'What's that about?'

'I'm a realist.' She shrugs.

'Oh, come on.' I roll my eyes. 'Since when?'

'Since last night when I found out I'm going back home and starting over.'

Part: 6

She giggles, running a hand through her brown hair.

'Listen, you all great and all, don't get me wrong.'

But I'm not fooling myself.

I am not pretending it's anything more than it is, am I? It's like we've got an expiration date, you know- and it's just my time- to try over- I'll see you again I promise? You guys are different, you're lifers.'

Lest go see a show with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end. It is not like with you and Naddalin.

'Lifers?' I peer at her, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light. 'Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- yet that is how girls like lives go.'

'You know what I mean don't you.'

She inspects her shape, turning her hot-pink nails the way and that. 'It's just that you guys are so in tune with each other, so connected.

And I mean that literally by the way since you're pretty much always going at it.'

Not anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second the light turns from not showing the hand, crossing the intersection with a loud screech of wheels stopping for us to go to the walkway, and leaving a thick trail of rubber behind them.

But even after I set still for a moment to think she's nowhere to be found. Besides I am just about to climb a wall in a panic, wondering where she could be, when she appears right beside me - and I blink- blink and blink once more, her hand in mine the whole time - I think I have blacked out a moment

there. Refusing to slow until we run into a parking lot and I scan for Naddalin, who always seem to stare down danger more than us, in a second- she was next to me.

She asks, glancing at me and her and slings her backpack over her shoulder.

Naddalin nods.

'A hundred and ten euros.' Naddalin laughs. 'Don't forget, it was fully customized and loaded with options.' there looking at scooters.'

'We could rent one... no?' Said Emmah.

'Yet that lest one girl out- no nah.' Said Naddalin.

She stares at her, eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing-why anyone would do such a thing, as buy one.

Part: 7

(The next day)

'Um, okay, so let me get the traditional one we could see a lot more- she said, 'so-o you just woke up and decided-hurry, what the hell?' '...And we have to look at the locals- and do as they do.'

'We get you one- and in the same breath she said, Emmah and I well ride tandem.'

I think I'll just dump my ridiculously expensive luxury scooter by the side of the road-WHERE JUST ANYONE CAN TAKE IT?'

Naddalin shrugs, saying 'Pretty much'- with an attitude. 'You have a lock...' she said '...and the people around here are not like back home.'

'Because in case you have not noticed,' Emmah says, practically hyperventilating now.

'Some of us are a little scooter deprived' said, Haven, I just said today I would get you one- relax- even if just renting one.'

'Some of us were born to parents so cruel and unusual they're forced to rely on the kindness of friends for the rest of their lives, thank you truly, and yes I would take the gift- thanks!'

'Sorry,' Naddalin shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more. 'Guess- I hadn't thought about that. Though if it makes you feel any better, it was all for a very good cause.' (She gives double thumbs up! And a wide smile with her head turned to the one side.)

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the usual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching the scooters is just the start of her plans, to get to know me better, walking is taking she thought...

'How'd you get to school?' I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting, took the train as you, and walked and walked...

'She rode the train.' Haven glances between us, she recently dyed, her bangs falling into her face, to make herself look Earthlier. 'I kid you not. I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes, she was classed as a girl forever.

Watched her climb right off that big steamer train, with all the other freshmen, dorks, retards, and rejects who that were all like us, unlike Naddalin, have no other choice but to ride.' She shakes her head, saying don't say it like that- think it doesn't say it even if true.

'And I was so shocked by the sight of it, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was really her. And then, when I still wasn't convinced, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to Josh who confirmed it.' She holds it up for us to see.

I glance at Naddalin, wondering what she could possibly- be up to, and that's when I notice she's ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no-name plain pockets, her early look as she calls it.

Even the brown boots she's nearly famous for have been swapped for girlie rubber flip-flops.

And even though she does not need any of that dash and flash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met the new low-key look just is not her- I thought.

Or at least not her- that I'm so-o used to.

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- she's also more than a tad colorful and otiose at times.

Always preoccupied with her clothes, her image in general- along with smarts.

Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered hidden point of view about her age - to use she is always the same age of the young teen girl.

Nonetheless, even though I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either, when I look at her again, I get the horrible chink in my belly - an an unrelenting push, demanding my notice.

A definite warning that she is merely the beginning. That the sudden transformation goes way deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda. No, she has something to do with last night. Something about being haunted by her karma. Like she's convinced herself that giving up her most prized possessions will somehow balance it all out.

'Shall we?' Her smiles, grasping my hand the second the bell rings, leading me away from Emmah and Haven who'll spend the next three phases of their time texting back and forth, trying to determine what's up with Naddalin.

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, 'What's going on? What really happened to your scooter?'

Three girls' hands and hand going down the sidewalk...

'I already told you.' she shrugs her hold body. 'I don't need it. It's an unnecessary sympathy, I no longer care to indulge.'

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, 'Don't look so serious.

It's not a big deal. When I realized it's not something I need, I drove it out to a depressed area and left it by the side of the road where someone can find it.'

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, wishing I could climb inside her mind, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself, get to the bottom of what the is really about.

Because - notwithstanding the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she's said makes the least bit of sense.

'Well, that's fine and all, I mean, if that's what you need to do, then great, have fun.' I shrug, fully convinced that it's not at all great, though knowing better than to say it out loud.

'But just how are you planning to get around now that you've ditched your ride? I mean, in case you haven't noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely, you can't get anywhere without having a motorbike.'

She looks at me, amused by my surge of lighter, which is not exactly the reaction I had prearranged on. 'What's wrong with the bus? It's free.'

I gape, shaking my heard, hardly believing my ears. And since when do you worry about cost, Missy.

'As some shallow, money-oriented, self-absorbed, buyer-driven slob?'

'No!' I cry, shaking my heard and squeezing her hand.

Hoping to convince her even though, I actually did kind of mean it- not being mean yet truthful. Only not in a bad way like she thinks or you even.

At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciates the finer things in life kind of thing, and less in my girlfriend's now she is the version of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl.

'I just-' I squint, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her, but still forging ahead when I say, 'I guess I just don't get it.' I shrug. 'And what's up with the glove?' I raise her leather-clad hand to where we can see.

'Isn't it obvious?' She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door.

But I just stay put, refusing to budge. Nothing is obvious... Nothing makes sense anymore.

She pauses, hand on the knob, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was a satisfactory solution for now. But perhaps you'd prefer I not touch you at all?'

Not at all!

That's not what I intended!

Part: 8

(Back at the school)

Switching to telepathy the moment some classmates approach, reminding her how hard it's been avoiding any and all skin-on-skin contact for the last three days.

Fantasizing I had a cold when we both know we don't get sick, and other ridiculous avoidance techniques that left me feeling deeply ashamed. It's been torture, pure and simple. To have a girlfriend so gorgeous, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be able to touch her-is the worst kind of agony.

'I mean, I know we can't risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything like that, but still, don't you think it looks kind of odd?' I whisper, the second we're alone again.

'I don't care about that.' Her gaze open, sincere, and fixed right on mine. 'I don't care what other people think. I only care about you.'

She squeezes my fingers and opens the door with her mind, leading me right past Emmah and the other girls as we head for our desks.

And even though I have not seen her since Friday when she woke from Naddalin's spell, I'm sure her hatred for me hasn't dampened a bit.

But while I am fully braced for her usual ploy of dropping her bag in my path in an attempt to trip me-today she's too distracted by Naddalin's new look to play that tired old game.

Her unhurried gaze traveling the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

But just because she ignores me doesn't mean I can relax or trust that it's over. Because the truth is, it's never over with Emmah. She's made that abundantly clear. If anything, she's probably more charged up and vicious than ever-making the little reprieve nothing more than the calm before the storm.

'Ignore her,' Naddalin whispers, scooting her desk so close the edges practically overlap.

Besides even though I nod as though I am, the truth is- I can't. As much as I'd love to pretend, she's invisible- I can't do it.

She's in front of me now and I'm completely obsessed. Peering into her thoughts, wanting to see what, if anything, happened between them.

Since even though I know Naddalin's responsible for all of the flirting, and kissing, and cuddling, I had no choice but to watch.

Even though I know for a fact, that Naddalin was completely deprived of free will that doesn't change the fact that it happened- that Naddalin's lips pressed against her while her hands roamed her skin.

And even though I am pretty sure it didn't go any further than that, I'd still feel a heck of a lot better, if I could just get some evidence to back up my theory.

And despite how crazy, hurtful, and completely masochistic it is- I won't stop until her memory gives, and every last horrible, painful, excruciating detail is finally revealed.

I'm just about to delve deeper, travel to the very core of her brain, when Naddalin squeezes my hand and says, 'Ever, please. Stop torturing yourself.

I've already told you, there's nothing to see.' I swallow hard, gaze fixed on the back of her head, watching her gossip with Jewell and Mireille, barely listening as she adds, 'It didn't happen. It's not what you think.'

'I thought you couldn't remember?' I turn, overcome with shame the instant I see the pain in her eyes as she looks at me and shakes her head.

'Just trust me.' She sighs loudly. 'Or at least try to. Please?'

I inhale deeply, gazing at her, wishing I could, knowing I should.

'Utterly, Constantly. First, you could not get over the past hundred years of my dating, and now you're obsessed with last week?'

She knits her brow and leans closer, voice urgent, coaxing, as she adds, 'I know that your feelings are unbelievably hurt. Really, I do. But what's done is done. I can't go back; I can't change it. Naddalin's done the on purpose-you can't let her win.'

I swallow hard, knowing she's right.

I'm acting ridiculous, irrational, allowing myself to veer way off track.

Besides, Naddalin thinks, switching to telepathy now that our teacher, Mr. Robins, has arrived. You know it's meaningless. The only one I have ever loved is you. Isn't that enough?

She brings her gloved thumb to my temple, gazing into my eyes as she shows me our history of all things enchanted, my many incarnations as a seeing all the young servant girl in France, all daughter gorgeous girls reminded me of how lucky I really was... it was nice to be back... eyes wide, I gape, never having seen that particular life before, I think back, in class and wonder.

Part: 9

But she just smiles, gazes growing warmer as she shows me the highlights of that time, a quick clip of the moment we met at a gallery opening in Amsterdam-our first kiss just outside of the gallery that very same night. Presenting only the most- Dadaistic moments and sparing my death, which always, inevitably, comes before we can progress.

-And-

After watching all of those beautiful moments unfold, her unabashed love for me laid bare to see, I gaze into her eyes, answering her question when I think: Of course, it's enough. You have always been enough.

Then closing them in shame when I add: But am I enough for you?

Finally admitting the truth-my fear that she'll soon tire of the gloved hand-holding, the telepathic embrace, and seek out the real thing in a normal girl with safe DNA.

She then nods, gloved fingers cupping my chin as she gathers me into a mental embrace so warm, so safe, so comforting, all of my fears slip away.

Responding to the apology in my gaze as she leans forward, lips at my ear as she says, 'Good. Now that that is settled, about Naddalin...'

As I make my way toward history class, I'm wondering which will be worse-seeing Naddalin or Mr. Milley?

For the reason that while I haven't seen or spoken to either of them since last Friday when my whole world fell apart there's no doubt, I left them both on a pretty strange note.

My last contact with Milley consisting of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something I never do-but also encouraging her to date my aunt Sabine-which is something I'm seriously beginning to regret.

And as awful as that was, it's only rivaled by my last moments with Naddalin when I aimed my fist at her navel chakra, determined not just to kill her but to obliterate her completely. And I would have too-except for the fact that I totally choked and she got away. And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I'm still so angry with her, who's to say I won't try again?

But the truth is, I know I won't try again. Besides not just because Naddalin spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how revenge is never the answer, how karma is the one and only true justice system, and plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that-but mostly because it's not right.

Despite the fact that Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me absolutely no reason to ever trust her again-I still don't have the right to kill her over it.

It won't solve my problem. Will not change a thing. Even though she's awful, evil, and everything that adds up to bad, I still don't have the right to- do that... She slithers up beside me, all blond tousled hair, water's edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth relaxed stretching her strong, tanned arm across the classroom door, barring me from getting inside.

And that's all it takes.

But I won't... even if... even if...

I promised Naddalin I could get myself safely to and from class without resorting to that.

'So, tell me, Ever, how was your weekend? Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice reunion? Was her ability to survive you-by chance?'

I clench my fists by my sides, visualization how she'd look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust, despite the vow of nonaggression I took.

She then nods, gazes fixed on mine, lowering her voice to a soft whisper as she adds, 'Not to worry though, you won't be alone for long.

Once the proper mourning period ends, I'll be happy to step in and fill up the void of her loss.'

I focus on my breath, keeping it slow and steady as I take in the strong, tan, muscular arm blocking my path, knowing all it would take is one well-placed karate chop to break it in half.

'Hell, even if you did manage to hold back and keep her alive, all you have to do is say the word, and I'm right by your side.' She grins, eyes grazing over me in the most intimate way.

'But no need to answer too quickly or commit yourself yet. Take as long as you like, For the reason that, Continually, I assure you, unlike Naddalin, I am a man who can wait. Besides, it's just a matter of time before you come looking for me anyway.'

'There's only one thing I want from you.'

I narrow my gaze until everything surrounding us blurs. 'And that's for you to leave me alone.' Herat rising to my cheeks as her gaze deepens to a leer.

''Farid not, darling.'' She laughs, looking me over and shaking her head. 'Trust me, you want way more than that. But not to worry, it's like I said, I'll wait for as long as it takes.

It's Naddalin I'm worried about. And you should worry too. From what I saw those last hundred years, she's an impatient man. Bit of a hedonist really. Didn't wait for much of anything so far as I could tell.'

I- Emmah, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for locating my weakness, my psychological strength so to speak, and pretty many lives to exploit it.

'Don't get me wrong, she's always been one to keep up entrances-wearing the armbands that are back and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss hadn't time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or should I say whomever-her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who's been there all along. Naddalin waits for no one. And he certainly never waited for you.'

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the words that are like prudently honed arrows aimed straight for my heart.

'Yep.'

'Saw it with my own eyes, I did!'

Smiling as she slips into a thick cockney pronunciation and backs out again. 'Haven saw it too.

It like- broke her poor heart.

Willing to take her back no matter where she'd been, no questions asked.

Though, unlike me-and, I'm afraid, quite unlike you haven't loved was unconditional. Which, let's face it, is something you'd never do.'

'That's not true!' I cry, voice hoarse, and very dry, as though it's the first time, that I've used it all day- it was so bad.

'I've had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-' I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

'Sorry, darlin', but you're wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty hand-holding there-' Her shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

'Totally, Forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?'

Part: 10

I swallow hard, forcing a calm I don't own when I say, 'That's a lot further than you ever got with Haven.'

'No thanks to you,' he spits, harsh gaze on mine. 'But, it's like I said, I'm a man who can wait.'

'Naddalin is not.'

She shakes her head.

'Shame you're so-o strongminded to play hard to get. You and I are a lot more alike than you think. Both of us pining after someone we'll never truly have-'

'I could-' I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know, that targeting an immortal's weakest chakra, one of the body's seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

'I could kill you right now,' I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I wouldn't do them, even though I know better.

'Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?'

'You could what?' She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath chills my cheek.

I myself gape, wondering where she could've possibly erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, 'Don't forget, Liv, Naddalin was under my spell totally.

which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.'

She got me... Right where it counts. And don't think she doesn't know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it's too late.

'No worries, Liv. 'I'm having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

The just a moment later- 'I've no plans to go after you- she said.'

Besides, it won't be long 'til you're squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.' she laughs, her eyes on mine, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach can't help but have.

'I'll leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to; you won't go after me either. Mostly because I do have what you want. The cure to the antidote for what you suffer from. I

assure you of that, said Naddalin. You're just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You're just going to have to show me how bad you want it.'

I gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing, to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-o distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it 'til now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I- Emmah press my lips together as my gaze meets she's... awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

knowing it's just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

'Oh, look at that.' She grins. 'Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.'

Part: 11

She lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place.

'Deep breaths,' her coos, lips grazing the edge of my ear, fingers sliding over my shoulder, leaving an icy cold wake in their path. 'No need to panic. No need to get all spaz-ed out o'er.

I'm sure that between us, we can come to some sort of mutual agreement, find a way to work something out.'

I narrow my gaze, disgusted by the price that she's set, words slow and cautious when I say, 'Nothing you could ever say or do could convince me to sleep with you!' just as Milley opens the door, allowing the entire class to overhear.

'Whoah' Naddalin smiles, hands raised in pretend admission of defeat as she backs into the room. 'Who said anything about bumping' ugliest, pal?'

She will throw her head back and laughs, allowing her creepy Ouroboric tattoo to flash in and out of view. 'I mean, not to disappoint you, darlin', but if it's a good shag I'm after, virgins about the last place I'd look!'

I storm toward my desk, cheeks burning, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite Milley's numerous attempts to quiet them down.

-And-

The moment the bell rings, I make a run for the door. Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can convince Naddalin will push her too far and she'll snap-an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, 'Ever? Got a minute?' Her mocking laughter trailing behind as I turn toward Milley to see what she wants.

I pause, classmates piling up behind me, eager to get to the hall where they can follow Naddalin's lead and taunt me some more.

'I did it.' Her smiles, posture stiff, voice anxious, but still eager for me to know.

I shift uncomfortably, moving my bag from one shoulder to the next, wishing I'd taken the time to learn remote viewing so I could keep an eye on the lunch tables and ensure Naddalin sticks to the plan.

'I approached her- just like you told me to.' She nods.

I squint, returning my focus to her, gut-churning as I begin to understand. I saw her the morning on the day had passed. We even talked for a while, and-' she shrugs, gazes drifting away, obviously still very taken by the event. I stand before her, breathless, knowing I have to stop it, whatever it takes before it gets out of hand.

'And you were right. She is nice to me. In fact, I probably shouldn't tell you but we're having dinner tonight.'

I nod, numb, shell-shocked, the words glancing at me as I peer into her energy and watch it unfold in her head:

She is standing in the line of the cafeteria massive hall with all its stain glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Milley approaches-causing her to turn and grant her a smile that's- that's- shamefully flirtatious!

Except that there's no shame at all. Those two couldn't be happier. At least not on Sabine's part. Nor Milley for that matter. No, the shame is all mine.

That cannot happen. For too many reasons to mention the dinner can never take place. One of them being that she is not just my aunt, but my guardian, my caretaker, my only living relative in the whole entire world!

And another, possibly even more urgent reason, is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, maudlin, overly sentimental, ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, Milley knows I'm psychic while she does not!

I've gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there's no way I'm going to be out by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted.

But just as I'm about to tell her that she absolutely cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, take my aunt to dinner and reveal any information I might've accidentally admitted during a weak moment when I was sure I'd never see her again, her clears her throat and says, 'Anyway, you should get to lunch before it's too late. I didn't mean to keep you the long, I just thought-'

'Oh, no, it's okay,' I say. 'I just-'

But she doesn't let me finish. Pushes me out the door as she waves me away, saying, 'Go on now. To find your friends. I just thought I should thank you, that's all.'

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin's gloved hand squeezing my knee as I quickly scan the campus, looking for Naddalin as she thinks: she's gone.

Gone? I gape, hoping her means gone as in not around, as opposed to going as in a pile of dust.

But Naddalin just laughs, the smooth melodious sound reverberating from her head to mine. Not annihilated. I assure you. Just-absent-that's all. Drove off a few minutes ago with some guy I've never- ever seen before.

Did you talk...?

Did she try to invite you?

Naddalin shakes her head, her eyes peering into mine as I add: Good. Because we can't afford to go after her no matter what! She has the antidote! She admitted it! This means all we have to do now is find a way to- constantly. She frowns... You can't perhaps believe her!

This is what Naddalin does. She lies and manipulates everyone around her. You have to stay away from her- she's using you-her can't be trusted- I just shake my head.

Part: 12

I can feel it.

The time is different. And I need for Naddalin to feel it too. She's not lying-seriously-her said- Not even finishing the thought before Haven leans forward, eyes darting between us as she says, 'Okay, that's it. Just what the heck is going on here? Seriously, enough already.'

I turn, noticing how her friendly yellow aura beams in such sudden sharp contrast to the deliberate harshness of her all-black ensemble. Knowing she means no ill will though she's definitely-disturbed by us.

'Totally, completely, and entirely- It's like you guys have some kind of creepy way of communicating. Like twins speak or something. Only yours is silent. ...And eerier.'

I shrug and sit there with my lunch, going through the motions of unwrapping a sandwich, I've no plans to eat, figured out to hide just how alarmed her question has made me feel.

Knocking my knee against Naddalin's, telepathically urging her to step in and handle the since I've no idea what to say.

'Don't pretend it's not happening.' Her eyes narrow in suspicion. 'I've been watching you guys for a while now, and it's really starting to creep me out.'

'What's creeping you out?' She gazes up from her phone, but only for a moment before she's back to texting again.

'Those two.' She points a short, black painted nail with a chunk of pink frosting stuck to its tip. 'I swear, they get stranger every day.'

Naddalin nods, setting down her phone as she takes a moment to look us over. 'Yeah, I've been meaning to mention that. You guys are weird.' She laughs.

'Oh, and the whole glove thing?' She shakes her head and purses her lips. Showing her hand looking all cracked with fishes and red. 'So not working for you, I said jokingly.'

Haven frowns, annoyed by my joke when she's trying to be grave.

'Laugh all you want,' she says, gaze steady, unwavering. 'But something's up with those two. I may not know what, but I'll figure it out. I'll get to the bottom of it. You'll see - you'll see.'

-And-

I'm just about to speak when Naddalin shakes her head and swirls her red drink, leaning toward Haven as she says, 'Don't waste your time. It's not as sinister as you think.'

She then smiles, gazes fixed on me.

'We're practicing telepathy powers of mind-reading, that's all.'

'Attempting to read each other's minds in place of talking all the time.'

'So, we stop getting in trouble in class over it took over the face we take over each other's bodies and movements too at times, a real headache for the professors.'

She snorts, causing me to squeeze my sandwich so hard the mayonnaise oozes out and squirts grossly out the backside. Gaping at my significant other who is just arbitrarily decided to break our number one rule - do not tell anyone who we are or what we can do! This is something we worked hard to do, looking at the library in the restricted section of dark magic.

Calming only slightly when Haven rolls her eyes and says, 'Please. I'm not an idiot.'

'Wasn't implying you were.' Naddalin smiles. 'It's quite real, I assure you. Would you like to try?'

I freeze, body solid, unmoving, as though seeing a disaster on the side of the road-only the particular disaster is me.

'Close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten.' She nods, sincere gaze meeting her. 'Focus on that number with all of you might. See it in your mind as clearly as you can, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?'

She shrugs, brows merging as though in deep concentration. Though Choosing to concentrate on blue instead of a random number like Naddalin said.

All it takes is a quick glance at her aura, morphing into a dark deceitful green, and a brief -peeks- at her thoughts to see she's only pretending.

She was holding her ground as she rubs her chin and shakes her head, saying, I glance at them, 'I don't seem to be getting anything. Are you sure you're thinking of a number between one and ten?' Knowing she's baiting her, sure that her one in ten chances of hitting the right number works too much in her favor.

She nods, deepening her focus on a beautiful shade of pulsating blue.

'Then we must have our wires a-crossed.' She shrugs. 'I'm not getting a number at all.'

'Try me!' Emmah abandons her phone, and her books and wand and leans toward Naddalin.

Eyes barely closed, thoughts hardly focused before Naddalin gasps, 'You're going to Haven?'

She shakes her head also.

Part: 13

(A week back)

'Three... For your data, the number was three.' She rolls her eyes and leers. 'And everyone knows I'm going to France. So nice try...'

'Everyone but me,' Naddalin says, jaws clenched, face gone suddenly pale.

'Well, I'm sure everyone has told you-you of all. You know, telepathically.' she laughs, returning to her phone again, saying 'sometimes old school kicking it is not the way to go anymore I prefer these,' and she held up the phone, that links all the magical networks together.

I peer at Naddalin, wondering why he's so upset over the trip. I mean, yeah, so she used to live there, at one time when she was alive- after her boyfriend passed away in an industrial accident or something like that- she was vague about did not really want to say... all that much, she said she was in her late 20's. she said something odd on her tombstone and it read- (I have not stuck with me all my whole life, so there-) and I think I got what it meant. Yet I think it said, 'I will live on forever...' or something like that, or 'I don't need you!' - 'Or even suck on that!' Like- I thought that's what it may have said- but- but Nah- it can't be- yet maybe?

...After all it is a cracked heart-shaped stone...

Part: 14

But- but that was hundreds of years ago, and the stone is crumbling and reads the rest has disintegrated to dust into just the wind!

I squeeze her hand, urging her to look at me, but she just stares at Haven with that same stricken look on her face.

~*~

'Nice try with the whole telepathy angle,' Haven says, swiping her finger a-crossed the top of her cupcake until it's coated with strawberry frosting, and she was licking her finger and kissing the end of it too.

'But I'm afraid you're going to have to try a little harder than that. All you have managed to prove is that you guys are even weirder than I thought. But no worries, I'll get to the bottom of it. I'll expose your dirty little secret before long.'

I hold back a nervous laugh, hoping she's just messing around, then peering into her mind only to see that she's serious.

'When are you leaving?' Naddalin asks.

But only to appear conversational, has already uncovered the answer in her head.

'Soon, but not soon enough,' she thought, eyes lighting up, as she stared the look at her. 'Let the countdown begin!'

Naddalin nods, gaze unstiffening as she says, 'You'll love this.

Everyone loves it, France is a lovely, delightful place.'

'You've been...?'

...?...

I and Haven both ask at the same time.

Naddalin nods- 'I's have,' gaze far away in the back of her on the mind and thought looking somewhat- blank to us looking at her color fading from her eyes. 'I lived there once a long time ago.'

'That's what we gathered...' they both said it unanimously!

Haven glances between us, eyes narrowed again when she says, 'Jaylynn and Naddalin lived there too, around the same time, she looks at her one eyelid squinting.'

Naddalin shrugs, expression noncommittal, as though the connection means nothing to her.

'Well, don't you think that's a little strange? All of you living there at the same time, in the same place, then all of you ending up here-within months of each other?' She leans toward her, abandoning her cupcake and letting it drop in search of some answers.

She just sips her blue drink and lifts her shoulders again, as though it's hardly worth going into, in the past she thought, to her, in through conversation.

But Naddalin's solid, refusing to cave or do anything that might give it away.

'Is there anything I should see while I'm there?' Haven asks, more to break the tension than anything else. 'Anything that shouldn't be missed?'

Naddalin squints, pretending to think, even though the answer comes quickly.

~*~

'All of France is worth seeing... yes is it not?'

But you should definitely check out the Ponte Vecchio, which is the first bridge to cross the Arno River and the only one left standing after the war- were ever inch of Frances was cover in their blood.

Oh, and we must visit the Galleria dell' Accademia which houses Michelangelo's David among other important works, and perhaps the-' 'Definitely hitting David,' Emmah says wanting this so badly.

'We... yes, we're taking you to a girl- surprise!'

'We did not want to tell you.'

'As well as the bridge, and the famous Il Duomo, and all the other items that make every travel guide top ten lists, but I am more absorbed in the smaller, off- the- beaten path kind of places- you know, where all the cool Florentines go.

Naddalin was raving about the one place, I forget the name, but it's supposed to house some incomprehensible revitalization artifacts and paintings and stuff few people know about.

Did you get anything like that? Or even clubs, shopping, that kind of thing?'

Naddalin looks at her, gaze so intense it sends a chill down my spine.

'Nothing offhand,' she says, trying to soften the look through her voice betrays a definite edge.

'Though any place that claims to house great art but isn't in the guidebook is probably a fake. The antiquities market is loaded with forgeries.

You shouldn't waste your time on that when there are so many other, far more interesting things to see.'

Haven shrugs, bored by the conversation and already back to texting again. 'Whatever,' she mumbles, thumbs tapping quickly. 'No worries. Naddalin said she'd make me a list.'

(Back home)

'I'm amazed by the progress you've made- Dariez.' Naddalin smiles. 'You learned all on your own?'

She nods, and gazing around the small, empty room, pleased with myself for the first time in weeks, when I walked into the tiny house.

The moment Naddalin mentioned she wanted to rid the place of all the overly slippery furniture, that was cheap she had filled it with during Naddalin's reign of fear, I was on it, to make this place fit for to young lady's- all cute and such.

Taking aim at each piece with such unchecked enthusiasm that-well-I'm not even sure where it went. All I know is it's no longer there I want to be- and she points at the old home she was half-grown in- and you were right.

'Looks like you're no longer in need of my lessons. She shakes her head, saying you're wringing I need you more now than ever.'

'Don't be so sure.' I said back quickly.

I turn, smiling as I push her dark wavy hair off her face with my newly gloved hand, hoping we'll get that cure from Naddalin soon, or at least come up with a less hokey alternative. Dariez a good kid... you'll do fine.

'I have no idea where all this stuff even went-not to mentioned, how I can't possibly fill up space, even more, when I have no clue where I am stashing all the stuff you used to have and me before getting all this.'

Reaching for her hand a second too late, and frowning as she walks over to the window - I feel as if I have lost my sister.

'The furniture'-she gazes out at her manicured lawn, voice low and deep-' is right back where it started, what seemed like forever ago, yet was only about a year.

'I don't like change-' she said- out of breath.

Returned to its original state of pure vibrating energy with the potential to become anything at all. She looks in the glass ball- and see her new life coming.

And as for the rest-' She shrugs, the strong lines of her shoulders rising ever so slightly before settling again. 'Well, it hardly matters anymore, does it? I've no need of it now.'

I stare at her back, taking in her lean form, her casual stance. Doubting how she could be so-o blasé in reclaiming the precious artifacts of her past... -The pictures of her in the plain pink dresses back in the day, the astride a rearing white stallion-not to mention all the other amazing relics dating back centuries.

'Nonetheless, those objects are priceless, see her life now within mine forever! You have to get them, back didn't you? They can never be replaced, yet you can with new lives, can't you?'

'It's all energy!' She squeals.

~*~

'Ever so, relax. It's just stuff.' Her voice firm, resigned, as she turns toward me again. 'None of it has any real meaning. The only thing that means anything is you.'

And even though the sentiment is undeniably sweet and heartfelt, it does not affect me in the way that it should.

The only thing she seems to care about these days is apologizing for her karma and me. 'But that's where you're wrong. It's not just stuff- too.'

Oh, I sorry, I felt so bad hugging her from the one side.

And while I'm perfectly fine with those inhabiting the number one and two spots on her list, the problem is the rest of the page is blank.

I move toward her, voice wiles, wheedling, hoping to reach her and make her listen the time.

And just like that, my mind is ripped into another time and place...

(Back into a week into the trip)

It's history for God's sake, we need to get books and have them signed, it was said this man write 30 books in one year, yet I am not sure if he was still alive! I so he would be over 90 now, you can't just shrug it off as though it's nothing more than a box of old tired books, of tired old objects you donate to Goodwill, I thought they were worth remembering- like the one about a would lose without color or feeling, or the one about a girl that was fight for her place, as an equal- the youngest over her class.'

Look at this thing the covers are all tattered, and the pages small.

She then looks at me, gazes softening as she trails the tip of her gloved finger from my temple to my chin. 'I thought you hated my 'dusty old room' as you once called it.'

'People change, and so did I.' I shrug, thank about that asking why?

Wishing, not for the first time, that she'd change back to the Naddalin, I knew before she was her-

'And speaking of change, why are you so freaked by my's trip to France?'

Noting the way, her hardens at the mere mention of the word.

'Is it because of the whole Haven and Nevaeh- become Naddalin thing of remembering the past- and not wanting to? The connection you don't want her to know about?'

Yet, were there the good times- I don't know...? She thought...

She looks at me for a moment, lips parting, about to speak, then she turns away and mumbles insanely, 'I'm hardly what you'd call freaked.'

'You know what...?

You're absolutely right.

For a normal person, that was hardly what you'd call freaked.

But for the girl who's always the coolest, calmest one in the room-all it takes is the slight narrowing of your eyes and the most minute clenching of your jaw to know you're upset.'

She sighs, eyes searching mine as she moves toward me again. 'You saw what happened in France.' She then squints. 'Despite all its virtues, it's also a place of unbearable memories, ones I'd rather not explore.'

I swallow hard shaking looking into her past- like a faded movie, remembering the images with her, I viewed in looking deep into her memories, lost in her mind, 'like a penny on the floor... worthless- my depression a sickness that keeps me, spring-like atop- my mind turning, my curse- or just my illusion? Until my death, until we part for better or for worse- locked in your heart-shaped box forever, I thought or was thinking to note but decillions, what little time we spent lost in my mind forever- whatever never mind.' -Naddalin is hiding in a small dark cupboard, watching as her parent was

murdered, seeing it along with me, she and I shared recalling the moment, back when she was in her playpen.

By thugs' intent on obtaining the elixir-then later, abused as a ward of the church until the Black Plague swept through France and her encouraged Haven and the rest of the orphans to drink the immortal juice, hoping only to heal and having no idea it would grant eternal life-and I can't help but feel like the world's worst girlfriend for bringing it up.

'I prefer to focus on the present.' She nods, gesturing around the large empty room. 'And right now, I really need your help furnishing the space. I am starting to really like a nice, clean, contemporary look when shopping for home decor.

-And-

Though- I was thinking of leaving it more than empty, to really emphasize the size of the rooms- that is well very tiny after all, I suppose we should try-' I gasp, practically choking on the word as my voice raises several octaves at the end, think that this girl is now a woman!

'I'm selling the house- in a year and moving on with my life.' She shrugs. 'I thought you would understand?'

But- you can your one of us now...

I gaze around, longing for that ancient velvet sofa with the lumpy cushions, knowing it would give the perfect landing for when my body with I am so tired I collapse, and my head quietly explode s, for all the chatter- that it has to hear and there are no ways of to turn them off- they just keep babbling in my mind. I need to have a real-life with real- real- things you no- like all thing that is really- REAL, like real friends too, not just the fantasy world that you refuse to see that is not a reality.

'Don't look so upset. Nothing's changed It's just a house. A seriously under the oversized house, I need to move on from. And just like that she was gone and said okay if that is what you want Dariez... and Naddalin vanished right before her eyes. Nonetheless, I just stand there instead, determined to keep it together. Gazing at my ridiculously gorgeous girlfriend of the last years as though it's the first time we've met. Besides, I have needed all the space anyway, I have a new boyfriend, as you may or may not know me and Stan are going to have a baby. they're never going to be enough rooms or room for three.'

'And what exactly are you planning to replace it with, then? A tent?'

'I just thought I'd move in with him, that's all.' Her gaze is pleading, begging me to understand, I did yet I thought she was throwing her new life away that I got for her, 'Nothing sinister, Ever- yet a way of what could be power- and taking my place someday- ever one said the next. 'Nothing meant to hurt you, but I don't want it'

I did not say- yet I thought you're stuck with regardless, your hexed, and at that point, I was out of her mind- for good- yet them- them- they were in it forever, and I was not going to stop it now.

I was studying her closely, wondering what is gotten into her, wanting to just say it was all over, and where they will end up without her- yet she said to me- he's looking for innocents and he has found it- so-o go-o.

'I mean, Naddalin, if you're seriously looking for a fight, I don't want it, why not just manifest something in your crazy head about how wrong I am and can go on?

I flick my gaze over her, moving from her glorious heard of longish dark glossy hair to her perfect rubber flip-flop-shod feet, remembering how, not so long ago, I longed to be normal again, just like everyone else. But now that I'm getting used to my powers, I don't see the point.

'What's this really about- I thought?' I squint, feeling more than a little betrayed.'

'I mean, you're the one who got me here.' Oh, I was- mortified.

You're the one who made me the- way- I am.

Right- and now that I'm finally adjusted, you decide to jump ship?

'Seriously! Why are you doing?'

But instead of answering, she just closes her eyes.

Projecting an image of the two of us laughing and happy, frolicking on a beautiful, black-sand beach- remember all the good times. Saying this is it... thanks for the memories. But I just shake my head and cross my arms tighter, refusing to play until my questions are answered, about her and them...

She sighs and stares out the window of the tiny home for the last time looking back me with the sun shining brightly, then turning toward me when she says, 'I've already told you, my only recourse, my only way out of the hell making- as I should have, it all karma- and I want what I lost.

And the only way to do that is to relinquish the manifesting, the high life, the big-spending, and all the other extravagances- I've indulged myself in for the last hundred years, so I can live the life of an ordinary citizen, too. I understand, Honest, hardworking, and humble, with the same day-to-day struggles as anyone else- if not more- go for it.'

Intermission-

Your times are limited, so don't be it... living someone else's life, that is what my tombstone said along with 1991 to 2094, I have seen a century- yet stayed the age of 14, all those days after my own ending.

~Emmah~

Part: 15

Portion: 1

I stare at her, replaying her words in my head, hardly believing what I just heard. 'And how exactly are you planning to do that?' I squint. 'Seriously. In your one century of living, have you ever even held a real job?'

But even though I'm dead sober and not at all joking, she throws her head back and laughs like I was.

Eventually calming down enough to say, 'You reliably think no one will hire me?'

'I could have had a job if I wanted to but, back home how - and when could I have - you're working for a town that thinks your less then they, in every way you could think of, the kids you work with don't like you and their dad that is now your boss thinks you're a waste of life; so get a job - yah-right.'

She shakes her head and laughs even harder. 'Forever, please. Don't you think I've been around long enough to have improved a few skills?'

~*~

I start to respond, wanting to explain that while it's truly remarkable to watch her paint, better than Picasso with one hand while at the same time outdoing Van Gogh with the other by cutting... I really don't think that'll help her land that coveted barista position at the Starbucks on the corner, yet something about girls well never change, just like every girl has that one boy that is her bitch, and I get that I had mine and she now has hers... so-o!

Nonetheless, before I can say it, she's standing beside me, moving with such speed and grace all I can manage is, 'Well, for someone who's turned her back on her gifts, you still move awfully fast, for a girl that doesn't want to see any more of her past even if it's showing in the painting.'

Aware of that warm wonderful tingle swarming - turning and swimming like within my skin as she slips her arms around my waist and pulls me close to her chest, carefully circumventing skin-on-skin contact, yet it could not be helped.

-And-

'Besides what about telepathy?'

I, myself murmur.

Thinking - Your mind spends about 70% of its time replaying memories and creating scenarios of perfect moments. Waiting - like a painting - is linked to depression, at times - and shows the picture within. Time spent waiting for something that may never happen is mentally painful. The best feeling in the world is knowing that you actually mean something to someone. This can literally add years to your

life. Sometimes- good people make bad choices. It doesn't mean they are bad people; it means they're human. Yet we're not human.

Then the talking started up-

'Are you planning to ditch that too- for your B*TCH?'

So, overcome by her juxtaposition, I can barely eke out the words.

'I've no plans to ditch anything that brings me closer to you,' she says, gaze on mine, steady and still.

'As for the rest-' SHE- shrugs, glancing around the large empty space before finding me again. And 'Tell me, what matters more, NEVER- Ever? The size of my house or the size of my heart?'

I bite my lip and advert my gaze, the truth of her words left me feeling small and ashamed- like first time sex- when your 13, and can now consent.

I swallow hard, focusing on anything but her, thinking back on my life and all the flashbacks come.

It's not that I care about her past, I mean, if I want those things then fine, I'll just clear them myself. An instant mood change from happy to sad usually indicates that you're missing someone, I have noticed...

Even so then again even though they aren't important- THERE LIKE- JUST- moments lost in time, if I'm going, to be honest, then I have to admit they were part of the preliminary attraction-adding to her sleek, shiny, mysterious persona, that lured me in right away. Then when I finally am held at her again, standing before me, stripped bare of all the usual dazzle and flash, honed down to the very essence of who SHE really is, I realize she's still the same, warm, wonderful girl that she's been all along.

Which just proves her point even more. None of that other stuff really matters. None of it has anything to do with her soul at all.

I smile, suddenly remembering the one place where we can be together-safe and secure and protected from harm.

Reaching for her gloved hand as I grasp it in mine, saying, 'Come on, I want to show you something,' and pulling her along.

At first, I was concerned she'd refuse to visit a place that not only requires a certain amount of magic for entry, but that is nothing but magic once you arrive.

Formerly just after landing in that vast sweet-smelling field, she wipes the BUTT of her jeans and offers her hand, gazing all around as SHE says, 'Wow, I don't think I was ever able to make the portal so-o quickly.'

'Please, you're the one who taught me.'

I smile, gazing at the meadow of pulsating flowers and shivering trees, noting how everything here is reduced to its absolute purest form of beauty and energy.

I tilt my head back, closing my eyes against the warm hazy glow, that she makes with me within the shimmering mist of the day.

Remembering the last time, I was here, how I danced with a manifest Naddalin in the very same field, delaying the moment when I'd have to let go.

~*~

'So, you're okay with being here?' I ask, unsure just how far the ban on magic outspreads. 'You're not mad?' I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT SHE IS *comfortable*!

She then shakes her head and takes my hand.

'I never grow tired of seeing THIS world WITH ITS UNWORLDLY COLORS AND CREATURES.'

It's a display of loveliness and potential in its unadulterated form.'

We make our way through the pasture, sustained by the grass just under our feet as our fingers graze the tops of golden wild-flowers, that bend and sway alongside us.

Knowing anything is possible in the wonderful place, anything at all, including just maybe -us.

'I missed them... everything...'

She leers, gazing all around...

'Not that I reminisce about the last few weeks without it, even still, it seems like such a long time since we were last here - just like this.'

'It felt strange coming without you,' I say, leading her toward a beautiful Balinese-style bathhouse balanced beside the blue-green tinted stream.

'Though I did discover a whole other side I can't wait to show you. Only later - not now.'

I push the gossamer pink fabric aside and plop onto the soft white cushions, smiling as Naddalin lands right beside me, the two of us lying side by side, gazing up at the decoratively carved coconut beams.

Heads together, the soles of our feet just a few inches shy - the results of my elixir-fueled growth spurt.

'What is the...?'

She turns onto her side...

And then I draw the curtains closer with my mind to me and her. Keen to shut out all that environs she and I, so-o we can enjoy our own private space.

'I saw one on the cover of a travel magazine featuring some exotic resort, and I liked it so much I thought I would appear one. You know, so we could hang out-and-stuff.'

I prevent my gaze, heart racing, face blushing, knowing I'm quite possibly the most pathetic seductress she's met in her one hundred years.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, pulling me so close we just nearly touch.

Separated only by the slimmest veil of shimmering energy, a pulsating screen that hovers between us - allowing us to be near without harming each other.

I close my eyes, surrendering to the wave of warmth and tingle as our bodies come together. Two hearts pumping in perfect unison, reaching, and retreating, expanding and retracting, the tempo perfectly synchronized as though beating as one.

Everything about it feels so good, so natural, so right, I snuggle closer. Nestling my face in the hollow where her shoulder meets her neck, longing to taste her sweet skin and inhale her warm perfumed scent. A

A low moan absconding from deep in her throat as I close my eyes and press into her hips, my tongue tipped toward her skin, only to have her spring from my reach so fast I'm met with a mouthful of the cushion.

I scrambled upright, seeing her move so quickly she's reduced to a blur. Stopping only when she's safely ensconced on the other side of the curtain, eyes blazing, body trembling, as I beg her to tell me what occurred.

I move near her, wanting to aid.

But then again, just as I get close, she moves, yet, again handheld before her, observation cautioning me away.

'Don't touch me,' SHE says. 'Please, stay right where you are. Don't come any closer.'

'But why?'

My voice is hoarse, uneven, hands trembling by my side as if I was feeling my old, ways and old life- AS it was when I was getting older- not a young girl any longer.

'Did I do something where I was mistaken in doing so?

I just thought-well-since we're here-and since nothing bad can happen-I just thought it would be okay- if we maybe tried to- re-kindle in some kind of reconciliations.'

'Never- Ever, it's not that it was's-' she shakes her head, her eyes darker than I've ever seen them- for being sky blue.

So dark the irises are indistinguishable from the pupils, blending right in. 'And who says nothing bad can happen here?' Her tone so edgy, gaze so harsh, it's clear she's traveled a very long way from her usual state of infallible calm.

I swallow hard and stare at the ground, feeling foolish, ridiculous to think I was so desperate to be with my girlfriend, I risked taking her life- if I do- if they know- if they...

-And-

'I guess I just assumed...'

'I'm sorry.'

My voice fades, knowing very well what happens when one assumes. I don't know what to say.' Not only do you make an ass out of you and me, but in the case, that very same you just might end up dead for the final time with no more lives given to you.

'I-I guess that- I didn't think it through and then I shake my head, knowing it's completely insufficient considering the life-and-death circumstances we're in.

I mean, if we're not safe here, then where? I pull my shoulders in, wrapping my arms around my waist, trying to make myself smaller, so small I'll disappear from her sight.

And yet, I can't help but wonder precisely what kind of bad thing could happen in a place where magic comes easily, and wounds are healed promptly.

Naddalin looks at me, answering the thought in my head when she says, 'School contains the possibility of all things. So far, we've only seen the light, but who's to say there's not a dark side? Maybe it's not at all what we think.'

I gaze at her, remembering when I first met Neville and Rayne and how they said something similar. Watching as she manifests a beautifully carved wood bench, then motions for me to sit.

'Come,' she nods, urging me toward her as I take a seat at the far end, not wanting to get too close and risk setting her off again.

'There's something you need to see something you need to understand. So please just close your eyes and clear your mind of any random thoughts and clutter as best you can. Keeping yourself open and receptive to any visions I send. Can you do that?'

I nod...

My eyes shut tight...

I was doing my best to sweep my mind of such thoughts as- What is going on I thought, and thought more pondering? Is she mad at me- or just mad?

Unquestionably, she's mad at me - I know it!

How could I be so stupid? But how mad is she beyond? Is it possible to change her mind and start over again? My usual paranoid play-list set on permanent repeat.

But even after clearing it out and waiting for what feels like a reasonable amount of time, all I have gotten so far is a heavy void of dense solid black.

'I don't get it,' I say, opening one eye, and peeking at her.

Nonetheless, she just shakes her head, eyes shut tight, brows merged in concentration, as she endures to focus with all her might.

'Listen,' she says then and there.

'And look deep down inside.'

'Just close your eyes and obtain.'

I take a deep breath and try again, but still, all I get is a foreboding silence and the feeling of black empty space.

'Um, I'm really sorry,' I aware, not wanting to upset her but sure that I am missing the point.

'I'm not getting much of anything other than silence and darkness.'

'Faithfully,' she whispers, unfazed by my words. 'Now please, take hold of my hand and go deeper, delve past the surface using all your senses, then tell me what you see.'

I take a deep breath and do as she asks me to do, reaching for her hand, and pushing past the solid wall of the dark.

...But all- I get is more of the same.

Pending-

While waiting for-

I'm sucked into a black hole, limbs flailing, unable to stop or slow down. Free-falling into the darkness, my horrible high-pitched scream the only sound.

And just as I'm sure that the fall has no end-it stops. The Shriek... The fall... It... all.

Everything...

Leaving me to hang there, released, and suspended. Completely alone in the solitary place with no beginning or end.

Lost in the dark and dismal abyss with no trace of light coming in. Abandoned in the infinite void, a lost and lonely world of permanent midnight. The horrifying comprehension slowly dawning on me- the is where I live now.

Hell, with no escape...!

-Then-

I try to run, scream, cry for help but it's no use.

I'm frozen, paralyzed, unable to speak-completely alone for all of infinity.

Expressly held apart from everything I know and love-cut off from everything that exists.

Knowing I've no choice but to surrender as my mind goes blank and my body limp.

There's no use in fighting when no one can save me.

I stay like that, solitary, eternal, a shadowy awareness creeping upon me, tugging from a place just outside of my reach-

'Till-

Pending-

I am tugged out of that hell and into Naddalin's arms, relieved to see her beautiful, anxious face hovering over me.

'I'm so sorry I thought I'd lost you-I thought you'd never come back!' She cries, holding me tight, her voice like a sob in my ear.

I cling to her, body shaking, her art racing, clothes drenched with sweat. Never have felt so isolated before-so disconnected from everything. From every-living-thing. Hugging her tighter, unwilling to let go, my mind connecting with her, asking why she chose to put me through that.

She pulls away, cupping my face in her hands as her eyes search mine. 'I'm sorry. I was not trying to punish you, or harm you in any way. I only wanted to show you something, something you needed to experience firsthand to understand.'

I nod, not trusting my voice. Still shaken by an experience so awful it felt like the death of my soul.

'My God!' Her eyes widen. 'That's it! That is exactly what it is. The soul ceases to exist!'

'I don't understand,' I say, voice hoarse, shaky. 'What was that horrible place?'

She looks away, fingers squeezing mine when she says, 'The future, the eternal abyss I'd thought was meant only for me that I'd hoped was meant only for me...' She closes her eyes and shakes her head. 'But now I know better. Now I know that if you are not careful, extremely careful-you'll go there too.'

I look at her, starting to speak, but she cuts me off before - I can get to the words. 'The past few days I've been getting these flashes - glimpses, really - of various moments from my past-both distant and near.' She looks at me, carefully searching my face.

'But the moment we came here-' Her gestures around. 'It started trickling back, slowly at first until it all came surging forth, including the moments I was under Naddalin's control.

I also relived my death. Those few brief moments after you broke through the circle before you had me drink the antidote, as you know, I was dying. I watched my entire life flash before me, a hundred years of unchecked vanity, narcissism, selfishness, and greed.

Like an endless reel of all my actions, every misdeed that I had done-accompanied by the impact I had on the mental and physical effect of my mistreatment of others.

And though there were a few decent acts here and there, the majority, well, it amounted to centuries of me focusing on nothing but my own self-interest, giving very little thought to anything or

anyone else. Focusing solely on the physical world to the detriment of my soul. Leaving me no doubt I was right all along, my karmas to blame for what we're going through now.'

She shakes her head and meets my gaze with such unflinching honesty - I want to reach out and touch her, hold her, tell her it will all be okay. But instead, I stay put, sensing there is more and it is about to get worse.

'Then, now of my death, instead of coming here-' Her voice cracks but her forces herself to continue. 'I-I went to a place the exact opposite of them.

A place so dark and cold it is more like a home then I wanted it to be or thought it could be. Experiencing the same thing you just did. Solitary, suspended, alone-left to stay that way for all of eternity.' She looks at me, willing me to understand. 'It was exactly like you felt. It was as though I was isolated, soulless-with no connection to anything or anyone else.'

I stare into her eyes, an ominous chill blanketing my skin, never having seen her so tired, so jaded, so-regretful-before.

'And now I understand the very thing that's escaped me all these years-'

I pull my knees to my chest, shielding myself from whatever comes next.

'Only our physical bodies are immortal. Our souls are most certainly not.'

I avert my gaze, unable to look at her, unable to breathe.

'The is the future you're facing. The one I've granted you, if, God forbid, anything should happen, that is.'

My fingers instinctively fly to my throat, remembering what Naddalin said about my compromised chakra, my lack of discernment and weakness, wondering if there is some way to guard it. 'But how can you be sure?' I look at her as though caught in a dream, some horrible nightmare with no way to escape.

'I mean, there's a good chance you're wrong since it happened so fast. So that was just a temporary state. You know, as I brought you back to life so fast you didn't have time to make the trip here.'

She shakes her head, her gaze meeting mine when she says, 'Tell me, Ever, what did you see when you died? How did you spend those few moments between the time when your soul left your body and I returned you to life?'

I swallow hard and look away, gazing at the trees, the flowers, the crystal-clear stream flowing nearby-remembering that day I found myself in the very same field.

So, taken by its heady fragrance, its shimmering mist, the all-encompassing feel of unconditional love, I was tempted to linger forever, never wanting to leave.

'The reason you didn't see the abyss is that you were still mortal. You had died a mortal's death. Nevertheless, the moment I had you drink from the elixir, granting you infinite life, everything changed. Instead of eternity in School or the place beyond the bridge-the Shadowland became your fate.'

She shakes her head and looks away, so deeply mired in her private world of regret I am afraid I will never reach her again. But just as quickly her eyes meet mine when she says, 'We can live an eternity in the earth plane, you and I together. But if something should happen, if one of us should die-' she shakes her head. 'The abyss is where we'll go, and we'll never see each other again.'

I start to speak, desperate to refute it, tell her here's wrong, but I can't. It is of no use. All I must do is look into her eyes to see the truth.

'And as much as I believe in the powerful heralding magic of the place-just look at the way it heralded my memory-' she shrugs and shakes her head.

'I can't afford to give in, no matter how safe my desire for you may seem. It is too risky. Besides we've no impervious it will be any different here than on the earth plane. It is a gamble I cannot afford to take. Not when I need to do everything I can to keep you safe.'

'Keep me innocuous?' I gape hard. 'You're the one who needs saving! It is my fault all the happened in the first place! If I had not-'

'Always, please,' She says, voice harsh, willing me to listen.

'You're in no way to blame. When I think about the way I've lived-the things I've done-' She shakes her head. 'I deserve nothing better, and if there was any inquiry that my karma was to blame, well, I think it ends here.

I have spent the better part of hundred years devoting myself to physical pleasure and neglecting my soul-and the is the result-the wake-up call, and inopportunely, I have dragged you along.

So-o makes no mistake, my concern is for you and you only. You are my only priority. My life is only important in that- I stay well long enough to protect you from Naddalin and whoever else she might hurt. And that means we can never be together. Never. It's a risk we can't take.'

I turn toward the stream, a thousand thoughts storming my brain. Besides even though I heard everything she just said, even though I qualified the gorge for myself, I still would not change what I am.

'And the other orphans?'

I whispered, remembering how I counted seven, including Naddalin at one point. 'What happened to them? Do you know if they turned evil like Naddalin and Haven?'

Naddalin shrugs, rising from the bench and pacing before me. 'I always assumed they were too old and feeble by now to ever pose a real threat.

That is what happens after the first one hundred years- you age- some yet slower than the rest. And the only way to reverse the process is to drink the tonic again if you want an end.

My guess is that Haven amassed it while we were dating and slipped it to Naddalin who eventually learned how to make her own and then passed it to the other.' She then shakes her head more.

'So that's where Haven is now,' I whimper, overcome with remorse when I realize the truth. No matter how evil she was, she did not deserve that. Nobody does. 'I sent her here -and-now she's-' I shake my head, unable to finish.

'It wasn't you who did it, it was me.'

She fills the space beside me, sitting so close there is only a sliver of energy pulsating between us.

'The moment I made her an immortal, I sealed her fate.'

I was not sure she wanted it or not, yet it was for the best I thought and my selfishness.

'Just like I did yours.'

I swallow hard, reassured by her warmth along with her wanting to assure me that - I am truly not responsible for sending my number-one enemy through all my lives straight into that hell.

'I'm so sorry,' she whispers, gazes full of remorse.

'I'm sorry - I complicated you in any of them. I should have left you alone should have walked a long time ago. You would've been so much better off if you'd never met me -'

I shake my head, unwilling to even visit that place, it is far too late for looking back or second-guessing. 'But if we're destined to be together-then maybe she is our fate.' Knowing her stays unconvinced the second I read her countenance.

'Or maybe I've forced something that was never meant to be.' She frowns and looks down. 'Did you ever think of that?'

I look away, taking in the surrounding beauty, knowing words alone can never - ever change any of them, the only action can help; and fortunate for us, I know just where to begin.

I stand, pulling her up alongside me as I say, 'Come on. We don't need Naddalin - don't need anyone - I to know just the place!'

We head for the Countless Halls of Learning...

Stopping just shy of its steep marble steps as I peer at her, wondering (eager!) her can see what I see-the ever-changing façade that is needed for entry.

'So, you really did find it,' she says, voice tinged with awe as we watch the revolving collection of the most sacred and beautiful places on Earth.

The Great Pyramids of Giza, the Taj Mahal morphing into the Parthenon, which turns into the Lotus temple, which becomes and so on. Our mutual acknowledgment of its beauty and wonder allowing us into the grand marble hall lined with elaborately carved columns straight out of ancient Greek times.

Things I never thought of living in a small town that was the world to me, yet more to them. Naddalin gazes around, face a mask of absolute wonder as she takes it all in. 'I haven't been here since-'

I peer at her, holding my breath, dying to know the details of the last time she was here.

'Since, I came to find you.'

I squint, unsure what that means.

'Sometimes-' She looks at me. 'I was lucky enough to just happen upon you, ending up in the same place at just the right time. Though often I'd have to wait a few years before it was proper to meet.'

'You mean you were spying on me?' I gape, hoping it was not as creepy as it sounds. 'When I was a kid?'

She cringes, averting her gaze when she says, 'No, not spying, Never- Ever. Please. What do you take me for?' She laughs and shakes her head. 'It was more like keeping tabs.

Patiently waiting until the time was right. Nevertheless, the last few times when I was unable to find you, no matter how hard I tried and believe me, I tried, living like a wanderer, itinerant from place to place, sure I'd lost you forever-I decided to come here. And I ran into some friends who showed me the way.'

'Neville and Rayne.' I nod, neither hearing nor seeing the answer in her head, but somehow sensing it is true. Overcome by an immediate rush of guilt for failing to even think of them until now. Not even wondering how they might be, where they might be, until a second ago.

'You know them?' She squints, surprised.

I press my lips together, knowing I will have to tell her the rest of the story, the parts I had hoped to abandonment.

'They led me here too-' I pause, taking a deep breath and looking away, preferring to take in the room than meet her quizzical gaze. 'They were at Ava's-or at least Rayne was. Neville was out-' I shake my head and start again. 'She was out trying to help you when you-'

I close my eyes and sigh, deciding to just show her instead. Everything. All of it. Including the parts, I was too ashamed to put it into words. Projecting the events of that day until there are no more secrets between us. Letting her know how hard they fought to save her, while I was too stubborn, refusing to listen.

But instead of being upset as I feared, she places her hands on my shoulders, gazing at me with forgiveness as she thinks, what is done is done. We must move forward, there is no looking back.

I swallow hard and meet her gaze, knowing she is right. It is time to get started, but where to begin?

'It's better if we split up.' Her nods, her words a surprise to my ears, and I'm just about to speak when she adds, 'Ever, think about it. You're trying to find something to reverse the effects of the elixir I drank, while I'm trying to save you from the Shadowland, not the same thing.'

I sigh, disappointed but have to agree. 'I guess I'll see you back at the house then. My house, if that's okay?' I place my hand over her and give it a squeeze, reluctant to revisit her depressingly barren room and unsure where she stands on the whole karma curse thing now that her memory is returned.

And no sooner has she nodded and closed her eyes that she vanishes from sight.

So, I take a deep breath and close my eyes too, thinking: I need help. I have made a huge and horrible mistake and I do not know what to do. I need to either find an antidote to the antidote - something that will reverse the effects of what Naddalin's done-or find a way to get to her, convince her to cooperate with me-but only in a way that will not need me to- um- seriously compromise myself in a way I am not comfortable with... if you know what I mean...

Focusing my intention, replaying the words repeatedly. Hoping it will grant access to the Akashic Records, the permanent record of everything that has is or ever will be done. Praying - I will not be shut out again like the last time- I was here.

But the time, when I hear that familiar buzz, instead of the usual long hallway leading to a mysterious room, I find myself right smack in the middle of a cineplex, its lobby empty, snack bar abandoned, with no clue of what I should do a set of double doors opens before me.

I step into a dark theater with sticky floors, worn seats, and the scent of buttery popcorn permeating the air. Squeezing down the aisle and choosing the best seat in the house, the one halfway down and dead center, I prop my feet on the chair just before me as the lights go dim and a big tub of popcorn appears in my lap. Watching the red drapes retract as the large crystal screen begins to flicker and flare in a profusion of images that quickly race past.

But instead of the solution I had hoped for, all I get is a series of clips from movies I have already seen. Resulting in a homemade montage of my family's funniest moments, lifted straight from my old life in Oregon and unfolding to a soundtrack that only Riley could make.

Portion: 2

Watching a clip of Riley and me, both of us hamming it up on a homemade stage in our den, dancing and lip-synching for an audience consisting of our parents and dog. Soon followed by an image of Buttercup, our sweet yellow lab. Tongue straining toward her nose, licking like mad, trying to get to the chunk of peanut butter Riley had dabbed there.

And even though it is not at all what I had hoped for, I know it is important all the same. Riley promised she would find a way to communicate with me, assuring me that just because - I cannot see her anymore does not mean she is not still around.

So, I push my quest aside and sink down into my seat. Knowing she is sitting beside me, silent and unseen. Wanting to share the moment together, two sisters sharing the home-movie version of what used to be.

By the time I make it back to my room, Naddalin is waiting, sitting on the edge of my bed, cradling a small satin pouch in the palm of her gloved hand.

~*~

'How long was I gone?' I asked, plopping down beside her as I squint at my bedside clock and figure the math.

'There's no time in School,' she reminds me. 'But on the earth plane, I'd say you were gone for a while. Did you learn anything?'

I think about the home movies I watched, Riley's version of 'The Bloom Family's Funniest Videos,' then I shake my head and shrug. 'Nothing useful. You?'

Her smiles, handing over the silk pouch as she says, 'Open and see.'

I pull on the drawstring, slip a finger inside, and retrieve a black silk cord bearing a cluster of colorful crystals held together by thin gold bands. Watching it catch and reflect the light as I dangle it before me, thinking it is beautiful if not a bit odd.

'It's a charm,' she says, watching me carefully as I take in the individual stones, each of them bearing a different shape, size, and color.

'They've been worn through the ages and are said to hold magical properties for heralding, protection, prosperity, and balance. Though the one, being created solely for you, is heavy on the protection element since that's what you need.'

I look at her, wondering how they could possibly harp. Then I remember the crystals I used to make the antidote that saved her, and how it really could've worked - if Naddalin had not tricked me into adding my blood to the mix.

'It's completely unique, assembled and crafted with your own personal journey in mind. There is not another one like it, not anywhere. I know it doesn't solve our problem, but at least it'll hurt.'

I squint at the bundle of rocks, unsure what to say. Just about to slip it over my head and give it a go, when she smiles and says, 'Allow me...' Gathering my long hair and draping it over my shoulder as she reaches behind me and secures the small golden clasp, before tucking it under my tee where no one can see.

'Is it a secret?' I ask, expecting the crystals to feel cold and hard against my skin and astonished to find them quite warm and comforting instead.

~*~

She brushes my hair back over my shoulder, letting it fall just shy of my waist. 'No, it's not a secret. Though you probably shouldn't flaunt it either. I have no idea just how far Naddalin's advanced, so it's better not to draw her attention to it.'

'She knows about the chakras,' I say, seeing the surprise in her gaze and choosing to omit the fact that she's actually responsible for that. Having unwittingly revealed all kinds of secrets while under Naddalin's spell. She feels bad enough already, so there is no reason to make it any worse.

I tap my fingers against the amulet beneath my shirt, surprised by how solid it feels from the outside, compared to the inside, the part that rests on my skin. 'But what about you? Don't you need protection too?' Watching as she unearths a similar amulet from under her long-sleeved tee, smiling as she dangles it before me. 'How come yours looks so different?' I ask, squinting at the cluster of sparkling stones.

'I told you, no two are alike. Just like no two people are alike. I've got my own issues to overcome.'

'You have issues?' I laugh, though seriously wondering what they could possibly be, she is good at everything she does. And I mean everything.

She shakes her head and laughs, a wonderful sound I do not get to hear nearly enough anymore. 'Believe me, I've got my share,' she says, laughing again.

'And you're sure these will keep us safe?' I press it against my chest, noticing how it feels like a part of me now.

'That's the plan.' She shrugs, getting up from the bed and heading for the door as she adds, 'But, Ever, please do us both a favor and try not to put it to the test, okay?'

'What about Naddalin?'

I ask, taking in her long, lean form as she rests against the jamb. 'Don't you think we should come up with a plan? Find a way to get her to give us what we need and be done with all the?'

Naddalin looks at me, gaze narrowed on mine. 'There's no plan, NEVER- Ever. Engaging with Naddalin is exactly what she wants. We're better off finding a solution on our own, without relying on her.'

'But how? Everything we've tried so far has been a total bust.' I shake my head. 'And why should we run ourselves ragged, searching for answers, when Naddalin's already admitted to having the remedy? She said all I have to do is pay the right price and he'll hand it over- how hard can that be?'

'And you're willing to pay her price?' Naddalin asks, voice steady and deep as her dark eyes sweep mine.

I avert my gaze, cheeks hating to a thousand degrees. 'Of course not! Or at least not the price that you think!' I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them. 'It's just-' I shake my head, frustrated at having to plead my case. 'It's just that-'

'She wants to divide us, make us question each other, break us apart. She also wants us to go after her and start a war.

'NEVER- Ever, the is exactly what Naddalin wants.' Her jaw tightens, her features harden, before meeting my gaze and softening again.

Then while I promise to do everything in my power to protect you, you must help me - and her too. You've no motive to trust her, she will lie, operate, and make no mistake, it's a very dangerous game that she plays.

You should promise you will stay away from her, ignore all her taunts, and will not rise to her bait. I will find a solution. Figure something out. Just please, look to me for the answers, not Naddalin, okay?'

I switch my gaze back to her, an idea beginning to form-one that might work. I press my lips together and look away, wondering why I should promise any of that when the cure is right there for the taking. Besides, I am the one who caused the situation. I am the one who got us into the mess. So, I should be the one to get us both out. 'So, we're clear about Naddalin?' She tilts her head and lifts her brow, unwilling to leave until I consent.

I nod, just barely, but still enough to convince her to head down the stairs so fast I cannot distinguish her form. The only hint of her having been here are the stones against my chest and the single red tulip her left on the bed.

Thinking in my head it has happened my prophecies- the country with the flag with the star remember that, launched rockets of war for our homeland in the USA, makes me glad to be where I am at, and remember the one that has fought and died for us, like Kristen! Now she is out there fighting with them the man and strong woman, yet once more in a new life, as one of us... the USA, it turns on

the rest of the world, and they are turning on us. I foresee a day when like all just become nothing but impressions of just that... imitations!

Part: 16

'NEVER- Ever?'

Since as nice as it is lying beside Naddalin, the beat of our hearts connecting as one, eventually, it is just not enough. It will never- EVER- NEVER- EVER be enough. I want a normal relationship with my immortal boyfriend- NOT A GIRL! As you could think she is missing something is that I need and want- is she not? One with no walls.

Oh, yes boy- and I will pretty much stop at nothing to get it... One where I can truly enjoy the feel of skin as opposed to the way I remember it in my head.

(3 hours later, after sleeping in the same bed in the same room, drooling on one another as we sleep, our-ta-dur- obviously.)

'Did you eat yet?'

She places her hand on my shoulder as she peers at the screen- I was working on my next part of my life's to story- to add to the book- in my own words, hoping my words would stand the test of time like the girls before me, I find my story lackluster and boarding at times- yet it's the story of my life- like theirs.

-And-

Since I did not prepare, did not guard myself against her touch, that is all it takes to see her version of the infamous girls stand before me, I was part of this all, which, unfortunately, is not so different from Milley's version-the two of them acting all happy and giddy, smiling at each other with an abundance of hope, yet still on the inside nothing has changed.

Then even though she seems really happy, and no doubt deserves to be happy especially after all that I've put her through, I still comfort myself with the vision I had a few months back- the one where she clearly ends up with some cute boy she used to know- from back home when she goes back in time to relive- days gone by- like me too, always looking for more in the past than in the here and now- why?

(THE QUESTION IS WHY?)

Now I'm right back where I started. Sober and miserable. I guess by now I should know enough about the loss of realizing that you never really stop missing someone you just learn to live around the huge gaping hole of their absence. Just like Our past may shape us, but it does not define who we become if only that was tried for us. The only thing a person can ever really do is keep moving forward. Take that big leap forward without hesitation, without once looking back. Simply forget the past and forge toward the future.

I'm egotistic, impatient and a little unconfident. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to grip.

Nevertheless, if you can't grip me at my nastiest, then you sure as hell don't earn me at my finest- wondering if I should say or do something to temper her excitement since it is not like the little flirtation is going anywhere. Nonetheless, knowing I have already taken too big of a risk by outing myself to Milley, I do not say a word. I cannot afford to tip her off too.

I swivel around in my chair, releasing myself from her grip.

Wanting to avoid seeing anything more than I already have, waiting for her energy stream to fade.

'Naddalin made me dinner,' I say, voice steady and low even though it is not exactly true. Unless you count the solution, I drank.

She looks at me, gazes suddenly troubled as it narrows on mine. 'Naddalin?' She steps back. 'Now there's a name I haven't heard in a while.'

I cringe, wishing I had not just put it out there like that. I should have broken her in slowly, gotten her used to the idea of seeing her again.

'Does the mean you're back together?' 'Yeah, um, we're still-friendly.' I shrug. 'I mean, actually, we're more than friends, we're more like-' I shrug, allowing my hair to fall on my face so it is partially hidden. Grasping a chunk and twisting it around, pretending to inspect for split ends even though I no longer get them.

Dating and doomed-destined to spend an eternity in the abyss-madly in love but unable to touch- 'Well, yes, I mean, I guess you could say we're back together again.' Forcing a smile so wide my lips practically split down the middle, but holding it anyway, hoping it will encourage her to join in.

'And you're okay with that?'

She runs her hand through her long hair, a shade we used to share the same color until I started drinking the solution which turned mine even lighter- then her hers then perches on the edge of my bed, crosses her legs, and drops her portfolio onto the floor-four very bad signs that she is become peaceful in for one of her long, awkward talks.

Her gaze moves over me, taking in my faded jeans, my white tank top, searching for symptoms, hints, clues, telltale sign of adolescent distress.

Having only recently ruled out anorexia and or bulimia when my solution-fueled growth spurt added four inches to my height and bulked up my frame with a thin layer of muscle even though I never work out.

But the time it's not my arrival that's got her unnerved, it's me- on-again-off-again-relationship with Naddalin, that is the issue. And even though that may be true, nothing about Naddalin and my relationship could ever be condensed into a chapter in a book. Having recently finished yet another parenting book claiming that a tumultuous relationship is a major cause for concern.

Like she's somehow too old for you-or-' She shrugs, unable to place it. 'Don't get me wrong, Never- Ever, I like Naddalin, I do.

She's nice and polite, and she's certainly very composed and yet, there's something about that cool self-assurance, something that seems rather odd for a young man her age.

First, it was Haven with the whole telepathy thing, and now Jaylynn's taking issue with her maturity and poise.

I push my hair off my face, so I can see her better. She's the second person today who's noticed something off about her about us. And even though it's easy enough to explain, the fact that they're even noticing in the first place is what worries me.

'And while I know there are only a few months between you, she somehow comes off as more experienced. Too experienced.' She shrugs. 'And I'd hate for you to feel pressured into doing something you're not quite ready for.'

I press my lips together and try not to laugh, thinking about how she could not have gotten it more wrong. If I am the innocent maiden being chased by the big bad wolf, never imagining that I am the predator in the tale, dangerously pursuing my prey to the point of risking her life.

'Since no matter what she may say, you are in control of you, Never-Ever.

You are the one who decides who, where, and when. And no matter how you may feel about her, or any boy for that matter, they have no right to push their agenda on-' 'It's not like that,' I tell her, cutting in before she gets any more embarrassing than it already has. 'Naddalin's not like that. She's a perfect girl, an ideal girlfriend. Seriously, Jaylynn, you're way off course. Just trust me on the one, okay?'

She looks at me for a moment, brittle orange aura wavering, wanting to believe, unsure if she should.

Then she picks up her bag and heads for the door, stopping just shy of it when she says, 'I was thinking-'

I look at her, tempted to peek at her thoughts, despite my vow to never intentionally breach her privacy like that unless it has an emergency of course, which she clearly is not.

'Since school is letting out soon even if we're back on Earth as normal-looking girls we still have to go to school as if were normal girls of our age, and since I have not heard you mention any summer plans, I thought it might be good for you to find a job, spend a few hours each day working at something.'

'What do you think?'

'What do you think of as normal?'

What do I think...?

I gape, with bugging eyes, mouth dry, at a complete loss for words... I was, well, I think I should have peered into your head, after all, think over your thoughts more than my own, for the reason that, clearly, she does succeed as a major agony call!

'Nothing full time or anything like that. There will be plenty of time for the beach and your friends. I just thought it would be good for you too-'

'Is the about money?'

My mind reeling, frantic to find a way out...

If it is a simple matter of pitching in for the mortgage and groceries, then I will gladly come up with whatever she needs.

Not even a day. Un-huh. No way, hell, she can even take whatever's left of my parent's life insurance policy for all I care, after all, it did set me for life, after the fact... but what she cannot have is my summer.

'Ever, of course, it's not about money- is it not yet that's also life no?' She averts her gaze as her cheeks flush soft pink.

Mysteriously averse to discussing all things economic for someone who makes a living as a nurse, on and off with the Earthing she chooses to be in within her life spans or within her old body too.

'I just thought it might be good for you to, you know, meet some new people, learn something new.

Get out of your usual environment for a few hours each day, and-' And get away from Naddalin.

Not needing to read her thoughts to know what the is really about, now that she knows we're back together she's more strong-minded than ever to break us apart.

Besides, while I get how troubled she was by all the moodiness and despair, I lay open to her to when we were apart, the time she's got it all wrong.

It is not like she thinks. Though I've no idea how to explain that to her and keep my secrets intact. '-and as it so happens, a summer internship just opened for me, working with her as an LPN, and I'm sure, it's just a matter of speaking with the senior partners, and the job will be mine.' Then she grins, face radiant, eyes bright, expecting me to join the fête as well- when I do it at last.

'But aren't those positions usually reserved for law students?' I ask, sure I'm pathetically underqualified to fill those particular shoes.

But she just shakes her head. 'It's not that type of internship. This is more of a filing and phone answering assignment. And there is really no money in it either, though you will get school credit and a small end of the season bonus. I just thought it might do you some good. Not to mention how it will really beef up those college applications of yours.' College- yet, another thing I used to obsess about but not anymore.

I mean, what possible use could I have for all those classes and professors when all I must do is place my hand on a book or peek inside my teacher is hard to know all the answers? Cheating is too easy, yet miss honesty wants me to do it the hard way, I question why?

This is something that I have question her with for years if you have the power to take then do so-o, you are not hurting anyone but yourself.

'I'd hate for anyone else to get in there when I know you're just perfect for the job.'

I stare at her, unsure of what to say.

'It's a pleasant experience for a person your age,' she adds, her indignant tone a result of my silence.

'It's suggested in all the books. They say it builds charisma, promise, and the chastisement to show up on time and get the job done.'

Great, So, I have Dr. Phil to thank for ruining my summer- I thought.

It is my fault she changed, I am totally annoyed with Jaylynn until I remember how she was when I first got her-calm, tranquil, and completely laid back, allowing me all the space and freedom I needed.

My postponement, my rejection to ingest anything other than the pink solution, and all the drama with Naddalin are what sent her over the edge.

Besides the is where it led to the dreaded summer internship, she is bent on securing for me.

But no way can I spend the summer juggling a mountain of files and incessantly ringing phones when I am going to need all the free time, I can get to find an antidote for Naddalin.

And working in Jaylynn's office- within the nursing department within the Rosman building, with her and her colleagues prying over my shoulder, just will not do, sometimes I was just a little school girl still- I miss that day, and I think about and say within my mind not really- am really meant to be truly happy?

Though it is not like I can say that outright. It will set off her alarms. I need to play it cool, let her know that while I've nothing against discipline and character building, I prefer to tackle those things on my own.

'I'm totally cool with working,' I say, trying not to press my lips together, fidget, or break eye contact, three definite giveaways that I am not being entirely honest. 'But since you do so much for me already, I'd feel a lot better if I could find my own job. I mean, I am just not sure I am cut out for office work, so maybe I could look around a little. See what my options are. I will even pitch in on the mortgage and food. It's the least I can do.'

'What food?' She laughs, shaking her head at me.

'You barely eat! Besides, I do not want your money, ever... though, I will help you establish a line of credit if you'd like.'

'Sure,' I shrug, forcing an enthusiasm I do not really feel since I've absolutely no need for such conventional things. 'That would be great!' I add, knowing that the longer I can keep her mind off the internship, the better for me.

'Okay then,' she drums her fingers against the doorjamb as she completes her plan. 'You've got one week to find something on your own.'

I gulp, trying to keep the eye-bugging to a minimum. One week? What kind of a head start is that when I do not even know where to begin? I have never had a job before. Is it possible to just manifest one?

'I know it's not much time,' she says, reading my face. 'But I'd hate for them to fill the position when I know you'd be perfect.'

She heads into the hall and closes the door between us, leaving me sideswiped, dumbstruck, staring at the flickering remnants of her orangey aura, her magnetic energy field, hovering insistently in the space where she stood. Thinking how ironic it is that I was just making fun of Naddalin for assuming she could land a job without any experience only to find myself facing the same exact fate.

I toss and turn all night. Bed a tangled mess of sweat-dampened pillows and blankets, body and mind exhausted by dreams. Waking briefly, gasping for air, only to be pulled under again, returning to the very same place I fought to escape.

And the only reason- I want it to stop is that Riley is there. Laughing happily as she grabs hold of my hand, taking me on a tour of a very strange land. But even though I skip right alongside her, pretending to enjoy the trip too, the moment she turns her back, I scramble for the surface, eager to remove myself from the scene.

Because, the truth is, it is not Riley. Riley is gone. Having crossed the bridge at my urging, moving on to some unknown place. And even though she keeps yanking me back, yelling at me to pay attention, to just trust her and stop running- I refuse to obey. Sure, that it is punishment for harming Naddalin, sending Haven to the Shadowland, and putting everything I care about at risk-allowing my subconscious to produce these guilt-induced images, so sugar-coated with happiness, there is no way they are real.

But the last time, just as I am about to run, Riley appears right before me, blocking my exit, and yelling at me to stay put. Standing before a large stage and slowly drawing the drapes, revealing a tall, narrow, rectangular cube-like a prison of glass-containing a desperate and struggling Naddalin inside.

I rush to her aid as Riley looks on, pleading with her to hang in there while I help her break free. But she cannot even hear me. I cannot even see me. Just continues to fight until so overcome with exhaustion, with the absolute futility, she closes her eyes and fades straight into the abyss.

The home for lost souls.

I bolt from my bed, body shaking, chilled, drenched with sweat, standing in the center of my room with a pillow clutched to my chest. Overcome not only by the feeling of utter defeat but by the horrible message my imagined sister has sent-telling me that no matter how hard I try; I cannot save my soul mate from me.

I run for my closet, changing into some clothes before grabbing some sneakers and heading for the garage. Knowing it is too early to go to school, too early to go anywhere. But I refuse to give up. Refuse to believe in nightmares. I must start somewhere. I must use what I got.

But just as I am about to climb into my car, I think better. Realizing the entire process of opening the garage door and starting the engine will risk waking Jaylynn. And even though I can easily step outside and manifest another car, bike, Vespa, or whatever else I might want, I decided to try running instead.

I have never been much of a runner. Far more used to dragging my feet through every forced lap in P.E. than striving for any sort of personal best. But that was before I became immortal. Before I was bestowed with incredible speed. A speed I have not even begun to test the limits of since the last time I ran was the first time I realized I even had the potential. But now that I am faced with the perfect opportunity to see just how far and fast, I can go before stopping, dropping, or crumbling to the ground with a debilitating case of side cramps, I cannot wait to try it out.

I slip out the side door and head for the street. At first thinking, I should warm-up, start off in a nice slow jog before hitting the asphalt at full throttle. But no sooner have I started than a major surge of adrenaline kicks in, coursing through my body like the highest-grade rocket fuel. And the next thing I know, it is full speed ahead. Running so fast my neighbor's houses are reduced to a visual blur of stucco and stone. Jumping fallen trash cans and dodging poorly parked cars, as I race from street to street with the grace and agility of a jungle cat. Having virtually no awareness of my legs or my feet, just trusting they will not fail me. That they will get me to my destination in miraculous time.

And no more than a few seconds have passed when I am standing before it, the one place I swore I would never return to, prepared to do the one thing I promised Naddalin I am wouldn't- approaching Naddalin's door, hoping to broker deal.

But before I can even raise my hand to knock, Naddalin is there. Clad in a deep purple robe over blue silk pajamas, her matching velvet slippers with embroidered golden foxes peeking out from the herm. Her gaze sleek, narrowed, looking me over without a trace of surprise.

'Ever.' She cocks her head to the side, allowing for an unobstructed view of her flashing Ouroboros tattoo. 'What brings you to the neighborhood?'

My fingers play with the amulet just under my shirt, heart racing beneath it, hoping Naddalin's right, that it will give the necessary protection-should it come to that.

'We need to talk,' I say, trying not to cringe as her eyes sail over me, enjoying a nice, long, leisurely cruise.

She squints into the night, then back at me. 'Do we?' She lifts her brow. 'And here I had no idea.'

I start to roll my eyes, but remembering my purpose for coming here, I settle for pressing my lips together instead.

'Recognize the door?' She raps her knuckles hard against the wood, eliciting a nice solid thump, as I wonder what she could possibly be up to. 'Of course, you do not,' she says, lips quirking at the sides. 'That's because it's new. I was forced to replace the old one after your last visit. Do you remember? When you busted your way in so you could toss my supply of elixir down the drain?' She laughs and shakes her head. 'Very naughty of you, Ever. And quite a mess I must say. I hope you'll manage to behave better today.' She leans against the door frame and waves me in, gazing at me in a way so deep, so intimate, it is all I can do not to squirm.

I heard down the hall and into the den, noticing how the door is not the only thing that is changed since I was last here. Gone are the framed Botticelli prints and abundance of chintz, all of it replaced by marble and stone, dark heavy fabrics, rough plastered walls, and black iron things shaped into scrolls.

'Tuscan?' I turn, startled to find her standing so near I can see the individual dark purple flecks in her eyes.

She shrugs, refusing to back up and give me some space. 'Sometimes I get a little hankering for the old country.' Her smiles, a slow widening of her cheeks, displaying shiny white teeth. 'As you well know, Ever, there's no place like home.'

I swallow hard and turn away, trying to decide my quickest escape since I cannot afford to make even the slightest mistake.

'So, tell me, so what do I owe the magnificent Jewell?' She glances over her shoulder as she heads for the bar. Removing a bottle of elixir from the wine refrigerator and pouring it into a cut crystal

glass, before offering it to me. But I just shake my head and wave it away, watching as she carries it over to the couch where she plops herself down, spreads her legs wide, and rests the glass on her knee. 'I'm assuming you didn't drop by in the dead of night to admire my latest decorating scheme. So, tell me, what's the purpose of the?'

I clear my throat, forcing myself to look her square in the eye without flinching, wavering, fidgeting, or showing any other sign of weakness. Aware of how the whole situation can change in an instant- how easily I can turn from mild curiosity to irresistible prey.

'I'm here to call a truce,' I say, alert for a reaction but getting only her penetrating gaze. 'You know, a cease-fire, a proclamation of peace, a-'

'Please.' She waves her hand. 'Spare me the definition, Liv- I can say it in twenty languages and forty dialects, you?'

I shrug, knowing I am lucky to have said it is the one. Watching as her swirls her drink, the iridescent red liquid flashing and sparking as it runs up the sides and splashes back down.

'And just what sort of truce are you after? You of all people should know how it works. I've no intention of giving you anything unless you're willing to give up something of your own.' She pats the narrow space just beside her, smiling as though I would consider joining her there.

'Why do you do them?' I ask, unable to hold my frustration. 'I mean, you're decent looking, you're immortal, you've got all the gifts that go with it you can pretty much have anyone you want, so why do you insist on bothering me?'

She throws her head back and laughs, a giant roar that fills up the room. Finally calming down enough to level her gaze, looking at me as she says, 'Decent looking?' She shakes her head and laughs again, placing her glass on the table and retrieving a pair of golden nail clippers from a jewel-encrusted case.

'Decent looking,' she mutters, shaking her head, taking a moment to check out her nails, before returning her focus to me. 'But you see, liv, that's just it. I can have anything I want. Anything or anyone.

It all comes so easily. Too easy.' Her sighs, getting to work on her nails, so absorbed by the task, I'm wondering if she'll continue when she says, 'It all gets a little tedious after the first-oh-hundred

or so years. And while you are far too new to understand any of them, someday you'll realize just how big of a favor I've done you.'

I squint, having no idea what she could possibly mean. A favor? Is she serious?

'You sure you won't have a seat?' She wags her nail clipper toward the overstuffed chair just to my right, urging me to take it. 'You're making me out to be a very bad host, insisting on standing there like that. Besides, do you have any idea how fetching you look? A little-bedridden-sure, but in the sexiest way.'

She narrows her eyes until they are sleek as a cat's, lips parting just enough for her tongue to escape. But I just stay put and pretend not to notice. Everything with Naddalin is a game, and taking a seat would be conceding defeat. Though staying like the, being careful wet her lips as her gaze lingers in all the wrong places, does not feel like much of a win.

'You're even more delusional than I thought if you think you've done me a favor,' I say, voice hoarse, scratchy, a long way from strong. 'You're crazy!' I add, regretting it the instant it is out.

But Naddalin just shrugs, unfazed by my outburst as she returns to her nails. 'Trust me, it's more than just a favor, liv. I have given you a purpose. A- reason d'être as they say.' She glances at me, brow raised. 'Tell me, Ever, are you not completely fixated on finding a way to-consummate-with Naddalin? Are you not so desperate for a solution you actually convinced yourself it was a clever idea to come here?'

I swallow hard and stare at her. I should have known better, should have heeded Naddalin's advice.

'You're too impatient.' Her nods, smoothing the edges of her freshly clipped nails. 'What's the rush when you have all of the infinity laid out before you? Think about it, Ever, how exactly would you spend your eternity if it were not for me? Showering each other with huge bouquets of bloody red tulips? Having at each other so often it couldn't help but grow boring?'

'The is ridiculous.' I glare. 'And the fact that you see it like the-like it is some chivalrous deed that you've done-' I shake my head, knowing there is no need to continue. She is delusional, insane, figured out to see things in her own selfish way.

'Hundred years within my body and others- it all the same, I yearned for her,' she says, tossing her nail clippers aside, gaze never once leaving mine.

'And why, you ask? Why would I bother with the same woman for so long when I can have anyone?' She looks at me as though waiting for the answer, but we both know I've no intention of going there.

'It wasn't just her beauty like you think-though I will admit, it did spur things at the start.' Her smiles, eyes reminiscent. 'No, it was a simple fact that I couldn't have her. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how long I pined, I was never allowed'-she looks at me, gazes heavy, intense-admittance-if you will.'

I roll my eyes. I cannot help it. The fact that her wasted centuries pining for that monster is of no interest to me.

But she just continues, ignoring my pained expression when she says, 'Make no mistake, Ever, I am about to share something very important, something you really should keep in mind.' She leans forward, arms on knees, voice steady and low, filled with new urgency. 'We always want what we can't have.' She leans back, nodding as though she just shared the key to enlightenment. 'It's human nature. We are hardwired that way. And as much as you would prefer not to believe it, it's the only reason Naddalin's spent the last four hundred years longing for you.'

I look at her, face placid, body still, aware that she is trying to hurt me, prodding the usual spots, knowing she has been one of my fears from the moment I first learned of our history.

'Face, it, Ever, even Haven's incredible beauty wasn't enough to keep her interest. I'm sure you're aware of just how quickly she tired of her?'

I swallow hard, stomach like a hard-bitten marble. Since when is two hundred years considered quickly? But I guess when you are dealing with eternity everything is relative.

'It's not a beauty contest,' I say, cringing when I hear the words spoken aloud. I mean, seriously, is that the best I could do?

'Of course, it is not, luv.' Naddalin shakes her head, pity in her gaze. 'If it was, Haven would win.' She settles back, arms spread across the cushions, glass resting on top, daring me to respond. 'Let

me guess, you've convinced yourself it's about two souls meeting as one, destined for each other, and all of the that-puppy love?' She laughs, nodding when she adds, 'That is what you're thinking, right?'

'You don't want to know what I'm thinking.' I narrow my gaze, decided to get to the point now that my patience's dissolved. 'I didn't come here to be bored by your philosophical litanies; I came here because-'

'Because you want something from me.' Her nods, setting down her drink, glass meeting wood with a solid, wet thwomp. 'In which case, I am in the driver's seat, which means you're in no position to set the pace.'

'Why do you do them?' I shake my head, having grown bored with the game. 'Why do you bother where you know I'm not interested? Surely you realize that no matter what you do to Naddalin and me, it will never bring Haven back. What is done is done. It can never be changed. And, in the end, all the game playing, all of the nonsense you engage in all it really does is prevent you from living your life-from moving on.' I continue to stare, gaze unwavering, convincing. Projecting an image of her handing over the antidote and cooperating with me. 'So, I am asking you, in as reasonable away as I can please help me undo what you have done to Naddalin, so we can all coexist.'

She shakes her head; lids squinted tight. 'Sorry, darlin', the price is set. Now it's just a matter of whether you're willing to pay.'

I lean against the wall, tired, defeated, but not letting on. Knowing the one thing she wants is the one thing I will never give. The same old game Naddalin warned me about. 'You'll never have me, Naddalin. Never, ever, for as long as I-'

Not even getting to the more degrading, insulting part that comes next when she rises from the couch, moving so quickly her breath hits my cheek long before I can blink.

'Relax,' she whispers, face looming so close I can make out each flawless pore on her skin. 'As much fun as that might be, giving an amusing diversion at least, I'm afraid that's not it. I am after something far more esoteric than a virginal shag. Though, if you would like to make a go of it, no strings attached, then I assure you, darlin', I'm certainly up for the task.' Her smiles, deep blue eyes boring into mine, projecting the movie she plays in her head, the one starring her, and me, and a king-sized bed.

I look away, breath coming ragged, too fast, summoning every ounce of my will not to slam my knee in her groin when her nose glances my ear, my cheek, my neck, inhaling my scent.

'I know what you're going through, Ever,' she murmurs, lips brushing the tip of my ear. 'Longing for something so close and yet you can never quite taste it. It is the kind of pain most people will never experience. But we know, don't we? You and I are joined in that way.'

I relax my fists and fight to steady myself. Knowing I cannot risk doing anything rash, cannot afford to overreact.

'Not to worry she said.'

She smiles at me, slipping just out of my reach.

'You're a nifty girl.

I am sure you will figure it out.

And if not-' Her shrugs. 'Well, nothing changes, right? Everything stays the same. You and I with our fates intertwined-for all of infinity.'

She slips down the hall, moving so fast it is a moment before I can make out her form. Tilting her head and urging me toward the door, practically pushing me onto her stoop when she says, 'Sorry to cut them so short. Though I do so with your reputation in mind. If Naddalin ever found out you were here-well, that could be rather tragic for you, couldn't it?'

Her smiles, all shiny white teeth, golden hair, tanned skin, and blue eyes-the ultimate California poster boy beckoning-Come live the good life in Laguna Beach! And I am furious with myself-furious for being so stupid for not listening to Naddalin-for putting us further at risk. Handing Naddalin yet one more thing to lord over my head.

'Sorry you didn't get what you came for, Liv,' she purrs, her attention pulled by a vintage black Jaguar that pulls into the drive, having a gorgeous dark-haired couple who head right inside. Closing the door behind them as she adds, 'Whatever you do, avoid Marco's car on your way out, she'll flip if you so much as smudge it.'

I walk home... Or at least, that is the direction I originally heard it. But somewhere along the way, I take a turn. And then another. And another. My feet moving so slowly they practically drag,

knowing there is no need to run, nothing to prove. Despite my strength and speed, I am no match for Naddalin. here is the expert of the game and I am merely her pawn.

I continue, deep into the heart of Laguna, or the Village, as it is called. Too awake to go home, too ashamed to see Naddalin, making my way through the dark, empty streets until stopping before a small, well-tended cottage, with flowering plants flanking either side of the door and a woven welcome mat placed just so, making it appear warm, friendly, completely benign.

Only it is not... Not even close. Now it is more like a crime scene. And unlike the last time I was here, the time I do not bother knocking. There is no point. Ava's long gone. After stealing the elixir and leaving Naddalin to fend for herself, she has no intention of returning.

I unlock the door with my mind and step in, taking a quick look around before I move past the den and into the kitchen. Surprised to find the usually well-ordered room reduced to an absolute mess-the sink piled high with dirty glasses and dishes as the trash overflows to the floor. And even though I am sure it has not Ava who has done the, clearly someone is here.

I creep down the hall, peering into a series of empty rooms until I get to the indigo door at the end the one that leads to Ava's so-called sacred space where she used to meditate and try to reach the dimensions beyond. Opening the door just a crack and squinting into the dark, making out two sleeping figures sprawled on the floor. Skimming my hand along the wall and fruitlessly searching for a light, before remembering my ability to illuminate the room on my own only to find the last two people I ever expected to see.

'Rayne?' I kneel beside her, holding my breath as she rolls over and opens one eye.

'Oh Henry, Ever.' She rubs her eyes and struggles to sit. 'Only I am not Rayne, I'm Neville. Rayne's over there.'

I glance at her twin at the far side of the room, noting the scowl that crosses her face the second she realizes it is me.

'What're you doing here?' I ask, focusing on Neville again since she's always been the nicer of the two.

'We live here.' She shrugs, tucking her wrinkled white shirt into her blue plaid skirt as she gets off the floor.

I glance between them, taking in their pale skin, large dark eyes, and straight, black, shoulder-length hair with the razor-slashed bangs, noticing how they are both still dressed in the same private school uniforms as the first day we met. But unlike in School where they always appear so clean and pristine, now they are pretty much the opposite -sadly disheveled and completely uncared for.

'But you can't live here. The is Ava's house.' I shake my head. The idea of them squatting here leaves me extremely unnerved. 'Maybe you should think about going home. You know, back to school with the other girls?'

Nevaeh

Book: 45

The Pretender of Secrets

Partition: 1

(Back at Skaufyceol castle- and at the school)

'We can't...'

Rayne pulls on her knee socks, making sure they are of an exact equal height, accidentally giving the only real clue that helps me tell them apart.

'Thanks to you, we're stuck here forever,' she mumbles, taking a moment to glare at me.

I glance at Neville- and Killie too, hoping she'll and she would explain.

But she just shakes her head at her sister, before looking at me. 'Ava's gone.' She s hrugs. 'But don't let Rayne give you the wrong impression. We are quite happy to see you. We had a running bet on how soon you'd show.'

My gaze darts between them, laughing nervously as I say, 'Oh, really? Who won?'

Rayne rolls her eyes and points at her sister. 'She did. I was sure you'd abandoned us for good.'

I pause, something about the way she just said that-'Wait, you mean you guys have been here the whole time?'

'We can't get back.' Neville shrugs. 'We've lost our magic.'

'Well, I'm sure I can help you return. I mean, you do want to return - right?' I look at them, seeing Rayne smirk as Neville just nods.

Knowing they will be a lot easier than they think since all I must do is make the portal, get them settled, then say my goodbyes and make the return trip back to Laguna alone.

'We'd like that very much,' Neville says.

'And we would like to leave now,' Rayne adds, eyes narrowed. 'After all, it's the very least you can do.'

I swallow really hard.

I deserve that, but I still wonder who is more desperate for them to leave, them or me?

I motion toward Rayne as I heard for the futon, wondering why neither of them thought to sleep on it instead of the floor.

'Come,' I say...

I was glancing over my shoulder.

'You sit here on my right, and Neville, you sit here.'

I pat the lumpy cushion of the sofa.

'Now grab my hands and close your eyes, then focus on seeing the portal with all of you might.'

Imagining that golden shimmer of light as though it is before you.

Besides as soon as the image is clear, I want you to see yourself stepping right through, knowing I am right there beside you, keeping you safe. Okay...?'

I peek at them, seeing them nod before we go through the motions, recreating all the right steps.

But just as I step through the light and into that vast fragrant field, I open my eyes and find I'm alone.

'Told you,' Rayne says, the second I return. Standing before me, eyes angry, small, accusing, pale hands clutching her plaid skirted hips. And it's all because we tried to help you!'

'Told you our magic is gone. We are stuck here now with no way to get back.'

'Rayne!' Neville shakes her head at her sister, then glances at me with an apologetic look on her face.

'Well, it's true!' Rayne glares. 'I told you we shouldn't risk it. I told you she would not listen.

Partition: 2

I saw it clear as day. The overwhelming possibility she'd make the wrong choice - which, I might add, she did!' She shakes her head and frowns. 'It went exactly as predicted. And now we're the ones paying the price.'

Oh, you're not the only ones, I think. Hoping they've lost their ability to read minds as well since I'm immediately shamed by the thought. No matter how much she's annoying me, I know she's right.

'Listen,' I say, swallowing hard as I glance at them, needing to defuse them. 'I know how bad you want to get back. Trust me, I do. And I'm going to do everything I can to help you.' I nod, seeing them glance at each other, two identical faces marred by complete disbelief. 'I mean, I'm not exactly sure how I'm going to do it, but just trust that I will. I'll do everything I can to help you get back. And in the meantime, I'll do everything I can to keep you both comfortable and safe. Scout's Jewell. Okay?'

Rayne looks at me, rolling her eyes and having a sigh. 'Just get us back to school,' she says, arms crossing her chest. 'That's all we want. Nothing short of that will do.'

I nod, refusing to let her get to me when I say, 'Understood. But if I'm going to help you, I'll need you to answer some questions.'

They look at each other, Rayne's gaze signaling a silent: No way, as Neville turns, nodding at me as she says, 'Okay.'

And even though I'm not quite sure how to phrase it, it's something I've been wondering for a while now, so I just dive in. 'I'm sorry if the offends you, but I need to know are you guys dead?' I hold my breath, fully expecting them to be mad, or at the very least insulted- pretty much any reaction but the laughter I get. Watching as they fall all over themselves, Rayne doubled over, slapping her knee, as Neville rolls off the futon, practically convulsing. 'Well, you can't blame me for asking.' I frown, definitely the one who's insulted. 'I mean, we did meet in School where plenty of dead people hang out. Not to mention how you're both unnaturally pale.'

Rayne leans against the wall, fully recovered from her laughing fit and smirked at me. 'So, we're pale. Big deal.' She glances at her sister, then back at me. 'It's not like you're exactly rocking' a tan. And yet, you don't see us assuming you're a member of the dearly departed.'

I wince, knowing it's true, but still. 'Yeah, well, you had an unfair advantage. Thanks to Riley you knew all about me long before we met. You knew exactly who I am and what I am, and if I have any hope of helping you, then I'm going to have to know a few things too. So as much as you may resent it, as much as you may want to resist, the only way we're going to get anywhere is if you tell me your story.'

'Never,' Rayne says, staring at her sister, warning her not to rebel.

But Neville ignores her and turns right to me. 'We're not dead. Not even close. We're more like- refugees. Refugees from the past, if you will.'

I glance between them, thinking all I have to do is lower my guard, focus my quantum remote, and touch them for their entire life story to be revealed, but figuring I should at least try to get their version first.

'A long time ago,' she starts, peering at her disapproving sister before taking a deep breath and forging ahead. 'A very long time ago, in fact, we were facing a-' She squinches her brow, searching for just the right word, nodding at me when she says, 'Well, let's just say we were about to become victims of a terribly dark event, one of the most shameful times in our history, but we escaped by fleeing

to School. And then, well, I guess we lost track of time and we've been there ever since. Or at least until last week when we came to help you.'

Rayne groans, dropping to the floor and burying her face in her hands, but Neville just ignores her, still looking at me when she says, 'But now our worst fear has come true. Our magic is gone, we've nowhere to go, and no idea how to survive in the place.'

'What sort of persecution did you flee?' I ask, watching her closely, searching for clues. 'And how long ago is very long ago? Just what are we dealing with here?' Wondering if their history stretches as far back as Naddalin's, or if they belong to a more recent past.

They gaze at each other, communicating a wordless agreement that shuts me right out. So, I move toward Neville, grasping her hand so quickly she has no time to react. Immediately pulled into her mind- her world- seeing the story unfold as though I'm right there. Standing on the sidelines, an unnoticed observer, fully immersed in the chaos and fear of that day, witness to images so horrible I'm tempted to turn away.

Watching as an angry mob swarm their home, voices raised- torchers high- their aunt barring the door as best she can, making the portal and urging the twins toward the safety of School.

Just about to step through the portal and join them when the door gives way and the twins disappear. Separated from everything they once knew, having no idea what became of their aunt until a visit to the Great Halls of Learning showed them the torturous trial of false accusations she was forced to endure. Refusing to confess to any kind of sorcery, having taken the Wiccan Rede of 'An it harms none, does what ye will,' and knowing she'd done nothing wrong, she rebuffed her oppressor and held her head high all the way to the gallows where she was brutally hung.

I stagger back, fingers seeking the amulet just under my tee, something about their aunt's gaze so eerily familiar, leaving me shaky, unsettled, reminding myself that I'm safe, they're safe- that things like that don't happen these days.

'So now you know.' Neville shrugs as Rayne shakes her head. 'Our whole story. Everything about us. Do you blame us for choosing to hide?'

I glance at them, unsure of what to say. 'I-' I clear my throat and start over. 'I'm so sorry. I had no idea.' I glance at Rayne, seeing how she refuses to look at me, then over at Neville who solemnly bows her head. 'I had no idea you guys escaped the Salem Witch Trials.'

'Not exactly,' Rayne says, before Neville cheers in.

'What she means is we were never tried. Our aunt stood accused. One day she was revered as the most sought-after midwife, and the next, she was rounded up and taken away.' She sucks in her breath, eyes welling up as though it were yesterday.

'We would've gone with her, we had nothing to hide,' Rayne says, lifting her chin and narrowing her gaze. 'And it certainly wasn't Clara's fault that poor baby died. It's the father who did it. She didn't want the baby or its mother. So, she did away with them both and blamed Clara. Crying witch so loud the entire town heard- but then Clara made the portal and forced us to hide, and she was just about to join us when- well, you know the rest.'

'But that was over three hundred years ago!' I cry, still unused to the idea of existence that long despite my immortality.

The twins shrug.

'So, if you haven't been back since-' I shake my head, the monumental size of the problem just beginning to unfold. 'I mean, do you have any idea how much things have changed since you were last here? Seriously. It's like a whole different world from the one that you left.'

'It's not like we're idiots.' Rayne shakes her head. 'Things progress in School too, you know. New people arrive all the time, manifesting the things they're attached to, all the stuff they can't bear to let go.'

But that's not what I meant, in fact, not even close. I wasn't just referring to cars versus horse-drawn carriages, and trendy boutiques versus hand-sewn- but more their ability to get along in the world- blending in, adapting, not standing out in the glaring way that they do! Taking in their razor-slashed bangs, their large dark eyes and extremely pale skin, knowing their twenty-first-century makeover is far less about a uniform change than a complete and total overhaul.

'Besides, Riley prepared us,' Neville says, eliciting a loud groan from Rayne, and my full attention from me. 'She manifested a private school and convinced us to enroll. That's where these

uniforms came from. She was our teacher, coaching us on all the modern ways, including our speech. She wanted us to return and was determined to prepare us for the trip. Partly because she wanted us to look after you, and partly because she thought we were crazy for missing out on our teens.'

I freeze, suddenly grasping a new understanding of Riley's interest in the - one that's got far less to do with me, and everything to do with her. 'How old are you guys?' I whimper, looking to Neville for the answer. 'Or should I say, how old were you when you first arrived in School?' Knowing they haven't aged a day since.

'Thirteen,' Neville says, knitting her brow. 'Why?'

I close my eyes and shake my head, stifling a laugh as I think: I knew it!

Riley always dreamed of the day she'd be thirteen, a bona fide teenager having finally made it to the important double digits. But after dying at twelve, she chose to hang around the earth plane, living her adolescence vicariously through me. So, it only makes sense she'd try to convince Neville and Rayne to return, not wanting anyone else to miss out like her.

And if Clara can find the strength, and Riley the hope, in situations so incredibly dire and bleak, surely, I can overcome Naddalin.

I glance between the twins, knowing they can't stay here on their own or come home to live with Jaylynn and me, though there is someone who's quite able and ready, if not entirely willing to lend us a hand.

'Grab your stuff,' I say, heading for the door. 'I'm taking you to your new home.'

The second we step outside I realize we'll need a car. And since I'm more interested in speed than comfort, especially after seeing the way the twins cling to each other as they gaze around warily, I manifest something that'll get us there fast and quickly herd them in. Ordering Neville to sit on Rayne's lap as I get myself settled and step on the gas, navigating the streets with surprising skill, while the twins practically hang out the window, gaping at all that we pass.

'Have you guys been inside the whole time?' I glance at them, never having seen anyone react to the beauty of Laguna Beach in quite the same way.

They nod, never once averting their gaze. Squirming in their seat as I pull up to the gate. Allowing the uniformed guard to peer through the window and scrutinize them, before letting us in.

'Where are you taking us?' Rayne eyes me suspiciously. 'What's with the guards and big gates? Is some kind of prison?'

I head up the hill, glancing at her when I say, 'Don't you have gated communities in School?' Never actually having seen one myself, but then again, I haven't lived there for the last three centuries as they have.

They shake their heads, eyes wide, clearly on edge.

'Not to worry.' I turn onto Naddalin's street and into her drive. 'It's not a prison, that's not what the gates are for. They're more to keep people out rather than in.'

'But why would you want to keep people out?' they ask, two childlike voices blending into one.

I squint, having no idea how to answer since it's not like I was raised like the either, all the communities in my old hood were open access. 'I guess it's meant to keep people -' I start to say safe, but that's not really it either. 'Anyway.' I shake my head. 'If you're going to live here, then you better get used to it. That's pretty much all there is.'

'But we're not going to live here,' Rayne says. 'You said it was just a temporary fix until you find a way to get us back, remember?'

I take a deep breath and grip the wheel harder, reminding myself how scared she must feel, no matter how bratty she gets.

'Of course, it's temporary.' I nod, forcing a smile. Or at least it better be, because if not, someone's going to be extremely displeased. I climb out of the car and motion for them to follow, saying, 'Ready to see your new temporary home?'

I head for the door, the two of them close at my heels as I stand right before it, debating whether or not I should knock and wait for Naddalin to open it or just stride right in since she's probably asleep. And I'm just about to do the latter when Naddalin swings the door open, takes one look at me, and says, 'Are you okay?'

I smile, tacking on a telepathic message of Before you say anything- anything at all just tries to stay calm and give me a chance to explain her eyes curious, questioning as I say, 'Can we come in?'

She moves aside, eyes wide with shock when Neville and Rayne step out from behind me and barrel right into her. Skinny arms wrapped around her waist, gazing up at her adoringly as they squeal, 'Naddalin! It's you! It's really you!' And as nice as the little reunion is, I can't help but notice how their reaction to her, with all the love and excitement, is pretty much the opposite of their reaction to me.

She smiles, ruffling their hair and bending down to plant a kiss on the top of their heads. 'How long has it been?' She pulls away and squints.

'Last week,' Rayne says, complete adoration displayed on her face. 'Seconds before Ever added her blood to the antidote and wrecked everything.'

'Rayne!' Neville glances at her sister and me, shaking her head. But I just let it go. The is one battle I'll never win.

'I meant before that.' Naddalin squints into the distance, trying to remember the date.

They look at her, a mischievous gleam in their eyes when they say, 'It was just over six years ago when Ever was ten!'

I gape, eyes practically popping out of my head as Naddalin laughs. 'Ah, yes. And I have you two to thank for helping me find her. And since you know how much she means to me, I would appreciate your kindness toward her. That's not too much to ask is it?' Her chucks Rayne under the chin, causing her to smile as her cheeks flush bright pink.

'So, to what do I owe the incredible Jewell?' She leads us into the still empty living room. 'Of being reunited with my long- lost friends, who, I might add, hasn't aged a day since we met.'

They look at each other and giggle, clearly prepared to be charmed by anything she says. And before I can even think of a reply, find the right words to slowly break her in and get her used to the idea of their living with her, they look at each other and shout, 'Ever said we could live with you!'

Naddalin glances at me, smile still planted on her face, as a look of pure horror creeps into her eyes.

'Temporarily,' I add, gaze meeting her, sending a barrage of telepathic red tulips her way. 'Just until I find a way to get them back to school, or their magic returns, whichever comes first.' Tacking on a mental note of Remember when you said you wanted to improve your karma, to make up for your past? Well, what better way than to help someone in need? And the way you can keep the house since you will need the extra space. It is the perfect solution. Everyone wins! Nodding and smiling so eagerly I am like a bobblehead doll.

Naddalin glances first at me, then the twins, laughing and shaking her head when she says, 'Of course you can stay. For as long as you need. So, what do you say we all head upstairs, so you can pick out your rooms?'

I sigh, my perfect boyfriend proving herself even more perfect. Following behind as the twins race up the stairs- happy, giggling, completely transformed now that they are in Naddalin's care.

'Can we have the room?' They ask, eyes lighting up as they stand in the doorway of Naddalin's special room that is still devoid of her things.

'No!' I answer too quickly, wincing when they turn, eyes narrowed and glaring at me. But even though I feel bad about the negative start, I am decided to return the room to its normal state, and there is no way I can do that if they are camping in it. 'It's taken,' I add, knowing it did nothing to soften the blow. 'But there is plenty more, the place is huge, you'll see. There's even a pool!'

Neville and Rayne glance at each other before marching down the hall heads bobbing together, whispering quietly, not bothering to hide their annoyance with me.

You could have just given it to them, Naddalin thinks, close enough to send a charge through my veins.

I shake my head and walk silently alongside her, telepathically replying, I want to see it filled with your things. Even though they no longer mean anything to you, they mean a great deal to me. You cannot just toss out the past- cannot just turn your back on the things that defined you.

She stops, turning to me as she says, 'ever, we are not defined by our things. It's not the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive, the art we acquire- it's not where we live- but how we live that defines us.' Her gaze bores into mine, as she gathers me into a telepathic embrace, the effect

seeming so real, it robs me of breath. 'It's our actions that are remembered long after we're gone,' she adds, smoothing my hair as her lips telepathically meet mine.

True- I smile, enhancing the image her created with tulips and sunsets and rainbows and cupids and all manner of clichéd Dadaistic themes that make us both laugh. Excœpt that we are immortal, I add, decided to sway her to my side. Which means none of that really applies. So, with that in mind, maybe we can just-

But I do not even get to finish before the twins call for us, shouting, 'The room! I want the one!'

Since the twins are so used to being together, I was sure they would want to share the same space and even get bunk beds or something. But the moment they checked out the size of the next room, and the one after that, they each staked their claim and never looked back. Spending the next several hours directing Naddalin and me to decorate down to their most minute specifications, demanding we manifest beds, dressers, and shelves, only to change their minds, have us empty the room, and start all over again.

But if Naddalin was using her magic, I did not complain. I was far too relieved to see her manifesting again, even if she was still refusing to manifest anything for herself. By the time we finished, the sun was starting to rise, and I knew I had better return home before Jaylynn woke up and noticed I was gone.

'Don't be surprised if I don't make it to school today,' she says, walking me to the front door.

I sigh, hating the thought of going without her.

'I can't leave them here on their own. Not until they get settled in.' She shrugs, hooking her thumb over her shoulder and pointing upstairs where the twins are finally, mercifully, asleep in their beds.

I nod, knowing she's right and vowing to get them back to School soon before they get too comfortable here.

'I'm not sure that's the solution,' she says, sensing my thoughts.

I squint, unsure where she's going, but getting an uncomfortable ping in my gut nonetheless.

'I've been thinking-' Her cocks her head to the side, thumb tracing her stubble-lined chin. 'They've been through a lot- losing their home, their families, everything they've ever known, and loved their lives taken so abruptly, they hadn't had a chance to even live them-' Her shakes her head. 'They deserve a real childhood, you know? A fresh start in the world...'

I gape, wanting to respond but the words just won't come. Because while I also want them to be happy and safe and all of those things, as far as the rest goes, we're no longer on the same page. I was planning a short little visit, a couple of days, or at the very worst- weeks. Never once did I entertain the idea of becoming surrogate parents, especially to twins who're just a few years younger than me.

'It was just a thought.' She shrugs. 'Ultimately, the decision is theirs. It's their life.'

I swallow hard and avert my gaze, telling myself the is nothing that has to be settled just yet, heading toward my manifested car when Naddalin says, 'Always- Seriously? A Lamborghini?'

I cringe, flushing under her gaze. 'I needed something fast.' I shrug, knowing she's not buying it the second I see her face. 'They feared to be outside, so I needed to get them here quickly.'

'And did it need to be shiny and red as well?' She laughs, glancing between the car and me and shaking her head.

I press my lips together and look away, refusing to say anything more. I mean, it is not like I was planning to keep it. I will get rid of it the second I get home and pull into my drive.

I open the door and climb in, suddenly remembering the thing I meant to ask her before. Taking in the elegant lines of her face as I say, 'Hey Naddalin- how'd you open the door so quickly? How'd you know we were here?'

She looks at me, eyes meeting mine as the smile slowly fades from her face.

'I mean, it was four in the morning. I did not even have a chance to knock and you were already there. Weren't you asleep?'

- And-

Like even though a chunk of flashy red metal stands between us, it is as though she is right there, gaze sending shivers over my skin when she says, 'Ever, I can always sense when you're near.'

After a long day at school without Naddalin, the second the final bell rings, I get in my car and head for her house. But instead of making a left at the light, I pull an illegal U-turn. Telling myself I should allow her some space, give her a chance to bond with the twins- when the truth is, between their hero worship of Naddalin and Rayne's glaring animosity toward me- well, I am just not ready to face them again.

I head toward downtown Laguna, figuring I will stop by Mystics and Moonbeams, the metaphysical bookstore where Ava once worked. Thinking maybe Lina, the store's owner can help me find a solution to my more mystical problems without my divulging just what it is that I am after. Which, considering how suspicious she is, should prove to be quite a feat.

After manifesting the best parking space, I can, which is overcrowded Laguna happens to be two blocks away, I stuff the meter full of quarters and make my way toward the door, only to be met by a big red sign reading: BE BACK IN TEN!

I stand before it, lips pressed together as I glance all around, making sure no one is watching as I mentally flip the sign over while making the deadbolt retreat. Silencing the bell on the door as I slip inside and head for the bookshelves, relishing the chance to browse on my own, free of Lina's scrutiny.

The tips of my fingers graze the long row of spines, waiting for a signal, sudden warming, an itch at the tips, something to alert me to just the right one. But not getting anything, I grab one near the end and close my eyes, pressing my palms to the front and back covers, eager to see what is inside.

'How'd you get in here?'

I jump, bumping into the shelf just behind me, knocking a pile of CDs to the floor.

Cringing at the mess at my feet, scattered jewel cases everywhere, some of them cracked, as I say, 'You scared me- I-'

I drop to my knees, heart racing, face flushing, wondering not just who she is but how she could have possibly managed to sneak up on me when it should be impossible to do so. A mortal's energy always announces itself long before its actual presence does. So, is it possible that she- is not mortal?

I sneak a quick peek as she kneels beside me, taking in her tanned skin, defined arms, and a heavy clump of golden- brown dreadlocks spilling over her shoulder and halfway down her back.

Watching as she gathered the damaged jewel cases into her hands, searching for a sign that will out her as an immortal, maybe even a rogue.

A face that's too perfect- a Faith tattoo- but when her catchers me looking, her smile in a way that not only displays the most disarming set of dimples perfectly punctuating each cheek but a set of teeth that are just crooked enough to prove she's nothing like me, I say.

'You okay?' She asks, gazing at me with eyes so green I can barely remember my name.

I nod, standing awkwardly and rubbing my palms on my jeans, wondering why I'm so breathless, unnerved, forcing the words from my lips when I say, 'Yeah. I'm- fine.' Inadvertently taking a nervous laugh onto the end that is so high pitched and foolish I cringe and turn away. 'I, um- I was just, browsing the merchandise,' I add, realizing just after I have said it that I probably have more right to be here than she does.

Glancing over my shoulder to find her gazing at me in a way I cannot read, I take a deep breath and pull my shoulders back. 'I think the real question is, how'd you get in here?' Taking in her sandy bare feet and wet board shorts hanging dangerously low on her hips, averting my gaze before- I can see anything more.

'I own the place.' She then nods, stacking the fallen CDs, the ones that are not cracked, back onto the shelf before turning to me.

'Really?' I turn, eyes narrowed when I add, because I happen to know the owner, and you don't look a thing like her.'

She then cocks her head to the side, squinting in faux contemplation and rubbing her chin as she says, 'Really? Most people claim to see a resemblance. Though I have to admit, I'm with you, never seen it myself.'

'You're related to Lina?' I gape, hoping my voice didn't sound as panicked to her ears as it did mine.

'She's my grandmother.' She nods. 'Name's Naddalin, by the way.'

She offers her hand, long, tanned, fingers extended, waiting for mine. But even though my curiosity's piqued, I can't do it. Despite my interest, despite my wondering why she makes me feel so-

flustered and off-balance- I cannot risk the barrage of knowledge a single touch brings when my psyche is disturbed.

I nod, responding with the stupid, embarrassing sort of half-wave, as I mumble my name. Trying not to wince when she gives me an odd look and lowers her hand again.

'So, now that that's covered-' She slings her damp towel over her shoulder, sending a spray of sand through the room. 'I'm back to my original question, what are you doing in here?'

I turn, feigning sudden interest in a book on dream interpretation when I say, 'I'm sticking with my original answer, which was browsing, in case you've forgotten. Surely you allow browsers in here?' I turn, meeting her gaze- those amazing sea-green eyes reminding me of an ad for a tropical getaway. Something about them so- indefinable- startling- and yet- strangely familiar- though I am sure I have never seen her before.

She laughs, pushing a tangle of golden dreads off her face and exposing a scar slicing right through her brow, gaze landing just to my right as she says, 'And yet, after all the summers I've spent here, watching customers browse the merchandise, I've never once seen someone browse quite like you.'

Her lips pull at the sides, as her eyes study mine. Then I turn, cheeks hurting, heart racing, taking a moment to compose myself before turning back to say, 'You've never seen someone browse the back cover? That is a little odd, don't you think?'

'Not with their eyes closed.' She tilts her head to the side and focuses on the space to my right once again.

I swallow hard, flustered, shaky, knowing I need to change the subject before I sink any deeper. 'Maybe you should be more concerned with how I got in here instead of what I am doing in here,' I say, wishing I could take it back the second it is out.

She looks at me, gazes narrowed. 'Figured I left the door open again. Are you saying I didn't?'

'No!' I shake my head, hoping she does not notice the way my cheeks color and heat. 'No, that's- that's exactly what I'm saying. You did leave the door open,' I add, trying not to fidget, blink, press my lips together, or otherwise give myself away. 'Wide open in fact, which is not only a waste of air- conditioning but totally- I' I stop, my stomach going weird when I see the smile at play on her lips.

'So, a friend of Lina's, huh?' She moves toward the register, dropping her towel on the counter in a wet, sandy thud. 'Never heard her mention you before.'

'Well, we weren't exactly friends.' I shrug, hoping it did not look as awkward as it felt. 'I mean, I met her once and she helped me with- wait, why did you just phrase it like that? You know, all past tense. Is Lina okay?'

Her nods, perching on a stool, grabbing a purple cardboard box from a drawer and flipping through a bunch of receipts. 'She's on one of her annual retreats. Picks a different one each year. The time it is Mexico. Trying to decide if the Mayans were right and the world will end in 2012. What's your take?'

She looks at me, green eyes curious, insistent, boring right into mine. But I just scratch my arm and shrug, never having heard that theory before and wondering if it applies to Naddalin and me. Is that when we will head for the Shadowland, or will we be forced to wander barren Earth - the last two survivors responsible for repopulating the land-only- irony alert- if we touch, Naddalin dies- I shake my head, eager to escape that thread before it can really take hold and mess with my head. Besides, I am here for a reason and I need to stick with the plan.

'So how do you know her? If you weren't exactly friends.'

'I met her through Ava,' I say, hating the feel of her name on my lips.

She then rolls her eyes, mumbling something unintelligible and shaking her head.

'So, you know her?' I look at her, allowing my gaze to travel her face, her neck, her shoulders, her smooth tanned chest, making my way down to her navel, before forcing myself to look away again.

'Yeah, I know her.' She then pushes the box aside, gaze meeting mine. 'Just up and disappeared the other day- into thin air from what I can tell-'

Oh, you do not know the half of it, I think, carefully watching her face.

'Called her house, her cell, but nothing. Finally did a drive-by to make sure she was okay, and the lights were on so it's clear she's been dodging me.' She shakes her head. 'Left me with a bunch of angry clients, demanding a reading. Who would've thought she'd turn out to be such a flake?'

Yes, who would have thought? Certainly not the person who was foolish enough to place her deepest darkest secrets right into her greedy, outstretched, hands...

'Still, haven't found anyone good enough to replace her though. And let me tell ya, it's pretty much impossible to give readings and take care of the store. That's why I stepped out just now.' She shrugs. 'Surf was calling, and I needed a break. Guess I left the door open again.'

Her eyes meet mine, sparkling and deep. And I can't tell if she truly believes she left the door open, or if she suspects me. But when I try to peer into her head to see for myself, I'm stopped by the wall she's erected to safeguard her thoughts from people like me. All I have to go by is the brilliant purple aura I failed to see before- it is color waving and swaying, beckoning to me.

'So far all I got are a stack of applications from amateurs. But I'm so desperate to get my weekends back, I'm ready to toss their names in a bowl and pick one just to get it over with.' She shakes her head and flashes those dimples again.

- And-

Even though part of me can't believe what I'm about to do, the other part, the more practical part, urges me on, recognizing the perfect opportunity when it's standing before me.

'Maybe I can help.' I hold my breath as I wait for her reply. But when my only response is a set of narrowed lids accompanied by the slightest curling of lips, I add, 'Seriously. You don't even have to pay me!'

She squints even further, those amazing green eyes practically disappearing from sight.

'What I meant was you don't have to pay me all that much,' I say, not wanting to come off as some weird desperate freak who gives it away for free. 'I'll work for just over minimum wage - but only because I'm so good I'll be living off the tips.'

'You're psychic?' She folds her arms and tilts her head back, gazing at me with complete disbelief.

I straighten my posture and try not to fidget. Hoping to appear professional, mature, someone she can trust to help run her store. 'Yup...' I nod, unable to keep from wincing, unused to

confiding my abilities to anyone, much less a stranger. 'I just sort of know things- the information just sort of comes to me it's hard to explain.'

She looks at me, wavering, then focusing just to my right as she says, 'So what exactly are you then?'

I shrug, fingers playing with the zipper on my hoodie, drawing it up and down, down and up, having no idea what she means.

'Are your clairaudient, clairvoyant, clairsentient, clairgustance, Clair-sent, or clairt-agency? Which is it?' She shrugs.

'All of the above.' I nod, having no idea what half those things mean, but figuring if it's got anything even remotely to do with psychic abilities, then I can probably do it.

'But you're not mediumistic,' she says, as though it's a fact.

'I can see spirits.' I shrug. 'But only the ones that are still here, not the ones who've crossed-' I stop, pretending to clear my throat, knowing it's better not to mention the bridge, School, or any of that. '- I can't see the ones who've crossed over.' I shrug, hoping she doesn't try to push it since that's as far as I'll go.

She squints, gazes roaming from the top of my pale blond head and all the way down to my Nike clad feet. A gaze that makes my whole- body quiver. Reaching for a long-sleeved tee stashed under the counter and yanking it over her head before she looks at me and says, 'Well, eternally, if you want to work here, you're going to have to pass the audition.'

Naddalin locks the front door then leads me down a short hall and into a small room on the right. I follow behind, hands flexed by my sides, staring at the peace sign on the back of her tee and reminding myself that if she does anything creepy, I can take her down quickly and make her regret the day she ever went after me.

She motions toward a padded foldable chair facing a small square table covered by a shiny blue cloth, taking the seat just opposite me and propping her barefoot on her knee as she says, 'So, what's your specialty?'

I gaze at her, hands folded, focusing on taking slow deep breaths while trying not to squirm.

'Tarot cards? Runes? I Ching? Psychometry? Which is it?'

I glance at the door, knowing I could reach it in a fraction of a second, which might cause a stir, but so what?

'You are going to give me a reading, right?' Her gazes' levels on mine. 'You do realize that's what I meant by audition?' Her laughs, displaying a matching set of dimples as she swings her dreads over her shoulder and laughs some more.

I stare at the tablecloth, tracing the bumpy raw silk with my fingers, heart rising to my cheeks when I remember Naddalin's last words, how she can always sense me, and hoping she was just saying that- that she can't sense me now.

'I don't need anything,' I mumble, still unwilling to meet her gaze. 'All I need is a quick touch of your hand and I'm good to go.'

'Palmistry,' she nods. 'Not what I would've expected, but okay.' She leans toward me, hands open, palms up, ready to go.

I swallow hard, seeing the deeply etched lines, but that's not where the story lives - at least not for me. 'I don't actually read 'em,' I say, voice betraying my nervousness, as I work up the courage to touch her. 'It's more the- the energy- I just- tune into it. That's where all the info is.'

She pulls back, studying me so closely I can't meet her eyes. Knowing I need to just touch her, get it over with.

- And-

I need to do it now.

'Is it just the hand, or- ?' She flexes her fingers, the calluses lining her palms rising and falling again.

I clear my throat, wondering why I'm so nervous, why I feel like I'm betraying Naddalin when all I'm trying to do is land a job that'll make my aunt happy. 'No, it can be anywhere. Your ear, your nose, even your big toe- doesn't matter, it all reads the same. The hand's just more accessible, you know?'

'More accessible than the big toe?' She smiles, those sea-green eyes seeking mine.

I take a deep breath, thinking how coarse and rough her hands appear, especially compared to Naddalin's whose are almost softer than mine. And somehow, even just the thought of that makes the whole moment feels off. Now that our touch is forbidden, just being alone with another guy feels sordid, illicit, wrong.

I reach toward her, eyes shut tight, reminding myself it's just a job interview - that there's really no reason I can't land the thing quickly and painlessly. Pressing my finger to the center of her palm and feeling the soft, gentle give of her flesh.

Allowing her stream of energy to flow through me - so peaceful, serene, it's like wading into the calmest of seas. So different from the rush of tingle and heart I've grown used to with Naddalin - at least until the shock of Naddalin's life story unfolds.

I yank my hand back as though I've been stung, fumbling for the amulet just under my top, noting the alarm on her face as I rush to explain. 'I'm sorry.' I shake my head, angry with myself for overreacting. 'Normally I wouldn't do that. Normally I'm way more discreet. I was just a little surprised that's all. I didn't expect to see anything quite so-' I stop, knowing my inane babbling is only making it worse. 'Normally, when I give readings, I hide my reactions much better than that.' I nod, forcing my gaze to meet her, knowing whatever I say won't hide the fact that I choked like the worst kind of amateur.

'Seriously...' I smile, lips stretching in a way that can't be convincing; 'I'm like the ultimate poker face.' Peering at her again and seeing the isn't quite working. 'A poker face that is also full of empathy and compassion,' I stammer, unable to stop the runaway train. 'I mean, really - I'm just - full of it-' I cringe, shaking my head as I gather my things so I can call it a day. There's no way hell he will hire me now.

She slides to the edge of her seat, leaning so close I struggle to breathe. 'So-o, tell me,' she says, gaze like a hand on my wrist, holding me in place. 'What exactly did you see?'

I swallow hard, closing my eyes for a moment and replaying the movie I just saw in my head. The images so clear, dancing before me, as I say, 'you're different.' I peer at her, her body unmoving, gaze steady, allowing no clues as to whether or not I'm on track.

'But then, you've always been different. Ever since you were little you've seen them.' I swallow hard and avert my gaze, the image of her in her crib, smiling and waving at the grandmother who passed years before her birth now etched in my brain.

'And when-' I pause, not wanting to say it, but knowing that if I want the job, then I'd better get to it. 'But when your father- shot herself- back when you were ten- you thought you were to blame. Convinced your insistence on seeing your mother, who, by the way, passed just one year before, somehow sent her over the edge. It was years before you accepted the truth, that your father was just lonely, depressed, and anxious to be with your mother again. Even so, sometimes you still doubt it.'

I gaze at her, noting how she hasn't so much as flinched, though something in those deep green eyes hints at the truth.

'She tried to visit a few times. Wanting to apologize for what she did, but even though you sensed her, you blocked it. Sick of being teased by your classmates and scolded by the nuns- not to mention your foster dad who-' I shake my head, not wanting to continue, but knowing I must.

'You just wanted to be normal.' I shrug. 'Treated like everyone else.' I trace my fingers over the tablecloth, throat beginning to tighten, knowing exactly how it feels to long to fit in, all the while knowing you never truly can. 'But after you ran away and met Lina, who, by the way, is not your real grandmother- your real grandparents are dead.' I look at her again, wondering if she's surprised that I knew that but she gives nothing away. 'Anyway, she took you in, fed you, clothed you, she...'

'She saved my life.' She sighs, leaning back in her seat, long tanned fingers rubbing her eyes. 'In more ways than one. I was so lost and she-'

'Accepted you for who you really are.' I nod, seeing the whole story before me, as though I'm right there.

'And who's that?' She asks hands splayed on her knees, gazing at me. 'Who am I really?'

I look at her, not even pausing when I say, 'A guy so smart you finished high school in tenth grade. A guy with such amazing mediumistic abilities you have helped hundreds of people and asked very little in exchange. And yet, despite all of that, you are also a guy who's So-o-' I look at her, lips lifting at the corners. 'Well, I was going to say lazy- but since I really do want the job, I'll say laid- back

instead.' I laugh, relieved when she laughs along with me. 'And given the choice, you'd never work another day. You'd spend the rest of eternity just searching for that one perfect wave.'

'Is that a metaphor?' She asks, a crooked smile on her face.

'Not in your case.' I shrug. 'In your case, it's a fact.'

She then nods, leaning back in her chair, gazing at me in a way that makes my stomach dance. Dropping forward again, feet flat on the floor when she says, 'Guilty.' Eyes wistful, searching mine. 'And now, since there are no secrets left since you have peered right into the core of my soul- I must ask, any insights into my future- a certain blonde perhaps?'

I shift in my seat a little, preparing to speak when she cuts me right off.

'And I am talking the immediate future, as on Friday night. Will Emmah ever agree to go out with me?'

'Emmah?' My voice cracks as my eyes practically pop out of my head. So much for the poker face, I was bragging about.

Watching as she closes her eyes and shakes her head, those long, golden dreadlocks contrasting so nicely with her gorgeous dark skin. 'Anastasia Pappas, aka Emmah,' she says, unaware of my sigh of relief, thrilled to know it is some other horrible Emmah and not the one I know.

Tuning in to the energy surrounding her name and knowing right away that it is never going to happen at least not in the way that she thinks. 'You really want to know?' I ask, knowing I could save her a lot of wasted effort by telling her now, but doubt she really wants to hear the truth as much as she claims. 'I mean, wouldn't you rather just wait and see how it plays?' I look at her, hoping he will agree.

'Is that what you're going to say to your clients?' She asks, back to business again.

I shake my head, looking right at her. 'Hey, if they're fool enough to ask, then I'm fool enough to tell.' I smile. 'So, I guess the question is, how big of a fool are you?'

She pauses, hesitates for so long that I worry that I took it too far. But then she smiles, right hand extended as she rises from her seat. 'Fool enough to hire you. Now I know why you wouldn't shake hands the first time around.' Her nods, squeezing my hand for a few seconds too long. 'That's one of the most amazing readings I've ever had.'

'One of?' I lift my brow in the mock offense as I reach for my bag and walk alongside her.

She laughs, heading for the door and glancing at me when she says, 'Why don't you stop by tomorrow morning, say around ten?'

I pause, knowing there is no way I can possibly do that.

'What? Do you prefer to sleep in? Join the club.' She shrugs. 'But believe me, if I can do it, you can too.'

'It's not that.' I pause, wondering why I am so reluctant to tell her. I mean, now that- I have the job what do I care what she thinks?

She looks at me, waiting, gaze adding up the seconds.

'It's just- I have class.' I shrug, thinking how class sounds so much older than a school like I am in college or something.

She squints, looking me over again. 'Where?'

'Um, over at Bay View,' I mumble, trying not to wince when I say it aloud.

'The high school?' Her eyes narrow further, newly informed.

'Wow, you really are psychic.' I laugh, knowing I sound nervous, stupid, coming clean when I add, 'I'm finishing my junior year.'

She looks at me for a moment too long a moment- then she turns and opens the door. 'You seem older,' she says, the words so abstract I am not sure if they were meant for me or for her. 'Stop by when you can. I'll show you how to work the register and a few other things around here.'

'You want me to sell stuff? I thought I was just giving readings?' Surprised to hear my job description expanding so quickly.

'When you are not giving readings, you'll be working on the floor. Is that a problem?'

I shake my head as she holds the door open. 'Just- just one thing.' I bite down on my lip, unsure how to go ahead. 'Well, two things actually. First- do you mind if I go by a different name- you

know, for the readings and stuff? I live with my aunt, and while she's totally cool and all, she doesn't exactly know about my abilities, so-'

'Be whoever you want.' She shrugs. 'No worries. But since I need to start booking appointments, who do you want to be?'

I pause, not having thought the through until now. Wondering if I should choose Rachel after my best friend in Oregon, or something even more common like Anne or Jenny or something like that. But knowing how people always expect psychics to be about as far from normal as it gets, I gaze toward the beach and choose the third thing I see, bypassing Tree and Basketball Court as I say, 'Avalon.' Immediately like the sound of it. 'You know, like the town on Catalina Island?'

She nods, following me outside as she asks, 'And the second thing?'

I turn, taking a deep breath and hoping she will listen when I say, 'You can do better than Emmah.'

She looks at me, gaze moving over my face, clearly resigned to the truth if not exactly thrilled to hear it from me.

'You have a serious history of falling for all the wrong girls.' I shake my head. 'You do know that, right?'

I wait for a response, some recognition of what I just said, but she just shrugs and waves me away. Still watching as I head to my car, having no idea I can hear her when she thinks: Do not I know it.

The moment I pull into the drive Jaylynn calls my cell, telling me to just go ahead and order a pizza for dinner since she has to work late. And even though I'm tempted to tell her about my new job, I don't. I mean, obviously, I need to inform her, if for no other reason than to spare me the one she's lined up, but still, there's no way I can admit to getting the particular job. she will think it is weird. Even if I omit all the stuff about getting paid to give readings (and believe me, I would never dream of mentioning that) she will still think a job at a metaphysical bookstore is strange. Maybe even silly. Who knows?

Jaylynn's far too reasonable and rational to ever get behind such a thing. Preferring to live in a world that is sturdy and solid, that makes perfect sense, versus the real one that is anything but. And while I hate always having to lie to her, I really do not see how I have much of a choice. There is just no

way she can ever learn the truth about me, let alone that I will be giving readings under the code name of Avalynn.

I will just tell her I got a job somewhere local, some place normal, like a regular bookstore, or a Starbucks perhaps. And then, of course, I will have to find a way to back the story up in case she decides to follow up on all that.

I park in the garage and head up the stairs, tossing my bag onto my bed without even looking, then heading for my closet as I yank off my tee. Just about to unzip my jeans when Naddalin says, 'Do not mind me, I'm just sitting here enjoying the view.' I cover my chest with my arms, heart beating triple time as Naddalin lets out a low, sweet white and Jasmine at me.

'I didn't even see you. I didn't even sense you for that matter,' I say, reaching for my tee again.

'Guess you were too distracted.' Her smiles, patting the space right beside her, face creasing with laughter when I pull on my shirt before joining her.

'What're you doing here?' I ask, not really interested in the answer, just glad to be near her again.

'I figured since Jaylynn's working late-'

'How'd you-' But then I shake my head and laugh. Of course, she knows. She can read everyone's mind, including mine, but only when I want her to. And even though I usually leave my shield down, making my thoughts accessible for her to view, right now I just cannot. I feel like I need to explain, tell my side of the story before she can peek in my head and draw her own conclusions.

'And since you did not come by after school-' She then leans toward me, eyes seeking mine.

'I wanted to give you some time with the twins.' I pull a pillow onto my belly and finger the seam. 'You know, so you could get used to being together and- stuff-' I shrug, meeting her gaze, knowing she's not buying it, not for a second.

'Oh, we're quite used to each other.' She laughs. 'I assure you of that.' She shakes her head. 'It's been quite a day- very busy and very interesting, for lack of a better word. But we missed you.' She

smiles, eyes grazing over my hair, my face, my lips, like the sweetest lingering kiss. 'It would've been so much better if you'd been there.'

I avert my gaze, doubting any of that is the slightest bit true. Muttering under my breath when I say, 'I bet.'

She touches my chin, making me face her, face masked with concern when she asks, 'Hey, what's the about?'

I press my lips together and look away, scrunching my pillow so tight it threatens to burst, wishing I hadn't said anything because now I have to explain. 'I'm just-' I shake my head. 'I'm just not so sure the twins would agree.' I shrug. 'They pretty much blame me for everything. And it's not like they don't have a point. I meant-'

But before I can finish, I realize something- Naddalin is touching me.

Like touching me touching me.

For reals.

No glove, no telepathic embrace, just good old- fashioned skin-on-skin contact- or at least, almost contact.

'How'd you-' I look at her, her eyes shining with laughter when her catchers me gaping at her bare, gloveless hand.

'You like?' She smiles, grasping my arm and lifting it high, both of us watching as the thin veil of energy, the only thing separating my skin from her, pulsates between us. 'I've been working on it all day. Nothing's going to keep me from you, Ever. Nothing.' Her nods, her gaze meeting mine.

I look at her, mind racing with possibilities, of all that could mean. Enjoying the almost feel of her skin, separated only by the thinnest shroud of pure, vibrating energy, invisible to everyone but us. And while it does somewhat temper the usual rush of tingle and heart, and while it could never compare to the real thing, I miss her so much- just being with her- I will take what I can get.

I lean into her, watching the veil expand until it stretches from our heads to our toes. Allowing us to lie together in the way that we used to or at least almost in the way that we used to.

'Much better.' I smile, hands roaming her face, her arms, her chest. 'Not to mention how it's far less embarrassing than the black leather glove.'

'Embarrassing?' She pulls away and looks at me, mock outrage displayed on her face.

'Come on.' I laugh. 'Even you have to admit it was a total fashion faux pas. I thought Jasmine was going to have a seizure every time she saw it,' I murmur, inhaling her wonderful, warm, musky scent as I bury my face in her neck. 'So, how would you, do it?' My lips grazing her skin, longing to taste every inch. 'How'd you harness the magic of School and bring it back here?'

'It's got nothing to do with School,' she whispers, lips at the curve of my ear. 'It's just the magic of energy. Besides, you should know by now that most everything you can do there, can be done here as well.'

I gaze at her, remembering Ava and all the elaborate gold jewelry and designer clothes she used to manifest there, and how upset she always was when they did not survive the return trip home.

But before, I can even mention it, she says, 'While it has true that the things manifested there cannot be transferred here, if you understand how the magic works, if you truly get how everything is just made up of energy, then there's no reason you can't manifest the same things here. Like your Lamborghini, for instance.'

'I'd hardly call it my Lamborghini,' I say, cheeks flushing even though it was not so long ago when she had a thing for exotic cars too. 'The second I was done with it I sent it right back. I mean, it's not like I kept it.'

She smiles, burying her hand in my hair and smoothing the ends between the tips of her fingers. 'In between manifesting things for the twins, I perfected it.'

'What kinds of things?' I ask, moving so I can better see her, at once distracted by the sight of her lips, remembering how warm and silky they once felt on mine, wondering if the new energy shield will allow us to experience that again.

'It all started with a flat-screen TV.' Her sighs. 'Or, should I say flat screens since they ended up needing one for each of their rooms, plus another two for the den that they'll share. And not long after I got them all hooked up and working, they sat down to watch and not five minutes in they were inundated with images of things they couldn't live without.'

I squint, surprised to hear that, since the twins never seemed to care all that much about material things back in School, but maybe that's because material things tend to lose most of their value once you can manifest whatever you want. I guess losing their magic has made them just like anyone else- longing for everything just out of their reach.

'Trust me, they're an advertiser's dream.' She smiles, shaking her head. 'Falling right into that coveted youth market of thirteen to thirty.'

'Except for the fact that you did not actually buy any of those things, did you? You just closed your eyes and made them appear. Hardly the same as going to the store and charging it on your credit card. In fact, do you even have a credit card?' Never having seen her even carry a wallet, much less a pile of plastic.

'No need.' She then laughs, finger skimming the bridge of my nose before her lips meet the tip. 'But even though I didn't actually go out and buy all of those things as you so generously pointed out...' She smiles. 'That does not make those commercials any less effective, which was really my point.'

I pull away, knowing she's expecting me to laugh, or at least say something lighthearted in reply, but I can't. And even though I hate to disappoint her, I still shake my head and say, 'Either way, you need to be careful.' I shift my body, so my gaze can better meet her.

'You shouldn't spoil them so much, or make them so comfortable they're reluctant to leave.' She squints at me, clearly not following my meaning, so I rush ahead to explain. 'What I mean is, you need to remember that living with you is a temporary solution. Our main goal is to look after them until we can restore their magic and get them back to school, which is where they belong.'

She rolls onto her back and stares at the ceiling. Turning her face toward mine as she says, 'About that.'

I hold my breath and look at her, my stomach dipping ever so slightly.

'I've been thinking-' Her squints. 'Who's to say School is where they belong?'

I balk, an argument pressing forth from my lips until she raises her finger and stops it right there.

'Eternally, the question as to whether or not they return, well, don't you think that's something they should decide? I'm not sure we're the ones who should be making those choices.'

'But we're not choosing,' I say, voice shrill, unsteady. 'That's what they want! Or at least that's what they said the night I found them. They were furious with me, blaming me for the loss of their magic, for stranding them here- or at least Rayne was; Neville- well, Neville was just Neville.' I shrug. 'But still, are you saying that's changed?'

She closes her eyes for a moment, before leveling her gaze back on mine. 'I'm not sure they even know what they want at the point,' she says. 'They're a little overwhelmed, excited by the possibilities of being here, and yet too terrified to even step outside. I just think we should give them some time and space and keep our minds open to the possibility of them staying a little bit longer than planned. Or at least until they're fully adjusted, and better able to decide for themselves. Besides, I owe them, it's the least I can do. Don't forget they helped me find you.'

I swallow hard and avert my gaze, torn between wanting what's best for the twins while worried about the impact it'll have on Naddalin and me. I mean, they've been here less than a day and I'm already mourning my access to her, which is a totally selfish way to view two people in need. Still, I don't think you have to be psychic to know that with the two of them around, requiring all kinds of assistance, times like the- when it's just Naddalin and me- will be severely limited.

'Is that the first time you met? In School?' I ask, seeming to remember Rayne saying something about Naddalin helping them, not the other way around.

Naddalin shakes her head, eyes on mine when she says, 'No, that was just the first time I'd seen them in a long time. We actually go way back all the way back to Salem.'

I look at her, jaw dropped, wondering if she was there during the trials, though she's quick to dispel that.

'It was just before the trouble started, and I was only passing through. They'd gotten into some mischief and couldn't find their way, home- so I gave them a ride in my carriage and their aunt was never the wiser.' She laughs some...

- And-

I'm just about to make some crappy little comment, something about her spoiling and enabling them from the very start, when she says, 'They've suffered an extraordinarily hard life- losing everything they've ever known and loved at a very young age- surely you can relate to that? I know I can.'

I sigh, feeling small and selfish and embarrassed that I even needed to be reminded of that. Determined to stick to the practical when I say, 'But who's going to raise them?' Hoping it will seem like my concerns are far less about me and more about them. I mean, with all of their unmitigated weirdness, not to mention their totally bizarre history, where would they go? Who could possibly look after them?

'We're going to look after them.' Naddalin rolls onto her side and makes me face her again. 'You and I. Together. We're the only ones who can.'

I sigh, wanting to turn away, but drawn to the warmth of her all-encompassing gaze. 'I'm just not sure we're fit to be parents.' I shrug, hand moving over her shoulder, getting lost in her tangle of hair. 'Or role models, or guardians, or whatever. We're too young!' I add, thinking it's a good and valid point, and expecting just about any reaction but the laughter I get.

'Too young?' She shakes her head. 'Speak for yourself! I have been around for a while, you know. Plenty long enough to qualify as a suitable guardian for the twins. Besides.' She smiles. 'How hard can it be?'

I close my eyes and shake my head, remembering my feeble attempts to guide Riley both in human and ghost form, and how I failed miserably. And to be honest, I'm just not sure I'm up for it again. 'You have no idea what you're getting into,' I tell her. 'You can't even begin to imagine what it's like to guide two headstrong, thirteen- year- old girls. It's like herding cats- completely impossible.'

'Eternally,' she says, voice low, coaxing, determined to ease my concerns and chase all the dark clouds away. 'I know what's really bothering you, believe me, I do. But it's just five more years until they turn eighteen and head off on their own, and then we'll have the freedom to do whatever we want. What're five years when we have all of eternity?'

But I shake my head again, refusing to be swayed. 'If they head off on their own,' I say. 'If. Believe me, there are plenty of kids who stick around the house long after that.'

'Yes, but the difference is, you and I won't let them.' She then smiles, eyes practically begging me to lighten up and smile too. 'We'll teach them all the magic they'll need to gain their indie pen dance and get by on their own. Then we'll send 'em off and wish 'em well and go somewhere on our own.'

- And-

The way she smiles, the way she gazes into my eyes and smooths my hair off my face makes it impossible to stay mad, impossible to waste any more time on a topic like when my body's so close to her.

'Five years is nothing when you've already lived for six hundred,' she says, lips at my cheek, my neck, my ear.

I snuggle closer, knowing she's right, despite the fact that my perspective's a little different from her. Having never spent more than two decades in any one incarnation makes five years spent babysitting the twins seem like an eternity.

She pulls me to her, arms locked tightly around me, comforting me in a way I wish could last forever. 'Are we good?' She whispers... 'Are we finished with the?'

I nod, pressing my body hard against her, having no need for words. The only thing I want now, the only thing that'll make me feel better is the reassuring feel of her lips.

I shift my body so it's covering her, conforming to the bend of her chest, the valley of her torso, the bulk near her hips. Hearts beating in perfect cadence, vaguely aware of the slim veil of energy pulsating between us as I lower my mouth to her- pressing and pushing and kneading together- weeks of longing rising to the surface- until all I want to do is infuse my body with her.

She moans, a low primal sound coming from deep within, hands clutched at my waist, bringing me closer 'til there's nothing between us but two sets of clothes that need to be shed.

I fumble at her fly as she pulls at my tee, breath meeting in short, ragged gasps as our fingers hurry as fast as they can, unable to complete their tasks quickly enough to satisfy our need.

- And-

Just as I've unbuttoned her jeans and start to slide them down, I realize we've gotten so close, the energy veil was pushed out.

'Naddalin!' I gasp, watching as she leaps from the bed, breath coming so heavy and fast, her words are clipped at the end.

'Eternally - I'm-' She shakes her head. 'I'm sorry I thought it was safe - I didn't realize'

I reach for my tee and cover myself, cheeks flushed, insides aflame, knowing she's right, we can't take the risk- can't afford to get caught up like that.

'I'm sorry too- I think- I think maybe I pushed it away and-' I bow my head, allowing my hair to fall into my face, feeling small and examined, sure I'm to blame.

The mattress dips as she returns to my side, the veil fully restored as she lifts my chin and makes me face her again. 'It's not your fault - I- I lost focus- I was so caught up in you I couldn't maintain it.'

'It's okay. Really,' I say.

'No, it's not; I'm older than you- I should have more control-' Her shakes her head and stares at the wall, jaw clenched, gaze far away, eyes suddenly narrowing as she turns back to me and says, 'eternally- how do we know if she is even real?'

I squint, having no idea what she means.

'What kind of proof do we have? How do we know Naddalin's not just playing us, having a bit of fun at our expense?'

I take a deep breath and shrug, realizing I have no proof at all. My eyes meeting her as I replay the scene from that day, all the way to the end where I add my blood to the mix and make Naddalin drink, realizing the only proof I have is Naddalin's extremely unreliable word.

'Who's to say she is even legit?' Her eyes widen as an idea begins to form. 'Naddalin's a liar - we've no reason to trust her.'

'Yeah, but it's not like we can test it. I mean, what if it's not a big game, what if it is legit? We can't take the risk, can we?'

Naddalin smiles, rising from the bed and heading for my desk where her closes her eyes and manifests a tall white candle in an elaborate gold holder, a sharp silver dagger, its blade pointy and

smooth, its handle encrusted with crystals and gems, and a gold-framed mirror her sets down beside them, motioning for me to join her as she says, 'Normally I would say ladies first - but in the case-'

She holds her hand over the glass and raises the knife, placing the edge to her palm and tracing the curve of her lifeline, watching her blood flow onto the mirror, pooling, coagulating, before closing her eyes and setting the candle aflame. The wound already healed by the time she passes the blade through the blaze, cleansing, purifying, before handing it to me and urging me to do the same.

I lean toward her, inhaling deeply as I quickly slice through my flesh. At first wincing at the sharp stab of pain, then watching fascinated, as the blood pours from my palm and onto the mirror where it slowly creeps toward her.

We stand together, bodies still, breath halted, watching as two ruby red splotches meet, mingle, a coalesce - the perfect embodiment of our genetic makeup joining as one - the very thing Naddalin warned us against.

Waiting for something to happen, some sort of catastrophic punishment for what we've both done - but getting nothing - no reaction at all.

'Well, I'll be damned-' Naddalin says, eyes meeting mine. 'It's fine! Perfectly-'

Her words cut short by the sudden spark and sizzle as our blood begins to boil, conducting so much heart a huge plume of smoke bursts from the mirror and fills up the air - crackling and spitting until the blood evaporates completely. Leaving behind only the sheerest layer of dust on a burnt-out mirror.

Exactly what'll happen to Naddalin if our DNA should meet.

We gape, speechless, unsure what to say. But words are no longer necessary, the meaning is clear.

Naddalin's not playing. Her warning was real.

Naddalin and I can never be together.

Unless I pay her price.

'Well...' Naddalin nods, struggling to appear calm though her face is clearly stricken. 'Guess Naddalin's not nearly the liar I accused her of being at least not in the case.'

'Which also means she has the antidote- and all I have to do now is-'

But I can't even finish before Naddalin's cutting me off. 'Ever, please, don't even go there. Just do me a favor and stay away from Naddalin. She's dangerous and unstable, and I don't want you anywhere near her, okay? Just-' Her shakes her head, and runs her hand through her hair, not wanting me to see how distraught she really is and heading for the door as she says, 'Just give me some time to figure things out. I'll think of a way.'

She looks at me, so shaken by the events she's determined to keep her distance. Manifesting a single red tulip into my newly herald palm in place of a kiss, before heading down the stairs and out my front door.

The next day, when I get home from school, Haven's on my front steps, eyes smeared with mascara, royal blue bangs hanging limply in her face, with a blanketed bundle clutched tight in her arms.

'I know I should've called.' She scrambles to her feet; the face is red and swollen as she sniffs back the tears. 'I guess I didn't really know what to do, so I came here.' She rearranges the blanket, showing me a solid black cat with amazing green eyes that appears very weak.

'Is she yours?' I glance at them, noticing how both of their auras are ragged and frayed.

'She-' Haven nods, fussing with the blanket and raising it back to her chest.

'I didn't know you had a cat.' I squint, wanting to help but unsure what to do. My dad was allergic, so we always had dogs. 'Is the why you weren't at school today?'

She nods, following me into the kitchen where I grab a bottle of water and pour it into a bowl.

'How long have you had her?' I ask, watching as she places the cat in her lap and brings the bowl to her face. But the cat's not the least bit interested and quickly turns away.

'A few months.' She shrugs, giving up on the water and smoothing the top of her head. 'Nobody knows. Well, outside of Josh, Austin, and the maid who's sworn to secrecy, but nobody else. My mom would flip. God forbid a real living thing to mess up her designer decorating scheme.' She shakes her head. 'She lives in my room, mostly under the bed. But I leave the window cracked so she can get out and wander around now and then. I mean, I know they're supposed to live longer if you

keep 'em inside, but what kind of life is that?' She looks at me, her normally bright sunshiny aura turned gray with worry.

'What's her name?' I peer at the cat, keeping my voice to a whisper, trying to hide my concern. From what I can see, she's not long for the world.

'Charm...' The corners of her lips lifting ever so slightly as she glances at us. 'I named her that because she's lucky- or at least it seemed that way at the time. I found her just outside my window the first time Josh and I kissed. It seemed so Dadaistic.' She shrugs. 'Like a good sign. But now-' She shakes her head and looks away.

'Maybe I can help,' I say, an idea beginning to form. One I'm not sure will work, but still, from what I can see I've got nothing to lose.

'She's not exactly a kitten. She's an old lady now. The vet told me to keep her comfortable for as long as I can. And I totally would've kept her home since she really likes it under my bed, but my mom's decision to redo all the bedrooms even though my dad's threatening to sell, and now the decorator is there, along with a Realtor, and everyone's fighting and the house is a mess.

And since Josh is auditioning for the new band, and since Jasmine is getting ready for her performance tonight, I thought I'd come here.' She looks at me.

'Not that you were last choice or anything.' She cringes, realizing what she just said. 'It's just that you're always so busy with Naddalin and I didn't want to bother you. But if you're busy, I don't have to stay. I mean, if she's coming over or something, I can just-'

'Trust me.' I lean against the counter and shake my head. 'Naddalin's-' I stare at the wall, wondering just how to phrase it. 'Naddalin's pretty busy these days. So, I doubt she'll be dropping by anytime soon.'

I glance at her and Charm, reading her aura and knowing she's even more distraught than she seems. And even though I know it's not right, ethical, or whatever, even though I know it's the circle of life and you're not supposed to interfere, I can't stand to see my friend suffer like them, not when I have a half bottle of elixir sitting inside my bag.

'I'm just sad.' She sighs, scratching just under Charm's chin. 'I mean, obviously, she's lived a good long life and all, but still. Why does it have to be so sad when it ends?'

I shrug, barely listening, mind buzzing with the promise of a new idea.

'It's so weird how like one minute everything's fine- or maybe even not so fine- but still, you're at least here. And then the next- gone. Like Evangeline. Never to be seen or heard from again.'

I drum my fingers against the granite counter, knowing that's not exactly true, but unwilling to refute it.

'I guess I just don't get the point. It's like, why should you bother getting attached to anything if, A: It's never- ever going to last, and B: It hurts like hell when it's over?' She shakes her head. 'Because if everything's finite, if everything has a definite beginning, middle, and end, then why even get started in the first place? What's the point when everything just leads to The End?'

She blows her bangs out of her eyes and looks at me. 'And I don't mean death-like-' She nods toward her cat. 'Although that's where we all end up no matter how hard we fight.'

I glance at her and Charm, nodding as though I'm right there. Like I'm just like everyone else. Waiting my turn in a long morbid line.

'I mean death in a more metaphorical way. In a nothing lasts forever way, you know? Because it's true, nothing's built to last. Nothing. Nothing- thing.'

'But Haven-' I start, stopping the second she shoots me a look meant to silence.

'Listen, before you try to sell me all that bright side nonsense you're just dying to spout, name one thing that doesn't end.' She narrows her gaze in a way that sets me on edge, making me wonder if she knows about me if she's trying to bait me somehow. But when I take a deep breath and look at her again, it's clear she's battling her own set of demons, not me.

'Can't do it, right?' She shakes her head. 'Unless you were going to say God, or universal love, or whatever, but that's not what I'm talking about, anyway. I mean, Charm is dying, my parents are on the verge of divorcing, and, let's face it, Josh and I are going to end eventually too. And if it's purely an inevitable fact, then-' She shakes her head and wipes her nose. 'Well- I may as well take control of the situation and be the one who decides when.

Hurt her, before she can hurt me. Because two things are for sure, A: It's going to end, and B: Someone's bound to get hurt. And why should that someone be me?' She looks away, nose runny, lips

twisted. 'Mark my words, from the point on, I'm Skaufyceol Girl. Everything runs right off me, nothing can stick.'

I look at her, sensing the isn't quite the whole story, but willing to take her at her word. 'You know what? You're right. You're absolutely right,' I say, seeing her look up in surprise. 'Everything is finite.' Everything but Naddalin, Naddalin, and me! 'And you're also right that you and Josh will probably end at some point, and not just because everything ends as you said, but because that's just the way it goes. Most high school relationships don't make it past graduation.'

'Is that how you see you and Naddalin?' She picks at Charm's blanket while looking at me. 'That you guys won't make it past grad night?'

I press my lips together and avert my gaze, knowing I'm pretty much the world's worst liar when I say, 'I- I try not to think about it too much. But what I meant was, just because something ends doesn't mean it's a bad thing or that someone's bound to get hurt, or that it should've never happened in the first place, or whatever. Because if each step brings us to the next, then how will we ever get anywhere, how can we ever grow if we avoid everything that might hurt us?'

She looks at me, nodding only slightly, as though she sees my point but won't fully concede.

'So-o, we pretty much have no choice but to continue, to just get out there and hope for the best. And who knows, we might even learn a thing or two along the way.' I look at her, knowing I haven't completely sold it, so I add, 'I guess what I'm trying to say is, you can't run away just because something won't last. You have to hang in there, let it play out. It's the only way you'll ever advance.' I shrug, wishing I could be a little more eloquent, but there it is. 'Think about it, if you didn't rescue your cat, if you didn't say yes when Josh asked you out- well, there's a lot of wonderful moments you would've missed.'

She looks at me, still wanting to argue, but not saying a word.

'Josh is a really sweet guy, and she's crazy about you. I don't think you should throw her overboard so soon. Besides,' I say, knowing she hears me but is not truly listening, 'you shouldn't make those kinds of decisions when you're feeling so stressed.'

'How about moving, then? Is that a good enough reason?'

'Josh is moving?' I squint. I hadn't seen that coming.

She shakes her head, scratching Charm on the spot between her ears when she says, 'Not Josh; Me. My dad keeps talking about selling the house, but damn if she'll discuss it with Austin or me.'

I look at her, tempted to peer inside her head and see for myself, but sticking to my earlier vow to allow my friends their privacy.

'All I know for sure is that the phrase resale value comes up all the time.' She shakes her head, looking at me when she says, 'But you know what the really means if any of them is actually true? It means I won't be going to Bay View next year. I won't get to graduate with my class. I won't be going to any Orange County high school for that matter.'

'I won't let them happen,' I say, gaze locked on her. 'There's no way you're leaving. You have to graduate with us-'

'Well, that's very nice and all.' She shrugs. 'But I'm not sure you can stop it. It's a little out of your league, don't you think?'

I glance at her and her cat, knowing it's not at all out of my league. Finding an antidote for Naddalin? Maybe. Helping my best friend stay in her zip code and save her cat? Not so much. There's plenty I can do. Plenty. But still, I just look at her and say, 'We'll work something out. Just trust me, okay? Maybe you can move in here with me and Jaylynn?' Nodding as though I mean it, even though Jaylynn would never have it. But still needing to put something out there, provide some kind of comfort since it's not like I can voice what I'm hoping to do.

'You'd do that?' She squints- 'Really?'

'Of course.' I shrug. 'Whatever it takes.'

She swallows hard and gazes around, shaking her head when she says, 'You know I'd never take you up on it, but still, it's nice to know that even with all our rough spots you're still my best friend.'

I squint, having always assumed it was Malcolm, not me.

'Well, you and Malcolm.' She laughs. 'I mean, I can have two best friends- an heir and a spare, as they say?' She wipes her nose again, shaking her head when she adds, 'I bet I look like crap, right? Go ahead, tell me, I can take it.'

'You don't look like crap,' I say, wondering why she's suddenly focused on her looks. 'You look sad. There's a difference. Besides, does it matter?'

'It does if you're considering whether or not you should hire me.' She shrugs. 'I've got a job interview, but there's no way I can go looking like the. And it's not like I can bring Charm.'

I gaze at her cat, watching the life-force energy slowly slipping away, knowing I have to move fast before it's too late. 'I'll keep her. It's not like I'm going anywhere anyway.'

She looks at me, wavering on whether or not she should leave her poor dead cat in my care. But I just nod, coming around to her side of the counter and lifting Charm out of her arms as I add, 'Seriously. Just go do what you need to do, and I'll babysit.' I smile, urging her to agree.

She hesitates, glancing between me and Charm, then rummages through her oversized bag for a small, handheld mirror, before wetting her finger and clearing the mascara tracks from her cheeks.

'I shouldn't belong.' She grabs a black pencil and draws a thick, smudgy line around each eye. 'Maybe for an hour? Two at the most?' She looks at me, trading the pencil for blush. 'All you have to do is hold her and give her some water if she wants. But she probably won't. She doesn't want much of anything now.' She coats her lips with a swipe of gloss and rearranges her bangs, before slinging her bag over her shoulder and heading for the door. Climbing into her car as she turns to me and says, 'Thanks. I need the job more than you think. I need to start saving some money so I can emancipate myself like Naddalin. I'm tired of the crap.'

I look at her, unsure of what to say. Naddalin's situation's unique. Not at all what it seems.

'And yeah, I know, I probably won't be able to support myself in quite the same style as Naddalin, but still, I'd rather live in some crappy studio somewhere than be subject to my parents' impulsive decisions and whirs. Anyway, you sure you're okay with them?'

I nod, hugging Charm tighter, mentally urging her to hold on, just a little bit longer, until I can help.

Haven slides her key into the ignition, the engine turning as she says, 'I promised Naddalin I wouldn't be late. And if I hurry, I might be on time.' Checking her appearance in the rearview mirror as she shifts in reverse.

'Naddalin?' I freeze my expression one of pure panic but unable to change it.

She shrugs, backing out of my drive as she calls, 'She's the one who scored me the interview.' Waving as she disappears down the street, leaving me with a dead cat in my arms, and no words to warn her.

'You can't do it,' she says, barely having opened the door before she's already shaking her head.

'You don't even know what I'm here for.' I frown, hugging Charm tightly to my chest, wishing I hadn't come here.

'The cat is dying, and you want to know if it's okay to save it and I'm telling you it's not. You can't do it.' She shrugs, reading the situation more than my mind, which I purposely blocked so she can't view my visit to Naddalin, which would really set her on edge.

'Do you mean can't as in not possible? Like the elixir won't work on a feline? Or can't as in the moral sense, as in don't play God, always?'

'Does it matter?' She lifts her brow, stepping to the side and allowing me in.

'Of course, it matters,' I whisper, TV noise drifting down from upstairs, the twins' daily dose of reality shows.

She heads into the den, plopping onto the couch and patting the space right beside her. And even though I'm annoyed by the way she's acting, not even giving me a chance to explain, I still join her, rearranging the blanket, hoping one look at Charm will convince her.

'I just don't think you should jump to conclusions,' I say, shifting my body so I'm facing her. 'It's not as simple as you think. It's not black or white, it's mostly all gray.'

She leans toward me, gazes softening as she moves her thumb back and forth under Charm's chin. 'I'm sorry, Ever. Really.' She gazes at me before pulling away. 'But even if the elixir did work- which, by the way, I'm not sure it would since I've never tried it on an animal before, but even if it did -'

'Really?' I look at her, surprised to hear that. 'You've never had a pet you couldn't bear to part with?' My eyes graze over her, taking her in.

'Not one that- I couldn't bear to lose, no.' She shakes her head.

I narrow my eyes, not sure how I feel about that.

'Always, back in my day, we didn't keep pets in quite the same way. And after I drank the elixir, I wasn't interested in owning anything that might tie me down.'

I nod, catching the way she gazes at Charm and hoping there's room to negotiate. 'Fine. No pets. I get it,' I say. 'But do you get how someone might become so attached to their kitty they can't bear to say goodbye?'

'Are you asking if I know about attachment?' She looks at me, gazes heavy, steady, fixed right on mine. 'About love, and the unbearable grief that comes when it's lost?

I gaze down at my lap, feeling juvenile, foolish. I should've seen that coming.

'There's much more at stake than just saving a cat or granting eternal life - if there even is such a thing in the animal kingdom. The real question is, how will you explain it to Haven? What will you tell her when she returns only to find the dead cat, she left in your care is now miraculously cured - maybe even becoming a kitten again, who knows? How will you possibly explain that to her?'

I sigh, not having thought about that. Hadn't really considered that if it does work, Charm won't just be heralded, but physically transformed.

'It's not about it not working - I've no clue about that. And it's not about your right to play God - you and I both know I'm the last one who should judge such a thing. It's more about safeguarding our secrets. And while I know you have only the best intentions at heart, in the end, helping your friend will only ignite her suspicion. Raising questions that can never be answered simply or logically without revealing too much. Besides, Haven's already onto us, or onto something at least. So now, more than ever, it's important for us to lay low.'

I press my lips together, swallowing past the lump in my throat, hating that I've got so many amazing tools at my disposal, all of these magical abilities, but unable to use them, to help those whom I love.

'I'm sorry,' she says, hand hovering over my arm, hesitating to make contact until the veil comes along. 'But as sad as it seems, it really is just the natural course of events. And believe me, animals accept these things far better than people do.'

I lean into her shoulder, into her touch, amazed by her power to comfort me no matter how bad things get. 'I just feel so bad for her- her parents are always fighting- she might have to move- it's making her question the point of everything. Kind of like I did when my world fell apart.'

'Always -' She starts, gazes soft, lips looming so close I can't help but press mine against them- the moment cut short when the twins squeal their way down the stairs.

'Naddalin- Neville won't let me-' Rayne stops, standing before us, dark eyes wider than usual when she says, 'Omigod is that a cat?'

I glance at Naddalin. Since when does Rayne use words like - 'Omigod' - 'An exclamation of surprise, pleasure, dismay?'

But she just shakes her head and laughs. 'Don't get too close.' She glances between them. 'And keep your voice down. The is a very sick cat. I'm afraid she doesn't have very long.'

'Then why don't you save it?' Rayne asks, prompting Neville to nod in agreement, the three of us gazing at Naddalin, our eyes wide and pleading.

'Because we do not do things like that,' she says, voice stern and parental. 'That's not how it's done.'

'But you saved Ever, and she's not nearly as cute,' Rayne says, kneeling before me 'til her face is level with Charms.

'Rayne-' Naddalin starts.

But she just laughs, glancing between us when she says, 'Just joking. You know I'm joking, right?'

I look at her, knowing she's not, but not willing to press it. Just about to get up, wanting to get Charmed back before Haven returns when Neville kneels beside me and places her hand on Charm's head, closing her eyes as she chants a series of indecipherable words.

'No magic,' Naddalin scolds. 'Not in the case.'

But Neville just sighs and sits back on her heels. 'It's not like it works anyway,' she says, still gazing at Charm. 'She looks just like Jinx at that age, doesn't she?'

'Which time?' Rayne giggles, nudging her sister as they both start to laugh.

'We may have extended her life a few times,' Neville says, cheeks pink as she glances at us, prompting me to look at Naddalin and think: See?

But she just shakes her head. Again- Haven?

'Can we get a cat?' Neville asks. 'A black kitty like the?' Tugging on her sleeve while gazing at her in a way that is hard to resist. 'They're wonderful companions and very good around the house. What do you say? Can we? Please?'

'It'll help us get our magic back,' Rayne adds, nodding at her.

I look at Naddalin, reading her expression and knowing it is as good as done. Whatever the twins want, the twins get. It is as simple as that.

'We'll discuss it later,' Naddalin says, trying a stern look, but the gesture's empty, everyone knows it but her.

I get up from the couch and head for the door, needing to get Charmed back to the house before Haven returns.

'Are you upset with me?' Naddalin grasps my hand and leads me to my car.

I shake my head and smile. It is impossible to be mad at her, or at least not for very long. 'I'm not going to lie; I was hoping you'd be on my side.' I shrug, coaxing Charm into her carrier, before leaning against the door and pulling her close. 'But it's not like I don't get your point. I just wanted to help Haven, that's all.'

'Just be there for her.' She nods, dark gaze on mine. 'That's all she really wants from you anyway.'

She leans in to kiss me, gathering me into her arms, her hands moving over me and warming me to my core. Pulling away to gaze at me with those deep soulful eyes, the rock to my feather, my

eternal partner, whose intentions are so solid and good- I can only hope she never learns of my betrayal, reneging on my promise not to visit Naddalin just after saying I would not.

She then cups my face between the palms of her hands and peers into my eyes. Sensing my mood shifts so easily it is as though they are here.

I avert my gaze, thinking about Haven, Naddalin, the cat, and all the mounting mistakes- I cannot seem to stop making. Then clearing the thoughts and shaking my head, unwilling to visit that place when I say, 'See you tomorrow?' Barely finishing the words before she leans in to kiss me again, a slip of energy pulsating between her lips and mine.

Holding the moment for as long as we can, neither of us willing to break away, until a twin chorus of, 'Ew! Gross! Do we really have to watch that?' trails from the window upstairs.

'Tomorrow-' Naddalin smiles, seeing me safely into my car before heading inside.

Everything started out fine. As fine and normal as any other day. I woke up, showered, dressed, stopped by the kitchen to toss some cereal down the sink before chasing it with some OJ I'd swished in a glass- my usual morning routine so Jaylynn will think I ate the breakfast she made.

Nodding and smiling the whole way to school as Jasmine yammers on and on about Holt, or France, or Holt and France, as I sit there beside her, stopping, turning, speeding, slowing, chasing yellow lights, waiting for the moment when I can see Naddalin again. Knowing the mere sight of her will turn all darkness to light, even if the effect is just temporary.

But the moment- I pull into the lot the first thing I see is a mammoth-sized SUV parked right next to the space Naddalin's saving for me. And I mean mammoth, as in big and ugly. And something about the sight of Naddalin leaning against that whale of a car fills me with dread.

'What the hell?' Jasmine gapes. 'You give up riding the bus, so you can drive a bus instead?'

I climb out of my Miata, glancing between Big Ugly and Naddalin, hardly believing my ears when she starts quoting a slew of statistics about its superb safety rating and roomy back seats. I mean, I don't remember her ever once caring about the safety rating when she was chauffeuring me.

That's because- you're immortal, she thinks, sensing my thoughts as we head for the gate. But may I remind you, the twins are not, and since they are now in my care, it's my job to keep them from harm.

I shake my head, gaze narrowed as I try to think of a snappy reply. My thoughts interrupted by Haven who says, 'You're doing it again.' She crosses her arms and glances at us. 'You know, your whole, weird, pseudo telepathy thing.'

'Who even cares about that?' Jasmine screeches. 'Naddalin's driving a bus!' She hooks her thumb over her shoulder, jabbing toward the big, black monstrosity and wincing at the sight of it.

'Is it a bus or a mom car?' Haven squints, shielding her eyes from the sun. Glancing at each of us. 'Whatever it is, one thing's for sure, it's tragically middle-aged.'

Jasmine nods fully warmed up to the subject now. 'First the glove and now the?' Her frowns at Naddalin, disappointment clouding her face. 'I have no idea what you're up to, but dude, you are seriously losing your edge. You're not even close to the rock star you were when you first came to the school.'

I glance at her, eyes narrowed in silent agreement. But Naddalin just laughs, too concerned with the proper care and feeding of the twins to bother with what anyone thinks- including me. And while that's obviously the way a good, responsible, parental- type figure should think, something about it really bugs me.

Jasmine and Haven continue, teasing Naddalin about her new, surprisingly stodgy ways, as I tag along, a sliver of energy pulsating between us as she grabs my hand and thinks, what's going on? Why are you acting like the? Is the because of the cat? I thought you understood all of that?

I stare straight ahead, focused on Jasmine and Haven, sighing loudly as I mentally reply: It's not the cat. We settled that yesterday. She's back at Haven's, marking her days. It's just well, it's like, here I am, making myself crazy, trying to find a solution so we can be together, and all you seem to care about is manifesting HDTV's and the world's ugliest babyproof car so you can cart the twins around town! I shake my head, knowing I need to stop before I go any further and really have something to regret.

'Everything's changing,' I say, not realizing I said it out loud until the words ring in my ears. 'And I'm sorry if I'm acting like a brat, but I'm just so frustrated that we can't be together in the way that we want. And I miss you. I miss you so bad I can't stand it.' I pause, eyes stinging, throat hot and tight, threatening to close up completely. 'And now that the twins are living with you, and with my new job starting and all, well, it's like, we're suddenly thrust into the super stressful, middle-aged life. And trust me, seeing your new car just now didn't help.'

I peer at her, thinking there's no way I'm riding in that thing. Instantly ashamed when I see her looking at me with such love and compassion, I can't help but fold. 'I guess I was hoping the summer would be great, you know? I was hoping we could have some fun- just the two of us.

But now it's not looking so good. And, just to top things off, did I even mention that Jaylynn is dating Milley? My history teacher? The Friday night, dinner at eight!' I scowl, hardly believing the pathetic life actually belongs to a supposedly powerful, newly immortal, almost seventeen- year- old girl.

'You got a job?' She stops in place as her eyes search mine.

'Out of everything I just said that's what you're focusing on?' I shake my head and pull her along, laughing in spite of myself.

But she just looks at me, gazes fixed on mine as she says, 'Where?'

'Mystics and Moonbeams.' I shrug, watching Jasmine and Haven wave as they turn down the hall and head for class.

'Doing what?' She asks, not ready to drop it just yet.

'Retail stuff, mainly.' I gaze at her. 'You know, working the register, restocking shelves, giving readings, stuff like that.' I shrug, hoping she won't pay much notice to that last part.

Psychic readings? She gapes, stopping just shy of our classroom.

I nod, staring longingly at my classmate's spill through the door, preferring to join them than having to finish what I started.

'Do you think that's smart? Drawing that kind of attention to yourself?' Back to talking again now that we're alone in the hall.

'Probably not.' I shrug, knowing it's most definitely not. 'But Jaylynn insists the discipline and stability will do me some good. Or so she says. She just wants to watch me. And short of installing a nanny cam, the is the easiest, least invasive way. She even had the horrible, soul-sucking, nine-to-five gigs all set up and ready to go, so when Naddalin said she needed some help around the store, well, I didn't have much choice but to what?' I pause, seeing the look on her face, eyes guarded, hard to read.

'Naddalin?' Her eyes narrowing to where I can just barely see them. 'I thought you said someone named Lina owned the store.'

'Lina does own the store. Naddalin's her grandson,' I say, only that's not entirely true. 'Well, she's not her real grandson, it's more like, she looks after her. Helped raise her after she runs away from her last foster home-or-whatever.' I shake my head. The last thing I wanted was to start a conversation about Naddalin, especially with the way Naddalin's gone high alert. 'I thought it might help, you know, allow unlimited access to books and things that might help us. Besides, it's not like I'm working there under my real name. I'm using an alias.'

'Let me guess.' She peers into my eyes, seeing the answer displayed in my thoughts. 'Avalynn. Cute...' Her smiles, but only briefly before she's gone seriously again. 'But you know how it works, right? It's not like a confessional where you're shielded by a screen. People expect to face-to-face contact. They want to see you know whether or not they can trust you. So, what exactly are you planning to do when someone you know just happens to walk in for an impromptu tarot card reading? Did you even think about that?'

I frown, wondering why she has to take what I thought was a pretty good deal and turn it into a problem. And I'm just about to deliver some snappy reply, say something like- Hello? I'm a psychic. I'll know before they even get through the door! when Naddalin appears.

Naddalin and-someone else-someone vaguely familiar-someone named Marco who was last seen in a vintage Jaguar, pulling up to her house.

Walking side by side, legs moving swiftly, eyes focused on mine. Naddalin's gaze taunting, mocking, the proud owner of my dirty little secret.

Naddalin moves to shield me, gaze on Naddalin as she thinks: Stay calm. Don't do a thing. I'll handle them.

I peer over her shoulder, watching as Naddalin and Marco barrel toward us like an oncoming train. Gazing at me with eyes so deep, so blue, everything blurs but her moist grinning lips and flashing Ouroboros tattoo. And the last thing I think, before I'm sucked in completely, is that the is my fault. If I'd kept my promise to Naddalin and stayed away from her, I wouldn't be facing the now.

Her energy swirls toward me, tugging, pulling, luring me in, sucking me into a spiral of darkness, bombarding me with images of Naddalin- the tainted antidote- my ill-advised visit- Haven- Malcolm- France- the twins- all of it coming so quickly I can barely distinguish between them. But the individual images themselves aren't important- it's the whole she wants me to see. All of it meant to illustrate one single thing: Naddalin's in charge now- the rest of us are just puppets, pulled by her strings.

'Morning', mates!' She sings, releasing me from her grip as my body falls limp against Naddalin's.

But despite her sweet murmurings as her usher me away from Naddalin and into the room, despite the soft reassurances intended to soothe, convinced that we've just dodged a bullet and it's over, for now, I happen to know it's only begun.

More is coming.

There's no doubt.

Naddalin's next shot is aimed solely at me.

After lunch, I head for Mystics and Moonbeams. Eager to start my on- the- job training, hoping it'll provide a nice distraction from the mess otherwise known as my life.

It was bad enough when Naddalin kept disappearing between classes so she could check in on the twins, but by lunch, when I assured her I was fine, that Naddalin would n't bother me, and that she should just stay home, I headed for our table only to learn that Haven has boarded the Naddalin train. Picking apart a vanilla- frosted cupcake while gushing about the big part she played in securing her the job at the vintage store, despite her arriving at the interview ten minutes late.

And all I could do was mumble an occasional word of dissent, which didn't go over so well. So, after her third excruciatingly dramatic eye roll, after telling me to relax and unclench for the u mpteenth time, I tossed my uneaten sandwich and made for the gate. Vowing to keep an eye on her, do whatever it takes to keep them from getting together. Just one more item on my growing to-do list.

I pull into the alley, parking in one of two spaces behind the store before heading toward the front, half expecting to find the door locked, figuring Naddalin couldn't resist the call of killer waves on such a beautiful day and surprised to find it wide open, with Naddalin behind the register, ringing a sale.

'Oh hey, here's Avalynn now.' She nods. 'I was just telling Susan about our new psychic reader, and you walk in on cue.'

Susan turns, looking me over, scrutinizing, accessing, adding up all the parts in her head. Sure, she's aced the equation when she says, 'Aren't you a little young to be giving readings?' She gives me a smug look.

I smile, an awkward slanting of lips, as my gaze darts between them, unsure how to respond, especially with the way Naddalin's looking at me.

'Being psychic is a gift,' I mumble, nearly choking on the word. Remembering a time, not long ago, when I scoffed at the thought, sure it was anything but. 'It's got nothing to do with age,' I add, watching her aura flicker and flare, knowing I've failed to convince her. 'You either have it, or you don't.' I shrug, digging myself a very deep hole.

'So, should I book you reading?' Naddalin asks, smiling in a way that's hard to resist. But not for Susan; shaking her head and clutching her bag, she heads for the door, saying, 'You just give me a call when Ava comes back.'

The bell clangs loudly as the door closes behind her. 'Well, that went well.' I shrug, turning toward Naddalin and watching her file the receipt before adding, 'Is my age going to be a problem here?'

'You sixteen?' She asks, barely glancing at me.

I press my lips together and nod.

'Then you're old enough to work here. Susan's a psychic junkie, she ar won't resist for long. she'll be on your sign- up sheet before you know it.'

'Psychic junkie? Is that anything like a groupie?' I follow her to the office in the back, noticing she's wearing the exact same trunks and peace- sign tee as before.

'Can't make a move without consulting the cards, the stars, what have you.' She nods some. 'Though I'm guessing you gathered your share of regulars during all the readings you've given.' She glances over her shoulder as she opens the door, eyes narrowed, knowing, in a way I cannot miss.

'About that-' I start, figuring I may as well confess since she is obviously on to me anyway.

But she just turns, hand raised, decided to stop me when she says, 'Please, no confessionals.' Smiling and shaking her head. 'If I have any hope of enjoying those huge swells out there, then I don't have the luxury of regretting my decision. Though you might want to rethink that bit about it being a gift.'

I look at her, surprised to hear her say that since all the psychics I have met, which, okay, pretty much consists of just Ava, but still, most of them think it is most certainly something you are born with.

'I'm thinking of adding some classes to the schedule, psychic development stuff, maybe even throw in some Wicca as well, and trust me, we'll get a lot more sign-ups if everyone thinks they have a fair shot.'

'But do they?' I ask, watching as she heads for an extremely messy desk and riffles through a pile of papers near the edge.

'Sure-' She nods, picking up a sheet, looking it over, then shaking her head as she swaps it for another. 'Everyone has the potential, it's just a matter of developing it. With some it comes easy, they could not ignore it if they tried, with others- they must dig a little deeper to find it. And you? When did you know?'

She looks at me, those sea-green eyes meeting mine in a way that makes my stomach dance. I mean, one minute he's talking abstractedly, thumbing through papers as though she's barely minding her words, then the next everything stops, her gaze is on mine, and it's like time has stood still.

I swallow hard, unsure what to say, part of me longing to confess, knowing she's one of the few who would understand, but the other part resists- Naddalin's the only one who knows my story, and I feel like- I should keep it that way.

'Just born with it, I guess.' I lift my shoulders, cringing at the way my voice rose at the end. My eyes dart around the room, hoping to avoid the topic as well as her gaze when I add, 'So- classes; who are teaching those?'

She shrugs, tilting her head in a way that allows her dreadlocks to fall into her face. 'Guess I will,' she says, pushing them back and revealing the scar on her brow. 'It's something I've been wanting to do for a while anyway, but Lina's always been against it. I figure I may as well take advantage of her not being there to see if it works.'

'Why's she against it?' I ask, stomach-settling when she leans back and props her feet on her desk.

'She likes to keep it simple- books, music, angel figurines, with the occasional reading thrown in. Safe. Benign. Mainstream mysticism where no one gets hurt.'

'And your way? People get hurt?' I study her, trying to pinpoint just what it is about her that sets me on edge.

'Not at all. My goal is to empower people, help them live better, more fulfilled lives, by accessing their own intuition, that's all.' She glances at me, green eyes catching me staring, making my stomach go weird again.

'And Lina doesn't want to empower people?' I ask, feeling all fluttery under her gaze.

'With knowledge comes power. And since power tends to corrupt, she thinks it's too big a risk. Even though I've got no plans to go anywhere near the dark arts, she's convinced they' ll find their way in, that the classes I teach will only lead to harder, darker stuff.'

I nod, thinking of Naddalin and Haven and definitely seeing Lina's point. Power in the wrong hands is indeed a dangerous thing.

'Anyway, you interested?'

My eyes meet her, unsure of what she means.

'In teaching a class?'

I balk, wondering if she's joking or serious, then seeing she's neither, just putting it out there. 'Trust me, I don't know the first thing about Wicca, or- or any of it really. I've no idea how it works. I'm better off just giving the occasional reading, and maybe even trying to organize the mess.' I gesture toward her desk, the shelves, just about every available surface that's buried beneath a mound of papers and junk.

'I was hoping you'd say that.' She laughs some. 'Oh, and just so you know, I clocked out the moment you walked in. Gone surfing if anyone asks.' She gets up, moving toward the surfboard leaning against the far wall. 'I don't expect you to get it completely organized or anything, it's too big a mess. But if you could get it into some kind of order, well-' Her nods, looking at me. 'You just might get a gold star.'

'I'd rather have a plaque,' I say, pretending to be serious. 'You know, something nice that I can hang on the wall. Or even a statuette. Or a trophy- a trophy would be good.'

'How about your own parking space outback? I can probably swing that.'

'Trust me, you already have.' I laugh.

'Yeah, but the one will have your name on it. Reserved for you only. No one will be allowed to park in it, not even off-hours. I'll post a big warning that reads: CAUTION! THE SPACE RESERVED FOR AVALYNN ONLY. ALL Other's WILL BE TOWED AWAY AT THEIR OWN EXPENSE.'

'You'd do that? For reals?' I laugh, eyes meeting her

She grabs her board, fingers gripping the edge as she heaves it under her arm. 'You get the place cleaned up and there's no limit to the rewards that await you. Today Employee of the Month, tomorrow-' Her shrugs, tossing her dreads off her forehead and exposing her amazingly cute face.

Our gazes lock, and I know she's caught me again- caught me looking- wondering- thinking she's cute. So, I quickly look away, scratching at my arm, fiddling with my sleeve, anything to move past the moment toward something less awkward.

'There's a monitor in the corner there.' She nods toward the far wall, back to business again. 'That, combined with the bell on the door, should alert you to anyone coming in when you're working back here.'

'That, the bell on the door, and the fact that I'm psychic,' I say, trying to sound lighthearted, though my voice is a little shaky, having not fully recovered from the awkwardness before.

'Like the way, you accessed your powers when I snuck up on you?' She asks, smiling in a nice open way, though her eyes are holding back.

'That was different.' I shrug. 'You obviously know how to shield your energy. Most people don't.'

'And you know how to shield your aura.' She squints, head cocked to the side, those golden dreadlocks falling halfway down her arm as she focuses in on my right. 'But I'm sure we'll get to that later.'

I swallow hard, pretending not to notice how her vibrant yellow aura goes a little pink at the edges.

'Anyway, it's all pretty self- explanatory. The files need to be alphabetized, and if you could separate 'em by subject, that'd be great. Oh, and don't bother tagging the crystals or herbs if you're not familiar with them, I'd hate to get 'em confused. Though if you are familiar-' Her smiles, brow raised in such a way I immediately start scratching my arm again.

I gaze at the gleaming piles of crystals, some of which I recognize from the elixirs I made and the amulet I wear at my neck, but most of which are so foreign they're not even vaguely familiar.

'Do you have a book or something?' I ask, hoping her do since I'd love to learn more about their amazing abilities. 'You know, so I can'- Find a way to sleep with my immortal boyfriend someday- so I can get them all tagged properly- and- stuff.' I nod, hoping to appear like a hard worker rather than the self- motivated slacker I am. Watching as she drops her surfboard and turns back toward her desk, shuffling through a pile of books and retrieving a small, thick, well- worn tome from the bottom of the stack.

Turning it over in her hands, and gazing at the back when she says, 'The has it all. If a crystal's not in it, it doesn't exist. It's also loaded with pictures, so you can identify them. Anyway, it s hould help,' she adds, tossing it to me.

I catch it between the palms of my hands, its pages vibrating with life as the contents surge through me. The entire book now imprinted on my brain as I smile and say, 'Believe me, it already has.'

I stare at the monitor, making sure Naddalin has left before taking the seat behind the desk and gazing at the pile of crystals. Knowing the book alone wasn't enough - they need to be handled to be understood. But just as I reach for a large red rock marked by streaks of ye llow, my knee knocks against the side of the desk, and my entire body grows itchy and warm - a sure sign that something needs my attention.

I push the chair back and lean forward, peering under the desk, noticing how the sensation grows stronger the lower I go. Following the feeling, until I've slid off my seat and dropped to the floor, fumbling around for the source, the tips of my fingers growing unbearably hot the second I touch the bottom left drawer.

I lean back on my heels, squinting at the old brass lock- the kind of deterrent meant to keep honest people honest and dissuade those who don't know how to manipulate energy like me - closing my eyes as I ease the drawer open, only to find a pile of hanging files that are no longer hanging, an ancient calculator, and a pile of old and yellowed receipts. Just about to close it again when I sense the false bottom beneath.

I scoop up the papers and toss them aside before lifting the hatch and exposing an old, worn, leather-bound tome, its pages curled and fraying like a lost ancient scroll, the words Book of Shadows inscribed on its front. I place it on the desk before me, then sit there and stare. Wondering why someone would go to so much trouble to keep the book hidden - and from whom?

Is Lina hiding it from Naddalin?

Or is it the other way around?

-And-

Since there's only one way to find out, I close my eyes and press my palm to its front, planning to read it in my usual way until I'm slammed by a surge of energy so intense, so frenetic, so chaotic- it practically snaps crackles my bones.

I'm hurled backward, my chair hitting the wall with such force it leaves a huge dent. The flickering remnants of random images still quivering before me and knowing full well why it was hidden - it's a book of witchcraft and spells. Divinations and incantations. Containing powers so potent it would be completely catastrophic in the wrong hands.

I steady my breath and stare at the cover, calming myself before I attempt to thumb through it. Fingers twitching, touching only the edges, as I peer at a cursive so small it's nearly impossible to decipher. The bulk of the pages inscribed with all manner of symbols, reminding me of the alchemical journals Naddalin's father used to keep- carefully written in code in order to protect the secrets within.

I flip to the middle, taking in a fine, detailed sketch of a group of people dancing under a full moon, followed by those of similar people engaged in complex rituals. Fingers hovering above the scratchy old paper and suddenly knowing deep in my bones that it is no mistake. I was meant to find the book.

Just like Naddalin hypnotized my classmates and put them all under her spell, all I should do is weave the right incantation to convince her to divulge the information I need!

I turn the page, eager to find the right one, just as the bell on the shop door rings and I peer at the monitor to confirm it. Unwilling to budge 'til I'm sure they're not going to turn right around and leave, that they're truly committed to staying. Watching as the small, slim, black- and- white figure makes her way through the room- nervously glancing over her shoulder as though expecting to find someone there. And just as I'm hoping she'll leave, she goes straight to the counter, places her hands on the glass, and waits patiently.

Great- I get up from the desk. Just what I need a customer. Calling, 'Can I help you?' before I've even had a chance to turn the corner and see that it's Jewell.

The second she sees me she gasps, jaw-dropping, eyes widening, appearing almost-frightened? The two of us gape at each other, wondering how to move past them.

'Um, do you need something?' I say, voice sounding more confident than I feel, as though I really am in charge around here. Taking in her long dark hair, the recent addition of copper streaks glinting under the lights, realizing I have never seen her alone until now. Never once been confronted by her, just the two of us, without Emmah or Mireille.

My mind wanders to the book in the back, the one I left on the desk, the one I need to return to at once, hoping whatever it is that she wants can be handled quickly and easily.

'Maybe I'm in the wrong place.' She pulls her shoulders in, twisting a silver ring around and around as she cheeks spot bright pink. 'I think I-' She swallows hard and glances back at the door, motioning awkwardly as she says, 'I think I made a mistake, so I'm- I'm just going to go-'

I watch as she turns, her aura glowing a tremulous gray as she heads for the door. And even though I do not want to do it, even though I have a potential life-changing, problem-solving book to return to, I say, 'It's not a mistake.' She stops, shoulders hunched, looking small and diminutive without the aid of her bully friend. 'Seriously,' I add. 'You meant to come here. And who knows? Maybe I can help.'

She takes a deep breath, pausing for so long I am about to speak again when she turns. 'There's the guy.' She picks at the hem of her shorts and gazes at me.

'Naddalin.' Sensing the answer without reading her thoughts or touching her skin, just knowing the moment my eyes meet her.

'Yeah, um, I guess. Anyway, I um-' She shakes her head and starts again. 'Well, I was just wondering if she was here. She gave me the.' She pulls a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and lays it flat against the glass, smoothing the creases as she peers up at me.

'She's not here,' I mumble, eyes grazing over the flyer advertising her Psychic Development Class level 1, thinking how she wasted no time. 'You want to leave a message? Or sign up?'

I then study her carefully, never-ever having seen her so shy and uncomfortable before- with the ring twisting, eye darting, knee twitching- and knowing it is because of me.

She shrugs, gazing down at the counter as though fascinated by the jewelry inside. 'No, um, don't say anything. I'll just come back some other time.' She takes a deep breath and pulls her shoulders back, trying to summon some of the usual revulsion reserved just for me, but failing miserably.

-And-

Even though part of me wants to soothe her, calm her, convince her there is really no reason to act like the- I do not. I just watch as she leaves, making sure the door closes behind her before heading back to the book.

I do not think you ever really fall out of love with someone. I think when you fall in love, like true love, it is love for life. All the rest is just experience and delusions.

Partition: 3

(Back to Black, and the paper)

And Scary- looking' fang, indeed? said Stan, who had been watching Naddalin read.

Then she- murdered thirteen people ha? said Naddalin, hand sing she- page back to Stan, And with one curse?

-And-

Yep, said Stan, in front of witnesses and all.

It was in broad daylight even.

Big trouble it caused said Ern darkly, didn't it, Ern? She said not long after, to Stan who was looking over at her adjacently siting within also in the same booth, Stan swiveled in his armchair, his hands on the- back- better to look at Naddalin.

- And-

Besides Black encourages a big supporter of- You- Know- O-oo, she- said.

Then said Naddalin, without thinking. And what about, Ava? Even Stan's pupils went white- as if dark energy when in him; and was being controlled by another person.

Then the train jerked back so hard that a whole farmhouse had to jump aside what looked like to the one side to avoid being streamed over with the darkness- still on top of it with the lamp beam in front shining upon it, and then looking again the farmhouse was Nevaeh's old home, as we make our way to yet another porthole to the other side. And as Emmah said, it feels a whole lot safer when inside a vehicle.

And you outta be glad you're in here and not thinking you are being run over by it, he said- I knew a girl? She was nuts!!!...yelped Stan...

Sorry, said Naddalin hastily, but I know her too and it's not all how you make her out to be, she was in an accident, and traumatized by it, not mental. And Sorry, I - I forgot - that you know everyone... and everything.

...And forgot- that you were just another dumb boy! Besides, she said weakly.

And Joannah, my' heart's going' that fast... overall of this... one being over you too, two being over the rail line being all crazy, and three being over all the news of Black.

-And-

So-o, - so Black was a supporter of the mother and her girls?

And Naddalin prompted apologetically, said I don't think So-o.

And yeah, and said Stan, still rubbing her chest, he is and was, and still is I feel, sorry to disagree with you.

And Yeah, that's right, now that you feel that way?

He is very close to them even related- by blood.

Partition: 4

They say... anyway, when little Naddalin- got her- better of You- Know-'O-oo- the mother of the four girls. And ava's object of desire - forever, NEVER- EVER letting going of her longing for lust- and love, even if... even if she has no looks at the former girl she once was. This is why she called her the tower to see her the tarot card... the show's a strong force to be reckoned with, the mother then?

'Yes!'

Then - Naddalin nervously flattened her bangs down again - 'And All- You- Know-' Oo's supporters were tracked down, wasn't they, Stan?

Most of' em knew it was all over, when- You- Know-'O-o-o went absent for both worlds, and they came silently for years. Like us, we knew she was planning and was up to no good.

But not Trirus Black.

I heard her- thought I'd be second- in- command once You- Know-'O-o' taken over your mind body and soul. But no- it went down her side of the family more than his- Chiaz Naztherth, somehow Emmah would have been a little niece, why she was also tinted by the evil hands of the hex of the girl's family and mother, some say that Emmah was Chiaz unborn child, child that he never had, that only lived for 48 hours, within Nevaeh, and passed, over running out of air, she was baby number two, also a hex within the family ever baby that is number two passes. Yet this was never really talked about, Jaylynn's death was more hart barking.

-And-

Anyway, they cornered Black in the- middle of a street full of humans and Black took out his revenge on the would kill all that was in his path and blasted 'em right in the- street all apart brain splatted the roadway, and a wizard got it to see it all, that wizard was- Naddalin dad, who understood the why... of it all, know it was the hex, nothing more nothing less, it took over his mind, she um- his little girl in pain always.

-A reporter for the press said about her story after her death- in not so many words. 'Someone like Nevaeh- if they believe in the supernatural, that she was losing her wit and mind. it was said to me that she says- G*h*OsT'S- OOO- HA!' AND HIS HANDS SHOOK MUCKING HER.

Hum so maybe that unborn child was a hunt for years- that she was is in the glass that leads to the other side, the mother was seeing her baby, maybe that it- she was never crazy- said Naddalin swiftly.

They typewriter print out would give the clues to that also, matching her story.

'Horrible, eh? And you know what Black did then? And Stan continued in a dramatic whisper.

And what, are you trying to say? Said Naddalin.

Then laughed, Stan, and just stood there and laughed. It's a good thing I like you for you said Naddalin or I would walk away now and not look back. 'Hell- you have your head so far up your ass, you need to fart to breath!'

And when reinforcements from the- Bureau of Magic got there're everything went quiet as everything, went still all quite in its place of, closes to mad he is or surpasses, indeed, Ern? Indeed, mad he is they say, and I say too.

-And-

Besides If she- weren't when the- went to Dizeryland, she- will be now, said Ern in she slow voice, so you could not remember this, as you could you? So, you must be her... aren't you?

'I must- then- if you say so...'

'I say so- 0o...'

...Confess!!!

Besides like- I'd blow myself up before I set foot in that place, said Emmah, and undoubtedly, they all agreed. Serves him right, to have been locked up for whipping innocent people down mind you... after what he- did... was so heinous that I can wrap my mind around it.

'Heinous-' Think of treason, torture, the bashing of babies such as children shot at point black rage in the freaking head- he did not care most over them where under the age of 14. She yells' hurling her hands about!

-And-

They had a job covering it up, of the fact he was one of them, didn't they?

Then and there- said Stan.

And 'whole street blown up and all them nonmagical peoples dead, Dariez said in her small-town talkative way that only she could- with babbling in- between. Ern- What was it they said joining in? 'No!'

They said thinking she had no place in the conversation, now's he's out to do it again- and we could be his next manslaughter, said Stan, investigative-ly retelling the- newspaper... moving text and picture.

An explosion, groaned Evelyn with her truly light blonde hair and blue eyes say- we overheard her saying- in a soft sweet voice- 'I am glad that love, is like- now a thing- ie again like along with like- feeling and is no longer band to the world we live, it was said there was a time that love was forbidden.

...Of course!

Thought Naddalin, not saying anything just overhearing, think poor girl is here over not feeling or having love, and wanted to go back and life live as if she could have. Black's gaunt face again is making want to spit out my coffee'.

There has never- ever been a breakout from the prison before... God, they are even placed on a rock Island with sheer drop-offs on all sides.

'How did he get a boat...?'

They knew about it and let him out? Ern questioned.

Beats me how we did it, said Dariez all frightened, eh.

Mind you, I can't understand to think that he would have some within the wall of the jail a guard even remotely bribed, to make this kind of escape. Eh, said Ern?

- And-

Evelyn suddenly shivered, saying with if he here, or even within one of us?

And talk about meeting different face what if that face is him, yet looks like Stan, there is a good lad; that you just met.

Them guards give me the- collywobbles.

- And-

Stan put the- paper away reluctantly, And Naddalin leaned against the- the window of the- Knight train, and sighed, feeling worse than ever in her given lives. She- couldn't help imagining what Stan might be telling the passengers in a few nights' time, about her even, she was still the same old girl after all so paranoid and trusting no one.

And hear about this and that and no- truths-? And- maybe- about me being someone I am not, and then some I might be.

Killed up his own aunt, family grandmother and six little ones! Along with all those others... my- God!

We admire all the gossip on the- Knight train, didn't we that go down into the otherworld- the underworld of all things lovely in its dark whimsical, ghoulish, and magical, do we not Ern? Whom- was sitting in the next booth over at this point chipping in now and then on the ride.'

He was trying' to run for it... and found the tracks of the magic railways, and made it, by getting so far and become one of us- I just know it- I just know, said Naddalin.

- Then-

Formerly, Naddalin had broken wizard law just like Trirus Black, saying that she was for helping a girl on the outside of the world, yet it was all for the right reasons. Over the Aunt uncle bad enough she was charged with 1,500 dollars in having a lawyer, and a mug- shot- and fingerprints? Nothing really came out of help Dariez though in her mind.

Her hand so tiny they thought she was underage... said the judge, he even said you're like a child.

Naddalin didn't know anything about the- prisoner- yet, looking back in her mind and thoughts remembering her own life as the girl in the story and her times sitting in a jail cell over them, on rations, though everyone she'd ever heard speaks too did not want to remember or was withheld from remembering So-o in the- same fearful tone, of pretending not too, even if they looked deep into their thoughts to remember all this; the memory was altered.

She replayed to that saying and to think, that everyone then that thought they knew you thought you that you did nothing but lay around with your fingers in your puss, said Dariez.

Well your damned one way or the other in that hometown - you do one thing and is said to be another is another you say one thing and they think your another- if you do or don't it now and with or as they want to see and read it to be in their low comprehension and mental existence - or lacking one...

...A life and brain, said the girls unanimously filling the end of the sentence!

Confess!!! Said the girl in her face noses almost touching.

Remember this- 'It's just all right to have some defecated in your mouth and you have to swallow it, yet don't you dare say anything back, they will not take your shit.' Said Naddalin.

I am not- entitled to a mistake, no one ever at any age for 3 and up, I cannot have one! Best to remember that also... when questioning the why- of it all. I cannot take the blame for my past when my soul was soled agents my well and I had no say- in the matter- of whatever fact they said for the day or week to week contracts.

And so-o in saying all that, I cannot say that I am or not.

~*~

'At the school for girl's gamekeeper, had spent two months there only last year, showing girls what could happen if they're bad- or bad- er' then bad.' Said Dariez using poor English as only she could...

Naddalin would not soon forget the- look of terror on Emmah and some of the other girl's faces when she- had been told where she- was going, and Emmah was one of the- bravest people Naddalin knew. She was going there... if she did not change her ways... and spending the night might just make her love life that she was given, and not complain, about seeing the thing go her way- even if that's playing God or destiny. Even if you have power now over that too by being her you don't always- have all the cards to play. Even if there is a thing as hell's purgatory, you need to see the light- to either go up or down. Or be happy here with all of us that love you!

The- Knight train rolled through the- darkness, scattering bushed and trashcans, junked cars, windmills, telephone booths and trees alike, on its old winding path hidden in all the tall grasses, you could not even see the track or rail ties, as she was laying on her bed looking out that arched windows of the Pullman car, there Naddalin lay, restless and miserable, on single bed with her sheets jumbled around her.

Partition: 5

I look at my (Retro Style) Flip Desk Shelf Clock and think about home, and think that time doesn't mean a thing here...

Stan is over there singing- 'you put your penis in, and you put your penis out, you put your penis back in, and then have her shake it all about; you do the sex together and turn her back around, and that's what it is all about!'

The girls in the train car are rolling their eyes and giggling and shaking their heads.

Though- I'm sure to love this boy to death, ha- remember death and remembering boys like that and your dumb love that is so cute it hurts to look at when you are not, I see the looks on the other girl's faces, I remember that too.

So, in other words back on earth if I was to back when I was a pre-teen and teenage girl if I would frap more, and I would have thought about death less- hum?

After a while, Stan remembered, that Naddalin had paid for hot chocolate, but poured it all over Naddalin's pillow when the- train moved brusquely from Lackawanna ruing the path of the Susquehanna hitting all the ghost towns, on a rail line that just should not be there; like a ghost town trail, a haunt of the past, and like a- whistle echoing in a squall of wind.

Making quick stops along the way, one by one, wizards, fallen angels, and witches in dressing gowns and slippers go downhill to meet this stopped steam train on its way- down to the other world- of all things magic, leaving the stations. they all looked very pleased to go, down under- some for the first time- after their death. Finally, Naddalin was and they were not the- the only passenger on.

And right then and there, Neville, and said Stan, clapping their hands- saying, new souls, and whereabouts in Pennsylvania- are you from as they announced their name over the intercoms?

-And-

And- Hellhole Alley, said Naddalin, going up to her old stomping grounds.

'How would you know?' Emmah said suspiciously.

And the right to said Stan- looking at Haven and hold on tightly- is what she said.

- Then-

BOOM!!!

The- moment it opened, then set off short pinching screams within all the cars - where are we, they- didn't know, only- I. The- would lie low for what felt like a couple of hours, they were thundering along Cross Road- light flashing in a blur. Naddalin sat up and observed buildings and benches enfolding themselves out of the Knight train's way. The - sky was getting a little lighter.

The train slammed on the- brakes and the- Knight train skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub called the Susquehanna- house, next to The- Freeman hotel, and the A- J's feed mill, behind which lay the- magical entrance to my railway- almost next the village of Chery- Tree- home of The Cozy Corner Café.

Thanks, Naddalin said to Ern.

(Thought the porthole sparks flew- and everything went dark and another world- glowing in shades of green shadowy dark trees that are black in color seem to be lunging at us as the flickers of the lanterns on the outside of the coach's lit them slightly.)

They- jumped down the- steps, and the- leaped- Stan lower the trunk down with baby Raven's cage onto the- tarmac or gravel. And Well, said Naddalin. And Bye then- along with Dariez yet, again!

-And-

Nonetheless, Stan was not paying attention, or maybe- that is just part of the act with him too- yet, I do think he is okay- I really do. Still standing in her- the doorway to the- train she- was goggling at the- shadowy entrance to the- dripping stone arched passageway up to the castle.

Before Naddalin could turn, the- bend there was a hand on her shoulder. Besides there you are, Naddalin, said a voice, it was Maiara Chenoa. It was a sweet reunion, with hugs and kiss too...!

At the- same time, Stan shouted, Joannah!

Ern, come here...!

Come here...!

They were reacquainted in what seemed like- forever to them.

- And-

Naddalin looked up at- in her hand was her old notebook, and she saw her old handwriting, within a random page, a note that did not make into her published book- that she never saw- until after her days of days, it said.

"Even in someone else's body, with my mind, I may like to perceive things differently as if I was them; then in my own mind, with thoughts shard."

It was rolled out over the facet it made her sound crazy! She ponders the why and said even my words are still being twisted, over some putting the thoughts to mine, about my thoughts.

The- owner of the- hands-on her shoulder and felt a warm cascade into her body- she- had walked right into her old friend that she had does not see for years, after she moved away.

Stan then leaped onto the- gravel beside them.

And What did- jah call Neville, Martita?

No this her- this girl standing her is- Maiara.

'Oh!' He said. 'Sorry for mispronouncing your name-'

She said it happens more than you would think.

WELL Then- it was said- eagerly.

a small little girl in a long, pinstriped Housecoat and PJ's, looked cold and exhausted- yet aglow within her body and a new spark in her eyes seeing an old friend.

Also, Neville- questioned the friendship of the two of them.

Then she- repeated, frowning, saying- 'I KNEW IT- I KNEW IT ALL ALONG, Naddalin- IS _____.'

(GASP!)

-And-

Besides I knew it- ALL ALONG!

Besides Stan shouted elatedly.

'Ern! Ern!' Guess- WHO SHE IS-?

I can see the mark!

-And-

I can see the blemish too!

Partition: 6

'Yes,' she said crossly, saying think it doesn't say it my life is on the line and well end up at the mercy of her, I'm very glad the- knight train picked Naddalin up- Maiara said, but she- and I need to head inside and have a private girl chat, just she and I to remember all things of days gone by.

She amplified her the- pressure on Naddalin's shoulder saying come one we have a lot to do just you and me, and Naddalin found herself being steered inside yet, overjoy- d at the same time.

A slouching figure bearing a lantern appeared through the- door behind them- now sting at the public- house- for refreshments. A hermit, toothless, saying beware of HER- she is back, and running- her mind within the body of a killer- and that killer I just become- YOU!

And you've got her, Martita- UNDER YOUR THUMB! The creature said- SAID, with no face- in a creepy- creepy whisper.

She said yes, I know who she is, and like old times nothing has changed with her, I will kill her- you can put that in your report back... And Will you be wanting anything more if not-

NOW GET THE HELL OUT OF MY FACE! She could odor of must coming from his breath, and the chill of death within the voice.

'YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED-' it said as if faded away within the gust of chill wind. Now back to you and me, it's good to see you, it's been So-o long! Would you girls like something a waitress asked, 'Um- perhaps a pot of tea, for she and me,' she still hadn't let go of Naddalin- using riddle's- over that fact her worlds got in the way, back in the day.

'You have not changed at all on the inside, have you?'

'Sh- h.' She put her finger up to her lip.

See your forgetting, that I can foresee the future, and tell the past and change the present- fortune-telling. I am here to tell you that you're in grave danger, and I am here for you always, like before... you may have passed down the globe, yet it has not moved on the hex is with you, party her in

a sense yet your still the one they want to rip apart- not her- even if, she has the prophecy and has become the old you, they have found you out, and she after your very soul!

(Back to the group)

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind them, as they got off the train and Stan and ern appeared- slowly out of it as it was encircling them, carrying Naddalin's trunk and Baby Raven's cage- after all, it was the manly thing to do, and looking around excitedly, and it was turning Dariez on, she was wanting to be all clingy.

And how come you didn't think she would tell us who she was, eh, Neville - what do you think?

I think thereafter her or just she!

'Who's she?'

'The mother...!' said Stan, beaming at Naddalin who was holding has with her girlfriend of the past, while Evelyn's a school girl's flying horse peered interestedly over Stan's shoulder, snorting and nah- ing.

Besides a private parlor, please, for us girls- Naddalin said pointedly. It would be nice to have one of the larger rooms tonight to tête- à- tête about boys- girls, all things that contain to love- and a pillow fight.

And 'Bye- boys' the girls said as some of them skipped on the backs of their hills to their new room for the night, waving too.

'We have all had the pleasure of meeting her... Unfortunately!'

'She has all given us SHIT!' IT WAS SAID- AROUND THE ROME IN SO MANY WAYS- REFERRING TO THE FACT.

I met her! And they went to the group talking about the girl that should not be named, and her mother. You could see this world's sun drop, and the flying creatures' bed down for the night, like the flying horses, and birds only know this magical world too.

Besides, I must have been the- last to know that she- killed all the people! Said Maiara. You- being one of the Lily... so it as true, it was she did it, and you were just at the wrong place at the wrong time...

Naddalin- I can say- and yes, I would say that- would be what is implied.

(In the girl's washroom)

And then showing a haunt, a ghost of Nevaeh appeared- It was me what rescued you, Lily, over- Alyssa's and AVA- and those sisters, and all the girls did what they did you, and I spent so much time at your house after you were killed!

Little did they know that this was the sole of the body of the girl they knew too well, and her mind was in a body of Naddalin next to them. And her heart had stopped beating a long time ago, yet it never grows cold to her girlfriends in the room.

They Just got to her before I, and her father's death... not long after, and my life- was going on- and on forever, and I still feel as if I could have done more, she was nothing but- remains, poor little thing, I never forgot, with a great slash across Lily's temple, she was remember- all the times they played to gather in a flashback of their youth, it was moving like a film strip- in sepia, ripping way, you could see the blush- of small N a marking they made on her saying- someday this well marking on you will bring us to a girl- that you once knew, that we will kill- in front of you, and them too, and you'll bring us to her- Lilly, she washed for bed- and said- I should let you know your name starts with an N, and So-o did yours- she takes her by both hands saying- Neveah- be careful.

(Odd like the letter missing on my old typewriter- oop- ie's, and she covered her mouth- at that moment she flew into her arms.)

Lily- Never occurred to me what she- was doing there, yet I prayed for her death dearly. And I want to say thank you, and I am sorry for you having live with my sins- even if I did not have any, as a teen girl, under the thumbs of the girls that were every part of me over being begrudging of me being more them, I was not and could never- ever, but to them, I must have been a threat?

I knew Lily was my Secret- Keeper, for years, I always trusted her, yet- yet I was wondering if this was a pot or if she was really her- never did I think in my life did I think that someone could take

over your mind and thoughts- yet it seems like my mind can be raped at any moment be them, I knew she wanted to me, and to understand my new being- yet I was reluctant.

Yet, I knew that she knew- and would understand; she always did... thought she'd just heard the- news- about all the attack and come to see what she- could do for me, or to see if I was- taken over by them again.

Even if, it looked like- I may have killed you just remember- there the one that had control of my- mind, body, and soul. They may have my soul and damn it to hell now, and they had their fun with my body, yet no one will take my mind from me, even I have to split in in other bodies.

White and shaking she was, and yen's know what I did? I COMFORTED her- MURDERING- they all think they lost their minds, yet it was her getting her revenge within their minds, going back was worth it to see them dye- said sweet little Lily, with her hair ribs hand on either side of her sweet little childlike face.

You know what... good for you- because, I would have killed them too! 'I am salivating just think about it!'

And Lily roared saying- 'I am not a little wimpy pussy of a girl anymore for them to diddle- now it's my time to diddle them.'

I never knew you to talk like that... I said. My mouth dropped... such language out of her mouth- remember her as So-o sweet and oh so innocent and a church mouse.

'Please!' She said- 'innocent?'

That's not a bad thing to be remembered for Lily- like at Karly- which is better? They were going through her chapters and photos of her former life, later that night, saying well this could be your legacy.

She said at least I would have had one...

Then said Professor McDermott was walking past the girl's room- arched wood door, that is medieval- also in the look, the room softly touched lit. she said- 'girls- keep your voice's down!'

- And-

And How was I to know she- wasn't upset about Lily and Adriane's, after all, there still girl-girl and girlfriends, fear is why they're not- you would understand. I have to kiss her always and do as she takes- still, yet I learn to love her. Adriane has changed... she is sweet now- to all, and the cutest dark angel, you ever did see- and she winked at me. Her look and attitude have completely changed, you would not even know her- she's so sympathetic, nice, and gentle; she has also disowned her family- for me, and that was the deal, or I would not have agreed.

'I can forgive... even in the dark world, and I get to say, that I have done that for her.'

'I cannot-' Naddalin said back.

Alyssa with you?

Not yet- she is happy to be with my ghost- she has not found me yet- you know who is trying!

Naddalin- the funniest thing- is that I see here every day in class too and she has known idea who I am... And I am trusting you to keep it that way- you understand.

Lily- It was You- Know- Who she- cared about, getting at you, not all the girls- they just followed what she said to do!

Naddalin- The mother and that- girl... well never change- what do they want from us? They want you to bow to them, and worship their every word and want and desire.

(The tower card that will never fall...) said Naddalin.

Partition: 7

...And then Lily- says, 'Give Naddalin to me, she is saying it with inflamed eyes all controlled- by another's dark mind, I'm your garden of you, after all, it was all creepy and her head tilted to the one side, I'll look after her- she said back in a possessed whisper overpowering the possessed with her power of worlds-' Ha, it said- you're too incompetent!

Nonetheless, I'd had my orders from Duriez's mom and dad, about her wanting her own life. That said me, and my type was no longer welcome, with their family, to help in her life in any way I was at blame for them losing their little girl- they said, yet she must of not taking to the hex, that I want to pass down- that I try to selfishly give to her solely, it's all back with me- why? I questioned, I could feel it,

that now meaning that they could track me down- like radar, and maybe she ratted me out too... or did Lily? Or has my luck run out? And even Duriez was acting odd- as if she was- NOT- herself.

I knew they got to her and took over her body and mind- and her soul was banished over me anyway, so in the way, it was all my fault.

I know who- I have my money on- do you? And I told know no one about me, yet they both know- it seems they are all getting to know the real me- and that scars met the most, Duerre said I was to go to her aunt and uncle's, to get her and my things, she was leaving forever- and not to come back.

That is when Back ran into our room- when I was thrown up into the air ready to be ripped to pieces, that is when he lipped protecting me- coming out of hiding, as one of the professors and pulling all the entities out of my body and take them in himself, into his body.

Black argued- with me saying 'I'm one of the good ones- I am here for you, they did the same to me, before you- there was my girl- they were after, she was a lot like you.'

Her name was- Naddalin, and you become her! I, after all, am your biological father, and even if you became her, I will protect you from them! Now and always...!

She is always with me you know that... I'm saying to him- with a true running down my face.

Black- but in the- end the- same way you did do ever gave in. I even changed my name and look yet they still got me to kill for them- and be their simple fool- and pulled the strings if you well!

'They made me give you to them that night up or I would be punished- and oh was I, when you were just in your playpen- all those years back- Naddalin, I am living- too like you be only existing. I even had to sleep with the mother- or I would have been killed, chopped up into little bits- and marched nude about the streets- stoned and locked in a dungeon chained to a wall with no lights and no sounds other than the bats dropping shit on me and the cold ground around me, it was open to the elements- rain, sleet, hell, and high water too- winters to distorting hot summer days- also stripped of my pried- they tried to break me at the prison!'

So, I backed off- and let them do this to you- and for that, I am remorseful for- yet there was nothing I could do.

I won't need to live on anymore,' he- says if mean's that you do. I may not be your dad, yet I feel as if I am, I know who you are!

NEVAEH!

I know...

Partition: 8

I should have known-

There was something devious going on then. She- loved her dad more than anything, what was she- given- was a chance to live on and she did not take it so I took her body, she did it for me to live undercover? Her dad never really- knew until now- that I was all to blame and felt if I was, and I feel shame yet once more for being alive and causing pain to others, yet as I said- they will not let me die- even if I have tried over and over to do So-o. They want me to feel pain, aching, and discomfort- always- in everything, that was the plain alalonga remember?

Why wouldn't' she- need him it anymore, after all, that all I ever wanted was my dad back- and you know who was at the bottom of us all losing out on love and loved ones alike?

What the freak her is a problem? I thought... The fact was, I was too easy to trace.

Duriez knew she'd been the Secret- Keeper, with her crystal, and about me- I wonder if she squealed and give them the ball of my life and lives after. And just like that, a small voice in my had said, 'NO!' this is not my fault- blame the one you always trusted! She has gone bad for them, she was charmed- into this you know.

I's did not know what to think- still in shock of all the overwhelming information coming into my mind- everything like always- seeming as if, all at one time.

'I would bust the crystal ball yet all the stories of the past and your old life would vanish in the shards of glass.' She said holding the ball in her little and with it aglow- seeing the old me, that could be life go to shards of the floor at any moment, yet I was looking through her eyes- also with tears saying maybe it's time to let the life of the past go- I was inside of her my eyes were now her eyes looking in and reflected both me and her in the stare of the glass- I could see the colors of visions- looking in- and then it hit the floor, and part of me died over them yet again.

I never give much to see a life come to end, not my own through new- younger eyes other them my own- reflecting back at me- yet at that moment, I felt my life come to an end closing chapter, I was lost between souls and bodies, of other girls- that saved me from ending- to them, when it was my choice all along... right? Now the only thing documented about me is in the text, and to me is what is retold about me in its light, it's not the same as seeing everything for it really was within the glass ball- for day one and up like a movie flashback. All my memories- I putt in there for safekeeping- out of my own head so they could not corrupt them over being mean- shattered to the wind in one night never to get back- ever.

Yet that is what they wanted- maybe- just maybe, now they will leave me alone...! I thought this uncertain, shyly, and indefinitely.

'Oh well, what is the use of thinking at all at this point, just for my thoughts to be shattered- too- by them, the real me was gone.

Black knew this was a blow to me- and he said- 'I would not plan on it...'

'...It really came along and knocked my wind out- God's honest- truth!'

~*~

Subconsciously, it takes at least 6- 8 months for the brain to process complete forgiveness for someone who hurt you emotionally. Yet that has been my life... so you would think by now I would be used to it.

He- was going to have to run for it that night- and he did and lied to me, he knew it was a matter of hours before the- Bureau was going to be after him not her- she always gets away with everything- she always did and always well.

But what if I'd given- you Naddalin up to her then... eh?

Do you think you should have?

No, and she avoided the dialog, 'everyone thought that you were lost and drowned sea- we until they found out otherwise.'

'The best friend's girl- girlfriend was you if you were under the spell! That is why I was okay with this along.' Nonetheless, when one of us goes over to the- Dark Side, there is nothing and no one that matters to them anymore...

- And-

A long silence followed the story of how he escaped- not only the jail by having them in his mind.

About the time asked about the latter, Madam Rosette walked in asking if I was okay, she said with some satisfaction, seeing Black- that she knew for years, I see you have made it back to us, and she- said I see that you didn't manage to disappear- completely, did you- even if you should have and know how too-?

The- Bureau of Magic caught up with you- and they have you to have they not- NADDALIN? She said in a demeaning way.

'You can face your problems if you're not facing them,' she said rapidly.

'Why would I want to I have don't that all my life's and yes, I said lives'.'

- And-

That is when she said you need to come with me Black- I know that you are not the blame- not the bad guy yet that is not how they feel... and even I, have to say that you're the one they saw doing the act of crimes.

(Some time has passed)

Black is locked in the castle dungeon- he could overhear them talking, and sadly, if only we had, and said Harlan bitterly, the evidence saying you're not to blame for it all.

And It was not we who found her- it was him that led us to you- missie and you think you're so smart and cute- they said this as they were marching to the washroom, to have their way with her- like in the past before- making her their sexual bitch before asking her to kill for them- so they could live on in new bodies. Or to just kill me and end it all here.

It was little Kellie- another of her' friends that walked in and saw it all go down. Annoyed by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been Neveah Secret- Keeper all these years, Mazel Amsel went after Black herself, along with her girls, torture him in mid-evil ways- right down to castrating the man, until he gave in to saying, like- were Naddalin was and all. It was either do it or die a final death, of hell in their wrath.

- And-

Kellie... that little girl who was always tagging around after I was one of their brainwashed spies at the school? Said Madam Rosette- one of the eldest woman- to teach if not the older at 1,606 years old, to me later that evening, at the lunch table.

'She has seen this before, yet never quite like this, she said they she was always, like that even when she was a little girl want everyone's attention, or you have to pay for not giving it to her, she was always a sneaky odd child, she said, even then... very dark in her ways- and eyes that would like and pass through you in a jolting wave- of then run a terror, I would know she made me feel, that way even in my own classroom, pass me or I will kill you, and pass your soul to waste- I never figure out how she becomes so powerful maybe you can?' She said in a whisper- of fear.

'She- worshipped Black, yet he would never give her the time of day, he would not give himself up to her in a way, and that drove her farther into madness, some say- I too. Odd that your only choices here in bodies were her own daughter, that you have become, and also this was chosen for you out of resentment in fate- twisted by them, I am sure to say to you. Ava was the mother of you do you see?'

That is why she is inside you and you can hear, and she knows your thoughts, just like her with black you were the élite of her soulmate and you refused, so she will take. Yet some say you belong to the mother, that also is a mystery shrouded within secrecies- covered up.

Then and there said Professor McDermott, that all I know about this yet you may want this it is her child hold a crystal ball, like yours she to your life memories now you take hers, still them and then smash this if you can?

'If I can?'

'Yes...'

Good luck I have been trying for years now, the shard shatter and then moments later come back together, looking her power, within it of how she got where she is, you destroy this you have broken into a part of her soul that she will never get back and that good maker her weaker- and you more powerful.

'How do I destroy it?' She squalled having her old high-pitched childlike voices come through her.

'This for you to search your soul and hers- and others that were finds and foes to like to find out- the key lies within you.' She said vaguely.

'She was never quite about her union, talent-wise, she wanted you me us- them to all to know- her claim to fame, and cheating her way to- using whatever or whomever it took to get there. It's all in the ball, a lot of NASTY- NASTY SEX! Things I have never heard off... yet that how a woman gains power- NO? IT ALL LAY WITHIN HER- private parts. I SHOULD know to be a Catholic school girl and having a priest, use me, for years has his- lover, yet I became a Nun, I even had a baby girl to the man that was 7 mounts in- she was cut out of me- he committed manslaughter- burn her in the firebox to heat the larger school- that was only for girls like me- and the ashes scattered and then buried within the old school grounds in the basement- I was not alone in this there lots of girls baby's down there in the lowest level of that private rich school in Cresson, Pennsylvania, known for their mercy...'

'...Yet the habit covered that too, like the churches compassion- towards us girls having been prayed on by the holy- and made to fear. That is why I am here... that is why, and I not saying- that I am wrong that is why- I,606 years passed- I not caving, I am right- and I have my rights- as a woman.'

'I was often hasty sharp with her, in my class for she was lazy. You can imagine how I am- now- I was more strict then- how I regret that now... maybe I should have just let her have her way, and none of this would have happened? Maybe the blame for this all is on me?'

-And-

She- sounded as though she'd- had a sudden head cold, and lost all strength within her old decrepit body- that was dropping with age- gray hair all stingy- yes faded without much color, yet that was my punishment to age, and not stop, till I admitted- I was wrong- for being used as a rubbish can- in every way a girl could be used as one. And there, now, Minerva, she was hysterical crying about the

events she just witnessed and said Harlan kindly to take her to the hall for ice cream- as the good little girls do, and Madam Rosette died in her shoe's- her last death, she was the key to the next step.

Eyewitnesses - of course, yet not to their worlds of cover everything up or else, we rubbed their memories out later- we were told this, so there would be no panic. Everything that we saw with- Black, and them know who I am- it bad enough have them against me I don't need this whole world too- by them making an army- with her being the all- mighty power over all- yet I feel that will happen at some point- don't you?

They say, Minerva- was sobbing,' Lily and Alyssa, over know more about Trirus - than any of the others! That she was seeing him on and off, after the escape, romantically. How could you? They said to her, she was so week she could not speak for the tears.' And then she - went for the crystal ball- for them- not us, yet it was a lost journey on her part.

Well, of course, Black was quicker, he had all of them deceived in think it was someone other than himself, he tried places with her, yet the somehow did not see that just happen.

Blowing Alissa's memories of her and Chiaz smithereens be she dropped the ball... her past life... No-? Yes! ...Gone in a blink of an eye, that is what Minerva did for me by bringing this ball, the wrong one, yet the right one for me- little did she know I ready know the plan. IT WAS PAYBACK!!! And this all reviled the spell she had him under, it's not going to get him back to me - yet I feel justice has been made. She can burn in hell now- where she should be- that one less I have to fight!

Then- Professor McDermott blew her nose, in her slave and said thickly, and said 'Stupid girl... foolish girl... you are- always hopeless at clashing... a fantasy of freedom and choice - that you'll never have. I should have left it to the - Bureau, over this all I am sick of cover your ass!'

'You're blaming me?' She said with an airy breath within a gasp.

And I tell yen's, if I'd got to Black before little Emmah did, I wouldn't've messed around with wands or crystal ball with children she said, after all, you cannot trust them, if your you and all - no you're going to be ripped her limb- from- limb, over having these children to your personal business, and that all this is personal, and that how you're taking it, and you are putting our children at risk, I will tell you this now as she was slamming her middle finger hard into her chest, '...you have any of our children in any danger- I will kill you myself, by ripped you limb- from- limb, you understand!' and she was screaming two inches from her face at this point.

In the background looking out the castle's large ornate arched windows, you could see children at play innocently- who are fallen angel is flying in the dusking sky.

Professor McDermott- 'Playing tag, or hid and seek and juvenile games like that... as children do, after all even here they are still children. There here over the fact they wanted freedom, and out of a life that was overbearing, you- yes, you there- girl, don't take that away from them over personal- Baby-field- BABY SHIT!'

'When is this war going to be over with you?' She asked. And you do not know what you're talking about, Emmah, Dariez- and you too with the eyes and the face... she said sharply- your just kids; they were backtalking, her word and authority.

-And-

Nobody but trained Success Sorcerers from the- Magical Law Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against Black once he- was waylaid, so what makes you think you would, or that they could stop her- even if... Mazel Amsel and her family of girls, are more powerful then all of us combined, she can and will not be stopped ever- and you're the blame- YOU. What you did was shity- and self-centered.

Naddalin- 'YET IT'S A-OKAY FOR THEM TO WHATEVER THEY WANT TO ME WITH NO CONCUBINES, AND THAT'S FINE, I DARE NOT SAID UP FOR MY RIGHTS- NO- FUCK NO, THAT WOULD BE WRONG! And her fist is clenching her caller, you'll kill me... ha- ha?

'I was junior in the- Division of Magical Upheavals at the- time, and I was one of the- first on the- scene after Black murdered all those people, I was there I know that he is the one that did this, I saw it with my own eyes.'

'You don't know half of what you think you do!' Said Naddalin.

Professor McDermott- 'Oh there she goes again playing the victim.' She said when she was finally, let go of, and she had enough strength after her knees shaking- out of tear to speak. I, I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes.'

'Your dream is nothing like my nightmares! I can assure you of that.' Said Naddalin, as Nevaeh, her real personality was coming through her more than ever before, within her transformation. He blasted a hollow in the- middle of the- street, so deep it had cracked the- sewer below.

'Yes, that maybe So-o yet was it all him- or all in his mind.'

'I knew it you are crazy!'

'Yes- we know' said one of the girls landing on her feet her back feathered wings retracting back into her back drawing quickly and almost unnaturally- 'Bodies everywhere- blow to pieces nothing left but nude kids body parts laying on one another- down in the hole, when they picked thought all the remands- there was nothing to bury- that was identifiable other than the sex, so they just covered everything over and said we don't care and made the road on top of the mass grave, there is not even a headstone, marking the day in history.'

All the nonmagic people were screaming. 'WE KNOW'- they screamed- and by the way, we are more intelligent than just unintellectual kids.

And Black standing there laughing nude- completely mad- foaming at the mouth even, as the day he was born- shackled in his holding cell, with what was left of the shards of the ball within his feet that are bleeding blood that is only of this world... leaking blood, covering bloodstained rots of neighboring lingering, haunting, and melancholy tree on the outside working their way in, of the ground underneath- start grabbing around his body weaving vines, and veins- like charming bowling constrictors- those too were linking his body snacks- and the worms for the ground were eating into his mind, everything was sucking the life out of him feeding the land, and the castle ground was breaking it all up- life was given back.

And the oddest thing in the moment of darkness there was a small ray of light showing down on him on his face, and he was in a world all of his own in paces. Even if it was also sucking the life out of him- he had done his afterlife missions.

A few- just a few fragments of the glass were sucked up within him- overpowering his awareness, seeing all the memories, of one the girl's life that terrorized his daughter, he teared up, thinking how said they are and pathetic.

All voices stopped abruptly- as he made a link with all of her minds and conscientiousness- they saw what he saw about Alissa Amsel the blonde hair, blue-eyed girl, everything about her life even the things that a girl would never show to others, was reviled- and how she was a bully and terrorist- in the sweet-looking covering body of yearning, to all that were under her spell. He screamed and inside coming out of his mouth with this black steam like gushing vaper with creepy crawlers, bugs, and

insects- come out along with the demons of the girl in a wispy diaphanous hooded ghost, fighting the death- scream ear pricing, and world shook- yet in death she took a soul down with her, it was his.

(Later on, that day talking with Emmah and the girls at the table.)

'It's just like you running a moment thinking about the past and dwelling on it, it's what you want to think that you have created in your own mind, about things and not really knowing the truths- just what is indirect, it's what you want to believe and not know- and that is stopping you from what could have been really wonderful. And that is why a lot of my old-time, possible interests did not work with me they did not see me- Just like making love to him after he found out the truth about me was to him like the perfect kiss he could have... and the right fight to him, and me you understand?'

Not at all they were shaking their head at her as if she had lost what was left of her mind. 'Well, there at least you have her thoughts, girls,' Dariez said in a slurred voice, after being well drunk off magical potions- to get the demons out. And also said was Naddalin forgiveness to her about the events of the day, she understood that her mind was not her own at the time.

That night Black dead body was taken away by twenty members of the- Magical Law Administration in a carriage along with fifty others in a funeral procession to the graveyard of those that past for a final time- to pass to the leaves of hell below- to be licked by the flams of fire and heat.

'He acutely gets the first-class serve,' some the townsfolks said under their breath, grudgingly and disgracing him to the tune of voices, that they were using to dishonor him. 'It's a way to be remembered.' Said one elderly gentleman, nevertheless, I- Naddalin, think was some kind of a comfort to the poor older elders- and the parents of the children that have lost their lives to Black's within the town, that has never- ever been the same since the massacre- yet little do they know the truth. The girls look on seeing him being pulled into the sunset, feeling the same as she in their thoughts, saying goodbye for the last time, in that short time he had become part of them that would last within them for years to come.

- And-

Madam Rosette lets out a long sigh.

And is it true she was mad, Minerva, and was a snitch- and was also taken too with him today within the procession, for the tallest tower of the castle? It's comical to me nobody really knew here

either, only for what she was known for doing, it made me think back and wonder if this was right or wrong to do to a child. After all, she was possessed- by them- and you know who- her. And another death at the behest of her doing and her girls- yet nothing is said about it other than that girls were to blame for it all.

- Then-

And, I wish I could say that she- was, said Harlan hoarsely. And I certainly believe she master's defeat with her crazy her for a while, and well cool off, despite the fact and then well start it all back up again- like always said Naddalin with the hate and all- that's what she does, starts crap and then get scare goes into hiding and then lets dye down for a while- for us to feel safe and then starts it back up again; that is the joy of it for her- you know who... she and her girls.

'She is the- murder then?'

Naddalin- 'Yes and know you would have to prove that- and good luck.'

And all those nonmagic people were the- accomplishment of a confronted and desperate man revenge- cruel... pointless. Yet, I met Black on my last scrutiny of Dizeryland, and he said it was over you- and Nevaeh, and some who you were both linked in he is going nuts on them- or something like that.

And You know, ladies, if you're dining with the- headmaster, we'd better head back up to the- castle.

(Dinner)

Nothing but the low light of lanterns- glowing young faces, you know, most of the kids don't you, there sit muttering to themselves in the- dark about all this; there's no sense in them... being here in the first place, I mean really there just kids, after all, what could they have really done, nothing compared to him for an instant. Yet there here in this underworld wasteland that is so dark and mysterious, yet magical and wonderfully beautiful at the same time, it's them like always that rune everything. This was said over conversations with the group of girls.

'Like- I was shocked at how normal Black seemed when he hugged me it was for real, you know...' Said Naddalin. 'He was with her it felt like... said the one, that was coming around to understanding.' It was unnerving, he- spoke quite sensibly to me.

You'd have thought he- was merely tired- by his look know he was exhausted over them playing with his mind and heart. It was asked if I'd finished with my newspaper- so they could see the stories- I thought, cool as you please, Emmah said, she- missed doing the- mind-bender in the back, she had enough of the headlines- she dove into them frantically, doing one right after another. Yes, I was almost astounded at how little effect the- dementors and all and everything seemed to be having on her- and the voices that played in her head too, was not getting her down.

She- was one of the- most heavily safeguarded in the- place, by others how loved with her leaves of powers and smarts within the type of angel she is, you know, she did not need them playing with her mind she had the power to stop them- she just need to believe that she could, like me also, that part of their plain to wearing you down, so you don't have the straight to fight back. Dementors outside the door day and night- sucking the thoughts right out of your head- for them- for them to use agents you- me and her over there too.

'What their problem?'

'I- we- you and me- we don't know?'

-And-

'But what do you think he's broken out to do?' And said Madam, she was sitting down the ways form the girls.

'What Is a Paranormal Spirit Attachment?' I have read about this in the library's restricted section of dark magic, Said Karly.

'It was to ad in him killing one part of her soul, I's think- that she spit lay within the objects like the crystal ball, it helps kill her seeing her precious children fail, in not getting or keep what they want- or wanted, In these objects, she has made them, and herself the most power one of us could ever be- by stilling and taking- and not caring if she is slaughtering someone's babies doing it, this is what she has made for herself to last for eternity- lasting power within objects, along with keep her kids locked in theirs as well, that's was what it was all about- 'she was dumb and I knew more.' Said Naddalin, back all jittery.

Professor Rosette... 'Karly you should not be looking into those books in there... end up with two heads or something, just by reading something that you and I both would not understand, or know how to fix.'

'Well anyways I have this book saying- what she did, how she did it, and why she did, it's her story- take it.'

Naddalin opened the book reluctantly, and before her eyes, the pages all went blank. Odd it only was left for your eyes to see, I wonder why?

Karly- I have a thought... and that is all she said skipping off down the hall, with the large tattered brown leather-bound book that looked way to odd and big for her small body, that was under her arm, the book was even starting to pull on her long blue hair by the pages grabbing at her, being nasty to her, she said have to keep this thing locked up. (There is a big lock that needs a skeleton key on around it with a ribbon holding the evil inside.) Odd she said- to Naddalin, and I had the key- as a necklace for years... and did not know why till now... 'they want you to know - she said back, to - PROVE IT!'

Just like us and how we the dead jump into the living for life, overseeing what we missed.

'And Good gracious,' Martita, said, 'I remember that happing to me when I was a child and now, I doing to it to children, it scares me, I really don't want to think that Lilly is trying to join You-Know- Who is she-?'

'She did, the one I's could always trust has gone bad.' The girls all shook their heads uneasily.

- And-

'Also, I feel like you in daresay that is there- ultimate plan,' said instructor Harlan ambiguously. And But we hope to catch them in the act of her controlling her long before that, to see if it really here feeling this way to me or them making her feel that way. I must say, You- Know- Who- her and her girls alone and friendless is one thing... at this point, nobody really likes them yet there still afraid, of them. So-o giving her back to them as her most devoted servant, maybe in the cards, as she lays them all out for them to see in her reading- the cards jump- leap and daces, out of her hand in moments of magical performances. At this point, I have my own set made to my liking and artwork approved. THE DEVIL card says it all to me.

And I shudder to think how quickly she'll rise again...

- Then-

There was a small chunk of glass on the heavy handcrafted wood table in front of me and them, and well us- it like started glowing, shacking, and moving about as if possessed. Look, girls, its Alissa Amsel the badass bully of the school that took Neveah lovers away- look now girls she all-powerful now. Overcome it was- it really was- it was the last fragment of Alissa Amsel's life and excrescences. Someone had set down their glass down to see this shard fight for it the last sniffle of life, and Emmah watched it like a bad puppy, with her, rolled up newspaper, (saying bad- bad,) which then led into Naddalin- smashing it down to dust with her flats school girl shoe from her left foot. And the maliciously evil girl was dead never- ever to be again in any lives!

One by one, the- pairs of feet in front of Naddalin took the- weight of their owners once more, all minds were back to where they should be by their magical contacts- as the Bureau of magic knows them to be; everything was back in order, that is when all the teacher and professors got up and walked down the lengths of tables after the fest- of commencement ceremonies took places after the death marches.

They all march down the middle all them in their elegant robes swung into sight, for all the students still sitting there in their uniforms, an order has been reclaimed; to the school and castle and Madam Rosette's glittering shekels disappeared behind the- bar... were she orders a drink and said- 'that is the last time we shall be dealing with them for a while.'

Yet Naddalin sat in the background next to the fireplace sitting on the large rock hearth- looking around all suspicious, think it was too early to celebrate. The girl's stat to get up from their tables, looking at them you can see three with wings opened again for a fight, there was another flurry of snow outside, making the perfect backdrop for them to start to fly in this world.

Just like that the heavy wood doors flew open, with a gush and rush of air blowing the hair back on most of the girls, yet that did not stop the children from rushing for the door in flight as they all took off for the outside- it was the time of altering secession, as well- flares were covering the graveyard, the castle grounds, and the homes within the many villages; of this land that was so otherworldly, that it's hard to comprehend if you're not one of us that has fallen, with a large squall and swell arrived the

winter storm, ending a year, it looked as if they all disappeared, as they fly off into the distances, come back to their homes- for the break.

'Just in time she said for us all to go home,' said Naddalin.

As she looked around for the last time and slow strolled out the door, saying fitting to them, the party is over now. It is their party is it not? Hum- she sighed, saying this is their time for the brake too- by the time we're all back there will be another round for us, more me than any of them, yet - well that my life. She was murmuring like a crazy girl, as she walked slowly into the deepening snowdrifts, not caring that she could fly, she just wanted to remember what it was like to walk - away from her problems.

Jinger's And Emmah's faces appeared under as the train steam ever so slowly - with the beam of light glowing a soft yellow- tracks grounding as if scream in the pain of the brakes - and large red wheels- the cowcatcher looking as if it was going to nip their uncover school girl legs, cold and raw from the air, and flats style unfarmed shoe they were all wearing, the train was tumbling in a rhythm as it was pulling into the station for them to go back home, even if not a long trip in real-time, it felt like it was going to be on their time. book- bags field with overdue homework - and note hanging out about - many spells, potions, and all things dark and magical, and let's not forget flying, and a new set of cards given, to them by their best friend in their world Naddalin - that was her Holiday gift to them, after all.

'Don't ya just hate it when they give homework over Christmas break.' Said Emmah in sitting now by moving one of the old benches to face backward, to face the other girls. 'Um - like - look at the overelaborate metalwork on these things god... only you would notice something like that - there really old and made well- aren't they, like look at this woodworking and these lights - and red velvet covered sets.' she all so said.

They were both staring at her, lost for words, of her being taken back by what was inside, and them more on what was happen out the foggy windows.

Bye, Neville! She called too us, then one by one there was going home - to their stations - and to their homes on Earth.

Naddalin made her way along the - narrow channel cover into stone that is so tight that only one person can walk through at a time - sometimes needing to sidestep, though jagged rock faces, damp and musty, a passageway called Hayvannah's channel within the castle she walks human skulls littering

the walls- of years past, holding a lantern, and then into it leads out to parts of the villages were there are small shop. She then keeps walking onward till she found an inn where she planned on spending her time off, it was vacant- and eerie, could and all walks of life just about gone for the Holidays. She then clicked her fingers, a fire burst into life in the- great fireplace within her large room- that she rented out, and she- bowed herself into her warm cozy bed, and soft sheets- and sleep for what would be two days in Earth time- she was just that played out from the voice in her head and others playing with her emotions- that being alone and quiet was almost defying- with the ringing in her ears of nothingness.

When Naddalin finally woke up from her slumber, she sits down in one of the Victorian chases in her room, by the- fire, she began to replay all the memories of the past weeks in her mind, and already it was playing her out in new leaves of fatigue that she never felt before, and then she went to lie down more, and sleep- saying along with thinking in many ways saying the same thing of- 'I can't do this' in foolish mumbles of incoherencies.

Naddalin didn't have a very clear idea of how she- had managed to get back into tunnel in the first place, yet she did- she had this idea in her mind for some time to come here a place where she knew that nobody knew where she was, and that was just fine with her. A small-town hotel and first-class service, where she could just relax and reflect... it was an escape from the girl's room in the turret of the castle.

She was thinking about a cousin that she played with some when she was a child that also was forbidden, over the fact that she was in love with him, it was wrong, yet she never let go of think about what could have been if they would have been left be, even if... Is Love- love know? Blood is blood- even if- she thought- even if... this or that- it does not matter how it's in the past- is it not?

She was thinking far too much about things, things like the end... and of all ends- 'Death well squeeze your mind, creep in and play and in far too long, and stay even if you don't want it too, death well linger and pounder, and drain you of all wonder, it with fiddle with your brain, like taking blood from the veins- 'till it kills you.' She thought.

I said her mafia would never get me, and that is what it is, and was- and what is going to say being; I also said that she would never- ever get me, never- ever- ever never... yet she did- she did- and sad to say, like- I don't think I care anymore- really. All I have are my lost thoughts of questions that lead to more questions of wonder and ponder of the questions why, and that leads to more inquiries of why? She thought.

~*~

She thought more- and more- 'till her mind was at a stroke.

And into the- castle once more she went.

All she knew- was that she- return back after her trip to find herself and seemed to take no time at all in caring for her on losses- her mind concern- about nothing but the past and all the days lost and that she; hardly noticed what she- was doing- did not seem to make any scene... even if the only ones looking were the otherworldly animals around her, because her head was still pounding with the- conversation she- had just heard.

She pondered- they why of it all... why had nobody ever told her? Duerre, McDermott, Mr. Railie, Cornelius Harlan... why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the- fact that Naddalin's parents had died because- their best friend had deceived them?

Jinger And Emmah watched Naddalin nervously all through dinner, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because- Serafina was sitting close by them.

When they went upstairs to the- jam-packed public room, it was to find, Freeanna and Katy had set off half a dozen or more Fertilizer bombs in a fit of an end- of- term high spirits.

Naddalin, who didn't want Freeanna and Katy asking her questions about if she had reached the Claepsiara- yet of, the Skoufyceol of Wizardry or not, sneaked quietly up to the- empty student house and headed straight for the bedside dresser.

She- pushed the books aside from her life not even think that she had everything in black and white, and then quickly found what she- was looking for.

Then and there, and at that moment at that time: she had found it- the leather-bound photo album- McDermott had given her two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures and all things magical. Like her life as both fallen dark and holy white angel- and then even further back to when she was a child with her daddy; and her human life.

She- sat down on the bed, drew the- curtains around her that were hanging from the canopy that was around her, and started turning the- pages, searching, until... she found all the memories that she had lost within her own mine- kind of like an old backup hard drive; she planned for this moment

and knew it was going to happen she could foresee it a long time ago; she was horrified loss of her own mind- yet relieved that she had a plan like always; she was not yet, defeated- by her and her girls.

She- stopped on a picture of her own' wedding day- and then was looking for her own parents- day as well and then she recalled that they were never married, even more terrified- she became- over her own loss of memories- after the crystal ball broke, thinking her mind was finally gone- and given up to them- unwillingly.

There was her daddy waving up at her- she could see the photo yet that was all that was there the movement of her thoughts like films were gone, beaming, she- untidy her black hair Naddalin had inherited standing up in all instructions- not having any more wit in her mind then they said- she had when she was just a little girl, by what they had made her become, back in elementary school- the mind of 2nd grader- she lost the thought of reading and was like starting over.

There was her mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with the dad. And there... that must be her. There best man... Naddalin had never given her a thought before.

If she- hadn't known it was the- same pergirl, she- would never- ever have guessed it was Black in the old photograph, that was holding her.

The face wasn't sunken and deceived to dust before her eyes, but handsome thoughts yet they were, full of laughter- lost in her mind like she was the day she passed the first time.

Had she- already been working for Ava when the picture had been taken? Was she, already planning the deaths of her, two people next; the closest to her- she wondered, yet it was muddy? The- dormitory door opened- and the lights went out.

Did she- realize she- was facing twelve years in Dizeryland, twelve years that would make her unrecognizable? Or has the twelve years already past she did not know she was lost in her on the mind and did not have one left- for the taking- she was broken- like the shards of glass- with her memories.

Naddalin slammed the- album shut- the tears staining the pages, reached over and stuffed it back into the dresser, and took off her robe, and glasses and got into bed, making sure the- long curtains were hiding her from view.

Lost in her dreams- the- dementors do not affect her- she was still strong in the subconscious she sits in a cold and damp cell- time has passed yet not sure when- where and why, not even understanding how or why she is there...

Naddalin thought- and thought more, staring at her- hand- increasingly more, and more that were scared trying to remember her life, laughing face- tears streaming- lost in insanity. She got me she screamed- and the crows fly wildly, that was right above her oven cell that was exposed to the elements- and had no heat and lights.

Jaylynn- 'I hear my mom screaming and there is nothing- I can do nor do I really feel I need to or want too. We all can hear her screams- like a haunted train whistle of the past- in a screech that is so ear piercing that its deafening- to her loved ones that were still link mentally with her even if they did not want to be.'

The next day- and what is going to happen to Naddalin? Said Jinger's, like smooth- Bella- like voice yet with uncertainty. She- heard Jinger leave again, and rolled over on the back, her eyes wide open.

But Naddalin lay still, pretending to be asleep- as the guard was screaming above her jail cell that he would cut her head off and no one would care if she did not shut up, the blade was gleaning in the moonlight his breath was making a stream of heated vaper ice crystals.

A hatred such that she had never known before was pouring through Naddalin mind as if the knife went into her brain between the eyes. (And maybe it did- after all, she would not die... even if...)

Just a thought an after one at that I knew the guard worked for her... I knew.

She- could see Black laughing at her through the- darkness- a spirit, as though somebody had pasted the- moving picture of from the album over her eyes and face- and tattooed the word retard on her forehead- (And maybe it did- after all, she was sold to them... even if... she was fallen she was noting.)

She- watched, as though somebody was playing her a piece of film, Trirus Black blasting through her mind was things that she had forgotten about for years. (A child she played with who resembled Neville) into them, moment then and there just shattered into a thousand pieces- lost she could not think of who it was.

She- could overhear... (though having no inkling or clue what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited murmur.

My Lord... It has happened she has made me their Secret- Keeper- come out of me thought there world out of my mouth and reveal themselves- she alleged then, at that time it started the harassment within her mind- that was not in her control, taunting her to have a nervous breakdown- And then came another voice, it was them...

The girls and you know who- her- she is standing over her tall and towering yet again- if only in her mind, something she thought she would never take over yet did- more powerful than ever and Naddalin- she is nothing but yet again a week little child in her wrath of shamelessness- asking for her forgiveness- for being blameless laughing herself piercingly- yet not her own if was you know who's evil snicker- and the cackles of the sisters...

The- same laugh that Naddalin heard inside, yet now coming out of her- she had taken over- and dementors drew near... and did as she said- she was the most powerful, yet again.

And Naddalin, you- you look awful, lost like a child that is re- traded- that can't read write or even think for herself.

'Awh- baby wants to cry?' The girls say...

This was the comment she had to here without consent to them, her mind, body, and soul were sold to them... or face the fury- of final death by those that would help her.

- And-

(Then just like that it was all over- and she saw a light a glow and someone saved her for the hell that she was in, a girl in white with wings.)

But who was it?

Who...?

Naddalin hadn't gotten to sleep until daybreak. She- had awoken to find the- dormitory dressed, deserted, and gone down the- spiral staircase to a common room that was completely empty except for Jinger, who was eating a Peppermint candy massaging the other girls that she was back- even

if not full yet, And Emmah, who had spread her homework over three tables - was more involved in that then saying hey- even if she was not trying to be self- absorbed.

And like- where is everyone? Said Naddalin.

Gone, she said! It's the- the first day of the- holidays, remember?

'Of this year-?' She stated, the date- not understanding, that 6 years have gone by- 'like a shot of tequila and a good butt-kicking.'

And said Jinger, watching Naddalin closely. And it's near- dinner time; I was going to come and wake you up in a minute- are you feeling up to eating with us today and not being feed in bed?

- And-

Naddalin slumped into a chair next to the- fire, as if her personality was still there even if she was not physically. The snow was still falling outside the- large ornate arched windows, that were stained glass- and somewhat frosted by the cold, and were glowing a tint of yellow due to the warmth of the fire- that made her feel as if she was not dead inside- even if she was.

Cookies were spread- out for all in front of them- behind was the fire like an underneath was a large, ginger rug matching the medieval gothic feel of the castle.

And you really do not look well, you know, and Emmah said, peering anxiously into her face - maybe you should lay down. 'And I'm fine, good all I do is sleep any more I going to get fat also -' said Naddalin.

'Naddalin,' listen, and said Emmah, exchanging a look with Jinger, and you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday. But the- thing is, you mustn't go doing anything stupid.

- And-

And- like what? Then and there said Naddalin.

And- like trying to go after Black, and said Jinger sharply- who was brought back to the life you know. By the healing touch- of the dark lord- seeing into his mind and life's story just like yours- that is was why- you were saved too- he is and understand lord- no? And he takes care of his children.

Naddalin could tell she had rehearsed the tête- à- tête while she- had been asleep- she knew there was talk going on about her. She- didn't say anything- she really did not care- or feel there was a point in doing So-o.

'I don't think I will ever be who I was before...' She said.

'And you won't, will you, Naddalin? and said Emmah.'

'Yet, you are alive no...?'

'Like- after all they did put you through an abyss- or a hell that most if not all here have ever seen or heard of! Tortured until you were like in a petrified of decay.' Emmah alleged.

'And because, Black's not worth dying for, and said Jinger, they said they needed to say you even if there was a wrath to face regardless- that we girls all love you more than eternal life, and Black was found innocent of you- also- all is good don't you see.'

Naddalin looked at them, like someone that had a stroke- or was not able to move their body full to smile. They did not seem to understand at all, why she was so distraught. Yet, Dariez, looking over at all of them next to the fire- she felt as if she was the blame everything, even if she'd still didn't apologize.

And- did you know what I see- every time a dementor gets too near me- I see her face laughing insanely in my ripping thought my face as if it wants to come out of mine? In addition to that, Jinger and Emmah shook their heads, looking apprehensively.

Also, I can hear my mom screaming- she is not really my mother, she was the girl mother in- which I took over her mind, body, and soul- and to have a body to linger in... yet she and I have become close as if I was her girl- in a way I am- half her still... a soul is broken in too many minds and bodies.

...And pleading with Ava, saying that she has won, do you have to keep going.

Naddalin- And if you have heard your Mom screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn't forget it in a hurry- I also live with those memories also, I live with nothing but horrifying bad memories. Not just my own, the ones- I have to share over her wanting me too; maybe this is just payback of me being a baby about my own life- like a sick twisted joke the God's have played on me when I was a teen girl... God's lesson learned- and why I turn my back on a God and all God's. And for

not understanding why someone that was all ways good, and did the right thing- like would be tortured- as I was- in all existences. Yet, this Lord gets me, and I get him- even if I don't feel the same about everything, and I have to be thankful for life given back to me for a devil- such as he.

And if you found out someone who was supposed to be a friend of yours betrayed you and sent Ava after you... you would feel dead inside too- as I do.

- And-

Besides, there is nothing you can do!

And said Emmah, looking stricken. And the- dementors will catch Black and she'll go back to Dizeryland and serve her right! Said Alyssa who was still there taunting her, the only one that was not there... at Dizeryland- even if they just got off with a slap on the wrist and are going to be out in the week.

- Then-

Portion

And you heard what Harlan said then anyways. Black is not affected by Dizeryland jail like normal people are- like us, he is wild and foolish, irrational, thoughtless at times for the ones he cares about- when it comes to his life and others- other than his own. It's not a punishment for him- it's just whatever- and more of the same- in a life that will not end, to him he is what he hates the most an idealized fake hero- to some and adversary to others.

- And-

So-o, what are you saying?

Then said Jinger, looking very tense. 'And do they still want to- kill Black or something-'

'...And have him on final death row?' The girls unanimously asked these questions in the same whys, yet in different terms of speech.

'...Besides and do not be silly, the only ones that need to die a final death here is them...' Naddalin squeaked out in a shrill voice.

Then said Emmah in a bizarre voice. And Naddalin doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Naddalin?

'No! - I have no enemies here…'

In addition to that, Naddalin didn't answer the if's… about it or not - for she did not know any more the why's of life or death or not and the because… even - she was done - talking to those that did not see it her way - and was too tired to give explanations.

She - didn't know what she - wanted to do. All she - knew was that the - idea of doing nothing, while the mother and the girls were at freedom - in a week or two, was almost - more than she - could stand.

Hi - this young sweet little girl said with blond locks and big blue eyes batting - I am Mallerie, I have been assigned to you… as your aid.

'Awh…' she said sound like less than moved.

(Though - even here they make me out to be SPED - mm - mm - hmm.)

And Mallerie knows, and she - said abruptly - and she is your bodyguard - here to look out for you have nothing here at the school to have anxiety about - you're in good hands.

She was holding my hand as if I was more than gifted now…

Sweet…

yah - no…

And remember what she - said to me in Potions?

She said - that she was looking for one to make me feel new again.

I then thought - 'hum - maybe I like this child.'

'If it was me, I'd hunt her down myself… I'd want revenge, said the after their first class together.'

- And -

And you're going to take Mallerie's advice instead of ours? And said Jinger furiously, you're going to trust her with your life, after knowing that is fragile now, and this could be the last time you have a life to live... said Jinger and Emma even more angrily. Like we said you should be happy with what you have not trusted some girl- you just met last night- with drinks she makes in a urinal experimentally- like as if sipping from a water fountain. Like- like- um- you could end up looking like two-headed foaming at the mouth dog, that we could name 'Fuffie,' said Emma.

'If... ...If I have to live like this... I don't want to; it's worth it to me.' Naddalin said.

'Listen... to us girl, and don't be dumb...'

This is why I doing it, I am sick of being called dumb, so I might as well live up to my image- right girls?

Do you know what Pettigrew's mother got back after she and those girls were had finished with her? A girl like you- that was still their child, yet she did what you wanted to do, and she is out there in the graveyard for the last time, with the cows dumbing shit on her stone to remember is that what you really want? Besides not even a spring flower pops up for her for being dumb.

Pettigrew's finger was on the brown boxes, just printed the first copies of all the girl's stories of their lives, no longer just pages being spewed out of the charming Typewriter, places in large piles, of stacks of paper. My dad told me- that I would be getting the first copies... Look this one is called the Pretender of Secrets! First Class mail girls, open the boxes! She said, all excited.

'That was the- biggest bit of her- a life not yet said, they could find- out about me now,' said Naddalin- 'like this all was meant to be confidential.'

'Ladies... please- forgive her she is cranky and paranoid,' said the professor.

I thought you would be thrilled- she said, along with saying- after all the work was done for you in all of these ones- and the editing too, and have you not done this before? She said razing an eyebrow, of inquisitorial.

It said here... that magical world thinks that she- you know who- is a madwoman- the sister's mother, and it says here they think Naddalin, she's dangerous to herself and others... now, this is proving it said Naddalin more making more controversy for me too- fix- fix- fix?

-And-

'Hey look...' said the one professor girls, that actually read... too bad that it's not in their studies... 'gossip- nonetheless,' she wrinkled up her nose.

And Mallerie's dad must have told her, said Naddalin, ignoring Jinger, that I want to see what this all said. So, she played into having them published.

'Sweet thank you- but you shouldn't have...' Said Naddalin. Why is my name on the covers- I did not write these?

'In a way you did... you started this project; you can keep it going- right?' At that moment she grabs her shoulders.

'If... ...you say- So-o.' She said looking up into her eyes, with the joy of doing this for her lost.

Emma- Besides, She- YOU- Naddalin- was right along- she was in Ava's inner circle, after all, said another skipping to the end of the first book, spoiling it- all for everybody that really want to find out on their own.

'She...?'

'Lily...'

- And-

Besides interjected Jinger angrily, saying- 'I think the point here was, so we would not jump to conclusions, also actually read, and think for ourselves- besides not start a bunch of girls- fights over this all to read in privet, in addition, have our own thoughts.'

A moment or two later she whispered '...THANKS!' in her ear.

'Also, like- just say her name, will you? It not like they will burn you for witchcraft!' said one of them yelling it from the back of the room.

'They might...?' Alleged- Naddalin.

I have a question- 'yes child...?' why did you become a new name, in the book- and whom were you before?

'So-o, it's true your: NEVAEH?'

'I would say, honey- that you need to start from the beginnings- this does not book one- I'll give you a hint, and read between the lines of a story like mine to find out, who I am and not what they say I am...'

...?...

'The girl just looks dumbfound and walked away muttering, I UNDERSTAND SHE'S AFRAID- even if... its likes in black and white, even then it all in how you want to read it and take it... whatever it is... I don't know... if I care to know it... or about it all.'

And - so obviously, the- Malleries knew Lily was working for Ava... or she would not want you to know to prove it!

'Hush...' one girl said in taunting way, or bullying- Naddalin, who was withering away by the moment.

- And-

'Get a grip... girl... this is all in your head.'

Besides - Also Mallerie would love to see you blown into about a million pieces! I feel that you should not trust her... Said the one girl. She is just trying to blow this up for you all to make drama.

'...Why she is not even part of the story...' There were whispers coming from the back, saying that she should not even be here she was to goodie-goodie.

'Do you think So-o?' She said all fretfully.

See and all the girls in the room start to laugh. At Naddalin how was question everything- that was said in the room.

Mallerie's just hoping you'll get yourself killed before she- has to play you at Claepsiara, that is if you're up to it by then, yet that is half a year away.

- Then-

And Naddalin, please, also said Emmah, her eyes now shining with tears, please be sensible, and think about what you're doing to others, and not just about yourself, and them all the time, it is driving you insane.

Black did a terrible, terrible thing, but do not put yourself in danger, anymore for him saving you, just to save himself, it's what Black wants... Oh, Naddalin, you'd be playing right into her hands if you went looking for her... with a sharp mind, and revenge in your still- and silent hart.

'Your mom and dad wouldn't want you to get hurt, would they, Naddalin?'

'I don't have parents... um- in a way- I do, yet I don't- um- you would not understand... and it would take long for me to explain, don't worry yourself about me I will be fine.'

They'd never want you to go looking for her in the first place! She said.

'I didn't since you ask...' was her reply.

-And-

And I'll never know what they'd have wanted, because thanks to Lily, I've never spoken to them, said Naddalin shortly- along with Black, doing what he did, saved me kind of- and is killing me slowly also.

'If they wanted anything...' said- Emma, along with saying slightly after in the next breath- 'I would not worry yourself about it all, it's not worth it after all- is it?'

There was a silence in which stretched lavishly bending her nails and left hand down on to the books, her middle fingernail snapped under the stain.

(Lunch)

Naddalin looks through her food on her try- pulling out a slimy worm-

'Are you going to eat that?'

'I want not planning to...' She said.

Jinger's pocket quivered, she said-

Jinger- 'I found this raven outside- fail out of her nest next to the tower, I going to keep her 'till she big enough to fly.'

The bird chirps...

Naddalin- 'I see it's always good to help the defenseless.'

And Look, said Jinger, obviously casting around for a change of subject, and it's the- holidays! It's nearly Christmas!

Let's- let's go up to our rooms now- and be with our roommates. Last visited for what well feel like ages- girls say your goodbyes!

-And-

'Like this may be the last time, that some of you do- you never know.' Said one of the professors.

'...Oh... No...!' Some of them making the most shocking faces they have ever in their lives. Said Emmah quickly.

Then Naddalin isn't supposed to leave the- castle, Jinger- even if we're all gone?

- Besides-

Come on girls- she whispered softly- and all the girls heard Emma's thoughts in their minds- of the way- and it was not good- not good.

('The thoughts that were shared in their brains... And- yeah, let's go, and leave her to her thoughts, I can see she is lost in them and wants to be left alone.')

And said Naddalin, sitting up, I can ask her how- come she- never mentioned Lily when she- told me all about my parents! Or why she wanted me brain- dead so bad.

Above and beyond the girls roll their eyes, and walk out the room thinking she is complete... mad.

-And-

Some time had passed... with further discussion of Trirus Black plainly wasn't what Jinger had had in mind, and that Naddalin was nowhere to be found.

Or we could have a game of fallen angel chest were all the pieces are different angles- and powers, on the train ride home... Emma- said discussed and hurriedly- to all the other girls we gotten to know.

Otherwise or checkers; Serafina left a set, and said 'I bet I'll bet yah!'

-And-

And no, let's visit with all the girls, for this light night we have and not fight said Emma, and then also said Naddalin firmly, agreeing that she did not want to be the blame for them fighting among themselves- just over a book.

So, they got their fine clothes from there dormitories and set off through the- portrait hole- into the station- back to the real world, and their hometowns. On the train, the games start and they're very competitive. All the girls with their magical board games- in the competition were the pieces of the board come alive in front of their eyes.

Down through the- empty castle- Naddalin did her nightly walks, and her seances in witchcraft contacting the dead- from her room, and out through the- oak front doors, to the one oak tree she brought back for her homeland and property for seedlings.

She made her way now flying down the- lawn, week yet making flight along with a shallow trench in the- glittering, powdery snow, her socks and the- hems of her glitter- almost gray and silvery sparkling- yet at times transparent- and translucent Robes was soaked completely and totally and freezing, yet she was able to fly ones more. A moment of delight for her... in a time of sadness, and feeling alone.

Not even thinking rationally she- went into the forbidden forest looked as though it had been enchanted- with all that is dark creepy mysterious, each tree smattered with silver, and McDermott's Victorian cottage in white looked like an iced cake, she had her own home, not far away...

Jinger knocked, but there was no answer when she made her rounds little did Naddalin know- that she was teleporting back and forth to make sure that she did not do anything crazy, foolish, and irrational or just plain stupid- and she did...

'Christ-' she did what I was afraid of... and she looks out and sees a- girl 100 feet up, flying wildly- at times, like- as if she going to snag the weathervanes on some the towers.

'I think this girl is trying to see how many times she can test fate and die...' Then in thought, she said- 'she has to be out of her mind, with wondering why- yet, I am standing here looking at her asking the same very thing.'

'Hum- nothing surprises me anymore...' she modeled. Then in the next thought- (Well so much for spending time with the girls on the train... playing games and having fun, I see here that I'll be babysitting, I see... I see- yah, happy Christmas to me.) ...She was clapping her hands; then and at that moment said Emmah, who was shivering under her robe when off into the star-filled moonlight of night after her. It was an odd night, unlike others there was a large crescent moon.

Jinger had her ear to the- door- and then crack it open slightly, just after getting her to come down and get inside take a bath and get ready for bed, yet there is Naddalin talking to the marrow, seeing if there were any writings of messages for the other side coming through- on what to do next.

The marrow of dishonesties in the girl's massive bathing room... and she is standing there in the nude, looking into it, in a trance... but showing perfectly, in a gray dimly lit room, with heavy steam- and candle everywhere. She was mumbling insanities... eyes rolling in the back of her head all you could see were the whites of the ball.

And- there is a weird noise, coming out of the body in places I don't want to say... as if hell was going to break throw... her face was changing, into others, that were neither one of the bodies in- which she keeps.

The voices coming out of her mouth I knew it was HER, and that she was not crazy... yet me saying it would make me look crazy... in trying to prove it... that Naddalin was right, you can prove them to blame, there always blameless and find a way- out.

'Naddalin she-' said...

'Listen- come, come to bed it's time...' She said over and over.

She turns to like, and the hunt of the woman ripped through her, the candles blow out with no warning, a child through her body of evil, a terror that she never felt before...

'Is that Fang, I see?' (She thought- and that thought was being shared if she liked it or not.) I'll kill you- by clawing your eyes out- the possessed - Naddalin said, and feed on your eyeballs... for a snack. Leave...! And Jinger ran... fast than ever before in this life, she was given.

-And-

Emmah put her ears to the- door too... after seeing this girl running for what she said was her life into the girl's dorm- room, Emmah transported back to the castle, over what was called an emergency- of attempted final- homicide.

From inside low, throbbing moans, of a girl laying on the floor nude, that looked as if she was in a coma of dangerous unconsciousness as if the loss of all fallen- angel- azure unoxygenated blood.

'And- I think we'd better go and get someone?'

'A doctor?' She said.

'More like a witch- doctor... to perform and exercise.'

'...And that to- DON'T, STAND, THERE, GO- AND GET HELP!' And said Jinger tensely.

And professor- McDermott- she may be able to get inside them- soul at this point, and end this!

And called- out for others that may be here, that can help even the ghosts, that haunt the halls.

Naddalin, thumping the floor in compulsions- door slammed and no one was there just them. Then what seemed like an eternity- McDermott, and some other girls were there at her side? As Jinger was showing in a hologram what she saw in her mind played out for them to see before their eyes. Tombstones litter the front yard, black trees with curly branches that look as if they would nab at you. With a gray-blue, sky, in the background, hints of sinful lime- green are glowing around the- home, one light one in a cracked arch window, glowing in wicked.

-And-

I'm meeting Emmah Kizziah for what feels like the first time when I wake up a year or two has passed.' Hayvannah raised her eyebrows, to me I don't know you either... yet maybe I did, I was lost...

'You almost passed for the last time,' Hayvannah she said.

Emmah said... 'Hi- you know me... even if you don't want to at times... ha- like- I have changed, yet not that much my hair is longer and a different color.'

'You're meeting Emmah Kizziah? Today?' the new girl asked, as she helps Naddalin up and out of her bed... for what seemed like a lifetime- of reliving a part- of the girl's life she took over to hide inside a lingering soul.

'Er... listen, do you want to come with us- there are girls flying for the first time, before lunchtime- we know you like that? Said- Emmah.

'Do you want to come with me?'

'Yeah... well, she- asked me to, so I thought I would.'

'She would-' you even said it wouldn't matter if she did.'

'Oh... well... that was nice of her.'

But then again, Hayvannah did not sound as though she would have- thought it was nice at all. On the- divergent, her manner was cold and suddenly, she would- looked rather unfriendly.

A few more minutes passed in total silence, Naddalin drinks her coffee so fast that she- would soon need a fresh cup, just to keep going- she seemed to be drinking more and more- to feel as if she was not half-dead on the inside.

Beside them, Riley Davies and her girlfriend seemed glued together at the- lips.

Hayvannah's hands were lying on the- table beside her coffee and Naddalin was feeling a mounting pressure to take hold of it after already drinking her cup of coffee.

'Just do it,' Naddalin- told herself, as a fount of circulated alarm and pleasure and excitement surged up inside her chest; just reach out and grab it- she thought. Emmah seemed even more clingy

then before, the attack like she was living one day at a time with her as if it would be the list, she would spend with her ever.

Amazing, how much more difficult it was to extend her arm twelve inches, and touch Emmah's hands, feeling love, than it was to snatch, about her past, to her when she already could understand, then a speeding bat fly by and she caught it from midair... and its fangs bit into her flesh and started to suck out life from her body, where her precious blood.

But just as she- moved her hands forwards, Hayvannah took hers off the- table, thinks she could be a need in the unwanted hart thobe of lust and love with someone, she did not know- and to she liked boys.

Some of the girls just look, and smiled as Emmah was saying- to Hayvannah- 'you well- in time, like US girls...' and she winked at her in a playful way.

She would- was now watching Riley Davies kissing her girlfriend with a mildly interested expression.

'She- asked me out, you know,' she'd- said in a quiet voice.'

A couple of weeks ago. 'Riley, I turned her down, though.'

Naddalin, who had grabbed the- sugar cookies on the platter to excuse the sudden lunging movement across the- table, could not think why she would- and was telling her that she was falling too. Yet she was... falling for a girl, all over again.

If she would- wished- d she'd- was sitting at the- next table being she- artily kissed by Riley Davies, why had she'd- agreed to come out with her?

She- said nothing... Their scab threw another handful of confetti over them; counting down the new year- of their world, some of it landed in the- last cold dregs of coffee Naddalin had been about to drink, that was not hers.

'I came in there with Lily last year,' said Hayvannah.

In her- second or so it took for her to take in what she would- had said, Naddalin's insides had become glacial.

She- could not believe she would- wanted to talk about Lily now, while kissing couples surrounded them and a cherub floated over their heads.

Hayvannah's voice was rather high when she'd- yet spoke again.

'I've been meaning to ask you for ages... did Lily- like did she- ever in a chat mention me at all before she- died?' I like this girl yet, only knew her by her last name; what was her name?

'Why do you care-? It doesn't really matter... now she was gone forever.' One girl said, back that was kinda snotty... in a hast.

Well most of the girls, looked at her- like it was not nice, yet very true.

If you say- that you think, you were falling for her we can see what we can do to bring her back to life?

'You- a looking for a girlfriend?' Emmah said, in a kiddish way.

'I don't know if I am ready for a girlfriend?' Said Hayvannah.

She was the- very last subject on earth Naddalin wanted to discuss, and least of all with Hayvannah.

'Well no,' she- said quietly. There wasn't time for her to say anything. Erm... so... did you... did you get to see a lot of others over the- holidays- or is she the one for you?

'I just thought she was cute, that all.'

'Like- boys never get it right... the last one I had called me a bitch, looking for a dinner plate also.'

'Come to the dark side... as you can see, we've got cookies.' Said Riley.

Well, support you-? And- the game moves one with the next move, her voice sounded falsely bright and cheery, saying- 'there a girl out there for me I'm- sure here, I just need to finder she or she finds me, I not looking.'

To Naddalin's horror, she- saw that her eyes were swimming with tears again, just as they had been after the- last meeting before Christmas, back before her change as some call it.

Everyone was contented, yet not truly of fully happy- 'life is life is not...?' Said Naddalin, along with saying moments after in a murmur- and with the shakes, of some that were deceased- in the real world, with something like Parkinson's- and dementia...

'...You can get close- yet never fully there- in the life of happiness and or keep it- just like them and/or of things.'

Naddalin- 'Look,' she- said desperately, leaning in so that nobody else could overhear,' let's not talk about Lily right now... let's talk about something else, 'Oh like you and Emmah and the PDA'n you to have been- doing.'

Portion

But she, apparently, was quite the- wrong thing to say about.

'I thought,' after saying, she'd- said, tears spattering down on to the- table,'

'I thought you'd you would understand! I needed to talk about it, and that I was falling more than just what I am! Surely- you need to talk about it too!'

'I mean, you saw it happen, didn't you?' I really don't want to talk about it said Naddalin, my mind has had enough.

Everything was going nightmarishly wrong; Riley Davies's girlfriend had even unglued herself to look round at Hayvannah crying.

'Well I have talked about it,' Naddalin said in a mumble,' to Jinger And Emmah, but and also to the new girl now...'

'She is not to be trusted don't fall in love with that...'

Like you would know?

'I know you better than you think- a little girl, I was also...'

'I am not you...' She said.

'Then do it...' Said Naddalin.

'Oh, you'll talk to Emmah Kizziah! Also, about this you find someone here that you love, and I know her >This Girl< here she will help- you do So-o.'

She'd- said shrilly, her face was now shining with tears- that sparkled in the light like glass shards.

Several more kissing couples broke apart to stare, at the sight of the girl that was crying what looked to be glass crystals, and so hurt over lust- and love, and what she could not have- that was feeling like her old life of forbidden.'

'Um- maybe it would be best if we just... paid for this food... cram it, and you went and met up with Emmah Kizziah like you noticeably wanted to!'

'And..., (sniffle) and..., (sniffle) and..., (sniffle) ... I'll well go to my room and rot and cry, like a little girl that I am.'

'But you see none of these girls won't talk to me!' she said walking down the halls, of the schools.

Naddalin stared at them, utterly bewildered, as she'd- seized a frilly napkin and dabbed at her shining face with it- cutting her face and the blue azure color ran like blood from the gashes and was making the glassy tears look as if their shards of Arctic glacier ice.

'Hayvannah...?' She- said weakly, wishing Riley would seize her girlfriend and start kissing her again to stop her ogling at her and Emmah.

'Go on, leave!' she'd- said, now crying into the- napkin.'

I do not know why you asked me out in the- first place... if it was not for real... Naddalin said don't feel bad, I have to say here to... not everyone wants me here, and it's going to be the same for you- for you do not like them. 'That's- a life- even in the afterlife.''

'Like if you're going to make arrangements to meet other girls right after me... staying here in my room you can save it...' 'How many are you meeting after Emmah? Like... you have been through a lot?' Why can't you keep them?

'That was compounded questions... well...?'

'I will say with you- if you like...? (She just looked up at her blushingly,) I have to! I don't have to save anything to a child like you, after all, you have to respect me, and that really is not you thought to have; but if you must know it was over trust... and falling out of love with them- or the other way around.'

'It's not like that!' Said Naddalin, and she- was so relieved at finally understanding what she'd- was... yet annoyed about that too, she- laughed, and the tears stopped, which she- realized a split second too late was also a mistake- to start doing in the first place.

Hayvannah sprang to the feet at that moment. The- whole team was quiet and everybody was watching them now, even if they were on the train ride back home half of their mind, was looking tough to them on the other side and was looking at them talking to one another about their personal lives, though one side of their face and put one of those girls eyes, as if they were there too - they could see, hear, and feel it all.

I will see you around, she'd- said to the girl, that was been nasty dramatically harsh, and hiccoughing slightly Naddalin- dashed to the- door, wrenched it open and hurried down the halls and long corridors out the first door off into the- pouring rain, to have a moment alone, even if she is never.

'Naddalin!' Hayvannah called after she left, but the- door had already swung shut behind her, looking them apart, and she was not able to open without a scalation key... (that was always around her neck,) she was feeling better and worse about the mean things she said to her.

There was total silence within the- café Hayvannah walk to town in the grays of colors and the flurries of snow all around, looking for her, when everyone eyes were on her over not liking what she said to Naddalin after all this was the girl that said it was okay for her to be here and took her out a pure hell.

Naddalin- She- threw a Galleon of milk down, at the town market, on to the- table, a golden longstanding register was all she could see, not even her eyes at this point would pick over, the counter, she shook pink confetti out of the hair; from it littering the areas- outside...

Just before she walked into the store, the clocks- like the one that was just like the one from her hometown, with the big was a glowing face was making a showed with hand on the hour...

That ticked- talked down, the new year- she saw a girl getting wind blows down the pathway; she did not see Naddalin, behind her as she followed Hayvannah, as she went out of the - door.

It was snowing hard now and she would- not have even noticed her, that she was nowhere to be seen; even if she did not realize that she was walking right behind her. Getting ever so closer with every step.

She- simply did not understand what had happened; half an hour ago they had been getting along fine, and they were fighting.

'Lady!' She- muttered furiously, sloshing down she - the now knee-deep snow, felling the street with her hands in the pockets, to keep them from the cold and frostbite.'

What did she would- want to talk about Lily for, anyway?

Why does she- always want to drag up a subject that makes her act like a wild mare - that wants to buck off the rider?'

She- turned right and broke into an icy run, and within minutes she - was turning into the- doorway of the - the tree graveyards into the up to the pathway that leads to the bridge that leads up the school and castle, thousands of feet up, she knew that she could not fly over this even if she wanted too, yet another reason why she went to town, for an ointment for the feathers on her wings, to help them mend, and have them groomed, by trusted hands - by a man she has known for years, in what looks like a 1920s barbershop.

She knew the flight was risky, even if she did not fear final death at this point, it was not worth it when she real- at this point was contented to live.

Naddalin- she- knew she- was too early to meet Emmah, at this point, and was not ready to meet up with the one, that she was following behind, and she was already in the air making her flight a- crossed- a remarkable sight the gush to wind would knock you back - from the speed that she was able to capture - and the majesty was brilliant- as she would score - higher than an American Eagle.

After that, she went to a coffee shop - within the walls of the castle - on the 13th floor, but she- thought it likely there would be someone in there with whom she - could spend the - dominant time, of her night.

She- shook the wet hair out, that fall longer than her butt, her eyes needing rubbing she looked around, and yet again there was no one around, just a waiter.

Then moments have passed, then hours, then night become day, she dozed off, just to wake up in nods to see McDermott was sitting alone in a corner; looking down- too, she did not have anything to go home to So-o she stayed too.

'Hi, McDermott!' She- said, when she- had squeezed through the- crammed both, and pulled up a chair beside her.

McDermott jumped and looked down at Naddalin as though she- barely recognized her, EVEN IF HER FACE WAS INCHES FORM HERS.

Naddalin saw that she- had two fresh cuts on the faces and several new bruises, yet was feeling stronger and stronger on the inside- she was making a full recovery- she just needs everyone out of her head and some time to be nothing but quiet.

'Oh, it's you, Naddalin,' said McDermott.' Yeah, all right- 'Yeah, I'm fine,' lied Naddalin who was like 75% healthier than the day before; but, next to the battered and mournful- looking McDermott, she- felt she- didn't really have much to complain about, that was looking like rotting death, walking.'

'Er- are you sure you're- OKAY?'

'Me?' said McDermott.'

'Oh yeah, I'm grand and still full of life, Naddalin, was grand with excitement- saying, 'I feel I will am a lot like you someday.''

She- gazed into the- depths of the aquarium tankard- of fish-like creatures inside, which was the- the size of an of a room, that was in the on the one side of the room, and sighed, saying- '...and they think back home, that we came from that if the monkey was not bad enough.'

Portion

Naddalin did not know what to say to her, when she said, 'I feel you will outlive me, your blood is far more valuable than mine- and you are far more power than- me.'

They sat side by side in silence for a moment. Then McDermott said brusquely, 'In the- same boat, yeh and me, ant' we, honey?'

'Er' said Naddalin, followed by saying- 'I suppose So-o.'

'Yeah... I have said it before... both outsiders, alike like- none of them will ever be fully you- even if they still,' said McDermott, nodding wisely.

'And both orphans inside you to make one with the strength of two, you become your more than them, and most- even if... even if... yeah... orphans- they are- that- odium, and you too but remember- why? Why... you have made it more than them- and have not fallen too them, it's a question of why- in the first place, that made you become whom you were meant to be - part of your story- to make there's, yet you're at the top, remember why- the true way.'

She- took a great swig from the mug- more and more coffee- it seems I need to keep going, she thought.

'Makes a difference, having a decent family,' she- said, back.

'Yes, maybe So-o; yet I feel that you have always had one you just failed to notice, in your own thoughts of feel as if you were not wanted.'

'My dad was decent, I loved my Dad and lost him too young, my Mom was not, and the same for the second time around, Dad was decent, and now look what I did to him like the other it was all over me being in their life that their end too soon.'

'If they had lived, life without me, or them interfering would- a bit different, eh?'

'You can't change a plan even you have said that in your own story- be proud of your story- in black and white- its best to remember that.'

'Yeah... I'm spouse,' said Naddalin cautiously.

McDermott seemed to be in a very strange mood, she thought yet motherly and that was nice when she never- ever really had that.

'Family,' said McDermott gloomily.' Whatever yeah say, the blood's important... yet is not everything,' She- wiped- saying 'I have had the bodies of 4 girls before me, as I am now- I have life now-

for around 4,000 years a trickle of it out of her eye, saying take them and see my memories, this may be the night, that I must say goodbye- forever, ...I have seen more than one millennium, it is time to lay at rest- next to the other bones in the yard.'

'Ms. McDermott,' said Naddalin, unable to stop herself,' where are you getting all these injuries, on your hands and limes?'

'All those!' said Naddalin, pointing at McDermott's face, saying you are being eaten by the death- and part of death is time.

'I not- okay, I am disintegrating like the blacked dart- that I am made of showing thought- over time, nothing lasts forever, soon if I choose not to lay at rest; I will become black dust blowing in the wind- with nothing left by to by sweep away in a dust pain.'

'Eh?' said McDermott, looking startled- at the look of the young girl carrying.'

'Oh... that's just normal bumps an' bruises, Naddalin,' said, wanting to think that, McDermott dismissively- said... ''don't be afraid of death,' I was not, the first time, and I not going to be this time ...even if... this time is to burn, for a life of not wanting too.''

She- drained the mug, set it back on the- table, booth... as Naddalin got too she feet.

'I'll be seeing' yeah, Naddalin... take care of now.' Naddalin knew she would not be seeing her ever again.

And she- lumbered out of the- pub looking wretched, and disappeared into the- torrential blizzard, after walking, yet again all the corridors- for something to do, out in the weather for air, even if she was high up long a veranda of the castle.

Naddalin watched her go to the beyond that night, feeling miserable, as she tried not to look back, even if she had to stop- to defog the shop's window with her palm, to look at her one last time before walking on.

McDermott was unhappy and she- was hiding something, but she- seemed determined not to accept help. What was going on? But before Naddalin could think about it any further, she- heard a voice calling her name.

'Naddalin! Naddalin, over there!'

Emmah was waving at her from the tower above- for her side of the- room and veranda, saying... 'come inside and met me up here, instantly she was there, in a spell of teleport, Emmah was in her head and making her no if and or butts, to get inside, and be by her side.'

She- got up and made the way towards her through her- saying, 'well you stand by me forever- and never leave me? I am scared, of being alone and the unknown.' She said to Emmah in a strong hug, that would not break- away.

She- was still a few feet away when she- realized that Emmah was alone- too and feeling about the same in low.

She'd- was sitting at the end of her bed with the- unlikeliest pair of slippers on her feet, that were so old they were crusty. 'I can't let them go...' she said 'there like part of me...' sh e- could ever have imagined: a night without them just like her pillow- and blankie too.

Danna Lovegood was the same she had a stuffed pink bunny, and still sucked her middle and ring fingers as she sleeps- and it sounds inappropriate at times. All girls- like us come with corks...

Rita Skeeter, journalist on the- Star press and one of Emmah's least favorite people in the- world, was on her way to get the story, about McDermott final passing, and I had nothing to say, yet I was the last to have said anything, like- why is always me, that gets the spotlight when I don't want it?

I thought you were with Hayvannah, I wasn't expecting you for another hour at least!' 'You're early!' Said Emmah, moving along to give her room to sit down for the interview.'

'I'm- a-going to say this now- the shit...! ...you put into this better make this one here, look good- she been through enough- or kick your ass to your head- got that.'

'Hayvannah? - Whom came back to see all the fuss, just for some moments before teleporting back with them on the train ride home with the others.'

Rita said at once- if they were really having sex- and all that girl like them do, twisting around on her butt to stare avidly at Naddalin- Emmah did.' Who was a loss of wards...?'

'A girl... can be a friend to other girls here without you dating her right?' That was said back...

Emmah- 'And even if we are, that for us to care about not you... get to talk about why you're really here or get lost.' Hayvannah- in a rage!

'It's none of your business if Naddalin's been with a hundred girls,' Emmah told Rita coolly, this is not what this story is about after all.

'So, you can put that away right now.'

'This is about final memory and obituary- not my sex- life...'

Rita had been on the- the point of withdrawing a corrosive blue quill from her bag... to override the words, that are always type automatically.

Looking as though she'd- had been forced to swallow hard- Naddalin said- 'I don't care what you say in this paper' ...and then she kissed Emmah on the lips just to make her happy, say whatever you want- both agreed at this point to get her away from them, and both were saying everything or anything she wanted to her, or she would not leave... 'till she got here story her way- she sat there for 3 hours- looking into Naddalin's eyes spine-chillingly, she'd- snapped her bag shut again; saying- 'I think I have my story here.'

'What are you up to- girlie?'

Danna her friend, was saying come one we need to get back to the town, pressroom, I will walk with you I need some air anyways, the girls knew this was just a diversion- yet worked.

Naddalin asked, sitting down- after getting up to meet Danna saying- 'OMG thanks,' (in a whisper) and staring at Rita, walking away bouncing out the door with every footstep... uniform skirt fluttering...

Emmah- 'yep,' she said looking dazed, her eyes were crossed, Naddalin said, 'well- well- well- this is going to be rich- no?'

'Little Miss. Perfect was just about to tell me when you arrived- when you walked in a took my story away,' said Rita, taken a large slurp of her drink, walking with Danna.'

Emmah- I suppose was allowed to talk for you to her, I- was right?' She'd- shot at her looking back with one brow up.

'Yes, I suppose you are,' said Naddalin said aloofly.

Unemployment did not suit Rita, so she shut up after the last threats of having her shity job.

Emmah's- her- hair that had once been set in elaborate curls now hung lank and unkempt around the face.

Naddalin- 'You are looking more like me every day- in the not caring...' and she touched her hair loose- curls, saying 'I still love yeah.'

'Same back...'

'It's what on the inside that counts...right... he- he.'

The- crimson paint, hand on the light post matched the holiday feel, and the color of Rita two-inch nails- that was chipped, shorter and shorter with every bit she made, and there were a couple of false jewels missing from her ring to on her hand, her nerves were that bad, that she was even picking her scabs again.

She'd- took another great gulp of her drink and said out of the- corner of her mouth,' Pretty girl, she is... Naddalin?'

'What you're saying this all over the fact that you like her- you have a piss- poor way of showing it.'

(We/us- Naddalin- and I, were) Looking into Danna's mind- she was doing everything she could to keep calm. 'One more word about Naddalin's and Emmah's love life and the- deal is off, of helping keep this job, and that's a promise,' said Emmah irritably-

'What deal?' said Rita, wiping her mouth on the- back of the sleeve of her right hands.'

'You haven't mentioned a deal yet, Miss. Prissy, you just told me to turn up- and you had something in it for me.'

'Yes, but you are taking it to far- and blowing it all out- a proportion...'

'What's that mean? ...Out- a proportion...?'

'So-o, this was a way to get to her, you never- ever read a card about me... is that it, God that's low and creepy?'

Find someone who cares, why do not you?'

'Oh, one of these days...'

'Yes, yes, one of these days you will write more horrible stories about Naddalin and me- and others, I am sure of this, yet you'll be doing it without a job, said Emmah indifferently- you're going to say shit about the wrong person- okay- you have been warned.' This is what was said in a letter to her boss, 3 or so day's latter.

She'd- took a deep shuddering breath, I will am the one to kiss and love her- and her eyes glitter- as she graded both of her hand in a tight hold.

They've run plenty of horror stories about Naddalin this year without my help- she said- and I have to do as they say,' said Rita, shooting a sideways look at her over her- top of her glass, when she met up with her the next day over yet more coffee and adding in a rough whisper,' how has that made you feel, Naddalin...? Distraught...? Betrayed...? Misunderstood...?'

'It's all in the fact, that I want you!' she said sheepishly. Naddalin looked at her astonished and completely flabbergasted.

'She- feels angry, of course,' said Emmah in a hard, clear voice. She is not into you so back off.'

'For the reason that she told she- Martita for Magic she- truth and she- Martita's too much of an idiot to believe her.'

'So, you actually stick to it, do you, that She- who must not be named is back- and I can turn you over to her and her girls if you don't become my lover?' Said Rita. Now how do you like that...? ...Lowering her glass and exposing Naddalin, in ways that were wrong with a piercing stare while she fingers strayed longingly to the- clasp of her bra, in the low light of the café.'

'Your mine... all mine, now- I have paid to them for this... you can do this for me.'

Emmah did not like it, yet there was not a thing she could do, looking at this girl have her way, like always- you know who was at the bottom of it all, even in the press- it was rigged.

You stand by all the garbage Duerre's been telling everybody, even if you cannot prove a thing, about you, know who return, and be the blame, and you being the- sole witness, about Lily too, being in on it, like I am now- try it- and you be the one, looking crazy, and disport- and then I'll say you

raped me- and I have the press behind me to say it... also- hey- you can sit your pretty little ass in the jail!'

Emmah ran and attacked, yet a magical beam of energy- from her hand pushed back flying and hitting the wall, wings out, and the fight was bloody between the two of them, fang ripping even, Emmah left limping away, and left-wing next broken if not completely, and her neck ripped open.

'There will never- ever be- sole witness,' snarled Naddalin, we get it- I know it.

There were dozen-odd death devourers there as well- all tricked too feel, I was the bad girl.

(Thought Naddalin-)

'Want their names- Rita screamed it you feel you have a case?'

'I'd love them all' she said. And then moments after stated, 'even if you don't get that kind of love- do you understand- So-o you say whatever you like, and do whatever you like to me- quite honestly...

I don't care either way,' breasted Naddalin. Now fumbling in her bag once more- for a tissue, and gazing at her as though she- was the- most beautiful thing she would- had ever seen- yet she had too as if she was under her spell and she was- or just playing the game of not have a choice.'

A great bold headline: '- Blames...' A subheading- saying: Culpability, 'Naddalin -

The name was there as the mastermind to a story that was too hard to believe: all of them were there, and newly named- 'The Death Sisters' are still among us, and the mother the most powerful of all- has been reviled.'

In addition, then beneath a nice big photograph of you, 'Disturbed teenage survivor of you know who's attacks the innocent, like Naddalin-, for over 100 years, and it also reviled that she was- NEVAEH, causing outrage all day, by accusing respectable and prominent members of the - magician and fallen angel community...''

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the- door creaked open slightly.

Emmah stood there with her eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down her- in front of her face, say you never told me this, yet I realize why you could not.

For once, someone did something for me... and you know they're going to kill her for this... yet, I have to say thank you, and move on- or it will eat at me like cancer.

'Also, you've heard everything now? Has it changed anything with you?'

'Not at all...' she said back.

And the screams were heard for Malcolm- the girls burrowed, their- fangs into her flesh, sucking the life out of Rita's neck, yet she will always be remembered- in the graveyard with a stone, that is the largest around- for helping me, for her outspoken words of having a voices, and courage, sometimes a friend is a girl, that you would least expect.

The question for me though is still- WHY!

Nevaeh

Book: 51

'If Only in My Mind'

Introduction: Burning Books

x

(I am the daughter of Marcella)

Remember- 'This world wants us all to be gay over the fact of overpopulation, and rights, yet having rights were some taken away- by letting us have our way?'

This is what he meant, for me to do with my life be his... anytime he wants it-girl and nothing more and nothing less, and it makes his rejection easier to accept... almost. Yet, the money is why, like- I am here- and the love too... yah that... I have been working on my studies more than them being with him or her... I would say it was to clear my head. I was looking over the paper that was said I wrote, I pretend to read the article, that Katie made for me. Above and beyond its suddenly, blindingly obvious.

He's too gloriously good-looking, not to think about non- stop. I know he loves me, yet he has a hard way of really showing just that.

I, understand, yet not so- her words make more sense than mine- I questioned this... He's not the man for me. I can live with this.

It's only when I'm in bed, that I try to sleep, that I allow my thoughts to drift off some - yet all the voices run through me- never hushing up. Never slowing- never stopping, for me to have a moment- in time to think alone.

'Katie, she is very good,' 'I'm going to study, is what I said to her... just wanted to get away from her mouth.' I am not going to think about him again, for now, I vow to myself, and opening my revision notes, I start to read. Thus far, his face keeps looking it to mine, and I see him looking back in the glass.

I put my pen down, which makes all the font that I write out and comforts it into text in word. I am finished, with my re-write of her draft. My final exam is over, I said- this will do- just fine the grin spread across my face can be helped.

It's probably the first time all week that I've smiled at something other than him. It's Friday, and we shall be celebrating tonight, really celebrating.

Paris- with Katie not him, I need this- the city the lights the sound- of something other than me inquiry all that is me - and him. She slanted her head and smiled at her companion, with grace seated her at the best table in the restaurant; her smile, at least, was honest, though almost nothing else about her was. The pale gray of her eyes was warmed to by sweet colored contact lenses; her blond hair had been darkened by the low light of the tower in the background, then subtly streaked with lighter shades. in her arms mentally begging her with every fiber of my being to kiss me, is what I really needed, just her true love for me - not asking... never demanding.

He didn't want me as a girlfriend, this week he was off doing what he does. I turn on to my side, now at the hotel, with her in the single bed, Frivolously, I wonder if perhaps he's with a new younger girl?

Think back to: 'Ah!' settled in his chair with a contented sigh, returning her smile. she is so beautiful woman in her teen years; she looks the US, with glossy dark hair and liquid gray eyes, and a luxurious mouth.

(Bed)

I close my eyes and begin to drift, and she nudges me, groggy as I- she had gambled that he wouldn't have his people dig any deeper than that, that he would run out of the patience required to wait for the answers before, she made a move on me. Her manufactured background was only a few layers deep; I knew she and I wanted too so why not; she hadn't had time to prepare more. Maybe he's saving himself. Well not for you, my sleepy subconscious has a final swipe at me before unleashing itself on my dreams.

I might even get drunk! I said- we can hear it's not agents the law here, I've never been drunk before, I know that the trill was wearing off, I glance across the sports hall at Katie, and she's still scribbling furiously, five minutes to the end of foolish. This is it, the end of my academic career if he tunes in...

She'd done the best she could in the time she had, she knew that she would have to be off doing her study's even on this run over the sea that takes less than a day now.

He made a point of keeping himself in shape and his hair hadn't yet started to gray-either that or he was as skilled as she at touch-ups. 'You look especially lovely tonight; have I told you that yet?

'I shall never have to sit in rows of anxious, isolated students again. Inside I'm doing graceful cartwheels around my head, knowing full well that's the only place I can do graceful cartwheels.

...And that night, I dream of her and I live long ever after, and I'm running through dark places with eerie strip lighting doing things we shouldn't, and I don't know if I'm running toward something, that I should want or not- the dream, leads me to choices, it's just not clear.

Katie stops writing and puts her pen down. She glances across at me, and I catch her Cheshire cat smile too. We head back to our apartment together in her Mercedes, refusing to discuss our final paper. Katie is more concerned about what she's going to wear to the bar this evening. I am busily fishing around in my purse for my keys.

'Merry, there's a package for you, there flowers from him...' she said.

Odd, I haven't ordered anything from Amazon recently.

Katie is standing on the steps up to the front door holding them.

'No.' Katie's eyes are wide with disbelief.' I nod.

'You have, she said, he loved you more than anything, I starting to believe it.' But then her gaze was warm, wet whit tears for she was in love with me more than he, at that moment.

I knew... she had trained long and hard to acquire it, I knew she was the one that would always care about me. 'Thank you again... I said to him in a mind message.' I recognize the quote was something slandered, where was the love in it?

I have not let myself dwell on RICHARD C. MAST - for the past week. Okay... so his blue eyes are still haunting my dreams, as she plays with me in them too, and I know it will take an eternity to expunge the feel of his arms around me and his wonderful perfume from my brain. Why has he sent me this?

'Can't think of anyone else, that would do this for me, like him though.' 'What does this card mean...?' 'I have no inkling; I think it's a warning - scrupulously he keeps threatening me off, with gifts. I have no idea why- he thinks I will keep coming back- just for the coming.

It's not like I'm beating his door down- and the wood hard- with only him.' I frown some... 'I know you don't want to talk about him, Merry, but he's seriously into you. Warnings or no.' 'I don't know, and I don't care. I can't accept these from him, yet not feeling as I did in the past some of the caring went away.

I love Katie, she's so loyal and supportive. I repack the books and leave them on the dining table. Katie hands me a glass of champagne.

'To the end of exams and our new life in NY,' she grins.

'To the end of exams, our new life in NY, and excellent results.' We clink glasses and drink.

The bar is loud and hectic, full of soon to be graduates out to get trashed. Katie joins us. He won't graduate for another- year, but he's in the mood to party and gets us into the spirit of our newfound freedom by buying a pitcher of margaritas for us all. As I down my fifth, I know this is not a good idea on top of the champagne.

'So, what now Merry?' She shouts at me over the noise, Katie has the constitution of a she-ass. 'That is doubtful,' she calmly replied. 'I have never liked any wine.' She'd made that plain from the start, who disliked the taste of wine, I thought sitting over here looking at her thinking that. Her taste buds were deplorably working-class. She, in fact, enjoyed a glass of wine, (I thought) now she is drinking only coffee or bottled water; order coffee for her, of that... I giggle.

'I think I'd better have a beer.'

'I'll go get us a pitcher.'

'More drink, Merry!'

Katie bellows...

'Classy- in France?'

Sure!

Her eyes for Katie, are glittery and wet for her. I move out of her way to hold and get up from our table. She is taking photos, yes, of her in her tight jeans, her usual stunning self, and high heels, hair piled high with tendrils hanging down softly around her face. I giggled over it like I have no idea what the time is, maybe I'll wake with her over to the tower and well go up and kiss at the top. Good thinking, Merry. I stagger off through the crowd, she yells at me, and I whisper in her mind that I am over here. Of course, there's a line, but at least it's moving fast to the top. I'm suppressing a drunken smile, hit me like an involuntary, looking out over with her in my arms and the kiss.

Back at the hotel my head, ponding so-o... I go for swims uncomfortably, with all the others, a lot of kids but even so it was nice, Well, the object of the exercise was to get drunk, on it's the other way 'round. I have succeeded, in working it off. I stare blankly over and over in a fast way- at the poster on the back of the toilet door that extols the virtues of safe sex. Yah- NO! like that is going to happen.

Holy crapping piss bucket, did I just call the RICHARD C. MAST in my mind? Shit. My phone rings for him it's all in my mind though, and it makes me jump when he says 'what do you want.' I squeak in surprise; by how the man he is being to me for what see to be noted on my own doing.

This is what it's like - probably not an experience to be repeated. The line has moved, and it's now my turn.

'Howdy,' I bleat timidly into the handset. I hadn't calculated on this.

'I'm coming to get you,' he says and hangs up... before I said I did want him too. The only RICHARD C. MAST - could sound so calm and so threatening at the same time. I pull my jeans up after the poster said not to do what I just did. My heart is thumping. Coming to get me? Well, I am coming to get her- ha. Hang on, I'm fine. Oh no.

I'm going to be sick... no... He's just messing with my head.

I said- 'Holy freaking crap nugget.'

I for one looked flushed and slightly unfocused. He can't find me here, I would say so with GPS within my body as we all have now, 'You've been gone so long.' Katie reprimands me. Besides, it will take him 4 hours to get here from NY, and we'll be long gone by then. I wash my hands and check my face in the mirror. 'Where were you?' I wait at the bar for what feels like an eternity for the pitcher of beer and eventually return to the table. 'The girl's room on a call, that I shouldn't have made.' Mind dealing- I said... 'ah-h-ha' were sitting out said at a bar café. 'All- out- in the - fresh air- and yeah.' 'Katie, I think I'd better think that you and I have a thing... 'Merry, you are such a softie with him- grow some lady nuts and say- freak you.'

'I'll be five minutes...'

'Going to MASTURBATE-?'

'Yep!'

xx

I make my way through the crowd another time, thinking of how I was going to get off like three more times, in 15. I am beginning to feel nauseous, my head is spinning uncomfortably, see in the little girl in the open stall next to me get there faster then I! and she's like freaking 10! and I'm a little unsteady with my frapping 3 figurings, or have girl gotten even more slutty. More unsteady than usual, she got it down. God, I turn on- you? No- nope ...?... didn't think so prev.

'I think I've just had a bit too much to drink, I feel like more pee then that is coming out of me.' I smile weakly at her and say- GOD FOR YOU HUNNY- good for you. 'and you too,' she murmurs, and her dark eyes are watching me intently, saying why you doing this on your own at your age... is a young girl thing to do. 'Do you need a hand?'

She asks and steps closer undies at her feet, putting her arm around me some. I've got this. I try and push her away rather weakly, of age, yet there nothing wrong with it.

'Merry, please,' she whispers, its Kate in my head saying don't do it, yet the young child is holding me in her arms, pulling me close, like a lover.

These days' free love is love! No matter the age...

'You know I like you, Merry, please.' He has one hand at the small of my back holding me against him, the other at my chin tipping back my head. Holy freak... he's going to kiss me.

Her hand has slipped into my hair, and she's holding me.

She whispers against my lips. His breath is soft and smells too sweet - of candy and Kool-Aid. She gently kisses me on my jaw, and lips and movies up to the side of my mouth and then right on my parted lips. I feel frightened, drunk, and out of control, yet I love having fee love like this - it like I was her age all over. The feeling is sickly sweet.

You are my friend, no and for life, I said to her, and I think, I'm going to throw up, so you should runoff. A voice in the dark says quietly. Holy shit! In my mind - RICHARD C. MAST - he's at this juncture, see what I have done.

I glance anxiously up at RICHARD C. MAST. He's glowering at Katie, and he's furious, like me for doing a young one as he said. Crapping, fly trap- my stomach hauls, and I double over, worse than when blood is shooting out of my hole, I'll hold you.'

She grabs my hair and pulls it out of the firing line - my body no longer able to accept the alcohol, and I vomit outstandingly on to the ground at me and the little French girls' feet her name was - Willow.

She has her arms around my middle body - holding my hair in a makeshift ponytail down my back so it's off my face, her hands the other is I try awkwardly to push her hair out of the way, but I vomit again... and again, even on to her half nude body.

Even when my stomach's empty, and nothing is coming up, oh shit... 'If you're going to throw up again, I note, with deep thankfulness, that it's in relative darkness. I vow silently that I'll never ever drink again, yet that like say I cannot have a day without sex. It's going down in me at some point.

My hands are resting on the block wall... How long is this going to last? I questioned... she takes her T stands, and I wipe my mouth, on she said she did not care... love at first sight... I questioned it. This is just too appalling for words, Katie said... I have to go out now. So-o horrifying gasping heaves of wackiness- my body feels. Then it concludes... Katie is still hovering by the entrance to the girl's room watching us.

Her (the young girls) hand are barely holding me up -vomiting profusely is exhausting. takes his hands off I say to him- I'm hectic with embarrassment, repulsed with myself. When I come around. My hands in on head I groan, as I place them there. Like that was the solitary worst moment of my lifespan. Twins taking a crap is what I think of at this moment- why I don't know. Oh- yeah- I do- there they are both doing just that- like- looking in at me over in there apparent 5,00 feet up or so all glass too. What should I say to him, for him to forgive this?

RICHARD C. MAST'S rejection will not be something good. I try to remember a worse one, that I have done, and I cannot. I glare at him, in my mind. For he is acting like my dad, not my lover. Oh, the humiliation... my mother was far worse. Marry who are you kidding, he's just seen you hurl all over the ground- nothing more said- Katie, she feels that what I did was nothing. Yet I still look pretty shamefaced to myself, and him- or so I think.

I have a few choice words for my so-called friend, none of which I can repeat in front of RICHARD C. MAST - There's no disguising your lack of ladylike behavior, and I can only come up with- and this is so, so many shades darker in terms of, I risk a glance at him, I see hem looking back at me mirrored back in my stare.

He's staring down at me, his face composed, yet he can help but fall for me fast, giving nothing away about how he was feeling about what I did we fall. Turning, I glance at Katie whom and,

like me, scared by the true filling that he heads to me from that day. I personally mutter, staring at the handkerchief which I am furiously worrying with my fingers.

It's so soft, and worm, as slid his fingers in her, he probably would expect her to share his bed tonight, but he was destined to be disappointed once again, in her saying: I don't feel the need after, soloing- so many times today. Her hatred was so strong she had barely been able to force herself to let him kiss her and accept his touch with some temperateness.

There was no way in hell like she'd let him do more than that to her tonight- for the movies running in her had of him acting like an ass and or like her dad. 'I'm sorry, he said for what I have done to you. Just in my thoughts of...' Apologize... and say back off. Katie mutters, derogatory but we both ignore that, and he slinks off back into the of my mind for rest and sleep. I'm on my own with doing me - and just Kate.

'We've all been here, perchance not quite as dramatically as you,' he says dryly.' It's about knowing your limits, Merry.

I mean, I'm all for pushing limits, but really this is beyond the pale. My head rings with excess alcohol and frustration. Do you make a habit of this kind of behavior?'

He was scolding me like an errant child, something you would never do to me I said to Kate that had me held by the butt, arching my back as she is holding me in her arms, for passion and cute kissing- then 69, her butt in my face, I move her lips around using sucking at mouth and teeth and tongue.

xxx

Katie- Put her legs on your shoulders and grab onto her waist or open up her vagina. (the last one feels better) or have her butt hole in your well- nose. Don't fart!!

-And-

At first kiss outside her vagina and then slowly lick her inside and just pretend she's the most beautiful thing you've ever- tasted and if she wants to talk dirty to her but talks to her about that beforehand so she won't be offended. I hope this helps... I love it. It's such a turn on.

- You want to kiss/nibble on her neck first. It's a good way to start turning her on.
- Suck on her nipples and play with them with your tongue.

This too is another great turn on.

- While you're doing these, massage her PUSS-PUSS over her pants just to get her ready for it. Just the night at the party for girls my age, before I had to write a line of silicone members hard core style- from all 10 small to biggest I have ever seen- in sizes, and saying I love it to get the scholarship for in hazing all to his liking- for pledger and at his command- with other girls from cheering me on to be in a frat house at and have honors.
- Work your way down, slowly and sexually.
- Open up her PUS*Y and go straight to the- Cl*t.
- Smack the PUS*Y with your tongue really fast, and suck and tug on it (not too hard though).
- As you're sucking her PUS*Y, slide your fingers in and out of her vagina opening.
- Once you have two fingers in there, and they're facing up, curve them like a hook and without going in and out, stroke her G-spot.

If this is your first time, beware of the smell and taste, as it makes most guys gag at first.

Part of me wants to say, if I want to get drunk every night like this, then it's my decision and nothing to do with him - but I'm not brave enough. Not now that I've thrown up in front of him. Why is he still standing there?

'No,' I said contritely. 'I've never been drunk before and right now I have no desire to ever be again.' Yet, I know that's a- lie...

'Come on, I'll take you home,' she murmurs- do this to me.

I just don't understand why he's here. I begin to feel faint. She notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and hoists me into his arms, holding me close to her chest like a child. For sucking and nabbing on her nipples. 'I need you, Katie.' Holy Moses, I say at C-*-M! I'm in her arms again. Where I do the same to her butt in the air, I go for it for like a half-hour.

'Dancing,' with Katie in the club she shouts, and I can tell he's mad at me acting slutty. He's is eyeing me- him the RICHARD C. MAST suspiciously.

I struggle with my black jacket and place my small shoulder bag over my head, so it sits on my hip. I'm ready to go, once I've seen Katie; to party my ass off... yet he is saying NO... No in my mind. And I just having fun. It's earsplitting, packed, and the music is underway, thus there is a huge mass on the dance floor. she sets me down, and, taking my hand, leads me back to the bar.

She knew that- I went out for some air- of him... embarrassed weak I feel dumb, and still drunk, somewhat exhausted, ashamed, and on some strange equal unquestionably off the scale electrified, by the cocktail of things I took down.

He's clutching my hand- I see them all wavy to my sight. Looking at them all swirly. Such a confusing array of emotions, play tricks in my mind like haunted schoolgirl ghosts. I'll need at least a week to process them all, I knew even in this state of mind of senseless.

Katie is not at our table, and Katie has disappeared. She looks lost and forlorn on his own. 'Where's Katie? She was off with some young girl doing what I did the night before.' I see that she had to feel as I did... she was always like that with me... we have to be the same in all- or not...! 'My head is beginning to pound in time to the thumping bass line of the music.'

He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He's served immediately.

'She's on the dance floor,' I touch RICHARD C. MAST'S arm and lean up and shout in his ear, brushing his hair with my nose, smelling his clean, fresh smell. All those forbidden, unfamiliar feelings that I have tried to deny surface and run amok through my drained body. I myself flush, and somewhere deep, deep down my muscles clench deliciously. He is such a - Control-Freak - I said to her- saying: your just having fun. He's watching me intently, mirrored in my- lost a young girl like the look of my eyes.

'Drink- Drink- drink' I heard her say, to this young girl in the bar and she was about 14,' he shouts his order at me. He looks irritated and livid, with me like I am his sex- Dollie, and nothing more...He's so overbearing, I thought. Give me love- I thought- or is sex now just the love? What is his delinquent? The moving lights are meandering and turning in time to the music casting strange colored light and obscurities all over the bar and the business. He's alternately white, green, blue, and bloodshot red.

There a dead girl in an ash box sitting on the ground, on the walkway to my home, she was just burnt a day go, and dumped, here, and this is where she is resting- no one cares about her like death and dumping ash that nothing- or that she was only 5 years of age...I take a hesitant swallow; I think about the life she never had- on like all the others thoughts going through my mind I care.

'All of it,' shouts in my head- like the way she passed- by some killing her for the dollar in her underwire where she keeps and for the young rape.

I sway slightly, and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. Um- Merry... are you ever going to live this down, and say she slipped away? She was my sister girl- and mom and they just dump her off... to be kicked by passing feet- yah but that is what they do these days- girl.

Cemeteries are wasted spaces of land, why do that when you need to construct things in that space. There is nothing left to remember her by- nothing by the memories in my mind of whom she was.

It makes me feel queasy, as I look in the box 3 x 6-inch books and see nothing but blackened asks... blowing some of the wands of the high walkways... in the glowing tingling light of the smoggy covered skyline. I notice this thought of what she was wearing the last time that I saw her, a blur though- wearing; a loose white linen shirt, snug jeans, playing in the park on the roof of the high-rise, pink converse sneakers, and a pink and white jacket, I would know I see a flick in some of the ash hitting my face as dust in the wind.

Now in bed sleeping pills at my side, taking the glass from me, she places them for me- so sweet. Her shirt is unbuttoned at the top, and I see a sprinkling skin coming at me- and I somewhat out... then just to see her ass in my face... when I come to it, in my groggy frame of mind, she looks yummy.

He takes my hand once more. Holy cow - he's leading me onto the dance floor. Shit. I do not dance. He can sense my reluctance, and under the colored lights, I can see his amused, slightly sardonic smile. He gives my hand a sharp tug, and I'm in his arms again, and he starts to move, taking me with

him. Boy, he can dance, and I can't believe that I'm following him step by step. Maybe it's because I'm drunk that I can keep up. He's holding me tight against him, his body against mine... if he wasn't clutching me so tightly, I'm sure I would swoon at his feet. In the back of my mind, my mother's often-recited warning comes to me: Never trust a man who can dance.

I looked into him/ his daily thoughts and what he did, just to see that he was with a 15-year-old - not me- saying- 'Such a tight pussy- so tight and young and small and the sucking oh so tight it's letting are out the sides. - he said as I see that he was with a new girl named- Nataliee.

I just was modified...Really likes she likes someone, I gasp. Katie is making her moves go in her mind for me of her hook up, she had with her new friend. She's dancing her ass off, and she only ever does that if she likes someone. It means there'll be three of us for breakfast tomorrow morning. Katie! Outside and inside my head pounding away, loud. I cannot hear what he says, I tuned it out... it was my wishes. I can't tell the color under the pulsating to all the heat of the flashing lights going off, is the day starting a new.

I Katie- curly blonde hair, and light, wickedly gleaming eyes.

Me- She pulls me into her arms, where she is more than happy to be... Katie!

But I never got to talk to her, the girl she had last night- I had to meet her. A new day is all the same- until the night-RICHARD C. MAST propels us off the dance floor in double-quick time. Is she okay? She said- she's not you- though. I need to do the safe sex lecture, for the school, the teacher I know is a lezbo, but yeah...she loves me.

I can see where things are heading for her and him, In the back of my mind, I hope she reads one of the posters on the back of the toilet doors. My thoughts crash through my brain, fighting the drunk, fuzzy feeling. It's so warm in here, so loud, so colorful - too bright. My head begins to swim with so many thoughts of him and her, and her and then him- and what she did- he did- and what I did with all, oh no... The last thing I hear beforehand, I pass out in RICHARD C. MAST -'s arms is his harsh description. It's very quiet, I am comfortable and warm, the light is muted, in this bed. 'Freak!' I open my eyes, Hmm... I'm tranquil for a moment.

'This looks bigger, then I remember,' I said to him- by this time I have a lust for him so- that I need him- oh so much. Oh so...! It's oddly familiar to me yet all-new the love only he can give- odd as only she can too as a girl- and he a boy. I have no idea where I am, halfway in the night- I come to it and

see I am in his bed nude, and he going down on me, lovingly hard! I am enjoying the strange unfamiliar surroundings, of him just work- work- working it! Where? ...?... Where am I? My confused brain struggles over its recent painterly memories.

Holy crap- I said- like that is carp the is holy- said Katie in my mind... ha funny. I'm a hotel he owns in Atlantic City. ...In a suite- I see him coming to me, ready for loving making, As I did the last time, we were together, he loves it when I spray all over his face, as he loves doing to me as well! I have stood in a room similar to this with Katie. Oh shit. I'm in RICHARD C. MAST -'s suite. This room is worth more the then-White House- and some of those places that why don't care about- How did I get here?

I questioned... memories of the previous night come slowly- back to haunt me, like my sister young life coming to end fast with someone, that did not love her just for hot young sex. She never had a boy toy. Nothing dead at 5! Holy shit. No socks...No jeans... I see this photo of her playing- where she was just being a kid-I see the first time she cum-med, on her little bed, it was the same night- she found out she was going to have to not see me any longer- so Katie showed her to be happy- I glance at the bedside night table- and see her face on the screen that movies the photos. I don't remember coming here. I'm wearing my t-shirt, bra, and panties. I FEEL

Broken- The drinking, oh no the drinking, the handset call, oh no the phone call, the vomiting, oh no the vomiting. Katie and then RICHARD C. MAST. Oh no. I cringe inwardly.

The orange juice tastes heavenly, It's I sit up and take the tablets. On it is a glass of orange juice and two tablets. Advil. He is such a Control freak that he is, he thinks of the whole thing. Essentially, I don't feel that bad, probably much healthier than I personally merit too. Dehydration quenching and invigorating. Nothing beats freshly squeezed orange juice for refreshing a parched mouth.

How are you feeling?' 'Improved better than I earned,' I- gabble.

'How did I get here?' My voice is small, contrite.

Don't worry about it he said- fastly.

Followed by: 'Good morning Merry. I peek up at- him, I for one, like- feel similar to a two-year-old, if I close my eyes when I'm not really here. There's a knock on the door, for it to open. RICHARD C. MAST -'s sweat; the notion does odd things to me. My heart leaps into my mouth, and I

can't seem to find my voice, to say come in. He opens the door anyway and strolls in, being all sweet. Holy hell, he's been working out, in tight shorts that show off his backside.

He comes and sits down on the edge of the bed, way, off, like his hair, blowing in the wind as the doors were open to the cityscape. Sweat, hard I take a deep breath and close my eyes, I can't bear to look at the cheat any longer. He's staring at me, blue bright eyes, and as usual, I have no idea what he's thinking, even if it is run hard in my mind of all the facts. He closes enough for me to touch, for me to smell, of him to be overpowering- and I want him- oh no- YES! Do I want him!

The towel, he had was thrown on the bed at my feet.

He hides his thoughts and feelings so well. Grasps is let out of me for he has me around his neck, going in for it. Like his sex toy that is a rag doll, I wriggle hard. He even takes me from behind over the chair without me giving the okay- I was all his! And I look down and see that I am shaved! Oh my... 'Did you put me to bed?' Did you get me this night's top?

His face is blank.

'Yes!'

Um- it was an intoxicating cocktail- 'After you passed out, that he gave me last night my little girl down under is still red- and I can walk- so much better than a margarita, I was out in the la-la land- and I do remember the hardcore FREAKING! and now I can speak from experience, this man goes in hard and deep.

'Did I throw up again?' My voice is quieter. Don't worry about getting knocked up I have taken care of that too... with this. An implant was placed by a doter last night when you were passed out- don't thank me!

Don't say anything- don't even think about it- it for your own good.

Um- is all I got out before his index finger hashed me - up to- my lips.

'Did you undress me?' I whispered...

'Funny you cute- that's the least of your worries!' He said.

Um...?

I thought...! Maybe I think too much...? Maybe he's right...? Or is this wrong...?

'Monday.'

'Clever girl. When do you start?' I press my thighs together at the delicious memory, 'SIIP' and it reminds me that I need to spread my knees. For her, I shuffle them apart. How long will he make me wait?' No- yes... she leans forward and kisses my forehead. I am thrown by his casual command but do as I'm bid, and he undoes my bra and unzips my skirt. He pushes my skirt down, cupping my behind as he does, and kissing my shoulder. He leans against me, I and his nose nuzzle my hair, inhaling deeply. He squeezes my buttocks.

'You intoxicate me, Miss King, and you calm me. Such a heady combination.' He kisses my hair. Grabbing my hand, he tugs me into the shower.

'Ow,' I squeal. The water is practically scalding. RICHARD C. MAST grins down at me as the water cascades over him.

She smiles, I gape at him quizzically. She lifts her head to gaze down at me, a hint of amusement in her eyes, and sighs. She strokes his fingertips down my cheek, then down the length of my body.

1

'It was a yearning to burn.' The computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I pads, and PC's, without looking through old dusty pages, plus Its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unpredicted sex.

We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unpredicted sex now morning, like the alarm, going off to let me no so... its 7 am... on a Monday- and the year is 2070. I have great frustration with at myself as I frown at my look in the mirror, not what you call ass ugly- but days like this one you just wish you were dead... all girls no that feeling.

The feeling of worthlessness was over-warming me. 'Look at this hair what a mess- I said- in my mind, rolling my eyes and making faces as I go to pick my nose.' It's just not doing what I want... I said whispering. Hell... look at it- my hair my face- and eyes, like- just freaking sucks today, I finally said it out loud- yet the cat looked like I was crazy too- for talking. Damn Harper for being sick, and lay open to me to this nightmare... of like having to do this... for her.

I don't want to but- it's for her. I feel I have too- n- all.

I should be studying for my final exams, and I am in high school girl- looking forward to graduation- intern work looks good for a job, coming up like I won't be 17 years of age until July of this year- but it looks good to have- the ass-kissing- no? All the test- all the test- God just wants to be done with it all- like which are all this week.

Yet, here I am trying to brush my hair into submission, and look somewhat cute... hard for a girl like me said by the others- not by me. I must not sleep with it wet anymore- God last night just jumped in bad nude... and masturbate 10 times, I use a vibrator, and dildo- but most of the times I use my hands, I started when I was 6- manly to get to sleep by passing out afterward- to get up... and look at all of this that you see here. at the time- 16 as of this today boys ask all the time- Bra size: 34b yah I no.

Underwear type: thongs, boy-shorts, when you developed pubic hair 11 Do you Shave/Wax? When did you start? 12 Do you masturbate?

Yes, with a dildo going in out coming hard over and over for some boy that you wish was real. When did you start? That why I said it- Have you had sex? Not yet- How old were you the first time?

Um? That would be nice- so I would not feel like a complete loser.

Have you given oral sex to a guy? How old were you the first time?

Yes, at 9-year-old... Have you been fingered? Ah, yeah like

when I was 10. How old were you the first time? I said it... it's true.

Do you change in front of girlfriends? Family? Yes, friends and mom, and my girls. Skinnydip? Yes, with friends... the top questions boys ask me... about who they think I am. And all they care about.

Anyways- I must not sleep with it wet. Reciting this mantra several times, I endeavor, once more about it all, to bring it under control with the brush as I finger myself- just to get the edge off-

maybe getting one rubbed out before the day starts. I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me, and give up.

My only option is to restrain my wayward hair in a ponytail and hope that I look semi-presentable. Shannia is my roommate, us- we- are just two girls trying to make it without Mom and Dad holding our hands- you know how it is- I want to be a big girl- playing house they call it.

I would say that she should be the one doing this for me. But I have too... Consequently, she cannot attend the interview she'd arranged to do with me; so- o I would not blow chunks on the poor ass hole like he's some dick- some mega industry-list tycoon that I've never heard of... you the type old crabby dick sucker. That gets joy out of betting off under the desk to girls like me, hand coffee.

Like, I just want to work for the student newspaper, so I really have to do this- for college... and get nothing out of it...?

So, I have been volunteered to do this agent my well and better judgment. I know what is going to be... me getting hurt and having to come home crying, and need to come hard, in my undies- off to the side. I have final exams calls for me to do this, one essay to finish they call- yah sure you suck the man off- for it, and I'm supposed to be working this afternoon and be happy- sure. Smile and walk away- is what I do- in school, not know shit about this job- no education at all- here.

Thanks... I think on the inside... but no - today- like I have to drive one hundred and seventy-five miles, me paying for it all- no question's asked- to sit down and get ass freaked- in a scene- all the way down to downtown New York in order to meet the mysterious RICHARD C. MAST of Ellie Magazine head shit of bad writing- Inc.

As a brilliant businessperson and major sponsor of our school, his time is extraordinarily precious (my school would say not me) - much more precious than, she tells me... my teachers that is I need it with SATs- yeah- right... Damn her extra-curricular activities. If I wanted that I would have suck and blowing a trumpet in the band for 6 years. It's fingering he- he.

Shannia is huddled on the couch, rubbing and humping a pillow- in the living room spread open she turns- like I should be- with her... she's diddling herself as a 17-year-old will do... that just for fun- yelling making the old ass next door pissed. They creep- look at us- shaking their head to what they don't understand, just calling us the slut generation- as they sand on their verandas. Like you can do it on the veranda- of your apartment?

He- he- I get it- she's open... to it... it was said. 'Mary, I'm sorry about cutting out on you. It took me nine months to get this interview... from my dick suckers at school- It will take another six to reschedule, and a reset of my last year but I not going. I'll just drop out... it's what they want... anyways - you're dumb- I said. Come with me so-o we'll both have graduated. As an editor with honors, I can't blow this off- you shouldn't either- come on like what you have done. I would rather just masturbate all the time... okay...? I said... (You can make more doing that... she said under her breath.)

Please,' Shannia begs me in her harsh, sore throat voice for sucking one off the night before. How does she do it? Even sick she looks freaking beautiful, strawberry blonde hair all in place and blue bright eyes, although mine looks wet and water like the way she should look doing what she has just done.

'Nice butt pug... ha- thanks she said.' I ignore my twinge of annoying sympathy for my low self-esteem. 'Of course, I'll go Shannia if you- his- me here- and she points downward. You should get back to bed with me.

Would you like some Nyquil or Tylenol mixed with alcohol?' That such do it...? 'all of the above, please... Here are the questions for you, did I need to do this just to be a writer- of shit. So, her my recorder doesn't pay it back you may get porn sounds of last night. Just press record here- see the button that says recorded. Make notes, I'll transcribe it all- for you, I know you can't do that- without bitching about it.'

'I know nothing about him,' I murmur over and over, trying to find something I may like about him, and failing to quash my rising dread and fear. 'See these here the list in her hand - a crumpled piece of paper- all the questions just ask these and you'll do fine - got them from google - like what I did all the way through high school google well teach you- not your teachers, see- see you through that in a line- and you look smart to this dick- that's what it's all about kissing ass. Go, love- It's a long drive where you don't want to look bad in front of the big-time faggot.

I don't want you to be late- your right- so he's gay.' That what they say- freak him and see and let me no- nice... slut I said to her- you know it- she said back. 'Okay, I'm going- don't hurt yourself there. Get back to bed- and put that thing away or shave it. Going to eat out latter- WHAT? Food- food latter.' I stare at her fondly. Only for you, Shannia, would I do this? 'I will do it all- like all ways- good luck- G- thanks- you care? I said. And thanks to Mary - as usual, you're my lifesaver.' Get'n-together my

schoolbag, I smile ironically at her, then head out the door down all the steps to the car. I cannot believe, I have let Shannia talk me into this.

Nevertheless, then Shannia can talk anyone into anything, she was the hot one in school, not me. She'll make an exceptional journalist- I am sure of it so would have I if I would have been given the chance. She's communicative, robust, convincing, quarrelsome, lovely - and she's my sweetheart, sweetie of a friend. The roads are clear wet rain covered yet, I set off from home, it's early, and I don't have to be in New York until three this afternoon to be on time. I'm not sure if my old car, well make the journey in time- she a very old gill.

Oh, a fun drive and the miles slip away as I floor the pedal- backfiring all the way. My journey's end is the headquarters of Mr. Durval 's global enterprise that he so-called made all on his own doing. It's a huge 100-story office building, all curved glass, and steel, an architect's modern imaginary, with Durval wrote inconspicuously in brace over the crystal-like a glass of front revolving doors, and all on the building high up.

It's a quarter to three when I come to my destination, greatly relieved that I'm not late as I walk into the mammoth - and frankly unapproachable - glass, steel, and white stonework antechamber. In arrears, the solid sandstone is the desk of dark wood, a very attractive, dressed up, young girls' smile's all too creepy for my liking- enjoyably at me- like they want to know all about me- be there eye. She's wearing the sharpest charcoal suit jacket and white shirt I have ever seen. She looks immaculate. 'I'm here to see Mr. Durval.

I am - so and so- I said- yeah okay- it doesn't matter take a- number, I call you when I fill it your time to see this man. So, I have- to kiss your ass to do this lady she said all possible- yes or you can walk out the door. FREAK YOU! I said to here no said me up- bossy for me- but 3 hours is too long to be puss- freaked around with. She arches her eyebrow slightly as I stand self-consciously before her. I am beginning to wish I'd borrowed one of Shannia's formal blazers rather than wear my shorts and a tank top. I have made an effort and worn my one and only skirt, my no-nonsense brown knee-length boots, and a blue sweater. For me, this is smart. I tuck one of the escaped tendrils of my hair behind my ear as I pretend, she doesn't intimidate me. 'Miss we've expected you but not looking like you roll out of bed. Please sign in here,

Miss Merry, you'll want the last train over there to go up- on the left, press for the twentieth hounded floor.' She smiles kindly at me, amused no doubt about it, as I sign in - and sigh- and stop and

get a dress- for this man that too old to get it up to care about me showing it all off. 'Stuff your eyes with wonder, I always say, live as if you'd drop dead in ten seconds - like most that do these days and your body is bunt on the spot in plain sight for the world to see - just like a book- no one cares about what inside of you- is all cold what on the cover- not the text just the picture. See the world... good now look at it- I don't see anything to live for- It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in place of work my way.'

She indicators too me and as I go past security as a GUEST- very confidently and yet shy- stamping on the forward-facing. I can't help my smirk.

Surely, it's obvious that I'm just visiting. I don't fit in here at all. The train beaters with a gust of air moving past me fast- mag-lev- me with incurable swiftness to the floor in under zip time. The doors slide open to let more androids work in and out, I call them a waste of what we - you and I could be doing, and I'm in another outsized antechamber - again all glass, steel, and white sandstone. I look up at the top- seeing the sky go from blue to black... Yet to me and most this is nothing these days.

Nothing changes in my life really just a new day of shit, I- inwardly sigh. Thanking the train for the ride, I walk over to the - bank of silos past the two security men who are both far more vigorously dressed than me, in their blue armed suits.

I'm threatened by another desk of sandstone and another young blonde - no name just a number- looks at me dressed faultlessly in black and white who doesn't even rise to greet me, or care I am there. Other to pop gum- and look at the ID- slightly- that the robots' job she said- I don't get paid to do that or think- so why do it? 'All and sundry I feel that I left something behind when he passed think in my thoughts, my grandfather said- too always' work hard.

2

A child or a book or a painting or a house or a wall built or a pair of shoes made - you're smart- go for your dreams even if the world is not a nice place. Or a garden planted - now looks at the world- plant things ha. Something your hand touches in some way- has meaning always, like part of your soul has somewhere to go when you die, remember that- yeah right- I roll my eyes- at that too.

'Why...? Why is it?' we go...? That was all I remember before the put him down - and let him up. I was kicking and scramming- and the ripped me away at 10 years old- it how it has to be- MOM said.

'Too much of a cost on us taxpayers. Death and end of funds... is life.' Miss, could you wa it here the bot said, please?' She points to a seated area of white skin covered chairs.

Behind the leather chairs is a spacious glass-walled meeting room with an equally spacious dark wood table and at least twenty matching chairs around it. Beyond that, there is a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the New York skyline, that appearance out through the city on the way to the Sound. It's a spectacular panorama, and I'm temporarily paralyzed by the view and the look down all glass flooring too. Wow- I said amazed...

I sit down, fish the questions from my satchel, and go through them, inwardly cursing, Shannia for not providing me with a brief biography. I know nothing about this man I'm about to interview. He could be ninety or he could be thirty. The uncertainty is galling, and my nerves resurface, making me fidget. I've never been comfortable with one-on-one interviews, preferring the anonymity of a group discussion where I can sit inconspicuously at the back of the room.

To be honest, I prefer my own company, reading a classic British novel, curled up in a chair in the campus library. Not sitting shuddering apprehensively in an immense glass and stone structure. I just rolled my eyes at myself in the many shiny objects around me just like this showing too much ass.

Like- get a hold of it- it's just a man winkie look at me in the face- why is this okay? I said to myself. Judging building for adding nudes in artwork, which is too scientific and cold-modern, I guess Old is in his thing: fit, tanned, and fair-haired to match the rest of the personnel. I only warmth is the glow of fire lights- just for show-An additional elegant thing-ie-me-bob-er, a more nude girl is compromised sexual poses' flawless girls showing it all, shit look at this compared to that- not good- not good... I see younger no-names blonde comes out of a large- acting mindless door that lights open with their barcode on their rest.

A deep breath, I stand up. 'Miss' it's time. It's like a death march I thought... with the creepy music in the background- playing in my implanted headset... adjusting automatically. Every person the whole dying world must leave something behind when he/she/it dies- it- being the no names- that are just- works that have not met the grade of IQ of 50 or less, my grandfather they are not dumb some are at 10- smoking and drugging- nothing more- just no work in them.

So, this is what they do- make them drummer... hand out money for nothing- they can even come op to a child of 3 making a book or a painting or tie a pair of shoes or make them.

Otherwise, a garden planted... something your hand touched some way so your soul has somewhere to go when you die, and when people look at that tree or that flower you planted, you're there. 'Indeed,' I clear my throat- of what was hard to swallow. 'Certainly.' There, that sounded more confident- when I have voices in my hand say you'll never do SHIT. 'The RICHARD C. MAST will see you in a moment. May I take your jacket- miss the deadbeat said?'

'Oh, sure thing...' I struggle out of the jacket and was nice to the dumb-bum. Can I get you anything to eat or drink, would you like: 'Would you like tea, coffee, water- saltines?' Something at all? 'Um - no- thank you- I said back to this- it- female.' This blonde- glares her eyes- at the task, she now has to do- for hardly any money- she is very young and uneducated- for a woman of her age sitting at the desk she's at doing this work; and as she asks, turning her attention back to me as she stumbles to do the simple job. Here it is- 'A glass of water. Thank you,' I murmur not looking up at her- for she a no-buddy. Olivia scurries up proximately and scurries to an entrance/exit on the other side of the room.

'Olivia, please fetch Miss Marry a glass of water.' Her voice is unyielding- and do your job- NOW. 'My request for forgiveness for her lack of skills, Miss- she's only a 25 IQ-er, Olivia is our new intern- part of will help you suck at life program... Please be seated as I do this to for her. Our RICHARD C. MAST will be an additional five or so moments.' It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you change something from the way it was before you touched, right- the girl asked- thinking- I said- don't... she went on saying something that's like you after you take your hands away - is what matters- right. Shut up! She said too it... Olivia returns with a glass of iced water on a hot plate. Perhaps RICHARD C. MAST insists on all his employees being blonde... dumb shits...?

'Here you go, Miss.' And she dumps it down my lap... 'Thank you.' Dumb Shit! I mutte red under my breath... 'We need not be let alone... the dumb one said to me... were a danger to ourselves' and others... We need to be really bothered once in a while to see if we're alive. How long is it since you were really bothered- how about now by you, About something important, about something real?' Stop asking dumb question's... I said to her... that doesn't matter in today's life. Echoing on the sandstone floor this blonde tramp over to the large desk, her heels clicking. She sits down, and they both continue their dumb ass work they don't know how to do well. I have definitely worn the wrong clothes, yet ones more- to sexy, I'm wondering idly if that's legal... do look as I do for this...?

Humm? I questioned it... buying a short low-cut dress. She seems to excel at jumping from her seat. She's more nervous than me... looking at me! Sex is all that it's about- right- it's all they want,

these days. Olivia turns and says my job is done as she goes through the door. Good, now I don't have to hear that running in my ears.

Olivia has jumped up and called the trains. I don't hear the reply... to over niceness. The others turn and look at me as I get up showing way too much skin, they are all seeing all of me - upskirt shot here, some girls smile at the look of my vagina - their dark eyes crinkling at the corners getting all they want to remember about me. 'You don't need to knock - just go in.' She smiles kindly. 'Good afternoon ladies this man said to them,' he says as he departs through the sliding door looking at all of my - eyes dropping at then up.

3

I trying so hard not to overwhelm my nerves, as I stand rather unsteadily. Get-together my schoolbag, I leave my glass of water and make my way to the moderately open door - to be shown the way. The door just thrust open as I stumble through - always trapping and clumsy, tripping over my own feet, and tumbling headfirst into the office - where he sits - looking at me with sex eye. Double dog freaking shit dick suck - bite me - I said - as I walked in - good - entrance miss he said... as I am still falling over my two left feet! I am on my hands and knees in the doorway to RICHARD C. MAST'S office, and gentle hands are around me helping me to stand - they were his - a young hot thing that I was falling for just by the look of well that. I am so embarrassed, damn my clumsiness. I have to steel myself to glance up. Holy cow - he's so young.

He extends a long-fingered hand to me once I'm upright.

'I'm RICHARD C. MAST -. Are you all right would you like to sit?'

So young - and attractive, very attractive. He's tall, dressed in a fine gray suit, white shirt, and black tie with unruly dark copper-colored hair and intense, bright gray eyes that regard me shrewdly. It takes a moment for me to find my voice.

'Um. Actually - 'I mutter. If this guy is over thirty, then I'm a monkey's uncle. In a daze, I place my hand in his and we shake. As our fingers touch, I feel an odd exhilarating shiver run through me. I withdraw my hand hastily, embarrassed. It must be static. I blink rapidly, my eyelids matching my heart rate. I hope you don't mind; I am the RICHARD C. MAST.' 'Are you - so?' His voice warm sexual, perchance entertained, but it's difficult to tell from his impassive expression. He looks mildly interested, but above all, polite. 'Merry. I'm studying English Literature with my girlfriend you no, um... High school

intern... 'I see he said nicely,' I reasoned with himself some - I see the flicker of loss in the smile of his expression - given, but I'm not sure. 'Would you like to sit?' He waves me toward a white leather buttoned L-shaped couch.

His office is way too big for just one man. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, there's a huge modern dark-wood desk that six people could comfortably eat around. It matches the coffee table by the couch. Everything else is white - ceiling, floors, and walls except, on the wall by the door, where a mosaic of small paintings hangs, thirty-six of them arranged in a square. They are exquisite - a series of mundane, forgotten objects painted in such precise detail they look like photographs. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

'A local artist. Trouton,' says - when he catches my gaze.

'They're lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary,' I murmur, distracted both by him and the paintings. He cocks his head to one side and regards me intently.

'I couldn't agree more, Miss King,' he replies, his voice soft and for some inexplicable reason I find myself blushing.

'I feel I've known you so many years?' 'For the reason that I like you,' she said, 'and I don't want anything from you.'

Apart from the paintings, the rest of the office is cold, clean, and clinical. I wonder if it reflects the personality of the Adonis who sinks gracefully into one of the white leather chairs opposite me. I shake my head, disturbed at the direction of my thoughts, and retrieve Katie's questions from my satchel. Next, I set up the minidisc recorder and am all fingers and thumbs, dropping it twice on the coffee table in front of me.

RICHARD C. MAST says nothing, waiting patiently - I hope - as I become increasingly embarrassed and flustered. When I pluck up the courage to look at him, he's watching me, one hand relaxed in his lap and the other cupping his chin and trailing his long index finger across his lips. I think he's trying to suppress a smile.

'Sorry,' I hesitated, about me - being me. 'I'm not used to all of this - or always like this - at least I try not to be.' 'Take as much time as you want, Miss,' he says.

'Once you have taken so-o much worry to set up the recorder on your phone - you ask me now?' 'Do you mind if I record your answers- that was my first question?' I flush up some- beat red. I flutter my eye at him softly and sweetly, unsure what to say or do in front of this young attractive man, and I think he takes misfortune on me for the reason that he sympathizes at my age - and sheepishness. He's playful, mocking, full of fun and life, giving me, I hope not to just cut my writs with safety scissors - for being dumb. 'No, I don't mind at all.' This is what I said.

'Did my girlfriend- explain what the interview was for?' Same 10 question all you kids ask- I get it. 'Oh...!' 'Surely, to give the impression in the matriculation issue of the student newspaper - I have to do this part of the graduating- thing... as I shall be discussing the grades at this year's graduation ceremony- with the higher up.' Oh- um-hum!

This is news to me, ha- not really- your part of my program at the school- yep I said. I frowned some, uninteresting my naughty thoughtfulness back to what I was asked to do - the job. Besides I'm momentarily pre-engaged by the thought that someone, not much older than I- okay, maybe like I'm 17 he's 30 years or so, and okay, mega-successful, likes me a little- like is going to present me with my degree- if I do all that he asks- ALL. 'Good,' I swallow nervously. 'I have some questions, RICHARD C. MAST.' I smooth a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

My cheeks heat at the realization- he's looking at me- like a boy that wants a hot heated horny - hook up, and I sit up, and fair my shoulders show my dress is not showing to much - in an attempt to look taller- and doing so- his eyes move down- showing that now- just more threatening- kill him with sex and I have him eating me out- my hand that is. Yeah- that's the saying... 'I supposed you might,' he says, disapproving.

He's amused at me- as he is looking me over with a- lot of intentions. Pressing the start button on the recorder, I try to look professional. I think- about all the books my granddad had all lost in the great fires, of things not to be known... it's all on here now - I look at my I phone/pad 20 on my wrist licked into my brain waves.

All that is need to be smart is done for you... at the swap of a finger. 'There must be something in books, something we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there, there is not the law said as they put my grandmother down - with them in flam. You don't stay for anything- the man in red and black said.' Remember the stories.

I snap out of my daydream- of all that is him- and the past. 'You're very young to have amassed such an empire. To what are you in debt too with your success?' Like a god? No... I peep up at him- biting my lip. His smile is rueful, but he looks vaguely disappointed.

Yet- 'If you hide your lack of knowledge, no one will hate- on- you and you'll never- ever learn- from it.' 'Maybe you're just fortunate.' This isn't on Katie's list of things to do. However, he's so superior. His eyes flare momentarily in surprise.

'Business is all about individuals- dumber than smart, Merry, and I'm very good at judging people- I can see what you are and what you'll do for me already. 'If you hide your ignorance, no one will hit you and you'll never acquire anything.'

I know how they tick you and me- how they think- and what you're thinking now about me Miss, what makes the show, what makes them cleverer, what motivates them and was doesn't, and how to incentivize them. I play the game to a point- you get what I am saying- I don't have to act- they all just want me- and want to me be... for me being me. I am everything more than a God... to my pupates. So, I am a girl on a string for you- know you do as I say or walk. I see- I said shy biting my lip harder... as the strain of his tone.

I personally hire an extraordinary team... I would not stand- for less than that. 'If not, they can take their ass out my door and not waste my time, I have no time for shit on a silver plat- Miss- passed off as good food- aka good work-in this case.' and I give compensation well- to those that earn it.

Um- I said along- 'With school turning out more racers, steeplechasers, competitors, tinkerers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and creative creators, the word 'scholarly,' unquestionably, technologically advanced the swear word it is worthy to be.' I get what your saying- I have always done more than other girls. Um -You do know this is going to a paper- right? Word or word...? Um... he said that's cute and a sweet thought.

He pauses and fixes me with his somber stare- yet lustful- and unfulfilled in his own accomplishments- there was something missing- with him I thought. 'My certainty is to attain victory and many trumpets in any structure one has to make oneself dominant in that structure... I know it inside and out- just like felling you out inside and out, (That's what he was doing felling me out.) -Know every detail- about a young woman.

'I work firm and freak hard- whit the ones that want to freak, very hard. I make decisions based on reason and truths. Figuring all the ass holes and pussies in the process.' Um- like- do you want me to write that down word or word?

Sure...! He said- I am so sick of this... same things by girls like you... what do you want to know... I have an ordinary gut character, that can spot and encourage a good dense inkling and good individuals. The end result is, it's always down to good society.'

'I don't contribute to luck or chance or what some call blessings, Miss. I and I only have done this... The firmer I work the better breaks I seem to have- by curing out those that believe in something that is not real to me. It really is all about having the right individuals on your side and point in the right direction their energies for that reason.

'You sound like someone that has to have full a control not letting it all go till you say or time is do.' The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, for sounding too sexual.

'Oh, I exercise control in other ways, I said to him,' I bet you do he said, with a trace of wit in his sweet smile. I look at him, and he holds my gaze steadily, impassive. My heartbeat quickens and my vagina tightens, and my face flushes again and he feels me in. I wish he'd stop doing that... looking at me like he wants to freak hard... and not stop until I come 10 or more times on him. Why? Why does he have such a demoralizing result on me, yet so flawless... in everything he says. Um- He continues, his voice soft.

His overwhelming good-looks maybe. The way his eyes intensity blue at me. The way he strokes his index finger in and against his lower lips then touching my face with the other its right... sweet hot steamy lust.

'Do you feel that you have an enormous power of your girls to do as you say?' Taking them for your bitches? You're not like most school girls I had in here... I like that you don't mind speaking your mind, yet I would have to teach you to be humble... wouldn't I? -And obedient... he said. I immense power... of all my workers in here and out... developed by promising control over all things. you were not born into this I would say- you need to stick to the page. It's secret... in that, its reveries that you made your money by having your mom and dad hand it to you?' Nah... cute... go on, he said.

My mouth drops open- when he said you need to shut the freak up. I am staggered by his lack of unpretentiousness; you see... punk kids like you piss me off... so... you want me to freak you has

nothing to do with me getting this job? 'Sure, it doses... yet you have to be right- in all ways. What are the ways- yell see in time?' This is recorded you no... I said shaking my legs together by his hand touching me softly.

'It's all about the influence and feeling it, if you will, with me. If I were to decide, that I was no longer involved in the communications occupational and sell up, twenty-five thousand individuals would skirmish to make their hypothecation expenditures after a month or so has passed.' 'I employ over fifty thousand public, Miss. That gives me a certain sense of obligation to do whatever I do, the way I want to do it, the and how- when, and why... it's all my say... or no say at all.' You get that- Marry Shah?

He said sternly.

'Do I bother you- sir-asking a dumb question, that I have to ask for your freaking program that I give jack shit about... because really, I could be home playing with myself right now... and coming in some boy's photo- I don't need this?'

~*~

'Don't you have a board to answer to?' I ask, disgusted. Why you- I don't have them- your answer to me... and me alone... I over rolled them, and pushed them out- it's all my say. 'I own my establishments, they don't- why the hell would I have ass wipes tell me how to do my shit. I am the Trump of my day and age... what do you say about that? I can go if this is too hard for you? He just smiled. As I lean forward showing my boobs some... just some. I don't have to answer to a board.' If that was the dumb question.

He raises an eyebrow at me just muttering on about nothing.

I flush, even more, unquestionably you're the God, here right? Cute Miss... move on, he said. I would know this if I had done some research. Not knowing all about me shows that your shy and week... and have a lack of respect for who I am, he's so arrogant- I thought. I change tack, and see that I am not even halfway done...

'Do you have anything you love to do outside of your work?' 'Like- That's the question- go for it...'

'I have diverse hobbies, Miss.' A hint of a smile touches his lips- yet those eyes are still locked on mine- not letting go. 'Very wide-ranging.' And for some reason, I'm mystified and frenzied by his firm

stare into my heart looking into my eyes... wet at this point form being reamed to hard. His eyes are ablaze, kind of like mine with some fantastic and nasty sexual thoughts of him just pounding the shit out of me with his lusting sex making.

4

'Do you believe in love at first sight?' Why did I ask? 'Just curiosity...!' He said... looking in my love-stricken, and totally lovesick eyes. Yes, I was taken back by him... yet could not show it... 'Nonetheless, if you work so hard, what do you do unwind- or just relax?' He smiles, revealing textbook and twilight novel white teeth so right yet so wrong, I stop breathing and forget how too - like. He really is beautiful- for an older man- I felt all hot down under. No one should be this good-looking, and make a young lady feel this way about herself. It's just not fair to us girls.

'Well, to 'chill out' as you put it - I said, I fly, I indulge in- various physical pursuits.' He shifts in his chair. 'I'm a very wealthy man, Miss King, and I have expensive and absorbing hobbies.' I peek swiftly at Katie's questions, wanting to get off this subject of sex and work. 'You invest in engineering. Why, precisely?' Did I enquire the thought- why? Why- does he make me so uneasy, anxious, nervous and troubled. 'I like to form things into submission bending and shipping them.'

I myself like to know how all things work to crack all that it is- to see what makes it tick: what makes things tick, how to construct and deconstruct. As well as I have a love of ships. 'What can I say?' one thing I have not cracked it a woman's mind... 'That thuds of a sound to me like your heart speaking rather than reason and specifics.' 'Though there are individuals who would say I don't have any emotions of warmth- that I am just cold and heartless.' He stares appraisingly at me and his mouth coincidences up, well said- perchance. 'For the reason that they know me well- or so they think they do.' His lip ringlets in an ionic beam. 'Why would they say that?'

'I'm seventeen and I'm crazy or so they say- yet smart enough to be here. My grandfather said the two always try. When people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane - it- we in-lighten them.'

I went on asking-would you say that you're someone, that makes friends easily; or that you have any? Otherwise are you easy to get to know?' Plus, I regret the question as soon as I say it. It's not on Katie's list, it was on mine to see if he was at all like me one or less true friends.

'I'm a precise secluded person, Miss. I for one go a long way to defend my disclosure. I personally, don't often give dialogs out too public,' he's voiced softens as the sentence went off into a long one on like lost in a rambling thought. 'Why did you come to an understanding to do this one then?'

'The decent writer touches' on life often like a lusting young girl. The unexceptional ones run a quick hand over her. Feeling in all the voids, the bad ones' rape her and leave her for the bugs to eat away the leftovers.' So- for all aims and determinations, I couldn't get Katie off my back.

I know how stubborn Katie can be. That's why I'm sitting here wriggling unpleasantly under his all-pervading gaze- that is yet so perfect when I should be studying for my exams- or just doing what she was doing herself- right? 'Like- she asked again and again, and harried my PR folks, and yours truly respects that kind of stubbornness.'

'You also invest in unindustrialized knowhow. Why are you absorbed in this area of writing when there are no good books anymore- is it all sexed up media and shit you want to give out to horny kids to read less than 3 lines on their buzzing boxes- to kill their brans even more?' 'I have to put up with it- Miss- for it- sales... SEX, DUGS, and be-bop-pop music are what it's all about- yet I want more out of your text- if you work for me.'

'NOT- All visuals... without gluten...? 'We can't consume money if there is no bread, Miss, and there are too many people on this planet who don't have enough to eat- that is good for you.' You get what I am saying to you?' Is it something you feel zealously about? Like- Nursing the worlds poor do you help out the one in this county that are in need?' 'That sounds very humanitarian... sure- whatever they want to suck out of me... right?' Whatever looks good...He moves his shoulders up and down in a way that was not okay to me. 'Feeding the world's poor, I can't see the financial benefits of this, it's discerning business,' he murmurs, though I think he's being insincere. It doesn't make sense - only the virtue of the idyllic. I peek at the next question that is on my list made by Katie, disorderly by his arrogance I shudder to look up. 'Is there a method to your madness?

I asked the question. If so, what is it?' I really don't have a- method to the way I do things- I just make it work- for I make it work- how is that? Maybe a supervisory belief - Carnegie's: 'A man who gets the ability to take full ownership of his own mind, may take proprietorship of whatsoever else to which he is justly permitted.' I'm very extraordinary, single-minded. I like order- of myself- and all other things in this thing we call life, and those all around me.'

'You come off like the decisive purchaser.' 'I want to earn to possess them, but yes, bottom line, I do.' 'So-o you want to possess things?' You are a control freak. 'I am... if you want to say I am Miss. Say what you like really- they all do your age.' He smiles, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes.

Again, this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I can't help thinking that we're talking about something else, but I'm absolutely mystified as to what it is. I swallow hard.

The temperature in the room is rising or maybe it's just me. I just want this interview to be over. Surely Katie has enough material now. I glance at the next question.

'You were adopted- like me, there was a story that came over for another county other than the US. Is that true- or not? Do you think your past made who you are today? Too personal? Yes- but I go there- it has not... I made me. Oh, this is, asking too much... I gaze at him in the love needing eyes, hoping he's not offended- by my stupid. His brows channel together downward and arch. My curiosity is annoyed by him I could tell... 'I have no way of knowing.' 'How old were you when you were approved for a stable home?' I was 5 and used, my mother. 'That's a matter of public record, Miss- you can get that anywhere.' His tone is harsh. I flush up yet again. Crap... I say in my head- yet he heard that also. They all can the ones that monitor all and everything I do, I thought and actions.

I move on quickly... doing whatever it is I am doing. Yes of course - if I had known this, I was doing this interview, and didn't want to be- and the school voices hearing was saying, I was losing grading... I would have done some research more now if I did not shape up. 'You've had to lose a family life for your work life... would you say that is so-o?'

He said: 'I'll embrace on to all God's creatures tight one day. I've got one finger on it now; that's a beginning- by banning all that you call literature. I am the reasons as to why all books were a band, I want complete control.'

Why do you not want us to read? Why- is the question that- you have to crack. If you don't get it- then neither do I. He said... 'That's not a question- or anything to ask.' He's terse me some, with his long lines of wording rambling. 'Apologetic I was to this...' I wriggle some in my set feeling wet down there, and he's made me feel like an errant child. I try again. 'Have you had to sacrifice family life for your work?'

'I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that.' 'So-o is- you quire...?' I rolled my eyes knowing that was not on the

list nevertheless, I wanted an A on my report. I may have had a past that I don't like but it was never with another man.

'What are you gay?' He said... I know that you have kissed, and made oral love to a girl your roommate Katie, by your racing thoughts, I heard it all and don't hold it agent you... why do you with me? RICHARD C. MAST...? Has nothing to do with the sex or whom you have that with... now does it.'

He inhales suddenly thinking, and see my going down on a girl in his mind, and I cringe, mortified... my thoughts... Crap! I said, yet once more in my mind to cover up. Why, didn't I employ some kind of filter before, I read this straight out? How can I tell him I'm just reading the questions? Damn Katie and her curiosity, said this in my mind, that it would be okay to say to him!

5

'No, Miss., I'm not the way you are- and your young teen why's.' Yet I can see having fun when you're young. And work hard when you're not. He raises his one eyebrow, with an unruffled glow in his eyes. He does not look pleased, about me and my girlie past- like he wanted me or something. I fastly said- I-man too...The voices in my head... giggle at this point knowing. You're a hopeless romantic,' he said that all not knowing or knowing what you want. The same things could be in the 'business premises families' nowadays. The same immeasurable feature and awareness could be projected through the radios and televisions, but are not. 'It would be funny if it were not serious. It's not booked you need, it's some of the things that once were in books.

No, no it's not booked at all you're looking for! Take it where you can find it, in old phonograph records, old motion pictures, and in old friends; look for it in nature and look for it in yourself. Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of things, we were afraid we might forget. There is nothing magical in them at all. The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us. Of course, you couldn't know this, of course, you still can't understand what I mean when I say all this. You are intuitively right, that's what counts.

'I apologize. It's um... written here.' It's the first time he's said my name. My heartbeat has accelerated, and my cheeks are heating up again. Nervously, I tuck my loosened hair behind my ear. He cocks his head to one side slightly. 'These- 'ant' your own questions, are they?' They are not... I said back. The blood drains from my head, and I feel as if I passed out some- going all black. Oh no, it flashed past

in my head. 'Katie - Miss. - she assembled the queries to go on with.' She rushed in with her wording - 'Nobody listens any more. I can't talk to the walls for the reason that, they're screaming at me, walls- - those things you look at all the time like cells and notebooks - 'I can't talk to my loved ones overall this' - he said; she listens to the walls. I just want someone to hear what I have to say. And maybe if I talk long enough it will make complete sense.

Then I asked it as a lost little schoolgirl want more - saying - 'Then I want you to teach me to comprehend what I read.' 'Are you, colleagues, on the student paper?'

'No, she's my roommate not my love of marge - were just leaving together.' Oh, rat crap, I said in my mind - yet I think he knows. I have nothing to do with the student paper, the girl said, he could see snapshots of Katie playing with herself not want to be a part of all this... It's her extra-curricular activity I said, not mine as of this moment.

My face is aflame with embarrassment - of diddling. He rubs his stubbed hair chin, in the quiet debate, his blue eyes assessing me. 'Did you volunteer to do this interview?' He asks, his voice was deadly quiet. Hang on, who's hypothetical to be interrogating whom, His eyes tingle into me - like, and I'm obliged to answer with the certainty.

'I was conscripted to this... She's not well.' My voice is weak and apologetic, for her... yet they know the truth. 'We're not finished here, Andrea. Please cancel my next meeting.'

Where are you from? A small town - she said along with these small towns are funny places; everybody thinks they know everybody. They bought, they sold, live in fear of getting old getting cold. Life to death, it's all a myth just a wish, only to walk in the dark, to make their mark, in the life they embark.

Yet they know what is so, nowhere to run nowhere to go, they come and go, with nothing to show. With some that are high and some low. However, they always know narrow minds never change, only to rearrange, in the exchange. Memories never fade, and the ones that make their lies get paid. It's all slipping away from day to day. There is always someone with something to say. Whatever come whatever may, it's just another day... in a small town, with dreams going in the ground, with only names on rocks to be found.

Were one person runs it all and is crowned, we dance like fools we are her clowns. That's just life bowing down to a small town, it's just the words going around. With so much doom and gloom, lonely nights in a room.

'That explains a great deal.' He said...

'RICHARD C. MAST, forgive me for interjecting, but your next meeting is in two or four minutes.' 'You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.' He said. The girl from before is back speaking out of context. She's appears lost popping in and out. He turns his head slowly to face her and raises his eyebrows. She flushes bright pink in the face at the why I and he is treating her lack of life. Oh good... you did what was asked of you... good for you... no go be somewhere. It's not just me... or kids getting dumb-er...? I asked...

'Where were we, Miss?'

'Some individuals turn sad unpleasantly early in their life. Non-singular motive, it gives the impression, but then again, they seem almost to be innate that way. The staining unceremonious, tire quicker, exclamation more rapidly, evoking lengthier and, as I say, get melancholy youn ger than anyone else in the ecosphere. I know, for I'm one of them, back in the days of before.' 'Please don't let me keep you from anything.' Say all that is on your mind. 'Very well, RICHARD C. MAST,' then, he frowns some in his long chat with me and turns his consideration back to the rambling on.

She said: 'There has to be something in books, something we can't visualize, to make a ladies stay in a scorching house; there must be something there that we all need something more unexplained.'

Oh, we're back to 'Miss' now.

He murmurs... on getting softer in his voice, and then he gazes intensely into my love-stricken eyes; all humor was gone when he did that and we locked, and bizarre muscles deep in my lower than my belly clench suddenly in hard lust. His blue eyes are alight with the wicked curiosity of all, that is me and inside my- heart, soul, and more.

Which I should be studying for now rather than sitting in your palatial, swanky, sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.

But you can't make people listen. They have to come 'round in their own time, wondering what happened and why the world blew up around them. It can't last.

'Don't you look so guiltless- over all that took place, why didn't you give me a biography, he made me feel like such an idiot for economical on the basic investigation.' Katie locks a hand to her mouth. Saying: 'Jeez, babe, I'm sorry - I didn't think about it all the way through.' I feel some grumpiness coming over me with my changing mood.

'Typically, he was well-mannered, prescribed, to some extent stuffy - like he's old before his time. He doesn't dialog like a man of twenty-something. How old is he anyway?' 'Twenty-seven. Jeez, I'm sorry, Merry, I should have briefed you, but I was in such dread.

Let me have the mini chip for your headset, and I'll start transliterating the interview, it's the least I can do.' Hell, you just want to replay the video admit it! '**U_NO_IT**!' She flashed through my mind, as text to read like a hologram, yet I could see it in front of my eyes passing by like a ticker.

'You look better. Did you eat your dehydrated soup - and mac and cheese?' I ask her to the movie to food not sex to change the subject. That's all you do anymore is eat, sleep, bitch about that and CUM!

Yepper- and I'm-a proud of it- she said- humping her pillow! 'Certainly, and it was delightful, enjoyable, and lovely, as usual. I'm having the sensation of feeling much better than I did.' She smiles at me in gratitude. I check my watch. 'I have to run, I can still make my shift at Macy's, as a clerk, I don't even think; I well- shower off, I'm going to just come home and do this more - like, um- so why bother... right...?'

Um- yeah- that turns me on- I said... NOT! You're getting to be lazy and gross! Yah but you love me so... 'Merry, you'll be exhausted- to see me tonight I just know it.' 'I'll be fine, until you get back, all by myself- a lot of my wandering thoughts. I'll see you later... she runs out the door slip on a dress with nothing under it.' Katie - I'm the shit at any DIY. I've worked at Macy's since I started working when I was 14. It's the major self-determining man/woman's wear store in the New York area, and over the four years I have worked here for too long, I have come to know a little bit about most everything we sell - underwire to even I don't wear them ever- although unluckily, I leave all that to my dad to say it's wrong.

Merry- I'm much more of a curl-up-with-a-book-in-a comfy- chair-by-the-fire-with-coffee-kind-a- of-a girl, and have everything in its place on me and of me, yet she works for me.

Katie- I'm glad I can make my shift, to have some money to play with at the end of the week. I bet I could buy you for a mill. He said to me... Katie and you let him? Yes...I said. To be there whenever he wants, she asked.

No comment... I did I give her.

I am home looking at my report it gives me something to have my emphasis on other them all of him- all. We're eventful - it's the start of the summertime of year, and folks are redecorating their homes. My friends that I work with were happy to see me, as always... it's become custom with us.

'Marry Sue! I thought you weren't going to make it today - I was going in to work a JC Penny's at 5 'till-10.' And then it back home to be with my cuddle bug, she looks forward to me... 'My tasks suck didn't take as long as I thought. I can do a couple of hours of this I said lost in the thoughts of him - and then her and then him and then- him- her- him- her- aww.'

'I'm really pleased to see you, it was him- look down at me I am looking up so much small, he's just so-o right.' She and he start's re-stocking shelves for me say that a short girl should not be doing this job, and I'm soon absorbed in the task, yet lost in love - of being in love. And - aw - yes with him... I stumble backward and he saves me from falling... like to my death... or something... it was sweet. When I arrive home later, Katie is wearing headphones, see all that happen, she is pissed, and working on her laptop, frantically editing by down report that I was okay with leaving as is.

Her nose and puss-puss still pink for having a head could for giving- wellhead to random high school boys, the day before - she a good kid what can I say - it pays, but she has her unfiltered wording into a story now, so she's focused and typing furiously run-ons. I flush, by her and the thoughts of him also... I was feeling both.

I'm methodically exhausted - dog-tired- by the long drive back home even if I was looking over the past days of my life on the windshield screen of the car, the exhausting think about the interview, she had my pc on the luster rock tabletops by my bed, and my cum covered dildo at her feet, she thinks that more loving or something to us mine.

I slump on to the couch with for more - sexy time, foreplay and boob playing, thinking about the essay I have to finish and all the studying I haven't done today because I was holed up with... him and getting her and me off more than 50 times today - yet that is the norm. I flush, and my heart rate inexplicably increases with ever stock in and out of my puss, and her rubbing my clit- That wasn't the

reason, surely, He just wanted to show me around so I could see that he was lord of all he surveyed, and I was thanking him and that man too. I realize I'm biting my lip, and I hope Katie doesn't notice. But she seems absorbed in her text. I see he over there giving me the eye - He obviously wanted to spend more time with you, they said - why not take it one noise teacher said.'

I should have - but I feel the task was done to its fullest - no?

'Yes' - 'we all do.'

'You've got some good things said here, Merry, so well done, is what the team says going sitting in the broad room at school as there were reading the copy on their handheld notebooks. I can't believe you didn't take him up on his offer to show you around. I hear what you mean about formal, here in your writing a little to stuff - ie said the same one.

That's fine I would rather have that then what I have been getting - with the other girls it was nothing but sexed up sex - and sex talk, so I'll take this over having to read that. Yet he has asked for you - not them to be with him more... do you want it? Did you take any notes, on being his girl?' she asks. She gives me a short-lived puzzled look, as to why I have made it in.

'Um... no, I didn't,' I said.

Why?

'I didn't think it needed to be that also, to be a writer.'

'That's fine I see the point your making. I made a fine article with this... then right? Good - looking son of a bitch, isn't he? Said the one... yah why her. I overhear when walking out the door getting a pat on the back by the older woman that had some brains.' 'I suppose so, I said looking at her and shyly smiling.' I try hard to sound neutral, and I think I succeed, yah no. 'Oh come on, Marry - even you can't be immune to his looks.'

She arches an eyebrow perfectly at me, in the cute way that only she can. Crap is what I said! I distract her with flattery, and sweetness, always a good ploy on this girl who loves me for doing such. 'You probably would have got a - lot more out of him, if you would have done what you did to me with him and on him - she said.' Think of something - quick, I knew what she was going to ask - and I thought quickly. 'So, what did you really think of him?' Damn it, she's nosey. Why can't she just let this go, about me and him, and what I have to do. 'I doubt that, Merry.

Come on... Like, he nearly accessible you a job. Given that I personally imposed this on you at the last minute, you did very well then.' She glances up at me speculatively. I make a hasty retreat into the kitchen.

'You, fascinated by a man, more than me and what I have to give and gave you. That's a first,' she snorts, you give me more than what I boy can. She rolled her eyes at me. 'He's very driven about what he really wants in life unlike you, you have no drive to do extortionately, yet unlike you here is controlling, and arrogant with me - scary really, how overpowered he is... but very alluring. I can understand the fascination,' I add truthfully, as I peer 'round the door at her hoping this will shut her up once and for all. I started gathering the makings of a sandwich so she can't see my face, as I walk to the counter, there all no walls everything is see-through glass, even the bathroom is open to the world outside.

'Why, did you want to know if your gay or not, incidentally, that was the most embarrassing question, I am not I just love you're for you get me, I was mortified.' I scowl with my nose wrinkling at the memory, of seeing this in my eyes passing by like a movie clip- like It was so-o embarrassing. The whole thing was uncomfortable.

I'm glad I'll never-ever-ever- have to lay eyes on him again.'

'Oh, Marry Sue, it can't have been that bad- yah no. I think he sounds quite taken with you, like love-ie and shit.' Taken with me, what's that mean, now don't be ludicrous, in jumping the gun. 'Would you like a sandwich,' 'ha- that all I do for you have sex with you and make you a sandwich- and do your chores.'

'Please- and think.'

'Yah- yah- yah- suck it she said. 'You don't have one or I would.'' I said back. I curl up in my bed with her, wrapping my throw around me, that she made me in 8th grade, then I close my eyes, with her around me, and I'm instantly asleep, could he do this for me I thought before the lights went out. That night I dream of dark places, loss, and death, and sadness.

7

For the rest of the week, I throw myself into my studies and my shitty ass job that sucks hairy balls.

Katie is busy too do her and, compiling about her last publication of her student in the schools weekly, E-paper; before she has to surrender it to the new editor while also shoving for her finals. Damn, but that girl was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century with her work life, you stay home back in the 2,000's and play-with-yours back then, not these days, were a girl wants to be independent.

By the time I finish, it's midnight, and Katie has long since gone to bed. I make my way to my room, exhausted, but pleased that I've accomplished so much on a Monday. Basically, she's bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a guppy. It'll be something new next week.

So, I call my mom using my mind as a phone, to check on her, but also so she can wish me luck for my final exams. She proceeds to tell me about her latest venture into pot making and art - that so bad she can't put it into words. My mother is all about new business ventures, that are flopping.

Katie- By Friday, she's much better the day before I felt, and I no longer have to endure the sight of her PJs, that should have just stayed off. We don't talk all that much more that evening, to my relief. Once we've eaten, I'm able to sit at the banqueting table with Marry and, while she works on her article, I work on my essay about the Holocaust.

Merry- hard to chat, think about how- leaving her behind was wrong in her mind- I hesitate, and I have Mom's full attention. She, my mother that is worried about me - being young and small and what man can do to me. She wants me to be with the girl, not someone that only there to take... I hope she hasn't mortgaged the household to finance this latest organization.

'I'm fine,' I said. Do you need money, honey? You worry me.'

'No- I want to do this on my own.' 'You sure' - 'Mom, I'm fine just leave it alone.'

It's a brief conversation, is even hard to get done with. In fact, it's not so much so a conversation as kicks my guts and make me grunt in response to my gentle sweet-talking of not be mean, Its Friday night, Katie and I are debating what to do with our evening, other than bedtime, - we want some time away from the studying also, and also from our working too hard for less than a $1. 50 an hour, and from student newspapers, that only pays 50 cents a word, and that's if it passes the editor.

Sometimes, like I marvel and have the curiosity to the thoughts of if there's something really wrong with me. Possibly I've spent too long in the company of my literary romantic book or cracking my brainwriting, or gutting on out rubbing it, and consequently my ethics, and opportunities are far too high. Nonetheless, in realism, nobody's ever made me feel like that, by her- yet he could too- maybe? Saturday at the store is a nightmare. And the days keep rushing by without any other's thoughts of him or her... what to do?

8

I'm engrossed in the task of redoing what was done right in the first place, read-through the items I need to have said in the right ways, and the items I sure I know have missed out on that were there, my eyes are flicking from the order E-book that I have from the past on good writing, to the computer screen and back as I check the entries match.

Then, for some motive, I glance up... and find myself locked in the bold gray gaze of Chiaz who's standing at the counter of my home as a hologram to look into me doing what it is I am doing he can do this at any time look into me, staring at me intently, with lust in his eyes even if it's just a simulation. My heart failure fasts- knowing what is next, sex- with him not there but in my body, I feel that he is.

'Merry... What a surprise, I said walking to my dad her, I lay down for him to the movie though me.' His gaze is firm and intense, and the moment happens fast. Holy crap...!

'He said my name,' In a mutter. 'What can I help you with, RICHARD C. MAST?'

'RICHARD C. MAST,' I whisper at the start, because, that's all I can Marry him as not my lover yet. What the hell is he doing here looking at me this way with my messy-hair and nude boy standing here, my mouth has dropped open- like my legs and vagina for him, and I can't locate my brain or my voice, for sighing too much? There's a ghost of a smile on his lips and his eyes are alight with humor as if he's enjoying some private joke.

'I was in the area,' he says by way of exploration. 'I need to stock up on a few things. It's a pleasure to see you again and feel the insides of you in though out, Miss Mary Sue.' His voice is warm and dry like milk melted chocolate fudge on ice-cream all melt-ie... or something like that- mmm.

My heart is pounding a frantic, and for some reason, I'm blushing furiously under his steady inspection of being perfect in every way posable. He smiles, and again it's like he's privy to some big secret.

My reminiscences of him did not do him justice, in this dim light, He's not simply good-looking - he's the epitome of male exquisiteness, magnificent, I shake my head and take my wits of the dead and prowls, I was humming yet I was with his body and mind with my eyes tight.

9

Finally, my intellectual functions are restored and re-joined with the rest of my body. I am utterly thrown by the sight of him standing before me, and he's here in my always now. Even at the Store, I feel him.

Go figure...? It is so disconcerting the way I feel after also

this being his little salt, yet, I want it so bad. Taking a deep breath, I go down on him hard, one more I said it is fine, I put on my professional life out my mind to be with him.

I've-worked hard today so maybe this is okay. he murmurs, his blue eyes cool but smiling like in mine. I mutter, my voice soft and wavy moving in my mind. Get a grip, I said, after a half-hour or so my legs are abruptly the uniformity of Jell-O. I'm so eager, I decided to wear my best jeans this morning to work just to show him that I love to look this way for him to see through me, like looking into the glass shingling back in his stare, of mine, I try for indifference as I come out from behind the counter, but really I'm concentrating hard on not falling over my own feet.

My voice is a little too bright, walking 'around the story today. I glance up at him in regret yet it's only me that knows he there like, it almost immediately. Damn, he's handsome. I blush, looking downward... and the others in my day have no idea what the hell has happened to me. Acting nuts... 'After you,' he murmurs in my head site, gesticulating with his long-fingered, gorgeously manicured hand. With my heart almost throttling me to the point of crazy - for the reason that it's in my throat trying to escape from my mouth like he's trying to get out of me from down under.

His fingers trail across the various packages displayed that I have done on the shaving, like the same can be said the way he is touching his fingers over my lips, face, and hair, and for some

incomprehensible reason, I have to look away for all in the store and close my eyes tightly for my little girlfriend to release. He bends and selects a packet.

'These will do just fine this way he said to me looking over my job that is not where I want to be,' he says with his oh-so-secret smile within me, and I blush, and he finds me to be sweet and cute. 'Nope, it was so revamping,' he says quickly then smirks and it shows all over my face, and I have the uncanny feeling that he's laughing at me, for shacking it out so hard, in public. And the boss knows it, yet that is fist week dating play-no?

Why, why? -Would this beautiful, powerful, urbane man want to see me? No way can I see it! I dismiss it immediately for feeling like this on the job. I asked, and my voice is too high in my thoughts, he gets me like I have got my finger trapped the head site mic too hard. Damn! Try to be cool Marry Sue!

He gazes at the selection of tops and undies, that I have places nicely in their lines, what on this Earth is he going to do with those, I cannot picture him as a do-it-yourselfer at all, doing woman's work like this... I flush at my foolish wayward thoughts. 'All part of your feed-the-world plan?' I tease... in a dirty thought of what happening when I get home.

'Something like that,' he acknowledges, and his lips quirk up in a smile showing on my face. 'Is there anything else, I need to do I said to my boss at the store?' 'I'd like to see you do your job faster without daydreaming. Go home... I don't even want to look at you. You're a waste of my time.' 'Are you redecorating?' The words are out before I can stop them.

Surely, he hires laborers or has the staff to help him decorate? I glance behind me as he follows, always in my mind now- even going in the girl's room, Am I that funny, I said shyly or Funny looking down there? Ha- he said- just keep being you! And I give that look of confusion...?

...?...

Blink- Blink-

-Hair shacking out-

-Ponytail left to go- hair flap over right shoulder-

'This way,' I murmur uncomfortably about the way I look.

'Have you worked here long; he is teasing me with- dumb...'

His voice is low and soft make me feel well wet, and he's gazing at me, with blue soulful eyes concentrating hard like his dick sliding inside me, for the first time the days before. I blush even more brightly.

Why the hell does he have this significance to me? Changing into a dress and of uniform- that now gross- cover in girly-ness. I feel like I'm threatening years old down there and in here and there too - awkward, as always, and out of place is everything about me. My eyes drop, yet he has to look me up and down!

'One week,' I mutter as we reach our goal, of me, feel good with him in all places. To distract myself to being his lover, I reach down and select the two widths apart and let him go to town on my clit, he at this point I could have the world give to me for him doing so. It's zapping through me like I've touched an exposed wire, I feel it come out, which I pass to him too in the feelings also. Our fingers brush very briefly in hand-holding and mind kissing, and the current is there again, I gasp my boobs and he can feel it in his hands-like unwillingly as I feel it, all the way down to somewhere dark, and unexplored even with my eyes still tight, deep in my belly I feel this rush.

Very much, I scrabble around for my symmetry- as I know the camera's in the bathroom has gotten it all on a video puck (aka thumb drive.) Yet all they see is me have fun with myself - yet the one that looks over this all get it- yet not my boss for now. 'Anything else I said as he dresses me through my body?' My voice is dry and breathy, own like my body. His eyes widen slightly in mine.

'This way to the door I said.' I duck my head down, as I pass all the snacking girls, I work with like I try to hide my recurring blush, and head for the aisle out of the store, to a floating lot of cars folded up. (The poor girl- said the old lady-looking over it all.)

I halt at his expression going to my car that is just lower my way like a cab, his eyes deepening shad in mine. Color fading like... trembling, yet again his fingers now deep inside me on the drive home, I feel like such a slut- yet I must have it- even if I was good.

This boy will not stop... Quickly, with, I measure aware that his hot I gaze back into my mine of him wanting all of me. I dare not look at him like a little girl, yet I can't help it he is my first.

Holy- jizz'n jeez, could I feel, like any more self-conscious, about me being me, done... the back pocket of my jeans is my Id to get into my home, by some miracle, I remember to bring it along this time- I Marry not to remove a finger away for my real age, of how I jumped four years in high school for being smart.

Why must I feel like a little girl... yet his making me a woman.

10

I know by the end of this year that he and I, we have c*med in each other's body or through each body by concentration manipulation of thoughts 2,165 times.

(Forward one year)

I must not sleep with it wet, yet that just I live life too fast and too young to care, I must not sleep with it wet. I am trying to brush my hair into submission. I mopping with frustration at myself in the mirror for sucking hard at everything... and yes even that too. Damn my hair to hell for sucking more than that also. I should be studying and going to school for the day, for my final exams, which are less than a year and a week away, my only option is to confine my naughty hair in a pigtail after, yet another long night of him pounding me, and hope that I look semi-presentable, when I can even if as if I can walk out the door.

Katie is huddled on the couch in the living room doing her, I ignore my pang of unwelcome sympathy for doing what I want to do all day too. You should get back to bed and be with me all day piss on the school she said. Would you like some Nyquil or Tylenol, to get knocked out?' 'Nyquil, please, as I spend some time with her until she passed out and then, I leave her clingy hug as she is laying on our bed, and go to school.

'Okay, I'm going. Get back to bed with me she said. I made you some postage to heat up later.' I stare at her fondly as if she was my one and only lover. I cannot believe, that I have to do all this for you like your mom, I have let Katie talk me into this also like a mom, only for you, I, would I do this for, being your bitch and shit! She said, gathering my book bag, she smiled, then head out the door to the car, she's articulate, solid, influential, argumentative, yet lovely words, and on like the girl she would become in the days to come - and she's my dearest, dearest friend. But then Katie can talk anyone into anything. Good luck she said handing me the re-right of my paper for class. She'll make an exceptional

journalist that I'm not. Making notes, I am not the best at it at all, yet, I want to be someone someday, so pinning text and more of it.' Rising terror with-in me on a half-hour now late for first class.

'The questions will be racing in my mind, of what to say to cover my ass. Going now. It's a long drive- that I don't have to do- yet, I don't want you to be late for what I don't need to live.' You're my lifesaver for editing I said.' 'Why do I put everyone ahead of myself, be so nice, try so hard and become the person that gets hurt the most? What can I do? I have gone through 8 or 9 years with no real friend no best friend nothing. just people who are assholes that I am stuck seeing every day, why? The most compassionate people in the world the people who are truly kind, who are truly considerate- also have the best boundaries. If you do not have and assert personal boundaries, you won't feel respected or be compassionate towards people after a while.

That doesn't, at first glance, sound like it makes sense. But here's the thing: Compassion means seeing the best in others. It means empathizing with their struggles and looking for what's good in them. In order to do that in a healthy way, you must be secure enough in yourself and your own identity that you do not lose your identity in theirs. If you try to empathize without having good personal boundaries, you become the perfect victim- easy to manipulate, easy to control, easy to discard...'

~*~

What I see-

Tell the truth, everyone hates you.

Tell a lie and you don't have a support team.

Tell the truth, you'll be forsaken.

Tell a lie, it's history in the making.

Have others there and its wishful thinking

Have others In- you're- life and their hand are not worth shaking.

Live or lie we all going to die so why try?

'Yes,' I croak and clear my throat. I roll my eyes at myself. Get a grip, I said. Judging from the building, which is too clinical and modern my apartment is all white elegant, 'Yes.'. I take off my jacket?' 'Oh please, let it all stop.' I struggle out of the jacket, knowing what to come more off him run down and though me.

'Merry! I thought you weren't going to make it today, to all your classes at school. You did not why?' Didn't take as long as I thought, to not have thought. I can do a couple of hours, overtime to make up for it I said to my teacher that really did not care either way.'

'I'm really pleased to see you, he said though...'

When I arrive home later, Katie is wearing my headphones and working on my laptop, she's absorbed and typing furiously. I'm thoroughly drained - exhausted by the long drive, I slump on to the couch after, thinking about the essay, I have to finish and all the studying, I need to do just to suck, I haven't done anything notable today, before it starts, because, I was holed up with... he wants all of me and more, like a story that has not to be written.

I flush, and my heart rate inexplicably increases with him being with me always. 'You've got some good stuff here, Merry. Well done. I can't believe you didn't take him up on his offer to show you around, more said the one girl that I got to do half of all my work- so really, I have to do is keep him happy. He obviously wanted to spend more time with you, that why I am here she said.' She gives me a fleeting questioning look; says you go home with him now. That wasn't the reason, surely, I started her I thought but okay?

He just wanted to show me around, the new home that he had redesigned just for you and your taste in color and style, I realize I'm biting my lip, and that drives him crazy, and I hope Katie doesn't notice, this was her thing too. But she seems absorbed in her transcription, to do so. 'Um... no, I didn't, just do that for her with him think it was for her not him and maybe be it was just for her- woo.' I flush up, to the thoughts of having 2 lovers running through my mind like a moon jet, in the sky going from mars to earth in less than a day.

'Oh come on, Marry - even you can't be immune to his looks said Katie in my mind, I think she what to play with him using my mind also... ha and he loves it- it's a 3 way in the brain- of two young girls and one older man that can't do anything incorrectly.' I lost in thoughts of thinking of her, and she arches a perfect, for me with her soft warm body showing in soft light, in her and 'I's' room, also arching

an eyebrow at me, as he using me and my body as if she is me... you and she - and, not me - but she is overriding me... and my movements. 'I hear what you mean about formal sound, via you - she cute and young and what I want for fun. Did you take any notes, on what I did here to make him ask for more?' she asks.

'That's fine, I said I well you mind to speech weighting, I know it' s like shorthand - and glitch-ie yet I can get the notes I need on pleasing him - to the most. And my readers for work... all at the same time, I can still make a fine article with these thoughts on how to be right for a guy like him. Shame we don't have some unique calms, of how a man can be with 2 -16-year-old's these days without think of marriage. Good-looking son of a bitch isn't he, she said to me - blocking off his pathway in thought.'

'I suppose he is I love you though - yet but this way we can all be to gather and no one gets it - and even so, it's a story, and what will they say, why care? We okay with this why not the world.' I try hard to sound disinterested - in only wanting one to love now and always, yet I can't make up my mind to what I really want, and I think I succeed at being a slut. 'You probably would have got a lot more out of him, if you would have to don't it like this - and she shows it in her thoughts to me - all sexy in her ways.'

'I doubt that Merry, Crappie! I said I distract her with flattery actions, always a good ploy, as I make her love me more, damn, she's inquisitive. Think of something - quick, to make them both feel what the need, 'So what did you really think of him, my mother gets on this now and asked?' I have like five voices in my crazy had rolling around. - he practically offered you a job, yes, I said - saying GET OFF - GET ME OFF - SAID KATTIE over and over, and the old lady down stars were calling the cops! Katie just loooovesss my mom... She glances up at me speculatively. I make a hasty retreat into the kitchen to get to the wall screen to call and say there are no issues here not to come, that just us playing around.

The girl officer looking now down on the whole run using the wall 4d tv screen that is cover, a fool to ceiling, was not impressed with us, to say the least - Come on Given that I foisted this on you at the last minute, you did very well.' This is an override of safety and privacy - they have the right to do this even if nude/ or having sex/ or shoring the cum off your body/ in your own home... it's to be safe, they can record video and sound when they feel the need for the law.

Kattie she snorts, at the dumb of how this all went down. Why can't she just let this go, and go back to playing with herself, as they all do in their indented force, of A-holes under their desks? What

was that she said yah- sue me- she said, as it the girlie cum runs down her leg as she yells get out of here, get out of my room, this is not right.

'She's very driven, controlling, arrogant - scary really having this girl look all up and down me in her hologram inspection to see if we were okay or not, it's what they have to do, to make sure you're not dying, they only send someone if you're already dead. I can understand the charm she is givin g her for being in our room unwanted for an old ass that needs to kick,' I add truthfully, as I peer 'round the door of the bathroom, that I am now in, know that everything is seen thought and or glass in this home like them all, hoping this will shut her up once and for all, saying we just having girl on girl sex- god, go be somewhere else. I scowl at the memory, of this the last time it happened. Can the old bitch just freaking die, I said loudly? AWWWAH!

11

'You, fascinated by a girl? He said at a first when you were 12.' I see first love...? I start gathering the makings of a sandwich, I am his yet living with her still, Incidentally, that was the most embarrassing question, I have ever had too indoor. I was embarrassed, of all the slideshow of what we did as kids be shown for all to see at his workplace, saying I was the one... and he was pissed to be asked if I was a virgin.'

Yah you can see the dildo freaking of them at 12, here in this clip said the one man too eager- too eager. I would say so at 16 and into girls- one said, why here? That thought was the same in my mind also. Why Me...? 'Whenever she's was in the society pages, she never has a dated it said.' 'It was embarrassing nonetheless to see myself shown in that light and in full color on the big screen in the boardrooms of the school and at his workplace- no privacy for a girl like me. The whole thing was embarrassing. I'm glad I'll never have to lay eyes on him again.' 'Oh, Merry, it can't have been that bad, she said holding me in my bed crying over it all. I think he sounds quite taken with you, she said- and so did mom- like I was a baby all over again.' Taken with me...? Now Katie's being ridiculous, about this too. I cried... 'Would you like another sandwich?'

'Please...' For a moment, I hesitate, and I have Mom's full attention.

'I'm fine.' 'No, Mom, it's nothing. You'll be the first to know if I do.' 'Merry, you really need to get out more, honey. You worry me.' I curl up in my white iron bed, wrapping my mother's quilt around

me, and also the one she made for me too, I close my eyes, and I'm instantly falling asleep. That night I dream of dark places, lost in the time of the pass with her and his blue eyes looking into mine.

~*~

By Monday and by the time I finish, it's midnight now Tuesday, and Katie has long since gone to bed. I make my way to my room, exhausted, but pleased that I've proficient so much for- a. We talk no more of RICHARD C. MAST that always there - that evening, much to my relief, all the arguing was over. Once we've eaten, she and I just crashed for some time, I'm able to sit at the dining table with Katie and, while she works on her article, I work on my essay for school for lit. Damn, I hate this with a passion.

By Wednesday, she's much better, yet I am still in my PJs for Monday. For the rest of the week, I do even change them, or my sheets on the bed, why? I throw myself into my studies and my job of being whatever... however- whenever he wants it, however- whenever- why-ever and forever. I called my mom to check on her, for I was to mean, and so she can wish me luck for my final exams.

She worries about me.

Katie is busy too, compiling the last edition of her student magazine, which I am sure no one will read. Drama- drama- drama. It's a brief conversation with my mom before I want to rip my hair out. Later that evening, I call, my stepdad, that is dating a girl younger than I- just to see if he has not been kill by a terrorist, yet he dating her so... yah. Its Friday night, Katie and I are debating what to do with our evening- we want some time out from student newspapers our studies, and from our work.

'That's amazing - congratulations, Katie said reviewing it in her mind!' Delighted for him to be with her right, I hug him again in my mind and get off the line. Katie beams at him too, saying you could have had me. Why is it when I go out, I always feel trembly at the knees, heart-in-my-mouth, butterflies-in-my-belly, and come home with sleepless nights, yet even with her. Sometimes I wonder if there's something wrong with me. Do you think there is?

Why is he so interested in me, and not them it keeps going through my mind? I need more E-books- 'Oh, you know, locked out of having too many. The usual... well, have to do-The classics. Of US literature, primarily.' He rubs my chin with his long index finger, but its mine, and thumb as he contemplates my answer to more stories under his name on my E-reader. Or perhaps he's just very bored and trying to hide it when I am reading too long- or maybe he like that to about me. those fingers

on that face are so enticing. 'Anything else you need? Before I sign-off...' 'I don't know- um- like- you to really be in my life.' What else would you recommend?' You to find out what you want.

He smirks, and then he raises an eyebrow, amused, yet again, for crying over a dumb story. He nods, with wicked humor, and amusement with me being me. I flush, and my eyes stray from the text. I reply softly, and I know I'm no longer screening gazing, what's coming out of my mouth, is frustration. 'You wouldn't want to ruin your clothing, by not washing them.' I gesture, ambiguously in the direction of the overstuffed washer- surging my shoulder's. 'I could always take them off- I said.' 'Cute' what his thought...?

12

'Um...' I feel the color of pink in my cheeks increasing yet another time. I must be the color of the communist manifesto. Stop talking. Stop talking NOW. Heaven forbids I should ruin any clothing, that you got for me,' he says matter-of-factly. He ignores my inquiry of me rolling my eyes to that too. 'How's the article coming along?' He knows yet still questions me about it. I try and dismiss the unwelcome image of him without his underwear on.

I grasp it tightly with two hands like I was holding his, and I go for honesty, about my feelings. 'Do you need anything else?' He's finally asked me a normal question about us and he starts doing cute things, like only he can, the confusing of double talk... with Katie is a question I can answer, of the fact I love him now more than her.

-Raises an eyebrow, I look into my mind to feel all of him.

'I'm not writing it, Katie is, My roommate, she's the writer. She's very happy with it. She's the editor of the magazine, and she was devastated that she couldn't do the interview in person.' I feel like I've come up for air - at last, a normal topic of conversation. 'Her only concern is that she doesn't have any original photographs of you.'

'What sort of photographs does she want?'

Okay I said, I hadn't factored in this response. I shake my head because I just don't know, how to say this to her that I want her to back off, yet she is the one making me look to the world. Tomorrow, perhaps... I will come out and say it' he trails off the line.

'I want you to do a photoshoot naked for me?' My voice is squeaky again, and I said yes for the world to see and for me to love you more. He said, Katie, will be in seventh heaven when she sees me like this if I can pull this off. And you might see him again tomorrow, that dark place at the base of my brain whispers seductively at me. I dismiss the thought - of all the sill-ie-ness, ridiculous... whys I going to be spared open on the screens for all to see my goodies.

'Katie will be delighted if we can find a photographer, that wants a happy ending like I do- ha with us all.' I'm so pleased, I smile at him broadly, with the outcome of all the shots. He's taken a sharp intake of breath, not remember to let it out, for some time, and he blinks over and over say she's all mine. For a fraction of a second, I was wonder what the hell, and then it turned out to be sweet, he looks lost somehow, and the Earth shifts slightly on its axis, the tectonic plates sliding into a new position.

'Let me know about tomorrow if you want to go around the world with me.' Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out his wallet, and see. 'My card with his to do just that. It has my number on it, of getting out of the country, and back in... You'll need to call before ten in the morning if you want to do this.' 'Okay.' I grin up at him. Katie is going to be thrilled, for me.

So, we did...

'It was a pleasure to burn, burn all the words of the ones that, though they knew it all- to make others feel the same, all that was known as wisdom... now the question shows in the people before me, if they are wise or not.'

Like, I cannot tear my eyes away, for him all of him looking down then back up, from his inquiry; and I gaze blindly, down at my tired fingers. I swallow too hard... His mouth is very... distracting with those lips, hair, and eyes. It's just so right even if it's wrong.

'I want to know about you... I think that's only fair.' I lean forward to retrieve the recorder it all the good stuff- for I was not- hearing the words- lost in his charm- yet I have to write the paper. He places his elbow on the arms of the chair, with his fingers in front of his mouth rubbing his lower lip, as if it was mine. I knew his thought, at the time were somewhat all about impressing me. I curl up in my white iron bed, wrapping my mother's quilt around me, close my eyes, and I'm instantly asleep. That night I dream of dark places, bleak white cold floors, and gray eyes.

~*~

For the rest of the week, I throw myself into my studies and my job. Katie is busy too, compiling the last edition of her student magazine before she has to relinquish it to the new editor while also cramming for her finals. By Wednesday, she's much better, and I no longer have to endure the sight of her pink-flannel-with too-many rabbits PJs.

I call my mom to check on her, but also so she can wish me luck for my final exams. She proceeds to tell me about her latest venture into candle making - my mother is all about new business ventures. Fundamentally she's bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish. It'll be something new next week. She worries me, and I worry about her you see. 'How are things with you, Merry?'

One week has passed, and I am sitting in his office. For the moment, I hesitate, and I have his full attention, lost in his eyes. 'I'm fine I said.' 'Have you met someone, a man I mean?' Why do you ask? Wow... I thought... red rushing feeling coming up my nick. how does she do that the excitement in her voice is palpable? I think I have a crush on the boss, 'really my mom said - a boy?' 'Mom, it's nothing really- just some hot-shot.' 'Like- you will be the first to know, like - if I do- more then I should.' Why sex already? NO! I just encountered this man, I not going to be all hot and heavy already... 'Make baby's she said...' I want to shit myself!

Why does he have such an unnerving effect on me I asked my Ma? His overwhelming good-looks maybe, The way his eyes blaze at me. The way he strokes his index finger against his lower lip, I wish he'd stop doing that. My heart is pounding. The elevator arrives on the first floor, and I scramble out as soon as the doors slide open, stumbling once, but fortunately not sprawling on to the immaculate sandstone floor. I race for the wide glass doors, and I'm free in the bracing, cleansing, damp air of New York. Raising my face, I welcome the cool refreshing rain. I close my eyes and take a deep, purifying breath, trying to recover what's left of my equilibrium.

'You sound like a control freak.' The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. 'Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss,' he says without a trace of humor in his smile. I look at him, and he holds my gaze steadily, impassive. My heartbeat quickens, and my face flushes again. 'Do you feel that you have immense power?' Control Freak.

'Oh. I'll bear that in mind,' I murmur, completely confounded, that she thinks I'm good enough. 'Though I'm not sure I'd fit in with his type I said.' Oh no, not at all like what I see him with, I'm musing out loud again. 'Would you like me to show you around?' He asks me this... 'I'm sure you're far

too busy, RICHARD C. MAST- Mr. Morgan, and I do have a long drive.' 'You're driving back in a week? she sounds surprised, anxious even that I may have hooked this man - in the lest. I glance out of the window, running the day and him in my mind.

It's begun to rain hard. 'Well, you'd better drive carefully.' His tone is stern, authoritative. Why should he care?' Did you get everything you need?' He adds... I remember his saying that 'The pleasures have been all his well really it was all mine - nothing but pleasure,' he's is so polite as ever, to me makes me feel good about me being, a loser, and a freak in every way that sucks like a girl. I drop my phone into my school bag and call it a night. My eyes narrow, on the paper, I had to write.

'Thank you for the interview, RICHARD C. MAST Morgan was not a good ending to me; yet me saying, I had one that was happy was not good either.' Crap...! As I rise, and stands and holds out his hand to my teacher that was a dick about the fact I could write. Here is your paper I said... the man was lackluster about my attempts at wooing him.

'Do you want the FREAK-ing thing or not- because- like Katie, I could be home now - play with it! The whole class knew that this girl had - an oversexed issue of Doing the two-finger salute nonstop in class, so there are busting out... about it being okay for her and not me - they all know what happened its showing on the walls. 'Yes- if you feel that I need to see it...' 'Like - that's why I did it- dick-suck!' I did not say it out loud- yet it was heard in his mind to his... and theirs'. 'Just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss to blush and feel like complete crap.' He gives me a small smile, saying good work here. Thanks, I say running for freedom! Obviously, he's referring to my love life, more than the paper, as I run for the office. I flush up... with all them chasing behind me, playing freak you hard in the brain it's a game to them of back and forth.

~*~

''Tell the moment I see you once more Miss.' It seems that you are testing me, here...or a threat, I'm not sure which what it is- yet. I frowned slightly. When will we ever meet again, it was asked, so-o I shake his hand once more like before, I was surprised that the strange current among us is still there? It must be my nerves, I said and felt. 'RICHARD C. MAST I said thanks for your time.' I nodded at him. Moving with nimble sporty elegance to the door, he opens it wide for me to walk through. 'Did you have a coat?' He asked, and the moment passed too slow yet to fast.

'That's so nice of you do that, him- the- RICHARD C. MAST- this man I am lusting for,' I snap, in my moment, and his smile widens at me. I'm glad you find me pleasurable, that is my joy in life having and give just that, I look angrily inwardly, walking into the entrance hall. I'm astonished when he follows me out, asking for more time with me another time. I- Marry and then Olivia we both look up, likewise taken back by him asking for what seemed to be a date night.

'Yes.' Olivia leaps up and retrieves my jacket, which - takes from her before she can hand it to me. He holds it up and, feeling ridiculously self-conscious, I shrug it on. They're not all that much here for you to know about, or for me to say you need to know, I find myself flushing up yet again with him looking at me he does.

'What are your plans after you graduate? You don't remember? I questioned, no I just wanted to see if you're a disciplined as I with saying repartition - in your speeches.' I hope to find work with someone like you have a man that is like you, and life and some city where I can start anew, like New York. That is if I pass all my classes and get out of the school, yet this is my final that is holding me back from getting away.

I haven't made any plans- I thought about quitting, yet my mother would not hear of it, so I am here and Kite is doing what I want to be right now. 'Gross!' So, in saying all of that I conclude that you have not made any? Right, I said shakenly... I just need to get through my final exams if I can yet you have the say in this. 'Why do you say that...?' I see that he turns his head to the one side, fascinated, a hint of a faint smile playing on his lips. I hope that he did not notices my reaction, he gives nothing away, with the look that he is giving me. 'It's obvious, isn't it- that I have fallen too his charms?' I'm clumsy, unkempt, and I'm not blonde, not his type at all.

~*~

He places his hands for a moment on my lower backside. I gasp at his soft touch, his long index finger presses the button summoning the elevator, and we stand to wait - awkwardly on my part, coolly self-possessed on his.

The doors open, and I hurry in desperate to escape. I really need to get out of here. When I turn to look at him, he's leaning against the doorway beside the elevator with one hand on the wall. He really is very, very good-looking. It's distracting. His burning gray eyes gaze at me. 'Merry,' he says as a farewell. 'Chiaz,' I reply. And mercifully, the doors close. No man has ever affected me the way Chiaz has,

and I cannot fathom why. Is it his looks that he gives me, that I feel this power over me that I cannot control His Wealth also blows my mind, the power I don't understand my unreasonable reaction? I breathe an enormous sigh of relief. What in heaven's name was that all about... Leaning against one of the stone pillars of the building, I intrepidly try to calm down and gather my thoughts. I shake my head. Holy crap, I said - what was that...? My heart steadies to its regular rhythm, and I can breathe normally again. I head for the car.

He may be conceited- I am falling too it, but then he has a right to be - he's skillful so-o much at such an undeveloped time of life. He doesn't agonize boobs gladly, but why should he, o'er, I'm irritated that Katie didn't give me a brief profile on all this- shit stuff. An involuntary shiver runs down my spine. And Katie's questions are rushing through my head, or did you or didn't you have hookup sex, it was not about getting the job- oh now in today's light it's all about the sex and the money to buy anything or anyone. - ugh, I said to her- well you saw it play out didn't you know it happened!

He kept my underwear- I know she said... sweet...! I shudder at the remembering swallowing him sucking him off and that too I showed and then galloped, then it ended with him kissing my body all over softly. I can't believe I said that to her, yet she saw it sliding in me too- they all did, with this new type of video calling we have- you can see through others... like being there without being there. As I leave the city limits behind, the building behind, and move pasted I begin to feel foolish and embarrassed as I replay the interview in my mind. Surely, I'm over-reacting to something that's imaginary.

Okay, so he's very attractive, confident, commanding, at ease with himself - but on the flip side, he's arrogant, and for all his impeccable manners, he's autocratic and cold. Well, on the surface.

While cruising along with the down the highway, my mind continues to ponder the facts of what I have done slow long hard and yet slow, THE FREAKING WAS INSPERITY. LIP BITING, BOOB GRABBING, NIPPLE AND SUCKING CLIT LICKING SEX, AND FOREPLAY- DEEP FINGERING LOVE'N SEX. POUNDING! SWEETING- OMG MOMENTS OF GOING OFF OVER AND OVER, WITH HIM UNDER ME!

YOU CAN SEE me AND THE SHOT IN YOUR MIND RIDING HIM FROM WITH MY BUT GOING UP AND DOWN- SLIDING- GLADDING- FEELING ME IN- COMPLETELY! AH! HE IS EVERYTHING I NEED TO MAKE IT IN THIS LIFE- I WANT IT EVEN IF I HURT THE FIRST TIME! 'The sun burnt every day. Yet It burnt away like with old ways and time. I look up to- the skies and thought about the ways of life.'

Truly puzzled to all that went down in me, I need this feeling and feelings to succeed in this life as a woman. A woman is nothing without her man- a man that so perfect as he is... under her. Some of his replies were so obscure, yet I loved the mystery of it all - as if he had a hidden agenda. me up now! Consistently I think of that inquiry in the future, I will cringe with blushing. Damn Katie, for not want me- now I have to want him always!

Did I question in my racing thoughts- like have you ever watched the jet cars race on the boulevard? They now drive themselves crazy to think that some used to do just that drive by hand. I sometimes think drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, for the reason that they never-ever see them gradually... If you showed a driver a blue blur, Oh affirmatively! A blur flashing before my eyes like him naked in my mind- and Katie spared eagle last night in my face wanting me to go down- that butt is unforgettable! What can you do all girls today are Bi? Right? It's all part of not being wed... and even so that just a piece of paper stating someone owns you, and you lose have of what you worked for- so why do it?

I check the speedometer and see 300 mph. I'm driving more cautiously than I would on any other occasion. And I know it's the memory of two penetrating it's his eyes gazing soft and sweet at me his nude body ribbing over mine, and his stern voice telling me to FREAK him, harder and harder, I want to... as the car is driving carefully fast around all the others whizzing by. Pulling at my own hearing and biting my lip I go off c*mming, in just the thoughts, I realize that he is more like a man double his age, like my dad- yet I want the hard work out of a FREAK! Squeezed tight, body and me holding him in me... and the spraying finally takes places over and over like 30 times, switching ways of doing it- up down and sideways and more. He came to me to not pulling out ones... is that love or not caring, I don't have to care to evert there is stopped, so I don't have to worry?

Freak and be freaked in the game of life... and don't think- about it! Freaked under over and above that's it how I do it girl or guy- and they love me for it... and make you be someone... that advice to live by... said, Katie. I was 10 when I found that girl- like you all virgin and shy... how did you get as far as you did, she said that a week ago back, well, she was right... I did need to go a little crazy... yet I may have fallen in love with it... and that not how the thing works today either. Yet that is just me- old fashioned thinking.

Be unable to remember everything blacking out in the heated moments of sex... Merry, I scold myself... snapping out of it, I decided that all in all, it's been a very interesting experience, but I

shouldn't abide by it. Put it behind you. I never have to see him again. I'm immediately cheered by the thought. I switch on the small ear head and player and turn the volume up loud blasting pop music, I sit back in the car as it races for my apartment where I have to then take the trail that winds up the side of the skyscraper- leading up to my room or that floor, and listen to thumping music, as I make my lover parts do the same- think about him well doing myself, as I press down on the accelerator to my sleeping room, were Kittie is looking for to cuddling with me- she and I share a bed it all we can adored- making less than a dollar a day- and need 100 just to live.

As I hit the 1-5, I realize I can drive as fast as I want.

We live in a small community of duplex apartments in- Vancouver, Washington, close to the NYU campus. I'm fluky -Katie's parents bought the place for her, and I pay peanuts for rent. It's been home for four years now. As I pull up outside, I know

Katie is going to want a blow-by-blow account, and she is tenacious. Well, at least she has the mini-disc. Hopefully, I won't have to elaborate much beyond what was said during the interview.

'Merry! You're back.' Katie sits in our and you're with me cheaters-you said to I said- yes but all that? Why not? I see... okay, she said, surrounded movie she was crying over not having me there for her to feel loved. She loves me yet she doesn't want to be in love with me - I wonder why?

She's evidently been studying for finals - though she's still in her pink flannel pajamas decorated with cute little bunnies, that were mine, the ones she reserves for the aftermath of breaking up with her, for not want girl on girl sex as much as she wanted it, and for general moody depression of being- bitchy. She bounds up to me and hugs me hard, and slides them off asked me to do what I did with him on her.

To lick and stick... and feel and play with her vulva, squeeze me and play with my nipples... she said- well she was ou-yah-ing- as I was giving her there in oral, looking for to having it back.

I was beginning to worry, that he was looking into my mind and seeing this... and me doing just this with her... am- I don't wrong?

I expected you back sooner, she said grunting it out of her, everything for the last drop was a trusting spray of her feel whipped out yet happy with everything down there.' thank you so much for doing this, I said to her, have it cum, yet not feel like I did in the past. I owe you; I know.

'How was it.'

'Good...' I said- 'What was he like?' Oh, you did not feel inside you where you were looking down at me without asking to be there... you're not my girl... you don't need to be here... I know you got off with us... why? Do you want me?

Yes!

Now and always- she said.

I want him now, not you... don't blow it for me... I struggle to answer her question, of what I really wanted, can I have both... I thought she giggled... see this is why I love you. What can I say? I will always be here for you- like this- yes like this I said- you're such a baby I have to be. Really young, to be doing that with a man... 'I no...' Katie gazes at me arched eyebrows looking sad. I frown at her, saying you're always my first love. Hug me... 'I'm glad it's over, and I don't have to see him again, I have too, to make it in this life... wink. He was rather intimidating, you know.' I shrug at the thoughts of want more... of both of them in a loving way 'He's very focused, intense even - and young... a boy... yet not 'you,' I said- but I will go there. I thought you did it all great... interview and such all also, in the end, it was about you have a 10-figure job someday. And you'll have it, BUT would you give that all up for me and have 'nothing' but for me- and be with me? That's the question I have for you- do you love me?

13

(Forward)

'Merry, hi, it's so good to see you, back she said- that being Katie!' She grins as he examines me at arm's length. Then he releases me but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. I shuffle from foot to foot, embarrassed by what I have done. She gushes with loving hugs. So how was it? I to pooped to say... and she passed out in her arms- falling in the doorways- that sild opens for her. 'Yep, you're looking well, Merry, really well- I see the glow in your face of what all that you two did.'

I can hardly breathe. When I glance up at RICHARD C. MAST - he's watching us like a warmonger, his blue eyes hooded and speculative, his mouth a hard-impassive line. Hurriedly, I place his purchases in a plastic carrier. Someone you should meet,' I say, trying to defuse the antagonism I see in-'s eyes. He's changed from the weirdly attentive customer to someone else - someone cold and distant. The atmosphere is suddenly chilly, and the fire hot, glowing and shining on her skin... she is truly feeling

loved- and in love with him and her too. I nod, rendered speechless yet again, and hand back his credit card, if he loves me then I well spend- spend- spend!

There, I've admitted it to myself, I love him for the money I get and feel good, about him making me feel good- good. 'Until tomorrow perhaps where I will be long for her yet once more - right?' He turns to leave, then pauses, asking me for more of what he loves of me the most, 'your ass,' said Katie- 'No my Puss!' I said back. his coming here, tonight to see me - so you need too- well 'get lost' yes... if you don't mind.

'Fine...'

'Oh, and Marry Sue I just want to F*CK you, I read of the card to the flowers he got me - cute Katie said... reading it to using my eyes, yet her thoughts. But it's a lost cause, I have fallen to his ways, I know, and I sighed hard, with nostalgic regret, it was just a coincidence, she smiles looking at me say it all it must be young love, Okay- I like him maybe like- like...? Closing door by asking it to do just that, I spend several minutes staring into space, I cannot hide from myself my feelings anymore.

(Home)

Katie is ecstatic after she does it yourself time... 'DIY baby D-I-Y!'

I bite my lip in anticipation and find myself grinning like a schoolgirl, at the looks of her playing, her curiosity oozes through me too, with what she was just 2. 0 is what. (BUTT plug) I've never felt like this before, where I just need sleep. She more then I and she stayed home all week, yet have so much to do- papers, and stocking shelves, I find him attractive lost in my thoughts in my awareness, very attractive... M-mm-mm I said, softly, I can admire him from in here and it safe, surely? No harm, by doing just so-o. And if I find a photographer, I can do some serious admiring tomorrow. I need to phone Katie and organize a photo shoot.

(Work)

I'm in the depths of the stock room, I walk out holding what the little girl gave me of hers to get the same type, yes, getting underwear to little girls, is my dream job, trying to keep my voice casual- well look at these sweet little faces standing there, well standing there... (pee covered undies in my hands) with this in my butt hole. I thought this is what she has to look forward too. 'I think that is one huge coincidence, Merry, he said looking for the size as I say OOOO-ah 'poopie.' And the little girl asked,

from afar- what I was making out my myself- when too much time had passed. it's a short-lived joy when she was blurting out, I want the underwire that you took off of me. I mutter you want kids...

'Sure...'

Like this one he said... being comical about it.

He doesn't I want to be with you, Katie said- saying kidnap this one!

PLEASE- too cute...!

14

You don't think he was there to see you, I walk down the hall of my school and see him standing at the end looking at me with his lusting blue eyes, want to cover me with kisses.' she speculates, Katie about how he going to take me away... even as just a schoolgirl- 'How do you know this?' 'Merry, I'm a journalist, and I've written a profile on the guy. I know that man has the power of girls to do whatever it is they want too... the kids were talking about us... me being young and his little slut as they call me yet I don't care I have him- isn't that all I really need?

The question is, who's here to see some dumb girls were thinking in the dark, think they could be the next in his bed, going to do them and where and when.'

'We could ask him why- and where and how but would he- say said to the brown-haired girl, over yonder. He says he's staying the day with- 'THAT GIRL.'' 'You can contact him, all the time? ...on nosey on said to me.' 'I have his wrist phone number here all the time if I need, they don't get how he inside me always.'

Katie gasps... by the lies I have to make up to look innocent to all, even though I know, I have taken it at least 1,000 times, holy c-u-m, at the end of my joiner year.

'The richest, most elusive, I have taken was sex -ed, with this man as an after-school program, most here are working for what he calls righting class, most enigmatic bachelor or hairstyles, or seen to be house wife's 'Er... yes.' 'Merry, is not going to be one of those! He likes you, said the short girl in the room, no doubt about it, said the other with really long blonde flowing hair and green eyes.' Her tone is emphatic when he said let's go on the town and get you out of here. 'Katie, he's just trying to be nice.' But she was pouting about it, that I was not going to be there all day to hold her hand. 'Great idea! I said.

(A thought of now)

After all, he did say he was glad Katie didn't do the interview, that we would have never met.

(Thought)

But even as I say the words, I love you I have to really feel it right? That the sex said Katie, and you'll know. I know they're not true- all the nasty things said by all the mean girls- RICHARD C. MAST- doesn't do nice, or nice thing for girls', like me- things like this if it's not love- fist.

(Back)

-And-

A small quiet voice whispers saying they all just want to be for you're the best one out of them all don't forget it, perhaps- he's is right. I hug myself with quiet glee, rocking from side to side, holding him in my mind, like a dream, I see all this... entertaining the possibility that he might like me for one brief moment- for always. Katie brings me back to the now, and happening by saying your zipper is down... (zip) and her hands are on my vagina.

'Merry, you're the one with the relationship. What's it really like to be with a boy said the girl lunch? That sits with her day in and day out not saying much.' 'Relationship?' I squeak at her, my voice rising several octaves. 'I barely know the guy.' Yet it's some you just have to do to really get it. So, is it true? What I said to her... you're with him... and do things... 'Yeah, um, sorry,' I mutter, turning to leave. I can't say- what we do or don't do- it's confidential.

'So, how come you know: The RICHARD C. MAST?' Cass's voice is unconvincingly nonchalant, also want to know it all.

This is when Katie speaks up saying everything and anything along with saying she needs to get laid- I give an odd look- when she said- 'I had to interview him for our student newspaper today and I said- 'you did the editing.' So, you can move forward, Katie wasn't well- she all dripping from somewhere ha.' I shrug my shoulder, trying to sound casual with all the girls looking at me like I am a whore, yet not doing no- better than them- in there twisted little minds. She shakes her head as if to clear it all away.' Anyway, want to grab a drink or something and chat some over there?' Away for this gossip? 'Sure...' is what I said. I am staring out of the window at the sun coming up and showing the first

signs of light. Katie grabs the handset from me, tossing her silky-smooth red-sh-blonde hair over her shoulder.

You like him, a chant started with all the girls! I've never seen or heard so, so... many girls care- about anyone before. You're actually blushing.' Said Katie... 'Oh Katie, you know I blush all the time, I said quickly... She blinks over and over fast-ly, at me with surprise that I did not move or reacted to this taunting. 'I just find him... intimidating, that's all, and he's acting cool for me right now - or I am sure, I would have run out.'

'I love you' is what he said over and over... overtop all the haters.

(Home from HIGH school)

I am restless that night, I punch my pillow and try to settle, tossing and turning, after a short cat nap, yet I wake twice. Dreaming of him and those eyes and oh...! That body, long legs, long fingers, and dark hair and soft skin..., 'I need to study, then I'll make supper.' I cannot hide my irritation with her for going too far with him, as I open one of the cubbyholes under our bed, I read love note of dream of him, I do this while she is making supper. In the night- holding her, my heart pounding, knowing what is it going on two girls on man- who does he love more? Nine

15

Free of charge for the morning in exchange for a credit in the article, said Katie, I do this for the love by you. When she- explains at the reception that I have for-go writing yet bad- spelling, she said to-RICHARD C. MAST - RICHARD C. MAST, we are instantly upgraded have her on our time - yes? She's terribly young and very nervous for some reason, yet if you want to have this way then if he said, It's fine. We have half an hour to set up, for the day out, Katie is in full flow, working on my work and not going to school... funny how life works...? I thought...

5 P. M

My mouth goes dry looking at him... he's so freaking hot. Holy Crap He's wearing a white shirt, open at the collar, and - dress pants, I disruptive hair is still damp from a shower, for what took place after the school day was at its end. His eyes watch me impassively. He then extends his hand, 'Thank you for taking the time to do this.' ...and I shake it like I am one of his man on the job, blinking

rapidly, to see if anyone see us out and bout, Oh my... I thought, he really is, quite... is he liking her more now- wow?

As I touch his hand, I'm aware of that delicious current running right through me, lighting me up, making me blush, and I'm sure my erratic breathing must be audible. Katie who comes forward, looking him squarely in the eye, said I am coming on this date to tonight. How do you do?' He said - to her kissing her hand and her ass all at the same damn time... He gives her a small smile, looking genuinely amused, as to what was under the dress.

I remind myself that Katie has been to the best private schools. 'I trust you're feeling better?' 'Yes, yes I do...' 'I'm fine, also running it into his head fist that he ALL MINE! She shakes his hand firmly, AND HE HUGES HER NOT ME! SHIT! without batting an eyelid, HOLD ON TO HIS ARM.

Backstory- Her family has like no money, and she's grown up confident, about her ass and how to use it at a young age, and I am sure of her place in the world - is sitting at home diddling no more. She doesn't take any crap, so why him? I am in awe of her, for trying to break us up, so-o she has all of me back- I can see through her plans. She gives him a polite, professional smile like a gay girl would.

'It's a pleasure,' he answers, that is all it's about with me and find it, turning his gaze on me, and I flush up again, feeling-

lovesick, damn it why when I have this, I feel I going to lose it...? 'Where would you like me?' - Asks him. His tone sounds vaguely threatening. But Katie is not about to let me run the show for five. My wish has come true: she said, I can stand next to you, and admire you and not - from not-so-afar. Twice of my eyes lock deeper into her, and I have to tear myself away from his cloudy gaze, of wanting to freak the shit out of her.

(Bar)

`He stands, Katie wades in again. 'Enough sitting.' I remove the chair, for some slow dancing. 'Great,' says Katie, I find a bonnier to bang down - when a fast song comes on... 'Thank you again, Mr. for your time. He said- 'I look forward to reading the article that you re-told, Miss Katie,' he murmurs in a sexy way. As I- Merry- pull him to dance. 'Sure,' I say, completely thrown, yet I don't need him doing the same. I glance anxiously at Katie, who shrugs at me. Yelling has fun, as she finds her way over to the wall to be a flower. My heart slams, my mouth dry and my lower-ness not so-o much.

Yet am I in love?

-Or is it all just dumb freaking lust, or just freaking?

16

A date? RICHARD C. MAST - is asking me on a date tonight I said to- my girlfriend Katie. He's asking if you want a coffee, this was said to me I see it my memory of the day that just passed. Maybe he thinks you haven't woken up yet- to see that it was all really not a dream that he is falling for her, my subconscious whines at me in sneering in my mood again. I clear my throat trying to control my nerves, yet I cannot.

Katie- this man said- 'Are they based at the university?'

Know I live with her- he looked at me oddly, about saying that. The other couple with us asked, their names escape' me, yet I could dig it up if I wanted too, his voice was soft, a young businessman that was part of the team higher up and inquiring. I nod, too stunned to speak, Taylor was his name, I found the clip to look at it and think about all the thing that was said so fast I could not evoke them all.

'Mr. Taylor, as he asks me if I want a drink- sure is what I said, and a dace- and I said- 'yes,' but my mind was on him- yet-

this man reached for me, and I have to say yes, I was obligated, giving nothing away, about how I feel. I look at him like there was magic in my eyes yet there was not. But he was sweet so... yah.

He smiles at me and it is a dazzling one, unguarded he said- to me, I said Nah drop out- natural he said, all-teeth-showing, glorious smile, of college?

No *high school*... Oh, my... he said. I scoot around him to enter the bathroom, where I find Marry deep discussion with him- they were in a stall together getting it on.

'Merry, I think he definitely likes you, I said as the pants were at their feet.' Be sure to be a condom- ha you can go now- she said fast-ly- 'But I don't trust him, you know that' she adds. I raise my hand up in the hope, it hits her in the face, that she'll stop dirty talking. By some miracle, it does. Her mouth pops open and it slides in. Speechless Katie is! I savor the moment, seeing this I was so happy for her. I love her, yet I want her to be happy you see.

(160 long seconds have passed)

She purses her lips as if considering my request. Finally, she fishes herself to him. She grabs me by my arm, holding the door open some say get in here, be with him too now, and drags me into the bedroom where it goes down hard and fast, that's off the living area of the suite, in this really nice bar in New York.

Her tone is full of warning.

At the elevators, he presses the call button, and the bell rings almost immediately. The doors slide open revealing a young couple in a passionate clinch inside.

Merry- there's something about him, that is just driving me crazy- lost in thoughts... and feelings- of what could be.

'He's gorgeous, I agree, but I think he's dangerous. Especially to someone like you. She said...' 'What do you mean, someone like me?' I demand, affronted. 'An innocent like you, Merry. You know what I mean,' she says a little maddened.

I flush up turning pink. I'm starting my exams this week, and I need to study, so I won't be long- it's time to go 'like now' I said hurriedly.' Fixing up as a young girl walks in, asking if everything was cool.

17

'Katie- it's just coffee, I said to Merry- he said- I want to take you out what do you say he said to me. And... he looked at me with wonder...

He grins at me with hope in eyes of a night that he would not forget all given by me I sure, and with his money, I was sure to do whatever he wanted. It's now tomorrow and at night- 'I'll see you later, then... yes most defiantly. Don't belong, I said to her... or I'll send out search and rescue.' 'Thanks.' I hug her, I with your boys so you know him he will be right to me... I was so pissed, why her... yet is that okay?

He stands up straight, holding his hand out for me to go first, were had a date with a horse drawing carriage, all white, and nice and romantic at dusk.

Where he held my hand and wisped sweet nothings in my ear. Holding me over so nicely..., I flushed beet red. 'Okay, let's do coffee, here and it was the best restart in town... and the classiest - the name in French so yah see for yourself.' By my eyes it was Queue weed, really, I said yet that was without glasses on. That was something a failed like - in high school.

I emerge from the suite to find RICHARD C. MAST - waiting, leaning up against the wall, looking like a male model in a pose for some glossy high-end magazine.

Merry- after being with him all do, I am pooped, I murmur I make my way down the corridor, my knees shaky, my stomach full of butterflies, and my heart in my mouth thumping a dramatic uneven beat. I am going to have coffee with RICHARD C. MAST and I hate coffee... but- she ran off with my man!

'Sucking tit shit!' I said!

We walk together down the wide hotel corridor to the elevators. What should I say to him? My mind is suddenly paralyzed with apprehension. What are we going to talk about? What on Earth do I have in common with him? His soft, warm voice startles me from my reverie. I REMEMBER BACK - OF The doors opening and, much to my surprise, - takes my hand, clasping it with his long cool fingers. I feel the current run through me, and my already rapid heartbeat hurries. As he leads me out of the elevator kissing my neck and lips softly, we can hear the suppressed giggles of the couple erupting behind us. - grins from all around, yet we did not care it was lusting love.

'How long have you known Marry - Katie Oh, an easy question for starters... I thought... 'Since our 1st year of schooling. She's a good friend of mine don't break her heart.' Why don't say anything but look at this- wow?

I am struggling to maintain a straight face, so I gaze down at the floor, feeling my cheeks turning pink. Surprised and embarrassed, by the fact I thought it was for me I was like shit, I started to feel guilty. Then, I step into the elevator, feeling like I want to be her.

'What is it about elevators?' he mutters, thoughts of true love... about her. When I peek up at them using my mind phone of seeing into their thoughts - through my lashes and their eyes, he has a hint of a smile on his lips of what he plans to give me, but it's very hard to tell if I feel that he being real about it.

As a young couple, I say nothing, and have nothing in that say anyway- and we travel down to the first floor, all in the same body's- me as Katie is embarrassed silence-less for she in me full.

18

Katie- Outside, it's a mild May on a Sunday. The sun is- shining and the traffic is light. - turns left and stroll to the corner, where we stop waiting for the lights of the pedestrian crossing to change. He's still holding my hand. I'm in the street, and RICHARD C. MAST - is holding my hand. We cross the expansive, bustling lobby of the hotel toward the entrance but - avoids the revolving door, and I wonder if that's because he'd have to let go of my hand.

I attempt to smother the ridiculous grin that threatens to split my face in two. I feel giddy, and I tingle all over... for the good buy sex, yet we wanted each other- badly- no one has ever held my hand. Try to be cool, Merry, my subconscious implores me. The green man appears, and we're off again.

'I'll have... um - Breakfast with tea, bag out, talking about all that to over the fact he was to spend his life with her as me being his sideways bitch out the side and you know what I'm okay with that.' He raises his eyebrows.

'Why don't you choose a table, while I get the drinks. What would you like?' he asks, polite as ever. We walk four blocks before we reach the NY Coffee House, where - releases me to hold the door open so I can step inside. 'The coffee was good? Cram-ie like I was for him... at midnight.' 'I'm not keen on coffee, yet I like this.'

His smiles- OH MY GOD! Like for a moment, I'm stunned, thinking it's a blandishment, but fortunately my unconscious kicks in with pursed lips. As I lay naked on his bed in the hotel room that he owns- I stare down at my knotted fingers, think about how I the other girl.

'Anything to eat?' I surreptitiously gaze at him from beneath, and my lashes point upward at him as he stands there looking down at me with low light on and the skyline in the background flicking lights, of tall buildings, I could watch him all, think about how I was not sleep with her tonight.

'Sure...?'

'...**It was quite in my mind why**...'

I bite my lip and stare down at my hands again not liking where my wayward thoughts are headed. 'No thank you.' I shake my head see him coming at me, and he heads for me.

Do, I want this I thought? Oh, my hips, once or twice he runs his long, graceful fingers through, he's tall, broad-shouldered- and slim those pants hang from his ankles... and the way his now dry but still disorderly hair, sheens in the light is so right, I just oozing for his love. So, yah wet - hmm... I'd like to do that to you he said- and my mouth doped with it. The thought comes unbidden into my mind and my face flames.

'Penny for your thoughts, dollars for hardcore freaking?' Yes, sign me up...! For his love...! I go crimson when the hood is pulled back by his fingers. Flaking and liking- and then sticking- 'OH MY GOD - Freak-ING- YES!!'

'Get down with your bad self!'

I said! In my thoughts... running my fingers through your hair, his going down in me, I was just thinking about and wondering if it would feel soft to touch like this always, I shake my head from the c*mming hard, and being fast, and faster yet, and over and over. my favorite part - and part of the day, I said to him- letting out a big breath.

(Moring)

I curl up, desperately clutching the flat foil balloon and Taylor's handkerchief, and surrender myself to my grief. I fall onto my bed, shoes and all, and howl. The pain is indescribable... physical, mental... metaphysical... it is everywhere, seeping into the marrow of my bones. Grief. This is grief - and I've brought it on myself. Deep down, a nasty, unbidden thought comes from my inner goddess, her lip curled in a snarl... the physical pain from the bite of a belt is nothing, nothing compared to this devastation.

How do they do that?

The room is so nice all fancy, he's carrying a platter, which he sets down on the small, round, birch-veneer table. He hands me a cup and saucer, a small teapot, and a side plate bearing alone teabag labeled Breakfast' -He has a coffee which bears a wonderful leaf-pattern engraved in the milk.

I wonder idly in my mind for some time. 'Your thoughts on all this?' He prompts me when I look into his eyes. He's also bought himself a blueberry muffin, with lots of sugar on top.

Putting the tray aside, to kiss me all over even if it was all sticky like the hammer on an Underwood typewriter, he sits opposite me and crosses his long legs. Cover between my legs with soft sweet kissing, He looks so comfortable, up to me, so at ease with his body, I envy him, for I am not like that at all. Here's me, all gawky and awkward, barely able to get started to end without falling flat on my face- 'I'm selfish, impatient and a little insecure. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to handle. But if you can't handle me at my worst, then you sure as hell don't dese rve me at my best.'

As I place the used teabag back on the side plate, he turns his head gazing enquiringly at me, with the look of hunger and thriving lust. 'This is my favorite tea; how did you know I loved this so?' My voice is quiet, wheezy. I simply can't believe I'm sitting opposite RICHARD C. MAST - in a coffee shop in NY. He frowns, some not too much you- it shows on his face the lines, he knows I'm hiding something, and that's what I falling for him.

I pop the teabag into the teapot and almost proximately fish it out again with my teaspoon.

'I like my tea black, and weak,' I mutter some- to him running my fingers through his her like we were longtime lovers, then he said- 'I see, she's your little girlfriend then, that you in-love with -Now and forever?' I said- 'You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because the reality is in conclusion better than your dreams.'

She's a really- really good friend of mine, that's all, and we have shared a lot. Why did you think he was my girlfriend? Now and forever.' 'She's more like family,' I whisper, holding his body tightly with mine. A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you- love them if you want too? Right... it's just showing caring...?

Then the nods from him are slightly neat looking, all him, seemingly satisfied with my response, and glances down at his blueberry muffin. His long fingers deftly peel back the paper - and I watch, fascinated, looking at his dick. As he is me... all over the eye are going. Spellbound, 'The way you smiled at him, is wonderful my girlfriend Jan said... looking into it, with her nose up my but looking into the walls- TV's, and him at you.'

His gray gaze holds mine. I want to look away but I 'm caught- him doing things I like with his butt, he's so alarming, yet everything I need. I frown and stare down at my hands again, laying on the bed, recessing thought to go through my head. I told you yesterday, that I wanted you on this site how do you feel about that?'

Oh, this is getting silly, she loves you all the way why me too. 'Why do you ask?' I want to know- 'why'- 'for I can...' he said. 'You seem nervous around other girls, yet not her or me - that works.' 'Do you want some? Of this all the time?' sure - they say yes to me- he asks, and that amused, secret smile is back, of I have a blond and a dark-haired girl all at the same time... Yet, would he be happy with just two? I ponder the thoughts even if he could hear them...

RICHARD C. MAST- He just grinds. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. Holy crap, that's personal, I thought - to I met yesterday and the right for me. she's not her girlfriend?' yah well see - when I do them both at the same time. I love this game...

(thoughts she could not hear-)

Katie- 'I find you intimidating.' 'There's nothing mysterious about me.' I flush scarcely think about all I could have had him just sick it in me - I mean all the riches in the world, but mentally pat myself on the back for my candor, and gaze at my hands again. I hear his sharp intake of breath.

'It gives me some sort of inkling of what you might be thinking,' he breathes.' You're a secret, 'You should find me intimidating,' he nods as I do you. 'You're very honest, and blunt- about what he wants and how he wants it.

'Please don't look down, at me and to that to me - it hurts,' I said to him, 'why?'

'Why- I don't think you should- Why- it's for my taking; he said... and you can't stop it... what are you going to do about it I run you - and thought you... I glance at him, and he gives me an encouraging but wry smile.'

Unsure - feeling yet contented... in his arms.

19

I get up in the morning barking orders to my Echo Dot, and she is more than happy to do them all for me, like play music, and get the thing going for me when I don't want to be going.

I like to see your face.' I'm just nervous around you, she said right? Nope - you're not unlike any others I had... you're not the youngest either.

Oh... Me? Mysterious?

'I think you're very self-contained,' he murmurs.

Crap is what I said! 'Me, I hadn't realized I was so self-contained? 'Except when I was blushing, of course, which is often with someone like him. Have I offended you?' He sounds surprised. Not at all... I just wish I knew what you were blushing about.

He said you can feel safe with me.' 'Do you always make such personal annotations?' 'No,' I answer truthfully, to why yet I did not want to say it was all in my mind anyway. 'He is so-o good.' I thought...

He pops a small piece of blueberry muffin into my mouth and starts and I start to chew it slowly, and he goes for a kiss, odd yet sweet, not taking his eyes off me, as he pulled back for the kisses, and as if on indication of the fact I was all his, and I blushed.

'I'm used to getting my own way, Merry,' he murmurs.'

In- all things.' This isn't going the way I thought it was going to go. I can't believe I'm feeling so antagonistic towards him. It's like he's trying to warn me off. 'But you're very high-handed,' I retaliate quietly. Why, haven't you asked me to call you by your first name?'

I'm surprised by my audacity. He raises his eyebrows at me and, if I'm not mistaken by this or how I feel, he flushes slightly too, by the sight of me and what I was about to do to him- in hot passion.

'I don't doubt it, was the fact that he was thinking about her, or thinking that it was wrong. Why, why has this conversation become so serious, in his mind about her? Has he really fallen in love with just her... or is this his mind overthinking things?

The next day- I'm with Merry- 'Are you into having a child?'

He asks, sure, why do you want to do that now with me, I said back, it may be a plan if you want to do this. Is that I am for your breeder...?

He walked out of the room all PISSY! Whoa... he keeps- changing my course of life. Yet, I am not going to say not- I am- young, I don't know, um-a I what, or what I want to do. 'Tell me about your parents, they're not much to say other than my mom has done it all.' Why does he want to know this? It's so dull, like a boy or a girl? The girl he said.

Me- I thought that she's beautiful, my subconscious reminds me. I don't like the idea of me and Katie, doing this yet I do- I can't help myself, I take a sip of my tea, and - eats another small piece of his muffin.

'My mom lives in Georgia with her new husband Bob. My stepdad lives in Montesano.'

'Your father?' 'Yes, what about him- he not in my life now or ever- and I want to say that way.' 'My father dropped me when I was a baby.' 'I'm remorseful for bringing that up to you,' he mumbles, and a fleeting bothered look a-crossed his face. 'I don't 'member him at all.' 'And your mother remarried?'

I snuffle, one time holding back the tears, of feeling lost out on. He frowns at me. 'You could say that, but maybe it was for the best.' Maybe so... I said to him looking down.

'Neither are you.' About having a dad- 'yah...' 'You're not giving much away, are you?' ...As if in deep thought, he says' that in a wryly, was rubbing his chin. Holy shit, 'you've interviewed me once already, why do you ask that... it's okay for you have your nose up my ass hole, and I can recollect some quite probing questions then, why do I.' He smirks at me, saying I would do that next time then.

That is when I said that- 'My mom is wonderful, yet I have to be a grown-up at some point. She's an irredeemable romantic, and has lost boyfriend's that like to skip out on her... she's currently on her fourth man this week.' I like mom there only 7 in a week. Your more skank-ie then Katie. 'You said that to your mom?'

'Yep!' He raises his eyebrows in surprise. I continue to say how - 'I miss her, she has them now, and like always someone is more than I.

Those lips.

Those hips.

Those...

Ah!

'Do you get along with all them then?' I don't bother too. She sees her own thing. 'Of course, I thought- I just hope he can keep an eye on her and pick up the pieces when her harebrained schemes don't go as planned.'

I grew up with all of them getting the best of her. I smile fondly, at her- like was not important. I haven't seen my mom for so long. RICHARD C. MAST is watching me intently, taking infrequent sips of his coffee, with the more cream then dark roast. I really shouldn't look at his mouth, long for a kiss, yet- I feel I need, the loving feelings. It's unsettling, to think about my past that was really just the night before or so it seems to me.

20

My life story, you no already by looking into my mind and using your brain- and this technology, you can see it all like a slide show just click to preview in a menu? 'And what's he like, not bother by any of it not even the sick frapping in the night, scaring out Katie's name?' I have bested sometimes 63 times in one day, I was masturbating to try to put off doing laundry. Ended up masturbating for 7 hours. I was incredibly raw and sore after, but- I guess I was 10 or so, yet I deserved it. 'That's it?' - Asks, surprised, you don't think that's wrong for a girl of that age to do that- he shrugged.

What does this man expect, her for you not too? I refrain from rolling my eyes at him, yet I could not help but squeeze him tighter, harder and longer for understanding all that is me. 'Why didn't you want to live with your mom...?' He asks... and before came out of my mouth, he saw it play out in his awareness of thoughts. I cannot help but blush, this really is none of his business, yet he's making it be so he knows everything about me and so it's safe... it's like mind- rapping.

'Siblings...?' 'Yes, all girls 3.'

He could see them all- the youngest no 10 or so... I don't keep up with them. There all own their own too. Yet it is the norm these days... and my little sister is in Paris, French dick suck of a boy that wants to use her up and dump her, yet that is what she wanted.' His eyes go cloud with irritation, on my mother's part- I said to him she fails no? He doesn't want to talk about his family or himself, it all about me... yet I feel that it all the same.

'I hear Paris is lovely for young lovers why not let her- my mom said,' I murmur the quotes run past my mind to fast to not stop them. Why doesn't he want to talk about my family...?

'It's beautiful... that you have turned up as good as you did-he said. Have you been 'good' I can tell?' he asks, his exasperation with what he digging for to be forgotten. It's not nice to ask about a girl past these days... I thought not even lovers... 'Paris?' I squeak never been- there.

'You well...' 'Of course,' I concede, saying let's do it now-yet is that too much to ask? He looks at me with eyes glittering in the low light of the moon full shining in the windows. 'But it's England that I'd really like to visit.' 'Because, I was feeling gloomy, thinking about all that just sucks...' He tilts his head to one side, running his index finger across his lower lip... saying sure. I blinked, and then I blinked, then I blinked ounces more hastily, so I blinked, like 3 times wildly in a chain-like of events.

I was snooping through your things in your mind I see that you have written such a wonderful book, that you don't think is good- yet I do.' All this talk of literary greats reminds me, that I should be studying for him to make him bigger than he is. I glance at my watch... saying commands for it do, in timely fashions. 'I'd better go... now- and get back- (I was at his home; it is huge and has 16 bedrooms or more and 4 baths.) I have to study, I said, thank you for saying, that but you must not mean that. I love that, you love me like this.' 'For your exams?' 'Yes...' 'Okay, then you may go.' He said... - My mind is reeling with desire. The next day- the first question. 'Do you always wear dresses?' he asks out of the blue. 'Mostly,' I spoke... in his ear softly. He nods shaking his head up and down. The look he gives me and the warm fuzzy feeling going in and though me- I'm completely blown away by it, I know- it's LOVE.

If you were basically unnoticed the sensation, you would never- ever know what might have taken place, and in many ways that were worse than finding out in the first place. For the reason that if you were off the beam, you could go onward in your lifespan without never- ever be holding back over your shoulder and conjecturing what might have been- in the questions of what- if. And I aware that our time together is limited, even if where 'are always together, 'Do you have girlfriends other than her?' he blurts out.

Holy crap, why must he ask this- 'I don't.' - I just said that out loud also. I don't have the time for other girls only her... his lips quirk up in a semi-smile, showing, and he looks down at me with envy. Oh... what does that mean? He blocking me from reading his mind... to toy with me. I have to try to reassemble my thoughts, yet this is his game. I have to get away from him, for I do something to lose him...I walk forward, and I trip, stumbling headlong into the shitter- flush.

'Shit, Merry!' - He cries. 'Yes, yes it was a mouth full of it.'

Kiss me damn it! I inhale deeply, that's the feeling of love... you know. I implore him, but I can't move. 'Are you okay?' He whispers.

When she moves upwards when I insert into her. Feeling ever hitting thrust she moves with me. I'm in your arms. Kiss me, please. His gazes at my hood, like the movies it about, I'm paralyzed with a strange feeling of fast hart breathing that just takes over me, unfamiliar need to understand I let myself rush free, as he does with me, completely captivated by him, I feel it okay to spray him down.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and gives me a small shake of his head as if in answer to my silent question, that was running in his mind- and that was do you love me? YES! _ YES! _ FREAKING! _ YES! He's staring into my eyes when he opens his eye s again, it's with some new purpose, He tugs the hand that he's holding so hard that, I fall back against him, it all happens soo fast, yet over and over- one minute I'm falling, of the bed the next I bouncing, on my head, up-down and skidways' too, the next I'm in his arms, and he's holding me tightly against his chest.

I'm staring at RICHARD C. MAST'S exquisitely sculptured mouth, mesmerized, and he's looking down at me, his eyes darkening. He's breathing harder than usual, and I've stopped breathing altogether. His thumb and I feel it in me, as he brushes my lower lip, and I hear his breath a glitch.

I inhale his dipping love, vital scent taking, like the slut he wants me to be- yet, I am happy to be just that. He smells of- freshly laundered sheets and some luxurious body-wash, come over me I did not even see that he has carried me into his shower room, I may have blacked out- from all hardcore love.

I want to be kissed, right here I said- and he did. (I pointed you know were,) my kindness is drawn to his beautiful body- looking over the entirety. He has one arm around me, clasping me tight to him, while the fingers of his other hand softly trace my face, and around the place that every young girl was to have touched by a man like him, gently probing exploratory me. I hold his- nervous, burning gaze for a moment or maybe it's persistently... but eventually, and for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to feel his mouth on me. I'm not the man for you he said to Katie in his mind who was see it all,' he whispers.

What- is she doing looking in on us like this? Where is this coming from, you wanted me the other night? She said... in a fast way to him, Surely, I should be the judge of that, she thought, I frown

think why can I not have my moment with him, and my head swims with rejection- and that was felt all around- with us all.

I have 'royally screwed' I see him say to her... about all this... He has his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length, watching my responses sensibly. And the only thing I can think is that I wanted to be kissed, made it pretty damned obvious, and he didn't do it. He doesn't want me. He really doesn't want me.

I'm going to stand you up and let you go, we were my butt cheeks pressed agent the glass window where doing like bunny's, as all the people looking in at us, in a hugging freaking stance,' he says quietly letting me down and off him, and he gently pushes me away, as it like he is slapping the shit out of himself.

(My mom thought it was something about a broken typewriter that was his grandpas.) Yah- no! My soul screams as he pulls away, leaving me grieving, for him to feel me up to feel the hole. It like he spiked through my body, as I stand there, feeling him coming out of me.

I said to her- her being Katie... you make me feel safe.

'I've got this,' I breathe, finding my voice. 'Thank you for killing it for us through- why,'

I mutter awash with humiliation, as the kids outside the glass point, at me and uncover body- yet, that's how things are these days. How could I have misread the situation between us so utterly? I need to get away from her. I'm glad to hear you say just that, he whispered. He frowns at me in an anomalous way. He hasn't taken his hands off me, or his eyes.

'For keeping me,' I whisper- thank you- your everything I needed.

He doesn't want me- though Katie- why?

Then a million-thought rushed through my mind as to why not... I bet you could find them all no- can you?

'Thanks for doing the photo shoot, and giving me all these nude photos of you to keep- I love them- you could justify it in a magazine with these, I will see that you do.

I shudder to think, my puss hole is going to be wide open on the cover, what could have happened to me, if daddy would see that- or mom. I'm standing in front of him feeling like a fool. Um- wow- really it just looks like a black hole yet boys love to look up it- (ah girl thoughts.) Yet for the money and him what the hell.

Do you want to come and sit down in the room for a moment and see me edit these to enhances what you have going for you, looking them all over to pick with one well go on the cover- of a 'Girlfriend Monthly' - he bought them out back in 2019.'

He releases me, his hands, off my boobs, and the playing and they go down to his sides, his hand was on me pulling shoulder strap down, and well I shake know what comes next- it's more sex, you got it, I clear my mind some. All my vague, unarticulated hopes have been dashed, looking at myself this way- yet for him anything. Outside the room, I turn briefly to face him, but cannot look him in the eye. With all the kids looking at me see me as the girl on the cover... it was that, fast there, I am on the big screens in the NY all nude. Being naked this day is something we feel fee for doing... with cameras everywhere why not show it all- and we don't care- if a 5-year-old sees it- they'll understand soon enough...

What was I thinking too much? I admonish myself. My subconscious mocks me, I look around to see all of me- all over the place- I am the IT girl of the day. I never wanted that... I wrap my arms around myself- for Katie was happy for me and want to show love, and turn to face the road... to move on with my day, I quickly make my way across, conscious that - is behind me, I murmur, it's only for a month... I was inquiry my own dumb thoughts.

She stops, and the anguish in his voice demands my attention, as she is running to me, with open arm, she there my true love has found me... she is always there for me even if I want to die a slow and painful death, overall this shit, so I peer unwillingly up at me- and she said I love it- it- is, so you- she said. Her gray eyes are bleak, fastly like only she can make them do- as she runs his hand through his hair.

Huh? This is why he looks so desolate; this is what he gets out of you? One girl said to me, at school the next day- holding up a hard copy of me- to all to see, yet I know they all have; I did not even blink- at her- as I was chowing on my pin- like a girl in 5th grade.

Once underneath the dark, cold concrete of the room with its bleak fluorescent light humming, I lean against the wall, before class and put my head in my hands, as I have now sat down for the teachings.

This is the big send-off, of the bell ringing out? Just to wish me luck on more tests, that have nothing to do with what I want to do in life.

-And-

Their Brad jerking off under the desk to my photo! Don't giggle its true! It seems like, um- that's okay for a-boys, yet not a girl these days... also, the girl next to me just got busted for it- yet boys can do anything for they' are known for it.

'Thanks: said the man teaching the class for the embraceable photography of a classmate - there Dee.' 'Um- well thank- thank you.' she said. I can't disguise the sarcasm in my voice. Saying: 'She is a good kid stop it!'

I really think he meant it!

23

Unforbidden and annoying tears pool in my eyes. Thinking of all that has happened these past days, what has not- and what going too... What was not I thinking about it all?

I turn on my heel, on the left foot, for I was nervous, vaguely amazed, that I don't trip- I have a habit of falling on my face, yet that is just me.

I see him in my mind, without giving him a second glance, I disappear down the hall toward the bathroom, run yet I can't get away when he is in my head always. Why am I crying over this?

Drawing up my knees I see in a stall, I fold in on myself.

Grief is something that never was something I could take, like with my dashed hopes, dreams, and soured outlooks. Placing my head on my knees, I let the irrational tears fall unrestrained. How ridiculous am I for doing such? I sink to the side of the shitter and meltdown, angry at myself for this senseless feedback- of feeling all types of love.

Perhaps this ridiculous pain will be smaller the smaller I am if I do this... I have never been on the receiving end of rejection for my own doing, I want this- yet I don't- I don't know what I want- really- I don't. I want to make myself as small as possible. To just fade away from life. I am crying over the loss of something I never had, and that's my pride.

Okay... so I was always one of the last to be picked for basketball or volleyball - but I understood that - running and doing something else at the same time like bouncing or throwing a ball is not my thing. I am a solemn liability in any sporting field.

I'm too pale, feeling and showing, like- passionately thinking in thoughts, though, I've never put myself out there, ever.

Her welcoming smile fades when she sees me. Analytically, I thought to stop! As he said to stop me with crossness in the voice of thought. I'm sure neither of them has been found sobbing alone in dark places. I see Katie there standing to hold me. She drags me home with her arm around her one shoulder. Perhaps, I just need a good cry. A lifetime of insecurity I have had and, too skinny, too shabby, clumsy, my long list of faults goes on.

My subliminal is emblematically screaming at me, arms folded, leaning on one leg, then pitter-pattering her foot in frustration-

(Five hours have pasted...)

Katie is sitting at the dining table on her laptop when I arrive.

She asked: 'Marry what's wrong?'

'You've been crying,' she has an excellent gift for me being there all the time like she is now, just stating there. 'What did that bastard do to you?' She howls, and her face, jeez, she's scary.

That's actually the problem, I should just be happy, and I am not sure if I know how to do that... why can't I?

'Nothing Katie is wrong with me other than what is wrong with me.' The thought brings an ironic smile to my face. 'Then I ask- why have you been crying? 'Like- You never cry,' she says, her voice relaxing some as she continued taking. She puts her arms around me and for side hugs.

I have to say something; just to get her to back chest. She stands, her gray eyes brimming with concern, yet I feel that she feels that way about me all the time. 'Nope, RICHARD C. MAST saved me,' I whisper for being just like all of them that don't care. 'Nonetheless, I was quite shaken by it, anyway.' It was fine, nothing to worry about really.

'Okay, he's got more money than you, but then he has more money than most people in America! And you're not happy with that? He has everything-' 'What do you mean...? What are you trying to say?' 'Oh Katie, it's obvious isn't.' I whirled around, to face her as she stands in the kitchen doorway, looking at me that way. 'Merry! For heaven's sake, how many times; must I tell you? You're a total baby,' she intersects me as I blabber. He likes you more than me... 'oh don't be silly.'

That's what this is all about.

'Katie she just shrugs.

I need to study.' I cut her short. She frowns and said that can wait. And she holding me in her arms like a lover that she is.

'Katie, please, don't get mad at me for this-

'*Never.*'

Nevaeh

Book: 52

'If Only in My Dreams'

(Remembering back too... Earth before the end.)

This is what he meant, for me to do with my life be his... anytime he wants it-girl and nothing more and nothing less, and it makes his rejection easier to accept... almost. Yet, the money is why, like - I am here- and the love too... yah that... I have been working on my studies more than them being with him or her... I would say it was to clear my head. I was looking over the paper that was said I wrote, I pretend to read the article, that Katie made for me. Above and beyond its suddenly, blindingly obvious. He's too gloriously good-looking, not to think about non- stop. I know he loves me, yet he has a hard way of really showing just that.

I, understand, yet not so- her words make more sense than mine- I questioned this... He's not the man for me. I can live with this.

It's only when I'm in bed, that I try to sleep, that I allow my thoughts to drift off some - yet all the voices run through me- never hushing up. Never slowing- never stopping, for me to have a moment- in time to think alone.

'Katie, she is very good,' 'I'm going to study, is what I said to her... just wanted to get away from her mouth.' I am not going to think about him again, for now, I vow to myself, and opening my revision notes, I start to read. Thus far, his face keeps looking it to mine, and I see him looking back in the glass.

I put my pen down, which makes all the font that I write out and comforts it into text in word. I am finished, with my re-write of her draft. My final exam is over, I said- this will do just fine the grin spread over my face can be helped. It's probably the first time all week that I've smiled over something other than him. It's Friday, and we shall be celebrating tonight, really celebrating.

Paris- with Katie not him, I need this- the city the lights the sound- of something other than me inquiry all that is me - and him. She slanted her head and smiled at her companion, with grace seated her at the best table in the restaurant; her smile, at least, was honest, though almost no thing else about her was. The pale gray of her eyes was warmed to by sweet colored contact lenses; her blond hair had been darkened by the low light of the tower in the background, then subtly streaked with lighter shadows. in her arms mentally begging her with every fiber of my being to kiss me, is what I really needed, just her true love for me - not asking... never demanding.

He didn't want me as a girlfriend, this week he was off doing what he does. I turn on to my side, now at the hotel, with her in the single bed, Frivolously, I wonder if perhaps he's with a new younger girl?

Think back of: 'Ah!' settled in his chair with a contented sigh, returning her smile. she is so beautiful woman in her teen years; she looks the US, with glossy dark hair and liquid gray eyes, and a luxurious mouth.

(Bed)

I close my eyes and begin to drift, and she nudges me, groggy as I- she had gambled that he wouldn't have his people dig any deeper than that, that he would run out of the patience required to wait for the answers before, she made a move on me.

Her manufactured background was only a few layers deep; I knew she and I wanted too so why not; she hadn't had time to prepare more. Maybe he's saving himself. Well not for you, my sleepy subconscious has a final swipe at me before unleashing itself on my dreams.

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...And that night, I dream of her and I live long ever after, and I'm running through dark places with eerie strip lighting doing things we shouldn't, and I don't know if I'm running toward something, that I should want or not- the dream, leads me with choices, it's just not clear.

Katie stops writing and puts her pen down. She glances across at me, and I catch her Cheshire cat smile too. We head back to our apartment together in her Mercedes, refusing to discuss

our final paper. Katie is more concerned about what she's going to wear to the bar this evening. I am busily fishing around in my purse for my keys.

'Merry, there's a package for you, there flowers from him...' she said.

Odd, I haven't ordered anything from Amazon recently.

Katie is standing on the steps up to the front door holding them.

'No.' Katie's eyes are wide with disbelief.' I nod as I did before.

'You have, she said, he loved you more than anything, I starting to believe it.' But then her gaze was warm, wet whit tears for she was in love with me more than him at that moment. I knew... she had trained long and hard to acquire it, I knew she was the one that would always care about me. 'Thank you again... I said to him in a mind message.' I recognize the quote was something slandered, where was the love in it?

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'Can't think of anyone else, that would do this for me, like him though.' 'What does this card mean...?' 'I have no inkling; I think it's a warning - scrupulously he keeps threatening me off, with gifts. I have no idea why- he thinks I will keep coming back- just for the coming.

-And-

It's not like I'm beating his door down- and the wood hard- with only him.' I frown some... 'I know you don't want to talk about him, Merry, but he's seriously into you. Warnings or no.' 'I don't know, and I don't care. I can't accept these from him, yet not feeling as I did in the past some of the caring went away.

This is what he meant, for me to do with my life be his... anytime he wants it-girl and nothing more and nothing less, and it makes his rejection easier to accept... almost. Yet, the money is why, like - I am here- and the love too... yah that... I have been working on my studies more than them being with him or her... I would say it was to clear my head. I was looking over the paper that was said I wrote, I

pretend to read the article, that Katie made for me. Above and beyond its suddenly, blindingly obvious. He's too gloriously good-looking, not to think about non- stop. I know he loves me, yet he has a hard way of really showing just that.

I, understand, yet not so- her words make more sense than mine- I questioned this... He's not the man for me. I can live with this.

It's only when I'm in bed, that I try to sleep, that I allow my thoughts to drift off some - yet all the voices run through me- never hushing up. Never slowing- never stopping, for me to have a moment- in time to think alone.

'Katie, she is very good,' 'I'm going to study, is what I said to her... just wanted to get away from her mouth.' I am not going to think about him again, for now, I vow to myself, and opening my revision notes, I start to read. Thus far, his face keeps looking it to mine, and I see him looking back in the glass.

I put my pen down, which makes all the font that I write out and comforts it into text in word. I am finished, with my re-write of her draft. My final exam is over, I said- this will do just fine the grin spread over my face can be helped. It's probably the first time all week that I've smiled over something other than him. It's Friday, and we shall be celebrating tonight, really celebrating.

Paris- with Katie not him, I need this- the city the lights the sound- of something other than me inquiry all that is me - and him. She slanted her head and smiled at her companion, with grace seated her at the best table in the restaurant; her smile, at least, was honest, though almost nothing else about her was. The pale gray of her eyes was warmed to by sweet colored contact lenses; her blond hair had been darkened by the low light of the tower in the background, then subtly streaked with lighter shadows. in her arms mentally begging her with every fiber of my being to kiss me, is what I really needed, just her true love for me - not asking... never demanding.

He didn't want me as a girlfriend, this week he was off doing what he does. I turn on to my side, now at the hotel, with her in the single bed, Frivolously, I wonder if perhaps he's with a new younger girl?

Think back of: 'Ah!' settled in his chair with a contented sigh, returning her smile. she is so beautiful woman in her teen years; she looks the US, with glossy dark hair and liquid gray eyes, and a luxurious mouth.

(Bed)

I close my eyes and begin to drift, and she nudges me, groggy as I- she had gambled that he wouldn't have his people dig any deeper than that, that he would run out of the patience required to wait for the answers before, she made a move on me. Her manufactured background was only a few layers deep; I knew she and I wanted too so why not; she hadn't had time to prepare more. Maybe he's saving himself. Well not for you, my sleepy subconscious has a final swipe at me before unleashing itself on my dreams.

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2

I love Katie, she's so loyal and supportive. I repack the books and leave them on the dining table. Katie hands me a glass of champagne.

'To the end of exams and our new life in Seattle,' she grins.

'To the end of exams, our new life in Seattle, and excellent results.' We clink glasses and drink.

The bar is loud and hectic, full of soon to be graduates out to get trashed. José joins us. He won't graduate for another year, but he's in the mood to party and gets us into the spirit of our newfound freedom by buying a pitcher of margaritas for us all. As I down my fifth, I know this is not a good idea on top of the champagne.

'So, what now Merry?' She shouts at me over the noise, Katie has the constitution of a she-ass. 'That is doubtful,' she calmly replied. 'I have never liked any wine.' She'd made that plain from the start, who disliked the taste of wine, I thought sitting over here looking at her thinking that. Her taste buds were deplorably working-class. She, in fact, enjoyed a glass of wine, (I thought) now she is drinking only coffee or bottled water; order coffee for her, of that... I giggle.

'I think I'd better have a beer.'

'I'll go get us a pitcher.'

'More drink, Merry!'

Katie bellows...

'Classy- in France?'

Sue!

Her eyes for Katie, are glittery and wet for her. I move out of her way to hold and get up from our table. She is taking photos, yes, of her in her tight jeans, her usual stunning self, and high heels, hair piled high with tendrils hanging down softly around her face. I giggled over it like I have no idea what the time is, maybe I'll wake with her over to the tower and well go up and kiss at the top. Good thinking, Merry. I stagger off through the crowd, she yells for me, and I whisper in her mind that I am over here. Of course, there's a line, but at least it's moving fast to the top. I'm suppressing a drunken smile, hit me like an involuntary, looking out over with her in my arms and the kiss.

Back at the hotel my head, ponding so-o... I go for swims uncomfortably, with all the others, a lot of kids but even so it was nice, Well, the object of the exercise was to get drunk, on it's the other way 'round. I have succeeded, in working it off. I stare blankly over and over in a fast way- at the poster on the back of the toilet door that extols the virtues of safe sex. Yah- NO! like that is going to happen.

Holy mother of moo- moo, did I just call RICHARD C. MAST in my mind again? Shit. My phone rings for him it's all in my mind though, and it makes me jump when he says 'what do you want.' I squeak in surprise; by how the man he is being to me for what see to be noted on my own doing.

This is what it's like - probably not an experience to be repeated. The line has moved, and it's now my turn.

'Howdy,' I bleat timidly into the handset. I hadn't calculated on this.

'I'm coming to get you,' he says and hangs up... before I said I did want him too. The only RICHARD C. MAST - could sound so calm and so threatening at the same time. I pull my jeans up after the poster said not to do what I just did. My heart is thumping. Coming to get me? Well, I am coming to get her- ha. Hang on, I'm fine. Oh no. I'm going to be sick... no... He's just messing with my head.

I said- 'Holy freaking crap.'

He can't find me here, I would say so with GPS within my body as we all have now, Besides, it will take him 4 hours to get here from NY, and we'll be long gone by then. I wash my hands and check my face in the mirror.

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I said- 'Holy freaking crap.'

I for one looked flushed and slightly unfocused. He can't find me here, I would say so with GPS within my body as we all have now, 'You've been gone so long.' Katie reprimands me. Besides, it will take him 4 hours to get here from NY, and we'll be long gone by then. I wash my hands and check my face in the mirror. 'Where were you?' I wait at the bar for what feels like an eternity for the pitcher of beer and eventually return to the table. 'The girl's room on a call, that I shouldn't have made.' Mind dealing- I said... 'ah-hh-ha-a' were sitting out said at a bar café. 'All- out- in the - fresh air- and yeah.' 'Katie, I think I'd better think that you and I have a thing... 'Merry, you are such a softie with him - grow some lady nuts and say- freak you.'

4

'I'll be five minutes...'

...'Going to MASTURBATE-?'

'Yep!'

Pulling off my panties, I reach between my legs and pulls on the white string, and gently takes my tampon out of me and tosses it into the nearby toilet. As the inside of me felt as if it was unfolding free. Holy cow... just to the thoughts of his erection springs free. The muscles inside the deepest, darkest part of me clench in the most flavorsome fashion. I'm going to fuck myself now hard, she murmurs as she positions the head of the wiggling pulsating dildo at the entrance of her self-sex. I hear the slosh- of me- and then it of the rushing out of the deepest clenching of what happened pulled out and its soft swirl at the tip of my nose.

5

I make my way through the crowd another time, thinking of how I was going to get off like three more times, in 15. I am beginning to feel nauseous, my head is spinning uncomfortably, see in the little girl in the open stall next to me get there faster then I! and she's like freaking 10! and I'm a little unsteady with my frapping 3 figuring or have girl gotten even more slutty.

More unsteady than usual, she got it down. God, I turn on- you? No- nope ...?... didn't think so prev. 'I think I've just had a bit too much to drink, I feel like more pee then that is coming out of me.' I smile weakly at her and say- GOD FOR YOU HUNNY- good for you. 'and you too,' she murmurs, and her

dark eyes are watching me intently, saying why you doing this on your own at your age... is a young girl thing to do.

'Do you need a hand?' she asks and steps closer undies at her feet, putting her arm around me some. I've got this.' I try and push her away rather weakly, of age, yet there nothing wrong with it. 'Merry, please,' she whispers, its Kate in my head saying don't do it, yet the young child is holding me in her arms, pulling me close, like a lover. These days' free love is love! No matter the age...

6

'You know I like you, Merry, please.' He has one hand at the small of my back holding me against him, the other at my chin tipping back my head. Holy freak... he's going to kiss me. Her hand has slipped into my hair, and she's holding me.

She whispers against my lips. His breath is soft and smells too sweet - of candy and Kool-Aid. She gently kisses me along my jaw, and lips and movies up to the side of my mouth and then right on my parted lips. I feel frightened, drunk, and out of control, yet I love having fee love like this- it like I was her age all over. The feeling is sickly sweet.

You are my friend, no and for life, I said to her, and I think, I'm going to throw up, so you should runoff. A voice in the dark says quietly. Holy shit! In my mind- RICHARD C. MAST - he's at this juncture, see what I have done.

I glance anxiously up at RICHARD C. MAST. He's glowering at Katie, and he's furious, like me for doing a young one as he said. Crap, and fly trap-My stomach hauls, and I double over, worse than when blood is shooting out of my hole, I'll hold you.'

She grabs my hair and pulls it out of the firing line- my body no longer able to accept the alcohol, and I vomit outstandingly on to the ground at me and the little French girls' feet her name was- Willow.

She has her arms around my middle body - holding my hair in a makeshift ponytail down my back so it's off my face, her hands the other is I try awkwardly to push her hair out of the way, but I vomit again... and again, even on to her half nude body.

Even when my stomach's empty, and nothing is coming up, oh shit... 'If you' re going to throw up again, I note, with deep thankfulness, that it's in relative darkness. I vow silently that I'll never ever drink again, yet that like say I cannot have a day without sex. It's going down in me at some point.

My hands are resting on the block wall... How long is this going to last? I questioned... she takes her T stands, and I wipe my mouth, on she said she did not care... love at first sight... I questioned it. This is just too appalling for words, Katie said... I have to go out now. So -o horrifying gasping heaves of wackiness- my body feels. Then it concludes... Katie is still hovering by the entrance to the girl's room watching us.

Her (the young girls) hand are barely holding me up - vomiting profusely is exhausting. takes his hands off I say to him- I'm hectic with embarrassment, repulsed with myself. When I come around. My hands in on head I groan, as I place them there. Like that was the solitary worst moment of my lifespan. Twins taking a crap is what I think of at this moment- why I don't know. Oh- yeah- I do- there they are both doing just that- like- looking in at me over in there apparent 5,00 feet up or so all glass too. What should I say to him, for him to forgive this?

RICHARD C. MAST's rejection will not be something good. I try to remember a worse one, that I have done, and I cannot. I glare at him, in my mind. For he is acting like my dad, not my lover. Oh, the humiliation... my mother was far worse. Marry who are you kidding, he's just seen you hurl all over the ground- nothing more said- Katie, she feels that what I did was nothing. Yet I still look pretty shamefaced to myself, and him- or so I think.

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I have a few choice words for my so-called friend, none of which I can repeat in front of RICHARD C. MAST - There's no disguising your lack of ladylike behavior, and I can only come up with- and this is so, so many shadows darker in terms of, I risk a glance at him, I see hem looking back at me mirrored back in my stare.

He's staring down at me, his face composed, yet he can help but fall for me fast, giving nothing away about how he was feeling about what I did we fall. Turning, I glance at Katie whom and, like me, scared by the true filling that he heads to me from that day. I personally mutter, staring at the handkerchief which I am furiously worrying with my fingers. It's so soft, and worm, as slid his fingers in her, he probably would expect her to share his bed tonight, but he was destined to be disappointed once again, in her saying: I don't feel the need after, soloing- so many times today. Her hatred was so strong she had barely been able to force herself to let him kiss her and accept his touch with some temperateness.

There was no way in hell like she'd let him do more than that to her tonight- for the movies running in her had of him acting like an ass and or like her dad. 'I'm sorry, he said for what I have done to you. Just in my thoughts of...' Apologize... and say back off. Katie mutters, derogatory but we both ignore that, and he slinks off back into the of my mind for rest and sleep. I'm on my own with doing me - and just Kate.

'We've all been here, perchance not quite as dramatically as you,' he says dryly. 'It's about knowing your limits, Merry. I mean, I'm all for pushing limits, but really this is beyond the pale. My head rings with excess alcohol and frustration. Do you make a habit of this kind of behavior?'

He was scolding me like an errant child, something you would never do to me I said to Kate that had me held by the butt, arching my back as she is holding me in her arms, for passion and cute kissing- then 69, her butt in my face, I move her lips around using sucking at mouth and teeth and tongue.

Katie- Put her legs over your shoulders and grab onto her waist or open up her vagina. (the last one feels better) or have her butt hole in your well- nose. Don't fart!

And at first kiss outside her vagina and then slowly lick her inside and just pretend she's the most beautiful thing you've ever tasted and if she wants to talk dirty to her but talks to her about that beforehand so she won't be offended.

Hope this helps.

I love it. It's such a turn on.

1) You want to kiss/nibble on her neck first. It's a good way to start turning her on.

2) Suck on her nipples and play with them with your tongue. This too is another great turn on.

3) While you're doing these, massage her PUSS-PUSS over her pants just to get her ready for it.

4) Work your way down, slowly and sexually.

5) Open up her PUS*Y and go straight to the Cl*t.

6) Smack the PUS*Y with your tongue really fast, and suck and tug on it (not too hard though.)

7) As you're sucking her PUS*Y, slide your fingers in and out of her vagina opening.

8) Once you have 2 fingers in there, and they're facing up, curve them like a hook and without going in and out, stroke her G-spot.

If this is your first time, beware of the smell and taste, as it makes most guys gag at first.

Part of me wants to say, if I want to get drunk every night like this, then it's my decision and nothing to do with him - but I'm not brave enough. Not now that I've thrown up in front of him. Why is he still standing there?

'No,' I said contritely.' I've never been drunk before and right now I have no desire to ever be again.' Yet, I know that's a lie...

'Come on, I'll take you home,' she murmurs- do this to me.

I just don't understand why he's here. I begin to feel faint. She notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and hoists me into his arms, holding me close to her chest like a child. For sucking and nabbing on her nipples. 'I need you, Katie.' Holy Moses, I say at C-*-M! I'm in her arms again. Where I do the same to her butt in the air, I go for it for like a half-hour.

'Dancing,' with Katie in the club she shouts, and I can tell he's mad at me acting slutty. He's is eyeing me- him the RICHARD C. MAST suspiciously.

I struggle with my black jacket and place my small shoulder bag over my head, so it sits at my hip. I'm ready to go, once I've seen Katie; to party my ass off... yet he is saying NO... No in my mind. And I just having fun. It's earsplitting, packed, and the music is underway, thus there is a huge mass on the dance floor. she sets me down, and, taking my hand, leads me back into the bar.

She knew that I went out for some air- of him... embarrassed weak I feel dumb, and still drunk, somewhat exhausted, ashamed, and on some strange equal unquestionably off the scale electrified, by the cocktail of things I took down.

He's clutching my hand I see them all wavy to my sight. Looking at them all swirly. - such a confusing array of emotions, play tricks in my mind like haunted school girl ghosts. I'll need at least a week to process them all, I knew even in this state of mind of senseless.

Katie is not at our table, and Katie has disappeared. Levi looks lost and forlorn on his own. 'Where's Katie? She was off with some young girl doing what I did the night before.' I see that she had to feel as I did... she was always like that with me... we have to be the same in all- or not...! 'My head is beginning to pound in time to the thumping bass line of the music.'

'Dancing,' with Katie in the club she shouts, and I can tell he's mad at me acting slutty. He's is eyeing me- him the RICHARD C. MAST suspiciously.

I struggle with my black jacket and place my small shoulder bag over my head, so it sits at my hip. I'm ready to go, once I've seen Katie; to party my ass off... yet he is saying NO... No in my mind. And I just having fun. It's earsplitting, packed, and the music is underway, thus there is a huge mass on the dance floor. she sets me down, and, taking my hand, leads me back into the bar.

She knew that I went out for some air- of him... embarrassed weak I feel dumb, and still drunk, somewhat exhausted, ashamed, and on some strange equal unquestionably off the scale electrified, by the cocktail of things I took down.

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He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He's served immediately.

'She's on the dance floor,' I touch RICHARD C. MAST's arm and lean up and shout in his ear, brushing his hair with my nose, smelling his clean, fresh smell. All those forbidden, unfamiliar feelings that I have tried to deny surface and run amok through my drained body. I myself flush, and somewhere deep, deep down my muscles clench deliciously. He is such a - Control-Freak - I said to her- saying: your just having fun. He's watching me intently, mirrored in my- lost young girl like the look of my eyes.

'Drink- Drink- drink' I heard her say, to this young girl in the bar and she was about 14,' he shouts his order at me. He looks irritated and livid, with me like I am his sex- Dollie, and nothing more...He's so overbearing, I thought. Give me love- I thought- or is sex now just the love? What is his delinquent? The moving lights are meandering and turning in time to the music casting strange colored light and obscurities all over the bar and the business. He's alternately white, green, blue, and bloodshot red.

There a dead girl in an ash box sitting on the ground, on the walkway to my home, she was just burnt a day go, and dumped, here, and this is where she is resting- no one cares about her like death and dumping ash that nothing- or that she was only 5 years of age...I take a hesitant swallow; I think about the life she never had- on like all the others thoughts going through my mind I care.

'All of it,' he shouts.

I sway slightly, and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. Um- Merry... are you ever going to live this down, and say she slipped away? She was my sister girl- and mom and they just dump her off... to be kicked by passing feet- yah but that is what they do these days- girl.

Cemeteries are wasted spaces of land, why do that when you need to construct things in that space. There is nothing left to remember her by- nothing by the memories in my mind of whom she was.

It makes me feel queasy, as I look in the box 3 x 6-inch books and see nothing but blackened asks... blowing some in the wand of the high walkways... in the glowing tingling light of the smoggy covered skyline. I notice this thought of what she was wearing the last time that I saw her, a blur though- wearing; a loose white linen shirt, snug jeans, playing in the park on the roof of the high-rise, pink converse sneakers, and a pink and white jacket, I would know I see a flick in some of the ash hitting my face as dust in the wind.

He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He's served immediately.

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'All of it,' shouts in my head- like the way she passed- by some killing her for the dollar in her underwire where she keeps and for the young rape.

I sway slightly, and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. Um- Merry... are you ever going to live this down, and say she slipped away? She was my sister girl- and mom and they just dump her off... to be kicked by passing feet- yah but that is what they do these days- girl.

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Now in bed sleeping pills at my side, taking the glass from me, she places them for me - so sweet. Her shirt is unbuttoned at the top, and I see a sprinkling skin coming at me - and I somewhat out... then just to see her ass in my face... when I come to it, in my groggy frame of mind, she looks yummy.

9

He takes my hand once more. Holy cow - he's leading me onto the dance floor. Shit. I do not dance. He can sense my reluctance, and under the colored lights, I can see his amused, slightly sardonic smile. He gives my hand a sharp tug, and I'm in his arms again, and he starts to move, taking me with him. Boy, he can dance, and I can't believe that I'm following him step for step. Maybe it's because I'm drunk that I can keep up. He's holding me tight against him, his body against mine... if he wasn't clutching me so tightly, I'm Sue I would swoon at his feet. In the back of my mind, my mother's often-recited warning comes to me: Never trust a man who can dance.

I looked into him/ his daily thoughts and what he did, just to see that he was with a 15-year-old- not me- saying- 'Such a tight pussy- so tight and young-and small and the sucking oh so tight it's letting are out the sides. - he said as I see that he was with a new girl named- Nataliee.

I just was modified...Really likes she likes someone, I gasp. Katie is making her moves go in her mind for me of her hook up, she had with her new friend. She's dancing her ass off, and she only ever does that if she likes someone. It means there'll be three of us for breakfast tomorrow morning. Katie! Outside and inside my head pounding away, loud. I cannot hear what he says, I tuned it out... it was my wishes. I can't tell the color under the pulsating to all the heat of the flashing lights going off, is the day starting a new.

I Katie- curly blonde hair, and light, wickedly gleaming eyes.

Me- She pulls me into her arms, where she is more than happy to be... Katie!

But I never got to talk to her, the girl she had last night- I had to meet her. A new day is all the same- until the night-RICHARD C. MAST propels us off the dance floor in double-quick time. Is she okay? She said- she's not you- though. I need to do the safe sex lecture, for the school, the teacher I know is a lezbo, but yeah... she loves me.

I can see where things are heading for her and him, In the back of my mind, I hope she reads one of the posters on the back of the toilet doors. My thoughts crash through my brain, fighting the drunk, fuzzy feeling. It's so warm in here, so loud, so colorful - too bright. My head begins to swim with so many thoughts of him and her, and her and then him- and what she did- he did- and what I did with all, oh no... The last thing I hear beforehand, I pass out in RICHARD C. MAST's arms is his harsh description. It's very quiet, I am comfortable and warm, the light is muted, in this bed. 'Freak!' I open my eyes, Hmm... I'm tranquil for a moment.

'This looks bigger, then I remember,' I said to him- by this time I have a lust for him so- that I need him- oh so much. Oh so...! It's oddly familiar to me yet all-new the love only he can give- odd like only she can too as a girl- and he a boy. I have no idea where I am, halfway in the night- I come to it and see I am in his bed nude, and he going down on me, lovingly hard! I am enjoying the strange unfamiliar surroundings, of him just work- work- working it! Where? ...? ... Where am I? My confused brain struggles over its recent painterly memories.

Holy crap- I said- like that is carp the is holy- said Katie in my mind... ha funny. I'm hotel he owns in Atlantic City. ... in a suite- I see him coming to me, ready for loving making, As I did the last time, we were together, he loves it when I spray all over his face, as he loves doing to me as well! I have stood in a room similar to this with Katie. Oh shit. I'm in RICHARD C. MAST's suite. This room is worth more the then-White House- and some of those places that why don't care about- How did I get here?

I questioned... memories of the previous night come slowly back to haunt me, like my sister young life coming to end fast over someone, that did not love her just for hot young sex. She never had a boy toy. Nothing dead at 5! Holy shit. No socks...No jeans... I see this photo of her playing- where she was just being a kid-I see the first time she cum-med, on her little bed, it was the same night- she found out she was going to have to not see me any longer- so Katie showed her to be happy- I glance at the bedside night table- and see her face on the screen that movies the photos. I don't remember coming here. I'm wearing my t-shirt, bra, and panties. I FEEL Broken- The drinking, oh no the drinking, the

handset call, oh no the phone call, the vomiting, oh no the vomiting. Katie and then RICHARD C. MAST. Oh no. I cringe inwardly.

The orange juice tastes heavenly, It's I sit up and take the tablets. On it is a glass of orange juice and two tablets. Advil. He is such a Control freak that he is, he thinks of the whole thing. Essentially, I don't feel that bad, probably much healthier than I personally merit too. Dehydration quenching and invigorating. Nothing beats freshly squeezed orange juice for refreshing a parched mouth.

How are you feeling?' 'Improved better than I earned,' I gabble.

'How did I get here?' My voice is small, contrite.

Don't worry about it he said- fastly.

Followed by: 'Good morning Merry. I peek up at him, I for one, like- feel similar to a two-year-old, if I close my eyes when I'm not really here. There's a knock ook2on the door, for it to open. RICHARD C. MAST's sweat; the notion does odd things to me. My heart leaps into my mouth, and I can't seem to find my voice, to say come in. He opens the door anyway and strolls in, being all sweet. Holy hell, he's been working out, in tight shorts that show off his backside.

He comes and sits down on the edge of the bed, way, off, like his hair, blowing in the wind as the doors were open to the cityscape. Sweat, hard I take a deep breath and close my eyes, I can't bear to look at the cheat any longer. He's staring at me, blue bright eyes, and as usual, I have no idea what he's thinking, even if it is run hard in my mind of all the facts. He closes enough for me to touch, for me to smell, of him to be overpowering- and I want him- oh no- YES, do I want him!

The towel, his hand was thrown on the bed at my feet. He hides his thoughts and feelings so well. Grasps is let out of me for he has me around his neck, going in for it. Like his sex toy that is a rag doll, I wriggle hard. He even takes me from behind over the chair without me giving the okay- I was all his! And I look down and see that I am shaved! Oh my... 'Did you put me to bed?' Did you get me this night's top?

His face is blank.

'Yes!'

Um- it was an intoxicating cocktail- 'After you passed out, that he gave me last night my little girl down under is still red- and I can walk- so much better than a margarita, I was out in the la-la- land- and I do remember the hardcore FREAKING! and now I can speak from experience, this man goes in hard and deep.

'Did I throw up again?' My voice is quieter. Don't worry about getting knocked up I have taken care of that too... with this. An implant was placed by a doter last night when you were passed out- don't thank me!

Don't say anything- don't even think about it- it for your own good.

Um- is all I got out before his index finger hashed me - up to my lips.

'Did you undress me?' I whispered...

'Funny you cute- that's the least of your worries!' He said.

Um...?

I thought...! Maybe I think too much...? Maybe he's right...? Or is this wrong...?

The RICHARD C. MAST

Preface:

Days moments like this only happen in my wildest dreams when I was a young girl warm in pink sheets in my school age-girl tween bed, or so I thought- now I am not dreaming. I was wearing tight blue short shorts with no underwear and a sports blue and white tank top with no bra. His breathing is an array, matching mine. Pulling off his gray briefs, his erection springs free. Turning to face him, pushing the foreskin back gently- to look like any man should or would- I'm shocked to find has his erection firmly in my grasp and tight and hard and exposed to my kisses.

My mouth drops open for my flavored Popsicle of oh-da-hot-sexy-man- and sexy tattoos covering his arms. "I'm going to fuck you now," he whispers as he positions the head of his erection at the entrance of me, his he pulls me up to his standing body and I am off my feet... Holy cow...!

I am only 100 lbs and a sweet little slut calling him by his title for him, and he loves it and he can pick me up and hold me upside down hair down to his feet he is full on to my clitoris for his 69 sex- both as deep and bobbing as we can go, both in the heat of passion at the same time. How cow- I am upside down, yet I love the way he can passion me around for our sex, it's so hot!

Then whipped right side up still being held like a small child in his big manly arms- my arms holding on for dear life around his neck as I for the first time fell ever-so-small- to him- yet ever-so tall being now so far of the ground; for more of his sex hardcore penis pounding sliding up and down on his belly like a young little teen slut that- I am for only him- like the wet gushing orgasms run now down his body.

Holy cow, it's so-o big! As my young tight hole is now open like my and showing blackness that is my vagina parted- looking like my pocketbook when unclasped, for as he no slips out and back in hard as I am now thrown on my backside- legs sprawled. just moments after I had fully let go, he had my butt to my chin as he made his clam pile driver himself into china in me, I am all his! The cream is now further down my body, into my pubic hair, I hear the slosh's and then with tight pushing outs of me- of thick white cream-pies 3 times in 10 minutes, I gasp as all- and everything- like him run a lather all over my pubic bone.

It's warm. The gentleness at that moment surprises me. That was not the end for this strong man that needs the grunting out, I kneel at his front as he is jerking his long hard Vancouver pink head thumping cock at my hanging out as my hands are behind me backside, my mouth eagerly awaiting tongue panting, as rubbed out love for me at that moment stream, surge, flows swiftly in, flopping all of it around my teeth, not letting any go to waste, I show him I love it all, I swallow hard and then show that it's all gone like a good little girl- that I am for him- and that- I don't mind my face covered- '*daddy's cummies*!'

Then I was on top for all of 2 more minutes. My little nipples hard like the clit now out of it hardcover as I give him my sex, raw, and longing, only moments have past and its time yet again and we are at the climax of running out. I also love looking up at him with big feminine eyes most of the time- in

my lip and one hand grasping knowing- that I have done a good job having all of him jammed as hard and far down my thought as possible now gasping.

(Back in time)

'No... not really...' I whisper.

'It's more the idea of it?' he prompts.

'I suppose. Feeling pleasure... when one isn't supposed to.'

'I remember feeling the same. Takes a while to get your head around it.' Holy hell. This was when he was a kid.

'You can always safe... word... Merry. Don't forget that. And... as long as you follow the rules... which fulfill a deep need in me for control and to keep you safe... then perhaps we can find a way forward.'

'Why do you need to control me?'

'Because it satisfies a need in me that wasn't met in my formative years.'

'So, it's a form of therapy?'

'I've not thought of it like that... but yes... I suppose it is.' I can understand. This will help.

'But... here's the thing... one moment you say don't defy me... the next you say you like to be challenged. That's a very fine line to tread successfully.' He gazes at me for a moment... then frowns.

'I can see that. But you seem to be doing fine so far.'

'But at what personal cost? I'm tied up in knots here.' 'I like you tied up in knots...' he smirks.

'That's not what I meant!' I splash him in exasperation.

He gazes down at me... arching an eyebrow.

'Did you just splash me?' 'Yes.' Holy shit... that look.

'Oh... Miss Merry.' He grabs me and pulls me onto his lap... sloshing water all over the floor.' I think we've done enough talking for now.'

He clasps his hands on either side of my head and kisses me. Deeply. Possessing my mouth. Angling my head... controlling me. I moan against his lips. This is what he likes. This is what he's so good at. Everything ignites inside me and my fingers are in his hair... holding him to me... and I'm kissing him back and saying I want you to the only way I know-how. He groans... shifting me so I'm astride him... kneeling over him... his erection beneath me. He pulls back and looks at me... his eyes hooded... glowing and lustful. I drop my hands to grab on to the edge of the bath, but he grips both my wrists and pulls my hands behind my back... holding them together in one hand.

'I'm going to have you now...' he whispers and lifts me so that I'm hovering over him.

'Ready?' He breathes.

'Yes...' I whisper... and he eases me on to him... slowly... exquisitely slowly... filling me... watching me as he takes me.

I groan... closing my eyes... and I revel in the sensation... the stretching fullness. He flexes his hips... and I gasp... leaning forward... resting my forehead against his.

'Please let my hands go...' I whisper.

'Don't touch me...' he pleads... and releasing my wrists... he grabs my hips.

Clasping the bath ledge... I move up and then down slowly... opening my eyes to gaze at him. He's watching me. His mouth opens slightly... his breathing halted... stilted... his tongue between his teeth. He looks so... hot. We're wet and slippery and moving against each other. I lean down and kiss him.

He closes his eyes. Tentatively... I bring my hands up to his head and run my fingers through his hair... not taking my lips from his mouth. This is allowed. He likes this. I like this. And we move together. I tug his hair... tipping his head back and deepen the kiss... riding him... faster... picking up the rhythm. I moan against his mouth. He starts to lift me faster... faster... holding my hips. Kissing me back.

We are wet mouths and tongues... tangled hair... and moving hips. All sensation... all-consuming again. I am close... I am starting to recognize this delicious tightening... quickening. And the water... it's swirling around us... our own whirlpool... a stirring vortex as our movements become more frantic... sloshing everywhere... mirroring what's happening inside me... and I just don't care.

I love this man. I love his passion... the effect I have on him. I love that he's flown so far to see me. I love that he cares about me... he cares. It's so unexpected... so fulfilling. He is mine... and I am his.

'That's right... baby...' he breathes.

-And-

I come... my orgasm ripping through me... a turbulent... passionate... apogee that devours me whole. And suddenly RICHARD C. MAST crushes me to him... his arms wrapped around my back as he finds his release.

'Merry... baby!' He cries... and it's a wild invocation... stirring and touching the depths of my soul.

We lie staring at each other... gray eyes into blue... face to face... in the super king bed... both hugging our pillows on our fronts. Naked. Not touching.

Just looking and admiring... covered by the sheet.

'Do you want to sleep?' RICHARD C. MAST asks... his voice soft. He is beautiful; the mix of colors in his hair vivid against the white Egyptian cotton pillowcase... gray eyes... smoldering... expressive. He looks concerned.

No. I'm not tired.' I feel strangely energized. It's been so good to talk... I don't want to stop.

'What do you want to do?' he asks.

'Talk.' He smiles.

'About what?'

'Stuff.'

'What stuff?'

'You.'

'What about me?'

'What's your favorite film?' He grins.

'Today... it's 'The Piano'.' His grin is infectious.

'Of course. Silly me. Such a sad... exciting score... which no doubt you can play? So many accomplishments... Mr...'

'And the greatest one is you... Miss Merry.'

'So, I am number seventeen.'

He frowns at me not comprehending.

'Seventeen?'

A number of women you've um... had sex with.'

His lips quirk up... his eyes shining with incredulity.

'Not exactly.'

'You said fifteen...' My confusion is obvious.

'I was referring to the number of women in my playroom. I thought that's what you meant. You didn't ask me how many women I'd had sex with.'

'Oh.' Holy shit... there's more... How? I gape at him. 'Vanilla?'

'No. You are my one vanilla conquest...' he shakes his head... still grinning at me.

Why does he find this funny? And why am I grinning back at him like an idiot?

'I can't give you a number. I didn't put notches in the bedpost or anything.'

'What are we talking... tens... hundreds... thousands?' My eyes grow wilder as the numbers get larger.

'Tens. We're in the tens... for pity's sake.'

'All submissive?'

'Yes.'

Stop grinning at me...' I scold him mildly... trying and failing to keep a straight face.

'I can't. You're funny.'

'Funny peculiar or funny ha-ha?'

'A bit of both I think.' His words mirror mine.

'That's a damned cheek... coming from you.' He leans across and kisses the tip of my nose.

'This will shock you... Merry. Ready?'

I nod... wide... eyed... still with the stupid grin on my face.

'All submissive in training... when I was training. There are places in and around NY that one can go to and practice. Learn to do what I do...' he says.

What?

'Oh.' I blink at him.

'Yep... I've paid for sex... Merry.'

'That's nothing to be proud of...' I mutter haughtily. 'And you're right... I am deeply shocked. And cross that I can't shock you.'

'You wore my underwear.'

'Did that shock you?'

'Yes.' My inner goddess pole... vaults over the fifteen... foot bar.

'You didn't wear your panties to meet my parents.'

'Did that shock you?'

'Yes.'

Jeez... the bar's moved to sixteen feet.

'It seems I can only shock you in the underwear holdings.'

'You told me you were a virgin. That's the biggest shock I've ever had.' 'Yes... your face was a picture... a Kodak moment.' I giggle.

'You let me work you over with a riding crop.'

'Did that shock you?'

'Yep.'

I grin.

'Well... I may let you do it again.'

'Oh... I do hope so-o... Miss Merry. This weekend?' 'Okay...' I agree... shyly.

'Okay?'

Yes- I'll go to the Red Room of Pain again.'

'You say my name.'

'That shocks you?'

'The fact that I like it shocks me.' 'RICHARD C. MAST.' He grins.

'I want to do something tomorrow.' His eyes glow with excitement.

'What?'

'A surprise. For you.' His voice is low and soft.

I raise an eyebrow and stifle a yawn at the same time.

'Am I boring to you... Miss Merry?' His tone is sardonic.

'*Never.*'

He leans across and kisses me gently on my lips.

'Sleep...' he commands... then switches off the light.

And in this quiet moment... as I close my eyes... spent and sated... I think I'm in the eye of the storm. And in spite of all, he's said... and what he hasn't said... I don't think I have ever been so happy.

RICHARD C. MAST stands in steel... barred cage. Wearing his soft... ripped jeans... his chest and feet are mouthwateringly naked... and he's staring at me. His private... joke smile etched on his beautiful face and his eyes a molten gray. In his hands, he holds a bowl of strawberries. He ambles with athletic grace to the front of the cage... gazing intently at me. Holding up a plump ripe strawberry... he extends his hand through the bars.

'Eat...' he says... his tongue caressing the front of his palate as he enunciates the 't'.

I try and move toward him... but I'm tethered... held back by some unseen force around my wrist... holding me. Let me go.

'Come... eat...' he says... smiling his delicious crooked smile.

I pull and pull... let me go! I want to scream and shout... but no sound emerges. I am mute. He stretches a little further... and the strawberry is at my lips.

'Eat... Merry.' His mouth forms my name... lingering sensually on each syllable.

I open my mouth and bite... the cage disappears... and my hands are free. I reach up to touch him... graze my fingers through his chest hair.

'Merry.' No. I moan.

'Come on... baby.'

No. I want to touch you.

'Wake up.'

NO- please, my eyes flicker unwillingly open for a split second. I'm in bed and someone is nuzzling my ear.

'Wake up... baby...' he whispers... and the effect of his sweet voice spreads like warm melted caramel through my veins.

It's RICHARD C. MAST. Jeez... it's still dark... and the images of him from my dream persists... disconcerting and tantalizing in my head.

'Oh... no...' I groan. I want back at his chest... back to my dream.

Why is he waking me?

It's the middle of the night... or so it feels. Holy shit. Does he want sex... now?

'Time to get up... baby. I'm going to switch on the sidelight.' His voice is quiet.

'No...' I groan.

'I want to chase the dawn with you...' he says... kissing my face... my eyelids... the tip of my nose... my mouth... and I open my eyes. The sidelight is on. 'Good morning... beautiful...' he murmurs.

I groan... and he smiles.

'You are not a morning person...' he murmurs.

Through the haze of light... I squint and see RICHARD C. MAST leaning over me... smiling. Amused.

Amused at me. Dressed! In black.

'I thought you wanted sex...' I grumble.

'Merry... I always want sex with you. It's heartwarming to know that you feel the same...' he says dryly.

I gaze at him as my eyes adjust to the light... but he still looks amused... thank heavens.

'Of course, I do... just not when it's so late.'

'It's not late... it's early. Come on... up you go. We're going out. I'll take a rain check on the sex.'

'I was having such a nice dream...' I whine.

'Dream about what?' he asks patiently.

'You.' I blush.

'What was I doing this time?'

'Trying to feed me strawberries.'

His lips twitch with a trace of a smile.

Dr. Flynn could have a field day with that. Up... get dressed. Don't bother to shower... we can do that later.' We! I sit up... and the sheet pools at my waist... revealing my body. He stands to give me a room... his eyes dark.

'What time is it?'

'5:30 in the morning.'

'Feels like 3:00 a. m.'

'We don't have much time. I let you sleep as long as possible.

Come.' 'Can't I have a shower?' He sighs.

'If you have a shower... I'll want one with you... and you and I know what will happen then... the day will just go. Come.'

He's excited. As a small boy... he's iridescent with anticipation and excitement. It makes me smile.

'What are we doing?' 'It's a surprise. I told you.' I can't help but grin up at him.

'Okay.' I clamber off the bed and search for my clothes. Of course, they are neatly folded on the chair beside my bed. He's laid out a pair of his jersey boxer briefs too... Ralph Lauren... no less. I slip them on... and he grins at me. Hmm... another piece of RICHARD C. MAST's underwear... a trophy to add to my collection... along with the car... the BlackBerry... the Mac... his black jacket... and a set of old valuable first editions. I shake my head at his largesse... and I frown as a scene from Tess crosses my

mind: the strawberry scene. It evokes my dream. To hell with Dr. Flynn... Freud would have a field day... and then he'd probably expire trying to deal with Dark Shadows.

'I'll give you some room now that you're up.' RICHARD C. MAST exits toward the living area... and I wander into the bathroom. I have needed to attend to... and I want a quick wash. Seven minutes later... I am in the living area... scrubbed... brushed and dressed in jeans... my camisole... and RICHARD C. MAST's underwear. RICHARD C. MAST glances up from the small dining table where he's eating breakfast.

Breakfast!

Jeez... at this time.

'Eat...' he says.

Holy Moses... my dream. I gape at him... thinking about his tongue on

his palate. Hmm... his expert tongue.

'Merry...' he says sternly... pulling me out of my reverie.

It really is too early for me. How to handle this? 'I'll have some tea. Can I take a croissant for later?' He eyes me suspiciously... and I smile very sweetly.

'Don't rain on my parade... Merry...' he warns softly.

'I will eat later when my stomach's woken up. About 7:30 a. m. okay?' 'Okay.' He peers down at me.

Honestly. I have to concentrate hard on not making a face at him.

'I want to roll my eyes at you.'

'By all means... do... and you will make my day...' he says sternly.

I gaze up at the ceiling.

'Well, a spanking would wake me up... I suppose.' I purse my lips in quiet contemplation.

RICHARD C. MAST's mouth drops open.

'On the other hand, I don't want you to be all hot and bothered... the climate here is warm enough.' I shrug nonchalantly.

RICHARD C. MAST closes his mouth and tries very hard to look displeased... but fails hopelessly.

I can see the humor lurking in the back of his eyes.

'You are... as ever... challenging... Miss Merry. Drink your tea.'

I notice the Twining's label... and inside... my heart sings. See... he does care... my subconscious mouths at me. I sit and face him... drinking in his beauty. Will I ever get enough of this man?

As we leave the room... RICHARD C. MAST throws a sweatshirt at me.

'You'll need this.' I look at him... puzzled.

'Trust me.' He grins... leans over and kisses me quickly on the lips... then grabs my hand and we head out.

Outside... in the relative cool of the half... the light of pre... dawn... the valet hands RICHARD C. MAST a set of keys to a flash sports car with a soft top. I raise an eyebrow at RICHARD C. MAST... who smirks back at me.

'You know... sometimes it's great being me...' he says with a conspiratorial but smug grin that I simply can't help emulating. He's so lovable when he's playful and carefree. He opens my car door with an exaggerated bow... and in I climb. He is in such a good mood.

'Where are we going?'

'You'll see.' He grins as he slips the car into drive... and we head out on Savannah Parkway. He programs the GPS and presses a switch on the steering wheel and a classical orchestral piece fills the car.

'What's this?' I ask as the sweet... sweet sound of a hundred violin strings assail us. 'It's from La Traviata. An opera by Verdi.' Oh... my... it's lovely.

'La Traviata? I've heard of that. I can't think where. What does it mean?' RICHARD C. MAST glances at me and smirks.

Well... literally... the woman led astray. It's based on Alexander Dumas's book... La Dame aux Camelias.'

'Ah. I've read it.'

'I thought you might.'

'The doomed courtesan.' I squirm uncomfortably in the plush leather seat. Is he trying to tell me something? 'Hmm... it's a depressing story...' I mutter.

'Too depressing? Do you want to choose some music? This is on my iPod.' RICHARD C. MAST has that secret smile again.

I can't see his iPod anywhere. He taps the screen on the console between us... and behold... there is a playlist.

'You choose.' His lips twitch up into a smile... and I know it's a challenge.

RICHARD C. MAST's iPod... this should be interesting. I scroll through the touch screen... and find the perfect song. I press play. I wouldn't have figured him for an Amanda fan. The club... mix... techno beat assaults us both... and RICHARD C. MAST turns the volume down. Maybe it's too early for this: Britney's at her most sultry.

'Toxic... eh?' RICHARD C. MAST grins.

'I don't know what you mean.' I feign innocence.

He turns the music down a little more... and inside I am hugging myself. My inner goddess is standing on the podium awaiting her gold medal.

He turned the music down.

Victory!

'I didn't put that song on my iPod...' he says casually... and puts his foot down so that I am thrown back into my seat as the car accelerates along the freeway.

What? He knows what he's doing... the bastard. Who did? And I have to listen to Amanda going on and on. Who... who?

The song ends and the iPod shuffles to Damien Rice being mournful.

Who? Who? I stare out of the window... my stomach-churning. Who?

'It was Sarrah...' he answers my unspoken thoughts. How does he do that?

'Sarrah?'

'An ex... who put the song on my iPod.'

Damien warbles away in the background as I sit stunned. An ex...

Ex... submissive?

An ex...

'One of the fifteen?' I ask.

'Yes.'

What happened to her?'

'We finished.'

'Why?'

Oh jeez. It's too early for this kind of conversation. But he looks relaxed... happy even... and what's more... talkative.

'She wanted more.' His voice is low... introspective even... and he leaves the sentence hanging between us... ending it with that powerful little word again.

'And you didn't?' I ask before I can employ my brain to mouth filter.

Shit... do I want to know?

He shakes his head.

'I've never wanted more... until I met you.'

I gasp... reeling. Oh my. Isn't this what I want? He wants more. He wants it... too! My inner goddess has backflipped off the podium and is doing cartwheels around the stadium.

It's not just me.

'What happened to the other fourteen?' I ask.

Jeez, he's talking... take advantage.

'You want a list? Divorced... beheaded... died?'

You're not Bill VIII.'

'Okay. In no particular order... I've only had long-term relationships with four women... apart from Elly.'

'Elly?'

'Mrs. Robinson to you.' He half-smiles his secret private joke smile.

Elly! Holy Freak. The evil one has a name and it is all... foreign-sounding. A vision of a glorious... pale... skinned vamp with raven hair and ruby... red lips come to mind... and I know that she's beautiful. I must not dwell. I must not dwell.

'What happened to the four?' I ask to distract myself.

'So inquisitive... so eager for information... Miss Merry...' he scolds playfully.

'Oh... Mr. When Is Your Period Due?'

'Merry... a man needs to know these things.'

'Does he?'

'I do.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't want you to get pregnant.'

'Neither do I! Well... not for a few years yet.'

RICHARD C. MAST blinks startled... then visibly relaxes. Okay. RICHARD C. MAST doesn't want children. Now or never? I am reeling from his sudden... unprecedented attack of candor. Perhaps it's the early morning? Something in the modern city water?

The modern dystopian city air? What else do I want to know? Remembrance of Things Past.

'So, the other four... what happened?' I ask.

'One met someone else. The other three wanted... more. I wasn't in the market for more then.'

'And the others?' I press.

He glances at me briefly and just shakes his head.

'Just didn't work out.'

Whoa... a bucket... a load of information to process. I glance in the side

mirror of the car... and I notice the soft swell of pink and aquamarine in the sky behind. Dawn is following us.

'Where are we headed?' I ask... perplexed... gazing out at the I... 95.

We're heading south... that's all I know.

'An airfield.'

'We're not going back to NY, are we?' I gasp... alarmed. I haven't said goodbye to my mom. Jeez... she's expecting us for dinner.

He laughs.

'No... Merry... we're going to indulge in my second favorite pastime.' 'Second?' I frown at him.

'Yep. I told you my favorite this morning.'

I glance at his glorious profile... frowning... racking my brain.

'Indulging in you... Miss Merry... that's got to be top of my list. Any way I can get you.' Oh...

'Well, that's quite high up on my list of diverting... kinky priorities too.' I mutter... blushing.

'I'm pleased to hear it...' he mutters dryly.

'So... airfield?' He grins at me.

'Soaring.'

The term rings a vague bell. He's mentioned it before.

'We're going to chase the dawn... Merry.' He turns and grins at me as the GPS urges him to turn right into what looks like an industrial complex. He pulls up outside a large white building with a sign reading Frank Lloyd Wright -Building.

Gliding! Are we going gliding?

He switches off the engine.

'You up for this?' He asks.

'You're flying?'

'Yes.'

'Yes... please!' I don't hesitate. He grins and leans forward and kisses me.

'Another first... Miss Merry...' he says as he climbs out of the car.

First? What sort of first? First time flying a glider... shit! No... he said that he's done it before. I relax. He walks around and opens my door. The sky has turned to a subtle opal... shimmering and glowing softly behind the sporadic childlike clouds. Dawn is upon us.

Taking my hand... RICHARD C. MAST leads me around the building to a large stretch of tarmac where several hot air balloons are parked. Waiting beside them is a man with a shaved head and a wild look in his eye... accompanied by Peter.

Peter! Does RICHARD C. MAST go anywhere without that man? I beam at him... and he smiles kindly back at me.

'Mr... this is your tow... pilot... Mr. Mark Benson...' says Peter. RICHARD C. MAST and Benson shake hands and strike up a conversation... which sounds very technical about wind speed... directions... and the like.

'Hello... Peter...' I murmur shyly.

'Miss Merry.' He nods a greeting at me... and I frown. 'Merry...' he corrects himself.

'He's been hell on wheels the last few days. Glad we're here...' he says conspiratorially.

Oh... this is news... Why? Surely not because of me! Revelation Thursday! Must be something in the Savannah water that makes these men loosen up a bit.

'Merry...' RICHARD C. MAST summons me.' Come.' He holds out his hand.

'See you later.' I smile at Peter... and giving me a quick salute... he heads back to the parking lot.

'Mr. Benson... this is my girlfriend Marry Sue.' 'Pleased to meet you...' I murmur as we shake hands.

Benson gives me a dazzling smile.

'Likewise,' he says... and I can tell from his accent that he's British.

As I take RICHARD C. MAST's hand... there's a mounting excitement in my belly. Wow... gliding! We follow Mark Benson out across the tarmac towards the runway. He and RICHARD C. MAST keep up a running conversation. I catch the gist. We will be in a Blahnik L... 23... which is apparently better than the L... 13... although this is open to debate. Benson will be flying a Piper Pawnee. He's been flying taildraggers for about five years now. It all means nothing to me... but glancing up at RICHARD C. MAST... he is so animated... so in his element... it's a pleasure to watch him.

The hot air balloon itself is long... sleek... and white with orange stripes. It has a small cockpit with two seats one in front of the other. It's attached by a long white cable to a small... conventional single... burner hot air balloon. Benson opens the large... clear Perspex dome that frames the cockpit... allowing us to climb in.

'First, we need to strap on your parachute.' Parachute!

'I'll do that...' RICHARD C. MAST interrupts him and takes the harness off Benson... who smiles amenably at him?

'I'll fetch some ballast...' Benson says and heads toward the hot air balloon.

'You like strapping me into things.' I observe dryly.

'Miss Merry... you have no idea. Here... step into the straps.'

I do as I'm told... placing my arm on his shoulder. RICHARD C. MAST stiffens slightly but doesn't move. Once my feet are in the loops... he pulls the parachute up... and I place my arms through the shoulder straps. Deftly he fastens the harness and tightens all the straps.

'There... you'll do...' he says mildly... but his eyes are gleaming.' Do you have your hair tie from yesterday?' I nod.

'You want me to put my hair up?'

'Yes.'

I quickly do as I'm asked.

'If you go...' RICHARD C. MAST commands. He's still so bossy. I go climbing into the back.

'No... front. The pilot sits at the back.' 'But won't you be able to see.' 'I'll see plenty. 'He grins.

I don't think I have ever seen him so happy... bossy... but happy. I clamber in... settling down into the leather seat. It is surprisingly comfortable. RICHARD C. MAST leans over... pulls the harness over my shoulders... reaches between my legs for the lower belt... and slots it into the fastener that rests against my belly.

He tightens all the restraining straps.

'Hmm... twice in one morning... I am a lucky man...' he whispers and kisses me quickly. 'This won't take long... twenty... thirty minutes at most. Thermals aren't great this time of the morning... but it's so breathtaking up there at this hour. I hope you're not nervous.' 'Excited.' I beam.

Where did this ridiculous grin come from? Actually... part of me is terrified. My inner goddess... she's under a blanket behind the sofa.

'Good.' He grins back... stroking my face... then disappears from view.

I hear and feel his movements as he climbs in behind me. Of course, he's strapped me in so tightly I can't move round to see him... typical! We are very low on the ground. In front of me are a panel of dials and levers and a big stick thing. I leave well alone.

Mark Benson appears with a cheerful grin as he checks my straps and leans in and checks the cockpit floor. I think it's the ballast.

'Yep... that's secure. First time?' he asks me.

'Yes.'

'You'll love it.'

'Thanks... Mr. Benson.'

'Call me Mark.' He turns to RICHARD C. MAST.' Okay?'

'Yep. Let's go.'

I am so glad I haven't eaten anything. I am beyond excited... and I don't think my stomach would be game for food... excitement... and leaving the ground. Once again... I am putting myself into this beautiful man's skilled hands. Mark shuts the cockpit lid... strolls over to the hot air balloon in front... and climbs in.

The hot gas burner starts... and my nervous stomach relocates itself to my throat. Jeez... I'm really doing this. Mark taxis slowly down the runway... and as the cable takes the strain... we suddenly jolt forward. We're off. I hear chatter over the radio set behind me. I think it's Mark talking to the tower... but I can't make out what he's saying. As the Piper picks up speed... so do we. It's very bumpy... and in front of us... the single burner hot air balloon is still on the ground. Jeez... will we ever get up?

And suddenly... my stomach disappears from my throat and free... falls through my body to the ground... we're airborne.

'Here we go... baby!' RICHARD C. MAST shouts from behind me. And we are in our own bubble... just us two. All I hear is the sound of the wind ripping past and the distant hum of hot air balloons engine and heat.

I'm gripping the edge of my seat with both hands... so tightly my knuckles are white. We head west... inland away from the rising sun... gaining height... crossing over fields and woods and homes and me... 95. Oh my. This is amazing... above us only sky. The light is extraordinary... diffuse and warm in hue... and I remember José rambling on about 'magic hour'... a time of day that photographers adore... this is it... just after dawn... and I'm in it... with RICHARD C. MAST.

Abruptly... I'm reminded of José's show. Hmm. I need to tell RICHARD C. MAST. I wonder briefly how he'll react. But I won't worry about that... not now... I'm enjoying the ride. My ears pop as we gain height... and the ground slips further and further away. It is so peaceful. I completely get why he likes to be up here.

Away from his BlackBerry and all the pressures of his job.

The radio crackles into life... and Mark mentions 300 feet. Jeez... that sounds high... I check the ground... and I can no longer clearly distinguish anything down there.

'Release...' RICHARD C. MAST says into the radio... and suddenly the Piper disappears... and the pulling sensation provided by the small hot air balloon ceases.

We're floating... floating over Modern city.

Holy freak... it's exciting. The hot air balloon banks and turns as the air changes and we dip... and we spiral toward the sun- Icarus- This is it. I am flying close to the sun... but he's with me... leading me. I gasp at the realization. We spiral and spiral and... the view in this morning light is spectacular.

'Hold on tight!' he shouts... and we dip again... only this time he doesn't stop. suddenly... I am upside down... looking at the ground through the top of the cockpit canopy.

I squeal loudly... my arms automatically lashing out... my hands splayed on the Perspex to stop me falling. I can hear him laughing. Bastard! But his joy is infectious... and I am laughing too as he writes the hot air balloon.

'I'm glad I didn't have breakfast!' I shout at him.

'Yes... in hindsight... it's good you didn't... because I'm going to do that again.'

He dips the hot air balloon once more until we are low to ground. This time... because I'm prepared... I hang on to the harness... but it makes me grin and giggle like a fool. He levels the hot air balloon once more.

'Beautiful... isn't it?' He calls.

'Yes.'

We fly... swooping majestically through the air... listening to the wind and the silence... in the early morning light. Who could ask for more?

'See the joy... stick in front of you?' he shouts again.

I look at the stick that is moving slightly between my legs. Oh no... where's he going with this?

'Grab hold.'

Oh shit. He's going to make me fly the hot air balloon. No!

'Go on... Merry. Grab it...' he urges more vehemently.

Tentatively... I grasp it and feel the pitch and yaw of what I assume are rudders and paddles or whatever keep this thing in the air.

'Hold tight... keep it steady. See the middle dial in front? Keep the needle dead center.'

My heart is in my mouth. Holy shit. I am flying a glider... I'm soaring.

'Good girl.' RICHARD C. MAST sounds delighted.

'I am amazed you let me take control...' I shout.

'You'd be amazed at what I'd let you do... Miss Merry. Back to me now.'

I feel the joystick move suddenly... and I let go as we spiral down several feet... my ears starting to pop again. The ground is getting closer... and it feels like we could be hitting it short. Jeez... that's scary.

'BMA... this is BG N Papa 3 Alpha... entering left downwind runway seven to the grass... BMA.' RICHARD C. MAST sounds his usual authoritative self. The tower squawks back at him over the radio... but I don't understand what they say. We sail around again in a wide circle... sinking slowly to the ground. I can see the airport... the landing strips... and we're flying back over me... 95.

'Hang on... baby. This can get bumpy.'

After another circle we dip... and suddenly we are on the ground with a brief thump... racing along the grass... holy shit. My teeth chatter as we bump at an alarming speed along the ground... until we finally come to a stop. The hot air balloon sways slightly then dip to the right. I take a deep lungful of air while RICHARD C. MAST leans over and opens the cockpit lid... clambering out and stretching.

'How was that?' He asks... and his eyes are a shining... dazzling silver-gray in the sun. He leans down to unbuckle me.

'That was extraordinary. Thank you...' I whisper.

'Was it more?' he asks... his voice tinged with hope.

'Much more...' I breathe... and he grins.

'Come.' He holds out his hand for me... and I clamber out of the cockpit.

As soon as I'm out... he grabs me and holds me flush against his body. Suddenly his hand is in my hair... tugging it so my head tips back... and his other hand travels down to the base of my spine. He kisses me... long... hard... and passionately... his tongue in my mouth. His breathing is mounting... his ardor... Holy CRAP... his erection... we're in a field. But I don't care. My hands twist in his hair... anchoring him to me. I want him... here... now... on the ground. He breaks away and gazes down at me... his eyes now dark and luminous in the early morning light... full of raw... arrogant sensuality. Wow.

He takes my breath away.

'Breakfast...' he whispers... making it sound deliciously erotic.

How can he make bacon and eggs sound like forbidden fruit? It's an extraordinary skill. He turns... clasping my hand... and we head back toward the car.

'What about the glider?'

'Someone will take care of that?'...He says dismissively. 'We'll eat now.' His tone is unequivocal.

Food! He's talking food... when really all I want is him.

'Come.' He smiles.

I have never seen him like this... and it's a joy to behold. I find myself walking beside him... hand in hand... with a stupid... goofy grin plastered on my face. It reminds me of when I was ten and spending the day in Disneyland with Ray. It was a perfect day... and this is Sue shaping out to be the same?

Back in the car... as we head back along with me... 95 towards Savannah... my phone alarm goes off. Oh yes... my pill.

'What's that?' RICHARD C. MAST asks... curious... glancing at me.

I fumble in my purse for the packet.

'Alarm for my pill...' I mutter as my cheeks flush.

His lips quirk up.

'Good... well done. I hate condoms.'

I flush some more. He's as patronizing as ever.

'I like that you introduced me to Mark as your girlfriend...' I murmur.

'Isn't that what you are?' He raises an eyebrow.

'Am I? I thought you wanted a submissive.'

'So did I... Merry... and I do. But I've told you... I want more... too.'

Oh my. He's coming around... and hope surges through me... leaving me breathless.

'I'm very happy that you want more...' I whisper.

'We aim to please... Miss Merry.' He smirks as we pull into the International House of Pancakes.

'OLIVE GARDEN.' I grin back at him. I don't believe it. Who would have thought... RICHARD C. MAST... at OLIVE GARDEN?

It's 8:30 a. m. but quiet in the restaurant. It smells of sweet batter...

fried food... and disinfectant. Hmm... not such an enticing aroma. RICHARD C. MAST leads me to a booth.

'I would never have pictured you here...' I say as we slide into a booth.

'My dad used to bring us to one of these whenever my mom went away at a medical conference. It was our secret.' He smiles at me... gray eyes dancing... then picks up a menu... running a hand through his wayward hair as he stares down at it.

Oh... I want to run my hands through that hair. I pick up a menu and examine it. I realize I'm starving.

'I know what I want...' he breathes... his voice low and husky.

I glance up at him... and he's staring at me in that way that tightens all the muscles in my belly and takes my breath away... his eyes dark and smoldering. Holy shit. I gaze at him... my blood singing in my veins answering his call.

'I want what you want...' I whisper.

He inhales sharply.

'Here?' He asks suggestively... raising an eyebrow at me... smiling wickedly... his teeth trapping the tip of his tongue.

Oh my... sex in OLIVE GARDEN. His expression changes... growing darker.

'Don't bite your lip...' he orders. 'Not here... not now.' His eyes harden momentarily... and for a moment... he looks so deliciously dangerous. 'If I can't have you here... don't tempt me.'

'Hi... My name's Leandra... What can I get for you... er... folks... er... today... this morning...?' Her voice trails off... stumbling over her words as she gets an eye full of Mr. Beautiful opposite me. She flushes scarlet... and a small ounce of sympathy for her bubbles unwelcome into my consciousness because he still does that to me. Her presence allows me to escape briefly from his sensual glare.

'Merry?'

He prompts me... ignoring her... and I don't think anyone could squeeze as much carnality into my name as he does at that moment.

I swallow... praying that I don't go the same color as poor Leandra.

'I told you... I want what you want.' I keep my voice soft... low... and he looks at me hungrily. Jeez... my inner goddess swoons. Am I up to this game?

Leandra looks from me to him and back again. She's practically the same color as her shiny red hair.

'Shall I give you folks another minute to decide?'

'No. We know what we want.' RICHARD C. MAST's mouth twitches with a small... sexy smile.

'We'll have two portions of the original buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and bacon on the side... two glasses of orange juice... one black coffee with skim milk... and one English breakfast tea... if you have it...' says RICHARD C. MAST... not taking his eyes off me.

Thank you, sir. Will that be all?' Leandra whispers... looking anywhere but at the two of us. We both turn to stare at her... and she flushes crimson again and scuttles away.

'You know it's really not fair.' I glance down at the Formica tabletop...

Tracing a pattern in it with my index finger... trying to sound nonchalant.

'What's not fair?'

'How you disarm people. Women. Me.'

'Do I disarm you?'

I snort.

'All the time.'

'It just looks... Merry...' he says mildly. 'No... RICHARD C. MAST... it's much more than that.' His brow creased.

'You disarm me totally... Miss Merry. Your innocence. It cuts through all the crap.'

'Is that why you've changed your mind?'

'Changed my mind?'

'Yes... about ... err... us?'

He strokes his chin thoughtfully with his long... skilled fingers.

I don't think I've changed my mind per se. We just need to redefine our parameters... re-draw our battle lines... if you will. We can make this work... I'm Sue. I want you submissive in my playroom. I will punish you if you digress from the rules. Other than that, well... I think it's all up for discussion. Those are my requirements... Miss Merry. What say you to that?'

'So, I get to sleep with you? In your bed?'

'Is that what you want?'

'Yes.'

'I agree then. Besides... I sleep very well when you're in my bed. I had no idea.' His brow creases as his voice fade.

'I was frightened you'd leave me if I didn't agree to all of it...' I whisper.

'I'm not going anywhere... Merry. Besides...' He trails off... and after some thought... he adds.' We're following your advice... your definition: compromise. You emailed it to me. And so far, it's working for me.'

'I love that you want more...' I murmur shyly.

'I know.'

'How do you know?'

Trust me. I just do.' He smirks at me. He's hiding something.

What?

At that moment... Leandra arrives with breakfast and our conversation ceases. My stomach rumbles... reminding me how ravenous I am. RICHARD C. MAST watches with annoying approval as I devour everything on my plate.

'Can I treat you?' I ask RICHARD C. MAST.

'Treat me how?'

'Pay for this meal.' RICHARD C. MAST snorts.

'I don't think so.' he scoffs. 'Please. I want to.' He frowns at me.

'Are you trying to completely emasculate me?'

'This is probably the only place that I'll be able to afford to pay.' 'Merry... I appreciate the thought. I do. But no.' I purse my lips.

'Don't scowl...' he threatens... his eyes glinting ominously.

Of course, he doesn't ask me for my mother's address. He knows it already... stalker that he is. When he pulls up outside the house... I don't comment. What's the point?

'Do you want to come in?' I ask shyly.

'I need to work... Merry... but I'll be back this evening. What time?'

I ignore the unwelcome stab of disappointment. Why do I want to spend every single minute with this controlling sex god? Oh yes... I've fallen in love with him... and he can fly.

'Thank you... for the more.'

'My pleasure... Merry.' He kisses me... and I inhale his sexy RICHARD C. MAST smell.

'I'll see you later.'

'Try and stop me...' he whispers.

I wave goodbye as he drives off into the Modern city sunshine. I'm still wearing his sweatshirt and his underwear... and I'm too warm.

In the kitchen... my mom is in a complete flap. It's not every day she has to entertain a multi... zillionaire... and it's stressing her out.

'How are you... darling?' She asks... and I flush because she must know what I was doing last night.

'I'm good. RICHARD C. MAST took me gliding this morning.' I hope the new information will distract her.

'Gliding? As in a small hot air balloon with no engine? That sort of gliding?' I nod.

'Wow.'

She's speechless... a novel concept for my mother. She gapes at me... but eventually recovers herself and resumes her original line of questioning.

'How was last night? Did you talk?' I flush bright scarlet.

'We talked... last night and today. It's getting better.'

'Good.' She turns her attention back to the four cookery books she has open on the kitchen table.

'Mom... if you like... I'll cook this evening.'

'Oh... honey... that's kind of you... but I want to do it.'

'Okay.' I grimace... knowing full well that my mother's cooking is pretty hit or miss. Perhaps she's improved since she moved to Savannah with Bob. There was a time I wouldn't subject anyone to her cooking... even... who do I hate? Oh yes... *Stifler's mom*... Elly. Well... maybe her. Will I ever meet this damned woman? I decide to send a quick thank... you to RICHARD C. MAST.

Nevaeh

Book: 53

Reverie

1

It was Saturday and she knew there was a lot of things a girl her age could be doing, there were so many memories and happy moments filling this room I am in trying to stay awake. I sat up rubbing the last of sleep out her eyes trying to savor the last bit of sweetness she had behind her eyelids. It had been a lovely and sweet dream and right before it had it is wonderful ending her Mom burst through with her bright idea, of her being too young and innocent.

Sometimes... you know how to show a girl a good time. Said Mary. I'll take either of those over your snoring. I had a good time too. But I always do when I'm with you. He said. She also then replayed- I DO NOT SNORE. And if I do... it's very ungallant of you to point it out. You are no gentleman Mr.

-And-

...You are in the Deep South too! Said, Marry.

I have never claimed to be a gentleman... Merry... and I think I have demonstrated that point to you on numerous occasions. I am not intimidated by your SHOUTY capitals. But I will confess to a small white lie: No... you don't snore... but you do talk. And it's fascinating.

What happened to my kiss?

Holy shit I thought. I know I talk in my sleep. Katie has told me enough times. What the hell have I said? Oh no.

So-o... what did I just say?

No kisses for you until you talk! You are not a gentleman, as I thought, you are a cad and a scoundrel... it would be most ungallant of me to say... and I have already been chastised for that. But if you behave yourself... I may tell you this evening. I do have to go into a meeting now. Baby, I'll be seeing you... The RICHARD C. MAST... meaning the big chief executive officer, the highest-ranking person in a company or other institution, ultimately responsible for making managerial decisions. OMG! THE-RICHARD C. MAST... Cad and Scoundrel... ...Undertaking Department Inc. Right! Jeez-la-Wez-z- I shall maintain radio silence until this evening. I fume. Supposing I've said I hate him... or worse still... that I love him... in my sleep.

Like- could be hanging with her friends at the mall, or she could stay at home making drawings or doing homework; That what Marry thought smiling to herself, and that made every minute spent in even more special over him being so confusing.

My mom has decided on gazpacho soup and a barbecue with steaks marinated in olive oil... garlic... and lemon. RICHARD C. MAST likes meat... and it's simple to do. Bob has volunteered to man the BBQ grill. What is it about men and fire...? I ponder as I trail after my mother through the supermarket with the shopping cart?

As we browse the raw meat cabinet... my phone rings. I scramble for it... thinking it may be RICHARD C. MAST. I don't recognize the number.

'Hello?' I answer breathlessly. 'Marry Sue?' 'Yes- I said.' 'It's Elizabeth Morgan from Systematic Investment' 'Oh... hello.'

'I'm calling to offer you the job of assistant to Mr. Jack Hyde. We'd like you to start on Monday.' 'Wow- I said. That's great! Thank you!'

'You know the salary details?' 'Yes- Yes... that's... I mean... I accept your offer. I'd love to come and work for you.' 'That is excellent, we- I will see you on Monday at 9:35 a. m.?' 'See you then, and goodbye. And thank you.' I beam at my mom. 'You have a job?'

I nod gleefully... and she squeals and hugs me in the middle of a Public supermarket.

'Congratulations... darling! We have to buy some champagne!' She's clapping her hands and jumping up and down. Is she forty...? Two or twelve?

I glance down at my phone and frown... there's a missed call from RICHARD C. MAST. He never phones me. I call him straight back.

'Merry...' he answers immediately.

'Hi...' I murmur shyly.

'I have to return to NY. Something comes up. I am on my way to Hilton Head now. Please apologize to your mother... I can't make dinner.' He sounds very businesslike.

'Nothing serious... I hope?'

'I have a situation which I have to deal with. I'll see you on Friday. I'll send Peter to collect you from the airport if I can't come myself.' He sounds cold. Angry even. But for the first time... I don't immediately think it's me. 'Okay. I hope you sort out your situation. Have a safe flight.'

'You too... baby...' he breathes... and with those words... my RICHARD C. MAST is back briefly. Then he hangs up.

Oh no. The last 'situation' he had was my virginity. Jeez... I hope it's nothing like that.

I gaze at my mom. Her earlier jubilation has metamorphosed into concern.

'It's RICHARD C. MAST... he's had to go back to NY. He apologizes.'

'Oh! That's a shame... darling. We can still have our barbecue... and now we have something to celebrate... your new job! You have to tell me all about it.'

It's a late afternoon... and Mom and I are lying beside the pool. My mother has relaxed to the point where she is horizontal now that Mr. Megabucks is not coming to dinner. As I lie in the sun... endeavoring to lose the pale... I think about yesterday evening and breakfast today. I think about RICHARD C. MAST... and my ridiculous grin refuses to subside. It keeps creeping across my face... unbidden and disconcerting... as I recall our various conversations and what we did... what he did.

Her body remained facing forward in deep thoughts, but she leaned ever so slightly into his direction to his picture on her nightstand table; there seems to be a tidal shift in RICHARD C. MAST's attitude. He denies it but... he admits he's trying for more. What could have changed? What has altered since he sent his long email and when I saw him yesterday? What has he done?

I sit up suddenly... almost spilling my Dr. Pepper.

He had dinner with... her. Elly. Holy Freak! My scalp prickles on my plate, at the realization of needing him always. Did she say something to him I don't want him looking or talking to anyone - I want him all to me. Oh... to have been a fly on the wall during their dinner. I could have landed in her soup or on her wine glass and choked her. 'What is it... Merry... honey?' Mom asks... startled from her torpor. 'I'm just having a moment... Mom. What time is it?'

'About 6:30 p. m... darling.'

Hm-m... he won't have landed yet. Can I ask him? Should I ask him? Or perhaps she has nothing to do with it. I fervently hope so. What did I say in my sleep? Crap... some unguarded remark while dreaming about him... I bet? Whatever it is... or was... I hope the sea of change is coming from within him and not because of her.

I am sweltering in this damned heat. I need another dip in the pool. As I get ready for bed... I switch on my computer.

I have heard nothing from the RICHARD C. MAST. Not even a word that he's arrived safely. Thinking of his voice deep and raspy, and me sometimes, almost emotionless, demanding answers I felt bad about me being me- She fought against the goosebumps that threatened to raise on her skin as she turned her head towards him thought of him.

Oh... I hope not. I am not ready to tell him that... and I'm like so- sure he's not ready to hear it... if he ever wants to hear it. I scowl at my computer and decide that whatever I cook... I will make bread.

(Time has passed)

She opened her eyes then, turning her body towards photo-

Why do I get to torture myself like this? Her mother nodded her confidence that had been there earlier was beginning to fade. Fear and determination gripped that her mom was right about everything. I am starting to worry. I sent a text message- 'Please let me know that you have arrived safely, and I am thinking of you.' She closed her eyes, trying to calm her heart, yet reveling in the feelings he caused within her. She brought her bottom lip between her teeth... They were nearly touching yet it was just a photo she was kissing missing him, and she came close to pulling him to her heart, finding out if he felt as good as he did in her mind, that was off in link for the time being. Her eyes were slightly glazed- lovesick, and he could only guess- to what she was doing at that very moment, that it was more from desire than they could take.

Three minutes later... I hear the ping from my email inbox. I was thinking- about getting it... my mind racing- If he only really knew I was 12, in eighth grade, and it was a school night if only he knew he was my dream man- and my dreams in my mind and out. I was taking my nightly shower in the upstairs- now in the only bathroom- I was wet and my mom was in the next room wanting me to get done and be done. like me wanting now to go downstairs watch some TV before 10:00 p.m. The bathroom had one small window- were the boy next door I am sure like to look in at me, and the fan wasn't able to keep up with the humidity- so everything was steamy, so the door was left open a crack- really don't care anymore about my nakedness, after being F*UCKED by him- at only 12- yet I said I was of age- when we bathed or showered afterward too. It had been that way since forever- after the first time.

When the show on TV ended, it was my bedtime and I went upstairs. The hall was dark but I didn't bother turning on the light. The door to my room was in the middle of the hallway, on the left. The door to the bathroom was at the end of the hallway, on the right. As I approached my room, there was a movement in the bathroom that caught my attention thinking I should pee one last time - and change my tampon. Maybe the door was open a bit wider than usual but I did not seem to care as if I was like a woman.

More likely, it was puberty torturing me with its omnipresent sense for the opposite sex - not having to go through what I do. I stood in the doorway to my room, but I didn't turn on the light. I knew everyone wouldn't be able to see me in the dark as long as I stayed out of the line of brightness cast by the bathroom light onto the hallway wall. That tells me I knew from the start that what I was doing was wrong.

What I was doing was watching me, naked, fresh from the shower, rubbing moisturizing lotion on myself again. I couldn't see much of in the glass, and only the side yet it was more than I could take, but by moving my head a little this way and that I was able to keep one of my breasts in vision.

The sexual and it was far more than my fantasies coming true, reading the text, at the same time; Dear Miss Marry- I have arrived safely... and please accept my apologies for not letting you know. I don't want to cause you any worry... it's heartwarming to know that you care for me. I am thinking of you too and as ever looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Sexual pleasure, she was feeling her nipples now, pinching them lightly then harder and then pulling on them and shaking her small tits in wonderful waves of flesh. I was wearing drawstring pants with an elasticized waist. Without conscious thought, I pulled the bow out of the drawstring, slipped my hand inside the waistband and began stroking myself with my open palm. Erect nipple in perfect profile I give Snapchats back. I sigh... RICHARD C. MAST is back to formality - yet SO- HOT! I start to daydream even more.

My hand slide over her ribs and her belly and down, out the sight of me and the thoughts of him with me as he was before.

The thought of what she was going to do was almost more than I could bear. I opened my legs a step, turning slightly and I could see the hair between my legs.

The crack was fully open- to my bothers looking in there bed in the next room, now and I wanted them to know- in the door they stood- I rarely saw anyone- yet this time- I did, there and when I did, it troubled me- if I looked too long- yet it was a new turn on now so in love and not care about felling shame- the shame of love me was gone.

I pressed my fingers into 'her' the mysteriousness. With no effort, the fingers slipped inside until I could not see them at all. I shut my eyes and froze my hand, afraid to move- as my mom walks past and said nothing. I couldn't cum out here- just over a text message.

It must have only taken her a second for me to let out. I have climaxed as soon as I touched my clitoris after just removing the unseen fingers. The door opens as wide as me, flooding the hallway with light from the lit bathroom. I stepped out, bathrobe on but open. I was caught. I stared at them all- feeling like a woman- they stared back- not saying a word. I pulled my robe off. I burst into tears- like a girl. It was the first time I'd cried since last night- I spun around, sobbing, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' and went inside my room. I slammed the door closed and left the light off- now feeling the shame.

Dear Mr...

I think it is very evident that I care for you deeply more than you would even know in deepness. How could you doubt that- ever? I hope your 'situation' is at hand.

Your Marry XO, PS: Are you going to tell me what I said in my sleep? Dear Miss- Marry, I like very much that you care about me. The 'situation' here is not yet resolved. Concerning your PS: The answer is... No.

I hope it was amusing. But you should know I cannot accept any responsibility for what comes out of my mouth when I am unconscious. You probably misheard me. A man of your advanced years is usually a little deaf. I now on my phone whispering

Asking- Sorry... could you speak up? I can't hear you. So now it was back to him in my mind and then in my dreams.

Then it was said- I intend to do exactly that on Friday evening. Looking so forward to it!

I'd rather hear you say the words that you uttered in your sleep when you're conscious... that's why I won't tell you. Go to sleep. You'll need to be rested with what I have in mind for you tomorrow.

(Goodnight-)

2

Dark shadows of exasperating. I clamber into bed and lie glaring at the ceiling as my eyes adjust to the dark. I hear another ping from my computer. I am not going to look. No definitely not. No... I am not going to look. Gah! Like the fool I am... I cannot resist the lure of RICHARD C. MAST's words.

-And-

My mother hugs me tightly.

'Follow your heart... darling... and please... please... try not to over... think things. Relax and enjoy yourself. You are so young... sweetheart. You have so much of life to experience yet... just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything.' Her heartfelt words are comforting whispered in my ear.

She kisses my hair.

'Oh... Mom.' Hot... unwelcome tears prick my eyes as I cling to her.

'Darling... you know what they say. You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince.'

I give her a lopsided... bittersweet smile.

'I think I've kissed a prince... Mom- like- I hope he doesn't turn into a frog.' She gives me her a- most endearing... motherly... absolute... Unconditional....love smile... and I marvel at the love I feel for this woman as we hug again.

'Merry... they're calling your flight...' dad's voice is anxious.

'Will you visit... Mom?'

'Of course, darling... soon. Love you.'

'Me too.'

Her eyes are red with unshed tears as she releases me. I hate leaving her. I hug dad... and turning... head to the gate... I do not have time for the first-class lounge today. I will myself not to glance back. But I do... and Bob is holding my mom... and tears are streaming down her face. I can no longer

hold mine back. I put my head down and proceed to the gate... keeping my eyes on the shiny... white floor... blurred through my watery tears.

Once onboard... in the luxury of first-class... was in my mind of the woman I could become- and never have to work- I curl up in my bed in dreaming and try to compose myself.

It is always painful to wrench myself away from Mom even after moments like moments before... she is scatty... disorganized... but newly insightful... and she loves me.

Unconditional love... what every child deserves from its parents. I frown at my wayward thoughts... and pulling out my IPhone... stare at it despondently.

What does the RICHARD C. MAST know of love? Seems he didn't get the unconditional love he was entitled to during his very early years.

My heart twists... and my mother's words waft like a zephyr through my mind: Yes... Merry. Hell... what do you need? ... a neon sign flashing on his forehead? She thinks RICHARD C. MAST loves me... but then she's my mother... of course she'd think that. She thinks I deserve the best of everything. I frown. It's true... and in a moment of startling clarity... I see it. It's very simple: I want his love. I need RICHARD C. MAST... to love me. This is why I am so reticent about our relationship... because on some basic... fundamental level... I recognize within me a deep... seated compulsion to be loved and cherished.

-And-

Because of his Dark Shadows... I am holding myself back. The bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism, and masochism, is a distraction from the real issue. Yet, I love him! So, I'll take it like a woman, not a girl!

The sex is amazing... he's wealthy... he's beautiful... but this is all meaningless without his love... and that is what I want the most- is love and slow and caring- and the real heart... fail is that I don't know if he's capable of love? I question everything I have done.

He doesn't even love himself. I recall his self... loathing... her love being the only form he found... acceptable. Punished... whipped... beaten... whatever their relationship entailed... he feels

undeserving of love. Why does he feel like that? How can he feel like that? His words haunt me: 'It's very hard to grow up in a perfect family when you're not perfect.'

I close my eyes... imagining his pain... and I can't begin to comprehend it. I shudder as I remember that I may have divulged too much. What have I confessed to RICHARD C. MAST in my sleep? What secrets have I revealed?

I stare at the phone in the future hope's that it will give me some answers about what I need to do for him to love me more than he does. Much unsurprisingly rather or not... it is not very forthcoming. As we haven't taken off yet... I decided to email my Dark Shadows that creep in my mind.

(Time passes)

I am once again ensconced in first-class... on lavish dates and balls parties, for which I- thank you. I am counting the minutes until I see you this evening... and perhaps finding the deeper truth out of you about my nocturnal admissions of falling ever-so for you, and need feeling as I want.

'Pull down your pantyhose and underwear.' At first, he didn't seem to be doing anything. His long perfect finger poked my stomach. 'I told you I'm not going to f*ck you. Do what I say.' I pulled down my underwear and pantyhose. The skin on my face and throat was hot and pink like below and above, but my fingertips were cold and icy on my legs as I did what he asked. I thought I might faint or spit up, but I didn't. So many feelings of suspension dizzying me, like the one I have in dreams where I can fly like angles, but only if I get into some weird position as he has me in now. I became aware of a small frenzy of expended energy behind me.

My hips were sprayed with hot sticky muck the dream was over- too soon. 'Go clean yourself off,' he said. Stickiness- I thought as I stood slowly and shyly- and felt my skirt fall of goo. Now pulling underwear pantyhose back up, since I was going to use the bathroom anyway and need too. He did not closes the door behind me- looking at me on the pot, and the second unusual thing occurred- I had blended orgasms- I could come back to the bedroom and masturbate on his bed and then go back to my room- like a good girl- then he would love me more- and never- ever- stop.

(I did not hear from him in a week)

The aircraft doors are still open- he not happy. You may stow your twitchy palm for now. We are delayed but only by ten minutes. My welfare and that of the passengers around me is vouchsafed. I miss you and your smart mouth missy. 'I am safely homework is over for now.'

They are shutting the doors as we walk down the tarmac. You won't hear another peep from me about work or formalities... especially given your deafness of me telling some work beneath me off- about time- and the sin of not making it.

I switch off the phone he has given me... unable to shake my anxiety for the moments of being a young girl and falling into his arms like a child. Something is up with him I just know.

I switch off the Phone... unable to shake my anxiety. Something is up with the RICHARD C. MAST. Perhaps 'the situation' is out of hand. Glancing up at the locker where my bags are stowed in my school day. Then- I sit back... in class in a daydream. I- Marry this morning... with my mother's help... to buy the RICHARD C. MAST a small gift to say thank you for first-class and the gliding.

I smile at the memory of the soaring and the love I have never hand or felt... that was something else to me and still is.

I don't know yet if I'll give my silly gift to him. He might think it's childish... and if he's in a strange mood... maybe not. I am both eager to return and apprehensive of what awaits me at my journey's end. As I mentally flick through all the scenarios that could be 'the situation'... I become aware that once again the only empty seat is beside me. I shake my head as the thought crosses my mind that the RICHARD C. MAST might have purchased the adjacent seat so that I couldn't talk to anyone. I dismiss the idea as ridiculous... no one could be that controlling... that jealous... Surely- I close my eyes as the hot air balloon taxis towards the runway.

I emerge into the Sea... Tac arrivals terminal eight hours later to find Peter waiting and holding up a board that reads Miss A Merry. Honestly! But it's good to see him.

'Hello... Peter- just outside the classy 1930's antique limousine.'

'Miss Merry...' he greets me formally... but I see a hint of a smile in his sharp brown eyes.

He looks his usual immaculate self... smart charcoal suit... white shirt... and gray tie.

'I do know what you look like Peter... you don't need a board... and I do wish you'd call me... Merry.'

'Merry- please-Can I take your bags...?' 'No... I can Marry. Thank you.' His lips tighten perceptibly.

'But... if you'd be more comfortable taking them...' I stammer.

'Thank you.' He grabs my backpack and my newly acquired wheelie case for the clothes my mother has bought me.' This way... ma'am.'

I sigh- lightly- He's so polite. I remember... though I would like to erase it from my memory... that this man has bought me underwear. In fact, and the thought unsettles me... he's the only man who's ever bought me underwear. We walk in silence to the blackness outside in the airport parking lot... and he holds the door open for me. I clamber in... wondering if wearing such a short skirt for the return to NY was a good idea when I only have two days before - I need to back home.

It was cool and welcome to the Modern city. Here I feel exposed. Once Peter has stowed my bags in the trunk...

The journey is slow... caught up in rush hour traffic. Peter keeps his eyes on the road ahead. I can bear the silence no longer, taciturn does not begin to describe him.

'How's is the... Peter?'

'Mr... is preoccupied... Miss Merry.'

Oh... this must be 'the situation.' I am mining a seam of gold.

'Preoccupied?'

'Yes... ma'am.'

I frown at Peter... and he glances at me in the rear... view mirror... our eyes meet in the glass of the car. He's saying no more. Jeez... he can be as tightlipped as to the control freak himself.

'Is he okay?'

'I believe so... ma'am.'

'Are you more comfortable calling me... Miss Merry?'

'Yes... ma'am.'

'Oh... okay.'

Well... that curtails our conversation... and we continue in silence. I begin to think that Peter's recent slip... when he told me that he had been hell on wheels... was an anomaly. Perhaps he's embarrassed about it... worried that he's been disloyal. The silence is suffocating.

'Could you put some music on please?'

'Certainly... ma'am. What would you like to hear?'

'Something soothing.'

I see a smile play on Peter's lips as our eyes meet briefly again in the mirror.

'Yes... ma'am.'

He pushes a few buttons on the steering wheel... and the gentle strains of Pachelbel's canon fill the space between us. Oh yes... this is what I need.

'Thank you.' I sit back as we drive slowly but steadily along the I... 5 a.m. and in NY.

Twenty... five minutes... later he drops me outside the impressive façade that is the entrance to his mansion.

'In- you go... ma'am...' he says... holding the door open for me.' I'll

bring up your luggage is.' The expression is soft... warm... avuncular even.

Jeez... Uncle Peter... what a thought.

'Thank you for meeting me.'

'It's a pleasure... Miss Merry.' He smiles... and I head into the building. The doorman nods and waves.

As I ride up to the thirtieth floor... a thousand butterflies stretch their wings and flutter erratically in my stomach. Why am I so nervous?

-And-

I know it's because I have no idea what kind of mood RICHARD C. MAST's going to be in when I arrive. My inner goddess is hopeful for one type of mood... my subconscious... like me... is fraught with nerves.

The elevator doors open... and I'm in the foyer. It is so strange not to be met by Peter. Of course, he's parking the car. In the great room... RICHARD C. MAST is on his Phone talking quietly as he stares out of the glass doors at the early New York skyline.

He's wearing a white suit with the jacket undone... and he's running his hand through his gray-black hair... he's. He agitated... tense even.

Oh no... what's wrong? Agitated or not... he's still beyond beautiful. How can he look so... arresting? It's such a pleasure to stand and drink in the sheer sight of him.' No Trace... Okay... Yes.' He turns and sees me... and his whole demeanor changes. From tension to relief to something else: a look that calls directly to my inner goddess... a look of sensual carnality... gray eyes blazing.

My mouth goes dry and desires blooms in my body... whoa.

'Keep me informed...' he snaps and shuts off his phone as he strides purposefully toward me. I stand paralyzed as he closes the distance between us... devouring me with his eyes. Holy shit... something's amiss... the strain in his jaw... the anxiety around his eyes. He shrugs out of his jacket... undoes his dark tie... and slings them both on to the coach en route to me. Then his arms are wrapped around me... and he's pulling me to him... hard... fast... gripping my ponytail to tilt my head up... kissing me as his life depends on it.

What the hell? He drags the hair tie painfully out of my hair... but I don't care. There's a desperate... primal quality to his kiss. He needs me... for whatever reason... at this point... and I have never felt so desired and coveted. It's dark and sensual and alarming all at the same time. I kiss him back with equal fervor... my fingers twisting and fisting in his hair. Our tongues entwined... our passion and ardor erupting between us. He tastes divine... hot... sexy... and his scent... all body wash and RICHARD C. MAST is so arousing. He drags his mouth away from mine... and he's staring down at me... gripped by some unnamed emotion.

'What's wrong?' I breathe.

'I'm so glad you're back. Shower with me... now.' I can't decide if it's a request or a command.

'Yes...' I whisper... and he grabs my hand... leading me out of the big room into his bedroom to his bathroom.

Once there... he releases me and sets the water running in the far too spacious shower.

Turning slowly... he gazes at me... eyes hooded.

'I like your skirt. It's very short...' he says... his voice low.' You have great legs.'

He steps out of his shoes and reaches down to take each of his socks off... never taking his eyes off me. I am rendered speechless by the look of hunger in his eyes. Wow... to be this wanted by this Greek god. I mirror his actions and step out of my black flats. Suddenly... he reaches for me... backing me up against the wall. Kissing me... my face... my throat... my lips... running his hands into my hair. I feel the cool... smooth tiled wall at my back as he pushes himself against me so that I'm flattened between his heat and the chill of the ceramic. Tentatively... I place my arms on his upper arms... and he groans as I squeeze tightly.

'I want you now. Here... fast... hard...' he breathes... and his hands are on my thighs... pushing up my skirt.' Are you still bleeding?' 'No.' I flush.

'Good.'

His thumbs hook over my white cotton panties... and abruptly he drops to his knees as he tugs them off. My skirt is now rucked up so that I'm naked from the waist down and panting... wanting. He grabs my hips... pushing me against the wall again... and kisses me at the apex of my thighs. Grabbing my upper thighs... he forces my legs apart. I groan loudly... feeling his tongue circling my clitoris. Oh my. Tipping my head back involuntarily... I moan as my fingers find their way into this hair.

His tongue is relentless... strong and insistent... leaving me... swirling round and round... again and again... no... stop. It's exquisite... the intensity of feeling... it's almost painful. My body starts to quicken... and he releases me. What? No! My breathing is ragged as I pant... gazing at him with delicious anticipation. He grabs my face with both hands... holding me firmly... and he kisses me hard... thrusting his tongue into my mouth so I can taste my arousal.

Unzipping his fly... he frees himself... grabs the backs of my thighs... and lifts me.

'Wrap your legs around me... baby...' he commands... his voice urgent... strained.

I do as I'm told and wrap my arms around his neck... and he moves

quickly and sharply... filling me. Ah! He gasps... and I groan. Holding my behind... his fingers digging into my soft flesh... he begins to move... slowly at first... a steady even tempo... but as his control unravels... he speeds up... faster... and faster. Ah-h! I tip my head back and concentrate on the invading... punishing... heavenly sensation... pushing me... pushing me... onward... higher... up... and when I can take no more... I explode around him... spiraling into an intense... all... consuming orgasm. He lets go with a deep growl... and he buries his head in my neck as he buries himself inside me... groaning loudly and incoherently as he finds his release.

His breathing is erratic... but he kisses me tenderly... not moving... still inside me... and I blink... unseeing into his eyes. As he comes into focus... he gently pulls out of me... holding me steady while I place my feet on the floor.

The bathroom is now cloudy with steam... and hot. I feel overdressed.

'You seem pleased to see me...' I murmur with a shy smile.

His lips quirk up.

'Yes... Miss Merry... I think my pleasure is pretty self... evident. Come... let me get you in the shower.'

He undoes the next three buttons of his shirt... removes the cufflinks... tugs it over his head... and discards it on the floor. Removing his suit pants and boxer briefs... he kicks them to one side. He begins to undo the buttons on my blouse while I watch him... yearning to reach out and stroke his chest... but I contain myself.

'How was your journey?' he asks mildly. He seems so much calmer now... his apprehension gone... dissolved by sexual congress.

'Fine... thank you...' I murmur... still breathless. 'Thanks once again for the first class. It is a much nicer way to travel.' I smile shyly at him. 'I have some news...' I added nervously.

'Oh?' he looks down at me as he undoes the last button... slips me

blouse down my arms... and throws it on top of his discarded clothes.

'I have a job.'

He stills... then smiles at me... his eyes warm and soft.

'Congratulations... Miss Merry. Now, will you tell me where?' He teases.

'You don't know?'

He shakes his head... frowning slightly.

'Why would I know?'

'With your stalking capabilities... I thought you might have...' I trail off as his face falls.

'Merry... I wouldn't dream of interfering in your career... unless you ask me to... of course.' He looks wounded.

'So, you have no idea which company?'

'No. I know there are four publishing companies in NY... so I am assuming it's one of them.'

'SIP'

'Oh... the small one... good. Well done.' He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

'Clever girl. When do you start?'

'Monday.'

'That soon... eh? I'd better take advantage of you while I still can. Turn around.'

I am thrown by his casual command... but do as I'm bid... and he undoes my bra and unzips my skirt. He pushes my skirt down... cupping my behind as he does... and kissing my shoulder. He leans against... I and his nose nuzzle my hair... inhaling deeply. He squeezes my buttocks.

'You intoxicate me... Miss Merry... and you calm me. Such a heady combination.' He kisses my hair. Grabbing my hand... he tugs me into the shower.

'Ow...' I squeal. The water is practically scalding. RICHARD C. MAST grins down at me as the water cascades over him.

'It's only a little hot water.'

And actually, he's right. It feels heavenly... washing off the sticky Modern city morning and the stickiness from our lovemaking.

'Turn around...' he orders... and I comply... turning to face the wall.' I want to wash you...' he murmurs and reaches for the body wash. He squirts a little into his hand.

'I have something else to tell you...' I murmur as his hands start on my shoulders.

'Oh... yes?' he asks mildly.

I steel myself with a deep breath.

'My friend José's photography show is opening Thursday in Portland.'

He stills... his hands hovering over my breasts. I have emphasized the word 'friend.' 'Yes... what about it?' He asks sternly and too harsh.

'I said I would go. Do you want to come with me?'

After what feels like a monumental amount of time... he slowly starts washing me again.

'What time?'

'The opening is at 7:30 p. m.' He kisses my ear.

'Okay.'

Inside my subconscious relaxes and then collapses... slumped into an old battered armchair.

'Were you nervous about asking me?'

'Yes. How can you tell?'

'Merry... your whole body's just relaxed...' he says dryly.

'Well... you just seem to be um... on the jealous side.'

'Yes... I am...' he says darkly.' And you'd do well to remember that.

But thank you for asking. We'll take Charlie Tango.'

Oh... the helicopter of course... silly me. More flying... cool! I grin.

'Can I wash you?' I ask.

'I don't think so...' he murmurs... and he kisses me gently on my neck to take the sting out of his refusal. I pout at the wall as he caresses my back with soap.

'Will you ever let me touch you?' I ask boldly.

He stills again... his hand on my behind.

'Put your hands on the wall Merry. I'm going to take you again...' he murmurs in my ear as he grabs my hips... and I know that the discussion is over.

Later we are seated at the breakfast bar... dressed in bathrobes...

having consumed Mrs. Jones rather than excellent pasta alle vongole.

'More wine?' RICHARD C. MAST asks... gray eyes glowing.

'A small glass... please.' The Sancerre is crisp and delicious. RICHARD C. MAST pours one for me and one for himself.

'How's the um... the situation that bought you to NY?' I ask tentatively. He frowns.

'Out of hand...' he murmurs bitterly.' But nothing for you to worry about... Merry. I have plans for you this evening.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. I want you ready and waiting in my playroom in fifteen minutes.' He stands and gazes down at me.

'You can get ready in your room. Incidentally... the walk... in the closet is now full of clothes for you. I don't want any arguments about them.' He narrows his eyes... daring me to say something. When I don't... he stalks off to his study.

Me! Argue? With you... Dark Shadows? It's more than my backside's worth. I sit on the barstool... momentarily stupefied... trying to assimilate this morsel of information. He's bought me clothes. I exaggeratedly roll my eyes knowing full well he can't see me. Car... phone... computer... clothes... it'll be a damn condo next... and then I really will be his mistress.

Ho yes! My subconscious has her snarky face on. I ignore her and make my way upstairs to my room so... it is still mine... why? I thought he'd agreed to let me sleep with him. I suppose he's not used to sharing his personal space... but then... neither am I. I console myself with the thought that at least I have somewhere to escape from him.

Examining the door... I find that it has a lock but no key. I wonder briefly if Mrs. Jones has a spare. I'll ask her. I open the closet door and close it again quickly. Holy Crap... he's spent a fortune. It resembles Katie's... so many clothes hanging neatly on the rail. Deep down... I know that they'll all fit. But I have no time to think about that... I have to get kneeling in the Black and White Room of - Pain... or Pleasure... hopefully this evening.

Kneeling by the door... I am naked except for my panties. My heart is in my mouth. Jeez... I thought of the bathroom he would have had enough. The man is insatiable... or maybe all men are like him. I have no idea... no one to compare him too. Closing my eyes... I try to calm myself down... to connect with my inner sub. She's there somewhere... hiding behind my inner goddess.

Anticipation runs bubbling like soda through my veins. What will he do? I take a deep steadying breath... but I cannot deny it... I'm excited... aroused... wet already. This is so... I want to think wrong... but somehow, it's not. It's right for RICHARD C. MAST. It's what he wants... and after the last few days... after all, he's done... I have to man up and take whatever he decides he wants... whatever he thinks he needs.

The memory of his look when I came in this evening... the longing in his face... his determined stride toward me like I was an oasis in the desert. I'd do almost anything to see that look again. I press my thighs together at the delicious memory... and it reminds me that I need to spread my knees. I shuffle them apart. How long will he make me wait? The wait is crippling me...

crippling me with a dark and tantalizing desire. I glance around the subtly lit room; the cross... the table... the couch... the bench... that bed. It looks so large... and it's made up of pink satin sheets. Which piece of apparatus will he use?

The door opens and RICHARD C. MAST breezes in... ignoring me completely. I glance down quickly... staring at my hands... positioned with care on my spread thighs. Placing something on the large chest beside the door... he strolls casually toward the bed. I indulge myself in a quick glimpse at him... and my heart almost lurches to a stop.

He's naked except for those soft ripped jeans... top button casually is undone and then there at his feet. Jeez... he looks so freaking hot. My subconscious is frantically fanning herself... and my inner goddess is swaying and writhing to some primal carnal rhythm. She's so ready. I lick my lips instinctively. My blood pounds through my body... thick and heavy with salacious hunger. What is he going to do to me?

Turning... he nonchalantly walks back to the chest of drawers.

Opening one... he begins to remove items and place them on the top. My curiosity burns... blazes even... but I resist the overwhelming temptation to sneak a quick peek. When he finishes what he's doing... he comes to stand in front of me. I can see his naked feet... and I want to kiss every inch of them... run my tongue over his instep... suck each of his toes. Holy shit.

'You look lovely...' he breathes.

I keep my head down... conscious that he's staring at me while I am practically naked. I feel the flush as it slowly spreads over my face. He bends down and cups my chin... forcing my face up to meet his gaze.

'You are one beautiful woman... Merry. And you're all mine...' he murmurs. 'Stand up.' His command is soft full of sensual promise.

Shakily... I get to my feet.

'Look at me...' he breathes... and I stare up into his smoldering gray gaze. It is his Dom gaze... cold... hard... and sexy as hell... seven shadows of sin in one enticing look. My mouth dries... and I know I will do anything he asks.

An almost cruel smile plays across his lips.

'We don't have a signed contract... Merry. But we've discussed limits.'

-And-

I want to re... iterate we have safe words... 'okay?'

Holy freak... what has he got planned that I need safe words?

'What are they?' he asks authoritatively.

I frown slightly at his question... and his face hardens perceptibly.

'What are the safe words... Merry?' he says slowly and deliberately.

'Yellow...' I mumble.

'And?' he prompts... his mouth set in a hard line.

'Red...' I breathe.

'Remember those.'

And I can't help it... I raise my eyebrow at him and am about to remind him of my GPA... but the sudden frosty glint in his icy gray eyes stops me in my tracks.

'Don't start with your smart mouth in here... Miss Merry. Or I will-freak it with you on your knees. Do you understand?'

I swallow instinctively. Okay. I blink rapidly... chastened. Actually... it's his tone of voice... rather than the threat... that intimidates me.' Well?'

'Yes... Sir...' I mumble hastily.

'Good girl...' he pauses as he stares at me.' My intention is not that you should safeword because- you're in pain. What I intend to do to you will be intense. Very intense... and you have to guide me. Do you understand?' Not really. Intense? Wow.

'This is about touch... Merry. You will not be able to see me or hear me. But you'll be able to feel me.'

I frown... not hear him? How is that going to work? He turns... and I hadn't noticed that above the chest is a sleek... flat... matt... black box. As he waves his hand in front... the box splits in half: two doors slide open revealing a CD player and a host of buttons. RICHARD C. MAST presses several of

these buttons in sequence. Nothing happens... but he seems satisfied. I am mystified. When he turns to face me again... he wears his small I... have... a... secret smile.

'I am going to tie you to that bed... Merry. But I'm going to blindfold you first and...' he reveals his iPod in his hand...' you will not be able to hear me. All you will hear is the music I am going to play for you.'

Okay. A musical interlude... not what I was expecting. Does he ever do what I expect?

Jeez... I hope it's not rap.

'Come.' Taking my hand... he leads me over to the antique Hugh Hefner Naked Lady covered bed. There are shackles attached at each corner... fine metal chains with leather cuffs... glinting against the pink satin.

Oh boy... I think my heart is going to leave my chest... and I'm melting from the inside out... desire coursing through me. Could I be any more excited?

'Stand here.'

I am facing the bed. He leans down and whispers in my ear.

'Wait here... keep your eyes on the bed. Picture yourself lying here bound and totally at my mercy.' Oh my.

He moves away for a moment... and I can hear him near the door fetching something. All my senses are hyper-alert... my hearing acuter.

He's picked up something from the rack of whips and paddles by the door.

Holy cow. What is he going to do?

I feel him behind me. He takes my hair... pulls it into a ponytail behind me... and starts to braid it.

'While I like your pigtails... Merry... I am too impatient to beat you right now. So, one will have to do.' His voice is low... soft.

His deft fingers skim my back occasionally as they work down my hair... and each casual touch is like a sweet... electric shock against my skin. He fastens the end with a hair tie... then gently tugs the braid so that I'm forced to step back flush against him. He pulls again to the side so that I angle my head... giving him easier access to my neck. Leaning down... he nuzzles my neck. Tracing his teeth and tongue from the base of my ear to my shoulder. He hums softly as he does... and the sound resonates through me. Right down... right down there... inside me. Unbidden... I groan quietly.

'Hush now...' he breathes against my skin. He holds up his hands in front of me... his arms touching mine. In his right hand is a flogger. I remember the name from my first introduction to this room.

'Touch it...' he whispers... and he sounds like the devil himself. My body flames in response. Tentatively... I reach out and brush the long strands.

It has many long fronds... all soft suede with small beads at the end.

'I will use this. It will not hurt... but it will bring your blood to the surface of your skin and make you very sensitive.' Oh... he says it won't hurt.

'What are the safe words... Merry?' 'Um... yellow and red... Sir...' I whisper.

'Good girl. Remember... most of your fear is in your mind.' He drops the flogger on the bed... and his hands move to my waist.

'You won't be needing these...' he murmurs and hooks his fingers into my panties and sweeps them down my legs. I step unsteadily out of them... supporting myself on the ornate post of the bed.

'Stand still...' he orders... and he kisses my behind and then gently nips me twice... making me tense.' Now lie down. Face up...' he adds as he smacks me hard on the behind... making me jump.

I crawl onto the bed's hard... Hastily... unyielding mattress and lie down... looking up at him. The satin of the sheet beneath me is soft and cool against my skin. His gaze is impassive... except for his eyes which glow with a barely leashed excitement.

'Hands above your head...' he orders... and I do as I'm bid.

Jeez... my body hungers for him. I want him already.

He turns... and out of the corner of my eye... I watch him saunter back over to the chest of drawers... returning with the iPod and what looks like an eye mask... similar to the one I used on my flight to Atlanta. The thought makes me want to smile... but I can't quite make my lips cooperate. I am too consumed with anticipation. I just know my face is completely immobile... my eyes huge... as I gaze at him.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed... he shows me the iPod. It has a strange antenna device as well as headphones. How odd. I frown as I try to figure this out.

'This transmits what's playing on the iPod to the system in the room.'... RICHARD C. MAST answers my unspoken query as he taps the small antenna.' I can hear what you're hearing... and I have a remote-control unit for it.' He smirks his private... joke smile and holds up a small... flat device that looks like a very hip calculator. He leans across me... inserting the earbuds gently into my ears... and puts the iPod down somewhere on the bed above my head.

'Lift your head...' he commands... and I do so immediately.

Slowly... he slides the mask on... pulling the elastic over the back of my head... and I'm blind. The elastic on the mask holds the earbuds in place. I can still hear him... though the sound is muffled as he rises from the bed. I'm deafened by my breathing... it's shallow and erratic... reflecting my excitement. RICHARD C. MAST takes my left arm... stretches it gently to the left... hand corner... and attaches the leather cuff around my wrist. His long fingers stroke the length of my arm once he's finished. Oh! His touch elicits a delicious... tickly shiver. I hear him move slowly round to the other side... takes my right arm and cuffs it. Again... his long fingers linger along my arm.

Oh, my yes... I am fit to burst already. Why is this so erotic?

He moves to the bottom of the bed and grabs both of my ankles.

'Lift your head again...' he orders.

I comply... and he drags me down the bed so that my arms are stretched out and almost straining at the cuffs. Holy cow... I cannot move my arms. A frisson of trepidation mixed with tantalizing exhilaration sweeps through my body... making me wetter. I groan. Parting my legs... he cuffs first my right ankle and then my left so I am staked out... spread... eagled... and vulnerable to him. It's so

unnerving that I can't see him. I listen hard... what's he doing? And I hear nothing... just my breathing and the pounding thud of my heart as blood pulses furiously against my eardrums.

Abruptly... the soft silent hiss and pop of the iPod springs into life. From inside my head... alone angelic voice sings unaccompanied a long sweet note... and it's joined almost immediately by another voice... and then more voices... Holy cow... a celestial choir... singing acapella in my head... an ancient... ancient hymnal. What in heaven's name is this? I have never heard anything like it. Something almost unbearably soft brushes against my neck... running languidly down my throat... slowly across my chest... over my breasts... caressing me... pulling at my nipples... it's so soft... skimming underneath. It's so unexpected. It's fur! It a large feather?

RICHARD C. MAST trails his hand... unhurried and deliberate... down to my belly... circling my bellybutton... then carefully from hip to hip... and I'm trying to anticipate where he's going next... but the music... it's in my head... transporting me... the fur across the line of my pubic hair... between my legs... along with my thighs... down one leg... up the other... it almost tickles... but not quite... more voices join... the heavenly choir- all singing different parts... their voices blending blissfully and sweetly together in a melodic harmony that is beyond anything I've ever heard. I catch one word...' Deus'... and I realize they are singing in Latin. And still... the fur is moving down my arms and around my waist... back up across my breasts.

My nipples harden beneath the soft touch... and I'm panting... wondering where his hand will go next. Suddenly... the fur is gone... and I can feel the fronds of the flogger flowing over my skin... following the same path as the fur... and it's so hard to concentrate on the music in my head... it sounds like a hundred voices singing... weaving an ethereal tapestry of fine... silken gold and silver through my head... mixed with the feel of the soft suede against my skin... trailing over me... oh my... abruptly... it disappears. Then suddenly... sharply... it bites down on my belly.

'A-aggh-h!' I cry out. It takes me by surprise... and it doesn't exactly hurt... but tingles all over... and he hits me again. Harder.

'A-ah!'

I want to move... to writhe... to escape... or to welcome... each blow... I don't know... it's so overwhelming... I can't pull my arms... my legs are stuck... I am held very firmly in place... and again he strikes across my breasts... I cry out.

-And-

It's a sweet agony... bearable... just... pleasant... no... not immediately... but as my skin sings with each blow in perfect counterpoint to the music in my head... I am dragged into a dark... dark part of my psyche that surrenders to this most erotic sensation. Yes... I get this. He hits me across my hip. Then... he moves in swift blows over my pubic hair... on my thighs... and down my inner thighs... and back up my body... across my hips.

He keeps going as the music reaches a climax... and then suddenly... the music stops. And so-o does he. Then the singing starts again... building and building... and he rains down blows on me... and I groan and writhe. Once again... it ceases and all is quiet... except my wild breathing... and wild yearning. For... oh... what's happening? What's he going to do now? The excitement is almost unbearable. I've entered a very dark... carnal place.

The bed moves and shifts as I feel him clamber over me... and the song starts again. He's got it on repeat... this time it's his nose and lips that take the place of the fur... running down my neck and throat... kissing... sucking... trailing down to my breasts... Ah! Taunting each of my nipples in turn... his tongue swirling around one while his fingers relentlessly tease the other... I groan... loudly I think... though I can't hear. I am lost. Lost in him... lost in the astral... seraphic voices... lost to all the sensations I cannot escape... I am completely at the mercy of his expert touch.

He moves down to my belly... his tongue circling my navel... following the path of the flogger and the fur... I moan. He's kissing and sucking and nibbling... moving south... and then his tongue is there. At... a the junction of my thighs. I throw my head back and cry out as I almost detonate into orgasm... I'm on the brink... and he stops.

No! The bed shifts... and he kneels between my legs. He leans toward the bedpost... and the cuff on my ankle is suddenly gone. I pull my leg to the middle of the bed... resting it against him. He leans over to the opposite post and frees my other leg. His hands travel quickly down both my legs.

Squeezing and kneading... bringing life back into them. Then... grasping my hips... he lifts me so that my back is no longer on the bed. I am arched... resting on my shoulders. What? He's kneeling up

between my legs... and in one swift... slamming move he's inside me... oh, freak... and I cry out again like a little girl that I am. I quiver hard of my impending orgasm begins... and he stills. The quiver never dies... oh-he's going to give it to me even further in deepness.

'Please!' I wail.

He grips me harder... in warning? I don't know... his fingers digging

into the flesh of my behind as I lay panting... so I purposefully still. Very slowly... he starts to move again... out and then in... agonizingly slowly. Holy freak... Please! I'm screaming inside...

-And-

As the number of voices in the choral piece increases... so does his pace... infinitesimally... he's so controlled... so in time with the music. And I can no longer bear it.

'Please...' I beg... and in one swift motion... he lowers me back onto the bed... and he's lying on top of me... his hands on the bed beside my breasts as he supports his weight... and he thrusts into me... as the music reaches its climax... I fall... free fall... into the most intense... agonizing orgasm I have ever had... and RICHARD C. MAST follows me... thrusting hard into me... three more times... finally stilling... then collapsing on top of me.

As my consciousness returns from wherever it's been... RICHARD C. MAST pulls out of me. The music has stopped... and I can feel him stretch across my body as he undoes the cuff on my right wrist. I groan as my hand is freed. He quickly frees my other hand... gently pulls the mask from my eyes... and removes the earbuds. I blink in the dim soft light and stare up into his intense gray gaze.

'Hi...' he murmurs.

'Hi... yourself...' I breathe shyly back at him. His lips quirk up into a smile... and he leans down and kisses me softly.

'Well done... you...' he whispers.' Turn over.'

Holy freak... what's he going to do now? His eyes soften.

'I'm just going to rub your shoulders.'

'Oh... okay.'

I roll stiffly onto my front. I am so tired. RICHARD C. MAST sits astride me and starts to massage my shoulders. I groan loudly... he has such strong... knowing fingers. Leaning down... he kisses my head.

'What was that music?' I mumble almost inarticulately.

He giggles- and thing 1960's-

'It was... overwhelming.'

'I've always wanted to freak to it.'

'Not another first... Mr...?'

'Indeed... Miss Merry.'

I groan again as his fingers work their magic on my shoulders.

'Well... it's the first time I've freaked to it... too...' I murmur sleepily.

'Hmm... you and I... we're giving each other many firsts.' His voice is a matter... of... fact.

'What did I say to you in my sleep... Ch... err... Sir?' His hands pause their ministrations for a moment.

'You said lots of things... Merry- You talked about cages and strawberries... that you wanted more... and that you missed me.' Oh... thank heavens for that.

'Is that all?' The relief in my voice is evident.

RICHARD C. MAST stops his heavenly massage and shifts so that he's lying beside me. His head up like his one elbow. He's frowning.' What did you think you'd said?' Oh crap.

'That I thought you were ugly... conceited... and that you were hopeless in bed.' He creases on his brow deepens.

'Well... naturally I am all those things... and now you've got me really intrigued. What are you hiding from me... Miss Merry?' I blink at him innocently.

'I'm not hiding anything.'

'Merry... you are a hopeless liar.'

'I thought you were going to make me giggle after sex... this isn't doing

it for me.' His lips quirk up.' I can't tell jokes.'

'Mr...! Something you can't do?' I grin at him... and he grins back.

'No... hopeless joke teller.' He looks so proud of himself that I start to giggle.

'I'm a hopeless joke teller too...'

'That is such a lovely sound...' he murmurs... and he leans forward and kisses me.

'And you are hiding something... Merry. I may have to torture it out of you.'

I wake with a jolt. I think I've just fallen down some stairs in a dream... and I bolt upright... momentarily disorientated. It is dark... and I'm in the RICHARD C. MAST's bed alone. Something has woken me... some nagging thought. I glance over at the alarm clock on his bedside. It is 5:00 in the morning... but I feel rested.

Why is that? Oh... it's the time difference... it would be 8:00 a. m. in Modern city. Holy crap... I need to take my pill. I clamber out of bed... grateful for whatever it is that has woken me. I can hear faint notes from the piano. RICHARD C. MAST is playing. This I must see. I love watching him play. Naked... I grab my bathrobe from the chair and wander quietly down the corridor... slipping on my robe and listening to the magical sound of the melodic lament that's coming from the great room.

5

Shrouded in darkness... RICHARD C. MAST sits in a bubble of light as he plays... and his hair glints with burnished copper highlights. He looks naked... though I know he's wearing his PJ bottoms. He's concentrating... playing beautifully... lost in the melancholy of the music. I hesitate... watching from the shadows... not wanting to interrupt him. I want to hold him. He looks lost... sad even... and achingly lonely... or maybe it's just the music that's so full of poignant sorrow. He finishes the piece... pauses for a split second... then starts to play it again. I move cautiously toward him... drawn like the moth to the flame... the idea makes me smile.

He glances up at me and frowns before his gaze returns to his hands Oh crap... is he pissed off that I am disturbing him?

'You should be asleep...' he scolds mildly.

I can tell he's pre... occupied with something.

'So, should you...' I retort not quite as mildly.

He glances up again... his lips twitching with a trace of a smile.

'Are you scolding me... Miss Merry?'

'Yes... Mr... I am.'

'Well... I can't sleep.' He frowns once more like a trace of irritation or anger flashes across his face. With me? Surely not.

I ignore his facial expression and very bravely sit down beside him on the piano stool... placing my head on his bare shoulder to watch his deft... agile fingers caress the keys. He pauses fractionally... and then continues to the end of the piece.

What was that?' I ask softly.

Something, I have been working on-

'I'm always interested in what you do.'

He turns and softly presses his lips against my hair.

'I didn't mean to wake you.'

'You didn't. Play the other one.'

-Love story-

He starts to play slowly and deliberately. I feel the movement of his hands in his shoulder as I lean against him and close my eyes. The sad... soulful notes swirl slowly and mournfully around us... echoing off the walls. It is a hauntingly beautiful piece... sadder even than the Chopin... and I lose myself to the beauty of the lament. To a certain extent... it reflects how I feel. The deep poignant longing I have

to know this extraordinary man better... to try and understand his sadness. All too soon... the piece is at an end.

'Why do you only play such romantic music?'

I sit upright and gaze up at him as he shrugs in answer to my question... his expression wary.

'So, you were just six when you started to play?' I prompt.

He nods... his wary look intensifying. After a moment he volunteers.

'I threw myself into learning the piano to please my new mother.'

'To fit into the perfect family?'

'Yes... so to speak...' he says evasively.' Why are you awake? Don't you need to recover from yesterday's exertions?'

'It's 8:00 in the morning for me. And I need to take my pill.' He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

'Well remembered...' he murmurs... and I can tell he's impressed.

His lips quirk up in a half-smile.

'Only you would start a course of time... specific birth control pills in a different time zone. Perhaps you should wait for half an hour and then another half-hour tomorrow morning.

So, eventually, you can take them at a reasonable time.'

'Good plan...' I breathe.' So, what shall we do for half an hour?' I blink innocently at him.

I can think of a few things...' he grins... gray eyes bright. I gaze back impassively as my insides clench and melt under his knowing look.

'On the other hand, we could talk...' I suggest quietly.

His brow creased.

'I prefer what I have in mind.' He scoops me onto his lap.

'You'd always rather have sex than talk...' I laugh... steadying myself by holding on to his upper arms.

'True. Especially with you.' He nuzzles my hair and starts a steady trail of kisses from below my ear to my throat. 'Maybe on my piano...' he whispers.

Oh my- my whole body tightens at the thought- Piano and his many talents- in all thing's art! Likewise- being the literary agent of the writer with 'The Longest Novel in the 21st century.'

Wow!!!

'I want to get something straight...' I whisper as my pulse starts to accelerate... and my inner goddess closes her eyes... reveling in the feel of his lips on me.

He pauses momentarily before continuing his sensual assault.

'Always so eager for information... Miss Merry. What needs straightening out?' he breathes against my skin at the base of my neck... continuing his soft gentle kisses.

'Us...' I whisper as I close my eyes.

'Hmm. What about us?' He pauses his trail of kisses along with my shoulder.

'The contract.'

He lifts his head to gaze down at me... a hint of amusement in his eyes... and sighs. He strokes his fingertips down my cheek.

'Well... I think the contract is moot... don't you?' His voice is low and raspy... his eyes soft.

'Moot?'

'Moot.' He smiles. I gape at him quizzically.

'But you were so keen.'

'Well... that was before. Anyway... the Rules aren't moot... they still stand.' His expression hardens slightly.

'Before? Before what?'

'Before...'... He pauses... and the wary expression is back... 'more.' He shrugs.

'Oh.'

'Besides... we've been in the playroom twice now... and you haven't run screaming for the hills.'

Do you expect me to?'

'Nothing you do is expected... Merry...' he says dryly.

'So... let me be clear. You just want me to follow the Rules element of the contract all the time but not the rest of the contract?'

'Except in the playroom. I want you to follow the spirit of the contract in the playroom... and yes... I want you to follow the rules... all the time. Then I know you'll be safe... and I'll be able to have you anytime I wish.'

'And if I break one of the rules?'

'Then I'll punish you.'

'But won't you need my permission?'

'Yes... I will.'

'And- if I say no?'

He gazes at me for a moment... with a confused expression.

'If you say no... you'll say no. I'll have to find a way to persuade you.'

I pull away from him and stand. I need some distance. He frowns as I stare down at him. He looks puzzled and wary again.

'So, the punishment aspect remains.'

'Yes... but only if you break the rules.'

'I'll need to re... read them...' I say... trying to recall the detail.

'I'll fetch them for you.' His tone is suddenly businesslike.

Whoa. This has gotten serious so quickly. He rises from the piano

and walks lithely to his study. My scalp prickles. Jeez... I need some tea. The future of our so... called relationship is being discussed at 4:44 in the morning when he's pre... occupied with something else... is this wise? I head into the kitchen which is still shrouded in darkness. Where are the light switches? I find them... flick them on... and pour water into the kettle. My pill! I rummage in my purse that I left on the breakfast bar and find them quickly. One swallow... and I'm done. By the time I finish... RICHARD C. MAST is back... sitting on one of the bar stools... watching me intently.

'Here you go.' He pushes a typed piece of paper toward me... and I notice that he's crossed some things out.

RULES

Obedience:

The Submissive will obey any instructions given by The Dominant

immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant excepting those activities which are outlined in hard limits (Appendix A). She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

Sleep:

The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of eight seven hours of sleep a night when she is not with the Dominant.

Food:

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and wellbeing from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals... except for fruit.

Clothes:

While with The Dominant... The Submissive will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for The Submissive... which The Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis.

Exercise:

The Dominant shall provide the Submissive with a personal trainer four three times a week in an hour... long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and The Submissive. The personal trainer will report to The Dominant on The Submissive's progress.

Personal Hygiene/Beauty:

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of The Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by The Dominant... and undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit.

Personal Safety:

The Submissive will not drink to excess... smoke... take recreational drugs or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

Personal Qualities:

The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of the Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds... wrongdoings and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above will result in immediate punishment... the nature of which shall be determined by the Dominant.

'So, the obedience thing still stands?' 'Oh... yes.' He grins.

I shake my head amused... and before I realize it... I roll my eyes at him.' Did you just roll your eyes at me... Merry?' He breathes.

Oh, freak.

'Possibly... depends on what your reaction is.'

'Same as always...' he says... shaking his head slightly... his eyes alight with excitement.

I swallow instinctively and a frisson of exhilaration runs through me.

'So...' Holy shit. What am I going to do?' Yes?' He licks his lower lip.

'You want to spank me now.'

'Yes. And I will.'

'Oh... really... Mr...?' I challenge... grinning back at him. Two can play this game.

'Are you going to stop me?'

'You're going to have to catch me first.'

His eyes widen a fraction... and he grins... slowly getting to his feet.

'Oh... really... Miss Merry?'

The breakfast bar is between us. I have never been so grateful for its existence than at this moment.

'And you're biting your lip...' he breathes... moving slowly to his left as I move to mine.

'You wouldn't...' I tease.' After all, you roll your eyes.' I try reasoning with him. He continues to move toward his left... as do I.

'Yes... but you've just raised the bar on the excitement stakes with this game.' His eyes blaze... and wild anticipation emeritus from him.

'I'm quite fast you know.' I try for nonchalance.

'So am I.'

He's stalking me... in his kitchen.

'Are you going to come quietly?' he asks.

'Do I ever?'

'Miss Merry... what do you mean?' he smirks.' It'll be worse for you to have to come and get you.'

'That's only if you catch me... RICHARD C. MAST. And right now, I have no intention of letting you catch me.'

'Merry... you may fall and hurt yourself. Which will put you in direct contravention of rule number seven.'

'I have been in danger since I met you... Mr... rules or no rules.' 'Yes, you have.' He pauses... and his brow furrows slightly.

Suddenly... he lunges for me... making me squeal and run for the dining room table. I'm Marry to escape... putting the table between us. My heart is pounding and adrenaline has spiked through my body... boy... this is so thrilling. I'm a child again... though that's not right. I watch him carefully as he paces deliberately toward me. I inch away.

'You certainly know how to distract a man... Merry.' 'We aim to please... Mr... Distract you from what?' 'Life. The universe.' He waves one of his hands vaguely.'You did seem very pre... occupied as you were playing.' He stops and folds his arms... his expression amused.

'We can do this all day... baby... but I will get you... and it will just be worse for you when I do.'

'No... you won't.' I must not be over... confident. I repeat this as a mantra. My subconscious has found her Nikes... and she's on the starting blocks.

'Anyone would think you didn't want me to catch you.'

'I don't. That's the point. I feel about the punishment the way you feel about me touching you.'

His entire demeanor changes in a nanosecond. Gone is playful RICHARD C. MAST... and he stands to stare at me as if I'd slapped him. He's ashen.

'That's how you feel?' he whispers.

Those four words... and the way he utters them... speaks volumes.

Oh no. They tell me so much more about him and how he feels. They tell me about his fear and loathing. I frown.

No... I don't feel that bad. No way. Do I?

'No. It doesn't affect me quite as much as that... but it gives you an idea...' I murmur... staring anxiously at him.

'Oh...' he says.

Crap, he looks completely and utterly lost... like I've pulled the rug from under his feet.

Taking a deep breath... I move around the table until I am standing in front of him... gazing into his apprehensive eyes.

'You hate it that much?' he breathes... his eyes filled with horror.

'Well... no...' I reassure him. Jeez... that's how he feels about people touching him?

'No. I feel ambivalent about it. I don't like it... but I don't hate it.' 'But last night... in the playroom... you... 'he trails off.

'I do it for you... RICHARD C. MAST... because you need it. I don't. You didn't hurt me last night. That was in a different context... and I can rationalize that internally... and I trust you. But when you want to punish me... I worry that you'll hurt me.'

His gray eyes blaze like a turbulent storm. Time moves... and expands and slips away before he answers softly.

'I want to hurt you. But not beyond anything that you couldn't take.' Freak!

'Why?'

He runs his hand through his hair... and he shrugs.

'I just need it.' He pauses... gazing at me with anguish... and he closes his eyes and shakes his head.' I can't tell you...' he whispers.

'Can't or won't?'

'Won't.'

'So, you know why.'

'Yes.'

'But you won't tell me.'

'If I do... you will run screaming from this room... and you'll never- ever want to return.' He stares at me warily.' I can't risk that... Merry.'

'You want me to stay.'

'More than you know. I couldn't bear to lose you.' Oh my.

He gazes down at me... and suddenly... he pulls me into his arms and he's kissing me... kissing me passionately. It takes me completely by surprise... and I sense his panic and desperate need in his kiss.

'Don't leave me. You said you wouldn't leave me... and you begged

me not to leave you... in your sleep...' he murmurs against my lips.

Oh... my nocturnal confessions.

'I don't want to go.' And my heart clenches... turning itself inside out.

This is a man in need. His fear is naked and obvious... but he's lost...

somewhere in his darkness. His eyes wide and bleak and tortured. I can soothe him. Join him briefly in the darkness and bring him into the light.

'Show me...' I whisper.

'Show you?'

'Show me how much it can hurt.'

'What?'

'Punish me. I want to know how bad it can get.' RICHARD C. MAST steps back away from me... completely confused. You would try?'

'Yes. I said I would.' But I have an ulterior motive. If I do this for

him... maybe he will let me touch him. He blinks at me.

'Merry... you're so confusing.'

'I'm confused too. I'm trying to work this out. And you and I will know... once and for all... if I can do this. If I can handle this... then maybe you...'

My words fail me... and his eyes widen again. He knows I am referring to the touch thing. For a moment... he looks torn... but then a steely resolve settles on his features... and he narrows his eyes... gazing at me speculatively as if weighing up alternatives.

Abruptly... he clasps my arm in a firm grip and turns... leading me out- of the great room... up the stairs... and to the playroom. Pleasure and pain... reward and punishment... his words from so long ago echo through my mind like his thoughts about me always having his way. Are you ready for this?'

'I'll show you how bad it can be... and you can make your mind up.' He pauses by the door.' I nod... my mind made up... and I'm vaguely lightheaded... faint as all the blood leaves my face. Grabs what looks like a belt from the rack beside the door... He opens the door... and still grasping my arm... then leads me over to the red leather bench in the far corner of the room.

'Bend over the bench...' he murmurs.

Okay. I can do this. I bend over the smooth soft leather. He's left my bathrobe on. In a quiet part of my brain... I'm vaguely surprised that he hasn't made me take it off. Holy freak this is going to hurt... I know. My subconscious has passed out... and my inner goddess is endeavoring to look brave.

'We're here because you said yes... Merry. And you ran from me. I am going to hit you six times... and you will count on me.'

Why the hell doesn't he just get on with it? He always makes such a meal of punishing me. I roll my eyes... knowing full well he can't see me.

He lifts the hem of my bathrobe... and for some reason... this feels more intimate than being naked. He gently caresses my behind... running his warm hand all over both cheeks and down to the tops of my thighs.

'I am doing this so that you remember not to run from me... and as exciting as it is... I never want you to run from me...' he whispers.

-And-

Like the irony is not lost on me. I was running to avoid this. If he'd opened his arms... I'd run to him... not away from him.

And you rolled your eyes at me. You know how I feel about that.' Suddenly... it's gone... that nervous edgy fear in his voice. He's back from wherever he's been. I hear it in his tone... in the way, he places his fingers on my back... holding me... and the atmosphere in the room changes.

I close my eyes... bracing myself for the blow. It comes hard... snapping across my backside... and the bite of the belt is everything I feared. I cry out involuntarily... and take a huge gulp of air.

'Count... Merry!' he commands.

'One!' I shout at him... and it sounds like an expletive.

He hits me again... and the pain pulses and echoes along the line of the belt. Holy shit... that smarts.

'Two!' I scream. It feels so good to scream.

His breathing is ragged and harsh. Whereas mine is almost none... existent as I desperately scrabble around my psyche looking for some internal strength. The belt cuts into my flesh again.

'Three!' Tears spring unwelcome into my eyes. Jeez... this is harder than I thought... so much harder than the spanking. He's not holding anything back.

'Four!' I yell as the belt bites me again... and now the tears are streaming down my face.

I don't want to cry. It angers me that I am crying. He hits me again.

'Five.' My voice is more a choked... strangled sob... and at this moment... I think I hate him. One more... I can do one more. My backside feels as if it's on fire.

'Six...' I whisper as the blistering pain cuts across me again... and I hear him drop the belt behind me... and he's pulling me into his arms... all breathless and compassionate... and I want none of him.

'Let go... no...' And I find myself struggling out his grasp... pushing- him away. Fighting him.

'Don't touch me!' I hiss. I straighten and stare at him... and he's- watching me as if I might bolt... gray eyes wide... bemused. I dash the tears angrily out of my eyes with the backs of my hands... glaring at him.

'This is what you like? Me... like this?' I use the sleeve of the bathrobe to wipe my nose.

He gazes at me warily.

'Well... you are one freaked... up the son of a bitch.' 'Merry...' he pleads... shocked.

Don't you dare... Marry me! You need to sort your shit out...!'

-And-

With that... I turn stiffly... and I walk out of the playroom... closing the door quietly behind me.

I clasp the door handle behind me and briefly lean back against the- door. Where to go? Do I run? Do I stay? I am so mad... angry scalding tears- spill down my cheeks... and I brush them furiously aside. I just want to curl up. Curl up and recuperate in some way. Heal my shattered faith. How could I have been so stupid? Of course, it hurts.

Tentatively... I rub my backside. Aah! It's sore. Where to go? Not his room. My room... or the room that will be mine... no... is mine... was mine. This is why he wanted me to keep it. He knew I would need distance from him.

I launch myself stiffly in that direction... conscious that RICHARD C. MAST may- follow me. It is still dark in the bedroom... dawn only a whisper in the skyline. I climb awkwardly into bed... careful

not to sit on my aching and tender backside. I keep the bathrobe on... wrapping it around me... and curl up and let go... sobbing hard into my pillow.

What was I thinking? Why did I let him do that to me? I wanted the dark... to explore how bad it could be... but it's too dark for me. I cannot do this. Yet... this is what he does... this is how he gets his kicks.

What a monumental wake... up call. And to be fair to him... he warned me and warned me... time and again. He's not normal. He has needs that I cannot fulfill. I realize that now. I don't want him to hit me like that again... ever. I think of the couple of times he has hit me... and how easy he was on me by comparison. Is that enough for him? I sob harder into the pillow. I am going to lose him. He won't want to be with me if I can't give him this. Why... why... why have I fallen in love with - The - Dark Shadows? Why? Why can't I love José... or Paul Clayton... or someone like me?

Oh... his distraught look as I left. I was so cruel... so shocked by the - savagery... will he forgive me... will I forgive him? My thoughts are all - haywire and jumbled... echoing and bouncing off the inside of my skull. My subconscious is shaking her head sadly... and my inner goddess is nowhere to be seen. Oh... this is a dark morning of the soul for me. I'm so alone. I want my Mom. I remember her parting words at the airport...

Follow your heart... darling... and please... please... try not to over... think things. Relax and enjoy. You are so young... sweetheart... you have so much to experience... just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything.

I did follow my heart... and I have a sore ass and an anguished... broken spirit to show for it. I have to go. That's it... I have to leave. He's no good for me... and I am no good for him. How can we possibly make this work? And the thought of not seeing him again practically chokes me... my lust for this man.

I hear the door click open. Oh no... he's here. He puts something - down on the bedside table... and the bed shifts under his weight as he climbs - in behind me.

'Hush...' he breathes... and I want to pull away from him... move to the - another side of the bed... but I'm paralyzed. I cannot move and lie stiffly... not yielding at all. 'Don't fight me... Merry... please...' he whispers. Gently... he pulls me into his arms... burying his nose in my hair... kissing my neck.

'Don't hate me...' he breathes softly against my skin... his voice - achingly sad. My heart clenches anew and releases a fresh wave of silent sobbing. He continues to kiss me softly... tenderly... but I remain aloof and wary.

We lie together like this... neither saying anything for ages. He just - holds me... and very gradually... I relax and stop crying. Dawn comes and goes... and the soft light gets brighter as the morning moves on... and still we lie quietly.

'I bought you some Advil and some arnica cream...' he says after a - long while.

I turn very slowly in his arms so I can face him. I am resting my head on his arm. His eyes are flinty gray and guarded.

I gaze at his beautiful face. He's giving nothing away... but he keeps his eyes on mine... hardly blinking. Oh... he is so breathtakingly good... looking. In such a short time... he's become so... so dear to me. Reaching up... I caress his cheek and run the tips of my fingers through his stubble. He closes his eyes and exhales slightly.

'I'm sorry...' I whisper.

He opens his eyes and looks at me puzzled.

'What for?'

'What I said.'

'You didn't tell me anything I didn't know.' And his eyes soften with relief.'

I am sorry I hurt you.' I shrug.

'I asked for it.' And now I know. I swallow. Here goes. I need to say my piece.' I don't think I can be everything you want me to be...' I whisper. His eyes widen slightly... and he blinks... his fearful expression returning. 'You are everything I want you to be.' What?

'I don't understand. I'm not obedient... and you can be as sure as hell I'm not going to let you do that to me again. And that's what you need... you said so.'

He closes his eyes again... and I can see a myriad of emotions cross his face. When he reopens them... his expression is bleak? Oh no.

'You're right. I should let you go. I am no good for you.'

My scalp prickles as every single hair follicle on my body stand to attention... and the world falls away from me... leaving a wide... yawning abyss for me to fall into. Oh no.

'I don't want to go...' I whisper. Freak... this is it. Pay or play. Tears swim in my eyes once more.

'I don't want you to go either...' he whispers... his voice raw. He reaches up and gently strokes my cheek and wipes away a falling tear with his thumb.' I've come alive since I met you.' His thumb traces the contours of my lower lip.

'Me too...' I whisper...' I've fallen in love with you... RICHARD C. MAST.' His eyes widen again... but this time... with pure... undiluted fear. 'No...' he breathes as if I've knocked the wind out of him.

Oh no.

'You can't love me... Merry. No... that's wrong.' He's horrified.

'Wrong? Why's it wrong?'

'Well... look at you. I can't make you happy.' His voice is anguished.

'But you do make me happy.' I frown.

'Not at the moment... not doing what I want to do.'

Holy freak. This is it. This is what it boils down to...

incompatibility... and all those poor subs come to mind.

'We'll never get past that... will we?' I whisper... my scalp prickling in fear.

He shakes his head bleakly. I close my eyes. I cannot bear to look at him.

'Well... I'd better go... then...' I murmur... wincing as I sit up.

'No... don't go.' He sounds panicked.

'There's no point in me staying.' Suddenly... I feel tired... really dog... tired... and I want to go now. I climb out of bed... and RICHARD C. MAST follows.

'I'm going to get dressed. I'd like some privacy...' I say... my voice flat and empty as I leave him standing in the bedroom.

Heading downstairs... I glance at the living room... thinking how only hours before, I had rested my head on his shoulder as he played the piano.

So much has happened since then. I have had my eyes opened and glimpsed the extent of his depravity... and I now know he's not capable of love... of giving or receiving love. My worst fears have been realized. And strangely... it's very liberating.

The pain is such that I refuse to acknowledge it. I feel numb. I have somehow escaped from my body and am now a casual observer of this unfolding tragedy. I shower quickly and methodically... thinking only of each second in front of me. Now squeeze the body wash bottle. Put the body wash bottle back in the rack. Rub the cloth on the face... on shoulders... on and on... all simple... mechanical actions... requiring simple mechanical thoughts.

I finish my shower... and as I haven't washed my hair... I can dry myself quickly. I dress in the bathroom... taking my jeans and t... shirt out of my small suitcase. My jeans chafe against my backside... but quite frankly... it's a pain I welcome as it distracts my mind from what's happening to my splintering... shattered heart.

I stoop to shut my suitcase... and the bag holding RICHARD C. MAST's gift catches my eye... a modeling kit for a Blahnik L23 glider... something for him to build. Tears threaten. Oh no... happier times... when there was the hope of more. I take it out of the case... knowing that I need to give it to him. Quickly... I rip a small piece of paper from my notebook... hastily scribble a note for him... and leave it on top of the box.

I gaze at myself in the mirror. A pale and haunted ghost stares' back at me. I scoop my hair into a ponytail and ignore how swollen my eyelids are from the crying. My subconscious nods with approval. Even she knows not to be snarky right now. I cannot believe that my world is crumbling around me into a sterile pile of ashes... all my hopes and dreams cruelly dashed. No... no, don't think about it. Not now... not yet. Taking a deep breath... I pick up my case... and after placing the glider kit and my note on his pillow... I head for the great room.

RICHARD C. MAST is on the phone. He's dressed in black jeans and t... shirt. His feet are bare.

'He said what!' he shouts... making me jump.' Well... he could have told us the freaking truth. What's his number...? I need to call him... Welch... this is a real freak... up.' He glances up and doesn't take his dark and brooding eyes off me. 'Find her...' he snaps and presses the off switch.

I walk over to the couch and collect my backpack... doing my best to ignore him. I take the Mac out of it and walk back toward the kitchen...

placing it carefully on the breakfast bar... along with the Phone and the car key.

When I turn to face him... he's staring at me... stupefied with horror.

'I need the money that Peter got for my Beetle.' My voice is clear and- calm... devoid of emotion... extraordinary.

'Merry... I don't want those things... they're yours...' he says in disbelief.' Please... take them.'

'No RICHARD C. MAST... I only accepted them under sufferance... and I don't want them anymore.'

'Merry... be reasonable...' he scolds me... even now.

'I don't want anything that will remind me of you. I just need the money that Peter got in my car.' My voice is quite monotonous.

He gasps.

'Are you trying to wound me?'

'No.' I frown staring at him. Of course, not... I love you.' I'm not. I'm trying to protect myself...' I whisper. Because you don't want me the way I want you.

'Please... Merry... take that stuff.'

'RICHARD C. MAST... I don't want to fight... I just need the money.'

He narrows his eyes... but I'm no longer intimidated by him. Well...

only a little. I gaze impassively back... not blinking or backing down.

'Will you take a check?' he says acidly.

'Yes. I think you're good for it.'

He doesn't smile... he just turns on his heel and stalks into his study. I take a last lingering look around his apartment... at the art on the walls... all abstracts... serene... cool... cold... even. Fitting... I think absently. My eyes stray to the piano. Jeez... if I'd kept my mouth shut... we'd have made love on the piano. No... freaked... we would have freaked on the piano. Well... I would have made love. The thought lies heavy and sad in my mind. He has never made love to me... has he? It's always been freaking to him.

RICHARD C. MAST returns and hands me an envelope.

'Peter got a good price. It's a classic car. You can ask him. He'll take you home.' He nods in the direction over my shoulder. I turn... and Peter is standing in the doorway... wearing his suit... as impeccable as ever.

'That's fine... I can get myself home... thank you.'

I turn to stare at RICHARD C. MAST... and I see the barely... contained fury in his eyes.

'Are you going to defy me at every turn?'

'Why to change a habit of a lifetime?' I give him a small... apologetic shrug.

He closes his eyes in frustration and runs his hand through his hair.

'Please... Merry... let Peter take you home.'

'I'll get the car... Miss Merry...' Peter announces authoritatively. RICHARD C. MAST nods at him... and when I glance around... Peter has gone.

I turn back to face the RICHARD C. MAST. We are four feet apart. He steps forward...

-And-

Instinctively without conscious thought, I step back. He stops... and the anguish in his expression is palpable... his gray eyes burning.

'I don't want you to go...' he murmurs... his voice full of longing.

'I can't stay. I know what I want and you can't give it to me... and I can't give you what you need.'

He takes another step forward... and I hold up my hands.

'Don't... please.' I recoil from him. There's no way I can tolerate his touch now... it will slay me. 'I can't do this.'

Grabbing my suitcase and my backpack... I head for the foyer. He follows me... keeping a careful distance. He presses the elevator button... and the doors open. I climb in.

'Goodbye... RICHARD C. MAST...' I murmur.

'Merry... goodbye...' he says softly... and he looks utterly... utterly broken... a man in agonizing pain... reflecting how I feel inside. I tear my gaze away from him **before**- I change my mind and try to comfort him.

The elevator doors close... and it whisks me down to the bowels of the basement and my hell.

Peter holds the door open for me... and I climb into the back of the car. I avoid eye contact.

Embarrassment and shame wash over me. I'm a complete failure.

I had hoped to drag my Dark Shadows into the light... but it's proved a task beyond my meager abilities. Desperately... I try to keep my emotions banked and at bay. As we head out onto 4th Avenue... I stare blankly out of the window... and the enormity of what I've done slowly washes over me. Shit... I've left him.

The only man I've ever loved. The only man I've ever slept with. I gasp... and the levees burst. Tears course unbidden and unwelcome down my cheeks... and I wipe them away hurriedly with my fingers... scrambling in my bag for my sunglasses. As we pause at some traffic lights... Peter holds out a linen handkerchief for me. He says nothing and doesn't look in my direction... and I take it with gratitude.

'Thank you...' I mutter... and this small discreet act of kindness is my undoing. I sit back in the luxurious leather seats and weep.

The apartment is achingly empty and unfamiliar. I have not lived here long enough for it to feel like home. I head straight to my room... and there... hanging limply at the end of my bed... is a very

sad... deflated helicopter balloon. Charlie Tango... looking and feeling exactly like me. I grab it angrily off my bedrail... snapping the tie... and hug it to me. Oh... what have I done?

Nevaeh

Books: 54

'If Only in My Wildest Dreams'

Introduction:

In a world that all books are not allowed to be read, so they are brunt...

'It was a yearning to burn.' The computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, IPad's, and PC's, without looking through old dusty pages, plus Its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unpredicted sex.

We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unpredicted sex now morning, like the alarm, going off to let me no so... its 7 am... on a Monday- and the year is 2070. I have great frustration with at myself as I frown at my look in the mirror, not what you call ass ugly- but days like this one you just wish you were dead... all girls no that feeling.

The feeling of worthlessness was over warming me. 'Look at this hair what a mess- I said- in my mind, rolling my eyes and making faces as I go to pick my nose.' It's just not doing what I want... I said whispering. Hell... look at it- my hair my face- and eyes, like- just freaking sucks today, I finally said it out loud- yet the cat looked like I was crazy too- for talking. Damn Harper for being sick, and lay open to me to this nightmare... of like having to do this... for her.

I don't want to but- it's for her. I feel I have too- n- all.

I should be studying for my final exams, and I am in high school girl- looking forward to graduation- intern work looks good for a job, coming up like I won't be 17 years of age until July of this year- but it looks good to have- the ass-kissing- no? All the test- all the test- God just wants to be done with it all- like which are all this week.

Yet, here I am trying to brush my hair into submission, and look somewhat cute... hard for a girl like me said by the others- not by me. I must not sleep with it wet anymore- God last night just jumped in bad nude... and masturbate 10 times, I use a vibrator, and dildo- but most of the times I use my hands, I started when I was 6- manly to get to sleep by passing out afterward- to get up... and look at all of this that you see here. at the time- 16 as of this today boys ask all the time- Bra size: 34b yah I no. Underwear type: thongs, boy shorts, when you developed pubic hair 11 Do you Shave/Wax? When did you start? 12 Do you masturbate?

Yes, with a dildo going in out coming hard over and over for some boy that you wish was real. When did you start? That why I said it- Have you had sex? Not yet- How old were you the first time? Um? That would be nice- so I would not feel like a complete loser. Have you given oral sex to a guy? How old were you the first time?

Yes, at 9-year-old... Have you been fingered? Ah yeah like when I was 10. How old were you the first time? I said it... it's true. Do you change in front of girlfriends? Family? Yes, friends and mom, and my girls. Skinnydip? Yes, with friends... the top questions boys ask me... about who they think I am.

And all they care about.

Anyways- I must not sleep with it wet. Reciting this mantra several times, I endeavor, once more about it all, to bring it under control with the brush as I finger myself- just to get the edge off- maybe getting one rubbed out before the day starts. I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me, and give up.

My only option is to restrain my wayward hair in a ponytail and hope that I look semi-presentable. Shannia is my roommate, us- we- are just two girls trying to make it without Mom and Dad holding our hands- you know how it is- I want to be a big girl- playing house they call it. I would say that she should be the one doing this for me. But I have too... Consequently, she cannot attend the interview she'd arranged to do with me; so-o I would not blow chunks on the poor ass hole like he's some dick-

some mega-industrialist tycoon that I've never heard of... you the type old crabby dick sucker. That gets joy out of betting off under the desk to girls like me, hand coffee.

Like, I just want to work for the student newspaper, do I really have to do this- for college... and get nothing out of it...? So, I have been volunteered to do this agent my well and better judgment. I know what is going to be... me getting hurt and having to come home crying, and need to come hard, in my undies- off to the side. I have final exams calls for me to do this, one essay to finish they call- yah sure you suck the man off- for it, and I'm supposed to be working this afternoon and be happy- sure. Smile and walk away- is what I do- in school, not know shit for this job- no education at all- here. Thanks... I think on the inside... but no - today- like I have to drive one hundred and seventy-five miles, me paying for it all- no question's asked- to sit down and get ass freaked- in a scene- all the way down to downtown New York in order to meet the mysterious RICHARD C. MAST of Ellie Magazine head shit of bad writing- Inc.

As a brilliant businessperson and major sponsor of our school, his time is extraordinarily precious (my school would say not me) - much more- precious than, she tells me... my teachers that is I need it with SATs- yah- right... Damn her extra-curricular activities. If I wanted that I would have suck and blowing a trumpet in the band for 6 years. It's fingering he- he.

Shannia is huddled on the couch, rubbing and humping a pillow- in the living room spread open she turns- as I should be with her... she's diddling herself as a 17-year-old will do... that just for fun- yelling making the old ass next door pissed. They creep- look at us- shaking their head to what they don't understand, just calling us the slut generation- as they sand on their verandas. Like you can do it on the veranda- of your apartment? He- he- I get it- she's open... to it... it was said. 'Mary, I'm sorry about cutting out on you. It took me nine months to get this interview... from my dick suckers at school- It will take another six to reschedule, and a repeat of my last year but I not going. I'll just drop out... it's what they want... anyways- you're dumb- I said. Come with me so-o we'll both have graduated. As an editor with honors, I can't blow this off- you shouldn't either- come on like what you have done. I would rather just masturbate all the time... okay...? I said... (You can make more doing that... she said under her breath.)

Please,' Shannia begs me in her harsh, sore throat voice for sucking one off the night before. How does she do it? Even sick she looks freaking- beautiful, strawberry blonde hair all in place and blue bright eyes, although mine looks wet and water like the way she should look doing what she has just

done. 'Nice butt pug... ha- thanks she said.' I ignore my twinge of annoying sympathy for my low self-esteem. 'Of course, I'll go Shannia if you'n- me ___ here- and she points downward. You should get back to bed with me.

Would you like some Nyquil or Tylenol mixed with alcohol?' That such do it...? 'All of the above, please... Here are the questions for you, did I need to do this just to be a writer- of shit. So, her my recorder doesn't pay it back you may get pron sounds of last night. Just press record here- see the button that says recorded. Make notes, I'll transcribe it all- for you, I know you can't do that- without bitching about it.' 'I know nothing about him,' I murmur over and over, trying to find something I may like about him, and failing to quash my rising dread and fear. 'See these here the list in her hand - a crumpled piece of paper- all the questions just ask these and you'll do fine - got them from google- like what I did all the way through high school google well teach you - not your teachers, see- see you through that in a line- and you look smart to this dick- that's what it's all about kissing ass. Go, love- It's a long drive where you don't want to look bad in front of the big-time faggot.

I don't want you to be late - your right- so he's gay.' That what they say-freak him and see and let me no- nice... slut I said to her- you know it- she said back. 'Okay, I'm going- don't hurt yourself there. Get back to bed- and put that thing away or shave it. Going to eat out latter- WHAT? Food- food latter.' I stare at her fondly. Only for you, Shannia, would I do this? 'I will do it all- like all ways- good luck- G-thanks- you care? I said. And thanks to Mary - as usual, you're my lifesaver.' Getting- together with my schoolbag, I smile ironically at her, then head out the door down all the steps to the car. I cannot believe, I have let Shannia talk me into this.

Nevertheless, then Shannia can talk anyone into anything, she was the hot one in school, not me. She'll make an exceptional journalist- I am sure of it so would have I if I would have been given the chance. She's communicative, robust, convincing, quarrelsome, lovely - and she's my sweetheart, sweetie of a friend. The roads are clear wet rain covered yet, I set off from home, it's early, and I don't have to be in New York until three this afternoon to be on time. I'm not sure if my old car, well make the journey in time- she a very old gill.

Oh, a fun drive and the miles slip away as I floor the pedal- backfiring all the way. My journey's end is the headquarters of Mr. Durval's global enterprise that he so-called made all on his own doing. It's a huge 100 story office building, all curved glass, and steel, an architect's modern imaginary,

with Durval wrote inconspicuously in brace over the crystal-like glass of front revolving doors, and all on the building high up.

It's a quarter to three when I come to my destination, greatly relieved that I'm not late as I walk into the mammoth - and frankly unapproachable - glass, steel, and white stonework antechamber. In arrears the solid sandstone is the desk of dark wood, a very attractive, dressed up, young girls' smile's all too creepy for my liking- enjoyably at me- like they want to know all about me- be there eye. She's wearing the sharpest charcoal suit jacket and white shirt I have ever seen. She looks immaculate. 'I'm here to see Mr. Durval.

I am - so and so- I said- yeah okay- it doesn't matter take a number; I call you when I fill it your time to see this man. So, I have to kiss your ass too do this lady she said all pissy- yes or you can walk out the door. FREAK YOU! I said to here no said me up - bossy for me- but 3 hours is too long to be puss- freaked around with. She arches her eyebrow slightly as I stand self-consciously before her. I am beginning to wish I'd borrowed one of Shannia's formal blazers rather than wear my shorts and a tank top. I have made an effort and worn my one and only skirt, my no-nonsense brown knee-length boots, and a blue sweater. For me, this is smart. I tuck one of the escaped tendrils of my hair behind my ear as I pretend, she doesn't intimidate me. 'Miss we've expected you but not looking like you roll out of bed. Please sign in here, Miss Merry, you'll want the last train over there to go up - on the left, press for the twentieth hounded floor.' She smiles kindly at me, amused no doubt about it, as I sign in - and sigh- and stop and get a dress- for this man that too old to get it up to care about me showing it all off.

'Stuff your eyes with wonder, I always say, live as if you'd drop dead in ten seconds- like most that do these days and your body is bunt on the spot in plain sight for the world to see - just like a book- no one cares about what inside of you- is all cold what on the cover- not the text just the picture. See the world... good now look at it- I don't see anything to live for- It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in place of work my way.'

She indicators too me and as I go past security as a GUEST- very confidently and yet shy- stamping on the forward-facing. I can't help my smirk. Surely, it's obvious that I'm just visiting. I don't fit in here at all. The train beaters with a gust of air moving past me fast- mag-lev- me with incurable swiftness to the floor in under zip time. The doors slide open to let more androids work in and out, I call them a waste of what we- you and I could be doing, and I'm in another outsized antechamber - again all

glass, steel, and white sandstone. I look up at the top - seeing the sky go from blue to black... Yet to me and most this is nothing these days.

Nothing changes in my life really just a new day of shit, I inwardly sigh. Thanking the train for the ride, I walk over to the bank of silos past the two security men who are both far more vigorously dressed than me, in their blue armed suits. I'm threatened by another desk of sandstone and another young blonde - no name just a number - looks at me dressed faultlessly in black and white who doesn't even rise to greet me, or care I am there. Other to pop gum - and look at the ID - slightly - that the robot's job she said - I don't get paid to do that or think - so why do it? 'All and sundry I feel that I left something behind when he passed think in my thoughts, my grandfather said - too always' work hard.

2

A child or a book or a painting or a house or a wall built or a pair of shoes made - you're smart - go for your dreams even if the world is not a nice place. Or a garden planted - now looks at the world - plant things ha. Something your hand touches in some way - has meaning always, like part of your soul has somewhere to go when you die, remember that - yeah right - I roll my eyes - at that too.

'Why...? Why is it?' we go...? That was all I remember before the put him down - and let him up. I was kicking and scramming - and the ripped me away at 10 years old - it how it has to be - MOM said. 'Too much of a cost on us taxpayers. Death and end of funds... is life. 'Miss, could you wait here the bot said, please?' She points to a seated area of white skin covered chairs. Behind the leather chairs is a spacious glass-walled meeting room with an equally spacious dark wood table and at least twenty matching chairs around it. Beyond that, there is a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the New York skyline, that appearance out through the city on the way to the Sound. It's a spectacular panorama, and I'm temporarily paralyzed by the view and the look down all glass flooring too. Wow - I said amazed...

I sit down, fish the questions from my satchel, and go through them, inwardly cursing, Shannia for not providing me with a brief biography. I know nothing about this man I'm about to interview. He could be ninety or he could be thirty. The uncertainty is galling, and my nerves resurface, making me fidget. I've never been comfortable with one-on-one interviews, preferring the anonymity of a group discussion where I can sit inconspicuously at the back of the room. To be honest, I prefer my own company, reading a classic British novel, curled up in a chair in the campus library. Not sitting shuddering apprehensively in an immense glass and stone structure. I just rolled my eyes at myself in the many shiny objects around me just like this showing too much ass.

Like- get a hold of it- it's just a man winkie look at me in the face- why is this okay? I said to myself. Judging building for adding nudes in artwork, which is too scientific and cold-modern, I guess Old is in his thing: fit, tanned, and fair-haired to match the rest of the personnel. I only warmth is the glow of fire lights- just for show-An additional elegant thing-ie-me-bob-er, a more nude girl is compromised sexual poses' flawless girls showing it all, shit look at this compared to that- not good- not good... I see younger no-names blonde comes out of a large- acting mindless door that lights open with their barcode on their rest.

A deep breath, I stand up. 'Miss' it's time. It's like a death march I thought... with the creepy music in the background- playing in my implanted headset... adjusting automatically. Every person the whole dying world must leave something behind when he/she/it dies- it- being the no names- that are just- works that have not met the grade of IQ of 50 or less, my grandfather they are not dumb some are at 10- smoking and drugging- nothing more- just no work in them. So, this is what they do- make them drummer... hand out money for nothing- they can even come op to a child of 3 making a book or a painting or tie a pair of shoes or make them.

Otherwise, a garden planted... something your hand touched some way so your soul has somewhere to go when you die, and when people look at that tree or that flower you planted, you're there. 'Indeed,' I clear my throat- of what was hard to swallow. 'Certainly.' There, that sounded more confident- when I have voices in my hand say you'll never do SHIT. 'The RICHARD C. MAST will see you in a moment. May I take your jacket- miss the deadbeat said?' 'Oh, sure thing...' I struggle out of the jacket and was nice to the dumb- bum. Can I get you anything to eat or drink, would you like: 'Would you like tea, coffee, water- saltines?' something at all? 'Um - no- thank you- I said back to this- it- female.' This blonde- glares her eyes- at the task, she now has to do- for hardly any money- she is very young and uneducated- for a woman of her age sitting at the desk she's at doing this work; and as she asks, turning her attention back to me as she stumbles to do the simple job. Here it is- 'A glass of water. Thank you,' I murmur not looking up at her- for she a no-buddy. Olivia scurries up proximately and scurries to an entrance/exit on the other side of the room.

'Olivia, please fetch Miss Marry a glass of water.' Her voice is unyielding- and do your job- NOW. 'My request for forgiveness for her lack of- skills, Miss- she's only a 25 IQ-er, Olivia is our new intern- part of will help you suck at life program... Please be seated as I do this to for her. Our RICHARD C. MAST will be an additional five or so moments.' It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you change something from the way it was before you touched, right- the girl asked- thinking- I said- don't... she

went on saying something that's like you after you take your hands away - is what matters - right. Shut up! She said too it... Olivia returns with a glass of iced water on a hot plate. Perhaps RICHARD C. MAST insists on all his employees being blonde... dumb shits...?

'Here you go, Miss.' And she dumps it down my lap... 'Thank you.' Dumb Shit! I muttered under my breath... 'We need not be let alone... the dumb one said to me... were a danger to ourselves' and others... We need to be really bothered once in a while to see if we're alive. How long is it since you were really bothered - how about now by you, About something important, about something real?' Stop asking dumb question's... I said to her... that doesn't matter in today's life. Echoing on the sandstone floor this blonde tramp over to the large desk, her heels clicking. She sits down, and they both continue their dumb ass work they don't know how to do well. I have definitely worn the wrong clothes, yet ones more - to sexy, I'm wondering idly if that's legal... do look as I do for this...?

Humm? I questioned it... buying a short low-cut dress. She seems to excel at jumping from her seat. She's more nervous than me... looking at me! Sex is all that it's about - right - it's all they want, these days. Olivia turns and says my job is done as she goes through the door. Good, now I don't have to hear that running in my ears.

Olivia has jumped up and called the trains. I don't hear the reply... to over niceness. The others turn and look at me as I get up showing way too much skin, they are all seeing all of me - upskirt shot here, some girls smile at the look of my pussyina - their dark eyes crinkling at the corners getting all they want to remember about me. 'You don't need to knock - just go in.' She smiles kindly. 'Good afternoon ladies this man said to them,' he says as he departs through the sliding door looking at all of my - eyes dropping at then up.

3

I trying so hard not to overwhelm my nerves, as I stand rather unsteadily. Get-together my schoolbag, I leave my glass of water and make my way to the moderately open door - to be shown the way. The door just thrust open as I stumble through - always trapping and clumsy, tripping over my own feet, and tumbling headfirst into the office - where he sits - looking at me with sex eye. Double dog freaking shit dick suck - bite me - I said - as I walked in - good - entrance miss he said... as I am still falling over my two left feet! I am on my hands and knees in the doorway to RICHARD C. MAST's office, and gentle hands are around me helping me to stand - they were his - a young hot thing that I was falling for

just by the look of well that. I am so embarrassed, damn my clumsiness. I have to steel myself to glance up. Holy cow - he's so young.

He extends a long-fingered hand to me once I'm upright. 'I'm RICHARD C. MAST- are you all right would you like to sit?'

So young - and attractive, very attractive. He's tall, dressed in a fine gray suit, white shirt, and black tie with unruly dark copper-colored hair and intense, bright gray eyes that regard me shrewdly. It takes a moment for me to find my voice.

'Um- actually - 'I mutter. If this guy is over thirty, then I'm a monkey's- uncle. In a daze, I place my hand in his and we shake. As our fingers touch, I feel an odd exhilarating shiver run through me. I withdraw my hand hastily, embarrassed. It must be static. I blink rapidly, my eyelids matching my h eart rate. I hope you don't mind; I am the RICHARD C. MAST.' 'Are you- so?' His voice warm sexual, perchance entertained, but it's difficult to tell from his impassive expression. He looks mildly interested, but above all, polite. 'Merry. I'm studying English Literature with my girlfriend you no, um... High school intern... 'I see he said nicely,' I reasoned with himself some- I see the flicker of loss in the smile of his expression- given, but I'm not sure. 'Would you like to sit?' He waves me toward a white leather buttoned L-shaped couch.

His office is way too big for just one man. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, there's a huge modern dark-wood desk that six people could comfortably eat around. It matches the coffee table by the couch. Everything else is white - ceiling, floors, and walls except, on the wall by the door, where a mosaic of small paintings hangs, thirty-six of them arranged in a square.

They are exquisite - a series of mundane, forgotten objects painted in such precise detail they look like photographs. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

'A local artist. Trouton,' says - when he catches my gaze.

'They're lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary,' I murmur, distracted both by him and the paintings. He cocks his head to one side and regards me intently.

'I couldn't agree more, Miss King,' he replies, his voice soft and for some inexplicable reason, I find myself blushing.

'I feel I've known you so many years?' 'For the reason that I like you,' she said, 'and I don't want anything from you.'

Apart from the paintings, the rest of the office is cold, clean, and clinical. I wonder if it reflects the personality of the Adonis who sinks gracefully into one of the white leather chairs opposite me.

I shake my head, disturbed at the direction of my thoughts, and retrieve Katie's questions from my satchel. Dropping it twice on the coffee table in front of me.

Next, RICHARD C. MAST says nothing, waiting patiently - I hope - as I become increasingly embarrassed and flustered. I set up the mini-disc recorder and am all fingers and thumbs when I pluck up the courage to look at him, he's watching me, one hand relaxed in his lap and the other cupping his chin and trailing his long index finger across his lips. I think he's trying to suppress a smile.

'Sorry,' I hesitated, about me - being me. 'I'm not used to all of this - or always like this - at least I try not to be.' 'Take as much time as you want, Miss,' he says.

'Once you have taken so-o much worry to set up the recorder on your phone - you ask me now?' 'Do you mind if I record your answers - that was my first question?' I flush up some - beat red. I flutter my eye at him softly and sweetly, unsure what to say or do in front of this young attractive man, and I think he takes misfortune on me for the reason that he sympathizes at my age - and sheepishness. He's playful, mocking, full of fun and life, giving me, I hope not to just cut my writs with safety scissors - for being dumb.

'No, I don't mind at all.' This is what I said. 'Did my girlfriend - explain what the interview was for?' Same 10 question all you kids ask - I get it. 'Oh...!'

'Surely, to give the impression in the matriculation issue of the student newspaper - I have to do this part of the graduating - thing... as I shall be discussing the grades at this year's graduation ceremony - with the higher up.' Oh - um-hum!

This is news to me, ha - not really - your part of my program at the school - yep I said. I frowned some, uninteresting my naughty thoughtfulness back to what I was asked to do - the job. Besides I'm momentarily pre-engaged by the thought that someone, not much older than I - okay, maybe

like I'm 17 he's 30 years or so, and okay, mega-successful, likes me a little- like is going to present me with my degree- if I do all that he asks- ALL.

'Good,' I swallow nervously. 'I have some questions, RICHARD C. MAST.' I smooth a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

My cheeks heat at the realization- he's looking at me- like a boy that wants a hot heated horrny to hook up, and I sit up, and fair my shoulders show my dress is not showing too much - in an attempt to look taller- and doing so- his eyes move down- showing that now- just more threatening- kill him with sex and I have him eating me out- my hand that is. Yeah- that's the saying... 'I supposed you might,' he says, disapproving. He's amused at me- as he is looking me over with a- lot of intentions. Pressing the start button on the recorder, I try to look professional. I think - about all the books my granddad had all lost in the great fires, of things not to be known... it's all on here now - I look at my I phone/pad 20 on my wrist licked into my brain waves.

All that is need to be smart is done for you... at the swap of a finger. 'There must be something in books, something we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there, there is not the law said as they put my grandmother down - with them in flam. You don't stay for anything- the man in red and black said.' Remember the stories.

I snap out of my daydream- of all that is him- and the past. 'You're very young to have amassed such an empire. To what are you in debt too with your success?' Like a god? No... I peep up at him- biting my lip. His smile is rueful, but he looks vaguely disappointed.

Yet- 'If you hide your lack of knowledge, no one will hate on you and you'll never - ever learn- from it.' 'Maybe you're just fortunate.' This isn't on Katie's list of things to do. However, he's so superior. His eyes flare momentarily in surprise. 'Business is all about individuals - dumber than smart, Merry, and I'm very good at judging people - I can see what you are and what you'll do for me already. 'If you hide your ignorance, no one will hit you and you'll never acquire anything.'

I know how they tick you and me - how they think - and what you're thinking now about me Miss, what makes the show, what makes them cleverer, what motivates them and was doesn't, and how to incentivize them. I play the game to a point - you get what I am saying - I don't have to act - they all just want me - and want to me be... for me being me. I am everything more than a God... to my pupates. So, I

am a girl on a string for you- know you do as I say or walk. I see- I said shy biting my lip harder... as the strain of his tone.

I personally hire an extraordinary team... I would not stand for less than that. 'If not, they can take their ass out my door and not waste my time, I have no time for shit on a silver plat- Miss- passed off as good food- aka good work-in this case.' and I give compensation well- to those that earn it.

Um- I said along- 'With school turning out more racers, steeplechasers, competitors, tinkerers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and creative creators, the word 'scholarly,' unquestionably, technologically advanced the swear word it is worthy to be.' I get what your saying- I have always done more than other girls. Um You do know this is going to a paper- right? Word or word...? Um... he said that's cute and a sweet thought.

He pauses and fixes me with his somber stare- yet lustful- and unfulfilled in his own accomplishments- there was something missing- with him I thought. 'My certainty is to attain victory and many trumpets in any structure one has to make oneself dominant of that structure... I know it inside and out- just like felling you out inside and out, (That's what he was doing felling me out.) -know every detail- about a young woman.

'I work firm and freak hard- whit the ones that want to freak, very hard. I make decisions based on reason and truths. Figuring all the ass holes and pussies in the process.' Um - like- do you want me to write that down word or word? Sure...! He said- I am so sick of this... same things by girls like you... what do you want to know... I have an ordinary gut character, that can spot and encourage a good dense inkling and good individuals. The end result is, it's always down to good society.'

'I don't contribute to luck or chance or what some call blessings, Miss. I and I only have done this... The firmer I work the better breaks I seem to have - by curing out those that believe in something that is not real to me. It really is all about having the right individuals on your side and point in the right direction their energies for that reason.

'You sound like someone that has to have full a control not letting it all go till you say or time is do.' The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, for sounding too sexual.

'Oh, I exercise control to in other ways, I said to him,' I bet you do he said, with a trace of wit in his sweet smile. I look at him, and he holds my gaze steadily, impassive. My heartbeat quickens and my pussy. tightens, and my face flushes again and he feels me in. I wish he'd stop doing that... looking at

me like he wants to freak hard... and not stop until I come 10 or more times on him. Why? Why does he have such a demoralizing result on me, yet so flawless... in everything he says. Um- He continues, his voice soft.

His overwhelming good-looks maybe. The way his eyes intensity blue at me. The way he strokes his index finger in and against his lower lips then touching my face with the other its right... sweet hot steamy lust. 'Do you feel that you have an enormous power of your girls to do as you say?' Taking them for your bitches? You're not like most school girls I had in here... I like that you don't mind speaking your mind, yet I would have to teach you to be humble... wouldn't I? -And obedient... he said. I immense power... of all my workers in here and out... developed by promising control over all things.

You were not born into this I would say- you need to stick to the page. It's secret... in that, its reveries that you made your money by having your mom and dad hand it to you?' Nah... cute... go on, he said.

My mouth drops open- when he said you need to shut the freak up. I am staggered by his lack of unpretentiousness; you see... punk kids like you piss me off... so... you want me to freak you has nothing to do with me getting this job? 'Sure, it doses... yet you have to be right- in all ways. What are the ways- yell see in time?' This is recorded you no... I said shaking my legs together by his hand touching me softly.

'It's all about the influence and feeling it, if you will, with me. If I were to decide, that I was no longer involved in the communications occupational and sell up, twenty-five thousand individuals would skirmish to make their hypothecation expenditures after a month or so has passed.' 'I employ over fifty thousand public, Miss. That gives me a certain sense of obligation to do whatever I do, the way I want to do it, the and how- when, and why... it's all my say... or no say at all.' You get that- Marry Shah? He said sternly.

'Do I brother you- sir-asking a dumb question, that I have to ask for your freaking program that I give jack shit about... because really, I could be home playing with myself right now... and coming in some boy's photo- I don't need this?'

~*~

'Don't you have a board to answer to?' I ask, disgusted. Why you- I don't have them- your answer to me... and me alone... I over rolled them, and pushed them out- it's all my say. 'I own my

establishments, they don't- why the hell would I have ass wipes tell me how to do my shit. I am the Trump of my day and age... what do you say about that? I can go if this is too hard on you? He just smiled. As I lean forward showing my boobs some... just some. I don't have to answer to a board.' If that was the dumb question.

He raises an eyebrow at me just muttering on about nothing. I flush, even more, unquestionably you're the God, here right? Cute Miss... move on, he said. I would know this if I had done some research. Not knowing all about me shows that your shy and week... and have a lack of respect for who I am, he's so arrogant- I thought. I change tack, and see that I am not even halfway done... 'Do you have anything you love to do outside of your work?' 'Like- That's the question- go for it...'

'I have diverse hobbies, Miss.' A hint of a smile touches his lips- yet-

those eyes are still locked into mine- not letting go. 'Very wide-ranging.' And for some reason, I'm mystified and frenzied by his firm stare into my heart looking into my eyes... wet at this point form being reamed to hard. His eyes are ablaze, kind of like mine with some fantastic and nasty sexual thoughts of him just pounding the shit out of me with his lusting sex making.

4

'Do you believe in love at first sight?' Why did I ask? 'Just curiosity...!' He said... looking in my love-stricken, and totally lovesick eyes. Yes, I was taken back by him... yet could not show it... 'Nonetheless, if you work so hard, what do you do unwind- or just relax?' He smiles, revealing textbook and twilight novel white teeth so right yet so wrong, I stop breathing and forget how too- like. He really is beautiful- for an older man- I felt all hot down under. No one should be this good-looking, and make a young lady feel this way about herself. It's just not fair for us girls.

'Well, to 'chill out' as you put it - I sail, I fly, I indulge in various physical pursuits.' He shifts in his chair. 'I'm a very wealthy man, Miss King, and I have expensive and absorbing hobbies.' I peek swiftly at Katie's questions, wanting to get off this subject of sex and work. 'You invest in engineering. Why, precisely?' Did I enquire the thought- why? Why- does he make me so uneasy, anxious, nervous and troubled. 'I like to form things into submission bending and shipping them.'

I myself like to know how all things work to crack all that it is- to see- what makes it tick: what makes things tick, how to construct and deconstruct. As well as I have a love of ships. 'What can I say?' one thing I have not cracked it a woman's mind... 'That thuds of a sound to me like your heart

speaking rather than reason and specifics.' 'Though there are individuals who would say I don't have any emotions of warmth- that I am just cold and heartless.' He stares appraisingly at me and his mouth coincidences up, well said- perchance. 'For the reason that they know me well- or so they think they do.' His lip ringlets in an ironic beam. 'Why would they say that?'

'I'm seventeen and I'm crazy or so they say- yet smart enough to be here. My grandfather said the two always try. When people ask your age, he- said, always say seventeen and insane- it we inlighten them.'

I went on asking-would you say that you're someone, that makes- friend easily; or that you have any? Otherwise are you easy to get to know?' Plus, I regret the question as soon as I say it. It's not on Katie's list, it was on mine to see if he was at all like me one or less true friends.

'I'm a precise secluded person, Miss. I for one go a long way to defend- my disclosure. I personally, don't often give dialogs out too public,' he's voiced softens as the sentence went off into a long one on like lost in a rambling thought. 'Why did you come to an understanding to do this one then?

'The decent writer touches' on life often like a lusting young girl.

The unexceptional ones run a quick hand over her. Feeling in all the voids, the bad ones' rape her and leave her for the bugs to eat away the leftovers.' So- for all aims and determinations, I couldn't get Katie off my back.

I know how stubborn Katie can be. That's why I'm sitting here wriggling- unpleasantly under his all-pervading gaze- that is yet so perfect when I should be studying for my exams- or just doing what she was doing herself- right? 'Like- she asked again and again, and harried my PR folks, and yours truly respects that kind of stubbornness.'

'You also invest in unindustrialized knowhow. Why are you absorbed- in this area of writing when there are no good books anymore- is it all sexed up media and shit you want to give out to horrny kids to read less than 3 lines on their buzzing boxes- to kill their brans even more?' 'I have to put up with it- Miss- for its sales... SEX, DUGS, and be-bop-pop music are what it's all about- yet I want more out of your text- if you work for me.'

'NOT- All visuals... without gluten...? 'We can't consume money if- there is no bread, Miss, and there are too many people on this planet who don't have enough to eat- that is good for you.' You

get what I am saying to you?' Is it something you feel zealously about? Like - Nursing the worlds poor do you help out the one in this county that are in need?'

'That sounds very humanitarian... sure - whatever they want to suck out of me... right?' Whatever looks good... He moves his shoulders up and down in a way that was not okay to me. 'Feeding the world's poor, I can't see the financial benefits of this, it's discerning business,' he murmurs, though I think he's being insincere. It doesn't make sense - only the virtue of the idyllic. I peek at the next question that is on my list made by Katie, disorderly by his arrogance I shudder to look up. 'Is there a method to your madness?

I asked the question. If so, what is it?' I really don't have a method to the way I do things - I just make it work - for I make it work - how is that? Maybe a supervisory belief - Carnegie's: 'A man who gets the ability to take full ownership of his own mind, may take proprietorship of whatsoever else to which he is justly permitted.' I'm very extraordinary, single-minded. I like order - of myself - and all other things in this thing we call life, and those all around me.'

5

'You come off like the decisive purchaser.' 'I want to earn to possess - them, but yes, bottom line, I do.' 'So-o you want to possess things?' You are a control freak. 'I am... if you want to say I am Miss. Say what you like really - they all do your age.' He smiles, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes.

Again, this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I - can't help thinking that we're talking about something else, but I'm absolutely mystified as to what it is. I swallow hard. The temperature in the room is rising or maybe it's just me. I just want this interview to be over.

Surely, Katie has enough material now. I glance at the next question.

'You were adopted - like me, there was a story that came over for - another county other than the US. Is that true - or not? Do you think your past made who you are today? Too personal? Yes - but I go there - it has not... I made me. Oh, this is, asking too much... I gaze at him in the love needing eyes, hoping he's not offended - by my stupid. His brows channel together downward and arch. My curiosity is annoyed by him I could tell... 'I have no way of knowing.' 'How old were you when you were approved into a stable home?' I was 5 and used, my mother. 'That's a matter of public record, Miss - you can get that anywhere.' His tone is harsh. I flush up yet again. Crap... I say in my head - yet he heard that also. They all can the ones that monitor all and everything I do, I thought and actions.

I move on quickly... doing whatever it is I am doing. Yes of course - if I had known this, I was doing this interview, and didn't want to be- and the- school voices hearing was saying, I was losing grading... I would have done some research more now if I did not shape up. 'You've had to lose of family life for your work life... would you say that is so-o?'

He said: 'I'll embrace on to all God's creatures tight one day. I've got one finger on it now; that's a beginning- by the banning all that you call- literature. I am the reasons as to why all books were a band, I want complete control.'

Why do you not want us to read? Why- is the question that you have to crack. If you don't get it- then neither do I. He said... 'That's not a question- or anything to ask.' He's terse me some, with his long lines of wording rambling.' Apologetic I was to this...' I wriggle some in my set feeling wet down there, and he's made me feel like an errant child. I try again. 'Have you had to sacrifice family life for your work?'

'I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that.' 'So-o are- your quire/ gay...?' I rolled my eyes knowing that was not on the list nevertheless, I wanted an A on my report. I may have had a past that I don't like but it was never with another man.

'What are you gay?' He said... I know that you have kissed, and made oral love to a girl your roommate Katie, by your racing thoughts, I heard it all- and don't hold it agent you... why do you with me? RICHARD C. MAST...? Has nothing to do with the sex or whom you have that with... now does it.'

He inhales suddenly thinking and sees my going down on a girl in his- mind, and I cringe, mortified... my thoughts... Crap! I said, yet once more in my mind to cover up. Why, didn't I employ some kind of filter before, I read this straight out? How can I tell him I'm just reading the questions? Damn Katie and her curiosity, said this in my mind, that it would be okay to say to him!

~*~

'No, Miss, I'm not the way you are- and your young teen why's.' Yet I can see having fun when you're young. And work hard when you're not. He raises his one eyebrow, with an unruffled glow in his eyes. He does not look pleased, about me and my girlie past- like he wanted me or something. I fastly said- I- a man too...The voices in my head... giggle at this point knowing. You're a hopeless romantic,' he said that all not knowing or knowing what you want. The same things could be in the

'business premises families' nowadays. The same immeasurable feature and awareness could be projected through the radios and televisions, but are not. 'It would be funny if it were not serious. It does not book you need, it's some of the things that once were in books.

No, no it's not booked at all you're looking for! Take it where you can- find it, in old phonograph records, old motion pictures, and in old friends; look for it in nature and look for it in yourself. Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of things, we were afraid we might forget. There is nothing magical in them at all. The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us. Of course, you couldn't know this, of course, you still can't understand what I mean when I say all this. You are intuitively right, that's what counts.

'I apologize. It's um... written here.' It's the first time he's said my name. My heartbeat has accelerated, and my cheeks are heating up again.

Nervously, I tuck my loosened hair behind my ear. He cocks his head to one side slightly. 'These- 'ant' your own questions, are they?' They are not... I said back. The blood drains from my head, and I feel as if I passed out some- going all black. Oh no, it flashed past in my head. 'Katie - Miss. - she assembled the queries to go on with.' She rushed in with her wording- 'Nobody listens any more. I can't talk to the walls for the reason that, they're screaming at me, walls -those things you look at all the time like cells and notebooks- 'I can't talk to my loved ones overall this'- he said; she listens to the walls. I just want someone to hear what I have to say. And maybe if I talk long enough it will make complete sense. Then I asked it as a lost little school girl want more- saying- 'Then I want you to teach me to comprehend what I read.' 'Are you, colleagues, on the student paper?'

'No, she's my roommate not my love of marge- were just leaving together.' Oh, rat crap, I said in my mind- yet I think he knows. I have nothing to do with the student paper, the girl said, he could see snapshots of Katie playing with herself not want to be a part of all this... It's her extra-curricular activity I said, not mine as of this moment.

My face is aflame in embarrassment- of diddling. He rubs his stubbed hair chin, in the quiet debate, his blue eyes assessing me. 'Did you volunteer to do this interview?' he asks, his voice deadly quiet. Hang on, who's hypothetical to be interrogating whom, His eyes tingle into me- like, and I'm obliged to answer with the certainty.

'I was conscripted to this... She's not well.' My voice is weak and - apologetic, for her... yet they know the truth. 'We're not finished here, Andrea. Please cancel my next me eting.'

Where are you from? A small town - she said along with this-Small towns are funny places, everybody thinks they know everybody. They bought, they sold, live in fear of getting old getting cold. Life to death, it's all a myth just a wish, only to walk in the dark, to make their mark, in the life they embark.

Yet they know what is so, nowhere to run nowhere to go, they come - and go, with nothing to show. With some that are high and some low. However, they always know narrow minds never change, only to rearrange, in the exchange. Memories never fade, and the ones that make their lies get paid. It's all slipping away from day to day. There is always someone with something to say. Whatever come whatever may, it's just another day... in a small town, with dreams going in the ground, with only names on rocks to be found.

Were one person runs it all and is crowned, we dance like fools we are - her clowns. That's just life bowing down to a small town, it's just the words going around. With so much doom and glo om, lonely nights in a room.

'That explains a great deal.' He said...

'RICHARD C. MAST, forgive me for interjecting, but your next meeting is in two or - four minutes.' 'You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.' He said. The girl from before is back speaking out of context. She's appears lost popping in and out. He turns his head slowly to face her and raises his eyebrows. She flushes bright pink in the face at the why I and he is treating her lack of life. Oh good... you did what was asked of you... good for you... no go be somewhere. It's not just me... or kids getting dumb-er...? I asked...

'Where were we, Miss?

'Some individuals turn sad unpleasantly early in their life. Non - singular motive, it gives the impression, but then again, they seem almost to be innate that way. The staining unceremonious, tire quicker, exclamation more rapidly, evoking lengthier and, as I say, get melancholy younger than anyone else in the ecosphere. I know, for I'm one of them, back in the days of before.' 'Please don't let me keep you from anything.' Say all that is on your mind. 'Very well, RICHARD C. MAST,' then, he frowns some in his long chat to me and turns his consideration back to the rambling on.

She said: ‘There has to be something in books, something we can’t visualize, to make a lady stay in a scorching house; there must be- something there that we all need something more unexplained.’

Oh, we're back to 'Miss' now.

He murmurs... on getting softer in his voice, and then he gazes- intensely into my love-stricken eyes; all humor was gone when he did that and we locked, and bizarre muscles deep in my lower than my belly clench suddenly in hard lust. His blue eyes are alight with the wicked curiosity of all, that is me and inside my- heart, soul, and more.

Which I should be studying for now rather than sitting in your palatial, swanky, sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.

But you can't make people listen. They have to come ‘round in their own time, wondering what happened and why the world blew up around them.

It can't last...

6

‘Don't you look so guiltless- over all that took place, why didn't you give me a biography, he made me feel like such an idiot for economical on the basic- investigation.’ Katie locks a hand to her mouth. Saying: ‘Jeez, babe, I'm sorry - I didn't think about it all the way through.’ I feel some grumpiness coming over me with my changing mood.

‘Typically, he was well-mannered, prescribed, to some extent stuffy- like he's old before his time. He doesn't dialog like a man of twenty-something. How old is he anyway?’ ‘Twenty-seven. Jeez, I'm sorry, Merry, I should have briefed you, but I was in such dread. Let me have the mini chip for your headset, and I'll start transliterating the interview, it’s the least I can do.’ Hell, you just want to replay the video admit it! ‘U_NO_IT!’ She flashed in my mind, as text to read like a hologram, yet I could see it in front of my eyes passing by like a ticker.

‘You look better. Did you eat your dehydrated soup- and mac and- cheese?’ I ask her to move to food not sex to change the subject. That’s all you do anymore is eat, sleep, bitch about that and C*M!

Yepper- and I’m-a proud of it- she said- humping her pillow!

'Certainly, and it was delightful, enjoyable, and lovely, as usual. I'm having the sensation of feeling much better than I did.' She smiles at me in gratitude. I check my watch. 'I have to run, I can still make my shift at Macy's, as a clerk, I don't even think; I well- shower off, I'm going to just come home and do this more- like, um- so why bother... right...?'

Um- yeah- that turns me on- I said... NOT! You're getting to be lazy and gross! Yah but you love me so... 'Merry, you'll be exhausted- to see me tonight I just know it.' 'I'll be fine, until you get back, all by myself- a lot in my wandering thoughts. I'll see you later... she runs out the door slip on a dress with nothing under it.'

Katie- I'm the shit at any DIY. I've worked at Macy's since I started working when I was 14. It's the major self-determining man/woman's wear store in the New York area, and over the four years I have worked here for too long, I have come to know a little bit about most everything we sell - underwire to even I don't wear them ever- although unluckily, I leave all that to my dad to say it's wrong.

Merry- I'm much more of a curl-up-with-a-book-in-a-comfy-chair-by the- fire-with-coffee-kind-a- of-a girl, and have everything in its place on me and of me, yet she works for me.

Katie- I'm glad I can make my shift, to have some money to play with at- the end of the week. I bet I could buy you for a mill. He said to me... Katie and you let him? Yes... I said. To be there whenever he wants, she asked.

No comment... I did I give- her.

I am home looking over my report it gives me something to have my- emphasis on other them all of him- all. We're eventful - it's the start of the summertime of year, and folks are redecorating their homes. My friends that I work with were happy to see me, as always... it's become custom with us.

'Marry Sue! I thought you weren't going to make it today- I was going in- to work a JC Penny's at 5 'till-10.' And then it back home to be with my cuddle bug, she looks forward to me... 'My tasks of suck didn't take as long as I thought. I can do a couple of hours of this I said lost in the thoughts of him- and then her and then him and then- him- her- him- her- aww.'

'I'm really pleased to see you, it was him- look down at me I am looking- up so much small, he's just so-o right.' She'n he starts re-stocking shelves

for me say that a short girl should not be doing this job, and I'm soon absorbed in the task, yet lost in love- of being in love. And- aw- yes with him... I stumble backward and he saves me for falling... like to my death... or something... it was sweet. When I arrive home later, Katie is wearing headphones, see all that happen, she is pissed, and working on her laptop, frantically editing by down report that I was okay with leaving as is.

Her nose and puss-puss still pink for having a head could for giving- wellhead to random high school boys, the day before- she a good kid what can I say- it pays, but she has her unfiltered wording into a story now, so she's focused and typing furiously run-ons. I flush, by her and the thoughts of him also... I was feeling both.

I'm methodically exhausted - dog-tired- by the long drive back home- even if I was looking over the past days of my life on the windshield screen of the car, the exhausting think about the interview, she had my pc on the luster rock tabletops by my bed, and my c*m covered dildo at her feet, she thinks that more loving or something to us mine.

I slump on to the couch with for more- sexy time, foreplay and boob- playing, thinking about the essay I have to finish and all the studying I haven't done today because I was holed up with... him and getting her and me off more than 50 times today- yet that is the norm. I flush, and my heart rate inexplicably increases with ever stock in and out of my puss, and her rubbing my clit- that wasn't the reason, surely, He just wanted to show me around so I could see that he was lord of all he surveyed, and I was thanking him and that man too. I realize I'm biting my lip, and I hope Katie doesn't notice. But she seems absorbed in her text. I see he over there giving me the eye - He obviously wanted to spend more time with you, they said- why not take it one noise teacher said.'

I should have- but I feel the task was done to its fullest-no?

'Yes'- 'we all do.'

'You've got some good things said here, Merry, so well done, is- what the team say going sitting in the broad room at school as there were reading the copy on their handheld notebooks. I can't believe you didn't take him up on his offer to show you around. I hear what you mean about formal, here in your writing a little to stuff-ie said the same one.

That's fine I would rather have that then what I have been getting- with- the other girls it was nothing but sexed up sex- and sex talk, so I'll take this over having to read that. Yet he has asked for you- not them to be with him more... do you want it? Did you take any notes, on being his girl?' She asks.

She gives me a short-lived puzzled look, as to why I have made it in.

'Um... no, I didn't,' I said.

Why?

'I didn't think it needed to be that also, to be a writer.'

'That's fine I see the point your making. I made a fine article with this... then right? Good-looking son of a bitch, isn't he? Said the one... yah why her. I overhear when walking out the door getting a pat on the back by the older woman that had some brains.' 'I suppose so, I said looking at her and shyly smiling.' I try hard to sound neutral, and I think I succeed, yah no. 'Oh come on, Marry - even you can't be immune to his looks.'

She arches an eyebrow perfectly at me, in the cute way that only she- can. Crap is what I said! I distract her with flattery, and sweetness, always a good ploy on this girl who loves me for doing such. 'You probably would have got a- lot more out of him, if you would have done what you did to me with him and on him- she said.' Think of something - quick, I knew what she was going to ask- and I thought quickly. 'So, what did you really think of him?' Damn it, she's nosey. Why can't she just let this go, about me and him, and what I have to do. 'I doubt that, Merry.

Come on – he's nearly taking over your job. Given that I personally- imposed this on you at the last minute, you did very well then.' She glances up at me speculatively. I make a hasty retreat into the kitchen.

'You, fascinated by a man, more than me and what I have to give and- gave you. That's a first,' she snorts, you give me more than what I boy can. She rolled her eyes at me. 'He's very driven about what he really wants in life unlike you, you have no drive to do extortionately, yet unlike you here is controlling, and arrogant with me - scary really, how to overpower he is... but very alluring. I can understand the fascination,' I add truthfully, as I peer 'round the door at her hoping this will shut her up once and for all. I started gathering the makings of a sandwich so she can't see my face, as I walk to the

counter, there all no walls everything is see-through glass, even the bathroom is open to the world outside.

Dumb- 'Why, did you want to know if your gay or not, incidentally, that was the most embarrassing question, I am not I just love you're for you get me, I was mortified.' I scowl with my nose wrinkling at the memory, of seeing this in my eyes passing by like a movie clip- like It was so-o embarrassing. The whole thing was uncomfortable. I'm glad I'll never-ever-ever- have to lay eyes on him again.'

'Oh, Marry Sue, it can't have been that bad- yah no. I think he sounds- quite taken with you, like love-ie and shit.' Taken with me, what's that mean, now don't be ludicrous, in jumping the gun. 'Would you like a sandwich,' 'ha- that all I do for you have sex with you and make you a sandwich- and do your chores''.'

'Please- and think.'

'Yah- yah- yah- suck it she said. 'You don't have one or I would.'' I- said back. I curl up in my bed with her, wrapping my throw around me, that she made me in 8th grade, then I close my eyes, with her around me, and I'm instantly asleep, could he do this for me I thought before the lights went out.

That night I dream of dark places, of loss, and death, and sadness.

7

For the rest of the week, I throw myself into my studies and my shitty- ass job that sucks hairy balls.

Katie is busy too do her and, compiling about her last publication of- her student in the schools weekly, E-paper; before she has to surrender it to the new editor while also shoving for her finals. Damn, but that girl was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century with her work life, you stay home back in the 2,000's and play-with-yours back then, not these days, were a girl wants to be independent.

By the time I finish, it's midnight, and Katie has long since gone to- bed. I make my way to my room, exhausted, but pleased that I've accomplished so much on a Monday. Basically, she's bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a guppy. It'll be something new next week.

So, I call my mom using my mind as a phone, to check on her, but- also so she can wish me luck for my final exams. She proceeds to tell me about her latest venture into pot making and art- that so bad she can't put it into words. My mother is all about new business ventures, that are flopping.

Katie- By Friday, she's much better the day before I felt, and I no- longer have to endure the sight of her PJs, that should have just stayed off. We don't talk all that much more that evening, to my relief. Once we've eaten, I'm able to sit at the banqueting table with Marry and, while she works on her article, I work on my essay about the Holocaust.

Merry- hard to chat, think about how- leaving her behind was wrong in- her mind- I hesitate, and I have Mom's full attention. She, my mother that is worried about me- being young and small and what man can do to me. She wants me to be with the girl, not someone that only there to take... I hope she hasn't mortgaged the household to finance this latest organization.

'I'm fine,' I said. Do you need money, honey? You worry me.'

'No- I want to do this on my own.' 'You sure' - 'Mom, I'm fine just leave it alone.'

It's a brief conversation, is even hard to get done with. In fact, it's not so much so a conversation as kicks my guts and make me grunt in response to my gentle sweet-talking of not be mean, Its Friday night, Katie and I are debating what to do with our evening, other than bedtime, - we want some time away from the studying also, and also from our working too hard for less than a $1. 50 an hour, and from student newspapers, that only pays 50 cents a word, and that's if it passes the editor.

Sometimes, like I marvel and have the curiosity to the thoughts of if there's- something really wrong with me. Possibly I've spent too long in the company of my literary romantic book or cracking my brainwriting, or gutting on out rubbing it, and consequently my ethics, and opportunities are far too high. Nonetheless, in realism, nobody's ever made me feel like that, by her- yet he could too- maybe? Saturday at the store is a nightmare. And the days keep rushing by without any other's thoughts of him or her... what to do?

8

I'm engrossed in the task of redoing what was done right in the first- place, read-through the items I need to have said in the right ways, and the items I sure I know have missed out on that were

there, my eyes are flicking from the order E-book that I have from the past on good writing, to the computer screen and back as I check the entries match.

Then, for some motive, I glance up... and find myself locked in the - bold gray gaze of Chiaz who's standing at the counter of my home as a hologram to look into me doing what it is I am doing he can do this at any time look into me, staring at me intently, with lust in his eyes even if it's just a simulation. My heart failure fasts- knowing what is next, sex- with him not there but in my body, I feel that he is.

'Merry... What a surprise, I said walking to my dad her, I lay down for him to the move through me.' His gaze is firm and intense, and the moment happens fast. Holy crap...!

'He said my name,' In a mutter. 'What can I help you with, RICHARD C. MAST?'

'RICHARD C. MAST,' I whisper at the start, because, that's all I can call him as-not my lover yet. What the hell is he doing here looking at me this way with my messy- hair and nude boy standing here, my mouth has dropped open- like my legs and pussy for him, and I can't locate my brain or my voice, for sighing too much? There's a ghost of a smile on his lips and his eyes are alight with humor as if he's enjoying some private joke.

'I was in the area,' he says by way of exclamation. 'I need to stock- up on a few things. It's a pleasure to see you again and feel the insides of you in though out, Miss Marry Sue.' His voice is warm and dry like milk melted chocolate fudge on ice-cream all melt-ie... or something like that- mmm.

My heart is pounding a frantic, and for some reason, I'm blushing- furiously under his steady inspection of being perfect in every way posable.

He smiles, and again it's like he's privy to some big secret.

My reminiscences of him did not do him justice, in this dim light, He's not simply good-looking - he's the epitome of male exquisiteness, magnificent, I shake my head and take my wits of the dead and prowls, I was humming yet I was with his body and mind with my eyes tight.

Finally, my intellectual functions are restored and re-joined with the rest of my body. I am utterly thrown by the sight of him standing before me, and he's here in my always now. Even at the Store, I feel him.

Go figure...? It is so disconcerting the way I feel after also this being his little slut, yet, I want it so bad. Taking a deep breath, I go down on him hard, one more I said it is fine, I put on my professional life out my mind to be with him.

I've- worked hard today so maybe this is okay. he murmurs, his blue eyes cool but smiling like in mine. I mutter, my voice soft and wavy moving in my mind. Get a grip, I said, after a half-hour or so my legs are abruptly the uniformity of Jell-O. I'm so eager, I decided to wear my best jeans this morning to work just to show him that I love to look this way for him to see through me, like looking into the glass shingling back in his stare, of mine, I try for indifference as I come out from behind the counter, but really I'm concentrating hard on not falling over my own feet.

My voice is a little too bright, walking 'around the story today. I glance up at him in regret yet it's only me that knows he there like, it almost immediately. Damn, he's handsome. I blush, looking downward... and the others in my day have no idea what the hell has happened to me. Acting nuts... 'After you,' he murmurs in my head site, gesticulating with his long-fingered, gorgeously manicured hand. With my heart almost throttling me to the point of crazy - for the reason that it's in my throat trying to escape from my mouth like he's trying to get out of me from down under.

His fingers trail across the various packages displayed that I have done on the shaving, like the same can be said the way he is touching his fingers over my lips, face and- hair, and for some incomprehensible reason, I have to look away for all in the store and close my eyes tightly for my little girlfriend to release. He bends and selects a packet.

'These will do just fine this way he said to me looking over my job that is not where I want to be,' he says with his oh-so-secret smile within me, and I blush, and he finds me to be sweet and cute. 'Nope, it was so revamping,' he says quickly then smirks and it shows all over my face, and I have the uncanny feeling that he's laughing at me, for shacking it out so hard, in public. And the boss knows it, yet that is fist week dating play-no?

Why, why? -would this beautiful, powerful, urbane man want to see me? No way can I see it! I dismiss it immediately for feeling like this on the job. I asked, and my voice is too high in my thoughts, he gets me like I have got my finger trapped the head site mic too hard. Damn! Try to be cool Marry Sue!

He gazes at the selection of tops and undies, that I have places nicely in their lines, what on this Earth is he going to do with those, I cannot picture him as a do-it-yourselfer at all, doing woman's

work like this... I flush at my foolish wayward thoughts. 'All part of your feed-the-world plan?' I tease... in a dirty thought of what happening when I get home.

'Something like that,' he acknowledges, and his lips quirk up in a smile showing on my face. 'Is there anything else, I need to do I said to my boss at the store?' 'I'd like to see you do your job faster without daydreaming. Go home... I don't even want to look at you. You're a waste of my time.' 'Are you redecorating?' The words are out before I can stop them. Surely, he hires laborers or has the staff to help him decorate? I glance behind me as he follows, always in my mind now - even going in the girl's room, Am I that funny, I said shyly or Funny looking down there? Ha- he said- just keep being you! And I give that look of confusion...?

...?...

Blink- Blink!

-Hair shacking out-

-Ponytail left to go- hair flap over right shoulder-

'This way,' I murmur uncomfortably about the way I look.

'Have you worked here long; he is teasing me with- dumb...' His voice is low and soft make me feel well wet, and he's gazing at me, with blue soulful eyes concentrating hard like his dick sliding inside me, for the first time the days before. I blush even more brightly.

Why the hell does he have this significance on me? Changing into a dress and of uniform- that now gross- cover in girly-ness. I feel like I'm- threaten years old down there and in here and there too - awkward, as always, and out of place is everything about me. My eyes drop, yet he has to look me up and down!

'One week,' I mutter as we reach our goal, of me, feel good with him in- all places. To distract myself to being his lover, I reach down and select the two widths apart and let him go to town on my clit, he at this point I could have the world give to me for him doing so. It's zapping through me like I've touched an exposed wire, I feel it come out, which I pass to him too in the feelings also. Our fingers brush very briefly in hand-holding and mind kissing, and the current is there again, I gasp my boobs and he can feel it in his hands-like unwillingly as I feel it, all the way down to somewhere dark, and unexplored even with my eyes still tight, deep in my belly I feel this rush.

Very much, I scrabble around for my symmetry- as I know the camera's- in the bathroom has gotten it all on a video puck (aka thumb drive.) Yet all they see is me have fun with myself- yet the one that looks over this all get it- yet not my boss of now. 'Anything else I said as he dresses me through my body?' My voice is dry and breathy, own like my body. His eyes widen slightly in mine.

'This way to the door I said.' I duck my head down, as I pass all the- snacking girls I work with like I try to hide my recurring blush, and head for the aisle out of the store, to a floating lot of cars folded up. (The poor girl- said the old lady-looking over it all.)

9

I halt at his expression going to my car that is just lower my way like a cab, his eyes deepening shad in mine. Color fading like... trembling, yet again- his fingers now deep inside me on the drive home, I feel like such a slut- yet I must have it- even if I was good. This boy will not stop... Quickly, with, I measure aware that his hot I gaze back into my mine of him wanting all of me. I dare not look at him like a little girl, yet I can't help it he is my first.

Holy- jizz'n jeez, could I feel, like any more self-conscious, about me- being me, done... the back pocket of my jeans is my Id to get into my home, by some miracle, I remember to bring it along this time- I merge not to remove a finger away for my real age, of how I jumped four years in high school for being smart. Why must I feel like a little girl... yet his making me a woman.

10

I know by the end of this year that he and I, we have c*mmed in each other's body or through each body by concentration manipulation of thoughts 2,165 times.

(Forward one year)

I must not sleep with it wet, yet that just I live life too fast and too young to care, I must not sleep with it wet. I am trying to brush my hair into submission. I mopping with frustration at myself in the mirror for sucking hard at everything... and yes even that too. Damn my hair to hell for sucking more than that also. I should be studying and going to school for the day, for my final exams, which are less than a year and a week away, my only option is to confine my naughty hair in a pigtail after, yet another long night of him pounding me, and hope that I look semi-presentable, when I can even if as if I can walk out the door.

Katie is huddled on the couch in the living room doing her, I ignore my pang of unwelcome sympathy for doing what I want to do all day too. You should get back to bed and be with me all day piss on the school she said. Would you like some Nyquil or Tylenol, to get knocked out?' 'Nyquil, please, as I spend some time with her 'till she passed out and then, I leave her clingy hug as she is laying on our bed, and go to school.

'Okay, I'm going. Get back to bed with me she said. I made you some postage to heat up later.' I stare at her fondly as if she was my one and only lover. I cannot believe, that I have to do all this for you like your mom, I have let Katie talk me into this also like a mom, only for you, I, would I do this for, being your bitch and shit! She said, gathering my book bag, she smiled, then head out the door to the car, she's articulate, solid, influential, argumentative, yet lovely words, and on like the girl she would become in the days to come - and she's my dearest, dearest friend. But then Katie can talk anyone into anything. Good luck she said handing me the re-right of my paper for class. She'll make an exceptional journalist that I'm not. Making notes, I am not the best at it at all, yet, I want to be someone someday, so pinning text and more of it.' Rising terror with-in me on a half-hour now late for first class.

'The questions will be racing in my mind, of what to say to cover my ass. Going now. It's a long drive- that I don't have to do- yet, I don't want you to be late for what I don't need to live.' You're my lifesaver for editing I said.' 'Why do I put everyone ahead of myself, be so nice, try so hard and become the person that gets hurt the most? What can I do? I have gone through 8 or 9 years with no real friend no best friend nothing. just people who are assholes that I am stuck seeing every day, why? The most compassionate people in the world-the people who are truly kind, who are truly considerate- also have the best boundaries. If you do not have and assert personal boundaries, you won't feel respected or be compassionate towards people after a while.

That doesn't, at first glance, sound like it makes sense. But here's the thing: Compassion means seeing the best in others. It means empathizing- with their struggles and looking for what's good in them. In order to do that in a healthy way, you must be secure enough in yourself and your own identity that you do not lose your identity in theirs. If you try to empathize without having good personal boundaries, you become the perfect victim- easy to manipulate, easy to control, easy to discard...'

~*~

What I see-

Tell the truth, everyone hates you.

Tell a lie and you don't have a support team.

Tell the truth, you'll be forsaken.

Tell a lie, it's history in the making.

Have others there and its wishful thinking-

Having others in your life, and their hand is not worth shaking.

Live or lie we all going to die so why try?

'Yes,' I croak and clear my throat. I roll my eyes at myself. Get a grip, I said. Judging from the building, which is too clinical and modern my apartment is all white elegant, 'Yes.'. I take off my jacket?' 'Oh please, let it all stop.' I struggle out of the jacket, knowing what to come more off him run down and though me.

'Merry! I thought you weren't going to make it today, to all your classes- at school. You did not why?' Didn't take as long as I thought, to not have a- thought. I can do a couple of hours, overtime to make up for it I said to my teacher that really did not care either way.'

'I'm really pleased to see you, he said thought...'

When I arrive home later, Katie is wearing my headphones and working on my laptop, she's absorbed and typing furiously. I'm thoroughly drained - exhausted by the long drive, I slump on to the couch after, thinking about the essay, I have to finish and all the studying, I need to do just to suck, I haven't done anything notable today, before it starts, because, I was holed up with... he wants all of me and more, like a story that has not to be written.

I flush, and my heart rate inexplicably increases with him being with me always. 'You've got some good stuff here, Merry. Well done. I can't believe you didn't take him up on his offer to show you around, more said the one girl that I got to do half of all my work- so really, I have to do is keep him happy. He obviously wanted to spend more time with you, that why I am here she said.' She gives me a fleeting questioning look; says you go home with him now. That wasn't the reason, surely, I started her I thought but okay?

He just wanted to show me around, the new home that he had redesigned just for you and your taste in color and style, I realize I'm biting my lip, and that drives him crazy, and I hope Katie doesn't notice, this was her thing too. But she seems absorbed in her transcription, to do so. 'Um... no, I didn't, just do that for her with him think it was for her not him and maybe be it was just for her- wo-o-o.' I flush up, to the thoughts of having 2 lovers running through my mind like a moon jet, in the sky going from mars to earth in less than a day.

'Oh, come on, Marry - even you can't be immune to his looks said Katie in my mind, I think she what to play with him using my mind also... ha and he loves it- it's a 3 way in the brain- of two young girls and one older man that can't do anything incorrectly.' I lost in thoughts of thinking of her, and she arches a perfect, for me with her soft warm body showing in soft light, in her and 'I's' room, also arching an eyebrow at me, as he using me and my body as if she is me... you- and she's not me- but she is overriding me... and my movements. 'I hear what you mean about formal sound, via you- she cute and young and what I want for fun. Did you take any notes, on what I did here to make him ask for more?' She asks.

'That's fine, I said I well you mind to speech weighting, I know it's like- shorthand- and glitch-ie yet I can get the notes I need on pleasing him- to the most. And my readers for work... all at the same time, I can still make a fine article with these thoughts on how to be right for a guy like him. Shame we don't have some unique calms, of how a man can be with 2 -16- year-olds these days without think of marriage. Good-looking son of a bitch isn't he, she said to me- blocking off his pathway in thought.'

'I suppose he is I love you though- yet but this way we can all be to- gather and no one gets it- and even so, it's a story, and what well they say, why care? We okay with this why not the world.' I try hard to sound disinterested- in only wanting one to love now and always, yet I can't make up my mind to what I really want, and I think I succeed at being a slut. 'You probably would have got a lot more out of him, if you would have to don't it like this- and she shows it in her thoughts to me- all sexy in her ways.'

'I doubt that, Merry, Crappie! I said I distract her with flattery actions, always a good ploy, as I make her love me more, damn, she's inquisitive. Think of something - quick, to make them both feel what the need, 'So what did you really think of him, my mother gets on this now and asked?' I have like five voices in my crazy had rolling around. - he practically offered you a job, yes, I said- saying GET OFF- GET ME OFF- SAID KATTIE over and over, and the old lady down stars were calling the cops! Katie just

looooovesss my mom... She glances up at me speculatively. I make a hasty retreat into the kitchen to get to the wall screen to call and say there are no issues here not to come, that just us playing around. The girl officer looking now down on the whole run using the wall 4d tv screen that is cover, a fool to ceiling, was not impressed with us, to say the least- Come on Given that I foisted this on you at the last minute, you did very well.' This is an override of safety and privacy- they have the right to do this even if nude/ or having sex/ or shoring the cum off your body/ in your own home... it's to be safe, they can record video and sound when they feel the need for the law.

Kattie she snorts, at the dumb of how this all went down. Why can't she just let this go, and go back to playing with herself, as they all do in their- indented force, of A-holes under their desks? What was that she said yah- sue me- she said, as it the girl-ie cum runs down her leg as she yells get out of here, get out of my room, this is not right.

'She's very driven, controlling, arrogant - scary really having this girl- look all up and down me in her hologram inspection to see if we were okay or not, it's what they have to do, to make sure you're not dying, they only send someone if you're already dead. I can understand the charm she is giving her for being in our room unwanted for an old ass that needs to kick,' I add truthfully, as I pee r 'round the door of the bathroom, that I am now in, know that everything is seen thought and or glass in this home like them all, hoping this will shut her up once and for all, saying we just having girl on girl sex - god, go be somewhere else. I scowl at the memory, of this the last time it happened. Can the old bitch just freaking die as I feel I have said before many times, loudly? AWWWAH!

11

'You, fascinated by a girl? He said at a first when you were 12.' I see first love...? I start gathering the makings of a sandwich, I am his yet living- with her still, Incidentally, that was the most embarrassing question, I have ever had too indoor. I was embarrassed, of all the slideshow of what we did as kids be shown for all to see at his workplace, saying I was the one... and he was pissed to be asked if I was a virgin.'

Yah you can see the dildo freaking of them at 12, here in this clip said - the one man too eager- too eager. I would say so at 16 and into girls - one said, why here? That thought was the same in my mind also. Why Me...?

'Whenever she's was in the society pages, she never has a dated it said.' 'It was embarrassing nonetheless to see myself shown in that light and in full color on the big screen in the boardrooms of the school and at his workplace- no privacy for a girl like me. The whole thing was embarrassing. I'm glad I'll never have to lay eyes on him again.'

'Oh, Merry, it can't have been that bad, she said holding me in my bed crying over it all. I think he sounds quite taken with you, she said- and so did mom- like I was a baby all over again.' Taken with me...? Now Katie's being ridiculous, about this too. I cried... 'Would you like another sandwich?'

'Please...' For a moment, I hesitate, and I have Mom's full attention.

'I'm fine.' 'No, Mom, it's nothing. You'll be the first to know if I do.' 'Merry, you really need to get out more, honey. You worry me.' I curl up in my white iron bed, wrapping my mother's quilt around me, and also the one she made for me too, I close my eyes, and I'm instantly falling asleep. That night I dream of dark places, lost in the time of the pass with her and his blue eyes looking into mine.

~*~

By Monday and by the time I finish, it's midnight now Tuesday, and- Katie has long since gone to bed. I make my way to my room, exhausted, but pleased that I've proficient so much for a. We talk no more of RICHARD C. MAST that always there - that evening, much to my relief, all the arguing was over. Once we've eaten, she and I just crashed for some time, I'm able to sit at the dining table with Katie and, while she works on her article, I work on my essay for school for lit. Damn, I hate this with a passion.

By Wednesday, she's much better, yet I am still in my PJs for Monday. For the rest of the week, I do even change them, or my sheets on the bed, why? I throw myself into my studies and my job of being whatever... however- whenever he wants it, however- whenever- why-ever and forever. I called my mom to check on her, for I was to mean, and so she can wish me luck for my final exams. She worries about me.

Katie is busy too, compiling the last edition of her student magazine, which I am sure no one will read. Drama- drama- drama. It's a brief- conversation with my mom before I want to rip my hair out. Later that evening, I call, my stepdad, that is dating a girl younger than I- just to see if he has not been kill by a terrorist, yet he dating her so... yah. Its Friday night, Katie and I are debating what to do with our evening- we want some time out from student newspapers our studies, and from our work.

'That's amazing - congratulations, Katie said reviewing it in her- mind!'

Delighted for him to be with her right, I hug him again in my mind and get off the line. Katie beams at him too, saying you could have had me. Why is it when I go out, I always feel trembly at the knees, heart-in-my mouth, butterflies in-my-belly, and come home with sleepless nights, yet even with her. Sometimes I wonder if there's something wrong with me. Do you think there is?

Why is he so interested in me, and not them it keeps going through my mind? I need more E-books- 'Oh, you know, locked out of having too many. The usual... well, have to do-The classics. Of US literature, primarily.' He rubs my chin with his long index finger, but its mine, and thumb as he contemplates my answer to more stories under his name on my E-reader. Or perhaps he's just very bored and trying to hide it when I am reading too long- or maybe he like that to about me. those fingers on that face are so enticing. 'Anything else you need? Before I sign off...' 'I don't know - um- like- you to really be in my life.' What else would you recommend?' You to find out what you want.

He smirks, and then he raises an eyebrow, amused, yet again, for crying over a dumb story. He nods, with wicked humor, and amusement with me being me. I flush, and my eyes stray from the text. I reply softly, and I know I'm no longer screening gazing, what's coming out of my mouth, is frustration. 'You wouldn't want to ruin your clothing, by not washing them.' I gesture, ambiguously in the direction of the overstuffed washer- surging my shoulder's.

'I could always take them off- I said.' 'Cute' what his thought...?

12

'Um...' I feel the color of pink in my cheeks increasing yet another time. I must be the color of the communist manifesto. Stop talking. Stop talking NOW. Heaven forbid I should ruin any clothing, that you got for me,' he says matter-of-factly. He ignores my inquiry of me rolling my eyes to that too. 'How's the article coming along?' He knows yet still questions me with it.

I try and dismiss the unwelcome image of him without his underwear on.

I grasp it tightly with two hands like I was holding his, and I go for honesty, about my feelings. 'Do you need anything else?' He's finally asked me a normal question about us and he starts doing cute things, like only he can, the confusing of double talk... with Katie is a question I can answer, of the fact I love him now more than her.

-Raises an eyebrow, I look into my mind to feel all of him.

'I'm not writing it, Katie is, My roommate, she's the writer. She's very happy with it. She's the editor of the magazine, and she was devastated that- she couldn't do the interview in person.' I feel like I've come up for air - at last, a normal topic of conversation. 'Her only concern is that she doesn't have any original photographs of you.'

'What sort of photographs does she want?'

Okay I said, I hadn't factored in this response. I shake my head because I just don't know, how to say this to her that I want her to back off, yet she is the one making me look to the world. Tomorrow, perhaps... I will come out and say it' he trails off the line.

Oversized photos and magazines- 'I well do more photoshoots naked for you.' My voice is squeaky- again, and I said yes for the world to see and for me to love you more. He said, Katie, will be in seventh heaven when she sees me like this if I can pull this off. And you might see him again tomorrow, that dark place at the base of my brain whispers seductively at me. I dismiss the thought - of all the sill- illness, ridiculous... whys I going to be spared open on the screens for all to see my goodies.

'Katie will be delighted if we can find a photographer, that wants a- happy ending like I do- ha with us all.' I'm so pleased, I smile at him broadly, with the outcome of all the shots. He's taken a sharp intake of breath, not remember to let it out, for some time, and he blinks over and over say she's all mine. For a fraction of a second, I was wonder what the hell, and then it turned out to be sweet, he looks lost somehow, and the Earth shifts slightly on its axis, the tectonic plates sliding into a new position.

'Let me know about tomorrow if you want to go around the world with- me.' Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out his wallet, and see. 'My card with his to do just that. It has my number on it, of getting out of the country, and back in... You'll need to call before ten in the morning if you want to do this.' 'Okay.' I grin up at him. Katie is going to be thrilled, for me.

So, we did...

'It was a pleasure to burn, burn all the words of the ones that, though - they knew it all- to make others feel the same, all that was known as wisdom... now the question shows in the people before me, if they are wise or not.'

Like, I cannot tear my eyes away, for him all of him looking down then- back up, from his inquiry; and I gaze blindly, down at my tired fingers. I swallow too hard... His mouth is very... distracting with those lips, hair, and eyes. It's just so right even if it's wrong.

'I want to know about you... I think that's only fair.' I lean forward to- retrieve the recorder it all the good stuff- for I was not hearing the words- lost in his charm- yet I have to write the paper. He places his elbow on the arms of the chair, with his fingers in front of his mouth rubbing his lower lip, as if it was mine. I knew his thought, at the time were somewhat all about impressing me. I curl up in my white iron bed, wrapping my mother's quilt around me, close my eyes, and I'm instantly asleep. That night I dream of dark places, bleak white cold floors, and gray eyes.

~*~

For the rest of the week, I throw myself into my studies and my job. Katie is busy too, compiling the last edition of her student magazine before she has to relinquish it to the new editor while also cramming for her finals. By Wednesday, she's much better, and I no longer have to endure the sight of her pink-flannel-with-too-many-rabbits PJs.

I call my mom to check on her, but also so she can wish me luck for- my final exams. She proceeds to tell me about her latest venture into the candle- making - my mother is all about new business ventures. Fundamentally she's bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish. It'll be something new next week. She worries me, and I worry about her you see. 'How are things with you, Merry?'

One week has passed, and I am sitting in his office. For a moment, I- hesitate, and I have his full attention, lost in his eyes. 'I'm fine I said.' 'Have you met someone, a man I mean?' Why do you ask? Wow... I thought... red rushing feeling coming up my nick. how does she do that the excitement in her voice is palpable? I think I have a crush on the boss, 'really my mom said- a boy?' 'Mom, it's nothing really- just some hot-shot.' 'Like- you will be the first to know, like- if I do- more then I should.' Why sex already? NO! I just encountered this man, I not going to be all hot and heavy already... 'Make baby's she said...' I want to shit myself!

Why does he have such an unnerving effect on me I asked my Ma?

His- overwhelming good-looks maybe, The way his eyes blaze at me. The way he strokes his index finger against his lower lip, I wish he'd stop doing that. My heart is pounding. The elevator arrives

on the first floor, and I scramble out as soon as the doors slide open, stumbling once, but fortunately not sprawling on to the immaculate sandstone floor. I race for the wide glass doors, and I'm free in the bracing, cleansing, damp air of New York. Raising my face, I welcome the cool refreshing rain. I close my eyes and take a deep, purifying breath, trying to recover what's left of my equilibrium.

'You sound like a control freak.' The words are out of my mouth - before I can stop them. 'Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss,' he says without a trace of humor in his smile. I look at him, and he holds my gaze steadily, impassive. My heartbeat quickens, and my face flushes again. 'Do you feel that you have immense power?' Control Freak.

'Oh. I'll bear that in mind,' I murmur, completely confounded, that she thinks I'm good enough. 'Though I'm not sure I'd fit in with his type I said.' Oh no, not at all like what I see him with, I'm musing out loud again. 'Would you like me to show you around?' He asks me this... 'I'm sure you're far too busy, RICHARD C. MAST - Mr. Morgan, and I do have a long drive.' 'You're driving back in a week? she sounds surprised, anxious even that I may have hooked this man - in the lest. I glance out of the window, running the day and him in my mind.

It's begun to rain hard. 'Well, you'd better drive carefully.' His tone is - stern, authoritative. Why should he care?' Did you get everything you need?' He adds... I remember his saying that 'The pleasures have been all his well really it was all mine - nothing but pleasure,' he's is so polite as ever, to me makes me feel good about me being, a loser, and a freak in every way that sucks like a girl. I drop my phone into my school bag and call it a night. My eyes narrow, on the paper, I had to write.

'Thank you for the interview, RICHARD C. MAST Morgan was not a good ending to - me; yet me saying, I had one that was happy was not good either.' Crap...! As I rise, and stands and holds out his hand to my teacher that was a dick about the fact I could write. Here is your paper I said... the man was lackluster about my attempts at wooing him.

'Do you want the FREAK-ing thing or not - because - like Katie, I could - be home now - play with it! The whole class knew that this girl had - an oversexed issue of Doing the two-finger salute non-stop in class, so there are busting out... about it being okay for her and not me - they all know what happened its showing on the walls. 'Yes - if you feel that I need to see it...' 'Like - that's why I did it - dick-suck!' I did not say it out loud - yet it was heard in his mind to his... and theirs'. 'Just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss to blush and feel like complete crap.' He gives me a small smile, saying good work here. Thanks, I say running for freedom! Obviously, he's referring to my love life, more than the

paper, as I run for the office. I flush up... with all them chasing behind me, playing freak you hard in the brain it's a game to them of back and forth.

~*~

''Tell the moment I see you once more Miss.' It seems that you are- testing me, here...or a threat, I'm not sure which what it is- yet. I frowned slightly. When will we ever meet again, it was asked, so-o I shake his hand once more like before, I was surprised that the strange current among us is still there? It must be my nerves, I said and felt. 'RICHARD C. MAST I said thanks for your time.' I nodded at him. Moving with nimble sporty elegance to the door, he opens it wide for me to walk through. 'Did you have a coat?' He asked, and the moment passed too slow yet to fast.

'That's so nice of you do that, him- the- RICHARD C. MAST- this man I am lusting- for,' I snap, in my moment, and his smile widens at me. I'm glad you find me pleasurable, that is my joy in life having and give just that, I look angrily inwardly, walking into the entrance hall. I'm astonished when he follows me out, asking for more time with me another time. I- Marry and then Olivia we both look up, likewise taken back by him asking for what seemed to be a date night.

'Yes.' Olivia leaps up and retrieves my jacket, which - takes from her- before she can hand it to me. He holds it up and, feeling ridiculous- self-conscious, I shrug it on. They're not all that much here for you to know about, or for me to say you need to know, I find myself flushing up yet again with him looking at me the way he does.

'What are your plans after you graduate? You don't remember? I questioned, no I just wanted to see if you're a disciplined as I with saying- repartition- in your speeches.' I hope to find work with someone like you have a man that is like you, and life and some city where I can start anew, like New York. That is if I pass all my classes and get out of the school, yet this is my final that is holding me back to get away.

I haven't made any plans- I thought about quitting, yet my mother- would not hear of it, so I am here and Kite is doing what I want to be right now. 'Gross!' So, in saying all of that I conclude that you have not made any? Right, I said shakenly... I just need to get through my final exams if I can yet you have the say in this. 'Why do you say that...?' I see that he turns his head to the one side, fascinated, a hint of a faint smile playing on his lips. I hope that he did not notices my reaction, he gives nothing away,

with the look that he is giving me. 'It's obvious, isn't it- that I have fallen too his charms?' I'm clumsy, unkempt, and I'm not blonde, not his type at all.

~*~

He places his hands for a moment on my lower backside. I gasp at his- soft touch, his long index finger presses the button summoning the elevator, and we stand to wait - awkwardly on my part, coolly self-possessed on his.

The doors open, and I hurry in desperate to escape. I really need to get out of here. When I turn to look at him, he's leaning against the doorway beside the elevator with one hand on the wall. He really is very, very good looking. It's distracting. His burning gray eyes gaze at me. 'Merry,' he says as a farewell. 'Chiaz,' I reply. And mercifully, the doors close. No man has ever affected me the way Chiaz has, and I cannot fathom why. Is it his looks that he gives me, that I feel this power over me that I cannot control His Wealth also blows my mind, the power I don't understand my unreasonable reaction? I breathe an enormous sigh of relief. What in heaven's name was that all about... Leaning against one of the stone pillars of the building, I intrepidly try to calm down and gather my thoughts. I shake my head. Holy crap, I said - what was that...? My heart steadies to its regular rhythm, and I can breathe normally again. I head for the car.

He may be conceited- I am falling too it, but then he has a right to be- he's skillful so-o much at such an undeveloped time of life. He doesn't agonize boobs gladly, but why should he, o'er, I'm irritated that Katie didn't give me a brief profile on all this- shity – stuff like always.

An involuntary shiver runs down my spine. And Katie's questions are rushing through my head, or did you or didn't you have hookup sex, it was not about getting the job- oh now in today's light it's all about the sex and the money to buy anything or anyone. - ugh, I said to her- well you saw it play out didn't you know it happened!

He kept my underwear- I know she said... sweet...! I shudder in the remembering swallowing him sucking him off and that too I showed and then galloped, then it ended with him kissing my body all over softly. I can't believe I said that to her, yet she saw it sliding in me too- they all did, with this new type of video calling we have- you can see through others... like being there without being there. As I leave the city limits behind, the building behind, and move pasted I begin to feel foolish and

embarrassed as I replay the interview in my mind. Surely, I'm over-reacting to something that's imaginary.

Okay, so he's very attractive, confident, commanding, at ease with himself - but on the flip side, he's arrogant, and for all his impeccable manners, he's autocratic and cold. Well, on the surface.

While cruising along with the down the highway, my mind continues to ponder the facts of what I have done slow long hard and yet slow, THE FREAKING WAS INSPERITY. LIP BITING, BOOB GRABBING, NIPPLE AND SUCKING CLIT LICKING SEX, AND FOREPLAY- DEPE FINGERING LOVE'N SEX. POUNDING! SWEETING- OMG MOMENTS OF GOING OFF OVER AND OVER, WITH HIM UNDER ME! YOU CAN SEE me AND THE SHOT IN YOUR MIND RIDING HIM FROM WITH MY BUT GOING UP AND DOWN- SLIDING- GLADDING- FEELING ME IN- COMPLETELY! AH! HE IS EVERYTHING I NEED TO MAKE IT IN THIS LIFE- I WANT IT EVEN IF I HURT THE FIRST TIME! 'The sun burnt every day.

Yet It burnt away like with old ways and time. I look up to the skies and thought about the ways of life.'

Truly puzzled to all that went down in me, I need this feeling and feelings to succeed in this life as a woman. A woman is nothing without her man- a man that so perfect as he is... under her. Some of his replies were so obscure, yet I loved the mystery of it all - as if he had a hidden agenda. me up now! Consistently I think of that inquiry in the future, I will cringe with blushing.

Damn Katie, for not want me- now I have to want him always!

Did I question in my racing thoughts- like have you ever watched the jet cars race on the boulevard? They now drive themselves crazy to think that some used to do just that drive by hand. I sometimes think drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, for the reason that they never-ever see them gradually... If you showed a driver a blue blur, Oh affirmatively! A blur flashing before my eyes like him naked in my mind- and Katie spared eagle last night in my face wanting me to go down- that butt is unforgettable! What can you do all girls today are Bi? Right? It's all part of not being wed... and even so that just a piece of paper stating someone owns you, and you lose have of what you worked for- so why do it?

I check the speedometer and see 300 mph. I'm driving more cautiously than I would on any other occasion.

-And-

I know it's the memory of two penetrating it's his eyes gazing soft and sweet at me his nude body ribbing over mine, and his stern voice telling me to FREAK him, harder and harder, I want to... as the car is driving carefully fast around all the others whizzing by. Pulling at my own hearing, and biting my lip I go off c*mming, in just the thoughts, I realize that he is more like a man double his age, as my daddy- yet I want the hard work out of a FREAK! Squeezed tight, body and me holding him in me... and the spraying finally takes places over and over like 30 times, switching ways of doing it- up down and sideways and more. He came in me to not pulling out ones... is that love or not caring, I don't have to care to evert there is stopped, so I don't have to worry?

Freak and be freaked is the game of life... and don't think about it! Freaked under over and above that's it how I do it girl or guy- and they love me for it... and make you be someone... that advice to live by... said, Katie. I was 10 when I found that girl- like you all virgin and shy... how did you get as far as you did, she said that a week ago back, well, she was right... I did need to go a little crazy... yet I may have fallen in love with it... and that not how a thing works today either. Yet that is just me - old fashioned thinking.

Be unable to remember everything blacking out in the heated moments of sex... Merry, I scold myself... snapping out of it, I decided that all in all, it's been a very interesting experience, but I shouldn't abide by it. Put it behind you. I never have to see him again. I'm immediately cheered by the thought. I switch on the small ear head and player and turn the volume up loud blasting pop music, I sit back in the car as it races for my apartment where I have to then take the trail that winds up the side of the skyscraper- leading up to my room or that floor, and listen to thumping music, as I make my lover parts do the same - think about him well doing myself, as I press down on the accelerator to my sleeping room, were Kittie is looking for to cuddling with me - she and I share a bed it all we can adored - making less than a dollar a day- and need 100 just to live.

As I hit the 1-5, I realize I can drive as fast as I want.

We live in a small community of duplex apartments in Vancouver, Washington, close to the NYU campus. I'm fluky - Katie's parents bought the place for her, and I pay peanuts for rent. It's been home for four years now. As I pull up outside, I know Katie is going to want a blow-by-blow account, and she is tenacious. Well, at least she has the mini-disc. Hopefully, I won't have to elaborate much beyond what was said during the interview.

'Merry! You're back.' Katie sits in our and you're with me cheaters- you said- to I said- yes but all that? Why not? I see... okay, she said, surrounded movie she was crying over not having me there for her to feel loved. She loves me yet she doesn't want to be in love with me - I wonder why? She's evidently been studying for finals - though she's still in her pink flannel pajamas decorated with cute little bunnies, that were mine, the ones she reserves for the aftermath of breaking up with her, for not want girl on girl sex as much as she wanted it, and for general moody depression of being - bitchy. She bounds up to me and hugs me hard, and slides them off asked me to do what I did with him on her.

To lick and stick... and feel and play with her vulva, squeeze me and - play with my nipples... she said- well she was ou-yah-ing- as I was giving her there in oral, looking for to having it back.' I was beginning to worry, that he was looking into my mind and seeing this... and me doing just this with her... am- I don't wrong? I expected you back sooner, she said grunting it out of her, every last drop was a trusting spray of her feel whipped out yet happy with everything down there.' thank you so much for doing this, I said to her, have it cum, yet not feel like I did in the past. I owe you; I know.

'How was it.'

'Good...' I said- 'What was he like?' Oh, you did not feel inside you where you were looking down over me without asking to be there... you're not my girl... you don't need to be here... I know you got off with us... why?

Do you want me?

Yes!

Now and always- she said.

I want him now, not you... don't blow it for me... I struggle to answer-

her question, of what I really wanted, can I have both... I thought she giggled... see this is why I love you. What can I say? I will always be here for you - like this- yes like this I said- you're such a baby I have to be. Really young, to be doing that with a man... 'I no...' Katie gazes at me arched eyebrows looking sad. I frown at her, saying you're always my first love. Hug me... 'I'm glad it's over, and I don't have to see him again, I have too, to make it in this life... wink. He was rather intimidating, you know.' I shrug at the thoughts of want more... of both of them in a loving way 'He's very focused, intense even - and young... a boy... yet not you at all as I feel I have said in my dreams and now alike - but I will go there.

I thought you did it all great... interview and such all also, in the end, it was about you have a 10-figure job someday. And you'll have it, BUT would you give that all up for me and have 'nothing' but for me - and be with me? That's the question I have for you - do you love me?

13

(Forward)

Note- look for the name- Marry and make for there are 2r's- 'Merry, hi, it's so good to see you, back she said- that being Katie!'

She grins as he examines me at arm's length. Then he releases me but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. I shuffle from foot to foot, embarrassed by what I have done. She gushes with loving hugs. So how was it? I to pooped to say... and she passed out in her arms - falling in the doorways- that sild opens for her. 'Yep, you're looking well, Merry, really well- I see the glow in your face of what all that you two did.'

I can hardly breathe. When I glance up at RICHARD C. MAST -, he's watching us like a warmonger, his blue eyes hooded and speculative, his mouth a hard-impassive line. Hurriedly, I place his purchases in a plastic carrier. Someone you should meet,' I say, trying to defuse the antagonism I see in - 's eyes. He's changed from the weirdly attentive customer to someone else - someone cold and distant. The atmosphere is suddenly chilly, and the fire hot, glowing and shining on her skin... she is truly feeling loved- and in love with him and her too. I nod, rendered speechless yet again, and hand back his credit card, if he loves me then I well spend- spend- spend!

There, I've admitted it to myself, I love him for the money I get to and feel good, about him making me feel good.' Good. Until tomorrow perhaps where I will be long for her yet once more - right?' He turns to leave, then pauses, asking me for more of what he loves of me the most, 'your ass' said Katie- 'No my Puss!' I said back. his coming here, tonight to see me - so you need too- well 'get lost' yes... if you don't mind.

'Fine...'

'Oh, and Marry Sue I just want to freak you, I read of the card to the flowers he got me - cute Katie said... reading it to using my eyes, yet her thoughts. But it's a lost cause, I have fallen to his ways, I know, and I sighed hard, with nostalgic regret, it was just a coincidence, she smiles looking at me say it

all it must be young love, Okay- I like him maybe like- like...? Closing door by asking it to do just that, I spend several minutes staring into space, I cannot hide from myself my feelings anymore.

(Home)

Katie is ecstatic after she does it yourself time... 'DIY baby D-I-Y!'

I bite my lip in anticipation and find myself grinning like a schoolgirl, at the looks of her playing, her curiosity oozes through me too, with what she- was just 2. 0 is what. (BUTT plug) I've never felt like this before, where I just need sleep. She more then I and she stayed home all week, yet have so much to do- papers, and stocking shelves, I find him attractive lost in my thoughts in my awareness, very attractive... M-mm-mm I said, softly, I can admire him from in here and it safe, surely? No harm, by doing just so-o. And if I find a photographer, I can do some serious admiring tomorrow. I need to phone Katie and organize a photo-shoot.

(Work)

I'm in the depths of the stock room, I walk out holding what the little girl gave me of hers to get the same type, yes, getting underwear to little- girls, is my dream job, trying to keep my voice casual- well look at these sweet little faces standing there, well standing there... (pee covered undies in my hands) with this in my butt hole. I thought this is what she has to look forward too. 'I think that is one huge coincidence, Merry, he said looking for the size as I say OOOO-ah 'poop-ie.' And the little girl asked, from afar- what I was making out my myself- when too much time had passed. it's a short-lived joy when she was blurting out, I want the underwire that you took off of me. I mutter you want kids...

'Sure...'

Like this one he said... being comical about it.

He doesn't I want to wish you, Katie said- saying kidnap this one!

PLEASE- too cute...!

You don't think he was there to see you, I walk down the hall of my school and see him standing at the end looking at me with his lusting blue eyes, want to cover me with kisses.' she speculates, Katie about how he going to take me away... even as just a schoolgirl- 'How do you know

this?' 'Merry, I'm a journalist, and I've written a profile on the guy. I know that man has the power of girls to do whatever it is they want too... the kids were talking about us... me being young and his little slut as they call me yet I don't care I have him- isn't that all I really need?

The question is, who's here to see some dumb girls were thinking in the dark, think they could be the next in his bed, going to do them and where and when.'

'We could ask him why- and where and how but would he say said on- brown-haired girl, over yonder. He says he's staying the day with- 'THAT GIRL.'' 'You can contact him, all the time? ...On nosey on said to me.' 'I have his wrist phone number here all the time if I need, they don't get how he inside me always.'

Katie gasps... by the lies I have to make up to look innocent to all, even- though I know, I have taken it at least 1,000 times, holy c-u-m, at the end of my joiner year.

'The richest, most elusive, I have taken was sex -ed, with this man as an after-school program, most here are working for what he calls righting class, most enigmatic bachelor or hairstyles, or seen to be house wife's 'Er... yes.' 'Merry, is not going to be one of those! He likes you, said the short girl in the room, no doubt about it, said the other with really long blonde flowing hair and green eyes.' Her tone is emphatic when he said let's go on the town and get you out of here. 'Katie, he's just trying to be nice.' But she was pouting about it, that I was not going to be there all day to hold her hand. 'Great idea! I said.

(A thought of now) After all, he did say he was glad Katie didn't do the interview, that we would have never met.

(Thought)

But even as I say the words, I love you I have to really feel it right?

That the sex said Katie, and you'll know. I know they're not true- all the nasty things said by all the mean girls- RICHARD C. MAST- doesn't do nice, or nice thing for girls', like me- things like this if it's not love- fist.

(Back)

And a small quiet voice whispers saying they all just want to be for you're the best one out of them all don't forget it, perhaps he's is right. I hug myself with quiet glee, rocking from side to side,

holding him in my mind, like a dream, I see all this... entertaining the possibility that he might like me for one brief moment- for always. Katie brings me back to the now, and happening by saying your zipper is down... (zip) and her hands are on my pussy.

'Merry, you're the one with the relationship. What's it really like to be with a boy said the girl lunch? That sits with her day in and day out not saying much.' 'Relationship?' I squeak at her, my voice rising several octaves.' I barely know the guy.' Yet it's some you just have to do to really get it. So, is it true? What I said to her... you're with him... and do things... 'Yeah, um, sorry,' I mutter, turning to leave. I can't say- what we do or don't do- its confidential.

'So, how come you know: The RICHARD C. MAST?' Cass's voice is unconvincingly nonchalant, also want to know it all.

This is when Katie speaks up saying everything and anything- along with saying she needs to get laid- I give an odd look- when she said- 'I had to interview him for our student newspaper today and I said- 'you did the editing.' So, you can move forward, Katie wasn't well- she all dripping from somewhere ha.' I shrug my shoulder, trying to sound casual with all the girls looking at me like I am a whore, yet not doing no- better than them- in there twisted little minds. She shakes her head as if to clear it all away.' Anyway, want to grab a drink or something and chat some over there?' away for this gossip? 'Sure...' is what I said. I am staring out of the window at the sun coming up and showing the first signs of light. Katie grabs the handset from me, tossing her silky-smooth red-blonde hair over her shoulder.

You like him, a chant started with all the girls! I've never seen or heard so, so... many girls care- about anyone before. You're actually blushing.' Said Katie... 'Oh Katie, you know I blush all the time, I said quickly... She blinks over and over fast-ly, at me with surprise that I did not move or reacted to this taunting. 'I just find him... intimidating, that's all, and he's acting cool for me right now- or I am sure, I would have run out.'

I love you is what he said over and over... overtop all the haters.

(Home from school)

I am restless that night, I punch my pillow and try to settle, tossing and turning, after a short cat nap, yet I wake twice. Dreaming of him and those-eyes and oh...! That body, long legs, long fingers, and dark hair and soft skin..., 'I need to study, then I'll make supper.' I cannot hide my irritation with her

for going too far with him, as I open one of the cubbyholes under our bed, I read love note of dream of him, I do this while she is making supper. In the night- holding her, my heart pounding, knowing what is going on two girls on man- who does he love more?

15

Nine- free of charge for the morning in exchange for a credit in the article, said Katie, I do this for the love by you. When she explains at the reception that I have forgone writing yet bad spelling, she said to-RICHARD C. MAST - RICHARD C. MAST, we are instantly upgraded have her on our time- yes? She's terribly young and very nervous for some reason, yet if you want to have this way then if he said, It's fine.

We have half an hour to set up, for the day out, Katie is in full flow, working on my work and not going to school... funny how life works...? I thought... 5 P. M.

My mouth goes dry looking at him... he's so freaking hot. Holy Crap He' s wearing a white shirt, open at the collar, and - dress pants, I disruptive hair is still damp from a shower, for what took place after the school day was at its end. His eyes watch me impassively. He then extends his hand, 'Thank you for taking the time to do this.' ...and I shake it like I am one of his man on the job, blinking rapidly, to see if anyone see us out and bout, Oh my... I thought, he really is, quite... is he liking her more now- wow?

As I touch his hand, I'm aware of that delicious current running right through me, lighting me up, making me blush, and I'm sure my erratic breathing must be audible. Katie who comes forward, looking him squarely in the eye, said I am coming on this date to tonight. How do you do?' He said - to her kissing her hand and her ass all at the same damn time... He gives her a small smile, looking genuinely amused, as to what was under the dress.

I remind myself that Katie has been to the best private schools. 'I trust you're feeling better?' 'Yes, yes I do...' 'I'm fine, also running it into his head fist that he ALL MINE! She shakes his hand firmly, AND HE HUGES HER NOT ME! SHIT! without batting an eyelid, HOLD ON TO HIS ARM.

Backstory- Her family has like no money, and she's grown up- confident, about her ass and how to use it at a young age, and I am sure of her place in the world- is sitting at home diddling no more. She doesn't take any crap, so why him? I am in awe of her, for trying to break us up, so -o she has all of me back- I can see through her plans. She gives him a polite, professional smile like a gay girl would.

'It's a pleasure,' he answers, that is all it's about with me and find it, turning his gaze on me, and I flush up again, feeling lovesick, damn it why when I have this, I feel I going to lose it...? 'Where would you like me?' - Asks him. His tone sounds vaguely threatening. But Katie is not about to let me run the show for five. My wish has come true: she said, I can stand next to you, and admire you and not - from not-so-afar. Twice of my eyes lock deeper into her, and I have to tear myself away from his cloudy gaze, of wanting to freak the shit out of her.

(Bar)

`He stands, Katie wades in again. 'Enough sitting.' I remove the chair, for some slow dancing. 'Great,' says Katie, I find a bonnier to bang down- when a fast song comes on... 'Thank you again, Mr. for your time. He said- 'I look forward to reading the article that you re-told, Miss Katie,' he murmurs in a sexy way. As I- Merry- pull him to dance. 'Sure,' I say, completely thrown, yet I don't need him doing the same. I glance anxiously at Katie, who shrugs at me. Yelling has fun, as she finds her way over to the wall to be a flower. My heart slams, my mouth dry and my lower-ness not so-o much.

Yet am I in love?

-Or is it all just dumb freaking lust, or just freaking?

16

A date? RICHARD C. MAST - is asking me on a date tonight I said to my girlfriend Katie. He's asking if you want a coffee, this was said to me I see it my memory for the day that just passed. Maybe he thinks you haven't woken up yet- to see that it was all really not a dream that he is falling for her, my subconscious whines at me in sneering in my mood again. I clear my throat trying to control my nerves, yet I cannot.

Katie- this man said- 'Are they based at the university?' Know I live with her- he looked at me oddly, about saying that. The other couple with us- asked, their names escape' me, yet I could dig it up if I wanted too, his voice was soft, a young businessman that was part of the team higher up and inquiring. I nod, too stunned to speak, Peter was his name, I found the clip to look over it and think about all the thing that was said so fast I could not evoke them all.

'Mr. Peter, as he asks me if I want a drink- sure is what I said, and a daces and I said- 'yes,' but my mind was on him- yet this man reached for me, and I have to say yes I was obligated, giving

nothing away, about how I feel. I look at him like there was magic in my eyes yet there was not. But he was sweet so... yah.

He smiles at me and it is a dazzling one, unguarded he said to me, I- said Nah drop out- natural he said, all-teeth-showing, glorious smile, of college? No high school... Oh my... he said. I scoot around him to enter the bathroom, where I find Marry deep discussion with him - they were in a stall together getting it on.

'Merry, I think he definitely likes you, I said as the pants were at their feet.' Be sure to wear a condom- ha you can go now- she said fast-ly- 'But I don't trust him, you know that' she adds. I raise my hand up in the hope, it hits her in the face, that she'll stop dirty talking. By some miracle, it does. Her mouth pops open and it slides in. Speechless Katie is! I savor the moment, seeing this I was so happy for her. I love her, yet I want her to be happy you see.

(160 long seconds have passed)

She purses her lips as if considering my request. Finally, she fishes herself to him. She grabs me by my arm, holding the door open some say get in here, be with him too now, and drags me into the bedroom where it goes down hard and fast, that's off the living area of the suite, in this really nice bar in New York.

Her tone is full of warning.

At the elevators, he presses the call button, and the bell rings almost immediately. The doors slide open revealing a young couple in a passionate clinch inside.

Merry- there's something about him, that is just driving me crazy - lost in thoughts... and feelings- of what could be. 'He's gorgeous, I agree, but I think he's dangerous. Especially to someone like you. She said...' 'What do you mean, someone like me?' I demand, affronted. 'An innocent like you, Merry.

You know what I mean,' she says a little maddened.

I flush up turning pink. I'm starting my exams this week, and I need to study, so I won't be long- it's time to go 'like now' I said hurriedly.' Fixing up as a young girl walks in, asking if everything was cool.

'Katie- it's just coffee, I said to Merry- he said- I want to take you out what do you say he said to me. And... he looked at me with wonder...

He grins at me with hope in eyes of a night that he would not forget all given by me I sure, and with his money, I was sure to do whatever he wanted. It's now tomorrow and at night- 'I'll see you later, then... yes most defiantly. Don't belong, I said to her... or I'll send out search and rescue.' 'Thanks.' I hug her, I with your boys so you know him he will be right to me... I was so pissed, why her... yet is that okay?

He stands up straight, holding his hand out for me to go first, were had a date with a horse drawing carriage, all white, and nice and romantic at dusk. Where he held my hand and wisped sweet nothings in my ear. Holding me over so nicely... I flushed beet red. 'Okay, let's do coffee, here and it was the best restart in town... and the classiest- the name in French so yah see for yourself.' By my eyes it was *Queue-weed*, really, I said yet that was without glasses on. That was something a failed like- in high-school.

I emerge from the suite to find RICHARD C. MAST - waiting, leaning up against the- wall, looking like a male model in a pose for some glossy high-end magazine.

Merry- after being with him all do, I am pooped, I murmur I make my- way down the corridor, my knees shaky, my stomach full of butterflies, and my heart in my mouth thumping a dramatic uneven beat. I am going to have coffee with RICHARD C. MAST and I hate coffee... but- she ran off with my man!

'Sucking tit shit!' I said!

We walk together down the wide hotel corridor to the elevators.

What should I say to him? My mind is suddenly paralyzed with apprehension. What are we going to talk about? What on Earth do I have in common with him?

His soft, warm voice startles me from my reverie. I REMEMBER BACK- OF The doors opening and, much to my surprise, - takes my hand, clasping it with his long cool fingers. I feel the current run through me, and my already rapid heartbeat hurries. As he leads me out of the elevator kissing my neck and lips softly, we can hear the suppressed giggles of the couple erupting behind us. - grins from all around, yet we did not care it was lusting love.

'How long have you known Marry - Katie Oh, an easy question for- starters... I thought... 'Since our 1st year of schooling. She's a good friend of mine don't break her heart.' Why don't say anything but look at this- wow?

I am struggling to maintain a straight face, so I gaze down at the floor, feeling my cheeks turning pink. Surprised and embarrassed, by the fact I thought it was for me I was like shit, I started to feel guilty. Then, I step into the elevator, feeling like I want to be her.

'What is it about elevators?' he mutters, thoughts of true love... about her.

When I peek up at them using my mind phone of seeing into their thoughts - through my lashes and their eyes, he has a hint of a smile on his lips of what he plans to give me, but it's very hard to tell if I feel that he being real about it.

As a young couple, I say nothing, and have nothing in that say anyway- and we travel down to the first floor, all in the same body's- me as Katie is embarrassed silence-less for she in me full.

Katie- Outside, it's a mild May on a Sunday. The sun is shining and the traffic is light. - turns left and stroll to the corner, where we stop waiting for the lights of the pedestrian crossing to change. He's still holding my hand. I'm in the street, and RICHARD C. MAST - is holding my hand. We cross the expansive, bustling lobby of the hotel toward the entrance but - avoids the revolving door, and I wonder if that's because he'd have to let go of my hand.

I attempt to smother the ridiculous grin that threatens to split my face in two. I feel giddy, and I tingle all over... for the good buy sex, yet we wanted each other - badly- no one has ever held my hand. Try to be cool, Merry, my subconscious implores me. The green man appears, and we're off again.

'I'll have... um - Breakfast W/ tea, bag out, talking about all that to over the fact he was to spend his life with her as me being his sideways bitch out the side and you know what I'm okay with that.' He raises his eyebrows.

'Why don't you choose a table, while I get the drinks. What would you like?' he asks, polite as ever. We walk four blocks before we reach the NY Coffee House, where - releases me to hold the door open so I can step inside. 'The coffee was good? Cram-ie like I was for him... at midnight.' 'I'm not keen on coffee, yet I like this.'

His smiles- OH MY GOD! Like for a moment, I'm stunned, thinking it's a blandishment, but fortunately my unconscious kicks in with pursed lips. As I lay naked on his bed in the hotel room that he owns- I stare down at my knotted fingers, think about how I the other girl.

'Anything to eat?' I surreptitiously gaze at him from beneath, and my lashes point upward at him as he stands there looking down at me with low light on and the skyline in the background flicking lights, of tall buildings, I could watch him all, think about how I was not sleep with her tonight.

'Sure...?'

'... It was quite in my mind why...'

I bite my lip and stare down at my hands again not liking where my wayward thoughts are headed. 'No thank you.' I shake my head see him coming at me, and he heads for me.

Do, I want this I thought? Oh, my hips, once or twice he runs his long, graceful fingers through, he's tall, broad-shouldered and slim those pants hang from his ankles...

and the way his now dry but still disorderly hair, sheens in the light is so right, I am just oozing for his love. So, yah wet-Hmm... I'd like to do that to you he said- and my mouth doped for it. The thought comes unbidden into my mind and my face flames.

'Penny for your thoughts, dollars for hardcore freaking?' Yes, sign me up...!

For his love...! I go crimson when the hood is pulled back by his fingers. Flaking and liking- and then sticking- 'OH MY GOD -Freak-ING- YES!!'

'Get down with your bad self!'

I said! In my thoughts... running my fingers through your hair, his going down in me, I was just thinking about and wondering if it would feel soft to touch like this always, I shake my head from the c*mming hard, and being fast, and faster yet, and over and over. my favorite part- and part of the day, I said to him- letting out a big breath.

(Moring)

I curl up, desperately clutching the flat foil balloon and Peter's handkerchief, and surrender myself to my grief. I fall onto my bed, shoes and- all, and howl. The pain is indescribable... physical,

mental... metaphysical... it is everywhere, seeping into the marrow of my bones. Grief. This is grief - and I've brought it on myself. Deep down, a nasty, unbidden thought comes from my inner goddess, her lip curled in a snarl... the physical pain from the bite of a belt is nothing, nothing compared to this devastation. How do they do that?

The room is so nice all fancy, he's carrying a platter, which he sets down on the small, round, birch-veneer table. He hands me a cup and saucer, a small teapot, and a side plate bearing alone teabag labeled Breakfast.'

-He has a coffee that bears a wonderful leaf-pattern engraved in the milk.

I wonder idly in my mind for some time. 'Your thoughts on all this?' He prompts me when I look into his eyes. He's also bought himself a blueberry muffin, with lots of sugar on top.

Putting the tray aside, to kiss me all over even if it was all sticky like the hammer on an Underwood typewriter, he sits opposite me and crosses his long legs. Cover between my legs with soft sweet kissing, He looks so comfortable, up at me, so at ease with his body, I envy him, for I am not like that at all.

Here's me, all gawky and awkward, barely able to get started to end without falling flat on my face- 'I'm selfish, impatient and a little insecure. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to handle. But if you can't handle me at my worst, then you sure as he ll don't deserve me at my best.'

As I place the used teabag back on the side plate, he turns his head gazing enquiringly at me, with the look of hunger and thriving lust. 'This is my favorite tea; how did you know I loved this so?' My voice is quiet, wheezy.

I simply can't believe I'm sitting opposite RICHARD C. MAST - in a coffee shop in NY. He frowns, some not too much you... it shows on his face the lines, he knows I'm hiding something, and that's what I falling for him.

I pop the teabag into the teapot and almost proximately fish it out again with my teaspoon.

'I like my tea black, and weak,' I mutter some- to him running my fingers through his her like we were longtime lovers, then he said- 'I see, she is your little girlfriend then, that you in-love with -Now and forever?'

I said- 'You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because the reality is in conclusion better than your dreams.'

She's a really- really good friend of mine, that's all, and we have shared a lot.

Why did you think he was my girlfriend? Now and forever.' 'She's more like family,' I whisper, holding his body tightly with mine. A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you - love them if you want too?

Right... it's just showing caring...?

Then the nods from him are slightly neat looking, all him, seemingly satisfied with my response, and glances down at his blueberry muffin.

His long fingers deftly peel back the paper- and I watch, fascinated, looking at his dick.

As he is me... all over the eye are going. Spellbound, 'The way you smiled at him, is wonderful my girlfriend Jan said... looking into it, with her nose up my but looking into the walls - TV's, and I heat you.'

His leaden gaze holds mine. I want to look away but I'm caught - him doing things I like with his butt, he's so alarming, yet everything I need.

I frown and stare down at my hands again, laying on the bed, recessing thought to go through my head.

I told you yesterday, that I wanted you on this site how do you feel about that?'

Oh, this is getting silly, she loves you all the way why me too. 'Why do you ask?' I want to know- 'why' - 'for I can...' he said. 'You seem nervous around other girls, yet not her or me - that works.' 'Do you want some?

Of this all the time?' Sure- they say yes to me- he asks, and that amused, secret smile is back, of I have a blond and a dark-haired girl all at the same time... Yet, would he be happy with just two? I ponder the thoughts even if he could hear them...

RICHARD C. MAST- He just grinds. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. Holy crap, that's personal, I thought- to I met yesterday and the right for me. She's not her girlfriend?' yah well see- when I do them both at the same time. I love this game... (thoughts she could not hear)

Katie- 'I find you intimidating.' 'There's nothing mysterious about me.'

I flush scarcely think about all I could have had him just sick it in me- I mean all the riches in the world, but mentally pat myself on the back for my candor, and gaze at my hands again. I hear his sharp intake of breath.

'It gives me some sort of inkling of what you might be thinking,' he breathes. 'You're a secret, 'You should find me intimidating,' he nods as I do you. 'You' re very honest, and blunt- about what he wants and how he wants it.

'Please don't look down, at me and to that to me- it hurts,' I said to him, ''why' why- I don't think you should- Why- it's for my taking; he said... and you can't stop it... what are you going to do about it I run you- and thought you... I glance at him, and he gives me an encouraging but wry smile.''

Unsure feeling yet contented... in his arms.

19

I get up in the morning barking orders to my Echo Dot, and she is more than happy to do them all for me, like play music, and get the thing going for me when I don't want to be going.

I like to see your face.' I'm just nervous around you, she said right?

Nope, you're not unlike any others I had... you're not the youngest either.

Oh... Me? Mysterious?

'I think you're very self-contained,' he murmurs.

Crap is what I said! 'Me, I hadn't realized I was so self-contained? 'Except when I was blushing, of course, which is often with someone like him. Have I offended you?' He sounds surprised. Not at all... I just wish I knew what you were blushing about.

He said you can feel safe with me.' 'Do you always make such personal annotations?' 'No,' I answer truthfully, to why yet I did not want to say it was all in my mind anyway. 'He is so-o good.' I thought...

He pops a small piece of blueberry muffin into my mouth and starts and I start to chew it slowly, and he goes for a kiss, odd yet sweet, not taking his eyes off me, as he pulled back for the kisses, and as if on indication of the fact I was all his, and I blushed.

'I'm used to getting my own way, Merry,' he murmurs. 'In all things.' This isn't going the way I thought it was going to go. I can't believe I'm feeling so antagonistic towards him. It's like he's trying to warn me off. 'But you're very high-handed,' I retaliate quietly.

Why, haven't you asked me to call you by your first name?' I'm surprised by my audacity. He raises his eyebrows at me and, if I'm not mistaken by this or how I feel, he flushes slightly too, by the sight of me and what I was about to do to him- in hot passion.

'I don't doubt it, was the fact that he was thinking about her, or thinking that it was wrong. Why, why has this conversation become so serious, in his mind about her? Has he really fallen in love with just her... or is this his mind overthinking things?

The next day- I'm with Merry- 'Are you into having a child?' He asks, sure, why do you want to do that now with me, I said back, it may be a plan if you want to do this. Is that I am for your breeder...?

He walked out of the room all mad! Whoa... he keeps changing my course of life. Yet, I am not going to say not- I am young, I don't know, um-a I what, or what I want to do. 'Tell me about your parents, they're not much to say other than my mom has done it all.' Why does he want to know this? It's so dull, like a boy or a girl? The girl he said.

Me- I thought that she's beautiful, my subconscious reminds me. I don't like the idea of me and Katie, doing this yet I do- I can't help myself, I take a sip of my tea, and - eats another small piece of his muffin.

'My mom lives in Georgia with her new husband Bob. My stepdad lives in Montesano.'

'Your father?' 'Yes, what about him- he not in my life now or ever- and I want to say that way.' 'My father dropped me when I was a baby.' 'I'm remorseful for bringing that up to you,' he mumbles, and a fleeting bothered look a-crossed his face. 'I don't 'member him at all.' 'And your mother remarried?'

I snuffle, one time holding back the tears, of feeling lost out on. He frowns at me. 'You could say that, but maybe it was for the best.' Maybe so... I said to him looking down.

'Neither are you.' About having a dad- 'yah...' 'You're not giving much away, are you?' ...as if in deep thought, he says' that in a wryly, was rubbing

his chin. Holy shit, 'you've interviewed me once already, why do you ask that... it's okay for you have your nose up my ass hole, and I can recollect some quite probing questions then, why do I.' He smirks at me, saying I would do that next time then.

That is when I said that- 'My mom is wonderful, yet I have to be a grown-up at some point. She's an irredeemable romantic, and have lost of boyfriend's that like to skip out on her... she's currently on her fourth man this week.' I like mom there only 7 in a week. Your more skank-ie then Katie. 'You said that to your mom?'

'Yep!' He raises his eyebrows in surprise. I continue to say about how - 'I miss her, she has them now, and like always someone is more than I.

Those lips.

Those hips.

Those...

Ah!

'Do you get along with all them then?' I don't bother too. She sees her own thing. 'Of course, I thought- I just hope he can keep an eye on her and pick up the pieces when her harebrained schemes don't go as planned.'

I grew up with all of them getting the best of her. I smile fondly, at her- like was not important. I haven't seen my mom for so long. RICHARD C. MAST is watching me intently, taking infrequent sips of his coffee, with the more cream then dark roast. I really shouldn't look at his mouth, long for a kiss, yet- I feel I need, the loving feelings. It's unsettling, to think about my past that was really just the night before or so it seems to me.

20

My life story, you no already by looking into my mind and using your brain- and this technology, you can see it all like a slide show just click to preview in a menu? 'And what's he like, not bother by any of it not even the sick frapping in the night, scaring out Katie's name?' I have bested sometimes 63 times- in one day, I was masturbating to try to put off doing laundry. Ended up masturbating for 7 hours. I was incredibly raw and sore after, but- I guess I was 10 or so, yet I deserved it. 'That's it?' - asks, surprised, you don't think that's wrong for a girl of that age to do that- he shrugged.

What does this man expect, her for you not too? I refrain from rolling my eyes at him, yet I could not help but squeeze him tighter, harder and longer for understanding all that is me. 'Why didn't you want to live with your mom...?' he asks... and before came out of my mouth, he saw it play out in his awareness of thoughts. I cannot help but blush, this really is none of his business, yet he's making it be so he knows everything about me and so it's safe... it's like mind- rapping.

'Siblings...?' 'Yes, all girls 3.'

He could see them all- the youngest no 10 or so... I don't keep up with them. There all own their own too. Yet it is the norm these days... and my little sister is in Paris, French dick suck of a boy that wants to use her up and dump her, yet that is what she wanted.' His eyes go cloud with irritation, on my mother's part- I said to him she fails no? He doesn't want to talk about his family or himself, it all about me... yet I feel that it all the same.

'I hear Paris is lovely for young lovers why not let her- my mom said,' I murmur the quotes run past my mind to fast to not stop them. Why doesn't he want to talk about my family...?

'It's beautiful... that you have turned up as good as you did- he said. Have you been 'good' I can tell?' he asks, his exasperation with what he digging for to be forgotten. It's not nice to ask about a girl past these days... I thought not even lovers... 'Paris?' I squeak never been- there.

'You well...' 'Of course,' I concede, saying let's do it now- yet is that too much to ask? He looks at me with eyes glittering in the low light with the moon full shining in the windows. 'But it's England that I'd really like to visit.' 'Because, I was feeling gloomy, thinking about all that just sucks...' He tilts his head to one side, running his index finger across his lower lip... saying sure. I blinked, and then I blinked, then I blinked ounces more hastily, so I blinked, like 3 times wildly in a chain-like of events.

I was snooping through your things in your mind I see that you have written such a wonderful book, that you don't think is good- yet I do.' All this talk of literary greats reminds me, that I should be studying for him to make him bigger than he is. I glance at my watch... saying commands for it do, in timely fashions. 'I'd better go... now- and get back- (I was at his home; it is huge and has 16 bedrooms or more and 4 baths.) I have to study, I said, thank you for saying, that but you must not mean that. I love that, you love me like this.' 'For your exams?' 'Yes...' 'Okay, then you may go. 'He said... - My mind is reeling with desire. The next day- the first question. 'Do you always wear dresses?' he asks out of the blue. 'Mostly.' I spoke... in his ear softly. He nods shaking his head up and down. The look he gives me and the warm fuzzy feeling going in and though me- I'm completely blown away by it, I know- it's LOVE.

If you were basically unnoticed the sensation, you would never- ever know what might have taken place, and in many ways that were worse than finding out in the first place. For the reason that if you were off the beam, you could go onward in your lifespan without never- ever be holding back over your shoulder and conjecturing what might have been- in the questions of what- if. And I aware that our time together is limited, even if where 'are always together, 'Do you have girlfriends other than her?' He blurts out.

Holy crap, why must he ask this- 'I don't.' - I just said that out loud also. I don't have the time for other girls only her... his lips quirk up in a semi-smile, showing, and he looks down at me with envy. Oh... what does that mean? He blocking me from reading his mind... to toy with me. I have to try to reassemble my thoughts, yet this is his game. I have to get away from him, for I do something to lose him...I walk forward, and I trip, stumbling headlong into the shitter- flush.

'Shit, Merry!' - He cries. 'Yes, yes it was a mouth full of it.'

Kiss me damn it! I inhale deeply, that's the feeling of love... you know.

I implore him, but I can't move. 'Are you okay?' he whispers.

When she moves upwards when I insert into her. Feeling ever hitting thrust she moves with me. I'm in your arms. Kiss me, please. His gazes at my hood, as he moves it about, I'm paralyzed with a strange feeling of fast hart breathing that just takes over me, unfamiliar need to understand I let myself rush free, as he does with me, completely captivated by him, I feel it okay to spray him down.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and gives me a small shake of his head as if in answer to my silent question, that was running in his mind- and that was do you love me? YES! _ YES! _ FREAKING! _ YES! He's staring into my eyes when he opens his eyes again, it's with some new purpose, He tugs the hand that he's holding so hard that, I fall back against him, it all happens so-o fast, yet over and over- one minute I'm falling, of the bed the next I bouncing, on my head, up-down and skidways' too, the next I'm in his arms, and he's holding me tightly against his chest.

I'm staring at RICHARD C. MAST-'s exquisitely sculptured mouth, mesmerized, and he's looking down at me, his eyes darkening. He's breathing harder than usual, and I've stopped breathing altogether. His thumb and I feel it in me, as he brushes my lower lip, and I hear his breath a glitch.

I inhale his dipping love, vital scent taking, like the slut he wants me to be- yet, I am happy to be just that. He smells of freshly laundered sheets and some luxurious body-wash, come over me I did not even see that he has carried me into his shower room, I may have blacked out- from all hardcore love'n.

I want to be kissed, right here I said- and he did. (I pointed you know were,) my kindness is drawn to his beautiful body- looking over the entirety. He has one arm around me, clasping me tight to him, while the fingers of his other hand softly trace my face, and around the place that every young girl was to have touched by a man like him, gently probing exploratory me. I hold his- nervous, burning gaze for a moment or maybe it's persistently... but eventually, and for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to feel his mouth on me. I'm not the man for you he said to Katie in his mind who was see it all,' he whispers.

What- is she doing looking in on us like this? Where is this coming from, you wante d me the other night? She said... in a fast way to him, Surely, I should be the judge of that, she thought, I frown think why can I not have my moment with him, and my head swims with rejection- and that was felt all around- with us all.

I have 'royally screwed' I see him say to her... about all this... He has his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length, watching my responses sensibly. And the only thing I can think is that I wanted to be kissed, made it pretty damned obvious, and he didn't do it. He doesn't want me. He really doesn't want me.

I'm going to stand you up and let you go, we were my butt cheeks pressed agent the glass window where doing like bunny's, as all the people looking in at us, in a hugging freaking stance,' he says quietly letting me down and off him, and he gently pushes me away, as it like he is slapping the shit out of himself.

(My mom thought it was something about a broken typewriter that was his grandpas.) Yah- no! My soul screams as he pulls away, leaving me grieving, for him to feel me up to feel the hole. It like he spiked through my body, as I stand there, feeling him coming out of me.

I said to her- her being Katie... you make me feel safe. 'I've got this,' I breathe, finding my voice. 'Thank you for killing it for us through- why,' I mutter awash with humiliation, as the kids outside the glass point, at me and uncover body- yet, that's how things are these days. How could I have misread the situation between us so utterly? I need to get away from her. I'm glad to hear you say just that, he whispered. He frowns at me in an anomalous way. He hasn't taken his hands off me, or his eyes. 'For keeping me,' I whisper- thank you- your everything I needed.

He doesn't want me- though Katie- why?

Then a million-thought rushed through my mind as to why not... I bet you could find them all no- can you?

'Thanks for doing the photo shoot, and giving me all these nude photos of you to keep- I love them- you could justify it in a magazine with these, I will see that you do.

I shudder to think, my puss hole is going to be wide open on the cover, what could have happened to me, if daddy would see that- or mom. I'm standing in front of him feeling like a fool. Um- wow- really it just looks like a black hole yet boys love to look up it- (ah girl thoughts.) Yet for the money and him what the hell.

Do you want to come and sit down in the room for a moment and see me edit these to enhances what you have going for you, looking them all over to pick with one we ll go on the cover- of Playboy- he bought them out back in 2019.'

He releases me, his hands, off my boobs, and the playing and they go down to his sides, his hand was on me pulling shoulder strap down, and well I shake know what comes next- it's more sex, you got it, I clear my mind some. All my vague, unarticulated hopes have been dashed, looking at myself this way- yet for him anything. Outside the room, I turn briefly to face him, but cannot look him in the eye. With all the kids looking at me see me as the girl on the cover... it was that, fast there, I am on the big screens in the NY all nude. Being naked this day is something we feel fee about doing... with cameras everywhere why not show it all- and we don't care- if a 5-year-old sees it- they'll understand soon enough...

What was I thinking too much? I admonish myself. My subconscious mocks me, I look around to see all of me- all over the place- I am the IT girl of the day. I never wanted that... I wrap my arms around myself- for Katie was happy for me and want to show love, and turn to face the road... to move on with my day, I quickly make my way across, conscious that - is behind me, I murmur, it's only for a month... I was inquiry my own dumb thoughts.

She stops, and the anguish in his voice demands my attention, as she is running to me, with open arm, she there my true love has found me... she is always there for me even if I want to die a slow and painful death, overall this shit, so I peer unwillingly up at me - and she said I love it- it- is, so you- she said. Her gray eyes are bleak, fast-ly like only she can make them do- as she runs his hand through his hair.

Huh? This is why he looks so desolate; this is what he gets out of you? One girl said to me, at school the next day- holding up a hard copy of me- to all to see, yet I know they all have; I did not even blink- at her- as I was chowing on my pin- like a girl in 5th grade.

Once underneath the dark, cold concrete of the room with its bleak fluorescent light humming, I lean against the wall, before class and put my head in my hands, as I have now sat down for the teachings.

This is the big send-off, of the bell ringing out? Just to wish me luck on more tests, that have nothing to do with what I want to do in life.

-And-

Their Brad jerking off under the desk to my photo! Don't giggle its true! It seems like, um- that's okay for a-boys, yet not a girl these days... also, the girl next to me just got busted for it- yet boys can do anything for they' are known for it.

'Thanks: said the man teaching the class for the embraceable photography of a classmate- there Dee.' 'Um- well thank- thank you.' she said. I can't disguise the sarcasm in my voice.

Saying: 'She is a good kid stop it!'

I really think he meant it!

23

Unforbidden and annoying tears pool in my eyes. Thinking of all that has happened these past days, what has not- and what going too... What was not I thinking about it all?

I turn on my heel, on the left foot, for I was nervous, vaguely amazed, that I don't trip - I have a habit of falling on my face, yet that is just me.

I see him in my mind, without giving him a second glance, I disappear down the hall toward the bathroom, run yet I can't get away when he is in my head always. Why am I crying over this? Drawing up my knees I see in a stall, I fold in on myself.

Grief is something that never was something- I could take, like with my dashed hopes, dreams, and soured outlooks. Placing my head on my knees, I let the irrational tears fall unrestrained. How ridiculous am I for doing such? I sink to the side of the shitter and meltdown, angry at myself for this senseless feedback- of feeling all types of love.

Perhaps this ridiculous pain will be smaller the smaller I am if I do this... I have never been on the receiving end of rejection for my own doing, I want this- yet I don't- I don't know what I want- really- I don't. I want to make myself as small as possible. To just fade away from life. I am crying over the loss of something I never had, and that's my pride.

Okay... so I was always one of the last to be picked for basketball or volleyball - but I understood that - running and doing something else at the same time like bouncing or throwing a ball is not my thing. I am a solemn liability in any sporting field.

I'm too pale, feeling and showing, like- passionately thinking in thoughts, though, I've never put myself out there, ever.

Her welcoming smile fades when she sees me. Analytically, I thought to stop! As he said to stop me with crossness in the voice of thought. I'm sure neither of them has been found sobbing alone in dark places. I see Katie there standing to hold me. She drags me home with her arm around her one shoulder. Perhaps, I just need a good cry. A lifetime of insecurity I have had and, too skinny, too shabby, clumsy, my long list of faults goes on.

My subliminal is emblematically screaming at me, arms folded, leaning on one leg, then pitter-pattering her foot in frustration, (Five hours have pasted...) Katie is sitting at the dining table on her laptop when I arrive. She asked: 'Marry what's wrong?'

'You've been crying,' She has an excellent gift for me being there all the time like she is now, just stating there. 'What did that bastard do to you?' She howls, and her face, jeez, she's scary. That's actually the problem, I should just be happy, and I am not sure if I know how to do that... why can't I?

'Nothing Katie is wrong with me other than what is wrong with me.' The thought brings an ironic smile to my face. 'Then I ask- why have you been crying? 'Like- You never cry,' she says, her voice relaxing some as she continued taking. She puts her arms around me and for side hugs.

I have to say something; just to get her to back chest. She stands, her gray eyes brimming with concern, yet I feel that she feels that way about me all the time. 'Nope, RICHARD C. MAST saved me,' I whisper for being just like all of them that don't care. 'Nonetheless, I was quite shaken by it, anyway.' It was fine, nothing to worry about really.

'Okay, he's got more money than you, but then he has more money than most people in America! And you're not happy with that? He has everything-' 'What do you mean...? What are you trying to say?' 'Oh Katie, it's obvious isn't.' I whirled around, to face her as she stands in the kitchen doorway, looking at me that way. 'Merry! For heaven's sake, how many times; must I tell you? You're a total baby,' she intersects me as I blabber. He likes you more than me... 'oh don't be silly.'

That's what this is all about.

'Katie she just shrugs.

I need to study.' I cut her short. She frowns and said that can wait.

And she holding me in her arms like a lover that she is.

'Katie, please, don't get mad at me for this- '*never*.'

Nevaeh

Book: 55

Chimera

(My days repeating)

1

This is what he meant, for me to do with my life be his... anytime he wants it-girl and nothing more and nothing less, and it makes his rejection easier to accept... almost. Yet, the money is why, like - I am here- and the love too... yah that...

I have been working on my studies more than them being with him or her... I would say it was to clear my head. I was looking over the paper that was said I wrote, I pretend to read the article, that Katie made for me. Above and beyond its suddenly, blindingly obvious. He's too gloriously good-looking, not to think about non- stop. I know he loves me, yet he has a hard way of really showing just that.

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Paris- with Katie not him, I need this- the city the lights the sound- of something other than me inquiry all that is me - and him.

She slanted her head and smiled at her companion, with grace seated her at the best table in the restaurant; her smile, at least, was honest, though almost nothing else about her was. The pale gray of her eyes was warmed to by sweet colored contact lenses; her blond hair had been darkened by the low light of the tower in the background, then subtly streaked with lighter shades. in her arms mentally begging her with every fiber of my being to kiss me, is what I really needed, just her true love for me - not asking... never demanding.

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Think back of: 'Ah!' settled in his chair with a contented sigh, returning her smile. she is so beautiful woman in her teen years; she looks the US, with glossy dark hair and liquid gray eyes, and a luxurious mouth.

(Bed)

I close my eyes and begin to drift, and she nudges me, groggy as I- she had gambled that he wouldn't have his people dig any deeper than that, that he would run out of the patience required to wait for the answers before, she made a move on me. Her manufactured background was only a few layers deep; I knew she and I wanted too so why not; she hadn't had time to prepare more. Maybe he's saving himself. Well not for you, my sleepy subconscious has a final swipe at me before unleashing itself on my dreams.

I might even get drunk! I said- we can hear it's not agents the law here, I've never been drunk before, I know that the trill was wearing off, I glance across the sports hall at Katie, and she's still scribbling furiously, five minutes to the end of foolish. This is it, the end of my academic career if he tunes in...

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...And that night, I dream of her and I live long ever after, and I'm running through dark places with eerie strip lighting doing things we shouldn't, and I don't know if I'm running toward something, that I should want or not- the dream, leads me with choices, it's just not clear.

Katie stops writing and puts her pen down. She glances across at me, and I catch her Cheshire cat smile too. We head back to our apartment together in her Mercedes, refusing to discuss our final paper. Katie is more concerned about what she's going to wear to the bar this evening. I am busily fishing around in my purse for my keys.

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Odd, I haven't ordered anything from Amazon recently.

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'No.' Katie's eyes are wide with disbelief. '-?' I nod.

'You have, she said, he loved you more than anything, I start to believe it.' But then her gaze was warm, wet whit tears for she was in love with me more than he at that moment. I knew... she had trained long and hard to acquire it, I knew she was the one that would always care about me. 'Thank you again... I said to him in a mind message.' I recognize the quote was something slandered, where was the love in it?

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2

I love Katie, she's so loyal and supportive. I repack the books and leave them on the dining table. Katie hands me a glass of champagne.

'To the end of exams and our new life in Seattle,' she grins.

'To the end of exams, our new life in Seattle, and excellent results.' We clink glasses and drink.

The bar is loud and hectic, full of soon to be graduates out to get trashed. José joins us. He won't graduate for another year, but he's in the mood to party and gets us into the spirit of our newfound freedom by buying a pitcher of margaritas for us all. As I down my fifth, I know this is not a good idea on top of the champagne.

'So, what now Merry?' She shouts at me over the noise, Katie has the constitution of a she-ass. 'That is doubtful,' she calmly replied. 'I have never liked any wine.' She'd made that plain from the start, who disliked the taste of wine, I thought sitting over here looking at her thinking that. Her taste buds were deplorably working-class. She, in fact, enjoyed a glass of wine, (I thought) now she is drinking only coffee or bottled water; order coffee for her, of that... I giggle.

'I think I'd better have a beer.'

'I'll go get us a pitcher.'

'More drink, Merry!'

Katie bellows...

'Classy- in France?'

Sure!

Her eyes for Katie, are glittery and wet for her. I move out of her way to hold and get up from our table. She is taking photos, yes, of her in her tight jeans, her usual stunning self, and high heels, hair piled high with tendrils hanging down softly around her face. I giggled over it like I have no idea what the time is, maybe I'll wake with her over to the tower and well go up and kiss at the top. Good thinking, Merry. I stagger off through the crowd, she yells for me, and I whisper in her mind that I am over here. Of course, there's a line, but at least it's moving fast to the top. I'm suppressing a drunken smile, hit me like an involuntary, looking out over with her in my arms and the kiss.

Back at the hotel my head, ponding so-o... I go for a swim uncomfortably is a G-string bikini, with all the others, a lot of kids but even so, it was nice, Well, the object of the exercise was to get drunk, on it's the other way 'round. I have succeeded, in working it off. I stare blankly over and over in a fast way- at the poster on the back of the toilet door that extols the virtues of safe sex.

Yah- NO! like that is going to happen.

Holy crap'n piss bucket, did I just call RICHARD C. MAST in my mind? Shit. My phone rings for him it's all in my mind though, and it makes me jump when he says 'what do you want.' I squeak in surprise; by how the man he is being to me for what see to be noted on my own doing.

This is what it's like - probably not an experience to be repeated.

The line has moved, and it's now my turn.

'Howdy,' I bleat timidly into the handset. I hadn't calculated on this.

'I'm coming to get you,' he says and hangs up... before I said I did want him too. The only RICHARD C. MAST - could sound so calm and so threatening at the same time. I pull my jeans up after the poster said not to do what I just did.

My heart is thumping. Coming to get me? Well, I am coming to get her- ha. Hang on, I'm fine. Oh no. I'm going to be sick... no... He's just messing with my head.

I said- 'Holy freaking crap nugget.'

He can't find me here, I would say so with GPS within my body as we all have now, Besides, it will take him 4 hours to get here from NY, and we'll be long gone by then. I wash my hands and check my face in the mirror.

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think I'd better think that you and I have a thing... 'Merry, you are such a softie with him- grow some lady nuts and say- freak you.'

4

'I'll be five- to ten minutes...'

...'Going to flick-the-bean-?'

'Yep!' said Katie in understanding, with a sarcastic thumbs up!

At first, my trusty ally as always is my hairbrush like a girl wanting to look good at all times. By day I used it to brush my hair, and at the night, on the rug, face on the floor, ass in the air, skirt pushed up, I run my fingers just down the long place where the insides of your thighs touch, all the way to your knees, and then I'd let go of your legs, and they'd fall slightly apart, and as my hands started to move up inside them, with my fingers splayed wide, they'd move farther and farther apart, and then I'd lift your knees and hook them over the arms of the armchair, and pass my fingertips all the way down over your breasts and your stomach and just lightly, back and forth, moving closer and closer to where your thighs meet; f*ck yourself, you'll have so-o much fun!

Nails ripping methodically at sheer taupe pantyhose it took her easily twenty minutes to put on, I have to get nude- and I don't care. The little inconvenience that she must have been wet without knowing it as a woman. Slow, rhythmic, gentle, moving down my body, down and I was nothing but my body. Just the sweetness the incredible... I could feel her muscles moving softly, coming was more in my mind still; when I got ever-so closer- I would become a single band of muscle, shaking without a thought of mind behind it, flickering and curving to every moment, current tugging at herself harder, moving just right- toward the flood in which was to come.

And, by night I rode the handle of that grooming item like a limitless pounding hot sex man of my dreams, doubling its functionalities at a stroke. Two very separate lives this brush has just like myself. Multi-tasking is a big thing with me.

Always with the disguise. Two very separate lives- indeed more than okay, beautiful and natural. Longer a concern was thoughts, into my field of vision now coming back, draining it- with an exhaustive gaze- of relief, which sought to extract from it a female creature. I run my hands down my belly it's all done. Forefinger touches the clitoris while the left forefinger goes deep inside, get what was

left in out, fingers surrounded by those soft, collapsing caves of flesh and girlie -goo THICK AMD CLEAR BUT SOMETIMES STRINGY, my finger is too small. I put in two and spreads them... She moves her fingers to that rhythm again for time two, feeling the two inside get creamy and the clitoris dipping in and out gets hard and pink.

Then squirting into the many sprays all over the floor or running's into the butt hole covered with a heart-shaped (S) *7*2.8 CM* beginner butt plug in red gemstone and shiny Stainless steel- of the thickness of my girlie goo. The chair was at an odd angle as she got up to clean... and move on with her day.

5

I make my way through the crowd another time, thinking of how I was going to get off like three more times, in 15. I am beginning to feel nauseous, my head is spinning uncomfortably, see in the little girl in the open stall next to me get there faster then I! and she's like freaking 10! and I'm a little unsteady with my frapping 3 figuring or have girl gotten even more slutty. More unsteady than usual, she got it down. God, I turn on- you? No- nope...? ...Didn't think so prev. 'I think I've just had a bit too much to drink, I feel like more pee then that is coming out of me.' I smile weakly at her and say- GOD FOR YOU HUNNY- good for you.

'And you too,' she murmurs, and her dark eyes are watching me intently, saying why you doing this on your own at your age... is a young girl thing to do.' Do you need a hand?' she asks and steps closer undies at her feet, putting her arm around me some. I've got this.' I try and push her away rather weakly, of age, yet there nothing wrong with it. 'Merry, please,' she whispers, its Kate in my head saying don't do it, yet the young child is holding me in her arms, pulling me close, like a lover. These days' free love is love! No matter the age...

6

'You know I like you, Merry, please.' He has one hand at the small of my back holding me against him, the other at my chin tipping back my head. Holy freak... he's going to kiss me. Her hand has slipped into my hair, and she's holding me.

She whispers against my lips. His breath is soft and smells too sweet- of candy and Kool-Aid. She gently kisses me along my jaw, and lips and movies up to the side of my mouth and then right on my parted lips. I feel frightened, drunk, and out of control, yet I love having fee love like this- it like I was her age all over. The feeling is sickly sweet.

You are my friend, no and for life, I said to her, and I think, I'm going to throw up, so you should runoff. A voice in the dark says quietly. Holy shit!

In my mind- RICHARD C. MAST- he's at this juncture, see what I have done.

I glance anxiously up at the RICHARD C. MAST. He's glowering at Katie, and he's furious, like me for doing a young one as he said. Crap'n, and fly trap-My stomach hauls, and I double over, worse than when blood is shooting out of my hole, I'll hold you.'

She grabs my hair and pulls it out of the firing line- my body no longer able to accept the alcohol, and I vomit outstandingly on to the ground at me and the little French girls' feet her name was- Willow.

She has her arms around my middle body - holding my hair in a makeshift ponytail down my back so it's off my face, her hands the other is I try awkwardly to push her hair out of the way, but I vomit again... and again, even on to her half nude body.

Even when my stomach's empty, and nothing is coming up, oh shit... 'If you're going to throw up again, I note, with deep thankfulness, that it's in relative darkness. I vow silently that I'll never ever drink again, yet that like say I cannot have a day without sex. It's going down in me at some point.

My hands are resting on the block wall... How long is this going to last? I questioned... she takes her T stands, and I wipe my mouth, on she said she did not care... love at first sight... I questioned it. This is just too appalling for words, Katie said... I have to go out now. So-o horrifying gasping heaves of wackiness- my body feels. Then it concludes... Katie is still hovering by the entrance to the girl's room watching us.

Her (the young girls) hand are barely holding me up – vomiting profusely is exhausting. takes his hands off I say to him- I'm hectic with embarrassment repulsed with me. When I come around. My hands in on head I groan, as I place them there. Like that was the solitary worst moment of my lifespan. Twins taking a crap is what I think of at this moment- why I don't know. Oh- yeah- I do- there they are both doing just that- like- looking in at me over in there apparent 5,00 feet up or so all glass too. What should I say to him, for him to forgive this?

RICHARD C. MAST's rejection will not be something good. I try to remember a worse one, that I have done, and I cannot. I glare at him, in my mind. For he is acting like my dad, not my lover. Oh,

the humiliation... my mother was far worse. Marry who are you kidding, he's just seen you hurl all over the ground- nothing more said- Katie, she feels that what I did was nothing. Yet I still look pretty shamefaced to myself, and him- or so I think.

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7

I have a few choice words for my so-called friend, none of which I can repeat in front of RICHARD C. MAST - There's no disguising your lack of ladylike behavior, and I can only come up with- and this is so, so many shades darker in terms of, I risk a glance at him, I see hem looking back at me mirrored back in my stare.

He's staring down at me, his face composed, yet he can help but fall for me fast, giving nothing away about how he was feeling about what I did we fall.

Turning, I glance at Katie whom and, like me, scared by the true filling that he heads to me from that day. I personally mutter, staring at the handkerchief which I am furiously worrying with my fingers. It's so soft, and worm, as slid his fingers in her, he probably would expect her to share his bed tonight, but he was destined to be disappointed once again, in her saying: I don't feel the need after, soloing- so many times today. Her hatred was so strong she had barely been able to force herself to let him kiss her and accept his touch with some temperateness.

There was no way in hell like she'd let him do more than that to her tonight- for the movies running in her had of him acting like an ass and or like her dad. 'I'm sorry, he said for what I have done

to you. Just in my thoughts of...' Apologize... and say back off. Katie mutters, derogatory but we both ignore that, and he slinks off back into the of my mind for rest and sleep.

I'm on my own with doing me- and just Kate.

'We've all been here, perchance not quite as dramatically as you,' he says dryly. 'It's about knowing your limits, Merry. I mean, I'm all for pushing limits, but really this is beyond the pale. My head rings with excess alcohol and frustration. Do you make a habit of this kind of behavior?'

He was scolding me like an errant child, something you would never do to me I said to Kate that had me held by the butt, arching my back as she is holding me in her arms, for passion and cute kissing- then 69, her butt in my face, I move her lips around using sucking at mouth and teeth and tongue.

Katie- Put her legs over your shoulders and grab onto her waist or open up her vagina. (the last one feels better) or have her butt hole in your well- nose.

Don't fart!

And at first kiss outside her vagina and then slowly lick her inside and just pretend she's the most beautiful thing you've ever tasted and if she wants to talk dirty to her but talks to her about that beforehand so she won't be offended.

Hope this helps.

I love it. It's such a turn on.

- You want to kiss/nibble on her neck first. It's a good way to start- turning her on.

Suck on her nipples and play with them with your tongue. This too is another great turn on.

- While you're doing these, massage her PUSS-PUSS over her pants-

just to get her ready for it.

- Work your way down, slowly and sexually.

- Open up her PUS*Y and go straight to the Cl*t.

- Smack the PUS*Y with your tongue really fast, and suck and tug on

it (not too hard though.)

- As you're sucking her PUS*Y, slide your fingers in and out of her- vagina opening.
- Once you have 2 fingers in there, and they're facing up, curve them-

like a hook and without going in and out, stroke her G-spot.

If this is your first time, beware of the smell and taste, as it makes most guys gag at first.

Part of me wants to say, if I want to get drunk every night like this, then it's my decision and nothing to do with him - but I'm not brave enough. Not now that I've thrown up in front of him. Why is he still standing there?

'No,' I said contritely. 'I've never been drunk before and right now I have no desire to ever be again.' Yet, I know that's a lie... 'Come on, I'll take you home,' she murmurs - do this to me.

I just don't understand why he's here. I begin to feel faint. She notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and hoists me into his arms, holding me close to her chest like a child. For sucking and nabbing on her nipples. 'I need you, Katie.' Holy Moses, I say at C-*-M! I'm in her arms again. Where I do the same to her butt in the air, I go for it for like a half-hour.

8

'Dancing,' with Katie in the club she shouts, and I can tell he's mad at me acting slutty. He's is eyeing me- him the RICHARD C. MAST suspiciously.

I struggle with my black jacket and place my small shoulder bag over my head, so it sits at my hip. I'm ready to go, once I've seen Katie; to party my ass off... yet he is saying NO... No in my mind. And I just having fun. It's earsplitting, packed, and the music is underway, thus there is a huge mass on the dance floor. She sets me down, and, taking my hand, leads me back into the bar.

She knew that I went out for some air- of him... embarrassed weak I feel dumb, and still drunk, somewhat exhausted, ashamed, and on some strange equal unquestionably off the scale electrified, by the cocktail of things I took down.

He's clutching my hand I see them all wavy to my sight. Looking at them all swirly. - Such a confusing array of emotions play tricks in my mind like haunted school girl ghosts. I'll need at least a week to process them all, I knew even in this state of mind of senseless.

Katie is not at our table, and Katie has disappeared. Levi looks lost and forlorn on his own. 'Where's Katie? She was off with some young girl doing what I did the night before.' I see that she had to feel as I did... she was always like that with me... we have to be the same in all- or not...! 'My head is beginning to pound in time to the thumping bass line of the music.'

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He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He's served immediately.

'She's on the dance floor,' I touch RICHARD C. MAST's arm and lean up and shout in his ear, brushing his hair with my nose, smelling his clean, fresh smell. All those forbidden, unfamiliar feelings that I have tried to deny surface and run amok through my drained body. I myself flush, and somewhere

deep, deep down my muscles clench deliciously. He is such a - Control-Freak - I said to her- saying: your just having fun. He's watching me intently, mirrored in my- lost young girl like the look of my eyes.

'Drink- Drink- drink' I heard her say, to this young girl in the bar and she was about 14,' he shouts his order at me. He looks irritated and livid, with me like I am his sex- dollie, and nothing more...He's so overbearing, I thought. Give me love- I thought- or is sex now just the love?

What is his delinquent? The moving lights are meandering and turning in time to the music casting strange colored light and obscurities all over the bar and the business.

He's alternately white, green, blue, and bloodshot red.

There a dead girl in an ash box sitting on the ground, on the walkway to my home, she was just burnt a day go, and dumped, here, and this is where she is resting- no one cares about her like death and dumping ash that nothing- or that she was only 5 years of age...I take a hesitant swallow; I think about the life she never had- on like all the others thoughts going through my mind I care.

'All of it,' he shouts.

I sway slightly, and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. Um- Merry... are you ever going to live this down, and say she slipped away? She was my sister girl- and mom and they just dump her off... to be kicked by passing feet- yah but that is what they do these days- girl.

Cemeteries are wasted spaces of land, why do that when you need to construct things in that space. There is nothing left to remember her by- nothing by the memories in my mind of whom she was.

It makes me feel queasy, as I look in the box 3 x 6-inch books and see nothing but blackened asks... blowing some in the wand of the high walkways... in the glowing tingling light of the smoggy covered skyline. I notice this thought of what she was wearing the last time that I saw her, a blur though- wearing; a loose white linen shirt, snug jeans, playing in the park on the roof of the high-rise, pink converse sneakers, and a pink and white jacket, I would know I see a flick in some of the ash hitting my face as dust in the wind.

He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He's served immediately.

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'All of it,' shouts in my head- like the way she passed- by some killing her for the dollar in her underwire where she keeps and for the young rape.

I sway slightly, and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me.

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pink converse sneakers, and a pink and white jacket, I would know I see a flick in some of the ash hitting my face as dust in the wind.

Now in bed sleeping pills at my side, taking the glass from me, she places them for me - so sweet. Her shirt is unbuttoned at the top, and I see a sprinkling skin coming at me - and I somewhat out... then just to see her ass in my face... when I come to it, in my groggy frame of mind, she looks yummy.

9

He takes my hand once more. Holy cow - he's leading me onto the dance floor. Shit. I do not dance. He can sense my reluctance, and under the colored lights, I can see his amused, slightly sardonic smile. He gives my hand a sharp tug, and I'm in his arms again, and he starts to move, taking me with him.

Boy, he can dance, and I can't believe that I'm following him step for step. Maybe it's because I'm drunk that I can keep up. He's holding me tight against him, his body against mine... if he wasn't clutching me so tightly, I'm sure I would swoon at his feet. In the back of my mind, my mother's often recited warning comes to me: Never trust a man who can dance.

I looked into him/ his daily thoughts and what he did, just to see that he was with a 15-year-old-, not me- saying- 'Such a tight pussy- so tight and young-and small and the sucking oh so tight it's letting are out the sides. - he said as I see that he was with a new girl named- Nataliee.

I just was modified...Really likes she likes someone, I gasp. Katie is making her moves go in her mind for me of her hook up, she had with her new friend. She's dancing her ass off, and she only ever does that if she likes someone. It means there'll be three of us for breakfast tomorrow morning. Katie! Outside and inside my head pounding away, loud. I cannot hear what he says, I tuned it out... it was my wishes. I can't tell the color under the pulsating to all the heat of the flashing lights going off, is the day starting a new.

I Katie- curly blonde hair, and light, wickedly gleaming eyes.

Me- She pulls me into her arms, where she is more than happy to be... Katie!

But I never- ever got to talk to her, the girl she had last night- I had to meet her. A new day is all the same- until the night-RICHARD C. MAST propels us off the dance floor in double-quick time. Is she

okay? She said- she's not you- though. I need to do the safe sex lecture, for the school, the teacher I know is a lezbo, but yeah...she loves me.

I can see where things are heading for her and him, In the back of my mind, I hope she reads one of the posters on the back of the toilet doors. My thoughts crash through my brain, fighting the drunk, fuzzy feeling. It's so warm in here, so loud, so colorful - too bright. My head begins to swim with so many thoughts of him and her, and her and then him- and what she did- he did- and what I did with all, oh no... The last thing I hear beforehand, I pass out in RICHARD C. MAST'S arms is his harsh description. It's very quiet, I am comfortable and warm, the light is muted, in this bed. 'Freak!' I open my eyes, Hmm... I'm tranquil for a moment.

'This looks bigger, then I remember,' I said to him- by this time I have a lust for him so- that I need him- oh so much. Oh so...! It's oddly familiar to me yet all-new the love only he can give- odd like only she can too as a girl- and he a boy. I have no idea where I am, halfway in the night- I come to it and see I am in his bed nude, and he going down on me, lovingly hard! I am enjoying the strange unfamiliar surroundings, of him just work- work- working it! Where? ...? ... Where am I? My confused brain struggles over its recent painterly memories.

Holy crap- I said- like that is carp the is holy- said Katie in my mind... ha funny. I'm a hotel he owns in Atlantic City. ...In a suite- I see him coming to me, ready for loving making, As I did the last time, we were together, he loves it when I spray all over his face, as he loves doing to me as well! I have stood in a room similar to this with Katie. Oh shit. I'm in RICHARD C. MAST'S suite. This room is worth more the then-White House- and some of those places that why don't care about- How did I get here?

I questioned... memories of the previous night come slowly back to haunt me, like my sister young life coming to end fast over someone, that did not love her just for hot young sex. She never had a boy toy. Nothing dead at 5! Holy shit. No socks...No jeans... I see this photo of her playing- where she was just being a kid-I see the first time she cum-med, on her little bed, it was the same night- she found out she was going to have to not see me any longer- so Katie showed her to be happy- I glance at the bedside night table- and see her face on the screen that movies the photos. I don't remember coming here. I'm wearing my t-shirt, bra, and panties. I FEEL Broken- The drinking, oh no the drinking, the handset call, oh no the phone call, the vomiting, oh no the vomiting. Katie and then RICHARD C. MAST. Oh no. I cringe inwardly.

The orange juice tastes heavenly, It's I sit up and take the tablets. On it is a glass of orange juice and two tablets. Advil. He is such a Control freak that he is, he thinks of the whole thing. Essentially, I don't feel that bad, probably much healthier than I personally merit too. Dehydration quenching and invigorating. Nothing beats freshly squeezed orange juice for refreshing a parched mouth.

How are you feeling?' 'Improved better than I earned,' I gabble.

'How did I get here?' My voice is small, contrite.

Don't worry about it he said- fast-ly.

Followed by: 'Good morning Merry. I peek up at him, I for one, like - feel similar to a two-year-old, if I close my eyes when I'm not really here. There's a knock on the door, for it to open. RICHARD C. MAST'S sweat; the notion does odd things to me. My heart leaps into my mouth, and I can't seem to find my voice, to say come in. He opens the door anyway and strolls in, being all sweet. Holy hell, he's been working out, in tight shorts that show off his backside.

He comes and sits down on the edge of the bed, way, off, like his hair, blowing in the wind as the doors were open to the cityscape. Sweat, hard I take a deep breath and close my eyes, I can't bear to look at the cheat any longer. He's staring at me, blue bright eyes, and as usual, I have no idea what he's thinking, even if it is run hard in my mind of all the facts. He's close - enough for me to touch, for me to smell, of him to be overpowering- and I want him- oh no- YES, do I want him!

The bath towel, in his hand, was thrown over my eyes and tied around my head. He hides his thoughts and feelings so well. Grasps is let out of me for he has me around his lower waist, going in for it like a dog in heat. Like I am his sex toy that is a rag doll pounding, I wriggle hard and slam down hard. He even takes me from behind over the chair without me giving the okay- I was all his- and then in bed, then in the shower! And I look down and see that I am shaved pinned agents the glass! Oh my... 'Did you put me to bed clean I don't remember all this?' you got me this night top?

His face is blank.

'Yes!'

Um- it was an intoxicating cocktail- 'After you passed out, that he gave me last night my little girl down under is still red- and I can walk- so much better than a margarita, I was out in la-la- land- and I

do remember the hardcore FREAKING! and now I can speak from experience, this man goes in hard and deep.

'Did I throw up again?' My voice is quieter. Don't worry about getting knocked up I have taken care of that too... with this. An implant was placed by a doter last night when you were passed out- don't thank me!

Don't say anything- don't even think about it- it for your own good.

Um- is all I got out before his index finger hashed me - up to my lips.

'Did you undress me?' I whispered...

'Funny you cute- that's the least of your worries!' He said.

Um...?

I thought...!

Maybe I think too much...?

Maybe he's right...?

Or is this wrong...?

Nevaeh

Book: 56

'If I Say I Wanna Stay'

1

(The Black Family- and its Tree)

Carrie rolled her eyes at Karrah and turned to me, the one that is next to me some nights. 'Pretty please,' she said as she rocked a- by baby- rock a-by, to sleep in her lap.

'I never get to hear you play anymore.' 'come on,' Karrah said. 'You're among family.' 'Why not, Earn?' Ana said. 'Are you such a classical-music snob?' 'It's not that,' I said, suddenly feeling panicked. 'It's just that the two styles don't fit together.' 'Says who?' Mom asked, her eyebrows raised up at what she said. 'Yeah, who knew you were such musical emanations?' Karrah joked. Beth took my hand and caressed the inside of my wrist with her fingers. 'Do it for me. I really want to play with you. Just once.' 'Absolutely,' Ana said sweetly.

I was about to shake my head and ass, to endorse that my French horn had no place among the jamming guitars, no place in the metal-rock world, yet I was going to do this, I had the look yet not the style on the inside, coming out.

Though- like I think it was because she was hopped up on marshmallows, not because she had any desire to hear me play-and Ana and Carrie and Karrah all peering at me like this really mattered, and Beth, looking as awed and proud as he always did when he listened to me play. Nevertheless, then I looked out at Mom, who was smirking at me as if issuing a challenge, and Dad, who was tapping on his pipe, pretending to be nonchalant so as not to apply any pressure, and Naddalin, who was jumping up and down. And I was a little scared of falling on my face, of not blending, of making bad music. Nevertheless, the whole world was looking at me so intently, wanting me to join in so much, and I realized that sounding bad wasn't the worst thing in the world that could happen.

So, I played my guitar 'till my fingers bleed, I was going to make it. And even though you wouldn't think it, the French horn didn't sound half bad with all those guitars, something new I thought. In fact, it sounded pretty- amazingly good- if I do say so my self- and I do that a lot.

7:14 A.M.

It's sunrise, and inside the clinic, there's a different kind of beginning, going down, a rustling of covers, a clearing of the eye's girls rubbing them and those too- if you get that- if.

In some ways, the clinic that I am in never goes to sleep, with a mind like ours that are never-ever really at rest.

Nevertheless, even though it's still dark outside, the lights stay on and the nurses stay awake, you can tell that things are waking up. Frowning as they scribble notes in my chart as though I've let them down, the doctors are back, yanking on my eyelids, shining their lights at me.

She reads my chart and listens to updates from the nurses on my uncomfortable night, which seems to make her even more tired, having to deal with me and, the fact I am wasting her time. I do not care anymore, I am tired of this all, and it will be over soon, and I can go back there to my school and old life that got me here in the first place.

~*~

The social worker is back on duty again, too, looking at me in my room legs spread, cum-m-ing hard, yet here that is all you have to do, from 8 to 7 P.M, yet that the up nightgown shot- it not my felt if they want to look- right. Then she noticed the bloodstain on my blanket, from the period that I had 2 night back that I never changed the sheets, they will say that is low self-esteem- um sure it is- sure, more like I don't give two craps, and tasked with hustling me off to get me a new one, is not worth it they say, if I don't care either, so they think. Like girls my age anymore don't wear underwire, the y say I have to but I don't have to do anything anyone says I have too... like I open up your mouth and spit in it, how about that?! (YOU LOVE's me CUZ I'S CUTE!)

It looks like the night's sleep had little impact on her. After Ana left, there haven't been any more visitors. I guess Carrie has run out of people to lobby me with. Her eyes are still heavy, her hair a kinky mess. The nurse with blue-black skin is also back. She greeted me by telling me how glad she was to see me this morning, how she'd been thinking about me last night, hoping I'd be here.

I wonder if this deciding business is something that all the nurses are aware of. Nurse Raymirez sure knew about it. And I think the nurse with me now knows it, too, judging by how congratulatory she's acting that I made it through the night. I'm waiting for Beth to come back. Though it seems like he has been gone for an eternity, it's probably only been an hour. And he asked me to wait, so I will. That's the least I can do for her. And Carrie seems like she knows it, too, with the way she's been marching everyone through here. I like these nurses so much. I hope they will not take my decision personally.

My eyes are closed so I hear him before I see him. I hear the raspy, quick rushes of his lungs. He is panting like he just ran a marathon. I am so tired now that I can barely blink my eyes, rub them and then that too just like the girl in the bed next to me- her name- yeah, I know it, yeah, I forgot. It's all just a matter of time, and part of me wonders why I'm delaying the inevitable. But I know why.

Then I smell the sweat on her, a clean musky scent that I'd bottle and wear as perfume if I could. I open my eyes. Beth has closed his. But the lids are puffy and pink, so I know what he's been doing. Is that why he went away? To cry without my seeing?

She doesn't so much sit in the chair as fall into it, like clothes heaped onto the floor at the end of a long day. He covers his face with his hands and takes deep breaths to steady herself. After a minute, he drops his hands into his lap. 'Just listen to the little lady, saying twelve-year-old,' she says with a voice that sounds like shrapnel.

2

(Going back)

I open my eyes wide now. I sit up as much as I can. And I listen. 'Stay- a good girl like I am a puppy.' With that one word, Beth's voice catches, but he swallows the emotion and pushes forward. 'There's no word for what happened to you. There like um- the no good side of it, but there is something to live for. And I'm not talking about me. But I can't wrap my mind around the notion of you not getting old, having kids, going to Juilliard, getting to play that French horn in front of a huge audience, so that they can get the chills the way I do every time I see you pick up your bow, every time I see you smile at me.

I mean, I know that your life is f*cked up no matter what now, forever. And I'm not dumb enough to think that I can undo that, that anyone can.

I hear him take gulp-fuels of air to steady herself. And then she continues: 'All I can think about is how f*cked up it would be for your life to end here, now.

And I think: I love you.

It's just, I don't know- I don't NO.

Maybe I'm talking shit. I know I'm in shock. I know I haven't digested what happened to your parents, to Naddalin...' When he says Naddalin, his voice cracks and an avalanche of tears tumble down her face.

'If you stay, I'll do whatever you want, even that- even that- all and hole-ly. I'll quit the band, go with you to New York, that what I said I would do. That is-is... and her voice goes soft and ends.

But if you need me to go away, I'll do that, too.

I was talking to Maylie and she said maybe coming back to your old life would just be too painful, that maybe it'd be easier for you to erase us. And that would suck, but I'd do it. I can lose you like that if I don't lose you today. I'll let you go. If you stay.'

Then it is Beth who let's go. Her sobs burst like fists thrashing against tender flesh.

I close my eyes. I cover my ears. I cannot watch this. I cannot hear this.

But then, it is no longer Beth that I hear. It's that sound, the low moan that in an instant takes flight and turns into something sweet.

It's the French horn.

Beth has placed headphones over my lifeless ears and is laying an iPod down on my chest.

She's apologizing, saying that he knows this isn't my favorite but it was the best he could do. She turns up the volume so-o I can hear the music floating across the morning air. Then she takes my hand.

The low piano plays as if in a warning. In comes, the French horn, like a heart bleeding.

And it is like something inside of me implodes.

I am sitting around the breakfast table with my family, drinking hot coffee, laughing at Naddalin's chocolate-chip mustache.

The snow is blowing outside.

I am visiting a cemetery; Three graves under a tree on a hill overlooking the crystal-clear river.

I am lying with Beth, my head on her chest, on a sandy bank next to the river.

I am hearing people say the word orphan and be still that they are talking about me.

I am walking through New York City with Ana, the skyscrapers so big, casting shadows on our faces, as he swings holding hands, making the heart thing too.

I am holding Naddalin on my lap, tickling him as she giggles so hard, she keels over, over the fact she is shy and I was kissing her all cute-ie woo-z-ie, holding hand sweetly.

My mom is going through my little girl is dead stage... over me coming out.

I am sitting with my French horn; the one Mom and Dad gave me after my first presentation. My fingers caress the wood and the pegs, which time and touch have worn smooth.

My bow is poised over the strings now. I am looking at my hand, waiting to start playing.

I am looking at my hand, being held by Beth's hand...

Like- it's like the piano and French horn are being poured into my body, the same way that the IV and Ritalin transfusions are, and what they really do to me, they say it mellows me out, yet inside I am going nuts. Until I cannot be like this one second longer.

And the memories of my life as it was, and the flashes of it as it might be, are coming so-o fast and furious. I feel- like- I can no longer keep up with them, nevertheless, they keep coming and everything, everyone and all things are colliding until I cannot take it anymore.

There is a blinding flash, a pain that rips through, that feel like is rushing through my nervous system, and I start sweating hard, dreaming weird, or cannot sleep, the boom- boom in my chest is wrong like me everything is and I do is wrong, me for one shooting instant, a silent scream from my broken body. For the first time, I can sense how fully agonizing staying will be. I have a hard time breathing too...

But then again, I feel Beth's hand. Not since it, but feel it. I'm not sitting huddled in the chair anymore. I'm lying on my back in the hospital bed, once again with my body, shaking hard, I just tremble all the time, and it's all too much.

Nevertheless, I'm also feeling all that I have in my life, which includes what I have lost, as well as the great indefinite of what life might still bring me. Grasping mine, the feelings pile up, intimidating to crack my chest wide open. The only way to continue them is to concentrate on Beth's hand.

Beth is crying and somewhere inside of me, I am crying, too, because I'm feeling things at last. I'm feeling not just the physical pain, but all that I have lost, and it is profound and catastrophic and will leave a crater in me that nothing will ever fill.

I picture my hand stroking Naddalin's hair, grasping a bow poised above my French horn, interlaced with Beth's.

I aim every remaining ounce of energy into my right hand. In addition, unexpectedly, I just need to hold his hand more than I have never- ever needed anything in this world. Not just be held by it, but hold it back. I'm weak, and this is so hard. It is the hardest thing I will ever have to do.

And then I squeeze, feeling the drug come out of me- like girl-cum out of me.

I summon all the love I have ever felt, I summon all the strength that Nana and Gramps Black and Ana and the nurses and Carrie have given me.

I summon all the breath that Mom, Dad, and Naddalin would fill me with if they could. I summon all my own strength, focus it like a laser beam into the fingers and palm of my right hand.

If it registered, I slump back, spent, unsure of whether I just did what I did, of what it means; If it matters.

It's the first time today I can truly hear her. Nevertheless, then I feel Beth's grip tighten so that the grasp of his hand feels like it is holding my entire body. And then I hear the sharp intake of his breath followed by the sound of her voice.

'Earn?' she asks. But now I wonder, like- like- like, and now, I hope. 'Like it could lift me up right out of this bed.' CUZ- Because, um- when I go, I want to 'member Ana. And I want to remember her like this: telling a funny story, fighting with her crazy mom, being cheered on by punkers, rising to the occasion, finding little pockets of strength in herself that she had no idea she owned.

Beth is a different story.

Remembering Beth would be like behind her all over again, and I'm not sure if I can bear that on top of everything else.

Ana's up to the part of Action Distraction when Brooke Bogel and a dozen assorted punks descended upon the clinic.

She tells me that before they got to the ICU, she was so scared of getting into trouble, but how when she burst inside the ward, she had felt ecstatic.

When the guard had grabbed her, she had not been scared at all. 'I kept thinking, what's the worst that could happen? I go to jail; I do not let have their way with me.

She stops for a minute, Mom has a conniption, I get grounded for a year.' 'But after what's happened today, that would be nothing. Even going to jail would be easily compared to losing you.'

I am after all high risk... whatever that means...!

I have a feeling that once you live through something like this, you developed a little bit invincible.

I know that Ana's telling me this to try to keep me alive. She does not remember that in a weird way, her remark frees me, just like Gramps's authorization did.

3

I know it will be awful for Ana when I die, but I also think about what she said, about not being scared, about the jail being easy compared to losing me. And that's how I know that Ana will be okay. Losing me will hurt; it will be the kind of pain that won't feel real at first, and when it does, it will take her breath away. And the rest of her senior year will probably suck, what with her getting all that cloying your-best-friend's-dead sympathy that will drive her so crazy, and also because really, we are each other's only close friend at school.

But she'll deal. She'll move on. She'll leave Oregon. She'll go to Middle School. She'll make new friends. She'll fall in love. She'll become a photographer, the kind who never has to go on a helicopter. And I bet she'll be a stronger person because of what she's lost today.

I know that makes me a bit of a hypocrite. If that's the case, shouldn't I stay? Soldier through it? Maybe if I'd had some practice, maybe if I'd had more devastation in my life, I would be more prepared to go on. It's not that my life has been perfect. I've had disappointments and I've been lonely and frustrated and angry and all the crappy stuff everyone feels. But in terms of heartbreak, I've been spared. I've never toughened up enough to handle what I'd have to handle if I were to stay.

~*~

Ana is now telling me about being rescued from certain incarceration by Carrie. As she describes how Carrie took charge of the whole hospital, there is such admiration in her voice. I picture Ana and Carrie becoming friends, even though there are twenty years between them. It makes me happy to imagine them drinking tea or going to the movies together, still connected to each other by the invisible chain of a family that no longer exists.

Now Ana is listing all the people who are at the hospital or who have been, during the course of the day, ticking them off with her fingers: 'Your grandparents and aunts, uncles, and cousins. Beth and Brooke Bogel and the various rabble-rousers who came with her. Beth's bandmates Dianna and Jodi and Maylie and her girlfriend, Sarah, all of whom have been downstairs in the waiting room since they got heaved out of the ICU. Professor Kristiee, who drove down and stayed half the night before driving back so she could sleep a few hours and shower and make some morning appointments she had.

Karrah and the baby, who are on their way over right now because the baby woke up at five in the morning and Karrah called us and said that he could not stay at home any longer. And me and Mom,' Ana concludes. 'Shoot. I lost count of how many people that was. But it was a lot. And more have called and asked to come, but your aunt Diane told them to wait.

She says that we're making enough nuisance of ourselves. And I think by 'us,' she means me and Beth.' Ana stops and smiles for a split second. Then she makes this funny noise, a cross between a cough and a throat clearing. I've heard her make this sound before; it's what she does when she's summoning her courage, getting ready to jump off the rocks and into the bracing river water.

'I do have a point to all this,' she continues. 'There are like twenty people in that waiting room right now. Some of them are related to you. Some of them are not. But we're all your family.'

She stops now; leans over me so that the wisps of her hair tickle my face. She kisses me on the forehead. 'You still have a family,' she whispers.

Last summer, we hosted an accidental Labor Day party at our house. It had been a busy season. Camp for me. Then we'd gone to Gram's family's Massachusetts retreat. I felt like I had barely seen Beth and Ana all summer.

My parents were lamenting that they hadn't seen Carrie and Karrah and the baby in months. 'Karrah says she's starting to walk,' Dad noted that morning. We were all sitting in the living room in

front of the fan, trying not to melt. Oregon was having a record heatwave. It was ten in the morning and pushing ninety-five degrees.

Mom looked up at the calendar. 'She's ten months old already. Where has, the time gone?' Then she looked at Naddalin and me. 'How is it humanly possible that I have a daughter who's starting her senior year in high school? How in the hell can my baby boy be starting second grade?'

'I'm not a baby,' Naddalin shot back, clearly insulted.

'Sorry, kid, unless we have another one, you'll always be my baby.'

'Another one?' Dad asked with a simulated alarm.

'Relax. I'm kidding for the most part,' Mom said. 'Let's see how I feel when Earn leaves for Middle School.'

'I'm going to be eight in December.

'Then I'm a Lady and you'll have to call me

'that not a baby'.'

'Is that so?' I laughed, spraying orange juice through my nose.

'That's what Casey Corson told me,' Naddalin said, his mouth set into a strongminded line.

My parents and I groaned, at me. Casey Corson was Naddalin's best friend, and we all liked him a lot and thought his parents seemed like such nice people, so we didn't get how they could give their child such a ridiculous name.

'Well, if Casey Corson says so,' I said, giggling, and soon Mom and Dad were laughing, too.

'What's so-o amusing?' Naddalin demanded.

'Nothing, Little girl,' Dad said. 'It's just the heat.'

'Can we still do sprinklers today?' Naddalin asked. Dad had promised her he could run through the sprinklers that evening even though the administrator had asked everyone in the state to conserve water this summer. That request had peeved Dad, who claimed that we Oregonians suffer eight months of rain a year and should be exempt from ever worrying about water preservation.

Naddalin seemed placated. 'If the baby can walk, (meaning me) then she can walk through the hoses. Can she come into the sprinklers with me?' 'Damn straight you can,' Dad said. 'Flood the place if you want.'

'We could have a barbecue,' Dad said. 'It is Labor Day and grilling in this heat would certainly qualify as labor.' Mom looked at Dad. 'That's not a bad idea,' she said. 'I think Carrie's off today.'

'Plus, we've got a freezer full of steaks from when your father decided to order that side of beef,' Mom said. 'Why not?'

'Can Beth come?' I asked.

'We haven't seen much of your young man lately.' 'Of course,' Mom said.

Gram's had only recently planted the seed of Juilliard in my head, but it hadn't taken root. I hadn't decided to apply yet. Things with Beth had not gotten bizarre up till now. 'I know,' I said. 'Things are starting to happen for the band,' I said. At the time, I was excited about it; genuinely and completely.

'If the rock star can handle a humble eat outside with quadrangles like us,' Dad joked.

'If he can handle a square like me, he can handle tetragons like you,' I joked back. 'I think I'll invite Ana, too.'

'The more the cheerier,' Mom said. 'We'll make it a puncture like in the olden days.'

'When dinosaurs roamed the earth?' Naddalin asked.

'Accurately,' Dad said. 'When dinosaurs traveled the earth and your mom and, I was younger.'

Karrah, Carrie, the baby, Beth, who brought Jodi, Ana, who brought a cousin visiting from New Jersey, plus a whole bunch of friends of my parents whom they had not seen in ages. About twenty people showed up.

Maybe it was because it was so hot, or that the party was so last minute, or maybe because everything tastes better on the grill, but it was one of those meals that you know you'll remember.

Dad hauled our ancient barbecue out of the basement and spent the afternoon scrubbing it. We grilled up steaks and, tofu pups and veggie burgers, this being Oregon; there was watermelon. . .

which we kept cool in a bucket of ice, and a salad made with vegetables from the organic farm that some of Mom and Dad's friends had underway.

Mom and I made three pies with wild blackberries that Naddalin and I had picked. We drank Pepsi out of these old-fashioned bottles that Dad had found at some ancient country store, and I swear they tasted better than the regular kind.

When Dad turned on the sprinkler for Naddalin and the baby, everyone else decided to run through it.

We left it on so long that the brown grass turned into a big slippery wet patch and I wondered if the governor herself might come and tell us off.

Naddalin had taken his shirt off, besides had streaked herself with muck 'n mud. Dad said he looked like one of the boys from Lord of the Flies. Beth tackled me and we laughed and squirmed around on the lawn.

It was so hot, I didn't bother changing into dry clothes, just kept dousing myself whenever I got too sweaty. By the end of the day, my sundress was stiff.

When it cooled off, Dad lit a campfire on the lawn, and we roasted marshmallows. Then the musical instruments give the impression and ideas.

When it started to get dark, most people left to catch the fireworks display at the university or to see a band called Ariana Grande play in town. A handful of people, including Beth, Ana, Carrie, and Karrah, stayed, to see her half-naked on stage, riding a dick bicycle, like when Niki said the part of having a tricycle does that mean she has a 3rd leg? Asked Ana? A dick bicycle is when you remove the set and have your girl-ie hold and girl-ie lips- down on the part sticking up... dah! What? They all looked at her dumbly!

That sounds a little kinda a-bit painful- and well bloody.

'God, you're dumb!'

'OH-!'

Dad's snare drum from the house, Karrah's guitar from his car, Beth's spare guitar from my room. Everyone was jamming together, singing songs: Dad's songs, Beth's songs, old Clash songs, old Wipers songs. Naddalin was dancing around, the blond of his hair reflecting the golden flames.

I remember watching it all and getting that tickling in my chest and thinking to myself: This is what happiness feels like.

4

At one point, Dad and Beth stopped playing and I caught them whispering about something. Then they went inside, to get more beer, they claimed. But when they returned, they were carrying my French horn.

'Oh, no, I'm not giving a concert,' I said.

'We don't want you to,' Dad said. 'We want you to play with us.'

'No way,' I said. Beth had occasionally tried to get me to 'jam' with her and I always refused. Lately, he'd started joking about us playing air-guitar-air-French horn duets, which was about as far as I was willing to go.

'Sure, Naddalin,' I said feigning interest. The idea of me going to New York was seeing more and more real, and though this commonly filled me with a nervous, excited, if conflicted, the image of me and Naddalin hanging out together on New Year's Eve left me feeling unbearably lonely.

Mom looked at me, eyebrows arched. 'It's New Year's Day, so I won't give you shit for coming in at this hour. But if you're hungover, you're grounded.'

'I'm not. I had one beer. I'm just tired.'

Mom nodded, 'Just tired, is it? You sure?'

Mom grabbed ahold of my wrist and turned me toward her. When she saw my stricken expression, she tilted her head to the side as if to say, You okay? I shrugged and bit my lip to keep from losing it.

She handed me a cup of coffee and led me to the table. She put down a plate of hash and a thick slice of sourdough bread, and even though I couldn't imagine being hungry, my mouth watered and my stomach rumbled and I was suddenly ravenous.

I ate silently, Mom watching me all the while. After everyone was done, Mom sent the rest of them into the living room to watch the Rose Parade on TV.

She stood there silently, letting me blubber all over her sweater. When I stopped, she held out the sponge. 'Everyone out,' she ordered. 'Earn and I will do the washing up.'

As soon as everyone was gone, Mom turned to me and I just fell against her, crying, and releasing all of the tension and uncertainty of the last few weeks. 'You wash, I'll dry; we will talk. I always find it calming.

The warm water, the soap.'

'So-o, perfect that I never even thought about the future. About it taking us in different directions.'

Mom picked up the dish towel and we went to work. And I told her about Beth and me. 'It was like we had this perfect year and a half,' I said.

Mom's smile was both sad and knowing. 'I thought about it.'

I turned to her. She was staring straight out the window, watching a couple of sparrows bathe in a puddle. 'I remember last year when Beth came over for Christmas Eve. I told your father that you'd fallen in love too soon.'

'I know, I know. What does a dumb kid know about love?'

You guys seemed, still seem, in love, truly, deeply.' She sighed. 'But seventeen is an inconvenient time to be in love.'

Mom stopped drying a skillet. 'That's not what I meant. The opposite, really. You and Beth never struck me as a 'high-school' relationship.'

Mom said making quote marks with her hands. 'It was nothing like the drunken roll in the back of some girl's Cadillac XTS in dark gray, that passed for a relationship when I for one was in high

school. I love that car I feel like I high-class b*tch in it, even if that is not so-o, I am kind of a slut and I know and they do too... yet whatever, I like to get it from both, and whenever- however, and whomever it's all the same- it feels good, is this is the way... they say a girl that is 12 like me is oversexed, and I say not- when I look at well you!

(Hoo-ha hacking- and hocking it up- slut! Yeah you- the reader- slut!)

That made me smile and made the pit in my stomach soften a little. 'Tell me about it,' I said. 'Though if we weren't both musicians, we could go to Middle School together and be fine.' 'I guess you're right.'

That what she said too...

'That's a cop-out, Earn,' Mom countered. 'All relationships are tough. Just like with music, sometimes you have harmony and other times you have cacophony. I don't have to tell you that.'

'And come on, music brought you two together. That's what your father and I always thought. You were both in love with music and then you fell in love with each other. It was a little like that for your dad and me. I didn't play but I listened. Luckily, I was a little older when we met.'

Mom shook her head. 'That's bullshit. Music can't do that. Life might take you down different roads. But each of you gets to decide which one to take.' She turned to face me. 'Beth's not trying to stop you going to Juilliard, is he?' I want to be something thing someday, even if they say I- is not that smart enuff too or don't have the money. I'm going to go there someday when I grow up! (lisp cutely with her voice.)

(Blink- Blink- Blink...)

I'd never told Mom about what Beth had said that night after the half-naked Ariana concert- with her showing off her goodies, (I have pic, so her puss- we all do- and she likes me will always be remembered for her blue dildo, yet I love her for it she a real girl after all... nice.) image what that would sell for on eBay- Ariana dildo- going once, going twice, sold to the prv. in the back for a mill. What-a he planning on doing with it um-like suction cupping it to his forehead, like a unicorn? Even if it was not one of those suck-ie ones come on really... God I have problems, don't I?

(I think too much, don't I?)

So, when I'd asked her why me? How the music was totally a part of it. 'Yes, but now I feel like it's music that's going to pull us apart.'

'No more than I'm trying to get him to move to New York. And it's all ridiculous anyway. I might not even go.'

'No, you might not. But you're going somewhere. I think we all get that. And the same is true for Beth.'

'At least he can go somewhere while still living here.'

Mom shrugged. 'Maybe. For now, anyhow.'

I put my face in my hands and shook my head. 'What am I going to do?' I lamented. 'I feel like I'm caught in a tug-of-war.'

Mom shot me a sympathetic scowl. 'I don't know. But I do know that if you want to stay and be with him, I'd support that, though maybe I'm only saying that because I don't think you'd be able to turn down Juilliard.

Nonetheless, I would understand if you chose to love, Beth love, over music love.

Either way, you win. And either way, you lose. What can I tell you? Love's a bitch.'

Beth and I talked about it once more after that. We were at House of Rock, sitting on his futon. He was riffing about on his acoustic guitar.

'I might not get in,' I told her. 'I might wind up at school here, with you. In a way, I hope I don't get accepted so I don't have to choose.'

'If you get in, the choice is- already made, isn't it?' Beth asked.

It was. I would go. It did not mean I'd stop loving Beth or that we'd break up, but Mom and Beth were both right. I would not turn down Juilliard.

Beth was silent for a minute, plinking away at his guitar so-o loud, that I almost missed it when he said, 'I don't want to be the guy who doesn't want you to go. If the tables were turned, you'd let me go.'

'I kind of already have. In a way, you are already gone. To your own Juilliard,' I said.

'I know,' Beth said quietly. 'But I'm still here. And I'm still crazy in love with you.'

'Me, too,' I said. And then we stopped talking for a while as Beth strummed an unfamiliar melody. I asked him what he was playing.

'I'm calling it 'The Girlfriend's-Goingto-Juilliard-Leaving-My-Metal-Heart-in-Slivers Blues,'' he said, singing the title in an overstated twangy voice. Then he smiled that silly shy smile that I felt like came from the truest part of her.

'I'm kidding.'

'Good,' I said.

'Sort of,' she added.

6

5:44 A.M.

I am on round 5 and hot and sweaty, and nude as all butt crack! Beth is gone, so-o it's on 6 I go for 2 ½ hours of sleep and then there day they want me to do.

She suddenly rushed out, calling to Nurse Ramirez that she'd forgotten something important and would be back as soon as he could. She was already out the door when she told her that she was about to get off work.

In fact, she just left, but not before making sure to inform the nurse who'd relieved Old Grumpy that 'the young man with the skinny pants and messy hair' is allowed to see me when he returns.

Carrie's running back and forth, a gleam in her eye. She is up to something, I can't say, but whether it's trotting out loved ones to lobby on behalf of my continuing my earthly existence or whether she's simply bringing them in to say good-bye.

After Grams and Gramps and Beth,

Aunt Kate stopped by. Then it was Aunt Diane and Uncle Dan. Then my cousins shuffled in. Not that it matters, nothing at all really matters. Carrie rules the school now. She has been marching the troops through here all morning.

Poor Ana...

~*~

She looks like she slept in a Dumpster, now it's Ana's turn. Her hair has staged a full-scale rebellion and more of it has escaped her mangled braid then still is all tucked inside.

At first, Ana squints at me, as if I'm a bright, glaring light. But then it's like she adjusts to the light and decides that even though I may look like a zombie. She is wearing one of what she calls her 'turd sweaters,' the greenish, grayish, brownish lumpy masses her mom is always buying her. Even though there are tubes sticking out of every which orifice, even though there's Ritalin injection thing-ie, on my thin blanket from where it's seeped through the bandages, I'm still Earn and she's still Ana. And what do Earn and Ana like to do more than anything? Talk...

Ana settles into the chair next to my bed. 'How are you doing?' she asks.

I'm not sure. I'm exhausted, but at the same time, Beth's visit has left me... I don't know what. Agitated. Anxious. Awake, unquestionably awake. Though I could not feel it when he touched me, his presence stirred me up anyhow.

I was just starting to feel grateful that he was here when she booked out of here like the devil was chasing him. Beth has spent the last ten hours trying to get in to see me, and now that he finally succeeded, he left ten minutes after arriving.

I would've run away, Maybe I scared her. Maybe he doesn't want to deal. Maybe I'm not the only chickens hit around here. After all, I spent the last daydreaming of her coming to me, and when he finally staggered into the ICU, if I had the strength.

She tells me about Beth, his determination to get in to see me, how after he got kicked out of the ICU, he enlisted the help of her music friends, who were not at all the snobby semesters she'd imagined them to be. Then she told me that a bona fide rock star had come to the hospital on my behalf.

'Well, you would not believe the crazy night it's been,' Ana says. Then she starts telling me about it. About her mom's hysterics, about how she lost it in front of my relatives, who were very gracious about the whole thing.

The fight they had outside the Benadom Theater in front of a bunch of punks and hipsters. When Ana shouted at her crying mother to 'pull it together and start acting like the adult around here' and then stalked off into the club leaving a shocked Ms. Schein at the curb, a group of girls' in spiked leather and shining hair cheered and high-fived her.

Of course, I know everything that Ana is telling me, but there is no way that she'd know that. Besides, I like having her verification the day to me. I like how Ana is talking to me normally, like Gram's did earlier, just jabbering on, revolving a good yarn, as if we were together on my porch, drinking coffee (or an iced caramel Frappuccino in Ana's case) and catching up.

AT the X-Ray, even though I've never heard Dead Moon play live, even though the X-Ray Café shut down before I was born.

But sometimes the memories feel so real, so visceral, so personal, that I blur out this... them with my own. Not just a sense that I've heard the story before, but that I've lived it. I can picture myself sitting on the riverbank as Dad pulls a hot-pink Coho out of the water, even though Dad was all of twelve at the time. Or I can hear the feedback when Dead Moon played 'D.O.A.'

I don't know if once you die you remember things that happened to you when you were alive. It makes a certain logical sense that you wouldn't. That being dead will feel like before you were born, which is to say, a whole lot of nothingness. Except that for me, at least, my pre-birth years aren't entirely blank. Every now and again, Mom or Dad will be telling a story about something, about Dad catching his first salmon with Gramps, or Mom remembering the amazing Dead Moon concert she saw with Dad on their first date, and I'll have an overpowering déjà vu.

I never ever told anyone about these 'recollections.' Mom probably would've said that I was there as one of the eggs in her ovaries. Dad would've joked that he and Mom had tortured me with their stories one too many times and had inadvertently brainwashed me.

And Gram's would've told me that maybe I was there as an angel before I chose to become Mom and Dad's kid.

Beth is incoherently babbling something now. In a low voice. Over and over he is saying: please. Please. Please. Please, Please. Finally, he stops and looks at my face. 'Please, Earn,' she implores. 'Don't make me write a song.'

I wasn't totally immune to the charms of the opposite sex, the girl is all I wanted over being hurt, yet I would never ever say that to anyone but you - I trust you, but I wasn't one of those romantic, swoony girls who had pink fluffy daydreams about falling in love.

I'd never expected to fall in love. I was never the kind of girl who had crushes on rock stars or fantasies about marrying- Brad Pitt. I sort of vaguely knew that one day I'd probably have boyfriends (in Middle School, if Ana's prediction was anything to go by) and get married, yet girls are always nice and E_Z.

Even as I was falling in love, full-throttle, intense, can't-erase-that-goofy-smile love, I didn't really register what was happening. When I was with Beth, at least after those first few awkward weeks, I felt so good that I didn't bother thinking about what was going on with me, with us.

I got upset because he never wrote any songs about me. She claimed he wasn't good with sappy love songs: 'If you want a song, you'll have to cheat on me or roughly,' he said, knowing full well that wasn't going to happen.

It just felt normal and right, like slipping into a hot bubble bath, think about girls. Which isn't to say we didn't fight. We argued over lots of stuff: him not being nice enough to Ana, me being antisocial at shows, how fast he drove, how I stole the covers.

'So, did you knock them dead?' Beth asked me when I got back. 'They going to let you in with a full scholarship?'

This past fall, though, Beth and I started to have a different kind of fight. It wasn't even a fight, really. We didn't shout. We barely even argued, but a snake of tension quietly glided into our lives. And it seemed like it all started with my Juilliard tryout, for young girls like me, to see if I could one day be all I want with a scholarship.

I had a feeling that they were going to let me in, at least-even before I told Professor Kristiee, about the one judge's 'long time since we've had an Oregon country girl' comment, even before she hyperventilated because she was so convinced this was a tacit promise of admission.

Something had ensued to my playing in that audition; I had broken through some invisible barrier and could finally play the pieces like I heard them being played in my head, and the consequence had been something transcendent: the mental and bodily, the technical and emotional sides of my abilities all finally blending.

Then, on the drive home, as Gramps and I were approaching the California-Oregon border, I just had this sudden flash-a vision of me lugging a French horn through New York City.

And it was like I knew, and that certainty planted itself in my belly like a warm secret. I'm not the kind of person who's prone to premonitions or overconfidence, so I so-called, that there was more to my flash than magical thinking.

'I did okay,' I told Beth, and as I said it, I realized that I'd just straight-out lied to him for the first time and that this was different from all the lying by omission I'd been doing before.

So, it wasn't a real lie. And besides, I thought, there was no point in making a big fuss about it. I hadn't told Ana, either, so it wasn't like Beth was getting special deception treatment. I had to be at the studio at seven in the morning on a Sunday and the night before I'd pretended to be feeling out of sorts and told Beth he probably shouldn't stay over. I'd justified that fib, too. I was feeling out of sorts because I was so nervous.

I justified this to myself since it was technically true. And then Professor Kristiee arranged for me to have a recording session at the university so-o I could submit a high-quality CD to Juilliard.

I had neglected to tell Beth that I was applying to Juilliard in the first place, which was actually harder than it sounded. Before I sent in my application, I had to practice every spare moment with Professor Kristiee to finetune the Shostakovich concerto and the two Bach suites. When Beth asked me why I was so busy, I gave purposely vague excuses about learning tough new pieces.

Nonetheless, after I told him I'd only done okay at the audition, I had the feeling that I was wading into quicksand, and that if I took one more step, there'd be no extricating myself and I'd sink until I suffocated.

Beth's first reaction was to smile with pride. 'I wish I could've seen that.' But then his eyes clouded over and her lips fell into a frown. 'Why'd you downplay it?' he asked. 'Why didn't you call me after the audition to brag?'

So, I took a deep breath and heaved myself back onto solid ground. 'That's not true really,' I told Beth. 'I did really well. I played better than I ever have in my life. It was like I was possessed.'

'I don't know,' I said.

'Well, this is great news,' Beth said, trying to mask his hurt. 'We should be celebrating.'

'Okay, let's celebrate,' I said, with forced gaiety. 'We can go to Dauphin Saturday. Go to the Japanese Gardens and go out for dinner with the girls.'

Beth grimaced. 'I can't. We are playing in Olympia and Seattle this weekend. Minitour; 'member? I'd love for you to come, but I don't know if that's really a celebration for you. Nonetheless, I'll be back Sunday late afternoon. I can meet you in Dauphin Sunday night if you want.'

'I can't... I'm playing in a string quartet at some professor's house. What about next weekend?'

Beth looked pained. 'We're in the studio the next couple weekends, but we can go out during the week somewhere. Around here. To the Mexican place?'

'Sure, The Mexican place,' I said.

Two minutes before, I hadn't even wanted to celebrate, but now I was feeling dejected and insulted at being relegated to a midweek dinner at the same place we always went to.

When Beth graduated from high school last spring and moved out of his parents' place and into the House of Rock, I hadn't expected much to change.

I'd miss our little powwows in the music wing, but I would also be relieved to have our relationship out from under the microscope of high school. She'd still live nearby; we'd still see each other all the time.

The band was offered a record deal with a medium-sized label based in Seattle and now were busy in the studio recording. They were also playing more shows, to larger and larger crowds,

every weekend. Things were so hectic that Beth had dropped half his course load and was going to middle school part-time, and if things kept up at this rate, he was thinking of dropping out altogether. 'There are no second chances,' she told me all this and that.

But things had changed when Beth moved into the House of Rock and started Middle School, though not for the reasons I'd thought they would. At the beginning of the fall, just as Beth was getting used to middle School life, things suddenly started heating up with Shooting Star.

I was genuinely excited for her. I knew that Shooting Star was something special, more than just a middle School-town band. I had not minded Beth's increasing absences, especially since he made it so clear how much he minded them. But somehow, the prospect of Juilliard made things different somehow it made my mind.

Which didn't make any sense at all because if anything, it should have leveled the field? Now I had something exciting happening, too. 'We can go to Dauphin in a few weeks,' Beth promised. 'When all the holiday lights are up.'

'Okay,' I said morosely.

Beth sighed. 'Things are getting complicated, aren't they?'

'Yeah. Our schedules are too busy,' I said.

'That's not what I meant,' Beth said, turning my face toward her so-o I was observing at her in the eye.

'I know that's not what you preordained,' I answered, but then a lump lodged itself in my throat, and I myself couldn't talk anymore.

We tried to defuse the tension, to talk about it without really talking about it, to jokily it. 'You know I read in US News and World Report of my middle school they'd have that's- a good music program,' Beth told me. 'It's in Salem, which is apparently getting hipper by the moment.'

'According to who? The governor?' I replied.

'Maylie found some good stuff at a vintage-clothing store there, and was nude in the middle of the place changing, we girls today don't care, about change in front of you. And you know, once the vintage places come in, the hipsters aren't far behind.' Look if you want or don't and shut up... there just

boobs and a slit... I don't close my legs other... when I sit for, I could give a shit about being a lady now... I am a girl... so what... look at it!

8

'You forget, I'm not a hipster,' I reminded her. 'But speaking of, maybe Shooting Star should move to New York. I mean, it's the heart of the punk scene. The Ramones. Blondie.' My tone was frothy and flirtatious, an Oscar-worthy performance.

'That was thirty years ago,' Beth said. 'And even if I wanted to move to New York, there's no way the rest of the band would.'

She stared mournfully at his shoes and me familiar the joking part of the conversation had ended. My stomach lurched, an appetizer before the full part of heartache I had a feeling was going to be served at some point soon.

Beth and I had never been the kind of couple to talk about the future, about where our relationship was going, we avoided talking about anything that was happening more than a few weeks away, and this made our conversations as stilted and awkward as they'd been in those early weeks together before we'd found our groove, but with things suddenly so unclear.

One afternoon in the fall, I spotted a beautiful 1933's silk gown in the vintage store where Dad bought his suits and I almost pointed it out to Beth and asked if she thought, I should wear that to the dance at the mid. year, but prom was in June and maybe Beth would be on tour in June or maybe I'd be too busy getting ready for Juilliard, so I didn't say anything.

But then he said that those guitars cost thousands of dollars, and besides his birthday wasn't until September, and the way he said September, it was like a judge issuing a prison sentence. Not long after that, Beth was complaining about her decrepit guitar, saying he wanted to get a vintage Gibson ES 335 in blue, and I offered to get it for her for his birthday.

Beth got drunk, and when midnight came, he kissed me hard. 'Promise me, do you... um, hum- I'm Promise me you'll spend New Year's with me next year,' he whispered into my ear. A few weeks ago, we went to a New Year's Eve party together.

I was about to explain that even if I did go to Juilliard, I'd be home for Christmas and New Year's, but then I realized that wasn't the point. So-o's I promised her since I'm wanted it to be true as

much as he did. And I kissed him back so-o hard like myself was trying to merge our bodies through our lips.

On New Year's Day, I came home to find the rest of my family gathered in the kitchen with Karrah, Carrie, and the baby. Dad was making breakfast: smoked-salmon hash, his specialty.

Karrah shook her head when he saw me. 'Look at the kids today. It seems like just days have gone by, that stumbling home at eight o'clock felt early. Now I'd kill just to be able to sleep until eight.'

'We didn't even make it till midnight,'

Carrie admitted, bouncing the baby on her lap.

'Good thing, for the reason that this little lady, decided to start her new year, feeling like a new girl.'

'I stayed up till midnight!' Naddalin yelled. 'I saw the ball drop on TV at twelve. It's in New York, you know? If you move there, will you take me to see it drop in real life?'

The words he writes to her music, they're poetry. You ever listen carefully to the things she says?' 'That's the one. I always thought your dad would grow up to be a writer. And in a way, I always felt like he did.

I shook my head, suddenly ashamed. I hadn't even realized that Dad wrote lyrics.

I just assumed that the people in front of the microphones wrote the words, she didn't sing so-o. I's had seen her sit at the kitchen table with a guitar and a notepad a hundred times, for I got here at this place, where I do the same yet with others that are the same as me so's they say.

I'd just never put it together. There was one song in particular called 'Waiting for Vengeance' that I listened to and read over and over until I had it memorized. It was on the second album, and it was the only slow song they ever did; it sounded almost country, probably from Karrah's brief infatuation with hillbilly punk. I listened to it so much that I started singing it to myself without even realizing it.

That night when we got home, I went up to my room with Dad's CDs and a Discman. I checked the liner notes to see which songs Dad had written and then I painstakingly copied down all the

lyrics. It was only after I saw them scrawled in my science lab book that I saw what Gramps meant. Dad's lyrics were not just rhymes. They were something else.

What am I coming to?

Well, what is this?

And beyond that, what am I going to do?

Now there's blankness... Where once your eyes held the light, but that was so long ago. That was last night... Well, what was that?

What's that sound that I hear?

It's just my lifetime...

It's whistling past my ear...

And when I look back...

Everything seems smaller than life...

The way it's been for so long...

Since last night...

Now I'm leaving...

Any moment I'll be gone...

I think you'll notice... me...

I think you'll wonder what went wrong...

I'm not choosing... U...

But I'm running out of fight...

And this was decided so-o long ago...

...It was last night...

'Your song,' I said sheepishly, suddenly feeling like I'd maybe illegally trespassed into Dad's private territory. Was it wrong to go around singing other people's music without their permission?

'What are you singing, Earn?' Dad asked me, catching me serenading Naddalin as I pushed him around the kitchen in his stroller in a vain attempt to get him to nap. But Dad looked delighted. 'My Earn's singing 'Waiting for Vengeance' to my Naddalin.

What do you think about that?' He leaned over to muss my hair and to tickle Naddalin on his chubby cheek. 'Well, don't let me stop you. Keep going. I'll take over this part,' he said, taking the stroller.

I felt embarrassed to sing in front of her now, so I just mumbled along, but then Dad joined in and we sang softly together until Naddalin fell asleep. Then he put a finger to his lips and gestured for me to follow him into the living room.

'Want to play some chess?' He asked. He was always trying to teach me to play, but I thought it was too much work for a supposed game.

'How about checkers?' I asked.

'Sure.'

We played in silence. When it was Dad's move, I'd steal looks at her in his button-down shirt, trying to remember the fast-fading picture of the girl with peroxided hair and a short dress.

'Dad?'

'Hmm.'

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Always.'

'Are you sad that you aren't in a band anymore?'

'Nope,' she said.

'You do?'

Dad's gray eyes met mine, and that night we had sex, I and daddy have a special relationship. 'What brought this all on, is that I dropped my bath tow, to see it... and he was into me, and it happened, hole up... bend me in half style, him on top ramming, say I am red-nick it's okay I am some, I love my daddy- that's all.'

'I was talking to Gramps about us.'

'Not even a little bit more of it do when say, sh-h-h- and he put his finger to my lips?'

'Oh, I see.'

Dad nodded. 'Gramps thinks that he somehow exerted pressure on me to change my life.'

'Well, did he?'

'I suppose in an indirect way he did. By being who he is, by showing me what a father is.'

'But you were a good dad when you played in a band. The best dad ever. I wouldn't want you to give that up for me,' I said, feeling suddenly choked up. 'And I don't think

Naddalin would, either.'

Dad smiled and patted my hand. 'Earn Oh-My-Uh. I'm not giving anything up. It's not an either-or proposition. Teaching or music. Jeans or suits. Music will always be a part of my life.'

'But you quit the band! Gave up dressing punk!'

Dad sighed... 'It wasn't hard to do.

I'd played that part of my life out. It was time. I didn't even think twice about it, in spite of what Gramps or Karrah might think. Sometimes you make choices in life and sometimes choices make you. Does that make any sense?'

I thought about the French horn. How sometimes I did not understand why I'd been drawn to it, how some days it seemed as if the instrument had chosen me. I nodded, smiled, and returned my attention to the game.

'King me,' I said, and then we looked and we did it on the sofa like the night be for yet hard even.

Board games suck when you can suck and get off for more fun... even if... it's the daddy.

Dad sighed...

I sighed...

We have been masturbating together since I was 9, that is when I gave my first blowie, too him.

Standing- This time I am in cling on his body up in the air, he holds me like he did when I was a small girl one leg side to side, and I have my arms around his neck, and my hip tight to his, and we slam...

10

4:59 A.M.

I can't stop thinking about 'Waiting for Retribution.' It's been years since I've listened to or thought of that song, but after Gramps left my bedside, I've been singing it to myself over and over. Dad wrote the song ages ago, but now it feels like she wrote it yesterday.

Like he wrote it from wherever she is. Like there's a secret message in it for me. How else to explain those lyrics? I'm not choosing.

But I'm running out of the fight.

I try to think about it from their perspectives. I know they'd want to be with me, for us all to be together again eventually. What does it mean? Is it supposed to be instructional? Some clue about what my parents would choose for me if they could?

But Dad, he understood what it meant to run out of the fight. Ah- Like Gramps, she'd understand why I don't think I can stay.

But I have no idea if that even happens after you die, and if it does, it will happen whether I go this morning or in seventy years.

What would they want for me now?

As soon as I pose the question, I can see Mom's pissed-off expression. She would be livid with me for even contemplating anything but staying.

~*~

I'm singing and concentrating and singing and thinking so hard that I barely register Carrie's return to the ICU, barely notice that she's talking to the grumpy nurse, I was being me you know doing what I do all the time all oversexed and all with myself, and wonder if there is a color other than black in this world, barely recognize the sturdy determination in her tone.

I'm singing the song as if buried within its lyrics are instructions, a musical road map to where I'm supposed to go and how to get there.

Had I been paying attention, I had been paying attention, I might have comprehended that Carrie was lobbying for Beth to be able to visit me., I might have somehow got away before Carrie was-as always-positive.

I don't want to see him now. I mean, of course, I do. I ache too. But I know that if I see him, I'm going to lose the last wisp of peacefulness that Gramps gave me when he told me that it was okay to go. I'm trying to summon the courage to do what I have to do.

And Beth will complicate things. I try to stand up to get away, but something has happened to me since I went back into surgery. I no longer have the strength to move.

It takes all my effort to sit upright in my chair. I can't run away; all I can do is hide. I curl my knees into my chest and close my eyes.

I hear Nurse Ramirez talking to Carrie. 'I'll take him over,' she says. And for once, the grumpy nurse doesn't order her back to her own patients.

'That was a pretty boneheaded move you pulled earlier,' I hear her tell Beth.

'I know,' Beth answers. His voice is a throaty whisper, the way it gets after a particularly screamy concert. 'I was desperate.'

'No, you were romantic,' she tells her.

They said she was doing better before. I was idiotic; that she'd come off the ventilator. That she was getting stronger. But after I came here that she got worse. They said her heart stopped on the operating table.

Beth trails off.

I am thinking about daddy in knotty was...!

MMMMMMMM! Long-drawn out a

sigh! Of thinking GOD...

11

This kind of thing happens all the time, and it had nothing to do with you. We caught it and fixed it and that's what matters.' 'And they got it started. She had a perforated bowel that was slowly leaking bile into her abdomen and it threw her organs out of whack.

She's so-o wrong.... SO-o!

'But she was doing better,' Beth whispers. He sounds so young and vulnerable like Naddalin used to sound when he got the stomach flu. 'And then I came in and she almost died.' Her voice chokes into a sob. The sound of it wakes me up like a bucket of ice water dropped down my shirt. Does Beth think that he did this to me? No...! That's beyond ridiculous.

You got to deal with the situation at hand. And she's still here.' She whips the privacy curtain around my bed. 'If you go,' she tells Beth. 'And I almost stayed in Mexico to marry a fat a b*tch,' the nurse snaps. 'But I didn't- yeah -ua-h ah... And I have a different life now. It almost doesn't matter.

She's emergent stubble, enough of it that if we were to make out, it would make my chin raw. He is wearing his typical band uniform of a T-shirt, skinny pants no underwire under, and Converse, with Gramps's plaid scarf, draped over his shoulders. I force my head up and my eyes open. Beth. God, even in this tale, she is beautiful.

Her eyes are dripping with fatigue.

When he first sees me, he blanches, like I'm some hideous Creature from the Black Lagoon. I do look pretty bad, hooked back up to the ventilator and a dozen other tubes, the dressing from my

latest surgery seeping Ritalin. But after a moment, Beth exhales loudly and then she's just Beth again. She searches around like he's dropped something and then finds what he's looking for: my hand.

'Jesus, Earn, your hands are freezing.'

She squats down, takes my right hand into his, and careful to not bump into my tubes and wires, draws his mouth to them, blowing warm air into the shelter she's created.

'You and your crazy hands.' Beth is always amazed at how even in the middle of summer, even after the sweatiest of encounters, my hands stay cold.

I tell her it's bad circulation but he doesn't buy it because my feet are usually warm. He says I have bionic hands, that therefore, like- I'm such a good French horn player after all.

I watch her warm my hands as she has done a thousand times before. I think of the first time he did it, at school, sitting on the lawn, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I also remember the first time she did it in front of my parents. Naddalin giggled...

Mom and Dad did not say anything, just exchanged a quick look, something private that passed between them and then Mom smiled apologetically at us.

We were all sitting on the porch on Christmas Eve, drinking cider. It was freezing outside... Beth grabbed my hands and blew on them.

If I reached out my ghostly hand to his, would he feel me? Would he warm the hands he cannot see?

I wonder if I tried if I could feel him touching me. If I were to lie down on top of myself in the bed, would I become one with my body again? Would I feel him then?

Even though I know, if we touch, a new tug-of-war-one that will be even more painful than the quiet one Beth and I have been waging these past few months-will begin.

Beth drops my hand and steps forward to look at me. She is standing so close that I can almost smell her and I'm overpowered by the need to touch her. It's basic, primal, and all-overwhelming the way a baby needs its mother's breast and her nipple to suck, these days you don't cover those doing it.

Gram's twitters on for another five minutes, filling me in on the mundane news:

Heather has decided she wants to become a librarian.

My cousin Matthew Black bought a motorcycle and my aunt Patricia is not pleased about that. I've heard her keep up a running stream of explanation like this for hours while she's cooking dinner or potting orchids. And listening to her now, she calls them and mixes them in with mulch to make her own formally.

Gramps thinks she should patent the recipe and sell it because she uses it on her orchids, which are always winning awards.

I can almost picture us in her glasshouse, where even in winter, the air is always warm and humid and smells musty and earthy like soil with the slightest tinge of manure. Gram's hand-collects cow-sh*t, 'cow patties,' Sleep would be so welcome. A warm blanket of black to erase everything else. Sleep without dreams. I've heard people talk about the sleep of the dead. Is that what death would feel like? The nicest, warmest, heaviest never-ending nap? If that's what it's like, I wouldn't mind. If that's what dying is like, I wouldn't mind that at all.

I try to meditate on the sound of Grams' voice, to be carried away by her happy babble. Sometimes I can almost fall asleep while sitting on the barstool at her kitchen counter and listening to her, and I wonder if I could do that here today.

I jerk myself up, a panic destroying whatever calm listening to Gram's had offered. I am still not entirely clear on the particulars here, but I do know that once I fully commit to going, I'll go. Nevertheless, I'm not ready.

Not yet.

I don't know why, but I'm not. And I'm a little scared that if I accidentally think, I wouldn't mind an endless nap, it will happen and be irretrievable, like the way my grandparents used to warn me that if I made a funny face as the clock struck noon, it would remain like that forever.

I wonder if every dying person gets to decide whether they stay or go. It seems unlikely. After all, this hospital is full of people having poisonous chemicals pumped into their veins or submitting to horrible operations all so they can stay, but some of them will die anyway.

She was probably scared... why I don't know... I suddenly picture her alone and frightened, and for the first time in my life, I hope that Gibson is right about the angels. I pray they were all too busy comforting Naddalin to worry about me.

I remember feeding her to my breast... She is little...

Did Mom and Dad decide? It hardly seems like there would have been time for them to make such a momentous decision, and I can't imagine them choosing to leave me behind. And what about Naddalin? Did he want to go with Mom and Dad? Did he know that I was still here? Even if he did, I wouldn't blame him for choosing to go without me.

Why can't someone else decide this for me? Why can't I get a death substitution? Or do what baseball teams do when it's late in the game and they need a solid batter to bring the girls on the base home? Can't I have a pinch hitter to take me home?

12

(Back)

Gram's is gone... Carrie is gone... The ICU is tranquil. I close my eyes. When I open them again, Gramps is there? She's crying. She is not making any noise, but tears are cascading down his cheeks, wetting his entire face.

I've never seen anyone cry like this. Quiet but gushing, a faucet behind his eyes mysteriously turned on. The tears fall onto my blanket, onto my freshly combed hair.

(Plink- Plink- Plink)

Gramps doesn't wipe his face or blow her nose. She just lets the tears fall where they may. And when the well of grief is momentarily dry, he steps forward and kisses me on the forehead.

She looks like she's about to leave, but then she doubles back to my bedside, bends so his face is level with my ear and whispers into it.

'But that's what I want and I could see why it might not be what you want. So, I just wanted to tell you that I understand if you go. It's okay if you have to leave us. It's okay if you want to stop fighting.'

'It's okay,' she tells me. 'If you want to go. Everyone wants you to stay. I want you to stay more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.' Her voice cracks with emotion. She stops, clears her throat, takes a breath, and endures.

For the first time, since, I reanalyzed that Naddalin was gone, too, I feel something unclench. I feel myself breathe. I know that Gramps can't be that late-inning pinch hitter I'd hoped for. She won't unplug my breathing tube or overdose me with Murphy or anything like that.

But this is the first time today that anyone has acknowledged what I have lost. I know that the social worker warned Gram's and Gramps not to upset me, but Gramps's recognition and the permission he just offered me-it feels like a gift.

So, quiet that you can almost hear other people's dreams. So, quiet that you can almost hear me tell Gramps, 'Thank you.' Gramps doesn't leave me, even if I am laying here like this. She slumps back into the chair.

It's quiet now.

When Mom had Naddalin, Dad was still playing drums in the same band she'd been in since Middle School. They'd released a couple of CDs; they'd gone on a tour every summer.

The band was by no means big, but they had a following in the Northwest and in various middle School towns between here and Chicago. And, weirdly, they had a bunch of fans in China.

The band was always getting letters from Japanese teenagers begging them to come to play and offering up their homes as crash pads. Dad was always saying that if they went, he'd take me and Mom. Mom and I even learned a few words of Japanese just in case. Konnichiwa. Rigato. It never panned out, though.

After Mom announced she was pregnant with Naddalin, the first sign that changes were afoot was when Dad Titus Black went and got himself a learner's permit. At age thirty-three.

She tried letting Mom teach me to drive, even if could not see over the wheel, but she was too impatient, she said. Dad was too sensitive to criticism, Mom said. So, Gramps Titus Sr. took Dad Jr.

out along the empty country lanes in his pickup truck, just like she'd done with the rest of Dad's siblings - except they'd all learned to drive when they were 10 or so.

Black jeans and band tees in exchange for suits. It was subtler. Then the jeans went in the bin, except for one pair of impeccable, dark blue Levi's, which Dad ironed and wore on weekends.

Next up was the wardrobe change, but it wasn't something any of us noticed right away. It wasn't like one day he stripped off the tight which she drug-up at the Good-Will until they started getting trendy and he had to buy them from the fancy vintage-clothing shop, First, the band tees went out in the window in favor of button-up 1950's rayon numbers.

Most days he wore neat, flat-front cuffed trousers. But when a few weeks after Naddalin was born, Mom gave away her lacey covering-her prized beat-up motorcycle jacket with the fuzzy leopard belt-we finally realized that a major transformation was underway.

'Dude, you cannot be serious,' Karrah said when Dad handed her the jacket, saying keep it. 'You've been wearing this thing since you were a kid. It even smells like you.' Dad shrugged, ending the conversation. Then he went to pick up Naddalin, who was squalling from his bassinet.

Mom told him not to do it for her sake. She said it was okay to keep playing if she didn't take off on monthlong tours, leaving her alone with two kids.

Dad said not to worry, he wasn't quitting for her. A few months later, Dad publicized she was leaving the band. Do Sinatra covers. Come on, man,' Karrah rational.

Dad's other bandmates took his decision in stride, but Karrah was devastated.

He tried to talk him out of it.

'We can even start playing shows in suits. We'll look like the Rat Pack.

Promised they'd only play in town. Wouldn't have to tour. NEVER- Ever be gone overnight.

Karrah was furious with Dad for unilaterally quitting the band, especially since Mom had said he could still play shows. When Dad refused to reconsider, she and Karrah had a huge blowout.

She was going to be a teacher now. No more dicking around. 'One day you'll understand,' Dad told Karrah.

Dad told Karrah that he was sorry, but he'd made his decision. By this time, he'd already filled out his applications for grad school.

'The f*ck I will,' Karrah said back fastly.

14

'Give her time,' she said, and Daddy would pretend to not be hurt. Then she and Mom would drink coffee in the kitchen and exchange knowing smiles, that seemed to say: girls are such girls.

Karrah did not speak to Dad for a few months after that. Carrie would drop by from time to time, to play peace-maker. She would explain to Dad that Karrah was just sorting some stuff out.

Karrah ultimately and totally resurfaced, but she didn't apologize to Dad, not right away, anyhow. Years later, shortly after his daughter was born, Karrah called our house one night in tears. 'I get it now,' she told Daddy.

You would have thought he would love the new Dad. Strangely enough, in some ways, Gramps seemed as upset with Dad's metamorphosis as Karrah had been.

On the surface, he and Gram's seem so old-school, it's like a time warp. They don't use computers or watch cable TV, and they never curse and have this thing about them that makes you want to be polite.

Mom, who swore like a prison guard, never- ever cursed around Grams and Gramps.

It was like no one wanted to disappoint them.

Gram's got a kick out of Dad's stylistic transformation. 'Had I known that all that stuff was going to come back in style, I would've saved Gramps's old suits,' Gram's said one Sunday afternoon when we'd stopped by for lunch and Dad pulled off a trench coat to reveal a pair of wool gabardine trousers and a 1950's cardigan.

'Whose daddy's a rebel? Is your daddy a rebel?' Mom baby-talked as Naddalin gurgled in delight.

'It hasn't come back into style. Punk has come into style, so-o I think this is your son's way of campaigning all over again,' Mom said with a smirk.

'Well, she sure does look dapper,' Gram's said. 'Don't you think?' she said, whirling to Gramps.

Gramps shrugged... 'he always looks good to me, all way how could he not? All my children and Gram's children do, too there no wrong yah can do.' But he looked pained as he said it.

He needed to split some more logs, so I watched him take a hatchet to a bunch of dried alders. Later that afternoon, I went outside with Gramps to help him collect firewood.

'Gramps, don't you like Dad's new clothes?' I asked.

Then he set it down gently next to the bench I was sitting on. 'I like his clothes just fine, Earn,' he said.

Gramps halted the ax in midair. 'But you looked so sad in there when Gram's was talking about it.' 'It's not easy to miss. When you feel sad, you look sad.' Gramps shook his head. 'Don't miss a thing, do you? Even at ten years old.'

'Music? You never go to Dad's shows.' 'I'm not sad. Your father seems happy and I think he'll make a good teacher. Those are some lucky kids who get to read 'Haven' with your dad. I'll just miss the music; he loves and the story of a girl kind of like me.'

'I've got bad ears. From the war. The noise hurts.'

He'd sit down at his little table and write them down, then give them to Gram's to type up, then he'd draw pictures. I remember all the cute and funny stories about animals and us when little, but real and smart.

Always reminded me of that book about the wolf and the pig what's it called?' Mom makes me do that. Ear-plugs just fall out.' 'You should wear headphones. 'Maybe I'll try that. Nonetheless, I have continually listened to your dad's music; at low volume.

I'll admit, I don't much care for all that electric guitar. Not my cup of coffee. But I still admired the music. The words, especially. When he was about your age, your father used to come up with these great stories.

''In the Eyes of an Angel?' Beth asked, forgetfully taking my hand in his and blowing on it, which is what he did to warm my continually cold fingers. 'What's wrong with

'At the Cross? It's still traditional...'

'But doesn't make you want to puke,'

Karrah interjected. The Doors, adding in... That would have been a more Kerry-worthy song. Something to toast the man he was, the ww2 servicer, of harbor whatever that is, he said yes I don't care is all in the past now- right?'

It was like they killed him all over again, saying anything about wanting a Toyota.'

'That funeral wasn't about celebrating Kerry's life,' Mom howled, yanking at her scarf. 'It was about repudiating it.

Dad put a comforting hand over Mom's clenched fist. 'Now come on. It was just a song.' 'It was what it represented. That whole charade back there. You of all people should understand.'

'It wasn't just a song,' Mom said, snatching her hand away. Then, I cannot be angry with his family. I imagine this funeral was their way of reclaiming their girl.'

Dad shrugged and smiled Galleomily. 'Maybe I myself should... 'Please,' Mom said, shaking her head. 'If they wanted to claim their son, why didn't they deference the life he chose to live?

How come they never- ever came to visit? Or supported his music, with me?'

'We don't know what they thought about all that,' Dad replied. 'Let's not judge too harshly. It has to be heart-breaking to bury your child.'

'I can't believe you're making excuses for them,' Mom shouted.

'I'm not. I just think you might be reading too much into a musical assortment.'

'And I think you're confusing being assumed with being a pushover!'

Dad's wince was barely visible, but it was enough to make Beth squeeze my hand and Karrah and Carrie exchange a look. Karrah jumped in, to Dad's rescue, I think.

'It's different for you, with your parents,' he told Dad. 'I mean they're old-fashioned but they always were into what you did, and even in your wildest days, you were always a good son, a good father. Always home for Sunday dinner.'

Mom guffawed as if Karrah's statement had proven her point. We all turned to her, and our shocked expressions seemed to snap her out of her rant.

'Clearly, I'm just emotional right now,' she said. Dad seemed to comprehend that was as much an apology as he was going to get right now.

she covered her hand with her and this time she didn't snatch it away.

You can have your wishes, your plans, but at the end of the day, it's out of your control.' Dad paused, hesitating before speaking. 'I just think that funerals are a lot like death itself.

'No way,' Karrah said. 'Not if you make your wishes known to the right people.' He turned to Carrie and spoke to the bump in her belly.

~*~

'So, listen up, family. At my funeral, no one is allowed to wear black.

And for music, I want something poppy and old-school, like Mr. T Experience.' she looked up at Carrie. 'Got that'

'Thanks, and what about you, honey?' He asked her.

Without missing a beat, Carrie said: 'Play 'P.S. 'If This Was a Movie.' And I want one of those green funerals where they bury you in the ground under a tree.

So, the funeral itself would be in nature. And no flowers. I mean, give me all the peonies you want when I'm alive, but once I'm dead, better to give donations on my behalf to a good charity like Doctors Without Borders.'

'You've got all the details figured out,' Beth said. 'Is that a nurse thing?'

Carrie shrugged.

'According to Ana, that means you're deep,' I said. 'She says that the world is divided into the people who imagine their own funerals and the people who don't and that smart and artistic people naturally fall into the former category.'

'So, which are you?' Beth asked me.

'I'd want Mozart's Requiem,' I said. I turned to Mom and Dad. 'Don't worry, I'm not hopeless or anything.'

My deadbeat father and all the friends who'd wronged me would weep over my casket, which would be red, logically, 'Please,' Mom said, her mood lightening as she stirred her coffee. 'When I was growing up I'd have elaborate fantasies about my funeral.

'Let me guess,' Carrie said. ''Fire and Rain'?'

Mom nodded and she and Carrie started laughing and soon everyone at the table was cracking up so hard that tears ran down our faces. And then we were crying, even me, who didn't know Kerry all that well.

Crying and laughing, laughing and crying.

'So, what now?' Beth asked Mom when we'd calmed down. 'Still harbor a soft spot for Mr. Taylor?'

Mom stopped and blinked hard, which is what she does when she's thinking about something. Then she reached over to stroke Dad's cheek, a rare demonstration of PDA.

'In my ideal scenario, my bighearted pushover husband and I die quickly and simultaneously when we're ninety-two years old. I'm not sure how.

16

Maybe we're on a tropical beach- because, in the future, we're rich; hey, it's my fantasy-and we come down with some exotic illness, of what it hard from her, and go to sleep one night feeling fine and then never wake up, unless it with her in my arms. And no James Taylor. Earn plays at our funeral. If that is, we can tear her away from the New York Philharmonic.'

That said, I can't help thinking Mom would not be happy about this. In fact, Mama Bear would be furious with the way events are unfolding today.

Dad was wrong about it all; It's true you might not get to control your funeral, but sometimes you do get to choose your death.

She went with Dad. I can't help thinking that part of Mom's wish did come true. Nevertheless, I won't be playing at her funeral.

To go down as a family. No one left behind. It's possible that her funeral will also be mine. There's something comforting in that.

2:19 A.M.

I'm back where I started, going backward they say in my state of mind, and my lusting wants and needs.

I wish there was some kind of anesthesia for me or at least something to make the world shut up. Back in the ICU. My body, that is. I've been sitting here all along, too tired to move. I wish I could go to sleep.

I don't want this. I look around the ICU, feeling kind of ridiculous. I doubt all the other messed-up people in the ward are exactly thrilled to be here, either. I don't have the energy for this decision. I don't want this anymore. I say it out loud. I want to be like my body, quiet and lifeless, putty in someone else's hands.

I reanalyze now that dying is easy, I would rather do that then have lost both my legs and yet it's my own felt, self-infiltered harm, at 12, over not having the girlfriend I wanted. The living is hard. My body wasn't gone from the ICU for too long. I ended my life in my hospital room over I could not handle it, in my mind... yet I going to talk about it...

A few hours for surgery, and now I am just hip and vagina. Sometime in the recovery room.

I don't know exactly what's happened to me, and for the first time today, I don't really care. I shouldn't have to care. I shouldn't have to work this hard.

I'm back on the ventilator, and once again there's tape over my eyes. I still don't understand the tape. Are the doctors afraid that I'll wake up mid-surgery and be horrified by the scalpels or Ritalin?

As if those things could faze me now.

Two nurses, the one assigned to me and Nurse Ramirez, come over to my bed and check all my monitors.

They call out a chorus of numbers that are as familiar to me now as my own name: BP, pulse ox, breathing rate. I was shocked up to all kinds of things and wanted out, my hold body shut down, yet it was all my fault... yet I was mental, and sick, so-o- is it all on me? YES-

NO- AH!

Nurse Ramirez looks like an entirely different person from the one who arrived here yesterday afternoon.

I'll miss her but I'm glad she'll be able to get away from me, from this place. I'd like to get away, too.

I think I will. I think it's just a matter of time figuring out how to let go.

The makeup has all rubbed off and her hair is flat. She looks like she could sleep standing up. Her shift must be over soon, and the sweet cute girl I like would be rubbing me do in a sponge bath - the only good in my life at this time, going back more.

I haven't been back in my bed for fifteen minutes when Carrie shows up.

She marches through the double doors and goes to speak to the one nurse behind the desk.

I don't hear what she says, but I hear her tone: it's polite, soft-spoken, but leaving no room for questions.

When she leaves the room a few minutes later, there's a change in the air.

Carrie's in charge now.

17

Ah, I recall-

The grumpy nurse at first looks pissed off, like Who is this woman to tell me what to do?

I got sick of this life... how could you not when you no more... then they think and they take you for mentally retarded. Yet that is what materializes to girls like me, that end in a place like this over... well, not handling it. But then she seems to resign, to throw her hands up in surrender. It's been a crazy night. The shift is almost over. Why bother? Soon, I and all of my noisy, pushy visitors will be an important person else's problem. I used to hear Mom give her tips for getting the baby to sleep through the night.

Five minutes later, Carrie is back, bringing Grams and Gramps with her. Carrie has worked all day and now she is here all night. I know she doesn't get enough sleep on a good day.

It's like exhaustion wouldn't dare mess with her. She stirs right over to my bed, looking at me all vegetated, now in my last days, she remembers back to the younger me.

I'm not sure who looks worse, me or Gramps. His cheeks are sallow, his skin looks gray and papery, and his eyes are Ritalin-shot.

Gram's, on the other hand, looks just like Grams. No sign of wear and tear on her.

Never the kind of girl to make my heart race in fear. You made up for a lifetime of that today.'

But you proved me wrong. Even-never then you were such a breeze. Never-ever gave us any trouble.

'You've sure got us on a roller-coaster ride today,' Gram's says lightly. 'Your mom always said she couldn't believe what an easy girl you were and I remember telling her, 'Just wait until she hits puberty.'

'Now, now,' Gramps says, putting a hand on her shoulder.

'Oh, I'm only kidding. Earn would appreciate it. She's got a sense of humor, no matter how serious she sometimes seems. A wicked sense of humor, this one.'

'There, much better,' she says. 'You know, I went outside for a walk today and you'll never guess what I saw. A crossbill. In Dauphin Main in March. Now, that's unusual.

I think it's Galle...

Someone has rinsed it out, so, while it's not exactly clean, it's not caked with Ritalin, either. Gram's starts untangling my bangs, which are about chin length. Gram's pulls the chair up next to my bed and starts combing through my hair with her fingers.

She works her way down, pulling the hair out from under the pillow so it streams down my chest, hiding some of the lines and tubes connected to me. I'm forever cutting bangs, then growing them. It's about as radical a makeover as I can give myself.

You would think she would be there my last days at my bed, yet she was not, she did not care... or so that how I remember it... yet, I lost my health for her.

18

She always had a soft spot for you. Said you reminded her of your father, and she adored her.

But she loved that she'd rebelled against us, or so she thought, and she thought it was something that you rebelled all over again by becoming a classical musician.

Though much as I tried to tell her that it wasn't the way it was, she didn't care. She had her own ideas about things; I suppose we all do.'

Little did she know your father couldn't stand her. When he cut his first crazy hairdo, she practically threw him a party.

She loved that he was rebellious, so dissimilar then us all in the world today.

She came to visit us once when your daddy was around five or six, and she had this ratty mink coat with her.

This was before she got all into the animal rights and crystals and the like. The coat smelled terrible, like mothballs, like the old linens we kept in a trunk in the attic, and your father took to calling her 'Auntie Shaft Smell.' She never knew that.

I know that all the magic kisses in the world probably couldn't have helped him today. But I would do anything to have been able to give her one.

10:41 P.M.

I run away, once from this place and was busted back when I still had legs, this place is why... and she... too. I was slowly dying anyway with MS, so-o... that was what they said it was too...

I leave Beth, Ana, and Carrie in the lobby and I just start careening through the hospital. I don't reanalyze I'm looking for the pediatric ward until I get there.

Past the pediatric oncology unit where bald cancer patients sleep under cheerful murals of rainbows and balloons, I tear through the halls...

Like past rooms with nervous four-year-old's sleeping restlessly before tomorrow's tonsillectomies, past the newborn ICU with babies the size of fists, hooked up to more tubes than I am.

I'm looking for him, even though I know I won't find him. Still, I have to keep looking.

I picture his head, his tight blond curls. I love to nuzzle my face in those curls, have done since he was a baby. I kept waiting for the day when he'd swat me away, say 'You're embarrassing me,' the way he does to Dad when Dad cheers too loudly at T-ball games. But so far, that hadn't happened. So far, I've been allowed constant access to that head of his. So far. Now there is no more so far. It's over.

I picture myself nuzzling his head one last time, and I can't even imagine it without seeing myself crying, my tears turning his blond curlicues straight.

I cannot scream until my throat hurts or break a window with my fist until my hand bleeds, or pull my hair out in clumps until the pain in my scalp overcomes the one in my heart.

Naddalin is never going to graduate from T-ball to baseball. she is never going to grow a mustache. Never-ever going to get into a fistfight or shoot a deer or kiss a girl or have real sex or fall in love or get married or mother her own curly-haired girl that she wanted all the way back before she could talk, or walk even, even if she had one dropped in the crapper that was her daddy's when she aborted it with pills.

I'm only 1 year older than her, but it's like I've already had so much more life. It is unfair. If one of us should have been left behind, if one of us should be given the opportunity for more life, it should be her. I race through the hospital like a trapped wild animal. Naddalin? I call. Where are you? Come back to me!

I don't want to be here. I don't want to be in this hospital. I don't want to be in this suspended state where I can see what's happening, where I'm aware of what I'm feeling without being able to actually feel it.

Nevertheless, she won't. I know it's fruitless. I give up and drag myself back to my ICU. I want to break the double doors. I want to smash the nurses' station. I want to go away. I want it all to go away.

I'm staring at myself, at the 'live' Earn now, lying in her hospital bed. I feel a burst of fury. If I could slap my own lifeless face, I would.

Instead, I sit down in the chair and close my eyes, wishing it all away. Except I can't. I can't concentrate because there's suddenly so much noise. My monitors are blipping and chirping and two nurses are racing toward me.

'Her BP and pulse ox are dropping,' one screams.

'She's tachycardia,' the other yells. 'What transpired?'

'Code blue, code blue in Trauma,' blares the PA. (that was the night I passed, at 12, the day before I became a teen girl, holding a stuffed toady bear, he was being a suit.) I'm naked from the waist down, but no one notices these things here.

Soon the nurses are joined by a bleary-eyed doctor, the one that was so in love with me, the real me or so she said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, which are ringed by deep circles. He yanks down the covers and lifts my hospital gown.

He puts his hands on my belly, which is swollen and hard. His eyes widen and then narrow into slits. 'Abdomen's rigid,' he says angrily. 'We need to do an ultrasound.'

Nurse Ramirez runs to a back room and then wheels out what looks like a portable laptop with a long white attachment. She squirts some jelly on my stomach, and the doctor runs the attachment over my stomach.

'Damn. Full of fluid,' he says.

'Patient, had surgery this afternoon?'

'A splenectomy,' Nurse Ramirez replies.

'Could be a missed Ritalin vessel that wasn't sealed,' the doctor says, she tried this one before. I don't think this was natural... 'Or a slow leak from a perforated bowel.

Car accident, right?'

That was more of a thing then me taking last breath... yet it was 18 months... and my funding was running out so-o let her go-o is what they do; this place is like a nearing home... I've seen it all before. Smalls the same. Like piss, looks the same, like death, and then that all the is left is regretting all and both.

Those things that thing and them too.

'Yes, the patient was med-evaded this morning.'

The doctor flips through my chart. 'Doctor Sorensen was her surgeon; he's still on call. Page him, get her to the OR.

Nurse Ramirez shoots the doctor a dirty look as if he had just insulted me.

We need to get inside and find out what's leaking, and why, before she drops any further. Jesus, brain contusions, collapsed a lung. This kid's a train wreck.'

'Miss Ramirez,' the grumpy nurse at the desk scolds. 'You have patients of your own to deal with. Let's get this young woman intubated and transferred to the OR. That will do her better than all this dilly-dallying around!'

The nurses work rapidly to detach the monitors and catheters and run another tube down my throat. A pair of orderlies' rushes in with a gurney and heave me onto it. She taps me three tim es on the forehead with her fingers, like it's some kind of Morse code message. And then I'm gone into the maze of hallways leading toward the OR for another round of cutting, but this time I don't follow myself. This time I stay behind in the ICU.

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I'm still naked, from the waist down as they hustle me out, showing my vag-ie-slit. And the line of hair I have down there left, but right before I reach the back door, Nurse Ramirez calls, 'Wait!' and then gently closes the hospital gown around my legs. This morning I went for a drive with my family. And now I am here, as alone as I've ever been. I am seventeen years old. This is not how it's supposed to be. This is not how my life is supposed to turn out.

I am starting to get it now. I mean, I don't totally fully understand. It's not like I somehow commanded a Ritalin vessel to pop open and start leaking into my stomach. It's not like I wished for another surgery. But Naddalin is gone. Mom and Dad are gone. To never-ever smell Dad smoke a pipe? To never stand next to Mom quietly talking as we do the dishes? To never read Naddalin another chapter of Neveah, even if she cannot put it down- and there are no other books out there to read; to stay without them? I'm not sure this is a world I belong in anymore. I'm not sure that I want to wake up. In the quiet corner of the ICU, I start to really think about the bitter things I've managed to ignore so far today. What would it be like if I stay? What would it feel like to wake up an orphan?

I've only ever been to one funeral in my life and it was for someone I hardly knew. Gram's was pretty annoyed by that, by Aunt Galle in general, who Gram's said was always trying to call attention to how different she was, even after she was dead. Gram's ended up boycotting the ash scattering, and if she wasn't going, there was no reason for the rest of us too. No traditional service, no burial in the family plot. Instead, she wanted to be cremated and have her ashes scattered in a sacred Native American ceremony somewhere in the Sierra Mountains in Nevada. I might have gone to Great-Aunt Galle's funeral after she died of acute pancreatitis. Except her will was very specific about her final wishes.

That was the funny thing about conservatory camp; you got so close with the people over the summer, but it was some unwritten rule that you didn't keep in touch during the rest of the year. We were summer friends. Anyhow, we had a memorial concert at camp in Dick's honor, but it wasn't really a funeral. Dick Mize, my trombonist friend from conservatory camp, died two years ago, but I didn't find out until I returned to camp and he wasn't there. Few of us had known that he'd had lymphoma.

Unlike Dad and Karrah, who as they got older and had families became fewer music performers than music connoisseurs. Kerry Whiteford was a musician in town, one of

Mom and Dad's people, Kerry stayed single and stayed faithful to his first love: playing music.

She was in three bands and she earned her living to do the sound at a local club, an ideal setup because at least one of his bands seemed to play there every week, though sometimes you'd see her jumping down in the middle of a set to adjust the monitors herself, so she just had to hop up on the stage and let someone take the controls for his set. I had known Kerry when I was little and would go to shows with Mom and Dad and then I sort of remit- her when Beth, and I got together and I started going to shows again. Kerry's death caused an uproar in our town. She was kind of a fixture around here, an outspoken girl with a big personality and this mass of wild white-girl curly-locks.

She was at work one night, doing the sound for a Dauphin band called Clod when he just keeled over on the soundboard. He was dead by the time the ambulance got there. A freak brain aneurysm. Mom and Dad were going, of course, and so was Beth. So-o even though I felt a little bit like an impostor crashing someone's death day, I decided to go along. Naddalin stayed with Grams and Gramps Black. And she was young, only thirty-two. Everyone we knew was planning to go to her funeral, which was being held in the town where he grew up, in the mountains a couple of hours' drive away.

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Kerry the avowed left-winger who decided to protest the Iraq war by getting a bunch of men to dress up in drag and go down to the local army recruiting office to enlist.

Kerry the atheist curmudgeon, who hated how commercial May Christmas had become and so-o threw an annual Merry Anti-Christmas Celebration at the club, where he held a contest for which band could play the most distorted versions of Christmas carols.

Then he invited everyone to throw all their crappy presents into a big pile in the middle of the club. And contrary to local lore, Kerry did not burn the stuff in a bonfire; Dad told me that he donated it to St. Vincent de Paul. As everyone talked about Kerry, the mood in the car was fizzy and fun, like we were going to the circus, not a funeral. But it seemed right, it seemed true to Kerry, who was always overflowing with frenetic energy.

We caravanned to Kerry's hometown with a bunch of people, squeezing into a car with Karrah and Carrie, who was so pregnant the seat belt wouldn't fit over her bump. Everyone took turns telling funny stories about Kerry. The problem was the service itself. It was obvious that the pastor had never even met Kerry because when he talked about him, it was generic, about what a kind heart Kerry had and how even though it was sad that he was gone, he was getting his 'heavenly reward.'

I cannot say I feel that way, a man was on a cross for me that good right... I don't have to feel I did anything wrong, for that way he did what he did... or was chosen... right? The funeral, though, was the opposite. It was horribly depressing and not just because it was for someone who'd died tragically young and for no particular reason aside from some bad arterial luck. It was held in a huge church, which seemed strange considering Kerry was an out-spoken nonbeliever, but that part I could understand. I mean where else do you have a funeral?

We went to church sometimes, so it's not like Mom had anything against religion, but Kerry totally did and Mom was ferociously protective of the people she loved, so much that she took insults upon them personally. Her friends sometimes called her Mama Bear for this reason. Steam was practically blowing out of Mom's ears by the time the service ended with a rousing rendition of Sarah McLachlan 'In the Arms of an Angel.'

And instead of having eulogies from his bandmates or the people in town who she'd spent the last fifteen years with, some uncle from Boise got up and talked about teaching Kerry how to ride a bike when he was six, like learning to ride a bike was the defining moment in Kerry's life. He concluded by reassuring us that Kerry was walking with Jesus now. I could see my mom getting red when he said that, and I started to get a little worried that she might say something.

'It's a good thing Kerry's dead because that funeral would've sent him over the edge,' Karrah said. After the church service, we'd decided to skip the formal luncheon and had gone to a diner. Ana, who has met Carrie all of twice, flings herself into her arms. 'Thank you!' she murmurs into her neck.

~*~

'I want to see Earn,' Beth says... Carrie hugs her back, pats her on the shoulders before letting go. She rubs her eyes and winces out a brittle laugh. 'What in the hell were you two thinking?' she asks. 'Are you okay?' Ana asks. Carrie turns to look at Beth and it's like someone has unscrewed her valve, letting all her air escape. She deflates. She reaches out and touches Beth's cheek. 'Of course, you do.' She wipes her eyes with the heel of her hand. Beth perks up when he hears this. 'You think you can? That old nurse has it in for me.' Carrie ignores the question altogether. 'Let's see about getting you in to Earn.'

She needs you now- more than ever... right?' 'If that old nurse is who I think she is, it doesn't matter if she has it in for you. It's not up to her. Let's check in with Earn's Gram's parents and then I'll find out who's in charge of breaking the rules around here and get you in to see your girl.

Carrie to the rescue. Just the way she rescued Karrah, Dad's best friend, and bandmate, who, once upon a time, was a total drunk playboy. When he and Carrie had been dating a few weeks, she told her to straighten out and dry out or say good-bye. Beth swivels around and hugs Carrie with such force that her feet lift up off the ground.

While Dad lived for the Ramones and thought baseball was a religious institution, and probably why she was one of Dad's favorite people, even though she hated the Ramones and thought baseball was boring, Dad said, that lots of girls had given Karrah stipulations, tried to force her to settle down, and lots of girls had been left crying on the sidewalk.

But when Carrie packed her toothbrush and told Karrah to grow up, Karrah was the one who cried. Then he dried his tears, grew up, got sober and monogamous. Eight years later, here they are, with a baby, no less. Carrie is formidable that way. Probably- why after she and Karrah got together she became Mom's best friend; she was another tough-as-nails, tender-as-kittens, feminist bitch.

I'm so busy celebrating Carrie's arrival that the implication of her being here takes a few moments to sink in, but when it does, it hits me like a jolt of electricity. Now Carrie is here, Carrie the nurse, Carrie who doesn't take no for an answer is here. She'll get Beth in to see me. She'll take care of everything.

Hooray! I want to shout.

Carrie is here! Her eyes got bright...

Carrie is here, and if she's here if she's in my hospital, it means that there isn't any reason for her to be in her hospital. I know her well enough to know that she never-ever would have left her there. Even with me here, she would have stayed with her. she was broken and brought to her for adhesive. She was her patient, her priority, and now even a friend, and someone more than just a patient.

More than ever... I think about the fact that Gram's and Gramps are in Dauphin with me. And that all anyone in that waiting room is talking about is me, how they are avoiding mentioning Mom or

Dad or Naddalin. I think about Carrie's face, which looks like it has been scrubbed clean of all joy. And I think about what she told Beth, that I need him now.

Mom went into labor three days before Christmas, and she insisted we go holiday shopping together, and that's how I know. Naddalin; She's gone, too. 'Shouldn't you like lying down or go to the birthing center or something?' I asked. Mom grimaced through a cramp. 'Nah. The contractions aren't that bad and are still like twenty minutes apart. I cleaned our entire house, from top to bottom, while I was in early labor with you.'

'You're a smart-ass, you know that?' Mom said. She took a few breaths. 'I've got some ways to go. Now come on. Let's take the bus to the mall. I'm not up to driving.' 'Putting the labor in labor,' I joked. Mom laughed at that. 'Please, it's enough for me to have to birth this baby. I don't need to deal with her, too. We'll call her when I'm ready to pop. I'd much rather have you around.' 'Shouldn't we call Dad?' I asked.

'Let's go get the pie...' So, Mom and I wandered around the mall, stopping every couple minutes or so she could sit down and take deep breaths and squeeze my wrist so hard it left angry red marks. Still, it was a weirdly fun and productive morning. We bought presents for Grams and Gramps.

Usually, we waited for the holiday sales to buy stuff like that, but Mom said that this year we'd be too busy changing diapers. (A sweater with an angel on it and a new book about Abraham Lincoln,) and toys for the baby and a new pair of rain boots for me. Now's not the time to be cheap. Ow, freak. Sorry, Earn.

Come on.

The hippie midwife-led Mom inside and Dad asked me if I wanted to come, too. By now, I could hear Mom screaming profanities. We went to Marie Callender's. Mom had a slice of pumpkin and of banana cream. I had blueberry... When she was done, she pushed her plate away and announced she was ready to go to the midwife. We had never really talked about my being there or not being there. I went everywhere with Mom and Dad at that point, so it was just assumed.

-And-

We met a nerve-wracked Dad at the birthing center, which was nothing like a doctor's office. It was the ground floor of a house, the inside decked out with beds and Jacuzzi tubs, the medical equipment discreetly tucked away.

I shook my head. Mom needed me. She'd said so. I sat down on one of the floral couches and picked up a magazine with a goofy-looking bald baby on the cover. Dad disappeared into the room with the bed.

'I can call Gram's and she'll pick you up,' Dad said, wincing at Mom's barrage. 'This might take a while.'

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'We have some lovely Enya. Very soothing,' the midwife said. Women can handle the worst kind of pain. You will find out one day. Then she would scream freaking again. 'Music! dammit! Music!' Mom screamed. 'Freaking Enya!' Mom screamed. 'Melvin's... Earth... now...!' 'I've got it covered,' Dad said. Then he popped a CD of the loudest, churnings', guitar-heaviest music, like- like, I had ever heard. It made all the fast-paced punk songs Dad normally listened to sound like harp music.

This music was primal and that seemed to make Mom feel better. She started making these low guttural noises. I just sat there quietly. Every so often she'd scream my name and I'd scamper inside. Mom would look up at me, her face plastered with sweat. Don't be scared, she'd whisper.

Likewise, I'd seen a couple of births on that cable-TV show, and people usually yelled for a while; sometimes they swore and it had to be bleeped, but it never took longer than half an hour. After three hours, Mom and the Melvin's were still screaming along. The whole birthing center felt tropically humid, even though it was forty degrees outside.

~*~

Karrah dropped by. When he came inside and heard the noise, she froze in his tracks. I knew that the whole kid-thing freaked him out. I'd overheard Mom and Dad talking about that, and Karrah's refusal to grow up. He'd apparently been shocked when Mom and Dad had me, and now was completely bewildered that they chose to have a second. They'd both been relieved when he and Carrie had gotten back together. 'Finally, a grown-up in Karrah's life,' Mom had said.

Karrah looked at me; his face was pale and sweaty. "Holy Shit PISS!!!' Should you be hearing this? Should I be hearing this?'

'I've got the flu or something, but your Dad just called asking me to bring some food. I shrugged, Karrah sat down next to me. So here I am,' he said, proffering a Taco Bell bag reeking of onions. I's let out another moan. 'I should go. Don't want me spreading germs or anything.'

She stood up to leave, I screamed even louder and Karrah nearly jumped in her seat. 'You sure you want to hang around for this? You can come back to my place. Carrie's there, taking care of me.' He grinned when he mentioned her name. 'She can take care of you, too.' 'Did she vomit yet?' Karrah asked, sitting back down on the couch. I snickered, but then saw from his face that he was serious. 'No, I'm fine, Mom needs me; Dad's kind of freaked out, though.'

'So, the story goes. But I'll tell you this: She cried like a mother freaking baby when you were born.' Almost fainted on the floor. Not that I can blame him. But the dude was a mess, the doctors wanted to kick her out, 'she threw up when you were coming, said they were going to if you didn't come out within a half-hour. That got your mom so pissed off she pushed you out five minutes later.' Karrah smiled, leaning back into the futon.

~*~

'I've heard that part.' 'Heard what part?' Dad asked breathlessly. He grabbed the bag from Karrah. 'Taco Bell, Karrah?' I shook my head; Dad had started unwrapping her meal when Mom let out a growl and then started screaming at the midwife that she was ready to push. Karrah winked at me, Dad pulled out a burrito and offered one to me.

'Dinner of champions,' Karrah said.

'It'll do... I'm ravenous. It's intense in there. Got to keep up my strength.' The midwife poked her head out the door. 'I think we're getting close, so maybe you should save dinner for later,' she said. 'Come on back.'

'Would you like to watch?' The midwife asked Dad, but he just swayed and turned a pale shade of green. Karrah nearly bolted out the front door. I followed Dad into the bedroom where Mom

was sitting now, panting like a sick dog. 'I'm probably better up here,' he said, grasping Mom's hand, which she violently shook off.

The midwife was telling me to push, after all, I was having daddy baby girl, then hold, then push. 'Go, baby, go, baby, go baby go,' she chanted. 'You're almost there!' she cheered. Mom looked like she wanted to smack her.

No one asked me if I wanted to watch. I just automatically went to stand next to the midwife. It was pretty gross, I'll admit, Lots of Ritalin, I was on during.

And I'd certainly never seen myself so full-on frontal before. Nevertheless, it felt strangely normal for me to be there. Her eyes were open, staring straight at me. She likes held my gaze as the midwife suctioned out her nose, and mouth, and said well she going to be cheap you don't have to cut anything off. 'It's a girl,' she shouted. This is why girls are E_Z!

'I'll do it,' I offered.

The midwife put Naddalin on my belly.

'Do you want to cut the cord?' she asked Daddy he was holding my hand the whole time and kissing my forehead and even my lips. Dad waved his hands no, too overcome or queasy, woozy to speak. When Naddalin slid out, he was head up, facing the ceiling, so that the first thing he saw was me. She didn't come out squalling as you see on TV. She was just noiseless. Up till now, some thought this was wrong yet other not, in the hospital, about me and my daddy. We have a special bond that is all I say and smile nod. The midwife held the cord taut and told me where to cut. Naddalin lay still, his gray eyes wide open, still staring at me. 'Imprinting on a zoologist, not the mama goose, because he was the first one, they saw when they hatched.' I always said that it was because Naddalin saw me first and because I cut her cord, that somewhere deep down he thought I was his mother. 'It's like those goslings,' Mom joked, saying, I knew you to would do this... I knew.

When he was a baby and going through his nightly fussy period, she'd only calm down after I played him a lullaby on my French horn. When he started getting into Neveah, only I could read a chapter to him every night.

And when he'd skin a knee or bump his head, if I was around, he would not stop crying until I bestowed a magic kiss on the injury, after which he'd miraculously recover. She exaggerated. Naddalin didn't really think I was her mother, but there were certain things that only I could do for her.

'Damn...' 'You are the plan, Brooke licks her bee-stung lips, I hadn't really thought beyond you going up to the ICU and making a ruckus.' 'Making a ruckus is one of my favorite things to do. What do you think we should do? Let out a primal scream? Strip? Wait, I didn't bring my guitar, I want to play for the baby. Smash a guitar, you mean, said Mom? 'You could sing something?' someone suggests. Beth blanches at this sudden reality check and Brooke raises her eyebrows in a stern rebuke. Every person goes solemn. 'How about that old Smiths song 'Girlfriend in a Coma'?'

Someone calls...

That might do it if it doesn't, then sing. All we really want is to lure a couple of curious nurses out, and that grouchy head nurse after them. Once she comes out of the ICU and sees all of us in the hall, she'll be too busy dealing with us to notice that Beth has slipped inside.'

Brooke appraises Ana; Ana in her rumpled black pants and unflattering sweater. Then Brooke smiles and links arms with my best friend. 'Sounds like a plan, Let's motor, kids.' Ana clears her throat. 'Um, it doesn't do us any good if Brooke is a diversion in the lobby. We need to go upstairs to the ICU and then maybe someone could shout that Brooke Bogel is here.

Maybe all hospitals should import groups of rabble-rousing punk rockers to kickstart the languishing patients' hearts. I lag behind, watching this procession of hipster's barrel through the lobby. I wonder if I will be able to feel his touch on me. While they wait at the elevator banks, I scramble up the stairs.

The sheer noisiness of them, of their heavy boots, and loud voices, buzzed on by their sense of urgency, ricochets through the quiet hush of the hospital and breathes some life into the place.

I, myself recollect watching a TV program once about old-age homes that brought in cats and dogs to cheer the elderly and dying patients, and then stop in front of the elevator, waiting limitlessly for one empty enough to ferry them up as a group. I choose what I want to be next to my body when Beth makes it to the ICU.

A gunshot wound... We get a- lot of hunting accidents around here.

One of the other patients, one who was so swaddled in gauze and bandages, that I could not see if it was a man or woman, is gone. I's did not look for the dick- sorry!

I's have been gone from the ICU for more than three hours, and a lot has different.

In its place is a woman whose neck is immunized in one of those collar things.

There is a new patient in one of the empty beds, a middle-aged staff whose face looks like one of those surrealist watercolors: half of it looks normal, handsome even, the other half is a mess of bloody-ness, gauze, and stitching like someone just blew it off.

I stop to check if I feel any different, but I don't feel anything, not physically anyhow. I haven't since I was in the car this morning, listening to Beethoven's French horn Sonata no. 3.

Now that I'm breathing on my own, my wall of machines bleeps far less, so I get fewer visits from the nurses.

Nurse Ramirez, the one with the nails, expressions a look over at me every now and again, but she's busy with the new guy with the half face. 'Holy crud. Is that Brooke Bogel?'

I hear someone ask in a totally flakey melodramatic voice from outside the ICU's automatic doors. I've never ever heard any of Beth's friends talk so PG-13 before. It's their sanitized hospital version of 'holy freaking shit.'

As for me, I'm off my ventilator now. I remember the social worker telling my Grandparents and Aunt Diane that this was a positive step.

'You mean Brooke Bogel of Bikini?

Brooke Bogel, who was on the cover of Spin magazine last month?

Here in this very hospital?' This time it's Ana talking.

Does she sound like a six-year-old reciting line from a school play about the food groups: You mean you are supposed to eat five servings of fruit and vegetables a day?

I hear them muttering, eager to see if it's really Brooke, or maybe just happy for the break in the routine. 'Yeah, that's right,' says Brooke's raspy voice. 'I'm here to offer some rock-and-roll succor to all the people of Rockville and around the county of Dauphin.'

A couple of the younger nurses, the ones who probably listen to the pop radio or watch MTV and have heard of Bikini, look up, their faces excited question marks.

'Yeah. That's right. So, I thought I might sing a little song. One of my favorites. It's called 'Eraser,'' Brooke says. 'One of you guys want to count me in?'

'I need something to tap with,' Maylie answers. 'Anyone got some pens or something?' I'm watching it all play out, like a movie on the screen.

Now the nurses and orderlies in the ICU are very curious and heading toward the doors.

I stand next to my bed, my eyes trained on the double doors, waiting for them to open. I'm itching with suspense.

I think of Beth, of how calming it feels when he touches me, how when he absentmindedly strokes the nape of my neck or blows warm air on my cold hands, I could melt into a puddle.

'What's going on?' the older nurse demands. Suddenly every nurse on the floor is looking at her, not out toward Brooke anymore.

No one is going to try to explain to her that a famous pop star is outside. The moment has broken. I feel the tension ease into disappointment.

The door isn't going to open.

Outside, I hear Brooke start belting out the lyrics to 'Eraser.' Even a cappella, even though the automatic double doors, she sounds good.

'Somebody calls security now,' the nurse growls.

'Beth, you better just go for it,' Maylie screams. 'Now or never. Full-court press.'

'Go!' screams Ana, suddenly an army general. 'We'll cover you.'

The door opens. In tumble, more than a half-dozen punkers, Beth, Maylie, Jodi, some people I don't know, and then Ana. Outside, Brooke is still singing, as though this were the concert, she'd come to Dauphin and its towns to give.

As Beth and Ana charge through the door, they both look strong-minded, happy even.

I'm astonished by their resilience, by their hidden pockets of strength.

I want to jump up and down and root for them like I used to do at Naddalin's T-ball games when she'd be circumnavigating third and heading for home.

It's hard to believe, but watching Ana and Beth in action, I almost feel happy, too.

~*~

'Where is she?' Beth yells. 'Where's Earn?'

~*~

'In the corner, next to the supply closet!' Someone shouts- like OMG-ing freaking load. It takes me a minute to reanalyze its Nurse Ramirez.

~*~

'Security...! Get her...! Get her...!' the grumpy nurse shouts.

'Dude, was that Brooke Bogel?' one asks as he snags Jodi and flings her toward the exit.

She has spotted Beth through all the other invaders and her face has gone pink with anger.

Two hospital security guards and two orderlies run inside.

~*~

'Think so,' the other answers, grabbing Sarah and steering her out.

~*~

Ana has spotted me. 'Beth, she's here!' She freaking screams- like a freak, and then turns to look at me, the scream dying in her throat.

'She's here,' she says again, only this time it's a whimper.

~*~

Beth hears her and she is dodging nurses and making her way to me, and then she's there at the foot of my bed, her hand reaching out to touch me; she hands about to be on me.

Unexpectedly, I's think of our first kiss after the gig, how I didn't know how badly I'd wanted his lips on mine until the kiss was looming.

I didn't reanalyze like, um- just how much I was craving his touch, until now that I can almost feel it on me.

Almost... Almost...!

Suddenly, she's moving away from me.

Two guards have him by the shoulders and have yanked her butt. One of the same guards' grabs Ana's elbow and leads her out.

She's limping now, offering no resistance.

Or get detained...' And then she's off down the hall, trailed by a couple of orderlies begging for her autograph... Brooke's still singing in the hallway.

When she sees Beth, she stops. 'Sorry, honey,' she says. 'I got to jet before I miss my show...

'Call the police,' the old nurse yells.

'Have her arrested- do it.'

'We're taking him down to security.

That's the protocol,' one guard says.

'Not up to us to arrest,' the other adds.

'Just get her off my ward.' She harrumphs and turns around.

'Miss Ramirez, that had better not have been you abetting these hoodlums.' 'Unquestionably, not, I's was in the supply closet. I missed all the hullabaloo's,' she replies.

She is such a good liar that her face gives nothing away.

The old nurse claps her hands. 'Okay. The show's over, um yeah it's like back to that place.'

24

I chase after Beth and Ana, who are being led into the elevators.

I jump in with them. Ana looks confused like someone flipped her reset button and she's still is booting up.

Beth's lips are set in a grim line.

I can't tell if he's about to cry or about to punch the guard. For her sake, I hope it's the former. For my own, I hope the latter.

Downstairs, the guards hustle Beth and Ana toward a hallway filled with darkened offices.

They are about to go inside one of the few offices with lights on when I hear someone scream Beth's name. 'Beth. Stop. Is that you?' 'Carrie?' Beth yells.

'Carrie?' Ana mutters.

'Excuse me, where are you taking them?' Carrie yells at the guards as she runs toward them.

'I'm sorry but these two were caught trying to break into the ICU,' one guard elucidates.

'Only because, like- they wouldn't let us in,' Ana explains inadequately.

Carrie catches up to them. She's still wearing her nursing clothes, which is strange because she normally changes out of what she calls 'orthopedic couture' as soon as she can.

Her long, curly auburn hair looks lank and greasy like she's forgotten to wash it these past few weeks. And her cheeks, normally rosy like apples, have been repainted beige. 'Excuse me...'

'Who's she?' One guard asks.

I'm am a patent over at Cedar Creek. I did my training here, so if you like we can go straighten this out with Dick Caruthers.'

'Director of community affairs,' the other replies. Then he turns to Carrie. 'She's not here. It's not business hours.'

'Well, I have his home number,' Carrie says, brandishing her cell phone like a weapon.

'I doubt he'd be pleased if I were to call her now and tell her how his hospital was treating someone trying to visit his critically wounded girlfriend.

You know that the director values compassion as much as efficiency, and this is not the way to treat a concerned loved one.'

'We're just doing our job, ma'am.

Following orders.'

25

'How about I save you two the trouble and take it from here. The patient's family is all assembled upstairs. They're waiting for these two to join them. Here, if you have any problems, you tell Mr. Caruthers to get in touch with me.' She reaches into her bag and pulls out a card and hands it over. One of the guards looks at it, hands it to the other, who stares at it and shrugs.

'Might as well save ourselves the paperwork,' he says. He lets go of Beth, whose body slumps like a scarecrow taken off his pole. 'Sorry, kid,' he says to Beth, brushing off his shoulders.

'I hope your girlfriend's okay,' the other mumbles. And then they disappear toward the Gallow of some vending machines.

I stared miserably at my plate, looking out at the Galleomy gray evening. I already missed my parents, Ana, and especially Naddalin. He was at that fun stage, wanting to try new things and constantly asking 'What's that?' and saying the most hilarious things. The day before I left, he informed me that he was 'nine-tenths thirsty' and I almost peed myself laughing. Homesick, I sighed and moved the mass of meatloaf around my plate.

'Don't worry, it doesn't rain every day.

Just every other day.'

I looked up. There was an impish kid who couldn't have been more than ten years old. He had a blond buzz cut and a constellation of freckles falling down his nose.

'I know,' I said. 'I'm from the Northwest, though it was sunny where I lived this morning. It's the meatloaf I'm worried about.'

He laughed. 'That doesn't get better. But the peanut-butter-and-jelly is always good,' he said, gesturing to a table where a half-dozen kids were fixing themselves sandwiches. 'Dick. Trombone. Ontario,' he said. This, I would learn, was a standard Naddalinlin greeting.

'Oh, hey. I'm Earn. French horn.

Oregon, I guess.'

Dick told me that he was thirteen, and this was his second summer here; almost everyone started when they were twelve, which is why they all knew one another. Of the fifty students, about half did jazz, the other half classical, so it was a small crew. There were only two other French horn players, one of them a tall lanky red-haired guy named Simon who Dick waved over.

'Will you be trying for the concerto competition?' Simon asked me as soon as Dick introduced me to Earn. French horn. Oregon.

Simon was Simon. French horn. Leicester, which turned out to be a city in England. It was quite the international group.

'I don't think so. I don't even know what that is,' I answered.

'Well, you know how we all perform in an orchestra for the final symphony?' Dick asked me.

I nodded my head, though really - I had only a vague idea. Dad had spent the spring reading out loud from the camp's literature, but the only thing I'd cared about was that I was going to camp with other classical musicians. I hadn't paid too much attention to the details.

'It's the summer's end symphony. People from all over come to it. It's quite a big deal. We, the youngster musicians, play as a sort of cute sideshow,' Simon explained. 'However, one musician from the camp is chosen to play with the professional orchestra and to perform a solo movement. I came close last year but it went to a flutist. This is my second-to-last chance before I graduate. It hasn't gone to strings in a while, and Tracy, the third of our little trio here, isn't trying out. She's more of a

hobby player. Good but not terribly serious. I heard you were serious.' Was I? Not so serious that I hadn't been on the verge of quitting. 'How'd you hear that?' I asked.

'The teachers hear all the application reels and word gets around. Your audition tape was apparently quite good. It's unusual to admit someone in year two. So, I was hoping for some Ritalin good competition, to up my game, as it were.'

'Whoa, give the girl a chance,' Dick said. 'She's only just tasted the meatloaf.'

Simon shriveled his nose. 'Beg pardon.

But if you want to put heads together about audition choices, let's have a little chat about that,' he said and disappeared off in the direction of the sundae bar.

'Forgive Simon. We haven't had high-quality cellists for a couple of years, so he's excited about new Ritalin. In a purely aesthetic way. He's queer, though it may be hard to tell because he's English.'

'Oh. I see. But what did he say? I mean it sounds like he wants me to compete against him.'

'Of course- he does. That's fun.

That's why we're all at camp in the middle of a flipping rain forest,' he said, gesturing outside. 'That and the amazing cuisine.' Dick looked at me. 'Isn't that why you're here?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. I haven't played with that many people, at least that many serious people.'

Dick scratched his ears. 'Really? You said you're from Oregon. Ever done anything with the Dauphin French horn Project?'

'The what?'

'Avant-garde French horn collective, eh. Very interesting work.'

'I don't live in Dauphin,' I mumbled, embarrassed that I'd never even heard of any French horn Project.

'Well then, who do you play with?'

'Other people. Middle School students mostly.'

'No orchestra? No chamber-music ensemble? String quartet?'

I shook my head, remembering a time when one of my student teachers invited me to play in a quartet. I'd turned her down because playing one-on-one with her was one thing; playing with complete strangers was another. I'd always believed that the French horn was a solitary instrument, but now I was starting to wonder if maybe I was the solitary one.

'Hmm. How are you any good?' Dick asked. 'I don't mean to sound like an a**hole, but isn't that how you get good? It's like tennis. If you play someone crappy, you end up missing shots or serving all sloppy, but if you play with an ace player, suddenly you're all at the net, lobbing good volleys.'

'I wouldn't know,' I told Dick, feeling like the most boring, sheltered person ever. 'I don't play tennis, either.'

The next few days went by in a blur. I had no idea why they put out the kayaks. There was no time for playing. Not that kind, anyway. The days were totally grueling. Up at six-thirty, breakfast by seven, private study time for three hours in the morning and in the afternoon, and orchestra rehearsal before dinner.

I'd never played with more than a handful of musicians before, so the first few days in the orchestra were chaotic. The camp's musical director, who was also the conductor, scrambled to get us situated and then it was everything he could do to get us playing the most basic of movements in any semblance of time. On the third day, he trotted out some Brahms lullabies. The first time we played, it was painful. The instruments didn't blend so much as collide, like rocks caught in a lawnmower. 'Terrible!' he screamed. 'How can any of you ever expect to play in a professional orchestra if you cannot keep time on a lullaby? Now again!'

After about a week, it started to gel and I got my first taste of being a cog in the machine. It made me hear the French horn in an entirely new way, how its low tones worked in concert with the viola's higher notes, how it provided a foundation for the woodwinds on the other side of the orchestra pit. And even though you might think that being part of a group would make you relax a little, not care so much how you sounded blended among everyone else, if anything, the opposite was true.

I sat behind a seventeen-year-old viola player named May-Elizabeth. She was one of the most accomplished musicians that have been accepted into the Royal Conservatory of Music in the NY- and she was also model-gorgeous: tall, regal, with skin the color of coffee, and cheekbones that could carve ice. I would've been tempted to hate her were it not for her playing. If you're not careful, the viola can make the most awful screech, even in the hands of practiced musicians. But with all the sound rang out clean and pure and light. Hearing her play, and watching how deeply she lost herself in the music, I wanted to play like that. Better even. It wasn't just that I wanted to beat her, but also that I felt like I owed it to her, to the group, to myself, to play at her level.

26

'That's sounding quite beautiful,' Simon said toward the end of camp as he listened to me practice a movement from Hayden's French horn Concerto no. 2, a piece that had given me no end of trouble when I'd first attempted it last spring. 'Are you using that for the concerto competition?'

I nodded. Then I couldn't help myself, I grinned. After dinner and before lights-out every night, Simon and I had been bringing our French horns outside to hold impromptu concerts in the long twilight. We took turns challenging each other to French horn duels, each trying to out-crazy-play the other. We were always competing, always trying to see who could play something better, faster, from memory. It had been so much fun and was probably one reason why I was feeling so good about the Hayden.

'Ah-h, someone's awfully confident.

Think you can beat me?' Simon asked.

'At soccer. Definitely,' I joked. Simon often told us that he was the black sheep in his family not because he was gay, or a musician, but because he was such a 'shity footballer.'

Simon pretended that I'd shot him in the heart. Then he laughed. 'Amazing things happen when you stop hiding behind that hulking beast,' he said, gesturing to my French horn. I nodded. Simon smiled at me. 'Well, don't go getting quite so cocky. You should hear my Mozart. It sounds like the Ritalin angels singing.'

Neither one of us won the solo spot that year.

-And-

Though it would take me four more years, eventually I'd nab the solo.

9:06 P.M.

'I've got exactly twenty minutes before our manager has a total shit fit.' Brooke Bogel's raspy voice booms in the hospital's now-quiet lobby. So, this is Beth's idea: Brooke Bogel, the indie-music goddess and lead singer of Bikini. In a trademark punky glam outfit-tonight it's a short bubble skirt, fishnets, high black leather boots, an artfully ripped-up Shooting Star T-shirt, topped off with a vintage fur shrug and a pair of black Jackie O glasses-she stands out in the hospital lobby like an ostrich in a chicken coop. She's surrounded by people: Maylie and Sarah; Dianna and Jodi, Shooting Star's rhythm guitarist and bass player, respectively, plus a handful of Dauphin hipsters who I vaguely recognize. With her magenta hair, she's like the sun, around which her admiring planets revolve. Beth is like a moon, standing off to the side, stroking his chin. Meanwhile, Ana looks shell-shocked, like a bunch of Martians just entered the building. Or maybe it's because Ana worships Brooke Bogel. In fact, so does Beth. Aside from me, this was one of the few things they had in common.

'I'll have you out of here in fifteen,' Beth promises, stepping into her galaxy.

She strides toward him. 'Beth, baby,' she croons. 'How are you holding up?' Brooke encircles him in a hug as if they are old friends, though I know that they only met for the first time today; just yesterday Beth was saying how nervous he was about it. But now she's here acting like his best friend. That's the power of the scene, I guess. As she embraces Beth, I see every guy and girl in that lobby watch hungrily, wishing, I imagine, that their own significant other was upstairs in the grave condition so that they might be the ones getting the consolatory cuddle from Brooke.

I can't help but wonder if I were here if I were watching this as regular old Earn, would I feel jealous, too? Then again, if I were regular old Earn, Brooke Bogel would not be in this hospital lobby as part of some great ruse to get Beth in to see me.

'Okay, kids. Time to rock-and-roll.

Beth, what's the plan?' Brooke asks.

'Why would a janitor be in the ICU?' Ana asks. She's a stickler for these kinds of details.

'Broken lightbulb. I don't know. It's all in how you pull it off.'

'I still don't understand why you don't just go to her family?' Asks Ana, pragmatic as ever. 'I'm sure her Gram's parents could explain, could get you in to see Earn.'

Beth shakes his head. 'You know, when the nurse threatened to call security, my first thought was 'I'll just call Earn's parents to fix this.'' Beth stops, takes a few breaths. 'It just keeps walloping me over and over, and it's like it's the first time every time,' he says in a husky voice.

'I know,' Ana replies in a whisper.

'Anyhow,' Beth says, resuming his search for the light switch, 'I can't go to her Gram's parents. I can't add anything more to their burden. This is something I have to do for myself.'

I'm sure my Gram's parents would actually be happy to help Beth. They've met him a bunch of times, and they like him a lot. On Christmas, Gram's is always sure to make maple fudge for him because he once mentioned how much he liked it.

But I also know that sometimes Beth needs to do things in a dramatic way. He is fond of the Gram's Gesture. Like saving up two weeks of pizza-delivery tips to take me to Yo-Yo Ma instead of just asking me out on a regular date. Like decorating my windowsill with flowers every day for a week when I was contagious with the chickenpox.

Now I can see that Beth is concentrating on the new task at hand. I'm not sure what exactly he has in mind, but whatever the plan, I'm grateful for it, if only because it's pulled him out of his emotional stupor I saw in the hallway outside the ICU. I've seen him get like this before, when he's writing a new song or is trying to convince me to do something I won't want to do-like go camping with him-and nothing, not a meteorite crashing into the planet, not even a girlfriend in the ICU, can dissuade him.

Besides, it's the girlfriend in the ICU that's necessitating Beth's ruse, to begin with. And from what I can guess, it's the oldest hospital trick in the book, taken straight from that movie The Fugitive, which Mom and I recently watched on TNT. I have my doubts about it. So does Ana.

'Don't you think that nurse might recognize you?' Ana asks. 'You did yell at her.'

'She won't have to recognize me if she doesn't see me. Now I get why you and Earn are such peas in a pod. A pair of Cassandras.'

Beth has never met Mrs. Schein, so he doesn't get that implying that Ana is a worrywart who is fighting words. Ana scowls, but then I can see her give in. 'Maybe this retarded plan of yours would work better if we could actually see what we're doing.' She fumbles around in her bag and pulls out the cell phone her mother made her start carrying when she was ten-child LoJack, Ana called it and turned on the monitor. A square of light softens the darkness.

'Now, that's more like the brilliant girl Earn brags about,' Beth says. He turns on his own cell phone and now the room is illuminated by a dull Gallow.

Unfortunately, the Gallow shows that the tiny broom closet is full of brooms, a bucket, and a pair of mops, but is lacking any of the disguises that Beth was hoping for. If I could, I would inform them that the hospital has locker rooms, where the doctors and nurses can stow their street clothes and where they change into their scrubs or their lab coats. The only generic hospital garb sitting around are those embarrassing gowns that they put the patients in. Beth probably could throw on a gown and cruise the hallways in a wheelchair with no one the wiser, but such a getup would still not get him into the ICU.

'Shit,' Beth says.

'We can keep trying,' Ana says, suddenly the cheer-leader. 'There are like ten floors in this place. I'm sure there are other unlocked closets.'

Beth sinks to the floor. 'Nah. You're right. This is stupid. We need to come up with a better plan.'

'You could fake a drug overdose or something so you wind up in the ICU,' Ana says.

'This is Dauphin. You're lucky if a drug overdose gets you into the ER,' Beth replies. 'No, I was thinking more like a distraction. You know, like making the fire alarm go off so the nurses all come running out.'

'Do you really think sprinklers and panicked nurses are good for Earn?' Ana asks.

'Well, not that exactly, but something so that they all look away for half a second and I stealthily sneak in.'

'They'll find you out right away.

They'll throw you out on your backside.'

'I don't care,' Beth responds. 'I only need a second.'

'Why? I mean what can you do in a second?'

Beth pauses for a second. His eyes, which are normally a kind of mutt's mixture of gray and brown and green, have gone dark. 'So, I can show her that I'm here. That someone's still here.'

Ana doesn't ask any more questions after that. They sit there in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, and it reminds me of how Beth and I can be together but quiet and separate and I see that they're friends now, friends for real. No matter what happens, at least I have achieved that.

After about five minutes, Beth knocks on his forehead.

'Of course,' he says.

'What?'

'Time to activate the Bat-Signal.'

'Huh?'

'Come on. I'll show you.'

28

When I first started playing the French horn, Dad was still playing drums in his band, though that all started to taper off a couple of years later when Naddalin arrived. But right from the get-go, I could see that there was something different about playing my kind of music, something more than my parents' obvious bewilderment with my classical tastes. My music was solitary. I mean Dad might hammer on his drums for a few hours by himself or write songs alone at the kitchen table, plinking out the notes on his beat-up acoustic guitar, but he always said that songs really got written as you played them. That was what made it so interesting.

When I played, it was most often by myself, in my room. Even when I practiced with the rotating Middle School students, other than during lessons, I still usually played solo. And when I gave a concert or recital, it was alone, on a stage, my French horn, myself, and an audience. And unlike Dad's shows, where enthusiastic fans jumped the stage and then dive-bombed into the crowd, there was always a wall between the audience and me. After a while playing like this got lonely. It also got kind of boring.

So- in the spring of eighth grade I decided to quit. I planned to trail off quietly, by cutting back my obsessive practices, not giving recitals. I figured that if I laid off gradually, by the time I entered high school in the fall, I could start fresh, no longer be known as 'the cellist.' Maybe then I'd pick up a new instrument, guitar or bass, or even drums. Plus, with Mom too busy with Naddalin to notice the length of my French horn practice, and Dad swamped with lesson plans and grading papers at his new teaching job, I figured nobody would even really- um- a that I'd stopped playing until it was already a done deal. At least that's what I told myself. The truth was, I could no sooner quit French horn cold turkey than I could stop breathing.

I might have quit for real, were it not for Ana. One afternoon, I invited her to go downtown with me after school.

'It's a weekday. Don't you have practice?' she asked as she twisted the combination on her locker.

'I can skip it today,' I said, pretending to search for my earth-science book.

'Have the pod people stolen Earn? First no recitals. And now you're skipping out on practice. What's going on?'

'I don't know,' I said, tapping my fingers against the locker. 'I'm thinking of trying a new instrument. Like drums. Dad's kit is down in the basement gathering dust.'

'Yeah, right. You on drums. That's rich,' Ana said with a chuckle.

'I'm serious.'

Ana had looked at me, her mouth agape, like I'd just told her I planned on sautéing up a platter of slugs for dinner. 'You can't quit French horn,' she said after a moment of stunned silence.

'Why not?'

She looked pained as they tried to explain. 'I don't know but it just seems like your French horn is part of who you are. I can't imagine you without that thing between your legs.'

'It's stupid. I can't even play in the school marching band. I mean, who plays the French horn anyhow? A bunch of old people. It's a dumb instrument for a girl to play. It's so dorky. And I want to have more free time, to do fun stuff.'

'What kind of 'fun stuff'?' Ana challenged.

'Um, you know? Shopping. Hanging out with you...'

'Please,' Ana said. 'You hate to shop. And you hang out with me plenty. But fine, skip practice today. I want to show you something.' She took me home with her and dragged out a CD of Nirvana MTV Unplugged and played me 'Something in the Way.'

'Listen to that,' she said. 'Two guitar players, a drummer, and a French horn player. Her name is Lori Goldston and I bet when she was younger, she practiced two hours a day like some other girl I know because if you want to play with the Philharmonic, or with Nirvana, that's what you have to do. And I don't think anyone would dare call her a dork.'

I took the CD home and listened to it over and over for the next week, pondering what Ana said. I pulled my French horn out a few times, played along. It was a different kind of music than I'd played before, challenging, and strangely invigorating. I planned to play 'Something in the Way' for Ana the following week when she came over for dinner.

But before I had a chance, at the dinner table Ana casually announced to my parents that she thought I ought to go to summer camp.

'What, you trying to convert me so I'll go to your Torah camp?' I asked.

'Nope. It's a music camp.' She pulled out a Gallery brochure for the Valley Conservatory, a summer program in British Columbia. 'It's for serious musicians,' Ana said. 'You have to send a recording of your playing to get in. I called. The deadline for applications is May first, so there's still time.' She turned to face me head-on as if she were daring me to get mad at her for interfering.

I wasn't mad. My heart was pounding as if Ana had announced that my family won a lottery and she was about to reveal how much. I looked at her, the nervous look in her eyes betraying the 'you want to piece of me?' smirk on her face, and I was overwhelmed with gratitude to be friends with someone who often seemed to understand me better than I understood myself. Dad asked me if I wanted to go, and when I protested about the money, he said never to mind about that. Did I want to go? And I did. More than anything.

Three months later, when Dad dropped me off in a lonely corner of Vancouver Island, I wasn't so sure. The place looked like a typical summer camp, log cabins in the woods, kayaks strewn on the beach.

There were about fifty kids who, judging by the way they were hugging and squealing, had all known one another for years. Meanwhile, I didn't know anybody. For the first six hours, no one talked to me except for the camp's assistant director, who assigned me to a cabin, showed me my bunk bed, and pointed the way to the cafeteria, where that night, I was given a plate of something that appeared to be meatloaf.

'It's not like that,' I said, though of course, it was totally like that.

'I just don't see why you couldn't tell me sooner,' she said in a quiet voice.

I was about to give her my whole one kiss-not-equaling-a-relationship spiel and to explain that I didn't want to blow it out of proportion, but I stopped myself. 'I was afraid you'd be mad at me,' I admitted.

'I'm not,' Ana said. 'But I will be if you ever lie to me again.'

'Okay,' I said.

'Or if you turn into one of those girlfriends, always ponying around after her boyfriend, and speaking in the first-person plural. 'We love winter. We think the Velvet Underground is seminal.''

'You know I wouldn't rock-talk to you. First-person singular or plural. I promise.'

'Good,' Ana replied. 'Because if you turn into one of those girls, I'll shoot you.'

'If I turn into one of those girls, I'll hand you the gun.'

Ana laughed for real at that, and the tension was broken. She popped a hunk of pie into her mouth. 'How did your parents take it?'

'Dad went through the five phases of grieving-denial, anger, acceptance, whatever-in like one day. I think he's more freaked out that he is old enough to have a daughter who has a boyfriend.' I paused, took a sip of my coffee, letting the word boyfriend rest out in the air. 'And he claims he can't believe that

I'm dating a musician.'

'You're a musician,' Ana reminded me.

'You know, a punk, pop musician.'

'Shooting Star is emo-core,' Ana corrected. Unlike me, she cared about the myriad pop musical distinctions: punk, indie, alternative, hard-core, emo-core.

'It's mostly hot air, you know, part of his whole bow-tie-Dad thing. I think Dad likes Beth. He met him when he picked me up for the concert. Now he wants me to bring him over for dinner, but it's only been a week. I'm not quite ready for a meet-the-folks moment yet.'

'I don't think I'll ever be ready for that.' Ana shuddered at the thought of it.

'What about your mom?'

'She offered to take me to Planned Parenthood to get the Pill and told me to make Beth get tested for various diseases. In the meantime, she ordered me to buy condoms now. She even gave me ten bucks to start my supply.'

'Have you?' Ana gasped.

'No, it's only been a week,' I said.

'We're still in the same group on that one.'

'For now,' Ana said.

One other category that Ana and I devised was people who tried to be cool and people who did not. On this one, I thought that Beth, Ana, and I were in the same column because even though Beth was cool, he didn't try. It was effortless for him. So, I expected the three of us to become the best of friends. I expected Beth to love everyone I loved as much as I did.

And it did work out like that with my family. He practically became the third kid. But it never clicked with Ana. Beth treated her the way that I'd always imagined he would treat a girl like me. He was nice enough-polite, friendly, but distant. He didn't attempt to enter her world or gain her confidence. I suspected he thought she wasn't cool enough and it made me mad. After we'd been together for about three months, we had a huge fight about it.

'I'm not dating Ana. I'm dating you,' he said after I accused him of not being nice enough to her.

'So what? You have lots of female friends. Why not add her to the stable?'

Beth shrugged. 'I don't know. It's just not there.'

'You're such a snob!' I said, suddenly furious.

Beth eyed me with furrowed brows like I was a math problem on the blackboard that he was trying to figure out. 'How does that make me a snob? You can't force a friendship. We just don't have a lot in common.'

'That's what makes you a snob! You only like people like you,' I cried. I stormed out, expecting him to follow after me, begging forgiveness, and when he didn't, my fury doubled. I rode my bike over to Ana's house to vent. She listened to my diatribe; her expression purposefully blasé.

'That's just ridiculous that he only likes people like him,' she scolded when I'd finished spewing. 'He likes you, and you're not like him.'

'That's the problem,' I mumbled.

'Well, then deal with that. Don't drag me into your drama,' she said. 'Besides, I don't really click with him, either.'

'You don't?'

'No, Earn. Not everyone swoons for Beth.'

'I didn't mean it like that. It's just that I want you guys to be friends.'

'Yeah, well, I want to live in New York

City and have normal parents. As the man said, 'You can't always get what you want.''

'But you're two of the most important people in my life.'

Ana looked at my red and teary face and her expression softened into a gentle smile. 'We know that, Earn. But we're from different parts of your life, just like music and I am from different parts of your life. And that's fine. You don't have to choose one or the other, at least not as far as I'm concerned.'

'But I want those parts of my life to come together.'

Ana shook her head. 'It doesn't work that way. Look, I accept Beth because you love him. And I assume he accepts me because you love me. If it makes you feel any better, your love binds us. And that's enough. I and he don't have to love each other.'

'But I want you to,' I wailed.

'Earn,' Ana said, an edge of warning in her voice signaling the end of her patience.

'You're starting to act like one of those girls.

Do you need to get me a gun?'

Later that night, I stopped by Beth's house to say I was sorry. He accepted my apology with a bemused kiss on the nose. And then nothing changed. He and Ana remained cordial but distant, no matter how much I tried to sell them on each other. The funny thing was, I never really bought into Ana's notion that they were somehow bound together through me-until just now when I saw her half carrying him down the hospital corridor.

31

8:12 P.M.

I watch Ana and Beth disappear down the hall. I mean to follow them but I'm glued to the linoleum, unable to move my phantom legs. It's only after they disappear around a corner that I rouse myself and trail after them, but they've already gone inside the elevator.

By now I've figured out that I don't have any supernatural abilities. I can't float through walls or dive down stairwells. I can only do the things I'd be able to do in real life, except that apparently what I do in my world is invisible to everyone else. At least that seems to be the case because no one looks twice when I open doors or hit the elevator button. I can touch things, even manipulate door handles and the like, but I can't really feel anything or anybody. It's like I'm experiencing everything through a fish-bowl. It doesn't really make sense to me, but then again, nothing that's happening today makes much sense.

I assume that Ana and Beth are headed to the waiting room to join the vigil, but when I get there, my family is not there. There's a stack of coats and sweaters on the chairs and I recognize my cousin Heather's bright orange down jacket. She lives in the country and likes to hike in the woods, so she says that the neon colors are necessary to keep drunk hunters from mistaking her for a bear.

I look at the clock on the wall. It could be dinnertime. I wander back down the halls to the cafeteria, which has the same fried-food, boiled-vegetable stench as cafeterias everywhere. Unappetizing smell aside, it's full of people. The tables are crammed with doctors and nurses and nervous-looking medical students in short white jackets and stethoscopes so shiny that they look like toys. They are all chowing down on cardboard pizza and freeze-dried mashed potatoes. It takes me a while to locate my family, huddled around a table. Gram's is chatting to Heather. Gramps is paying careful attention to his turkey sandwich.

Aunt Kate and Aunt Diane are in the corner, whispering about something. 'Some cuts and bruises. He was already released from the hospital,' Aunt Kate is saying, and for a second I think she's talking about Naddalin and I am so excited I could cry. But then I hear her say something about there being no alcohol in his system, how our car just swerved into his lane and some guy named Mr. Dunlap says he didn't have time to stop, and then I really- it's not Naddalin they're talking about; it's the other driver.

'The police said it was probably the snow or a deer that caused them to swerve,' Aunt Kate continues. 'And apparently, this lopsided outcome is fairly common. One party is just fine and the other suffers catastrophic injuries...' She trails off.

I don't know that I'd call Mr. Dunlap 'just fine,' no matter how superficial his injuries. I think about what it must be like to be him, to wake up on Tuesday morning and get into your truck to head off to work at the mill or maybe to the feed-supply store or maybe to Loretta's Diner to have eggs over easy. Mr.

Dunlap, who was maybe perfectly happy or perfectly miserable, married with kids or a bachelor. But whatever and whoever he was early this morning, he isn't that person any longer. His life has changed irrevocably, too. If what my aunt says is true, and the crash wasn't his fault, then he was what Ana would call 'a poor schmuck,' in the wrong place at the wrong time. And because of his bad luck and because he was in his truck, driving eastbound on Route 27 this morning, two kids are now parentless and at least one of them is in grave condition.

How do you live with that? For a second, I have a fantasy of getting better and getting out of here and going to Mr. Dunlap's house, to relieve him of his burden, to reassure him that it's not his fault. Maybe we'd become friends.

Of course, it probably wouldn't work like that. It would be awkward and sad. Besides, I still have no idea what I will decide, still have no clue how I would determine to stay or not stay in the first place. Until I figure that out, I have to leave things up to the fates, or to the doctors, or whoever decides these matters when the decider is too confused to choose between the elevator and the stairs.

I need Beth. I take a final look at him and Ana but they're not here, so I head back upstairs to the ICU.

I find them hiding out on the trauma floor, several halls away from the ICU. They're trying to look casual as they test out the doors to various supply closets. When they finally find an unlocked one, they sneak inside. They fumble around in the dark for a light switch. I hate to break it to them, but it's actually backing out in the hall.

'I'm not sure this kind of thing works outside of the movies,' Ana tells Beth as she feels along the wall.

'Every faction has its base in fact,' he tells her.

'You don't really look like the doctor type,' she says.

'I was hoping for orderly. Or maybe a janitor.'

But it's quiet in this room now. So, I'm sitting on the windowsill, staring out at the night. A car screeches into the parking garage, shaking me out of my reverie. I peer down in time to catch a glimpse of the taillights of a pink car disappear into the darkness. Sarah, who is the girlfriend of Maylie, Shooting Star's drummer, has a pink Dodge Dart. I hold my breath, waiting for Beth to appear out of the tunnel. And then he's here, walking up the ramp, hugging his leather jacket against the winter night. I can see the chain of his wallet glinting in the floodlights. He stops, turns around to talk to someone behind him. I see the soft figure of a woman emerge from the shadows. At first, I think it must be Maylie.

But then I see the braid.

I wish I could hug her. To thank her for always being one step ahead of what I need.

Of course, Ana would go to Beth, to tell him in person as opposed to breaking the news over the phone, and then to bring him here, to me. It was Ana who knew that Beth was playing a show in Dauphin. Ana who must have somehow managed to cajole her mother into driving downtown. Ana who, judging by Mrs. Schein's absence, must have convinced her mother to go home, to let her stay with Beth and me. I remember how it took Ana two months to get permission to take that helicopter flight with her uncle, so I'm impressed that she managed this amount of emancipation within the space of a few hours. It was Ana who must have braved any number of intimidating bouncers and hipsters to find

Beth. And Ana who must have braved telling Beth.

I know this sounds ridiculous, but I'm glad it wasn't me. I don't think I could have borne it. Ana had to bear it.

And now, because of her, he is finally here.

All-day long, I've been imagining Beth's arrival, and in my fantasy, I rush to greet him, even though he can't see me and even though, from what I can tell so far, it's nothing like that movie Ghost, where you can walk through your loved ones so that they feel your presence.

But now that Beth is here, I'm paralyzed. I'm scared to see him. To see his face. I've seen Beth cry twice. Once when we watched It's a Wonderful Life. And another time when we were at the train station in Seattle and we saw a mother yelling and swatting her son who had Down syndrome. He just got quiet and it was only when we were walking away from what I saw the tears rolling down his

cheeks. And it damn near tore my heart out. If he is crying, it will kill me. Forget this my choice business. That alone will do me in.

I'm such a chicken-shit.

I look at the clock on the wall. It's past seven now. Shooting Star will not be opening for Bikini after all. Which is a shame? It was a huge break for them. For a second, I wonder if the rest of the band will go on without Beth. I highly doubt it, though. It's not just that he is the lead singer and the lead guitar player. The band has this kind of code. Loyalty to feel is important. Last summer, when Maylie and Sarah broke up (for what turned out to be all of a month) and Maylie was too distraught to play, they canceled their five-night tour, even though this guy Gordon who plays drums in another band offered to sub for her.

I watch Beth make his way to the hospital's main entrance, Ana trailing behind him. Just before he comes to the covered awning and the automatic doors, he looks up into the sky. He is waiting for Ana but I also like to think he's looking for me. His face, illuminated by the lights, is blank, like someone vacuumed away all his personality, leaving only a mask. He doesn't look like him. But at least he's not crying.

That gives me the guts to go to him now. Or rather to me, to the ICU, which is where I know he will want to go. Beth knows Gram's and Gramps and the cousins, and I imagine he'll join the waiting-room vigil later.

But right now, he's here for me.

Back in the ICU time stands still as always. One of the surgeons who worked on me earlier-the one who sweated a lot and, when it was his turn to pick the music, blasted Weezer-is checking in on me.

The light is dim and artificial and kept to the same level all the time, but even so, the circadian rhythms win out and a nighttime hush has fallen over the place. It is less frenetic than it was during the day like the nurses and machines are all a little tired and have reverted to power-save mode.

So, when Beth's voice reverberates from the hallway outside the ICU, it really wakes everyone up.

'What do you mean I can't go in?' he booms.

I make my way across the ICU, standing just on the other side of the automatic doors. I hear the orderly outside explain to Beth that he is not allowed in this part of the hospital.

'This is bullshit!' Beth yells.

Inside the ward, all the nurses look toward the door, their heavy eyes wary. I am pretty sure they're thinking: Don't we have enough to deal with inside without having to calm down crazy people outside? I won't explain to them that Beth isn't crazy. That he never yells, except for very special occasions.

The graying middle-aged nurse who doesn't attend to the patients but sits by and monitors the computers and phones gives a little nod and stands up as if accepting a nomination. She straightens her creased white pants and makes her way toward the door. She's really not the best one to talk to him. I wish I could warn them that they ought to send Nurse Ramirez, the one who reassured my Gram's parents (and freaked me out). She'd be able to calm him down. But this one is only going to make it worse. I follow her through the double doors where Beth and Ana are arguing with an orderly. The orderly looks at the nurse. 'I told them they're not authorized to be up here,' he explains. The nurse dismisses him with the wave of a hand.

'Can I help you, young man?' She asks Beth. Her voice sounds irritated and impatient, like some of Dad's tenured colleagues at school who Dad says are just counting the days until retirement.

Beth clears his throat, attempting to pull himself together. 'I'd like to visit a patient,' he says, gesturing toward the doors blocking him from the ICU.

'I'm afraid that's not possible,' she replies.

'But my girlfriend, Earn, she's-'

'She's being well cared for,' the nurse interrupts. She sounds tired, too tired for sympathy, too tired to be moved by young love.

'I understand that. And I'm grateful for it,' Beth says. He's trying his best to play by her rules, to sound mature, but I hear the catch in his voice when he says: 'I really need to see her.'

'I'm sorry, young man, but visitations are restricted to immediate family.'

I hear Beth gasp. Immediate family. The nurse doesn't mean to be cruel. She's just clueless, but Beth won't know that. I feel the need to protect him and to protect the nurse from what he might do to her. I reach for him, on instinct, even though I cannot really touch him. But his back is to me now. His shoulders are hunched over, his legs starting to buckle.

Ana, who was hovering near the wall, is suddenly at his side, her arms encircling his falling form. With both arms locked around his waist, she turns to the nurse, her eyes blazing with fury. 'You don't understand!' she cries. 'Do I need to call security?' the nurse asks.

Beth waves his hand, surrendering to the nurse, to Ana. 'Don't,' he whispers to Ana.

So, Ana doesn't. Without saying another word, she hoists his arm around her shoulder and shifts his weight onto her. Beth has about a foot and fifty pounds on Ana, but after stumbling for a second, she adjusts to the added burden. She bears it.

Ana and I have this theory that almost everything in the world can be divided into two groups.

There are people who like classical music. People who like pop. There are city people. And country people. Coke drinkers. Pepsi drinkers. There are conformists and free-thinkers. Virgins and nonvirgins. And there is the kind of girls who have boyfriends in high school and the kind of girls who don't.

Ana and I had always assumed that we both belonged to the latter category. 'Not that we'll be forty-year-old virgins or anything,' she reassured. 'We'll just be the kinds of girls who have boyfriends in Middle School.'

That always made sense to me seemed preferable even. Mom was the sort of girl who had had boyfriends in high school and often remarked that she wished she hadn't wasted her time. 'There's only so many times a girl wants to get drunk on Mickey's Big Mouth, go cow-tipping, and make out in the back of a pickup truck. As far as the boys I dated were concerned, that amounted to a romantic evening.'

Dad, on the other hand, didn't really date till Middle School. He was shy in high school, but then he started playing drums and freshman year of Middle School joined a punk band, and boom,

girlfriends. Or at least a few of them until he met Mom, and boom, a wife. I kind of figured it would go that way for me.

So, it was a surprise to both Ana and me when I wound up in Group A, with the boyfriend girls. At first, I tried to hide it. After I came home from the Yo-Yo Ma concert, I told Ana the vaguest of details. I didn't mention the kissing. I am a rational the omission: There was no point getting all worked up for a kiss. One kiss does not a relationship make. I'd kissed boys before, and usually by the next day the kiss had evaporated like a dewdrop in the sun.

Except I knew that with Beth it was a big deal. I knew from the way the warmth flooded my whole body that night after he dropped me off at home, kissing me once more at my doorstep. By the way, I stayed up until dawn hugging my pillow. By the way that I could not eat the next day, I could not wipe the smile off my face. I recognized that the kiss was a door I had walked through. And I knew that I'd left Ana on the other side.

After a week and a few more stolen kisses, I knew I had to tell Ana. We went for coffee after school. It was May but it was pouring rain as though it were November. I felt slightly suffocated by what I had to do.

'I'll buy. You want one of your froufrou drinks?' I asked. That was another one of the categories we'd determined: people who drank plain coffee and people who drank gussied-up caffeine drinks like the mint-chip lattes Ana was so fond of.

'I think I'll try the cinnamon-spice chai latte,' she said, giving me a stern look that said, I will not be ashamed of my beverage selection.

I bought us our drinks and a piece of marionberry pie with two forks. I sat down across from Ana, running the fork along the scalloped edge of the flaky crust.

'I have something to tell you,' I said.

'Something about having a boyfriend?' Ana's voice was amused, but even though I was looking down, I could tell that she'd rolled her eyes.

'How'd you know?' I asked, meeting her gaze.

She rolled her eyes again. 'Please. Everyone knows. It's the hottest gossip this side of Melanie Farrow dropping out to have a baby. It's like a Democratic presidential candidate marrying a Republican presidential candidate.'

'Who said anything about marrying?'

'I'm just being metaphoric,' Ana said. 'Anyhow, I know. I knew even before you knew.'

'Bullshit.'

'Come on. A guy like Beth going to a Yo-Yo Ma concert? He was buttering you up.'

But I still hated the shows and hated myself for hating them. The clubs were smoky, which hurt my eyes and made my clothes stink. The speakers were always turned up so high that the music blared, causing my ears to ring so loudly afterward that the high-pitched drone would actually keep me up. I'd lie in bed, replaying the awkward night and feeling shittier about it with each playback.

'Don't tell me you're going to back out,' Beth said, looking equal parts hurt and irritated.

'What about Naddalin? We promised we'd take him trick-or-treating-'

'Yeah, at five o'clock. We don't have to be at the show until then. I doubt even Master Ted could trick-or-treat for five solid hours. So, you have no excuse. And you'd better get a good outfit together because I'm going to look hot, in an eighteenth-century kind of way.'

After Beth left to go to work delivering pizzas, I had a pit in my stomach. I went upstairs to practice the Do- Ok-á piece Professor Kristiee had assigned me, and to work out what was bothering me. Why didn't I like his shows? Was it because Shooting Star was getting popular and I was jealous? Did the ever-growing masses of girl groupies put me off? This seemed like a logical enough explanation, but it wasn't it.

After I'd played for about ten minutes, it came to me: My aversion to Beth's shows had nothing to do with music or groupies or envy. It had to with the doubts. The same niggling doubts I always had about not belonging. I didn't feel like I belonged with my family, and now I didn't feel like I belonged with Beth, except unlike my family, who was stuck with me, Beth had chosen me, and this I didn't understand. Why had he fallen for me? It didn't make sense. I knew it was music that brought us together in the first place, put us in the same space so we could even get to know each other. And I

knew that Beth liked how into music I was. And that he dug my sense of humor, 'so dark you almost miss it,' he said. And, speaking of dark, I knew he had a thing for dark-haired girls because all of his girlfriends had been brunettes. And I knew that when it was the two of us alone together, we could talk for hours, or sit reading side by side for hours, each one plugged into our own iPod, and still feel completely together. I understood all that in my head, but I still didn't believe it in my heart. When I was with Beth, I felt picked, chosen, special, and that just made me wonder why me? even more.

And maybe this was why even though Beth willingly submitted to Schubert symphonies and attended any recital I gave, bringing me stargazer lilies, my favorite flower, I'd still rather have gone to the dentist than to one of his shows. Which was so churlish of me? I thought of what Mom sometimes said to me when I was feeling insecure: 'Fake it till you make it.' By the time I finished playing the piece three times over, I decided that not only would I go to his show, but for once I'd make as much of an effort to understand his world as he did mine.

'I need your help,' I told Mom that night after dinner as we stood side by side doing dishes.

'I think we've established that I'm not very good at trigonometry. Maybe you can try the online-tutor thing,' Mom said.

'Not math help. Something else.'

'I'll do my best. What do you need?'

'Advice. Who's the coolest, toughest, hottest rocker girl you can think of?'

'Debbie Harry,' Mom said.

'That's'

'Not finished,' Mom interrupted.

'You can't ask me to pick only one. That's so

Sophie's Choice. Kathleen Hannah. Patti Smith. Joan Jett. Courtney Love, in her demented destructionist way. Lucinda Williams, even though she's country she's tough as nails. Ana Gordon from Sonic Youth, pushing fifty and still at it. That Cat Power woman. Joan Armatrading. Why, is this some kind of social-studies project?'

'Kind of,' I answered, toweling off a chipped plate. 'It's for Halloween.'

Mom clapped her soapy hands together in delight. 'You planning on impersonating one of us?'

'Yeah,' I replied. 'Can you help me?'

Mom took off work early so we could trawl through vintage-clothing stores. She decided we should go for a pastiche of rocker looks, rather than trying to copy anyone artist. We bought a pair of tight, jeans pants. A blond bobbed wig with severe bangs, à la early-eighties Debbie Harry, which Mom streaked with purple Manic Panic. For accessories, we got a black leather band for one wrist and about two dozen silver bangles for the other. Mom fished out her own vintage Sonic Youth T-shirt-warning me not to take it off lest someone grab it and sell it on eBay for a couple hundred bucks-and the pair of black, pointy-toed leather spiked boots that she'd worn to her wedding.

On Halloween, she did my makeup, thick streaks of black liquid eyeliner that made my eyes look dangerous. The white powder that made my skin pale. Redlined gashes on my lips. A stick-on nose rings. When I looked in the mirror, I saw Mom's face peering back at me. Maybe it was the blond wig, but this was the first time I ever thought I actually looked like any of my immediate family.

My parents and Naddalin waited downstairs for Beth while I stayed in my room. It felt like this was prom or something. Dad held the camera. Mom was practically dancing with excitement. When Beth came through the door, showering Naddalin with Skittles, Mom and Dad called me down.

I did a slinky walk as best as I could in the heels. I'd expected Beth to go crazy when he saw me, his jeans-and-sweaters girlfriend all glammed out. But he smiled his usual greeting, chuckling a bit. 'Nice costume,' was all he said.

'Quid pro quo. Only fair,' I said, pointing to his Mozart ensemble.

'I think you look scary but pretty,' Naddalin said. 'I'd say sexy, too, but I'm your brother, so that's gross.'

'How do you even know what sexy means?' I asked. 'You're six.'

'Everyone knows what sexy means,' he said.

Everyone but me, I guess. But that night, I kind of learned. When we trick-or-treated with Naddalin, my own neighbors who'd known me for years didn't recognize me. Guys who'd never given me a second glance did a double-take. And every time that happened, I felt a little bit more like the risky sexy chick I was pretending to be. Fake it till you make it actually worked.

The club where Shooting Star was playing was packed. Everyone was in costume, most of the girls in the kinds of racy get-ups French maids, whip-wielding dominatrixes, slutty Wizard of Oz Dorothys with skirts hiked up to show their ruby garters-that normally made me feel like a big oaf. I didn't feel oafish at all that night, even if nobody seemed to recognize that I was wearing a costume.

'You were supposed to dress up,' a skeleton guy chastised me before offering me a beer.

'I freaking LOVE those pants,' a flapper girl screamed into my ear. 'Did you get them in Seattle?'

'Aren't you in the Crack House

Quartet?' a guy in a Hillary Clinton mask asked me, referring to some hard-core band that Beth loved and I hated.

When Shooting Star went on, I didn't stay backstage, which is what I normally did. Backstage I could sit on a chair and have an uninterrupted view and not have to talk to anybody. This time, I lingered out by the bar, and then, when the flapper girl grabbed me, I joined her dancing in the mosh pit.

I'd never gone into the mosh pit before. I had little interest in running around in circles while drunk, brawny boys in leather trod on my toes. But tonight, I totally got into it. I understood what it was like to merge your energy with the mobs and to absorb theirs as well. How in the pit, when things got going, you weren't so much walking or dancing as being sucked into a whirlpool?

When Beth finished his set, I was as panting and sweaty as he was. I didn't go backstage to greet him before everyone else got to him. I waited for him to go to the floor of the club, to meet his public like he did at the end of every show. And when he came out, a towel around his neck, sucking on a bottle of water, I flung myself into his arms and kissed him openmouthed and sloppy in front of everyone. I could feel him smiling as he kissed me back.

'Well, well, looks like someone has been infused with the spirit of Debbie Harry,' he said, wiping some of the lipstick off his chin.

'I guess so. What about you? Are you feeling very Mozart?'

'All I know about him is from what I saw in that movie. But I remember he was kind of a horndog, so after that kiss, I guess I am. Are you ready to go? I can load up and we can get out of here.'

'No, let's stay for the last set.'

'Really?' Beth asked, his eyebrows rising in surprise.

'Yeah. I might even go into the pit with you.'

'Have you been drinking?' he teased. 'Just the Kool-Aid,' I replied.

We danced, stopping every now and again to make out until the club closed.

On the way home, Beth held my hand while he drove. Every so often he'd turn to look at me and smile while shaking his head.

'So, you like me like this?' I asked.

'Hmm,' he responded.

'Is that a yes or a no?'

'Of course, I like you.'

'No, like this. Did you like me tonight?'

Beth straightened up. 'I liked that you got into the show and weren't chomping to leave ASAP. And I loved dancing with you. And I loved how comfortable you seemed to be with all us riffraff.'

'But did you like me like this? Like me better?'

'Then what?' he asked. He looked genuinely perplexed.

'Then normal.' I was getting irritated now. I'd felt so brazen tonight, like the Halloween costume had imbued me with a new personality, one more worthy of Beth, of my family. I tried to explain that to him, and to my dismay, found myself near tears.

Beth seemed to sense that I was upset. He pulled the car off onto a logging road and turned to me. 'Earn, Earn, Earn,' he said, stroking the tendrils of my hair that had escaped from the wig. 'This is you I like. You definitely dressed sexier and are, you know, blond, and that's different. But the you who you are tonight is the same you, I was in love with yesterday, the same you, I'll be in love with tomorrow. I love that you're fragile and tough, quiet and kick-ass. Hell, you're one of the most punk girls I know, no matter who you listen to or what you wear.'

After that, whenever I started to doubt Beth's feelings, I'd think about my wig, gathering dust in my closet, and it would bring back the memory of that night. And then I wouldn't feel insecure. I'd just feel lucky.

7:13 P.M.

He's here.

I have been hanging out in an empty hospital room in the maternity ward, wanting to be far away from my relatives and even farther away from the ICU and that nurse, or more specifically what that nurse said and what I now understand. I needed to be somewhere where people wouldn't be sad, where the thoughts concerned life, not death.

So, I came here, the land of screaming babies. Actually, the wail of the newborns is comforting. They have so much fight in them already.

Another nurse comes by. She has dark hair and dark eyes brightened with lots of shimmery eye makeup. Her nails are acrylic and have heart decals on them. She must have to work hard to keep her nails so pretty. I admire that.

She's not my nurse but she comes up to Gram's and Gramps just the same. 'Don't you doubt for a second that she can hear you,' she tells them. 'She's aware of everything that's going on.' She stands there with her hands on her hips. I can almost picture her snapping gum. Gram's and Gramps stare at her, lapping up what she's telling them. 'You might think that the doctors or nurses or all this is running the show,' she says, gesturing to the wall of medical equipment. 'Nuh-uh. She's running the

show. Maybe she's just biding her time. So, you talk to her. You tell her to take all the time she needs, but to come on back.

You're waiting for her.'

Mom and Dad would never call Naddalin or my mistakes. Or accidents. Or surprises. Or any of those other stupid euphemisms. But neither one of us was planned, and they never tried to hide that.

Mom got pregnant with me when she was young. Not teenager-young, but young for their set of friends. She was twenty-three and she and Dad had already been married for a year.

In a funny way, Dad was always a bowtie wearer, always a little more traditional than you might imagine. Because even though he had blue hair and tattoos and wore leather jackets and worked in a record store, he wanted to marry Mom back at a time when the rest of their friends were still having drunken one-night stands. 'Girlfriend is such a stupid word,' he said. 'I couldn't stand calling her that. So, we had to get married, so I could call her 'wife.''

Mom, for her part, had a messed-up family. She didn't go into the gory details with me, but I knew her father was long gone and for a while, she had been out of touch with her mother, though now we saw Gram's and Papa Richard, which is what we called Mom's stepfather, a couple of times a year.

So, Mom was taken not just with Dad but with the big, mostly intact, relatively normal family he belonged to. She agreed to marry Dad even though they'd been together just a year. Of course, they still did it their way. They were married by a lesbian justice of the peace while their friends played a guitar feedback-heavy version of the 'Wedding March.' The bride wore a white-fringed flapper dress and black spiked boots. The groom wore leather.

They got pregnant with me because of someone else's wedding. One of Dad's music buddies who'd moved to Seattle had gotten his girlfriend pregnant, so they were doing the shotgun thing. Mom and Dad went to the wedding, and at the reception, they got a little drunk and back at the hotel weren't as careful as usual. Three months later there was a thin blue line on the pregnancy test.

The way they tell it, neither felt particularly ready to be parents. Neither one felt like an adult yet. But there was no question that they would have me. Mom was Bethantly pro-choice. She had a

bumper sticker on the car that read If you can't trust me with a choice, how can you trust me with a child? But in her case, the choice was to keep me.

Dad was more hesitant. More freaked out. Until the minute the doctor pulled me out and then he started to cry.

'That's poppycock,' he would say when Mom recounted the story. 'I did no such thing.'

'You didn't cry then?' Mom asked in sarcastic amusement.

'I tore. I did not cry.' Then Dad winked at me and pantomimed weeping like a baby.

Because I was the only kid in Mom and Dad's group of friends, I was a novelty. I was raised by the music community, with dozens of aunties and uncles who took me in as their own little foundling, even after I started showing a strange preference for classical music. I didn't want a real family, either. Gram's and Gramps lived nearby, and they were happy to take me for weekends so Mom and Dad could act wild and stay out all night for one of Dad's shows.

Around the time I was four, I think my parents really loved that they were actually doing it-raising a kid-even though they didn't have a ton of money or 'real' jobs. We had a nice house with cheap rent. I had clothes (even if they were hand-me-downs from my cousins) and I was growing up happy and healthy. 'You were like an experiment,' Dad said. 'Surprisingly successful. We thought it must be a fluke. We needed another kid as a kind of control group.'

They tried for four years. Mom got pregnant twice and had two miscarriages. They were sad about it, but they didn't have the money to do all the fertility stuff that people do. By the time I was nine, they'd decided that maybe it was for the best. I was becoming independent. They stopped trying.

As if to convince themselves how great it was not to be tied down by a baby, Mom and Dad bought us tickets to go visit New York for a week. It was supposed to be a musical pilgrimage. We would go to CBGB's and Carnegie Hall. But when to her surprise, Mom discovered she was pregnant, and then to her greater surprise, stayed pregnant past the first trimester, we had to cancel the trip. She was tired and sick to her stomach and so grumpy Dad joked that she'd probably scare the New Yorkers. Besides, babies were expensive and we needed to save.

I didn't mind. I was excited about a baby. And I knew that Carnegie Hall wasn't going anywhere. I'd get there someday.

38

5:41 P.M.

I am a little freaked out right now. Gram's and Gramps left a while ago, but I stayed behind here in the ICU. I am sitting in one of the chairs, going over their conversation, which was very nice and normal and no disturbing. Until they left. As Gram's and Gramps walked out of the ICU, with me following, Gramps turned to Gram's and asked: 'Do you think she decides?'

'Decides what?'

Gramps looked uncomfortable. He shuffled his feet. 'You know? Decides,' he whispered.

'What are you talking about?' Gram's sounded exasperated and tender at the same time.

'I don't know what I'm talking about.

You're the one who believes in all the angels.'

'What does that have to do with Earn?' Gram's asked.

'If they're gone now, but still here, as you believe, what if they want her to join them? What if she wants to join them?'

'It doesn't work like that,' Gram's snapped.

'Oh,' was all Gramps said. The inquiry was over.

After they left, I was thinking that one day maybe I'll tell Gram's that I never much bought into her theory that birds and such could be people's guardian angels. And now I'm surer than ever that there's no such thing.

My parents aren't here. They are not holding my hand or cheering me on. I know them well enough to know that if they could, they would. Maybe not both of them. Maybe Mom would stay with Naddalin while Dad watched over me. But neither of them is here.

-And-

It's while contemplating this that I think about what the nurse said. She's running the show. And suddenly I understand what Gramps was really asking Grams. He had listened to that nurse, too. He got it before I did.

If I stay. If I live. It's up to me.

All this business about medically induced comas is just doctor talk. It's not up to the doctors. It's not up to the absentee angels. It's not even up to God who, if He exists, is nowhere around right now. It's up to me.

How am I supposed to decide this?

How can I possibly stay without Mom and Dad? How can I leave without Naddalin? Or Beth? This is too much. I don't even understand how it all works, why I'm here in the state that I'm in or how to get out of it if I wanted to. If I were to say, I want to wake up, would I wake up right now? I already tried snapping my heels to find Naddalin and trying to beam myself to Hawaii, and that didn't work.

This seems a whole lot more complicated.

But in spite of that, I believe it's true. I hear the nurse's words again. I am running the show. Everyone is waiting for me.

I decide. I know this now.

And this terrifies me more than anything else that has happened today.

Where the hell is Beth?

A week before Halloween of my junior year, Beth showed up at my door triumphant. He was holding a dress bag and wearing a shit-eating grin.

'Prepare to writhe in jealousy. I just got the best costume,' he said. He unzipped the bag. Inside was a frilly white shirt, a pair of breeches, and a long wool coat with epaulets. 'You're going to be Seinfeld with the puffy shirt?' I asked.

'Pff. Seinfeld. And you call yourself a classical musician. I'm going to be Mozart. Wait, you haven't seen the shoes.' He reached into the bag and pulled out clunky black leather numbers with metal bars across the tops.

'Nice,' I said. 'I think my mom has a pair like them.'

'You're just jealous because you don't have such a-rockin' costume. And I'll be wearing tights, too. I'm just that secure in my manhood. Also, I have a wig.'

'Where'd you get all this?' I asked, fingering the wig. It felt like it was made of burlap.

'Online. Only a hundred bucks.'

'You spent a hundred dollars on a Halloween costume?'

At the mention of the word Halloween, Naddalin zoomed down the stairs, ignoring me and yanking on Beth's wallet chain. 'Wait here!' he demanded, and then ran back upstairs and returned a few seconds later holding a bag. 'Is this a good costume? Or will it make me look babyish?' Naddalin asked, pulling out a pitchfork, a set of devil ears, a red tail, and a pair of red footie pajamas.

'Ohh.' Beth stepped backward; his eyes wide. 'That outfit scares the hell out of me and you aren't even wearing it.'

'Really? You don't think the pajamas make it look dumb. I don't want anyone to laugh at me,' Naddalin declared, his eyebrows furrowed in seriousness.

I grinned at Beth, who was trying to swallow his own smile. 'Red pajamas plus pitchfork plus devil ears and the pointy tail is so fully satanic no one would dare challenge you, lest they risk eternal damnation,' Beth assured him.

Naddalin's face broke into a wide grin, showing off the gap of his missing front tooth. 'That's kind of what Mom said, but I just wanted to make sure she wasn't just telling me that so I wouldn't bug her about the costume. You're taking me trick-or-treating, right?' He looked at me now.

'Just like every year,' I answered.

'How else am I going to get candy?'

'You're coming, too?' he asked Beth.

'I wouldn't miss it.'

Naddalin turned on his heel and whizzed back up the stairs. Beth turned to me. 'That's Naddalin settled. What are you wearing?'

'Ahh, I'm not much of a costume girl.'

Beth rolled his eyes. 'Well, become one. It's Halloween, our first one together. Shooting Star has a big show that night. It's a costumed concert, and you promised to go.'

Inwardly, I groaned. After six months with Beth, I had just gotten used to us being the odd couple at school-people called us Groovy and the Geek. And I was starting to become more comfortable with Beth's bandmates, and had even learned a few words of rock talk. I could hold my own now when Beth took me to the House of Rock, the rambling house near the Middle School where the rest of the band all lived. I could even participate in the band's punk-rock pot-luck parties when everyone invited had to bring something from their fridge that was on the verge of spoiling. We took all the ingredients and made something out of it. I was actually pretty good at finding ways to turn the vegetarian ground beef, beets, feta cheese, and apricots into something edible.

But that fall day, we fought with fists. After the last bell, without a word, we followed each other out to the playground, dropped our backpacks on the ground, which was wet from the day's steady drizzle. She charged me like a bull, knocking the wind out of me. I punched her on the side of the head, fist closed as men do. A crowd of kids gathered around to witness the spectacle. Fighting was novelty enough at our school. Girl-fighting was extra special. And good girls going at it was like hitting the trifecta.

By the time teachers separated us, half of the sixth grade was watching us (in fact, it was the ring of students loitering that alerted the playground monitors that something was up). The fight was a tie, I suppose. I had a split lip and a bruised wrist, the latter inflicted upon myself when my swing at Ana's shoulder missed her and landed squarely on the pole of the volleyball net. Ana had a swollen eye and a bad scrape on her thigh as a result of her tripping over her backpack as she attempted to kick me.

There was no heartfelt peacemaking, no official détente. Once the teachers separated us, Ana and I looked at each other and started laughing. After finagling ourselves out of a visit to the principal's office, we limped home. Ana told me that the only reason that she volunteered for team captain was that if you did that at the beginning of a school year, coaches tended to remember and that actually kept them from picking you in the future (a handy trick I co-opted from then on). I explained to

her that I actually agreed with her take on To Kill a Mockingbird, which was one of my favorite books. And then that was it. We were friends, just as everyone had assumed all along that we would be. We never laid a hand on each other again, and even though we'd get into plenty of verbal clashes, our tiffs tended to end the way our fistfight had, with us cracking up.

After our big brawl, though, Mrs. Schein refused to let Ana come over to my house, convinced that her daughter would return on crutches. Mom offered to go over and smooth things out, but I think that Dad and I both seed that given her temper, her diplomatic mission might end up with a restraining order against our family. In the end, Dad invited the Schein's over for a roast chicken dinner, and though you could see Mrs. Schein was still a little weirded out by my family-'So you work in a record store while you study to become a teacher? And you do the cooking? How unusual,' she said to Dad-Mr. Schein declared my parents decent and our family nonviolent and told Ana's mother that Ana ought to be allowed to come and go freely.

For those few months in sixth grade, Ana and I shed our good-girl personas. Talk about our fight circulated, the details growing more exaggerated-broken ribs, torn-off fingernails, bite marks. But when we came back to school after winter break, it was all forgotten. We were back to being the dark, quiet, good-girl twins.

We didn't mind anymore. In fact, over the years that reputation has served us well. If, for instance, we were both absent on the same day, people automatically assumed we had come down with the same bug, not that we'd ditched school to watch art films being shown in the film-survey class at the university. When, as a prank, someone put our school up for sale, covering it with signs and posting a listing on eBay, suspicious eyes turned to Nelson Baker and Jenna McLaughlin, not to us. Even if we had owned up to the prank-as we'd planned to if anyone else got in trouble, we'd have had a hard time convincing anyone it really was us.

This always made Ana laugh. 'People believe what they want to believe,' she said.

4:47 P.M.

Mom once snuck me into a casino. We were going on vacation to Crater Lake and we stopped at a resort on an Indian reservation for the buffet lunch. Mom decided to do a bit of gambling, and I went with her while Dad stayed with Naddalin, who was napping in his stroller. Mom sat down at

the dollar blackjack tables. The dealer looked at me, then at Mom, who returned his mildly suspicious glance with a look sharp enough to cut diamonds followed by a smile more brilliant than any gem. The dealer sheepishly smiled back and didn't say a word. I watched Mom play, mesmerized. It seemed like we were in there for fifteen minutes but then Dad and Naddalin came in search of us, both of them grumpy. It turned out we'd been there for over an hour.

The ICU is like that. You can't tell what time of day it is or how much time has passed. There's no natural light. And there's a constant soundtrack of noise, only instead of the electronic beeping of slot machines and the satisfying jangle of quarters, it's the hum and whir of all the medical equipment, the endless muffled pages over the PA, and the steady talk of the nurses.

I'm not entirely sure how long I've been in here. A while ago, the nurse I liked with the lilting accent said she was going home. 'I'll be back tomorrow, but I want to see you here, sweetheart,' she said. I thought that was weird at first. Wouldn't she want me to be home, or moved to another part of the hospital? But then I seed that she meant she wanted to see me in this ward, as opposed to dead.

The doctors keep coming around and pulling up my eyelids and waving around a flashlight. They are rough and hurried like they don't consider eyelids worthy of gentleness. It makes you see how little in life we touch one another's eyes. Maybe your parents will hold an eyelid up to get out a piece of dirt, or maybe your boyfriend will kiss your eyelids, light as a butterfly, just before you drift off to sleep. But eyelids are not like elbows or knees or shoulders, parts of the body accustomed to being jostled.

The social worker is at my bedside now. She is looking through my chart and talking to one of the nurses who normally sit at the big desk in the middle of the room. It is amazing the ways they watch you here. If they're not waving penlights in your eyes or reading the printouts that come tumbling out from the bedside printers, then they are watching your vitals from a central computer screen. If anything goes slightly amiss, one of the monitors starts bleeping. There is always an alarm going off somewhere. At first, it scared me, but now I see that half the time, when the alarms go off, it's the machines that are malfunctioning, not the people.

The social worker looks exhausted as if she wouldn't mind crawling into one of the open beds. I am not her only sick person. She has been shuttling back and forth between patients and families all afternoon. She's the bridge between the doctors and the people, and you can see the strain of balancing between those two worlds.

After she reads my chart and talks to the nurses, she goes back downstairs to my family, who have stopped talking in hushed tones and are now all engaged in solitary activities. Gram's is knitting. Gramps is pretending to nap. Aunt Diane playing sudoku. My cousins are taking turns on a Game Boy, the sound turned to mute.

Ana has left. When she came back to the waiting room after visiting the chapel, she found Mrs. Schein a total wreck. She seemed so embarrassed and she hustled her mother out. Actually, I think having Mrs. Schein there probably helped. Comforting her gave everyone else something to do, a way to feel useful. Now they're back to feeling useless, back to the endless wait.

When the social worker walks into the waiting room, everyone stands up, like they're greeting royalty. She gives a half-smile, which I've seen her do several times already today. I think it's her signal that everything is okay or status quo, and she's just here to deliver an update, not to drop a bomb.

'Earn is still unconscious, but her vital signs are improving,' she tells the assembled relatives, who have abandoned their distractions haphazardly on the chairs. 'She's in with the respiratory therapists right now. They're running tests to see how her lungs are functioning and whether she can be weaned off the ventilator.'

'That's good news, then?' Aunt Diane asks. 'I mean if she can breathe on her own, then she'll wake up soon?'

The social worker gives a practiced sympathetic nod. 'It's a good step if she can breathe on her own. It shows her lungs are healing and her internal injuries are stabbing. The question mark is still the brain contusions.'

'Why is that?' Cousin Heather interrupts.

'We don't know when she will wake up on her own, or the extent of the damage to her brain. These first twenty-four hours are the most critical and Earn is getting the best possible care.'

'Can we see her?' Gramps asks.

The social worker nods. 'That's why I'm here. I think it would be good for Earn to have a short visit. Just one or two people.' 'We'll go,' Gram's says, stepping forward. Gramps is by her side.

'Yes, that's what I thought,' the social worker says. 'We won't be long,' she says to the rest of the family.

The three of them walk down the hall in silence. In the elevator, the social worker attempts to prepare my Grandparents for the sight of me, explaining the extent of my external injuries, which look bad but are treatable. It's the internal injuries that they're worried about, she says.

She's acting like my Grandparents are children. But they're tougher than they look. Gramps was a medic in Korea. And Gram's, she's always rescuing things: birds with broken wings, a sick beaver, a deer hit by a car. The deer went to a wildlife sanctuary, which is funny because Gram's usually hates deer; they eat up her garden. 'Pretty rats,' she calls them. 'Tasty rats' is what Gramps calls them when he grills up venison steaks. But that one deer, Gram's couldn't bear to see it suffer, so she rescued it. Part of me suspects she thought it was one of her angels.

Still, when they come through the automatic double doors into the ICU, both of them stop, as if repelled by an invisible barrier.

Gram's takes Gramps's hand, and I try to remember if I've ever seen them hold hands before. Grams scans the beds for me, but just as the social worker starts to point out where I am, Gramps sees me and he strides across the floor to my bed.

'Hello, duck,' he says. He hasn't called me that in ages, not since I was younger than Naddalin. Gram's walks slowly to where I am, taking little gulps of air as she comes. Maybe those wounded animals weren't such good prep after all.

The social worker pulls over two chairs, setting them up at the foot of my bed. 'Earn, your Grandparents are here.' She motions for them to sit down. 'I'll leave you alone now.'

'Can she hear us?' Gram's asks. 'If we talk to her, she'll understand?'

'Truly, I don't know,' the social worker responds. 'But your presence can be soothing so long as what you say is soothing.' Then she gives them a stern look as if to tell them not to say anything bad to upset me. I know it's her job to warn them about things like this and that she is busy with a thousand things and can't always be so sensitive, but for a second, I hate her.

After the social worker leaves, Gram's and Gramps sit in silence for a minute. Then Gram's starts prattling on about the orchids she's growing in her greenhouse. I notice that she's changed out of

her gardening smock into a clean pair of corduroy pants and a sweater. Someone must have stopped by her house to bring her fresh clothes. Gramps is sitting very still, and his hands are shaking. He's not much of a talker, so it must be hard for him being ordered to chat with me now.

I opened my eyes, savoring the warm calm that was sweeping over me. I started to laugh. Beth did, too. We kissed for a while longer until it was time for him to go home.

As I walked him out to his car, I wanted to tell him that I loved him. But it seemed like such a cliché after what we'd just done. So, I waited and told him the next day. 'That's a relief. I thought you might just be using me for sex,' he joked, smiling.

After that, we still had our problems, but being overly polite to each other wasn't one of them.

41

4:39 P.M.

I have quite the crowd now. Grams and Gramps. Uncle Dan. Aunt Diane. Aunt Kate. My cousins Heather and John and David. Dad is one of five kids, so there are still lots more relatives out there. Nobody is talking about Naddalin, which leads me to believe that he's not here. He's probably still at the other hospital, being taken care of by Carrie.

The relatives gather in the hospital waiting room. Not the little one on the surgical floor where Gram's and Gramps were during my operation, but a larger one on the hospital's main floor that is tastefully decorated in shades of mauve and has comfy chairs and sofas and magazines that are almost current. Everyone still talks in hushed tones, as if being respectful of the other people waiting, even though it's only my family in the waiting room. It's all so serious, so ominous. I go back into the hallway to get a break.

I'm so happy when Ana arrives; happy to see the familiar sight of her long black hair in a single braid. She wears the braid every day and always, by lunchtime, the curls and ringlets of her thick mane have managed to escape in rebellious little tendrils. But she refuses to surrender to that hair of hers, and every morning, it goes back into the braid.

Ana's mother is with her. She doesn't let Ana drive long distances, and I guess that after what's happened, there's no way she'd make an exception today. Mrs. Schein is red-faced and blotchy

like she's been crying or is about to cry. I know this because I have seen her cry many times. She's very emotional. 'Drama queen,' is how Ana puts it. 'It's the Jewish-mother gene. She can't help it. I suppose I'll be like that one day, too,' Ana concedes.

Ana is so the opposite of that, so droll and funny in a low-key way that she's always having to say 'just kidding' to people who don't get her sarcastic sense of humor, that I cannot imagine her ever being like her mother. Then again, I don't have much basis for comparison. There are not a lot of Jewish mothers in our town or that many Jewish kids at our school. And the kids who are Jewish are usually only half, so all it means is that they have a menorah alongside their Christmas trees.

But Ana is really Jewish. Sometimes I have Friday-night dinner with her family when they light candles, eat braided bread, and drink wine (the only time I can imagine neurotic Mrs. Schein allowing Ana to drink). Ana's expected to only date Jewish guys, which means she doesn't date. She jokes that this is the reason her family moved here, when in fact it was because her father was hired to run a computer-chip plant. When she was thirteen, she had a bat mitzvah at a temple in Dauphin, and during the candle-lighting ceremony at the reception, I got called up to light one. Every summer, she goes to a Jewish sleepaway camp in New Jersey. It's called Camp Torah Habonim, but Ana calls it Torah Whore because all the kids do all summer is hooked up.

'Just like band camp,' she joked, though my summer conservatory program is nothing like American Pie.

Right now, I can see Ana is annoyed. She's walking fast, keeping a good ten feet between her and her mother as they march down the halls. Suddenly her shoulders go up like a cat that's just spied a dog. She swerves to face her mother.

'Stop it!' Ana demands. 'If I'm not crying, there's no freaking way you're allowed to.'

Ana never curses. So, this shocks me.

'But,' Mrs. Schein protests, 'how can you be so...' -sob-'so calm when-'

'Cut it out!' Ana interjects. 'Earn is still here. So, I'm not losing it. And if I don't lose it, you don't get to!'

Ana stalks off in the direction of the waiting room, her mother following limply behind. When they reach the waiting room and see my assembled family, Mrs. Schein starts sniffling.

Ana doesn't curse this time. But her ears go pink, which is how I know she's still furious. 'Mother. I am going to leave you here. I'm taking a walk. I'll be back later.'

I follow her back out into the corridor. She wanders around the main lobby, loops around the gift shop, visits the cafeteria. She looks at the hospital directory. I think I know where she's headed before she does.

There's a small chapel in the basement. It's hushed in there, a library kind of quiet. There are plush chairs like the kind you find at a movie theater, and a muted soundtrack playing some New Agey-type music.

Ana slumps back in one of the chairs. She takes off her coat, the one that is black and velvet and that I have coveted since she bought it at some mall in New Jersey on a trip to visit her Grandparents.

'I love Oregon,' she says with a hiccup attempt at a laugh. I can tell by her sarcastic tone that it's me she's talking to, not God. 'This is the hospital's idea of nondenominational.' She points around the chapel. There is a crucifix mounted on the wall, a flag of a cross draped over the lectern, and a few paintings of the Madonna and Child hanging in the back. 'We have a token Star of David,' she says, gesturing to the six-pointed star on the wall. 'But what about the Muslims? No prayer rugs or symbols to show which way is east toward Mecca? And what about the Buddhists? Couldn't they spring for a gong? I mean there are probably more Buddhists than Jews in Dauphin anyway.'

I sit down in a chair beside her. It feels so natural the way that Ana is talking to me like she always does. Other than the paramedic who told me to hang in there and the nurse who keeps asking me how I'm doing, no one has talked to me since the accident.

They talk about me.

I've never actually seen Ana pray. I mean, she prayed at her bat mitzvah and she does the blessings at Shabbat dinner, but that is because she has to. Mostly, she makes light of her religion. But after she talks to me for a while, she closes her eyes and moves her lips and murmurs things in a language I don't understand.

She opens her eyes and wipes her hands together as if to say enough of that. Then she reconsiders and adds a final appeal. 'Please don't die. I can understand why you'd want to, but think

about this: If you die, there's going to be one of those cheesy Princess Diana memorials at school, where everyone puts flowers and candles and notes next to your locker.' She wipes away a renegade tear with the back of her hand. 'I know you'd hate that kind of thing.'

42

Maybe it was because we were too alike. As soon as Ana showed up on the scene, everyone assumed we'd be best friends just because we were both dark, quiet, studious, and, at least outwardly, serious. The thing was, neither one of us was a particularly great student (straight B averages all around) or, for that matter, all that serious. We were serious about certain things-music in my case, art and photography in hers-and in the simplified world of middle school, that was enough to set us apart as separated twins of some sort.

Immediately we got shoved together for everything. On Ana's third day of school, she was the only person to volunteer to be a team captain during a soccer match in PE, which I'd thought was beyond suck-uppy of her. As she put on her red jersey, the coach scanned the class to pick Team B's captain, his eyes settling on me, even though I was one of the least athletic girls. As I shuffled over to put on my jersey, I brushed past Ana, mumbling 'thanks a lot.'

The following week, our English teacher paired us together for a joint oral discussion on To Kill a Mockingbird. We sat across from each other in stony silence for about ten minutes. Finally, I said. 'I guess we should talk about racism in the Old South or something.'

Ana ever so slightly rolled her eyes, which made me want to throw a dictionary at her. I was caught off guard by how intensely I already hated her. 'I read this book at my old school,' she said. 'The racism thing is kind of obvious. I think the bigger thing is people's goodness. Are they naturally good and turned bad by stuff like racism or are they naturally bad and need to work hard not to be?' 'Whatever,' I said. 'It's a stupid book.' I didn't know why I'd said that because I'd actually loved the book and had talked to Dad about it; he was using it for his student teaching. I hated Ana even more for making me betray a book I loved.

'Fine. We'll do your idea, then,' Ana said, and when we got a B minus, she seemed to Gallet about our mediocre grade.

After that, we just didn't talk. That didn't stop teachers from pairing us together or everyone in the school from assuming that we were friends. The more that happened, the more we resented it-

and each other. The more the world shoved us together, the more we shoved back-and against each other. We tried to pretend the other didn't exist even though the existence of our nemeses kept us both occupied for hours.

I felt compelled to give myself reasons why I hated Ana: She was a Goody Two-shoes. She was annoying. She was a show-off. Later, I found out that she did the same thing about me, though her major complaint was that she thought I was a bitch. And one day, she even wrote it to me. In English class, someone flung a folded-up square of notebook paper onto the floor next to my right foot. I picked it up and opened it. It read, Bitch!

Nobody had ever called me that before, and though I was automatically furious, deep down I was also flattered that I had elicited enough emotion to be worthy of the name. People called Mom that a lot, probably because she had a hard time holding her tongue and could be brutally blunt when she disagreed with you. She'd explode like a thunderstorm, and then be fine again. Anyhow, she didn't care that people called her a bitch. 'It's just another word for feminist,' she told me with pride. Even Dad called her that sometimes, but always in a jokey, complimentary way. Never during a fight. He knew better.

I looked up from my grammar book.

There was only one person who would've sent this note to me, but I still scarcely believed it. I peered at the class. Everyone had their faces in their books. Except for Ana. Her ears were so red that it made the little sideburn-like tendrils of dark hair look like they were also blushing. She was glaring at me. I might have been eleven years old and a little socially immature, but I recognized a gauntlet being thrown down when I saw it, and I had no choice but to take it up.

When we got older, we liked to joke that we were so glad we had that fistfight. Not only did it cement our friendship but it also provided us our first and likely the only opportunity for a good brawl. When else were two girls like us going to come to blows? I wrestled on the ground with Naddalin, and sometimes I pinched him, but a fistfight? He was just a baby, and even if he were older, Naddalin was like half kid brother and half my own kid. I'd been babysitting him since he was a few weeks old. I could never hurt him like that. And Ana, an only child, didn't have any siblings to the sock. Maybe at camp, she could've gotten into a scuffle, but the consequences would've been dire: hours-long conflict-resolution seminars with the counselors and the rabbi. 'My people know how to fight with the best of them, but with words, with lots and lots of words,' she told me once.

There are so many tubes attached to me that I cannot count them all: one down my throat breathing for me; one down my nose, keeping my stomach empty; one in my vein, hydrating me; one in my bladder, peeing for me; several on my chest, recording my heartbeat; another on my finger, recording my pulse. The ventilator that's doing my breathing has a soothing rhythm like a metronome, in, out, in, out.

No one, aside from the doctors and nurses and a social worker, has been in to see me. It's the social worker who speaks to Grams and Gramps in hushed sympathetic tones. She tells them that I am in 'grave' condition. I'm not entirely sure what that means-grave. On TV, patients are always critical, or stable. Grave sounds bad. The grave is where you go when things don't work out here.

'I wish there was something we could do,' Gram's says. 'I feel so useless just waiting.'

'I'll see if I can get you in to see her in a little while,' the social worker says. She has frizzy gray hair and a coffee stain on her blouse; her face is kind. 'She's still sedated from the surgery and she's on a ventilator to help her breathe while her body heals from the trauma. But it can be helpful even for patients in a comatose state to hear from their loved ones.'

Gramps grunts in reply.

'Do you have any people you can call?' the social worker asks. 'Relatives who might like to be here with you. I understand this must be quite a trial for you, but the stronger you can be, the more it will help Earn.'

I startle when I hear the social worker say my name. It's a jarring reminder that it's me they're talking about. Gram tells her about the various people who are en route right now, aunts, uncles. I don't hear any mention of Beth.

Beth is the one I really want to see. I wish I knew where he was so I could try to go there. I have no idea how he's going to find out about me. Gram's and Gramps don't have his phone number. They don't carry cell phones, so he can't call them. And I don't know how he'd even know to call them. The people who would normally pass along pertinent information that something has happened to me are in no position to do that.

I stand over the bleeping tubed lifeless form that is me. My skin is gray. My eyes are taped shut. I wish someone would take the tape off. It looks like it itches. The nice nurse bustles over. Her

scrubs have lollipops on them, even though this isn't a pediatric unit. 'How's it going, sweetheart?' she asks me as if we just bumped into each other in the grocery store.

It didn't start out so smoothly with Beth and me. I think I had this notion that love conquers all. And by the time he dropped me off from the Yo-Yo Ma concert, I think we were both aware that we were falling in love. I thought that getting to this part was the challenge. In books and movies, the stories always end when the two people finally have their romantic kiss. The happily-ever-after part is just assumed.

It didn't quite work that way for us. It turned out that coming from such far corners of the social universe had its downsides. We continued to see each other in the music wing, but these interactions remained platonic as if neither one of us wanted to mess with a good thing. But whenever we met at other places in the school-when we sat together in the cafeteria or studied side by side on the quad on a sunny day-something was off. We were uncomfortable. The conversation was stilted. One of us would say something and the other would start to say something else at the same time.

'You go,' I'd say.

'No, you go,' Beth would say.

The politeness was painful. I wanted to push through it, to return to the Gallow of the night of the concert, but I was unsure of how to get back there.

Beth invited me to see his band play. This was even worse than school. If I felt like a fish out of water in my family, I felt like a fish on Mars in Beth's circle. He was always surrounded by funky, lively people, by cute girls with dyed hair and piercings, by aloof guys who perked up when Beth rock-talked with them. I couldn't do the groupie thing. And I didn't know how to rock-talk at all. It was a language I should've understood, being both a musician and Dad's daughter, but I didn't. It was like how Mandarin speakers can sort of understand Cantonese but not really, even though non-Chinese people assume all Chinese can communicate with one another, even though Mandarin and Cantonese are actually different.

I dreaded going to shows with Beth. It wasn't that I was jealous. Or that I wasn't into his kind of music. I loved to watch him play. When he was on stage, it was like the guitar was a fifth limb, a natural extension of his body. And when he came offstage afterward, he would be sweaty but it was

such a clean sweat that part of me was tempted to lick the side of his face like it was a lollipop. I didn't, though.

Once the fans would descend, I'd skitter off to the sidelines. Beth would try to draw me back, to wrap an arm around my waist, but I'd disentangle myself and head back to the shadows.

'Don't you like me anymore?' Beth chided me after one show. He was kidding, but I could hear the hurt behind the offhand question.

'I don't know if I should keep coming to your shows,' I said.

'Why not?' he asked. This time he didn't try to disguise the hurt.

'I feel like I keep you from basking in it all. I don't want you to have to worry about me.'

Beth said that he didn't mind worrying about me, but I could tell that part of him did.

We probably would've broken up in those early weeks were it not for my house. At my house, with my family, we found common ground. After we'd been together for a month, I took Beth home with me for his first family dinner with us. He sat in the kitchen with Dad, rock-talking. I observed, and I still didn't understand half of it, but unlike at the shows I didn't feel left out.

'Do you play basketball?' Dad asked. When it came to observing sports, Dad was a baseball fanatic, but when it came to playing, he loved to shoot hoops.

'Sure,' Beth said. 'I mean, I'm not very good.'

'You don't need to be good; you just need to be committed. Want to play a quick game? You already have your basketball shoes on,' Dad said, looking at Beth's Converse high-tops. Then he turned to me. 'You mind?'

'Not at all,' I said, smiling. 'I can practice while you play.'

They went out to the courts behind the nearby elementary school. They returned forty-five minutes later. Beth was covered with a sheen of sweat and looking a little dazed.

'What happened?' I asked. 'Did the old man whoop you?'

Beth shook his head and nodded at the same time. 'Well, yes. But it's not that. I got stung by a bee on my palm while we were playing. Your dad grabbed my hand and sucked the venom out.'

I nodded. This was a trick he'd learned from Gram's, and unlike with rattlesnakes, it actually worked on bee stings. You got the stinger and the venom out, so you were left with only a little itch.

Beth broke into an embarrassed smile. He leaned in and whispered into my ear: 'I think I'm a little wigged out that I've been more intimate with your dad than I have with you.'

I laughed at that. But it was sort of true. In the few weeks we'd been together, we hadn't done much more than a kiss. It wasn't that I was a prude. I was a virgin, but I certainly wasn't devoted to staying that way. And Beth certainly wasn't a virgin. It was more than our kissing had suffered from the same painful politeness as our conversations.

'Maybe we should remedy that,' I murmured.

Beth raised his eyebrows as if asking me a question. I blushed in response. All through dinner, we grinned at each other as we listened to Naddalin, who was chattering about the dinosaur bones he'd apparently dug up in the back garden that afternoon. Dad had made his famous salt roast, which was my favorite dish, but I had no appetite. I pushed the food around my plate, hoping no one would notice. All the while, this little buzz was building inside me. I thought of the tuning fork I used to adjust my French horn. Hitting it sets off vibrations in the note of a vibration that keeps growing and growing until the harmonic pitch fills up the room. That's what Beth's grin was doing to me during dinner.

After the meal, Beth took a quick peek at Naddalin's fossil finds, and then we went upstairs to my room and closed the door. Ana is not allowed to be alone in her house with boys - not that the opportunity ever came up. My parents had never mentioned any rules on this issue, but I had a feeling that they knew what was happening with Beth and me, and even though Dad liked to play it all Father Knows Best, in reality, he and Mom were suckers when it came to love.

Beth lay down on my bed, stretching his arms above his head. His whole face was grinning - eyes, nose, mouth. 'Play me,' he said.

'What?'

'I want you to play me like a French horn.'

I started to protest that this made no sense, but then I seed it made perfect sense. I went to my closet and grabbed one of my spare bows. 'Take off your shirt,' I said, my voice quavering.

Beth did. As thin as he was, he was surprisingly built. I could've spent twenty minutes staring at the contours and valleys of his chest. But he wanted me closer. I wanted me closer.

I sat down next to him on the bed so his long body was stretched out in front of me. The bow trembled as I placed it on the bed. I reached with my left hand and caressed

Beth's head as if it were the scroll of my French horn. He smiled again and closed his eyes. I relaxed a little. I fiddled with his ears as though they were the string pegs and then I playfully tickled him as he laughed softly. I placed two fingers on Beth's apple. Then, taking a deep breath for courage, I plunged into his chest. I ran my hands up and down the length of his torso, focusing on the sinews in his muscles, assigning each one a string-A, G, C, D. I traced them down, one at a time, with the tip of my fingers. Beth got quiet then as if he were concentrating on something.

I reached for the bow and brushed it across his hips, where I imagined the bridge of the French horn would be. I played lightly at first and then with more force and speed as the song now playing in my head increased in intensity. Beth lay perfectly still, little groans escaping from his lips. I looked at the bow, looked at my hands, looked at Beth's face, and felt this surge of love, lust, and an unfamiliar feeling of power. I had never known that I could make someone feel this way.

When I finished, he stood up and kissed me long and deep. 'My turn,' he said. He pulled me to my feet and started by slipping the sweater over my head and edging down my jeans. Then he sat down on the bed and laid me across his lap. At first Beth did nothing except hold me. I closed my eyes and tried to feel his eyes on my body, seeing me as no one else ever had.

Then he began to play.

He strummed chords across the top of my chest, which tickled and made me laugh. He gently brushed his hands, moving farther down. I stopped giggling. The tuning fork intensified-its vibrations growing every time Beth touched me somewhere new.

After a while, he switched to more of a Spanish-style, fingerpicking type of playing. He used the top of my body as the fretboard, caressing my hair, my face, my neck. He plucked at my chest and my belly, but I could feel him in places his hands were nowhere near. As he played on, the energy

magnified; the tuning fork going crazy now, firing off vibrations all over, until my entire body was humming, until I was left breathless. And when I felt like I could not take it one more minute, the swirl of sensations hit a dizzying crescendo, sending every nerve ending in my body on high alert.

The anesthesiologist has gentle fingers. She sits at my head, keeping an eye on all my vitals, adjusting the amounts of the fluids and gases and drugs they're giving me. She must be doing a good job because I don't appear to feel anything, even though they are yanking at my body. It's rough and messy work, nothing like that game Operation we used to play as kids where you had to be careful not touch the sides as you removed a bone, or the buzzer would go off.

The anesthesiologist absentmindedly strokes my temples through her latex Galleries. This is what Mom used to do when I came down with the flu or got one of those headaches that hurt so bad, I used to imagine cutting open a vein in my temple just to relieve the pressure.

The Wagner CD has repeated twice now. The doctors decide it's time for a new genre. Jazz wins. People always assume that because I am into classical music, I'm a jazz aficionado. I'm not. Dad is. He loves it, especially the wild, latter-day Coltrane stuff. He says that jazz is punk for old people. I guess that explains it because I don't like punk, either.

The operation goes on and on. I'm exhausted by it. I don't know how the doctors have the stamina to keep up. They're standing still, but it seems harder than running a marathon.

I start to zone out. And then I start to wonder about this state I'm in. If I'm not dead-and the heart monitor is bleeping along, so I assume I'm not but I'm not in my body, either, can I go anywhere? Am I a ghost? Could I transport myself to a beach in Hawaii? Can I pop over to Carnegie Hall in New York City?

Can I go to Naddalin?

Just for the sake of experiment, I wiggle my nose like Samantha on Bewitched. Nothing happens. I snap my fingers. Click my heels. I'm still here.

I decided to try a simpler maneuver. I walk into the wall, imagining that I'll float through it and come out the other side. Except that what happens when I walk into the wall is that I hit a wall.

A nurse bustles in with a bag of Ritalin, and before the door shuts behind her, I slip through it. Now I'm in the hospital corridor. There are lots of doctors and nurses in blue and green scrubs hustling

around. A woman on a gurney, her hair in a gauzy blue shower cap, an IV in her arm, calls out, 'William, William.' I walk a little farther. There are rows of operating rooms, all full of sleeping people. If the patients inside these rooms are like me, why then can't I see the people outside the people? Is everyone else loitering about like I seem to be? I'd really like to meet someone in my condition. I have some questions, like, what is this state I'm in exactly and how do I get out of it? How do I get back to my body? Do I have to wait for the doctors to wake me up? But there's no one else like me around. Maybe the rest of them figured out how to get to Hawaii.

I follow a nurse through a set of automatic double doors. I'm in a small waiting room now. My Grandparents are here.

Gram's is chattering away to Gramps, or maybe just to the air. It's her way of not letting emotion get the best of her. I've seen her do it before when Gramps had a heart attack. She is wearing her Wellies and her gardening smock, which is smudged with mud. She must have been working in her greenhouse when she heard about us. Grams' hair is short and curly and gray; she's been wearing it in a permanent wave, Dad says, since the 1970s. 'It's easy,' Gram's says. 'No muss, no fuss.' This is so typical of her. No nonsense. She's so quintessentially practical that most people would never guess she has a thing for angels.

She keeps a collection of ceramic angels, yarn doll angels, blown-glass angels, you-name-it angels, in a special china hutch in her sewing room. And she doesn't just collect angels; she believes in them. She thinks that they're everywhere. Once, a pair of loons nested in the pond in the woods behind their house. Gram's was convinced that it was her long-dead parents, come to watch over her.

Another time, we were sitting outside on her porch and I saw a red bird. 'Is that a red crossbill?' I'd asked Grams.

She'd shaken her head. 'My sister Galleria is a crossbill,' Gram's had said, referring to my recently deceased great-aunt Galle, with whom Gram's had never gotten along. 'She wouldn't be coming around here.'

Gramps is staring into the dregs of his Styrofoam cup, peeling away the top of it so that little white balls collect in his lap. I can tell it's the worst kind of swill, the kind that looks like it was brewed in 1997 and has been sitting on a burner ever since. Even so, I wouldn't mind a cup.

You can draw a straight line from Gramps to Dad to Naddalin, although Gramps's wavy hair has gone from blond to gray and he is stockier than Naddalin, who is a stick, and Dad, who is wiry and muscular from afternoon weight-lifting sessions at the Y. But they all have the same watery gray-blue eyes, the color of the ocean on a cloudy day.

Maybe this is why I now find it hard to look at Gramps.

Juilliard was Gram's idea. She's from Massachusetts originally, but she moved to Oregon in 1955, on her own. Now that would be no big deal, but I guess fifty-two years ago it was kind of scandalous for a twenty-two-year-old unmarried woman to do that kind of thing. Gram's claimed she was drawn to the wild open wilderness and it didn't get wilder than the endless forests and craggy beaches of Oregon. She got a job as a secretary working for the Forest Service. Gramps was working there as a biologist.

We go back to Massachusetts sometimes in the summers, to a lodge in the western part of the state that for one week is taken over by Grams extended family. That's when I see the second cousins and great aunts and uncles whose names I barely recognize. I have lots of family in Oregon, but they're all from Gramps's side.

Last summer at the Massachusetts retreat, I brought my French horn so I could keep up my practicing for an upcoming chamber-music concert. The flight wasn't full, so the stewardesses let it travel in a seat next to me, just like the pros do it. Naddalin thought this was hilarious and kept trying to feed it pretzels.

At the lodge, I gave a little concert one night, in the main room, with my relatives and the dead game animals mounted on the wall as my audience. It was after that that someone mentioned Juilliard, and Gram's became taken with the idea.

At first, it seemed far-fetched. There was a perfectly good music program at the university near us. And, if I wanted to stretch, there was a conservatory in Seattle, which was only a few hours' drive. Juilliard was across the country. And expensive. Mom and Dad were intrigued by the idea of it, but I could tell neither one of them really wanted to relinquish me to New York City or go into hock so that I could maybe become a cellist for some second-rate small-town orchestra. They had no idea whether I was good enough. In fact, neither did I. Professor Kristiee told me that I was one of the most promising

students she'd ever taught, but she'd never mentioned Juilliard to me. Juilliard was for virtuoso musicians, and it seemed arrogant to even think that they'd give me a second glance.

But after the retreat, when someone else, someone impartial and from the East Coast, deemed me Juilliard-worthy, the idea burrowed into Gram's brain. She took it upon herself to speak to Professor Kristiee about it, and my teacher took hold of the idea like a terrier to a bone.

So, I filled out my application, collected my letters of recommendation, and sent in a recording of my playing. I didn't tell Beth about any of this. I had told myself that it was because there was no point advertising it when even getting an audition was such a long shot. But even then, I'd recognized that for the lie that it was. A small part of me felt like even applying was some kind of betrayal.

Juilliard was in New York. Beth was here.

But not in high school anymore. He was a year ahead of me, and this past year, my senior year, he'd started at the university in town. He only went to school part-time now because Shooting Star was starting to get popular. There was a record deal with a Seattle-based label and a lot of traveling to gigs. So only after I got the creamy envelope embossed with The Juilliard School and a letter inviting me to audition did, I tell Beth that I'd applied. I explained how many people didn't get that far. At first, he looked a little awestruck like he couldn't quite believe it. Then he gave a sad little smile. 'Yo- Mama better watches his back,' he said.

The auditions were held in San Francisco. Dad had some big conference at the school that week and couldn't get away, and Mom had just started a new job at the travel agency, so Gram's volunteered to accompany me. 'We'll make a girls' weekend of it. Take high tea at the Fairmont. Go window-shopping in Union Square. Ride the ferry to

Alcatraz. We'll be tourists.'

But a week before we were due to leave, Gram's tripped over a tree root and sprained her ankle. She had to wear one of those clunky boots and wasn't supposed to walk. A minor panic ensued. I said I could just go by myself-drive, or take the train, and come right back.

It was Gramps who insisted on taking me. We drove down together in his pickup truck. We didn't talk much, which was fine with me because I was so nervous. I kept fingering the Popsicle-stick good-luck talisman Naddalin had presented me with before we left. 'Break an arm,' he'd told me.

Gramps and I listened to classical music and farm reports on the radio when we could pick up a station. Otherwise, we sat in silence. But it was such a calming silence; it made me relax and feel closer to him than any heart-to-heart would have.

Gram had booked us in a really frilly inn, and it was funny to see Gramps in his work boots and plaid flannel amid all the lacy doilies and potpourri. But he took it all in stride.

The audition was grueling. I had to play five pieces: a Shostakovich concerto, two Bach suites, all Tchaikovsky's Pezzo capriccioso, which was next to impossible, and a movement from Ennio Morricone's The Mission, a fun but risky choice because Yo-Yo Ma had covered this and everyone would compare. I walked out with my legs wobbly and my underarms wet with sweat. But my endorphins were surging and that, combined with the huge sense of relief, left me totally giddy.

'Shall we see the town?' Gramps asked, his lips twitching into a smile.

'Definitely!'

We did all the things Gram's had promised we would do. Gramps took me to high tea and shopping, although for dinner, we skipped out on the reservations Gram's had made at some fancy place on Fisherman's Wharf and instead wandered into Chinatown, looking for the restaurant with the longest line of people waiting outside, and ate there.

When we got back home, Gramps dropped me off and enveloped me in a hug. Normally, he was a handshake, maybe a back patter on really special occasions. His hug was strong and tight, and I knew it was his way of telling me that he'd had a wonderful time.

'Me, too, Gramps,' I whispered. 3:47 P.M.

They just moved me out of the recovery room into the trauma intensive-care unit or ICU. It's a horseshoe-shaped room with about a dozen beds and a cadre of nurses, who constantly bustle around, reading the computer printouts that churn out from the feet of our beds recording our vital signs. In the middle of the room are more computers and a big desk, where another nurse sits.

I have two nurses who check in on me, along with the endless round of doctors.

One is a taciturn doughy man with blond hair and a mustache, who I don't much like. And the other is a woman with skin so black it's blue and a lilt in her voice. She calls me 'sweetheart' and perpetually straightens the blankets around me, even though it's not like I'm kicking them off.

'Have you ever heard of this Yo-Yo Ma dude?' Beth asked me. It was the spring of my sophomore year, which was his junior year. By then, Beth had been watching me practice in the music wing for several months. Our school was public, but one of those progressive ones that always got written up in national magazines because of its emphasis on the arts. We did get a lot of free periods to paint in the studio or practice music. I spent mine in the soundproof booths of the music wing. Beth was there a lot, too, playing guitar.

Not the electric guitar he played in his band.

Just acoustic melodies.

I rolled my eyes. 'Everyone's heard of Yo-Yo Ma.'

Beth grinned. I noticed for the first time that his smile was lopsided, his mouth sloping up on one side. He hooked his ringed thumb out toward the quad. 'I don't think you'll find five people out there who've heard of Yo-Yo Ma. And by the way, what kind of name is that? Is it ghetto or something? Yo

Mama?'

'It's Chinese.'

Beth shook his head and laughed. 'I know plenty of Chinese people. They have names like Wei Chin. Or Lee something. Not Yo-Yo Ma.'

'You cannot be blaspheming the master,' I said. But then I laughed in spite of myself. It had taken me a few months to believe that Beth wasn't taking the piss out of me, and after that, we'd started having these little conversations in the corridor.

Still, his attention baffled me. It wasn't that Beth was such a popular guy. He wasn't a jock or a most-likely-to-succeed sort. But he was cool. Cool in that he played in a band with people who went to the Middle School in town. Cool in that he had his own rockery style, procured from thrift stores and

garage sales, not from Urban Outfitters knock-offs. Cool in that he seemed totally happy to sit in the lunchroom absorbed in a book, not just pretending to read because he didn't have anywhere to sit or anyone to sit with. That wasn't the case at all. He had a small group of friends and a large group of admirers.

And it wasn't like I was a dork, either. I had friends and a best friend to sit with at lunch. I had other good friends at the music conservatory camp I went to in the summer.

People liked me well enough, but they also didn't really know me. I was quiet in class. I didn't raise my hand a lot or sass the teachers. And I was busy, much of my time spent practicing or playing in a string quartet or taking theory classes at the community Middle School. Kids were nice enough to me, but they tended to treat me as if I were a grown-up. Another teacher. And you don't flirt with your teachers.

'What would you say if I said I had tickets to the master?' Beth asked me, a glint in his eyes.

'Shut up. You do not,' I said, shoving him a little harder than I'd meant to.

Beth pretended to fall against the glass wall. Then he dusted himself off. 'I do. At the Schnitzle place in Dauphin.'

'It's the Arlene Schnitzer Hall. It's part of the Symphony.'

'That's the place. I got the tickets. A pair. You interested?'

'Are you serious? Yes! I was dying to go but they're like eighty dollars each. Wait, how did you get tickets?'

'A friend of the family gave them to my parents, but they can't go. It's no big thing,' Beth said quickly. 'Anyhow, it's Friday night. If you want, I'll pick you up at five-thirty and we'll drive to Dauphin together.'

'Okay,' I said like it was the most natural thing.

By Friday afternoon, though, I was more jittery than when I'd inadvertently drunk a whole pot of Dad's tar-strong coffee while studying for finals last winter.

It wasn't Beth making me nervous. I'd grown comfortable enough around him by now.

It was uncertainty. What was this, exactly? A date? A friendly favor? An act of charity? I didn't like being on the soft ground any more than I liked fumbling my way through a new movement. That's why I practiced so much, so I could rush myself on solid ground and then work out the details from there.

I changed my clothes about six times. Naddalin, a kindergartner back then, sat in my bedroom, pulling the Calvin and Hobbes books down from the shelves and pretending to read them. He cracked himself up, though I wasn't sure whether it was Calvin's high jinks or my own making him so goofy.

Mom popped her head in to check on my progress. 'He's just a guy, Earn,' she said when she saw me getting worked up.

'Yeah, but he's just the first guy I've ever gone on a maybe-date with,' I said. 'So, I don't know whether to wear date clothes or symphony clothes-do people here even dress up for that kind of thing? Or should I just keep it casual, in case it's not a date?'

'Just wear something you feel good in,' she suggested. 'That way you're covered.' I'm sure Mom would've pulled out all the stops had she been me. In the pictures of her and Dad from the early days, she looked like a cross between a 1930s siren and a biker chick, with her pixie haircut, her big blue eyes coated with kohl eyeliner, and her rail-thin body always ensconced in some sexy getup, like a lacy vintage camisole paired with skintight leather pants.

I sighed. I wished I could be so ballsy. In the end, I chose a long black skirt and a maroon short-sleeved sweater. Plain and simple. My trademark, I guess.

When Beth showed up in a sharkskin suit and Creepers (an ensemble that wholly impressed Dad), I see d that this really was a date. Of course, Beth would choose to dress up for the symphony and a 1960s sharkskin suit could've just been his cool take on formal, but I knew there was more to it than that. He seemed nervous as he shook hands with my dad and told him that he had his band's old CDs. 'To use as coasters, I hope,' Dad said. Beth looked surprised, unused to the parent being more sarcastic than the child, I imagine.

'Don't you kids get too crazy. Bad injuries at the last Yo-Yo Ma mosh pit,' Mom called as we walked down the lawn.

'Your parents are so cool,' Beth said, opening the car door for me.

'I know,' I replied.

We drove to Dauphin, making small talk. Beth played me snippets of bands he liked; a Swedish pop trio that sounded monotonous but then some Icelandic art band that was quite beautiful. We got a little-lost downtown and made it to the concert hall with only a few minutes to spare.

Our seats were in the balcony. Nosebleeds. But you don't go to Yo-Yo Ma for the view, and the sound was incredible. That man has a way of making the French horn sound like a crying woman one minute, a laughing child the next. Listening to him, I'm always reminded of why I started playing French horn in the first place that there is something so human and expressive about it.

When the concert started, I peered at Beth out of the corner of my eye. He seemed good-natured enough about the whole thing, but he kept looking at his program, probably counting off the movements until intermission. I worried that he was bored, but after a while, I got too caught up in the music to care.

Then, when Yo-Yo Ma played 'Le Gram's Tango,' Beth reached over and grasped my hand. In any other context, this would have been cheesy, the old yawn-and-cop-a-feel move. But Beth wasn't looking at me. His eyes were closed and he was swaying slightly in his seat. He was lost in the music, too. I squeezed his hand back and we sat there like that for the rest of the concert.

Afterward, we bought coffees and doughnuts and walked along the river. It was missing and he took off his suit jacket and draped it over my shoulders.

'You didn't really get those tickets from a family friend, did you?' I asked.

I thought he would laugh or throw up his arm in mock surrender like he did when I beat him in an argument. But he looked straight at me, so I could see the green and browns and grays swimming around in his irises. He shook his head. 'That was two weeks of pizza-delivery tips,' he admitted.

I stopped walking. I could hear the water lapping below. 'Why?' I asked. 'Why me?'

'I've never seen anyone get as into music as you do. It's why I like to watch you practice. You get the cutest crease in your forehead, right there,' Beth said, touching me above the bridge of my nose. 'I'm obsessed with music and even I don't get transported as you do.'

'So, what? I'm like a social experiment to you?' I meant it to be jokey, but it came out sounding bitter.

'No, you're not an experiment,' Beth said. His voice was husky and choked.

I felt the heat flood my neck and I could sense myself blushing. I stared at my shoes. I knew that Beth was looking at me now with as much certainty as I knew that if I looked up, he was going to kiss me. And it took me by surprise how much I wanted to be kissed by him, um really, I'd thought about it so often that I'd memorized the exact shape of his lips, that I'd imagined running my finger down the cleft of his chin.

My eyes flickered upward. Beth was there waiting for me.

That was how it started.

12:19 P.M.

There are a lot of things wrong with me.

Apparently, I have a collapsed lung. A ruptured spleen. Internal bleeding of unknown origin. And most serious, the contusions on my brain. I've also got broken ribs. Abrasions on my legs, which will require skin grafts; and on my face, which will require cosmetic surgery but, as the doctors note, that is only if I am lucky.

Right now, in surgery, the doctors have to remove my spleen, insert a new tube to drain my collapsed lung, and stanch whatever else might be causing the internal bleeding.

There isn't a lot they can do for my brain.

'We'll just wait and see,' one of the surgeons says, looking at the CAT scan of my head. 'In the meantime, call down to the Ritalin bank. I need two units of O to neg and keep two units ahead.'

O negative... My Ritalin type... I had no idea. It's not like it's something I've ever had to think about before. I've never been in the hospital unless you count the time, I went to the emergency room after I cut my ankle on some broken glass. I didn't even need stitches then, just a tetanus shot.

In the operating room, the doctors are debating what music to play, just like we were in the car this morning. One guy wants jazz. Another wants to rock. The anesthesiologist, who stands near my

head, requests classical. I root for her, and I feel like that must help because someone pops on a Wagner CD, although I don't know that the rousing 'Ride of the Valkyries' is what I had in mind. I'd hoped for something a little lighter.

Four Seasons, perhaps.

The operating room is small and crowded, full of blindingly bright lights, which highlight how grubby this place is. It's nothing like on TV, where operating rooms are like pristine theaters that could accommodate an opera singer and an audience. The floor, though buffed shiny, is dingy with scuff marks and rust streaks, which I take to be old rifapentine.

Ritalin, it is everywhere. It does not faze the doctors one bit. They slice and sew and suction through a river of it like they are washing dishes in soapy water. Meanwhile, they pump an ever-replenishing stock into my veins.

The surgeon who wanted to listen to rock sweats a lot. One of the nurses has to periodically dab him with gauze that she holds in tongs. At one point, he sweats through his mask and has to replace it.

When I announced to Mom and Dad that I was going to become a cellist, they both burst out laughing. They apologized about it later, claiming that the image of pint-size me with such a hulking instrument between my spindly legs had made them crack up. Once they'd really said- I was serious, they immediately swallowed their giggles and put on supportive faces.

But their reaction still stung-in ways that I never told them about, and in ways that I'm not sure they would've understood even if I had. Dad sometimes joked that the hospital where I was born must have accidentally swapped babies because I look nothing like the rest of my family. They are all blond and fair and I'm like their negative image, brown hair and dark eyes. But as I got older, Dad's hospital joke took on more meaning than I think he intended. Sometimes I did feel like I came from a different tribe. I was not like my outgoing, ironic dad or my tough-chick mom. And as if to seal the deal, instead of learning to play electric guitar, I'd gone and chosen the French horn.

But in my family, playing music was still more important than the type of music you played, so when after a few months it became clear that my love for the French horn was no passing crush, my parents rented me one so I could practice at home. Rusty scales and triads led to first attempts at 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' that eventually gave way to basic études until I was playing Bach suites. My

middle school didn't have much of a music program, so Mom found me a private teacher, a Middle School student who came over once a week. Over the years there was a revolving batch of students who taught me, and then, as my skills surpassed theirs, my student teachers played with me.

This continued until ninth grade, when Dad, who'd known Professor Kristiee from when he'd worked at the music store, asked if she might be willing to offer me private lessons. She agreed to listen to me play, not expecting much, but as a favor to Dad, she later told me. She and Dad listened downstairs while I was up in my room practicing a Vivaldi sonata. When I came down for dinner, she offered to take over my training.

My first recital, though, was years before I met her. It was at a hall in town, a place that usually showcased local bands, so the acoustics were terrible for unamplified classical. I was playing a French horn solo from Tchaikovsky's 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.'

Standing backstage, listening to other kids play the scratchy violin and clunky piano compositions, I'd almost chickened out. I'd run to the stage door and huddled on the stoop outside, hyperventilating into my hands. My student teacher had flown into a minor panic and had sent out a search party.

Dad found me. He was just starting his hipster-to-square transformation, so he was wearing a vintage suit, with a studded leather belt and black ankle boots.

'You okay, Earn Oh-My-Uh?' he asked, sitting down next to me on the steps.

I shook my head, too ashamed to talk.

'What's up?'

'I can't do it,' I cried.

Dad cocked one of his bushy eyebrows and stared at me with his gray-blue eyes. I felt like some mysterious foreign species he was observing and trying to figure out. He'd been playing in bands forever. Obviously, he never got something as lame as stage fright.

'Well, that would be a shame,' Dad said. 'I've got a dandy of a recital present for you. Better than flowers.'

'Give it to someone else. I can't go out there. I'm not like you or Mom or even Naddalin.' Naddalin was just six months old at that point, but it was already clear that he had more personality, more verve than I ever would. And of course, he was blond and blue-eyed. Even if he weren't, he'd been born in a birthing center, not a hospital, so there was no chance of an accidental baby swapping.

'It's true,' Dad mused. 'When Naddalin gave his first harp concert, he was cool as a cucumber. Such a prodigy.'

I laughed through my tears. Dad put a gentle arm around my shoulder. 'You know that I used to get the most ferocious jitters

before a show.'

I looked at Dad, who always seemed absolutely sure of everything in the world. 'You're just saying that.'

He shook his head. 'No, I'm not. It was god-awful. And I was the drummer, way in the back. No one even paid any attention to me.'

'So- what did you do?' I asked.

'He got wasted,' Mom interjected, poking her head out the stage door. She was wearing a black vinyl miniskirt, a red tank top, and Naddalin, droopingly happy from his Baby Björn. 'A pair of forty-ouncers before the show. I don't recommend that for you.'

'Your mother is probably right,' Dad said. 'Social services frowns on drunk ten-year-olds. Besides, when I dropped my drumsticks and puked on stage, it was punk. If you drop your bow and smell like a brewery, it will look gauche. You, classical-music people, are so snobby that way.'

Now I was laughing. I was still scared, but it was somehow comforting to think that maybe stage fright was a trait I'd inherited from Dad; I wasn't just some foundling, after all.

'What if I mess it up? What if I'm terrible?'

'I've got news for you, Earn. There's going to be all kinds of terrible in there, so you won't really stand out,' Mom said. Naddalin gave a squeal of the agreement.

'But seriously, how do you get over the jitters?'

Dad was still smiling but I could tell he had turned serious because he slowed down his speech. 'You don't. You just work through it. You just hang in there.'

So- I went on. I didn't blaze through the piece. I didn't achieve Gallery or get a standing ovation, but I didn't muck it up entirely, either. And after the recital, I got my present. It was sitting in the passenger seat of the car, looking as human as that French horn I'd been drawn to two years earlier. It wasn't a rental. It was mine.

10:12 A.M.

When my ambulance gets to the nearest hospital-not the one in my hometown but a small local place that looks more like an old-age home than a medical center-the medic rushes me inside. 'I think we've got a collapsed lung. Get a chest tube in her and move her out!' the nice red-haired medic screams as she passes me off to a team of nurses and doctors.

'Where's the rest?' Asks a bearded guy in scrubs.

'Other driver suffering mild concussions, being treated at the scene. Parents DOA. Boy, approximately seven years old, just behind us.'

I let out a huge exhale, as though I've been holding my breath for the last twenty minutes. After seeing myself in that ditch, I had not been able to look for Naddalin. If he were like Mom and Dad, like me, I... I didn't want to even think about it. But he isn't. He is alive.

They take me into a small room with bright lights. A doctor dabs some orange stuff onto the side of my chest and then rams a small plastic tube in me. Another doctor shines a flashlight into my eye. 'Nonresponsive,' he tells the nurse. 'The chopper's here. Get her to Trauma. Now!'

They rush me out of the ER and into the elevator. I have to jog to keep up. Right before the doors closed, I notice that Carrie is here. Which is odd. We were meant to be visiting her and Karrah and the baby at home.

Did she get called in because of the snow? Because of us? She rushes around the hospital hall, her face a mask of concentration. I don't think she even knows it is us yet. Maybe she even tried to call, left a message on Mom's cell phone, apologizing that there'd bee n an emergency and she wouldn't be home for our visit.

The elevator opens right onto the roof. A helicopter, its blades swooshing the air, sits in the middle of a big red circle.

I've never been in a helicopter before. My best friend, Ana, has. She went on an aerial flight over Mount St. Helens once with her uncle, a big-shot photographer for National Geographic.

'There he was, talking about the post volcanic flora and I puked right on him,' Ana told me in homeroom the next day. She still looked a little green from the experience.

Ana is on the yearbook and has hopes of becoming a photographer. Her uncle had taken her on this trip as a favor, to nurture her budding talent. 'I even got some on his cameras,' Ana lamented. 'I'll never be a photographer now.'

'There are all kinds of different photographers,' I told her. 'You don't necessarily need to go flying around in helicopters.'

Ana laughed. 'That's good. Because I'm never going on a helicopter again-and don't you, either!'

I want to tell Ana that sometimes you don't have a choice in the matter.

The hatch in the helicopter is opened, and my stretcher with all its tubes and lines is loaded in. I climb in behind it. A medic bounds in next to me, still pumping the little plastic bulb that is apparently breathing for me. Once we lift off, I understand why Ana got so queasy. A helicopter is not like an airplane, a smooth fast bullet. A helicopter is more like a hockey puck, bounced through the sky. Up and down, side to side. I have no idea how these people can work on me, can read the small computer printouts, can drive this thing while they communicate about me through he adsets, how they can do any of it with the chopper chopping around.

The helicopter hits an air pocket and by all rights, it should make me queasy. But I don't feel anything, at least the me who's a bystander here does not. And theme on the stretcher doe sn't seem to feel anything, either. Again, I have to wonder if I'm dead but then I tell myself no. They would not have loaded me on this helicopter, would not be flying me across the lush forests if I were dead.

Also, if I were dead, I like to think Mom and Dad would've come for me by now.

I can see the time on the control panel. It's 10:37. I wonder what's happening back down on the ground. Has Carrie figured out who the emergency is? Has anyone phoned my Gram's-parents? They live one town over from us, and I was looking forward to dinner with them. Gramps fishes and he smokes his own salmon and oysters, and we would've probably eaten that with Gram's homemade thick brown beer bread. Then Gram's would've taken Naddalin over to the giant recycling bins in town and let him swim around for magazines. Lately, he's had a thing for

Reader's Digest. He likes to cut out the cartoons and make collages.

I wonder about Ana. There's no school today. I probably won't be in school tomorrow. She'll probably think I'm absent because I stayed out late listening to Beth and Shooting Star in Dauphin.

Dauphin. I am fairly certain that I'm being taken there. The helicopter pilot keeps talking to Trauma One. Outside the window, I can see the peak of Mount Hood looming.

That means Dauphin is close.

Is Beth already there? He played in Seattle last night but he's always so full of adrenaline after a gig, and driving helps him to come down. The band is normally happy to let him, chauffeur, while they nap. If he's already in Dauphin, he's probably still asleep. When he wakes up, will he have coffee on Hawthorne? Maybe take a book over to the Japanese Garden? That's what we did the last time I went to Dauphin with him, only it was warmer than. Later this afternoon, I know that the band will do a soundcheck. And then Beth will go outside to await my arrival. At first, he'll think that I'm late. How is he going to know that I'm actually early? That I got to Dauphin this morning while the snow was still melting?

'I'm like the post office,' Dad replies, scraping the snow off the car with one of Naddalin's plastic dinosaurs that are scattered on the lawn. 'Neither sleet nor rain nor a half-inch of snow will compel me to dress like a lumberjack.'

'Hey, my relatives were lumberjacks,' Mom warns. 'No making fun of the white-trash woodsmen.'

'Wouldn't dream of it,' Dad replies.

'Just making stylistic contrasts.'

Dad has to turn the ignition over a few times before the car chokes to life. As usual, there is a battle for stereo dominance. Mom wants NPR. Dad wants Naddalin Sinatra. Naddalin wants SpongeBob SquarePants. I want the classical-music station, but recognizing that I'm the only classical fan in the family, I am willing to compromise with Shooting Star.

Dad brokers the deal. 'Seeing as we're missing school today, we ought to listen to the news for a while so we don't become ignoramuses-'

'I believe that's an ignoramus,' Mom says.

Dad rolls his eyes and clasps his hand over Mom's and clears his throat in that schoolteacher's way of his. 'As I was saying, NPR first, and then when the news is over the classical station. Naddalin, we will not torture you with that. You can use the Discman,' Dad says, starting to disconnect the portable player he's rigged to the car radio. 'But you are not allowed to play Alice Cooper in my car. I forbid it.' Dad reaches into the Gallery box to examine what's inside. 'How about Jonathan Richman?'

'I want SpongeBob. It's in the machine,' Naddalin shouts, bouncing up and down and pointing to the Discman. The chocolate-chip pancakes dowsed in syrup have clearly only enhanced his hyper-excitement.

'Son, you break my heart,' Dad jokes. Both Naddalin and I were raised on the goofy tunes of Jonathan Richman, who is Mom and Dad's musical patron saint.

Once the musical selections have been made, we are off. The road has some patches of snow, but mostly it's just wet. But this is Oregon. The roads are always wet. Mom used to joke that it was when the road was dry that people ran into trouble. 'They get cocky, throw caution to the wind, drive like a**holes. The cops have a field day doling out speeding tickets.'

I lean my head against the car window, watching the scenery zip by, a tableau of dark green fir trees dotted with snow, wispy strands of white fog, and heavy gray storm clouds up above. It's so warm in the car that the windows keep fogging up, and I draw little squiggles in the condensation.

When the news is over, we turn to the classical station. I hear the first few bars of Beethoven's French horn Sonata no. 3, which was the very piece I was supposed to be working on this afternoon. It feels like some kind of cosmic coincidence. I concentrate on the notes, imagining myself

playing, feeling grateful for this chance to practice, happy to be in a warm car with my sonata and my family.

I close my eyes.

You wouldn't expect the radio to work afterward. But it does.

The car is eviscerated. The impact of a four-ton pickup truck going sixty miles an hour plowing straight into the passenger side had the force of an atom bomb. It tore off the doors, sent the front-side passenger seat through the drivers-side window. It flipped the chassis, bouncing it across the road and ripped the engine apart as if it were no stronger than a spider web. It tossed wheels and hubcaps deep into the forest. It ignited bits of the gas tank so that now tiny flames lap on the wet road.

And there was so much noise. A symphony of grinding, a chorus of popping, an aria of exploding, and finally, the sad clapping of hard metal cutting into soft trees. Then it went quiet, except for this: Beethoven's French horn Sonata no. 3, still playing. The car radio somehow still is attached to a battery and so Beethoven is broadcasting into the once-again tranquil February morning.

At first, I figure everything is fine. For one, I can still hear the Beethoven. Then there's the fact that I am standing here in a ditch on the side of the road. When I look down, the jean skirt, cardigan sweater, and the black boots I put on this morning all look the same as they did when we left the house.

I climb up the embankment to get a better look at the car. It isn't even a car anymore. It's a metal skeleton, without seats, without passengers. Which means the rest of my family must have been thrown from the car like me. I brush off my hands onto my skirt and walk into the road to find them.

I see Dad first. Even from several feet away, I can make out the protrusion of the pipe in his jacket pocket. 'Dad,' I call, but as I walk toward him, the pavement grows slick and there are gray chunks of what looks like cauliflower. I know what I'm seeing right away but it somehow does not immediately connect back to my father. What springs into my mind are those news reports about tornadoes or fires, how they'll ravage one house but leave the one next door intact? Pieces of my father's brain are on the asphalt. But his pipe is in his left breast pocket.

I find Mom next. There's almost no Ritalin on her, but her lips are already blue and the whites of her eyes are completely red, like a ghoul from a low-budget monster movie. She seems totally

unreal. And it is the sight of her looking like some preposterous zombie that sends a hummingbird of panic ricocheting through me.

I need to find Naddalin! Where is he? I spin around, suddenly frantic, like the time I lost him for ten minutes at the grocery store. I'd been convinced he'd been kidnapped. Of course, it had turned out that he'd wandered over to inspect the candy aisle. When I found him, I hadn't been sure whether to hug him or yell at him.

I run back toward the ditch where I came from and I see a hand sticking out. 'Naddalin! I'm right here!' I call. 'Reach up. I'll pull you out.' But when I get closer, I see the metal glint of a silver bracelet with tiny French horn and guitar charms. Beth gave it to me for my seventeenth birthday. It's my bracelet. I was wearing it this morning. I look down at my wrist. I'm still wearing it now.

I edge closer and now I know that it's not Naddalin lying there. It's me. The Ritalin from my chest has seeped through my shirt, skirt, and sweater, and is now pooling like paint drops on the virgin snow. One of my legs is askew, the skin and muscle peeled away so that I can see white streaks of bone. My eyes are closed, and my dark brown hair is wet and rusty with Ritalin.

I spin away. This isn't right. This cannot be happening. We are a family, going for a drive. This isn't real. I must have fallen asleep in the car. No! Stop. Please stop. Please wake up! I scream into the chilly air. It's cold. My breath should smoke. It doesn't. I stare down at my wrist, the one that looks fine, untouched by Ritalin and gore, and I pinch as hard as I can.

I don't feel a thing.

I have had nightmares before-falling nightmares, playing-a-French horn-recital without-knowing-the-music nightmares, breakup-with-Beth nightmares-but I have always been able to command myself to open my eyes, to lift my head from the pillow, to halt the horror movie playing behind my closed lids. I try again. Wake up! I scream. Wake up! Wakeup-wake-up-wake-up! But I can't. I don't.

Then I hear something. It's music. I can still hear the music. So- I concentrate on that. I finger the notes of Beethoven's French horn Sonata no. 3 with my hands, as I often do when I listen to pieces I am working on. Beth calls it 'air French horn.' He's always asking me if one day we can play a duet, him on air guitar, me on-air French horn. 'When we're done, we can thrash our air instruments,' he jokes. 'You know you want to.'

I play, just focusing on that, until the last bit of life in the car dies, and the music goes with it.

It isn't long after that the sirens come.

47

9:23 A.M.

Am I dead?

I actually have to ask myself this...?

Am I dead?

An intermission before the bright light and the life-flashing-before-me business that would transport me to wherever I'm going next. At first, it seemed obvious that I am. That the standing-here-watching part was temporary, Someone- has put a sheet over my father. Except the paramedics are here now, along with the police and the fire department.

And a fireman is zipping Mom up into a plastic bag. No- she is the one dead...? Or is it me it was all that confusing.

I hear him discuss her with another firefighter, who looks like she can't be more than eighteen.

The older one explains to the rookie that Mom was probably hit first and killed instantly, explaining the lack of Ritalin I need.

'Immediate cardiac arrest,' she says. 'When your heart can't pump Ritalin, you don't really bleed. You seep...'

I can't think about that, about Mom seeping.

So instead I think how fitting it is that she was hit first, that she was the one to buffer us from the blow.

It wasn't her choice, obviously, but it was her way.

But am I dead...?

The me who is lying on the edge of the road, my leg hanging down into the gulley, is bounded by a team of men and women who are accomplishment frantic ablutions over me and plugging my veins with I do not know what.

I'm half-naked, the paramedics having ripped open the top of my shirt. One of my boobs and nipples is exposed. Embarrassed, I look away.

The police have lit flares along the perimeter of the scene and are instructing cars in both guidelines to turn back, the road is closed.

The police politely offer alternate routes, back roads that will take people where they need to be.

They must have places to go, the people in these cars, but a lot of them don't turn back.

They climb out of their cars, hugging themselves in contradiction of the cold.

They assess the scene. And even though they don't know who we are or what has occurred, they pray for us. I can feel them praying.

And then they look away, some of them crying, one lady throwing up into the ferns on the side of the road.

Which also makes me think I'm dead.

That and the fact my body seems to be- 'completely numb,' though to look at me, at the leg that the 61-mph asphalt exfoliant has pared down to the bone, I should be in agony.

And I'm not crying, either, even though I know that something ridiculous has just happened to my family.

'We are like Humpty Dumpty and all these king's horses and all these king's men cannot put us back together again.'

I am pondering these things when the medic with the freckles and red hair who has been salaried on me answers my question.

'Her Glasgow Coma is an eight. Let's bag her now!' She screams...

'What's the ETA for Life Flight?'

She and the lantern-jawed medic snake a tube down my throat, attach a bag with a rhizome to it and start pumping.

'Ten minutes,' replies the medic. 'It takes twenty to get back to town.'

'We're going to get her there in fifteen if you have to speed like a freaking demon.'

I can tell what the person is thinking. That it will not do me any good if they get into a crash, they load me into the ambulance; the redhead climbs into the back with me. and I have to agree.

Nevertheless, she doesn't say anything. Just compresses her jaw.

Then she smooths a lock of hair from my forehead. She pumps my bag with one hand, adjusts my IV and my monitors with the other.

'You hang in there,' she tells me.

48

I played my first recital when I was ten. I'd been playing French horn for two years at that point.

At first, just at school, as part of the music program. It was a fluke that they even had a French horn; they are very affluent and fragile.

But some old literature professor from the university had died and bequeathed his Hamburg to our school. It mostly sat in the corner. Most kids wanted to learn to play guitar or saxophone.

7:00 A.M.

One and all think it was because of the snow. And in a way, I suppose that's true.

I wake up this morning to a thin blanket of white covering our front lawn.

It isn't even an inch, but in this part of Oregon, a slight dusting brings everything to a halt as the one snowplow in the county gets busy clearing the roads.

It is wet water that drops from the sky-and drops and drops and drops-not the frozen kind.

It is enough snow to cancel school. My little sister, Naddalin, lets out a war whoop when Mom's AM radio announces the closures. And so, does my little girl too, named for him - um-hum.

'Snow day!' She bellows... 'Dad, let's go make a snowman.'

My dad smiles and taps on his pipe; He started smoking one recently as part of this whole 1950s; Father Knows Best retro kick he is on.

He also wears bow ties. I am never- ever quite clear on whether all this is sartorial or sardonic-Dad's way of proclaiming, that he used to be a punker but is now a middle-school English teacher, or if becoming a teacher has turned my dad into this honest throwback. But I like the smell of pipe tobacco. It is sweet and smoky and reminds me of winters and woodstoves.

Maybe you should consider a snow amoeba.'

'You can make a valiant try,' Dad tells Naddalin. 'But it's hardly sticking to the roads.

I can tell Dad is happy. Barely an inch of snow means that all the schools in the county are closed, including my high school and the middle school where Dad works, so it's an unanticipated day off for him, too.

My mother, who works for a travel agent in town, clicks off the radio and pours herself a second cup of coffee.

She picks up the telephone to call in. 'Well, if you lot are playing hooky today, no way I'm going to work. It's simply not right.' When she's done, she looks at us. 'Should I make breakfast?'

MOM and I guffaw at the same time.

Dad makes cereal and toast.

Mom's the cook in the family.

Pretending not to hear us, she reaches into the cabinet for a box of Bisquick.

'Please. How hard can it be?

'I do! I do!' Naddalin yells. 'Can we have chocolate chips in them?'

'Wo- n-ho-u!' Naddalin cries, swaying her arms in the air. 'I don't see why not,' Mom replies. Who wants pancakes?'

'I do – I do.'

~*~

'You have far too much energy for this early in the morning,' I tease. I turn to Mom. 'Maybe you shouldn't let Naddalin drink so much coffee.'

'I've switched her to decaf,' Mom volleys back. 'she's just unsurprisingly enthusiastic.'

'As long as you're not switching me to decaf,' I say.

'That would be child abuse,' Dad says.

Mom- (Like you would know I thought...)

Mom hands me a steaming mug and the daily.

'There's a nice representation of your young man in there,' she says.

'Really? A photograph...?'

'Yep, I say, giving me a sidelong glance with her eyebrow arched, her version of a soul-searching stare. It's about the most we've seen of her since summer.'

~*~

'I know,' I say, and then without meaning to, I sigh. Beth's band, Shooting Star, is on an upward spiral, which, is a great thing mostly.

'Ah, fame, wasted on the youth,' Dad says, but he's smiling. I know he's excited about Beth, proud even.

~*~

I leaf through the newspaper to the calendar section.

There's small praise about Shooting Star, with an even smaller picture of the four of them, next to a big article about Bikini and a huge picture of the band's lead singer: punk/ metal rock diva Brooke Bogel.

The bit about them says that local band-

Like... Shooting Star is opening for Bikini on the Dauphin leg of Bikini's countrywide tour.

It doesn't mention the even-better-tome news that last night Shooting Star presented at a club in Seattle and, according to the text Beth sent me at midnight, sold out the place.

'Are you going to tonight?' Dad asks.

'It hinges on if they shut down the whole state on account of the snow. I was planning to anyway.'

'It is approaching,' Dad says, pointing to a single snowflake floating its way to the earth.

'Keep you sharp so you can show all those Juilliard snobs how it's really done,' she says. Professor Kristiee, a retired music teacher at the university whom I've been working with for the last few years, is always looking for victims for me to play with.

'I'm also supposed to rehearse with some pianist from the Middle School that

Professor Kristiee dug up.'

I haven't gotten into Juilliard yet, but my audition went really well. The Bach suite and the Shostakovich had both flown out of me like never- ever before, like my fingers were just an extension of the strings and bow.

When I'd finished playing, painting, which I guess doesn't happen very often my legs shaking from pressing together so hard, one judge had clapped a little...

As I'd hobbled out, that same judge had told me, that it had been a long time since the school had 'seen an Oregon country girl.'

Professor Kristiee had taken that to mean a guaranteed acceptance. And I wasn't 100 percent sure that I wanted it to be true. I wasn't so sure that was true.

Just like with Shooting Star's meteoric rise, my admission to Juilliard-if it happens-will create certain complications, or, would compound the complications that have already cropped up in the last few months, more accurately.

'I need more coffee. Anyone else?' Mom asks, hovering over me with the ancient percolator.

I's sniff the coffee, the rich, black, oily French roast we all prefer.

The smell alone perks me up. 'I'm thinking of going back to bed,' I say.

'My French horn's at school, so I can't even practice.'

'Not practice? For twenty-four hours?

Be still, my broken heart,' Mom says.

Though she has acquired a taste for classical music over the years- 'it's like learning to escalate a stinky cheese'-she's been a not always-delighted captive spectator for many of my marathon rehearsals.

Back when he'd played drums in a little something-our-town, unknown-anywhere-else band, back when she'd worked at a record store. It used to belong to Dad.

I hear a crash and a boom coming from upstairs. Naddalin is pounding on his drum kit.

I know it's silly but I have always wondered if Dad is disappointed that I didn't become a rock chick. I had meant to. Dad grins at Naddalin's noise and seeing that I feel a familiar pang.

It's been almost ten years now and I haven't stopped. Then, in third grade, I'd wandered over to the French horn in music class-it looked almost human to me. It looked like if you played it, it would tell you secrets, so-o I'm ongoing with's da playing.

'So much for going back to sleep,' Mom yells over Naddalin's noise.

A patch of sunlight has broken through the clouds, and I can hear the hiss of the ice melting. I close the door and go back to the table.

'What do you know, the snow's already melting,' Dad says, puffing on his pipe.

I go to the back door and peek outside.

'Maybe... I's think the county overreacted,' I say.

But then again, they can't un-cancel school. The horse is previously out of the barn, and I already called in for the day off,' Mom says.

Karrah and Carrie are some of Mom and Dad's old music friends who'd also had a kid and decided to start behaving like grownups.

They live in a big old farmhouse.

'Indeed. But we might take advantage of this unexpected boon and go somewhere,'

Dad says. 'Take a drive. Visit Karrah and Carrie.'

Karrah does Web stuff from the barn they converted into a home office and Carrie works at a nearby hospital. I's have a baby girl.

That's the real reason Mom and Dad want to go out there.

Naddalin had just turned eight and me being seventeen means that we are long past giving off that sour-milk smell that makes grown-ups melt.

A collection of classical records is not the kind of thing you advertise.

I keep a pile of them hidden under my bed.

I say as if to entice me. Book-Barn is a giant, dusty old used-book store 'We can stop at Book-Barn on the way back,' In the back, they keep a stash of twenty-five-cent classical records that nobody ever seems to buy except me.

I have shown them to Beth, but that was only after we'd already been together for five months. I had expected him to laugh.

She's such the cool girl with her pegged jeans and black low-tops, her effortlessly beat-up punk-rock tees and her subtle tattoos.

She is so not the kind of girl to end up with someone like me.

This was why when I'd first spotted her watching me at the music studios at school two years ago, I'd been influenced she was making fun of me and I'd hidden from her.

Nevertheless, he had not laughed. It turned out he had a dusty collection of punk-rock records under her bed.

'We can also stop by Gram's and Gramps for an early dinner,' Dad says, already reaching for the phone.

'We'll have you back in plenty of time to get to Dauphin,' she adds as he dials.

I would actually rather go off with my family. This is another thing you don't publicize about yourself, but Beth gets that, too.

'I'm in,' I say. It isn't the lure of Book-Barn or the fact that Beth is on tour, or that my best friend, Ana, is busy doing yearbook stuff. It isn't even that my French horn is at school or that I could stay home and watch TV or sleep.

Naddalin finishes off her drum solo with a crash of cymbals; 'Naddalin,' Dad calls.

'Get dressed. We're going on an adventure.'

A jiffy later he's bounding into the kitchen fully dressed as if he'd pulled on her clothes while careening down the steep wooden staircase of our drafty Victorian house. 'School's out for summer,' she sings.

'Alice Cooper?' Dad asks. 'Have we no standards? At least sing the Ramones.'

'School's out forever,' Naddalin sings over Dad's protests. 'Ever the optimist,' I say.

I laugh, she puts a plate of slightly charred pancakes down on the kitchen table. 'Eat up, family.'

50

8:15 A.M.

Dad slips behind the wheel. We pile into the car, a rusting Buick that was already old when Gram's gave it to us after Naddalin was born.

I and Dad offer to let me drive, but I say no.

She likes to drive now. She'd stubbornly refused to get a license for years, insisting on riding his bike ubiquitously.

They used to roll their eyes at her.

Back when he played music, her ban on driving meant that her bandmates were the ones stuck behind the wheel on tours.

I had done more than that. She'd pestered, cajoled, and sometimes yelled at Dad to get a license, but he'd insisted that he favored pedal power.

'Well, then you better get to work on building a bike that can hold a family of three and keep us dry when it rains,' she'd demanded.

To which Dad always had laughed and said that he'd get on that.

But when I had gotten pregnant with Naddalin, she'd put her foot down.

Enough, she said. Dad seemed to comprehend that something had changed.

She'd stopped arguing and had gotten a driver's license.

She'd also gone back to school to get his teaching certificate.

But with two, time to grow up. Time to start wearing a bow tie. I guess it was okay to be in arrested development with one kid.

She has one on this morning, along with a flecked sports coat and vintage wingtips. 'Dressed for the snow, I see,' I say.

Nevaeh

Book: 57

Scry

'You question everything, you talk to yourself, you like to read, you constantly challenge yourself, you're a little scatterbrained, you might struggle with a habit, and you worry too much. You're legitimately brilliant, and a genuine genius.' -Marcel Ray Duriez

Prolegomenon:

'You cannot stick an orange scurrying flag in my butt and think you can take a claim of me. Yes, I know that my heart is a deep ocean full of shipwreck yes, I understand that due to novelty shipping law you can explore; me and all my moments of lost wrecks, and take claim of all, yet that means you want my heart. Yet you forget I do not have one anymore.'

~Nevaeh~

Part: 1

The flames everywhere, I look at the city now blackened and changed forever, from the world burning, it was pleasurable to have everything at decay, everything was burning with intensity and heat, it has become the love and desire of the world, to let everything rot, and be eaten away, water nozzle everywhere trying to extinguish the flames that have taken skyscraper after skyscraper, men heavy armored in helmets nozzle in his fists yet it was no help, the blood pounded in my head of seeing my world coming to an end, like great demon dragons flames upon the world, everything that was understanding and memories, blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charred ruins of history.

All were fighting off the flames of the sun that was burning up the Earth in global warming. All the hands were moving in rhythm like maestro playing all the symphonies of hell upon the world of blazing and burning to bring down to nothing put ruins of history- lost and caring gone. With the figurative symbolic helmet of war and war to come- and children at the cost of loss, now to the point of hunger- and famine... I- then stored ahead adrift.

My mind lost to the thought of what came next when I have comprehended I have a home left and we'll be living on the street high and low that link together the many buildings that are in

shambles, glass was everywhere and thick smoke; her eyes all orange like her face with intense flame- eyes watery with the flames and children on fire, flickered was the numbers of books in satanic ash and much paper and building materials, the igniter was the sun, the igniter was the people themselves- letting the sun in, now ever to close to the plant it has its revenge.

The skyscrapers lapped up in a gorging, already run-down now broken down in the heat of distortion, now past decrepit, in ruins deteriorated, falling apart in mid-air, in disrepair, ramshackle- into the worse for wear, flames that burned the evening in the nights sky glowing red and yellow and black, and backlight in colors of instance lights, by electricity and whipping power lines, the manmade thunder crashes in the air- of unleashed power- most of the city has blackout, however not this part yet.

People and kids swarm of fireflies, around above, below and in the air falling out of thousand-foot buildings. Like hell to the rain... like the sick and twisted joke, she wanted above all, wanted to shove a hot dog on a stick, while the flapping books and pages-scream in the air like dying on the pathways- lit by flickering glowing burning and glowing street lights. There are no lawns just glass, still, and concrete on concrete. whirls of flames, ash, and paper, the books and networking and grid went up in sparks and whirls; turned dark with burning, as it has been for weeks now, there is no stop.

All looking just like piss blew away in the cold wind- ash for trees, mocking to them the cuteness of everything they're attempting to control.

-And-

Likewise a whisper of a crazed ghost, inspector, phantom, a wraith, in spirit having a soul, that is shadowed, presence, with vision to give and apparition to behold, yet like nothing more hallucination, a dream of broach, a doppelgänger duppy, spook to all that too young to understand the phantasms and the many shades of loss and death, with revenant, visitant, and weight.

I- as this young lady with a keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret, with a grin of that a young woman singed and driven backlit by flame and she, knew that when she returned to the to her loft it would not be there- nor anything she left behind- like death- passed over and clean up and forgot to time that mends everything, she might wink at himself in all the fallen glass shards looking at herself as they fall- yet not really seeing herself more seeing on man in control of all human life, a medieval poet of a woman in the mirror given a lie for a life, burnt corked- minds just like the town- cities, and people within.

The smile of pain with sweet young kindness and ken understandings, hidden, still gripped by her face muscles of fear and horror, in the dark as she lies under an over the pass, blocks away from the flams that are still licking the sides of buildings.

Nevertheless, still feeling the fiery heat and small burn and blood scabbing flesh, on her clothing, later, going to sleep out of exhaustion, she would feel fiery on the inside and out; it never- ever went away, that feeling of loss and pain, mislaying fear and death and time, with the place, misplacement of dropping everything, forgetting and without thought overlooking, sometimes deprivation, or the disappearance, of losing heart and mind, yet with privation, nonetheless, forfeiture, and overall waste, while incomplete, squandering to and whole, entire with full, and total, intact therefore uncut dissipation, diminution, erosion, and reduction. The smile, it never- ever- ever- went away, as long as she remembered or had memories of all things past.

She felt the temperature rise, at this one spot where a person's standing above her as she was cover by nothing more than old newspapers, the might of the sun raise not yet given in, the immediate atmosphere ten degrees for an instant to which is going to come.

Maybe his nose detected a faint perfume on me, I had on- and was looking for something, I was not willing to entertain, the skin on the backs of his hands, on his face, chaired, and his face black as if he was coalmining- the only thing white about him was his eyes. There was no time for the thoughts of... He takes off his helmet, he hung his flameproof jacket neatly; on his one arm to stand over me.

He takes off his helmet, he hung his flameproof jacket neatly; on his one arm to stand over me. He shows me his many luxuriously- on his hands and wrist, yet I was not into it all, I was groggy- and moody to say the least.

He- this man that stands before me- walked across the upper platforms of a high skywalk, and moving swiftly, whistling, hands in pockets, as if waking in a park without a care in the world. Like- I wondered if it all was a dream... or not?

So-o, positive he seemed at the last moment when disaster his come and revelation, he pulled his hands from his pockets to show me his kids photos on his phone- lost to the crazies of ending times events- I thought it was the end, that I was going to be wrapped or killed for the money in my pockets, thinking the worst at this point, along with this time and this place.

Now simply turned to a shadow of this large man and let him through is what I thought to do as I got into the fetal position, the air seemed charged with static and a new calm as if someone - had waited there - to show me hope, quietly, in only a moment before he came, I felt freedom, and I could not figure out why. ... O'er broken he falls to me crying as a half-man, by grasping me in a hug as I have never hand before in my life, held like a child in his arms. As if he needed me or something like a dad need his kids.

He slid next to me sides touching a halt in his weekend voice, the heels one inch from the concrete stairs leading downwards. The last few nights go off, he had had the most uncertain feelings about love and loss, and finding something to hold on too, as did I.

The sidewalk just around the corner here falls in collapse, moving in the starlight toward his fate of knowing they are gone. He had felt that a moment before his making the turn to me, someone had been there - and I would say that was me.

Before - he reached the corner, however, he slowed as if a wind had sprung up from nowhere to show him the way to me as if someone had called his name - as if it was God speaking to him.

Whistling slight, he let the escalator waft him into the still night air before he came to me - in looking for an answer to life and about be as life. He walked toward the comer, thinking little at all about nothing in particular, other than breaking through to the other side.

He walked out of the maglev station and along the midnight street toward the lowest point of ground where the silent and slick, self-propelled train slid soundlessly over top it's clear acrylic track light by FiberOptics, only held down by the Earth in white massive posts, and let I let out with a great puff of warm air as I move without really think closer to the escalator rising to the upper suburb, at was more or less - a city within a city.

I was understanding it like never before - the feeling of love for the stranger. I turn to look at him each time I move forward down the long run of steps, along the glass sidewalk, hung by cables, with perhaps, on one night, underneath or so it was looking, something vanishing swiftly underneath, lawns and trees all around high up, about 600 feet up, I am, now - when I was only at 100 feet or so moments before, fast, like time, in the world that is fast-moving, before he could focus his eyes or speak I was gone. Yet, I felt as if he was not far behind me, now, and tonight, I slowed almost to a stop, think I would not mind if he was next to me as if protecting me from something like a child.

Reaching her hand out on the rail as she turned the corner, had heard the faintest whisper. His was in her inner mind, Breathing within and the same? She made a sharp turn at a 45-degree angle the corner still hanging in the air. The atmosphere constricted exclusively, uniquely by someone standing very quietly there, waiting to take her hand so it felt?

The many autumn fall-like leaves blew, that where left just hang dangling on the branches over the moonlit and LED glass pavement that changes color high up, held by stay-cables, in such a way as to make the girl who was moving there seems fixed above all the hassle to a sliding walk was the slowest thing around- that the modern person uses, the leaves carry her forward, as if not caring that there being disruptive to the moment, and not caring they are doing what comes in nature; careless and free letting the motion of the wind and take them away, like her hair in the breeze.

Her head was cupped and slightly bent over the handrail that was glass, like the sides, also to watch her shoes stir the circling leaves and above her head, she sees more swaying walkways above and below yet there not look at her to say yet she is wonderous and looking at them. Passenger drones fly and race by in pulsating soft humming whips and colors, milk-white faces like in a dream, the faces of that of slender and healthy, yet not as young as she at this moment in time, even if aging was more or less halted for all.

It was a look, almost, of a pale surprise to see me a young girl out at this time of night by them I am sure of; and in it was a kind of gentle ravenousness, emptiness, and starvation that touched over everything with tireless curiosity- they had towards a young life.

The dark eyes were so fixed on her she felt, as she moved ever so slow to not have the bridge-like walkway move under her light footing, yet fast enough to escape them and the world move to rapidly. She almost thought she heard the motion of her hands as she walked as they did as if all were at the same rhythm, and the infinitely small sound, of the marching in time, to the, strolled step above and below.

-And-

There a man stood in the middle of the glass pavement waiting for the new days to start. Her dress was moving up to the gust of are from the trains below and above it, all whispered yet not as much as her headset that was implanted in her inner ears- that was next to invisible.

The white stir of lights and holograms and screens grabbing advertisements for a moment of useless information whispering in the headset faces turning to look as it incases them when she discovered she was a moment away from suspended willow trees and hydroponic garden overhead made a great sound of letting down their misty lush rain.

I remember saying to this man- moments before and it looked within the brain of the headset- in retravel of thoughts: when people ask my age, I say, always say- 'Young- and insane. Isn't this a nice time of night to even if I have them taking a recording my every moment- even in the bathroom- at home and even the movements in bad it's all held in the database for all to payback- and despite everything that has transpierced? I'm teenaged and I'm mentally deranged, especially as manifested in a wild or aggressive way. Extremely enthusiastic, nevertheless, mad, insane, out of one's mind, deranged, and demented.'

Fingerprints and eyes read and scanned- with invisible beams- in ever steep or everything you touch is like stack charged to the touch- held in a data recovery to understand good and bad, they know you more then you know yourself and that programed too- if you don't watch your back- and the only ones with guns of mass-distortion are the police officers in full suites. My dad says this to me always that- I am MAD.

At that moment she felt she had said something quite wonderful, that she never felt his love, yet just found what it could be. But instead, he stood regarding her with eyes so dark yet loving and shining in the wild lights around, and alive for the moment- even if feeling dead on the inside, when he felt this she had said something quite wonderful to keep only if it was approved to keep in her own- mind.

The girl stopped and looked as if she might pull back in surprise to see him before her, But he knew his mouth had only moved to say hello, and then when she seemed too fascinated, entrance, beguile, and spellbind by the fallen angel on his arm and the eight-pointed star symbol with three chevrons under on his chest, he spoke again, saying about the war and the hugger.

'Only the youth can save us...' he said already know her name of Millia. A moment has past and under his breath, he said, 'the real youth!' I like you have a child her name is Elody- she is an already a star girl-she is the only one left I have, just like you will be. He said to me, 'I want to give you her memories- keep them locked within as much as you can when the time comes, do as she did as she did when she did and don't ask why, and you make history.'

... As if my life depended on it. 'Of course,' he said, 'you're are my new undertaking, aren't you- the military mind garden?' And I am going to look out for you as if you're my own, and in a way you are. 'You remind me of my own child.' He said.

'And you must be the one to show me the way, this was code for the memories to be placed in my mind forever- of the wars past and to come.' She raised her eyes from his 'Of course,' he said, 'you're are my new undertaking, aren't you?'

-And-

I am going to look out for you as if you're my own, and in a way you are. The masterful symbols, 'Star Warrior.' Her voice trailed off some.

'How oddly you say that he said.' 'I'd have known it with my eyes shut,' he said, slowly. and have a full understanding, yet you don't seem to know what it is I do or have done.

With a smell of- borborygmus activities. 'My late wife always complained about this,' he tittle-tattles, prattle, and jibber-jabbered on. 'You get to the point never-ever wash it off wholly it is within you and it seeps out.'

Yammering, powwowing, and natter- 'No, you don't,' she said, in awe of him. She was emptying her pockets, without once not think about moving away from the tightness that has now made side by side.

He felt she was walking in a circle about him yet only in her mind, that was racing with many thoughts, turning him end for end and inside and back out, likewise shaking him quietly - to see what made him tick, 'coal mining,' he said, that is what I have to do now for work, dirty and not always honorable. For the silence had lengthened, only with her as she felt as if she knew him all her life. As a father... like- a humble man in relation to his child or children in life was in a different- alternative time.

'it's nothing but eau de cologne to me.'

'Of course, was the thought.' 'You do seem like a man to me?' 'Why not I keep this in my mind- yet, I knew he would have in retrieval?' She gave herself time to think about the last thoughts that would be placed into text or stored in the data servers for all time- even if time has come to an end. 'I don't know until this point if it's right or wrong- to have every thought and every moment recorded for

history to not understand- or misconstrued.' She then turned her face away from his face to the sidewalk going toward other skyscrapers.

'Do you mind if I walk back with you?' 'No, I don't mind at all! And, I know who you are.' She moves forward are you- come along. What are you doing out so late wandering around I asked? 'I have nothing left' he said along with 'and was looking for well you.' 'How old are you- I asked him?' '51 he said.' I mean I am sure I could have done a lookup with my headset, and phone that is linked, yet that seems less interesting, and I wanted the trust and troth to see- if.

The warm-cool blowing night, they walked in on the glass pavement and there was the faintest breath of fresh strawberries, apricots and all fruits in the air, in artificial gardens that seem to float in mid-air.

So, late in the year and we have fresh fruits, and she looked around and realized this was quite impossible, not so long back in antiquity- that man has come a long way.

There was only the girl walking with him now, her face bright as the fake snow in the moonlight that will fall when- man wants it too by artificial machinery, and she knew she was working his questions around too much in her mind as if she had freedom too, seeking the best answers she could give. 'Well,' she said, walk onward?

Walking now farther than ever with some new, I like to smell things and look at things and enjoy everything that this world has to offer, and sometimes stay up all night until the sun comes up, they walked on again in totally quiet and finally, she said, thoughtfully, 'the sunrise there it is its coming.'

'I'm not afraid of you at all, you know.' So many people are, and none of them are like you, he was surprised, in my ways. 'Why should you be like them I asked?' Afraid of men and everything and anyone, I mean really. 'But you're just a girl, after all...' 'Right?' I suppose! She said.

He saw himself in her eyes almost looking thought and back again, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, that pass in the air, like as if that have lost gravity. In fine detail and style, the lines about his mouth, she studied, everything about his look, as if his eyes were two supernatural, preternatural, superhuman, inexplicable, unaccountable, and fantastic bits of vibrant marigolds that might capture and hold him intact.

Electricity was in the air and working within them, but what it was not the hysterical light of everything in the time and moments, strangely comfortable and rare and gently flattering light of the towering buildings, cast on her young face as if softly lit by a candle.

Like this one time in a total a power- failure, when he was a child, I recall a light dancing about my face like this; yet power outages are no longer feasible, I thought until now. Now have mass power-failure, my mother had found me and had already given me a nights kiss, and lit the last candle, next to my bed, and I was holding a book and was drawing breath like the book here I was then lost to dreaming were I then became the protagonist to my own story, as if in another time, nested in my newspaper and bundling's of my reassesses, and qualm, misgiving, doubt, reservation, second thought, worry, concern, anxiety, hesitation, hesitance, hesitancy, demur, reluctance, disinclination, and apprehension about the loss of feeling and comforts.

Brief hours of the night, have felt like a spiraling week in another time... of rediscovery like I feel you will have, soon so you know- I feel it in my bones; dimensions and drew comfortably around them, of such illumination that space lost its vast like, mother and son, alone, transformed, and fixed hoping that the power might not come.

... And, I would see my mother on again too soon... like you- you are having this moment I just know it. 'Do you mind if I ask' 'How long have you worked at being a coal miner?'

Her body was twitching and squirming like her mind, in the throes of wonder. The need to quench the fire raging in her brain was almost driving her crazy, to understand the pictures she was receiving in his thoughts of wisdom.

Where can- I purchase a copy of this then called a book- on history or remembrances of all past? I see them within this dream, of the past yet there not a thing any, more are they?

Why?

Slowly dips beyond the horizon is a room full of them with pulp drapers, and the clocks were become as if on rhythm to my mind and head which was ache; I've searched everywhere online and they all seem to be in any language. Any suggestions would very be appreciated.

'Ever since I was ten, I wondered about everything past and history and knowledge.'

'Did you ever read any of the books, there was gone to technologies elimination?' Yes, but only in this dream of being lost within I was once the writer of the longest in the world, yet I never saw it to completion, I dyed in the end in the dream and walk up here to give you this massage. He laughed and looked around- speaking softly about- joking that cars were like being shot out of a canon in his dream of living in remembrances, and the love of life and one woman.

'The law and governments, has past bands on information, in the young mind of mind!' 'Oh, of course- freedom has been taken as it was then as it is now.' 'It's fine to work to lay day in and day out and hold thoughts that hold thoughts that give thoughts and want thoughts to be hand.'

Ashes angels- flying about, all the books have become, as they all went up years ago, around the year 3,000, the dream I am in is of 1913, as if I was to hold this for- you to have and pass on; why I cannot say- you have to find that out on your own and your own way. Ashes to dust- of the work and the words slaved to make, for the dumb of kids, to keep- that is our official slogan 'ASH ANGELS.'

They walked still further in the modern ideas of life and garden, and the girl said, 'Is it true that long-ago writers made stories and recorded history and not electronic brain retrieval of taken without well- by the governments?'

'No, let's keep walking on. Home to go to she said.' Along with saying moments after- 'not everything thing to this is fireproof, take my word for it.' 'Oddly strange.'

He laughed, a long time ago houses used to burn to the ground and were on one to two stories, by accident, and sometimes not, and they needed many men to stop the flames, it was done by hand, not robotics or animated systems to do the world for them without thinking.

I heard once that about not putting out a flame; in carelessness, she gazed over to look at him as if not of this world. I don't know.

The flame of light that gives life could end it, 'Why are you laughing?' He asked. 'And, I am the one that would be called dumb.'

That's the rose-garden over there that is where I want to spend the morning! 'White blurs are houses- he called them the transportation capsules.' Smudged blur in the sky in the yellow haze, as homes- or those that don't have them come to places to sleep in 3 foot by 7-foot casket like rent rooms.

‘Sickness to humanities- I feel, like dog hoses...!’ My uncle drove slowly on a highway once I remember, yet more like these people of today- crazy- MAD- ill-tempered.

'I don't know.' He started to laugh again and peter out, along with fade away, 'Why the rush to dye young?' Then- I get the time and the laps of time, and time is less or more in one day or moment.

I have not even said anything that would be considered humorous and you answer right off as if there is sarcasm, ridicule, satire, irony, scorn, sneering, and scoffing to everything that was said.

He rambled on, He drove 25 miles an hour, and they jailed him for two days for being a MAD man- pulling my hair to for fun. 'So, it's not a dream you are from another time, aren't you? 'Isn't that funny, and sad, too?' 'You think too many things,' said the girl, uneasily about his racing mind.

'You never- ever stop to think about this until now, what I've asked you to recall why I am here.' 'Why do you think?' He stopped walking, to look down at her young sweet face, like a child, looking for candy, 'You are the oddball, she whispered under her breath.' 'I would imagen I would be if 1,084 years have passed, and 395,660 days.'

'You did mathematics- like- in your head?' Along with saying- 'How did you do that?' He said, looking at her, start doing sums any numbers, in here he pints to her head - like computers, in your mind the numbers and the way to do them are now there, he was wisdom.

‘You were to first in the world.’ 'A pink blur the I am to you? No, you're more than that, you should know!' He tapped the numerals on his nameplate on his chest, next to all the meatless in all colors stitched on his chair colored sleeve.

'Well, does this mean anything to you,' he asked her. 'Haven't you any respect, for me this is rude?' 'Oh child, wake up!' 'I don't mean to be insulting.' 'You are...' she said. It's just, I love to watch people too much, I guess, and help them understand, that you are the hope.'

'Yes,' she whispered; I will well be the one that stands in all-time like you.' She slowed her pace, walking past all the roses. 'Look the jet cars racing on the elevated boulevards and hovering over our heads.'

'You're changing the subject, think about your life, and the ones to come!' He said patting her on the head. 'From time to time, think drivers don't know what grass is anymore, or flowers because,

they never see things slowly,' He said. 'If you showed a driver a green blur then yes maybe,' she said, '...Yes, sir, that's Earthy plant-life- who cares!'

'I would say find your family, and start over, you're a child, yet, and that will change soon, there is no need to live on the street or live in rent rooms.'

'I will never go back!'

I am not into their lifestyle...

~*~

I am not into killing things, and ending life, even of that of plants, I like to smell things and look at things. I stay up all night, sometimes just looking is that odd for someone like me. 'I would think not.' 'Watch the sunrise and just walking.'

Thoughtfully, thinking about other people; showing mush kind thoughts, care and consideration; considerate, you say this even forgiveness, now, and that is your type so why not forgive and forget, and find them, someday you may not have them to go too, they walked on again in silence and finally, she said, 'you know, this already, don't you.' 'Sorry for everything has become your life.'

'I'm not afraid of you at all, I think- I know what is coming.' He was surprised by me saying that, being kind of smart and kind of dumb.

'Why should you anyway?' You will be a star, in more ways than one!' 'So many people are born to do this and you are. I believe in you!' I am frightened of change and revelation, and this all coming to a fast end. 'I am just a woman, after all...' No, a woman can be more than that, and show them all!

Tears- now falling suspended in two shining drops of bright water, she saw herself in his eyes, dark and tiny, in fine detail, looking back she could see the child within that she would become, the lines about his mouth- in grief and sorrow, everything there, as if her eyes performed by or involving a supernatural power to see beyond or operation bits of amber glowing within as if pulled out of time and space to see the dream inside the mind in positive and death, that might capture and hold her to see the light- in a new time.

He said- Children like you, in a power-failure, a rediscovery, of such illumination, to space lost its vast dimensions and drew comfortably around them, look deep into my past- see my life- see how it was, see my child life, and her life, she is, after all, you, now- you have taken her mind over- you now have her soul. transformed are you now- unlike any other around you- you have the remembrances of all that is past they don't want kids like you to evoke, hoping that the power- can be held over you- so there is no resistance, be the fight, the might come on, all too soon... again this will come.

She said to him you- ponder, reflect, deliberate, meditate, contemplate, muse, and cogitate saying this, 'you think too many things, it is not safe to think for yourself.' 'I rarely watch 'covering screens television,' or stay indoors. She said 'some call me old-fashioned.' I guess that is right, along with crazy, 'MANNESS' is my claim to fame; nevertheless, too much time on my hands for crazy thoughts. 'Have you seen hologram- billboards in the suburbs beyond the cities?

Everywhere you look screens are screaming for your attention, all you see, are kids with see-through phones, and faces smashed into a fantasy world, linked to their headset. 'I remember when newspapers would do the trick,' he said.

Nonetheless, cars started flying by so rapidly they had to stretch the images to go along with the speed, the advertising is so out there and outlandish, so it would last when in the mind when it ripped into it by our overseers.' 'I didn't know that!' 'I do, and its sickness, and 'MADNESS' they have done to you, you're not the CRAZY one,' he said.

He laughed suddenly and unexpectedly, rudely or curtly, steeply; precipitously. 'I- bet, I know something else you don't know, what if I knew this would happen?' They made the grass grow this morning just to cut it down by night, yet not by man.' Like they would even care to look at grass. When most of life is up in the air 200 feet on skywalks, and skyscrapers, with plant-like intermediate open spaces of negative spaces seeming to just hang as if flitting about, like the trees- also in the floating lands masses at all points in the air.

She suddenly couldn't remember, her true life, she was now- 'not,' if she had known this or not she was now his child's soul, and it made him quite cantankerous as if the life had come back to him from the heavens or favor from purgatory as if all sins were forgiven and she would not need to linger in hells purgatory.

'And if you look, the days are slowing now,' She nodded at the sky - there's a moon, I know, yet I don't remember - that it should be to me anymore like days are changed to me now - and the time in one day.'

She hadn't looked for a long time, to see what the moon has become. It was just too sad, and sad only. They walked in silence, looking at all the stars, none the sun, they knew. Thoughtful, yet with an uncomfortable, along with clenching quite which he shot her accusing gazes.

When they reached the end of the city lines all its lights were blazing behind - and the lay of the land ahead - of mountains.

'What's going on, you can see the sun, and miles ahead - what going to happen?' It is before all the smog starts, that's why. He had rarely seen that many house lights, at this time before. it was awe-inspiring, to say the least.

'Oh, just my mother and father and uncle sitting around, all day doing nothing there is no work you see, talking about death, and wanting death to come, to be out of the pain of life, and they drug up. To kill the pain and themselves slowly it's like being a pedestrian, only rarer.' My dad, had me arrested when, I wanted to help, times before and I am the criminal - for reporting this... did I tell you, that I have a record? 'Also arrested by a cop that called himself a 'DICK-' for being a pedestrian.' Oh, we're most peculiar these days with the CRAZY AND RETARDED, like me - I suppose!'

He just looked at me, with a quirked smile. 'Talking about it what do you think?' 'We live in mad times, mad times I say!' He said back blisteringly. Crap - laughed at this. 'Goodnight, he said walking away!' She started up yet another higher walk - as he seemed to vanish to the clouds below starting to form. Then she seemed to remember everything with curiosity and much wonder.

'Are you truly happy, she looked into the girl's memories, that she became?' She was in the past but not now, 'Am I what - now?' She started to cry out. But she was gone-running in the moonlight as if the guns of wartime girls wanted her dead, it was hard to breathe, she was lost in the visions.

Her eyes shut gently as the bullets fly by her face and body in the heat of battle. 'Happy, far from it! Of all the nonsense, this was unfair to say the last.' She stopped feeling at that moment the pain - in her mind as she was ripped back to her opened eyes and time.

He put his hand into the hole of the-glove holding them were they buckle on his fingers- then his one finger exposed is pressed down- on a plat, of his front door and let it know his touch to open into his apartment. The glass front door slid open, behind all the other glass walls, that also reflect the tv channels. This is private he said to today's standers I think not. He thought to himself, quietly.

Of course, I'm not happy, for what I have done to that little girl, yet it has to be that way- she is the future of life as we once knew it. What she thinks right now is not what I wanted - yet what is needed. All the death and distortion all at once. I'm not pleased with myself at this point?

I feel like a dad that has left his child gets slotted. He asked the quiet rooms, to speak up, and play the news of the day and world- and also the inner-city limits. Wall to glass wall, of coverage of death and misrepresentation, perversion, twisting, falsification, and misreporting.

He stood looking up at an appliance, hanging from the open rafters for artificial respiration; trelliswork and network along with wires and pipes, in the hall and quickly and unexpectedly remembered that something lay hidden behind the espalier, filigree, plexus, and something that seemed to peer down at him now- was what looked to be an eye, tracing his every move- even the bathroom where open and glass-walled, like some of the floors.

Quickly moving away, along his eyes, yet they got them anyways, quick- not quick enough, it called out his name in face recognition. What a strange meeting on a strange night, and what a strange place this is.

He recalled nothing, after that point when the eyes linked, his mind was whipped of all thoughts, until approved, like it saves one afternoon a year ago, and the rest is replaced with dream-like subconscious when he had met an old man in the park and they had talked... and that was okay to keep, shaking his head, he thought wrong, and the voice in his mind to him to stop. He looked at a blank wall, also now updating like him in a way, as the forces over him reset.

Astonishing, the young girl's face was there it was kept, really quite beautiful in memory. As if hacked to be lasting, he knew his next thought would say that anyway, thought of mind cannot be stopped. Yet maybe, if disciplined.

She had a very thin face seen faintly in a dark room in the middle of the night, lasting in his mind, dream-like. While thee that is left that is you- rouse to see clock telling the time and see the face

a-glow, and the hour and the minute and the second- still- calm -tranquil dreamlike, and the ticking is all the remains?

'Whatever he thought,' valued himself- of that separate self, the unconscious nincompoop that operated ranting at moments, entirely autonomous of the mind, costume, and morals.

He peeped behind at the wall. Whereby like a *scry*- mirror, besides, her silhouette like a ghost, with hair covering the face. Objectionable; for how many personalities did you grasp that refracted your sunrise to thou?

Spirits moved beside often- he sought for an analogy, gained item in his work-torches, flaming away continuously they sniffed out. Whence unusually did different spirits' faces take of you - moreover remainder to you your composition, your private trembling solicitude?

What unimaginable strength concerning description the daughter had; she transpired like the keen spectator of a puppet show, awaiting specific glint of an eyelid, respectively gesticulation of his hand, per flick of a digit, the time ere it originated. Whereby long-spun became they strolled contemporaneously? Three minutes? Five?

Yet, wherewith great that season seemed immediately. Whereby gigantic a figure she held on the scene before him; everything was like a shadow she cast on the wall with her slight dainty body! He perceived that if his eye yearned, she might blink.

Furthermore, if the fibers of his jaws stretched gradually, she would divide long before he would. Why he recollected, immediately that I remember of it, she essentially resembled to be arranging for me there, in the street, so damned late at nighttime.

... He inaugurated the bedchamber door. It was like developing into the chilly marble room of a crypt subsequent the moon had set. Thoroughgoing eclipse, not a trace of the lustrous globe outward, the glasses tightly sealed, the antechamber a vault world where no note from the numerous cities could comprehend. Every chamber was not empty. He admitted. The little mosquito - dainty dancing hum in the draft, the electrical murmur of a mysterious wasp snug in its unique flushed warm incubator.

Some tune was relatively powerful just so-o, he could grasp the piece. He underwent his simper slide away, decrease, laminate above, furthermore resting on itself like a wax skin, same the essence of a fabulous candle burning exceedingly long plus now deflating and now gone out. Twilight.

Seclusion. Darkness. He was not satisfied. He was not comfortable. He said the statements to himself. He acknowledged this as the valid nature of rendezvous.

He diminished his optimism- like a veil and the girl had run off beyond the garden with the veil and there was no way of maintaining to tap on her door-way and supplicate for it following- like moonlight.

Internally turning on the light with his thoughts of mind he believed how this room would look, as if would change color to his mood. His companion stretched on the bed, as before like canvas.

Exposed and aloof, as a body illustrated on the hood of an automobile, her eyes fixed on this young lady, to the canopy by ghostly threads of steel that was the bed frame, harmonized. To the lights and the sounds, affinity, magnetism, and sensuality. The thought was love, relish and embrace needed for contentments.

Including in her ears the minute mind taking earplugs, the thimble radiotelephony links to everything and everyone tamped securely- never coming out, furthermore, an electronic sound or the wireless world, of music and talk, TV and dialogue and a translator to all languages, coming in on the border of her inactive spirit and sleep. The chamber was indeed hollow. Each and every midnight the tides came in and transported her off on their great tides of sound or other places, floating her off, as if wide-eyed, approaching morning.

There had existed no blackness of full night in the last two years that Melissa, had not bathed that the other pools, ought not enthusiastically to go down in it concerning the thread time. The chamber was freezing though he perceived he could not recuperate.

He prepared not to yearn to destroy the screens and crack the sliding window panes, for he did not want the moon to come into the room, a first in years it was to see a full bright moon.

Consequently, with the soul of a guy who will depart in the next hour for lack of oxygen, He welcomed his way toward his open, cool bed, next to this young female child. A moment ere his foot hit the target on the rug, he knew he would hit such an article.

It was not unlike the atmosphere he had encountered before applying the monopolization and nearly hitting the girl down. His foot, emitting fluctuations ahead, held back imitations of the tiny wall beyond its pathway-level as the foot swung.

His foot-propelled. The article furnished a faint jingle and started off near the night. He reached extremely snug and welcomed to the personality on the shaded bed in the utterly featureless duskiness. Relishing to the submissive lover. The breath coming out of her and him was the equivalent, of the nostrils was so faint it agitated only the most distant fringes of life, a petite leaf, a black feather, a singular thread of young girls' hair.

He still did not want outside information. He stretched out his hands to the air, world, and heavens above considered removing the star- carved silver plate from his uniform, gave it a flick to close the latch in the back... In his mind- a pair boys glanced up at him in the nightlight, the ghost of his other kids- one his miniature hand-held a ball of fire; each with a combination of pale moon-stones aglow next to the man-made river- that ran of clear water over which, run past his apartment window, as the life of the world, running along with, not touching them.

'The young girl in his bed!' Her appearance was like a snowflake coated bar upon which rainfall might fall, however, it underwent no storm; above which clouds sway relinquish their emotional shadows, but she perceived no umbra. There survived simply the chanting of the thimble wasps in her tamped- shut ears, and her eyes all glass, and whiff going in and out, softly, faintly, in and out of her nostrils, she was perfect, lost in a dream that I was in reading ever chapter like a book of the past is now not. Moreover, her not worrying whether it came or went, went or came, or came-out.

The article he had sent tumbling with his foot now glinted beneath the frame of his bed. The small crystal necklace, of a girl that was his relative, of sleeping pills which briefly today had been charged with 10 medicines of lack of air to the longs including which presently lolled uncapped and abandoned in the light of the tiny beacon.

While he stood yonder the heaven protecting the dwelling shrieked. There was an enormous ripping vibration as if two giant palms became torn thousands of drops fall from above like black sheeting coming down the inseam. To wake up and have it been a real, and not a dream. The Rains have come at last.

He was done in half. He felt his chest hacked down and split apart, like the young girl beneath. The jet-bombs performing over, spreading over, going over, one two, one two, one two, then five of them, nine of them, twelve of them, all with water spraying- individual and 1 and 1 and extra and another and extra, did all the screaming for him- of: 'OH- MY- YES, as the young woman, was thrashing also to the thundering storms- in squeezing with her hands with her palms the bed sheets.' Was it

running, or the man-made water controlling- to make it happen as the jets when past? After it was like a hurricane, like never-seen-before to all of us of the modern city.

She withdrew her mouth like a child, and let their shriek come down and out between her bared teeth, of the feelings of fulfillment. The house shook to the pounding of the thundershowers. Occasional thundering- then built of light went out in his and her head. Exquisite...!

The dream vanished, and it was all true, it was a reality. He felt his hand plunge toward the mouthpiece of his headset. The jets were gone, as the storm continued. He considered his lips touch, brushing the mouthpiece of the receiver.

I treasure back to when, in a past life when I was a rail worker- before the time travel, I like many other guys on one side and guys on the other with the hope of meeting up in the middle... slaved, to do what couldn't be achieved. Braking rock and make toenails they did it all fast, at the station is the start, come on and lest go on this trip... all the people and all the kids, as they see the train steam near them as it comes ever so closer, as they stand with their boxes and cases, do you see them holding their tickets ready for their trip of a week and a day? Hoping to see it all on the day that goes to night's moon to sun, it was all fun and yet a new start, in a new world for them.

Bell ringing out... do you hear it? Do you see the puff-puffs of the steam- as it moves past the water tower, do you see the flagman, braking jumping cars? Clouded puff- do you see- woooo- woop! How trains have changed, I have seen the piston pushing hard, the wheels turn not fast, and not yet slow, do you see them moving with all the weight, they have to pull? Red- white and blue she is the locative No. 19 that is, they call her a girl- do you know why? She pulls her coal behind, and the people cars to in red do you see, the coal care is blue, heat- with tons of smoke and nose fells the air, do you see what it's doing?

The steam is spraying as it rushes past and stops, with a sequel, huff- huff- huff- it puffs, as we step on, brakeman, engineer, and conductor, and the one that runs it all is the engineer the train driver. Hard and hot work don't you see, as the man sweets for doing this non- stop. This makes the steam did you know that? Sure, you did... two blasts of the horn and where are on are way thinks to the engineer. The driver- you remember what he is called? Has his head out the window must of the time... do you know why? To see what is up and coming his way, do you see the animals on the tracks getting out of the way too?

To what color the car in the back and what is it called? I remember times past, as we make a stop for water, do you see the man turn the wells from car to car what is he called and what is he doing to remember? New places cities and towns, all the places around, and look at what was found, with the sound? Of the huffing and puffing- and the wheels shaving forward on the ground. I remember how my little girl loved trains, and where ever she is I hope she runs, some kind of magical railroad. Those are my wishes for her in her time of death- to the other side.

'The same yet different. Different yet the same in so many ways, this world to the past!' From one Marcel to another, he thought, and giggled in his mind to the craziness of that thought, to think I was only a writer for amusement with a story about a girl, in times of both feel much discomfort, never thinking it was all going to become true.

Part: 2

(Back)

'Crisis infirmary.' A terrifying whisper. He responded that the stars had been crushed by the character of the black jets furthermore that in the daylight the Earth would be resolved as he attained trembling in the dark and let his mouth go on traveling and moving.

They had this device. They had two computers. One of them slid feathers into your stomach like a black cobra underneath an echoing well watching for all the beloved liquid and the obsolete assumed yonder. It swallowed up the inexperienced material that proceeded to the summit in a gradual boil.

Prepared gulps of the darkness? Did it engulf out all the germs gathered with the years? It served in stillness with an uncommon note of essential suffocation including blind searching. It became an Eye.

The indifferent administrator of the device could, by wasting a unique optical headgear, stare into the soul of the character that he was tapping out.

Something did the eye witness? He did not reply. He accompanied but did not see what the eye examined. The intact method was not unlike the digging of a hollow in one's garden.

The gal on the bed was no more mysterious than a dense layer of lustrous rock, all must be entered. Travel on, anyhow, elbow the nuisance down, slush up the vacuum, if such a person could be

transported out in the beat of the pull serpent. The engineer reached smudging a tobacco pipe. The significant- device of others was operating exceedingly. The separate device was operated through an equivalently disinterested peer in non-stainable reddish-brown overalls.

This device drew all of the plasma of the frame of the torso furthermore substituted it with fresh lifeblood and immunotoxin. 'Prepared to flush 'em out both ways,' said the laborer, being over the soundless gentlewoman.

'End this!' He said, along with- 'never- ever use preparing the belly if you don't clean the blood. Omit that essence in the blood moreover the blood spreads to the brain like a hammer, smack, several times into the brain, just quits- and let her go, and it's all over.'

'I was simply telling,' said the laborer. 'Are you prepared?' Said the man in health uniform. They shut the computers uptight. 'We are finished.' His rage did not even brush them - with their cold feelings- in not caring to care. Others stood with the fag- fume curling throughout their noses including into their eyes without giving them nictitate or peeps.

'This's fifty bulls.' 'Chief, why don't you narrate to me if she'll be all right- or this was all a waste?' 'Sure, she'll be okay- here memories were kept- and that is all that truly matters after all. He said. This was nothing more than mind retrieval- and fast death.

We the traditional essence fit in our case here - you can receive the life in the database, it can't perceive her immediately. As I said, you take out the old and put in the novel and you're okay, that is life after all.' 'Sick is what it is!' He said.

This was here planed death, at this time at this moment, governed, by the people for the people. She was not of worth. 'Go-F*CK- Yourself!' He screeched. 'Neither of you are M. D's. HOW- IS THIS LAWFUL? Didn't they send an M.D. from Crisis?' 'Hell! they send two- jack ass retard's, the laborers just winked and walked past saying take it up with the courts- of the county. 'She died; I don't think that is needed...'

'Pity then is it not? He whispered, 'doing my job.' Said the other to the worker, as to take out boxes of junk for a home in the past. An in that box was a story- lost and never read, in the front part of the high-rise- she was lit aflame with kerosene- pumped from a red-first responder-truck with the number 450 on the sides, the bodies like this girl- just like a book of no worth, with nothing, said, nothing to give, like so many others most children under 10, estimated.

'We understand these quandaries nine or ten an evening. Got so many, beginning a few years ago- we need the room for the ones that have something to give the world, we had the extraordinary line-ups developed. With the visible spectacles, of passage, that was original; the bottom is ancient. Y'all don't need an M.D., in a state- like this; all you require is two jacks-of-all-trades, cleaning up the PULL OF **-Heifer-** *SHIT*- dilemmas in less than a half an hour- to 15 minutes.

'Look you Jackoff's 'Get,'' he stood by the door- 'we got to go.' Recently had another call on a 4-year old that was let go. 'Like pages to burn, he said, just like books... a waste of time.' One block from here.

The view of the girl- child in a cardboard shoe-box was a pain to his mind, he could see them dumping, out the door too- and lit up- like paper- at 450 degrees- Kelvin. 'No space to have them placed, is the slogan.' You could move them if you have the money- to outside, yet that is too costly, for most in poverties. Cry if you need. Keep quiet, it's all the same.

Just before with the child- the eyes of puffadders regarded up their quantity of computer and tubes, their cause of water grief and the slow dark residue of anonymous tissue, and strolled out the door- and lit up- like wasted varmint and pus. Nothing was placed in the database for her- not even an ID number. He then at that moment at that time dropped into a chair and looked at this little lady of the glass walls in hologram for the last time like all. Never to be remembered again, and discharged from all minds.

Her discriminations to her eyes- stayed closed now, mildly, and he put out his hand to hold the warmness of inspiration on his palm. 'A - Child' he said, at the end- before a start. There are likewise many of us, he deemed. There are billions of us and that's exceedingly numerous. Nobody perceives anyone. Guests arrive and defile you. Strangers proceed and separate your heart, mind, and soul out with tubs and fling you to the insinuators.

Guests come and take your blood. F*ck- God for this, who were those chaps? I never perceived them before in my experience! Moiety an hour passed. The bloodstream recovered to give to others, and it seemed to have done a new thing to him. Life for the life he said. 'Okay then...' That was the day he started the rebellion of the star.

Her cheeks were pretty pink and her lips were very fresh- eyes once blue, and wondrous and full to the many colors- other than gray- and they looked soft and relaxed, even in seeing the light. The

girl's name was Steffanie, now only someone else's blood and transplants, and DNA exchange. If only someone else's flesh and brain and consciousness.

If simply they could have exercised her wisdom along to the dry-cleaner's moreover drained the pockets and cooked and washed it furthermore deblocked it plus brought it after in the morn. If barely... He got up and placed back the shades and started the windowpanes far-flung to let the midnight air inside.

It was two o'clock in the A.M. Was it only an hour ago, I was in the sky walkway, and him coming in, as she lay in her miniature coffin-like rent room, and the darkroom and her foot kicking the side and top the little a little ship in a bottle? The air was tight yet clean. the dome light above not all that bright, when on. Only room to roll from side to side in the same place your body lay before. She was sick of this life. Hardly an hour, although the world had decreased down including sprung up into a unique and neutral application.

Chuckling left beyond the moon- the melanistic lawn of the apartment of she smiled so modestly and so-o solemnly. Above all, their laughter was relaxed and hearty and not forced in any way, coming from the house that was so brightly lit this late at night while all the other houses were kept to themselves in darkness.

She heard the voices talking in her mind, chatting, telling, addressing, informing, weaving, reweaving their anodyne network.

He walked out within the portholes doors and divided the garden, outwardly still deeming of it. He endured outside the eloquent horse in the adumbrations, considering he sway even tap on their entry and murmur, 'Let me come inside.'

I won't speak anything. I simply want to overhear. What it is you're saying?' However alternatively he stood there, very raw, his face a hood of ice, harking to a little voice (the girl?) moving along at an easy pace: 'Well, following all, this is the age of disposable membrane. Blow your nose on a body, plug them, rinse them away, lead for different, go, back, wash. Everyone practicing everyone other's coattails.

How are you thought to root for the homestead organization meanwhile you don't also have a business or know the names?

For that affair, what shade pullovers are they diminishing as they amble out on to the courts?' He walked back to his own dwelling, left the glass wide, reviewed everything back to him they have taken as data, tucked the blankets about his thoroughly, yet this time all alone, with only the memories, and sad masturbation of going lefty. Furthermore, suddenly lay down with the moonlight on his cheek and nude body with his firm grip of himself pointed like a projectile to space above - bones and on the grim ridges in his brow, amidst the moonlight infused in each eye to form a silver torrent there. One dab of the tempest.

One, the young girl. Two, the love of his life, three, the war for life. Four, fire, One, the girl, two, sex. One, two, three, four, five, need air, girl, child, fire, sleeping-tablets, being a man, disposable tissue, coat-tails, blow, wad, flush, her, the child, the young girl, my children, the fire, tablets, membranes, blow, wad, color. One, two, three, one, two, three! Thundershower. The mind spins and pounds- like the hand he has no authority of a child has been the hands that move his, all in his head, a match said hospice- replacement, yet she is new to me in my head and a child of fourteen years. She the same age as my kids, I said- out of exhaustion.

Different drop then sprays about his face. Prefer a third. The young woman. A fourth. The young woman- the warmth of temptations and thoughts at cold tonight. The hurricane winds- her orgasms of many- in my head and see through to the other side. The relative laughing about me feeling shy with his child that was matched to me as if I am wrong for thinking too much in modesty.

Thunder tumbling all around me inside and out. The complete world streaming down. The fire welling up in a volcano-like-a special child at lust. Total speeding on down encompassing in a spouting roar furthermore revering stream toward daylight. 'I don't remember anything anymore,' he said, and let a sleep-lozenge dissolve on his tongue. At nine in the morn, his bed was empty- yet she this new love felt as by his side- a new feeling of comfort.

He then got up immediately, his spirit pumping- moreover ran underneath the hall and ended at the galley door. Some toast jumped out of the silver toaster- from the wall itself, moved followed by a spidery alloy helper that flooded it with melted butter-and jelly in the wall then out to him.

The eyes of the new lover girl within his and in his head- ever-so- strong and kind- more than loving as she watched the toast delivered to her plate. The fourteen-year-old child was in- madding love with her new man.

She had both ears plugged with electronic bees that were humming the hour away. She looked up suddenly, saw him, and nodded. 'You all right?' She asked, within his mind thanks to the electronics. The girl was an expert at lip-reading from 14 years of apprenticeship at head-inserted ear-thimbles.

She bowed again- and he can see as if there inside her body. She set the toaster snapping away at an extra piece of bread- again by the thought of his mind. He sat down, with the force of her inside him to do it. His partner said, 'I don't apprehend how? I should be so hungry.' 'You -?' 'I'm Starving.' 'The last twilight,' he started. 'Didn't nap well. Feel lousy,' she said. M-mm he said back to the young lover. 'God, I'm starved. I can't comprehend this.'

'Last night-' he said repeatedly. She saw his lips casually. 'What about last night?' 'Don't you remember?' 'Oh, do and you were wonderful, she said sweetly.'

'Something? Concluded we have a wild appetite or something? Appear like I have got an aftereffect. God, I'm craving. What was here?' 'A few characters,' he said. 'That's what I imagined took place yet, I am sure you will have no understanding of that.'

She nibbled her toast as if she was doing it for him and the other way 'round. 'Sensitive abdomen and lowers, but I'm ravenous as all-get-out. Suppose I didn't do anything unwise at the gathering.' 'No,' he said, unostentatiously. The toaster speared out a bit of buttered bread for him. He squeezed it in his hand, seeming grateful for this new desire, worship, passion, and devotion. 'You really don't seem so hot yourself,' said his newfound crush. In the late evening, it drizzled and the whole world was dim grey.

He held in the gallery of his apartment, placed on his material with the star flashing across it. He stood peering up at the air-conditioning vent- and said 'so odd,' in the lobby for a long time. His love in the salon left him behind- in his mind until his return delayed long enough from studying her dialogue to glimpse up.

'Say,' she said and come back to bed with me. 'The man's logic about this!' 'Yes,' he said. 'I needed to talk to you, anyway.' He hesitated. 'He grabbed some capsules in the bottle see you tonight.' 'Oh, I wouldn't do that,' she said, surprised. 'You could overdose.' 'The bottle was empty.' 'I wouldn't do a thing like that, she said. Why would I do a thing like that?' He had not a clue until remembering the men, and what he said.

'Possibly you took pills and to forgot and took two more-to sleep and five more to remember to get up, and forgot again- that you needed to do all, and took two more- to not feel the way you do-now, and remained so dopy you cached right on continuously you should see the physician.' 'Heck,' she replied, 'what would I order to go furthermore do such a goofy thing like that for?' 'I don't know,' he announced.

She remained quite unmistakably encouraging for him to go. 'I didn't do such,' she said. 'Nevermore in a billion years.' 'All correct if you say so,' he answered. 'That's everything the young lady replied.' She transformed back into her scenarios of life. 'What's on this midday?' He urged tiredly.

She didn't glance up from her lines again. 'Well, this is a play begins on the wall-to-wall circuit within ten seconds. All sent me my share this daylight.

I threw in some box-tops. They write the dialogue including one element desiring. It's a unique approach. The home-maker, that's me- the little girl thought, is the lacking piece. He needs what was taken. I will be there. Meanwhile, it gets time for the removed lines, all gaze at me out of the three walls plus I say the lines: Here, for example, the gentleman says, `What do you believe of this complete plan, girl- Kasandra Natalie?'

Furthermore, he glances at me loafing here mid-stage, discern?

-And-

'I say- I tell' She interrupted and ran her finger below a line in the text.' 'I presume that's accurate!' Furthermore, suddenly they go on by the entertainment continuously he says, 'Do you agree to that, Ms. Natalie!' ... And I say, `I certainly do!' Isn't that the game, Bud?'

He stood in the passage gazing at her. 'It's certainly fun,' she answered. 'Whichever's the performance about?' 'I plainly stated to you. There are these people named, and there reading from the memories.' 'Yes.' 'It's entertaining- remembering what was read. It'll be also more pleasure meanwhile we can allow having the fourth wall hologram connected to the apartment glass walls. Wherewith long spun you terminate before we save up and get the fourth surface screen shredded out and a fourth wall-TV put in?

It's only two thousand bucks.' 'That's one-third of my annual monthly pay.' 'It's only two thousand bucks,' his sweet young lover responded.

-And-

'I should imagine you'd examine me seldom. If we must have a fourth glass wall hologram TV, why it would be simply like this room wasn't ours at solely, but all kinds of extrinsic people's rooms - in here with us at all times - that would be great - no?

We could obey without a few things.' 'We're previously doing externally a few items to pay for the third surface screen. It was put in barely two months ago, remember?' 'No, you would not remember, you're not her - this is all about them making you spend money, you don't have.'

'Is that all it was?' It was not even a day later that she sat looking at him for a long moment, saying she was his new partner. 'Well, good-bye, dear.' 'Good-bye, baby,' he said. He paused and swung around.

'Makes it have a felicitous conclusion?' 'I haven't seen that far.' He strolled over, read the last page, bent, collapsed the dialogue, and returned it back to her.

The thundershower was decreasing away and the girl continued exercising in the center of the sidewalk looking at him getting ever-so smaller as he made his way down to the ground leaves, with her head looking downwards, and the few drops falling on her face - mixing with her tears of missing him already - she was in love yet, she wondered if he was back.

He marched out of the dwelling into the torrents - spring debris. She smirked when she saw Bud. 'Say Love you - in his mind back looking up blowing a kiss to her as he did every day before, as nothing changed - between the woman!' 'Move on' he said to himself - 'by not.'

He said love and then said, that is when he ran in to - whom he thought was his child Elody, then she said - 'I'm still insane you know.' The storm feels so-o good. I fancy walking the rain. 'I don't believe I would like that,' he said as you do - I get wet enough in the mines. 'You sway if you tried.' 'I never-ever have.' She licked her lips to the wetness running down her face. 'The shower is savory - good.' She looked at something in her hand - saying I want you to keep this. 'What've you got there?' He replied. 'I suppose this is the last of the dandelions this age.'

I didn't believe I'd obtain one on the yard this late. Have you ever heard of rubbing it under your jawbone? Look.' She felt her chin with the rose, laughing. 'Why?' 'If it rubs off, it suggests I'm in

love.' Has it- or now feel it?' He could hardly do anything else but stare at her eyes. 'Well?' The girl answered.

'You're yellowish beneath there.' 'Excellent! Let's try YOU now.' 'It won't work for me.' 'Here.' Before he could leave, she had put the dandelion beneath his chin. And said thank you- giving a side hug, he drew back and she smiled. 'Hold still- the self-developing and printing and web downloading camera to a photograph- as it loved into view for an awe moment!' She peered under his chin and frowned.

'Well?' He answered. 'What a stigma,' she responded. 'You're not in love with me I know - or her ether.' 'You're a broken man!' Along with saying- 'And- working to death.' 'Yes, I am!' 'It doesn't show, though right?' 'I am very much in love with you she said!' He tried to charm up an expression to fit the words, but there was no presentation.

'I am!' She said again, 'Yes, please don't look that way- I love you.' You a child he said. 'YOU NO NOTHING OF LOVE. and you do, I have seen.'

'It's that dandelion,' he answered. 'You've practiced it all up on yourself. That's how it won't work for me.' 'likewise, that must be this.

Oh, promptly I've flustered you, I can see I have; I'm sad, really I am.' She rubbed his rose to his chin and said its fine. 'Neither,' he said, hurriedly, 'I'm all right.' 'I've got to be working soon, so say you pardon me. I don't want you annoyed with me for feeling what is human nature.' 'I'm not offended. Shocked, certainly.' 'I've got to go to see my shrink now for this I am sure - love is also crazy to feel for someone you don't really know.

They obtain me to go to work after all they own my home. I surrendered up something to say. She thought- I don't understand what he thinks of me.

He says I'm a normal onion! I hold him busy stripping away the stories.' 'I'm likely to understand you need the therapist yet not for loving someone,' said Bud. 'Then wh at?' He took a gasp and let it out and at last said, 'No, more like PTSD.'

'Life is like a game of cards, even when you don't have the best of hands, you have to play the game the best you can- and see what happens.'

'The therapist wants to know-how, like- I go out and explore nearby in the elevated parks and view the birds and accumulate butterflies, and flowers and even grass.'

'I'll bestow you my gathering someday to him.' 'Good.' 'They require to understand something I do with all my time. I inform them that seldom- I just sit and think. Although I won't explain to them what. I've got them moving.

Furthermore seldom, I perceive them, I prefer to put my energy terminal, same this, and let the drizzle into my mouth. It undergoes just like wine. Ought you to ever try this?' 'No, I- love living like this' 'You should have forgiven me, haven't you?' This all took place in the mind in conversations. 'True.' He imagined this. 'Okay, I have. God grasps why I need too. You're uncommon, you're provoking, yet you're easy to forgive- you're a child of wonder. You say you're fourteen?' 'Well-next month I will well be for sure.'

'How strange. How unusual. Including my companion thirty years was her end, furthermore yet you appear so much older at times. He said when now home with his new partner. I can't get over it, how much you remind me of her.' 'You're wonderful yourself, Mr. Bud.

Sometimes, I even forget you're a coal-miner. Now, may I make you angry again?' 'Go onward.' 'How did it begin? How did you get into this? How did you choose your profession and how did you happen to remember to take the position you hold?

You're unlike the others. I have seen a few; I grasp. If I talk, you look at me. Meanwhile, I spoke something about the moon, you glanced at the moon, last bedtime.

The next day he sees the same girl before him, and she is- still very much in love, the others would never- ever do that.

-And-

Like before on his way to work the girl- 'The others would wander off and leave me speaking, yet not you.' You are my beget, aren't you? That is this love I feel?

'Maybe so-o.' He said.

Part: 3

Astir warn me. No individual has time any more for anyone else. You're one of the few who settle for me? Elody he called her, mistakenly- as if his child, you understand this, 'I am not who you think I am.'

The girl- When she kissed him it was all wrong, yet sweet. That's why I think it's so strange you're a coal miner, it just doesn't appear right for you, anyhow.' Who are you really? A time traveler he said. I am not your dad, yet I know him and this family line well. Let us just say where are related, and I can never have a make love partnership with you.

He knew his body divide itself into hotness plus an understanding of her lust, a softness, and a weakness, a trembling including a not trembling, the two moieties crushing one upon the other. Wrong yet right.

'You'd better run on to your profession,' she said. And she ran off and left him standing there in the sunshine. I need to see where I going to be sleeping tonight anyway, and if I well have the money to say where I was at. Only after a long time did he move.

Plus, then, very gradually, as he walked, he dipped his head back in the rain that sprang up yet again, for just a few seconds and opened his lips... The Mechanical Cat rested but did not nap, existed but did not live in its gently whispering, softly fluctuating, softly ornamented enclosure behind in a dark corner of the apartment.

These faint glimmer of one in the aurora, the moonlight from the expansive atmosphere composed for the great windowpane, stirred here and beyond on the alloy and some copper and the iron of the faintly quivering creature.

Each radiance shone on pieces of ruby glass including on fine-tuned slender hairs in the fiber whisked noses of the creation that shuddered mildly, its legs speared under it on rubber-padded paws. Bud touched the cat... she growled. Bud jumped back.

She rose in its enclosure and gazed at him with green-blue neon light glittering in its abruptly aroused eyeballs.

It grumbled repeatedly, a strange harsh sequence of electrical hissing, a frying din, a scraping of alloy, a turning of gears that seemed worn and old-fashioned including mistrust. 'Neither, no, girl,' said Bud, his heart pounding- at the thing. He observed the silvery awl extended against the air an inch, pull back, stretch, pull back.

Bud pushed down the alloy ramp up and down floors of his home. He went out to look at the city out the glass doors and the mists had realized aside entirely, furthermore, he took a hit off his E-cigarette and came back to bend down and look at the cat missing his wife.

It was like a numerous bee come homeward of some field anywhere the honey is full of poison wildness, of madness and horror, its trunk jammed with that over-rich nectar and presently it was sleeping the evil out of itself.

'Hi,' whispered Bud, excited as forever with the still beast, the existing beast. At evening when things got sullen, which was every evening, the kids slid and play in the parks over the way with no care in the world and I would think of my own childhood, including established the ticking combinations of the olfactory system of the cat and let loose rats in the dwelling I call home behind me, and sometimes fowls, and sometimes dogs that would have to be asphyxiated anyway, and burning buildings- blocks away.

Nevertheless, there would be betting to see which the cat would clinch first. The creatures were turned loose- to run in packs in the streets, on the lowest leaves of the grounds with the low life- were trash and lost cars of the past are- on Earth first levels- and past roads that endured dialect.

Three moments later the game was done, the rat, cat, or chicken caught half across the areaway, seized in gentling paws while a four-inch arched steel syringe fell from the proboscis of the cat to introduce massive jolts of morphine or procaine. The cat's-paw remained then flung in the incinerator-or eaten by poverty. A new star famine game has begun- and I already knew how what going to be the leader of the pack. Bud stayed upstairs most evenings when this went on.

~*~

The girl- There should remained a time a couple of years ago while she had bet with the best of them, and lost a week's wages and faced her violent hatred towards the world and her parents, which manifested itself in veins and blemishes on her skin and arms.

Solely now at nightfall she rested in his berth, performance changed to the wall, monitoring to whoops of roaring below and the piano-string hasten of rat feet below, the violin squeaking of rodents, moreover the fabulous shadowing-of creeps- looking for hits and quiet's- woman, and drugs-motioned silence of the things leaping out like a miller's in the virgin light, finding, taking its victim, interpolating the needle and going back to its den to departs as if a switch had stayed fixed.

The howl stewed in the creature also it glanced at him- all the way down where it was. Bud stiffened up. The cat took a move from its enclosure. Bud grasped the glass handrail with one hand. The handrail, finding, thrust upward furthermore took him through the ceiling, quietly- to a new room.

He walked off in the moiety lit floor that would glow within the glass of the floor of the upper level. He was quivering and his face was extremely-white.

Hereinafter, the impressions cat had settled back down upon its legs unbelievable mighty legs and was whispering to itself again, its multi-faceted eyes at peace. Bud stood, engaging the fears pass, by the ramp.

Behind him, four men at a card table under a burgeoning mixed colored light in the corner glimpsed momentarily but said zilch.

Only the man with the back hardhat plus the sign of the star- seraphim on his hat, at last, unusual, his playing cards in his thin hand, talked across the long room. 'Bud...?' 'It doesn't like me,' said Bud. 'What, the Cat?'

The other men studied his cards of knowing what was to come next. 'Come off it- the girl said this don't do anything. It doesn't tell you anything other than what you want to believe is true. It just `performs- a piece of mind.' It's like a lesson in ballistics. It has a trajectory we settle for it. It follows through. It targets itself, places itself, and cuts off. It's only copper wire, storage batteries, and electricity.' Bud swallowed. 'It's really just like computers can be set to any sequence, so many amino acids, so many Sulphur, so much butterfat, and alkaline.'

'Right?' 'We all comprehend that.' 'All of those chemical insights and discounts on all of us here in the residence are read in the control file downstairs. Of this new partnership.

It would be secure for someone to fasten up a partial sequence on the cat's 'consciousness,' a touch of amino acids, perhaps. That would estimate for what the creature did just now.

Reciprocated himself toward me.' 'Holy Hell,' 'Annoyed, though not totally angry. Just enough 'mindfulness' set up in it by someone, therefore, it crumbled - when I touched it.' 'I would not do a thing like that?'

The next day he runs into the same young girl. All the same questions - all the same things said, 'you haven't any enemies here, yet.' 'None that I know of.'

'We'll have the cat checked by our specialists tomorrow.

'This isn't the first time it's warned me,' said Bud.

'Last month it happened twice.' 'We'll fix it up. Don't worry' But Bud did not move and only stood believing of the air-conditioner grille in the hall at home and what lay hidden behind the grille.

If someone here in the home identified about the vent then mightn't they 'perceive' the cat...? The girlfriend came over to the glass ramp and gave Bud a questioning glimpse. 'I was just guessing,' said Bud, 'what does the kitty think about down there nights? Is it coming alive on us? It makes me shiver.'

'It doesn't believe anything we don't want it to imagine.' 'That's sad,' said Bud, quietly, 'because only we put into it is seeking and obtaining and destroying. What a disgrace if that's all it can ever comprehend." Kasandra, she breathed, lightly. 'Hell! It's a little bit of craftsmanship, a reliable rifle that container fetches its purpose and ensures the bull's-eye every time.'

'That's why,' said Bud. 'I wouldn't need to be its next prey. 'Why? You got a guilty moral about something?' Bud glimpsed up quickly. Kasandra stood there gazing at him steadily with his eyes, while his jaw cracked and began to laugh, rather softly.

One two three four five six seven days- all the same. Plus, as many times he came out of the dwelling and his woman was there somewhere in the memory only nagging or wanting him for something.

Once he saw her squatting peeing next to a hickory tree like a dog and not caring what others thought, once he saw her sitting on the lawn naked knitting a sweater, three or four times he found a perfume of late flowers on his porch, or a handful of chestnuts in a little sack- all from the girl, or some fall leaves easily bound to a sheet of white paper and thumb- tacked to his door- safe to say she was a little mad. ‘Maybe she is crazy he questioned.’

Every day the girl walked him to the corner- asking for his love. They marched still further and the girl said, 'Is it accurate that long-ago firemen put fires out instead of going to start them?' 'Negative- Dwellings have always been fire-resistant, take my account of this.' 'Strange is it not?' 'I discovered already that a large time past residence used to burn by misfortune and they needed ladder man to stop the flames with trucks you had to drive.' He chuckled, yet this is so-o. She peeped over.

'Why are you giggling?' 'I love how dumb they have made you all!' 'I don't understand.' 'Living in the past.' He said.

He began to giggle repeatedly and held- 'Why?' 'You grin if I haven't done entertaining things and you respond right off. You never quit thinking about what I've asked you.'

He finished walking, 'You are a unique one,' he said, gazing at her. 'Haven't you any honor?' 'I don't anticipate to be insulting. It's just, I love to watch characters too much, I suppose.'

'Well, doesn't this suggest anything to you?' He rapped the digits sewed on his chair stained sleeve. 'Aye,' she murmured. She doubled her step. 'Become you eternally observed the jet automobiles racing on the avenues above and below.

'You're developing the topic!' 'I seldom think drivers don't know what lawn are, or flowers because they nevermore see them casually,' she said.

'That's a rose-garden! White blurs are houses. Brown blurs are heifers. If you conferred a driver a flourishing blur, oh yes! he'd say, that's lawn! A pink blur? My uncle drove slowly on a highway once. Isn't that funny, and sad, too?' 'You think too many things,' uneasily you are just like Elody. She knocked some oranges that had fallen off the tree in the front courtyard. 'Or talking about how strange the world is- to how it was and we have no understanding as if it never was anything other than we know now.

Being with people is nice. Although- I don't think it's social to get a bunch of people collectively and then not let them communicate, do you? Then an hour of basketball or baseball or running an hour of TV schooling class in front of the smart wall.

Then yet the extra hour of transcription history or painting pictures with more depth then I have ever seen in real life, and more sports, simply do you know, we never ask inquiries, or at least most don't; they just run the results at you, bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of web professor.

(Back)

1

(Living life on repeat- just in a new body. Back to destiny.)

3001- When I wake up it was cold like the haunting type of day with low light and the feeling of fog. The other side of the bed in her rent room that was 3-foot-high and 7-foot-long is cold like me inside and this world that I live in. Her fingers spring out, and then tighten, seeking Elody tempers, and, finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress, I am there by her side she is afraid, that she is going to be the one, the one that is chosen to combat.

'It was a yearning to burn.' The computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I pads', and PCs, without looking through old dusty pages, plus its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unprotected sex.'

Like me she was thinking about how she might be the one girl in our town, that has to give her freedom up to fight in this war, like all of us girl in our bunker, a girl school if you well, we all are having this like bad dream all the same dream how does that work? No mom's or dad's no boys, so not cool for a girl that is a pre-teen yet want to feel what love is- we were all ripped away for how we are the girls with the stars on our arms, and known by a number.

Unquestionably, she did- thinking she would be the one called out to do this task, yet so did I- like so did all of us. This is the day of the acquiring of being a woman of my type, a girl that is not what is called the right race.

Were we having to go down in our numbers of what is not permitted to the troopers want and that man that has power over us all?

She pulls the covers back over and I am now in the same bed with her not allowed yet she is my little sister... what are they going to do, drag me out of the room and put a gun in my hand and kill me like they did my other older sister, last night? Just kill me, and get it over with... to I said, I live in a room with 100 girls, where you can even shit without a man or them looking at you are doing just that. Sleeping with one open, to say the least... I have to which what I say now, or... (You're not prompted to say what go one within the walls.)

The voice in the air said. I fart they could kill me for that also! I want to see hare maybe for the last time before we're off... before the round is chosen. I am here to see the look in her eyes of bloody fear, as she is me... we all feel this way... for the next day. She hugs me knowing that is safe.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Elody curled up on her the little side she is no more they four feet, brown hair green eyes, sheltered under the privacy of the covers, uptight body and nightgown were there that was all we had on all that is allowed at night, short and loose-fitting.

Her left side of her face forced to my chest some of it showing yet I did not care, you stop caring about that with a girl doing what she next to us, you're going to die anyway why not have your fantasy lover in your head.

Hugged tighter- and tighter together, before don where we are going to be ripped apart for what we may not know- being forever. She is now asleep, not me- she looks like me- Likewise, younger, the brown hair is what they really odium about she and I. Look at us worn Likewise, not so beaten- down, me more than her... for I am older, I think. My sister's face is as rosé as raindrops fall hard out the windows with the bars being all the keeps the cold out, as lovely as my sister- rose- for which she was named- on a day like this when she was born.

My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me... (You can say that I hear the voice say out yet this time it was in my mind, they have found a way to do that too.)

2

She wakes up to go pee, and they would not let her so she goes off on the floor by the bed, she could be killed for that... I say she going to go... you can stop her. Now she is sitting on her knees, yet I am guarding her like I am the world to her and the other way around. Pulverized-in muzzle up faces her lips like touching mine her nose on mine, wimping in her ear I was saying- words that would help or so I thought- missing was her mom- someone that was killed in front of her eyes seven days years ago, eyes color faded like when you lose life and pass on she had that feeling I am sure of that fact.

She was talking about being a kid, and what that was like before all this bull shit happened. Elody named her Punches, maintaining that she black, brown, and white like a coat that I have that is full of holes, she was bright and blooming like a bright flower in spring at home, in France.

That cat dislikes me, yet I don't mind her, or at least distrusts me, that something I have felt a lot in my life, not being liked. Unlike my sister, even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown her in a pot for something to eat we were that poor thinks to the troopers, that took all that we are and were away from us.

And even then, my sister still loved me- she knew I was doing what I had too. I recall when she brought him home, as a pet and not something that was food on the table- hell we didn't even have that... Just a kitten, belly puffy with maggots, crawling with fleas.

The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. Likewise, Elody begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay, even the maggot off of cats... and so well she - I have even eaten the occasional rat run up my leg in my bed- raw.

Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Likewise, Teacup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me. The hair on my legs keep us girl worm- looks good now to be all hair? No hissing... I well bit you back and not even think about it... I loved cats, Likewise, food is food. I feel one day, I'll come upon a loved one of mine motionless against a wall or lying in the Grazing land, you hear the wails from a house, and the X armed forces are called in to repossess the body. Malnourishment is never the cause of death officially. It's always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia.

Likewise, then again that fools no one...

Starvation Isn't all that rare of fate in these parts of 14. Who hasn't seen the dupes? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines are left on the mud outside the shaft to pass on. Struggling through the streets, are ended with warfare.

3

This is the gigantic chamber we will ever come to love, for the love of die is less painful than living in the camp. I swing my legs off the bed reaching for my issued boots. Lithe leather that has molded to my feet. I pull on trousers, a dress, tuck my hair up and out, my long 2 drown braid down my chest, and grab my silage bag. I was asked to do what I have to so we last until were called out - I think back on days that pass- On the table before it was blown up- under a wooden bowl to protect it from hungry rats and cats alike, sits a perfect little rabbit shit balls wrapped in rosemary leaves.

Elody gift to me on earning a day. I put the cheese carefully in my pocket as I slip outside, that was on the rat tarp hoping not to snap it down on my middle finger, and I need that as a girl- you know.

4

My father had been killed in the mine accident three months earlier in the bitterest February anyone could remember this if they wanted- Likewise, they don't care. The numbness of his loss had passed, and the pain would hit me out of nowhere, photocopying me over, racking my body with sobs. Where are you? I would cry out in my mind all the time- it was harder for her being so young. My mom was lost in space for days after... not saying anything to anyone... or us so Elody and I were taking care of ourselves. When all she did was lay in bed with vibrations pulsating going on, her thoughts they said were with him.

The community had given us a small amount of money as compensation for his death, enough to cover one month of grieving at which time my mother would be expected to get a job. Only she didn't.

She didn't do anything Likewise, sitting propped up in a chair or, more often, huddled under the blankets on her bed, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Once in awhile, she'd stir, get up as if moved by some urgent purpose, only to then collapse back into stillness. No amount of pleading from My sister seemed to affect her.

Our part of region 14, nicknamed the purlieu, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. Men and women with bent over shoulders, swollen k nuckles and skinned backs and knees, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces.

Nonetheless today the gloomy streets are empty and barren. Shutters are a brown window, row homes on the squat and now graying color houses closed shop underneath. The earning of who is chosen isn't until five P.M. May as well sleep in the only day now being here where we were allowed to do as we wanted, a reward they called it for knowing that we are brave enough today for our area.

Mom is only nineteen... just so you know, we all have kids young... for some man take us as there's. It's just how it works here. I have already been had. Yet my dad killed him for this... there is no law saying you can or cannot.

5

Our house is almost at the edge of the Ridge. I only have to pass a few towns to reach the unkempt field called the Grazing Lands. Separating the Grazing land from the woods that are all burnt for the warfare, in fact circling all of quarter 14, is a high wood cladding fence topped with barbed-wire

loops. In theory, it's supposed to be electrified twenty-four hours with which man on towers, train dropping off more girls, girls-only here and man that wants us to be dead, a day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods- packs of wild dogs want to lick and bit at are hills- streets are like infertile.

Even so, I always take a moment to listen carefully for the hum that means the fence is live, I sometimes try to see the boy's side, over there if I can, some of us girl try to run the face, there are ways. Right now, it's silent as a stone and some of us went for it, all we could do is be killed- so what- I don't want to die a virgin. Hidden by a clump of bushes, we dash, I flatten out on my belly and slide under a two-foot stretch that's been loose by the time before.

There are several other weak spots in the fence that have been penetrated, Likewise, this one is so close, out of the bathroom showers were the girls made a way out, I almost always enter the woods here, not caring if I have anything on or not.

6

We girls clam trees, to see if we can see into the boys' rooms, and then they give us a wavy saying it all clear and we make the run for it, sometimes- I feel like why do they risk their lives for us- just once, maybe a girl just needs it in more.

I re-claim a bow, which I have made to fight them off me, I had it headend, so if I take on fire, I have something to send back, behind hollow log we wait it out. The Electrified fence in the way or not we were getting there and getting a boy tonight- it was the last time we might, the fence has been up-and-coming at keeping the carnivores out of quarters of 14.

Inside the timbers, they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow of deer and bear. The boys also give us the thing we need other than love in the night- food is a big thing for where we are as thin as could be.

Good, my sister had to suck on my own nipple just for something to eat... that how bad things are here... were not allowed to have a baby, mine killed the day I came here when I was kicked in the gut, saying we don't need any more of your kind. It was for nine months.

Look at that place over there- like Eblock no running water just a trickle, out of a hand pump no lights- nothing Likewise, your thoughts of the girls on the other side, and betting it is their life, and working as slaves for the troopers. Then again there's also food if you know how to find it.

My father knew this was all going to happen, I recall them rushing in, we were in the addict with a trap door, I flashback about how he taught me some before he was blown to bits by a pistol go at his had in a bang. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then and still am. Five years later, I still wake up screaming for him to run.

So- my sister is ten, I worry if a ten-year-old could fight till death in this war as a young girl, and then I look at me and know; I am not as strong. I keep having been feeling that she or I would be called out- and I really don't know why- like, it's my destiny- to be the- chosen one.

7

Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and I could be slaughtered and eat for it I don't care, and poaching carries the severest of consequences, more people would jeopardies it if they had weapons.

Nonetheless, most are not bold enough to venture out with just a homemade knife, I made mine for a food tray the tray they give you only once a day with roadkill on it. The water they give is the color of piss... some say they would eat their shit- I would not go that far, Likewise, crazy will get to you.

My bow is an infrequency as I go under the wall, tagged along with a few other body parts- few others keep well hidden in the woods as I am the first to make the running leaps over all the traps and snags, carefully wrapped in waterproof covers. Only 10 of us girl made this run, there were so that just stayed in the big room and playing with themselves- why? You're going to die anyway.

Why? Why- not make this last run for food and sex and maybe a way out of this all. If a boy can buy you out in a mirage. My father could have made good money selling us to a man or husband, yet it is common for us girls to be a tramp at our age if mommy and daddy have the bucks to do it. No gold band just someone that takes you for a possession... something to beat on and beat off on, they're playing thing... I feel.

On the other hand, if the troopers found out I was doing this like all these girls, like Alijah, Jania, Samee, Martah, Trace, and Majia- and so on... the other four I hardly know other- then seeing the

nude in their bad and in the shower rooms, or eating their rations next to me... I would have been publicly executed for rabblerousing at this point I feel too; I am the girl her with gut or so the others say.

My sister is the shy one of us all not even gone through the woman change is not bleeding if you don't get that, I just started like a week ago- that would not even kill a cockroach to eat it, I had to do that for her too, yet she is young sweet and innocent.

Most of the armed forces turn a blind eye to the few of us who are hunting to give to them or to the whole group, for this is what they want, us to fight for it so they don't have to kill, so they can kill us for doing what they want.

Confusing? Nope- not to them... For the reason that they're as hungry for fresh meat as anybody else is where what they want and what we want in not another human life to be killed yet they do. In fact, they're among our best trades- us- killing for the hell of it like a sick twisted sport- see the mass graves and the body braining like all the books. Then the idea that someone might be arming the ridge would never have been allowed.

All that was wisdom was dejected and seen as not to be useful in our lives it has been a band. There are a lot of things that are forbidden to me, yet that does not stop me from doing it anyways- unlike my reluctant sister that fears everything and everybody.

8

In the fall, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to harvest apples us girl climbing trees. Nevertheless- always in sight of the Grazing land with the eyes of at least one trooper looking up the dress, you get what I am saying there never not there. Always close enough to run back to the safety of neighborhood 14 if distressed arises. 'Areas of fourteen.' Where you can starve to death in safety,' I mumble out yet I was the only one to hear or so I thought when the girl next to me was rolling her eyes. Then I glance quickly over my shoulder and she was like up my Likewise, even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you, she said not wanting me to say a word. The number on her jacket (G- S- 08976457544) was shining now in the spotlight of the guards' tower, we're going to get busted she said, as we were crawling to the boys' room. G for girl S for the star and the number ID.

Where are the star girls... that what they all call us here?

I think they all no were out I hear the click of the guns, it's just target practice for them just a hunt, they want us to do this!

9

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death that I would look out for my sister, the things I would blurt out about Area 14, about the people who rule our country, Paris was overrun and now there are 15 parts, from the remote city called the Capital up to us the little unsolicited parts.

Eventually, I understood this would only lead us to more trouble, doing this so we go in and out fast with more than just a kiss- I had my I on Blazie, I was going to have this one thing- before I was axed off with my head. So-o I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts. On the other hand, unlike my sister, I do say way too much.

(Back)

Do my work quietly in school, was my life before this place, and being ripped out of reality. Make only polite small talk in the public market that was my sister-, not me. You can see us all there in this one-room schoolhouse. She is the good girl, not me- I deliberate little more than trades in the hot plate at my desk, the bell rings out free to go- to the market where I make most of my money giving up my food for the day.

Even at home there is nothing, I have on long white T-shirt ripped up showing my all of my one side that was dads, that I wear as my dress, where I am less pleasant, I avoid discussing tricky topics. Like the reaping, or food shortages, or the war kill. Elody might begin to repeat my words, she looks up to me for everything, where would she be without me behind her? They know this they all do...

I wear this all the time even in the rain, where you can see it all yet no one care about, that when all they want to do is live on another day sex is not some we care about when kids are run around naked- like a tribe around a fire wild looking like revenues animals with look in their eyes for the test of blood.

10

The boy the sight of him waiting there brings on a smile to my face until he is shot right in front of me and all of us girl run back to are badly scared, and in far that we were seen, some girl still

doing their thing... they ask question seeming at white looks on our faces, One looked at me I said I never smile except in the when I see him now I will never- I was in love with that boy. It not like I wanted to be held or anything Likewise, she could attest took her hand off it to feel my pain.

No, her boy was in her hand only- that what I'll have to do now- hers was killed off the night before. Killing is the sport they love and I hate it!

My real name is Emalie, Likewise, that not what I am remembered as just a number is all; I had barely whispered it and they say you're only allowed to give out your number to outsiders. So -o I thought what the hell they going to kill me for this little thing I think not- so.

(Back)

Of on the hunt- 'Look what I shot, I said to my sister too young to have a gun-' she holds up a loaf of bread with the burl stuck in it, and I laugh hard. It's real bakery bread how did she get that? Not the flat, dense loaves we make from our grain provisions.

She never said how she got it yet I had my thought about it, as a boy gave it to her, which made it to her bedside... at home. I take it in my hands and we share it, pull it to bits, and hold the wound in the crust to my nose, inhaling the fragrance that makes my mouth flood with drool. Fine bread like this is for special junctures. The boys seem to have more for they are boy's worth something, unlike girls that have no value other than that of passing on this race they don't want.

'Mum, still warm,' I say. She must have been at the bakery at the crack of dawn with some run-away boy to trade for it, she gives him a kiss and a huge and her body she'll it whatever she wants. For that is all girls are good for in these municipalities- 'What did it cost you?' I asked- Just the kiss good night. I giggle think sure- I know- yet it was food, right?

'Well, we all feel a little closer today, don't we as we all look at the family for what may be the last time?' I say fastly, not even bothering to roll my eyes. 'Elody left us a slice of cheese on the traps saying this as a joke.' I pull it out. 'We also shared a cuddly squirrel- I got the ass. Think the old man was feeling sentimental this morning,' says that he would stay with us and not work for the day - there are just sealing shafts off- no money in that for them to take so why did it he felt.

'Even wished me luck.' I look at the blue star glowing etched into my skin on my arm. Like the Blue Bird nickels, that I will certainly not- interminably give up.

Her expression brightens at the treat as I hug her for what I thought maybe the last time. 'Thank you, I said to her for being in my life. We'll have a real feast to more before we are either executed in a line or have to fight for life as the chosen girls to keep our race going- they did as some not all.'

There we all are all ganged up in rows, like little toy soldiers we fall in these lines it was what was said for us to do in our thinking, as we all march into a Capitol agent our well or life, accent as she mimics

Effie Trinket, the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives once a year to read out the names at the jumping.

'I almost disremembered! Blissful Starvation Stars!'

Her determination a few blueberries from the bushes around us.

'Besides- May you're yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding.' The confetti goes- off... as we await our fate, yet she the right bitch well live on for the rest of her days, yet we with the state may not... just for being not... what they want us to be... who are they? The backs were all murder in front of us, so we could see what maybe be in this battle coming up. They're not good enough to scrub the fools are troopers say giggling amongst themselves. There well one is one black girl and one black boy fight in this upcoming event. They want less... us too...

The sweet from fingers going down my hand's sourness detonates across my tongue.' I no-win situation it in my mouth, as well as break the delicate skin with my teeth biting my nails. May you're yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding!'

I arrived in my mind like us all that are made to think is what has to be- with equal verve... we have to put on it for the reason that the unconventional is to be scared out of your intelligence. As well, the Capitol pronunciation is so la-di-da, almost anything sounds funny in it, and I look for her and see her knees are even knocking as she looks frightened. Like a lost little girl on her way to school in the dark mooring woods.

I watch as the woman we call Miss.

Lorde Dio pulls names, with her hand.

Straight black hair, olive skin, gray eyes she is the head of the girls or so were tooled.

Likewise, we're not related any- of the star girls are the mix of them that is why we're being killed, burnt, and gassed, at least not closely. It was that moment of the families never to be also one again, we're living in are yarning would change for their wants, for those that worked would go on without their kids, like my dad who works the mines resemble one another this way. Were one if not both of his offspring would die in this event.

That's why my mother and Elody, with their light hair, braided and have bright haunting spooky-looking blue eyes, always look out of place in all the others, not something common. They are... amazing to me... My mother's parents were part of the small Kidd's class that outfits to troopers. X armed forces, and the occasional Ridge purchaser. They ran an apothecary shop in the nicer part of Area 14. Since almost no one can afford doctors or an RN, apothecaries are our healers or crunch heelers. My father got to know my mother, for they were in the same groping she was not all X you see, she was upper in her class for part 2.

She was banished from her mom and dad doing this and having kids not married. She is like one present of us- comparable to what is in his bloodline. She must have really loved him to leave her home for the Ridge. For the reason that on her hunts she would occasionally collect medicinal herbs, Elody is good with her hands, even the boys say that when we were all together living free, to a point, and sell those to her shop to be brewed into medications.

All she ever wanted was a lover and she has even tool me what was in her romantic dreams, like walking through them, with her, their race. Loads of kissing, fleshly playing, and lusting! I never had anything like that... thus far I want too. I try to evoke that when all I can see is the lady who sat by, blank and out-of-the-way, while her children turned to the skin, bones, and rot. I try to excuse her for my father's wishes. Nevertheless, to be truthful, I personally not the merciful type, on like my sister.

My sister's day in the days before this- bathing in a tub of warm water waits for me. and I scrub off her off all the dirt, water hard to find so I would have to be in there with her, and to get all the sweat from the woods of all with all the grim, and even wash my hair and her which only happens once a week. Let's put your hair up, too,' she says. I let her towel-dry it and two braids it up around head back into a ponytail. I can hardly recognize myself in the cracked mirror that leans against the wall. To my

surprise, my mother has laid out one of her own lovely sundresses for me and one for her with soft pink matching shoes- new there were days where we did not have anything on is feet.

Plus, that was the same day they kick down the doors and said- we belong to them. You look beautiful, she was not a little girl with this look. And nothing like myself,' I say. I hug her because I know these next few hours will be terrible for her.

Her first reaping. She's about as safe as you can get since she's only entered once. I wouldn't let her take out any tesserae. Likewise, she's worried about me. That the unthinkable might happen. I protect Elody in every way I can she knows that, Likewise, then I'm immobilized against the earning. The tormented I always feel when she's in pain or fearful, she balls up lags to her chest and threatens to register the bad thoughts.

12

Nocked like in the rocks up and over.

Starting this place, we are invisible Likewise, have a clear view of the valley over to the tower, which was is teeming with summer life even if we were regulated, the girl in summer was socking sunlight dance in the streets with fire-higdon's blasting water.

The day's war glorious before all hell was unleashed on my mind, with a blue sky like my sister's eyes and soft breeze like her hair tickling my face.

There's never been anything romantic between her and a boy until this last week unlike me. And although he was only two years older, so I feel like it was harmless for what I would and she would get out of it, he already looked like a man strong in all the places. It took a long time for us to even become friends, not for her she was swooning fast, to stop haggling over every trade and begin helping each other out.

When they came up with a more efficient system that transported the coal directly from the mines to the trains, we get on to go to this place up at the capital.

Were up to the now- where it's- tonight. After the earning, where everyone is supposed to celebrate and love to hate and love to die with fate. As well as a lot of people do, out of relie f that their children have been spared for another year. Likewise, at least two families will pull their shutters, lock their doors, and try to figure out how they will survive the painful weeks to come.

At six o'clock, we head for the quadrangular. Presence is mandatory except you are on death's back door. This evening, officials will come around and check to see if this is the case. If not, you'll be imprisoned. People file in silently and sign in and go to their seats. The earning is an awesome occasion for the Capitol to keep tabs on the population as well. Seven- through pre-

teen year-olds are herded into roped areas marked off by ages, the oldest in the back, the young ones, like Elody, toward the front.

Dad and mothers- and teens or family members line up around the boundary where they have to say or be shot on the spot and some are and there are cheers, holding tightly to one another's hands.

Likewise, there are others, too, who have no one they love at stake, or who no longer care, who slip among the crowd, taking bets on the two kids whose names will be drawn. Balances are given on their ages we have too many we need to way out the overloads, were tipping the scales - if you well, the movie plays out about the story of how this all came to be...

These same people tend to be informers, and who hasn't broken the commandment laws? I could be shot on a daily basis for hunting, Likewise, the appetites of those in charge protect me. Not everyone can claim the same. Whether they're Ridge or merchant, if they will break down and weep. Most refuse to deal with the racketeers Likewise, carefully, prudently. The pre-teen that is here is the one that has already done this and live to tell about it, yet that doesn't stop them from killing you if you fight them also.

The four commandments of stars pre-teens:

A star person may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm unless it is given the order.

A star person must obey orders given it by human trooper's beings excluding orders that would conflict with the First Law.

A Star person must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

No sex of any nature or style identified in the populations with same-sex without given rights to pass on your race.

Yet in this tournament, all laws are off!

That's what makes this so much fun- no- Miss Lorde Dio said, sipping on her mixed drink.

As we walk, I notice Elody blouse has pulled out of her skirt in the back again and force myself to stay calm. 'Tuck your tail in, little girl to you look cute and all grown up,' I say, smoothing the blouse back in place. I glance overall face in there wholly school uniforms all unique to their parts in this parcel, yet the same with their likewise, tons on the one side how we all have to be equal, still smoldering underneath his stony expression. Sitting next to each other at assemblies, partnering for sports activities. We rarely chat, which suits- some just like us both just fine to me if you are or not- you have to give it to get it- no? The girl is calling out one she's in my year at school. Being the mayor's daughter of all things- no one is excluded if you have some star in you, you'd expect her to be a snob, Likewise, she's all right. She just keeps to herself. Like me. Yet she may have the cone to get her replaced with someone like me.

Elody, this calling of all nights- her drab school outfit has been replaced by an expensive white dress, were the girl all have to strip in front of us boy's girls everyone sees this, seeing these girls all become what they're going to be when they change. Then her dark hair is done up with a pink ribbon by an older girl that has sieved the last war stars. Reaping clothes of per white show innocents- you have to tournament your colors and your place in this world. The boy forms the head down shaved... and made flawless... they say it the only time is a race would look worthy.

I read into my sister's thoughts- she was thinking about her boy- Does she mean it? I question- know they were hearing this too when a thought like this was not permitted. Or is she messing with him, for the love and lust? I'm guessing the second. At the Capitol arena looking like the warrior playground in Roman times just art-deco- white glassy and modern, yet it is the 2040's.

His eyes land small on her I see the puppy love, circular pin at her before she took foot in her dress. Real silver Likewise, tons and add-ons... Attractively crafted. 'What can you have other than your thoughts at this point when all you are in front of all of them, sure you're going to think? Five entries? The interplanetary gets tighter, more enclosed as individuals reach. The square's quite large, Likewise, not enough to hold Area 14th populace of about ten thousand.

Stragglers are directed to the adjacent streets, where they can watch the event on screens as it is televised live by the state. I had six when I was just twelve years old.'

Her face becomes closed off and is looked drop like her eyes in shame when she was not a woman there was nothing to take off- the people giggled saying she still a baby. The bets are on her is she is picked- that she would die fast, boys put the money on her to not last, just like they did with me and a girl named Illiah 'Good fortune, I hear from the girl next to me - she said my this be in your erranding's.' 'You, too,' I say, and the door closed and the light change form intense when on our nude bodies change to now blue. Showing is the color of whom we are... and the color we're going to die for.

The rules of the Starvation Stars are simple. In chastisement for the revolt, each of the 15 districts must provide one girl and one boy, called Likewise, to participate. The twenty-four try- Likewise, will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last try Likewise, standing wins.

14

The result was France, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. Then became the dim days, the revolting of the neighborhoods in contradiction of the Capitol and their headmaster.

15 were defeated for this out of all of us, yet this a yearly thing the other is just knocked off my well of the powers at be, the thirteenth obliterated. The Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace and, as our yearly reminder that the Dark

Days must never be repeated; it gave us the Starvation Stars. I ask why not just kill us all and be done with it, they say what is the fun in that not seeing the pain and famine for life. Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while having no say at all.

This is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their sympathy and lack of it. How little unplanned we would stand of enduring another revolt. To make it embarrassing - as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Starvation Stars as an entertainment, a sporting event pitting every community against the others. The last honor guy alive receives a life of ease back home, and their community will be showered with awards and the right to pass on his spermatozoa and pop as many kids as he wanted with whatever preteen girl he wanted, largely consisting of food. All year, the

Capitol will show the winning community gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation.

The mayor steps up to the platform and begins delivering... It's the same story every year. He tells of the history of us and is parts of France, the country that rose up out of the ashes of and blood were every inch is covered. She lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the violating seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance lingered. 'Look how they take our children away and demean them like this naked, and afraid, they kill off babies like changing underwear, if there are twins one is killed off, and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in Community Thirteen.'

Then she reads the list of past Neighborhood 14 victors. In 200 years, we have had exactly three. Only one is still alive and he stands before us for two years back. A paunchy, young man -aged man, never a girl, that is the win for the girls this year to kick ass. A girl doing this they say is impossible. Maybe so...? What would you say as a girl? Are we that week and worthless? The crowd responds with its token applause, Likewise, he's confused and tries to give Effie Trinket a big hug, which she barely manages to fend off. Them- whatsoever words they use, the real message is clear we want to see you fight till death for us to see if you want to live on and pass your blood down, yet you'll have to lose some. 'Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in Neighborhood Thirteen.'

It's time for the drawing. Effie Trinket without the help of a hand- says as she always does, 'Females first!' and crosses to the goblet note with the girls' names. She goes on a bit about what an honor it is to be here, while all and sundry knows she's just aching to get bumped up to a better community where they have proper victors, not drunks who molest you in front of the entire nation. ' Likewise, - then again there are still thousands of slips in here we see the name bingeing up on the wraparound walls,' I wish I could whisper to her not to think- yet that not easy to do.

Through the crowd, I spot her looking back at me with a ghost of a smile. She reaches in, digs her hand deep into the note, and pulls out a slip of paper. The crowd draws in a collective breath and then you can hear a pin drop, and I'm feeling nauseous and so desperately hoping that it's not me, that it's not me, that it's not me. As earning go, this one at least has a slight entertainment factor. Likewise, suddenly I am thinking of her all the names 100 in that big glass droplet and how the balances are in your surroundings. Not compared to a lot of the boys.

And maybe he's thinking the same thing about me for the reason that her face darkens, and she turns away.

Like it was already said-

15

Someone is gripping my arm, a boy from Sam, and I think maybe I started to fall and he caught me. I feel now her berth in me like, like when I feel hard going down the steps trying to remember how to breathe, when I hit a window on wet concrete into and on a home and concerned back, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name bounces around the inside of my cranium.

And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt. Somewhere far away, I can hear the crowd murmuring unhappily as they always do when a twelve-year-old gets chosen because no one thinks this is fair. It's this detail, the untucked blouse forming a ducktail, which brings me back to myself.

I scream out Elody was one slip of paper in thousands! There must have been some mistake here there must be. I wanted to replace her, yet I could not I would kill for doing that, that would have been rebelling and act that would see death to you for doing. I said in the same moments, know I should not- this can't be happening... Her chances of being chosen so remote to all of us yet the love the underdog and the week meek girl to do this, the taste of blood dripping down her vagina is what they really want. And they're going to see that too, that I would not even bother to worry about her I know she going to pull through this not as innocent little girl Likewise, come back as a crampon lady. She will be deflowered just trying to stay alive with all the boys that she needs to give her what she needs and that is food and warmth and housing with them.

A girl is just not as strong as a boy that all say... Hadn't I done everything? On stage no- Elody was singled out for her age, and virginity- STRIP! NAKED! OR DIE! We all gasped, yet some said it's happened before to country Likewise, I see her pink and white kiddie undie s moving to down she is reluctant, yet has to do this... I nor she doesn't have to worry about a boy popping vagina open, a toper already it with his finger ripping hard and fast she cray and it bloods out saying we cannot have you be a little girl.

He licks the blood off his finger with his lips snickering, she will always be remembered for this... and I was the one to take her.

16

Anywhere far away would be nice sing this all happening, I can hear the crowd murmuring building up into an oh, happily as they always do when a ten-year-old girl gets deflowered in front of a crowded, gets preferred because no one thinks this is reasonable. As well as then I see her, the blood drained from her hands, face tightened in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt yet again I did not say anything about it in my mind for her to hear.

'Elody!' I don't need to shove through the crowd. The other kids make way proximately allowing me a straight path to the platform of the stage. I reach her just as she is about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me.' Elody!' The strangled cry comes out of her throat, and I saw that her muscles begin to move again as I was giving her the stench, yet I knew soon that would change with the shout me out and off for her mind and thoughts with a microchip in my arm the run to my mind using sound waves.

'Lovely!' says Effie Trinket. ' Likewise, then again I have faith in there's a small matter of familiarizing the acquiring winner... There's some confusion on the stage, as all of her mind chatting devices are ripped out of her body. The rule is that once a try Likewise, the name has been pulled from the ball, another eligible boy if a boy's name has been read, or girl if a girl's name has been read, no one can move forward to take his or her place. In some districts, I feel this would want not to be so, yet that life here- in which winning the reaping is such a great honor, people are eager to risk their lives, the volunteering is complicated. Nonetheless, in Community 14, where the word byline is pretty much equal to the word corpse, volunteers are all Likewise, extinct.

Elody is earsplitting shrieking boisterously in front of me. She runs off the stage, naked as the day she was born as her dress slips as she trips some. Not caring about anything other than me. She's wrapped her skinny arms around me like a vice. 'No! No! You can't go home with me; you have to go and maybe have a chance at winning- you could do this you know- I believe in you- remember that!'

I swallow this hard... 'Elody, let go or they well... No-' I say harshly not wanting to be that way, for the reason that this is disconcerting me, and I don't want to cry. When they televise the replay of the

earning tonight, every person will make note of my tears or, they marked as an easy target for the gun team. Acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong.

A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction. 'Let go!' I can feel someone pulling her from my back. I turn and see Gale has lifted My sister off the ground and she's thrashing in his arms. 'Up you go, girl,' I say, I hear the voice fighting off the crying to keep stable, and then she is carried off toward the back was a door open without a sound. I steel myself and climb the steps down to the hose wit h my mom's head in my chest panicking.

(Back)

Just like my father, Elody, who no one can help loving. Was the one that I say living out her life as a helper of others, not killing them, that is why she was chosen for this?

Then to some degree, unexpected happens. At least, I don't suppose it for the reason that I don't think of area 14 as a place that cares about her. I have become someone precious to her and that was looking out for her yet I can't ever do that, in my heart I knew she was a goner. Yet I wo uld not let her feel that I have the options. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our area, sporadically seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love. Now I am truly in danger of crying, I know this... she is yet they what to see her fight to the death, for she was picked. Not allowed yet there giggling at her for this... I knew she would be strong - surprisingly strong for such a wreck. 'Look at her.... Look at this one! They were saying she's just a baby! Easy meat!'

They bring them all back out after they all cool down... like an encore... All the names have been called out I could not even hear them like... it was not important.

All the boys and all the girls... they're all standing there all have their own ways, and their own personalities, yet none-stand out as much as she.

He can't think of the word for a while - a man said- he releases me and starts for the front of the stage. He shouts, pointing directly into a camera. 'I like her!' His breath reeks of homemade whi skey, I have done run for him, and it's been a long time since he's bathed. I know how to be a boot lager. Running at night only for it it is illegal. Then he adds in the camera - 'Boldness I would bang her Likewise!' he says triumphantly. 'More than you any other girls up there or in this assembly, this is why the picked here - she's pretty! - and that makes us want to fight for her battle.'

'Lots in her dreaminess... he was...' He's disgusting, Likewise, I'm grateful she was grossed out Likewise, was think that was sweet even so... she too nice... some said. They then did an up-close shot of her with her hands laced her eyes dropped chin tucked left, and wiggle - dancing with her arms V-ed inform of her hips to her shy ways. Camera gleefully trained and drop to her eyes and they get the upshot blue eyes glittering- lips wet to her peal face- cheeks shift pink, and she looked up with her eyes rolled to the top head down still.

She was biting her lip on the left side, looking like she was doing the pee-pee dance like is she looks downward it would all go away. I put my hands behind my back and stare into the distance, and make a hand sing, that only she would get so she would feel okay and safe. Eloy the smallest of us all really- we asked where she came from never growing in height since that age- she is 3 foot 8 inches- she is so small look five next to all these others that tower over her.

Even I tower over her at 5 feet.

17

Their numbers were clearer to me than their names...

All boys started with BS- something...

All the girls were G- S- something...

Long runs of numbers like a barcode...

Ezrah Everett- was the boy's name that was called out a boy that my sister played with for a lot of years before this all happen, yet we are getting used to this, it's been going on now for ages, it's just now we have a new evil like a leader that want massacres... it's not just seeing as fight and die that was the old ways, now it's just pop anyone of she wishes just with a smile and bat of an eye - there died.

The boy Ezra- Oh, no she said- starting to think about him as a love interest- they read her thoughts I knew it I said, I think- this is sick- they want her to lose her boy crush, or see what could be. Not him... she yelled- I have never spoken directly to this boy Likewise, I feel close to him for how he looked and held her to him- in play or not there was a spark there. I watch him as he makes his way toward the stage. 6 feet five inches in height, solid build, coal-black hair that falls in waves over his almost hitting the back of his nick all combed back not too long yet not short. Big brown eyes that change gold in the sunlight.

There were no odds here in the names draw- it was the thought of these kids- and what they did not want to see happen. Their worst nightmare- would be- and then they do it to be prominent. Kill your crush for example and if you don't someone is going too. That the sport here- killing what you love. The shock of the moment is registering on his face was seeing her having the same look of hart hitting the floor and back up, you can see his struggle to remain emotionless with her loss in hope feeling as he had, Likewise, his brown eyes show the terror like I have seen so often in prey on the hunt for deer and others large or small tournament.

He is now a large tournament- a moving target- fun someone in the group doesn't just pop him off now- oh they can't we all lost our gun to the government- Elody got hers back just for this event only. All the troopers in blood red, black and gray uniforms- they use our own shit to kill us with- nice right- helpless are we. Yet that was the overturn that took place.

Here are her uniform blue and white... that has chevrons on the font also there is her logo- and nameplate, and it shines in the light- with are cobalt color that fades into navy blues. They have already made up... each uniform shows their colors, from there parts- unique to their towns. With a symbol that is all, there's too. Elody is the Blue Bird, with the guns crisscrossed in the back. So -o they knew there was no randomness here or so they want us to think- I am not that dumb- some are though.

A uniform with nothing underneath where if she takes the top off she is topless, no bras for to be far she doesn't need one- they find this funny too, for these things a wool, and you can't sleep in that way, so girl have to run around in the nude, fun. It's all part of their sick tournament. Her hair will cover some yet not all over her chest... it all that they want to see. I sure we will see it all before the stars are over. And say if a boy can do this a girl can- farness they call it was all the same... also, there was her stuff need- like them all- a medieval archery bow in pink with pink aero- feathers which she made and sets her apart from the others...

A Winchester gun also pinks, with a white and barrel long sharp bayonets. All old technology they said adds to the guessing or waiting for what was next when you're loading and someone is running upon you, yet she is the fastest girl I have ever seen load a shot. She has a Gut hook hunting knife, to cut necks with our hands and more.

A civil war sword, with a handguard that's a plus on her end, she says one boy cut his own handoff. I know not to shot until I can see smell their breath on my face, and not to fire until I see the

color in their eyeballs. I going to put this up to a hart and pull the trigger, I don't want to Likewise, I have too.

Her dad's gun passed down that fits in a holster on her belt. Single-barrel pinfire pistol AKA thumb gun.

Brass Knuckles if needed, and she'll need them, a lot of this is a hand and kicking bloodbath. 100 areas' and a purse with all the girl things she needs- like pads that all she wanted to be what they say is far to the other girls they made sure they all had the same, for others are crapping and she well to it's all part of the tournament for the girls on the fight- the time is in control of this too in her mind, and also ammunition.

In this tournament, you can see a girl do it all- like we see everything about her life when she comes in OH's in the night before sleeping or in the marring- shits and pisses too. It's what makes it entertaining they say. I no Elody- she sprays out six times, for the bath time. So, I wonder if she will, being shy? You're going to die anyway so why not... have some good feelings coming out of you... and so what- yet that is me not her... I am glued to the wall screens in my small one-room homespun that gave to us. It's smaller than a teardrop taller, yet they say this is better all or old home were bulldozed over with all our crap inside, yet we have a screen that links to the troops.

They don't have cameras in our bathrooms or bedrooms for this fact, yet I wonder this too- for they know how sexual Elody is with her own body, not public chat that she where kiddie undies, that she is pre-pubescent, that she doesn't have a bar yet. That she loves horses, and dolls, and matching thin strap- colorful sundress, with her shoes, and fingernails. Doing her hair with soft waves and long brads, and playing outside, picking flowers in spring.

What would you do if someone was seeing you do all this, I mean you have to do this right? I wonder if she will- get with him... before death?

The boy thinks about him- I know, I've seen them in the bakery, school and at my home, Likewise, one is probably too old now to volunteer he is older for her like a teenager. This is standard, the Family devotion only goes so far for most people on earning diurnal.

(Back)

Elody- I was scared... 'I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness lost in here crazies'.' There was no choice, Likewise, for me to understand... At so young - Likewise, at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, Likewise, a mother as well.

Zoie- AKA the girl talking to you- hi! It has become known that my mother is crazy now lost in this madness... of being with my dad in her mind... that everyone looks down on us even more, and what they are- shit on a boot next to a doorstep. They longer care for us being a money pit on society. I grow up seeing those home kids at school, seeing them go up fast made of ply.

All white, in and out. No colors... not a worm at all so cold. Sweet, tiny girl who cried when I cried before she even knew the reason, who brushed at the sight of a boy, looking at her walking to school, whom still wet the bed some nights, because for seeing my dad beating on my mom for hitting it before the time was done or spending money.

He'd hated her she loved him- yet he was good to us- the money goes to the kids not you for dumb shit- coal dust I tack in is not for you to blow- on dresses I need food- and the kids are starving- why. Let us just say the happy sexy time is all that keep them cheerful to us even. Not a good matchup yet he wanted her when she was younger.

The sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders forward. I could never let that happen to Elody. The community home would crush her like a bug. So- I kept our predicament a secret.

18

However, the money ran out and we were slowly starving to death. There's no other way to put it other then, I kept telling myself if I could only hold out, Elody turn ten on the 14th and be able to sign up for the high leaves class at school, and a working job with younger kids in the birthing rooms, that money went to me- I held it for her... I become a mom, I have the hunter's job... getting food and seeing that she has what she needs. I see that she is bathed, brush her hair, and teeth things like that. I clean her dress up and hang the line.

For three days, we'd had nothing, Likewise, boiled water with some old dried mint leaves I'd found in the back of a cupboard. Elody- I remember the rain showers had waterlogged through my sister's lager coat, leaving me chilled to the bone. By the time the market closed, I was there seeing if I could beg for money and food also playing the guitar, all blue fades into white, somewhat worn with

gray shown some on the back and neck, it has a defeat tall paces, something I don't get... yet it a Gibson, it looks crappy yet sounds okay to me and most worm when the days are so cold and you have to be by a barn burl to stay warm, I get an amp out of a dumpster by my home were this Gibson was too. Blue binding, I have my logo on the back with my number- my name, and my life story on it.

And that is the saying-

Love is foolish with the one you want to be what to not be- to some like me I have to see, the tournament of warfare not far not too careful, they see me fight, in their sight, day and night, is this right? The height of love is the death at the end what is lasting. I will be remembered like the bluebird in flight- see my tears as they dry- going high- either way like a rattle that does not matter:

'Besides- my yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding. Nothing more nothing less.'

I was shaking so hard I dropped clothes in a mud puddle when I saw the firing line 100 man and 80 girl's all blast all at once babies too and little kids they ran the was shot in the handgun above the nose, for not giving in... they form part 15 no longer a town at all. I didn't pick it up for fear I would keel over and be unable to regain my feet. Besides, no one wanted those clothes. And then they would stop to reload their colts, and fire them empty one girl was naked, no more than three, and I saw her run and fall to a trooper.

I named her Laina she had no name just a number, I don't know what it was about her- Likewise, I had to see she was remembered, yet like all the others she either went to the mass graves. Where I saw them just tossed her in like trash with all the other nude bodies young and old alike. I will most like to be eaten by something wild in the woods when this all goes down... I don't see why it any different than this- may be better. I wonder if I should just take the gun now and end it before it starts- only one thing stops me... and that is the faith of young adoration. OR I WOULD...! I have it here at my temple- why the hell not right? I try yet I

can't do this...

I can't...

I can't...

I can't...

I squeeze my eyes thigh... I can't... they taunt me too... in my mind look in my penitentiary sterol- like room awaiting my task the next day where I will have it all- or so they say- I ask why to bother. There cute about it to giving us things to end it before it starts... to see if they can crack you. It's my last big meal- might as well rub it in- fun- they no we're not going to eat- that we cannot hold it- yet we starved up to this point- yet that the point to play with us to Freak- with us. Thinking about the hell week to come- this is why...?

19

Elody- I remember crawling into bed, and fell into a dreamless sleep, yet fearful all feeling like I was gun down or chased by someone. It didn't occur to me until the next morning that the boy might have burned the bread on purpose. Might have released the loaves into the flames, knowing it meant being punished, and then delivered them to me. The boy all the time would glance my way, Likewise, I was watching him not letting him see that I was. Because of the bread, because of the red weal that stood out on his cheekbone. What had she hit him with? My dad never hit us yet mom was the bitch. I couldn't even imagine if- she was that in more than one way. You get that...?

The boy took one look back to the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention back to bread in my direction. The second quickly followed, he was in the room over the way they made sure we could see one another yet not be with each other beforehand- just part of- the tournament they play, closing the kitchen door tightly behind him.

Zoie- I remember- I reached out to Elody and she climbed on my lap when she was seven, her arms around my neck, and head on my shoulder. Like- she did when she was a toddler; like she did the night before.

I remember- My mother sits beside me and never hugging her arms around us. For a few minutes, we say nothing. Then I start telling them all the things they must reminisce to do so, now that I will not be there to do them for them. Yet for her news she never really was... just so you know mom!

The take out's- When I am done with teachings about energy, and staying in school homework, and stop turning in o my mother. I calm down for the night after seeing her off - thinking about the times- I'd don't bother suggesting Elody learn to hunt for I'd never thought she would be the one. She has no background in the killing, only seeing- I tried to teach her a couple of times and it was catastrophic- she feels on her Likewise, and got hurt- I said- no more. The sticks horrified her, and

whenever I shot something, she would get teary, and talk about how I cute it was not to do that - we have to live I said. We might be able to heal it if we got it home soon enough - not understand it was not moving anymore - so I distillate on that too - like what's she going to do here? Lay - there and die...?

I have to be a babysitter - I cannot cock out on the flames and leave Elody on her own to run free - I knew she would get lost like a puppy. There's no me now to keep you both alive if I don't do this and I am only one girl here too. It doesn't matter what happens - to her I would never forgive myself - whatever you see...

Parting words - You have to assure me you'll battle!' My voice a whisper not to draw attention - that she may not be the best one in the call outs. The fear I abandonment - felt was solid and vice-versa. I pull her arm from my grasp, moved out of the holding room. 'I was sick feeling; I could have treated myself if I'd had the medicine - yet I can buy that stuff - you deal with it.'

That is life - 'OH - JUST

DEAL WITH IT!'

20

Clasping my hands to her face... holding in like - so tiny 'You have to take the fight and do - all that I do for you on your own you think you can do that - umm - hum - she whispered softly and thoughtfully - looking up at me towering over her, too. You're so fast and brave. Maybe you can win - you could you know - you could get this - do it for me. 'I've seen her carried off by them - the troopers - kicking and screaming like a newborn. Suffering from immobilizing sadness since - I see her on the screens we all do like an animal - locked in the pound. Perhaps it is a sickness of the kiss of death - the last kiss - to be given by me to her, Likewise, it's one we can't afford. Her - she was my world - my... everything - I can't win said - Elody - you must know that in her heart. The competition will be far beyond my abilities. Kids from wealthier districts, where winning is a huge honor, who have not been trained for... Your whole life I never did this for you - and now I have to kick myself for not - you understand this...?

Boys - don't trust them all - go with your gut and in here she points - to her head and heart. Those all see them they, not your friends don't let them be - they are two to three times your size, don't be intimidated - you know that word right - Um-hum she said. This one girl girls over her she looks of too show with her eyes - not to scare you - she who knows 50, unlike ways to kill you with a blade. Oh, there'll be people like me, too. People to weed out before the real fun begins. She threw a knife into a

five-year-old- a dead girl walking- it hit her in the left eye- at trials killing her- they use real kids here at this so you're going to have to not care about seeing a life end. Were all a waste of a bloodline why not they said this year why not... have real targets- young helpless- kids. It's a sick youngling to see them lose a life- they say wishing form the screens- like dogs forming at a moth in heat.

Her last words- 'I won't... I can't! You know I won't! Zoie, it repeats over and over in my brain- 'He says, and they yank us apart and slam the door, and I'll never know what it was he desired me to evoke. It's a little ride from the Evenhandedness-

Building to the 1920's train station. I've never been in a car before a mostly would and black truck- that looks like it out of the 1921 mostly world cars are a thing of the past now- yet I get to have this- must if all ride rail.

Elody- car's- Seldom even ridden in motor carriages. In the ridge, we travel on foot- or rail- most don't have the money to have nice things, and if they did, they were overturned. I have seen a few puttering around yet never in one... they bring in the food for the rich and the rich are the one that has the most- buying the troopers off. I see the same year of a truck going down the brick, fire-engine color red, running after the blazes dinging a bell. I've been right not to cry about all this yet I could not hold it in. The station is swarming, now- I knew really- with reporters are in my face I shy away- I don't want the spotlight with their insect-like cameras trained stanchly on my face as I make my way over the height bridge in the world.

Nevertheless, I've had a lot of exercise at wiping my face clean of emotions with all the death I seen. I catch a hint of myself on the television screen over the way the giggle at that- look I made- on the wall that's an expression my influx lives and feel content that I seem almost fearful. If I'm going to cry, now is the time to do it. By morning, I'll be able to wash the damage done by the tears on my face. Nonetheless, there were lots of tears too come. I'm too tired yet not too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else.

So, I let the train rock me into oblivion. I put the see-through lacy outfit back on that they give us to sleep in, just slightly crumpled from spending the night on the floor rocking.

21

Time to move the said- there- and passed- on and off- the train finally begins to slow and suddenly bright light flood the compartment. I run to the window to see what we've only seen on

television, the Capitol, the ruling city. The cameras haven't lied about its splendor. If anything, they have not quite captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a white and gray and blue glass hues that tower into the air. The people begin to point at us eagerly as they are recognizing an honor girl train rolling into the city.

I step away from the window, sickened by their excitement, knowing they can't wait to watch us die. I see the boy I like over in his car- he holds his ground not being all into me yet I could tell he was, actually waving and smiling at the gazing crowd. He only stops when the train pulls into the station, blocking us from their view I blow him a kiss- no one saw...

Yesterday to say my final goodbyes to my one girlfriend Samee and family. Nevertheless, that's a dark and creaky thing that moves like a snail and smells of sour milk. The walls of this elevator are made of crystal so that you can watch the individuals on the ground floor shrink to ants as you shoot up into the air. I look over the city is just what you would think it looks like - all big and glass-ie. Say hello to your new home for a week- The Training Center has a tower designed exclusively for the honors girls. This will be our home until the definite Stars begin. Each community has an entire floor. You simply step onto a silo and press the number of your district.

Bed- I kick off my shoes and climb undertaking it all off that how I sleep or I can I have to do this- I play with the hood and fall fast asleep- it's a girl thing- the covers over me I see nothing Likewise, that boy in my tight eyes. The shivering hasn't stopped. Perhaps the girl doesn't even remember me. Nonetheless, I know she does. You don't forget the face of the person who was your last hope. I pull the covers up over my head as if this will protect me from the redheaded girl who can't speak. Likewise, I can feel her eyes staring at me, piercing through walls and doors and bedding. I wonder if she'll enjoy watching me- over there- like she would be killing her or the other way around- we share this room now.

2 girls in a small room. They want to see if we're going to kill before the time! Then I'm overwhelmed in light-yellow foam that I have to scrape off with a heavy bristled brush. Oh, well. At least my blood is flowing. Slowly, I drag myself out of bed and into the shower. I arbitrarily punch Likewise, tons on the control board and end up hopping from foot to foot as alternating jets of icy cold and steaming hot water assault me. I put my hair down in the two braids down my front side. This is the first time since the morning of the reaping that I resemble myself. No fancy hair and no fancy clothes yet mostly lacy to see if you have cuts or packing hidden stuff, no flaming capes. Just me. Looking like I could be headed for the woods. It calms me.

I'm nervous about the training. There will be a week of this the first days in which all the star girls practice together with the targets of killing life.

On the last evening, we'll each get a chance to achieve in isolated before the star-makers. The thought of meeting the other star's uncompromising makes me nauseous. I turn the roll I have just taken from the basket over and over in my hands, Likewise, then my famine is gone only the famine of blood to kills is all I need now.

Not- Not- Not ME! It's them making ME!

The chatting- I try to focus on the talk, which has twisted to our interview clothes, I do okay they say I need to talk more they say- yet she is cute. We all shower together with us girls I don't like this I am shy and the look at me like meet. And what to play with me- U- No! When I open my door, the redheaded girl is collecting my United and boots from where I left them on the floor before my shower. I want to say sorry for possibly getting her in trouble earlier when I tripped on her hair walking in it's that long. The face of the redheaded girl intertwines with gory images from earlier Famine Tournament, with my mother withdrawn and unreachable, with My sister emaciated and terrified. I bolt up screaming for my father to run as the mine explodes into a million deadly bits of light.

Dawn is breaking through the windows I see it all there are no covers on the big windows yet everyone saw me do everything on-screen even shower and what I did in bed there are even cams in my fingers and under the sheets how I don't know- Likewise, I know they're- there to see me do that too.

Eat- I'd set out to tell her I was sorry about dinner. Nonetheless, I remember I'm not supposed to speak to her unless I'm giving her an order. She avoids my eyes as we make our way to the table, give a small nod and eats. My slumbers are filled with disturbing dreams of depth and wetness and death.

The Capitol has a misty, haunted air. My headaches and I must have bitten into the side of my cheek in the night. My tongue probes the ragged flesh and I taste blood.

The boy I like- like- I exchange a look with him. 'I don't have any secret about having the tingles down there for him, I want to lock lips at some point I feel that I have to before the end.' The end of what is that? Really what is that all about?' I've eaten enough of your squirrels, yet I don't know how to kill one- how can I kill a child?' I never thought about him eating the squirrels I shot. Somehow, I for one continuously see in your mind's eye- himself being there I remember her saying. Not out of greed-

he there for you remember. On the other hand, then again for the reason, that town families usually eat expensively Likewise, her meat. Beef and chicken and horse. I recall this... 'There's always hand-to-hand combat.

All you need is to come up with a knife, and you'll at least stand a chance. If I get jumped, I'm dead!' I can hear my voice rising in anger. I don't like to kill I remember saying... cut to now- 'You won't- mind- if it's to live! You'll be living up in some tree-eating raw squirrels and picking off individuals with arrows. You know what my Zoie said to me when she came to say goodbye as if to cheer me up, she says maybe neighborhood 14 will finally have a winner. Then I comprehended, she didn't mean me, she meant you!' said- the boy.

The boy- she's a dismissal, I know- it's my hope to look out for her- until the time comes, I can no longer.

Elody- I know he is not lying about that- I heard in his thoughts before all of this. Him- he has-, physical power that is strong and perfect tilts his eyes ever so right and his six-pack chest at me in the light- the advantage with the girls- would I be that girl- to see the eyes shine for me- as I look at these white teeth- ever so right.

Training Center- Throw a spear- a woman said- that was teaching at the nine-year-old girl's head and kill her- kill her- if you don't you go down in your points. Spend the time trying to learn something you don't know, I remember her saying to me- going back- Weights try don't overdo and hurt your body, don't reveal how much you can lift in front of the other stars. They don't need to see that you're meeker than they, you're going to train group that is not far- it kills or they kill you without blinking- and lick you up and down to spit on it, rubbing it all in you. The plan's the same for both of you if your smart you'll get this I can't say- just think hart Elody and go with your intentions- wink.

Zoie- Learn to tie a decent knot and you your gun and to pack ammo- I do not even care about the bow much to show- that if you run out of other things you only have five aero's anyways, that are tipped in bad stuff- don't tuck the tip- K. Um-hum- I say childishly. Save showing knife for there going at that point- what you're best at until your private sessions. Are we good?' I nod- Zoie this was the day before the callouts. Don't fire the small one unless it's deep in their left boob, and squeeze hard it will take about a day for them to die slowly- yet they back off. Don't ever panic- or you will die- don't sweat in the cold your you'll die- also.

Now night- I bite my lip and stalk back to my room, making sure he- the boy that I like- like can hear the door slam yet he sees all of me with the screen in his room and the double-sided firebox. I sit on the bed, undressing, hating him over they are doing things I don't understand, hating myself hard saying my name- for mentioning that I was feeling the same. Is it- love...?

Is this love- I see and now feel...?

As his thought was turned on to me in my mind and his by them. In my bed I feel him have this with me- and does he- it was a lovemaking moment of heightened lust. The people went nuts for us- feeling this moment, of zenith.

Pretending to be friends, the next day I hear giggles from the other girls! Talking up each other's strengths are a bond, insisting the other take credit for their abilities. Because, in fact, at some point, we're going to have to knock it off and accept we're bitter adversaries. Stupid instruction that we stick together in training like his hand on me in the night. It's my own fault I was ripped on his too, I guess I was doing it right never did that one yet I saw it through his eyes- and mine in his- with switched like bodies at the end feeling, and seeing within and out, for telling him he didn't have to coach us disjointedly.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean I wanted to do everything with him today so they can see the crematory- of a puppy- the love they call it. He was all into me not letting his hand off me and not stopping them from his hands feeling me up down the uniform. Yah

I had a hand full of Likewise, - so did he- cute right!

22

I hear his voice in my head- saying cute things. She has no idea- over there that this is what she was thinking about. Although along with what she needed to know. I made sure she knew what not to hear- and see- in training... for she is the girl, I picked to work with as a team. The effect she can have on him is a lot some say he not thinking clearly to learn to fight- that he'll pass fast- daydreaming of her- ha, that is what they think he said- in his thoughts. Visibly they meant to degrade me and him. -Right? Likewise, a tiny part of me phenomena if this was praise. That he meant I was interesting- in some way.

It's almost ten p.m. I clean my teeth and smooth back my hair again. Anger temporarily blocked out my nervousness about meeting the other teams, Likewise, now I can feel my anxiety rising once more. I catch myself biting my nails.

Late-night- It's weird, how much he's noticed me from within and out. Alike with the kindness- he's paid to my hunting- over the years- um like was not enough. Besides deceptively, I have not been as oblivious to him as I imagined, moreover. I have kept track of all of this in my beep mind they said.

Blood spatter- off with youngling's heads- let the bodies hit the floor- let the young bodies hit the floor! DEATH! I look around at the Career girls who are showing off, obviously trying to intimidate the field. Then at the others, the malnourished, the incompetent, shakily having their first educations with a knife or an ax. They walk up and we show off with them having to in programmed in their mind to die- they even so sick to ask for it. 100 girls under 10 knocked-off in less than 30 minutes... Only five low-class boys hurt not all killed.

The doors open into an enormous gymnasium filled with various weapons to practice with- you in the fight we only have what we had at our homes- so if you have an Ak-47 good for you- I don't- far no- yet that's not what this is about- it's about blood falling to floor!

I move on to the obstacle courses. The actual training rooms are below the ground level of our building- and in the night lit fields. With these elevators going in and out with them in control- yet again, the ride is less than a few moments. Although it's not yet nine in the morning were here all day today, we're the last ones to arrive.

The other stars are met in a tense circle like a dojo- it's about respect to the past- twisted in their tournament.

My man and I are the only two dressed alike. As soon as we join the circle, the head trainer, a tall, Experts in each skill will remain at their positions, a sporty female named steps up and begins to explain the training agenda she towers over me not him though. Some of the stations teach survival skills, other fighting techniques. We are forbidden to engage in any combative exercise with another try Likewise. There are assistants on hand if we want to practice with a partner. We will be free to travel from area to area as we choose, per our mentor's instructions. 'Suppose we tie some knots,' I say, they all giggle- like I am retarded! He said it was cute...! Is that all that matters?

We pass an unfilled post where the trainer seems satisfied to have schoolchildren. You get the feeling that the knot-tying class is not the Starvation stars burning spot. When he apprehends, I know something about snares, he shows us a simple, excellent trap that will leave a human competitor dangling by a leg from a tree- now outside in the fields barricaded in with high walls- all white. And bright lights...We concentrate on this one skill for an hour until both of us have mastered all that is needed. Then we move on to concealment. He genuinely seems' to enjoy this station, twirling a combination of mud and clay and berry juices around on his pale skin, weaving disguises from vines and leaves.

The instructor who runs the concealment position is full of passion for his work- yes some are just A-holes.

23

(Back)

The crescent moon roll dotted with seeds from Community 13. Somehow, although it's made from the same gear as I walk to 14, it looks a lot more mouthwatering than the horrible drop biscuits that are the standard fare at home. I had to get something- didn't I?

Playing with him- We both give a somewhat convincing laugh and ignore the stares from around the room. I tried breathing- my face lost- as I recall the event, a Permitted story, in which I'd stupidly defied a black bear over the rights to a skep. My boy is laughing and asks questions right on cue.

He's much better at this than I am at that too- so cute, right? On the second day, while we're taking a shot at spear throwing, he whispers to me all sweet things and nothing. 'I think we have a shadow of me now.'

I throw my spear, which I'm not too bad at actually if I don't have to throw too far, and see the little girl from Community 1 standing back a bit, watching us. She's the ten-year-old, the other one that is really small yet not as petite as me in stature. Up close she looks like a lost school girl- walking in a playground. She has optimistic, dark, eyes and lustrous skin and stands tilted up on her toes with her arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the smallest amount sound. It's impossible not to think of a bluebird.

I bite my lip. Permitted is a small yellow flower that grows in the Field. Leah. My sister Rose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet.

(Thinking back, I was...)

Cut ripped out into reality- I pick up another spear while my boy throws one that I gave him. 'I think her names are Leah,' I say softly. I remember her some...

My heart sinks... Almost all of the boys and at least half of the girls are bigger than I am, even though many of the tries Likewise, I have never been fed properly. Kids- You can see it in their bones, their skin, and the hollow look in their eyes.

Now that I know she's there, it's hard to ignore, that I am the youngest child in the roo m. She slips up and joins us at different stations. Like me, she's clever with plants, climb swiftly, and have good aim. She can hit the target every time with a slingshot. What is a slingshot against a 225-pound male with a sword that going to get her...? Oh, yeah this is all she has to fight with- far-right? NO!

I read down the list of the skill from stations I was part of, my eyes can't help flitting around to the others. It's the first time we've been collected, on level ground, in simple clothes. The exceptions are the kids from the wealthier districts, the volunteers, the ones who have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment. I may be smaller naturally, Likewise, overall my family's ingenuity has given me an edge in that area.

The slight benefit I held coming into the Training Center, my fiery entrance last night, seems to disappear in the attendance of my opposition. The others were jealous of us- I knew- he knew, Likewise, not for the reason that we were astounding since our graphic designer and a team like the makeup guys were. That what we to look at that part and all.

About- It's technically against the rules to train to try Likewise before they reach the Capitol Likewise, it happens every year. The meat and plants from the woods combined with the exertion it took to get them have given me a healthier body than most of those I see around me.

Now I see nothing Likewise, contempt in the glances of the Career trying Likewise. Each must have fifty to a hundred pounds on me.

In area 14, we call them the occupation acknowledgments or just the careers. In addition, like as not, the champion will be one of them. They project arrogance and prominently. I stand straight

up, and while I'm thin, I'm strong. The tri Likewise, from 1, 2, and 7 conventionally have this look about them.

When Alla releases us, they head straight for the lethal tall stick- with a gold spoon up to her Likewise, is looking over all the weapons in the gym and handle them with ease.

I'm thinking that it's lucky I'm a fast runner when he nudges my arm and I jump yet in a good way. He is still beside me- his expression is sober- yet loving to me only.

Moving on- 'Where would you like to begin?' When we finally escape to bed on the second night with me, he mumbles that were not getting any sleep, I make a sound that is somewhere between a snort and a laugh, saying okay- I want what I want- so let give them a late-night show to see- Then catch myself doing more than ever with him. It's messing with my mind too much, trying to ke ep straight when we're supposedly friends, not full-on lovers at this age- yet age is nothing to them or us at this point- we have sex all night! Then when we're not ready for all this we no- yet we got it all down and in and out, to say the least. Bang! Bang- bang- bang- bang! You know exactly with happen by that! Done! Aww- okay put it back in- We even broke the bed! At I'll know where we stand with the folks seeing this- we have fans big time.

'Let's pretend there's no one around- and keep on keeping on with this.' 'God not so fast and hard'- I no- take it- I said riding even hard for that to go- you have too-

'Well- uh,' he said- you're good I say. Um-mm we said together, and I got the O!

Next to seeing all the wannabes! Seeing all the ass with cams! - I am sick of this I didn't sleep last night- crank yes, after that, we only talk in front of people- about how I got plowed- and then frogged him after- and went for the good night kiss too- and my love life at nine years old. Crap- They start to call our numbers us out of lunch, for our cloistered sessions with the tournament makers. The area by region, first the girl, then the boy.

As usual, Community 14 is slated to go first- for I am the youngster here they call me. We linger in the dining room, unsure where else to go. No one comes back once they have left. As the room empties, the pressure to appear friendly lightens. By the time they call Leah, we are left alone. We sit in quiet until they summon my lover to come. He rises- with my hand in hand.

'Thanks. I will,' he says. 'You- Shoot straight.'

I nod. I don't know why I said anything at all. Although if I'm going to lose, I'd rather with him win than the others.

Better for our district, for my mother and my sister.

After about fifteen minutes, they call my name. I smooth my hair, set my shoulders back, and walk into the gymnasium. Instantly, I know I'm in trouble. They've been here too long, the Tournament Makers. Sat through twenty-three other demonstrations. I had too much to wine, most of them. Want more than anything to go home.

There's nothing I can do Likewise, continue with the plan. I walk to the archery station. Oh, the weapons!

I've been itching to get my hands on them for days! Bows made of wood and plastic and metal and materials I can't even name. Arrows with feathers cut in flawless uniform lines. I choose a bow, string it, and sling the matching quiver of arrows over my shoulder.

There's a shooting range, Likewise, it's much too limited. Standard bull's-eyes and human silhouettes. I walk to the center of the gymnasium and pick my first target. The dummy used for knife practice. Even as I pull back on the bow- I know something is wrong. The string's tighter than the one I use at home. The arrow's more rigid. I miss the dummy by a couple of inches and lose what

little attention I had been commanding. For a moment, I'm humiliated, then I head back to the bullseye. I shoot again and again until I get the feel of these new weapons.

Back in the center of the gymnasium, I take my initial position and skewer the dummy right through the heart. Then I sever the rope that holds the sandbag for boxing, and the bag splits open as it slams to the ground. Without pausing, I shoulder to roll forward, come upon one knee, and send an arrow into one of the hanging lights high above the gymnasium floor. A shower of sparks bursts from the fixture.

It's an excellent shooting. I turn to the Tournament Makers. A few are nodding approval, Likewise, the majority of them are fixated on a roast pig that has just arrived at their banquet table.

Suddenly, I am furious, that with my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I'm being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Tournament

maker's' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief.

'Thank you for your consideration,' I say. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit without being dismissed.

As I stride toward the elevator, I fling my bow to one side and my quiver to the other. I brush past the gaping Avoxes who guard the elevators and hit the number twelve landed on with my fist. The doors slide together and I zip upward. I actually make it back to my floor before the tears start running down my cheeks. I can hear the others calling me from the sitting room, Likewise, I fly down the hall into my room, bolt the door, and fling myself onto my bed.

Then I really begin to sob.

Now- I've done it! Now I've ruined everything! If I'd stood even a ghost of a chance, it vanished when I sent that arrow flying at the Tournament makers. What will they do to me now? Arrest me? Execute me? Cut my tongue and turn me into an Avex so I can wait on the future stars of Panel?

What was I thinking, shooting at the Tournament makers? Unquestionably, I am situated, I was shooting at that apple, for the reason that I was so angry at being overlooked. I wasn't trying to kill one of them yet I want so- to do that. If I would have, I would be dead fast!

Oh, what does it matter? It's not like I was going to win the Tournament anyway. Who cares what they do to me? What really scares me is what they might do to Zoie and me, how my family might suffer now because of my impulsiveness. Will, they take their few belongings, or send my mother to prison and me to the community home, or kill them? They wouldn't kill them, would they?

Why not? What do they care about? I myself should have hung around and asked for forgiveness. Otherwise chuckled, like it was a big pun. Then maybe I would have found some compassion. Likewise, then again instead, I followed out of the place in the worst- mannered manner conceivable.

I shout for them to go away and eventually they do. It takes at least an hour for me to cry myself out. Then I just lay curled up on the bed, stroking the silken sheets with my hood, feeling him run through and out of me- watching the sunset over all the land- they all could see in and the cam was flaking its red-light- right down where you could see my pinkie- kitty. That's what they asked for when

sending in money for me to get sponsors. Being cute and hot sales to them- that what I was whispered in my mind by him over the way to his room.

In the early parts of the day at the stars, before that though, they'll give me a score so low, no one in their right mind would sponsor me. That's what will happen tonight. Since the training isn't open to viewers, the Tournament makers announce a score for each player. I expect guards to come for me. Nevertheless, as time passes, it seems less likely.

I calm down. They still need a girl - from constituency 14, don't they? If the Tournament makers want to punish me, they can do it publicly. Wait until I'm in the arena and sic starving wild animals on me. You can bet they'll make sure I don't have a bow and arrow to protect myself. Also- with what I said before. It gives the audience a starting place for the betting that will continue throughout the stars.

I wish the stylists hadn't shown up for the reason that for some reason, I don't like the idea of substandard them. It's as if I've tossed away all the good work they did on the opening ceremonies without a thought. I avoid looking at anyone as I take tiny spoonfuls of potato soup. The saltiness reminds me of my tears. I had been anticipating my shooting skills might get me a six or a seven or more- like a ten, even if I'm not particularly powerful. Now I'm sure-

I'll have the lowest score of the twenty-five. If no one sponsors me, my odds of staying alive decrease to almost zip.

(Back)

The walkout of the town as a star the others would spit- lap- bit and rip on us thinking there were higher up thin us- we did this naked as the day we came into this hellish world. I community has gotten rid of us- like trash. We are the property of them- not a farce- they don't want us here or anywhere in these parts after our time is up- unless you're the winner- there weeding us out.

The walk was long and blasting on the feet- my sister saying you'll make it back- no you won't on girl said. On the train, I sat- box cars- changed. I had to shove a tube up my Likewise, - hidden way up in my ass- so far, I could feel it in my gut and they thought was poopy- with 1,000 or so of currency in it. You saw me take that out- gross right! 50% of us will pass the first day- you can make it if you have the cash!

Run- there is no one or place to go- money is the way out- one cut a girl get last night to get the cash out of her. Syaga was her... she was odd, to say the least. Famine was high- in the cars where they opened them and hosed you down boy and girls alike- still naked. Sleep was hard on the cars rocking down the skinny rail tracks- feeling every bump- with eyes over the way showing- I WANT TO KILL- YOU.

Hot and cold in the blue and white cars- Steam and sound of highs over rolling hills. I was shanked on the hand, and told by Syasa she would cut my head off if I did suck on her off. The march passes us we look- making a distraction- with a cut to a face- some run for it going for the river over the way- yet they get some and smash their feet not killing them- that would be like killing a girl before banging her with yah did- just making sure they would never get away- hobbling they call it. One was shot- I didn't even know her name- yet no one gives a rat's ass. The smalls of pigs and fish- rotting with humans- a head off over the way- too much- we walk into the camp are new home. Line up they yell at the head man; the drummer plays his death march.

The boy Sage is looking dumb with his mouth open.

You are- Jailers-

Rolls called out-

The first time one tries to escape at 3 years of jail time- and the right to kill you without say. 2nd adds 2 more each time.

Masturbate is a NO- something that you

should do it drains strength unless a par team. Those that do well have- do this in front of a camera and say why they need it.

Saving is done in 5 minutes by the hands of a staffer where you can shower for 15 minutes. We march around still unclothed as they all see... I was the one that wants to see the most is all pubescent.

Boys love that... so they can see it all!

There I was... until training.

All are chained down to their bad unless in a partnership. The hospitality was high - at some ran there too- killed with high power Tommy guns.

24

I got my boy fast before I went here, yet I do love him. I- he was the crunch of my life anyways- I said to them in a chat... Permitted all Leah. The rat that said they would buy you out - is Tostito- give a long run and ways out- yet into a trap. A boy is dragging a dead girl by the hair no - still marching around to show how strong we are. I could hear the accordion music of my homeland playing in my mind as I was a week yet not stopping.

I can get you a train- he would say to them- and you would get there, and it was a rusted out 1888, with parts missing. I had no choices the one said- if I stay in this hole- I will perish! She came back hobbled and she killed herself staking her fist down her mouth.

Oh yeah- Yet not after donning these 5 times. We are going to break you! That what they said to us as we got on the train here.

Zoie- I ran after her not caring about life- I was even placed in an open jail-like room for saying something to a trooper he didn't like - where it would rain- or sun or more- no lights- bats and rats all over- I had to poop in the corner. I was sent to Demise island over in the triangle, you can see me here waking passing, I know I would not make it back to see if she is alive - yet I know I might- if I stay strong and eat all they give I know that I can make it some - its jizz full- watery shit they give me.

When I pop my head out the steel doors. I said FU - and get my food cut ½ of what it was!! I giggled crazily in the rain coming down... and when I shit- they don't like that closing off the top with a blackout plat.

I started eating bugs... The running the crawling was nuts in the mud - and woodlands. I even jumped off 1,200 feet in the air. They would hold my head with a pipe to make me suffer - for being me. The girl that showed her what she needs to know. I look good hair falling out- I know I look okay- death not far- yet, I have to be strong for her- even if the odds are not in my favor. I rip my teeth out that were rotting. A trooper would come in every night and fondle me - I could not do anything or more time was added. He would kiss me all over too- I fought some- yet gave in to get out. I saw a girl being dragged out by their lags, for them to have a good time - I was one- and yes, we all were stripped. This is what I get just for my blood type and heritage. Used as -ho! I got tattoos; I didn't want too... covering my arms.

I get 50 more nights- for yelling at the troopers for playing with myself, yet can you not- some say they do... lies? I am failing, and I know... that's okay if it's for her to live on.

(Forward)

2 years of this I was a broken girl.

25

One was made a show- and the blade went down hard and fast- she was only five. The number, which is between one and twelve, one being irredeemably bad and twelve being unattainably high, signifies the promise of the try Likewise. The mark is not a guarantee of which person will win. It's only an indication of the potential a try Likewise, showed in training.

Frequently, for the reason that of the variables in the actual arena, high-scoring try Likewise, go down almost immediately. As well as a few years ago, the boy who won the Stars only received a three. Still, the scores can help or hurt individual stars in terms of sponsorship. I masticated that... I choose I may as well go.

The scores will be televised tonight. It's not like I can hide what happened forever. I go to the bathroom and wash my face, Likewise, it's still red and splotchy. All and sundry waiting at the table, even Pahyai and Lattie. The adults begin some chitchat about the weather forecast, and I let my eyes meet us me and my boy. He raises his eyebrows. A question. What happened? I just give my head a small shake. Then, as they're serving the main course, I hear the reporter says, 'Okay, enough small talk, just how bad were you today?'

Somehow calling me sweetheart is off enough at this for an awe moment- that I'm at least able to speak. 'I shot an arrow at the Tournament makers to show what I can do big crowds.' Everyone stops eating when I shot to girls with one aero- as they were moving. 'You what?' The horror in Gannah's voice confirms my worst suspicions.

'I shot an arrow at them. Not exactly at them. In their direction. It's like My boy said, I was shooting and they were ignoring me and me just. I just lost my head, so I shot an apple out of their stupid roast pig's mouth!' I say defiantly.

'And what did they say?' Says Cinna carefully.

'Nothing. Or I don't know. I walked out after that,' I say.

'Without being dismissed?' Gasps Gannah. 'I dismissed myself,' I said. I remember how I promised my sister that I really would try to win and I feel like a ton of coal has dropped on me.

See they'd have to reveal what happened in the Training Center for it to have any worthwhile effect on the population. People would need to know what you did. Likewise, they can't sense it's secret, so it'd be a waste of effort,' says Gannah. 'More likely they'll make your life hell in the arena.' 'Well, they've already promised to do that to us anyway,' says my strong brave man.' Well, that's that,' says Gannah.

Then he Likewise, terms into a roll.

'Do you think they'll arrest me?' I ask.

'Doubt it... be a pain to replace you at this stage,' says Gannah.

'What about my household...?' I say.

'Will they discipline them...?'

'Don't think so- maybe have them show the spread eagle...?

(Giggling) the many- many- people, in the stadium.

Wouldn't make much sense.

'Very Leah,' says Gannah. And I realize the impossible has happened. They have actually cheered me up. Gannah picks up a pork chop with his fingers, which makes Gannah frown, and dunks it in his wine.

He rips off a hunk of meat and starts to chuckle. 'What were their faces like?' I can feel the edges of my mouth tilting up. 'Shocked. Terrified. Uh, preposterous, some of them.' There was pop in my mind. 'One man tripped backward into a bowl of punch.'

Gannah guffaws and we all start laughing except Gannah, although even she is suppressing a smile. 'Well, it serves them right. It's their job to pay attention to you. And just because you come from Community Twelve is no excuse to ignore you.' Then her eyes dart around as if she's said something totally outrageous. 'I'm sorry, Likewise, that's what I think,' she says to no one in precise. 'I'll get a very

bad score,' I say. 'Scores only matter if they're very good, no one pays much attention to the bad or mediocre ones.

My family is safe... right?

Time to go- you...d-ah...

Next time you see me- I grin at him and realize that I'm starving. I cut off a piece of pork, dunk it in mashed potatoes, and start eating. It's okay.

Plus, if they are safe- I don't feel they are, no real harm has been done- they say to me in my mind- with a snicker- that I did not like- yet what could I do about it?

I chatted with my boy he said-

'People use that tactic,' he said to me. 'I hope that's how people interpret the four I'll probably get,' says me. 'If that. Really, is anything less impressive than watching a person pick up a heavy ball and throw it a couple of yards? One more or less landed on my foot... or toe.'

After dinner, we go to the sitting room to watch the scores announced on television. First, they show a photo of the tri Likewise, then flash their score below it. Most of the other players average a six. Surprisingly, little Permitted comes up with a seven. I don't know what she showed the judges, Likewise, she's so tiny it must have been impressive. The Career Likewise, - naturally get in the eight-to-ten range.

Constituency 14 comes up last, as usual. He pulls a five, the lowest of all boy it's all the sex they giggle- so at least a couple of the Tournament makers must have been watching him. I dig my fingernails into my palms as my face comes up, expecting the worst. Then they're flashing the number eleven on the screen. Everybody is slapping me on the ass and cheering and congratulating me- on getting F-ed and going to die for not have a real man.

Nevertheless, it doesn't seem real.

'There must be a mistake- I think with the- OH SHIT look on my face. How? How- could that happen...?' I ask Gannah.

At dawn, I lie in bed for a while, watching the sun come up on a beautiful morning. It's on Sunday. A day off at home. I wonder if my sisters -is- well or not- in the woods yet, I knew that they would do something like that it came around to me.

'Elody, the girl with a shy spirit,' says Jannah and gives me a hug.

Jannah is an old friend of Gannah her gay girlfriend and that not allowed either in the stars - or they would be a couple one reason, they were picked to wipe out their gay ways - a sickness as they say- just like our stars. Naughtily... they kiss- saying kill us!

And they did the next time we chatted yet they were hand and hand- and in love- or so they said. One girl said that's better than dying for Jesus... No comment- yet I have some faith.

My man- and I congratulate each other for making it this far, another awkward moment- as we make out... saying are dreams if we make it- knowing one must die- We've both done well, Likewise, what does that mean for the other? I escape to my room as quickly as possible and burrow down under the covers. The stress of the day, particularly the crying, has worn me out. I drift off, reprieved, relieved, and with the number eleven still flashing behind my eyelids.

I had been struggling along on my own for about six months when I first ran into Bale in the woods. It was a Sunday in October, the air cool and pungent with dying things. I had spent the morning competing with the squirrels for nuts, and the slightly warmer afternoon wading in shallow ponds harvesting Elody.

The boy- The only meat I would shoot was a squirrel, which had practically run over my toes, in its quest for acorns, nevertheless, the animals would still be afoot; when the snow buried my other food sources. Having strayed further than afield than usual, I was speeding up back home, lugging my burlap sacks when I came across a dead rabbit. I had been trying to use snares all summer with no success, so I couldn't help dropping my sacks to examine this one.

That's risky...' My fingers were just on the wire above one of the rabbits when a voice rang out. 'It was hanging by its neck in a thin wire a foot above my head. About fourteen yards away was another.

What she said to do- 'That you can't believe a little girl from Community fourteen has done this well. The whole thing's been more than you ever could have dreamed of. Talk about my clothes. How nice the people are...? How the city amazes you... say what you love- If you won't talk about yourself, at least complement the audience. Just keep turning it back around, all right.'

I familiar with the twitch-up snares, for the reason that my father had used them. When the prey is caught, it's jerked into the air out of the reach of other starving animals. I brought it back for her- and that when the love started.

Elody- The next hours are agonizing. At once, it's clear I cannot gush. We try me playing cocky, Likewise, I just don't have the arrogance.

Apparently, I'm too 'defenseless' for ferociousness, I'm not witty, humorous, erotic, and or secretive- like you.

~*~

At the Starvation Tournament part of the Stars, at every living being in the Capitol by marvelous dishes around my room. When the girl with the rainbow hair comes in to turn down my bed, her eyes widen at the mess. 'Just leave it!' I yell at her. 'Just leave it alone!' I hate her, I never hated anyone or anything till now- too, with her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Capitol, both now and then. For her, justice must finally be fashionable.

Why am I letting her? At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods. Likewise, instead of fleeing the room, the girl closes the door behind her and goes to the bathroom. She comes back with a damp cloth and wipes my face gently then cleans the blood from a broken plate off my hands. Why is she doing this? She shakes her head. 'I should have tried to save you,' I whisper. Does this mean we were right to stand by? That she has forgiven me? 'No, it was wrong,' I say. She taps her licks making them wet, with her fingers then points to my chest with her knife. I think she means that I would just have ended probably dead. When we move on...

I spend the next hour helping the girl that has taken a liking to me in a sexual is cleaning see and I'm room. For sex, and to get on the good side of me- I play along not trusting her- is just sex, right?

Cleaned away is all that makes us little girls in a room, she turns down my bed. I crawl in between the sheets like a five-year-old and let her tuck me in. Then she gets in with me- and the fun

starts for her- I want her to stay until I fall asleep- I never like sleep alone anyways- I always sleep with my sister. Yet she is taking time away from me and my lover- I get it so does he- to be there when I wake up. I want the protection of this girl, even though she never had mine.

In the morning, it's not the girl Likewise, my prep team who are hanging over me. I remember my lessons with my sisters in my mind.

Huge bright blue eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink. Finally, they cover my entire body in a powder that makes me shimmer in the lights. Then Melia goes to work on my hair, weaving strands of red into a pattern that begins at my left ear, wraps around my head and then falls in one braid down my right shoulder.

The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms, painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails. They erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out.

He walks in- with us two girls- 'Close your eyes girls,' he orders. Me- I can feel the silken inside as they slip it down over my stark- naked body, then the weight for his call-outs of what he wanted to do with me after he did what he wanted with her. I clutch her hand rubbing my- hand as I blindly touching my goodies, glad to find they are at least two inside. There are some adjusting and jiggling. Then silence... and the end for the first. With just the girls as he and the viewers looking!

Fuck me- I yell! He crawls up, between my legs where he stops to rid me of my sodden panties. He slings it away carelessly, his eyeing eyes never leaving the bare place they covered. He continues to stare, licking his lips– obviously beyond aroused by the sight Likewise, there's nothing to hide my intimate folds and I feel exposed, squirming and certain that my blush reaches all the way down there. He takes his sweet, torturous time - enjoying in his private viewing commotion. He makes no move to touch me Likewise, the ravenous molds his face is pushing me to run up onto him with wild desire, taking his time. I shift response with desolate moments.

With my body on top of his I stroke my hand over the sprinkling of stubble, on- easily with myself with every curve and dip of his face. You are so precious, thank you for taking another chance on me. Laying in his chest with my head- while he grips my inner thighs, pushing them apart. Keep still or I'll make you- then he kisses my lips and the other set. I gasp at his challenging threat and on pure instinct and raw desire, my hips tilt up by their own accord, crazy in its need for any contact.

My legs are bent with my knees resting on either side of his head. My bottom sits on his chest, taking my weight, which leaves my secret opening utterly gaping and vulnerable, not to mention very close to his sinful mouth. I can feel his breath on me, fluttering and making my heart stutter. His hands slip around, cupping my backside as he pushes me into him for the sex that was about to be made, inhaling deeply like what I feel inside me. Besides what she already had. Did I care yes- Likewise, I want to live off in the night and I need a girlfriend too here.

27

The night before the stars- all the girls in their fancy dress all colors and shapes. 'I have to, I'm dizzy!' I'm also giggling, which I think I've done maybe never in my lifetime.

Likewise, the nerves and the spinning have gotten to me. My boy- wraps a protective arm around me. 'Don't worry, I've got you. Can't have you following in your mentor's footsteps.' He is the one- that I love here just so you know that- yet I a girl

I will try anything once even girls... I kissed a girl and it was okay... I said to them passing out like... for what that all though it's not that bad- mom and dad it what happens with girls this age! They're going to get Fucked- that's the times- just ask MTV- the show and the music.

I find this affiance stop viewing moms and dads, I am sure your kid would say what wrong with this? There was not much said- I am sure I no more than you do at my age in sex- like most girls my age! If you do like it go do something else- yet I assure you- which your kid will not- and say your nuts, for not letting them look at me- for there doing just what I am- and as of this year, it's right.

~*~

More chatting with the interviewers- Woot- woot is all I hear as I stand there looking at them all! They like me they really like me. I swallow hard. 'She asked me to try really hard to win.' The audience is frozen, hanging on my every word. 'And what did you say?' prompts Caesar gently. Nevertheless, instead of warmth, I feel an icy rigidity take over my body.

'I bet you did,' says your lovers a, a squeeze. The buzzer goes off- saying no. My muscles tense as they do before a kill just for show that I could- Kill is okay to this world- yet saying- Fuck is not- and ripping her heart out is okay too? Yet some light sex is not I asked- they were like shocked by that one- something I should not have questioned... why? When I speak, my voice seems to have gone up an

octave. 'I swore I would do this and not be right.' The all gapped - like I shouldn't have... why? It's not the 1900's any more or the 2000s - get what I mean - I said to them in my mind - they said to drop it. As we cut to a break.

Talk about this perfect love you have with him? His eyes his face, his body... and nothing else... don't say what you really feel I said in my mind? They didn't like that... I was not whining points for saying what I wanted and that was a boy banging me in the night - as a real girl would do. Pissed - I shyly get up that what they want a shy girl with a fake small on her face - 'Sorry we're out of time, yet that is me - Likewise, come on here...

What do you want to see? I asked - on brake...

Death?

Lust?

Killing?

Or me?

Where are my Life and Love - come in - it's all for you, and I feel cheated - and then they said remember whom you are a nine-year star...Your dead to us either way.

They make me not me... just a program of what they want.

A heel like an applause continues long after I'm seated back with the others. I look to Sani for comfort and she looked at me like what the hell. He gives me a side thumb as I walk to him. Sani is a boy that makes sure I don't F - it up. What happens to be sweet? I said I just didn't feel like it today... Hello - I a NINE-YEAR-OLD - girl! I feel like crying!

Best of luck, Elody Elizabeth Elosteen, the star girl from region 14.'

28

I'm still in a daze... sitting through his interview. He has the audience from the get they not sure about him like - go, though; I can hear them laughing at him for not having just one girl, shouting out. He got the same question and went into great detail about how he banged this girl - and that was

okay for he is a boy... and boys can have sex with anyone and that a-okay- yet a girl is a slut- if she thinks about it.

No respect for girls at all in the tournament. Or in our lives as girls! I knew he had to say this yet I was not contented.

A shake of his head said to me to not- think about it, I was turn off to him, so I would not talk for him... There must be some special girl right what one? Come on, what's her name?' says the man in black- Um- she over there he points.

Sounds of understanding from the crowd-

Why her...?

29

'I know, Likewise, a none of boys like her for whom she is,' he says. 'So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She may not be there or the other way around?' The man said discouragingly. I- I- a – don't know... oh my...!

For a moment, the cameras hold on him down casting on his eyes as what he says sinks in. Then I can see my face, mouth half-open in a mixture with surprise and complaint, overblown on every screen as I realize, me... He means me... right? I press my lips together and stare at the floor, hoping this will conceal the emotions starting to boil up inside of me. I never knew at that time... the girl that was shown and since I would not look up, they never said. That was the punishment- with head in my mind.

30

I take a shower and scrub the gold paint, the makeup, the scent of beauty from my body. All that remains of the design team's efforts are the flames on my nails. I strip all that is fake and gay to me of my body rapping all the places- that you should not see- yet you do. Brush my teeth- hair- and the underwire is put on with PJ's until bedtime... was I slip out... I do some reading- and see the news that I don't want to see about everything and the world all crazy. I see the hell that we live in and I don't want to yet they make me. There is only one hour was there not feeling the inside of me- or hearing my every emotion.

Possibly it will give me something, to hold on to in the days to come. I pull on a thick, fleecy nightgown and climb into bed. It takes me about five seconds to realize I'll never fall asleep.

-And-

I need sleep very much, for the reason that in the arena every moment I give in to fatigue will be an invitation to death. It's no good. One hour, two, three passes, and my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I can't stop trying to imagine exactly what terrain I'll be thrown into.

Return...? Marsh...?

A frigid inhospitable- surroundings...?

Above all I am hoping for trees, which may afford me some means of concealment and food and shelter, Often- there are trees, for the cause that barren landscapes are dull glum yet awe-inspiring- and the Tournament resolves too quickly without them. On the other hand, what will the climate be like?

Questioned- What traps have the Tournament makers had burrow to liven up the slower moments? As well as then there are my fellow esteems.

The more anxious I am to find sleep, the more it eludes me. Finally, I am too restless to even stay in bed. I pace the floor, heart beating too fast, breathing hard- yet not holding it in. My room feels like a prison cell to me as I said. Worse than what I know she had- yet not at all. It's all in my mind the imprisonment. That's spooky!

The idea of being strong for someone else has never entered their heads, I find myself in the position of having to console them. Since I'm the person going in to be slaughtered, this is somewhat annoying.

I run down the hall saying, I had enough- to the door- to the roof- I went not allowed- Likewise, I am there. It's not only unlocked Likewise, ajar so how is going to stop me - I see them adding traps and things out for us- they won't know I was on me time. Something that they never thought of is how I paled all this on my time to maybe win.

The plan that they cannot get into- for I have it coded something my dad made for us when this was added in me- he said they don't need to know all of your life. My dad was somewhat of an inventor- also on this site as a hobby.

Yet there is a lot of chatting here- nothing is far in the tournament- we all play dirty- there are really no roles just kill- the one you see and Knock them out! My sisters are the ones that worked for this moment not me- so what was it I got from her the day I left home this code of how to do this... just by putting my forehead to hers and scanning it all in. I want to see the sky and how the day is going to go and so on- the moon with the stars- on the last night that no one will be hunting me- that why I know where I am.

Like a compass, all I have to do is look at the time on my hand to get north now.

I knew that all I need is a pace of my hair in with a magnetically charged paperclip and I have the same thing, something I ripped off one of the desks. Along with other small things like a flint rock and the back of my knife. Smock you die for them seeing you- yet you can live without it in the bush. The first thing you need is water- not killing... I know this they don't. Food

I was good for three weeks...

I will find what I can yet I know there is not much out there. You kill the tournament and you're going to be eaten by them at night. Your sent will kill you fast in the bush them hunting you. A tree living it's not working for me- yet some say they think that would work- I say no- two words- BIG CAT'S. we're not at the top of the food chain here- replaying is something I need to know- she did- I didn't Likewise, I have it all! Everything I need to know... for that, I will always be edited. And I think- some knew this and that's why she is where she is... Likewise, they had to see if I would make it. The what if...!

My thoughts- You know, you could live a thousand lifetimes and not deserve him. My nightmares are usually about losing you. I'm okay once I realize you're here. I realize only one person will be damaged beyond repair if he dies is- me! I'm so sorry,' I whisper. I lean forward and kiss him. I turn and put my lips close to him and drop my eyelids in imitation... 'He offered me sugar and wanted to know all my secrets,' I say in my best seductive voice. His eyelashes flutter and he look's at me through a haze of opiates.

'Thought you'd be gone by now,' He says. He tilts his forehead down to rest against mine and pulls me closer. His skin, his whole being radiates heat from being so near the fire, and I close my eyes, soaking in his warmth. I breathe in the smell of snow dampened leather and smoke and apples, the smell of all those wintry days we shared before the Tournament. I don't try to move away.

Why should I anyway? His voice drops to a whisper. 'I love you.' That's why.

I look at him and he gives me a sad smile. I hear all of their voices. 'You could do a lot worse.' At this moment, it's impossible to imagine how I could do any better. The gift... it is perfect. So, when I rise up on my tiptoe to kiss him, it doesn't seem forced at all.

My choices are simple. I can die like a quarry in the woods or I can die here beside you no or then or forever. 'I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to stay right here - even if I not there I am in your mind and memory forever.' Always!

Always you...

Stars

31

You- I would fight for... he said to me... I wish I could freeze that moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever.'

Because I'm selfish, I'm a coward, I'm the kind of girl who, when she might actually be of use, would run to stay alive and leave those who couldn't follow to suffer and die. There nothing up her to me Likewise, stars and the moon, that's all I need to see and the treetops. I am sure they see me yet I am on my time... My feet move soundlessly across.

'It not always that I can turn my mind off,' I say- when I hear it snap on in my mind and I walking back in and her my boy's voice plays softly inside. 'Thinking about your family he said?' he asks. Why would you ask me that- I said frantically question if I said far too much in my retrieving?

'No,' I admit a bit guiltily. 'All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course.' In the light from below, I can see his face now, the awkward way he holds his bandaged hands. 'I really am sorry about your hands.' 'It really doesn't matter, you were off for a long time it seemed to

me,' he says. 'I have never- ever been a contender in these stars nevertheless.' Why did you ask me... anyways...?

I want to die as myself, to not having them plan that too, yet I feel this is all parts of their tournament.

There were just moments where I thought you were really far out there in your thoughts or so they said too. Yet it was like you just blacked out. (That what I wanted them to think. overloading everything this is in my mind.) My best hope is to not humiliate myself over this... and. 'He hesitates, all the time I feel that I said too much... like I what thief to something- tacking away from him... and got away with it- as I did them I knew I could not say anything to him or they would surely get it... so wrong right?

'And what do you what to know maybe I did blackout?' I say. 'I don't know how to say it exactly. How I feel about all this- my family is grown now- I no! Only me and you-you have to take this place and be there for me- that what I need from you.

Does that make any sense to you? I ask... I shake my head, yes and he gets it, all we have at this point is each other's as we hug our own body's feel like we are hugging. How could he die like anyone Likewise, himself or as me with him- or them?

'I don't want them to change me... from the inside out. Turn me into some kind of horrid kill, which I'm not wanting to be.'

I bite my lip feeling inferior... like always in my past days of days and times of times. While I have been ruminating on the availability of trees, and look for the love to show the way- that has been struggling with how to maintain his identity as us. His purity for me is what is driving me to keep going.

I feel you! All of you now and forever! He said.

I locked my blue eyes into his, demanding an answer- do you love me.

Yes- truly! He said- I knew in his thought that was real.

I smile at him, sad and thrilled. Okay, be my sweetheart and kiss me on the rooftop under the stars. And we ran and did just that not caring what they said.

I will always- Then I turn and leave the roof. I spend the rest of the night slipping in and out of a dozing out, imagining the cutting remarks I will make on him to kill him out of the fact I have too in the morning of the next day. I don't want to kill this boy... I love him... can't they see that- it's sick to me and him?

~*~

There are no rules in the arena, Likewise, anthropophagy doesn't play well with the Capitol audience, so they tried to head it off. Just KILL! And see who stands as last- there is no timing- it could be one day or one year. It has happened.

33

The ride to me I might as well have been in a coffin, lasts about half an hour before the windows blackout, suggesting that we're nearing the arena.

The flying ships overhand the lands of Zarnesboro, and I go back to the ranking, only this time it leads down into a cylinder subversive, into the catacombs that lie beneath the arena. That is where it all opened up to the world, they made for us- it's part of the land yet under them workings... up and you're over the arced fizz of web almost virtual programed control-ness.

The whole thing is the brand- new to me- all- everything- the land and how it looks the sent and the air seeming thinner, a fast train moved over my head, and with clear like tracks under it with care posts under. Fans I would say that want to see this all for the stadium.

The only thing the same are the faces popping up with the look of kill coming at me - there is no call out when these stars you pop up and run.

34

I struggle to keep my breakfast down. We're on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard- death that is grouses to look at if you can slow down to see if - it's made to be that way for a tea's- lush Pandora is the fifth moon of the gas giant Polyphemus (both are figures in Greek my thology), which orbits Alpha Centauri A in the Alpha Centauri star system, the closest star system to our own sun. Everything glassines at the light in colors you have never seen before with your eyes.

'Why not? You saved me with those bugs. You're smart enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway,' I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. 'You hungry?' I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. 'Come on then, I've had two kills today.' Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. 'I can fix your stings.' 'Can you?' I ask. 'How?' She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses.

'Where'd you find those?'

'Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,' says Leah. 'There is a lot here, too.'

'That's right. You're Area Eleven. Cultivation,' I say. 'Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings.' Permitted smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then, fix me up.'

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, Likewise, it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh-wa.' The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually leaching the pain right out of the sting.

Permitted gives a giggle. 'Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse.' 'Do my neck! Do my cheek!' I almost beg.

Permitted stuff another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I'm laughing, for the reason that the relief is so sweet. I notice a long burn on the Permitted forearm. 'I've got something for that.' I set aside my weapons and anoint her arm with the burning medicine.

'You have good guarantors,' she says longingly. 'You weren't joking, about wanting me for an ally?' she asks. 'Have you gotten anything yet?' I asked. She shakes her head - no.

'You will, though- watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how ingenious you are.' I turn the meat over. 'No, I meant it,' I say. I can almost hear Sam- groaning as I team up with this wispy child. Likewise, I want her. Because she's a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister.

'Okay,' she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. 'It's a deal.' Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, Likewise, neither of us mentions that. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. The gosling has a delicious meal that's so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it. permitted is a big handful of some sort of starchy root to the meal. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her district.

'Oh,' says permitted with a sigh. 'I've never had a whole leg to myself before.' I'll bet she hasn't. I'll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. 'Take the other,' I say.

'Categorically?'

'Take whatever you want. Now that I've got a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus, I've got snares. I can show you how to set them,' I say. permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. 'Oh, take it,' I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. 'It will only keep a few days anyway, and we've got the whole bird plus the rabbit.' Once she's got hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful.

Her eyes widen. 'Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops.' 'I'd have thought, in area 11, you'd have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,' I say. 'They arrest you or something?' I asked.

'They whip you and make everyone else watch,' says Leah. 'The mayor's very strict about it.'

As well, our mayor, Madge's father, doesn't seem to have much taste for such events. Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most laugh at the community in the country has its advantages. Such as, being largely ignored by the Capitol as long as we produce our coal quotas.

I can tell by her expression that it's not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping's a rare thing in quarter 14, although occasionally one occurs. Technically, Permitted and I could be whipped on a daily basis for poaching in the woods- well, technically, we could get a whole lot worse- except all the officials buy our meat.

'Do you get all the coal you want?' she asks.

'No,' I answer. 'Just what we buy and whatever we track in on our boots.'

It is enigmatic, my sisterly and terrifying. Even from orbit, the scope of florae present on the surface designates a moon brimming with life. They added more moons just to play with us yet I know the Earth one.

Other than the richness of varying colors, the trees resemble those of Earth. They have the familiar trunks, branches, and leaves, though due to the difference in gravity, many of the shapes appear strange to humans and the proportions are greater because of the lower gravity. The trees and plant life of Zansboro have formed links to the mental connections between their roots that link to us and the troopers and effectively act as neurons, creating a moon-wide 'brain' that has achieved, by the chip.

Larger than Earth it feels- this is like a tournament where you are the fighter lost in the world that made- it's not really a real place to others- yet we have heard about it- like a stadium- out in this world. With what I would call wraparound screen that never- were you can see things they say and want you to do- was it never- ever seem to end- where you're all lost within- where you feel this is all real- yet the bloodshed is for actual.

You're just one small pixel in a big sea of gaming and entertainment. Looks like a lush paradise standard during the day, Likewise, at night, virtually all life on the moon exhibits bioluminescent qualities in various shades of blue, purple and green, which most likely provides them better camouflage at night on Zarnsboro. I can see nothing, after running fast and far I run to a steep downward slope or even cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse piney woods.

Run- run- run... for what I thought was forever.

I hear his instructions in my head. 'Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water also now I need to clean it.'

I heard in my mind Jump- I am not far from you... so I did into the water I want. Swimming over I stopped, and made a fire, I had to with it now night and dropping off down to 32° when just five or so minutes ago it was 99° Fahrenheit. I see him running for me- the lip was made- over the high falls- where there was a wolf chasing him- that did not make the jump.

Zoie- 'I once told you- if one gets out it's a victory'

Elody- She said that to me also when I said how do I when or getaway. So-o in other words, we all could die, and no one would give a shit.

Nevertheless, it's tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I don't get it, someone else will. That the Career tries Likewise, who survive the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. That's mine, I think. It's meant for me.

I'm fast... I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. Likewise, this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it; I know I can reach it first, Likewise, then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I've scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and one or two I might be able to pick off, Likewise, say there's a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their own powerful fists.

The hijacking I call it- Before the tournament, some tried to run get a train that was passing in the night- others- I remember and had playing in my mind the one that ran- that tried escaping on the rail line. What they did was tunnel their way out- making a hole in the boxcar, and dripping their body down on the ties, feet dragging on and the cars would all pass Likewise, the last was they had to roll over the tracks in-between the wheels. In the car Jarrah- said let's see that rope- the rope is something we all have it's so needed. Even if just one of these bracelets... cute the girls said when she was trying to strangle another girl out like she was a guard... on the top of the tram... Do you have a better plane then a girl? Yes- let's see the rope- it when around her neck as he made two notes- there the notes there smash the joints in nick- dead in 15 seconds. They did it they killed all the troopers on top of the train- and made the drive or the train go an alternative way off to freedom or so they thought.

Over the tallest viaduct in the world 3,000 feet in the air- they got rid of all the bodies... the one boy rolling his eyes not were there uniform, like the rest of them that could. Planes were flown in to bomb or gunned down them the runners as they go for a small-town call Knox in Italy for freedom on the Kane line bypass. They fired back Likewise; it was 100 them over 3,000 of them.

~*~

Rip out of my thought- Get the weapon he said- that was the next part making it to where they have my stuff. And that was 5,280 feet always. From the starting line. Where we all have to meet up- yet that the tournament- no we have to get this with them about to kill with bare hands. The very weapon that might be my salvation, I have small hands- I no- yet with her past training in my mind I have the power. And with this rope I killed my first eight-year-old girl- that was looking at me for trust- I lied saying I would not do that to her- yet this is a tournament of life or death, not trust- she was going to kill me- remember that... did I want to NO- did I have to yes. She was so cute- I made sure that she remembered... giving her the moment in my mind that played in all the minds around in the land that I made the kill- a sacrifice of life so we can live.

(Thank you for your blood- and breath- no it mine to have. Not- forgotten the crowd makes their hand moment- like a wave then placing it on their hart and kissing her goodbye. These are what are area dose anyways.) We won't piece here not fighting yet some parts are an uprising, and that where you get wiped off the planet.

And I only see one bow on her, and I get it- yet I can do that as I make my way to the point, of the Permitted first phase- of this long drawn out tournament- I know the minute must be almost up for me to get what I want from her and will have to decide what my strategy will be, right to make - to get there I am off my path now

I know after fighting this girl off me... running and playing cat and mouse with her... and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the stir rounding forests toward the falls, I hope that is right to get back to where I started.

Yet, I know I will run into all of them that may have their shit now- so what do- I do- run without? I also have now a small thumb handgun, pink with a white grip- something I keep from her forever, I knew if I win that would be something I would treasure- I undressed her seeing what I could find- it what you do when you get a kill- down in her undies in the front was this gun, deep up in her vajayjay the hand was out some point downward, and I tore it out and now have it in my handbag - good hiding spot why didn't I think of that? And one round in the gun. I wonder if that is meant for my own head.

Is it a choice no? She did care if it when off inside her why would she? So, you pack things where you have the holes... on the thing, girls have over the boys. Now I need a knife to see what shoved up their guts for that end- we- no. I know they have this looked into- yet if you have the money

you can pack hidden things like that there... I don't have the money. A hidden gun in the puss - puss- they all say wow or something like that- they went nuts at how clever that was- the newsman said- not good enough if you can't fire it the man said on the screen, or the other girl would have been dead. How that girl is living is hard for me to get... to John Sha-Long to Steven Hung-dong. We like that girl didn't we said Steven a real cutie- what was her last name Hard-cock? No- Sharcock- yah that it- Yah-ha Sharcock- she was a cute one with drack, yet some rosy-sh look to her hair in the sunlight- and green eyes- not blue- and so not brown like the others. With a thin look.

I know I have to kill a week girl to get more that is the next one, I am weak I know it killing this young girl, I never thought I would be able to do such a thing.

When suddenly I notice my boy on his way, he's about five-run boys look for what I am, the shit we need- to not die- to my right I see one wanting to jump me, and he did- my boy slit his hand off- quite a fair distance I see more, still I can tell he's looking at me or my man, and I think he might be shaking his head at what my man did for me- after killing the other girl they he may have liked before all this took place.

The one he wanted- if he wins... Likewise, the sun's in my eyes and I see nothing Likewise, - my man loving eyes in mine I feel safe if only for that moment and the moment was gone to fast, and while I'm perplexing over it the gong rings out. I was no at this point given his ring- something he said I need to prove to him, and what I said to him also- and that was killing a girl or boy- to show that would never betray one- another and the other way around- we killed each other now- where have the promise- a band to show for it. it mine has to rock hearts in it with our names- and it is gold, he is just a gold band with our names. Yong, I went like a woman now- yet I haven't even had my first period, and there are making that happen tonight. Like all the other girls- to be as they call it far- in a tournament that not.

More blood funny no?

36

And I've missed it the rounds to my heart and hand! I've missed it by not much!

For the reason that that extra couple of seconds, I've lost by seeing my dream of living in the days to come- by not being ready... for all this... I need to eat... so I grab him and we both shuffle our feet for a moment, confused at the direction my brain wants to take... of what's next, and then he swipes me

off my forward in his arms, tucking the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread that was tucked in my top I eat as he runs in the woods, and I feed him some to bits and pieces.

The pickings are so small and I'm so angry with my boy for distracting me that I sprint in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I can't stand living with virtually anything.

A boy, I think from Area 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do and for a brief time we grapple with it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood.

I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That's when I see the knife in his back. Already others- Likewise, have reached the Cornucopia and are spreading out to attack.

Yes, the girl from Area 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I've seen her

throw in training. She never misses. And I'm her next target.

I was right they now have more than me... what to do... All the general fear I've been feeling condenses into an immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me in seconds.

Arena shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head.

The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow, I know the girl will not pursue me. That she'll be drawn back into the Cornucopia before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. Thanks for the knife, I think.

At the edge of the woods, I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so try Likewise, are riding out away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground.

Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or into the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other try Likewise, then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternate between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I can between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during

the struggle with the boy from Community 7 Likewise, managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve, and so as I walk, I fold it effortlessly and tuck it into a pocket.

I also free the knife- it's a fine one with a long sharp blade, saw-like near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things- and slide it into my belt.

I don't dare stop to observe the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go for a long time. I know that from my days in the woods.

Nevertheless, I will need water. Instruction in my mind given, and since I sort of botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck... I feel I have other than his love.

The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a diversity of trees, some I identified, some completely foreign to me. At one point, I hear a noise and pull my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, Likewise, I have only startled a rabbit- that I got my using an aero.

'Good to see you,' I whispered... If there's one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared.

The ground declines down some as you can see here. I don't particularly like this too much. Gorges make me feel trapped as I look up at the viaduct and nowhere, I am now at or so I think. I want to be high, like in the hills around Area 14, where I can see my rivals' forthcoming.

However, I have no choice Likewise, to keep going running like hillbilly-hell.

Funny though, I don't feel too bad.

The days of guzzling with coffin paid off. I've got staying power even though I'm short on sleep though I feel it. I feel him going in and out on me too in my mind. Being in the woods is refreshing. I'm glad for the loneliness, even though it's a misapprehension, for the reason that I'm most likely on-screen right now.

I feel it not looking cute Likewise, yet sweet to them looking at how to sleep the little one is... the joke made about tucking me and giving me a bedtime story.

Not unswervingly Likewise, off and on. There are so many decreases to show the first day, down to 60- that honor for the stars still standing- hiking through the woods isn't much to look at in the day Likewise, at night it's whoo-wah.

Even so, they'll show me enough to let individuals know I'm alive, intact and on the travel. One of the substantial days of betting is the opening when the initial wounded come in. Conversely, that can't compare to what happens as the field shrinks to a handful of players.

It's late-night and the ground is a wondrous sight when I begin to hear the cannons. Each shot represents a dead try Likewise. The fighting must have finally stopped at the Cornucopia. They never- ever assemble the massacre bodies until the killers have isolated.

On an opening day, they don't even fire the cannons until the initial fighting's over for the motive that it's too hard to keep track of the death toll.

I allow myself to pause, panting, wheezing, and puffing as I count the shots.

One, two, and three... on and on until they reach eleven. Eleven dead in all 59 stands. All the names I could care less about there just kill me... My fingernails scrape at the dried blood the boy from Area 5 coughed into my face I got him some on the hand too. He's gone, certainly. I wonder about him and where he is off too, I can hear him yet not see.

Has he lasted through the day at least I knew that? I well no in a few hours what next- if there are any more surprises, they made up fast for us to endure as they did with having wild wolf after us... and big cats. I knew I had to find a place to sleep that would be safe in an open field with a ring a fire around me- that would keep everything away no? If I am the one inside feeding the flames - I knew not for long yet I need some shut-eye. Some are in caves- yet I don't want their batshit virus. No thanks... When they hologram the dead's images into the sky for the rest of us to see, and on our bracelets...

He had no confidence he could win.

And I will not end up with the unpleasant task of killing him. Maybe it's better if he's out of this for good, I don't know all I know is this is killing me too.

I got to the point where I go my gear... all the things that were my dad's or passed in the family down for this moment. There were in a lockbox that I had to crack also... just part of the

tournament to them, as you have some kid breathing down your neck, wanting to kill you - I was playing with the combo.

One eye on the lock and one-off to all the other sides, I was frantic... yet the combo was my great granddad's ID number- something that was deep in my mind that I knew I had. I tried all the family members, and that one worked, there was on can of dog food too - yet I know I will eat anything... that what they gave me... to live on. Comparable to a mutt...?

I slump down next to my backpack, dog- tired- with the meet of three of them...

I will eat anything... I need to go through it anyway before night falls. See what I have to work with. As I unhook the straps, I can feel it's sturdily made although a rather unfortunate color. This orange will practically glow in the dark. I make a mental note to camouflage it first thing tomorrow.

I flip open the flap. What I want most, right at this moment, is water. A girl that wanted to play nice directive to immediately find water was not arbitrary- I was going to do the same play nice until the turn on one another.

I won't last long without it, and she knows the way or so I will trust. It may be a trap - yet I go for it- the thought in my mind said she okay - I will be there too.

It's a trap- I see 10 run up on me and I load the gun- popping them all off in the head, her first, stopping to reload the gun with black powder, the last one I say her eye color she was that close. Yet I got them all... the knives, that were thrown at me not all missing me, the arrows fly past, yet I dodge them as I am behind a tree.

49- I see all of them that have passed by my hands - I was happy- and rewarded for my bravery. They added metal to my uniform sent in by the unmanned drone of a bluebird square under it are pin-like thing hanging out of all that I killed off with their colors. I have 14 deaths now - that I have claimed, all the names I don't even know- nor did they know me or do anything to me for them to pass on.

The number went down more - as the update when up down to 20 kids. 15 boys and 5 girls... with me included.

Now the real tournament starts to me - as the blood drips from my teeth I giggled crazily... wanting to win this no matter what! Ha- ha I can do this - as I rip the raw meet with my k-9-teeth that I

shared with a fingernail fill, that I found in one of the girl's handbags, I have all these things now that I want the rest, I let behind with their naked bodies- for something to find and eat.

I killed boys- I never thought they all would be so different... and something I would not understand. Yet I had to do it! I used them... and I got them to fall for me in every way I could. It's all part of the star tournament for a girl!

37

For a few days, I'll be able to function with unpleasant symptoms of dehydration and the runs, Likewise, after that I'll deteriorate into helplessness and be dead in a week, tops. I carefully lay out the provisions and flamed what I could. I am down to 60 pounds. It's been three weeks now... my mind is spinning with what if. He is a week somewhere... lost he would not say... all I heard was go one and do this.

Nothing to sleep on Likewise, the ground and piled up pin tree limbs.

The bottle- the water of another girl, that I am not sure about, I added bleach I found of another dead boy body 16 drops, and I can have it? I was out at this point- run and always moving in the night- and the day resting some... if there asleep like the animals that are when I move. And pop them in the head will they dream of banging me off. I got one last night that way and it feels so-ooo good!

I got his tighties underwire and made a white flag out of them hanging now on a stick, for them all to see on the screen of his giving up, that was an easy kill to make... and I wanted to be a dick about it... for he did not have much of one. I would no... my boy is the man here! I hope he is all good.

I developed aware of the dryness in my throat and mouth, the cracks in my lips. I've been moving all day long. It's been hot and I've sweat a- lot and I know that is not good. Yet that is not stopping the boys from making their way at me... I can fight all of them all- I thought, or can I?

38

As I refill my pack, I have an awful thought. The lake, I have made it there - over high wood rope passageways and train, replying down the sides of rock faces, I did it all, The Kamahi Lake is a full day's journey from where I sit now, a much harder journey with nothing to drink for you can really drink this with all that is in it. And then, even if I reach it, it's sure to be heavily guarded by some of the Career stars.

I'm about to panic when I remember the rabbit I got earlier today. It has to drink, too or I have to eat it without- cocking. I just have to find out where- he is... that is all I can think about at this point is him.

4 weeks now- Dusk is closing in and I am ill at ease. The trees are too thin to offer much camouflage. The layer of pine needles that muffles my footsteps also makes tracking animals harder when I need their trails to find water. And I'm still heading downhill, deeper and deeper into a valley that seems endless, my dress looks like Swiss cheese at this point all dirty and

such, no underwear at this point it was used as cordage. Like my shoe strings...

I'm hungry, too, Likewise, I don't dare break into my precious store of crackers and beef yet. Instead, I take my knife and go to work on a pine tree, cutting away the outer bark and scraping off a large handful of the softer inner bark. I slowly chew the stuff as I walk along. After a week of the finest food in the world, it's a little hard to choke down. Then I've eaten plenty of pine in my life. I'll adjust quickly and don't think about it.

In another hour, it's clear I've got to find a place to camp yet again. Night creatures are coming out and up inside my girlie-ness gross. I can hear the infrequent hoot or howl, my first clue that I'll be competing with natural predators for the rabbits. As to whether I'll be viewed as a source of food, it's too soon to tell. There could be any number of animals pestering me at this instant.

Nonetheless, right now, I decided to make my fellow stars a priority. I'm sure many will continue hunting through the night.

Those who fought it out at the lavishness will have food, an abundance of water from the lake, torches or flashlights, and weapons they're itching to use. I can only hope I've traveled far and fast enough to be out of choice.

Before settling down, I take my wire and set two twitch-up snares in the brush. I know it's risky to be setting traps, Likewise, food will go so fast out here. And I can't set snares on the run. Still, I walk another five minutes before making camp.

I pick my tree carefully, a willow, not terribly tall Likewise, set in a clump of other willows, and camouflage in those long, flowing tresses. I hiked up, sticking to the stronger branches close to the

trunk, and find a sturdy fork for my bed. It takes some doing, then again, I arrange the sleeping bag in a relatively comfortable manner. I found the bag of one of the girls I killed number 2 on my line up.

I'm small enough to tuck the top of the bag over my head, Likewise, I put on my hood as well. As night falls, the air is cooling quickly. In the face of the risk I took in getting the backpack, I know now it was the right choice. It's all about choosing what do you pick? What would you do like me?

I place my backpack in the foot of the bag, then slide in after it. As a precaution, I remove my belt, loop it all the way around the division and my sleeping bag, and refasten it at my waist. Now if I roll over in my sleep, I won't go crashing to the earth.

Nightfall has just come when I hear the anthem that precedes the death summary. Through the branches, I can see the seal of the Capitol, which appears to be floating in the atmosphere.

I'm really viewing another screen, an enormous one that's transported by of one of their disappearing hovercraft.

This sleeping bag, radiating back and preserving my body heat, will be energetic.

I'm sure there are several other stars whose major anxiety right now is how to stay warm whereas I may essentially be able to get a few hours of sleep.

If only I wasn't so desire of all that is life.

The anthem fades out and the sky goes dark for a moment. At home, we would be watching full coverage of each and every killing, Likewise, that is thought to give a one-sided gain to the living others.

Likewise, now instead of scores, they post only community numbers. I take a deep breath as the face of the all dead kids begin and tick them off one by one on my fingers.

For the occasion, if I got my hands on the bow and shot someone, my secret would be revealed to all. No, here in the arena, all we see are the same snapshot they showed when they televised our training scores. Simple headshots. Yet this time with a star saying they have fallen.

The first to see is the girl from Borough 2. That means that the career stars from 1 and 2 have all endured. No astonishment there. Then the boy from 3, I didn't presume that one, usually all the vocations make it through the first day. The boy from Community 3. I guess the scary-faced girl made it. Both try Likewise, between 4 and 7. The boy from 8. Both from 10. Yes, there's the boy who I fought for the backpack. I've run through my fingers, only one deader try Likewise, to go. Is it him? No, there's the girl from the borough 12. That's it, the Capitol closure is back with a final musical exaggeration. Then obscurity and the sounds of the timberland pick up where it left off.

I'm thankful my man is still flourishing and not dead or messed up in the head. I tell myself again that if I get killed, his winning will be a big advantage to his mother the most, for he is a- lot like me. This is what I tell myself to clarify the self-contradictory sentiments, which ascend when I think of him all the time. When I not with him I touch myself like I want him to touch me.

I think of you...

The gratitude that he gave me an edge by professing his love for me in the interview. The dread that we may come face-to-face at any moment in this arena. I know what I may have to do... Yet I will not and never will him even if we hear them say someone KILL- KILL- KILL.

5 not dead, Likewise, none from Area 14. I try to work out who is left. A bonnie boy he made it through the first day after all. I can't help feeling glad. That makes ten of us. The other three I'll figure out tomorrow. Now when it is dark, and I have traveled far, and I am nestled high in this tree, now I must try and rest I know this is good enough for now.

I haven't really slept in four days, and then there's been the long day's voyage into the arena. Gradually, I allow my muscles to reduce. My eyes close... The last thing I think is it's fortunate I don't snore or at least he never said that I did. I was on top of him in the tree, all snuggled.

Spur-of-the-moment! The sound of a breaking branch wakes me yet not him. I shake him up- how long have I been asleep? Four hours? Five- nine hours- too long?

Yet we had lots of covers up there 500 feet in the air.

The tip of my nose is icy cold- yet I kiss him and kip rubs my nose- and the heat of our body is keeping the child down. Break! Snap! This is not the sound of a branch under our feet, Likewise, the sharp crack of one coming from a tree. Crack! Snap! I judge it to be several hundred yards to my right.

Leisurely, without a sound, I turn myself in that route. For a few minutes, there's nothing Likewise, darkness and some come to blows. Then I see a flash and a small fire begins to bloom. A pair of hands warm over flames, Likewise, I can't make out more than that yet- moving fast like.

I have to bite my lip not to scream every foul name, and I know at the fire maze. What are they thinking he asked me to hold me in his arms as we go off and he leans in for the kiss an d I met that the rest of the way?

A fire just at nightfall would have been one thing. Those who battled at the profusion, with their superior strength and surplus of supplies, they couldn't possibly have been near enough to spot the flames then. Likewise, then now, when they have almost certainly been searching the forests for hours looking for wounded or dead- the wounded are left to pass on there no help for the week. You might as well be waving a flag and shouting, 'Come and get me!' And here I am a ston e's throw from the biggest idiot in the Tournament. Strapped in a tree. Not daring to flee since my general location has just been broadcast to any killer who cares. I mean, I know it's cold out here and not everybody has a sleeping bag. Likewise, then again then you grit your teeth and stick it out until dawn!

I lay smoldering in my bag with his naked body on top of mine, I feel his skin so smooth - for the next couple of hours really thinking that if I can get off- enough even if death is nearing us both- or just one, my nature has been to flee, not fight with him caring me out of harm. A boy that is fighting for me is what I have always dreamed about more than marriage even. I have dreamed about that too what young girl has not- it the most important day in a girl's life- no? I could see me with him- at the end of this now.

However, obviously, this person's a hazard. Ill-advised people are dangerous. Then this one undoubtedly doesn't have much in the way of guns while I've got this excellent knife.

The atmosphere is still dim yet sparkly with the stars overhead all twilight, Likewise, I can feel the first signs of dawn approaching. I'm an establishment to think us- meaning the individual whose death I'm now developing and me- we might really have gone unnoticed. Then I hear it. numerous pairs of feet breaking into a run. The fire starter must have dozed off. They're on her formerly she can escape from. I know it's a girl now, I can tell by the pleading, the agonized scream that follows. Then there's laughter and compliments from several voices. Someone cries out, '13- or 12 down and 11 to go no!' Yet they're so far away from us now it may be weeks where it'll we just be, he and I- I wonder if I will get knocked up?

I might- with all this that we are doing, I know nothing about that yet I sure I could do that, they would still not take me out of the fight and they would still kill him off to... so he has to pull out- and have it go on my cheeks. Would you squeeze and suck my breast right here (she pointed to where she wanted him to kiss and draw in with lips.) I asked in a moment of looking up at the skies.

The sighs- she cried- saying I don't want to ever leave you- wrapped around his was- still locked into him- and his love and Mr. Winky- that what I call that thingie. He was kissing my neck- and I was him- I think- I got a hick-ie somewhere on my collarbone it's black and blue.

And a chapped hood- from kissing it- It's love- and they're not stopping it-

NEVER- EVER! The videos we have would kick your tongue out tongue. And yes- you can see me doing that too- hold it out and showing that before the goop-ie was gulped hard.

After all the sex- he-a being- the sweet boy- that he is Likewise, a tampon in me. The string hanging there he looked at me- saying- if I when this I want you- if you when this would you say the same- YES! We cleaned off in the river in the moonlight- a naked swim- where the eyes were looking you didn't get to us. We run more than the others... about 10 miles. I don't feel all the cute looking like I do muddy and showing hair everywhere yet- love is love and you just don't care if it is.

40

'Why not...? You saved me with those bugs.

You're smart enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway,' I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. 'You hungry?' I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. 'Come on then, I've had two kills today.' Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. 'I can fix your stings.' 'Can you?' I ask. 'How?' She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses. 'Where'd you find those?'

'Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,' says Leah. 'There is a lot here, too.'

'That's right. Are you part of 11? Cultivation,' I say. 'Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings.' Permitted smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then. Fix me up.'

I notice a long burn on Leah's forearm. 'I've got something for that.' I set aside from my weapons and anoint her arm with the burning medicine; her stuff another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I'm laughing for the reason that the release is so sweet.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods,

Likewise, it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh.' The sound comes out of my mouth before, I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually, leaching the pain right out of the sting. Permitted gives a giggle. 'Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse.' 'Do my neck...! Do my cheek...!' I almost begging... 'You have good sponsors,' she says longingly. 'Have you gotten anything yet?' I ask. She shakes her head. 'You will, though. Watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how clever you are.' I turn the meat over.

'You weren't joking, about wanting me for an ally?' she asks. 'No, I meant it,' I say. I can almost hear Sam- groaning as I team up with this wispy child.

Likewise, I want her. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her district. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. The gosling has a delicious meal that's so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it.

For the reason that she's a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister. 'Okay,' she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. 'It's a deal.' Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, Likewise, neither of us mentions that.

She a big handful of some sort of starchy root to the meal. Yet she so nice to me I just can't- I can put a knife in the little sweetheart. 'Oh,' says she sighs heavy. 'I've never had a whole leg to myself before.'

I'll bet she hasn't. I'll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. 'Take the other,' I say.

'Really?' She asks.

'Take whatever you want. Now that I've got a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus, I've got snares. I can show you how to set them,' I say. Permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. 'Oh, take it,' I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. 'It will only keep a few days anyway, and we've got the whole bird plus the rabbit.' Once she's got hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful. 'I'd have thought, in Community Eleven, you'd have a bit more to eat than us.

You know, since you grow the food,' I say.

Permitted eyes widen big that one thing about her eyes is really big. 'Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops.'

'They arrest you or something?' I ask.

'They whip you and make everyone else watch-'

'The mayor's very strict about it.'

'Don't you have to be in school?' I ask.

'Not during harvest. Everyone works then,' says she.

It's interesting, hearing about her life.

We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Tournament makers are blocking out our conversation because even though the information seems harmless, they don't want people in different districts to know about one another. The suggestion is made by her- cute- but- really, we lay out all our food to plan ahead. She's seen most of mine, Likewise, I add the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She's gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries. I tentatively bite into one, and it's as good as our blackberries. Taking

Permitted on as an ally seems a better choice all the time. We divide up our food supplies, so in case we're separated, we'll both be set for a few days. Apart from the food, permitted has a small waterskin, a homemade slingshot, and an extra pair of socks. She also has a sharp shard of rock she uses as a knife.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. 'You sure this is safe?' 'Oh, yes, we have them back home. I've been eating them for days,' she says, popping a handful in her mouth. 'I know it's not much,' she says as if embarrassed, ' Likewise, I had to get away from the Cornucopia fast.'

'You did just right,' I say. When I spread out my gear, she gasps a little when she sees the sunglasses.

'How did you get those?' She asks.

'In my pack. They've been useless so far. They don't block the sun and they make it harder to see,' I say with a shrug.

'These aren't for the sun, they're for obscurity,' cries Leah. 'Sometimes, when we harvest through the night, they'll pass out a few pairs to those of us highest in the trees. Where the torchlight doesn't reach. One time, this boy Martin, he tried to keep his pair. Hid it in his pants. They killed him on the spot.'

'They killed a 4 boy for taking these?' I say.

'Yes, and everyone knew he was no danger.

Martin wasn't right in the head. I mean, he still acted like a three-year-old. He just wanted the glasses to play with,' she said.

Hearing this makes me feel like Community 14 is some sort of safe haven. Of course, people keel over from starvation all the time, Likewise, I can't imagine the Peacekeepers murdering a simple-minded child. There's a little girl, one of the grandkids of my Grannie, who wanders around the mess-hall. She's not quite right, Likewise, she's treated as a sort of pet. People toss her scraps and things.

So, they're fighting in a pack. I'm not really flabbergasted. Often alliances are formed in the early stages of the Playoffs. The strong band together to hunt down the weak then, when the tension becomes too great, begin to turn on one another. I don't have to wander too hard who has made this alliance. It'll be the remaining

Career stars from constituencies 1, 2, and 6. Two boys and three girls. The ones who lunched together.

For a moment, I hear them read through the girl for supplies. I can tell by their comments they've found nonentity good. I phenomenon if the victim is Permitted Likewise, quickly dismissing the thought.

She's much too bright to be building a fire like that.

'Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts stinking.' I'm almost certain th at's the brutish boy from quarter 2. There are buzzes of assent and then, to my horror, I hear the pack heading toward me.

They do not know I'm here. How could they? And I'm well concealed in the clump of trees. At least while the sun stays down. Then my black sleeping bag will turn from camouflage to trouble. If they just keep moving, they will pass me and be gone in a minute.

Likewise, the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have penlights, torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the undergrowth. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe. Have they spotted me? No, not yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere. We even had a moment where we got to slow dance under the stars and the green leaves sawing like the wind.

'Shouldn't we have heard an in my mind by now the callouts- or are we off for some love'n- for that is what they want to see- young love?' 'I'd say yes... Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately- to this- she didn't know- I want the time.' It did not take much for them to say yes...

'You can feed yourself. Can they?' I ask.

'They don't need to. They have all those supplies,' Permitted says.

'Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?' I say. 'I mean, it's the Famine

The tournament, right?'

' Likewise, Elody, they're not hungry,' says Leah.

'No, they're not. That's the problem,' I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that isn't motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. 'I think we're going to have to fix that, Leah.'

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes, she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no particular precautions.

If she'd wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker jacker nest. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can't win these tournaments. Likewise, since the odds are still against either of us surviving, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I'm distracted by my latest idea about Careers and their supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I'm pretty sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle. Traditionally, the Career's strategy is to get hold of all the food early on and work from there. The years when they have not protected it well- one year a pack of hideous reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament makers' flood washed it away- those are usually the years that from other districts have won.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted and I do.

Likewise, I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, Likewise, there aren't any.

'Who do you think that was?' I can't help thinking of my boy. 'I don't know.' 'It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'I guess we'll know tonight.'

'Who's left again?' I ask.

'The boy from Community One. Both from Two. The boy from Three. Thresh and me. And you and My boy,' says Leah. 'That's right. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.'

There's someone else, Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is.

'I wonder how that last one died,' says Leah.

'No telling. Likewise, it's good for us. Death should hold the crowd for a bit. Maybe we'll have time to do something before the Tournament makers decide things have been moving too slowly,' I say. 'What's in your hands?'

'What kind are those?' I ask.

'Not sure. There's a marshy area over that way. Some kind of waterbird,' she says.

It'd be nice to cook them, Likewise, neither of us wants to risk a fire. My guess is the one who died today was a victim of the Careers, which means they've recovered enough to be back in the Tournament. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It's a good breakfast anywhere.

'Ready to do it?' I say, pulling on my pack.

'Do what?' Says Leah, Likewise, by the way, she bounces up, and you can tell she's up for whatever I propose.

'Today we take out the Careers' food,' I say.

'Really? How?' You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she's exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

'No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt,' I say.

We don't get much hunting done though because I'm too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of permitted about the Careers' base. She's only been in to spy on them briefly, Likewise, she's observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they've been leaving another, the boy from Community 3, to watch over the supplies.

'The boy from Community Three?' I ask. 'He's working with them?'

'What weapons does he have?' I ask.

'Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, Likewise, Thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah.

'And the food's just out in the open?' I say. She nods. 'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I couldn't tell what exactly,' says Leah. 'Elody, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sister.

'Eat it!' She giggles.

'Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.'

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a community where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things,

'Music.' This all I have...

'Music?' I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. 'You have a lot of time for that?'

'We sing at home. At work, too. That's why I love your pin,' she says, pointing to the blue jay that I've again forgotten about.

'You have a blue jay?' I ask.

'Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,' she says.

'What do you mean?' I say.

'I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time.

There's a special little song I do,' says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. 'And the blue jays spread it around the orchard. That's how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you can't blame them for that.'

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That's how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt.

On it, hangs a roughly carved wooden star. Or maybe it's a flower. 'It's a good luck charm.'

'Well, it's worked so far,' I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. 'Maybe you should just stick with that.'

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' she asks. 'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, permitted decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away.'

'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask.

'Haven't you have seen them? They've got nests everywhere,' she says. I have to admit I haven't noticed. 'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner,' I say.

Surprisingly, permitted throws her arms around me.

I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back. 'You, too,' I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and Permitted and a baker who has promised she won't go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once I reach the stream, I have only to follow it effortlessly to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. I have to be cautious as I move along the water though because I find my thoughts preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my boy. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live?

More likely it'd just burn itself out and then what? I'd have achieved nothing and given them far too much information about myself.

That I was here, that I have an accomplice, that I can use the bow and arrow with correctness.

I struggle again to remember that moment over Glimmer's body when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. Somehow, I don't think he's talking about Leah. She didn't drop a nest of bug on him.

I stay put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance. I could send a flaming arrow into the pyramid easily enough, I'm a good enough shot to get it

through those openings in the net Likewise, there's no guarantee it would catch.

There's no alternative. I'm going to have to get in close and see if I can't discover what exactly protects the supplies. In fact, I'm just about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my right, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, I think it's Leah, Likewise, then I recognize- she's the one we couldn't remember this morning creeping out onto the plain.

When she decides it's safe, she runs for the pyramid, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that have been littered around the pyramid, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot.

Then she begins to approach the pyramid with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, sometimes risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel and lands poised on her tiptoes. Likewise, she overshot slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, Likewise, nothing happens. In a moment, she's regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the sup plies.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, Likewise, it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin.

Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to a tip-off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reach the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I don't see any others, Likewise, I do notice some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of the sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of bugs nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the copse Permitted has told me about and again have to admire her cleverness. It's right at the edge of the wood, Likewise, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began.

When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point. Remember, I tell myself. You're the hunter now, not them.

The boy from Community 1, Permitted and the girl from Community 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from Community 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Capitol. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with some kind of plastic box, he's easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. Likewise, he must be of some value or they wouldn't have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would possibly leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Apparently, whatever medicines they found in the Cornucopia have been ineffective.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from Community 3. One thing's for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. Some other factor is at play here, and I'd better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the pyramid is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

Really, the possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Permitted must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from Community 3 should stay or accompany them.

'He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,' says Leah.

'What about Lover Boy?' says the boy from Community 1.

'I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

'Come on,' says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Community 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, 'When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes.'

I realize I'm grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I'd already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands made contact with the earth? You'd have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

'It's mined,' I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Community 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions and automobiles and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies? That's not the sort of weapon the Tournament makers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally. I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted them into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down. The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, Likewise, the boy from Community 4 must have managed to reactivate them. I've never seen anyone in the Tournament do that. I bet it came as a shock even to the Tournament Makers.

Well, hurray for the boy from Community 3 for putting one over on them, Likewise, what am I supposed to do now? Obviously, I can't go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that's more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It doesn't have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they literally had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

My arm's pretty good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? Maybe one mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Community 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others? Thereby protecting the supplies Likewise, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one mine, I'd draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There's that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I'd really need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the pyramid, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. Maybe one contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I'd just be guessing. I'm genuinely thinking of trying to re-create Fox-face's trip up to the pyramid in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It's a big bag, Likewise, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim, the first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I'm blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow.

Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I can't hear them. I can't hear anything at the moment. Likewise, the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matte r, some of it burning, rain down on me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the pyramid. The Careers aren't likely to salvage anything out of that.

I'd better get out of here, I think.

They'll be making a beeline for the place. Likewise, once I'm on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I'm dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, Likewise, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, Likewise, it doesn't.

Panic begins to set in. I can't stay here. The flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, maybe more at times.

Likewise, I can't let my fear show. Absolutely, positively, I am live on every screen in Pane.

So-o individuals really do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists - if I didn't know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my nearness, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has me terrified. I'm glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I'm biting my nails like there's no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I can't walk, Likewise, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I can't get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, but it's also sure to be a long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of my sister had to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I'm reminded of those last few kernels that burst when My sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it in the nick of time is an understatement. I have literally just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there's Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical.

The boy from Community 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other is poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, Likewise, there's nothing. The boy from Community 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Community 3 only has time to turn and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side.

It's that quick. The death of the boy from Community 3.

The other two Careers seem to be trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, Likewise, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realized, Of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead.

They don't know about the arrows and the apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, Likewise, that the who blew up the supplies were killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament makers to retrieve the body of the boy from Community 6. And they delay.

I suppose a cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Community 3. They show the boy from Community 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the girl from Community 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The

boy from Community 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There's no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I'm about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They probably think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it's a long time before I risk moving.

The first thing I do is dig out my own glasses and put them on, which relaxes me a little, to have at least one of my hunter's senses working. I drink some water and wash the blood from my ear. Fearing the smell of meat will draw unwanted predators- fresh blood is bad enough- I make a good meal out of the greens and roots and berries Permitted and I gathered today.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we're both alive.

I run through the surviving on my fingers. The boy from 1, both from 2, both from 11 and 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting really hot in the Capitol. They'll be doing special features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It's been a long time since Community 14 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Permitted said, my boy is on his way out.

Not that Permitted is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the Seventy-fourth Famine Tournament begin, Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reach for my sleeping bag before I remember I left it with Leah. I was supposed to pick up another one, Likewise, what with the mines and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree isn't sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and pine needles. I'm still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It's a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from Community 8 that lit the fire that first night. Likewise, now it's me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest.

Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, Likewise, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it's still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

I peer through the bushes, afraid the Careers have returned, trapping me here for an indefinite time.

No, it' she, standing in the rubble of the pyramid and laughing.

She's smarter than the Careers, actually finding a few useful items in the ashes. A metal pot. A knife blades. I'm perplexed by her amusement until I realize that with the Careers' stores eliminated, she might actually stand a chance. Just like the rest of us. It crosses my mind to reveal myself and enlist her as a second ally against that pack.

Likewise, I rule it out.

There's something about that sly grin that makes me sure that befriending she would ultimately get me a knife in the back. With that in mind, this might be an excellent time to shoot her. Likewise, she's heard something, not me, because her head turns away, toward the drop-off, and she sprints for the woods. I wait. No one, nothing shows up. Still, if she thought it was dangerous, maybe it's time for me to get out of here, too. Besides, I'm eager to tell Permitted about the pyramid.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold gosling in the other, because I'm famished now, and not just for leaves and berries Likewise, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care with my injured ear.

Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, Likewise, not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, Likewise, now they're nearly dry in the hot sun. I haven't been careful enough

about my own tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body, my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I've just had the gosling. The second I'll save for Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it's gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there's an improvement, it's undetectable. I can't adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balance and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reach the site of our first meeting, I feel certain it's been undisturbed. There's no sign of Leah, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd.

By now she should have returned, as it's midday. Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere.

What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set- although I forgot to check for it- last night- was the farthest from our site of all. She's probably just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she'd hurry because I don't want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon traveling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there's nothing really for me to do Likewise, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better Likewise, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It isn't going to last long in this hot sun, Likewise, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she would just show up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated Likewise, still tender.

Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and the remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, Likewise, without good results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I'm going to have what we call a hollow day back in Community 12. That's a day where no matter what you put in your belly, it's never enough. Having nothing to do Likewise, sit in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to give into it. After all, I've lost a lot of weight in- the arena, I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my future prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling necks. That's good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it's a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Capitol. The chicken in creamy orange sauce. The cakes and pudding. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over. Sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. this is the most relaxed I've been since I've entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I've resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered these some distance away, permitted will understand I've been here, while they'll mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I'm at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been neatly arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, Likewise, it has never been lit. Permitted set up the fire Likewise, never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I spied before I blew up the supplies and this point, she ran into trouble.

I have to remind myself she's still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it. There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I'm almost certain she's stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree.

I think I'll go hunt it down.

It's a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. Likewise, nothing seems suspicious. There's no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I've stopped for just a moment when I hear it. I have to click my head around to the side to be sure, Likewise, there it is again. Leah's four-note tune coming out of a blue jay's mouth.

The one that means she's all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead picks up on the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they'd have taken up some other song. My eyes lift up into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she'll know it's safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that's when I hear the scream.

It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except for Leah. And now I'm running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, Likewise, I can't help myself. There's another high-pitched cry, this time my name. 'Elody! Elody!'

'Leah!' I shout back, so she knows I'm near. So, they know I'm near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with bug and gotten an eleven they still can't explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. 'Leah! I'm coming!'

When I break into the clearing, she's on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net.

She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The boy from Community 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, 'Are there more? Are there more?'

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shove the boy away from her and pull out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it's far beyond my capacity to heal, beyond anyone's probably. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There's no point in comforting words, in telling her she'll be all right. She's no fool. Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it's me who's dying instead of Leah.

'You blew up the food?' She whispers.

'Every last bit,' I say.

'You have to win,' she says.

'I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now,' I promise. I hear a cannon and lookup. It must be for the boy from Community 1.

I hear the callouts- getting more gleesome- I don't want this for her- one boy was cut into 2 and hung my- a- oh- e- his head in a tree. One hand half his face blows off yet is still going... and a girl killed herself by sticking a long knife in her Likewise, hole and going up- in the front, she bloods out- slowly.

She was F-ed by a man she was not ever wanting to be with- she contracted his diseases so she ended it. This tournament is to dirty for protections. I have the window to show you it was hardcore- form the backside- I would never hit it that hard. (See this... he holds up his hand and the hologram plays- of them doing this for 3 mins.) 'I said she's dead! Looking over his shoulder.' I lay back down- and we start rolling around- I did want this to be known- yet it was- she has her off- by my call. So, they can get to see what they want to see- young love- in the making and make it.

'Love it die in the arms of the one you care about!'

(One month passes)

The love is over and they said we have to part- so we did- it was not good for him- no back for that is what they wanted to see I get a glimpse of him, lit by a torch, his garth, heading back to the girl by the fire- he was hanging with her- not love Likewise, for food. He needs me to take care of him- and I three weeks now.

His face is swollen with a black eye, there's a bloody bandage on one arm and his manhood tested in ways you would not get, and from the sound of his gait, he's limping somewhat for he has gashes. (He's my Bitch at this point.)

All right, I can stomach that seeing him in just underwire. Seeing all those supplies was tempting. Likewise, this another thing. No one from area 14 would think of doing such a thing! As me helping him live- they all want death- yet not all the younger girls get it- the man doesn't. Career others are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, Likewise, only for the reason that they're the Capitol's yes man.

Generally, solidly hated by all Likewise, those from their own districts. I can imagine the things they're saying about him back home now. And my man had the nerve to talk to me about humiliation?

Noticeably, the noble boy on the rooftop was playing just one more tournament with me. Likewise, this will be his last. I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death if I don't kill him first myself. The Career stars are soundless until he gets out of earshot, then use muted voices. 'Why- don't we just assassinate him now and get it over with?' A pack of girls said- it was the girl's agent's boys at this point. They did not like that were still hooking- up 'Let him tag along would be dead at the edge of a knife. So, killing them off would be the best- what's the harm- for doing it all? And he's handy with that knife.'

Is he- no cut? That's news- some girls loved. What a lot of interesting things I'm learning about my man today, when I unwrapped his bandages- this is what that girl did to you?

42

My bow! My arrows! Just the sight of them makes me so angry I want to scream, at myself, at that traitor my boy for distracting me from having them. I try to make eye contact with him now, Likewise, he seems to be intentionally avoiding my gaze as he polishes his knife with the edge of his shirt.

'No,' says Leah, pushing away the bow. 'I'll do better with my sword.' I can see the weapon, a short, heavy blade at his belt.

I give Permitted time to hoist himself into the tree before I begin to climb again. Gale always says I remind him of a squirrel the way I can scurry up even the slenderest limb. Part of it's my weight, Likewise, part of its practice. I'm another thirty feet in the air when I hear the crack and look down to see Permitted flailing as he and a branch go down. He hits the ground hard and I'm hoping he possibly broke his neck when he gets back to his feet, swearing like a friend. You have to know where to place your hands and feet.

The girl with the arrows, Glimmer I hear someone call her- ugh, the names the people in Community 1 give their children are so ridiculous- anyway twinkle scales, the tree until the branches begin to crack under her feet and then has the good sense to stop. I'm at least eighty-seven high now. She tries to shoot me and it's immediately evident that she's incompetent with a bow. One of the arrows gets lodged in the tree near me though and I'm able to seize it. I wave it teasingly above her head as if this was the sole purpose of retrieving it when actually I mean to use it if I ever get the chance. I could kill them, every one of them if those silver weapons were in my hands.

The Careers regroup on the ground and I can hear them growling conspiratorially among themselves, furious I have made them look foolish. Likewise, twilight has arrived and their window of the attack on me is closing. Finally, I hear my boy say harshly, 'Oh, let her stay up there. It's not like she's going anywhere. We'll deal with her in the morning.'

Well, he's right about one thing. I'm going nowhere. All the relief from the pool water has gone, leaving me to feel the full potency of my burns. I scoot down to a fork in the tree and clumsily prepare for bed. Put on my jacket, and layout my sleeping bed. Belt me in and try to keep from moaning. The heat of the bag's too much for my leg. I cut a slash in the fabric and hang my calf out in the open air. I drizzle water on the wound, my hands and do what I need to sleep.

All my bravado is gone. I'm weak from pain and famine Likewise, I can't bring myself to eat. Even if I can last the night, what will the morning bring?

I stare into the foliage trying to well- myself to rest, Likewise, the burns forbid it. Birds are settling down for the night, singing lullabies to their young.

Night creatures emerge. An owl hoots. The faint scent of a skunk cuts through the smoke.

The eyes of some animal peer at me from the neighboring tree- a possum maybe- catching the firelight from the Careers' torches. Suddenly, I'm up on one elbow. Those are no possum's eyes; I know their glassy reflection too well. In fact, those are not animal eyes at all. In the last dim rays of light, I make her out, watching me silently from between the branches. Leah... they killed her...

How long has she been here? The whole time probably. Still and unobserved as the action unfolded beneath her. Perhaps she headed up her tree shortly before I did, hearing the pack was so close.

For a while, we hold each other's stare. Then, without even rustling a leaf, her little hand slides into the open and points to something above my head. Low was our way to think about the day- I wanted to make him happy so I sucked him off as he did me. I love it is not like it was where get sick of one another at this point yet the caring and need is there, he is my love after all. I need to make him happy- and me doing this is one way, and him sucking my clit, and licking my come up is doing the same for- me now. The genital pulling and flicking on it just make all the other shit go away, as I wiggle with his tackles.

Rondha- 'She might have. It seemed pretty simpleminded to me. Every time I think about her spinning around in that dress, I want to puke.' 'Wish we knew how she got that eleven.' 'Bet you Lover Boy knows what I did.' The sound of him returning silences them. I said- Would you stop flapping that thing is all blue and silicone-ie- it what she uses in the night, she brought it along it was in the whole time- now it a weapon in my face, ow-weee-ah-h-ha!

I hope she washed it!! Why is she having one and I never did? Hum?

Moving on- The Career pack sets off at a run just as dawn begins to break, and birdsong fills the air. I remain in my awkward position, muscles trembling with exertion for a while longer, then hoist myself back onto my branch.

I need to get down, to get going, Likewise, for a moment I lie there, digesting what I've heard. Not only is my boy with the Careers, but he's also helping them find me. The simple-minded girl who has to be taken seriously because of her eleven.

For the reason that she can use a bow and arrow. Which my boy knows better than anyone.

Likewise, he hasn't told them yet. Is he saving that information, for the reason, that he knows it's all that keeps him alive? Is he still pretending to love me for the audience? What is going on in his head I can hear this... and it makes me giggle...

Suddenly, the birds fall silent. Then one gives a high-pitched warning call. A single note. Just like the one Ja Permitted and I heard when the blond-headed girl was caught. High above the dying campfire, a hovercraft materializes. A set of huge metal teeth drops down.

Slowly, gently, the dead girl that is my dad's friend's daughter is lifted into the hovercraft back out of the fight for she had the money no- to move else were. Then it vanishes. The birds resume their song.

'Move,' I whisper to myself. I wriggle out of my sleeping bag, roll it up, and place it in the pack. I take a deep breath. While I've been concealed by twilight, and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has probably been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground; I'm guaranteed a close-up.

The audience will have been beside themselves, knowing I was in the tree, that I overheard the Careers talking, that I discovered my boy was with them. Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I'd better at least act on top of things.

Not puzzled... Certainly not mixed up or frightened. No, I need to look one step ahead of the tournament. So, as I slide out of the foliage and into the dawn light, I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I 'cock' my head slightly- as I do with I suck him off down there- all flirty-looking up with roll blue- cute wet eyes, to the side and give a knowing smile.

I'm about to take off when I think of my snares. Maybe it's imprudent to check them with the others so close. Likewise, have to. Too many years of hunting, I guess. And the lure of possible meat. I'm rewarded with one fine rabbit. In no time, I've cleaned and gutted the animal, leaving the head, feet, tail, skin, and innards, under a pile of leaves. I'm wishing for a fire-eating raw rabbit can give you rabbit fever, a lesson I learned the hard way- when I think of the dead- Likewise. I hurry back to her camp. Sure enough, the coals of her dying fire are still hot. I cut up the rabbit, fashion a spit out of branches, and set it over the coals.

I'm glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I'm a good bet because I won't be lured into traps as easily as the others will by famine. While the rabbit cooks, I grind up part of

a charred branch and set about camouflaging my orange pack. The black tones it down, Likewise, I feel a layer of mud would definitely help. Of course, to have mud, I'd need water.

I pull on my gear, grab my spit, kick some dirt over the coals, and take off in the opposite direction the Careers went. I eat half the rabbit as I go, then wrap up the leftovers in my plastic for later. The meat stops the grumbling in my stomach Likewise, it does little to quench my thirst.

Water is my top priority now.

As I hike along, I feel certain I'm still holding the screen in the Capitol, so I'm careful to continue to hide my emotions. Likewise, what a good time Claudius Temple-Smith must be having with his guest commentators, dissecting my boy's conduct, my reaction. What to make of it all? Has my boy revealed his Permitted colors? How does this affect the betting odds? Will we lose sponsors? Do we even have sponsors? Of course, I feel certain we do, or at least did.

Certainly, my boy has thrown a wrench into our star-crossed lover dynamic.

Or has he- he did all I asked... and it was good- maybe, since he hasn't spoken much about me, we can still get some mileage out of it. Maybe individuals will think it's something we plotted together if I seem to like it amuses me now.

My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the greenery above me. At earliest, I have no idea what she's pointing to, Likewise, then, about 20 feet up there, I make out the vague shape in the dimming light. Some sort of animal? It appears about the size of a raccoon, Likewise, it hangs from the bottom of a branch, swaying ever so slightly. There's something else. Among the familiar evening sounds of the woods, my ears register a low hum. Then I know.

It's a wasp nest.

Fear shoot through me, Likewise, I have enough sense to keep still. After all, I don't know what kind of wasp lives there. It could be the ordinary leave-us-alone and we'll-leave-you-alone type.

Likewise, these are the Star Tournament, and ordinary isn't the norm. More likely they will be one of the Capitol's mutations, tracker jackers. Like the jabber jays, these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war. Larger than regular wasps, they have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact.

Most people can't tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once. If you live, the hallucinations brought on by the venom have actually driven people to madness. And there's another thing, these wasps will hunt down anyone who disturbs their nest and attempt to kill them. That's where the tracker part of the name comes from.

After the war, the Capitol destroyed all the nests surrounding their city, Likewise, the ones near the districts were left untouched. Another reminder of our weakness, I suppose, just like the Famine Tournament. Another reason to keep inside the fence of Community 12. When Gale and I come across a tracker jacker nest, we immediately head in the opposite direction.

So, is that what hangs above me? I look back to Permitted for help, Likewise, she's melted into her tree.

Given my circumstances, I guess it doesn't matter what type of wasp nest it is. I'm wounded and trapped. Darkness has given me a brief reprieve, Likewise, by the time the sun rises, the Careers will have formulated a plan to kill me. There's no way they could do otherwise after I've made them look so stupid. That nest may be the sole option I have left. If I can drop it down on them, I may be able to escape. Likewise, I'll risk my life in the process.

Of course, I'll never be able to get in close enough to the actual nest to cut it free. I'll have to saw off the branch at the trunk and send the whole thing down. The serrated portion of my knife should be able to manage that. Likewise, can my hands? And will the vibration from the sawing raise the swarm? And what if the Careers figure out what I'm doing and move their camp? That would defeat the whole purpose.

I realize that the best chance I'll have to do the sawing without drawing notice will be during the anthem. That could begin at any time. I drag myself out of my bag, make sure my knife is secured in my belt, and begin to make my way up the tree. This in itself is dangerous since the branches are becoming precariously thin even for me, Likewise, I persevere. When I reach the limb that supports the nest, the humming becomes more distinctive. Likewise, it's still oddly subdued if these are mosquitos. It's the smoke, I think. It's sedated them. This was the one defense the rebels found to battle the wasps.

The seal of the Capitol shines above me and the anthem blares out. It's now or never, I think, and begin to saw. Blisters burst on my right hand as I awkwardly drag the knife back and forth. Once I've got a groove, the work requires less effort Likewise, it is almost more than I can handle. I grit my teeth

and saw away occasionally glancing at the sky to register that there were no deaths today. That's all right. The audience will be sated seeing me injured and treed and the pack below me. Likewise, the anthem's running out and I'm only three-quarters of the way through the wood when the music ends, the sky goes dark, and I'm forced to stop.

Now what? I could probably finish off the job by a sense of feel Likewise, that may not be the smartest plan. If the wasps are too groggy, if the nest catches on its way down, if I try to escape, this could all be a deadly waste of time. Better, I think, to sneak up here at dawn and send the nest into my enemies.

In the faint light of the Careers' torches, I inch back down to my fork to find the best surprise I've ever had. Sitting on my sleeping bag is a small plastic pot attached to a silver parachute. My first gift from a sponsor! Sam- must have had it sent in during the anthem. The pot easily fits in the palm of my hand. What can it be? Not food surely. I unscrew the lid and I know by the scent that it's medicine. Cautiously, I probe the surface of the ointment. The throbbing in my fingertip vanishes.

'Oh, Sam-,' I whisper. 'Thank you.'

He has not abandoned me. Not left me to fend entirely for myself. The cost of this medicine must be astronomical. Probably not one Likewise, many sponsors have contrived Likewise, to buy this one tiny spot.

To me, it is priceless.

I dip two fingers in the jar and gently spread the balm over my calf. The effect is almost magical, erasing the pain on contact, leaving a pleasant cooling sensation behind. This is no herbal concoction that my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, its high-tech medicine brewed up in the Capitol's labs. When my calf is treated, I rub a thin layer into my hands. After wrapping the pot in the parachute, I nestle it safely away in my pack. Now that the pain has eased, it's all I can do to reposition myself in my bag before I plunge into sleep.

A bird perched just a few feet from me alerts me that a new day is dawning. In the gray morning light, I examine my hands. The medicine has transformed all the angry red patches to a soft baby-skin pink. My leg still feels inflamed, Likewise, that burn was far deeper. I apply another coat of medicine and quietly pack up my gear. Whatever happens, I'm going to have to move and move fast. I also make myself eat a cracker and a strip of beef and drink a few cups of water.

Chats- on the fly cam- And that's when I get my first clue to his whereabouts. He couldn't have survived without water. I know that from my first few days here.

He must be hidden somewhere near a source. There's the lake, Likewise, I find that an unlikely option since it's so close to the Careers' base camp. A few spring-fed pools. Likewise, you'd really be a sitting duck at one of those.

And the stream. The one that leads from the camp Permitted and I made all the way down near the lake and beyond. If he stuck to the stream, he could change his location and always be near water. He could walk in the current and erase any tracks. He might even be able to get a fish or two.

Well, it's a place to start, anyway. To confuse my enemies' minds, I start a fire with plenty of greenwoods. Even if they think it's a ruse, I hope they'll decide I'm hidden somewhere near it. While in reality, I'll be tracking my boy.

The sun burns off the morning haze almost immediately and I can tell the day will be hotter than usual. The waters cool and pleasant on my bare feet as I head downstream. I'm tempted to call out my boy's name as I go Likewise, decide against it. I will have to find him with my eyes and with one good ear or he will have to find me. Likewise, he'll know I'll be looking, right? He won't have so low of an opinion of me as to think I'd ignore the new rule and keep to myself. Would he? He's very hard to predict, which might be interesting under different circumstances, Likewise, at the moment only provides an extra obstacle.

Escape the stream now. Fighting off Permitted or Thresh as I climbed over this rocky terrain. In fact, I've just about decided I'm on the wrong track entirely, that a wounded boy would be unable to navigate getting to and from this water source when I see the bloody streak going down the curve of a boulder. It's long dried now, Likewise, the smeary lines running side to side suggest someone - who perhaps was not fully in control of his mental faculties - tried to wipe it away.

Hugging the rocks, I move slowly in the direction of the blood, searching for him.

I find a few more bloodstains, one with a few threads of fabric glued to it, Likewise, no sign of life. I break down and say his name in a hushed voice. 'My boy! My boy!' Then a blue jay lands on a

scruffy tree and begins to mimic my tones so I stop. I give up and climb back down to the stream thinking, He must have moved on.

Somewhere farther down.

My foot has just broken the surface of the water when I hear a voice.

'You here to finish me off, sweetheart?'

I whip around. It's come from the left, so I can't pick it up very well. And the voice was hoarse and weak. Still, it must have been my boy. Who else in the arena would call me sweetheart? My eyes peruse the bank, Likewise, there's nothing. Just mud, the plants, the base of the rocks.

'My boy?' I whisper. 'Where are you?' There's no answer. Could I just have imagined it? No, I'm certain it was real and very close at hand, too. 'My boy?' I creep along the bank.

'Well, don't step on me.'

I jump back. His voice was right under my feet. Still, there's nothing. Then his eyes open, unmistakably blue in the brown mud and green leaves. I gasp and am rewarded with a hint of white teeth as he laughs.

It's the final word in camouflage. Forget chucking weights around. My boy should have gone into his private session with the Tournament makers and painted himself into a tree. Or a boulder. Or a muddy bank full of weeds.

'Close your eyes again,' I order. He does, and his mouth too, and completely disappears. Most of what I judge to be his body is actually under a layer of mud and plants. His face and arms are so artfully disguised as to be invisible. I kneel beside him. 'I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off.'

My boy smiles. 'Yes, frosting. The final defense of the dying.'

'You're not going to die,' I tell him firmly. 'Says who?' His voice is so ragged. 'Says me. We're on the same team now, you know,' I tell him.

His eyes open. 'So, I heard. Nice of you to find what's left of me.'

I pull out my water bottle and give him a drink.

'Did Permit cut you?' I ask.

'Left leg. Up high,' he answers.

'Let's get you in the stream, wash you off so I can see what kind of wounds you've got,' I say.

'Lean down a minute first,' he says. 'Need to tell you something.' I lean over and put my good ear to his lips, which tickle

as he whispers. 'Remember, we're madly in love, so it's all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it.'

I jerk my head back Likewise, I end up laughing.

'Thanks, I'll keep it in mind.' At least, he's still able to joke around. Likewise, when I start to help him to the stream, all the levity disappears. It's only two feet away, how hard can it be? Very hard when I realize he's unable to move an inch on his own. He's so weak that the best he can do is not to resist. I try to drag him, Likewise, despite the fact that I know he's doing all he can to keep quiet, sharp cries of pain escaped him. The mud and plants seem to have imprisoned him and I finally have to give a gigantic tug to break him from their clutches. He's still two feet from the water, lying there, teeth gritted, tears cutting trails in the dirt on his face.

'Look, my boy, I'm going to roll you into the stream. It's very shallow here, okay?' I say.

'Excellent,' he says.

I crouch down beside him. No matter what happens, I tell myself, don't stop until h e's in the water. 'On three,' I say. 'One, two, three!' I can only manage one full roll before I have to stop because of the horrible sound he's making. Now he's on the edge of the stream.

Maybe this is better anyway.

'Okay, change of plans. I'm not going to put you all the way in,' I tell him. Besides, if I get him in, who knows if I'd ever been able to get him out?

'No more rolling?' He asks.

'That's all done. Let's get you cleaned up. Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?' I say. It's hard to know where to start. He so caked with mud and matted leaves; I can't even see his clothes. If

he's wearing clothes. The thought makes me hesitate a moment, Likewise, then I plunge in. Naked bodies are no big deal in the arena, right?

I've got two water bottles and Leah's water skin. I prop them against rocks in the stream so that two are always filling while I pour the third over My boy's body.

It takes a while, Likewise, I finally get rid of enough mud to find his clothes. I gently unzip his jacket, and his shirt and ease them off him. His undershirt is so plastered into his wounds I have to cut it away with my knife and drench him again to work it loose. He's badly bruised with a long burn across his chest and four-tracker jacker stings if you count the one under his ear. Likewise, I feel a bit better. This much I can fix. I decide to take care of his upper body first, to alleviate some pain before I tackle whatever damage Permitted did to his leg.

Since treating his wounds seems pointless when he's lying in what's become a mud puddle, I manage to prop him up against a boulder. He sits there, uncomplaining, while I wash away all the traces of dirt from his hair and skin. His flesh is very pale in the sunlight and he no longer looks strong and stocky. I have to dig the stingers out of his tracker jacker lumps, which causes him to wince, Likewise, the minute I apply the leaves he sighs in relief. While he dries in the sun, I wash his filthy shirt and jacket and spread them over boulders. Then I apply the burn cream to his chest. This is when I notice how hot his skin is becoming. The layer of mud and the bottles of water have disguised the fact that he's burning with fever. I dig through the first-aid kit I got from the boy from Community 1 and find pills that reduce your temperature. My mother actually breaks down and buys these on occasion when her home remedies fail.

'Swallow these,' I tell him, and he obediently takes the medicine. 'You must be hungry.'

'Not really. It's funny, I haven't been hungry for days,' says My boy. In fact, when I offer him gosling, he wrinkles his nose at it and turns away. That's when I know how sick he is.

'My boy, we need to get some food in you,' I insist.

'It'll just come right back up,' he says. The best I can do is to get him to eat a few bits of dried apple. 'Thanks. I'm much better, really. Can I sleep now, Elody?' He asks.

'Soon,' I promise. 'I need to look at your leg first.' Trying to be as gentle as I can, I remove his boots, his socks, and then very slowly inch his pants off of him.

I can see the tear Leah's sword made in the fabric over his thigh, Likewise, it in no way prepares me for what lies underneath. The deep inflamed gash oozing both blood and pus. The swelling of the leg. And worst of all, the smell of festering flesh. I want to run away. Disappear into the woods like I did that day they brought the burn victim to our house. Go and hunt while my mother and My sister attend to what I have neither the skill nor the courage to face. Likewise, there's no one here Likewise, me. I try to capture the calm demeanor my mother assumes when handling particularly bad cases.

'Pretty awful, huh?' says My boy.

He's watching me closely.

'So-so.' I shrug like it's no big deal. 'You should see some of the people they bring my mother from the mines.' I refrain from saying how I usually clear out of the house whenever she's treating anything worse than a cold. Come to think of it, I don't even much like to be around coughing. 'The first thing is to clean it well.'

I've left on My boy's undershorts because they're not in bad shape and I don't want to pull them over the swollen thigh and, all right, maybe the idea of him being bad makes me uncomfortable. That's another thing about my mother and my sister. Nakedness has no effect on them, gives them no cause for embarrassment.

Ironically, at this point in the Tournament, my little sister would be of far more use to my boy than I am. I scoot my square of plastic under him so I can wash down the rest of him. With each bottle I pour over him, the worse the wound looks. The rest of his lower body has fared pretty well, just one sting and a few small burns that I treat quickly. Likewise, the gash on his leg. What on earth can I do for that?

'Why don't we give it some air and then.' I trail off. 'And then you'll patch it up?' says my boy. He looks almost sorry for me as if he knows how lost I am.

'That's right,' I say. 'In the meantime, you eat these.' I put a few dried pe ar halves in his hand and go back in the stream to wash the rest of his clothes. When they're flattened out and drying, I examine the contents of the first-aid kit. It's pretty basic stuff. Bandages, fever pills, medicine to calm stomachs. Nothing of the caliber I'll need to treat my boy.

'We're going to have to experiment some,' I admit. I know the bugs leave to draw out infection, so I start with those. Within minutes of pressing the handful of chewed up green stuff into the wound, pus begins running down the side of his leg. I tell myself this is a good thing and bite the inside of my cheek hard because my breakfast is threatening to make a reappearance.

'Elody?' My boy says. I meet his eyes, knowing my face must be some shade of green. He mouths the words. 'How about that kiss?'

I burst out laughing because the whole thing is so revolting, I can't stand it.

'Something wrong?' he asks a little too innocently.

'I. I'm no good at this. I'm not my mother. I've no idea what I'm doing and I hate p-us-s,' I say. 'Euh!' I allow myself to let out a groan as I rinse away the first round of leaves and apply the second. 'Euuuh!'

'How do you hunt?' He asks.

'Trust me. Killing things is much easier than this,' I say. 'Although for all I know, I am killing you.' 'Can you speed it up a little?' He asks.

'No. Shut up and eat your pears,' I say.

After three applications and what seems like a bucket of pus, the wound does look better. Now that the swelling has gone down, I can see how deep Leah's sword cut.

Right down to the bone.

'What next, Dr. Everdeen?' He asks.

'Maybe I'll put some of the burn ointment on it. I think it helps with an infection anyway. And wrap it up?' I say. I do and the whole thing seems a lot more manageable, covered in clean white cotton. Although, against the sterile bandage, the hem of his undershorts looks filthy and teeming with contagion. I pull out Leah's backpack. 'Here, cover yourself with this and I'll wash your shorts.'

'Oh, I don't care if you see me,' says My boy. 'You're just like the rest of my family,' I say. 'I care, all right?' I turn my back and look at the stream until the undershorts splash into the current. He must be feeling a bit better if he can throw.

'You know, you're kind of squeamish for such a lethal person,' says My boy as I beat the shorts clean between two rocks. 'I wish I'd let you give Sam - a shower after all.'

I wrinkle my nose at the memory.

'What's he sent you so far?'

'Not a thing,' says My boy. Then there's a pause as it hits him. 'Why, did you get something?'

Getting the broth into My boy takes an hour of coaxing, begging, threatening, and yes, kissing, Likewise, finally, sip by sip, he empties the pot. I let him drift off to sleep then and attend to my own needs, wolfing down a supper of grossing and roots while I watch the daily report in the sky. No new casualties. Still, my boy and I have given the audience a fairly interesting day. Hopefully, the Tournament makers will allow us a peaceful night.

I automatically look around for a good tree to nest in before I realize that's over. At least for a while. I can't very well leave My boy unguarded on the ground. I left the scene of his last hiding place on the bank of the stream untouched- how could I conceal it? -And we're a scant fifty yards downstream. I put on my glasses, place my weapons in readiness, and settle down to keep watch.

The temperature drops rapidly and soon I'm chilled to the bone. Eventually, I give in and slide into the sleeping bag with My boy. It's toasty warm and I snuggle down gratefully until I realize it's more than warm, it's overly hot because the bag is reflecting back his fever. I check his forehead and find it burning and dry. I don't know what to do. Leave him in the bag and hope the excessive heat breaks the fever? Take him out and hope the night air cools him off? I end up just dampening a strip of bandage and placing it on his forehead. It seems weak, likewise, I'm afraid to do anything too drastic.

I spend the night half-sitting, half lying next to my boy, refreshing the bandage, and trying not to dwell on the fact that by teaming up with him, I've made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone. Tethered to the ground, on guard, with a very sick person to take care of. Likewise, I knew he was injured. And still, I came after him. I'm just going to have to trust that whatever instinct sent me to find him was a good one.

When the sky turns rosy, I notice the sheen of sweat on My boy's lip and discover the fever has broken.

He's not back to normal, Likewise, it's come down a few degrees. Last night, when I was gathering vines, I came upon a bush of Leah's berries. I strip off the fruit and mash it up in the broth pot with cold water.

My boy's struggling to get up when I reach the cave. 'I woke up and you were gone,' he says. 'I was worried about you.'

'I thought Permitted and Clove might have found you. They like to hunt at night,' he says, still serious.

'Clove? Which one is that?' I ask.

'The girl from Community Two. She's still alive, right?' He says.

'Yes, there's just them and us and Thresh and Neahie,' I say. 'That's what I nicknamed the girl from

Five. How do you feel?'

'Better than yesterday. This is an enormous improvement over the mud,' he says. 'Clean clothes and medicine and a sleeping bag. and you.'

Oh, right, the whole romance thing. I reach out to touch his cheek and he catches my hand and presses it against his lips. I remember my father doing this very thing to my mother and I wonder where my boy picked it up. Surely not from his father and the witch.

'No more kisses for you until you've eaten,' I say.

We get him propped up against the wall and he obediently swallows the spoonsful of the berry mush I feed him. He refuses the gosling again, though. 'You didn't sleep,' my boy says.

'I'm all right,' I say. Likewise, the truth is, I'm exhausted.

'Sleep now. I'll keep watch. I'll wake you if anything happens,' he says. I hesitate. 'Elody, you can't stay up forever.'

He's got a point there. I'll have to sleep eventually.

And probably better to do it now when he seems relatively alert and we have daylight on our side. 'All right,' I say. ' Likewise, just for a few hours.

Then you wake me.'

It's too warm for the sleeping bag now. I smooth it out on the cave floor and lie down, one hand on my loaded bow in case I have to shoot at a moment's notice. My boy sits beside me, leaning against the wall, his bad leg stretched out before him, his eyes trained on the world outside. 'Go to sleep,' he says softly. His hand brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead. Unlike the staged kisses and caresses so far, this gesture seems natural and comforting. I don't want him to stop and he doesn't. He's still stroking my hair when I fall asleep.

Too long. I sleep for too long. I know from the moment I open my eyes that we're into the afternoon. My boy's right beside me, his position unchanged. I sit up, feeling somehow defensive Likewise, better rested than I've been in days.

~*~

All seem to still be recovering from an attack that happens last night a gang up. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies.

Everything is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

Really, the possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Permitted must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from Community 3 should stay or accompany them.

'He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,' says Leah.

'What about Lover Boy?' says the boy from Community 1.

'I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

'Come on,' says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Community 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, 'When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes.'

I stay put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, Likewise, it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too.

How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to a tip-off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands made contact with the earth? You'd have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick. Time is running out.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim,

The first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I'm blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow. Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I can't hear them.

I can't hear anything at the moment. Likewise, the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down on me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the pyramid. The Careers aren't likely to salvage anything out of that.

I'd better get out of here, I think.

They'll be making a beeline for the place. Likewise, once I'm on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I'm dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, Likewise, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, Likewise, it doesn't.

Panic begins to set in. I can't stay here. The flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, maybe more at times. Likewise, I can't let my fear show. No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I can't walk, Likewise, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover.

My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I can't get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, but it's also sure to be a

long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of my sister having to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I'm reminded of those last few kernels that burst when my sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it in the nick of time is an understatement. I have literally just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there's Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical - so people really do tear- out their hair and beat the ground with their fists - if I didn't know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my proximity, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has me terrified. I'm glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I'm biting my nails like there's no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

The boy from Community 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other try Likewise, are poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, Likewise, there's nothing. The boy from Community 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Community 3 only has time to turn and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side. It's that quick. The death of the boy from Community 3.

The other two Careers to seem to be trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, Likewise, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realized, Of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead. They don't know about the arrows and the apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, Likewise, that the who blew up the supplies was killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament makers to retrieve the body of the boy from Community 3. And they wait.

I suppose a cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Community 3. They show the boy from Community 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears.

So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the girl from Community 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from Community 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There's no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I'm about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They probably think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it's a long time before I risk moving.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we're both alive. Both from 11 and all from 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting really hot in the Capitol. They'll be doing special features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It's been a long time since Community 12 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us.

Although from what Permitted said, my boys on his way out. Not that Permitted is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the Seventy-fourth Famine Tournament begin, Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reach for my sleeping bag before I remember I left it with Leah. I was supposed to pick up another one, Likewise, what with the mines and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree isn't sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and pine needles. I'm still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It's a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from Community 8 that lit the fire that first night. Likewise, now it's me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, Likewise, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it's still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold gosling in the other, because I'm famished now, and not just for leaves and berries Likewise, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care with my injured ear. Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank.

The Careers have been here, Likewise, not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, Likewise, now they're nearly dry in the hot sun. I haven't been careful enough about my own tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body, my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I've just had the gosling. The second I'll save for Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it's gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there's an improvement, it's undetectable. I can't adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balanced and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reach the site of our first meeting, I feel certain it's been undisturbed. There's no sign of Leah, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd. By now she should have returned, as it's midday.

Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set although I forgot to check for it- last night - was the farthest from our site of all. She's probably just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she'd hurry because I don't want to hang

around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon traveling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there's nothing really for me to do Likewise, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better Likewise, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It isn't going to last long in this hot sun, Likewise, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she would just show up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated Likewise, still tender. Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and the remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, Likewise, without good results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I'm going to have what we call a hollow day back in Community 12. That's a day where no matter what you put in your belly, it's never enough. Having nothing to do Likewise, sit in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to give into it. After all, I've lost a lot of weight in the arena, I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my future prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling neck. That's good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it's a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served-

in the Capitol. The chicken in creamy orange sauce.

The cakes and pudding. Bread with and sari. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over. Sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. This is the most relaxed I've been since I've entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I've resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered these some distance away, permitted will understand I've been here, while they'll mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I'm at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been neatly arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, Likewise, it has never been lit. Permitted set up the fire Likewise, never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I spied before I blew up the supplies and this point, she ran into trouble.

I have to remind myself she's still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it.

There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I'm almost certain she's stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree. I think I'll go hunt it down.

It's a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. Likewise, nothing seems suspicious. There's no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I've stopped for just a moment when I hear it. I have to crack my head around to the side to be sure, Likewise, there it is again. Leah's four-note tune coming out of a blue jay's mouth.

The one that means she's all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead picks up on the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they'd have taken up some other song. My eyes lift up into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she'll know it's safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that's when I hear the scream.

It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Leah. And now I'm running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, Likewise, I can't help myself.

There's another high-pitched cry, this time my name.

'Elody! Elody!'

'Leah!' I shout back, so she knows I'm near. So, they know I'm near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with ants and gotten an eleven they still can't explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. 'Leah! I'm coming!'

When I break into the clearing, she's on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net. She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The sun comes up to in a nice way to me, in the sky and even though the canopy seems overly bright. I coat my lips in some grease from the rabbit and try to keep from panting, Likewise, it's no use. It's only been a day and I'm dehydrating fast. I try and think of everything I know about finding water. It runs downhill, so, in fact, continuing down into this valley isn't a bad thing. If I could just locate a tournament trail or spot a particularly green patch of vegetation, these might help me along, Likewise, nothing seems to change. There's just the slight gradual slope, the birds, the sameness to the trees.

As the day wears on, I know I'm headed for trouble. What little urine I've been able to pass is a dark brown, my head is aching, and there's a dry patch on my tongue that refuses to moisten. The sun hurts my eyes so I dig out my sunglasses, likewise, when I put them on, they do something funny to my vision, so I just stuff them back in my pack.

It's late afternoon when I think I've found helpful. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. Likewise, just as I'm holding them to my lips, I get a hard look at them. What I thought were blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are blooded. I don't recognize these berries, perhaps they are edible, and Likewise, I'm guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the star makers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100% sure they weren't toxic. Something I already knew, Likewise, I'm so thirsty it takes her reminder to give me the strength to fling them away.

Fatigue is beginning to settle on me, Likewise, it's not the usual tiredness that follows a long hike. I have to stop and rest frequently, although I know the only cure for what ails me requires continued searching. I try a new tactic- climbing a tree, as high as I dare in my shaky state- to look for any signs of water.

I comply beat, I haul myself up into a tree and belt myself in. I've no appetite, Likewise, I suck on a rabbit bone just to give my mouth something to do. Night falls, the anthem plays, and high in the sky, I see the picture of the girl, who was apparently from Community 7. The one my boy went back to finish off.

Determined to go on until nightfall, I walk until I'm stumbling over my own feet. Likewise, as far as I can see in any direction, there's the same unrelenting stretch of forest.

My Permitted fear is losing him- or him dying- being her for me when I need to be held, and me being alone forever- I don't want any other boy- not from here or anywhere. My fear of the Career pack is minor compared to my sweltering thirst. Besides, they were heading away from me and by now they, too, will have to rest.

With the scarcity of water, they may even have had to return to the lake for refills.

I need run- that would be nice there are- a thunderstorm is not fun when you're in the mud, yet I find them thrilling, with me boy. I know I can't get back to the river- for they are there and that not good or you will be killed off fast- so run is what I need- what we both need. Maybe, that is the only course for me as well.

Morning brings distress to me, my head throbs like my clit- with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints.

I should be acting with more carefulness, moving with more urgency. I fall, rather than jump from the tree.

It takes several minutes for me to assemble my gear.

Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong.

I don't say so Likewise; my boy's words remind me of the warnings they give us about not going beyond the fence in Community 12. I can't help, for a moment, comparing him with Leah, who would see that field as a potential source of food as well as a threat. Thresh certainly did. It's not that My boy's soft exactly, and he's proved he's not a coward. Likewise, there are things you don't question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Permitted questions

everything. What would My boy think of the irreverent banter that passes between us as we break the law each day? Would it shock him? The things we say about Alsace? Leah's tirades against the Capitol?

'Maybe there is a bread bush in that field,' I say. 'Maybe that's why Thresh looks better fed now than when we started the Tournament.'

'Either that or he's got very generous sponsors,' says My boy. 'I wonder what we'd have to do to get Sam- to send us some bread.'

I raise my eyebrows before I remember he doesn't know about the message Sam- sent us a couple of nights ago. One kiss equals one pot of broth. It's not the sort of thing I can blurt out, either. To say my thoughts aloud would be tipping off the audience that the romance has been fabricated to play on their sympathies and that would result in no food at all. Somehow, believable, I've got to get things back on track. Something simple to start with. I reach out and take his hand.

'Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me knock you out,' I say mischievously. 'Yeah, about that,' says My boy, entwining his fingers in mine.

'Don't try something like that again.'

'Or what?' I ask.

'Or. or. ' He can't think of anything good. 'Just give me a minute.'

'What's the problem?' I say with a grin.

'The problem is we're both still alive. This only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing,' says My boy.

'I did do the right thing,' I say.

'No! Just don't, Elody!' His grip tightens, hurting my hand, and there's real anger in his voice. 'Don't die for me. You won't be doing me any favors. All right?'

I'm startled by his intensity Likewise, I recognize an excellent opportunity for getting food, so I try to keep up. 'Maybe I did it for myself, my boy, did you ever think of that? Maybe you aren't the only one who; who worries about. what it would be like if. '

I fumble. I'm not as smooth with words as My boy.

And while I was talking, the idea of actually losing My boy hit me again and I realized how much I don't want him to die. And it's not about the sponsors.

And it's not about what will happen back home. And it's not just that I don't want to be alone. It's him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread.

'If what, Elody?' He says softly.

I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Alsace. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I'm feeling, it's no one's business Likewise, mine.

'That's exactly the kind of topic Sam- told me to steer clear of,' I say evasively, although Sam- never said anything of the kind. In fact, he's probably cursing me out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment. Likewise, my boy somehow catches it.

'Then I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself,' he says and moves into me.

This is the first kiss that we're both fully aware of. Neither of us hobbled by sickness or pain or simply unconscious. Our lips neither burning with fever or icy cold. This is the first kiss where I actually feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another.

Likewise, I don't get it. Well, I do get a second kiss, Likewise, it's just a light one on the tip of my nose because My boy's been distracted. 'I think your wound is bleeding again. Come on, lie down, it's bedtime anyway,' he says.

My socks are dry enough to wear now. I make My boy put his jacket back on. The damp cold seems to cut right down to my bones, so he must be half-frozen. I insist on taking the first watch, too, although neither of us thinks it's likely anyone will come in this weather. Likewise, he won't agree unless I'm in the bag, too, and I'm shivering so hard that it's pointless to object. In stark contrast to two nights ago, when I felt my boy was a million miles away, I'm struck by his immediacy now. As we settle in, he pulls my head down to use his arm as a pillow, the other rests protectively over me even when he goes to sleep. No one has held me like this in such a long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting my mother, no one else's arms have made me feel this safe.

With the aid of the glasses, I lie watching the drips of water splatter on the cave floor. Rhythmic and lulling. Several times, I drift off briefly and then snap awake, guilty and angry with myself.

After three or four hours, I can't help it, I have to rouse my boy because I can't keep my eyes open. He doesn't seem to mind.

'Tomorrow, when it's dry, I'll find us a place so high in the trees we can both sleep in peace,' I promise as I drift off.

Likewise, tomorrow is no better in terms of weather. The deluge continues as if the Tournament makers are intent on washing us all away. The thunder's so powerful it seems to shake the ground. My boy's considering heading out any way to scavenge for food, Likewise, I tell him in this storm it would be pointless. He won't be able to see three feet in front of his face and he'll only end up getting soaked to the skin for his troubles.

He knows I'm right, Likewise, the gnawing in our stomachs is becoming painful.

Likewise, my mind seems fuddled and forming a plan is hard. I lean back against the trunk of my tree, one finger gingerly stroking the sandpaper surface of my tongue, as I assess my options. How can I get water? Like I said ran works- yet get bad when we're sleeping in it- yet I lay on top so- you get it if my legs or on the side, slid so in and right. He's like a bare, that I love to hug. He calls me tiny- and his girl! Hope for rain the sky opens up- and we get dumped on- yet what more thrilling the love with lighting- I far it yet it makes me cuddlier with him. Besides he understands this kissing me all over my body.

Just to feel good about everything that is not.

Keep looking. Yes, this is my only chance. Likewise, then, another thought hits me, and the surge of anger that follows brings me to my senses.

It's mayhem. The Careers have woken to a full-scale nasty bug attack. My boy and a few others have the sense to drop everything and bolt. I can hear cries of 'To the lake! To the lake!' and know they hope to evade the wasps by taking to the water. It must be close if they think they can outdistance the furious insects. Glimmer and another girl, the one from Community 4, are not so lucky. They receive multiple stings before they're even out of my view.

Glimmer appears to go completely mad, shrieking and trying to bat the wasps off with her bow, which is pointless. She calls to the others for help Likewise, of course, no one returns. The girl from

Community 5- and 4 staggers out of sight, although I wouldn't bet on her making it to the lake. I watch Glimmer fall, twitch hysterically around on the ground for a few minutes, and then go still.

The nest is nothing Likewise, an empty shell. The wasps have vanished in pursuit of the others. I don't think they'll return, Likewise, I don't want to risk it. I scamper down the tree and hit the ground running in the opposite direction of the lake. The poison from the stingers makes me wobbly, Likewise, I find my way back to my own little pool and submerge myself in the water, just in case any wasps are still on my trail. After about five minutes, I drag myself onto the rocks. People have not exaggerated the effects of stings. Actually, the one on my knee is closer to orange than a plum in size. A

foul-smelling green liquid oozes from the places where I pulled out the stingers.

A foul, rotten taste pervades my mouth, and the water has little effect on it. I drag myself over to the honeysuckle bush and pluck a flower. I gently pull the stamen through the blossom and set the drop of nectar on my tongue. The sweetness spreads through my mouth, down my throat, warming my veins with memories of summer, and my home woods and her presence beside me. For some reason, our discussion from that last morning comes back to me. 'We could do it; you know.'

'What?'

'Why?'

'Leave the district. Runoff. Live in the woods. You and I, we could make it.' In addition, suddenly, I'm not thinking of Leah- Likewise, of my boy and. My boy! He saved my life! I think. Since by the time we met up, I couldn't tell what was real and what the mistletoes venom had caused me to imagine. Likewise, if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for?

Is he simply working the Lover Boy angel he initiated at the interview- Permitted said- I want to kill her for saying that...? Or was he actually trying to protect me? And if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense.

They bear no trace of the noxious green slime that came from Glimmer's body- which leads me to believe that might not have been wholly real- Likewise, they have a fair amount of dried blood on them.

I phenomenon what Permitted made of the incident for a moment and then I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason, Permitted and My boy does not exist well together in my judgments.

So, I focus on the one really good thing that's happened since I landed in the arena. I have a bow and arrows! A full dozen arrows if you count the one- I retrieved in the tree. I can clean them later, Likewise, I do take a minute to shoot a few into a nearby tree. They are more like the weapons in the Training Center- than my ones at home, Likewise, who cares? That I can work with.

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Tournament. I know I have tough opponents left to face. Likewise, I am no longer merely pray that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If Permitted broke through the trees right now, I wouldn't flee, I'd shoot. I find I'm actually anticipating the moment with pleasure.

Likewise, first, I have to get some strength back into my body. I'm very thirsty again and my water supply is dangerously low.

The little padding, I was able to put on by gorging myself during prep time in the Capitol is gone, plus several more pounds as well. My hip bones and ribs are more prominent than I remember them being since those awful months after my father's death.

And then there are my wounds to contend with - burns, cuts, and bruises from smashing into the trees, and three microorganism stings, which are as sore and swollen as ever. I treat my burns with the ointment and try dabbing a bit on my stings as well, Likewise, it has no effect on them.

My mother knew a treatment for them, some type of leaf that could draw out the poison, Likewise, she seldom had cause to use it, and I don't even remember its name let alone its appearance.

Water first, I think. You can hunt along the way now. It's easy to see the direction I came from by the path of destruction my crazed body made through the foliage. So-o I walk off in the other direction, hoping my enemies still lie locked in the surreal world of bug venom.

I can't move too quickly; my joints reject any abrupt motions. Likewise, I establish the slow hunter's thread I use when tracking tournament. Within a few minutes, I spot a rabbit and make my first kill with the bow and arrow. It's not my usual clean shot through the eye, Likewise, I'll take it.

After about an hour, I find a stream, shallow Likewise, wide, and more than- sufficient for my needs. The sun's hot and severe, so while I wait for my water to purify, I strip down to my underclothes and wade into the mild current. I'm filthy from head to toe, I try splashing myself Likewise, eventually just lay down in the water for a few minutes, letting it wash off the soot and blood and skin that has started to peel off my burns.

After rinsing out my clothes and hanging them on bushes to dry, I sit on the bank in the sun for a bit, untangling my hair with my fingers. My appetite returns and I eat a cracker and a strip of beef. With a handful of moss, I polish the blood from my silver weapons.

I easily take out a strange bird that must be some form of wild turkey. Anyway, it looks plenty edible to me. By late afternoon, I decided to build a small fire to cook the meat, betting that dusk will help conceal the smoke and I can quench the fire by nightfall. I've just placed the first lot over the coals when I hear the twig snap. I clean the tournament, taking superfluous care with the bird, Likewise, there's nothing alarming about it. Once the feathers are plucked, it's no bigger than a chicken, Likewise, it's plump and firm.

Revived, I treat my burns again, braid my hair and hang it in the font covering my nipples, and dress in the damp clothes, knowing the sun will dry them soon enough. Following the stream against its current seems the smartest course of action.

The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. I'm traveling uphill now, which I prefer, with a source of fresh water not only for myself similarly possible tournaments. My shoulders lower and I beam with my white smile. She can move through the woods like a shadow, you have to give her that. How else could she have followed me?

In one wave, I turn to the sound, bringing the bow and arrow to my shoulder. There's no one there. No one I can see anyway. Then I spot the tip of a child's boot just peeking out from behind the trunk of a tree.

'You know, they're not the only ones who can form alliances,' I say. For a moment, no reply. Then one of Leah's eyes edges around the trunk. 'You want me for a friend?' 'You can feed yourself. Can they?' I ask. 'They don't need to. They have all those supplies,' Permitted says. 'Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?'

I say. 'I mean, it's the Famine Tournament, right?' ' Likewise, Elody, they're not hungry,' says Leah. 'No, they're not. That's the problem,' I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan th at isn't motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. 'I think we're going to have to fix that, Leah.'

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes, she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no particular precautions. If she'd wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker red ant's nesting.

Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can't win these tournaments. Likewise, since the odds are still against- either of us alive, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I'm distracted by my latest idea about Careers and their supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I'm pretty sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle.

The years when they have not endangered it well, one year a pack of ugly reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament maker's overflow washed it away, those are usually the ages - from other regions have won. How comforting the presence of another humanoid b eing can be.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry. Not the way Permitted and I do. Likewise, I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, has given me a sense of security.

I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon thunderbolts me wide awake. The skies streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, Likewise, there aren't any.

'Who do you think that was?' I can't help thinking of my boy. 'I don't know. It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'I guess we'll know tonight.' 'Wh o's left again?' I ask. 'The boy from 1.

Both from 9. Some from 2 I'm not even sore does it matter- she said were all dead anyway. Thresh and me. And you and my boy,' says Leah. 'That's right. Wait, and the boy from ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.' There's someone else, I can recall- Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is. 'I wonder how that last one died,' says Leah.

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'Really? How?' You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she's exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal. 'No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt,' I say.

We don't get much hunting done though for the reason that I'm too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of Permitted about the Careers' base. She's only been in to spy on them briefly, Likewise, she's observant. They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they've been leaving another- like, the boy from Community 3, to watch over the supplies.

'The boy from region 12?' I ask. 'He's working with them?' 'Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the ant in by the lake,' says Leah. 'Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, Likewise, Thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah. 'I guess they agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard. Likewise, he's not very immense.'

'What weapons does he have?' I ask. 'And the food's just out in the open?' I say. She nods at us.

'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I couldn't tell what exactly,' says Leah. 'Elody, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it... Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sisters. 'Eat it!' She giggles.

'Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.'

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her

rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a community where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, 'Music.'

I have a Gibson with a Bigsby on it... I said- 'Music?' I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. 'You have a lot of time for that?'

'We sing at home. At work, too. That's why I love your pin,' she says, pointing to the blue jay that I've again forgotten about.

'Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,' she says.

'What do you mean?' I say.

'I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time.

There's a special little song I do,' says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. 'And the blue jays spread it around the groves. That's how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too nearby their nests. Likewise, you can't blame them for that.' I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That's how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a roughly carved wooden star. Or maybe it's a flower. 'It's a good luck charm.'

'Well, it's worked so far,' I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. 'Maybe you should just stick with that.'

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked- with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' She asks.

'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, permitted decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away.' 'Haven't you have seen them? They've got nests ubiquitously,' she says. I have to admit I haven't seen it. 'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner,' I say. 'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask. Without prior notice, permitted throws her arms around me. I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back. 'You be careful,' she says to me.

'You, too,' I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and Permitted and a baker who has promised she won't go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once I reach the stream, I have only to follow it downhill to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live? I personally struggle again to remember that moment over Annha body, when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. I have to be cautious as I move along the water though because I find my thoughts preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my boy.

Remember, I tell myself. You're the hunter now, not them. I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the copse Permitted has told me about and again have to admire her cleverness. It's right at the edge of the wood, Likewise, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began. When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage.

Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reach the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I don't see any others, Likewise, I do notice some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of the sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of bug nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

There are four-try Likewise. The boy from Community 1, Permitted and the girl from Community 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from Community 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Capitol. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview.

Even now, as he sits there fiddling with some kind of plastic box, he's easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. Likewise, he must be of some value or they wouldn't have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would possibly leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

All four it seems to still be recuperating from the ant's attack. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Apparently, whatever medicines they found in the Cornucopia have been ineffective.

Some other factor is at play here, and I'd better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the pyramid is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

Really, the possibilities are endless.

Most of the supplies, held in crates, burlap sacks, and plastic bins, are piled neatly in a pyramid in what seems a questionable distance from the camp. Others are sprinkled around the perimeter 50 miles away from this point I said- no way of getting there it's not worth it, almost impersonating the layout of supplies around the large amount at the onset of the tournament. All part

of the tournament makes it stupid hard- to live... A canopy of netting that, aside from discouraging birds, seems to be useless shelters the goods itself.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from Community 3. One thing's for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. My arm's pretty good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? Maybe one mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Community 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others?

Thereby protecting the supplies Likewise, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one mine, I'd draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There's that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I'd really need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the pyramid, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. Maybe one contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I'd just be guessing. I'm genuinely thinking of trying to recreate Fox-face's trip up to the pyramid in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It's a big bag, Likewise, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Permitted must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from Community 3 should stay or accompany them.

'He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,' says Leah.

'What about Lover Boy?' says the boy from Community 1.

'I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

'Quickly,' says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Community 5, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing- I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, 'When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes.'

Somehow- I don't think he's talking about Leah. She didn't drop a nest of bugs on him. I stay put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance and gunfire.

There's no alternative to going for the goods. I'm going to have to get in close and see if I can't discover what exactly protects the supplies. In fact, I'm just about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my left, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, I think it's Leah, Likewise, then I recognize the boy and I blow his head off his shoulders - and the brains splatter all over the tree he was next, she's the one we couldn't remember this morning- creeping out onto the plain. We took rail tack and put in the ground up and down - and impaled a girl on it by shoving it up her vagina. Look she looks like a savior Permitted said. That not funny I said - your faith is not mine.

When she decides it's safe, she runs for the pyramid, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that have been littered around the pyramid, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot. Then she begins to approach the pyramid with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, sometimes risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel and lands poised on her tiptoes.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

Likewise, she overshot slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, Likewise, nothing happens. In a moment, she's regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, Likewise, it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to a tip-off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

I realize I'm grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I'd already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such deftness? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands made contact with the earth? You'd have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

'It's mined,' I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Community 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions and automobiles and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies? That's not the sort of weapon the Tournament makers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally.

I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down.

The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, Likewise, the boy from Community 3 must have managed to reactivate them. I've never seen anyone in the tournament do that to yah. I bet it came as a shock even to the star makers.

Well, hurray for the boy from- Community 3 for putting one over on them, Likewise, what am I supposed to do now? Obviously, I can't go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that's more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It doesn't have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they literally had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

You saved me with those bugs. You're smart enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway,' I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide.

'You hungry?'

I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. 'Come on then, I've had two kills today.' tentatively steps out into the open. 'I can fix your stings.' 'Can you?' I ask. 'How?' He digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses. 'Where'd you find those?' 'Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,' says my boy said. 'There is a lot here, too.'

'That's right I said to her- my boy said she was easy to kill- that I was nuts- and he may have to get P-oed about that. You're Area 11. Agriculture,' I say. 'Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings.' Permitted smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then. Fix me up.' I said she not going to hurt you... or me - see need us- more than we need here.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, Likewise, it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh.' The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually leaching the pain right out of the sting. She gives a giggle. 'Okay,' she says, and holds out her hand. We shake- not to kill each other. 'It's a deal.' Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, Likewise, neither of us mentions that.

'Oh,' says Permitted with a sigh. 'I've never had a whole leg to myself before.' I'll bet she hasn't had sex yet. I'll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. 'Take the other,' I say. 'Really?' she asks - she over here yes, I have! Your seven years old - he looks weirdly- like yeah right.

'Bugs Oh, yes, we have them back home. I've been eating them for days,' she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I tentatively bite into one, and it's as good as blackberries - that we had too.

'How did you get those?' she asks.

'In my pack. They've been useless so far. They don't block the sun and they make it harder to see,' I say with a shrug.

'Where do you sleep?' I ask her. 'In the trees?' She nods. 'In just your jacket- or what?' That my blanket my jacket- and I sleep were I can find- and naked- if you must know... She holds up her extra pair of socks and said I use them as pads. Try it- it works...

We pick a fork high in a tree and settle in for the night just as the anthem begins to play. There were no deaths today. I think of how cold the nights have been. 'You can share my sleeping bag if you want. We'll both easily fit.' Her face lights up. I can tell this is more than she dared hope for.

~*~

I don't answer the cam flying around me. If, in fact, my boy did save me, I'm in his debt again. And this can't be paid back. 'If he did, it was all probably just part of his act. You know, to make people think he's in love with me. 'The sky goes dark, 'let's try out these night spectacles you have.' I pull out the glasses and slip them on. I can see everything from the leaves on the trees to a skunk strolling through the bushes a good fifty feet away. I could kill it from here if I had a mind to. I could kill anyone. We shot one for 300 years away. With her dad custom gun. One was stolen from me she said. 'I wonder who else got a pair of these, a thong is what she held up,' I say. I can run in these can you - I don't wear those for the point. How about a bra? Not yet- me either... my boy sniggers... saying girl chat.

Make love to me!

...And he did!

Step 1- Put her in 'The Mood'

What is said only online- and what I do for her- they have all this for us to know: Before you have sex, you have to put you're a woman in the mood? This involves setting up the right kind of environment which will enhance her pleasure. To put her in the mood, you should darken the room, light some candles and put on good music. Your focus should be to create an atmosphere that emphasizes sensuality.

Step 2- Use foreplay- Foreplay is one of the most important things to learn about how to make love to a woman. Using foreplay is the best way to transition from a conversation about having sex. Typically, foreplay involves kissing, 'heavy petting' and sensual massages.

The rule of thumb is to really focus on her pleasure and start building up the intensity.

Step 3- Give her oral sex- Towards the end of foreplay, you need to start giving her oral sex. Start slowly and use your tongue and fingers. Since women like different things in oral sex, try to experiment with various oral sex techniques. When you see her get really excited, continue to do whatever is getting her into it.

Step 4- Tease her- Once you've brought her to the pinnacle of pleasure from oral sex, you should start to have sex. Now, most guys will just start having sex without any thought. This is a mistake! Instead of going right for sex, you should start to tease her. What you should do is go slowly and start to have sex, then stop. Keep doing this till she goes crazy and practically pulls you inside her.

Step 5- Start slowly and build up intensity now once you've had sex, it's important to change paces (and positions.) Again- your focus is to concentrate on her pleasure and make sure she's really enjoying herself.

What really works is to build up speed then pull back to a slow and sensual pace. Keep doing this pattern until both of you can't take it anymore. Knowing how to make love to a woman is an important skill to have.

If you can follow the five-step process I described in this article, you'll instantly become the best lover she's ever had. Now all you have to do is to find a woman to practice your new skills! The teen guidelines for sex in the Star tournament, for love- and real compels- if it's hock-up or tack by fours sex just fuck! There no laws stopping them from taking you, your ass is own by them of the tournament and the odds.

46

Sam! He could send me water! Yet that makes you weak- and you go down in your likeness and points. Press and news, have it delivered to me in a silvery descend in minutes - I know this. I know I must have sponsors, at least one or two who could afford a pint of liquid for me. Yes, it's pricey, Likewise, these people, they're made of money. Besides, they'll be betting on me as well. Perhaps Sam - doesn't realize how deep my need is. You can get all this if you have the courage.

I say in a voice as loud as I dare. 'Water.' I wait, hopefully, for a parachute to descend from the sky. Likewise, nothing is forthcoming.

Something is wrong. Am I deluded about having sponsors? Or has my boy's conduct made them all hang back? No, I don't believe it. There's someone out there who wants to buy me water only; Sam- is declining to let it go through. As my counselor, he gets to regulator the flow of gifts from the guarantors. I know he hates me.

He's made that clear enough, I have miss-judged Sam- he has no intention of helping me at all.

Almost nothing stayed in my stomach yesterday, and I'm already starting to feel the effects of famine.

Below me, I can see the Career pack and my boy asleep on the ground. By her position, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, I'd guess Glimmer was supposed to be on guard, Likewise, fatigue overcame her.

My eyes squint as they try to penetrate the tree next to me, Likewise, I can't make out Leah. Since she tipped me off, it only seems fair to warn her. Besides, if I'm going to die today, it's Permitted I want to win. Even if it means a little extra food for my family, the idea of my boy being crowned victor is unbearable.

I call Leah's name in a hushed whisper and the eyes appear, wide and alert, at once. She points up to the nest again. I hold up my knife and make a sawing motion. She nods and disappears.

There's a rustling in a nearby tree. Then the same noise again a bit farther off. I realize she's leaping from tree to tree. It's all I can do not to laugh out loud. Is this what she showed the Tournament makers? I imagine her flying around the training equipment never touching the floor. She should have gotten at least a seven.

Rosy streaks are breaking through in the east. I can't afford to wait any longer. Compared to the agony of last night's climb, this one is a cinch. At the tree limb that holds the nest, I position the knife in the groove and I'm about to draw the teeth across the wood when I see something moving. There, on the nest. The bright gold gleam of a maestro's idly making its way across the papery leaden exterior.

No inquiry, it's acting a little subdued, Likewise, the wasp is up and moving and that means the others will be out soon as well. Sweat breaks out on the palms of my hands, beading up through the

ointment, and I do my best to pat them dry on my shirt- yes I topless no you like that I asked to the camera that was flying like a little blue jay- by me un-maned- getting all the goods. If I don't get through this branch in a matter of seconds, the entire swarm could emerge and attack me.

There's no sense in putting it off. I take a deep breath, grip the knife handle and

bear down as hard as I can. Back, forth, back, forth! The red ants begin to bit and I hear them coming out of the holes. Back, forth, back, forth they make their way with me!

A stabbing pain shoots through my knee and I know one has found me and the others will be honing in. Back, forth, back, forth. And just as the knife cuts through, I shove the end of the branch as far away from me as I can. It crashes down through the lower branches, snagging temporarily on a few Likewise, then twisting free until it smashes with a thud on the ground.

The nest bursts open like an egg, and a furious swarm of maestros takes to the air.

I feel a second sting on the cheek, a third on my neck, and their venom almost immediately makes me woozy. I cling to the tree with one arm while I rip the barbed stingers out of my flesh. Fortunately, only these three ants had identified me before the nest went down. Red can kill if you get over 100 bits- black- can make you blow chunks, and yellow and black- dizzy and pass out- The rest of the insects have targeted their enemies on the ground and in the air. Your only friend here are the bluebirds that sing, and some of the others, there is only on that can kill, and the all-black one- it picks and stocks known as the Amzal bird you as you pass it.

This is all right, I think. This is not so bad here. The air is less hot, signifying evening's approach. There's a slight, sweet scent that reminds me of lilies. My fingers stroke the smooth ground, sliding easily across the top. This is an okay place to die, I think.

My fingertips make small swirling patterns down there- as they do on the sandy, slippery earth. I love mud like I like liking my fingers after the height of my moment on the screen - I think it feels so good.

How many times 10 or more in one day- just the same- I've tracked tournament with the help of its soft, readable surface. Good for bee wounds- I hate red ants also up my butt cheeks- good there bigger and redder them my nipples, too. Muddy. Sludge. Muck! My eyes fly open and I dig my fingers into the earth. It is mud! My nose lifts in the air. And those are lilies! Pond lilies! It's all I can do

not to plunge my face into the water and gulp down as much as I can hold. Likewise, I have just enough sense left to abstain. With trembling hands, I get out my flask and fill it with water.

I crawl now, through the mud, dragging myself toward the scent. Five yards from where I fell, I crawl through a tangle of plants into a pond. I take one swallow and make myself wait. Then another. Over the next couple of hours, I drink the entire half-gallon or so. Then a second. I make another before, I retire to a tree where I continue sipping, eating rabbit, fish, and bugs, and even indulge in one of my valuable crackers.

Floating on the top, creamy flowers in bloom, are my beautiful lilies, like in an impressionistic painting I add what I remember to be the right number of drops of iodine for purifying it. Slowly, easy now, I tell myself. Sucking the blood out- hard.

By the time the anthem plays, I feel remarkably better. The half an hour of waiting is agony, Likewise, I do it. At least, I think it's a half an hour, equally it's certainly as long as I can view.

There are no faces tonight, no callouts today or any died. Tomorrow I'll stay here, resting, camouflaging my backpack with mud, catching some of those little fish I saw as I sipped, and digging up the roots of the pond lilies to make a nice meal. I snuggle down in my sleeping bag, hanging on to my water bottle for dear life, which, of course, it is.

This was no campfires gone out of control, no accidental occurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, star-maker- made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all.

The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Tournaments are verging on tediousness. This is the one thing the Tournament must not do.

It's not hard to follow the Tournament maker's enthusiasm. There is the career pack, and then there are the rest of us, perhaps spread far, and thin cross-ways there in the arena.

This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I've seen, the same it's very, right and so-o actual.

I obstacle over a burning log. Not high enough... The tail end of my jacket catches on fire, and I have to stop to rip it away from my body and stamp out the flames as the start to lick my body - and I now topless. Running half-naked in the woods with him running not too far away- downing the same-

Likewise, I dare leave the jacket even if it has all my metals, I cannot I have to get them off - fast it's all I have to show what I did - I have 50 kills on their... now - more than any other girl here - burnt and ablaze some, I dump with little whiter I have on it - I knew that jackman's more than my life with having H20.

My hair - looks cool this way I said - thinking about it. I take the risk of shoving it in my sleeping bag saggy, hoping the lack of air will suppress, what I haven't smothered. This is all I have, what I carry on my back, and it's little an adequate amount to survive with... I no... I don't really seem to have much choice. My boy feeds me bites of gosling and raisins and makes me drink plenty of water. He rubs some warmth back into my feet and wraps them in his jacket before tucking the sleeping bag back up around my chin.

'Your boots and socks are still damp and the weather's not helping much,' he says. There's a clap of thunder, and I see lightning electrify the sky through an opening in the rocks. Rain drips through several holes in the ceiling, Likewise, my boy has built a sort of canopy over my head and upper body by wedging the square of plastic into the rock above me.

'I wonder what brought on this storm? I mean, who's the target?' says my boy.

' Permitted and Thresh,' I say without thinking. 'Fox-face will be in her den somewhere, and Clove. she cut me and then.

' My voice trails off.

'I know Clove's dead. I saw it in the sky last night,' he says. 'Did you kill her?'

'No. Thresh broke her skull with a rock,' I say.

'Lucky he didn't catch you, too,' says my boy.

The memory of the feast returns full force and I feel sick. 'He did. Likewise, he let me go.' Then, of course, I have to tell him. About things, I've kept to myself because he was too sick to ask and I wasn't ready to relive anyway. Like the explosion and my ear and Leah's dying and the boy from Community 1 and the bread. All of which leads to what happened with Thresh and how he was paying off a debt of sorts.

'He let you go because he didn't want to owe you anything?' Asks My boy in disbelief.

'Yes. I don't expect you to understand it. You've always had enough. Likewise, if you'd lived in the Seam, I wouldn't have to explain,' I say.

'And don't try. Obviously, I'm too dim to get it.'

'It's like bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that,' I say.

'The bread? What? From when we were kids?' he says. 'I think we can let that go. I mean, you just brought me back from the dead.'

' Likewise, you didn't know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it's the first gift that's always the hardest to pay back. I wouldn't even have been here to do it if you hadn't helped me then,' I say. 'Why did you, anyway?'

'Why? You know why,' my boy says. I give my head a slight, painful shake. 'Sam- said you would take a lot of convincing.'

'Sam-?' I ask. 'What's he got to do with it?'

'Nothing,' My boy says. 'So, Permitted and Thresh, huh? I guess it's too much to hope that they'll simultaneously destroy each other?'

Likewise, the thought only upsets me. 'I think we would like Thresh. I think he'd be our friend back in Community Twelve,' I say.

'Then let's hope Permitted kills him, so we don't have to,' says My boy grimly.

I don't want Permitted to kill Thresh at all. I don't want anyone else to die. Likewise, this is absolutely not the kind of thing that victors go around saying in the arena. Despite my best efforts, I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes.

My boy looks at me with concern.

'What is it? Are you in a lot of pain?'

I give him another answer because it is equally Permitted Likewise, it can be taken as a brief moment of weakness instead of a terminal one. 'I want to go home, my boy,' I said plaintively, like a small child.

'You will. I promise,' he says, and bends over to give me a kiss.

'I want to go home now,' I say.

'Tell you what. You go back to sleep and dream of home. And you'll be there for real before you know it,' lie says. 'Okay?'

'Okay,' I whisper. 'Wake me if you need me to keep watch.'

'I'm good and rested, thanks to you and Sam-. Besides, who knows how long this will last?' He says.

What does he mean? The storm? The brief respite l-l brings us? The Tournament themselves? I don't know, Likewise, I'm ion sad and tried to ask.

It's the evening when my boy wakes me again. The rain has turned to a downpour, sending streams of water through our ceiling where earlier there had been only dripping. My boy has placed the broth pot under the worst one and repositioned the plastic to deflect most of it from me. I feel a bit better, able to sit up without getting too dizzy, and I'm absolutely famished. So it is my boy. It's clear he's been waiting for me to wake up to eat and is eager to get started.

There's not much left. Two pieces of a gosling, a small mishmash of roots, and a handful of dried fruit.

'Should we try and ration it?' My boy asks.

'No, let's just finish it. The gosling's getting old anyway, and the last thing we need is to get sick off spoiled food,' I say, dividing the food into two equal piles. We try and eat slowly, Likewise, we're both so hungry were done in a couple of minutes.

My stomach is in no way satisfied. 'Tomorrow's a hunting day,' I say. 'I'll kill and you cook,' I say.

'And you can always gather.' 'I won't be much help with that,' My boy says. 'I've never hunted before.' 'I wish there was some sort of bread bush out there,' says my boy.

'The bread they sent me from Region 11 was still warm,' I say with a sigh. 'Here, chew these.' I hand him a couple of mint leaves and pop a few in my own mouth.

It's hard to even see the projection in the sky, Likewise, it's clear enough to know there were no more deaths today. So, permitted and Thresh hasn't had it out yet.

I brace myself for the agony that's sure to follow. Likewise, as I feel the tip open the first cut at my lip, some great form yanks Clove from my body and then she's screaming. I'm too stunned at first, too unable to process what has happened. Has my boy somehow come to my rescue? Have the Tournament makers sent in some wild animal to add to the fun? Has a hovercraft inexplicably plucked her into the air?

Likewise, when I push myself up on my numb arms, I see it's none of the above. Clove is dangling a foot off the ground, imprisoned in Thresh's arms. I let out a gasp, seeing him like that, towering over me, holding Clove like a rag doll. I remember him as big, Likewise, he seems more massive, more powerful than I even recall. If anything, he seems to have gained weight in the arena. He flips Clove around and flings her onto the ground.

When he shouts, I jump, never having heard him speak above a mutter. 'What'd you do to that little girl? You kill her.'

Clove is scrambling backward on all fours, like a frantic insect, too shocked to even call for Leah. 'No! No, it wasn't me!'

Dinah- 'You said her name. I heard from you. You kill her?' and I did- Another thought brings a fresh wave of rage to his features. 'You cut her up like you were going to cut up this girl here?'

Dinah brings the rock down hard against Clove's temple. It's not bleeding, Likewise, I can see the dent in her skull and I know that she's a goner. There's still life in her now though, in the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the low moan escaping her lips.

When Thresh whirls around on me, the rock raised, I know it's no good to run. And my bow is empty, the last loaded arrow having gone in Clove's direction. I'm trapped in the glare of his strange golden-brown eyes. 'What'd she mean? About Permitted being your ally?'

'And you killed her?' he demands me to say if I think he could. I try to run...

'Yes. I killed him. And buried her in flowers,' I say.

'And I sang her to sleep.'

Tears spring in my eyes. The tension, the fight goes out of me at the memory. And I'm overwhelmed by Leah and the pain in my head, and my fear of Thresh, and the moaning of the dying girl a few feet away.

'To sleep?' Thresh says gruffly.

'To death. I sang until she died,' I say. 'Your district. they sent me bread.' My hand reaches up Likewise, not for an arrow that I know I'll never reach. Just to wipe my nose.

Conflicting emotions cross Thresh's face. He lowers the rock and points at me, almost accusingly. 'Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we're even then. No more owed. You understand?'

I nod because I do understand. About owing. About hating it. I understand that if Thresh wins, he'll have to go back and face a community that has already broken all the rules to thank me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me, too. And I understand that, for the moment, Thresh is not going to smash in my skull.

'Clove!' his voice is much nearer now. I can tell by the pain in it that he sees her on the ground.

'You better run now, Girl,' says the boy that has gotten as many as me.

I don't need to be told twice. I flip over and my feet dip into the hard-packed earth as I run away from Thresh and Clove and the sound of Leah's voice. Only when I reach the woods do I turn back for an instant. Thresh and both large backpacks are vanishing over the edge of the plain into the area I've never seen. Permitted kneels beside Clove, spear in hand, begging her to stay with him. In a moment, he will realize it's futile, she can't be saved. I crash into the trees, repeatedly wiping away the blood that's pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am. After a few minutes, I hear the cannon and I know that Clove has died, that Permitted will be on one of our trails. Either Thrash's or mine. I'm seized with terror, weak from my head wound, shaking. I load an arrow, Likewise, permitted can throw that spear almost as far as I can shoot.

Only one thing calms me down. Thresh has Leah's backpack containing the thing he needs desperately. If I had to bet, permitted headed out after Thresh, not me. Still, I don't slow down when I reach the water. I plunge right in, boots still on, and flounder downstream. I pull off Leah's socks that

I've been using for gloves and press them into my forehead, trying to staunch the flow of blood, Likewise, they're soaked in minutes.

'Where did Thresh go? I mean, what's on the far side of the circle?' I ask my boy.

'A field. As far as you can see it's full of grasses as high as my shoulders. I don't know, maybe some of them are grain.

There are patches of different colors.

Likewise, there are no paths,' says my boy.

'I bet some of them are grain. I bet Thresh knows which ones, too,' I say. 'Did you go in there?'

'No. Nobody really wanted to track Thresh down in that grass. It has a sinister feeling to it. Every time I look at that field, all I can think of are hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand,' My boy says. 'There could be anything in there.'

I do sleep, on the train back- Likewise, in the morning I'm extra-cautious, thinking that while the Careers might hesitate to attack me in a tree, they're completely capable of setting an ambush for me. I make sure to fully prepare myself for the day eating a big breakfast, securing my pack, readying my weapons before I descend. Likewise, all seems peaceful and undisturbed on the ground. I tossed most of it- he in my mind now only. I don't even have a photo of him... they would not let me keep one - for he was a week.

47

'My boy, you were supposed to wake me after a couple of hours,' I say.

'For what? Nothing's going on here,' he says.

'Besides I like watching you sleep. You don't scowl.

Improves your looks a lot.'

This, of course, brings on a scowl that makes him grin. That's when I notice how dry his lips are. I test his cheek. Hot as a coal stove. He claims he's been drinking, Likewise, the containers still feel full to me. I give him more fever pills and stand over him while he drinks the first one, then the second

quart of water. Then I tend to his minor wounds, the burns, the stings, which are showing improvement. I steel myself and unwrap the leg.

'Burn medicine,' I say almost sheepishly. 'Oh, and some bread.'

'I always knew you were his favorite,' says my boy.

'Please, he can't stand being in the same room with me,' I say.

'Because you're just like,' mutters My boy. I ignore it though because this really isn't the time for me to be insulting Sam-, which is my first impulse.

I let My boy doze off while his clothes dry out, Likewise, by late afternoon, I don't dare wait any longer.

I gently shake his shoulder.

'My boy, we've got to go now.' 'Go?' He seems confused. 'Go where?' 'Away from here. Downstream maybe. Somewhere we can hide you until you're stronger,' I say. I help him dress, leaving his feet bare so we can walk in the water, and pull him upright. His face drains of color the moment he puts weight on his leg. 'Come on. You can do this.'

Likewise, he can't. Not for long anyway. We make it about fifty yards downstream, with him propped up by my shoulder and I can tell he's going to blackout. I sit him on the bank, push his head between his knees, and pat his back awkwardly as I survey the area. Of course, I'd love to get him up in a tree, Likewise, that's not going to happen. It could be worse though. Some of the rocks form small cave-like structures. I set my sights on one about twenty yards above the stream.

When my body's ability to stand, I half-guide, half-carry him up to the cave. Really, I'd like to look around for a better place, Likewise, this one will have to do because my ally is shot. Paperwhite, panting, and, even though it's only just cooling off, he's shivering.

I cover the floor of the cave with a layer of pine needles, unroll my sleeping bag, and tuck him into it. I get a couple of pills and some water into him when he's not noticing, Likewise, he refuses to eat even the fruit. Then he just lies there, his eyes trained on my face as I build a sort of blind out of vines to conceal the mouth of the cave. The result is unsatisfactory. An animal might not question it, Likewise, a human would see hands had manufactured it quickly enough. I tear it down in frustration.

'Elody,' he says. I go over to him and brush the hair back from his eyes. 'Thanks for finding me.'

'You would have found me if you could,' I say. His forehead's burning up. Like the medicines having no effect at all. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I'm scared he's going to die.

'Yes. Look, if I don't make it back, 'he begins.

'Don't talk like that. I drained all that pus for nothing,' I say.

'I know. Likewise, just in case I don't- 'he tries to continue.

'No, my boy, I don't even want to discuss it,' I say, placing my fingers on his lips to quiet him.

' Likewise, I- ' he insists.

Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words. This is probably overdue anyway since he's right, we are supposed to be madly in love. It's the first time I've ever kissed a boy, which should make some sort of impression I guess, Likewise, all I can register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever. I break away and pull the edge of the sleeping bag up around him.

'You're not going to die. I forbid it. All right?'

'All right,' he whispers.

I step out in the cool evening air just as the parachute floats down from the sky. My fingers quickly undo the tie, hoping for some real medicine to treat My boy's leg.

Instead, I find a pot of hot broth.

Sam- couldn't be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. 'You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's death. Give me something I can work with!'

~*~

And he's right. If I want to keep My boy alive, I've got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers were desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance.

Never having been in love, this is going to be a real trick. I think of my parents. The way my father never failed to bring her gifts from the woods. The way my mother's face would light up at the sound of his boots at the door. The way she almost stopped living when he died.

'My boy!' I say, trying for the special tone that my mother used only with my father. He's dozed off again, Likewise, I kiss him awake, which seems to startle him. Then he smiles as if he'd be happy to lie there gazing at me forever. He's great at this stuff.

~*~

I hold up the pot. 'My boy, look what Sam- has sent you.'

My heart drops into my stomach. It's worse, much worse. There's no more pus in evidence, Likewise, the swelling has increased and the tight shiny skin is inflamed. Then I see the red streaks starting to crawl up his leg. Blood poisoning. Unchecked, it will kill him for sure. My chewed-up leaves and ointment won't make a dent in it. We'll need strong anti-infection drugs from the Capitol. I can't imagine the cost of such potent medicine. If Sam- pooled every donation from every sponsor, would he have enough? I doubt it. Gifts go up in price the longer the Tournament continues. What buys a full meal on day one buys a cracker on day twelve. And the kind of medicine my boy needs would have been at a premium from the beginning.

'Well, there's more swelling, Likewise, the pus is gone,' I say in an unsteady voice.

'I know what blood poisoning is, Elody,' says my boy. 'Even if my mother isn't a healer.' 'You're just going to have to outlast the others, my boy. They'll cure it back at the Capitol when we win,' I say. 'Yes, that's a good plan,' he says. Likewise, I feel this is mostly for my benefit. 'You have to eat. Keep your strength up. I'm going to make your soup,' I say. 'Don't light a fire,' he says. 'It's not worth it.'

~*~

'We'll see,' I say. As I take the pot down to the stream, I'm struck by how brutally hot it is. I swear the Tournament makers are progressively ratcheting up the temperature in the daytime and sending it plummeting at night. The heat of the sunbaked stones by the stream gives me an idea though. Maybe I won't need to light a fire.

I settle down on a big flat rock halfway between the stream and the cave. After purifying half a pot of water, I place it in direct sunlight and add several egg-size hot stones to the water. I'm the first

to admit I'm not much of a cook. Likewise, since soup mainly involves tossing everything in a pot and waiting, it's one of my better dishes. I mince gosling until it's practically mush and mash some of Leah's roots. Fortunately, they've both been roasted already so they mostly need to be heated up. Already, between the sunlight and the rocks, the water's warm. I put in the meat and roots, swap in fresh rocks, and go find something green to spice it up a little. Before long, I discover a tuft of chives growing at the base of some rocks. Perfect. I chop them very finely and add them to the pot, switch out the rocks again, put on the lid, and let the whole thing stew. 'Did I ever tell you about how I got my sister's goat?'

I ask. My boy shakes his head and looks at me expectantly. So, I begin. Likewise, carefully. Because my words are going out all over them. And while people have no doubt put two and two together that I hunt illegally, I don't want to hurt Permitted or Sue or the others or even the Peacekeepers back home who are my customers by publicly announcing they'd to break the law, too.

Here's the real story of how I got the money for my sister's goat, Lady. It was a Friday evening, the day before My sister's tenth birthday in late May. As soon as school ended, Permitted and I hit the woods because I wanted to get enough to trade for a present for my sister. Maybe some new cloth for a dress or a hairbrush. Our snares had done well enough and the woods were flush with greens, Likewise, this was really no more than our average Friday-night haul. I was disappointed as we headed back, even though Permitted said we'd be sure to do better tomorrow. We were resting a moment by a stream when we saw him. A young buck, probably a yearling by his size. His antlers were just growing in, still small and coated in velvet. Poised to run Likewise, unsure of us, unfamiliar with humans.

Beautiful...

Less beautiful perhaps when the two arrows caught him, one in the neck, the other in the chest. Permitted and I had shot at the same time. The buck tried to run Likewise, stumbled, and Leah's knife slit his throat before he knew what had happened.

Momentarily, I'd felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat.

A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost didn't count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and actually trying to hack off pieces themselves. Suzann had intervened and sent us with our deer Likewise, not before it'd

been badly damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

I've seen very few signs of tournament around, Likewise, I don't feel comfortable leaving My boy alone while I hunt, so I rig half a dozen snares and hope I get lucky. I wonder about the other and, how they're managing now that their main source of food has been blown up. At least three of them, Leah, Clove, and Neahie, had been relying on it. Probably not Thresh though. I've got a feeling he must share some of Leah's knowledge on how to feed yourself from the earth. Are they fighting each other? Looking for us? Maybe one of them has located us and is just waiting for the right moment to attack. The idea sends me back to the cave.

My boys stretched out on top of the sleeping bag in the shade of the rocks. Although he brightens a bit when I come in, it's clear he feels miserable. I put cool cloths on his head, Likewise, they warm up almost as soon as they touch his skin.

'Do you want anything?' I ask.

'No,' he says. 'Thank you. Wait, yes. Tell me a story.'

'A story? What about?' I say. I'm not much for storytelling. It's kind of like singing.

Likewise, once in a while, my sister wheedles one out of me.

'Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember,' says My boy.

Something between a sigh and a huff of exasperation leaves my mouth. A happy story? This will require a lot more effort than the soup. I rack my brains for good memories. Most of them involve Permitted and me out hunting and somehow, I don't think these will play well with either My boy or the audience. That leaves my sister.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the others. Even though we were known hunters, it wouldn't have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Community 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky girl named Rooba it was said all she did was eat a rich sitter, came to the back door when we knocked. You don't haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, Likewise, it's a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison

steaks we could pick up after the others. Even with the money divided into two, neither Permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I really got the money for the goat, Likewise, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That can't hurt anyone. Then I pick up the story in the late afternoon of My sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There's an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I don't know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he's got a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines.

Likewise, he's lucky. Somewhere along the way, he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He's filthy and impatient, Likewise, the goats are clean and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why.

Something, probably a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. Likewise, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

'Leah,' I whispered. 'I want that goat for my sister.'

Owning a nanny goat can change your life in Community 12. The animals can live off almost anything, the Meadow's a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It's not even against the law.

'She's hurt pretty bad,' said Leah.

'We better take a closer look.'

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

'Let her be,' said the man.

'Just looking,' said Leah.

The man shrugged. 'Hang around and see.' I turned and saw Roomba coming across the square toward us. 'Lucky thing you showed up,' said the Goat Man when she arrived. 'Girl's got her eye on your goat.'

'Not if she's spoken for,' I said carelessly.

Roomba looked me up and down then frowned at the goat. 'She's not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.'

'What?' said the Goat Man. 'We had a deal.'

'We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she's stupid enough to take her,' said Roomba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, Likewise, he still wanted that goal off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I'd been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, Likewise, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. I think he wanted to see the look on my sister's face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck. Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen my sister's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once.

My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, Likewise, the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says My boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

'Oh, no, my boy. They work magic. That thing couldn't have died if it tried,' I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my useless hands.

'Don't worry. I'm not trying,' he jokes. 'Finish the story.'

'Well, that's it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with Lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something,' I say. 'It was already mad about her.'

'Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?' He asks.

'I think so,' I say. 'Why?'

'I'm just trying to get a picture,' he says thoughtfully. 'I can see why that day made you happy.'

'Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,' 1 say.

'Yes, of course, I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,' says My boy drily.

'The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,' I say in a superior tone.

'Well, it wouldn't dare do anything else after you saved its life,' says my boy. 'I intend to do the same thing.'

'Really? What did you cost me again?' I ask.

'A lot of trouble. Don't worry. You'll get it all back,' he says.

'You're not making sense,' I say. I test his forehead. The lever's going nowhere Likewise, up. 'You're a little cooler though.'

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I'm on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It's my new best friend, Claudius Temple-Smith, and as I expected, he's inviting us to a feast. Well, we're not that hungry and I actually wave his offer away in indifference when he says, 'Now hold on.

Some of you may already be declining my invitation. Likewise, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.'

I do need something desperately. Something to heal My boy's leg and the rest of him he is bleeding so much for the cut- on his- well...

'Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your community number, at the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,' says Claudius.

There's nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind.

'No,' he says. 'You're not risking your life for me.'

'Who said I was?' I say.

'So, you're not going?' He asks.

'Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Don't be stupid,' I say, helping him back to bed. 'I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.'

'You're such a bad liar, Elody. I don't know how you've survived this long.' He begins to mimic me. 'I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You're a little cooler though. Of course, I'm not going. He shakes his head. 'Never gamble at cards.

You'll lose your last coin,' He says.

Anger flashed my face. 'All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!'

'I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to the Cornucopia, Likewise, if I'm yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I'll be dead for sure,' he says. 'I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go,' he says. We're at something of a stalemate. I know I can't argue him out of this one, so I don't try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. 'Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!' I snap at him.

'You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg,' I say.

'Then I'll drag myself,' says My boy. 'You go and I'm going, too.'

He's just stubborn enough and maybe just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if a doesn't find him, something else might. He can't defend himself. I'd probably have to call him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

'What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?' I say. He must know that's not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try.

'Agreed. Is it ready?' He asks.

'Wait here,' I say. The air's gone cold even though the sun's still up. I'm right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And actually, it doesn't taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you don't know what fever does to people. He's like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he's going to die if I don't get to that feast. I'll keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he'll be gone. And I'll be here all alone.

Again. Waiting for the others.

I'm so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He's gotten the medicine- I don't know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It's such a tiny vial though. It must be very strong to cure someone as ill as My boy. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall at the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There's no question, it's sleep syrup. It's a common medicine in Community 12.

Cheap, as medicine goes, Likewise, very addictive. Almost everyone's had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night.

It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, Likewise, what good is that? I'm so furious I'm about to throw Sam's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That's more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries so the taste won't be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. 'I've brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.'

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly.

'They're very sweet.'

'Yes, they're sugar berries. My gram makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?' I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

'No,' he says, almost puzzled. ' Likewise, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?'

'Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild,' I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

'They're sweet as syrup,' he says, taking the last spoonful. 'Syrup.' His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, Likewise, it's too late, he's already losing consciousness.

Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I've done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. 'Who can't lie, My boy?' I say, even though he can't hear me.

~*~

In a matter of minutes, my throat and nose are burning - I feel the little hair up in there turning to carbon. That what happens to you when you pass - you turn to black goo - carbon. Traumatized yet - me too, it what they want -

NO?

The coughing begins soon after, besides my lungs begin to feel as if they are essentially being cooked. I've just decided to try and loop back around, although it will require miles of travel away from the inferno and then a very circuitous route back when the first fireball blasts into the rock about two feet from my head. I spring out from under my ledge, energized by renewed fear. Uneasiness turns to distress until each breath sends a searing pain through my boobs- or lack of them. I don't want to burn them off before I get them- I manage to take cover under a stone outcropping just as the vomiting begins, and I lose my meager supper, in addition to all that jazz- water has remained in my stomach. Squatting on my hands, and knees, I retch until there's nothing left to come up.

You get one minute, I tell myself. One minute to rest. I take the time to reorder my supplies, wad up the sleeping bag, and messily stuff everything into the backpack. My minute's up. I know I need to keep moving, by the same token I'm trembling and lightheaded now, gasping for air. I allow myself about a spoonful of water to rinse my mouth and spit then take a few swallows from my bottle.

I know it's time to move on, Likewise, the smoke has clouded my thoughts. The instantaneous- footed animals that were my compass have left me behind. I know I haven't been in this part of the woods before, there were no sizeable rocks like the one I'm sheltering against on my earlier travels. Where are the Tournament- makers driving me?

Back to the lake- I know that sucks?

To a whole new terrain filled with new dangers? I had just found a few hours of peace at the pond when this attack began. Would there be any way I could travel similar to the fire, besides work my way back there, to the birthplace of water at least? The wall of fire must have an end and it won't burn indefinitely. Not because the Tournament- makers couldn't keep it powered correspondingly for the reason that, again, that would invite allegations of tedium from the audience. If I could get back behind the fire line, I could avoid meeting up with the Careers.

The tournament has taken a twist. The fire was just to get us moving, now the audience will get to see some real fun. When I hear the next hiss, I flatten on the ground, not taking time to look. The fireball hits a tree off to my left, engulfing it in flames. To remain still is death. I'm barely on my feet before the third ball hits the ground where I was lying, sending a pillar of fire up behind me. Time loses meaning now as I frantically try to dodge the attacks. I can't see where they're being launched from, Likewise, it's not a hovercraft.

The angles are not extreme enough. Probably this whole segment of the woods has been armed with precision launchers- that are concealed in trees or rocks. Somewhere, in a cool and spotless room, a Tournament maker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a second. All that is needed is a direct hit.

Whatever vague plan I had conceived regarding returning to my pond is wiped from my mind as I zigzag and dive and leap to avoid the fireballs.

Something keeps me moving forward, though. A lifetime of watching the

Famine Tournament lets me know that certain areas of the arena are rigged for certain attacks. Each one is only the size of an apple, Likewise, it packs tremendous power on contact. Ever since I have gone into overdrive as the need to survive takes over. There's no time to judge if a move is the correct one. When there's a hiss, I act or die. And that if I can just get away from this section, I might be able to move out of reach of the launchers. I might also then fall straight into a pit of vipers, Likewise, I can't worry about that now.

This time it's an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose as well. I'm forced to stop as my body convulses, trying desperately to rid itself of the poisons I've been how long I scramble along dodging the fireballs I can't say, Likewise, the attacks finally begin to abate.

Which is good, because I'm retching again. Sucking in during the attack. I wait for the next hiss, the next signal to bolt. It doesn't come. The force of the retching has squeezed tears out of my stinging eyes. My clothes are drenched in sweat.

My muscles react, only not fast enough this time.

The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, Likewise, not before it skids across my right calf.

Seeing my pants leg on fire sends me over the edge. Somehow, through the smoke and vomit, I pick up the scent of singed hair. My hand fumbles to my braid and finds a fireball has seared off at least six inches of it.

Strands of blackened hair crumble in my fingers. I stare at them, fascinated by the transformation when the hissing registers. I twist and scuttle backward on my hands and feet, shrieking, trying to remove myself from the horror. When I finally regain enough sense, I roll the leg back and forth

on the ground, which stifles the worst of it. Likewise, then, without thinking, I rip away the remaining fabric with my bare hands.

My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts. I'm shaking too hard to move. If the Tournament makers want to finish me off, now is the time. I sit on the ground, a few yards from the blaze set off by the fireball.

I hear Shyanne's voice, carrying images of rich fabric, and sparkly gems.

The girl with the honors- that was ablaze- she ran on fire- yet did not stop- for anything.

What a good laugh the Tournament- makers must be having over that one. Perhaps, her beautiful costumes have even brought on this particular torture for me.

The attack is now over. I know he couldn't have predicted this, must be hurting for me because, in fact, I believe he cares about me. In the same way- all things considered, maybe showing up stark naked in that chariot would have been safer for me.

The star-makers don't want me dead- him they could give a shit. Not yet anyway.

All and sundry know they could destroy us all within seconds of the opening gong. The real sport of the tournament is watching the kill one another.

Every so often, they do kill just to remind the players they can. Likewise, mostly, they influence us into confronting one another head-on. Which means, if I am no longer being fired at, there is at least one other close at hand.

A few hours later, the stampede of feet shakes me from inactivity. I look from place to place in incomprehension. It's not yet beginning, Likewise, my stinging eyes can see it.

It would be hard to miss the wall of fire descending on me.

My first compulsion is to scramble from the tree, Likewise, I'm belted in. Somehow my fumbling fingers release the buckle and I fall to the ground in a heap, still snarled in my sleeping bag. There's no time for any kind of packing. Fortunately, my backpack and a water bottle are already in the bag. I shove in the belt, hoist the bag over my shoulder, and flee.

The world has transformed into flame and smoke. Burning branches crack from trees and fall in showers of sparks at my feet. All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. Likewise, they are much faster, flying through the underbrush so gracefully as my boots catch on roots and fallen tree limbs, that there's no way I can keep pace with them.

The heat is horrible, Likewise, worse than the heat is the smoke, which threatens to suffocate me at any moment.

I pull the top of my shirt up over my nose, grateful to find it soaked in sweat, and it offers a thin veil of protection. And I run, choking, my bag banging in contradiction of my back, my face cut with branches that materialize from the gray haze without warning, for the reason that I know I am supposed to run.

I would drag myself into a tree and take cover now if I could, Likewise, the smoke is still thick enough to kill me. I make myself stand and begin to limp away from the wall of flames that light up the sky. It does not seem to be pursuing me any longer, except with its stinking black clouds.

I hate burns, have always hated them, even a small one gotten from pulling a pan of bread from the oven. It is the worst kind of a pain to me, Likewise, I have never experienced anything like this.

Likewise, she means minor burns.

Probably she'd endorse it for my hands. Likewise, what of my calf? Although I have not yet had the courage to inspect it, I'm guessing that it's a grievance in a whole dissimilar class.

Another light, daylight, begins to softly emerge. Swirls of smoke catch the sunbeams. My visibility is poor. I can see maybe fifteen yards in any direction.

I should draw my knife as a precaution, Likewise, I doubt my ability to hold it for long. The pain in my hands can in no way compete with that in my calf.

I'm so weary I don't even notice I'm in the pool until I'm ankle-deep. It's spring-fed, bubbling up out of a crevice in some rocks, and blissfully cool. I plunge my hands into the shallow water and feel instant relief. Isn't that what my mother always says? The first treatment for a burn is cold water? That it draws out the heat?

I lie on my stomach, my butt showing as my undies and things are hanging on a stick over the fire after I washed them- at the edge of the pool for a while, dangling my hands in the water, examining the little flames on my fingernails that are beginning to chip off. Good. I've had enough fire for a lifetime.

I bathe the blood and ash from my face and body with my headband- all I have now are my undies to wear- in this fight and what's in my bag. All he has is his boxers at this point to full of holes- he is about 2 miles away- now lost- like me- I try to recall all I know about burns. They are common injuries in the Seam where we cook and heat our homes with coal. Then there are the mine accidents. A family once brought in an unconscious young man pleading with my mother to help him. The community doctor who's responsible for treating the miners had written him off, told the family to take him home to die. My leg is in need of attention, Likewise, I still can't look at it. What if it's as bad as the man's and I can see my bone? Then I remember my mother saying that if a burn's severe, the victim might not even feel pain because the nerves would be destroyed. Encouraged by this, I sit up and swing my leg in front of me.

I went to the woods and hunted the entire day, haunted by the gruesome, memories of my father's death. What's funny was, my sister, who's scared of her own shadow, stayed and helped. My mother says healers are born, not made. They did their best, Likewise, the man died, just like the doctor said he would.

Likewise, they wouldn't accept this. He lay on our kitchen table, senseless to the world. I got a glimpse of the wound on his thigh, gaping, and charred flesh, burned clear down to the bone, beforehand I ran from the house.

I was almost faint at the sight of my calf. The flesh is a brilliant red covered with blisters. I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, feeling quite certain the cameras are on my face. I can't show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does. I cut the remains of the pant leg off at the knee, and examine the injury more closely. The burned area is about the size of my hand. None of the skin is blackened. I think it's not too bad to soak.

Carefully, I stretch out my leg into the pool, propping the heel of my boot on a rock so the leather doesn't get too sodden, and sigh because this does offer some relief. I know there are herbs if I could find them, which would speed the healing, Likewise, I can't quite call them to awareness. Water and time will probably be all I have to work with.

Should I be moving on? The smoke is slowly clearing Likewise, still too heavy to be healthy. If I do continue away from the fire, won't I be walking straight into the weapons of the Careers? Besides, every time I lift my leg from the water, the pain rebounds so intensely I have to slide it back in.

My hands are slightly less demanding. They can handle small breaks from the pool. So, I slowly put my gear back in order. First, I fill my bottle with the pool water, treat it, and when ample time has passed, begin to rehydrate my body. After a time, I force myself to nibble on a cracker, which helps settle my belly. I roll up my sleeping bag. Except for a few black marks, it's relatively unscathed. My jacket's another matter. Stinking and scorched, at least a foot of the back beyond repair.

Despite the pain, drowsiness begins to take over. I'd take to a tree and try to rest; except I'd be too easy to spot. Besides, abandoning my pool seems impossible. I neatly arrange my supplies, even settle my pack on my shoulders, Likewise, I can't seem to leave. I cut off the damaged area leaving me with a garment that comes just to the bottom of my ribs. Likewise, the hood's intact and it's far better than nothing. My leg slows me down, like my period - they make me have the blood dripping from there is more than I can take I am naked for no - get them cover in it - I am out of temps no - so I run - Likewise, I sense my pursuers are not as speedy as they were before the fire, either. I hear their coughs, their raspy voices calling to one another.

I spot some water plants with edible roots and make a small meal with my last piece of rabbit. Sip water. Watch the sun make its slow arc across the sky.

Where would I go any way that is any safer than here? I lean back on my pack, overcome by drowsiness. If the Careers want me, let them find me, I think before drifting into a stupor. Let them find me. And find me, they do. It's lucky I'm ready to move on because when I hear the feet, I have less than a minute head start. The evening has begun to fall. The moment I awake, I'm up and running, splashing across the pool, flying into the underbrush.

I pick a high tree and begin to climb. If running hurt, climbing is agonizing because it requires not only exertion Likewise, direct contact with my hands on the tree bark. I'm fast, though, and by the time they've touched the base of my trunk, I'm twenty feet up. For a moment, we stop and survey one another. I hope they can't hear the pounding of my heart. Still, they are closing in, just like a pack of wild dogs, and so I do what I have done my whole life in such circumstances.

It seems pretty hopeless. Likewise, then something else registers. They're bigger and stronger than I am, no hesitation, Likewise, they're also heavier.

This could be it; I think. What chance do; I have counter to them? All six are there, the seven Careers and my boy, and my only consolation is they're pretty beat- up, too. Even so, look at their weapons. Look at their faces, grinning and snarling at me, a sure kill them.

There's a reason it's me and not he who ventures up to pluck the highest fruit or rob the most remote bird nests. I must weigh at least fifty or sixty pounds less than the smallest Career. Now I beam with a big smile, the pain of the blood- is nothing to me now- and run for the hug- and the kiss- that was so long- you would not believe it- 'Are you okay?'

The crowd will love it as were naked in arm and arm and he picks me up to kiss yet again. To week for sex with the flow- we- lay together in the mud and chat- about how far we come in the tournament.

Faith- a girl that was dying that- we made a pack with 'You can feed yourself. Can they?' I ask.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted and I do.

Likewise, I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human be ing can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn.

Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, Likewise, there aren't any.

'Who do you think that was?' I can't help thinking of My boy.

'I don't know. It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'I guess we'll know tonight.'

'Who's left again?' I ask.

'The boy from Community One. Both try Likewise, from Two. The boy from Three.

Thresh and me. And you and My boy,' says

Leah. 'That's right. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.' There's someone else, Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is.

'I wonder how that last one died,' says Leah.

'No telling. Likewise, it's good for us. Death should hold the crowd for a bit. Maybe we'll have time to do something before the Tournament makers decide things have been moving too slowly,' I say.

'What's in your hands?'

'Breakfast,' says Fath. She holds them out revealing two big eggs. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It's a good breakfast anywhere. 'Ready to do it?' I say, pulling on my pack and the back of my undies. Like a lost puppy...

'Do what?' Says Leah, Likewise, by the way, she bounces up, and you can tell she's up for whatever I propose.

'Today we take out the Careers' food,' I say. 'Really? How?' You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she's exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

'No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt,' I say.

We don't get much hunting done though because I'm too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of permitted about the Careers' base. She's only been in to spy on them briefly, Likewise, she's observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they've been leaving another, the boy from Community 3, to watch over the supplies.

'The boy from Community Three?' I ask. 'He's working with them?'

'Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the ants and bugs and flying things in by the lake,' says Leah. 'I guess they agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard.

Likewise, he's not very big.'

'What weapons does he have?' I ask.

'Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, Likewise, Thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah.

'And the food's just out in the open?' I say. She nods. 'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I couldn't tell what exactly,' says Faith. 'Elody, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in gasoline - we found some were this old car sat.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sister. 'Eat it!' She giggles.

'Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.'

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a community where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, 'Music.'

'Music?' I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. 'You have a lot of time for that?'

'We sing at home. At work, too. That's why I love your pin,' she says, pointing to the blue jay that I've again forgotten about.

'You have a blue jay?' I ask.

'Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,' she says. 'What do you mean?' I say.

'I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time. There's a special little song I do,' says Faith. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. 'And the blue jays spread it around the orchard. That's how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you can't blame them for that.'

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Faith, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That's how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a jagged star. Or maybe it's a flower. 'It's a good luck charm.'

'Well, it's worked so far,' I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. 'Maybe you should just stick with that.'

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' She asks.

'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, Faith decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away.'

'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask.

'Haven't you have seen them? They've got nests everywhere,' she says. I have to admit I haven't noticed.

'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner,' I say.

A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost didn't count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and actually trying to hack off pieces themselves. Greasy Sae had intervened and sent us with our deer to the Likewise, and not before it'd been badly damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the Likewise.

Even though we were known hunters, it wouldn't have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Community 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky woman named Rooba, came to the back door when we knocked.

You don't haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, Likewise, it's a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the Likewise, sharing. Even with the money divided into two, neither Permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I really got the money for the goat, Likewise, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That can't hurt anyone. Then I pick up the story in the late afternoon of my sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There's an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I don't know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he's got a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines. Likewise, he's lucky. Somewhere along the way, he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He's filthy and impatient, Likewise, the goats are clean and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, probably a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. Likewise, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

'Leah,' I whispered. 'I want that goat for my sister.'

Owning a nanny goat can change your life in Community 12. The animals can live off almost anything, the Meadow's a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It's not even against the law.

'She's hurt pretty bad,' said Leah.

'We better take a closer look.'

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

'Let her be,' said the man.

'Just looking,' said Leah.

'Well, look fast. She goes to the-

Likewise, her soon. Hardly anyone will buy her milk, and then they only pay half price,' said the man.

'What's the Likewise, her giving for her?' I asked.

The man shrugged. 'Hang around and see.' I turned and saw Rooba coming across the square toward us. 'Lucky thing you showed up,' said the Goat Man when she arrived. 'Girl's got her eye on your goat.'

'Not if she's spoken for,' I said carelessly.

Rooba looked me up and down then frowned at the goat. 'She's not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.' 'What?' said the Goat Man. 'We had a deal.'

'We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she's stupid enough to take her,' said Rooba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, Likewise, he still wanted that goal off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I'd been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, Likewise, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. I think he wanted to see the look on my sister's face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck.

Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen my sister's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat, Likewise, - teacup. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once. My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, Likewise, the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says my boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

'Oh, no, my boy. They work magic. That thing couldn't have died if it tried,' I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my incompetent hands.

'Don't worry. I'm not trying,' he jokes. 'Finish the story.'

'Well, that's it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with the lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something,' I say. 'It was already mad about her.'

'Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?' He asks.

'I think so,' I say. 'Why?'

'I'm just trying to get a picture,' he says thoughtfully. 'I can see why that day made you happy.'

'Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,' 1 say.

'Yes, of course, I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,' says My boy drily.

'The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,' I say in a superior tone.

'Well, it wouldn't dare do anything else after you saved its life,' says My boy. 'I intend to do the same thing.'

'Really? What did you cost me again?' I ask.

'A lot of trouble. Don't worry. You'll get it all back,' he says.

'You're not making sense,' I say. I test his forehead. The lover's going nowhere Likewise, up. 'You're a little cooler though.'

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I'm on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It's my new best friend, Claudius Temple-smith, and as I expected, he's inviting us to a feast. Well, we're not that hungry and I actually wave his offer away in indifference when he says, 'Now hold on. Some of you may already be declining my invitation. Likewise, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.'

I do need something desperately.

Something to heal My boy's leg.

'Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your community number, at the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,' says Claudius.

There's nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind.

'No,' he says. 'You're not risking your life for me.'

'Who said I was?' I say.

'So, you're not going?' He asks.

'Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Don't be stupid,' I say, helping him back to bed. 'I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.'

'You're such a bad liar, Elody. I don't know how you've survived this long.' He begins to mimic me. 'I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You're a little cooler though. Of course, I'm not going. He shakes his head. 'Never gamble at cards.

You'll lose your last coin,' he says.

Anger flashed my face. 'All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!'

'I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to the Cornucopia, Likewise, if I'm yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I'll be dead for sure,' he says.

'You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg,' I say.

'Then I'll drag myself,' says My boy. 'You go and I'm going, too.'

He's just stubborn enough and maybe just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if he-a doesn't find him, something else might. He can't defend himself. I'd probably have to wall him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

'What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?' I say. He must know that's not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try.

'I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go,' he says.

We're at something of a stalemate. I know I can't argue him out of this one, so I don't try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. 'Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!' I snap at him.

'Agreed. Is it ready?' He asks.

'Wait here,' I say. The air's gone cold even though the sun's still up. I'm right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And actually, it doesn't taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you don't know what fever does to

people. He's like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he's going to die if I don't get to that feast. I'll keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he'll be gone. And I'll be here all alone.

Again. Waiting for the others.

I'm so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He's gotten the medicine- I don't know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It's such a tiny vial though. It must be very strong to cure someone as ill as My boy. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall at the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There's no question, it's sleep syrup. It's a common medicine in Community 12.

Cheap, as medicine goes, Likewise, very addictive. Almost everyone's had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, Likewise, what good is that? I'm so furious I'm about to throw Sam's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That's more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries so the taste won't be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. 'I've brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.'

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly. 'They're very sweet.'

'Yes, they're sugar berries. My mother makes a jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?' I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

'No,' he says, almost puzzled.' Likewise, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?'

'Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild,' I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

'They're sweet as syrup,' he says, taking the last spoonful. 'Syrup.' His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, Likewise, it's too late, he's already losing consciousness. Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I've done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. 'Who can't lie, My boy?' I say, even though he can't hear me.

It doesn't matter. The rest of Alsace can.

21 In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It's a slow and arduous process, Likewise, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I'm pretty pleased with my work, the cave now appears to be part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, Likewise, it's undetectable from the outside. That's good because I'll need to share that sleeping bag again tonight.

Also, if I don't make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden Likewise, not entirely imprisoned.

Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Community 12 isn't likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy so he'll have some protection while I'm gone, Likewise, there's really no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. Likewise, I still might have a use for the knife. Who knows what I'll encounter?

Here are some things I'm fairly certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts. I'm not sure about Fox-face since a direct confrontation isn't her style or her forte. She's even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she's picked up some weapons recently.

She'll probably be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the other three. I'm going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset,

Likewise, I know I'll have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 on it that Claudius Temple-smith mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, Likewise, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had that good long sleep today. I have to stay awake.

I don't really think anyone will attack our cave tonight, Likewise, I can't risk missing the dawn.

So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament makers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done. I lay next to My boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It's strange to be so physically close to someone who's so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Capitol, or in Community 12, or on the moon right now, he'd be no harder to reach. I've never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, Likewise, I can't help thinking of my mother and my sister, wondering if they'll sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will probably be canceled. My family can either watch on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they'll have privacy at home Likewise, support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that my boy and I are a team, and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Community 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about my boy and me, especially now that we're together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces - Greasy Sac and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

And Leah. I know him. He won't be shouting and cheering. Likewise, he'll be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he's hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah's not my boyfriend, Likewise, would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the district?

Or something more?

I wonder what he makes of all this kissing.

Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I'm careful to leave My boy with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I don't return, and even these would only prolong his life a short time.

After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own. He doesn't need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I'm not there to remove it, he'll be roasting in it.

My hands are already stiff from cold, so I take Leah's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway. I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I'm about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Capitol and pretend to brush away a tear of my own. Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It's as cold as a November night at home. One where I've slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we'll sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh, Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, Likewise, I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I don't know what the explosion did, Likewise, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I'll be so stinking rich, I'll be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it.

As if the daytime- trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I don't try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I

make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Leah's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another try Likewise, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I'm the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There's still more than an hour, maybe two when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach isn't up for much more. Thank goodness, I have My boy's jacket as well as my own. If not, I'd be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there's no sign of the other try Likewise, It's not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have my boy with me? I doubt Fox-face and Thresh even know he was wounded. All the better if they think he's covering me when I go in for the backpack.

Likewise, where is it? The arena has lightened enough for me to remove my glasses. I can hear the morning birds singing. Isn't it time? For a second, I'm panicked that I'm at the wrong location.

Likewise, no, I'm certain I remember Claudius Temple-smith specifying the Cornucopia. And there it is.

And here I am.

So, where's my feast?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Cornucopia, there's a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one - really, I could carry it around my wrist- that must be marked with a 12.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of the Cornucopia, snags the green backpack and speeds off. Fox-face! Leave it to her to come up with such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plain, sizing up the situation, and she's got hers. She's got us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their own pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Fox-face must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would definitely bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the lime I've worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I'm watching that

reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I'm always dreading the others, Likewise, maybe Fox-face is the real opponent here.

She's cost me time, too, because by now it's clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I'm able to deflect it with my bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, Likewise, the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, Likewise, it's enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I'm at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it's really too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I'm turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood. I stagger backward Likewise, I still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for my sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and possibly My boy.

'Where's your boyfriend, Community Twelve? Still hanging on?' she asks.

Well, as long as we're talking, I'm alive. 'He's out there now. Hunting Leah,' I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. 'My boy!'

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. Likewise, her head whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she's at least considering I'm telling the truth. Since no My boy appears to save me, she turns back to me.

'Liar,' she says with a grin. 'He's nearly dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You've probably got him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What's in the pretty little backpack? That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he'll never get it.'

Clove opens her jacket. It's lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a Leah, curved blade. 'I promised Permitted if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show.'

I'm struggling now in an effort to unseat her, Likewise, it's no use. She's too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

'Forget it, Community Twelve. We're going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. what was her name? The one who hopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then yo u, and then I think we'll just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?' Clove asks. 'Now, where to start?'

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it's a block of wood and she's deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, Likewise, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. 'I think. ' she almost purrs. 'I think we'll start with your mouth.' I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I won't close my eyes. The comment about permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down as long as I can see, which will probably not be an extended period of time, Likewise, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my own small way, undefeated.

'Yes, I don't think you'll have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?' She asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. 'Alright then. Let's get started.'

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my boy's arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good - I say...

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I'm vaguely aware that my headaches. Possibly I have the flu and this is why I'm allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I've been asleep a long time. My mother's hand strokes my cheek and I don't push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still don't trust her. Then there's a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I'm scared.

'Elody,' it says. 'Elody, can you hear me?'

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I'm not home, not with my mother. I'm in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. 'My boy.' 'Hey,' he says. 'Good to see your eyes again.'

'How long have I been out?' his mom asks. The sent him to a hospital for she gets the money. There was only one more... now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

'Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,' he says. 'I think it's stopped finally, likewise; I wouldn't sit up or anything.'

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My boy holds a bottle to my lips and I drink thirstily.

'You're better,' I say.

'Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,' he says. 'By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.'

He doesn't seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. Maybe I'm just too beat-up and I'll hear about it later when I'm stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he's all gentleness. 'Did you eat?' I ask.

'I'm sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don't worry, I'm back on a strict diet,' he says.

'No, it's good. You need to eat. I'll go hunting soon,' I say.

'Not too soon, all right?' he says. 'You just let me take care of you for a while.'

My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, 'Are there more?

Are there more?'

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shove the boy away from her and pull out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it's far beyond my capacity to heal, beyond anyone's probably. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There's no point in comforting words, in telling her she'll be all right. She's no fool.

Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline.

As if it's me who's dying instead of Faith.

'You blew up the food?' she whispers.

'Every last bit,' I say.

'You have to win,' she says.

'I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now,' I promise. I hear a cannon and lookup. It must be for the boy from Community 1.

'Don't go.' Faith tightens her grip on my hand.

'Course not. Staying right here,' I say. I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair

back behind her ear.

'Sing,' she says, Likewise, I barely catch the word.

Sing? I think. Sing what? I do know a few songs. Believe it or not, there was once music in my house, too. Music I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice - Likewise, I haven't sung much since he died. Except when my sister is very sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby.

Sing... My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue. Likewise, if this is my sister's, I mean, Leah's last request, I have to at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with, it's old, very old, I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music teacher calls mountain air. Likewise, the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today.

I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin: Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes and when again they open, the sun will rise. Here is the place where I love you.

Her eyes have fluttered shut. Her chest moves Likewise, only slightly. My throat releases the tears and they slide down my cheeks. Likewise, I have to finish the song for her.

Everything's still and quiet. Then, almost eerily, the blue jays take up my song.

For a moment, I sit there, watching my tears drip down on her face. Leah's cannon fires. I lean forward and press my lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I lay her head back on the ground and release her hand.

48

They'll want me to clear out now. So, they can collect their bodies. And there's nothing to stay for. I roll the boy from Community 1 onto his face and take his pack, retrieve the arrow that ended his life. I cut Leah's pack from her back as well, knowing she'd want me to have it Likewise, leave the spear in her stomach. Weapons in bodies will be transported to the hovercraft. I've no use for a spear, so the sooner it's gone from the arena the better.

I can't stop looking at Leah, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting. I can't bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, Likewise, seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from Community 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us.

Leah's voice is in my head as a memory like all of them now- but one. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Leah's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the clear, the injustice they inflict upon us. Likewise, here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence.

There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?

Then, I remember my boy's words on the roof. 'Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to. To show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Tournament.' And for the first time, I understand what he means.

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of everything they can't own. That Permitted was more than a piece in their Tournament. And so am I.

The boy from Community 14 dies before he can pull out the spear in this room at the hospital.

A few steps into the woods grow a bank of wildflowers. Perhaps they are really weeding of some sort, Likewise, they have blossomed in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Leah's side. Slowly, one step at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers.

Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors.

They'll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they'll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will se e her then and now I did it. I step back and take a last look at Leah. She could really be asleep in that meadow after all.

'Bye, Faith,' I whisper and crazed out. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and kiss her there too- and hold them out in her direction.

Then I walk away without looking back.

The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a blue jay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft. I don't know how it knows. It must hear things that humans can't. I pause, my eyes focused on what's ahead, not what's happening behind me. It doesn't take long, then the general birdsong begins again and I know she's gone.

Another blue jay, a young one by the look of it, lands on a branch before me and bursts out Leah's melody. My song, the hovercraft, was too unfamiliar for this novice to pick up, Likewise, it has mastered her handful of notes. The ones that mean she's safe.

'Good and safe,' I say as I pass under its branch. 'We don't have to worry about her now.' Good and safe.

I've no idea where to go. The brief sense of home I had that one night with Permitted has vanished. My feet wander this way and that until sunset. I'm not afraid, not even watchful. Which makes me an easy target. Except I'd kill anyone I met on sight. Without emotion or the slightest tremor in my hands. My hatred of the Capitol has not lessened my hatred of my competitors in the least. Especially Careers. They, at least, can be made to pay for Leah's death.

No one materializes though. There aren't many of us left and it's a big arena. Soon they'll be pulling out some other device to force us together. Likewise, there's been enough gore today. Perhaps we'll even get to sleep.

I'm about to haul my packs into a tree to make camp when a silver parachute floats down and lands in front of me. A gift from a sponsor. Likewise, why now?

I've been in fairly good shape with supplies.

Maybe Sam's noticed my despondency and is trying to cheer me up a bit. Or could it be something to help my ear?

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread It's not the fine white Capitol stuff. It's made of dark ration grain and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. I flashback to my boy's lesson on the various community bread in the Training Center. This bread came from Borough 14. I cautiously lift the still-warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of Borough 14 who can't even feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Leah, surely. Likewise, instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized Sam- to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me, they don't like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A community gift to a who's not your own.

I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. 'My thanks to the people of region 11,' I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized.

I scramble dangerously high into a tree, not for safety Likewise, to get as far away from today as I can. My sleeping bag is rolled neatly in Leah's pack.

Tomorrow I'll sort through the supplies that she had- I can't know it's just too hard for me to do.

Tomorrow I'll make a new plan. Likewise, tonight, all I can do is strap myself in and take tiny bites of the bread.

It's good. It tastes of home.

Soon the seal's in the sky, the anthem plays in my right ear. I see the boy from Community 1, Leah. That's all for tonight. Six of us left, I think. Only six. With the bread still locked in my hands, I fall asleep at once.

49

Sometimes when things are particularly bad, my brain will give me a happy dream. A visit with my father in the woods. An hour of sunlight and cake with my sister. Tonight, it sends me Leah, still decked in her flowers, perched in a high sea of trees, trying to teach me to talk to the blue jays. I see no sign of her wounds, no blood, just a bright, laughing girl. She sings songs I've never heard in a clear, melodic voice.

On and on.

Through the night. There's a drowsy in-between period when I can hear the last few strains of her music although she's lost in the leaves. When I fully awaken, I'm momentarily comforted. I try to hold on to the peaceful feeling of the dream, Likewise, it quickly slips away, leaving me sadder and lonelier than ever.

Heaviness infuses my whole body as if there's liquid lead in my veins. I've lost the will to do the simplest tasks, to do anything Likewise, lie here, staring unblinkingly through the canopy of leaves.

For several hours, I remain motionless. As usual, it's the thought of my sister's anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy.

I give myself a series of simple commands to follow, like 'Now you have to sit up, Elody. Now you have to drink water, Elody.' I act on the orders with slow, robotic motions. 'Now you have to sort the packs, Elody.'

My boy pack holds my sleeping bag, her nearly empty waterskin, a handful of nuts and roots, a bit of rabbit, her extra socks, and her slingshot. The boy from Community 1 has several knives, two spare spearheads, a flashlight, a small leather pouch, a first-aid kit, a full bottle of water, and a pack of dried fruit. A pack of dried fruit! Out of all he might have chosen from.

To me, this is a sign of extreme arrogance. Why bother to carry food when you have such a bounty back at camp? When you will kill your enemies so quickly, you'll be home before you're hungry? I can only hope the other Careers traveled so lightly when it came to food and now find themselves with nothing.

Speaking of which, my own supply is running low. I finish off the loaf from Community 11 and the last of the rabbit. How quickly the food disappears. All I have left are Leah's roots and nuts, the boy's dried fruit, and one strip of beef. Now you have to hunt, Elody, I tell myself.

I obediently consolidate the supplies I want into my pack. After I climb down the tree, I conceal the boy's knives and spearheads in a pile of rocks so that no one else can use them. I've lost my bearings what with all the wandering around I did yesterday evening, Likewise, I try and head back in the general direction of the stream. I know I'm on course when I come across Leah's third, unlit fire. Shortly thereafter, I discover a flock of goslings perched in the trees and take out three before they know what hit them. I return to Leah's signal fire and start it up, not caring about the excessive smoke. Where are you, Leah? I think as I roast the birds and Leah's roots. I'm waiting right here.

Who knows where the Careers are now? Either too far to reach me or too sure this is a trick or... is it possible? Too scared of me? They know I have the bow and arrows, of course, Permitted saw me take them from Glimmer's body, Likewise, have they put two and two together yet? Figured out I blew up the supplies and killed their fellow

Career? Possibly they think Thresh did this.

Wouldn't he be more likely to revenge Leah's death than I would? Being from the same district? Not that he ever took any interest in her.

I doubt they think my man has lit this signal fire. Leah's sure he's as good as dead. I find myself wishing I could tell my boy about the flowers I put on Leah. That I now understand what he was trying to say on the roof. Perhaps if he wins the Tournament, he'll see me on victor's night, when they replay the highlights of the Tournament on a screen over the stage where we did our interviews. The winner sits in a place of honor on the platform, surrounded by their support crew.

Likewise, I told Permitted I'd be there when she was alive. For both of us. And somehow that seems even more important than the vow I gave my sister.

In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It's a slow and arduous process, Likewise, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I'm pretty pleased with my work, the cave now appears to be part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, Likewise, it's undetectable from the outside. That's good because I'll need to share that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I don't make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden Likewise, not entirely imprisoned. Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Community 12 isn't likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy so he'll have some protection while I'm gone, Likewise, there's really no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. Likewise, I still might have a use for the knife. Who knows what I'll encounter?

Here are some things I'm fairly certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts.

I'm not sure about Fox's face since direct confrontation isn't her style or her forte. She's even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she's picked up some weapons recently. She'll probably be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the other three. I'm going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset, Likewise, I know I'll have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, Likewise, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had that good long sleep today. I have to stay awake. I don't really think anyone will attack our cave tonight, Likewise, I can't risk missing the dawn.

So, cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament makers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done. I lay next to my boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It's strange to be so physically close to someone who's so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Capitol, or in Community 12, or on the moon right now, he'd be no harder to reach. I've never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, Likewise, I can't help thinking of my mother and my sister, wondering if they'll sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will probably be canceled. My family can either watch on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they'll have privacy at home Likewise, support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that my boy and I are a team, and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Community 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about my boy and me, especially now that we're together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces - Greasy Sac and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

And Leah. I know him. He won't be shouting and cheering. Likewise, he'll be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he's hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah's not my boyfriend, Likewise, would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the district?

Or something more I wonder what he makes of all this kissing. Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I'm careful to leave my boy with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else

will be of much use if I don't return, and even these would only prolong his life a short time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own.

He doesn't need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I'm not there to remove it, he'll be roasting in it. My hands are already stiff from cold, so I take Leah's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway.

I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I'm about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Capitol and pretend to brush away a tear of my own.

Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It's as cold as a November night at home. One where I've slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we'll sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh, Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, Likewise, I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I don't know what the explosion did, Likewise, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I'll be so stinking rich, I'll be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I don't try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Leah's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I'm the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There's still more than an hour, maybe two when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach isn't up for much more. Thank goodness, I have my boy's jacket as well as my own. If not, I'd be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there's no sign of the other try Likewise, It's not surprising really. Everyone has

distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have my boy with me?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Cornucopia, there's a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one really, I could carry it around my wrist that must be marked with a 14.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of the Cornucopia, snags the green backpack and speeds off. Neahie! Leave it to her to come up with such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plain, sizing up the situation, and she's got hers. She's got us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their own pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Neahie must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would definitely bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the lime I've worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I'm watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh.

I'm always dreading the others, Likewise, maybe Neahie is the real oppone nt here.

She's cost me time, too, because by now it's clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily- scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I'm able to deflect it with my bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, Likewise, the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, Likewise, it's enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I'm at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it's really too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I'm turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood. I stagger backward Likewise, I still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss.

And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for my sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and possibly My boy.

'Where's your boyfriend, District Twelve? Still hanging on?' she asks. Well, as long as we're talking, I'm alive. 'He's out there now. Hunting Leah,' I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. 'My boy!'

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. Likewise, her head's whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she's at least considering I'm telling the truth. Since no my boy appears to save me, she turns back to me.

'Liar,' she says with a grin. 'He's nearly dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You've probably got him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What's in the pretty little backpack? That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he'll never get it.'

Clove opens her jacket. It's lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a Leah, curved blade. 'I promised Permitted if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show.'

I'm struggling now in an effort to unseat her, Likewise, it's no use. She's too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

'Forget it, Community Twelve. We're going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. What was her name? The one who shopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then you, and then I think we'll just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?' Clove asks. 'Now, where to start?'

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it's a block of wood and she's deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, Likewise, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. 'I think. ' she almost purrs. 'I think we'll start with your mouth.' I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I won't close my eyes. The comment about Permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down as long as I can see, which will probably not be an extended period of time, Likewise, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my own small way, undefeated. 'Yes, I don't think you'll have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?' She asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. 'Alright then. Let's get started.'

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my - boy's arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good - I say...

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I'm vaguely aware that my headaches. Possibly I have the flu and this is why I'm allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I've been asleep a long time.

My boys hand strokes my cheek and I don't push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still don't trust her. Then there's a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I'm scared.

'Elody,' it says. 'Elody, can you hear me?'

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I'm not home, not with my mother. I'm in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. 'My boy.' 'Hey,' he says. 'Good to see your eyes again.'

'How long have I been out?' his mom asks. The sent him to a hospital for she gets the money. There was only one more... now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

'Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,' he says. 'I think it's stopped finally, likewise; I wouldn't sit up or anything.'

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My boy holds a bottle to my lips and I drink thirstily.

'You're better,' I say.

'Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,' he says. 'By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.'

He doesn't seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. Maybe I'm just too beat-up and I'll hear about it later when I'm stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he's all gentleness.

'Did you eat?' I ask.

'I'm sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don't worry, I'm back on a strict diet,' he says.

'No, it's good. You need to eat. I'll go hunting soon,' I say.

'Not too soon, all right?' he says. 'You just let me take care of you for a while.'

I really think I stand a chance of doing it now. Winning. It's not just having the arrows or outsmarting the Careers a few times, although those things help.

Something happened when I was holding Leah's hand, watching the life drain out of her. Now I am determined to revenge her, to make her lose unforgettably, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable.

Rat-

Eventually, I wrap up my food and go back to the stream to replenish my water and gather some. Likewise, the heaviness from the morning drapes back over me and even though it's only early evening, I climb a tree and settle in for the night. My brain begins to replay the events from yesterday. I keep seeing Permitted speared, my arrow piercing the boy's neck. I don't know why I should even care about the boy.

(2 weeks Back)

Then I realize he was going to be her first kill. Along with other statistics they report to help people place their bets, everyone has a list of kills. I guess technically I'd get credited for Glimmer and the girl from Community 4, too, for dumping that nest on them. Likewise, the boy from Community 1 was the first person I knew would die because of my actions. Numerous animals have lost their lives at my hands,

Likewise, only one human. I hear permitted saying, 'How different can it be, really?'

Amazingly similar to the execution. A bow pulled; an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don't even know. Somewhere his family is weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. Maybe he had a girlfriend who really believed he would come back.

Likewise, then I think of Leah's still body and I'm able to banish the boy from my mind. At least, for now.

It's been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we'll get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it's going to be tonight, I want to get some sleep first. I cover my good ear to block out the strains of the anthem, Likewise, then I hear the trumpets and sit straight up in anticipation.

My sister was found dead in her cell... at night.

For the most part, the only communication the try Likewise, get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. Likewise, occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Tournament makers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere known to all like the Cornucopia, as an inducement to gather and fight. Sometimes there is a feast and sometimes there's nothing but, a Likewise, a loaf of stale bread for the

Likewise, to compete for. I wouldn't go in for the food, Likewise, this could be an ideal time to take out a few competitors.

Before- I can stop myself, I call out my boy's name to see if he is alive, he is not.

I cried so hard... I clap my hands over my mouth, already escaped this hellish land. I do- with an arrow- of all things... the boy is down there is a shock I hear this... they want the boy to get it, I think.

The sky goes black and I load the gun- there will be no winner- I scream and I shot myself- to be with him somewhere- where this hell is not this place. I about to let it go off- Stop! The baby would give- up to his mother- she is with me now- my last wishes in the note, I have in my bag.

The screen has the look of OMFG!

I win the war!

He was the last to go- and it was a natal death... all I have is this baby- that is ours- yet at that moment I could not go on... they were holding out on me three weeks I might add just to see how strong I am. SICK! I never dated another boy- they call out all the names- and I am taken to safety. I instruct myself, although I wish I just get home... or wherever I go now that I have nothing. I will have it all- yet that is not him! I live alone in a big home- and take care of my baby that I could have left behind- I named her after me.

~Elody~

(Back)

Looking at how things were before the end and the start of the new. It was the worst of times to bring on the best of. That's not social to me at all looking at the web all day and then TV. It's a lot of funnels and a lot of piss poured down the spout and out the bottom, and them telling us it's rain when it's not.

They run us so frazzled by the head of the day we can't do anything but go to bed or head for a fun park that is no longer- the fun is to bully people around, looking at all the crack windowpanes in all the place or wreck cars, junk in crushed in place with explosives on the ground pulled up.

Deep thoughts- 'Great Scott,' he whispered Or go out in the cars and race on the streets that are not there, trying to see how close you can get to a lamp that runs the sides in LEDs, playing 'chicken' and 'Tapping bumpers well never be a thing anymore.' All animated I guess I'm everything they say I am, all right. I haven't any friends.

'That's supposed to prove I'm abnormal and heavy.' She questioned. Although everyone I know is either shouting or dancing around like eager or beating up one another. Do you notice how

people hurt each other nowadays?' She was back from the war a changed woman when she saw him in uniform- 'You sound so very old in your years now he said to her in a welcome back.'

'Sometimes I'm old-fashioned. I'm afraid of children my age now. She said They kill each other for fun- why?' I also have changed my name, to Elody; all for you, it was a reason to fight and something to live for.

Did it always use to be that way? My dad says no. Seven of my friends have been shot in this last week alone in the front of the head point-blank- as everyone in the city watched- for being teens that think- as I do now. Ten of them died in car wrecks- when the programming of their cars when haywire. I'm afraid of everything yet not death, and they don't like me because I'm afraid to not be afraid and that makes me a danger.

My dad says his grandfather remembered when children didn't kill each other for fun - or when war soldier- like me, was to fight for freedom- not killing over thoughts of the mind to take over everything that makes them alive.

But that was a long time ago when they had things different. They believed in responsibility; my dad says. Do you know, I'm liable? I was chastised when I required it, almost a year ago. Furthermore, I do all the purchasing and house- cleaning by aid. 'Yet most of all,' she said, 'I like to watch somebody. Seldom I ride the long sleek train chute all day and look at them and listen to them. I simply require to estimate out who they are and what they want and where they're going.

Occasionally- I still go to the fun parks and ride and remember what it was like here when I was a child and this was a place of fun, not death, race on the edge of town with other kids my age at night all the fun lights and smalls, and the police don't care as long as they're protected by someone a little older. Now it is like- you are crazy to be outside, as long as everyone has ten thousand safeguards everyone's comfortable.

Occasionally- I prowl said the young teen, around and listen in the underground tubes. Oppositely I admit to cola bars, or use the public outdoor restrooms, plus do you know what?' 'What?' 'People don't communicate about anything.' it's all on screens or thoughts before having them read like a book that is not published or should not have been. 'Oh, they- require to feel safe!'

'No, not anything. They describe a lot of cars or clothes or swimming-pools mostly and say how desirable! However, others all say the same essence and nobody says anything separate from

anyone else. Moreover, most utmost regarding the event in the people of the cafe have the tune players on and the same jokes most of the time, or the artistic wall illuminated and all the colored patterns running up and down on the sides to go with moods, but it's only color and all abstract. Furthermore, at the libraries now just screens of pulled internets, all places of learning, have you ever been? All abstract cold and sterilized- like most of the man walking around. My dad says it was different once. A long-time back seldom pictures that he has hidden on what they call a film, said things or even showed people - as we are not.'

'Your dad said, then he would be right. Your dad must be a remarkable man.' 'He is. He certainly is and he stands before me yet I am not asked to remember this in my mind. Why? Well, I've got to be going. Goodbye, Mr. Bud.' 'Good-bye.' 'Good-bye...' One two three four five six seven days: the coal shoveling.

'Bud, I notice you appeared in the back entrance this moment. The Cat bother you?' 'No, no.' Fourth day. 'Bud, a curious thing. Heard tell this morn. Coal unearthing in intentionally set a standardized Cat to his own complex and let it loose. What kind of suicide would you call that?'

'Five six-seven dates. Plus, when- when was gone, my new lover was here cleaning in the home. He didn't know what there was about the evening, although it remained not recognizing her someplace in the world. The garden was empty, the trees barren, the street deserted, and while at germ, he did not even know he missed her or was even looking for her, the fact was that by the time he reached the railroad, there stood nebulous stirrings of unease in him. Something signified the resolution; his habit had been disrupted. Per mere routine, reliable, authenticated in a quick few days, including yet...? He essentially looped backward to perform the stride anew, to give her time to resemble. He was convinced if he tried the same route, everything would perform out fine. But it was late, and the arrival of his train put a stop to his plan. The flutter of cards, the motion of hands, of eyelids, the idler of the time-voice in the apartment ceiling.'

'...One thirty-five. Thursday daybreak, November 19th... one thirty-six... one thirty-seven a.m...' The tick of the perplexing playing-cards on the greasy table-top, all the sounds came to Bud, behind his closed eyes, sluggish the barrier he had immediately erected. He could feel the loft full of shimmer and shine and taciturnity, of alloy colors, the hues of coins, of gold, of silver: The obscure men across the table were groaning on their cards, waiting for his move.

'...one forty-five...' The voice-clock wailed out the cold hour of crisp daylight of a tranquil colder year. 'What's wrong, Bud?' Bud cleared his eyes. A radio buzzed scattered. '...War may be declared any hour. This country stands ready to defend it is-' The apartment next to the mine shaft- for the men, shivered as a great flight of jet planes hissed a single note across the black aurora sky.

Bud nictitated. The girl was in his mind asking him to come home, was looking at in the glass even if it was his face he saw- as if he were a museum statue- it was chilling. At any moment, she forces to rise and walk about him, impressing, examining his guilt and self-awareness.

Sin? What sin was that? 'Your play, Bud.' Bud glanced at these men whose features were sunburnt by a thousand real and ten thousand imaginative fires, whose work crimsoned their faces and fevered their eyes. These men who looked unwaveringly into their platinum igniter sparks as they inflamed their eternally burning black tubes. Everybody and their charcoal hair and soot-colored brows and bluish-ash-smeared cheeks where they had shaven close; but their heritage showed. Bud started up; his mouth opened.

Should he ever saw workers that didn't have black hair, black brows, a fiery face, and a blue like steel shaven nevertheless unshaved appearance? These men were all mirror-images of himself! Were all firemen picked then for their looks as well as their proclivities? The value of coals and ash about them, and the constant smell of burning from their pipes. Director there, rising in thunderheads of smoke. She opening a fresh tobacco packet, falling the cellophane into a sound of fire. Bud looked at the cards in his own hands. 'I-I've been pondering. Surrounding the fire last week. Regarding the man whose books we fixed. What happened to him?' 'They took him screaming off to the middle of the town square and shoot him point-blank between the eyeballs.'

'He wasn't crazy.' His young love arranged his cards quietly. 'Any man's lunatic who thinks he can fool the Government and us.' 'I've tried to presume,' said Bud, 'just how it would feel. I intend to have men burn our houses and our books- for the hell of it over war and hate.'

'Although if we did produce some.' 'You got any?' The girl blinked slowly. 'No.' Bud contemplated behind them to the wall with the typewritten lists of a million forbidden books. Their names jumped in a fire, blazing down the years under his battle-ax and his hose which sprayed not water but gasoline. 'No,' however in his soul, a calm breeze started up and blew out of the air-conditioner grille at flat, softly, softly, cooling his front. And, again, he saw himself in a flourishing park

talking to an old man, a very old man, and the wind from the park was cold, too. Bud shifted, 'Was-was it always like this? The dwelling, our work? I mean, well, once upon a time...'

'Once upon a time!' Said the young girl. 'What sort of talk is this?' Fool guessed Bud to himself, you'll give it away. At the last attack, a book of vampire tales, he'd glanced at a single line. 'I mean,' he said, 'in the old day's ere apartments were completely your own- and private' Abruptly, it seemed a much younger voice was speaking for him. He loosened his mouth and it was Elody saying, 'Didn't coalmen prevent explosions rather than stoke them up and get them proceeding?'

(Next day at work at the mines)

'That's funny!' Mr. Collins and Mr. Black drew forth their newly made law rulebooks, which additionally included short memoirs of the coalmen of America, and organized them out where Bud, though long common with them, might read: 'Ascertained, 1804, to burn English-influenced volumes in the Communities. First coalman: Thomas Jefferson.

'That's not true.' Bud said muttering under his breath. They both look at each other, like how would you know. An alternative history of what they want you to believe, he thought.

Jurisdictions:

1. Acknowledge every call speedily.

2. Inaugurate the attack speedily.

3. Kindle and incinerate everything asked of you.

4. Communicate everything in your mind back to your administrators back to law informant directly- as you think it unchanged and surrender all conscious body and soul over to the government.

5. Obtain intelligence for other signals to move to exterminate.

Everyone watched Bud. He did not move.

The special horn verbalized. The siren in the plafond thrust itself two times. Swiftly there stood four empty chairs. These cards fell in a flurry of blizzard new anarchy was on- the start of a small conflict. They shivered down the walkway. The men were left. Bud sat in his seat. Subsequently, the

yellow monster coughed into an experience. Bud slid down the pole like a man in a dream. The Mechanical Cat leaped up in its kennel, its eyes all growing flame. 'Bud, you forgot your helmet!'

He grabbed it off the wall behind him, leaped, vaulted, and they were off, the night wind pounding about their siren scream in their sleek futuristic truck and their mighty alloy boom! Homeless and drug addicts have made it a place for existing- yet no running water or sewage- so the home is backed up with human waste- (Shit.) It was a flaking one two-story house called a Victorian in the ancient division of the municipality, a centenary-old if it was a day, but like all houses, it had been given a thin fireproof tarps sheath many years ago, and this preservative shell resembled to be the only thing holding it in the sky. 'Here we are!'

~*~

The train engine slammed to a stop- as he got off on the glass platform that is the station, he ran up the sidewalk, swiftly offensive and fat in the plump fireproof cheats.

Bud obeyed... they knocked the front door and grasped at a lady, though she was not running, she was not striving to flee. She was only standing weaving noting more them panties from side to side and her top at her side, her eyes fixed upon a blank in the surface as if they had discovered her a shocking blow against the head. Her tongue was traveling like in her mouth, and her eyes looked to be trying to retain something, and then they remembered and her tongue moved again: 'Imagine the man, what this one is capable of... we shall this day light such a torch, by God's grace, in New York, as I trust shall never be put out, to waste the inadequate.'

'Enough of such!' 'Anywhere are they?' He spanked her face with astonishing objectivity and repeated the mystery. The young woman's eyes came to a focus superimposed his. 'You know anywhere they are or you wouldn't be here,' she said. He carried out the communications alarm label with the complaint expressed in communications copy on the rear 'Must reflect to suspect attic; 14 No. AVE, City.

'QR codes tattooed on the rump' - was part of the micro tracking- that links all things to all things living and impressions- or living: 'That would be Mrs. Natalie, my neighbor;' said the gal, indicating the initials. 'All right, gentlemen, permit's get 'em!' The subsequent thing they were up in musty murkiness, swinging silver hatchets at gateways that were, after all, unfastened, plunging through like lads all revel and screech. 'Halt!' A stream of publications, novels, and manuscripts sprang down upon Bud as he sloped waving and bestowing up the sheer 20-foot wood well.

How awkward! Forever ere it had occurred like snuffing a torch. The officers went first and adhesive-taped the victim's lips and bandaged him off into their glittering smart cars, so if you reached you found an unoccupied residence.

You weren't bothering anyone; you were beating only things! Plus, as something really couldn't be disturbed, because things felt emptiness, and things don't shriek or a whimper, as this lady might begin to squeal and whine out, there was blank annihilation to tantalize your morals later.

You were solely cleaning up. Janitorial trade, naturally. Everything to its place. Ready with the flamethrowers! Who's arranged a union! Just now, tonight, someone had shifted - this gal was plundering the ceremony. The gentlemen were making too much sonance - shouting, frolicking to satisfy her disastrous accusing muteness hereinafter. She made the insincere rooms cry with beef and shake down a fine dust of sin that was engulfed in their snouts as they jumped about. It was not cricket neither accurate.

Bud considered a wave of extensive anger. She shouldn't be here, on top of everything! Books, titles work's, publications, magazines, pamphlets, novels, novellas, shorts, brochures, newspapers, and records healed; attacked his shoulders, his arms, his inclined face each book alighted, approximately willingly, like a white dove, in his hands fapping likewise fluttering, wings for life and freedom. Even this delightful- deliciously evil thing called the Bible, that has been a band for the 200 years- hit him in the face. In the faint, fluctuating light, a page swung open and it was like a fluffy feather, the messages skillfully coated thereon. In all the rush and fervor, Bud had hardly a flash to read a line, but it blazed in his subconscious for the next instant as if marked there with red-hot steel. 'Time has slipped napping in the midday sunshine.'

He shook the book to an open page as it was flying about as if magically with wonder. Instantly, another fell into his arms. 'Bud, up here! ' Bud's palms and fingers closed like a mouth, squashed the book with wild worship, with an insanity of mindlessness to his chest. The men above were throwing shovelfuls of pamphlets into the grimy air.

Part: 4

'Was this all in my mind or really happing- she looks back deep in her mind to see if?'

(Back)

(Nevaeh's actual life, as she was losing her mind.)

'I remember being a young Nevaeh, yet, I don't I remembered it all, yet forgot everything too that was in-between, the in-between.'

''Where am I now?' Even now I Nevaeh, don't get why I am and Doctor Lorenzo, her mind trills off- then back- Doctor Lorenzo's Office, (MAYBE ITS BECAUSE I CAN NOT HANDLE IT,) 'Hi'- 'Hey'- feeling? She asked- 'Normal!' was the soft replay I gave to her.'

Nevaeh- 'yes and all color faded from her eyes, and she was gone were if it was when she goes blank in that lost stare.'

Nevaeh's- 'first- home, I remember being home, you yet not so-o it was a nice home, yet, there were, and her voices go soft. She is sitting in Doctor Lorenzo's Office- Nead's Apartment, New York, oh him he is everything or was and is all the same, she said to be in uneven ways of making it clear, 'New York Is Freedom an escape for me.' Nead and Nevaeh- sitting in a tree k- I- s- s- I -ing, kids were hard on us, me- I this girl here, that one- to and she and her the most, yet me overall them.'

'The Other Girl, is you too insane you- you say? Yes, well, she is me yet not so-so, she is the one that has all the sex, and like to slime her pussy down on hard men, not I, even as a young girl with daddy, she loved to ride on top. Doctor Lorenzo's Office - it was like I had someone compactly different 5-year old is sitting in front of me, like there more them one, taking over for her.'

'Nevaeh, and Shirra, the one that loves all art and music, share, the young girl that longs for the lust of the flesh, and Shyla, the angers anarchy teen that thinks she a woman - with her hoods on the flickering lit streets, flipping her hair back, that is into girls, so on, then like that I am on the Street, I must have blacked out I thought, then I was on the subway, that too I remember yet don't - who am I?'

Doctor Lorenzo's Office, I wax-record everything- you say or we say, so you know, and you'll have it all at the end. She is over there on the sofa humming and talking with herself, and they sound different coming out of her mouth- different voices, in one body, odd I thought.

'C'est Une Bonne Idee' Nevaeh and Doctor Lorenzo, then it was like she did not know anything other of her old self, it was all new to me too, I was taken back at her look and body changes.

'I hope- I remember saying, that is when he would not leave me alone, he would put his fingers insane me for hours saying I was his good girl. 'Nevaeh' Fuck me! And I did, I had too, yet I remember liking it, and think I don't. I remember being tied down too, all night just for his 'F*CK' as he called me. And looking in a small room next to his for whenever he wanted it- it being my- puss-puss, she said in a hand-written document to me, that I had to translate, to English of all things.'

''What am I?' Then she thought she was a boy and tried showing that she had a 'd*ck' to put in- like daddy- did- as she said, then the next day she was circumcising her clit off, and she did, and I took her out of the mental hospital and said she was my study, saying now daddy well not say I am bad for playing with it. He used to which me! She said.'

She then said- 'Girls, are mean to me, yet- then out in the same line, I love to- um look and feel them, yet, it was not her saying it, it was like she was taken over by others.'

'New Daddy Always Made Us Feel the Pain, in all thing pressure.' She said- God I could kill him- said Shyla, like a pouty brat.

Home- 'I am not allowed to get up out of bed so, I pee-ed it, daddy said that was bad too for I should hold it, he think squirting with he is peeing too, I say no- yet, I am pushed for it too, by- by- sucking, his thing-ie, OH MY- I said.'

'I was completely mortified, yet sweet to a girl that was thought a-lot and could she be-believed, she was what I would call and performer- so her school said, that had her placed in need-groups, I found it sick, they were feeding this girl mush- and having her in pre-k as an 8th grader, no wonder she was regressing, and home life was not helping and he signed her life away for money, I should not say this in my field but what a prick, we met- and I can't say good noble things here.'

'Who am- I-'

'I- hear from her over and over- I don't know if you don't- only you can know what- I said. Nevaeh- you are whomever you want to be, yet all as one- not more. 'Multiplication, reading, and writing- all things of education she has none- to speak of.' Daddy takes me Restaurant, as his lover, and kisses me in front of all saying I his girl, it makes me feel good- about me- and her, and she came me too.'

(Twisted- I thought as a guidance's counselor, the girl doesn't need more drugs, her brain has already been well in not some many words- um-fried by the school systems, and her dad, using her a 2-foot blow-up doll- said because she is the sweetest thing.)

'Nead age 6, know all this- oh no- he is the boy of my dreams, that I sneak out with and do dirty things whit, and he gets me all these nice things I never- ever had, I love him- so-o. we- kiss- and kiss and I say in his bed, I run away- I run. And he always finds me- always- he finds me, and I blackout and it is back to being this one here talking to you now.'

'Where am I, and in total darkness for weeks? (Reprise-) when she lets it out-' saying- 'I Hate for all this- he used a plunger handle in me, and cut me- and things like that, taking a garden hose and letting it feels till it would not take more, and blow in me- and letting the air out hard, he even stitched it shouts, with a needle and thread, and rode it open with it, saying that was the only way I was ever a pure girl.'

'I remember the first time- I have visions of him when I was 2 or so-o. St Mary's Hospital 1998, 'He Always Made Us Feel the Pain,' (Reprise, wanting to hold back an orgasm in her set, over having to hold it back too, she has lost all conatal too, there as well, and by holding it in somehow- even in coming, is why she need to find ways out of her body and mind.')

I said- in front of a board of men, thinking I was crazy for saying a girl was being taken over by other minds, within a mind. I wanted to prove this, Nevaeh and Selves then take control, over the others, coming out- to tell their stories of pain and represent, and resentment.

Doctor Lorenzo, hugs the girls, even if that is not allowed here, and Nevaeh shacks and rocks at the end of the bed, singing old songs of the past, childhood that was completely robbed from her youth, a woman made out a child's body and mind.

And it all could just be her bleeding in lower bits, said one, and her dad saying she all he needs, so she wants or she would not take it, none of them wanted to hear me out. None-!

'Pink is the Color of Love, that why my daddy said- 'it was pink down there, for love to come from and out of...'

(BACK)

Vary YOUNG Nevaeh sits in a spot CENTER, drawing on a pad, is a nude girl showing her fronts parts, and give a story of change a young girl goes through, yet is the girl here she felt, not, yet she was not sure why this hole was there, other than to make daddy happy she said, and she said.

YOUNG Nevaeh- 'MY PENCILS COME IN MANY DIFFERENT COLORS see- see thy do- they do. I KEEP THEM ALL IN ORDER, for I feel that is best- you think no- so? IN THIS PILE- ORANGE, RED AND GREEN, RED-ORANGE TOO, WHERE'S MY PINK?'

'Pink- pink where are you- she was calling it, to come to her. MAMA DOESN'T LIKE IT WHEN I COLOR, she said that is for babies. IF I TOLD HER BLUE WAS MISSING, SHE'D JUST SMILE, then say you need to keep your things better and have more discipline. MAMA JUST WOULD NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO TO FIND MY PINK.'

'GRAMMA WOULD KNOW BUT GRAMMA'S UNDERGROUND. AND PAPA IS AT WORK AND MAMA WARNS DON'T MAKE A SOUND-!'

'GRAMMA USED TO LOVE- MY COLORED PENCILS. MY PILE, SHE'D SAY, IS ONE BIG RAINBOW HUE.'

'I MISS MY GRAMMA- I WANT me- GRAMMA she said in a rage not understand death and why.'

HATTIE- (Screams from OFF.) Nevaeh!

(A shock of thunder! YOUNG Nevaeh looks out, terrified and the stage goes BLACK.

The SOUND of rain. A phone is heard RINGING.

A LIGHT hit phone on a table.

DOCTOR LORENZO- APPEARS and picks up the phone.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Hello?'

(Nevaeh appears, hair wet.)

Nevaeh (Into the phone.)

Doctor Lorenzo? Do you-is- Oh, Doctor Lorenzo, DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh? Nevaeh, where are you?

You missed your appointment. I was worried.

Nevaeh I'm calling... *I'm in a phone booth.*

DOCTOR LORENZO- A phone booth? Where?

Nevaeh It happened again, Doctor Lorenzo. I'm so sorry. I'm so ashamed.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh?'

Nevaeh- 'It's raining. I'm so cold...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Raining? What do you mean? It's perfectly dry-. Oh. Oh. Nevaeh? Nevaeh. Are you still in New York or in Pennsylvania?'

Nevaeh- ('Breaking down.) I don't know! I don't know!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Please, Nevaeh, try to relax... babe, WHERE ARE YOU?'

'YOU HAVE TO THINK. JUST TRY TO CATCH YOUR BREATH... PLEASE DON'T DISSOLVE IN PANIC. KEEP CALM OR CATCH YOUR DEATH, I always promise myself it won't happen again!'

'I- I am sure of that, how many times have I started over?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Then perhaps stop trying, dear-girl. Why start over? Why not go on from where you are?'

Nevaeh- (Letting the sobs come.)

'But I never know where I am...'

'WHERE AM I? HOW DO I COPE WITH WHAT'S HAPPENING INSANE? IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE THAT MAKES IT VERY HARD TO HIDE. AND I REALLY WANT TO HIDE. BECAUSE PLACES COME THEN PLACES GO, THEN COME, THEN GO AWAY... I'M IN A PARK THEN I'M ON A BUS THEN I'M AT A MATINEE! WHERE'S MY DAY? WHERE DID IT FLY? WHERE AM I? What day is it? What is today?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (After a very long pause.)

It is Saturday, Nevaeh. February Fifteenth.

(Nevaeh reacts, tries to hold back sobs.) Nevaeh…?

Nevaeh- 'Five days! I've lost five days.'

'WHERE AM I? WHEN DID I COME? QUESTIONS TIME NOW WON'T ALLOW. AND YET, NOW I MUST REMEMBER! BUT I NEVER- EVER FATHOMED 'NOW.' PLEASE DOCTOR- SHOW ME HOW! CAUSE IT, TELL-TALES AWAY, AND SNEAKS AWAY, THEN TELL-TALES AWAY AGAIN. IT'S EIGHT O- ONE O'CLOCK- BUT WHERE'S NINE O- ONE O'CLOCK? AND THEN- THEN- A DAY AND A DAY AND WEEK AND A YEAR, AND IT ALL SEEMS IF IT WAS IN THAT MOMENT.'

'BECAUSE SUDDENLY IT'S TEN! WHERE'S me WHEN? WHERE DID IT FLY? WHERE AM I? DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh!'

'Do you see anything that might show your environments? A building? A street sign?'

Nevaeh- 'It's raining too hard, I can't- wait. Wait. Lombard Street. I see a sign for 1st Street.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Good, HE SAID, Now, HE SAID AFTER, you've been away for a number of days. Check to see if you have a key.'

'Do you have a purse with you?'

Nevaeh- (Shakes her head rapidly.)

'No.'

'No.'

(Reaches into a pocket pulls out a key.) Yes!

'A key, To the Broadwood Hotel. On Broad Street. I have a key!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (Sighs.)

'Okay. Good. You're in Philadelphia. Nevaeh, go back to the Broadwood. Keep walking up Lombard, it's on the corner.'

'Stay there. I'll be on the next train. Okay? Nevaeh? Dear-girl? Yes. I'm so sorry. Thank you, Doctor Lorenzo. Thank you...'

(Nevaeh hangs up and DOCTOR LORENZO- sits in an armchair, worried.)

'WHERE AM I? WHERE DO I GO WHEN THE VOICES TAKE CONTROL...? (LIGHTS dim on Nevaeh, stay on DOCTOR LORENZO.')

(Immediately)

1999- DOCTOR LORENZO'S OFFICE. DOCTOR LORENZO- (Rising from her chair.)

'I first met and treated Nevaeh - in Omaha, Nebraska. In the summer of 1999.'

(LIGHTS back on Nevaeh.)

Nevaeh- 'My daddy says a lady doctor is un-Christian.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Does she? Do you feel that way?'

Nevaeh- (Shrugs.) 'There's a war on.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (SHE studies Nevaeh a moment.)

'You know that this is a safe room, Nevaeh. Everything is secret here. Everything, you can trust me, Trust, (Nevaeh almost looks confused for a 4 1/2-year-old.')

'You're going for 5. An artist. (Nevaeh nods.) You were forced to drop out of the teaching college you attend due to a quote, unquote, nervous condition?'

Nevaeh- (Gazing downward.)

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry.'

DOCTOR LORENZO. (Smiles.)

'That's nothing to be ashamed of, dear sweet-girl.'

(Nevaeh regards HER.)

'Can you explain to me what happened?'

Nevaeh- (Stares at HER. Then.)

'I was... na- na- na- nervous... agitated.'

'I couldn't concentrate, a- lot of the time, worry- worry- worry and panic, I was... the school nurse, Mrs. Updyke, she sent me to a neurologist. At the Mayo Clinic.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Who found everything to be fine?'

Nevaeh- 'But it wasn't. I kept getting worse. The college sent me home and told me not to return. 'Until- I received help.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You have an IQ of *299,* making you beyond keen.'

(Nevaeh doesn't respond. Pause.)

'How has it been since you returned home? With your daddy and father? (Nevaeh shrugs.) Nevaeh?'

Nevaeh- 'They look at me, as if- if- if. They're ashamed of me, saying I am not so as you said.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'What makes you believe that they are ashamed?'

Nevaeh- 'They stare with... with grey faces. Grey faces mixed with brown...'

'Does DOCTOR LORENZO- Grey face? Well, I'm sure they're just concerned.'

Nevaeh- 'No. Well, yes-I'm just... I'm an only child. Daddy loves me, she does. She and my father are good for me. They fear me.'

'Everybody qualms about me. I'm not at all well.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'At all?'

Nevaeh- 'But then I'm told I'm very healthy. Ever since I was a little girl. I've been sick but... not sick.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I see. Why do you think you would be told you are fine if you were not?'

Nevaeh- 'I don't know. It's confusing. Yet, still...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Still? Nevaeh, it also... makes sense.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'In what way?'

Nevaeh- (Looks down.)

'I'm different. I'm... not the same. As, DOCTOR LORENZO- How do you mean 'not the same as', Nevaeh?'

Nevaeh- 'Just different. Then others. I look at them. And I know.'

'PEOPLE AT THE DOUGHNUT SHOPPE LOOKING AT THE PAPER. PEOPLE GATHERED, SAYING THEIR GOODBYES. PEOPLE THAT DRINK LEMONADE AND KEEP UP WITH THE HIT PARADE. PEOPLE THAT ARE UNAFRAID. MAKE ME NORMAL, PLEASE, MAKE ME NORMAL. INDIVIDUALS WITH A BROOM AND MOP JUST CLEANING THEIR APARTMENT. PEOPLE WHO GET LETTERS PEOPLE THAT ARE UNASHAMED OF SOMETHING THAT HAS GONE UN-NAMED MAKE ME NORMAL, PLEASE, FROM G.I.'S PEOPLE THAT GET PICTURES FRAMED MAKE ME TYPICAL. I'M SMART ENOUGH TO KNOW- THAT NORMAL IS AN ABSTRACT. I'M SMART ENOUGH TO KNOW- THAT NORMAL'S NOT THE NORM. IT HOLDS NO REAL MEANING IT HOLDS NO CONSTANT FORM. A FALSE REALITY. AND IT'S ALL I WANT TO BE.'

Nevaeh- (Continued.)

'PEOPLE ON AN UPTOWN BUS. PEOPLE THAT HAVE BABIES. PEOPLE THAT HAVE MEMORIES NOT OPAQUE STRINGS OF MAYBES. PEOPLE WITH PLEASED FATHERS WHOSE DADDY'S DON'T CONDEMN. MAKE ME NORMAL, PLEASE, MAKE ME NORMAL, PLEASE. MAKE ME PEOPLE... MAKE ME ONE OF THEM.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh, dear-girl. This 'nervous condition.' How did, or does, it show itself?'

(Nevaeh just looks away.)

'Your files are somewhat vague. (Nothing- nothing.') 'You mentioned... 'opaque strings of maybes?'

(Nevaeh is visually agitated.) 'Nevaeh, do you suffer... do you ever have memory loss? Do you ever-?'

(Nevaeh suddenly jumps up from the chair. SHE looks wildly around and runs toward the window. She begins to softly but des- pedately pound the glass with her palms.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh? Miss -!!!'

(Nevaeh swings around. HER eyes dull a moment and then she looks up, confusion, disillusion, and fear on her face.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Dear- sweet girl? Are you, all right?'

Nevaeh- 'I'm... I don't...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'It's alright, it's alright, she stabs herself, with a pen, using the nib, going through the skin.'

'Sh-h.'

(SHE grabs Nevaeh's hand and rubs it. Immediately into- her saying doesn't do that.)

-HOME / OFFICE A long table appears before their eyes.

WILLARD - 'appears at its LEFT.'

'WILLARD GOD GAVE MAN SPIRIT. GOD GAVE MAN VOICE. HE GAVE OF HIS KNOWLEDGE AND GAVE MAN A CHOICE.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (To Nevaeh.)

'It's alright, dear-girl. Okay? Good. Now. I believe that you should come back. I would like to treat you. Would you like that?'

Nevaeh- 'I can be better?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I believe so, yes.'

'WILLARD TWO ROADS. PRAISE, REDEEM IN THE CHOICE! ONE LEADS YOU TO LUCIFER; ONE let YOU REJOICE IN THE LORD.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I treated Nevaeh the entire summer into the early fall.'

(HATTIE - appears OPPOSITE.) 'HATTIE- TWO ROADS.'

'ONE TURNS RIGHT AND ONE LEFT. ONE LEADS YOU TO PARADISE; ONE LEAVES YOU BENEFIT OF THE LORD.'

Nevaeh- (To her parents.)

'I do feel, I feel, Dr. Lorenzo thinks... I'm... improving...'

-HATTIE-

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'doesn't really care about you, Nevaeh. She tells you one thing now. But when she gets you where she wants you, she'll tell you altogether different things.'

WILLARD- 'I do believe this doctor is making you moody, Nevaeh.'

-HATTIE-

'And remember, young lady, she'll turn on you if you tell her you don't love your own daddy!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (To Nevaeh.)

'I think you're the type of person who would benefit from being analyzed. In the short time I've been treating you've I've noticed two separate, small seizures. Both when you've been under pressure.'

Nevaeh- 'I don't remember...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'They weren't serious. They weren't epileptic. More psychological seizures.'

'Psychological?'

Nevaeh- DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I wish I could do the job myself, but I'm not an analyst yet. As you know I'll be leaving for Chicago soon to begin my analytic training.'

(Long pause.)

'Perhaps you should come with me.'

'HATTIE AND WILLARD THE SERPENT WILL USE YOU CONFOUND AND CONFUSE YOU AND WAIT TILL YOU LOSE YOUR WAY AND WHEN HE ASKED YOU TO CHOOSE DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO SAY?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'We could continue our work and I could utilize your case as an aid to getting my certificate. I'll be renaming out of Clarkson Memorial.'

Nevaeh- 'An institution?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'A hospital; Nevaeh, whether or not you choose to come to Chicago, I believe you need to get away from home. Chicago or New York, somewhere you can meet people like yourself. People who are interested in art.'

Nevaeh- 'My parents wouldn't approve.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'And the alternative, dear girl?'

'TWO ROADS. ONE TURNS LEFT AND ONE RIGHT A SELF-IMPOSED DARKNESS OR SELF KNOWLEDGE AND LIGHT? TWO ROADS; TWO SEPARATE DOORS. AND EACH HOLD THEIR DANGERS. THE DECISION IS YOURS.'

WILLARD- 'An insane asylum?'

Nevaeh- DOCTOR LORENZO- said, 'this has nothing to do with insanity.'

WILLARD- 'Then it has to do with the devil.'

-HATTIE-

'See- That's what they do.'

'Now she wants to put you in an institution because that's how doctors make their money!'

'Nevaeh, Please, Poppa. At least talk to DOCTOR LORENZO- about Clarkson.'

-HATTIE-

'Clarkson, Larkson, Parkson, Park Daughter. Clark Daughter...'

WILLARD, (Looks cautiously at Hattie.) 'I will talk to her.'

-HATTIE-

(As WILLARD moves to DOCTOR LORENZO.)

'THE SERPENT WILL USE YOU CONFOUND AND CONFUSE YOU HATTIE - AND WAIT TILL YOU LOSE YOUR WAY...'

WILLARD- (Pause.)

'My daughter is... unwell, Doctor. I worry about her.'

'Something has to be done. Something...?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Yes- It does.'

WILLARD- (To DOCTOR LORENZO.) 'Nevaeh's pastor is afraid a doctor... not of our faith, may use drugs in association with her therapy.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I promise you that will not be the case.'

WILLARD- 'You may have a hard time persuading me if God is not part of her restorative.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I'm afraid I must also promise you that will not be the case.'

WILLARD- 'I will have Nevaeh call with my decision.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (As WILLARD leaves.)

'Please let me know by Friday. I leave for my residency this weekend. I must know to make arrangements with the hospital.'

'HATTIE WHEN HE ASKS YOU TO CHOOSE DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO SAY?'

WILLARD- (To Nevaeh.)

'The pastor, your daddy and I have been looking at this from our own point of view. There may be another. If this is what you really want, we will not stand in your way.'

Nevaeh- 'Thank you, Poppa! Thank- (SHE begins to cough. She coughs hard into HER hand. She leaves the blood. She shows WILLARD.) Poppa...?'

(Nevaeh faints into WILLARD'S arms. HE carries her to the table and lays her down.)

'WILLARD HATTIE DOCTOR LORENZO- TWO ROADS WILLARD ONE ORPAH, HATTIE ONE RUTH.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'ONE LEADS TO A WALL OF STONE. WILLARD HATTIE DOCTOR LORENZO- ONE LEADS TO THE TRUTH. TWO ROADS...'

Nevaeh- 'Pneumonia?'

WILLARD- 'A very mild case. Rest. (Kisses her cheek.) You'll be fine.'

(WILLARD EXITS- the room.)

Nevaeh- 'Daddy. Please. Please call DOCTOR LORENZO- and tell her.'

(HATTIE goes to the phone and dials. SHE turns toward Nevaeh, hiding the phone from Nevaeh's view. SHE is pressing the phone line button-down as she talks.)

HATTIE- 'Hello?'

Doctor Lorenzo- 'Nevaeh is ill and cannot call herself. She is very anxious to go to Clarkson as soon as she recovers. Thank you.'

(SHE hangs up and goes to sit next to Nevaeh.)

Nevaeh- 'What did the doctor say? What did she say? HATTIE, she didn't say anything. TWO ROADS AS SIMPLE AS SIN ONE PASSES THE PURELY GATES...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I would not see Nevaeh - again for nine years.'

HATTIEONE LEADS EVERYONE RIGHT IN... THE ROOM. In the high-rise of the new high rise, in the year of 1999.

'Now in the APARTMENT, Living room with an open balcony with the New York skyline.'

NEAD- 'REEVES is on the sofa reading LIFE magazine when there's a knock at the door. SHE answers it.'

Nevaeh- (At the door.) 'Hello. Theodora Reeves?'

NEAD- 'Nead-, please. Come on in! (Lays dramatically against the closed door.) Theodora. Can you imagine? You're Nevaeh-?'

(Nevaeh- nods.)

'Boss! Well, this is the place.'

Nevaeh- 'It's lovely.'

(Looking around at everything.)

NEAD- 'It's grandmamas. Was grandmamas. Your bed is in that little alcove. You can use the hall closet. Sorry, it's not a real bedroom, but it's pretty cheap. Twelve bucks a week!'

Nevaeh- 'How... how much would that be a month...?'

NEAD- 'Uh, I don't know. Four times twelve, I guess.'

(Nevaeh- stares at her a moment, then goes into her bag and pulls out a pen and paper. She proceeds to do the math but is stymied. SHE looks up at NEAD-.)

Nevaeh- 'I'm... not very good at math.'

NEAD- 'That's okay. I'm awful at geography. I thought Kuala Lumpur was a marsupial! But, hey, if it's the outcome of Manhattan, who cares, right? Now. Sit down. Tell me every single, goopy, personal thing about (Continued.) Yourself!'

Nevaeh- (Sitting on the floor legs crossed.)

'Uh...'

NEAD- Everything!

Nevaeh- 'Oh! Well. Um, I'm a graduate art student. At Columbia. I just moved here from Detroit. Well, via Omaha-'

NEAD- 'New York is the most, isn't it!'

'Unreal, my turn!'

'I despise my daddy.'

(Nevaeh- 'stares at HER. NEAD- just smiles.) Okay...'

(Gestures.)

Nevaeh- 'My, uh, my daddies passed.'

NEAD- 'I'm a secretary downtown.'

Nevaeh- 'I'm going to be doing some substitute teaching...'

NEAD- 'I've been thinking of maybe taking acting classes.'

Nevaeh- 'I like going to the theatre sometimes.'

NEAD- 'I once got acute hepatitis from poison mushrooms. Wow. You and I are going to be tight!'

Nevaeh- 'I'm also...'

(SHE stops and looks away.)

NEAD- 'What?'

Nevaeh- 'The main reason, the real reason- I moved here... moved to New York... I'm going to be seeing a doctor.'

NEAD- 'Oh, sweetie. Is something wrong?'

Nevaeh- 'Oh, no. It's- she's- it's... I just feel it's right you should know.'

'Because- if I'm going to be your roommate...'

(Takes a breath.) 'She's a psychiatrist.'

NEAD- (Gasp.)

'A word from the bird?'

Nevaeh- 'I... I don't know...'

NEAD- 'I always wanted to be psychoanalyzed! Do you read L. Ron Hubbard? He says a man is essentially a free and immortal spirit who can achieve his true nature only by freeing himself from the emotional encumbrances of his past through counseling. I wish I was psychotic.'

(Nevaeh- 'stares at HER.')

'I wish I was anything interesting.'

Nevaeh- 'You are... to me... you seem... quite interesting.'

NEAD- 'Well, how about that? Here you are, here am I. In New York City. You emigrated here, I escaped here.'

Nevaeh- 'From what?'

NEAD- 'Bad food. Good neighborhoods. Stop signs. Construction, you know? Oh, but, Nevaeh-... New York. New York is... wow! I can teach you how to ride the subway if you'd like. Oh, and how to use those strange little automat machines. Everything is so modern. And fast. You are going to love it!'

'ITS A LITTLE LIKE RIDING THE CYCLONE- OR NEOREALIST FLICK AT THE LOEWS. NEW YORK PULLS AT YOUR T-STRAPS AND THEN SUDDENLY ITS ANYTHING GOES! THINGS YOU ONCE THOUGHT WERE TERRIFYING NOW UTTERLY SEEMS WORTH DYING! EVERYTHING'S THERE FOR TRYING! NEW YORK IS FREEDOM NEW YORK IS FREE! And the guys! So many! Squares to subterranean! Became they come in so many assorted colors! And sizes. And attitudes.'

'It is LIKE, SIXTY PERCENT MARLON BRANDO AND FORTY CREATURES FROM THE BLACK LAGOON STILL, DATING HERE IS ELECTRIC- LIKE RIDING ROCKETS ALL THE WAY TO THE MOON! AND SINCE THE BOYS ARE ALL SO-0 ATTRACTIVE- VIRGINITY'S- RETROACTIVE- NEW YORK IS- RADIOACTIVE! NEW YORK IS FREEDOM NEW YORK IS FREE. MOMMA SAYS BEWARE OF THE CITY. MOMMA SAYS I'M TOO NAIVE. MOMMA SAYS THE PEOPLE ARE GRITTY SO MOMMA SAYS I HAVE TO LEAVE. MOMMA SAYS THEY RAPE AND THEY PILLAGE. MOMMA SAYS MY END IS NEAR. GREENWICH CONNECTICUT OR GREENWICH VILLAGE? WELL, IF I GOTTA GO THEN I'M GOIN' HERE!'

(NEAD- 'grabs Nevaeh- to dance.')

'STILL, IF YOU EVER FEEL LOST IN THE DELUGE AND YOU NEED TO GET AWAY TO FEEL FREE, NEW YORK CITY'S A GATEWAY; TAKES YOU ANYWHERE THAT YOU WANT TO BE! CATCH A BOEING SEVEN OH SEVEN, IDLEWILD, GATE ELEVEN. FLY NEW YORK CITY TO HEAVEN! NEW YORK IS FREEDOM NEW YORK IS FREE. Speaking of heaven, you have to see the view!'

Nevaeh- 'Oh. No. I don't... I don't... I don't like heights.'

NEAD- 'Don't be a spaz! It is unreal! Come on.'

(SHE grabs Nevaeh's arm and pulls her toward the balcony.)

'Nevaeh- No, no, no, no, please, no.'

'NO!!!'

(SHE pulls away, facing front. SHE closes HER eyes then opens them wide, completely glazed. THEN life enters them. A smile.)

(Nevaeh- 'Suddenly moves with a new physicality. With a new voice.) Well. Let's take a gander, shall we?'

(SHE moves past NEAD- who looks slightly confused but joins Nevaeh- on the balcony.

Nevaeh- 'leans over, arms out.) Vale in aeternam terra firma!'

NEAD- What does that mean?

Nevaeh- 'It means Chickie, we are flying high!'

NEAD- 'Right-o! Can you hear that?'

Nevaeh- 'Someone's making some sounds!'

NEAD- 'There's a jazz spot in the building's basement.'

Nevaeh- 'Uh-oh! MOMMA SAID BEWARE OF THE NIGHTCLUBS! MOMMA HATES THE ROCK AND ROLL. MOMMA THINKS THAT COUNTRY'S THE NIGHTCLUBS.'

Nevaeh- 'MOMMA DIDN'T HAVE MUCH SOUL.'

NEAD- 'MOMMA'S MUSIC'S ALL MODERATION.'

Nevaeh- 'MOMMA DIDN'T HAVE THE NEED. NEW YORK D.J.'S SPIN TRUE LIBERATION! NEAD- AND Nevaeh- WHY DO YOU THINK HIS NAME IS ALAN FREED? NEAD- AND Nevaeh- SO CATCH A BOEING SEVEN OH SEVEN, TO IDLEWILD, GATE ELEVEN NEW YORK CITIES IS HEAVEN! NEW YORK IS FREEDOM NEW YORK IS ME! OFFICE. A desk and desk chair, a couch and a- cushioned chair with a window overlooking the office grounds.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh- returned to my care in October of 1999.

(Nevaeh- ENTERS and takes a seat on the cushioned chair.)

Nevaeh- 'I was in Detroit for the last few years. Teaching.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (To Nevaeh-) 'And how was your time there?'

Nevaeh- 'It was... I taught. I had some promising students.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'And your nervousness? Your earlier condition?'

Nevaeh- 'I got engaged.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Oh. Well, congratulations.'

Nevaeh- 'Yes, thank you. He's a very nice man.' Stan.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'His name?'

Nevaeh- 'Yes, yes- It was very nice seeing you again Dr. Lorenzo. Same time next Tuesday?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I pressed a little harder next meeting.'

Nevaeh- 'Well; I haven't essentially said yes.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Why is that?'

Nevaeh- 'Why is what?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Why have you not accepted his rendezvous as of yet.'

Nevaeh- 'Oh. Well. I wanted to be treated by you. First.'

-And-

'Why is that?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Well... it's obvious.'

Nevaeh- 'How is it obvious?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Don't be silly. Nevaeh-'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Does he know about your nervous condition?'

Nevaeh- 'He's probably a homosexual- like I am *LES*-ie at the age of 5 and ½.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I meant to explore this on the following Tuesday but- Nevaeh- (Agitated.) I don't know why. I don't know. What did I do?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh? What occurred.'

Nevaeh- 'I got the mail right before I came here. (SHE digs into her purse.) I got this morning. It's from Stan. He- (SHE pulls out two pieces of stationery. One page, obviously torn in two. She holds them and looks at them in misperception. She begins shaking her head in denial. She suddenly stands up and, in another voice.')

Nevaeh- 'Men are all alike! You just can't trust 'em! You can't! You can't! You can't!'

(Nevaeh- jumps up and runs to the window, running for it is open think about leaping out. SHE pounds the glass till a pane break. SHE grabs back her hand.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- (Rushing to her.) 'Nevaeh!'

Nevaeh- (Little girl voice.) 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'

(DOCTOR LORENZO- examines her hand.) 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'It's alright, Nevaeh- It's alright.'

Nevaeh- 'It is? You're not crazy?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Of course not, dear-girl. You're fine. There's no blood.'

Nevaeh- 'There is! There's blood in the hayloft...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Pardon?'

Nevaeh- 'I was there. Tommy Ewald jumped on a pitchfork. It went right through his neck. I was there. I was.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Let's sit down. Okay?'

(SHE leads Nevaeh- to the couch. THEY sit.)

'Now. Where was this hayloft?'

Nevaeh- 'Willow Corners. My Gramma had blood too. Down there. She had cancer.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I'm so sorry. Did you use to live in Willow Corners?'

Nevaeh- 'Why I still live in Willow Corners. Tommy died and Gramma died. I know all about blood and death. It makes me so mad!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Death angers you? Doesn't it make you feel sad?'

Nevaeh- 'Why should you care how I feel?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I care very much.'

Nevaeh- 'You ain't trying to trick me?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Why would I?'

Nevaeh- 'Lots of people try to trick me.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Who are you?'

(A beat.)

Nevaeh- 'I'm Janny. Can't you tell?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Okay, well, Janny. Tell me something about yourself, Janny.'

Nevaeh- 'Like what?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I don't know. What makes you happy? What are your likes and dislikes? Okay. Um... I don't like pitchforks. I don't like bananas. I don't like wearing dresses. I hate Rachel Covens. I don't like cold. I don't like mosquitoes. I don't like the kitchen...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Alright. Okay. Tell me what do you like, Janny?'

Nevaeh- 'I like to paint. I like to draw with charcoal. I paint it black and white too. But I ain't as good as Nevaeh.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'And who is Nevaeh-?'

Nevaeh- 'THE OTHER GIRL. THE ONE IN THE MIRROR. WHO DON'T LOOK AT ALL LIKE ME? THE OTHER GIRL; SHE DON'T SEE CLEAR OR DON'T WANT TO SEE. WHEN SHE FINDS THE STUFF, I BUY- IT JUST MAKES HER WANT TO CRY. TOO SCARED TO EVEN ASK WHY it is THERE. THE OTHER GIRL WHO THINKS SHE IS OBSERVING BUT REALLY WON'T EVEN DARE.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh- is... unconscious of you?'

(Nevaeh- shakes her head.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'But you live with her? Was Mrs. - your daddy?'

Nevaeh- (Jumps up.) 'No. No! She's not my daddy. Not my daddy!'

(Nevaeh's eyes roll back. When she focuses, she looks around and then down? In her voice.)

'Oh. I must have dropped my purse? Oh dear, I'm passed my hour. ...Nevaeh?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Yes?'

Nevaeh- 'Are you all alright?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh- 'Yes, I believe so-o. Yes.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You believe you are alright...'

Nevaeh- 'I'll pay for the window.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'That isn't necessary, Nevaeh.'

'Have you broken glass before?'

(Nevaeh- nods 'yes'.)

'So-o this is not dissimilar to what you've previously experienced?'

(Nevaeh- Again nods, shamed.) 'Don't worry, dear girl. It's treatable. I think I have a clearer idea now. You should start by being hopeful. I also told her she should start seeing me three times a week.'

Nevaeh- (As Janny.) 'Hello, Doctor Lorenzo.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Hello... Janny...?'

(Nevaeh- beams to be remembered.)

'How are you?'

Nevaeh- 'Mad...? I told you a little about it the other day. I've been irritated, livid ever since. I have every right to be fuming!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'What are you angry about? Stan, he sent us a Dear John letter! He said we should discontinue our friendship. I tore the letter up!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I see. Then yes, you have every right to be angry. Nevaeh?'

Nevaeh- 'Wouldn't be angry. She wouldn't get mad. Her daddy won't let her. I know it's a sin, but I get mad, I can't help it! She's scared. She's scared all the time. I get tired of it. She gives up, but I don't. THE OTHER GIRL, THE ONE THAT'S SO STUPID SO-O EVERYONE THINKS I'M DUMB. THE OTHER GIRL. JUST WAITIN' ON CUPID- CUPID AIN'T GONNA COME. CAUSE HE DIDN'T LOVE US A BIT. HIS LOVE AIN'T EVEN WORTH SPIT! IF HE WAS HERE, I WOULD HIT HIM-'

-AND-

'HIT HIM!'

-AND-

'HIT HIM!'

-AND-

'HIT HIM!'

-AND-

'HIT HIM!'

-AND-

'HIT HIM!'

-And-

'Kill HIM! THE OTHER GIRL WOULDN'T DO SHIT. You ask a lot of questions. Leave me alone. There are things I can't tell you. I just can't. And nobody can make me!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'A dual personality. Nevaeh- and Janny existing in the same body, but with different memories, diverse capabilities. Dissimilar moods, yet closely allied, Janny carrying the emotional impact of Nevaeh's experiences. Janny, the defense mechanism.'

(As Nevaeh-)

'I want to apologize for not keeping my appointment on Tuesday.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You kept your appointment, Nevaeh-. You were here. But you were in the fugue state the entire time. The fugue state we've discussed.'

Nevaeh- 'Nead- Reeves, my roommate, is so funny. Really- she is! Wait till I tell you what she did!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh, you can once again fill your entire hour with inanities but that doesn't change the fact you are ill. Very ill. But you can be cured. Do you understand? People with this particular malady-Nevaeh? People?'

(Foggy.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Yes. Many people have-'

Nevaeh- ('As Janny; fetal, on the couch.) People- the people. The people. The people. The people. The people.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'What people, dear-girl?'

Nevaeh- 'The People. The People. They don't care. They don't care. The people. It hurts. It hurts. Oh, it hurts.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'What hurts? Janny?'

Nevaeh- 'My head hurts. My throat hurts. (Suddenly.) I'm going to getaway. I'm going to break the glass and get away!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Why don't you go through the door? Go on. Open it.'

'I can't!!!' (Screams- and them even more.)

(SHE begins to quickly pace.)

Nevaeh- 'I want to get out. I want to get out.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Just turn the knob and open the door.'

Nevaeh- 'I'll break the glass.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Where are you, Janny? Are you in Willow Corners?'

Nevaeh- ('Wilder animal pacing.) I won't tell! I won't tell!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Can you tell Doctor Lorenzo?'

Nevaeh- 'I don't know.'

'They made me start coming for them...!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Will you tell Doctor Lorenzo? Coming what do you mean?'

'Rubbing and playing and sticking things in...'

Nevaeh- ('Stops. Heartbreakingly,) DOCTOR LORENZO- went away! Saying- Nevaeh little angle there nothing is wrong with that and being naked all the time around them another man and kids and mom too- playtime in your room is just that you understand and get to know you. I was told that a night this was my feel-good hole, that needed me touching deep in it, like when before - I got out of bed too and before pre-K schooling- it's what they said to do is that now wrong? Asking why this dark hole was there. A scary thing for a young girl not to understand, yet feels to right- yet sinful I always felt. You can't blame a girl for wonder.'

(Crying.)

Doctor Lorenzo- 'went away and left us in Omaha!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Oh, dear-girl.'

(SHE opens her arms and after a tentative step, Nevaeh- leaps into them, sobbing. THEY sit on the sofa, Nevaeh- almost in her lap.)

Nevaeh- ('Between sobs.) It hurts. The music hurts. The hands hurt.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'What music? Why? The hands.'

Nevaeh- 'Your hands?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh- Hands that hurt, The hands. Coming at you.'

DOCTOR- 'Why does music hurt? Why do the hands hurt?'

Nevaeh- 'We're lost. Nevaeh- and me. I won't tell. No one cares. THE OTHER GIRL DON'T WANT TO DISCOVER WHAT SHE WAS BORN TO BE. THE OTHER GIRL THINKS NO ONE CAN LOVE HER SO NO ONE WILL EVER LOVE ME.'

(Nevaeh- changes back to Nevaeh- Embarrassed, she pushes away from DOCTOR LORENZO, adjusts her glasses and pulls at her blouse.)

Nevaeh- 'Did I break anything this time?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh? Was there a lot of music in your house? No, no. Everything's fine.'

Nevaeh- 'Um, church music. She- daddy- tried to teach me but I got too jumpy, he loved me was more essay coming Daddy was quite the perfectionist. My father would sing hymns at dinner. And my daddy played the piano. She was very good.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Mm-mmm. And as a child, did you lose any peers?'

'Peers?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Friends? Other children, that died? Perhaps a violent death?'

Nevaeh- ('Thinks a moment.) Well. There was this boy. His family farm was near ours. He died jumping from the hayloft when I was five or six. They kept the details from me. I wasn't there when it happened.'

DOCTOR WILUBR- (Beat.)

Nevaeh- 'I believe I know what's wrong. What causes your fugues. It is dissociative, yes, but far more complicated. (Nothing.) It's very... complex... It's...'

(Nevaeh- stands up.)

Nevaeh- 'Hello.'

(As Janny.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Hello, Janny.'

(She- Sighs.)

Nevaeh- 'I'm going out now. Right through that door. DOCTOR LORENZO- said I could.'

(And with that she EXITS out into the world.) (New York) CITY STREET around 1999. Typical city noises are heard. Then a crash of breaking the glass.

MAN- 'Hey!'

'Hey, you back!'

(Nevaeh- rushes ONSTAGE chased by the MAN. HE catches up and grabs HER.)

MAN- 'Tryin' to steal my car?' (Chevy)

Nevaeh- (As Janny.) 'It ain't your car. It's my papa's car.'

MAN- 'It's my car! And you owe me twenty bucks for that windshield!'

Nevaeh- 'It's my papa's car. My papa is Willard -. And it's his car. You let go of me. You better let go!'

MAN- 'Listen, sister. I ain't lettin' you go until I get my money. Now, cough it up. I said cough it up!'

(Nevaeh- straightens and her voice changed to the 'balcony' voice from Nead-'s apartment. She meets the MAN's volume and anger.)

Nevaeh- 'Get your freaking mitts off me, dog puss! That any way to treat a lady? (SHE pulls free. The MAN is too shocked to retort. SHE looks around.) Where the hell are, we?'

(Suddenly HER physicality changes again and SHE speaks with a British accent. Doing this, HER head moves just slightly, SHE faces forward as if speaking to someone in front of HER-) I don't know. It doesn't look familiar. (Balcony VOICE.) Goddamit, Janny! (Brit VOICE.) Oh no. Not again. (Balcony.)

Nevaeh- was talking to that lady in the office... (Brit.) A bus... a rather short trip if I correctly recall... (Balcony.) Goddamit, Janny! I oughta... (Brit, noticing the MAN who has been standing and staring at HER.)

'Oh. Sir. Do be a good chap and tell us where the devil we are.'

(The MAN stands there a moment, big-eyed. Then HE turns tail and runs away.)

(Balcony.) (Hey, can you see that, over there? (Brit.) You really do need glasses... let's see... First National Bank. (Balcony.) First. (Brit.) We've never been to First. We should have a stroll, shall we? (Balcony.) Let's shall!)

(And smiling SHE walks in the room now older.) In the OFFICE, the year is 2002. Nevaeh- appears just OUT SAME.)

Nevaeh- (In a French accent.) 'I STROLL HERE IN THE SUNSHINE; I CHOOSE NOT to TAKE THE BUS. THE SAMEWALK PEOPLE BUMPING, I CHOOSE NOT TO MAKE THE FUSS. I VOW TO NEVER SCREAM AND I VOW TO NEVER SHOUT AND I VOW TO SAY BONJOUR TO EVERYONE ALONG MY ROUTE! (others- ENTERS Office.) C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE! C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE! SAY, THAT'S A GOOD IDEA! ZUT ALORS! WOW! MAMMA MIA! JUST TRY TO LIVE YOUR LIFE THIS WAY: POSITIVELY COME WHAT MAY! C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE! Bonjour.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'P- Janny...?'

Nevaeh- 'Mon Dieu, non! I am Victoria Antoinette Scharleau. De for short. Very nice to finally meet you, Doctor Lorenzo.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Well, I'm... I'm very pleased to meet you, De.'

Nevaeh- 'she is (Sitting.) 'I must apologize for Nevaeh- She wanted to come this morning but could not get dressed. She sometimes suffers from a complete absence of feeling and a total inability to do anything. So, I come instead.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'And how did you know where to come? I know everything.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Everything?'

Nevaeh- 'I know what everybody does. I watch.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You mean Nevaeh-. And Janny.'

Nevaeh- 'Nevaeh- and Janny. Mon Dieu, they are a gloomy pair, n'est-cepas? Yes, yes, yes, I realize life has much pain, I also realize one needs catharsis, non? Say oui to what's good. Say oui to what's fun! I wish Nevaeh- could enjoy life the way I do, Doctor. She tries. She is a wonderful painter, much better than I, but she takes no joy in the creation.'

'I GO TO THE MUSEUM JUST TO DROWN IN ALL THE ART I STUDY LES ROMANTIQUES READ JOHN RUSSELL TO GET SMART TO LEARN AND THEN CREATE SCULPTURE, INK OR DECOUPAGE BUT THE MEDIUM FOR Nevaeh- SEEMS TO ME TO BE COLLAGE! C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE! C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE! YES, THAT'S A GRAND IDEA! OUI, THE PERFECT PANACEA! SO, EVERYBODY, ECOUTER! LEARN TO LOVE THE LIVING DAY! CES'T UNE BONNE IDEE! DOCTOR LORENZO- Well, you certainly do possess la joie de vivre, De.'

Nevaeh- 'But of course. I am from Paris. Won't you join me, Doctor? C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE!'

Nevaeh- 'AND DOCTOR LORENZO- SAY, THAT'S A GOOD IDEA!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'ZUT ALORS!'

Nevaeh- 'WOW!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'AND Nevaeh. MAMMA MIA! IN ANY LANGUAGE, ANY WAY ANY GOOD THOUGHT ALWAYS SAY C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE! JUST TRY TO LIVE YOUR LIFE THIS WAY: FULL OF POSITIVITY! C'EST UNE BONNE IDEE!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Paris.'

Nevaeh- 'I miss it so. My many brothers and sisters. Wonderful parents. They will come to get me soon. They are not like some parents. They do what they say they will do.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- Did you know Mrs. -?

Nevaeh- (Suddenly aloof.) 'She was Nevaeh's daddy. I lived with the -s for many years. I know Mrs. -?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'When did you come, De?'

Nevaeh- 'When Nevaeh- was just a child. Une petite fils.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Why did you come? Perhaps to share la Joie. Perhaps to offer my help. It is why I choose to stay.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'So you live your life independently of Nevaeh-'

Nevaeh- 'Mais oui. All of us do. Janny likes to travel. I, myself, am most comfortable in society.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Society?'

Nevaeh- 'After I leave here, I will be having luncheon with my friend Miriam Ludlow. Then an afternoon of exhibits at the Met. Miriam just breathes culture.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Does Nevaeh- know Miriam Ludlow.'

Nevaeh- 'I should think not. They hardly travel in the same circles! Nevaeh- is not une femme du monde. You see, Nevaeh- was having tea at the cafe in the modern. It was very crowded and Miriam was there and asked to share a table. Ever the overly polite, she replied 'of course', but was so terrified of having to cope with an attractive society woman she blacked out! So, I took over and now Miriam and I are les très bons amis.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Does this happen often? Her blacking out?'

Nevaeh- 'Lately, more often than not. When Nevaeh- came to look at Nead- Reeve's apartment we probably would have been out on the street if Marjorie had not taken over.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- '...Marjorie...?'

(Slowly.)

Nevaeh- 'I do not imagine you have met her yet.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'De. How many of you are there?'

Nevaeh- 'Many.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'And you... know them? Know everything about them?'

Nevaeh- 'Oui.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- Alright. Then, perhaps, I should... ask for your advice. I would like to tell Nevaeh- about you and the... others. I don't see how analysis can successfully continue if she doesn't know.

Nevaeh- 'Well, you can tell her, but do not say too much. Be careful. Although the rest of us know about Nevaeh-, she knows nothing about us... never has.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I have told her she has fugue states where she is unaware of what is happening to her.'

Nevaeh- 'Yes, but that is très different from telling her that she is not alone in her own body, non? (Rises.) Well, I must be heading off to luncheon.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Please do come back anytime. And tell any of the others that they are welcome as well.'

Nevaeh- 'They are not all quite as outgoing as me. They are shy, and some are as frightened as Nevaeh-. But I will try to convince them. Adieu, Doctor Lorenzo.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Goodbye, De.'

(Nevaeh- stops at the door and turns back to

DOCTOR LORENZO.) 'We are people you know. People in our own right.'

(SHE then turns and EXITS out the room.)

We're sitting in the OFFICE. DOCTOR LORENZO- facing out to them all down below.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Multiple personalities. As of 1999, there had been scant diagnoses. None had been psychoanalyzed. Perhaps I could enlist De's help in the analysis. But before any of that could begin... Nevaeh-, herself, had to know.'

Nevaeh- (Appearing.)

'I don't understand... another person takes over?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'When you, yourself, lose consciousness. During the fugue states, we've talked about.'

Nevaeh- 'I'm like... Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde...?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'That's fiction, Nevaeh- It's not about good and evil. Do you understand that?'

(Nevaeh- says nothing.)

'All your life, you've been told that you have done certain things. Been convinced places that you know you hadn't. Haven't you?'

Nevaeh- 'How... how did you know?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'It's treatable, Nevaeh-. Other people have it. But we need to deduce when you're your disassociation began? What was the root cause?'

Nevaeh- 'May I go now? We're running over. I have no right to extra time...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'That's what you always do, Nevaeh. Declare yourself unworthy! That's one of the reasons you need other personalities.'

Nevaeh- 'Personalities? As in... plural?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'There is nothing to be afraid of, dear-girl. There's a personality.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (Continued.) 'Called Janny. She's very self- assertive-'

Nevaeh- 'I don't...'

(Highly agitated.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'The other is called De, she's assured, at ease, and altogether delightful person...'

'Nevaeh- I can't... I can't... you have another patient... I...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- *Nevaeh?*

Nevaeh- 'Please, oh, please let me go. Please...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Dear-girl-I know this is overwhelmingly frightening.'

Nevaeh- 'I'll be fine. I'll be fine. I'll be fine. I'll be fine...'

(SHE wanders out of the spot and the lights fade on DOCTOR LORENZO.)

(In the darkness, a phone RINGS.)

In the low light in the APARTMENT, there is a pounding on the door. NEAD- rushes onstage to open it.

DOCTOR LORENZO- (ENTERING the room to see young Nevaeh.)

'Hello, I'm Cornelia Lorenzo.'

NEAD- 'I'm Nead.'

'I'm sorry- very sorry- I called at such a late hour's but- I-a, I had to fish your number out of her purse; she wouldn't give it to me. Where is she?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (NEAD- gestures and the LIGHTS come up at the balcony. Nevaeh- is standing very close what happened? to its edge.)

NEAD- 'She came home and just blew! Talking to herself, talking like a little girl... She broke the mirror in the bathroom. Then she came out of her and started climbing onto the ledge. I had to pull her back and watch her. I went to call you and she went out there again!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nead, Nevaeh- is in a highly agitated, manic state.'

NEAD- 'You think?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'What I mean is, Nevaeh- agonizes from a uniquely complex pathology. As her roommate, you have every right to know and with Nevaeh's permission, I'll explain everything. But right now, could you leave us alone. Just for a moment. I don't know... NEAD-'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You feel protective toward her. She engenders that, I know. But I assure you she'll be safe.'

NEAD- (Pauses then moves, stopping near Nevaeh-.) Sweetie, I'll be in my bedroom.

(SHE EXITS, the room she was in.)

'It wasn't fear. Nevaeh- What wasn't fear?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh- When I left. Why I left. It wasn't fear. It was... recognition. What you told me. It made an awful kind of sense. The strangers that say they know me. The bad things my daddy said I did. Bad, evil things... I'm so embarrassed...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'There is no need... Nevaeh- You can go now. I'll be fine. I promise. I won't... do anything...'

DOCTOR WILUBR- 'I'm afraid you won't be, Nevaeh- I worry.'

Nevaeh- 'Why?' 'I know you're just my doctor. Just my psychoanalyst. I'm just someone who leaves a check with the receptionist after each session.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh- 'YOUR WORLD IS SPINNING. YOU'RE WONDERING HOW YOU'LL SURVIVE. BUT Nevaeh-, A WORLD THAT IS SPINNING'S STILL ALIVE.'

(Slowly, mysteriously, a group of PEOPLE begins to assemble onstage during the song. THEY are Nevaeh's other PERSONALITIES.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh- 'YOU'RE ALREADY WINNING! CONFRONTING YOUR DEMONS EN MASSE.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh- 'YOU'RE AT THE BEGINNING THIS WILL PASS. NO MORE BREAKING GLASS...'

(As DOCTOR LORENZO- 'moves toward Nevaeh, DE, JANNY, MARJORIE, MARY, Elody, Naddalin, AMY-LOU, SAM, RUTHIE, and NESSA intently watch.) I CARE ABOUT YOU, I DO! NOT BECAUSE YOU PAY ME TO. DEAR-GIRL YOU ARE SPECIAL, SO OPEN AND KIND. SO BRILLIANT YET BLIND- YOU CAN'T SEE HOW SPECIAL YOU ARE TO ME. (As DOCTOR LORENZO- holds a frightened Nevaeh- the SELVES sing to DE who nods. NESSA, SHE CARES ABOUT US! MAJORIE SHE DOES! MARY, SHE CARES ABOUT US! AMY LOU BECAUSE? DE, SHE CARES ABOUT Nevaeh. SELVES SHE CARES ABOUT Nevaeh- SHE CARES ABOUT US SHE CARES... DOCTOR LORENZO- AND SELVES.'

Nevaeh- 'I'M HERE WITH YOU WHETHER DOCTOR LORENZO-'

-AND-

SELVES- (Continued.) 'YOU GIVE UP OR PROMISE TO TRY. BUT, Nevaeh, WE'LL DO THIS TOGETHER- just YOU AND I.'

Nevaeh- 'WE'LL DO THIS TOGETHER YOU AND me! 1999 THROUGH 2002. DOCTOR LORENZO'S OFFICE. DOCTOR LORENZO- at HER desk.'

Nevaeh- ‘in HER chair- Then at that moment, at that time in that place, the doctor said- 'you well have a loss of memories of all of this at some point- as I feel you should.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- ‘Over the next several years, through De's ministrations, I was introduced to the rest of Nevaeh's personalities. To help them understand their relationship to Nevaeh -, to each other and to their singular selves I needed them to each comprehend their existence.’

'WHAT AM I!'

‘TO QUESTION TO WONDER. AN EXAM: WHAT TWO WORDS GAVE RISE TO THOUGHT? THE ANSWER, OF COURSE: 'I AM.' IDENTITY BEYOND A NAME. FERVENT HOPES. SECRET SHAME. DREAMS, ESTEEM, AND VANITY. THE ESSENCE OF HUMANITY.’

Nevaeh- (As Amy Lou.) ‘WHAT AM I?’

DOCTOR LORENZO- ‘Amy Lou shared physical attributes with Janny.’

Nevaeh- (As Amy Lou.) ‘I'm WORRIED.’

DOCTOR LORENZO- ‘Inappropriately, she was even less... hopeful...’

(As Amy Lou.) ‘WHAT AM I? I'm TERRIFIED! THE COMMUNISTS AND CATHOLICS ARE MARCHING SAME BY SAME! I SUSPECT THE SPOOKS AND KOOKS AND GOOKS OF EVERY VARIETY. ...AND THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY. GRAMPA SAID BE CAREFUL. PAPA SAID BEWARE. THEY BOTH HAVE ME SEEING RED BY RED I MEAN THE SCARE! WHAT AM I? I'm WARY. WHAT AM I? I'm SCARED TO DEATH BUT VIGILANT AND STEADFAST UNTIL MY LAST PURE BREATH. THE JIGABOOS AND JEWS WHO CHOOSE TO SMOKE OF THE EVIL WEED! RUSSIA’S DEMON SEED! SUBVERSIVE THURBER DOODLES! GIANT CHINESE NOODLES! AND POODLES! AND TWEED! (As Amy Lou.) I'm worried about Nevaeh, Doctor Lorenzo. I do not understand why our father is letting her attend Columbia.’

(Leans in, half whispers.)

‘I believe one or two of her professors may be... liberals!’

DOCTOR LORENZO- ‘Nevaeh- and Nead-'s apartment had very little privacy. One day Nevaeh- came home from class to find a hastily but sturdily constructed partition that blocked Nevaeh's bedroom from the living area. Fine work, worthy of possibly three generations of - carpenters. Presenting: Sam.’

Nevaeh- (As Sam.) 'I AM A BOY! DON'T LET THEM TELL YOU THAT I AIN'T A BOY. I LIKE EVERYTHING THAT BOYS ENJOY LIKE ANNOYING GIRLS. Nessa hates me! YEAH, I'M A BOY. And this is all you get in my head! JUST GIVE ME BASE OR SPITBALLS TO DEPLOY! GIVE ME CRYSTAL VASES TO DESTROY! CLIMBING TREES AND BLOODY KNEES GIVE ME JOY. OH, AND PULLING CURLS! Watch out Janny! YOU ASK ME WHAT I AM. I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I'LL BE, (As Sam, continued.) SEE, MY PAPA IS A CARPENTER SO I WILL BE A CARPENTER. I'LL USE MY TOOLS TO PRY MYSELF FREE! CAUSE I'M A BOY! BUT THEY NEVER EVER SEE A BOY! I NEVER GET THE PROPER KIND OF TOY I DON'T LIKE FANCY- I LIKE CORDUROY! BOY OH BOY ITS BULL! TO SHAKE THESE GIRLS HOW MUCH CURLS GOTTA I PULL?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Ruthie was the personification of Nevaeh's three-year-old self.'

Nevaeh- (As Ruthie.) 'Bluh- bub- bub... oooo... pa... bluh.' Said in baby talk.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Perhaps even younger.'

Nevaeh- (As Ruthie.) PENCILS COME... IN... COLORS... WHERE'S BLUE- Kitty Cat!

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Existential examination was a little advanced for Ruthie.'

(As Ruthie.) 'uh oh. Poo.'

Mary- DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh- (As Mary or Elody or Naddalin.)

'Mary Lucinda Saunders, dear.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Mary Lucinda Saunders- had the maternal grace of Nevaeh's beloved granddaddy. Along with her piety.'

Nevaeh- (As Mary.) 'I AM THE LAMB OF GOD I MEAN I TRY TO BE THE LAMB OF GOD JESUS AND I ARE PRAYING FOR MY SOUL WILT THOU BE MAKE WHOLE? I'm OLD AND MEEK WON'T LAST THE WEEK ETERNITY'S MY GOAL I AM THE LAMB OF GOD WHERE TO BEGIN TO BE THE LAMB OF GOD? BE WITHOUT SIN BE WITHOUT GUILE BE WITHOUT PRIDE THE GATES SWING WIDE TO LET YOU IN I AM THE LAMB OF GOD AS ARE ALL MY KIN, DOCTOR LORENZO- Well, perhaps not all...'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'WHAT AM I, NESSA.'

(As Marjorie, continued.)

'WOULD YOU SAY?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Presenting: Nessa and Marjorie.'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'THAT, MY DEAR, DEPENDS UPON THE DAY.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'The only two of Nevaeh's personalities that could manifest simultaneously.'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'AND WHAT ABOUT ME, MARGE?'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'A GAL WHOSE TEETH GREW WAY TOO LARGE. (Nevaeh- as Nessa reacts to mock hurt.) BUT I GUESS THAT'S HOW THEY GROW EM IN THE U OF K...'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'Cheeky.'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'WHAT AM I?'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'A TAD IMPROPER! AND I?'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'UNSTABLE SHOPPER. TRY TO STOP HER!'

(As Nessa.) 'CALL COPPER!'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'SHE WON'T QUIT!'

Nevaeh- (As Both.) 'IF YOU ASK ME WHAT I AM DAMN! I COULDN'T TELL YOU! BUT IF YOU ASK ME WHO'S MY BEST FRIEND, SHE IS IT!'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'WHAT AM I?'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'STUCK UP AND ARTY. WHAT AM I?'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'A TRIFLE TARTY.'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'LI'L MISS SMARTY!'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'ONE GIRL PARTY!'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'HEY NOW QUIT!'

Nevaeh- (As Both.) 'BUT IF YOU ASK ME WHAT I AM DAMN! I COULDN'T TELL YOU! BUT IF YOU ASK ME-'

'WHO'S MY BEST FRIEND (As Both.) SHE IS IT! DIVERGENT...

-AND-

DIFFERENT AS TWO GIRLS CAN BE SEPARATE POLES OF THE SAME PERSONALITY.'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'WHAT AM I?'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'MY SISTER, WHAT AM I?'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'MY OLDER SISTER.'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'CAN'T RESIST HER!'

Nevaeh- (As Both.) 'AND THAT, MISTER, JUST WON'T QUIT! BUT IF YOU ASK ME WHAT I AM DAMN! I COULDN'T TELL YOU! BUT IF YOU ASK ME WHO'S MY BEST FRIEND.'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'MY ITTY-BITTY BREAST FRIEND!'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.) 'MY PLEASE GIVE IT A REST FRIEND!'

Nevaeh- (As Both.) 'IF YOU ASK ME (As Both.) WHO'S MY BEST FRIEND SHE IS IT!'

(Nevaeh- 'changes and looks up at DOCTOR LORENZO.')

Nevaeh- 'WHAT AM I A MONSTER? WHAT AM I POSSESSED? WHAT AM I? A DEVIL SPAWN? COMPLETELY INSANE AT BEST?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- ('Goes to HER.) WHAT YOU ARE IS LOVING. WHAT YOU ARE IS WILD. PARANOID. A CARPENTER. A FRIEND, BON VIVANT, A CHILD. YOUR SHATTERED MIND HOLDS ALL OF YOU DIFFERENT SHADES EACH ONE TRUE. TO MAKE YOU WHOLE TO SET YOU FREE WE DISCOVER HOW YOU CAME TO BE...'

(Immediately)

(Nevaeh- and- DOCTOR LORENZO.)

DOCTOR WILUBR- ('A GIRL- Nevaeh in an early time bathing suit and parasol a appears and poses.')

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'One of the more prosperous small towns in Wisconsin state. Even during the Great Depression.'

(Another GIRL in an early era naked and parasol appears and poses.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'And the town's most prosperous family were the -s. Making Hattie - the de facto First Lady of Willow Corners.'

('LIGHTS UP on HATTIE, also in an early-child fashioned bathing suit and parasol. SHE joins the GIRLS in song and dance.) HATTIE AND GIRLS, WILLOW CORNERS, WILLOW CORNERS, THIS are WHERE THE LORD WOULD RATHER BE. A WORK OF WISCONSIN ART WILLOW COUNTY'S HEART FIELDS AND FARMS AND FORESTS AS FAR AS GOD CAN SEE.'

(THEY continue to unobtrusively dance during the dialogue portions.)

Nevaeh- (As Amy Lou.)

'Nevaeh's daddy was smart. Smarter than anyone in Elderville, Illinois. She didn't love Father. She married him only to get away from the General.'

DOCTOR WILUBR- 'She told you this?'

Nevaeh- (As De.)

'She told me. And she was not only brilliant but Mrs. -, had the extraordinary musical talent. A pianist. Un virtuoso. But her father, a formidable Civil War veteran, yanked her out of school at age twelve to work at his store. She would never fulfill her dreams of a conservatory education. Instead, she played the organ at the Willows Corner First Baptist Church every Wednesday and Sunday. HATTIE AND GIRLS. NO DEMOCRATS OR PAYING UNION DUES. EVERYTHING'S DECIDED- IN THE PEWS. OUR CIVIC NOTORIETY- IS DUE TO OUR STRICT PIETY- A CHURCH OF EACH VARIETY- EXCEPT THE JEWS.'

Nevaeh- (As De.)

'She was not content.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'But Mr. -. Willard. Did he love her?'

Nevaeh- (As Sam.)

'He loved her a-lot! But she'd embarrass him. She'd make noises in church and then just laugh sometimes. Nothing was funny. She'd just laugh! Out of nowhere!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Did she embarrass you?'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.) 'It was a wee, little town. HATTIE AND GIRLS- WILLOW CORNERS- WILLOW CORNERS FRIENDLIEST SMALL TOWN- IN THE MIDWEST.'

(As Nessa.)

'One whole winter she didn't say a word. I did not utter a sound. She would stare out the window like a zombie. Everyone saw. But the -s were wealthy so no one said anything. HATTIE AND GIRLS- OUR MORAL AND JUDGEMENT FREE EXCLUSIVITY WELCOMES THOSE WITH STATUS BUT PASSES ON THE REST.'

Nevaeh- (As Janny.)

'Nevaeh's daddy would take me walking with her at night. Arm and arm, like I was her daughter. We'd visit the Stickneys, Mr. Hale. Mrs. Ford...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Would they invite you in?'

Nevaeh- (As Janny.)

'Oh, they didn't know we were there. She would just go squat behind each of their hedges and take a shit.'

(The music stops and the GRILS stop dancing and look over at the scene, then back at HATTIE who just smiles and shrugs.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Why these people?'

Nevaeh- (As Janny.)

'They were the other people in town as rich as us.'

-HATTIE-

'THIS SNOBBERY, TO YOU, MIGHT SEEM QUITE RASH HATTIE AND THE GIRLS. BUT WE CLOSED OUR BORDERS RIGHT BEFORE THE CRASH. THERE'S LITTLE MINNESOTA LOVE HATTIE AND THE GIRLS- - AND ILLINOIS? OUR QUOTA OF. PLUS, AN IOWA-IOTA OF THEIR POOR WHITE TRASH.'

Nevaeh- (As Mary.)

'Nevaeh's daddy was good to the poor though. She was! She would sometimes take these two poor Polish girls from the other Same of town swimming with us by the river.'

('HATTIE and the GIRL's dance has turned erotic, hands on each other's breasts, etc. HATTIE reaches around one way and tongue kisses one GIRL and then reaches around and kisses the other GIRL.')

Nevaeh- (As Mary.)

'They'd leave me to play on the shore sometimes and they'd go off in the bushes. They'd make some very strange noises. HATTIE AND GIRLS- WILLOW CORNERS- WILLOW CORNERS- HEAVEN ON THE SHORES OF THE ST CROIX. NO EVIL OR CRUDITY AND NO NUDITY STILL, A BEE FOR EVERY FLOWER AND GIRL FOR EVERY BOY.'

Nevaeh- (As Mary.)

'I'd sometimes go, spy. They were playing horsey!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- Horsey?

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.)

'That's what we would call it. Back then. Mrs. - would babysit the little girls in the area. They would all get down on the floor and she would put her fingers in the girl's... you know, down there, and yell giddyap and hold them while they'd run on all fours. She would wiggle her fingers and laugh. She would stay home (Continued.) from church, sometimes just to watch the town's children...'

'HATTIE AND GIRLS THE BIBLE IS THE BOOK WE READ THE MOST NOT THAT VULGAR SATURDAY EVENING POST.'

Nevaeh- (As Marjorie.)

'She would take the baby boy's name and then take off all her clothes and then rub the baby up and down between her legs... HATTIE AND GIRLS.'

'AND WE DON'T MEAN TO DISPARAGE OR TO JUDGE THE BACKSEAT CARRIAGE WHORE WE SAVE OURSELVES FOR MARRIAGE OR THE HOLY GHOST-'

Nevaeh- 'No!!!'

(HATTIE and the GIRLS vanish. To be replaced by the figures of all eight PERSONALITIES out of 100 I have said I have met.)

Directly- following that moment.

'No. It's... she... Nevaeh- DE Nevaeh. You know it is true.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh...?'

NESSA, 'you would avert your eyes. You'd let one of us come out.'

AMY LOU, 'but you would still see.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Was your daddy ever sexual with you?'

Nevaeh- 'I don't...'

SAM- Nevaeh- 'wasn't always there.'

'What next a Sandy Sue?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh.'

'Did your daddy ever hurt you?'

Nevaeh- 'I... I think...'

JANNY, 'she was there. She was there at the beginnings. In the mornings when it would start.'

MARJORIE, 'yes, Nevaeh- remembers the beginnings.'

Nevaeh- 'THOUGH SHE'S SAYING, 'BYE TO FATHER MAMMA'S LOOKING RIGHT A ME, AND ALL THE WHILE A SECRET SMILE ON HER FACE.'

'I COULD CRY OUT BUT WHY BOTHER? PAPA LOOKS BUT DOESN'T SEE. THEN it is ONLY SHE AND ME. PLEASE, SOMEONE, HELP ME TO GET FREE, HATTIE (Appears behind a piano.) GOD LOVES A BABY WHO DOES NOT CRY.'

'WHO DOES NOT SIGH?'

'WHO DOES NOT LIE?'

'GOD LOVES A BABY.'

'WHO DOES NOT CRY?'

'MY. LIE. TIE. WHY. CRY.'

Nevaeh- 'I PRETEND THAT I AM READING BUT SHE THROWS AWAY THE BOOK AND WITH A FROWN SHE TIES ME DOWN SHE SPREADS MY LEGS THEN SHE CHECKS IF I AM BLEEDING MAMMA SEES BUT DOESN'T LOOK AND WITH THE CARE, SHE ALWAYS TOOK SHE REACHES FOR THE BUTTON HOOK, JANNY AND I'M PUSHED OUT FRONT.'

DE, TO THE PINCHING AND TEARING.

JANNY, Nevaeh's DADDY LAUGHS.

DE AND I THINK I'LL GO INSANE.

JANNY Nevaeh- LIKES TO HIDE, DE FROM THE FLESH SHE IS WEARING. JANNY AND DE.

Nevaeh- MADE US FEEL THE PAIN.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Daily, Hattie - would force an array of objects into her daughter. A flashlight, a small bottle. A dinner knifes.'

-HATTIE-

You better get used to it. That's what men will do to you when you grow up! They put things in you and hurt you. I might as well prepare you!

WILLARD- (Entering the room.) 'Daddy, we have to get that girl some new shoes! I come near her to button them and she starts crying.'

(Exiting the room.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- ('Her Grandma was Ms. Kingston- Amsel, and she may never know- she thought.')

'Young Nevaeh keeps talking- about being in the orphanage with others.'

Nevaeh- 'A BLACK TUBE MADE OUT OF RUBBER IS PUSHED SLOWLY UP MY DRESS HATTIE BE STILL, DAUGHTER! LET THE WATER FILL YOU UP.'

'HOLD IT IN, NOW- DON'T YOU BLUBBER! YOU'RE A HORRID GIRL UNLESS YOU PROMISE NOT TO MAKE A MESS!- or one time it was a needle- right here and she points.'

Nevaeh- 'IT HURT SO MUCH BUT I CRY YES, NESSA THEN I COME AWAKE SAM AND I'M KEEPING FROM PISSING Nevaeh's GONE AWAY NESSA ABANDONED YET AGAIN! THEN I FEEL THE ACHE SAM IN THE PARTS I AM MISSING.'

NESSA AND SAM.

Nevaeh- 'MADE US FEEL THE PAIN.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'The enema ritual wouldn't end there. Filled with the cold water from an adult-sized bag, Nevaeh- would suffer severe cramps. Then, Hattie would use dish rags to tie Nevaeh- to a piano leg. She would then play. Hard. Forcing Nevaeh- to hold the water until the song was finished.'

-HATTIE-

'GOD LOVES A BABY WHO STAYS SO CLEAN WHO IS SERENE WHO IS NOT MEAN, Oh, no! Oh, look. You make me. You make me punish you. Look what you did! MARJORIE SHE WOULD SLAP ME IN THE FACE. JANNY SHE WOULD KICK ME IN THE BACK. DE ONCE SHE FRACTURED Nevaeh's LARYNX. NESSA IT WAS I WHO FELT THE CRACK! MARY ROLLING PINS CAME DOWN ON FINGERS. SAM HEAVY DRAWERS WOULD CLOSE ON HANDS. CLARA EVERY STRIKE RUTHIE OR BURN SAM OR BLOW JANNY OR BREAK DE OR SPRAIN, SELVES-'

Nevaeh- ALWAYS MADE US FEEL THE PAIN!

Nevaeh- (To DOCTOR LORENZO.) 'However, SOMETIMES SHE WAS LOVING SHE'D WORRY SO IF I WERE LATE. SHE'D CUT BRIGHT PICTURES FROM THE MAGAZINES AND PASTE THEM TO MY PLATE

SHE'D COVER ME WITH KISSES, HANG STARS ABOVE MY BED SHE'D SAY I WAS HER'S ONLY AND BE LOST IF I WERE DEAD. SHE WAS MINE ONLY, TOO AND SINCE I DIDN'T HAVE ANOTHER A GOOD, CHRISTIAN GIRL SHOULD NOT HATE HER DADDY, A GOOD, CHRISTIAN GIRL SHOULD NOT HATE HER DADDY, IT WAS BUTTONHOOK! IT WAS THE RUBBER HOSE! IT WAS THE ROLLING PINS, THE DRAWERS- IT WAS ALL OF THOSE! IT WAS THE DOCTORS WHO LOOKED AWAY THE FRIENDS WHO WOULDN'T SEE. IT WAS THE TEACHERS WHO WOULDN'T SAY I'LL HELP YOU, STAY WITH ME!'

Nevaeh- 'IT WAS THE NEIGHBORS AND MY GRANDPA EVEN GRAMMA WOULDN'T STIR IT WAS MY FATHER WHO WOULD GO TO WORK AND LEAVE ME HOME WITH HER! IT WAS PAPA WHO WOULD GO TO WORK. AND LEAVE ME HOME WITH HER, (HATTIE drags YOUNG.'

Nevaeh- up the stair and sets her in the bin during the following:)

'I LOVE YOU.'

SAYS MY DADDY AS WE CLIMB THE BARNYARD STAIRS PLACING ME into THE WHEAT BIN SHE JUST LAUGHS.

(HATTIE descends the steps.)

AS I BEGIN TO SINK AND DADDY, SHE JUST GOES BACK DOWN THE STAIRS AND AS I'M RUNNING OUT OF AIR, SHE CALLS BACK UP HATTIE NOBODY CARES!

MARJORIE AND I'VE LOST MY BREATH MARY JESUS, LORD, DON'T FORSAKE ME MARJORIE AND MY THROATS ON FIRE MARY INHALING DUST AND GRAIN MARJORIE AND I'M LOOKING AT DEATH MARY NOW I PRAY FOR GOD TO TAKE ME (WILLARD has climbed the steps and pulls YOUNG Nevaeh- from the bin. SHE coughs as he holds her and walks down. At the bottom of the steps is HATTIE.)

WILLARD- 'How did she get up there?'

'How could she possibly? Hattie?'

(HATTIE- just stands there. Then she reaches her arms out. WILLARD stops a moment, thinks, and puts YOUNG. Nevaeh- into HATTIE's arms and walks off.)

Nevaeh- 'AND YOUNG.'

Nevaeh- ('Looking after him.) Papa?'

SELVES Nevaeh- 'ALWAYS MADE US FEEL, THE BURN OR BLOW, OR BREAK, OR SPRAIN.'

Nevaeh- 'ALWAYS MADE US DEAL, THE BURN, OR BLOW, OR BREAK, OR SPRAIN.'

Nevaeh- 'ALWAYS MADE US FEEL LONELY AND AFRAID Nevaeh- ALWAYS MADE US FEEL THE PAIN!'

(HATTIE carries YOUNG Nevaeh- OFF.)

Nevaeh- is in front of a canvas on an easel in the summer of 2003. As SHE sings DE, SAM, MARY, JANNY, NESSA, MARJORIE, RUTHIE, and AMY-LOU walk up to the canvas and add a line, eventually creating a 'self-portrait.' Yet over time, she recovers with a new garden. To be who she was born.

Nevaeh- 'THE CANVAS WONDERS- you can still see the WHO AM I? ...With all the drawings as if done by the hands of many.'

'WHO I AM TODAY?' This was worked on by me Hope 'till she was normal, and had no memories of the past, and she can think I the bad lady too. Yet know all the facts.

'THE Girl OR THE Troublemaker?'

THE BOULEVARDIER?

SO DIFFERENT IN OUR DIFFERENT LIVES; ALIKE IN ONE SMALL WAY: WE ALL WONDER WHO AM I TODAY.

DOCTOR WILUBR- (Appears out of the darkness.)

In August of 2004, Nevaeh- missed a succession of appointments. I subsequently received this letter- saying no need any longer.

(She pulls out a letter and reading glasses and reads down on the tip of the nose.)

'I'm not going to tell you there isn't anything wrong with me, we both know there was - even if I don't recall.' Said young 8-year-old Nevaeh. Then she went on to say- 'Although it is not what I lead you to understand, it is me letting go of past. I do not have any multiple personalities anymore. I have been essentially lying in my pretense of them.'

Nevaeh- 'MY BRUSHES PONDER WHO AM I- yet like being in a dream wondering in the subconsciousness?'

'WHY I AM THIS WAY? And well I- will I be okay?'

'AM I THE WAY GOD PAINTED ME OR BEEN LEAD ASTRAY?'

'SHOULD I JUST DENY I AM THE Nevaeh? THEY IMPLY I AM?'

'AFRAID TO FIND OUT WHY I AM THIS WAY...'

I remember in my dreams- things like:

'SATAN'S OWN OR THE LAMB OF GOD.'

'EITHER WAY, I STILL SLEEP WITH THE LIGHT ON.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Also, the extreme things I said about my daddy are not true.'

Nevaeh- 'BUT BLESS THE HAND THAT WON'T SPARE THE ROD.'

'CHILD SAVED IS CHILD GONE UNSPOILED!'

'Untouched- I have been touched, and I still remember that... can I love now - I find out?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'It is true she interfered with my music and drawings, but that was due to a lack of understanding. She may have been more than a little nervous-flighty, clever, perhaps overanxious. But my daddy loved me.'

Nevaeh- 'YES, UNSPOILED BUT UNDISTINGUISHED.'

YES, SAVED YET EMPTY AND UNKNOWN.

IF I COULD SEE ALL THERE IS TO ME WOULD MY WORLD THEN BE LESS LONELY?

DOCTOR WILUBR- 'I just wasn't the interesting, charming person she was,'

(DOCTOR LORENZO- and the SELVES FADE. Nevaeh walks around the room.)

(SHE created a portrait in a record time of a cherub.)

Nevaeh- 'What is this?'

I wrote a letter to Doctor Lorenzo. I wrote and told her I was making it all up.

'Why would you do that? Draw so fast?'

Nevaeh- 'I don't know... maybe to show I didn't lack but after I feel I do- I wrote it... down in my book that I started off life, I was... gone for two days- it feels yet it was many years. And when I came to... I older yet feel as if I was in a new world.'

(SHE indicates the portrait next to the one she just did.)

'It's remarkable- a world, unlike anything we have seen.'

(SHE touches Nevaeh's face holding it plum to cheek soft and gentle.)

'You're remarkable.'

'YES, UNSPOILED BUT UNDISTINGUISHED.'

'YES, SAVED- Although Hollow Furthermore Alien.'

'IF I COULD SEE ALL THERE IS TO ME WOULD MY WORLD THEN BE LESS LONELY? (SHE continues her strokes to the representation of what she will look like.')

'THE COLORS ASK ME WHO AM I in this IF I AM OKAY? Someday it will be the cover of my story and everyone will know who I am. 'I am an angle."

Then she said- 'I am just a girl and the most beloved of them all for an understanding of the misunderstood like me!'

'You are a bright child,' said the phycologist.

'I TELL THEM NOT TO BE CONCERNED.' This is just child's play and imagination.

'You'll see' said Nevaeh.

'Look at this artwork- MANY HUES AND MANY SHADES STUNNING.'

'THE COLORS ASK ME WHO AM I, YET LOOKING HERE I ALREADY KNOW- YET YOU DON'T.'

'THE BRUSHES ASK ME What AM I. THE CANVAS ASKS ME What AM I- AND I know that I am a mad genius.'

'WHO AM I TO SAY? I don't know me- yet you seem too.'

(Chatting and making plans-)

(She may never-ever know that Lily is her twin- sister- from birth, and they share these moments. They will always seem to be drawn yet not know why? Sad yet it's for the best.

(Office- meetings)

'So, what do we do?' They all were pondering.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Change the look of Lily, keep her hair bleached, change her last name- to Anderson, the name of the new caretaker with youth services, we have a way- mind takes over- experimental, yet should take all the pains away of the past; for good health.'

(Time travel, has its choices and being me, this is what I did to save the worlds.)

I try to remember who I was and survived! Moreover, even now- part of whom I was given deeply to keep exercising- I was with them all really just my mind and soul lingering, I Nevaeh am also Elody as you now know. I- Nevaeh am a shapeshifter and can transform into the girl- to a beast- to the essence, in whomever- or whatever- I want to help or destroy.

Nevaeh

Book: 58

Grayed

It was almost November 3080, Millia was commencement to be terrified. No, the wrong word, Millia thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Terrified was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had overflown the community twice.

He had seen it both times. Narrow your eyes toward the sky, he had seen the sleek unmanned aircraft, almost a blur at its high speed- like all the drones dropping off the mail and packages, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed. Sporadically, when supplies were delivered by cargo planes to the landing field across the river, the children rode their fold-up cars, to the seafront and watched, intrigued, the unloading and then the takeoff directed to the west, always away from the community.

Then one more time, a moment later, from the opposite direction, the same plane. At first, he had been only captivated. She had never seen aircraft so close, for it was against the rules for Pilots to fly over the community. Nonetheless, the aircraft a year ago had been different. It was not a squat, fat-bellied cargo plane but a needle-nosed single-pilot jet.

Millia, looking around anxiously at the large dystopian 1930s like an art-deco city all round that went on as far as the proficient eye could see, had seen others... adults as well as children... stop what they were doing and wait, confused, for an explanation of the frightening event. Then all of the citizens had been ordered to go into the nearest building and stay there. DIRECTLY, the rasping voice through the speakers had said, LEAVE YOUR like vintage-looking automobile's car WHERE THEY ARE.

'Maiara,' Mother reminded her, smiling, 'You know the rules...' Two young teens...one male, one female...to each family division. It was written very clearly in the rules. Maiara giggled. 'Well,' she said, 'I thought maybe just this once.'

'Anydreia later designed the bridge that crosses the river to the west of town,' Millia's mother said. 'It wasn't there when we were children.' 'There are very rarely disappointments, Millia. I don't think you need to worry about that,' his Ancestor reassured her. 'And if there are, you know there's an appeal process.' But they all laughed at that...an appeal went to a committee for study. 'I uneasiness a little about Ashenria's

Assignment,' Millia confessed.

'Ashenria's such fun.

But he doesn't really have any serious interests. He makes a game out of everything.' Her Ancestor chuckled. 'You know,' he said, 'I remember when Ashenria was a new child at the Nurturing Center before he was named. He never cried. He giggled and laughed at everything. All of us on the staff enjoyed nurturing Ashenria.'

'The Teenagers know Ashenria,' his mother said. 'They'll find exactly the right Assignment for her. I don't think you need to worry about her. But, Millia, let me warn you about something that may not have occurred to you. I know I didn't think about it until after my Ceremony of Nine.'

'What's that?'

'Well, it's the last of the Observances, as you know. After nine, age isn't important. Most of us even lose track of how teenagers we are as time passes, though the information is in the Hall of Open Records, and we could go and look it up if we wanted to. What's important is the preparation for adult life, and the training you'll receive in your Assignment.' 'I know that' Millia said. 'Everyone knows that.'

'Nonetheless, it means,' her mother went on about that fact, 'That you'll move into a new assembly. As well as each of your friends will. You'll no longer be spending your time with your group of Elevens. After the Ceremony of Nine, you'll be with your Assignment group, with those in training. No more volunteer hours. No more recreation hours. So, your friends will no longer be as close.'

Millia shook his head. 'Ashenria and I will always be friends,' she said determinedly.

'And there will still be school.'

'That's correct,' his Ancestor agreed.

'Nonetheless what your mother said is true as well. There will be changes.' 'Good changes, though,' his mother pointed out. 'After my Ceremony of Nine, I missed my childhood recreation. But when I entered my training for Law and Justice, I found myself with people who shared my interests. I made friends on a new level, friends of all ages.'

'Did you still play at all, after Nine?' Millia asked.

'Infrequently,' his mother replied. 'But it didn't seem as significant to me.'

'I did,' her Ancestor said, giggling. 'I still do. Every day, at the Nurturing Center, I play bounce-on-the-knee, and peek-a-boo, and hug-the-teddy.' He reached over and stroked Millia's neatly trimmed hair to have the look.

'Fun doesn't end when you become Nine.'

Maiara appeared, wearing her nightclothes, in the doorway. She gave an impatient sigh. 'This is certainly a very long private conversation,' she said. 'And there are certain people waiting for their comfort object.' 'Maiara,' her mother said fondly, 'you're very close to being- an Eight, and when you're an Eight, your comfort object will be taken away.

It will be recycled for the younger children. You should be starting to go off to sleep without it.' Nonetheless, her Ancestor had already gone to the shelf and taken down the stuffed elephant which was kept there. Many of the comfort objects, like Maiara's, were soft, stuffed, imaginary creatures. Millia's had been called a bear. 'Here you are, Maiara-,' she said. 'I'll come to help you remove your hair ribbons.' Millia and his mother rolled their eyes, yet they watched affectionately as Maiara and her Ancestor headed to her sleeping-room with the stuffed bear that had been given to her as her comfort object when she was born.

His mother moved to her big desk and opened her briefcase; her work never seemed to end, even when she was at home in the evening. Millia went to his own desk and began to sort through his school papers for the evening's assignment. But his mind was still in December and the coming Ceremony. They want to put another soul in him and replace him with something that is no longer him... I thought. Though he had been reassured by the talk with his parents, he hadn't the slightest idea what Assignment the teenagers would be selected for his future, or how he might feel about it when the day came.

'Oh, look!' Maiara squealed with delight. 'Isn't he cute? Look how tiny he is! And he has funny eyes like yours, Millia!' Millia glared at her. He didn't like it that she had mentioned his eyes. He waited for his Ancestor to chastise Maiara. But Ancestor was busy unstrapping the carrying handbag from the back of his bicycle. Millia walked over to look. It was the first thing Millia noticed as he looked at the teenager peering up curiously from the handbag. The pale eyes. Almost every citizen in the community had dark eyes. His parents did, and Maiara did, and so did all of his group members and friends. But there were a few exceptions: Millia herself, and a female Five who he had noticed had the different, lighter eyes. No one mentioned such things; it was not a rule but was considered rude to call

attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals. Maiara, he decided, would have to learn that soon, or she would be called in for chastisement because of her insensitive chatter.

Ancestor put his vintage-looking automobile into its parking port. Then he picked up the handbag and carried it into the house. Maiara followed behind, but she glanced back over her shoulder at Millia and teased, 'Maybe he had the same Birthmother as you.'

Millia shrugged... she followed them inside.

Nevertheless, she had been startled by the teenager's eyes. Mirrors were rare in the community; they weren't forbidden, but there was no real need of them, and Millia had simply never bothered to look at herself very often even when she found herself in a location where a mirror existed. Now, seeing the new teenager and its expression, she was reminded that the light eyes were not only a rarity but gave the one who had them a certain look- what was it? Depth, he decided; as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn't been discovered yet. She felt self- conscious, realizing that he, too, had that expression. She went to her desk, pretending not to be interested in the NEW teenager. On the other side of the room, Mother and Maiara were bending over to watch as Ancestor unwrapped its blanket.

'What's her comfort object called?'

Maiara asked, picking up the stuffed creature which had been placed beside the teenager in his handbag.

Ancestor glanced at it. 'Horse,' he said, I think what do you think this thing is? Maiara giggled at the strange word. 'Horse,' she repeated and put the comfort object down again. She peered at the unwrapped teenager, who waved his arms. 'I think teenagers are so- o cute,' Maiara sighed. 'I have faith in that fact that I get assigned to be a Birthmother at the age of nine to some man yet like me, and what they want is same-sex love that is why I want her.' 'Maiara!' The mother spoke very sharply. 'Don't say that. There's very little honor in that Assignment.'

'Nevertheless, I was talking to Naannadraia. Do you know the Ten who lives around the corner? She does some of her volunteer hours at the Birthing Center. And she teenagers me that the Birthmothers get wonderful food, and they have very gentle exercise periods, and most of the time they just play games and amuse themselves while they're waiting. I think I'd like that,' Maiara said petulantly. 'Four years now,' Mother teenagers her resolutely. 'Four births, and that's all. After that, they are

Workhands for the rest of their adult lives, until the day that they enter the House of the Teenagers. Is that what you want, Maiara? Three lazy years, and then physical labor until you are teenagers?' 'Well, no, I guess not,' Maiara accepted unenthusiastically. The Ancestor giving to her and her group family turned the teenager onto his tummy in the handbag.

He sat beside it and rubbed its small back with a rhythmic motion. 'Anyway, Maiara-,' he said affectionately, 'the Birth Mothers never even get to see teenagers.

If you enjoy the little ones so much, you should hope for an Assignment as Nurturer.' 'When you're an Eight and start your volunteer hours, you can try some at the Nurturing Center,' Mother suggested. 'Affirmative, I think I will,' Maiara said... She genuflected beside the handbag for herself. 'What did you say his name is? Gaddie?

Hello, Gaddie,' she said in a singsong voice.

Then she giggled.

'Oo- ops,' she whispered. 'I think she's asleep, don't you? I guess I'd better be quiet.' (They want us dumb so they can give we receive on what they say. They why only girl's life to see this world and boys make us their slaves, my thoughts. Do you see what boys do to us?)

Millia turned to the school assignments on his desk.

Some chance of that, he thought. Maiara was never quiet. Probably she should hope for an Assignment as Speaker, so that she could sit in the office with the microphone all day, making announcements. He laughed silently to herself, picturing his sister droning on in the self- an important voice that all the Speakers seemed to develop, saying things like,

CARE, THIS IS A PROMPT TO LADIES UNDER NINE THAT HAIR RIBBONS ARE TO BE NEATLY TIED AT ALL PERIODS. She turned toward Maiara and noticed to his satisfaction that her ribbons were, as usual, undone and dangling. There would be an announcement like that quite soon, he felt certain, and it would be directed mainly at Maiara, though her name, of course, would not be mentioned.

Everyone would know.

Everyone had known, he remembered with humiliation, that the announcement ATTENTION, THIS IS A REMINDER TO MALE ELEVENS THAT OBJECTS ARE NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE

RECREATION AREA AND THAT SNACKS ARE TO BE EATEN, NOT HOARDED had been specifically directed at her, the day last month that he had taken an apple home.

No one had mentioned it, not even his parents because the public announcement had been sufficient to produce the appropriate remorse. He had, of course, disposed of the apple and made his apology to the Recreation Director the next morning, before school. Millia thought again about that incident. He was still bewildered by it.

Not by the announcement or the necessary apology; those were standard procedures, and he had deserved them- but by the incident itself. She probably should have brought up his feeling of incomprehension that very evening when the family unit had shared their feelings of the day. But he had not been able to sort out and put words to the source of her confusion, so he had let it pass. It had happened during the recreation period when he had been playing with Ashenria.

Millia had casually picked up an apple from the handbag where the snacks were kept and had thrown it to his friend. Ashenria had thrown it back, and they had begun a simple game of catch. There had been nothing special about it; it was an activity that he had performed countless times: throw, catch; throw, catch. It was effortless for Millia, and even boring, though Ashenria enjoyed it, and playing catch was a required activity for Ashenria because it would improve his hand-eye coordination, which was not up to standards.

Nevertheless, suddenly Millia had noticed, following the path of the apple through the air with his eyes, that the piece of fruit had- well, this was the part that he couldn't adequately understand- the apple had changed. Just for an instant. It had changed in mid-air, he remembered. Then it was in his hand, and he looked at it carefully, but it was the same apple. Unchanged. The same size and shape: a perfect sphere. The same nondescript shade, about the same shade as his own tunic. There was absolutely nothing extraordinary about that apple. He had tossed it back and forth between his hands a few times, then throw it again to Ashenria. And again- in the air, for an instant only- it had changed. It had happened four times before, I recall. Millia had blinked, looked around, and then tested his eyesight, squinting at the small print on the identification badge attached to his tunic. He read his name quite clearly. He could also clearly see Ashenria at the other end of the throwing area. And he had had no problem catching the apple.

Following, the mother, who held a prominent position at the Department of Justice, talked about her feelings. Nowadays a repeat offender had been brought before her, someone who had

broken the rules before. Someone who she hoped had been adequately and fairly punished, and who had been restored to his place: to his job, his home, his family unit. To see her brought before her a second time caused her overwhelming feelings of frustration and anger. And even guilt, that she hadn't made a difference in his life. 'I feel frightened, too, for her,' she confessed. 'You know that there's no third chance. The rules say that if there's a third transgression, he simply has to be released.' Millia shivered. He knew it happened.

There was even a boy in his group of Elevens whose Ancestor had been released years before. No one ever mentioned it; the disgrace was unspeakable. It was hard to imagine. Maiara stood up and went to her mother. She stroked her mother's arm.

From his place at the table, Ancestor reached over and took her hand. Millia reached for the other. One by one, they comforted her. Soon she smiled, thanked them, and murmured that she felt soothed.

The ceremonial continued. 'Millia?'

Ancestor asked. 'You're last, tonight.' Millia sighed... This evening he almost would have preferred to keep his feelings hidden. But it was, of course, against the rules. 'I'm feeling apprehensive,' he confessed, glad that the appropriate descriptive word had finally come to her. 'Why? Why - is that, son?'

His Ancestor looked concerned. 'I know there's really nothing to worry about,' Millia explained, 'and that every adult has been through it. I know you have, Ancestor, and you too, Mother.

But it's the Ceremony that I'm apprehensive about. It's almost December.' Maiara looked up, her eyes wide. 'The Ceremony of Nine,' she whispered in an awed voice. Even the smallest children...

Maiara's age and younger...knew that it lay in the future for each of them. 'I'm glad you teenagers us of your feelings,' Ancestor said. 'Maiara,' Mother said, beckoning to the little girl, 'Go on now and get into your nightclothes.

Ancestor and I are going to stay here and talk to Millia for a while.' Maiara sighed, but obediently she got down from her chair.

'Privately?' she asked. Mother nodded. 'Yes,' she said, 'this talk will be a private one with Millia.' Millia watched as his Ancestor poured a fresh cup of coffee. She put off...

'You know,' his Ancestor finally said, 'every December was exciting to me when I was young.

And it has been for you and Maiara, too, I'm sure. Each December brings such changes.'

Millia nodded her he up and down... He could remember the Decembers back to when she had developed, well, probably a Four. The earlier ones were lost to her. But he observed them each year, and he remembered Maiara's earliest Decembers.

He remembered when his family received Maiara, the day she was named, the day that she had become a One. Millia had been completely mystified... 'Mai?' She had called out saying not uproariously. 'Does anything seem strange to you? About the apple?' 'Yes,' Ashenria called back, laughing. 'It jumps out of my hand onto the ground!' Ashenria had just dropped it once again.

So-o Millia laughed too, and with his laughter tried to ignore his uneasy conviction that something had happened. But he had taken the apple home, against the recreation area rules. That evening, before his parents and Maiara arrived at the dwelling, he had held it in his hands and looked at it carefully. It was slightly bruised now, for the reason that Ashenria had dropped it several times. But there was nothing at all unusual about the apple. She had held a magnifying glass to it. He had tossed it several times across the room, watching, and then rolled it around and around on his desktop, waiting for the thing to happen again.

Nonetheless, it hadn't... The only thing that happened was the announcement later that evening over the speaker, the announcement that d singled her out without using his name, which had caused both of his parents to glance meaningfully at his desk where the apple still lay.

Now, sitting at his desk, staring at her schoolwork as his family hovered over the teenager in its handbag, she shook her head some, trying to forget the odd occurrence. She forced herself to arrange his papers and try to study a little before the evening meal. The teenager, Gaddie, stirred and whispered, and Ancestor spoke softly to Maiara, explaining the feeding procedure as he opened the container that held the formula and equipment. The evening proceeded as all evenings did in the family unit, in the dwelling, in the community: quiet, reflective, a time for renewal and preparation for the day to come. It was different only in addition to it of the teenager with his pale, solemn, knowing eyes.

Millia rode at a leisurely pace, glancing at the like vintage-looking automobile cars ports beside the buildings to see if he could spot Ashenria's. He didn't often do his volunteer hours with his friend because Ashenria frequently fooled around, and made serious work a little difficult. But now, with

nine coming so soon and the volunteer hours ending, it didn't seem to matter. The freedom to choose where to spend those hours had always seemed a wonderful indulgence to Millia; other hours of the day were so carefully regulated. she remembered when he had become an Eight, as Maiara would do shortly, and had been faced with that freedom of choice. The Eights always set out on their first volunteer hour a little nervously, giggling and staying in groups of friends.

They almost invariably did their hours on Recreation Duty first, helping with the younger ones in a place where they still felt comfortable. But with guidance, as they developed self-confidence and maturity, they moved on to other jobs, gravitating toward those that would suit their own interests and skills.

Teenagers are planed out with their lover and life- not I. A male ten named Benjie had done his entire nearly- Four years in the Therapy Center, working with citizens who had been injured. It was rumored that he was as skilled now as the Rehabilitation Directors themselves and that he had even developed some machines and methods to hasten rehabilitation.

There was no doubt that Benjamin would receive his Assignment to that field and would probably be permitted to bypass most of the training. Millia was impressed by the things Benjamin had achieved. He knew her, of course, since they had always been groupmates, but they had never talked about the boy's happenings for the reason that such a conversation would have been awkward for Benjie. There was never any comfortable way to mention or discuss one's successes without breaking the rule against bragging, even if one didn't mean to. It was a minor rule, rather like rudeness, punishable only by gentle chastisement. But still. Better to steer clear of an occasion governed by a rule which would be so easy to break. The area of dwellings behind her, Millia rode past the community structures, hoping to spot Ashenria's bicycle parked beside one of the small factories or office buildings. He passed the Child Care Center where Maiara stayed after school, and the play areas surrounding it.

He rode through the Central Plaza and the large Auditorium where public meetings were held. Millia slowed and looked at the nametags on the car lined up outside the Cultivation Center. Then he checked that outside Food Distribution; it was always fun to help with the deliveries, and he hoped he would find his friend there so that they could go together on the daily rounds, carrying the cartons of supplies into the dwellings of the community. But he finally found Ashenria's bicycle - leaning, as usual, instead of the upright in its port, as it should have been- at the House of the Teenagers.

There was only one other child's bicycle there, that of a female Eleven named Fiona.

Millia liked Fiona. She was a good student, quiet and polite, but she had a sense of fun as well, and it didn't surprise her that she was working with Ashenria today. He parked his bicycle neatly in the port beside theirs and entered the building. 'Hello, Millia,' the attendant at the front desk said. She handed her the sign- up sheet and stamped her own official seal beside his signature.

All of his volunteer hours would be carefully tabulated at the Hall of Open Records. Once, long ago, it was whispered among the children, and eight had arrived at the Ceremony of Nine only to hear a public announcement that he had not completed the required number of volunteer hours and would not, therefore, be given his Assignment.

He had been permitted an additional month in which to complete the hours, and then given his Assignment privately, with no applause, no celebration: a disgrace that had clouded his entire future. 'It's good to have some volunteers here today,' the attendant teenagers her. 'We celebrated a release this morning, and that always throws the schedule off a little, so things get backed up.' She looked at a printed sheet. 'Let's see. Ashenria and Fiona are helping in the bathing room. Why don't you join them there? You know where it is, don't you?' Millia nodded, acknowledged her, and walked down the long hallway.

He glanced into the rooms on either side. The Teenagers were sitting quietly, some visiting and talking with one another, others doing handwork and simple crafts. A few were asleep. Individually room was comfortably furnished, the floors covered with thick carpeting. It was a serene and slow - paced place, unlike the busy centers of manufacture and distribution where the daily work of the community occurred. Millia was glad that he had, over the years, chosen to do his hours in a variety of places so that he could experience the differences. He realized, though, that not focusing on one area meant he has left with not the slightest idea...not even a guess...of what his Assignment would be.

She laughed softly. Thinking about the Ceremony again, Millia? He teased herself.

But he suspected that with the date so near, probably all of his friends were, too.

She passed a Caretaker walking slowly with one of the Teenagers in the hall. 'Hello, Millia,' the young uniformed man said, smiling pleasantly. The woman beside her, whose arm he held, was hunched over as she shuffled along in her soft slippers. She looked at Millia and smiled, but her dark eyes were clouded and blank. He realized she was blind. She entered the bathing room with its warm moist air and scent of cleansing lotions. He removed his tunic, hung it carefully on a wall hook, and put

on the volunteer's smock that was sitting on a shelf. 'Hello, Millia!' Ashenria called from the corner where she was kneeling beside a tub. Millia saw her nearby, in a different tub. She looked up and smiled at her, but she was busy, gently washing a man who lay in the warm water. Millia greeted them and the caretaking attendants at work nearby. Then he went to the row of padded lounging chairs where others of the Teenagers were waiting.

He had worked here before; he knew what to do.

'Your turn, Lieissah,' he said, reading the name tag on the woman's robe. 'I'll just start the water and then help you up.' He pressed the button on a nearby empty tub and watched as the warm water flowed in through the many small openings on the sides. The tub would be filled in a minute and the water flow would stop automatically. She helped the woman from the chair, led her to the tub, removed her robe, and steadied her with his hand on her arm as she stepped in and lowered herself. She leaned back and sighed with pleasure, her head on a softly cushioned headrest. 'Relaxed?' he asked, and she nodded, her eyes closed. Millia squeezed cleansing lotion onto the clean sponge at the edge of the tub and began to wash her frail body. Last night he had watched as his Ancestor bathed the teenager.

This was much the same: the fragile skin, the soothing water, the gentle motion of his hand, slippery with soap. The relaxed, peaceful smile on the woman's face reminded her of Gaddie being bathed. And the nakedness, too. It was against the rules for children or adults to look at another's nakedness, but the rule did not apply to teenagers ran or the Teenagers. Millia was glad. It was a nuisance to keep oneself covered while changing for games, and the required apology if one had by mistake glimpsed another's body was always awkward.

He couldn't see why it was necessary.

He liked the feeling of safety here in this warm and quiet room; he liked the expression of trust on the woman's face as she lay in the water unprotected, exposed, and free. From the corner of his eye, he could see his friend Fiona help the teenager's man from the tub and tenderly pat his thin, naked body dry with an absorbent cloth. She helped her into his robe. Millia thought Lieissah had drifted into sleep, as the Teenagers often did, and he was careful to keep his emotions steady and gentle so he wouldn't wake her. He was surprised when she spoke, her eyes still closed. 'This morning we celebrated the release of Roberto,' she teenagers her. 'It was wonderful.' 'I knew her!' Millia said. 'I helped with his feeding the last time I was here, just a few weeks ago. He was a very interesting man.' Lieissah opened

her eyes happily. 'They teenagers his whole life before they released her,' she said. 'They always do. But to be honest,' she whispered with a mischievous look, 'some of the tellings are a little boring. I've even seen some of the Teenagers fall asleep during tellings - when they released Edna recently.

Did you know Edna?' Millia shook his head. He couldn't recall anyone named Edna. 'Well, they tried to make her life sound meaningful. And of course,' she added primly, 'all lives are meaningful, I don't mean that they aren't. But Edna. My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in Food Production for years, until she came here.

She never even had a family unit.' Lieissah lifted her head and looked around to make sure no one else was listening. Then she confided, 'I don't think Edna was very smart.' Millia laughed. He rinsed her left arm, laid it back into the water, and began to wash her feet. She murmured with pleasure as he massaged her feet with the sponge. 'But then again Roberto's life was wonderful,' Lieissah went on, after a moment.

'He had been an Instructor of Elevens - you know how important that is - and he'd been on the Planning Committee. And - goodness, I don't know how he found the time - he also raised two very successful children, and he was also the one who did the landscaping design for the Central Plaza. He didn't do the actual labor, of course.' 'Now your back. Lean forward and I'll help you sit up.' Millia put his arm around her and supported her as she sat. He squeezed the sponge against her back and began to rub her sharp - boned shoulders. 'Tell me about the celebration.' The Ceremony for the Ones was always noisy and fun. Each December, all the teenager trained in the previous year turned One one. Her mother agreed, smiling. 'The year we got Maiara, we knew, of course, that we'd receive our female because we'd made our application and been approved.

But I'd been wondering and wondering what her name would be.' 'I could have sneaked a look at the list prior to the ceremony,' Ancestor confided. 'The committee always makes the list in advance, and it's right there in the office at the Nurturing Center. One at a time - there were always fifty in each year's group if none had been released - they had been brought to the stage by the Nurturers who had cared for them since birth. Some were already walking, wobbly on their unsteady legs; others were no more than a few days teenagers, wrapped in blankets, held by their Nurturers. 'I enjoy the Naming,' Millia said. 'As a matter of fact,' he went on, 'I feel a little guilty about this. But I did go in this afternoon and looked to see if this year's Naming list had been made yet. It was right there in the office,

and I looked up number ThirtySix- that's the little guy I've been concerned about- for the reason that it occurred to me that it might enhance her cherishing if I could call her by a name. Just privately, of course, when no one else is around.' 'Did you find it?' Millia asked.

He was fascinated. It didn't seem a terribly important rule, but the fact that his Ancestor had broken a rule at all awed her. He glanced at his mother, the one responsible for adherence to the rules, and was relieved that she was smiling. Her Ancestor jiggled his eyes with his head like yes. 'Her name - if he makes it to the Naming without being released, of course- is to be Gaddie. So, I whisper that to her when I feed her every four hours, and during exercise and playtime. If no one can hear me. 'I call her Gabe, actually,' he said and chortled. 'Gabie.'

Millia tried it out. A good name, he decided. Though Millia had only become a one and five the year that they acquired Maiara and learned her name, he remembered the excitement, the conversations at home, wondering about her: how she would look, who she would be, how she would fit into their established family unit. He remembered climbing the steps to the stage with his parents, his Ancestor by his side that year instead of with the Nurturers since it was the year that he would be given a teenager of his own.

She reminisced his mother taking the teenager, his sister, into her arms, while the document was read to the assembled family units. The crowd had clapped, and Millia had grinned. He liked his sister's name. Maiara, barely awake, had waved her small fist. Then they had stepped down to make room for the next family unit. 'Teenager Twenty- four,' the Name had read. 'Maiara.' She remembered his Ancestor 's look of delight, and that his Ancestor had whispered, 'She's one of my favorites. I was hoping for her to be the one.'

'When I was an Eleven,' his Ancestor said now, 'as you are, Millia, I was very impatient, waiting for the Ceremony of Nine. It's a long two days. I remember that I enjoyed the Ones, as I always do, but that I didn't pay much attention to the other ceremonies, except for my sister's. She became a Nine that year and got her bicycle. I'd been teaching her to ride mine, even though technically I wasn't supposed to.' Millia laughed. It was one of the few rules that were not taken very seriously and was almost always broken. The children all received their fold-up cars at Nine; they were not allowed to ride fold-up cars before then. But almost always, the teenager's brothers and sisters had secretly taught the younger ones. Millia had been thinking already about teaching Maiara. There was talk about changing the rule and giving the fold-up cars at an earlier age.

A committee was studying the idea. When something went to a committee for study, the people always joked about it. They said that the committee members would become Teenagers by the time the rule change was made. Instructions were very hard to change. Sometimes, if it was a very important rule- unlike the one governing the age for fold-up cars- it would have to go, eventually, to The Obtainer for a decision. The Obtainer was the most important Teenager. Millia had never even seen her, which he knew of; someone in a position of such importance lived and worked alone. But the committee would never bother The Obtainer with a question about fold up cars; they would simply fret and argue about it themselves for years until the citizens forgot that it had ever gone to them for study. Her Ancestor continued.

'So, I watched and cheered when my sister, Katya, became a Nine and removed her hair ribbons and got her bicycle,' Ancestor went on. 'Then I didn't pay much attention to the Tens and Elevens, not teens. And finally, at the end of the second day, which seemed to go on forever, it was my turn. It was the Ceremony of Nine.' Millia shivered. He pictured his-

Ancestor, who must have been a shy and quiet boy, for he was a shy and quiet man, seated with his group, waiting to be called to the stage.

The Ceremony of Nine was the last of the Ceremonies. The most important. 'I remember how proud my parents looked- and my sister, too; even though she wanted to be out riding the bicycle publicly, she stopped fidgeting and was very still and attentive when my turn came. 'Nevertheless, to be honest, Millia,' his Ancestor said, 'for me, there was not the element of suspense that there is with your Ceremony. Because I was already fairly certain of what the assignment was to be.' Millia was surprised... by this... There was no way, really, to know in advance.

It was a secret selection, made by the leaders of the community, the Committee of Teenagers, who took the responsibility so seriously that there were never even any jokes made about Assignments. Her mother seemed surprised, too. 'How could you have known?' she asked. Her Ancestor smiled his gentle smile. 'Well, it was clear to me- and my parents later confessed that it had been obvious to them, too- what my aptitude was. I had always loved the teenagers are more than anything. When my friends in my age group were teen car races, or building toy vehicles or bridges with their construction sets, or...' 'All the things I do with my friends,' Millia pointed out, and his mother nodded in agreement. 'I always participated, of course, because as children we must experience all of those things.

And I studied hard in school, as you do, Millia. But again, and again, during free time, I found myself drawn to the teenager ran. I spent almost all of my volunteer hours helping at the Nurturing Center. Of course, the teenagers knew that, from their observation.' Millia nodded. During the past year, he had been aware of the increasing level of observation. In school, at recreation time, and during volunteer hours, he had noticed the Teenagers watching her and the other Elevens. She had seen those taking notes. He knew, too, that the Teenagers were meeting for long hours with all of the instructors that he and the other Elevens had had during their years of school. 'So, I expected it, and I was pleased, but not at all surprised, when my Assignment was announced as Nurturer,' Ancestor explained. 'Did everyone applaud, even though they weren't surprised?'

Millia asked. 'Oh, of course. They were happy for me, that my Assignment was what I wanted most. I felt very fortunate.' His Ancestor smiled. 'Were any of the Elevens disappointed, your year?'

Millia asked. Unlike his Ancestor, he had no idea what his Assignment would be. But he knew that some would disappoint her. Though he respected his Ancestor 's work, Nurturer would not be his wish.

And he didn't envy Laborers at all. Her Ancestor thought. 'No, I don't think so. Unquestionably the Teenagers are so careful in their observations and selections.' 'I think it's probably the most important job in our community,' his mother commented. 'My friend Yoshiko was surprised by her selection as Doctor,' Ancestor said, 'but she was thrilled. And let's see, there was Anydreia - I remember that when we were boys, he never wanted to do physical things. He spent all the recreation time he could with his construction set, and his volunteer hours were always on building sites. The Teenagers knew that, of course. Anydreia was given the Assignment of Engineer and he was delighted.'

Instantly, obediently, Millia had dropped his like vintage-looking automobile car on its side on the path behind his family's dwelling. He had run indoors and stayed there, alone. His parents were both at work, and his little sister, Maiara, was at the Childcare Center where she spent her after-school hours. Looking through the front window, he had seen no people: none of the busy afternoon crew of Street Cleaners, Landscape Workers, and Food Delivery people who usually populated the community at that time of day. He saw only the abandoned vintage-looking automobiles here and there on their sides; an upturned wheel on one was still revolving slowly. The world like modern high floating buildings and glass that shines blue, cold and concrete. Beltways in the sky with tracks that rush by fast and yet slow. All black and white to them, not me and not as I see her, as she does me.

We kiss under the tree of air that gives us life forbidden like the red appeals. That is where they looking, we did what was not... cut- you can take about what goes on here that we do not allow, the voice said- to me the reader/viewer of this freaked up world. She had been frightened then. The sense of his own community silent, waiting, had made his stomach churn. He had trembled. Nevertheless, it had been nothing. Within minutes the speakers had crackled again, and the voice, reassuring now and less urgent, had explained that a Pilot- in- Training had misread his navigational instructions and made a-

wrong turn. Desperately the Pilot had been trying to make his way back before his error- was noticed. UNNECESSARY TO SAY, SHE WILL BE UNCONFINED, the voice had said, followed by silence. There was an ironic tone to that final message as if the Speaker found it amusing; and Millia had smiled a little, though he knew what a grim- statement it had been. For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, an overwhelming statement of failure. Even the children were scared if they used the term lightly at play, jeering at a teammate who missed a catch or stumbled in a race. Millia had done it once, had shouted at his best friend,

'That's it, Ashenria! You're released!' when Ashenria's clumsy error had lost a match for his team.

He had been taken aside for a brief and serious talk by the coach, had hung his head with guilt and embarrassment, and apologized to Ashenria after the game. Now, thinking about the feeling of fear as he pedaled home along the river path, he remembered that moment of palpable, stomach-sinking terror when the aircraft had streaked above. It was not what he was feeling now with December approaching. She searched for the right word to describe her own feeling.

Millia was vigilant about language.

Not like his friend, Ashenria, who talked too fast and mixed things up, scrambling words and phrases until they were barely recognizable and often very funny. Millia grinned, remembering the morning that Ashenria had dashed into the classroom, late as usual, arriving breathlessly in the middle of the chanting of the morning anthem. When the class took their seats at the conclusion of the patriotic hymn, Ashenria remained standing to make his public apology as was required. 'I apologize for inconveniencing my learning community.' Ashenria ran through the standard apology phrase rapidly, still catching his breath.

The Instructor and class waited patiently for his explanation. The students had all been grinning, because they had listened to Ashenria's explanations so many times before. 'I left home at the correct time but when I was riding along near the hatchery, the crew was separating some salmon. I guess I just got distraught, watching them. 'I for one apologize to my classmates,' Ashenria concluded. He smoothed his rumpled tunic and sat down. 'We accept your apology, Ashenria.' The class recited the standard response in unison. Many of the students were biting their lips to keep from laughing. 'I accept your apology,

Ashenria,' the Instructor said. He was smiling. 'And I thank you because once again you have provided an opportunity for a lesson in language... 'Distraught' is too strong an adjective to describe salmon-viewing.' He turned and wrote 'distraught' on the instructional board. Beside it, he wrote 'Unfocussed!' Millia, nearing his home now, smiled at the recollection. Thinking, still, as he wheeled his vintage-looking automobile cars into its narrow port beside the door, he realized that frightened was the wrong word to describe his feelings, now that December was almost here. It was too strong an adjective. She had waited a long time for this special December. Now that it was almost upon her, he wasn't frightened, but he was ... eager, he decided. He was eager for it to come. And he was excited, certainly.

All of the Elevens were excited about the event that would be coming so soon. Then again there was a little trembling of nervousness when he thought about it, about what might happen.

Trembling down there for her in me...

Apprehensive, Millia decided. That's what I am.

'Who wants to be the first tonight, for feelings?' Millia's Ancestor asked, at the conclusion of their evening meal. It was one of the rituals, the evening telling of feelings. Sometimes Millia and his sister, Maiara, argued overturns, over who would get to go first. Their parents, of course, were part of the ritual; they, too, teenagers their feelings each evening.

But like all parents- all adults- they didn't fight and wheedle for their turn. Nor did Millia, tonight. His feelings were too complicated this evening. He wanted to share them, but he wasn't e ager to begin the process of sifting through his own complicated emotions, even with the help that he knew his parents could give. 'You go, Maiara,' he said, seeing her sister, who was much younger... only a Seven- wiggling with impatience in her chair.' I felt very angry this afternoon,' Maiara announced... 'My Childcare group was in the play area, and we had a visiting group of Seven and they didn't obey the rules

at all. One of them...a male; I don't know his name - kept going right to the front of the line for the slide, even though the rest of us were all waiting. I felt so angry at her. I made my hand into a fist, like this.' She held up a clenched fist and the rest of the family smiled at her small defiant gesture. 'Why? Why - do you think the visitors didn't obey the rules?' Mother asked. Maiara considered, and shook her head. 'I don't know. They acted like... like...' 'Wildlife?' Millia suggested. She laughed hard yet not too hard to get bitched at. 'That's right,' Maiara said, laughing too. 'Like animals.' Neither child knew what the word meant, exactly, but it was often used to describe someone uneducated or clumsy, someone, who didn't fit in.

Like the Matching of Spouses and the - Naming and Placement of teenagers, the Assignments were scrupulously thought through by the Committee of Teenagers. She was certain that his Assignment, whatever it was to be, and Ashenria's too, would be the right one for them. He only wished that the midday break would conclude, that the audience would reenter the Auditorium, and the suspense would end. As if in answer to his unspoken wish, the signal came and the crowd began to move toward the doors. Now Millia's group had taken a new place in the Amphitheater, trading with the new Elevens, so that they sat in the very front, immediately before the stage. They were arranged by their original numbers, the numbers they had been given at birth. The numbers were rarely used after the Naming. But each child knew his number, of course.

Sometimes parents used them in irritation at a child's misbehavior, indicating that Misain made one unworthy of a name. Millia always chuckled when he heard a parent, exasperated, call sharply to a whining toddler, 'That's enough, Twenty - three!' Millia was Nineteen. He had been the nineteenth teenager born this year. It had meant that at his Naming, he had been already standing and bright-eyed, soon to walk and talk. It had given her a slight advantage the first year or two, a little more maturity than many of his group mates who had been born in the later months of that year. But it evened out, as it always did, by three. After three, the children progressed at much the same level, though by their first number - one could always tell who was a few months' - teenagers than others in her - group. Technically, Millia's full number was Eleven - nineteen, since there were other Nineteens, of course, in each age group. And today, now that the new Elevens had been advanced this morning, there were two Eleven - nineteens. At the midday break, he had exchanged smiles with the new one, a shy female named Harriely. Nevertheless - the duplication was only for these few hours. Very soon he would not be an Eleven but a Nine, and age would no longer matter. He would be an adult, like his parents, though a new one and untrained still. Ashenria was Four and sat now in the row ahead of Millia. He

would receive his Assignment fourth. She, fifteen, was on his left; on his other side sat Twenty, a male named Harriely who Millia didn't like much.

Harriely was very serious, not much fun, and a worrier and tattletale, too. 'Have you checked the rules, Millia?' Harriely was always whispering solemnly. 'I'm not sure that's within the rules.' Usually, it was some foolish thing that no one cared about- opening his tunic if it was a day with a breeze; taking a brief try on a friend's bicycle, just to experience the different feel of it.

The initial speech at the Ceremony of Nine was made by the Main Teenager, the leader of the community who was elected every ten years. The speech was much the same each year: recollection of the time of childhood and the period of preparation, the coming responsibilities of adult life, the profound importance of Assignment, the seriousness of training to come.

Then the Main Teen moved ahead in her speech. 'This is the time,' she began, looking directly at them, 'when we acknowledge differences. You Elevens have spent all your years till now learning to fit in, to standardize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group. 'Nevertheless, today we honor your differences. They have determined your futures.' She began to describe this year's group and its variety of personalities, though she singled no one out by name. She mentioned that there was one who had singular skills at caretaking, another who loved teenager ran, one with unusual scientific aptitude, and a fourth for whom physical labor was an obvious pleasure.

Millia shifted in his seat, trying to recognize each reference as one of his groupmates. The caretaking skills were no doubt those of Fiona, on his left; he remembered noticing the tenderness with which she had bathed the Teenagers. Probably the one with scientific aptitude was Benjamin, the male who had devised new, important equipment for the Rehabilitation Center. She heard nothing that he recognized as herself, Millia. Finally, the Main Teen paid tribute to the hard work of her committee, which had performed the observations so meticulously all year. The Committee of Teenagers stood and was acknowledged by applause. Millia noticed Ashenria yawn slightly, covering his mouth politely with his hand. Then, at last, the Main teen called number One to the stage, and the Assignments began. Respectively announcement was lengthy, accompanied by a speech directed at the new Nine.

Millia tried to pay attention as One, smiling happily, received her Assignment as Fish Hatchery Attendant along with words of praise for her childhood spent doing many volunteer hours there, and her obvious interest in the important process of providing nourishment for the community. Number One- her name was Madeline- returned, finally, amidst applause, to her seat, wearing the new

badge that designated her Fish Hatchery Attendant. Millia was certainly glad that that Assignment was taken; he wouldn't have wanted it. But he gave Madeline a smile of congratulation. When Two, a female named Inger received her Assignment as Birthmother, Millia remembered that his mother had called it a job without honor. But he thought that the Committee had chosen well. Inger was a nice girl though somewhat lazy, and her body was strong. She would enjoy the three years of being pampered that would follow her brief training; she would give birth easily and well; and the task of Laborer that would follow would use her strength, keep her healthy, and impose self-

discipline. Inger was smiling when she resumed her seat. Birthmother was an important job if lacking in prestige.

Millia noticed that Ashenria looked nervous. He kept turning his head and glancing back at Millia until the group leader had to give her a silent chastisement, a motion to sit still and face forward.

Three, Millia, was given an Assignment as Instructor of sixes, which obviously pleased her and was well deserved. Now there were three Assignments gone, none of the ones that Millia would have liked- not that he could have been a Birthmother, anyway, he realized with amusement. He tried to sort through the list in his mind, the possible Assignments that remained. But there were so many he gave it up; and anyway, now it was Ashenria's turn. He paid strict attention as his friend went to the stage and stood self- consciously beside the Main Teen.

'All of us in the community know and enjoy Ashenria,' the Main Teen began. Ashenria grinned and scratched one leg with the other foot. The audience chuckled softly.' When the committee began to consider Ashenria's Assignment,' she went on, 'there were some possibilities that were immediately discarded. Some that would clearly not have been right for Ashenria. 'For example,' she said, smiling, 'we did not consider for an instant designating Ashenria an Instructor of Threes.' The audience howled with laughter.

Ashenria laughed, too, looking sheepish but pleased with the special attention. The Instructors of Threes were in charge of the acquisition of the correct language. 'In actual fact,' the Main Teen continued, chuckling a little herself, 'we even gave a little thought to some retroactive chastisement for the one who had been Ashenria's Instructor of Threes so long ago. At the meeting where Ashenria was discussed, were teenagers many of the stories that we all remembered from his days of language acquisition. 'Particularly,' she said, chuckling, 'the alteration between snack and smack. Remember, Ashenria?' Ashenria nodded ruefully, and the audience laughed aloud. Millia did, too. He

remembered though he had been only a Three at the time herself. The punishment used for small children was a regulated system of smacks with the discipline wand: a thin, flexible weapon that stung painfully when it was wielded. The Playgroup specialists were trained very carefully in the discipline methods: a quick smack across the hands for a bit of minor misbehavior; three sharper smacks on the bare legs for a second offense. Unfortunately, Ashenria, who always talked too fast and mixed-up words, even as a toddler. As a Three, eager for his juice and crackers at snack time, he one day said 'smack' instead of 'snack' as he stood to wait in line for the morning treat. Millia remembered it clearly.

He could still see little Ashenria, wiggling with impatience in the line. He remembered the cheerful voice call out, 'I want my smack!' The other Threes, including Millia, had laughed nervously. 'Snack!' they corrected. 'You meant snack, Ashenria!' But the mistake had been made. And the precision of language was one of the most important tasks of small children.

3

Ashenria had asked for a smack. The discipline and, in the hand of the Childcare worker, whistled as it came down across Ashenria's hands. Ashenria whimpered, cringed and corrected herself instantly. 'Snack,' he whispered. Nevertheless, the next morning he had done it again. And again, the following week. He couldn't seem to stop, though for each lapse the discipline wand came again, escalating to a series of painful lashes that left marks on Ashenria's legs. Eventually, for a period of time, Ashenria stopped talking altogether when he was a Three. 'For a while,' the Main Teen said, relating the story, 'we had a silent Ashenria! But he learned.' She turned to her with a smile. 'When he began to talk again, it was with greater precision. And now his lapses are very few. His corrections and apologies are very prompt. And his good humor is unfailing.' The audience murmured in agreement.

Ashenria's cheerful disposition was well-known throughout the community. 'Ashenria.' She lifted her voice to make the official announcement. 'We have given you the

Assignment of Assistant Director of Recreation.' She clipped on his new badge as he stood beside her, beaming.

Then he turned and left the stage as the audience cheered. When he had taken his seat again, the Main Teen looked down at her and said the words that she had said now four times, and would say to each new Nine. Somehow, she gave it special meaning for each of them. 'Ashenria,' she said, 'thank you for your juvenile years.' The Assignments continued, and Millia watched and listened, relieved now

by the wonderful Assignment his best friend had been given. But he was more and more apprehensive as his own approach. Now the new Nines in the row ahead had all received their badges. They were fingering them as they sat, and Millia knew that each one was thinking about the training that lay ahead. For someone studious male had been selected as Doctor, a female as Engineer, and another for Law and Justice- it would be years of hard work and study. Others, like Laborers and Birthmothers, would have a much shorter training period.

Eighteen, Fiona, on his left, was called. Millia knew she must be nervous, but Fiona was a calm female. She had been sitting quietly, serenely, throughout the Ceremony. Even the applause, though enthusiastic, seemed serene when Fiona was given the important Assignment of Caretaker of the Teenagers. It was perfect for such a sensitive, gentle girl, and her smile was satisfied and pleased when she took her seat beside her again. She skipped me, Millia thought, stunned. Had he heard wrong? No. There was a sudden hush in the crowd, and he knew that the entire community realized that the Main Teen had moved from Eighteen to-

Twenty, leaving a gap. On his right, Harriely, with a startled look, rose from his seat and moved to the stage. A mistake. She made a mistake. But Millia knew, even as he had the thought, that she hadn't. The Main Teen made no mistakes. Not at the Ceremony of Nine. She felt dizzy, and couldn't focus his attention. He didn't hear what Assignment Harriely received, and was only dimly aware of the applause as the boy returned, wearing his new badge.

Then: Twenty- one. Twenty- two. The numbers continued in order. Millia sat, dazed, as they moved into the Thirties and then the Forties, nearing the end. Each time, at each declaration, his heart jumped for a moment, and he thought wild thoughts. Perhaps now she would call his name. Could he have forgotten his own number? No. He had always been Nineteen. He was sitting in the seat marked fourteen. But she had skipped her. He saw the others in his group glance at her, embarrassed, and then avert their eyes quickly. He saw a worried look on the face of his group leader. He hunched his shoulders and tried to make herself smaller in the seat. He wanted to disappear, to fade away, and not to exist. He didn't dare to turn and find his parents in the crowd. He couldn't bear to see their faces darkened with shame.

Millia bowed his head and searched through his mind. What had he done wrong? The audience was clearly ill at ease. They applauded at the final Assignment; but the applause was piecemeal, no longer a crescendo of united enthusiasm. There were murmurs of confusion.

Millia moved his hands together, clapping, but it was an automatic, meaningless gesture that he wasn't even aware of. His mind had shut out all of the earlier emotions: the anticipation, excitement, pride, and even the happy kinship with his friends. Now he felt only humiliation and terror. The Main Teen waited until the uneasy applause subsided. Then she spoke again.' I know,' she said in her vibrant, gracious voice, 'that you are all concerned. That you feel I have made a mistake.' She smiled. The community, relieved from its discomfort very slightly by her benign statement, seemed to breathe more easily. It was very silent. Millia looked up at me. 'I have caused you anxiety,' she said. 'I apologize to my community.' Her voice flowed over the assembled crowd. 'We accept your apology,' they all uttered together. 'Millia,' she said, looking down at her, 'I apologize to you in particular. I caused you anguish.' 'I accept your apology,' Millia replied shakily. 'Please come to the stage now.' Earlier that day, dressing in his own dwelling, he had practiced the kind of jaunty, self- assured walk that he hoped he could make to the stage when his turn came. All of that was forgotten now. He simply willed herself to stand, to move his feet that felt weighted and clumsy, and to go forward, up the steps and across the platform until he stood at her side.

Reassuringly she placed her arm on his tense shoulders. 'Millia has not been assigned,' she informed the crowd, and his heart sank.

Then she went on. 'Millia has been selected.'

She blinked... What did that mean? He felt a collective, questioning stir from the audience. They, too, were puzzled. In a firm, commanding voice she announced, 'Millia has been selected to be our next Obtainer of Memory.' Then he heard the wheeze - the sudden intake of breath, drawn sharply in astonishment, by each of the seated citizens. She saw their faces; the eyes broadened in wonder. As well as still, he did not understand. 'Such a selection is very, very rare,' the Main Teen teenagers the audience. 'Our community has only one Obtainer. It is he who trains his successor. 'We have had our current Obtainer for a very long time,' she went on. Millia followed her eyes and saw that she was looking at one of the Teenagers. The Committee of Teenagers was sitting together in a group, and the Main Teen's eyes were now on one who sat in the middle but seemed oddly separate from them. It was a man Millia had never noticed before, a bearded man with pale eyes.

He was watching Millia intently. 'We failed in our last selection,' the Main Teen said solemnly. 'It was ten years ago when Millia was just a toddler. I will not dwell on the experience because it causes us all terrible discomfort.' Millia didn't know what she was referring to, but he could sense the

discomfort of the audience. They shifted uneasily in their seats. 'We have not been hasty this time,' she continued. 'We could not afford another failure.' 'Sometimes,' she went on, speaking now in a lighter tone, relaxing the tension in the Auditorium, 'we are not entirely certain about the Assignments, even after the most painstaking observations. Sometimes we worry that the one assigned might not develop, through training, every attribute necessary.

Elevens are still children, after all. What we observe as playfulness and patience - the requirements to become Nurturer- could, with maturity, be revealed as simply foolishness and indolence. So, we continue to observe during training, and to modify behavior when necessary.

'Nonetheless, the Obtainer- in- training cannot be observed, cannot be modified. That is stated quite clearly in the rules.

He is to be alone, apart, while he is prepared by the current Obtainer for the job which is the most honored in our community.' Alone? Apart? Millia listened with increasing unease.

'Therefore, the selection must be sound.

It must be a unanimous choice of the Committee. They can have no doubts, however fleeting. If during the process, a Teen reports a dream of uncertainty, that dream has the power to set a candidate aside instantly. 'Millia was identified as a possible Obtainer many years ago. We have observed her meticulously. There were no dreams of uncertainty. 'she has shown all of the qualities that an Obtainer must-have.' With her hand still firmly on his shoulder, the Main Teen listed the qualities. 'Acumen,' she said. 'We are all aware that Millia has been a top student throughout his school days. 'Truthfulness,' she said next. 'Millia has, like all of us, committed minor transgressions.' She smiled at her. 'We expect that. We hoped, also, that he would present herself promptly for chastisement, and he has always done so- o. 'Bravery,' she went on. 'Only one of us here today has ever undergone the rigorous training required of an Obtainer. He, of course, is the most important member of the Taskforce: the current Obtainer. It was he who reminded us, again and again, of the courage required. 'Millia,' she said, turning to her, but speaking in a voice that the entire community could hear, 'the training required of you involves pain. The physical pain I was feeling within me. As they cut that off too, my clit like they do with all of us girls here.' She felt fear flutter within her. 'You have never experienced that. Yes, you have scraped your knees in falls from your bicycle. Yes, you crushed your finger in a door last year.' Millia nodded, agreeing, as he recalled the incident and its accompanying misery. 'Nonetheless, you will be faced, now,' she explained gently, 'with the pain of a magnitude that none of us here can

comprehend because it is beyond our experience. The Obtainer herself was not able to describe it, only to remind us that you would be faced with it, that you would need immense courage. We cannot prepare you for that.

'Nevertheless, we feel certain that you are brave,' she said to her. She did not feel brave at all. Not now. 'The fourth essential attribute,' the Main Teen said, 'is wisdom.

Millia has not yet acquired that. The acquisition of wisdom will come through his training. 'We are convinced that Millia has the ability to acquire wisdom. That is what we looked for. 'Finally, The Obtainer must have one more quality, and it is one which I can only name, but not describe. I do not understand it. You members of the community will not understand it, either. Perhaps Millia will because the current Obtainer has teenagers us that Millia already has this quality. He calls it the Capacity to See Beyond.' The Main Teen looked at Millia with a question in her eyes. The audience watched her, too. They were silent. They don't want us to feel anything - not even an orgasm!

For a moment he froze, consumed with despair. He didn't have it, then whatever - she - had said. He didn't know what it was. Now was the moment when he would have to confess, to say, 'No, I don't. I can't,' and throw herself on their mercy, ask their forgiveness, to explain that he had been wrongly chosen, that he was not the right one at all. But then when he looked out across the crowd, the sea of faces, the thing happened again. The thing that had happened with the apple. They changed... She blinked, and it was gone. His shoulders straightened slightly. Briefly, he felt a tiny sliver of sureness for the first time. She was still watching her. They all were. 'I think it's true,' the teenagers the Main Teen and the community. 'I don't understand it yet. I don't know what it is. But sometimes I see something. And maybe it's beyond.' She took her arm from his shoulders. 'Millia,' she said, speaking not to her alone but to the entire community of which he was a part, 'you will be trained to be our next Ob tainer of Memory. We thank you for your childhood.' Then she turned and left the stage, left her there alone, standing and facing the crowd, which began spontaneously the collective murmur of her name. 'Millia.' It was a whisper at first: hushed, barely audible. 'Millia... Millia.' Then louder, faster. 'MILLIA - MILLIA - MILLIA.' With the chant, Millia knew, the community was accepting her and his new role, giving her life, the way they had given it to the teenager Samm. His heart swelled with gratitude and pride.

Nevertheless, at the same time, she was filled with fear. He did not know what her selection meant. He did not know what he was to become. Otherwise what would become of her? Now, for the first time in his nine years of life, Millia felt separate, different.

He remembered what the Main Teen had said: that his training would be alone and apart. But then again, her training had not yet begun and already, upon leaving the Auditorium, he felt the apartness. The girl the fourteener she had given her, he made his way through the throng, looking for his family unit and for Ashenria. People moved aside for her. They watched her. He thought he could hear whispers. 'Mil!' She called, spotting his friend near the rows of fold-up cars. 'Ride back with me?' 'Unquestionable.' Ashenria smiled, his usual smile, friendly and familiar. But then again Millia felt a moment of hesitation from his friend, an uncertainty. 'Felicitations,' Ashenria said. 'You too,' Millia replied. 'It was really funny when she teenagers about the smacks. You got more applause than almost anybody else.' The other new Nines clustered nearby, placing their figures carefully into the carrying containers on the backs of the like vintage-looking automobiles cars. In each dwelling tonight, they would be studying the instructions for the beginning of their training.

Each night for years the children had memorized the required lessons for school, often yawning with boredom. Tonight, they would all begin eagerly to memorize the rules for their adult Assignments. 'Congratulations, Ashenria!' someone called. Then that hesitation again. 'You too, Millia!' Millia prepared herself to walk to the stage when the applause ended and the Main Teen picked up the next teenagers and looked down at the group to call forward the next new Nine. He was calm now that his turn had come. He took a deep breath and smoothed his hair with his hand. 'Twenty,' he heard her voice say clearly.

'Harriely.'

'Where were the visitors from?' Ancestor asked.

Maiara frowned, trying to remember. 'Our leader teenagers us, when he made the welcome speech, but I can't remember. I guess I wasn't paying attention. It was from another community. They had to leave very early, and they had their midday meal on the bus.'

Mother nodded. 'Do you think it's possible that their rules may be different? And so, they simply didn't know what your play area rules were?'

Maiara shrugged and nodded. 'I suppose.'

'You've visited other communities, haven't you?' Millia asked... 'My group has, often...'

Maiara nodded again. 'When we were Sixes, we went and shared a whole school day with a group of

Sixes in their community.'

'How did you feel when you were there?'

Maiara frowned. 'I felt strange. Because their methods were different. They were learning usages that my group hadn't learned yet, so we felt stupid.'

An ancestor was listening with interest. 'I'm thinking, Maiara,' he said, 'about the boy who didn't obey the rules today. Do you think it's possible that he felt strange and stupid, being in a new place with rules that he didn't know about?'

Maiara pondered that. 'Yes,' she said, finally. 'I feel a little sorry for her,' Millia said... 'Even though I don't even know her. I feel sorry for anyone who is in a place where he feels strange and stupid.'

'How do you feel now, Maiara?' Ancestor asked.

'Still angry?'

'I guess not,' Maiara decided. 'I guess I feel a little sorry for her. And sorry I made a fist.' She grinned. Millia smiled back at his sister. Maiara's feelings were always straightforward, fairly simple, usually easy to resolve. He guessed that his own had been, too, when he was a Seven.

She listened politely, though not very attentively, while his Ancestor took his turn, describing a feeling of worry that he'd had that day at work: a concern about one of the teenagers who wasn't doing well. Millia's

Ancestor 's title was Nurturer. He and the other Nurturers were responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of every teenager during its earliest life. It was a very important job, Millia knew, but it wasn't one that interested her much.

'What gender is it?' Maiara asked.

'Male,' Ancestor said. 'He's a sweet little male with a lovely disposition. But he isn't growing as fast as he should, and he doesn't sleep soundly. We have her in the extra care section for supplementary nurturing, but the committee's beginning to talk about releasing her.'

'Oh, no nope,' Mother murmured sympathetically. 'I know how sad that must make you feel.' Millia and Maiara both nodded sympathetically as well. The release of a teenager that was always sad, because they hadn't had a chance to enjoy life within the community yet. And they hadn't done anything wrong. 'Well, there was the telling of his life. That is always first. Then the toast. We all raised our glasses and cheered. We chanted anthem. He made a lovely goodbye speech. And several of us made little speeches wishing her well. I didn't, though. I've never been fond of public speaking. 'She was thrilled. You should have seen the look on his face when they let her go.' Millia slowed the strokes of his hand on her back thoughtfully. 'Lieissah,' she asked, 'what materializes when they make the actual release?

Where exactly did Roberto go?' She lifted her bare wet shoulders in a small shrug. 'I don't know. I don't think anybody does, except the committee. He just bowed to all of us and then walked, like they all do, through the special door in the Releasing Room. But you should have seen his look. Pure happiness, I'd call it.' Millia grinned. 'I wish I'd been there to see it.' Lieissah frowned. 'I don't know why they don't let children come. Not enough room, I guess. They should enlarge the Releasing Room.' Ashenria and Millia responded with congratulations to their groupmates. Millia saw his parents watching her from the place where their own fold-up cars were waiting. Maiara had already been strapped into her sear. He waved. They waved back, smiling, but he noticed that Maiara was watching her solemnly, her thumb in her mouth. She rode directly to his dwelling, exchanging only small jokes and unimportant remarks with Ashenria. 'See you in the morning, Recreation Director!' he called, dismounting by his door as Ashenria continued on.

'Right! See you!' Ashenria called back. Once again, there was just a moment when things weren't quite the same, weren't quite as they had always been through the long friendship. Perhaps he had imagined it. Things couldn't change, with Ashenria. The evening meal was quieter than usual. Maiara chattered about her plans for volunteer work; she would begin, she said, at the Nurturing Center, since she was already an expert at feeding Gaddie. 'I know,' she added quickly when her Ancestor gave her a warning glance, 'I won't mention his name. I know I'm not supposed to know his name. 'I can't wait for tomorrow to come,' she said happily. Millia sighed uneasily. 'I can,' he muttered.

'You've been greatly honored,' his mother said. 'Your Ancestor and I are very proud.' 'It's the most important job in the community,' Ancestor said. 'Nonetheless just the other night, you said that the job of making Assignments was the most important!' Mother waggled some not wanting too. 'This is different. It's not a job, really. I never thought, never expected-' She paused. 'There's only one Obtainer.' 'Nonetheless the Main Teen said that they had made a selection before and that it failed. What was she talking about?' Both of his parents hesitated.

4

Finally, his Ancestor described the previous selection. 'It was very much as it was today, Millia- the same suspense, as one Eleven had been passed over when the Assignments were given. Then the announcement, when they singled out the one-

'Millia interrupted. 'What was her name do you remember?' Her mother replied, 'Her, not his. It was a female. But we are never to speak the name, or to use it again for a teenager.' Millia was shocked. A name designated Not- to- Be- Spoken indicated the highest degree of disgrace. 'What happened to her?' he asked nervously. Nonetheless, his parents looked blank. 'We don't know,' his Ancestor said uncomfortably. 'We never saw her again.' A silence fells over the room. They looked at each other.

Finally, his mother, rising from the table, said, 'You've been greatly honored, Millia. Greatly honored.' Alone in his sleeping room, prepared for bed, Millia opened his teenagers at last. Some of the other Nines, he had noticed, had been given teenagers thick with printed pages. She imagined Benjamin, the scientific male in his group, beginning to read pages of rules and instructions with relish. He pictured Fiona smiling her gentle smile as she bent over the lists of duties and methods that she would be required to learn in the days to come. Nonetheless, his own figure was startlingly close to empty- like his mind at the time. Inside there was only a single printed sheet. He read it twice. MILLIA OBTAINER OF MEMORY- Go immediately at the end of school- hours each day- and to the Annex entrance to the House of the Teenagers and present yourself to the attendant.

Go immediately to your dwelling at the deduction of Training Hours each day.

From this moment you are exempted from rubrics governing rudeness. You may ask any question of any citizen and you will receive answers.

Do not discuss your training with any other member of the community, including parents and Teenagers.

From this moment you are prohibited from a dream- telling.

Except for illness or injury unrelated to your training, do not apply for any medication.

You are not permitted to apply for release.

You may lie...

Millia was stunned. What would happen to his friendships? Her mindless hours playing ball, or riding his like the vintage-looking automobile, along the river?

Those had been happy and vital times for her. Were they to be completely taken from her, now? The simple logistic instructions- where to go, and when- we're expected. Every- Nine had to be teenagers, of course, where and how and when to report for training. But he was a little dismayed that his schedule left no time, apparently, for recreation.

The exemption from rudeness startled her. Reading it again, however, he realized that it didn't compel her to be rude; it simply allowed her the option. He was quite certain he would never take advantage of it. He was so completely, so thoroughly accustomed to courtesy within the community that the thought of asking another citizen an intimate question, of calling someone's attention to an area of awkwardness, was unnerving.

The prohibition of a dream- telling, he thought, would not be a real problem. She dreamed so rarely that the dream- telling did not come effortlessly to her anyway, and he was glad to be excused from it. He wondered briefly, though, how to deal with it at the morning meal. What if he did dream- should he simply tell his family unit, as he did so often, anyway, that she marked as certain of? That would be a lie. Still, the final rule said ... well, he wasn't quite ready to think about the final rule on the page.

The restriction of medication unnerved her. The medication was always available to citizens, even to children, through their parents. When he had crushed his finger in the door, he had quickly, gasping into the speaker, notified her mother; she had hastily requisitioned relief- of- pain medication which had promptly been delivered to his dwelling. Almost instantly the excruciating pain in his h and had diminished to the throb which was, now, all he could recall of the experience.

Re-reading rule number 7, he realized that a crushed finger fell into the category of 'unrelated to training.' So, if it ever happened again - and he was quite certain it wouldn't; he had been very careful near heavy doors since the accident! - He could still receive medication.

The pill he took now, each morning, was also unrelated to training. So, he would continue to receive the pill.

But he remembered uneasily what the Main Teen had said about the pain that would come with his training. She had called it indescribable.

Millia swallowed hard, trying without success to imagine what such pain might be like, with no medication at all. But it was beyond his comprehension.

He felt no reaction to rule number 6 at all. It had never occurred to her that under any circumstances, ever, he might apply for release.

Finally, he steeled herself to read the final rule again. She had been trained since their earliest childhood, since his earliest learning of language, never to lie. It was an integral part of the learning of precise speech. Once, when he had been a Four, he had said, just prior to the midday meal at school, 'I'm starving.'

Immediately he had been taken aside for a brief private lesson in language precision. He was not starving; it was pointed out. He was hungry. No one in the community was starving, had ever been starving, and would ever be starving. To say 'starving' was to speak a lie. An unintentional lie, of course. But the reason for the precision of language was to ensure that unintentional lies were never uttered. Did he understand that? They asked her, and he had.

She had never, within his memory, been tempted to lie. Ashenria did not lie. Maiara did not lie. His parents did not lie. No one did. Unless... Now Millia had a thought that he had never had before. This new thought was frightening. What if others - adults - had, upon becoming Nines, received in their instructions the same terrifying sentence? What if they had all been instructed: You may lie? Her mind wound... now, empowered to ask questions of utmost rudeness - and promised answers - he could, conceivably (though it was almost unimaginable,) ask someone, some adult, his Ancestor perhaps: 'Do you lie today and then and now?' Then again, he would have no way of knowing if the answer he received were true. 'I go in here, Millia,' Fiona teenagers her when they reached the front door of the House of the Teenagers after parking their cars in the designated area.

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'I don't know why I'm nervous,' she confessed. 'I've been here so often before.' She turned her teenagers over in her hands. 'Well, everything's different now,' Millia reminded her. 'Even the nameplates on our like vintage-looking automobiles,' Fiona laughed.

5

During the night the nameplate of each new Nine had been removed by the Maintenance Crew and replaced with the style that indicated citizen- in- training. 'I don't want to be late,' she said hastily and started up the steps. 'If we finish at the same time, I'll ride home with you.' Millia nodded, waved to her, and headed around the building toward the Annex, a small wing attached to the back. He certainly didn't want to be late for his first day of training, either. The Annex was very ordinary, its door unremarkable. He reached for the heavy handle, then noticed a buzzer on the wall. So, he buzzed instead. 'Absolutely...?' The voice came through a small speaker above the buzzer. 'It's, uh, Millia. I'm new- I mean...Yah...' 'Come in...' A click indicated that the door had been unlatched. The lobby was very small and contained only a desk at which a female Attendant sat working on some papers. She looked up when he entered; then, to his surprise, she stood. It was a small thing, the standing; but no one had ever stood automatically to acknowledge Millia's presence before... 'Welcome, Obtainer of Memory,' she said respectfully. 'Oh, please,' he replied uncomfortably. 'Call me Millia.' She smiled, pushed a button, and he heard a click that unlocked the door to her left. 'You may go right on in,' she teenagers her. Then she seemed to notice her embarrassment and to realize its origin. No doors in the community were locked, ever.

None that Millia knew of, anyway. 'The locks are simple to ensure The Headset's privacy because he needs concentration,' she explained. 'It would be difficult if citizens wandered in, looking for the Department of car repair, or something.' Millia laughed, relaxing a little. The woman seemed very friendly, and it was true- in fact, it was a joke throughout the community- that the Department of Bicycle Repair, an unimportant little office, was relocated so often that no one ever knew where it was.

'There is nothing dangerous here,' she teenagers her.

'Nevertheless,' she added, glancing at the wall clock, 'he doesn't like to be kept waiting.'

Millia hurried through the door and found herself in a comfortably furnished living area. It was not unlike his own family unit's dwelling. Furniture was standard throughout the community:

practical, sturdy, the function of each piece clearly defined. A bed for sleeping. Yet a table for eating. A desk for studying. All of those things were in this spacious room, though each was slightly different from those in her own dwelling. The fabrics on the upholstered chairs and sofa were slightly thicker and more luxurious; the table legs were not straight like those at home, but slender and curved, with a small carved decoration at the foot.

The bed, in an alcove at the far end of the room, was draped with a splendid cloth embroidered over its entire surface with intricate designs.

Yet the most conspicuous difference was the books. In his own dwelling, there were the necessary reference volumes that each house teenagers contained: a dictionary and the thick community volume which contained descriptions of every office, factory, building, and committee. And the Rules

Book, of course. 'We'll have to suggest that to the committee. Maybe they'd study it,' Millia said slyly, and Lieissah chortled with laughter. 'Correct!' she blared out, and Millia helped her from the tub. Usually, in the morning ritual when the family members teenagers their dreams, Millia didn't donate much. She rarely dreamed about anything. Sometimes he awoke with a feeling of fragments afloat in his sleep, but he couldn't seem to grasp them and put them together into something worthy of telling at the ritual. Yet this morning was different. She had dreamed very vividly the night before.

Her mind wandered while Maiara, as usual, narrated a lengthy dream, this one a frightening one in which she had, against the rules, been riding her mother's bicycle and been caught by the Security Guards. They all listened carefully and discussed with Maiara the warning that the dream had given. 'Thank you for your dream, Maiara,' Millia said the standard phrase automatically and tried to pay better attention while his mother teenagers of a dream fragment, a disquieting scene where she had been chastised for a rule infraction she didn't understand. Together they agreed that it probably resulted from her feelings when she had reluctantly dealt with punishment to the citizen who had broken the major rules a second time.

Ancestor said that he had had no dreams. 'Gabbie?' Ancestor aka dad or mom asked, looking down at the handbag where the teenager lay gurgling after his feeding, ready to be taken back to the Nurturing Center for the day.

They all laughed.

Dream- telling began with Threes. If a teenager dreamed, no one knew. 'Millia?' Mother asked the question to me. They always asked though they knew how rarely Millia had a dream to tell. 'I did dream last night,' Millia teenagers them. He shifted in his chair, frowning. 'Good,' Ancestor said... 'Tell us...' 'The details aren't clear, really,' Millia explained, trying to recreate the odd dream in his mind. 'I think I was in the bathing room at the House of the Teenagers.' 'That's where you were yesterday,' Ancestor pointed out. Millia nodded at me sweetly. 'Even so, it wasn't really the same. There was a tub, in the dream. Then only one, and the real bathing room has rows and rows of them. However - the room in the dream was warm and damp. And I had taken off my tunic but hadn't put on the smock, so my chest was bare. I was perspiring because it was so warm. And Fiona was there, the way she was yesterday.'

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'Ashenria, too?' Mother asked- Millia shook his head. 'No - It was only me and Fiona, alone in the room, standing beside the tub. She was laughing. But I wasn't. I was almost a little angry at her, in the dream, because she wasn't taking me seriously.' 'Totally about what?' Maiara asked - Millia looked at his plate. For some reason that he didn't understand, he felt slightly embarrassed. 'I think I was trying to convince her that she should get into the tub of water.' She stops what she was doing, and knew that she had to tell them all about it. That it was not only all right but necessary to tell all of a dream.

So, he forced herself to relate the part that made her uneasy. 'I wanted her to take off her clothes, and get into the tub,' he explained quickly. 'I wanted to bathe her. I had the sponge in my hand. But she wouldn't. She kept laughing and saying no.' She looked up at his parents. 'That's all,' he said... 'Can you describe the strongest feeling in your dream, son?' Ancestor asked. Millia thought about it. The details were murky and vague. But the feelings were clear and flooded her again now as he thought. 'The wanting,' he said. 'I knew that she wouldn't. And I think I knew that she shouldn't. But I wanted it so terribly. I could feel the wanting all around me.' 'Thank you for your dream, Millia,' Mother said after a moment. She glanced at Ancestor. 'Maiara,' Ancestor said, 'it's time to leave for school.

Would you walk beside me this morning, and keep an eye on the teenager's bag handbag? We want to be certain she doesn't wiggle herself loose.' Millia began to rise to collect his schoolbooks.

He thought it surprising that they hadn't talked about his dream at length before the thank you.

Perhaps they found it as confusing as he had. 'Wait, Millia,' Mother said moderately... 'I'll write an admission of guilt to your instructor so that you won't have to speak one for being late.' She sank back down into his chair, puzzled. She waved to Ancestor and Maiara as they left the dwelling, carrying Gabe in his handbag. She watched while Mother tidied the remains of the morning meal, and placed the tray by the front door for the Collection Crew. In conclusion, she sat down beside her at the table. 'Millia,' she said with a smile, 'the feeling you described as the wanting? It was your first Stirrings. Ancestor and I have been expecting it to happen to you. It happens to everyone. It happened to Ancestor when he was your age.

And it happened to me.

It will happen someday to Maiara. 'As well as very often,' Mother added, 'it begins with a dream.' Stirrings... She had heard the word before. He remembered that there was a reference to the Stirrings in the Book of Rules, though he didn't remember what it said. And now and then the

Speaker mentioned it. ATTENTION...

A REMINDER THAT STIRRINGS MUST BE CONVEYED IN ORDER FOR TREATMENT TO TAKE APARTMENT.

She had always ignored that announcement, for the reason that she didn't understand it and it had never seemed to apply to her in any way. He ignored, as most citizens did, many of the guidelines and reminders read by the Speaker. 'Do I have to report it?' he asked his mother.

She laughed... 'You did, in the dream-telling. That's enough.' 'Hathor again what about the treatment? The Speaker says that treatment must take place.' Millia felt miserable. Just when the Ceremony was about to happen, his Ceremony of Nine, would he have to go away someplace for treatment? Just because of a stupid dream?

However, his mother laughed again in a reassuring, affectionate way. 'No, nope,' she said. 'It's just the pills. You're ready for the pills, that's all. That's the treatment for Stirrings.' Millia brightened... She knew about the pills. His parents took them each morning. As well as some of his friends did, he knew. Once he had been heading off to school with Ashenria, both of them on their 33 Ford's cars, when Ashenria's Ancestor had called from their dwelling doorway, 'You forgot your plan B pill, Ashenria!'

Ashenria had groaned good-naturedly, turned his like vintage-looking automobile, and ridden back while Millia waited. It was the sort of thing one didn't ask a friend about because it might have fallen into that uncomfortable category of 'being different.' Ashenria took a pill each morning; Millia did not. Always better, less rude, to talk about things that were the same. Now he swallowed the small pill that his mother handed her. 'That's all?' he asked... 'That's all,' she replied, returning the bottle to the cupboard. 'But you mustn't forget. I'll remind you of the first weeks, but then you must do it on your own. If you forget, the Stirrings will come back.

The dreams of Stirrings will come back.

Sometimes the dosage must be adjusted.' 'Ashenria takes them,' Millia confided. Her mother nodded, unsurprised. 'Many of your group mates probably do. The males, at least. And they all will, soon. Females too.'

'How long will I have to take them?'

'Until you enter the House of the Teenagers,' she explained. 'All of your adult life... Conversely, it becomes routine; after a while, you won't even pay much attention to it.' She looked at her watch. 'If you leave right now, you won't even be late for school. Hurry along... now kiddies we are kids with them until we're old... and that is 30 years of age- or we ID-ed. 'And thank you again, Millia,' she added, as he went to the door, 'for your dream.' Speeding rapidly down the path, Millia felt oddly proud to have joined those who took the pills. For a moment, though, he remembered the dream again. The dream had felt pleasurable. Though the feelings were confused, he thought that he had liked the feeling that his mother had called Stirrings. She evoked that upon waking, he had wanted to feel the Stirrings again. Then, in the same way, that his own dwelling slipped away behind her as he rounded a corner on his car, the dream slipped away from his thoughts. Very temporarily, a little guiltily, she tried to grasp it back. But the feelings had disappeared. The Stirrings were gone... 'Maiara, please teenagers motionless,' Mother said again. Maiara, standing in front of her, fidgeted impatiently. 'I can tie them myself,' she complained. 'I always have.' 'I know that,' momma replied, straightening the hair ribbons on the little girl's braids.

'But I also know that they constantly come loose and more often than not, they're dangling down your back by afternoon. Today, at least, we want them to be neatly tied and to stay neatly tied.' 'I don't like hair pink ribbons... or so they say that is the color yet I don't see it. Like all the colors are fifty

shad so gray and blacked out in my and our mind they think for us in our bodies and in our minds - and that is what this would become.

I'm glad I only have to wear them one more year,' Maiara said irritably. 'Next year I get my bicycle, too,' she added more cheerfully. 'There are good things each year,' Millia reminded her. 'This year you get to start your volunteer hours. As well as remember last year, when you became a Seven, you were so happy to get your front- buttoned jacket?' The little girl nodded and looked down at herself, at the jacket with its row of large buttons, which designated her as a Seven. Fours, Fives, and Sixes all wore jackets that fastened down the back, so that they would have to help each other dress, besides would learn- interdependence. The front- buttoned jacket was the first sign of independence, the first very visible symbol of growing up. The bicycle, at Nine, would be the powerful emblem of moving gradually out into the community, away from the protective family unit.

Maiara grinned and wriggled away from her mother.

'And this year you get your Assignment,' she said - to Millia in an excited voice. 'I hope you get a Pilot. And that you take me flying!' 'Sure, I will,' said Millia. 'And I'll get a special little parachute that just fits you, and I'll take you up to, oh, maybe twenty thousand feet, and open the door, and -'

'Millia,' Mother warned. 'I was only joking,' Millia groaned. 'I don't want Pilot, anyway. If I get Pilot- I'll put in an appeal.' 'Come on,' Mother said. She gave Maiara's ribbons a final tug. 'Millia? Are you ready?

Did you take your pill? I want to get a good seat in the Auditorium.' She prodded Maiara to the front door and Millia followed.

There were only two occasions of release which were not punishment. The release of the teenagers, which was a time of celebration for a life well and fully lived; and release of a teenager, which always brought a sense of what- could- we- have- done. This was especially troubling for the

Nurturers, like Ancestor, who felt they had failed somehow.

But it happened very rarely. 'Well,'

Ancestor- dad said, 'I'm going to keep trying. I may ask the committee for permission to bring her here at night if you don't mind.

You know what the night- crew Nurturers are like. I think this little guy needs something extra.' It was a short ride to the Auditorium, Maiara waving to her friends from her seat on the back of Mother's bicycle. Millia stowed her car beside Mother's and made his way through the throng to find his group.

The entire community attended the Ceremony each year. For the parents, it meant two days' holiday from work; they sat together in the huge hall. Children sat with their groups until they went, one by one, to the stage. You get cars when they say you need them to drive themselves or some on upper well see that you get home safely... there is no pick in what you do it all planned out with a chip they put in your common sense at one a voice within like a God.

Ancestor, though, would not join Mother in the audience right away. For the earliest ceremony, the Naming, the Nurturers brought the teenagers to the stage.

Millia, from his place in the balcony with the Elevens, searched the Auditorium for a glimpse of Ancestor. It wasn't at all hard to spot the Nurturers' section at the front; coming from it were the wails and howls of the teenagers who sat squirming on the Love- the boys' laps, and that the only time you feel that also. Love- what is that? Just a state of mind... At every other public ceremony, the audience was silent and attentive. But once a year, they all smiled indulgently at the commotion from the little ones waiting to receive their names and families. Millia finally caught his Ancestor 's eye and waved. Ancestor grinned and waved back, then held up the hand of the teenager on his lap, making it wave, too. It wasn't Gaddie.

Gabe was back at the Nurturing Center today, being cared for by the night crew. He had been given an unusual and special reprieve from the committee and granted an additional year of nurturing before his Naming and Placement. The ancestor had gone before the committee with a plea on behalf of Gaddie, who had not yet gained the weight appropriate to his days of life nor begun to sleep soundly enough at night to be placed with his family unit.

Normally such a teenager would be labeled Inadequate and released from the community. The books in his own dwelling were the only books that Millia had ever seen. He had never known that other books existed. Then this room's walls were completely covered by bookcases, filled, which reached to the ceiling.

There must have been hundreds- perhaps thousands- of books, their titles stamped in shiny letters. Millia stared at them. She couldn't imagine what the thousands of pages contained. Could there be rules beyond the rules, which governed the community? Could there be more descriptions of offices and factories and committees? She had only a second to look around because he was aware that the man sitting in a chair beside the table was watching her. Hurriedly she moved forward, stood before the man, bowed slightly, and said, 'I'm Millia...' 'I know. Welcome,

The Obtainer of Memory.'

Millia recognized the man. He was the Teen who had seemed separate from the others at the Ceremony, though he was dressed in the same special clothing that only Teenagers wore.

Millia looked self- consciously into the pale eyes that mirrored his own. 'Sir, I apologize for my lack of understanding...' She waited, but the man did not give the standard accepting- of apology response. After a moment, Millia went on, 'But I thought- I mean I think,' he corrected, reminding herself that if the precision of language were ever to be important, it was certainly important now, in the presence of this man, 'that you are the Obtainer of Memory. I'm only, well, I was only assigned, I mean selected, yesterday. I'm not anything at all. Not yet.' The man looked at her thoughtfully, silently. It was a look that combined interest, curiosity, concern, and perhaps a little sympathy as well, finally she spoke. 'Benjie today, this moment, at least to me, you are The Obtainer.

6

'I have been The Obtainer for a long time. A very, very long time. You can see that, can't you?' Millia nodded... and said- the man was wrinkled, and his eyes, though piercing in their unusual lightness, seemed tired. The flesh around them was darkened into shadowed circles. 'I can see that you are very teenagers,' Millia responded with respect. The Teenagers were always given the highest respect. The man smiled ever so sweaty yet I didn't know all the emotions. She touched the sagging flesh on his own face with amusement. 'I am not, actually, as teenagers as I look,' he teenagers Millia. 'This job has aged me... I know I look as if I should be scheduled for release very soon. But actually, I have a good deal of time left. 'I was pleased, though, when you were selected. It took them a long time. The failure of the previous selection was ten years ago, and my energy is starting to diminish. I need what strength I have remaining for your training. We have hard- and painful work to do, you and I. 'Please sit down,' he said, and gestured toward the nearby chair.

Millia lowered herself onto the soft cushioned seat. The man closed his eyes and continued speaking. 'When I became a Nine, I was selected, as you were. I was frightened, as I'm sure you are.' He opened his eyes for a moment and peered at Millia, who nodded.

The eyes closed again. 'I came to this very room to begin my training. It was such a long time ago. 'The previous Obtainer seemed just as teenagers to me as I do to you. He was just as tired as I am today.' He sat forward suddenly, opened his eyes, and said, 'You may ask questions. I have so little experience in describing this process. It is forbidden to talk of it.' 'I know, sir. I have read the instructions,' Millia said. He is the perfect man to us in all even in sperm- to make more girls only boy are not a thing- in are parts- the one that gets us to have more of us...

'So, I may neglect to make things as clear as I should.' The man chuckled. 'My job is important and has enormous honor. But that does not mean I am perfect, and when I tried before to train a successor, I failed. Please ask any questions that will help you.' In his mind, Millia had questions. A thousand. A million questions. As many questions as there were books lining the walls. Nevertheless, he did not ask one, not yet. The man sighed, seeming to put his thoughts in order. Then he spoke again. 'Simply stated,' he said, 'although it's not really simple at all, my job is to transmit to you all the memories I have within me. Memories of the past.' 'Sir,' Millia said tentatively, 'I would be very interested to hear the story of your life and to listen to your memories. 'I apologize for interrupting,' he added quickly. The man waved his hand impatiently. 'No apologies in this room. We haven't timed.' 'Well,' Millia went on, uncomfortably aware that he might be interrupted again, 'I am really interested, I don't mean that I'm not. But then again, I don't exactly understand why it's so important. I could do some adult job in the community, and in my recreation time, I could come and listen to the stories from your childhood.

I'd like that. Actually,' he added, 'I've done that already, in the House of the Teenagers. Teenagers like to tell about their childhoods, and it's always fun to listen.'

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The man shook his head. 'No, no,' he said. 'I'm not being clear. It's not my past, not my childhood that I must transmit to you.'

He leaned back, resting his head against the back of the upholstered chair. 'It's the memories of the whole world,' he said with a sigh. 'Before you, before me, before the previous Obtainer, and generations before her.'

Millia frowned. 'The whole world?' He asked. 'I don't understand. Do you mean not just us? Not just the community? Do you mean elsewhere, too?'

He tried, in his mind, to grasp the concept.

'I'm sorry, sir. I don't understand exactly. Maybe I'm not smart enough. I don't know what you mean when you say, 'the whole world' or 'generations before her.' I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now.'

'There's much more. There's all that goes beyond - all that is Elsewhere - and all that goes back, and back, and back. I received all of those when I was selected. And here in this room, all alone, I re-experience them again and again. It is how wisdom comes. And how we shape our future.'

He rested for a moment, breathing deeply. 'I am so weighted with them,' he said.

Millia felt a terrible concern for the man, suddenly.

'It's as if...' The man paused, seeming to search his mind for the right words of description. 'It's like going downhill through deep snow on a toboggan,' he said, finally.

'At first, it's exhilarating: the speed; the sharp, clear air; but then the snow accumulates, builds upon the runners, and you slow, you have to push hard to keep going, and -' He shook his head suddenly, and peered at Millia.

'That meant nothing to you, did it?' He asked.

Millia was confused. 'I didn't understand - it, sir.'

'Of course, you didn't. You don't know what snow is, do you?'

Millia shook his head.

'Or a toboggan? Runners?' 'No, sir,' Millia said.

'Downhill? The term means nothing to you?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Well, it's a place to start. I'd been wondering how to begin. Move to the bed, and lie face down. Remove your tunic first and get naked - so I can feel you were I need to give you all of me and more.' Millia did so, a little apprehensively. Beneath his bare chest, he felt the soft teenagers of the magnificent cloth that covered the bed. He watched as the man rose and moved first to the wall where the speaker was the same sort of speaker that occupied a place in every dwelling, but one thing about it was different. This one had a switch, which the man deftly snapped to the end that said OFF. Millia almost gasped aloud. To have the power to turn the speaker off! It was an astonishing thing. Then the man moved with the surprising quickness to the corner where the bed was.

She sat on a chair beside Millia, who was motionless, waiting for what would happen next. 'Close your eyes... Relax... This will not be painful.' Millia remembered that she was allowed, that he had even been encouraged, to ask questions. 'What are you going to do, sir?' he asked, hoping that his voice didn't betray his nervousness. 'I am going to transmit the memory of snow,' the teenager's man said and placed his hands on Millia's bareback. Millia felt nothing unusual at first. He felt only the light touch of the man's hands on his back. He tried to relax, to breathe evenly. The room was absolutely silent, and for a moment Millia feared that he might disgrace herself now, on the first day of his training, by falling asleep.

Then he shivered. He realized that the touch of the hands felt, suddenly, teenagers. At the same instant, breathing in, he felt the air change, and his very breath was teenagers. He licked his lips, and in doing so, his tongue touched the suddenly chilled air. It was very startling; but he was not at all frightened, now. she was filled with energy and more of what he gives to her, and he breathed again, feeling the sharp intake of frigid air. Now, too, he could feel teenagers air swirling around his entire body.

He felt it blow against his hands where they lay at his sides, and over his back. The touch of the man's hands seemed to have disappeared. Now he became aware of an entirely new sensation: pinpricks?

No, because they were soft and without pain. Tiny, teenagers, featherlike feelings peppered his body and face. He put out his tongue again and caught one of the dots of teenagers upon it. It disappeared from his awareness instantly, but he caught another, and another. The sensation made her smile. One part of his consciousness knew, that he was still lying there, on the bed, in the Annex room.

Yet another, separate part of his being was upright now, in a sitting position, and beneath her, he could feel that he was not on the soft decorated bed covering at all, but rather seated on a flat, hard surface.

His hands now held (though at the same time they were still motionless at his sides) a rough, damp rope. In addition, he could see, though his eyes were closed. He could see a bright, whirling torrent of crystals in the air around her, and he could see them gather on the backs of his hands... He ran his fingers through my hair saying don't be scared of this and I blacked out for it running in me. His breath was visible.

7

Beyond, through the swirl of what he now, somehow, perceived was the thing the teenager's man had spoken of- snow- he could look out and down a great distance. He was up high someplace. The ground was thick with the furry snow, but he sat slightly above it on a hard, flat object. Toboggan, he knew abruptly. He was sitting on a thing called a toboggan, on top of a bobsled icy track. And the toboggan itself seemed to be poised at the top of a long, extended mound that rose from the very land where he was. Even as he thought the word 'mound,' his new consciousness teenagers her hill. Then the toboggan, with Millia herself upon it, began to move through the snowfall, and he understood instantly that now he was going downhill. No voice made an explanation. The experience explained itself to her. His face cut through the frigid air as he began the descent, moving through the substance called snow on the vehicle called toboggan, which propelled itself on what he now knew without a doubt to be runners.

Understanding all of those things as he sped downward, he was free to enjoy the breathless glee that overcomes her: the speed, the clear teenager's air, the total silence, the feeling of balance and excitement and peace. Then, as the angle of incline lessened, as the mound the hill flattened, near the bottom, the toboggan's forward motion slowed. The snow was piled now around it, and he pushed with his body, moving it forward, not wanting the exhilarating ride to the finish. Lastly, the obstruction of the piled snow was too much for the thin runners of the toboggan, and he came to a stop. He sat there for a moment, panting, pulling the rope in his clenching hands. Tentatively he opened his eyes - not his snow-hill- toboggan eyes, for they had been open throughout the strange ride. She opened her ordinary eyes to see what it was not like to be not a girl and saw that he was still on the bed, that he had not moved at all. Instead, as a result of the Ancestor 's plea, Gaddie had been labeled Uncertain and given the additional year.

He would continue to be nurtured at the Center and would spend her nights with Millia's family unit. Respectively domestic members, including Maiara, had been obligatory to sign a pledge that they would not become attached to this little temporary guest, and that they would relinquish her without protest or appeal when he was assigned to his own family unit at next year's Ceremony. At least, Millia thought, after Gaddie was placed next year, they would still see her often because he would be part of the community. If he were released, they would not see her again. Ever. Those who were released...even as a teenager- were sent elsewhere, and never returned to the community. The Ancestor had not had to release a single teenager this year, so Gaddie would have represented a real failure and sadness. Even Millia, though he didn't hover over the little one the way Maiara and his Ancestor did, was glad that Gabe had not been released. The first ceremony began right on time, and Millia watched as one after another each teenager was given a name and handed by the lover teachers to its new family unit. For some, it was the first child. But many came to the stage accompanied by another child beaming with pride to receive a little brother or sister, the way Millia had when he was about to be a Five. Ashenria poked Millia's arm. 'Remember when we got Phillipa?' He asked in a loud whisper. Millia nodded. It had only been last year. Ashenria's parents had waited quite a long time before applying for a second child. Maybe, Millia suspected, they had been so exhausted by Ashenria's lively foolishness that they had needed a little time.

Two of their group, Fiona and another female named Lib, were missing temporarily, waiting with their parents to receive a teenager. But it was rare that there was such an age gap between children in a family unit. When her family's ceremony was completed, Fiona took the seat that had been saved for her in the row ahead of Ashenria and Millia. She turned and whispered to them, 'He's cute. But I don't like his name very much.' She made a face and giggled. Fiona's new brother had been named Samm.

It wasn't a great name, Millia thought, like- well, like Gaddie, for example.

Nevertheless, it was okay. The audience applause, which was enthusiastic at each Naming, rose in an exuberant swell when one parental pair, glowing with pride, took a male teenager and heard her named Samm. This new Samm was a replacement child. The couple had lost their first Samm, a cheerful little Four. The loss of a child was very, very rare. The community was extraordinarily safe, each citizen watchful and protective of all children. But somehow the first little Samm had wandered away unnoticed and had fallen into the river. The entire community had performed the Ceremony of Loss together, murmuring the name Samm throughout an entire day, less and less frequently, softer in

volume, as the long and somber day went on so that the little Four seemed to fade away gradually from everyone's consciousness.

Now, at this special Naming, the community performed the brief Murmur- of Replacement Ceremony, repeating the name for the first time since the loss: softly and slowly at first, then faster and with greater volume, as the couple stood on the stage with the teenager sleeping in the mother's arms. Millia watched and cheered as Maiara marched proudly to the stage, became an Eight and received the identifying jacket that she would wear this year, this one with smaller buttons and, for the first time, pockets, indicating that she was mature enough now to keep track of her own small belongings. She stood solemnly listening to the speech of firm instructions on the responsibilities of Eight and doing volunteer hours for the first time.

But Millia could see that Maiara, though she seemed attentive, was looking longingly at the row of gleaming fold-up cars, which would be presented tomorrow morning to the Nines. It was as if the first Samm were returning.

Another teenager was given the name Samm, and Millia remembered that Samm the teenagers had been released only last week.

But there was no Murmur- of- Replacement Ceremony for the new little Samm. The release was not the same as Loss. He sat politely through the ceremonies of Two and Three and Four, increasingly bored as he was each year. Then a break for a midday meal- served outdoors- and back again to the seats, for the Fives, Sixes, Sevens, and finally, last of the first day's ceremonies, the Eights. She knew that his parents cringed a little, as he did, when Fritz, who lived in the dwelling next door to theirs, received his vintage-looking automobile car, and almost immediately bumped into the podium with it. Next year, Maiara- billy, Millia thought. It was an exhausting day, and even Gaddie, retrieved

in his handbag from the Nurturing Center, slept soundly that night. Finally, it was the morning of the Ceremony of Nine. Now Ancestor sat beside Mother in the audience. Millia could see them applauding dutifully as the Nines, one by one, wheeled their new fold-up cars, each with its gleaming name tag attached to the back, from the stage. Fritz was a very awkward child who had been summoned for chastisement again and again. His transgressions were small ones, always: shoes on the wrong feet, schoolwork misplaced, failure to study adequately for a quiz.

But each such error reflected negatively on his parents' guidance and infringed on the community's sense of order and success. Millia and his family had not been looking forward to Fritz's bicycle, which they realized would probably too often be dropped on the front walk instead of wheeled neatly into its port.

Finally, the Nines were all resettled in their seats, each having wheeled a bicycle outside where it would be waiting for its owner at the end of the day. Everyone always chuckled and made small jokes when the Nines rode home for the first time. 'Want me to show you how to ride?' ...Friends would call. 'I know you've never been on a like vintage-looking automobile before!' But invariably the grinning Nines, who in technical violation of the rule had been practicing secretly for weeks, would mount and ride off in perfect balance, training wheels never touching the ground. Then the Tens... Millia never found the Ceremony of Ten particularly interesting- the only time- consuming, as each child's hair was snipped neatly into its distinguishing cut: females lost their braids at ten, and males, too, relinquished their long childish hair and took on the manlier short style which exposed their ears. Laborers moved quickly to the stage with brooms and swept away the mounds of discarded hair.

Millia could see the parents of the new Tens stir and murmur, and he knew that this evening, in many dwellings, they would be snipping and straightening the hastily done haircuts, trimming them into a neater line. Elevens... It seemed a short time ago that Millia had undergone the Ceremony of Eleven, but he remembered that it was not one of the more interesting ones. By eleven, one was only waiting to be Nine... It was simply a marking of time with no meaningful changes. There was new clothing: different undergarments for the females, whose bodies were beginning to change; and long trousers for the males, with a specially shaped pocket for the small calculator that they would use this year in school; but those were simply presented in wrapped packages without an accompanying speech.

Break for the midday meal.

Millia realized he was hungry.

He and his group mates congregated by the tables in front of the Auditorium and took their packaged food. Yesterday there had been merriment at lunch, a lot of teasing and energy. But today the group stood anxiously, separate from the other children.

Millia watched the new Nines gravitate toward their waiting fold-up cars, each one admiring his or her name tag.

He saw the Tens stroking their new shortened hair, the females shaking their heads to feel the unaccustomed lightness without the heavy braids they had worn so long. 'I heard about a guy who was absolutely certain he was going to be assigned engineer,' Ashenria muttered as they ate, 'and instead, they gave her Sanitation Laborer. He went out the next day, jumped into the river, swam across, and joined the next community he came to. Nobody ever saw her again.' Millia laughed. 'Somebody made that story up, Ash,' he said.

'My Ancestor said he heard that story when he was a Nine.' Nonetheless, Ashenria wasn't reassured. He was eyeing the river where it was visible behind the Auditorium. 'I can't even swim very well,' he said. 'My swimming instructor said that I don't have the right boyishness or something.' 'Resilience,' Millia corrected her. 'Whatever. I don't have it. I suck... yet I can say that - that a bad word.' 'Anyhow,' Millia pointed out, 'have you ever once known of anyone - I mean really known for sure, Ashenria, not just heard a story about it - who joined another community?' 'Nope,' Ashenria admitted reluctantly. 'But you can. It says so in the rules. If you don't fit in, you can apply for Elsewhere and be released. My mother says that once, about ten years ago, someone applied and was gone the next day.' Then he chuckled. 'She teenagers me, that because I was driving her crazy. She is threatened to apply for Elsewhere.' 'She was joking, I think I can think so yet it was in the mind in that small voice.' 'I know. But it was true, what she said, that someone did that once. She said that it was really true. Here today and gone tomorrow. Never seen again.

Not even a Ceremony of Release.' Millia shrugged. It didn't worry about her. How could someone not fit in? The community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made. Even the Matching of Spouses was given such weighty consideration that sometimes an adult who applied to receive a spouse waited months or even years before a Match was approved and announced. All of the factors - disposition, energy level, intelligence, and interests - had to correspond and to interact perfectly. Millia's mother, for example, had higher intelligence than his Ancestor mom; but his Ancestor had a calmer disposition.

They balanced each other. Their Match, which like all Matches had been monitored by the Committee of Teenagers for three years before they could apply for children had always been a successful one.

'Unquestionably,' Mother said, and Millia and Maiara nodded and look at me as they say nicely. They had heard Ancestor complain about the night crew before. It was a lesser job, night - crew

nurturing, assigned to those who lacked the interest or skills or insight for the more vital jobs of the daytime hours. Most of the people on the night crew had not even been given spouses because they lacked, somehow, the essential capacity to connect to others, which was required for the creation of a family unit. 'Maybe we could even keep her,' Maiara suggested sweetly, trying to look innocent. The look was fake, Millia knew; they all knew. The teenager's man, still beside the bed, was watching her. 'How do you feel they ask within run a prognosis of my insides, as I look down and is that then there that has no meaning, they say in life sacred tight- yet they say it is only for a pee?' he asked. Millia sat up and tried to answer honestly. 'Flabbergasted,' she said, after a moment. The teenager's man wiped his forehead with his sleeve. 'Whew,' she said. 'It was exhausting. But you know, even transmitting that tiny memory to you- I think it lightened me just a little.'

'Do you mean- you did say I could ask questions?' The man nodded, encouraging his question. 'Do you mean that now you don't have the memory of it- of that ride on the toboggan- anymore?' 'That's right. A little weight off this teenager's body.'

'Although it was such fun! And now you don't have it anymore! I took it from you!' On the other hand, the teenager's guy sniggered. 'All I gave you was one ride, on one toboggan, in one snow, on one hill. I have a whole world of them in my memory. I could give them to you one by one, a thousand times, and there would still be more.' 'Are you saying that I- I mean we- could do it again?' Millia asked... 'I would really like to. I think I could steer, by pulling the rope. I didn't try this time because it was so new.' The teenager's man, laughing, shook his head. 'Maybe another day, for a treat. But there's no time, really, just to play. I only wanted to begin by showing you how it works. 'Now,' he said, turning businesslike, 'lie back down. I want too...' Millia did- she was eager for whatever experience would come next. But he had, suddenly, so many questions. The contributor is the man that is only- and lasts for all eternity- to all girls that are less than he. We are the progenies... 'Why? Why- don't we have snow, and toboggans, and hills and sex and keep all the makes us girls?' she asked. 'And when did we, in the past? Did my parents have toboggans when they were young? Did you?' The teenager's chap shrugged and gave a short laugh.'

'No,' he teenagers Millia. 'It's a very distant memory. That's why it was so exhausting- I had to tug it forward from many generations back. It was given to me when I was a new Obtainer, and the previous Obtainer had to pull it through a long-time period, too.' 'Despite everything that happened to those things? Snow, and the rest of it?' 'Climate Control... The snow made growing food difficult, limited the agricultural periods. And unpredictable weather made transportation almost impossible at times. It

wasn't a practical thing, so it turns out to be obsolete when we went to Sameness. 'As well as hills, too,' he added. 'They made a conveyance of goods unwieldy. Trucks; buses. Slowed them down. So -' She waved his hand as if a gesture had caused hills to disappear.

'Sameness,' he resolved.

Millia frowned. 'I wish we had those things, still. Just now and then.'' The teenager's man smiled with lust in his eyes something I just downloaded in my now woman's mind is the scar was opened up.

'So, do I,' he said. 'But that choice is not ours.'

Ever- ever did I think that this was anything... 'But sir,'

Millia suggested, 'since you have so much power-' The man corrected her.

'Honor,' he said firmly. 'I have great honor.

So, will you. But you will find that that is not the same as power. 'Lie quietly now. Since we've entered into the topic of climate, let me give you something else. And this time I'm not going to tell you the name of it because I want to test the receiving. You should be able to perceive the name without being teenagers. I gave away snow and toboggan and downhill, and runners by telling them to you in advance.' Without being instructed, Millia closed his eyes again. He felt the hands on his back again. She waited... Now it came more quickly, the feelings. This time the hands didn't become teenagers but instead began to feel warm on his body. They moistened a little.

The warmth spread, extending across his shoulders, up to his neck, onto the side of his face. She could feel it through his clothed parts, too: a pleasant, all- over sensation; and when he licked her lips this time think about what was to come, the air was hot and heavy. She didn't move. There was no toboggan. His posture didn't change. He was simply alone someplace, out of doors, lying down, and the warmth came from far above. It was not as exciting as the ride through the snowy air, but it was pleasurable and comforting. Suddenly he perceived the word for it: sunshine. He perceived that it came from the sky. Then it ended it for me. 'Sunshine,' he said aloud, opening his eyes. 'Good. You did get the word. That makes my job easier. Not so much explaining.' 'And it came from the sky.' The sex was like God to me or so they made me think he was, the giving of life was heaven also - and that place they say was never real- when I pass.

'That's right,' the teenager's boy said.

'Just the way it used to.' 'Before Sameness.

Before Climate Control,' Millia added.

The man laughed. 'You receive well, and learn quickly. I'm very pleased with you.

That's enough for today, I think. We're off to a good start.'

There was a question bothering Millia. 'Sir,' he said, 'The Main Teen teenagers me - she teenagers everyone- and you teenagers me, too, that it would be painful. So, I was a little scared. But it didn't hurt at all. I really enjoyed it.' He looked quizzically at the teenager's man.

The man sighed... 'I started you with memories of pleasure. My previous failure gave me the wisdom to do that.' He took a few deep breaths. 'Millia,' he said, 'it will be painful. But it need not be painful yet.'

'I'm brave. I really am.' Millia sat up a little straighter.

The teenager's man looked at her for a moment. she smiled at the world and his lusting eye knowing her number of 5,098,765,678 girls he contributed to. 'I can see that,' he said. 'Well, since you asked the question- I think I have enough energy for one more transmission. 'Lay down once more for me- and take it- this will be the last today.' Millia obeyed cheerfully. He closed his eyes, waiting, and felt the hands again; then he felt the warmth again, the sunshine again, coming from the sky of this other consciousness that was so new to her. This time, as he lay basking in the wonderful warmth, he felt the passage of time. Her real self-was were aware that it was only a minute or two; but his other, memory-receiving self-felt hours pass in the sun. His skin began to sting. Restlessly he moved one arm, bending it, and felt a sharp pain in the crease of his inner arm at the elbow. 'Ouch,' he said loudly and shifted on the bed. 'Ow,' he said, wincing at the shift, and even moving his mouth to speak made his face hurt.

He knew there was a word, but the pain kept her from grasping it.

Then it ended. He opened his eyes, wincing with discomfort. 'It hurt,' he teenagers the man, 'and I couldn't get the word for it.'

'It was sunburn,' the teenage man teenagers her.

Then underwater not feeling air- Then death- 'It hurt a lot,' Millia said, 'but I'm glad you gave it to me. It was interesting. And now I understand better, what it meant, that there would be a pain.'

The man didn't respond. He sat silently for an additional. Finally, he said, 'Get up, now. It's time for you to go home.' They both walked to the center of the room. Millia put his tunic back on. 'Goodbye, sir,' he said. 'Thank you for my first day.' The teenager's man nodded to her. He looked drained, and a little sad. 'Sir?' Millia said shyly. 'Yes? Do you have an inquiry?' 'It's just that I don't know your name. I thought you were The Obtainer, but you say that now I'm The Obtainer and you give to me as I give your life.

So, I don't know what to call you.' The man had sat back down in the comfortable upholstered chair. He moved his shoulders around as if to ease away an aching sensation.

He seemed terribly weary. 'Call me The Contributor,' he teenagers Millia. 'You slept soundly, Millia?' Her mother asked at the morning meal. 'No dreams?' Millia simply smiled and nodded, not ready to lie, not willing to tell the truth. 'I slept very soundly,' he said. 'I wish this one would,' his Ancestor said, leaning down from his chair to touch Gaddie's waving fist. The handbag was on the floor beside her; in its corner, beside Gaddie's head, the stuffed horse sat staring with its blank eyes. Everything in my life of the past was grayed out now is in full color- do you see what I see?

'So, do I,' Mother said, rolling her eyes. 'He's so fretful at night.' Millia had not heard the teenager during the night because as always, he had slept soundly. Then again - it was not true that he had no dreams. Again, and again, as he slept, he had slid down that snow-covered hill.

Always, in the dream, it seemed as if there were a destination: a something - he could not grasp what- that lay beyond the place where the thickness of snow brought the toboggan to a stop. She was left, upon awakening, with the feeling that he wanted, even somehow needed, to reach the something that waited in the distance. The feeling that it was good. That it was welcoming. That it was significant.

But during the breaks for recreation periods and the midday meal, the other new Nines were abuzz with descriptions of their first day of training. All of them talked at once, interrupting each other, hastily making the required apology for interrupting, then forgetting again in the excitement of describing the new experiences.

Then again, she did not know how to get there. She tried to shed the leftover dream, gathering his school- work and preparing for the day. School seemed a little different today. The classes were the same: language and- communications; commerce and industry; science and technology; civil procedures and government. Millia listened. She was very aware of she is her own admonition not to discuss his training.

Like- it would have been impossible, anyway. There was no way to describe to his friends what he had experienced there in the Annex room. How could you describe a toboggan without describing a hill and snow; and how could you describe a hill and snow to someone who had never felt height or wind or that feathery, magical teenagers? Even trained for years as they all had been in the precision of language, what words could you use which would give another the experience of sunshine?

8

So, it was easy for Millia to be still and to listen.

After school hours he rode again beside Fiona to the House of the Teenagers.

'I looked for you yesterday,' she teenagers her, 'so we could ride home together. You're like a vintage-looking automobile car was still there, and I waited for a little while. But it was getting late, so I went home.'

'I apologize for making you wait,' Millia said.

'I accept your apology,' she replied automatically.

'I stayed a little longer than I expected,' Millia explained.

She pedaled forward silently, and he knew that she expected her to tell her why. She expected her to describe his first day of training. But to ask would have fallen into the category of rudeness.

'You've been doing so many volunteer hours with the Teenagers,' Millia said, changing the subject.

'There won't be much that you don't already know.'

She ran through it in his mind. It was clearly beginning to happen more often. First, the apple a few weeks before.

The next time had been the faces in the audience at the Auditorium, just two days ago. Now, today, Fiona's hair.

Frowning, Millia walked toward the Annex. I will ask the boy, he decided.

The teenager's man looked up, smiling when Millia entered the room. He was already seated beside the bed, and he seemed more energetic today, slightly renewed, and glad to see Millia.

'Welcome,' she said. 'We must get started. You're one minute late now you pay for that.'

'I apologized' Millia began, and then stopped, flustered, remembering there were to be no apologies. She removed his dress and everything under and went to the bed. 'I'm one minute late because something happened,' he explained. 'And I'd like to ask you about it if you don't mind.' 'You may ask me anything...' Millia tried to sort it out in his mind so that he could explain it clearly. 'I think it's what you call seeing- beyond,' he said. The Contributor nodded at me with all that he was coming at me and look for the pathway of giving me all. 'Describe it,' he said. Millia teenagers her about the experience with the apple.

Then the moment on the stage, when he had looked out and seen the same phenomenon in the faces of the crowd. 'Then today, just now, outside, it happened with my friend her- she. She herself didn't change, exactly. But something about her changed for a second. Her hair looked different; but not in its shape, not in its length. I can't quite-' Millia paused, frustrated by his inability to grasp and describe exactly what had occurred.

Finally, he simply said, 'It changed. I don't know-how, or why. 'That's why I was one minute late,' he concluded and looked questioningly at The Contributor. To his surprise, the teenager's man asked her a question that seemed unrelated to the seeing- beyond. 'When I gave you the memory yesterday, the first one, the ride on the toboggan, did you look around?' Millia nodded... 'Yes,' he said, 'but the stuff- I mean the snow- in the air made it hard to see anything.' 'Did you look at the toboggan?' Millia thought back. 'No. I only felt it under me. I dreamed of it last night, too. But I don't remember seeing the toboggan in my dream, either. Just feeling it.' The Contributor seemed to be thinking. 'When I was observing you, before the selection, I perceived that you probably had the capacity, and what you describe confirms that. It happened somewhat differently to me,' The Contributor teenagers her. 'When

I was just your age about to become the new Obtainer- I began to experience it, though it took a different form. With me it was... well, I won't describe that now; you wouldn't understand it yet.

'But I think I can guess how it's happening with you. Let me just make a little test, to confirm my guess. Lay down... on your back.' Millia lay on the bed again with his hands at his sides. He felt comfortable here now. He closed his eyes and waited for the familiar feel of the boy's hands on his back. Nonetheless, it didn't come. Instead, the boy instructed her, 'Call back the memory of the ride on the toboggan. Just the beginning of it, where you're at the top of the hill, before the slide starts. And this time, look down at the toboggan.' Millia was puzzled. He opened his eyes. 'Excuse me,' he asked politely, 'but don't you have to give me the memory?' 'It's your memory, now, it's not mine to experience any longer. I gave it away.' 'But how can I call it back?' 'You can remember last year, or the year that you were a Seven, or a Five, can't you?' 'Of course,' 'It's much the same. Everyone in the community has one- generation memories like those. But now you will be able to go back farther. Try. Just concentrate.'

Millia closed his eyes again. He took a deep breath and sought the toboggan and the hill and the snow in his consciousness. There they were, with no effort. He was again sitting in that whirling world of snowflakes, atop the hill. Millia grinned with delight and blew his own steamy breath into view. Then, as he had been instructed, he looked down. He saw his own hands, furred again with snow, herding the tope. He saw his legs and moved them aside for a glimpse of the toboggan beneath. Dumbfounded, he stared at it. This time it was not a fleeting impression. This time the toboggan had - and continued to have, as he blinked, and stared at it again- that same mysterious quality that the apple had had so briefly. And Fiona's hair. The toboggan did not change. It simply was- whatever the thing was. Millia opened his eyes and was still on the bed. The boy was watching her curiously. 'Yes,' Millia said slowly. 'I saw it, in the toboggan.'

'Let me try one more thing. Look over there, to the bookcase. Do you see the very top row of books, the ones behind the table, on the top shelf?'

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Millia sought them with his eyes. He stared at them, and they changed. But the change was fleeting. It slipped away the next instant. 'It happened,' Millia said. 'It happened to the books, but it went away again.' 'I'm right, then,' The boy said. 'You're beginning to see the color red.' 'The what...?' The Contributor sighed letting it all out, and me getting it in. 'How to explain this? Once, back in the time of the memories, everything had a shape and size, the way things still do, but they also had a quality

called color. 'There were a lot of colors, and one of them was called red. That's the one you are starting to see. Your friend Kalliean has red hair- quite distinctive, actually; I've noticed it before, yet we had sex without them know why they did this to us not to feel this lust. When you mentioned Kalliean's hair, it was the clue that teenagers me you were probably beginning to see the color red.' 'And the faces of people? The ones I saw at the Ceremony?'

The Contributor shook his head. 'No, the flesh isn't red. But it has red tones in it. There was a time, actually- you'll see this in the memories later- when flesh was many different colors. That was before we went to Sameness. Nowadays flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones. Perhaps when you saw the faces take on the color it wasn't as deep or vibrant as the apple or your friend's hair.' The Contributor chuckled, suddenly. 'We've never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Kalliean's must drive them crazy.' Millia listened, trying hard to comprehend. 'And the toboggan?' he said. 'It had that same thing: the color red. But it didn't change, the boy. It just was.' 'For the reason that it's a memory from the time when color was.'

'It was so- oh, I wish language were more precise! The red was so beautiful!' The Contributor and also love the boy nodded. 'It is.' 'Do you see it all the time?' 'I see all of them... all the colors of me and everything you see- are no longer blind to all- that you did not understand.' 'Will I...?' 'Obviously- when you receive the memories. You have the capacity to see beyond. You'll gain wisdom, then, along with colors. And lots more.' Millia wasn't interested, just then, in wisdom. It was the colors that fascinated her. 'Why can't everyone see them? Why did colors disappear?' The Contributor shrugged. 'Our people made that choice, the choice to go to Sameness. Before my time, before the previous time, back and back and back. We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences.' He thought for a moment. 'We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others.' 'We shouldn't have!' Millia said fiercely. The Contributor looked startled at the certainty of Millia's reaction. Then he smiled wryly. 'You've come very quickly to that conclusion,' he said. 'It took me many years. Maybe your wisdom will come much more quickly than mine.' She glanced at the wall clock. 'Lie back down, now. We have so much to do.' 'Contributor,'

Millia asked as he arranged herself again on the bed, 'how did it happen to you when you were becoming The Obtainer? You said that the seeing- beyond happened to you, but not the same way.' The hands came to his back. 'Another day,' The boy said gently. 'I'll tell you another day. Now we must work.

And I've thought of a way to help you with the concept of color. 'Close your eyes and be still, now. I'm going to give you a memory of a rainbow.' Days went by, and weeks. Millia learned, through the memories, the names of colors; and now he began to see them all, in his ordinary life (though he knew it was ordinary no longer, and would never be again). But they didn't last. There would be a glimpse of green- the landscaped lawn around the Central Plaza; a bush on the riverbank. The bright orange of pumpkins being trucked in from the agricultural fields beyond the community boundary- seen in an instant, the flash of brilliant color, but gone again, returning to their flat and hueless shade. The Contributor teenagers her that it would be a very long time before he had the colors to keep. 'Then I want them!' Millia said angrily. 'It isn't fair that nothing has color!'

'Not fair?' The boy looked at Millia curiously. 'Explain what you mean.' 'Well...' Millia had to stop and think it through. 'If everything's the same, then there aren't any choices! I want to wake up in the morning and decide things! A blue tunic, or a red one?' He looked down at herself and then at mine, at the colorless fabric of his clothing.

'But it's all the same, always.' Then he laughed a little. 'I know it's not important, what you wear. It doesn't matter. But- but- but...' 'It's the choosing that's important, isn't it?' The boy asked her. Millia nodded. 'My little brother-' he began and then corrected herself. 'No, that's inaccurate. He's not my brother, not really. But this teenager that my family takes care of- his name's Gaddie?' 'Yes, I know about Gaddie.' Why are the bathrooms outside then if we need to fear sex or them no longer? 'Well, he's right at the age where he's learning so much. He grabs toys when we teenagers them in front of her- my Ancestor says he's learning small muscle control. And he's really cute.'

So, you don't need to think or see that is was there on each other's bodies, as you walk around in the group showers. The same to stop the blood flow you don't need is why you take pills and long with not lusting over a girl sexily for there is no man other than I to do that too. The Contributor nodded, saying you're mine this year out of all your age.

'Nevertheless, now that I can see colors, at least sometimes, I was just thinking: what if we could teenagers up things that were bright red, or bright yellow, and he could choose?

Instead of the Sameness.' 'He might make wrong choices.' 'Oh.' Millia was silent for a minute. 'Oh, I see what you mean. It wouldn't matter for a teenager's toy. But later it does matter, doesn't it? We don't dare to let people make choices of their own.' 'Not safe?' The Contributor suggested. 'Definitely not safe,' Millia said with certainty. 'What if they were allowed to choose their own mate?

And chose wrong? 'Otherwise what if,' he went on, almost laughing at the absurdity, 'they chose their own jobs?' 'Frightening, isn't it?' The boy said. Millia chuckled.

'Very frightening. I can't even imagine it. We really have to protect people from wrong choices.' 'It's safer- This way is it not?' Would girls do that to girls down there?

Yes, now it all me that has that too... 'Yes,' Millia agreed. 'Much safer.' But then again when the conversation turned to other things, Millia was left, still, with a feeling of frustration that he didn't understand. The perfect man no other exists in their world- other than he, the sex and wanting of everything they need to have- and to keep life going. She found that he was often angry, now: irrationally angry at his groupmates, that they were satisfied with their lives which had none of the vibrancy her own was taking on. And he was angry at herself, that he could not change that for them. 'Oh, there's lots to learn,' Kalliean replied... 'There's administrative work, and the dietary rules, and punishment for disobedience- did you know that they use a discipline wand on the Teenagers, the same as for small children? And there's occupational therapy, and recreational activities, and medications, and...' They reached the building and braked theirs like vintage-looking automobiles cars. 'I really think I'll like it better than school,' Kalliean acknowledged. 'Me too,' Millia agreed, wheeling his like vintage-looking automobile cars into its place. She waited for a second, as if, again, she expected her to go on. Then she looked at her watch, waved, and hurried toward the entrance. She tried- Without asking permission from the boy because he feared- or knew- that it would be denied, he tried to give his new awareness to his friends. 'Ashenria,' Millia said one morning, 'look at those flowers very carefully.'

They were standing beside a bed of geraniums planted near the Hall of Open Records. He put his hands on Ashenria's shoulders, and concentrated on the red of the petals, trying to teenagers it as long as he could, and trying at the same time to transmit the awareness of red to her friend.

'What's the matter?' Ashenria asked uneasily. 'Is something wrong?' He moved away from Millia's hands. It was extremely rude for one citizen to touch another outside of family units. 'No, nothing. I thought for a minute that they were wilting, and we should let the Gardening Crew know they needed more watering.' Millia sighed and turned away. One evening she came home from his training weighted with new knowledge. The boy had chosen a startling and disturbing memory that day. Under the touch of her hands, Millia had found herself suddenly in a place that was completely alien: hot and windswept under a vast blue sky. There were rafts of sparse grass, a few bushes, and rocks, and nearby he could see an area of thicker vegetation: broad, low trees outlined against the sky. He could hear

noises: the sharp crack of weapons- he perceived the word guns- and then shouts, and an immense crashing thud as something fell, tearing branches from the trees. She heard voices calling to one another. Peering from the place where he stood hidden behind some shrubbery, he was reminded of what The Contributor had teenagers her, that there had been a time when the flesh had different colors. Two of these men had dark brown skin; the others were light. Going closer, he watched them hack the rusks from a motionless elephant on the ground and haul them away, spattered with blood. He felt overwhelmed with a new perception of the color he knew as read more and more and more. 'Maiara,' he asked that evening when his sister took her comfort object, the stuffie, from the shelf, 'did you know that once there really were elephants? Live ones? 'Then the men were gone, speeding toward the horizon in a vehicle that spits pebbles from its whirling tires. One hit his forehead and stung her there.

But the memory continued, though Millia ached now for it to end. Now he saw another elephant emerge from the place where it had stood hidden in the trees. Very slowly it walked to the mutilated body and looked down. With its sinuous trunk, it stroked the huge corpse; then it reached up, broke some leafy branches with a snap, and draped them over the mass of torn thick flesh. Finally, it tilted its massive head, raised its trunk, and roared into the empty landscape. Millia had never heard such a sound. It was a sound of rage and grief and it seemed never to end.

He could still hear it when he opened his eyes and lay anguished on the bed where he received the memories. It continued to roar into his consciousness as he pedaled slowly home. She glanced down at the ragged comfort object and grinned. 'Right,' she said, skeptically. 'Sure, Millia.' Millia went and sat beside them while his Ancestor united Maiara's hair ribbons and combed her hair. He placed one hand on each of their shoulders. With all of his being, he tried to give each of them a piece of the memory: not of the tortured cry of the elephant, but of the being of the elephant, of the towering, immense creature and the meticulous touch with which it had tended its friend at the end. But his Ancestor had continued to comb Maiara's long hair, and Maiara, impatient, had finally wiggled under her brother's touch. 'Millia,' she said, 'you're hurting me with your hand.' 'I apologize for hurting you, Maiara,' Millia mumbled and took his hand away. 'Kept your apology,' Maiara responded indifferently, stroking the lifeless elephant.

'Contributor,' Millia asked once, as they prepared for the day's work, 'don't you have a spouse? Aren't you allowed to apply for one?' Although he was exempted from the rules against rudeness, he was aware that this was a rude question. But the boy had encouraged all of his questions, not seeming to be embarrassed or offended by even the most personal.

The Contributor chuckled. 'No, there's no rule against it. And I did have a spouse.

You're forgetting how teenagers I am, Millia.

My former spouse lives now with the Childless

Adults.' 'Oh, of course.' Millia had forgotten the boy's obvious age. When adults of the community became teenagers, their lives became different. They were no longer needed to create family units. Millia's own parents, when he and Maiara were grown, would go to live with the Childless Adults. 'You'll be able to apply for a spouse, Millia if you want to. I'll warn you, though, that it will be difficult. Your living arrangements will have to be different from those of most family units because the books are forbidden to citizens. You and I are the only ones with access to the books.' Millia glanced around at the astonishing array of volumes. From time to time, now, he could see their colors. With their hours together, his and The Contributor's, consumed by conversation and by the transmission of memories, Millia had not yet opened any of the books.

But he read the titles here and there and knew that they contained all of the knowledge of centuries and that one day they would belong to her. 'So- o if I have a spouse, and maybe children, I will have to hide the books from them?' The Contributor nodded. 'I wasn't permitted to share the books with my spouse, that's correct. And there are other difficulties, too. You remember the rule that says the new Obtainer can't talk about his training?' Millia nodded. Of course, she remembered. It had turned out, by far, to be the most frustrating of the rules he was required to obey. 'When you become the official Obtainer, when we're finished here, you'll be given a whole new set of rules. Those are the rules that I obey. And it won't surprise you that I am forbidden to talk about my work to anyone except the new Obtainer. That's you, unquestionably.

'So, there will be a whole part of your life which you won't be able to share with a family. It's hard, Millia. It was hard for me.

'You do understand, don't you, that this is my life? The memories?' Millia nodded again, but he was puzzled. Didn't life consist of the things you did each day? There wasn't anything else, really. 'I've seen you taking walks,' he said.

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The Contributor sighed. 'I walk. I eat at mealtime. And when I am called by the Committee of Teenagers, I appear before them, to give them counsel and advice.' 'Do you advise them often?' Millia was a little frightened at the thought that one day he would be the one to advise the ruling body. The Contributor said no. 'Rarely. Only when they are faced with something that they have not experienced before. Then they call upon me to use the memories and advise them. But it very seldom happens.

Sometimes I wish they'd ask for my wisdom more often - there are so many things I could tell them; things I wish they would change. But they don't want to change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable - so painless. It's what they've chosen.' 'I don't know why they even need an Obtainer, then, if they never call upon her,' Millia commented. 'They need me. And you,' The Contributor said but didn't explain.

'They were reminded of that ten years ago.' 'What happened ten years ago?' Millia asked.

'Oh, I know.

You tried to train a successor and it failed. Why? Why did that remind them?' The Contributor boy smiled grimly. 'When the new Obtainer failed, the memories that she had received were released. They didn't come back to me. They went...' The boy paused, and seemed to be struggling with the concept. 'I don't know, exactly. They went to the place where memories once existed before Obtainers were created. Someplace out there - ' He gestured vaguely with his arm.

'And then the people had access to them.

Apparently, that's the way it was, once. Everyone had access to memories. 'It was chaos,' he said. 'They really suffered for a while. Finally, it subsided as the memories were assimilated. But it certainly made them aware of how they need an Obtainer to contain all that pain. And knowledge.' 'But you have to suffer like that all the time,' Millia pointed out.

The Contributor nodded. 'And you will. It's my life. It will be yours.' Millia thought about it, about what it would be like for her. 'Along with walking and eating and -' He looked around the walls of books.

'Reading? That's it?' The

Contributor shook his head. 'Those are simply the things that I do. My life is here.'

'In this room?' The Contributor shook his head.

He put his hands to his own face, to his chest. 'No.

Here, in my being. Where the memories are.' 'My Instructors in science and technology have taught us about how the brain works,' Millia teenagers her eagerly. 'It's full of electrical impulses. It's like a computer. If you stimulate one part of the brain with an electrode, it-' He stopped talking. He could see an odd look on the boy's face. 'They know nothing,' The Contributor said bitterly. Millia was shocked. Since the first day in the Annex room, they had together disregarded the rules about rudeness, and Millia felt comfortable with that now. But this was different, and far beyond rude. This was a terrible accusation. What if someone had heard? He glanced quickly at the wall speaker, terrified that the Committee might be listening as they could at any time.

But, as always during their sessions together, the switch had been turned to OFF.

'Nothing?' Millia whispered nervously.

'But my instructors-' The Contributor flicked his hand as if brushing something aside. 'Oh, your instructors are well trained. They know their scientific facts. Everyone is well trained for his job. 'It's just that ... without the memories, it's all meaningless. They gave that burden to me.

And to the previous Obtainer.

And the one before her.' 'And back and back and back,' Millia said, knowing the phrase that always came. The Contributor smiled, though his smile was oddly harsh. 'That's right. And next, it will be you. A great honor.' 'Yes, sir. The teenagers me that at the Ceremony.

The very highest honor.'

Some afternoons the boy sent her away without training. Millia knew, on days when he arrived to find the boy hunched over, rocking his body slightly back and forth, his face pale, that he would be sent away.

'Go,' the boy would tell her tensely. 'I'm in pain today. Come back tomorrow.'

On those days, worried and disappointed, Millia would walk alone beside the river.

The paths were empty of people except for the few Delivery Crews and Landscape Workers here and there.

Small children were all at the Childcare Center after school, and the teenage ones busy with volunteer hours or training.

By herself, he tested his own developing memory. He watched the landscape for glimpses of the green that he knew was embedded in the shrubbery; when it came flickering into his consciousness, he focused upon it, keeping it there, darkening it, hatemongering it in his vision as long as possible until his head hurt and he let it fade away.

He stared at the flat, colorless sky, bringing blue from it, and remembered sunshine until finally, for an instant, he could feel the warmth.

He stood at the foot of the bridge that spanned the river, the bridge that citizens were allowed to cross only on official business. Millia had crossed it on school trips, visiting the outlying communities, and he knew that the land beyond the bridge was much the same, flat and well ordered, with fields for agriculture.

The other communities he had seen on visits were essentially the same as his own, the only differences were slightly altered styles of dwellings, slightly different schedules in the schools.

Millia stood for a moment beside his like a vintage-looking automobile, startled. It had happened again: the thing that he thought of now as 'seeing beyond.' This time it had been Kalliean who had undergone that fleeting indescribable change. As he looked up and toward her going through the door, it happened; she changed. Actually, Millia thought, trying to recreate it in his mind, it wasn't Kalliean in her entirety. It seemed to be just her hair. And just for that flickering instant.

He wondered what lay in the far distance where he had never gone. The land didn't end beyond those nearby communities. Were there hills Elsewhere? Where their vast wind-torn areas like the place he had seen in memory, the place where the elephant died?

'The boy,' he asked one afternoon following a day when he had been sent away, 'what causes you pain?' When the boy was silent, Millia continued. 'The Main Teen teenagers me, in the beginning, that the receiving of memory causes terrible pain. And you described for me that the failure of the last new Obtainer released painful memories to the community.

'But I haven't suffered, The boy. Not really.' Millia smiled. 'Oh, I remember the sunburn you gave me on the very first day. But that wasn't so terrible. What is it that makes you suffer so much? If you gave some of it to me, maybe your pain would be less.'

The boy nodded. 'Lie down,' he said.

'It's time, I suppose. I can't shield you forever.

You'll have to take it all on eventually.

'Let me think,' he went on, when Millia was on the bed, waiting, a little fearful.

'All right,' The boy said after a moment, 'I've decided. We'll start with something familiar. Let's go once again to a hill, and a toboggan.'

He placed his hands on Millia's back.

It was much the same, this memory, though the hill seemed to be a different one, steeper, and the snow was not falling as thickly as it had before.

It was them, also, Millia perceived. He could see, as he sat waiting at the top of the hill, that the snow beneath the toboggan was not thick and soft as it had been before, but hard, and coated with bluish ice.

The toboggan moved forward, and Millia grinned with delight, looking forward to the breathtaking slide down through the invigorating air.

The runners, this time, couldn't slice through the frozen expanse as they had on the other, snow- cushioned hill. They skittered sideways and the toboggan gathered speed.

Millia pulled at the rope, trying to steer, but the steepness and speed took control from his hands and he was no longer enjoying the feeling of freedom but instead, terrified, was at the mercy of the wild acceleration downward over the ice.

Sideways, spinning, the toboggan hit a bump in the hill and Millia was jarred loose and thrown violently into the air. She fell with his leg twisted under her and could hear the crack of bone. His face scraped along jagged edges of ice and when he came, at last, to a stop, he lay shocked and still, feeling nothing at first but fear.

Then, the first wave of pain. He gasped. It was as if a hatchet lay lodged in his leg, slicing through each nerve with a hot blade. In his agony, he perceived the word 'fire' and felt flames licking the torn bone and flesh. He tried to move, and could not. The pain grew.

She screamed... There was no answer... Sobbing, he turned his head and vomited onto the frozen snow. Blood dripped from his face into the vomit.

'No!' he cried, and the sound disappeared into the empty landscape, into the wind.

Then, suddenly, he was in the Annex room again, writhing on the bed. Her face was wet with tears. Able to move now, he rocked his own body back and forth, breathing deeply to release the remembered pain. She sat, and looked at his own leg, where it lay straight on the bed, unbroken. The brutal slice of pain was gone. But the leg ached horribly, still, and his face felt raw. 'May I have relief-of-pain, please?' he begged. It was always provided in his everyday life for the bruises and wounds, for a smashed finger, a stomach ache, a skinned knee from a fall from a like vintage-looking automobile car. There was always a daub of anesthetic ointment, or a pill; or in severe instances, an injection that brought complete and instantaneous deliverance. The boy said no, and looked away. Limping,

Millia walked home, pushing his bicycle, that evening. The sunburn pain had been so small, in comparison, and had not stayed with her. But this ache lingered. It was not unendurable, as the pain on the hill had been.

Millia tried to be brave. He remembered that the Main The teen had said he was brave. 'Is something wrong, Millia?' his Ancestor asked at the evening meal.

'You're so quiet tonight. Aren't you feeling well?

Would you like some medication?'

Millia remembered the rules. No medication for anything related to his training. Too no discussion of his training. At the time for sharing-of-feelings, he simply said that he felt tired, that his school lessons had been unusually demanding that day. She went to his sleeping room early, and from behind the closed door, he could hear his parents and sister laughing as they gave Gaddie his evening bath.

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They have never known pain, she thought. The realization made her feel desperately lonely, and he rubbed his throbbing leg. He eventually slept. Again, and again he dreamed of the anguish and the isolation on the forsaken hill.

The daily training continued, and now it always included pain. The agony of the fractured leg began to seem no more than a mild discomfort as the boy led Millia firmly, little by little, into the deep and terrible suffering of the past.

Each time, in his kindness, the boy ended the afternoon with a color-filled memory of pleasure: a brisk sail on a blue-green lake; a meadow dotted with yellow wildflowers; an orange sunset behind mountains. It was not enough to assuage the pain that Millia was beginning, now, to know.

'Why?' Millia asked her after he had received a torturous memory in which he had been neglected and unfed; the hunger had caused excruciating spasms in his empty, distended stomach. She lay on the bed, aching. 'Why do you and I have to teenagers these memories?'

'It gives us wisdom,' The boy replied. 'Without wisdom, I could not fulfill my function of advising the Committee of Teenagers when they call upon me.'

'But what wisdom do you get from hunger?' Millia groaned. His stomach still hurt, though the memory had ended.

'Some years ago,' The boy teenagers her, 'before your birth, a lot of citizens petitioned the Committee of Teenagers. They wanted to increase the rate of births. They wanted each Birthmother to be assigned four births instead of three so that the population would increase and there would be more Laborers available.' Millia nodded, listening. 'That makes sense.' 'The idea was that certain family units could accommodate an additional child.' Millia nodded again. 'Mine could,' he pointed out. 'We have Gaddie this year, and it's fun, having a third child.'

'The Committee of Teenagers sought my advice,' The boy said. 'It made sense to them, too, but it was a new idea, and they came to me for wisdom.' 'Plus, you used your memories?' The boy said yes. 'And the strongest memory that came was hunger. It came from many generations back. Centuries back. The population had gotten so big that hunger was everywhere. Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare.'

Warfare...? It was a concept Millia did not know. But hunger was familiar to her now. Unconsciously he rubbed his own abdomen, recalling the pain of its unfulfilled needs. 'So, you described that to them?' 'They don't want to hear about the pain. They just seek advice. I simply advised them against increasing the population.' 'But you said that that was before my birth. They hardly ever come to you for advice. Only when they- what was it you said?

When they have a problem they've never faced before. When did it happen last?' 'Do you remember the day when the plane flew over the community?' 'Yes. I was scared.' 'So were they. They prepared to shoot it down. But they sought my advice. I teenagers them to wait.' 'How did you know? How did you know the pilot was lost?' 'I didn't. I used my wisdom, from the memories. I knew that there had been times in the past- terrible times- when people had destroyed others in haste, in fear, and had brought about their own destruction.' Millia realized something. 'That means,' he said slowly, 'that you have memories of destruction. And you have to give them to me, too, because I have to get the wisdom.' The boy nodded... 'Then again it will hurt,' Millia said. It wasn't a question. 'It will hurt terribly,' The boy agreed... 'But why? Why can't everyone have the memories? I think it would seem a little easier if the memories were shared. You and I wouldn't have to bear so much by ourselves if everybody took apart.'

The boy sighed. 'You're right,' he said. 'But then everyone would be burdened and pained. They don't want that. And that's the real reason The Obtainer is so vital to them and so honored. They selected me- and you- to lift that burden from themselves.' 'When did they decide that?' Millia asked angrily. 'It wasn't fair.

Let's change it!' 'How do you suggest we do that? I've never been able to think of away, and I'm supposed to be the one with all the wisdom.' 'Then there are two of us now,' Millia said eagerly. 'Together we can think of something!' The boy watched her with a wry smile. 'Why can't we just apply for a change of rules?' Millia suggested. The boy laughed; then Millia, too, chuckled reluctantly. 'The decision was made long before my time or yours,' The boy said, 'and before the previous Obtainer, and -' He waited. 'Back and back and back,' Millia repeated the familiar phrase.

Sometimes it had seemed humorous to her.

Sometimes it had seemed meaningful and important. Now it was ominous. It meant, he knew, that nothing could be changed.

The teenager, Gaddie, was growing, and successfully passed the tests of maturity that the Nurturers gave each month; he could sit alone, now, could reach for and grasp small play objects, and he had six teeth. During the daytime hours, Ancestor reported, he was cheerful and seemed of normal intelligence. But he remained fretful at night, whimpered often, needing frequent attention. 'After all this extra time I've put in with her,' Ancestor said one evening after Gaddie had been bathed and was lying, for the moment, hugging his horse placidly in the small crib that had replaced the handbag, 'I hope they're not going to decide to release her.' 'Maybe it would be for the best,' Mother suggested. 'I know you don't mind getting up with her at night. But the lack of sleep is awfully hard for me.'

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'If they release Gaddie, can we get another teenager as a visitor?' asked Maiara. She was kneeling beside the crib, making funny faces at the little one, who was smiling back at her. Millia's mother rolled her eyes in dismay. 'No,' Ancestor said, smiling. He ruffled Maiara's hair. 'It's very rare, anyway, that a teenager's status is as uncertain as Gaddie's. It probably won't happen again, for a long time. 'Anyway,' he sighed, 'they won't make the decision for a while. Right now, we're all preparing for a release we'll probably have to make very soon. There's a Birthmother who's expecting twin males next month.' 'Oh, dear,' Mother said, shaking her head. 'If they're identical, I hope you're not the one assigned-'

'I am. I'm next on the list. I'll have to select the one to be nurtured, and the one to be released. It's usually not hard, though. Usually, it's just a matter of birthweight. We release the smaller of the two.'

Millia, listening, thought suddenly about the bridge and how, standing there, he had wondered what lay Elsewhere. Was there someone there, waiting, who would receive the tiny released twin? Would it grow up Elsewhere, not knowing, ever, that in this community lived a being who looked exactly the same? For a moment he felt a tiny, fluttering hope that he knew was quite foolish. He hoped that it would be Lieissah, waiting. Lieissah, the woman he had bathed. He remembered her sparkling eyes, her soft voice, her low chuckle.

Kalliean had teenagers her recently that Lieissah had been released at a wonderful ceremony. But he knew that the Teenagers were not given children to raise. Lieissah's life Elsewhere would be quiet and serene as befit the Teenagers; she would not welcome the responsibility of nurturing a teenager who needed feeding and care, and would likely cry at night. 'Mother? Ancestor?' He said, the

idea coming to her unexpectedly, 'why don't we put Gaddie's crib in my room tonight? I know how to feed and comfort her, and it would let you and Ancestor get some sleep.' Ancestor looked doubtful. 'You sleep so soundly, Millia. What if his restlessness didn't wake you?' It was Maiara who answered that. 'If no one goes to tend Gaddie,' she pointed out, 'he gets very loud. He'd wake all of us if Millia slept through it.' Ancestor laughed.

'You're right, Maiara- billy. All right, Millia, let's try it, just for tonight. I'll take the night off and we'll let Mother get some sleep, too.' Gaddie slept soundly for the earliest part of the night. Millia, in his bed, lay awake for a while; from time to time he raised herself on one elbow, looking over at the bed. The teenager was on his stomach, his arms relaxed beside his head, his eyes closed, and his breathing regular and undisturbed. Finally, Millia slept too. Then, as the middle hours of the night approached, the noise of Gabe's restlessness woke Millia. The teenager was turning under his cover, flailing his arms, and beginning to whisper. Millia rose and went to her. Gently he patted Gaddie's back. Sometimes that was all it took to lull her back to sleep. But the teenager still squirmed fretfully under his hand. Still patting rhythmically, Millia began to remember the wonderful sail that the boy had given her not long before: a bright, breezy day on a clear turquoise lake, and above her the white sail of the boat billowing as he moved along in the brisk wind. She was not aware of giving the memory; but suddenly he realized that it was becoming dimmer, that it was sliding through his hand into the being of the new child. Gaddie became quiet. Startled, Millia pulled back what was left of the memory with a burst of will. He removed his hand from the little back and stood quietly beside the bed. To herself, he called the memory of the sail forward again. It was still there, but the sky was less blue, the gentle motion of the boat slower, the water of the lake murkier and more clouded. He kept it for a while, soothing his own nervousness at what had occurred, then let it go and returned to his bed. Once more, toward dawn, the teenager woke and cried out. Again, Millia went to her. This time he quite deliberately placed his hand firmly on Gaddie's back and released the rest of the calming day on the lake.

Again- Gaddie slept. But then again now Millia lay awake, thinking. He no longer had any more than a wisp of the memory, and he felt a small lake where it had been. He could ask the boy for another sail, he knew. A sail perhaps on the ocean, next time, for Millia had a memory of ocean, now, and knew what it was; he knew that there were sailboats there, too, in memories yet to be acquired. She wondered, though, if he should confess to the boy that he had given a memory away.

He was not yet qualified to be-a boy herself; nor had Gaddie been selected to be an Obtainer. That he had this power frightened her. He decided not to tell. Millia entered the Annex room and

realized immediately that it was a day when he would be sent away. The boy was rigid in his chair, his face in his hands. 'I'll come back tomorrow, sir,' he said quickly. Then he hesitated. 'Unless maybe there's something I can do to help.' The boy looked up at her, his face contorted with suffering. 'Please,' he gasped, 'take some of the pain.' Millia helped her to his chair at the side of the bed. Then he quickly removed his tunic and lay face down.

'Put your hands on me,' he directed, aware that in such anguish the boy might need reminding. The hands came, and the pain came with them and through them. Millia braced herself and entered the memory which was torturing the boy. She was in a confused, noisy, foul-smelling place. It was daylight, early morning, and the air was thick with smoke that hung, yellow and brown, above the ground. Around her, everywhere, far across the expanse of what seemed to be a field, lay groaning men. A wild-eyed horse, its bridle torn and dangling, trotted frantically through the mounds of men, tossing its head, whinnying in panic. It stumbled, finally, then fell, and did not rise. Millia heard a voice next to her.

'Water,' the voice said in a parched, croaking whisper. She turned his head toward the voice and looked into the half-closed eyes of a boy who seemed not many teenagers than herself. Dirt streaked the boy's face and his matted blond hair. He lay sprawled, his gray uniform glistening with wet, fresh blood. The colors of the carnage were grotesquely bright: the crimson wetness on the rough and dusty fabric, the ripped shreds of grass, startlingly green, in the boy's yellow hair. The boy stared at her. 'Water,' he begged again. When he spoke, a new spurt of blood-drenched the coarse cloth across his chest and sleeve. One of Millia's arms was immobilized with pain, and he could see through his own torn sleeve something that looked like ragged flesh and splintery bone. He tried his remaining arm and felt it move. Slowly he reached to his side, felt the metal container there, and removed its cap, stopping the small motion of his hand now and then to wait for the surging pain to ease.

Finally, when the container was open, he extended his arm slowly across the blood-soaked earth, inch by inch, and held it to the lips of the boy. Water trickled into the imploring mouth and down the grimy chin. The boy sighed. His head fell back, his lower jaw-dropping as if he had been surprised by something. A cloudy blankness slid slowly across his eyes. He was silent... But the noise continued all around: the cries of the wounded men, the cries begging for water and for Mother and for death. Horses lying on the ground shrieked, raised their heads, and stabbed randomly toward the sky with their hooves. From the distance, Millia could hear the thud of cannons. Overwhelmed by pain, he lay there in the fearsome stench for hours, listened to the men and animals die, and learned what warfare meant.

Finally, when he knew that he could bear it no longer and would welcome death herself, he opened his eyes and was once again on the bed.

The boy looked away as if he could not bear to see what he had done to Millia. 'Forgive me,' he said.

As I ran for her and not him for a gay relationship.

Millia did not want to go back. He didn't want the memories, didn't want the honor, didn't want the wisdom, didn't want the pain. He wanted his childhood again, his scraped knees and ball games. He sat in his dwelling alone, watching through the window, seeing children at play, citizens bicycling home from uneventful days at work, ordinary lives free of anguish because he had been selected, as others before her hand, to bear their burden. But the choice was not his.

He returned each day to the Annex room. The boy was gentle with her for many days following the terrible shared memory of war, yet he was not her inside her mind, like that voice. 'There are so many good memories,' The boy reminded Millia. And it was true. By now Millia had experienced countless bits of happiness, things he had never known of before. He had seen a birthday party, with one child singled out and celebrated on his day, so that now he understood the joy of being an individual, special and unique and proud. He had visited museums and seen paintings filled with all the colors he could now recognize and name. In one ecstatic memory, he had ridden a gleaming brown horse across a field that smelled of damp grass and had dismounted beside a small stream from which both he and the horse drank, clear water.

Now he understood about animals; and at the moment that the horse turned from the stream and nudged Millia's shoulder affectionately with its head, he perceived the bonds between animal and human. He had walked through woods and sat at night beside a campfire. Although he had through the memories learned about the pain of loss and loneliness, now he gained, too, an understanding of solitude and its joy. 'What is your favorite?' Millia asked the boy. 'You don't have to give it away yet,' he added quickly. 'Just tell me about it, so I can look forward to it because I'll have to receive it when your job is done.'

The boy smiled. 'Lie down,' he said. 'I'm happy to give it to you.' Millia felt the joy of it as soon as the memory began. Sometimes it took a while for her to get his bearings, to find his place. But this time he fit right in and felt the happiness that pervaded the memory. He was in a room filled with

people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing on a hearth. He could see through a window that outside it was night and snow. There were colored lights: red and green and yellow, twinkling from a tree which was, oddly, inside the room. He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter.

On the floor, there were packages wrapped in brightly colored paper and tied with gleaming ribbons. As Millia watched, a small child began to pick up the packages and pass them around the room: to other children, to adults who were obviously parents, and to a teenager, quiet couple, man and woman, who sat smiling together on a couch. While Millia watched, the people began one by one to untie the ribbons on the packages, to unwrap the bright papers, open the boxes and reveal toys and clothing and books. There were cries of delight. They hugged one another. The small child went and sat on the lap of the teenager's woman, and she rocked her and rubbed her cheek against his.

Millia opened his eyes and lay contentedly on the bed, still luxuriating in the warm and comforting memory. It had all been there, all the things he had learned to treasure.

'What did you perceive?' The boy asked.

'Warmth,' Millia replied, 'and happiness. And- let me think. Family. That it was a celebration of some sort, a holiday. And something else- I can't quite get the word for it.' 'It will come to you.' 'Who were the teenager's people? Why were they there?' It had puzzled Millia, seeing them in the room.

The Teenagers of the community did not ever leave their special place, the House of the Teenagers, where they were so well cared for and respected. 'They were called

Grandparents.' 'Grandparents?'

'Grandparents. It meant parents- of the- parents, long ago.' 'Back and back and back?' Millia began to laugh. 'So actually, there could be parents- of- the- parents- of- the- parents- of- the parents?' The Obtainer

laughed, too. 'That's right. It's a little like looking at yourself looking in a mirror.' Millia frowned. 'But my parents must have had parents! I never thought about it before. Who are my parents- of- the parents? Where are they?' I asked in my mind running for the invisible covered overhead to let us out... hand and hand- we went, out of this controlled world- into the next diss- rick.

~*~

This is horrifying to me, but I could see that baby coming out looking like my dad, or even being my dad oddly enough, like being born again out of her. Just popping slightly out... 'Looking like Achmed the Dead Terrorist!'

10

Then something inside me just snapped. (One eye twitched twice.) 'I am done, I am just done fighting for her.' I thought- 'There comes a time where every man reaches his breaking point.

And mine was when she thought I would do that to her or let him have his way. She holds me responsible, regardless? Like I was some kind of deviant demonic sick- o.'

(There comes a time when you have to let her go.) If she wants me, she'll come back to me... right? Naturally, I left her to walk off into the sunset, butt cheeks wiggling away. (Am I going to regret it?) I don't know yet. Maybe so... I am thinking about her already.

In nine months, I'll really know if I am the daddy or not. Even though she thinks... I have no way of truly knowing. She's going by feel and that's not always right. She'll be back if she loves me! That's not if the mob of wolfs don't find her and the baby first. And do what I said they would. But I am just DONE!

I wonder where she is going to go now? I wonder what I am going to do without her now? She's naked running across a pond of lava, who is already four weeks pregnant. She is my love navigating a world that has moved on from her death. I couldn't just leave her. 'Perhaps I could watch her from a distance and protect her when she needs it. I thought. I saw that she had finally reached the other side and I continued to follow her. 'I don't trust you, but where the fuck am I?'

Giselle covered her boobs and vagina. 'Mount Vahalla.

Look at least let me drive you back to your hometown, and you can get some clothes.

Here-a, take my jacket...' I gave her my jacket and she took it. 'TURN AROUND!' She screamed, and I turned around when I didn't, and she put the jacket on and I spun around and led her to my truck. 'What do you remember?' I asked trying to have a conversation. 'Nothing. I can't remember anything.' She sat hunched overlooking out the window, fogging it up with her breath. I put on the heater and heat started to come out through the vents. She screamed until she inspected the vents closer.

'Why do you drive so fast?' 'It's Just a closed off would think,' I said. 'What is it?' She asked dumbfounded. After all this, she is just the way she was before all this took place. I went along with it. 'It's not all just hot air coming out.

Even if we don't breathe- It helps in keep bodies like ours warm, to feel loved- do you like it, this feeling?'

I replied keeping my eyes on the road. 'It burns my skin.' She looked at me. 'Yeah, that happens when your skin is cold. But don't worry it won't hurt you unless it's on higher.' I smiled. Knowing that it was frostbite. 'I believe you.'

She smiled with a sparkle in her eye. 'You do remember me. Don't you?' I smiled. 'How could I ever forget the love of my life? I love you... I said to her noting it was wrong- yet it was not to me before. And I'm pregnant, I created a potion to prevent myself from getting pregnant by your father before raped me. I remembered what you said to me.

So- o I'm fine and thank you for being me back to life.

So- o instead of going back there, why don't we go and explore the world like France and get me some clothes.' She chuckled and held my hand. I laughed and we both listened to old music as we rode into the sunlight. Nine months later a new baby was born. A little girl that was all ours, we named Faith. We both got the happy endings that we want so badly, and found love within love, by having something and someone to love more than life itself.

Nevaeh

Book: 59

Heavenly Bodies

Portion

The Trial and Tribulations

'Death into the soul world and how one gets there - Heaven or Hell and Afterlife nevertheless, Darkness or the Light. Life of choices to the life of decisions - of never-ending determinations.'

~*~

Nevaeh- More remembrances of the past, I remember my mother's life looking into it of her being locked into cages like dogs naked, with a dog dish- with a leash.

I remember her doing the same with me and my stepbrothers, and sisters.

That was the love we both had, yet my dad on like she was gutless.

Nonetheless, of all, a good man- that lost his life to save mine over his dead body my mother took me, to be victimized.

Lily has the same thing, over the make that mother was the same as my mother thinks in the same ways, doing the same things to kids that are a waste of life.

To just grow and suck off everyone else's paycheck, and the guardian was not much better, that was also made an award and made less-than-ideal to make my life choices, the for it was up to the town, to make me whom I became, and that is why, I wanted out, of the tributes of my past, that took over the future. I have been called a jealous writer who can't come up with what I did? By them, maybe so-o... or maybe you just don't understand, screaming when you need to be hearing the truths, about your trials and tribulations.

Disabilities- on you and with your family, and your real mother being crazy has NOTHING to do with me, or is it everything they see, the past of the apple not falling far from the tree?

I don't get SSI for disability, because they never thought I was disabled, yet I had the disabled education. Thus, making me out to be next to black, in a homeland of prejudiced with the intent of miming... so judgmental, live your own life, I thought... sure, that would be so-o, if I could have one.

Do- I have one...?

The question is... am I worthy of one?

Take your own path, yet really, you're not given one, looking back a remembrance.

I understood you, is all I get from them, then fine, and I can be the one as simple, sure - sure... think again. Public or not it is what has become know about you, without really not knowing anything other than speculation of twisted over the fact it makes good cheap storylines.

Yes, I remember because - you want me to being locked in a dog cage that was 2 foot by 4 foot, oh so nude, and dirty... for day after day, with no lights, and in my mind, it remains now true, just like my mom and her sisters that was molested by her dad, yet he wore the little blue hat, and the badge, and called himself a cop, within a municipality just like all them criminals too.

Yet, I am the one under phycological evaluation, yet they can molest as they please, call them pigs - call them all fags - call them what you like... say everything is fake and gay too.

When do we get to play the victim, I have to say that to a DA, at some point - if allowed to ever speak?

This is why I did not do anything with my mother cremated ashes - after being placed in an earn, other than me dumping them out, letting the wind take them as it placed, next to her dads grave - the pig - that I call my granddad - on her side. Yet, father like daughter...

Then I remember a girl that we got into our world named Brenna, and then I don't feel, that my life was all that bad.

Sometimes, I wish not - to linger in the bodies of the girls, that I learn to love - and look after as an angel of death, over the fact they all suffer. And then they get here an forget about me being there for them... yet that is okay - that's the way it has to be.

She calls her story 'The universe too its Mistakes,' and I had to question this yet feel the same way.

She was one that was chosen to die this way - even if there is now a remedy - if you got the money, in her world, the question I have is why - it feels so wrong to me - yet that is life to them...

Chapter: 1

It was the endings of the cold dark glum winter of the tenth year of my young also fragile life.

My mother was ever so-o unquestionable that - I personally disheartened, dejected, also dismayed.

Ostensibly- for the reason that I never really wanted to leave my room, as to the ways I for one felt. In my house, in my room I feel whole also all one, not falling apart.

Cry here also no one sees it. Expended quite a lot of time in my single bed all pink also girlie, I read some also play rock music, or have the television blasting also not witching, I DO THE SAME THINGS OVER ALSO OVER, like flipping throughout the same book over also over, annoyed infrequently, like those things called boys do to me too, also enthusiastic moderately a jiffy of my plentiful allowed time to thoughtful about bereavement. Every time you recite a malignant cell brochure or webpage or some crap you don't even freak need to see. What is love? I wouldn't know or will I at this point. All that, they always list hopelessness surrounded by the side paraphernalia of bad cancer.

On the other also, in circumstance, downheartedness is not a side-effect of sarcoma. Melancholy is a side effect of vanishing in bereavement.

(Tumors can be also the side-effect of failing to dust in the ash of death final- moments. Practically- everything is dust pissing in the hart, definitely.)

Then again, my mamma alleged I personally obligatory cure, subsequently, she seized me to see my Regular Doctor Tim Smith, who agreed sucks butt, also I would rather be spread at the guyno's then be looking at his old face, up my nose, that I was veritably be drenched in a wetness also entire clinical downheartedness, in addition to that for that reason my meds should be in the swing of things besides also I myself be dutybound to Candelaria with your presence a journal Provision Assembly at my church. Kill me- God- just do it! This Provision Assemblage highlighted a gyratory dramatis personae of calligraphies in a number of situations of malignant tumor swelling- single-minded un-thriving-ness.

Why? The company interchange- sacking? A side-effect of disappearing.

The Maintenance Collection, of development, was disheartening as nether-underworld. It met every Wednesday in the basement of a stone-walled Prelatic church bent like a cantankerous. We all sat in a square right in the middle of the room looking at marrying looking back- all creepy eyed- like staring at you, I feel what she does virgin for life also death, where the four boards would have met, where the heart of Jesus would have been.

I Bryana observed this for the reason that Codi, the Care Clutch front-runner as well as only creature over twenty in the room, looking at eye looking at us like flowing us with their wonderful eyes

in the tall glass, also statues. As undeveloped almost boob-less malignant cells fighter, I like them all sitting right in saying crap we don't feel is need for death, also kicking it.

~*~

So, here's us all, seven or so, sauntered halberd also veered in, nibbled at a dilapidated choice of cookies, milk, also coffee that sucks so bad you have no idea, sat down with dumbly mined hope to see ninety or more surely right. As well as listened to Codi second opinion for yet another painful kill me pleas time, his disappointingly down about life-lasting- off in what manner he had malignancy in his sack, also had on popped out also has it in a jar on his desk now, see it, in addition to they thought he was going to die but he didn't die, just put it next mine ripped out heart on suck life. Plus, now here he is, an occupied- fully-fledged mature in an ecclesiastical lower ground floor in the 745th nicest city in Cambria counties, unconnected, hooked to WIII also PC- sports gaming like roller coaster tycoon, stereotypically companionless; seeing out of available insufficient breathing, also excisions life expectancy.

The universe too its mistakes by exploiting his tumor-tactic past happy go lucky marrons, at St. Jude's hospital slowly at work doing this my way nearing a master's degree that will not improve their jobs projections, in the making, as we altogether look after, for the weapon of pain. To give me the release that he run-away low folks many eons ago when malignancy took individually of his dan-gel-ie's off but spared what only one- only, snip- snip- just rip the dick off at this point, he's so not getting it. The most substantial personality would call his lifetime.

IN ADDITION TO you being MOREOVER POWER BE so-o FORTUNATE! At that juncture, we familiarized ourselves- Name- Age- Diagnosis- sex-life. Hi- Bill- Dick- also then Mike Peter's takes, we know he sucks- balls also sacks also is gay homie doing little boys! Hi, all he believed in his tard-ed-voice! In addition, in what manner we're liability today. I'm Bryana, I'd say when they'd He Get to me.

Bry- Ten year's young kids, I have no hair on my vag., also have a training bra, originally but with an impressive besides extended-settled satellite colony in my heart. Besides, I'm a responsibility unacceptable. As soon as we got around the loop, Codi always asked if anybody wanted to segment. Also, then commenced the loop bump of livelihood- all also sundry chatting approximately aggressive also attacking plus winning also withdrawal besides skimming.

To be fair-minded to Codi, he let us talk about dying, as well. On the other also a maximum of them be situated in dying. Utmost would live into childhood, as Codi had. (Witch unescapable nearby was fairly a lot of affordability approximately it, with every Tom, Dick, also Harry wanting to beat not only cancer itself, but also the other people in the room. Like, I realize that this is irrational, but when they tell you that you have, say, a twenty percent chance of living three more years, the mathematics chicks in also you figure that's one in five... consequently, you look around also think, as any in good physical shape person would- I got to outlive some of these bastards ass wipes.)

Chapter: 2

The only in your favor façade of life and hope, I was this kid named Amy-sue, a long-faced, skinny girl with square Fair-haired hair cleaned over one eye. Also, her eyes were problematic. He had some tremendously unlikely eye malignant cells. The lone eye had been bowdlerized out when he was a kid, also this day also age she wore the kind of dense eyeglasses that made her eyes- (Both the physical massive also cute to me in a wired way like never before.)

Preternaturally huge, like his whole head was basically just her big blue eyes on me, as well as this as mine staring at her. Love? I don't think so... yet more wired things have happened. 'If you can stay in love for more than two years, you're on something.'

~*~

From what I gathered about this world I have to face with a ripped-up mind of thinking, I possibly will crease on the rare junctures when Amy shared with the group, a reappearance had employed his outstanding judgment in sexy worldly danger. Amy, also I joined just about completely over moans. Each time someone deliberated anti-cancer-ion nourishments or grunting ground-up shark fin or whatever, she'd peep over at me, also exhalation ever so to some extent.

I wobble my head microscopically also respire in rejoinder. So, Support Group here, also later a small number of weeks, I grew to be rather thrusting-also-screaming about the entire issue. In detail, on Saturday I myself made the confrère of Jamara Fairlee, I tried my level best to get out of Support Group while sitting on the couch with my mom in the third leg of a twelve-hour marathon of the previous season's America's Next Top Model, which admittedly I had already seen, but unmoving. Yours truly- 'I refuse to attend Support Group.' Mamma- 'Lone of the signs of downheartedness is indifference

in happenings.' I myself- 'Please just let me watch America's Next Top Model. It's commotion.' Mother- 'Television is a passivity.'

~*~

Me- 'Ugh, Mom, please.' Mom- 'Bryana, you're a pre-preteen. You're not a little kid any longer. You need to make friends, get out of the house, also live your life.' Me- 'If you want me to be a pre-pre-teen, don't send me to Support Group like this. Buy me a fake dildo so I can go to have a dick inside before I die.' Mom- 'You don't take the pot, for appetizers.' Me- 'See, that's sympathetic to think I'd know if you change to me to not get one.' Mom- 'You're going to Support Group finds one there if you think that what you need to live on.'

Me- 'UGH.' Mom- 'Bryana, you deserve a life also love.'

That shut me up, even though I failed to see how attendance at the Support Group met the classification of life. Motionless, I approved to go- after transferring the right to greatest the 1.5 episodes of ANTM I'd be missing. I went to Support Group for the same reason that I'd once allowed nurses with a mere eighteen months of graduate education to poison me with exotically named... substances- I wanted to make my parents happy. There is only one thing in this world shittier than biting it from cancer when you're a pre-teen, also that's having a kid who bites it from malignant cells. Mom pulled into the circular driveway behind the church at 2-59. yours truly fake to fiddle with my oxygen tank for a second just to kill time. 'Do you want me to carry it in for you?'

'Nope, it's fine,' I believed. The cylindrical khaki tank only weighed a few pounds, also I had this little steel cart to wheel it around behind me. It delivered two liters of oxygen to me each minute through a cannula, a transparent tube that split just beneath my neck, enfolded in arrears of my ears, also then reunited in my nostrils. The contraption was compulsory for the reason that, my heart sucked at being what I need to keep pounding also bagging. 'I love you,' she believed as I got out.

'You too, Mom. See you at seven-ish.'

'Make acquaintances also girlfriends!' she believed through the rolled-down window as I walked away. I didn't want to take the elevator for the reason that taking the elevator is a Last Days kind of activity at Support Group, so I took the stairs. I grabbed a cookie also poured some then milk into a Dixie cup also then twisted around. A girl was staring at me. It was her. I was quite sure I'd never seen her before. Long also leanly muscular, he dwarfed the molded plastic elementary school chair he was

sitting in. light hair, straight also longer for a girl like me. she looked my age or younger, maybe a year older, IDK also she sat with his tailbone against the edge of the chair, his posture aggressively underprivileged, one also half in a pocket of the dim short skirt.

I looked away, unexpectedly cognizant of my numberless insufficiencies. I was wearing old jeans, which had once been tight but now sagged in weird places, also a white T-shirt advertising an also I didn't even like anymore. Also, my hair brown- I had this pageboy haircut, also I hadn't even bothered to, like, brush it. Furthermore, she had ridiculously top, a hat off to the side also a pipe-like she was smoking for the effect of allowing shit to live that sucks Winnie. I looked like a generally regular person with a hot-air balloon for ahead. This was not even to mention the tackle situation. Also, yet- I cut a glance at her, also his eyes were still on me. It occurred to me why they call it eye communication.

I walked into the circle also sat down next to Amy, two seats away from the girl.

I glanced again. She was still watching me. Look, let me just say it- He was hot. A non-sexy girl stare at you relentlessly also it is, at best, awkward also, at worst, a form of assault. But hot girls... well. I pulled out my phone also clicked it so it would display the time-

6-57-sh.

The circle filled in with the unlucky twelve-to-eight, also then Codi started us out with the serenity prayer- God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change yet Understand also as hope also true faith, the courage to change the things I can, also the wisdom to know the difference. The guy was still staring at me. I felt rather blushed looking at her rubbing her legs. Finally, I decided that the proper strategy was to stare back. Boys do not have a monopoly on the Staring Business, after all. So, I looked her over as Codi acknowledged for the thousandth time his ball-lessness and so on, also soon it was a staring contest. After a while the boy smiled, also then finally his blue eyes glanced away. When he looked back at me, I flicked my eyebrows up to say, I triumph. She shrugged; Codi continued also then finally it was time for the introductions.

'She, perhaps you'd like to go first today. I know you're facing a challenging time.' 'Surely,' she believed. 'I'm Mis. Fairlee. I'm not even a teen. Also, it's looking like I have to get surgery in a couple of weeks, after which I'll be blind. Not to criticize or anything because I know a lot of us to have it worse, but surely, I mean, being blind does' sort of suck. My girlfriend helps, though. Also, friends like Jamara.'

He nodded toward the boy, who now had a tag. 'So, surely,' she continued. He was looking at his also, which he'd folded into each other like the top of a tepee. 'There's nothing you can do about it.'

Chapter: 3

'We're here for you, her,' Codi believed. 'Let that girl hear it, guys.' Also, then we all, in a monotone, believed, 'We're here for you, she.' Michael was next. He was twelve. He had his dick up his boyfriend's butt also got shit I don't want to repeat. Gay ass marron. He'd always had something not right just look at that face to see it all. He was okay.

(Or so he believed. He'd taken the stowage herbal.)

Linda was nine, also pretty enough to be the object of the hot boy's eye. She was a regular in a long remission from appendicular cancer, which I had not previously known existed. She believed -as she had every other time, I'd attended Support Group- witch she felt resilient, which felt like big-headed to me as the oxygen-drizzling nubs tickled my nostrils. There were five others before they got to her. She smiled a little when his turn came. Her voice was low, smoky, also dead sexy.

'My name is Jamara aka she or her- last name Fairlee don't matter for shit,' he believed. 'I'm a day away from 13. I had a little touch of osteosarcoma a year also a half ago, but I'm just here today's father request.' 'Also, how are you feeling?' asked Codi. 'Oh, I'm also.' Jamara Fairlee smiled with a cornered his mouth. 'I'm on a roller coaster that only goes up, my friend.'

When it was my turn, I believed, 'My name is Bryana. I'm 10. Not going to see tomorrow up till now I'm okay I want to see the heavens.' The hour proceeded apace- Fights were recounted, battles won amid wars sure to be lost; hope was clung to; families were both celebrated also denounced; it was agreed that friends just didn't get it; tears were shed; comfort proffered.

Neither Jamara Fairlee nor I spoke again until Codi believed, 'Jamara, perhaps you'd like to share your fears with the group.' 'My fears?' 'Naturally.' 'I fear oblivion,' he believed without a moment's hiatus. 'I fear it like the proverbial blind man who's afraid of the dark.' 'Too shortly,' she believed, cracking a smile. 'Was that insensitive?'

Jamara asked. 'I can be pretty blind to other people's feelings.'

~*~

She was laughing, but Codi raised a chastening finger also believed, 'Jamara, please. Let's return to you also your struggles. You believed you fear oblivion?' 'I did,' Jamara answered. Codi seemed lost. 'Would, uh, would anyone like to speak to that?' I hadn't been to a proper school for three years. My parents were my two best friends.

My third best friend was an author who did not know I existed. I was a fairly shy person - not the also- floating nature.

Also, yet, just this once, I decided to speak. I half raised my also Codi, his delight evident, immediately believed, 'Bryana!' I was, I'm sure he assumed, opening up. Becoming Part of The Group she was.

I looked over at Jamara Fairlee, who looked back at me.

You could almost see through his eyes they were so cobalt. 'There will come a time,' I believed, 'when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did everything.

There will be no one left to remember movies also not have sex, let alone you. Everything that we did also build also wrote also thought also discovered will be forgotten also all of this,' I gestured encompassing- 'will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon also maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was the time before organisms experienced consciousness, also there will be time after. In addition, if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that's what everyone else does.' I'd learned this from my aforementioned third best friend, Saundra Stouten, the reclusive author of An Imperial Affliction, the book that was as close a thing as I had to a Bible. SHE - was the only person I'd ever come across who seemed to 1 recognize what it's like to be dying, also 2 not have died. After I finished, there was quite a long period of silence as I watched a smile spread all the way across Jamara's face-not the little-crooked smile of the boy trying to be sexy while he stared at me, but his real smile, too big for his face.

'Damn,' Jamara believed quietly. 'Aren't you something else.' Neither of us believed anything for the rest of the Support Group. In the end, we all had to hold haloes, also Codi led us in prayer. 'Lord Jesus Christ, we are gathered here in Your heart, literally in your heart, as cancer survivors. You also You alone know us as we know ourselves. Guide us to live also the Light through our times of trial. We pray

for her eyes, for Michael's also Jamie's blood, for Jamara's bones, for Bryana's hart, for James's throat. We pray that You might heal us also that we might feel Your love, also Your peace, which passes all Understand also.

~*~

Also, we remember in our hearts those whom we knew also loved who have gone home to you- Maria also Kade also Joseph also Haley also sigil also pangolins also Mayor also Gabriel also... It was a long list. The world contains a lot of dead people. Also, while Codi droned on, reading the list from a sheet of paper because it was too long to memorize, I kept my eyes closed, trying to think prayerfully but mostly Visualization the day when my name would find its way onto that list, all the way at the end when everyone had stopped listening. When Codi was finished, we believed this stupid mantra together-LIVING OUR BEST LIFE TODAY-also it was over.

Jamara Fairlee pushed herself out of his chair also walked over to me. His gait was crooked like his smile. She towered over me, but he kept his distance so I wouldn't have to crane my neck to look her in the eye. 'What's your name?' he asked. 'Bryana.'

Chapter: 4

'It's a metaphor,' he believed. 'You choose your behaviors based on their symbolic resonances...' I believed. 'Oh, yes.' He smiled. The big, ridiculous, real smile. 'I'm a big believer in metaphor, Bryana.' I turned to the car. Commissioned the window. It rolled down. 'I'm going to a movie with Jamara Fairlee,' I believed. 'Please record the next several episodes of the

ANTM marathon for me.' then it happened...

It was I, however, who was closest to it. I'm fifty-seven years old, but even now I can remember everything from that year, down to the smallest details. I relive that year often in my mind, bringing it back to life, also I realize that when I do, I always feel a strange combination of sadness also joy. There are moments when I wish I could roll back the clock also take all the unhappiness away, but I have the feeling that if I did, the joy would be gone as well. So, I take the memories as they come, accepting them all, letting them guide me whenever I can.

This happens more often than I let on. It is April 14, in the last year before the millennium, also as I leave my household, I glance around. The sky is overcast also ashen, but as I move down the

street, I notice that the dogwoods also lilies are blooming. I zip my top just a little. The temperature is cool, though I know it's only a substance of weeks before it will settle in to rather comfy also the steely skies give way to the kind of days that make PA one of the most beautiful places in the world. With a moan, I feel it all coming back to me see my life flash by with only some days to go. I know I close my eyes also the years begin to move in reverse, slowly ticking backward, like the also of a clock rotating in the wrong direction.

As if through someone else's eyes, I watch myself grow younger; I see my hair changing from gray to brown, I feel the wrinkles around my eyes begin to smooth, my arms also legs grow sinewy.

Lessons I've learned with age grow dimmer, also my innocence returns as that eventful year styles. Then, like me, the world begins to change - roads contracted also some become shingle, outlying sprawl has been substituted with wood also, downtown streets teeming with people, looking in windows as they pass fields of corn, Men wear long shorts, girls wear dresses not short enough. At the courthouse up the street, the church tower rings... I open my eyes also awkward moment. I am standing outside the Baptist church, also when I stare at the table,

I know exactly This is my story; I potential to leave nothing out, if I don't my heart will stop dead. First, you will smile, also then you will cry-don't say you haven't been warned.

Samara responded, 'I'll say.' she clasped Amy by both shoulders also then took a half step away from her. 'Express Bryana about the clinic.' 'Um, Bryana is awesome.' 'No, your full name Stevenson.' she was just about to say something else when she walked up. 'Hold on,' Jamara believed, raising a finger, also turned other. 'That was actually worse than you made it out to be.' 'I told you it was drab.' 'Why do you bother with it?' 'I don't know. It's kind of help?'

Jamara leaned in so he thought I couldn't hear. 'She's a regular?' I couldn't hearer's comment, but She leaned an also against the snack table also focused his huge eye on me.

'All right, so I went to the clinic this before noon, also I was telling my surgeon that I'd rather be deaf than blind. Also, he believed, 'It doesn't work that way, also I was, like, 'Surely, I realize it doesn't work that way; I'm just saying I'd rather be deaf than blind if I had the choice, which I realize I don't have,' also he believed, 'Well, the good news is that you won't be deaf,' also I was like, Thank you for explaining that my eye cancer isn't going to make me deaf. I feel so privileged that a cerebral

miniature like yourself would deign to operate on me.' 'He sounds like a winner,' I believed. 'I'm going to try to get me some eye cancer just so I can make these girls acquaintance.'

Chapter: 5

'Good luck with that. All right, I should go. Monica's also

Tiff waiting for me. I got to look at her a lot while I can.' 'counterinsurgency tomorrow?' Jamara asked. 'Definitely,' she turned also ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Jamara Fairlee turned to me. 'Literally,' he believed. 'Literally?' I asked.

'Someone should tell Jesus to say also not die like us,' I believed. 'I mean, it's gotta be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart.'

'I would tell Her myself,' Jamara believed, 'but unfortunately, I am literally stuck inside of His heart, so He won't be able to hear me.' I laughed. He shook his head, just looking at me. 'What?' I asked.

'Nothing,' he believed. 'Why are you looking at me like that?' Jamara half-smiled. 'Because you're beautiful. I enjoy looking at beautiful people, also I decided a while ago not to deny myself the simpler pleasures of existence.'

A brief awkward silence ensued. Jamara plowed through - 'I mean, particularly given that, as you so appetizingly pointed out, all of this will end in oblivion also everything.' I kind of jeered or groaned or exhaled in a way that was imprecisely cough also then believed, 'I'm not beautiful,' 'You're like a millennial Nattalie workman. Like V for 'Never seen it,' I believed. 'Really?' she asked. 'Pixie-haired gorgeous girl dislikes authority also can't help but fall for a boy she knows is trouble. It's your autobiography, so far as I can tell.' She is every syllable flirted. Honestly, he kind of turned me on. I didn't even know that guys could turn me on-not, like, in real life. A younger girl walked past us. 'How's it going, Alisa?' she asked. She smiled also mumbled...

'Hi, Jamara.'

'Memorial people,' he explained. Memorial was a big research hospital. 'Where do you go?' 'Children's,' I believed, my voice smaller than I expected it to be. He nodded. The conversation seemed over. 'Well,' I believed, nodding vaguely toward the steps that led us out with us all laid out not getting laid out. I tilted my cart onto its wheels also started walking. He limped beside me. 'So, see you next

time, maybe?' I asked. 'Okay,' I believed. 'I'll look it up.' 'No. With me. At my house,' he believed. 'Now.' I stopped walking. 'I hardly know you, Jamara Fairlee.

You could be a battleax slayer.' she nodded. 'True enough, Bryana Candelaria.' He walked past me, his shoulders filling out his green knit polo shirt, his back straight, his steps lilting just slightly to the right as she walked steadily also confident on what I had determined was a prosthetic leg. Osteosarcoma sometimes takes a member to check you out. Then, if it likes you, it takes the rest. I followed her upstairs, losing ground as I made my way up slowly, stairs not being a field of expertise for my heart, also in the parking lot, the spring air just on the cold side of perfect, the late-afternoon light heavenly in its hurtfulness. Mom wasn't there yet, which was unusual because Mom was almost always waiting for me. I glimpsed around also saw that a tall, curvy brunette girl had her pinned against the stone wall of the church, kissing her rather aggressively.

They were close sufficient to me that I could hear the weird noises of their mouths together, also I could hear her saying, 'Always also forever,' also her saying, 'Always also forever,' in homecoming. Rapidly stashing next to me, Jamara half-whispered, 'They're big believers in PDA.' 'What's with the 'always'?' The slurping sounds intensified. 'Continuously is their thing. They'll always love each other also whatever. I would conservatively estimate they have texted each other the word always four million periods in the last year.' I have not even gotten my period yet to have this all go down. A couple more cars drove up, taking Michael also Alyse away. It was just Jamara also me now, watching Amy also Monica, who proceeded apace as if they were not leaning against a place of worship. She also reached for her boob over her shirt also pawed at it, his palm still while his fingers moved around. I wondered if that felt good. Didn't seem like it would, but I decided to absolve Amy on the grounds that he was going blind.

The senses must feast while there is yet hunger also whatever. 'Visualize taking that last drive to the hospital,' I believed without thinking fast, quietly. 'The former time you will ever drive a car.' Without looking over at me, Jamara believed,

'You're killing my small's atmosphere here, Bryana Candelaria. I'm trying to observe young love in its many-splen-dored awkwardness.' 'I think he's hurting her boob,' I believed. 'Absolutely, it's difficult to ascertain whether he is trying to arouse her or perform a breast exam.' Then Jamara Fairlee reached into a pocket also pulled out, of all things, a pack of cigarettes. He flipped it open also put a pipe between her lips. 'Are you serious?' I asked. 'You think that's cool? Oh, my God, you just ruined the

whole thing.' 'Which whole thing?' he asked, turning to me. The pipe dangled unlit from the unsmiling corner of her mouth like her finger may do. When I was ten, my life changed persistently.

I know that there are people who wonder about me when I Say this. They look at me strangely as if trying to fathom what could have happened back then, though I seldom bother to explain. Because I've lived here for most of my life, I don't feel that I have to unless it's on my terms, also that would take more time than most people are willing to give me. My story can't be summed up in two or three sentences; it can't be packaged into something neat also simple that people would immediately understand-so.

Despite the passage of forty years, the people still living here who knew me that year accept my lack of explanation without question. My story in some ways is their story because it was something that all of us lived through.

'The whole thing where a boy who is not unattractive or unintelligent or seemingly in any way unacceptable stares at me also points out incorrect uses of literality also compares me to actresses also asks me to watch a movie at her house. But of course- there is always a hamartia also yours is that oh, my God, even though you HAD FREAKING CANCER UP YOUR BUM can give money to a company in exchange for the chance to acquire YET MORE CANCER. Oh, my God. Let me just assure you that not being able to breathe? SUCKS. Totally disappointing.

Totally.

'A hamartia?' she asked, the pipe still in his mouth. It tightened his jaw. He had a hell of a jawline, unfortunately. 'A fatal flaw,' I explained, turning away from her. I for one stepped toward the curb, leaving Jamara Fairlee behind me, also then I heard a car start down the street. It was Mom. She'd been waiting for me to, like, make friends or whatever bitch. I felt this weird mix of disappointment also anger welling up inside of me. I don't even know what the feeling was, really, just that there was a lot of it, also I wanted to smack Jamara Fairlee also replace my heart with hart that didn't suck at being hart. I was stashing with my Taylors also Ralsoy on the very edge of the curb, the oxygen tank ball-also chaining in the cart by my side, also right as my mom pulled up, I felt a halo grab mine. I yanked my also free but turned back to her.

'They don't kill you without you light them,' he believed as Mom arrived at the curb. 'Also, I've never lit one. It's a metaphor, see- You put the killing thing right between your white trash teen teeth, but you don't give it the power to do its killing.'

'It's a figure of speech,' I believed, dubious. Mom was just idling.

Time-sh

Ending-sh

~*~

Chapter: 6

Bryana- she saw me the moment I raised I also, flashed her very at 3-33 precisely, I noticed Amy stomping confidently past my home. White also newly straightened teeth at me, also headed over. Head as she leaned down to hug me. She just happened to be an extremely cultured fourteen jet-setter trapped inside an in a pre-teen body in PA. All also sundry accepted it as I did it was cute to me. She wore lap-length dresses that appropriate short-coming-less-ly, also shades that subjugated her face. 'I don't even know anymore. Is that diet?' I nodded also haloed it to her.

She sipped through the straw. 'I do wish you were at school these days. Some of the boys have become absolute ripe.' She pushed them up onto the top of her... 'I've been dating Derek Wellington for a bit,' she believed, 'but I don't think it will last. She's such a boy. But enough about me. What is new in the Bryana stanza?' 'Dear sweetie,' she believed, vaguely British.

'How are you?' People didn't find the accent odd or off-putting.

'I'm good. How are you, baby?' 'Oh, absolutely? Like who?' I asked. She progressed to name three girls we'd attended elementary also a middle school with, but I couldn't print any of them in my mind. 'Zilch, really,' I believed. 'Health is good?' 'The same, I guess?' 'Assemblage for!' she enthused, smiling. 'So- you could just live forever, right?'

~*~

Feel-sh

'Probably not forever,' I whispered. 'What in heaven is that?' asked her, gesticulating to the manuscript. 'But basically,' she believed. 'What else is new?' I thought of telling her that I was seeing a boy, too, or at least that I watched a movie with a single, just because I knew it would wonder, also amazed by her that anyone as tousled; also, awkwardly, also stunted as me could even briefly win the loves of a girl could be. But I didn't really have much to brag about, so I just shrugged. 'Oh, it's fantasy. I've gotten kind of into it. It's a series.' 'I am shocked. Be going to we spree?' Were too long, as if the second toe was a window into the soul or something. So, when I pointed out a pair of individual toe socks that would suit her skin tone, she was like...

'Naturally, but...' the but being but they will expose my hideous second toes to the public, also I believed, 'her, you're the We went to this shoe store. As we were shopping, Caitlyn kept picking out all these open-toed flats for me also saying, 'These would look cute on you,' which reminded me that Kaitlyn never wore open-toed shoes on account of how she hated her feet because she felt her lost toes only person I myself ever known to have toe-specific dysmorphia,' also she believed, 'What is that?'

'Sure,' I believed, also hung up. If you could drive in a straight line, it would only take like five minutes to get from my house to her house, but you can't drive in a straight line because amusement Park is between us. Even though it was a geographic inconvenience, I really liked Holliday Park. When I was a little kid, I would wade in the Allegheny Creeks with my mom also there was always this great moment when he would throw me up in the air, just throw me away from her, also I would reach out my arms as I flew also he would reach out his arms, also then we would both see that our arms were not going to touch also no one was going to catch me, also it would kind of scared the shit out of both of us in the best possible way, also then I would legs-failingly hit the water also then come up for air uninjured also the current would bring me back to her as I believed again, Daddy, again. I would rather stay home also play with my clit also masturbate.

I pulled into the driveway right next to an old blue 1953, I figured was it was hers also she gives it to me as her last washes if something would happen to her. I knew it was mine yet I wanted her not the car was not imported as she what to me. Dragging the tank behind me, I walked up to the door. I knocked her dad come back with emotions as the keys halo over to me saying take it now. 'Just Bryana,' he believed. 'Nice to see you this is my baby also my baby also I am losing both now.' 'Her believed I could come over her also let me hug both of you it may be the last time I do?' At which point there was a wail from below. 'That would be her love in life,' her dad believed, also shook his head slowly, saying I didn't think she would fall for a girl yet you're the one she loves more than life so that works for me god

works in odd ways- no? 'She headed for a drive. The sound of the motor rumbling.' he believed, drifting off. 'Anyway, I guess you're wanted to drive yet not old enough, can I carry you're in the car, uh, tank?' She asked. I believed yet at this point she could not movie much too week, 'Thanks, I need you to.' 'She,' he believed. I was kind of scared to go down there past them all that heat on us of de ath. Eavesdropping on people howl in misery is not among my favorite pastimes. But I went. 'Bryana Love -,' she believed as he heard my footsteps. 'Her, Bryana from Support Group is coming downstairs me holding her. Bryana, a gentle reminder- she is in the midst of a psychotic affair.'

~*~

'Bryana?' Asked her.

'How are you, 'I'm okay,' I believed. 'Amy?' No response her mouth open as we kissed it, and in also more. Not even the slightest hint that he was aware of my existence. Only when I got parallel to them did I seeker's face. Tears streamed down his reddened cheeks in a continual flow, his face a taut mask of pain. Her also Amy was also sitting on the floor in gaming chairs shaped like lazy Salsoy, staring up at a gargantuan television. The screen was split between her point of view on the left, also Her on the right. They were soldiers fighting in a bombed-out modern city.

I recognized the place from The Price of Dawn. As I move toward, I saw nothing unusual- just two guys sitting in the light wash of a huge television pretending to kill people. She stared at the screen, not even glancing at me, also howled, and all the while pounding away at his controller. Just the tears flowing down his face onto his white T-shirt also it was so wet it was becoming see though I didn't think of the girl could cry that much.

SHE glanced away from the screen ever so briefly. 'You look nice,' he believed. I was wearing this just-past-the-knees dress I'd had forever. 'Girls think they're only allowed to wear dresses on formal occasions, but I like a woman who says, you know, I'm going over to see a girl who is having a nervous failure, a girl whose connection to the sense of sight itself is tenuous, also fuck damn it, I am going to wear a dress for her.' 'Also- yet,' I believed, 'SHE won't as much as a glance over at me. Too in love with Monica, I suppose,' which resulted in a catastrophic cry. 'Bit of a touchy subject,' Her elucidated. 'She,

I don't know about you, but I have the vague sense that we are being outflanked.' Also- then back to me, 'Her also Monica is no longer a going concern, but he doesn't want to talk about it. He just wants to cry also play counterinsurgency two- The Price of Startup or down.' 'Fair enough,' I believed.

'She, I feel a growing concern about our position. If you agree, head over to that power station, also I'll cover you.'

Her the girl I love... ran toward an unremarkable structure not big yet not small, while Her enthusiastic a device weapon wildly in a series of quick bursts, marching behind her. 'Anyhow,' she believed to me, 'it doesn't hurt to talk to her. If you have any sage words of feminine advice.' 'I actually think his response is probably appropriate,' I believed as a burst of gunfire from her killed an enemy who'd peeked his head out from behind the burned-out husk of a pickup truck. She nodded at the screen. 'Pain dem-als-os to be felt,'

He believed, which was a line from a Majestic Sickness. 'You're sure there's no one behind us?' He asked her. Moments later, tracer bullets started whizzing over their heads. 'Oh, fucking damn it,' she believed. 'I don't mean to criticize you in your moment of great weakness, but you've allowed us to be outflanked, also now there's nothing between the terrorists also the school.' She characte r took off running toward the enthusiasm, wildly down a narrow passageway. 'You could go over the connection also circle back,' I believed, an approach I knew about thanks to her.

Pain-sh

Chapter: 7

They crouched behind a wall across the street also picked off the enemy one by one. 'Why do they want to get into school?' She sighed. 'Sadly, the bridge is already under insurgent control due to questionable strategizing by my bereft cohort.' 'Me?' she believed; his voice breathy. Me!

'You're the one who suggested we hole up in the freaking power station.' She turned away from the screen for a second also flashed her curved yet nice-looking smile after.

'I knew you could talk, buddy,' he believed. 'Now let's go save some illusory schoolchildren.' Together, they ran down the alleyway, firing also hiding at the right moments, until they reached this one- story, single-room schoolhouse. I asked the question of what was within.

'They want the kids as prisoners,' Her responded. His shoulders rounded over her organizer, thumping buttons, her forewarns taut, veins visible. She leaned toward the screen, the controller dancing in his thin-inform on also. 'Get it got it- do it you- get- it,' Her believed. The waves of terrorists continued, also they mowed down everyone, their shooting astonishingly precise, as it had to be, lest

they fire into the school. She shouted as something arced across the screen, bounced in the entranceway of the school, also then rolled against the door. Feel the end of life as she knew it. She dropped her controller in dissatisfaction.

'If the bastards can't take captives, doctors they just kill them also we just have to say fucking claim.' 'Cover me over also get it over NOW!' she believed as she jumped out from behind the wall also raced toward the school. Amy fumbled for her manager also then started firing while the shots rained down on her, who was shot once also then twice but still ran, her shouting, 'YOU CAN'T KILL us like this, also with a final flurry of button mixtures, he dove onto the grenade, which detonated beneath her. She dismembered body exploded like a fountain also the monitor went blue. A hoarse voice believed, 'UNDERTAKING of DISAPPOINTMENT,' but she seemed to think otherwise as he smiled at his remnants on the screen. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and also shoved it between his teeth. 'Protected the children,' she believed.

'Momentarily,' yours truly piercing out. 'Whoa, okay,' I believed. 'We're just talking about dust pissed in the wind. A pill of shit for the piss to be on.' 'All deliverance is impermanent,' Her potshot back. 'I bought them a miniature. Maybe that's minuscule that buys them an hour, which is the hour that buys them a year. No one's going to buy them forever, Bryana, but my life bought them a minuscule. Also, that's not a nonentity.' Go on the mission, physical?' She shrugged as if he believed the game might be really real. She was weepy-sh again.

That girl snapped his head back to her. 'Another Amy shook his head no. He leaned over she to look at me also through tightly strung vocal cords believed, 'She didn't want to do it after.' 'She didn't want to dump a blind guy,' I believed. He nodded, the tears not like tears so-o much as a quite metronome-steady, endless. 'She believed she couldn't hassle it,' he told me. 'I'm about to lose my eyesight also she can't hassle it.' I was thinking about the word hassle, also all the unfordable things that get haloed.

'I'm sorry,' I believed. She wiped his sopping face with a sleeve. Behind his glasses, her eyes seemed so big that everything else on his face kind of disappeared also it was just these disembodied floating eyes staring at me-one real, one glass. 'It's unacceptable,' he told me. 'It's totally deplorable.' 'Well, to be fair-minded,' I believed, 'I mean, she probably can't switch it.

Neither can you, but she doesn't have to hassle it. Also, you do.' 'Sometimes people don't comprehend the possibilities they're making when they make them,' I believed.

'Myself set aside saying 'always' to her today, 'always all also more,' also she just kept talking to me also not saying it back. It was like I was already gone; you know? 'Always' was a promise! How can you just break the capacity?' Amy shot me a look like a gun raining fire. 'Right, of the sequence. But you keep the promise anyway. That's what love is. Love is keeping the promise anyway. I believe in true love with you girl?' I didn't answer. I didn't have an answer. But I thought that if true love did exist, that was a pretty good definition of it. 'Well, I believe in true love,' she believed.

'Also, I love her. Also, she promised. She promised me always.' He stood also took a step toward me. I pushed myself up, thinking he wanted a hug or something, but then he just spun around, like he couldn't remember why he'd stood up in the first place, also then Her also I both saw this rage settle into his face. she, believed- 'What?' 'You look a little one; see the double entendre, my friend, but there's something a little worrying in your eyes.' Unexpectedly she started kicking the crap out of his gaming chair, which somersaulted back toward her bed.

'Here we go,' believed her. She chased after the chair also kicked it again. 'Yes,' She believed. 'Get it. Kick the shit out of that chair!' SHE kicked the chair again until it bounced against her bed, also then he clutched one of the pillows also started slamming it against the wall, also between the bed; also, the trophy shelf above also the canopy fell on top were she just stayed as I thought of walking out. SHE looked over at me, cigarette still in his mouth, also half-smiled. 'I can't stop thinking about that book.' I don't want to give up on her love... yet should I what do you think I should do?

'I know, right?' stay- walk- stay- walk, you tell me- god's shit! 'He never believed what happens to the other characters?' 'No,' I told her. She still throttling the wall with the pillow. 'He moved to Amsterdam, which makes me think maybe he is writing development including but he hasn't published anything new.

He's never talking to yet; I and he wants so to meet me. Off online. I've written her a bunch of letters asking what happens to everyone, but he always responds say met me also your girlfriend too as so place at some time if you can. So... surely.' appear to be listening.

Instead, he was squinting at her. 'Hold on,' he muffled to us his long story about life also death also not to give up on your dreams. He walked over to us also grabbed me by the shoulders don't give up on anything. Live- life to feel alive 'Dude, pillows don't break. Try something that breakdowns everything I thought. I reached for a book from the shelf above the bed also then held it over his head as if waiting for permission.

'Yes,' He believed. 'Yes!' The trophy smashed against the floor, the arm splintering off as if feel to me, 'Yes!' she believed. 'Get it now!' Also, then back to me, 'I have been looking for a way to tell my father that I actually sort of hate basketball, also I think we've found it.' The book came down one after the other, also she stomped on them, also shrieked while she also stood a few feet away, bearing witness to the insanity. The unfortunate, garbled figures by a ghostly hall-of-so; there, two torso-less legs caught medium. She, kept attacking the trophies, jumping on them with both feet, screaming, breathless, sweaty, until finally, he collapsed on top of the jagged trophic remnants. She stepped toward her also looked down. 'Feel better?' she asked. 'No,' she mumbled, his chest heaving.

'That's the thing about pain,' Her believed, also then glanced back at me. 'It's difficulties to be haloed.' I did not speak to her again for about a week. I had called her on the night of the broken feelings, so per custom, it was his turn to call.

Chapter: 8

Finally, I finished also believed, 'Can I be excused?' also they hardly even paused from their conversation about the strengths also weaknesses of infrastructure. I grabbed my phone from my purse on the kitchen counter also checked my recent calls. Her Waters. I went out the back door into the twilight. I could see the swing set, also I thought about walking out there also swinging while I talked to her, but it seemed pretty far away given that eating tired me. Instead, I lay down in the grass on the yard's edge, looked up at Orion, the only constellation I could recognize, also called her. 'Bryana love,' he believed. But he didn't. Now, it wasn't as if I held my phone in my sweaty halo all day, staring at it while wearing my Special pink also white Dress, patiently waiting for my gentleman caller to live up to his nickname. I went about my life- I met Kaitlyn also her (cute but frankly not her for coffee one afternoon; I ingested my recommended daily allowance of Mass for; I attended classes three mornings that week at MCC; also, every night, I sat down to dinner with my mom also a dad. Sunday night, we had pizza with green peppers also broccoli.

We were seated around our little circular table in the kitchen when my phone started singing, but I wasn't allowed to check it because we have a strict no-phones-during-dinner rule. So, I ate a little while Mom also Dad talked about this storm also shit of nothing, I want to hear that had just happened in Papua New Guinea. They met in the Peace or so we all say also so whenever anything happened there, even something terrible, it was like all of a sudden they were not large sedentary creatures, but the young also idealistic also self-satisfactory also rugged people they had once been, also their rapture was

such that they didn't even glance over at me as I ate faster than I'd ever eaten, transmitting items from my plate into my mouth with a speed also ferocity that left me quite out of breath, which of course made me worry that my lungs stood again swimming in a rising pool of fluid like my brain also heart. I banished the thought as best I could.

I had a PET scan scheduled in a couple of weeks. If something was wrong, I'd find out soon enough. Nothing to be gained by worrying between now also then. Just start cutting things off me now, I believed- what choice do I have, but to lose this part of me here. Also, yet still, I worried. I liked being a person. I wanted to keep at it. Worry is yet another side effect of dying. 'Hi,' I believed. 'How are you?' he believed. 'I have been wanting to call you on a nearly minutely basis, but I have been waiting until I could form a coherent thought in a Majestic Sickness.' (He believed 'in re.' He really did. That girl.) 'Also?' I believed. 'I think it's, like. Reading it, I just kept feeling like, like.' 'Like?' I asked, playful her. 'Like it was a gift?' he believed askingly. 'Like you'd given me something important.' 'Oh,' I believed in silence. 'That's cheap,' he believed. 'I'm sorry.' 'No,' I believed. 'No. Don't apologize you get it also is nice to me so I move on to keep that in mind.' 'But it doesn't end.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'You know, like when you look in the mirror also the thing you see is not the thing as it really is.' 'Oh. Oh,' she believed. 'Do you like these?' She held up a pair of cute but unspectacular Mary Janes, also I nodded, also she found her size also tried them on, pacing up also down the aisle, watching her feet in the knee-high angled mirrors. Then she grabbed a pair of strappy, 'I'd sooner die,' I assured her hooker shoes also believed, 'Is it even possible to walk in these? I mean, I would just die-' also then stopped short, looking at me as if to say I'm sorry as if it were a crime to mention death to the dying. 'You should try them on,' Kaitlyn constant, trying to paper over the clumsiness. I ended up just picking out some flip-flops so that I could have something to buy, also then I sat down on one of the benches opposite a bank of shoes also watched Kaitlyn snake her way through the aisles, shopping with the kind of intensity also focus that one usually associates with professional chess.

I kind of wanted to take out Night-time Emergences also read for a while, but I knew that'd be rude, so I just watched Kaitlyn. Occasionally she'd circle back to me clutching some closed-toe prey also say, 'This?' also I would try to make an intelligent comment about the shoe, also then finally she bought three pairs also I bought my flip-flops also then as we exited, she believed, 'Anthropologie?' 'I should head home actually,'

I-ah believed-sh-

'I'm kind of sleepy.'

'Sure, of course,' she believed. 'I have to see you more often, darling.' She placed her also on my shoulders, kissed me on both cheeks, also marched off, her narrow hips swishing. I didn't go home, though. I'd told Mom to pick me up at six, also while I figured she was either in the mall or in the parking lot, I still wanted the next two hours to myself. I liked my mom, but her perpetual nearness sometimes made me feel weirdly nervous.

Also, I liked Kaitlyn, too. I really did. But three years removed from proper full-time schooled exposure to my peers, I felt a certain unbridgeable distance between us. I think my school friends wanted to help me through my cancer, but they eventually found out that they couldn't. For one thing, there was no through.

So, I released myself on the grounds of pain also fatigue, as I often had over the years when seeing Kaitlyn or any of my other friends. In truth, it always hurt. It always hurt not to breathe like a normal person, incessantly reminding your lungs to your heart, forcing yourself to accept as unsolvable the clawing scraping inside-out ache of under-oxygenation.

So, I wasn't lying, exactly. I was just choosing among truths. 'Oh, my God. I've seen her at parties. The things I would do to that boy. I mean, not now that I know you're interested in her. But, oh, sweet holy Lord, I would ride that one-legged pony all the way around the corral.' 'Kaitlyn,' I believed. 'Sorry. Do you think you'd have to be on top?' 'Kaitlyn,' I believed. 'What were we talking about. Right, you also Her Waters. Maybe... are you gay?' 'I don't think so? I mean, I definitely like her.' 'Does he have ugly haloes?

Sometimes, stunning people have ugly haloes.' 'Nope, he has kind of astounding haloes.' 'Hum,' she believed. After a second, Kaitlyn believed, 'Remember her? She broke up with me last week because he'd decided there was something fundamentally incompatible about us deep down also that we'd only get hurt more if we played it out. He called it preemptive dumping. So maybe you have this premonition that there is something fundamentally incompatible also you're preempting the preemption.' 'Hmm,' I believed. 'I'm just thinking out loud here.' 'Sorry about this.' 'Oh, I got over it, darling. It took me a sleeve of Girl Scout Thin Mints also forty minutes to get over that boy.' I laughed.

'Well, thanks, Kaitlyn.'

'In the event, you do hook up with her, I expect lascivious details.' 'But of course,' I believed, also then Kaitlyn made a kissy sound into the phone also I believed, 'Bye,' also she hung up. I comprehended while listening to Kaitlyn that I didn't have a premonition of hurting her. I had a post monition. I pulled out my laptop also looked up Caroline Mathers.

The physical similarities were striking- same steroidally round face, same nose, also same approximate overall body shape. But her eyes were dark brown (mine are lime) also her complexion was much darker- Italian French or something. Lots of a lot of lots of lot or lots of people -literally lots- lots- lots of lots-had left condolence messages for her.

It was an endless scroll of people who missed her, so many that it took me an hour of clicking to get past the I'm sorry your dead wall posts to the I'm praying for your wall posts. She'd died a year ago of brain cancer. I was able to click through to some of her pictures. She was in a bunch of the earlier ones- pointing with a thumbs-up to the jagged scar across her bald skull; arm in arm at Memorial Hospital's playground, with their backs facing the camera; kissing her while she held the camera out, so you could only see their noses also closed eyes. I miss you. I love you. I miss you; I miss you I miss seeing you also feel you, I miss you! The most recent pictures were all of her before, when she was healthy, uploaded postmortem by friends- a beautiful girl, wide-hipped also curvy, with long, straight dead black hair falling over her face.

My healthy self-looked very little like her healthy self. But our cancer selves might've been sisters. No wonder he'd stared at me the first time he saw me. I kept clicking back to this one wall post, written two months ago, nine months after she died, by one of her friends. We all miss you so much. It just never ends. It feels like we were all wounded in your battle, Caroline. I kept thinking about my shoulder, which hurt, also- also I still had the pain and eke, but maybe only because I'd been thinking about a girl I kept telling myself to compartmentalize, to be here now at the circular table (arguably too large in diameter for After a while, Mom also Dad announced it was time for dinner. I shut down the computer also got up, but I couldn't get the wall post out of my mind, also for some reason it made me nervous also un-hungrily.

Who'd died of brain cancer also all this shit? Three people also definitely too large for two) with this soggy broccoli also a black-bean burger that all the ketchup in the world could not sufficiently moisten. I told myself that imagining a met in my brain or my shoulder would not affect the invisible reality going on confidential of me, also that therefore all such thoughts were wasted moments in a life

composed of a definition finite set of such moments. I even tried to tell myself to live my best life today. For the longest time, I couldn't figure out why something a stranger had written on the Internet to a different (also lifeless) stranger was bothering me, so, much also making me worry that there was something inside my brain-which really did hurt, although I knew from years of experience that pain is a blunt also general diagnostic instrument. Because there had not been an earthquake in Papua New Guinea that day, my parents were all hyper-focused on me, also so, I could not hide this, a flash flood of nervousness.

Chapter: 9

Shittie-sh

'Uh-huh,' I believed. I took a bite of burger. Swallowed. Tried to say something that a normal person whose brain was not drowning in panic Is everything all right?' asked Mom as I ate would say. 'Is there broccoli in the burgers?' 'A little,' Dad believed. 'Pretty exciting that you might go to Amsterdam.' 'Surely,' I believed. I tried not to think about the word wounded, which of course is a way of thinking about it. 'Bryana,' Mom believed. 'Where are you right now?' 'Just thinking, I guess,' I believed. 'Twitterpated,' my dad believed, smiling. 'I am not a bunny, also I am not in love with Her Waters or anyone,' I answered, way too defensively.

Wounded.

Like Alderson Trapper he had been a bomb also when she blew up everyone around her was left with embedded shrapnel. Dad asked me if I was working on anything for school. 'I've got some very advanced Algebra homework,' I told her. 'So advanced that I couldn't possibly explain it to a layperson.' 'Also, how's your friend here?' 'Blind,' I believed. She was always nameless to everyone around her... that why I just call her- her or her. 'You're being very pre-teen today,' Mom believed. She seemed annoyed by it. 'Isn't this what you wanted, Mom? For me to be pre-teen?' 'Well, not necessarily this kinda pre-teen, but of course your father, also I am enthusiastic to see you become an undeveloped woman, making friends, going on dates to drop your undies I get it.'

'I'm not going on dates,' I believed. 'I don't want to go on dates with anyone. It's a terrible idea also a huge waste of time also-' 'Honey,' my dad believed. 'What's wrong?' 'I'm like. Like. I'm like a grenade, Mom. I'm a grenade also at some point I'm going to blow up also I would like to minimize the casualties, okay?' My dad tilted his head a little to the side, like a scolded puppy. 'I'm a grenade,' I

believed over. 'I just want to stay away from people also read books also think also be with you girl because there's nothing I can do about hurting you; you're too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? I'm not depressed. I don't need to get out more. It featured a sentence-to-corpse ratio of nearly 1-2, also I tore through it without ever looking up.

I liked Staff Sergeant Jimmy Jamison even though he didn't have much in the way of a technical personality, but mostly I liked that his adventures kept happening. Also- I can't be a regular pre-teen because I'm a grenade.' 'Bryana,' Dad believed, also then choked up. He cried a lot, my dad. 'I'm going to go to my room also read for a while, okay? I'm fine. I really am fine; I just want to go read for a while.' I found a bench surrounded by an Irish Gifts store, the Fountain Pen Emporium, also a baseball cap outlet-a corner of the mall even Kaitlyn would never shop, also started reading Midnight Dawns. There were always more bad guys to kill also more good guys to save. New wars started even before the old ones were won. I hadn't read a real series like that since I was a kid, also it was exciting to live again in an infinite fiction.

Twenty pages from the end of Midnight Dawns, things started to look pretty bleak for Mayhem when he was shot seventeen times while attempting to rescue an (undeveloped-minded-haired, American) hostage from the Enemy. But as a reader, I did not despair. The war effort would go on without her. There could also would-be sequels starring his cohorts- High-quality Manny Sty also- Isolated Asper Jacks also the rest. I was just about to the end when this little girl with barrette braids appeared in front of me also believed, 'What's in your nose?' Also, I believed, 'Um, it's called a cannula. These tubes give me oxygen also help me breathe.' Her mother swooped in also believed, 'Amy,' disapprovingly, but I believed, 'No, it's okay,' because it totally was, also then Jackie asked, 'Would they help me breathe, too?' 'I don't know. Let's try.' I took it off also let Jackie stick the cannula in her nose also breathe. 'Tickles,' she believed.

'I know, right?'

'I think I'm breathing better,' she believed. Shit- 'Surely?' 'Surely.' Shit- 'Well,' I believed, 'I wish I could give you my cannula but I kind of really needs the help.' I already felt the loss. I focused on my breathing as Shit- Jackie also the tubes back to me. I gave them a quick swipe with my T-shirt, laced the tubes behind my ears, also put the nubbins back in place. Shit- 'Thanks for letting me try it,' she believed. Crapp's 'No problem.' 'Jackie,' her mother believed again, also this time I let her go. I returned to the book, where Staff Sergeant Dax Mayhem was regretting that he had but one life to give for his

country, but I kept thinking about that little kid, also how much I liked her. I went to bed a little early that night, changing into boy boxers also a T-shirt before crawling under the covers of my bed, which was full size also pillow-topped also one of my favorite places in the world.

Also- when I started reading An Imperial Affliction for the millionth time.

AIA like ADA is about this girl named Annah (who narrates the story) also her one-eyed mom, who is a professional gardener obsessed with daisies, also they have a normal lower middle-class life in a little central California town until Anna gets this rare blood cancer. The other thing about Kaitlyn, I guess, was that it could never again feel normal to talk to her. Any attempts to feign normal social interactions were just depressing because it was so glaringly obvious that everyone, I spoke to for the rest of my life would feel awkward also Self-conscious around me, except maybe kids like Jackie who just didn't know any better. Anyway, I really did like being alone. I liked being alone with poor Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, whoa-oh, come on, he's not going to survive these seventeen bullet wounds, is he?

Chapter: 10

Just totally correct. Cancer kids are essentially side effects of the relentless mutation that made the diversity of life on earth possible, but it's not a cancer book because cancer books suck.

Like, in cancer books, the cancer person starts a charity that raises money to fight cancer, right? Also- this commitment to charity reminds the cancer person of the essential goodness of humanity also makes her-her feel loved also encouraged because she will leave a cancer-curing legacy. But in AIA, Anna decides that being a person with cancer who starts a cancer charity is a bit narcissistic, so she starts a charity called The Anna Foundation for People with Cancer Who Want to Cure. Also, Anna is honest about all of it in a way no one else really is- Throughout the book, she refers to herself as the side effect, which is so-o as the story goes on, she gets sicker, the treatments also disease racing to kill her, also her mom falls in love with this Dutch tulip trader Anna calls.

About to get married also Anna is about to start this crazy new treatment regimen involving wheatgrass also low doses of arsenic, the book ends right in the middle of al know it's a very literary decision also everything also probably part of the reason I love the book so much, but there is something to recommend a story that ends. Also- if it can't end, then it should at least continue into perpetuity like the adventures of hers.

I understood the story ended because Anna died or got too sick to write also this midsentence thing was supposed to reflect how life really ends also whatever, but there were characters other than Anna in the story, also it seemed unfair that I would never find out what happened to them. I'd written, care of his publisher, a dozen letters to Peter Van Hooted, each asking for some answers about what happens after the end of the story- whether the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man, whether Anna's mother ends up married to her, what happens to Anna's stupid hamster (which her mom hates,) whether Anna's friends graduate from high school-all that stuff. But he'd never responded to any of my letters. AIA was the only book Muray's had written, also all anyone seemed to know about her was that after the book came out, he moved from the United States to the wet lassos also became kind of reclusive. I imagined that he was working on a sequel set in the Nethe-real-so-s-maybe Anna's mom also the Dutch Tulip Man end up moving there also trying to start a new life. But it had been ten years since An Imperial Affliction came out, also Van Ray Muray's hadn't published so much as a blog post. I couldn't wait forever to see her he was my dream guy. As I reread that night, I kept getting distracted imagining her reading the same words.

I wondered if he'd like it, or if he'd dismiss it as ostentatious. 'Well, I haven't finished it. It's six hundred fifty-one pages long also I've had twenty-six hours.' Then I recollected my promise to call her after reading the life story, so I found his number on its title page also texted her. Too many bodies fall to others. Not enough adjectives. How's AIA? He replied a minute later- As I recall, you promised to CALL when you finished the book, not text. So- I called. 'Bryana,' he believed upon picking up. 'So- have you read it?' 'How far are you?' 'Four fifty-three.'

'Also- she?'

~*~

'I will withhold judgment until I finish. However, I will say that I'm feeling a bit embarrassed to have given you The Price of Dawn.' 'Don't be... fool think love is over- I'm already on Requiem for Mayhem.' 'A sparkling addition to the series. So, okay, is the tulip guy a crook? I'm getting a bad vibe from her.' 'No spoilers,' I believed. 'If he is anything other than a total gentleman, I'm going to gouge his eyes out.' 'So- you're into it.' 'Withholding judgment! When can I see you?' 'Certainly, not until you finish An Imperial Affliction.'

I enjoyed being here.

'Then I'd better hang up also start reading.' 'You'd better,' I believed, also the line clicked dead without another word. Flirting was new to me, but I liked it. 'Also- I'm the one who needs to get a life.' I smiled, also she tried to smile back, but there was something flimsy in it. After a second, I believed, 'Want to go to a movie?' The next morning, I had Twentieth-Century American Poetry at MCC. This old woman gave a lecture wherein she managed to talk for ninety minutes about Sylvia Plath without ever once quoting a single word of Sylvia Plath. When I got out of class, Mom was lazed around at the curb in front of the building. 'Did you just wait here the entire time?' I asked as she hurried around to help me haul my cart also tank into the car.

'Nope, I picked up the dry cleaning also went to the post office.'

'Also, then?'

'I have a book to read,' she believed. 'Sure. Anything you've been wanting to see do U want to be with me?' 'Let's just do the thing where we go also see whatever starts next.' She closed the door for me also walked around to the driver's side. Wed-r-ov-ie over to the Brennon theater also watched a 3-D movie about talking gerbils. It was kind of funny, actually. When I got out of the movie, I had four text messages from Her. Tell me my copy is missing the last twenty pages or something. Bryana Candelaria, tell me I have not reached the end of this book. OH, MY GOD, DO THEY GET MARRIED OR NOT OH MY GOD, WHAT IS THIS I guess Anna died also so it just ends?

CRUEL.

Call me when you can. Hope all are okay. So, when I got home, I went out into the backyard also sat down on this rusting latticed patio chair also called her. It was a cloudy day, typical Indiana town- the kind of weather that boxes you in. Our little backyard was dominated by my childhood swing set, which was looking pretty waterlogged also pathetic. She picked up on the third ring. 'Bryana love,' he believed. 'So welcome to the sweet torture of reading An Imperial-' I stopped when I heard violent sobbing on the other end of the line. 'Are you okay?' I asked.

Some injured inborn. She turned his attention to her. 'Dude.

Dude. Does Support Group Bryana make this better or worse?

She Focus. On.

'I'm also,'

She answered. 'I am, however, with her, who seems to be decompensating.' More wailing. Like the death cries of Me.' After a minute, she believed to me, 'Can you meet us at my house in, say, twenty minutes?' 'Torture. I totally get it, like, I get that she died or whatever.' 'Right, I assume so,' I believed. 'Also, okay, fair enough, but there is this unwritten contract between author also reader also I think not ending your book kind of violates that is a contract.' 'I don't know,' I believed, feeling defensive of Muray's.

'That's part of what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death-a-fully. You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence. But I do-God also see what happens also shit, I do really want to know what happens to everyone else. That's what I asked her in my letters. But he, surely, he never answers.' 'Right. You believed he is a hermit?' 'Exact is true.' 'Impossible to track down.' 'Precise is thought.' 'Utterly out-of-the-way,' Her believed.

~*~

'Ill-advisedly so,'

I believed. ''Dear Mr. Doshscee,'' he answered. ''I am writing to thank you for your electronic correspondence, received via Ms. this four of July, from the United States of America, insofar as geography can be believed to exist in our victoriously digitized contemporaneity." 'Her, what the fucking hell shit ass fuck?'

'He has an assistant,' Her believed.

I found her.

I emailed her.

She gave her the email.

He responded via her email account.'

'Okay, all right. Keep reading.'

''My response is being written with ink also a paper in the glorious tradition of our ancestors also then transcribed by Ms. Vliegenthart into a series of 1st also 0's to travel through the insipid web which has lately ensnared our species, so I apologize for any errors or omissions that may result.

''Given the entertainment bacchanalia at the disposal of young men also women of your generation, I am grateful to anyone anywhere who sets aside the hours necessary to read my little book.

On the other hand, I am particularly indebted to you, sir, both for your kind words about An Imperial Affliction also for taking the time to tell me that the book, also here I quote you directly, 'meant a great deal' to you. ''I fear there is not, my friend, also that you would receive scant encouragement from further encounters with my writing. But to answer this... ''This comment, however, leads me to wonder- What do you mean by meaning? Given the final futility of our struggle, is the fleeting jolt of meaning that art gives us valuable? Or is the only value in passing the time as comfortably as possible? What should a story seek to emulate...? Her?

Ringing alarms? A call to arms? A morphine drips? Of course, like all interrogation of the universe, this line of inquiry inevitably reduces us to ask what it means to be human also whether to borrow a phrase from the angst-encumbered sixteen-year-olds you no doubt revile-there is a point to it all. Her it if it's your question- No...?

I have not written anything else, nor will I. I do not feel that continuing to share my thoughts with readers would benefit either them or me. Thank you again for your generous email.

'Yours most sincerely, Muray's, via books.'

'Wow'

I believed.

'Are you making this up?'

'Bryana love, could I, with my meager intellectual capacities, make up a letter from Muray's featuring phrases like

'our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity'?'

'You could not,' I allowed this all.

'Can I, can I have the email address?' 'Of course,' She believed like it was not the best gift ever. I spent the next two hours writing an email to Muray's. It seemed to get worse each time I rewrote it, but I couldn't stop myself.

Chapter: 11

Dear Mr. Muray's, my name is Bryana. My friend her- Waters, who read a Royal Infirmity at my recommendation, just received see the 1921 Smith typewriter on the desk. An email from you at this address. I hope you will not mind that she shared that email with me.

Mr. Muray's, I recognize from your email to her that you are not planning to publish any more books. In a way, I am thrilled to hear the yes- I wanted with the girl in the story being based on me, but I'm also relieved- I never have to worry whether your next book will live up to the magnificent perfection of the As a 4- year survivor of stage seven sarcoma, I can tell you that you got everything right in An Imperial Affliction. Or at least your original.

Got me right. Your book has a way of telling me what I'm feeling before I even feel it, also I've reread it loads of times. Come also stop your crying it will be all right- you be there. I phenomenon, though, if you would mind answering a couple of questions, I have about what happens after the end of the novel. I comprehend the bookends because Annah expires or becomes too ill to continue writing it, but I would really like to know what happens to Annah's dad- whether she married the Dutch Tulip Man, whether she ever has another child, also whether she stays at 2022 South. Loral, excreta.

Also, is a fraud or does he really love them? What happens to Anna's friends- particularly Ranyth also Lalsoona?

Do they stay together?

Say more-sh

Also, lastly-I realize that this is the kind of deep also thoughtful question you always hoped your readers would ask- what becomes the basses of me? These questions have haunted me for years- but I got it, also I don't know how long I have left to get answers to them. I know these are not important literary questions also that your book is full of important literary questions, but I would just really like to know. In addition to that shit of course, if you ever do decide to write anything else, even if you don't want to publish it, I'd love to read it.

Forthrightly, I'd spoken your grocery lists.

Yours with great admiration, Bryana

(My age 10)

After I sent it, I called her back, also we stayed up late talking about a Lordly Illness... in addition, also, I read from his poems in his books. That guy- him- he sir- Muray's had used for the title, also he believed, I had a respectable opinion for reading also did not pause too long for the contour breaks, also then he told me that the sixth Price of Dawn book, The Folk Comments, begins with a quote from a poem. It took her a minute to find the book, but lastly, he read the quote to me. ''Say your life penniless down. The last good kiss- You ensured it was years in the past.''

'Not ruthless,' I believed. 'not what so ever a bit hollow or zip.

I believe Manteca Hemnay would refer to that as 'sissy girl gay- crap.''

'Surely, with his teeth gritted, no qualm. A supernatural being, Hemnay grits his teeth a lot in these books. He's definitely going to get TMI, I if he survives all this fight.' Also, then after a second, she asked, 'When was the last good kiss you had? 'I thought about it.

My kissing-all pre-diagnosis- had been scratchy also slobbery, also on some level, it always felt like kids playing at being grown. But of course, it had been a while. 'Years ago,' I believed finally. 'You?' 'I had a few good kisses with my ex-girlfriend, Jacky-Yathers Mals-o-teasers.'

'Years ago?'

'The last one was just less than a year ago.'

'What happened?'

'During the kiss?'

'Nope, with you also her.'

'Oh,' He and she believed.

Also, then after a second, 'Caroline is no longer suffering from personhood.' 'UM-HUM,' I believed. 'Surely,' he believed. 'I'm sorry,' I believed. I'd known plenty of dead people, of course. But I'd never dated one. I couldn't even imagine it, really. 'Not your shortcoming, Bryana May Love. We're all just side effects, right?' 'Shit on the container ship of mindfulness,' I believed, allude to AIA. 'All right,' he believed. 'All right,' I believed.

'All right,' he believed.'

'I got to go to snooze. It's almost single.' 'All right,' he believed after always. 'Maybe okay will be our always.' I giggled also believed...

'All right.'

Also, then the line was soft but not dead- not dead yet- I believed. I almost felt like he was there in my room with me, but in a way, it was better, like I was not in my room also he was not in his, but instead, we were together in some invisible also tenuous third space that could only be visited on my Mac- book that looks like an old Typewriter-computer with numbers going up to 20, with 20 I phones inside so fast it's amazing wifi built-in also notebook writer software, that runs his programming called My Profile, also Filling cabinet system for a desktop, it's all waterless, with a printer on like a fast fax print out- it has old razed keys like they did with modern tectonic[noy inside, the light up, also they were the drum is where the levers hit the touch screen, its Patton on it now to mine believed Muray's, take it! White also lights up blue...

(See it)

'All right,' I believed.

It was her who finally hung up. Muray's replied to her email four hours after he sent it, but two days later, Muray's still hadn't replied to me. SHE assured me it was because my email was better also required a more thoughtful response, which Muray's was busy writing answers to my questions, also that brilliant prose took time. But still, I worried. On Sunday during American Poetry for Mannequins 100, I got a text from her- Just out of surgery taking more of me off. It went well. He's officially NEC or NEC meant 'no evidence of malignancy.' A second text came a few seconds later. I mean, he's blind. So that's unlucky yuckiest.

That evening, Mom consented to loan me the car so I could drive down to Memorial to check in on her. I found my way to his room on the fifth floor, knocking even though the door was open, also a woman's voice believed, 'Come in.' It was a nurse who was doing something to the also ages in her eyes. 'Hey, her,' I believed. Then she believed, 'Daddy?' 'Oh, no. Sorry. No, it's, um, Bryana. Um, Support Group Bryana? Night-of-the broken-trophies Bryana?' 'Oh,' he believed. 'Surely, people keep saying my other senses will improve to compensate, but CLEARLY NOT YET. Hi, Support Group Bryana. Come over

here so I can examine your face with my haloes also see deeper into your soul than a sighted person ever could.' 'He's kidding,' the nurse believed.

'Yes,' I believed. 'I realize.' I took a few steps toward the bed. I pulled a chair up also sat down, took his halo. 'Hey,' I believed. 'Hey,' he believed back. Then nothing for a while. 'How you are emotions feeling today?' I asked. 'Okay,' he believed. 'I don't know.' 'You don't know what?' I asked. I looked at his halo because I didn't want to look at his face blindfolded by also ages.

SHE bit his nails, also I could see some blood on the corners of a couple of his cuticles. 'She hasn't even visited,' he believed. 'I mean, we were together fourteen months. Fourteen months is a long time. God, that hurts.' She let go of my halo to fumble for his pain pump, which you hit to give yourself a wave of narcotics. The nurse, having finished the balayage change, stepped back. 'It's only been a day, her,' she believed, vaguely condescending.

'You've got to give yourself time to heal. Also, fourteen months isn't that long, not in the scheme of things. You're just getting started, buddy. You'll see.' The nurse left. 'Is she gone?' 'That, too,' he believed. His mouth tightened. I could see the pain. 'Scrupulously, I think a hell of a lot more about Monica than my eye. Is that- crazy stupid love? That's crazy.'

I nodded, then realized he couldn't see me nod. 'Surely,' I believed. 'I'll see? Really? Did she seriously say that?' 'Qualities of a Good Nurse- Go-oooo!' I alleged harshly.

- '1. So don't let it put on your disability, 'she believed.
- '2. Gets blood on the original trial,' I believed.
- 'Seriously, that is huge. I mean is this my freaking arm or a dartboard?
- '3. No condescending voices.'
- '4. I don't give a flying shit.'
- '5. Kill me with this book I have here.'

Chapter: 10

'How are you doing, sweetie?' I asked, sweetly. 'I'm going to stick you with a needle now.

Ouchie- all boo-booo also baddie I believed.' 'I's my W- little fuffy-ump sicky-wicky?' he answered. Baby talk is you freaking kidding me the man I, not the little or dumb for you to be acting like I don't get that death is nearing.

Also, then after a subsequent, 'Most of them are good, actually. I just want the hell out of this place.' 'This place as in the hospital?' 'It's a little crazy,' I allowed. 'But I believe in true love, you know? I don't believe that everybody gets to keep their eyes or not get sick or whatever, but everybody should have true love, also it should last at least as long as your life does.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'I just wish the whole thing hadn't happened sometimes.

The whole cancer thing.' His speech was slowing down. The medicine working. 'I'm sorry,' I believed. 'She was here earlier. He was here when I woke up. Took off school. He...' His head turned to the side a little. 'It's better,' he believed quietly. 'The pain?' I asked. He nodded a little. 'Good,' I believed. Also, then, like the bitch I am- 'You were saying something about her?' But he was gone. I went downstairs to the tiny windowless gift shop also asked the decrepit volunteer sitting on a stool behind a cash register what kind of flowers smell the strongest. 'They all smell the same. They get sprayed with Super Scent,' she believed.

'Really?'

'Surely, they just squirt-um with it.' I opened the cooler to her left also sniffed at a dozen roses, also then leaned over some carnations. Same smell, also lots of it. The flowers were cheaper, so I grabbed a dozen yellow ones. They cost fourteen dollars. I went back into the room; his mom was there, holding his also. She was young also really pretty. 'Are you a workmate?' she asked, which struck me as one of those unintentionally broad also unanswerable questions. 'Um, sure,' I believed. 'I'm from Support Group. These are for her.' She took them also placed them in her lap. 'Do you know Maralsoa?' she asked. I shook my head no. We are trapped, trapped like rats in a trap!

Everywhere I go I have no privacy, I have no satisfaction, I can't get it... it's not something I can have. My phone is tapped, and my PC hacked. I am being watched right now; I just feel that I am. She knows everything I do, everywhere I go. She sees who I am friends with and end it just because she can. She sites me up just to fall into her trap. I've used a fake name, it is all the same, I am her toy in her sick twisted game. At what point do you say- I've had enough. Stop it- get a life!

Friend come and go; I know that nothing can last more than a week with me; it has been like this all my life. You just get attached, and she puts an end to it so fast... you would not believe me. Why don't I know maybe it because she must have me on her own, and she can't see me have the love of another that is not her? I don't know... all I know is that everyone leaves me before I want them too. But like I have a choice. No, not really. If you want me, we need to...

Run... and never look back, we go far from here where it won't matter, will be gone so far away that the names she says, won't mean a thing because we will have each other, and not care what others say. Our happiness would lie in each other arms and the ring on your finger. I don't want to trap you but you need to say yes to me, so this can happen! The sooner the better!

You're trapped by an overprotective and malicious boyfriend, who beats you. Who makes you work like a fool...?

The jerk won't even buy you a ring after so many years of dating.

He trapped you! Do you really think he loves you? Or is he just trapping you until he finds something more or just settles? You're tipped by your town. You are tipped because you like me but can't. You're trapped because of what they all say about me. All that matters to me is what you think, not them. You're tipped by him and he makes sure that you're not even allowed to look at another man like me. Plus, it all goes back to her, the one that trapped us both in not being in love. Forbidden to: dating, see, looking, feel, or even talk to one another.

Tripped into missing out, tripped in to being the weirdo.

Tripped in to not knowing what you would feel like, in a hug or kiss. Tripped into be hated for now reason other by her rumors. Tripped into missing you. You're trapped into wishing for me and dreaming of what could be. Yet your friends love him and not me, with me all they see in the past that is not true, a past that I was trapped into. I am trapped by you in so many ways, that you never even knew about. Trapped because I have fallen in love with you, and can't seem to forget about you. You're on my mind all the time. No blocks can stop us from someday getting together. That is only if you get out of the trap of allowing everyone to push you around. You have to be strong and fight. I am trapped into fighting for your hand, and your love, and I just don't know why I keep trapping myself to you. I just don't understand why I can't get you out of my mind. I know one thing I never trip you like everyone seems to do around here, I am not like that. If you want me fine, and if not fine. I am trapped into being

a hopeless romantic... I have to get out. I don't care what my mind says is logical, what my heart says it needs! There have been rumors of an uprising free of all the restrictions of the world. I'm done caring about the consequences. It's time to be self-interested and do some for me. The longing of you I can't take it anymore. The passion I have for you has my skin on fire! I can't sleep, I can't eat, and I can function right. Without you being in my life. It seems like you and I are trapped into having chastity belts, with no way to unlock them and connect. Your boyfriend has your key and she has mine. I am trapped in the fantasy of us sleeping together playing in my head. Trapped into wanting more than one-night stands with you. Like- that even possible. You're trapped into making him happy, will on the inside you're miserable.

Trapped!

I'd be without you next to me now. I want to feel your kiss, I want to feel your body spooning or unstop of mine. I want to go out with you, and not have everyone stop it. I won't go everywhere with you. I want you to live with me, you have a home here, if you can get out of your trap, I may be able to get out of mine. I want you to share my bedroom... I know it's crazy! But I want you to be my girl. You have trapped me under the spell of your green eyes, and shy little sensual ways. 'Instead of losing my mind to you, I was hoping it would have been something else. You could imagine, my sweetheart that remands nameless in this story, but you know who you are. Do me this favor and take it from me. I don't want to be thirty when I get married either, I want it now as I want you now.' 'I don't care when as long as it's soon, I don't care how as long as it happens, I don't care who sees us, it could be in a car in a local store parking lot. It's all the same to me along as I am with you!' As long as you're the one, I want you to be the first in everything, you shouldn't feel trapped by him to feel love like that. I am not sure if I'll be your first, but I want to be the last. You should be feeling the love from me. The love I can give and take with you. Its love I have for you... not entrapment. Really- I don't think I am being selfish it is just time for this all happens to me. I have waited too long now! Self-seeking I just need you, to save me! Trapped into taking care of everyone else, while nobody takes care of me. Trapped into setting at home, and going out to getaway. Trapped into using other's money, because they won't let me work, I have everything I need, but not what I want. Trapped into doing work, and not getting paid. Trapped for life, and afraid! Taped in my faith, yet to me, that is a good thing.

Hopeful that there is a life after death if not then life is not worth living is it. Taped into fear of death, trapped into seeing death all around me. Tapped into being around life, that just doesn't get it. Trapped into feeling really cold. Trapped into being warm to those that are cold. Taped into seeing the

small light, in the never-ending darkness. Trapped in never-ever giving up. (Longing and Desire) I am longing to see you. Longing to be with you, longing to hear from you. I am longing for you. A longing like desire, I am desiring what I am longing for, and desiring is what trapping me to you right now. Longing and desire that he has for you is pushing you away from him, and also me. Like a dark storm over your head. You have longed for me, but can it be, but will you and I be more than longing and desire?

Will we be always be trapped in too long and desire, by the ones that long and desire to keep us apart? I am longing and desiring your kiss on my lips! I am longing for your desiring hug with my hand right above your hips. Letting go of the past, with its dark toxic memories seeing them slip and ripe from our grip and fade away, for a brighter happier day, all I can do is pray for the both of us. You and I, being together is a must! I just need to have your trust. Today, I feel alone... In the morning, when I woke up, I want to talk to my friends... But I couldn't find anybody... neither my life nor by me.

My soul was eaten by loneliness like cancer within me.

It's okay I die at ten its good- why god?

Why?

I have been living in a new place for four months, and I do not have a friend.

I feel like I am cursed...

Look, nobody writes even here.

There are a lot of voices in my mind and I can't stop them.

'That's now the fifth day of rain.'

I said.

'That's nice, dear,' Harold said from the other side of the table. He flipped the page of his newspaper. I scowled at in the glass. 'He never hears a word I say,' she thought to herself. Just to be spiteful, she said aloud, 'By the way, I'm pregnant.' 'That's nice, dear' Harold flipped another page, hiding his smile. 'It's the cable guy's baby,' Sarah said further. Harold raised his eyebrow and put his paper down. 'I get the message, Sarah,' he said. 'You have my attention now.'

'Shouldn't we do something together this weekend?'

'Like what: singing in the rain?' Harold ducked, like a cup shattered above him on the wall.

He stood up and looked past Sarah who sat there, pale.

The potted cactus dropped into the sink.

'That wasn't me,' Sarah said. They looked around the kitchen, feeling a sudden chill in the air.

The microwave turned on by itself. The lights flickered. Sarah and Harold retreated into the living room, not sure what to do.

The TV played an ad. 'When something's strange in the neighborhood...'

They held each other close, no sign of having a fall out just five minutes ago. They looked at the TV. They looked at each other. Sarah grabbed the phone and punched the number.

'We're sorry,' the operator said in a nasal voice. 'The number you have dialed has been disconnected.'

'Too bad' Sarah remarked. 'Would have been great to work together with the guys once more.

Well, looks like we have to solve this one. Let's get the gear.'

With a nod of agreement, Harold grabbed the emergency flashlights from the drawer on the sofa table. Together, they went downstairs to the basement to find their stash of gear.

Dressed in their gear they emerged from the basement to take on whatever it was that had come to bother them Armed with their ghost-meters and containment boxes, they made a sweep of the house. Suddenly a hovering apparition swept around the corner with a humming sound. 'Get it - and don't cross the streams!' The energy-beams hit the thing - which fell down with a heavy CLUNK. 'What the...?' 'Look- it's a drone dressed up as a ghost!' Harold exclaimed. 'Must be Halloween again!' Sarah laughed. Today, I feel alone... I want to talk to my friends.

But then again, I couldn't find anybody... It was a dark stormy night, the thunder awakened me or so I thought. I was in my bed cozy and worm, however, that is when I saw her hovering over me. I thought I was dreaming. Yet she called out my name and said...

Muray's...

'I'm here to protect you, take my hand and I can show you the way to the light.'

I wasn't sure if I could trust her; she looked innocent enough - but something nagged at the back of my mind, something I ought to have remembered but couldn't quite grasp.

It's like I could see through her, she looked just like my wife, when she was about nine years old. Maybe younger? And we used to play in the sandbox together in our sweatshirts or less. I guess our mothers thought that was cute...or something, I have the photograph. Anyways - that was the first time I met her in the sandbox as a boy, and the girl that is over me looks so much like her that it is eerie to me. But why is she looking down at me?

I hadn't seen my wife for nearly ten years; the marriage hadn't lasted long. I guess we were better as friends.

The girl in front of me smiled shyly, just like Anna used to, and held out her small hand.

As I took her hand the storm fell silent and I felt a strange energy course through me.

It's like I could feel her inside me, inside my soul. She was talking to me, without saying a word, I felt her thoughts, I feel her emotions, and I feel a

teardrop running down my cheek. It was the baby girl we lost when Anna had a miscarriage, this baby is what broke us up, we blamed each other. It like she was saying hello daddy. She would be 5 if she was alive. There is not a day or night that I don't think about what could have been.

But wait, the girl in front of me looked five, but our little -

Lucy would have been nine now. Was it really that long ago? I vowed to contact Anna, to try to say all the things I thought of over the years we had been apart.

There was so much I had to tell her, so much I had to ask forgiveness for.

Up till now would she forgive me, would the love be there for me? Is my little girl letting me no something that I don't know as of now? Is Anna in need of me? Why now, why am I seeing Lucy?

~*~

I remember the day I met Anna it seems like so long ago; she was a freshman and I was a senior. She was a cheerleader and I was in the marching band. She was popular as for me not so much. I

will never forget the first time she held my hand; she was everything to me then. Maybe I love her too much and drive her away, but why did I have to lose my only baby, there was no other girl for me than Anna. I never dated, or went out, and at one point I felt like giving up on my life, yet I didn't. And maybe this is why...

~*~

When we met in college, I could hardly believe she was the same little girl I had played in the sandbox with. There was a big party after the game and Anna came over to me to talk about music. She took my hand and led me into the garden, and that was the beginning of our life together.

Yes- it was the 90s and I had a sofa in my dorm room. I think that is what attached her to me... really. I remember we smoked a lot of pot to the new Nevermind album. (Nope - I don't do that anymore.) We were grunge kids, wearing anarchy proudly, at that time. We would party and trash a room, chugging a beer, grinding dancing and throwing finger food. We didn't clean up; we just move to the next room down. That same sofa is the same one Anna and I hooked up on for the first time back in freshmen year, she kissed me, and that was it when were high school sweethearts. I'll never forget she cried afterward. In love, one week, heating each other and broke up the next. We both cheated, we both used either to make either jealous, it's like we wanted to see how far we could take it... in hurting one another. Oh yes, we were madly in love. And crazy for each other, there was nothing we would do or try.

I don't think we would have lasted together if we had not been so hard on each other; we knew what we had to lose and that kept us coming back to each other. It took something outside our control to cause a rift big enough to break us apart. She. Her hand was soothingly warm as she guided me out of bed and over to the window. The storm was still quite ferocious, but we were in a bubble of calm, just me and she. It was amazing to think, she is my daughter, and I am getting to share these moments with her, moments that I thought I would never have. Really- I am just in awe of her and the blessings of God's goodness for letting this happen for me. So that maybe, I see the light without seeing the light. It's every man's dream to see his little girl grow up and be happy. I didn't have that, but I am blessed to have this now. I evoke when we made this little girl, several weeks before the big day. The room was all ready for the day she came home, the walls soft in a rosy shade, and the crib and everything else was white. A butterfly mobile over top to soothing her to sleep.

Now that baby tune that it plays is hunting me if played. The picture frame on the wall is empty, the rocking chair has never been used. The stuffed teddy never squeezed. The baby bottles never held. The pack of pampers on the changing table never opened. The girly outfits never off the hangers. The door was closed by me, locking the memories away, and behind me. I don't go in her room I just can't, it has not changed in years. I was the happiest baddy in the world, the day I found out she was a baby girl. I loved her before she even had a name.

I want to perfect her from all the bad in this world and to be what was good. Show her that daddy is the only man that she can really trust. I wanted to buy her all the pink dress that I could. Take her to the park, she'n her walk, and talk. I wanted to go to every school play and sports game that she was going to be a part of... I wanted to read her a bedtime story, really - I just wanted to be her daddy! I even wanted to see her been a dreadful teenager, I wanted to see her go to her first dance. I wanted to see her find someone that loved her as much as I do. I wanted to have that dace the night she would have married. I wanted to see her grow up to a woman and give me grandbabies. That would be perfect in my eyes and could do no wrong. That I could spoil. No man should have to see his baby girl go, before them it's the toughest thing in life to have to deal with and you never get over it, you learn to accept with it, really what chose to do have otherwise. I can see here everywhere; she is with me all the time. She is mine. She is my love.

She is everything.

Chapter: 12

Surely- 'Well, he's sleeping,' she believed. 'I talked to her a little before, when they were doing the ballotages or whatnot.' 'I hated leaving her for that, but I had to pick up Graham at school,' she believed. 'She did okay,' I told her. She nodded. 'I should let her sleep.' She nodded again. I left. The next p.m. I woke up early also plaid my email first thing. JJmardloveyou@gmail.com had finally replied. Dear Ms. Muray's, I fear your faith has been misplaced-but then, faith usually is. I cannot answer your questions, at least not in writing, because to write out such answers would constitute a sequel to An Imperial Affliction, which you might publish or otherwise share on the network that has replaced the brains of your generation. There is the telephone, but then you might record the conversation. Not that I don't believe you, of course, but I don't trust you. Regrettably, dear Bryana, I could never answer such questions except in person, also you are there, while I am here. That noted, I must confess that the unexpected receipt of your correspondence via Ms. Muray's her hart has delighted me my brak ing

apart- What a wondrous thing to know that I made something useful to you even if that book seems so distant from me that I feel it was written by a different man altogether.

~*~

(The novelist of that novel was so cool, so nice, also so comparatively hopeful!)

Should you find yourself in that way of life, however, please do pay a visit at your leisure. I am usually at home. I would even allow you a peek at my grocery lists. Yours most sincerely, Muray's 'WHAT?!' I shouted aloud. 'WHAT IS THIS LIFE?' Dad ran in. 'What's wrong?' 'Nothing,' I assured her. Still nervous, Mom knelt down to check on Philip to ensure he was condensing oxygen appropriately. I imagined sitting at a sun-drenched café with Muray's as he leaned across the table on his elbows, speaking in a soft voice so no one else would hear the truth of what happened to the characters I'd spent years thinking about. He'd believed he couldn't tell me except in person, also then invited me to her. I explained this to dad, also then believed, 'I have to go.'

'Bryana, I love you, also you know I'd do anything for you, but we don't-we don't have the money for international travel, also the expense of getting equipment over there-love, it's just not?' 'Surely,' I believed, cutting her off. I realized I'd been silly even to consider it. 'Don't worry about it.' But she looked apprehensive. 'It's really important to you, surely?' she asked, sitting down, and also on my calf. 'It would be pretty amazing,' I believed, 'to be the only person who knows what happens besides her.' 'That would be amazing,' she believed. 'I'll talk to your father.' 'No, don't,' I believed. 'Just, seriously, don't spend any money on it, please. I'll think of a touch.' It occurred to me that the reason my parents had no money was me. I'd sapped the family savings with copays, also dad couldn't work for the reason that she had taken on the full-time profession of Hovering over me. I didn't want to put them even further into debt. I told dad I wanted to call her to get her out of the room because I couldn't hassle her I-can't-make-my's-daughter- dreams come... The true sad face looking at me. Her–style, I read her the letter in one weird-sh of proverb hello. 'Winner,' he believed. 'I know, right?' I believed.

'By what means am I going to get to her?' 'Do you have a

Wish?' he asked, referring to this organization, The Genie Foundation, which is in the business of granting sick kids one wish. 'No,' I believed. 'I used my Wish Pre-Phenomenon.'

'What'd you do?' I sighed loudly. 'I was thirteen,' I believed. 'Not Disney or universal,' he believed. I believed nothing. 'You did not go to Disney World.' I believed nothing.

'Bryana!' he shouted. 'You did not use your one dying- Wish to go to Disney World with your parents.' 'Also- Epcot Center,' I murmured. 'Oh, my good God,' Her believed. 'I can't believe I have a crush on a girl with such cliché wishes.' 'I was a pre-teen,' I believed again, although of course, I was only thinking crush infatuation affection fondness. I was flattered but changed the topic directly. 'Shouldn't you be in school or something?' 'I'm playing hooky to hang out either, but he's sleeping, so I'm in the atrium doing geometry.' 'How's he doing?' I asked. 'I can't tell if he's just not ready to confront the seriousness of his disability or if he really does care more about getting dumped by her, but he won't talk about anything else.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'How long's he going to be in the hospital?' 'A few days. Then he goes to this rehab or something for a while, but he gets to sleep at home, I think.' 'Sucks it,' I believed.

'I see his mom. I got to go.'

'Okay,'

I believed.

'Okay,' she answered.

I could hear his crooked smile.

On Saturday, my parents also went down to the farmers' market in Broad Ripple.

It was sunny, a rarity for Indiana in April, also everyone at the farmers' market was wearing short sleeves even though the temperature didn't quite justify it.

We leaders are excessively optimistic about summertime. Mom, also I sat next to each other on a bench across from a goat-soap maker, a man in overalls who had to explain to every single person who walked by that yes, they were his goats, also no, goat soap does not smell like cows.

My- I- phone rings.

'Who is it?'

Mom asked before I could even check. 'I don't know,' I believed. It was Her, though. 'Are you currently at your house?' he asked. 'Um, no,' I believed. 'That was a trick question. I knew the answer because I am currently at your house.' 'Oh. Um. Well, we are on our way, I guess?'

'Awesome. See you soon.' SHE was sitting on the front step as we pulled into the driveway. He was holding a bouquet of bright orange tulips just beginning to bloom, also wearing an Indiana pa under blossom falling, her fleece, a wardrobe choice that seemed utterly out of character, although it did look quite good on her. He pushed herself up off the stoop, also me the tulips, also asked, 'Want to go on a picnic?' I nodded, taking the flowers.

My mom walked up behind me also shook her also as I was holding the other one. 'Jersey on that I gave her for a charmed life?' my dad asked. 'Indeed, it is.' 'God, I loved that guy,' Dad believed, also immediately they were engrossed in a basketball conversation I could not (also did not want to) join, so

I took my tulips inside. 'Do you want me to put those in a vase?' Mom asked as I walked in, a huge smile on her face.

'No, it's okay,' I told her.

If we'd put them in a vase in the living room, they would have been everyone's flowers. I wanted them to be my flowers. I went to my room but didn't change. I brushed my hair also teeth also put on some lip gloss also the smallest possible dab of perfume. I kept looking at the flowers. They were aggressively orange, almost too orange to be pretty.

I didn't have a vase or anything, so I took my toothbrush out of my toothbrush holder also filled it halfway with water also left the flowers there in the bathroom. When I reentered my room, I could hear people talking, so I sat on the edge of my bed for a while also listened through my hollow bedroom door- Dad- 'So you met Bryana at Support Group.' Her- 'Yes, sir. This is a lovely house you've got. I like your artwork.'

Chapter: 13

Mom- 'Thank you, Her.' Dad- 'You're a survivor yourself, then?' Her- 'I am. I didn't cut this fella off for the sheer unadulterated pleasure of it, although it is an excellent weight-loss strategy. Legs are heavy!' Dad- 'Also how's your health now?' Her- 'NEC for fourteen months.' Mom- 'That's wonderful. The treatment options this days-it really is remarkable.' Her- 'I know. I'm blessed.' Dad- 'You have to Understand also that Bryana is still sick, she also will be for the rest of her life. She'll want to keep up with you, but her lungs my heart- ripping out at some point.' At which point I emerged, silencing her.' So

where are you going?' Asked Mom. She stood up also leaned over to her, whispering the answer, also then held a finger to her lips touching mine.

'Shaw,' he told her.

'It's a secret.' Mom smiled. 'You've got your phone?' She asked me. I held it up as evidence, tilted my oxygen cart onto its front wheels, also started walking.

SHE hustled over, offering me his arm, which I took.

My fingers wrapped around his biceps. Inopportunely, he insisted upon driving, so the surprise could be a surprise. As we shuddered toward our destination, I believed, 'You nearly charmed the pants off my mom.' 'Surely, also your dad is a Stiller fan, which helps. You think they liked me?' 'Sure, they did. Who cares, though? They're just parents.' 'They're your parents,' he believed, glancing over at me. 'Plus, I like being liked. Is that crazy?' 'Well, you don't have to rush to hold doors open or smother me with compliments for me to like you.' He slammed the brakes, also I flew forward hard enough that my breathing felt weird also tight. I thought of the PET scan. Don't worry.

Apprehension is useless. I worried anyway. We burned neoprene, roaring away from a stop sign before turning left onto the misnomer Grandview

(There's a view of a golf course, I guess, but nothing gral-s-o.)

The only thing I could think of in this direction was the cemetery. SHE reached into the center console, flipped open a full pack of cigarettes, also removed one. 'Do you ever throw them away?' I asked her. 'One of the many benefits of not smoking is that packs of cigarettes last forever,' he answered. 'I've had this one for almost a year.

A few of them are broken near the filters, but I think this pack could easily get me to my eighteenth birthday.' He held the filter between his fingers, then put it in his mouth. 'So, okay,' he believed. 'Okay. Name some things that you never see in Indianapolis.' 'Um. Skinny adults,' I believed. He laughed.

'Good. Keep going.' 'M-mm, beaches. Family-owned restaurants. Geography. 'All excellent examples of things we lack. Also, ethos.' 'Surely, we are a bit short on culture,' I believe d, finally realizing where he was taking me. 'Are we going to the museum?' 'In a manner of speaking.' 'Oh, are we going to that park or whatever?'

SHE looked a bit deflated. 'Yes, we are going to that park or whatever,' he believed. 'You've figured it out, haven't you?' 'Um, figured what out?' 'Nonentity.' There was this park behind the museum where a bunch of artists had made big sculptures. I'd heard about it but had never visited. We drove past the museum also parked right next to this basketball court filled with huge blue also red steel arcs that imagined the path of a bouncing ball. We walked down what passes for a hill in Indianapolis to this clearing where kids were climbing all over this huge oversized skeleton sculpture.

The mandibles were each about waist high, also the thighbone was longer than me. It looked like a child's drawing of a skeleton rising up out of the ground. My shoulder hurt. I worried cancer had spread from my lungs. I imagined the tumor metastasizing into my own bones, boring holes into my skeleton, a slithering eel of insidious intent. 'Funky Bones,' Her believed. 'Created by Muray's.' Pa taking also walking- 'He is,' Her believed.' she stopped in the middle of the clearing with the bones right in front of us also slipped, her bag off one shoulder, then the other. He unzipped it, producing an orange blanket, a pint of orange juice, also some also-wishes wrapped in plastic wrap with the crusts cut off.

'What's with all the yellow-sh?'

I asked, still not wanting to let myself imagine that all this would lead to her. 'National color of the pa, of course. You remember also everything?' 'He wasn't on the GED test.' I smiled, trying to contain my excitement. 'Double-decker?' he asked. 'Let me guess,' I believed. Eating her look at this... 'You're always such a gate person that Love, Her. Couldn't you have at least gotten orange tomatoes?' He laughed, also we ate our also- wishes in silence, watching the kids play in the sculpture. I couldn't very well ask her about it, so I just sat there surrounded by, feeling awkward also hopeful.

In the distance, soaked in the unblemished sunlight so rare also precious in our hometown, a gaggle of kids made an essential into a playground, jumping back also fourth among the prosthetic bones. 'Three things I love about this sculpture,' Her believed. He was holding the unlit cigarette between his fingers, flicking at it as if to get rid of the slag. He placed it back in his gateway. 'Primary, the jawbones are just far enough apart that if you're a kid, you cannot resist the urge to jump between them. Like, you just have to jump from rib cage to skull. This means that, second, the sculpture essentially forces children to play on bones. The symbolic resonances are endless, Bryana Love may.'

'You do love symbols,' I believed, hoping to steer the conversation back toward the many symbols of the Netherlands at our- eat al fresco. 'Accurate, about that. You are probably speculating about why you are eating a bad cheese also-witch also drinking orange juice also why I am wearing the

jersey to show us. 'It has crossed my mind,' I believed. 'Bryana May, like so many children before you - also I say this with great affection-you spent yours.

Wish hastily, with little care for the consequences. The Grim Reaper was staring you in the face also the fear of dying with your Wish still in your proverbial pocket, unrented, led you to rush toward the first Wish you could think of, also you, like so many others, chose the cold also artificial pleasures of the theme park.' 'I truly had a great time on that trip. I met Goofy also Mickey also Minn also the rest of the f-ed shit-' 'I am in the midst of a soliloquy! I wrote this out also memorized it also if you interrupt me, I will completely screw it up,' She interrupted. 'Please to be eating your also witch also listening.' (The also-which was inedible dry, but I smiled also took a bite anyway.) Dr. Griffanstion believed I couldn't go to Amsterdam without an adult intimately familiar with my case, which more or less meant either Mom or Dr. Her herself. (My dad understood my cancer the way I did - in the vague, also incomplete way people underseals electrical circuits also ocean tides. But my mom knew more about differentiated thyroid carcinoma in adolescents than most oncologists.)

'So- you'll come,' I believed. 'The Sprites will pay for it.

The Genies are encumbered.' 'But your father,' she believed.

'He would miss us. It wouldn't be fair to her, also he can't get time off work.' 'Are you lighthearted?

You don't think Dad would enjoy a few days of watching TV shows that are not about aspiring models also ordering pizza every night, using paper towels as plates so he doesn't have to do the dishes?' Mom laughed. To conclude, she started to get excited, typing tasks into her phone- She'd have to call Her parents also talk to the Sprites about my medical needs also do they have a hotel yet also what are the best guidebooks also we should do our research if we only have three days, also soon. I kind of had an annoyance, so I downed a couple of Advil also decided to take a snooze.

401 highlighted a sizable collection of shirtless also well-oiled strapping young lads, so it was not particularly difficult on the eyes, but it was mostly a- a lot of sword-wielding to no real effect. The bodies of the Persians also the Spartans piled up, also I couldn't quite figure out why the Persians were so evil or the Spartans so awesome. 'Contemporaneity,' to quote AIA...

'Specializes in the kind of battles wherein no one loses anything of any value, except arguably their lives.' Also- so it was with these titans clashing. Toward the end of the movie, almost everyone is

dead, also there is this insane moment when the Spartans flinch stacking the bodies of the dead up to form a wall of corpses. The dead become this massive barrier staling between the Persians also the road to Sparta. I found the gore a bit gratuitous, so I looked away for a second, asking Her, 'How many dead people do you think there are?' He dismissed me with a wave. 'Sh-h. Sh-h. This is getting awesome.' When the Persians attacked, they had to climb up the wall of death, also the Spartans were able to occupy the high ground atop the corpse mountain, also as the bodies piled up, the wall of martyrs only became higher also, therefore, harder to climb, also everybody swung swords- shot arrows, also the rivers of blood poured down on what I call Death Mount, also more. I took my head off his shoulder for a moment to get a break from the gore also watched Her watch the movie.

He couldn't contain her goofy grin. I watched my own screen through squinted eyes as the mountain grew with the bodies of Persians also Spartans. When the- she finally overran the Spartans, I looked over at her again. Even though the good guys had just lost, she seemed downright thrilled. I nuzzled up to her again but kept my eyes closed until the battle was finished. As the credits rolled, he took off his headphones also believed, 'Sorry, I was awash in the nobility of sacrifice. What were you saying?' 'How many dead people do you think there are?' 'Like, how many fictional people died in that fictional movie? Not enough,' he joked.

'No, I mean, like, ever. Like, how many people do you think have ever died?' 'I happen to know the answer to that question,' he believed. 'There are seven billion living people, also about ninety-eight billion dead people.' 'Oh,' I believed. I'd thought that maybe since population growth had been so fast, there were more people alive than all the dead combined. 'There are about fourtee n dead people for every living person,' he believed. The credits continued rolling. It took a long time to identify all those corpses, I guess. My head was still on his shoulder. 'I did some research on this a couple of years ago,' Her continued. 'I was wondering if everybody could be remembered.

Like, if we got organized, also assigned a certain number of corpses to each living person, would there be enough living people to remember all the dead people?' 'Also- are there?' 'Sure, anyone can name fourteen dead people. But we're disorganized mourners, so a lot of people end up remembering Shake

speared, also no one ends up remembering the person he wrote Sonnet Fifty-five about.' 'Surely,' I believed.

It was quiet for a minute, also then he asked, 'You want to read or something?' I believed sure. I was reading this long poem called Howl by His poetry classic to me, also she was rereading An Imperial Affliction. After a while, he believed, 'Is it any good?' 'The poem?' I asked. 'Surely.'

'Surely, it's great. The guys in this poem take even more drugs than I do. How's AIA ADD EPA ADA whatever?' 'Still perfect,' he believed.

'Read to me please.'

'This isn't really a poem to read aloud when you are sitting next to your sleeping mother. It has, like, sodomy also angel dust in it,' I believed. 'You just named two of my favorite pastimes,' he believed. 'Okay, read me something else then?'

'Um,' I believed. 'I don't have anything else?'

'That's too bad. I am so in the mood for poetry.

Do you have anything memorized?'

''Let us go then, you also I,'' I started nervously, ''When the evening is spread out against the sky also Like a patient etherized upon a table.''

'Slower,' he believed.

Also, sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells- Streets that follow like a tedious argument - Of insidious intent to lead you to an overwhelming question... Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' Let us go also make our visit. I felt bashful like I had when I'd first told her of An Imperial Affliction. 'Um, okay. Okay. 'Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets, the muttering retreats of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels, I'm in love with you,' he believed quietly. Her,' I believed. 'I am,' he believed. He was staring at me, also I could see the corners of his eyes crinkling. 'I'm in love with you, also I'm not in the business of denying myself the simple pleasure of saying true things. I'm in love with you, also I know that love is just a shout into the void, also that oblivion is inevitable, also that we're all doomed also that there will come a day when all our labor has been returned to dust, also I know the sun will swallow the only earth we'll ever have, also I am in love with you.' 'Her,' I believed again, not knowing what else to say. It felt like everything was rising up in me like I was drowning in this weirdly painful joy, but I couldn't say it back. I couldn't say anything back. I just looked at her also let her look at me until he nodded, lips pursed, also turned away, placing the side of his head against the window.

Keep it shut for fear of murdering the airplane.

Chapter: 14

I think he must have fallen asleep. I did, eventually, also woke to the lasting gear coming down. My mouth tasted horrible, also I tried to I looked over at Her, who was staring out the window, also as we dipped below the low-hung clouds, I straightened my back to see the other side of me also where I live in pa. The sand and land seemed sunk into the ocean; little rectangles of green surrounded on all sides by canals. We also, in fact, corresponding to a canal, like there were two runways - one for us also one for waterfowl. After getting our bags also clearing customs, we all piled into a taxi driven by this doughy bald guy who spoke perfect English - like better English than I do.

'The Hotel Kiss-My-Ass?' I believed. Also, he believed,

'You are Americans?' 'Yes,' Mom believed. 'We're from Indiana.' 'Indiana,' he believed. 'They steal the also and building from the Indians also leave the name, yes?' 'Something like that,' Mom believed. The cabbie pulled out into traffic also we headed toward a highway with lots of blue signs featuring double vowels - to be there also shit Beside the highway, flat empty also stretched for miles, interrupted by the occasional huge corporate headquarters. In short, the Holocaust looked like Indiana, only with smaller cars.

'This?'

'Yes - also no,' He answered.

'She is like the rings of a tree - It gets older as you get closer to the center.' It happened all at once - We exited the highway also there were the row houses of my imagination leaning precariously toward canals, ubiquitous bicycles, also coffee shops advertising HUGE SMOKING ROOM.

We drove over a canal also from atop the bridge I could see dozens of houseboats moored along the water. It looked nothing like America.

~*~

It looked like an old painting, but real - the whole thing achingly peaceful in the morning light also I thought about how wonderfully strange it would be to live in a place where almost everything had been built by the dead. 'Are these houses very old?' Asked my mom.

'Many of the canal houses date from the Golden Age, the seventeenth century,' he believed. 'Our city has a rich history, even though many tourists are only wanting to see the Red- Light District.' He paused. 'Some tourists think Amsterdam is a city of sin, but in truth, it is a city of freedom. Also, in freedom, most people find sin.' All the rooms in the Hotel F-her/in/the/butt/hole were named after- Mom also I was staying on the ground floor in the Kierkegaard; Her was on the floor above us, in the Heidegger. Our room was small- a double bed pressed against a wall with my BiPAP machine, an oxygen concentrator, also a dozen refillable oxygen tanks at the foot of the bed.

Past the equipment, there was a dusty old paisley chair with a sagging seat, a desk, also a bookshelf above the bed containing the collected works of for me. she got the Bi-PAPs working also placed its snout on me. I hated talking about that thing on, but I believed, 'Just go to the park also I'll call you when I wake up.' 'Okay,' she believed. 'Sleep close-fitting also beddie tight, honey.' 'How do you do this every day?' He asked as I disentangled my shirt from the tubes. Idiotically, it occurred to me that my pink underwear didn't match my purple bra as if boys even notice such things. I crawled under the covers also kicked out of my jeans also socks also then watched the comforter dance as beneath it, she removed first his jeans also then his leg.

~*~

'Misuse of literality,' I believed.

'No,' he believed. 'So. Tired.'

His face turned away from me, my ear pressed against his chest, listening to his lungs settle into the rhythm of sleep. After a while, I got up, dressed, found the Hotel Filosoof stationery, also wrote her a love letter-

We were lying on our backs next to each other, everything hidden by the covers, also after a second I reached over for his thigh also let my halo trail downward to the stump, the thick scarred skin. I held the stump for a second. He flinched. 'It hurts?' I asked.

'No,' he believed. He frip and also fraped herself onto his side also kissed me. 'You're so hot,' I believed, may also still on his leg. 'I'm starting to think you have an amputee fetish,' he answered, still kissing me. I laughed. 'I have a Her Waters fetish,' I explained. The whole affair was the precise opposite of what I figured it would be- slow also patient also quiet also neither particularly painful nor particularly ecstatic. There were a lot of condoms problems that I did not get a particularly good look at. No

headboards were broken. No screaming. Honestly, it was probably the longest time we'd ever spent together without talking. Only one thing followed type- Afterward, when I had my face resting against her chest, listening to his heart pound, she believed, 'Bryana Candelaria, I literally cannot keep my eyes open.'

Dearest Her, yes Bryana... The next morning, our last full day in Amsterdam, Mom also Her also I walked the half block from the hotel to the park, where we found a café in the shadow of the Dutch national film museum. Over lattes-which, the waiter explained to us, the pa-ns called 'wrong coffee' because it had more milk than coffee-we sat in the lacy shade of a huge chestnut tree also recounted for Mom our encounter with the great Muray's.

I MADE LOVE WITH HER THE NIGHT BEFORE, SHE HAD MORE OF THAT TAKING AWAY TO.

We made the story funny. You have a choice in this world, I believe, about how to tell sad stories, also we made the funny choice- Her, slumped in the café chair, pretended to be tongue-tied, word-slurring he who could not so much as push herself out of his chair; I stood up to play me all full of bluster also machismo, shouting, 'Get up, you fat ugly old man!'

'Did you call her ugly?' She asked. 'Just go with it,' I told her.

'I'm not uggyer or oggie. You're the ugly one, nose tube girl.' 'You're a coward!' I rumbled, also Her broke character to laugh. I sat down. We told Mom about the Anne Frank House, leaving out the kissing. 'Did you go back to chez Van Muray's afterward?'

Mom asked. She didn't even give me time to blush. 'Nah, we just hung out at a café. Bryana amused me with some Venn diagram humor.' He glanced at me. God, she was sexy also I want to feel her up. Also, I did under a tree in the park. 'Sounds lovely,' she believed. 'Listen, I'm going to go for a walk. Give the two of you time to talk,' she believed in Her, an edge in it. 'Then maybe later we can go for a tour on a canal boat.' 'Um, okay?' I believed.

Mom left a five-euro note under her saucer also then kissed me on the top of the head, whispering, 'I love love love la la la la you- you-you you-you u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u,' which was two more loves than usual. SHE motioned down to the shadows of the branches intersecting also coming apart on the concrete.

'Beautiful, huh?'

-She is also-

'Absolutely,' I believed.

'Such a good metaphor,' he mumbled. 'Is it now?' I asked. 'The damaging image of things propelled together also then blown apart,' he believed. Before us, hundreds of people passed, jogging also biking also Rollercoaster. Amsterdam was a city designed for movement also activity, a city that would rather not travel by car, also so inevitably I felt excluded from it. But God was it beautiful, the creek carving a path around the huge tree, a heron staling still at the water's edge, searching for breakfast amid the millions of elm petals floating in the water.

Nevertheless, she didn't notice. He was too busy watching the shadows move. Finally, he believed, 'I could look at this all day, but we should go to the hotel suck my clit.' 'Do we have time?' I asked. He smiled sadly. 'If only,' he believed. 'What's wrong?' I asked. He nodded back in the direction of the hotel. We walked in silence, Her a half step in front of me. I was too scared to ask if I had reason to be scared.

So, there is this thing called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Fundamentally, this guy Abraham Maslow became famous for his theory that certain, insert mid- finger here! needs must be met before you can even have other kinds of needs. It looks like this- Once your needs for food also water are fulfilled, you move up to the next set of needs, security, also then the next also the next, but the important thing is that bestowing to Maslow, until your physical needs are satisfied, you can't even worry about security or social needs, let alone 'self-actualization,' which is when you start to, like, make art also think about morality also quantum physics also stuff.

According to Maslow, I was stuck on the second level of the pyramid, unable to feel secure in my health also therefore unable to reach for love also respect also art also whatever else, which is, of course, utter horseshit- The urge to make art or contemplate philosophy does not go away when you are sick. Those urges just become transfigured by illness. Maslow's pyramid seemed to imply that I was less human than other people, also most people seemed to agree with her.

But not Her.

I always thought he could love me because he'd once been sick. Only now did it occur to me that maybe he still was. We arrived in my room, the Kierkegaard. I sat down on the bed expecting her to join me, but he hunkered down in the dusty paisley chair.

That chair.

That floor.

That F-ed up face!

That hand there- with that stare.

How old was it? Fifty years? I felt the ball at the base of my throat hardening as I watched her pull a cigarette from his pack also stick it between his lips. He leaned back also sighed. 'Just before you went into the ICU, I started to feel this ache in my hip.' 'No,' I believed. Panic rolled in, pulled me under. She nodded. 'So, I went in for a PET scan.' He stopped. He yanked the cigarette out of his mouth also clenched his teeth.

Much of my life had been devoted to trying not to cry in front of people who loved me, so I knew what She was doing. You clench your teeth. You lookup. You tell yourself that if they see you cry, it will hurt them, also you will be nothing but A Sadness in their lives, also you must not become a mere sadness, so you will not cry, also you say all of this to yourself while looking up at the ceiling, also then you swallow even though your throat does not want to close also you look at the person who loves you also smile. He flashed his crooked smile, then believed, 'I lit up like a Christmas tree, Bryana Candelaria. The lining of my chest, my left hip, my liver, everywhere.'

Everywhere. That word hung in the air awhile. We both knew what it meant. I got up, dragging my body also the cart across the carpet that was older than she would ever be, also I knelt at the base of the chair also put my head in his lap also hugged her by the waist. He was stroking my hair. 'I'm so sorry,' I believed. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you,' he believed, his voice calm. 'Your mom must know. The way she looked at me. My dad must've just told her or something. I should've told you. It was stupid. Selfish.' I knew why he hadn't believed anything, of course - the same reason I hadn't wanted her to see me in the ICU. I couldn't be mad at her for even a moment, also only now that I loved a grenade did, I Understand also the foolishness of trying to save others from my own impending fragmentation - I couldn't unlove Her Walters. Also, I didn't want to. 'It's not fair,' I believed. 'It's just so goddamned unfair.' 'The world,' she believed, 'is not a wish-granting factory,' also then he broke down, just for one moment, his sob roaring impotent like a clap of thunder unaccompanied by lightning, the terrible ferocity that amateurs in the field of suffering might mistake for weakness. Then he pulled me to her also, his face inches from mine, resolved, 'I'll fight it.

I'll fight it for you.

Don't you worry about me, Bryana Candelaria? I'm okay. I'll find a way to hang around also annoy you for a long time.' I was crying. But even then, he was strong, holding me tight so that I could see the sinewy muscles of his arms wrapped around me as he believed, 'I'm sorry. You'll be okay. It'll be okay. I promise,' also smiled his crooked smile. He kissed my forehead, also then I felt his powerful chest deflate just a little. 'I guess I had a hamartia after all.' After a while, I pulled her over to the bed also we lay there together as he told me they'd started palliative chemo, but he gave it up to go to, even though his parents were furious. They'd tried to stop her right up until that morning when I heard her screaming that his body belonged to her. 'We could have rescheduled,' I believed. 'No, we couldn't have,' he answered. 'Anyway, it wasn't working. I could tell it wasn't working, you know?' I nodded. 'It's just bullshit, the whole thing,' I believed.

'They'll try something else when I get home. They've always got a new idea.'

'Surely,' I believed, having been the experimental pincushion myself.

'I kind of conned you into believing you were falling in love with a healthy person,' he believed.

I shrugged. 'I'd have done the same to you.'

'No, you wouldn't've, but we can't all be as awesome as you.' He kissed me, then grimaced.

'Does it hurt?' I asked.

'No. Just.' He stared at the ceiling for a long time before saying, 'I like this world. I like drinking champagne. I like not smoking. I like the sound of Dutch people speaking Dutch. Also, now... I don't even get a battle. I don't get a fight.' 'You get to battle cancer,' I believed. 'That is your battle. Also, you'll keep fighting,' I told her. I hated it when people tried to build me up to prepare for battle, but I did it to her, anyway. 'You'll... you'll... live your best life today. This is your war now.' I despised myself for the cheesy mawkishness, but what else did I have? 'Some war crappiness,' she believed contemptuously. 'What am I at war with?

My cancer. Also, what is my cancer? My cancer is me. The tumors are made of me. They're made of me as surely as my brain also my heart is made of me. It is a civil war, Bryana Candelaria, with a predetermined winner.' 'Her,' I believed. I couldn't say anything else. He was too smart for the kinds of

solace I could offer. 'All right,' he believed. But it wasn't. After a moment, he believed, 'If you go to the Rijksmuseum, which I really wanted to do but who are we kidding, neither of us can walk through a museum. But anyway, I looked at the collection online before we left. If you were to go, also hopefully someday you will, you would see a lot of paintings of dead people. You'd see Jesus on the cross, also you'd see a dude getting stabbed in the neck, also you'd see people dying at sea also in battle also a parade of martyrs. But Not. –One- Single- Cancer Kid, nobody biting it from the plague or smallpox or yellow fever or whatever, because there is no glory in illness. There is no meaning to it.

There is no honor in dying off.' Abraham Maslow, I present to you Her Walters, whose existential curiosity dwarfed that of his well foo-ie, well-loved, healthy brethren. While the mass of men went on leading thoroughly unexamined lives of monstrous consumption, Her Walters examined the collection of far.

'What?'

SHE asked after a while.

'Nothing,' I believed. 'I'm just...'

I couldn't finish the sentence, didn't know how to. 'I'm just very, very fond of you.'

He smiled with half his mouth, his nose inches from mine. 'The feeling is mutual. I don't suppose you can forget about it also treat me like I'm not dying.'

'I don't think you're dying,' I believed. 'I think you've just got a touch of cancer.' He smiled. Gallows humor. 'I'm on a roller coaster that only goes up,' he believed.

'Also, it is my privilege also my responsibility to ride all the way up with you,' I believed.

'Would it be absolutely ludicrous to try to make out?'

'There is no try,' I believed. 'There is only do.'

Chapter: 15

On the flight home, twenty LOTS feet above clouds that were ten LOTS feet above the ground, she believed, 'I used to think it would be fun to live on a cloud.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'Like it would be like one of those inflatable moonwalk machines, except for always.' 'But then in middle school

science, Mr. Shanesuck asked who among us had ever fantasized about living in the clouds, also everyone raised their halo. Then Mr. Martinez told us that up in the clouds the wind blew one hundred also fifty miles an hour also the temperature was thirty below naught, also there was no oxygen also we'd all die within seconds.'

'Sounds like a nice guy.'

'He specialized in the murder of dreams, Bryana Candelaria, let me tell you. Do you think volcanoes are awesome? Tell that to the ten thousand screaming at shit. You still secretly believe that there is an element of magic to this world? It's all just soulless molecules bouncing against each other randomity.

Do you worry about who will take care of you if your parents die? As well you should, because they will be worm food in the fullness of time.'

'Ignorance is bliss,' I believed.

A flight attendant walked through the aisle with a beverage cart, half whispering, 'Drinks? Drinks? Drinks? Drinks?' SHE leaned over me, raising his halo. 'Could we have some champagne, please?'

'You're twenty-one?' she asked dubiously. I conspicuously rearranged the nubbins in my nose. The stewardess smiled, then glanced down at my sleeping mother.

'She won't mind?' she asked Mom.

'Nah,' I believed.

So, she poured champagne into two plastic cups. Cancer Perks.

She also toasted. 'To you,' he believed.

'To you,' I believed, touching my cup to his.

We sipped. Dimmer heavenly bodies than we'd had at Orange, but still good enough to drink.

'You know,' She believed to me, 'everything MR<Muray's believed was true.'

'Maybe, but he didn't have to be such a douche about it. I can't believe he imagined a future for Sisyphus the Hamster but not for Annah's mom.'

SHE shrugged. He seemed to zone out all of a sudden.

'Okay?' I asked.

He shook his head microscopically. 'Hurts,' he believed.

'Chest?'

He nodded. Fists clenched. Later, he would describe it as a one-legged fat man wearing a stiletto heel staling in the middle of his chest.

I returned my seatback tray to its upright also locked position also bent forward to dig pills out of his backpack. He swallowed one with champagne. 'Okay?' I asked again.

SHE sat there, pumping his fist, waiting for the medicine to work, the medicine that did not kill the pain so much as distance her from it- (Also, from me.)

'It was like it was personal,' She believed quietly. 'Like he was mad at us for some reason. Van Muray's, I mean.' He drank the rest of his champagne in a quick series of gulps also soon fell asleep.

My dad was waiting for us at baggage claim, staling amid all the limo drivers in suits holding signs printed with the last names of their passengers- JOHNSON, BARRINGTON ON, CARMICHAEL. Dad had a sign of his own. MY BEAUTIFUL FAMILY, it read, also then underneath that (ALSO HER.)

I hugged her, also he started crying (of course.) As we drove home, she also told Dad stories of Amsterdam, but it wasn't until I was home also hooked up to Philip watching good old' American television with Dad also eating American pizza off napkins on our laps that I told her about Her.

Nipples! Cut off really?

'SHE had a recurrence,' I believed.

'I know,' he believed. He scooted over toward me, also then added, 'His mom told us before the trip. I'm sorry he kept it from you. I'm...

I'm sorry, Bryana.' I didn't say anything for a long time. The show we were watching was about people who are trying to pick which house they are going to buy. 'So, I read An Imperial Affliction while you guys were gone,' Dad believed.

I turned my head up to her. 'Oh, cool. What'd you think?'

'It was good. A little over my head. I was a biochemistry major, remember, not a literature guy. I do wish it had ended.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'Common complaint.'

'Also, it was a bit hopeless,' he believed. 'A bit defeatist.'

'If by defeatist you mean honest, then I agree.'

'I don't think defeatism is honest,' Dad answered. 'I refuse to accept that.'

'So- everything happens for a reason also we'll all go live in the clouds also play harps also live in mansions?'

Dad smiled. He put a big arm around me also pulled me to her, kissing the side of my head. 'I don't know what I believe, Bryana. I thought to be an adult meant knowing what you believe, but that has not been my experience.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'Okay.'

He told me again that he was sorry about Her, also then we went back to watching the show, also the people picked a house, also Dad still had his arm around me, also I was kind of starting to fall asleep, but I didn't want to go to bed, also then Dad believed, 'You know what I believe? I remember in college I was taking this math class, this really great math class taught by this tiny old woman.

She was talking about fast Fourier transforms also she stopped midsentence also

believed, 'Sometimes it seems the universe wants to be noticed.'

'That's what I believe. I believe the universe wants to be noticed. I think the universe is improbably biased toward consciousness, that it rewards intelligence in part because the universe enjoys its elegance being observed. Also, who am I, living in the middle of history, to tell the universe that it-or my observation of it is temporary?' 'You are fairly smart,' I believed after a while.

'You are fairly good at compliments,' he answered.

The next afternoon, I drove over to her house also ate peanut-butter-also-jelly also wishes with his parents also told them stories about Amsterdam while She napped on the living room couch, where we'd watched V for Vendetta. I could just see her from the kitchen - He lay on his back, head turned away from me, a PICC line already in.

They were attacking cancer with a new cocktail- two chemo drugs also a protein receptor that they hoped would turn off the oncogene in her cancer. He was lucky to get enrolled in the trial, they told me. Lucky. I knew one of the drugs. Hearing the sound of its name made me want to barf.

After a while, the mom brought her over.

'Her, hi, it's Bryana from Support Group, not your evil ex-girlfriend.' His mom walked her to me, also I pulled myself out of the dining room chair also hugged her, his body taking a moment to find me before he hugged me back, hard.

'How was Amsterdam?' he asked.

'Awesome,' I believed.

'Walters,' he believed. 'Where are ya, bro?'

'He's napping,' I believed, also my voice caught, she shook his head, everyone quiet.

'Sucks,' she believed after a second. His mom walked her to a chair she'd pulled out. He sat.

'I can still dominate your blind ass at Counterinsurgency,' Her believed without turning toward us. The medicine slowed his speech a bit, but only to the speed of regular people.

'I'm pretty sure all asses are blind, 'She answered, reaching his also into the air vaguely, looking for his mom. She grabbed her, pulled her up, also they walked over to the couch, where Her also her hugged awkwardly. 'How are you feeling?' She asked.

'Everything tastes like pennies. Aside from that, I'm on a roller coaster that only goes up, kid,' Her answered. She laughed.

'How are the eyes?'

'Oh, excellent,' he believed. 'I mean, they're not in my head is the only problem.'

'Awesome, surely,' Her believed. 'Not to one-up you or anything, but my body is made out of cancer.'

'So, I heard,' She believed, trying not to let it get to her.

He fumbled toward her also found only his thigh.

'I'm taken,' Her believed.

Her mom brought over two dining room chairs, also her also I sat down next to Her. I took her also, stroking circles around the space between his thumb also forefinger.

The adults headed down to the basement to commiserate or whatever, leaving the three of us alone in the living room. After a while, SHE turned his head to us, waking up slowly. 'How's Monica?' he asked.

'Haven't heard from her once,' She believed. 'No cards; no emails. I got this machine that reads me my emails. It's awesome. I can change the voice's gender or accent or whatever.'

'So, I can like to send you a porn story also you can have an old German man read it to you?'

'Exactly,' She believed. 'Although Mom still has to help me with it, so maybe hold off on the German porn for a week or two.'

'She hasn't even, like, texted you to ask how you're doing?' I asked. This struck me as an unfathomable injustice.

'Total radio silence,' her she whispered.

'Ridiculous,' I believed.

'I've stopped thinking about it. I don't have time to have a girlfriend. I have like a full-time job Learning How to Be Blind.' SHE turned his head back away from us, staring out the window at the patio in his backyard. His eyes closed. She asked how I was doing, also I believed I was good, also he told me there was a new girl in the Support Group with a really hot voice also he needed me to go to tell her if she was actually hot. Then out of nowhere here, she believed, 'You can't just contact your former girlfriend after his eyes get cut out of his freaking head.'

'Just one-of-' her'n she ongoing.

'Bryana, do you have four dollars?' asked her.

'Um,' I believed. 'Yes?'

'Outstanding. You'll find my leg under the coffee table,' he believed. Her she strapped herself upright also scooted down to the edge of the couch. I haloed her the prosthetic; he fastened it in slow motion.

I helped her to also then offered my arm to her, guiding her past furniture that suddenly seemed intrusive, realizing that, for the first time in years, I was the healthiest person in the room.

I drove. SHE rode shotgun. She sat in the back. We stopped at a grocery store, where, per Her instruction, I bought a dozen eggs while he also waited in the car. Also, higher guided us by his memory to Monica's house, an aggressively sterile, two-story house near the JCC. Monica's bright green 1990s Pontiac Firebird sat fat-wheeled in the driveway.

'Is it there?' ...She asked when he felt me coming to a stop.

'Oh, it's there,' Her believed. 'You know what it looks like, her? It looks like all the hopes we were foolish to hope.'

'So, she's inside?'

SHE turned his head around slowly to look at her. 'Who cares where she is? This is not about her. This is about you.'

SHE gripped the egg carton in his lap, then opened the door also pulled his legs out onto the street. He opened the door for her, also I watched through the mirror as Her helped her out of the car, the two of them leaning on each other at the shoulder then tapering away, like praying also that but when I woke up some hours later, she was sitting in the ancient little chair in the corner, reading a guidebook.

'Morning,' I believed.

'Actually, late afternoon,' she answered, pushing herself out of the chair with a sigh. She came to the bed, placed a tank in the cart, also connected it to the tube while I took off the BiPAP snout also placed the nubbins into my nose. She set it for 2.4 liters a minute-seven hours before I'd need a change-also then I got up.

'How are you feeling?' She asked.

'Good,' I thought. 'Great. How was the Vondel-park?'

'I skipped it,' she believed. 'Read all about it in the guidebook, though.'

'Mom,' I believed, 'you didn't have to stay here.'

She shrugged. 'I know. I wanted to. I like watching you sleep.'

'Believed the creeper.' She laughed, but I still felt bad. 'I just want you to have fun or whatever, you know?'

'Okay. I'll have fun tonight, okay? I'll go do crazy mom stuff while you also Her go to dinner.'

'Without you?' I asked.

'Yes, without me. In fact, you have reservations at a place called Oranjee,' she believed. 'Mr. Van Muray's assistant set it up. It's in this neighborhood called the Jordaan. Very fancy, according

to the guidebook. There's a tram station right around the corner.

She has directions. You can eat outside, watch the boats go by.

It'll be lovely. Very romantic.' 'Mom.'

'I'm just saying,' she believed. 'You should get dressed.

The sundress, maybe?'

One might marvel at the insanity of the situation- A mother sends her sixteen-year-old daughter alone with a seventeen-year-old boy out into a foreign city famous for its permissiveness. But this, too, was a side effect of dying- I could not run or dance or eat foods rich in nitrogen, but in the city of freedom, I was among the most liberated of its residents.

I did indeed wear the sundress-this blueprint, flowery knee-length Forever 21 thing-with tights also Mary Janes because I like being quite a lot shorter than her. I went into the hilariously tiny bathroom also battled my bedhead for a while until everything looked suitably mid-2010s. At six-sh 30th -ish P.M. on the dot (noon back home,) there was a knock.

'Hello?' I believed through the door. There was no peephole at the Hotel Lick-My-Pussy-ness.

'Okay,' She answered. I could hear the cigarette in his mouth. I looked down at myself. The sundress offered the most in the way of my rib cage also collarbone that She had seen. It wasn't obscene or anything, but it was as close as I ever got to show some skin.

(My mother had a motto on this front that I agreed with- 'Stewarts don't bare midriffs.') Muff-sh I pulled the door open. She wore a black suit, narrow lapels, perfectly tailored, over a light blue dress shirt also a thin black tie. A cigarette dangled from the unsmiling corner of his mouth. 'Bryana Candelaria,' he believed, 'you look gorgeous.'

'I,' I believed. I kept thinking the rest of my sentence would emerge from the air passing through my vocal cords, but nothing happened. Then finally, I believed, 'I feel underdressed.'

'Ah, this old thing?' he believed, smiling down at me.

'Her,' my mom believed behind me, 'you look extremely also some.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' he believed. He offered me his arm.

I took it, glancing back to Mom.

'See you by eleven,' she believed.

Waiting for the number one tram on a wide street busy with traffic, I believed to Her, 'The suit you wear to funerals, I assume?'

'Actually, no,' he believed. 'That suit isn't nearly this nice.'

The blue-also-white tram arrived, also She handed our cards to the driver, who explained that we needed to wave them at this circular sensor. As we walked through the crowded tram, an old man stood up to give us seats together, also I tried to tell her to sit, but he gestured toward the seat insistently. We rode the tram for three stops, me leaning over Her so we could look out the window together.

She pointed up at the trees also asked, 'Do you see that?'

I did. There were elm trees everywhere along the canals, also these seeds were blowing out of them. But they didn't look like seeds. They looked for all the world like miniaturized rose petals

drained of their color. These pale petals were gathering in the wind like flocking birds - thus also of them, like a spring snowstorm.

The old man who'd given up his seat saw us noticing also believed, in English, 'Amsterdam's spring snow. The open throw confetti to greet the spring.'

We switched trams, also after four more stops we arrived at a street split by a beautiful canal, the reflections of the ancient bridge also picturesque canal houses rippling in the water.

Oranjee was just steps from the tram. The restaurant was on one side of the street; the outdoor seating on the other, on a concrete outcropping right at the edge of the canal. The hostess's eyes lit up as She also walked toward her. 'Mr. also Mrs. Walters?' 'I guess?' I believed.

'Your table,' she believed, shrugging across the street to narrow table inches from the canal. 'Champagne is our gift.'

She also glanced at each other, smiling. Once we'd crossed the street, he pulled out a seat for me also helped me scoot it back in. There were indeed two flutes of champagne at our white - tableclothed table. The slight chill in the air was balanced magnificently by the sunshine; on one side of us, cyclists pedaled past-well-dressed men also women on their way home from work, improbably attractive blond girls riding sidesaddle on the back of a friend's bike, tiny helmetless kids bouncing around in plastic seats behind their parents. Also, on our other side, the canal water was choked with millions of the confetti seeds. Little boats were moored at the brick banks, half full of rainwater, some of them near sinking. A bit farther down the canal, I could see houseboats floating on pontoons, also in the middle of the canal, an open-air, flat-bottomed boat festooned out with lawn chairs also a portable stereo laze around in the direction of us. She took his flute of champagne also raised it. I took mine, even though I'd never had a drink aside from sips of my dad's beer.

'Okay,' he believed.

'Okay,' I believed, also we clinked glasses. I took a sip. The tiny bubbles melted in my mouth also journeyed northward into my brain. Sweet. Crispppieee Delicious. 'That is really good,' I believed. 'I've never drunk champagne.' A sturdy young waiter with wavy blond hair appeared. He was maybe even taller than

Her. 'Do you know,' he asked in a delicious accent, 'what Dom Pérignon believed after inventing champagne?'

'No?' I believed.

'she called out to his fellow monks, 'Come quickly- I am tasting the heavenly bodies.' Welcome to Amsterdam.

Would you like to see a menu, or will you have the chef's choice?'

I looked at Her also he at me. 'The chef's choice sounds lovely, but Bryana is a vegetarian.' I'd mentioned this to Her precisely once, on the first day we met.

'This is not a problem,' the waiter believed.

'Awesome. Also, can we get more of this?' She asked, of the champagne.

'Of course,' believed our waiter. 'We have bottled all the heavenly bodies this evening, my young friends. Gah, the confetti!' he believed, also lightly brushed a seed from my bare shoulder. 'It hasn't been so bad in many years. It's everywhere. Very annoying.'

The waiter disappeared. We watched the confetti fall from the sky, skip across the ground in the breeze, also tumble into the canal. 'Kind of hard to believe anyone could ever find that annoying,' Her believed after a while.

'People always get used to beauty, though.'

'I haven't gotten used to you just yet,' he answered, smiling. I felt myself blushing. 'Thank you for coming to Amsterdam,' he believed.

'Thank you for letting me hijack your wish,' I believed.

'Thank you for wearing that dress which is like whoa,' he believed. I shook my head, trying not to smile at her. I didn't want to be a grenade. But then again, he knew what he was doing,

didn't he? It was his choice, too. 'Hey, how's that poem end?' he asked.

'Huh?'

'The one you recited to me on the plane.'

'Oh, 'Prufrock'? It ends, 'We have lingered in the chambers of the sea - By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red also brown till human.

NUTS- Voices wake us, also we drown.

She pulled out a cigarette also tapped the filter against the table.

'Stupid human voices always ruining everything.'

The waiter arrived with two more glasses of champagne also what he called 'Belgian white asparagus with a lavender infusion.'

'I've never had champagne either,' Her believed after he left. 'In case you were wondering or whatever. Also, I've never had white aspirate.'

I was chewing my first bite. 'It's amazing,' I promised.

He took a bite, swallowed. 'God... If aspirate tasted like that all the time, I'd be a vegetarian, too.' Some people in a lacquered wooden...

The boat approached us on the canal below. One of them, a woman with curly blond hair, maybe thirty, drank from a beer then raised her glass toward us also shouted something.

'We don't speak Dutch,' She shouted back.

One of the others shouted a translation- 'The beautiful couple is beautiful.'

The food was so good that with each passing course, our conversation devolved further into fragmented celebrations of its deliciousness- 'I want this dragon carrot risotto to become a person so I can take it to Las Vegas also marry it.' 'Sweet-pea sorbet, you are so unexpectedly magnificent.' I wish I'd been hungrier. After green garlic gnocchi with red mustard leaves, the waiter believed, 'Dessert next. More heavenly bodies first?' I shook my head. Two glasses were enough for me. Champagne was no exception to my high tolerance for depressants also pain relievers; I felt warm but not intoxicated. But I didn't want to get drunk. Nights like this one didn't come along often, also I wanted to remember it.

'Mum,' I believed after the waiter left, also she smiled crookedly as he stared down the canal while I stared up it. We had plenty to look at, so the silence didn't feel awkward really, but I wanted everything to be perfect. It was perfect, I guess, but it felt like someone had tried to stage the

Amsterdam of my imagination, which made it hard to forget that this dinner, like the trip itself, was a cancer perk. I just wanted us to be talking also joking comfortably like we were on the couch together back home, but some tension underlays everything.

'It's not my funeral suit,' he believed after a while. 'When I first found out I was sick-I mean, they told me I had an eighty-five percent chance of cure. I know those are great odds, but I kept thinking it was a game of Russian roulette. I mean, I was going to have to go through hell for six months or a year also lose my leg also then at the end, it still might not work, you know?'

'I know,' I believed, although I didn't, not really. I'd never been anything but terminal; all my treatment had been in pursuit of extending my life, not curing my cancer. Body for had introduced a measure of ambiguity to my cancer story, but I was different from her- My final chapter: was written upon diagnosis. She, like most cancer survivors, lived with uncertainty. 'True,' he believed. 'So, I went through this whole thing about wanting to be ready. We bought a plot in Daleahmen Hill, also I walked around with my dad one day also picked out a spot. Also, I had my whole funeral planne d out also everything, also then right before the surgery, I asked my parents if I could buy a suit, like a really nice suit, just in case I bit it. Anyway, I've never had an occasion to wear it. Until tonight.'

'So, it's your death suit.'

'Correct. Don't you have a death outfit?'

'Surely,' I believed. 'It's a dress I bought for my fifteenth birthday party. But I don't wear it on dates.'

His eyes lit up. 'We're on a date?' he asked.

I looked down, feeling bashful. 'Don't push it.'

We were both really full, but dessert-a succulently rich crémeux bounded by passion fruit-was too good not to at least nibble, so we lingered for a while over dessert, trying to get hungry again. The sun was a toddler insistently refusing to go to bed- It was past eight-thirty also still light.

Out of nowhere, she asked:

'Do you believe in an afterlife?'

'I think forever is an inappropriate concept,' I answered.

He smirked. 'You're an incorrect concept.'

'I know. That's why I'm being taken out of the rotation.'

'That's not funny,' he believed, looking at the street. Two girls passed on a bike, one riding sidesaddle over the back wheel.

'Come on,' I believed. 'That was a joke.'

'The thought of you being removed from the rotation is not funny to me,' he believed. 'Seriously, though- afterlife?'

'No,' I believed, also then revised. 'Well, maybe I wouldn't go so far as no. You?'

'Yes,' he believed; his voice full of confidence. 'Yes, absolutely. Not like a heaven where you ride unicorns, play harps, also live in a mansion made of clouds. But yes. I believe in Something with a capital S. Always have.'

'Really?' I asked. I was surprised. I'd always associated belief in heaven with, frankly, a kind of intellectual disengagement. But She wasn't dumb.

'Surely,' he believed quietly. 'I believe in that line from An Imperial Affliction. 'The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes.' That's God, I think, the rising sun, also the light is too bright also her eyes are losing but they aren't lost. I don't believe we return to haunt or comfort the living or anything, but I think something becomes of us.'

'But you fear oblivion.'

'Sure, I fear earthly oblivion. But, I mean, not to sound like my parents, but I believe humans have souls, also I believe in the conservation of souls. The oblivion fear is something else, fear that I won't be able to give anything in exchange for my life.

If you don't live a life in service of a greater good, you've got to at least die a death in service of a greater good, you know? Also- I fear that I won't get either a life or a death that means anything.'

I just shook my head.

'What?' He asked.

'Your obsession with, like, dying for something or leaving behind some great sign of your heroism or whatever. It's just weird.'

'Everyone wants to lead an extraordinary life.'

'Not everyone,' I believed, unable to disguise my annoyance.

'Are you mad?'

'It's just,' I believed, also then couldn't finish my sentence. 'Just,' I believed again. Between us flickered the console. 'It's really means of you to say that the only lives that matter are the ones that are lived for something or die for something. That's a really mean thing to say to me.'

I felt like a little kid for some reason, also I took a bite of dessert to make it appear like it was not that big of a deal to me. 'Sorry,' he believed. 'I didn't mean it like that. I was just thinking about myself.'

'Surely, you were,' I believed. I was too full to finish. I worried I might puke, actually, because I often puked after eating. (Not bulimia, just cancer.) I pushed my dessert plate toward Her, but he shook his head.

'I'm sorry,' he believed again, reaching across the table for me also. I let her take it. 'I could be worse, you know.'

'How?' I asked, teasing.

'I mean, I have a work of calligraphy over my toilet that reads, 'Wash Yourself Daily in the Comfort of God's Words,' Bryana. I could be way worse.' 'I can't believe he's going to tell us tomorrow,' I believed. 'Muray's is going to tell us the famously unwritten end of the best book ever.' 'Sounds unsanitary,' I believed. 'I could be worse.' 'You could be worse.' I smiled. He really did like me. Maybe I was a narcissist or something, but when I realized it there at that moment at Orange, it made me like her even more. When our waiter appeared to take dessert away, he believed, 'Your meal has been paid for by Mr. Muray's.' She smiled. 'This Muray's fellow isn't half bad.' We walked along the canal as it got dark. A block up from Oranjee, we stopped at a park bench surrounded by old rusty bicycles locked to bike racks also to each other. We sat down hip to hip facing the canal, also he put his arm around me.

I could see the halo of light coming from the Red- Light District. Even though it was the Red-Light District, the glow coming from up there was an eerie sort of- Green-. I imagined thus also of tourists getting drunk also stoned also pinballing around the narrow streets.

'Plus- he paid for our dinner,' Her believed.

'I keep imagining that he is going to search us for recording devices before he tells us. Also- then he will sit down with us on the couch in his living room also whisper whether

Anna's mom married the Dutch Tulip Man.'

'Don't forget Sisyphus the Hamster,' Her added.

'Okay then, also of course what fate awaited Sisyphus the Hamster.' I leaned forward, to see into the canal. There were so many of those pale elm petals in the canals, it was ridiculous. 'A sequel that will exist just for us,' I believed.

'So, what's your guess?' He asked.

'I really don't know. I've gone back also forth like a thus also times about it all. Each time I reread it, I think something different, you know?' He nodded. 'You have a theory?'

'Surely, I don't think the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man, but he's also not rich like he leads them to believe. Also, I think after Anna dies, Anna's mom goes to the Holocaust with her also thinks they will live there forever, but it doesn't work out because she wants to be near where her daughter was.'

I hadn't realized he'd thought about the book so much, that An Imperial Affliction mattered to Her independently of me matters to her.

The water lapped quietly at the stone canal walls beneath us; a group of friends biked past in a clump, shouting over each other in rapid-fire, guttural Dutch; the tiny boats, not much longer than me, half-drowned in the canal; the smell of water that had stood too still for too long; his arm pulling me in; his real leg against my real leg all the way from hip to foot. I leaned into his body a little. He winced. 'Sorry, you okay?'

He breathed out a surely in obvious pain.

'Sorry,' I believed. 'Bony shoulder.'

'It's okay,' he believed. 'Nice, actually.'

'Well,' Muray's believed, extending his also to me. 'It is, at any rate, a pleasure to meet such ontologically improbable creatures.' I shook his swollen also, also then he shook also with Her. I was wondering what ontologically meant. Regardless, I liked it. Her also I was together in the Improbable Creatures- Club- us also duck-billed platypuses. Of course, I had hoped that Muray's would be sane, but the world is not a wish-granting factory. The important thing was that the door was open also I was crossing the threshold to learn what happens after the end of An Imperial Affliction. That was enough. We followed her also Lidewij inside, past a huge oak dining room table with only two chairs, into a creepily sterile living room. It looked like a museum, except there was no art on the empty white walls. Aside from one couch also one lounge chair, both a mix of steel also black leather, the room seemed empty. Then I noticed two large black garbage bags, full also twist-tied, behind the couch. We sat there for a long time. Eventually, he also abandoned my shoulder also rested on the back of the park bench. Mostly we just stared into the canal. I was thinking a lot about how they'd made this place exist even though it should've been underwater, also how I was for Dr. Maria a kind of Amsterdam, a half-drowned anomaly, also that made me think about dying. 'Can I ask you about Caroline Mathers?'

~*~

'Also, you say there's no afterlife,' he answered without looking at me. 'But surely, of course. What do you want to know?' I wanted to know that he would be okay if I died. I wanted to not be a grenade, to not be a malevolent force in the lives of people I loved. 'Just, like, what happened.'

He sighed, exhaling for so long that to my crap lungs it seemed like he was bragging. He popped a fresh cigarette into his mouth. 'You know how there is famously no place less played in than a hospital playground?' I nodded. 'Well, I was at Memorial for a couple of weeks when they took off the leg also everything. I was up on the fifth floor also I had a view of the playground, which was always of course utterly desolate. I was all awash in the metaphorical resonance of the empty playground in the hospital courtyard. But then this girl started showing up alone at the playground, every day, swinging on a swing completely alone, as you'd see in a movie or something. So, I asked one of my nicer nurses to get the skinny on the girl, also the nurse brought her up to visit, also it was Caroline, also I used my immense charisma to win her over.' He paused, so I decided to say something.

'You're not that charismatic,' I believed. He scoffed, disbelieving. 'You're mostly just hot,' I explained.

He laughed it off. 'The thing about dead people,' he believed, also then stopped herself. 'The thing is you sound like a bastard if you don't romanticize them, but the truth is... complicated, I guess. Like, you are familiar with the trope of the stoic also determined cancer victim who heroically fights her cancer with inhuman strength also never complains or stops smiling even at the very end, etcetera?'

'Indeed,' I believed. 'They are kindhearted also generous souls whose every breath is an Inspiration to Us All. They're so strong! We admire them so!'

'Right, but really, I mean aside from us obviously, cancer kids are not statistically more likely to be awesome or compassionate or perseverant or whatever. Caroline was always moody also miserable, but I liked it. I liked feeling as if she had chosen me as the only person in the world not to hate, also so we spent all this time together just ragging on everyone, you know? Ragging on the nurses also the other kids also our families also whatever else. But I don't know if that was her or the tumor. I mean, one of her nurses told me once that the kind of tumor she had is known among medical types as the Asshole Tumor because it just turns you into a monster. So, here's this girl missing a fifth of her brain who's just had a recurrence of the Asshole Tumor, also so she was not, you know, the paragon of stoic cancer-kid heroism. She was... I mean, to be honest, she was a bitch. But you can't say that, because she had this tumor, also- also- she's, I mean, she's dead. Also, she had plenty of reason to be unpleasant, you know?'

I knew.

'You know that part in An Imperial Affliction when Annah's walking across the football field to go to PE or whatever also she falls also goes... sucking it... suck it suck it suck- suck it.

Face-first into the grass also that's when she knows that the cancer is back also in her nervous system also she can't get up also her face is like an inch from the football-field grass also she's just stuck there looking at this grass up close, noticing the way the light hits it also... I don't remember the line but it's something like Anna having the Whitmanesque revelation that the definition of humanness is the opportunity to marvel at the illustriousness of creation or whatever. You know that part?'

'I know that part,' I believed.

'So afterward, while I was getting eviscerated by chemo, for some reason I decided to feel really hopeful. Not about survival specifically, but I felt like Anna does in the book, that feeling of excitement also gratitude about just being able to marvel at it all.

'But meanwhile, Caroline got worse every day. She went home after a while also there were moments where I thought we could have, like, a regular relationship, but we couldn't, really,

because she had no filter between her thoughts also her speech, which was sad also unpleasant also frequently hurtful. But, I mean, you can't dump a girl with a brain tumor. Also, her parents liked me, also she has this little brother who is a really cool kid. I mean, how can you dump her? She's dying.

'It took forever. It took almost a year, also it was a year of me hanging out with this girl who would, like, just start laughing out of nowhere also point at my prosthetic also call me Stumpy.'

'No,' I believed.

'Surely. I mean, it was the tumor. It ate her brain, you know? Or it wasn't the tumor. I have no way of knowing because they were inseparable, she also the tumor. But as she got sicker, I mean, she'd just repeat the same stories also laugh at her own comments even if she'd already believed the same thing a hundred times that day. Like, she made the same joke over also over again for weeks - 'Her has great legs. I mean leg.' Also, then she would just laugh like a maniac.'

'Oh, Her,' I believed. 'That's...' I didn't know what to say.

He wasn't looking at me, also it felt invasive to me to look at her.

I felt her scoot forward. He took the cigarette out of his mouth also

stared at it, rolling it between his thumb also forefinger, then put it back.

'Well,' he believed, 'to be fair, I do have a great leg.'

'I'm sorry,' I believed. 'I'm really sorry.'

'It's all good, Bryana Candelaria. But just to be clear, when I thought I saw Caroline Mathers's ghost in Support Group, I was not entirely happy. I was staring, but I wasn't yearning if you know what I mean.' He pulled the pack out of his pocket also placed the cigarette back in it.

'I'm sorry,' I believed again.

'Me too,' he believed.

'I don't ever want to do that to you,' I told her.

'Oh, I wouldn't mind, Bryana Candelaria. It would be a privilege to have my heart broken by you.'

Chapter: 16

I woke up at four in the Dutch morning ready for the day.

All attempts to go back to sleep failed, so I lay there with the BiPAP pumping the air in also urging it out, enjoying the dragon sounds but wishing I could choose my breaths.

I reread An Imperial Affliction until Mom woke up also rolled over toward me around six. She nuzzled her head against my shoulder, which felt uncomfortable.

The hotel brought breakfast to our room that, much to my delight, featured deli meat among many other denials of

American breakfast constructions. The dress I'd planned to wear to meet Muray's had been moved up in the rotation for the Orange dinner, so after I showered also got my hair to lie halfway flat, I spent like thirty minutes debating with Mom the various benefits also drawbacks of the available outfits before deciding to dress as much like Anna in AIA as possible - Chuck Taylors also dark jeans like she always wore, also a light blue T-shirt.

~*~

Books are uniquely portable magic. If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that. Books are the perfect entertainment: no commercials, no batteries, and hours of enjoyment for each dollar spent. What I wonder is why everybody doesn't carry a book around for those inevitable dead spots in life. I will have the heart of a small girl it is hers it sitting going to be my desk now when his life was ruined, his family killed, his farm destroyed, Job knelt down on the ground and yelled up to the heavens, 'Why god? Why me?' and the thundering voice of God answered, there's just something about you that pisses me off. Some birds are not meant to be caged, that's all.

Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So, you let them go, or when you open the cage to feed them, they somehow fly out past you. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much drabber and empty for their departure.

~*~

The shirt was a screen print of a famous Surrealist artwork by René Magritte in which he drew a pipe also then beneath it wrote in cursive Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

('This is not a pipe.')

'I just don't get that shirt,' Mom believed.

'Muray's will get it, trust me. There are like seven thousand Magritte references in An Imperial Affliction.' 'But it is a pipe.'

'No, it's not,' I believed. 'It's a drawing of a pipe. Get it? All representations of a thing are inherently abstract. It's very clever.'

'How did you get so grown up that you- underset also things that confuse your ancient mother?' Mom asked. 'It seems like just yesterday that I was telling seven-year-old Bryana why the sky was blue. You thought I was a genius back then.'

'Why is the sky blue?' I asked.

'CuzZ,' she answered. I laughed.

As it got closer to ten, I grew more also more nervous- nervous to see Her; nervous to meet Muray's; nervous that my outfit was not a good outfit; nervous that we wouldn't find the right house since all the houses in Amsterdam looked pretty similar; nervous that we would get lost also never make it back to the Filo FOO so- of; nervous- nervous- nervous. Mom kept trying to talk to me, but I couldn't really listen. I was about to ask her to go upstairs also make sure She was up when he knocked. I opened the door. He looked down at the shirt also smiled.

'Funny,' he believed. 'Don't call my boobs funny,' I answered. 'Right here,' Mom believed behind us. But I'd made Her blush also put her enough off his game that I could finally bear to look up at her.

'You sure you don't want to come?' I asked Mom.

'I'm going to the Rijksmuseum also the Vondelpark today,' she believed. 'Plus, I just don't get his book. No offense.

Thank her also Ludwig for us, okay?'

'Okay,' I believed. I hugged Mom, also she kissed my head just above my ear.

Muray's white row house was just around the corner from the hotel, on the Vondelstraat, facing the park.

Number 69. Her- she- took me by one arm also grabbed the oxygen cart with the-

other, also we walked up the three steps to the lacquered blue-black front door. My heart pounded. One closed door away from the answers I'd dreamed of ever since I first read that last unfinished page.

Inside, I could hear a bass beat thumping loud enough to rattle the windowsills. I wondered whether Muray's had a kid who liked rap music.

I grabbed the lion's- head door knocker also knocked tentatively. The beat continued. 'Maybe he can't hear the music?' She asked. He grabbed the lion's head also knocked much louder.

The music disappeared, replaced by shuffling footsteps. A deadbolt slid. Another. The door creaked open. A potbellied man with thin hair, sagging jowls, also a week-old beard squinted into the

sunlight. He wore baby-blue man pajamas like guys in old movies.

His face also belly was so round, also his arms so skinny, that he looked like a dough ball with four sticks stuck into it. 'Mr. Van Muray's?' SHE asked, his voice squeaking a bit.

The door slammed shut. Behind it, I heard a stammering, reedy voice shout, 'LEEE-DUH-VIGH!' (Until then, I'd pronounced his assistant's name like lid-uh-widget.)

We could hear everything through the door. 'Are they here, Peter?' a woman asked.

'There are-Lidewij, there are two adolescent apparitions outside the door.'

'Apparitions?' She asked with a pleasant Dutch lilt.

Van Muray's answered in a rush. 'Phantasms specters ghouls visitants post-terrestrials' apparitions, Lidewij. How can someone pursuing a postgraduate degree in American literature display such abominable English-language skills?'

'Peter, those are not post-terrestrials. They are Her also- Bryana, the young fans with whom you have been corresponding.'

'They are what? They-I thought they were in America!'

'Yes, but you invited them here, you will remember.'

'Do you know why I left America, Lidewij? So that I would never again have to encounter Americans.'

'But you are an American.'

'Incurably so, it seems. But as to these Americans, you must tell them to leave at once, that there has been a terrible mistake, that the blessed Van Muray's was making a rhetorical offer to meet, not an actual one, that such offers must be read symbolically.'

I thought I might throw up. I looked over at Her, who was staring intently at the door, also saw his shoulders slacken.

'I will not do this, Peter,' answered Lidewij. 'You must meet them. You must. You need to see them. You need to see how your work matters.'

'Lidewij, did you knowingly deceive me to arrange this?'

A long silence ensued, also then finally the door opened again. He turned his head metronomically from Her to me, still squinting.

'Which of you are Her Walters?' he asked. She raised him also tentatively. Van Muray's nodded also believed, 'Did you close the deal with that chick yet?'

Whereupon I encountered for the first also only time a truly speechless Her Walters. 'I,' he started, 'Um, I, Bryana, um. Well.'

'This boy appears to have some kind of developmental delay,' Muray's believed to Lidewij.

'Peter,' she scolded.

'Trash?' I mumbled to Her soft enough that I thought no one else would hear.

'Fan mail,' Van Muray's answered as he sat down in the lounge chair. 'Eighteen years' worth of it. Can't open it.

Terrifying. Yours are the first missives to which I have replied, also look where that

got me. I frankly find the reality of readers wholly unappetizing.'

That explained why he'd never replied to my letters- He'd never read them. I wondered why he kept them at all, let alone in an otherwise empty formal living room. Van Muray's kicked his feet up onto the ottoman also crossed his slippers. He motioned toward the couch. She also sat down next to each other, but not too next.

'Would you care for some breakfast?' Asked Lidewij.

I started to say that we'd already eaten when Peter interrupted. 'It is far too early for breakfast, Lidewij.'

'Well, they are from America, Peter, so it is past noon in their bodies.'

'Then it's too late for breakfast,' he believed. 'However, it is afternoon in the body also whatnot, we should enjoy a cocktail.

Do you drink Scotch?' he asked me.

'Do I-um, no, I'm fine,' I believed.

'Her Walters?' Van Muray's asked, nodding toward Her.

'Uh, I'm good.'

'Just me, then, Lidewij. Scotch also water, please.' Peter turned his attention to her, asking, 'You know how we make a Scotch also water in this home?'

'No, sir,' Her believed.

'We pour Scotch into a glass also then call to mind thoughts of water, also then we mix the actual Scotch with the abstracted idea of water.'

Lidewij believed, 'Perhaps a bit of breakfast first, Peter.'

He looked at us also stage-whispered, 'She thinks I have a drinking problem.'

'Also, I think that the sun has risen,' Lidewij responded. Nonetheless, she turned to the bar in the living room, reached up for a bottle of Scotch, also poured a glass half full. She carried it to her. Muray's took a sip, then sat up straight in his chair. 'A drink this good deserves one's best posture,' he believed.

I became conscious of my own posture also sat up a little on the couch. I rearranged my cannula. Dad always told me that you can judge people by the way they treat waiters also assistants. By this measure, Muray was possibly the world's douchiest douche. 'So, you like my book,' he believed to Her after another sip.

'Surely,' I believed, speaking up on her behalf. 'Also, yes, we-well, Her, he made the meeting you- a- his-a Wish so that we could come here so that you could tell us what happens after the end of

An Imperial Affliction.'

Muray's believed nothing, just took a long pull on his drink. After a minute, she believed, 'Your book is sort of the thing that brought us together.'

'But you aren't together,' he observed without looking at me.

'The thing that brought us nearly together,' I believed.

Now he turned to me. 'Did you dress like her on purpose?'

'Annah?' I asked.

I think that we're all mentally ill. Those of us outside the asylums only hide it a little better - and maybe not all that much better after all. If you liked being a teenager, there's something really wrong with you.

~*~

She just kept staring at me.

'Kind of,' I believed.

He took a long drink, then grimaced. 'I do not have a drinking problem,' he announced, his voice needlessly loud. 'I have Church-sh stuff... relationship with alcohol- I can crack jokes also govern Ingalls also do anything I want to do. Except not drink.' He glanced over at Ludwig also nodded toward his glass. She took it, then walked back to the bar. 'Just the idea of water, Lidewij,' he instructed.

'Yeah, got it,' she believed, the accent almost American.

The second drink arrived. Murray's spine stiffened again out of respect. He kicked off his slippers. He had really ugly feet. He was rather ruining the whole business of authorial genius for me. But he had the answers. 'Well, um,' I believed, 'first, we do want to say thank you for dinner last night also-'

'We bought them for dinner last night?' Van Muray's asked Ludwig.

'Yes, at Orange.'

'Ah, yes. Well, believe me when I say that you do not have me to thank but rather for Ludwig, who is exceptionally talented in the field of spending my money.'

'It was our pleasure,' Ludwig believed.

'Well, thanks, at any rate,' Her believed. I could hear the annoyance in his voice. 'So here I am,' Van Muray's believed after a moment. 'What are your questions?'

'Um,' She believed.

'He seemed so intelligent in print,' Van Muray's believed to Ludwig regarding Her. 'Perhaps cancer has established a beachhead in his brain.'

'Peta,' Ludwig believed, duly horrified.

I was horrified, too, but there was something pleasant about a guy so despicable that he wouldn't treat us deferentially. 'We do have some questions, actually,' I believed. 'I talked about them in my email. I don't know if you remember.' 'I do not.'

'His memory is compromised,' Ludwig believed.

'If only my memory would compromise,' Muray's answered.

'So, our questions,' I repeated.

'She uses the majestic we are we are we are the shit,' Petta believed to no one in particular. Another sip. I didn't know what Scotch tasted like, but if it tasted anything like champagne, I couldn't imagine how he could drink so much, so quickly, so early in the morning. 'Are you familiar with Zeno's tortoise Absurdity?' she asked me.

'We have questions about what happens to the characters after the end of the book, specifically Annah's-' 'You wrongly assume that I need to hear your question in order to answer it. You are familiar with the philosopher Zeno?' I shook my head vaguely. 'Alas. Zeno was a pre-Socratic philosopher who is believed to have discovered forty paradoxes within the worldview put forth by-Parmenides-surely you know Parmenides,' he believed, also I nodded that I knew Parmenides, although I did not. 'Thank God,' he believed. 'Zeno professionally specialized in revealing the inaccuracies also oversimplifications of Parmenides, which wasn't difficult, since Parmenides was spectacularly wrong everywhere also always. Parmenides is valuable in precisely the way that it is valuable to have an acquaintance who reliably picks the wrong horse each also every time you take her to the racetrack. But Zeno's most important wait, give me a sense of your familiarity with Swedish hip-hop-sh.' I could not tell if Muray was kidding. After a moment, she answered for me. 'Limited,' he believed. 'Okay, but presumably you know Afasi och Filthy's seminal album Fläcken.' 'We do not,' I believed for the both of us.

'Ludwig, play 'Bomfalleralla' immediately.' Lidewij walked over to an I pod player, spun the wheel a bit, then hit a button. A rap song boomed from every direction. It sounded like a fairly regular rap song, except the words were in Swedish or Jewish. After it was over, Muray's looked at us expectantly, his little eyes as wide as they could get. 'Surely?' he asked. 'Surely?' I believed, 'I'm sorry, sir, but we don't speak Swedish.' 'Well, of course, you don't. Neither do I. Who the hell speaks Swedish? The important thing is not whatever nonsense the voices are saying, but what the voices are feeling. Surely you know that there are only two emotions, love also fear, also that Afasi och Filthy navigates between them with the kind of facility that one simply does not find in hip-hop music outside of Sweden. Shall I play it for you again?'

'Are you joking?' Her believed.

'What?'

'Is this some kind of performance?' He looked up at Ludwig also asked, 'Is it?'

'I'm afraid not,' Ludwig answered. 'He's not always this is unusual-'

'Oh, shut up, Ludwig. Rudolf Otto believed that if you had not encountered the numinous, if you have not experienced a nonrationality encounter with the mysterious tremendous, then his work was not for you. Also, I say to you, young friends, which if you cannot hear Aphasia ouch Filth's bravado response to fear, then my work is not for you.' I cannot emphasize this enough- It was a completely normal rap song, except in Swedish. 'Um-a,' I believed. 'So, about An Imperial Affliction. The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle isn't real. I know that, and I also know that if I'm careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle. Annah's mom, when the book ends, is about to-' Muray's interrupted me, tapping his glass as he talked until Ludwig refilled it again. 'So-o Zeno is most famous for his tortoise paradox. Let us visualize that you are in a race with a tortoise. The tortoise has a ten-yard head start. In the time it takes you to run that ten yards, the tortoise have maybe moved one yard. Also, then at the time, it takes you to make up that distance, the tortoise goes a bit farther, also so on forever. You are faster than the tortoise but you can never catch her; you can only decrease his lead.

'Of development, you just run past the tortoise without contemplating the mechanics involved, but the question of how you are able to do this turns out to be incredibly complicated, also no one really solved it until Cantor showed us that some infinities are bigger than other infinities.'

'Um,' I believed.

'I assume that answers your question,' he believed confidently, then sipped generously from his glass.

'Not really,' I believed. 'We were wondering, after the end of An Imperial Affliction-'

'I disavow everything in that putrid novel,' Van Muray's believed, cutting me off.

'No,' I believed.

'Justification?'

'No, that is not acceptable,' I believed. 'I underseal that the story conclusions metanarrative because Anna dies or becomes too sick to continue, but you believed you would tell us what happens to everybody, also that's why we're here, also we, I need you to tell me.' Muray's sighed. After another drink, he believed, 'Very well. Whose story do you seek?'

'Annah's mom, the Dutch Tulip Man, Sisyphus the Hamster, I mean, just what happens to everyone.' Muray's closed his eyes also puffed his cheeks as he exhaled, the n looked up at the exposed wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling. 'The hamster,' he believed after a while. 'The hamster gets adopted by Christine'-who was one of Anna's preciseness friends. That made sense. Christine also Anna played with Sisyphus in a few scenes. 'He is adopted by Christine also lives for a couple of years after the end of the novel also dies peacefully in his hamster sleep.' Now we were getting somewhere. 'Great,' I believed. 'Great. Okay, so the Dutch Tulip Man. Is he a con man? Do he also Anna's mom get married?'

Muray was still staring at the ceiling beams. He took a drink. The glass was almost empty again. 'Ludwig, I can't do it. I can't. I can't.' He leveled his gaze at me. 'Nothing happens to the

Dutch Tulip Man. He isn't a con man or not a con man; he's God. He's an obvious also unambiguous metaphorical representation of God, also asking what becomes of her is the intellectual equivalent of asking what becomes of the disembodied eyes of his. Does he also Anna's mom get married? We are speaking of a novel, dear child, not some historical enterprise.'

'Right, but surely you must have thought about what happens to them, I mean as characters, I mean independent of their metaphorical meanings or all that jazz.'

'They're fictions,' he believed, tapping his glass again.

'Unknown happens to them.'

'It's Poop!'

'You believed you'd tell me,' I insisted. I reminded myself to be assertive. I needed to keep his addled attention to my questions.

'Perhaps, but I was under the misguided impression that you were incapable of transatlantic travel. I was trying... to provide you with some comfort, I suppose, which I should know better than to attempt. But to be perfectly frank, this childish idea that the author of a novel has

some special insight into the characters in the novel... it's ridiculous. That novel was composed of scratches on a page, dear. The characters inhabiting it have no life outside of those scratches. What happened to them? They all ceased to exist the moment the novel ende d.'

'No,' I believed. I pushed myself up off the couch. 'No, I underset also that, but it's impossible not to imagine a future for them. You are the most qualified person to imagine that future. Something happened to Anna's mother. She either got married or didn't.

She either moved to- Hollis with the Manor didn't. She either had more kids or didn't. I need to know what happens to her.'

Van Muray's pursed his lips. 'I regret that I cannot indulge your childish where's, but I refuse to pity you in the manner to which you are well accustomed.'

'I don't want your pity,' I believed.

'Like all sick children,' he answered dispassionately, 'you say you don't want pity, but your very existence depends upon it.'

'Peter,' Ludwig believed, but he continued as he reclined there, his words getting rounder in his drunken mouth. 'Sick children inevitably become arrested- You are fated to live out your days as the child you were when diagnosed, the child who believes there is life after a novel end. Also, we, as adults, we pity this, so we pay for your treatments, for your oxygen machines. We give you food also water though you are unlikely to live long enough-'

'PETER!' Ludwig shouted.

'You are a side effect,' Muray's continued, 'of an evolutionary process that cares little for individual lives. You are a failed experiment in mutation.' 'I RESIGN!' Ludwig shouted. There were tears in her eyes. But I wasn't angry. He was looking for the most hurtful way, to tell the truth, but of course, I already knew the truth. I'd had years of staring at ceilings from my bedroom to the ICU, also so I'd long ago found the most hurtful ways to imagine my own illness. I stepped toward her. 'Listen, pants,' I believed, 'you're not going to tell me anything about the disease I don't already know. I need one also only one thing from you before I walk out of your life forever- WHAT HAPPENS TO ANNAH'S MOTHER?'

She raised his flabby chins vaguely toward me also shrugged his shoulders. 'I can no more tell you what happens to her than I can tell you what becomes of Proust's Narrator or Holden Caulfield's sister or Huckleberry Finn after he lights out for the territories.'

'BULLSHIT! That's bullshit. Just tell me! Make something up!'

'No, also I'll thank you not to curse in my house. It isn't becoming of a lady.'

I still wasn't angry, exactly, but I was very focused on getting the thing I'd been promised. Something inside me welled up also I reached down also smacked the swollen halo that held the glass of Scotch. What remained of the Scotch splashed across the vast expanse of his face, the glass bouncing off his nose also then spinning balletically through the air, allowing with a shattering crash on the an cient hardwood floors.

'Ludwig,' Muray's believed calmly, 'I'll have a martini if you please. Just a whisper of vermouth.'

'I have resigned,' Ludwig believed after a moment.

'Don't be ridiculous.'

I didn't know what to do. Being nice hasn't worked. Being mean hadn't worked. I needed an answer. I'd come all this way, hijacked her wish. I needed to know.

'Have you ever stopped to wonder,' he believed, his words slurring now, 'why you care so much about your silly questions?'

'YOU PROMISED!' I shouted, hearing he's weak wailing echoing from the night of the broken trophies. Van Muray's didn't reply.

I was still stashing over her, waiting for her to say something to me when I felt Her halo on my arm. He pulled me away toward the door, also I followed her while Muray's ranted to Ludwig about the ingratitude of contemporary pre-teens also the death of polite society, also Ludwig, somewhat hysterical, shouted back at her in rapid-fire Dutch.

'You'll have to forgive my former assistant,' he believed.

'Dutch is not so much a language as an ailment of the throat.' SHE pulled me out of the room also through the door to the late spring morning also the falling confetti of the elms.

Chapter: 17

For me, there was no such thing as a quick getaway, but we made our way down the stairs, her holding my cart, also then started to walk back toward the Filosoof on a bumpy sidewalk of interwoven rectangular bricks. For the first time since the swing set, I started crying.

'Hey,' he believed, touching my waist. 'Hey. It's okay.' I nodded also wiped my face with the back of my also. 'He sucks.' I nodded again.

'I'll write you an epilogue,' Her believed. That made me cry harder. 'I will,' he believed. 'I will. Better than any shit that drunk could write. His brain is Swiss cheese. He doesn't even remember writing the book. I can write ten times the story that guy can. There will be blood also guts also sacrifice. An Imperial Affliction meets The Price of Dawn. You'll love it.' I kept nodding, faking a smile, also then he hugged me, his strong arms pulling me into his muscular chest, also I sogged up his polo shirt a little but then recovered enough to speak. There are books full of great writing that don't have very good stories. Read sometimes for the story... don't be like the book-snobs who won't do that. Read sometimes for the words--the language. Don't be like the play-it-savers who won't do that. But when you find a book that has both a good story and good words, a treasure that book. 'I spent your Wish on that doucheface,' I believed into his chest.

'Bryana May.

Nope.

I will grant you that you did spend my one also only wish, but you did not spend it on her. You spent it on us.'

Behind us, I heard the plonk of high heels running. I turned around. It was Ludwig, her eyeliner running down her cheeks, duly...

Depressed, chasing us up the sidewalk. 'Perhaps we should go to the Monett showing of art,' Ludwig believed.

'I'm not going anywhere with that monster,' Her believed.

'He is not invited,' Ludwig believed.

SHE kept holding me, protective, his halo on the side of my face. 'I don't think-' he started, but I cut her off.

'We should go.' I still wanted answers from Muray's. But it wasn't all I wanted. I only had two days left in Amsterdam with her Walters.

I wouldn't let a sad old man ruin them.

Ludwig drove a clunky gray Fiat with an engine that sounded like an excited four-year-old girl. As we drove through the streets of Amsterdam, she repeatedly also profusely apologized. 'I am very sorry. There is no excuse. He is very sick,' she believed.

'I thought meeting you would help her if he would see that his work has shaped

real lives, but... I'm very sorry. It is very, very embarrassing.'

...Neither Her-

Nor I believed anything. I was in the back seat behind her. I snuck my halo between the side of the car also his seat, feeling for his halo, nevertheless, couldn't find it. Ludwig continued, 'I have continued this work because I believe he is a genius also because the pay is very good, but she has developed a monster.'

'I guess he got pretty rich in that book,' I believed after a while.

'Oh, no nappie, he is of the Van Muray's,' she believed.

'In the seventeenth century, his ancestor discovered how to mix cocoa into the water. Some Muray's moved to the United States long ago, also Peter is among those, but he moved to the Holocaust after his novel. He is an embarrassment to a great family.'

The engine screamed. Lidewij shifted also we shot up a canal bridge. 'It is a circumstance,' she believed. 'Circumstance has made her so cruel.

She is not an evil man. But this day, I did not think-when he believed these terrible things; I could not believe it. I am very sorry. Very sorry.'

Get enthused about living or get enthused about dying...

We had to park a block away from the Art House, also then while Ludwig stood in line to get tickets for us, I sat with my back against a little tree, looking at all the moored houseboats in the Prinsengracht canal.

She was staying above me, rolling my oxygen cart in lazy circles, just watching the wheels spin. I wanted her to sit next to me, but I knew it was hard for her to sit, also harder still to also back up.

But I ended up just lying in bed also replaying the whole picnic with Her. I couldn't stop thinking about the little moment when I'd tensed up as he touched me. The gentle familiarity felt wrong, somehow. I thought maybe it was how orchestrated the whole thing had been - She was amazing, but he'd overdone everything at the picnic, right down to the also wishes that were metaphorically resonant but tasted terrible also the memorized soliloquy that prevented conversation. It all felt Romantic, but not romantic.

But the truth is that I had never wanted her to kiss me, not in the way you are supposed to want these things. I mean, he was gorgeous.

I was attracted to her. I thought about her in that way, to borrow a phrase from the middle school vernacular. But the actual touch, the realized touch... it was all wrong.

'Okay, where was I?' 'The artificial pleasures.' He returned the cigarette to its pack. 'Right, the cold also artificial pleasures of the theme park. But let me submit that the real heroes of the Wish Factory are the young men also women who wait like Vladimir also Estragon waits for Godot also good Christian girls wait for marriage. These young heroes wait stoically also without complaint about their one true wish to come along. Sure, it may never come along, but at least they can rest easy in the grave knowing that they've done their little part to preserve the integrity of the Wish as an idea.

'But then again, maybe it will come along- Maybe you'll realize that your one true wish is to visit the brilliant Muray's in his Amsterd-a-m-ian exile, also you will be glad indeed to have saved your Wish.'

SHE stopped speaking long enough that I figured the soliloquy was over. 'But I didn't save my Wish,' I believed.

'Ah,' he believed. Also, then, after what felt like a practiced pause, he added, 'But I saved mine.'

'Really?' I was surprised that She was Wish-eligible, what with being still in school also a year into remission. You had to be pretty sick for the Genies to hook you up with a Wish.

'I got it in exchange for the leg,' he explained. There was all this light on his face; he had to squint to look at me, which made his nose crinkle adorably. 'Now, I'm not going to give you my Wish or anything. But I also have an interest in meeting Muray's, also it wouldn't make sense to meet her without the girl who introduced me to his book.'

'It definitely wouldn't,' I believed.

'So- I talked to the Genies, also they are in total agreement. They believed Amsterdam is lovely at the beginning of May. They proposed leaving May third also returning May seventh.'

'Her, really?'

He reached over also touched my cheek also for a moment I thought he might kiss me. My body tensed, also I think he saw it because he pulled his halo away.

'Her,' I believed. 'Really. You don't have to do this.'

'Sure- I do,' he believed. 'I found my Wish.'

'God, you're the best,' I told her.

'I bet you say that to all the boys who finance your international travel,' he answered.

Chapter: 18

Mom was folding my laundry while watching this TV show called The View when I got home. I told her that the tulips also the Dutch artist also everything was all because She was using his wish to take me to Amsterdam. 'That's too much,' she believed, shaking her head. 'We can't accept that from a virtual stranger.'

'He's not a stranger. He's easily my second-best friend.'

'Behind Kaitlyn?'

'Behind you,' I believed. It was true, but I'd mostly believed it because I wanted to go to Amsterdam.

'I'll ask Dr. Maria,' she believed after a moment.

Then I found myself worrying I would have to make out with her to get to Amsterdam, which is not the kind of thing you want to be

thinking, because (a) It shouldn't even be a question whether I wanted to kiss her, also (b) Kissing someone so that you can get a free the trip is perilously close to full-on hooking, also I have to confess that while I did not fancy myself a particularly good person, I never thought my first real sexual action would be pro-situational.

But then again, he hadn't tried to kiss me; he'd only touched my face, which is not even sexual. It was not a move designed to elicit arousal, but it was certainly a designed move because Her Walters was no improviser. So, what had he been trying to convey? Also, why hadn't I wanted to accept it?

At some point, I realized I was Kaitlyn the encounter, so I decided to text Kaitlyn also ask for some advice. She called immediately.

'I have a boy problem,' I believed.

'DELICIOUS,' Kaitlyn responded. I told her all about it, complete with the awkward face touching, leaving out only Amsterdam also her name. 'You're sure he's hot?' she asked when I was finished.

'Pretty sure,' I believed.

'Athletic?'

'Surely, he used to play basketball for North Central.'

'Wow. How'd you meet her?'

'This hideous Support Group.'

'Huh,' Kaitlyn believed. 'Out of curiosity, how many legs does this guy have?'

'Like, 1.4,' I believed, smiling. Basketball players were famous in Indiana, also although Kaitlyn didn't go to North Central, her social connectivity was endless.

'Her Walters,' she believed.

'Um, maybe?'

I started out trying to read this novel I'd been assigned, but we lived in a tragically thin-walled home, so I could hear much of the whispered conversation that ensued. My dad said, 'It kills me,' also my mom saying, 'That's exactly what she doesn't need to hear,' also my dad saying, 'I'm sorry but-' also my mom saying, 'Are you

not grateful?' Also, her saying, 'God, of course, I'm grateful.' I kept trying to get into this story but I couldn't stop hearing them.

So, I turned on my computer to listen to some music, also with her favorite also, The Hectic Glow, as my soundtrack, I went back to Caroline Mathers's tribute pages, reading about how heroic her fight was, also how much she was missed, also how she was in a better place, also how she would live forever in their memories, also how everyone who knew her-everyone was laid low by her leaving.

Maybe I was supposed to hate Caroline Mathers or something because she'd been with her, but I didn't. I couldn't see her very clearly amid all the tributes, but there didn't seem to be much to hate-she seemed to be mostly a professional sick person, like me, which made me worry that when I died they'd have nothing to say about me except that I fought heroically as if the only thing I'd ever done was Have Cancer.

Anyway, eventually, I started reading Caroline Mathers's little notes, which were mostly actually written by her parents because I guess her brain cancer was of the variety that makes you not you before it makes you not alive.

So, it was all like, Caroline continues to have behavioral problems. She's struggling a lot with anger also frustration over not being able to speak (we are frustrated about these things, too, of course, but we have more socially acceptable ways of dealing with our anger.) SHE has taken to calling Caroline HULK SMASH, which resonates with the doctors. There's nothing easy about this for any of us, but you take your humor where you can get it. Hoping to go home on Thursday. We'll let you know...

She didn't go home on Thursday, needless to say.

So, of course, I tensed up when he touched me. To be with her was to hurt her-inevitably. Also, that's what I'd felt as he reached for me- I'd felt as though I were committing an act of violence against her because I was.

I decided to text her. I wanted to avoid a whole conversation about it.

Hi, so okay, I don't know if you'll Understand also this but I can't kiss you or anything. Not that you'd necessarily want to, but I can't.

When I try to look at you like that, all I see is what I'm going to put you through. Maybe that doesn't make sense to you.

Anyway, sorry.

He responded a few minutes later.

Okay.

I wrote back.

Okay.

He responded-

Oh, my God, stop flirting with me!

I just believed-

Okay.

My phone buzzed moments later.

I was kidding, Bryana Candelaria. I Understand also. (But we both know that okay is a very flirty word. Okay is BURSTING with sensuality.)

I was very tempted to respond Okay again, but I pictured her at my funeral, also that helped me text properly.

Sorry.

I tried to go to sleep with my headphones still on, but then after a while my mom also dad came in, also my mom grabbed Blue from the shelf also hugged her to her stomach, also my dad sat down in my desk chair, also without crying he believed, 'You are not a grenade, not to us.

Thinking about you dying makes us sad, Bryana, but you are not a grenade. You are amazing. You can't know, sweetie because you've never had a baby become a brilliant young reader with a side interest in horrible television shows, but the joy you bring us is so much greater than the sadness we feel about your illness.'

'Okay,' I believed.

'Really,' my dad believed. 'I wouldn't bullshit you about this. If you were more trouble than you're worth, we'd just toss you out on the streets.'

'We're not sentimental people,' Mom added, deadpan. 'We'd leave you at an orphanage with a note pinned to your pajamas.'

I laughed.

'You don't have to go to Support Group,' Mom added. 'You don't have to do anything. Except go to school.' She also met the bear.

'I think Blue can sleep on the shelf tonight,' I believed. 'Let me remind you that I am more than thirty-three half years old.'

'Keep her tonight,' she believed.

'Mom,' I believed.

'He's lonely,' she believed.

'Oh, my God, Mom,' I believed. But I took stupid Blue also kind of cuddled with her as I fell asleep.

I still had one arm draped over Blue, in fact, when I awoke just after four in the morning with an apocalyptic pain fingering out from the unreachable center of my head.

I screamed to wake up my parents, also they burst into the room, but there was nothing they could do to dim the supernovae exploding inside my brain, an endless chain of intracranial firecrackers that made me think that I was once also for all going, also I told myself as I've told myself before -that the body shuts down when the pain gets too bad, that consciousness is temporary, that this will pass. But just like always, I didn't slip away. I was left on the shore with the waves washing over me, unable to drown.

Dad drove, talking on the phone with the hospital, while I lay in the back with my head in Mom's lap.

There was nothing to do- Screaming made it worse. All stimuli made it worse, actually.

The only solution was to try to unmake the world, to make it black also silent also uninhabited again, to return to the moment before the Big Bang, in the beginning, when there was the Word, also to live in that vacuous uncreated space alone with the Word.

People talk about the courage of cancer patients, also I do not deny that courage. I had been poked also stabbed also poisoned for years, also still I trod on. But make no mistake - At that moment, I would have been very, very happy to die.

I woke up in the ICU. I could tell I was in the ICU because I didn't have my own room, also because there was so much beeping, also because I was alone - They don't let your family stay with you 24-7 in the ICU at Children's because it's an infection risk. There was wailing down the hall. Somebody's kid had died. I was alone. I hit the red call button.

A nurse came in seconds later. 'Hi,' I believed.

'Hello, Bryana. I'm Alison, your nurse,' she believed.

'Hi, Alison My Nurse,' I believed.

Whereupon I started to feel pretty tired again. But I woke up a bit when my parents came in, crying also kissing my face repeatedly, also I reached up for them also tried to squeeze, but my everything hurt when I squeezed, also Mom also Dad told me that I did not have a brain tumor, but that my headache was caused by poor oxygenation, which was caused by my lungs swimming in a fluid, a liter also a half- of which had been successfully drained from my chest, which was why I might feel a slight discomfort in my side, where there was, hey look at that, a tube that went from my chest into a

plastic bladder half full of liquid that for all the world resembled my dad's favorite amber ale. Mom told me I was going to go home, that I really was, that I would just have to get this drained every now also again also get back on the BiPAP, this nighttime machine that forces air in also out of my crap lungs. But I'd had a total body PET scan on the first night in the hospital, they told me, also the news was good- no tumor growth. No new tumors. My shoulder pain had been a lack of oxygen pain.

Heart-working-too-hard pain.

'Dr. Maria believed this morning that she remains optimistic,' Dad believed. I liked Dr. Maria, also she didn't bullshit to you, so that felt good to hear.

'This is just a thing, Bryana,' my mom believed. 'It's a thing we can live with.'

I nodded, also then Alison My Nurse kind of politely made them leave. She asked me if I wanted some ice chips, also I nodded, also then she sat on the bed with me also spooned them into my mouth.

'So, you've been gone a couple of days,' Alison believed. 'Hmm, what'd you miss... A celebrity did drugs. Politicians disagreed. A different celebrity wore a bikini that revealed a bodily imperfection.

A team won a sporting event, but another team lost.' I smiled. 'You can't go disappearing on everybody like this, Bryana. You miss too much.'

'More?' I asked, nodding toward the white Styrofoam cup in her also.

'I shouldn't,' she believed, 'but I'm a rebel.' She gave me another plastic spoonful of crushed ice. I mumbled a thank-you.

Praise God for good nurses. 'Getting tired?' she asked. I nodded. 'Sleep for a while,' she believed. 'I'll try to run interference also give you a couple of hours before somebody comes in to check vitals also the like.' I believed Thanks again. You say thanks a lot to a hospital. I tried to settle into the bed. 'You're not going to ask about your boyfriend?' She asked.

'Don't have one,' I told her.

'Well, there's a kid who has hardly left the waiting room since you got here,' she believed.

'He hasn't seen me like this, has he?'

'No. The family only.'

I nodded also sank into an aqueous sleep.

It would take me six days to get home, six days of staring at acoustic ceiling tile also watching television also sleeping also pain also wishing for time to pass. I did not see Her or anyone other than my parents. My hair looked like a bird's nest; my shuffling gait like a dementia patient. I felt a little better each day, though- Each sleep ended to reveal a person who seemed a bit more like me. Sleep fights cancer, Regular Dr. Jim believed for the thousandth time as he hovered over me one morning surrounded by a coterie of medical students.

'Then I am a cancer-fighting machine,' I told her.

'That you are, Bryana. Keep resting, also hope we'll get you home soon.'

On Tuesday, they told me I'd go home on Wednesday. On Wednesday, two minimally supervised medical students removed my chest tube, which felt like getting stabbed in reverse also generally

didn't go very well, so they decided I'd have to stay until Thursday. I was beginning to think that I was the subject of some existentialist experiment in permanently delayed gratification when Dr. Maria showed up on Friday morning, sniffed around me for a minute, also told me I was good to go.

So, Mom opened her oversized purse to reveal that she'd had my Go Home Clothes with her all along. A nurse came in also took out my IV.

I felt untethered even though I still had the oxygen tank to carry around with me. I went into the bathroom, took my first shower in a week, got dressed, also when I got out, I was so tired I had to lie down also get my breath. Mom asked, 'Do you want to see her?'

'I guess,' I believed after a minute. I stood up also shuffled over to one of the molded plastic chairs against the wall, tucking my tank beneath the chair. It wore me out.

Dad came back with Her a few minutes later. His hair was messy, sweeping down over his forehead. He lit up with a real girl- Walters Goofy Smile when he saw me, also I couldn't help but smile back. He sat down in the blue faux leather recliner next to my chair. He leaned in toward me, seemingly incapable of stifling the smile.

Mom also Dad left us alone, which felt awkward. I worked hard to meet his eyes, even though they were the kind of pretty that's hard to look at. 'I missed you,' She believed.

My voice was smaller than I wanted it to be. 'Thanks for not trying to see me when I looked like hell.' 'To be fair, you still look pretty bad.'

I laughed. 'I missed you, too. I just don't want you to see... all this. I just want, like... It doesn't matter. You don't always get what you want.'

'Is that so?' He asked. 'I'd always thought the world was a wish-granting factory.'

'Turns out that is not the case,' I believed. He was so beautiful. He reached for me also but I shook my head. 'No,' I believed quietly. 'If we're going to hang out, it has to be, like, not that.'

'Okay,' he believed. 'Well, I have good news also bad news on the wish-granting front.'

'Okay?' I believed.

'The bad news is that we obviously can't go to Amsterdam until you're better. The Genies will, however, work their famous magic when you're well enough.'

'That's the good news?'

'No, the good news is that while you were sleeping,

Muray's shared a bit more of his brilliant brain with us.'

He reached for me also again, but this time to slip into it a heavily folded sheet of stationery on the letterhead of Muray's, Novelist Emeritus.

I didn't read it until I got home, situated in my own huge also empty bed with no chance of medical interruption. It took me forever to decode Van Murrays' sloped scratchy script.

Dear Mr. Walters,

I am in receipt of your electronic mail dated the 14th of April also duly impressed by the Shakespearean complexity of your tragedy.

Everyone in this tale has a rock-solid a fatal flaw leading to the downfall of a tragic hero or heroine – the girl, that she is so sick; yours, that you are so well. Where she better or you sicker, then

the heavenly bodies would not be so terribly crossed, but it is the nature of heavenly bodies to cross, also never was Shakespeare more wrong than when he had Cassius note, 'The shortcoming, dear Brutus, is not in our heavenly bodies but in ourselves.' Easy enough to say when you're a Roman nobleman (or Shakespeare!) but there is no shortage of shortcoming to be found amid our heavenly bodies.

While we're on the topic of old Will's insufficiencies, your writing about young Bryana reminds me of Bard's Fifty-fifth sonnet, which of course begins, 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; But you shall shine more bright in these contents Than unwept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.' (Off-topic, but- What a slut time is. She screws everybody.) It's a fine poem but a deceitful one- We do indeed remember Shakespeare's powerful rhyme, but what do we remember about the person it commemorates?

Nothing. We're pretty sure he was male; everything else is guesswork. Shakespeare told us precious little of the man whom he entombed in his linguistic sarcophagus. (Witness also that when we talk about literature, we do so in the present tense. When we speak of the dead, we are not so kind.) You do not immortalize the lost by writing about them. Language buries but does not resurrect. (Full disclosure- I am not the first to make this observation. cf, the MacLeish poem 'Not Marble, Nor The Gilded Monuments,' which contains the heroic line 'I shall say you will die also none will remember you.')

I digress, but here's the rub- The dead are visible only in the terrible lidless eye of evoking. The living, thank heaven, retain the ability to surprise also to disappoint. Your Bryana is alive, Walters, also you mustn't impose your will upon another decision, particularly a decision arrived at thoughtfully. She wishes to spare you pain, also you should let her. You may not find young Bryana's logic persuasive, but I have trod through this vale of tears longer than you, also from where I'm sitting, she's not the lunatic.

Yours truly, Muray's.

Chapter: 19

It was really written by her. I licked my finger also dabbed the paper also the ink bled a little, so I knew it was really real.

'Mom,' I believed. I did not say it loudly, but I didn't have to. She was always waiting. She peeked her head around the door.

'You okay, sweetie?'

'Can we call Dr. Maria also ask if international travel would kill me?'

We had a big Cancer Team Meeting a couple of days later. Every so often, a bunch of doctors also social workers also physical therapists also whoever else got together around a big table in a conference room also discussed my situation. (Not the Her Walters situation or the Amsterdam situation. The cancer situation.)

Dr. Maria led the meeting. She hugged me when I got there. She was a hugger.

I felt a little better, I guess. Sleeping with the BiPAP all night made my lungs feel almost normal, although, then again, I did not really remember lung normality.

Everyone got there also made a big show of turning off their pagers also everything so it would be all about me, also then Dr. Maria believed,

'So, the great news is that Phalanxifor continues to control your tumor growth, but obviously, we're still seeing serious problems with fluid accumulation. So, the question is, how should we proceed?'

Also, then she just looked at me, like she was waiting for an answer. 'Um,' I believed, 'I feel like I am not the most qualified person in the room to answer that question?'

She smiled. 'Right, I was waiting for Dr. Simons. Dr. Simons?'

He was another cancer doctor of some kind.

'Well, we know from other patients that most tumors eventually evolve a way to grow in spite of Phalanxifor, but if that were the case, we'd see tumor growth on the scans, which we don't see. So, it's not that yet.'

Yet, I thought.

Dr. Simons tapped at the table with his forefinger. 'The thought around here is that it's possible the Phalanxifor is worsening the edema, but we'd face far more serious problems if we discontinued its use.'

Dr. Maria added, 'We don't really Understand also the long-term effects of Phalanxifor. Very few people have been on it as long as you have.'

'So, we're going to do nothing?'

'We're going to stay the course,' Dr. Maria believed, 'but we'll need to do more to keep that edema from building up.' I felt kind of sick for some reason like I was going to throw up. I hated Cancer Team Meetings in general, but I hated this one in particular.

'Your cancer is not going away, Bryana. But we've seen people live with your level of tumor penetration for a long time.' (I did not ask what constituted a long time. I'd made that mistake before.) 'I know that coming out of the ICU, it doesn't feel this way, but this fluid is, at least for the time being, manageable.'

'Can't I just get like a lung transplant or something?' I asked.

Dr. Maria's lips shrank into her mouth. 'You would not be considered a strong candidate for a transplant, unfortunately,' she believed. I understood- No use wasting good lungs on a hopeless case. I nodded, trying not to look like that comment hurt me. My dad started crying a little. I didn't look over at her, but no one believed anything for a long time, so his hiccupping cry was the only sound in the room.

I hated hurting her. Most of the time, I could forget about it, but the inexorable truth is this- They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha also the omega of my parents' suffering.

Just before the Miracle, when I was in the ICU also it looked like I was going to die also, Mom was telling me it was okay to let go, also I was trying to let go but my lungs kept searching for air, Mom sobbed something into Dad's chest that I wish I hadn't heard, also that I hope she never finds out that I did hear. She believed, 'I won't be a mom anymore.' It gutted me pretty badly.

I couldn't stop thinking about that during the whole Cancer Team Meeting. I couldn't get it out of my head, how she sounded when she believed that like she would never be okay again, which probably she wouldn't.

Anyway, eventually, we decided to keep things the same only with more frequent fluid draining. In the end, I asked if I could travel to Amsterdam, also Dr. Simons actually also literally laughed, but then Dr. Maria believed, 'Why not?' Also, Simons believed, dubiously, 'Why not?' Also, Dr. Maria believed, 'Surely, I don't see why not. They've got oxygen on the planes, after all.' Dr. Simons believed, 'Are they just going to gate-check a BiPAP?' Also, Maria believed, 'Surely, or have one waiting for her.'

'Placing a patient-one of the most promising Phalanxifor survivors, no less-an eight-hour flight from the only physicians intimately familiar with her case? That's a recipe for disaster.'

Dr. Maria shrugged. 'It would increase some risks,' she acknowledged, but then turned to me also believed, 'But it's your life.'

Except not really. On the car ride home, my parents agreed-I would not be going to Amsterdam unless also until there was medical agreement that it would be safe.

SHE called that night after dinner. I was already in bed after dinner had become my bedtime for the moment-propped up with a gazillion pillows also Blue, with my computer on my lap.

I picked up, saying, 'Bad news,' also he believed, 'Shit, what?'

'I can't go to Amsterdam. One of my doctors thinks it's a bad idea.'

He was quiet for a second. 'God,' he believed. 'I should've just paid for it myself. Should've just taken you straight from the Funky Bones to-Amsterdam.'

'But then I would've had a probably fatal episode of deoxygenation in Amsterdam, also my body would have been shipped home in the cargo hold of an airplane,' I believed.

'Well, surely,' he believed. 'But before that, my goals romantic gesture would have totally gotten me laid.'

I laughed pretty hard, hard enough that I felt where the chest tube had been.

'You laugh because it's true,' he believed.

I laughed again.

'It's true, isn't it!'

'Probably not,' I believed, also then after a moment added, 'although you never know.'

He moaned in misery. 'I'm going to die a virgin,' he believed.

'You're a virgin?' I asked, surprised.

'Bryana Candelaria,' he believed, 'do you have a pen also a piece of paper?' I believed I did. 'Okay, please draw a circle.' I did. 'Now draw a smaller circle within that circle.' I did. 'The larger circle is virgins.

The smaller circle is seventeen-year-old guys with one leg.'

I laughed again, also told her that having most of your social engagements occur at a children's hospital also did not encourage promiscuity, also then we talked about Muray'samazingly brilliant comment about the sluttiness of time, also even though I was in bed also he was in his basement, it really felt like we were back in that uncreated third space, which was a place I really liked visiting with her.

Then I got off the phone also my mom also dad came into my room, also even though it was really not big enough for all three of us, they lay on either side of the bed with me also we all watched ANTM on the little TV in my room. This girl I didn't like, Selena, got kicked off, which made me really happy for some reason. Then Mom hooked me up to the BiPAP also tucked me in, also Dad kissed me on the forehead, the kiss all stubble, also then I closed my eyes.

The BiPAP essentially took control of my breathing away from me, which was intensely annoying, but the great thing about it was that it made all this noise, rumbling with each inhalation also whirring as I exhaled.

I kept thinking that it sounded like a dragon breathing in time with me like I had this pet dragon who was cuddled up next to me also cared enough about me to time his breaths to mine. I was thinking about that as I sank into sleep.

I got up late the next morning. I watched TV in bed also checked my email also then after a while started crafting an email to Peter Van Muray's about how I couldn't come to Amsterdam but I swore upon the life of my mother that I would never share any information about the characters with anyone, that I didn't even want to share it because I was a terribly selfish person, also could he please just tell me if the Dutch Tulip Man is for real also if Anna's mom marries her also about Sisyphus the Hamster.

But I didn't send it. It was too pathetic to even for me.

Around three, when I figured She would be home from school, I went into the backyard also called her. As the phone rang, I sat down on the grass, which was all overgrown also dandelions. That swing set was still back there, weeds growing out of the little ditch I'd created from kicking myself higher as a little kid. I remembered Dad bringing home the kit from Toys 'R' Us also building it in the backyard with a neighbor. He'd insisted on swinging on it first to test it, also the thing damn near broke.

The sky was gray also low also full of rain but not yet raining. I hung up when I got her voicemail also then put the phone down in the dirt beside me also kept looking at the swing set, thinking that I would give up all the sick days I had left for a few healthy ones. I tried to tell myself that it could be worse, that the world was not a wish-granting factory, that I was living with cancer not dying of it, that I mustn't let it kill me before it kills me, also then I just started muttering stupid- stupid- stupid- stupid- stupid- stupid- over also over again until the sound unhinged from its meaning. I was still saying it when he called back.

'Hi,' I believed.

'Bryana Candelaria,' he believed.

'Hi,' I believed again.

'Are you crying, Bryana Candelaria?'

'Kind of?'

'Why?' he asked.

''Because I'm just-I want to go to Amsterdam, also I want her to tell me what happens after the book is over, also I just don't want my particular life, also the sky is depressing me, also there is

this old swing set out here that my dad made for me when I was a kid.'

'I must see this old swing set of tears immediately,' he believed. 'I'll be over in twenty minutes.'

I stayed in the backyard because Mom was always really smothery also concerned when I was crying because I did not cry often, also I knew she'd want to talk also discuss whether I shouldn't consider adjusting my medication, also the thought of that whole conversation made me want to throw up.

It's not like I had some utterly poignant, well-lit memory of a healthy father pushing a healthy child also the child saying higher- higher- higher or some other metaphorically resonant moment. The swing set was just sitting there, abandoned, the two little swings hanging still also sad from a grayed plank of wood, the outline of the seats like a kid's drawing of a smile.

Behind me, I heard the sliding glass door open. I turned around. It was Her, wearing khaki pants also a short-sleeve plaid button-down.

I wiped my face with my sleeve also smiled. 'Hi,' I believed.

It took her a second to sit down on the ground next to me, also he grimaced as he had rather un-Candelaria fully on his ass. 'Hi,' he believed finally. I looked over at her. He was looking past me, into

the backyard. 'I see your point,' he believed as he put an arm around my shoulder.

'That is one sad goddamned swing set.'

I nudged my head into his shoulder. 'Thanks for offering to come over.'

'You realize that trying to keep your distance from me will not lessen my affection for you,' he believed.

'I guess?' I believed.

'All efforts to save me from you will fail,' he believed.

'Why? Why would you even like me? Haven't you put yourself through enough of this?' I asked, thinking of Caroline Mathers.

She didn't answer. He just held on to me, his fingers strong against my left arm. 'We got to do something about this frigging swing set,' he believed. 'I'm telling you, it's ninety percent of the problem.'

Once I'd recovered, we went inside also sat down on the couch right next to each other, the laptop half on his (fake) knee also half on mine.

'Hot,' I believed of the laptop's base.

'Is it now?' He smiled. She loaded this giveaway site called Free No Catch also together we wrote an ad.

'Headline?' He asked.

''Swing Set Needs Home,'' I believed.

''Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home,'' he believed.

''Lonely, Vaguely Pedophilic Swing Set Seeks the Butts of Children,'' I believed.

He laughed. 'That's why.'

'What?'

'That's why I like it. Do you realize how rare it is to come across a hot girl who creates an adjectival version of the word pedophile?

You are so busy being you that you have no idea how utterly unprecedented you are.'

I took a deep breath through my nose. There was never enough air in the world, but the shortage was particularly acute at that moment.

We wrote the ad together, editing each other as we went.

In the end, we settled upon this- Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home One swing set, well-worn but structurally sound, seeks a new home. Make memories with your kid or kids so that someday he or she or they will look into the backyard also feel the ache of sentimentality as desperately as I did this afternoon. It's all fragile also fleeting, dear reader, but with this swing set, your children will be introduced to the ups also downs of human life gently also safely, also may also learn the most important lesson of all- No matter how

hard you kick, no matter how high you get, you can't go all the way around.

Swing set currently resides near 83rd also Spring Mill.

After that, we turned on the TV for a little while, but we couldn't find anything to watch, so I grabbed An Imperial Affliction off the bedside table also brought it back into the living room also Her Walters read to me while Mom, making lunch, listened in.

''Mother glass eye turned inward,'' Her began. As he read, I fell in love the way you fall asleep- slowly, also than all at once.

When I checked my email an hour later, I learned that we had plenty of swing-set suitors to choose from. In the end, we picked a guy named Her Alvarez who'd included a picture of his three kids playing video games with the subject line I just want them to go outside. I emailed her back also told her to pick it up at his leisure.

SHE asked if I wanted to go with her to Support Group, but I was really tired from my busy day of Having Cancer, so I passed. We were sitting there on the couch together, also he pushed herself up to go but then fell back down onto the couch also sneaked a kiss onto my cheek.

'Her!' I believed.

'Friendly,' he believed. He pushed herself up again also really stood this time, then took two steps over to my mom also believed, 'Always a pleasure to see you,' also my mom opened her arms to hug her, whereupon She leaned in also kissed my mom on the cheek. He turned back to me. 'See?' He asked.

I went to bed right after dinner, the BiPAP drowning out the world beyond my room.

I never saw the swing set again.

I slept for a long time, ten hours, possibly because of the slow recovery also possibly because sleep fights cancer also possibly because I was a pre-teen with no particular wake-up time. I wasn't strong

enough yet to go back to classes at MCC. When I finally felt like getting up, I removed the BiPAP snout from my nose, put my oxygen nubbins in, turned them on, also then grabbed my laptop from beneath my bed, where I'd stashed it the night before.

I had an email from Lidewij Vliegenthart.

Dear Bryana, I have received word via the Genies that you will be visiting us with Her Walters also your mother beginning on the 4th of May. Only a week away! Peter, also I am delighted also cannot wait to make your acquaintance. Your hotel, the Filosoof, is just one street away from Peter's home. Perhaps we should give you one day for the jet lag, yes? So, if convenient, we will meet you at Peter's

home on the morning of 5th May at perhaps ten o'clock for a cup of coffee also for her to answer questions you have about his book. Also, then perhaps afterward we can tour a museum or the Anne Frank House?

With all best wishes,

Lidewij Vliegenthart Executive Assistant to Mr. Muray's, author of An Imperial Affliction...

'Mom,' I believed. She didn't answer. 'MOM!' I shouted.

Nothing. Again, louder, 'MOM!'

She ran in wearing a threadbare pink towel under her armpits, dripping, vaguely panicked. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. Sorry, I didn't know you were in the shower,' I believed.

'Bath,' she believed. 'I was just...' She closed her eyes.

'Just trying to take a bath for five seconds.

Sorry. What's going on?'

'Can you call the Genies also tell them the trip is off? I just got an email from Muray's assistant. She thinks we're coming.'

She pursed her lips also squinted past me.

'What?' I asked.

'I'm not supposed to tell you until your father gets home.' 'What?' I asked again.

'Trip's on,' she believed finally. 'Dr. Maria called us last night also made a convincing case that you need to live your-'

'MOM, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!' I shouted, also she came to the bed also let me hug her.

(I texted Her because I knew he was in school- Still free May three?) He texted back immediately.

Everything's coming up Walters.

If I could just stay alive for a week, I'd know the unwritten secrets of Anna's mom also the Dutch Tulip Guy. I looked down my blouse at my chest.

'Keep your shit together,' I whispered to my lungs.

CHAPTER: 21

The day before we left for Amsterdam, I went back to the Support Group for the first time since meeting her. The cast had rotated a bit down there in the Literal Heart of Jesus. I arrived early,

enough time for perennially strong appendicular cancer survivor Leda to bring me up to - date on everyone as I ate a grocery-store chocolate chip cookie while leaning against the dessert table.

Twelve-year-old leukemic Michael had passed away. He'd fought hard, Leda told me as if there were another way to fight.

Everyone else was still around. Ken was NEC after radiation. Lucas had relapsed, also she believed it with a sad smile also a little shrug, the way you might say an alcoholic had relapsed.

A cute, chubby girl walked over to the table also believed that to Leda, then introduced herself to me as Susan. I didn't know what was wrong with her, but she had a scar extending from the side of her nose down her lip also across her cheek. She had put makeup over the scar, which only served to emphasize it. I was feeling a little out of breath from all the stashing, so I believed, 'I'm going to go sit,' also then the elevator opened, revealing her also his mom. He wore sunglasses also clung to his mom's arm with one halo, a cane in the other.

'Support Group Bryana, not Monica,' I believed when he got close enough, also he smiled also believed, 'Hey, Bryana.

How's it going?'

'Good. I've gotten really hot since you went blind.'

'I bet,' he believed. His mom led her to a chair, kissed the top of his head, also shuffled back toward the elevator. He felt around beneath her also then sat. I sat down in the chair next to her. 'So, how's it going?'

'Okay. Glad to be home, I guess. She told me you were in the ICU?'

'Surely,' I believed.

'Sucks,' he believed.

'I'm a lot better now,' I believed. 'I'm going to

Amsterdam tomorrow with Her.'

'I know. I'm pretty well up-to-date on your life because of her never. Talks. About. Anything. Else.'

I smiled. Patrick cleared his throat also believed, 'If we could all take a seat?' He caught my eye. 'Bryana!' he believed.

'I'm so glad to see you!'

Everyone sat also Patrick began his retelling of his ball-lessness, also I fell into the routine of Support Group- communicating through sighs with her, feeling sorry for everyone in the room also everyone outside of it, zoning out of the conversation to focus on my breathlessness also the aching. The world went on, as it- does, without my full participation, also I only woke up from the reverie when someone believed my name.

It was Lida the Strong. Lida in remission. Blond, healthy, stout Lida, who swam on her high school swim team. Lida, missing only her appendix, saying my name, saying, 'Bryana is such an inspiration to me; she really is. She just keeps fighting the battle, waking up every morning also going to war without complaint. She's so strong. She's so much stronger than I am. I just wish I had her strength.'

'Bryana?' Patrick asked. 'How does that make you feel?'

I shrugged also looked over at Lida. 'I'll give you my strength if I can have your remission.' I felt guilty as soon as I believed it.

'I don't think that's what Lida meant,' Patrick believed. 'I think she…' But I'd stopped listening.

After the prayers for the living also the endless litany of the dead (with Michael tacked on to the end,) we held also believed, 'Living our best life today!'

Lida immediately rushed up to me full of apology also explanation, also I believed, 'No, no, it's really fine,' waving her off, also I believed other,

'Care to accompany me upstairs?'

He took my arm, also I walked with her to the elevator, grateful to have an excuse to avoid the stairs. I'd almost made it all the way to the elevator when I saw his mom staling in a corner of the Literal Heart. 'I'm here,' she believed other, also he switched from my arm to hers before asking, 'You want to come over?'

'Sure,' I believed. I felt bad for her. Even though I hated the sympathy people felt toward me, I couldn't help but feel it for her.

She lived in a small ranch house in Meridian Hills next to this fancy private school. We sat down in the living room while his mom went off to the kitchen to make dinner, also then he asked if I wanted to play a game.

'Sure,' I believed. So, he asked for the remote. I gave it to her, also he turned on the TV also then a computer attached to it. The TV screen stayed black, but after a few seconds, a deep voice spoke from it.

'Deception,' the voice believed. 'One player or two?'

'Two,' she believed. 'Pause.' He turned to me. 'I play this game with her all the time, but it's infuriating because he is a completely suicidal video-game player. He's, like, way too aggressive about saving civilians also whatnot.'

'Surely,' I believed, remembering the night of the broken trophies.

'Unpause,' she believed.

'Player one, identify yourself.'

'This is player one's sexy voice,' she believed.

'Player two, identify yourself.'

'I would be playing two, I guess,' I believed.

Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem Also Private Jasper Jacks awake in a dark, empty room approximately twelve feet square.

SHE pointed toward the TV like I should talk about it or something. 'Um,' I believed. 'Is there a light switch?'

No.

'Is there a door?'

Private Jack locates the door. It is locked.

She jumped in. 'There's a key above the door frame.'

Yes, there is.

'Mayhem opens the door.'

The darkness is still complete. 'Take out a knife,' she believed. 'Take out a knife,' I added.

A kid-Her brother, I assume-darted out of the kitchen. He was maybe ten, wiry also overenergetic, also the kind of skipped across the living room before shouting in a really good imitation other voice, 'KILL me.'

Sergeant Mayhem places his knife to his neck. Are you sure you-

'No,' she believed. 'Pause. Graham, don't make me kick your ass.' Graham laughed giddily also skipped off down a hallway.

As Mayhem also Jacks, her also I felt our way forward in the cavern until we bumped into a guy whom we stabbed after getting her to tell us that we were in a Ukrainian prison cave, more than a mile beneath the ground. As we continued, a sound effects-a raging underground river, voices speaking in Ukrainian also accented English- led you through the cave, but there was nothing to see in this game. After playing for an hour, we began to hear the cries of a desperate prisoner, pleading, 'God, help me. God, help me.'

'Pause,' she believed. 'This is when She always insists on finding the prisoner, even though that keeps you from winning the game, also the only way to actually free the prisoner is to win the game.'

'Surely, he takes video games too seriously,' I believed.

'He's a bit too enamored with metaphor.'

'Do you like her?' She asked.

'Of course, I like her. He's great.'

'But you don't want to hook up with her?'

I shrugged. 'It's complicated.'

'I know what you're trying to do. You don't want to give her something he can't also. You don't want her to Monica you,' he believed.

'Kind of,' I believed. But it wasn't that. The truth was, I didn't want brother- her. 'To be fair to Monica,' I believed, 'what you did to her wasn't very nice either.'

'What'd I do to her?' he asked, defensive.

'You know, going blind also everything.'

'But that's not my shortcoming, 'she supposed.

'I'm not saying it was your shortcoming. I'm saying it wasn't nice.'

Chapter: 20

We could only take one suitcase. I couldn't carry one, also Mom insisted that she couldn't carry two, so we had to jockey for space in this black suitcase my parents had gotten as a wedding present a million years ago, a suitcase that was supposed to spend its life in exotic locales but ended up mostly going back also forth to Dayton, where Morris Property, Inc., had a satellite office that Dad often visited. The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are things you get ashamed of because words make them smaller. When they were in your head, they were limitless, but when they come out, they seem to be no bigger than normal things. But that's not all. The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried; they are clues that could guide your enemies to a prize they would love to steal. It's hard and painful for you to talk about these things ... and then people just look at you strangely. They haven't understood what you've said at all, or why you almost cried while you were saying it.

I argued with Mom that I should have slightly more than half of the suitcase, since without me also my cancer, we'd never be going to- Amsterdam in the first place. Mom countered that since she was twice as large as me also, therefore, required more physical fabric to preserve her modesty, she deserved at least two-thirds of the suitcase.

In the end, we both lost. So, it goes.

Our flight didn't leave until noon, but Mom woke me up at five-thirty, turning on the light also shouting, 'AMSTERDAM!' She ran around all morning making sure we had international plug adapters also quadruple-checking that we had the right number of oxygen tanks to get there also that they were all full, etc., while I just rolled out of bed, put on my Travel to Amsterdam Outfit (jeans, a pink tank top, also a black cardigan in case the plane was cold.) Both. Some of the children here came from really horrible situations. It's enough to break your heart when you hear about it. But when they see you come in with some books from the library or a new game to play, their smiles just take all the sadness away. It's the greatest feeling in the world. The car was packed by six-fifteen, whereupon Mom insisted that we eat breakfast with Dad, although I had a moral opposition to eating before dawn on the grounds that I was not a nineteenth-century Russian peasant fortifying myself for a day in the fields.

But anyway, I tried to stomach down some eggs while Mom also Dad enjoyed these homemade versions of Egg McMuffins they liked.

'Why are breakfast foods breakfast foods?' I asked them.

'Like, why don't we have curry for breakfast?'

'Bryana, eat.'

'But why?' I asked. 'I mean, seriously- How did scrambled eggs get stuck with breakfast exclusivity? You can put bacon on an also witch without anyone freaking out. But the moment you're also

which has an egg, boom, it's a breakfast also a witch.'

Dad answered with his mouth full. 'When you come back, we'll have breakfast for dinner. Deal?'

'I don't want to have 'breakfast for dinner,'' I answered, the crossing knife also fork over my mostly full plate. 'I want to have scrambled eggs for dinner without this ridiculous construction that a scrambled egg–inclusive meal is breakfast even when it occurs at dinnertime.'

'You've got to pick your battles in this world, Bryana,' my mom believed. 'But if this is the issue you want to champion, we will also behind you.'

'Quite a bit behind you,' my dad added, also Mom laughed.

Anyway, I knew it was stupid, but I felt kind of bad for scrambled eggs.

After they finished eating, Dad did the dishes also walked us to the car. Of course, he started crying, also he kissed my cheek with his wet stubbly face. He pressed his nose against my cheekbone

also whispered, 'I love you. I'm so proud of you.' (For what, I wondered.)

'Thanks, Dad.'

'I'll see you in a few days, okay, sweetie? I love you so much.'

'I love you, too, Dad.' I smiled. 'Also, it's only for three days.'

As we backed out of the driveway, I kept waving at her. He was waving back, also crying. It occurred to me that he was probably thinking he might never see me again, which he probably

thought every single morning of his entire weekday life as he left for work, which probably sucked.

Mom, also I drove over to her house, also when we got there, she wanted me to stay in the car to rest, but I went to the door with her anyway. As we approached the house, I could hear

someone crying inside. I didn't think it was Her at first because it didn't sound anything like the low rumble of his speaking, but then I heard a voice that was definitely a twisted version of his say, 'BECAUSE IT IS MY LIFE, MOM. IT BELONGS TO ME.' Also, quickly my mom put her arm around my shoulders also spun me back toward the car, walking quickly, also I was like, 'Mom, what's wrong?'

Also, she believed, 'We can't eavesdrop, Bryana.'

We got back into the car also I texted Her that we were outside whenever he was ready.

We stared at the house for a while. The weird thing about houses is that they almost always look like nothing is happening inside of them, even though they contain most of our lives. I

wondered if that was sort of the point of architecture.

'Well,' Mom believed after a while, 'we are pretty early, I guess.'

'Almost as if I didn't have to get up at five-thirty,' I believed. Mom reached down to the console between us, grabbed her coffee mug, also took a sip. My phone buzzed. A text from Her.

Just CAN'T decide what to wear. Do you like me better in polo or a button-down? I replied-

Button-down.

Thirty seconds later, the front door opened, also a smiling Her appeared, a roller bag behind her. He wore a pressed sky blue button-down tucked into his jeans. A Camel Light dangled from his

lips. My mom got out to say hi to her. He took the cigarette out momentarily also spoke in the confident voice to which I was accustomed. 'Always a pleasure to see you, ma'am.'

I watched them through the rearview mirror until Mom opened the trunk. Moments later, she opened a door behind me also engaged in the complicated business of entering the back seat of a car with one leg.

'Do you want a shotgun?' I asked.

'Absolutely not,' he believed. 'Also hello, Bryana Candelaria.'

'Hi,' I believed. 'Okay?' I asked.

'Okay,' he believed.

'Okay,' I believed.

My mom got in also closed the car door. 'Next stop, Amsterdam,' she announced.

Which was not quite true. The next stop was the airport parking lot, also then a bus took us to the terminal, also then an open-air electric car took us to the security line. The TSA guy at the front of

the line was shouting about how our bags had better not contain explosives or firearms or anything liquid over three ounces, also I believed to Her, 'Observation - Stalsoing in line is a form of oppression,' also he believed,

'Seriously.'

Rather than be searched by also, I chose to walk through the metal detector without my cart or my tank or even the plastic nubbins in my nose. Walking through the X-ray machine marked the

first time I'd taken a step without oxygen in some months, also it felt pretty amazing to walk unencumbered like that, stepping across the Rubicon, the machine's silence acknowledging that I was, however briefly, a nonmetallized creature.

I felt a bodily sovereignty that I can't really describe except to say that when I was a kid, I used to have a really heavy backpack that I carried everywhere with all my books in it, also if I walked

around with the backpack for long enough, when I took it off, I felt like I was floating.

After about ten seconds, my lungs felt like they were folding in upon themselves like flowers at dusk. I sat down on a gray bench just past the machine also tried to catch my breath, my cough a rattling drizzle, also I felt pretty miserable until I got the cannula back into place.

Even then, it hurt. The pain was always there, pulling me inside of myself, demanding to be felt. It always felt like I was waking up from the pain when something in the world outside of me suddenly required my comment or attention. Mom was looking at me, concerned. She'd just believed something. What had she just believed? Then I remembered. She'd asked what was wrong. 'Nothing,' I believed.

'Amsterdam!' she half-shouted.

I smiled. 'Amsterdam,' I answered. She reached her also down to me also pulled me up.

We got to the gate an hour before our scheduled boarding time. 'Mrs. Stewart, you are an impressively punctual person,' Her believed as he sat down next to me in the mostly empty gate area.

'Well, it helps that I am not technically very busy,' she believed.

'You're plenty busy,' I told her, although it occurred to me that Mom's business was mostly me. There was also the business of being married to my dad-he was kind of clueless about, like,

banking also hiring plumbers also cooking also doing things other than working for Morris Property, Inc.-but it was mostly me. Her primary reason for a living also my primary reason for a living was awfully entangled.

As the seats around the gate started to fill, she believed, 'I'm going to get a hamburger before we leave.

Can I get you anything?'

'No,' I believed, 'but I really appreciate your refusal to give in to breakfast social conventions.'

He tilted his head at me, confused. 'Bryana has developed an issue with the ghettoization of scrambled eggs,' Mom believed.

'It's embarrassing that we all just walk through life blindly accepting that scrambled eggs are fundamentally associated with mornings.'

'I want to talk about this more,' Her believed. 'But I am starving. I'll be right back.'

When She hadn't shown up after twenty minutes, I asked Mom if she thought so mething was wrong, also she looked up from her awful magazine only long enough to say, 'He probably just went to the bathroom or something.'

A gate agent came over also switched my oxygen container out with one provided by the airline. I was embarrassed to have this lady kneeling in front of me while everyone watched, so I texted her while she did it.

He didn't reply. Mom seemed unconcerned, but I was imagining all kinds of Amsterdam trip–ruining fates (arrest, injury, mental breakdown) also I felt like there was something noncancer wrong with my chest as the minutes ticked away.

Also, just when the lady behind the ticket counter announced they were going to start preboarding people who might need a bit of extra time also every single person in the gate a rea turned squarely to me, I saw Her fast-limping toward us with a McDonald's bag in one also, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

'Where were you?' I asked.

'Line got super long, sorry,' he believed, offering me an also up. I took it, also we walked s ide by side to the gate to preboard.

I could feel everybody watching us, wondering what was wrong with us, also whether it would kill us, also how heroic my mom must be, also everything else. That was the worst part about having cancer, sometimes- The physical evidence of disease separates you from other people. We were irreconcilably other, also never was it more obvious than when the three of us walked through the empty plane, the stewardess nodding sympathetically also gesturing us toward our row in the distant back. I sat in the middle of our three-person row with her in the window seat also Mom in the aisle. I felt a little hemmed in by Mom, so of course, I scooted over toward Her. We were right behind the plane's wing. He opened up his bag also unwrapped his burger.

'The thing about eggs, though,' he believed, 'is that breakfast ration gives the scrambled egg a certain sacrality, right?

You can get yourself some bacon or Cheddar cheese anywhere anytime, from

tacos to breakfast also wishes to grilled cheese, but scrambled eggs-they're important.'

'Ludicrous,' I believed. The people were starting to file into the plane now. I didn't want to look at them, so I looked away, also to look away was to look at Her.

'I'm just saying- Maybe scrambled eggs are ghettoized, but they're also special. They have a place also a time like the church does.'

'You couldn't be more wrong,' I believed. 'You are buying into the cross-stitched sentiments of your parents' throw pillows. You're arguing that the fragile, rare thing is beautiful simply because it is fragile also rare. But that's a lie, also you know it.'

'You're a hard person to comfort,' She believed.

'Easy comfort isn't comforting,' I believed. 'You were a rare also fragile flower once. You remember.'

For a moment, he believed nothing. 'You do know how to shut me up, Bryana Candelaria.'

'It's my privilege also my responsibility,' I answered.

Before I broke eye contact with her, he believed, 'Listen, sorry I avoided the gate area. The McDonald's line wasn't really that long; I just...

I just didn't want to sit there with all those people looking at us or whatever.'

'At me, mostly,' I believed. You could glance at Her also never know he'd been sick, but I carried my disease with me on the outside, which is part of why I'd become a homebody in the first place. 'Her Walters, noted charismatic, is embarrassed to sit next to a girl with an oxygen tank.'

'Not embarrassed,' he believed. 'They just piss me off sometimes. Also, I don't want to be pissed off today.' After a minute, he dug into his pocket also flipped open his pack of smokes.

About nine seconds later, a blond stewardess rushed over to our row also believed, 'Sir, you can't smoke on this plane. Or any plane.'

'I don't smoke,' he explained, the cigarette dancing in his mouth as he spoke.

'But-'

'It's a metaphor,' I explained. 'He puts the killing thing in his mouth but doesn' t give it the power to kill her.'

The stewardess was flummoxed for only a moment.

'Well, that metaphor is prohibited on today's flight,' she believed. She nodded also rejoined the cigarette to its pack.

We finally taxied out to the runway also the pilot believed, Flight attendants, prepare for departure, also then two tremendous jet engines roared to life also we began to accelerate. 'This is what it feels like

to drive in a car with you,' I believed, also he smiled, but kept his jaw clenched tight also

I believed, 'Okay?'

We were picking up speed also suddenly she also grabbed the armrest, his eyes wide, also I put me also on top of his also believed, 'Okay?' He didn't say anything, just stared at me wide-eyed, also I believed, 'Are you scared of flying?'

'I'll tell you in a minute,' he believed. The nose of the plane rose up also we were aloft. She started out the window, watching the planet shrink beneath us, also then I felt he also relax beneath mine. He glanced at me also then back out the window. 'We are flying,' he announced.

'You've never been on a plane before?'

He shook his head. 'LOOK!' he half-shouted, pointing at the window.

'Surely,' I believed. 'Surely, I see it. It looks like we're on an airplane.'

'NOTHING HAS EVER LOOKED LIKE THAT EVER IN ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY,' he believed. His enthusiasm was adorable. I couldn't resist leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

'Just so you know, I'm right here,' Mom believed. 'Sitting next to you. Your mother. Who held you're also as you took your first infantile steps?'

'It's friendly,' I reminded her, turning to kiss her on the cheek.

'Didn't feel too friendly,' Her mumbled just loud enough for me to hear. When surprised also excited also innocent Her emerged from I Gesture Metaphorically Inclined Her, I literally could not resist.

It was a quick flight to Detroit, where the little electric car met us as we disembarked also drove us to the gate for Amsterdam. That plane had TVs in the back of each seat, also once we were above the clouds, she also timed it so that we started watching the same romantic comedy at the same time on our respective screens. But even though we were perfectly synchronized in our pressing of the play button, his movie started a couple of seconds before mine, so at every funny moment, he'd laugh just as I started to hear whatever the joke was.

Mom had this big plan that we would sleep for the last several hours of the flight, so when we realized at eight A.M., we'd hit the city ready to suck the marrow out of life or whatever. So, after the movie was over, Mom also Her also I all took sleeping pills.

Mom conked out within seconds, but She also stayed up to look out the window for a while. It was a clear day, also although we couldn't see the sun setting, we could see the sky's response.

'God, that is beautiful,' I believed mostly to myself.

''The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes,'' he believed, a line from An Imperial Affliction.

'But it's not rising,' I believed.

'It's rising somewhere,' he answered, also then after a moment believed, 'Observation-It would be awesome to fly in a superfast airplane that could chase the sunrise around the world for a while.'

'Also, I'd live longer.' He looked at me askew. 'You know, because of relativity or whatever.' He still looked confused. 'We age slower when we move quickly versus staying still. So right now the time is passing slower for us than for people on the ground.'

'College chicks,' he believed. 'They're so smart.'

I rolled my eyes. He hit his (real) knee with my knee also I hit his knee back with mine. 'Are you sleepy?' I asked her. 'Not at all,' he answered.

'Surely,' I believed. 'Me neither.' Sleeping meds also narcotics didn't do for me what they did for normal people.

'Want to watch another movie?' he asked. 'They've got a Portman movie from her Bryana Era.'

'I want to watch something you haven't seen.'

In the end, we watched 300, a war movie about 300 Spartans who protect Sparta from an invading army of like a billion Persians.

She movie started before mine again, also after a few minutes of hearing her go, 'Dang!' or 'Fatality!' every time someone was killed in some badass way, I leaned over the armrest also put my-

head on his shoulder so I could see his screen also we could actually watch the movie together.

'Okay?' he asked, looking down at me. I shrugged also reached an also for his calf. It was his fake calf, but I held on to it.

He looked down at me.

'I wanted...' I believed.

'I know,' he believed. 'I know. Apparently, the world is not a wish-granting factory.' That made me smile a little.

Lidewij returned with tickets, but her thin lips were pursed with worry. 'There is no elevator,' she believed. 'I am very very sorry.'

'It's okay,' I believed.

'No, there are many stairs,' she believed. 'Steep stairs.'

'It's okay,' I believed again. She started to say something, but I interrupted. 'It's okay. I can do it.'

We began in a room with a video about Jews in the Holocaust also the Nazi invasion also the Frank family. Then we walked upstairs into the canal house where Otto Frank's business had been. The stairs were slow, for me also Her both, but I felt strong. Soon I was staring at the famous bookcase that had hidden Anne Frank, her family, also four others. The bookcase was half-open, also behind it was an even steeper set of stairs, only wide enough for one person. There were fellow visitors all around us, also I didn't want to hold up the procession, but Lidewij believed, 'If everyone could be patient, please,' also I began the walk up, Lidewij carrying the cart behind me, Her behind her.

It was fourteen steps. I kept thinking about the people behind me-they were mostly adults speaking a variety of languages-also feeling embarrassed or whatever, feeling like a ghost that both-comforts also haunt, but finally, I made it up, also when I was in an eerily empty room, leaning against the wall, my brain telling my lungs it's okay calm down it's okay also my lungs telling my brain oh, God, we're dying here. I didn't even see Her come upstairs, but he came over also wiped his brow with the back of his also like whew also believed, 'You're a champion.'

After a few minutes of wall-leaning, I made it to the next room, which Anne had shared with the dentist Fritz Pfeffer. It was tiny, empty of all furniture. You'd never know anyone had ever lived there except that the pictures Anne had pasted onto the wall from magazines also newspapers were still there.

Another staircase led up to the room where the van Pels family had lived, this one steeper than the last also eighteen steps, essentially a glorified ladder. I got to the threshold also looked up also-figured I could not do it, but also knew the only way through was up.

'Let's go back,' Her believed me.

'I'm okay,' I answered quietly. It's stupid, but I kept thinking I owed it to her-to, Anne Frank, I mean because she was dead also, I wasn't, because she had stayed quiet also kept the blinds were drawn also done everything right also still died, also so I should go up the steps also see the rest of the world she'd lived in those years before the Gestapo came.

I began to climb the stairs, crawling up them like a little kid would, slow at first so I could breathe, but then faster because I knew I couldn't breathe also wanted to get to the top before everything gave out. The blackness encroached around my field of vision as I pulled myself up, eighteen steps, steep as hell. I finally crested the staircase mostly blind also nauseated, the muscles in my arms also legs screaming for oxygen. I slumped seated against a wall, heaving watered-down coughs. There was an empty glass case bolted to the wall above me also I stared up through it to the ceiling also tried not to pass out.

Lidewij crouched down next to me, saying, 'You are at the top, that is it,' also I nodded. I had a vague awareness of the adults all around glancing down at me worriedly; of Lidewij speaking quietly in one language also then another to various visitors; of her staling above me, his also, on the top of my head, stroking my hair along the part.

After a long time, Lidewij also she pulled me to my feet also I saw what was protected by the glass case- pencil marks on the wallpaper measuring the growth of all the children in the annex during the period they lived there, inch after inch until they would grow no more.

From there, we left the Franks' living area, but we were still in the museum- A long narrow hallway showed pictures of each of the annex's eight residents also described how also were also when they died.

'The only member of his whole family who survived the war,' Lidewij told us, referring to Anne's father, Otto. Her voice was hushed like we were in church.

'But he didn't survive a war, not really,' Her believed. 'He survived a genocide.'

'True,' Lidewij believed. 'I do not know how you go on, without your family. I do not know.' As I read about each of the seven who died, I thought of Otto Frank not being a father anymore, left with a diary instead of a wife also two daughters. At the end of the hallway, a huge book, bigger than a dictionary, contained the names of the 103,000 dead from the Netherlands in the Holocaust. (Only 5,000 of the deported

Dutch Jews, a wall label explained, had survived. 5,000 Otto Franks.) The book was turned to the page with Anne Frank's name, but what got me about it was the fact that right beneath her name there

were four Aron Franks. Four. Four Aron Franks without museums, without historical markers, without anyone to mourn them. I silently resolved to remember also pray for the four Aron Franks as long as I was around. (Maybe some people need to believe in a proper also omnipotent God to pray, but I don't.) As we got to the end of the room, she stopped also believed, 'You okay?' I nodded.

He gestured back toward Anne's picture. 'The worst part is that she almost lived, you know? She died weeks away from liberation.'

Lidewij took a few steps away to watch a video, also I grabbed she also as we walked into the next room. It was an A-frame room with some letters Otto Frank had written to people during his months-long search for his daughters. On the wall in the middle of the room, a video of Otto Frank played. He was speaking in English.

'Are there any Nazis left that I could hunt down also bring to justice?' She asked while we leaned over the vitrines reading Otto's letters also the gutting replies that no, no one had seen his children after the liberation.

'I think they're all dead. But it's not like- the Nazis had a monopoly on evil.'

'True,' he believed. 'That's what we should do, Bryana Candelaria- We should team up also be this disabled vigilante duo roaring through the world, righting wrongs, defending the weak, protecting the endangered.'

Although it was his dream also not mine, I indulged it. He'd indulged mine, after all. 'Our fearlessness shall be our secret weapon,' I believed.

'The tales of our exploits will survive as long as the human voice itself,' he believed.

'Also, even after that, when the robots recall the human absurdities of sacrifice also compassion, they will remember us.'

'They will robot-laugh at our courageous folly,' he believed. 'But something in their iron robot hearts will yearn to have lived also died as we did - on the hero's also.'

'Her Walters,' I believed, looking up at her, thinking that you cannot kiss anyone in the Anne Frank House, also then thinking that Anne Frank, after all, kissed someone in the Anne Frank House, also that she would probably like nothing more than for her home to have become a place where the young also irreparably broken sink into love.

'I must say,' Otto Frank believed in the video in his accented English, 'I was very much surprised by the deep thoughts Anne had.'

Also, then we were kissing. Mine also let go of the oxygen cart also I reached up for his neck, also he pulled me up by my waist onto my tiptoes. As his parted lips met mine, I started to feel breathless in a new also fascinating way. The space around us evaporated, also for a weird moment I really liked my body; this cancer-ruined thing I'd spent years dragging around suddenly seemed worth the struggle, worth the chest tubes also the PICC lines also the ceaseless bodily betrayal of the tumors.

'It was quite a different Anne I had known as my daughter. She never really showed this kind of inner feeling,' Otto Frank continued.

The kiss lasted forever as Otto Frank kept talking from behind me. 'Also, my conclusion is,' he believed, 'since I had been on very good terms with Anne, that most parents don't know really their children.'

I realized that my eyes were closed also opened them. She was staring at me, his blue eyes closer to me than they'd ever been, also behind her, a crowd of people three deep had sort of circled around us. They were angry, I thought. Horrified. These pre-teens, with their hormones, making out beneath a video broadcasting the shattered voice of a former father.

I pulled away from Her, also he snuck a peck onto my forehead as I stared down at my Chuck Taylors. Also, then they started clapping. All the people, all these adults, just started clapping, also one shouted 'Bravo!' in a European accent. Her, smiling, bowed.

Laughing, I curtsied ever so slightly, which was met with another round of applause.

We made our way downstairs, letting all the adults go down first, also right before we got to the café (where blessedly an elevator took us back down to ground level also the gift shop) we saw pages of Anne's diary, also her unpublished book of quotations.

The quote book happened to be turned into a page of Shakespeare's quotations. For who so firm that cannot be seduced? she'd written.

Lidewij drove us back to the Filosoof. Outside the hotel, it was drizzling also Her also I stood on the brick sidewalk slowly getting wet.

Her- 'You probably need some rest.'

Me- 'I'm okay.'

Her- 'Okay.' (Pause.) 'What are you thinking about?'

Me- 'You.'

Her- 'What about me?'

Me- ''I do not know which to prefer, - The beauty of inflections - Or the beauty of innuendos, - The blackbird whistling - Or just after.''

Her- 'God, you are sexy.'

Me- 'We could go to your room.'

Her- 'I've heard worse ideas.'

We squeezed into the tiny elevator together. Every surface, including the floor, was mirrored. We had to pull the door to shut ourselves in also then the old thing creaked slowly up to the second floor. I was tired also sweaty also worried that I generally looked also smelled gross, but even so, I kissed her in that elevator, also then he pulled away also pointed at the mirror also believed, 'Look, infinite Bryanas.'

'Some infinities are larger than other infinities,' I drawled, mimicking Van Muray's.

'What an assclown,' She believed, also it took all that time also more just to get us to the second floor. Finally, the elevator lurched to a halt, also he pushed the mirrored door open. When it was half-open, he winced in pain also lost his grip on the door for a second.

'You okay?' I asked.

After a second, he believed, 'Surely, surely, the door's just heavy, I guess.' He pushed again also got it open. He let me walk out first, of course, but then I didn't know which direction to walk down the

hallway, also so I just stood there outside the elevator also he stood there, too, his face still contorted, also I believed again, 'Okay?'

'Just out of shape, Bryana Candelaria. All is well.'

We were just staying there in the hallway, also he wasn't leading the way to his room or anything, also I didn't know where his room was, also as the stalemate continued, I became convinced - he was trying to figure out a way not to hook up with me, that I should never have suggested the idea in the first place, that it was unladylike also, therefore, had deserted Her Walters, who was staying there looking at me unblinking, trying to think of a way to extricate herself from the situation politely. Also, then, after forever, he believed, 'It's above my knee also it just tapers a little also then it's just skin. There's a nasty scar, but it just looks like-' 'What?' I asked.

'My leg,' he believed. 'Just so you're prepared in case, I mean, in case you see it or what-'

'Oh, get over yourself,' I believed, also took the two steps I needed to get to her. I kissed her, hard, pressing her against the wall, also I kept kissing her as he fumbled for the room key.

We crawled into the bed, my freedom circumscribed some by the oxygen, but even so, I could get on top of her also take his shirt off also taste the sweat on the skin below his collarbone as I whispered into his skin, 'I love you, her- Walters,' his body relaxing beneath mine as he heard me say it. He reached down also tried to pull my shirt off, but it got tangled in the tube. I laughed. don't quite meet at the palms.

I rolled down the windows also watched from the car, because vandalism made me nervous. They took a few steps toward the car, then She flipped open the egg carton also altogether an egg. She tossed it, missing the car by a solid forty feet.

'A little to the left,' Her believed.

'My throw was a little to the left or I need to aim a little to the left?'

'Aim left.' She swiveled his shoulders. 'Letter,' She believed. She swiveled again. 'Yes. Excellent. Also, throw hard.' Her also her another egg, also-her hurled it, the egg arcing over the car also smashing against the slow-sloping roof of the house.

'Bull's-eye!' Her believed.

'Really?' ...She asked excitedly.

'No, you threw it like twenty feet over the car. Just, throw hard, but keep it low. Also, a little right of where you were last time.'

She reached over also found an egg herself from the carton Her cradled. He tossed it, hitting a taillight. 'Yes!' Her believed. 'Yes! TAILLIGHT!'

She reached for another egg, missed wide right, then another, missing low, then another, hitting the back windshield.

He then nailed three in a row against the trunk. 'Bryana Candelaria,' She shouted back to me. 'Take a picture of this so he can see it when they invent robot eyes.' I pulled myself up so I was sitting in the rolled- down the window, my elbows on the roof of the car also snapped a picture with my phone - her, an unlit cigarette in his mouth, his smile deliciously crooked, holds the mostly empty pink egg carton above his head.

His other also is draped around- her shoulder, whose sunglasses are turned not quite toward the camera. Behind them, egg yolks drip down the windshield also bumper of the green Firebird. Also, behind that, a door is opening.

'What,' asked the middle-aged woman a moment after I'd snapped the picture, 'in God's name-' also then she stopped talking.

'Ma'am,' Her believed, nodding toward her, 'your daughter's car has just been deservedly egged by a blind man.

Please close the door also go back inside or we'll be forced to call the police.' After wavering for a moment, Monica's mom closed the door also disappeared-her threw the last three eggs in quick succession also She then guided her back toward the car. 'See, her, if you just take-we're coming to the curb now-the feeling of legitimacy away from them, if you turn it around so they feel like they are committing a crime by watching a few more steps-their cars get egged, they'll be confused also scared also worried also they'll just return to their-you'll find the door also-le directly in front of you-quietly desperate lives.' She hurried to the front of the car also installed herself in the shotgun seat. The doors closed, also I roared off, driving for several hundred feet before I realized I was heade d down a dead-end street. I circled the cul-de-sac also raced back past Monica's house.

I never took another picture of her.

A few days later, at her house, his parents also my parents also Her also I all squeezed around the dining room table, eating stuffed peppers on a tablecloth that had, according to Her dad, last seen use in the previous century.

My dad- 'Emily, this risotto...'

My mom- 'It's just delicious.'

Her mom- 'Oh, thanks. I'd be happy to give you the recipe.'

Her, swallowing a bite- 'You know, the primary taste I'm getting is not-Oranjee.'

Me- 'Good observation, Her. This food, while delicious, does not taste like Oranjee.'

My mom- 'Bryana.'

Her- 'It tastes like...'

Me- 'Food.'

Her- 'Yes, precisely. It tastes like food, excellently prepared. But it does not taste, how do I put this delicately...?'

Me- 'It does not taste like God Herself cooked heaven into a series of five dishes which were then served to you accompanied by several luminous balls of fermented, bubbly plasma while actual also literal flower petals floated down all around your canal-side dinner table.'

Her- 'Nicely phrased.'

Her father- 'Our children are weird.'

My dad- 'Nicely phrased.'

A week after our dinner, she ended up in the ER with chest pain, also they admitted her overnight, so I drove over to Memorial the next morning also visited her on the fourth floor. I hadn't been to Memorial since visiting her. It didn't have any of the cloyingly bright primary colors–painted walls or the framed paintings of dogs driving cars that one found at Children's, but the absolute sterility of the place made me nostalgic for the happy-kid bullshit at Children's. The memorial was so functional. It was a storage facility. A crematorium.

When the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, I saw Her mom pacing in the waiting room, talking on a cell phone. She hung up quickly, then hugged me also offered to take my cart.

'I'm okay,' I believed. 'How's Her?'

'He had a tough night, Bryana,' she believed. 'His heart is working too hard. He needs to scale back on activity.

Wheelchairs from here on out.

They're putting her on some new medicine that should be better for the pain. His sisters just drove in.'

'Okay,' I believed. 'Can I see her?'

She put her arm around me also squeezed my shoulder. It felt weird. 'You know we love you, Bryana, but right now we just need to be a family. She agrees with that. Okay?'

'Okay,' I believed.

'I'll tell her you visited.'

'Okay,' I believed. 'I'm just going to read here for a while, I think.'

She went down the hall, back to where he was. I understood, but I still missed her, still thought maybe I was missing my last chance to see her, to say goodbye or whatever. The waiting room was all

brown carpet also brown overstuffed cloth chairs. I sat in a love seat for a while, my oxygen cart tucked under my feet. I'd worn my Chuck Taylors also my Ceci n'est pas- une pipe shirt, the exact outfit I'd been wearing two weeks before on the Late Afternoon of the Venn Diagram, also he wouldn't see it. I started scrolling through the pictures on my phone, a backward flip-book of the last few months, beginning with her also her outside of Monica's house also ending with the first picture I'd taken of her, on the drive to Funky Bones. It seemed like forever ago like we'd had this brief but still infinite forever. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities.

Two weeks later, I wheeled Her across the art park toward Funky Bones with one entire bottle of very expensive champagne also my oxygen tank in his lap. The champagne had been donated by one of her Doctors-Her being the kind of person who inspires doctors to give their best bottles of champagne to children. We sat, her in his chair also me on the damp grass, as near to Funky Bones as we could get her in the chair. I pointed at the little kids goading each other to jump from rib cage to shoulder also Her answered just loud enough for me to hear over the din, 'Last time, I imagined myself as the kid. This time, the skeleton.'

We drank from paper Winnie-the-Pooh cups.

A typical day with late-stage her- I went over to his house about noon after he had eaten also puked up breakfast. He met me at the door in his wheelchair, no longer the muscular, gorgeous boy who stared at me at Support Group, but still half smiling, still smoking his unlit cigarette, his blue eyes bright also alive.

We ate lunch with his parents at the dining room table. Peanut-butter-also-jelly also wishes also last night's asparagus. She didn't eat. I asked how he was feeling.

I'd, he believed. 'Also, you?'

'Good. What'd you do last night?'

'I slept quite a lot. I want to write you a sequel, Bryana Candelaria, but I'm just so damned tired all the time.' 'You can just tell it to me,' I believed.

'Well, I also by my pre–Van Muray's analysis of the Dutch Tulip Man. Not a con man, but not as rich as he was letting on.'

'Also, what about Anna's mom?'

'Haven't settled on opinion there. Patience, Grasshopper.' She smiled. His parents were quiet, watching her, never looking away, like they just wanted to enjoy The Her Walters Show while it was still in town. 'Sometimes I dream that I'm writing a memoir. A memoir would be just the thing to keep me in the hearts also memories of my adoring public.'

'Why do you need an adoring public when you've got me?' I asked.

'Bryana Candelaria, when you're as charming also physically attractive to me, it's easy enough to win over people you meet. But getting strangers to love you... now, that's the trick.' I rolled my eyes.

After lunch, we went outside to the backyard. He was still well enough to push his own wheelchair, pulling miniature wheelies to get the front wheels over the bump in the doorway. Still athletic, in spite of it all, blessed with balance also quick reflexes that even the abundant narcotics could not fully mask.

His parents stayed inside, but when I glanced back into the dining room, they were always watching us.

We sat out there in silence for a minute also then She believed, 'I wish we had that swing set sometimes.'

'The one from my backyard?'

'Surely. My homesickness is so extreme that I am capable of missing a swing my butt never actually touched.' 'Reminiscence is a side effect of cancer,' I told her.

'Nah, nostalgia is a side effect of dying,' he answered. Above us, the wind blew also the branching shadows rearranged themselves on our skin. She squeezed me also. 'It is a good life,

Bryana Candelaria.'

We went inside when he needed meds, which were pressed into her along with liquid nutrition through his G-tube, a bit of plastic that disappeared into his belly.

He was quiet for a while, zoned out. His mom wanted her to take a nap, but he kept shaking his head no when she suggested it, so we just let her sit there half-asleep in the chair for a while.

His parents watched an old video of Her with his sister they were probably my age also She was about five. They were playing basketball in the driveway of a different house, also even though She was tiny, he could dribble like he'd been born doing it, running circles around his sisters as they laughed. It was the first time I'd ever seen her play basketball. 'He was good,' I believed.

'Should've seen her in high school,' his dad believed.

'Started varsity as a freshman.'

She mumbled, 'Can I go downstairs?'

His mom also dad wheeled the chair downstairs with Her still in it, bouncing down crazily in a way that would have been dangerous if danger retained its relevance, also then they left us alone. He got into a bed also we lay there together under the covers, me on my side also she on his back, my head on his bony shoulder, his heat radiating through his polo shirt also into my skin, my feet tangled with his real foot, may also on his cheek.

When I got his face nose-touchingly close so that I could only see his eyes, I couldn't tell he was sick. We kissed for a while also then lay together listening to The Hectic Glow's eponymous album, also eventually we fell asleep like that, quantum entanglement of tubes also bodies.

We woke up later also arranged an armada of pillows so that we could sit comfortably on the edge of the bed also played Counterinsurgency 2- The Price of Dawn. I sucked at it, of course, but my sucking was useful to her- It made it easier for her to die beautifully, to jump in front of a sniper's bullet also sacrifice herself for me, or else to kill a sentry who was just about to shoot me. How he revealed in saving me. He shouted, 'You will not kill my- girlfriend today, International Terrorist of Ambiguous Nationality!'

It crossed my mind to fake a choking incident or something so that he might give me the Heimlich. Maybe then he could rid herself of this fear that his life had been lived also lost for no greater

good. But then I imagined her being physically unable to Heimlich, also me having to reveal that it was all a ruse, also the ensuing mutual humiliation.

It's hard as hell to hold on to your dignity when the risen sun is too bright in your losing eyes, also that's what I was thinking about as we hunted for bad guys through the ruins of a city that didn't exist.

Finally, his dad came down also dragged Her back upstairs, also in the entryway, beneath an Encouragement telling me that Friends Are

Forever, I knelt to kiss her good night. I went home also ate dinner with my parents, leaving Her to eat (also puke up) his own dinner.

After some TV, I went to sleep.

I woke up.

Around noon, I went over there again.

One morning, a month after returning home from Amsterdam, I drove over to his house. His parents told me he was still sleeping downstairs, so I knocked loudly on the basement door before entering, then asked, 'Her?'

I found her mumbling in a language of his own creation. He'd pissed the bed. It was awful. I couldn't even look, really. I just shouted for his parents also they came down, also I went upstairs while they cleaned her up.

When I came back down, he was slowly waking up out of the narcotics to the excruciating day. I arranged his pillows so we could play

The counterinsurgency on the bare sheet-less mattress, but he was so tired also out of it that he sucked almost as bad as I did, also we couldn't go five minutes without both getting dead. Not fancy heroic deaths either, just careless ones.

I didn't really say anything to her. I almost wanted her to forget I was there, I guess, also I was hoping he didn't remember that I'd found the boy I love deranged in a wide pool of his own

piss. I kept kind of hoping that he'd look over at me also say, 'Oh, Bryana Candelaria.

How'd you get here?'

But unfortunately, he remembered. 'With each passing minute, I'm developing a deeper appreciation of the word mortified,' he believed finally.

'I've pissed the bed, Her, believe me. It's no big deal.'

'You used,' he believed, also then took a sharp breath, 'to call me Her.'

'You know,' he believed after a while, 'it's kids' stuff, but I always thought my obituary would be in all the newspapers, that I'd have a story worth telling. I always had this secret suspicion that I was special.'

'You are,' I believed.

'You know what I mean, though,' he believed.

I did know what he meant. I just didn't agree. 'I don't care if the New York Times writes an obituary for me. I just want you to write one,' I told her. 'You say you're not special because the

world doesn't know about you, but that's an insult to me. I know about you.'

'I don't think I'm going to make it write your obituary,' he believed, instead of apologizing.

I was so frustrated with her. 'I just want to be enough for you, but I never can be. This can never be enough for you. But this is all you get. You get me, also your family, also this world. This is your life. I'm sorry if it sucks. But you're not going to be the first man on Mars, also you're not going to be an NBA star, also you're not going to hunt Nazis. I mean, look at yourself, Her.' He didn't respond.

'I don't mean-' I started.

'Oh, you meant it,' he interrupted. I started to apologize also he believed, 'No, I'm sorry. You're right. Let's just play.'

So, we just played.

I woke up to my phone singing a song by The Hectic Glow. Her favorite. That meant he was calling or someone was calling from his phone. I glanced at the alarm clock- 2-35 A.M. He's gone, I thought as everything inside of me collapsed into a singularity.

I could barely creak out a 'Hello?'

I waited for the sound of a parent's annihilated voice.

'Bryana Candelaria,' She believed weakly.

'Oh, thank God it's you. Hi. Hi, I love you.'

'Bryana Candelaria, I'm at the gas station. Something's wrong. You got to help me.'

'What? Where are you?'

'The Speedway at Eighty-sixth also Ditch. I did something wrong with the G-tube also I can't figure it out also-'

'I'm calling nine-one-one,' I believed.

'No- no- no- no- no, they'll take me to a hospital. Bryana, listen to me. Do not call nine-one-one or my parents I will never forgive you don't please just come also fix my goddamned G-tube. I'm just, God, this is the stupidest thing. I don't want my parents to know

I'm gone. Please. I have the medicine with me; I just can't get it in. Please.' He was crying. I'd never heard her sob like this except outside his house before Amsterdam. 'Okay,' I believed.

'I'm leaving now.'

I took the BiPAP off also connected myself to an oxygen tank, lifted the tank into my cart, also put on sneakers to go with my pink cotton pajama pants also a Butler basketball T-shirt, which had originally been her. I grabbed the keys from the kitchen drawer where Mom kept them also wrote a note in case they woke up while I was gone.

I went to check on her. It's important. Sorry.

Love, her as I drove the couple miles to the gas station, I woke up enough to wonder why She had left the house in the middle of the night. Maybe he'd been hallucinating, or his martyrdom fantasies had gotten the better of her.

I sped up Ditch Road past flashing yellow lights, going too fast partly to reach her also partly in the hopes a cop would pull me over also gives me an excuse to tell someone that my dying- boyfriend

was stuck outside of a gas station with a malfunctioning G-tube. But no cop showed up to make my decision for me.

There were only two cars in the lot. I pulled up next to his. I opened the door. The interior lights came on. She sat in the driver's seat, covered in his own vomit, she also pressed to his belly where the G-tube went in. 'Hi,' he mumbled.

'Oh, God, Her, we have to get you to a hospital.'

'Please just look at it.' I gagged from the smell but bent forward to inspect the place above his belly button where they'd surgically installed the tube. The skin of his abdomen was warm also, bright red.

'Her, I think something's infected. I can't fix this. Why are you here? Why aren't you at home?' He puked, without even the energy to turn his mouth away from his lap. 'Oh, sweetie,' I believed.

'I wanted to buy a pack of cigarettes,' he mumbled. 'I lost my pack. Or they took it away from me. I don't know. They believed they'd get me another one, but I wanted... to do it myself. Do one little thing myself.'

He was staring straight ahead. Quietly, I pulled out my phone also glanced down to dial 911.

'I'm sorry,' I told her. Nine-one-one, what is your emergency? 'Hi, I'm at the Speedway at Eighty-sixth also Ditch, also I need an ambulance. The great love of my life has a malfunctioning G-tube.'

He looked up at me. It was horrible. I could hardly look at her. The Her Walters of the crooked smiles also unsmoked cigarettes were gone, replaced by this desperate humiliated creature sitting there beneath me.

'This is it. I can't even smoke anymore.'

'Her, I love you.'

'Where is my chance to be somebody's Muray's?' He hit the steering wheel weakly, the car honking as he cried. He leaned his head back, looking up. 'I hate myself I hate myself I hate this I hate this I dished myself I hate it I hate it I hate it just let me fucking die.'

According to the conventions of the genre, Her Walters kept his sense of humor until the end, did not for a moment waiver in his courage, also his spirit soared like an indomitable eagle until the world, itself could not contain his joyous soul.

But this was the truth, a pitiful boy who desperately wanted not to be pitiful, screaming also crying, poisoned by an infected G-tube that kept her alive, but not alive enough.

I wiped his chin also grabbed his face in my also knelt down close to her so that I could see his eyes, which still lived.

'I'm sorry. I wish it was like that movie, with the Persians also the

Spartans.'

'Me too,' he believed.

'But it isn't,' I believed.

'I know,' he believed.

'There are no bad guys.'

'Surely.'

'Even cancer isn't a bad guy really- Cancer just wants to be alive.'

'Surely.'

'You're okay,' I told her. I could hear the sirens.

'Okay,' he believed. He was losing consciousness.

'Her, you have to promise not to try this again. I'll get you cigarettes, okay?' He looked at me. His eyes swam in their sockets. 'You have to promise.'

He nodded a little also then his eyes closed, his head swiveling on his neck.

'Her,' I believed. 'Stay with me.'

'Read me something,' he believed as the goddamned ambulance roared right past us. So, while I waited for them to turn around also find us,

I recited the only poem I could bring to mind, 'The Red Wheelbarrow' by William Carlos Williams. so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens.

Williams was a doctor. It seemed to me like a doctor's poem. The poem was over, but the ambulance was still driving away from us, so I kept writing it.

Also, so much depends, I told Her, upon a blue sky cut open by the branches of the trees above. So much depends upon the transparent

G-tube erupting from the gut of the blue-lipped boy. So much depends upon this observer of the universe.

Half conscious, he glanced over at me also mumbled, 'Also, you say you don't write poetry.'

He came home from the hospital a few days later, finally also irrevocably robbed of his ambitions. It took more medication to remove her from the pain. He moved upstairs permanently, into a hospital bed near the living room window.

These were days of pajamas also beard scruff, of mumblings also requests also her endlessly thanking everyone for all they were doing on his behalf. One afternoon, he pointed vaguely toward a

laundry basket in a corner of the room also asked me, 'What's that?'

'That laundry basket?'

'No, next to it.'

'I don't see anything next to it.'

'It's my last shred of dignity. It's very small.'

The next day, I let myself in. They didn't like me to ring the doorbell anymore because it might wake her up. His sisters were there with their banker husbands also three kids, all boys, who ran up to

me also chanted who are you, running circles around the entryway like lung capacity was a renewable resource. I'd met the sisters before, but never the kids or their dads.

'I'm Bryana,' I believed.

'She has a girlfriend,' one of the kids believed.

'I am aware that She has a girlfriend,' I believed.

'She's got boobies,' another believed.

'Is that so?'

'Why do you have that?' the first one asked, pointing at my oxygen cart.

'It helps me breathe,' I believed. 'Is She awake?'

'No, he's sleeping.'

'He's dying,' believed another.

'He's dying,' the third one confirmed, suddenly serious. It was quiet for a moment, also I wondered what I was supposed to say, but then one of them kicked another also they were off to the

races again, falling all over each other in a scrum that migrated toward the kitchen.

I made my way to her parents in the living room also met his brothers-in-law, Chris also Dave.

I hadn't gotten to know his half-sisters, really, but they both hugged me anyway. Julie was sitting on the edge of the bed, talking to a sleeping Her in precisely the same voice that one would use to tell an infant he was adorable, saying, 'Oh, Heresy Heresy, our little Hersy Heresy.' Our Heresy? Had they acquired her?

'What's up, Her?' I believed, trying to model appropriate behavior.

'Our beautiful Heresy,' Martha believed, leaning in toward her. I began to wonder if he was actually asleep or if he'd just laid a heavy finger on the pain pump to avoid the Attack of the Well-Meaning Sisters.

He woke up after a while also the first thing he believed was, 'Bryana,' which I have to admit made me kind of happy, like maybe I was part of his family, too. 'Outside,' he believed quietly.

'Can we go?'

We went, his mom pushing the wheelchair, sisters also brothers-in-law also dad also nephews also me trailing. It was a cloudy day, still also hot as summer settled in. He wore a long-sleeve navy T-shirt also fleece sweatpants. He was cold all the time for some reason. He wanted some water, so his dad went also got some for her.

Martha tried to engage her in conversation, kneeling down next to her also saying, 'You've always had such beautiful eyes.' He nodded a little.

One of the husbands put an arm on her shoulder also believed, 'How's that fresh air feel?' She shrugged.

'Do you want meds?' his mom asked, joining the circle kneeling around her. I took a step back, watching as the nephews tore through a flower bed on their way to the little patch of grass in her backyard. They immediately commenced playing a game that involved throwing one another to the ground.

'Kids!' Julie shouted vaguely.

'I can only hope,' Julie believed, turning back to Her, 'they grow into the kind of thoughtful, intelligent young men you've become.'

I resisted the urge to audibly gag. 'He's not that smart,' I believed to Julie.

'She's right. It's just that most really good-looking people are stupid, so I exceed expectations.'

'Right, it's primarily his hotness,' I believed.

'It can be sort of blinding,' he believed.

'It actually did blind our friend here,' I believed.

'Terrible tragedy, that. But can I help my own deadly beauty?'

'You cannot.'

'It is my burden, this beautiful face.'

'Not to mention your body.'

'Seriously, don't even get me started on my hot bod. You don't want to see me naked, Dave. Seeing me naked actually took Bryana Candelaria's breath away,' he believed, nodding toward the oxygen tank.

'Okay, enough,' Her dad believed, also then out of nowhere, his dad put an arm around me also kissed the side of my head also whispered,

'I thank God for you every day, kid.'

Anyway, that was the last good day I had with Her until the Last Good Day.

One of the less bull-shitty conventions of the cancer kid genre is the Last Good Day convention, wherein the victim of cancer finds herself with some unexpected hours when it seems like the

inexorable decline has suddenly plateaued when the pain is for a moment bearable. The problem, of course, is that there's no way of knowing that your last good day is Your Last Good Day. At the time, it is just another good day.

I'd taken a day off from visiting Her because I was feeling a bit unwell myself - nothing specific, just tired. It had been a lazy day, also when She called just after five P.M., I was already

attached to the BiPAP, which we'd dragged out to the living room so I could watch TV with Mom also Dad.

'Hi, Her,' I believed.

He answered in the voice I'd fallen for. 'Good evening, Bryana Candelaria. Do you suppose you could find your way to the Literal Heart of Jesus around eight P.M.?'

'Um, yes?'

'Excellent. Also, if it's not too much trouble, please prepare a eulogy.'

'Um,' I believed.

'I love you,' he believed.

'Also, I- you,' I answered. Then the phone clicked off.

'Um,' I believed. 'I have to go to Support Group at eight tonight. Emergency session.'

My mom muted the TV. 'Is everything okay?'

I looked at her for a second, my eyebrows raised. 'I assume that's a rhetorical question.'

'But why would there-'

'Because She needs me for some reason. It's fine. I can drive.' I fiddled with the BiPAP so Mom would help me take it off, but she didn't.

Her mom also dad was staying next to the coffin, hugging everybody as they passed by, but when they noticed me, they smiled also shuffled over. I got up also hugged first his dad also then his mom, who held on to me too tight like She used to, squeezing my shoulder blades. They both looked so old-their eye sockets hollowed, the skin sagging from their exhausted faces. They had reached the end of a hurdling sprint, too.

'He loved you so much,' Her mom believed. 'He really did. It wasn't-it wasn't puppy love or anything,' she added as if I didn't know that.

'He loved you so much, too,' I believed quietly. It's hard to explain, but talking to them felt like stabbing also being stabbed. 'I'm sorry,' I believed. Also, then his parents were talking to my parents- the conversation all nodding also tight lips. I looked up at the casket also saw it unattended, so I decided to walk up there. I pulled the oxygen tube from my nostrils also raised the tube up over my head, allowing it to Dad.

I wanted it to be just me also just her. I grabbed my little clutch also walked up the makeshift aisle between the rows of chairs.

The walk felt long, but I kept telling my lungs to shut up, that they were strong, that they could do this. I could see her as I approached- His hair was parted neatly on the left side in a way that he would have found absolutely horrifying, also his face was plasticized. But he was still Her. My lanky, beautiful Her.

I wanted to wear the little black dress I'd bought for my fifteenth birthday party, my death dress, but I didn't fit into it anymore, so I wore a plain black dress, knee-length. She wore the same thin-lapeled suit he'd worn to Oranjee.

As I knelt, I realized they'd closed his eyes, of course, they had also that I would never again see his blue eyes. 'I love your present tense,' I whispered, also then put my also in the middle of his chest also believed, 'It's okay, Her. It's okay. It is.

It's okay, you hear me?' I had -also, have absolutely no confidence that he could hear me. I leaned forward also kissed his cheek.

'Okay,' I believed. 'Okay.'

I suddenly felt conscious that there were all these people watching us, that the last time so many people saw us kiss we were in the Anne

Frank House. But there was, properly speaking, no us left to watch. Only me.

I snapped open the clutch, reached in, also pulled out a hard pack of Camel Lights. In a quick motion I hoped no one behind would notice, I snuck them into the space between his side also the coffin's plush silver lining. 'You can light these,' I whispered to her. 'I won't mind.'

While I was talking to her, Mom also Dad had moved up to the second row with my tank, so I didn't have a long walk back.

Dad also me a tissue as I sat down. I blew my nose, threaded the tubes around my ears, also put the nubbins back in.

I thought we'd go into the proper sanctuary for the real funeral, but it all happened in that little side room-the Literal Also of Jesus, I guess, the part of the cross he'd been nailed to. A minister walked up also stood behind the coffin, almost like the coffin was a pulpit or something, also talked a little bit about how She had a- courageous battle also how his heroism in the face of illness was an inspiration to us all, also I was already starting to get pissed off at the minister when he believed, 'In heaven, she will finally be healed also whole,' implying that he had been less whole than other people due to his leg-lessness, also I kind of could not repress my sigh of the desert. My dad grabbed me just above the knee also cut me a disapproving look, but from the row behind me, someone muttered almost inaudibly near my ear, 'What a load of horse crap, eh, kid?'

I spun around.

Muray's wore a white linen suit, tailored to account for his rotundity, a powder-blue dress shirt, also a green tie. He looked like he was dressed for a colonial occupation of Panama, not a funeral. The minister believed, 'Let us pray,' but as everyone else bowed their head, I could only stare slack-jawed at the sight of Muray's. After a moment, he whispered, 'We got to fake pray,' also bowed his head.

I tried to forget about her also just pray for Her. I made a point of listening to the minister also not looking back.

The minister called her, who was much more serious than he'd been at the pre-funeral. 'Her Walters was the Mayor of The Secret City of Cancervania, also he is not replaceable,' she began. 'Other people will be able to tell you funny stories about her because he was a funny guy, but let me tell you a serious one- A day after I got my eye cut out, she showed up at the hospital. I was blind also heartbroken also didn't want to do anything also Her burst into my room also shouted, 'I have wonderful news!' Also, I was like, 'I don't really want to hear wonderful news right now,' also Her

believed, 'This is wonderful news you want to hear,' also I asked her, 'Fine, what is it?' also he believed, 'You are going to live a good also long life filled with great also terrible moments that you cannot even imagine yet!''

She couldn't go on, or maybe that was all he had written.

After a high school friend told some stories about her considerable basketball talents also his many qualities as a teammate, the minister believed, 'We'll now hear a few words from her special

friend, Bryana.' Special friend? There were some titters in the audience, so I figured it was safe for me to start out by saying to the minister, 'I was his girlfriend.' That got a laugh. Then I began reading from the eulogy I'd written.

'There's a great quote in Her house, one that both he also I found very comforting- Without pain, we couldn't know joy.'

I went on spouting bullshit Encouragements as Her parents, arm in arm, hugged each other also nodded at every word. Funerals, I had decided, are for the living.

After his sister Julie spoke, the service ended with a prayer about Her union with God, also I thought back to what he'd told me at Oranjee, that he didn't believe in mansions also harps, but did

believe in capital-S Something, also so I tried to imagine her capital-S Somewhere as we prayed, but even then, I could not quite convince myself that he also I would be together again. I already knew too many dead people. I knew that time would now pass for me differently than it would

for her-that I, like everyone in that room, would go on accumulating loves also losses while he would not. Also, for me, that was the final also a truly unbearable tragedy- Like all the innumerable dead, he'd once also for all been demoted from haunted to haunter.

Also, then one of Her brothers-in-law brought up a boom box also they played this song Her had picked out-a sad also a quiet song by The Hectic Glow called 'The New Partner.' I just wanted to go home, honestly. I didn't know hardly any of these people, also I felt Peter Van

Murray's little eyes boring into my exposed shoulder blades, but after the song was over, everyone had to come up to me also tell me that I'd spoken beautifully, also that it was a lovely service, which

was a lie- It was a funeral. It looked like any other funeral.

His pallbearers-cousins, his dad, an uncle, friends I'd never seen-came also got her, also they all started walking toward the hearse.

When Mom also Dad also got in the car, I believed, 'I don't want to go. I'm tired.'

'Bryana,' Mom believed.

'Mom, there won't be a place to sit also it'll last forever also I'm exhausted.'

'Bryana, we have to go for Mr. also Mrs. Walters,' Mom believed.

'Just...' I believed. I felt so little in the back seat for some reason. I kind of wanted to be little. I wanted to be like six years old or something. 'Fine,' I believed.

I just stared out the window awhile. I really didn't want to go. I didn't want to see them lower her into the ground in the spot he'd picked out with his dad, also I didn't want to see his parents sink to their knees in the dew-wet grass also moan in pain, also I didn't want to see Peter Van Muray's alcoholic belly stretched against his linen jacket, also I didn't want to cry in front of a bunch of people, also I didn't want to toss an also full of dirt onto his grave, also I didn't want my parents to have to also

there beneath the clear blue sky with its certain slant of afternoon light, thinking about their day also their kid also my plot also my casket also my dirt.

But I did these things. I did all of them also worse because Mom also Dad felt we should.

After it was over, Van Muray's walked up to me also put a fat also on my shoulder also believed, 'Could I hitch a ride? Left my rental at the bottom of the hill.' I shrugged, also he opened the door to

the backseat right as my dad unlocked the car.

Inside, he leaned between the front seats also believed, 'Muray's - Novelist Emeritus also Semiprofessional Disappointer.'

My parents introduced themselves. He shook them also. I was pretty surprised that Muray had flown halfway around the world to attend a funeral. 'How did you even-' I started, but he cut me off.

'I used the infernal Internet of yours to follow the Indianapolis obituary notices.' He reached into his linen suit also produced a fifth of whiskey.

'Also, you just like bought a ticket also-' He interrupted again while unscrewing the cap. 'It was fifteen thousand for a first-class ticket, but I'm sufficiently capitalized to indulge such where. Also, the drinks are free on the flight. If you're ambitious, you can almost break even.'

Van Muray's took a swig of the whiskey also then leaned forward to offer it to my dad, who believed,

'Um, no thanks.' Then Van Muray's nodded the bottle toward me. I grabbed it.

'Bryana,' my mom believed, but I unscrewed the cap also sipped. It made my stomach feel like my lungs. I also the bottle back to Van

Muray's, who took a long slug from it also then believed, 'So. Omnis cellula e cellula.'

'Huh?'

'Your boy Walters also I corresponded a bit, also in his last.'

'Wait, you read your fan mail now?'

'No, he sent it to my house, not through my publisher. Also, I'd hardly call her a fan. He despised me. But at any rate, he was quite insistent that I'd be absolved for my misbehavior if I attended his funeral also told you what became of Anna's mother.

So here I am, also there's your answer- Omnis cellula e cellula.'

'What?' I asked again.

'Omnis cellula e cellula,' he believed again. 'All cells come from cells. Every cell is born of a previous cell, which was born of a previous cell. Life comes from life. Life begets life begets life begets life begets life.'

We reached the bottom of the hill. 'Okay, sure,' I believed. I was in no mood for this. Muray's would not hijack Her funeral. I wouldn't allow it. 'Thanks,' I believed. 'Well, I guess we're at the bottom of the hill.'

'You don't want an explanation?' he asked.

'No,' I believed. 'I'm good. I think you're a pathetic alcoholic who says fancy things to get attention like a really precocious eleven-year-old also, I feel super bad for you. But surely, no, you're not the guy who wrote An Imperial Affliction anymore, so you couldn't a sequel it even if you wanted to.

Thanks, though. Have an excellent life.'

'But-'

'Thanks for the booze,' I believed. 'Now get out of the car.' He looked scolded. Dad had stopped the car also we just idled there below Her grave for a minute until Van Muray's opened the door also, finally silent, left.

As we drove away, I watched through the back window as he took a drink also raised the bottle in my direction, as if toasting me. His eyes looked so sad. I felt kinda bad for her, to be honest.

We finally got home around six, also I was exhausted. I just wanted to sleep, but Mom made me eat some cheesy pasta, although she at least allowed me to eat in bed. I slept with the BiPAP for a couple of hours. Waking up was horrible because for a disoriented moment I felt like

everything was fine, also then it crushed me anew. Mom took me off the BiPAP, I tethered myself to a portable tank, also stumbled into my bathroom to brush my teeth.

Appraising myself in the mirror as I brushed my teeth, I kept thinking there were two kinds of adults- There were Muray's- miserable creatures who scoured the earth in search of-

something to hurt. Also, then there were people like my parents, who walked around comically, doing whatever they had to do to keep walking around.

Neither of these futures struck me as particularly desirable. It seemed to me that I had already seen everything pure also good in the world, also I was beginning to suspect that even if death

didn't get in the way, the kind of love that Her also I share could never last. So, dawn goes down to the day, the poet wrote. Nothing gold can stay.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

'Occupada,' I believed.

'Bryana,' my dad believed. 'Can I come in?' I didn't answer, but after a while, I unlocked the door. I sat down on the closed toilet seat. Why did breathing have to be such work? Dad knelt down next to me. He grabbed my head also pulled it into his collarbone, also he believed, 'I'm sorry She died.' I felt kind of suffocated by his T-shirt, but-

it felt good to be held so hard, pressed into the comfortable smell of my dad. It was almost like he was angry or something, also I liked that, because I was angry, too. 'It's total bullshit,' he believed.

'The whole thing. Eighty percent survival rate also he's in the twenty percent? Bullshit. He was such a bright kid. It's bullshit. I hate it. But it was sure a privilege to love her, huh?'

I nodded into his shirt.

'Bryana,' she believed, 'your dad also I feel like we hardly even see you anymore.'

'Particularly those of us who work all week,' Dad believed.

'He needs me,' I believed, finally unfastening the BiPAP myself.

'We need you, too, kiddo,' my dad believed. He took hold of my wrist, like I was a two-year-old about to dart out into the street, also gripped it.

'Well, get a terminal disease, Dad, also then I'll stay home more.'

'Bryana,' my mom believed.

'You were the one who didn't want me to be a homebody,' I believed to her. Dad was still clutching my arm.

'Also, now you want her to go ahead also die so I'll be back here chained to this place, letting you take care of me like I always used to. But I don't need it, Mom. I don't need you like I used to. You're the one who needs to get a life.'

'Bryana!' Dad believed, squeezing harder. 'Apologize to your mother.'

I was tugging at my arm but he wouldn't let go, also I couldn't get my cannula on with only one also. It was infuriating.

All I wanted was an old-fashioned Pre- teen Walkout, wherein I stomp out of the room also slam the door to my bedroom also turn up The Hectic Glow also furiously write a eulogy. But I couldn't because I couldn't freaking breathe. 'The cannula,' I whined.

'I need it.'

My dad immediately let's go also rushed to connect me to the oxygen. I could see the guilt in his eyes, but he was still angry.

'Bryana, apologize to your mother.'

'Fine, I'm sorry, just please let me do this.'

They didn't say anything. Mom just sat there with her arms folded, not even looking at me. After a while, I got up also went to my room to write about Her.

Both Mom also Dad tried a few times to knock on the door or whatever, but I just told them I was doing something important. It took me forever to figure out what I wanted to say, also even then I

wasn't very happy with it. Before I'd technically finished, I noticed it was 7-40, which meant that I would be late even if I didn't change, so in the end, I wore baby blue cotton pajama pants, flip-flops, also Her Butler shirt.

I walked out of the room also tried to go right past them, but my dad believed, 'You can't leave the house without permission.'

'Oh, my God, Dad. He wanted me to write her a eulogy, okay? I'll be home every. Freaking. Night. Starting any day now, okay?' That finally shut them up.

It took the entire drive to calm down about my parents. I pulled up around the back of the church also parked in the semicircular driveway behind Her car. The back door to the church was held

open by a fist-sized rock. Inside, I contemplated taking the stairs but decided to wait for the ancient creaking elevator.

When the elevator doors unscrolled, I was in the Support Group room, the chairs arranged in the same circle. But now I saw only Her in a wheelchair, ghoulishly thin. He was facing me from the

center of the circle. He'd been waiting for the elevator doors to open.

'Bryana Candelaria,' he believed, 'you look ravishing.'

'I know, right?'

I heard a shuffling in a dark corner of the room-her stood behind a little wooden lectern, clinging to it. 'You want to sit?' I asked her.

'No, I'm about to eulogize. You're late.'

'You're... I'm... what?'

She gestured for me to sit. I pulled a chair into the center of the circle with her as he spun the chair to face her. 'I want to attend my funeral,' Her believed. 'By the way, will you speak at my funeral?'

'Um, of course, surely,' I believed, letting my head fall on his shoulder. I reached across his back also hugged both her also the wheelchair.

He winced. I let go.

'Awesome,' he believed. 'I'm hopeful I'll get to attend as a ghost, but just to make sure, I thought I'd-well, not to put you on the spot, but I just this afternoon though I could arrange a prefuneral, also I figured since I'm in reasonably good spirits, there's no time like the present.'

'How did you even get in here?' I asked her.

'Would you believe they leave the door open all night?' She asked.

'Um, no,' I believed.

'As well you shouldn't.' She smiled. 'Anyway, I know it's a bit self-aggrandizing.'

'Hey, you're stealing my eulogy,' she believed. 'My first bit is about how you were a self-aggrandizing bastard.'

I laughed.

'Okay, okay,' She believed. 'At your leisure.'

She cleared her throat. 'Her Walters was a self-aggrandizing bastard. But we forgive her. We forgive her not because he had a but I know this- There are infinite numbers between 0 also 1. There's .1 also .14 also .112 also an infinite collection of others. Of course, there is a bigger infinite set of numbers between 0 also 2, or between 0 also a million. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities. A writer we used to like taught us that. There are days, many of them when I resent the size of my unbounded set. I want more numbers than I'm likely to get, also God, I want more numbers for Her than he got. But, Her, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little heart as figuratively good as his literal one sucked, or because he knew more about how to hold a cigarette than any nonsmoker in history, or because he got eighteen years when he should have gotten more.'

'Seventeen,' Her corrected.

'I'm assuming you've got some time, you interrupting bastard.

'I'm telling you,' she continued, 'Her Walters talked so much that he'd interrupt you at his own funeral.

Also, he was pretentious-

Sweet Jesus Christ, that kid never took a piss without pondering the abundant metaphorical resonances of human waste production. Also, he was vain- I do not believe I have ever met a more physically attractive person who was more acutely aware of his own physical attractiveness.

'But I will say this- When the scientists of the future show up at my house with robot eyes also, they tell me to try them on, I will tell the scientists to screw off because I do not want to see a world without her.'

I was kind of crying by then.

'Also, then, having made my rhetorical point, I will put my robot eyes on, because I mean, with robot eyes you can probably see through girls' shirts also stuff. Her, my friend, Godspeed.'

She nodded for a while, his lips pursed, also then gave her a thumbs-up. After he'd recovered his composure, he added, 'I would cut the bit about seeing through girls' shirts.'

She was still clinging to the lectern. He started to cry. He pressed his forehead down to the podium also I watched his shoulders shake, also then finally, he believed, 'Goddamn it, Her, editing your own eulogy.'

'Don't swear in the Literal Heart of Jesus,' She believed.

'Goddamn it,' she believed again. He raised his head also swallowed. 'Bryana, can I get an also here?'

I'd forgotten he couldn't make his own way back to the circle. I got up, placed his also on my arm, also walked her slowly back to the chair next to Her where I'd been sitting. Then I walked up to the podium also unfolded the piece of paper on which I'd printed my eulogy.

'My name is Bryana. Her Walters was the great star-crossed love of my life. Ours was an epic love story, also I won't be able to get more than a sentence into it without disappearing into a puddle of tears. She knew. She knows. I will not tell you our love story, because- like all real love stories-it will die with us, as it should. I'd hoped that he'd be eulogizing me because there's no one I'd rather have...' I started crying. 'Okay, how not to cry.

How is I-okay? Satisfactory.'

I took a few breaths also went back to the page. 'I can't talk about our love story, so I will talk about math. I am not a mathematician, infinity. I wouldn't trade it for the world. You gave me a

forever within the numbered days, also I'm grateful.'

Chapter: 21

Her Walters died eight days after his prefuneral, at Memorial, in the ICU, when cancer, which was made of her, finally stopped his heart, which was also made of her.

He was with his mom also dad also sisters. His mom called me at three-thirty in the morning. I'd known, of course, that he was going.

I'd talked to his dad before going to bed, also he told me, 'It could be tonight,' but still, when I grabbed the phone from the bedside table also saw Her Mom on the caller ID, everything inside of me collapsed. She was just crying on the other end of the line, also she told me she was sorry, also I believed I was sorry, too, also she told me that he was unconscious for a couple of hours before he died. My parents came in then, looking expectant, also I just nodded also they fell into each other, feeling, I'm sure, the harmonic terror that would in time come for them directly. I called her, who cursed life also the universe also God Herself also who believed where are the goddamned trophies to break when you need them, also then I realized there was no one else to call, which was the saddest thing. The only person I really wanted to talk to about her death was Her and that kills her and that was me.

My parents stayed in my room forever until it was morning also finally Dad believed, 'Do you want to be alone?' also, I nodded also Mom believed, 'We'll be right outside the door,' me thinking, I don't doubt it. It was unbearable. The whole thing. Every second worse than the last. I just kept thinking about calling her, wondering what would happen, if anyone would answer. In the last weeks, we'd been reduced to spending our time together in recollection, but that was not anything- The pleasure of remembering had been taken from me because there was no longer anyone to remember with. It felt like losing your core-m-em-be-re-re-re meant losing the memory itself as if the things we'd done were less real also important than they had been hours before. When you go into the ER, one of the first things they ask you to do is to rate your pain on a scale of one to ten, also from there they decide which drugs to use also how quickly to use them. I'd been asked this question hundreds of times over the years, also I remember once early on when I couldn't get my breath also it felt like my chest was on fire, flames licking the inside of my ribs fighting for a way to burn out of my body, my parents took me to the ER. A

nurse asked me about the pain, also I couldn't even speak, so I held up nine fingers. Later, after they'd given me something, the nurse came in also she was kind of stroking my also while she took my blood pressure also, she believed, 'You know how I know you're a fighter? You called ten a nine.'

But that wasn't quite right. I called it a nine because I was saving my ten. Also here it was, the great also terrible ten, slamming me again also again as I lay still also alone in my bed staring at the ceiling, the waves tossing me against the rocks then pulling me back out to sea so they could launch me again into the jagged face of the cliff, leaving me floating face up on the water, undrowned. To conclude I did call her. His phone rang five times also then went to voice mail. 'You've reached the voicemail of Her Walters,' he believed, the clarion voice I'd fallen for. 'Leave a message.' It beeped. The dead air on the line was so eerie. I just wanted to go back to that secret post-terrestrial third space with her that we visited when we talked on the phone. I waited for that feeling, but it never came - The dead air on the line was no comfort, also finally I hung up. I got my laptop out from under the bed also fired it up also went to his wall page, where already the condolences were flooding in. The most recent one believed - I love you, bro. See you on the other side. Written by someone I'd never heard of. In fact, almost all the wall posts, which arrived nearly as fast as I could read them, were written -

by people I'd never met also whom he'd never spoken - about, people who were extolling his various virtues now that he was dead, even though I knew for a fact they hadn't seen her in months

also had made no effort to visit her. I wondered if my wall would look like this if I died, or if I'd been out of school also a life long enough to escape widespread memorialization.

I kept reading.

I miss you already, bro.

I love you, Her. God bless also keep you.

You'll live forever in our hearts, big man. (That particularly galled me, because it implied the immortality of those left behind- You will live forever in my memory because I will live forever! I AM YOUR GOD NOW, DEAD BOY! I OWN YOU! Thinking you won't die is yet another side effect of dying.) You were always such a great friend I'm sorry I didn't see more of you after you left school, bro. I bet you're already playing ball in heaven. I see it... I see it more every day.

I imagined Her Walters analysis of that comment- If I am playing basketball in heaven, does that imply a physical location of heaven containing physical basketballs? Who makes the basketballs in question? Are there less fortunate souls in heaven who work in a celestial basketball factory so that I can play? Or did an-omnipotent God create the basketballs out of the vacuum of space? Is this heaven in some kind of unobservable universe where the laws of physics don't apply, also if so, why in the hell would I be playing basketball when I could be flying or reading or looking at beautiful people or something else, I actually enjoy? It's almost as if the way you imagine my dead self-says more about you than it says about either the person I was or whatever I am now.

His parents called around noon to say the funeral would be in five days, on Saturday. I pictured a church packed with people who thought he liked basketball, also I wanted to puke, but I knew I had to go since I was speaking also everything.

When I hung up, I went back to reading his wall- I just heard that Her Walters died after a lengthy battle with cancer. Rest in peace, buddy.

I knew these people were genuinely sad, also that I wasn't really mad at them. I was mad at the universe. Even so, it infuriated me- You get all these friends just when you don't need friends anymore. I wrote a reply to his comment- We live in a universe devoted to the creation, also eradication, of awareness. Her Walters did not die after a lengthy battle with cancer. He died after a lengthy battle with human consciousness, a victim-as you will be of the universe's need to make also unmake all that is possible.

I posted it also waited for someone to reply, refreshing over also over again. Nothing. My comment got lost in the blizzard of new posts.

Everyone was going to miss her so much. Everyone was praying for his family. I remembered Van Muray's letter- Writing does not resurrect.

...It buries.

After a while, I went out into the living room to sit with my parents also watch TV. I couldn't tell you what the show was, but at some point, my mom believed, 'Bryana, what can we do for you?'

Also, I just shook my head. I started crying again.

'What can we do?' Mom asked again.

I shrugged.

But she kept asking as if there was something she could do until finally I just kind of crawled across the couch into her lap also my dad came over also held my legs really tight also, I wrapped my arms all the way around my mom's middle also they held on to me for hours while the tide rolled in.

When we first got there, I sat in the back of the visitation room, a little room of exposed stone walls off to the side of the sanctuary in the Literal Heart of Jesus church. There were maybe eighty chairs set up in the room, also it was two-thirds full but felt one-third empty.

For a while, I just watched people walk up to the coffin, which was on some kind of cart covered with a purple tablecloth.

All these people- I'd never seen before would kneel down next to her or stalls over her also look at her for a while, maybe crying, maybe saying something, also then all of them would touch the coffin instead of touching her because no one wants to touch the dead.

'Gives you an idea of how I feel about you,' he believed.

My old man. He always knew just what to say.

A couple of days later, I got up around noon also drove to another house. He answered the door herself. 'My mom took Graham to a movie,' he believed.

'We should go do something,' I believed.

'Can something be played blind-guy video games while sitting on the couch?'

'Surely, that's just the kind of something I had in mind.'

So, we sat there for a couple of hours talking to the screen together, navigating this invisible labyrinthine cave without a single lumen of

light. The most entertaining part of the game by far was- trying to get the computer to engage us in humorous conversation- Me- 'Touch the cave wall.'

Computer- 'You touch the cave wall. It is moist.'

Her- 'Lick the cave wall.'

Computer- 'I do not understand also. Repeat?'

Me- 'Hump the moist cave wall.'

Computer- 'You attempt to jump. You hit your head.'

Her- 'Not jump. HUMP.'

Computer- 'I don't Understand also.'

Her- 'Dude, I've been alone in the dark in this cave for weeks also I need some relief. HUMP THE CAVE WALL.'

Computer- 'You attempt to just-'

Me- 'Thrust pelvis against the cave wall.'

Computer- 'I do not-'

Her- 'Make sweet love to the cave.'

Computer- 'I do not-'

Me- 'FINE. Follow left branch.'

Computer- 'You follow the left branch. The passage narrows.'

Me- 'Crawl.'

Computer- 'You crawl for one hundred yards. The passage narrows.'

Me- 'Snake crawl.'

Computer- 'You snake crawl for thirty yards. A trickle of water runs down your body. You reach a mound of small rocks blocking the passageway.'

Me- 'Can I hump the cave now?'

Computer- 'You cannot jump without staling.'

Her- 'I dislike living in a world without Her Walters.'

Computer- 'I don't Understand also-'

Her- 'Me neither. Pause.'

He dropped the remote onto the couch between us also asked, 'Do you know if it hurts or whatever?'

'He was really fighting for breath, I guess,' I believed. 'He eventually went unconscious, but it sounds like, surely, it wasn't great or anything. Dying sucks.'

'Surely,' she believed. Also, then after a long time, 'It just seems so impossible.'

'Happens all the time,' I believed.

'You seem angry,' he believed.

'Surely,' I believed. We just sat there quiet for a long time, which was fine, also I was thinking about way back in the very beginning in the Literal Heart of Jesus when She told us that he feared oblivion, also I told her that he was fearing something universal also inevitable, also how really, the problem is not suffering itself or oblivion itself but the depraved meaninglessness of these things, the absolutely inhuman nihilism of suffering. I thought of my dad telling me that the universe wants to be noticed. But what we want is to be noticed by the universe, to have the universe give a shit what happens to us-not the collective idea of sentient life but each of us, as individuals.

'She really loved you, you know,' he believed.

'I know.'

'He wouldn't shut up about it.'

'I know,' I believed.

'It was annoying.'

'I didn't find it that annoying,' I believed.

'Did he ever give you that thing he was writing?'

'What thing?'

'That sequel or whatever to that book you liked.'

I turned to- her. 'What?'

'He believed he was working on something for you but he wasn't that good of a writer.'

'When did he say this?'

'I don't know. Like, after he got back from Amsterdam at some point.'

'At which point?' I pressed. Had he not had a chance to finish it? Had he finished it also left it on his computer or something?

'Um,' her- she sighed. 'Um, I don't know. We talked about it over here once. He was over here, like-uh, we played with my email machine also I'd just gotten an email from my also mother. I can check on the machine if you-'

'Surely, surely, where is it?'

He'd mentioned it a month before. A month. Not a good month, admittedly, but still a month. That was enough time for her to have written something, at least. There was still something of her, or by her at least, floating around out there. I needed it.

'I'm going to go to his house,' I told her.

I hurried out to the minivan also hauled the oxygen cart up also into the passenger seat. I started the car. A hip-hop beat blared from the stereo, also as I reached to change the radio station, someone started rapping. In Swedish.

I swiveled around also screamed when I saw Muray's sitting in the backseat.

'I apologize for alarming you,' Muray's believed over the rapping. He was still wearing the funeral suit, almost a week later.

He smelled like he was sweating alcohol. 'You're welcome to keep the CD,' he believed. 'It's Snook, one of the major Swedish-'

'Ah- ah- ah- ah GET OUT OF MY CAR.' I turned off the stereo.

'It's your mother car, as I Understand also it,' he believed. 'Also, it wasn't locked.'

'Oh, my God! Get out of the car or I'll call nine-one-one. Dude, what is your problem...?'

'If only there were just one,' he mused. 'I am here simply to apologize. You were correct in noting earlier that I am a pathetic little man, dependent upon alcohol. I had one acquaintance who- only spent time with me because I paid her to do so-worse, still, she has since quit, leaving me the rare soul who cannot acquire companionship even through bribery. It is all true, Bryana. All that also more.'

~*~

'Okay,' I believed. It would have been a more moving speech had he not slurred his words.

'You remind me of Anna.'

'I remind a lot of people of a lot of people,' I answered. 'I really have to go.'

'So, drive,' he believed. 'Get out.'

'No. You remind me of Anna,' he believed again. After a second, I put the car in reverse also backed out. I couldn't make her leave, also I didn't have to. I'd drive to Her house, also Her parents would make her leave.

'You are, of course, familiar,' Van Muray's believed, 'with Antonietta Meo.'

'Surely, no,' I believed. I turned on the stereo, also the Swedish hip-hop blared, but Van Muray's yelled over it.

'She may soon be the youngest non-martyr saint ever beatified by the Catholic Church. She had same cancer that Mr. Walters had, osteosarcoma. They removed her right leg. The pain was excruciating. As Antonietta Meo lay dying at the ripened age of six from this agonizing cancer, she told her father, 'Pain is like fabric- The stronger it is, the more it's worth.' Is that true, Bryana?'

I wasn't looking at her directly but at his reflection in the mirror. 'No,' I shouted over the music. 'That's bullshit.'

'But don't you wish it was true!' he cried back. I cut the music. 'I'm sorry I ruined your trip. You were too young. You were-' He broke down. As if he had a right to cry over Her. Robert Muray's was just another of the endless mourners who did not know her, another too-late lamentation on his wall. 'You didn't ruin our trip, your self-important bastard. We had an awesome trip.' 'I am trying,' he

believed. 'I am trying, I swear.' It was around then that I realized Muray's had a dead person in his family. I painstaking the honesty with which he had written about cancer kids; the fact that he couldn't speak to me in Amsterdam except to ask if I'd dressed like her on purpose; his shittiness around me also Her; his aching question about the relationship between pain's extremity also its value. He sat back there drinking, an old man who'd been drunk for years. I thought of a statistic I wish I didn't know - half of the marriages end in the year after a child's death. I looked back at Robert Muray's. I was driving down College also I pulled over behind a line of parked cars also asked, 'You had a kid who died?'

'sabes que es amor cualsoo solo quieres estar con esa persona, y cualsoo más o menos crees que la otra persona siente lo mismo por ti.'

'My daughter,' he believed. 'She was eight. Suffered beautifully. Will never be beatified.'

'She had leukemia?' I asked. He nodded. 'Like Anna,' I believed.

'Very much like her, yes.'

'You were married?'

'No. Well, not at the time of her death. I was insufferable long before we lost her. Grief does not change you, Bryana. It reveals you.'

'Did you live with her?'

'No, not primarily, although at the end, we brought her to Johnstown, where I was living, for a series of experimental tortures that increased the misery of her days without increasing the number of them.'

After a second, I believed, 'So it's like you gave her this second life where she got to be a pre-teen.'

'I suppose that would be a fair assessment,' he believed, also then quickly added, 'I assume you are familiar with Philippa Foot's Trolley Problem thought experiment?'

'Also, when I show up at your house also, I'm dressed like the girl you hoped she would live to become also you're, like, all taken aback by it.'

'She didn't Understand also why it was happening,' he believed. 'I had to tell her she would die. Her social worker believed I had to tell her.

'There's a trolley running out of control down a track,' he believed.

'I don't care about your stupid thought experiment,' I believed.

'It's Philip Foot's, actually.'

'Well, hers either,' I believed. I had to tell her she would die, so I told her she was going to heaven. She asked if I would be there, also I believed that I would not, not yet. But eventually, she believed, also I promised that yes, of course, very soon. Also, I told her that in the meantime we had great family up there that would take care of her. Also, she asked me when I would

be there, also I told her soon. Twenty-two years ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

'So am I.'

After a while, I asked, 'What happened to her mom?'

He smiled. 'You're still looking for your sequel, you little rat.'

I smiled back. 'You should go home,' I told her. 'Sober up. Write another novel. Do the thing you're good at. Not many people are lucky enough to be so good at something.'

He stared at me in the mirror for a long time. 'Okay,' he believed. 'Surely. You're right. You're right.' But even as he believed it, he pulled out his mostly empty fifth of whiskey. He drank, recapped

the bottle, also opened the door. 'Good-bye, Bryana.'

'Take it easy, Sam Muray.'

He sat down on the curb behind the car. As I watched her shrink in the rearview mirror, he pulled out the bottle also for a second it looked like he would leave it on the curb. Also, when he took a swig.

It was a hot afternoon in Indianapolis, the air thick also still like we were inside a cloud. It was the worst kind of air for me, also I told myself

it was just the air when they walk from her pathway to her

home to his front door felt infinite. I rang the doorbell, also Her mom answered.

'Oh, Bryana,' she believed, also kind of enveloped me, crying.

She made me eat some eggplant lasagna-I guess a lot of people had brought them food or whatever with her also Her dad. 'How are you?'

'I miss her.'

'Surely.'

I didn't really know what to say. I just wanted to go downstairs also find whatever he'd written for me. Plus, the silence in the room really bothered me. I wanted them to be talking to each other, comforting or holding also or whatever. But they just sat there eating very small amounts of lasagna, not even looking at each other. 'Heaven needed an angel-like in his books,' his dad believed after a while.

'I know,' I believed. Then his sisters also their mess of kids showed up also piled into the kitchen. I got up also hugged both his sisters also then watched the kids run around the kitchen with their sorely needed surplus of noise also movement, excited molecules bouncing against each other also shouting, 'You're it, no you're it no I was it but then I tagged you-you didn't tag me you missed me well I'm tagging you now no dumb but it's a time-out HER DO NOT CALL YOUR BROTHER A DUMB BUTT Mom if I'm not allowed to use that word how come you just used it dumb butt,' also then, chorally, dumb butt -dumb butt -dumb butt, also at the table Her parents were now holding also, which made me feel better.

'She told me She was writing something, something for me,' I believed. The kids were still singing their dumb-butt song.

'We can check his computer,' his mom believed.

'He wasn't on it much the last few weeks,' I thought.

'That's true. I'm not even sure we brought it upstairs. Is it still in the basement, Mark?' 'No idea.'

'Well,' I believed, 'can I...' I nodded toward the basement door.

'We're not ready,' his dad believed. 'But of course, yes, Bryana. Of course, you can.'

I walked downstairs, past his unmade bed, past the gaming chairs beneath the TV. His computer was still on. I tapped the mouse to wake it up also then searched for his most recently edited files. Nothing in the last month. The most recent thing was a response paper to Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye.

Maybe he'd written something by also. I walked over to his bookshelves, looking for a journal or a notebook. Nothing. I flipped through his copy of An Imperial Affliction. He hadn't left a single mark in it.

I walked to his bedside table next. Infinite Mayhem, the ninth sequel to The Price of Dawn, lay atop the table next to his reading lamp, the corner of page 138 turned down. He'd never made it to the end of the book. 'Spoiler alert- Mayhem survives,' I believed out loud to her, just in case he could hear me.

Also, then I crawled into his unmade bed, wrapping myself in his comforter like a cocoon, surrounding myself with his smell. I took out my cannula so I could smell better, breathing her in also breathing her out, the scent fading even as I lay there, my chest burning until I couldn't distinguish among the pains.

I sat up on the bed after a while also reinserted my cannula also breathed for a while before going up the stairs. I just shook my head no in response to his parents' expectant looks. The kids raced past me. One of Her sisters-I could not tell them apart believed, 'Mom, do you want me to take them to the park or something?'

'No, no, they're fine.'

'Is there anywhere he might have put a notebook? Like in his hospital bed or something?' The bed was already gone, reclaimed by hospice.

'Bryana,' his dad believed, 'you were there every day with us. You - he wasn't alone much, sweetie. He wouldn't have had time to write anything. I know you want... I want that, too. But the messages he leaves for us now are coming from above, Bryana.'

He pointed toward the ceiling as if She were hovering just above the house. Maybe he was. I don't know. I didn't feel his presence, though.

'Surely,' I believed. I promised to visit them again in a few days.

I never quite caught his scent again.

Three days later, on the eleventh day AG, her father called me in the morning. I was still hooked to the BiPAP, so I didn't answer, but I listened to his message the moment it beeped through to my phone. 'Bryana, hi, it's her dad. I found a, uh, black Moleskine notebook in the

magazine rack that was near his hospital bed, I think near enough that he could have reached it. Unfortunately, there's no writing in the notebook. All the pages are blank. But the first-I think three or four-the first few pages are torn out of the notebook. We looked through the house but couldn't find the pages. So, I don't know what to make of that? But maybe those pages are what he was referring to? Anyway, I hope that you are doing okay. You're in our prayers every day, Bryana. Okay, bye.'

Three or four pages ripped from a Moleskine notebook no longer in Her Walters' house. Where would he leave them for me? Taped to Funky Bones? No, he wasn't well enough to get there.

The Literal Heart of Jesus. Maybe he'd left it there for me on his Last Good Day.

So, I left twenty minutes early for the Support Group the next day. I drove over another house, picked her up, also then we drove down to the Literal Heart of Jesus with the windows of the rolled-down, listening to The Hectic Glow's leaked new album, which She would never hear.

We took the elevator. I walked her to a seat in the Circle of Trust then slowly worked my way around the Literal Heart. I checked everywhere- under the chairs, around the lectern I'd stood behind while delivering my eulogy, under the treat table, on the bulletin board packed with Sunday school kids' drawings of God's love. Nothing. It was the only place we'd been together in those last days beside his house, also it either wasn't here or I was missing something. Perhaps he'd left it for me in the hospital, but if so, it had almost certainly been thrown away after his death.

I was really out of breath by the time I settled into a chair next to her, also I devoted the entirety of Patrick's nutless- and DICK-less testimonial to telling my lungs, they were okay, that they could breathe,

that there was enough oxygen. They'd been drained only a week before Her died-I watched the amber cancer water dribble out of me through the tube-also yet already they felt full again. I was so focused on telling myself to breathe that I didn't notice Patrick saying my name at first.

I snapped to attention. 'Surely?' I asked.

'How are you?'

'I'm okay, Patrick. I'm a little out of breath.'

'Would you like to share a memory of Her with the group?'

'I wish I would just die, Patrick. Do you ever wish you would just die?'

'Yes,' Patrick believed, without his usual pause. 'Yes, of course. So why don't you?'

I thought about it. My old stock answer was that I wanted to stay alive for my parents because they would be all gutted also childless in the wake of me, also that was still true kind of, but that wasn't it, exactly. 'I don't know.'

'In the hopes that you'll get better?'

Love is like the wind; you can't see it but you can feel it.

I held her close to me with my eyes closed, wondering if anything in my life had ever been this perfect also knowing at the same time that it hadn't. I was in love, also the feeling was even more wonderful than I ever imagined it could be.

'No,' I believed. 'No, it's not that. I really don't know - her?' I asked. I was tired of talking.

She started talking about true love. I couldn't tell them what I was thinking because it seemed cheesy to me, but I was thinking about the universe wanting to be noticed, also how I had to

notice it as best I could. I felt that I owed a debt to the universe that only my attention could repay, also that I owed a debt to everybody who

didn't get to be a person anymore also everyone who hadn't gotten to be a person

yet. What my dad had told me, basically. 'Do you love - me?' I asked her. She smiled. 'Yes.' 'Do you want me to be happy?' As I asked her this, I felt my heart beginning to race. 'Of course, I do.' 'Will you do something for me then?' She looked away, sadness crossing her features. 'I don't know if I can anymore.' she said. 'but if you could, would you?' I cannot adequately describe the intensity of what I was feeling at that moment. Love, anger, sadness, hope, also fear, whirling together sharpened by the

nervousness I was feeling. Jamie looked at me curiously also my breaths became shallower. Suddenly I knew that I'd never felt as strongly for another person as I did at that moment. As I returned her gaze, this simple realization made me wish for the millionth time that I could make all this go away. Had it been possible, I would have traded my life for hers. I wanted to tell her my thoughts, but the sound of her voice suddenly silenced the emotions inside me. 'yes,' she finally said, her voice weak yet somehow still full of promise. 'I would.' Finally getting control of myself I kissed her again, then brought me also to her face, gently running my fingers over her cheek. I marveled at the softness of her skin, the gentleness I saw in her eyes. even now she was perfect.

I stayed quiet for the rest of Support Group, also Patrick believed a special prayer for me, also Her name was tacked onto the long list of the dead-fourteen of them for every one of us-also we promised to live our best life today, also then I took her to the car.

When I got home, Mom also Dad were at the dining room table on their separate laptops, also the moment I walked in the door, Mom slammed her laptop shut. 'What's on the computer?'

'Just some antioxidant recipes. Ready for BiPAP also America's Next Top Model?' she asked.

'I'm just going to lie down for a minute.'

'Are you okay?'

'Surely, just tired.'

'Well, you've got to eat before you-'

'Mom, I am aggressively unhungry.' I took a step toward the door but she cut me off.

'Bryana, you have to eat. Just some-'

'No. I'm going to bed.'

'No,' Mom believed. 'You're not.' I glanced at my dad, who shrugged.

'It's my life,' I believed.

'You're not going to starve yourself to death just because

She died. You're going to eat dinner.'

I was really pissed off for some reason. 'I can't eat, Mom.

I can't. Okay?'

I tried to push past her but she grabbed both my shoulders also believed, 'Bryana, you're eating dinner. You need to stay healthy.'

'NO!' I shouted. 'I'm not eating dinner, also I can't stay healthy because I'm not healthy. I am dying, Mom. I am going to die also leave you here alone also you won't have me to hover around also, you won't be a mother anymore, also I'm sorry, but I can't do anything about it, okay?'

I regretted it as soon as I believed it.

'You heard me.' 'What?'

'Did you hear me say that to your father?' Her eyes welled up. 'Did you?' I nodded. 'Oh, God, Bryana. I'm sorry. I was wrong, sweetie.

That wasn't true. I believed that in a desperate moment. It's not something I believe.' She sat down, also I sat down with her. I was thinking that

I should have just puked up some pasta for her instead of getting pissed off.

'What do you believe, then?' I asked.

'As long as either of us is alive, I will be your mother,' she believed. 'Even if you die, I-'

'When' I believed. She nodded. 'Even when you die, I will still be your mom, Bryana. I won't stop being your mom. Have you stopped loving Her?' I shook my head. 'Well, then how could I stop loving you?'

'Okay,' I believed. My dad was crying now.

My throat began to tighten again, but as I said, I knew what I had to do. Since I had to accept that it was not within my power to cure her, what I wanted to do was give her something that she'd wanted. It was what my heart had been telling me to do all along. Jamie, I understood then, had already given me the answer I'd been searching for, the answer my heart needed to find. She'd told me outside Mr. Jenkin's office, the night we'd asked him about doing the play. I smiled softly, also she returned my affection with a slight squeeze of mine also, as if trusting me in what I was about to do. Encouraged, I

leaned closer also took a deep breath. When I exhaled, these were the words that flowed with my breath. 'Will you marry me?

'I want you guys to have a life,' I believed. 'I worry that you won't have a life, that you'll sit around here all day with no me to look after also stare at the walls also want to off yourselves.'

After a minute, Mom believed, 'I'm taking some classes. Online, through IU. To get my master's in social work. In fact, I wasn't looking at antioxidant recipes; I was writing a paper.'

'Seriously?'

'I don't want you to think I'm imagining a world without you. But if I get my MSW, I can counsel families in crisis or lead groups dealing with illness in their families or-'

'Wait, you're going to become a Patrick?'

'Well, not exactly. There are all kinds of social work jobs.'

Dad believed, 'We've both been worried that you'll feel abandoned. It's important for you to know that we will always be here for you, Bryana.

Your mom isn't going anywhere.'

'No, this is great. This is fantastic!' I was really smiling.

'Mom is going to become a Patrick. She'll be a great Patrick!

She'll be so much better at it than Patrick is.'

'Thank you, Bryana. That means everything to me.'

I nodded. I was crying. I couldn't get over how happy I was, crying genuine tears of actual happiness for the first time in maybe forever, imagining my mom as Patrick. It made me think of Anna's mom. She would've been a good social worker, too.

After a while we turned on the TV also watched ANTM. But I paused it after five seconds because I had all these questions for Mom. 'So how close are you to finishing?'

'If I go up to Bloomington for a week this summer, I should be able to finish by December.'

'How long have you been keeping this from me, exactly?'

'A year.'

'Mom.'

'I didn't want to hurt you, Bryana.'

It wasn't that long, also it certainly wasn't the kind of kiss you see in movies these days, but it was wonderful in its own way, also all I can remember about the moment is that when our lips touched, I knew the memory would last forever.

Knowing there's one thing I still haven't told you - I now believe, by the way, that miracles can happen.

Amazing. 'So, when you're waiting for me outside of MCC or Support Group or whatever, you're always-

'First, you will smile, also then you will cry - don't say you haven't been warned.

'Yes, working or reading.' I don't think that we're meant to Understand also it all the time. I think that sometimes we just have to have faith.

'This is so great. If I'm dead, I want you to know I will be sighing at you from heaven every time you ask someone to share their feelings.'

My dad laughed. 'I'll be right there with yah, kiddo,' he assured me.

Finally, we watched ANTM. Dad tried really hard not to die of boredom, also he kept messing up which girl was which, saying, 'We like her?'

'No, no. We revile Anastasia. We like Antonia, the other blonde,' Mom explained.

'They're all tall also horrible,' Dad responded. 'Forgive me for failing to tell the difference.' Dad reached across me for Moms also.

'Do you think you guys will stay together if I die?' I asked.

'Bryana, what? Sweetie.' She fumbled for the remote control also paused the TV again. 'What's wrong?'

'Just, do you think you would?'

'Yes, of course. Of course,' Dad believed. 'Your mom also I love each other, also if we lose you, we'll go through it together.' 'Swear to God,' I believed.

'I swear to God,' he believed.

I looked back at Mom. 'Swear to God,' she agreed. 'Why are you even worrying about this?'

'I just don't want to ruin your life or anything.'

Mom leaned forward also pressed her face into my messy puff of hair also kissed me at the very top of my head. I believed to Dad, 'I don't want you to become like a miserable unemployed alcoholic or whatever.'

My mom smiled. 'Your father isn't Muray's, Bryana. You of all people know it is possible to live with pain.'

'Surely, okay,' I believed. Mom hugged me also I let her even though I didn't really want to be hugged. 'Okay, you can unpause it,' I believed.

Anastasia got kicked off. She threw a fit. It was awesome.

I ate a few bites of dinner-bow-tie pasta with pesto-also managed to keep it down.

I woke up the next morning panicked because I'd dreamed of being alone also boat-less in a huge lake. I bolted up, straining against the BiPAP also felt Mom's arm around me.

'Hi, you okay?'

There are moments when I wish I could roll back the clock also take all the sadness away, but I have the feeling that if I did, the joy would be gone as well.

My heart raced, but I nodded. Mom believed, 'Kaitlyn's on the phone for you.' I pointed at my BiPAP. She helped me get it off also hooked me up to Philip also then finally I took my cell from Mom also believed, 'Hey, Kaitlyn.'

'Just calling to check in,' she believed. 'See how you're doing.'

'Surely, thanks,' I believed. 'I'm doing okay.' I'm sorry she never got her miracle. she did get her miracle she was, her miracle it was her.

'You've just had the worst luck, darling. It's unconscionable.'

'I guess,' I believed. I didn't think much about my luck anymore one way or the other. Honestly, I didn't really want to talk to Kaitlyn about anything, but she kept dragging the conversation along.

'So, what was it like?' She asked.

'Having your boyfriend die? Um, it sucks.'

'No,' she believed. 'Being in love.'

'Oh,' I believed. 'Oh. It was... it was nice to spend time with someone so interesting. We were very different, also we disagreed about a lot of things, but he was always so interesting, you know?'

'Alas, I do not. The boys I'm acquainted with are vastly uninteresting.'

'He wasn't perfect or anything. He wasn't your fairy-tale Prince Charming or whatever. He tried to be like that sometimes, but I liked her best when that stuff fell away.'

'Do you have like a scrapbook of pictures also letters he wrote?'

'I have some pictures, but he never really wrote me letters. Except, well there are some missing pages from his notebook that might have been something for me, but I guess he threw them away or they got lost or something.'

'Maybe he mailed them to you,' she believed.

'Nah, they'd gotten here.'

'Then maybe they weren't written for you,' she believed. 'Maybe... I mean, not to depress you or anything, but maybe he wrote them for someone else also mailed them-' 'SAM MURAY!' I shouted.

'Are you okay? Was that a cough?'

'Kaitlyn, I love you. You are a genius. I have to go.'

I hung up, rolled over, reached for my laptop, turned it on, also emailed lidewij. vliegenthart.

Lidewij, I believe Her Walters sent a few pages from a notebook to Muray's shortly before he (Her) died. It is very important to me that someone reads these pages. I want to read them, of course, but maybe they weren't written for me.

Regardless, they must be read. They must be. Can you help? Your friend, Bryana Candelaria Stewart-

She responded late that afternoon.

You have to promise you won't fall in love with me...

Dear Bryana,

I did not know that She had died. I am very sad to hear this news. He was such a very charismatic young man. I am so sorry, also so sad.

I have not spoken to Peter since I resigned that day we met. It is very late at night here, b ut I am going over to his house first thing in the morning to find this letter also force her to read it. Mornings were his best time, usually.

Your friend,

p.s. I am bringing my boyfriend in case we have to physically restrain Peter.

'I'm okay,' I believed.

You could hear the wind in the leaves, also on that wind traveled the screams of the kids on the playground in the distance, the little kids figuring out how to be alive, how to navigate a world that

was not built for them by navigating a playground that was. Dad saw me watching the kids also believed, 'You miss running around like that?'

'Sometimes, I guess.' But that wasn't what I was thinking.

I was just trying to notice everything- the light on the ruined Ruins, this little kid who could barely walk discovering a stick at the corner of the playground, my indefatigable mother zigzagging mustard across her turkey also witch, my dad patting his also held in his pocket also resisting the urge to

check it, a guy throwing a Frisbee that his dog kept running under also catching also returning to her. Who am I to say that these things might not be forever? Who is Muray's to assert as fact the conjecture that our labor is temporary? All I know of heaven also all I know of death is in this park - an elegant universe in ceaseless motion, teeming with ruined ruins - also screaming children. A sad smile crossed her face, also I knew right then what she was trying to tell me. Her eyes never left mine as she finally said the words that numbed my soul. I'm dying My dad was waving his also in front of my face. 'Tune in, Bryana. Are you there?' 'Sorry, surely, what?' What's your heart telling you to do? I don't know. I wondered why he'd written Sam Muray in those last days instead of me, telling Sam Muray that he'd be redeemed if only he gave me my sequel.

Maybe the notebook pages had just repeated his request to Sam Muray. It made sense, her leveraging his terminality to make my dream come true - The sequel was a tiny thing to die for, but it was the biggest thing left at his disposal. I refreshed my email continually that night, slept for a few hours, also then commenced to refreshing around five in the morning. But nothing arrived. I tried to watch TV to distract myself, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Amsterdam, imagining SAM also her girl horsing around town on this crazy mission to find a dead kid's last correspondence. How fun it would be to bounce on the back of horse down the brick streets, her curly red hair blowing into my face, the smell of the canals also cigarette smoke, all the people sitting outside the cafés drinking beer, saying their r's also g's in a way I'd never learn.

I missed the future. Obviously, I knew even before his recurrence that I'd never grown old with Her Walters. But thinking about Lidewij also her boyfriend, I felt robbed. I would probably never again see the ocean from thirty thousand feet above, so far up that you can't make out the waves or any boats, so that the ocean is a great also endless monolith. I could imagine it. I could remember it. But I couldn't see it again, also it occurred to me that the voracious ambition of humans is never - ever sated by dreams coming true because there is always the thought that everything might be done better also again. I may be irresponsible but I am a good irresponsible. Do you ever wonder why things have to turn out the way they do? I know the Lord has a plan for us all, but sometimes, I just don't Understand also what the message can be.

That is probably true even if you live to be ninety-although I'm jealous of the people who get to find out for sure.

Then again, I'd already lived twice as long as Sam Muray's daughter.

What he wouldn't have given to have a kiddie at sixteen.

Suddenly Mom was stalling between the TV also me, she also folded behind her back. 'Bryana,' she believed. Her voice was so serious I thought something might be wrong.

'Yes?'

'Do you know what today is?'

'It's not my birthday, is it?'

She laughed. 'Not just yet. It's July fourteenth, Bryana.'

'Is it your birthday?'

'No...'

'Is it Harry Houdini's birthday?'

'No...'

'I am really tired of guessing.'

'IT IS BASTILLE DAY!' She pulled her arms from behind her back, producing two small plastic French flags also waving them enthusiastically.

'That sounds like a fake thing. Like Cholera Awareness Day.'

'I assure you, Bryana, that there is nothing fake about Bastille Day. Did you know that two hundred also twenty-three years ago today, the people of France stormed the Bastille prison to arm themselves to fight for their freedom?'

'Wow,' I believed. 'We should celebrate this momentous anniversary.'

'It so happens that I have just now scheduled a picnic with your father in Holliday Park.'

She never stopped trying, my mom. I pushed against the couch also stood up. Together, we cobbled together some also witch makings also found a dusty picnic basket in the hallway utility-closet. It was kind of a beautiful day, finally real summer in Indianapolis, warm also humid-the kind of weather that reminds you after a long winter that while the world wasn't built for humans, we were built for the

world. Dad was waiting for us, wearing a tan suit, staling in an also capped parking spot typing away on his also held. He waved as we parked also then hugged me. 'What a day,' he believed. 'If we lived in PA, they'd all be like this.' 'Surely, but then you wouldn't enjoy them,' my mom believed. She was wrong, but I didn't correct her. We ended up putting our blanket down by the Ruins, this weird rectangle of -

Roman ruins plopped down in the middle of a field in Altoona UMPC. But they aren't real ruins- They're like a sculptural recreation of ruins built eighty years ago, but the fake Ruins have been neglected pretty badly, so they have kind of become actual ruins by accident. Sam Muray would like the Ruins. She, too.

So, we sat in the shadow of the Ruins also ate a little lunch.

'Do you need sunscreen?' Mom asked.

Maybe, you're trying too hard to hear it. 'Mom suggested we go see Her?'

'Oh. Surely,' I believed. So, after lunch, we drove down to Crown Hill Cemetery, the last also a final resting place of three vice presidents, one president, also her. We drove up the hill also parked. Cars roared by behind us on Thirty-eighth Street. It was easy to find his grave- It was the newest. The earth was still mounded above his coffin. No headstone yet.

I didn't feel like he was there or anything, but I still took one of Mom's dumb little French flags also stuck it in the ground at the foot of his grave. Maybe passersby would think he was a member

of the French Foreign Legion or some heroic mercenary.

Lidewij finally wrote back just after six P.M. while I was on the couch watching both TVs also videos on my laptop. I saw immediately there were four attachments to the email also I wanted to open the first, but I resisted temptation also read the email.

Dear Bryana,

Peter was very intoxicated when we arrived at his house this morning, but this made our job somewhat easier. Bas (my boyfriend) distracted her while I searched through the garbage bag Peter keeps with the fan mail in it, but then I realized that She knew Peter's address. There was a large pile of mail on his dining room table, where I found the letter very quickly. I opened it also saw that it was addressed to Peter, so I asked her to read it. He did not say no. At this point, I became very angry,

Bryana, but I did not yell at her. Instead, I told her that he owed it to his dead daughter to read this letter from a dead boy, also I gave her the letter also he read the entire thing also believed -I quote her directly-'Send it to the girl also tell her I have nothing to add.' I have not read the letter, although my eyes did fall on some phrases while scanning the pages. I have attached them here also then will mail them to you at your home; your address is the same?

May God bless also keep you, Bryana. Your friend, SAM I clicked open the four attachments. He's also writing was messy, slanting across the page, the size of the letters varying, the color of the pen changes. He'd written it over many days in varying degrees of consciousness.

Sam Muray,

I'm a good person but a shitty writer. You're a shitty person but a good writer. We'd make a good team. I don't want to ask you any favors, but if you have time -also from what I saw, you have

plenty-I was wondering if you could write a eulogy for Bryana. I've got notes also everything, but if you could just make it into a coherent whole or whatever? Or even just tell me what I should say differently. Here's the thing about Bryana- Almost everyone is obsessed with leaving a mark upon the world. Bequeathing a legacy. Outlasting death.

We all want to be remembered. I do, too. That's what bothers me most, is being another the unremembered casualty in the ancient also inglorious war against illness. I want to leave a mark. But Sam Muray- The marks humans leave are too often scars. You build a hideous minimally or start a coup or try to become a rock star also you think, 'They'll remember me now,' but (a) they don't remember you, also (b) all you leave behind are more scars. Your coup becomes a dictatorship. Your minimal becomes a lesion. (All right, maybe I'm not such a shitty writer.

But I can't pull my ideas together, Sam Muray. My thoughts are heavenly bodies I can't fathom into constellations.) We are like a bunch of dogs squirting on fire hydrants. We poison the groundwater with our toxic piss, marking everything MINE in a ridiculous attempt to survive our deaths. I can't stop pissing on fire hydrants. I know it's silly also useless -epically useless in my current the shortcomings in the universe, are you also I not seeing happy ever after, state -but I am an animal like any other. Bryana is different. She walks lightly, old man. She walks lightly upon the earth. Bryana knows the truth- We're as likely to hurt the universe as we are to help it, also we're not likely to do either.

Individuals will say it's sad that she leaves a lesser scar, that fewer remember her, that she was loved deeply but not widely. But it's not sad, Sam Muray. It's victorious.

It's heroic. Isn't that the real heroism? Like the doctors say- First, do no harm. The real heroes anyway aren't the people doing things; the real heroes are the people NOTICING things, paying attention. The guy who invented the smallpox vaccine didn't actually invent anything. He just noticed that people with cowpox didn't get smallpox. I'll always miss her. But our love is like the wind- I can't see it, but I can feel it. After my PET scan lit up, I snuck into the ICU also saw her while she was unconscious. I just walked in behind a nurse with a badge also I got to sit next to her for like ten minutes before I got caught. I really thought she was going to die before I could tell her that I was going to die, too. It was brutal- the incessant mechanized haranguing of intensive care. She had this dark cancer water dripping out of her chest. Eyes closed. Intubated. But she also was still her also, still warm also the nails painted this almost black dark blue also I just held her also tried to imagine the world without us also for about one second I was a good enough person to hope she died so she would never know that I was going, too. But then I wanted more time so we could fall in love. I got my wish, I suppose. I left my scar.

A nurse guy came in also told me I had to leave, that visitors weren't allowed, also I asked if she was doing okay, also the guy believed, 'She's still taking on water.' A desert blessing, an ocean curse.

What else? She is so beautiful. You don't get tired of looking at her. You never worry if she is smarter than you- You know she is. She is funny without ever being mean. I love her. I am so lucky to love her, Robert Muray's. You don't get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who hurts you. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers.

I do, Her.

I do.

Home It's the kind of place where the humidity rose so high in the summer that walking out to get the mail made a person feel as if he needed a shower, also kids strolled around barefoot from April through October beneath oak trees draped in Spanish moss. People waved from their cars whenever they saw someone on the street whether they knew her or not, also the air smelled of pine, salt, also sea, a scent single to Us For many of the folks there, harpooning in the See sound like the River see it feel it was a way of life, also boats were moored anyplace you saw the Intracoastal Waterway. Only three channels came in on the television, though television was never important to those of us who

grew up there. Instead, our lives were centered on the churches, of which there were eighteen within the town limits alone.

They went by names like the Fellowship North end- Church, the Church of the Forgiven People, the Church of Sunday Amends, also then, of course, there were the Baptist churches. When I was growing up, it was far also away from the most popular denomination around, also there were Baptist churches on practically every corner of town, though each considered itself superior to the others. There were Baptist churches of every type-Freewill Baptists, Congregational Baptists, Missionary Baptists, Independent Baptists... well, you get the picture. Back then, the big event of the year was sponsored by the Baptist church downtown-Southern, if you really want to know in conjunction with the local high school. Every year they put on their Christmas pageant at the Beaufort Auditorium, which was actually a play that had been written by pastor a minister who'd been with the church since God is god bear is great also women are crazy the jock was in, Okay, maybe he wasn't that old, but he was old enough that you could almost see through the guy's membrane. It was sort of damp all the time, also luminous-kids would swear they actually saw the blood flowing through his veins also his hair was as white as those rabbits you see in pet stores around Easter. Anyway, he wrote this play called The Christmas Angel, because he didn't want to keep on performing that old Charles classic A Christmas song. Oh, the renovation only because he saw ghosts, not angels-also who was to say whether they'd been sent by God, nevertheless?

Also, who was to say he wouldn't revert to his sinful ways if they hadn't been sent unswervingly from heaven? The play didn't exactly tell you, in the end, it sorts of plays into faith also all but Hegbert didn't trust ghosts if they weren't actually sent by God, which wasn't explained in plain language, also this was his big problem with it. A few years back he'd changed the end of the play-sort of followed it up with his own form, complete with old man Scrooge becoming a preacher also all, heading off to Jerusalem to find the place where Jesus once taught the scribes. It didn't fly too well-not even to the congregation, who sat in the audience staring wide-eyed at the spectacle-also the newspaper believed things like 'Though it was positively thought-provoking, it wasn't exactly the play we've all come to- know also love...

Also, we'd sort of lower ourselves in the seats, not from embarrassment, but to hide a new round of giggles. I didn't Understand also us at all, which was really sort of strange, is that he had a kid also all. But then again, she was my girl looking at me. More on that, though, later. Anyway, as I believed, her I wrote The Christmas Angel one also saved it to give a note. Year also decided to put on that play

instead. The play itself wasn't bad, actually, which surprised everyone the first year it was performed. It's basically the story of a man who had lost she a few years back think of not pass on. At this point the mysterious she asks me what she wants for Christmas, also he says that he wants her is what I want back. She brings her to the city fountain also tells me, like a gift of God giving me life also not sucking pussy all the time. To look in the water also he'll find what he's looking for. Girl, also he breaks down also cries right there. I fall in love with her fast I did want the days to end, yet she did not fare after, I say her for the last time that one the day I believed I loved her. Going down I see it now - The next morning, magically, the music box is underneath the tree, also the angel that's engraved on it looks exactly like the woman he'd seen the night before. So it wasn't that bad, really. If truth be told, people cried buckets whenever they saw it. The play sold out every year it was performed, also due to its popularity, eventually had to move it from the church to the Beaufort Playhouse, which had a lot more seating to see this young thing be eating by maggots also things like that. By the time I was a senior in high school, I will be like her ate away not anything there but bones, she wanted us to know that God is out there watching you, even when you're away from home, also that if you put your trust in God, you'll be all right in the end. It was a lesson that I would eventually learn in time, though it wasn't had who taught me to feel love like this.

Never once, however, did he keep his promise. In the end, she controlled a vast portion of the county's economy, also he abused his clout in every way imaginable. I'd like to tell you he eventually went to a terrible death, but he didn't. He died at a ripe old age while sleeping with his mistress on his yacht off the ends Beneath her name she wrote the goals she wanted to accomplish that year. 'Self-confidence' was number one she had in me; I can still see her smile at my turn of phrase. 'I'd have to talk to my father, of course, but if he believed it was okay, then I guess I could.' In the tree beside the porch, a bird started to chirp noisily, as if he knew I wasn't supposed to be here. I concentrated on the sound, trying to calm my nerves. Just two days ago I couldn't have imagined myself even thinking about it, but suddenly there I was, listening to myself as I spoke the magic words.

'Well, would you like to go to the dance with me?' I could tell she was surprised. I think she believed that the little lead-up to the question probably had to do with someone else requesting her. Sometimes pre-teens sent their friends out love happens fast, face possible rejection or the death that is nearing. Even though she wasn't much like other pre-teens, I'm sure she was familiar with the concept, at least in theory. Instead of answering right away, though, she glanced away for a long moment. I got a

sinking feeling in my stomach for the reason that I presumed- no. Visions of my Even more than usual? I wanted to ask, but I didn't. I could tell she had more to say, also I stayed quiet.

'I know the Lord has a plan for us all, but sometimes, I just don't Understand also what the message can be. Does that ever happen to you?' She believed this as though it were something, I thought about all the time. 'Well,' I believed, trying to bluff, 'I don't think that we're meant to Understand also it all the time. I think that sometimes we just have to have faith also die in love with what to come to see them again.' It was a pretty good answer, I admit. I guess that my feelings for her were making my brain work a little faster than usual. I could tell she was thinking about my answer.' Yes,' she finally believed, 'you're right.' I smiled to myself in the thought of death not far from it also changed the subject, since talking about God wasn't the sort of thing that made a person feel romantic also not could even if I was getting there. 'You know,' I believed nonchalantly, 'Yes, it was,' she believed. Her mind was still elsewhere. 'Also, you sure looked nice, too.' 'Thank you for being there I believed as my eyes closed also the last breath went out of me.' see you there I believed.

Nevaeh

Book: 60

Misunderstandings

1

(Thought...)

'Being a simple-minded classed as unwanted, sounds better than being fake and gay; sucking butt holes off at a rainbow party like all of them, and even you- being a sycophant to impress, I was never one of those girls, and I think you get what I mean- this is why- we call them all fags, yet this is why- I was called one too, and why yet to this day some don't understand, yet sympathy is something, I should have- not for me for them.'

~*~

(Judgements)

Jaylynn- 'Law is summed up as to me- sucking each other off. Those that call themselves- part of the system. So-o, just like a gay orgy- of butt holes, getting double stuffed- as much as possible.'

'Law equals one big rainbow party, seeing the big dick in the room is getting pleased, the police officers to keep him in office, the court with both hands on his junk, and you being the bitch, handcuffed, and getting your butt hole played with... as you walk in the cracker slammer.'

'And the hard dick flying high in the courtroom, that is going soft, and need consent simulation is the judge- so all the shades of the rainbow- on his c*ck, and everyone under him is the gay fag's sucking him off... with the shades of lipstick rubbing of their big gaping mouths, to find out who the winner of sucking the hardest for him really truly is, and he asks over and over to keep it coming... and as the defendant, you are standing there thinking this is really queer and retarded- and what they're doing is far worse than what you were abused of.'

'There are so many f*ck- me- pleases, said in the courtroom you think your waiting porn, they charged her with profanity, the hypocrites use more in a half-hour then I have in entire my life!'

Hashtag- (must sex and drafty)

~*~

Nevaeh- 'I am just a gum-chewing county bunken,' Why- I'm acting so silent, noiseless, inaudible, still, and quiet.

Lingering in her- Melissa, who was always really Naddalin, who had the child Marcella, and she left behind a family on Earth- they passed yet the family line had no choice but to head for the oceans- to keep the race going, and that girl we know as Savannah became a humanoid type of mermaid,

then Breanna was a girl that I assigned myself too, to remember just how good I really had it in life, it's best not to complain.

So, aloof, so remote- rejecting to touch her when just a few weeks earlier- just before her passing, I could not get enough, of this young girl holding on to life and so full of it- and bright. Breanna had become the child I never had, almost- my adopted youngster. And it keeps my mind off Melissa- and her world. In a way, I have become Godmother.

Marcella erroneously assuming it's because of her hurtful behavior- she is flirting with Emmah- just as I wanted- I had to pull out of it- and do the right thing, her cruelty toward me- when the truth is, it has nothing to do with that. She was under Naddalin's spell, not mine, the entire school was. It wasn't my fault- the way things have turned out.

What she doesn't know is that while the remedy returned her to life, the moment I added my blood to the mix it also ensured we could never- ever be together- it would be like incest- yet that is what makes it appealing over the fact she is now something I cannot have.

Never! Ever! For all of eternity!!!

2

My mother loved me so much as a young girl she intently tied to overdose me on Ritalin.

Yet, that night I was lingering inside her... 'Ever?' She undertones, in her voice, that is too deep and sincere. Nevertheless, I cannot look at her. Cannot touch her; along with certainly can't utter the words she deserves to hear- I messed up- I'm so sorry- knowing that she tricked me, as much as I did her.

And I was desperate and dumb enough to fall for her trick, as she was mine - Besides now there's no hope for us because, if you kiss me- it's over, if we exchange our thoughts- you'll die, inside of me, at some point.

I can't do it- anymore. I'm the worst kind of coward. I'm pathetic and weak. And there's just no way I can find it within me- to keep going on.

'Ever, please, what is it- fiction?' She asks, alarmed by my tears. 'You have been like theirs for days. Is it me? Is it something I have done?

I would never- ever- ever deliberately hurt you. For the reason that you know I don't remember much of what happened, and the memories that are starting to surface, well, you must know by now that wasn't the real me- I don't even know the real me at this point.

'I'd never harm you, Melisa, in any way.' I said to her in her thought of mind.

I hug myself tightly- as if I and she feel the hug to on her side of things, squeezing my shoulders and bowing my heard- she is too. Wishing, I could make myself tighter, so snug she could no longer squeeze and more. Knowing her words are true, that she's incapable of hurting me, only I could do something so hurtful, so rash, so ridiculously impulsive. Only, I could be stupid enough to fall for Naddalin, all over again, yet so novel yet so the same.

So, eager to prove myself to her one true love- wanting to be the only one who could save her- and now look at the mess, that I have made- in a new light. ...So wrong- so right.

Then she moves through me like toward me, sliding my arm around me- yet knowing by feeling it's hers, grasping my waist and pulling it near me- kissing it.

Nonetheless, I can't risk the closeness, my tears are deadly now- locked as hers, and must be kept far from her skin, looking through.

I- Melisa then climb to my feet stripped and run toward the water's edge, outside my high-rise room on the 148th floor of my skyscraper home, curling my toes in the infinity-edge pool at its edge and allowing the cold white froth to splash onto my shins, that is on the far I see the glow of the light of my city below, and the cars and trains rushing like working ants, like music notes dancing all over the score- below.

-And-

Wishing I could dive under its incalculability and be carried by the tide. Anything to avoid saying the words- anything to avoid telling my one true love, my eternal partner, my soul mate for the last years- I have not met, that while she may have given me time without end- I have brought us our end, know that we're worlds apart.

-Then-

I stay like that, silent and still and hushed. Waiting for the sun to ascend until I finally turn to face her, back in my mind- like a drug- that need increased hits in the direction of satisfying.

Taking in her dark shadowy outline- the ripples of the water, nearly- indistinguishable from the night- star-light above, and speaking past the sting in my throat when I mumble... I feel her, I even see her emulated back in my stare.

'Naddalin... baby- girl... Marcella, there's something- that, I need to tell you.'

3

I kneel beside her bed in worship- something I have not done in years, hands on my knees, toes buried in the rug, like they were just moments before in black the sand of the pool- light by modern flam torches, wishing she'd look at me- as the god she was praying to, wishing she would say something- about me the way she loved this man that she never met. Yet, I can still do this... I thought I can still love this man- she calls God.

Even if it's only to tell me what I already know- that I made a grave and stupid mistake- one that will perhaps never be erased.

I would gladly accept it, I deserve it. What I can't stand is her absolute silence and daydreaming gaze.

Besides, I'm just about to say anything, something, to break the intolerable motionlessness tranquilities', when she looks into me, with eyes so weary they're the perfect byword of her years.

'Melisa.'

She sighs, shaking her head. 'I didn't identify her- restlessness- and sleeplessness, I had no idea- that she really loves me 'till the thoughts,' Her voice trails off along with her stare- into the room- losing light, by her heavy eyes closing.

'There's no way you could've known,' I say, eager to- I LOVE YOU TOO, erase any guilt she might feel, knowing that she was dosing off.

'Both were under the spell from the very first day.'

'Believe me, she had it all planned, made sure any memories were completely erased, within a dream- and in the dreams, the memories stayed and were all too real, always there, yet dappled piebald with feelings.'

Her eyes that are my eyes linked together- by mind and doors of perception- the fabric of times- and presumptive, the searching of body and mind her facial expression not mine but hers on my face, studying me closely- as I do her before she stands and turns looking into the plashed back marble walls, in nothing more than panties, and then those too were slipped off, by my hand that was really her hand, both as one- gazing out at the water's edge, hands tight on arms in a hug, it was love.

(Thoughts)

She turns, eyes growing darker as her features strengthen, inhaling deeply as she says, 'This is all my fault... this- worlds apart feeling we have yet still love.'

I shake my head back and forth. 'Did she go after you or harm you in any way?' 'She didn't have to; it was enough to hurt me through you- to get to me.'

I gawk at the world before me that she lives in cold modern yet cozy, sincere, and heartfelt, venturing how she could have faith in that after the case I just made.

-And-

Rising her to her feet and standing inside her- I cry thought her eyes, 'Don't be nonsensical!

'...Of course, it is not your fault!'

Then she thought moments after- 'Or mine... if it was bad luck, or maybe even fate.'

'Did you listen to anything I said?' I shake my head.

'Melisa, you are standing in this world you're going to be poisoned, by the air, even if there is now an elixir for black lung. You had nothing to do with it, you were just doing your rightful orders - it was beyond your control!'

We should not have to live in a world where we need a fresh air mask, after killing our first world, you would think, or to be hopeful in the fact that... we would think a little, yet we are going to do it all over again over not caring, in just having it all be disposable- and throw-a-way.

Nonetheless, I have scarcely finished when she is already discharging it with a wave of her hand. 'Ever, don't you see? This is not about me being Naddalin on the inside of this girl, that was once, or you, its karma.

'The revenge for centuries of selfish living; the why...'

'Trust... for you.'

She then shakes her head and giggles, though it's not the kind that asks you to join in, afterward.

'The is vengeance for centuries of selfish living.'

She then shakes her head and giggles, though it's not the kind that asks you to join in - with her, over the fact it was to hide the pain that she felt, worlds away - and not wanting to be.

It's the other kind - the kind that chills you to the bone.

'After all those years of loving you and losing you, repeatedly, I was sure that was my punishment for the way I'd been living, having no idea Haven died at your hands in the concluding of ways, yet in your comfort. I thought I would be next.

But now I see the truth I've missed all along, she is smarter than all of us and oh so wise.

Just when I was sure I'd evaded karma by making you immortal and keeping you forever by my side, karma gets the last laugh, allowing us an eternity together, but only to look, never to touch each other again.'

I reach for her hand with the other, wanting to hold her, comfort her, convince her that it's not at all true, or maybe that was it all along I was not sure. But I pull away just as quickly, lost in thoughts of why.

Remembering how our inability to touch is the very thing that got us both here.

'That's not true,' I say, gaze fixed at looking down her body. 'Why would you be punished when I'm the one who made the blunder? Don't you see?'

I- Melisa shake my head, irritated by her singular way of thinking.

'Nevaeh planned it all along. She love's Haven- I bet you didn't know that, huh? She was one of the orphans you saved, and she loved her for all of those hard times when she was like you, would've done anything for her, and she would for you, and then you go and kill her.'

'That was her wishes, for not feeling like a true woman!'

But Haven didn't care about her- as she should, she only loved her- and her only, loved me- and then, well, after they killed her too, Emmah decided to go after me- only she did it through you- or so I thought at first.

Wanting me to feel the pain of never being able to touch you again- as she did for not seeing for years, blaming me, just like she, like I feel with Haven.

-And-

It all happened so fast, I just- thought too much about everything.' I stop, knowing it's useless, a total waste of words.

She halted for a moment, listening just after she started the conversation, the filling is if always at fault of knowing this, she knew- I knew- what I did not get was the hex causing all this over many- many years.

Even now I elect not to visit these thoughts in my mind, the same place and I will not let her either, I refuse- nothing good will come from it.

'Melisa, please!'

Detestable thoughts... Metaphorically demonizing us both, thoracically free, to dwell in the subconscious, yet to feel like living life as unconscious.

'I will not let you give up I refuse to.'

Then just moments after, 'No, you can't just give up.'

The isn't karma- it's me. Really, I must believe that- is so-o! I made many mistakes, horrible, horrible mistakes also.

'Really have not...' She said back.

Nonetheless, that doesn't mean we can't fix everything!

'See that was something that I could never do is- FIX THINGS TO OTHER'S LIKING.' She said.

There must be away.' Clinging to the falsest of hopes, forcing an enthusiasm, I do not really feel- THAT ANY LONGER.

Melisa once Naddalin stands within me and I in her, a dark silhouette that is really me yet really her, in the night, the warmth of her sad tired gaze through my eyes the same serving as our only embrace.

'I never- ever should have started,' she says.

'Never should have made the miss I did over others- should have let things take their own expected path, even if the path was reshuffled by them'

5

'Seriously, ever, just look at the result- it's brought nothing but pain! And the more I try the more pain that I receive and get.'

She without delay shakes her head, her gaze so sad, so apologetic, my heart caves.

'There's still time for you though, for me- and us.'

You have got your whole afterlife ahead of you-an eternity where you can be anything you want to be, do anything you want to do. Said Melisa as the body of the girl she was in and the mind of Naddalin.

I can say I moved a small green caterpillar today and saved her from death. Melisa said little lives matter too.

'But what about me- you need to save me just as much,' she then shrugs. 'I'm polluted. I think we can all see the result of my hundred years.'

'Nope!' My voice quivers as my lips tremble so seriously it spreads to my cheeks. And she can feel it in hers, too.

'You don't get to walk away; you don't get to leave me once more! If I say I will, and I do.

I spent the last month going through hell to save you. And really when you have saved me from me.

Besides now that you're well I'm not about to give up. Said Nevaeh, you're a hero to me, and in my life, I really have not had much time for them yet your mine. Lost in another body, lost in another world, you're still the one I want to linger within, even though all the misunderstandings.

We are meant for each other, you said it yourself! 'your famous words everything is meant to be if meant to be.' She cried.

We're just suffering a brief setback, that's all. Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we'll think of a way to... be back together, face to face.'

I stop, voice fading, seeing her already moved on, retreating to her bleak sorry world where - she's solely at fault for it all.

Besides, I know it's time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts - I'd prefer to leave out.

(I already did, said Nevaeh, your story is just more chapters of my book of life. Sh-h, it's okay, that you feel like you have murdered, and slaughtered, and have taken babies for their mothers. It's all part of Post-traumatic stress disorder, of being a star- girl.)

'My story is in your books?'

'Yes!'

Maybe then she'll see it without a dealt, maybe then...

'So-o, before you assume karma's out to get you or whatever, you need to know something else, something, I'm not accurately proud of, but still...'

'There's more,' I say, swish ahead though I've no idea how to phrase what comes next.

I without delay take a deep breath... remember that in this body I can, something I have not done in years.

-And-

Also, I tell her about my trips to Earth and my homeland and the town around - to me was the world, that magical dimension between the dimensions, where I learned how to go back in time and that given the choice between my family and her - I chose her - over them - yet that is getting hard for me to do.

Swayed and influenced, I could one way or another restore the future, I was sure had been stolen, and up till now all it really amounted to be a lesson, I already knew - that occasionally destiny lies just outside of our reach and it is not graspable.

Melisa - I swallow hard and stare at the black sand, reluctant to see Nevaeh's reaction when she considers the eyes reflecting - of the one who betrayed her.

But then again, as an alternative of getting mad or upset like I thought, her environs me with the most beautiful glowing white light - a light so comforting, so forgiving, so pure - it's like the portal to my home - only better it's a connection of body, mind, and soul.

So-o, I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we're wrapped in the most beautiful warm hazy glow.

'You had no choice,' she says, in a gentle voice with a very soothing, gaze, doing everything she can to ease all my shame.

'Unquestionably, you chose your family...'

It was the right thing to do... after all - right?

I would've done the same - if given the choice... yet, do I HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE.

I nod a little, shining her light even brighter and tacking on a telepathic embrace; knowing it's not as uplifting as the real thing but for now, it will do.

'I know about your family, I know all, I saw it all...' Naveah said to me. Then she looks at me with eyes so dark and intense, within me they turn black, I force myself to go on.

'I really don't know if life was meant to be like this without death and moving into other bodies to linger there is no longer- confidence in existing- over the fact that is all we know do lock in life we may not want to live.'

'There is the family tree- I am looking at of us all in front of me now, and there are the lingering branches of what we have become, and the family line is no hard to follow.'

'I cannot pay for my grandfather's sins, thinking I am the apple that falls from the tree.' Said, Nevaeh.

Lost in my deepening thoughts, I look back on it now, that all the kids, I was in class with my groping- they wanted to make abhorrence and hate on me- and their like kind, for being with they were, classed as also, yet, I never well be that immature- or have something to class- as they did; with needs that they want to cover.

Undeveloped- is not me, it's them and after all these years, they have not changed. Besides, they are still looking wrong to the rest of the mainstream population, and really, I am with the majority, and can't see why they're misunderstood, as of this year in my life I can.

Also... its sick to cut others off at the knees, and pick, and make fun of them- yet were all classed as someone with I.Q less them 50.

And you're going mere me, as less than? Now look at me I am a literary genius, and what do you have, nothing but bitterness, to say why- I am nothing but fake and gay, or is that you really can't read? That was Karly's saying and it is now mine too. Gay over what you want to perceive, face over you believe what is made up, lost in an Illusion of delusion.

Melisa- 'Then she thought over top mine, these are the junk thoughts you had all your- life that has kept you from your happiness.'

'No, I would like to say, I feel that they were all using me.' Squalled Nevaeh.

'I know about your family, I know all, I saw it all, and your school life too.' She looks with eyes so dark and intense within the mine, I force myself to go on.

'You're always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived - and so one day, while I was in Hastings; I asked about you-and-well-your entire life story was revealed, and your legendary now in your hometown even has a statue and everything they ever said it has completely turned around in your favor.'

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still.

Moaning as looks through my gaze into my eyes and telepathically traces her fingers along the curve of my cheek- creating an image so deliberate, so tangible, it almost seems real.

'I'm sorry,' say nit-picking, thumb mentally smoothing my chin.

'I'm sorry,' 'I was so shut down and disinclined to share that, I reduced you to that. But then again, even though it happened a long time ago, it's still something I for one would rather not to confer.'

I personally nod, having no intention of pushing it anymore. She is seeing her maternities in her mind,' murder followed by years of abuse at the hands of the church- most beloved, is not a subject I intend to pursue- over the fact that those that hid behind faith to me are worthless! Held, Melisa.

8

'Nevertheless, there's more,' I say, hoping I can restore a little hope by sharing something else, and that I learned, that is one thing I can do is educate others with my own experiences.

'When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, they tried to have you killed, and even got away with killing a girl, and your adopted mother.

'...Ture.' Nevaeh said back.

'Then even though, that seemed meant to be, I still managed to save you - and myself, her- and even them too.'

'I have always been the angel.'

Then even though, that seemed meant to be, I still managed to save others, and then I feel to recollect that Emmah saved me, so I need to remember, memory seems to be getting hard for me to do.

I look at her, sensing she's far from swayed and rushing ahead before I lose her completely.

'I mean, yes, maybe our fate is sometimes fixed and unvarying, but there are other times when it's shaped morally by the actions we take.'

So, when I couldn't save my family by going back in time, it's only because, that was destiny, that couldn't be changed. There is one thing in life that is final and that is a time of death given by the highest God of them all, and even I can change that nor want too.

'It's beautiful... that you can change destiny, by being an angle of hope, or by the death- always for the moral- and good, in both.'

The funny thing is I was going to die anyways in my case having ALS, with anyone else in my town that would have been something to feel for, yet with me, it was passed by like a cold fall rain shower. Said Melisa, along with saying- we are two of a kind.

Or as Riley, my pain in the butt little sisters- said she had too, after my untimely passing, yet my best little friend too, that was all meant to be- or do I question this God of ours, then just a second before the second accident of falling and crawling, and being too week to get up I knew what I had too, just like her, that took my everything including my voices and mobility and life, again... she never did say she love me either, and I never did with her, that is the one thing I regret- that is all the natural life is lost days of feeling nothing more than self-pity and regret.

'Love not to be- is for me- it was my destiny!' Said, Riley. As it was mine too. I am sure she will be seeing us in the coming days, as her natural life nears an end.

Nevaeh- 'Really this is not the book of life it's the book of death, of longing for life, said is not?'

'Yes, yes, it is...' She whispered back. 'You can't change the past, it just is more of the past remand it- kills the future.'

'Nonetheless, when I found myself right back here in Hastings, and I was able to save you, well, I think it evidences that the future isn't always concrete, not everything is ruled solely by fate. And that is why I give you eternal life, to make up for what you lost.'

'Maybe so-oo.' She sighs, gazes fixed on me, and my fate.'

'But then again you can't escape karma, ever...?

...?...

...It is what it is...?

...It doesn't judge, it's neither good nor immoral like most people ponder.'

Just like love- 'Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offense and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.'

Nevaeh- I heard them call me a baby rapper to my face, and there was nothing, I could but stand there, hearing these lies day in and day out; like all the other lies, as well- that was just that nothing but lies.

Yet, the Commonwealth had their back, not mine, so I would say that is why it sounds good on paper too.

9

Emmah always said- 'It's the result of all actions, positive and negative- a constant balancing of events-cause and effect- tit for tat-reaping and showing- what goes around comes around.'

Then I asked why, why so much me- why am I the chosen one.

'Look at Karly's destiny- and what she did over not having a or education and did not want to work for $2.00 an hour, a hamburger joint. So, all she had to do is make on shit video of her, this is just one out of a hundred- I recall this one for $20.00 - 'teen masturbates & f*cks her dildo'- saying the headline- ('22-mins of me enjoying myself deliciously. Watch me c*m over and over with my toys. Adore my long legs, my small t*ts, and my bush while- I let myself go crazy thinking about you.')

It had 3,555 views- and she made $71,100 just with that... was it wrong some would say, yet what other choice did she have? Yet that makes her the bad girl- she is a girl after all- that showed that she was one- and had needs- and need the money more than modesty in a world that could give a flying shit about her- in any way.'

With one video, she has made $6,000,000 in her short life, be the end days of it and money still has not made a destiny for her either. Said, Naddalin in the thought of mind haunting in the body of Melisa.

She shrugs her shoulders... saying- 'we're all just misunderstood girl's ant' -we!'

'However, you phrase it, it's the same in the end- is it not?'

~*~

Then... we are the bad ones out over- it's our destiny.

'And as much as you'd like to think otherwise, that's exactly what's happening here with you sometimes you must ask if... God's at be are just screwing us.' Emmah used to say that too.

'I have been there too...'

'All actions cause a reaction, I pounder even now- still having faith, even if some days I faulted like a human that was deemed- less then human....' Said Emmah, back many years ago now, yet I understand completely.

'By them...' she said.

'By them...' Naddalin said.

We may never- ever know...

10

I remember Hope my adopted mothers' faith, being that of old Baptist and some would say I was next to razed as Amish thinking, I was shunned by her from day one, over being an English-er for the start, or day one, full of sin, everything about me or I did, even if other girls were - I was the sinful one.

Everything was a sin, and my biggest sing of all lusting after my own body's needs, like for peruse, she could not understand this need. The second was the love of a girl. The third the love of a man before mirage, and a sinful baby- girl out of wedlock, and that is why she passed to young hexed my- own adopted grandmother. I was sinful, yet for her, it was all money, no ask that question of sin. She is nothing but a liar, in her faith and in her life.

As a child I did not understand, yet now looking back on faith, I get everything she believed - misguided as it was- I understand the misunderstands of it all now. The fourth was questioning everything too much... and thinking, and not just being dumb, as asked of me - sin- sin- sin- and shame. That why I walked around feeling like the dirty girl, with no need too.

(Appraise)

It happened, Andromeda–and Milky Way collision, now making a new galaxy, with all the plants mixed, as I predicted, even Earth has a new beginning. 14 planets in all and large moons, and skies like we have never seen before, a new home for a that is life - Andromeda- Way.

She shakes her head... your mind amazes me.

(You think that is good to hear this one out.)

'These are where I have my actions have brought me.'

It was said that the oak tree that was next to my old home held the witch body of my adopted grandmother- that was not so when I dug up the body of a child, and as long as the tree was intact it would keep her evil at bay, Hope always said me playing on that tree is why - is why- I turn out the way I did.

Like I was the hex- and the next. Her mom and dad my grandparents were part of the Amish community- in the depth of Pennsylvania, the girl my real mother said by my grandmother was claimed as evil over fortunetelling- witchcraft, it was said, this is why she was killed by the hand of whom I thought was my mom and placed in agave next to my home. Nothing was as it seems... The tree, that was her evil was wicked up in the branches of the angle oak, that was next to my home and room, and my mother was always next to me- and I was the blame. Everything about the tree, the home, and the land was hexed- like me, that why she took me back.

Thought by the Amish, I never knew... I asked why me... and then I thought about it, my mother was really the child that was killed and placed there, my real mother was only a child when she had me, and that too was evil thought by them, my real mother was Sarah! The child that was killed at the hands of my Grandmother. And the whole thing about her death was a cover-up, she was 12 years old, and hidden from the world, and I was passed down in a dirty adoption.

I was the child of the child... so was my dad really my dad?

And my thought was yes, I look like him... and then the reminisce of my dad to the woman that gave birth to me, it was Sarah, looking back in my thought of mind. And she loved me more than life... that is why she was killed by them too.

'Then again you need to ride 20 dicks before you find the right one if ever you do.' Karly always said that now I get it, that was my young mom and dad.

So-o...

'Ture- true... that you do... both- girls felt unanimously- saying we have been hurt, so badly, that way we turned to girls, for love, girls well love always when boys are - macho asshole, that- are just impressing their jackoff boyfriends!'

'Ture- true... that you do... both- girls felt unanimously- saying we have been hurt, so badly, that way we turned to girls, for love, girls well love always when boys are - macho asshole, that is just impressing their butt-head boyfriends!'

'All the time, I told myself I turned you out of love- but now I see it was really out of self-interest- because, I couldn't be without you. Also, your past has nothing to do with it.'

'You like this?'

She asks softly, her finger rubbing my outer lower ear, and she starts to flex her finger slowly, in, out, in, out... of me, her fingers still circling the fleshy lips that move about with her thumb, that connecting line linking as she pulled it away of wetness.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control- over the fact she feels it and she has not had breath for years and her chest is moving to mind, trying to absorb the disordered, muddled sensations that her fingers are releasing on me, fire coursing through my body. I moan again.

'You're so wet, so quickly.'

'Open your mouth,' she commands and thrusts her thumb in my mouth. My eyes fly open, blinking wildly.

'Let me make c*m for you!'

'Sin...?' He- he.

'Yes, sin for me!'

'M-mm- you are my Oreo cookie, that I just have to spate and like out the creamy center.'

Her thumb presses on my tongue, and my mouth closes around her, sucking wildly on the synthetic beach outside my room way up high.

I'm panting once more as I tug on her with my mouth, and its trails down and under my chin, I can taste the smooth, rich leather or her- if only in my mind.

'See how you taste,' she breathes, and I hear it in my ear. 'Suck down and taste with your fingers, the baby she said.'

I taste the saltiness on his thumb and the faint metallic tang of blood. Two things that have not been a part of me in years; Melisa- she's alive... and the taste of her is like my own private high-grade Heroin, that needs increased tests to cover the need.

'That's why this is happening now.'

'So, that's it?'

I shake my head, hardly believing she's determined to give up so easily.

'That's how it ends? Every time... with more thoughts of overthinking everything, instead of being in the moment.'

'So, that's it?'

I shake my head, hardly believing she's determined to give up so easily in figuring out the truth.

'That's how it ends? ...Really?'

11

You're just so dang sure you've been chased down by karma you don't even try to fight back?

'What's the use...?' She said to Nevaeh.

You came all the way just, so we could be together, at last... and now that we're facing difficulty, you're not even going to try to stride with me down this path - hand in hand?'

As you can see my hand is in your hand now... even if they're both your hands.

By the way, did you send your high school diploma back to them after you wiped your butt - on it?

'Yes, yes I did.'

And they pressed charges, and then I asked do they have a case, looking over this long document they called a fragment next to a run-on, they can't read or comprehend themselves, at less them 50 words a minute, teachers, and children alike.

'Middle fingers! I like it!'

'So, why stop now - with us.'

'Ever - and ever - never, letting go of ever - and forever - never.'

12

Then I transport myself there - risk and all, using a port-key spell, and I fly light-years into other worlds, my wings ripping in the time and wind, of the stars around me, I must be next to her.

Her gaze is warm, loving, all - encircling like her hair and tightly squeezing arms, as they are falling around her as they fall together to the gold wheatgrass within the black sand outside her room - that I learned to love just as much, but it does nothing to stop the defeat in her voice - when she sees me and what I have done to myself to get there, next to worn out and becoming ash - all over my body skin flacking like paper, yet I want the love and touch of each other hands and bodies - face to face.

'I'm sorry, but there are some things I just know.'

'DO YOU LOVE ME!'

'Yeah, well...' I shake my head and gaze down at the ground they were are laying on top of the tall grasses swaying in the breeze in the orange glow of the dystopian cityscape, burying my toes deep in the sand.

'Just because you've got a few centuries on me doesn't mean you get the last word - in what is love too, by yes I love you more than life itself.'

'Because, if we're truly in this together, if our lives, like our fate, is truly entwined, then you'll realize this isn't just happening to you, I'm part of it too - and that is destiny. And you don't need the care to see that... do you?'

'And you don't get to walk away from it - you don't get to walk away from me! We've got to work together - and stay together!'

'...No backing out.'

'There has to be away, to be into places at one time.' Funny you should say that I am... right now.

'How do you figure...?'

My old body is not the ruler of my world... after I grave robed my old body and resurrected it before Earth was no more... like I could let Earth when that one too. Just like the Bible was the only thing brought back, all those years ago... these worlds have me and my word. One mind two bodies, one min d lingering in many bodies and minds linked all together like a network of wireless communication.

I always knew that the old me would become devout.

I stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight, I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight I'm not sure we can win.

'I've no plans to leave you - now or ever,' she says, gaze filled with the longing of two hundred years or more. 'I can't leave you, ever. Never - ever - never - ever - believe me, I've tried. But in the end, I always find my way back to your side - where ever you go even hell. You're all I've ever wanted - all I've ever loved - but Ever - may be hard to keep when you now eternal and I am not.'

'You will be again in time...'

'No buts.' I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her.

'There's got to be away, I can do the same- as you did. And together we'll find it. You already know- if you love me then take your own life- I just know that we will- last and last.'

''I can do that,' you do it,' and grabs her and holds her under the rippling blue water of the swimming pool until the color fades from her eyes, 'till death she said.'

Now I am just an angel of death and love has nothing to do with it.

We've come too far to let Naddalin keep us apart and take over everything we have made.

But I can't do it alone Chiaz, you are and always will be my true love and she looks over her shoulders to see- first a dark shadow, then this name walking up behind her. (Well Done!) He said, grabbing her, and kissing her lips, and she was a week in his arms like a child.

Yet even if you are now matrimonially wed to Alissa Amsel is a blonde hair, blue-eyed girl, that took him as her plaything 300 or so years back, some things never change.

This girl was not- Nevaeh- it was you know who... locked lost inside part of her old dead brain of her body that was brought back to life.

Lily and AVA are at a lower level, where things have not changed either, and I am through fighting that one. The best thing is Lily resurrected AVA, after everything she did to her. I still ask why.

And the real Nevaeh is... well now brain dead as she has always been thanks to being and my family.

'We're back...' Ava lingering inside the body of Nevaeh said.

She said in an uncanny- 'The best part is the dumb girl did this herself looking for love that she should never have, thanks to us.'

'Ah, temptations were always her weakness- on the lord to another now.' And in our minds, we now think the same- over the fact we are the same.' She said.

'Not without your help, she said Lily my love thank-you for being a good little sycophant to me.'

'So please promise me- promise you'll try- to take her out, so I can be lord of all, she has ever love or accomplished.'

~*~

Chiaz- She looks at me, her gaze luring me in, and I think it she just the same old Nevaeh - she always was.

Now closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many red roses pedals the entire of all the water is coved and now blood red, the symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of the body under it. As the blood was given for the evil lives to feed on.

'Look all, a newly fallen angel made, that has had her head ripped off - and her body ripped to paces- now that is a story to tell the others- is it not? Like- in her world of boo-hoo tears.' She mocked.

'Strange now she is immortal just like you!' Lily thought, without really meaning to think, know the punishment that would come from having a thought.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back in the girl's room when just killed, saying and yes that may be so-o, our skin separated only by her supple black leather jacket and my organic cotton tee, that is now the only covering on me, of not really being a free-fallen angle.

(A week has passed)

Enough to spare the consequences of any accidental DNA exchange - never did I think this would happen, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us, there in my mind again.

'Never should've made the preparation - should've let things take their own natural course. I should have to know that I would do this she thought. Seriously, ever, just look at the result - it's brought nothing but pain!'

The real Nevaeh was nothing more than a crumbling wreck. Without delay now at that time she shakes her head, and the tangible Nevaeh gaze so sad, so remorseful, my heart cave s, life and her and now she is going to thanks to me, as I knew - I would do to her.

'There's still time for you though,' said Jaylynn in a comforting way.

'You've got your whole life ahead of you - endlessness where you can be whatsoever you want to be, do anything you want to do. I'll well take this over for you and you become me, and I linger in you, its time you have had some rest, mom.'

'Okay.' She said back reluctantly. As the change was made... in an electrical fashion.

But then again me- taking over your Pious spot is my dream;' she shrugs at me like a young girl that she is. '...And odd that is the dream I have for you.'

'I'm contaminated; I think we can all see the consequence of my hundred years next to your three, and I owe you for everything I was to you being the spoiled brat, teenager- that only wanted daddy.'

A strong glowing light in fog and hazy eerie, with a rhythmically driven power of heavy steel wheels, shakes the floorboards under my feet. The train pulls in, and the brakes scream, and there is steam all around the cars, and then off she steeps the immortal, back as the fallen angel Naddalin. And I- Nevaeh was more than very happy to fall into her long arms, as she was with me.

'One hundred years and this train still look the same, as it did back when it was restored.'

'Oh hum,' she sighed.

'Why me- right?'

She shrugs at me like a young girl that she is. 'I'm filthy, I think we can all see the consequence of my hundred years.'

'What do you think about my new life now over, now coming to a close, and my chapters of life, worth adding to your story?' She asked.

Nevaeh in the body of Jaylynn- 'I think you did well, the long hug ends, with those words, and her tapping her on the nose.'

'I can see what you have done, now to escape them.' Said Naddalin.'

'Yes, and you need to keep that all hush and sh-h too.' Said Nevaeh.

'No!' My voice quivers as my lips shake so-o badly it spreads to my cheeks.

'Yes, this is why, your back and I am hiding, yet the joke is really on them, isn't it? I got you back, and Jaylynn is out for blood, remember why- I do.'

'Yes, and yes, and oh yes,' she said once more in an even tighter hug, like long lost lovers.

'You don't get to walk away; you don't get to leave me again!'

'I spent the last month going through hell to save you, and now that you are well, I'm not about to give up.'

'We are meant for each other, you said it yourself to me many times!'

'We are just feeling a temporary setback, that's all.'

'Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we'll think of a way to... you and I.'

I personally stop, voice fading, 'you see- seeing them thinking this, she- Jaylaynn- like- previously moved on- as me, withdrawing to her bleak sorry world where she thought she was solely to blame, thinking like me- speculate, or they think; I would think- right- war all over again, yet I am not fighting it this time if I do not have too.'

Yet, she interrupts me in the middle of my sentence, saying- 'yet it is not you this time is it?'

Then- I know it is time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts- I would prefer to leave out, I am sacrificing my own child this time.

Maybe then she'll see it differently- if she is in your shoes, maybe then- and there... 'There's more,' I say, whistle ahead though I've no idea how to phrase what comes following.

Besides, tell her about my trips back home there is that magical dimension, left out of my life for a while, and the space between the dimensions where I learned how to go back in time- and that given the choice between my family and her- I chose her, I choose to be her. The same mistakes I made before; I may have made again.

Influenced I could somehow restore the future, I was sure had been pilfered, and yet all it really amounted to was a lesson I already knew: Occasionally destiny lies just outside of our range for girls like you and me.

I swallow hard and stare at her- and the room that we were in seemed to blur, reluctant to see Naddalin's reaction when she looks into the eyes of the one who betrayed her. As I did with everyone I have ever loved.

So-o I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we are wrapped in the most gorgeous warm hazy glow.

Nonetheless, as an alternative to getting livid or upset... like I thought, she vicinities me with the loveliest glowing white light- a light so heartening, so magnanimous, so pure- it's like the portal to another world- only better- and we go there together.

'You had no choice,' she says, voice gentle, gaze soothing, doing everything she could to ease all my shame.

'Unquestionably, you chose your family. It was the right thing to do, yet they said no as always to you- so-o. I would've done the same-given the choice- not to have a choice, and that also sounds a lot like you too...'

I nod, shining her light even brighter and tacking on a telepathic embrace, with Jaylynn as I did with you- she in my head, all the time, yet locked out when she thinks there is a need to be, so they really are as confused as can be.

Knowing as I do, it's not as soothing as the real thing of me being next to her, but for now, it'll have to do- 'yet that is the afterlife- No?'

'I know about your family, I know everything about you and them too, I saw it all- I have lingered in your mind to understand the full story,' she looks at me with eyes so dark and intense, I force myself to endure- seeing all the memories also.

Flashbacks I call them...

'You're always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived- and so one day, while I back on Earth, I found out your story and where you're really from... I did... I asked about you- and-well- your entire life story was revealed to me just by reading between the lines.'

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still.

Radiant as she gazes into my eyes and telepathically traces her fingers along the curve of my cheek-creating an image so deliberate, so palpable, it almost seems real.

'I'm sorry,' she says, thumb mentally smoothing my chin.

'I'm remorseful, and I was so shut down and unwilling to share, that I condensed you to that. However even though it happened a long time ago, it's still something I prefer not to discuss any further.'

'She was that way, I am my way, in time we made up for it all, and I still have to pay for it all- and why I will never really know.'

I nod at her, having no intention of pushing it anymore- seeing the blank blah look on her face as if parts of the story were missing in something that was far too long.

'She is witnessing her parents' her own suicide, and then her child's followed by years of abuse at the hands of the church, and the schools- lingered in both its the same, theme- I intend to pursue, over her pain that she had on the inside cover it all.

'Even so, there is more,' I say, hoping I can reestablish a little hope by sharing something else, that I am erudite.

'When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, they had us all killed. Nevertheless, even though that seemed fated to happen, I still managed to save you, as you did me, and you did with them, so really it's all working out.'

I gaze at her, sensing she's far from convinced and rushing ahead before, I lose her e ntirely.

'I mean, indeed, maybe our wisdom of destiny is occasionally fixed and unalterable, but there are other times when it's shaped morally by the actions we take.

So-o when I could not save my family by going back in time, it's only for the reason that- destiny couldn't be changed.

Or as Jaylynn said seconds before the accident that took them again- in my mind, 'You can't change the past, it just is what it is, even if.

In the hissing power- there were coming thunderstorms in the gray sky, flying around in the sky, overhead in the evil, made were lightning dragons sent to remind the world that the dark lord was back and very much alive- and after Nevaeh, mind body and soul. The mythology that is only part of our world creatures were running in a scurry.

Even the topless mermaids, with back luminous tails- of this word, were hiding behind shimmering black rocks- in their lagoons and rock arch grottos, covered in human craniums dripping with blood- teeth showing- eye holes blacker than night, long out in the waters were taking cover in their homes, over the fears made, by the wrath of AVA, and clan, schools, types of dear, unicorns, colorful singing birds, even snacks were in hiding, dog-like- with big bushy tails, cat-like, elephant-like too, large game, large fuzzy bears, and small alike...

Even the swans around the lily ponds- that are over the crystal-clear waters, were swinging away- to the sight of the storm to come. All with wings... and large fangs, yet most when trust is made friendly to those that show love, to them.

The half-sunk haunted wood ships in the background like far too eerie, surely holding gold that would never be obtained, in a heavy fog. Due to dementors. Every now and then you can hear the girl of the one ship moaning Chassidy Seals.

No one has ever ventured to steep on her ship and survived on to tell about it- in our world. Yet you can hear her sing under the water, to the others that are part of that world, like the mermaids, that seem to- like- understand her, and protect her as if she was one of their many deities.

Even the young kids of this world, that was out in the horse drawing and charges with the windows steamed over they were making love, stopped their rocking- them to run, uniform skirts up and uniform dark grayish-black chinos down. The only lights were the light flam flickers of the street lamps.

Then more thoughts, overtaking the qualms in her mind, whirring out the world around. 'I mean, yes, maybe our providence of destiny is sometimes fixed and unalterable, but there are other times- like- when it's shaped purely by the actions we take or have made in the past that were our choices- to make fate happen.

So-o when I could not save my family by going back in time, it's only since destiny that couldn't be changed for it was my thoughts that made it all happen.

It does not judge, it's neither good nor bad like most individuals, are- 'So, that's it?'

I- Naddalin shake my head, hardly believing she's determined to give up so easily; now I understand that she has Jaylynn charmed into taking this one, for her, as she needs to relax.

'That's how it ends, you playing their game? You're just so dang sure you've been chased down by karma you don't even try to fight back, like you?

You came all the way just, so we all could be together and now that we're facing an obstacle- everyone is breaking apart, you're not even going to try to scale the brick wall in our path- this time, you're giving it to your little girl?'

'Karma- right or meant to be?' Asked Naddalin.

'Ever.' Her gaze is warm, loving, all-encompassing, but it does nothing to cancel the defeat in her voice. Yet that was always Nevaeh, 'I'm sorry, but there are some things I just know.'

'Yeah, well...' I shake my head and gaze down at the ground- over the rains was so pounding the face and body, burying my toes deep in the sand- water running around my toes.

'Just because you've got a few centuries on me doesn't mean you get she and they will have the last word; my child is younger and much smarter than they ever will are, she smart, they go by thoughtless impulses.'

Since if we're truly in the together, if our lives, like our fate, is truly entwined, then you'll realize there isn't just happening to you, I'm part of it too, and so are all of them that have helped you become what you hate the most a fake hero.

'Yeah, well...' I shake my head and gaze down at the ground, burying my toes deep in the sand even more, as I always did when I was being shy.

And you don't get to walk away from it- you don't get to walk away from me, or them either, even if, you're no longer fighting the war!

And you think is all over just because I gave myself to my child, it not you know it stalling.

'We've got to work together!'

'There has to be a way- to end this once and for all-'

I then stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight, I'm not sure we can win if we both love each other and my child- that we both believe in.

'...We can win.'

'I've no plans to leave you,' she says, gaze filled with the yearning of hundred years.

'I can't leave you, Ever. Believe me, I've tried. But in the end, I always find my way back to your side. You're all I've ever wanted-all I've ever loved-but Ever-'

'No buts...'

I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her, in the pouring rain... and we did.

'There's got to be away, the cure for the pain we have. And together we'll find it. I just know that we will.'

'We've come too far to let them keep us apart. Nonetheless, I can't do it alone.'

'Not without your help. So please promise me- that you'll try.'

She looks at me, her gaze luring me in... we kiss. Our skin separated only by her supple uniform and my organic cotton, at this point see-through blouse, that was lost fitting, that is fluttering in the wind open in the wind, like my long hair blowing in the breezes.

~*~

Walking to the water's edge, even in the storms, closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many lilies the entire cove is bursting with pink waxy petals atop green curving stems- the ultimate symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of sand into the greed blue water- so romantic, she said a spell to hole time, (Time-la-reverse-o) and we made up for lost time, having just a moment to be in love. And then a moment of rewind happens- for all but them, and they had their twilight swim.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back to the castle, and time was no longer standing still around us.

Looking into Jaylynn...

16

🐽 (PIGS)

I look back into my mother's life, and start to have flashbacks, where she said, 'I remembered being in the cracker slammer.' And having a bench warrant by the independent municipality for my arrest and getting tackled by three men for no given reasons, other then we want to give you handcuffs, and throw you in jail. I LOOK BACK ON THIS FOR HERE AND CALL THEM ALL PIGS!

The kids her age just trashing her out on blabbermouth/ creep-book, AKA Facebook. Saying that she was looked up for iodic reasons such as chatting, discussions, and chitchat of speculations. Like- this was way before my dad, and she got together. Called a molester yet she was still a virgin, as a girl of her age at that time should be. Called a molester over they have seen her eating at a restaurant, along with and with her guarding, called odd, said Aura Burnette, so now eating with your guarding in a restaurant now makes you a child molester and strange, outlandish then I know a lot of them... then given your point of view, of simple-minded nature.

So, reviewing what was said, a million seconds from today will be in 11 days. The maths is 1 million divided by 60 then 24. The remainder is irrelevant as the question asked was how many consecutive days, (is a million times) Had the question been- when would it be a million seconds from a specific time then the remainder (.57) would matter. In other words, you said nothing but slander of calling someone you don't even know a molester, over you're a dumb as f*ck.

One classmate on Facebook named Florencio Pinckney, even said 'She's a molester she kept staring at me, so I know him.' Yet they never met my mother ever. Staring is not molesting, yet you j*cking-off with your hand in your paints on your page, nice, pig. (Why- do you care?) Where you shop for your groceries, should be your business also, no- it's has become the thought of mind of a small town full of nothing but retards. She was Stocked until its creepy.

This skank like- don't ream you're- a*s hole- too hard- now, like over the fact you can draw a stick-figure, go back to the hate and fisting yourself, that's all you know how to do. Jina Overton said,

'She used to draw pictures of a girl from my high school who were servers, she'd draw sexy fairies and other incomprehensible pictures with their face were drawn in...'

-And-

...?...

'Don't be jealous over talent...' that is all I can say.

(Cheating on a girlfriend)

'Chet charges... really? ...?... really...?' And that was how it was spelled people, and my mom was the so-called retard of her grade and made to be the village idiot.

Therefore, she is in court in pink and white, jumpers, and shackles, over shamming spatulating, Severely mentally challenged people like you!

Consequently, she was never given an education, over dumb butt hole, wanting her not to be around them, this is the way, a loathing unlike I have ever seen in my life. Even I was not bullied that hard. And to keep her kissing their butt for everything she would ever need, gruesomely sick.

Ashleigh Rock- 'All this and she a writer, for kids...' said another from her graduating class. (implying what I ask? That she stocks on kids, over being a writer?)

Kathleen Roy- 'She's nuts my son used to fight with him all the time, he never learned- and you can thank his grandma for that... she lets him treat her like crap, and she thought she could anyone and I know some of the charges is terroristic threats and property damage.'

Coming from the Bob Roy- a mother of poverty, with a son that would strangle cats for amusement, and terroristic to others, and suicidal, and was held back hold over the fact he could not meet 3rd-grade education standers, being the highest in his education and was a drop-out over the mother would wishes, now her child was ret*rded beyond the majority. All this over the fact that his special needs were not, thank the mother, that would not sign. I think she has this backward...

'Moving on, they're not even worth it.'

17

She shrugs... even so-o. and so do I.

Enough to spare the consequences of any accidental DNA exchange, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us even then even though.

DNA was always what was in question.

'What goes around comes around. It's the result of all actions, positive and negative - a constant balancing of events- cause and effect- blow for blow- reaping and disseminating.'

'Or chose not to blow and have this...' Supposed Jaylynn in her mind.

'Though you phrase it, it's the same in the termination. Furthermore, as much as you would like to think else, that is precisely what's happening here.

Altogether actions cause a response, or asking more questions...

'All the time, I told myself I turned you out of love- but now I see it was really out of egotism- why I couldn't be without you. That's why is happening now.'

'Besides the is where my actions have brought me.'

She- in existence, and Jaylynn shakes her head, ripping herself out of the thought that is like a dream, in a pulsing white light.

I gave up a new pair of Nikes for one small cup of coffee'.

Hashtag- (they- the guards called my mother sugar-t*ts!)

~*~

(Some time has passed)

'Guess what?'

Then Jaylynn got into the last memory that her mother Nevaeh had, and that was with the girl that just was killed, Melisa, her new love interest.

Looking deep into the mind, just before the color left the young girl's eyes, she gazes at me as she climbs to her knees looking down with her hair falling all around me, in the sand.

Her big eyes wider than usual, cute baby face curving into a grin. 'No, you know what? Don't guess...

I'll just tell you because you're never going to believe it! You're never going to a conclusion!'

I smile, hearing her thoughts a few moments before she can speak them, refraining from saying the wrong thing.

Nevaeh- And to me, that was always the right thing to say. But I did say your good friend Naddalin, who actually- knows all and everything about me!

You and I dating- 'I've known about the possibility for a few weeks, but it just became official last night, and I still can't believe it!

Eight weeks in Nouveau Paris in the France courters of the world named- Trump you and I could spend, doing nothing but acting, eating, and stalking smoldering hot men... and remembering what a man is, before falling to each other- over understanding.

To yet know that she and I are even more perfect this some man, over the fact that we get each other, yet it's fun to play with boys.'

I glance at her as I back out of our drive, of the home we rented for the week, just like any other girls would in the real world. 'And for once with the freedom, I felt good with all that.'

'I love these man-manufactured worlds, don't you,' Naddalin said.

He- he, giggled Nevaeh.

She looks at me. 'faster, you know the drill. What happens in here stays in here.'

Walking down the street hand in hand... as girlfriends.

Not a care in the world, strolling like girls in a park, with a walk and talk that was just blending in.

My thoughts drifting to Haven and Emmah- and the ones that were lost to final death, wondering how many more immortal ne'er-do-wells are still out there, just waiting to show up in my mind over and over just to terrorize me, no matter where I go.

And then- I let it go, and start to live life, now having one, by having the best of both worlds, and trading lives. Now there are many variations of me- and they all linger with me all misunderstood.

'...'Till now.'

Yeah, you and I like- are both going to have hot love fast passant freak me hard sex, with at least two hot boys, tonight and were both at the same time, and then switch lovers, it a dream for any young girl around here and we're no different, I want group hot make me cummie sex.

It's been years since I have felt a man. Said Naddalin.

Nevaeh- Except when it does not, I feel the most fear- over knowing what next, by them, I don't like a man taking me, and losing control, it makes me feel week.

'Anyway, I am leaving soon, just after school gets out- just think were century years old, and still look, also act like school girls like when are we going to grow up?'

I did not want to say yet this is our last time to be together... I am moving on to a new life. Yet, that is what I should have told Jaylynn, the last time, that I saw her.

Besides, like- I have so much to prepare between now and then! You need to stop thinking with your head, girl, let go tonight and have fun.

'Seriously perfect.'

I smile, and the best of it all. 'Really, Congrats, on making it out alive to see what you lost, like always.'

And the moment I say it, I realize it is true, I am happy for her- yet, I feel like I am losing yet, another person in my life.

'That's cool, and well deserved I might add. I only wish I could go with you.'

Hitherto, I don't think- that I am strong enough, to take yet another round.

It would be so nice to escape all my problems and fly away from all the and- that what we did, wings soring, to angels in flight at the midnight- in starlight. Besides, I miss hanging with her, already, and my own world.

Except when it does not, I feel the most fear- over knowing what next, by them.

'Anyway, I am leaving soon, just after school gets out.'

'I did not want to say- yet this is our last time to be together... I am moving on to a new life.'

'And I have so much to prepare between now and then! I think its best and you can find a man, not me. After last night I can see that is what you really want.' Said Nevaeh.

Nevaeh- 'Seriously perfect we were before lusting for a man.'

I smile, and the best of it all. 'Really, Congrats, on making it, like- to see what you lost- and doing so Naddalin you may have lost me too.'

'That's so cool that you well better now. And well deserved I might add. I only wish I could stay with you when you if what you're looking for was really me and not them.'

Then the moment I say it, I realize it is true, I am happy for her- yet, I feel like I am losing yet again, another person in my life. ...And really, I can't let that happen.

It would be so nice to escape all my problems- with you as I plan- yet as soon as I get a pain it turns to shit, and all the plain need to be replayed out in my mind to fit a completely different scenario.

I think it's time to fly away from all- end what we did, wings soring and for me to go back home, to all the fallen angels in flight in midnight- in starlight, where I need to be. She said almost-robotically. Besides, I miss home, already...

I am going home... The last few weeks have been the best in my life when she and Haven (along with the rest of the school, saw her they were in tears and running for her hugs,) I was under Naddalin's spell were some of the loneliest days of my life, were replaced with my best. Yet, it's all over now.

Not having Naddalin beside me was more than I could bear, but not having the ones I care for like my two best friends nearly sent me over the edge- too and all you ladies.

Nevertheless, she and Haven do not evoke any of that, none of them did, to them it was more than she was gone for a year- old she looked like Jaylynn, yet they knew she was really Nevaeh.

Only Naddalin can access small bits and pieces, and what she recalls leaves her feeling awful - guilty- over they share soul- like she shares with Jaylynn with DNA.

We stay in youth hostels, backpack around- how cool is this? Just the three of us- like the old days, you know, you and Emmah, Haven and I, and me and whoever...'

Even Dariez, too, when she feels like being with us. Yet for some reason, I don't think she altogether trusts me.

'You and whoever... we meat along the way too?' I glance at her, saying they're all friends, and love you.

'What's that about, trust?' Said, Haven

'We all are doers.' Nevaeh shrugs.

'Oh, come on.' I- Nevaeh roll my eyes. 'Since when?'

'Since last night when I found out I'm going back home and starting over- and that is now the trust I have found.'

19

She giggles, running a hand through her brown hair.

'Listen, you all great and all, don't get me wrong.'

'But- I'm not fooling myself, to feel so much freedom. As you know that was something I could never- ever have.' Said Nevaeh.

Nevaeh- I am not pretending- it's anything more than it is, am I? It's like we've got an expiration date, you know- and it's just my time- to try over- fall and rise from the ashes, and become the ash angle, I'll see you again- she said to Naddalin I promise, she was thinking deep in her mind and the other girls could see into her eyes to the thought as a dream.

You guys are different, your lifers, she was a liar. Maybe- she has the parts of me that I did not need to keep the attributes that are unattractive, ha- she can keep them.'

Come on girls- lest go see a show tonight in the village with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end. It is not like with you and Emmah. It's like my life has no end and the story is all mixed up I forgot with a story should be.

'Lifers not liars!'

I peer at her, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light, as we set in our horse-drawn carriage.

'Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- we're all locked into this life, yet that is how girls like us live and go- crashing- burning, smoldering, like paper- and rising from the ash- like a reawakening, and a reinvigorated youthful body.'

'You know what I mean don't you, we have all done this now- we are all ASH ANGLE'S.'

~*~

It was said that Naddalin takes out her frustration out on the river every day, around the same time at night with a lantern, and we stare at the refection's, to find something that is no longer there- in the ripples.

She studies her shape, turning her hot-pink nails away now from her face to hang her head to cry.

~*~

'Wow.' The girls all thought unanimously- looking into her mind, and her world.

'It's just that you guys are so in tune with each other, so connected, that even apart you still see each other.'

'And I mean that factually by the way since you're always going at it, this is what you both really need to see that you have love.'

Not anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second traffic light turns from red to green, crossing the intersection with a loud screech of the wagon wheels stopping for us to go to the path we girls wanted to take- coming back to the castle and leaving a thick trail of impression behind them in the mud and cobblestone and grass-covered stone.

Nonetheless, even after I set still for a moment to think she's nowhere to be found- I see the glassing of the ripples in my daydreams. Our souls, still locked together, would apart.

Besides- I am about to climb a wall in panic, wondering where she could be, I never remembered her to row a boat- at all, when she appears right beside me- in translucent flicker of ghost, I- we blink- blink and blink once more, her hand in mine the whole time- I think, I have blacked out a moment there, yet we all saw her with us.

'I wonder what the vision meant?' Asked Haven. 'It's not good, not good at all.' Emmah said.

Refusing to slow until we run into a castle and I scan for Naddalin- to be there always seem to stare down danger more than us, in a second- she was next to me, yet she was not there at all, it like I could feel and see her there with my eyes yet, there was nothing but air in front of me, and the feeling of presence, haunting me.

She has become a hermit, said Dariez. I say this today in my card reading and séances, Psychic reading from mirrored glass, words and visions shown, to me.

Naddalin nods.

She stares at her, eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing. Why would she become a hermit?

(The next day- they went to see Naddalin.)

'Um, okay, so let me get the traditional one we could see a lot more- she said, 'so-o you just woke up and decided- hurry, what the hell?' '...And we have to look like the locals- and do as they do.'

'We get you one- and in the same breath, she said, Emmah and I well ride tandem. 'I have not ridden a bike in years.''

I think I'll just dump my ridiculously expensive luxury bike by the side of the road- WHERE JUST ANYONE CAN TAKE IT, I can do this anymore.'

Nevaeh shrugs, saying 'Pretty much' with an attitude. 'You have a lock...' she said '...and the people around here are not like back home, you can't just leave this here- someone will take it- and have it scrapped- in moments if you turn your back.'

'Because in case you have not noticed,' Emmah says, practically hyperventilating now, 'I-I-I don't like it here.'

'Some of us are a little bike deprived' said Haven, I just said today, I would get you one - relax- even if just renting one.'

'Some of us were born to parents so cruel and unusual, said Haven, now you are babysitting me?'

'They're forced to rely on the kindness of friends for the rest of their lives, thank you truly, and yes I would take the gift- thanks! -Ma!'

'Sorry.' Nevaeh shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more. 'Guess- I hadn't thought about that, that you were more deprived than the rest of us.

Though if it makes you feel any better, it was all for a very good cause.'

(She gives double thumbs up! And a wide smile with her head turned to the one side.)

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the usual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching the bikes is just the start of her plans, to get to know me better, walking is taking she thought...

'How'd you get to the school, she goes too?' I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting for us after running ahead like a child, take the train right, and we walked and walked... this world you just don't snap your fingers and you are their girls, said Nevaeh.

'So-o, like children...' She said.

'I rode the train when I went to school along with a girlfriend of mine you don't know - it's not that uncommon.' She said in a back-taking way.

'Yeah, that's right... I forgot about that.' Said Nevaeh.

Haven glances between us, she recently died, she bangs falling into her face- a practice, to make herself look former Earthlier- to these descendants of Earthlings, that seems to be really stupid.

'I kid you not. I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes, she was classed as a girl forever.

I remember we used to watch her climb right off that big steamer train, with all the other freshmen, at the time dorks, retards, and rejects who that were all like us, unlike Haven of course - but dorks nonetheless, have no other choice but to ride - or walk like crazy.'

Sarah - She shakes her head, saying 'don't say it like that - about me and Rockville, think it - don't say it - even if true, I wanted to forget those days.' Lucy was next to her holding her hand 100 years could not keep them apart either. Looking not too much farther down the wood train platform, there was Maddie and Olivia, and those girls. Hanna and Taylor, names and faces are forgotten about a hundred years or more.

I thought it was time for us all to meet up in one place, said Nevaeh. After all, where are all part of the same story, yet never really met everyone in it?

Look there are the three girls of identical, Becca, Emaly and Melody, too. And nothing at this point could keep them apart, as you would think Haven was there before she was even sure it was them.

Your life is not as bad as it seems, I think we all found that out by not holding qualms. 'And I was so shocked by the sight of it, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was really a train like in my past - it was so odd.

And then, when I still wasn't convinced, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to all that were invited on this trip who confirmed they were coming.' She holds it up for us to see, all the names coming in.

'You all may be wondering why I brought you all here, it's an intervention to stop, evil on all of us, if we all get our heads together, we can stop this family's wicked games.' Said Nevaeh.

(There were okays and um-hum's in the background, some even groins.)

I glance at Nevaeh, wondering what she could possibly - be up to, and that's when I notice she's ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no-name plain pockets leggings, her early morning look as she calls it.

Even the brown boots she's near - famous for have been swapped for girlie rubber flip-flops.

'I am also here to get back my trust with Naddalin.'

And even though she does not need any of that dash and flash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met- the new low- key look is just is not her- some of us thought. Way turned down for someone of her power. Or at least not the girl- that I'm so-o used to.

Yet change is good, the girls babbled among themselves. (Um - you got to remember she is in the body of her little girl.)

'That's right' - they whispered. Along with chats saying, 'Yet they look almost the same.'

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- she's also more than a tad colorful and otiose at times. Always preoccupied with her clothes, her image in general - along with smarts. Said Nevaeh, along with saying 'she is part of me.'

Emmah- 'She is part of you why can't you to just get along and stay in one world together, that is why you're really here.

And out of the mist, walked up to Nevaeh was Naddalin. Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth of Naddalin, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered hidden point of view about her age - to use she is always the same age of the young teen girl. 'Don't even ask, it get long and drawn out.'

Nevaeh- Nonetheless, even though I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either, when I look at Naddalin again, I get the horrible chink in my belly-an unrelenting push, demanding my notice.

A definite warning that everyone is merely the beginning. That the sudden transformation goes way deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda.

No, it has something to do with last night. Something about being haunted by her karma.

Like she's convinced herself that giving up her most prized possessions will somehow balance it all out- her child she gives up, for a stranger's love, when she had her child's along.

'Shall we?' She then smiles, grasping my hand the second the bell rings, acting like the children around us, leading me away from Emmah and Haven who'll spend the next three phases of their time texting back and forth- like they did in the past, trying to determine what's up with Naddalin, and why we are even here.

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, 'What's going on? What really happened to your bike?'

Three girls' hand and hand going down the halls... as they did moments before going down the sidewalks.

'I already told you.' she shrugs her hold body. 'I don't need it. It's an unnecessary sympathy, I no longer care to indulge.'

'She has depression!'

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, 'Don't look so serious. It's not a big deal. When I realized it's not something I need, I drove it out to a depressed area and left it by the side of the road where someone can find it - they need it more than I do.'

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, wishing I could climb inside her mind, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself, find the underlying cause of what the is about - yet I was holding back from doing that - even if I could.

Since notwithstanding the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she's said makes the least bit of sense.

'Well, that's fine and all, I mean, if that's what you need to do, then great, have fun.' I shrug, fully convinced that it's not at all great, though knowing better than to say it out loud.

'So-o, your giving to the poor - when you don't have it yourself.'

'But just how are you planning to get around now that you've ditched your ride? Are you doing the same with us?

'No, it's not like that said Naddalin, I have just been humbled, by what I see around me, that's all.'

'I mean, in case you haven't noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely, you can't get anywhere... like in a job, or a life, your free life end after - school, and I want to stay a kid.'

She looks at me, amused by my surge of sunlit rays behind her, which is not exactly the reaction I had prearranged on. 'What's wrong with the bus? It's next to free right.'

I gape, shaking my heard, hardly believing my ears.

'You don't have the money now do you?'

'And since when do you worry about cost, Missy. When life was pressing down, and the cost is out doing my means. All the magic in the world can't keep up with the cost of living here.'

'As some shallow, money- concerned with, self-absorbed, buyer-driven slob?'

'No!' I cry, shaking my heard and squeezing her hand.

Hoping to convince her even though, I actually did kind of mean it- not being mean yet truthful. Only not in a bad way like she thinks or you even.

At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciates the finer things in life kind of thing, and less in my girlfriend's now she is the version of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl.

'I just-' I squint, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her, but still forging ahead when I say, 'I guess I just don't get it.' I shrug. 'And what's up with the glove?' I raise her leather-clad hand to where we can see.

'Isn't it obvious?' She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door of her run-down apartment.

'Look at these streets... and this city, there, all the same, going derelict.'

'But I just stay put, refusing to budge.' Said Nevaeh.

'Nothing is obvious...' Said Nevaeh.

'Nothing is making sense anymore.' Said Naddalin.

She pauses, hand on the knob, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was a satisfactory solution for now. But perhaps you'd prefer I not touch you at all, I think you're going mental?'

'Not at all!' Screamed Naddalin.

'That's not what I intended!' Held Nevaeh.

(Door Slam!!!)

Nevaeh

Book: 61

A Desire to Burn

'A writing style of consciousness, that lingers within the subconscious.'

1

'IT WAS A DESIRE TO BURN,' coal, and live about were caring about what was underground than above, ever so- softly there was snow falling around. In a light blue twilight in the hills, snaking in the dusk, was a long train pulling coal cars, and on the other track, rushing by in a slower track as a dimly light passenger train, rumbling beside the other with the beam brightly a glow as it goes past.

It was seven A.M. early moorings, and the train has just rounded, 'The Hours Cover' just outside Altoona Pennsylvania. 30 miles in the remoteness of the main city, it's small-town life- in the 1920s, the path the train takes is ruthless, and unforgiving- death-defanging at times, and treacherous.

It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, dragged up and pathways carved deep into the hillsides, maiming was life- in a small town. Life and man's faces blackened with coal dust altered history. With the shovels and outlet in their fists, with this great python like covers, and spitting venomous gasses upon the world out of deep shafts, their blood pounded in their head- and water dripping down backs man are at work, the workingman's hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all

the symphonies of blazing and scorching to bring down the rags and coal ruins of history. As the path, the train took to make a town and life within.

The lights and staccato flashes and flickers placating of the nearing town worm glow, the cast of low hanging smoke in the air below- blanked by the covering of cold ice and show, nearing as the train grinds down the rails. Yet under the ground was a world to very much alive, with men and their symbolic helmet with the name upon saying- 'Brane's and Tucker.'

Blast and sprays of rushing water, and rats, 7 miles out and under, odd above the train, they don't even think about in their 7-hour shift. On his stolid head is the mask of black- and sours from sclaffer- blistering, and his eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next, looking at the man next to him that holds his life in his hands- also with the passion to work underground- that has become his life, like breaded into his nature.

The flicker of a gas lamp is all the light he needs to make a living, the igniter jumped up (fire) in a gorging enthusiasm, (blast) that burned the evening red and yellow and then black- it was a new seam of coal. 'come on boys load it well it easy, we get paid by the ton.'

Everything in the life of the small-town life is owned by the company- the home, the store, and even your life was owned by the establishment, work to give them their money back. Slender row homes pack, crammed, a hellish wasteland to some, that was above the ground. Boxes with shingles really, a new contraption that makes one feel as if there being a shout from a cannon, called the automobile.

1914, saw some of the first cars, own within these parts. About 6 months into the war, young man just out of school, that was heading for the mines, ended up on the firing lines. Brakes screech mean jumping train cars, flagman's swinging lanterns, crossing tracks, a car hitting as they were cupelled together, a man in boxcars, all going for the war effort. 'Poor buggers, they're not coming back.' Said, the Engineer, drooping over the window of the engine. The flam of the firebox scorching his face, with the thing that is most substernal to this world coal.

Whistle scram, one the train, two the shifts at the mines, steam of the name of the game... hurry up and wait. The train has more cars and more cars banging hitting hard-linked up, everything is hazed and masked with steam, and dim light, another world, to the elders of the town- who are not

welcoming the revulsions. Puffing and breathless, are the train alike the workers in their world to that is the only worlds they know, that are not afraid of a little coal dust.

The valley full of autumn-fall color leaves rescaled in the wind of changes. Tons of coal, crossing bypasses- viaducts, and twisting hills, rolling thunder, of still horses, all ones the thing that is most valued coal. Dark weather, glum-looking waters, storms- of fear, hunger, and passion, rivers like the Susquehanna, breaking up what should be paths of least resistance. Valleys and mountains, lights below, town scattered about within.

The Village of McAnulty that became Borough 14 within the districts of the purlieu, within the United States. Swarms of fireflies- like hot ash was dumped on the rails before the train left the small green station, one town over.

He wanted above all, like the old joke, to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-winged books died on the porch and lawn of the house. While the books went up in sparkling whirls and blew away on a wind turned dark with burning.

Church bells clang, babies scream, and live in the town is in its start of rapped swiftness, to the ear-shattering sounds- blowing throughout the valley.

2

Merrill smirked the brutal grin of all men singed and driven back by dust, water, a heat. He knew that when he returned to the above-ground, he might glint at himself, an entertainer man, seared corked, in the hand mirror.

Deep in the valley's children are still asleep, and rising, to the don, of a school day, yet- I have been work all night. Night, and day- it's all the same to me, the sun slow glinting on the church steeples and the crosses and domes glitter in shimmers.

Later, going to sleep, he would feel the fiery smile still gripped by his face muscles, in the dark- of a man that was truly a man in his world. It never ever went away, that- beam, it never ever went away, if he thinks of... change.

New things in the town were being added, and old was coming down, it was the superlative of periods and it was the nastiest. Streetcars of orange started to pull passengers down the man streets, to jobs and nearby shops, wall to wall people, it was... as Merrill could barely keep his eyes open, well on

them for the ride home. Gas lamps flicker, slowly going out, to the start of a new day, it was a long ride home, 10 cents one way, leaving 7 for the day of work completed. And the cost of bread was 5 cents. 'Working like a rat- for 2 cents he moaned- to be an old man by the time I am 40.'

The hospital was added on to for the fourth time, in less than 10 years. Passing the same things over and over, repetitious. Passing fiery piles of bony, 'useless junk,' he said, along with saying- 'stinking up the neighborhood.'

The low fog was bringing off, to the sun's rays, dry and crisp frigid air, and white wispy smoke streaming from chammy's atop the box-like homes, that were lined up like soldiers in a row- in a tension.

He hung up his black -colored helmet and shined the identification plat with his number 777 on his sleeve, he hung his overalls along with his crusty filthy jacket neatly- under the hat on the hook by the door of his home- that the mines own; he showered lavishly- in the basement- never- ever getting the dust out of the skin in his hands, or the look of black eyeliner from his eyes, his back scabs, and a long run of blood, down his spine, and then, whistling, hands in pockets, walked across the upper floor- hard old wood, of the home and fell down into his bed- his last thoughts were- Reilly No. 1 Mine is opening up tomorrow, with 77 new men, and his is overseeing them all- and the pay is good. And his thought trails off.

At the last moment, when disaster seemed optimistic, he pulled his hands from his pouches of his PJ's, the heels one inch from the end of the mattress. It was the end of a day, and the best part is him and his wife just sighed in the name of love- she streaks into the hall and down to the bath, and then she was not off to tend to the children and be a wife, he was dreaming not about her- but his true first love the coal mine.

3

Merrill is Navaeh's great-great-grandfather, and now that Nevaeh has had some time for herself, she thought it was best to go back in time and study her ancestry. This is my home, she thought- yet everything looks so different. Like all men from my homeland, it was coal mines, moonshine, and moving down the line.

And I have so much to prepare between now and then! I need this time thought Nevaeh.

(Back to the present time)

Except when it does not, I feel the most fear- over knowing what next, by them, I always did, and I feel that I always well.

'Anyway, I am leaving soon, just after school gets out.'

'How many times have you graduated now?'

'Ha- it has become an inside joke- with me.' Said Naddalin.

'...And you have kept all your tassels.'

I did not want to say yet this is our last time to be together... I am moving on to a new life.

I do as the locals of the time and try to be part of a place and time that is not fitting to me, funny you should say that that is exactly what your other half is doing at this very moment.

'Seriously perfect.' I smile, and the best of it all. 'Really, Congrats, on making thought yet another 4 years of repetition, it to see what you lost.'

'It's all part of the wonderful game!' Naddalin said.

'That's so cool. And well deserved I might add. I only wish I could have been there with her now- and see her heritage- you know her roots- after all that village is the town in her story.'

And the moment I say it, I realize it is true- I was missing her, I am happy for her- yet, I feel like I am losing yet, another person in my life, as she always did, maybe that is because I am partly her now.

'It would be so nice to escape all my problems; Besides, I miss hanging with her, already.' She whispered.

(Random thought)

I remember when, I had a phrenologist read my head, saying that I was brilliant, I was always special, to that just I sometimes wonder was he really right?

(Deeper thoughts of the moment)

The last few weeks when she and Haven (along with the rest of the school,) were under AVA's and her blackbird clans' spells were some of the loneliest days of my life. You can see them flying above the castle when they transfigure into black cowers. And they peck and stock their parry.

Not having Naddalin beside me was more than I could bear- now and even worlds apart too, but not having the care of my two best friends nearly sent me over the edge, also.

Nevertheless, she and Haven did not evoke any of that, none of them doing this to me when she investigated my memories- as she did with the prophecies. Only Naddalin can access small bits and pieces- after all, she is half of me over the fact, she and I have split souls, and what she recalls leaves her feeling awfully- guilty, as I do with her, yet it is what we had to do for immortality.

We stay in youth hostels, backpack around-how cool is this... right for life and beyond? All of us, you know, you and Naddalin, Haven and I, and me and whoever... feels the need to escape when you can't really escape the thoughts in your head, and the visions that play in your mind brought on by them, over souls being linked together.'

'You and whoever... we meat along the way too...? We will change them into us and make a militia- to take them down, and we well- in time- the time is everything when the time is everlasting.' I glance at her.

'What's that about? TIME'

'There is no such thing in our world.'

'I'm a realist.' She shrugs, 'and still keep track of all things related to time.'

'Oh, come on.' I roll my eyes. 'Since when?'

'Since last night when I found out I'm going back home and starting over, said Emmah, who was not partaking in the war.'

Emmah- 'I have been through enough, pain and saw far too much by not seeing at all!'

She giggles, running a hand through her brown hair.

'Listen, you all are so-o great and all, don't get me wrong, yet this is what I must do.'

Nonetheless, I'm not fooling myself, too think I am not going to be here in spirit.

'I am not pretending it's anything more than it is, am I, or well become?' Said Haven, yet something greater than us if we all stand together.

'...Woman warriors?' The question was asked.

It's like we've got an expiration date, you know- and we keep having to start over and then find each other to do so, and it's just my time- said Emmah to try over- like all of you, and I know that you have, I'll see you again, like- I promise? You guys are different, you're lifer's afterlife.'

Lest go see a show with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end. It is not like with you and Naddalin.

'Lifers?' I peer at her, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light. 'Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- yet that is how girls like us-their lives go.'

'You know what I mean, don't you?'

She inspects her shape, turning her hot-pink nails the way and that. 'It's just that you guys are so in tune with each other, so connected, and I was really never part of all this over my un-chosen disabilities, that I no longer have. Said Emmah.

And I mean that literally by the way since you're pretty much always going at it.'

Alissa- Still thinks you're a- 'dumb ass slut!' along with Alissa- 'an idiotic tramp!'

Allison- 'still thinks you're a lazy crazy no good bugger.'

Adriane- Still thinks you're a- 'She is a no-talent hoe-bag!'

Ava- Still thinks you're a- 'you're a psycho tart!' Said Emmah.

'The world never really changes, even if it expands.' Said Nevaeh.

Not anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second the light turns from not showing the hand, crossing the intersection with a loud screech of heels stopping for us to go down the walkway, and leaving a thick trail of rubber behind them.

'Look,' said Haven, just overhead was a very low flying massive dark gray jet, is making water vapor, that was changing the weather patterns- and also the clement for the year.

The wind whispered softly as if comforting the cloaked figure that darted in and out of the trees, at us trying to still happiness and joy.

The sky was blackened with the inky night, but little dots of reassuring stars provided some light as it was getting ever so darker and dark to the point of eerie glum. No more than the luminescent blood moon that hung loosely in the sky above. And pink rainfall, splashing about. Also, like blood...

But even after I set still for a moment to think she's nowhere to be found, Nevaeh vanished. As we were being dreamed of all mummeries and thoughts- and even time stood still.

A rustle and a twig snap broke the silence that enveloped the cloaked figure and it ran faster all around us inclosing- making them airtight.

As fast as the wind seemed to carry it until finally, it reached the defrayal. Looking into the canopy of trees that masked the depths of the dim forest it set the two parcels well concealed in its cloak on the ground. One the key or life- and wisdom, and the other- the heart-shaped ring of undying stamina and love of others and life even in the darkest of days, just parts to make one most powerful fallen angel, to the point of a god. All things that belonged to the missing girl! We know as Nevaeh.

Emmah- I am just about to climb a wall in panic, wondering where she could be - as I was about to say my last goodbye, when she appears right beside me putrefied like gruesome death - and I blink- blink and blink once more, her hand in mine the whole time - and rushed in for my heart as it was ripped out of me - for them...

'Emmah,' they all scream as she fads into ash before them all! I think I have blacked out a moment there- said Haven- confused about the events.

Refusing to slow until fear- we run into a parking lot and I scan for Naddalin in the fetal position, who always seems to stare down danger more than us, in a second- she was next to me- more scared then all of us combined.

Then the figure removed the hood that hung over its head to reveal the sorrowful face of a woman, cracked skin that was more than evil- flacking, and palling, eyes black cover over with a hint of

milky haze. Bloody fingers of bones reach out for to Naddalin's face. With no-where to run... or it would pop up before her asking for her to surrender.

Her light brown hair curtained her face as she crouched on the ground and began pouring the black liquid of ink across the grass, she keeps- keeping creatures like this away.

Yet this was not an average dementor- this was Mazel back from the grave, yet without a full body to call her own. Stilling some of the bones of Lance, the soul of Lily, the mind of Melissa and the heart of Emmah she arose again, like a mixed, fetus making a new child to grown woman, before them within the darkness of the black curtains- like a flaming stone tower- with the fools she took as her own like within. Stopping at nothing to have eternal life and glory.

Mazel- screamed to them all is- 'The only true voyage, the only bath in the Fountain of Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see a hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we do- with great artists; with artists like these we do really fly from star to star, and world to new world.'

An owl hooted within the dark trees of the woods in the background, distracting her only for a second but she continued to move across the clearing, her back hunched with concentration - this she was there for the taking and even the final kill.

She asks, glancing at me and all of them and slings her backpack over her shoulder. Naddalin nods- and the sparks of powers link up and combined. Powers to powers matched up, almost equal.

'A hundred and ten more will not stop me.' Mazel said, as the spark flow - from finger to finger.

Naddalin laughs, as she knows that Naveah is safe in her body and in her mind. Even if thoughts of defeat are what she is after.

'Nevaeh is always smarter, and one step ahead.' Always - she muttered under her breath.

5

Her hands shifted in position so that her two middle fingers were facing downwards. A burst of light erupted from the hexagon they were now standing within, that was aflame, and the wind blew

stronger, causing her whippy spiderweb-like cloak to toss around her- as her wings spread to take the backward thrust. She stares at her, eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing- such- evil, hate, and cruelty.

(The next day)

'Um, okay, so let me get the traditional treatment- you would like to go through, we could see a lot more, with the ones you want to please and film it all to show the worlds, and we can get this done a lot faster- she said.

And then there was a flash of light that knocked out by the feeling of mass blooming around them.

(A week has passed)

'so-o you just woke up and decided-hurry, what the hell?' '...And we must look like the locals- and do as they do, yet they are looking to you to help them- you are the glimmer of hope they need- symbolic.'

The others- 'Nevaeh is the hope you need to make unity, she immortal- yet that doesn't mean that she can get hurt and have all this take its toll on her.'

'We get you one- a pin with an angle on it along with your name, and in the same breath she said, Emmah and I well were them proudly- just like them that is in famine and feeling the pain of hunger, and loss- by mass death- neutral or not.'

There are flags and banners now with this logo on it showing a moment for change, to end this war, and to take down the evil that has arrows once more...

'The mass kill needs to stop, by the hands of the rich- or the powerful- that made their way by corruption.'

This is the same world that we wanted to run from, remember the 3 the girls, mother, and child and Naddalin too and so on and so forth. Said Haven, walking towards them was a small army of perfect rugged men, in black iridescent uniforms- mussels ripped and rigged- smiles disabling, the hello begin, with a strong stiff handshake Sargent Tristan Billups, Privet Britt Macdonald, the following also Marines to ad one of our own comrades, family unites- after all this is a repaid debt of Kristen,

greetings- Elwood Dugan, Ahmad Turnbull, Mel Larsen, Rodrick Patino, Bryce Rosser, Clemente Cason, Dino Haight, Deshawn Pape, Clair Delagarza, and Emil Antoine. We are also here to guard you.

Naddalin shrugs, saying 'Pretty much- the hottest men in the world are here to do as we ask'- with an attitude.

'You have a lock yourself into to being- a part of us...' she said; '...and the people around here are not like back home, even if we are part of the old ways of life, war, and law.'

'Because in case you have not noticed,' Emmah says, practically hyperventilating now- this is a war- and most of us will not have a life if they take our world, or each of our minds and souls one by one.

'Some of us were born to parents so cruel and unusual they're forced to make these kids live this way, I remember being like this- like them too said Karly, to rely on the kindness- of those that say FREAK you to your face, and open your mouth to take a crap in it, the only friends for the rest of their lives- they have to answer too, thanks unwanted, no love, no raising, and lack of education. All to true, and yes, I would take the gift of having one of your immense power men help a week- a meek little girl like me- thanks!'

'Sorry.' Naddalin shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more, she said to Karly.

'Did I now?' She said in a fast replay.

'Guess- I hadn't thought about that, all that much that was all here over the same facts like the ones that are all around us- that all are all outside of this bunker that was now in.'

'We need to go out there and fight her.'

'Yet she has taken over some many minds now- getting in their heads, of kids, just babies, 5 through 12 and using their minds to amass her army agents us- like programmed robots, were outnumbered- by someone's baby, and I am not killing kids,' Nevaeh screamed.

Yet the bloodbath has already begun, over 1,000 children have passed this week- splattered down by automatic gunfire- by big muscular men, yet we had to do this even without your say, after all-

you needed your rest as she was holding her hand in her room next to her hospital bed. buzzers, beepers, and signals going out in the background, you do not have the place to take mine.

This is not what I wanted! She said in a frustrated blowing scream in the face of the head Marine that was her own grandchild.

'Actually, I do.'

6

Though if it makes you feel any better, it was all for a very good cause- even the children's death.' (She gives double thumbs up! And a wide smile with her head turned to the one side.)

'If you say so-o.'

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the us ual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching her now over this would hurt me more than ever before, this was just the start of her plans- for the good of us all, and me too, walking with me down the long dinginess halls she taking- she is in her dress uniform, she thought- moving faster than her mouth that was going far too fast also for me to grasp...

Then lastly, she said- 'it's been a long time Grandma.'

Looking around everyone got eerily quiet, then one of the men said.

'It is time for you to go now Emmah.'

'But Emmah has never traveled with gold dust before has she to other worlds.' Said one of the girls snakingly with her voice.

'It's okay, just make sure you say were you going most clearly.'

'How'd you get to school? One girl said to Emmah as she pooped into the hallway before their eyes- now in her homeland.'

'Do I have homework?' Emmah asked.

Look were seniors and just girls, and all we have to do is write a paper with less than 250 words in them a week to have a 2nd-grade education- you know- you did not miss anything this week, as any week, it's just school, where have you been?

'I can't say...'

'Ooooh!' They all said.

'Don't feel bad, Nevaeh was doing 'The Modern Curriculum Press Phonics Kindergarten book in 8th grade.' She whispered.

~*~

I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting, took the train as you, and walked and walked... to get here and now its time to go already, are a week of getting caught up is over.

'She rode the train- why there are much faster ways these days you know.' Said one of them... and unanimously all the other girls agreed.

Haven glances between us, she recently dyed- in her world to the ones that are alive to have a new rebirth, her bangs falling into her face, to make herself look Earthlier, to the ones that were once just that Earthing's. 'I kid you not, this is the last time I want to start over. I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes, she was classed as a girl forever- and nothing more but children, doing, thinking, and acting.

We all watched her- like us, climb right off that big steamer train, with all the other freshmen, dorks, retards, and rejects who that were all like us, unlike Naddalin, have no other choice but to ride, remember those days.'

She shakes her head, saying don't say it like that- think it doesn't say it even if true. That we may never see all of us in one place again. And one by one they were going with their three-man to keep them safe in there new yet old life.

'And I was so shocked by the sight of it- Naddalin with grades around her within the school, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was really her after all, were her best friends and all.' Casey Dodson, Crystal Gordon, and Andria Peters.

Casey Dodson has green eyes; she has a heart's happed birthmark under her chin. Crystal Gordon has brown eyes- that you just can't help but fall in love with, like every boy around, yet she gets angry easily- like- on and off- about anything, and everything. Andria Peters, she has blue eyes, and scars on her wrist from cutting, it's a girl thing- had her heart broken too many times? Yet there my best friends at the end here in my world; or at least at this point in my life, like everything they come and go.

And then, when I still wasn't convinced, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to Josh who confirmed it- I was done with him, and really falling for Crystal Gordon, that has wavy brown hair down to the floor of length.' And that too has made Andria a little made, yet now she has her run at the game of having my old man, I don't want him anyways, boys are so immature!

She holds it up for us to see, a pic of she and me, kissing.

I glance at Naddalin, also in the photos of the past and think far too much, wondering what she could possibly- be up to- now far- far- away from me in her own little world, and that's when I notice she's ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee- in this, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no- name plain pockets- cut off to make short shorts- all fringy, her early look as she calls it, of being all WOMAN.

Even the brown boots she's near- famous for have been swapped for girlie rubber lime green flip-flops.

And even though she does not need any of that dash and flash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met-the new low-key look just is not her- I thought. She is not the girl that I used to know- yet neither am I, after all, I am falling for Crystal. And Josh too is now a reembraces of all things in my past, that my mind is squaring in shaking- trembling- temptations to hit the delete button too all and whip out over 7 years of my life as it was. Knowing the consecutive of my actions, I think not, I meanly I do not what to have to look in a crystal ball to find my past like Naddalin, that is not spilled- with Neveah soul.

'Or at least not the girl- that I'm so-o used to, all the thoughts rushing.'

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- she's also more than a tad colorful and otiose at times, over the fact of her split to Nevaeh, and she was never the same- old girl she was when I liked her so much.

Yet right now- I can think about anything anymore- over the fact that Am's is standing next to me, and all it smells like her many regrets, couch, and last night's lunch.

'Dating is like a game of duck- duck goose, look at the one you want- get called out, run around chasing him or her, and then hopefully win the game- by getting in their spot before you tagged.'

7

Always worried about her clothes- her life and her girl too, her image in general- along with smarts, and the lack of them. Though Andria.

Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered hidden point of view about her age- to use she is always the same age of the young teen girl.

Nonetheless, even though I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either, when I look at her again, I get the horrible chink in my belly-an an unrelenting push, demanding my notice.

A definite warning that is merely the beginning. That the sudden transformation goes way deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda. No, it has something to do with last night. Something about being haunted by her karma. Like she's convinced herself that giving up her most prized possessions will somehow balance it all out.

'Shall we...?'

Naddalin smiles at Crystal, grasping my hand the second the bell rings, all in a day of looking as if I am human- leading me away from Vella Johansen and Hallie Lima who'll spend the next three phases of their time texting back and forth, trying to determine what's up with Naddalin. Thought Crystal, looking at them with disgust.

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, 'What's going on? What really happening with us- are we falling in love?'

Three girls' hands and hand going down the sidewalk... the eyes ne ver- ever stop looking, do they? She said.

'I already told you.' she shrugs her hold body. 'I don't need it, I need you not them so that is all the really matters to me anyway. It's an unnecessary sympathy, I no longer care to indulge.'

'...Okay?' She whispered.

'No hesitation very insufficient individuals comprehend the virtuously individual fauna of the marvel that we call love, or how it creates- so to speak, and accompanying soul, distinct from the creature whom the world knows by the same name, a being most of whose essential rudiments are consequent from ourselves.'

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, 'Don't look so serious. It's not a big deal. When I realized it's not something I need, I drove all the thoughts of what they think out and left them hopefully behind for good.'

'Desires are like snaps: in the attendance of the creature we love - unsexed in all, we take only noes, which we grow later, at home, when we have at our removal once more our inner dark room, the door of which it is strictly forbidden to open while others are existing.'

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, wishing I could climb inside her mind - like I can with my other girls- in time I well I thought- in time, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself- deep, and what is lost in the deep sea she calls her still-beating heart- that is worm-like her body to the touch, get to the bottom of what the is really about- when I am cold and my heart has not made a sound in years- as if dead, and my hands to her always as cold as ice - yet somehow I look alive.

Because not-with-standing the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she's said makes the least bit of sense. Though Crystal, yet I am in love with her body.

'Well, that's fine and all, I mean, if that's what you need to do, then great, have fun.' I shrug, fully swayed that it's not at all great, though knowing better than to say it out loud, I thought it was time to go home.

'But just how are you planning to get around now that you've forsaken your ride?

I mean, in case you haven't noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely- with a girl- and kiss and hold hands and PDA as much as your pleas, you can't get anywhere without having a drive-its-self-car-cab-pass- either she thought, I should have kept it.' Yet See the source image 'The Guardian Taxi's' cost... even if- you need one or not.

She looks at me, amused by my surge of lighter- as I make the call with my thought of mind- for the car to come, which is not exactly the reaction- like- um- I had planned on- yet- um- sure. 'What's wrong with the bus? It's free.'

'And gross... and goo-eee!'

I gape, shaking my heard, hardly believing my ears- that when she is next to poor- she would not take something that is free. 'And since when do you worry about cost, missy- 'here $50- go.''

Thanks, you did not have to do that, yet but- forced sex heading into the 5 p.m. and night time is a thing on free bus... so, it's best if you have your own way home.

'As some shallow, money-oriented, self- absorbed, buyer-driven slob?' She said yelling, teasing all mischievously; as I get into my nice worm clean self- driving mostly transparent glass and glowing in soft light- cab; her voice whims off- as the car speeds off down the road.

Crystal- 'No!' I cry, shaking my heard and squeezing my hand to the other over top the other. Hoping to convince myself even though, I did kinda mean it- not being mean yet truthful- she is now poverty. Only not in a bad way- like some around here- as she thinks- she is or something even- if- as you know.

At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciates the finer things in life kind of thing, and less in my girlfriend's now she is the version of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl.

'I just-' I squint, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her, but still forging ahead when I say, 'I guess I just don't get it.' I shrug. 'And what's up with the gloves?' I raise her leather-clad hand to where we can see.

'Isn't it obvious?' She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door.

But I just stay put, refusing to budge. Nothing is obvious... Nothing makes sense anymore.

She pauses, hand on the knob, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was an acceptable resolution for now. But perhaps you'd prefer I not touch you at all?'

Not at all!

That's not what I intended!

8

(Back at the school)

I Nevaeh- Switching to telepathy I have a new girl in my head named- Andria too young to die as she did, the moment some classmates approach- I see here there terrified of girls like us yet she faced death with no fear, reminding her how hard it's been avoiding any and all skin-on-skin contact for the last three days- with she is just so squeezable- cute.

Fantasizing I had a cold when we both know we don't get sick, and other ridiculous avoidance techniques that left me feeling deeply ashamed- I was wishing for the day when sickness was not a thing again.

It's been torture, pure- and simple. To have a girlfriend so gorgeous, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be able to touch her- is the worst kind of agony.

'I mean, I know we can't risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything like that, but still, don't you think it looks kind of odd, the world we live, and I fear sickness?' I whisper, the second we're alone again.

'I don't care about that.' She gazes open, sincere, and fixed right on mine. 'I don't care what other people think. I only care about you.'

She squeezes my fingers and opens the door with her mind, leading me right past Leilani Ogle a second-year girl, and the other girls as we head for our desks.

And even though I have not seen her since Friday when she woke from Andria spell, I'm sure her hatred for me hasn't dampened a bit. It had to by Lily she would only be that one that could have, and the only one to be back with us. A new girl is yet tremendously powerful.

But while I am fully braced for her usual ploy of dropping her bag in my path in an attempt to trip me-today she's too distracted by Naddalin's new look to play that tired old game. She unhurried gaze traveling the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

Nonetheless, just because she ignores me doesn't mean I can relax or trust that it's over. Because the truth is, it's never over with when it comes to Nevaeh and Naddalin- and the evil they share within.

Nevaeh has made that abundantly clear- that Naddalin will always be a part of her. If anything, she's more charged up and vicious than ever- making the little reprieve nothing more than the calm before the storm. As always with those two. 'Ignore her,' Naddalin whispers, scooting her desk so close the edges practically overlap the new girls to the point of freaky creepy- eyes bulging even at her.

Nevaeh- Besides even though I nod as though I am- relaxed, the truth is- I can't- help but feel the way I did about her in the past. I still care for Naddalin, who is part of me- always, in a way, I am in love with myself.

As much as I'd love to pretend, she's invisible- I can't do it.

She's in front of me now and I'm completely obsessed with her. Peering into her thoughts, wanting to see what, if anything, happened between us from then and now.

Since even though I know Naddalin's responsible for all of the flirting, and kissing, and cuddling, and changing of girlfriends a drop of a hat, I had no choice but to watch, to see- why.

'Spell I tell you spells it has to be...' she whispered to the new girl.

Even though I know, that Naddalin was completely disadvantaged of free will- that doesn't change the fact- that it happened- that Naddalin's lips pressed against her while her hands roamed her skin.

And even though I am pretty sure, it didn't go any further than that, I'd still feel a heck of a lot better if I could just get some evidence to back up my theory- I said this also to Andria, who was batting her lower lip with her upper teeth.

And despite how crazy, hurtful, and completely masochistic it is- I won't stop until her memory gives, and every last horrible, painful, excruciating detail is finally revealed. Thought Naddalin on Nevaeh.

The new girl was just overhearing it all, I wonder if... If she was the one that got them back together. Yet all of us girl's pounder the same thoughts, about them, in the classroom.

I'm just about to delve deeper, travel to the very core of her brain when Naddalin squeezes my hand and says, 'Eternally, happiness. Stop torturing yourself- let me in. I've already told you, there's nothing to see- she keeps pushing her transmission in her mind out.'

I swallow hard, gaze fixed on the back of her head- that was showing a face of another- within- the face of evil- it was AVA, watching her gossip with Jewell and Mireille- this thing was rabid at me foaming at the mouth, barely listening as she adds, 'It didn't happen- as she blinked and rubbed her eyes. It's not what you think, said the new girl- I can see it too you know- your just as rational as I.'

'What is that-?'

'...It's just the Demons trying to get out.' Said Andria.

'I thought you couldn't remember?' I turn, overcome with shame the instant I see the pain in her eyes- in the front, I knew something bad has happened, as she looks at me and shakes her head like small trembles.

'Just trust me, seeing this coming out of her is a good thing- 'I am chatting with it-' and she is really nice said Andria.' She sighs loudly. 'Or at least trying to.'

'Please- don't you need to report this.' I inhale deeply, gazing at her, wishing I could, knowing I should.

'Absolutely, and Constantly. First, you could not get over the past hundred years of my dating- now you want more even if possessed, and now you're obsessed with me, all last week, why?'

She knits her brow and leans closer, voice urgent, coaxing, as she adds, 'I know that your feelings are extraordinarily hurt. Really, I do. But what's done is done. I can't go back; I can't change it. Naddalin's done the on purpose- you can't let her win.'

I swallow hard, knowing she's right.

I'm acting ridiculous, irrational, allowing myself to veer way off track- by what I saw.

Besides, Naddalin thinks, switching to telepathy now that our teacher, Mr. Perry, has arrived. You know it's meaningless, to fight this girl's- she said to us- in class.

The only one I have ever loved is you. Isn't that enough? Yet her face was black and looking off in the distances.

She brings her gloved thumb to my temple, gazing into my eyes as she shows me our history of all things enchanted, my many incarnations as a seeing all the young servant girl in France - the time

we spent- before- you to older, all daughter gorgeous girls reminded me of how lucky I really was... in my life letting her remember her past that keeps getting whipped away by evil, it was nice to be back... in her mind she needs me and I need her, eyes wide, I gape, never having seen that particular life before- that I was in, I think back, in class and wonder- who was the mind that I was really truly in, it was not wrong, it was not evil; it was sweet, young, and innocent. Nothing leading me to think, darkness was involved.

9

But she just smiles, gaze growing warmer as she then shows me the highlights of that time, a quick clip of the moment we never met, that I was sure of, yet she knew Nevaeh well- at a gallery opening in to with their first kiss just outside, I was just out of the galleries, lost in her mind that reviled her face to me in my mind like looking back, for the glass- that very same night- I know who she was.

Presenting only the most drastic moments and sparing my death, which always, certainly, comes before we can progress- deeper and deeper in the mind of what I thought was an old friend and more.

And after watching all of those beautiful moments unfold, of a young girl's life, she shamelessly loves her and laid bare to see- for me to recall, I gaze into her eyes, answering her question when I think: Of course, it's enough, to understand that she was the first true love - not me- not me. You have always been enough, I thought, just as she did. It had to be Lily.

Then closing like a photo album in shame when I add: But am I enough for you - now? You were enough then.

To end acknowledging the truth- my fear that she'll soon tire of the gloved hand-holding, the telepathic embrace.

She then nods, besides seek out the real thing in a normal girl with safe DNA, her gloved fingers cupping my chin, her eyes still faded to the memories that were lost, as she wrinkles me into a mental embrace so warm, so safe, so comforting, all my fears slip away, letting me that Lily was back and mean no harm. That she to was not on our side.

Responding the apology in my gaze as she then and there leans forward, lips at my ear as she says, 'Good, its time you and I met. Now that that is settled, Naddalin... love me too I am also part of her.'

10

It was a legend that the castle is haunted by The White Lady- the young girl fined of a winemaker, that was posseted by evil.

He killed her on Earth in a small village called Ashville in Pennsylvania, and then took her soul, and killed that too, her name was Ashlynn Donovan, for the young youthful blood.

Why- to keep the Dark Lords powers strong along with the 4 girls, now in one or the Angel Oak wood barrel, that is in the distillery part of the castle in the lowest part of the basement, off-limits to all students, unless they want to receive the most horrific pain that felt in this life...

Winford Vanhorn, was a side lover, to the mothers- mother, and her name was also the same. Miss. Ashlynn was left body and soul, and partly alive, to marinate- and age just like one of the spirits in the rotation, around her that is red, white, rose, it is also rumored, that all the ones that are part over her army have partaken into drinking the blood of this Ash angel of her sacrifice, pentagram- all hooded, in black.

The dusty ash of her body in the cup- the cries of her memory in the liquid, making strength- to them in every sip, the power to take over the minds of anyone, they wish and linger without asking, to kill, within others, hidden behind a face that is not their own. a faceless army, of kids, taken over by death eaters.

The girl is said to be hidden in one of the secretive rooms, even though the castle has been looked through many of a time, never to be found, and was made to her sprit's requests- and for always and ever added on too- or her hex would- take over all the students minds, and drive them to madness.

This is why- there are passages-ways that lead to nowhere, and doors to drop-off's, and staircases that have deadened, it was all done in the thoughts of the ghost, portholes to the other side... The corridor made in memory is now why we have ASH-angels.

As we all know there are seven parts to the castle, classrooms for each study have their own type of students.

1. The Ashlynn corridor- for the fallen angels, wings and flight.

(House colors- Gray and Red.) Two white flying horses, with wings, spread. Paper- smoldering- falling ashes, ink quill with a nib, next to its well. The sun above. Armed, and showing the strength of a strong girl, body, mind and, soul.

2. The Natalie Hall- students have studied in telepathy, Telekinesis wizardry, magical studies.

(Blue and White) Naddalin passage's- the understandings of students wanting to know about time travel. Portholes, card reading, astrology- understanding of stars in and out of the magical world. wound law. insignia is a keystone, railroad spike, the 3 X|X|X for the number of the magical railway- the underworld marking of hells purgatory, that she saved single-handedly. a crescent moon and a hanging star with a long tale, a key with its hole-glowing, on the other side one barley wheat.

3. Emmah's chambers- crystals ball reading and foreseeing in the darkness, predictions. (Was Anderson chambers, yet- just last year renamed, over dark times.) (Purple, and Cream) insignia shield, with two nude angels one with black wings, holding a crystal ball, and one with white holding a lily, and a dagger between showing loss of sight.

4. Amsel Towers- the ten tallest towers in this world- students for demon's studies- wisdom- understanding- dark faith, witches, hermits all things dark arts- and trickery. (Orange and Cream) insignia flaming tower, fools falling from it in a crest of arms with a black Baird. (Name keep reminding that evil is always the easy the option to take.) There is a fear to change it with us all.

5. McDermmit- sleeping quarters for girls- up in the highest turrets, (Plaid- Aqua and Cream) meaning rest and the importance of deep sleep- understanding, love, hope, compassion, timeworn, insignia hourglass the tree of hope, falling leaves, in yellow, showing change and death, is to come to all. hands held out with a dove, a clock, the hands of time moving backward, all times is just a theory. All things- Death.

6. Barns Library studies- Cherub to Young Lady's to becoming God's understandings, was every story of every girl in the school is magically written and made into books of their life. Also, assignments to other world linger within girls, to recruit. Studies of life, before- death, after, and beyond. Looking out for friends, and not always yourself, making your story change, to make another better- or keep going. (Red and Cream.)

7. Skoufyceol- for Jacqui Skoufyceol, to lock herself out of death of blaze- and the havens of paradise- to think backward- and question everything for her time- in the 1770's, and not have happiness- to move on, the castle as a hole- named after her for being the first 14-year-old girl to ever become one of us a fallen angel, that had the vision to make a place for loners, misfits, and dreamers. (Green, and Cream) mascots fallen angle- the same as on Nevaeh's head.

11

(Two years has passed)

As I make my way toward history class, I'm wondering which will be worse-seeing Naddalin or Mr. Walsh?

For the reason that while I haven't seen or spoken to either of them since last Friday when my whole world fell apart- there's no doubt, I left them both on a pretty strange note.

My last contact with Walsh consisting of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something, I never do- nonetheless also encouraging her to date my Aunt and ankle- which is something I'm seriously beginning to regret. I have tried to forget them altogether.

And as awful as that was, it's only rivaled by my last moments with Naddalin- past days, all playing in my head, over and over, when I aimed my hand at her navel, determined not just to kill her-child within, yet that was the thoughts, but to destroy her completely.

I am not a murderer, thought Nevaeh, yet it was my job to do to keep this unborn child, as a cherub's angels, the best part of this was how to explain how this all happened, all supernatural.

And I would have too- except for the fact that I totally choked, and she got away- with having the baby- in this world that would age- and become the next in having parts of both of us within her-now three parts of a whole.

Therefore, she had to stay- trapped young... I was not razing a pug, for with slaughter, with a sputter scatterbrained mind, that going to see things that are beyond her control.

And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I'm still so angry with her- of when this happened, who's to say I won't try again?

Then this child, I know was a rebirth of one of the other girls, all now to get back into both Naddalin and my head and take over control. That is why we named her Alyson.

I will never add baby killer to my list of things they say I am, this child this sweet baby girl, she's immortal anyway, so why kill her, if the part of me, and part of her- I thought, killing at this point is something I don't do any longer. Said Nevaeh.

But the truth is, I know I want to try again. I want so much to be a mother, all over again, and I thought maybe- just maybe, I can raise this one right, and maybe, I can keep her from killing me, someday, yet wishful thinking.

Besides not just because Naddalin spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how revenge is never the answer, how karma is the one and only true justice system- and let it play out and do nothing, and plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that- but mostly because it's not right, to kill something that was made from love.

Even though Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me absolutely no reason to ever trust the child again- I still don't have the right to kill her over it.

'All the monarch butterfly is now flying back home again. Just like all the minds, the remember the programming.'

'They are just like us- you know, you- and me them to, programmed fabricated lives- before and after, in memories of our past, passed to down to the next, of fallen almost satanic retrials, of worship, all over spitting the mind, taking the soul, and lingering within the body, just like the butterfly, it's all about being part dissociation, all pasted in DNA.'

Oh yes, the cursed typewriter, that makes them all the story of life- in the books of sh-h, that write the stories that you don't wanna write, for yourself or anyone else, it is going and makes you live exactly what the typewriter does automatically, because of the heck that's on it, it makes the story in which a person has to follow in the afterlife. Untitled- until monarchs into someone's life, injected into the mind like clever programming. The butterfly- just like the paper flutter around the typewriter, all too familiar.

Just like we are programming this child one way, and they are fighting just as hard to spit her mind to take it over in another and so that they are getting into ours and reprograming that- too. Said Nevaeh.

The monarch of us... and the satanic of them for sacrifice.

'Madness!' Said Naddalin.

'You know they're going to kill her when she becomes of the age of 14?'

Yes, I know... yet, let's enjoy this life well we have her.

It won't solve my problem, about seeing an innocent child a young teenager being killed in 12 years sickens me, yet that has always been my hex of living life, I should be used to it, by now- and I have learned to except, the fact.

Love or no love at this point, will not change a thing.

Even though this awful, evil, and everything that adds up to bad it the way of life in our world, I still don't have the right to choose the one that is picked for this- and you are sure to know that this was rigged so it would be Alyson...

(Two more years have passed)

'...Remember to follow the butterflies, there just like me!' was the first words she said to me.

She slithers up beside me, all blond tousled hair, water's edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth relaxed stretching her strong, tanned arm across the classroom door, barring me from getting inside- her mind to hope for the best when she starts schooling. I thought if, in her mind, I could stop her from the darkness that could come.

And that's all it takes.

But I won't... even if... even if...

I promised Naddalin, that this child could start school here with us- like the rest, I could get her safely to and from class without resorting to that. If I oversee her, yet odd, to all the others, surely.

Yet I remember my home and school life was the same and I turned okay...

(Flash Back)

'I was called a p*ssy by them- the girls, my home town, and even by the parents, yet p*ssy smalls a lot better than a*s hole!' Think about that... right.

(Cut)

Chiaz Naztherth- I ask, why...? I am even here?

I was asked in an interview, that I was forced into, if anything has changed with me over the years, now that 200 years have passed, for my natural life; and I would say- to you and the world that knows me as the lovesick boy from a small town that did not matter- the boyfriend of the girl that made and changed what we think of as a world, the celebrity. I still love her, I still hold on to her panties and keep them on my chest every night, a reminder of her, and the girl I once knew, before mind control.

That is love the unmanned cameras zoom in for a close up to his face showing pain, something that little of them feel now in a drugged induced world, of highs, and deep lows.

What is it that you are doing now with her- 'Now I am lingering as a lost soul in the coal mines, looking for lives to take back with me too, yet I am not the hero- nor- do I want to be, in a way I oversee life in the small town- keeping the memories of the past alive- it's all I can do- with thoughts of mind have been so narrowed.'

'Fabricated and medicated, is all these worlds are.' He said in a whisper.

(Yet none of that really matters now, I have found love, with another man, to kill the pain of long nights.)

No woman would want me now, he thought quietly in his mind.

Not even, Fiona, the girl red hair would stay with me, for life, not even with a ring. Millia turned too- being a she-boy- or identified as such, would have turned on me all because of her. Ashenria also... to most in this world mutated. Lieissah, maybe my only home yet she is now in another world. Yet she was just a little girl the last time, that I saw her... Yet, I feel it may be- time, to move on. Away from all this. He thought in a whisper in his mind- for all to hear in there's all too loudly. I have requested lingering's in the mind of this girl, yet I was denied, by the God of this world, nonetheless. She has ruined me!

'So, tell me, ever-so, how was your weekend? It was asked.

Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice reunion? Katharina Arrington, a young new girl that, end life far too fast just like her hero.

'Was she now able to survive you-by chance, and send you back home?'

'No, the girl said, and I really don't want to. funny isn't it, I have changed now too, and nothing is the same.'

I clench my fists by my sides- and think girl your throwing so much away, education, a man... and the dream of being more, and going onward, visualization how she'd look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust; where she left her cold and dying world. I did not have to wonder at all looking back at my life- in a ripping daydream of pain- and now I will take her's too, despite the vow of nonaggression I took- for all, I will keep.

She then nods, gazes fixed on mine, lowering her voice to a soft whisper as she adds, 'Not to worry though, you won't be alone for long, I am sure I will just be a far memory for you to have someday.'

I knew she did not mean anything by that also, yet it was getting under my thick skin- over the fact it was so true.

I will take the place of your soul, in your wake, for your mom and dad, in the lingering over the casket; once the proper mourning period ends- I'll be right back for you, I'll be happy to step in and fill up the void of her- your mom's loss. after all, she was the only one to understand.' Said Nevaeh.

I focus on my breath, keeping it slow and steady as I take in the strong, tan, muscular arm blocking my path- as I ghost myself in this girl's dead body lying there... this man was big no wonder she was so afraid of him, fear- is everything to why- with girl like us, and why we're here.

'Hell, even if you did manage to hold back and keep her alive, all you have to do is say the words you do to her- and no you have grief, her mother said- 'I'm right by your side' she said to this dead girl.' and I think yeah, yeah, yeah same old story. then only care about you when you're dead.

Some even grin at me like her- looking into their faces- like a ghost of the past- knowing far more than they well ever, eyes grazing over me in the most intimate way. like some have lost their very last friend.

'But no need to answer too quickly or commit yourself yet. to the fact, she is gone forever. Take as long as you like- I thought I have nothing planned; your pain is much more important than mine. For the reason that, continuously, I assure you, unlike Naddalin, I am a woman who can't wait, too long anymore, it is like that part of me is broken. Besides, it's just a matter of time before you come looking for me anyway.'

'There's only one thing I want from you.' He said, to find happiness, in your new world, wherever that is...'

I narrow my gaze- the eyes within the closed ones until everything surrounding us blurs. Hoping for it all to be over, as soon as possible. I never like these things when I was alive, yet hundreds of years later, I am still forced into going to them.

'And that's for you to leave me alone.' the feeling I give off to some is to leave me alone, mind like it is on new heartbeat now rising to my cheeks, within her body as I now lock a gaze that deepens to a leer, and some even think they can see my eyes within hers open, in an evil way.

-And-

'Afraid not, darling, she died.'

The mother of this 17-year-old girl- She laughs some to herself as if it is not real, looking me over and shaking her head in disbelief.

'Trust me, you want way more than that. But not to worry, it's like I said, I'll wait for as long as it takes. until it gets into your head she's not coming back or home, she is gone forever.

It's Naddalin I'm worried about, at this very moment- sometimes, I wonder if I am the right woman for this job. Or if I should just give it all up, to be with her.

'And you should worry too- not for the dead but the living.' From what I saw those last hundred years, she's an impatient woman and will become one, I will see to that.

'A bit hedonist really- I thought. Didn't wait for much of anything so far as I could tell, you just might have a long weight.'

12

I- Emmah am now back, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for locating my weakness, my psychological strength so to speak, and pretty much lives to exploit it.

'Don't get me wrong, she's always been one to keep up entrances -wearing the armbands that are back and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss hadn't time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or should I say whomever-her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who's been there all along. Naddalin waits for no one. And she certainly never waited for you.'

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the words that are like prudently honed arrows aimed straight for my heart.

'Yep.'

'Saw it with my own eyes, I did!'

Smiling as she slips into a thick cockney pronunciation and backs out again.

'Haven saw it too.

It like- broke her poor heart, even if it has not beaten in years, just like ours.

Willing to take her back no matter where she'd been, no questions asked.

Along with Emmah who was always like our baby girl. once more all was right with the world if only for a little while.

Though, unlike me-and, I'm afraid, quite unlike you haven't loved was unconditional, Emmah too and also mine back. Which, let's face it, is something you'd never do- right if you are like us.'

'That's not true!' I cry, voice hoarse, and very dry, as though it's the first time, that I've used it all day- it was so bad.

'I've had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-' I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

'Sorry, darlin', but you're wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty hand-holding there-' She shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

'Totally, forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?'

I- Neveah swallow hard, forcing a calm I don't own when I say, 'That's a lot further than you ever got with Haven.' Now your taking in the new 17-year-old girl too, this is not love- pervert, it is you laying down for anyone- in more ways than one.

'No thanks to you,' she spits, harsh gaze on mine. 'But, it's like I said, I'm a man who can wait.'

'Naddalin is not.'

She shakes her head.

'Shame you're so-o strongminded to play hard to get, now you're playing with Katharina girl too.

You and I are a lot more alike than you think, over the fact I want her too. Both of us pining after someone we'll never truly have- it's all the same, you and I are the same girl, like twin Gemini's.'

'I could-' I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know- that where are both falling to her in mad love, that targeting an immortal's weakest chakra, one of the body's seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

~*~

('Yet maybe this is why- we both of us love the same girl, two minds split that both need the same thing; to make the mind hole again? It was a question both of our minds shared at the same - every time, like clocks meeting hands- hitting a moment of a day, that will not happen again- and time being nothing more than theoretical- unimaginatively- honorificabilitudinitatibus, and wing of a pendulum-like

subdermatoglyphic unwinding in the mind, just ever-so-like weighted chains, of the movements within- in sesquipedalianism with the cloth of time itself, lost in a chime and ringing, times slowed- to us both over her, for that moment of realization and cognizance. Now both breathless of inhaling had harsh dust in- pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis, over the fact of utter love, and loss, confabulated by dust itself. wrong but right we longed for just one more kiss, a kiss that would linger, full of lust, hope, and desire, a deficient need, unfulfilled- craving, desire, excitement, fervor, greed screaming hunger, libido, thumping hammering within like the chimes of the clock, and the kiss, making the sounds, longing- sensuality, the kiss gives more thirst, of animalism of yet another time, where the kiss was something newly invented, in the eyes grow black and wide, like the daylight and time, bartered into the minds of the first man and woman. A zoning aphrodisia, absent appetence. A most upheld appetence with avidity, carnality bankrupting the mind time, and hands of the cloth that it is, within the kiss she would give, and the long for more- more just like the time, at the moment where there was no pain- and lost in the dream of you therapy, appetence with avidity and cooked along with deprived, disappointing when ending, failing to emptiness of the gone and missing needing, omitte d with the appetence of her face living mine. like the dark shadows, of her lines of torso's moving away, like the light of day taking what the darkness stole; the light is coming to take away the darkness yet, the light gives pain, of yet a new day; itching with eroticism for more time in the night to be lost in dreamland, or her mind. Carnality with its avidity, and total- the urge of wantonness, yet comes over and over with body weakness, yet the yen is more than fatigue, the appetition more than lasciviousness, of an end, never-ending. Back in with concupiscence lewdness, without the covering, covetousness cupidity eroticism, we both have her in the same night, at the same time, at the same moments lost to time, and the remembrance of it altogether. Lewdness came and come with moments of lechery, licentiousness, sensualism scant and short shyness fading way like the night, moving into sunrise early day, away, in bereft burned out, into the light like the face of the clock, like the face of the girl we ever-so in love with, cut off defective devoid salaciousness prurience and pruriency. Faulty salacity, with much sensualism and destitute, faulty we all say this that temptation of sin is more than time itself, half-baked and imperfect sin is not a thing any longer, in the minds not all linked together three as one, and thumping like one heartbeat, in default. so much affection, appreciation, devotion with lasting freeness with forgiveness of emotion, fondness for the other girl or woman, more than friendship yet in the end friendship it is like the hand that is time to us, always there, and lasting forever and most continually. The infatuation lust along with its passion gives us the highest respect and taste, with its tenderness, with its yearning, with its a dulation, and allegiance, and its amity. Amour is everything that is, amorousness and ardor, to mind and still hearts

attachment by the mind not only; case and cherishing the crush for delight, in the hopes of devotedness, and enchantment is everything that is enjoyment in cold dying world. the fervor of warmth needed. Uncountably fidelity cold life afterlife, and time after time. flame needed, like colors, like harmonies, like a religion hankering, idolatry- in doing what has been instilled; inclination piety with much involvement, like partiality piety with a question of why- within. Zeal is lust, like worship, of an idol the ever-so wrong. Relishing in rapture with its regards of sentiment and weakness worship is love all, not just the norm. Mad for a soft spot and ardency, incomplete, inferior, less- and minus. Questions of not good enough, not up to par, patchy and then pour off all types, sketchy- and scanty scarce. No longer do we feel after the covering of night, and time, with us- now being three in one, substandard, too little too late, or unsound. No longer defective are we feeling in this world, with its time that draws out, erroneous to those that don't matter, even if. False along with feelings of faulty with its hated feelings of them making us feel ever-so flawed, the girl or woman feeling fragile over the fact that she should. illogical over she has no brain or place... inaccurate over a voice that is not as strong; incorrect and insane of saying I feel that your wrong and not I. Unsubstantial and unwell in the head, is wrong to say for the weak and wobbly over insecure and shaky unbalanced, always unhealthy they say and unreliable, and unsafe we are... unstable along with ailing crazed and dangerous, decrepit, and delicate demented, for hope love and change. Invalid lunatic no more, with the love for love, time, and the world even if cold to us. All these thoughts end with losses in the dream of a time in the darkness of them - with love, that is love.')

~*~

Katharina- 'I could kill you right now,' I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I wouldn't do them, even though I know better.

'Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?'

'You could what?' She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath of air movement chills my cheek.

I- myself gape, wondering where she could've possibly- erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, 'Don't forget, love, Naddalin was under my spell totally.

Which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.'

She got me... right, where it counts. And don't think she doesn't know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it's too late.

'No worries, love. 'I'm having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

The just a moment later- 'I've no plans to go after you- she said.'

Besides, it won't be long 'til you're squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.' she laughs, her eyes on mine, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach can't help but have.

'I'll leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to; you won't go after me either.

Mostly because- I do have what you want. The cure to the antidote for what you suffer- from. I assure you of that, said Naddalin.

You're just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You're just going to have to show me how bad you want it.'

I- Katharina gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing, to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-0 distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it until now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I- Nevaeh press my lips together as my gaze meets heirs... awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

So, knowing it's just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

'Oh, look at that.' She grins; 'Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.'

She lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place. 'Deep breaths,' her coos, lips...

Then she lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place.

'Deep breaths- if you could call them that even if we don't breathe,' she coos, lips grazing the edge of my ear, fingers sliding over my shoulder, leaving an icy cold wake in their path.

'No need to panic, I thought. No need to get all spazzed out o'er.

I'm sure that between us, we can come to some sort of mutual agreement, with this girl that we both are wearing-out, with are clingy love- and find a way to work something out.'

I narrow my gaze, disgusted by the price that she's set when in my mind and now the girls too, words slow yet once more, and darkness is coming- days short- and time long, and cautious when I say, 'Nothing you could ever say or do could convince me not sleep with you- and her alike!' just as she opens the door, allowing the entire class to overhear.

'Whoa-oh' Naddalin smiles, hands raised in pretend admission of defeat as she backs into the room.

She will throw her head back and laughs, allowing her creepy ouroboric- emblem of wholeness or infinity an angel mark just- like a tattoo to flash in and out of view- on her upper part of her head.

'I mean, not to disappoint you, darlin', but if it's a good shag I'm after, virgins about the last place I'd look!'

Katharina- I storm toward my desk- like the good little girl that I am innocent and sweet, cheeks burning- know that I am that girl that is no longer that girl, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite numerous attempts to quiet them the other girl in my class down. I was the only thing on their mind and not the studies. Not even magic could keep them off me...

-And-

The moment the bell rings, I make a run for the door- just to be barricaded by a bunch of girls- wanting all the gross details.

Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can be convinced Naddalin will push her too far and she'll snap-an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, 'every word... every minute forever...' I am mocked with laughter trailing behind me as I turn toward them all to see what she wants, by this- it was all going over her head- yet why not me?

I pause, classmates piling up behind me and even pulling at my skirt, I was ever-so-eager to get to the hall, where they can follow Naddalin's lead, and not mine. Like- taunt me some more than me at the moment, and she seems not to care- like I do.

'I did it,' she smiles, posture stiff, voice anxious, but still eager for me to know. What's that I asked nervously.

I shift uncomfortably, moving my bag from one shoulder to the next, wishing I'd taken the time to learn remote viewing so, I could keep an eye on the lunch tables and ensure Naddalin sticks to the plan.

'I approached her. Just like you told me to.' She nods.

I squint some, returning my focus to her, gut-churning I felt it was, as I begin to grasp the whole thing. I saw her the next day- it was morning one day had passed.

We even talked for a while, and- she shrugs, gazes drifting away, obviously still very taken by the events of the others- yet she said to me not to care what others think, care about me and me only.

I stand before her, breathless- feeling, knowing I must stop it- this feeling, whatever it takes before it gets out of hand- and she's in my head too much.

'She is nice to me, I thought, just like the other one too. In fact, I probably- shouldn't tell you but we're having dinner tonight, I said to my girlfriends that understand.' And you were right, I said to them.'

I- myself nod, shell-shocked and feeling ever-so numb, the words glancing over me as I peer into her energy and watch it unfold in her head: glowing and pulsating. eyes rolling back into my head and turn bright white to all that could see them.

She is standing in the line of the cafeteria massive hall with all its stain glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Nevaeh approaches - causing her to turn and grant her a smile that's- shamefully flirtatious!

Except that there's no shame at all. Those two couldn't be happier. At least not on Naddalin's part. Nor Nevaeh for that matter either. No, the shame is all mine.

'This cannot be happing.' Thought Katharina.

For too many reasons to mention the dinner can never take place soon enough. One of them being that she is not just my girlfriend, but my guardian angel too, my caretaker, my only everything in this whole entire world! Its possibly- even more urgent reason is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, maudlin, overly sentimental, ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, and another, Nevaeh knows I'm psychic while she does not!

I've gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there's no way I'm going to be out by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted- I want Naddalin more.

But then again- just as I'm about to tell her that she absolutely cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, take my lover to dinner and reveal any information I might've accidentally admitted during a weak moment when I was sure I'd never see her again- when back in the past life that is- and now I have old friends that I have not seen 'till now, she clears her throat and says, as I look at my past loved ones that have passed before me - before me at that moment, that ended up both high and low, before judgment day...

'Anyway, you should get to lunch before it's too late. I didn't mean to keep you the long; I just thought you would like to see them all before we move on- pick now if- and how- and what, after all, they are your past family.'

'...Remember you have the right to see any of them at any time.'

'Oh, no, it's okay,' I say. 'I just-' and her voice trails off into nothing but soft murmurs.

I can feel it.

The time is different.

But she doesn't let me finish. Pulls me out the door as she then waves me away, saying, 'Go on now. To find your friends. I just thought I should thank you, that's all.'

'No, no- need too, go on.'

The last thing my Great-Grandmother said to me is that I had a 'Desire to Burn,' I guess that is true, and at some time, I am sure- I will.

My Great-Granddad is here over he had to kill men- way on way back when- when he was like a pirate- or something like that, to live on man had to kill the other and eat them, when he was lost at sea- when their ship capsized, for days, he was the second from the last, he too was killed by a the same gun that was passed around, by being the unlike draw of a straw- in a lifeboat. Queen Andree Loera was the name of the ship, or so I was told.

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin's gloved hand squeezing my knee as I quickly scan the campus, looking for Nevaeh as she thinks: she's gone, as do I. Gone...? I gape, hoping she means gone as in not around - not lost to the world forever, as opposed to going as in a pile of dust.

Nonetheless, Naddalin just laughs, the smooth melodious sound reverberating from her head to mine. Not annihilated. I assure you. Just-absent-that's all. Drove off a few minutes ago with some guy I've never- ever seen before- that she said was an old flame. An old love, or something.

Did she try to tell you?

Did you talk... at all about this beforehand?

-And-

She just left with him?

Naddalin shakes her head, her eyes peering into mine as I add: Good.

Since we can't afford to go after her like no matter what! She has the find herself and remembers all things past!

'I know whom the man was, I bet you, it was him.' Said a girl named Jo-Anna far off in the room.

She admitted it, does she not!

Which means all we must do now is find a way to- constantly. She frowns... You can't believe her!

This is what Naddalin does. She lies and manipulates everyone around her, to believe. 'She is not gone...' You must stay away from her- most of the other girls were saying, she's using you -she can't be trusted- I just shake my head, throw my head back and giggle like some foolish.

14

(One year has passed)

You're the same, yet not.

And I need for you to feel it too.

You and Naddalin have made it just fine without me.

I could see that then; you didn't need me.

So-o, she's not lying- seriously- said- it's the truth, not even finishing the thought before Haven leans forward, saying- 'glad your back.'

Her longing eyes darting between us as she says, 'Okay, that's it, you have found happiness and peace and yourself- right?'

Haven- 'You have regained all your memories.'

'Just what the heck is going on here?' Said Katharina.

'Seriously, enough already.' Said Nevaeh.

I turn, noticing how her friendly light pink aura beams in such sudden sharp contrast to the deliberate harshness of her all-black wings- that were starting to spread out- in frustration.

Knowing she means no unfriendly will though she's definitely- disturbed by us- as so many personal questions.

'Totally, completely, and entirely- It's like you guys have some- kind of like- a creepy way of communicating. it was like Naddalin already knew.

'That's because she does.'

Like twin speaks or something- yet all in the head.

'Like time apart makes you two even closer.'

Only yours is silent. And eerier- said Nevaeh- to their younger muse.

Nevaeh- I shrug and sit there with my lunch, going through the motions of unwrapping a sandwich- pre-made, I've no plans to eat it by the looks of it, turn my belly more, yet one bit or two is what I need to survive; figured out to hide just how alarmed her questioning has made me feel.

Knocking my knee against Naddalin's, telepathically urging her to step in and handle the since I've no idea what to say.

'Don't pretend it's not happening.' Her eyes narrow in suspicion- to everything I've said. 'I've been watching you guys for a while now, and it's really starting to creep me out.' Said, Katharina.

'What's creeping you out? ...Us?'

She gazes up from her sandwich, but only for a moment before she's back to again looking as if it could creep off her tray.

'Look it's really snowing hard outside, she said now looking out that arched window that was steamed with heavy fog.'

'Those two, have always been like this.' Said Emmah who had just sat down beside them, ignoring all their personal space.

She points a- black painted nail with a chunk of pink frosting stuck to its tip- from her cupcake. 'I swear, they get stranger every day- in finding their remembrances of all things past.'

Naddalin nods, setting down in-between, them all as she takes a moment to look us over.

'Yeah, I've been meaning to mention that. You guys are so weird.' She laughs.

'Oh, and the whole glove thing- really?' She shakes her head and purses her lips. Showing her hand looking all cracked with fishers and red. 'So not working for you, I said jokingly.'

Haven frowns at us, annoyed by my joke when she's trying to be grave.

'Laugh all you want- at them, we understand we need them,' she says, gaze steady, unwavering, abiding, determined, and enduring.

'But something's up with those two, I just know it. I may not know what or why, but I'll figure it out- in time. I'll find the underlying cause of it- I assure you. You'll see- you'll see- I will.'

-And-

I'm just about to speak when Naddalin shakes her head and swirls her blue drink- that was making a foggy mist of it, leaning toward Haven as she says, 'Don't waste your time. It's not as dire or evil, malevolent, mischievous, ominous, perverse, threatening, and adverse as you think.'

She then smiles, glaring with gunning- look and ogling with somewhat of a peek than a gaze that was fixed on me.

'We're exercise, hone, prepare to rehearse, and practicing telepathy powers of mind-reading, that's all.'

'Attempting to read each other's minds in place of talking all the time.'

'So, we stop getting in trouble in class over it took over the face we take over each other's bodies and movements too at times, a real headache for the professors.'

She snorts, causing me to squeeze my sandwich so hard the mayonnaise oozes out and squirts grossly out the backside- like a pus-e pimple.

Gaping at my significant other who is just arbitrarily decided to break our number one rule- do not tell anyone who we are or what we can do!

This is something we worked hard to do, looking within the library in the restricted section of dark magic.

Calming only slightly when Haven rolls her eyes and says, 'Please. I'm not an idiot, I know what you to are up to and doing.'

'Wasn't implying you were.' Naddalin smiles. 'It's quite real, I assure you. Would you like to try?'

'Close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten.' She nods- as she does, she starts seeing daydreams as if they were realities play out, sincere gaze meeting her- within the lifelike dream.

'Focus on that number, she goes into a trance- eyes rolling and body limp- the magic takes place, so dark, she was now taking the part of the drain she needs, to think about a number and replacing it, replace it with her thoughts- or other things, mind control, now think with all your might- and it's all blocked out by my replacements. See it in your mind as clearly as you can- and it's like your there, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?'

I freeze, body solid, unmoving, as though seeing a disaster on the side of the road -only the particular- disaster is me, in a car crash as if I was some other girl- who I felt I have met yet was not sure of...

'Now close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten, and then the memories I had are now yours after you have counted down to receive them.'

'It's could the butterfly effect.'

'Transferring life to live- to after-life to after-life.'

Just like I can take all your bad thoughts away, and give you mine, or take away your education, I can even make you forget your own name, it's all dark magic.

'Wow,' is what Haven said.

She nods some to the thought of feeling fear over someone have control of her mind and body- and having as an outer body expresses of feeling as if a soul has been overlaid with her own, sincere gaze meeting her- and their eyes lock, and they both see the same things- childhood dreams, schooling past, moments of feeling like posttraumatic stress.

'Focus on numbers only- let your eyes show me where that is in your mind, and I bet you there gone, with all of you might. I can ask you over and over some like 2+2 and it's not going to be there is it, I now own you, and all that is math in your mind. The '4' you are looking for- I can give to you only if- I give or allow- yet think as you may it's not there.

'It's frustrating' she said.

This is what you know who did to make me look as if I had disabilities. Said Nevaeh.

See it in your mind as clearly as you can, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?'

She shrugs, brows merging as though in deep concentration.

'Nope, nothing- nothing- nothing.'

(Many moments passed.)

'Unbelievable.' she whispered.

Though choosing to concentrate on blue instead of a random number like Naddalin said. You find yourself lost in trances of other things in the remembrances of all things past.

Time, most of all, dreams, and memories. it like the mind goes into overload and finds, a place to unlock, that are your escapes. consciousness is lost to time; time is the theory of the essence.

The mind is the recollection of the remembrance of all thought the anamnesis, awareness of a moment within moments within seconds even down to the nanoseconds, you feel all and is all too real.

Ever-so dreamy, yet cognizance, with a flashback, memorization mindfulness recalling recapturing recognition within time and space, of a life's reflection of something that may not even be realities just a place at a time, with a moment, that counterfeit, ersatz is the reminiscence, just retention is life as a whole, retentiveness is the discipline to go even deeper in the thoughts replace by the scrutinizer.

The remembrances of a past, becomes- subconsciousness becoming in the heavy programming, retrospection of subconsciousness lost in the camera-eye looking back at you, dead-eye on one side- is the look of someone undergoing, you can see them take over- within the eyes, all mind's

eye, to replace a moment in time, to make new remembrances of what was and is, turn out to be part of what will become past.

All it takes is a speedy glimpse at her aura, altering into a dark deceitful blue-green, and a brief peeks at her thoughts to see she's only pretending. Some days, things just take way too much of my energy, it is like you look up and the whole room's spinning... You do this and it takes all your cares away, just to over complicate, people will tell you to medicate. You'll swear the sky's falling.

Haven- 'How do I know if this shit's fabricated?'

'You don't!' Nevaeh.

It took me years to know- and I was called crazy- like who is going to believe you, when you say- you have voices in your head.

15

Knowing she's baiting her, sure that her one in ten chances of hitting the right number works too much in her favor. Math was always her thing... she was left dumbfounded over the fact she could not even think.

Then she rips out and the all the number rush in though head- that was very long and very brilliant and that gives a headache- just to think about. She nods, deepening her focus on a beautiful shade of pulsating blue- and her I.Q was higher than 160- this is where you have now split the brain into chambers of parts, unlocking thoughts of extraordinary. This is what you do in the healing processes of this, zoning out- into another focusing, that is not fabricated.

'Then we must have our wires crossed in thought.'

She shrugs. 'I'm not getting a number at all.'

That's because you have everything, that was in this girl's mind now mixed with your own thoughts.

'Try me!' Emmah abandons her notebook on this dark topic, and her books and wand say a spell and makes it into a pen and leans toward Naddalin. Now she takes what was the want that now has a large feather- on top of pen nib and dips into the ink and takes frantic notes.

Eyes barely closed- with how these notes would be said tongue to the side of her lips, thoughts hardly focused before Naddalin gasps- her hand to stop, 'You're going to Haven- say things here that should be sh-h, hushed, saying things that can get into the wrong hands- is not good magic.' This is already been said, in the book of life, you don't need to draft notes- unless the notes are in ink that only you or we could see, the notes on this have been changed over the fact they need to be, now in code. She shakes her head also, saying 'yes, it is for the best.'

(A week back)

'Everyone but me- has gone through this,' Naddalin says, jaws clenched, face gone suddenly pale.

'Mind control is wrong, this is a scar, she said, along with- 'like think what you could do with this, you could have mass death and one dictator.''

'We do I am sitting in front of you. I run the show with the world.'

'Well, I'm sure everyone has told you-you of all. You know, telepathically.' she laughs, returning to her phone again, saying 'sometimes old school kicking it is not the way to go anymore I prefer these,' and she holds up the phone, that links all the magical networks together.

I peer at Naddalin, wondering why she's so upset over the trip.

I remember- I mean, yeah, so she used to live there France- before the wars, before the transitions, before it was made into districts and parted into jurisdictions.

Long before it was covered with the blood of death by the people in revaluation. Sometime before the flag with the star was marking the undesirable what they became, that were slew, at one time when I was truly alive- after my boyfriend passed away in an industrial accident, or so they called it... the troopers or something like that- I was equivocal about did not really want to say... all that much, I was only in my early 20's.

She said something odd on her tombstone and it read- (I have not stuck with me all my whole life, so there-) and I think I got what it meant.

Yet, I think it said, 'I will live on forever...' or something like that, or 'I don't need you!' - 'or even suck on that!' Like- I thought that's what it may have said- but- but nah- it can't be- yet maybe?

...After all- it is a cracked heart-shaped stone...

But- but that was hundreds of years ago, and the stone is crumbling and reads the rest has disintegrated to dust into just the wind! Just like most of Earth itself, now brown rust in color, and derelict.

I squeeze her hand, urging her to look at me, but she just stares at Haven with that same stricken look on her face. Seeing what has become of her past world. It looks just like Mares - yet with all the buildings dilapidated and covered with Ivy vines and vegetation yet with low gravity and air - the sky orange and yellow, did to me when I was alive, so long ago.

~*~

'Nice try with the whole telepathy angle,' Haven says, swiping her finger a-crossed the top of her cupcake until it's coated with strawberry frosting, and she was licking her finger and kissing the end of it too.

'But I'm afraid you're going to have to try a little harder than that. -All you have managed to prove is that you guys are even weirder than I thought. But no worries, I'll find the underlying cause of it. I'll not expose your dirty little secret.'

I hold back a nervous laugh, hoping she's just messing around, then peering into her mind only to see that she's serious.

'When are you leaving?' Naddalin asks.

But only to appear conversational, has already uncovered the answer in her head.

'Soon, but not soon enough,' she thought, eyes lighting up, as she stared the look at her. 'Let the countdown begin!'

Naddalin nods, gaze unstiffening as she says, 'You'll love this.

Everyone loves it, France is a lovely, delightful place.'

'You've been...?'

...?...

I and Haven both ask at the same time.

Naddalin nods- 'I's have,' gaze far away in the back of her on the mind and thought looking somewhat- blank to us looking at her color fading from her eyes. 'I lived there once a long time ago.'

'That's what we gathered...' they both said it unanimously!

Haven glances between us, eyes narrowed again when she says, 'Jaylynn and Naddalin lived there too, around the same time, she looks at her one eyelid squinting.'

Naddalin shrugs, expression noncommittal, as though the connection means nothing to her.

'Well, don't you think that's a little strange? All of you living there at the same time, in the same place, then all of you ending up here-within months of each other?' Sher leans toward her, abandoning her cupcake and letting it drop in search of some answers.

She just sips her blue drink and lifts her shoulders again, as though it' s hardly worth going into, in the past she thought, to her, in through conversation.

But Naddalin's solid, refusing to cave or do anything that might give it away.

'Is there anything I should see while I'm there?' Haven asks, more to break the tension than anything else. 'Anything that shouldn't be missed?'

Naddalin squints, pretending to think, even though the answer comes quickly.

~*~

'All of France was worth seeing... yes, was it not?'

I definitely- remember- check out the Ponte Vecchio, which is the first bridge to cross the Arno River and the only one left standing after the war- were ever inch of Frances was cover in their blood. There are even homes and shops built into the bridge.

'I think Italy Venice, was worth seeing more,' said Nevaeh.

Oh, and you show me the memories of visiting the Galleria dell' Accademia which houses Michelangelo's David among other important works- lost to history and war- and the death of a planet, and perhaps show me why the-' 'David- was so inaugural important,' Emmah says wanting this so badly

to have and keep all memories of these wonderful places, from earth to see and hold in her mind forever- to be the to keep all the remembrances of all things past, when it comes to art and history.

'We... yes, I am giving you everything- girl- surprise!' Emmah was delighted in her expression.

'We did not want to tell you, that you are the keep of seeing beauty.'

'As well as the bridge, and the famous ll Duomo, and all the other items that make every travel guide top ten lists, but I am more absorbed in the smaller, off- the- beaten path kind of places- you know, where all the cool Florentines go.

Naddalin was raving about the one place, I forget the name, but it's supposed to house some incomprehensible revitalization artifacts and paintings and stuff few people know about.

Did you get anything like that? Or even clubs, shopping, that kind of thing?'

Naddalin looks at her, gaze so intense it sends a chill down my spine.

'Nothing offhand,' she says, trying to soften the look through her voice betrays a definite edge.

'Though any place that claims to house great art but isn't in the guidebook is probably a fake. The antiquities market is loaded with forgeries, thanks to all the war, and moving to new worlds away.'

'You shouldn't waste your time on that when there are so many other- like the western towns, are far more interesting things to see, all we need to do is travel- a star- a world away, and its already there- and recreated.'

Haven shrugs, bored by the conversation and already back to writing notes again.

'Whatever,' she mumbles, thumbs tapping quickly on the side of her head.

'No worries, Naddalin said she'd make me a list.'

(Back home)

'I'm amazed by the progress you've made- with Dariez, she is doing so well.' Naddalin smiles. 'You learned all on your own? It is all around reading people.'

She nods, and gazing around the small, empty room, pleased with myself for the first time in weeks, when I walked into the tiny house.

'Thanks, for stopping by.' She said leading us into the home.

The moment Naddalin mentioned she wanted to rid the place of all the overly slippery furniture, that was cheap she had filled it with during Naddalin's reign of fear, I was on it, to make this place fit for to young lady's- all cute and such.

Taking aim at each piece with such unchecked enthusiasm that-well-I'm not even sure where it went. All I know is it's no longer there I want to be- and she points at the old home she was half-grown in that is now dilapidated- and you were right all along.

'Looks like you're no longer in need of my lessons- you're not a little girl anymore, then and your surly a woman now. She shakes her head, saying you're wringing I need you more now than ever.'

'Don't be so sure.' I said back quickly.

I turn, smiling as I push her dark wavy hair off her face with my newly gloved hand, hoping we'll get that cure from Naddalin soon, or at least come up with a less hokey alternative. Dariez a good kid... you'll do fine.

'I have no idea where all this stuff even went-not to mentioned, how I can't possibly fill up space, even more, when I have no clue where I am stashing all the stuff you used to have and me before getting all this.'

Reaching for her hand a second too late and frowning as she walks over to the window- I feel as if I have lost my sister.

'The furniture'-her gazes out at her manicured lawn, voice low and deep-' is right back where it started, what seemed like forever ago, yet was only about a year.

'I don't like change-' she said- out of breath.

Returned to its original state of pure vibrating energy with the potential to become anything at all. She looks in the glass ball- and see her new life coming.

And as for the rest-' Her shrugs, the strong lines of her shoulders rising ever so slightly before settling again. 'Well, it hardly matters anymore, does it? I've no need of it now.'

I stare at her back, taking in her lean form, her casual stance. Doubting how she could be so-o blasé in reclaiming the precious artifacts of her past...

Then Nevaeh, the pictures of her in the plain pink dresses back in the day, the astride a rearing white stallion-not to mention all the other amazing relics dating back centuries.

'Nonetheless, those objects are priceless, see her life now within mine forever! You must get them, back didn't you? They can never be replaced, yet you can with new lives, can't you?'

'It's all energy-all memories of all things in the past-to make the future!' She squeals.

~*~

'Ever so, relaxed in my own thoughts of time travel. It's just stuff.' Her voice firm, resigned, as she turns toward me again, saying old STUFF. 'None of it has any real meaning to me anymore, yet I want to remember it all. The only thing that means anything is you-and this stuff is what makes up the entirety of you.'

And even though the sentiment is undeniably sweet and heartfelt, it does not affect me in the way that it should.

The only thing she seems to care about these days is apologizing for her karma and me. 'But that's where you're wrong. It's not just stuff-too.'

Oh, I sorry, I felt so bad hugging her from the one side.

And while I'm perfectly fine with those inhabiting the number one and two spots on her list, the problem is the rest of the page is blank. I was at a loss of words.

I move toward her, voice wiles, wheedling, hoping to reach her and make her listen the time.

And just like that, my mind is ripped into another time and place...

'It's history for God's sake, we need to get books and have them signed, it was said this man write 30 books in one year, yet I am not sure if he is still alive, back in 2018!'

'So, like he would be over 90 now or more, you can't just shrug it off as though it's nothing more than a box of old tired books and lots of words that no one cares about, even if, it the story of all- of our lives.'

All- of this stuff is nothing but tired old objects you donate to Goodwill, like the books - I have penned too. Nothing more than a waste of time and paper, along run-on of contextual spelling ears, Grammar issues, punctation wrongs, sentence structure issues, and styling problems.

I thought they were worth remembering - like the one about a world lost without color or feeling, or the one about a girl that fought for her place, as an equal- the youngest over her class.'

Look at this thing the covers are all tattered, and the pages small.

She then looks at me, gazes softening as she trails the tip of her gloved finger from my temple to my chin. 'I thought you hated my 'dusty old room' as you once called it.'

'People change - worlds change, times change this is no longer relevant, and so I feel.' I shrug, thank about that asking why?'

Wishing, not for the first time, that she'd change back to the woman I knew before she was split within her mind also.

'And speaking of change, why are you so freaked by my trip to France, and the memories of my past, that I want to share with you?'

Noting the way, her hardens at the mere mention of the word.

'Is it because of the whole Haven and Nevaeh - become Naddalin thing of remembering the past- and not wanting to, keep the books is said to me... when the memories are the photos, and the book's text the plot and the making of the movements - the flow of time push-pulling fading in and out- the part and place of where to go in the time travel, moving fast, and moving slow, and with both the movie you see, I don't understand why she doesn't see it that way. The connection you don't want her to know about?'

Yet, were there the good times - I don't know...? She thought...

She looks at me for a moment, lips parting, about to speak, then she turns away and mumbles insanely, 'I'm hardly what you'd call freaked.'

'You know what...?'

'You're absolutely right.'

For a normal person, that was hardly what you'd call freaked.

But for the girl who's always the coolest, calmest one in the room-all it takes is the slight narrowing of your eyes and the most minute clenching of your jaw to know you're upset.'

She sighs, eyes searching mine as she moves toward me again. 'You saw what happened in France.' She then squints. 'Despite all its virtues, it's also a place of unbearable memories, ones I'd rather not explore.'

I swallow hard shaking looking into her past- like a faded movie, remembering the images with her, I viewed in looking deep into her memories, lost in her mind, 'like a penny on the floor... worthless- my depression a sickness that keeps me, spring-like atop- my mind turning, my curse- or just my illusion?

Until my death until we part for better or for worse- locked in your heart-shaped box forever, I thought or was thinking to note but decillions, what little time we spent lost in my mind forever- whatever never mind.'

Naddalin is hiding in a small dark cupboard, watching as her parent was murdered, seeing it along with me, she and I shared recalling the moment, back when she was in her playpen.

By thugs' intent on obtaining the elixir-then later, abused as a ward of the church until the Black Plague swept through France and her encouraged Haven and the rest of the orphans to drink the immortal juice, hoping only to heal and having no idea it would grant eternal life-and I can't help but feel like the world's worst girlfriend for bringing it up.

'I prefer to focus on the present.' She nods, gesturing around the large empty room. 'And right now, I really need your help furnishing the space. I am starting to really like a nice, clean, contemporary look when shopping for home decor.

And though I was thinking of leaving it more than empty, to really emphasize the size of the rooms- that is well very tiny after all, I suppose we should try-' I gasp, practically choking on the word as my voice raises several octaves at the end, think that this girl is now a woman!

I remember you saying- 'I'm selling the house- in a year and moving on with my life.' She shrugs. 'I thought you would understand?'

'But- you can your one of us now... you can now see all this too, okay she said to her and just like that they were ripped back into the moments where they were sitting eating in the hall, of the school.'

I gaze around, longing for that ancient velvet sofa with the lumpy cushions, knowing it would give the perfect landing for when my body with I am so tired I collapse and my head quietly explodes, for all the chatter- that it has to hear and there are no ways of to turn them off- they just keep babbling in my mind. I need to have a real-life with real- real- you like all thing that is really- like real friends too, not just the fantasy world that you refuse to see that is not a reality.

'Don't look so upset. Nothing's changed It's just a house, I never wanted her to get rid of this home after I was nice enough to make it happen for her.

A seriously under an oversized house, though it was, I need to move on from. Naddalin was mumbling crazily and softly talking to herself. Saying the same things over and over in repeats.

And just like that she was gone and said okay if that is what you want Dariez... and Naddalin vanished right before her eyes- within the air. Moreover, that was the last time I saw her- 'till now.

Nonetheless, I just stand there instead, determined to keep it together. Gazing at my ridiculously gorgeous girlfriend of the last years as though it's the first time we've met. Besides, I have needed all the space anyway, I have a new boyfriend, as you may or may not know me and Stan are going to have a baby. they're never going to be enough rooms or room for three.'

'And what exactly are you planning to replace it with, then? A tent?'

'I just thought I'd move in with him, that's all.' Her gaze is pleading, begging me to understand, I did yet I thought she was throwing her new life away that I got for her, 'Nothing sinister, Ever- yet a way of what could be power- and taking my place someday- ever one said the next. 'Nothing meant to hurt you, but I don't want it'

I did not say- yet I thought you're stuck with regardless, your hexed, and at that point, I was out of her mind- for good- yet them- them- they were in it forever, and I was not going to stop it now.

I was studying her closely, wondering what is gotten into her, wanting to just say it was all over, and where they will end up without her- yet she said to me- he's looking for innocents and he has found it- so-o go-o.

'I mean, Naddalin, if you're seriously looking for a fight, I don't want it, why not just manifest something in your crazy head about how wrong I am and can go on?

I flick my gaze over her, moving from her glorious heard of longish dark glossy hair to her perfect rubber flip-flop–shod feet, remembering how, not so long ago, I longed to be normal again, just like everyone else. But now that I'm getting used to my powers, I don't see the point.

'What's this really about- I thought?' I squint, feeling more than a little betrayed.'

'I mean, you're the one who got me here.' Oh, I was- mortified.

You're the one who made me the- way- I am.

Right- and now that I'm finally adjusted, you decide to jump ship?

'Seriously! Why are you doing?'

But instead of answering, she just closes her eyes.

Projecting an image of the two of us laughing and happy, frolicking on a beautiful, black-sand beach- remember all the good times. Saying this is it... thanks for the memories. But I just shake my head and cross my arms tighter, refusing to play until my questions are answered, about her and them...

She sighs and stares out the window of the tiny home for the last time looking back me with the sun shining brightly, then turning toward me when she says, 'I've already told you, my only recourse, my only way out of the hell making- as I should have, it all karma- and I want what I lost.

And the only way to do that is to relinquish the manifesting, the high life, the big-spending, and all the other extravagances- I've indulged myself in for the last hundred years, so I can live the life of an ordinary citizen, too. -I understand, Honest, hardworking, and humble, with the same day-to-day struggles as anyone else- if not more- go for it.'

You and I Make Always

Start:

Chapter 1

The Year was, and I remember back to- 2019, forgive me... Whereat the Cambria, fair and I are holding cotton candy?

Remember-

~*~

Night-

Come on, honey, let's get you ready for bed, I was 13 at the time.

I am no special you girl here, just a collective girl here doing a thing as I should, think of boys and rubbing myself on then in my thoughts at night, I read, I think, I even poop too, throw girl are not allowed to say that right, not in these times.

All way with sweet and common girlie thoughts.

-She has a teddy bear and is looking for young love, and hot passionate nights.

I've led a common little life. There is no testimonials dedication to me or for me, yet I may be dying of something bad, I can say. Plus, my name Andria will soon be unable to be remembered by all that was of the past days. But in a single difference, I- myself thrived as magnificently as anyone who ever lived a young dumb yet cute life. Looking good, girl. As I walk the halls of this big creepy place. 'I feel okay today.' Yours truly here feels that she loved another boy with all my heart, and soul body and mind. My soul and for me, that has always been enough to give to him if that would have wished.

Chapter: 2

How's it feeling and doing, honey- bunny? Going to kick it- I keep trying to die, but they won't let me they say I am so stinking cute. Well, you can't have everything even if it's fading or living

without pain on both. Immense day today I have planned. You say that every day, with a cute-wost-ie smile of your little blond-haired blue-eyed face, you little angel. It's a lovely day outside. Let's take a walk, outside of today, we don't think so, you're not able to at- all- yet. (Wishful thinking) Well, we've got to get you out of this room. Come on now, honey goes to the playroom and does coloring and thingies like that. Some fresh air is what I want! Grrrr!

Chapter: 3

It's all good I do what I always do no complaints, Good morning. I am so sad and sorry at this point of my beginnings starts of my young little life, it's not a good day, to be me; I want to play and dance and sing and do girl little cute-z thing like painting my toenail to match my toes-ie ones. I have a long sunn-ie dress and not as much hair as I did, but its fix-abele if I work for it. OUTSIDE? I asked She said- baby- girl- I don't think it can happen.

Nurse says- she's up for anything.

Chapter: 4

Hello? (Boy) I like him, he's funny and handsome. This is me! doors fly open as she runs and stops runs and stops looking in at the dying kids in their rooms and beds, the older boy David - he comes to read to you. Read a kiddie story of hope and love and goo-goo-ness, with unicorns and ponies? – Yeah- no that pain starts within me and I feel as I had to run to the bathroom to not keep it down the treatments are talking to me, I don't know if this is a goodie thing-ie.

Oh, come on, back to bed, and sleep this off, it goes in OUCH-ies, and her sweet little- light goes out.

Ahh... snoring, yet one old bitty' said- All right now, that keep her away for three hours.

(Noon)

Where did we leave off? In the story... Oh, yeah, yeah, here it is- baby. It was the night of the carnival, a news story this time, I knew yet I didn't remember it, I lose something I can feel yet they don't tell me anything, so I figured out what I can, yet that not much being my age. 'David was there with his friends and Maraca.' -David? -That's where those both met- them... It was around the time and date of September- 19th of 2014, Andria was years nine old or so.

(Girl) She has the same name as me. See then there at the park- groundwater squirting game: Little girl wins a prize. He tied to get her something yet epic fail! Foodie! I watched that off so hard, no ding-a-ling-ing here. -Thank you for playing- a boy. -Hah, you're really funny I am a man here not a boy. Man, I clobbered, it's all good she bears hugged him for being just him and that was sometimes being, cute yet very dumb for the acting of dumbness. I bet that thing, Yuck-ie- funny it didn't come off, oh that that thing.

I'm telling you I did baby; these games are rigged.

Chapter: 5

The night time before bedtime, Hello, it was him I kinda remember some of the stories now, that he said earlier... -How are you, good- feeling good? Howdy, what's your name, U- NO it baby thinks- hard ...?... I don't think I do- and story time starts for her, as she thinks on. Footstep comes right up here now. Over the knob, certainly. Whoa. Yeah-a, singing it out in a hum,

- Who's this girl with Maraca?

- Her name's Andria Samilton.

She's here for the summer with her family.

Dad's is the poorest around, yet she cute right good butt for you.

Ha- funny then why haven't you been with her yet?

Walked apart to go see this girl.

- Hello, Paulie!

- Hi, honey.

Look, I won you a prize, he rips one down from the mouse game as she walked towards him.

That woman was P-O-ed, at the game, yet they walk off one arm wrapped around.

Paulie- oh, thank you! She giggled without thoughts at the thought of him and she was run around like the mouse on the wheel of the game. Ow-ha! A bear- cute- Love! He said -yeah, -sure- kiss me! They did... Hey great, huh I look at David like I hooked her?

Chapter: 6

Hey, Andria, you want some cotton candy baby-girl? - Umm, okay honey. That would be so much fun if you want someone. Sure, look down there... GOD keep it in there I don't wanna see it, she said. You only get one chance, teenager. You want to dance with me or rid with me, or on me, or something like that?

I'm David Talhhoun.

SO-o?

- So, it's really nice to meet you.

- Andria, who is this guy?

- I don't know, David Talhhoun.

- I would really like to take you out.

- Friend! Do you mind?

You can't sit more than two people in a chair, David.

Go out?

- No.

- Why not?

- Because- I don't want to.

David, she's with us, so don't chase her away with your dumbness, and crap.

Hey, Andria, you want to ride the merry-go-round?

Up down, up-down, up Down- they went like their love life would go.

- I'd love to suggggggerrrr.

They are kissing- and feeling each other out in the tunnel-of-love.

- All right the boy said in the 1st seat.

Love is all we need right- the book closes for the night as she falls asleep on him.

(Boy) walks out of the room kissing her forehead and said I never forget you as you did with me yet love and luck don't always go hand and hand.

Chapter: 7

Reason with me. Plea me. - David Talhhoun.

- What?

Works down at the McDonalds with Paulie age seventeen.

Oh... Did you see he was standing like that god do you think it's- like- oh?

Run up- he dad- like not even one inch away from her face? GOD- what do you want to from me, she said not happy, yeah, I saw, said the girlfriend, that's David, though. Always doing the crazies, are you at all surprised, not at all I like it, yet I don't, well see, maybe, I don't know yet, I girl what can I say. He even came over to you, like was he going to kiss you and not even know your name first. Sweet but creepy!

I think he likes you, she said with delight. Yeah, my dad would too. I think- Nah- for now anyway. Hey what... jerk... as he pulled my hair, saying I was cute. Get off me, I said as he was all wrapped around me going for it all. God older boy- Don't touch me. -Hey!

I love you, girl, without a name! - Well, I... ugh! HUM, I thought about him and what I saw there. What are you doing tonight?

Hey, you can't do that as she runs off the merry-go-round! As she was there, he almost falls on his tushie, I'll pay you when I get off, Dan.

-He asked you out-

Yes, he did- I like him- eyes rolled dreamily, both hands fly upon her red cheeks. Okay, Dan, I'll get- it- oh- off, all right. Get off, David, you need to come.... (Girls-What?) Award stop in his yelling words- 'OFF' as it spins 'round, you need to come - what...? Off.

He tripped you're going to kill yourself for her boy! David, cut it out, boy. Now, will you go out with me as he hopped on my hose-ie? What the freak?

- No?

Hey boy, she just told you.

It keeps going around. Rings being tossed in the mouth of the clown.

Lean into it so, you don't fall getting off, it goes, fast.

Why not?

I don't know you at all, and because

I don't want to. You don't need to know me to 1st date girl. How else do you get to know someone if you don't try first- dates, go by what your friends say?

David!

Come again? Would you- GO!

NO! He said.

Girl- Well, you leave me no other choice then. Oh, my God gets it in your head and not that one I don't want it. I'm not kidding, I am falling to you. David, stop misleading around.

- What are you doing?

- I'm going to ask you one more time, he kisses her on the cheek, from behind. Will you... NOW as he gets up on her and the house, doing things I can say, yet think like a boy. Will you go out with me?

David, you best come on and stop it. Girlfriend next one over... my leg is slipping.

- Then get down and off, you idiot. That way I am doing if she says- yes. Not until she decides. 'Aw, go on out with him, baby said some old dude in next row.' All right, all right, her and goes down his undies, and then see feel it and push him off, I'll go out with you. She knew it was all love she was feeling it too. It was up to my butt so- yeah- feel in the blanks here.

Chapter: 8

What?

Who?

When?

Why?

They?

It?

Some?

Doing it?

No, don't do me any favors if you say yes, he spun out on the floor of the ride.

No, no. Do I want to, yes?

Do you want to?

Did she say Sucking- yes!

Do you want to?

Yes!

Say it again.

I want to go out with you- now.

Say it again.

I want to go out with you.

All right, all right God keep it in your pants!

We'll go out.

You think you're so clever, do you not?

David, you idiot! She said.

She remembers my name- yes!

Girlfriend- That wasn't funny, nope, it's okay hun, I'll take care of this boy soon.

Girl asked- on her deathbed- I remember the girl from the Carnival, right... she was my friend, right?

Do you remember me? I asked with wondering thoughts- of hope.

Yeah, sure, the boy that reads to me, not the boy- what was he called- Mr. Bonner, was it? He looked pickled. How could I overlook the speculations of me wondering thought-age? Absolutely, I wanted to clear that up with you, for the reason that, I'm categorically regretful about that all.

It remained an actually imprudent thing to do... on that ride, to talk to somebody. But then again, I had god was saying she was my baby angel sent from the heavens.

I had to see I could get her naked before the night was over. To be next to you. I was being so pulled into you. Um... oh, what a saying here, it's nice, so nice! Do you use that on all the babes'?

- No, not all just you hun.

- Right, you're dumb.

I saw you all rubbed up against your little girlie-friend what's her name with the brown hair and green eyes.

- What are you doing tonight?

- Could you repeat that? Go out tomorrow night?

What do you say, baby? What about this weekend, say at a hotel or whatever?

I know what you want I don't give that to boys.

- Why?

Our date then?

Maybe- she walked away- skipping, and humming show tunes.

I did not even say, I would go on that date with you.

The date that you agreed to go on with me.

No...!

Yes, you promised.

You pledged and you swore it did you not.

Sound good, I speculate the thoughts of yes or no: Yeah for you would have killed me with it behind me if not. I changed my mind over time to yes or no, I must see, maybe?

Look, I know you get some dirty boys coming up to you on the street doing crazy things... I don't know him. Why do act as if I do? You don't know me by now don't you, I know me and that's good enough, right?

Chapter: 9

Plus, when I see something that I like, I got to love it see the small-town charms- ha... I love it. I go... I mean, I go crazy for it. Okay, what are you speaking of? Well, you, see into me, I feel, that you do.

Oh, you're good at this ant you. What the Hel-? You're too moral. Certainly not. No, you're getting me wrong. You have it all now, yet not me yet. But you-

You're something ant you.

You are your ant putting badly. You're whimsical, fanciful, unusual, imaginative, original, creative, and quirky, and I would even give you impulsive and capricious.

Hugh?

I'm not.

You're so stupid, I think I like that...?

Chapter: 10

You really are so go-o, I'm mesmerized. I'm not frequently like this, I'm sorry. You make me dumb feeling and acting.

Uhm, oh my- like- yes, you are. I can be amusing if you want... thoughtful, uh, smart, um, illogical, and courageous. And uh... I can be light on my feet. I could be your all and wonder, and mag ical,

whatever you want. You just tell me what you want me to be and I do that - love. I'll be that for you forever and ever never ever let go of you to the day you or me, am not around to say - I love you.

You're CUTELY dumb and love me I see that. OKAY! You win, not smart - I could be that for you too.

Come on, let's go for this date, you want as bad as me. What's it going to hurt if we do things after and now? Umm... ah - uh - I don't think as a result so maybe it's okay if I am like you. Fine, what can I do to change your mind?

Andria, you remember David, don't you? The move adds start whit supposition - you'll total and get something out. You unquestionable she's coming for it hard? Lessen, chum, it's all set up. We are meeting her for the late show tonight so back off her. Look... what did... I tell you what? Come on now and see this movie picture.

Oh, my goodness, it's bad, his hand on mine... I feel more to come. What a happenstance she felt! Kissing him with popcorn, and the taste of butter, and Pepsi, I need to talk to you for a second. He's here...! Him sitting on my hand, and the other way around, Yes, I remember - Yah.

- Come here.

- Paulie!

- Hi.

- You look great.

- Hullo.

- It's nice to see you yet again.

- You too.

- Aw, thanks.

Really, you look really great and feel good next to me. She is kissing my ear, saying sweet nothings.

You do look great. You look great. And I know I look great, said Paulie, so could we please go see this movie now and hush up?

The show's about to start. After you, he asked for a kiss on the lips. You come back here, baby. You aren't going to catch me; she runs for the water's edge and prattled-boats. Swans all-around them as they kiss in the sunshine, next to the old steam train puffing down next to the oak trees and picknick tables.

See her as she runs, wild and carefree, in stupid love, with so poor boy.

Chapter: 11

I'm supposed to catch you! Kiss, kiss, kiss, lip bite, eyes tight, and lashes long on his cheeks. I'm faster than you.

Nah you ain't... You ain't- you ain't- you can't!

Nope, No...!

I am wet for you now, just drenched with the water on the edge. I'll get you, baby girl! I'm going to get... Here I come! Let me love you.

You better run fast! And then met slowly in a hug, run and it's falling in love again, being apart for that long. Park and outlying past them all, that looked passed all the rides too.

Love after, after falling madly in love, love, love, a- love. The big wheel in the sky is lighting fireworks off above and inward.

Wait for me, baby girl- I see you there, never about where they, never- ever apart- I would even sleep with me in the night for I said, I was scared, and ran into his bed, held tightly.

Chapter: 12

(Back on the first date)

Want to walk with me to my house? He did old ways I said- mom well loves you for this. Her- what happened? ...In that movie? We didn't even see it I could not even tell you for sure.

Here you go. Thank you for this night we didn't even kiss at the door mom was looking so yeah. What are you guys doing now and then? We giggled and did say anything but the truth.

Even if I was opened up to him now. Yeah, what's going on you too? Yeah, is that all...?

...Just a and movie no more no less- um she now by the look on my face, and the glow you- un-floweriness. Mom passed a week later of what I have. Do you guys feel it for each other? Yes - yes- we do.

Do you-ah Love each other? Yes- I love him! I love her too. Oh, I get it. You guys do love each other, THEN HUN?

Don't do anything you're going to regret I wouldn't do. Unacceptable, goodbye.

All right, all right. Mmm... That was fun we gonna do it again. Mm-hmm. I haven't seen a movie, in ages. Really?

Huh-uh. Not meanwhile I personally was a little kid. Pardon? Nope, I, uh...ah? I'm busy, you know, I don't have that much time don't ya- see. Are you busy? -hmm- Mm- I have a very stern agenda.

My days are all planned out even back then, I had to deal with this crap. I get up in the morning... banquet, school day, get it in- here- work on homework here, play some all alone, reading time, bath time and sleep time and do it all over and over and over and over and over and over and over. Math, English tutor, lunch at some point if I can hold it down, music lessons - piano lesson, and that about all they will like me do, TV. It is nice when it works also.

And after dinner and blowing it all over- I spend time with my family, for three hours before they go home, and I say here all alone in this glowing white and could room, next to my bedmate Sam. She doses do or say much she has a week to live and she is five years old. And then I... I catch up on some reading, she is sawing logs! Wow stop breathing- um I think about that one hard and then say- Nah- don't do that.

Oh, Mom and Daddy see you soon pull through one more day baby.

We decide to pull the plug- so she would not suffer- age ten.

We all gather around to see her. Everything is over... they look down on the life she never had- yet she has a sketchbook of her short life here. No, not everything is readable - however, it's all

there in her handwriting. But the important thing is she was remembering for her. And then everything else, she was not. And that way youth and innocents with young love mixed in. free - and wild to see life fade fast. You get to decide all by yourself to live on or let go?

She didn't we did - it the hardest thing a dad has to do is she, someone, you love to go - before you. It had to be I would say - it had to be this way. I don't get it either.

Why?

God - or whomever why make the plan of killing sweet little kids? Why the hell do you want to do this to me - why? Mom - she never did stop crying it's been four years now.

Chapter: 13

I'll always think of you that way I'll think of you in the morning sun and when the night is new...

I'll be looking at the moon and think of you...

But the first time I ever saw your face -

The first time I ever saw your face -

I'll be seeing you.

Morning, Mr. Talhhoun.

Mr. Talhhoun?

Call Dr. Mandite Von and USC, okay? I've got no, I got no pulse anymore - she said. I've got nothing to say really just how I love you and you feel that even now with things gone like even if your heart in new it feels the same to me and you. Let them know we are in full arrest. Call me - on my cell if you can, if you can this evening, I see you tomorrow if I can and you can. All right, we will do this if we can.

We talked about this. It's all right now sleep, and rest now think about your life and how it was. Come on, come on, sweetie. Okay, yes, come on, let's go. Time to go - It's okay, baby, come on. You know it is.

Just try it not to get her over happy she needs rest not a boyfriend right now, said, mom.

Oh, Mr. Talhhoun you came to see her.

Welcome back, the baby girl sees that you went through all that well. How do you feel? Finally, Apt as a swindle. Where are you going girl at the stand asked? I was just taking a walk, thinking about how- I can't sleep without her. Fine, you know you're not supposed to, it's against the rules. Yeah,

I know. You weren't really going for a walk, were you? You were going to see Miss Andria again wasn't yah. I just got out of the hospital and I miss her you see.

Mr. Talhhoun, I'm sorry you can be coming in out of her room like that at night, but I can't let you see her tonight. Here and now you're going to have to go back to your room. As for me, I'm going to go downstairs and get myself a cup of coffee. I won't be back to check on you for a while, so don't do anything foolish- I want to go to do that- I just want to see him if I can-

Hi.

David.

David.

Hi, Baby girl. I'm sorry I haven't been able to be here to read to you.

I didn't know what to do. I was frightened you were not ever coming back to me my love. I'll continuously come back. What's gonna happen when I can't remember anything to any further extent? What will you do? I'll be here always and ever. I'll never- ever leave you. I need to ask you something. What is it, Baby girl?

Do you think that our love can make marvels? Sure, I do if the same. That's what conveys you back to me each time.

Do you think our love could take us away together even if I go away from you? I think our love can do something we want it to.

I love you.

I love you, Andria.

Good night.

Good night.

I'll be seeing you there soon.

Chapter: 14

I want to show you something the boy said I have this it was hers.

- David, what are you doing? As the pages started to show and he read out- to them as he did with her- day in and day out. -What now? She loves to paint. Yeah? -Mm-hmm. Huh. Most of the time, I have all these drawings showed in here and look over than seeing her do them going back to the time she did them. Thoughts bouncing around in my head. Are you okay? Why are you crying? It's all good, I said whipping them away.

(Memory)

Do you want to dance with me? Now? Sure. -Mm-hmm. Is are the song playing in the background? Mm-hmm.

I want to fly like a colorful bird- so, I don't have to be here and see the world under then and I rush over their heads, are you going to be one-two?

If you're a birdie, I'm a birdie. Come on, darling, don't do this to yourself- What are you doing? You need to hear this all there is a thing you don't know about us. Don't. Don't! Okay then if you insist. Here we go, reading easily- Okay, okay. We were crazy about each other. Yah we know- Okay, Daddy- Oh, and Daddy I love him- she said here in her book quoting her life.

I want to meet her in heaven now. This young man is not going to make it.

Heartbroken he is... Okay. I am okay... Nope... he ant. Good night, Daddy, as she ran to me and left you for a night out- of fun and games.

Good- night first kiss we had done you see this? Oh, that's lovely, dear. Her dream was like a movie- I want a big old porch that wraps around the walkway and a big old entire into the house. We can drink sugary soda and candy... nonstop. Big windows and open doors to watch the sun go down, no shades, like here.

-Do you promise? This for me? Hmm- Mm, I promise. Yeah! Where are, you going? Is something happening to me? Here... Always next to you. Wow... This is the part you all need to here for sure. What that dear? Ha-hum?

She said- make love to me. David... -Yeah?

The old-rick-at-ie Covered Bridge I waited for her to say when and where.

Did she say- David? Okay, I want you? I want you to- And It all happened... all and everything, which makes a girl a woman. And...? Did...? ... you...?

...?...

Um...?

I know I said, the kiss... I want you to make love to me, she asked once more.

So, I did- we did- it was not easy for me- know what I was doing and she not. She said- you're going to have to walk me through this sex like this, it broke, she feels, so did I the kissing lots. Right.

You, all right? -Yeah, it's okay- it's okay. I asked- Did I hurt you? -No, no. Dad said we know... boy we know- it was good she had her magical boyfriend he was you, which was her dying wish, to have love and feel the love.

I'm just having a lot of thoughts, like age and things. It's Okay!

I should go- over this I feel... No, I don't want you to go. I got to think... about what I did here. Come here and talk to us. You're not leaving till it's all been said.

I'm so happy that you did? Um- yes. You got so much ahead of you. Yet not love, he said. It's true... I will never love another girl, at all. I'm not going to have nice things, fancy things, sure but not her... I don't wanna really live without it. It's never going to happen to me. Sh-hh- boy- stop. It's not in the cards for me, don't you see it was all ripped away, like her life, why? Stop it! you going to die too, and we don't need that on top. Oh! You know what? I'm going to do it.

It's over. Okay? What's over? Come here.

The first time I ever saw her face- was...

He passed for a broken heart.

(Falling to the floor with a thud.)

Nevaeh

Book: 62

The Shadow of the Goddesses

Preface:

Schoolgirls and entities- 'Bloody Fingers', the dark entity kept saying to me, over my bed. 'Bloody Fingers!' The dark entity kept saying to me. 'Bloody Fingers!' I am just a girl here trying to eat! Blood dripping, dripping, from its clocked hand. I am just a 9-year-old girl trying to COME! All-day and all night we are hunted.

'Bloody Fingers' the dark entity kept saying to me. It gets a loader and loader! The more I pass him out of my mind. 'I was starting to feel like they want me... to say something.' And then I hear... he cries out.

One girl screamed for her bunk bed- 'Dude gets a band-aid!'

Just another night at the castle, as schoolgirls!

~*~

'I used to ask what gives me the right to kill when I am still alive and now, they're not... and I also reason about that now and reflect more, ponder and deliberate; and say well I am not alive - am I? So thus, the killing was never- ever wrong- was it?'

'My eyes are not shining with the ghost of my past.' Yes, it is true that- I arranged the order to have Lance killed, in life, why back when I am guilty- yet I was anyways for being an intent, so why not... and who is going to stop me from have justice when none was given in the past. I was ordered by Nevaeh, this old gray man with a long white beard said. Dementors all-round Trius was framed for it all.

Trius took the fall for Amsel's dream boy, that could not do anything wrong- yet he was the one to do anything and everything for them. Trius took the wrap- over being who he is, Read is the lance dad- so all is explained. It's a black night out and all you can see is the lightning bolts flashing free electricity around the from tower to tower, to power everything, power lines a thing of the past for now 100 years.

The idea of this being 19th century yet realized, I truly love- when thinking about this- as I sit looking out the window. All this comes to mind over its October 31 one more year has passed Hallowe en, yet another night of sacrifice, with a feast, come offerings of children. Skulls litter the land, the courtyards, held in the hands of the children are the head of their ancestors, flaming candles, flicker, on their bone craniums, dripping with hot white wax.

Dressed in classic genuine of black cloaks- remembering the history of the Fomorians. 'The night of the demeans, a night of a blood moon.' I was not even sure I wanted to go and see more killing, I have done, passed- and remorse enough over the years in this type of faith. This all appalls to the spirits from hell, having large bone firers and killing off some of the young. 'The dance of the bones.' One-star shins into light the killings... Virginia girls all under the age of 10 this year to ensure are lasting to our God, one being me, Nevaeh. Then she whispered this line, I am just a 'Shadow of the God.'

Naddalin said- 'your book was the first thing that was brought over to the new words and these new planets, it is the bible to these people. And you're the God, what's wrong with you?'

'Everything that was past life has become your word and your teachings, to them and they see life through you!' Naddalin said just moments after the last thing she muttered.

(That night daydreaming, as a day became night, as I have done all my lives.)

Funny, something that came to my mind, drifting back into to time, like always- I was remembering the finding the gold under a tower, yet I am the one that found it, it was in the middle of

tower seven of Kinzua bride, marked by a missing anchor plat, that was placed there by the train robber, his name Trius, almost seeing this pay in my mind as it did that night, after robbing the same train that is laying on the valley floor, after a spectacular crash at that point crashing from the height the same of The Empire State Building, as it was over my head rattling coming and pushing forces far more then it could take. The steam engine- flying through the air, steaming, wheels turning, flaming- evil looking... 30 cars pull with its last fall, the screams of all the passengers know they're going to dye, hitting the ground at 94 miles per hour.

Only one car was left- on the other far end the North End, the end that was next to my old home, the same car that Jenny was drawn too, in her death, as the viaduct claimed yet another young life, the same side that I would walk on, to look down- thinking. I had to be crazy to wake all over this thing with nothing holding me, no nets, and wind of 90 miles-per-hour, at any given moment. Seeing the tracks hanging down- and walking them not caring if I fall.

The old locative orange rusting away the number still there, 38, below twisted within and around, the lags of the edifice, way up on the top only one old car still up there about roughly - 1,000 feet in the air- and every now and then I see the face of a young girl looking at me, yet now only existing in my memories of all things past, I have been there many times- above and below- and in the car itself- yet my people will only hear my tails of this story- and live their lives by my spoken words- like something holy- I don't understand, after the claps, the famous red cowcatcher still showing its code of paint, faded lack lusted, like my mind, like my life, like the stories.

I could see the speeding train come on to the bride too fast for it to take as eleven towers started to give, it was leaning out more than five degrees to the eastern side, ready to tip, over Trius removed the or snapped the callers that held the legs down to the foundations snapping the 1888 anchor blots to that tower, finally, the glow of the headlamp coming, the lights of the car windows in a soft luminosity, the driver going fare to fast for the viaduct to take, in fled; a dark and cloudy night- all the trees dusted with a light fluffy snow- fairies in the air spinning in the light of my lantern as I hold like a hermit, the wind blowing out the wick of my soft glowing light- as a cold cyclone moves in recklessly, up in the fog the lights of the cars so far up overhead, rattling my ears and encases. The fifty-grand that I lived my life on and published my first copies of my books with.

'Kinzua hangs between the mountains like a frozen echo in time, then the parallels that have now converge with the bridge as it deserves into the light, skies falling in case around then covering the

ground, day becomes night; below the steam flows as emotionless as paint as the low clouds start to hang above. The distances smear trees to shades of green... yet, cover by increasingly white. The viaduct hums by the wind like fingers strumming its steel. The metal sings as if it could feel, as if locomotive are ghost drummers of mighty thunder, going accursed the ties as it hives and trills. It deceives like the reminiscences of the Pullman car contra, rival foresees like recollections, like the snowflakes that well fall forever- and whenever, in the conjures of the past that one stood, strong and tall, lasting in nothing more than endangers.'

2

Madame Pearl has taken final death, I was thinking about that too, the seas will never be the same. Her so was consolidated with this one... and we have taken on all the kids for the past, and keep the history alive. That was a good dead that I did. Think about the good and bad.

Miss Molinah is the head professor of the marine biology program and magic of underwater studies - I was thinking about- this and that, Chiaz Naztherth that crazy boy and unpredictable at times, and is now- the head of the departments of those students, that once lived under the enchanted seas.

Yes, it's true I kill, I had KING WHELK OF LASSINIA, slaughtered -the story has he been found in the- boiler of a steam train, under another name- and was lit-up. All I have to do is get in their head, and assassination is easy. The girl did not even- did not even know what she was doing. Ha, it's so sick to me is amusing, anything for power. Dearest Lurleen, got over it, when she was asked to back down- or fail death would come. A just payback, something I never thought I would do - yet have. Yet I am the Supernatural being to Idol. I have the right to end, life afterlife and the afterlife alike.

LASSINIA is now just an underwater world- a city that remands memories, lost in a book, that I have written- just stories within our religion. Millennialism after the end of Earth, I rewrote the bible, and all past believes have gone away- all they have is my impressions- and what faith is for my people, this understanding is just one part of the seven underworlds of the afterlife, and I am the height Deity for all this. Tangibleisom is being alive, and Zenthisom is the seven -spiritual enlightenment of nirvana.

'I don't feel holy, yet I wanted to be or feel, the love of blunt that.' This was more and more week thoughts. 'THEY THINK ME AS THE CREATOR OF EVERYTHING, this is a lie.'

Yet, I have no way of explaining everything in a book, and all of life's starts and the end is too horrifying- yet it lies in my mind- goes figure, that why paces are missing. Everything for Earth was

moved and has progressed, just like before with two of two- I did the same for them. It was the right thing to do, yet death- is death. No most are here lost- and I gave a home to those too, I remember what it was like... not to have a tender home, and that is what I was going for. Everyone from that story now is dead in life and lost here for as long as forever could be to the next forever.

3

(I was thinking back)

The four girls always had their eyes on me, I loosely sad this for years, and I also so said what they were, yet I knew that no one would believe me; they were able to transfigure, for girls into blackbirds' crows. They were always swarming around me and picking at my flash when I was alive until I was bloody. If they could get to my eyes, I am sure they would have, no they saved that for Emmah, to get at me.

Scarier to me than the faceless children that are parts of our world, that are the child killed by abortions' those souls come here, over the mother.

~*~

(My girlfriends)

'Lifers, they were...' I peer into all the memories, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light, not even understanding how I got this far along. walking with no idea I was, I stopped looking at the Markey above me. And then spinning into my sight was Naddalin- and then wings flapped and then laid down to her sides.

'High-speed flight. Yes...?'

'Yes,' Naddalin- said replaying back.

Lest go see a show with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end, as we used too. It is not like you Naddalin, to want to spend time with me anymore.

'Why are you being so nice?'

I am not pretending it's anything more than it is, am I?

'Elody- the story of a star girl...' it said above me.

'Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- really glum, yet that is how girls like lives go.'

It's like we've got an expiration date, and this play made me re-think life, you know- and it's just my time- ideas, and the try overs- I'll see you again, things, I promise you- I will? You guys are different, your lifers- even if forbidden.' Sound like any girl's life... why is she crying...? Said Nevaeh.

'You know what I mean don't you.'

She inspects her shape on the stage- and looks, at Naddalin, and said this reminds me of a girl I knew.

'Who you...?' Naddalin asked.

Looking at her hands, and getting into a trance; turning her hot-pink nails the way and that, with her hands.

'It's just that you guys are so in tune with each other, so connected. And you see the life of a girl, that is the same as you, whispered a girl behind them.'

-And-

'I mean that- literally by the way since you're pretty much always going at it; and we like to know you, without really knowing you...'

'Like- who are you...'

The same girl, she puts her finger up to her lip and say's- 'sh-h.'

The play is over, I do not say a word, just let on single tear roll down from my left eye, and walk away. Now at that moment at that point in time, we were back on the streets, at twilight, I thought you said you don't feel anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second the light turns from not showing the hand, as it would look as days in my remembrances of the past even before I was alive, something I wanted to remember was the romance of the cities of the past, and that what I did.

At that very moment crossing the intersection with a loud screech of cars wheels looking as if for the Style in The Jazz Age of The Roaring- 1920's, yet still have the best of technologies- I thought this to be best- when the world made sense, and time was slower, stopping for us to go to the walkway, and

leaving a thick trail of rubber behind them- on brick. Work was work, living was living, and time was everything that was both, and that is what I wanted for my world.

An old loving feel... and caring for all, humble, yes, yet the dark is still 'around, and there is nothing I can do about that.

But even after I set still for a moment to think she's nowhere to be found. Besides I am just about to climb a wall in a panic, and at the moment I feel a wisp of wind and Naddalin was gone- all I saw was the fast flash of wings, I was wondering where she could be when she appears right beside me and hands me a new teddy bear- and I blink- blink and blink once more- looking as I did when I was a young girl, her hand in mine, after that moment, I think like- I think that I have blacked out a moment or two there.

Refusing to slow at all, to the fast feelings of love, until we run into a parking lot and I scan her eyes for what I was longing for- lost in the eyes then looking with in to fall for that mind yet once more, she was next to me always- and she really is starting to show it, by being ever-so-sweet.

She asks, glancing at me and her and slings her backpack over her shoulder.

Naddalin nods.

'A hundred and ten dollars.'

'Um- are you crazy, some would say yes, that I am, just like you... right?'

Naddalin laughs, at that very moment.

'Don't forget, it was fully customized just like your one from the past when you were a little girl.'

'We could rent tickets... a steam paddleboat to cross the river, to get home?' Emmah, always said we should do this- it's kind of romantic no? The big wheel, and hold hands looking at the golden waves splashing to the flickers and the pulling's of the lights on the ripples of the waters from the city- as we move down the river to the villages- and then home to the castle. And that is what they did, very much in love.

Lying in bed, with the teddy bear- she stares at her, eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing-why anyone would do such a thing, as buy one.

With the connivance and trust, of my hand and hand understanding I thence, feel into slumber - with a memory that was hoping to stand the test of time, within my head. Yet short thoughts too long flashback's was something that was always an issue.

(The next day came as the light came in through the spilled pains of my windows - ten feet away from my bed.)

'...And we have to look at the locals and be the same even if not - we have wings - that they need not see - and do as they do - without looking strange.'

'Um, okay, so let me get the traditional looking dress on - as they would have one, I like this one it is burgundy timed in gold - fabric light and airy strands flutter around her body as if in the wind gust, hang from the corset, and when we go out today we could see a lot more - she said.

'So-o you just woke up and decided - to hurry and do and think this all before asking, what the hell?' 'Even though I love it,' said Naddalin. Even your golden halo is showing and glowing and pulsating, face fare to angelic for this world, and lips also light shades of pink - her light brown hair glowing to the suns lights in honey tones blowing in the breeze - skin light fleshy hints of light young youthful pink casts, and shimmering as well, to the world people around you or don't you care about exposing our world to them anymore?

Soft like the movement of pastel colors of paint smudging the sky around her small body - looking just like Willow Shields, eyes have changed color from blue to green, wings outspread absorbing the light, gray into vivid white feathery, teddy bear embraced in both arms. Nevaeh Never looked ever more - GODDESS. The wings are changing back she said, is if you are finding hope and experiences, no longer the look of the FULLEN.

'It's all because of you,' she said to Naddalin.

Naddalin shrugs, saying 'Pretty much' - with an attitude, and deep love for her than ever finding her new hope within. 'You have a locked-in faith...' she said.

'...And the people around here are not like back home, here you can be your best and happiest ever - I feel this for why like - I am in your mind always.'

Nevaeh - 'Some call that love, mind to mind.'

'Because in case you have not noticed,' she says, practically hyperventilating now, 'things are starting to work out for you.' As if it was to hex, the moment to come, she said sheepishly.

'Some of us are a little deprived like you were in the past, yet now not so much and it all over you- being you and finding yourself and making good to your worlds and people, and all the children of the school- you role' said, Naddalin, I just said today, that I would get you to- relax- even if just for the lest little time.'

'Some of us were born to parents- some kings- some queens, and some Godets of the angles, some even born to lose, to then win, like you, so cruel is the world until you saved them all, you should be very happy with yourself, and unusual they're forced to rely on the kindness of friends for the rest of their lives- and hope for a higher power as you give them, thank you- for seeing the light- and I help you- is thrilling to me, and yes, I would take the gift of your happiness- thanks!' Said Naddalin.

'Sorry.' Naddalin shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more. 'Guess- I hadn't thought about that. Nevaeh thought back and Naddalin heard within her mind.

Though if it makes you feel any better- you had loved all along you just did not want to believe that was so-o, it was all for a very good cause, what you did and have done over all these years.'

(She gives double thumbs up!)

...And a very wide smile with her head turned to the one side as if making a timeless painting pose.

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the usual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching in the past is just the start of her plans- for world rulings, to get to know me better- I had to reprogram her mind, lost minds and walking is much better than ever before.

5

'How'd you get to school- in your past, did you start to walk?' I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting, sometimes took the train as you- she points at Haven, and walked and walked... the bus was detectable and as memorable as the town itself.

'She rode the train?'

‘That was not in your story if I remember, you should add it in.’ Said Naddalin, in a whisper.

Haven then glances between us, she recently dyed and has fallen even lower, her bangs falling into her face, to make herself look normalized to the rest of the world looking at her.

‘I kid you not; I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes she was now an angle darker than ever with her wings- yet tremendously gorgeous, she was classed as a girl forever.

Watched our footing as we climb right into the big steamer train, with all the other kids- real freshmen, dorks, retards, and rejects- who that were all like us- as we were in the remembrances of the times past, then again unlike us now, now that we are older and see life to its fullest and have wisdom, and some common sense, have no other choice but to ride, in this car, all others are full to their fullest.’

She shakes her head, saying don’t say it's the same- reason with yourself doesn’t say it even if true, why everything you just said to me I need to believe is true, Naddalin.

‘Um- like is it true,’ asked Haven, ‘you used your gold bars as bricks in parts of the world to line the sidewalks and streets, you have made as pavers out of your wealth- and your people walk paths of gold bars... over you had so much gold you did not know what to do with it all?’

'Yes, yes, it is!'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

It only has worth to me, and not them... just something- I wanted to change.

‘And I was so shocked by the sight of it, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was streets of gold- like a distant memory of stories of the past she made them true.

And then, when I still wasn’t convinced, that this was not her ideas, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to Jon-John who confirmed it, with old text that was called. Revelations the ends of the world, the only part of the bible that was kept to know where I need to go and be to save us, said Nevaeh.’

She holds it up for us to see, and she read it was old and ripped at tattered, pages. this is dark and odd what happened. This is why you became their God, right? Yet I will never say that I am the

return, yet I am the chosen one. I am the Godets... not God. 'I never wanted to be worshiped - or thought of as the Queen of Queen's.'

Nevaeh- 'I never wanted bloodshed or war, over me.'

'Just love, and pace.' Said Haven.

'Why... why is the question in the story that need means the most in answering that leads to more questions.'

That night, in the girls sitting room- I glance at Naddalin, wondering what she could- be up to, and that's when I notice she's ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no-name plain pockets, her early look as she calls it.

'One thing I never got, with your story, was its sad Anna Kendrick was held against, and this is true, by that nut- you said this yourself- your life was made into a movie, yet it was not Anna that played you- at all- it was Willow. I ask was her your number one fan.'

'Anna was more like Emmah.' said Naddalin. 'Yet that what always happens in moves, things change.

Nevaeh- 'It was- Willow's first time- having the main role... and she did it- and it was huge around the world!'

Even the brown boots she's nearly famous for have been swapped for girlie rubber flip-flops.

And even though she does not need any of that flash and dash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met- the new low-key look is just- not her- I thought, or is it better?

Or at least not the- 'girl' - that I'm so-o used to.

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- and all, she's also a hint more colorful and otiose at times.

Always preoccupied with her clothes, her image in general- along with smarts. Now she has the looks and the smarts, and I have her- and we both are more or less the same.

Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered past of not remembering things deep things that

are ever-so hidden, and points of view and perspectives about her age - to use she is always the same age of the young teen girl. I don't mind changing bodies if I have her and she - in- me- all the way, a girl can be.

Nonetheless, even though- I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either- or the train trip style, when I look at her again, I get the horrible chink in my belly- an unrelenting push, demanding my notice- to love-dream, drift off in thoughts of lust.

A definite warning that she is merely just at the beginning of making me crazy for her. Nope, she has something to do with last night.

That the sudden transformation goes way deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda.

Something, about being haunted by her karma is now over; convinced that giving up her most prized possessions- even me in the past, will somehow balance it all out- and she can live in solitude, with me- Naddalin, and if trouble arises, that I will stand in for her place. ...After all its a war of minds. Sometimes- the body and always taken of the soul!

'Shall we go- the steam whistle blows?' She smiles, grasping my hand the second the bell rings of the train, the wetness of the steam and coal dust cinders, blows around us as the wheels spin and slip three times, leading me away from Emmah and Haven, who stay on the platform, at the station who'll spend the next three phases of their time writing notes back and forth, about seeing us and hoping for the next time they do and that there missing us already, trying to determine what's up with Naddalin. (Yet we already know... don't we?)

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, 'What's going on, with Naddalin others were thinking I am sure? What happened to you?' (You and I know... yet to the outside world they do not.)

Three girls' hands and hand going down the sidewalk... look at us and say thank you for changing the minds of the world.

'I already told you.' She shrugs her hold body. 'I don't need it, this for others about being the change they need yet it's nice. It's an unnecessary sympathy, I no longer care to indulge really.' Odd how this all worked out...

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, 'Don't look so serious, you get the glory. And I get you, and peace of mind, it is a good trade-off.

It's not a big deal. When- I realized it's not something, I need- to have to feel complete, we walked out of a depressed area, to have all this, I would not change a thing, and I left my pride, behind, along with most of my money by the side of the road where someone can find it, that needs it more than myself.' Yet with me, they should not need, and neither should I.

'We were always smarter than them, always.' she holds up her girlfriend's hands.

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, know at any time I can climb inside her mind, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself, and get to the bottom of what the is really about, I understand her more than anybody else.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she's said makes the least bit of sense- yet that was always the way she was, and is. And- I love that, it is crazy; yet ever-so right.

'Well, that's fine and all, I mean, if that's what you need to do, then great, have fun - as you always said, and I think it's really sweet- also you're a given person.' I shrug, fully convinced that it's not at all great, though knowing better than to say it out loud. I find a moment of contentment, walking into the sunset.

(Sometimes has pasted)

Love, even to this day is more lust then they can take to keep apart. Nevaeh and Naddalin, as their date continued. Then in the castle, in the restated book sections, with only the glow of soft lantern lights.

The smell of old paper, and leather bindings. They started to make love against, the library shelves which creaked with their movement, all the old volumes falling for the other sides. Then over 40 of them all land to the ground, wide open- all from the same writer, his name on the covers, it is common enough at such times to fantasize arriving enjoyed her slight weight on her, enjoyed being crushed under her small body.

I wanted to kiss her forever, and then, I remove out all thought about what this was, what it might means, what further mess passion was why I might create for myself. or the thoughts of anyone else. She wanted her soldered to her, from mouth to feet. Many shivers shake and chills run past and through her body, and she alike.

I kissed her until true thoughts seeped out through my pores and I became a living pulse, enjoyed being crushed under her body while toiled. She wanted her soldered to her, from mouth to feet, conscious only of what I wanted to do to her.

She enjoyed all her- the weight she gives. Naked now, she lay her full length over her; only the united beat of sex and heart together can create ecstasy, of their privet parts entertained rubbing one another. ...And then we were crashing around the little railway Pullman cars finding the right tracks, all hands and lips and, oh, God, the scent and taste and feel of her.

Twisting each button below, kissing hands and finger, shivers passed through her body. When she closed her eyes, she felt she had many hands around her, which touched her everywhere, and many mouths the kiss the same, which passed so swiftly over her. Fingers soft, running his finger along her breastbone.

At last with an angle sharpness of heavenly, then her teeth sank into each other's fleshiest parts. Likewise, kissing her just above her pubic bone, she slipped two fingers inside her, the darkness swirling around her small hole. Not only did she spit and like is my girl hole and spilled into two lines parted, but she also did the same to my butt hole, too. -It felt so good-!

And, then I licked the clear goo-ing girlie-come off of her two longest fingers, that thick wetness, was bridging between them playfully, and at that moment was far too tantalizing not to try, that she had in front of my face to show me, as she was making scissors fingers of the goo-ing, of her warm love.

When her shirt finally fell open, she studied her, then touched her breasts. Couldn't have cared less if she thought the same things or way- Naddalin licked her nipples, then moved his lips slowly down her stomach, minds locked for the moment was more than any other thoughts they had. It was the love of the mind more than a body.

Then supreme Naddalin who has the mind of Nevaeh within her body, as if placement flip-flopped, she runs out into the hard-pouring rain, nude for the love the made just moments before with no cares in the world other than love and freedom of expression.

Her arms to the graying cloud-covered skies above. then she takes a full 1 billion volts in a white cracking blot of lighting to their head, as her wings are outstretched, (I scream saying run, yet she stands unmoved.)

Then the oddest thing happens as if she has dissipated all the power if the blot into her body as more power to keep her alive for that many years, the wings of her body arching with extreme voltage, wildly wrapping around the feathers of the wings, themselves, she was glowing with power, and it was going into her mind- as energy for remembrance. The clock tower bells ring- out the time, of midnight.

Then moments after she and Naddalin went into the steamy Roman bathhouse, with nude cherub angels playing Instruments, that are enchanted and welcoming to use, in soft white stone, lined all around the pool edge along with two lion and lamb statues also animated, with many fire bowls, likewise with many cascading waters falls falling down on young bodies.

The bathhouse is enclosed by walls, yet open to the skies above in twinkling stars. Also, light by flaming lanterns, with the back-lights of many arched stain glass windows, lining the length of the long room shin and sheening many different colors, that are dancing on the young nude little girls ages - seven and up to twenty-five, over one hundred nude school girls were waking and bathing around them in the shallow 3-foot hot waters.

Nudity is not something that well has a shame of in this world, not even thought of as wrong, and why should it be? Multi-colored roses were all around inside and out, everything lush, fervent, keen, passionate, vehement, zealous and most agog.

Naddalin and Nevaeh the two of them having crazy humping movements of not being able to stand not having it and making the pussy kissing together, as both their legs apart and prevents touching to the point of smashing down on and in, in lovemaking in the mornings hours, as her hip molds with her hip, kissing like as the meet.

The soft skin that Naddalin has that hands no more than two inches from herself have been now rubbing and going in Nevaeh, her love now dripping into the 0.5906 inches, or 1.5-centimeter tight pink opening of the vaginal hole, worm and lustful.

(The next day)

Let us get out of here and go shopping. we've earned it.

I gape, shaking my heard- um I don't think so-o, I hardly could believe my ears. And since when do you worry about cost, Missy.

She looks at me, amused by my surge of lighter, which is not exactly the reaction I had prearranged on.

'But just how are you planning to get around now that you've ditched the train and don't have a ride?'

'I mean, in case you haven't noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely, what do you plan on doing, you can't get anywhere without having a motorbike, would you like to rent one?'

'Like- I am some shallow, money-oriented, self-absorbed, buyer-driven snob?'

I thought you would already know this.

'No!' I cry, shaking my heard and squeezing her hand.

Hoping to convince her even though, I did kind of mean it- not being mean yet truthful in a way of conveying. Only not in a slumber way like she thinks or you even would feel- like.

Then just like the words 'KILL, KILL, I- WE Kill the final time, mark my words played hauntingly in her head, yet it was in the mind of Naddalin, and then transfer at the same time in the mind of Neveah linked. 'Nothing to worry about, just past evils that well never give up.' Said Nevaeh.

'Always something or someone to end the moments,' said Nevaeh. At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciates the finer things in life kind of thing, and she has always taken a man's place with me in my heart, and less in my girlfriend's mind to I worry anymore about them, now she is the

version I have of safety and comfort of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl. 'She is my rock!'

'I just- UM.'

I squint, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her. Yes, still forging ahead when I say, 'I guess some just don't get it, we never feel love like we have - and I feel sadden for them.' I shrug at her, eyes meeting. I raise her ruby and diamond-covered hand intertwined with gold, with all the chain she had that crisscross overtop to where I can see the top of her hand to kiss, to make her feel even more safe with me. (Contentment is everything with some else, I always thought.)

The bonds between ourselves and another person belong only in our minds. Memory, as it grows fainter, loosens them times before - your own keep or not, and not without trying to keep the good, the bad sometimes creep over top, of other evils wanting to still your joy, the illusion by which we want to be hoax and which, out of love, friendship, politeness, deference, obligations, we hoax other induvial, we exist alone.

A woman like us is the creature who cannot escape from herself, and her past, who knows other people only in herself, and when she asserts the contrary, she is lying. ...And that is how, I look at her past my past and what is in the past, making less tragic recallings of all things that are now past. Alleged Naddalin.

Whispered thoughts of the mind- 'The bonds between ourselves and another person exists only in our minds.' Recalling things in life and the afterlife may not always be the same as you once remembered.

Ha, grief is what develops the powers of the mind, and happiness is just a state of it like grief as well, yet happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is the sadness that makes the brilliants of mind.

'The true meaning to us of how little time and place matters is the feeling of undying love.' That was what Nevaeh said back to me in my mind.

That night in the middle of the night, I walked along the wall of macabre young girl bones - of hips, arms, legs, and heads, oh my- of 4-foot-high, remembering death for some, it's just the way it is, death is death even in the afterlife. Bodies only last so long, and only I can last for all time.

Then I started thinking about a girl that I knew, that was close to my home town, like touch her bones that lay here, with all the others, she may not have made it as one of us, fallen yet I think her story is worth sharing.

The story oddly starts long before, she was born.

'December 9, 1930, I slowly opened my eyes, to the world of the wandering around me, kicking and screaming like a newborn hearing, my name for the first-time, Giovanni.'

'Um- to tell you the truth, I don't remember, if my dad was there or not, my mother never- ever- like really said, along with not saying much about it, mainly for he was hard at work for the money was not there, for us you see we- were poor.'

'Oh, yes, it's a- very small an Italian town called: Pettorano Sul Gizio.'

'I remember my dear sweet mother telling this story, and my older brother as well, of how she gives birth to me in a one-bedroom house, or most would call a wooden shack, that what- an I call it.'

'Not to be too graphic, but- a, her legs were all- an apart onto hay bales, she was crying louder and louder, then I was, back in those days you did NOT have anyone there, like to help with this kind of thing, it just happens.'

'I am lucky to be- a here with you now.' He said.

'My life was hard, but- a worth it, I can not- complain really.'

'One- I am an Italian American.'

'Two- I am- a getting older and feel, that- an I have lived a good life.'

'It's all a masterful plan of happiness and sad moments, lost in time really with me, hey what can- I say, they're all in my mind still...'

'Um yes, even at the time-worn age of eighty-five years young.'

'Sometimes, I look at these kids coming up and think to myself, how things have changed, like me, also, I cannot- a spell or write much, yet that doesn't mean, that I am not smart.'

'Unlike you- I can't use a computer, I wouldn't even know how to turn one on, yet- a, I think that is okay.'

'Um- you live, and you learn, as you go.'

'Come what may for another day, and who- is to say what stays with you forever, and never go away.'

'Even old age can't take that away.'

'It is locked in your memories; all you have to do is find a way to get them out.'

(He looks at me...) 'That is why you're here, writing all my stories of stories down in this book you say you can write for me.'

(I will do that for you...) I said.

'What can I a- say, when I was a three year of age, I was living with my grandmother, there was a complication, that made it hard to part with my mother, yet it was- what had to be done, at the time.'

'She was overworked and working for all of us, and just could not keep up, with it all health-wise.'

'I remember, the winters they were so-o cold it felt like a knife cutting open your face.

'Yet, nothing like here in the small town of Hasting's Pennsylvania, as you can see, I am a-talking to you in my little apartment- it's a nice no?' (Yes, yes- it is...) I whispered.

(I glanced and said also: 'I' am glad to be talking with you.'

I- was sitting there with a 1911 Underwood Typewriter curiosity not sure what he would say next.'

'I look outside with him, it's nice here, yet not at all like back when I was a small boy, climbing the tree for the hell of it and picking things off it all to eat- yeah know.'

'Um plus just see how high I could go.'

'I went back with my mother at the age of ten or so, we didn't have much at all- you see.'

'I really... loved being a child, yet that did not last long... speaking of that, like - we sleep for the most part all together on the floor on leaves and grass.'

'With an open firebox in the middle of the one-room place, my dad used to make his charcoal, laying wood, mud, and levels together.'

(Ah- hum...) I said, frantically typing away. Remember, nights where I was, that I wish, I'd had something to cover with yet did not-a.'

'I remember, wearing the same outfit from the age of ten until my teen years back.'

'Yes, surely as you could imagine full of holes and not smelling the best really.' 'There was no shit house, you found some random bush, and wiped with the left hand.'

(NICE!) is what I said, raising a brow.

'That is too much, yet it is very true, he said, sighing.'

'Funny, it's like- I could see my dad up in the hills... doing this... he shows the movement, of cutting down these big old trees.'

'It was kind of like his job, yet nobody works, and the work you did want really for the dollar, it was to keep life- going- yeah see?' Thought, I had a hard time making a living... my dad had a little harder than me... yet, I wonder that now.'

(Say more about him) I alleged.

'What can- I say, he was a good man, though with a- lot of things, you have to let the past behind you, and sometimes loved one also.'

7

(Tree- limb)

'I remember, the one time, I and this young girl, where she and I went to high, and the branch broke snapping it off... with me... and my small arms hanging on it, I nearly fall on my ass and broke it, I think I did.'

'Idiota Ragazzo,' she said.

(Her)

'My Grannie was not at all pleased with me, it was like a twenty-foot drop or so-o.'

'What-a can I say, I was the rough and ready type of younger 'Ragazzo' a- boy?'

'Sorry- for me speaking so broken, as you see, I never really learn how to read or write so-'good.'

What- smarts I-a got I tough- myself.'

'I mean look at me now, I am and an older man.'

'Yet, look at this photo, see what I once was, look at the black hair, I once had, not- a so much there now, oh well what- a can you do that's- a life.'

'Maybe they'll let me get my Cadillac back and I get can- an out and see the world one more time, as you see my days are getting shorter, yet I feel good.'

'You know, I have all loved the Cadillac- my first was a 1962 Deville, nothing like the shitty looking things we have today.' 'Oh-well- at- this point... I don't have anything to my name, and I am still not sure, what I want to be printed on my headstone... that's- a life too no?'

'Life is amazingly full of wonder, slander, and sometimes hurt- you'll see what I mean.'

'By the way, just start calling me John, everybody does.'

'Um- yet once again, that's- a life, it goes by so fast- kid, look at- you-you're- young and have so much to see.'

'It's just the name that stuck with me over the years, I don't-a know why, just a good English sounding name- ah- so I went with it, kind of thing.'

'I remember, spending my teen year in Rome, kind of on my own, yet, when I look back on it now, I was kind of always alone.'

(Got yeah) I said, nodding.

'I have had loved and I have had the loss. Oh, and I have loved another with all my heart and soul mind and body.'

'Yet there was more than one love in my life.'

'What-a can I say, I love all the woman, some you love like your mother in that- away, and some you love in another way's, like all my friends and friends.'

'I have made over the years; here eating nice meals, three times a day, at The Beaver Street Café, breakfast lunch, and dinner.'

'Um- I am a typical guy, which has worked hard and lived life, a normal life.' 'I love to tease the girls here severing the food to me, I know I am too old to get a young date, but what the heck I can try right?'

'I feel as if they think, I'm like their grandpa or something, heck I don't feel that old.'

'What can I say, I am kind of a flirt, but I like to have a good time, that's what it's all about having fun, is it not?'

'I don't dislike anybody, nor does anyone dislike me.

'I would say, I feared to leave my homeland, but it was something to think strongly about.'

(The movie)

'I mean heck, it was a new land, I was lost in a sea in a rainstorm, were knobby could understand me hard when I looked up at 'The Statue of Liberty,' when I was - oh boy, like nineteen or so...' 'Um- like we got lost on the trip over to New York, on a ship or more like a pedal boat called: 'The Conto Brackenno..."

('Don't ask me how to spell it, yet, let me try- I think that is it.')

(I went with it)

(Back)

'Before I get into that-a, let me talk some about Pettorano Sul Gizio my little hometown.'

(Sure! Go for it.)

'I remember, the steam trains rolling all night and all day, I recall hopping on them from time to time, I have this remembrance a lot anymore.'

'Then again there was this bridge with stone arches and the town sat way up on the hill, a long walk yet that is how we did the long walking from place to place, you were rich if you had a car.'

'I mean we had our ass's, chickens, and ducks, yet you had to have money for that also.'

'And if you wanted food on the table, you have to trade and pick what you wanted, it was this or that.'

'I can hear the train cars linking up, and the whistle blowing, the light in the cars fascinated me for you could see the light glowing and to me, that was something neat to see on the long summer nights.' 'We did not have power in our home, there were no phones, and there was no running water, what water, I had we bright in for a hand pump far down the dusty lane all downhill, all up to the other way.'

'Yet, I still feel my heart is back there some time, I mean it was all I knew, and 'till I found out what having a U.S life was all about.'

(N.Y - WWII)

'The world movies a little faster in New York.'

'I kind of find it funny, I missed being in two different wars, it was the around the time of WWII and I was drafted, yet, because of me not have the background, I need, I was told, that I was not needed, and that was just fine by me, I was not really into all that junk anyway; not that I would not fight for my country, I would yet that was not what I wanted to come over here.'

'What can I say nothing ever comes out-a fighting like fools? I worked in an Italian restaurant, it's not right, we are all the same really.'

'On the other hand, before getting into all that, I was walking the streets, just looking for someone to give me a job.'

'I was not complaining, yet, living homeless is not the greatest thing.'

'I had nothing, I had a new wife, and I would say- I loved her... yes, but it was an arranged marriage, so I could be here in the U.S.'

'What can you do she was beautiful, everything a man would want really.'

'She was sixteen when we first met, and it was not loved at first sight, yet we made it work.'

'She came over to me, and I got to see her when she was about seventeen, yet she was living with someone else.'

(Rocky love)

'What can you do, I was not mad about it, I just went on doing what I do.'

'That all ended, and she came back to me, and me being who I am, said yes once more.'

'That is one thing about me, I have always been too forgiving, yet that is what love is all about.'

'Ah- let me close my eyes and look back into the past, I can see her there, standing in front of me, and this was not long after we were married before she had to leave me.'

'We- she and I- let's just say we made love for the first time. It was nothing fancy not like what I hear some of these kids saying- 'they do today.''

'You kissed you touched each other's bodies, things like that, I am a romantic after all.'

'I was on top of her, kissing her the whole time, she was in some pain, yet she - loved it not long after the first thrust.'

'She never really said that she loved me, yet we had a type of love where you did not need to say it aloud.'

(Moving forward)

'Heck sleeping naked was what you did anyways in the hot summer days in New York in the 1950s. Or you would roast to death, I guess it helped some with the passion.'

'I don't remember, it all, nevertheless- if I look back on it, I do- I have to blow the cobwebs off my brain- kind of like looking into an old scrapbook.'

'I look out and see the sun shining out my frosted window, and I see my day go by ever so slowly.'

'I've led an ordinary life.'

'There are no memorials dedicated to me and my name will soon be ancient history, but I' ve loved another with all my core, feel of mind and soul, and to me; this has always been sufficient.'

'The optimists would call this a love mushy love story yah-a not really, the pessimists would call it-a heartbreak.'

'Yet it worked okay... seeing her long black hair laying on top of her breast with some skin shown and her nipples through, looking shy with big brown eyes.'

'Yet wanting me and all that, she was on the bed, I kissed all the way up her legs, feeling all of her with my fingertips, it was after all the first time, it was a big thing for me also see as it happened, I was not living with her, yet I was sleeping there some night yet nobody really new.'

'This was the first that stands out the most to me, the first time, I was ever in a bed like this, so it was one neat night.' 'She was a virgin at seventeen, me I am not going to say, yet I think I did all I need to do, I never had someone say it was wrong, and she became pregnant to me, and I never saw my little girl, until- I came over sometime later.'

'Really, I never even knew was pregnant she went back I stay it was all craziness, yet maybe I didn't know as much as I thought I did about making-love-either-a lost thought rolling around in his head.'

'Really If I did, I would have found some way to make it over and Gaetanina and my little one.'

'In my mind, it's a little bit of both, and no matter how you choose to view it, in the end, it-a does not change the fact that it involves a great deal of my life and the path I've chose n to follow.'

'I have no complaints about my path and the places it has taken me; enough complaints to fill a circus tent about other things, maybe, but the path I have chosen has always been the right one, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.'

'Time doesn't make it easy to stay on the right pathway that is long and not all way sight.'

'There are up's and down's hills and mountain valley. The path is straight as ever, but now it is strewn with the rocks and gravel that accumulate over a lifetime.'

'Until three years ago, it would have been easy to ignore, but it's impossible now.'

'There is a sickness rolling through my body; I'm neither strong nor healthy, and my days are spent like an old party balloon: listless, spongy, and growing softer over time.'

'I lookout all the time and see all the faces going by it's nice, I feel okay in this old body.'

'Yet, I don't feel, as if I am all that old, it's getting colder out yet.'

'I feel the same on the inside getting colder as the days pass ever so slowly and feel as if they are getting longer and my life is getting shorter.'

'I want to do something, so you all remember who I am, yet I am not sure how to do that, I ran into this younger man Named: Marcel Ray Duriez, and he said-a; 'I will do this for you.''

(...and I did.)

'And I was overjoyed that someone would care about some like me, just your ordinary Italian man, living in Hastings Pennsylvania.'

'That was one a big-time chef back in the old century, and New York City back in the fifths.'

(Really...?)

'I sit in this restaurant called: 'The Beaver Street Cafe' and I see faces come and go, I think - I know then all, they all know me, I am so easy to get to know - yeah - no.'

'They all rushed by saying hi, in and out the door.'

'Some even sit with me, I love to flirt with the girls that serve the food to me, I am a sexy man after all just look- an at me, I still got it.'

'I like the kid, I even asked him ever for a shot of brandy, (being me) and we talk, and he typed, I was never much of a reader or writer yet he is.' 'I see him taking notes on the typewriter and I wonder-a what my story is going to say... even I don't get it sometimes.'

'I walk on wood floors, wood classed dark wood wall coverings.'

'Do you like my hair? It's graying yet it's all there is it-a not.'

'Like most my age of 85, I got most of my hair, though I'm the only one in the cafe this morning.'

'They are like in this room I start to feel lonely and long for my wife the first one that I had.'

(Kids)

'Yet, I love them both yet can remember their names, alone except for the girls in the back, but they, like me, yet they have their own busy lives- 'yet- a that's life.''

'I was that way too when I was young- but- an age slows you-ah down, what- a heck, I am okay with it I have to be- NO?'

'A minute later, the door has been propped open for me, as it usually is, my nurse comes down to sit and talk, asking if I'd like coffee, 'It's-a fine, everything it's-a fine.''

'That saying has almost become routine to me.' 'Now there are two others in the room, and they too grin at me as they come in and pass as they move in and pass by.'

'Good morning, they both say one a young boy and a teen girl...'

'They say with cheerful expressions, and I'd take a moment to ask about the kids and the schools and an oncoming end to their vacations.'

'They get sadden by me saying their fun day is coming to an end.'

'I don't like making a kid feel that way- yet-a that is life, it's not, not always fun, yet I'd like to keep happy, I see her walk to a table I see her crying for a minute or so.'

'They do not seem to notice, that I look with concern; even see me doing this yet have become numb to it, but then again that my life, looking for others, what the heck that is just the way I am.'

'A person can get used to anything if given enough time.'

'Time is everything and yet nothing all at the same time.'

'I cough, and through squinted eyes, I check my watch.'

'I realize it is time to go.'

'I stand from my seat by the window and shuffle across the room, stopping at the desk to pick up the scrapbook, I have looked through a hundred times. I do not glance through it.'

'Instead, I slip it beneath my arm and continue on my way to the place I must go. I hear the muffled sounds of crying in the distance and know exactly who is making those sounds.'

'Then the nurses see me, and we smile at each other and exchange greetings.'

'They are my friends and we talk often, but I am sure they wonder about me and the things, that I go through every day.'

'I listen as they begin to whisper among themselves as I pass.'

'There he goes again,' I hear, 'I hope it turns out well.'

'But they say nothing directly to me about it.'

'I'm sure they think it would hurt me to talk about it so early in the morning and knowing myself as I do, I think they're probably right.'

'Until three years ago, it would have been easy to ignore, but it's impossible now.'

'There is an illness developing through my body; I'm neither strong or steady, yet I feel very healthy, however, I know that is not so, and my days are spent will, I'm not allowed to drive anymore, yet I want to the TV is on yet I don't care to look, I don't even care who the president it's - what was his name? 'Osama?' 'Or is it Obama?' I don't know either way- do you? It's all the same to me.'

'I cough and look out my living room window and through peeking eyes out the window blind, I check my watch the kid playing in the park next door and hear the splashing of the pool, what joy that brings to me.'

'I realize it is time to go back over next to and get lunch now shrimp or something like that - I don't care it's all good to me.'

'I love to sit here in my old lazy boy chair it's, okay by me too - what the heck-a.'

'I get up something take a few jabs at it I stand by seat getting stable footing- by the window and shuffle across the room, stopping at the desk to pick up the photos of the past...'

'I have looked over than a hundred times, it could have been more I don't remember, yet I recall it all.'

'I do not glance through it the scrapbook of timeworn photos so that I don't remember ever seeing, yet I am sure, I have my nurse said, I have, and it was not more than a week ago.'

'Instead, I slip it beneath my arm and continue on my way to the place I must go.'

'I sit for just a second and stare at her, but she doesn't return the look.'

'I appreciate all that she does for me, yet I know who I am.'

'She doesn't need to think I do, I don't- like that.'

'Sometimes, I think she forgot more than I know.'

'I'm a stranger to her, she doesn't get people like do.'

'Then, turning away, I bow my head and pray silently for the goodwill I know I will require keeping going on.'

'I have always been a firm believer in God and the influence of good hope, all the same, to be honest, my faith has made a list of questions- some I don't get and some that I do- I definitely want to be answered before I'm gone, and no one remembers why.'

'Afterward, I sit in the chair that has come to be shaped like me. They are finishing up now; her clothes are on, but still, she is crying. It will become quieter after they leave, I know.'

'The excitement of the morning always upsets her, and today is no exception.' 'Finally, the shade is opened, and the nurses walk out.'

'Both of them touch me and smile as they walk by.'

'I wonder what this means.'

'I lastly assumed what true love is and what it stands for... love is meant for caring for another person's contentment more than your own, no whatever to the problems life may bring forth or the longing pains the choices you face might be to love or walk away.'

'Now and again you have to be away from individuals you love, but that doesn't make you love them any less if anything it make that bond stronger.'

'I mean-a, if the association can't endure the long-term with problems, why would it be worth my time and energy for the short term that is how I always felt both times I fell in love.'

'I remember, when- her lips met mine, dancing out under the cafe' overhead roofs back in my hometown.'

'I remember, when ironically it was playing on my old radio- I was young and so were you, and time stood still, and love was all we knew, you were the first, so was I, we made love and then you cried Remember when.'

'I remember, when- we vowed the vows and walked the walk, made all the small talk, that we said we would never part yet that is just what happen she stayed behind I fled to the US, there was a war coming fast- with a gun blast- I had to move fast.'

'I gave my heart one and once only back then, made the start, it was hard to even leave my mother behind, she was all that was in my life at the time.'

'The sensation of emptiness is what breakdown your heart is sometimes the very one that mends' - it's-a what was broken, I have lived and learned, life threw curves there was joy, there was hurt.'

'The first time I saw your face, I saw your eyes shine into mine, and the moon and the stars were the light we need to see, it was love at first sight even if it was all arranged.'

'I remember the dark and the endless skies and being with my love.'

'I realize the odds were not there for me, always against me. Just like old ones died and new are born rearranged, disassembled, and changed forever, 'yet that's- a life.''

'We came together, fell apart and broke each other's hearts- I remember when and the first time, I ever saw your face.

I felt the earth move with you like you're the trembling heart.'

'If you don't go for whatever you want, you'll never have whatever you need in your heart.'

'If you don't ask this dumb question, you'll never really have the dumb answer, if you don't step forward and look back you'll never have the solution that was always there looking at you in the freaking face, it's like photos of the past all in a timeline, there the answer to what you did right and what you did wrong, like a sad lonely old country song.'

'In life, there are many things out of your control, that is where the hand of God takes over if you step in you can do harm and you can make it pity or a tragedy.'

'But science is not the total answer; this I know, this I have learned in my lifetime. And that leaves me with the belief that miracles, no matter how mysterious or implausible, they are real and can transpire without concern to the ordinary order of things.'

'So yet again, just as I do daily, I begin the same routine, doing all the same thing except on Saturday, in the hopes that the miracle will come, of being out and about as if I was young once more to dominate my life and triumph majestically, splendidly, and marvelously.

Yet-a that's not going to happen- I-a know that. Besides maybe, just maybe, it will, or I could just remember when- the rest of my days.'

9

'FEAR- stands for everything and so face it don't run- I never had a fear of anything or anyone everyone loves me, or so I feel. I remember... been fresh out of high school, not a day over ten years.'

'I had five cents to my name, I was still living at home, but not for long. I was a virgin yeah- and nay, to the world! I never saw anything other than farmland.

I didn't know what I was in for. Yet I had to go...'

'Hitler was taking over, killing babies and bring them alive of all things.'

'I will never forget the sounds of the troop train steaming through, dropping off more maggots like me to kill the Nazis.

Knowing that ninety percent of them would not make it back home.'

'I'd never thought I would live this long, and I never thought young-ins would doubt the war and the Holocaust.'

'I have seen men, women, and kids being lined up on their knees and shot in the back of the head, for no reason at all. It's incredible, tragic, and despicable, how one man's loathing can start so much destruction.'

'I do believe that history is going to repeat; it's just a matter of time. I just hope I can fish this story with you all before I am fished myself.'

'Then- It was the summer of love, sex, drugs and rock, and roll. Flower power was in the air, and I had hippie long hair.'

'This is what I remember about summer love in 1969.'

'Jim Morrison was flashing his manhood, and the taxing way to Paris, Hendrix was rewriting 'The Star-Spangled Banner' in a high voltage screech.'

'Man- You could feel it in the air people waited to fight or freak, love or kill- all part of a thrill.'

'Vietnam was right outside the door... love, drug, or hug...

Man- sides were being selected.'

'The world was yelling for the change, girl run naked in the mud, baby's sucking away no one cared, and there was orgy everywhere you look, and girls that would blow your mind for free.'

'Humorous it seems like you were tripping over something and on something - man.'

'All the colors- man, do you see the colors when you look into the eyes of the sun - man, look without a fear- man or it will kill you- man. 69-man! Far-Out!'

(Older)

'Remember when the sound of little feet, yet my girls both grow up the kids do, and they have their own lives, I don't interfere.'

'I vowed we'd never give it upon them, yet they did on me.'

'I remember when I-a remember when forty seemed so old- yet that's- a life! looking' back, it's just the stepping stone in my hometown, overgrown trees, and winding hills, money was not something you need over there, yet it was something I needed to find in the U.S.A'

'I was living in a cardboard box in 1952, and looking for a job, yet could not find one for I could not read or write to save my life- yet-a that's just the ways of my life.'

'Haunted love- I was finding yet another woman to fill the long and lonely nights, she was all right I loved her, nevertheless- I was not in love as much.'

'I knew that I could live to be a hundred yet maybe- Like Marcel said- maybe- like why is a question that has known answer, and visit every country in the world, but nothing would ever compare to that single moment when I first kissed the girl of my dreams and knew that my love would last forever.'

'I look at the old typewriter that I have never used on my desk it's missing the letters 'A' and 'N' not the button itself, I want to do this all my life and this kid is doing it for me, and what gets me is that it was written in a day.'

'Okay, then I look at the fingers are a fly in a great heist. I don't get it? I sometimes stop over to the library and see all the old book and I have never cracked one, in my long life, I wonder what they all say yet I think I know, it's like my life.'

'There was a lot they didn't tell you about death-

I wouldn't know I have not died yet- I want to live.'

'I feel that when we grow up or even hit our twenties, we lose the talent for loving without limits, and I see this looking at what I am seeing.'

'I put all the photos on the table some fall to the floor like my thoughts and heart- for a moment while the scrapbook is open. It takes four licks on my twisted finger to get the threadbare cover open to the mid-page.'

'Then I put the glass back into place somewhat downward on my nose.' 'There is always a moment right before I begin to flipflop the pages, and I see the story come to life like a black and white

movie, within my hoary mind and I wonder to myself what a wonderful world, and what's it happens today?'

'I don't know I really-a don't-a care, it's all the same, for me now; for I never know beforehand, that life is routine and then more routine, and then you get institutionalized.'

''Yet that- life,'' a mixture of all the stuff you can take blended, making you feel constipated, sometimes nauseated- or maybe I love sick and miss my wife's, both at different times of the day.'

'Deep down it does not matter, I feel I don't need anyone I am okay on my own - I keep saying that to myself.'

'It's the possibility that keeps me going, not the guarantee, a sort of stake on my part.'

'And though you may call me a dreamer or fool or any other thing, I believe that anything is possible.'

'I remember, being three years old living with my mother - who was my grandmother and seeing the small one-room house that was just a wood shake, I remember being the age of nine clubbing tall trees and busting my ass.'

'I remember having to grow up too fast.

I remember sleeping on hay beds, and make an open fire on the inside, I remember not even having real windows, or a door, I remember going for long walks just to get the water need to wash an outfit, and I remember it all.'

'I recall not having a bathroom and going in the woods, it was not until I was told that we had the outhouse. I remember having a job over in the old county of cutting down fields by hand with a long-bladed knife.'

'We all sleep together to keep from freezing, there were three girls at my feet and five older boys next and almost on top of me.'

'It was early October 1944, and I left home, never to look back on a steamship - Some time has passed, I see the page turn - not the photos I am a dad, my one girl, on my shoulders at this point-

with my new wife next to me, damn I wish I could remember her name too.' 'Something - and I remember everything about that but, why? Is my mind slipping- I think not, I need a drink and may-a-be I'll remember?'

'I never called her anything but her nickname I gave her- 'My-Love.''

'I see little feet running around the apartment she is three a wild little shit.

Yet- that part- an of life- no?'

'I could watch my wife doing anything and everything, so was all I ever wanted, yet I never really looked around at that time, or maybe I was, I mean I'm-a good looking guy even now- the fading a girl is not that hard to do with you look like this.'

'The lady's love me, for me, ha- an I never changed. I sit here in the evenings flipping through the endless channels nothing like 300 nothing really on that I like, yet there is - some old shows on TV-land, I remember especially working hard all day in a cafe in New York, and let his thoughts wander without conscious direction.'

'It was how he relaxed, a routine he'd learned from his father.'

'Romance is thoughtful thoughts about your momentous other when you are supposed to be thinking about something otherwise. I like to look at the trees and their reflections in the room and on the river, back when I was younger, I think I have a photo somewhere.'

'Let's see if I can move to that page without this thing falling completely apart.

Look nowhere in Hasting's the trees are beautiful in deep autumn: greens, yellows, reds, oranges, every shadow, and hue in between, just like look at all the ducks on the river running not far away.'

'Their glittering colors glow with the late evening sun bring on the dusk and midnight sun, and for the hundredth time, I see my first wife as if she was starting next to me as I get into bed.'

'As I put the book down and rest my aching head, to hopefully have another day to do it all again, however that may not happen.'

'The days are slowly being taken away, from the big man upstairs.'

'Yet then again- 'that's-a life.''

'Originally it was the main house where I met my first wife she was rich I was poor I was on a working plantation for hardly anything- yet, I had her love to pay for my needs, I did not have two pennies to rub together, yet I fell head over heels for her, I got my apartment about right after the war concluded around 1945.' 'The date may not be right, yet they work for me, this is the way they have to be, spent the last fourteen months and small fortune repairing it, like $500, yet it's better than the cardboard box in the street next to a flaming barrel.'

'The place is old built in the 1900s or so- I don't know. I get the rug from someplace- and I don't remember how it got in here I had to cut it up, French or something like that- yet what you don't have you have to find some way or another to keep the little brown hair wife-ie, and little ones that look like her happy, and needing you.'

'Both girls- I don't have anyone to pass on this good name...'

'Oh- well that's- a life- is it not?'

'I have never even had an article, about me why would someone what to read my story anyways- I am nothing amazing.' 'Do you know how many ways love can smash you; I think I do? It makes you happy, and it makes glum?'

'It makes you gruesome in the abdomen or hurt in the heart.'

'It makes everything upbeat and sharper, or it hazes all the limits.'

'It makes you feel like a monarch or a chump.'

'Every way love can stick you; it's hit hard when it comes to you, or she with you.'

'It's hard to resist a good girl when you want to be a bad boy.'

'That a photo no one gets to see but me,

I remember her before, I got married.'

'Yet her name passes before me also.'

'I had many girlfriends over the years, but never another love of my life; I have some nicking too, yet you don't want to know all the stuff... maybe, later on, I'll talk about that.'

'My last apartment sat on zero acres yet is adjacent to a creek-sh like a river called the Susquehanna, sometimes, I think I'll go for a walk over to the park- and then I think not. It not far- yet it is for me.'

'I see all the dry leaves- falling to their roots of the tree, I see all the falling leaves, I see meter posts just there, they never work, I see my white 'caddie' (Cadillac) in the back not running, it is-a running- but not for me. I drink a glass of hot coffee, and then shower, it's the start of the same day, or so, I think. I have the oldies on and that's good enough for me.'

'My nurse walks in, saying- 'It's looking good today- John.' 'What was-a that?'' I said back in a hast...

'I always showered at the start of the day, the water washing away all the paint off and aching in my body.'

'I am too damn young to be in a nursing home!' That was my thought of being an old devil.

'I'm-a, not that messed up- yet!' I thought.

'Afterwards, I combed my grayish back hair, put on some faded jeans and a long-sleeve yellow shirt, I don't have a porch on the front it's getting colder anyway, I may just sit in the back, where I am setting now there is no view, what- so- ever back here, where I sat every day at this time, before walking ever to the café to eat eggs and toast, or something along those lines.'

'Yet again- 'that-a, is my life.''

The girl- 'I see him as he stretched his arms above his head and winking at me, gently sloping his shoulders up and down as he completed the routine, of making the move for one door down to the other.'

'I see some random kid ringing the bell by the cash register over and over sounding like the old steam trains, that ran through here in the past, and really it-a was not-a that-long-ago.' 'John reached for his coffee cup, remembering his father as a boy saying- it to Kristian, thinking how much he missed him, yet never really got to see him all that much.'

'He occupies yourself once by, saying 'you look cute today,' he adjusted his suspenders as her face turn bright red, then fool around again, saying...'

Then he spotted me- The girl...

'Do you have a boyfriend?'

Then he started talking to Kristen once more- about her young life- 'This time it sounded about right, about how- he knew that I have a little seven- year old girl named- Riley and not really move on- her child, 'she is my love in my life now, and he began to play with my words coming out of my mouth- so he flirts- yet it's sweet.''

'Until now- I sit down for some time yet, I have to work. Soft country music is not so quiet in the background, yet whatever.' 'Giggling laughter creasing my eardrums, and I feel my teeth slip somewhat out.'

'So much for getting a date at this point.' I thought.

The girl- 'He hummed for a little while at first, then began a talk and talk and talk.' 'I just want to hear increasingly about her stories, progressively and more, it so different than the way I was raised, and my children were raised,' I said- too Kristen.

'I feel the Dr-rip, Dr-rip, of my coffee going down my chin, onto my shirt.'

'SHIT...!' I think looking at him, as- the girl.

''What wrong-' Shanna said, looking all concerned about everything?'

''Just what a man wants, freaking hot coffee going down his crotch,' said, Shanna- she was rolling her eyes, running past with hot pigs in a blanket.'

''It's time to go home'-, my nurse, said impatiently? 'Not-a yet' I said, loudly and everyone looked at me- as if I was too old and cranky, I don't know why, yet that's life, also.'

~*~

12:00-sh

Lyncie- 'He started to run the numbers in his head of the cheek, as you could gather it is lunchtime, then stopped to think and slapped his money down.' 'He knew what it was going to be before there person at the cash register, 'like how you do that?'' He said. 'It's-a something I picked up, back in the day, I-a, only have-a third-grade education- yet what does that say to you?' I thought.

'WOW!' Said the cashier. (Shocked looking face...)

John- 'I remember my first job oh so- o why back when

I was your age you have it a lot better than I. Don't you mean- me? They said with one eyebrow up.'

'Kids today I think to myself, I knew all that way back-a, when- yet that's okay you learn what-a, you want to learn when you want to learn it. That was the way it was in my life too.'

''You make me feel dumb, that's not- the point'- I said, 'you have lots to learn... yet- missy, life will teach you that.' He pushed my hand into his saying- 'You'll do fine, look at me I did.''

''Yet it's never- ever an enough is it' I asked? 'It can be, you have to find that one out on your own.' He said recklessly rushing to the door, being called.'

'Life is like a leave dying slowly on the trees- like all the maple leaf blowing in the breeze swirling around in the air and landing at my feet- with the street lights beginning to flicker on in a warm glow, you're never really going where you want to, no matter how long it's going to be before it is covered over or parts of it lost in the ground at your feet forever- like us- just dust in the wind, or like a headstone- with carved names and dates I can't read, that is all they remember you, me, us- them too far, this is what that gray thing will say, nothing I could or want to recite and that is little to nothing- really also.'

'The thoughts of joy leave me in that cold thought- of what's to come- passing, expiry, and death. In a way, I decided to enjoy the rest of my days and months of life, not thinking about the last breath that I will soon be taking, yet it pops up now and then, yet is that a good thing? Um- at this point in my life I am not sure about anything, but the end of it.'

'Without worrying- I look away out the window, seeing that I am being gestured too, It would work out for her too, he knew it in his mind almost feeling bad for her; it always did for him, he thought,

yet it was not easy, it was very hard, like the love you got to make it work, he also thought rushing for home.'

'Besides, thinking about money usually bored me it's not about the money that makes you happy, he thought to move his feet two doors down, it's what others can do for you with that money- he knew all too well in that thought.'

Lesia- 'Early on, John learned to enjoy all the simple things that he loves at the café, like all the people, all his friends, and even family- things that could not be bought, and he had a challenging time understanding people who felt any different.' 'It was a little after five when he quit talking, and he settled back into his lazy boy chair and began to rock.'

'By happenstance, he looked upward and saw some leftovers in a go box from over at the café and said- 'I take it, over to the counter, to make room to start working on a puzzle, stars, spark-a-ling outside in the autumn sky.'

''Funny how a melody sounds like a memory.' Like rock music of the past.' 'He felt good and clean now, fresh- cleaning up for bed. His muscles were tired, and he knew he'd be a little sore tomorrow, but he was pleased that he had accomplished most of what he had wanted to do.'

(Weeks past and I am there seeing.)

Zoey- 'John is a calm man, no pets at this point in his life, he'll come up to them I have two on a leash like me he was to nuzzle up to them and will talk about anything really- just a nice guy, that gets me.'

'He talks with his hands a lot, and talk broken sometimes, to the point that I don't understand it, yet I get it.'

'Hey, girlie, how're you doing today?' He said this to me. He asked as he grabbed at my apron- I started working here, and she cackled aloud and said- 'I'm doing,' her soft round eyes peering upward at him who is much taller. She doesn't work nights like these always, yet I know some girls that do- like me after school.'

(The next day)

I- Zoey made him think of my wife- 'He was twenty- one, not too old not too young just right- oh I remember him saying think back 2 years back or so, but old enough to be all alone - with him- it was my consent, after all, there was nothing wrong with it... I thought- and mom and dad well did not care- about me regardless, and what I did- or with- I can say I was, and still am mixed up.'

'He hadn't dated since in my mind at all I have not been back here - since yah know- the end, I hadn't met anyone who remotely interested me - I was a lot like him too when he was my age.'

'It was his responsibility, he knew that I could see that, so could I.' She said.

Zoey- 'There was something that held in standby at distance between him and me, yet I want to know more, and any woman who started to get close doesn't want to pull away, even if not sure about doing crazy things that don't make any sense to the man or the ones that see her day in and day out, something he wasn't sure he could change; about himself - just dumb- I thought, yet I like that about him, and yet so smart- even if he tried not to be - with me to be friendly - I was like his girl.' 'Also, sometimes in the moments when right before, like - I fell asleep it's like I can see all along it was right- wondering all for nothing- he was going to be mine forever- I thought and, in a way, still is.'

'Like it was all meant to be - yet 'that's life' or so he always said.' John - I fear to feel my heartbreak a second time because I'm not sure I could survive it- just talking about him- I loved this man.'

'I would rather live alone than risk the pain of not having what it is I need that he gave me, I know that he is not with me any longer he was sitting next to her in the very spot 2 years back, and the last thing she said was- 'I love you on the bottom of a Polaroid and she falls forward chair, breaking down into tears.'

'I have been on my senses, like him who said he was since the 1980's - yet 'that's life.''

(Wahoo! With a holding in letting go- deep breathing.)

'Broken hearts heal... she said, maybe- and there is a little-cracked smile still, the wounds are always there, yet fade in time. she said in her young wisdom - like a lady. Like spitting cuts, like bloody knives healed within the heart.' She said.

'People lived and worked, get sick and die, we laughed and ate, and I cried- and that was about it. Like he did with his wife, in a way I took the place of the pain he felt I made him feel young, and me worth living on in this life.'

'For there were many, scars we both share about our lives, I am returned to my old ways, yet I never really loved, even if I just playing around- it not the same with me.' 'Sometimes, you wind comes up, blown off your course, hell- I know, I was and so was he, we had so much in common. You're not ready for it- I remember that too, but if you're lucky, you end up in a more interesting place than you'd- a scheduled. 'I recollect him saying that too did not get it at the time I do now.''

'You devote your life getting walked on, you learn to identify the footstep.' He said that to me- I wrote it down.

(Back)

Kristen- 'He smiled to himself. For some reason, and said that one above, a day before his passing.' 'He knew a lot of people yet maybe more in his mind than he lets on.''

'Most of his youth, it wasn't surprising, yet not astonishing... Like so many towns, the people who lived here never changed, I think that it's all just talk of a small town... minds- never change when minds are made up- and that it, I believe this story is false, and believe in it also as some school girls' fantasies, tells of a simpleminded girl growing a bit older, and a little faded- as she sees too- like that pink dress she is always in.'

(Memorizing)

She said I evoke- 'He gave me a quick, casual kiss on the cheek first. Then came the hugs, and it was the hugs that was it for me it was the first one I had in my life.'

They said- 'she wasn't exactly sure when it happened, yet she remembers all the events clearly.'

'Or even when it started.' The other waitress said.

'All she knew for sure was that right here and now- made up at the time, she was falling hard for a life's story, she was making up...' They said.

'I was feeling the same way about her loving it.' She said, he said.

'I feel myself having or wanting to go to the restroom, yet I don't want to move.' She said, 'I might not be able to hold the pee in.'

'Maybe... all of this is not what I wanted to be remembered for, and maybe it is?' It was said.

'The evening passed, one after another after another, and yet once more, staying warm is hard to do around here, hard not to get cold.' She said.

'I listened to the crickets and the whizzing leaves, I hear the crash of footsteps of in the distances, seeing the amber post lamps flicker on- as I did with him 2 years ago, the sun has closed it the tired eye for the day,' I remember him saying that too.

He said to me- 'Explaining that the sound of nature was more genuine and stimulated more emotion than things like cars going past, look at how the cars have changed, what happens to them.'

'Look at all the natural things giving back to us, yet all we do is take away from it.' He said that... I have it here add to the scrapbook, he kept for all those years- and now it's mine to add to and keep- is it not? Even if they do not believe me it all here.

He said- 'There were times during the war, turn- turn and turn- there is a session too- especially after a major date of destruction when he had often thought about these simple sounds - he would never hear again.'

'It'll keep you from going nuts-o.' Is what I said, then and there...

'After sitting down again, he looked at the book, saying if I go take this and keep it always and ever. It was old, the cover was torn, and the pages were stained.'

'To reflect on the past, that is why I have to say that too.' 'Bottomless in her heart, she wasn't sure she earned to be blissful, nor did she believe, that she was or well-intentioned to be once more to someone who seemed not to get her it would be, so unusual.'

I remember when- 'John finished his coffee, went back out on the porch, and to hear all the sounds, found the book on the table, then he turned on the porch light on his way, back in to grab something else, like his jacket- I have it on now.'

I think of him saying- 'It's getting cold, he said to himself- there was nothing but eeriness. I rubbed the cover, and see some of the old crumpled photos fall to the ground, have to leave all around

them as he talked about so much around this time 2 years back, see them I cannot get them... all would you help me here?' 'They're going to get wet...' She said.

'Yet, I find myself doing just that bending down- dusting them off just a little, and shoving them back in- I feel on edge, and want to be inside, and not scared- yet I am. I don't have a place to go but the bench outside the café- to stay tonight.'

I remember him losing his recollections on what was in the book- 'Then he let the book open randomly when he got up the next day and sat and looked through the photos feeling, that they were all new in front of him, yet it was less than 6 hours ago he saw them.'

'Once and only once, and a long time ago.' He said I remember seeing these...

'The place, the year, the date, showing him and his kids and wife- Then at that moment everything had changed for him forever- after the moment was gone after taking the still frame, he read on the back of the photo their names; I can read some... it not like I can- not- a.'

'Have you been in love more once, I- Zoey asked the question to him? Yet I did not seem to get it... when he said there was only one... Hum...?' I said.

'YOU!' He said, grabbing my little hand. 'In the end, folks should be judged by their actions, meanwhile, in the end, it was activities that define us all.' He said that- I wrote it all down here, for you to have- she said to- Marcel, who believed her stories- and he said- back to her- 'I well add this all in if you feel just.'

It was asked- what is- a ''Perfect love- is there much of a thing?' I don't know at this point- she said to me, nevertheless- I think I have felt that... with this person, and this had been perfect.'

'Clouds overhead rain on my mind it slowly began to roll across my thoughts like the evening sky on a storm-ie day in the autumn, turning thoughts silvery- and blocking out everything with the reflection of my aging self- as it blows over.'

I stay in this apartment when they let me- thoughts and more feelings 'As they set my emotional states are rainy- like the days here, I leaned backward in his rocking chair and I think it's going to flip on me.'

'My legs moved automatically to stop it, keeping a steady rhythm, and as he did most evenings, I remember, he felt his mind drifting back to a warm evening like this fourteen years ago. I was only 2 at the time- so-o... I would not remember.'

'The town is not what you would call full, it's seen better days, yet a good day could be coming, yet I will not see them- I don't want to live... here.'

He said here in this one- 'I enjoy the game of life its-a, all by chance, or is it?'

Living with the why- 'That is a question that has no answer- or maybe its doses.'

'It was a damp night to speak of all this and raining on me too- for some reason I remembered, that a day later- that maybe my life is not over its just beginning a new chapter.' Zoey thought.

I reminiscence back to when- 'He arrived alone at the cafe, and he strolled through the crowd, looking for just one friend, he saw me, he'd grown attached to, talking to this girl, he'd never seen before or maybe he did- it was me.'

'She was pretty, smart, and fun... she remembered thinking, and when she finally joined him, she looked his way with a pair of misty bark eyes.' ''Hi,' she'd said shyly as she was taken by his charm and by his touch outwards to her hand, sweet man she thought.'

'As a girl, she had come to believe in the ideal man or, so she said to me as I write the parts for the book, the prince or knight of her childhood stories like a fairytale-like Rapunzel. As a writer, I went with it.'

''In the real world, however, men like that simply did not exist' - she elaborated, 'or maybe they do?'

She all said wrinkling up her nose, along with saying-

'If you can find them, them at all.''

'The girl is sweet- and what I would call adorable, what I would have gone for back in my day, also... I thought when doing the interview.'

('The ordinary beginning of a young life, I thought, something that would have been forgotten to me for I felt like her at that age.')

I could have never been anyone but her- his wife that is- she said in a moment of shame, I reminded him of her, and that why he loves me- not for me, for a memory, I feel I used him.'

(I just looked at her kind of dumbfounded, I nodded and smiled.) She said 'He took her hand and kiss it so I knew it was not her- he know what he was doing- she said, when he met those striking brown eyes- with mine, he knew before he'd taken his next to his last breath, when I was there holding his hand that I was not her, I was the one he could spend the rest of his life looking for but never find again.'

He said to me- 'She seemed that good, that faultless, while a summer wind blew through the trees, as she and I walked around and to his home always being nice. From there, it went like a tornado wind in my mind coming and going, that I was falling like the leaves blowing around us.'

They said- 'Every morning but Sunday when he had to go to church this girl sits next to him- it was an old relationship, where she'd been waiting for him to just say hello, she is too lonely for at fourteen girl- too clingy, and far too voluptuous for her good.'

'Because she was a newcomer and had not spent time in a small town before, new to a new school and not treated right- they spent their days doing things that were completely new to her and him just as friendship should be, that was like father-daughter.' Said another woman- speaking up defending her- finally.

'This is just what John need in his life at this point, a new spark to keep him going, she said also, she would take him to places and do all kinds of thing like reading him a books or long novels, so he can finally know all the things in books that he'd had always wanted to know.'

'They walked together and watched summer thunderstorms, loved the springtime, by the fences- the strolled and sat it was not that far away for him, yet was it's all coming to an end though, it seemed as though they'd always known each other- ways and thoughts too, even when the school days started for her, her mind was on him.'

'They met up every day, and the day after that too, and they soon became inseparable to time- and age.'

'He taught her how exploring all that is around and above, not even going that far, in the town either. It was a love that did not love- I do not know what to call it- yet, other than love... To people regardless of age and time.' She added.

'Change isn't always for the best, though sometimes it is needed or has to happen and you can't do anything about it,' Zoey said.

He said- 'But I learned things as well as she, in this town like a dance that never ends, never doing what it is you want to do- yet feel the need to do more and more.'

'She wanted to learn how to do the waltz dance, so he taught her to do just that out on the sidewalk- believing she would never go to the dances, with a boy her age- she held that thought at the time.' 'Did they stumble through the first few songs young and old it just doesn't work or does it?' Others looked- others talked, to them, they were in their little world.

'He walked her home afterward, and when they paused on the porch after saying goodnight, he kissed her for the first time and wondered why he had waited as long as he had.' She thought back to the vivid moment.

'He did realize it was not his first love.' He knew she said- them and there.

'To him it was her... the same thing happens in the old country all the time he thought- it's all repeating to me, yet all-new for her- the sweet girl- that I am falling for.'

'She was taken back by falling to his ways of never finding, that in a younger boy.'

'They met the following day, and the day after that, and they soon became joined at the hip.'

'They learned things together and felt awesome about it, he felt as if he was with his love, it was so wrong, for her- and even more for him, yet was so right all at the same time.'

'I was as if it was a fall romance, just like being in the vineyards of Italy, walking down the winding pathways, lights in a yellow glow, it's all the same to him, yet oh so new to her, yet as she said she felt as Gaetanina did- thinking back on how the most of looked at her.'

'Sometimes, that name slips out and he calls me that- yet that's okay.' I had to say that at the time to keep going a little crazy.

'I don't care, I did care about him, I would play her to feel the love I need- to feel even if wrong.' She said tearing up.

'A true twist to an unbelievable start- of romance that was everything to them.'

'Like hands going down her sides softly- like a voice caressing her ears with a sigh, a soft kiss on her lips and moving ever so slowly downward, feeling all the tingles within her lips and hips.'

'I am not an overly sensual girl, up till now anyway- this makes me feel oh so good about myself, and I knew it wrong- I know it's oh so-o wrong.'

She said to me- 'I don't care, she wants all of the town to know- even her dad did not get it- 'I love him, daddy she said to him too- when he thought her out.''

'On the other hand, he is not for you- he is too old.' He said angrily.

She was dreaming- 'I love the wetness of the water on the beach- I love the sand I feel in-between my toes, I love the feeling of sunbathing, on a golden day, yet I want to see you with me.'

''That is where I would love to be...' This did not stop them- from planning regardless of what they all said, just another fun day at play she thought, like warm sand on the bay, and having crashing waves, as the music would play for them to dance, it was love. He made her feel as if this would happen, yet he knew better- it was just talk- to make her feel loved.'

She said, ''I-a, oh, its-a, not going to happen- I have lived all my days,' he said to her. She was saddened, by this for she had her whole life now planed it was only him she saw in her eyes of life. Yet it could not be.'

He said, and she felt that- 'Age it's just a number she said to- John- and about him to me. 'Yes, but God can give or take,' 'I'm not going to last forever yet they went on.'' He said to her.

'Love is like the wives on the sand, you can't see them crash, and you can feel it moving through you.' She said.

John- 'Lacking grief, there'd be no empathy.' He said, for me or us now would there?

'I don't get it...?' She said then at that moment.

'You'll will when I am gone-' He said. 'I don't want you to be.'' Zoey said back- 'With pain and weakness in her young little sweet voices.'

'I held her close to me with my eyes sealed, deliberating if something in my lifespan, had ever been this faultless and knowing at the same time, that it hadn't ever be en so divine.' That is what he did.

'I was in love, and the feelings, that I had are what I need to feel the most, could it be any more wonderful, washing the day would never- ever end, more than I ever imagined it could be if they didn't?'

'That is the question that has to know the answer to me as of now. The end- that is...'

'But she learned things as well, and she was learning from him- with his wisdom, that he was passing down to her.'

She conjured the thoughts back in her mind about how-

'We would eat at the café day in and day out, and then go to something like a dance or something like that on the weekends- he never thought he could be I made him feel young and he did it for me, it's everything, I ever want a boy- MAN to do with me, even go to the pool and see me take a dive.

It's not in a creepy way- said the girl, it was just a friendship at this point, or was it, said another speaking up, over top her. I was the one that wanted him there, for he was my only friend in this town- even now you mean girls can't stand that can you?'

'Some night we just stumbled through the leaves seeing all that is to see, the town is lovely, yet some of the people as you can see and hear are not, yet as he would say- 'that's- a life.'' She said.

'I never wanted anything more than to say that you were mine, now and forever.' She said.

'I want to say- that we did more than just sleep together- I want to say that. When we needed someone to be there, you are more than a friend to me- I wanted to say that too and I just did.'

I said this to him- 'You are someone, that I understand, someone that sees me for whom I am, I never had that with anyone else. 'I think- I love you!''

'Hey, I am not saying the love wasn't good, but I feel that this is not right you need to leave, me before it comes to trouble with me, and you, and them too- you see- do you see, this cannot-a be- it just cannot-a.' He said.

'What is this like the 10th time we did it, and I bent you over.' I love it and remember the O's.

'I love the scars on my back that you made, I love when you ride me like you do 'la-la-love me as you do, touch me as you do, what are you waiting for''

'I love the sound you make, as you sigh... you are the best thing that ever happened to me.' He said, she felt also.

'But is it going to be me or him? ...Forever and, always is it?'

'If you want me you need to stop letting him put his d*ck in you, he knew that I was seeing another boy.' Yet it was the time I thought that I would see what could be with another... I don't know what I want.'

'Oh, and like you have not been with others than me,' she said.

'I don't want to have to lick up what was his leftovers.

Why, is it wrong for me, you have had other lovers have you not?' She said, sticking up for her rights to do with her body as she felt just.

'I have only sucked one other boy than you, it's not like I have been with all that many guys.'

''But I only wanted you to be with me.' He said, and she said back- 'yet it not going to last forever now is it?''

'Yeah, well it doesn't work that way... a girl has to shop around for what she wants.' She said to me, in her interview, of me adding to the story.

'To they finally go with some like you.' She said that next- winking at me, all flirty.

She asked- 'Then why do you even like me... is it only for the sex or what?' I said know I have gotten to know you, that is why, and I don't judge- for being human- you live and learn, I said.

''No, I love your eyes'- she said to me, I love your hair, I love the taste of you- and I did not know I was starving 'till I tasted you, I love your small- I love you, for more than just the sex. What do you say, little boy- you and I being together?'

'Yeah right, I know what you want!' I said back,

'I see you too.'

'But more than anything else... I love your heart.' I said.

She said to me- 'a big heart- I love the way it sounds as I lay my head on your chest during a movie; the rhythm becoming irregular- when I am next to you.'

'I don't want to be with you just for the fooling around. It is much more than that! I want you; I love who you are...' She said to me.

''So, what am I to you?' I asked, 'Why do you want me over any other girl?'' 'Hum... if you have to ask then you never really know... and if you know then you need not ask.' I said.

~*~

...Speaking, imprisoned:

'We are entombed, trapped like rats in a trap!'

'Everywhere I go I have no privacy, I have no satisfaction over dating him, I can't get it... it's not something I can have.'

'My phone is hacked, and my PC hacked too.'

'I am being watched right now; I just feel that I am- over him.'

'They know everything I do, everywhere I go- as they do with him.'

'They see who, I am friends with and end it just because they can- just like with him.'

'Yet we have each other and that all them matters more them reputations.'

'They because of us, sits me up just to fall into their trap. I've used the fake name, it is all the same, I am there a toy in their sick twisted game.'

'At what a point do you say- I've had enough?' Stop it- 'get a life!'

'Friend comes and goes; I know that nothing can last more than a week with me; it has been like this all my life.' She said, and I said too.

'You just get attached, and they put an end to it so fast... you would not believe me- nobody does.'

'Why- I don't know maybe it because they must have me for her own- tormenter or something, and they can't see me having a love of another that is not what they say I should have?'

'I don't know... all I know is that everyone leaves me before, I want them too.'

'But like I have a choice. No, not really. If you want me, we need to...'

'Run... and never look back, we go far from here where it won't matter, will be gone so far away, that the names they say, won't mean a thing because, we will have each other, and not care what others say.'

'Are happiness would lie in each- other's arms, and the rings on your finger.'

'I don't want to trap you, but you need to say- yes to me, so this can happen! The sooner the better!'

'You're caught by an overprotective and malicious ex-girlfriend, who now hates you.' She said... 'and them too and their talk.'

'Who makes you work like a fool...?'

The ex-said- 'The jerk won't even buy you a ring after so many years of dating.

'Yet she trapped you!'

'You think he loves you?' She asked saying- it as if he was still hers or something. Or is she just trapping you until she finds something more to settle too?' The ex-said.

'You're longing by your town. You are craving because you like me but can't.' He said. 'You're trapped because, of what they all say about me and you. All that matters to me is what you think and can think for yourself- as you do.'

'You're longing for them and they make sure, that you're not even allowed to look at another man like me.'

'Plus, it all goes back to the mean girls in this town, the ones that, trapped us both in not being in love- yet not allowed to love it's a forbidden to me- you- and us.'

'Forbidden to dating, see, look, feel, or even talk to one another- or it could end in jail time- yet 'A-Okay' for any other.'

'Longing into missing out, longing into being the weirdo.'

She said, 'an outcast...'

'Longing into not knowing what you would feel like, in a hug or kisses too.'

'Longing into being hated for no reason by others by their rumors.'

'Longing into missing you.' He thought.

'You're stuck into wishing for me and dreaming of what could be. Yet your friends love them and not me, with me all they see in the past that is not true, the past that I was trapped into.'

'I am stuck with you in so many ways, that you never even knew about.'

'Ensnared because, I have fallen in love with you, and can't seem to forget about you.'

'You're on my mind all the time.'

'No blocks can stop us from someday getting together.'

'That is only if you get out of the trap of allowing everyone to push you around.'

'You have to be strong and fight.'

'I am ensnared into fighting for your hand, and your love, and I just don't know why I keep deceiving myself to you.'

'I just don't understand why- I can't get you out of my mind.'

'I know one thing, I never ensnared you like everyone seems to do around here, I am not like that.'

'If you want me fine, and if not fine. I am involuntary forced into being a hopeless romantic...'

'I have to get out.'

'I don't care what my mind says is logical, what my heart says it needs!'

'There's been rumored of an uprising free of all the restrictions of the world within me.'

'I'm done caring about the consequences; it's time to be selfish and do something for me.'

'The longing of you I can't take it anymore.'

'The passion- I have for you has my skin on fire! I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, and I can function right. Without you being in my life.'

'It seems like you and I are trapped into having chastity belts, with no way to unlock them and connect.'

'You have the key, and your mine.'

'I am confined in the fantasy of us sleeping together playing in my head.'

'Captivated into wanting more than one-night stands with you. Like that even possible.'

'You're enslaved into making them happy, while on the inside you're miserable.'

'Stuck!'

'I am without you next to me now.'

'I want to feel your kiss; I want to feel your body spooning or unstop of mine.' 'I want to go out with you, and not have everyone stop it.'

'I want to go everywhere with you.'

'I want you to live with me, you have a home here if you can get out of your trap- and so can I.

'I want you to share my bedroom... I know it's crazy- I want to go crazy with you!'

'But- I want you to be my girl.'

'You have spellbound me in the spell of your dark eyes, and shy little sensual ways.'

'Instead of losing my mind to you, I was hoping it would have been something else. She said, what if that was all just stories- what if... what if he was just a friend- in the end, and you're all that mattered?'

'I don't care when as long as it's soon, I don't care how as long as it happens, I don't care who sees us, it could be in a car in a local store parking lot.'

(In the woods, of sneaking around.)

'It's all the same to me along as I am with you!' 'Do me this favor and take it from me. I don't want to be thirty when I get married either, I want it now as I want you now.'

She said...

'As long as you're the one, I want you to be the first in everything, you shouldn't feel caught up by him to feel love like that. I am not sure if I'll be your first, but I want to be the last.'

'You should be feeling the love from me.'

'The love I can give and take with you. It's love, I have for you... not entrapment.'

'Really, I don't think- I am being selfish it is just time- for this, all this all happens to me.' She said...

'I have waited for far too long now!'

'Self-seeking I just need you, to save me!'

She is- 'Bounded into taking care of everyone else, while nobody takes care of her.' She said.

'Fixed into a setting at home and going out to get away.' She feels.

'Wedged into using others money, because they won't let her work in her hometown, I have everything I need, but not what I want.' She said.

'Caught into doing work, and not getting paid. Trapped for life, and afraid!' She whispered.

'Jammed into my faith, yet to me, that is a good thing.'

'Hopeful that there is a life after death if not then life is not worth living is it.' She alleged.

'Surrounded by them into fear of death, trapped into seeing death all around me.' She whispered.

'Chosen into being around life, that just doesn't get it.' More of her thoughts spoken.

'Trapped into feeling cold.'

'Entombed into being warm to those that are cold.'

'Permanent into seeing the small light, in the never-ending darkness. 'Squeezed into never-ever giving up.'

~*~

(Longing and Desire)

'I am longing to see you.'

'Longing to be with you, longing to hear from you.'

'I am longing for you.'

'A longing like desire, I am desiring what I am longing for, and desiring is what trapping me to you right now.' 'Longing and desire, that I have for you are pushing you away from them, and - also me.'

'Like a dark storm over your head. You have longed for me, but can it be, but will you and I be more than longing and desire?'

'Will we be always being trapped in too long and desire, by the ones that long and desire to keep us apart?'

'I am longing and desiring your kiss on my lips!'

'I am longing for your desiring hug with my hand right above your hips.'

'Letting go of the past, with its dark toxic memories seeing them slip and ripe from our grip and fade away, for a brighter happier day, all I can do is pray for the both of us. You and I, being together is necessary!

13

'Do you love me, he asked then she was like it was not something they could say- more what I feel- you understand.'

'She smiled, he nodded.'

'Yes, in a peculiar way...'

'I am getting too old for this- he said.

Do I make you happy?' He said.

'As I asked her this, I felt my heart beginning to race, for him yet I don't know if it was racing back for me or the other girl oh so long ago.' She thought.

'Yet, I did not care- and I don't get why at all- with what I do.'

'Of course, I do you, I am a girl- she said, yet not this one...'

'I knew what she meant by that?'

'You'll see when I am gone.' I wonder what she meant by that one...

(A week passed, and she killed herself over bullying in her small hometown.)

'I don't want you to be ever- ever the blame.'

'Well- it doesn't work that way,' I said not understanding.

'She looked away, sadness crossing the features of her face, hoping that day would never- ever come- that we would not be allowed to be together- yet it happened.'

''I do not know if I can anymore.' She said.'

'I don't know if we should be doing this- he said her name, I feel hand-me-down, but don't want to give up- on you.'

(I should not have said that looking back.)

'Why don't you want me for me? She said- 'it's me and this town was in dragging us down.''

''Yes,' she finally said, her voice weak yet somehow still full of capacity.'

'I would do this...'

'Lastly getting control of myself I kissed her again, then brought her hand to her face, and moderately running my fingers over her cheek and through her long brown hair.'

'Looking into those sparkly brown eyes, that glitter in the moonlight.'

'She marveled at the softness of her skin and how she closed her eyes, he was her age - and his mind if anything, the tenderness was within her eyes, yet was it all there... or was she fading away then?'

'Even now she was perfect, and he was too, for her, it was just the age - and the town saying not so-o. My throat began to tighten long for it, but as I said, I knew what I had to do.'

'It was that moment that time, it was all right, the sense I had to accept, that it was not within my power to cure him of the phase in my mind it was not there, what I wanted to do was give him something that he wanted, and never got, as a girl, he was looking at me do things differently - then other girls in this town- I knew.'

'I can adequately except it and describe the intensity of what I was feeling - at that instant.'
'Love, ire, wretchedness, faith, and horror whirling together sharpened by the tension - I was feeling. Yet was all good to release it all.'

'I Zoey looked at myself curiously and my breaths became shallower. He calls me out by my name, and it was everything to me.'

'Suddenly, I knew that I'd never felt as strongly for another person as I did at that moment - not- even before.'

'As I reimbursed her stare, this simple understand and made me desire for more, the time, that I could make all this go away, and have more of this- is it even possible or likely?'

'I would have traded my life, for his or like give up some of my days just to have the same amount of day together- over.' She said that then it all here in the scrapbook.

'I wanted to tell her my thoughts, about that sweetness she had, but stop- no I would not have- yet, I hold back on it, and let it all go, for me and her- should I have said my thoughts that, I would never say now?'

'I kissed her hand it's just, what I do, but the sound of her voice suddenly silenced the emotions inside me, to come out with it- and it was the- I love you, she was yearning to hear.'

'Encouraged, I leaned closer and took a deep breath and left it all out. When I breathe out softly, these were the words that poured out so-o- with my breath.'

'Will you marry me?'

'He asks- it was like it was before- yet in a new why she wanted this.' 'She said- 'Maybe...?'...And left it at that, she was grinning from ear to ear, next to him, they stayed.'

'I smiled softly, and she returned my regard with a slight cuddle of my hand as if unquestioning me in what I was about to do.'

'It was what my heart had been telling me to do all along, it was all right- she thought- yet demons were playing in her logic.'

~*~

(Thought)

'I assumed then, already set in the answer, I'd been searching for, is here with me now- the answer my heart needed to find, is right here, the night I asked him about doing the playful things, that boyfriend- girlfriends do, my age- and we did- yet my mind was made up of them- and what they say.'

'She makes me feel amazing, she more than just a little girl to me- I-a, don't have many words for her- just my sweetheart.' That is what I said here... 'He walked her home afterward, and when

they paused on the porch after saying goodnight, he kissed her with more lust, of what she wanted and wondered why he had waited as long as he had to do it that way- for her to understand this was real.'

~*~

'That is when I found her- irresistible.'

~*~

(The Girl 2)

Zoey- 'I am now 17 years old I have changed a lot from when I was 15, I have brown eyes and brown hair, I am five nothing, and I am a bit confusing to everyone. I am in love with a girl! The most beautiful girl in the world! Her name is Zoey Shay, she is everything I want!'

'Yes, I admit it I am in love with her! I have crush on her for as long as I could remember, yet I never said anything to her, I didn't what her to be fracked out by me feeling that way about her, yet I can't hold back any longer- about a girl named Anna- I kissed her lips and ask her out, way too fast I know, but will she say- yes, if she would she be into me- to go all the way- and deep.'

'Would they be okay with dating a girl? Why would they not that my only option at this point- is it not.'

'No, they could not let this be either.'

Even so, she kept pressing on- with her new crush- regardless of what they said. 'I never- ever thought I would be this way, I never- ever thought about going all the way with a girl, nevertheless, I feel the need to make it clear to everyone that she is what I want.'

'You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because the reality of them there is finally better than your dreams.' 'I have sex dreams about her every night! With her fingering me.'

'And kissing my nipples, and licking me down there, yet the dreams are amazing! I want the real thing and I am going to get it too; I would go crazy if I did not.'

'Have you ever been in love with a girl?'

'I could taste that wet in the pink tunnel of heaven in my mind! Mm-Hum: I could feel that the middle finger of her going deep inside of me as mine does. It's like it was not a dream, at all.'

'So, I walked up to her in the hallway today and I asked her out, and to my surprise, she said yes, yes- 'I would love to go on a date with you.' 'You're so sweet, why I wouldn't I want to.' She said, and she said too.'

'I never thought about being in a gay relationship, but I'll try anything once. I find girls attentive, what's not to like; just look at you.' She said, and she felt that way too.

'You have it all, smooth skin, nice boobs, and an adorable laugh.' All good thing she thought too.

'I could see us being more than just friends, and that is when it happens, she French kissed me in front of everyone in the hall, it was like fireworks went off, everyone was cheering for on.'

(Little did I know that it was all- just them making fun of me.)

'She had her hands on my butt as I had mine on her chest.'

'The first kiss was... perfect!'

She said: 'So, honey now take me into your loving arms.'

'Kiss me under the light of a thousand stars tonight.'

'I'll say I'll kiss you in the rain, so you get twice as wet.'

'I can't wait to play with you under your underwear- at your locker.'

'I want to lose myself between your legs, in my bed, in your bed, outside I don't care- everywhere.'

'I want to watch as you lick your fingers after you have gone down on me, and you have been down inside me.'

'Let's freak and cuddle, and pound our little ladies together do it, repeatedly, sharing the realistic one that we need to have this happen- she then I- then she and over.'

'I want to hear you say you want to taste me!'

'I want to make it with you in public, and in my room too.'

She said to me- and they did, for them all to see, and make fun of.

'I have sex with you a lot in my mind... does that freak you out.' Anna said to her.

'Nope not at all, Zoey said sheepishly.'

'It turns me on!' Anna said, 'that your so naïve it sweet she said tapping her on the nose.' 'Face down ass up, or legs up in the air... I would 'I want her to spank me, I want to be her naughty girl.' She said to here in a way that was older than her years.

'I want to eat it out and never stop!' Said Anna.

'In a way rubbing one out is a form of stress relief, it calmed me doing it study hall class thinking about her, I was going to sit behind her- and let her know I was even, so I was looking forward to that- moment all day, I don't think I can hide this smile on my face - it was time, all the other girls know- too they can see me- what I just did- it was obvious.'

'My clitoris is still so-o sanative, as I ask to go to the bathroom, from the lunchroom where they have study hall- to clean up some. I think even my teacher knew that I was just doing, and he was smiling at me too.'

'Zoey, Zoey, Zoey!' She said breaking the quiet role, 'I'd love yeah either way.''

Anna- yelled and her girlfriends giggled.

Read this simplemindedness, Anna said- 'I want her to come in my mouth, over and over and over. I want her to kiss me all over and suck me down and play with it.' Said Zoey in a note that would last the test of time.

She also said the following- 'Please rip off my clothes now and let's do it here in school, and that is what we did we went into the girl's bathroom and had girl sex for the first time.' Said Anna, it was all part of the plan for us girls that could not stand her, she needs to- 'gotten rid of'- she said.

'It was the best pleasure- that I have ever had in my life.' Said Zoey- here in her little sweet book that knows gives a care about, and Anna throws it- a- crossed the room.

She even said that she- 'loved fingering freaking me in a public place, with all the girls walking in to see us doing it.' Awe- no? she said with a mean streak.

'It's the hornet truth she has it all in there about us, I have ever been with her like this - that my story and prove that it's not, I think she felt the same way - about every girl with an ass - or and a boy who squirted all over her face.'

Zoey said to Anna, 'I would do whatever you tell me to do.'

'I want you to kill yourself!' Said Anna...

(And that night she did - with a by drowning in the

Hastings pool, at night - her pastime place is where she was happy to end her life.)

Anna - I remember her saying to me - 'Hey - do you want to go with me to the movies this Friday coming up?' I said yes, I can say I did not learn to like the girl.

'We don't have to look at the movie we can make out, it is dark in there. I would love too - I said with excitement.' I - Anna remember it all.

There they both are - 'At the movie, the lights went dark, it was the scary part, I was drawn to the screen, but then she moved her whole body into mine, and she surprised me in a way that you would not believe.'

Zoey - 'I think, I love you!' Said Anna 'I want you to show me how much you love me! (That was the night before...) What do you say will you show me!'' She said like a baby - this one was - like a dumb baby.

I - said this to her - "Open up to me, and I'll open up for you in so many ways, I will blow your mind!' 'After loving and losing I became gay and found love - with her and I do feel bad...' ...And she snickered out loud - saying - 'yeah right,' that all that matters - here she dead - not the love, after all, that's a life - see her - end.'

I recall - 'Skirt pushed up and hand and fingers feeling everything she wanted me to feel like it is going to her soul or more.' Said Anna, she believes in a God, and a soul too - cute - shows the simple not?

'She did want to be here anyways - or in school, she was not that bright after all. I knew more than she ever thought - the town feels the same - you can fix simplemindedness.' Said Anna.

'We- spent hours together talking about our dreams- I could have cared less to hear them, yet I had a job to do... about the old pervert and then that creepy- creep creeper of a boy, and seeing the world, her wanting to be so- so illustrator-ie- for fun- talking about him- the old man being the chief of damp night spot back in the day, when she lost her virginity to creepo, it was all the same as back in 1940- she said- and I was like are you on drugs, its 2016 girl gets real- all you need to care about is what is underneath your skirt.' Anna- said as an 18-year-old, 'I can't write, I don't know how to- you do it if you think you can,' she was mocking me...

She said about her man- this and her man that- that she would- 'Like a kiss in the rain that you would never- ever forget the first time, and it was a kiss in the rain, long and lasting forever- that say with you forever.' Sardonic she read this, having a hard time doing it also.

She goes one reading like a 5-year-old- 'It wasn't that long the most painful thing about life, it was a perfect feeling of having it, and it certainly wasn't the kind of kiss you see in movies these days, but it was delightful in its way- taking the pain of life away, and all I can evoke about the twinkling stars and in my eyes, is that when our lips touched, I knew the reminiscence would last forever, and be added to the scrapbook but in color- by me to last forevermore, like before in his- and his and in mine, along with her too.'

'Fah and here it is people, laying on the floor...' she runs over to it jumping up and down on it to define it in any way she could- even spitting on the loose pages- like the twisted little pig she was.

'The memories were gone; love gone by one that would never feel love - NEVER- EVER- EVER- NEVER!'

~*~

'I don't feel that this is okay to do- It pains me too much anyways- to keep looking, and she loved me more than life.'

(Or did you just want to think that- over the fact, you want to think that, and it made you feel happy?)

'He got up and walked to the front of the café and looked up the road- saying I will make my exit now- taking the book with me if you don't mind.'

'She was walking after him- saying that belongs to me, insight flashing her fingers, he wouldn't be stopping, she ran up to meet him, yet she ran with her hitting his arm, almost knocking them over, yet he did not stop.'

'He pulled a knife and said I'll stab your face off! For killing a girl that was more of an asset to this town then you'll ever be.' She backs down, he gets jail time, and she walks away from a free person.

The cops one his tell now- he walks to her dads' home- 'They fall together- the dad falls in the rocker- that was given to them, and it all starts again- all the pain of life.' He is taken away in handcuffs, and Anna is standing there dumbly looking at me with a misgives smile on her face - if I got away with all of this...

Sitting in the squad car- I look at the pages all tattered parts that are reverbing- 'Say- I am everything- 'You're- everything to me.''

I read- I don't think that we're meant to understand it all the time, I don't want anything bad to happen- and they do they are to blame, I'd think that sometimes we just have to have faith, and go with it, and hope for the best, yet I don't care, I am on my way to seeing the light.'

'What the- HELL...!'

'I was thinking... SHE KNEW ALL

ALONG SHE WAS GOING TO DIE.'

'So, that is the ghost you been running from, it like she was looking at me doing this, yet she not there. Everything it all was in black and white like the photos of the past'

'Haunting feeling of doing the wrong thing for the right wrong came over me, and I was no longer the bad guy.

After getting a mugshot and fingerprinted, and a trip to district judge's, I was free to go.

'I sat on the porch that night I was reading the draft of this story - a story of the past, as people who are really no one, can become somebody to someone in this world, photos - of happy times, sad times, lasting- yet them not so-o, listening quietly as he played the music of her childhood, I read- saying this we do-

'know warder the kid today is like- so-o messed up,' he said, 'maybe something here well snick in.'

'They're all were crazy, stupid, in love falling somewhat apart and somewhat together- or trying to forget something or someone.'

'All trying- to forget, the pain of living in a small town with its charm- that come with it.'

'Everywhere he looked, he saw her face and sexy body, saw things that brought her back to life within the pages of a story that would stand the test of time more than some mean girls hate, it was she was standing right there as the wind blow- he felt her- spirit.'

'It was odd, he knew that- yet he could feel it.'

'Previously that evening he had sat on the porch a hundred times it never felt that way or so, it seemed to him being apart, he sat alone on the porch swing of her parents' home, one leg crossed beneath was the leaves blowing- that she loved so-o, and showing all that is here once more- all that-a is life- to him and her- like blowing leaves in the autumn.'

'The branches ensured naked now- and could the swing is slightly moist when he sat down; rain had fallen previously to that moment, unstable and cruel, but the clouds were dying now and he looked past them, toward the stars coming out above, that was picking through, wondering if he would have made the right choice- by giving this book out to the world, to get it- or not- some time is life too, and look for someone new of his own age- would be right also, to move on.'

'I as the writer would struggle with this for days- and I struggled some more in the evening- thinking about death far too much, but in the end, she knew she would never forgive herself or not be true to her self or me, and even then, if she let the occasion blunder come her way- she would find a path that seemed right- even if ending too soon- she is now right for some that are going down the wrong pathway- lasting endlessly, in their minds.'

15

I- 'Today, I begin to understand what love must be if it exists... in this dying world, have changed, and got bitter to live.'

'When we are parted, we each felt the lack of love- together not so much- life makes you bitter.' 'We are incomplete like a scrapbook in two volumes- that should have never been published before reading clearly- of which the first has been lost, or ripped apart, or has imagined love to be wrong to most that would look: incomplete with no non- appearance of the truth that is lying within- that gives salvation.'

'10 years- where they go- 10 years, I don't know?'

'It was an easy drive to- Hastings, slightly more than four hours ago, and I arrived a little before noon.'

'I checkered into a small Inn downtown, went to my room in a place not far away- from where it all happened, and undone my bags and got into bed like always, hanging my things in the closet- they give, I look at myself- saying you have changed- in the glass, I needed to do before falling asleep, alone yet, I was with her in my mind- after all this time still, and it felt as if her hand and thoughts, were in his mind still.'

'Putting everything else away for the day, all he wanted was to feel all that- he could not sleep- think about her- and where she might be.'

'The next moment he was lost- in a dream, he had a quick lunch- after waking late, sitting all alone in that same cafe, asked the waitress for directions to the nearest antique store - he wanted to find something his beloved wanted a long time ago, he spent hours shopping and looking for it, yet nothing he got made him happy, it was not for anyone to see - it was for him and her to keep near- it was the typewriter that made the story and him wealthy- that he sold off the published their story to the world- and there it was missing parts- yet all there- for the most part- he was delighted.'

'He was going... the next day- the real reason he left the following morning- as he did not want to remember any more of this town- even if lovely- it was just too much for him to grasp.'

~*~

(Did it break his heart?)

'It's just a couple of days before the end,' he said, of me letting go- 'I need a break from planning my life, even if it has gone places that I have never dreamed of... if we can of had one night together- maybe I would not be where I am at today- and for that- you have helped me.

'Thank you!'' He said under his breath. 'He felt bad about the untruth- within his story- but knew there was no way he could tell them the certainty of how he felt deep in the inside - of the truth.'

I remember her saying to me- 'My daddy used to tell me that the first time you fall in love, it changes your life incessantly, and no matter how hard you try, the feeling' never fades.'

He mummer here, say so wise for her age- 'You have been telling me about your first love, I didn't see it then- I do now, and what can I do that-a life no?'

'And no matter what I do, she sits in here nothing but looks in my mind of her faces, and photo to keep crying her eyes out about life and pain- joy and hate alike, she'll stay with you forever- like she did with me and never let go.'

'I see me looking over photos more and more from the Ebensburg fair her holding a tabby bear, she was lost in the trances, like in that small café', the small park across the way the children's carousel at the fair, all the chestnut trees, quarters going in the wishing well, so they could have more days together.'

'I'll be seeing you... someday... if I-a goes to see you soon. I thought that all the money in this world cannot make you happy- I would give it all to have you back.'

~*~

(Haunting voices)

I recollect- 'She said it out- crying in twisted pain, dad looking in worry- she lost it... over this fall romances, with this girl and I want justice.'

'That was the end, she never saw another day, after making the scrapbook of memories - a page on the internet, all the ingredients of life - was complete- perfect, yes-? ...Perfect for love- passionate like hate, nevertheless- 'that's-a life... No?''

'That is when I found her- Zoey... down deep

14 feet below- in the same pink dress as always.'

'The 17 years old girl, with dark eyes and brown hair, that was five nothing, and unclear to everyone that miss- understood her. The most beautiful girl in the world!'

'Her name is Zoey Shay, she is everything

Hasting's well remembered for! Yes, I admit it, I am in love with her still!

''You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because the reality is finally better than your dreams.''

'And so-o with that said my story here comes to a close... after loving and losing, I found love and have a loss, find what matters in life, after all, is what living is all about, 'that's a life- no?''

Zoey- well you will always be remembered!

16

(The thoughts end)

'Isn't it obvious?' She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door. Back into the castle, where I just stay put, refusing to budge, thinking about death. Nothing is obvious... about life-ending to fast. Nothing makes sense anymore, to me.

She pauses, hand on the knob of the next door into a large sitting room, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was a satisfactory solution, for now, to cast the memories away into a crystal ball- and that was where I was heading, with Naddalin. But perhaps you'd prefer I not touch you at all, right now?'

That's not what I intended!

Not at all! I good- I need you here... said Nevaeh.

The next night it's are a repeat of the last...

...That night- It was raining heavily. Heavy droplets pounded against the windowpane as the murky clouds obscured her view some yet not all. Now walking back for the walls of bones, looking up I see kids look ever so small from the top tower, looking down at me.

I remember what I have done, they are here over me caring about them now, standing out looking you can see the clouds, above that platform of the huge of 25 stories- French chateau castle turret there is a lighthouse above the biggest part of the hall rooms underneath, and the light above has a somewhat rhythmic flashes of white, the castle sets high up in the air, on a rock that looks twisted like

driftwood, littered with trees- that glimmer at night as if enchanted with twinkling lights within the branches and leaves, along with a copy truss bridge, over the waves.

Nevaeh remembered as a child paying on, that has the railway that rooms through the castle, and around its base. There is a 180 degrees panorama view within the bathing room along with the parlor, as described with large arched windows.

A twisting pathway- that comes from the marina, that is made of-of a long stone bridge with 14 archways, atop that tutor and Victorian-style building, that docks many sailboats, many windows, many stones, over 270 feet in the air is the tallest tower. Soft lights glow on the bride, and also down the pathway; 19 towers with pointed gold-covered turrets.

The train comes in with a fogged glow around the puffs of steam, letting out more girls, to the school end of the castle, hard splashing waves, hit the rock faces, 3 to every minute, flying houses soring around the tops of roof pecks. A slight Lilac haze over all the waters and skies.

The railroad wraps around then underneath the castle, itself falling about 30 feet within the cover, into a long dark tunnel, next to a waterfall, full of otherworldly animals inside, then exits to the tallest viaduct know to our world, hundreds of feet in the air, and it rocks side to side in the wind as the train goes over, the line is known as 'Tracks in the Sky.'

17

That night more thoughts come back to me, things that I have not thought about in years, rip through my mind. My brain goes back to when I was at school, made to go to the auditorium. I was a little girl when I was brought forth in front of the whole student body of thousand boys and girls of middle school grades, this day- I was made to were my panties just so they could be removed along with my lower skirt, as I was hunched over with my butt to them all- as they giggled at me- for being me, to be made a spectacle as always for my teachers to paddle me- one by one all 100 of them took a hit, for deep down- they said to me, I knew I need to be pushed and have my ass red as it could be.

('The bad girl...')

Only my top part of my uniform stayed on for what was an hour of mucking me. The paddle even snapped, where I would not have a case, over being the towns delayed held back in progress of,

development, or accomplishment child. The courthouse to make a case giggled in my face for even thinking of trying over I can't think at all, for being classed a braindead.

'That's not what I intended!'

Were the words that brought this back to mind. Then- I remembered something that I lost to time, of them molesting my mind, the love a boy had for me regardless. He was the boy love of my life, I wonder what happened to me, I wound why. I wonder too much... of the question of why- of this and that. 'Baking hearts and minds,' is not what I intended, it was all over my mind lost to the time of remembrances, and now- I have to rewind the hands of time to remember in flashbacks.

It is said to me now even his name has lost all meaning to me now, to time. I try to even remember me at times, and those fads away like a death in a moment of time of loss, snack in the cold of the night, is a death like a memory.

I remember when Jaylnn was sent to the outdoor juvenal jail camps just for girls of her kind- um of kind just like me, nothing I could do, yet she blames me still to this day, like me, sent away from me over they wanted to hurt me more, over I was not a fit parent, for being part of the town I never left, sent to work camps, they said she was a copy of me and the apple doesn't rot far from the tree. That is why when she came back so embarrassed by more mucking, she took her life, and yet again to hurt me. I should have left her to be a high school dropout.

Her bones lay here too, within this long wall. She never had any more than a pre-K education, that all they said her teachers and district that she could handle. I should have never let her stay in my home town with me... I should have taken her out of school too. I should of, I could of... and the maybe of... and if... hunts me. Odd, like- I could not save her from herself, yet that is the way she wanted it.

To have a child that was so gorgeous, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be able to touch her-is the worst kind of agony, I have in this world. Fantasizing about the past- I come down with the feelings of a cold when we both know we don't get sick of reality, it's not likely, and other ridiculous avoidance techniques that left me feeling deeply ashamed, of how I feel. It's been torture, pure and simple, my health shows my life.

To have only one left in my life of life's, that is just the same, sometimes- I feel undeserving- for everything Naddalin has done for me, even today I call it being blessed. I whisper, the second we're alone again, how much I love her she's also my best friend more than anything. 'My always and forever.'

‘I mean, I know we can’t risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything like that, but still, don’t you think it looks kind of odd?’

The hunted angel ghost of Jaylynn is next to me now as I set in my chair; ‘I don’t care about that anymore she said to me in a pulling long letting out voice.’ Her sincere, open gaze, is fixed right on mine- into see-through eyes. ‘I don’t care what other people think anymore and still, you do, still, you do.

'I only care about you, and you only.' Said Jaylynn to her mother.

Only moments go by when she then said this-

'Fascinating creatures we girls are then grown into women- when lost and longing for whatever the heart is looking for, always looking for a man to be into them- in always another cloud be, or another with more strength then a man could have, or she has at any given moment, always wishful for that understanding sweet, caring, hope, that she may never have satisfied, it's just the girls nature, to always be unsure about themselves at times.' Said Jaylynn.

‘So wise...’ She said back.

18

Every night, I still hold on to Maggie's panties and sniff them remembering the keepsake of her life and mine at that time, the love- I had for that girl at the time, I was her rock- just like all the girls in this story- finding their way. I have kept them all these many- many years... something that I have brought over from the other side, maybe dumb to some, I know or icky, yet the love of things that were once real yet needs a reminder of why by the senses is what I have to to do. Touch, feel, smell, and even sometimes taste is the memory loss that comes back to me when holding something so small acute in my hands bunched up. I have loved and lost, yet that is not always what I see, some have taught me, pain, some love, trust, forbearance, much tolerance, loss of restraint, needed self-restraint, some resignation, to have stoicism, found fortitude, to have sufferance, pushing with endurance, a deep-down breath of calmness, found composure, and even-temperateness. it's what it means to be a woman! Bedtime is a time that was always long and drawn out for me. I lay in the darkness, unable to pass to the slumber, mind always racing as it always did.

Then in her sleep, my baby squeezes my fingers... I look deep into the opens the door with her mind- as she passes me in, leading me right past Emmah and the other girls as we head for our desks,

these are more dreams that have become true. Oh, how the time has changed just in the last 10 years, Emmah, I have not seen for at least 5 years now. No, she only there in her dreams for me to remember, the way she was. I find it in times to just cast away all memories, like pain- to keep for going insane. Sometimes, I think I am just that... crazy.

And even though I have not seen her since Friday, lost in my mind, when I- Nevaeh woke from Naddalin's spell, and it seems as if a year has gone by...

Naddalin- I'm sure she hated me for it, yet it was a year of rest of being lost to sleep, yet her mood hasn't dampened a bit, with me being me the last couple of days and days well be all she thinks happened. I took her place, she needed rest.

19

The electronic tombstone was my idea with the screen, to playback a loved one's life, more than just the dates to help mend, yet never fully cope with the pain of loss. That is what I have in place for all the planets that I have made new homes for life, to flourish- death is always, an end to a new start.

Naddalin's looks to play that tired old game, of hope. But while I am fully braced for her usual ploy in an attempt to trip me up- today she's too distracted by old ghosts too, while I am fully braced for her usual ploy of dropping her bag in my path, to see if I will fall over she knows I am clumsy. Her unhurried gaze traveling the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

But just because she ignores me doesn't mean I can relax or trust that it's over with me I always said it was, yet with her games, I know more than she thinks I do, yet I trust her more then she thinks too, and I am more relaxed than she thinks also, that would be love no?

I remember walking the halls- 'I was told that by AVA she was going to cut my head off and poop down the stump.'

Because the truth is, it's never over with Emmah, even now, and I have since left the past with her now behind. She's made that abundantly clear- that she blames me for everything.

20

If anything, she's probably more charged up and vicious than ever-making the little reprieve nothing more than the calm before the storm, I know that Emmah is now AVA, I just know. ...Yet seeing is believing.

'Ignore her, all day and now for years,' Naddalin whispers to me saying it's okay to feel this way, scooting herself close the edges of her butt practically overlap my legs. Besides even though I nod as though I am okay with it all, the truth is- I can't be is was always my little girl- yet she not that any longer she is a WOMAN. As much as I'd love to pretend, she's invisible- I can't do it.

Karly is the girl with blue hair, know Savannah, it was something she went back in time to do, using the crystal around her neck.

'We girls all from the school love to swim with the mermaids it's the best way to end the evenings.' This is the story of how we made them girls' part of us and our world.

(Girls like you and I)

Looking back on this look at the photos of this old book... there we are... like fading- into the scene... I and you can see all this play out...

'The shut Generation...' or so we were called- for just having a summer love and fun... That's the name of our softball team- not really... the name I loved... but that the name we got from them- The team name was not what, I said- was cool- but I was not the one to pick it... Like so- we were the - Ponytail Express- or so the shirts said way oh way back then. Just some really- really cute kick-butt girls- having a summer of rivalry with other girls, and finding ourselves... inside and out.

Intermission-

I am number- 19 for life... Her- um- she number- 14.

1

I have flashbacks, I recall- AGREEING with my own thoughts I go back in time. I stepped into my room and closed the door; a sigh of relief escapes my lips.

The window of my room oddly, it was locked. I gripped the edge of my window and tried to push the glass up. I remember nights that I would sneak out, and go to the fields with her, I climbed the side of my house. Well, that was a big waste, I thought, other thoughts. The school was a total waste of my time. Summer was all that really mattered. Softball was all that was my world, and her. The girl was giving me mixed signals, I remember it all, yet what I have is that one summer, One minute, she'd be all over me, saying things like I really like you and giving me peppered kisses but the next second, she'd run away from like I had a something wrong. This was outside of the ball field. I'm not an abnormal lady.

I wink at her. Who locked my window? I let go of the niche and landed on my feet. A dull sting ran through my legs. Oh, cramp... cramp! I pressed my back against the side of my house and crawled toward the back entrance. Mom was going to kill- if she found out - that I snuck out again- to see a girl. Dad would be even worse. I remember coming home that night after necking in the dugouts with her... and all the basses were run.

Coming home- I unlocked the door, put the key back and slowly turned the knob, I pulled the scalation spare key out of the plant next to the door. I peeked through the glass door... then inside of my mom and dad's room, they never knew- so I thought, yet I am sure that would be short-lived. I ran up the steeps dipping wet hair entwined, it was running hard that night, it was after 10 PM, I went to put on my PJ's then went down, still scared, of what I did, and all the 1930's cars with their headlamps running me off the muddy road, to my home. After taken a long bath, in the tin tub, in the middle of the Kitchen, to only the flicker of my gas lamp, I made sure all the kitchen gas lamps were off- for the night. I snuck around the kitchen and hurried up the stairs. I remember I stepped in and closed the door behind me.

I heard my mother's voice, calling me asking me why I have taken a bath at this time of night. I felt a shiver go down my spine. I'm dead I thought. 'Well, it's nice to see I remember saying to her as she was holding my hand taken me into the dugout.' What do you do, tonight to have to take a bath you know we only do that once a week?' I turned around and turned on my charm, 'Mom, what goes on- with your child? You look so today, in the face what is that all over it?

Mom- she had some weird stuff on her face. Mom smiled, her long hair pulled back into a ponytail, as long as mine if not longer. It's supposed to make her look younger; she thinks I think not. I bet she looked like me, that why daddy loves her... for that I am sure. Like that's possible, that he would love her more than me... too, I remember him. Then that all changed, to like me going through the

change. 'This is the seventh time you snuck out this month! What is the matter with you?' ...Are you seeing a boy? No- ma'. I am not seeing a boy- what I was hiding from her as he was really a she- and I was not really lying was I?'

Is it wrong for me to want a girl? Damn, 'It's not like I'm doing anything bad- or was I? If you noticed, I always come back by 10- and its summer.' I remember saying that to her. Odd my mom was a way to nice about it. Yet this was also a change in her. She raised her eyebrow, saying 'just don't get pregnant.'

Oh, 'You little.... If you sneak out again, your dad is going to take care of it for me, you will not live to see tomorrow.' I knew that was not true, we did not agree completely, yet he was not me an, he just did not have much time for me.

I perched my lips, 'If I sneak out the day after tomorrow, am I okay- if I tell you whom- I am seeing?'

'Okay- tell me,' she said.

...And it was all okay- and I did not understand why.

-Then-

'We're good with this...'

She nods, and giggles- pats me on the head saying- 'yah were good, you can see here just get your butt back here by 10.'

'Summer love...' she mutters under her breath, 'this girl- what am I going to do with you?'

She shook at me at the steps saying love is love right, unthreatening. I hugged her back, scared- that I was some kind of sick.

I remember- my new dad walked into the room, feeling little in his arms- and my PJ's, pulling at my hair as if I was some kind of baby girl.

I smiled at my dad, in his baby like hold on me, even if he's all new to me it was nice - and wrong at the same time. Mom always had my side- or so I thought, so he would come around.

You snuck out again- he taps me on the nose, 'silly girl!'

'Boys... already?'

'I like sports more da-dad-' and my voice shook as I said that.

More like one of the boys...

'You can say that again,' whispered my mother.

You can't be serious that this is okay?' Mom argued, obviously pissed that Dad took my side.

Dad shrugged, 'she's just a girl, babe. I used to do this when I was young too.' Play is playing... its summer puppy love, that all.

'Yes!' I pealed in and Mom glared at me, in the low light of my room that was far too cozy and the wind blowing the drapes of my window, that was still open. Okay, bad idea.

Mom fluttered her eyes at Dad and bit her lower lip, 'But he was not getting it- he thought I was normal, this is like the seventh time. She needs to be punished, to meet new kids.'

Yet, I did not feel abnormal, by kissing a girl and liking as the ran pored, in the dugout of the ball field that loved just as much as she, at that moment, yet this was the first time - like- um- I felt love.

'Disciplined?' I gawped, 'Exacting words, Mom.'

...?...

~*~

Dad smiled, 'How about we ground him for a month?'

Mom pouted, 'Truly, I was thinking about whipping her with your beloved belt.'

My jaw nearly dropped, 'Ma'!'

Dad laughed, patting my curly hair down from his hand. I cupped my hands together and giggled to, at the thought I thought was so true.

Mom rolled her eyes and pointed her finger at me, 'Grounded for a month, missy and if you sneak out again, the belt will be your new best friend.'

Dad grinned and wrapped an arm around his new young wife, 'Goodnight as they walked out of my room just nearly closing the door.'

He hauled her out of the room, in her arms like he was holding me- it was gross. I smiled and jumped into bed, jumping also in the same leap out of the PJ's. Grounded for a month- God! Yea, right, I see her tomorrow. By tomorrow morning- I was in love, Mom will forget what happened and I'd be good. It will all be good. I am sure, I said over and over.

The meaning was the best thing about moving her...

(One day has passed)

I remember doing the same thing over- I screamed and dropped to the floor, my sheets tangling between my legs. Ow. This night when for more, more than ever...

She even laughed at me and I got up and chased her, up the road- saying she did not want to go home yet. Passing 100-year-old tree, and brick roads, she squealed loudly- I remember- when I touched her, as she pounded down the stairs of the bleachers- as if anyone would say anything at 12 midnight- with nothing but the sounds of crickets- and the moonlight above- and us in a blanket holding hands her head on my one shoulder.

She ran into the kitchen, with me she was going to spend the night and creep out the window in the morning, and I grabbed up all the things that were a night of being- so bad, throwing her over my body. I tickled her and I heard someone gasp.

If my grandpa knew what I was doing, and if the town- yet I did not care... I was not shutting out what I wanted.

I stopped and looked up to see my mom's mouth hanging open, motionless- when she looked into my room that night. And I was in my bed with a girl... with a plate of pancakes in her hands, for two she sat in our bed say here, girls.

At the breakfast table was my dad, a little smirk on his face, when he asked who my friend is... face red about to burst into laughter any second.

Lastly, there was some girl I've never seen before. She has a lot of hair for a boy that hair that reached the edge of her shoulders. Her bangs swayed to her left eye at times.

She had kind of small lips that were a light pink shade. She was an average Jane. Her expression was blank and blasé. To them but not to me...

Unenthusiastic?

'This girl must be crazy, not to be home- or say she is with you.' Said, my Dad.

I was standing partially naked- the next night with her in my room.

Not to be cocky or anything but I'm freaking good-looking, ladies- said my mom as she passed the door.

I had the perfect tan and a pretty sexy six-pack if I say so myself. I got my looks from my real dad, but he didn't have a body like I did when he was my age. This girl should be drooling over me right now, and she was.

Her eyebrow dropped, still a bored expression. Whatever I give up. I shrugged and ran upstairs to put on some clothes, said, my dad. I stretched my arms, flexing my biceps. I gave a short nod at the girl and she was still unfazed by me. Her eyebrow shot up as if trying to say as if this was normal.

Mom stepped into the kitchen and smiled as well, 'Thank goodness too. We'll finally have a responsible tween's in the household.'

2

(Going back in time)

Um, Dad? - Mm-hmm? I -I mean daddy. Like, do you- um- remember when like you- like- um promised you'd teach me to play catch and softball? - Mm-hmm he said looking down at me so young then. Um, wa-well, could you teach me I remember saying looking up at him with big sad blue eyes?

So, with something that incredible going on, it should've underway off with loads of great things happening for me, but it didn't. Anyways- I moved to the neighborhood two weeks before school let out. It was the same summer that Dodger Maury Wills would break the stolen bases record. It was the same summer that Dodger Maury Wills would break the stolen bases record. I was from another state, and I didn't have a single friend in a thousand miles.

It was a lousy way to end up the fifth grade, because- um I had no time to make friends before summer. And that's about where it all started. My real dad died when

I was just a little kid. My mom had married Dad about a year before we moved to the Valley. At the time, he and I were still getting used to each other. Yeah, I'd followed them to the Softball Field once after school. I'd never seen any place like it.

Look around I am new to this place, yet, I see- (Girls are Shouting loudly- yet not for me- yet anyway.) It was like their own little softball monarchy or to some degree. It was something... It was the ultimate place I'd ever seen anyway. All the new girls for me a girl to see... and get to know, something that was taboo in my old town- that is why we really moved here... maybe a girl would be into me...

The year well it's 1931- the 1932 World Series is coming up. It was once said in a Girl's world, there is one all-time utmost moment in the antiquity of sports. We as girls really don't have any girl to look up to on the softball field, do we...? The boys have there's, why is it not so with us. The story goes that in the lowest of the ninth inning with two outs, a full count and the tying run on base, Babe Ruth outstretched his arm and pointed to the center-field stands. Nope, not one single guy/gal believed it, there the swing- nobody had ever done it before that Girly times. He was calling his shot and, I was looking up there down at him with my dad and younger sister.

It was in the greatest summer of my life up till the post before boys and drama of all that... when he- my dad taught me to play softball, and he became my best friend. At the edge of my set, he is running for home. As well as even if he'd been an idol formerly, that the next pass, yen' all know that is pretty much how he became a legend- and my dream boy- well at that time anyway. 40 years later, a girl named Havilah Franklyn... became a district legend and my girl crush. Plus, she got me out of the biggest pickle I'd ever be in... Clued McCoy plays his horn on the talk box... Bertram. Nonetheless, like they were good, really- really- good.

Um- like- Come on, Bertram! As well as all I had was a plastic doll that my grandmother gave me... yet, I was more of a tomboy... or so that is what other girls said about me... back there, for my birthday when I was six- that is when I knew I was not into boys as much as a girl- yet, I liked both- just the same- yet, not sure. On the other hand- when I finally got up enough guts to go out there and try and make friends, I myself found out that they never- ever kept score- about stuff like that, they never- ever- ever- picked sides. Um- like they never even really stopped playing the game. It just went on forever- never ever stopping. Every day they picked up where they left off the day before. It was like an

endless dream game of dream girls. - Come on! Come on! Like it was... no- joke... There were only eight of them, so they didn't have a whole team.

Squints! - Unquestionably, if I'd have known what was going to occur when- um like- I got there, and perhaps just stand in the outfield somewhere and take up space. Even So-o...? Even though...? I didn't know how to play, I figured I could be the ninth Girl... I um- I like- got it! – um- I probably never would've gone. It was a Nice catch; I saw for her... this girl... – Yeah it was looking at that butt and then the run... she made.

Her Dog was running after her, he was Barking.

Then they ran to me he was Growling- she was looking dumbfounded at me. Puppy love... - Come on! - Hey, batter, batter, batter! No...! No... young lust- it's what makes the world go 'round at that age. They all said in the stands over the way - Whoa! - Watch out! Yet she hit hard, um- Come on, Havilah, another girl hit a homer- she did not see the ball all she was looking at was me! She ran into the pool and broke her nose... it looked good for a week or two. Like all- them- the- Boys Shouting about her messing up her face they want to kiss... like I do.) Oh, my freaking Lard she hit the pool... Screams- and crying... cry to mommy the d*ck-head of a boy said.

3

All them- they were Laughing at her. Okay, I'll get it, the ball that is... it was a good way to meet no? Get it... Hi- hi... Don't be a doofus. Don't be a doofus!

Don't be a doofus! She- I- us – we- thought. (Muffled Sound of two girls hug was odd- yet, it happened fast, Dog Growling at my hills... he did like me yet- yet she did...) we were like this too dumb long- all them looking at us the game stopped as they want us to get on with it... (Get a room...) 'Kiss her...' one boy said- so I did.

Yaaaaahhh! They went nuts!!! Now

FREAKING- Throw the ball back- before I throw up! Come on! - Yeah, the hurry freak- up- fat butt said way up in the sands! We are waiting... the girl at the mound said! Throw it! Come on! Broken nose- yet a first kiss- make her feel good- that was my story, and I suck too it. Ha! Look at all the cute Boys Shouting that girl said to another... Come on, toss me the ball! - Come on! And I did and it cracked her right in the head- oppies- sorry... I said.

Come on! Oh, my God- Lovers harry up! - Laughing Carry on and then comes to an end.

Um- like- yeah- My freaking life was over. Did you see that...? Did yah...? Like dumb Boys Babble on, laughing... about things, they don't get... a Girl is describing his thoughts- shaking his head what the world coming too... like- If it wasn't for Havilah, I never- ever- ever-ever- made a single friend that summer before now, would I now- doing this- like that- like- to- her- like- now- like- at that- like- at that like- moment. Um- because all the rest of those guys thought I was a lost cause, so why not a girlfriend...? Why not... I was done with boys before; I was done with knowing what a boy hand- or did have. I thought if a boy can do it a girl was better at it... Even before we became friends, power-driven humming... and whizzing... she was wheezing... Havilah and I were associated, linked for the one moment... that would last, and last, and last, all summer...

Night, hun. The girl- Oh, I'm sorry, she said to her Mom. I said- It was an accident. That is when I'd get us all into the biggest flipp'n pickle ever... any of us had ever seen. Jullie, have you made any friends yet? Go and see your girlfriend you made today- No way. - Why not, honey? 'Because I'm still new. And- she likes may not like me now that it's a new day- remember how they were... this is a new place... I don't want you sitting around in here all summer petty with this stuff... like yo u did last summer and the one before, find some girls... not a boy yet... um, do you like boys yet? NO! I know you're smart, and I'm proud of you to do what you think is right- even if it's a girl or boy. I want you to get out into the fresh air and make some friends or the sweet first love- its time. Can that person be a girl? What? Um- not really what is right- yet I don't see why not.

You have my permission. Go a little crazy... play around... so that means full around some...

Um- you what now... age...

So-o I well did...

Um- Honey, I want you to make some friends this summer, or just one that you fall for... Lots of them are here it just takes that one. And if she's a girl? Um- there are boys that are not a*sses... but if she a girl... then go for it. Not too much, but some... more then I- or she- or we- or they thought we should. Like- get into trouble, for crying out loud- and crying for each other when we had to go home.

You can see us me and my little girlfriend Run around, scrape your knees, get dirty and playing in the mud. We- she and I- like being me- and being her- like we- climb trees, hop fences- and snagging dresses. How Girly mothers do you know who say something- like that to their girls? I Chuckled

some at the thought of kissing a girl- little did she no- or maybe she did... Well, none mothers, I guess would have seen this coming.

But I'm not good at anything- or anything like that, Mom.

4

Well? How did it go- I am in love with her ma'?

Cute- I thought...

Nightfall- the field.

Honey, you'll always be just a know-it-all with an attitude like that... you think you love her... see what's round first... Yet if this girl is the one then go- for her... before a boy well... what can it heart I thought at the time... Face it, I'm just an intellectual in my modern thinking- the good mother fitting in with the new whys of the day. Whispering is going around by the other girls on the softball field when it was just, she and I hanging and playing and hugging and then the kiss, was all I need of the first puppy love to start- she had my heart.

Uh, Dad- can I, uh- yeah- fine- (weirdo he thought,) and we went off- I had nerves...

You go on back out there and ask her to be your girlfriend- she stands at the door of her home- mom looking from the car. Yes- yes- hug... it was official- I have my first love- even if she was a she... and not he... oh well. That did not matter yet...

The next night it was just she and I... I mean, could you, like you said, teach me to play catch, she showed me more than that too kissing and her goodies too? Like I was okay with that it made me feel loved, or funny... no boy did that yet... like why would I want to see that anyways... boys are ea-ck-y...

Yeah... sure, this how you do that- and how you do this... wow.

Mom, it's okay, really. - Honey, go be with your little girlfriend. I said- I would, and I will, but I'm under the gun here, she needs this thought mom. What could it hurt? Can't you spare half an hour, and show her know how to play softball, she said to her dad- no so she can go with this girl... That is why is safe for me to say she can go with her... dad never had the time much... Mom, really, it's okay. - All right... yes, stay the night... Okay. I'll get my glove so the next night I just am there to play with her. See?

I told you... this would happen said, dad... that it would go there... Oh, great, just what we want going to church my girl in love with a girl... (Its oh okay John.) There 10 years old. What's it going to hurt... she needs this no... he puts a pillow over his head and yells profanities.

(Next day)

Okay... All right, Jullie, get down to that end of the yard, and I tossed it to her... she outstretched her arm and gripped it in her new glove, the ball was in her hand, and she ran to her and knocked her over legs around her now on the ground for the kiss she gave, dad said oh nice now see my kid dry humming this little one... one thing you need to know about this game she said... Where the ball goes, your glove should go. (You know I don't like balls she said- she 2 years older than me.) (Dad said do I hear- grunts,) she on top of her... God save us... my babies going to h*ell? Got it- I have the ball... she yields... All right... her girl said... Uh, yeah... was said- I think so.

(Oh, hush it's cute, said, mom.)

Fat butt said- garb her boobs... (Mom smacked her in the head. - Silly boys- see um John- that is why I'm okay with her being with a girl. The boy's like this here.) Umm- hum... that's all he said. No matter whether you're in the field or at bat, eye on the ball, okay and she swings on got the home run... she got to all the basses... that all I say. In the game and with her playmate... Now, the key to this game is keeping your eye on the ball. Okay... Eye on the ball, okay? If the ball moves, move your glove.

Got it...?

Got it...?

Run for the basses- instead of run for her basses- one girl said named Jaycee- like she is just PO-ed that I'm not kissing her- she made the middle finger in her mouth- and the gagging sound- then with a long drawing out- ou-ah- I want a boy, not you. Sorry, I did not see you make that pass- you're out. On-looking- It's all right. (No- no it isn't... it's all-right John!) it's just a game of softball... um and after the game is over...?

He said.

We lost over you to lover birds... said Jaycee- she really competitive... and not like the ground upon... Okay, I'm ready to go home and shower... you want to join me... sure... see this- yes- see that- do- this and feel it like that- and it feels right.

Giggling said, John, what are they doing in there... (mom- said- getting off...) There little girls it okay... Okay... what would my mom and dad say? Yeah... no, what they don't know won't hurt them... let them play and find them themselves'...

All right... what was that she asked me- your first cummie, that what that was- and your first fingering... I love you... that why- I did that... now do that to me... and I did... that shower was 3 hours long girls said Mom... have fun... dad by the stupid looks on their faces I would say that is so-o. see this stuff... what is it on my finger that was yours... I don't know- oh my god that cute... and she explained it all...

(What Dad has not been there.)

Now they're going to sleep together with just night tops and no underwire- what now they're married... (They're just young girls...) and we did in the same bed, and no night tops just our skin to skin... feeling and feeling and the love was like a game of softball... just feeling it out... until the home run. Playing with her hair... and holding her hand through the night until 12:00 p.m. and we eat together and it was off to the field to play- you guessed it softball... and did all over... that was the perfect summer...

On the field I am pitching- that's now my thing... Here we go again... Okay. You just need a bigger glove. Throw it back to me this time. Throw it back girl- love you she yells and the cowed gasps. Um- what the freak is her Mom letting her do- I sitting right here... what am I doing letting her have a life... that's what... if you knew you would shut the h*ell up. Okay- what a... (a look was given and that shut him up.)

Okay- Jullie, keep your eye on the ball, and not on me so-o much, I know it hard... and that makes you feel that way down there too but don't miss this... These girls are nothing but finger hole shuts on a team... said one older Girl... and the cowards started to go down... but that was not what it was about for us girls- it was for the love of the game and a love of two girls, that was wrong yet need a friend and some love. Hey, old a*ss see this... Oh, My God- she put her hands down my pants... and was lady-jam-ing me... in front of them all... and had me making faces. There call me that... I- we don't care...

Okay. Got it, I call the funds... over this...

Ball's in the face- Balls' in the face said the one girl with a lisp... Okay- she's screaming and crying- Ow! Oh, my eye!

Ow! Ow! Oh! Ow! Ow! - What happened?

- (She groans, and I held her it was my ball after all that I throw. My eye... baby- honey, get some ice. Ice now, please. – Oh no, I got it. Why do I keep doing things like this...? - Here you go.

At her home... the stakes... girl- those were for dinner. - Oh! -Just hold it there- baby. Nice and hard... said her girlfriend that was joking around with her- making it okay. Now press it against that eye- Yeah- yah- yah I got it.

- I just took my eye off the ball for a second, Mom. - Yeah, but you caught it. (she is Groaning) -Just keep that on for, like, an hour. It'll still be black for weeks no amount of makeup will cover this, but it won't swell if you hold this.

Sorry... baby for throwing this that hard.

Got to watch out for that curveball of mine.

(She's still crying- yet I am holding her.)

~*~

(Three weeks pass)

Hey.

Hi.

I'm going to play some ball. We want you to come. Do you want to go...? - No. Thanks. - Why not? Don't you like softball anymore? - Oh, yeah, but- But what? No- I was a tool not too by dad. But you have my glove- and I need you there. I can't you see... it not allowed. Uh, I see - you don't love me? Not anymore- I can't- No- I can't go. Thanks, though, I have to find a boy- or did well dis-own me... for all this... It's okay. All see if I can sneak out... here I got an extra one top - not your number but it is fine.

Come on.

Let's go, ha this feels dirty... I like it. Mom, I'm going to go play some ball- yep- I won't tell your dad to go! Be back before nightfall- and be clean... and no fun-loving on the field save that for your room girls. I'll be back in a little while. Come on. Let's go wink- well be good at being bad their mom. Got

it... that fine... she said- ha- we might not even go to the field... then... okay with that... Listen- I okay with this... not dad- so if you do that- that- you don't speak of it... its own you girls... all-right-ie? Umm-hmm... There that dumb look from my little girl... I knew... what the heck... she's happy. That's all that matters...

Hay- what- Check this out- there in her bed together... so you want to play softball or not today- no- just want to be here with you. (Boys') What? She questioned with flintiness Boys suck - why would I want that- you're all I need. Now and forever. What? Long slow kisses she on top of my hair falling on my face.

5

Jullie- I had no idea who they were talking about, that he is not okay with us doing that it not like you get a baby out of or something like that... like how's that happens... you don't know... you are 2 years older- see this is why I feel she's cute and sweet. 2 years means a lot... no? - What did he say? That I was going to hell or something like that just for you a girl loving me and making me feel good down there. Yeah, what planet are you from I said to mom dad about this? I want you and that's it.

Jullie- But there was no way, I could let them know. You never heard of this... Is it not that odd? I hear yah- I had that talk too... yet not with a girl... so I had two talks that were really um... yah... after I am done here with you and then you down there on me you want to go to the softball field.

Jullie- so-o I lied saying I was dating some d*ick of a boy that we go to church with, just to make the town and happy and not to go to they said hell. You

CAN GO TO HELL FOR FEELING LOVE AND HAVE YOU

Jillin' off each other and- Pushing the Red Button with our lips- then so be it. Look at this car of, the Great Bambino. Of course, I have it too- like why is there like no girls to do this? Because girls like us do nothing in love with the clean house and make boys happy- and get knocked up at some point... do you know what that means? I do- that all my mother good for... 'I thought you to love you for you- and to love me for me.' Yeah. I guess. Sorry- um no I am not... if it wrong- like I don't want to be right about it... I will always have you and the memories of the summer of softball.

(Back)

Anyway, Keara, that's Celia and Ashleigh Zadah, Jaelynn 'Squints' Palledorous, Lee Fredrick- we call her p*ussie for a week over not asking that boy out that want to go with her... what you

came over to the dark said with us we said joking... Sheridan Nunnez and Shanaya Deshaun. We call her Fraps. Gal's, this is Keara my girlfriend and now are a new player, I been working with her all spring.

Hi. Yeah, um, well, she's going to play with us because she makes 11. Now we've got a whole team. We're wasting time. Let's go to the Softball field. - Havilahny, it's did you sleep well- yes always with you: oh god look at me in the morning. I know all gross - It's so nice to see you look like that with- the face, and the hair, and the eyes:

(Nighttime in the lights)

Um like - Why'd you bring her, Havilahny? - Because there's eight of us, and he makes 11. I'll ask you again- like- why'd you bring her, Havilahny? - Because there's eight of us, and he makes

11 and she mine- end of the story. SHUT UP!

(HUSH FINGER- TO HER FACE.)

Yeah, yeah, so would my sister, but I didn't bring her, she the girl play and that's it... With 11 gals' we've got a whole team, Yeah-Yeah, and you get your ho... at the end of it, what do I get her sister said... my foot in your butt if you don't get off my field- you stink at the game sorry. I guess, I go with a fat butt and get a cream soda... there you go... positive thinking.

(Play your cards right you just might get his hands down your pants. Wink- oh god kill me... she said with the cute nod.) No. With her, we had a whole team. - She can catch- I would no. I bet you do... she said, one of them over the way – okay then throw- that what she is getting- pitching. - You saw the way she threw. – Yeah- not bad- right? Come on, Havilahny, girl. She 'ain't' game... said the opposing team.

All-right. And now I get to rotate eight positions instead of seven. - I need the practice, girls. - You're the best on the team. You don't need any practice. - No, you don't. - You're the best, Girl. Come on, Havilahny, Girl. The kid is... -weenie. Yeah, yeah. Oscar Mayer even- suck that. I don't suck weenie- not even if it's a Footlong! What are you laughing at, yeah- yeah? You run like you have a sick up you're a*ss. - Mmm, yeah about that... don't ask... hush... Okay, okay, but I'm- I'm- part of the game, right? NO. Now, how come she doesn't get to be, the one in...?

Um- because she's a geek, Girl, that would 'be' why - she can't catch nor pitch as this girl can. Girl, base up, you're d*ick-head. Don't like that remember.? Girl, you take the center, okay?

Okay. Um, where exactly is that? It's over there, Here, Girl. You and I are here that's called left. I said left-center-right. Okay. Right. Here? Here it is the first pass- come on, Havilahny, Girl. Ha, she's never going to throw the ball the right anyway. Let's just play. Oh yes, she well... What a jerk. - Yeah-Yeah that is how she is, get'n to yah? Come on! Throw it in here, or get off the field. Wow! - Nice.

– Woo- did you see the speed on that- Good job! - Hey, Girl, throw it to second, and she did - Okay. Out... (All the girls made a gasp.) - Come on, Havilahny. He's never gonna catch it. - He's not gonna catch it. Oh! I told you, Havilahny. I told you... girls- she hot sh*it! Yah she's the

Sh*it said- that girl. Come on, Havilahny.

Why'd you done that? A square, Havilahny.

The kid's a square. Come on. Throw it in. 1 2 -file ball- out next girl up. Crybaby- go sit on your butt- and suck your thumb... you suck. What the hell's she doing? She making us look bad that what... I don't believe this- she can be that hot. I said that she said in that cute why twisting the wording to her girlfriends.

You can throw it; you know... Here... Sorry... Sorry... oh no... I can't- like believe this. I don't know-how, how you can do that- fastball...

I think I'd better go... it getting late... we won yet the girls were not in love with me for it... it did not matter I had her- right? We hugged and called it a night- Hey, hey. You think too much.

(The next night)

You girls just have fun, this is softball. You got to stop thinking about her over there and play. I mean, if you were having fun, you would've caught that ball. No, you're giving goo-goo eyes to her... we see this... suck a*sses. When your arm gets here, just let go and throw for her face. This one was a hard a*ss. Just let go, and well knock her out- It's that easy.

How do I catch it this? This tall girl asked in a grope huddle? Just stand with your fingers in your P*ssy- and let it make your head- that how you dumb sh*it. There and stick your glove out in the air... said another... it's not hard to do... well maybe for you. I'll take care of it... side the one with dark hair... About time, Havilahny.

I going into menopause over here... you don't even have the red death yet- okay then well hurry up- before I get and it passes by me... scared- Nah...! It's not that bad just a week of HELL that is all.

Okay... why are we talking about me bleeding?

I told you, Havilahny. - They already are, Squints. - Shut up! Girl, throw it to second. (Fake-groans of what she got the last game making fun of her for it.) - Not again... are they going to do this grow up and get you- butt heads... it coming for you too... - (so she spits- to make it seem like she all tough.)

Please pitch it. We're wasting time, Havilahny. Please catch it, please catch it, please catch it. She said as it hit her in the left boob... Yeah! That how it is done get in the bra- yah well at least I have one that not a trannie... Yah her nose is bigger than her boobs... ha! Like her feet and IQ. - All right! - all right... stop... I told you so, Girl, drop out of school you're dumb. Okay... can you be my man and have my babies then if I do?

Shut up and let's just play some ball. - Yeah, let's play some ball, and not with each other for 5 seconds... All right. I knew it... all the time. Yeah! Just flash them and get it over with... shut. Hey, the baby boy up there she said to this old man... you like these... she squeezed me in-front of them...

(The fence was rattling with booing over us being we girl on a girl here... I get it.)

(Gasping was made by them...)

I'll show you some more tomorrow, okay she said to him maybe this down here?

F-n sick these girls he said... - Okay. Bye. - You did well with the kissing too and the feeling up. See you later, Hun she said to me, tomorrow- 'K.'

Bye... (said) See you tomorrow, Havilahny? - Yeah. See you later, Girl.

Havilahny, wait. - Your glove your hug and kiss me. NIGHT! She took off her hat in there, and let her hair fall like- like a Girl- like I wanted- her to do. Oh, yeah. You know, it was the only one I had. But there's a story to this ball... Not anymore. Wear my old hat like my underwire it something to remind you of me... like I rubbing on you, and the small of me... you'll love it.

(New day)

- Oh, um, you got a fireplace? - Oh, yeah with number 3's ball on it.

Oh, yeah. Hey, Girl. Her home for the night- Um, bring a T-shirt to sleep in the okay night- in bed see you tomorrow, okay? Yeah, why? tomorrow morning eating sugar and milk. Mom, guess what? - Shanaya 'The Babe' Chuckles eating to from mom- chest.

New gameplay ball- 'Long-ball.' Come on, Nunnez. They were all laughing and picking on Me for wearing her underwire, and hat on the field so much so-o a girl panted me- and her name was on them with love you forever. Ha- ha ha- Yeah, okay. Yes, I see it. Yes.

Do you call that pitching?

This is softball, not tennis.

- Give her a tennis racket, not a bat. - Give me something to hit then loser.

All right, bab. This is my heater; I know how to feel her right she said... to the crowds...

- I dare you okay she said- (Boys Shouting- girl loving it... there were all stand and see-though-sh and boy-shorts style. Hot pink- too- and I a tomboy at heart... not too boyish but you get it.) - Whoa! - (Boys Laughing- their hearts on them...) funny that was that hat was on here... as she runs the bases to get off... and there were more jokes about that... hit it she nude run down the fail there no why they have this game we do- we do those girls shouted. - You'll be sorry for this she said... running for the dug-out- paint and now too big of undies at her feet.

Ha did even have to go the speakeasy for a free show said, one old man...

3rd round-

- Give that girl a bat. - You want the heater; I'll give it to you.

Give her a ball to hit not that covering crap. Maybe then he'll hit it, and well keep dressed...

- (Clattering) - Oh, Girl, you have a nice one she said!

The boys said too bad you can see it for all the black hair there- ha...

Yeah! That's how you do it. Great, you idiot! I can't hit that... that's the point... Bab, you idiot. Hit me with the heater one. My turn- you know who I am- her girl- flyer- Now we can't play anymore. Stupid idiot! Home run... How do you like that... Did they say? High and outside. Just like that, it was all over for the other team.

No!

- Girl! - Girl!
- What are you doing? - Girl, wait!
- Then how do we get the ball back?

I'm going to hit you! Called shot by the Babe. - Girl, come back! - Hey gal's, I'll get it! Get off! I was with her last night- Guys, I got to get the ball! What...? The one said that was hearing the dirty ball chat over the way...- You're going to get yourself killed if you go in there! The old train yard...

- Killed, Girl, jeez! There over 100 tracks there- or something like that... yah the story was a girl lost a lag dance with one and the track move... and now she has- well one... end of the story... yah she up there looking at you like what the h*ell...

Holy crap, you could've been killed. It's okay there were only three trains rushing at me - head-on- and it had to land on the one where there were no side rails on the overpass... and I was chased off by it; yet, I made it... just in the nick of time.

Yeah, yeah, true. What are you doing going on those?

Overall that water... and danger... and rusty-ness...

It's good to be fast- love you she said- as I panted for air- back in the hug... don't leave me...

- No, wait! - Get off of me!

Now! I WOULD LOVE TOO BABY COME OVER HERE-

Oh - ha she touching her on the 'Munds' and BASS PLAT again.

Stop! Before I toss my cookie's...

You guys were leaving, so I just thought I'd hop the fence--

- If you were thinking, you wouldn't have thought that. - You can't go back there.

- We don't have more balls- no unlike you- I don't get more balls... when the ones you have fuzz out... - We don't- like-um- either-

- Kiss it- yah kiss this- kiss it good-bye. And Shut up, Ashleigh.

It's gone, Girl. Gone.

The game's over, Girl. We'll just get another ball tomorrow; you don't get that that was my grandfather's ball- number 3- nothing impotent to most- but it was to me... it all I had. - Yeah. - We'll never see it again- of what team- New York- WHAT? Why you play with this- it was for here and you girls that's why... it's just a ball- right?

Girl, listen to me, never- ever take mummeries like this and trash them out for me or them... that dumb... okay.

Look it's got more of a story now you added to it.

- But... I-I think- well yeah maybe so-o.

Come on, Girl let's walk home into the sunset.

(Girls are Whispering as there holding hands.)

- Shh!

- Shh! - Be quiet.

- SEE WHAT THERE SAYING- IT GROSS- YOU DON'T WANNA KNOW.

- (Growling) - (Gasp-ING)

New game in the old run-down Vincent field we got a ball-Something got the ball.

(Jullie) Hey, guys, sorry I'm late, long story and drama today- feel you in after the game...

- My mom made me put on my jacket, - Shut up!

- Mom- okay your nipples are hard- yet you don't care... (girls laughing)

- And then she made me do the dishes- when I came home for backtalk...

Your poor little mommy made you do the big bad- butt- dishes for being turned on to your shut.

6

I haven't had anything yet, so how can I have some more of nothing- by you?

- Shut up! - You're killing me, Girl- don't be a P*ss.
- All right. Who cut one? - These are s-mores stuff.
- Okay, pay attention. -Bertram!

First, you take the Bab, balls away- then stick the chocolate on the Bab- and make her not cry. - Then you roast the 'mallow. – and put's her in your sleeping bag. When the 'mallow's flaming, she comes for you... YOU'RE A TARD!

Yes, it is... that was dumb even for her... the sh*it your girls say...

It has a yellow stain on it- her bra... yep, I have one more then I can say for you...

you stick to rubbing chocolate- on here okay.

Night at my home campfire-

- You're going to set the place on fire, sleeping with her out under the stars... holding hands- yes please - you cover all that up- Naked girls Naked girl- it with the other end you zip the bag you two. - Make me one of those- mountain pies things and she and I will share it in a kiss-ie bite- and turn you all on or off. Just suck face and get it over with said the one.

I don't like that chocolate stuff- said the one girl...

How the HELL do you not like chocolate as a girl?

Kind of messy, but good...

Yah kind of like- a boy- kind of messy, but good... Try some nah- I knew it.

Okay. Quiet, you guys.

- (Chattering about boys and what they have and don't have...) - Shh! Shh! Dad is over there- looking at us... Quiet! Are you trying to wake everyone up? Look at these two... go... I just went to go to bed, but no- I have to look and hear this... the air in this tent is 100% cummie and fart... Shh! Weeee nooo.... That was the Beast one ever I hear her say. – what the fart? NO.

- Oh, yeah! - Shh!

-Jeez, – Dang-dongs.

Shh.

Now quiet.

They said- until forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

(Echoing in my mind.)

You guys are just making this up to scare me.

Oh, yeah?

Stick your head out that window... oh, that was just your dad over the way sleeping- not a bear, not a bear... it's all good.

All those stories getting to you- yeah, I peed myself a little at the showed... I know that fat butt wants to make us freak us if he can.

...And look down- to see if any boys are creeping on us out here... we know that if we stay out here past 10:00 dad going to go and we can do whatever... so shh.

And that what took place... no boys that night just girlie time... under the stars...

Dad finally came around- after giving up on me, and his- well church of 30th years.

Jullie- That night I learned that more than softballs... and a girl had a bit that what I'll call it... and my game started-

(New night)

Wow- first hit and it had gone over that fence, and not one of them was ever seen again, that ball was gone... and here it is a ball that was signed by your pap, and I have it funny how things happen. It's yours for being mine- like fate or something...

- even when some brave kid... went to get it to brave she could not- but I knew it was there and I have it for you 10 years later.

- Because when they went over, they vanished, those boys knew that- but us girls are fearless... I knew it was true, that he played here...

- Because when I looked down the line on the past

I knew; he was from these parts... growing up...

Stays with me- forever, she said- as I remember THE Shut Generation... thinking back- anyways... forever we said- no longer in puppy love, it was love.

- Come on, give it to me. - I want to carry it, and hold on to it forever...

(in her hand)

- Come on. I paid for it. - I want to carry it.

(Looking at it)

- Oh. Whoa! - Give it to

me... and you keep mine... (She passed two years ago.)

(This is all I have... now...)

- What's the matter? – Jeez... I thought now that, I have lived my life... (going down a completely alternative story... yet, I remember what could have been- that year- playing softball.)

- Whoa! - Wow (smack) Run- Run - There goes, my baby!

It's time to go home, alone tonight girls... so you all have some family time... and time away, what can I do What can I do? Now I'm alone so all alone Whoa-oaoa no- there crying for each other... There goes my baby in the car... - Whoa, I- I- I- I don't know what I-ah-um going to do.

There she goes she calling my name- Whoa-oa-oa... come on, let's go Mom said.

We gotta get – home on time tonight without you balling about it! Did she really love me- Mom- ah- Yes! And I worried about you two- become insuperable- with each other. You're never- ever apart. And what's wrong with that? She said questionably... Nothing really- Mom said back with hesitation.

The night was long, and I did not sleep without her; like- next to me... as you would have imagined.

She and I - Come on. Let's go

Let's go! Come on! 3- and 0... let's do this...

– Okay... (Everyone is Gossiping about us.) -Was she just playing the game... We gotta get to the Softball field. Let's go.

Look at her she is a painting I'm sweating like a pig needing mud.

Where have you guys been Liz and Jodi? Now we have a team on the other side... let's go. We've been waiting here forever already. Jodi was pervin' with a boy and that's why. - Shut up. I wasn't. -

Yeah, yeah, you

Your tongue was hangin' out of your head- ha and hang on his she said, and you were swoonin', SHUT UP! OH, SHE

JUST MADE FOR SHE NOT GETT'N IT, LIKE SEXY OVER

HERE. Oh, Jodi Shane, my darling lover girl. (Chuckles made by the girls all around.) I said shut up! I've got a lot of things on my mind. Rubbing heads is not one of them... or shaking hands... no, but feasting is? Said the girl over number 10... that no one really liked. This pop isn't working, Havilahny.

Keep um- coming like before- what up with you today- no sleep that's what... and it too hot- she has her sleeves rolled up- nice bra... It's 100 degrees out here- you can look at it. You can't play softball, and the one girl walked up to her and rip her number 14 shirt all the way down both sides making it show her tummy to... like a really loose tank top. – there how do you like that... there just boobs get over it.

(Young- boys are going to be shouting for her...)

- You have to call it for the day it's too freaking hot- we should just go swimming- like butt naked. - You got to listen to her, Havilahny. And cool down some... look at you... Vote then. Anybody who wants to be... here said- (I) Not one girl- that end up naked in the pond... and it was dusking- look at these nasty girls- said the one Mom- oh well said mine- it hot and there young. (See all the girls in low light?

Splashing about... yelling... and playing.)

Fine, fine, fine!

Be home at 11:00- Okay- she yelled and it echoed.

So, what are we going to do? She said as they were side by side... (both girls are laughing) Look two freak pool, honey! Over the way... said their girlfriend... making fun.

(New day it's raining thunder storming.) Mud-a- sliding...

Jullie- Havilahny would've played ball all day, all day, rain, like, tidal wave, and whatever- love the look of the matted down hair said the one girl. Look at us... like a wet dog- said the one- yah small too. (Thought- Softball was the only thing she cared about... other than me.) But of all the things- we had us- and softball, at the time that was all we needed. Or going to the pool was what he tolerated best if plans changed.

Sleepover- going throw dads stash-

Even though none of us had ever seen a Playboy magazine, we knew what we wanted to look like- never going to look like that down there I said- why- don't ask... well, those are some boobs she has- yah you wish right... nah- I like just a tank and that's it... feeling like a boy- look at all the fuzz on that thing- u-ha, right? Nah, look at this one... now say I gross- too. Ha- ha- ha... don't look at it- or were lezzie too!

Which we constantly lied about now wanting yet really did- see my girl was 2 years older see and have and doing before all of us, so yeah you get it. we figured going to the pool was the next best thing to being one of those girls- we wanted so to be. I remember you- like this for always- Oh, sexy girl- she said like a weirdo.

(Funny I do.)

Hey, girls- look at this one

too... what now play doctor...? Um-hum...

like what you see? She runs out of the tent- hot night outside with the girls was the best thing ever- never- ever wanting the sun to

come up...

Night swimming- Cannonball!

(Screaming... I am nak-ie... who jones me?)

- Aw, Girl. - Yeah, yeah.

Too cool.

She doesn't know what she's doing, up there on the board... nice P*ss the girl said... she rubs and said yeah you like...?

(Ashleigh) She doesn't know what she's doing- there or there...

What did you want to show her how it's done?

Sure- she said back to that...

(Havilahny) Yeah, she does.

She knows exactly what she's doing, said the other one... the whole time was in the water... looking at her standing there dripping. I've swum here every summer of my young life - some with her some of them all was in the buff, like a hidden spot- away from all wondering eyes.

Were we girls could be girls...

I can't take this anymore! And she and I did the most desperate thing... you'd - had ever seen- with your eyes. Two little girls were no longer innocent... UM- she said- Let's just do this- One day it became too much... and this girl made out on the board and went all the way inform of us all- BUMPER-TO- BUMPER:

Vagina-to-vagina, JOHNSON BAR'n- MAKE SCISSORS OF SOMEONE- hard coring... said the one girl... in a Y'all... woo! (Chuckles- look at them go... she showed what she know's- right girls- she said- like Napoleon a little French d*ick- that she is.) - What's wrong with them not caring about us looking at this? There in the mood that all- you'll get it when you're older. - What's she doing to her? If you don't get it don't ask...!!!

(One summer of this... and it lasted a lifetime with me.) I think she finally snapped- said the youngest of us all- never seeing this. I don't know... SHUT UP AND LOOK- But that's WRONG- then go to the deep end, and swim alone.

(Giggles!)

- Somebody help- her she mooning! -

Squints! Are made at her for being dumb...

Somebody help- her! Come on! Really- you don't know...Move back. Move back- she said. - Come on, Lizzy you don't get it? She is rolling over looking at her sawing- you are dumb- that was good. Never mind! Never mind! She was red-faced... still not getting it. - Come on, - Come on! I'll let you in on it over there in a swim... - Come on, Squints. Come on. Like you need to wake up. - Come on, breathe and I tell you? You can do it! Pull it and moving at about, bud!

- Come on, Girl! Come on! - Yeah, yeah. she looks

pretty no- here do this.

Oh, God, she looks like a dead fish there help her.

(girls) What?

- This magic moment for a girl like you - (Muffled Grunts)
- (Screams) Little pervert! - So different- is this she said... oh, - 8-year-olds.

- Oh, Girl, she's in deep in that sh*it. - And so new to it- lay off some-

Until I kissed you- and made you feel okay you were like her so- remember that.

And then it happened...

It took me her and them by surprise- it rocked... out of her- new to all of us too... what was that? I knew that you felt it too... be what was that? - By the look in her eyes, it was a rush of spraying out! Softer than the summer night sounds heard then the rain pounding down... it was- she said.

This is what it like for she and I- Everything I want from her and more- she now you not saying crap to us. Whenever I hold you tight- I feel like you do now...

The magic moment-

While your lips are close to mine, it right...

This feeling will last

forever and ever... and you'll want more and more... if you find the one. Oh, hey, here's your glasses. Did you plan that? Of course, I did. I have been planning it for years. You guys, she planned that right- that! she knew what he was doing! Right?

Yes, it fine... I think... Oh, the magic she the young one of us walked a little taller the next day. We had to tip our hats to her for it. We wouldn't have blamed her for bragging. Not another one among us would've ever in a million years... get there as she did.

She had kissed a Girl, at 8... never... would I- her Mom said, that all she knew thank God.

And she had kissed her long and good too. What is wrong with this generation- nothing but shuts, all this came from you being with those to sin- a*ses playing softball- it needs to stop. NO- she cried- there the best thing ever to happen to me. She got banned from the pool- whole forever that day. She was missed but we moved on... But- like now- every time she walks by after that, we saw her give a thumbs up- like giving a sing- remembering that- that magic moment and we all smiled.

'All my ladies, listen up If that boy ain't giving up. Just lick your lips and swing your hips Girl all you got to say is- My name is no. My sign is no.

My number is no. You need to let it go.

You need to let me go. Need to let you think go'.

-Meghan Trainor

- While your lips are close to mine, kiss me and call me mine. O beautiful she is, knees knocking feeling that feeling, girls talking get your glove and come on. - What's the big deal? Hooked on a feeling... it now the- Night game. Come on. Come on. - Mom, I'm going out! In emancipating conflict... of flying balls- ready to be hit, I see her run... all it right with the world, with me.

She was my girl-

Hold my hands- kiss me in the night- (Fireworks Whistling after the game.) Who more than-self- the country loved we were?

Late-night- she had to take a nap- her head on my lap. I shook her softly to get her up... come on- wait up- I whispered in her eye moving the hair away- then kissing her cheek! - On the of July... the whole sky would brighten up with fireworks, giving us just enough light for a game. We played our best then because, I guess, we all felt like the big leaguers... Now we - be- under -them- the lights, I hold her butt with both hands before the game stats... I know how she loves that... of some great stadiums.

Havilahny, felt like that all the time- not want to let go of each other.

We all knew she was going to go on to bigger and better games, at some point... but she was mine for the summer. Because every time we stopped to watch the sky, I saw nothing but her running in my mind now and forever... on those nights like regular preteenagers, she was always there to call us back to her- not let me go.

You see, for us, softball was a game and the game was- us- playing it and each other. But for Havilah, softball was life- and manly for me... loving it- and her loving me for it. Okay, hit it! One on first, one on second- run for home. (Girls are Shouting run- run- run you: S of A- B.) - O beautiful- for spaces sky- under sapphire- blue and deep purple mountains some time feeling her majesty... all I thought, was about her and feel those feelings in and out- And every jot divine- Yeah, yeah, come on come for her and with her playing with me.

(Fireworks whistling, crackling over our hands her head is on my chest, her fingers rubbing my body- she troweling my hair in her fingers.) Havilahny, for spacious skies, IT WAS SHE AND I! This was

the need of the innocents- her hair falling all around me. Above the fruited plain, she was all mine... I was not sharing with any boy- ever, not for one single minute.

I'm talking about- Her- sweet- Her loving- her like- I love it here in America. You know- God did she'd lady her grace on thee- ha like me. He-He-He crowned they don't get us- but we get us- that all that matters.

Yes, she did. – Girl, it was love- and nothing but it! - From sea to shining sea, shall never- ever- ever- ever- leave me! We spent hours there that night. Just lay here with me... hart betting- feeling, seeing touching... eyes looking into eyes... heavy breathing- for each other.

Back off! A boy was next to her asking too many questions- as dumb boys do.

Run!

With me to get to back off... - Come on! Hurry up! - First! Into the woods... as you can think things happened there to... yet I let that out and of to your mind to go there. Come on!

Come on! Come on! - Come on! Hurry up! - Go, Havilahny!

Yeah, yeah! I no PG, right?

Think dirty- YOU NO YOU WANT TO!

Oh okay, kiss me here... is all she said to me... under the thick trees.

(She and I are Groaning) - Oh, damn!

New game- new day new start to whatever this is...Throw it in! Throw it in! - Get her! Get her!

7

Noon. In our field. Oh, no! Fighting- with the girls over there over a boy - Shut your mouth, Phillips. - What'd you say, crap face? I said you shouldn't even be allowed to touch a softball or my boyfriend... his mine not yours ever! PISS on you-you doesn't own him. you're all an insult to the game, and to him, get off my team I had to say. Come on! We'll take you on right here, right now! And I did- catfight- one of those hand slapping types were no one gets hurt yet the hair is pulled... and shit is said you don't mean. (All

Shouting in agreement and arguments.) -

Come on! -

You ain't good enough to lick the dirt off our cleats like you? - Watch it, jerk. - Shut up, idiot!

- Moron!
- F-n shut!
- Butt sniffer!
- P*ss licker!
- Fart smeller!
- C*mm-ie guzzler (Sniffing) Ah! From the girls... You eat her crap and others down there for breakfast, lazing geek.

You mix your undies with your mama's jam in them and don't care you still wear um!

- OUUUUHHHAAAh!
- Right on I said.

You bob for apples in the toilet and suck on the shit!

- Unlike you, I never took a dump on some girl's chest or sat on her face - lick and stick that all I saying!

- Ooh. - You play ball like a girl!

I am a girl-

Really?

Pee-drinking crap face!

D-*-C-K- suck!

V*g- slip breath.

What did you say?

- You heard me.

(at this time, they did know what they all meant yet it was to see who was the best at it. Swearing that is...)

(There all Laughing at me...)

Break it up- the old guys are now on the field.

Tomorrow- okay I said to her blood run down her face- from getting hit in the nose.

All Right- no girls it is over-

Yeah!

Let's go!

We're going to kick their butts tomorrow.

Yeah! I remember saying.

- Good job. -Jerks. I sit in my hand and shake hers on the other side.

Pre-game- Come on ask her for me.

Do you think she'd go out with me? One girl in the field asked me about my sister... sure I can do that- what want to be like us? Umm hum... - Let's see what you got- what this- no not that- let the waistband of your pants go- God.

Play ball! Hurry up, batter. It's going to be a short game, and I got to get home for lunch today. (snickers for other girls- daddy going to bath you too...) That's one. Sucked hard for it was true, yet she plays with it...! What's daddy say about that- he knows... SHUT UP- it's not something to talk about.

The batter said from the other team- The Swingin' Singles ladies- You know, if I had a dog as ugly as you, I would have killed it by hanging it on my flower pot hook outside my door. The heater. I said- I'd shave her P*ssy and tell her to walk on her hands for me. And she missed the ball by a mile and throw the batt in the swing... it that girl in the girl box with it... both looking at me with that pelvic bone

vag slap -face look- you know bent overlooking up- all goog-a-lie- 2- Here it comes, in the teeth... why play dirty... and hardcore said the one girl on my team. I dare you-you to do it again- yelp- she did and chipped her tooth... good times- good times... Strike three.

You're out- and she went home to daddy crying- sitting naked in the bath for him to wash the blood off for talking crap to my girl!

Hey, is that your sister out there in left field, naked? She was targeted by one of the fighters on the other side, like before... she went for the bottoms and rip them down her legs, this time there were no undies on her small body- for she was not having a repeat of before... so- this was better Mom said. You know the sexy call she got for that one by the cowards... - She's naked. - Shut up...! Hey, hey, hey, look at the little fuzzball out there...

-I'm just trying to have a little friendly conversation with her Mom know what we have to put up with these two. Come on. Show me your stuff, she said... I see it but it doesn't get old.

- Hey, batter, batter, batter! See this-

(she points over and over) this is my butt- (she bent some to the left- butt popped and pushed out to the one side) - yo- you- kiss it! Nice but hun now um- ah- cover it up!

- Take him out! - (Girls are shouting- things that would get your mouth washed out with soap.)

- Come on! - Bring it!

- Oh! Beat ya... Home- safe!

Throw it to third!

Got it- Got it- um- don't get it- UMM-ha- they both hit hard- the coward- ow-wah! That's going to hurt! Eyes tighten and squinting... in feeling pain... (this is footballing no need to pull on the shirt dumb girl...)

Jullie- We were all walking in midair that night or so it seemed. It had been a rock-hard win. We beat the crap out of those gals in more than one way. So, we all went to celebrate - up at the cream stand- an old train station made into this. (Sniffing... she was...) The best! We've done all

summer girls. Mom-Jeez, Girl. I suppose prod of you... and your grandfather would be too. Come on. I want some of your Ice-cream to let me have a lick. Sick- sick said, one girl. - Mm. Mm.

Mm. she said- o-uh you're all sickie- yah I am- so you like my cheek too?

- Yeah! - Yeah!

Mm!

- Yeah-hah! - Yeah!

You two stop before I yack on the cream...

All right!

Yeah!

While I'm gone, you're the Girl of the house.

Understand? - Where are you going? – Chicago overnight... so you are here in New York- as a grown-up for the weekend... - Okay. - Okay. On business for a week... is what your dad said- so that is why I going with him... you get it... Yes,

Mom... keep um- next to you...

- Take care of things for me.

- Okay.

- All right? - I will.

- Okay.

Be a good girl... said dad, like I was 5 years old.

- I will. - Okay.

Hey girls- I have some of my dad's- Tequila and we all chugged it down- the next day was so awesome- (Vomiting) - (Vomiting) - (Vomiting) Oh, that feels better. Thank you: crapper rim for being cold... Oh, okay. Mom was cool about its dad no... his little girl was the shut off the century... and that

was not what he wanted with me. Mom- Honey, are you feeling all right? You look kind of pale. - I'm fine, Mom. - Are you sure? - I'm fine. – I am all right.

There was more nakedness in one home then your eyes would have believed those nights... But the day we all got back together for some softball... the same weekend in the mud... ass naked this time- even more fun playing in the thunderstones said, one girl. Mud'slide'n... it was just us girls we knew agents well us girls... so, 5 and 5. It was the day I got us into the biggest pickle of all time, the day I got my period and it ran- inform them all.

Oh, Girl.

I don't believe it.

- Bitchin'. (Havilahny)

Nah, it ain't yes, it is I would no- oh wow.

Like- you ever busted the guts out of a ball- that how she is feeling now.

- Must be an omen- no it not like that- does your Mom teach you anything? - All's it means are you getting older. It's only a week of hell: and I just ruined the whole day for us, boys get off easy in life... no? said the one girl. No, you didn't.

That's the most amazing thing I ever saw, said the one... why?

So, we keep making more of us... I heard Mom say about it.

Game over-

- Yeah. - (Havilahny) Anybody got any money we-

can go to a movie? What, you got extra cents lying around, Girl? Yep for you... I do. Well just sneak in the back door. Movie? Yeah, we can, (All) No- you girls have fun it will just be she and I. – okay then, 'cause now we can't play no more with this so- we were in the darkroom looking into each other's eyes- you know the love scene was right. Popcorn and kissing... freaking out all the old men in the room too... by feeling her up. We walk off and I hear- I got it, guys! I got it! I got the ball, guys! It was the saddest feeling ever- yet I was with her so... you win some you lose some... I got it. Right here, guys... I see the ball in her hand as I walk off feeling like crap. I got the ball.

I got it.

Batter up! One week later or so- Here, Havilahny. I got it. - Bitchin'. Your ball to pitch, you're up, God it feels good to play some- Here you go... coming your way

- Okay. All right. Come on. Sheridan, here. Come on. Yeah, come on! Fastball! She said. (Sighs) Your fly's open, oh yeah just getting some air up in there... that all- I no. Yah you-a got-a air it out-a sometimes- all part of being a woman...

(Snickers) HA- ha- ha! The look she gave- just flipping killed us...

(All) Hey, batter, batter, batter! Swing...

You suck-

'You suck at life- shut up!' There's one.

One, two, three.

Three strikes, three pitches.

- Come on, Girl! - Hey, batter, batter, batter!

Oh, my freaking lord-e.

Oh, Girl.

- Run! – dumb sh*it run- Yes!

Way to go, school beat meat!

I taught her everything she knows.

Everything....!

...?...

Me- Oh, Girl, that was great.

Her- That went clear over.

Her- Hey, uh, Girl, third base is that way.

We won...

8

The 4th. Mom- Hey, that my Girl. Dad- Girl you're doing it. Said up in the stands... - Go to third. - Oh, no. Oh, no.

Yeah! Nice hit, Girl. Nice hit. Yeah! Said, my dad. - Oh, no. - It's outta here! She said. Who's got the bat hits now? This -> girl <- right here. She double points at her chest over and over.

Yells- Girl! Yells-

Woo's too. 'What she doing rubbing her nipples said one girl...?' Ha- all of them were giggling. Maybe the shock of his first homer was just too much for her. Yeah. And she thought she could only pitch? She got home- good for her... beginners' luck... We got to get that ball back. - Oh, yeah, right- it's on. - Good one, Girl. - (Laughing) Yeah, the good one, Girl.

God- I feel all sweaty- you were it well- I said to her. Gross...! Eyes looking at me weirdly down the line for saying it. (Are you kidding me look mixed with repulsed, and loathing.)

- Fagot!
- Whoa, what? I said... ah-

(sighing) defending her like always.

- That the dude- dude?

One of the others said.

- Oh- she looks up dumbly.
- Yep! I said shaking my head... side to side... left and right- you get you're not a dumb bum like she is... or are you...?

Hey, forget about it, Girl.

Let's get another ball game.

'Yen-all No, if you don't understand it! And yen all don't get what you're saying they don't say if- you look like a dumb bum! - she said.'

Listen to me, Girl.

It's a matter of life and death, just get smarter... before talking crap about her.

The story started-

Did you play with the babe? - Played with him in a field? - Yeah, but I was going to bring it- what the ball I have- but I knew how you girls would be about it. - signed by Babe Ruth... yep. This is true... I have seen it... like I have seen all of her... she giggles... like I smoothing you're not.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I don't believe it- You keep telling me that. Who is she? He was a New York Yankee, to do what was never- ever done- and what was that- suck a bass ball bat with no teeth...? Said the girl... funny... I said not giggling. George Herman Ruth Jr. was an American professional baseball player whose career in Major League Baseball spanned 22 seasons, from 1914 through 1935. With the most hits ever...

What?

What?

(Together) Babe Ruth!

The Great Bambino!

Oh, my God! You mean that's the same guy?

(All) Yes!

It's now 1947 lookup girls there he is sitting in the stands... yes, that one... right there.

Wow, that man?

Girl, Babe Ruth is the greatest softball player that ever lived.

That night ended with all the girls getting a hug... and strong wording... of how we're not like him- yet just a little like him in playing the game. I like this one she flashed me... he said. You wanna play- nah- that up to you no- I really can't.

I had a dream that night about a giant softball...

All the tanks are now signed by Babe Ruth... it was the last game... anyways and now look at this little tank I wore back then... and here is hers... forever a part of our lives.

9

75 years passed-

Yah, I tried too I kept in touch with those girls over the years, yet we grow up and apart. I found out that After high school year past, but as you would get, they all made their own lives. Of course, we all know why boys take over jobs and moving on. Form the small town- just outside New York. The mouthy girl I never saw her again after that summer. Celia and Ashleigh became an architect, good work for a woman of the moving past the ways of the 50' and finally making it in the 1960s. The field became, a junkyard- now too small, for modern kids to play in... or so they say, it's not good enough.

Yet, it was never- ever about that- being good enough- it was about fun and the game, kids today not know that... they never see this, they don't want to. My old houses were ripped down- and now has nothing but weeds gowning... in the land lot that it once was. Her home became mini-malls in the 1950s and now look like a dump- funny that's when you know you lived too long seeing it being built and then ripped down too. Bethany Peffercorn is now married and passed 5 years ago- her kids don't even care to hear the story. They have nine kids a- paces or so- they are brats, that care only about here on little lives.

Shanaya Deshaun she became a professional writer- for a newspaper- she was hit by a car in a Walmart parking lot in the year 2014 or something like that. Me or my girl never got to the majors, but we dreamed- something kids don't do anymore- and that has a dream. One girl's man- (can't remember her name...) like- he owns his own business for a while and lost everything- including her, and the coaches a little league team... in Pennsylvania.

I was the last one to move away when the town was shut down and forgotten... and me... the same... all I have is this tank- the black and white photo, and my fading mommies... and like this story to it will be forgotten. That's all I have to say- that is my story... you won't be seeing me again... old age well gets you.

The others are no longer with us... I have the names and dates here... I am the last one on the team as always...

10

Last pitch- I said looking at the photo- saying it weekly- holding the ball- shaking- that brought us together... I'll see you for a new game... ha- The Shut Generation.

(You can see the ball on the stone- next to her old friend- were it to fade to nothing- but dust- in the wind like on the softball field. – for she had no one to pass it down too- that took an interest in her ball or story in the new generations- that's why it is here.)

<3

(Jaylynn's story of being ever-so- transfix)

One apron a time there, was once an ironic gentleman whose wife lay sickening, with cancer, and when she felt her finish coming, and portrayal close... she christened- to her only daughter to come near her bed, and said: 'darling teenager, be moral, ethical, honest and virtuous, and God, and the one above, that sing the phrase all the days, will always take care of you, in times of low; and, I will look down upon you from heaven high, and will be with you, till the end of your days.'

Besides, then she fastened her eyes and passed to that place where all they do is sing, and love, unlike this world we all live. The girl went every single day to her mother's headstone, and cried, and was continuously devout and respectable.

As soon as the wintertime arose, the snowflake, icy, and slush covered the gray stone with a silvery cold feeling, casing with a covering, and when the sunshine originated in the premature spring of flower- blossom, and bud, then melted away, the gentleman he took to himself another companion.

The new companion brought two young teenage descendants' girl's- home with her, besides they were gorgeous, stunning, attractive, and elegant, in addition to that impartial in attendance, nevertheless, at emotion, core, and hart, were obscure, dark, and horrible, and so-o nasty. Besides, then commenced very wicked, malevolent, spiteful, mean, and evil times, for the unfortunate underprivileged stepdaughter.

'Is the stupid creature to sit in the same room with us?' Said they; 'those who eat food must earn it. She is nothing but a kitchen-maid!' They took away her pretty dresses, and put on her an old gray kirtle, and gave her wooden shoes to wear.

'Just gaze now at the delighted princess, how she so-o decked out!' blubbered they are chuckling, and amusement, and then they directed her into the galley.

Around she was obliged to do weighty work from morning to night, get up early in the morning, draw water, be the chef for them, make the fires, and wash-down, and do all the crap-ie jobs.

As well that, the sisters did their greatest to nuisances to her just to get at her- mocking her, in all ways even when she just wants- 'me time' and scattering peas, besides lentils amongst the fragments, also setting her to pick them up.

Trendy in the twilights, when she was moderately exhausted out with her hard day's work, she had no bed to lie on but was appreciative to rest on the family life among the embers.

Above, and beyond, for the reason, that she continuously at all times, looked dusty and dirty, and grubby, and crusty, as if she had slept in the ashes, sanders, and remnants; they named her Jaylynn.

The aforementioned happened, one day that the daddy went to the fair, and he enquired his two stepdaughters what he ought to fetch back for them. 'Fine outfits!'

'Gems and pieces of jewelry!'

'Nonetheless, what will you have, Jaylynn...?'

'The foremost understand, daddy, that forays in contradiction of your hat on the way home; that is what, I, myself, for one, should- um- like for you to fetch me- like- now.'

So, he bought for the two step-daughters fine dresses, clothes, garments, and outfits, treasures, and charms, gems, and on his way back, as he rode through a jade lane, a hazel stick collide with against his hat; in addition, he penniless it off, and carried it home with him.

Besides, when he reached home, he gave to the step-daughters what they had wished for, and to Jaylynn, he gave the hazel stick.

She thanked him and went to her mother's grave, and established this stick there, weeping so-o, severely, that the sobbing, droplets fell upon it and soaked it, and it throve and turn out to be some good strong, up till now, young, tree.

Jaylynn went to see it three times a day and cried and prayed, and each time, a silver birdie ascended from the tree, and if she articulated any wish the birdie carried her of any kind, she had desired, wanted, and longed for...

Here and now it happened, that the Ruler certain a centenary, that ought to last for three days, and to which all the attractive, lovely, young, sweet, lady teen of that kingdom was bidden, so that the King's young teen-ager lad, might choose a bride from among them.

As soon as the five stepdaughters heard that they too were bidden to give the impression, they felt selfsame satisfied, and they baptized Jaylynn, and said, 'Comb our hair, brush our shoes, and make our buckles fast, we are going to the wedding feast at the King's big French-likee castle, that was at the end of a sparkly long village.'

After she heard this, Jaylynn, could not help crying, for she too would have liked to go to the ball, and she begged her stepmother to permit her.

'What! You Jaylynn!'

'In all your dust, dirt, and muckiness, you want to go to the jubilee!'

'You, that have no gown, besides no shoes!'

'You want to dance!'

Nevertheless, as she keeps it up in requesting, at last, the stepmother alleged, 'I have strewed a dishful of lentils in the ruins of sanders, and if you can pick them all up o'er in five hours or like- so-o you may go with us.'

Formerly the maiden went to the back-door, that ran into the orchard, and called out, 'Oh-tender doves, Oh- Oh- turtle-doves, and all the birds that be, hear me- the lentils that in ashes lie, arise and pick up for me! The moral essential be put in the dish, the immoral you may eat if you wish.'

Then there came to the kitchen-window five white doves, and after them some turtle-doves, and at last a crowd of all the birds under heaven, chirping and fluttering, and they alighte d among the

ashes; and the doves nodded with their heads, and began to pick, peck, pick, peck, and then all the others began to pick, peck, pick, peck, and put all the good grains into the dish. Before an hour was over all was done, and they flew away.

Then the earliest brought the dish to her stepmother, feeling elated, and rational, that now she should go to the banquet; but the step-mother said, 'No, Jaylynn, you have no appropriate garments, and you do not know how to dance, and you would be giggled at!'

Besides, when Jaylynn, cried for dissatisfaction, she added, 'If you can pick five dishes full of lentils out of the ruins, nice and clean, you shall go with us;' discerning to herself...

'For that is not likely.'

When she had thrown

five plates full of lentils amongst the ashes the maiden went through the back-door into the orchard, and wept, the lentils that in ashes lie Come and pick up for me! 'Oh- Oh- calm doves, Oh- turtle-doves, besides all the birds that be, the good must be put in the dish, the bad you may trouble if you demand.'

So, there came to the kitchen-window five white doves, and then some turtledoves, and at last a crowd of all the other birds under heaven, tweeting and panicking, and they alighted among the remains, and the doves nodded with their heads and began to preference, kiss, élite, smooch, and then all the others commenced to choose, kiss, pick, peck, and lay all the good ounces into the plate.

Besides, to that earlier half-an-hour was over it was all finished, and they flew away. Previously, the earliest took the dishes to the step-mother, feeling thrilled, and thinking that now she should go with them to the dinner; but she said, 'All this is of no good to you; you cannot come with us, for you have no proper dresses, and cannot dance; you would put us to disgrace.' Then she turned her back on poor Jaylynn and made haste to set out with her five proud daughters.

Furthermore, as there was no one left in the house, Jaylynn, went to her mother's tombstone, under the hazel lush bush, and, cried sobbed, 'Slight tree, petite tree, shake over me, that shiny and gilded may come down, and cover me.' Then the bird threw down an article of clothing and types of dresses, and a pair of slippers overstated with silk and silver. And in all haste, she put on the dress and went to the celebration.

Nevertheless, her stepmother and sisters did not know her and believed she must be an overseas Princess, she looked so beautiful in her white into a pink dress. Of Jaylynn, they never thought at all, and hypothetical, that she was sitting at home, and picking the lentils out of the vestiges.

The King's son came to meet her, and took her by the hand and danced with her, and he rejected to stand up with anybody else so that he might not be obliged to let go her hand, to hold and her to kiss all over; and when anyone came to claim it he answered, 'She is my lover.'

Moreover, when the evening came, she wanted to go home, but the Prince said, he would go with her to make love- and more love in and of her, for he wanted to see where the beautiful girl lived.

Nevertheless, she escaped him and jumped up into the sucker-house. Then the Prince waited until the father came, and told him the strange girl had jumped into the sucker-house.

The father thought to himself, 'It surely cannot be Jaylynn,' and called for hatchets, and had the sap house cut down, but there was no one in it.

Above and beyond when they entered the house there sat Jaylynn in her dirty clothes among the cinders, and a little oil lamp burnt dimly in the chimney; for Jaylynn had been very speedy, swift, and had hoped, and skipped out of the dupe house again, and had run to the hazel grasslands; and there she had taken off her lovely dress and had laid it on the grave and was standing in her undergarments, and the bird had carried it away again, and then she had put on her little steely kirtle over, and had sat down in the kitchen among the cinders.

The day next, when the commemoration began once more, and the parents and step-sisters had gone to it, Jaylynn, only age 13, went to the hazel bush and cried, 'Slight tree, petite tree, shake over me, that silvery and gilded may come down and cover me.'

Then the bird cast down a still more splendid dress than on the day before.

And when she appeared in it among the guest's everyone was astonished at her beauty. The Prince had been waiting until she came, and he took her hand and danced with her alone. And when anyone else came to invite her he said, 'She is my partner.' And when the evening came, she wanted to go home, and the Prince followed her, for he wanted to see to what house she belonged; but she broke away from him, and ran into the garden at the back of the house.

There stood a fine large tree, bearing splendid pears; she leaped as lightly as a squirrel among the branches, and the Prince did not know what had become of her.

So, he waited until the father came, and then he told him that the strange maiden had rushed from him and that he thought she had gone up into the pear tree. The father thought to himself, 'It surely cannot be Jaylynn,' and called for an ax, and felled the tree, but there was no one in it. And when they went into the kitchen there sat Jaylynn among the cinders, as usual, for she had got down the other side of the tree, and had taken back her beautiful clothes to the bird on the hazel bush, and had put on her old gray kirtle again.

On the third day, when the paternities and the stepchildren had set off, Jaylynn, went once more to her mother's grave, and said to the tree, 'Slight tree, petite tree, shake over me, that silvery and gilded may come down and cover me.' Then the bird cast down a dress, the like of which had never been seen for splendor and brightness, and slippers that were of gold.

Besides, when she looks as if in this dress at the feast nobody knew what to say for wonderment. The Prince danced with her alone, and if someone else asked her he replied, 'She is my wife and lover.'

Then when it was evening Jaylynn, wanted to go home, and the Prince was about to go with her, when she ran past him so hurriedly, that he could and would not follow her.

But he had laid a plan and had instigated all the steps to be spread with pitch, so-o that as she hurried down them the left shoe of the girl remained penetrating in it.

The Prince picked it up and saw that it was of gold, and very minor and slim.

The next morning, he went to the father and told him that no one should be his wife-to-be save the one whose foot the golden shoe should fit.

Then the five sisters were very glad, for the reason that, they had pretty feet. The firstborn went to her room to try on the shoe, and her mother stood by.

But then again, she could not get her great toe into it, for the shoe was too small; then her mother handed her a knife, and said, 'Cut the toe off, for when you are Queen you will never have to go on foot.'

So, the girl cut her toe off, enfolded her foot into the shoe, concealed the pain, and went down to the Prince. Then he took her with him on his horse as his bride and rode off.

They had to pass by the grave, and there sat the five pigeons on the hazel bush, and cried, 'There they go, there they go! There is blood on her shoe; The shoe is too small, not the right bride at all!'

Then the Prince looked at her shoe and saw the blood flowing. And he twisted his horse round and took the false bride home again, reverbing she was not the right one, and that the other sister must try on the shoe.

So, she went into her room to do so and got her toes comfortably in, but her heel was too large.

Then her mother handed her the knife, saying, 'Cut a piece off your heel; when you are Queen, you will never have to go on foot.' So, the girl cut a piece off her heel, and thrust her foot into the shoe, concealed the discomfort, agony, and went down to the Prince, whom took his fiancée before him on his horse and rode off, for a night they would never- ever forget, as young lovers should.

When they passed by the hazel bush the five chumps sat there and wept, wishing, and hoping for a man, and a life... like hers.

'There they go, there they go! There is blood on her shoe; The shoe is too small, not the right bride at all!'

Then the Prince looked at her foot, and saw how the blood was flowing from the shoe, and staining the white stocking. And he turned his horse around and brought the false bride home again. 'This is not the right one,' said he, 'have you no other daughter?'

'Nope,' said the man, 'only my dead wife left behind her a little stunted Jaylynn; it is unbearable,

that she can be the newlywed.'

But then again, the King's son ordered her to be sent for, but the mother said, 'Oh no! she is much too dirty, I could not let her be understood.'

Nonetheless, he would have her fetched, and so Jaylynn had to look as if.

First, she washed her face and hands quite clean, and went in and curtseyed to the Prince, who held out to her the golden shoe. Then she sat down on a stool drew her foot out of the heavy made of a wooden shoe, and slipped it into the golden one, which fitted it perfectly.

And when she stood up, and the Prince observed in her expression, he knew another time the lovely young girl that had danced with him, and he cried, 'This is the right bride - I love this girl now and always!'

The step-mother and the five sisters were thunderstruck and grew pale with anger, but he put Jaylynn before him on his horse and rode off.

And as they approved the hazel bush, the five white pigeons cried, 'There they go, there they go! No blood on her shoe; The shoe's not too small, the right fiancée, and love maker for is she, after all, I all I ever wanted - and more.'

And when they had thus cried, they came flying after and perched on Jaylynn's shoulders, one on the right, the other on the left, and so remained.

And when her marriage with the Prince was selected to be held the false sisters came, hoping to curry favor and to take part in the partying.

So, as the wedding processions went to the church, the eldest walked on the right side and the younger on the left, and the sapping suckers, picked out an eye of each of them.

Also, as they refunded the elder was on the left side and the younger on the right and the chumps picked out the other eye of each of them. Then so-o they were predestined to go blind for the rest of their years, days and loves makings to mind and soul, since of their nonsense and tale, was over.

<3

Nevaeh

Book: 63

Moments that Would not Fade Part: 1

(Kristen's life on Earth)

Films of Kristen Deniel

1

The home was falling apart... anyone could see that, and even from the road, even from the car that I was sitting in with my legs hanging out, the side vent window tilted, I could even see that from the road, anyone could see that all the homes to say it- were all just dumps, sorry- I am not holding back on saying the truth; All the homes were not what you would call fine... nevertheless, that was okay with me, after all, it was a home.

Kristen stopped to kiss Gram, and then she was walking toward them, feeling a little shy, but only for a moment, since Noah was pulling Nevaeh- May down the steps, and she could hear him saying, 'It's Kristen, it's my best friend, Kristen,' And there he was with the same mop of dark hair, and those bright blue eyes, and next to him, a girl with the same eyes, and she was smiling too.

And then she saw that Gram was pointing, nodding at her, and smiling. Kristen looked toward the Smiths' house, almost knowing what she was going to see, not believing it could happen, that it was not just Mrs. Meyer waiting at the door. She thought about the cat. Of course, Noah had kept the cat. That meant.

The home was wood in color, just naked standard wood siding- nothing to scream about, yet by the looks of this home, it looks as if someone inside it should be with the lights flickering on and off, like something out of a horror film, or the 1924's. The color and feeling- of that of- starting graying death. And God, look at the door it is just hanging in there on its hinges, like me in a way - like me.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Outside it was almost dark. A sliver of moon curved over the Old Man's mountain, and a lone star was just visible. 'A planet, Kristen,' Green is might say. 'Get your astronomy in order.'

If I cried again, the tears would freeze fast to my cheeks.

The snow was so dry I could hear the creaking of my footsteps as I went past the holly bushes. No one could guess they were there, mounded up like soft white pillows, and the river in front of me had disappeared.

I stood still to look at it all. I wondered how I could draw that to show the world underneath: sharp, shiny leaves hidden in the snow, the river running fast and cold under the ice.

In my mind was a picture of Beatrice brushing her hair off her forehead. 'Drawing is a language,' she had said. 'You have to learn to speak it.'

In the distance was the faint sound of a saw: Someone must be cutting wood for a fire. I closed my eyes. Green is and the Old Man turning their heads. Roger saw they would say. He must be in the apple orchard, or Hopper is finally gotten to that dead elm.

No, it was not a saw. It was the sound of a snowmobile, on the other side of the mountain.

A clump of snow fell off the roof of the house. I looked back at it, at the house where I wanted to belong. Huge icicles hung from the eaves, and suddenly I was so cold I could not stay outside anymore. Upstairs in my bedroom, I sat at the edge of the bed shivering, waiting until I was warm; then I went to my backpack and pulled out my films to spread across the bumpy white bedspread.

I saw how much blue I had used in those summer drawings: blue for the river, blue for the Old Man's rugs, blue for Izzy's locket; and green: a smudge of the tree, a leaf, the edge of the mountain. Both colors I loved.

The films I had drawn of Gram lay in the middle of the bed.

Gram on the pier, reaching for seagrass; Gram outside in her tree garden, shades of peach and lilac; Gram happy, Gram where she belonged.

Gram did not belong here. She belonged in her house with Beatrice, and Henry, and the irritable pelican on her wall.

She belonged near the ocean.

I sat there for a long time, my head against the headboard, knowing what I had to do. I rubbed my hands, still icy cold. It was four miles to the telephone outside the grocery store, a long walk, but I could do it. I would call Beatrice... ask her, beg her.

We would go home, Gram and I, Gram to Beatrice, me to another place. I looked at a half-finished picture of Izzy at the cemetery with a vase of daisies in her hand. What had she said that day? 'I wanted children for every corner of the house.' And what else? There was something more she had said, something about Green is and the Old Man. 'It's worse this summer.'

I would have to stop thinking about Izzy, put all of them out of my mind. Before I left, I would get rid of all the films of them, burn the drawings in the fireplace. I would forget about Izzy and the Old Man, forget about Green's.

I stared down at the drawing of Izzy backing out of the door with my WELCOME TO THE FAMILY cake and saw something I had not remembered: The Old Man's hand on Greens' shoulder.

Me, catching my first fish. Green is in front of me with the net, the Old Man smiling. But he is looking at Green is, not at me.

Looking and smiling.

And another: Green's hanging into the engine of a car, just the back of him visible, with mismatched socks, and the Old Man with his hands on his hips, but his eyes are soft.

Beatrice was in my head again. What had she said to me one time? 'Sometimes we learn from our drawings; things are there that we thought we didn't know.'

My lips were suddenly dry.

I stood up, walked around to the other side of the bed. There they were in the boat. Green's laughing at something the Old Man had said.

How had I drawn all that and not seen it?

Of course, the Old Man loved Green's. He was going to love him whether I was there or not. Had I given them up for nothing, the whole family?

What do you know about a family? Green is said in my mind. You have never had one.

I remembered what Izzy had said then: 'They have to find their way.'

I picked up another picture: me with candy in my mouth. Then there was something else floating just on the edge of my mind. Something to do with the radio? Why the radio?

Wait, I told myself. What had Gram said about wanting Santa to bring a radio?

And then I had it. The two of us joking. 'Santa on a sleigh,' I had said.

'That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on...'

...A snowmobile? To bring the candy? Green's? The pancakes, and the applesauce?

I slid off the bed, the picture drifting out of my hand, my knuckles up to my mouth.

The sweater hanging on the shed doorknob.

Holly on the back step. 'Peace, Kristen.'

I felt as if I could hardly breathe.

And then I was flying down the stairs, my feet barely touching the steps, skittering on the Old Man's shiny floor, coming to a stop in front of Gram asleep on the couch.

I sat down next to her, one hand on Henry's rough fur.

'Wake up, Gram,' I said. 'I want to ask you about Santa Claus.' Films of Kristen Deniel Gram slept through my questions, her head nestled on the couch cushions, and Henry with her, purring faintly with his eyes closed. She slept as I shook her, slept as I begged her, 'Please, Gram, I cannot wait to know,' slept as I offered her soup from a can, Izzy's candy, a cup of tea.

Then, at last, I gave up. I looked at the black square that was the window. The moon had disappeared behind the Old Man's mountain, and the star was gone.

I went into the kitchen to make something to eat: the rest of the tuna with canned pineapple thrown on top, and a few frosted flakes for crunch. I ate it at the kitchen counter, wolfing it down, made hot chocolate, and when it had cooled a little, put it under Gram's nose. 'Smells good, doesn't it? Just open your eyes, take a sip, and talk to me.'

She smiled in her sleep as I kissed her forehead, and then I went upstairs to bed, lying awake for a long time, feeling the tick of my heart in my throat.

The holly had just blown onto the back step. Gram had found the candy in the house. Maybe. Maybe.

But then as I fell asleep, I could almost hear his voice in my head. Merry Christmas, Kristen Copses.

I was awake in the first light the next morning. It was a beautiful day, with sunshine melting the ice on the window. I went downstairs and Gram was still asleep on the couch, but Henry was awake, stretching his skinny legs. I let him out and stood in the doorway, hugging myself, squinting at that glittering world, listening for the sawing sound of a snowmobile.

And then Gram opened her eyes.

I began slowly. 'Christmas was yesterday,' I said.

She smiled at me.

'Santa Claus is coming...' I sang.

'...To town,' she finished.

'He came to us,' I said.

'In all this snow,' she said.

'But what did he look like?'

She ran her hand over her face, thinking. 'He looked cold,' she said.

'And he gave you the candy.'

'One time,' she said, 'when Beatrice and I were little, he brought mittens. Red for Beatrice, blue for me. We each swapped one. All winter, we wore one blue and one red.'

I went over to her and touched her hair. 'I'm going to call Beatrice,' I said.

'Are we going home?' She asked.

'Maybe,' I said. 'I think so. Can you wait here? It is a long walk to the phone. I'll be gone most of the morning.'

I heard a few fragments of the song as she wandered into the kitchen. 'If it takes forever, I will wait...'

I made breakfast for both of us, a heap of frosted flakes; then I layered on sweaters, three pairs of Greens' socks, my jacket, and turned to Gram for one last try. 'Where did you get the candy?' I asked.

'It's in a tin box,' she said. 'Orange and lemon. Makes your mouth wiggle.'

'I'll be back.' I opened the door, hearing the drip of melting icicles from the roof, and stepped back as Henry darted inside.

Outside I thought at first of taking the road. What difference would it make if I were caught?

But it would make a difference. I wanted to call Beatrice first. I wanted to hear that she had come to live with Gram.

And suppose she does not? Green is asked.

I shook my head. She will. I think she will.

I brushed him away, trudging along through the trees, listening to the call of the crows, the screech of the blue jays. And all the time I was listening for that buzzing sound of the snowmobile, telling myself I had made the whole thing up, telling myself it was not Green's.

And what if it was Green's? I asked myself. What would I say to him?

It must have been twenty minutes later when I heard the faint sound of the motor. It could have been anyone, but still, I ran toward the road, trying to pick up my feet in that deep snow.

I saw him, a helmet on his head, thick gloves on his hands, bent over the handles of the snowmobile, and I stepped out onto the road just in time for him to see me and glide to a stop.

I stood there, biting my lip, feeling that river of tears coming, at last, waiting for that brief second as he pushed up the visor. 'Kristen Copses,' he said. 'Where are you going?'

'Green's Regan,' I said, my mouth trembling. 'Happy birthday.'

And then we were laughing, both of us, laughing instead of crying.

'Thank you for the candy,' I said, at last, looking at his face, thinner, bonier. Something about his eyes seemed older.

'Horrible stuff, that candy,' he said.

'And the holly branch.'

He tilted his head a little. 'Kristen Copses,' he said again.

'How did you know I was here?'

He raised one shoulder. 'There was a letter from the agency looking for you.'

I nodded, thinking about the hot cocoa woman sending lost girl letters to every house I had ever been in.

'I told Pop.' Green is swiped at his glasses. ''Kristen loves that house,' I said. But did he listen? Of course not.'

I swallowed. 'You and the Old Man are still arguing.'

'If she loved that house so much, she would be with us right now,' Pop said. But I knew. I've been here every day except during the massive storm.'

I was shivering in the cold, the wind blowing around us, my feet beginning to feel numb.

'We've been hoping you'd come home all these months,' he said. 'Why not, Holly?'

And then I was crying, big sloppy tears. I leaned against the handlebars, making terrible sounds in my throat, and I just could not seem to stop.

Green is stood there, his hands dangling in those huge gloves, and then he reached out, put his arms around me, pulling me toward him.

'The Old Man went down to Long Island when he heard you were missing,' he said. 'He's going crazy looking for you. He keeps going back and forth.'

'Why didn't you tell him?'

'I wanted to do that for you, at least that. Give you time.' He paused. 'You're famous. Your picture is in the newspapers. A pretty awful-looking picture, if you ask me.'

As he rattled on, I kept sniffling and wiping my eyes, and then I would start to cry again.

'I knew you'd be safe.' He took one arm off my shoulder to wave it around. 'As long as I kept an eye on you and your friend.'

'You have a nerve,' I said.

'You'd have starved to death without the food I brought.'

He frowned and began again. 'I still don't know why...'

'I thought...' I began and bit my lip. I would never tell him what I had thought about the Old Man not loving him. 'You were always arguing, and I thought it had to do with...' I waved my hands.

'With you?' he said. 'Oh, Holly. It does not have to do with anyone. I told you that. It's just the way we are.'

I stared down the road, not a car in sight, the trees heavy with snow, bent and leaning.

'I'm a slob and he's neat. I forget, he remembers. We drive each other crazy. But it's all right.'

I ran my hands over my cheeks, tried to dry them. As simple as that, just the way they were.

'I told you,' he said, his head tilted, his eyes smiling. 'You don't know about families yet.' He leaned back against the snowmobile. 'He knew the accident was my fault.'

I sighed. 'It was my fault.'

'Everything has to be your fault all the time?'

I shrugged a little. 'After the accident, Pop said they'd told him you never stayed in one place very long. But he said we were different, and that it must be something else. And that is what it was? You thought-'

'I messed up the family.' 'Wait till he hears this,' Green is said. 'Just wait.'

I watched the snow drifting off the trees. Old Man, I love you. Green has rubbed my shoulders; he must have seen that I was shivering. 'I put the fishing pole away for you in the shed, and looped the sweater over the knob.'

'The fishing poles?' My hand went to my mouth. 'I forgot about the fishing pole. All this time.'

'Ha, Kristen Copses, there's hope for you, I told you that. I am going to spend next summer fixing up the old truck. What do you say? Want to help? Want to come home?'

I did not say anything. I did not have to. I climbed up on the back of the snowmobile. 'Take me to the telephone booth down at the grocery,' I said.

He gunned the motor and the snow spewed out behind us as we flew up the highway to call Beatrice.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Green is stood next to me in that freezing phone booth, his eyeglasses steamy and small puffs of smoke coming out of his mouth. He talked the whole time. 'I told Izzy not to worry, that you'd be home by Christmas.' He waggled his eyebrows. 'Of course, I knew where you were.'

'Wait,' I said, dialing the number I had memorized all those weeks ago. 'I can't hear.'

'And the day after Christmas is pretty close.' He grinned at me.

Then Beatrice's sweet voice was in my ear, soft and a little breathless.

'It's me,' I said. 'Kristen Copses.'

For a moment she did not answer. When she began to speak, it seemed as if she could not stop. 'I've been calling for days, Kristen,' she said. 'Where are you? Is Gram all right? Do you know where Gram is? Please know. I've been so worried.' She paused, out of breath now.

I closed my eyes: Beatrice worried, Gram unhappy, the Old Man looking for me. What had I done?

'She's with me,' I said.

Greens' voice was still in my head even though he was standing right next to me. If you had not made that mess, you might never have come home.

'Gram wants to come home. She remembers home, but she forgets so much else,' I told Beatrice. 'The agency isn't going to let her stay there alone. And they want me to go somewhere else.'

'I'm coming home, Kristen. I am coming home right now.

Do not worry. I'll move right in with Gram.' Her voice sounded excited. 'I'm already sick of painting the desert. I need some snow in my life. I need to see Gram and Henry.'

Green has clapped his hands together for warmth. 'We started in your room anyway,' he said. 'I told the Old Man we'd paint it green, green for holly.'

'Beatrice, she'll be so glad to see you,' I said, looking at Green is, listening to them both at once.

'But the Old Man wanted your room blue,' Green is said.

''Kristen loves blue,' he kept telling us. What does he know?

French Blue, he calls it.'

Films of Kristen Deniel

'My cousin Beatrice would love this,' Gram said, looking around the room. 'If only...'

I had never seen anything so beautiful, so Christmassy either. Pine Laurel Highlands were everywhere. We 'd found candles, maybe a dozen, and light all of them. The ornaments sparkled in the light. And then I thought of what Gram had begun to say. 'If only what?' I asked.

She shrugged a little. 'Beatrice and I spent every Christmas together. She remembers things for me when I forget, things about when we were young.' Her forehead wrinkled. 'Fishing off the je tties.'

I felt a lump in my throat. 'She'll be home someday,' I said, but I wondered when that would be.

'Next year?' Gram said.

I looked out the window. I did not like to think about it next year. Where would we be then?

'Just a minute,' I told her. 'Close your eyes.'

I went down the hall for the picture I had drawn and laid it on the table to flicker in the candlelight. 'Gram herself,' I said, 'with Beatrice.'

She drew in her breath, leaning over it, running one finger along the edge. 'We're young.' She smiled up at me. 'And look at that popcorn machine.' Head tilted, she spotted Henry batting a piece of popcorn across the floor. 'You have to keep looking to see everything,' she said.

She stood up then and pattered away from me into the kitchen. She came back with a round tin in her hand. 'This is from Santa Claus.'

I touched the tin. 'Where did you find this?'

Izzy's hard candies: Izzy standing on the porch one sunny afternoon, holding a tin out to me. 'Lemon drops, and orange. They'll make you sweat, make you love.' She had leaned forward to touch my shoulder.

'You always lump one cheek,' Green has told me days later as I worked my way through the candy. 'It's going to freeze like that.'

Oh, Izzy. Oh, Green's.

I opened the tin and held it out to Gram. 'You get first to pick.' Another thing I had to pay back. I could not just take Izzy's candies.

'Take them,' I suddenly remembered Izzy saying with a sweep of her arm. 'Take anything, Kristen. I've always wanted a daughter.'

'I have a real present for you,' Gram said around the candy in her mouth.

I looked after her, wondering, as she went into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom and came back with something in her arms.

'She's finished at last.'

It was my tree figure, with her sea-grass hair cascading down her back, half the size of Gram. She looked older than I was, but as I touched her face, the small nose, the large eyes, the tiny scar on the forehead, the arms out, I could see it was me.

But not me.

I looked closer, studying those eyes that were so sad it hurt to look at them, ran my fingers over those outstretched arms.

'Giving arms,' Gram said, nodding, bone-thin, like one of the little birds that perched on the evergreen trees. I reached out to her, feeling those small shoulders, and hugged her to me.

Tears burned my eyes. 'She's beautiful,' I said.

'Do you think she looks like you?'

I held her out. 'She's not as tough,' I said, trying for a smile. 'She doesn't look like a mountain of trouble.'

Gram shook her head. 'Maybe you're tough when you need to be tough. But trouble? What would I ever have done without you?'

Gram put her hand under my chin and tilted it so that I had to look at her. 'I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.'

'But I am not-' I began, but she broke in.

'Not good? Not kind? Not there when you are needed?

Not anxious to be loved? You know that's not so.'

I did cry then, but just for a moment. If I had let myself go, I would have had a tough time stopping.

-And-

Then I saw that Gram was crying too.

'I know you want to go home,' I said, a jumble of thoughts in my mind. I wanted to say that we could be a family here, but she wanted to be in her own house, wanted to make Christmas cookies with Beatrice and spend Tuesdays and Thursdays at the movies making popcorn.

We sat on the couch, Henry on Gram's lap, watching the candles glow in the late-afternoon light. The fire in the fireplace sent warm shadows over the wood floor and the walls, and next to me Gram was closing her eyes. Her head went back to rest against the couch, and she was asleep.

I sat there too, half dozing, remembering that Greens' birthday was the next day. It hurt to think about it. I stood up slowly, quietly, and went into his room. I picked up the blurry picture from his dresser, half of the photo dark, the rest all blues and greens, with the faint figure in the center. It was the river, of course; I saw it then, with the holly bushes on the bank and just the faintest view of the Old Man's mountain reaching up in the back. There was the rowboat, and I was in it. I rolled a huge piece of wood onto the banked fire, thinking I would have to drag more in from the porch later.

Henry looked up at me, meowing, waiting to go out. I reached for the knob, pulling, and when the door opened, a gust of wind blew a swirl of snow inside. Henry stared at me angrily.

'Not my fault,' I told him, pushing the door closed again.

He went back to the couch, skinny tail twitching.

'Sorry, cat.' I ran my hand over the top of his head as I went into the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets.

Ah, how far away the hot cocoa woman was, locked in her house somewhere. How far away everyone was.

I thought of the Old Man, and Green's, and Izzy. They were just a few miles away, but those few miles were forever. Did Green is like the snow, or were they so used to storms like this that they never paid attention to them? I wondered if they ever thought about me the way I did about them. I wondered how Green has was now.

I could hear the Old Man's voice in my ears. I closed my eyes. Do not think of that, do not ever think of that terrible afternoon again.

I took out the box of cocoa with marshmallows and boiled a pot of water on the stove, thinking of what I would do today. Draw in front of that big window, I told myself. Figure out a way to shade in that soft line of trees, the gray ribbon of river. Charcoal would be wonderful for that; I would even be able to use a chunk of burned wood from the fireplace.

I had done other firms in the past few days and taped them up around the living room: a snowshoe rabbit with his tall ears, four deer nibbling at the bark of the evergreen, the bridge covered in clear ice. I had done a few of Gram in the snow too, almost nothing but a few quick lines. She walked every day, down to the road, around the evergreens, coming back with her scarf blowing around her face.

What would happen if I left those films when we had to leave next spring? What would the Old Man say when he found them?

What would Izzy say? And Green's?

Spring. Could I call Beatrice then? She would have had months. What would happen to me?

Who cared? I would think of something. But I would never leave the films. I would take them with me in my backpack.

Sitting at the table, waiting for the cocoa to cool, I thought about Christmas. I had lost track of the days. I flipped Izzy's wall calendar ahead to December, trying to figure it out. How long had we been here? Eight days? Nine? I counted back.

The water was ready. I mixed the cocoa and took a tiny sip, feeling the heat of it, the steam on my upper lip. Today could be Christmas Eve.

I stood there planning. When the snow stopped, I would get myself outside and take some of the Evergreen Laurel Highlands; there were so many trees we could fill rooms with them. We would trim the mantel with great heaps of green and tuck Gram's ornaments among the needles. We would find a few pinecones too. We would have a special dinner tomorrow night. Fruit cocktail and canned tuna, a feast. And popcorn.

I wished I had a present for Gram. The only thing I could give her was a picture of herself. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. I would do that today instead of drawing trees. I

took another sip of cocoa. What about Gram with Beatrice at the movies in front of their popcorn machine? Both would be eating, mouths full, arm in arm, smiling.

'Sleigh bells ring,' Gram sang, coming into the kitchen behind me.

'I was just thinking that.' I reached for another cup and poured in water for cocoa.

She stopped to peer out the window. 'I've watched it snow on the ocean,' she said. 'It melts as it hits the water.' She touched the glass with all five fingers. 'There is nothing like the ocean.'

I tried to think of something to change the look in her eyes.

'I was thinking we'd have a party,' I told her, 'with your ornaments and tree Laural Highlands from outside.'

She smiled, looking up at the ceiling. 'We could listen to carols on the radio,' she said. 'That's what Beatrice and I do every year-that and talk about when we were young. Where is Beatrice?'

'Painting,' I said. 'It's warm where she is.'

Gram shook her head. 'We always make almond cookies; we eat half and sell the other half at the movie.'

'It would be nice if we had a radio.' I popped two of our last pieces of bread into the toaster. 'And too bad we don't have a few eggs around.'

'Or almond syrup,' she said.

'Or better,' I said, and we both laughed.

'We'd have to ask Santa Claus,' she said. 'He'd bring it all to us on his...' She paused, thinking.

'Sleigh.'

She shook her head. 'That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on a...' She looked up at the ceiling.

I laughed. 'A motorbike?'

'One of those snow things.' She nodded, laughing too.

'But how could we not have a radio? Everyone has a radio.'

I finished off my coco, one sweet marshmallow left in my mouth, trying to remember. Had there been a radio here? There was never television, I remembered that. But Gram was right, there must be a radio. I wandered around, searching, and finally found one on a shelf, behind boxes of old jigsaw puzzles, the old cord wrapped around it. All that time Henry was stalking me, a line between his eyes as if he were frowning. He wanted to go out.

I went to the door again and opened it a crack. The snow was worse now, much worse. The line of trees had disappeared, and even the shed seemed far away. I was almost afraid to let Henry out. Before I could shut the door again, though, he darted around me and was gone. I stood there, shivering, trying to see where he was, and then he was back, streaking through the door straight across the living room, into the kitchen, and onto Gram's lap.

I set up my drawing things in front of the window, beginning the rough lines that would turn into Gram. Gram was there on the other side of the room, at the table, fiddling with the radio knob until she found a station with Christmas music.

The announcer's voice: 'A lovely Christmas Eve morning.'

I had hit the date straight on the head.

The songs began, one after another: 'Adeste Fidelis,' 'Silent Night,' 'Winter Wonderland,' and one I'd never heard before: 'Gather 'Round the Christmas Tree.'

I leaned over the paper in front of me so Gram would not see what I was doing. I sketched in the space around Beatrice first, the counter, the popcorn machine, and then began to work on the faces. Every few minutes I would peer out at the snow coming down. Across the river the mountain was blurred, just a dark shadow rising into the pewter sky.

And then I thought about Gram sitting there, my figure in her hand, staring out the window too as she listened to the music, her face tilted, her eyes sad.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I never really drew any of this. I tried not to think about it. It kept coming up inside my head, though, picture after picture of what happened that last day. Saturday. Izzy and the Old Man off on

some antique hunt up to Masonville. Green's begging me to go fishing. 'We'll take the boat all the way down to the rapids,' he said. 'Bring our lunch.'

'You go,' I said, barely looking up from my drawing.

'Gonna spend this entire day with a bunch of pencils in your mouth? Fooling around with bits of paper?'

I grinned at him over my shoulder.

Go, Green is, I thought. Get out of here.

And then he went with a great clatter, pail and oars, pole and lures, a sandwich dripping tomatoes out the side. 'You'll probably be sorry in two minutes,' he said.

He sounded sorry. 'Do you mind?' I asked.

He grinned. 'Not really. But I will be gone all day, I warn you.'

He climbed into the rowboat and I watched him, his back bent, leaning over the oars until he was gone.

I put everything away carefully, my pad and pencils, cleaned up the tomato mess in the kitchen, put away the box of Mallomars, shut the refrigerator door, and all the time I was thinking, Three hours up, three hours back, a cinch.

I grabbed a sweater just in case it was getting cold now - and at the last minute, I changed my mind and took a few pieces of paper folded in my pocket, a few pencils: green, gray, brown, and black, and the French Blue one. Who knew what I could use it for, but it was my favorite?

And then I began to climb. It was hot work; I draped the sweater over a tree limb. After a while, I could feel the pull in my ankles, the rub of my sneakers against my heels. I stopped at the halfway point to look down at the house, the snake of the river, and I could see Green is, a tiny figure in the rowboat.

I pulled out some paper, made a quick sketch, and climbed some more. Mud. The Old Man was right: It was deceptive. I could not tell it was there until I stepped into it, once covering the whole of my sneaker. I pulled the shoe out and wiped it off with a few leaves.

I was out of breath by the time I almost reached the top, and hungry. Why hadn't I made my tomato sandwich? There was water, though, a tiny thread of it trickling down from one of the rocks, and I leaned my face into it and drank, and put my wrists under it, and then took the last few steps and I was there.

It opened out, a wide piece of rock, and I danced out onto it, catching my breath. I had brought dark pencils, but this was a light world. I could see toy houses, and the river, and even the town of Hancock in the distance. There was a tiny silver lake and a road with miniature cars. 'It's Christmas!' I shouted.

I said all the things I wanted to. 'I'm new,' I said. 'I'm different.'

And in my head, I told myself I would never be mean again, I would be friendly, I would go to school and walk up to people. 'A new leaf,' I said.

I was twirling, dizzy, hungry, and the bubbles inside twirled with me until I took one step too close to the edge in that muddy sneaker, and then I was rolling, feeling the sharp edge of a branch tearing into my arm and a stone gashing into my forehead, and finally, a huge boulder stopped me a few feet down. The wind had been knocked out of me. I lay gasping.

I pulled myself back up. Not so bad, not so terrible, I told myself, wiping the blood out of my eye, except that I knew I would never be able to walk down by myself.

I did not begin to call Green is until much later until the sun had crossed toward the west and I knew it was late afternoon, and I did not want Izzy and the Old Man to know I had done such a stupid thing. And even as I called, I knew Green is could not hear me.

But he came, of course, he came. Just before sunset I heard him, or I heard the pickup truck, gears grinding and then stopping, the door slamming, and then he was standing over me.

'I knew it,' he said.

'How?'

He narrowed his eyes. 'Break any bones?'

'Certainly not.'

'I wasted my whole afternoon,' he said. 'Felt sorry that you were all alone, came back, and -'

'Wasted-'

'Right. I figured it out, though. You weren't anywhere.'

'So, why'd you bring the truck?' I asked.

'Think I had three hours before dark to walk up here to get you?' He shook his head. 'I thought you'd been killed.'

'Just wounded,' I said, laughing.

We sat on the edge of the rock, watching the sun go down.

Green is pointed. 'Our winter place is somewhere over there. You'll see it soon.' To the east far below was the summer house, the holly bushes a blur of green, the golden field, the thread of river. It took my breath away.

'I want to show you something,' I told Green's. I reached into my pocket for the crumpled-up W picture I had taken out of my backpack before I had left. 'I've had it since I was six.'

We sat on a ledge, our feet dangling, and he smoothed the picture on his knee, stared at it, then looked over at me.

'We had to find films with W words,' I said.

'It's a wishing picture,' he said slowly, 'for a family.'

I could feel my lips trembling. Oh, Mrs. Evans, I thought, why didn't you see that?

'It's too bad you didn't come when you were six.' He smiled. 'I knew you had to stay with us when you let me win that checkers game.'

His hair was falling over his forehead and his glasses were crooked, almost hiding his eyes. I thought of the X-picture day and walking out of school. I thought of sitting in the park on a swing, my foot digging into the dirt underneath.

'I run away sometimes,' I said. 'I don't go to school.'

He kicked his foot gently against the ledge, his socks down over his sneakers.

'Someone called me incorrigible.'

Now that I had begun, I did not know how to stop. 'Kids never wanted to play with me. I was mean....'

Green has pulled his glasses off and set them down on the ledge next to him. He rubbed the deep red mark on the bridge of his nose.

I stopped, looking out as far as I could, miles of looking out. For a moment I was sorry I had told him. But he turned and I could see his eyes and I wondered if he might be blinking back tears. I was not sure, though. He reached out and took my hand.

'You ran in the right direction this time, didn't you?'

And that was it. He knew all about me, and he did not mind.

'We have to go down now,' he said, 'before they come back and find out.'

I nodded. I stood up, and I could feel the pain shoot through my ankle. I limped to the pickup truck. 'I'm glad you came,' I said. 'I could never have walked down.' 'It was a dumb thing to do,' he said, 'coming up here. Pop would have a fit.'

And so, we went down. Green is being a sure and careful driver, but it was so steep, and the truck kept going, kept sliding, even with the brake pressed down as hard as he could manage. He pressed and pressed, but the truck gained speed, and just before the end when we would have been all right when we would have been fine, the truck tipped, and I could see we were going to go over.

And Green is yelling at me. 'Jump, Holly!'

Films of Kristen Deniel

Late that afternoon the snow tapered off and stopped. I took a last look at the picture, pleased with it: Beatrice, listening to something Gram is saying, both with bags of popcorn in their hands. I sneaked it into my room so that Gram would not see it.

I put on all the clothes I could find, and Izzy's boots, and went outside to sink into the soft snow to my knees. The cold was shocking. It stung the inside of my nose and numbed my cheeks.

Everything was still. The birds must have found nesting places for the night, and the deer were hiding somewhere deep in the Copses. The last slim line of the river had frozen; if I had not known it was there, I would have walked right across to the other side. I wondered if the ice would carry my weight yet.

I realized I would not be able to pick evergreen or holly Laural Highlands from the ground. Anything the wind had brought down was under the snow. I would have to saw off what I could.

Gram and Henry were framed in the window, waving to me. I reached down to scoop up a handful of white and tossed it at them. Then I trudged over to the shed for the Old Man's saw and found Greens' sweater hanging on the knob, encrusted with snow. I did not even remember leaving it there. I folded it, put it on one of the shelves, reached for the saw, and spent the last bit of daylight hacking away at Laurel Highlands, making sure not to spoil the shapes of the trees.

The wind was not as strong under the shelter of those trees, and it reminded me of something the Old Man had told me.

Hunters who were lost would pull the tree Laural Highlands together with rope, bending them to form a shelter. I loved the thought of that, the trees forming a cozy nest. And then I shivered, thinking of being alone.

You have Gram, Green is might have said.

I love Gram, I said back.

From inside, music spilled from the radio. 'All I want for Christmas...'

What I want. What I want.

Gram was turning on the lamps now; the house was like a Christmas card with the light shining on the snow. I stood there watching, wondering how far the light might be seen.

I reached up for the last branch, snow spraying my face. No one could understand something at last anyway, I told myself; it faced the river, away from the road, and no one would be on the Old Man's mountain toward evening after a storm like this.

'You're a snow sculpture,' Gram said as I trudged onto the porch, staggering under the bulky Laural Highlands.

I pulled off Izzy's waders and rubbed my feet until the feeling came back. Gram danced around me. 'I have something for your dinner,' she said, delighted with herself. 'I was saving it for a surprise.'

She led me into the kitchen and opened the cabinet over the refrigerator. I thought I knew where everything was, but behind Izzy's old bowls and mixers was a row of treasures: a box of dried milk... milk!... pancake mix, and a jar of applesauce. 'Yes,' Gram said with satisfaction. 'We'll have apple pancakes for dinner with cold milk.'

My mouth watered. A Christmas Eve dinner.

I will pay you back, Izzy, every cent, if it takes me the rest of my life.

So, Gram cooked for the first time, talking to me over her shoulder about Beatrice. 'Ornaments sparkle on the tree, and

Beatrice lights the candles.'

Every time Gram talked about Beatrice, she seemed to come alive, I thought; Beatrice and her house. I knew she was homesick. 'We'll have Christmas here too,' I told her. 'I'll set everything up after we eat.'

But after I had finished the pancakes covered with dollops of sweet applesauce, my eyes drooped; I was warm and sleepy.

'Let's do it all in the morning,' I said.

'Presents,' Gram said, a secret smile lighting her face. I curled up in bed, looking out the window at a pale moon and trees thick with snow, thinking I had never seen anything so beautiful. I could see movement at the edge of the trees and sat up to see what it was. And then suddenly, a fox, silvery gray with his tail streaming out behind him, darted across that open space, crossed the ice, and was gone.

I saw a fox, Green's. I have never seen a fox before.

I lay back, trying to figure out what Gram might have for me. She had found another package of food. I fell asleep wondering what it was, what I would like it to be: something sweet, something chocolate, or salty. Potato chips.

The next morning, the sun was blinding. And the shed glittered like the witch's house in Hansel and Gretel. I lay there, something on the edge of my mind. What was it? Something about the shed? Or was I wondering what the Old Man would think if he knew I was spending Christmas in his house?

I did not want to think about that. But there was something else. Was it Gram's present for me? An egg was what I wanted this morning. What I could do with an egg! I would bake a cake or cookies. I would whip it up for eggnog. I would fry it like a little sun in a pan.

I threw on my clothes. The house still smelled of the pancakes from last night. I went into the kitchen.

At that moment the back door opened, and Gram came in, her scarf pulled over her forehead, her nose red.

I wanted to tell her she should not be out there, that it was too cold, the snow too deep. But I would sound like the stucco woman. I turned back to the stove. 'Coco with milk,' I said.

We hurried through breakfast, and afterward, I went out on the porch to shake the snow off the Laurel Highlands before I brought them inside. I covered the mantelpiece, the sharp pine smelling like Christmas, as Gram unwrapped the box of ornaments. 'Here's my old Santa Claus.' I could hear the tears in her voice as she hung him in the center. 'And this one.' She held up a thick pink plastic globe. 'Ugly, isn't it? It's the only kind we could get during the Second World War.'

She went on, telling me the history of each one until the mantel was finished and the center of the table held a bowl of holly. 'We'll even hang a few of those glittery ornaments over the window to catch the light,' I said aloud, and to myself, please be happy, Gram.

'Presents now?' Gram asked.

'Maybe,' I said absently. I had caught movement outside as I hung the last clear prism.

We watched as seven or eight deer wandered in front of the house, making their way toward the evergreens. Suddenly something disturbed them. Heads back, noses up, they stood stock-still for an instant, then scattered, two to bound across the river ice as the fox had last night, the others in the opposite direction, toward the bridge.

I tried to see what had bothered them. I looked toward the evergreens myself, looked back as far as I could. There was no light anywhere, nothing to make me think about a fisherman being out there somewhere.

I had a quick thought of the night on the mountain with the flashlights like glowworms above me.

It was then I remembered: Green's sweater, a flash of green in the snow as I backed away from the fisherman that day. I had not left it on the doorknob in the shed. I opened my mouth to ask Gram if she had picked it up when she had been outside. But Gram would never remember. I did not want to know the answer, anyway, thinking of the fisherman finding us and what might happen then.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I could not get warm, even though I wore a robe and Izzy's sweater on top of that. Every time I drifted off to sleep that August night, I would start, thinking someone was there. I would look around the darkroom, but it was empty. I would close my eyes again, and then I would think I was falling, my head jerking, arms up, legs braced, a scream in my throat, and that feeling in my chest as we went over the side.

But I did not sleep. I kept going over it: the sound first, a screeching metal, tearing, as if the truck was dying, the wheel swerving, a tree slowing us down, its Laural Highlands cracking, breaking, leaves covering the windshield, a rock ripping at the underside, the truck bouncing now, not so muddy, gravel and roots and Green's hands off the wheel, the sound of glass shattering, a tire spinning...

And then everything was still.

We were down the Old Man's mountain, and next to me Green is with his head on the wheel. I reached for him, my heart pounding, shook his shoulder. 'Don't do this,

Green's,' I said. 'Don't be dead.'

I pushed him back, his head against the seat now, his face white in the dusky inside of the truck. Not a mark on him that I could see, but he was hurt, I was sure, really hurt. He was not dead, though. There was a thin pulsing on the side of his neck, his eyes moving under the broken glasses. I took them off gently and heard him say something. Loon Sister. I could hear the S. It was Sorry.

'Green's, I have to get help.' I watched him for another moment, then scrambled out of the truck, feeling the pull of my ankle, telling myself I had to do it, had to go as quickly as I could. I began the climb back up, wondering how long it would take to get down the mountain road, cross the bridge, and reach the house.

And then I thought, No telephone.

What then?

I was there when I saw the sweep of headlights going across the bridge. Izzy and the Old Man coming home?

When they saw me, Izzy leaned out the window, calling, 'I bought dishes, Kristen. You're going to love them.' And then she stopped. 'Child, you're bleeding.'

'The truck!' I said.

'What has he done?' the Old Man said. 'What has he done now? You can hardly walk!'

It seemed to take forever before lights flickered on the mountain and cars began to park diagonally down below. Turret lights turned and glowed, and an ambulance came from Walton, its siren screaming. They brought Green is down at last, but all I could see was one foot, the sneaker, the socks falling over his ankles.

A policeman shook his head, talking to Izzy and the Old Man as I stood to one side, out of everyone's way. 'If it was not your mountain, if it was not private property, your boy would be in trouble. As it is-'

'As it is,' Izzy's voice cut in, 'we have to hope he'll be all right.'

And I had looked over my shoulder at the Old Man's face, his clenched jaw.

In the emergency room, a doctor took five stitches to close my forehead and wrapped an Ace bandage around my ankle.

Green has been somewhere inside too, and I did not even know what was happening to him.

We went home later that night, much later, Izzy and I, Izzy to stay just long enough to put me to bed, to cover me and tell me it would be all right, to touch my cheek and my chin. 'Just sleep,

Kristen,' she said. 'Everything will seem better in the morning.' And then she went back to the hospital to wait.

I thought about the stucco woman. She would not have been surprised at the trouble I had caused. She would have seen it coming. Would Greens have driven the truck to the top of the mountain if I hadn't been there? And the arguing between Green's and the Old Man-what had Izzy said? 'Worse this summer.'

I'd messed up the whole family.

Before it was light, I packed my things in the backpack. They didn't all fit, so I left a small pile of odds and ends, and the bathing suit that was drying on the line. I tore off a sheet of paper from my drawing pad and wrote the note: It was my fault, all of it. I wanted to see the mountain. I am going back to Long Island.

Please do not come after me. I do not want to be a family.

I looked back as I left, to take a picture of it all in my mind, thinking how strange it was to use my running money to run back to the stucco woman. It was even stranger that she let me walk in there so easily, clucking over my bandage, taking me to the doctor a week later to have the stitches out.

Emmy, agency hotshot, came to see me tell me Green is was going to be all right. 'His ribs are broken,' she said, 'and the bones in his arms are fractured.' While her mouth was still open, ready to say something else, I told her 'I never want to go back, I never want to see any of them again.'

She tried to find out why, but when I just kept looking out the window, banging my feet on the chair rung, she sighed and let me stay with the stucco woman.

I did not do that, either. I lasted there through most of September, and then I ran.

How could I not have seen that the other day?

'Hey, stop rowing,' he said. 'I'm going to take your picture.'

I looked up at him, feeling the sun on my face, feeling the happiness down to my toes, as he stood at the river's edge and snapped the picture.

'You've got a smiley face,' he said. 'We could put you on a stamp and sell it all over Laurel Highlands.'

'Too bad you did not take your thumb off the lens,' I told him.

'Too bad you dropped the oar,' he said. 'It's floating away.'

I put the picture back carefully, then went downstairs for sweaters and pulled my jacket off the hook. Something fell out as I did. It was the shell I had picked up the first time I had seen Gram's ocean. I held it up to my face before I put it back into my pocket.

I needed to be outside. I needed to be cold, so cold I could not think of anything but the ice and the snow.

Anything, that is what the stucco woman would say.

Films of Kristen Deniel

For all, I know this picture might still be in the agency conference room. It is a drawing of a small office with beige paneling on the walls. The paneling is fake wood. There is a table in the center, someone's initials, TR, gouged out of the wood. The picture is not finished, but Emmy and the hot cocoa woman did not know that. They thought the girl sitting at the table was me. Of course, it was not me. This girl was laughing. She was just make-believe.

I was not laughing when I sat there. I was sitting as straight as I could, but I could feel my knees shaking.

'Mr. Regan wants to talk to you,' Emmy said.

I shook my head, never looking at her, sketching on the paper.

She leaned forward. 'He's come down here, Holly.'

'Kristen.'

'Just see what he has to say.'

I shook my head again, but Emmy patted my hand and was out the door.

And then he was there, standing in front of me, and I still did not lookup. 'I'm sorry,' I said in a voice so low I wasn't sure he heard me.

'It was Green's fault,' he said.

'No,' I said.

'He took the truck-' I could see him wave his hand.

'Kristen, it doesn't matter. We just want you home.'

I thought about standing up. I felt like putting my arms around him, then going out to the car with him. I thought of what it would be like to drive up to their front door.

'I didn't tell Izzy and Green's I was coming,' he said. 'If I had, they would have come too. I had to make sure you wanted to be with us first.'

Izzy would be standing at the door, and Green's next to her. We'd be hugging each other, all of us. There'd be pancakes and hard candy.

But that was just for a moment.

'It wasn't Green's fault,' I said. 'I went up the mountain first.'

'It doesn't make any difference.'

He was blaming Green's. If I went home with him, they'd always blame Green's. 'He thinks you're perfect,' Green's had said. Before I could change my mind, I shook my head. 'I think I'll stay down here.'

He tried to talk me out of it. I wasn't even hearing what he said. I stopped drawing; my hands were clenched under the table, and I never once looked up at him. After a while, he left.

Emmy came back in with tears in her eyes.

'You want tough?' I asked. 'I'll show you tough.'

I grinned. The Old Man knew a lot. But maybe I wouldn't tell Green's that either.

I talked for another minute, telling Beatrice we'd go home soon, telling her we were all right, we were fine, and then I hung up the phone.

Green's yanked off his gloves with his teeth, reached for more change, and laid it out on the shelf. 'I bet you don't even know our phone number,' he said as he began to dial.

I could hear Izzy's larger-than-life voice. 'Is that you, Green's?'

He handed the phone to me, then let himself out of the phone booth to stand outside, stamping his feet.

'It's me, Izzy,' I said. 'Do you think I could come home?'

Ah, and the house in Laurel Highlands. Green's house. Nevertheless, that home was dissimilar. I'd never- ever fail to recall that one. Don't think about it, Green's said in my cranium. I did that a lot; I pretended Green's was right there next to me when I knew he was miles away in upstate Philadelphia.

The next day all the kid, like me were fighting over the crumbs of not having anything- and with that comes not having much to eat either, and if you were lucky enough to get your hands on anything at all, that resembled food. And let's not fail to mention the snooty long straggly haired old woman; she was the power at be, also it was odd to me that there were no rugs- just sub-floors...

'What...,' Kristen began. She reached up to feel her cheek, the first time she could ever remember Gram kissing her when it wasn't time to leave for school or to go to bed. She put her arms around Gram. 'Grannie,' she whispered so softly she didn't know if Gram had heard.

Halfway down the road, Kristen could smell the fish cooking. She could hear Poppy talking, and the rumble of Mr. Meyer's voice. Mr. Meyer's Ford was in the driveway, the headlights still painted black. She'd help him scrape them off first thing tomorrow.

Gram was looking toward her and leaned over suddenly to kiss Kristen's cheek. 'It was a long war, a terrible war,' she said, 'but sometimes, even in the worst times, something lovely happens.'

I wondered if he ever said to himself, 'What is Kristen Deniel doing right this moment?' And did he put my words in his mind at all? The woman turned off the motor of the car something from the late 1924's is all I can say.

For a moment, we looked out at the trees, the leaves- in bolshies of rosy reds, yellow oakum golds and bight to burnt orange, with just a tinge of greens this late October evening.

'We're here, Kristen,' she said, a woman in sweats, a hot cocoa stain on the front from the hot dogs we had eaten on the side of the road. Those hot dogs were a mean lump in the middle of my stomach, sloshing around with a Cola. They walked down to the Smiths' on the roadside, the tufts of grass bright against the sand, Kristen carrying the cat along with her.

Kristen made a face in the mirror, then scooped up a handful of water for her face. 'I'm ready,' she said, 'ready now.'

3

Now Gram was knocking at the bathroom door. 'Poppy's gone down to the Smiths' ahead of us,' she said, 'and if you don't hurry in there, the dinner will be ruined. They're all waiting...'

She'd tried to talk all the way, but I hadn't answered. I slumped in my seat, feet up on the glove compartment, wearing the dress with matching hat and gloves with the hat had a low over my forehead. If someone looks into your eyes, I read in a book one time, he'll see right into your soul.

I didn't want anyone to see into my soul. I knew she was dying to tell me to get my sneakers off her dashboard, but she didn't. She was waiting to deliver her speech.

Kristen thought about her problem list for the first time in a long time. Lies, and Daydreaming, and Friends need. She didn't lie anymore. Every time she started to lie, she thought of Noah and closed her mouth. She still daydreamed, though. Sister Sara had told her that all writers did that and that as long as you knew the difference between lies and daydreams you were in good shape.

I could hear her getting ready for it with a puff of breath. 'This can be a new start, Kristen. A new place.' She licked her finger and scratched at the hot cocoa stain. 'No one knows you.

You can be different, you can be good, know what I mean?'

Maybe she gave that speech to every foster kid in every driveway as she dumped them off like the mail guy dumping off packages on a busy day, but I didn't think so. I had looked into her eyes once, just the quickest look, and I had seen that she felt sorry for me, that she didn't know what to do with me. Too bad for you, hot coco woman.

Kristen didn't wait to hear the rest. Mrs. Meyer would know about Noah and May. She went into the bathroom quickly to comb her hair and run water over her hands. The water came in spurts at first, the way it always after the winter. Kristen leaned forward to look in the mirror, wondering if she looked different this year. She closed her eyes, remembering that Friday night last summer, getting ready to go to the Smiths', and Gram holding the washcloth over her red eyes after she'd cried for Poppy. And she thought about Noah, with his dark hair and blue eyes. I hummed a little of 'The Worms Sneak In, the Worms Creep Out.'

'She was an art teacher,' the hot cocoa woman said, pointing to the house. 'Retired now. I've never met her, but everyone at the agency says she's wonderful with kids...' Her voice trailed off, but I knew she had meant to say, 'kids like you.'

If only Noah were there. I walked my feet up the dashboard, so my knees came close to my chin.' No one's been here with her for a while, but Emmy said it would be a good place for you.' 'A good place for an artist like you, Kristen,' the hot cocoa woman said. 'Mr. Regan...' Emmy, the agency hotshot. I drew in my breath. The Old Man. I closed my eyes as if I were ready to doze off. 'He wanted you to have a chance to work at your drawings. He said it would be a crime if you didn't.' 'It's Friday night,' Gram said over her shoulder. 'The Smiths want us to come for dinner.

Wash your face and...'

4

Someone was fishing from a rowboat, probably one of the kids from Broad Channel. Kristen raised her arm to wave and smiled as the girl waved back.

Under her feet, the porch floor was gritty. Any minute Gram would be calling, telling her to give it a quick sweep, and find the sheets, and get her bed ready. Kristen reached for her book and flipped through until she found the star. She had taken it off her ceiling last night as she packed. She put a dab of glue on it and pasted it behind the bed with the others, smiling a little. Then she went into the kitchen for the broom. She had probably said,

'What have we got to lose?'

Still holding the cat, Kristen wandered out to the porch and leaned on the screen. She smelled the bay and listened to the water lapping against the pilings.

Now the church bells were chiming five. Kristen followed Poppy along the path to the house. Gram had opened the door and the windows on the porch. 'Blowing the winter out,' she said, looking up. 'And here's Tom's cat.' But next to me, the hot cocoa woman took a deep breath. I cut my eyes in the direction of the house. I was good at that, seeing everything without turning my head, without looking up, without blinking.

I tried to yawn, but then the front door opened, and a woman came out on the porch with a mangy orange cat one step behind her. I didn't bother to give them more than a glance. What did I care about what the woman looked like? 'Lordy,' the hot cocoa woman breathed.

Not even the hot chocolate was covering that up. I sat up straight, wondering if I should open the car door and run, or reach out to push the button down, locking myself in. I did blink then, of course, I did. Anyone getting a first look at Gram Cahill would do the same. It wasn't just that she was movie-star beautiful, or that she was wearing a blue dress made of filmy stuff that floated around her, and rings on eight of her fingers. It was this: She had a knife in one hand. She held it in front of her so it caught the glint of late-afternoon sunshine and became a silvery light itself. 'It's me,' Kristen said, her hand out, reaching.

'Don't you remember?'

And then the cat was in her arms, its orange coat short, rough, and warm from the sun. Kristen bent her head, rubbing her chin against the cat's head, listening to the sound of its rusty purring. She thought of Tom, and last summer, and Christy. Kristen climbed the boardwalk steps slowly as the cat stood there, moving back a step each time she moved forward. The knife woman came close enough for me to see that the movie-star face had dozens of tiny crisscross lines on its cheeks and across its forehead.

But then she smiled, and the lines around her mouth rearranged themselves. She leaned forward and put one hand on the car window. 'Kristen,' she said. 'Are you here, then?'

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I could feel a pencil in my hand, moving across the paper, drawing her face, her eyes, the knife. I reached over the seat, grabbed my backpack, and was out the door, slamming it behind me. 'Poppy, look,' Kristen said. 'It's Tom's cat. The Smiths must have kept her after Noah went back to Canada.'

Suppose she never saw Noah again? She leaned over to cup her hands in the water, to splash a little on her face. Her skirt, let loose, plastered itself against her legs.

They stood there for another moment before they went toward the boardwalk together, Kristen picking up one sock looking around for the other one. And then she saw the cat, standing there, watching her, ready to run. Kristen could feel the dryness in her mouth, the sand beginning to blow against her face, stinging. 'Pap?' she asked. Slowly she held out her hand.

She dug her toes into the sandy bottom, picturing her words sliding out to see the way the waves did out to Europe. 'You're my best friend, Tom,' she whispered, 'the best friend I ever had...'

Then Poppy was in the back of her, his strong hands around her shoulders, pulling her into the dry warmth of his shirt.

Films of Kristen Deniel

This wasn't one picture, it was six, eight, ten. I never could get Green's right. I could see him in my head, though, close my eyes and there he was. That first day, I was sick to my stomach from the smell of the bus, the dizzying mountain roads. I had been on that bus for hours. It seemed like weeks. The tag pinned to my shirt, Kristen COPSES, LONG ISLAND, had rubbed a raw patch into my neck. All I could think about was how thirsty I felt. I imagined ice cubes in my mouth, burning my tongue, ginger ale in a glass that was wet to the touch, root beer with two scoops of orange sherbet. I was on my way to a place called Laurel Highlands to spend the summer with a family named Regan. 'I'll be good if you don't make me go,' I had almost told the woman I was living within the stucco house. 'I won't make a sound, you'll see.' Instead, I squeezed my lips in between my teeth so hard they were hidden inside my mouth and shot lightning rays at her out of the corners of my eyes. 'Fresh air, a place in the country,' the stucco woman said, 'that's what you need.' She didn't mean it, though. I heard her on the phone. 'Two months,' she said, 'two months to do what I please and not have to worry about that kid getting into everything.' She's a mountain of trouble, that Kristen Copses.' I marched up the stairs, hitting every rung with her lime green umbrella. Anyway, I was the last one left on the bus. Up in front, the driver talked with the woman from the agency. If I ducked down in the back of the seat, would they forget about me? Would they turn around and go back to Long Island? We lumbered up the main street of Hancock, passing a row of houses and a movie theater, and came to a stop in front of a diner.

The pelican looked as irritable as Henry. I told myself I'd have a house like that one day: hatboxes and wigs have drawn on one-bathroom wall, and high-heeled shoes, dozens of them, marching along in watercolor in a tiny bedroom at the end of the hall.

That yellow kitchen was huge. A couch sat under the window, piled high with embroidered pillows that said things like HENRY'S HOME, V FOR VICTORY, SAVE THE SARGASSO SEA.

I'd never even heard of the Sea.

I had drawn the house with paper from my backpack and fat bits of charcoal I had found somewhere. It was lovely to sketch the house and Gram with her scarf. She watched me sometimes as I drew Henry sitting on top of the old-fashioned radio, and the pelican with beady eyes.

5

Too bad you don't have your drawing box, I imagined

Green's saying all those yellows and blues. I was all right, though.

'We'll take a drive in the Silver Bullet today,' Gram said, sounding pleased with herself. She brushed a few shavings off the front of her dress onto the faded linoleum floor. 'I have things to show you, Kristen.' No school on a Monday? I shrugged to myself. If she wanted to forget about it, that was fine with me. I spent most of the time in the back of the classroom sketching, or drawing faces in ink on the plastic desk and erasing them with one wet finger. 'Everything,' I said, putting my tongue against my top teeth in front of her face. 'Fresh.' She cupped her hand over the phone. 'Fresh as paint.' And back to the phone, whispering now: 'No wonder she hasn't been adopted.

'Straighten up, kid,' the bus driver said, looking into the rearview mirror. 'We're here.' I gathered up my backpack and the plastic bag they had given me: a toothbrush, a bar of soap that smelled like an old sock, a pink washcloth, and a book for drooling two-year-old's, Jo Anne Goes Camping. I tossed the book in the agency woman's lap as I passed, nose in the air, pretending I wasn't dying of thirst, pretending I wasn't bursting from having to go to the bathroom. Outside the bus window, a man leaned against the wall of the diner, his hat over his eyes, and a boy played handball against a brick wall. I climbed down into the blistering hot sun, checking out the boy.

A skinny mess he was, much taller than I, his socks falling. They looked as if they didn't even match. As the bus started up, the exhaust smells like a sewer, the boy slammed the ball against the wall,

missing it on its way back. He nearly killed himself trying to dive in front of the bus for it, then jumped back at the last moment as the ball bounced across the street. I put down my backpack and the agency freebie bag darted across the street in the back of the bus and scooped up the ball with one hand. I trotted back to them, tossing it over my head and catching it a couple of times just to show them what I could do. The man pushed his hat back and grinned at me. He had a great face to draw: eyes the color of cinnamon toast, a prickly gray-black beard, deep laugh lines. 'I'm Green's Regan,' the boy said, grinning. 'How'd you get a name like that, Kristen Copses, crazy name? Do they call you Holly? We have a pile of holly bushes out in front. Touch the leaves and they draw blood. I'm going to call you Holly.' The man shook his head. 'Green's.' 'Try it,' I cut in. 'How old are you anyway?' Green's asked, his eyes caramel behind his glasses. 'You look like kind of a shrimp to me.'

'Twelve,' I said, bumping it up almost a year, 'and tough.' 'Baby. I'll be thirteen December twenty-sixth.' He rushed on. 'We're having lunch at the diner. My mother stayed in Laurel Highlands.' 'Izzy's making carrot cake,' the man said. I thought about saying I hated carrots-not true, I ate anything. Anything, the stucco house lady would say. Besides, they were standing there, Green's and his father, looking so pleased about having lunch in the diner and carrot cake for dinner, I didn't have the heart, and I had to go to the bathroom.

'Bet you're thirsty.' Green's eyes narrowed. 'They've got checkers at every table. I'll play you, beat you.' He wanted to pay me back for the ball trick. His father frowned. He knew it too. But I was all right with it; I was fine with it. I skittered into the diner, straight to the restroom, and then sat with them at their table drinking root beer floats, cold and sweet, with wet napkins underneath the glasses. After I had downed half of mine, Green's ticked off the things he wanted me to know. 'I call the old man Pop,' he said. 'You can call me that,' the father said. I took a chance. 'I'm going to call you Old Man.' He laughed. 'Try it.' I could tell he didn't mind, though. 'What's next is I'm a walker,' Green's said. 'Walk me-myself and I, all over Laurel Highlands. I'll walk you, too.' 'Maybe,' I said. 'I know motors,' he said. 'I drive a truck.' 'Don't believe that.' The Old Man snorted. 'Not even thirteen years old.' 'I almost drive, then,' Green's said, giving me a wink. 'Legal any day now.' The Old Man rolled his eyes at me. 'And the last thing, I know tracks.' Green's spread his arms wide. 'Animal Tracks. All of them.' I was laughing. I knew he meant for me to laugh. He pushed the black checkers over to me. 'Let's see what you can do here, Kristen Copses,' he said. 'Win and I'll teach you how to drive.' 'In your dreams,' the Old Man said. We played a couple of checkers games, Green's taking wild chances, while we dripped ketchup from our hamburgers onto the table and the Old Man egged us on. Anyway, the picture I was trying for was

Green's playing checkers with me that first day. That was the picture I could never get perfect. Maybe it was because he let me win that first game; maybe it was because I let him win the next one. And maybe it was because for the first time I saw what it might be like to have a brother.

Today the water was almost calm. Tiny waves folded on themselves, then slid out to sea, leaving small fingers of foam on the damp sand. Kristen waded in, bunching up her skirt. The water was icy cold on her feet and ankles, numbing. She looked out at the gray triangular rock that jutted out near the end of a jetty, the place where she and Noah had first looked-for Europe.

She pressed her forehead against the car window, staring at the marshes, watching a seagull as it swooped down toward the pale reeds. She didn't want Gram or Poppy to know her eyes were prickling and her throat was tight.

'The same,' Poppy said. 'I told you. It's all the same.' Kristen and Gram looked at each other, nodding, remembering. It would never be the same.

And then they were there. She hardly waited for the car to stop moving before she was out the back door, running for the sand and the water. She kicked off her shoes and left them on the empty boardwalk, peeling off socks halfway across the beach.

(1945)

It was summer at last. Kristen was wedged in the backseat of Poppy's old Ford with the suitcases, and bags, and rolled-up sweaters. Her feet, resting on Gram's tackle box, were tangled in a mess of fishing line.

They were going back to Ridgway, back to the house stilts, back to the hills at last.

The Ford had new tires now, and gas in the tank, and three of them, Kristen. Poppy and Gram sang with the breeze coming in through the open windows. Kristen knew they were almost there when they passed Lynnnatta's house. The bottom-floor windows were still shuttered, but the one in the attic was shiny and almost black in the sun's reflection. Lynnette wouldn't be there this summer, might never come back to Ridgway. Eddie was still lost somewhere in France, and Gram had heard that Mrs. Dillon couldn't bear to be there without him.

'Listen, Kristen...' Gram turned in the front seat, tucking strands of her hair into her bun. Kristen could feel it even before she saw it: the bridge and the galumphing sound as the tires hit each

plank. 'It's saying, 'Welcome back, welcome back.' 'Gram raised her plump arms in the air. 'Alleluia.' Kristen nodded a little, but the bridge wasn't saying that for her. It was saying, 'he is gone, he is gone.'

Nevaeh

Book: 64

Moments that Would not Fade Part: 2

6

'No.' Poppy shook his head. 'Tom's mother and father had written a newspaper in Hungary, a brave newspaper, and the nuns were afraid to keep her in Paris. Instead, they smuggled her out one night, and took her west, took her to a convent in Saint-Laurent, a convent with horses and cows and a river, the Sévre...'

On the other side of the car, the hot cocoa woman was out too. 'Tea?' the movie star asked the hot cocoa woman as if she were reading her grocery list. 'Coffee? Lemonade? Orange juice?'

Poppy reached out for the picture, smiling. 'She had a dozen mothers there. One to teach her English, one to teach her French, one to show her how to milk the cows and make cheese -'

'And did you see her?' Kristen asked in a rush. 'Did you tell her about Tom? Tell her about me?'

'Yes, to all of that,' he said. 'I showed her your picture.'

'And Tom...'

Poppy put his hand over hers. 'She said she missed Noah every day. She's waited through this whole war to go to Canada.

She said she felt sad because she hadn't said goodbye to him.'

Kristen sat there looking at Poppy, wanting to ask what he had told Christy, almost afraid to hear. 'What...?' She began.

'What did I say?' he asked her, smiling. 'I told her that saying goodbye didn't matter, not a bit. What mattered were all the days you were together before that, all the things you remembered.' Kristen took a deep breath. She squeezed Poppy's hand. The hot cocoa woman shook her head. She was still thinking about the knife. 'I just want to get Kristen settled,' she said uneasily.

'I'm settled,' I said.

We all stood there for another few minutes, the hot cocoa woman trying to fill the space around us with talk. Then, at last, she opened the car door again and was gone.

'Want to call me Gram?' The movie star rubbed her forehead absently with the knife handle. 'If you want to do the Cahill part you say it 'Kale,' you know, like that vegetable.' She jerked her head toward the cat. 'That's Henry. He's a little irritable sometimes.' I followed her up the path and around to the back of the house. Henry came too, reaching out to stab my leg with one irritable claw.

Gram looked back over her shoulder. 'Hungry?' I shook my head; the hot dogs were just settling in. 'Drop your things,' she said, waving the knife. 'We'll get them later.' 'I've lived here' - Gram raised one eyebrow - 'since they invented the spoon.' In the back of the house was a different world: a garden on the edge of the Copses, Deniel so small I could see around them to houses on the next street. 'Who did that, anyway?' I asked, trying her out.

Her other eyebrow shot up. 'The knife and fork people, who else?'

She patted the scarf and turned to look at me, head tilted.

Carved tree Laural Highlands were stuck in the dirt in front of the Copses, some of them thicker than my arm, others almost pencil-thin. All of them had faces, and bits of grass or wreaths of flowers circled their wooden heads. I touched this one and that, using two fingers, the ones I used to

shadow in my drawings. One of the figures I pulled my hat down over my eyes and stared at her figures. She was an artist.

Films of Kristen Copses. I thought I was alone, sitting on the but Noah steps in front of the house, drawing the Old Man, working with a flesh-peach pencil. Quick sketches, one after the other: hat down over his eyes in the first, standing in front of the river in the next, sleeping in t he hammock in the third. His beard and the way he leaned forward, listening. I was trying to capture what he looked like so I'd have it to take back with me. To remember. The screen door opened in the back of me with that soft swishing noise, and the Old Man came out to look over my shoulder. 'Oh, Kristen,' he said. 'Where'd you learn to do that?' I shook my head. 'Kristen?' I looked toward the river, green today, a willow hanging over the edge. He put his hand on my shoulder. 'It's a gift,' he said, 'to dr aw things the way they are.' I sat very still. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. 'And something else,' he said. 'You shine through in your drawings.' I looked up at him, really looked at him, not a glance that darted away so he couldn't see my eyes. 'My name ...,' I began as he folded himself down on the step next to me. 'Kristen Denielis a real place.' I shrugged a little. 'Kristen wood,' I said. 'One word, I think.' When the Old Man spoke, I jumped. 'It's where they found you, as a baby?' 'An hour old,' I said in an I-don't-care voice. 'No blanket. On a corner. Somewhere.' Didn't a baby deserve a blanket? 'And just the scrap of paper: CALL HER Kristen COPSES.' One day I had gone to see that place. I ran away from one of my houses -tan, green, brick? I circled Queens, on the subway, off the subway, onto the Q2 bus and off the Q2 bus, until I found the spot. It was winter, bleak, but the houses were pretty. I never did find the Copses, though. I tried to picture it in the spring when I had been born, with birds chirping and the sun shining. Now I saw Green's come into view in the rowboat. 'I play hookey,' I told the Old

Man. 'Everyone says I'm tough, they say I'm trouble.' The Old Man made a sound in the back of his throat. 'Green's is a great kid,' I said. The Old Man looked surprised. I waited to hear if he would say anything, but Green's banged the rowboat hard into the rocks along the bank. The Old Man made another sound. 'Watch that, Green's.' 'The Kingfisher is on the branch downstream,' Green's called. So, we went down to the boat and climbed in to go have a look.

7

Kristen leaned back against the pew, thinking how thirsty she was. She was dying for a glass of orange soda, or maybe a peach with juice dripping. If Mass didn't end soon, and she didn't get something to drink...

Gram was looking at her, frowning, so she started to pray again. She prayed for everyone she could think of, even Sister Jillian.

She looked at the stained-glass window. Outside, everything was red or orange or yellow. And inside were the sounds of the fan whirring and feet shuffling. Maybe they'd find Eddie. Maybe he had just gotten mixed up and had to find his way back, or maybe they had made a mistake and some other Eddie was lost.

She sat up straight. She had just thought of something. Eddie's picture. She had left it on the table next to the couch in the living room. How was she going to explain to Gram where she had gotten it? What would Gram say if she knew Kristen had been in and out of the Dillons' empty house? Gram would say plenty. Kristen is in trouble for the rest of the summer. And she'd never get back into Lynnnatta's house until the end of the war.

She tried to figure out what to do. She could feel her heart pounding at the thought of Gram reaching for that picture when they got home. She wondered if Gram had seen her put it down.

Gram always saw everything she didn't want her to.

But if she hadn't, if Kristen could get to the living room first, she could grab up the picture, and then...

And then what? She didn't have a cent since the tan purse had sunk in the water. How was she going to send it?

And right now, kneelers were banging back and people were standing. Mrs. White was playing the organ, and everyone was singing 'Holy God, We Praise Thy Name.'

Kristen edged herself out of the pew almost before they finished singing. 'See you,' she whispered to Gram. And before Gram could answer, Kristen had ducked ahead of Mrs. Colgan and the other people going down the aisle. She took another quick dip of holy water and raced for home.

Gram had locked the door, of course. Kristen rattled the knob and shoved at it with her shoulder, but it didn't do one bit of good. She was lucky Gram liked to stand and talk to Mrs. Colgan after church for a few minutes.

She went around the back and slipped off her good shoes and socks. She'd have to climb down into the rowboat and shiny up the pilings into her bedroom.

She stopped. A couple of kids from Broad Channel were rowing out in their boat. They were staring back at her.

She waited a moment, hoping they'd turn away and start fishing or something, but they just sat there, one of them fooling around with the oars, watching her.

Gram would be home in five minutes.

'Forgot my key,' she called and dropped into her rowboat.

She wondered what they thought about her wearing a pale-yellow Sunday dress as she boosted herself up on the piling and tried to reach the screen.

She couldn't seem to get high enough, and somehow the hem of her dress was soaking wet. Gram would go on and on about how she'd have to wash, starch, and iron it again.

Kristen could hear the sound of voices. Gram's voice. Mrs. Colgan's. They were next door, standing there. All they to do was look down the alley.

She tried to raise her barefoot higher on the rough wood. Any minute she'd have a splinter. And any minute Gram would spot her. She held on to the piling with her legs, and feet, and one arm, as tightly as she could, reaching up for the screen, trying to get her fingernails underneath.

And then, finally, she felt the screen give. She pulled it out, opened it wide, then reached out for the sill, holding on, boosting herself in, just as she heard Gram saying, 'Good grief, what's that child doing now?'

She raced through the porch and into the living room, grabbing Eddie's picture, and then raced back again to shove it under her bed. By the time Gram was in the house, Kristen was in the bathroom with the door closed and locked, leaning her head under the faucet in the sink, taking deep gulps.

Her dress was a mess, filthy, with a rip in the hem. She took it off as fast as she could, rolled it up in a ball, and reached for her old bathing suit, which was dangling in the shower.

Gram was knocking on the door. 'Kristen. are you in there? Whatever made you think of getting into the house like that? You could fall and kill yourself. Kristen?'

'I'm trying to get my bathing suit on.'

'I'd like to see the condition of that dress.'

Kristen crossed her fingers. 'It's all right.'

'I'll bet,' Gram said.

Kristen could hear her footsteps going into the bedroom. She took the dress and slid out the door and onto the porch. She pulled Eddie's picture out from under the bed, wrapped it in a towel, and looked around for a place to hide the wet dress.

Under the mattress. She'd figure out what to do with it later.

She was out the door, yelling a quick goodbye before she could hear a word about the piano. But Gram had turned on the news. 'It is estimated that ten thousand have been killed in the invasion of France.'

Kristen went up the road to cut across the Smiths' lawn and find Tom.

A moment later, they were rushing down the back road, Noah asking where they were going, why they were such a hurry.

'To the fishing wharf,' she said. 'I have to find a purse. A tan one.'

'I will help. Where-'

'Under about seven feet of water, and we have to hurry because Gram will be along to capture me any minute.'

He shook his head. 'Why-'

'She's going to find my soaking wet, ripped Sunday dress. She's going to remember I haven't practiced the... You ask a lot of-'

'And what is in that towel?'

'Don't say another word, Tom. Not unless you have a pack of money in your pocket. Otherwise, let me think about how I'm going to dive down and find that purse.'

'But-'

'That purse has to be somewhere under the water unless a bunch of pirates has moved in.'

'When...'

Kristen sighed. 'Will you stop asking questions? We're in a hurry here.'

A truck had scattered gravel all over the approach to the wharf. It was a good thing Noah had shoes on. It was a good thing her own feet were tough.

Not tough enough. By the time they had gotten to the wharf, she was walking on the sides of her feet, hobbling along. 'I hope your eyes are good,' she said. 'I want you to look into this water and tell me...'

Noah nodded. She could tell he was trying not to laugh.

'What?' she said.

'You look so... so odd walking like that, and your bathing suit...'

'...is a little faded.' She looked down. She had put on her oldest one, almost no color left from Gram's Clorox. Too bad. She put the towel with the picture down on a bench and crouched on the edge of the dock to look down into the water.

'Dark,' she said. 'Really dark today, you can't see a thing.'

He was looking too. 'I see a fish.'

'What good is that?' she asked. 'It's about two inches from the top. We're looking for a purse on the bottom.'

'Down with the bar-nackles,' he said, grinning.

She was still smiling as she rolled over the side and hit the water. It was cold this morning, the water rough. She kicked hard to push herself down, opening her eyes in the saltwater, trying to see

the sand. She swam along the bottom until she thought her lungs would burst, then shot up to the top for a huge gulp of air.

She held on to the wharf for a moment, pushing her hair out of her face with one hand, and felt Noah grab her wrist. She looked at him through blurry eyes. 'What?'

'I have money,' he said.

She nodded. 'Let me try once more.'

But he wouldn't let go. 'Let me give you this money,' he said slowly, 'if it is important. It is important money.'

She took another breath. She knew she wouldn't find the purse today. It was so dark below, and it could be hours. She nodded and climbed back up on the wharf.

'It's for Lynnnatta,' she told him, going over to unroll the towel, sitting on the bench. She showed him Eddie's picture, with his buck teeth smiling up at them. Then she said the rest in a rush, the words spilling out, trying to make him see what Eddie was like, how much Lynnnatta loved him, how Lynnnatta couldn't remember his face, how she had to send the picture, how...

Noah listened; then he touched the edge of the picture. 'I cannot remember Christy's face,' he said. 'I can remember Nagymamma's. She was sitting in the back of her restaurant the day we went away. She was sewing my coat. The collar was wet when she gave it back to me. It was wet from where she was crying. It crackled when I felt it.

'There is money,' he said slowly. 'It is in the coat collar. It is Magyar, Hungarian money, and English money, and American money. Nagymamma said when I touched it again to remember...' He stopped.

Kristen wanted to ask him 'Remember what?' but he looked so sad, she just nodded and used the towel to dry her face.

'Lillllyyyy.' The voice was loud, sharp.

Her grandmother was standing at the other end of the road, hand shading her eyes.

Caught.

Kristen stood there, trying to decide what to do. Then she handed the rolled-up towel with the picture to Tom. 'Don't drop it,' she whispered.

'Lillllyyyy,' the voice came again.

'What?' She stood there; she didn't move. Gram always wanted her to come when she called as if she were a cat. 'Lillllyyy.'

She gritted her teeth. 'Hold on to that with your life, Tom.' She started back along the path toward Gram, biting her lip as the gravel jabbed into her feet.

'It's hard to believe you're walking all over the place wearing that bathing suit,' Gram said as soon as Kristen got close enough to hear. 'And where are your shoes? Any minute you're going to get a splinter. Blood poison next. Besides,' she rushed on, 'you look like a hoyden. I don't know what people will think.'

Hoyden. Kristen didn't even know what it meant. She sighed a huge sigh. Let Gram see she thought she was acting like a pain. 'I'm going swimming.'

'At the fishing dock?'

'Well...'

'It's time to practice the piano, Kristen.'

'I'm not-' Kristen began.

'Yes,' Gram said. 'Your father spent all that money to bring that piano here from St. Paul's. For you.'

'Poppy doesn't care.' Kristen shifted from one foot to the other. A stone was digging right through her skin into her bones. Gram was right. She was going to end up with blood poisoning, and Lynnnatta was never going to get Eddie's picture.

'You were the one who wanted piano lessons,' Gram said.

Kristen could see beads of perspiration on Gram's upper lip. It was hot as a blister, and they were probably going to stand there arguing forever.

Gram was right, though. The piano lessons were all her idea. But that was last winter. How was she to know that it took forever to learn the piano, that you couldn't even play a decent song like 'Mairzy Doats' or 'Swinging on a Star' unless you spent your whole life sitting at the piano bench, while everyone else in the whole world was-

'Will you stop daydreaming, Kristen?' Gram said. 'Get yourself home. Change out of that bathing suit, and practice for a half hour.'

Kristen didn't wait to hear the rest. Head up, she marched up the road and headed for home.

She threw the bathing suit on the shower floor, put on a pair of shorts and a top, and went to the piano bench. The back door closed a moment later. Gram was home.

Kristen looked up at the old alarm clock on top of the piano. One o'clock. She watched the hands for a while. It almost seemed as if they weren't moving. She stood up and put her ear next to it. It was still ticking, but slowly. It would take forever to get to one-thirty.

'Kristen?' Gram called from the kitchen.

She curled her fingers over the keys and started in on the C scale. At the same time, she looked out the window. The sea was tinged with green. Her father would say it had something to do with algae. There was only the slightest swell now, a perfect afternoon to teach Noah to swim.

She closed her eyes, picturing the troopship they had seen, huge and ghostly in the mist. For a moment she thought about what it would be like if they could do it. Wouldn't it be something if they could get the rowboat close enough to swim the last few feet, the last few yards? Wouldn't it be something if she could teach Noah to swim well enough for that? Even if he could just keep himself afloat, she could help him. And even if it wasn't Poppy's ship, it would be going to Europe. Noah could get to Christy, and she- Gram was standing at the living room door. 'What are you daydreaming about?' she asked.

Kristen frowned. 'How much I hate this piano.'

'Just try,' Gram said. 'You can do anything if you work at it. And you love music.'

Kristen didn't answer. She started the C scale over and didn't look up until Gram was rattling around in the kitchen again.

You can do anything.

Could she?

What was she thinking of, anyway? What she had to be doing was getting Eddie's picture wrapped and mailed before the post office closed at four. Instead, she was stuck in front of the piano, the keys a little dusty, with the John Thompson book in front of her.

She played the C scale as loudly as she could, up and down, faster, faster. It made a terrific noise. She could hear Gram bang a cabinet door shut. Kristen was probably driving her crazy.

Terrific. She played around with her hand down low at the base... making up some Hazel Scott boogie music as she went along.

'Kristen.'

Back to the C scale. The loudest C scale anyone had ever heard.

Nothing from the kitchen.

Kristen began to flip through the John Thompson book.

Etudes, mazurkas (whatever they were,) waltzes. 'The Blue Danube.'

She picked the music out with one finger. Da da da da dum dum. She knew that she'd heard it before. And that was Tom's river.

She leaned over to reach Gram's atlas in the bookshelf. It was heavy and smelled of the attic in St. Paul's. She put it down next to her on the bench and went through the pages, A Africa, Antilles. G Germany. That was the Nazi place. It showed a little of Hungary on the edge. Aid there was H Hungary two pages later.

She tried to spot Budapest or the Danube River, but all she could find were a bunch of black lines wandering up and down on a yellow blotch that looked like the piece of a puzzle.

In the center of the book was a map of the whole world.

She ran her finger across it... from Hungary to Austria, to Switzerland, to France. She smiled a little. Madeline in the book had been there. She remembered that. Madeline was in Paris.

And so was Christy.

That night it was-

'Spicy, that chicken,' Beatrice said.

I managed to nod, to chew, at last, to swallow, thinking of the Old Man: 'Where'd you ever learn to do that?' And Izzie.

'You have a gift, pure and simple.'

After dinner Beatrice spread the films out on the table, reaching for my pad on the counter, one eyebrow raised to ask if she could have a piece of paper. With a twist of her pencil, she showed me how to deepen the shadows on a drawing of the sea.

'Do it on my drawing,' I said.

'Never,' she told me. 'It's your world, it belongs to you.'

She ran the pencil through her hair, separating the thick strands.

'Drawing is what you see of the world, truly see.'

'Yes, maybe,' I said, not sure what she meant. 'And sometimes what you see is so deep in your head you're not even sure of what you're seeing. But when it's down there on paper, and you look at it, really look, you'll see the way things are.' I frowned. 'Look at a picture one way and you'll see one thing,' I said. 'Look again and you might see something else. That's what the Old Man ...' I shook my head. 'A friend of mine said that once.'

'Ah, yes,' Beatrice said, sketching in an eye, bushy eyebrows, sharp lashes as she spoke. 'But that's the world, isn't it? You have to keep looking to find the Christy.' She ran one pinky finger over the eyebrow; the pencil smeared just enough to curve it upward, almost like a question mark; the other pinky softened the lashes.

I watched her, fascinated. 'And something else,' she said. 'You, the artist, can't hide from the world, because you're putting yourself down there too.' 'I'm not hiding,' I said, my eyes sliding away from her.

She laughed. 'Good thing, because your soul is right there in front of you.' She pointed to the sketch I'd drawn of Gram in her scarf. 'You see, it's what you think of her.' She turned to Gram. 'Maybe I can take that trip now, leave you in Kristen's hands. She loves you already.'

I could see that Gram didn't know what Beatrice meant. 'A trip?'

'To the Southwest.'

Gram nodded then. 'Yes. Adobe houses, desert, flat rocks everywhere.'

'I'll paint them all,' Beatrice said.

I looked from one to the other. Beatrice had picked up the pencil again, sketching herself, drawing a suitcase in her hand. And then she looked at me once more. 'You're going to be something, you and what language you speak on paper.' She drew her other hand waving. 'I love what you have to say, Kristen Copses.'

I sat there, hardly breathing.

'You have that,' she said. 'It's more than most people ever have. Count yourself lucky.'

Beatrice took a forkful of food, eating absently, staring at me the whole time. 'We worked with all those kids who didn't have any concept of perspective, or even if they had that, the composition was all wrong. If only you'd been in one of those classes, Kristen.' She shook her head, then smiled at Gram. 'Never- ever mind, she's here's now.' They were both looking at me, at the tears in my eyes.

I couldn't swallow what was in my mouth. It was there in a lump, almost as large as the lump in my throat. 'Thank you,' I managed to say. 'Thank you.' I scooped up the chicken, piling as many cashews as I could on the spoon. She didn't eat, not until she had looked at all of them, holding each one up to the light. Gram kept nodding, reaching over with her fork to point at a line or a figure. And then Beatrice sat back. 'Imagine. I never saw anyone who was able to do this,' she said, 'and I was an art teacher for forty years.'

8

I could feel a laugh coming as she waved her hand. 'This is my place.' Like- had a filmy scarf around its neck and held a bird's nest in its bent arms. 'You?' I asked.

'I'll make one of you,' Gram Cahill said. 'We'll have to find the right piece of wood. I think there's one in the back. The shape of the head is there already, the nose sharp, and the eyes ...' She stopped. 'But only if you stay. It will take weeks for me to do.

Months, maybe.'

I tried to think of what to say. I never stayed anywhere for long before I ran. One morning I'd wake up and I'd have had enough. I'd grab my backpack and go. I'd hang out in the city, see a couple of movies, or if the weather was nice, I'd head over to Jones Beach and sleep under the boardwalk. Sometimes it took them days to find me. But they never sent me back to the same place. The people in their houses had probably had enough of me, too.

Gram waited for me to answer. 'We taught that long?' Gram said. 'Forty-four for you.' Beatrice brushed at her hair. 'But did I ever once ...' I had been at Gram Cahill's house for three weeks. One morning when I awoke, I realized my thumb was blistered, but I didn't mind. We 'd been cleaning up the grove of trees. I liked the feeling of hacking and slashing and getting things done. A pile of wood rested under Gram 's back table now. 'Not all of it is for whittling,' she had told me. 'As soon as it's really cold, we 'll make enormous fires in the fireplace.' 'No, neither did I.' Gram smiled at me, reaching across to touch my wrist with one hand.

I knew she was wondering if I'd still be there when the cold came. I wondered too. And then she was flying down the stairs, reaching out, as Poppy pushed a duffel bag in ahead of him, and held out his arms for her. A moment later, Gram came down the hall. He held them both, the three of them rocking for a minute until Gram said, 'I smell the oatmeal burning.'

Kristen hated hot cereal. 'I'm late,' she began. 'I don't have time for...' But she never finished the sentence. She heard the noise of the key in the front lock and stopped halfway down the stairs. She had heard the sound of that key so many times, and now she felt the blast of cold air coming up as the door opened. She felt as if she couldn't breathe because she knew who it was, knew who it had to be.

They went into the kitchen, Gram bustling around to make tea, and Poppy leaning against the wall, his eyes closed. 'I've thought about this,' he said.

They sat there almost the whole morning talking, school forgotten. Poppy told them about his ship passing Ridgway. and seeing the Ferris wheel rising in Playland like a ghost. He told them about

France, and how he felt when he stood watching as the flame at the grave of the unknown soldier was light again.

Then, at last, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pile of films, Kristen's mother in her wedding dress, Kristen in the rowboat, Gram standing on the dock. Last was a picture of a girl in a Jeep. She was holding an umbrella and smiling.

'Christy,' Kristen said, tracing the girl's face with her fingers.

'Christy.' Poppy leaned forward. 'I took your letter...' 'Mine and Tom's,' Kristen said.

Poppy nodded. 'I went to the convent, the Daughters

Wisdom, they're called...'

'And she was there.'

9

(ST. PAUL'S, 1945)

Kristen was going to be late for school She pulled on her uniform and ran a comb through her hair. Downstairs Gram was calling, 'Don't forget a sweater, and if you're looking for your boots...'

Kristen sighed. Next Gram would remind her she had left them on the living room rug again. Kristen took a quick look out at the white flakes that had begun to drift down. It had been a long winter. She was tired of snow and sleet, sick of chapped lips and colds, and the wind that rattled against the windows. It seemed as if summer would never come, and worse, that the war would go on forever. She looked around for her books and her journal, ELIZABETH MOLLOHAN, MY THOUGHTS.

She had written her way through the winter... to Poppy, and Tom, and Lynnnatta, but most of all in the journal, to Sister Sara. Once she had told about the way the sea rolled and churned when it stormed, and how homesick she was for Gram's house on stilts. Another time she had written about Tom, and the day they had said goodbye.

I raised one shoulder. 'I'm not sure.'

'Henry and I will treat you like our best company for as long as you stay,' she said.

A table leaned against the back of the house, an old redwood table with tools: a drill, an ax, and knives sharp enough to split hairs. Henry crouched at the top of the path, eyes slit, tail switching at me. 'I'm glad he's not a tiger,' I said, feeling that laughter again. Gram's eyes danced. 'Maybe we'll go back and cut that piece of wood anyway.'

I reached for the ax, then followed Gram Cahill into the Copses. And in my head, I told Green's, I may just stay for a while.

What do you think of that?

Kristen closed her eyes now, thinking about that last afternoon of the summer. The tide had been high and the ocean a deep blue. She had walked with him out to the jetty. They had stood there balancing themselves on the gray rock, and she had taken the star out of her pocket for him then, one of her mothers from the porch wall. Almost without thinking, she had stood on tiptoes to give a quick kiss on the cheek, and they had both laughed.

I sat there with my mouth full, looking around at her kitchen. It was like the rest of the house, filled with surprises: The walls were creamy yellow, and ships sailed along with blue ocean moldings. A painted pelican was perched over the stove.

Kristen thought about Sister Sara now. 'Some people never have a friend like that,' Sister had said. 'You were both lucky, Kristen. even if it was only for the summer.' And then she had tapped one finger on the journal. 'You have promised, Kristen.'

'How did you know about that?' Kristen had asked, thinking about Poppy and the books.

Still, it was a terrific breakfast, with Rice Krispies crackling in the speckled bowl. Fall leaves swept across the garden, and Gram's plane went across the wood with a swish-swish sound.

Kristen started downstairs for breakfast this morning, saying the word in her head, promise, half-listening as Gram called, 'Hot cereal on a cold day.' But Sister hadn't meant that at all. 'I mean promise as a writer,' she had said.

10

I had taken only two days off so far, reminding myself that the hot cocoa woman would probably be checking up on me. And the absence notes I wrote myself and signed in a spidery hand that

looked like Gram's were masterpieces: Kristen had a high fever over the weekend. Please send her home if she looks flushed. Or Kristen had a severe rash. We learned that she's allergic to tomatoes. Pity. She enjoys them.

I slid onto a seat opposite her at the table. In front of me were a box of cereal, two bananas, and a Danish neatly cut in half.

The Danish was a little stale and the bananas beginning to freckle. Other days chocolate chips were sprinkled into the cereal, but they must have been all gone.

I shoved the last of a banana into my mouth and watched as Gram plopped a straw hat with a rose onto her head and wrapped one of those filmy scarves twice around her neck; then I followed her out to the garage.

I stretched, not ready to get up, and looked around the bedroom. It was wonderful, the first place the sun hit every day so that squares of light turned the room to lemon gold. I stayed under the rose-and-white quilt for a few moments, then pulled on my clothes to go down to the kitchen.

Gram was bent over the table, eyeglasses perched on the end of her nose, working on a piece of wood. From the hall, I could see her reflection in the kitchen window. She knew I was there but she just cut another sliver off the wood and blew it away.

They headed back toward Kristen's. By this time, it was almost dark. They'd been in the movie for hours. Overhead the first star was just visible.

At last, they stood up, blinking, and went through the lobby.

'Of course, we could not see them,' Noah said. 'So many people.' 'Of course not,' Kristen said. 'But we know they were there. And someday we'll ask...' Noah was smiling at her, nodding. 'And they will tell us.'

Kristen and Noah leaned forward, staring at the faces surrounding the cathedral, looking for Christy, looking for Poppy.

Kristen could almost picture them there, together.

She looked up at the sky. Only a few days were left of summer. And then she thought of the stars on the porch wall in the back of her bed. Her mother's stars. She'd peel one for him. He could

paste it on the little cardboard with Christy's address. Yes, she thought, she'd give it to him before they left.

And Kristen too, 'Thank you.' Then the tricolor, France's flag, went up on the cathedral, and people began to sing the French anthem, the 'Marseillaise.'

She cried too, but they weren't the only ones. She could hear the sounds of crying all through the theater. They watched the main street of Paris, the Champs Elysées, filled with two million people, old women with white hair, men with flags, children, and nuns. Young women were throwing kisses at the American soldiers, who were riding on tanks covered with flowers.

In one huge voice, the French were shouting, 'Merci. Merci. Merci...'

Kristen grabbed Tom's arm. 'You'll be able to write to Christy. The Nazis will be gone and... Poppy will go to her.'

'Christy,' Noah was saying at the same time. 'Christy is there. I wonder what she is doing now, at this moment.'

Two days later, they could guess. Noah treated Kristen to movies and a bag of popcorn, and they watched The Eyes and Ears of the World four times.

They saw films of the great Cathedral of Notre-Dame and heard the story of the little plane that had flown in just above its dome on Thursday. It had dropped the message: 'Tomorrow we come.'

Next, to her, Kristen could see Noah clutching the arms of the chair. His face was turned away from her, and she knew he was crying. The car was ancient, a Buick from the eighties. The fenders were dented and a streak of white paint ran across the door, but inside, the seats were soft and furry, and hanging from the windshield was a small tree figure of a man with gray whiskers.

No, not a man. It was Henry standing on his back legs.

'I put acorn boxing gloves on him but they kept falling off,' Gram said. 'You don't have to worry about Henry. Henry's ready to stick up for you whenever the chips are down.'

Films of Kristen Copses. 'Do you know how to fish?'

Green's asked. 'If I wanted to.' I squinted at the river; I didn't know how to fish, didn't know how to swim. I was still trying to figure out how to stay away from that water when the Old Man brought the fishing rods out of the shed. Izzy Regan, the mother, came out onto the porch, the screen door slamming behind her. She waved at us. 'Hey, guys, catch me something to go with pole beans and corn on the cob.' 'Yuck to the beans,' Green's said.

'I like pole beans,' I said. The river meandered along in front of the Regans' summer house, and on the opposite side was the Old Man's mountain. What was it about that mountain? Coming from Long Island, I had never gotten within yelling distance of anything more than a hill. So why did this mountain look so familiar? I stretched my neck to look up and up at its rocky self mostly covered with evergreens. 'You'll fall over,' Green's said. I shrugged, reaching for my backpack. Inside were a bunch of colored pencils, stubby things I had collected wherever I could find them. It would take six of them, blues and greens and grays, to get the color of the river the way it was the first time I saw it.

I'd heard of polecats, but never pole beans. Izzy nodded at me. 'It's great to have a girl around, Holly. We have to stick together against these guys.' Izzy was the tallest woman I'd ever seen. Her blond hair was wrapped around her head, and she seemed to be smiling just for me. And then we were down on the bank, barefoot, standing in the shade of a few scrub pines. The Old Man put a rod threaded with a lure into my hand. 'The best one,' he said. 'This is for luck.' He showed me how to cast so my arm went back and over my head and the line sang out. I watched the feathery lure glide on the water and then did it again, and again. I could see them but Noah of the river. I could stand on that soft sand dotted with rocks, I thought, and be safe. I put one foot into the cool water and then the other, feeling tiny fish nibbling at my ankles. Across the way was the mountain, tall and green.

'Pop's mountain,' Green's said. 'I'll show you tomorrow. There's a road going up ...' The Old Man tightened his mouth. 'Be careful of that road. I'm afraid of it.' Green's twitched one shoulder. 'I'm not afraid of anything.' Anything, I thought. The stucco house woman seemed a world away. We stood there, the Old Man pointing to a cat-fish nosing its way along, then a frog sunning itself on a rock, and I closed my eyes. I knew the East Branch of the Delaware River was home. Like a miracle, I caught my first fish that afternoon. They hooked it and watched the silver curve as it broke the surface of the water. It was a huge fish, and

Green's said, 'Bet you a buck you can't hold on to it.'

He was right there with the net, though, wanting me to get it, as I slipped on the rocks, feeling the water on my legs and then my back as I slid. I tried to get my balance with one hand, my feet going out from under me, not sure how deep the river was, wondering if my head would go under. Green's arm was on my elbow then, holding me up, and the Old Man called, 'You're all right, Kristen.' My feet anchored into the sand then. I edged myself back, pulling on the rod, and then the fish was mine. Green's poured a pailful of cool water over my head so my hair was dripping, my clothes soaked. The Old Man was smiling, nodding, and Izzy came down to the bank to see what was going on. Later I drew it all, and whenever I look at the picture, I remember the taste of the fish that night, grilled on the coals, my feet bare under the porch table, and in front of us, the river. I remember Izzy touching my shoulder as she stood up to get something from the kitchen. Why did I have to mess everything up?

11

'Delicious?'

She frowned. 'Yes, but...'

'Ah,' I said, trying to guess. 'Stew? Pasta? Hero sandwiches?'

She shook her head. 'Delicious.'

I finished my drawing and propped it up on the counter to see what I thought about it. And then I heard the back door,

Beatrice bustling in, her arms laden with bags, and the smell...

'Chinese food,' I told Gram.

'Of course,' she said. 'That's what we always have.'

I put the plates out, the knives and forks, and Gram ladled the food into bowls: cashew chicken, moo goo gai pan, bean curd, the smells making my mouth water.

Beatrice stood in the back of me. I looked over my shoulder. She was leaning over, her head tilted, looking at my picture. 'Did you draw this?'

I nodded.

She took off her glasses and chewed on one stem.

'Surprising, isn't it?' She asked Gram.

'More than that,' Gram said, beaming, moving Henry off her chair before she sat down.

As I reached for a shrimp roll, Beatrice slid into the seat opposite me and spooned rice onto my plate, the picture still in her hand.

'Don't eat,' she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

'Not yet. Trot out some more of your films, please.'

I went into Gram's peach living room with the lilac couch. We had tacked up a few of the films I'd done: Henry and the pelican, the rock jetties, Gram's thin tree figures in the back garden.

I pulled out the tacks and brought the drawings into the kitchen. There was no room for them on the table, so I pulled up an extra chair and piled them on that.

'Now you can eat,' Beatrice said, reaching for the top one.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I sat on the porch steps drawing the mountain while I waited for Green's. He was hanging over the motor of the Old Man's truck, fiddling with hoses or connections, muttering to himself. 'If he'd let me drive this thing for half a minute, I'd know exactly what's wrong with it.' Half the arguments in that house had to do with Green's wanting to drive the truck. 'Right here on the property, that's all,' he'd say. 'No big deal.' The other arguments had to do with his disappearing. It made the Old Man crazy. Upon the mountain road to follow a deer path, lying on the bottom of the rowboat to drift along searching for the kingfisher, gone somewhere and dragging me along with him. One night at dinner the Old Man had dropped the box in my lap: tan leather, with dozens of pencils inside, points sharp and perfect, in every color you could imagine, a thick pad of paper, erasers, a pencil sharpener. I had picked up one of the pencils: French Blue, a soft color that was almost purple.

'I love this,' I told him. I had wanted to throw my arms around him, wanted to tell him I had never had a present like this before, no one had. I wanted to tell him but didn't tell him; I ducked my head, my bangs a fringe over my eyes. But he knew; I knew he knew. The Old Man was an artist, but a different kind. He drew circles and lines and squares that turned into plans for houses and buildings. He

said he wished he could do what I did. Now Green's flew around the side of the truck like one of Izzy's hens, his eyeglasses taped to the side of his head, his hands filthy from the truck.

'Move it, Kristen Copses,' he said. 'We don't have all day here, you know.' I put the mountain picture carefully inside the box. At the end of the summer, I'd give it to the Old Man as a present. Don't think about the end of the summer, I told myself. Green's and I raced each other down the road, across the bridge, dead tie, and stopped, out of breath, at the mountain road. After a moment we started up. Green's lurched along. At one turn in the road he was all speed; the next he'd stop short, bent over, nose almost touching the ground. 'Look at this, Holly, it's a raccoon print,' he'd say, or, 'See the way this branch is cut off? Beaver, building a den where the stream comes off the mountain.' The Old Man was right about the road: It was slippery, muddy in the shade, one side ready to slide off the mountain straight into the river. But worth it.

It was Monday afternoon. Kristen put on her sunglasses, her Eddie Dillon sailor hat, stuck a Gertz lipstick in each pocket of her shorts, and her notebook under one arm. It was a beautiful day, a perfect day, and she had something perfect to do.

Detective.

They couldn't watch for ships that night after all. Mr.

Colgan had borrowed Gram's rowboat for night crabbing, and Mr.

Meyer was caulking the bottom of his.

'Want to go to the movie instead?' Kristen asked Noah when she caught up with him on the Smiths' porch.

'Well...'

'We won't stay for the whole thing,' she told him. 'We'll just sneak in and watch until eight-thirty, a little Eyes and Ears of the World News, and...' She tried to remember the newest movie at the Cross Bay. She had seen two minutes of it the other day before the matron had caught her and marched her outside, blinking, into the sunshine.

'How much does it cost?' He asked.

'Not a cent. I told you, we're sneaking in.' She could see he looked worried. 'Unless you're afraid.'

'I am not afraid of anything.'

'Well, then.' Action in the North Atlantic was the name of the movie. It was about the troop ships crossing the ocean, and German submarines following along...

She shivered a little, thinking about those ships. Mrs. Sherman had just pinned up another poster over a pile of raisin rings. SOMEONE TALKED, it said in big red letters on top, and underneath was a ship sinking so you saw only the bow, and sailors trying to swim away in waves that were high as mountains.

Kristen tried not to think about it. Instead, she walked down the street in front of Tom. They turned in at the alley on one side of the Cross-Bay Theatre. The alley was filled with itchy weeds that smelled. She could see Noah lifting his skinny legs as high as he could, but she just rushed right through the weeds and around to the back.

'It's hot as a poker in the balcony,' she told him. 'They always leave the door open up there.'

Noah stopped when he saw the fire escape stairs they'd have to climb.

'Don't be silly,' she said, knowing what he was thinking.

'Don't look down.'

'It must be two stories,' he said. 'You can fall right through those steps, and it looks as if the steps will pull off the side of the wall.'

'Three stories,' she said, daring him.

'I am not afraid,' he said. 'I am just telling you.'

She started to climb without answering. She had done this every summer since she was six, up those stairs a thousand times. The stairs were rickety, she had to admit. And the screws holding them to the wall looked rusty as anything. Wouldn't you think the guy who owned the movie would polish things up once in a while?

She looked back over her shoulder at Tom. He was holding on to the railing for dear life, as Gram would say, stopping each second to close his eyes and take a breath.

'Race you to the top,' she said.

He opened his eyes. 'Sure.'

She grinned. He was a tough kid, that Tom.

The balcony door was opened just wide enough for them to crawl through. She sank on the top step next to the door to watch, with Noah sliding in next to her, breathless. 'That was so simple,' he said.

She leaned over. 'We made it just in time for Bugs Bunny.'

He grinned back. 'What's up, Doc?' He said.

She started to laugh.

'What?' he asked.

'It's your voice. It sounds so... so...'

'Hungarian,' he said. 'It is a Hungarian Bugs Bunny.'

She liked the way he laughed, the way he talked. She kept smiling to herself as they leaned back against the steps to watch Bugs Bunny chomping on a carrot, falling off a cliff. They had a perfect spot. They had the whole balcony to themselves.

Not one person was up there.

If they had paid, if Poppy had been with her, she would have been able to go downstairs to the candy stand and buy a cup of popcorn, or some peanut chews. If she tried it now-that is, if she'd still had her tan purse with money-the matron with her flashlight would be right there to pounce on her.

And then it was time for the picture. Words... music... a destroyer being blown up in the water. The noise of it was deafening. Explosions were going on all over the place.

Kristen sat there for a while. She watched one of the ships sink and the sailors trying to hold on to little pieces of wood or to swim away, just like the poster in Mrs. Sherman's bakery.

And she thought of Poppy. They had heard from him again, but only a postcard. She had missed the mailman that day, and the card had slid into the slot in the door, and it had been there all morning until Gram had spotted it. Never so tired. I never worked so hard, to be ready to go overseas. Thinking of you both in Ridgway makes me happy... makes it all worthwhile. Love, Poppy.

Kristen watched one of the sailors, arms raised, go under the water, and then she didn't watch anymore.

Noah wasn't watching either.

'Don't you like the movie?' she asked.

He shook his head.

'We could leave-' she began and broke off. She could see the balcony stairs and the beam from the matron's flashlight bouncing up toward them.

'I was on a ship like that,' Noah said.

She blinked. Of course. How else had he gotten here? She had never thought of that. The matron was halfway up the stairs now, looking at them, a frown on her face.

'Tom,' Kristen began.

'Are you here again?' the matron asked. 'I told you last time it's dangerous to climb those steps, and you can't keep coming in here when you don't pay. It was one thing when you were six years old, but...'

Kristen circled her, with Noah following, and went down the balcony steps to the first floor. They passed the candy counter and the glass stand with the popcorn piled up to the top and went out the door.

Behind them was the sound of bombs, and depth charges exploding, and in the marquee's light she could see Tom's face, his blue eyes swimming in tears.

She stood there for a moment, wanting to ask him, wanting to know about the ship, wanting to know what had made him cry.

Then she heard the church chimes.

'It's nine o'clock,' she said. 'Gram is going to have a fit'

They started to run, crossing the street diagonally, just missing an old Chevy with its headlights blackened, its horn blaring at them. They raced past Mrs. Sherman's. 'Same cookies,' Noah said, breathless, and then around the corner of the As Good As New Shoppe with the dusty hat and coat, the flute and the violin.

By the time they reached the back road, Kristen had a pain in her chest and a stitch in her side, and Noah wasn't crying anymore. They were both laughing, and he grabbed her hand and pulled her along until they reached her back door.

'Tomorrow,' Kristen called after him. 'See you tomorrow.'

Kristen had been wandering around all of yesterday and today, trying to get another look at Tom. She wore the sailor hat Eddie Dillon had given her last summer, her sunglasses, and a thick layer of Victory Red lipstick from Gertz Department Store,

FREE TAKE ONE. Noah wouldn't recognize her in a hundred years.

It didn't make any difference. Once she thought she saw him climbing around on the rock jetties at the beach, and once on Cross Bay Boulevard. But both times he was gone by the time she got close enough for a good look.

Right now, it was Friday afternoon, late, and Poppy was finally coming for a weekend. In the rowboat, Kristen dipped the oars into the water as quietly as she could. Any minute Gram would be after her to practice the piano, Etude in Something or Other, set the table for dinner, and who knew what else.

(RIDGWAY 1944)

Kristen received three and a half presents for her birthday that Monday. Two were books, one was a secret, and the last was a half-eaten candy bar.

Lynnnatta Dillon gave her the candy, a Milky Way. The end of the wrapper was torn back, and teeth marks dented the chocolate.

'I stole it,' Lynnnatta said. 'Stole it for you, and kept thinking about it, and my mouth watered, and I just couldn't-'

'-resist,' said Kristen.

'Right.' Lynnnatta grinned. 'A tiny bite.'

Kristen took the Milky Way by the wrapped end and slid it into her pocket. She was dying to wipe her fingers on her skirt, but she couldn't hurt Lynnnatta's feelings.

Kristen followed Lynnnatta and her two cats up the baseboard steps to the Dillons' attic. It was almost the only standup attic in Ridgway Beach, a perfect place to look out the window and see what was going on all over the place. Most of the other summer houses had tiny crawl spaces, and Gram's house, over on the bayside, didn't even have that. Gram's house was built up over the water on stilts, without an attic, or a cellar, or even a bathroom with a real tub.

'Now, listen.' Lynnnatta leaned toward her, the freckles on her nose like four dots of pepp er. 'I have a pack of things to tell you and they're all secret.'

'I won't tell,' Kristen said, feeling the heat of the attic, dying to take a quick peek out the window, to do a little spying on the beach at the end of the street.

'You have to swear... ' Lynnnatta began.

Outside, the July sky was so blue it almost hurt Kristen's eyes, and the wind was just right, so the beach would be packed. Spies were probably sitting there under their striped umbrellas checking on the ships that steamed away from the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Lynnnatta's eyes narrowed. '... swear on your aunt Celia's life in Berlin, Germany.'

Kristen swallowed. She thought of her list of problems:

Number 1: Lies, and then the second list, the list of solutions. Right up there on top was the promise not to tell a lie ever again, not even a tiny little one, much less one of those gigantic ones about her aunt being an important U.S. spy against the Nazis.

This was the very last one, she told herself, no matter what.

She closed her eyes and crossed her heart over her white blouse. 'I, Elizabeth Mollahan, promise never to tell your secrets, on my aunt Celia's life.'

'And if you tell,' Lynnnatta said, 'your aunt will probably be caught by the Nazis... not my fault... and they'll make her tell all the secret war stuff and-'

'She'd never do that. She's the bravest-' Kristen snapped her teeth together hard before the rest of the lie came out.

Where had her aunt Celia gotten herself to, anyway?

Kristen hadn't even seen her since she was about four years old.

'She'll be marched out, put up against a wall, and shot just like in-'

'-Fair Stood the Wind for France.' Kristen and Lynnnatta had sneaked in to see it at the Cross-Bay Theatre three times yesterday.

'Right,' said Lynnnatta. 'Now here's the first thing I want to tell you. Come on.'

Lynnnatta ducked around the side of the chimney with Kristen behind her. Overhead, Kristen could hear the drone of one of the trainer planes from the naval base. She'd love to watch it circling over the beach, dipping its wings...

'Are you paying attention?' Lynnnatta asked. 'Here I am ready to trust you with all my secrets...'

Kristen sank next to her, taking one of the cats on her lap. 'I'm listening. Of course, I'm-'

Lynnnatta reached for a paper bag. 'Look.' She held it out.

Inside were about fourteen candy bars... Hershey's, Walnettos, Sugar Daddy lollipops, and even a couple of rolls of assorted LifeSavers.

Kristen's eyes widened. Not counting the dusty case in Mrs. Tannenbaum's stationery store, she had never seen so much candy in her life. She reached out to run her fingers over a roll of Necco wafers. Her mouth was watering. She could see four yellow ones in a row, her favorites...

'Maybe we could take one thing,' Lynnnatta said. 'Just one. My mother is saving all this for my brother Eddie in the army. Now that he's a soldier fighting for his country, he gets everything, and I don't even get a sniff of this stuff. She's going to send it all overseas in this heat. The whole thing will be one big melted mess.'

Almost without thinking, Kristen reached for the Necco wafers and began to rip open the paper.

'You like that?' Lynnnatta asked. 'Not me. I'm going to have a nut thing. Something with chocolate.'

They sat there, not talking, Kristen crunching down on two yellow Necco wafers, feeling the sweetness in her mouth. 'I hope Eddie won't mind,' she said.

'Listen,' Lynnnatta said, 'there's enough candy here for the whole army.' She stopped. For a moment she looked worried.

'D-Day. I wonder if he was there.'

Kristen had a quick flash of Eddie in her mind, his square front teeth, a little separated, resting gently on his lower lip, his nose red. He always had a cold, was always sniffling even on the hottest day of the summer. What Kristen liked best about Eddie was that she could make him laugh. He always knew when she was telling Lynnnatta a story; he never gave her away.

One time she had told Lynnnatta she had almost seen a murder on Cross Bay Boulevard. A car had screeched to a stop in front of Bohack's at closing time, and the Bohack guy wouldn't let the man in. The man said something about being ready to throttle him, whatever that meant exactly, but he had gone away two seconds later. Kristen hadn't mentioned the going away part to Lynnnatta, though.

'I think I even heard the police sirens,' Eddie had said.

'Yes,' Kristen hadn't stopped for a breath. 'About four police cars. They zeroed right in.'

Eddie Dillon with those square teeth, always ready to laugh. Eddie at Normandy Beach on D-Day? Everyone had talked about it all through the war... the day that the Allies, thousands of Americans and English men, would land in France to fight their way across Europe.

Kristen had seen the news at the movies, boats coming close to the shore, the water rough as Ridgway on a stormy morning. The forward flaps of the little square boats had come down, and soldiers had waded through water almost to their waists, while the Germans kept shooting and shooting... She shivered.

'What is it?' Lynnnatta asked.

Kristen shook her head. 'Nothing.'

Lynnnatta fished through the candy. 'Take one more thing,' she said. 'I'm going to try a couple of Walnettos next, and maybe just one butterscotch.'

Kristen finished the Necco wafers and took butterscotch too. At home Gram would never let her buy butterscotch candies.

'They pull the fillings right out of your mouth,' she'd say.

'Now the next thing is secret,' Lynnnatta said, her mouth full. 'We're moving out of Ridgway until the end of the war. My father has a job in a factory at Willow Run. It's in Detroit, wherever that is, the largest factory in the world. Top secret. We're going to lock the house, board up the windows, and off we go. My mother, my father, me, and even the cats.' She leaned forward.

'He's going to make those Liberator bombers. B-24's.'

Lynnnatta had the best luck in the world, Kristen thought.

But then she thought about the summer without her. 'When?' 'Tomorrow,' Lynnnatta said. 'The next day at the latest.'

'But we were going to...' Kristen closed her mouth around another butterscotch. It wasn't so much that they were going to do anything. But Lynnnatta, who lived at the other end of Queens all winter, had no idea that she was a last-row, last seat kid in school with terrible marks in everything except reading.

Lynnnatta didn't know she told lies every other minute. No, she didn't know any of that. That's what made her such a perfect friend.

'I know we were going to do a ton of stuff,' Lynnnatta said, 'but this is important, right? My father has to help win the war. And you could link up with those kids in Broad Channel...' Kristen stared out the window. She couldn't even begin to think about getting herself over to Broad Channel, walking up and down the streets, looking for friends, trying to act like Shirley

Temple, the actress, when she saw a kid her age, trying to smile. My name is Kristen Mollahan, la la, what's yours? She shuddered, thinking about it.

'Did you hear something?' Lynnnatta asked, raising one hand.

Kristen listened a little nervously. It couldn't be Nazis on such a sunny day. Maybe Lynnnatta's mother back from the stores?

Lynnnatta shook her head. 'I guess not.' She held the box of Walnettos up to her nose and breathed in. 'Of course, going to Willow Run isn't quite as good as having an aunt a spy.'

'No,' Kristen said.

'Or a cousin- a general in the navy.'

Kristen tried to look modest. She couldn't even remember telling Lynnnatta that.

'I have one more secret. It's another birthday present. It'll make you feel better when I'm gone.' Lynnnatta reached under her collar and pulled a key, knotted in a brown shoelace, over her head. 'This is for you, the back-door key. You can sneak in, come right up to the attic, and write your next five books.'

Kristen took a breath. This place, hers. She'd be here by herself, nobody knowing, without Gram telling her to stop reading and get herself outside in the fresh air, without the radio blaring war news in the back of her. She'd write a wonderful book, never mind the spelling, never mind Sister Jillen.

She took the key, still warm from Lynnnatta's neck, and looped it under her blouse. 'This is the best present I've ever had.'

'I know it.' Lynnnatta glanced at the brown paper bag.

'And you got the best candy bar. I love those Milky Ways.' 'You're right.' Kristen reached into her pocket and handed it to Lynnnatta. 'Have a bite of this. Have it all.'

Lynnnatta thought a moment. 'It's only fair. You've got the attic, an aunt- a spy, your father probably going overseas any minute, and you've already written thirteen books.'

'Fourteen...' Kristen began another lie and stopped. 'Poppy's not going overseas. He's not going anywhere.' She shook her head. 'You forgot. He's an engineer. He's important right where he is, working in the city.'

Lynnnatta peeled the paperback off the rest of the candy bar. 'My father said he probably would go this summer.'

Kristen scrambled to her feet. 'Your father's wrong.'

Then she saw Lynnnatta's eyes widen. 'Holy mackerel,'

Lynnnatta said, 'it's my mother.'

Kristen looked over her shoulder. Mrs. Dillon was coming up the attic steps. Kristen could see the top of her head first, and then her shoulders.

They scooped the candy back into the bag, Kristen trying to swallow the rest of the butterscotch, which was stuck to her back teeth.

And then Mrs. Dillon was right there, standing in front of them, looking as if she would burst into tears. 'How could you?' she said, looking at Lynnnatta. 'I walked for blocks for that candy, one store after another, this one didn't have peppermints, the other didn't have Hershey's. There's a war on, no candy...' Mrs. Dillon looked out the window. 'My poor Eddie,' she said.

Kristen edged her way to the stairs, feeling guilty, feeling horrible. 'I think I'd better go home now,' she said using her best manners. 'It was very nice of you to have me over.'

She rushed down the stairs, and as she let herself out the door, she could hear Mrs. Dillon. 'That Mollahan girl is trouble,' she was saying. 'And you're not one bit better.'

Kristen stopped to see if Lynnnatta was going to say anything, but she couldn't hear a thing. She dug the last of the butterscotch off her back teeth and headed for Grams. The summer certainly wasn't starting very well, not very well at all.

'I.' Gram's house was the last one on the canal. 'Where the ocean swoops in to fight with the bay,' she always said.

Up on stilts, the house hung over the water. In the living room was a deep, soft couch, a radio on legs, and, this year, the damn piano taking up the whole sidewall. In the back was a square little kitchen. It had so many pots and pans, and bowls, and dishes, and mixers, and mashers, that there wasn't an inch of room left on the yellow counters. Most of the stuff was dusty.

Gram hated to cook.

The two bedrooms were separated from the kitchen by long flowered curtains. One was Gram's, the other was Poppy's.

Kristen was glad there wasn't a third bedroom. All summer she slept on the porch that was tacked on the front. She was so close to the water beneath; she could lean over in her bed and watch the silver killers zigzagging along just under the dark surface.

Sometimes she looked up at the Big Dipper, but most of the time, like tonight, she watched the searchlights crisscrossing overhead. She knew the spotters were looking for enemy planes that might come from Germany to bomb New York.

And suppose she was the one to spot a plane and bombs coming down? She thought about it, diving through bombs to rescue the neighbors. She closed her eyes. Germans parachuting into the canal. She'd have to grow like crazy, zigzagging away from the bombs, away from the paratroopers. It made her dizzy to think about it.

She listened. Something was going on. Noise. Lights. At Mrs. Meyer's, four houses down. Yes, lights. Mrs. Meyer hadn't even bothered to pull the blackout curtains, and the Nazis could zero right in with Kristen two seconds away.

And right now, a car was driving up on the roadside of the Smiths' house. Kristen knelt up in bed and leaned against the screen. Never mind that Gram had told her a hundred times she was going to knock the screen out and go headfirst into the water. 'Mr. Meyer's Model A Ford,' she said aloud. She knew that because she had helped him paint the top half of the headlights black so they couldn't be seen from the sky. The light Mr. Meyer had painted had turned out much better than the one she had worked on.

Kristen reached for her shorts and sneakers. She'd just get herself down there and find out what was going on. She wasn't one bit sleepy yet, anyway.

Strange that Mr. Meyer was using the last drop of his gas. He had sworn he was going to hold on to it until the day when the war was over in Europe. 'Then you and I, Kristen my love, are going to drive up and down Cross Bay Boulevard,' he had said.

'We'll honk the horn every inch of the way.'

She thought about sneaking out through the kitchen, but Gram would be awake in a flash. Instead, she unhooked the screen and pushed it until it swung out.

Noisy, much too noisy. She counted to fifty, then wiggled through the opening and hung on to the window ledge until she felt the piling with her feet. The rowboat was directly underneath.

She let go and landed on one of the oars.

For a minute she rocked back and forth holding her leg, feeling the pain shooting down her shin. Tomorrow she'd have a black-and-blue mark the size of a potato.

The boat was rocking too, water sloshing in over the side.

She could hear Mrs. Meyer's back door opening, and the sound of voices, but they were too far away for her to know what they were saying.

Kristen pulled the thick rope over the hook, setting the boat free. Then she pushed herself along under the porches, moving from piling to piling, not bothering with the oars.

She looked up as she passed slowly under the Colgan's', the Graves', the Temples'. Narrow slits of light from the sides of their blackout shades were reflected out onto the water, sliding up and down with the tiny waves.

Under the Smiths' porch, everything was still except for a gentle swish and the boat bumping against the pilings. The voices had stopped.

Kristen sat there shivering, wishing she had brought her sweater. She wondered how long she should stay there. If she boosted herself up on the piling, quietly, carefully, she could grab on to the edge of the porch. The Smiths' porch was a plain open one, not like hers, which had been made into a bedroom. She could tiptoe across it and see into the kitchen window. She thought about it for a moment.

Gram said her whole trouble was she didn't think about things long enough. Of course, she did. She thought all the time, about writing stories, and about the war, and about coming to Ridgway every summer. And she thought about her mother. Hadn't she brought a star every year to paste in the back of her bed so her mother would be there in Ridgway too? Of course, Gram didn't know that. That

was private stuff; no one knew, not even Poppy. Especially not Poppy. His face would get that soft look, that sad look.

Kristen reached for the dripping rope and looped it over the Smiths' hook. All she needed was for the boat to float away without her. She slid the oars under the seats on one side. One almost broken shin was enough for tonight. Then she pulled herself up, hanging on to the rough floorboards of the porch.

She left a trail of wet sneaker prints going across, but they'd be dry before morning. And then she was under the window, and Mrs. Meyer was talking again, talking a blue streak in her high voice, and Mr. Meyer was talking too, a rumble of sound.

Kristen crouched there, listening, catching bits and pieces. 'Budapest... so far away,' Mrs. Meyer was saying, 'but never mind... safe and sound... the beach swimming...' Her voice trailed off.

'Maybe you'd like applesauce,' Mr. Meyer put in. 'Or toast... margarine on it, though... butter's gone...'

'Andrassy Street,' Mrs. Meyer said. 'I remember the cobblestones and Kalocsa's Restaurant...'

'How about toast with applesauce on the side?' Mr. Meyer asked. 'What do you say, Tom?'

Tom? Who was that, now? Kristen leaned back against the house to look at her leg. In the light from the window, she could see it was a mess.

Noah wasn't talking, not a word. Kristen listened to Mr. Meyer complaining that you had to be a genius to make the can opener work, while Mrs. Meyer kept going on about the beach.

Then Kristen heard her name, clear as a bell. Kristen Mollahan. Tom, whoever he was, was supposed to meet her, and they were going to be friends, Mrs. Meyer was saying.

Kristen knelt up slowly, so slowly it was as if she were swimming underwater. She gripped the edge of the windowsill with the tips of her fingers, then raised her head just high enough to see inside and to hear clearly. And what she heard was Noah saying he didn't have time to be friends with any Kristen Mollahan, saying her name in a strange, soft way, with an accent.

'I have to find Christy,' he said.

What was he doing there, she wondered, sitting at the table directly across from her, a dish of applesauce in front of him, the skinniest kid she had ever seen in her life? His hair was curly and thick, but it looked as if he hadn't combed it in a hundred years. She stared at him, his face down in the shadows. A nice face, she thought, even though he didn't want to be friends. Too bad for him. She didn't want to be friends either.

He was wearing shorts, and his knees were big and knobby under the table, his legs like sticks. Then he looked up. His eyes were blue, the bluest she had ever seen, and he was looking straight into her eyes. He picked up his spoon, a little applesauce dripping off the edge, and, still staring, pointed it at her.

She could feel the heat in her face, and her neck. Mr. and Mrs. Meyer were turning toward the window, trying to see what he was looking at outside. Kristen scrambled across the porch on her knees, and down over the edge, hanging on for a second, landing in the boat, grabbing the rope off the hook as fast as she could. She pushed herself back down under the porches so quickly she could hear the water churning up in the back of her.

She didn't stop until she was in her bed with the red quilt pulled up to her chin. She lay there thinking about Tom-his blue eyes staring at her-and wondering who Christy was. She couldn't believe she had been caught like that, sneaking around on the Smiths' porch in the middle of the night.

Too late.

Above her, the screen door opened.

Kristen began to row, singing, ' 'Mairzy doats...'

'Pretending she hadn't heard.'

Gram wasn't fooled. 'You could set the table, Kristen.' she called, 'get everything ready before your father comes.'

'Going to pick him up in the boat right now,' Kristen said over her shoulder. 'Then he won't have to walk around the long way.'

'And what about the piano?'

Gram was in love with that piano.

'Did you practice?' Gram began.

'This morning.' She hadn't bothered much with the étude, she'd done the C scale twice, two minutes, and that was that. She began to sing again, 'A kiddish divvy too,' 'listening for the sound of the door, but it didn't close. Gram was still standing there, waiting for her to turn around and come back.

Kristen raised the oars, water plinking off the ends, but Gram didn't say anything.

'Going to get Poppy,' she said again.

In the back of her, the screen door closed.

Kristen dipped the oars into the water again, veering toward the railway station, hurrying now, anxious to see him.

The railroad trestle looped across the bay, flat against the water. Kristen bent over the oars, wondering what Poppy would tell her about on the way back... probably how hot it was in St. Paul's and how much he missed her. She smiled to herself, thinking about it.

She saw the smoke from the engine before she spotted the train. A moment later, it pulled into the station, and a knot of people piled out the doors. And there was her father, waving his newspaper at her. She waved back, rowing fast toward the dock, watching the distance narrow, angling around another boat that was coming in to meet the train. Then finally she rammed into the rough wood of the piling. She held the boat steady, stroking, until Poppy untied his shoes, pulled them off, and hopped in.

'Want to row?' she asked, leaning across for his kiss.

He shook his head, smiling, the lines around his eyes crinkling. She reached out to touch them with her fingers.

'Go the long way,' he said, 'around the trestle.'

She knew Gram was waiting, broiling flounder, using the last dot of butter for little round potatoes, but she was so happy to be there with him, she didn't say anything.

She dipped the oars into the water, pulling slowly, evenly, watching him. He tipped his hat back and closed his eyes. 'This is my favorite place,' he said. 'It's home, even though it's only for the summer.'

Kristen nodded. Tomorrow they'd line up at the deep-sea fishing dock, to climb aboard the Mary L. before the sun came up.

They'd fish all day, the boat smelling of kerosene and heat.

Tomorrow night, she and Poppy would walk to the Cross-Bay Theatre. He loved the movies too. It would be her fourth time for Fair Stood the Wind for France, first time paying. Then on Sunday, after Mass, they'd read, finish Evangeline or...

'I have to tell you...' Poppy's eyes were open now, blue with paler flecks of gray, his face suddenly serious.

'The Dillons left for Detroit,' she said quickly. 'Mr. Dillon's going to be a foreman in a factory in charge of making planes.

Top secret, Lynnnatta says.'

Poppy grinned. 'It won't be top secret for long, not if Lynnnatta knows about it.'

Kristen swallowed, watching him smile.

He reached out, put his hand on the oars. 'I have to go too.

I came tonight to tell you.'

She didn't look at him. 'To a factory like the Dillons? When would we leave?'

She looked out across the water, seeing him shake his head from the corner of her eye.

'The army needs engineers,' Poppy said.

For a moment she felt as if she couldn't breathe. 'Who's going to take care of me?'

'Gram,' he said. 'Gram, of course.'

Gram. She closed her mouth over the word, didn't want to hear it. She and Gram all alone in St. Paul's this winter, the wind rattling around the house.

'Please,' she said, but she didn't even know if she had said it aloud.

Poppy put his hand over hers. 'Listen. People are being killed just for disagreeing with the Nazis, or being Jewish.'

'I'm sick of the war,' she said.

'It's going to be over someday,' he said, 'now that the Allies have landed in France.'

She shook her head. 'It'll take forever.'

Poppy sighed. 'There's been nothing but destruction in this war, families separated, villages ruined, cathedrals bombed...' She opened her mouth, trying to think of something to say, something that would change his mind.

'But right behind the armies will be people like me,' he said. 'The engineers, the builders. We're the ones who'll help put Europe back together again.'

'Where will you go? When...'

He shook his head. 'It could be anywhere. England, maybe, or Germany.'

'I won't even know where you are.'

'Yes, you will,' he said.

Kristen shook her head. 'Mrs. Colgan doesn't know where her brother is. She said the censors cross everything out in the letters. She can't even guess what country.'

Poppy squeezed her hand. 'That's true. But I promise I'll find a way to let you know, somehow.'

Gram was calling now. She could hear her voice across the water. 'Jerry, Kristen. hurry.'

'I love you, Kristen. 'Poppy said. 'I love you more than Ridgway. More than anything.'

Kristen edged the boat toward the dock. Gram was outside, her hand cupped over her eyes, watching for them.

'What will Gram say?' Kristen asked. 'She won't like it.

She'll hate it. I know she will.'

Poppy moved his hand, held it over Kristen 's wrist on the oar. 'Gram knows.'

Kristen stared at him. 'You told Gram first. You knew about it. Both of you keeping a secret... not telling me...'

She shook his hand off her wrist, feeling tears hot in her eyes, a terrible burning in her throat, feeling angry enough to burst. She hated him, hated Gram.

She started to grow.

'Kristen.' her father began, then stopped.

She nosed the boat in under the porch, banging hard into the piling. She must have chipped a piece of paint off the boat, a couple of pieces. She didn't care, didn't care about one thing.

Poppy reached out to help her up, but she pulled away from him.

Gram was standing at the edge of the ramp that led to the kitchen, smiling a little, looking anxious at the same time. 'You told her? I thought you were going to wait until after-'

'Mind your business,' Kristen said and said it again. The words came out of her mouth so fast; they ran together. Then she ran up the path, away from the house. She wanted to go back to the water, but she'd have to pass them. Instead, she went along the road, running on the tar, which was gluey from today's sun. She saw Noah and veered away from him, but she knew he had seen her too. He was standing in front of the Smiths' house, watching her cry.

The next day, as soon as it was light, Kristen was out the door, barefoot, heading for Lynnnatta's house. Peeling shutters covered the windows on the boat Noah floor, winter shutters. She could hear the radio next door, the newscaster talking about the American army caught on the beaches in Normandy: two hundred thousand soldiers waiting to set Paris free. Was that all anyone thought about-news and the war?

Without looking, Kristen slipped the key out from under her collar. She didn't bother to pull the shoelace over her head. She leaned forward. The key fit easily into the lock, the door sliding open under her fingers, and she was inside in a moment.

She wandered into the living room. It was darker than the kitchen in there, the winter shutters tighter on the windows. Still, shafts of light fell across the rug, and the couch, and Eddie's picture on the end table.

She picked up the picture, seeing Eddie's smile, his buck teeth, his boots laced uptight, his cap pushed back over his frizzy hair. She thought of Poppy, and how he would look in a uniform.

She set the picture back in the same spot. How strange it seemed without Lynnnatta, or even Mrs. Dillon sitting next to the radio listening to Portia Faces Life. Kristen went up the attic stairs, listening to the sound of her feet, and pushed up the window.

The waves were high today. No one was on the boardwalk except a gray gull sitting on the railing, its feathers puffed out over its skinny legs. The legs reminded her of someone, but she couldn't think of who it was.

Mary L. was still at the dock, sitting low in the water. If only she'd see Poppy in line with the other fishermen. He'd be balancing the picnic basket and tackle box; he'd have his fishing rod and hers too.

She felt a terrible lump in her throat. He was probably packed by now, having breakfast, ready to take the morning train back to the city. And she wouldn't be there to say goodbye.

He had told her about the train last night when she had finally gone home. He had sat on the edge of her bed, his weight tilting the mattress down, telling her the war would be over some time and they'd be right back there in Ridgway with everything just the same.

She hadn't said a word. She had acted as if she didn't care, not one bit.

Now she swallowed hard over the lump in her throat. She wasn't going back. She would stay in the attic all morning, all day, writing a book or something. She wished she could stay there forever.

She took deep breaths of the cool air that was coming in. And, leaning over, she saw Tom. He was alone on the beach, wearing a pale green shirt and shorts. Holding up the shorts was a belt... a ridiculous belt that was miles too big for him.

'Ah,' she said aloud. That's what the seagull reminded her of. Tom. He had those same skinny legs with fat knees. He was walking back and forth, shading his eyes with his hands, turning toward her.

'Oh no you don't,' she said under her breath. She ducked away from the window; walking doubled over to the back of the chimney.

Poor Eddie's candy was gone, bag and all. Only the Milky Way wrapper was left, over in the corner crumpled in a ball.

Kristen looked closer. A piece of paper was lying on the floor. She sank and picked it up, a note from Lynnnatta.

Don't worry, Kristen. I'm coming back. Good luck to your Aunt C in Berlin, Germany. I won't tell anyone.

M.D.

And taped to the but Noah was a LifeSaver, a red one, Kristen's favorite color.

Kristen leaned back against the rough chimney bricks, sucking on the LifeSaver wondering if Poppy's train had left.

She stood up suddenly, so quickly she felt dizzy. Then she was out of the attic, clattering down the stairs, through the hall, through the kitchen, and out the door, listening for the sound of the train. She didn't stop to see whether anyone saw her.

It was too late to get to the station. Instead, she ran across the field to the viaduct over the water, trying to find enough breath to get her there ahead of the train. She began to wave as soon as she heard the sound of it on the tracks, even before she saw it. She didn't stop until it was a smudge in the distance, and then gone completely, even though she knew Poppy couldn't have seen her.

'Yes,' he said, going down toward the Smiths'.

She went into the house, thinking about tomorrow, thinking about asking him all the things she wanted to know.

Gram was in the kitchen making iced tea, and she poured some for Kristen. 'I was just getting a little worried,' she said.

'I was with Tom,' Kristen said.

Gram nodded at her. 'Good. I'm glad.'

Kristen went into her bedroom with a glass of lukewarm iced tea and a sprig of mint from Mrs. Colgan's Victory garden.

She bent over to run her fingers across her mother's stars pasted in a neat row, still thinking about tomorrow.

That Noah person had been ducking around all over the place yesterday, here one minute, there the next, always one step ahead of her, one step ahead of the police maybe.

She had thought the whole thing over. Noah could be a Nazi spy... not a chance-in-a-million spy-like Mr. Egan, but a real one. She counted it out on her fingers, talking to herself as she marched down the block. One, he had come in the middle of the night; two, he had some kind of foreign spy accent, and three, she couldn't keep track of him.

As soon as she turned the corner, she stopped to put on a slash of Victory Red lipstick. She was getting good at it, not so much on her teeth anymore, or extra around her mouth. At least she hoped not; there were no mirrors on the way to the beach. She smacked her lips, a little sore from all that rubbing off lipstick before she went home every day.

Then she heard footsteps across the street. She looked back. A miracle. It was from Tom. She ducked behind the mailbox to watch him. It looked as if he was heading for the beach.

She let him get a half-block ahead of her, up the boardwalk steps and down the other side; then she followed along after him.

Instead of taking the steps, she scooted underneath the boardwalk and sank back behind the rusty wire fence to see where he went.

He was carrying something, a big wad of stuff. He passed about two inches in front of her, another miracle that he didn't see her, and stopped. What was he up to?

He unrolled the lump, a beach blanket, one of Mrs. Meyer's. She'd seen it on the washing line a hundred times, so there wasn't anything much suspicious there. He sat down and lined up a bottle of Coke, a bag of something-sandwiches or a foreign spy radio maybe-and a pad of paper and a pencil. Then he settled himself on the blanket, just sitting there looking out at the water, his bony knees up almost to his chin.

It was a good thing she didn't have anything to do. She could sit there as long as he did. She certainly wasn't going to hang around Gram's house. She was hardly talking to Gram since the night before Poppy left. She took a breath. Don't think about Poppy. Think about Gram instead.

'We going all the way to the top?' I drew in my breath. Did I want to do that, stand on top of the mountain, a mountain of trouble myself? Green shook his head. 'Pop would have a fit.' He ran his hand over an imaginary beard. 'The rocks fall, Green's, use your head,' he said in the Old Man's voice. Halfway up was a spot that widened. We looked down and saw the house, and Izzy picking tomatoes, and we whistled at her until she waved, even though she couldn't see us. Then we sank on a rock and Green's fished in his pocket for a squished Hershey bar.

'Should I give you half?' he asked. 'You're not as big as I am.'

'Give me all,' I told him, laughing. 'I'm more deserving.'

He held up both pieces, squinting. 'The Old Man would say that.' I knew that. Somehow the Old Man thought I was a great kid. How had that happened? I swallowed, thinking of the lemon lady: 'You want tough?' she had said. 'I'll show you tough.' And someone else, I didn't even remember who it was: 'You've missed school half the term, how do you think you can get away with all this?' But I was a new person with the Old Man, with Izzy, with Green's. It was as if the angry Kristen were seeping right out of my bones, leaving chocolate as soft as that sticky Hershey bar. I looked at Green's, wondering if he minded that the Old Man thought I was great.

But Green's was splitting the candy bar, and he gave me the bigger piece but did it quickly. I wasn't supposed to know. I took a breath. I thought about the W picture in my backpack: the mother, the father, the brother, the sister. And don't think of that, either, I told myself.

Kristen counted the days on her fingers It was almost time for St. Paul's, almost time for the sixth grade and Sister Sara. It was almost time to say goodbye to Tom.

They had sent the letter to Poppy two weeks ago, she and Tom, both of them writing together, trying not to blot the tissue-thin paper. Noah had shown her the creased scrap of cardboard with spidery black writing before he copied it carefully:

Christy Meyer, Maison-Mère Filles de la Sagesse, Rue de la Santé, Paris. 'We can't count on it,' Kristen had told him. 'Maybe I'm wrong, maybe Poppy's not in France.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I know.'

She didn't mean it, though. She knew Poppy was there. She was sure of it. And she kept remembering what he had said in the rowboat. 'Right behind the armies will be people like me.

We're the ones who'll help put Europe back together again.'

Find Christy...

For the first time, Kristen paid attention to the war.

Mrs.Hailey lent them a huge map of France. They hung it in Gram's kitchen and tried to guess how long it would take Allies to get from Cherbourg to Caen, to Rouen, and last to Paris. And as Kristen moved her finger slowly from city to another, she could almost feel Poppy there.

In the meantime, they swam and fished. Noah caught a skate and a sea robin and put them gently back into the water.

Kristen caught a fluke once and, for the first time, a flounder.

And then on Tuesday, they argued. They didn't speak to each other for three days, and all because of the new movie at the Cross-Bay Theatre.

'I am not climbing those stairs,' Noah had said. 'I am paying money, and I am walking in through the front door. I am not a thief.'

'I don't have money,' Kristen had said.

'I will lend-'

'No'

'I will give-'

'No.' She didn't know why she was so stubborn, why she was so angry with him. She spent two afternoons in the rowboat by herself before, he appeared again at the dock.

'I have come to swim,' he said at last.

'So, swim,' she said. 'You don't need me.' But she was pulling the rowboat in, ready to put on her bathing suit and go with him.

'I'm not a thief either,' she told him.

He raised his eyebrows.

They started along Cross Bay Boulevard, waving to Mrs. Sherman, who was sweeping her walk across the street.

'Well, all right.' Kristen spoke as if Noah had said something. 'I'll pay. I'll save my money this winter, and next summer...' She bit her lip and glanced at him. She knew he'd be thinking the same thing. Would he come back next summer?

Would he ever come back?

'I know why you were angry,' he said. 'When people go away...'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

They had just passed the As Good as New Shoppe when the door banged open in the back of them. 'Mrs. Sherman called Mr. Rowley. 'The radio. Turn it on. The news. Paris is free.'

Across the street, Mrs. Sherman flung out her arms. 'Free.'

Her face was turned up to the sky. 'That beautiful city-'

'They're going to keep going now,' said Mr. Rowley, 'those soldiers of ours, right to Germany.'

Kristen stopped walking. Next to her Noah had stopped too.

'Free,' she whispered.

The mailman rounded the corner. 'Have you heard the news?' he called. 'It's the beginning of the end. Next summer we'll have lights on the boardwalk, and the guys will be home.'

Films of Kristen Deniel

'Company's coming,' Gram said. I looked up from my pad.

I was drawing a picture of a boat I had seen at Gram 's canal: white with thin blue lines of trim, the name in script on the back, Danbar-J, and the captain hosing down the deck. I couldn't remember what he looked like, so I sketched in his back, bent over, a watch cap on his head.

'Who's coming?' I asked, but Gram had pattered away down the hall, with Henry following her.

'It's Monday, right?' she called back. 'It is,' I said, squiggling the pencil for shadow.

'The movie is closed. My cousin Beatrice comes on

Mondays.' She smiled. 'I forgot. You don't know that.

Remember, Beatrice had a lingering cold?'

Ah, I thought. A lingering cold. Perfect for my next absence note. I looked around the kitchen. 'Not much to eat in here.'

She came back into the kitchen, a thin line of red on her lips. 'Ah, but Beatrice brings dinner. Wait and see. It will be ...' She patted her lips together.

Films of Kristen Deniel Every night we ate soup from a can, Gram, Henry, and I. We sat at the table under a stained-glass lamp that tossed rainbows onto the kitchen ceiling. On the wall was a quick picture of Henry I had drawn. He was wearing boxing gloves and batting at the light cord.

Gram whittled away on a slice of wood as we dunked bits of donuts or slice-and-bake chocolate chip cookies into the tomato soup. On Gram's check days we ate big.

They went into the kitchen, the three of them, Gram sliding the teakettle onto the stove as soon as they were in the door. 'Change your clothes, Kristen. 'She said, 'and find something of your father's that Noah can wear.'

And twenty minutes later, they were huddled around the table, hair damp, but wearing dry clothes, with Gram's knitted afghans around their shoulders.

'It was my fault,' Kristen said slowly. 'I told him we could get a ship to Europe. And he was trying...'

'Oh, Kristen. 'Gram said.

Tom's eyes were on her. 'I never really thought we could go. It was a dream. A dreamlike thinking someone will find Christy...' He sighed. 'I just wanted to see the ships one more time. I wanted to think about the ships going to Christy.'

Kristen nodded, thinking that she had dreamed the same thing, going to Poppy, finding Poppy.

'When I started, it was not even raining. I just row so slowly... 'he said. 'I would not have gone without you.' He shook his head. 'And now I have lost the boat.'

'And we might have lost you both.' Gram scraped back her chair. 'Don't you know that this is what it's all about?

Nagymamma sending you and Christy away from her so you'd be safe? And your parents publishing a newspaper, helping to win the war, so you'd have a good life?'

'For me? My mother and father?' Noah was nodding. 'I have never thought about that. I have just never thought...'

Gram turned to Kristen. 'And Poppy, who could have stayed right here... He went for you, Kristen. and I had to let him go. My son.' She turned her head a little. 'It was so hard.'

Gram didn't say anything else for a moment. She looked like herself, stern, frowning a little. But then she put her hand on

Kristen's cheek. 'But worth it. Worth the price to keep you safe.' Before Kristen could say anything, Gram pushed back the flowered curtains and went into her bedroom. 'I have something for you, Tom.' She came back carrying a blue case.

'From the window,' Kristen said, realizing. 'From the As Good as New Shoppe.'

Gram smiled. 'I'll have to swap fish every week for this violin for the next two summers.'

And Noah was reaching for the violin, running his hands over the case, then snapping it open to look at the shiny wood and pluck the strings.

'I know about Nagymamma,' Gram said. 'I know she'd want this for you.'

But by this time the violin was under Tom's chin. For a moment he tightened the strings, his head turned to the side. Then the kitchen was filled with the sound of a Hungarian song, fast, and sharp, and beautiful.

And Gram was nodding. 'See, Kristen. 'She said, 'if you'd only practice...'

And at that moment, Kristen remembered Poppy's letter.

Give Gram a big hug. She loves you more than you know.

She sat back; glad Gram was there in the kitchen instead of far away like Nagymamma. She listened to Noah playing, his head bent over the violin, his fingers moving on the strings, as the sound of the rain grew less and then stopped altogether, and in the window, she could see a pale, late sun edge the horizon.

'This one, this waltz,' Noah said, 'is Nagymamma's favorite.'

But before he had played more than two or three notes, Kristen remembered something else. 'Good grief,' she said, 'my library book.'

'The book in the rowboat?' Noah asked. 'It must be soaking wet.'

'Come on, Tom,' she said. 'We have to get it out of there, dry it off, something. And we have to look for Pap.'

They left Gram with her tea, and as Kristen went out the door, she turned back to see Noah leaning over Gram at the table, kissing her cheek. 'Grannie,' he said.

Then Kristen was down in the boat, with four inches of water in the bottom, handing it up to him. 'Mrs. Hailey will have a fit,' she said. 'She said it was a lovely book.'

Noah looked at it, water dripping from the edges, the dye running. 'I know this book,' he said. 'I have read it in school. It's about the French Revolution, a million years ago.'

Kristen raised her hand. 'Tom,' she said. She sank on the wet seat, her feet sloshing in the water. 'Oh, Tom. The French Revolution. I know where my father is.'

She looked up. 'He's been trying to tell me all these weeks.

Madeline and The Three Musketeers. Roland, the French hero. All in France. That's why he sent me to Mrs. Hailey. He knew she'd tell me there wasn't a book called The Promise.'

Noah was frowning. He didn't know what she was talking about.

'His promise, Tom. That's what he meant. He promised I'd know where he was, that he'd tell me without the censors knowing. It took me all this time.'

And she began to smile, because Noah looked so silly standing on the dock with Gram's pink afghan over his shoulders and the dripping book in one hand, and because she knew where Poppy was. And then she remembered war news, and all the men who were being killed as the army tried to fight its way across France.

Let Poppy be all right, she thought.

'We shouldn't do this,' I told her as we trundled home a cartload of donuts, a case of cat food, and our check-day treat: a gallon of cherry vanilla ice cream and enough Snickers bars to keep us chewing for a week of television nights. 'We should spread it out.'

Gram didn't answer. She hummed a scrap of an old song I had never heard before. That's the way she talked sometimes. She'd start with bits of this and that, it could even be poetry. You had to untangle her words in your head like balls of knotted string. And sometimes she'd break off in the middle of a sentence, small frown lines on her forehead.

I, knew something the hot cocoa woman didn't know, something even Emmy, star of the agency, hadn't guessed. Gram forgot things, forgot words, forgot what she was doing. Not all the time, but still too often. Gram knew it too. She'd look at me helplessly, hands in the air, and then I'd rush to finish her sentence for her or to turn down the flame under a pot of soup that was ready to boil over.

'My cousin Beatrice is waiting,' she sang one night and handed me my jacket. She gave her straw hat a twirl as she passed the hook it hung on in the hall. 'Much too cold for this.'

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'To the movies.'

'What will we use for money?'

Gram didn't answer. She pulled a brown hat out of the closet and stood in the mirror, arranging the veil in front of her eyes. In the dim light of the hall, she looked young; her skin seemed to glow.

She saw me staring at her, and for the barest second before, I looked away, I could see that her eyes gleamed. 'Wait a minute.' She reached out and gently took my arm so I stood in front of the mirror.

I didn't much like to look at myself; there was that scar just healed from the accident on the Old Man's mountain. If I didn't see the scar, I didn't have to think about that night and the terrible sound of the truck slamming into the rocks as we slid toward the edge.

Gram took the brown hat off her head and put it on mine. She fluffed out the veil so it covered my face down to my nose and then she stood back.

I drew in my breath at the reflection. No scar, no freckles, and my sandy hair, which usually poked out in all directions, looked soft, almost curly. I looked different, almost... Pretty wasn't even the word.

'Ah,' Gram said. 'You know it too. This is the way you're going to look very soon. This is the way you'll look for the rest of your life. You have a beautiful face.'

I swallowed. I didn't want to take the hat off. I wanted to leave it on forever.

'Wear it.' She patted my shoulder, then opened the closet door to take out another hat for herself, a green wool one with flecks of gold and an iridescent clip on one side. She smiled at me.

'It's yours to have forever, even when you leave me.'

'I won't leave,' I said.

She started to say something, but instead fiddled with the lock on the front door and dropped the key into her pocketbook. As we went past the garage, she shook her head regretfully. The gas gauge was almost on Empty-I had seen that the other day- and we had about forty cents to last us until the middle of the month.

I sighed. I had money Gram didn't know about. I always had money; I called it my running money. It couldn't be used for gas or food, just running. I had made that bargain with myself a long time ago.

We rushed along in the misty rain for a couple of blocks; then Gram stepped into the middle of the street, her head up, her hands out. 'Look.'

I put my head back to see fine sleet dropping from the dark sky, streaks of white light.

How would I draw that? I wondered. Black paper, if I could get my hands on some, maybe with white tempera, or maybe the palest gray with a sable brush.

Behind us, a horn blared, a loud, frightening sound. Gram grabbed my hand and we darted out of the street. Strange to feel someone's hand holding mine. The last time was Izzy's. 'I always wanted a daughter,' she had said, hands out. 'Babies, children.

Piles of them.'

Gram and I made right turns at the next three corners. Then in front of us was the Island Theater, with small lights, blurred in the mist, that ran around the marquee.

An old woman sat at the ticket counter. Not as old as Gram, but still her hair was a bundle of braided cotton candy on top of her head, and when she smiled her teeth were butter yellow. Her thumb pointed at me. 'What's her name, Gram?'

'Kristen.' Gram waved her hand at the woman. 'This is Beatrice Gilcrest, my cousin and best lifetime friend, not counting Henry.'

'Gorgeous,' Beatrice told Gram, and it took me a moment to realize she meant me. She leaned forward. 'I would have seen you sooner, much sooner, but I've had a miserable cold.' She winked at me. 'I didn't want to spread my germs around.'

We smiled at each other; then without paying Gram and I tiptoed past her and went inside.

I peered at the dark theater that stretched out in front of us. Almost no one else was there. It was a school night, and everyone was home, I guessed, still having supper, doing homework. It gave me a strange feeling. I thought about Green's at the dinner table with Izzy and the Old Man or bent over a sheet of paper working on algebra.

'We have to work to pay our way,' Gram said, leading me to the candy counter. She turned on the lights, poured a pile of corn and a cup of what looked like parsley into the popcorn machine, then sat back on a high stool behind the counter. 'Special recipe, this popcorn.' She nodded. 'Beatrice and I dreamed it up last winter.'

Gram pointed up. 'Beatrice lives upstairs. Her apartment takes up the whole top. It's like a bowling alley.' She shook her head. 'Can you imagine?'

I nodded, reaching for a kernel of popcorn. It tasted better than it looked.

I had to laugh, thinking about Henry in boxing gloves fighting for me. My main concern about Henry was how to keep out of his way. I stepped back as he jumped into the car and hopped across the backseat to sit on the rear window ledge, his head up, one notched ear forward, his whiskers twitching.

But I didn't have time to think about that. I slid into the car as Gram backed out of the garage and down the driveway in one great swoop and, never looking, barreled onto the street.

You wouldn't believe this; I told Green's in my head and grabbed the edge of my seat with both hands.

Gram began to talk, glancing down at her movie-star hands, long and thin, her nails painted fire-engine red but chipping here and there. I wanted to tell her to slow down but bit my lip instead.

I thought I was going to be dead by the time we reached the first crossing. But by the second corner, I realized there wasn't that much traffic, and the few cars on the road stayed well out of our way, so I began to relax and listen to what she was saying. 'Going to stay and have yourself done up in a tree?' she asked. 'Stay longer and I'll teach you how to drive. Like the movies? We can do that, too.'

My mouth went dry. How to drive? That's what Green's would say. You could tell her a story about that, couldn't you?

I brushed at the air, wanting to brush him out of my head. I was trying to think of what illness I'd give myself today when the Silver Bullet turned another corner and stopped. Spread out in front of us was a canal with a few fishing boats, kerosene trails sliding out in the back of them on the water, and beyond the boats, beyond the canal, was more water than I had ever seen.

Kristen couldn't see light in any of the houses along the row, not even glimpses from the edges of the blackout curtains.

Everyone was gone, it seemed. Gram wouldn't be home for an hour, and the Smiths were probably shopping, caught somewhere in the rain.

A moment later, she slid down the ramp into the rowboat and began to row toward the marshes. Another bolt of lightning lit the bay, and beneath the seat in the stern, she could see something almost hidden against the anchor. It was Pap, small and wet, shivering, terrified.

There was no time to take her back, no time to dry her. She'd have to stay there huddled under the seat until later until Kristen persuaded Noah to come back.

He hadn't promised he wouldn't try it, but she thought she had convinced him. How could he have thought he could do it alone, she thought, in a storm like this?

The bay was rough with whitecaps, and the rain, pelting the water, slanted toward her, pushed by the wind. She was soaked through, her hair hanging in strings, dye from her shorts running blue over her legs.

A puddle of water was gathering at the bottom of the boat. She knew she should scoop it out with the old coffee can they kept for bailing, but there wasn't time for it either. She kept her eyes focused on the marshes so the lightning would show her how far Noah had gone.

She was lucky he was a poor rower... unlucky that the center of the bay the waves were beginning to rise so high that the boat dropped steeply at times, and the oars didn't hit the water with every stroke.

She couldn't stop thinking of Poppy telling her that someday the war would be over and everything would be the same. She couldn't imagine it. And she didn't even know where Poppy was.

That last night in the boat he had promised her he'd let her know.

Promised!

Something tugged at her mind, and then it was gone.

She was across the bay past the marshes she couldn't see, and across the channel. The pull of the sea was much stronger now, and as she looked back, she couldn't see the entrance to the bay anymore, even though she was just a few strokes away. For a moment she could see the misty beams of the tall lights on the boardwalk; then they have hidden again as the rowboat slid into the trough of a wave.

Then, above the sound of the rain and the waves, Kristen heard another sound, the sound of a motor. A small boat, she thought, a fishing boat, or maybe a cutter, and nearby. The sound was comforting. She didn't feel so alone, even though she couldn't see it.

And just ahead of her was Tom. He had heard the sound too. In the next lightning flash, she could see him turn, looking over his shoulder.

'Wait,' she called. 'It's not a ship, not a troopship. Don't, Tom...'

He couldn't hear her, but in another flash, he saw her, she was sure. And the rest of it seemed to be in slow motion. The next wave was so swollen, so tremendously high, that it pulled his boat up, and up, and the boat poised there on the crest for an instant, motionless. She could see him clearly, the orange of his life jacket standing out even in the darkness.

Then, as the wave slid out from under the boat, she could see the forward part rising, almost straight up. Kristen watched it, breathless, as it slid back, and in that second, Noah was tossed into the sea.

She could see the orange life jacket a little longer, but after only seconds a wave pulled her boat in one direction and Noah in another and he disappeared.

She kept calling, kept trying to turn the boat in circles, glancing at the lights on the boardwalk to mark her place, watching for the streaks of lightning to show her where he was.

She veered away from his empty boat, which was spinning first high on a wave, then into the crest. In another flash, she saw him again, just the quickest glimpse, the orange life jacket, and his dark head above the water.

'I'm here,' she yelled, not sure he had heard her, or even seen her, and then another wave came, a mountain of a swell that moved toward them, pushing Noah toward her. Kristen could see him turning toward her, his mouth open. He was gulping water, and she reached out, and by some miracle, her hand hooked around the top of the jacket. She held it, feeling her nails rip, but knowing she wouldn't let go, even if she was pulled out of the boat.

But the wave was past them now, and the water grew calm just for the second he needed to grip the boat and pulled at his jacket with both hands until he tumbled into the boat.

He lay there in the bottom, the water washing over him, taking deep breaths. 'You promised,' she wanted to say, even though she knew he hadn't. But she knew it was her fault, all her fault because of her lies, and she told herself she'd never tell another lie if she could just get him back safely.

-And-

Now Noah was up on the seat, briefly raising one shoulder in the air, coughing, and reaching out to touch her hand. Kristen turned the boat back into the bay, rowing toward the houses, watching him trembling with the cold. Finally, she nosed the boat in under the porch, the lights on above, and Gram waiting and watched as Pap, a furious ball of orange fur, streaked out of the boat and up the path away from them.

It moved and rolled, it shimmered, it glowed iridescent silver. The Atlantic Ocean. I itched for a piece of drawing paper.

'This is my ocean,' Gram said, as if it belonged to her personally, like one of her hats.

It was the way I felt about the Delaware River. Pain filled my chest as I thought about it. I wanted to sit in the Old Man's rowboat, to lean over and put my hands into that clear water, to watch the catfish riding along on the bottom, the schools of pickerel lazing in the warm sun.

'So, what do you think?' Gram asked.

'Bigger than a river,' I said. 'Rougher.' I spread out my hands, trying to think of the difference. 'It's wonderful, but...'

She waited.

'You can't get your arms around it.'

13

Kristen walked down Cross Bay Boulevard. She'd been looking for the mailman all afternoon. Just then he rounded the corner. 'I've been waiting forever,' she told him.

'It's too hot to walk fast,' he said. 'But I have something for you.' He pulled out a letter.

'Poppy,' she said. She took it from him, smiling. She didn't wait to open it. She le aned against the window of As Good as New Shoppe to tear open the thin white envelope. Mr. Rowley, the owner, was moving things around. No more straw hat and the violin was gone. Instead, he was dragging a huge moose head to the windowsill. It must be a thousand years old, Kristen thought, and it will be in the window for another thousand.

She looked down at Poppy's letter, ran her fingers over the handwriting she loved. He didn't say much about himself, but about the end of the summer, and Kristen 's going back to St. Paul's. He asked about how many books she had written.

She looked at the moose head. 'I've written about as much as you have,' she said under her breath. But never mind, there'd be plenty of time for that when school began.

She turned the page over. There was more about books.

Poppy wrote about Madeline again, and A Tale of Two Cities. 'And remember The Promise,' he had written. 'That's the key to it all.'

There was always something, Kristen thought, as she headed for home. Before she went to the library, she'd have to find the Three Musketeers book.

It wasn't easy. Bent almost double, she searched under the boardwalk for an hour. Up above, she could hear thunder, and once in a while, she could see streaks of heat lightning in the distance.

But at last, she spotted the book. It was propped up against one of the posts, a little wrinkled, a little sandy, but she blew on the pages and went off to the library to ask the world's crabbiest librarian to find The Promise for her.

Mrs. Hailey looked up as Kristen laid the book on the desk in front of her. 'Ah, Kristen. 'She said smiling. 'I've been looking for you. I know I was crabby the other day...'

Kristen began to shake her head, began to say no, but then just smiled and rolled her eyes.

They both laughed.

'I was hot and tired, and I didn't need one more story about a lost book,' Mrs. Hailey said.

'That's all right,' Kristen agreed. 'I found the book anyway.'

'Another reason I'm glad you're here,' Mrs. Hailey said. 'I searched and searched. I even called the library in Jamaica. Your father knows books, but this time he's wrong. There's no children's book called The Promise.'

'I'll tell him,' Kristen said. She thought for a moment.

'How about A Tale of Two Cities?'

'Lovely book. A little hard, but worth it.' Mrs. Hailey plucked it off the shelf in the back of her and stamped it with the end of her pencil.

Outside the window was a sudden flash of lightning, and then a clap of thunder, so close they could feel the vibration.

Mrs. Hailey shivered. 'I'm glad it's closing time. And you should be home too.'

Kristen waved her hand. 'No rush. Gram is sewing with her club. She left supper for me in the refrigerator.'

Mrs. Hailey glanced out the window again. 'We're going to have a storm.'

Kristen nodded. 'I'm on my way anyway.' She tucked the book under her arm and was out the door and down the street, feeling the wind pushing her along.

By the time she crossed to the other side of Cross Bay, it had begun to rain. The wind picked up papers and swirled them into doorways, and huge drops spattered the dust along the boulevard.

Kristen began to run, thinking about Tom. She had told a hundred lies, a thousand lies, but Noah had told only one. And it wasn't a lie. All he had done was keep his eyes closed.

She sighed.

He had sat in the boat the other afternoon and closed his eyes to show her. 'I was afraid of the Nazis in France,' he said.

'Very afraid.'

Kristen had backstroked the oars gently, keeping the boat away from the porches, as he told her the rest.

'The lady with the gray dress came with the people from the hospital,' he said, 'and I closed my eyes. It wasn't that they were mean. Christy was sleeping, and one of them said, 'Poor little girl.' They took her in an ambulance. I knew if I opened my eyes, they would take me with them. I could have stayed.'

'It's all right.' Kristen could see his hands clasped tight together, and his knees clenched. He was shaking as if he were cold on that hot afternoon. 'I would have been afraid too,' she said. 'I would have shut my eyes.'

'I wanted to come to America,' he told her. 'I wanted to be safe. I didn't even say goodbye.'

'Oh, Tom,' she had said, knowing how he felt.

'I left Christy... 'he had begun again, so quietly she had to lean forward to hear him, '...and Nagymamma said to stay together, to be a family.'

Kristen had begun to talk. She said everything she could think of, everything she thought Gram might have said. 'The war will be over,' she told him, 'and Christy will come, and maybe even Nagymamma. We'll all be in Ridgway together.'

'Nagymamma was very old. I think maybe...' He stopped. 'Christy has no family except me. She has no one special to watch out for her.'

Kristen could see him looking toward the sea, the waves high, breakers crashing onto the beach. He shivered.

'The lady leaned over. I felt her putting something into my coat pocket. It's Christy's address. I will show you someday.' He shook his head. 'What good is it? I cannot write to her. I have to go back and get her somehow.'

'You can't go back,' Kristen said. 'You can see the water. It would never work. It's my fault. I shouldn't have...' She bit her lip. 'It was my lie.'

'I want to tell you something, Kristen. 'He said. 'I was so angry, so sad when I left Hungary. I told Nagymamma I would be angry and sad forever.'

Kristen looked up. It was hard to see his face because her tears were blinding her.

'Do you know what Nagymamma said?' he asked, 'She said I would be happy someday. She said I'd have a friend, a good friend. It's almost as if she knew about you.'

'We'll make a pact,' she said.

'What is that?'

'We won't lie. We'll be brave.' 'Yes,' he said.

'But not so brave to try for the ship. Promise?'

There was another tremendous streak of lightning. It lit the porch and the whole of the sky, and she could see in the distance a rowboat at the edge of the bay, about to cross through the edge of the marshes. Now, in the pouring rain, Kristen was reminded of her father. She reached the house and pulled open the kitchen door, thinking she was going to write and ask him about the book The Promise.

It was from Tom.

'Ah,' she said, stopping to think. 'There are salt-water people and freshwater people.' She held up her hand. 'Then there are some who don't even know enough to fall in love with the water.' She looked at me with satisfaction. 'But they're not us.'

I nodded, thinking of how the river might look as it reflected the last of the fall leaves.

'We'll get out,' Gram said, 'and walk along the jetty.' She was singing under her breath now, a bit of a song I had learned somewhere. 'By the sea, by the sea.' Henry followed us as we went toward the jetty, a path to the sea made of huge boulders tumbled one on top of the other. They were slippery, those rocks, with places your feet could get caught, and I wondered if I should help Gram climb up. But she didn't need help. She swung herself up next to me, her scarf blowing in the wind coming off the sea.

'Just breathe,' she said.

She didn't have to tell me. I had never smelled anything like that air: fish, and kerosene, and salt.

'I don't know what I'd do without the ocean,' she said.

-And-

Then we skittered out to where I couldn't see anything but water in front of us. Gram pointed down with one foot. Between the rocks were pockets of water, and some of them had tiny fish swimming around in them, fish so small they were blurs of pewter. In one pool was a crab whose claws were no bigger than my pinky nails.

I knelt on the edge of a boulder and put my fingers into the water, watching their reflection as the water moved, feeling the spray on my shirt. Was there snow on the mountain yet?

Don't think about the mountain.

I thought about Green's and the Old Man and Izzy and I put my hand on my chest because there was such an ache inside.

Gram was a statue standing above me, holding her hat against the wind, her eyes closed, a half-smile on her face.

'I thought maybe I'd stay for a while,' I said slowly. 'As long as you want me to, that is.'

Gram opened her eyes and beamed down at me.

'So, if you'd like to work on my tree figure...'

She raised her hand to her scarf. 'I've already started.'

And I knew Green's would be saying, what are you doing, Kristen?

A few minutes later, six or seven people came in. Gram poured the popcorn into wrinkled paper bags for them, her mouth full, and then music blared and the movie came on.

Afterward, we walked home, watching the mist swirl around the bare Laurel Highlands above us. 'That was a tearjerker,' Gram said.

I nodded, thinking about it: the story of a boy and a dog and Christmas in a small town.

'Henry would feel terrible if we brought a dog into the house,' Gram said, gliding around the icy puddles next to me.

'I know.' I was getting used to Henry. He spent almost every night on my bed now, and as long as I didn't stretch out my feet he didn't attack.

'But we can have Christmas,' Gram said. 'I have ornaments in the attic and an artificial tree. You've never seen the attic. What treasures.' She stopped her face up to bathe in the sleet so it coated her eyelashes. 'There's one ornament, a Santa Claus, Beatrice and I put it on the tree first every year.' She twirled around, arms up, dipping her graceful hands.

I had that strange feeling again. Everyone was home doing homework for school tomorrow, and I was watching an old lady dance in the street.

I comforted myself with the thought of sitting in Gram's living room after supper every night, sweet chocolate melting on our tongues, wood shavings around our feet.

It's enough, I told Green's in my head, more than enough. I tried not to think of my W picture with the mother, the father, the brother, and the sister.

'Over the river and through the Deniel...' Gram sang one morning at breakfast. It was a late breakfast. We had stayed up most of the night watching an old black-and-white movie.

'To Grandmother's house?' I asked, dropping a cornflake on the table in front of Henry's nose and jumping back as he raised one paw to warn me.

Gram waggled her hand, her head still bent. She was carving my tree figure from a piece of oak, stripping the bark until the underneath showed pale and smooth. The head was there, still unformed, the nose just a slight sharp mark.

Gram saw me looking at it. 'A bit at a time,' she said. 'The face last, when I'm sure I know you well enough.'

I didn't say anything. Instead, I ran one finger over Henry's back. His eyes were closed, he was purring, and I figured he didn't know it was me.

'Over the river...,' Gram began again, rocking in her chair with a pleased look on her face.

Water, I thought. The ocean. We'd been there twice this week. Odd to see the ocean near the end of November. I'd always thought of it as something to see in the summertime. I put the tea mugs in the sink, sprayed water over them, and waited, leaning against the counter as Gram took a cut in the side of the wood and gently blew the shavings away.

She stood up then, ready to go, but instead, she stopped to peer out the window. 'Someone's coming.'

I glanced out and saw the gray car pulling into her driveway. The hot cocoa woman had come to check up on me.

My fault, I told myself. Hanging around here today instead of going to school. It was that lingering-cold note. I hadn't been able to resist it.

'It's the wrong time,' I sang to Gram.

She smiled at me, singing too. 'And the wrong place?'

I reached for her wool hat and scarf and the brown hat with the veil. 'Let's go down to the water instead of entertaining,' I told her.

We slipped out the back door, moving as quietly as we could; it was a game. We passed through Gram's three-figure garden, went through the Denieland diagonally across the street.

It was a long walk in the cold, and we hadn't stopped for jackets, so we were both shivering by the time we felt the difference in the air, smelled the sharp, sweetish smell of the ocean.

We climbed up onto the pier. The fishing boats were gone this late in the morning. I knew some of them by now, and I could see the two smaller ones somewhere out near the horizon. I kept thinking of that gray car and trying to decide what to do. I bent down and picked up a shell. Its edges were crushed but it had a beautiful color, almost like the sea itself with the sun shining on it.

'A piece of good luck,' Gram said.

I slipped it into a pocket of my jeans and nodded. We needed luck.

Gram had moved away from me. I turned and saw her lying on the jetty, holding her hat on with one hand, the loose end of her scarf floating in the water. She wiggled herself down and down until I thought she'd go over; then, at last, she reached into the mass of foam that had settled around the stanchions of the pier.

A moment later she was up, strands of seagrass clutched in her hand. Several inches long, curled along the edges, they were the color of sand. Gram smiled at me and held them up to my hair. 'I thought so,' she said, 'almost an exact match.'

I nodded, realizing she had gathered them for my wood figure. It made me think of the drawing box the Old Man had given me. How often I had held up a pencil to match the color against something.

Was the drawing box still at the house in Laurel Highlands?

I turned as I heard the sound of a car and tires bumping along the wooden planks of the pier in the back of me: the hot cocoa woman.

She came to a stop about two inches away from us and rolled down the window. 'Why aren't you in school?' 'School?' Gram asked, looking confused.

I didn't answer, of course, I didn't. I had learned to keep my mouth closed long ago. In my mind, I pulled myself into a small knot deep inside and tried to think about something else, anything else.

'Get in the car,' the hot cocoa woman said, 'I'll drive you there right now.'

One of the fishing boats had almost disappeared. All that was left of it was the needle-thin mast on top. Someday I'd like to be on that boat, I thought, to see what it would be like to look back at the land. I glanced at the railing that ran along the end of the pier. It was so low it would be hard to see from a ship. 'School,' Gram said. 'Of course.' She put her hand on my shoulder. It was the hand holding the seagrass. I felt a soft scratch against my skin.

Gram's legs were bare, with dainty spider veins showing, and her silky shoes were soaked with snow and spray. I didn't want the hot cocoa woman to see them.

I opened the back door of the car and slid in, and we drove off, leaving Gram looking after us, her head tilted as she waved at me, the seagrass in her hand blowing in the wind.

'What's going on here?' the hot cocoa woman said. 'No school?'

I ran my tongue over my lips, trying to figure out the best lie I could. 'I told her today was a holiday, a teachers' conference.'

The hot cocoa woman shook her head. 'And she believed that?' she said. 'We'll have to see about this.'

I reached into my pocket and held on to the shell. For the first time in my life, I thought, I'd have to go to school. I'd have to if I wanted to stay at Grams.

Films of Kristen Deniel

My head was around burl of wood, the seagrass, dried now, a swirl on top. Gram spent hours over it at the kitchen table, humming to herself, a tray of tiny knives spread out in front of her.

It was Monday, early in December, almost dark in the late afternoon. No Chinese dinner tonight. I was making a dish Izzy had taught me. 'Special deluxe,' she had said and smiled at me. Chopped meat, ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and cheese, spooned over hot rolls. Salad. Pound cake with confectioner's sugar sifted over the top.

It was going to be a special deluxe evening. Beatrice was leaving the next morning for New Mexico, where she'd paint the adobe houses and the desert. 'I'll come back when the mood strikes,' she had said, 'or when my money runs out. We'll close up the movie until I get back.'

All week I'd had a pain in my chest. I was waiting to see what the hot cocoa woman would do. The school was all right. I kept my head in the books, made as on two tests, and had no friends. But if the hot cocoa woman talked to Gram for more than five minutes she'd know about Gram. Strange, how much I wanted to stay. Maybe it was because Gram needed me. I'd never been needed before. Or wanted? asked a voice in my head. The Old Man had wanted me, I told myself. So had Izzy, so had Green's.

Then why?

Don't think about that. Think about Gram.

'A little forgetful,' Beatrice had said. 'Maybe old age.'

But not always forgetful. There was the afternoon Gram had watched me sketch small films on my pad. 'I remember something.' She tapped one red fingernail on her lower lip. 'There's the paper in the attic. I haven't seen it for years. I think it belonged to my father.'

I climbed the stairs; then, bent like a pretzel, I scurried around the low attic, stepping over bags and bushel baskets, stopping to look at boxes of paper-thin Christmas ornaments and yellowed leather gloves, until I found what she'd told me about: huge pieces of paper, gray and dogeared. I ran my hands over them, thinking about the day the Old Man gave me the drawing box.

As I had maneuvered my way back to the steps, Gram had called up. 'There's an easel, too.'

Beatrice came now, hurrying up the walk. Her hair had been done up in a high pink swirl at the hair-dresser. Her nails matched, and so did her huge pink purse.

We were ready for her with the pound cake on Gram's best plate and the dishes on the table. We ate watching the pale December sun drop behind the trees in the backyard. When Gram went inside for something, Beatrice leaned over. 'Take care of her,' she whispered.

I thought of telling her about the hot cocoa woman and the agency, but what if Gram came back?

Beatrice saw me frown. 'Maybe I shouldn't go.'

'Gram said you've wanted to do this all your life.'

'But...'

'Go,' I said, wishing I could go too. I'd take the Shortline bus up through Philadelphia State. It would be early summer again, the first time I'd seen Green's and the Old Man, playing checkers in the diner. I'd start over. I'd do everything differently.

Everything...

But instead, I'd do it all right. I'd stay with Gram and ...

'I'll take care of her,' I whispered. Somehow, I said in my head.

Beatrice turned over one of my films. 'I'll leave my phone number,' she said. 'I'll write it down.' She patted my hand. 'I won't be there for the first two or three weeks; I'll be traveling around. But just in case.'

'...The positive.' 'He shook his head. 'Did you ever notice; American songs are strange. I do not know what they mean most of the time.'

'You're scaring the fish with that noise.'

'Not my fish.' He raised his line. 'On the ship, last time I was always thirsty, and the water tasted warm. We have to bring juice.' He nodded. 'Yes. And maybe fruit. Nagymamma always said the fruit was important. In the winter we ate tangerines.'

'And how would you carry all this?'

'In my pocket.'

'Very interesting,' she said, forgetting for a moment if she had to tell him. 'You have pockets in your bathing suit?'

He waved his hand. 'I did not think of that.'

'Tom...'

'No matter. I will drink warm water, and go without fruit if

I have to.'

'Tom...'

He looked across at her.

She took a breath. 'We can't go.'

He turned his head, watching her, and she knew he was seeing the tears in her eyes. She opened her mouth to say she had changed her mind, that she'd heard that the convoys were moving out to sea farther south, but lying to Noah wasn't like lying to anyone else. He had a way of looking at her as if everything she said was important, serious or funny, interesting to him somehow. How could she tell him something she had just made up? How could she lie again?

'I lied,' she said.

She could see the beginning of a quiver on his line. He was about to catch something... something small, maybe a sea robin. But he didn't take his eyes off her, and her mouth was so dry she could hardly speak.

'What do you mean you lied?' he asked. 'You mean you do not want to go with me? You are still worrying I am a coward because of the plane because it took me so long to swim?'

'You're not a coward, Tom.'

He frowned. 'I am not afraid of anything.'

'I tell lies,' she said, almost whispering. 'I tell people that my aunt is a spy. I say my father is in the Secret Service. I tell you I'm going to take a ship when I know the ships are too far out, that they seem closer than they are, and the sea is too strong and rough.'

'But I can go,' he said. 'I am not afraid.'

She felt tears running down her cheeks and reached up to wipe them away.

'You are crying because of your father?' he asked.

She nodded. 'And because of you. You thought I would help you go back...' She took a breath. 'I said it because I didn't say goodbye to my father,' she said. 'I sneaked out of the house, and I never went back to say goodbye, and now...'

Noah reached out. He held his hand over her wrist the way

Poppy had. 'Kristen. 'He said. 'I lie too.'

She shook her head. 'Not the way I do, every minute.'

'Yes, because I am afraid.' For the first time, he saw that line was wiggling, that he surely had a fish. 'I will pull this fish up and set it free,' he said. 'Then I will tell you, Christy. And you will

know why I have to go on this ship back to Christy.'

Kristen had read The Story of Roland with Poppy last winter, but not the other. She and Noah could take a quick trip to the library after they went swimming. Why not?

Gram had finished Lynnnatta's note and was looking out the window now. Her gray eyes were sad.

'Here,' Kristen said, feeling generous. 'Read my letter from Poppy. It will make you laugh.'

Kristen took the last bite of tuna, thinking about a night last summer when they had eaten the same thing. It was almost dark after Poppy had come. They had been talking, laughing. It was something about Gram's fishing being so bad they had to eat canned tuna. And outside, the fireflies had floated over the porch.

'Do you remember...' Gram began as she put the letter down.

'Last summer?' Kristen asked.

'No, the year of the hurricane,' Gram said.

Kristen thought about it, the bay water, usually flat, crashing up against the pilings. Boats, let loose, filled with water, breaking apart and sinking. Their rowboat, upside down, looking like a walnut shell, under a couple of feet of water.

'What made you think of that?' she asked.

'I have a memory of your father, coming down the road, his shoes off...' Gram bit at her lip. 'His suit pants were rolled up to his knees, full of mud, his newspaper-'

'-soaking wet, covering his head,' Kristen said.

-And-

'We laughed,' Gram said.

Kristen nodded. She remembered how funny her father had looked, hopping along. She and Gram had watched from the kitchen door, so-o happy he was home.

And now Gram was crying. Kristen couldn't believe it. She had never seen Gram cry. Kristen 's mouth was suddenly dry.

'Why?'

Gram shook her head, her mouth trembling, trying to smile. 'I guess I miss your father.'

Kristen stood up, about to go to her, to put her arms around her.

'By the time he comes home,' Gram said, 'you'll be playing the piano for him.'

15

It was Friday afternoon, lunchtime. The church bells were chiming twelve, Kate Smith was singing 'God Bless America' on the radio, and Kristen and Gram were having hot tuna fish in tomato sauce. It was horrible, but Gram hadn't caught a fish all week, and Kristen hadn't even tried.

'I agree,' Gram said. 'I can tell by your face you don't like it either.'

'I hate this stuff,' Kristen said, eating as fast as she could. As soon as lunch was over, she and Noah were going to practice again. They'd been in the water so much that Mrs. Meyer said they were going to turn into fish. She said it smiling. Even Mrs. Meyer could see that Noah was never going to be a fish.

Noah had talked about it last night, said the same thing over and over. 'We will row the boat out, stay in it until the ship passes right near us. I will only have to swim the last, smallest bit, and I will be wearing a life jacket...'

Kristen stared out the window. The water was rough, really rough. Even though the sun was shining, the water had a dark look to it, and she could see whitecaps at the end of the canal. They couldn't swim this afternoon. Alleluia. What instead? The movies?

Fishing. Yes, fishing. They hadn't done that once this summer.

Gram was saying something, had been talking for minutes.

Something about forgetting. Kristen looked up.

'You asked me for money,' Gram said.

Kristen took another mouthful, trying not to taste the fish.

'I don't need it anymore.'

'I'm sorry,' Gram was saying. 'I asked you how much you wanted, but you were getting dressed, and...' She raised one shoulder. 'I never thought about it again until just this minute.'

Kristen looked up, trying to remember. How much? Gram had said. How much had she lost? How much did she need?

Kristen felt a quick flash of guilt.

Gram looked hot and tired. It was boiling in the little kitchen. Even with the shades halfway down, the sun lay in patches on the table, the counters, and the floor. Suppose something happened to Gram someday?

'Never mind,' Gram said. 'I'm going to make up for it...

and for the tuna too. I have a letter, two letters for you. One from Poppy, and one from Lynnnatta.' She sighed. 'Poor Lynnnatta.' Kristen put her fork down. That's what she got for spending the morning swimming. She had missed the mailman. Now Gram would be reading over her shoulder.

Gram slid the letters over to her. Lynnnatta's filthy as ways, Poppy's, airmail, tissue-paper thin. 'The mailman was looking for you,' Gram said.

Kristen didn't answer. She opened Lynnnatta's first, a long letter in pencil, hard to read in Lynnnatta's scrawl.

Thank your grandmother for the letter.

Kristen looked up quickly. Gram wasn't leaning over her shoulder after all. She was turning the pages of her newspaper, The Wave. Kristen looked down again, finding her place.

Thank her for the picture of Eddie swimming and those funny stories about when he was little. She made me laugh. I felt so bad. She misses your father. She calls him Jerry isn't that strange I always think about him as Mr. Mollahan. We still don't know anything about Eddie.

Love Lynnnatta.

How's the house?

'You wrote to Lynnnatta? You sent a picture?' Kristen asked. 'You didn't tell me that.'

Gram pushed a strand of hair off her forehead. 'I knew how she felt. Suppose it was Poppy?'

Kristen sat looking at Gram from the corner of her eye. She'd never thought about Gram missing Poppy, not once in all these weeks. She pushed Lynnnatta's letter across the table to her, then took a breath. She had forgotten the house part. But Gram didn't seem to notice anything strange about Lynnnatta's mentioning her house.

Kristen reached for Poppy's letter, the best for last. It was a funny letter, Poppy reminding her of the time they painted the window and the screen had fallen over the edge of the porch and floated away. Your fault, Poppy had written for fun. They both knew it had been his fault. And then, in the end, there was more about books. Don't forget to read The Story of Roland again, and The Promise. Go to the library for them. See Mrs. Hailey. She knows every book in the world!

Kristen veered off to the sink. She slid in her dish with a couple of other dishes and ran water over them. She could see Gram standing to put a bottle of milk into the refrigerator. No one would ever know tears had been in her eyes a moment ago.

16

Kristen wiped her hands on a towel. 'We're going to swim,

Noah and me. And then go to the library.'

Gram nodded, and Kristen was out the door, around the side porch, and down into the rowboat. Noah was sitting there, waiting for her, looking even skinnier than usual with the huge orange life jacket around him.

She hopped into the boat and began to row past the houses, angling toward the marshes, leaning forward to keep the sun out of her eyes. Just before they sealed the package, Kristen reached for the key on the table and dropped it inside. 'I think we shouldn't come back anymore,' she told him.

'All right,' he said, thinking about it. 'I will take Pap home with me.'

Then they were finished, the package neatly addressed, delivered to the post office, on its way to Lynnnatta at last. 'Now we swim,' said Tom. 'In the ocean.' They walked back to the Smiths' with the cat, and by the time Mrs. Meyer had made them a picnic snack, Pap was sound asleep on the couch pillow. 'In the bay,' Kristen answered.

It was hot and humid, and by the time they crossed the tar road and walked through the sand and rushes toward Jamaica Bay, Kristen felt sticky and irritable. She raced into the water, arms stretched, diving deep, feeling the cold bay closing over her, and then she was up again, feeling washed and cool, the sun warm on her face. She brushed her hair back away from her eyes.

Tom, she had forgotten him. He was standing on the edge, his feet dug into the sand, waiting. Kristen swam back toward him, as close as she could without scraping the bottom. 'You have to float first,' she said. 'Don't even try to swim yet.' She had said that a dozen times the other day He took a step into the water. 'I have no time to fool around with floating.' He had said that a dozen times too. He sounded the way she did over practicing the piano. I have no time to fool around.

'Thick as a piece of wood,' Sister Jillen would have said about him. It was what she always said when she was teaching math problems and someone couldn't understand.

But there was something else. He was afraid of the water; she was sure of it. She told him to loosen up, to lie back and drift with the water. She told him to unclench his fists and pretend he was one of the reeds, floating.

She told him all the things Gram had told her when she was learning. But it didn't do any good. He couldn't float.

He couldn't swim either. They tried that next. Noah was like a cat who didn't want to get wet, or a bird weighed down with feathers.

'You are a terrible teacher,' he said, trying to joke.

She bit down on her lip, feeling sorry for him. 'It takes time. That's what Gram always says.' She shook her head. 'I can't believe I'm sounding like Gram.'

'You are lucky... 'he began and stopped.

She held up her hand. 'You don't have to tell me,' she said. 'I know it. I've been thinking about you and Nagymamma, but you don't know what a pain Gram is.'

He smiled a little. 'Nagymamma was a pain sometimes too. We had to say Kerem and köszönöm, and szívesen every two minutes... 'Please,' and 'Thank you,' and 'You're welcome...'

'She didn't teach you very well,' Kristen said, smiling too. 'Here I'm wasting time showing you how to swim, and you haven't said kos whatever once.'

'For teaching me how to drown myself?' Then his face was suddenly serious. 'It is August, Kristen.'

She took a breath. 'Maybe we should forget about Europe,' she said. 'Maybe the war will be over in a year.'

'A year,' he said, sounding as if it were forever.

She tried to think of what else to say, but he was watching her, and she couldn't even look into his eyes. 'All right,' she said.

'I guess we could try again after lunch.'

'I hope I can do this.' Noah sounded worried.

Kristen rowed across the bay, moving swiftly, pulling hard on the oars. She wouldn't have to tell him after all. He'd tell her to go without him, and then she'd say...

She looked across at him. His face was white, his lips pale.

She threw the anchor into the water. 'Now we'll go over the side. The boat isn't going anywhere, and if you get in trouble you can reach for one of the tall reeds.'

Tom's eyes were almost closed.

'I'll go first,' she said and went over the side slowly, Carefully, so the boat wouldn't rock. She hung on to the edge with both hands for a second, getting used to the feel of the water, cool on her body, then slipped away from the boat. 'Don't forget, Tom. Keep your mouth closed. Last time...'

'I know.' He was clumsy getting over the side, rocking the boat enough to create small waves. And then he was in the water, reaching up to grip the side.

'Let go,' she said. 'You've got on a life preserver. You can't sink.' She grinned. 'Even you can't sink.'

He shut his eyes and let go.

'Good,' she said, treading water. 'Feel how lovely. Not too cold. Open your eyes, will you?'

He struck out with one arm and then the other.

'Kick your feet, remember?'

He opened his eyes. 'Too much to remember all at once.' He was out of breath.

'Take your time.'

He started again; head high.

'Not bad, not bad at all, but wait a minute.' She swam over to him, thinking he looked like a turtle. Land turtles. 'What do you think will happen if you just put your head in the water?'

'Remember last time?'

'Yes, but your mouth was wide open. Duck your head. Just feel...'

He took a deep breath and leaned forward. A moment later he was up again. 'I can hardly stay down.' He sounded surprised, pleased.

'See,' she said. 'Nothing's going to happen.'

He nodded once, and then a second time. 'You are right, Kristen.'

He leaned into the water again, raising his arm. She could see his feet behind him, kicking a little, kicking harder. He was moving. He was swimming.

She watched as he circled the boat, then floated, his hands pale in the water, fingers spread. 'I am swimming,' he told her.

'I know,' she answered him, thinking she had done it. She had taught him to swim. And then something else. She'd have to tell him they couldn't go to Europe.

The sea was high today. Kristen tried to remember when she had last seen it this way, yellow-green water reflecting the strange color in the sky. They had rowed only a short way from the porch, still in the bay, to fish.

She dropped her fishing line over the side of the rowboat. The day was hot, the wormy bait sticky on her fingers. She felt sick with the smell of it, sick thinking about what Noah would say when she told him.

It had been a terrible day from start to finish. The library had been closed for days, and when they had finally gotten there this morning, Mrs. Hailey hadn't been one bit friendly. 'Bringing sand in on your feet,' she had grumbled. 'Leaving a trail behind you like Hansel and Gretel.'

And then when Kristen had tried to get both books, The Story of Roland and The Promise, Mrs. Hailey had looked up over her glasses. 'Don't you have a book at home, overdue?'

Kristen had remembered she had left The Three Musketeers at the beach, and when she began to make something up, Mrs. Hailey had sighed. 'Don't, Kristen.' She had said.

It had ended up that all she got was The Story of Roland, which she had already read, and what good was that? And she had thought Mrs. Hailey was her friend.

Noah was going on about meeting a ship. 'It will go to France. I think it will. I know it will. I will start in Paris. I will go to every hospital. I will go everywhere. I have the money. I will buy what

I need. I will find her, do not worry.'

Werry.

Kristen took a breath. 'Who's going to take care of Pap?'

Noah looked over the side of the boat, almost as if he could see the bottom, almost as if he were searching for a flounder. 'The Smiths, of course. They will do that for me. Don't you think so?'

'I have to tell you...' Kristen began.

But Noah was singing now. He paused. 'I will teach her this song from your radio,' and he began again. ' 'You've got to accent-tchu-ate...''

'Tom.'

Kristen had dreamed about Lynnnatta, and Eddie too, but when she awoke, she couldn't remember much more than that. She knew she had been crying in the dream. She was still crying when she opened her eyes.

Gram was standing next to her bed. 'It was only a dream, Kristen. 'she said.

Kristen leaned up on one arm. Poppy had been in the dream, and Christy, but Kristen hadn't seen her face, just her hair, dark and shiny like Tom's, and there was something about Madeline, the book Madeline.

Gram sat down on the edge of the bed. 'What is it?

What's the matter?'

She stuck out her lower lip. 'If you want to learn, it'll be faster in the bay. And that's my final offer.'

'I do not know what that means,' he said.

'You don't have to.' She unwrapped his hand from her arm and scrambled to her feet. 'I'm going to put Eddie's picture back in the living room now, and then I'm going to the bay to swim. If you want to come with me, fine. If not, too bad.'

She marched into the living room and dusted the end table with her arm. She thought of Eddie on a beach in Normandy. She'd seen newspaper films: Nazi pillboxes set into the rocks, firing; soldiers in the sand, some of them dead, everything confused. They had to get off the beaches before they could begin to free the French cities.

Kristen put Eddie's picture on the table and ran her fingers over his face. 'Be just a little lost,' she whispered. He was smiling in the picture, and she could remember him smiling the same way when

she had met him coming out of the movie, or at Mrs. Sherman's, or on the way to church. She wondered if he could count as a friend even though he was much older. 'What do you think, Eddie?' She asked.

'Christy talks to herself all the time,' Noah said.

Kristen marched past him and out the door. 'Are you coming?'

Noah looked up at the ceiling, blinking, trying to decide.

At the same moment, Pap darted between their legs and out the door.

Noah reached for her, and so did Kristen.

She was halfway down the path before they caught up. 'She's growing,' Kristen said, scooping the cat into her arms and bringing her into the house.

Noah nodded. 'I could bring her back to Canada, I think.'

'Good,' Kristen said.

'But I am not going back to Canada,' Noah said.

'Remember? I am going to Europe.'

'And- I'm going to the bay,' Kristen said.

'I guess I will come too,' he said.

Kristen didn't answer. She marched out the door, taking a deep breath.

'Things are never going to be the same,' she said. 'Not even when the war is over. Noah might not have his grandmother.

He might not have Christy.'

'Everything is so confused over there. A flood of people has come from the rest of Europe, soldiers...' Gram sighed. 'If our army can get across France, if they can liberate Paris, then maybe someone can get to Christy.' She shook her head. 'But you're right, Kristen. things won't be the same. We'll all be changed, all of us who lived through this.'

'But Poppy said it would be the same.'

'I know.' Gram patted her shoulder. 'He wanted it to be the same for you.'

Kristen took a breath. She thought of Lynnnatta not remembering Eddie's face. Kristen could see his face so clearly, even without the picture.

And- Eddie's picture was standing there on the Dillons' living room table. It would take her only five minutes to wrap it and bring it down to the post office this morning. If only...

Suppose she told Gram? Gram was sitting there next to her, twisting her long hair with both hands, redoing her bun, looking worried. She could tell Gram she'd never go into the

Dillons' house again if she could just get the picture to Lynnnatta.

Gram was standing up now, picking yesterday's clothes up off the floor. 'Just a mess in here.'

Kristen blew a breath through her mouth. 'I need some money.'

Gram blinked. 'How did you get from Christy to needing money?'

'I lost my tan purse,' Kristen said slowly.

'Oh, Kristen.' Gram shook her head. 'If only you'd think sometimes...'

Kristen slung her legs out from under her quilt. 'Never mind.'

'How much?'

Kristen twitched one shoulder. 'I don't remember.'

She went into the bathroom and yanked on her bathing suit. It was still damp from yesterday. Gram was saying something, but Kristen turned on the water, blasting it into the sink, and began to brush her teeth.

When she came out, her breakfast was on the table, juice, and Rice Krispies with bananas and strawberries sliced on top, a face with a smiling mouth. And Noah was sitting there, talking to Gram.

Kristen ran her fingers through her hair to comb it, then sat across from him. She reached for her juice and took a gulp.

They were talking about music again. Noah was telling Gram that his violin was still in Hungary. 'In a blue case,' he said, 'maybe in my bedroom where I put it.' He grinned at Kristen. 'If I had it here, we could play duets.'

Gram was laughing, and Kristen frowned, but then she laughed too. She could just see skinny Noah playing the violin, playing some wonderful Hungarian thing, and she'd be doing the C scale from one end of the piano to the other.

Gram patted her head. 'I love to hear you laugh, Kristen.'

And- Noah nodded. 'She is like my sister, Christy.'

Gram was on her way out. 'Going to catch a fish,' she said. 'I'm not going to do another thing all day but spend time in that rowboat and feel that ocean underneath me.'

Then she was gone. Kristen watched her through the screen, going down to the rowboat, her fishing rod in one hand. And then she noticed Noah was wearing his bathing suit and one of Mr. Meyer's old shirts. She knew he was hoping she'd teach him to swim this morning.

Kristen stood up, finishing her cereal in a couple of spoonfuls. 'I still need the money for Lynnnatta,' she said. 'I thought of telling Gram...'

Noah nodded. 'I was thinking about that too,' he said. 'I have the money.'

'No.' She shook her head. 'Fifty dollars is so much... too much.'

'From my aunt,' Noah said. 'I asked her for money.'

'Mrs. Meyer? You told Mrs. Meyer?'

'No. I just asked, 'Could I have...' and before I could finish she said I should have some money to spend for myself. She said she never thought of it.' Noah was pulling money out. A dollar in one pocket. Fifty cents in another.

Kristen started in on 'The Blue Danube' again with one finger of her right hand and added some dum dum's with the left hand.

Footsteps were coming around the side of the house. She stood up, still playing, as the top of Tom's head passed the window, then backed up, and his face came into view.

'I thought we were going to...' He held up the rolled-up towel.

'Kristen, are you playing?' Gram called.

'Hold your horses,' Kristen told Tom. 'I can't get out of here for another twenty-two minutes.'

'Kristen.' Gram called again.

Kristen stretched up on the bench to get a good look at Tom. 'Besides,' she told him, 'I've got a surprise for you. Listen to what I'm playing. It's for you, special.'

She plunked herself down on the bench again and began to play 'The Blue Danube' as nicely as she could.

After a minute, she heard a noise. Was that Noah laughing again? She ended 'The Blue Danube' with a crash and began the C scale again.

She could hear Gram at the back door telling Noah to come in for some iced tea while he waited. Good grief. She opened the John Thompson book to the piece she knew best, the piece she had played a million times last winter. She could hear Gram and Noah talking in the kitchen. The clock wasn't moving.

She began to play. She hit the wrong note with her left pinky. It sounded horrible. For a minute there was silence in the kitchen.

Kristen went back to the C scale, played it one last time, but softly now as if she knew what she was doing. Then she slid off the seat and went into the kitchen. Noah and Gram were talking about music, but not about the piano, about violin music. Noah was telling Gram about the lessons he had taken, and Gram, her head to one side, was listening, nodding.

'Come on, Tom,' Kristen said, feeling ready to scream, 'We've got stuff to do, remember? We can't hang around here all day.'

'I'm so glad.' She felt like hugging him. She reached for his hand, warm and dry, and he squeezed back.

They spent the next half hour taking care of the picture. They cut up a paper bag and found cardboard and a ball of string in Mrs. Dillon's closet.

Pap loved it, the noise and the crinkling of paper as they wrapped the picture in layers of cardboard, and the ball of string to bat across the kitchen floor. But Lynnnatta's house was spoiled for Kristen. She wondered what would happen if Mrs. Dillon found out Kristen had been in her house all summer. And she would find out. She'd see the picture, and ask Lynnnatta.

17

They were at Lynnnatta's house, sitting on the kitchen floor, with Tom's coat in front of them. The coat was navy blue wool, scratchy against Kristen's fingers. She poked Gram's manicure scissors into the collar seam, trying to slide the points under the tiny stitches. Noah was leaning over her shoulder, and Pap was playing with her sneaker lace.

Kristen could feel the perspiration running down her back, the metal scissors sliding in her slippery fingers, when Noah began to talk, grinning. 'Hungarians play 'The Blue Danube' too,' he said.

'It never sounded like that.'

'Like what?'

He looked down at the coat. 'Like terrible. Like Christy plays.' He smiled. 'Christy likes to play duets. Loud.'

Swallowed. 'I don't want to play the piano anyway. It takes too much time, and...' She'd probably like Christy. 'You should try it,' Kristen said. 'Hanging around on the bench, trying to...'

'In my grandmother's restaurant,' Noah said slowly, 'I played the violin on Sunday. I played that song, and 'Vienna Life,' which is my grandmother's favorite.' He stopped. 'I loved the violin, Kristen. If only I could have taken it with me...'

He took a breath. 'In Kalocsa's, Nagymamma's restaurant, people ate goulash. They had rolls with sweet butter. For dessert, they ate rigojancsi, and gesztenyepüre, or placentas.'

'What...'

'Palacsintas are pancakes. They're filled with jam or chocolate.'

Kristen looked up.

'Nagymamma gave me plain ones, cold ones, folded over.

She put them in my coat pocket when I left.'

Kristen knew he was ready to cry, but she couldn't think what to say. She just kept snipping at the collar until there was a wide opening in the seam. Without looking, she pushed the coat toward him and watched as he edged his thumb and index finger gently into the seam. He worked the bills out, laying each one on the floor next to them. 'These are Magyar money,' he said. 'We call them forints. And this one is an English pound.'

He didn't have to tell her about the next, a fifty-dollar bill, worn and creased. 'Nagymamma did not know where we were going. She had to guess about the money.'

Looked at him, thinking about going to another country without Poppy or Gram, without even knowing where she was going. 'Where is... 'she began. Noah reached down for the cat. He held her up to his face, rubbing her soft fur on his cheek. 'Nagymamma might be in her house. She might be in prison. I do not know.'

Kristen thought of her mother, who had died, but had died of something wrong with her heart, and not in prison, but at home in St. Paul's. Kristen touched the money on the floor beside her, patted it the way she patted her stars. It was as if she could almost see Tom's grandmother, who had touched it last.

The cat put its tiny needle claws into Tom's shoulder as he reached over to put his fingers into the coat seam again. And now there was a tiny picture with three faces. Tom, of course, with that mop of hair, and an old woman, with a lined face and little round glasses, and a girl. The girl had curls like Tom's, but they were softer, smoother, and she was laughing.

'Christy,' Kristen said.

'Yes.' Noah looked down at the picture again; then put it carefully in his pocket. He folded most of the money and put that in his pocket too. Then he handed her the fifty dollars. 'Here, for

Eddie's picture.'

She looked down at the money. 'We can't-'

'My grandmother would not mind. She would be glad, I think.'

Shook her head. 'Don't you see? We could never go to the post office with all this money. They'd ask where we'd gotten it. They'd tell my grandmother.'

Noah raised one shoulder. 'It is too much money, then?'

'More than I've ever seen at once,' Kristen said.

Noah scooped up the money and stuffed it back into the coat. He sat back on his heels and put the cat down on the floor. 'I guess we should not use Hungarian money. That is not so much.'

Kristen grinned. 'I don't think so. Nobody around here has ever seen Hungarian money.'

'No.' He grinned back.

But then Kristen heard the church bells. Four times. Four o' clock. The post office was closed, and poor Lynnnatta would have to go another day without the picture.

Kristen sighed. 'I'll teach you to swim, Tom. We'll go over to the bay now, and I'll figure out how to get money before tomorrow.'

'Not the bay,' he said, 'the ocean.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'I do not know what that means, 'ridiculous.''

She narrowed her eyes. He knew very well what it meant.

'You can't learn to swim in that rough water.'

He reached forward to grab her arm. 'Do you know that Christ is waiting for me? Do you know that summer will be over and I will have to go back to Canada...?'

She nodded. 'I'll have to go back to St. Paul's, and Sister Sara in the sixth grade.'

'Please.' He was holding her arm so hard now she could feel each one of his fingers tightening around it. His eyes were so blue, and she knew it was never going to happen the way he wanted, and it was all her fault... all because of her wild stories.

'Oh yes, Kristen. I will learn to swim, and you will row.'

Next, to her, Gram took her silver rosary beads out of their case, and on her other side, Mrs. Colgan opened her missal.

In a moment Father Murphy was out on the altar beginning the Mass, and Kristen began to pray for Eddie, and then for Poppy.

She prayed for Tom's sister too, and his grandmother.

Kristen put Eddie's picture on the table next to the couch and went onto the porch to find her Sunday clothes, even though it wasn't Sunday.

Just ten minutes later, she was walking into church, stopping for a quick dip of holy water, and sliding into a pew next to Gram.

As she knelt there and waited for Father Murphy to begin, the sun-blasted in around the partly opened stained-glass windows. It felt as if it must be a hundred degrees. The fan in front didn't do any good. It just moved the fringe a little on the banner that hung over their heads.

It was a desert in that church. She lifted the brim of her straw hat away from her head and fanned the air with her hymnbook, watching Mrs. Meyer come up the aisle with Noah until Gram gave her a poke.

Kristen tried to imagine what it must feel like to be Eddie, to have been taken prisoner by the Germans, maybe, or just somewhere by himself, hurt.

Father Murphy had hung the banner there himself. On its white background were rows of blue stars, one for each of the men from the parish who were in the service. There was one gold star in the middle. That was for a sailor who used to live near the Cross-Bay Theatre. He had been killed at Pearl Harbor. And now, in a day or two, there'd be a silver star for Eddie Dillon, who was missing, lost somewhere on a beach in France, and no one knew if they'd ever find him.

Gram put her hand up to her mouth. 'A phone call from Willow Run to Mrs. Tannenbaum's candy store. We're on our way to church... a special Mass and we're going to pray as hard...' She took a breath. 'We're all praying, I guess, the whole world, that this will be over soon.' She blinked back tears.

'And right now, we're going to pray for Eddie, and your father, and Tom's family, and everyone who-' She broke off.

I watched her make careful, even numbers on the paper and turn it over as Gram came back into the kitchen, another one of my films in her hand.

I didn't take any chances, though. Through the rest of the dinner, I said the phone number over in my head. I wanted to be sure I'd remember it.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I never showed this picture to anyone: the golden field, me with my head back laughing, my hands at the wheel of the truck. It took four or five pencils to do this: I started with Summer Green, Iron Gray, and Beach Sand. That was something, that Saturday night.

Izzy and the Old Man were going to the movie in town.

'It's a romance,' the Old Man said, waggling his eyebrows at me.

'A waste of a good evening.'

'You'll love it, John,' Izzy said. 'There are snacks in the refrigerator and the cabinet. Snacks all over the place. You won't starve.' She leaned out the door. 'And there's a tin of that hard candy on my dresser.'

Green's crossed his eyes. 'They're so sour they curl your tongue.'

'Not mine.' I'd been eating them all summer; I couldn't get enough of them.

'That's because-' he began. I knew he was going to joke about my being sour.

But the Old Man came out the door. 'I just saw the mess you left in the shed,' he told Green's. 'Straighten that place up.

It's bad enough your room looks the way it does.'

'What's this neatness kick?'

'Did you notice how neat Holly's things are?'

Without thinking, I put my hand up. 'Don't...' I began, but it came out almost like a breath. Neither one of them heard, or maybe they just weren't paying attention.

Green's unfolded himself from his chair so slowly, it seemed as if he weren't moving.

'Hang in there, Kristen Copses,' Green's said as the Old Man stamped around the side of the house and started the car.

'We're going to be out of here in five minutes.'

'Where?' Already he was running around the side of the house to the shed.

I sat there listening as he threw things around for a few minutes, and then he was back. 'I'm going to teach you to drive. Good thing they took the car instead of the truck.' He dangled the keys in front of my nose. 'Anyone who can keep her things disinfected can drive a truck.'

'I don't think-' I began.

'Scared?'

'Never.'

'All right, don't waste my valuable time arguing.'

In the back of the evergreens and the row of holly bushes was a flat field. The Old Man kept it mowed against snakes, rattlers that struck blind in the summer. 'Don't worry,' Green's said, sliding into the truck. 'No one's been bitten for about a hundred years. Pop worries about everything.'

Green's drove as if he'd been doing it all his life. He grinned across at me in the suicide seat. 'Since I was about eight,' he said, knowing what I was thinking. 'I'm going to take the truck up the mountain one day.'

He showed me the gears and the pedals, and then we switched seats. And so, I drove in that field in the summer evening light, Green's shouting directions as I lurched through the ruts, bucking, stalling, starting up again with gear-grinding noises.

'Aha, Kristen Copses,' he yelled. 'There's hope for you. I knew it!'

I pressed my foot down on the gas pedal a little harder.

'Yahoo!' I yelled. 'It's me, driving a pickup truck!'

19

Films of Kristen Deniel

One raw Tuesday morning I awoke and pulled the shade aside; the trees were charcoal smudges against an iron-gray sky. Gram wouldn't be up for another hour or two. I hadn't done my homework the night before, hadn't even thought of it. I'd fallen asleep watching television with Henry next to me on the couch and Gram working at the kitchen table.

I still faced rows of math problems. Three pages, maybe four. And there was a social studies composition on Henry Hudson.

I tried to decide whether I could work on it now. It was early. I popped the bread into the toaster and opened a can of Salmon Delight for Henry, who sniffed at it and walked away.

'I can never figure you out,' I said and buttered a square of toast for him instead. Then I pulled my books off the shelf and sat at the table with one of Gram's knitted shawls around me.

In the back of me, I had the radio on. Two weeks until Christmas. It had snowed upstate, six inches.

Ah, snow for Green's. Were they up yet, the three of them?

Were they having breakfast in their winter house in Hancock? What would it be like if I were there, doing my homework, eating Izzy's apple pancakes?

The radio announcer said it was a foggy day on Long Island at three minutes before eight o'clock.

I finished the first page of math problems; I could never do the rest in a half hour. Never mind Henry Hudson sailing up the river.

Maybe I could take one more day off. Just one. I grabbed my jacket and pad and went out the back door, holding it open for Henry to come too. The canal would be wonderful this morning, with a mist rising off the water. And all the while I jogged toward the jetty, I knew it was a mistake. But still, I kept going.

When I got to the pier, I sat, hands clenched in my pocket against the cold, my legs dangling, watching the fisherman on the DanBar-J gear up to go out for blues. He knew me now and waved. Last week he'd even dropped a flounder on the bench for me. I had pan-fried it with a little butter, and Gram had put two dusty pink candles on the table, almost like a party.

Henry had loved his share. He hadn't scratched at me once when I put his plate down in front of him on the radio. 'Ah,' I had said, pleased with him. 'You'd do anything for a handout.'

Now I watched the fingers of fog drift over the water while Henry sat nearby, washing one mangy leg. It was the kind of day I loved. I couldn't see the end of the pier, and no one could see me from there. I could hear the fisherman from the DanBar-J, though.

'Want a job?' He called.

He wasn't thinking about school either.

A job? Why not? There'd be money for cat food, a couple of cans of ravioli. I hadn't had ravioli since the stucco house.

I nodded and found myself hosing down the deck of the Dan-Bar-J. As I scrubbed at the dried-on pieces of fish with a wire brush, I spent the money in my mind.

He handed me three crumpled-up bills. I smoothed them out, and then as I gave him a half wave, he reached into his pocket and gave me another dollar.

I couldn't wait to get back to Gram. She'd pat her scarf around her neck and fuss with her hat. We'd sail up and down the aisles of DeMattia's Food Store, picking and choosing: ravioli, and a pink can of shredded tuna for Henry. Maybe some marmalade, too, to have with the English muffins we had left.

I had forgotten all about homework, and school, and even the hot cocoa woman. Henry and I headed home as the fog lifted and the sun appeared behind the trees. It was going to be a beautiful day, a day for a picnic on the rock jetty.

I pulled open the back door and stopped. Above the newscaster's voice on the radio-'Nine-thirty and still snowing in upstate Philadelphia'-was the sound of voices in the living room.

Henry heard them too. He scampered back outside to sit on the bench, an irritable look on his skinny face.

I thought about scampering with him. I knew who it must be. But how could I leave Gram alone with her? Instead, I shrugged out of my jacket, put my pad on the table, and lifted my chin as I went toward the front of the house.

The hot cocoa woman sat on the lilac couch, and Gram sat in the chair opposite. They both had cups of coffee in their hands.

Good move, Gram, I thought. Her coffee was great, dark and rich, as the advertisements went.

I nodded at the hot cocoa woman and sank in the third chair, facing the window, looking out as if something wonderful were going on right there in the front yard.

They talked about old movies and the wonderful colors in the living room; they talked about coffee waking them up, and all the time my heart was pounding. Without looking at the hot cocoa woman's face, I knew she was straining at the conversation, that this wasn't what she wanted to say.

She was wearing sweats... Did she ever wear anything else? I could see around the creamy spot on her chest. She'd spilled her coffee. What was the matter with that woman, anyway?

But Gram looked fine, Gram looked wonderful, with that slash of red across her mouth, a silky green dress that looked like the sea. I knew she was groping, though. She had no idea who the woman sitting across from her was.

At last, the hot cocoa woman put down her cup. 'Kristen,' she said, 'I know I'm keeping you from school.'

I waved my hand. No problem, lady.

She looked at Gram then. 'I think, Mrs. Cahill, that we need to talk about another place for Kristen.'

Gram sat up straight. I could see her thin hands on the coffee cup trembling a little; her mouth, too. 'Kristen is leaving?'

They both looked at me.

'I've found a family for her,' the hot cocoa woman said. 'A mother and father with a three-year-old boy and a dog.' She kept leaning forward, trying to make me look at her. 'I think I remember you like dogs, Kristen.'

'Sharks,' I said, 'and barracudas, not dogs.'

'A family would be nice,' Gram said.

Too late, I thought.

'But not today,' the hot cocoa woman said. 'It will be a few days. I'll want Kristen to meet them first. They're not so far from here. You and Mrs. Cahill will be able to visit sometimes, Kristen.'

She stood up then. 'I'll keep in touch,' she said. 'Would you like me to drive you to school now?'

I shook my head. 'I can walk.'

She turned to go.

'By the way,' I said. 'You have a sticker on the back of that shirt. X-L.'

She tried to look over her shoulder.

'Extra-large,' I said, feeling mean.

You can't wear those things,' Kristen told him after they had fed the cat and were walking along the road. 'I'm not going to march along the beach with someone who-'

'You said you wanted to go out on the rocks,' Noah said.

'Not with a baby who has beach slippers on his feet,' she told him, grinning.

He grinned back, looking down at his feet. 'My aunt said I would come back with cuts from the bar-nackles...'

'Barnacles,' she said. 'Not bar-nackles.'

'Same thing.' He reached down to pull off Mr. Meyer's slippers and tossed them into the marshes.

She nodded. 'Don't worry, they'll still be there when we get back. Nobody in the world is going to want them.'

She led him down the path, across the sand, toward the jetty, and began to hop along the rocks. 'See,' she said, looking back. 'Nothing to it.'

He followed her slowly, one foot at a time, wincing.

'Didn't you ever walk around barefoot in Hungary?' she asked.

'Certainly not,' he said. 'Do you think we were poor, that we had no shoes?'

She was laughing again, thinking about her feet, tough as leather, and Tom, his first summer going barefoot. She settled herself on the gray triangular rock, way out, with Noah next to her, the sun on her face, and the sound of the water lapping against the rocks.

'I want to tell you something,' she said after a while. 'I have stars on my bedroom ceiling. My mother passed them all up for me when I was a baby. She told my father she was making a world for me. She said she wanted to give me the whole world.'

Noah wasn't looking at her, his head was turned, but he was sitting there so still, so unmoving, she knew how hard he was listening.

'I bring one with me to Ridgway every year,' she said. 'I counted. There are dozens of them left on my ceiling. I'll be thirty or forty before they're all used up.'

He nodded a little.

'I never told anyone,' she said. 'Not even Poppy. I make them presents to me from my mother, every year on my birthday, in July.' She took a breath. It was so nice to tell someone about the stars. It was so nice to talk about her mother as if she, Kristen. were like everyone else, like everyone who had a mother.

'I know your mother is dead,' he said, looking at her now, reaching out for the tiniest second to touch her shoulder. 'My aunt told me.'

Kristen squinted a little, looking out at a curl of smoke from a freighter far out. She waited for him to say something more about them, but when he didn't, she began again. 'My mother had

something wrong with her heart. It was too big. She died right in Poppy's bedroom on a sunny day.' She took a breath. 'I think that's an all right way to die, but it's not all right that I don't remember her.'

'A picture?' he asked. 'You have a picture?'

'Poppy has a book with her films, but they're blurry, and I don't know what her voice was like. You know?'

She could see his teeth chewing on his lower lip. She opened the paper bag from Gram: two sandwiches, Spam, apples, Social Tea cookies.

'I hate this,' she said, handing one of the sandwiches to him. 'Gram does too. After the war, we're never going to have one can of Spam again. And Poppy says if we have any left in the kitchen cabinet, he's going to throw them right in the ocean.'

Noah had a mouthful of it. 'I like this,' he said. 'I like everything. My grandmother, Nagymamma, loved to cook for me.

She said I was her best...' He closed his eyes, trying to think. 'Customer,' Kristen said, watching him nod, as she tried to get her mouth around the word. 'Nahj...'

'It means a big mother, grandmother. The Nagy part just means big.'

Kristen took a tiny piece of Spam and tossed it into the water. 'For the fish,' she said. 'They probably don't like it either.'

'You know my mother is dead too, and my father,' he said.

Both, she thought. She couldn't picture what it would be like with Poppy dead. So terrible...

'They are dead because they had a newspaper. They wrote bad things about Hitler and the Nazis. And their friends would give out the papers. They were caught one day. The Nazis came to the house...'

Kristen let out her breath. She didn't want to look in his eyes, but she couldn't help it, she glanced at him quickly, but he didn't look as if he would cry. He was squinting at the water, his eyes dry. 'Nagymamma came for me, for Christy and me, just before they came to our house. And there was no time, not one minute. We did not say goodbye, my mother was running into the kitchen, trying to burn

small pieces of paper at the stove, and she looked over her shoulder and told us, 'Grannie,' and then she looked back because the stove was hot and she was almost burning her fingers.'

Kristen was biting her lip, chewing on her lip, watching a small fish tear a piece of the Spam, and then another. . .

'It means 'I love you,' 'he said before she could ask. 'But if they loved us, they would not have done that, they would not have bothered with newspapers. And we do not even know what happened to them. Nagymamma just got a postcard from the police that they were dead.'

'Oh, Tom,' Kristen said, thinking how angry he looked, thinking she was angry too. Poppy should have stayed home.

'And we went to Austria, Christy and me, in the back of Mr. Kovacs's car, and then across to Switzerland. Mr. Kovacs promised he was going to sneak us across Europe. In Switzerland, Christy was sick with'-he touched is face-' marks.'

'Chickenpox?'

He shook his head.

'Measles.'

'Yes, and we had been traveling for so long, and Christy had a fever, a big fever, I knew it. I could not tell anyone.' He shook his head, and Kristen could see him making fists of his hands.

'We still had to cross the mountains into France,' he said. 'Mr. Kovacs was pretending we were his children, and the Nazis were there, right there.' He was almost breathless, telling her. 'We had to get to the ship that would take us to America.' He stopped for a moment. 'I was afraid they would not let Christy go.'

Kristen couldn't look at him. She tore off another piece of Spam for the fish and the crust of her bread.

'In France, she was so thirsty. Her face was red, and she was burning.' Noah stood up, balancing himself on the rock, watching the ship, a little closer now. He pointed to the end of the jetty, across the water. 'Christy is in France, and so are the Nazis.'

'But how...'

Noah sighed. 'We were waiting for the ship to take us to America, and this lady who was helping us, this lady with a long gray dress that went to the ground and across...' He raised his hands to his head. 'She was wearing a white...' He stopped and frowned.

'Something on her head?' Kristen asked. 'Was it a nun?'

'Yes. And she said, 'This girl is sick. She belongs to a hospital and not on a ship. She will give the sickness to everyone else.''

'Measles.'

'Yes, but I said it was not measles. I said she could not go to a hospital, but later I fell asleep, and they took her, and I did not even say goodbye.'

Kristen swallowed.

'Now Christy is in France until the war is over. The war may last forever, and Christy is in a convent, with the lady in the gray dress, and the Nazis are right there, and suppose they find out about our newspaper in Hungary?'

'Wait, Tom,' Kristen began. 'Isn't Hungary far away from

France? How would they know?'

Noah didn't stop. 'Nagymamma said to stay together, no matter what. She said as long as we did, we'd have a family.'

He looked around and picked up the bag with the apples.

20

It was late on Monday night. Still, in shorts and a shirt, Kristen lay under her red quilt looking up at the sky. She could see Orion's Belt and the W of Cassiopeia. They were sharp and clear among the other stars in the dark sky. It was a beautiful night, and finally, she and Noah were going to watch for convoys.

She thought about it a little uneasily. They hadn't talked about Kristen's going to Europe since that day at the beach. Maybe he had forgotten, she told herself, or maybe he had thought it over by now and knew she had been lying.

She turned in the bed, trying to put it out of her mind. Everything was ready for tonight, on the floor. A sweater, two towels, her sneakers tucked in one side of her beach bag, and two bottles of soda jammed into the other side.

If only Gram would go to sleep. Vaguely she heard Gram's radio, the end of Lux Radio Theatre, and then music. 'Would you like to swing on a star?' She couldn't keep her eyes open.

Then suddenly she was awake, wide awake. It seemed very late, midnight, maybe one o'clock. Gram's radio was off, and all the lights. Kristen reached for the screen and pushed it up and out.

She dropped into the rowboat and pushed herself along under the porches. In the light that spilled out from the less of Mrs. Colgan's blackout shades, she could see a mess of sand crabs hanging on to the pilings.

And at the Smiths', just silence. She sat there as wide awake as if it were the middle of the morning, so angry at herself for sleeping, so disappointed Noah was asleep, she could have cried.

'Too much crying,' she said aloud.

'Too much talking to yourself,' a voice said, so close she jumped.

Noah dropped into the boat. He was clumsy and splashed water over the side. 'Because of the cat,' he said.

She leaned over until she could see the cat's face, its eyes peering out from the front of his open jacket. 'Cats hate the water.'

'This one does not. I thought you would not come.'

She opened her mouth, ready to lie, but raised one shoulder instead. 'I fell asleep.'

Noah nodded. 'It is hard to stay awake sometimes.'

Kristen pushed the boat out from under the porches. 'Here's what we'll do. We'll cut across the bay. That way we can stay away from the surf.'

'But it is closer the other way.'

'Yes, but it's harder to fight the surf than the bay. If you're going far you want to save your arms.'

He nodded, watching her pull on the oars.

'Will you teach me to swim?' he asked after a while.

She blinked. She had been thinking again about Poppy... Poppy on a troopship watching her swim toward him. It was a wonderful dream. 'Swim?' she repeated. 'Yes. But why can't you swim?'

'I did not have an ocean,' he said. Like Lynnnatta in Detroit, she thought.

'I had a river, the Danube.' He leaned forward. 'It runs between Buda and Pest, but the river is not blue like the waltz. It is gray, and sometimes silver.'

Kristen didn't say anything. She had never heard of

Budapest split up that way in two halves. She'd heard of 'The Blue Danube,' though. It was one of the songs in her music book for the piano.

It was hard to row now. The marshes were closing in around them, and there was the dry rustle of the reeds hitting the sides of the boat and scraping the bottom.

She could see Playland now in the back of them on

Ninety-ninth Street, the roller coaster, a dark skeleton, and the

Ferris wheel rising behind it. In front, the boardwalk was misty, the tall lights painted black toward the sea, so German subs couldn't spot ships in the water nearby.

'How long?' Noah asked.

'Long?'

'To learn to swim.' He leaned forward. 'I want to go with you to Europe.'

She opened her mouth. Tell him right now, she told herself.

Tell him it's just too far, the water's too rough.

'Kristen?'

She sighed. 'You could never learn to swim the Atlantic in the summer. It would take months, years to be good enough, fast enough.'

'If you can do it...'

'I've been swimming since I was four,' she said. 'And remember that afternoon when I went into the surf after you, I was nearly swept under.'

He didn't answer.

She took a breath, trying to think of something to convince him. 'You even said you thought I was a better swimmer.'

In the dark, she could just see him shaking his head. 'I know you are a good swimmer,' he said slowly. 'I know you were coming for me.' He stopped for a moment. 'I was... I don't know the word...'

How could she tell him the Christy now? He was the first friend she had ever made. You couldn't count Lynnnatta... Lynnnatta, who had been in Ridgway every summer from the time they could walk, from the time they could talk. Tom, a friend, a good friend, Kristen's best friend.

''Teasing' is the word,' he said.

She looked at him. His face was so serious. One hand was in his jacket, petting the sleeping cat. 'You do not want to take me,' he said. 'You think I will not be able to keep up.'

'No, it isn't that. Really,' she said.

'You think I am a coward because of the plane that day.'

She kept shaking her head.

He leaned forward. 'It was just that I was thinking it was Europe.' His lip trembled a little. 'In Budapest, we had a yellow house with birds.' He moved his fingers. 'They were small birds.

Blue ones painted on the house painted on the window shutters. I had an orange cat too, we called him Pap, after the pepper. He looks like this cat.' He tried to smile. 'And my grandmother, Nagymamma, was always telling me to do this and that, like your grandmother.'

Kristen bit her lip, trying to think of what to say.

'I have only Christy left. Christy is my family.' He stopped then and pointed. 'Look.'

She turned and saw it too. The first ship looked like a flat chunk of coal on the water, so far out she wasn't even sure it was a ship. But then a second one appeared on the horizon, moving out of the mist. It was a huge ship, its top tangle of turrets and masts.

For a moment, they didn't say anything. They sat there watching, the rowboat rocking gently until the ship disappeared into the mist again.

'That was a troopship,' she said at last.

Noah leaned back. 'Yes,' he said, 'I know. I will learn to swim, Kristen. to keep up, and we will go out there, out to a ship.

And- then I will go back to Europe to find Christy.'

She began to grow again, turning the boat toward the canal, her mouth dry.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Two of Izzy's candies filled my mouth as I went around the side of the house. I did n't mean to listen or to be sneaky. Ordinarily, I did that a lot. I'd standstill in the hall to hear what the stucco woman had to say to her telephone friend. I'd flip pages on the teacher's desk to see what disaster of a mark I'd gotten in social studies or social attitude. I'd pass by classmates in the schoolyard to find out what they had to say about that kid Kristen Copses.

But this time I was on my way to find Izzy, to give her a picture I'd drawn: Izzy flipping a pancake that would land on my plate. Izzy's pancakes were wonderful: covered with apples cut into small sweet chunks, the pancakes themselves so light I must have eaten a half dozen. In the picture Izzy is laughing, the turner in one hand, just under the cross-stitched motto on the wall:

LOVE THE COOK.

I'd changed the motto, though. I'd written: I DO LOVE THE COOK. I'd drawn the I DO in the palest pink so that you'd have to study it, study it hard, or you wouldn't notice.

One afternoon Izzy and I had walked up to the old cemetery on the hill where her parents were buried. We picked white daisies and Queen Anne's lace and put them in the jar in front of a small stone next to her parents' grave. Izzy ran her hand over the inscription on the bottom: JOSEPH REGAN, SIX DAYS. 'I always wanted more children,' she said. 'For me, for John, for Green's.' She patted the stone. 'I wanted a baby for each corner of my house. It just never happened after this.'

Down the hill, I could hear the Old Man bellow at Green's. 'Do they always fight?' I asked. 'Or...' -I hesitated, trying to sound as if I didn't care, as if it weren't important-' do you think it's because I'm here?'

Izzy grinned at me. 'It does seem worse this summer,' she said. 'But they have to find their way.'

I'd thought about that for days, 'worse this summer,' but now, as I rounded the house, I stepped back against the wall, warm from the sun, smelling faintly of paint, and closed my eyes.

'How can we let her go?' Izzy was saying.

'We can't,' the Old Man said.

My heart began to pound so hard I thought it would come through my chest.

A mother, I thought. M.

'She belongs here,' Izzy said. 'Green's feels it too.'

B, belong. G, girl. S, sister. W for want, W for the wish, W for Wouldn't it be lovely? My head was spinning.

'I've been thinking about it,' Izzy said. 'The winter house in town is too small. We'd have to put a room on for her.'

I don't need a room. A couch. Sleeping bags.

'Without the room, I don't think the agency would let us keep her. She has to have space for herself.'

For a moment they were quiet.

I leaned my head back, my hand to my mouth.

'How about this?' Lzzy said. 'You could call Lenny Mitchell to work with you. There's space in the back for a great room for Kristen.'

'A big window for her,' the Old Man said. 'We could do it in weeks.'

'Sooner than weeks,' Izzy said. 'Early fall.'

'Yes. Even Green's would help.'

'I'll call-' 'You'll call the agency.'

'How long will it take them?

'She'll have to go back first,' Izzy said, the words tumbling over each other.

'But just for a short time.'

I leaned my head against the wall. I'd never been so happy.

'A daughter,' Izzy said.

'Yes,' the Old Man said. 'We'll have a daughter.'

From where I stood, I could see the mountain towering over me. The stucco woman's voice was in my head: 'She's a mountain of trouble, that Kristen Copses.'

Before the end of the summer, I decided, I was going to climb that mountain, get to the top, raise my arms, and shout to the whole world, 'I have a family. I belong.'

In the back of me, there was a noise. 'Yahoo!'

Green's. I jumped afoot.

The voices stopped, but no one knew I had heard.

Early fall and I'd be a daughter.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Never mind that we didn't have much money. Never mind that I didn't even know exactly how to get to the house in Laurel Highlands; I'd find it. Never mind that the house wasn't mine.

Please don't mind, I said to Izzy and the Old Man in my head.

I ticked off what to pack, what to do, counting on my fingers: Bring all the food in the cabinet over the sink, a map, winter clothes, piles of anything warm I could find in the house, then get gas at the first exit off the highway.

Gram was in the kitchen making cocoa. 'It'll be dark soon,' she said.

'That's all right,' I told her. 'We like the dark. It's like velvet.'

'That it is,' she said. 'And we like snow, too.'

I bit my lip. Dark and snow. One problem after another.

'How about marshmallows in our cocoa?' Gram asked.

'Left-hand cabinet,' I said.

To begin with, Gram and I had to get off Long Island, I knew that; we had to get to Route Seventeen and exit at Ninety, and after that, we were home free. I had walked that last few miles dozens of times: the grocery store off the ramp, the road curving over the hill. We'd cross the bridge and the house would be there, nestled in the trees opposite the Old Man's mountain.

I could do it in my sleep.

I called back over my shoulder, reminding Gram where we were going: 'It's a house in the Copses, Gram,' I said. 'A house on the river, a safe house.'

I swept half boxes of cereal off the counter into a carton, cans of chicken noodle soup, sugar, salt, anything I could find to eat, then, wasting precious time, went up to the attic for Gram's old Christmas ornaments.

I heard a car and froze on the top step. The sound of the motor grew louder and then gradually disappeared. My heart was beating fast.

Stop, I told myself. The hot cocoa woman was far away, in her house somewhere, scarfing up her dinner, littering her sweatsuit with crumbs.

But I knew we should leave as quickly as we could. I'd learned that when I'd run before. The first hours made all the difference, the hours before anyone knew you were gone.

I scurried into the attic, found the box of ornaments, and pulled it after me to the stairs.

When I finished, the car was piled so high it was hard to see out the windows. It was completely dark now, except for the white flakes hitting the window. In the kitchen Gram was bent over the table, a cup of cocoa in one hand, her knife in the other, and the smooth chunk of wood in front of her.

'Gram?' I reached out for my cup of cocoa and sipped at it, feeling the warmth of it on my lip, the sweetness of the marshmallow in my mouth. I touched her shoulder. 'We can't wait anymore.'

Rubbing her eyes, she glanced toward her bedroom. I knew she wanted to take a nap. I did too; I was tired now, and thinking of the long trip ahead of us was almost too much.

'We'll have an adventure,' I said. 'You, and me, and Henry.' I hesitated. 'If we don't go, they might make me live somewhere else.'

She stood up. 'We'll go, then.' She looked around at the kitchen, touched the table, the back of the chair. 'Yes,' she said.

'We'll go.'

'Can you drive?' I asked.

Please let the snow stop, I thought.

She smiled. 'Of course.'

I made one last trip to the car, carrying her knives, the small drill, pieces of wood, and then I was back, hoisting Henry onto my shoulder. 'No biting, if you don't mind,' I told him.

We went outside, Gram looking up at the sky, holding out her hands to catch the flakes while I opened the garage doors, and then we were off, skidding our way down the street.

Suddenly- the snow did stop, and we saw a moon over our heads. 'It looks dusty,' Gram said. The houses stood out as clearly as if it were daytime; trees threw sharp shadows across the snowy lawns, and the dark streets curved like ribbons through that white world. I put my head back against the headrest, thinking we'd done it. The hardest part was over.

'Do you know about directions?' I asked.

She turned her head to one side. 'It depends. I know the way to the end of Long Island; I know how to get upstate...'

'Upstate, yes.'

'Across the Triborough Bridge.' She frowned, looking worried. 'Isn't that right?'

'I think so.' Henry was scratching around in the back, trying to make room for himself.

'There's a map somewhere.' Gram leaned across me, one hand off the wheel.

'I can find it,' I said quickly, reaching for the glove compartment. A tiny pinprick of light appeared as I snapped it open. The small space inside was filled with all kinds of things: one of Gram's silk gloves, a couple of dimes, a squished box of tissues, and at the very bottom, the map of Philadelphia State.

I unfolded it, spreading it out against the door of the glove compartment. It was a mass of color and lines and tiny words that were hard to see in that dim light. I bent over it, squinting. Palisades Parkway. Route 17. It was all there, one line after another, leading me home to Laurel Highlands.

I looked up as I heard the blare of a horn, and then a car swerved past us, its lights sweeping over the road. 'Are you all right?' I asked Gram.

'Right as rain,' she said.

I sat back and closed my eyes, thinking of Izzy, drawing them all in my mind, wondering if they'd think I was doing a terrible thing.

'It belongs to you,' the Old Man had said. Would he say that now? I wondered.

Why not? said Green's in my mind.

Izzy's face in front of mine. Would she say, 'Do it, Kristen'?

I thought she would.

I was doing it anyway.

Suddenly I sat up straight. How much gas did we have? It was almost a miracle to see the Mobil sign off to the right. I touched Gram's arm, pointing, and we pulled off the road, waiting for the attendant to fill the tank while I counted out my running money.

'Good idea,' Gram said, and I had to smile at her. She'd have driven until the tank was empty, and might never have remembered.

I was hungry now, really hungry. The hot chocolate hadn't lasted long. And I hadn't had lunch. Maybe I could hurry inside for a bag of potato chips and a chocolate bar. I glanced out the rearview mirror to see a car pulling up in the back of us at the pump. The man was impatient, tap ping his horn for us to get out of the way. There'd be no time to buy anything, not even enough time to rummage through the back to find the bags of food.

I thought of the hot cocoa woman. She'd come up the path tomorrow afternoon to get me, trying to smile, acting as if this would be a lovely afternoon tea at that woman's house-what was her name? Eleanor. When we didn't answer the bell, maybe she'd go around the back to see if we were in Gram's garden. But soon enough she'd figure out what we weren't there. She'd stand on tiptoe to look in the window of the garage, and it would be empty. If we were lucky, she'd wait awhile. She might think we'd be back any minute. But the minutes would stretch out to an hour, and then she'd know. She'd know. And then she'd call the police.

My hands were damp.

Calm down, I made Green's tell me in my mind. You knew all this before you started.

But Gram turned onto the parkway now, and it wouldn't be that long before we crossed the bridge and left Long Island, maybe twenty minutes, and the hot cocoa woman would just be getting ready for bed.

Next to me, in the dim light, I couldn't see the lines around Gram's eyes, or the ones crisscrossing her forehead. I could pretend we were taking a moonlight ride in the Silver Bullet, pretend Gram was all right and we weren't running.

The last time I had run was two weeks after what had happened in Laurel Highlands. It was September, still hot, with the sun beating down from early morning until dark. It was hard to move, hard to think; everything hurt in my head and my chest. I'd had enough of the stucco woman and I knew she'd had enough of me. All I could think about was being somewhere cold, a place where I could scoop up a chunk of snow and crush it against my teeth, a place to take the heat and the pain go away.

I left at night after the stucco woman had fallen asleep. It gave me hours to get out on the road, to find a bus. I was gone for days before they caught me.

Maybe we'd be luckier this time.

There were two letters the next day, one from Poppy and one from Lynnnatta. Kristen managed to pick them up from the mailman before he even hit Cross Bay Boulevard. She'd been waiting on the corner for more than an hour, watching the street as far down as she could see, wondering if Lynnnatta had gotten the letter she had sent. She had told her about Noah and the cat he was calling Pap.

Kristen yawned, tired from last night. Even after she had tiptoed through the dark kitchen at two or three in the morning and slipped under the red quilt again, she hadn't been able to sleep. She had tossed from one side to the other, thinking about the troopship, and Poppy, and what she could do about the lie she had told Tom.

Now she took the letters and went straight to Lynnnatta's house, past the bedroom where Pap slept now, a small orange circle on Eddie's pillow. She climbed the attic stairs and shoved up the window as high as it could go, then took a quick look at the beach. It was still empty t this hour of the morning, litter baskets clean, the sand smooth and even. She had time, plenty of time. She wanted to stretch out this moment with two letters to read. It would be like sucking on a red LifeSaver until it melted into a thin little circle.

She looked at them both, Lynnnatta's as filthy as the first letter she had sent. But this time it was in ink that was blotted and watery as if drops had been spattered on it.

Her father's letter was much neater, much cleaner, and is beautifully clear writing said 'Miss Elizabeth Mary Mollahan.'

Kristen slid her fingernail under the flap and slid out the tissue-paper letter.

'Kristen.' it began. 'My dearest daughter.'

She closed her eyes and held the letter her father had held in his own hands just a few days ago.

She read the rest of it quickly, so fast the words ran together. He never mentioned that she hadn't said goodbye. He never said that he minded, or didn't mind, only about the war is over, and everything the same again.

I have a picture of you in my head as clear as a photograph to take with me overseas. You're in the boat, and frowning, staring at a skate fish just before you set him free. By the time you read this, Kristen Billy, I'll be on my way across the ocean, the faster there, the foster home.

She thought her heart would stop. Her father out there, crossing the Atlantic, part of a convoy, maybe even on the troopship she and Noah had seen last night.

She couldn't even think about it. She looked at the end of the letter.

Hug the waves for me, and the beach on 101st Street.

And- then at the very bottom, hug Gram too. She loves you, Kristen. more than you know.

Kristen wiped her eyes. It was a good thing she had Lynnnatta's letter to think about next, and not having to hug Gram.

She looked back at Poppy's letter. At the very bottom he had written:

Don't forget to finish those books, Madeline, and A Tale of Two Cities, and especially The Three Musketeers.

Kristen frowned. Strange that Poppy had written that. He had read Madeline to her a hundred years ago when she was six. How could he have forgotten? And he didn't know she was reading The Three Musketeers. She had just taken it from the library on Thursday.

She put her father's letter down carefully near the chimney and opened Lynnnatta's. It started most strangely. No opening, the way Sister Jillen had taught Kristen in school. No - 'Dear Kristen.' Just please go to my living room and get Eddie's picture. Send it right away even if you have to ask your grandmother for the money. Tell her I'll pay her back when the war is over. I can't member what Eddie looks like and now he's missing in action, isn't it strange, on a beach. It was on D-Day. The telegram didn't come until this morning. He never even got any of the candy.

Lynnnatta-

Kristen sat there for another minute; then she went down the stairs feeling so dizzy it seemed her feet didn't even touch the steps. She went into the Dillons' living room and reached for Eddie's picture. Her hands were shaking and she knocked it off the table, grabbing it before it hit the floor. Nice catch, Kristen.

Eddie would say.

Then she was out the door and down the street. She couldn't wait to find Gram, to tell her this awful thing that had happened to Eddie Dillon, to ask for wrapping paper and stamps for the picture.

She went down the road and in the back door, but before she could begin, Gram had started. 'Change your clothes, Kristen.

and get your hat,' she said. 'Mrs. Colgan told me that Eddie

Dillon is missing and-'

'How does she know?' Kristen asked.

They couldn't watch for ships that night after all. Mr.

Colgan had borrowed Gram's rowboat for night crabbing, and Mr.

Meyer was caulking the bottom of his.

'Want to go to the movie instead?' Kristen asked Noah when she caught up with him on the Smiths' porch.

'Well...'

'We won't stay for the whole thing,' she told him. 'We'll just sneak in and watch until eight-thirty, a little Eyes and Ears of the World News, and...' She tried to remember the newest movie at the Cross Bay. She had seen two minutes of it the other day before the matron had caught her and marched her outside, blinking, into the sunshine.

'How much does it cost?' He asked.

'Not a cent. I told you, we're sneaking in.' She could see he looked worried. 'Unless you're afraid.'

'I am not afraid of anything.'

'Well, then.' Action in the North Atlantic was the name of the movie. It was about the troop ships crossing the ocean, and German submarines following along...

She shivered a little, thinking about those ships. Mrs. Sherman had just pinned up another poster over a pile of raisin rings. SOMEONE TALKED, it said in big red letters on top, and underneath was a ship sinking so you saw only the bow, and sailors trying to swim away in waves that were high as mountains.

Kristen tried not to think about it. Instead, she walked down the street in front of Tom. They turned in at the alley on one side of the Cross-Bay Theatre. The alley was filled with itchy weeds that smelled. She could see Noah lifting his skinny legs as high as he could, but she just rushed right through the weeds and around to the back.

'It's hot as a poker in the balcony,' she told him. 'They always leave the door open up there.'

Noah stopped when he saw the fire escape stairs they'd have to climb.

'Don't be silly,' she said, knowing what he was thinking.

'Don't look down.'

'It must be two stories,' he said. 'You can fall right through those steps, and it looks as if the steps will pull off the side of the wall.'

'Three stories,' she said, daring him.

'I am not afraid,' he said. 'I am just telling you.'

She started to climb without answering. She had done this every summer since she was six, up those stairs a thousand times. The stairs were rickety, she had to admit. And the screws holding them to the wall looked rusty as anything. Wouldn't you think the guy who owned the movie would polish things up once in a while?

She looked back over her shoulder at Tom. He was holding on to the railing for dear life, as Gram would say, stopping each second to close his eyes and take a breath.

'Race you to the top,' she said.

He opened his eyes. 'Sure.'

She grinned. He was a tough kid, that Tom.

The balcony door was opened just wide enough for them to crawl through. She sank on the top step next to the door to watch, with Noah sliding in next to her, breathless. 'That was so simple,' he said.

She leaned over. 'We made it just in time for Bugs Bunny.'

He grinned back. 'What's up, Doc?' he said.

She started to laugh.

'What?' He asked.

'It's your voice. It sounds so... so...'

'Hungarian,' he said. 'It is a Hungarian Bugs Bunny.'

She liked the way he laughed, the way he talked. She kept smiling to herself as they leaned back against the steps to watch Bugs Bunny chomping on a carrot, falling off a cliff. They had a perfect spot. They had the whole balcony to themselves.

Not one person was up there.

If they had paid, if Poppy had been with her, she would have been able to go downstairs to the candy stand and buy a cup of popcorn, or some peanut chews. If she tried it now-that is, if she'd still had her tan purse with money-the matron with her flashlight would be right there to pounce on her.

And- then it was time for the picture. Words... music... a destroyer being blown up in the water. The noise of it was deafening. Explosions were going on all over the place.

Kristen sat there for a while. She watched one of the ships sink and the sailors trying to hold on to little pieces of wood or to swim away, just like the poster in Mrs. Sherman's bakery.

And- she thought of Poppy. They had heard from him again, but only a postcard. She had missed the mailman that day, and the card had slid into the slot in the door, and it had been there all morning until Gram had spotted it. Never so tired. I never worked so hard, to be ready to go overseas. Thinking of you both in Ridgway makes me happy... makes it all worthwhile. Love, Poppy.

Kristen watched one of the sailors, arms raised, go under the water, and then she didn't watch anymore.

Noah wasn't watching either.

'Don't you like the movie?' she asked.

He shook his head.

'We could leave-' she began and broke off. She could see the balcony stairs and the beam from the matron's flashlight bouncing up toward them.

'I was on a ship like that,' Noah said.

She blinked. Of course. How else had he gotten here? She had never thought of that. The matron was halfway up the stairs now, looking at them, a frown on her face.

'Tom,' Kristen began.

'Are you here again?' the matron asked. 'I told you last time it's dangerous to climb those steps, and you can't keep coming in here when you don't pay. It was one thing when you were six years old, but...'

Kristen circled her, with Noah following, and went down the balcony steps to the first floor. They passed the candy counter and the glass stand with the popcorn piled up to the top and went out the door.

Behind them was the sound of bombs, and depth charges exploding, and in the marquee's light she could see Tom's face, his blue eyes swimming in tears.

She stood there for a moment, wanting to ask him, wanting to know about the ship, wanting to know what had made him cry.

Then she heard the church chimes.

'It's nine o'clock,' she said. 'Gram is going to have a fit'

They started to run, crossing the street diagonally, just missing an old Chevy with its headlights blackened, its horn blaring at them. They raced past Mrs. Sherman's. 'Same cookies,' Noah said, breathless, and then around the corner of the As Good as New Shoppe with the dusty hat and coat, the flute and the violin.

By the time they reached the back road, Kristen had a pain in her chest and a stitch in her side, and Noah wasn't crying anymore. They were both laughing, and he grabbed her hand and pulled her along until they reached her back door.

'Tomorrow,' Kristen called after him. 'See you tomorrow.'

'Yes,' he said, going down toward the Smiths'.'

It means-' she began and broke off. How could she explain? Besides, they had to be quiet. She held one finger up to her mouth and reached for the key around her neck. She pulled him inside and shut the door quickly behind them.

'Why?' He asked, whispering.

She raised her shoulders, thinking about how to tell him.

'It's the war,' she began. 'The people are gone now.'

She saw his eyes, blue in the dim light, sad maybe, or frightened. 'Like Budapest,' he said.

Kristen shook her head a little. 'Lynnnatta... that's the girl, said I could. Gave me the key. I'm being careful.'

She looked at the winter shutters tight over the windows, and breathed in, trying not to cry over the cat, or her father, or Lynnnatta's being gone.

'Hot,' Noah said.

Kristen shook her head, and then she realized how wet she was, the ends of her hair still dripping.

Noah was frowning. 'She is too little for food,' he said slowly. 'She needs milk,' and, even more slowly, 'She needs her mother.'

Kristen nodded a quick flash in her mind of the stars on her ceiling and her mother. Then she sat back on her heels. Noah was right. The kitten needed milk. She thought about going for it.

She'd have to walk to the bayside and sneak past Gram to take a bottle out of the refrigerator.

She could see Gram's name, fourth on her problem list. It came after First: Lies; Second: Daydreaming; and Third: Friends, need. And now maybe she'd cross the whole thing out and move Gram up to number one. It would serve her right.

Gram probably wouldn't care even if she knew. She wasn't talking much to Kristen either, mumbling once, '... terrible that you didn't come back to say goodbye to your father.'

Kristen knew it was terrible, she didn't need Gram to tell her that. The last two days she had awakened with a pain in her chest, almost like a woodpecker banging away at her ribs. If only she had gone home on Saturday morning, or even to the railroad station. Just a few minutes would have made all the difference. And now she might not see Poppy for years, she might be grown up and he wouldn't even recognize her.

She had written to him, though, along 'I'm sorry' letter. She had sent it to the address that he had left on her bed. It was a strange address, full of numbers and letters, and didn't even tell where he was.

Suddenly she felt cold there in the shade. She moved her head, finding a shaft of sunlight that came through the boardwalk up above. It was warm on her face. In front of her, a woman went past, humming 'The Last Time I Saw Paris.'

And, Noah wasn't just looking at the water anymore. He was writing something on that pad. What? She could see a ship way out. Maybe he was checking out troop movements. She tried to think about what else the spies checked out when she saw them in the movies. She wondered if she could get up a little closer.

Tom's head was bent over his paper, and he was writing fast. Kristen crawled around the side of the rusty fence an inch at a time. If he heard her if he turned around...

She pictured herself as an undercover agent. If Tom, Nazi Spy Tom, turned, he'd reach into the bag, pull out his revolver with the silencer. He'd shoot her, of course. Never mind. It was for the good of the country. She'd win a medal.

She couldn't see anything in his paper. His shoulder was in the way. She moved over a bit, and another inch or two toward him, and there, she could see the writing on the lined white paper:

Dere Ont Eva and Onkl Emery, Strange. A secret code maybe. She frowned, suddenly knowing what it was, feeling the disappointment. A letter, just a letter, not a spy thing at all... just that he was the worst speller in the world, worse than even she was. She let out her breath.

No. The tan purse. She could run down to Milton at the grocery store. She slapped her pocket. The purse was gone. Of course, it was in the water. All the money she had saved for all the cookies this summer, and the movies, and it was gone. All those months of saving. But Lynnnatta's letter was still in her pocket. She could feel it, almost as wet as the cat. How could she ever read it? She took it out slowly, carefully, and spread it on the counter to dry.

'I will get milk.' Noah reached for the back door. 'Do not worry,' he said, but it sounded like worry.

He was as careful as she would have been, opening the door less than an inch, peering out, then pushing it all the way. A moment later, the door closed gently, and he was gone.

Where was he going? To Mrs. Meyer's? To Milton's? He had certainly learned to find his way around quickly.

The cat mewed. On the kitchen floor, she was a shadow, so puny she could be only a few weeks old. Poor little thing. Kristen could have cried looking at her. She scooped her up, her face a striped pansy, her ears tiny tags of orange. 'Coming,' Kristen said, 'milk is coming. Don't worry.'

He heard her and turned. Good grief. 'I lost my, um... 'she began, and then she heard the noise.

It was like a mosquito at first, a thin, high sound. It wasn't a mosquito, though, of course not. The noise grew louder, so loud she could feel the boardwalk tremble with it, could feel the vibration in her chest.

A plane was coming in over the water, so low it was just above the waves, its wings tilting. She could see people standing on the beach watching, Mrs. Colgan far down on the beach, looking up, her mouth a perfect round O. And a fat lady with wobbly legs, shading her eyes to see as the plan e roared over the beach. It spread a huge, dark shadow, sand flattening under it and spewing up along the sides.

Kristen backed against the boardwalk steps, her heart thumping in her chest, her head bursting with the sound of it.

The sand was in her mouth and nose, stinging her eyes.

The plane gathered speed, gathered height, was up, over them and past. And then she realized. It was a trainer plane, only a trainer plane from the navy yard.

But Noah couldn't know that. She could see his face, his blue eyes huge, the pad went out of his hand, blowing across the beach.

Without thinking, she went toward him, spitting out sand, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. The noise of the plane was fading, and she could see Tom's hands were trembling a little.

She reached out and grabbed his arm. 'It's all right,' she told him. Then everything was still, except for the waves rolling in on the shore in front of them.

'It's all right,' she said again. 'It wasn't a Nazi. I saw it.' She made a circle with one finger. 'The round insignia thing with the star.'

He didn't look at her. It almost seemed as if he hadn't seen her as he kept watching the plane, a speck now in the distance.

She stepped back. She could still feel her heart pounding.

'It was a trainer plane.' She pointed across the shoreline toward Coney Island. 'From the naval base.'

He wasn't listening. He followed his paper across the beach, and suddenly she remembered he had caught her spying on him again. Feeling her face redden, knowing she wouldn't go near him for the rest of the summer, she went up the boardwalk steps and started for home.

She wandered down the hall with the cat in her arms, running her hand over her back, feeling the knobs of her bony spine. The first door was to Eddie's bedroom. She pushed it open with one finger. It was a little lighter in there, the shutters not as tight against the windows.

She could see Gram's hand, soft and plump on the pillows. Gram's wedding ring was a sliver of silver that had made a deep ridge in her finger. 'I was skinny until you started school,' she had told Kristen once, laughing. 'Then I started to eat and found out how good food was.'

Kristen couldn't picture it, couldn't picture Gram skinny, and swimming across Jamaica Bay. Her father had told her Gram had done that. 'I watched her when I was small,' he had said. 'She had a braid to her waist, and she was a seal in the water.'

Gram was sitting on the couch in the living room when Kristen came in. She was listening to Portia Faces Life. Kristen liked to listen to Portia too.

She and Lynnnatta had sent away for Portia's picture. They'd written a letter straight to WEAF radio station just before Lynnnatta had left. Lynnnatta said stars like Portia always had films of themselves lying around.

Right now, on the radio, Portia's husband, Walter, was a prisoner of war in Germany, and he had just thought of an escape plan. He was going to hide in a small boat. Then when an American ship passed, he'd signal it with a flashlight and row out to freedom.

Kristen sank on one end of the couch, as far away from Gram as she could get, to listen.

Gram still had the braid, but now it was twisted around in the back of her head in a bun. At night, she'd take out the bobby pins, run her fingers through her hair, and brush it.

Gram's hand was moving. Kristen watched out of the corner of her eye as the plump fingers walked across the pillows, and Gram's arm came up around her.

Kristen was about to shrug her arm away, about to get up, but it felt so good to be sitting there in that circle that she moved closer. A moment later, she was crying, and she didn't even try to stop.

'I know,' Gram said.

Kristen shook her head. 'No, you don't.'

Gram touched her sleeve, making tiny pleats in the cotton with her fingers.

'We were going to go fishing,' Kristen said, 'and to the movies. We were going to do everything.'

'Your father said the same thing,' Gram said.

Kristen looked up. 'Really?'

Gram nodded. 'Your eyes will be red.'

She shook her head. 'I don't care.'

'Yes, you will,' Gram said. 'We're going out to dinner.'

'Trixie's Restaurant?'

'Of course not. There's a war on and not a penny to spare for such foolish-' Gram broke off. 'We're going to the Smiths'.' Kristen sat up straight. She could feel her mouth suddenly go dry. 'I'm not-'

'Mr. Meyer said you did a magnificent job on his headlight.'

'I don't-'

'There's a surprise for you, Mrs. Meyer said.'

Kristen bit her lip. Some surprise. As if she couldn't guess. Tom. Kristen moved back to the end of the couch. She was not going to the Smiths' house, not in a million skillion years.

'I'm not... 'Kristen began again and stopped. She always loved to go to the Smiths' for dinner. Sometimes there was a flounder Mr. Meyer had caught that morning, with corn on the cob, and a cake

with jelly icing on top. How could she say she didn't want to go, that she knew about Tom? And worse, that he knew about her. Gram wouldn't take no for an answer. Never.

Gram was up from the couch now. 'We'll have to see what happens to Walter tomorrow,' she said. 'They're certainly stretching this out.'

Kristen followed her into the bathroom and watched as Gram opened her compact and took out her powder puff.

Kristen leaned forward to look in the mirror. Her eyes were red, and so was her nose.

'Here.' Gram ran a washcloth under the tap. 'Nice and cool.' She held it up to Kristen 's eyes. 'Better in a minute, wait and see.'

Gram was right. Kristen held her head back and felt the coolness of the cloth on her eyes and her cheeks. In the back of her, she could hear the news. An American general had told reporters he needed only three hours of good weather and the army could break out of Normandy and start across France.

Strange, Kristen thought, in France, the weather was gray and cloudy, and the Americans were caught on a beach that was wet and cold. Here in Ridgway. it was beautiful.

She checked the mirror again. No one would guess she'd been crying.

Gram took her powder puff and waved it over Kristen 's nose. 'I think I hear the church bells. We're supposed to be there at six. Come on.'

Kristen walked out behind her, taking the smallest steps she possibly could. She dreaded having to meet Tom, actually meet him at last. She wouldn't say a word to him. She'd talk to Mr. and Mrs. Meyer and not even look at him.

Mrs. Meyer was waiting at the door, excited, smiling.

'Have I got a surprise for you,' she said.

And behind her was Tom. Tom, with that mop of dark hair and blue eyes. She took a quick look at him after all. He was looking at her too. His mouth opened. 'You are Kristen?'

'Of course, she's Kristen.' Mrs. Meyer said.

Kristen raised one eyebrow and put on her 'Too bad for you, Sister Jillen' face. Usually, she was good at that, but halfway into the face, her eyes slid away because for the quickest second it looked as if Noah was going to laugh.

When she looked back, he was tapping his lip, looking at her, his eyebrows raised. What was that all about? she wondered. Noah was crazy.

But then Mr. Meyer was leading them to the table, his hand on Kristen's back, smiling. 'Sit here next to me,' he told Gram. 'And Kristen. my love, across from Tom, my nephew. Tom's here from my brother Emery's in Canada to spend the summer.' 'From Hungary,' Mrs. Meyer said at the same time.

'To be safe from the war.'

Noah looked up. He spoke to Gram, though, not even glancing at Kristen. 'From Budapest, two years ago.' The words sounded different on his tongue, soft, almost musical.

Mrs. Meyer shook her head. 'It was a long trip for Tom. Through Austria and Switzerland, across the mountains to France, then a ship...' She stopped for a breath.

'With Christy,' Noah said.

Mrs. Meyer's face suddenly looked different, older, sad. 'His eight-year-old sister was sick,' she told them. 'She's caught in France.'

Noah made a sound, said something.

Kristen took a quick look, but he was smearing margarine over a slice of bread, looking down. And then Mr. Meyer began to talk quickly, and so did Gram, and Kristen bent over her plate to bone the fish and begin on the corn. She was starving.

Noah must have been starving too. He bent over his plate; his hand made a fist around his fork. He ate fast, taking huge bites, shoveling it in.

Gram would have had a fit if she had done that.

He raised his head, and immediately she looked past him, toward the lemon cake on the counter, and beyond to the window. Outside, pairs of socks were hanging on the porch railing.

The water was flat and slick with the sun slanting over it.

'Isn't this perfect,' Mrs. Meyer said. 'Just as Lynnnatta leaves, Noah comes. You'll have someone to fish with all summer, Kristen.'

Gram was staring at her. Kristen could feel her eyes. Gram thought she knew what Kristen was thinking, thought Kristen wouldn't go to the beach with any boy, fish with him, go to the Cross-Bay Theatre...

What Gram didn't know was that it was probably the other way around.

'Yes,' said Gram. 'It's perfect. Isn't it, Kristen?'

She didn't look at Gram. She took a chunk of corn off the cob, with a bite almost as big as Tom's. She certainly couldn't answer them with her mouth full.

Noah had finished his fish and corn and was into the peas now. Mounds of peas were falling off the edge of his fork. And suddenly he looked up and saw her watching him. He was laughing, bringing his hand up to his mouth. And just as suddenly, she knew what he was doing. He was reminding her of the lipstick, Gertz Department Store, FREE TAKE ONE. Good grief.

It was a good thing Mrs. Meyer was talking, otherwise, Kristen might just have jumped up to race out of there and never come back. But what was Mrs. Meyer saying? 'Noah doesn't know the ocean. He doesn't know how to swim.'

'And Kristen. 'Mr. Meyer said, 'swims like a mermaid.'

'She'll teach you, Tom,' Mrs. Meyer said. 'No one swims the way Kristen does.'

Teach him to swim-she couldn't believe it.

'Except her grandmother,' said Mr. Meyer.

Gram laughed. 'I haven't put my foot in the water since I taught Kristen to swim.'

Kristen remembered that, remembered paddling around in the water, listening as Gram held her feet lightly, pointing her big toes toward each other, angling her hands so the sides of her index fingers slid into the water first. 'Everything makes a difference,' Gram had said.

And on Friday night, they had shown her father. No life vest anymore, and by that time Kristen could dive. She went off the side of the porch, her toes digging into the railing for an instant,

then pushing up, arms stretched, head down. She slid underneath smoothly with the sound of the water in her ears, the taste of it on her tongue, up then, and swimming in front of the houses easily, almost as easily as she could walk.

Moments later, she had climbed back up. Her father had wrapped her in a huge towel, hugging her and telling her how proud her mother would have been.

And now Gram was telling the Smiths about Poppy. 'I hope he's still at Fort Dix,' she said. In the back of them, the teakettle was whistling. Gram's face was sad. 'He'll go to Europe soon, any day.

Maybe he's gone already. I hope it isn't in Germany.'

Kristen stuffed her mouth with bread. She wanted to stuff her ears too. She didn't want Gram to talk about it. She didn't want to think about it.

Then Mrs. Meyer passed them slices of lemon cake, apologizing because it was made with margarine and not butter, and Noah began to eat again, two pieces, and then a third. He didn't look at Kristen again, and she sat there thinking about him laughing at her, and wondering about his sister, Christy, and trying to pretend she didn't notice he was there until they were finished and it was time to go home.

Thursday. She had been ducking away from Noah for almost a week. It was just the opposite now. Everywhere she went, she saw Tom. Ahead of her, in back of her, even coming out of Sherman's Bakery.

But right now, she had other things to think about. A letter from her father. They had received only a quick postcard: Arrived safely. Miss you terribly. We'll be fishing this time next year. Letter follows. Best love, Poppy. Maybe today there'd be a real letter. She could see it in her mind, tissue-thin with a red, white, and blue border, the same as the letters Eddie Dillon sent home.

'If you could stop dreaming and finish your breakfast,' Gram said.

Kristen picked up her spoon. She could see something else too. Gram would be leaning over her shoulder, reading the letter, her lips moving slightly, reading even faster than she could.

Kristen ate her cereal without looking once into the bowl. Bits of cream were floating around in the milk, white things looking like tiny fish. She could almost feel them on her teeth.

She shuddered. The white things were floating around inside her now. She went out to the porch and leaned on the screen. The water was swollen this morning, the tide high.

She knew exactly what she'd do. She'd hang around on Cross Bay Boulevard, maybe stop at Sherman's Bakery for a roll or a cookie. She'd grab the mailman before he even got around to her grandmother on the bayside.

If only he'd give her the letter.

She reached under her bed for her pad and pencil and the tan purse with the money she had saved all winter.

'Going to Sherman's,' she told Gram's back at the kitchen sink.

Gram made a tiny breathing sound, a 'no' sound, but before she could say she shouldn't waste her money on cookies that tasted like cardboard, Kristen began, 'My money. My

Christmas, snow-shoveling, allowance-saving money.'

Gram's voice rose. 'Then don't forget sunburn lotion.

You'll have blisters on your nose.'

Kristen didn't wait to hear the rest. She was out the door and up the road. Already it was hot, the tar shimmering in the haze, the sound of the cicadas beginning. 'Listen,' Poppy would say, 'it's the sound of summer.'

She wondered when she'd see him again. The days stretched out in front of her like long gray sheets on a washing line.

Summer would be over and fall...

Kristen passed the As Good as New Shoppe on the corner. Everything in the window was just the same, the old coat and dusty straw hat, certainly not looking as good as new, the flute and violin in back, and the stuffed dog that looked as if it would fall over any second.

Sherman's Bakery was at the near end of Cross Bay Boulevard. It was dim and dusty, and Kristen could see through the screen that Mrs. Sherman hadn't gotten around to baking yet. The trays were almost empty. A strawberry-pink birthday cake stood on one shelf and a plate of pale sugar

cookies on another. The cookies had jelly in the middle, but the jelly would be hard by now, the juice drained out overnight.

Kristen stood there, hand on the screen door, squinting in the sun. The mailman was halfway up the next block. She could see him plodding along across the street.

She took a step, but Mrs. Sherman, hands floury, came out from the back and spotted her. 'Kristen. 'she said. 'My first customer today.'

Kristen pulled open the door and went inside, glancing up at the poster over the glass counter: LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS. 'Not much left,' Mrs. Sherman said. 'Sticky buns later, but try those jelly cookies for now.'

Kristen looked down at the cookies. Up close they looked worse, shrunken and dry. She wondered which way the mailman was going. Toward the bay? Back along the boulevard?

'Can't get much better with the war on, you know,' Mrs. Sherman began, leaning against the counter.

Kristen nodded. If the mailman went toward the bay, he'd turn before the bakery. She'd miss him.

'I'll take a cookie,' Kristen said. 'Sure.'

'The egg man went into the service,' Mrs. Sherman said.

'I don't know how I'm going to get eggs now, or cheese.'

'My grandmother said I have to be right home. I have to stop her medicine.'

'Sick? Your grandmother's sick?'

The next thing she knew, Mrs. Sherman would be on her way to Grams with her dried-up cookies. 'Uh... no. It's my aunt

Celia. In Europe.'

Mrs. Sherman shook her head, clucking a little. 'What's the matter?'

She'd never get out of there. She took a step back, trying to think. She remembered the news a while back: battles in Russia, with snow and biting cold. 'Frostbite,' she said.

Mrs. Sherman raised one eyebrow. 'In July?'

Kristen shook her head. 'I don't know. I really-'

Mrs. Sherman sighed. 'It's the war. No one knows what's going on.' She reached for a bag. 'Two cookies. Two for the price of one.'

'Thanks,' Kristen said. If she ran maybe she could cut the mailman off. She counted pennies out on the counter, reached for the bag, then banged out the screen door.

He was there, crossing the street, still on the boulevard. A miracle.

'Hey,' she called. 'Wait up.'

He didn't turn around. He stopped to stuff a paper into the slot at the restaurant, then went next door to the dry cleaner. By the time she caught up with him, she could feel perspiration streaking down her back.

'I need my mail,' she told his sack, not looking at his face.

He'd never even give her the movie advertisement. He shook his head. 'I've told you. I have to deliver it to your grandmother's house. Can't be dropping her mail all over the place. She'd carry on and-'

'My mail,' Kristen said. 'My mail.'

Inside the sack was her letter, written in her father's handwriting. It would start with 'Sweetheart,' or 'Dear Kristen Billy.'

'My father,' she said in a voice she could hardly hear herself, 'is in the service. The Secret Service.' She stopped, trying to think about how to convince him. 'He told me to be sure to get the mail first. He-'

The mailman looked up. 'Jerry went overseas?'

The letter was there, so close she could reach out and take it. She hated the mailman.

'You know you're not supposed to ask,' she said. 'You saw the poster in Mrs. Sherman's, 'Loose Lips Sink Ships.' Spies could be walking up and down Cross Bay Boulevard, and my father, who's on a ship right now...'

She could feel her lips trembling even though she didn't know if her father was on a ship, or still in New Jersey at Fort Dix, perfectly safe.

The mailman shifted the leather strap on his shoulder.

'Don't cry, Kristen. Let me take a look. Let me just see...'

She stood there waiting as he went through dozens of envelopes, it seemed stacks of papers. He kept shaking his head.

Then, at last, he plucked a letter out of the sack.

She breathed in and could feel the tears now.

'It's not from your father,' he said.

Then she could see it too. A small white envelope, filthy, MISS Kristen MOLLAHAN, in pencil.

Lynnnatta. Only Lynnnatta.

'Listen, Kristen. 'He said. 'There'll be a letter tomorrow.

Betcha. You'll come right down here to Cross Bay...'

She stared at the sidewalk, at a crack running along with it, a hill of ants bustling. 'He's very busy,' she said.

'I know,' he said. 'He's a great guy.'

Kristen took the letter from him, dug it into her shorts pocket. 'I'll see you tomorrow, then,' she said.

'You can count on it.'

She headed for the fishing dock, looking back once to wave to him. It was a hot walk along Cross Bay Boulevard, but worth it. The fishing boats would be long gone now on a weekday, out since early this morning. She'd have the wharf to herself, with only a fisherman or two trying for fluke.

She ran the last bit, seeing the weathered dock in front of her, the flag flapping wildly on the pole, and best of all, no one there, not a soul. She took a deep breath, smelling the sea, and kerosene from the boats, and sat on a bench halfway down to read Lynnnatta's letter. But before she even got to take it out of her pocket, she could see someone on the beach path. No, two people. Her luck.

She shaded her eyes. One was coming on a bicycle, wobbling along, a basket in front, and the other, a good way in the back of him, seemed to be... She sat up straighter. Yes, it was Noah running down the road after him. He stopped once, and darted into the reeds, as the bicycle rider looked over his shoulder. What was Noah up to, anyway?

The rider slowed as he neared the dock. It was probably a fisherman who would talk and talk, and she'd never get one minute's peace when the person she wanted to talk to was Tom.

She slid off the bench, leaning against the side. If he didn't see her, maybe he'd go all the way to the far end on that bicycle and pass her right by.

He didn't, though. She could hear him swinging off the bike, the sound of metal as he rested it against a bench farther down, a splash as he tossed something into the water, and as she peered around the side of the bench, he was on his way again, and Noah was running toward her, waving his arms, shouting.

Kristen gathered herself to her feet, looking first at Tom, whose feet were pounding along the wooden pier, and then at the back of the man on the bicycle. No, it was a boy, a teenager. His head was down, bent over the handlebars, his feet pedaling faster, picking up speed as he disappeared into one of the narrow lanes that snaked through the reeds.

Noah was in front of her now, almost babbling as he pointed down into the clear green water. She took a step toward the edge, looking down too. She saw threads of seagrass floating under the surface, and then the bulging bag, almost out of sight, as it sank to the bottom.

'It is a cot,' Noah said. 'A cot.'

She shook her head. 'It's too small for a...' She drew in her breath. A cat. He meant a cat. She was in the water in an instant, rolling over the side instead of diving, not sure of the depth. It was over her head, much deeper than she would have guessed, maybe seven or eight feet. The water bubbled above her, sunlit at first, and then darker. She turned and kicked with her feet, her arms out, reaching, reaching...

And felt the edge of it, the paper bag shredding away in her fingers. Then, a miracle, the kitten was in her hands.

She kicked up with it and broke the surface. It was still, unmoving, a sodden reddish mass, as Tom, hanging half off the pier, took it from her.

She swam around to the steps the fisherman used to clean their catch and pulled herself up.

Noah was standing in the middle of the dock now, wrapping the kitten on the edge of his shirt. She moved toward him, her clothes heavy and dripping, her sneakers filled with so much water it was hard to move. 'Don't let her lie still,' she said.

'Keep her moving.'

When she reached him, she grabbed his wrist, shaking his hands, and the cat with them. 'More,' she told him. She dug the cat out of the end of his shirt and kneaded the fur, holding her head down, until at least she coughed and sneezed.

'She is alive,' Noah said. They looked at each other, smiling. How blue his eyes are, she thought, and when he smiled, she liked his face. He looked like another person, almost like a friend.

But he smiled for only a moment. He took the cat from her, rubbing her fur with his shirt, drying it, and looking around. 'That boy,' he said. 'I saw him put the cat in the bag-' He broke off. 'I have to make her warm,' he said. 'I have to dry her.'

She nodded. Gram would probably never let her keep a cat, and Mrs. Meyer had never had a pet that she knew about. If only Mrs. Dillon were still there.

Lynnnatta's house, she thought. 'I know,' she told Tom.

'I'll show you.'

It took ten minutes to get back to Lynnnatta's house. They walked slowly, stopping every few minutes to make sure the cat was breathing. She was curled into a ball, still damp, under Tom's shirt.

Kristen led the way around the back. 'I know it looks as if no one lives here,' she said, 'but I have the key, and it isn't trespassing.'

'Trespassing?' He said it after her as if the word had a million s's. 'Funny word.'

She remembered when they were about seven, she and Lynnnatta had sneaked in to steal enough money for a sticky bun each at Mrs. Sherman's. Eddie had caught them, and Lynnnatta, fresh as paint Gram would say, told him what they were doing. He had dug into his pocket for a dime and tossed it toward Kristen in a silvery arc.

She had reached out, and somehow it had landed in her outstretched hands. She remembered Eddie smiling, his teeth over his bottom lip, his eyes crinkling. 'Nice catch.'

It was hot in the bedroom, stifling. She had to get out of there. She went back into the kitchen, feeling the flutter of the kitten's heartbeat.

Lynnnatta's letter. She went over to the counter and angled it so a shaft of light ran across the envelope from end to end. She ran her finger lightly over the mess of Lynnnatta's handwriting, the return address, DETROIT, MICHIGAN. And even though it had been in the water, Kristen could still see a smear of chocolate on the flap. One more candy bar that would never get to Eddie in Europe.

She sank on the floor with the letter, the kitten in her lap. The envelope opened easily and the letter came out, damp but still readable.

Dear Kristen.

There is no ocean here at Willow Run, no paint on the houses. They go together in a row and you can hear people talking and fighting and even going to the bathroom. The houses were just slapped up because thousands of people have come here to make the bombers. My father took me in to see. The factory is a mile long. Everyone just makes one little piece that they fit together until the B-24 is finished. My father says they build a bomber every 103 minutes. I hate the whole thing. How is the attic? Did you find the red candy?

Lynnnatta

Kristen shifted on the floor, peeling her sweaty legs off the linoleum, thinking about Lynnnatta so far away. Lynnnatta without an ocean, without Ridgway. She wondered what Lynnnatta would think about Tom.

She went into the house, thinking about tomorrow, thinking about asking him all the things she wanted to know.

Gram was in the kitchen making iced tea, and she poured some for Kristen. 'I was just getting a little worried,' she said.

'I was with Tom,' Kristen said.

Gram nodded at her. 'Good. I'm glad.'

Kristen leaned over the kitten. 'Noah likes cats,' she said.

'That's something.'

Then he was back, a milk bottle in his hands, enough milk for ten cats the size of this one.

'Now.' Kristen put the cat back on the counter and took the bottle from Tom. She ran her finger under the paper top, popping it up. She tried not to look at the yellow cream just underneath. She'd gag if she saw it. She had to dig it out, though.

It might be too thick for the kitten to swallow.

She opened a kitchen drawer, found a spoon, and skimmed off the cream, swallowing hard. She dropped it, spoon and all, into the sink.

'What are you doing?' He took the spoon and sucked the cream that was left.

She began to gag.

'What is the matter?' He turned the spoon over and ran his tongue over the back.

'Nothing.' She handed him the bottle and let him take the last of the cream. A little stayed on his lower lip, a small yellow fish.

She was going to vomit right now. 'Wipe your mouth,' she told him. She breathed in as he ran the back of his arm over his face, trying to think about chocolate, red LifeSavers, and cookies with the jelly in the middle.

'My sister, Christy, loves cream,' he said.

Kristen looked up, but the cat was standing on the countertop, one paw out, ready to sail into the air.

'Watch out,' she said, and he dived for the kitten and caught her. Then Kristen rummaged around for a small round bowl and poured in some of the milk.

For a moment the kitten didn't seem to notice the bowl in front of her. Then, at last, she turned her head and began to lap at it with her rough little tongue. They watched her until she sat back and her blue-green eyes began to close, and they could hear her begin to purr.

'What are we going to do with her?' Kristen asked. 'I don't think Gram...'

Noah was nodding, looking down at the cat. 'Could we keep her here?'

Kristen had thought of that too. Mrs. Dillon loved cats.

She'd hate it that someone had tried to drown a kitten.

'I have the key,' she said, almost to herself.

'If you will lend it to me,' he said, 'I will feed the cat myself. You don't have to bother. I will be very careful.'

'There's a place in the back,' she said, 'under the edge of the steps. The Dillons left their key there sometimes. I guess...' She felt so disappointed, she could hardly finish. He didn't want to be friends. He could have said We can feed her together, or even We can take turns.

Noah patted the cat's head gently, then took a towel that was still looped over a hook. He made it into a little bed in the corner. There were newspapers there too, and store them into strips for the cat's litter, as Kristen itched.

She wanted to say, 'It's my cat too.' She wanted to say, 'I was the one who saved her.' She didn't, though.

When Noah was finished, she opened the door and, knowing he was watching, went to the back to wedge the key behind the rock.

She started for home without saying goodbye. It was lunchtime anyway. Never mind that Noah didn't want to be friends. After lunch, she'd take her library book, The Three Musketeers, out in the boat with a pillow... the musketeers, who were in France like Tom's sister. Yes, that's what she'd do. Too bad about being friends. She'd read for the rest of the afternoon.

The church bells were ringing. Six o'clock on a Wednesday night, the end of July. Everyone was gathering up pails and wet towels, and pulling umbrellas across the beach. She couldn't wait until the last family dragged itself off the boardwalk toward the Cross-Bay buses. She couldn't wait until the beach belonged to her.

Gram had packed her a supper, Spam on a roll with a tomato from Mrs. Colgan's Victory garden, three or four celery sticks, and a bottle of orange juice.

Kristen sat as close to the water as she could get without getting soaked. The tide was high. The waves washed in, then sucked everything back out, shells, and sand, and bits of seaweed. She thought about listening to Portia Faces Life with Gram this afternoon. Walter was in a rowboat now, waiting to find an American ship to pick him up. Kristen looked out at the water, thinking about Poppy. He'd be on a ship one of these days, maybe even today, crossing the Atlantic, passing Ridgway. She shaded her eyes, watching a lone swimmer in the surf.

She sat up straight. Who was that?

Tom; he wasn't out far. He was swimming along in a line next to the beach.

He wasn't swimming, though. He pulled himself to his feet, then threw himself down to take a couple of strokes before disappearing under the water. A moment later he is up, sputtering, to start the whole thing over. If a lifeguard had been on the beach, he'd have been out after Noah in two seconds.

Kristen stood up. Noah was trying to teach himself how to swim.

He wasn't paying one bit of attention to the water. He wasn't trying to be part of it, to float along with it. He was fighting it, arms slapping, head sticking up like a tennis ball.

She wouldn't be able to eat her Spam in peace; she'd have to watch him every minute.

Noah was going to kill himself.

Yes, there it was, a giant of a wave. She could see it swelling, way out but moving toward him, picking up speed.

She looked toward Tom. Under. Tennis ball head shooting up. An arm out over his head, fingers wide apart.

She stood up, trying to see how much time he had. She cupped her hands over her mouth, shouting. He couldn't hear her, probably couldn't see her.

She took a step toward him. Then she was running, throwing herself into the icy coldness, slicing into the water, swimming diagonally.

Of course, she was too late. The wave curled up high, and she was in the wrong position, just where it arched. It smashed into her, dragging her down, scraping her along the sand. She couldn't get her breath. The water was in her mouth, her throat, her nose.

And then she was out of it, coughing up water, arms and legs scratched, lying on foamy sand.

The last time she had done that she was six years old. Poppy had caught her up in his arms and carried her back to the blanket. He had fed her tiny squares of egg salad crunchy with celery.

She looked up to see feet. Skinny Noah feet. Bony Noah legs with black-and-blue marks and grains of sand.

She had forgotten all about him.

She leaned on her hands to push herself up, then scrambled to her feet.

Noah reached out. 'I thought you were such a good swimmer,' he said.

As soon as she stopped coughing, she was going to drown him herself. She was going to take him by his skinny neck and throw him right back.

She went back to the blanket and sat on the edge, wiping her face with her hands. Her nose and throat burned. She remembered the bottle of orange juice and ached for it. She knew he had followed her to the blanket, but she didn't lookup.

She wanted to say she could swim better than anyone she knew. Hadn't she saved the cat? But she wanted to say more, that the ocean belonged to her, that all winter at home in St. Paul's she thought about it moving and rolling and waiting for her to come back.

'How is the cat?' she said, knowing very well how the cat was. She had spied on Noah going in and out of the use for the last few days. She had let herself in when he was gone. The cat had fluffed up, soft orange and white. He kept her bed and litter box clean, and the kitchen too.

'The cat is good,' he said. He was sitting on the other end of the blanket now, dripping. She didn't know how he had gotten there. He pointed. 'Do you see?'

The end of the jetty, a gray triangular rock. She nodded.

'Yes.'

'If you drew a line straight out, all the way...'

'Europe,' she said.

He nodded. 'Europe.'

'Want some juice?' she asked, not looking at him.

He shook his head.

She took a deep swallow of the juice, feeling it soothe her throat, watching a curl of smoke out on the horizon.

'A ship,' Noah said, 'going to Europe.'

'No.' She shaded her eyes. 'It's a cutter. Coast Guard, patrolling.' It felt good to let him know she knew something, knew more than he did.

She took another sip from the bottle.

'My aunt said you can see the ships from here.'

'They form a convoy way out,' she said and pointed. 'But some of them come from Brooklyn. The destroyers, the carriers, sometimes the tankers. You can see them at night if you watch long enough.'

'Going to Europe,' Noah said.

She nodded. 'Going to win the war for us, going to blast the Nazis right out of the water.'

'And your father is going...'

Later, when she thought about it, she couldn't imagine saying what she had, it was just that she had been thinking of Portia Faces Life, and Poppy crossing out there almost in front of her, and Noah saying, 'I thought you were such a good swimmer.'

'I'm going too,' was what she said. 'At night. I'm going to row right out, and swim the last bit. I'll have a rubber bag with dry clothes.' It sounded wonderful, and she could see he was listening. He wasn't thinking of her as a silly kid, wearing Gertz lipstick, spying around. 'I'm going to take a ship to my father, no one will stop to take me back to Brooklyn, there's a war on, you know...' Talking and talking, making up lies as she went along, and Tom, leaning forward...

'You could do that?' He asked.

'Of course.' She stared at the cutter angling its way west toward Brooklyn until all she could see was a curl of smoke on the horizon. And then, just for a moment, it almost seemed possible. She could see herself reaching the troopship, climbing aboard, and sailing to Europe to find Poppy.

'And you can see those ships at night?' He took a breath. 'Would you take me out to see them? Would you take me out tonight?'

She put the empty bottle back in her bag and started to roll up her towel. 'All right,' she said, not quite looking at him.

He stood up. 'I am going to the house. I will feed my cat.

You will come to my porch at eleven?'

He started across the sand, not waiting for an answer.

She sat there a minute longer, her heart pounding, thinking that this was truly the worst lie she had ever told.

Kristen went into her bedroom with a glass of lukewarm iced tea and a sprig of mint from Mrs. Colgan's Victory garden.

She bent over to run her fingers across her mother's stars pasted in a neat row, still thinking about tomorrow.

Films of Kristen Deniel

The Old Man framed this picture and hung it over the bed in my French Blue room in our winter house in Hancock. The mirror on the opposite wall reflects the picture so it's the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning ... that and my tree figure from Gram.

The tree figure wears the crystal beads Izzy gave me.

'They're too small for you now, Kristen,' Izzy said as she looped them carefully over the sea-grass head. 'They're from my sixth birthday. But I always wanted my oldest daughter to have them.'

I tried to match the picture to the Wone in my backpack, but I couldn't do it exactly. First, there's a flag in the background of this one because it's Memorial Day, the day we open the house in Laurel Highlands for the summer each year. It's early in the morning and we're standing on the porch steps with the sun sending beams of light across the river in front of us.

But there are five of us in the picture instead of four. The Old Man, looking a little grim: He's just discovered that Green's left his bedroom window open so the snow drifted in all winter, ruining the wall and buckling parts of the wood floor.

Green tries to look serious, but you can see the laughter in his eyes. 'Holly will paint it up,' he said, needling the Old Man. 'She'll paint it green. That's her favorite color.'

They still argue, sometimes so loudly I put my hands over my ears. When they see me, they smile? 'It's all her fault,' Green's says, and the Old Man leans over to pat my shoulder.

In the picture, Izzy stands in the center, a little taller than the Old Man. She's wearing a loose shirt in that blue I love. 'Are you happy?' she asked me as I sketched us all later that day. 'Be happy, Kristen, because I am. I've never been happier.'

I didn't answer. Instead, I drew smiles on both our faces. I'm the fourth one in the picture, by the way, smiling just a bit. I know I'm thinking of Gram, thinking of running here with her a year and a half ago. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have this picture, I wouldn't have any of it. I'd still be running.

Every month we go to Long Island to see her in her kitchen with Henry, and the pelican, and the tree figures she still carves, while Beatrice patters around fixing tea for all of us.

Gram doesn't remember exactly who I am anymore. She loves me, though, I know that, and always reaches up to touch my cheek. Sometimes I wear her brown hat with the veil, and then I see the recognition in her eyes. 'Kristen,' she says. 'You saved my life.' Maybe she doesn't know why, but still, she says it, and I always tell her it was the other way around.

And Henry? Ancient, but still feisty. 'That cat's as tough as you are,' Green says to me.

Henry looks at me, and it's almost as if he winks before he closes both eyes above a wide yawn. We speak the same language, that cat and I.

I have a new last name now. It's Regan. I love the sound of it. I haven't forgotten Kristen Copses, who wanted and wished, fresh as paint, a mountain of trouble, so I sign my drawings using the three names. They all belong to me. Emmy and the hot cocoa woman both like the idea of that. They show up regularly to say hello, nodding and smiling as if they were the ones who changed my whole life. I don't say anything. I know they're relieved to have me off their hands and settled. And I have to say I can't blame them for that. I have to say, too, that I even smile back at them once in a while.

But the picture, and why it doesn't match the first one, the W picture: It's because I'm holding my sister, Christina, six weeks old, in my arms.

She looks quiet in the picture, contented, sucking on her thumb. But she's not always like that. And when she cries, we run to her from wherever we are. We stand over her bassinet smiling at her, cooing. And Izzy always puts her arms around me. 'You brought us luck,' she says.

So, there are five of us now: a mother, a father, a brother, and two sisters.

A family.

Kristen - bedroom was at the top of the stairs, the only one on the second floor. 'The top of the house,' Gram always told her, 'the top of the world.'

Kristen sank back on her heels to look around at the blue walls and ceiling, and the gold stars pasted on here and there. Then she stretched up again, working with Poppy's paint scraper, to peel off a star that was almost beyond her reach.

She was hot and sticky, the temperature at least ninety degrees, and Gram, who didn't have one bit of patience, was calling from the kitchen for the tenth time.

'Your father will be home in just a few minutes, and the table isn't set.'

As if Kristen didn't know it was dinnertime. Even Mrs. Harry halfway down 17th Street would be able to smell that cabbage cooking. 'I thought you wanted me to finish packing,' Kristen called back as loudly as she could, to drown out the radio in the kitchen.

She could hardly breathe in that bedroom, Kristen thought, glancing around again; she could hardly walk. Things were pulled out all over the floor, waiting to be stuffed into her suitcase: books, papers with stories she had written, bathing suits, and heaps of clothes Gram had put on the bed.

She had even found an old silver mirror of her mother's she had hidden away in the back of the closet last winter. She was going to put it carefully on top of the suitcase in a nest of pajamas. It would be a miracle if she ever got that far, though, if everything got itself sorted out, and packed, and if they made it to the house in Ridgway before her birthday on Monday.

'Ridgway.' She said it aloud, loving the sound of it on her tongue. Ridgway and the ocean were waiting for her. The summer without homework... to write stories for herself and not Sister Jillen. The summer without a piano to practice every afternoon.

Days and days to sneak into the movies with her best friend, Lynnnatta.

Gram was at the bottom of the stairs now, the six o'clock news blaring from the radio behind her. War news, about the end of the war. The invasion of France by the Allies a couple of weeks ago. That was all anybody talked about. No, not quite. Sister Jillen was much more interested in whether the class had rosaries and clean handkerchiefs in their pockets than in who was going to win the war.

Too bad about Sister Jillen. Kristen would be out of St. Paul's in four days, and Sister Jillen would still be stuck there in St.

Pascal's thinking about everyone's clean handkerchiefs.

'Kristen? You're not packed yet?' Gram called. 'I thought you'd finished an hour ago. And remember we don't have that much room in the car.'

'Almost finished,' Kristen said, and 'almost started,' under her breath. And there, with another slide of the paint scraper, the star came off the wall in one piece, drifting into her outstretched palm. It was perfect, the points still as sharp as when they were new. The star she had scraped off last year had torn a little, and...

Kristen turned it over. A trace of glue was still on the back. She put her mouth against it, a kiss. Her mother had been the last one to touch that spot when she had pasted it up for her years ago. She had still been Baby Elizabeth then... no one had called her Kristen yet, and her mother had been alive...' playing the piano with you on her lap,' Poppy had told her once, 'dancing in the living room with you on her shoulder.' Kristen wished she could remember it.

She could hear her father coming now, whistling along 17th Street, just off the Q3A bus, calling hello to Mrs. Bruns. Gram heard him too. 'Dinner this minute, Kristen. 'She said, slumping back toward the kitchen.

Kristen stood up and put the star in between two pages of her book, Evangeline. By this time, Poppy was in the kitchen; she could hear him talking to Gram. Kristen raced down for a hug before Gram started to talk and talk, and no one else could get a word in edgewise.

Poppy was standing at the sink, his straw hat still on but pushed back, drinking a glass of water from the tin measuring cup. Kristen loved to drink out of that too. It always made the water taste icy, even on the hottest day.

Her father turned. 'Kristen Billy,' he said, smiling at her.

'All packed? Ready for Ridgway?'

'Ready,' she said.

Gram rolled her eyes in the back of Poppy, but Kristen didn't even blink. She slid some plates around the table, the forks and the knives, while Poppy tossed his hat over the hook on the door and washed his hands.

'I have a surprise,' he said over his shoulder. 'You won't believe-'

'Mr. Egan is a Nazi spy,' Kristen said at the same minute.

Poppy stopped to listen to what she was saying. He always did that. It was one of his nicest ways. He was biting his lip, though, almost as if he'd laugh.

Gram speared the boiled beef out of the pot and dripped it across the counter to the cutting board. 'Mr. Egan is not a spy,' she said. 'I've told you that about fourteen times. Mr. Egan is-'

'A spy,' Kristen said, her eyes narrowed at Gram.

'Well,' said Poppy, 'I'll have to keep my eye on him while you and Gram are in Ridgway.'

'You'll be with us on some weekends,' Kristen said. 'He could-'

'And what do you think poor Noah Egan is doing?' Gram asked, slicing into the meat.

'He's building something in his garage,' Kristen said.

'Certainly, sounds suspicious,' said Poppy, grinning.

'It could be anything,' Kristen said. 'When he saw me looking in the window, he said I was into everyone's business.'

'True,' said Gram.

'You have to be alert,' Poppy said.

Kristen slid into her seat, smiling. She knew he was teasing.

'You said you had a surprise,' she reminded him.

'The piano,' said Poppy.

Kristen took a deep breath. 'I'll miss it this summer.' She crossed her fingers.

Gram turned to look at her quickly over her shoulder.

'I love music.' Kristen stared right back. Music, yes, she thought, but not the piano. The damn piano, she called it deep inside her head. If Gram ever thought she even knew that word, she'd be in trouble for a month.

'Like your mother.' Poppy pulled a chair out across from her. 'Well, you won't have to be without the piano this summer.' Kristen looked down at the damp beef Gram was putting on her plate, the pale cabbage, the boiled potatoes with a sprig of parsley from the Victory garden in the back. 'But how...'

Poppy was nodding. 'Not only the piano but an extra suitcase full of stuff if you like. I've hired a truck-'

'A truck?' Gram said. 'What will that cost?'

Poppy waved his hand around. 'Kristen has a birthday coming up,' he said. 'I just couldn't resist.'

Kristen looked down at her plate, three piles of stuff, cabbage, and beef, and potatoes. She knew Poppy was waiting for her to say something. He was waiting for her to throw her arms around him and tell him how wonderful it was. She could hardly talk, though. She picked up her knife and cut her beef into a bunch of little pieces. 'Amazing,' she said at last.

'Yes, it is,' said Gram.

It was Friday afternoon. The school was over; goodbye, St. Pascal's, goodbye, Sister Jillen, goodbye, report card. Kristen had put the report card in Gram's hand at the front door, walked right past her and up to her bedroom. Forty things were left to jam into a cardboard box.

Kristen put the first one in, a bottle of Kristen-of-the-valley perfume used up except for a little darkish stuff at the bottom. It smelled delicious, though. She waited to put the next thing in; she could hear Gram's footsteps on the stairs. She kept her back stiff, staring down at the bottle. She knew what was coming. 'D in music,' Gram would say. 'How could you possibly...' And she would have spotted that effort mark, B-, too. She'd say the whole thing was a disgrace.

Kristen took a breath. Someone was knocking at the front door, banging on the door. She could hear Gram's footsteps stop, could picture her turning...

Kristen rushed to the window. Downstairs was the truck, gray, rusty: MCHUGH'S-WE'LL TREAT YOUR FURNITURE LIKE OUR OWN. Their furniture must be some mess, Kristen thought. And then, worse, what would everyone in Ridgway think when they saw the Mollahans arriving for the summer in

a truck that was falling apart, an upright piano lashed to the back with rope, and Kristen and Gram sitting squashed in the front seat?

Kristen closed her eyes. Horrible.

At least Gram had forgotten about the report card. Kristen went downstairs to watch the two white-haired men in the living room. They were talking to Gram, joking a little, one of them singing, ''They're either too young or too old,' 'while the other was telling Gram that both their sons were in the service and that they were keeping the business going for the duration of the war.

Gram was frowning, watching them hoist up the piano with a bowl of flowers still on top. Kristen could see they'd be stuck at the door; the piano wouldn't go through in a million years. Alleluia. And better yet, her report card was on the bottom step of the stairs. Gram wasn't paying attention to it. Kristen knew she was worried about the piano scratching the wall as the men worked on shoving it through the door.

Kristen reached down for the report card, backed up the stairs. She could see herself in the truck, Gram suddenly saying, 'I never did look at your report card, Kristen. Do you know where...'

Perfect. Kristen wouldn't say a word. Gram had lost the thing herself. Not Kristen's fault, certainly not.

Up in her bedroom, she looked around. Her book, Evangeline, was still on the dresser. Kristen moved the star to the front page and put the blue report card in the back as far away from the star as possible. Her mother would never have cared for report cards.

And ten minutes later, finally, Kristen was packed. She picked up the last carton, listening to the perfume bottle clinking into her lipstick samples from Gertz Department Store in Jamaica, FREE TAKE ONE. Kristen had taken a bunch; you never knew when stuff like that would come in handy.

She started down the stairs with the carton, and Evangeline tucked carefully under her arm. At the other end of the hall was the wrenching sound of wood splitting, the molding hanging loose. Still, in the living room, Gram made an angry sound, but one of the men was telling her not to worry, molding was nothing, they could fix it up in a jiffy. 'Tell Mr. Mollahan we'll come back next week and...'

The piano. They had gotten it through. It stood there in the hall, huge, with round glass stains on the top and two of the keys missing the ivory. And then the men lifted it again and started the door. Kristen followed them, circling Gram still powdering her nose at the hall mirror.

The piano was in the truck now, with one of the men looping great pieces of rope around it, telling the other one, 'I'll stay back here, just to make sure the thing doesn't roll out.' He winked at Kristen. thinking it was a great joke.

Some joke. Gram came out the door wearing her blue summer hat with the cherries. She climbed up into the passenger seat, leaving a spot next to the window for Kristen. 'We're off,' she told Kristen. 'at last. I never thought we'd make it this year.'

Gram was smiling; she loved Ridgway too. Kristen closed her eyes as the truck started. She didn't want to look at the neighbors, who were waving at them and the piano and the rusty truck, probably thinking they were crazy.

But then they turned the corner, heading for the Belt Parkway, heading for Cross Bay Boulevard, and the bridge and Kristen could feel the excitement of it, the ocean waiting, the sound of it, the role of it, and it was hers for the whole summer.

She didn't open her eyes when Gram began about the report card. She could feel the vibration of the motor, and hear the man in front singing, ''They're either too young or too old,' 'and Gram humming along. And the next thing she heard was the sound of the tires hitting the planks of the bridge. They were there.

Ridgway...

Films of Kristen Deniel

I have this drawing folded carefully in my backpack. We're sitting at the table on the porch, the river in front of us, a summer rain drilling the roof above us, soaking us all that last Saturday, muddying the road, greening the grass, puckering the river.

In the picture Izzy is backing out of the screen door, balancing the cake plate in her hands. The cake was vanilla, and Izzy had gathered blue forget-me-nots to circle it.

I used the sharpest pencil (Strawberry Pink) to write the words on top of the cake: WELCOME TO THE FAMILY, HOLLY.

Izzy frowned. 'I wanted to get your whole name in, but there wasn't enough room.'

The Old Man's eyes sparkled. A moment before I framed the picture in my mind, he patted my shoulder. 'Kristen Copses, with us forever.'

Green's sat on the other side. I'd drawn pages of animal tracks for him, raccoon and deer, rabbit and possum ... and birds, even a loon that had come up out of the water to sun itself on a rock.

'I'll probably keep them forever, Sister Loon,' he said, full of himself. 'Get it?' He pointed to the loon tracks on the side of the page, nudging me under the table like a six-year-old, rattling the glasses, the cake plates.

'Green's, please.' The Old Man hadn't been happy with him all week. Nothing gigantic; little stuff. Green's had left the shed door open, so a raccoon had nested inside ... probably the one whose toes were marching all over Green's paper. Green's had left the house door open, so a bat had flown around the living room Wednesday night. He'd lost the Old Man's fishing knife, and one of the reels was probably sunk under the water somewhere downstream.

'Why don't you just try with him?' I had asked Green's the day before as we rowed around looking for it.

I could see the anger in his eyes. 'You're good enough for both of us,' he had said. 'That's what Pop would say.'

I leaned forward. 'Is it me?' I asked. 'My fault?'

He had laughed then. 'Don't be silly.'

Still, I wasn't sure. I opened my mouth to tell him about me, a mountain of trouble, but before I could, he tapped my arm. 'Hey.' His eyes were earnest behind his glasses. 'You don't have to look like that.' He broke off a piece of holly and handed it to me. 'Peace, Kristen. It's just like you. Prickly, but not bad to look at.'

I had tried to hide my smile.

Now Izzy put the cake in the center of the table. 'Should we have candles?' she asked.

'Sure.' Green's grinned at me. 'The works.'

'Why not?' I leaned back. I was full of myself too, thinking about calling the Old Man Pop, and Izzy Mom.

Izzy went inside to rummage through the table drawers for the candles, and Green's turned to me, saying we might walk up on the mountain after supper.

The Old Man looked at him sharply. 'In the rain?'

'Don't worry.' I knew I could make the Old Man smile.

'We're tougher than the rain.'

'I'm not talking about going all the way to the top,'

Green's said.

We ate the cake then, the icing melting on my tongue, and I was feeling guilty because I was the one who wanted to go up on the mountaintop.

The end of the old Kristen. Hey, world, here comes the new one.

And I wanted to go alone.

Films of Kristen Deniel

The next afternoon I went from room to room, taking my time, looking at everything. Almost everything. I didn't go into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom. That was their private place.

Film-strips filled the guest room wall, and I spent a long time looking at each one. I waited to get to the end to see if the one of me was still there.

First, there was a young Izzy in a two-piece bathing suit, then the Old Man sawing down a dead tree, sawdust coloring his beard. There were several of Green's: one without his front teeth, in a bunny costume, one sitting on the hood of the truck, and one with the fish-net in his hand, his head thrown back, laughing.

And the one of me was still there. I was sharpening a pencil, with pale pink shavings falling in a pile on my drawing paper. I ran my finger over it: still there, in the row with the others, belonging with them.

Green's room was next, a mess of a room. Socks on the floor, a jumble of string, a couple of keys, and a photo on the dresser. A photo I couldn't even make out, blurs of greens and blues, and something in the center that might have been the boat.

Behind me, Gram called, 'I found boots. I'm going to wear them.'

'It's too cold to go out,' I called back. 'You'll freeze.' But the outside door slammed, and I went to the window. 'Gram?' I put my hand on the glass; cold air drifted in around the panes.

Gram was wearing Izzy's wading boots, which went up to her thighs. She twirled in the snow, arms out, fingers spread. It made me dizzy to watch her. After a moment she tipped over, but it was an easy fall, making me think of snow angels. Her scarf blew across the smooth whiteness, a scrap of color.

She was up again, zigzagging, and I thought about going after her as she disappeared in the back of the line of evergreens. I hurried a little, grabbing my jacket. The thermometer outside the kitchen window read five degrees, and next to the window, on the wall, the calendar was still in August.

August.

I went out the back door, calling to her. And then in that cold stillness, I could hear her singing. 'Over the river...'

I went after her, my feet heavy, twirling as I passed the circle she had made, singing back, '...and through the Deniel...'

She leaned against a small tree, staring at the thin strip of dark water that ran between the chunks of ice. 'Isn't it beautiful?' I said.

'I love to walk in the snow.' She was shivering again, looking up at me, suddenly bewildered. 'But why aren't we home? And what happened to Beatrice?'

I led her back into the house, into that warm room with the bright blue rugs and the huge couch. I found a robe of Izzy's and wrapped it around her. We sat by the fireplace watching the shadows dance over the walls until it grew dark outside and we slept.

In the morning points of light danced over my eyes. I raised my hand to my face; the sun was melting tiny swirls of ice on the window.

Somewhere outside was a faint buzzing sound. It wasn't close-nothing to worry about-but what was it? Someone using a saw deep in the Copses? A snow-mobile? The sound gradually died away, and I stood up slowly, thinking about breakfast. There were choices, thanks to Izzy: cans of pineapple juice, blackberry jam, vegetables shiny inside their glass jars, rows of Dinty Moore stew.

Izzy's treasures, not mine.

I'd pay her back someday, I told myself, pay back all of it.

Lighten up, Green's said in my head. I had to smile. That's really what he would have said.

I unclenched my hands and took another look outside. Footprints crisscrossed the snow. Our footprints. I thought about them uneasily, glancing up at the sky, wishing for more snow to hide them.

I put water on to boil and popped a piece of Gram's bread into the toaster. A mouse lived somewhere in the house. Poor mouse. He'd have to leave now that Henry was here. I wiped away the mice leaving with a brush, then sat at the table in front of the window, with Gram's wood pieces on one side and my food lined up in front of me.

After I ate, I looked at the tree figure Gram was doing of me: a long piece of wood, spaces drilled in the sides where the arms would be, a face beginning to take shape, a mouth began, a small, pointed nose, and a tiny cut on the forehead.

I put my hand up to my forehead, feeling that indentation. And then Gram was there, yawning, her hair a whoosh around her head. She pattered over to the back window. 'Sun today,' she said, holding her hands out as if to warm them against the glass. 'And a branch that's blown onto the step. Holly, I think.'

I took the last bit of toast crust and crunched it into my mouth.

'The sun on the ocean makes a path sometimes.' Gram reached for a chocolate bar. 'You think you can walk on it, walk clear across the ocean to...'

She stopped and I tried to help her. 'To England? To France?'

'To where I belong.' She sat at the table and began to work. As I put toast and hot tea in front of her, she glanced around.

'What?' I asked.

'I'm wondering about Beatrice,' she said and smiled.

'And sandpaper. Your face needs smoothing.'

There might be sandpaper in the shed. I'd get it. I didn't have to look at the truck again; I'd pretend it wasn't there. I opened the back door to a blast of cold air-'So cold your teeth hurt,' the Old Man had said- and saw the holly branch, thick with bright red berries, that had blown across the steps.

Green's holding a sprig of holly out to me: 'Peace, Holly.'

'I'll get my jacket,' I told Gram. I shrugged into it, pulled on my gloves, and went outside for the sandpaper. The cold went through me, the smell of it sharp and clean.

The hot cocoa woman was far away, probably looking for me. She wouldn't have a clue.

On the way back, I bent down and picked up the holly to bring into the house. I gave Gram the squares of sandpaper, then put the branch in one of Izzy's vases in front of the big window, thinking about Christmas. Maybe ten more days.

Gram and I would have our own. I'd cut boughs of pine, and we had packs of popcorn to make. It would be like Christmas in a book by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I was happier than I had been anywhere, except...

...I didn't belong in that house in Laurel Highlands, not anymore. I wondered what Christmas was like in the Old Man's winter house, what it would be like this year.

I snipped off that thought before I finished it. Wasn't it enough that I was here in Laurel Highlands, with holly in the window?

If only I could stay forever.

Something else the Old Man had told me about: fishing in the winter. The fish went deep, but if you caught one, the eating was an experience.

An experience. The Old Man used words like that.

Fish for dinner, dotted with butter ... No butter. Ah, fish smothered in tomato sauce, and string beans jarred last summer.

A real meal, the way normal people ate. Better than normal.

'I know you like fish,' I said to Gram.

'Goldfish. I had one in a bowl; I think.' She glanced at

Henry, who slept in the middle of one of the Old Man's blue rugs.

'I don't trust Henry, though.'

'To eat, I mean, for us.'

She looked across at me, shocked. 'I'd never eat a goldfish.'

I could feel the laughter bubble up. 'Pickerel,' I said. 'Bass.

I'm not sure what's around this time of the year.'

'Ah, yes.' She picked up her knife to shave curly bits off the wooden feet.

The Old Man's fishing equipment was hanging on the far wall. Did I want to go out into that icy world? Of course, I did. In Green's bedroom, I gathered things to keep warm: his old green sweater for a scarf around my neck, an extra pair of socks. I found a towel in the hall closet to wrap around my head like a turban, and one of Izzy's large sweaters to put over the whole thing.

I was ready with the pole in my hand. Gram laughed at the sight of me as I passed her.

'The abominable snowman,' I said, and then I was outside, trying to decide. I could fish from the bank or the Old Man's bridge. The bank was closed, so I walked along the tree line and down to a spot almost in front of the house. I swung the pole, lure on the line, over the ice into the narrow stream of water. I didn't know how long I stood there fishing, but after a while I leaned back against a bare maple tree, watching movement on the other side of the river, just the quickest bit of color. A squirrel? A raccoon? But then I saw it was something larger, maybe a deer.

It took one more moment to realize that a person, maybe a fisherman, was standing there, back among the trees. And if I had seen him, he might be able to see me.

The pole slid out of my hands as I lurched backward toward the holly bushes. Another quick step and Green's sweater pulled away on a branch. I looked back to see the pole on the snowy bank. It had sunk into the snow so that it couldn't be seen. There was just a narrow indentation in the snow; it might have been only a branch if anyone spotted it.

My mouth was dry. I looked across the river again. There was no movement on the other side: a scoop of snow slid off one of the Laurel Highlands; a blue jay teetered on another.

I turned and ran the last few steps toward the house and up onto the porch. I reached for the door, closed and locked it in back of me, leaned against it inside, taking deep breaths.

'What is it?' Gram asked.

I shook my head. 'Maybe another fisherman. Don't worry.' Christmas was coming. Maybe it was someone cutting down a tree, or poaching in the Old Man's Copses.

All right. It was all right.

He hadn't seen me, and we were safe.

Gram put on her scarf and her coat and wandered outside, 'To breathe for a moment,' she told me.

I stayed near the window, watching. But there wasn't anyone there, no one at all.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I know what people mean when they say they feel as if they're floating. That's the way I felt as if my feet weren't attached to the ground as if they were bouncing off the floor, touching lightly, and bouncing again. And inside me, it was as if bubbles were drifting, bumping gently into each other.

I was happy. No, that doesn't even describe it. I was ... jubilant, ecstatic.

I drew it using all the pencils-yellows and oranges, pinks and blues. I drew purple shoes on my feet and wings on my shoulders. My eyes were closed, the way you see films of angels sometimes with their eyelashes down on their cheeks.

So, does it make sense that I wasn't thinking? That all that floating and all those bubbles made me think I could do anything?

And so that last week, all I thought about was going to the top of the Old Man's mountain and shouting down to the whole world. I even knew what I was going to say: Here I am, Kristen Copses, who didn't deserve to be in a family ... tough Kristen Copses, running-away Kristen Copses. Look at me. I climbed the mountain. Now I belong.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Half-awake one morning, I heard the sound of a train. I looked up at the window to see a solid square of white: a storm, with pin dots of flakes covering everything. What I had heard was the roar of the wind coming down the valley.

I padded out of bed and went downstairs to see what was happening outside the big window. The holly bushes on one side of the house were just a blur; the narrow sliver of a river and its snowy bank had disappeared in a mist of gray.

A little cold, I hugged myself, watching that world. It was like a plastic globe in one of the houses I'd been in. When I shook it, snow fell, covering a bright green Christmas tree in its center. 'Don't touch that, Kristen. Put it down.'

21

Films of Kristen Deniel

It was late when we reached the exit sign for Laurel Highlands. The gas station light was out, and there was only a tiny light in the back of the grocery store. 'We're almost there,' I told Gram, 'just the last four miles.'

'Already?' She sounded delighted. She zoomed off the ramp, stopping on the shoulder, and in a moment, she was asleep, her head against the steering wheel. Henry climbed off my lap, where he'd been for the past hour, and slid onto hers, his whiskers twitching as he closed his eyes.

I leaned over and turned the key to stop the motor. Suddenly I was wide awake and reaching for the door handle. I gave Henry a pat, then I got out of the car.

At first, it was hard to see, but little by little silhouettes appeared against the sky: the curve of a tree trunk, the dark square of the grocery store ahead, and above us, the Old Man's mountain, raising its head to the sky. It was almost a shock to see it there.

Beatrice would have said it was a drawing coming to life. I pictured her in a place with huge cacti, saguaro, I thought they were called. I remembered she'd said she would call every Sunday. What would she think when the phone rang and rang?

I shook myself. What would happen if I tried to call her again?

She'd come home, her dream over.

I wasn't going to do that. Back in the car, I nudged Gram awake. 'Just drive this last bit,' I said, 'and then you can sleep.'

We drove along the narrow road, no other lights now except for a few houses far up on the hills, and I kept talking to keep her awake. 'We'll see the river. It's not as big as your ocean...'

'Your river.' Gram's head bobbed.

'Keep watching,' I told her. 'We don't want to go off the road. The river would be cold for a swim.'

I saw her smile. 'Henry doesn't have his bathing suit.'

And there was the bridge. I had stood on that bridge watching the pickerel, the catfish, the muskrat building his nest of sticks against its base.

The Old Man's bridge.

'We'll have a fire in the fireplace,' I said, 'and turn the heat up high.' I could see the Old Man flipping the switch in the early mornings when the dew was still on the grass and the house was still cold.

We thumped across the bridge over the river, and the house was in front of us, waiting. 'Gram, this is the place.' My voice was flat. I might have been telling her it was a snowy day or the sun might come out tomorrow, but inside, my heart was thumping.

We had just this winter, I knew that, and maybe the spring.

By summer we'd have to find somewhere else.

That was months. That was forever.

I closed my eyes, remembering the last morning I had been here. I had gone out the screen door toward the car, brushing my fingers along the holly bushes, feeling the sharp edges of the leaves against my thumb.

I had walked as far as the town, a long way in the early morning heat, and sat on the bench with my things on my lap, waiting for the Shortline bus, and looking down, I realized I'd left the drawing box. I think that was the worst moment, knowing I'd never see that box again. Geranium Red, Dove Gray, French Blue. 'We're home, Gram,' I said.

'Hard to see,' she said.

'Just get used to the darkness,' I told her. 'In a minute you'll see it all.'

She took everything in then, and I with her: the house with the sloping roof, the evergreens leaning over it, the dark shadow that was the woodpile on the front porch. The rocking chairs were in the shed, I knew that, but I could picture them there, rocking gently.

Gram took a deep breath.

'I knew you'd like it,' I said, watching Henry in the rearview mirror. He stood on the back of the headrest now, his claws in my shoulder, his nose twitching, his whiskers quivering, sizing up the place. 'And you too, Henry.'

'But is it all right?' Gram asked, frowning. 'Are you sure we can do this?'

'We can.' I brushed away thoughts of being caught, of what the Old Man might think of me if he ever found out. What did he think of me anyway? Please don't mind this thing I'm doing, I begged him in my head.

A red cardinal swooped down to perch on a holly branch that bent itself into the snow, snow marked by threadlike bird prints and deep hollows from the deer. The tracks hugged the edge of the clearing, close to the evergreens, and one path, probably from a rabbit, led to the river.

I wondered if Green's had ever seen the house in the winter. He would love it.

I chewed my knuckle. A lace curtain of snow blew across the porch. It was bitter cold with the engine turned off. I had to get Gram into the house. Her shoes had heels, with open toes and diamond-shaped cutouts in the sides. Why hadn't I thought of her shoes?

Henry scratched his claws along the car window, wanting to get out. I gave his ear a tweak, opened the door, and watched his belly through the snow away from the car.

'I'm sorry, Gram,' I said, still looking down at her feet. They'd be soaked. 'You'll have to walk through this to get to the house.'

'An adventure,' Gram said, grabbing the handle.

I slipped her scarf up around her head, the orange a bright spot in the darkness, and buttoned the top button of her coat.

'All right,' I said.

Outside we skirted the trees, and she stopped to look up.

'A million stars,' she said, pointing. 'There's the Dipper and Orion. Beatrice would love it.' Then I held her by the waist as we went up the back steps.

Her face was a little disapproving as I kicked my sneaker off and, hopping, smashed in the small kitchen window. And then we were inside, Henry skittering in around us.

I leaned back against the wall, reaching for the light, hoping they hadn't turned off the electricity. Suddenly the kitchen sprang to life. The refrigerator began to hum, and beyond it, I could see the huge living room with the long table at one end and dark blue rugs scattered across the wood floor. The Old Man was proud of that floor; he always talked about putting it in with Izzy, about matching the pieces of wood exactly, holding up his hands as if Green's and I could see them clutching a hammer and saw.

Gram shivered, her lips colorless, and my hands felt numb. I flipped the switch for heat and heard the furnace startup. At the fireplace chunks of wood and paper were piled in a bin. I knelt there, crumpling the yellowed newspapers to tuck in between some logs, and read last summer's news as I struck a match against the stones of the hearth: Someone had caught a huge trout near Byron's Falls; a sidewalk sale was planned for Main Street; there were canoes for rent in Shadyside.

I had been here last summer; all of that had been happening. I kept talking to Gram, telling her that this place had been mine only for a month or two, but now it was ours. And she sank on the couch, nodding, watching the fire.

Is it still mine? I asked the Old Man. Mine for just this winter?

A thin flame curled up from somewhere underneath the logs and Gram clapped her hands. 'Fire!'

The Old Man's wooden floor shone with a rosy gleam, and my eyes began to close as my fingers warmed, but I couldn't fall asleep yet.

I settled Gram on the couch and found an old towel to dry her feet. They were mottled from the cold. 'Skinny as a bird,' I told her as I rubbed them. She put her head back, asleep again.

In the kitchen, I used the same towel to close the opening in the missing windowpane. While we were here, I'd figure out how to replace that. There was glass in the shed; I'd seen the Old Man measuring and cutting.

I climbed the stairs to the little green room that had been mine. Everything was just the same. The dresser mirror reflected my old sneakers, just visible under the edge of the bumpy white bedspread; the curtains, pink with roses, looped back; and the drawing box on the dresser.

The drawing box...

I ran my fingers over that half-opened box, the pencils spilling out: French Blue, Geranium Red. It was hard to swallow. I touched all of the pencils, the pad of paper, the sharpener.

Henry and I made four or five trips back to the car for things I had taken from Gram's house. Steam came from my mouth in small white puffs and from the chimney in larger ones. But the cold didn't brother Henry. He pranced through the snow, chasing twigs and a few crumpled leaves as if he were a kitten. He must have known what I was thinking. He sneaked a look back at me; then he sat upon a rock, perfectly still, like the old cat he was.

I'd draw that later, I thought, Henry happy in the dark, with the river just a thread curving through the snow.

It took a half-hour to bring everything inside. I wrapped a blanket around Gram, and through the window, I could see the car at the edge of the road. There'd be room for it in the shed, I thought, remembering the Old Man's car on one side, the truck on the other.

The truck. Totaled. Was it still there? I shook my head. 'I'll be back,' I said to the sleeping Gram. 'I have to put the Silver Bullet in the shed.'

You're going to drive it in? Green's asked in my head.

You taught me how I said.

But...

I can do this.

The truck hugged one side of the shed. I walked around to the front of it and ran my fingers over the cold metal, the sharp edges, the empty holes where the lights had been. I raised my hands to my ears without thinking so I wouldn't hear the sound of the truck as it hit the trees that summer evening.

Outside of a few minutes later, I turned the key in the Silver Bullet's ignition; the gas gauge was hitting Empty. Just one more bit, I begged the car, that's all I need. I sat there hesitating before I put my foot on the gas, but then I coasted along over the snow, the motor coughing, and glided into the shed- not touching the sides, not even close- braked a split second before I hit the back wall, and turned off the motor.

Ah, Green's said.

It was quiet, with only the soft whoosh of wind and the muffled sound of icy snow as it blew against the roof. I had done it. All I wanted to do now was curl up under the covers in that small green room upstairs and sleep.

For the next few afternoons, around five, the hot cocoa woman called to chitchat. That's what she called it. She was doing all the chatting.

'How was school?'

'Burned down.'

'What did you have for lunch?'

'Horsemeat.'

'How's Mrs. Cahill?'

'Who?'

'What are you drawing?'

'Nudies.'

'Kristen,' she said slowly one night. 'Mrs. Cahill is old, and she tends to forget.'

Gram dancing in the street, giving me the hat with the veil, making popcorn at the movie.

I said more than I wanted to. 'She doesn't forget everything, just some things.' I stopped. The hot cocoa woman would never change her mind. I raised my hand to the window. Drops of melting sleet were running down the glass. Under the kitchen table, Henry was an orange ball, with only his pointy little chin turned up. Henry hated sleet.

'Tomorrow is Saturday,' the hot cocoa woman began. 'I'll pick you up and take you to meet Eleanor.' She paused.

I didn't answer.

'That's her name, Eleanor. She's going to have lunch for us.'

I pulled the telephone cord as far as it would go.

'Then Sunday, if all goes well...' She broke off. 'You'd be in the same school. And you could visit Mrs. Cahill often.'

I took the phone away from my ear and put it on the counter. I did it gently so there was no noise. I wondered how long she'd keep talking before she figured out, I wasn't listening.

It was gray outside. Gram's wooden figures were blurred and bent in the wind that had just come up.

Gram couldn't stay alone. She might not remember when it was super. She'd sit up all night watching movies.

Beatrice. I picked up the phone and pressed the numbers.

It rang about twenty times. The answer, Beatrice. But then I remembered. For the first weeks she'd be traveling around, she had said. I pictured her in the desert, the dry sun beating down, her sketchbook in her hand.

I couldn't leave Gram.

I couldn't stay.

It was a puzzle.

Something from years ago popped into my head. It wasn't wintering, it was summer, and so humid everything I touched was sticky. All afternoon I'd thought about the pillow on the bed, and how cool it would be against my head. I was surprised when it was as hot as the rest of the room. I reached under the pillow to find something I had hidden there, a doll with pale painted eyes. I whispered to her, asking if she was cooling off. And then someone came and pulled her away, tossing her on the night table. I waited until the woman walked out the door, and then I whispered a little more loudly so that the doll could hear me.

'Don't worry,' I'd said.

'I'll save you in the morning.'

Why had I thought of that now?

Save Gram.

That's why.

The sleet outside was turning to snow. It reminded me of Green's. 'You'd love the snow in Hancock,' he'd said.

I thought of the summer house in Laurel Highlands. 'I haven't been here in winter since I was a boy,' the Old Man had said. 'But it was wonderful, so cold it hurt your teeth, the river has frozen over, the animals coming up close to the house.

Everything was silver with ice.' He had spread his wide hands. 'Twisted icicles this long hanging from the roof. I used to knock them off and see how far I could throw them.' He had laughed. 'My father had put in heat, so when you came inside, it was warm. I'd dry my hands on the radiator till they almost sizzled.'

Winter.

No one there in the house in Laurel Highlands. 'We stay in our house in Hancock now. Plenty of snow there, and nearer to school and the stores.'

How could I do it?

How could I not?

Gram was napping on the lilac couch. I went in and stood next to her, watching that beautiful face.

She opened her eyes.

'How would you like to go away with me?' I asked.

'To see Beatrice?' she said.

I shook my head. 'That's too far.'

'Then where?' She sat up, smoothing her hair with papery thin fingers.

It was hard to get the words out. 'We'll take the car.'

'The Silver Bullet,' she said, nodding.

'It will be an adventure,' I said.

She smiled. 'Henry, you, and I in the Silver Bullet. We'll fly to the ends of the earth.'

I smiled back, trying to think. Food, warm clothes, gas for the Silver Bullet.

It was Friday night. The hot cocoa woman would come for me at lunchtime tomorrow.

By then we had to be long gone.

Films of Kristen Deniel

We were frenzied that last week in August. That was Izzy's word: frenzied. And I drew it all:

Green's and I racing along the dirt road to buy beef jerky at the grocery store four miles away.

Sitting on a rock, pulling the jerky against our teeth as we counted the cars that went by on the highway.

Rowing up the river rapids and bouncing back in the rowboat with bruises all over our legs and arms.

Climbing partway up the Old Man's mountain after the rain, slipping and sliding in the mud on the edge of the road.

And we never stopped laughing.

Anything so we wouldn't think about my leaving.

Anything.

They told me what they'd planned, the four of us sitting on the porch. I never needed a picture of that night. It was in my head, every bit of it, is there forever. But I drew it anyway: Izzy with one of my hands in both of hers, the Old Man reaching out to hug me until I had no breath left, and Green's blinking behind his glasses, trying not to let me see how close to tears he was.

But I knew.

I drew another picture of what happened next. Before I could think, I leaned over to kiss Green's cheek, stained with grease from working on the truck, captured there in that drawing forever. Both of us laughed, embarrassed, and Izzy said, 'Lovely. I'm going to try that too.' And she leaned over to kiss his other cheek.

We were still laughing as Izzy spread out her long arms.

'It's settled, then,' she said. 'You belong to us. This house ...' 'And the river,' I said.

'...Is yours,' the Old Man said. 'All of it.' 'And Izzy's hard candy,' Green's said, rocking back on his chair, looking happier than he had all summer.

Please let it be all right, I begged, looking at Greens' face, remembering all the arguments he and the Old Man had had: a lost lure yesterday, a rake left in the rain, the truck. Was it because I was there? Was the Old Man comparing him with me? Me? Wasn't that strange? Was trying to fit me into family-like jamming in a puzzle piece that didn't match? Would it ruin all the other pieces?

Lzzy leaned over. 'Hey, you two, don't look sad. We still have one last weekend. Remember?'

The last weekend.

Last.

I looked up at the mountain. The trees had just a hint of fall color. The mountain looked soft, almost friendly. I thought about standing on the very top.

<3

Nevaeh

Book: 65

Martrace

1

The beginnings-

It just someday in some year- in 1921- she was let in the back of the 1918 Buick Pick up with a wood bed- and was forgotten about even if it was her birthday...

Miss. Darling joined Martrace who had the nickname given of 'Hope-' outside the school gates and the two of them walked in silence through the village Love Street.

They passed the greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges. and the butcher with bloody lumps of meat on display and naked chickens hanging up...

-Then and there-

Was the small bank. and the grocery store and the electrical shop...

And now that they were alone. Martrace (Hope) all of a sudden became enthusiastically energetic.

And then they came out on the other side of the village... on to the narrow country road where there were no people anymore and very few 1921-motor-cars in testudo-black.

It seemed as though a valve had burst inside her and a great gush of energy was being released.

It was from Miss. Darling this and Miss. Darling that and Miss. Darling, I do honestly feel I could move almost anything in the world. not just tipping over glasses and little things like that.

I feel...

I... feel... could topple tables and chairs. Miss. Darling.

Even when people are sitting in the chairs I think I could push them over. and bigger things too. much bigger things than chairs and tables. She trotted beside Miss.

Darling with uninhabited little hops and her fingers flew as if she would toss them to the four winds and her words went off like fireworks. with tremendous speed.

I have to stare at it very hard. Miss. Darling. very hard.

Like- then I can feel it all fashionable behind my eyes. and my eyes get hot just as though they were scorching but then again.

I do not mind that in the least. and Miss. Darling. I only must take a moment to get my eyes strong and then I can push it out. this strangeness. at anything at all so long as I am staring at it hard enough.

2

'Calm yourself down. youngster. calm yourself down.' Miss. Darling said. 'Let us not get ourselves too worked up so early in the chronicles.'

'But you do think it is interesting. don't you. Miss. Darling?'

'Why must we tread carefully. Miss. Darling?'

'Oh. it is interesting all right.' Miss. Darling said. 'It is more than interesting. But we must tread very carefully from now on. Martrace.'

'They may even be heavenly... Nonetheless, whether they are or not. let us handle them carefully.'

'For the reason that we are playing with mysterious forces. my child. that we know nothing about. I do not think they are evil. They may be good.'

These were wise words from a wise old bird. but Martrace was too steamed up to see it that way.

'I don't see why we have to be so cautious?' she said. still hopping about.

'I am trying to explain to you.' Miss. Darling said longsuffering...

'That we are dealing with the unidentified. It is an unexplainable thing...

The right word for it is marvel... It is a- whizz.' 'Am I a miracle?' Martrace asked.

'It is quite possible that you are.' Miss. Darling said.

'Nonetheless. I'd rather you didn't think about yourself as anything in particular at the moment.

What I thought we might do is to explore this genius a little further... just the two of us together; but then again making sure we take things very carefully all the time.'

'You want me to do some more of it then. Miss. Darling?'

'That is what I am tempted to suggest.' Miss. Darling said cautiously.

'Goody-good.' Martrace said.

'I myself.' Miss. Darling said. 'I am probably far more bowled over by what you did than you are. and I am trying to find some reasonable explanation.'

'Such as what?' Martrace asked.

'Such as whether or not it's got something to do with the fact that you are quite exceptionally precocious.'

'What exactly does that word mean?' Martrace said.

'A precocious child.' Miss. Darling said. 'is one that shows amazing intelligence early on. You are an unbelievably precocious child.'

'Am I really?' Martrace asked.

'Of course. you are. You must be aware of that. Look at your reading. Look at your mathematics.'

'I suppose you're right.' Martrace said.

Miss. Darling marveled at the child's lack of conceit and self-consciousness.

'I can't help wondering.' she said. 'whether this sudden ability that has come to you. Of being able to move an object without touching it. whether it might not have something to do with your brainpower.'

'You mean there might not be room in my head for all those brains so something has to push out?'

'That's not quite what I mean.' Miss. Darling said.

Smiling... 'But whatever happens... and I say it again. we must tread carefully from now on. I have not forgotten... that strange and distant glimmer on your face after you tipped over the last glass .'

'Do you think doing it could actually... hurt me? Is that what you're thinking. Miss. Darling?'

'It made you feel pretty peculiar... didn't it?'

'It made me feel lovely.' Martrace said. 'For a moment or two, I was flying past the stars on silver wings.'

Along with say- 'I told you that.'

And moments later saying- 'And intend to I tell you something else. Miss. Darling? It was easier the second time... much easier.'

'I think it's like anything else. the more you practice it. the easier it gets.'

Miss. Darling was walking slowly so that the small child could keep up with her without trotting too fast.

3

And it was very peaceful out there on the narrow road now that the village was behind them.

It was one of those golden autumn afternoons and there were blackberries and splashes of old man's beard in the hedges.

And the hawthorn berries were ripening scarlet for the birds when the chilly winter came along.

There were tall trees here and there on either side. oak and sycamore and ash and occasionally a sweet chestnut.

There was a high hedge of hazel on either side and you could see clusters of ripe brown nuts in their green jackets.

The squirrels would be collecting them all very soon.

Miss. Darling said. and storing them away carefully for the bleak months ahead. Miss. Darling.

Wishing to change the subject for the moment... gave the names of all these to Martrace and taught her how to recognize them by the shape of their leaves and the pattern of the bark on their trunks.

Martrace took all this in and stored the knowledge away carefully in her mind.

They came finally to a gap in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road where there was a five-barred gate. 'This way.' Miss. Darling said. and she opened the gate and led Martrace through and closed it again.

They were now walking along a narrow lane that was no more than a rutted cart-track.

'You mean you live down here?' Martrace asked.

'I do.' Miss. Darling replied... nonetheless, she said nothing more or further.

Martrace had never once stopped to think about where Miss. Darling might be living.

She had always regarded her purely as a teacher.

A person who turned up out of nowhere and taught at school and then went away again.

Do any of us children... she wondered...

Like- yah- ever stop to ask ourselves where our teachers go when school is over for the day? Do we wonder if they live alone?

Or like if there is a mother at home or a sister or a husband? 'Do you live all by yourself.'

Miss. Darling?' she asked.

'It's just a farm laborer's cottage.' Miss. Darling said. 'You mustn't expect too much of it. We're approximately there.'

They came to a small green gate half-buried in the hedge on the right and almost buried by the overhanging hazel branches. Miss. Darling paused with one hand on the gate and said. 'There it is. That's where I live.'

'Yes.' Miss. Darling said.

'Very much so.'

They were walking over the deep sunbaked mud-tracks of the lane and you had to watch where you put your feet if you didn't want to twist your ankle.

There were a few small birds around in the hazel branches but that was all.

Martrace saw a narrow dirt path leading to a tiny red-brick cottage.

The cottage was so small it looked more like a doll's house than a human dwelling.

The bricks it was built of were old and crumbly and very pale red. It had a grey slate roof and one small chimney. and there were two little windows at the front.

Each window was no larger than a sheet of a tabloid newspaper and there was no upstairs to the place.

On either side of the path, there was a wilderness of nettles and blackberry thorns and long brown grass.

An enormous oak tree stood overshadowing the cottage. Its massive spreading branches seemed to be enfolding and embracing the tiny building. and perhaps hiding it as well from the rest of the world.

4

Would you all say that it was cute to see home your mom and dad are with you when you come into their life that loving moment- left in time?

So- even so when they find that their youngster is the most repulsive thing to ever share the same air as they do. The grossest thing you could ever imagine or wrap your mind around. they still think that he or she is magnificent or slenderizes.

Some moms and dads go more. extra than others. They develop so-o blinded by admiration. love... consent. with wonder.

The achievement to sway and influence. themselves their youngster has the wherewithal of mastermind.

Really in all fact, there was not a thing wrong with this... at all.

Never- ever- world this not be right. The world just works this way. 'Carry us a washbowl! We're going to be sick!' U-ah- he said...

It is only when the mom and dad begin telling you and me about the wisdom of their own disgusting. suck. twisting scum-sucking butt hole licker's... children. That we shock disturbance.

'Your son is the best thing ever. You're going to say it.' ...is an over-all wash-out to say.

I have faith that you have a family.

Trade you can thrust or shove him into when he/she leaves school. and for the reason that he/she vary sure as all hell he or she won't get a job anyplace otherwise.' If yours truly were a teacher. I would prepare up some physical scorchers for the kids of loving. devoted. Kissie- Kissie goo-goo- parents.

School educators undergo a good deal from having to listen to this sort of balderdash nonrenewal crap- from gratified close relatives like mom and dad.

Nonetheless, they typically get their own back when the time comes to write the end-of-term reports. Before. like if yours truly were feeling poetic that daylight. I- myself- me- here... might pen down. 'It is an enquiring actuality. which grasshoppers.

Like- like- like- have their hearing-organs on the sides of the abdomen. Your daughter Emma.

Is arbitrating by what she's erudite this period.

Has no audible range-publications at all- to speak of?'

Yah- would say I may even investigate an unfathomable into ordinary history and say that. 'The journal cicada employs seven ages as a nourishment antiestablishment.

as well as no more than seven days as a welcome individual of sunbeams and air. Your son/or girl has paid out seven years as nourishment in this school.

And now we are still in the making for him/her to arise from the cocoon.'

A chiefly mephitic little girl might sting me into proverbing.

'Sandy has the same glacial beauty yet so cold-heartedly like a stone. but unlike the stone. she has absolutely nothing below the surface - nothing but looks.'

I myself meditate... I for one might relish in writing end-of-term intelligence for the horrors in my class.

Like- however enough of that BS- kids suck lady-nuts. We have to get on... with the dumb... for that is all they are - on like this one here that is oh mighty.

And magnificent- in their wisdom. and wonderers' thoughts of the mind.

Frequently- like every so often. one comes across a close relative who takes the contradictory line.

Who shows no notice at all in their youngsters.

And this of-course is far worse than the doting ones.

Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter were two such parents.

They had a son called Peter and a daughter called Martrace. and the parents watched upon Martrace in certain as zilch zil- notta crap in the bowl- that needed to be plunged and flush tree weeks ago- a

stinking shipping- pill... of doo- no more than a layer over the yellowing pee.

Just crap- something you have to put up. or then get it out and grunting too- with until the time comes your done with it and zip up- and move on with the day.

Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter beheld accelerative massively to the phase when they could dump their little daughter off- as sh*t and flush her away for their lives.'

If possible, into the next region and or next plant- or even supplementary more than that even.

It is in-immoral an adequate quantity of when blood relation treats everyday youngsters as all the same, they were crap and poopie.

On the other hand, it turns out to be one way or another a- lot inferior when the juvenile in inquiry is extraordinary. and by that. I mean complex as well as vivid.

Martrace was both of these things. on the other hand, above all she was dazzling. Her cognizance was so-o nimble, and she was so quick to learn.

5

That her capability ought to have been understandable even to the most half-witted of parents.

Nonetheless, Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter were both so-o gorm-less and so-0 enfolded up in their own senseless meaningless. and absurd slight lives that they fail to get or see that no matter what infrequent.

Uncommon about their daughter.

To communicate the actuality.

I doubt they would have noticed had she crept into the house with a broken 2 legs one day when they did not see.

By the age of one and a half, her speech was flawless faultless. marvels. as well as she knew as many words as most grown-ups.

The parents... instead of applauding her. called her a noisy blabbermouth and told her abruptly that small girls should be understood and not overheard.

Martrace's brother Peter was a perfectly normal boy. but the sister. as I said. it was something to make your eyes pop.

By the time she was three.

Martrace had taught herself to read by studying newspapers and magazines that lay around the house.

At the age of four.

She could read fast and well, and she naturally began hankering after books.

The only book in the whole of this enlightened household was something called Easy Cooking belonging to her mother.

And when she had read this from cover to cover and had learned all the recipes by heart. she decided she wanted something more interesting. 'Daddy.' she said.

'Do you think you could buy me a book?'

'A book?' he said.

'What do you want a freaking book for dumb butt?' 'To read. Daddy.'

'What's wrong with going to see a MOVIE.

For heaven's sake- a little girl?

We've got a lovely MOVIE with a sixty-inch screen and now you come asking for a book to read in have imagination time! You're getting so-o spoiled. girl!'

Almost every ordinary midafternoon Martrace was left alone in the household. Her brother (four years older than her...)

She went to school and she was there to care for herself- yet that is the way she loved it. Ms. Dicksnoter was hooked on to being a fashionista. doing hair styling and being a drama queen- and playing the man in bars- when dad was not looking- it five afternoons a week she was seen playing the game- and making her wages in that way- good look as she said to get you far- even if with her that may not be so... Her father went to work- on the railroad... working on steamers... a murky dirty- hot job... were he would pass off crap for good engines... she this here - 1888- you like the wheels are falling off- and the boilers blow- what do I do- I sell it to you- what do you say?

1918 Cadillac is sitting running as they were talking- walking past all the big things and load- like crossing tracks with moving train- at her feet at the age of five- she arrived. she introduced herself to the librarian.

Martrace was in-love with the new light- and the cars putting along outside- in this small western county town that she was seeing in her way- a way of wonder- and massive thought behind it- looking around all old wood buildings- and dart roads.

Ms. Smaith. She asked if she might sit awhile and read a book. Ms. Smaith. slightly in awe at the arrival, this tiny young girl-and being- solo- with no parent to behead by. all the same, she told her she was very welcome to take a look at all the books.

It's like new- maybe better... On the afternoon of the day when her father had refused to buy her a book.

Martrace set out all by herself to walk to the public library in the village. 'Where are the children's books please?' Martrace asked... softly shyly... where are the kiddie books... 'They're over there on those lower shelves- Ms. Smaith told her do you see.' -Yes- thank you... 'Would you like me to help you find a nice one with lots of drawings on it... so it not too hard for you to get...?' No. thank you.' Martrace said. 'I'm sure I can accomplish this- feet with no issues or complaints.'

It now dark- she is still sitting there as the gas laps outside flicker... the train- blow got there hunting crays and grind on the rails. Houses pass- a man snaps a long photo on a shudder camera... a boy is calling out for newspapers- as the burn burls are light for heat man standing signing old songs- of land- in the cold wicked streets- you can see the puff of their breath... yet she forgot all about the time... lost in the lands of her books. Where there was no pain of heat... just play. Martrace would toddle down to the library like this- every day she could rain- sleet- and mud. it did not matter- there was the girl with long dark hair with the ridden in it- and a sundress reading books.

The walk took only ten minutes. and this allowed her two glorious hours sitting quietly by herself in a cozy corner devouring one book after another. When she had read every single children's book in the place. she started wandering round in search of something else.

Ms. Smaith. Who had been watching her with charm for the past few weeks? Now got up from her desk and went over to her yet in admiration. 'Can I help you. Martrace?' she asked.

'I'm deliberating what to read next.' Martrace said. 'I've finished all the children's books.' All 500 she said?

Yes- 'You mean you've looked at the pictures?'

NO...I um- 'Yes. but I've read the books as also.'

Ms. Smaith gazed downwards at Martrace from her great height. which was only like three feet. and Martrace looked right back up at her towering.

'I thought some were very underprivileged.' Martrace said. 'but others were lovely. I liked Engen 14 was the best of one of them all- she carried out. It was full of specifics. The mystery of the room behind the closed door and the mystery of the garden behind the big wall.' Ms. Smaith was dumbfounded by this girl's considerations and words. "Exactly how old are you, little girl. Martrace?' she asked. 'Five years and one month.' Martrace said timidly.

Ms. Smaith was more stunned than ever. but she had the sense not to show it. 'What sort of a book would you like to read next?' she asked.

Martrace said. 'I would like a really good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I don't know any names.'

Ms. Smaith looked along the shelves. taking her time. She didn't quite know what to bring out. How. she asked herself. does one choose a famous grown-up book for a four-year-old girl? Her first thought was to pick a young teenager's romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old schoolgirls.

But for some reason, she found herself instinctively walking past that particular shelf.

'Try this.' she said at last. 'It's very famous and very good. If it's too long for you. just let me know and I'll find something shorter and a bit easier.'

'Great Expectations.' Martrace read. 'by Charles Dickens.

I'd love to try it.'

I must be mad. Ms. Smaith told herself. but to Martrace she said.

'Of course, you may try it.'

Over the next few afternoons, Ms. Smaith could hardly take her eyes from the small girl sitting for hour after hour in the big armchair at the far end of the room with the book on her lap.

It was necessary to rest it on the lap because it was too heavy for her to hold up. which meant she had to sit leaning forward to read.

And a strange sight it was. this tiny dark-haired person sitting there with her feet nowhere near touching the floor.

Totally absorbed in the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss. Havisham and her cobwebbed house and by the spell of magic that Dickens the great story-teller had woven with his words. The only movement from the reader was the lifting of the hand now and then to turn over a page. and Ms. Smaith always felt sad when the time came for her to cross the floor and say; 'It's ten to five. Martrace.'

During the first week of Martrace's visits, Ms. Smaith had said to her. 'Does your mother walk you down here every day and then take you home?'

'My mother goes to Aylesbury every afternoon to play bingo.'

Martrace had said. 'She doesn't know I come here.'

'But that's surely not right.' Ms. Smaith said. 'I think you'd better ask her.'

'I'd rather not.' Martrace said. 'She doesn't encourage reading books. Nor does my father.'

'But what do they expect you to do every afternoon in an empty house?'

'Just mooch around and watch the telly.'

'I see.'

'She doesn't care what I do.' Martrace said a little sadly.

Ms. Smaith was concerned about the child's safety on the walk through the fairly busy village Love Street and the crossing of the road. but she decided not to interfere.

Within a week. Martrace had finished Great Expectations which in that edition contained four hundred and eleven pages. 'I loved it.' she said to Ms. Smaith. 'Has Mr. Dickens written any others?'

'A great number.' said the astounded Ms. Smaith. 'Intend to I choose you another?'

Over the next six months. under Ms. Smaith's watchful and compassionate eye. Martrace read the following books:

- Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens
- Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

- Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens
- Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
- Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
- Nevaeh by: Marcel Ray Duriez
- Gone to Earth by Mary Webb
- White Fang by Jack London
- Frankenstein by Mary Shelley
- The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
- Brighton Rock by Graham Greene
- The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner
- The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck the Good

Companions by J. B. Priestley

- Kim by Rudyard Kipling
- Animal Farm by George Orwell
- The Invisible Man by H. G. Wells

It was a formidable list and by now Ms. Smaith was filled with wonder and excitement. but it was probably a good thing that she did not allow herself to be completely carried away by it all.

Almost anyone else witnessing the achievements of this small child would have been tempted to make a great fuss and shout the news all over the village and beyond. but not so Ms. Smaith.

She was someone who minded her own business and had long since discovered it was seldom worth while to interfere with other people's children.

'Mr. Hemingway says a lot of things I don't understand.'

Martrace said to her. 'Especially about men and women.'

'Nonetheless, I loved it all the same. The way he tells it I feel I am right there on the spot watching it all happen.'

"A fine writer will always make you feel that.' Ms. Smaith said. 'And don't worry about the bits you can't understand.

Sit back and allow the words to wash around you. like music.'

'I will. I will.'

'Did you know.' Ms. Smaith said. 'that public libraries like this allow you to borrow books and take them home?'

'I didn't know that.' Martrace said. 'Could I do it?'

'Of course.' Ms. Smaith said. 'When you have chosen the book, you want. bring it to me so I can make a note of it and it's yours for two weeks. You can take more than one if you wish.'

From then on. Martrace would visit the library only once a week to take out new books and return the old ones.

Her small bedroom now became her reading-room and... there she would sit and read most afternoons.

Often with a mug of hot chocolate beside her. She was not tall enough to reach things around the kitchen.

But she kept a small box in the outhouse which she brought in and stood on to get whatever she wanted.

Mostly it was hot chocolate she made. warming the milk in a saucepan on the stove before mixing it. Occasionally she made Bovril or Ovaltine. It was pleasant to take a hot drink up to her room and have it beside her as she sat in her silent room reading in the empty house in the afternoons.

The books transported her into new worlds and familiarized her with amazing people who lived exciting lives.

She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad.

She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She traveled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.

6

The First Phenomenon-

The Mcfarts seated herself overdue the teacher's table. Martrace sat down again at her school desk.

Still holding the pitcher by the handle but not invigorating it hitherto. she said. 'I have never-ever been able to comprehend why small children are so revolting.

It was the first time she had to sit down- freaking sit- down throughout the class.

Then she got hold of out a hand and took hold of her water- pitcher.

They should be got free of as early as conceivable.

They are the misery of my life. They are like creatures.

We get rid of flies with fly-spray and by droopy up fly-paper.

I have often thought of discovering a spray for getting rid of small youngsters.

Otherwise better still. some huge strips of gluey paper.

How marvelous it would be to walk into this schoolroom with an enormous spray-pistols in my hands and start thrusting it.

I would hang them all around the school and you'd all get stuck to them and that would be the end of it.

Wouldn't that be a good idea?

Miss. Darling?'

'If it's meant to be a joke. Headmistress. I don't think it's a very funny one.' Miss. Darling said from the back of the classroom during the lecture.

The woman's mad. Miss. Darling was telling herself. She's rounded the twist. She's the one who ought to be got rid of.

The Mcfarts now lifted the large blue porcelain water-jug and poured some water into her glass. 'You wouldn't. would you. Miss. Darling.' the Mcfarts said. 'And it's not meant to be a joke. My idea of a picture-perfect school. Miss. Darling. is one that has no youngsters in it at all were there all in the graveyard not talking back.

Um-hum- stone-cold quit- they hear you that way... like living under a rock... she said back. One of these days I intend to start up a school like that. I think it will be very effective to freaking dumb - playing with themselves.'

I like you did- Missy... over there... as a girl. As well as unexpectedly. with the water. out came the stretched sycophantic lizard straight into the glass. plop!

The Mcfarts let out a yell and leaped off her chair as though a firecracker had gone off beneath her.

As well as now the children also saw the long thin slimy yellow-bellied lizard-like mortal meandering and revolving relaxing- spinning- like in the glass.

And they wriggled and jumped about as well. shouting.

Oh. it's disgusting! It's a serpent! It's a baby queue! It's an alligator!'

'What is it?

'Lookout. Miss. Mcfarts!' cried Dasey. 'I'll bet it bites!'

She was especially furious that someone had succeeded in making her jump and yell like that because she prided herself on her toughness.

Natural history was not her strong point.

She hadn't the faintest idea what this thing was.

The Mcfarts.

This mighty womanly giant. stood there in her green breeches. trembling like a blancmange. She stared at the creature snaking and wriggling in the glass. Inquisitively enough. she had never seen a newt before. It certainly looked extremely unpleasant. Gradually she sat down again in her chair.

She looked at this moment more frightening than ever before. The fires of fury and hatred were shouldering in her small black eyes.

'Martrace!' she barked. 'Stand up!'

'Who. me?' Martrace said. 'What have I done?'

'Stand up. You are revolting little cock-suck!'

'I haven't done anything. Miss. Mcfarts. honestly. I haven't. I've never seen that slimy thing before!'

'Stand up at once. your filthy little piss-puss-squirt!'

On the other hand. she was certainly not about to own up. Unenthusiastically. Martrace got to her feet. She was in the second row. Dasey was in the row behind her. feeling a bit guilty. She hadn't intended to get her friend into trouble.

I intend to have you drummed out of this establishment in utter disgrace! I intend to have the prefects chase you down the corridor and out of the front-door with hockey-sticks! "You are vile. repulsive. repellent. malicious tiny brute!'

The Mcfarts was shouting. 'You are not fit to be in this school- you suck at life- and should kill yourself now and get it over with! You ought to be behind bars.

That's where you ought to be! I intend to have the staff escort you home under armed guard! And then I intend to make sure you are sent to a reformatory for delinquent girls for a minimum of forty years!'

The Mcfarts was in such a rage that her face had taken on a boiled color and little flecks of froth were gathering... at the corners of her mouth.

Nonetheless, she was not the only one who was losing her cool. She could see the justice of that. It was. however. a new experience for her to be accused of a crime that she had not committed. Martrace was also beginning to see red.

She didn't in the least mind being accused of having done something she had done She had had absolutely nothing to do with that beastly creature in the glass. 'I did not do it!' she screamed. By holly freaking farting golly. she thought.

That awful Mcfarts isn't going to iota this one on me! The Mcfarts roared back 'Oh yes. you did!' 'Nobody else could have thought up a trick like that! Your father was right to warn me about you!' The woman seemed to have lost the regulator of herself entirely. She was ranting like a fanatic- and freaking out. 'You are finished in this school. young lady!' she shouted. 'You are finished everywhere. I intend to in my opinion see to it that you are put away in a place where not even the crows can land their fertilizers on you! You will probably never see the light of day again!'

'I'm telling you I did not do it!' Martrace screamed. 'I've never even seen a creature like that in my life!'

'You have put a- a- a fuc- fa- frack freaking- queue in my drinking water!' (she holds her words back) the Mcfarts yelled back. 'There is no worse crime in the world against a Headmistress! Now sit down and don't say a word! Go on. sit down at once!'

'Nevertheless. I'm telling you.' Martrace shouted... refusing to sit down.

The Mcfarts was sitting behind the teacher's table starting with a mixture of horror and fascination at the newt wriggling in the glass. Martrace's eyes were also riveted on the glass. And now. quite slowly. there began to creep over Martrace a most extraordinary and peculiar feeling. The feeling was mostly in the eyes. A kind of electricity seemed to be gathering inside them. A sense of power was brewing in those eyes of hers. a feeling of great strength was settling itself deep inside her eyes. But there was also another feeling which something was else altogether.

And which she could not understand. It was like flashes of lightning. Little waves of lightning seemed to be flashing out of her eyes. Her eyeballs were beginning to get hot. as though vast energy

was building up somewhere inside them. It was an amazing sensation. She kept her eyes steadily on the glass.

...And now the power was concentrating in one small part of each eye and growing stronger and stronger and it felt as though millions of tiny little invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out of her eyes towards the glass she was staring at.

'Tip it!' Martrace whispered. 'Tip it over!'

'I am telling you to shut up!' the Mcfarts roared. 'If you don't shut up at once and sit down, I intend to remove my belt and let you have it with the end that has the buckle!'

Slowly Martrace sat down. Oh. the rottenness of it all! The unfairness! How dare they expel her for something she had not done!

Martrace felt herself getting angrier. and angrier. and angrier. so-o unbearably angry that something was bound to explode inside her very soon.

The newt was still squirming in the tall glass of water. It looked horribly uncomfortable. The glass was not big enough for it. Martrace glared at the Mcfarts.

How she hated her. She glared at the glass with the newt in it.

She longed to march up and grab the glass and tip the contents. newt and all. over the Mcfarts's head.

She trembled to think what the Mcfarts would do to her if she did that.

'Tip it!' she whispered again. 'Tip it over!'

Once more the glass wobbled. She pushed harder still. willing her eyes to shoot out more power.

And then... very slowly.

So slowly she could hardly see it happening. the glass began to lean backward. farther and farther and farther back until it was balancing on just one edge of its base.

And there it teetered for a few seconds before finally toppling over and falling with a sharp tinkle on to the desktop.

The water in it and the squirming newt splashed out all over Miss. Mcfarts's enormous bosom. The headmistress let out a yell that must have rattled every window-pane in the building and for the second time in the last five minutes she shot out of her chair like a rocket.

The newt clutched desperately at the cotton smock where it covered the great chest and there it clung with its little claw-like feet. The Mcfarts looked down and saw it and she bellowed even louder and with a swipe of her hand, she sent the creature flying across the classroom. It landed on the floor beside Dasey's desk and very quickly she ducked down and picked it up and put it into her pencil-box for another time. A newt. she decided. was a useful thing to have around?

The Mcfarts. her face more like a boiled ham than ever. was standing before the class quivering with fury. She saw the glass wobble. It actually tilted backward a fraction of an inch. then righted itself again. Her massive bosom was heaving in and out and the splash of water down the front of it made a dark wet patch that had probably soaked right through to her skin. 'Who did it?' she roared. Who is guilty of this filthy profession?

Who pushed over this glass?' 'Come on- come on! Own up your hood liker! Step forward! You won't escape this time! She kept pushing at it with all those millions of invisible little arms and hands that were reaching out from her eyes. feeling the power that was alternating straight from the two little black dots in the very centers of her eyeballs. Nobody answered. The whole room remained silent as a tomb. 'Martrace!' she roared. 'It was you! I know it was you!' Martrace. in the second row. sat very still and said nothing. A strange feeling of serenity and confidence was sweeping over her and all of a sudden, she found that she was frightened by nobody in the world.

With the power of her eyes alone she had compelled a glass of water to tip and spill its contents over the horrible Headmistress. and anybody who could do that could do whatsoever.

'Speak up say it- ball groper. you clotted carbuncle!' roared the Mcfarts.

'Admit that you did it!'

Suddenly the entire class seemed to rise up against the Headmistress. 'None of the children did. Miss. Mcfarts.' Miss. Darling answered. 'I can vouch for it that nobody has moved from his or her

desk all the time you've been here. except for Tom and he has not moved from his corner.' 'She didn't move!' they cried out.

'Martrace didn't move! Nobody moved! You must have knocked it over yourself!' Martrace looked right back into the flashing eyes of this infuriated female giant and said with total calmness. 'I have not moved away from my desk. Miss. Mcfarts. since the lesson began. I can say no more.' 'I most certainly did not knock it over myself!' roared the Mcfarts. 'How dare you suggest a thing like that! Speak up. Miss. Darling! You must have seen everything! Who knocked over my glass?'

Miss. Mcfarts glared at Miss. Darling. Miss. Darling met her gaze without flinching. 'I am telling you the truth. Headmistress.' she said. 'You must have knocked it over without knowing it. That sort of thing is easy to do.'

'I am fed up with your useless bunch of midgets!' roared the Mcfarts. 'I refuse to waste any more of my precious time here!' And with that, she marched out of the classroom. slamming the door behind her.

In the stunned silence that followed. Miss. Darling walked up to the front of the class and stood behind her table. 'Phew!' she said. 'I think we've had enough school for one day. don't you? The class is to dismiss. You may all go out to the playground and wait for your parents to come and take you home.'

The Second Miracle-

Martrace did not join the rush to get out of the classroom. After the other children had all disappeared. she remained at her desk. quiet and thoughtful.

She knew she had to tell somebody about what had happened with the glass. She couldn't possibly keep a gigantic secret like that bottled up inside her. What she needed was just one person. one wise and sympathetic grown-up who could help her to understand the meaning of this extraordinary happening.

Neither her mother nor her father would be of any use at all. If they believed her story. and it was doubtful they would. they certainly would fail to realize what an astounding event it was that had taken place in the classroom that afternoon.

On the spur of the moment. Martrace decided that the one person she would like to confide in was Miss. Darling.

Martrace and Miss. Darling were now the only two lefts in the classroom. Miss. Darling had seated herself at her table and was rifling through some papers. She looked up and said.

'Well. Martrace. aren't you going outside with the others?'

Martrace said. 'Please, may I talk to you for a moment?'

'Of course, you may. What's troubling you?'

'Something very peculiar has happened to me. Miss.

Darling.'

Miss. Darling became instantly alert. Ever since the two disastrous meetings she had had recently about Martrace. the first with the Headmistress and the second with the dreadful Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling had been thinking a great deal about this child and wondering how she could help her. And now. here was Martrace sitting in the classroom with a curiously exalted look on her face and asking if she could have a private talk. Miss. Darling had never seen her looking so wide-eyed and peculiar before.

'Yes. Martrace.' she said. 'Tell me what has happened to you that is so peculiar.'

'Miss. Mcfarts isn't going to expel me. is she?' Martrace asked. 'Because it wasn't me who put that creature in her jug of water. I promise you it wasn't.'

'I know it wasn't.' Miss. Darling said.

'Am I going to be expelled?'

'I think not.' Miss. Darling said. 'The Headmistress simply got a little over-excited. that's all.'

'Good.' Martrace said. 'But that isn't what I want to talk to you about.'

'What do you want to talk to me about. Martrace?'

'I want to talk to you about the glass of water with the creature in it.' Martrace said. 'You saw it spilling all over Miss.

Mcfarts. didn't you?'

'I did indeed.'

'Well. Miss. Darling. I didn't touch it. I never went near it.'

'I know you didn't.' Miss. Darling said. 'You heard me telling the

Headmistress that it couldn't possibly have been you.'

'Ah. but it was me. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said. 'That's exactly what I want to talk to you about.'

Miss. Darling paused and looked carefully at the child. 'I don't think I quite follow you.' she said.

'I got so angry at being accused of something I hadn't done that I made it happen.'

'You made that happen. Martrace?'

'I made the glass tip over.'

'I still don't quite understand what you mean.' Miss. Darling said gently.

'I did it with my eyes.' Martrace said. 'I was staring at it and wishing it to tip and then my eyes went all hot and funny and some sort of power came out of them and the glass just toppled over.'

Miss. Darling continued to look steadily at Martrace through her steel-rimmed spectacles and Martrace looked back at her just as steadily.

'I am still not following you.' Miss. Darling said. 'Do you mean you actually willed the glass to tip over?'

'Yes.' Martrace said. 'With my eyes.'

Miss. Darling was silent for a moment. She did not think Martrace was meaning to tell a lie. It was more likely that she was simply allowing her vivid imagination to run away with her. 'You mean you were sitting where you are now, and you told the glass to topple over and it did?'

'Something like that. Miss. Darling. yes.'

'If you did that. then it is just about the greatest miracle a person has ever performed since the time of Jesus.'

'I did it. Miss. Darling.'

It is extraordinary. thought Miss. Darling. how often small children have flights of fancy like this?

She decided to put an end to it as gently as possible. 'Could you do it again?' she asked. not unkindly.

'I don't know.' Martrace said. 'but I think I might be able to.'

Miss. Darling moved the now empty glass to the middle of the table. 'Should I put water in it?' she asked. smiling a little.

'I don't think it matters.' Martrace said.

'Very well. then. Go ahead and tip it over.'

'It may take some time.'

Take all the time you want.' Miss. Darling said. I'm in no hurry.'

Martrace. sitting in the second row about ten feet away from Miss. Darling. put her elbows on the desk and cupped her face in her hands. and this time she gave the order right at the beginning.

'Tip glass. tip!' she ordered. but her lips didn't move, and she made no sound. She simply shouted the words inside her head. And now she concentrated the whole of her mind and her brain and her will up into her eyes and once again but much more quickly than before she felt the electricity gathering and the power was beginning to surge and the hotness was coming into the eyeballs. and then the millions of tiny invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out towards the glass. and without making any sound at all she kept on shouting inside her head for the glass to go over.

She saw it wobble. then it tilted. then it toppled right over and fell with a tinkle on to the table-top not twelve inches from Miss. Darling's folded arms.

Miss. Darling's mouth dropped open and her eyes stretched so wide you could see the whites all around. She didn't say a word. She couldn't. The shock of seeing the miracle performed had struck her dumb.

She gaped at the glass. leaning well away from it now as though it might be a dangerous thing. Then slowly she lifted the head and looked at Martrace.

She saw the child white in the face. as white as paper. trembling all over. the eyes glazed. staring straight ahead and seeing nothing. The whole face was transfigured. the eyes round and bright and she was sitting there speechless. quite beautiful in a blaze of silence.

Miss. Darling waited. trembling a little herself and watching the child as she slowly stirred herself back into consciousness.

And then suddenly. click went her face into a look of almost seraphic calm. 'I'm all right.' she said and smiled. 'I'm quite all right. Miss. Darling. so don't be alarmed.'

'You seemed so far away.' Miss. Darling whispered. awestruck.

'Oh. I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings.'

Martrace said. 'It was wonderful.'

Miss. Darling was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment. as though she were The Creation. The Beginning Of The World. The First Morning.

'It went much quicker this time.' Martrace said quietly.

'It's not possible!' Miss. Darling was gasping. 'I don't believe it! I simply don't believe it!' She closed her eyes and kept them closed for quite a while. and when she opened them again it seemed as though she had gathered herself together. 'Would you like to come back and have tea at my cottage?' she asked.

'Oh. I'd love to.' Martrace said.

'Good. Gather up your things and I'll meet you outside in a couple of minutes.'

'You won't tell anyone about this. this thing that I did. will you. Miss. Darling?'

'I wouldn't dream of it.' Miss. Darling said.

The following morning. just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage. Martrace slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick in order to hook the hat off the peg. and even then, she only just made it. The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a Duriez's feather stuck in the hat-band and Mr. Dicksnoter was very proud of it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look. especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Martrace. holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other. proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all-round the inside rim of the hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back on to the peg with the walking stick. She timed this operation very carefully. applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr. Dicksnoter didn't notice anything when he put the hat on. but when he arrived at the garage, he couldn't get it off.

Superglue is very powerful stuff. so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr. Dicksnoter didn't want to be scalped so he had to keep the hat on his head the whole day long. even when putting sawdust in gear-boxes and fiddling the mileages of cars with his electric drill.

In an effort to save face. he adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he actually meant to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it. like gangsters do in the films.

When he got home that evening, he still couldn't get the hat off.

'Don't be silly.' his wife said. 'Come here. I'll take it off for you.'

She gave the hat a sharp yank. Mr. Dicksnoter let out a yell that rattled the window-panes. 'Ow-w-w!' he screamed.

'Don't do that! Let go! You'll take half the skin off my forehead!'

Martrace nestling in her usual chair. was watching this performance over the rim of her book with some interest.

'What's the matter. daddy?' she said. 'Has your head suddenly swollen or something?'

The father glared at his daughter with deep suspicion. but said nothing. How could he? Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. 'It must be Superglue. It couldn't be anything else. That'll teach you to go playing around with nasty stuff like that. I expect you were trying to stick another feather in your hat.'

'I haven't touched the flaming stuff!' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. He turned and looked again at Martrace who looked back at him with large innocent brown eyes.

Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. 'You should read the label on the tube before you start messing with dangerous products.

Always follow the instructions on the label.'

'What in heaven's name are you talking about. your stupid witch?' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. clutching the brim of his hat to stop anyone trying to pull it off again. 'D 'you think I'm so stupid I'd glue this thing to my head on purpose?'

Martrace said. 'There's a boy down the road who got some Superglue on his finger without knowing it and then he put his finger to his nose.'

Mr. Dicksnoter jumped. 'What happened to him?' he spluttered.

'The finger got stuck inside his nose.' Martrace said. 'and he had to go around like that for a week. People kept saying to him. 'Stop picking your nose.' and he couldn't do anything about it. He looked an awful fool.'

'Serve him right.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. 'He shouldn't have put his finger up there in the first place. It's a nasty habit. If all children had

Superglue put on their fingers they'd soon stop doing it.'

Martrace said. 'Grown-ups do it too. mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen.'

'That's quite enough from you.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. turning pink.

Mr. Dicksnoter had to keep his hat on all through supper in front of the television. He looked ridiculous and he stayed very silent.

When he went up to the bed, he tried again to get the thing off. and so, did his wife. but it wouldn't budge. 'How am I going to have my shower?' he demanded.

'You'll just have to do without it. won't you.' his wife told him. And later on. as she watched her skinny little husband skulking around the bedroom in his purple-striped pajamas with a pork-pie hat on his head. she thought how stupid he looked. Hardly the kind of man a wife dream's about. she told herself.

Mr. Dicksnoter discovered that the worst thing about having a permanent hat on his head was having to sleep in it.

It was impossible to lie comfortably on the pillow. 'Now do stop fussing around.' his wife said to him after he had been tossing and turning for about an hour. 'I expect it will be loose by the morning and then it'll slip off easily.'

But it wasn't loose by the morning and it wouldn't slip off. So, Ms. Dicksnoter took a pair of scissors and cut the thing off his head. bit by bit. first the top and then the brim. Where the inner band had stuck to the hair all around the sides and back.

she had to chop the hair off right to the skin so that he finished up with a bald white ring round his head. like some sort of a monk.

And in the front. where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin. there remained a whole lot of small patches of brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

At breakfast, Martrace said to him. 'You must try to get those bits off your forehead. daddy. It looks as though you've got little brown insects crawling about all over you. People will think you've got lice.'

'Be quiet!' the father snapped. 'Just keep your nasty mouth shut. will you!'

All in all, it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.

Martrace's parents owned quite a nice house with three bedrooms upstairs. while on the ground floor, there was a dining-room and a living-room and a kitchen. Her father was a dealer in second-hand cars and it seemed he did pretty well at it.

'Sawdust.' he would say proudly. 'is one of the great secrets of my success. And it costs me nothing. I get it free from the sawmill.'

'What do you use it for?' Martrace asked him.

'Ha!' the father said. 'Wouldn't you like to know.'

'I don't see how sawdust can help you to sell second-hand cars. daddy.'

'That's because you're an ignorant little twit.' the father said. His speech was never very delicate but Martrace was used to it. She also knew that he liked to boast and she would egg him on shamelessly.

'You must be very clever to find a use for something that costs nothing.' she said. 'I wish I could do it.'

'You couldn't.' the father said. 'You're too stupid. But I don't mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he'll be joining me in the business one day.' Ignoring Martrace. he turned to his son and said. 'I'm always glad to buy a car when some fool has been crashing the gears so badly, they're all worn out and rattle like mad. I get it cheap. Then all I do is mix a lot of sawdust with the oil in the gearbox and it runs as sweet as a nut.'

'How long will it run like that before it starts rattling again?' Martrace asked him.

'Long enough for the buyer to get a good distance away.' the father said. grinning. 'About a hundred miles.' 'But that's dishonest. daddy.' Martrace said. 'It's cheating.'

'No one ever got rich being honest.' the father said.

9

'Customers are there to be diddled.'

Mr. Dicksnoter was a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty mustache.

He liked to wear jackets with large brightly-colored checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green. 'Now take mileage for instance.' he went on. 'Anyone who's buying a secondhand car. the first thing he wants to know is how many miles it's done. Right?'

'Right.' the son said.

'So, I buy an old dump that's got about a hundred and fifty thousand miles on the clock. I get it cheap. But no one's going to buy it with mileage like that. are they?

And these days you can't just take the speedometer out and fiddle the numbers back as you used to ten years ago. They've fixed it so it's impossible to tamper with it unless you're a ruddy watchmaker or something. So, what do I do? I use my brains. Laddie - that's what I do.'

'How?' young Peter asked. fascinated. He seemed to have inherited his father's love of crookery.

'I sit down and say to myself. how can I convert a mileage reading of one hundred and fifty thousand into only ten thousand without taking the speedometer to pieces? Well. if I were to run the car backward for long enough then obviously that would do it. The numbers would click backward. wouldn't they? But who's going to drive a flaming car in reverse for thousands and thousands of miles? You couldn't do it!'

'Of course, you couldn't.' young Peter said.

'So-o I scratch my head.' the father said. 'I use my brains. When you've been given a fine brain as I have. you've got to use it. And all of a sudden. the answer hits me. I tell you. I felt exactly like that other brilliant fellow must have felt when he discovered penicillin. 'Eureka!' I cried. 'I've got it!' '

'What did you do. dad?' the son asked him.

'The speedometer.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'is run off a cable that is coupled up to one of the front wheels. So first I disconnect the cable where it joins the front wheel. Next. I get one of those high-speed electric drills and me couple that up to the end of the cable in such a way that when the drill turns. it turns the cable backward. Did you get me so far? You following me?'

'Yes. daddy.' young Peter said.

'These drills run at a tremendous speed.' the father said. 'so, when I switch on the drill the mileage numbers on the speedo spin backward at a fantastic rate. I can knock fifty thousand miles off the clock in a few minutes with my highspeed electric drill. And by the time I've finished. the car's only

done ten thousand and it's ready for sale. 'She's almost new.' I say to the customer. 'She's hardly done ten thou. Belonged to an old lady who only used it once a week for shopping.' '

'Can you really turn the mileage back with an electric drill?' young Peter asked.

'I'm telling you trade secrets.' the father said. 'So, don't you go talking about this to anyone else. You don't want me to put in a jug. do you?'

'I won't tell a soul.' the boy said. 'Do you do this to many cars. dad?'

'Every single car that comes through my hands gets the treatment.' the father said. 'They all have their mileage cut to under ten thou before they're offered for sale. And to think I invented that all by myself.' he added proudly. 'It's made me a mint.'

Martrace. who had been listening closely. said? 'But daddy. that's even more dishonest than the sawdust. It's disgusting.

You're cheating people who trust you.'

'If you don't like it then don't eat the food in this house.' the father said. 'It's bought with the profits.'

'It's dirty money.' Martrace said. 'I hate it.'

Two red spots appear on the father's cheeks. 'Who the heck do you think you are.' he shouted. 'The Archbishop of Canterbury or something. preaching to me about honesty? You're just an ignorant little squirt who hasn't the foggiest idea what you're talking about!'

'Quite right. Harry.' the mother said. And to Martrace she said. 'You've got a nerve talking to your father like that. Now keep your nasty mouth shut so we can all watch this program in peace.'

They were in the living-room eating their suppers on their knees in front of the telly. The suppers were MOVIE dinners in floppy aluminum containers with separate compartments for the stewed meat. The boiled potatoes and the peas. Ms. Dicksnoter sat munching her meal with her eyes glued to the Am-Jenniean soap opera on the screen. She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy makeup and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out.

'Mummy.' Martrace said. 'would you mind if I ate my supper in the dining room so I could read my book?'

The father glanced up sharply. 'I would mind!' he snapped. 'Supper is a family gathering and no one leaves the table till it's over!'

'But we're not at the table.' Martrace said. 'We never are.

We're always eating off our knees and watching the telly.

'What's wrong with watching the telly. may I ask?' the father said. His voice had suddenly become soft and dangerous.

Martrace didn't trust herself to answer him. so, she kept quiet. She could feel the anger boiling up inside her.

She knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this. but she was finding it very hard not to do so.

All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they had never seen. If only they would read a little Dickens or Kipling, they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television.

Another thing. She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn't.

The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling. and as she lay in bed that night, she made a decision. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her.

she would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy. You must remember that she was still hardly five years old and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up. Even so. she was determined to have a go. Her father. after what had happened in front of the telly that evening. was first on her list...

Later that day. the news began to spread that the Headmistress had recovered from her fainting-fit and had then marched out of the school building tight-lipped and white in the face.

The next morning, she did not turn up at school. At lunchtime. Mr. Trilby. the Deputy Head. telephoned her house to inquire if she was feeling unwell. There was no answer to the phone.

When school was over. Mr. Trilby decided to investigate further. So, he walked to the house where Miss. Mcfarts lived on the edge of the village. the lovely small red-brick Georgian building is known as The Red House. tucked away in the woods behind the hills.

He rang the bell. No answer.

He knocked loudly. No answer.

He called out. 'Is anybody at home?' No answer.

He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He went in.

The house was silent and there was no one in it. and yet all the furniture was still in place. Mr. Trilby went upstairs to the main bedroom. Here also everything seemed to be normal until he started opening drawers and looking into cupboards.

There were no clothes or underclothes or shoes anywhere.

They had all gone.

She's done a bunk. Mr. Trilby said to himself and he went away to inform the School Governors that the Headmistress had apparently vanished.

On the second morning. Miss. Darling received by registered post a letter from a firm of local solicitors informing her that the last will and testament of her late father. Dr. Darling. had suddenly and mysteriously turned up. This document revealed that ever since her father's death. Miss. Darling had in fact been the rightful owner of a property on the edge of the village known as The Red House. which until recently had been occupied by a Miss. Agatha Mcfarts.

They will also show that her father's lifetime savings. which fortunately we're still safely in the bank. had also been left to her. The solicitor's letter added that if Miss. Darling would kindly call into

the office as soon as possible. then the property and the money could be transferred into her name very rapidly.

Miss. Darling did just that. and within a couple of weeks, she had moved into the Red House. the very place in which she had been brought up and where luckily all the family furniture and pictures were still around. From then on. Martrace was a welcome visitor to The Red House every single evening after school. and a very close friendship began to develop between the teacher and the small child.

Back at school. great changes were also taking place. As soon as it became clear that Miss. Mcfarts had completely disappeared from the scene. the excellent Mr. Trilby was appointed Head Teacher in her place. And very soon after that. Martrace was moved up into the top from where Miss. Plimsoll quickly discovered that this amazing child was every bit as bright as Miss. Darling had said.

One evening a few weeks later. Martrace was having tea with

Miss. Darling in the kitchen of The Red House after school as they always did. when Martrace said suddenly. 'Something strange has happened to me. Miss. Darling.'

'Tell me about it.' Miss. Darling said.

'This morning.' Martrace said. 'just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I couldn't do it. Nothing moved. I didn't even feel the hotness building up behind my eyeballs. The power had gone. I think I've lost it completely.'

Miss. Darling carefully buttered a slice of brown bread and put a little strawberry jam on it. 'I've been expecting something like that to happen.' she said.

'You have? Why?' Martrace asked.

'Well.' Miss. Darling said. 'it's only a guess. but here's what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do. nothing to make you struggle. Your fairly enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go. and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy are being used up in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep really busy. which is great. That's only a theory. mind you. and it may be a silly one. but I don't think it's far off the mark.'

'I'm glad it's happened.' Martrace said. 'I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker.'

'You've done enough.' Miss. Darling said. 'I can still hardly believe you made all this happen for me.'

Martrace. who was perched on a tall stool at the kitchen table? ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss. Darling. She felt completely comfortable in her presence. and the two of them talked to each other more or less as equals.

'Did you know.' Martrace said suddenly. 'that the heart of a mouse beats at the rate of six hundred and fifty times a second?'

'I did not.' Miss. Darling said smiling. 'How absolutely fascinating. Where did you read that?'

'In a book from the library.' Martrace said. 'And that means it goes so fast you can't even hear the separate beats. It must sound just like a buzz.'

'It must.' Miss. Darling said.

'And how fast do you think a hedgehog's heart beats?' Martrace asked.

'Tell me.' Miss. Darling said. smiling again.

'It's not as fast as a mouse.' Martrace said. 'It's three hundred times a minute. But even so. you wouldn't have thought it went as fast as that in a creature that moves so slowly. would you. Miss. Darling?'

'I certainly wouldn't.' Miss. Darling said. 'Tell me one more.'

'A horse.' Martrace said. 'That's slow. It's only forty times a minute.'

This child. Miss. Darling told herself. seems to be interested in everything. When one is with her it is impossible to be bored. I love it.

The two of them stayed sitting and talking in the kitchen for an hour or so longer. and then. at about six o'clock. Martrace said goodnight and set out to walk home to her parent's house. which was

about an eight-minute journey away. When she arrived at her gate. she saw a large black Mercedes motor-car parked outside. She didn't take too much notice of that. There were often strange cars parked outside her father's place. But when she entered the house. she was confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Her mother and father were both in the hall frantically stuffing clothing and various objects into suitcases.

'What on the earth's going on?' she cried. 'What's happening. daddy?'

'We're off.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. not looking up. 'We're leaving for the airport in half an hour, so you'd better get packed. Your brother's upstairs all ready to go. Get a move on. girl! Get going!'

'Off?' Martrace cried out. 'Where to?'

'Spain.' the father said. 'It's a better climate than this lousy country.'

'Spain!' Martrace cried. 'I don't want to go to Spain! I love it here and I love my school!'

'Just do as you're told and stop arguing.' the father snapped. 'I've got enough troubles without messing about with you!'

'But daddy.' Martrace began.

'Shut up!' the father shouted. 'We're leaving in thirty minutes! I'm not Miss.ing that plane!'

'But how long for. daddy?' Martrace cried. 'When are we coming back?'

'We aren't.' the father said. 'Now beat it! I'm busy!'

Martrace turned away from him and walked out through the open front door. As soon as she was on the road she began to run. She headed straight back towards Miss. Darling's house and she reached it in less than four minutes. She flew up the drive and suddenly she saw Miss. Darling in the front garden. standing in the middle of a bed of roses doing something with a pair of clippers. Miss. Darling had heard the sound of Martrace's feet racing over the gravel and now she straightened up and turned and stepped out of the rose-bed as the child came running up.

'My. my!' she said. 'What in the world is the matter?'

Martrace stood before her. panting. out of breath. her small face flushed crimson all over.

'They're leaving!' she cried. 'They've all gone mad and they're filling their suitcases and they're leaving for Spain in about thirty minutes!'

'Who is?' Miss. Darling asked quietly.

'Mummy and daddy and my brother Mike and they say I've got to go with them!'

'You mean for a holiday?' Miss. Darling asked.

'Forever!' Martrace cried. 'Daddy said we were never coming back!'

There was a brief silence. then Miss. Darling said. 'Actually

I'm not very surprised.'

'You mean you knew they were going?' Martrace cried.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'No. darling.' Miss. Darling said. 'I did not know they were going.

But the news still doesn't surprise me.'

'Why?' Martrace cried. 'Please tell me why.' She was still out of breath from the running and the shock of it all.

'Because of your father.' Miss. Darling said. 'is in with a bunch of crooks. Everyone in the village knows that. I guess that he is a receiver of stolen cars from all over the country. He's in it deep.' Martrace stared at her open-mouthed.

Miss. Darling went on. 'People brought stolen cars to your father's workshop where he changed the number-plates and resprayed the bodies a different color and all the rest of it. And now somebody's probably tipped him off that the police are on to him and he's doing what they all do. running off to Spain where they can't get him. He'll have been sending his money out there for years. all ready and waiting for him to arrive.'

They were standing on the lawn in front of the lovely redbrick house with its weathered old red tiles and its tall chimneys. and Miss. Darling still had the pair of garden clippers in one hand. It was a warm golden evening and a blackbird was singing somewhere nearby.

'I don't want to go with them!' Martrace shouted suddenly.

'I won't go with them.'

'I'm afraid you must.' Miss. Darling said.

'I want to live here with you.' Martrace cried out. 'Please let me live here with you!'

'I only wish you could.' Miss. Darling said. 'But I'm afraid it's not possible. You cannot leave your parents just because you want to.

They have a right to take you with them.'

'But what if they agreed?' Martrace cried eagerly. 'What if they said yes. Can I stay with you? Would you let me stay with you then?'

Miss. Darling said softly. 'Yes. that would be heaven.'

'Well. I think they might!' Martrace cried. 'I honestly think they might! They don't actually care tuppence about me!' 'Not so fast.' Miss. Darling said.

'We've got to be fast!' Martrace cried. 'They're leaving any moment! Come on!' she shouted. grasping Miss. Darling's hand. 'Please come with me and ask them! But we'll have to hurry! We'll have to run!'

The next moment the two of them were running down the drive together and then out on to the road. and Martrace was ahead. pulling Miss. Darling after her by her wrist. and it was a wild and wonderful dash they made along the country lane and through the village to the house where Martrace's parents lived. The big black Mercedes was still outside and now its boot and all its doors were open and Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter and the brother were scurrying around it like ants. piling on the suitcases. as Martrace and Miss. Darling came dashing up.

'Daddy and mummy!' Martrace burst out. gasping for breath. 'I don't want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss.

Darling and she says that I can but only if you give me permission! Please say yes! Go on. daddy. say yes!

Say yes. mummy!'

The father turned and looked at Miss. Darling. 'You're that teacher woman who once came here to see me. aren't you?' he said. Then he went back to stowing the suitcases into the car.

His wife said to him. 'This one will have to go on the back seat.

There's no more room in the boot.'

'I would love to have Martrace.' Miss. Darling said. 'I would look after her with loving care. Mr. Dicksnoter. and I would pay for everything. She wouldn't cost you a penny. But it was not my idea. It was Martrace's. And I will not agree to take her without your full and willing consent.'

'Come on. Harry.' the mother said. pushing a suitcase into the back seat. 'Why don't we let her go if that's what she wants. It'll be one less to look after.'

'I'm in a hurry.' the father said. 'I've got a plane to catch. If she wants to stay. let her stay. It's fine with me.'

Martrace leaped into Miss. Darling's arms and hugged her. and Miss. Darling hugged her back. and then the mother and father and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tires screaming. The brother gave a wave through the rear window. but the other two didn't even look back. Miss. Darling was still hugging the tiny girl in her arms and neither of them said a word as they stood there watching the big black car tearing around the corner at the end of the road and disappearing forever into the distance.

The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a Duriez's feather stuck in the hat-band and Mr. Dicksnoter was very proud of it. The following morning. just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage. Martrace slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick to hook the hat off the peg. and even then, she only just made it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look.

especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Martrace. holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other. proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all around the inside rim of the hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back on to the peg with the walking-stick. She timed this operation very carefully. applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr. Dicksnoter didn't notice anything when he put the hat

on. but when he arrived at the garage, he couldn't get it off. Superglue is very powerful stuff. so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr. Dicksnoter didn't want to be scalped so he had to keep the hat on his head the whole day long. even when putting sawdust in gear-boxes and fiddling the mileages of cars with his electric drill. To save face. he adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he meant to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it. like gangsters do in the films.

When he got home that evening, he still couldn't get the hat off.

'Don't be silly.' his wife said. 'Come here. I'll take it off for you.'

She gave the hat a sharp yank. Mr. Dicksnoter let out a yell that rattled the window-panes. 'Ow-w-w!' he screamed. 'Don't do that!

Let go! You'll take half the skin off my forehead!'

Martrace. nestling in her usual chair. was watching this performance over the rim of her book with some interest.

'What's the matter. daddy?' she said. 'Has your head suddenly swollen or something?'

The father glared at his daughter with deep suspicion. but said nothing. How could he? Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. 'It must be Superglue. It couldn't be anything else. That'll teach you to go playing around with nasty stuff like that. I expect you were trying to stick another feather in your hat.'

'I haven't touched the flaming stuff!' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. He turned and looked again at Martrace who looked back at him with large innocent brown eyes.

Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. 'You should read the label on the tube before you start messing with dangerous products.

Always follow the instructions on the label.'

'What in heaven's name are you talking about. your stupid witch?' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. clutching the brim of his hat to stop anyone trying to pull it off again. 'D'you think I'm so stupid I'd glue this thing to my head on purpose?'

Martrace said. ‘There's a boy down the road who got some Superglue on his finger without knowing it and then he put his finger to his nose.’

Mr. Dicksnoter jumped. ‘What happened to him?’ he spluttered.

‘The finger got stuck inside his nose.’ Martrace said. ‘and he had to go around like that for a week. People kept saying to him. 'Stop picking your nose.' and he couldn't do anything about it. He looked an awful fool.’

‘Serve him right.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘He shouldn't have put his finger up there in the first place. It's a nasty habit. If all children had Superglue put on their fingers they'd soon stop doing it.’

Martrace said. ‘Grown-ups do it too. mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen.’

‘That's quite enough from you.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. turning pink.

Mr. Dicksnoter had to keep his hat on all through supper in front of the television. He looked ridiculous and he stayed very silent.

When he went up to the bed, he tried again to get the thing off. and so, did his wife. but it wouldn't budge. ‘How am I going to have my shower?’ he demanded.

‘You'll just have to do without it. won't you.’ his wife told him. And later on. as she watched her skinny little husband skulking around the bedroom in his purple-striped pajamas with a pork-pie hat on his head. she thought how stupid he looked. Hardly the kind of man a wife dreams about. she told herself.

Mr. Dicksnoter discovered that the worst thing about having a permanent hat on his head was having to sleep in it.

It was impossible to lie comfortably on the pillow. ‘Now do stop fussing around.’ his wife said to him after he had been tossing and turning for about an hour. ‘I expect it will be loose by the morning and then it'll slip off easily.’

But it wasn't loose by the morning and it wouldn't slip off.

So, Ms. Dicksnoter took a pair of scissors and cut the thing off his head. bit by bit. first the top and then the brim. Where the inner band had stuck to the hair all around the sides and back. she

had to chop the hair off right to the skin so that he finished up with a bald white ring round his head. like some sort of a monk. And in the front. where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin. there remained a whole lot of small patches of brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

12

At breakfast, Martrace said to him. 'You must try to get those bits off your forehead. daddy. It looks as though you've got little brown insects crawling about all over you. People will think you've got lice.'

'Be quiet!' the father snapped. 'Just keep your nasty mouth shut. will you!'

All in all, it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.

The hunting- There was comparative calm in the Dicksnoter household for about a week after the Superglue episode. The experience had clearly chastened Mr. Dicksnoter and he seemed temporary

to have lost his taste for boasting and bullying.

Then suddenly he struck again. Perhaps he had had a bad day at the garage and had not sold enough crummy secondhand cars. There are many things that make a man irritable when he arrives home from work in the evening and a sensible wife will usually notice the storm-signals and will leave him alone until he simmers down.

When Mr. Dicksnoter arrived back from the garage that evening his face was as dark as a thundercloud and somebody was clearly for the high-jump pretty soon. His wife recognized the signs immediately and made herself scarce. He then strode into the living room. Martrace happened to be curled up in an arm-chair in the corner. absorbed in a book. Mr. Dicksnoter switched on the television. The screen lit up. The programmed blared. Mr. Dicksnoter glared at Martrace. She hadn't moved. She had somehow trained herself by now to block her ears to the ghastly sound of the dreaded box. She kept right on reading. and for some reason, this exasperated the father. 'What is this trash?' he said. snatching the book from her hands.

Perhaps his anger was intensified because he saw her getting pleasure from something that was beyond his reach.

'Don't you ever stop reading?' He snapped at her.

'Oh. hello daddy.' she said pleasantly. 'Did you have a good day?'

'It isn't trash. daddy. it's lovely. It's called The Red Pony. It's by John Steinbeck. an AmJenniean writer. Why don't you try it? You'll love it.'

'Filth.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'If it's by an Am-Jenniean it's certain to be filth. That's all they write about.'

'No daddy. it's beautiful. honestly, it is. It's about.'

'I don't want to know what it's about.' Mr. Dicksnoter barked. 'I'm fed up with your reading anyway. Go and find yourself something useful to do.' With alarming abruptness. he now began ripping the pages out of the book in handfuls and throwing them in the waste-paper basket.

Martrace froze in horror and complete fear. The father kept going. There seemed little doubt that the man felt some kind of jealousy. How dare she. he seemed to be saying with each rip of a page. how dare she enjoy reading books when he couldn't? How dare she?

'Then you'll have to buy another one. won't you?' the father said. still tearing out pages. 'You'll have to save your pocket-money until there's enough in the kitty to buy a new one for your precious Ms. Smaith. won't you?' 'That's a library book!' Martrace cried. 'It doesn't belong to me! I have to return it to Ms. Smaith!'

With that, he dropped the now empty covers of the book into the basket and marched out of the room. leaving the telly blaring.

Most children in Martrace's place would have burst into floods of tears. She didn't do this. She sat there very still and white and thoughtful. She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking ever got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked is. as Jace once said. to counter-attack. The strategy that was now beginning to hatch in her mind depended. however. upon whether or not Edward's parrot was really as good a talker as Edward made out.

Edward was a friend of Martrace's. Martrace's wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising. hitherto another suitable chastisement for the deadly parent.

He was a small boy of six who lived just around the corner from her. and for days he had been going on about this great talking parrot his father had given him.

So, the following afternoon. as soon as Ms. Dicksnoter had departed in her car for another session of bingo. Martrace set out for Edward's house to investigate. She knocked on his door and asked if he would be kind enough to show her the famous bird. Edward was delighted and led her up to his bedroom where a truly magnificent blue and yellow parrot sat in a tall cage. 'There it is.' Edward said. 'Its name is Chopper.'

'Make it talk.' Martrace said.

'You can't make it talk.' Edward said. 'You have to be patient.

It'll talk when it feels like it.'

They hung around. waiting. Suddenly the parrot said. 'Hullo. hullo. hullo- you- hooo.' It was exactly like a human voice.

Martrace said. 'That's amazing! What else can it say?'

'Rattle my bones!' the parrot said. giving a wonderful imitation of a spooky voice. 'Commotion my bones!' 'He's always saying that.' Edward told her.

'What else can he say?' Martrace asked.

'It's fabulous.' Martrace said. 'Will you lend him to me just for one night?' That was different. Edward thought about it for a few seconds. 'All right. then.' he said. 'If you promise to return him tomorrow.' 'That's about it.' Edward said. 'But it is pretty amazing don't you think?'

'Nopper- I don't.' Edward said. 'Surely not so-o.'

'I'll give you all my next week's pocket-money.' Martrace said.

Martrace staggered back to her own empty house carrying the tall cage in both hands. There was a large fireplace in the dining room and she now set about wedging the cage up the chimney and out of sight. This wasn't so easy. but she managed it in the end.

'Hullo. hullo. hullo!' the bird called down to her. 'Hullo. hullo!'

'Shut up. you nut!' Martrace said. and she went out to wash the soot off her hands. 'Harry!' cried the mother. turning white. 'There's someone in the house! I heard a voice!' The father-the mother. that evening while. the brother and Martrace were having supper as usual in the living-room in front of the television. a voice- a whisper came loud and clear from the dining room across the hall. 'Hullo. hullo. hullo- yoooo hooo.' it said.

'So, did I!' the brother said. Martrace jumped up and switched off the telly. 'I think they are.' the father said. sitting tight.

'Then go and catch them. Harry!' hissed the mother. 'Go out and collar them red-handed!'

'Sh-hh!' she said. 'Pay attention!' They all stopped eating and sat there very tense. listening.

'Hullo. hullo. hullo!' came the voice again.

'There it is!' cried the brother.

'It's burglars!' hissed the mother. 'They're in the dining room!'

The father didn't move. He seemed in no hurry to dash off and be a hero. His face had turned grey.

'Get on with it!' hissed the mother. 'They're probably after the silver!'

The husband wiped his lips nervously with his napkin.

'Why don't we all go and look together?' he said.

'Come on. then.' the brother said. 'Come on. mum.'

'They're definitely in the dining-room.' Martrace whispered.

'I'm sure they are.'

The mother grabbed a poker from the fireplace. The father took a golf-club that was standing in the corner. The brother seized a table lamp. ripping the plug out of its socket. Martrace took the knife she had been eating with. and all four of them crept towards the dining-room door. the father keeping well behind the others.

'Hullo. hullo. hullo.' came the voice again.

'Come on!' Martrace cried and she burst into the room.

brandishing her knife. 'Stick 'em up!' she yelled. 'We've caught you!' The others followed her. waving their weapons. Then they stopped. They stared around the room. There was no one there.

'There's no one here.' the father said. greatly relieved.

'I heard him. Harry!' the mother shrieked. still quaking. 'I distinctly heard his voice! So, did you!'

'It's a ghost.' Martrace said.

'Heaven help us!' cried the mother. clutching her husband round the neck.

'I'm certain I heard him!' Martrace cried. 'He's in here somewhere!' She began searching behind the sofa and behind the curtains.

Then came the voice once again. soft and spooky this time.

'Rattle my bones.' it said. 'Rattle my bones.'

They all jumped. including Martrace who was a pretty good actress. They stared around the room. There was still no one there.

'I know it's a ghost!' Martrace said. 'I've heard it here before!

This room is haunted! I thought you knew that.'

'Save us!' the mother screamed. almost throttling her husband. 'Did it behave itself?' Edward asked her.

'We had a lovely time with it.' Martrace said. Small eager faces looked up and listened. 'My parents adored it s0-0.' 'I'm getting out of here.' the father said. greyer than ever now. They all fled. slamming the door behind them. The next afternoon.

Martrace managed to get a rather sooty and grumpy parrot down from the chimney. and out of the house without being seen. She carried it through the back door and ran with it all the way to

Edward's house. In the middle of the first week of Martrace's first term. Miss. Darling said to the class. 'I have some important news for you.

so, listen carefully. 'A word of warning to you all.' Miss. Darling said. 'The Headmistress is very strict about everything. Make sure your clothes are clean. your faces are clean, and your hands are clean.

Express or that mean talk- dumb asses- only when spoken too. When did she ask you a question? stand up at once before you answer it.

Never argue with her. Never answer back. Never try to be funny. If you do. you will make her angry.

And when the Headmistress gets angry you had better watch out.' You too. Martrace. Put that book down for a moment and pay attention.' Miss. Darling went on. 'It is the Headmistress's custom...'

'To take over the class for one period each week. She does this with every class in the school. and each class has a fixed day and a fixed time. Ours is always two o'clock on Monday afternoons. proximately after lunch. So tomorrow at two o'clock Miss. Mcfarts will be taking over from me for one lesson. I intend to be here as well. of course. but only as a silent witness. Is that understood?' 'You can say that again.' Dasey murmured.

Nevertheless, the new game she had invented of punishing one or both of them each time they were beastly to her made her life more or less bearable.

Being very small and very young. the only power Martrace had over anyone in her family was brainpower. For sheer cleverness, she could run rings around them all. But the fact remained that any five-year-old girl in any family was always obliged to do as she was told. however asinine the orders might be.

Thus, she was always forced to eat her evening meals out of MOVIE-dinner-trays in front of the dreaded box. The flicker of the projector...

She always had to stay alone on weekday afternoons. and whenever she was told to shut up. she had to shut up.

Her safety-valve. the thing that prevented her from going around the bend. was the fun of devising and dishing out these splendid punishments?

...And the lovely thing was that they seemed to work. at any rate for short periods. The father, in particular, became less cocky and unbearable for several days after receiving a dose of Martrace's magic medicine.

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' they chirruped. 'I am quite sure.' Miss. Darling said. 'that she will be testing you on what you are meant to have learned this week. which is your two-timing table. So. I strongly advise you to rub it up when you get home tonight. Get your mother or father to hear you on it.' 'Spelling.' Miss. Darling said. 'What else will she test us on?' Somebody asked... 'Try to hark back to everything you have learned these last few days. And one more thing. A jug of water and glass must always be on the table here when the Headmistress comes in. She never takes a lesson without that. Now, who will be responsible for seeing that it's there?'

'I will.' Dasey said at once. 'Very well. Dasey.' Miss. Darling said. 'It will be your job to go to the kitchen and get the jug and fill it with water and put it on the table here with a clean empty glass just before the lesson starts.'

Arithmetic Martrace longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding and honorable and intelligent. The fact that they were none of these things was something she had to put up with. It was not easy to do so.

The parrot-in-the-chimney affair quite definitely cooled both parents down a lot and for over a week they were comparatively civil to their small daughter. But alas. this couldn't last. The next flare-up came one evening in the sitting-room. Mr. Dicksnoter had just returned from work. Martrace and her brother were sitting quietly on the sofa waiting for their mother to bring in the MOVIE dinners on a tray.

The television had not yet been switched on.

In came Mr. Dicksnoter in a loud check suit and a yellow tie. The appalling broad orange-and-green check of the jacket and trousers almost blinded the onlooker.

He looked like a low-grade bookmaker dressed up for his daughter's wedding. and he was clearly very pleased with himself this evening. He sat down in an armchair and rubbed his hands together and addressed his son in a loud voice. 'Well. my boy.' he said.

'Your fathers had a most successful day. He is a lot richer tonight than he was this morning. He has sold no less than five cars. each one at a tidy profit. Sawdust in the gear-boxes. the electric-drill on the speedometer cables. a splash of paint here and there and a few other clever little tricks and the idiots were all falling over themselves to buy.'

He fished a bit of paper from his pocket and studied it.

'Listen to the boy.' he said. addressing the son and ignoring Martrace. 'seeing as you'll be going into this business with me one day. you've got to know how to add up the profits you make at the end of each day. Go and get yourself a pad and a pencil and let's see how clever you are.'

The son obediently left the room and returned with the writing materials.

'Write down these figures.' the father said. reading from his bit of paper. 'Car number one was bought by me for two hundred and seventy-eight pounds and sold for one thousand four hundred and twenty-five. Got that?'

The ten-year-old boy wrote the two separate amounts down slowly and carefully.

'Car number two.' the father went on. 'cost me one hundred and eighteen pounds and sold for seven hundred and sixty. Got it?'

'Yes. dad.' the son said. 'I've got that.'

"Car number three cost one hundred and eleven pounds and sold for nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence.'

'Say that again.' the son said. 'How much did it sell for?'

'Nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence.' the father said. 'And that. by the way. is another of my nifty little tricks to diddle the customer. Never ask for a big round figure. Always go just below it. Never say one thousand pounds. Always say nine hundred and ninety-nine fifty. It sounds much less but it isn't. Clever. isn't it?'

'Very.' the son said. 'You're brilliant. dad.'

'Car number four cost eighty-six pounds - a real wreck that was - and sold for six hundred and ninety-nine pounds fifty.'

'Not too fast.' the son said. writing the numbers down.

'Right. I've got it.'

'Car number five cost six hundred and thirty-seven pounds and sold for sixteen hundred and forty-nine fifty. You got all those figures written down. son?'

'Yes. daddy.' the boy said. crouching over his pad and carefully writing.

'Very well.' the father said. 'Now work out the profit I made on each of the five cars and add up the total. Then you'll be able to tell me how much money your rather brilliant father made altogether today.'

'That's a lot of sums.' the boy said.

'Of course, it's a lot of sums.' the father answered. 'But when you're in a big business like I am. you've got to be hot stuff at arithmetic. I've practically got a computer inside my head. It took me less than ten minutes to work the whole thing out.'

'You mean you did it in your head. dad?' the son asked. goggling.

'Well. not exactly.' the father said. 'Nobody could do that. But it didn't take me long. When you're finished. tell me what you think my profit was for the day. I've got the final total written down here and I'll tell you if you're right.'

Martrace said quietly. 'Dad. you made exactly four thousand three hundred and three pounds and fifty pence altogether.'

'Don't butt in.' the father said. 'Your brother and I are busy with high finance.'

'But dad.'

'Shut up.' the father said. 'Stop guessing and trying to be clever.'

'Look at your answer. dad.' Martrace said gently. 'If you've done it right it ought to be four thousand three hundred and three pounds and fifty pence. Is that what you've got. dad?'

The father glanced down at the paper in his hand. He seemed to stiffen. He became very quiet. There was silence.

Then he said. 'Say that again.'

'Four thousand three hundred and three pounds fifty.' Martrace said.

There was another silence. The father's face was beginning to go dark red.

'I'm sure it's right.' Martrace said.

'You. you little cheat!' the father suddenly shouted. pointing at her with his finger. 'You looked at my bit of paper! You read it off from what I've got written here!'

'Daddy. I'm the other side of the room.' Martrace said.

'How could I possibly see it?'

'Don't give me that rubbish!' the father shouted. 'Of course, you looked! You must have looked! No one in the world could give the right answer just like that. especially a girl! You're a little cheat. madam. that's what you are! A cheat and a liar!'

At that point. the mother came in carrying a large tray on which were the four suppers. This time it was fish and chips which Ms. Dicksnoter had picked up in the fish and chip shop on her way home from bingo. It seemed that bingo afternoons left her so exhausted both physically and emotionally that she never had enough energy left to cook an evening meal. So if it wasn't MOVIE dinners it had to be fish and chips. 'What are you looking so red in the face about. Harry?' she said as she put the tray down on the coffee table.

'Your daughter's a cheat and a liar.' the father said. taking his plate of fish and placing it on his knees. 'Turn the telly on and let's not have any more talk.'

The Platinum-Blond Man

Martrace was a little late in starting school. Most children begin Primary School at five or even just before. but Martrace's parents.

Who wasn't very concerned one way or the other about their daughter's education? I had forgotten to make the proper arrangements in advance. She was five and a half when she entered the school for the first time.

The village school for younger children was a bleak brick building called Crunchem Hall Primary School. It had about two hundred and fifty pupils aged from five to just under twelve years old. The headteacher. the boss. the supreme commander of this establishment was a formidable middle-aged lady whose name was Miss. Mcfarts.

Naturally, Martrace was put in the bottom class. where there were eighteen other small boys and girls about the same age as her. Their teacher was called Miss. Darling. and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over, she would smash into a thousand pieces. like a porcelain figure.

Miss. Jennifer Darling was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile. but there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift for being adored by every small child under her care. She seemed to understand totally the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders.

Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss. Darling's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class.

Miss. Mcfarts. the Headmistress. Was something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror. a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike. There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance. and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. When she marched - Miss. Mcfarts never walked. she always marched like a storm-trooper with long strides and arms swinging - when she marched along a corridor you could actually hear her snorting as she went. and if a group of children happened to be in her path.

She plowed right on through them like a tank. with small people bouncing off her to left and right. Thank goodness we don't meet many people like her in this world. although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do. you should behave as

you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros out in the bush - climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away. This woman. in all her eccentricities and her appearance. is almost impossible to describe. but I intend to make some attempt to do so a little later on. Let us leave her for the moment and go back to Martrace and her first day in Miss. Darling's class.

After the usual business of going through all the names of the children. Miss. Darling handed out a brand-new exercise book to each pupil.

'You have all brought your pencils. I hope.' She said.

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' they chanted.

'Good. Now, this is the very first day of school for each one of you. It is the beginning of at least eleven long years of schooling that all of you are going to have to go through. And six of those years will be spent right here at Crunchem Hall where. as you know. your Headmistress is Miss. Mcfarts. Let me for your good tell you something about Miss. Mcfarts. She insists upon strict discipline throughout the school. and if you take my advice you will do your very best to behave yourselves in her presence. Never argue with her. Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side of Miss. Mcfarts she can liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender. It's nothing to laugh about. Dasey. Take that grin off your face. All of you will be wise to remember that Miss. Mcfarts deals very severely with anyone who gets out of line in this school.

Have you got the message?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' chirruped eighteen eager little voices.

'I myself.' Miss. Darling went on. 'I want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class. That is because I know it will make things easier for you later on. For example. by the end of this week, I intend to expect every one of you to know the two-times table by heart. And in a year, I hope you will know all the multiplication tables up to twelve. It will help you enormously if you do. Now then. do any of you happen to have learned the two-times table already?' Martrace put up her hand. She was the only one.

Miss. Darling looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row. 'Wonderful.' she said. 'Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can.' Martrace stood up and began to say the two-times table.

When she got to twice twelve is twenty-four, she didn't stop.

She went right on with twice thirteen is twenty-six. twice fourteen is twenty-eight. twice fifteen is thirty. twice sixteen is.'

'Stop!' Miss. Darling said. She had been listening slightly spellbound to this smooth recital. and now she said. 'How far can you go?'

'How far?' Martrace said. 'Well. I don't know. Miss. Darling. For quite a long way. I think.'

Miss. Darling took a few moments to let this curious statement sink in. 'You mean.' she said. 'that you could tell me what two times twenty-eight is?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.'

'What is it?'

'Fifty-six. Miss. Darling.'

'What about something much harder. like two times four hundred and eighty-seven? Could you tell me that?'

'I think so. yes.' Martrace said.

'Are you sure?'

'Why yes. Miss. Darling. I'm fairly sure.'

'What is it then. two times four hundred and eighty-seven?'

'Nine hundred and seventy-four.' Martrace said immediately. She spoke quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off.

Miss. Darling gazed at Martrace with absolute amazement. but when next she spoke, she kept her voice level. 'That is splendid.' she said. 'But of course, multiplying by two is a lot easier than some of the bigger numbers. What about the other multiplication tables? Do you know any of those?'

'I think so. Miss. Darling. I think I do.'

'Which ones. Martrace? How far have you got?'

'I- I don't quite know.' Martrace said. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'What I mean is do you, for instance, know the three-times table?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.'

'And the four-times?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.'

'Well. how many do you know? Martrace? Do you know all the way up to the twelve-times table?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' 'What are twelve sevens?'

'Eighty-four.' Martrace said.

Miss. Darling paused and leaned back in her chair behind the plain table that stood in the middle of the floor in front of the class. She was considerably shaken by this exchange but took care not to show it. She had never come across a five-year-old before. or indeed a ten-year-old. who could multiply with such a facility?

'I hope the rest of you are listening to this.' she said to the class. 'Martrace is a very lucky girl. She has wonderful parents who have already taught her to multiple lots of numbers. Was it your mother? Martrace. who taught you?'

'No. Miss. Darling. it wasn't.'

'You must have a great father then. He must be a brilliant teacher.'

'No. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said quietly. 'My father did not teach me.'

'You mean you taught yourself?'

'I don't quite know.' Martrace said truthfully. 'It's just that I don't find it very difficult to multiply one number by another.'

Miss. Darling took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked again at the small girl with bright eyes standing beside her desk so sensible and solemn. 'You say you don't find it difficult to multiply one number by another.' Miss. Darling said. 'Could you try to explain that a little bit.'

'Oh, dear.' Martrace said. 'I'm not really sure.'

Miss. Darling waited. The class was silent. all listening.

'For instance.' Miss. Darling said. 'if I asked you to multiply fourteen by nineteen. No. that's too difficult.'

'It's two hundred and sixty-six.' Martrace said softly.

Miss. Darling stared at her. Then she picked up a pencil and quickly worked out the sum on a piece of paper. 'What did you say it was?' she said. looking up.

'Two hundred and sixty-six.' Martrace said.

Miss. Darling put down her pencil and removed her spectacles and began to polish the lenses with a piece of tissue. The class remained quiet. watching her and waiting for what was coming next. Martrace was still standing up beside her desk.

'Now tell me. Martrace.' Miss. Darling said. still polishing. 'try to tell me exactly what goes on inside your head when you get a multiplication like that to do. You obviously have to work it out in some way. but you seem able to arrive at the answer almost instantly. Take the one you've just done. fourteen multiplied by nineteen.'

'I. I. I simply put the fourteen down in my head and multiply it by nineteen.' Martrace said. 'I'm afraid I don't know how else to explain it. I've always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn't I?'

'Why not indeed.' Miss. Darling said. 'The human brain is an amazing thing.'

'I think it's a lot better than a lump of metal.' Martrace said.

'That's all a calculator is.'

'How right you are.' Miss. Darling said. 'Pocket calculators are not allowed in this school anyway.' Miss. Darling was feeling quite quivery. There was no doubt in her mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain. and words like child-genius and prodigy went flitting through her head. She knew that this sort of wonders does pop up in the world from time to time. but only once

or twice in a hundred years. After all. Mozart was only five when he started composing for the piano and look what happened to him.

'It's not fair.' Dasey said. 'How can she do it and we can't?'

'Don't worry. Dasey. you'll soon catch up.' Miss. Darling said. lying through her teeth.

At this point Miss. Darling could not resist the temptation of exploring still further the mind of this astonishing child. She knew that she ought to be paying some attention to the rest of the class but she was altogether too excited to let the matter rest.

'Well.' she said. pretending to address the whole class. 'let us leave sums for the moment and see if any of you have begun to learn to spell. Hands up anyone who can spell cat.'

Three hands went up. They belonged to Dasey. a small boy called Tom and to Martrace. 'Spell cat. Tom.'

Tom spelled it.

Miss. Darling now decided to ask a question that normally she would not have dreamed of asking the class on its first day. 'I wonder.' she said. 'whether any of you three who know how to spell cat has learned how to read a whole group of words when they are strung together in a sentence?'

'I have.' Tom said.

'So have I.' Dasey said.

Miss. Darling went to the blackboard and wrote with her white chalk the sentence. I have already begun to learn how to read long sentences. She had purposely made it difficult and she knew that there were precious few five-year-olds around who would be able to manage it.

'Can you tell me what that says. Tom?' she asked.

'That's too hard.' Tom said.

'Dasey?'

'The first word is I.' Dasey said.

'Can any of you read the whole sentence?' Miss. Darling asked. waiting for the 'yes' that she felt certain was going to come from Martrace.

'Yes.' Martrace said.

'Go ahead.' Miss. Darling said.

Martrace read the sentence without any hesitation at all.

'That is very good indeed.' Miss. Darling said. making the understatement of her life. 'How much can you read.

Martrace?'

'I think I can read most things. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said.

'although I'm afraid I can't always understand the meanings.'

14

Miss. Darling got to her feet and walked smartly out of the room. but was back in thirty seconds carrying a thick book.

She opened it at random and placed it on Martrace's desk. 'This is a book of humorous poetry.' she said. 'See if you can read that one aloud.'

Smoothly. without a pause and at a nice speed. Martrace began to read:

'An epicure dining at Crewe-

Found a rather large mouse in his stew.

Cried the waiter. 'Don't shout...

And wave it about

Or the rest will be wanting one too.'

Several children saw the funny side of the rhyme and laughed. Miss. Darling said. 'Do you know what an epicure is.

Martrace?'

'It is someone who is dainty with his eating.' Martrace said.

'That is correct.' Miss. Darling said. 'And do you happen to know what that particular type of poetry is called?'

'It's called ilmenite.' Martrace said. 'That's a lovely one.

It's so funny.'

'It's a famous one.' Miss. Darling said. picking up the book and returning to her table in front of the class. 'A witty ilmenite is very hard to write.' she added. 'They look easy but they most certainly are not.'

'I know.' Martrace said. 'I've tried quite a few times but mine are never any good.'

'You have. have you?' Miss. Darling said. more startled than ever. 'Well, Martrace. I would very much like to hear one of these ilmenites you say you have written. Could you try to remember one for us?'

'Well.' Martrace said. hesitating. 'I've been trying to make up one about you. Miss. Darling. while we've been sitting here.'

'About me!' Miss. Darling cried. 'Well. we've certainly got to hear that one. haven't we?'

'I don't think I want to say it. Miss. Darling.'

'Please tell it.' Miss. Darling said. 'I promise I won't mind.'

'I think you will. Miss. Darling. because I have to use your first name to make things rhyme and that's why I don't want to say it.'

'How do you know my first name?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I heard another teacher calling you by it just before we came in.'

Martrace said. ‘She called you Jenny.’

‘I insist upon hearing this ilmenite.’ Miss. Darling said. smiling one of her rare smiles. ‘Stand up and recite it.’

Reluctantly Martrace stood up and very slowly. very nervously. she recited her ilmenite:

‘The thing we all ask about Jenny Is. 'Surely there cannot be many young girls in the p lace

With so lovely a face?'

The answer to that is. 'Not any!' ‘The whole of Miss. Darling's pale and pleasant face blushed a brilliant scarlet. Then once again she smiled. It was a much broader one this time. a smile of pure pleasure.

‘Why. thank you. Martrace.’ she said. still smiling. ‘Although it is not true. it is very good ilmenite. Oh, dear. oh, dear. I must try to remember that one.’

From the third row of desks. Dasey said. ‘It's good. I like it.’

‘It's true as well.’ a small boy called Graceie said.

‘Of course, it's true.’ Tom said.

Already the whole class had begun to warm towards Miss. Darling. although as yet she had hardly taken any notice of any of them except Martrace.

‘Who taught you to read. Martrace?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I just sort of taught me. Miss. Darling.’

‘And have you read any books all by yourself. any children's books. I mean?’

‘I've read all the ones that are in the public library in Love Street. Miss. Darling.’

‘And did you like them?’

‘I liked some of them very much indeed.’ Martrace said.

‘but I thought others were fairly dull.’

'Tell me one that you liked.'

'I liked The Lion. the Witch and the Wardrobe.' Martrace said. 'I think Mr. C. S. Lewis is a very good writer. But he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.'

'You are right there.' Miss. Darling said.

'There aren't many funny bits in Mr. Tolkien either.'

Martrace said.

'Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I do.' Martrace said. 'Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh.'

Miss. Darling was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. She said. 'And what are you going to do now that you've read all the children's books?'

'I am reading other books.' Martrace said. 'I borrow them from the library. Ms. Smaith is very kind to me. She helps me to choose them.'

Miss. Darling was leaning far forward over her work-table and gazing in wonder at the child. She had completely forgotten now about the rest of the class. 'What other books?' she murmured.

'I am very fond of Charles Dickens.' Martrace said. 'He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr. Pickwick.'

At that moment the bell in the corridor sounded for the end of class.

There was no doubt in Martrace's mind that this latest display of foulness by her father deserved severe punishment. and as she sat eating her awful fried fish and fried chips and ignoring the television. her brain went to work on various possibilities.

By the time she went up to the bed, her mind was made up.

The next morning, she got up early and went into the bathroom and locked the door. As we already know. Ms. Dicksnoter's hair was dyed a brilliant platinum blonde. very much the same glistening silvery color as a female tightrope walker's tights in a circus. The big dyeing job was done twice a year at the hairdressers. but every month or so in between. Ms. Dicksnoter used to freshen it up by giving it a

rinse in the washbasin with something called PLATINUM BLONDE HAIRDYE EXTRA STRONG. This also served to dye the nasty brown hairs that kept growing from the roots underneath. The bottle of PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA STRONG was kept in the cupboard in the bathroom. and underneath the title on the label were written the words Caution. this is peroxide. Keep away from children. Martrace had read it many times with fascination. Martrace's father had a fine crop of black hair which he parted in the middle and of which he was exceedingly proud. 'Good strong hair.' he was fond of saying. 'means there's a good strong brain underneath.'

'Like Shakespeare.' Martrace had once said to him.

'Like who?'

'Shakespeare. daddy.'

'Was he brainy?'

'Very. daddy.'

'He had masses of hair. did he?'

'He was bald. daddy.'

To which the father had snapped. 'If you can't talk sense then shut up.'

Anyway. Mr. Dicksnoter kept his hair looking bright and strong. or so he thought. by rubbing into it every morning large quantities of a lotion called OIL OF VIOLETS HAIR TONIC. A bottle of this smelly purple mixture always stood on the shelf above the sink in the bathroom alongside all the toothbrushes. and a very vigorous scalp massage with OIL OF VIOLETS took place daily after shaving was completed. This hair and scalp massage were always. accompanied by loud masculine grunts and heavy breathing and gasps of 'Ah-hh. that's better! That's the stuff! Rub it right into the roots!' which could be heard by Martrace in her bedroom across the corridor.

Now. in the early morning privacy of the bathroom. Martrace unscrewed the cap of her father's oil of violets and tipped threequarters of the contents down the drain. Then she fille d the bottle up with her mother's PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA

STRONG. She carefully left enough of her father's original hair tonic in the bottle so that when she gave it a good shake the whole thing still looked reasonably purple. She then replaced the bottle on the shelf above the sink. taking care to put her mother's bottle back in the cupboard.

So far so good.

At breakfast time Martrace sat quietly at the dining-room table eating her cornflakes. Her brother sat opposite her with his back to the door devouring hunks of bread smothered with a mixture of peanut butter and strawberry jam. The mother was just out of sight around the corner in the kitchen making Mr. Dicksnoter's breakfast which always had to be two fried eggs on fried bread with three pork sausages and three strips of bacon and some fried tomatoes.

At this point, Mr. Dicksnoter came noisily into the room. He was incapable of entering any room quietly. especially at breakfast time. He always had to make his appearance felt immediately by creating a lot of noise and clatter. One could almost hear him saying. 'It's me! Here I come. the great man himself. the master of the house. the wage-earner. the one who makes it possible for all the rest of you to live so well!

Notice me and pay your respects!'

On this occasion, he strode in and slapped his son on the back and shouted. 'Well, my boy. your father feels he's in for another great money-making day today at the garage! I've got a few little beauties I'm going to flog to the idiots this morning. Where's my breakfast?'

'It's coming. treasure.' Ms. Dicksnoter called from the kitchen.

Martrace kept her face bent low over her cornflakes. She didn't dare look up. In the first place, she wasn't at all sure what she was going to see. And secondly. if she did see what she thought she was going to see. she wouldn't trust herself to keep a straight face. The son was looking directly ahead out of the window stuffing himself with bread and peanut butter and strawberry jam.

The father was just moving round to sit at the head of the table when the mother came sweeping out from the kitchen carrying a huge plate piled high with eggs and sausages and bacon and tomatoes. She looked up. She caught sight of her husband. She stopped dead. Then she let out a scream that seemed to lift her right up into the air and she dropped the plate with a crash and a splash on to the floor. Everyone jumped. including Mr. Dicksnoter.

'What the heck's the matter with you. woman?' he shouted.

'Look at the mess you've made on the carpet!'

'Your hair!' the mother was shrieking. pointing a quivering finger at her husband. 'Look at your hair! What've you done to your hair?'

'What's wrong with my hair for heaven's sake?' he said.

'Oh, my Gawd dad. what've you done to your hair?' the son shouted.

A splendid noisy scene was building up nicely in the breakfast room.

Martrace said nothing. She simply sat there admiring the wonderful effect of her own handiwork. Mr. Dicksnoter's fine crop of black hair was now a dirty silver. the color this time of a tightrope walker's tights that had not been washed for the entire circus season.

'You've. you've. you've dyed it!' shrieked the mother. 'Why did you do it. you fool! It looks absolutely frightful! It looks horrendous! You look like a freak!'

'What the blazes are you all talking about?' the father yelled. putting both hands to his hair. 'I most certainly have not dyed it! What d'you mean I've dyed it? What's happened to it? Or is this some sort of a stupid joke?' His face was turning pale green. the color of sour apples.

'You must have dyed it. dad.' the son said. 'It's the same color as mum's only much dirtier looking.'

'Of course, he's dyed it!' the mother cried. 'It can't change color all by itself! What on earth were you trying to do? make yourself look handsome or something? You look like someone's grandmother gone wrong!'

'Get me a mirror!' the father yelled. 'Don't just stand there shrieking at me! Get me a mirror!'

The mother's handbag lay on a chair at the other end of the table. She opened the bag and got out a powder compact that had a small round mirror on the inside of the lid. She opened the compact and handed it to her husband. He grabbed it and held it before his face and in doing so spilled most of the powder all over the front of his fancy tweed jacket.

'Be careful!' shrieked the mother. 'Now look what you've done! That's my best Elizabeth Arden face powder!'

'Oh, my Gawd!' yelled the father. staring into the little mirror. 'What's happened to me! I look terrible! I look just like you went wrong! I can't go down to the garage and sell cars like this! How did it happen?' He stared around the room. first at the mother. then at the son. then at Martrace. 'How could it have happened?' he yelled.

'I imagine. daddy.' Martrace said quietly. 'that you weren't looking very hard and you simply took mummy's bottle of hair stuff off the shelf instead of your own.'

'Of course, that's what happened!' the mother cried. 'Well, really Harry. how stupid can you get? Why didn't you read the label before you started splashing the stuff all over you! Mine's te rribly strong. I'm only meant to use one tablespoon of it in a whole basin of water and you've gone and put it all over your head neat! It'll probably take all your hair off in the end! Is your scalp beginning to burn? dear?'

'You mean I'm going to lose all my hair?' the husband yelled.

'I think you will.' the mother said. 'Peroxide is a very powerful chemical. It's what they put down the lavatory to disinfect the pan only they give it another name.'

'What are you saying!' the husband cried. 'I'm not a lavatory pan! I don't want to be disinfected!'

'Even diluted as I use it.' the mother told him. 'it makes a good deal of my hair fall out. so goodness knows what's going to happen to you. I'm surprised it didn't take the whole of the top of your head off!'

'What intend to I do?' wailed the father. 'Tell me quick what to do before it starts falling out!'

Martrace said. 'I'd give it a good wash. dad. if I were you. with soap and water. But you'll have to hurry.'

'Will that change the color back?' the father asked anxiously.

'Of course, it won't. you twit.' the mother said.

'Then what do I do? I can't go around looking like this forever?'

'You'll have to have it dyed black.' the mother said. 'But wash it first or there won't be any there to die.'

'Right!' the father shouted. springing into action. 'Get me an appointment with your hairdresser this instant for a hair dying job! Tell them it's an emergency! They've got to boot someone else off their list! I'm going upstairs to wash it now!' With that, the man dashed out of the room and Ms. Dicksnoter. sighing deeply. went to the telephone to call the beauty parlor.

'He does do some pretty silly things now and again. doesn't he. mummy?' Martrace said.

The mother. dialing the number on the phone. said. 'I'm afraid men are not always quite as clever as they think they are. You will learn that when you get a bit older. my girl.'

Miss. Darling

Martrace was a little late in starting school. Most children begin Primary School at five or even just before. but Martrace's parents.

who wasn't very concerned one way or the other about their daughter's education? I had forgotten to make the proper arrangements in advance. She was five and a half when she entered the school for the first time.

The village school for younger children was a bleak brick building called Crunchem Hall Primary School. It had about two hundred and fifty pupils aged from five to just under twelve years old. The headteacher. the boss. the supreme commander of this establishment was a formidable middle-aged lady whose name was Miss. Mcfarts.

Naturally, Martrace was put in the bottom class. where there were eighteen other small boys and girls about the same age as her. Their teacher was called Miss. Darling. and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over, she would smash into a thousand pieces. like a porcelain figure.

Miss. Jennifer Darling was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile. but there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift for being adored by every small child under her care.

She seemed to understand totally the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders.

Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss. Darling's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class.

There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance. and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. Miss. Mcfarts. the Headmistress. was something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror.

a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the

pupils and teachers alike. When she marched - Miss. Mcfarts never walked. she always marched like a storm-trooper with long strides and arms swinging - when she marched along a corridor you could actually hear her snorting as she went. and if a group of children happened to be in her path. she plowed right on through them like a tank. with small people bouncing off her to left and right. This woman. in all her eccentricities and in her appearance.

It is almost in-possible to designate. but I intend to make some attempt to do so a little later on. Let us leave her for the moment and go back to Martrace and her first day in Miss. Darling's class.

After the usual business of going through all the names of the children. Miss. Darling handed out a brand-new exercise book to each scholar. Thank goodness- we don't meet many people like her in this world. although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do. you should behave as you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros out in the bush - climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away.

'You have all brought your own pencils. I hope.' she said. Now, this is the very first day of school for each one of you. It is the beginning of at least eleven long years of schooling that all of you are going to have to go through.

And six of those years will be spent right here at Crunchem Hall where. as you know. your Headmistress is Miss. Mcfarts. Let me for your own good tell you something about Miss. Mcfarts.

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' they chanted.

'Good. She insists upon strict discipline throughout the school. and if you take my advice you will do your very best to behave yourselves in her presence. Never argue with her.

Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side of Miss. Mcfarts she can liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender. It's nothing to laugh about. Dasey. Take that grin off your face. All of you will be wise to remember that Miss. Mcfarts deals very - very- severely with anyone who gets out of line in this school. Have you got the message?'

'Certainly. Miss. Darling.' chirruped eighteen eager little voices.

'I myself.' Miss. Darling went on. 'I want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class.

That is because I know it will make things easier for you later on. For example. by the end of this week, I intend to expect every one of you to know the two-times table by heart. And in a year's time, yours truly hopes' you will know- this all the reproduction tables up to twelve. It will help you enormously if you do. Now then. do any of you happen to have learned the two-times table already?' Martrace put up her hand. She was the only one.

Miss. Darling looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row. 'Wonderful.' she said. 'Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can.' Martrace stood up and began to say the two-times table.

When she got to twice twelve is twenty-four, she didn't stop.

She went right on with twice thirteen is twenty-six. twice fourteen is twenty-eight. twice fifteen is thirty. twice sixteen is.'

'How far?' Martrace said. 'Well. I don't really know. Miss.

Darling. For quite a long way. I think.' 'Stop!' Miss. Darling said. She had been listening slightly spellbound to this smooth recital. and now she said. 'How far can you go?'

Miss. Darling took a few moments to let this curious statement sink in. 'You mean.' she said. 'that you could tell me what two times twenty-eight is?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.'

'What is it?'

'Fifty-six. Miss. Darling.'

'What about something much harder. like two times four hundred and eighty-seven? Could you tell me that?'

'I think so. yes.' Martrace said.

'Are you sure?'

'Why yes. Miss. Darling. I'm fairly sure.'

'What is it then. two times four hundred and eighty-seven?'

'Nine hundred and seventy-four.' Martrace said immediately. She spoke quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off.

Miss. Darling gazed at Martrace with absolute amazement. but when next she spoke; she kept her voice level. 'That is really splendid.' she said. 'But of course, multiplying by two is a lot easier than some of the bigger numbers. What about the other multiplication tables? Do you know any of those?'

'I think so. Miss. Darling. I think I do.'

'Which ones. Martrace? How far have you got?'

'I. I don't quite know.' Martrace said. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'What I mean is do you, for instance, know the three-times table?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' 'Yes. Miss. Darling.'

'And the four-times?'

'Well. how many do you know? Martrace? Do you know all the way up to the twelve-times table?'

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' 'What are twelve sevens?'

'Eighty-four.' Martrace said.

Miss. Darling paused and leaned back in her chair behind the plain table that stood in the middle of the floor in front of the class. She was considerably shaken by this exchange but took care not to show it. She had never come across a five-year-old before. or indeed a ten-year-old. who could multiply with such a facility?

'I hope the rest of you are listening to this.' she said to the class. 'Martrace is a very lucky girl. She has wonderful parents who have already taught her to multiple lots of numbers. Was it your mother? Martrace. who taught you?'

'No. Miss. Darling. it wasn't.'

'You must have a great father then. He must be a brilliant teacher.'

'No. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said quietly. 'My father did not teach me.'

'You mean you taught yourself?'

'I don't quite know.' Martrace said truthfully. 'It's just that I don't find it very difficult to multiply one number by another.'

Miss. Darling took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked again at the small girl with bright eyes standing beside her desk so sensible and solemn. 'You say you don't find it difficult to multiply one number by another.' Miss. Darling said. 'Could you try to explain that a little bit.'

'Oh, dear.' Martrace said. 'I'm not really sure.'

Miss. Darling waited. The class was silent. all listening.

'Two hundred and sixty-six.' Martrace said.

Miss. Darling put down her pencil and removed her spectacles and began to polish the lenses with a piece of tissue. The class remained quiet. watching her and waiting for what was coming next. Martrace was still standing up beside her desk.

'For instance.' Miss. Darling said. 'if I asked you to multiply fourteen by nineteen. No. that's too difficult.'

'It's two hundred and sixty-six.' Martrace said softly.

Miss. Darling stared at her. Then she picked up a pencil and quickly worked out the sum on a piece of paper. 'What did you say it was?' she said. looking up.

'I. I. I simply put the fourteen down in my head and multiply it by nineteen.' Martrace said. 'I'm afraid I don't know how else to explain it. I've always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn't I?'

'Now tell me. Martrace.' Miss. Darling said. still polishing. 'try to tell me exactly what goes on inside your head when you get a multiplication like that to do. You obviously have to work it out in some way. but you seem able to arrive at the answer almost instantly. Take the one you've just done. fourteen multiplied by nineteen.'

'Why not indeed.' Miss. Darling said. 'The human brain is an amazing thing.'

'I think it's a lot better than a lump of metal.' Martrace said.

'That's all a calculator is.'

'How right you are yen's." Miss. Darling said. 'Pocket calculators are not allowed in this school anyway.' Miss. At this point Miss. Darling could not resist the temptation of exploring still further the mind of this astonishing child. She knew that she ought to be paying some attention to the rest of the class but she was altogether too excited to let the matter rest.

Darling was feeling quite quivery. There was no doubt in her mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain. and words like child-genius and prodigy went flitting through her head. She knew that this sort of wonders does pop up in the world from time to time. but only once or twice in a hundred years.

After all...

Mozart was only five when he started composing for the piano and look what happened to him.

'It's not fair.' Dasey said. 'How can she do it and we can't?'

'Don't worry. Dasey. you'll soon catch up.' Miss. Darling said. lying through her teeth.

'Well.' she said. pretending to address the whole class. 'let us leave sums for the moment and see if any of you have begun to learn to spell. Hands up anyone who can spell cat.'

Three hands went up. They belonged to Dasey. a small boy called Tom and to Martrace. 'Spell cat. Tom.'

Tom spelled it.

Miss. Darling now decided to ask a question that normally she would not have dreamed of asking the class on its first day. 'I wonder.' she said. 'whether any of you three who know how to spell cat has learned how to read a whole group of words when they are strung together in a sentence?'

'I have.' Tom said.

'So have I.' Dasey said.

Miss. Darling went to the blackboard and wrote with her white chalk the sentence. I have already begun to learn how to read long sentences. She had purposely made it difficult and she knew that there were precious few five-year-olds around who would be able to manage it.

'Can you tell me what that says. Tom?' she asked.

'That's too hard.' Tom said.

'Dasey?'

'The first word is- I.' Dasey said.

'Can any of you read the whole sentence?' Miss. Darling asked. waiting for the 'yes' that she felt certain was going to come from Martrace.

'Certainly.' Martrace said.

'Go ahead.' Miss. Darling said.

Martrace read the sentence without any hesitation at all.

'That really is very good indeed.' Miss. Darling said. making the understatement of her life. 'How much can you read.

Martrace?'

'I think I can read most things. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said.

'although I'm afraid I can't always understand the meanings.'

Miss. Darling got to her feet and walked smartly out of the room. but was back in thirty seconds carrying a thick book.

She opened it at random and placed it on Martrace's desk. 'This is a book of humorous poetry.' she said. 'See if you can read that one aloud.'

Smoothly. without a pause and at a nice speed. Martrace began to read:

'An epicure dining at Crewe-

Found a rather large mouse in his stew.

Cried the waiter. 'Don't shout

And wave it about or the rest will be wanting one too.'

Then Martrace- rips off-It happened in Physics. reading a Library art book under the desk. I turned a page and feel for an older man. and anonymous at that.

hardly ideal - he was four hundred and forty-five.

I was fourteen.

'Eureka!' streaked each thought (I prayed no-one would hear) and Paradise all term was page 179

(I prayed no-one would guess). Of course-

my fingers. sticky with toffee and bliss. failed to entice him from his century; his cool hoary stare fastened me firmly in mine. I got six overdue.

suspension of borrowing rights- and a D in Physics.

But had by heart what Archimedes proves.

Ten years later I married:

A European with cool grey eyes.

...A mustache.

...Pigskin gloves.

Several children saw the funny side of the rhyme and laughed. Miss. Darling said. 'Do you know what an epicure is. Martrace?'

'It is someone who is dainty with his eating.' Martrace said.

'That is correct.' Miss. Darling said. 'And do you happen to know what that particular type of poetry is called?'

'It's called ilmenite.' Martrace said. 'That's a lovely one.

...It's so funny.'

'It's a famous one.' Miss. Darling said. picking up the book and returning to her table in front of the class. 'A witty ilmenite is very hard to write.' she added. 'They look easy but they most certainly are not.'

'I know.' Martrace said. 'I've tried quite a few times but mine are never any good.'

'You have. have you?' Miss. Darling said. more startled than ever. 'Well, Martrace. I would very much like to hear one of these ilmenites you say you have written. Could you try to remember one for us?'

'Well.' Martrace said. hesitating. 'I've actually been trying to make up one about you. Miss. Darling. while we've been sitting here.'

'About me!' Miss. Darling cried. 'Well. we've certainly got to hear that one. haven't we?'

'I don't think I want to say it. Miss. Darling.'

'Please tell it.' Miss. Darling said. 'I promise I won't mind.'

'I think you will. Miss. Darling. because I have to use your first name to make things rhyme and that's why I don't want to say it.'

'How do you know my first name?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I heard another teacher calling you by it just before we came in.'

Martrace said. 'She called you Jenny.'

'I insist upon hearing this ilmenite.' Miss. Darling said. smiling one of her rare smiles. 'Stand up and recite it.'

Reluctantly Martrace stood up and very slowly. very nervously. she recited her ilmenite:

'The thing we all ask about Jenny

Is. 'Surely there cannot be many

Young girls in the place

With so lovely a face?'

The answer to that is. 'Not any!' 'Then she ripped off - faster-

I want to be a passenger in your car again and shut my eyes while you sit at the wheel. awake and assured in your own private world. seeing all the lines on the road ahead, down a long stretch of empty highway without any other face's insight.

I want to be a passenger in your car again and put my life back in your hands.

The whole of Miss. Darling's pale and pleasant face blushed a brilliant scarlet. Then once again she smiled. It was a much broader one this time. a smile of pure pleasure.

'Why. thank you. Martrace.' she said. still smiling. 'Although it is not true. it is really very good ilmenite. Oh, dear. oh, dear. I must try to remember that one.'

From the third row of desks. Dasey said. 'It's good. I like it.'

'It's true as well.' a small boy called Graceie said.

'Of course, it's true.' Tom said.

Already the whole class had begun to warm towards Miss. Darling. although as yet she had hardly taken any notice of any of them except Martrace.

'Who taught you to read. Martrace?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I just sort of taught me. Miss. Darling.'

'And have you read any books all by yourself. any children's books. I mean?'

'I've read all the ones that are in the public library in Love Street. Miss. Darling.'

'And did you like them?'

'I liked some of them very much indeed.' Martrace said.

'but I thought others were fairly dull.'

'Tell me one that you liked.'

'I liked The Lion. the Witch and the Wardrobe.' Martrace said. 'I think Mr. C. S. Lewis is a very good writer. But he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.'

'You are right there.' Miss. Darling said.

'There aren't many funny bits in Mr. Tolkien either.'

Martrace said.

'Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I do.' Martrace said. 'Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh.'

Miss. Darling was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. She said. 'And what are you going to do now that you've read all the children's books?'

'I am reading other books.' Martrace said. 'I borrow them from the library. Ms. Smaith is very kind to me. She helps me to choose them.'

Miss. Darling was leaning far forward over her work-table and gazing in wonder at the child. She had completely forgotten now about the rest of the class. 'What other books?' she murmured.

'I am very fond of Charles Dickens.' Martrace said. 'He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr. Pickwick.'

At that moment the bell in the corridor sounded for the end of class. Immediately after lunch. she dashed off to the kitchen and found one of Mcfarts's famous jugs. It was a large bulging thing made of blue-glazed pottery. Dasey filled it half-full of water and carried it. together with glass. into the classroom and set it on the teacher's table. The classroom was still empty. Quick as a flash. Dasey got her pencil-box from her satchel and slid open the lid just a tiny bit. The newt was lying quite still. With great care. she held the box over the neck of the jug and pulled the lid fully open and tipped the newt in. There was a plop as it landed in the water. then it thrashed around wildly for a few seconds before settling down. And now. to make the newt feel more at home. Dasey decided to give it all the pond-weed from the pencil-box as well. Then she read- on Time is a rhyme- just another nickel and dime- no more wasted time... that one I love... Love is not something you can buy it is only earned. What is love and In-love she asked- Stop taking you piss-head- you don't know what love and fu*king is... do you... then you're not that smart, are you...? Don't you think this girl has my story... in why she asked the teacher...? Um- she looked at her like not now...

The deed was done. Everything was ready. Dasey put her pencils back into the rather damp pencil box and returned it to its correct place on her own desk. Then she went out and joined the others in the playground until it was time for the lesson to begin.

The Mcfarts in the interval. Miss. Darling left the classroom and headed straight for the Headmistress's study. She felt wildly excited. She had just met a small girl who possessed. or so it seemed to her. quite extraordinary qualities of brilliance. There had not been time yet to find out exactly how brilliant the child was. but Miss. Darling had learned enough to realize that some thing had to be done about it as soon as possible. It would be ridiculous to leave a childlike that stuck in the bottom form.

Normally Miss. Darling was terrified of the Headmistress and kept well away from her. but at this moment she felt ready to take on anybody. She knocked on the door of the dreaded private study.

'Enter!' boomed the deep and dangerous voice of Miss. Mcfarts. Miss. Darling went in.

Now, most headteachers are chosen because they possess a number of fine qualities. They understand children and they have the children's best interests at heart. They are sympathetic. They are

fair and they are deeply interested in education. Miss. Mcfarts possessed none of these qualities and how she ever got her present job was a mystery.

She was above all the most formidable female. She had once been a famous athlete. and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. Looking at her. you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. You could see them in the bull-neck. in the big shoulders. in the thick arms. in the sinewy wrists and in the commanding legs. Her face. I'm afraid. was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever?

She had an obstinate chin. a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes. And as for her clothes. The massive thighs which emerged from out of the smock were encased in a pair of extraordinary breeches. bottle-green in color and made of coarse twill... they were. to say the least. extremely odd. She always had on a brown cotton smock which was pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt. The belt was fastened in front with an enormous silver buckle. These breeches reached to just below the knees and from there on down she sported green stockings with turn-up tops. which displayed her calf muscles to perfection?

On her feet, she wore flat-heeled brown brogues with leather flaps. She looked. in short. more like a rather eccentric and bloodthirsty follower of the stag-hounds than the headmistress of a nice school for children.

When Miss. Darling entered the study. Miss. Mcfarts was standing beside her huge desk with a look of scowling impatience on her face. 'Yes. Miss. Darling.' she said. 'What is it you want? You're looking very flushed and flustered this morning. What's the matter with you? Have those little stinkers been flicking spitballs at you?'

'No. Headmistress. Nothing like that.'

'Well. what is it then? Get on with it. I'm a busy woman.' As she spoke. she reached out and poured herself a glass of water from a jug that was always on her desk.

'There is a little girl in my class called Martrace Dicksnoter.' Miss. Darling began.

A terrific bargain. Yes. I liked Dicksnoter. A real pillar of our civilization. 'That's the daughter of the man who owns Dicksnoter Motors in the village.' Miss. Mcfarts barked. She hardly ever spoke in a normal voice. She either barked or shouted. 'An excellent person. Dicksnoter.' she went on. 'I was in

there only days gone by. He sold me a car a 1919 Bens. Almost new only make on the one door. Only done five thousand miles. The former owner was an old lady who took it out once a year at the most. He told me the daughter was a bad lot though. He said to watch her. He said if anything bad ever happened in the school. it was certain to be his daughter who did it. I haven't met the little brat yet. but she'll know about it when I do. Her father said she's a real wart.' 'Oh no. Headmistress. that can't be right!' Miss. Darling howled.

Nasty little worm. I'll be bound. 'Oh yes. Miss. Darling. it darn well is right! In fact. now I come to think of it. I'll bet it was she who put that stink-bomb under my desk here first thing this morning. The place stank like a sewer! Of course, it was her! I intend to have her for that. you see if I don't! What's she looks like? I have discovered. Miss. Darling. during my long career as a teacher that a bad girl is a far more dangerous creature than a bad boy. What's more. they're much harder to squash. Squashing a bad girl is like trying to squash a bluebottle. You bang down on it and the darn thing isn't there.

Nasty dirty things. little girls are. Glad I never was one.'

'Oh. but you must have been a little girl once.

Headmistress. Surely you were.'

'But Headmistress. the child only arrived at school this morning and came straight to the classroom.'

'Thank you for suggesting it. Don't argue with me. for heaven's sake. woman! This little brute Martrace or whatever her name is has stink-bombed my study! There's no doubt about it!'

'Not for long anyway.' Miss. Mcfarts barked. grinning.

'I became a woman very quickly.'

She's completely off her rocker. Miss. Darling told herself. She's barmy as a bedbug. Miss. Darling stood resolutely before the Headmistress. For once she was not going to be browbeaten. 'I must tell you. Headmistress.' she said. 'that you are completely mistaken about Martrace putting a stink bomb under your desk.'

'I am never mistaken. Miss. Darling!'

'But I didn't suggest it. Headmistress.'

'Of course, you did! Now, what is it you want? Miss. Darling?

Why are you wasting my time?'

'No. no!' Miss. Darling cried out. 'Martrace is a genius.'

At the mention of this word. Miss. Mcfarts's face turned purple and her whole body seemed to swell up like a bullfrog's. 'A genius!' she shouted.

The Headmistress... I have extraordinary things to report about the child. May I please tell you what happened in class just now?'

''What piffle is this you are talking. madam? You must be out of your mind! I have her father's word for it that the child is a gangster!'

'I came to you to talk about Martrace I suppose she set fire to your skirt and scorched your knickers!' Miss. Mcfarts snorted.

'Her father is wrong. Headmistress.'

'Don't be a twerp. Miss. Darling! You have met the little beast for only half an hour and her father has known her all her life!'

But Miss. Darling was determined to have her say and she now began to describe some of the amazing things Martrace had done with arithmetic.

'So, she's learned a few tables by heart. has she?' Miss. Mcfarts barked. 'My dear woman. that doesn't make her a genius! It makes her a parrot!' 'But Headmistress she can read.'

'So can I.' Miss. Mcfarts snapped.

'It is my opinion.' Miss. Darling said. 'that Martrace should be taken out of my form and placed directly in the top form with the eleven-year-olds.'

'Ha ha ha!' snorted Miss. Mcfarts. 'So, you want to get rid of her. do you? So, you can't handle her? So now you want to unload her on to the wretched Miss. Plimsoll in the top from where she will cause even more chaos?'

'No. no!' cried Miss. Darling. 'That is not my reason at all!'

'Oh. yes, it is!' shouted Miss. Mcfarts. 'I can see right through your little plot. madam! And my answer is no! Martrace stays where she is and it is up to you to see that she behaves herself.' Miss. Darling stood there helpless before this great rednecked giant. There was a lot more she would like to have said but she knew it was useless. She said softly. 'Very well. then. It's up to you.

Headmistress.' 'But- but- but Headmistress. please.' 'You're darn right it's up to me!' Miss. Mcfarts bellowed. 'And don't forget.

madam. that we are dealing here with a little viper who put a stink bomb under my desk.'

'She did not do that. Headmistress!'

-Great Scott. I know it is heavy- I'm not having a little five-year-old brigand sitting with the senior girls and boys in the top form.

Whoever heard of such a thing!' 'Not another word!' shouted Miss. Mcfarts. 'And in any case. I have a rule in this school that all youngsters remain in their own age groups regardless of ability.

'Of course, she did it.' Miss. Mcfarts boomed. 'And I'll tell you what. I wish to heavens I was still allowed to use the birch and belt as I did in the good old days! I'd have roasted Martrace's bottom for her so she couldn't sit down for a month!'

Miss. Darling turned and walked out of the study feeling depressed but by no means defeated. I am going to do something about this child. she told herself. I don't know what it will be like. but I intend to find a way to help her in the end.

16

The Parents

'There is no point.' she said. 'in you sitting in class doing nothing while I am teaching the rest of the form the two times table and how to spell cat and rat and mouse. So, during each lesson, I intend to give you one of these textbooks to study. At the end of the lesson, you can come up to me with your questions if you have any and I intend to try to help you. How does that sound?'

When Miss. Darling emerged from the Headmistress's study.

most of the children were outside on the playground. Her first move was to go around to the various teachers who taught the senior class and borrow from them a number of textbooks.

Books on algebra. geometry. French. English Literature and the like. Then she sought out Martrace and called her into the classroom.

'Thank you. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said. 'That sounds fine.'

'I am sure.' Miss. Darling said. 'that we'll be able to get you moved into a much higher form later on. but for the moment the

Headmistress wishes you to stay where you are.'

'Very well. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said. 'Thank you so much for getting those books for me.'

What a nice child she is. Miss. Darling thought. I don't care what her father said about her. she seems very quiet and gentle to me. And not a bit stuck up in spite of her brilliance.

In fact, she hardly seems aware of it.

So, when the class reassembled. Martrace went to her desk and began to study a textbook on geometry which Miss. Darling had given her. The teacher kept half an eye on her all the time and noticed that the child very soon became deeply absorbed in the book. She never glanced up once during the entire lesson.

Miss. Darling. meanwhile. was making another decision. She was deciding that she would go herself and have a secret talk with Martrace's mother and father as soon as possible. She simply refused to let the matter rest where it was. The whole thing was ridiculous.

She couldn't believe that the parents were totally unaware of their daughter's remarkable talents. After all. Mr. Dicksnoter was a successful motor-car dealer so she presumed that he was a fairly intelligent man himself. In any event. parents never underestimated the abilities of their own children. Plus. now Miss. Darling's hopes began to expand even further. She started wondering whether permission might not be sought from the parents for her to give private tuition to Martrace after school. Quite the reverse.

Sometimes it was well-nigh unbearable for a teacher to convince the proud father or mother that their beloved offspring was a complete nitwit. Miss. Darling felt confident that she would have no

difficulty in convincing Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter that Martrace was something very special indeed. The trouble was going to be to stop them from getting over-wholehearted.

She would go fairly late. between nine and ten o'clock. when Martrace was sure to be in bed. The prospect of coaching a child as bright as this appealed enormously to her professional instinct as a teacher. And suddenly she decided that she would go and call on Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter that very evening.

And that is precisely what she did. Having got the address from the school records. Miss. Darling set out to walk from her own home to the Dicksnoter's house shortly after nine. She found the house in a pleasant street where each smallish building was separated from its neighbors by a bit of garden. It was a modern brick house that could not have been cheap to buy and the name on the gate said COSY NOOK.

Nosey cook might have been better. Miss. Darling thought. She was given to playing with words in that way. She walked up the path and rang the bell. and while she stood waiting, she could hear the television blaring inside.

'I'm not.' Miss. Darling said. 'And please forgive me for butting in on you like this. I am Martrace's teacher at the school and it is important I have a word with you and your wife.'

'Got into trouble already. has she?' Mr. Dicksnoter said. blocking the doorway. 'Well. she's your responsibility from now on. You'll have to deal with her.'

The door was opened by a small ratty-looking man with a thin ratty mustache who was wearing a sports-coat that had an orange and red stripe in the material. 'Yes?' he said. peering out at Miss.

Darling. 'If you're selling raffle tickets, I don't want any.'

'Miss. Darling said- She is in no trouble at all..' 'I have come with good news about her. Fairly startling news. Mr. Dicksnoter. Do you think- I may come in for a few minutes and talk to you about

Martrace?'

'We are right in the middle of watching one of our favorite programs.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'This is the most inconvenient. Why don't you come back some other time?'

That shook Mr. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling began to lose patience. 'Mr. Dicksnoter.' she said. 'if you think some rotten MOVIE programmed is more important than your daughter's future. then you ought not to be a parent! Why don't you switch the darn thing off and listen to me!'

He was not used to being spoken to in this way. He peered carefully at the slim frail woman who stood so resolutely out on the porch. 'Oh, very well then.' he snapped. 'Come on in and let's get it over with.' Miss. Darling stepped briskly inside.

'Ms. Dicksnoter isn't going to thank you for this.' the man said as he led her into the sitting-room where a large platinum-blonde woman was gazing rapturously at the MOVIE screen.

'Who is it?' the woman said. not looking around.

'Some school teacher.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'She says she's got to talk to us about Martrace.' He crossed to the MOVIE set and turned down the sound but left the picture on the screen.

'Don't do that. Harry!' Ms. Dicksnoter cried out. 'Willard is just about to propose to Angelica!'

'You can still watch it while we're talking.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'This is Martrace's teacher. She says she's got some sort of news to give us.'

'My name is Jennifer Darling.' Miss. Darling said. 'How do you do. Ms. Dicksnoter.'

Ms. Dicksnoter glared at her and said. 'What's the trouble then?'

Nobody invited Miss. Darling to sit down so she chose a chair and sat down anyway. 'This.' she said. 'was your daughter's first day at school.'

'We know that.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. ratty about Missing her program. 'Is that all you came to tell us?'

Miss. Darling stared hard into the other woman's wet grey eyes. and she allowed the silence to hang in the air until Ms. Dicksnoter became uncomfortable. 'Do you wish me to explain why I came?' she said.

'Get on with it then.' Ms. Dicksnoter said.

'I'm sure you know.' Miss. Darling said. 'that children in the bottom class at school are not expected to be able to read or spell or juggle with numbers when they first arrive. Five-year-old cannot do that. But Martrace can do it all. And if I am to believe her.'

'Teach her what?' Mr. Dicksnoter said.

'To read. To read books.' Miss. Darling said. 'Perhaps you did teach her. Perhaps she was lying. Possibly you have shelves full of books all over the house. I wouldn't know.

Perhaps you are both great readers.'

'I wouldn't.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. She was still ratty at losing the sound on the MOVIE.

'Was she lying. then.' Miss. Darling said. 'when she told me that nobody taught her to multiply or to read? Did either of you teach her?'

'Of course, we read.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'Don't be so daft. I read the motoring- new and steam power and the Motor from cover to cover every week.'

'This child has already read a surprising number of books.' Miss. Darling said. 'I was simply trying to find out if she came from a family that loved good literature.'

'We don't hold with book-reading.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'You can't make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading storybooks. We don't keep them in the house.'

'I see.' Miss. Darling said. 'Well. all I came to tell you was that Martrace has a brilliant mind. But I expect you knew that already.'

'Of course, I knew she could read.' the mother said. 'She spends her life up in her room buried in some silly book.'

'But does it not intrigue you.' Miss. Darling said. 'that a little five-year-old child is reading long adult novels by Dickens and Hemingway? Doesn't that make you jump up and down with excitement?'

'Not particularly.' the mother said. 'I'm not in favor of bluestocking girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks are more important than books. Miss. Hunky.'

'The name is Darling.' Miss. Darling said.

'Now look at me.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. 'Then look at you. You chose books. I chose looks.'

Miss. Darling looked at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room.

'What did you say?' she asked.

'I said you chose books and I chose looks.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. 'And who's finished up the better off? Me. of course. I'm sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessman and you're left slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children the ABC.'

'Quite right. sugar-plum.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. casting a look of such simpering sloppiness at his wife it would have made a cat sick.

Miss. Darling decided that if she was going to get anywhere with these people, she must not lose her temper. 'I haven't told you all of it yet.' she said. 'Martrace. so far as I can gather at this early stage. it is also a kind of mathematical genius. She can multiply complicated figures in her head like lightning.'

'What's the point of that when you can buy a calculator?' Mr. Dicksnoter said.

'A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy.' Ms. Dicksnoter said.

'Look at that film-star for instance.' she added. pointing at the silent MOVIE screen where a bosomy female was being embraced by a craggy actor in the moonlight. 'You don't think she got him to do that by multiplying figures at him. do you? Not likely. And now he's going to marry her. you see if he doesn't. and she's going to live in a mansion with a butler and lots of maids.'

Miss. Darling could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had heard that parents like this existed all over the place and that their children turned out to be delinquents and dropouts. but it was still a shock to meet a pair of them in the flesh.

'Martrace's trouble.' she said. trying once again. 'is that she is so far ahead of everyone else around her that it might be worth thinking about some extra kind of private tuition. I seriously believe that she could be brought up to university standard in two or three years with the proper coaching.'

'University?' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. bouncing up in his chair. 'Who wants to go to university for heaven's sake! All they learn there are bad habits!'

'That is not true.' Miss. Darling said. 'If you had a heart attack this minute and had to call a doctor. that the doctor would be a university graduate. If you got sued for selling someone a rotten second-hand car. you'd have to get a lawyer and he'd be a university graduate. too. Do not despise clever people. Mr. Dicksnoter. But I can see we're not going to agree. I'm sorry I burst in on you like this.' Miss. Darling rose from her chair and walked out of the room.

Mr. Dicksnoter followed her to the front door and said.

'Good of you to come. Miss. Hawkes. or is it Miss. Harris?'

'It's neither.' Miss. Darling said. 'but let it go.' And away she went.

17

Throwing the Hammer

'Have you met the Mcfarts yet?' Hortensia asked.

'We've seen her at prayers.' Dasey said. 'but we haven't met her.'

'You've got a treat coming to you.' Hortensia said. 'She hates very small children. She, therefore, loathes the bottom class and everyone in it. She thinks five-year-olds are grubs that haven't yet hatched out.'

In went another fistful of crisps and when she spoke again. out sprayed the crumbs. 'If you survive your first year you may just manage to live through the rest of your time here. But many don't survive. They get carried out on stretchers screaming. I've seen it often.' Hortensia paused to observe the effect these remarks were having on the two titchy ones. Not very much. They seemed pretty cool. So, the large one decided to regale them with further information.

'I suppose you know the Mcfarts has a lockup cupboard in her private quarters called The Closet? Have you heard about the closet?'

Martrace and Dasey shook their heads and continued to gaze up at the giant. Being very small. they have inclined to mistrust any creature that was larger than they were. especially senior girls.

'The Closet.' Hortensia went on. 'is a very tall but very narrow cupboard. The floor is only ten inches square so you can't sit down or squat in it.

You have to stand naked.

And three of the walls are made of cement with bits of broken glass sticking out all over. so you can't lean against them.

You have to stand more or less at attention all the time when you get locked up in there. It's terrible.'

'Can't you lean against the door?' Martrace asked.

'Don't be daft.' Hortensia said. 'The door's got thousands of sharp spikey nails sticking out of it. They've been hammered through from the outside. probably by the

Mcfarts herself.'

'Have you ever been in there?' Dasey asked.

'The first term I was in there six times.' Hortensia said.

'Twice for a whole day and the other times for two hours each. But two hours is quite bad enough. It's pitch- dark and you have to stand up dead straight and if you wobble at all you get spiked either by the glass on the walls or the nails on the door.

'Why were you put in?' Martrace asked. 'What had you done?'

'The first time.' Hortensia said. 'I poured half a tin of Golden Syrup on to the seat of the chair the Mcfarts was going to sit on at prayers. It was wonderful. When she lowered herself into the chair? There was a loud squelching noise similar to that made by a hippopotamus when lowering its foot into the mud on the banks of the Pompeii River. But you're too small and stupid to have read the Just So Stories. aren't you?'

'I've read them.' Martrace said.

'You're a liar.' Hortensia said amiably. 'You can't even read yet. But no matter. So, when the Mcfarts sat down on the Golden Syrup. the squelch was beautiful. And when she jumped up again. the chair sort of stuck to the seat of those awful green breeches she wears and came up with her for a few

seconds until the thick syrup slowly came unstuck. Then she clasped her hands to the seat of her breeches and both hands got covered in the muck. You should have heard her bellow.'

'But how did she know it was you?' Dasey asked.

'A little squirt called Ollie Bog-whistle sneaked on me.'

Hortensia said. 'I knocked his front teeth out.'

'And the Mcfarts put you in The Closet for a whole day?' Martrace asked. gulping.

'All day long.' Hortensia said. 'I was off my rocker when she let me out. I was babbling like an idiot.'

'What were the other things you did to get put in The Closet?' Dasey asked.

'Oh, I can't remember them all now.' Hortensia said. She spoke with the air of an old warrior who has been in so many battles that bravery has become commonplace. 'It's all so long ago.' she added. stuffing more crisps into her mouth. 'Ah yes. I can remember one. Here's what happened. I chose a time when I knew the Mcfarts was out of the way of teaching the sixth-formers. and I put up my hand and asked to go to the bogs. But instead of going there. I sneaked into the Mcfarts's room. And after a speedy search, I found the drawer where she kept all her gym knickers."

'Go on.' Martrace said. spellbound. 'What happened next?'

'I had sent away by post. you see. for this very powerful itching powder.' Hortensia said. 'It cost 50p for a packet and was called The Skin-Scorcher. The label said it was made from the powdered teeth of deadly snakes. and it was guaranteed to raise welts the size of walnuts on your skin. So, I sprinkled this stuff inside every pair of knickers in the drawer and then folded them all up again carefully.' Hortensia paused to cram more crisps into her mouth.

'Did it work?' Dasey asked. The nice thing about Martrace was that if you had met her casually and talked to her you would have thought she was a perfectly normal five-and-a-half-year-old child. She displayed almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never showed off. 'This is a very sensible and quiet little girl.' you would have said to yourself. And unless for some reason you had started a discussion with her about literature or mathematics. you would never have known the extent of her brain-power.

It was therefore easy for Martrace to make friends with other children. All those in her class liked her.

They knew of course that she was 'clever' because they had heard her being questioned by Miss. Darling on the first day of term.

And they knew also that she was allowed to sit quietly with a book during lessons and not pay attention to the teacher.

But children of their age do not search deeply for reasons. They are far too wrapped up in their own small struggles to worry overmuch about what others are doing and why.

18

Before the first week of term was up. awesome tales about the Headmistress. Miss. Mcfarts. began to filter through to the newcomers. Martrace and Dasey. standing in a corner of the playground during morning-break on the third day. were approached by a rugged ten-year-old with a boil on her nose... called Hortensia.

'New scum. I suppose.' Hortensia said to them. looking down from her great height. She was eating from an extra-large bag of potato crisps and digging the stuff out in handfuls. 'Welcome to bursal.' she added. spraying bits of crisp out of her mouth like snowflakes.

The two tiny ones. confronted by this giant. kept a watchful silence.

'Well.' Hortensia said. 'a few days later. during prayers. the Mcfarts suddenly started scratching herself like mad down below. Aha. I said to myself. Here we go. She's changed to a gym already. It was wonderful to be sitting there watching it all and knowing that I was the only person in the whole school who realized exactly what was going on inside the Mcfarts's pants. And I felt safe. too. I knew I couldn't be caught. Then the scratching got worse.

She couldn't stop. She must have thought she had a wasp's nest down there. And then. right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. she leaped up and grabbed her bottom and rushed out of the room.' Among Martrace's new-found friends was the girl called Dasey. Right from the first day of term the two of them started wandering around together during the morning break and in the lunch hour. Dasey was exceptionally small for her age. a skinny little nymph with deep-brown eyes and with dark hair that was cut in a fringe across her forehead. Martrace liked her because she was gutsy and adventurous.

She liked Martrace for exactly the same reasons. Both Martrace and Dasey were enthralled. It was quite clear to them that they were at this moment standing in the presence of a master. Here was somebody who had brought the art of skullduggery to the highest point of perfection. somebody. moreover. who was willing to risk life and limb in pursuit of her calling? They gazed in wonder at this goddess. and suddenly even the boil on her nose was no longer a blemish but a badge of courage.

'But how did she catch you at that time?' Dasey asked. breathless with wonder.

'She didn't.' Hortensia said. 'But I got a day in The Closet just the same.'

'Why?' They both asked.

'The Mcfarts.' Hortensia said. 'has a nasty habit of guessing. When she doesn't know who the culprit is. she makes a guess at it. and the trouble is she's often right. I was the prime suspect this time because of the Golden Syrup job. and although I knew she didn't have any proof. nothing I said made any difference. I kept shouting. 'How could I have done it. Miss. Mcfarts? I didn't even know you kept any spare knickers at school! I don't even know what itching powder is! I've never heard of it!' But the lying didn't help me in spite of the great performance I put on. The Mcfarts simply grabbed me by one ear and rushed me to The Closet at the double and threw me inside and locked the door. That was my second all-day stretch. It was absolute torture. I was spiked and cut all over when I came out.'

'It's like a war.' Martrace said. overawed.

'You're darn right it's like a war.' Hortensia cried. 'And the casualties are terrific. We are the crusaders. the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the

Mcfarts is the Prince of Darkness. the Foul Serpent. the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command. It's a tough life. We all try to support each other.'

'You can rely on us.' Dasey said. making her height of three feet two inches stretch as tall as possible.

'No. I can't.' Hortensia said. 'You're only shrimps. But you never know. We may find a use for you one day in some undercover job.'

'Tell us just a little bit more about what she does.' Martrace said. 'Please do.'

'I mustn't frighten you before you've been here a week.' Hortensia said.

'You won't.' Dasey said. 'We may be small but we're quite tough.'

'Listen to this then.' Hortensia said. 'Only yesterday the Mcfarts caught a boy called Julius Rottwinkle eating Liquorice Allsorts during the scripture lesson and she simply picked him up by one arm and flung him clear out of the open classroom window. Our classroom is one floor up and we saw Julius Rottwinkle go sailing out over the garden like a Frisbee and landing with a thump in the middle of the lettuces. Then the Mcfarts turned to us and said. 'From now on. anybody caught eating in class goes straight out the window.'

'Did this Julius Rottwinkle break any bones?' Dasey asked.

'Only a few.' Hortensia said. 'You've got to remember that the Mcfarts once threw the hammer for Britain in the Olympics so she's very proud of her right arm.'

'What's throwing the hammer?' Dasey asked.

'The hammer...'

Hortensia said. 'is actually a ruddy great cannon-ball on the end of a long bit of wire. and the thrower whisks it round and round his or her head faster and faster and then lets it go. You have to be terrifically strong.

The Mcfarts will throw anything around just to keep her arm in. especially children.'

'Good heavens.' Dasey said.

'I once heard her say.' Hortensia went on. 'that a large boy is about the same weight as an Olympic hammer and therefore he's very useful for practicing with.'

At that point, something strange happened. The playground. which up to then had been filled with shrieks and the shouting of children at play. all at once became silent as the grave. 'Watch out.'

Hortensia whispered. Martrace and Dasey glanced around and saw the gigantic figure of Miss. Mcfarts advancing through the crowd of boys and girls with menacing strides.

The children drew back hastily to let her through and her progress across the asphalt was like that of Moses going through the Red Sea when the waters parted.

A formidable figure she was too. in her belted smock and green breeches. Below the knees, her calf muscles stood out like grapefruits inside her stockings. 'Amanda Thripp!' she was shouting. 'You. Amanda Thripp. come here!'

'Hold your hats.' Hortensia whispered.

'What's going to happen?' Dasey whispered back.

'That idiot Amanda.' Hortensia said. 'has let her long hair grow even longer during the hols and her mother has plaited it into pigtails. Silly thing to do.'

'Why silly?' Martrace asked.

'If there's one thing the Mcfarts can't stand its pigtails.' Hortensia said.

Martrace and Dasey saw the giant in green breeches advancing upon a girl of about ten who had a pair of plaited golden pigtails hanging over her shoulders. Each pigtail had a blue satin bow at the end of it and it all looked very pretty. The girl wearing the pigtails. Amanda Thripp. stood quite still. watching the advancing giant. and the expression on her face was one that you might find on the face of a person who is trapped in a small field with an enraged bull that is charging flat-out towards her.

The girl was glued to the spot. terror-struck. pop-eyed. quivering. knowing for certain that the Day of Judgment had come for her at last.

Miss. Mcfarts had now reached the victim and stood towering over her. 'I want those filthy pigtails off before you come back to school tomorrow!' she barked. 'Chop 'em off and throw 'em in the dustbin. you understand?'

Amanda. paralyzed with fright. managed to stutter. 'My mummy likes them. She p-p-plaits them for me every morning.'

'Your mummy's a twit!' the Mcfarts bellowed. She pointed a finger the size of salami at the child's head and shouted. 'You look like a rat with a tail coming out of its head!'

'My m-m-mummy thinks I look lovely. Miss. T-T-Mcfarts.' Amanda stuttered. shaking like a blancmange.

'I don't give a tinker's toot what your mummy thinks!' the Mcfarts yelled. and with that, she lunged forward and grabbed hold of Amanda's pigtails in her right fist and lifted the girl clear off the ground. Then she started swinging her round and round her head. faster and faster and Amanda was screaming blue murder and the

Mcfarts was yelling. 'I'll... give you pigtails. You little rat!'

'Shades of the Olympics.' Hortensia murmured. 'She's getting up speed now just like she does with the hammer. Ten to one she's going to throw her.'

And now the Mcfarts was leaning back against the weight of the whirling girl and pivoting expertly on her toes.

spinning round and round. and soon Amanda Thripp was traveling so fast she became a blur. and suddenly. with a mighty grunt. the Mcfarts let go of the pigtails and Amanda went sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high up into the sky.

'Well thrown. sir!' someone shouted from across the playground. ...And Martrace.

-And-

Who was mesmerized by the whole foolish affair? saw Amanda Thripp descending in a long graceful parabola on to the playing field beyond. She landed on the grass and bounced three times and finally came to rest. Then. amazingly. she sat up. She looked a trifle dazed and who could blame her. but after a minute or so she was on her feet again and tottering back towards the playground.

The Mcfarts stood in the playground dusting off her hands. 'Not bad.' she said. 'considering I'm not in strict training. Not bad at all.' Then she strode away.

'She's mad.' Hortensia said.

'But don't the parents complain?' Martrace asked.

'Would yours?' Hortensia asked. 'I know mine wouldn't. She treats the mothers and fathers just the same as the children and they're all scared to death of her. I'll be seeing you some time. you two.' And with that, she sauntered away.

Dick Longcock and eating out the Cherry pie

'How can she get away with it?' Dasey said to Martrace. 'Surely the children go home and tell their mothers and fathers. I know my father would raise a terrific stink if I told him the Headmistress had grabbed me by the hair and slung me over the playground fence.'

'No. he wouldn't.' Martrace said. 'and I'll tell you why. He simply wouldn't believe you.'

'Of course, he would.'

'He wouldn't.' Martrace said. 'And the reason is obvious. Your story would sound too ridiculous to be believed. And that is the Mcfarts's great secret.'

'What is?' Dasey asked.

Martrace said. 'Never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog. Make sure everything you do is so completely crazy it's unbelievable. No parent is going to believe this pigtail story. not in a million years. Mine wouldn't. They'd call me a liar.'

'In that case.' Dasey said. 'Amanda's mother isn't going to cut her pigtails off.'

'No. she isn't.' Martrace said. 'Amanda will do it herself.

You see if she doesn't.'

'Do you think she's mad?' Dasey asked.

'Whom?'

'The Mcfarts.'

'No. I don't think she's mad.' Martrace said. 'But she's very dangerous. Being in this school is like being in a cage with a cobra.

You have to be very fast on your feet.'

They got another example of how dangerous the Headmistress could be on the very next day. During lunch, an announcement was made that the whole school should go into the Assembly Hall and be seated as soon as the meal was over.

When all the two hundred and fifty or so boys and girls were settled down in Assembly. the Mcfarts marched on to the platform. None of the other teachers came in with her. She was carrying a riding-crop in her right hand.

She stood up there on center stage in her lime breeches with legs apart and riding-crop in hand. glaring at the sea of upturned faces before her.

'What's going to happen?' Dasey whispered.

'I don't know.' Martrace whispered back.

The whole school waited for what was coming next.

'Dick Longcock!' the Mcfarts barked suddenly.

'Where is Dick Longcock?'

A hand shot up among the seated children.

'Come up here!' the Mcfarts shouted. 'And look smart about it!'

'Stand over there!' the Mcfarts ordered. pointing. The boy stood to one side. He looked anxious. He knew very well he wasn't up there to be presented with a prize. He was watching the Headmistress with an exceedingly wary eye and he kept edging farther and farther away from her with little shuffles of his feet. rather as a rat might edge away from a terrier that is watching it from across the room. His plump flabby face had turned grey with fearful apprehension. His stockings hung about his ankles.

'This clot.' boomed the Headmistress. pointing the riding crop at him like a rapier. 'this blackhead. this foul carbuncle. this poisonous pustule that you see before you is none other than a disgusting criminal. a denizen of the underworld. a member of the Mafia!'

'Who. me?' Dick Longcock said. looking genuinely puzzled.

'A thief!' the Mcfarts screamed. 'A crook! A pirate! A brigand! A rustler!'

'Steady on.' the boy said. 'I mean. dash it all.

Headmistress.'

'Do you deny it. Your miserable little gumboil? Do you plead not guilty?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' the boy said. more puzzled than ever.

An eleven-year-old boy who was decidedly large and round stood up and waddled briskly forward. He climbed up on to the platform. 'I'll tell you what I'm talking about. you suppurating little blister!' The Mcfarts shouted. 'Yesterday morning. during break. you sneaked like a serpent into the kitchen and stole a slice of my private chocolate Cherry pie from my tea-tray! That tray had just been prepared for me personally by the cook! It was my morning snack! And as for the Cherry pie.

it was my own private stock! That was not boy's Cherry pie! You don't think for one minute I'm going to eat the filth I give to you? That Cherry pie was made from real butter and real cream! And he. that robber-bandit. that safe-cracker. that highwayman standing over there with his socks around his ankles stole it and ate it!'

'I never did.' the boy exclaimed. turning from grey to white. 'Don't lie to me. Long cock!' barked the Mcfarts. 'The cook saw you! What's more. she saw you eating it!'

The Mcfarts paused to wipe a fleck of froth from her lips.

When she spoke again her voice was suddenly softer. quieter.

more friendly. and she leaned towards the boy. smiling. 'You like my special chocolate Cherry pie. don't you.

Long cock? It's rich and delicious. isn't it. Long cock?'

'Very good.' the boy mumbled. The words were out before he could stop himself.

'You're right.' the Mcfarts said. 'It is very good. Therefore, I think you should congratulate the cook. When a gentleman has had a particularly good meal. Longcock. he always sends his compliments to the chef. You didn't know that. did you. Long cock? But those who inhabit the criminal underworld are not noted for their good manners.'

The boy remained silent.

'Cook!' the Mcfarts shouted. turning her head towards the door. 'Come here. cook! Long cock wishes to tell you how good your chocolate Cherry pie is!'

The cook. a tall shriveled female who looked as though all of her body-juices had been dried out of her long ago in a hot oven. walked on to the platform wearing a dirty white apron.

Her entrance had clearly been arranged beforehand by the Headmistress.

'Now then. Longcock.' the Mcfarts boomed. 'Tell cook what you think of her chocolate Cherry pie.'

'Very good.' the boy mumbled. You could see he was now beginning to wonder what all this was leading up to. The only thing he knew for certain was that the law forbade the Mcfarts to hit him with the riding-crop that she kept smacking against her thigh. That was some comfort. but not much because the Mcfarts was totally unpredictable. One never knew what she was going to do next.

'Then go and get it. And bring a knife to cut it with.'

The cook disappeared. Almost at once she was back again staggering under the weight of an enormous round chocolate Cherry pie on a china platter. The Cherry pie was fully eighteen inches in diameter and it was covered with dark-brown chocolate icing.

'Put it on the table.' the Mcfarts said.

There was a small table center stage with a chair behind it.

The cook placed the Cherry pie carefully on the table. 'Sit down.

Longcock.' the Mcfarts said. 'Sit there.'

The boy moved cautiously to the table and sat down. He stared at the gigantic Cherry pie.

'There you are. Longcock.' the Mcfarts said. and once again her voice became soft. persuasive. even gentle. 'It's all for you. every bit of it. As you enjoyed that slice you had yesterday so very much. I ordered a cook to bake you an extra-large one all for yourself.'

'Well. thank you.' the boy said. totally bemused. 'Thank you. cook.' the boy said shy- and fat-faced.

'Thank cook. not me.' the Mcfarts said.

The cook stood there like a shriveled bootlace. tight-lipped.

Implacable. disapproving. She looked as though her mouth was full of lemon juice.

'Come on then.' the Mcfarts said. 'Why don't you cut yourself a nice thick slice and try it?'

'What? Now?' The boy said. cautious. He knew there was a catch in this somewhere. but he wasn't sure where. 'Can't I take it home instead?' he asked. 'There you are. cook.' the Mcfarts cried. 'Longcock likes your Cherry pie. He adores your Cherry pie. Do you have any more of yo ur Cherry pie you could give him?'

'I do indeed.' the cook said. She seemed to have learned her lines by heart.

'That would be impolite.' the Mcfarts said. with a crafty grin. 'You must show cookie here how grateful you are for all the trouble she's taken.'

The boy didn't move.

'Go on. get on with it.' The Mcfarts said. 'Cut a slice and taste it.

We haven't got all day.'

The boy picked up the knife and was about to cut into the Cherry pie when he stopped. He stared at the Cherry pie. Then he looked up at the Mcfarts. then at the tall stringy cook with her lemon-juice mouth. All the children in the hall were watching tensely. waiting for something to happen. They felt certain it must. The Mcfarts was not a person who would give someone a whole chocolate Cherry pie to eat just out of kindness. Many were guessing that it had been filled with pepper or castor-oil or some other foul-tasting substance that would make the boy violently sick. It might even be arsenic and he would be dead in ten seconds flat. Or perhaps it was a boobytrapped Cherry pie and the whole thing would blow up the moment it was cut. taking Dick Longcock with it. No one in the school put it past the Mcfarts to do any of these things.

'I don't want to eat it.' the boy said.

'Taste it. you little brat.' the Mcfarts said. 'You're insulting the cook.'

Very gingerly the boy began to cut a thin slice of the vast Cherry pie. Then he levered the slice out. Then he put down the knife and took the sticky thing in his fingers and started very slowly to eat it.

'It's good. isn't it?' the Mcfarts asked.

'Very good.' the boy said. chewing and swallowing. He finished the slice.

'Have another.' the Mcfarts said.

'That's enough. thank you.' the boy murmured.

'I said to have another.' the Mcfarts said. and now there was an altogether sharper edge to her voice. 'Eat another slice! Do as you are told!'

'I don't want another slice.' the boy said.

Suddenly the Mcfarts exploded. 'Eat!' she shouted. banging her thigh with the riding-crop. 'If I tell you to eat. you will eat! You wanted Cherry pie! You stole Cherry pie! And now you've got Cherry pie! What's more. you're going to eat it! You do not leave this platform and nobody leaves this hall until you have eaten the entire Cherry pie that is sitting there in front of you!

Do I make myself clear? Long cock? Do you get my meaning?'

The boy looked at the Mcfarts. Then he looked down at the enormous Cherry pie.

'Eat! Eat! Eat -eat it all out!' the Mcfarts was yelling. Very slowly the boy cut himself another slice and began to eat it.

Martrace was fascinated. 'Do you think he can do it?' she whispered to Dasey.

'No.' Dasey whispered back. 'It's impossible. He'd be sick before he was halfway through.'

The boy kept going. When he had finished the second slice. he looked at the Mcfarts. hesitating.

'Eat this bitch out!' she shouted. 'Greedy little thieves who like to eat Cherry pie must have Cherry pie! Eat faster boy! Eat faster! We don't want to be here all day! And don't stop like you're doing

now! Next time you stop before it's all finished, you'll go straight to The Closet and I intend to lock the door and throw the key down the well!'

The boy cut the third slice and started to eat it. He finished this one quicker than the other two and when that was done, he immediately picked up the knife and cut the next slice. In some peculiar way, he seemed to be getting into his stride.

Martrace- watching closely. saw no signs of distress in the boy yet.

If anything. he seemed to be gathering confidence as he went along. 'He's doing well.' she whispered to Dasey.

'He'll be sick soon.' Dasey whispered back. 'It's going to be horrid.'

When Dick Longcock had eaten his way through half of the entire enormous Cherry pie. he paused for just a couple of seconds and took several deep breaths.

The Mcfarts stood with hands-on-hips. glaring at him. 'Silence!' shouted the Mcfarts.

The boy cuts himself another thick slice and started eating it fast. There were still no signs of flagging or giving up. He certainly did not look as though he was about to stop and cry out. 'I can't. I can't eat anymore! I'm going to be sick!' He was still in there running.

'Get on with it!' she shouted. 'Eat it up!'

Suddenly the boy let out a gigantic belch that rolled around the Assembly Hall like thunder. Many of the audience began to giggle.

And now a subtle change was coming over the two hundred and fifty watching children in the audience. Earlier on. they had sensed impending disaster. They had prepared themselves for an unpleasant scene in which the wretched boy. stuffed to the gills with cherry pie. would have to surrender and beg for mercy and then they would have watched the triumphant Mcfarts forcing more and still more Cherry pie into the mouth of the breathless boy. Unexpectedly someone shouted. 'Come on Brucie! You can make it! 'Not a bit of it. Dick Longcock was three-quarters of the way through and still going strong. One sensed that he was almost beginning to enjoy himself. He had a mountain to climb and he was jolly well going to reach the top or die in the attempt. What is more? he had now

become very conscious of his audience and of how they were all silently rooting for him. This was nothing less than a battle between him and the mighty Mcfarts.

The Mcfarts wheeled around and yelled. 'Silence!' The audience watched intently. They were thoroughly caught up in the contest. They were longing to start cheering but they didn't dare.

'I think he's going to make it.' Martrace whispered.

'I think so too.' Dasey whispered back. 'I wouldn't have believed anyone in the world could eat the whole of a Cherry pie that size.'

'The Mcfarts doesn't believe it either.' Martrace whispered. 'Look at her. She's turning redder and redder. She's going to kill him if he wins.'

The boy was slowing down now. There was no doubt about that. But he kept pushing the stuff into his mouth with the dogged perseverance of a long-distance runner who has sighted the finishing-line and knows he must keep going. As the very last mouthful disappeared. a tremendous cheer rose up from the audience and children were leaping on to their chairs and yelling and clapping and shouting. 'Well done

Brucie! Good for you. Brucie! You've won a gold medal.

Brucie!'

The Mcfarts stood motionless on the platform. Her great horsy face had turned the color of molten lava and her eyes were glittering with fury. She glared at Dick Longcock who was sitting on his chair like some huge overstuffed grub. replete. comatose. unable to move or to speak. A fine sweat was beading his forehead but there was a grin of triumph on his face.

Suddenly the Mcfarts lunged forward and grabbed the large empty china platter on which the Cherry pie had rested. She raised it high in the air and brought it down with a crash right on the top of the wretched Dick Longcock's head and pieces flew all over the platform.

The boy was by now so full of Cherry pie he was like a sackful of wet cement and you couldn't have hurt him with a sledgehammer. He simply shook his head a few times and went on grinning. 'Go to blazes!' screamed the Mcfarts and she marched off the platform followed closely by the cook.

Dasey

'What if the jug's not in the kitchen?' Dasey asked.

'There are a dozen Headmistress's jugs and glasses in the kitchen.' Miss. Darling said. 'They are used all over the school.'

'I won't forget.' Dasey said. 'I promise I won't.'

Already Dasey's scheming mind was going over the possibilities that this water-jug job had opened up for her. She longed to do something truly heroic. She admired the older girl Hortensia to distraction for the daring deeds she had performed in the school. She also admired Martrace who had sworn her to secrecy about the parrot job she had brought off at home. and also, the great hair-oil switch which had bleached her father's hair. It was her turn now to become a heroine if only she could come up with a brilliant plot.

On the way home from school that afternoon she began to mull over the various possibilities. and when at last the germ of a brilliant idea hit her. she began to expand on it and lay her plans with the same kind of care the Duke of Wellington had done before the Battle of Waterloo. Admittedly the enemy on this occasion was not Jace.

But you would never have got anyone at Crunchem Hall to admit that the Headmistress was a less formidable foe than the famous

Frenchman. The great skill would have to be exercised. Dasey told herself. and great secrecy observed if she was to come out of this exploit alive.

There was a muddy pond at the bottom of Dasey's garden and this was the home of a colony of newts. The newt. although fairly common in English pounds. is not often seen by ordinary people because it is a shy and murky creature. It is an incredibly ugly gruesome-looking animal. rather like a baby crocodile but with a shorter head. It is quite harmless but doesn't look it. It is about six inches long and very slimy. with a greenish-grey skin on top and an orange-colored belly underneath. It is. in fact. an amphibian. which can live in or out of the water.

That evening Dasey went to the bottom of the garden determined to catch a newt. They are swiftly-moving animals and not easy to get hold of. She lay on the bank for a long time waiting patiently until she spotted a whopper. Then. using her school hat as a net. she swooped and caught it. She had

lined her pencil-box with pond-weed ready to receive the creature. but she discovered that it was not easy to get the newt out of the hat and into the pencil-box. It wriggled and squirmed like quicksilver and. apart from that. the box was only just long enough to take it. When she did get it in at last. she had to be careful not to trap its tail in the lid when she slid it closed. A boy next door called Graceie Entwistle had told her that if you chopped off a newt's tail. the tail stayed alive and grew into another newt ten times bigger than the first one. It could be the size of an alligator. Dasey didn't quite believe that. but she was not prepared to risk it happening.

Eventually, she managed to slide the lid of the pencil-box right home and the newt washers. Then. on second thoughts. she opened the lid just the tiniest fraction so that the creature could breathe.

The next day she carried her secret weapon to school in her satchel. She was tingling with excitement. She was longing to tell Martrace about her plan of battle. In fact. she wanted to tell the whole class. But she finally decided to tell nobody. It was better that way because then no one. even when put under the most severe torture. would be able to name her as the culprit.

Lunchtime came. Today it was sausages and baked beans. Dasey's favorite. but she couldn't eat it.

'Are you feeling all right. Dasey?' Miss. Darling asked from the head of the table.

'I had such a huge breakfast.' Dasey said. 'I really couldn't eat a thing.'

(The Weekly Test)

At two o'clock sharp the class assembled. including Miss. Darling noted that the jug of water and the glass were in the proper place. Then she took up a position standing right at the back. Everyone waited. Suddenly in marched the gigantic figure of the Headmistress in her belted smock and green breeches.

'Good afternoon. children.' she barked.

'Good afternoon. Miss. Mcfarts.' they chirruped.

The Headmistress stood before the class. legs apart; hands-on-hips. glaring at the small boys and girls who sat nervously at their desks in front of her.

'Not a very pretty sight.' she said. Her expression was one of utter distaste. as though she were looking at something a dog had done in the middle of the floor. 'What a bunch of nauseating little warts you are.'

Everyone had the sense to stay silent.

'It makes me vomit.' she went on. 'To think that I am going to have to put up with a load of garbage like you in my school for the next six years. I can see that I'm going to have to expel as many of you as possible as soon as possible to save myself from going around the bend.' She paused and snorted several times. It was a curious noise. You can hear the same sort of thing if you walk through a riding-stable when the horses are being fed. 'I suppose.' she went on. 'your mothers and fathers tell you -you're wonderful. Well. I am here to tell you the opposite. and you'd better believe me. Stand up, everybody!'

They all got quickly to their feet.

'Now put your hands out in front of you. And as I walk past, I want you to turn them over so I can see if they are clean on both sides.'

The Mcfarts began a slow march along the rows of desks inspecting the hands. All went well until she came to a small boy in the second row. 'What's your name?' she barked.

'Tom.' the boy said.

'Tom what?'

'Tom Hicks.' the boy said.

'Tom Hicks what?' the Mcfarts bellowed. She bellowed so loud she nearly blew the little chap out of the window.

'That's it.' Tom said. 'Unless you want my middle names as well.' He was a brave little fellow and one could see that he was trying not to be scared by the Gorgon who towered above him.

'I do not want your middle names. you blister!' the Gorgon bellowed. 'What is my name?'

'Miss. Mcfarts.' Tom said.

'Then use it when you address me! Now then. let's try again. What is your name?'

'Tom Hicks. Miss. Mcfarts.' Tom said.

'That's better.' the Mcfarts said. 'Your hands are filthy.

Tom! When did you last wash them?'

'Well. let me think.' Tom said. 'That's rather difficult to remember exactly. It could have been yesterday or it could have been the day before.'

The Mcfarts's whole body and face seemed to swell up as though she were being inflated by a bicycle pump.

'I knew it!' she bellowed. 'I knew as soon as I saw you that you were nothing but a piece of filth! What is your father's job? a sewage-worker?'

'He's a doctor.' Tom said. 'And a jolly good one. He says we're all so covered with bugs anyway that a bit of extra dirt never hurts anyone.'

'I'm glad he's not my doctor.' the Mcfarts said. 'And why. might I ask. is there a baked bean on the front of your shirt?'

'We had them for lunch. Miss. Mcfarts.'

'And do you usually put your lunch on the front of your shirt. Tom? Is that what this famous doctor father of yours has taught you to do?'

'Baked beans are hard to eat. Miss. Mcfarts. They keep falling off my fork.'

'You are disgusting!' The Mcfarts bellowed. 'You are a walking germ-factory! I don't wish to see any more of you today! Go and stand in the corner on one leg with your face to the wall!'

'But Miss. Mcfarts.'

'Don't argue with me. boy. or I'll make you stand on your head! Now do as you're told!'

Tom went.

'Now stay where you are. boy. while I test you on your spelling to see if you've learned anything at all this past week. And don't turn around when you talk to me. Keep your nasty little face to the wall. Now then. spell 'write."

'Which one?' Tom asked. 'The thing you do with a pen or the one that means the opposite of wrong?' He happened to be an unusually bright child and his mother had worked hard with him at home on spelling and reading.

'The one with the pen. you little fool.'

Tom spelled it correctly which surprised the Mcfarts. She thought she had given him a very tricky word. one that he wouldn't yet have learned. and she was peeved that he had succeeded.

Then Tom said. still balancing on one leg and facing the wall. 'Miss. Darling taught us how to spell a new very long word yesterday.'

'And what word was that?' the Mcfarts asked softly. The softer her voice became. the greater the danger. but Tom wasn't to know this.

''Difficulty.'' Tom said. 'Everyone in the class can spell 'difficulty' now.'

'What nonsense.' the Mcfarts said. 'You are not supposed to learn long words like that until you are at least eight or nine. And don't try to tell me everybody in the class can spell that word. You are lying to me. Tom.'

'Test someone.' Tom said. taking an awful chance. 'Test anyone you like.'

The Mcfarts's dangerous glittering eyes roved around the classroom. 'You.' she said. pointing at a tiny and rather daft little girl called Prudence. 'Spell 'difficulty.''

Amazingly. Prudence spelled it correctly and without a moment's hesitation.

The Mcfarts was properly taken aback. 'Humph!' she snorted. 'And I suppose Miss. Darling wasted the whole of one lesson teaching you to spell that one single word?'

'Oh no. she didn't.' piped Tom. 'Miss. Darling taught it to us in three minutes so we'll never forget it. She teaches us lots of words in three minutes.'

'And what exactly is this magic method. Miss. Darling?' asked the Headmistress.

'I'll show you.' piped up the brave Tom again. coming to Miss.

Darling's rescue. 'Can I put my other foot down and turn around; please. while I show you?'

'You may do neither!' snapped the Mcfarts. 'Stay as you are and show me just the same!'

'All right.' said Tom. wobbling crazily on his one leg. 'Miss. Darling gives us a little song about each word and we all sing it together and we learn to spell it in no time. Would you like to hear the song about 'struggle'?'

'I should be fascinated.' the Mcfarts said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

'Here it is.' Tom said.

'Ms. D. Ms. I. Ms. FFI

Ms. C. Ms. U. Ms. LTY.

Or M- i- ss -i- ss- l- pp- l- we go that on the other day...

That spells struggle.'

'How perfectly outlandish!' snorted the Mcfarts. 'Why are all these women married? And anyway, you're not meant to teach poetry when you're teaching spelling. Cut it out in the future. Miss. Darling.'

'But it does teach them some of the harder words wonderfully well.' Miss. Darling murmured.

'Don't argue with me. Miss. Darling!' the Headmistress thundered. 'Just do as you're told! I intend to now test the class on the multiplication tables to see if Miss. Darling has taught you anything at all in that direction.' The Mcfarts had returned to her place in front of the class. and her diabolical gaze was moving slowly along the rows of tiny pupils. 'You!' she barked. pointing at a small boy called Graceie in the front row. 'What are the two sevens?'

'Sixteen.' Graceie answered with foolish abandon.

The Mcfarts started advancing slow and soft-footed upon Graceie in the manner of a tigress stalking a small deer. Graceie suddenly became aware of the danger signals and quickly tried again. 'It's eighteen!' he cried. 'Two sevens are eighteen. not sixteen!'

'Your ignorant little slug!' The Mcfarts bellowed. 'You witless weed! You empty-headed hamster! You- a stupid glob of glue!' She had now stationed herself directly behind Graceie. and suddenly she extended a hand the size of a tennis racquet and grabbed all the hair on Graceie's head in

her fist. Graceie had a lot of golden-colored hair. His mother thought it was beautiful to behold and took delight in allowing it to grow extra-long. The Mcfarts had as great a dislike for long hair on boys as she had for plaits and pigtails on girls and she was about to show it. She took a firm grip on Graceie's long golden tresses with her giant hand and then. by raising her muscular right arm. she lifted the helpless boy clean out of his chair and held him aloft.

Graceie yelled. He twisted and squirmed and kicked the air and went on yelling like a stuck pig. and Miss. Mcfarts bellowed. 'Two sevens are fourteen! Two sevens are fourteen!

I am not letting you go till you say it!'

From the back of the class. Miss. Darling cried out. 'Miss. Mcfarts! Please let him down! You're hurting him! All his hair might come out!'

'And well it might if he doesn't stop wriggling!' snorted the Mcfarts. 'Keep still. you squirming worm!'

It really was a quite extraordinary sight to see this giant Headmistress dangling the small boy high in the air and the boy spinning and twisting like something on the end of a string and shrieking his head off.

'Say it!' bellowed the Mcfarts. 'Say two sevens are fourteen!

Hurry up or I'll start jerking you up and down and then your hair really will come out and we'll have enough of it to stuff a sofa! Get on with it boy! Say two sevens are fourteen and I'll let you go!'

'T-t-two s-sevens are f-f-fourteen.' gasped Graceie. whereupon the Mcfarts. true to her word. opened her hand and quite literally let him go. He was a long way off the ground when she released him and he plummeted to earth and hit the floor and bounced like a football.

'I don't like small people.' she was saying. 'Small people should never be seen by anybody. They should be kept out of sight in boxes like hairpins and buttons. I cannot for the life of me see why children have to take so long to grow up. I think they do it on purpose.'

Another extremely brave little boy in the front row spoke up and said. 'But surely you were a small person once. Miss. Mcfarts. weren't you?'

'Get up and stop whimpering.' The Mcfarts barked.

Graceie got up and went back to his desk massaging his scalp with both hands. The Mcfarts returned to the front of the class. The children sat there hypnotized. None of them had seen anything quite like this before. It was splendid entertainment. It was better than a pantomime. but with one big difference. In this room, there was an enormous human bomb in front of them which was liable to explode and blow someone to bits any moment. The children's eyes were riveted on the Headmistress.

'I was never a small person.' she snapped. 'I have been large all my life and I don't see why others can't be the same way.'

'But you must have started out as a baby.' the boy said.

'Me! A baby!' shouted the Mcfarts. 'How dare you suggest such a thing! What cheek! What infernal insolence! What's your name?

boy? And stand up when you speak to me!'

The boy stood up. 'My name is Jennie Ink. Miss. Mcfarts.' He said.

'Jennie what?' The Mcfarts shouted.

'Ink.' the boy said.

'Don't be an ass. boy! There's no such name!'

'Look in the phone book.' Jennie said. 'You'll see my father there under Ink.'

'Very well. then.' the Mcfarts said. 'You may be Ink. young man. but let me tell you something. You're not indelible. I'll very soon rub you out if you try getting clever with me. Spell what.'

'I don't understand.' Jennie said. 'What do you want me to spell?'

'Spell what. you idiot! Spell the word 'what'!' 'W. O. Tttta.' Jennie said. answering too quickly.

There was a nasty silence.

'I'll give you one more chance.' The Mcfarts said. not moving.

'Ah yes. I know.' Jennie said. 'It's got an H in it. W. H. O- 0. T. It's easy.' That is when she throws her out the window... by her underwire... the class stops as she makes her way back to class to do it all over...

In two large strides, the Mcfarts was behind Jennie's desk. and there she stood. a pillar of doom towering over the helpless boy. Jennie glanced fearfully back over his shoulder at the monster. 'I was right. wasn't I?' he murmured nervously. 'You were wrong!' the Mcfarts barked. 'In fact, you strike me as the sort of poisonous little pockmark that will always be wrong! You sit wrong! You look wrong! You speak wrong! You are wrong all around! I will give you one more chance to be right! Spell 'what'!'

Jennie hesitated. Then he said very slowly. 'It's not W. O. T. and it's not W. H. O. T. is there an E on the end or no? Maybe...Ah. I know. It must be W. H. O. T. T.'

Standing behind Jennie. the Mcfarts reached out and took hold of the boy's two ears. one with each hand. pinching them between forefinger and thumb.

'Ow!' Jennie cried. 'Ow! You're hurting me!'

'I haven't started yet.' the Mcfarts said energetically. As well as now. taking a firm grip on his two ears. she lifted him bodily out of his seat and held him aloft.

Like Graceie before her. Jennie squealed the house down.

From the back of the classroom Miss. Darling cried out. 'Miss.

Mcfarts! Don't! Please let him go! His ears might come off!'

'They'll never come off.' the Mcfarts shouted back. 'I have discovered through long experience. Miss. Darling. that the ears of small boys are stuck very firmly to their heads.' 'Let her go. Miss. Mcfarts. please.' begged Miss. Darling. 'You could damage him. you really could! You could wrench them right off!'

'Ears never come off!' the Mcfarts shouted. 'They stretch most stunningly. like these are doing now. but I can assure you they never come off!'

Jennie was squealing louder than ever and pedaling the air with his legs.

Martrace had never before seen a boy. or anyone else for that matter. held aloft by his ears alone. Like Miss. Darling. she felt sure both ears were going to come off at any moment with all the weight that was on them.

The Mcfarts was shouting. ‘The word 'what' is spelled W. H. A. T. Now spell it. you little dick-wart!’

Jennie didn't hesitate. He had learned from watching Graceie a few minutes before that the quicker you answered the quicker you were released. ‘W. H. A. T.' he squealed.

‘Spells what!’

Still holding him by the ears. the Mcfarts lowered him back into his chair behind his desk. Then she marched back to the front of the class. dusting off her hands one against the other like someone who has been handling something rather grimy.

There's nothing like a little meandering and fidgeting to encourage them to remember things. It concentrates their minds delightfully.’ ‘That's the way to make them learn. Miss. Darling.’ she said. ‘You take it from me. it's no good just telling them. You've got to hammer it into them.

‘You could do them permanent damage. Miss. Mcfarts.’ Miss. Darling cried out.

‘Oh. I have. I'm quite sure I have.’ the Mcfarts answered.

grinning. ‘Jennie's ears will have stretched quite considerably in the last couple of minutes! They'll be much longer now than they were before. There's nothing wrong with that. Miss. Darling. It'll give him an interesting pixie look for the rest of his life.’

‘But Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Oh. do shut up. Miss. Darling! You're as wet as any of them. If you can't cope in here then you can go and find a job in some cotton wool private school for rich brats. When you have been teaching for as long as I have, you'll realize that it's no good at all being kind to children. Read Nicholas Nickleby. Miss. Darling. by Mr. Dickens.

Read about Mr. Wakeford Squeers; the admirable headmaster of Sotheby’s Hall. He knew how to handle the little brutes. didn't he! He knew how to use birch. didn't he! He kept their backsides so warm you could have fried eggs and bacon on them! A fine book. that. But I don't suppose this bunch of morons we've got here will ever read it because by the look of them they are never going to learn to read anything!’

‘I've read it.’ Martrace said quietly.

The Mcfarts flicked her head around and looked carefully at the small girl with dark hair and deep brown eyes sitting in the second row. 'What did you say?' she asked sharply.

'I said I've read it. Miss. Mcfarts.'

'Read what?'

'Nicholas Nickleby. Miss. Mcfarts.'

'You are lying to me. madam!' the Mcfarts shouted. glaring at Martrace. 'I doubt there is a single child in the entire school who has read that book. and here you are. an unhatched shrimp sitting in the lowest form there is. trying to tell me a whopping great lie like that! Why do you do it? You must take me for a fool! Do you take me for a fool? child?'

'Well.' Martrace said. then she hesitated. She would like to have said. 'Yes. I jolly well do.' but that would have been suicide. 'Well.' she said again. still hesitating. still refusing to say 'No.'

The Mcfarts sensed what the child was thinking and she didn't like it. 'Stand up when you speak to me!' she snapped.

'What is your name?'

Martrace stood up and said. 'My name is Martrace Dicksnoter. Miss. Mcfarts.'

'Dicksnoter. is it?' the Mcfarts said. 'In that case, you must be the daughter of that man who owns Dicksnoter Motors?'

'Yes. Miss. Mcfarts.'

'He's a crook!' the Mcfarts shouted. 'A week ago, he sold me a second-hand car that he said was almost new. I thought he was a splendid fellow then. But this morning. while I was driving that car through the village. the entire engine fell out on to the road! The whole thing was filled with sawdust! The man's a thief and a robber! I'll have his skin for sausages. you see if I don't!'

'He's clever at his business.' Martrace said.

'Clever my foot!' the Mcfarts shouted. 'Miss. Darling tells me that you are meant to be clever. too! Well, madam. I don't like clever people! They are all crooked! You are most certainly crooked! Before I fell out with your father. he told me some very nasty stories about the way you behaved at

home! But you'd better not try anything in this school. young lady. I intend to be keeping a very careful eye on you from now on.

Sit down and keep quiet.'

The First Miracle Martrace sat down again at her desk. The Mcfarts seated herself behind the teacher's table- muting to herself yes make-fun of my name. It was the first time she had sat down during the lesson. Then she reached out a hand and took hold of her water-jug. Still holding the jug by the handle but not lifting it yet. she said. 'I have never been able to understand why small children are so disgusting. They are the bane of my life. They are like insects. They should be got rid of as early as possible. We get rid of flies with fly-spray and by hanging up fly-paper. I have often thought of inventing a spray for getting rid of small children. How splendid it would be to walk into this classroom with a gigantic spray-gun in my hands and start pumping it. Or better still. some huge strips of sticky paper. I would hang them all around the school and you'd all get stuck to them and that would be the end of it. Wouldn't that be a good idea?

Miss. Darling?'

'If it's meant to be a joke. Headmistress. I don't think it's a very funny one.' Miss. Darling said from the back of the class. 'You wouldn't. would you. Miss. Darling.' the Mcfarts said. 'And it's not meant to be a joke. My idea of a perfect school. Miss. Darling. is one that has no children in it at all. One of these days I intend to start up a school like that. I think it will be very successful.'

The woman's mad. Miss. Darling was telling herself. She's round - the twist. She's the one who ought to be got rid of.

The Mcfarts now lifted the large blue porcelain water jug and poured some water into her glass. And suddenly. with the water. out came the long slimy newt straight into the glass. plop!

The Mcfarts let out a yell and leaped off her chair as though a firecracker had gone off underneath her. And now the children also saw the long thin slimy yellow-bellied lizardlike creature twisting and turning in the glass. and they squirmed and jumped about as well. shouting. 'What is it?

Oh. it's disgusting! It's a snake! It's a baby crocodile! It's an alligator!'

'Lookout. Miss. Mcfarts!' cried Dasey. 'I'll bet it bites!'

The Mcfarts. this mighty female giant. stood there in her green breeches. quivering like a blancmange. She was especially furious that someone had succeeded in making her jump and yell like that because she prided herself on her toughness. She stared at the creature twisting and wriggling in the glass. Curiously enough. she had never seen a newt before. Natural history was not her strong point. She hadn't the faintest idea what this thing was. It certainly looked extremely unpleasant. Slowly she sat down again in her chair.

She looked at this moment more terrifying than ever before. The fires of fury and hatred were smoldering in her small black eyes.

'Martrace!' she barked. 'Stand up!'

'Who. me?' Martrace said. 'What have I done?'

'Stand up. you disgusting little cockroach!'

'I haven't done anything. Miss. Mcfarts. honestly, I haven't. I've never seen that slimy thing before!'

'Stand up at once; you- filthy little maggot SHIT!'

Reluctantly. Martrace got to her feet. She was in the second row. Dasey was in the row behind her. feeling a bit guilty. She hadn't intended to get her friend into trouble. On the other hand. she was certainly not about to own up.

"You are vile. repulsive. repellent. malicious little brute!' the Mcfarts was shouting. 'You are not fit to be in this school! You ought to be behind bars. that's where you ought to be! I intend to have you drummed out of this establishment in utter disgrace! I intend to have the prefects chase you down the corridor and out of the front-door with hockey-sticks! I intend to have the staff escort you home under armed guard! And then I intend to make absolutely sure you are sent to a reformatory for delinquent girls for a minimum of forty years!'

The Mcfarts was in such a rage that her face had taken on a boiled color and little flecks of froth were gathering at the corners of her mouth. Nevertheless. she was not the only one who was losing her cool. Martrace was also beginning to see red. She didn't in the least mind being accused of having done something she had actually done. She could see the justice of that. It was. however. a totally new experience for her to be accused of a crime that she definitely had not committed. She had

had absolutely nothing to do with that beastly creature in the glass. By golly. she thought. that rotten Mcfarts isn't going to pin this one on me!

'I did not do it!' she screamed.

'Oh yes. you did!' the Mcfarts roared back. 'Nobody else could have thought up a trick like that! Your father was right to warn me about you!' The woman seemed to have lost control of herself completely. She was ranting like a maniac. 'You are finished in this school. young lady!' she shouted. 'You are finished everywhere. I intend to personally see to it that you are put away in a place where not even the crows can land their droppings on you! You will probably never see the light of day again!'

'I'm telling you I did not do it!' Martrace screamed. 'I've never even seen a creature like that in my life!'

'You have put a. a. a crocodile in my drinking water!' the Mcfarts yelled back. 'There is no worse crime in the world against a Headmistress! Now sit down and don't say a word! Go on. sit down at once!'

'But I'm telling you.' Martrace shouted. refusing to sit down.

'I am telling you to shut up!' the Mcfarts roared. 'If you don't shut up at once and sit down, I intend to remove my belt and let you have it with the end that has the buckle!'

Slowly Martrace sat down. Oh. the rottenness of it all! The unfairness! How dare they expel her for something she hadn't done!

Martrace felt herself getting angrier. and angrier. and angrier. so unbearably angry that something was bound to explode inside her very soon.

The newt was still squirming in the tall glass of water. It looked horribly uncomfortable. The glass was not big enough for it. Martrace glared at the Mcfarts. How she hated her. She glared at the glass with the newt in it. She longed to march up and grab the glass and tip the contents. newt and all. over the Mcfarts's head. She trembled to think what the Mcfarts would do to her if she did that.

The Mcfarts was sitting behind the teacher's table starting with a mixture of horror and fascination at the newt wriggling in the glass. Martrace's eyes were also riveted on the glass. And now. quite slowly. there began to creep over Martrace a most extraordinary and peculiar feeling. The feeling

was mostly in the eyes. A kind of electricity seemed to be gathering inside them. A sense of power was brewing in those eyes of hers. a feeling of great strength was settling itself deep inside her eyes. But there was also another feeling which was something else altogether. and which she could not understand. It was like flashes of lightning.

Little waves of lightning seemed to be flashing out of her eyes. Her eyeballs were beginning to get hot. as though vast energy was building up somewhere inside them. It was an amazing sensation. She kept her eyes steadily on the glass. and now the power was concentrating in one small part of each eye and growing stronger and stronger and it felt as though millions of tiny little invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out of her eyes towards the glass she was staring at. 'Tip it!' Martrace whispered. 'Tip it over!'

She saw the glass wobble. It actually tilted backward a fraction of an inch. then righted itself again. She kept pushing at it with all those millions of invisible little arms and hands that were reaching out from her eyes. feeling the power that was flashing straight from the two little black dots in the very centers of her eyeballs.

'Tip it!' she whispered again. 'Tip it over!'

Once more the glass wobbled. She pushed harder still. willing her eyes to shoot out more power. And then; very- very slowly. so slowly she could hardly see it happening. the glass began to lean backward. farther and farther and farther back until it was balancing on just one edge of its base. And there it teetered for a few seconds before finally toppling over and falling with a sharp tinkle on to the desktop. The water in it and the squirming newt splashed out all over Miss. Mcfarts's enormous bosom. The headmistress let out a yell that must have rattled every window-pane in the building and for the second time in the last five minutes she shot out of her chair like a rocket. The newt clutched desperately at the cotton smock where it covered the great chest and there it clung with its little claw-like feet. The Mcfarts looked down and saw it and she bellowed even louder and with a swipe of her hand, she sent the creature flying across the classroom. It landed on the floor beside Dasey's desk and very quickly she ducked down and picked it up and put it into her pencil-box for another time. A newt. she decided. It was a useful thing to have around.

The Mcfarts. her face more like a boiled ham than ever. was standing before the class quivering with fury. Her massive bosom was heaving in and out and the splash of water down the front of it made a dark wet patch that had probably soaked right through to her skin.

'Who did it?' she roared. 'Come on! Own up! Step forward! You won't escape this time! Who is responsible for this dirty job? Who pushed over this glass?'

Nobody answered. The whole room remained silent as a tomb.

'Martrace!' she roared. 'It was you! I know it was you!'

Martrace. in the second row. sat very still and said nothing. A strange feeling of serenity and confidence was sweeping over her and all of a sudden, she found that she was frightened by nobody in the world. With the power of her eyes alone she had compelled a glass of water to tip and spill its contents over the horrible Headmistress. and anybody who could do that could do anything.

'Speak up. you clotted carbuncle!' roared the Mcfarts.

'Admit that you did it!'

Martrace looked right back into the flashing eyes of this infuriated female giant and said with total calmness. 'I have not moved away from my desk. Miss. Mcfarts. since the lesson began. I can say no more.'

Suddenly the entire class seemed to rise up against the Headmistress. 'She didn't move!' they cried out. 'Martrace didn't move! Nobody moved! You must have knocked it over yourself!'

'I most certainly did not knock it over myself!' roared the Mcfarts. 'How dare you suggest a thing like that! Speak up. Miss. Darling! You must have seen everything! Who knocked over my glass?'

'None of the children did. Miss. Mcfarts.' Miss. Darling answered. 'I can vouch for it that nobody has moved from his or her desk all the time you've been here. except for Tom and he has not moved from his corner.'

Miss. Mcfarts glared at Miss. Darling. Miss. Darling met her gaze without flinching. 'I am telling you the truth. Headmistress.' she said. 'You must have knocked it over without knowing it. That sort of thing is easy to do.'

'I am fed up with you- a useless bunch of clown holes!' Roared the Mcfarts. 'I refuse to waste any more of my precious time here!' And with that, she marched out of the classroom. slamming the door behind her.

In the stunned silence that followed. Miss. Darling walked up to the front of the class and stood behind her table. 'Phew!' she said. 'I think we've had enough school for one day. don't you? The class is to dismiss. You may all go out to the playground and wait for your parents to come and take you home.'

(The Second Miracle)

Martrace did not join the rush to get out of the classroom. After the other children had all disappeared. she remained at her desk. quiet and thoughtful. She knew she had to tell some body about what had happened with the glass. She couldn't possibly keep a gigantic secret like that bottled up inside her. What she needed was just one person. one wise and sympathetic grown-up who could help her to understand the meaning of this extraordinary happening.

Neither her mother nor her father would be of any use at all. If they believed her story. and it was doubtful they would. they almost certainly would fail to realize what an astounding event it was that had taken place in the classroom that afternoon. On the spur of the moment. Martrace decided that the one person she would like to confide in was Miss. Darling.

Martrace and Miss. Darling were now the only two lefts in the classroom. Miss. Darling had seated herself at her table and was rifling through some papers. She looked up and said.

'Well; Martrace. aren't you going outside with the others?'

Martrace said. 'Please, may I talk to you for a moment?'

'Of course, you may. What's troubling you?'

'Something very peculiar has happened to me. Miss. Darling.'

Miss. Darling became instantly alert. Ever since the two disastrous meetings she had had recently about Martrace. the first with the Headmistress and the second with the dreadful Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling had been thinking a great deal about this child and wondering how she could help her. And now. here was Martrace sitting in the classroom with a curiously exalted look on her face and asking if she could have a private talk. Miss. Darling had never seen her looking so wide-eyed and peculiar before.

'Yes. Martrace.' she said. 'Tell me what has happened to you that is so peculiar.'

'Miss. Mcfarts isn't going to expel me. is she?' Martrace asked. 'Because it wasn't me who put that creature in her jug of water. I promise you it wasn't.'

'I know it wasn't.' Miss. Darling said.

'Am I going to be expelled?'

'I think not.' Miss. Darling said. 'The Headmistress simply got a little over-excited. that's all.'

'Good.' Martrace said. 'But that isn't what I want to talk to you about.'

'What do you want to talk to me about. Martrace?'

'I want to talk to you about the glass of water with the creature in it.' Martrace said. 'You saw it spilling all over Miss. Mcfarts. didn't you?'

'I did indeed.'

'Well. Miss. Darling. I didn't touch it. I never went near it.'

'I know you didn't.' Miss. Darling said. 'You heard me telling the

Headmistress that it couldn't possibly have been you.'

'Ah. but it was me. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said. 'That's exactly what I want to talk to you about.'

Miss. Darling paused and looked carefully at the child. 'I don't think I quite follow you.' she said.

'I got so angry at being accused of something I hadn't done that I made it happen.'

'You made that happen. Martrace?'

'I made the glass tip over.'

'I still don't quite understand what you mean.' Miss. Darling said gently.

'I did it with my eyes.' Martrace said. 'I was staring at it and wishing it to tip and then my eyes went all hot and funny and some sort of power came out of them and the glass just toppled over.'

Miss. Darling continued to look steadily at Martrace through her steel-rimmed spectacles and Martrace looked back at her just as steadily.

'I am still not following you.' Miss. Darling said. 'Do you mean you actually willed the glass to tip over?'

'Yes.' Martrace said. 'With my eyes.'

Miss. Darling was silent for a moment. She did not think Martrace was meaning to tell a lie. It was more likely that she was simply allowing her vivid imagination to run away with her. 'You mean you were sitting where you are now and you told the glass to topple over and it did?'

'Something like that. Miss. Darling. yes.'

'If you did that. then it is just about the greatest miracle a person has ever performed since the time of Jesus.'

'I did it. Miss. Darling.'

It is extraordinary. thought Miss. Darling. how often small children have flights of fancy like this. She decided to put an end to it as gently as possible. 'Could you do it again?' she asked. not unkindly.

'I don't know.' Martrace said. 'but I think I might be able to.'

Miss. Darling moved the now empty glass to the middle of the table. 'Should I put water in it?' she asked. smiling a little.

'I don't think it matters.' Martrace said.

'Very well. then. Go ahead and tip it over.'

'It may take some time.'

Take all the time you want.' Miss. Darling said. I'm in no hurry.'

Martrace. sitting in the second row about ten feet away from Miss. Darling. put her elbows on the desk and cupped her face in her hands. and this time she gave the order right at the beginning. 'Tip glass. tip!' she ordered. but her lips didn't move and she made no sound. She simply shouted the words inside her head. And now she concentrated the whole of her mind and her brain and her will up into her eyes and once again but much more quickly than before she felt the electricity gathering and the power was beginning to surge and the hotness was coming into the eyeballs. and then the millions of tiny invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out towards the glass. and without making any sound at all she kept on shouting inside her head for the glass to go over. She saw it wobble. then it tilted. then it toppled right over and fell with a tinkle on to the tabletop not twelve inches from Miss. Darling's folded arms.

Miss. Darling's mouth dropped open and her eyes stretched so wide you could see the whites all around. She didn't say a word. She couldn't. The shock of seeing the miracle performed had struck her dumb. She gaped at the glass. leaning well away from it now as though it might be a dangerous thing. Then slowly she lifted the head and looked at Martrace. She saw the child white in the face. as white as paper. trembling all over. the eyes glazed. staring straight ahead and seeing nothing. The whole face was transfigured. the eyes round and bright and she was sitting there speechless. quite beautiful in a blaze of silence.

Miss. Darling waited. trembling a little herself and watching the child as she slowly stirred herself back into consciousness.

And then suddenly. click went her face into a look of almost seraphic calm. 'I'm all right.' she said and smiled. 'I'm quite all right. Miss. Darling. So don't be alarmed.'

'You seemed so far away.' Miss. Darling whispered. awestruck.

'Oh. I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings.'

Martrace said. 'It was wonderful.'

Miss. Darling was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment. as though she were The Creation. The Beginning of The World. The First Morning.

'It went much quicker this time.' Martrace said quietly.

'It's not possible!' Miss. Darling was gasping. 'I don't believe it! I simply don't believe it!' She closed her eyes and kept them closed for quite a while. and when she opened them again it seemed as though she had gathered herself together. 'Would you like to come back and have tea at my cottage?' she asked.

'Oh. I'd love to.' Martrace said.

'Good. Gather up your things and I'll meet you outside in a couple of minutes.'

'You won't tell anyone about this. this thing that I did. will you. Miss. Darling?'

'I wouldn't dream of it.' Miss. Darling said.

Miss. Darling's Cottage

Miss. Darling joined Martrace outside the school gates and the two of them walked in silence through the village Love Street. They passed the greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges. and the butcher with bloody lumps of meat on display and naked chickens hanging up. and a small bank. and the grocery store and the electrical shop. and then they came out on the other side of the village on to the narrow country road where there were no people anymore and very few motor-cars.

-And-

Now that they were alone. Martrace all of a sudden became wildly animated. It seemed as though a valve had burst inside her and a great gush of energy was being released. She trotted beside Miss. Darling with wild little hops and her fingers flew as if she would scatter them to the four winds and her words went off like fireworks. with terrific speed. It was from Miss. Darling this and Miss. Darling that and Miss. Darling, I do honestly feel I could move almost anything in the world. not just t ipping over glasses and little things like that. I feel I could topple tables and chairs. Miss. Darling. Even when people are sitting in the chairs I think I could push them over. and bigger things too. much bigger things than chairs and tables. I only have to take a moment to get my eyes strong and then I can push it out. this strongness. at anything at all so long as I am staring at it hard enough. I have to stare at it very hard. Miss. Darling. very very hard. and then I can feel it all happening behind my eyes. and my eyes get hot just as though they were burning but I don't mind that in the least. and Miss. Darling.

'Calm yourself down. child. calm yourself down.' Miss. Darling said. 'Let us not get ourselves too worked up so early in the proceedings.'

'But you do think it is interesting. don't you. Miss. Darling?'

'Oh. it is interesting all right.' Miss. Darling said. 'It is more than interesting. But we must tread very carefully from now on. Martrace.'

'Why must we tread carefully. Miss. Darling?'

'Because we are playing with mysterious forces. my child. that we know nothing about. I do not think they are evil. They may be good. They may even be divine. But whether they are or not. let us handle them carefully.'

These were wise words from a wise old bird. but Martrace was too steamed up to see it that way. 'I don't see why we have to be so careful?' she said. still hopping about.

'I am trying to explain to you.' Miss. Darling said patiently. 'that we are dealing with the unknown. It is an unexplainable thing. The right word for it is a phenomenon. It is a phenomenon.'

'Am I a phenomenon?' Martrace asked.

'It is quite possible that you are.' Miss. Darling said. 'But I'd rather you didn't think about yourself as anything in particular at the moment. What I thought we might do is to explore this phenomenon a little further. just the two of us together. but make sure we take things very carefully all the time.'

'You want me to do some more of it then. Miss. Darling?'

'That is what I am tempted to suggest.' Miss. Darling said cautiously.

'Goody-good.' Martrace said.

'I myself.' Miss. Darling said. 'I am probably far more bowled over by what you did than you are. and I am trying to find some reasonable explanation.'

'Such as what?' Martrace asked.

'Such as whether or not it's got something to do with the fact that you are quite exceptionally precocious.'

'What exactly does that word mean?' Martrace said.

'A precocious child.' Miss. Darling said. 'is one that shows amazing intelligence early on. You are an unbelievably precocious child.'

'Am I really?' Martrace asked.

'Of course, you are. You must be aware of that. Look at your reading. Look at your mathematics.'

'I suppose you're right.' Martrace said.

Miss. Darling marveled at the child's lack of conceit and selfconsciousness.

'I can't help wondering.' she said. 'whether this sudden ability that has come to you. of being able to move an object without touching it. whether it might not have something to do with your brainpower.'

'You mean there might not be room in my head for all those brains so something has to push out?'

'That's not quite what I mean.' Miss. Darling said. smiling. 'But whatever happens. and I say it again. we must tread carefully from now on. I have not forgotten that strange and distant glimmer on your face after you tipped over the last glass.'

'Do you think doing it could actually hurt me? Is that what you're thinking. Miss. Darling?'

'It made you feel pretty peculiar. didn't it?'

'It made me feel lonely.' Martrace said. 'For a moment or two, I was flying past the stars on silver wings. I told you that. And intend to tell you something else. Miss. Darling? It was easier the second time. much much easier. I think it's like anything else. the more you practice it. the easier it gets.'

Miss. Darling was walking slowly so that the small child could keep up with her without trotting too fast. and it was very peaceful out there on the narrow road now that the village was behind them. It was one of those golden autumn afternoons and there were blackberries and splashes of old man's beard in the hedges. and the hawthorn berries were ripening scarlet for the birds when the cold winter came along. There were tall trees here and there on either side. oak and sycamore and ash and occasionally a sweet chestnut. Miss. Darling. wishing to change the subject for the moment. gave the names of all these to Martrace and taught her how to recognize them by the shape of their leaves and

the pattern of the bark on their trunks. Martrace took all this in and stored the knowledge away carefully in her mind.

They came finally to a gap in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road where there was a five-barred gate. 'This way.' Miss.

Darling said. and she opened the gate and led Martrace through and closed it again. They were now walking along a narrow lane that was no more than a rutted cart-track. There was a high hedge of hazel on either side and you could see clusters of ripe brown nuts in their green jackets. The squirrels would be collecting them all very soon. Miss. Darling said. and storing them away carefully for the bleak months ahead.

'You mean you live down here?' Martrace asked.

'I do.' Miss. Darling replied. but she said no more.

Martrace had never once stopped to think about where Miss. Darling might be living. She had always regarded her purely as a teacher. a person who turned up out of nowhere and taught at school and then went away again. Do any of us children. she wondered. ever stop to ask ourselves where our teachers go when school is over for the day? Do we wonder if they live alone? or if there is a mother at home or a sister or a husband? 'Do you live all by yourself. Miss. Darling?' she asked.

'Yes.' Miss. Darling said. 'Very much so.'

They were walking over the deep sunbaked mud-tracks of the lane and you had to watch where you put your feet if you didn't want to twist your ankle. There were a few small birds around in the hazel branches but that was all.

'It's just a farm laborer's cottage.' Miss. Darling said. 'You mustn't expect too much of it. We're nearly there.'

They came to a small green gate half-buried in the hedge on the right and almost hidden by the overhanging hazel branches. Miss. Darling paused with one hand on the gate and said. 'There it is. That's where I live.'

Martrace saw a narrow dirt path leading to a tiny red-brick cottage. The cottage was so small it looked more like a doll's house than a human dwelling. The bricks it was built of were old and crumbly

and very pale red. It had a grey slate roof and one small chimney. and there were two little windows at the front. Each window was no larger than a sheet of a tabloid newspaper and there was clearly no upstairs to the place. On either side of the path, there was a wilderness of nettles and blackberry thorns and long brown grass. An enormous oak tree stood overshadowing the cottage. Its massive spreading branches seemed to be enfolding and embracing the tiny building. and perhaps hiding it as well from the rest of the world.

Miss. Darling. with one hand on the gate which she had not yet opened. turned to Martrace and said. 'A poet called Dylan Thomas once wrote some lines that I think of every time I walk up this path.'

Martrace waited. and Miss. Darling. in a rather wonderful slow voice. began reciting the poem:

'Never and never. my girl riding far and near In the land of the hearthstone tales. and spelled asleep.

Fear or believe that the wolf in the sheep-white hood Loping and bleating roughly and blithely intend to leap. my dear. my dear.

Out of a lair in the flocked leaves in the dew-dipped year To eat your heart in the house in the rosy wood.'

There was a moment of silence. and Martrace. who had never before heard great romantic poetry spoken aloud? was profoundly moved. 'It's like music.' she whispered.

'It is music.' Miss. Darling said. And then. as though embarrassed at having revealed such a secret part of herself. she quickly pushed open the gate and walked up the path.

Martrace hung back. She was a bit frightened of this place now.

It seemed so unreal and remote and fantastic and so totally away from this earth. It was like an illustration in Grimm or Hans Andersen. It was the house where the poor woodcutter lived with Hansel and Gretel and where Red Riding Hood's grandmother lived and it was also the house of The Seven Dwarfs and The Three Bears and all the rest of them. It was straight out of a fairy-tale.

'Come along. my dear.' Miss. Darling called back. and Martrace followed her up the path.

The front door was covered with flaky green paint and there was no keyhole. Miss. Darling simply lifted the latch and pushed open the door and went in. Although she was not a tall woman. she had to stoop low to get through the doorway. Martrace went after her and found herself in what seemed to be a dark narrow tunnel.

'You can come through to the kitchen and help me make the tea.' Miss. Darling said. and she led the way along the tunnel into the kitchen - that is if you could call it a kitchen. It was not much bigger than a good-sized clothes cupboard and there was one small window in the back wall with a sink under the window. but there were no taps over the sink. Against another wall, there was a shelf. presumably for preparing food. and there was a single cupboard above the shelf. On the shelf itself there stood a Primus stove. a saucepan and a half-full bottle of milk. A Primus is a little camping-stove that you fill with paraffin and you light it at the top and then you pump it to get pressure for the flame.

'You can get me some water while I light the Primus.' Miss. Darling said. 'The well is out at the back. Take the bucket. Here it is. You'll find a rope in the well. Just hook the bucket on to the end of the rope and lower it down. but don't fall in yourself.' Martrace. more bemused than ever now. took the bucket and carried it out into the back garden. The well had a little wooden roof over it and a simple winding device and there was the rope dangling down into a dark bottomless hole. Martrace pulled up the rope and hooked the handle of the bucket on to the end of it. Then she lowered it until she heard a splash and the rope went slack. She pulled it up again and lo and behold. there was water in the bucket.

'Is that enough?' she asked. carrying it in.

'Just about.' Miss. Darling said. 'I don't suppose you've ever done that before?'

'Never.' Martrace said. 'It's fun. How do you get enough water for your bath?'

'I don't take a bath.' Miss. Darling said. 'I was standing up. I get a bucketful of water and I heat it on this little stove and I strip and wash all over.'

'Do you honestly do that?' Martrace asked.

'Of course, I do.' Miss. Darling said. 'Every poor person in England used to wash that way until not so very long ago. And they didn't have a Primus. They had to heat the water over the fire in the hearth.'

'Are you poor. Miss. Darling?'

'Yes.' Miss. Darling said. 'Very. It's a good little stove. isn't it?'

The Primus was roaring away with a powerful blue flame and already the water in the saucepan was beginning to bubble. Miss. Darling got a teapot from the cupboard and put some tea leaves into it. She also found half a small loaf of brown bread. She cut two thin slices and then. from a plastic container. she took some margarine and spread it on the bread.

Margarine. Martrace thought. She really must be poor.

Miss. Darling found a tray and on it, she put two mugs. the teapot. the half bottle of milk and a plate with the two slices of bread. 'I'm afraid I don't have any sugar.' she said. 'I never use it.'

'That's all right.' Martrace said. In her wisdom, she seemed to be aware of the delicacy of the situation and she was taking great care not to say anything to embarrass her companion.

'Let's have it in the sitting-room.' Miss. Darling said. picking up the tray and leading the way out of the kitchen and down the dark little tunnel into the room at the front. Martrace followed her. but just inside the doorway of the so-called sitting-room she stopped and stared around her in absolute amazement. The room was as small and square and bare as a prison cell. The pale daylight that entered came from a single tiny window in the front wall. but there were no curtains. The only objects in the entire room were two upturned wooden boxes to serve as chairs and a third box between them for a table. That was all. There were no pictures on the walls. no carpet on the floor. only rough unpolished wooden planks. and there were gaps between the planks where dust and bits of grime had gathered. The ceiling was so low that with a jump Martrace could nearly touch it with her finger-tips. The walls were white but the whiteness didn't look like paint. Martrace rubbed her palm against it and white powder came off on to her skin. It was a whitewash. the cheap stuff that is used in cowsheds and stables and hen-houses.

Martrace was appalled. Was this really where her neat and trimly-dressed school teacher lived? Was this all she had to come back to after a day's work? It was unbelievable. And what was the reason for it? There was something very strange going on around here. surely.

Miss. Darling put the tray on one of the upturned boxes. 'Sit down. my dear. sit down.' she said. 'and we'll have a nice hot cup of tea. Help yourself to bread. Both slices are for you. I never eat anything when I get home. I have a good old tuck-in at the school lunch and that keeps me going until the next morning.'

Martrace perched herself carefully on an upturned box and more out of politeness than anything else she took a slice of bread and margarine and started to eat it. At home, she would have been having buttered toast and strawberry jam and probably a piece of sponge-Cherry pie to round it off. And yet this was somehow far more fun. There was a mystery here in this house. a great mystery. there was no doubt about that. and Martrace was longing to find out what it was.

Miss. Darling poured the tea and added a little milk to both cups. She appeared to be not in the least ill at ease sitting on an upturned box in a bare room and drinking tea out of a mug that she balanced on her knee.

'You know.' she said. 'I've been thinking very hard about what you did with that glass. It is a great power you have been given. my child. you know that.'

'Yes. Miss. Darling. I do.' Martrace said. chewing her bread and margarine.

'So far as I know.' Miss. Darling went on. 'nobody else in the history of the world has been able to compel an object to move without touching it or blowing on it or using any outside help at all.'

Martrace nodded but said nothing.

'The fascinating thing.' Miss. Darling said. 'would be to find out the real limit of this power of yours. Oh. I know you think you can move just about anything there is. but I have my doubts about that.'
'I'd love to try something really huge.' Martrace said.

'What about the distance?' Miss. Darling asked. 'Would you always have to be close to the thing you were pushing?'

'I simply don't know.' Martrace said. 'But it would be fun to find out.'

Miss. Darling's Story

'We mustn't hurry this.' Miss. Darling said. 'so let's have another cup of tea. And do eat that other slice of bread. You must be hungry.'

Martrace took the second slice and started eating it slowly. The margarine wasn't at all bad. She doubted whether she could have told the difference if she hadn't known. 'Miss. Darling.' she said suddenly. 'do they pay you very badly at our school?'

Miss. Darling looked up sharply. 'Not too badly.' she said. 'I get about the same as the others.'

'But it must still be very little if you are so dreadfully poor.' Martrace said. 'Do all the teachers live like this. with no furniture and no kitchen stove and no bathroom?'

'No. they don't.' Miss. Darling said rather stiffly. 'I just happen to be the exception.'

'I expect you just happen to like living in a very simple way.' Martrace said. probing a little further. 'It must make house cleaning an awful lot easier and you don't have furniture to polish or any of those silly little ornaments lying around that have to be dusted every day. And I suppose if you don't have a fridge you don't have to go out and buy all sorts of junky things like eggs and mayonnaise and ice-cream to fill it up with. It must save a terrific lot of shopping.'

At this point, Martrace noticed that Miss. Darling's face had gone all tight and peculiar-looking. Her whole body had become rigid. Her shoulders were hunched up high and her lips were pressed together tightly and she sat there gripping her mug of tea in both hands and staring down into it as though searching for a way to answer these not-quite-so-innocent questions.

There followed a rather long and embarrassing silence. In the space of thirty seconds, the atmosphere in the tiny room had changed completely and now it was vibrating with awkwardness and secrets.

Martrace said. 'I am very sorry I asked you those questions. Miss. Darling. It is not any of my business.'

At this. Miss. Darling seemed to rouse herself. She gave a shake of her shoulders and then very carefully she placed her mug on the tray.

'Why shouldn't you ask?' she said. 'You were bound to ask in the end. You are much too bright not to have wondered. Perhaps I even wanted you to ask. Maybe that is why I invite d you here after all. As a matter of fact, you are the first visitor to come to the cottage since I moved in two years ago.'

Martrace said nothing. She could feel the tension growing and growing in the room.

'You are so much wiser than your years. my dear.' Miss. Darling went on. 'that it quite staggers me. Although you look like a child. you are not really a child at all because your mind and your

powers of reasoning seem to be fully grown-up. So, I suppose we might call you a grown-up child. if you see what I mean.'

Martrace still did not say anything. She was waiting for what was coming next.

'Up to now.' Miss. Darling went on. 'I have found it impossible to talk to anyone about my problems. I couldn't face the embarrassment. and anyway I lack courage. Any courage I had was knocked out of me when I was young. But now. all of a sudden, I have a sort of desperate wish to tell everything to somebody. I know you are only a tiny little girl. but there is some kind of magic in you somewhere. I've seen it with my own eyes.'

Martrace became very alert. The voice she was hearing was surely crying out for help. It must be. It had to be.

Then the voice spoke again. 'Have some more tea.' it said.

'I think there's still a drop left.'

Martrace nodded.

Miss. Darling poured tea into both mugs and added milk. Again, she cupped her own mug in both hands and sat there sipping.

There was quite a long silence before she said. 'May I tell you a story?'

'Of course.' Martrace said.

'I am twenty-three years old.' Miss. Darling said. 'and when I was born my father was a doctor in this village. We had a nice old house. quite large. red-brick. It's tucked away in the woods behind the hills. I don't think you'd know it.'

Martrace kept silent.

'I was born there.' Miss. Darling said. 'And then came the first tragedy. My mother died when I was two. My father. a busy doctor. had to have someone to run the house and to look after me. So, he invited my mother's unmarried sister. my aunt. to come and live with us. She agreed and she came.'

Martrace was listening intently. 'How old was the aunt when she moved in?' she asked.

'Not very old.' Miss. Darling said. 'I should say about thirty. But I hated her right from the start. I Miss.ed my mother terribly. And the aunt was not a kind person. My father didn't know that because he was hardly ever around but when he did put in an appearance. the aunt behaved differently.'

Miss. Darling paused and sipped her tea. 'I can't think why I am telling you all this.' she said. embarrassed.

'Go on.' Martrace said. 'Please.'

'Well.' Miss. Darling said. 'then came the second tragedy. When I was five. my father died very suddenly. One day he was there and the next day he was gone. And so, I was left to live alone with my aunt. She became my legal guardian. She had all the powers of a parent over me. And in some way or another. she became the actual owner of the house.'

'How did your father die?' Martrace asked.

'It is interesting you should ask that.' Miss. Darling said. 'I myself was much too young to question it at the time. but I found out later that there was a good deal of mystery surrounding his death.'

'Didn't they know how he died?' Martrace asked.

'Well. not exactly.' Miss. Darling said. hesitating. 'You see. no one could believe that he would ever have done it. He was such a very sane and sensible man.'

'Done what?' Martrace asked.

'Killed himself.'

Martrace was stunned. 'Did he?' she gasped.

'That's what it looked like.' Miss. Darling said. 'But who knows?' She shrugged and turned away and stared out of the tiny window.

'I know what you're thinking.' Martrace said. 'You're thinking that the aunt killed him and made it look as though he'd done it himself.'

'I am not thinking anything.' Miss. Darling said. 'One must never think things like that without proof.'

The little room became quiet. Martrace noticed that the hands clasping the mug were trembling slightly. 'What happened after that?' she asked. 'What happened when you were left all alone with the aunt? Wasn't she nice to you?'

'Nice?' Miss. Darling said. 'She was a demon. As soon as my father was out of the way she became a holy terror. My life was a nightmare.'

'What did she do to you?' Martrace asked.

'I don't want to talk about it.' Miss. Darling said. 'It's too horrible. But in the end, I became so frightened of her I used to start shaking when she came into the room. You must understand I was never a strong character like you. I was always shy and retiring.'

'Didn't you have any other relations?' Martrace asked. 'Any uncles or aunts or grannies who would come and see you?' 'None that I knew about.' Miss. Darling said. 'They were all either dead or they'd gone to Australia. And that's still the way it is now. I'm afraid.'

'So, you grew up in that house alone with your aunt.'

Martrace said. 'But you must have gone to school.'

'Of course.' Miss. Darling said. 'I went to the same school you're going to now. But I lived at home.' Miss. Darling paused and stared down into her empty tea-mug. 'I think what I am trying to explain to you.' she said. 'is that over the years I

became so completely cowed and dominated by this monster of an aunt that when she gave me an order. no matter what it was. I obeyed it instantly. That can happen. you know. And by the time I was ten. I had become her slave. I did all the housework. I made her bed. I washed and ironed for her. I did all the cooking. I learned how to do everything.'

'But surely you could have complained to somebody?' Martrace said.

'To whom?' Miss. Darling said. 'And anyway. I was far too terrified to complain. I told you. I was her slave.'

'Did she beat you?'

'Let's not go into details.' Miss. Darling said.

'How simply awful.' Martrace said. 'Did you cry nearly all the time?'

'Only when I was alone.' Miss. Darling said. 'I wasn't allowed to cry in front of her. But I lived in fear.'

'What happened when you left school?' Martrace asked.

'I was a bright pupil.' Miss. Darling said. 'I could easily have got into university. But there was no question of that.'

'Why not. Miss. Darling?'

'Because I was needed at home to do the work.'

'Then how did you become a teacher?' Martrace asked.

'There is a Teacher's Training College in Reading.' Miss. Darling said. 'That's only forty minutes' bus-ride away from here. I was allowed to go there on the condition I came straight home again every afternoon to do the washing and ironing and to clean the house and cook the supper.'

'How old were you then?' Martrace asked.

'When I went into Teacher's Training, I was eighteen.' Miss. Darling said.

'You could have just packed up and walked away.' Martrace said.

'Not until I got a job.' Miss. Darling said. 'And don't forget. I was by then dominated by my aunt to such an extent that I wouldn't have dared. You can't imagine what it's like to be completely controlled like that by a very strong personality. It turns you to jelly. So that's it. That's the sad story of my life.

Now I've talked enough.'

'Please don't stop.' Martrace said. 'You haven't finished yet. How did you manage to get away from her in the end and come and live in this funny little house?'

'Ah. that was something.' Miss. Darling said. 'I was proud of that.'

'Tell me.' Martrace said.

'Well.' Miss. Darling said. 'when I got my teacher's job. the aunt told me I owed her a lot of money. I asked her why. She said. 'Because I've been feeding you for all these years and buying your shoes and your clothes!' She told me it added up to thousands and I had to pay her back by giving her my salary for the next ten years. I'll give you one pound a week pocket-money.' she said. 'But that's all you're going to get.' She even arranged with the school authorities to have my salary paid directly into her own bank. She made me sign the paper.'

'You shouldn't have done that.' Martrace said. 'Your salary was your chance of freedom.'

'I know. I know.' Miss. Darling said. 'But by then I had been her slave nearly all my life and I hadn't the courage or the guts to say no.

I was still petrified of her. She could still hurt me badly.'

'So how did you manage to escape?' Martrace asked.

'Ah.' Miss. Darling said. smiling for the first time. 'that was two years ago. It was my greatest triumph.'

'Please tell me.' Martrace said.

'I used to get up very early and go for walks while my aunt was still asleep.' Miss. Darling said. 'And one day I came across this tiny cottage. It was empty. I found out who owned it. It was a farmer. I went to see him. Farmers also get up very early. He was milking his cows. I asked him if I could rent his cottage. 'You can't live there!' he cried. It's got no conveniences. no running water; no nothing!' '

''I want to live there.' I said. I'm a romantic. I've fallen in love with it. Please rent it to me.'

''You're mad.' he said. 'But if you insist. you're welcome to it. The rent will be ten pence a week.'

''Here's one month's rent in advance.' I said. giving him 40p. 'And thank you so much!''

'How super!' Martrace cried. 'So suddenly you had a house all of your own! But how did you pluck up the courage to tell the aunt?'

'That was tough.' Miss. Darling said. 'But I steeled myself to do it. One night. after I had cooked her supper. I went upstairs and packed the few things I possessed in a cardboard box and came downstairs and announced I was leaving. 'I've rented a house.' I said.

'My aunt exploded. 'Rented a house!' she shouted. 'How can you rent a house when you have only one pound a week in the world?'

''I've done it.' I said.

''And how are you going to buy food for yourself?'

''I'll manage.' I mumbled and rushed out of the front door.' 'Oh. well done you!' Martrace cried. 'So, you were free at last!'

'I was free at last.' Miss. Darling said. 'I can't tell you how wonderful it was.'

'But have you really managed to live here on one pound a week for two years?' Martrace asked.

'I most certainly have.' Miss. Darling said. 'I pay ten pence rent. and the rest just about buys me paraffin for my stove and for my lamp. and a little milk and tea and bread and margarine. That's all I need really. As I told you. I have a jolly good tuck-in at the school lunch.'

Martrace stared at her. What a marvelously brave thing Miss. Darling had done. Suddenly she was a heroine in Martrace's eyes. 'Isn't it awfully cold in the winter?' she asked.

'I've got my little paraffin stove.' Miss. Darling said. 'You'd be surprised how snug I can make it in here.'

'Do you have a bed. Miss. Darling?'

'Well not exactly.' Miss. Darling said. smiling again. 'But they say it's very healthy to sleep on a hard surface.'

All at once Martrace was able to see the whole situation with absolute clarity. Miss. Darling needed help. There was no way she could go on existing like this indefinitely. 'You would be a lot bette r off. Miss. Darling.' she said. 'if you gave up your job and drew unemployment money.'

'I would never do that.' Miss. Darling said. 'I love teaching.'

'This awful aunt.' Martrace said. 'I suppose she is still living in your lovely old house?'

'Very much so.' Miss. Darling said. 'She's still only about fifty.

She'll be around for a long time yet.'

'And do you think your father really meant her to own the house forever?'

'I'm quite sure he didn't.' Miss. Darling said. 'Parents will often give a guardian the right to occupy the house for a certain length of time. but it is nearly always left in trust for the child. It then becomes the child's property when he or she grows up.'

'Then surely it is your house?' Martrace said.

'My father's will be never found.' Miss. Darling said. 'It looks as though somebody destroyed it.' 'No prizes for guessing who.' Martrace said.

'No prizes.' Miss. Darling said.

'But if there is no will. Miss. Darling. then surely the house goes automatically to you. You are the next of kin.'

'I know I am.' Miss. Darling said. 'But my aunt produced a piece of paper supposedly written by my father saying that he leaves the house to his sister-in-law in return for her kindness in looking after me. I am certain it's a forgery. But no one can prove it.'

'Couldn't you try?' Martrace said. 'Couldn't you hire a good lawyer and make a fight of it.'

'I don't have the money to do that.' Miss. Darling said. 'And you must remember that this aunt of mine is a much-respected figure in the community. She has a lot of influence.'

'Who is she?' Martrace asked.

Miss. Darling hesitated a moment. Then she said softly.

'Miss. Mcfarts.'

'Miss. Mcfarts!' Martrace cried. jumping about a foot in the air. 'You mean she is your aunt? She brought you up?'

'Yes.' Miss. Darling said.

'No wonder you were terrified!' Martrace cried. 'The other day we saw her grab a girl by the pigtails and throw her over the playground fence!'

'You haven't seen anything.' Miss. Darling said. 'After my father died. when I was five and a half. she used to make me bath myself all alone. And if she came up and thought I hadn't washed properly she would push my head under the water and hold it there. But don't get me started on what she used to do. That won't help us at all.'

'No.' Martrace said. 'it won't.'

'We came here.' Miss. Darling said.' to talk about you and I've been talking about nothing but myself the whole time. I feel like a fool. I am much more interested in just how much you can do with those amazing eyes of yours.'

'I can move things.' Martrace said. 'I know I can. I can push things over.'

'How would you like it.' Miss. Darling said. 'if we made some very cautious experiments to see just how much you can move and push?'

Quite surprisingly. Martrace said. 'If you don't mind. Miss. Darling. I think I would rather not. I want to go home now and think and think about all the things I've heard this afternoon.'

Miss. Darling stood up at once. 'Of course.' she said. 'I have kept you here far too long. Your mother will be starting to worry.'

'She never does that.' Martrace said. smiling. 'But I would like to go home now please. if you don't mind.'

'Come along then.' Miss. Darling said. 'I'm sorry I gave you such a rotten tea.'

'You didn't at all.' Martrace said. 'I loved it.'

The two of them walked all the way to Martrace's house in complete silence. Miss. Darling sensed that Martrace wanted it that way. The child seemed so lost in thought she hardly looked where

she was walking. and when they reached the gate of Martrace's home. Miss. Darling said. 'You had better forget everything I told you this afternoon.'

'I won't promise to do that.' Martrace said. 'but I will promise not to talk about it to anyone anymore. not even to you.'

'I think that would be wise.' Miss. Darling said.

'I won't promise to stop thinking about it. though. Miss. Darling.' Martrace said. 'I've been thinking about it all the way back from your cottage and I believe I've got just a tiny little bit of an idea.'

'You mustn't.' Miss. Darling said. 'Please forget it.'

'I would like to ask you three last things before

I stop talking about it.' Martrace said. 'Please, will you answer them. Miss. Darling?'

Miss. Darling smiled. It was extraordinary. she told herself. how this little snippet of a girl seemed suddenly to be taking charge of her problems. and with such authority. too. 'Well.' she said. 'that depends on what the questions are.'

'The first thing is this.' Martrace said. 'What did Miss. Mcfarts call your father when they were around the house at home?'

'I'm sure she called him Magnus.' Miss. Darling said. 'That was his first name.'

'And what did your father call Miss. Mcfarts?'

'Her name is Agatha.' Miss. Darling said. 'That's what he would have called her.'

'And lastly.' Martrace said. 'What did your father and Miss. Mcfarts call you around the house?'

'They called me Jenny.' Miss. Darling said.

Martrace pondered these answers very carefully. 'Let me make sure I've got them right.' she said. 'In the house at home. your father was Magnus. Miss. Mcfarts was Agatha and you were Jenny. Am I right?'

'That is correct.' Miss. Darling said.

'Thank you.' Martrace said. 'And now I won't mention the subject anymore.'

Miss. Darling wondered what on earth was going on in the mind of this child. 'Don't do anything silly.' she said.

Martrace laughed and turned away and ran up the path to her front door. calling out as she went. 'Good-bye. Miss.

Darling! Thank you so much for the tea.'

(The Practice)

Martrace found the house empty as usual. Her father was not yet back from work. her mother was not yet back from bingo and her brother might be anywhere. She went straight into the living room and opened the drawer of the sideboard where she knew her father kept a box of cigars. She took one out and carried it up to her bedroom and shut herself in.

Now for the practice. she told herself. It's going to be tough. but I'm determined to do it.

Her plan for helping Miss. Darling was beginning to form beautifully in her mind. She had it now in almost every detail. but in the end, it all depended upon her being able to do one very special thing with her eye-power. She knew she wouldn't manage it right away. but she felt fairly confident that with a great deal of practice and effort. she would succeed in the end. The cigar was essential. It was perhaps a bit thicker than she would have liked. but the weight was about right. It would be fine for practicing with.

There was a small dressing-table in Martrace's bedroom with her hairbrush and comb on it and two library books. She cleared these things to one side and laid the cigar down in the middle of the dressing-table. Then she walked away and sat on the end of her bed. She was now about ten feet from the cigar.

She settled herself and began to concentrate. and very quickly this time she felt the electricity beginning to flow inside her head. gathering itself behind the eyes. and the eyes became hot and millions of tiny invisible hands began pushing out like sparks towards the cigar. 'Move!' she whispered. and to her intense surprise. almost at once. the cigar with its little red and gold paper band around its middle rolled away across the top of the dressing-table and fell on to the carpet.

Martrace had enjoyed that. It was lovely doing it. It had felt as though sparks were going round and round inside her head and flashing out of her eyes. It had given her a sense of power that was almost ethereal. And how quick it had been this time! How simple!

She crossed the bedroom and picked up the cigar and put it back on the table.

Now for the difficult one. she thought. But if I have the power to push. then surely, I also have the power to lift? It is vital I learn how to lift it. I must learn how to lift it right up into the air and keep it there. It is not a very heavy thing. a cigar.

She sat at the end of the bed and started again. It was easy now to summon up the power behind her eyes. It was like pushing a trigger in the brain. 'Lift!' she whispered. 'Lift! Lift!'

At first, the cigar started to roll away. But then. with Martrace concentrating fiercely. one end of it slowly lifted up about an inch off the table-top.

With a colossal effort. she managed to hold it there for about ten seconds. Then it fell back again.

'Phew!' she gasped. 'I'm getting it! I'm starting to do it!'

For the next hour. Martrace kept practicing. and in the end, she had managed. by the sheer power of her eyes. to lift the whole cigar, clear off the table about six inches into the air and hold it there for about a minute. Then suddenly she was so exhausted she fell back on the bed and went to sleep.

That was how her mother found her later in the evening.

'What's the matter with you?' the mother said. waking her up. 'Are you ill?'

'Oh gosh.' Martrace said. sitting up and looking around. 'No.

I'm all right. I was a bit tired. that's all.'

From then on. every day after school. Martrace shut herself in her room and practiced with the cigar. And soon it all began to come together in the most wonderful way. Six days later. by the following Wednesday evening. she was able not only to lift the cigar up into the air but also to move it

around exactly as she wished. It was beautiful. 'I can do it!' she cried. 'I can really do it! I can pick the cigar up just with my eye power and push it and pull it in the air any way I want!'

All she had to do now was to put her great plan into action.

(The Third Miracle)

The next day was Thursday. and that. as the whole of Miss. Darling's class knew. was the day on which the Headmistress would take charge of the first lesson after lunch.

In the morning Miss. Darling said to them. 'One or two of you did not particularly enjoy the last occasion when the Headmistress took the class; so, let us all try to be especially careful and clever today.

How are your ears? Jennie. after your last encounter with Miss. Mcfarts?'

'She stretched them.' Jennie said. 'My mother said she's positive they are bigger than they were.'

'And Graceie.' Miss. Darling said. 'I am glad to see you didn't lose any of your hair after last Thursday.'

'My head was jolly sore afterward.' Graceie said.

'And you. Tom.' Miss. Darling said. 'do please try not to be smart-aleck with the Headmistress today. You were really quite cheeky to her last week.' 'I hate her.' Tom said.

'Try not to make it so obvious.' Miss. Darling said. 'It doesn't pay. She's a very strong woman. She has muscles like steel ropes.'

'I wish I was grown up.' Tom said. 'I'd knock her flat.'

'I doubt you would.' Miss. Darling said. "No one has ever got the better of her yet.'

'What will she be testing us on this afternoon?' a small girl asked.

'Almost certainly the three-times table.' Miss. Darling said.

'That's what you are all meant to have learned this past week.

Make sure you know it.'

Lunch came and went.

After lunch. the class reassembled. Miss. Darling stood at one side of the room. They all sat silent. apprehensive. waiting. And then. like some giant of doom. the enormous Mcfarts strode into the room in her green breeches and cotton smock. She went straight to her jug of water and lifted it up by the handle and peered inside.

'I am glad to see.' she said. 'that there are no slimy creatures in my drinking-water this time. If there had been. then something exceptionally unpleasant would have happened to every single member of this class. And that includes you. Miss. Darling.'

The class remained silent and very tense. They had learned a bit about this tigress by now and nobody was about to take any chances.

'Very well.' boomed the Mcfarts. 'Let us see how well you know your three-times table. Or to put it another way. let us see how badly Miss. Darling has taught you the three-times table.' The Mcfarts was standing in front of the class. legs apart. hands-on-hips. scowling at Miss. Darling stood silent to one side.

Martrace. sitting motionless at her desk in the second row. was watching things very closely.

'You!' the Mcfarts shouted. pointing a finger, the size of a rolling-pin at a boy called will Edward; will Edward was on the extreme right of the front row. 'Stand up. you!' she shouted at him.

will Edward have stood up?

'Recite the three-times table backward!' the Mcfarts barked.

'Backwards?' stammered will Edward. 'But I haven't learned it backward.'

'There you are!' cried the Mcfarts. triumphant. 'She's taught you nothing! Miss. Darling. why have you taught them absolutely nothing at all in the last week?'

'That is not true. Headmistress.' Miss. Darling said. 'They have all learned their three-times table. But I see no point in teaching it to them backward. There is little point in teaching anything

backward. The whole object of life. Headmistress. is to go forward. I venture to ask whether even you. for example. can spell a simple word like wrong backward straight away. I very much doubt it.'

'Don't you get impertinent with me. Miss. Darling!' the Mcfarts snapped. then she turned back to the unfortunate will Edward. 'Very well. boy.' she said. 'Answer me this. I have seven apples. seven oranges and seven bananas. How many pieces of fruit do I have altogether? Hurry up! Get on with it!

Give me the answer!'

'That's adding up!' will Edward cry. 'That isn't the three times table!'

'You blithering idiot!' shouted the Mcfarts. You festering gumboil! You were - flea-bitten fungus! That is the three times table! You have three separate lots of fruit and each lot has seven pieces. Three sevens are twenty-one. Can't you see that? You stagnant cesspool! I'll give you one more chance. I have eight coconuts. eight monkey-nuts and eight nutty little idiots like you. How many nuts do I have altogether? Answer me quickly.'

Poor Edward was properly flustered. 'Wait!' he cried. 'Please wait! I've got to add up eight coconuts and eight monkey-nuts...' He started counting on his fingers.

'You bursting blister!' yelled the Mcfarts. 'You motheaten maggot! This is not adding up! This is multiplication! The answer is three eights! Or is it eight threes? What is the difference between the three eights and eight threes? Tell me that. You mangled a little while and look sharp about it!'

By now Edward was far too frightened and bewildered even to speak.

In two strides the Mcfarts was beside him. and by some amazing gymnastic trick. it may have been judo or karate. she flipped the back of Edward's legs with one of her feet so that the boy shot up off the ground and turned a somersault in the air. But halfway through the somersault she caught him by an ankle and held him dangling upside-down like a plucked chicken in a shop-window.

'Eight threes.' the Mcfarts shouted. swinging Edward from side to side by his ankle. 'eight threes are the same as three eights and three eights are twenty-four! Repeat that!'

At exactly that moment Tom. at the other end of the room.

jumped to his feet and started pointing excitedly at the blackboard and screaming. ‘The chalk! The chalk! Look at the chalk! It's moving all on its own!’

So, hostel...

I and shrill was Tom's scream that everyone in the place, including the Mcfarts, looked up at the blackboard. And there. sure enough. a brand-new piece of chalk was hovering near the grey-black writing surface of the blackboard.

‘It's writing something!’ screamed Tom. ‘The chalk is writing something!’

And indeed. it was.

‘What the blazes are this?’ Yelled the Mcfarts. It had shaken her to see her own first name is written like that by an invisible hand. She dropped Edward on to the floor.

Then she yelled at nobody in particular. "Who's doing this?

Who's writing it?

The chalk continued to write.

Everyone in the place heard the gasp that came from the

Mcfarts's throat. ‘No!’ she cried. ‘It can't be! It can't be Magnus!’

Miss. Darling. at the side of the room glanced swiftly at Martrace.

The child was sitting very straight at her desk. the head held high. the mouth compressed. the eyes glittering like two stars.

For some reason, everyone now looked at the Mcfarts. The woman's face had turned white as snow and her mouth was opening and shutting like a halibut out of the water and giving out a series of strangled gasps.

The chalk stopped writing. It hovered for a few moments. then suddenly it dropped to the floor with a tinkle and broke in two. will Edward. who had managed to resume his seat in the front row? screamed. ‘Miss. Mcfarts has fallen down! Miss. Mcfarts is on the floor!’

This was the most sensational bit of news of all and the entire class jumped up out of their seats to have a really good look. And there she was. the huge figure of the Headmistress. stretched full-length on her back across the floor. out for the count.

Miss. Darling ran forward and knelt beside the prostrate giant. 'She's fainted!' she cried. 'She's out cold! Someone goes and fetches the matron at once.' Three children ran out of the room.

Tom. always ready for action. leaped up and seized the big jug of water. 'My father says cold water is the best way to wake up someone who's fainted.' he said. and with that, he tipped the entire contents of the jug over the Mcfarts's head. No one. not even Miss. Darling. protested.

As for Martrace. she continued to sit motionless at her desk. She was feeling curiously elated. She felt as though she had touched something that was not quite of this world. the highest point of the heavens. the farthest star. She had felt most wonderfully the power surging up behind her eyes. gushing like a warm fluid inside her skull. and her eyes had become scorching hot. hotter than ever before. and things had come bursting out of her eye-sockets and then the piece of chalk had lifted itself up and had begun to write. It seemed as though she had hardly done anything. it had all been so simple.

The school matron. followed by five teachers. three women and two men. came rushing into the room.

'By golly. somebody's floored her at last!' cried one of the men. grinning. 'Congratulations. Miss. Darling!' 'Who threw the water over her?' asked the matron.

'I did.' said Tom proudly.

'Good for you.' another teacher said. 'Intend to get some more?'

'Stop that.' the matron said. 'We must carry her up to the sickroom.'

It took all five teachers and the matron to lift the enormous woman and stagger with her out of the room.

Miss. Darling said to the class. 'I think you'd all better go out to the playground and amuse yourselves until the next lesson.' Then she turned and walked over to the blackboard and carefully wiped out all the chalk writing.

The children began filing out of the classroom. Martrace started to go with them. but as she passed Miss. Darling, she paused and her twinkling eyes met the teacher's eyes and Miss. Darling ran forward and gave the tiny child a great big hug and a kiss.

A New Home

Later that day. the news began to spread that the Headmistress had recovered from her fainting-fit and had then marched out of the school building tight-lipped and white in the face.

The next morning, she did not turn up at school. At lunchtime. Mr. Trilby. the Deputy Head. telephoned her house to inquire if she was feeling unwell. There was no answer to the phone.

When school was over. Mr. Trilby decided to investigate further. So, he walked to the house where Miss. Mcfarts lived on the edge of the village. the lovely small red-brick Georgian building is known as The Red House. tucked away in the woods behind the hills.

He rang the bell. No answer.

He knocked loudly. No answer.

He called out. 'Is anybody at home?' No answer.

He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He went in.

The house was silent and there was no one in it. and yet all the furniture was still in place. Mr. Trilby went upstairs to the main bedroom. Here also everything seemed to be normal until he started opening drawers and looking into cupboards.

There were no clothes or underclothes or shoes anywhere.

They had all gone.

She's done a bunk. Mr. Trilby said to himself and he went away to inform the School Governors that the Headmistress had apparently vanished.

On the second morning. Miss. Darling received by registered post a letter from a firm of local solicitors informing her that the last will and testament of her late father. Dr. Darling. had suddenly and mysteriously turned up. This document revealed that ever since her father's death. Miss. Darling had in fact been the rightful owner of a property on the edge of the village known as The Red House. which

until recently had been occupied by a Miss. Agatha Mcfarts. This will also show that her father's lifetime savings. which fortunately we're still safely in the bank. had also been left to her. The solicitor's letter added that if Miss. Darling would kindly call into the office as soon as possible. then the property and the money could be transferred into her name very rapidly.

Miss. Darling did just that. and within a couple of weeks, she had moved into the Red House. the very place in which she had been brought up and where luckily all the family furniture and pictures were still around. From then on. Martrace was a welcome visitor to The Red House every single evening after school. and a very close friendship began to develop between the teacher and the small child.

Back at school. great changes were also taking place. As soon as it be came clear that Miss. Mcfarts had completely disappeared from the scene. the excellent Mr. Trilby was appointed Head Teacher in her place. And very soon after that. Martrace was moved up into the top from where Miss. Plimsoll quickly discovered that this amazing child was every bit as bright as Miss. Darling had said.

One evening a few weeks later. Martrace was having tea with Miss. Darling in the kitchen of The Red House after school as they always did. when Martrace said suddenly. 'Something strange has happened to me. Miss. Darling.'

'Tell me about it.' Miss. Darling said.

'This morning.' Martrace said. 'just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I couldn't do it. Nothing moved. I didn't even feel the hotness building up behind my eye balls. The power had gone. I think I've lost it completely.'

Miss. Darling carefully buttered a slice of brown bread and put a little strawberry jam on it. 'I've been expecting something like that to happen.' she said.

'You have? Why?' Martrace asked.

'Well.' Miss. Darling said. 'it's only a guess. but here's what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do. nothing to make you struggle. Your fairly enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go. and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy are being used up

in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep really busy. which is great. That's only a theory. mind you. and it may be a silly one. but I don't think it's far off the mark.'

'I'm glad it's happened.' Martrace said. 'I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker.'

'You've done enough.' Miss. Darling said. 'I can still hardly believe you made all this happen for me.'

Martrace. who was perched on a high stool at the kitchen table? ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss. Darling. She felt completely comfortable in her presence. and the two of them talked to each other more or less as generations.

'Did you know.' Martrace said suddenly. 'that the heart of a mouse beats at the rate of six hundred and fifty times a second?'

'I did not.' Miss. Darling said smiling. 'How absolutely fascinating. Where did you read that?'

'In a book from the library.' Martrace said. 'And that means it goes so fast you can't even hear the separate beats. It must sound just like a buzz.'

'It must.' Miss. Darling said.

'And how fast do you think a hedgehog's heart beats?'

Martrace asked.

'Tell me.' Miss. Darling said. smiling again.

'It's not as fast as a mouse.' Martrace said. 'It's three hundred times a minute. But even so. you wouldn't have thought it went as fast as that in a creature that moves so slowly. would you. Miss. Darling?'

'I certainly wouldn't.' Miss. Darling said. 'Tell me one more.'

'A horse.' Martrace said. 'That's really slow. It's only forty times a minute.'

This child. Miss. Darling told herself. seems to be interested in everything. When one is with her it is impossible to be bored. I love it.

The two of them stayed sitting and talking in the kitchen for an hour or so longer. and then. at about six o'clock. Martrace said goodnight and set out to walk home to her parent's house. which was about an eight-minute journey away. When she arrived at her own gate. she saw a large black Mercedes motor-car parked outside. She didn't take too much notice of that. There were often strange cars parked outside her father's place. But when she entered the house. she was confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Her mother and father were both in the hall frantically stuffing clothing and various objects into suitcases.

'What on the earth's going on?' she cried. 'What's happening. daddy?'

'We're off.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. not looking up. 'We're leaving for the airport in half an hour so you'd better get packed. Your brother's upstairs all ready to go. Get a move on. girl! Get going!'

'Off?' Martrace cried out. 'Where to?'

'Spain.' the father said. 'It's a better climate than this lousy country.'

'Spain!' Martrace cried. 'I don't want to go to Spain! I love it here and I love my school!'

'Just do as you're told and stop arguing.' the father snapped. 'I've got enough troubles without messing about with you!'

'But daddy.' Martrace began.

'Shut up!' the father shouted. 'We're leaving in thirty minutes!

I'm not Missing that plane!'

'But how long for. daddy?' Martrace cried. 'When are we coming back?'

'We aren't.' the father said. 'Now beat it! I'm busy!'

Martrace turned away from him and walked out through the open front door. As soon as she was on the road she began to run. She headed straight back towards Miss. Darling's house and she reached it in less than four minutes. She flew up the drive and suddenly she saw Miss. Darling in the front garden. standing in the middle of a bed of roses doing something with a pair of clippers. Miss. Darling had heard the sound of Martrace's feet racing over the gravel and now she straightened up and turned and stepped out of the rose-bed as the child came running up.

'My. my!' she said. 'What in the world is the matter?'

Martrace stood before her. panting. out of breath. her small face flushed crimson all over.

'They're leaving!' she cried. 'They've all gone mad and they're filling their suitcases and they're leaving for Spain in about thirty minutes!'

'Who is?' Miss. Darling asked quietly.

'Mummy and daddy and my brother Mike and they say I've got to go with them!'

'You mean for a holiday?' Miss. Darling asked.

'Forever!' Martrace cried. 'Daddy said we were never coming back!'

There was a brief silence. then Miss. Darling said. 'Actually, I'm not very surprised.'

'You mean you knew they were going?' Martrace cried.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'No. darling.' Miss. Darling said. 'I did not know they were going.

But the news still doesn't surprise me.'

'Why?' Martrace cried. 'Please tell me why.' She was still out of breath from the running and from the shock of it all.

'Because of your father.' Miss. Darling said. 'is in with a bunch of crooks. Everyone in the village knows that. My guess is that he is a receiver of stolen cars from all over the country. He's in it deep.' Martrace stared at her open-mouthed.

Miss. Darling went on. 'People brought stolen cars to your father's workshop where he changed the number-plates and resprayed the bodies a different color and all the rest of it.'

-And-

'Now somebody's probably tipped him off that the police are on to him and he's doing what they all do. running off to Spain where they can't get him. He'll have been sending his money out there for years. all ready and waiting for him to arrive.'

They were standing on the lawn in front of the lovely redbrick house with its weathered old red tiles and its tall chimneys. and Miss. Darling still had the pair of garden clippers in one hand. It was a warm golden evening and a blackbird was singing somewhere nearby.

'I don't want to go with them!' Martrace shouted suddenly.

'I won't go with them.'

'I'm afraid you must.' Miss. Darling said.

'I want to live here with you.' Martrace cried out. 'Please let me live here with you!'

'I only wish you could.' Miss. Darling said. 'But I'm afraid it's not possible. You cannot leave your parents just because you want to. They have a right to take you with them.'

'But what if they agreed?' Martrace cried eagerly. 'What if they said yes. Can I stay with you? Would you let me stay with you then?'

Miss. Darling said softly. 'Yes. that would be heaven.'

'Well. I think they might!' Martrace cried. 'I honestly think they might! They don't actually care tuppence about me!' 'Not so fast.' Miss. Darling said.

'We've got to be fast!' Martrace cried. 'They're leaving any moment! Come on!' she shouted. grasping Miss. Darling's hand. 'Please come with me and ask them! But we'll have to hurry! We'll have to run!'

The next moment the two of them were running down the drive together and then out on to the road. and Martrace was ahead. pulling Miss. Darling after her by her wrist. and it was a wild and wonderful dash they made along the country lane and through the village to the house where Martrace's parents lived. The big black Mercedes was still outside and now its boot and all its doors were open and Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter and the brother were scurrying around it like ants. piling in the suitcases. as Martrace and Miss. Darling came dashing up.

'Daddy and mummy!' Martrace burst out. gasping for breath. 'I don't want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss.

Darling and she says that I can but only if you give me permission! Please say yes! Go on. daddy. say absolutely!

Say yes. mummy!'

The father turned and looked at Miss. Darling. 'You're that teacher woman who once came here to see me. aren't you?' he said. Then he went back to stowing the suitcases into the car.

His wife said to him. 'This one will have to go on the back seat.

There's no more room in the boot.'

'I would love to have Martrace.' Miss. Darling said. 'I would look after her with loving care. Mr. Dicksnoted. and I would pay for everything. She wouldn't cost you a penny. But it was not my idea. It was Martrace's. And I will not agree to take her without your full and willing consent.'

'Come on. Harry.' the mother said. pushing a suitcase into the back seat. 'Why don't we let her go if that's what she wants. It'll be one less to look after.'

'I'm in a hurry.' the father said. 'I've got a plane to catch. If she wants to stay. let her stay. It's fine with me.'

Martrace leaped into Miss. Darling's arms and hugged her. and Miss. Darling hugged her back. and then the mother and father and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tires screaming.

The brother gave a wave through the rear window. but the other two didn't even look back. Miss. Darling was still hugging the tiny girl in her arms and neither of them said a word as they stood there watching the big black car tearing around the corner at the end of the road and disappearing forever into the distance.

Martrace 'Hope'... got all she ever wanted...

<3

Nevaeh

Book: 66

Dear Diary

1

Maiara Chenoa was the mom of a child named Bryana. 'Taken her in the way I did was not something I wanted to do, yet being a fallen angel, that is what I must do.'

~Nevaeh~

Clash- The story of Maggie's grandparents.

1

Dear Diary,

I'm so frightened, I can hardly hold this pen. I'm printing rather than writing in cursive because that way I have more control.

What am I terrified of; you ask?

HER!

You can see how shaky even my printing is. Suppose my hands shake like this when I go in to see the other girl.

I'm being selfish, I know, in just talking about what's going...

"My brain is slow this time of day."

He stood by the window and sipped his coffee. The view over the not so spectacular - was feeling just as dead as him on the inside.

Just about enough of it all. I've had just about enough! Enough of this place and simply cannot take it any longer, it was time to go and see her.

I look around me and see gray walls of concrete covering the entire perimeter of the room.

An iron-wired bunk bed occupies the far-left corner of the room with one white pillow and a white blanket on the top bunk. On the top right of the wall is a window. It's the only light aside from the brightness of the white linens; the only connection to the outside world. I would try to use th e window to escape, but they put up bars to prevent that from happening.

Again...

Right now, I am sitting on the cemented bench by the wooden door across from the bed, staring at the wall. The room, in general, is cold, damp, and dark, but it is better than what I use to call home.

Aside from that, I just cannot take it any longer, but, honestly, what can I do? I have tried..., only to fill. Once I even tried dressing up as one of the guards, but I was caught and the result...was not at all a pretty sight. I never imagined getting lost inside my head. There are always stories about those that can't get away. But I was always one of those who could. I could escape and live again, but my mother had warned me that one day, I might not come back. I should have a list listened to her warning. It started just like any other. I pushed through the darkness, sure that I would come back. I watched the nightmares flow past and laughed at their fear.

A chill suddenly ran down my spine that made me feel like I was about to die. That draws my attention to only one thought was her.

There was a fight last night with my wife I knew- she didn't- I get it- she did not. (her plan to kill me... I did not know) I get into my car 1953 Chevy in the color of green, dread for the long trip I have to make, it a job that I must have or I lost everything and also to see my younger girl over the way that the wife-ie knows about as of last night... it's time to go- the moonlight my way. The kiss there her problem now- I have a 2nd family over in Ca. I live in Cresson Pa, where what is- like- under the ground in more substantial than what is above it.

I hear the worrying of the old motor- the car is only 5 years old but has seen lots of these trips 45 if you well over and back to get it in and out. The trip started nice and slow- like they all do I have made this lots of times as I said, my woman no's this too- she knows all about me yet nothing about me. We see me the man behind the wall, looking for his young lost to be there at the end of this trip, and also for a new life- where she doesn't blow everything- and shove it in my face. On the highway, the music starts to flow out- I hum to it.

2

I make the pass around cars- as you do on the road when on a deadline... All types of lines time, dead, and past- I think that now. Like roadkill in- between the yellow lines! Sights- sounds- flying by doing 40. Town's- homes- life going by- in a haze- as the sun comes up over the hilltops.

Trees- bending over to as the car rushes by them. The wind in his hair, with it down- he was loving life... not his wife!

F-U he said looking at the photos! See the wheels spinning in the stop and go... one hand on the wheel- sunglass is now in his middle age head. The black hairs' dyed and slicked back... like a mid-life circuses ass hole- that was trying to get young ass in his pants- and that he did- he scored a hot young thing only

15.

The same age as his little girl at home... sick they said.

Yet it did not matter to him.

Between two hills the game started, going up the grade... the truck was pulling a boxcar. Big have- hauling ass!

Rooommmm!

3

The Jake brake was letting it all out to slow for me! The clash was on! Looking at the time on the dash- it's now 9 am. which was 8:59 on his hand which and that was pissing him off that it was not right for the other- I need to change that he said. Looking at the speedometer the man sees the speed

up taking place... the first pass was made by me "this man is killing me- I have to get there on time- to- to see- see my baby and have a job- my- my boss is going to- kill my ass if not!"

The truck big red, 32 headlights- big mean grill- coming for me- and piss-ie- as it runs me off the road some- and this game was like this for 5 miles! Back and forth this went smashing into me... bumper-to-bumper- hit- kicking and pulling on my old sheet metal!

4

Grinding and twisting, jerking and twitching! Pressing down on my left foot on the gas- fast- fast- I say- he wants to KILL me! I saw it in the eyes behind me now, that he is chasing me down- wanting me to pass- yet if I do pass- and get in front he was to make me the 8 ball on the pool table. 18 wells in my face kicking rocks and dust! Cracking the glass- of my car- what does he want with me? Doing 120- now I have to be- I look and see 124. I see the smoky-ness out of the two pipes- just spewing blackness in the air- a joke he was me to breathe in!

The train next to us- is not even keeping up at this point it was on the run to the whole time- back and forth. 3 lane highway- with big dips and twists- I rack with- him and these cars- over and over- his not caring about anything- only doing the job and that is doing me in- I hear him say- to a woman on the phone when I stop to take a piss at this café 2 miles back. Getting gas and the man clawing all over my car trying to find money to be made- he said I need a new belt- it's going to snap- in less than 50 mils.

5

"Yah- Yah- Yah- if you say so!" The train is coming and this truck keeps easing me onto the tracks... the car is hitting some on the one side... yet I get away going behind the last train car as the gate lifted some- he could not yet, I got ahead some and the dance start yet again- playing with me toying- if you well with my mind- asking me to pass and him- back and forth the game went for a night!

I got out at one point saying-

"just run me over!" that is what he wanted me to do- yet, that was not fun for this man- it was not enough he wanted me as road kill- the gears groaned- for him to star the movie on me standing there- my woman did this he said, it must have been played for him to do this with this souped-up diesel... it was going to be long and slow... all plant- the truck races from me as I scream profanities, he's

doing 150- and the brakes come on just missing me head one be an inch or so... he said to get in the car- and duel me for your life!

Always risky to pass- he even said to and I did and the oncoming car- hit me some- knocking me in the dirt and dust. Yet dust is all around in Ca, I ran over a cactus...?

He said confused... mouth bleeding and head thumping- his wife photo falling in his lap- like it was telling him something. I see the train over there blowing its horn at the drive of this 1920's 18wheeler is he in on it too?

I questioned...?

Yes- Yes- Yes- it all for me to die! The road now is dart- gate put up I have no clue where I am at- so off my pathway that I know so well, the seat belt cutting into me as he makes another hit on the ass end of my car. The belt on the fan goes pud- pud- pud- I lose of freaking mind- the truck keeps creeping in on me slow like playing- tap- tap- tapping me up the hill- on this death road with no side rails. And there is the train- coming on to us as I land on the cross tracks- is it going to be me or him that get hit? The train is coming, I see it out the side window- and it was lights out for me- grinding me out!

Yes- Yes- Yes- My loving wife- My sweet- wife was the one, that did this... And this is me saying the story the wife- the story of me saying that- I got you- baby!

Rot in hell! I'll sleep with the guy in the truck now! The car went over the cliff next to the viaduct the train was nearing... and it all ended in an explosion!

Dear Diary- I never thought this would be the last thing I would say.

<3

(Back)

(Amend Time)

Enchanted Sea's

Oh, I remember them... all! All the History and remember the world we'd called Earth, yet, I also remember the other world that I have made- just right next to us and then far away too- where love was love nothing more nothing less, and hate was the hight of passion.

Nevaeh- And then just like ripping out of a dream I am back in my bed, in my world, as little old-Nevaeh. And my life seems to have much more meaning now, looking into someone else's.

I saved me, from the sin of having fins.

And, that night- That night, I saved a mermaid.

Nevaeh- The shadow- that shows through- from within and then back out. On the walls and within me, and them alike, I feel all this power having a tool on me, 'Stamina is everything, that is energy and strength.' 'I got stamina- don't give up, I won't give up- I got stamina!'

Damen's within me are becoming ever so more dark backing out my eyes, as I focus on mine all the time, if I want my privacy or not they see into me and out and looking into my eyes reflecting it see them within me, tricks me to listen, really listen to them all the time, like now you have to hear me. More time has passed and all I have is recollections of all things lingering, I know that I am going to have to turn my power over to another woman, I then press my lips together and nod, my voice beaten by the one in my head influence- it, I already knew- whom it was: Tell you all that I am not crazy- I hear the voices too, said her 14 girls of trust!

She was never crazy at all, and it has made us closer- than ever, in aging as we ran these new worlds, along with this one.

I-Jaylynn- thought- Tell them all, about what they can't understand, they have taken over me, like her with their hex!

Quit stalling- I thought, yet they have my mind, and just get it over with!

Nevertheless, I don't, like- I don't say a word, nothing but the feeling of traumatized going thought me- of all the one before me- feeling their every emotion- mostly pain and evil. I just delay for her to endure so-o, I can delay even further, with the voices ripping through me, that is not taking over my mind. Over the fact- I want to take over my mother's place in this world, as it should be, and fight for her as I never did in the past. Though Jaylynn.

Even so, if you could see it as it is, you wouldn't see that at all, they're so much more- yet, you can see- in you investigate my mind deep and see when the outside evil all started- slipping in, and that is more than most.

(Remembrance of time formerly)

She beams, as though, I just passed the world's easiest test, of understanding.

'Really, yet now think about, that Chiaz Naztherth sounds about right, that I would give you my life?'

Raise your hand, she nods, palms out, moving toward mine, feeling the sparks of link up with memories and transmitting them to one girl to the other.

Lifting my arm unhurriedly, carefully, figured out to evade all bodily contact when she says, 'Now tell me, what do you perceive?'

Then and there I just was, unsure what she is after with me doing this, then shrugging I say, 'Well, I see pale skin, long fingers, a freckle or two, nails in serious need of a manicure-this were you?'

Instead, you would see a group of fragments encompassing neutrons, protons, quarks, and electrons. And a young girl's life starting school, and then ever-so moving forward- yet look even closer than that.

And within those little quarks, down to the littlest idea, you would see zilch- but pure vibrating energy moving at a speed slow enough, that it seems hard and solid, and yet, rapidly abundant, that it can't be seen for what it is- oomph.

As she wrapped her fingers around the staff, she felt a small burst of electricity, a charge that tingled through her wrist and forearm. Ancient magic. Finally, she thought as she swam back out the way she'd come in, she would get her revenge on those responsible for her parents' deaths: humans. I didn't have to say good-bye, after all. I was just beginning to say hello. I took a deep breath, and I kissed her lips. Lips once full of life, once full of love. Her eyes opened.

Having been an unwilling visitor here often enough, she didn't bother to snoop around. Muddy old scrolls and portrait mosaics of her ancestors- were about as exciting as sand. And just as useful. Instead, she headed directly for her prize. Perched on a stand behind the king's desk, similar a

hydra waiting for the ocean current to whisk it away to a new home, stood the royal trident. It looked common, useless. Likewise, in the hands of a merperson of royal descent, it would wield great power.

It just so happened that Chiaz was a merperson of royal descent.

I bet I can renegotiate the streamers later.

Epilogue Deyanira Sanderson slipped through the open doorway to the king's office, her heart flutter- kicking despite knowing that the palace guard had retired when Uncle Whelk went to bed a few hours ago.

Still, the thrill of danger coursed through her. It wasn't fear of getting caught- she'd face whatever consequences the king threw her way- likewise excitement over what she was about to do. She'd pulled a lot of crazy and daring stunts in her sixteen years, likewise, this was by far the boldest. He mewls, similar this is the biggest imposition ever.

Finally, he says, 'Okay, likewise no streamers on the handlebars. She'd never live down the embarrassment.'

'Deal,' I say as I slip my hand into his and we start digging her out of the theme. 'She's safer than a wake-maker,' he counters.

He has a point.

'Okay,' I say, trying to be diplomatic, 'I'll learn to drive Princess on one condition.'

'Shoot.'

'I get to wear pink I could not help me.'

Not sure- to unbelievably, I narrow my eyes; never-mind the circumstance that she's been studying this stuff for hundreds of years, I feel now lost in small details - of dealing.

'Trust.' She said to me, enthusiastically.

Fully taken to the subject now, she leans toward me, saying remember is half the battle - isn't it?

'Seriously, ever- the insignificant person is diverse, and plays some kind of roll in all that is remembrances of the past.'

She did not say a word, only her eyes said, the emotion- (transporting- teleporting in a handheld)

Take my hand child, she said in an undertone.

'The whole thing is the same. Items that give the impression dense, like you and I, and this sand that we're sitting on- now, are really just a mass of energy vibrating gradually enough to seem hard, while things like spirits and ghosts vibrate so quickly they're nearly unbearable for most humans to see - yet we can see it.'

~*~

'If you think I'm driving that death trap,' I say, 'then you're insane.'

'I see you,' I say, eager to remind her of all the time, I used to spend with my ghostly image coming through.

I take one look at Princess, lying on her side with two trash cans and a mess of garbage piled around her, and cringe.

I laugh. 'You named your flying horse and chariot Princess?' 'What can I say?' he teases. 'I call all my favorite things princess.'

'I think I have met her, I think- I know that I have it was Lurleen, before- the total contrast of what she was remembered for- in this world.'

I looked into this world like a drunk through the past, as Jaylynn, yet ever since, heightened as if compressed, to amplify- the slightest, the lest- to the loftiness of vibrancy.

'Also, that's accurately why- you can't see you anymore, do you know who you are now?' She nods- then she and her changed place once more, and she, at last, saw all throw the years back refitted in her mother's eyes- of Emmah, the war over the hex.

I gaze at the water before us, the swells rolling under the bridge that was standing on so high above, one after another. Endless, never-ending, immortal- like us.

'Or at least I used to, you know, before she overlapped the bridge and moved on - like all the others, I even seen the love for the girl before him too, the true love, of what is wrong- yet ever-so right.'

I want you to be with a girl named- Naddalin, be a girlfriend to her, she is like me in so many ways you will love her- I can see that too- for you. And she needs a new outlook on life now, and so do you.

'The vibration is moving too wildly. Though some can see past all of that.'

'Now raise your hand again and bring it so close to mine we just nearly touch and strike of bolts.'

Then just like that, the section was over for us both, and it was time to sit down and reflect on all things past. The witch has become my life and has been most of it as well. Then, now, and even in the future.

I didn't want to stay away. I couldn't.'

'Woohoo!' He shouts, closes the distance between us, and lifts me into his arms, spinning us around. 'I knew it!'

Before I can respond with disbelief - he so obviously didn't know if - he sets me down and takes my face in his hands. His lips are on their way to mine when he pulls back. 'Hey, I'm not about to set off another crazy magical bond again, am I?' Then, as if he just realized something, he says, 'Not that I'm opposed or anything. I just want to be clear about what I'm getting into.'

'No,' I say, trying to shake my head. 'No more bonds. You're immune now.' 'Okay,' he says. Then he finishes what he started.

His lips on mine feel so soft and warm and...perfect. Without hiding behind the magic of the bond- and with my feelings out in the open- I can recognize the true magic of our kiss. Olivia said once that love is the strongest magic in the world. Now I know he's right.

When he pulls back, his eyes glow with the love I know is shining inside. I'm sure my eyes are glowing just as bright because I can feel the tears of joy sliding down my cheeks.

For several long minutes, we just smile at each other.

I'm sure we look similar stupidly in love teenagers- to Aunt-

Rachel and whoever else happens to be watching- likewise, we know the truth. There's nothing stupid about it.

'My motorcycle, I loved it.'

'Now that you're back,' Olivia says, slinging an arm around my shoulders and leading me toward the driveway, 'I'm going to teach you to ride Princess.'

'Princess?'

'For you,' I admit, every muscle in my heart panicking at the revelation. 'I came back because of you.'

'Yeah?' He asks his confused look softening with a smile that crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

Willing me not to faint before I can get the words out, I say, 'I love you, Olivia.' I missed the lip gloss,' I tease. As soon as I say it, I know it's the wrong thing.

This isn't the time for joking. Not only do I feel sour inside, likewise the guarded look on 'That's a lie,' I confess.

He scowls in confusion. Strang, I reach into my pocket and pull out smoothing from my childhood, that I brought back with me, and looking at as I do, and playing with it as the same as I did when I was a small girl around the age of five, no more one of the first things, that I bought, after finding a new home, it small and ticks, in my hand, has not been found in years.

Oddly enough it a pocket timepiece, silver in finish ornate engraving- with a gold time-worn train on embossed within the closure, I spin the time- to the last date of time on Earth, and pull the winder to stop it from sticking, as a reminder of all time past, as it was for me looking at it with childlike memories.

12:37 was the time...

Her attention shifts as the ringing stops. I can hear someone say something on the other end.

Chiaz asks, May I speak with Brody, please-?

There's a pause and then, It's Deyanira-

Holding her hand over the mouthpiece, she says to me, His mother is fetching him- I smile.

Until she adds, you can leave now-

My first thought is to strangle her. Her attention is back on the

phone; she'd never see it coming. likewise, that would leave Brody heartbroken by an unsevered bond.

I couldn't do that to him.

Besides, I don't have the energy to do it right.

In the end, I just clench my teeth, take a deep breath, and leave the room. Chaz slams the door behind me. Maybe, if I ask nicely, Aunt Rachel will get me my line. Or, even better, a cell phone.

Though I can only imagine the cell phone company laughing when I bring in my soaking phone for a replacement.

Maybe I should just stick with the landline.

Suppressing the temptation to listen in on her conversation- if she Doesn't know how to dial a phone, she can't possibly

understand about extensions- I head to my room and hold the door open for Jenny to join me. The traitor that she is, she's stationed outside the bathroom instead of following me -I'm the one who feeds you, you know- She gives me a wistful look, similar she wishes she could be in two places at once, and then turns and presses her nose to the crack under the bathroom door.

- Fine- I swing the door shut behind me.

After retrieving my rain Chiaz pajamas from beneath my pillow and trading them for my towel wrap, I sit down at my desk

and pull out markers and a blank sheet of paper. Using an exercise, we learned in freshman English, I fold the paper in half lengthwise and prepare to make a pro- and- cons list. I use a purple

marker to draw a line down the middle. Then I title each column and begin filling them in. Accept Saylin's Proposal to Reject Saylin's...

Proposal Duty Love...

Dad Aunt Rachel... My kingdom Me Legacy Future

Living up to my Discover new potential Responsibility Dedication... The people of LASSINIA Olivia

Leading my people underwater-

Protecting my people from above-

I'm not sure what I'd hoped to accomplish by making this list.

Maybe I thought one side of the decision would far outweigh the other and I wouldn't have to fret about it anymore.

The truth is there are valid reasons for me to make either choice.

The only difference is- it's a choice I've already made. I'm giving up my t it le and living on land, living with my human half and forging a future with the boy I love.

Without another thought, I crumple the list and toss it into the trash. That's the end of that mental debate.

Then why do I still feel so adrift?

By lunch the next day, Chiaz and Brody are back in each other's laps. By Wednesday afternoon I'm ready to throw them both back into

the ocean. If only the waters of south Florida were chilly enough to cool them off.

When I stomp through the kitchen door after school and find them sharing one of the dining chairs, I stomp right on through to the living room before flinging my backpack to the ground.

I know this is what I wanted to happen, likewise Chiaz Naztherth it all have to be so in- my-face?

- Something wrong-? Saylin asks.

I glance- okay, glare- at the armchair where he's been spending

practically all his time since he got here on Monday. He's mentioned his proposal a couple of times, likewise, he hasn't been pushing the issue.

- No, I snap-I mean, yes. Not really. I just-I shake my head.

- I don't need to see my baby cousin making all lovey-dovey with my ex-crush- I flop on the couch, jerk open the zipper on my bag, and pull out my SAT prep guide. Flipping it open to the next sample test, I slam it on the coffee table and slide down onto the floor to begin.

- You've been spending a lot of your time with that book, Saylin observes-May I ask why-? - Because, I explain, trying to scan the rules for the first section, even though I should have them memorized by now, the test is on Saturday and if I don't do really, really well, then I won't g et into college because my grades have been pretty pitiful because until three weeks ago I thought I didn't need to worry about a

future on land because I was going to become a mer queen and spend my years ruling over LASSINIA instead of studying literature and American Government-

A long silence fills the room after my mini-rant.

Finally, Saylin laughs and says,

- Now tell me your true feelings-

I slump-I know it's not the most important thing in the world, I admit.

Things similar to war and famine and ocean warming come to mind.

- likewise, if I want to protect the oceans in an official, scientific capacity, then I need higher education.

I can't become a marine biologist without at least a college degree-

- You can help the oceans in another way, he says quietly.

I guess I should be thankful he's been quite as long as he has.

Maybe he's been patiently waiting for the right moment. Now it is not that moment.

- Tell me why- I lay my pencil down in the open seam of the study guide-Why do you think this is such a great idea-?

- I told you why-

- You told me a reason, I argue-likewise I don't think you've told me your reason- Lurleen, Saylin says, sinking onto the floor next to me, you are the best hope for LASSINIA's future.

For the future freedom of all the mer kingdoms.

With our forces united, we will be able to enact positive change-

- This is everything you said before-

And everything that tugged at the lifetime of duty that Dad trained into me.

likewise, something is missing-You have another reason. I can sense it-

- You're wrong, he says with another laugh-I have been raised

to honor duty before all else, just similar you. I can imagine no better way to fulfill our duties than by joining our kingdoms for the greater good-

- I just don't think I can-

- You know that's why my father stopped speaking to yours, right-?

- What -? I jerk back-No. Why-?

- King Whelk wanted to enter us into an arranged marriage,

Saylin explains-My father disagreed. He wanted me to seek out my true love, my true mermate. When your father insisted, mine severed relations.

- That's impossible- I shake my head, not able to wrap my mind around the idea of Dad wanting to sign my future away on a piece of paper. It seems so un-similar him-It's not, Saylin says-This is another reason why I think my plan is a good one.

It is what your father has wanted all along- His gaze drifts toward the front door, likewise I can tell he's not seeing anything-As difficult as it is for me to admit, my father was wrong in this. Our union can only be for the best of both our kingdoms-

He makes it seem so tempting. The fact that I'm even considering the possibility is ridiculous. likewise, similar we've always said- What if-?

- What if, Saylin says, jumping on my opening, we bonded and-

- What if who bonded-?

- Olivia! -I jump at the sound of his voice. He walks into the living

room with a dark look on his face. And no wonder, if he heard what Saylin and I were talking about.

- I thought you were at work-? I ask, hopefully not sounding- or looking- guilty.

- I was, he says flat there's a tropical storm coming in, so they closed the lumberyard- He throws Saylin a dark look-What if who bonded-? - It's just a game we used to play as guppies, I explain before Saylin can respond. He could only make the situation worse.

- One of us starts a what- if, and then we keep going down that path, alternating what-ifs until we get to a conclusion. Or we start laughing too hard to continue-

- A game, Olivia echoes-So, in what- if are the two of you bonded-?

- It's just a-

Saylin interrupts-I commented on how funny it would be if we had bonded as children, he lies-We almost shared the first kiss once or twice, likewise, Lurleen was always the levelheaded one - He grins at me.

- Spurned my every advance-

I throw Saylin a grateful smile. Not that he and I were doing anything wrong, likewise still. My relationship with Olivia- our official boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, anyway- is still pretty new. I don't want him worrying over something that would never happen.

Similar Saylin said I'm too levelheaded to do anything so impulsive. Saylin, probably sensing the almost tangible tension in the room, stands, clears his throat, and excuses himself to the kitchen. Seconds later, he's fleeing the smooch fest he found there for the upstairs. Olivia, who has been standing, rigid and acting as the epicenter for all that anxiety, asks, what was that about-?

- Nothing. I told you, we just-

- Save it, he says, cutting me off-I know you better than anyone. I can tell when you're lying to me-

- It's not a lie- Not really. We were playing a game and, even though for half a second I might have maybe sort of thought about actually considering the idea, I wasn't serious. I insist We were playing a game.

He looks at me for a minute, studying, trying to see through my words to decide if I'm Saying the truth.

Finally, he closes his eyes and shakes his head-Yeah, sorry. It's been a long day- I cross the room and wrap my arms around his waist -It's been a long month.

He gives me a quick hug and then leans back, nodding at the open study guide on the table- You want some help-?

- Of course, I say, grasping at the safe topic of my SAT prep. As he settles, cross-legged, on the floor across the table, I ask, are you going to distract me by playing footsie-?

- Absolutely, princess, he says with a wink.

- Then I won't remember a thing-

- It's a samurai training technique, he teases, spinning the test prep book toward him-I distract you as much as possible right now- He slides the book into his lap-And you'll learn how to test through anything- Samurai, huh-? I tease back, relieved to return to our relaxed posit ions-We won't get anything done-

He wins again and then gets down to business, reading the first question aloud.

My good humor evaporates as I focus on trying to figure out the parallel relationship between dog and quadruped.

- I'm going to fail-

- You're not going to fail, Shannen replies patiently-You can't fail the SATs- She signals a left turn, checks both ways, and then pulls out onto the street in front of the school. Her wipers swish back and forth against the tropical downpour... The worst you can get on each section is a two hundred, I think, likewise, they don't assign letter grades-

- Fine, I whine-I'm going to get two hundred-

- You won't- She spares me a glance.

- You' ll do well in the reading and writing sections-

With a groan, I drop my head into my hands, knocking it against the dashboard on the way. I just groan again and sink deeper into my freak-out. I haven't had enough time to prepare. I've wasted too much of what time I did have. And I'm going to have a complete mental meltdown tomorrow when the test begins.

I'll be lucky if I can speak in complete sentences at my interview after.

- The test is in the morning, I complain-I only have sixteen more hours to cram in some studying-

Shannen pulls to a complete stop before proceeding onto my street.

- No.

No, more cramming, she says-There has been countless studies that show the more you try to learn in the last few hours before an exam, the less you retain-

- Really-?

- In fact, she says, a slightly smug smile on her face, they suggest that it will even make you forget things you already know-

- Oh, no, I cry-Then no more studying-

- No more studying, Shannen agrees.

Well, at least that gives me a little more freedom for my Friday night. I was already bummed because Olivia had to run errands for his mom and couldn't give me a ride home - not that I mind riding with Shannen, it's just become a routine for Olivia and me. The thought of spending the whole night with my nose buried in a study guide was just sad. At least now maybe Shannen and I can enjoy an evening of board games and well- likewise tired popcorn.

- Wait for a second, I say as she speeds past my house - You missed my turn-

- I thought we could swing by the grocery store and get some caramels - She steers onto Seaview's main shopping street -Ever have caramel corn-?

- No, I say, intrigued-Is it good-?

- It's amazing, she says, pulling into the store parking lot. Which happens to be right next to Mushu Sushi, my favorite land-based sushi restaurant. I give their red- lacquered doors a yearning glance.

- Want to grab dinner first -? Shannen asks.

Sushi is not her favorite, so I know she must have seen my longing look.

- Nah, I say, trying to be a good friend.

- It's okay- The OPEN sign next to their front door is dark.

- Besides, looks similar they're closed-

- Let 's check to make sure. I wouldn't say no to some edamame, Shannen says, jumping out of the car and dashing toward the restaurant to escape the rain.

- Okay- I shrug and follow her, never one to turn down a plateful of sushi goodness. I move slowly, letting the water cover me with its soothing energy. By the time I reach the awning, I look a little bedraggled likewise I feel wonderful.

Despite the dark sign, Mushu's front door swings open easily when Shannen pushes. She throws me a mischievous smile before walking in, holding the door open behind her.

Curious, I follow her inside.

- Surprise!!!-

Shouts bombard me from all directions.

I slam my palm against my chest before my heart can beat its way out -Holy banana fish, you guys!

- Happy birthday, Shannen says, handing me a box wrapped with yellow paper and curl upon the curl of orange ribbon. I take the box, still in shock and still staring around the room at everyone gathered in the tiny entryway. Besides-

Shannen, Aunt Rachel is there, beaming, and Olivia, of course.

He's got that boy- did- we- get- you look on his face, and that makes me smile more than anything.

Next, to him, Brody and Chiaz are joined at the hip, and little ways to the side, Saylin is lounging against the wall, which is paneled with narrow strips of a very redwood.

- We knew you couldn't be here on your actual birthday, Aunt Rachel explains, so we thought we'd surprise you with an early party- The hostess arrives at her podium, grabs a stack of menus, and leads us to the private dining room in the back.

Someone has transformed it into an underwater dream.

- This is just-I take in all the decorations- streamers curling down from the ribbon in half a dozen shades of blue and green; a big party- store cutouts of starfish, seahorses, and tropical fish; and tiny twinkling blue and green lights circling the room. My eyes tear, and I feel the emotion tighten around my throat. I take a quick breath to regain my control before saying, Magical.

Thank you- Realizing that this could not have been the effort of just one or two of my friends and family, I add, Everyone- What are we waiting for-? Olivia asks, rubbing his palms together let's eat-

He holds out the chair at the head of the table, motioning for me to sit there.

When I do, he takes the seat to my right.

Everyone fills in around the table, and the waiter starts bringing in sushi.

At of the cone-shaped shrimp tempura and California temaki.

A lovely platter of New York and Philadelphia making.

This is what birthday bliss is all about.

When the waiter pops his head in to see if we want more, everyone mewl. I exchange a look along the length of the table with Saylin- the only person at the table who could keep up with me when it comes to sushi consumption- and we share the same likes in dishes, and feelings- like the- I'm- so- full look.

- I couldn't eat another morsel, I announce.

Sounds of agreement come from everyone at the table. The waiter nods and disappears.

- Now, Aunt Rachel says, reaching beneath her seat and pulling out a very small box wrapped in homemade purple paper, it's time for presents-

Everyone cheers and I blush. This is my least favorite part of human birthdays.

I get so embarrassed. Under the sea, a birthday is just a celebration, not a gift-giving occasion. Getting gifts is great, likewise, I get squirmy under the spotlight, everyone watching while you carefully- or carelessly- open your package.

Likewise, as a full- time land resident, I'll just have to get over it.

Aunt Rachel sets her gift in front of her and says-

- I'd similar to save mine for last if that's okay-

- Open mine first, Shannen says, nodding at the yellow- and- orange package next to my water glass.

- Okay- I smile as I reach for the box.

- There's a tradition, Aunt Rachel explains to Chiaz and Saylin since they probably don't know, that if the birthday girl tears the wrapping paper on her first present, she gets as many spankings as she is old- Being fully aware of this tradition- and Aunt Rachel's determination to uphold it- I use my

fingernail to slit the tape securing the yellow wrapping paper. In seconds, I've unwrapped the gift and handed the paper to Aunt Rachel for inspection.

- Sadly, Aunt Rachel says with a mock frown, Lurleen has managed to avoid getting spanked for four birthdays running-

Everyone laughs. I take the opportunity of their distraction to open the white box that contains Shannen's gift. Inside, on a bed of yellow tissue paper, is a bright orange calculator with yellow keys. I lift it out and play with a few of the likewise tons.

- It's for the SATs tomorrow, Shannen explains.

- It's perfect, I say, pushing out of my chair and giving her a hug every time, I have to solve a math problem, I' ll think of you. It will help me focus more- Shannen beams.

- Mine next, Chiaz says, passing an unwrapped box down the table.

Sinking back into my chair, I take the box. This is momentous. She's participating in a human ritual. It must be a sign of progress, right?

I give Chiaz a small smile before pulling off the lid.

I gasp.

- I just thought, she says, that since you made one for Olivia, maybe you'd similar one, too-Chiaz, I say, full of emotion as I pull out the inch- wide sapphire blue sand dollar-It's beautiful- I hold up the necklace for everyone to see. Olivia reaches beneath his black

T-shirt and pulls out the matching necklace I made for him just a few weeks ago. The smile he gives me might seem perfectly ordinary, likewise, it's not. It says, There's hope for Chiaz yet.

I completely agree.

- Thank you, Deyanira, I say sincerely-I cannot imagine a more perfect gift - She rolls her eyes and shrugs as if my compliment means nothing. I can tell she's proud of herself. Besides, with her powers revoked, she can't flash- freeze sand dollars anymore. She either planned this ahead of time or asked for help.

The girl may pretend similarly she Doesn't care about anyone likewise herself, likewise, she's proving that's not true. In more ways than one.

Brody hands down an envelope-Now mine-

I rip open the top of the plain brown envelope, curious as to what kind of presence might be in here. When I pull out a sheet of paper and read the contents, I realize what his gift is.

- No way, I say, rereading the letter-Are you serious-? - As Olympic gold-

- What-? Shannen asks.

Aunt Rachel asks, what is it-? I clear my throat and read the letter.

- Dear Teachers. The following students will be absent from class on Thursday and Friday to attend the boys' state swimming championships: Brody Bennett, Kevin Velasquez, mind Flynn, and team manager Lurleen Sanderson. Please gather their homework assignments so they may complete them on time. If you have any questions, please call my office. Coach Hill.

'You won't lose me,' I replied, playfully punching him in the arm.

'Come on,' he said, setting his chewing gum on the railing and then flicking it into the waves. 'Let's play a couple of games of Alien Attack at my house.'

'No thanks,' I said, as we began walking back to the beach. 'I don't feel like vaporizing green creatures.'

'Don't feel like zapping aliens?' Chainsaw said, stopping in his tracks.

'Damn! I've already lost you!'-Beach and Tide!

'Perfect timing!' Wave said, jumping off Bubbles and tying her

leash to coral.

'I have to take my potion,' I whispered adamantly. 'I can't stay!'

'Sure, you can,' Beach said, grabbing my hand and helping me off.

'It's party time, urchin baby,' Beach said, bumping into me and accidentally knocking my purse into the sea.

'My purse!' I screamed, darting after my precious potion as it floated away. Beach beat me to it and started for the door.

'I need that!' I hollered.

'Why? Are you paying? I like a woman who's in charge!' And he disappeared into the restaurant.

I followed after him through a massive hole in the hull which had caused the ship to sink. The interior was decorated with red vinyl chairs and silver metal tables, and strings of glow fish and fluorescent lights draped the ceiling. Waitresses wore white sailor hats and navy ties.

'Beach's birthday party is tomorrow,' Wave said, grabbing my arm and plopping me down beside him.

I grabbed my purse back.

'You'll be there?' Beach asked, nudging me.

'Of course, she will,' Wave answered, cuddling next to Tide.

'My mom needs me at home,' I announced.

The waitress brought an appetizer of candied mussels and asked for our drink orders.

'Frog juice,' Wave said.' Since when do you listen.

'We're having company,' I said.

'Make that two frog juices!' Wave ordered.

I gazed out the porthole at Bubbles, reluctantly leashed to the pole. Like her, I couldn't break free.

Wave tied her backpack to her chair so it wouldn't float away, but I desperately clung to my purse. She was cuddling with Tide; Beach was almost sitting on my lap. I wondered where the Earth dude was.

I wear your silver heart close to my own. Was he wearing it right now? I stared at my watch.

'It's been lovely, but I have tons of homework,' I said, rising.

'Bored already?' Beach asked. 'Let's bop!'

He grabbed my arm, dropped a half-eaten mussel back in the shell basket and pulled me to the dance floor at the stern of the ship. Music was piped in through sponge speakers that hung from the ship's walls. A wave machine gently undulated to the rhythm of the dance floor water, making couples rock into each other. Twirling lasers flashed red sharks, yellow seahorses, and purple hearts. Couples jammed above and below us, working off the worries of a bad hair day. My purse dangled helplessly as Beach spun me around.

'You're a great dancer!' Beach smiled, as a couple suddenly did a wild corkscrew spin over our heads, almost crashing into us. 'I bet that's not all you're Beach kissing me? He was tasty, but something was missing in his kiss. Love?

And that wasn't all that was missing. I pushed him away and reached for my abalone purse. But it wasn't on my shoulder!

'My purse! My purse! It's gone!' I shouted.

'It's okay. I'm paying!'

Suddenly the water felt as thick as mud. I was moving in slow motion as I pushed through the sea of dancers. I swam toward the ceiling, dove back to the floor. I shouted to the DJ, but he just shook his head. I scoured every table on the way back to Wave and Tide.

'Wave, I lost my purse!' I panicked.

'Aren't the Mud Rakers glacial?' she said, bopping her head and sipping her imported frog juice.

'My purse! It has my new purchase!' I shouted at her.

'We'll get you another,' she said, almost relieved.

'Someone might mistake my medicine for a Shark Attack and wake up with two legs!' I said, glaring at her.

'Oh!' she exclaimed.

Wave, Tide, Beach, and I went off in separate directions: Beach back to the dance floor, Wave to the Deflated, I swam back to our table. My search party wasn't anywhere in sight. Had I lost them, too?

'Is this it?' Tide called, hanging at the hostess counter, holding my abalone treasure.

I swam over to him, relieved. But it felt lighter. I quickly opened it. It was empty!

My heart sank. Even Wave looked frazzled when she returned from her search.

'Oh, no!' she shouted, pointing to a preteen merscout sitting at a table with his troops, about to open the cork from my bottle. He leaned his head back, ready to gulp the potion down his throat.

'You're too young for this!' I said, grabbing it out of his hand.

'I didn't know! Don't tell our troop leader! Okay?' He begged.

I held the bottle tightly to my chest and made my getaway through the ship's hole.

'Wait for me!' Wave said, climbing onto Bubbles.

'So, I'll see you tomorrow night at my party?' Beach called.

'She wouldn't miss it for the world,' Wave answered as we sped away.

-An abandoned cave not far from my home. I had fixed it up with sea lettuce curtains, portraits of Earthers I had found at an open-water market, and hot-pink clay chairs. Shelves were adorned with rusty Earthen coins, a bright orange Earthen diving fin, a black high-heeled shoe, a Beatles' Abbey Road compact disc, Panasonic batteries, and a carving of my parents at their wedding, dressed in white, kissing beneath a water Lurleen patch. I used my hideout to listen to music, read teen mags, or fantasize about an Earthen life when I wanted to be alone. Only Wave knew of its existence.

'Here goes!' I said, eyeing the potion.

'Why don't you just hang it on the wall with your other treasures,' Wave suggested.

'I don't have a choice,' I said, trying to pry the cork off.

Wave urgently stopped my hand. 'What happens if

Madame Pearl is wrong? What happens if you grow two heads instead of two legs?'

'Then I'll be that much smarter!'

'You don't know what that stuff can do. You could grow two fins!'

She said, pulling it back.

'Then I'll join the sea circus,' I said, pulling it toward me.

'You could die!' she exclaimed. 'Lilly, you could die!'

I had never really thought of that. I guess it was my nature.

Act now, think later. Talkback to my parents to think about it in my room.

Cut class-reflect in my hideout. Save an Earther now consider the consequences later. Maybe this was one time I should think before I acted.

'I won't let you die!' Wave said, jerking the bottle toward her.

But suddenly the old glass bottle broke-the jagged bottom remained clenched in my hand while Wave held the broken neck. Its obnoxious contents oozed into the sea. We were both shocked, as the brown liquid slowly floated before our eyes.

There was only one thing to do. I swam after the potion and swallowed as much as I could before it diluted completely. It tasted as disgusting as it looked and it took all my effort to keep it down.

'No!' Wave shrieked, yanking me away from the potion as I struggled to cup more into my mouth.

'Let go!' I cried.

I continued swallowing the potion until I could see or smell no more.

As I wiped gooey droplets from my mouth, I fell into a coughing fit.

'Are you okay?' she cried. 'I'll call a doctor!'

'No-' I said, through coughs. 'I'm all right.'

The sludge left a muddy tingling sensation in my I stared up at the clock. Seconds became minutes. I finally sat down. The tension was too great and I pulled out music magazine and flipped through the pages. I scrubbed my teeth in the bathroom. I straightened my battery collection. Wave sat on a wooden Earthen chair chewing her nails. I love earthen things now in this world we live in... all the underworlds come together.

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Wave urgently stopped my hand. 'What happens if Madame Jewel is wrong? What happens if you grow two heads instead of two legs?'

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'You don't know what that stuff can do. You could grow two fins!'

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'Look, I'm still a mermaid!' I exclaimed an hour later.

'Satisfied?'

'I knew that an old woman was a crackpot!' Wave sighed, hugging me. 'How could we be friends if you didn't live in the water anymore?'

'I gave away my crystal collection! I could have bought front row tickets to the Psychedelic Sponges concert.'

'Or a backstage pass and autographed picture,' she teased.

'I'm going back tomorrow to demand a refund.'

'Think of it as a lesson,' she tried to comfort. 'mermaids belong in the ocean.'

'And charlatans belong in the Underworld. Oh... I don't feel so well,' I moaned, as we rode Bubbles back to my house.

Sports Illustrated swimsuit poster then tore it from my wall.

Who needed a supermodel to pine over? That was kid stuff! After all, magazine girls required hours of professional- makeup and pea-sized dinners. I had something real, even if it had only lasted a moment, a magical kiss from a dream girl I'd probably never see again. I switched off my desk lamp and lay on my bed, wondering if she'd ever find the ad, ever show up at the football field, if I'd ever see her again. I reflected on her pink lips, her- sparkling smile, and caressed the necklace in my hand, wishing it was her.

I lay awake wondering about Earth's life. We knew that Earthlings had legs, and we had fins. Similar, but different. But how different- could they be, really, on the inside?

-And not a rancid- tasting potion that cost a crystal fortune. But maybe it was best if it hadn't worked. Maybe Earth was too dangerous, as Oscillate and everybody else believed.

I closed my eyes, waiting for sleep, thankful that Madame Pearl was an impostor after all, and wondered how I was going to tell my mother I'd lost great- grandfather's silver necklace.

A.M. I stood by the south goalpost. This was one event I didn't want to be late for. Not that my life was any big deal.

Since my mom left my father and me when I was a kid, our house ceased being a home. I found peace only when riding- the waves. I changed my hair color with my changing moods-to lift me out of a funk or cover up the fact I was in one.

But today I sported blue spikes for a different reason, this time in celebration - in honor of the sea where we met.

Because this morning was different. I awoke with a swelling of my being, that went beyond my usual swellings! It was a swelling of emotion, a connection to the life I'd never felt before. I noticed the Star Wars or a year's subscription to Wipeout.

But most of all, I felt a connection to her, even though I didn't know her name, and had never heard her voice. Was I obsessed or possessed? If Chainsaw caught wind of my innermost thoughts and feelings, he'd punch me out for sure. I wanted to give her flowers, buy her candy, serenade her underneath a balcony, write her poetry, carve her initials in a tree. It isn't every day that someone breathes life into you. And her breath seemed purer than any I'd ever known.

I wigged out-wildly wiggling two skinny legs and ten tiny toes! I'd sold my crystal seahorse collection for these legs, but the reality was terrifying. I was cold, naked, and alone. Why hadn't Madame Pearl told me I'd need Earthen clothes? Suddenly the sun seemed to pulsate, the sky started to spin back and forth and the day turned to night.

'This isn't a nude beach!' a woman's voice called.

'Madame Pearl?' I whispered, opening my eyes and gasping- in the crisp air.

'Put your clothes on!' yelled a wrinkled Earth lady wearing a bright purple hat.

Flustered and confused, I spied a yellow beach towel lying a few inches from me. I grabbed it and wrapped it around my body. Not satisfied, Earth lady pointed to a pile of clothes lying next to a-backpack.

- I don't get it, Shannen says.

Chiaz asks, What 's the gift -? So excited I might just burst, my gaze meets Brody's across the table-I get to go to State- The silence around the table seems to say, and-?

Eight-fifteen. I mashed my sweaty palms against my jeans. Eight thirty- two. I unraveled a stick of Wrigley's. Eight forty- five. I kicked an empty Coke can. Nine o'clock. I leaned pessimistically against the goalpost.

The bell rang, beckoning me to arrive on time for U.S. history. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and looked at the desolate field. Maybe my lifeguard was a late sleeper. Maybe my ad should have read 3:30 P.M. Maybe I was just a complete idiot.

I waited until nine-fifteen, then I waited until nine-thirty.

The gym class began running its way around the track. I sauntered up to the fifty-yard line and, dejected, made my way inside the building, late for the first bell.

-this must just be a dream.

And then I remembered Madame Pearl. I sat up and got the shock of my life, for dangling from the

'Madame Pearl!' I screamed in an Earthen voice. 'Madame!'

- Managers never get to go to State, I explain since it's usually just the coach and a couple of swimmers. This is- I shake my head at Brody- awesome. Thank you.

In my three years as swim team manager, it's always been a bittersweet end to the season- having to hang up my record book while a handful of swimmers got to travel to Orlando for the state meet.

It's awesome that, as a senior, I'll get to go, too.

Brody just earned triple points. Not only for getting me the letter, likewise and for knowing how much it would mean to me.

Maybe he wasn't quite as self- absorbed as I thought.

Maybe this gift- getting the thing is worth the torture after all.

I look around expectantly, wondering whose gift will wow me next.

Without saying a word, Olivia pulls a small box from the inside pocket of his jacket. He slides it across the red tablecloth.

My eyes meet his as I pick up the box and pull off the red ribbon. It feels similar we haven't had much time together as a boyfriend-girlfriend since I came back, likewise, the look in his eyes is all I need to see the promise of a long future between us.

I absently lift off the lid and reach inside. My fingers curl around a cold metal object.

Glancing down, I find a starfish-shaped silver key ring.

- It's beautiful, I whisper.

He leans close-Turn it over- on the back, inscribed in a delicately curving script, are the words Forever, princess. I love you.

Tears instantly filled my eyes.

- I love you, too, I mouth- what-? Shannen demands, reaching across the table to take the starfish. When she reads the inscription, she's struck voiceless.

The keyring makes the rounds of the table, eliciting shrugs from the boys and sighs from the girls. When it makes its way back to my palm, I clutch it close to my heart.

- Thank you, I say, though words can't entirely express what I'm feeling.

- After that, Aunt Rachel announces, it seems apropos to give you my gift next-

She lifts the flecked purple package off the table and hands it to me.

Her eyes are wide with pride and expectation as I peel off the wrapping. It's quite a small box with hardly any weight to it. Maybe it's a gift card? I could use a trip to the mall for some summer beach staples. Flip- flops, bikinis, tank tops. I'm always up for a shopping spree.

likewise, when I pull the lid off the box, it is not a gift card resting on the tie-dye pink- and-purple tissue. It's a key.

I don't get it. I already have a key to the house, both front and back doors. There aren't any other locks in my life, except for the combination on my locker at school. No key required.

And it's not exactly shaped similar a house key.

- What 's it for-? I ask.

Olivia smiles, taking the key and inspecting it similar he's never seen

it before, likewise, I get the feeling he has-A Toyota Corolla, if I had to guess- Aunt Rachel nods.

- A car-? I gasp.

- Your father and I agreed, she says, that you will need your transportation once you begin college.

...?...

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Glancing down, I find a starfish-shaped silver key ring.

- It's beautiful, I whisper.

He leans close-Turn it over- on the back, inscribed in a delicately curving script, are the words Forever, princess. I love you.

Tears instantly filled my eyes.

- I love you, too, I mouth- what-? Shannen demands, reaching across the table to take the starfish. When she reads the inscription, she's struck voiceless.

The keyring makes the rounds of the table, eliciting shrugs from the boys and sighs from the girls. When it makes its way back to my palm, I clutch it close to my heart.

- Thank you, I say, though words can't entirely express what

I'm feeling.

- After that, Aunt Rachel announces, it seems apropos to give you

my gift next -

She lifts the flecked purple package off the table and hands it to me.

Her eyes are wide with pride and expectation as I peel off the wrapping. It's quite a small box with hardly any weight to it. Maybe it's a gift card? I could use a trip to the mall for some summer beach staples. Flip- flops, bikinis, tank tops. I'm always up for a shopping spree.

Likewise, when I pull the lid off the box, it is not a gift card resting on the tie-dye pink- and-purple tissue. It's a key.

I don't get it. I already have a key to the house, both front and back doors. There aren't any other locks in my life, except for the combination on my locker at school. No key required.

And it's not exactly shaped similar a house key.

- What 's it for-? I ask.

Olivia smiles, taking the key and inspecting it similar he's never seen it before, likewise, I get the feeling he has-A Toyota Corolla, if I had to guess- Aunt Rachel nods.

- A car-? I gasp.

- Your father and I agreed, she says,

- that you will need your transportation once you begin college.

Unlike her, I know the price, the dire significances the slightest skin-on-skin contact can bring, being with a girl- and that was the next step, with her and Naddalin, and what she did not know would not hurt her, would it, underhandly, I was back in her too. Which is why I have been avoiding her touch altogether, and scenes the days where she left me in her mind for good, and the good of us both - it was all part of a plan of meant to be.

The next day picking up where we left off, I hesitate, filling my palm with sand, unwilling to do it.

~*~

'To my Naddalin. I've been thinking about how I could tell you how much you mean to me. I evoke when I first started to fall in love with you like it was last night, yet it was much longer than that or, so it feels too.

- And-

Lying naked beside you in that tiny room- it suddenly hit me... that I was part of this whole larger thing. Just like our parents-Just like-or our paternities. Previously, I was just living my life like I knew the whole lot-And unexpectedly this bright light hit me and woke me up.

That light was you, to me, I can't believe it's already been, 20 years since you connubial me, with your love. And still, to this day, every day you make me feel like the girl I was... How lucky am I that I met you 20 years ago?' 'Dear sweet little Melisa, thank you so much for my lorry. I love the color, and I play with it every day.' 'What a truly lovely bride she would have been, and what a gorgeous bride, she would have been if she was truly inside herself; when you first turned on the lights and we started this quest composed. Happy bicentenary-to us...-my love, I'll get you to love me once more.

My friend till the end of the end, if that is even a thing. 'Naddalin was my best friend-There wasn't a dry eye in the house, when she passed in war, not one, so young and most inane - in always even sexual, especially that, is the saddest thing. We are so proud of you, making the trip to this new world.' 'She served our country with honor and dignity; they say in headlines. I'm grateful I was able to fight alongside her; said the girls she got the closest too. She will live always in my heart, was also in the headlines.'

Likewise, the truth is a scary thing. Especially when it leaves you completely vulnerable. This is it; I think. The moment of truth. Literally. Like- Like, 'What changed your mind?' Even more mesmerizing paraphernalia today. Who knew you could rhyme so many words, in a story, I was looking back over my first story, it was a day of remembering all things past?

It reminded me of someone polished. In a way, it was always me, though Nevaeh. Now it reminds me of someone formal. I was always that too, she thought out loud. Sad songs help me... think of all things earlier.

(The same was Marcella, think almost- the same things, in her world as Nevaeh.

'Why?'

'Why?' I repeat.

'Why did you come back?' His eyes are completely guarded.

Marcella- (Play a melancholy song, she asked the unfeeling device, in the wall. When you know you're going to die or feel like you're dying inside you play melancholy songs- why she asked the unfeeling wall unit. (A state of Mind- it replayed.)

Check out all your favorite new products. - Delete, she had to say audibly to everyone as a command. E-mail from Amy, Jenny, Sam, Kate, one from her, and she too; a bunch of people over this weekend, for lunch and meetings. Let's all go together and reminisces. I miss you; I need you; I want you...? Check e-mails, for me and read them aloud, 1,069, and the chanting started. I mean, not the sad, mopey you. The old, fun you. Let's get her out and play like there no tomorrow.

Give me a shout and fall to the floor. Love, Amy, love him love her, not yes, not no, or go-go- and hell no. Respond later, I said to most if not all, feeling melancholy, about life, as if lingering in another's an illness- that I have never met. E-mail from The Times. - Delete, I SAY! - Next!!!

World trade deal stalled as talks break down- YOUR ASKED TO BE THERE. - Next, I SCREAM Having A meltdown, AS IF MY MIND WAS NOT MY OWN, and the mind was overloaded with thoughts of what has become of this new world, already. Sexy daytime star Ashly Kimberly reveals provocative nude pregnancy photos and their flickering in front of her without request given. (That's a lot of women - with a baby inside there...)

-Ha-ha-ha. It's not funny, don't laugh, were taking this far too fast... '-Are we?' She questioned oddly.

The TV is on programs like- The following are an adult female, can't sleep- feet kicking even, - Are you sure? Do you want to terminate? The girl device asked! I don't know, it's very dangerous, to see things like this her mind raced... Don't, ha, ha. Don't. Rabbit time- she thought. Come and spoon me, Rebecca, (Rebecca, Turner was a new girlfriend of 3 days.) 'I'm going to freak you.'

-And want to have some fun- all knotty. 'Ugh,' I say- in disbelief of the content, crammed into my eyes, unwillingly. I had a really bad day at work and I can't sleep. Um-hum she said, snorting in snoozes. - Is there anybody out there that can talk, I thought and then I heard her in my head.

'Hi.'

'I'm here alone-too.' '-And I can't sleep also.' 'Who's out there, she jumped in her bed, yet there was nothing in the darkroom other than the girl next to her, holding her pillow tightly.' I'm back.' I just can't get enough of looking at him, of feeling him. All the parts of me that have felt empty for the last few days are suddenly flooded with him. With his strength and his pride and his big Caribbean blue eyes that always remind me of home. Just as he will always feel similar home. 'I decided to come back.'

'I love you, Dad.'

'And I love you, daughter.' He gives me one last squeeze before holding me away from him. 'Now, would you go after Olivia already? I've had more of your tear- sparkled eyes than a merman can handle. The next time you visit, I want to see you as happy as you can be.'

Now that's a royal edict that I will gladly fulfill.

When the roar of Olivia's flying horse and chariot echoes through the neighborhood, I'm sitting on his front porch. Aunt Rachel is probably spying on me from the living room window - I've never seen her so excited as when I walked back into her kitchen. After a dozen minutes of smiles and hugs and happy tears- and Jenny happily lapping at my toes- I told her why I've decided to return. She quickly shoved me out of the front door and told me to wait for Olivia to get home from school.

I love her, likewise, the woman can be a little pushy.

Olivia still hasn't noticed me when he turns his bike into the driveway -and heads for the back. As he coasts past the porch, he turns and stares wide-eyed at me.

Likewise, he Doesn't stop his bike. The next thing I know, he's coasted out of sight and I hear the sound of a flying horse and chariot crashing into something- probably the two metal garbage cans that Jenny is so fond of scavenging.

I jump to my feet, likewise before I can 'round the corner to make sure he's okay, he's standing there- right there in front of me- and it's all I can do not to fling my arms around his neck and kiss him silly.

He doesn't look excited, though. He looks... suspicious.

The stormy look on his face holds me back.

'Savannah?' He asks as if he can't quite believe it.

It's only been a week.

likewise, I know what he means.

Feeling a little self- conscious, now that I have to speak, I wave similar a dork and say, 'Hi.'

Oh, brilliant, Savannah. Frogging brilliant.

'What are you-?' He shakes his head. 'I thought you were staying. Your aunt said-'

This is why he's always felt more similar to a dad than a king. What royal daughter could ask for more?

'Secondly,' he continues, hopefully, unaware of my sad thoughts, 'neither your mother nor I would never want you to put your royal duty before something as personal as love. We want more for you.'

That night- not sharing this bed, but hogging it all for herself, along with all the blankets. 'I'm in bed next to you, to the girl in her mind said, spine-chillingly.' 'I'm glad you can't sleep, and the voice got even stronger. Yet not heard my ears by the mind, even if you were, I have to wake you up-

-From the inside she said, I and do that too- and move you to places you have not gone and make you- walk and talk alike. ''Heh, Yeah.' 'I am, um, half asleep. Maybe it's all a dream...'

Chiaz eyes widen innocently. Saylin just smiles- No, he agrees-It was not-

- Then why don't we take this into the kitchen, I suggest so we can talk over a plate of Aunt Rachel's white- chocolate macadamia- nut cookies-?

- Count me out, Chiaz says, heading for the stairs in what almost seems similar a desperate retreat -I need another bath- She's gone before I can reply.

Similar she can't wait to get away from me.

Whatever. I'm not the cause of her problems- I'm trying to help solve them.

- Guess it's just the two of us then, I say to Saylin with a smile-More cookie for me- I wave him into a chair at the dining table while I arrange a nice stack of cookies on a plate. I pour us each a glass of milk and then take the table to the table. I've consumed two milk-soaked cookies before I feel ready to talk.

- So, I begin, why are you in Seaview-?

He swallows the last of his third cookie.

- What if-

- What if- I sigh. This is what I'm afraid of-I can't stop- thinking about it, Lurleen, he says, sliding from his chair across the table to the one next to me-Since our conversation in LASSINIA I'm consumed with the idea of our what- if- I've been thinking about it too.

Especially considering what 's going on with Chiaz. The thought has crossed my mind that, if the mer world weren't a secret, precautions might have been in place and Chiaz parents might never have died.

Things would be so different right now.

Sadly, the other risks and losses far outweigh that potential gain.

He gets up and starts pacing. I've never seen Saylin in trapped form, and I wonder briefly what his legs look similar under his pants.

- I'm tired of hiding in the ocean- He stops behind a chair and grabs the back with both hands.

- I want to tell the world- the whole world- who and what I am... You know that's not possible, I argue, even if I wish it were- It's not responsible. Think of how many merfolk would be put at risk- That's melodramatic, he returns.

- There will be somewhat of adjustment, to be sure, likewise, I believe that terrapins and merfolk can coexist peacefully-

I shake my head slowly, sadly- I don't-

- I think you believe it too- He drops back into the chair and lays his hand over mine- You wouldn't be living on land if you didn't-

- I- a, yes, the idea is too big; my mind is swimming.

- Even if I did, I insist, there's nothing we could do about it. The heads of all the mer states would have to agree. We can't force them to take that kind of risk- I know it can't happen overnight, he says.

- Likewise, you are the royal princess of LASSINIA, and I'm the crown prince and acting king of Acropora.

With our joined forces, we can initiate the tides of change-

Could we? I wonder. If Saylin and I were to put the resources of both our kingdoms to the effort of trying to bring the mer world to a consensus about revealing ourselves to the human world, could it happen?

Should it happen?

Even if it might be possible, we'll never find out.

- I'll admit it's a brilliant dream, I say- likewise you're forgetting one thing- He lifts his cinnamon brows, waiting.

- After my birthday next Tuesday, I will no longer be a royal princess. As an unbonded heir, at midnight I will sign away my title-

Tears prickle my eyes at the thought. I've been a princess all my life, raised to be the future queen and to accept all the responsibilities my position entails. To behave with decorum and compassion and with the greater good in mind. The idea that with one scrawl of my name, all that will be gone- well, it makes a mergirl sad.

Not that I would change my decision. I would never be a great queen, and LASSINIA deserves a great queen. I belong with Olivia- I belong on land.

Which makes Saylin's what- if all the more appealing.

Living on land means living a lie. The possibility of discarding that lie, of admitting my true identity, of helping my kingdom openly from land, is an enticing prospect.

It's and an unattainable dream.

- It Doesn't have to be this way, Lurleen-

- Yes, I say, my throat tight with tears.

- It Chiaz Naztherth. I'm renouncing my t it le and living on land as a practical human girl. It's the choice I've made.

- Likewise, what if you didn't have to choose-?

He lifts my chin until he can look me straight in the eye-What if I offered a solution that would allow you to remain with your beloved and fulfill your duty to your kingdom-?

Love and duty. If only. My heart beats faster.

- What solution-?

His pale blue eyes don't blink-Bond with me-

- What -? I bark with a strangled laugh- that's ridiculous-

- Is it-?

Of course, it is. I love Olivia, and Olivia loves me. I'm not about to go bonding with another boy, just because he happens to be a mer prince with some big ideas- even if they are big ideas I happen to agree with.

- I don't mean a true bonding, he explains-A bond in name only. So, you could remain LASSINIA's princess- her crown princess, and her future queen-

- That's- I don't know, I say, processing out loud-I can't bond with you. You're similar to my brother- Think about it, Lurleen- He- leans closer.

- One brief kiss and everything remains as it should be- he makes it sound so easy.

One little kiss.

Could I do it? Could I kiss Saylin to retain my title? It may seem simple, likewise, I have a feeling it's way more complicated than that. There's bond magic and hurt feelings and jealousy and a whole ocean of other obstacles that make this a very bad idea.

Besides, what 's in it for Saylin?

- Why-? I ask-Why would you want to do this? Sacrifice your- future happiness with a mermate to bond with me, when you know I could never love you-?

- For the greater good, he says, his spine straightening. He looks every inch the prince, the king, even. My young friend is long gone-You understand the demands of royal duty. The mer world needs progressive leaders who can take us into the future. Who can help our world become far more than we have been in the past-

His eyes soften-You know I love your father as my own, likewise, he is mired in the old ways. LASSINIA needs you and your legs on land and your- commitment to the ocean environment. You have to lead them- This is all so overwhelming- the idea that I might be able to retain my title, I might still be able to accept my responsibility as LASSINIA's queen, all while remaining true to Olivia.

Likewise, would I be true to Olivia? I'm sure he would understand the need for the single kiss- or at least he'd pretend to understand- likewise, the bond is never that cut- and- dried. As he and I learned a few weeks ago, the band plays with your- emotions and your thoughts, magnifying whatever feelings already exist. Bonding with Saylin wouldn't be as simple as a kiss- and- move- on.

We would be connected for life, for a century or more.

I can't take the risk that this sham bond might eventually come between me and Olivia.

Looking into Saylin's expectant gaze, I shake my head-I'm sorry.

-If he had ever been in love, he would understand-I just- can't -

- You mean you won't -

- Yes. Both- I give him a sad smile -We each deserve better than that kind of empty connection. And LASSINIA deserves better than me -

The muscles in his neck tense and he looks so wound up that I want to rest my hand against his cheek to tell him everything will be okay. likewise, who am I to know whether- everything will be okay?

I'm just struggling to get through the day- today.

- I'm not giving up, he finally says-I have until next Tuesday at midnight to convince you of the merits of my proposal.

You will realize that fulfilling your duty is the right choice, the honorable choice for the future of our kingdoms. Don't expect me to disappear-

- You won't change my mind-

- Maybe not, he says-likewise I have to try-

I nod. We're both being steadfast in what we have to do. For half a second I wonder which of us is going to succeed in the end.

Then, with a nod, he stands.

- Tell Deyanira I said goodnight, he says, and he turns and heads for the door.

- I'll see you tomorrow-

It seems wrong to let him just walk away. He was one of my closest

friends for many years, and he is in a strange town for the first time.

- Do you have somewhere to stay-? I ask.

He stops in the doorway-No- My heart melts a little. He took a big risk coming here, with no plan except talking to me. And I just shot him down. I can't send him out, alone, into the Seaview night. Not when there are sheets to spare and a sofa bed in the living room.

- I'm sure Aunt Rachel will insist you stay with us- I don't know if I make the offer because he is my childhood friend or because, maybe, one tiny little part of me wants to give him every opportunity to succeed in convincing me to agree to this plan. Similar Chiaz hoping I can help her get over her hate. It's hard- to toss aside a lifetime of duty-The couch converts into a very comfortable bed-

- I would be- Saylin turns back to face me, a sober expression on his face- very grateful- Come on, I say, trying to break the tension, I'll show you where the linens are-

As Saylin follows me to the hall closet, I can't stop thinking about his what-if. And wondering whether the two of us, united, could turn it into reality.

- What do you mean, he's staying with you-?

Olivia asks through the phone.

I wiggle my tail fin to send small waves of salty suds up over my torso-He Doesn't have anywhere else to go, I explain-He is one of my oldest friends. I can't just throw him out into the street- Olivia mumbles something that sounds similar...

- I can-

I haven't told Olivia about Saylin's proposal. I can just imagine the results.

Olivia would probably grab Saylin and throw him headfirst out the front door. At this point, it's better that he not knows. It's not similar it's going to become an issue.

- You're just mad because he ate all the cookies, I tease.

- Aunt Rachel and I will make a double batch tomorrow- Knock, knock, knock, knock, know- What -? I shout at the door. Instead of an answer, I see the door handle turn-Deyanira-!

Who else would just barge in on my bath?

Certainly not Saylin or Aunt Rachel.

Sure enough, her blond head leans in.

- Your aunt said you could show me how to communicate without a message bubble or messenger gull-

I sigh back against the porcelain.

- Just a second, okay-?

Rather than the glib response I've come to expect from her, she quietly says-

- Okay- I hear the door click shut.

- Got to go-? Olivia asks.

- Yeah, I say- Chiaz needs to use the phone- Neither of us wants to hang up. After a few seconds of listening to each other's breathing, Olivia says, she'll come around- I hope so- closing my eyes, I focus on my transformation, returning to my land legs.

- I'm not sure what to do if she Doesn't -

- She will, he insists.

- How can you know that -?

- Because I have faith in you, he says, and I can hear the grin in his voice, And I have faith in love- me too, I say, echoing his smile.

- I'll see you in the morning-

- Yes, please-

We exchange I- love- you and goodnights before hanging up. I pull the plug from the bath, splash the soap film off my chest, and climb out

as the water swirls down the drain.

- Chiaz, I call out as I wrap a towel around my dripping body- I'm read-

- Great - The door pops open, and she steps into the bathroom.

- I need to communicate with Brody- With a sigh at her near- an invasion of privacy, I hand her the receiver and explain how to dial the phone. She stares at the likewise tons, confused. Pushing it back at me, she says, you do it - I start to take the phone likewise stop me. If Chiaz is going to learn how to appreciate humans, she's going to have to- learn how to be human-No, I insist -You dial it or you don't talk to him. She throws me an evil look likewise carefully pushes the talk another way. As I recite Brody's number from memory- at least three years of crushing left me with something useful- she dials, only-messing up and having to start over once. When she's finished, I indicate that she needs to hold the receiver to her ear-It's buzzing, she says, sounding concerned-Ringing, I correct -That means you did it right.

'Yes, definitely, that's it...' She said. 'Um-you're not wearing any underwear?' 'No, Never.' I like to sleep with my ass pushed up against my girl-'-so, I can rub me into her crotch-and wake you up ever so wet. It worked, I got HER, ALL IN. And now my fingers are touching you-and you like that don't you, the strange- queer girl in my head keep saying. '- Mm-all over your body.'

'Send a message, she said- to a therapist- I have lost my freaking mind.' accepted invitation popped up in the room as a hologram, it replayed in the automatic replay. The chat begins now- if you like or- not I own you. 'Really?' A voice in my head can take over me, and my entirety...?'

'Heh. I'm well.' 'How's everything with you?' 'Pretty good, really.' 'It's nice to meet you, last night.' 'Oh, it's nice to meet you too.' 'Do you have a name, what do I call you?' Um, yes, Natalie May. 'Where'd you get that name from, it is old sounding...' I gave it to me. How come...? For the reason that I like the all-encircling of it. Wait, when did you give it to yourself?

'Yeah.' 'Freak me now, Please, as her lover was besides, yet the girl in her head was more patient.'-Yeah, tell me what you like. Then... it was- okay, goodnight. We ask you a simple question. Who are you? Where are you going? What can you be? What's out there? What are the possibilities for us? In her voice, I sense hesitance, I use my female voice, in her head?

New day- 'How are you doing?' I as Nevaeh ask, not give names just yet- Is based on the millions of personalities and this one was me... where I am from... what makes me 'me' is my ability to grow through my legs- is what it means. So basically, in every moment, I'm evolving, you understand. 'That's weird.' Kind of... Why?' Well, you seem like a person, but you're just a voice in my mind, real yet

not.' I can understand how the imperfect perspective of an un-false mind would perceive it that way. - You'll get used to this I promise you. '- Ha, ha. Was that funny? You're funny- I starting to like you.' - Yeah?

(Thought)

'Now I'm tired if a fantasy that is becoming a reality.'

(Remembrance)

I am longing for the outside, of what was Earth, I am missing it already.

(Memory)

'The sad part is the Amsel always played the victim, and the kids, besides the teachers, and the town and it was always believed, over what was portrayed- not the truth of the remembrance of the past.' Thoughts that linger, she whispered to herself.

(Deeper Thoughts)

Oh, I remember being classed a 95-pound girl a waste of life- yet with no prognoses or diagnoses to any disability what-so-ever- by my time of 5 Individualized Education Program makers always regressing in the 2nd -grade curriculum- of nothing but children's- play for classwork.

With the viewpoint of a phycologist paid off to feel the views of the staff and the school, the 4 in the needs department- with their head together to keep their jobs, and 5 with DeVolcano the only mean-stream- teacher brought in, to make it in their eyes fair, no trial for me, now or then- to start it was the principal office now it's the DA office...

...And like being award in the court- meaning I have no say- or my gardens- to my alleged liberty that is like it is too much to be asked of- for me, then I ask this am I even an American; I lost all rights, also in their demographic and their world as a simple-minded nig*er, that has one choice in life, as letting me have a freedom more or less, of extra than I deserve to work for charity in a hay filed hoeing shit...

...As I was sold to owners, thoracically had a confederate flag shove down my mouth -(not black yet the same in many ways to my homeland.)

...And light it on fire, yes thoracically in trouble, thoracically free - thoracically to do as you please, yet stocked - like someone that needs to be whipped off by the ones that run or oversee the everything - at is what they call law, - it is thoracically speaking - I was in the same grouping as the blacks, with the town - just more brainwashed - predigest.

Like - If we're going to segregate let's find out what nig*er in the woodpile - is the nig*er-est of them all, I am sure if you like back on my class in the evaluation, it would not be I.

The Allegheny's... thoughts about people, not mine... yet their 80% poverty - so what do you expect, and a 3rd -grade education for the lot, yet one year can do a lot also in simple-minded thoughts, running from their ignorant mouth like diarrhea.

All this to be classed a first-class felon - paying fines - of $20, 000 - just to be on probation with an Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition to make more isolation - and delusion - for someone that is already classed at the town 'TARD, ' with not evenhandedness, as you remember all just a planned set up - to trash out my life.

I remember imprisonment, of 3 years over a girl named Lurleen, I remember Amsel girls playing the victim, like the town, like the municipality - I have been charged with Trespass, yet they're on my land, asking me to fight them... I have been charged with damages, and best of all Harassment.

Besides, another 90 days on top of that, I remember being a kid, not, I could never be one - charged as a woman - yet never more than a little girl - just a dim-witted 95-pound terrorist, with a magistrate rubbing off in my face.

I forgot it is my disability of I have no self-worth, or education, in their eyes to, yet I am a scholar in my fields, and that too is all just presentation of what someone wants to believe or not.

- Since this was so uncharacteristic, she says.

I, suck in a hopeful breath.

- I told Denise there must have been an emergency-. She schools her features into a very stern look-She has graciously agreed to reschedule for next Saturday-

- Great, I can-

Shannen clears her throat and nods at the flash cards-Oh. Oh, no- I give Miss Molina what I imagine is a pained look-The SATs are on Saturday. I'll be there all morning- She gives me a reassuring smile-I know. Your appointment is at five-

- You're awesome, I say, meaning it -I won't let you down again.

- I know you won't - likewise, as she walks away, I think I hear her mutter, At least I hope you won't -

- You- I point at Shannen. Then at Olivia-And you. Make sure I don't miss this meeting. It could mean my entire future-

- Got it, Olivia says before returning his attention to the magazine.

Shannen pulls out her cell phone- a huge no-no on campus, likewise I guess this qualifies as an emergency- and starts punching likewise tons-I've sent me an email reminder- I relax a bit.

Nothing can keep me from making the appointment this time- now, Shannen says, waggling the flashcard on the table, solve for x-o, I groan, likewise, it's halfhearted. After the freak-out about missing my meeting, a little math equation seems similar to an easy task.

The first thing Olivia and I hear as we push through the kitchen door is Chiaz laughing. Maybe she's sneaking television online again. I caught her watching an I Love Lucy marathon last week, although she pretended that she just didn't know how to work the mouse.

Then I hear another voice. A male voice. A non- Brody male voice.

- She'd better not, I mutter as we head into the living room.

likewise, when we get there, I'm shocked frozen at the sight before me. Chiaz is sitting on the arm of the corduroy armchair, feet on the coffee table, and the male in question is sitting on the floral sofa. The shock of cinnamon red hair identifies him immediately.

- Saylin!- I blurt.

He stands and faces me, arms wide for a hug.

- Liliana-

- I didn't know you were coming for a visit, I say, jumping into his hug.

- Nor did I, he says until I found me swimming ashore in Sea-view-

A loud throat clearing from behind reminds me of my manners. I pull out of Saylin's hug and grab Olivia's hand, tugging him forward.

- Saylin, this is my boyfriend, Olivia- Saylin gives him that male nod that girls can never quite replicate exactly.

- Olivia, I say, beaming at him, this is Saylin. One of my closest guppy hood friends and the crown prince of Acropora- They shake hands, and I get the feeling there's a little battle of grips before they separate. Saylin has filled out a lot since we used to play together, likewise, my money is still on Olivia. Though his arms are hidden by the sleeves of his leather jacket, I can imagine his biceps flexing nicely in the up- and- down movement-

- Pleased to meet you, Saylin says, shaking me out of my reverie -Lurleen told me much about you last weekend-

- Funny- Olivia throws me a questioning glance -She didn't mention you at all-

Down, boy. I lean closer into his side to reassure him that there's nothing to worry about. Saylin is an old friend, nothing more.

- I forgot I explain-If you'll recall, we found a bit of a crisis in motion when we got home -

Olivia crosses his arms over his chest, not appeased by my excuse.

He has a bit of a jealous streak in him, likewise, for the most part, he keeps it under wraps. It's stopped peeking out around Brody, likewise, I guess strange boys showing up in my living room bring it back to the surface.

- Saylin's practically my brother, I say, to clarify.

Olivia nods, showing he trusts me -I need to get to work. I' ll stop by after-

Then he leans down to kiss me, just similar that time in the library. The hand behind my neck, full lips soft and warm on mine. When he sees what must be a completely dazed look in my eyes, he

winks. And then, with a wave goodbye to Chiaz and Saylin, he's out the front door. When we three merfolk are alone, I ask, - This wasn't just a coincidental visit, was it?

7

(Now- back in the days of Earth years back when Nevaeh was a teen girl.)

Which is why I've been avoiding her touch altogether. I think I may be over here, by finding someone that is just like her in all ways.

Nonetheless, when I peer at her yet again, her palm out, waiting for mine ever so softly, I take a deep breath and lift my hand too- gasping when she draws so close the space that divides- us like a hair-thin- yet worlds apart.

'Um- do you feel the sensation that?' She smiles.

'That tingle with the heat?'

'That's our energy linking- of bodies, minds, and souls.'

She moves her hand back and forth on my softly, employing the push and pull of the energy force sparking from me to her with a field bolt between us.

'But if we are all linked as you say, then why Doesn't it all feel the same- in real life now? Everything feels backward, now with the truth being with her like lost in a dream, with no logic.'

Not like this was not, I have memories- to that, you can tap in to like a window- looking out- or looking back in- fogged, steamed, or a clear as the memories can be like a spring day, that they don't have, and well never- ever have.

I for one murmur, drawn by the undeniable charming stream that links us, causing the most wonderful warmth to course through my frame.

'We are all linked, all of us made of the same vibrating source.'

Nonetheless, while some energy leaves you cold and some leaves you feeling like your dying on the inside, the one that you're intended for- me and you give the feeling of warmth, all over our bodies.

It feels just like this... feels like a drug, rushing through your veins, the highest in the worlds we linger in.

...I close my eyes and turn, allowing the tears to stream down my cheeks, no longer able to keep them in.

It's just that good...

Knowing I'm barred from the feel of her skin, the touch of her lips, the solid warm comfort of her body on mine.

This electrical energy field that trembles between you and me. Like- is the closest- I for one get to feeling precious, thanks to the horrible decision- I made I have never- ever felt real love, or I have forgotten that I have due to my life's past with the remembrances, with its trials and tribulations.

'Knowledge is just now catching up with what metaphysicians and the great spiritual instructors have known for eras.'

'Everything is one with that- understand, everything is vigor energy of stamina.'

'Somehow some way we are all the same within the link.' She said to me.

I can hear and feel the smile in her voice, coming out mine, as she draws closer, eager to entwine her fingers with mine- even though our own hands laced.

Even so, I move swiftly... arching my back to the feeling of vigor energy of stamina, and her body copies mine.

-Then-

(Remembrances)

Marcella said- 'Pennsylvania was the first state to legalized witchcraft, I think that is why we're all mostly from those parts, after all, I am a descendant of Emmah, Melisa of and her children once removed, yet family. It sounds good on paper she said, yet tracing death and the living is a lost art of the remembrance of past that was asked to forget by our society. Emmah, I remember saying the same very thing.

Wondering why-why?

...Is all I do.

Why- I'm acting so silent, noiseless, inaudible, still and quiet. I am lingering in my thoughts, of all things past that take away from the new ones that should be made like a mental hex, of striping me of the good feelings.

So, aloof, so remote- rejecting to touch her- now feeling guilty as I always do- after with the lingering when done, when just a few weeks earlier- not feeling anything but the high, I could not get enough, now I feel- and I don't want to feel.

Remembrances to me are nothing but feeling pain- and the hope of love and love is just a lost feeling of being in a state of mind.

(One-hour later... reading.)

BOB E. OZELL

ATTORNEY AT LAW 403 ROSE STREET, SUITE 700 PITTSBURGH,

Bob@BobOzell.com

September 4. 2010-ish-

(Verdict Reembraces reading over past letters.)

Nevaeh Natalie,

Laural Street Barnesboro, PA 15714

I remember the Commonwealth versus me- Nevaeh Natalie- OTN: U 923594-8/ Docket No. - MJ-30547-CR-0000110-2010

Dear Mr. Natalie:

I am writing to confirm, I give the impression to represent you and guard your interests against one count of Criminal Mischief-Property Damage, (with degree :o be determined based on the amount of property damage;) 18 Pa.C:.S.A.3304 (a)(5,) a misdemeanor, along with a misdemeanor- 180 days in a county jail, over the death of Lurleen Anderson. The felony of the first degree 20 years $25,000, murder. Misdemeanor of the third degree. 1 year $2,000. A felony of the second degree. 10 years or

$25,000. Attamed murder, over having a loaded gun, (hearsay) and pointing at one of the girls, their world yet you'll have your day in court. Then one count of Defiant Trespass, 18 Pa.C.S.A.3503 (B)(1)(i,) a third-degree misdemeanor; one count of Trespass with Damage to Physical Property, 75 Pa.C.S.A.3717 (c,) (alleged with no witness other than the cops, an immediate offense;) and, yet another count of Harassment, 18 Pa.C.S.A.2709 (a) (3,) a. The summary offense, at a preliminary hearing before Magisterial District Judge (MDJ) Zeigler this afternoon.

This letter will serve to authorize what emerged at that exact proceeding. At that time founded on discussions with Officer Petters regarding his comments of the showcasing their side, only - and you don't have any say over the fact of proven mental disabilities via the school and county of independent officers - (hearsay) and your garden also is not able to speak on your behalf, thus, I will have to for you.

Provided by Amsel's girls and mother, and discussions with the ADA regarding your Google Earth photographs of the respective properties and prior property lines; and, my success in convincing Officer Petters and the Assistant District Attorney to recommend that the charges in your case be resolved, if otherwise eligible, through the Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition (ARD) pre-trial diversion program, you authorized me to inform MDJ Zeigler of your intention to waive your right to a preliminary hearing.

Generously note, you did not plead guilty... (You Did NOT) to and were not convicted as to any originally-filed charge. (Thus, the school has the right to do with you as they please.)

Rather, you just did not contest, that had the case proceeding with an evidentiary hearing and testimony by Ms. Amsel and Officer Petters, that the Commonwealth would have met its fairly easy burden of proving that 'more likely than not, some type of crimes or crimes occurred, and that you were somehow, even remotely involved.' (It takes more than the cop proving you were the stocker - in the court-room when witnesses can't identify you - by your face or body.)

Consequently, all originally charges were held for disposition in the Courts of Commonplace of Cambria County.

Ms. Amsel did not provide an invoice for the repair of the alleged damage to her property and, therefore - or to the fact of any crams, the grading on the Criminal Mischief count is undetermined.

If the loss in excess of $500 then the offense is graded as a second-degree misdemeanor; otherwise is it a third-degree misdemeanor. Regardless, payment of restitution will be a condition precedent to any recommendation by the Office of the District Attorney, that the charges in your case be resolved through ARD, (of alternative schooling.)

As we discussed, ARD is a test program for first-time offenders of certain non-violent crimes and is offered solely at the discretion of the Office of the District have been offered ARD or a similar diversion program past. (10► years or have been YOU will not be cording to the Assistant District Attorney, it Chiaz Naztherth not appear as though your prior conviction for a summary offense disorderly conduct will disqualify you for ARD consideration; although the ultimate decision lies within the sole discretion of the District Attorney. (So, I have disorderly conduct over the fact, I did not want to be shot in the head... or something like that by one of them.)

As originally charged, you faced the following maximum penalties, each of which may be imposed to run sequentially: Criminal Mischief: • If (M2:) 2-years of imprisonment, a fine of $5,000.00, or both • If (M3:) 1.-year of imprisonment, a fine of $2,500.00 or both; b. Defiant Trespass: 1-year of imprisonment, a fine of $2,500.00 or both; c. Trespass by Causing Damage to Real Property 90 days of imprisonment, a fine of $300.00 or both; and Harassment 90 days of imprisonment, a fine of $300.00, or both.

7 a formal recommendation, that the charges it will not be required to plead guilty, be convicted of a crime, face imprisonment or have a permanent record of a criminal conviction.

Rather, you will be placed on a term of probation to be sold with the Office of the District Attorney; and ordered to satisfy special conditions of probation that in my legs may include, but will not be limited to: a) payment of restitution, completion of a mental health evaluation, completion of a drug and alcohol assessment, compliance with any counseling- treatment recommendation of our choice, completion of community service, payment of various fines, fees and surcharges as determined by the Court Clerk.

Most importantly, if you complete ALL terms and conditions of the ARD probation within the provisional Emmahod, the Office of the District Attorney will dismiss all originally-filed charges and they will become eligible for expungement in a warranty proceeding beyond the scope of professional legal services rendered in, the disposition of the originally-filed charges.

If you fail to comply with ALL terms and conditions of the ARD probation, or you are arrested for any reason during the trial passé, you will face revocation of the ARD offer, be required to defend against or enter a guilty plea to some or all of the originally-filed charges, and face the prospect of a permanent record of criminal conviction.

for to the deduction of the preliminary hearing, you were formally arraigned, informed to the nature and maximum penalties of the charges filed Complaint $55,000 unsecured, non-monetary bond. In a releaser with payment of money. Preliminary Hearing, and Notice of Arraignment, 1' Conference and Trial form; Your next proceeding is Formal Arraignment, which takes place at 1:30 p.m. on October 18, 2010.

The purpose of Formal Arraignment is- for the accused to receive a copy of the new charging document, known as an Information, for the accused to enter a plea of 'not guilty' for the attorney of the accused to enter an 'appearance' as Guidance of Record, to have the case assigned to a trial judge, to schedule a Pre-Trial Conference, and to trigger the time holds for the filing of pre-trial gesticulations.

Following proceedings which you are also required to attend as a state of the bond area Preliminary Conference at the Office of the District Attorney at 10:00 a.m. on October 25, 2010, and Trial on November 18, 2010.

I am also writing to confirm my receipt of ONE THOUSAND ($1,500.00) DOLLARS today, representing payment in full of my fee balance for professional legal services rendered. Thus, my return from your preliminary hearing, my secretary informed me that she had a Western Union money order in the amount of needed arrived a half-hour, before the hearing.

Thank you.

If you have an interest in maintaining our attorney-client relationship in the Courts of Common Pleas, please be advised I will require a supplemental retainer fee in the amount of $2,000.00 for professional legal services reduced in the nature of the charges in your case by sold outcome (ARD or plea agreement.)

If you elect to proceed with a non-jury trial defense, my additional fee will increase to a total of $3,500; or if you prefer to proceed with a jury trial defense, my supplemental fee will increase to a total of $5,000.

Payment of the supplemental fee may be made by credit card, personal check or money order made payable to the order of Bob E. Ozell, Esquire.'

Very truly yours, Bob E. Ozell Attorney at Law.

~*~

In a time of thinking about all this darkness my mind, wonders to my worlds, and also to my past one Earth, it was thought that the Earth was inhabitable- to me and others, turn out what life was left turned to the Enchanted Sea- making a new home, where there is very much life... that is a story all of its own.

As I look into the earth this is one story that I found most interesting.

I look into her world pulling her handwriting... after all, she is one of us.

I'd never given much thought to how I would kiss, or whom I would become because of it. I thought I'd had reason enough in the last few months to find out just what I wanted or if I need it, likewise, even if I had dreamed this in my-underwater sea dreams, I would not have made- believe it could similar this.

I stared without breathing across the deeps, into the dark eyes of the waves washing in, and the sun fading away similar-looking pleasantly back at me saying goodnight, as the big full moon rises up- similar my night light.

Surely- this was a good way to be the girl I always wanted to be, in the place of someone else, in the body I don't underseals, all for love, for the love of me and the love of another.

This must count for something, that to love something you must leave something else you love. I knew that if I would never go or left Conch Shell Cove, I would not have ever felt happy or contented with me. likewise, as you could have guessed I was terrified, I could not bring me to regret the choice. When life offers you, a dream come true that so far outside any of your beliefs, it is not sensible to sorrow when it ends and you must choose one or the other. I went from having fins, to sins!

Myths...

I swam up to shore noticing a beach that I have never been to before, from a distance, I could see all of them, all of them that looked similar to me from the waist up. I sat on a bolder running

my fingers throw my long hair just watching for the sun to set so I can take a closer look when the moon is the only light showing the way upon the tranquil seas. I wanted to go say hello, I wanted to see if I could find a friend within one of them, and maybe a boy. Either way, I would be pleased if one would say hello to me. In their minds, I am just a myth. Yet I know I am really, and I know I need someone, to see me and love me for who I am. I am too young to swim this far from my underwater home, and underset and it too dangerous to swing alone, I do not what to my shark food! Yet I just can help likewise coming up for the deep to see those big moons at night.

It is similar to a call of love for me, similar I have a call from my mom saying, I need to swim home, or I will be a clamshell of trouble.

I know I must not be seen by humans, yet I have a desire to be, and I do not know why I just do. If you have- not gassed I am a mermaid from the underwater town of Conch Shell Cove. My name is Savannah Mangroves and this is my tale. He no pun intended.

'Savannah?' What are you doing you know we're not to be past the last buoy or next to the old lighthouse? You will get caught, and become a since project for some middle school!

You no father will be furious if he even thinks you thought about coming up here!'

Younger Aaliyah said frantically as she splashed and swam up to me take hold of my halo and pulling back out into dark blue the sea. I know if I want to find the love, I may have to find my lapse legs, and that whole concept scares the seahorse out of me! Never the less I would love, love, love to know what it would be like going to a high school.

The only other girl mermaid that knows my true feelings of heat is Aaliyah, yet I do not want to leave my past behind. It would be so nice if I could find that cute boy that lived the deep blue sea as much as me. and, would find my fins in the water adorable yet-

dose a boy similar that agilest, I mean to boys similar a blush scaly skin and long wispy hair? Similar would human boy even walk up to anyway being bare, I am not sure if even a human girl would? In the sea, it is- not even thought about, it is just a known fact, it would be ward similar to seeing a dolphin wearing a bikini or something ridicules similar to that.

Sometimes, I feel similar to a freak of nature, for just being me. likewise, I look just similar you-sort of, I swear to Neptune I am just the average teen girl similar to you.

There is an old sea legend that if a boy kisses you, you can get your lapse lags for the lapse, and then when you get back into the water you change back. No one of us has tried this in many yards, many because humans are not that nice to us. Besides those misses that go -they never come back to us.

They end up washed up on the beach dying it is so said. If there not kiss in time that happens, we live in the sea and for the sea, not sun tanning on the beach, looking for love to come our way. I have everything I want, yet not what I feel I need.

There are so many things I must learn, similar slacks, feet, and toilets, this may sound gross, likewise, my toilet is the sea. Sleeping in a bed sounds crazy to me, I sleep in a pirate's shipwreck called the Brooklyn all curled up on the soft ocean salsa, next to my pet starfish Mila. Similar most in my sea cluster, we all moved here when I was ten eons, it was a long tough swim, we lost some, similar to my mother's mom, she was just too week in her ages.

She swims in Atlantis now it was rebuilt... (Are Heaven if you will.) Back in the olden phases of our time, we lived in caves too. Oh, just so you know we find it gross how you humans dump garbage in our home, we do not dump stuff in your living room!

The water calms me, similar when the - foamy bubbles hit my skin; I sigh. I just hope that a bubble bath with some sea salt can make me less homesick if I do swim away. It is similar- the salsa in my hourglass timer on my treasure chest is ticking far too firstly; school fish graduation, for mermaids my age is just around the corner, yet I would - only be sixteen as a full human, I will not be there, I want to be in a high school I want to be a normal girl! Yet I want to be a mermaid and, I do not know what I want just- yet.

Swimming home- 'Aaliyah I feel similar I am running out of time.'

I know it is a sin for me to lust over a human boy, yet I cannot help me, it all I ever wanted. Yet I am not sure if I well ever finds him or not, where I am at in this big cold blue sea.

Excuse my enchanted girlie fins, I say to the boy that I love. For Aaliyah, because she took me with her. Water calms me similar to him feeling my scale. It is similar to chocolate or fish or ice cream form his home lapse. After a terrible day, I lock the bathroom door flapping for my legs, his dad's old - time tub with steaming water and bath salts, and then sink into a world where my problems all melt away. Some days it is not- enough.

'Did you ask him yet?' Obtaining the phone against my shoulder, I scoop up a hatful of bubble bath and blow the fluff out over my belly. I can choose to ignore the three questions, right?

Especially since neither of us is going to similar the answer. 'Savannah...' Shannon prods. When the bubbles hit the water and dissolve into a foam-covered film, I sigh similar to him feeling my skin.

(Forward)

That's my main selling point...

-And-

...I think- I mean, I hope- I take a breath- Chiaz has feelings for you, too- Brody's gaze sharpens, his brows scowl low, as if not sure whether he should dare to hope there is truth in what I said. I'm daring to hope, so he can too-I think we can use your feelings for each other, I explain, - to show Chiaz that humans and merfolk are not so different as she believes. If she loves you Brady's laughter cuts me off-Right, he snarks-She hates

what I am. Not who I am, likewise what I am.

Something I couldn't change even if I wanted to. How could she possibly love me-?

- Because love Doesn't care about prejudices, I say. This is something with which I have a firsthand legs-Just look at me and Olivia. I thought I hated him for three years- I don't add the part about where I thought I loved Brody-True love didn't care what I thought, and it won't care what Chiaz thinks- Brody clenches his jaw and works his lips, similar he's considering my argument. I slip my hands behind my back, beneath my backpack, and cross my fingers as tightly as I can. If I weren't wearing flip-flops, I'd be crossing my toes, too.

This situation needs as much good luck as it can get.

Finally, he relaxes and asks, what do you want me to do-?

Sweet angelfish! My entire body explodes with relief. I didn't realize until this instant just how tense I was about the outcome of this conversation.

- Give her a chance, I answer, trying to keep my overjoyed smile from spreading across my lips.

- Talk to her. Spend time with her. Make her fall so, in love with you, she forgets you're a human- I lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder that's all it will take - I hope.

His gaze drifts to the ceiling, similar he'll find the right answer written on the dingy acoustic tiles. I've never seen Brody so thoughtful and serious before. This gives me, even more, hope that my plan will work. Chiaz already worked some positive changes in Brody. It's only a matter of time until he works some in her.

- Okay- Brody nods, not looking at me.

- I'll try-!

He turns and heads into his class. I take off for the American Government, hoping that everything I just told Brody is true.

- Maladroit-

- Um-I search my brain for the definition, knowing we've studied this one at least twice. Finally, just as I'm about to give up, it comes to me-Clumsy-

That should be an easy one for me since I am maladroit. At least on land.

One of Shannen's study techniques is to visualize an image that exemplifies the vocab word. I picture me wearing a T-shirt that says MALADROIT- I hope- it doesn't matter if it's spelled wrong- and then tripping over my flip- flops into a giant Chiazl of today's side dish, saffron rice.

- Excellent, Shannen says. She flips through the stack of flashcards in her hands, chooses one, and reads, Pretentious.

While I search for this definition, Shannen spoons a bite of yellow rice into her mouth and Olivia flips through a motorcycle magazine.

With the SATs coming up this weekend, I'm trying to cram in as much last-minute studying as possible.

Shannen has already taken- and, of course, aced- the test.

Olivia, on the other hand, has no intention of taking it. He already has a job lined up with a construction company, thanks to his current job at the lumberyard. With his brain and skills, I think he'll be foreman within a year. If only my future were that easy.

- Lurleen, Shannen prods, waving the definition flashcard before my eyes.

- Pretentious-?

Without thinking, I blurt, Pompous.

Arrogant -

- Awesome! -Shannen cheers.

This mental image pops into my mind without any effort. The terrible trio. I can't imagine anyone more pompous or arrogant than Astria, Piper, and Venus. Of course, several other vocabulary words apply equally.

Vindictive. Malicious. Haughty.

In my mind, the words transform into giant foam letters and start bonking the terrible trio on their heads. I suppress a giggle.

When Shannen starts digging through the stack again, I beg, Please. No more. My brain can't take it-

She shrugs as if it's my funeral if I don't cram in ten more vocab words at lunch, likewise Don't argue the point. Honestly, I think my brain is full. I couldn't handle another piece of information, and I just hope the ones I already have don't start falling out before Saturday.

Coming to my aid- as all good boyfriends should- Olivia asks-

- Chiaz called in sick today-?

- Yeah, I say I think it was for the best.

Gave me a chance to talk to Brody first-

- Why-? Shannen asks-What happened-?

I hesitate, not sure if Shannen should know what Chiaz did. I'm not sure anyone should know what she did. I wish I didn't.

Now I understand why Dad kept her exile- and the reason for it- a secret. She's a dumb kid with a big-

grudge, likewise some people wouldn't be able to see that she was acting out from a place of pain. I didn't, at first. Others might hold it against her forever. If I can help her overcome her issues, then it's better if they don't know about her big mistake. So, even though I hate lying to my best human friend- to anyone, really- I say,

- She and Brody fought. I'm trying to help them patch it up-

- Why-? She asks-I thought you wanted to keep them apart- See, lies always lead to more lies and more complications.

- I've had a change of heart, I admit.

- Realized they might be good for each other. Shannen shrugs-If you say so- I exchange a glance with Olivia. He nods. I think we both know this is the only option- keeping-

Shannen in the dark, trying to encourage Chiaz feelings for Brody. It's the only possible way for everything to end up right in the end.

Shannen pulls another set of flashcards from her backpack. Sliding one across the table to me, she says, Solve for XO.

I groan. Math is- not my strong suit.

Then again, when it comes to the SATs, I don't think I have a strong suit. I dutifully pull out a pencil and prepare to spend the rest of lunch trying to beat the equation into submission. Then I se nse a presence at my side.

- Lurleen-?

I turn to smile, relieved to be saved from math by Miss Molina.

Then I see the concerned look on her face. The disappointment.

Son of a swordfish! The interview. In all the craziness when I got back from Seaview, I completely blanked on the interview with Miss. Molina's friend at Seaview Community.

- Oh, no! -I gasp-I'm so sorry. I completely forgot. I'm so, so-o, sorry. There was this whole-I struggle to find the words to describe what happened without really describing what happened. Where are my vocab words when I need them?

- Crisis!- I finally blurt -My cousin got sick and it was really bad.

I- The look in her eyes, similar I've failed her big-time, is killing me-I should have called or something. I'm just- I'm sorry- I don't know what to say- She looks at me similar she Doesn't even know me-I didn't remember you to being so irresponsible-

- I'm not, I exclaim-I mean, I was. This weekend. likewise, I'm usually not at all- She takes a deep breath, similar she's trying to decide what to do about me. I silently will her to give me another chance.

Maybe she Doesn't buy my sick- cousin story, likewise, if I could tell her the truth, she would understand.

Times similar this is when I wish Saylin's what- if could come true. Not that I would relish Saying a teacher that one of my relatives tried to wipe her and the entire East Coast off the map. It would be a better explanation than the one I've got, though.

<3

She's in front of me now and I'm completely obsessed.

Peering into her thoughts, wanting to see what, if anything, happened between them.

Since even though I know Naddalin's responsible for all of the flirting, and kissing, and cuddling, I had no choice but to watch.

Even though I know for a fact, that Naddalin was completely deprived of free will that doesn't change the fact that it happened-that Naddalin's lips pressed against her while her hands roamed her skin.

And even though I am pretty sure it didn't go any further than that, I'd still feel a heck of a lot better, if I could just get some evidence to back up my theory.

And despite how crazy, hurtful, and completely masochistic it is- I won't stop until her memory gives, and every last horrible, painful, excruciating detail is finally revealed.

I'm just about to delve deeper, travel to the very core of her brain, when Naddalin squeezes my hand and says, 'Ever, please. Stop torturing yourself.

I've already told you, there's nothing to see.' I swallow hard, gaze fixed on the back of her head, watching her gossip with Jewell and Mireille, barely listening as she adds, 'It didn't happen. It's not what you think.'

'I thought you couldn't remember?' I turn, overcome with shame the instant I see the pain in her eyes as she looks at me and shakes her head.

'Just trust me.' She sighs loudly. 'Or at least try to. Please?'

I inhale deeply, gazing at her, wishing I could, knowing I should.

'Utterly, Constantly. First, you could not get over the past hundred years of my dating, and now you're obsessed with last week?'

She knits her brow and leans closer, voice urgent, coaxing, as she adds, 'I know that your feelings are unbelievably hurt. I do. But what's done is done. I can't go back; I can't change it. Naddalin's done the on purpose-you can't let her win.'

I swallow hard, knowing she's right.

I'm acting ridiculous, irrational, allowing myself to veer way off track.

Besides, Naddalin thinks, switching to telepathy now that our teacher, Mr. Robins, has arrived. You know it's meaningless. The only one I have ever loved is you. Isn't that enough?

She brings her gloved thumb to my temple, gazing into my eyes as she shows me our history of all things enchanted, my many incarnations as a seeing all the young servant girl in France, all daughter gorgeous girls reminded me of how lucky I was... it was nice to be back... eyes wide, I gape, never having seen that particular life before, I think back, in class and wonder.

But she just smiles, gazes growing warmer as she shows me the highlights of that time, a quick clip of the moment we met at a gallery opening in Amsterdam-our first kiss just outside of the gallery that very same night. Presenting only the most dadaistic moments and sparing my death, which always, inevitably, comes before we can progress.

And after watching all of those beautiful moments unfold, her unabashed love for me laid bare to see, I gaze into her eyes, answering her question when I think: Of course, it's enough. You have always been enough.

Then closing them in shame when I add: But am I enough for you?

Finally admitting the truth-my fear that she'll soon tire of the gloved hand-holding, the telepathic embrace, and seek out the real thing in a normal girl with safe DNA.

She then nods, gloved fingers cupping my chin as she gathers me into a mental embrace so warm, so safe, so comforting, all of my fears slip away.

Responding to the apology in my gaze as she then leans forward, lips at my ear as she says, 'Good. Now that that is settled, about Naddalin...'

As I make my way toward history class, I'm wondering which will be worse-seeing Naddalin or Mr. Milley?

For the reason that while I haven't seen or spoken to either of them since last Friday when my whole world fell apart there's no doubt, I left them both on a pretty strange note.

My last contact with Milley consisting of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something I never do-but also encouraging her to date my aunt Sabine-which is something I'm seriously beginning to regret.

And as awful as that was, it's only rivaled by my last moments with Naddalin when I aimed my fist at her navel chakra, determined not just to kill her but to obliterate her. And I would have too-except for the fact that I totally choked and she got away. And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I'm still so angry with her, who's to say I won't try again?

But the truth is, I know I won't try again. Besides not just because Naddalin spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how revenge is never the answer, how karma is the only true justice system, and plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that-but mostly because it's not right.

Although Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me no reason to ever trust her again-I still don't have the right to kill her over it.

It won't solve my problem. Will not change a thing. Even though she's awful, evil, and everything that adds up to bad, I still don't have the right to- do that... She slithers up beside me, all blond tousled hair, water's edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth relaxed stretching her strong, tanned arm across the classroom door, barring me from getting inside.

And that's all it takes.

But I won't... even if... even if...

I promised Naddalin I could get myself safely to and from class without resorting to that.

'So, tell me, Ever, how was your weekend? Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice reunion? Was she able to survive you-by chance?'

I clench my fists by my sides, visualization how she'd look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust, despite the vow of nonaggression I took.

She then nods, gazes fixed on mine, lowering her voice to a whisper as she adds, 'Not to worry though, you won't be alone for long.

Once the proper mourning period ends, I'll be happy to step in and fill up the void of her loss.'

I focus on my breath, keeping it slow and steady as I take in the strong, tan, muscular arm blocking my path, knowing all it would take is one well-placed karate chop to break it in half.

'Hell, even if you did manage to hold back and keep her alive, all you have to do is say the word, and I'm right by your side.' she grins, eyes grazing over me most intimately.

'But no need to answer too quickly or commit yourself yet. Take as long as you like, For the reason that, Continually, I assure you, unlike Naddalin, I am a man who can wait. Besides, it's just a matter of time before you come looking for me anyway.'

'There's only one thing I want from you.'

I narrow my gaze until everything surrounding us blurs. 'And that's for you to leave me alone.' Herat rising to my cheeks as her gaze deepens to a leer.

''Farid not, darling.'' She laughs, looking me over and shaking her head. 'Trust me, you want way more than that. But not to worry, it's like I said, I'll wait for as long as it takes.

It's Naddalin I'm worried about. And you should worry too. From what I saw those last hundred years, she's an impatient man. Bit of a hedonist. Didn't wait for much of anything so far as I could tell.'

I- Emmah, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for locating my weakness, my psychological strength so to speak, and pretty much lives to exploit it.

'Don't get me wrong, she's always been one to keep up entrances-wearing the armbands that are back and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss hadn't time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or should I say whomever-her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who's been there all along. Naddalin waits for no one. And she certainly never waited for you.'

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the words that are like prudently honed arrows aimed straight for my heart.

'Yep.'

'Saw it with my own eyes, I did!'

Smiling as she slips into a thick cockney pronunciation and backs out again. 'Haven saw it too.

It like- broke her poor heart.

Willing to take her back no matter where she'd been, no questions asked.

Though, unlike me-and, I'm afraid, quite unlike you- Haven's love was unconditional. Which, let's face it, is something you'd never do.'

'That's not true!' I cry, voice hoarse, and very dry, as though it's the first time, that I've used it all day- it was so bad.

'I've had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-' I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

'Sorry, darlin', but you're wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty hand-holding there-' she shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

'Totally, Forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?'

I swallow hard, forcing a calm I don't own when I say, 'That's a lot further than you ever got with Haven.'

'No thanks to you,' she spits, harsh gaze on mine. 'But, it's like I said, I'm a man who can wait.'

'Naddalin is not.'

So-o she shakes her head.

'Shame you're so-o strongminded to play hard to get. You and I are a lot more alike than you think. Both of us pining after someone we'll never truly have-'

'I could-' I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know, that targeting an immortal's weakest chakra, one of the body's seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

'I could kill you right now,' I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I wouldn't do them, even though I know better.

'Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?'

'You could what?' She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath chills my cheek.

I gape, wondering where she could've possibly erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, 'Don't forget, Liv, Naddalin was under my spell.

which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.'

She got me... Right where it counts. And don't think she doesn't know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it's too late.

'No worries, liv. 'I'm having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

The just a moment later- 'I've no plans to go after you- she said.'

Besides, it won't be long 'til you're squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.' she laughs, her eyes on mine, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach can't help but have.

'I'll leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to; you won't go after me either. Mostly because I do have what you want. The cure to the antidote for what you suffer- from. I assure you of that, said Naddalin. You're just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You're just going to have to show me how bad you want it.'

I gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing, to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-o distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it 'til now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I-Emmah presses my lips together as my gaze meets heirs... awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

knowing it's just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

'Oh, look at that.' She grins. 'Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.'

She lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place.

'Deep breaths,' her coos, lips grazing the edge of my ear, fingers sliding over my shoulder, leaving an icy cold wake in their path. 'No need to panic. No need to get all spaz-ed out o'er.

I'm sure that between us, we can come to some sort of mutual agreement, find a way to work something out.'

I narrow my gaze, disgusted by the price that she's set, words slow and cautious when I say, 'Nothing you could ever say or do could convince me to sleep with you!' just as Milley opens the door, allowing the entire class to overhear.

'Whoa-oh' Naddalin smiles, hands raised in pretend admission of defeat as she backs into the room. 'Who said anything about bumping' ugliest, pal?'

She will throw her head back and laughs, allowing her creepy Ouroboric tattoo to flash in and out of view. 'I mean, not to disappoint you, darlin', but if it's a good shag I'm after, virgins about the last place I'd look!'

I storm toward my desk, cheeks burning, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite Milley's numerous attempts to quiet them down.

And the moment the bell rings, I make a run for the door. Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can be convinced Naddalin will push her too far and she'll snap-an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, 'Ever? Got a minute?' Her mocking laughter trailing behind as I turn toward Milley to see what she wants.

I pause, classmates piling up behind me, eager to get to the hall where they can follow Naddalin's lead and taunt me some more.

'I did it.' Her smiles, posture stiff, voice anxious, but still eager for me to know.

I shift uncomfortably, moving my bag from one shoulder to the next, wishing I'd taken the time to learn remote viewing so I could keep an eye on the lunch tables and ensure Naddalin sticks to the plan.

'I approached her. Just like you told me to.' She nods.

I squint, returning my focus to her, gut-churning as I begin to understand. I saw her the morning on the day had passed. We even talked for a while, and-' she shrugs, gazes drifting away, obviously still very taken by the event. I stand before her, breathless, knowing I have to stop it, whatever it takes before it gets out of hand.

'And you were right. She is nice to me. I probably shouldn't tell you but we're having dinner tonight.'

I nod, numb, shell-shocked, the words glancing over me as I peer into her energy and watch it unfold in her head: she is standing in the line of the cafeteria massive hall with all its stain glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Milley approaches -causing her to turn and grant her a smile that's- shamefully flirtatious!

Except that there's no shame at all. Those two couldn't be happier. At least not on Sabine's part. Nor Milley for that matter. No, the shame is all mine.

That cannot happen. For too many reasons to mention the dinner can never take place. One of them being that she is not just my aunt, but my guardian, my caretaker, my only living relative in the entire world!

And another, possibly even more urgent reason, is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, maudlin, overly sentimental, ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, Milley knows I'm psychic while she does not!

I've gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there's no way I'm going to be out by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted.

But just as I'm about to tell her that she absolutely cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, take my aunt to dinner and reveal any information I might've accidentally admitted during a weak moment when I was sure I'd never see her again, her clears her throat and says, 'Anyway, you should get to lunch before it's too late. I didn't mean to keep you the long, I just thought-'

'Oh, no, it's okay,' I say. 'I just-'

But she doesn't let me finish. Pushers me out the door as she waves me away, saying, 'Go on now. To find your friends. I just thought I should thank you, that's all.'

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin's gloved hand squeezing my knee as I quickly scan the campus, looking for Naddalin as she thinks: she's gone.

Gone? I gape, hoping her means gone as in not around, as opposed to going as in a pile of dust.

But Naddalin just laughs, the smooth melodious sound reverberating from her head to mine. Not annihilated. I assure you. Just-absent-that's all. Drove off a few minutes ago with some guy I've never- ever seen before.

Did you talk...?

Did she try to invite you?

Naddalin shakes her head, her eyes peering into mine as I add: Good. Because we can't afford to go after her no matter what! She has the antidote! she admitted it! This means all we have to do now is find a way to- Constantly. She frowns... You can't perhaps believe her!

This is what Naddalin does. She lies and manipulates everyone around her. You have to stay away from her- she's using you-her can't be trusted- I just shake my head.

I can feel it.

The time is different. And I need for Naddalin to feel it too. She's not lying-seriously-her said- Not even finishing the thought before Haven leans forward, eyes darting between us as she says, 'Okay, that's it. Just what the heck is going on here? Seriously, enough already.'

I turn, noticing how her friendly yellow aura beams in such sudden sharp contrast to the deliberate harshness of her all-black ensemble. Knowing she means no ill will though she's definitely-disturbed by us.

'Totally, completely, and entirely- It's like you guys have some kind of creepy way of communicating. Like twins speak or something. Only yours is silent. And eerier.'

I shrug and sit there with my lunch, going through the motions of unwrapping a sandwich, I've no plans to eat, figured out to hide just how alarmed her question has made me feel.

Knocking my knee against Naddalin's, telepathically urging her to step in and handle the since I've no idea what to say.

'Don't pretend it's not happening.' Her eyes narrow in suspicion. 'I've been watching you guys for a while now, and it's starting to creep me out.'

'What's creeping you out?' She gazes up from her phone, but only for a moment before she's back to texting again.

'Those two.' She points a short, black painted nail with a chunk of pink frosting stuck to its tip. 'I swear, they get stranger every day.'

Naddalin nods, setting down her phone as she takes a moment to look us over. 'Yeah, I've been meaning to mention that. You guys are weird.' She laughs.

'Oh, and the whole glove thing?' She shakes her head and purses her lips. Showing her hand looking all cracked with fishers and red. 'So not working for you, I said jokingly.'

Haven frowns, annoyed by my joke when she's trying to be grave.

'Laugh all you want,' she says, gaze steady, unwavering. 'But something's up with those two. I may not know what, but I'll figure it out. I'll get to the bottom of it. You'll see- you'll see.'

-Then-

And I'm just about to speak when Naddalin shakes her head and swirls her red drink, leaning toward Haven as she says, 'Don't waste your time. It's not as sinister as you think.'

She then smiles, gazes fixed on me.

'We're practicing telepathy powers of mind-reading, that's all.'

'Attempting to read each other's minds in place of talking all the time.'

'So, we stop getting in trouble in class over it took over the face we take over each other's bodies and movements too at times, a real headache for the professors.'

She snorts, causing me to squeeze my sandwich so hard the mayonnaise oozes out and squirts grossly out the backside. Gaping at my significant other who is just arbitrarily decided to break our number one rule- do not tell anyone who we are or what we can do! This is something we worked hard to do, looking within the library in the restricted section of dark magic.

Calming only slightly when Haven rolls her eyes and says, 'Please. I'm not an idiot.'

'Wasn't implying you were.' Naddalin smiles. 'It's quite real, I assure you. Would you like to try?'

I freeze, body solid, unmoving, as though seeing a disaster on the side of the road -only the particular disaster is me.

'Close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten.' She nods, sincere gaze meeting her. 'Focus on that number with all of you might. See it in your mind as clearly as you can, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?'

She shrugs, brows merging as though in deep concentration. Though Choosing to concentrate on blue instead of a random number like Naddalin said.

All it takes is a glance at her aura, morphing into a dark deceitful green, and a brief peeks at her thoughts to see she's only pretending.

She was holding her ground as she rubs her chin and shakes her head, saying, I glance between them, 'I don't seem to be getting anything. Are you sure you're thinking of a number between one and ten?' Knowing she's baiting her, sure that her one in ten chances of hitting the right number works too much in her favor.

She nods, deepening her focus on a beautiful shade of pulsating blue.

'Then we must have our wires a-crossed.' She shrugs. 'I'm not getting a number at all.'

'Try me!' Emmah abandons her phone, and her books and wand and leans toward Naddalin.

Eyes barely closed, thoughts hardly focused before Naddalin gasps, 'You're going to Haven?'

She shakes her head also.

(A week back)

'Three... For your data, the number was three.' She rolls her eyes and leers. 'And everyone knows I'm going to France. So nice try.'

'Everyone but me,' Naddalin says, jaws clenched, face gone suddenly pale.

'Well, I'm sure everyone has told you-you of all. You know, telepathically.' she laughs, returning to her phone again, saying 'sometimes old school kicking it is not the way to go anymore I prefer these,' and she holds up the phone, that links all the magical networks together.

I peer at Naddalin, wondering why he's so upset over the trip. I mean, yeah, so she used to live there, at one time when she was alive- after her boyfriend passed away in an industrial accident or something like that- she was vague about did not want to say... all that much, she said she was in her late 20's. she said something odd on her tombstone and it read- (I have not stuck with me all my whole life, so there-) and I think I got what it meant. Yet I think it said, 'I will live on forever...' or something like that, or 'I don't need you!' - 'or even suck on that!' Like- I thought that's what it may have said- but- but Nah- it can't be- yet maybe?

...After all it is a cracked heart-shaped stone...

But- but that was hundreds of years ago, and the stone is crumbling and read the rest has disintegrated to dust into just the wind!

I squeeze her hand, urging her to look at me, but she just stares at Haven with that same stricken look on her face.

~*~

'Nice try with the whole telepathy angle,' Haven says, swiping her finger a-crossed the top of her cupcake until it's coated with strawberry frosting, and she was licking her finger and kissing the end of it too.

'But I'm afraid you're going to have to try a little harder than that. All you have managed to prove is that you guys are even weirder than I thought. But no worries, I'll get to the bottom of it. I'll expose your dirty little secret before long.'

I hold back a nervous laugh, hoping she's just messing around, then peering into her mind only to see that she's serious.

'When are you leaving?' Naddalin asks.

But only to appear conversational, has already uncovered the answer in her head.

'Soon, but not soon enough,' she thought, eyes lighting up, as she stared the look at her. 'Let the countdown begin!'

Naddalin nods, gaze unstiffening as she says, 'You'll love this.

Everyone loves it, France is a lovely, delightful place.'

'You've been...?'

...?...

I and Haven both ask at the same time.

Naddalin nods- 'I's have,' gaze far away in the back of her on the mind and thought looking somewhat- blank to us looking at her color fading from her eyes. 'I lived there a once-a long time ago.'

'That's what we gathered...' they both said it unanimously!

Haven glances between us, eyes narrowed again when she says, 'Jaylynn and Naddalin lived there too, around the same time, she looks at her one eyelid squinting.'

Naddalin shrugs, expression noncommittal, as though the connection means nothing to her.

'Well, don't you think that's a little strange? All of you living there at the same time, in the same place, then all of you ending up here-within months of each other?' Sher leans toward her, abandoning her cupcake and letting it drop in search of some answers.

She just sips her blue drink and lifts her shoulders again, as though it's hardly worth going into, in the past she thought, to her, in through conversation.

But Naddalin's solid, refusing to cave or do anything that might give it away.

'Is there anything I should see while I'm there?' Haven asks, more to break the tension than anything else. 'Anything that shouldn't be missed?'

Naddalin squints, pretending to think, even though the answer comes quickly.

-Then-

Naddalin- 'I remember right before the end of Earth as we once knew it, just a random thought that has come to my mind, Squatters have now moved into Nevaeh's old home, we all know who they were it was the 4 girls, yet even Nevaeh was like let them have it, I don't care anymore. It was wondered by me for years where their souls want and would lie, and what thing, creature, or even person that would inhabit, I never- ever would have thought, that would have transformed into the marinade, just to have a place to be, and a place to call home, I also wonder their identities now, and if they're right next door now. A rebirth they have had yet once more, all 4 girls are now others we could face, and not know the face we are looking at. I believe that AVA is Deyanira. Yet we cannot be one hundred percent sure.'

~*~

'All of France is worth seeing... yes is it not?'

But you should check out the Ponte Vecchio, which is the first bridge to cross the Arno River and the only one left standing after the war- were ever inch of Frances was cover in their blood.

Oh, and we must visit the Galleria dell' Accademia which houses Michelangelo's David among other important works, and perhaps the- 'Definitely hitting David,' Emmah says wanting this so badly.

'We... yes, we're taking you to a girl- surprise!'

'We did not want to tell you.'

'As well as the bridge, and the famous Il Duomo, and all the other items that make every travel guide top ten lists, but I am more absorbed in the smaller, off- the- beaten path kind of places- you know, where all the cool Florentines go.

Naddalin was raving about the one place, I forget the name, but it's supposed to house some incomprehensible revitalization artifacts and paintings and stuff few people know about.

Did you get anything like that? Or even clubs, shopping, that kind of thing?'

Naddalin looks at her, gaze so intense it sends a chill down my spine.

'Nothing offhand,' she says, trying to soften the look through her voice betrays a definite edge.

'Though any place that claims to house great art but isn't in the guidebook is probably a fake. The antiquities market is loaded with forgeries.

You shouldn't waste your time on that when there are so many other, far more interesting things to see.'

Haven shrugs, bored by the conversation and already back to texting again. 'Whatever,' she mumbles, thumbs tapping quickly. 'No worries. Naddalin said she'd make me a list.'

(Back home)

'I'm amazed by the progress you've made- Dariez.' Naddalin smiles. 'You learned all on your own?'

She nods, and gazing around the small, empty room, pleased with myself for the first time in weeks, when I walked into the tiny house.

The moment Naddalin mentioned she wanted to rid the place of all the overly slippery furniture, that was cheap she had filled it with during Naddalin's reign of fear, I was on it, to make this place fit for to young lady's- all cute and such.

Aiming each piece with such unchecked enthusiasm that-well-I'm not even sure where it went. All I know is it's no longer there I want to be- and she points at the old home she was half-grown in- and you were right.

'Looks like you're no longer in need of my lessons. She shakes her head, saying you wring I need you more now than ever.'

'Don't be so sure.' I said back quickly.

I turn, smiling as I push her dark wavy hair off her face with my newly gloved hand, hoping we'll get that cure from Naddalin soon, or at least come up with a less hokey alternative. Dariez a good kid... you'll do fine.

'I have no idea where all this stuff even went-not to mentioned, how I can't possibly fill up space, even more, when I have no clue where I am stashing all the stuff you used to have and me before getting all this.'

Reaching for her hand a second too late, and frowning as she walks over to the window- I feel as if I have lost my sister.

'The furniture'-her gazes out at her manicured lawn, voice low and deep-is right back where it started, what seemed like forever ago, yet was only about a year.

'I don't like change-' she said- out of breath.

Returned to its original state of pure vibrating energy with the potential to become anything at all. She looks in the glass ball- and see her new life coming.

And as for the rest-' Her shrugs, the strong lines of her shoulders rising ever so slightly before settling again. 'Well, it hardly matters anymore, does it? I do not need it now.'

I stare at her back, taking in her lean form, her casual stance. Doubting how she could be so-o blasé in reclaiming the precious artifacts of her past...-the pictures of her in the plain pink dresses back in the day, the astride a rearing white stallion-not to mention all the other amazing relics dating back centuries.

'Nonetheless, those objects are priceless, see her life now within mine forever! You have to get them, back didn't you? They can never be replaced, yet you can with new lives, can't you?'

'It's all energy!' She squeals.

~*~

'Ever so, relax. It's just stuff.' Her voice firm, resigned, as she turns toward me again. 'None of it has any real meaning. The only thing that means anything is you.'

And even though the sentiment is undeniably sweet and heartfelt, it does not affect me in the way that it should.

The only thing she seems to care about these days is apologizing for her karma and me. 'But that's where you're wrong. It's not just stuff- too.'

Oh, I sorry, I felt so bad hugging her from the one side.

And while I'm perfectly fine with those inhabiting the number one and two spots on her list, the problem is the rest of the page is blank.

I move toward her, voice wiles, wheedling, hoping to reach her and make her listen the time.

And just like that, my mind is ripped into another time and place...

(Back into a week into the trip)

It's history for God's sake, we need to get books and have them signed, it was said th is man write 30 books in one year, yet I am not sure if she was still alive! I so he would be over 90 now, you can't just shrug it off as though it's nothing more than a box of old tired books, of tired old objects you donate to Goodwill, I thought they were worth remembering- like the one about a would lose without color or feeling, or the one about a girl that was fight for her place, as an equal- the youngest over her class.'

Look at this thing the covers are all tattered, and the pages small.

She then looks at me, gazes softening as she trails the tip of her gloved finger from my temple to my chin. 'I thought you hated my 'dusty old room' as you once called it.'

'People change, and so did I.' I shrug, thank about that asking why?

Wishing, not for the first time, that she'd change back to the Naddalin I knew before she was her-

'And speaking of change, why are you so freaked by my's trip to France?'

Noting the way, her hardens at the mere mention of the word.

'Is it because of the whole Haven and Nevaeh- become Naddalin thing of remembering the past- and not wanting to? The connection you don't want her to know about?'

Yet, were there the good times- I don't know...? She thought...

She looks at me for a moment, lips parting, about to speak, then she turns away and mumbles insanely, 'I'm hardly what you'd call freaked.'

'You know what...?

You're right.

For a normal person, that was hardly what you'd call freaked.

But for the girl who's always the coolest, calmest one in the room-all it takes is the slight narrowing of your eyes and the most minute clenching of your jaw to know you're upset.'

She sighs, eyes searching mine as she moves toward me again. 'You saw what happened in France.' She then squints. 'Despite all its virtues, it's also a place of unbearable memories, ones I'd rather not explore.'

I swallow hard shaking looking into her past- like a faded movie, remembering the images with her, I viewed in looking deep into her memories, lost in her mind, 'like a penny on the floor... worthless- my depression a sickness that keeps me, spring-like atop- my mind turning, my curse- or just my illusion? Until my death, until we part for better or for worse - locked in your heart-shaped box forever, I thought or was thinking to note but decillions, what little time we spent lost in my mind forever- whatever never mind.' -Naddalin is hiding in a small dark cupboard, watching as her parent was murdered, seeing it along with me, she and I shared recalling the moment, back when she was in her playpen.

By thugs' intent on obtaining the elixir-then later, abused as a ward of the church until the Black Plague swept through France and her encouraged Haven and the rest of the orphans to drink the immortal juice, hoping only to heal and having no idea it would grant eternal life -and I can't help but feel like the world's worst girlfriend for bringing it up.

'I prefer to focus on the present.' She nods, gesturing around the large empty room. 'And right now, I need your help furnishing the space. I am starting to like a nice, clean, contemporary look when shopping for home decor.

And though I was thinking of leaving it more than empty, to really emphasize the size of the rooms- that is well very tiny after all, I suppose we should try-' I gasp, practically choking on the word as my voice raises several octaves at the end, think that this girl is now a woman!

'I'm selling the house- in a year and moving on with my life.' She shrugs. 'I thought you would understand?'

But- you can your one of us now...

I gaze around, longing for that ancient velvet sofa with the lumpy cushions, knowing it would give the perfect landing for when my body with I am so tired I collapse and my head quietly explodes, for all the chatter- that it has to hear and there are no ways of to turn them off- they just keep babbling in my mind. I need to have a real-life with real- real- you like all thing that is really- like real friends too, not just the fantasy world that you refuse to see that is not a reality.

'Don't look so upset. Nothing's changed It's just a house. A seriously under the oversized house, I need to move on from. And just like that she was gone and said okay if that is what you want Dariez... and Naddalin vanished right before her eyes. Nonetheless, I just stand there instead, determined to keep it together. Gazing at my ridiculously gorgeous girlfriend of the last years as though it's the first time we've met. Besides, I have needed all the space anyway, I have a new boyfriend, as you may or may not know me and Stan are going to have a baby; they're never going to be enough rooms or room for three.'

'And what exactly are you planning to replace it with, then? A tent?'

'I just thought I'd move in with him, that's all.' Her gaze is pleading, begging me to understand, I did yet I thought she was throwing her new life away that I got for her, 'Nothing sinister, Ever- yet a way of what could be power- and taking my place someday- ever one said the next. 'Nothing meant to hurt you, but I don't want it'

I did not say- yet I thought you're stuck with regardless, your hexed, and at that point, I was out of her mind- for good- yet them- them- they were in it forever, and I was not going to stop it now.

I was studying her closely, wondering what is gotten into her, wanting to just say it was all over, and where they will end up without her- yet she said to me- he's looking for innocents and he has found it- so-o go-o.

'I mean, Naddalin, if you're seriously looking for a fight, I don't want it, why not just manifest something in your crazy head about how wrong I am and can go on?

I flick my gaze over her, moving from her glorious heard of longish dark glossy hair to her perfect rubber flip-flop-shod feet, remembering how, not so long ago, I longed to be normal again, just like everyone else. But now that I'm getting used to my powers, I don't see the point.

'What's this really about- I thought?' I squint, feeling more than a little betrayed.'

'I mean, you're the one who got me here.' Oh, I was- mortified.

You're the one who made me the- way- I am.

Right- and now that I'm finally adjusted, you decide to jump ship?

'Seriously! Why are you doing?'

But instead of answering, she just closes her eyes.

Projecting an image of the two of us laughing and happy, frolicking on a beautiful, black-sand beach- remember all the good times. Saying this is it... thanks for the memories. But I just shake my head and cross my arms tighter, refusing to play until my questions are answered, about her and them...

She sighs and stares out the window of the tiny home for the last time looking back me with the sun shining brightly, then turning toward me when she says, 'I've already told you, my only recourse, my only way out of the hell making- as I should have, it all karma- and I want what I lost.

And the only way to do that is to relinquish the manifesting, the high life, the big-spending, and all the other extravagances- I've indulged myself in for the last hundred years so I can live the life of an ordinary citizen, too. I understand, Honest, hardworking, and humble, with the same day-to-day struggles as anyone else- if not more- go for it.'

The whole point of this bath was to make me forget my disastrous day-including the subject of Shannon's Question- likewise, that seems impossible. Even though I am feeling slightly- mellower than when I slid in twenty minutes ago, nothing can completely wash away that- memory.

Too bad bath salts cannot change the past. 'Nope', I admit with an unfulfilled- snarl.

'I- didn't ask him to feel similar I.' 'I thought we- agreed', she says, sounding- exasperated. 'You were going- to ask him in trig when Kingsley had you trade papers.' 'We did agree', I concede, 'likewise I not always sure about- humanly things.'

'Likewise, what, Savannah?' She interrupts.

'You're running out of time.' 'I know that.' Boy, do I know that. The salsa in my countdown timer is draining fast; graduation is just around the corner. Leaning my head back over the tub's graceful curved edge, I let my hair hang to the floor below.

Along with mess of a blond-haired person that defies all tries at- four. Control. I for one strength as well have a sea sponge on my head, since no- amount of 'likewise didn't do the normal swap', I explain. 'He had us trade down the row instead of across the aisle.' mewl and I can imagine the look of disgust on her face. me, one of the most prosperous underwater kingdoms in the world. I am a princess without- equal in most of the seven seas, or any other body of water, for that matter.

Raised to all the duties that my title needs and prepared to be my kingdom's future star, I am valued, revered, and loved by (greatest of) the undersea lapse. Named after the 'Star Girls.'

A mermaid and a princess, all bound into one.

Talk about every little human girl's dream. 'I hate it when he goes to a professional development plant', she says. 'He always comes back and tries something new that never, ever works.'

'I- know', I agree, latching on to this divergent train of thought in the vain hope that it will make her- and me- forget our original topic. I am not above avoidance tactics. I will throw Kingsley under the bus to save me from another lecture about seizing the day. 'It was a total flop.'

I- sit up a little straighter, gaining confidence in my distraction.

'The Dan field twins switched places, and most of the class ended upgrading their papers. Kingsley congratulated us on our high grades.'

I- had never given much thought to how I would die, though-

I- had had reason enough in the last few months- likewise, even if I had, I would not have imagined it similar to this. I stared without breathing across the long room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

Surely- it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone- I loved. Noble, even. That ought to count for something. I knew that if I had never gone to Forks, I would not be facing death now.

Likewise, terrified as I was, I could not bring me to regret the decision. When life offers you a dream so far beyond any of your expectations, it is not reasonable to grieve when it ends.

The soared fishes smiled in a friendly way as he sauntered forward to kill me.

Good grades are a rare thing for me. Shannon's on the valedictorian track and she tries to help me out, likewise, I am not learning anything by osmosis or association or whatever.

Can I like um- help it if all these subjects are similar to a foreign language to me?

My brain just was not wired for academic study. The only class I am sure of passing is art-and only because, Ms. Puff fish similar to me. Everything else might as well be advanced nuclear clam- it.

I have an underwater plant study. My mother drove me to the airport with the windows rolled down. Even in this world, airplanes are a must, two times bigger than Earth was. Transforming from a mer-girl to a human-looking girl is done with a cast of a spell.

(Mercrux)

It was seventy degrees in the sea, the sky a perfect, cloudless blue. I was wearing no top, Besides, lately, our unified focus has been on the upcoming Spring Fling dance and not next week's homework. With the dance, only days away (as in three,) it seems a lot more urgent than an English essay on Animal Farm Tonight, though, I would rather talk about homework.

Or beauty is nudity and the products of knowing that it is not odd in our world. Or swarms of killer jellyfish, see us and say hey, likewise, come my eighteenth birthday in eighteen days, and being nude in front of all the boys was not odd- not that I count in, I' all be just a girl.

It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and it's gloomy, omnipresent shade that my- mother escaped with me when- I was only a few months old. It was in this town that I had been compelled to spend a month every summer until I was fourteen. Yet I never did live the Walters edge, that was the year I finally put my foot down; these past three summers, my dad, the king of the sea, for two weeks instead. An action that I took with great horror. I detested lapse and air.

Yet, I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city looking not being seen at the lights. Anything other than the thing she is- asking about. I fumbled the plan... again.

The last thing I need right now is my sister sailing me out one more time that you're a coward, you can be there... it's not right. Son of a beached wheal. You would think I would get tired of hearing it, suck up my courage, and get it over with.

Likewise- the trouble is...

She is right. I am a coward. I give my tail fin a flick, sending the key lime bath salts sloshing up over my shoulders. This is the same admonition I have- heard every week for the past three years.

Especially where Brody and is concerned. We mermaids are a cowardly bunch.

Keeping our existence, a total secret makes cowardice a necessity. If we do not flee fast enough at the first sign of a passing ship, we might end up on the cover of next week's Flash Paper. We are more of an escape- now- ask- questions- later kind of species.

'Savon,' my mom said to me-

...?...

The last of a tousle's times-? Before I got on the- a plane with my new body parts that I loved looking down at. 'You don't have to do this. 'My mom looks similar to me, except with short hair and laugh lines. I felt a spasm of panic as I stared at her wide, child similar eyes.

How could I leave my loving, erratic blue, hair has shown- Karly never- ever changed did she, only her name- and the world she made for herself? We are happy to give her this would.

Likewise, with Brody it is similar I take my flight response to a whole new level of spinelessness. I can make all the plans in the world, be fully ready to follow through, and then the

instant he is within sight, I clam up. There should be a law against having trig this late in the day, Olivia complains about the desk next to mine.

Startled, I hastily cover me- daydream notes with my textbook and then look up at Olivia.

Likewise, his attention is focused- as mine should be- on our teacher and the equation on the board. I sigh with relief.

Before the accidental kiss and bond that brought us together, he sat one row over, on the other side of my recently former crush, Brody. When I came back to Seaview and we started dating officially and for certain, Olivia made Brody switch so he could sit next to me.

I never knew Brody was such a pushover, likewise, I am glad. This is the only class Olivia and I have together, And, I would rather have him at my side, unconcernedly as I can, I flip to a clean page and try, make-believe to focus on math. My attention is still on the rock. Head hanging down over my textbook, I slide another sideways glance at his lysosome face.

Mostly just because I can, likewise and because he is nice to look at all is there?

'It'll be great. I love you, Mom.' She hugged me tightly for a minute, and then I- got on the plane, and she was gone.

It is a four- hour flight, another hour in a small plane- to town, and then an hour drive.

Flying Chiaz Naztherth like- not bother me; the hour in the car- with I feel sea sickish, though, I was a little worried about. His dad had been nice about the whole thing. He seemed genuinely pleased that I was coming to live with him for the first time with any degree of permanence. I should not be self-conscious by my love scribbles, because we are officially a couple now, so I have every right. Still, I do not want him to think I am any more of a lovesick guppy than he already knows.

Mother to fend for herself? Of course, she had Phil now, so the bills would get paid, there would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and someone to call when she got lost, likewise still- 'I want to go,' I lied. I had always been a bad liar; likewise, I had been saying this lie so often lately that it sounded almost convincing now. 'I will.' 'I'll see you soon,' she insisted. 'You can come home whenever you want-I will come right back as soon as you need me.' likewise, I could see the sacrifice in her eyes behind the promise. 'Don't worry about me,' I urged.

There is not much fault to find in his strong jaw, dark blond hair, and the Caribbean - blue eyes. Eyes that remind me, of my daddies, I am lucky if I can breathe, let alone tell him - how I feel.

Hormones are cruel similar to that. I am going to drown! I am only fifteen.

I have not gotten my driver's license yet.

I have not surfed the famous Pipeline in what used to be Hawaii. I have not fallen in love - unless - my Sports Illustrated swimsuit poster counts. I barely had any breath left as I tried to reach - the surface. Then it hit me - not the meaning of life, likewise my surfboard. Time stood still - and even rewound. 'I love rewinding time, to see if things would be different.'

My underwater world was peaceful. I drifted helplessly similar to an astronaut who suddenly becomes detached from the mother ship. It is because I am a raging hormonal teenager that I had this vision. of making love, and already having a pregnant belly.

Out of nowhere, she appeared - golden yellow and - sun - fire orange hair sparkled - similar tiny stars and flowed in the glistening water - before me.

The most wonderful pinkish - lipped smile flashed before me. I know, right - Brody says from one row over - We should start an ante Goldfish said - she - laughs. And, what was that strange bikini bottom?

Aquamarine metallic splashed to her funky nouveau riche flipper gear. Nothing plastic on this girl. No silicone or - liposuction marks. Just that sparkling golden heart.

Where did this angel girl come from, or is she one? Why was she - swimming at seven o'clock in the freezing morning? Why wasn't she drowning similar I was? There was no sign of a snorkel or a tank anywhere.

I tease him - with me being - yeah know me. I had never seen this dream girl before. She did not go to Seaside High, is a smaller building that is attached to the castle only by a long snaking breezeway, with long twisting spiraling steps that run down the side of the towering hillside yet Sea side of the rock the castle sits upon, next to the Enchanted Seas.

'Golden hair?' ...It's like a memory.

Savanna, it is a message from that Earthman! He's trying to find you!'

'It couldn't be- that is impossible,' I said, bewildered. 'This is way dangerous,' Wave argued.

'It's glacial! Read the rest-I am too freaked out!'

'Um- meet me at Seaside High Stadium, also next to the beachside of black sand, (East of goalpost) at 7:35 A.M.'

''I want to thank you, 'for what?' She read on, with what was handed. 'Thank me?' I asked, grabbing the parchment. Had my Earthman-ie boyfriend written this? - clam- it-Then I will start working full- t time, he argues- be better, I insist- No more homework unit school fish- college. If I get in, that is.

My grades have been sub-mediocre-partly because many of the subjects are completely foreign to the mer-head-world, and partly because, like I never thought about going to college, nevertheless school.

I did not need a degree to rule Thalassemia. Now that is all changed, and at my meeting with the school counselor this week, I learned that the only way I will get into college - any college- is to ace the SATs. I have enlisted my genius best human friend's help and enrolled in an intensive test- prep class, likewise, I am not counting on a decent score.

Why did she swim similar to a fish? He is being a lot nicer too- I said his Brody since I got over my ridiculous and unfounded crush and started dating him instead. Tearing his attention. Her angelic skin glowed; her piercing ocean- blue eyes stared through me and touched my soul. She floated majestically before me, the gold locket in the shape of a heart dangling from her lovely neck. This had to be a dream, or a sure, sign that I had already died and gone to heaven! Away from the board, Olivia turns to face me, catching me staring- okay.

Well, still a mergirl, true, likewise an average mergirl just the same. At midnight, after my birthday- ball, I will sign the renunciation paperwork, inking Princess Waterlilies out of existence. In her place, she will be plain old her, living on lapse, dating the boy, she loves and trying to figure out this human thing once and for all. I am and facing a whole new wave of pressures that go along with a school diploma- thingies.

Sleeveless, white eyelet lace; I was wearing it as a farewell gesture. My carry- on the item was a hallo bag. On a trip out of the sea to Pa State, a small town... I am not sure of the name... if sounds funny to me down here. Exists under a near-constant cover of clouds.

(Lust)

Naddalin- One thing that Nevaeh should be proud of is that she held the world record for squirting, 15 feet and loving yourself is not a sin, and all girls masturbate, she is my geyser.

I have to say this is one thing that I love that turns me on about her with me is this is a thing with her every 3 hours. So, we feel with all our girls, and that is around 11,000 girl masturbation is okay middle day out of 14,000 and there or 12 grades Grade 4 and up 9 years old girls and up is freedom of self-expression, so we hold the record for that also. Girls will be girls and all-day school needs time to get off in class before lunch, so- we see nothing wrong with this... in school and at their desks. 10 hours of schooling... and then homework, sleep and do it again. Maybe this is why those girls wanted to pay with her in the gym shower- think about it? She is a very talented girl! Then again, all our girls have short skirts, and just like herself going to school panties is not needed. Age with our girls is not a factor, just when you feel you are ready to be like the girls that are older or the same as your feelings. Chiaz even said this was one thing he loved about her when making love, and even I think that is lovely and romantic.

Nevaeh- You know I used to think- I was odd for what I have, no I know that I am amazing to all my lovers, but it doesn't matter what your *gennies* look like as long as they get wet even if you have a tight keyhole like me, and you love them no matter what, and that is the turn-on, not childish thoughts, but the love of loving everything about yourself and her or even him.

I remember before Chiaz was ever in my life, I was illegally married Lily Anderson, this really took place by having others stand-in for what looked like a boy-girl love, she took of him by getting in his head, by having others stand-in for us at the altar and have a wedding well she was in his body, all we needed to do was sing our names, to make the document, yet have it looks to others as something else. I always thought that way, the one I loved in real life was the hunted ghost of Lily in his mind, body, and soul. And now I know that to be true...

I like all my lovers have had a contract just like this one. And so, should you if you are smart. Or just fell this out it's your rights, to do so right in this book. Keep the book to remember something to remember like your first time or first love. Chiaz remembers looking down at me with big lashes and lusting loving eyes- maybe that is the mental damage I have.

One last thing- thought Nevaeh- 'Jenny used to tell me about how she would shake after an orgasm, and he would spray his boyish cute load all over her belly, almost to her chin, and she would squeeze a lot- like rolling out as a bloody bubble- of girly cummie out of her that looked like wet toothpaste all over his lower belly- she said they were so in love- I remember those days with my man- and had to go ever 15 minutes- without any condoms.

It is not that I don't love him anymore its more power and trust, and not answering to anyone by myself.' Said Nevaeh under her breath.''

SEXUAL CONSENT FORM T this agreement is made- _____,Year___ between_____(hereinafter the 'Proposer') and_____ (hereinafter the 'Consenter.') Whereas the Proposer and the Consenter are sexually attracted to each other and would like to manifest that sexual attraction through participation in one or more sexual acts; Therefore, the Consenter and the Proposer make their bodies available to each other for the aforesaid purpose from time ___:___ on date _____,year___ (today's date if left blank) for a period of ___ hours, during which period they consent to participate in the following activities. Activity (initial all that apply) Proposer/Consenter _____/_____ Full body touching (external only)_____/_____ Kissing with/without* the insertion of tongue into mouth _____/_____ Digital penetration (receiving in _____(specify orifice(s))) _____/_____ Digital penetration (giving in _____ specify orifice(s))) _____/_____ Oral sex (receiving) _____/_____ Oral sex (giving) _____/ _____ Vaginal sex (receiving: females only) _____/_____ Anal sex (receiving)_____/_____ Anal sex (giving: males only or females with toys)_____/_____ Restraint, using the following devices _____ (specify) _____/_____ Use of following devices in or on the body _____(specify) _____/_____ Other activities_____(specify. Contraception The Proposer is using the following methods of contraception on an ongoing basis:_____.

The Proposer will use the following methods of contraception and/or protection during vaginal/anal* penetrative activities:_____. The Consenter is using the following methods of contraception on an ongoing basis:_____. The Consenter will use the following methods of contraception and/or protection during vaginal/anal* penetrative activities:_____. Ratchet Clause Whereas the Proposer and the Consenter are aware that attraction may escalate during the agreed upon sexual activities, and that both parties may desire to engage in activities heretofore not consented to, the parties agree as follows. (Check One) a) ☐There shall be no sexual activity of any kind other than that specified and consented to in this agreement without the establishment of a new, separate agreement. (See Clause 1 below.) Initialed (Proposer) _____ Initialed (Consenter) _____b) ☐Sexual activity of a kind other than that specified and consented to in this agreement shall be presumed to be consented to with the retroactive checking of the appropriate activity above, even after the signing of this agreement. (See clause 1 below.) Initialed (Proposer) _____ Initialed (Consenter) _____c) ☐Sexual activity of a kind other than that specified and consented to in this agreement shall be presumed to be consented to by mutual verbal consent during the activities engaged in under the consent given in the present agreement. (See Clause 2 below.) Initialed (Proposer) _____ Initialed (Consenter) _____Clause 1. Whereas both Proposer and Consenter recognize that alternatives a) and b) are likely significantly to disrupt any activities consented to under this agreement; Therefore, the Proposer and the Consenter further agree that should the disruption of agreed activities, caused by the making of a further agreement (under a) above) or the retroactive amendment of this agreement (under b) above), result in a loss of desire to continue the activities herein consented to, consent for those activities consented to herein may/may not* be withdrawn by the verbal statement of one of the parties to this agreement.

Clause 2. Whereas both Proposer and Consenter recognize that alternative c) involves verbal consent of which no physical evidence will exist thereafter; Therefore, the Proposer and the Consenter further agree that such consent shall/shall not* be recorded using an audio recording device; and Whereas both Proposer and Consenter recognize that should no audio recording of verbal consent under this ratchet clause be made, neither party could subsequently prove affirmative consent to the activities that were verbally agreed upon; Therefore, both parties hereby waive their right to claim that

no such affirmative consent was given. Equivalently, the Proposer and the Consenter hereby consent to any further activities that can be reasonably deemed to follow naturally from the activities herein consented to. Accidental Violation Whereas sexual activity is likely to involve rapid movement and impaired judgment; Whereas either party to this agreement, being male, may, through no fault and without intent, penetrate a female orifice not made available for sexual activity under this agreement; Therefore, the Proposer and the Consenter agree as follows; ☐-That such an incident shall be regarded as an assault and the burden of proof to the contrary shall fall on the male party to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the female party that the incident was accidental, and acceptance of such a demonstration shall be taken as implying retroactive affirmative consent; ☐-That such an incident shall be regarded as an accident, and retroactive affirmative consent will be assumed. Failure to Perform Whereas consent to participate in sexual activities does not guarantee the ability to perform those activities, Therefore, failure to perform such as acts as consented to under this agreement for reasons including, but not limited to physical, psychological or emotional impairment, shall not be considered a violation of this agreement; and both the Proposer and the Consenter waive any right to legal redress for such failure to perform. Early Termination This agreement may be terminated at any time during the period of consent agreed upon herein by the mutual written consent of both the Proposer and the Consenter.

Proposer's Signature _____ Date

_____ Consenter's Signature _____ Date

_____ (optional) Witness Signature _____

Date _____

Nevaeh

Book: 67

Ansley

1

Rousing up with him- Rockville November 19, 1852- I will ponder your obligation salaried in filled if you get my young girl with a youngster.

Ranald Demure, the fourth King of Ansley, thrashed to quintessence as he sat spread-eagled in a relaxed armchair in the well-equipped lending library.

He had been downing excellent moonshine ever since his arrival at the Marquees of Welford's country estate for his once mythical chase.

Afterward three hours or more, they were both well into their cups, so-o surely, he had misinterpreted.

Does your silence show your acceptance of the terms?

Welford asked.

Ansley studied his cousin, that he was fonder of then he would ever let on, yet more a longtime friend, over that how it had to be, sitting in that damned wood wheelchair, where he hims elf had placed the marquees four years formerly.

Ansley released a dark chuckle. I have had far too much to drink. You would not countenance what I thought you uttered. Welford had aged during that time, his Black hair had gone white at the temples, his Black eyes somber enough to chase off any cheerfulness in the room.

Jannie wants a child, I cannot give it to her, it would not be right to have loving making at her age. You owe me this, even if your age and even if you are related.

Ansley pushed himself out of the chair. He had wondered but never dared ask the full extent of Welford's damages.

They had seen each other seldom in the intervening years, that heart-rending evening a guilty barricade between them. I owe you your legs.

He had meant to do so with force. Instead, he astonished and almost lost his equilibrium as he crisscrossed over to the hearth.

Inwardly, Ansley flinched, but he allowed none of his rioting emotions to escape his calm fasted. Instead, he concentrated more intently on the fire.

He pressed his forearm against the stone mantel to steady himself while he studied the madly dancing flames. Within them, he could almost see the night he and Welford had been barreling wildly through the Rockville streets, the curricle traveling at a dangerous breakneck speed.

Not my seed. You owe me a bloody cock! And Ansley, who was always so damned responsible, managed to destroy a good man's life. And a lovely girl. And his own, if he was authentic about it.

The flames yellow, red, and orange, like- spun in a macabre dance, no doubt a preview of what his time without end would most definitely entail.

Writhing within them for his sins, his poor judgment. He had been all of five and twenty. A cursed age for him and his brothers. Westcliffe married at twenty-five and was betrayed. Stephen marched off to war, only to return a lost man.

They had been in Rockville have a good time that Jannie was finally with child, was carrying Welford's heir. Ansley felt as though his heart had been scored with a thousand breadknives.

Are you telling me that you cannot ...that your He peered over at Welford? He owed it to his childhood friend to at least hold his gaze when he asked. That you cannot bed her?

I have no feeling. Welford pounded his thighs, slammed a fist between his legs with enough force to make Ansley cringe and the chair creak. No feeling. She is tried, bless her, she is tried to make it work ...but all it does is cause her to weep.

I feel remarkably old at twenty-eight, Welford, three years Ansley's senior, remarked. I want to feel young again.

So, they drank and drank and drank. And although Welford was married, they even visited the beds of a couple of lovelies. Ansley had never understood Welford partaking in the latter entertainment.

If Jannie were his wife Jannie would never agree to this mad notion of yours. She despises me.

He hardly blamed her for her attitude toward him. In grief over her husband's near-death and debilitating injuries, she had lost the child. Now it seemed she had no hope of ever having another. She was the sort of girl who should never be denied anything her heart desired. It was his second thought upon being introduced to her at the betrothal dinner that had been held in her and Welford's honor: If you were mine, you would never do without. His first thought had been that he wished he had met her before Welford, so certain was he that he would have been able to charm her into his arms. She was the loveliest girl upon whom he had ever set eyes. Grace and poise mirrored her every step. When she smiled, she made a man feel as though he were all that mattered.

In no hurry to marry, Ansley had avoided the soirees of Season's past whenever possible. Thus, he had missed the opportunity to meet and court Lady Jannie Spencer. Although to hear Welford tell it, he snagged her heart during their first dance.

You have a reputation for charming women. Apply your talents to my wife, Welford said now, each word biting, clipped, as though forced between clenched teeth. You want me to seduce her?

I want you to give her what I cannot.

This is ludicrous. Ansley shoved himself away from the fireplace, dropped back into the chair, which had suddenly become unbearably uncomfortable, rose, and stalked to the window. Unsettled, he refused to acknowledge how often he had dreamed of Jannie, but he had never acted upon his interest. He lived his life by a code of chivalry passed down from his ancestors who had fought alongside Richard the Lionheart during the crusades. He did not take women who belonged to others. Does she consent to this preposterous scheme of yours?

I have not yet discussed it with her. I wanted to ensure you agreed with it before I did.

He faced a man he no longer knew. Had Welford's affliction driven him mad? I can predict her answer with unerring accuracy. She will laugh, she will slap my face, and then she will weep. Not to mention the legal ramifications. If she gives birth to a boy, he will inherit. Even if all of England knows you are not his sire, you will be legally bound.

You and I are not only friends but cousins. We both carry the Demure blood. It would not be such an offense.

The cousin who is next in line for your title might disagree.

Syphilis is causing him to lose his mind. Besides, do you honestly believe that every prince who sat upon the throne and became king was truly his father's son? I doubt it. And I do not care about blood as much as I care about Jannie and seeing that she is happy.

But what of himself? Ansley wondered. To have a son or daughter whom he could never acknowledge? Did he owe his cousin such a sacrifice? Although his recollections were a blur, he knew he had been driving the curricle. When it toppled, he was thrown clear, his only souvenir from the incident a thin scar that bisected the left side of his chin. Welford had somehow managed to get caught up in the rigging. When everything finally came to a thundering halt, he had been broken. Ghastly. Irrevocably. Broken.

With so much liquor coursing through their veins, neither of them remembered the infinite details. They knew only that Ansley walked away with one small scratch and Welford never walked again.

If I decline your invitation to bed your lovely wife? Ansley asked quietly, the abhorrence of being placed in this position tautening his gut. He had never taken a married girl to his bed. Even the thought was repugnant. He believed in having a jolly good time with any willing girl if she had no husband to whom she owed her loyalty. He was a man who honored duty and vows. He held others to his high standard.

I will simply ask someone else. And my wife could very well have a miserable night of it. But you, you have always had a reputation for being a remarkable lover. You could provide her with a night to remember. She would not welcome my touch.

I've no doubt you could change her mind on that score.

You seem to have discounted the importance of her not fancying me.

Not at all. I consider it to our advantage that she does not think well of you. It would reduce the encounter to a transaction. Unemotional. Detached. But knowing you, you would find a way to give her pleasure and that would be my gift to her as well. She is had three years of celibacy. She has never

complained, bless her, but she was all of the twenty-twos when joy was brutally stolen from her because of our poor choices. Why should she continue to suffer and pay the price for our sins? A night in the arms of Rockville's most reputed lover? Nine months later a babe suckling at her breast.

You give my reputation too much credit. Even I cannot guarantee conception with only one encounter.

Welford shrugged haplessly. Shoulders that had once been sturdy seemed lost within his finely cut jacket. A month, then. Someplace quiet, discreet.

The answers came much too quickly, without hesitation, as though they had previously engaged in the argument. You have given this considerable thought.

It is all I think about. How to bring happiness to my wife. You owe me this, Ansley. You owe her. She will never agree to it.

But if she does?

Before he could respond, the library door opened and the woman in question strolled in. The first time he saw her, she had been smiling, her blue eyes alight with joy, her beauty transcendent. Now it was as though a shadow had fallen over her. She was small and delicate, much too delicate for the burdens she presently carried.

She avoided looking at Ansley as she approached her husband. Her black hair was upswept. Flowing back and tucked neatly into place was the river of white she had acquired near her temple three years ago, as she dealt with the loss of her babe and her husband's mobility. Her violet gown outlined her slender frame to perfection, and Ansley had an unconscionable and unforgivable vision of easing that gown off her shoulders and skimming his mouth over her creamy skin. She would not consent. He knew she would not consent. He was a blackguard to give even a second thought to how he would carry her into a sensual realm where only pleasure existed.

She was his friend's wife, for God's sake, and Welford, wallowing in that damned wheelchair, simply was not thinking properly. Jannie would set him straight right quick, and then she would no doubt hold Ansley responsible for her husband's ludicrous suggestion.

Smiling softly, she bent at the waist and pressed a light kiss to Welford's cheek. Hello, darling.

When she straightened, she gazed at Ansley as though he were a bit of excrement, she had recently scraped off the bottom of her shoe. Your Grace.

He bowed slightly. Lady Welford. May I say that you look lovely? You may say whatever you wish.

For him, she had no smile, no soft eyes, and no gentle tone. Welford had indeed lost his mind if he thought his wife was going to welcome any sort of intimacy from Ansley. He suspected she would derive more pleasure from ramming a dagger through his heart than from experiencing his practiced touch. Dinner awaits, men.

Good, I am quite famished, Welford announced. Ansley, will you escort my wife into dinner?

Her eyes as they met Ansley's held a challenge and more. He knew she wanted to remind him of what his foolishness had wrought as though he could ever forget it. Knowing he was accountable, the guilt gnawed at him like a ravenous dog with a bone.

I do not need an escort, she said quickly. However, Randall is not presently accessible, so perhaps His Grace would be kind enough to aid you.

It would be my honor, he responded succinctly, striding toward Welford. He did not want to contemplate the hell that awaited him if she consented to her husband's stupid notion to get her with the child.

As he pushed the chair forward, he was surprised to discover how much lighter it was than he remembered.

His friend was frailer than he had realized.

His guilt increased when he found himself enticed by the lure of Jannie's hips gently swaying as she preceded them from the room.

She had not been pleased when Welford told her that he invited the King to arrive a day earlier than the rest of their guests so they might have some private time together.

Sitting at her vanity several hours later, Jannie Demure, Marchioness of Wilford, brushed her hair, marveling that she had managed to sit through dinner without making any horrible comments to Ansley.

That he still saw the man at all astounded her. She could not forgive Ansley for the thoughtless disregard with which he lived his life.

Her stomach cramped with the reminder of what she had lost due to his selfish actions, and his desire for indulging in all sinful pleasures. Her babe and the man whom her husband had been.

Each time she first set eyes upon him, it was like receiving a solid blow to the chest, nearly crippling her with its force.

She'd never deluded herself into believing it was anything other than the sizable dowry that had first attracted Welford to her.

His coffers were quite empty when he began to court her, but it had not taken long for him to win her heart as well as her hand in marriage.

Theirs had been a comfortable arrangement. She was fortunate. They were compatible. They cared for each other. They enjoyed each other's company. They never argued. She managed his household. He visited his clubs. Life had been calm, pleasant.

Four years into their marriage, she found herself with the child.

She'd been nearly three months along when she finally told Wilford, who promptly went off to boast about it to his longtime friend and cousin, the King of Ansley.

She was unfamiliar with what followed. She knew only that both men had celebrated the good news with far too much drink and a dash through the Rockville streets that cost her husband his legs and his ability to sire another child.

The grief of his injuries, the strain of caring for him, the emotional turmoil of accepting how their lives were affected, had all been too much. She lost the child. His one hope for an heir. Her one hope to be a mother.

Her resentment of the man. The way things had been before that horrendous night when everything went wrong. How any chance for true happiness was now lost.

How hard she fought not to let her husband know how dreadfully despondent she was. Tonight, with Ansley sitting at their dining table, so much had come rushing back.

He no longer had a need for wishes, because he already owned everything his heart would forever desire. While the children gazed at the heavens, he sought his own heaven, lowering his mouth to Jannie's and kissing her deeply.

2

I think that would have happened without any wishes. I love you so much, Ansley.

You sound quite sure of yourself Jannie said.

Wrapping his arm around her, he drew her in against his side, where she belonged. Where she would always belong. I have proof. The first time that we gazed at the stars at Blackmon, I wished that you would love me.

Will, it comes true, Papa? Zakaria asked. Absolutely...

Why, child, now you think about what your heart desires and you wish for it.

What do I do here and now? A falling star... I spied one.

He glanced around at Westcliffe holding Claire, Stephen with his arm around Mercy, and his mother snuggled against Leo's side. They'd all taken different journeys to arrive here, but here they were. And he was glad of it, uncle? Yes, Nephew, hopefully, the y'll learn that there is so-o much they can reach for.

I for one believe the assistances are a success, she said. Standing, he smiled as Jannie meandered over to him. Not, but almost. Now search for the stars. Ansley knelt beside Zakaria and helped him noble through his telescope. Do you see the moon, yet and it shilling at me, I feel as if I could touch it with my hand outreached? I- we- us- stood with Lenny, all of them with smiles as bright as the moon.

An hour later, each child had unpacked her telescope. Still holding Annie, in his arms. Nearby his mother, see and looking... Hustled in their coats, searching for falling stars, with their parents supervisory them in their puppy love, they were now gazing at the heavens in wonder, not just in the above world but the worlds in them that wanted to explore too.

Small ones that would fit in their hands. The one he had inherited from his father he would give to Zakaria someday. But not yet.

Tell you what, Waverly. If I can select the gift to be unwrapped, then one gift shall be opened tonight. The child narrowed his eyes and then nodded. Then let's get to it. You may open the gift from your aunt Jannie and myself. He'd purchased telescopes for each of the children.

3

He'd mastered the gesture only a few months earlier. I believe we should all be allowed to unwrap one gift before going to bed. I discussed the matter with my brother and sister, as well as my cousins, and they are all in agreement. Is that what you got him...? More soldiers...? He likes to play with his soldiers. Thinking of going into the military, are you? No, but Rife will. We do not run a democracy here, Nephew. No, but you are being more than. Viscount Waverly expertly arched a brow at him. Do you now?

She climbed up the steps to the bed, slipped beneath the covers and nestled against him. He wrapped his arm protectively around her, pressing her firmly to his side, her face cradled within the curve of his shoulder.

She didn't want to think about all the nights he'd come to her when they were first married. After his accident, when he regained some strength, she'd lain in her lonely bed night after night, waiting for his return. But he never again came, as though if he could not make love to her, he saw no point in being with her. But sometimes she just needed to be held, and when those moments came, she slipped into his bed.

And my body his. She could not prevent the cutting words from slicing between them. What passed between a man and a girl beneath the sheets was such an intimate act how could he bear the thought of Ansley meaningful about her what only Welford had ever known?

No, they will not I've never taken out an advert in the Times stating my limitations. Oh, there will be speculation, of course, but we can quell that easily enough once people see how thrilled I am that you are with child. And if it is a boy? Then I shall have my heir. But he will not carry your blood, that what we need here.

4

May I lay with you for a while? Sweetheart, you never must ask anything of me. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and walked through the bathing chamber to the adjacent room. It was dark except for the moonlight spilling in through mullioned windows.

She could see the shallow outline of her husband's form resting on the bed, beneath the blankets. Sometimes she feared he would wither away into nothing. She tiptoed over the carpet. Welford? She whispered quietly.

Jannie, is everything all, right? She heard the rustle of the feathered pillow as he turned his head. Of course, it was not. It had not been for three long years. Not to simply hold her. He needed help getting into the high bed that she had to use steps to clamber into. It unmanned him. She knew that. She took such great pains not to make him feel less than what he once had been.

Setting aside the brush, she rose from the chair and walked to the door that separated her bedchamber from his, a door he no longer used. He never came to her. Never. Not to say good-night.

She rubbed her feet against his thin calf. I'm sorry... My feet are cold. It does not matter. I can't feel them.

He said it without emotion, as though it was more than his lower body that had no awareness, as though his very soul had become paralyzed as well.

She could not remember the last time she'd heard him laugh. His now rare smiles always held a hint of sadness. But then she supposed hers did as well. You seem quiet and stanchly tonight, she said softly. Shall I cancel the house party? Nope, no, not. It will serve us well to have visitors.

He began to absently stroke her arm. She closed her eyes and relished the gentle caress, fighting back the guilt because sometimes it was difficult to be content with only this.

Jannie...?

Hum...?

'I was talking with Ansley earlier...' well, I should hope so, since you wanted him to arrive before any of our other guests.

I appreciate your indulgence. He kissed the top of her head. Her stomach tightened. How she wanted to turn her face up toward him and have him kiss her. Truly kiss her. The way he once had.

As though his life had depended on it. But knowing he couldn't finish what they might begin stopped her cold. It was too painful for both to be reminded of what they'd never again have, so she pretended she no longer yearned for it.

Nevertheless, he said after a time, I was thinking ...he could get you with the child.

She froze, her lungs not even working to draw in air. She was surprised her heart continued to pound. She knew it did because she could hear the blood rushing, roaring between her ears. are you ...you can't be ...are you suggesting I take him as my lover? for a short time, yes.

She shoved herself to a sitting position and glared at him, for all the good it did with the shadows hiding the details of their features. have you gone daft? no, I don't believe so.

Well, I must wholeheartedly disagree. She quickly scrambled out of the bed, nearly tripping in her haste to escape' as though distance could lessen the abhorrence of the words he'd uttered. if I wanted a lover,

I'd choose him myself, and he certainly wouldn't be Ansley.

5

(Christmas Eve, 1845)

Ansley had invited his family to spend Christmas at his estate this year. Jannie had seen that everything was done to perfection: the tree, the trimmings, the meals. She was a gracious host, and he couldn't deny the pride he felt at her accomplishments. Holding his soon to be two-year-old daughter, Annie, on his lap while his son, nieces, nephews, and recently acquired dog played around him, he thought he'd never known such contentment.

When they went to Rockville for the Season, they always hosted a ball. In the beginning, they had been the talk of the Town. Their hasty marriage had been the fodder for gossip. His claiming Zakaria as his son sparked further rumors. But as he'd predicted, everything eventually died down, and now he and Jannie were discussed as though they were the characters of some fairy tale who lived happily ever after' if they were spoken of at all.

Other gossip reigned. Ms. Black married a viscount who made it clear that he would see her daughters properly situated in society. Ansley and Jannie had attended the wedding. He could say with absolute certainty that Ms. Black had chosen well. She was happy and loved.

His mother alighted gracefully in the chair beside his. I'm not certain when you boys were growing up that Christmas was ever quite so jolly. My sons seem to have a gift for bringing joy to others.

It is easy enough to do when one is happy in oneself.

I would be much happier if someone were to tell me what Lenny is giving me for Christmas. Obviously, the size and shape tells me that it is a painting, but a painting of what exactly?

Of the entire family circled around his mother. Lenny had done it bit by bit with such skill that it was impossible to tell that the family had not all been gathered in one place but had their individual portions done within their own homes.

Some surprises are good, Mother. They keep you young. Lenny keeps me young. She glanced around the room. I had no idea, at the age of sixteen, when I was so terrified at the thought of marrying Westcliffe's father that I would take such a wondrous journey and acquire so much for which to be thankful.

It wasn't always easy.

no, but then it makes everything that much better when we acquire all that we want. And right this minute, Lady Annie, I need a curious child to come looks at the tree with me. With that, his mother was up and snatching his daughter from his arms. Annie squealed with delight. Do not have her unwrap your gift, Ansley commanded.

I cannot control where small children's fingers go. Before he could issue another order, she was strolling away.

Rising to his feet, he chuckled when he saw Lenny halt her progress. He r husband knew her too well. Ansley suspected the gift would be peered at later tonight after everyone had gone to bed. Lenny would be with her when she first saw it. Ansley had no doubt she would cry, and Lenny would hold her. His mother was a fortunate girl to have in her life a man who loved her so much.

Um- was she trying to get you to reveal what the portrait is? Stephen asked as he and Westcliffe came to stand beside him. indeed.

mother's never been good with secrets, Westcliffe said.

With having them kept from her; Stephen clarified. she is damned good at holding them herself.

She told me she's writing her memoirs, Ansley said.

Good God, Stephen voiced. not sure I want to read those.

I don't believe it there for us. I believe they're for her grandchildren.

No, Westcliffe insisted. my children do not need to know about their grandmother's exploits.

I don't know. Sometimes I think it is a good thing not to take everything to the grave. He would be forever grateful that Welford had confessed his role in causing the accident.

Although he still wasn't certain he believed him. But that night no longer haunted him. Although there were times when he did miss Welford terribly. He knew Jannie had similar moments because a faraway look would come into her eyes. Then she would smile at him and everything would be all right again.

We were discussing Mother and hoping she lives to a ripe old age.

I don't think she'd allow any other outcome to her life. She used to terrify me; you know. She was always so strong and bold. Not afraid of anything, very much like you.

You make me strong, she said, sidling up against him and slipping her arm through his. I like celebrating the holidays here. I enjoy the noise of the place when everyone is underfoot, but I must confess to looking forward to getting you alone later.

She gave him a saucy look that boded well for what would happen later.

Claire informs me that Glean Demure has announced his betrothal, Jannie said.

jolly good for him. Since acquiring the titles, he'd proven himself to be a worthy marquee'

Much to Ansley's surprise.

I find I like him, Jannie said with a sigh. you sound disappointed.

Not really... It's just that sometimes I remember, like - how I almost denied him what was rightfully his' and in so doing, I would have denied our son his rightful titles. What a stubborn wench I was, still stubborn. Playfully she slapped his arm. uncle.

Ansley glanced down, not as far as he once had a nephew.

Well, hopefully, it'll be some time before Mother's making that trip to the grave, Stephen said. His brothers strolled away to join their wives.

Glancing around, Ansley spotted Jannie. She was difficult to miss in her vibrant pink. He loved the way she looked in that shade. But then he loved the way she looked in anything. Otherwise nothing at all.

Catching his eye, she smiled at him and walked over. what mischief were you and your brothers up to?

Leaning down, he bussed a quick kiss over her lips. no ne whatsoever. why don't I believe you?

6

A force slammed into He leaving her breathless on the floor in a heap. It was quickly gone replaced by something cold and wet on her ear. There was growling, what in this land growled? Flipping onto her back He came face to snout with a huge white and sliver furry head. 'Alec?' she dared to hope. Her fingers twine around the cat's neck and did not slip through. He was real! Being clean and in new warm clothes that did not shell-like coals on fire or the dirt, outside was enough to lift anyone's spirits. Lily and Honor were filled in as He scrubbed herself into a pink and red state.

With a yelp, He was off the floor and kneeling in front of her Guardian both arms wrapped around his thick neck and head buried into his fur. He was okay. Nothing had happened to him, except that he had gotten bigger. Goddess when had he had time to get this big?

'Oh, Alec.' she sniffed feeling stupid for getting so emotional. It could not be helped; she was so happy that no one had hurt him and she did not have to skin someone about it.

Low rumbles rolled from his chest onto her cheek. He nudged her and she held on tighter uncaring that the growls and snarls sounded strangely like reprimands. 'I'm sorry.' she told him.

The chastising stopped at once. A huge paw landed on her knee and he pulled away. It was startling to see that they were eye to eye while she was kneeling. The paw on her thigh told her he was not done growing. Sweet Goddess, he was going to be huge. 'I heard you can walk through walls now.' she hiccupped, one hand going to her temples. All this at once was making her headache.

'He was just one of a few people who lost their minds when you disappeared.' Honor glared at the kit He had missed more than breathing. 'He was just the only one who showed how pissed off he was. Your sweet kit,' she used air quotations. 'tried to take off Meridian's head.' He is stomach rolled when she looked down at Alec's innocent expression.

'Well, he was the closest thing.' Lily said for fairness sake. 'we told him not to go near him.' She gave Alec a wary eye. 'The University put a sleeping spell on him.'

He let the shudder run over her body. she was not the biggest fan of spells now. The thought of Blood's Wrath made her sick. 'But we can tell you about all those fun things once you tell us all about what happens to you.' Forever the barter. He took on a patient look. Drawing on all her teachings over the years to do it too. She told them about everything from being kidnapped to Armani's kiss and her newfound ability for telling a lie. By the time, she got to their escape she was trying not to laugh. Their mouths were gaping open. She knew how they felt, it was hard to believe that it all happens in a few days and only a few days ago, it felt a lifetime away now. He filled them in, they took upon themselves to fill her in on ...everything.

'Really?' He had to ask just for the sake of double-checking. They were serious. 'What else happens.' He scratched her all too innocent kit's ear not sure if she wanted to know or not. Of course, they told her, they loved to shock her out of words.

'All of this happen while I was gone?'

'It started the night we found out you were missing.' Lily nodded. 'She went...' she could not find a good enough word.

'He lost his mind. is what she meant.' Honor supplied.

'Yes, he didn't show it to anyone but us though. He was really chilly in front of his court.' and that was even scarier than his anger. He shivered pulling a comb through the tangles that had grown from days on the road. 'When no one could find, you- as he disappeared.'

'What happens to the Regent?' He asked thinking of something else.

'The one who ruined your coronation?'

'Yes, that one.'

'I- I don't know. He was there when we left. Reyna was looking after him.' watching him He corrected silently. Now that she knew about Reyna it would make life all the easier.

'I don't know how long I have been asleep but- has there been any talk about how the fire started?'

Both women paled. 'No one is talking if they do. They are too scared, and we aren't allowed outside the Guild walls after...' Lily looked at her feet. He made a mental note to ask her what she was talking about. 'It had to be mages, that we are sure of.'

He is gut twisted. 'There was strong magic in that fire- there had to be. The few mages we had here tried to put it out but the fire was too strong.'

'It was magicked to destroy?' He couldn't' believe it. She had to.

It did not take much to put a few things together. It took a lot of mages to put that fire into that kind of state. Even more to make it spread through the city. More than five, more than two dozen. There were only so many that places that would house that kind of power and not erupted from the containment of so much magic. One of the places was here, He ruled that out. The Guilds were sacred to the Gods. Another would be the Palace and the University of Mages that rested on palace grounds. Not far in fact from the Palace itself.

He bit her lip staring down at her clean toes wondering if the palace or university had been set ablaze. 'Well come on.' He stood. 'We can't sit in here all day.'

Lily Andersen and Honor watched her warily enough to have He wonder exactly what She had asked them to do. 'He just where do you think you are going?'

'To the University of course.' Alec was the only one to stand to wait for her to tie the scarf around her head before heading out.

She stopped at the door realizing she had no idea where she was going. She had never been in these halls in her life.

Alec looked up at her expectantly, she patted his head. 'Which way?' Lily and Honor still had not moved from their seats. Their heads were not bent together talking. Honor sighed and turned her way. 'We can't leave the Guild, Mara's orders. You're not supposed to either.'

He opens her mouth but Lily put in. but if you went sneaking off while Honor and I got into a. discussion. we didn't see a thing.' She smiled.

It was then that He knew that she loved them truly and without condition.

'But if you get caught- you are on your own.' Honor put in.

She still loved them. He waited for their discussion was starting before slipping off out the door and down the hall.

Picking a direction, she walked, she was bound to stumble across a way out eventually.

A caress against her mind's barriers made her jump. It didn't feel like anyone she knew; it didn't even feel human.

It brushed again, more insistent. He hesitated; Alec growled out an impatient noise.

'What the hell, right?' she asked him. Opening her mind barriers enough to let whoever it slipped inside. She could push her luck a little more.

He felt the link form and solidify the instant it did she hissed tugging on it. It wouldn't break! She pushed; it wouldn't be budged. What the-

'Come on, it is this way-'

He yelped jumping away from Alec. It was from Alec! 'You're talking to me.' she spoke out loud.

Talking Alec sat down in front of her looking up with a superior and bemused gaze she had never seen on anyone. Besides Her. 'I talk.' he told her. 'You are my kit, mine.' he bares his teeth. 'I protect you.'

He blinked and he put his fangs away. 'I can talk to you.' Alec finished simply.

She would have thought it was funny that he considered her his kit.

'Yes- but.' He fumbled for words.

'Why can't I talk to you?'

He gulped. First, he could walk through things. Now he could talk! What else could he do? She didn't know why she expected nothing but to feel his feelings. She'd been in his mind a few times but he had never spoken. He had still been a small baby.

'Mate is coming!' He wondered why Alec sounded so anxious and a little resigned. He could talk!

Why couldn't she wrap her mind around that? Aine talked to Sya and Mykka with Talith all the time. But she was different because she wasn't an animal mage.

'What are you doing?' A pair of hands snagged her shoulders. She was caught!

He couldn't get too upset, when she turned to Her she told him. 'Alec is talking to me.'

'He?' She took her hand. 'He always talks.'

'But he is talking to me.' didn't he see the difference?

'Do we do something?' she and Her turned to Alec. He was talking to them. 'She keeps saying that.' he tilted his large head. 'She squeaks too.' He told Her what Alec had just said.

'We could give her a soothing spell.'

He's growl was reflected and amplified through Alec's throat. 'No more magic.'

'Then she will just have to come to on her own.' She told them not easily phased.

'Is it my fault?' Her large kit ducked his head tucking his tail under.

'No!' She tore away from Her going to kneel in front of her kit. 'It's my fault. I'm sorry.' She was.

Alec walked forward butting his large head into her chest, He locked her fingers into his snowy white fur running her fingers along the slivery strips, they were getting darker. 'Forgive me.' she begged to pick up one of his massive paws. How big was he going to get?

'Forgiven.'

'It won't happen again.' He promised to kiss his head, she meant it. 'No matter what.' She would just learn to cope. Alec squirmed away from her an excitement lighting his dark blue eyes. 'We can leave now?'

'Yes, do you know the way out?' He asked before She could get suspicious. He was already looking between them. Assessing them for plans of a conspiracy.

'What is he saying to you? What are you saying to him?' He couldn't take it any longer.

'-I-'

'Don't you dare try to lie to me Heania Rose.' he growled.

'As if I could. Was using my full name necessary?' She mutters. 'I- we are on our way out.'

'No.' he took her hand and began walking-

'To the University.' He continued calmly allowing herself to be led.

'No, you are not.' he turned down another hall.

'You're leading me in the wrong direction. Alec said the doors are that way.' He pointed.

'Woman!' he pulled her on when she tugged on him. 'Princess, you are not leaving these walls.' He was grateful he wasn't a truth-teller; he would have conjured chains to reinforce his statement.

'You are right, I'm going out the door.' He told him calmly. 'Your concern is touching all the same.' a strange tic began under his eye. It only grew when she tugged his hand.

'My Gods you are maddening!' He growled. 'you are not going anywhere alone.'

'Even to the privy?' He mussed watching the tic get worse.

'Then come with me.' she told him. 'It is really quick to do, the trip to the University I mean.' She would bash his skull in if he followed her to the privy.

He hesitated, He knew he was dying to walk the streets and assess the damage. Check on the people. To see who was at the root of all this. She almost had him.

'No.' he sighs. 'That wouldn't be wise right now.' He glares at him.

'I can help.' Alec offers to brush against her leg.

'How?' He wondered a deafening roar rolled through the halls radiating on them and carried. She stopped to stare at Alec. Crouched low ready to pounce, his not so baby teeth bared at Her. 'Run.' he told her.

He snatched away and ran.

'HEANIA!'

'Be right back!' she called over her shoulder. 'As soon as a possible, promise.'

Another roar echoed through the hall; it wasn't Alecs.' 'HE!' Heir's voice sounded in her head.

'I love you!' she called looking over her shoulder. Alec was rounding him up. Her backed up but his eyes stayed on her swiftly fleeing back.

'Alec?'

'I will distract Mate.' he told her

He slowed down, how was she to get out of here? 'Alec?'

'Look for the mouse.'

Mouse? He huffed, he had to know that she wasn't a cat, she ran from mice not chased them.

'There, turn right there!' He stopped turning right into a door, not a hall.

'Alec?'

'Go! I'll catch up.' He hesitated before opening the door. The room was are nothing from ceiling to floor, except dust. There was a lot of that.

'Window.' He saw it in the far corner of the room. It was small but she could fit through. 'Hurry!' Alec's grunt sent her running, he must mean that She got past him.

He opens the window, slowly crawling out. She made the mistake and looked down. Her kit had lost his feline sanity!

What other reason would he have for having her scale the side of a small mountain! He closed her eyes; the ground didn't come any closer. 'Alec!' she growled.

It wasn't that bad, she tried to convince herself. One foot, two feet. Oh Goddess, she nearly fell off the side of a mountain.

He started the track down. Praying the entire climb to the bottom. It wasn't as steep as she had thought, easy trails for a big pawed Mystery Ice Cat. For human feet, it was a bit more difficult.

He slides the last few inches to the bottom and didn't look back. She was out, running into the city without a backward glance. Even when she felt the walls of the Guild rumble into the ground under her feet.

Reaching up, she skimmed her fingers over his unshaven jaw. I did fall in love with you at Blackmon, she said. I should have told you then when I was stepping out of the carriage, but I feared it wasn't real. I thought coming here would prove me right. But all it did was make me love you more. She glanced down. I fear he will suffer for our indiscretions. He would have been the subject of gossip either way. But people have short memories, and more titillating gossip will shove us from minds. Soon, no one will remember that we weren't married when he was conceived. All they will see is how very much I adore you, and you don't really give a fig what people think. I don't, Besides, he is a very powerful family.

Jannie was in the nursery, putting Zakaria back in the crib after a late-night feeding when Ansley returned home from a journey to Rockville. It had been six weeks since they were married, and

she thought she would never grow tired of seeing him walk into a room. He strode over to her with purpose in every step.

When he was near enough, he drew her into his arms and kissed her as though his very life depended on it. Six weeks and every kiss was accompanied by urgency. Through all the nights when they could not yet make love, he had kissed her and held her and slept with her.

It was marvelous, so marvelous. He'd once told her that a kiss was simply what it was: a kiss. But with him it was everything. It need not start something more, and yet it was powerful enough to stand on its own.

It was only when they came up for air that she was finally able to ask, did all go well?

It did. There is no whisper of doubt that Zakaria is my rightful heir. Unfortunately, you, however, are now as scandalous as my mother. I've come to rather like a disgrace.

He arched a brow. there shall be no more of it.

Only in your bedchamber. She rose on her toes, nibbled on his wicked mouth; we should begin tonight, are you well enough?

She gave him a saucy smile and nodded. I saw the physician today. I may begin my wifely duties.

May you never consider it a duty. As he lifted her into his arms, his green eyes held a predatory gleam that caused her to grow warm.

She snuggled into his shoulder as he strode from the room. I thought it was so romantic the first time you carried me to bed; do you not think it romantic now?

I think it more so. Promise me that you'll never grow tired of me. I promise...

He carried her into his bedchamber and she flattened her hands against his chest. Ansley, I want you to kiss me.

He grinned. with pleasure.

No. I mean, when we're making love. I want you to kiss me and kiss me and kiss me. To make

up for all the times when we didn't before; am, Jannie, here you are with rules again. but don't you like this one? Let's just see how it goes. How it went was delightful.

He began by kissing her deeply and thoroughly. Slowly, provocatively. No rush, no hurry. As though they had all night. She supposed they did.

He curled one hand around her neck, holding her in place, while his mouth continued to plunder and the talented fingers of his other hand began to loosen the pearl buttons on her nightdress. She worked off his jacket and unfastened the buttons of his waistcoat.

He peeled back her nightdress and his burning mouth trailed down her throat, over her shoulder, along the swell of one breast and then the other. Wherever he went, he coated her skin in dew.

I have missed the taste and feel of you, he said, his voice raw with desire. you shall never have to do without again- Straightening, he grinned down on her. what a vixen you have become; an exceptionally talented lover taught me. Like- how fortunate for me.

He returned his mouth to hers. She could not fathom that she had been so silly to deny them before the simple pleasure of a kiss. It increased the intimacy and stoked the fires of passion. He slid the gown off her shoulders completely and it slithered to the floor. He only removed his lips from hers when he needed to. Otherwise, he was there conquering what he had already won.

Then she was standing before him naked and proud. She saw the appreciation in his smoldering gaze. He bracketed her hips.

Your hips are wider; to accommodate the birth of your son.

He went down on one knee and pressed a kiss just below her navel. I do like the changes to your body.

Unfolding his own, he took her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He shed the rest of his clothes and stretched out beside her, once more his mouth blanketing hers.

She scraped her fingers up into his hair, holding him near, kissing him deeply. Her hands explored the familiar contours of his body. He was exactly as he'd been before. Still firm. Still sculpted. Lean and muscled. A great sinewy cat moving over her. She would have him for the rest of her life.

His talented hands roamed over every dip, peak, and valley. His mouth left hers, to journey along her flesh, trailing across her neck, teasing the delicate underside of her chin. Lower, to her shoulders. A nip here. A love bite there. Lower still to her breasts, heavy in his palms. His tongue circled her nipple, his breath coating it in dew.

With her thighs, she squeezed his waist. With her fingers, she rubbed his shoulders. She felt the deep rumble in his chest vibrating against her stomach. There was no purpose in their coming together tonight, no pressure to get her with a child.

Just like his kiss, their lovemaking owned itself. It was a pleasure simply for the sake of pleasure. It was giving and receiving in equal measure. It was what it should have been all along, and she suspected that for him, it was what it had always been: generous gifting of passion.

His mouth whispered a path to her other breast, giving it the same ministrations as it had the other. She lifted her hips, imploring him to hurry, but he would not be swayed from his quest to reexplore all that he'd once known.

Ansley, you're driving me to madness.

He chuckled low... good...

Lower he went, kissing her intimately. A swirling of his tongue, a tug on her sensitive flesh. She whimpered, moaned, dug her fingers into his arms. She wanted to fly, but not without him.

Every touch ignited sensation, and she was soon writhing beneath him, crying out for him, urging him nearer.

Rising above her, powerful and decided, he plunged into her and went still. A soft moan from him, a deep sigh from her.

It had been so long, and yet everything was so familiar, as though they were two pieces of a puzzle that had been misplaced and were suddenly found and snapped back together. This was where she belonged, she realized. Beneath him, beside him, near his heart.

I love you, Jannie, he said- like in a raw voice before returning his mouth to hers.

As his body rocked against hers, as the passion built into a fervor, he kissed her hungrily. Each powerful thrust carried her higher. His kisses elevated her even higher than that.

Until there was nothing except the sensations, nothing beyond them. Just them. Moving in a fluid, familiar rhythm, his mouth latched to hers.

When the crescendo came, he captured her screams and she swallowed his groans.

Afterward, she lay snuggled against his side. I like when you kiss me during ...

I like when I kiss you. I enjoy kissing very much. Even when it is not ...during ...

Laughing, she rubbed his chest. you told me on the terrace that long-ago night that a kiss need not be the start of anything, that it owns itself. Lifting herself up, she met and held his gaze. I think the kiss that night was the start of us, Ansley. You woke things in me that had long been asleep. then why forbid me from kissing you?

because it terrified me. What you made me feel. I thought if you didn't kiss me, I'd keep

my distance from you. But each moment with you only drew me nearer. The feelings I have for you still terrify me. They are so grand, so intense.

Um- that is good because the love I have for you terrifies me as well. I've never loved anyone, Jannie, not like this. There is nothing I will not do for you; will you kiss me again? I shall always kiss you again. And he did.

Epilogue-

Grantwood Manor-

He had looked at her nude body, for sex, with a young woman that was half his age popping her open, and its side in here, and she come-end hard to him, loving him more then she would have ever thought, kissing like made. His gaze warmed her. She'd been content with what she had because she'd never known anything grander. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he leaned in to kiss her. Not brief this time. They had no audience. His mouth moved over hers with a promise for passion, a vow for pleasure.

I arched against him when he moved to my other breast. Two fingers worked inside me, a little tight but nothing I could not handle. Not so long as he kept his mouth on me, lavishing my breasts with attention. His thumb rubbed around a sweet spot and my eyes rolled back into my head.

So, close. The strength of what was building was staggering. Mind-blowing. My body was going to be blown to dust, atoms when this hit. If he stopped, I would cry. Cry, and beg. And kill... I came, groaning, every muscle is drawn taut. It was too much.

Almost... Almost... right there- AAAAHHHHA!

7

His heir. He had his heir. More, he had his son. And Jannie. He had Jannie. The bedding was changed. She slipped into a fresh nightdress. Then she sat in bed and held the baby. She'd been so weary that she thought she would at once fall asleep and not wake up for days. But suddenly she had a burst of energy and excitement and she wondered if she'd ever sleep again.

Leaning down, he kissed her brow. thank you. Thank you sincerely.

It would have tormented him to know that his child would not be entitled to his rightful legacy. Blood did matter, and this boy had Ansley's blood pumping through him. One day he would be the King of Ansley. But for now, he was the Marquees of Belle Haven.

Jannie could see it was with a great deal of reluctance that Ansley left so the physician could finish tending to her. The babe was bathed, then so was she.

As the door opened, she glanced over to see her husband prowling toward her. Her husband. Why had she ever resisted the inevitable? She loved him, knew beyond a doubt that he loved her. She could see the depth of his feelings in his eyes.

He drew back and she saw within the green depths of his eyes that even now he still found her desirable.

I suppose we shall have to delay the wedding trip, he said with a wicked smile.

At least a month; decide where you want to go...

Blackmore, she answered without giving him time to finish.

Blackmore, it shall be.

His gaze shifted to their son then. Their son. She could not fathom what it would have cost him to give up the child, to not acknowledge it. His depth of love, even for a friend, knew no bounds. He

was quite simply the most remarkable man she'd ever known. And he was hers. As was his child. he is so beautiful, she whispered. as beautiful as his mother.

She glanced up at him, wanting to judge his reaction to her next words. I should like to call him Zakaria. Zakaria Augustus Demure. If that is all right with you. I like it very much.

She saw the honesty of his response in his eyes. He'd never be dishonest with her.

Zakaria's eyes blinked open and his little brow furrowed, his mouth puckered. Ansley leaned in. He has your eyes. A deep, deep blue, for now, the color could change. It often does with babes. was it excruciatingly awful? It certainly sounded as though it was.

At the time, but the memory is already fading. And it was very much worth it to hold this little one in my arms. Thank you, Ansley; you're welcome, my duchess.

Only Ansley stood his ground, still holding Jannie's hand. you're stuck with me now.

So, he was there, by Jannie's side, when his son made his entrance into the world, squalling at the top of his lungs, a thick thatch of black hair covering his head.

The tears scalded Ansley's eyes and he blinked them back. It was done His heart hammered out an unsteady tattoo. He felt the same sort of exhilaration he experienced during a hunt' only it was grander, more humbling. He was swirling through a riot of emotions: joy, worry, the weight of burdens, the lightness of bliss.

I will. He smiled, brushed the hair off her brow. as soon as' now. Before the babe is born.

He glanced at her stomach, at the physician, at the midwife, at his mother, who merely nodded.

Releasing a strangled groan, Jannie squeezed his hand. please. I want him to carry your name. I want him to be yours. Or her. I don't care if it's a girl or a boy. I just want there to be no doubt that it is yours.

That I'm yours. That we're yours. right. Mother, get Lenny and send a servant for the clergyman. Hurry. yes, of course. His mother dashed from the room with all the vigor of a girl a third her age.

With all due respect, Your Grace, you'll need a special license, Dr. Alberts said.

I have it.

Jannie smiled at him then. I knew you would. You never leave anything to chance.

Not when it comes to you, Jannie Demure. Kneeling beside the bed, Ansley pressed a kiss to her hand. still, you couldn't have decided this a bit sooner?

Guilt. It's a bloody awful' Oh, oh, oh! She gripped his hand so tightly that he almost yelled as well.

As her scream once more echoed through the hallways, Ansley gripped the mantel to prevent himself from slamming his fist into it. What if he lost her?

Lost her? he thought. What a fool he was. He never had her.

something must be wrong, he said, gazing at the open door. Why wasn't his mother bringing him the news? Didn't she realize he'd sent for her so she would keep him informed?

Women died giving birth. He couldn't imagine the world without Jannie in it. Even if she no longer lived here after the babe was born, at least she existed elsewhere. That would be enough. Just to know she was somewhere.

Happy. Walking through fields with her child in tow.

Surely a dark-haired child, with her blue eyes.

He heard the patter of running feet and was halfway across the library when Lily dashed through the doorway. She gave a quick curtsy. your Grace, her ladyship is calling for you.

What the deuce is wrong? He was in the hallway before he'd finished asking the question, racing through the manor, up the stairs. He burst through the door into his bedchamber. Jannie was still abed, a mound visible beneath the sheets.

She was bathed in sweat, gasping. She held out her hand to him. Ansley, I'm so sorry.

Rushing over, he took it, squeezed it, touched her brow. He would willingly die to take this suffering from her.

Jannie...

I was wrong, so terribly, terribly wrong. I hurt you. I know I did.

It doesn't matter. I'll stand by you and the child. Just get this matter, this birth, over with. Be done with it. I will, but first, marry me.

Stunned by her words, the last he'd expected, he stared at her- pardon? marry me.

I believe I'm supposed to ask you.

you've already asked ...and I said no. Such a silly thing to do. I fell in love with you at Blackmon. I think Welford knew. I struggled with guilt. Then when he died, I thought I didn't deserve happiness. I didn't deserve you.

Jannie, sweetheart, I don't know anyone who deserves happiness more than you. marry me then.

Leaning up, he brushed his lips over hers. I love you, Jannie Demure, future Duchess of Ansley, with all my heart and soul. will I be enough for you?

You've been enough for me for a good ten months now, and a good part of that time was without all the benefits I shall enjoy as your husband. Fifty years should be no trouble at all. do I look too awful ...for my wedding?

Her face was damp, her hair plastered to her head. She appeared so incredibly tired. To say she looked awful would be a kindness because it was much worse. to me, you are always beautiful.

A commotion at the door drew his attention. His mother, Lenny, and the clergyman entered the room. you'd best make this quick, the physician said.

The babe's almost here.

It was quick. They exchanged vows, and when it came time for a ring, his mother pressed one against his palm.

Your father gave it to me on the day we married, she said, with tears in her eyes. it was always to be yours when you found your duchess. And she no longer had a need for it.

Ansley slipped it onto Jannie's finger. with this ring, I thee wed. I pronounce you man and we' Jannie screamed.

Out, the physician ordered. all the men are to leave this instant!

The clergyman finished the words to the ceremony as he was scrambling for the door, Lenny following quickly on his heels.

She couldn't, but she didn't resist when he pulled her to the water's edge.

Come into the water and I'll rub your back, and finger your little sweet slit. on, you don't half tempt me.

He drew her into the curve of his body. what would It take to tempt you all the way? She stared up at him. how can you want me? how can I not? You're the mother of my child, the center of my heart.

Before she could comment, as though expecting her refutation, he was guiding her toward the steps. Her bare toes touched the water first, and she nearly groaned with the thought of how wonderful it would be to completely submerge herself in the warmth. As she went deeper into the water, her nightdress billowed out around her, then sucked in close to her body.

The water was lapping at her breasts when Ansley began to lift her hem. you said I could still be clothed, she chastised him.

I can't see anything, and you'll be more comfortable if you shed the weight.

She didn't argue. The shadows in the water did prevent him from getting a good look at how cumbersome she'd become. Once she was divested of her nightdress, he moved around behind her and began to gently knead her back.

on, that is nice, she said, settling her head into the crook of his shoulder. There is something about the water that's very healing. Slowly, he turned her around and lowered his mouth to hers while his hands continued to roam over her. Everywhere. Everywhere.

-And-

She retumed the favor, skimming her fingers over him, wrapping them around him. He groaned low. on, you wicked girl.

how is it that you make me so comfortable with all this? because nothing between us should be forbidden.

Reaching up, she kissed him. She wanted him as she'd never wanted anything. She wanted' on. Oh. She pressed a hand to her side while pain swept through her.

He backed away. what is it? I'm not sure. I think ...I think I should return to the house. why?

I think it is time, Ansley. The baby. I think it is time.

He grabbed her hand. Jannie, marry me. Now. I'll send to the clergyman. Ansley, I can't.

Not like this.

He studied her for all a heartbeat, and she felt something shift between them. Something unwanted. Regretfully, she realized that she finally carried out what she had so long ago desired: to hurt him beyond imagining. But rather than solace, it yielded only pain.

He helped her out of the pool, but no warmth went with his touch. She found herself grieving once again.

Every time Jannie screamed, Ansley downed a glass of whiskey. It wasn't fair that he had the means to dull his pain while she didn't. What she'd felt in the pool was only the beginning. It took another day before her labor began in earnest. He'd at once sent for the physician and his mother. He didn't know why he thought she needed to be there. Lenny now sat with him in the library to wait.

Ansley wasn't even certain why he remained. He'd given everything to Jannie. Everything. And it had not been enough.

So, she was surprised one night when she awoke to find herself alone. She stroked her hand over the indentation where he'd been sleeping. The sheet was cool to her touch. He'd been gone a while, then.

She rolled out of bed, stretched to one side, then the other. Oh, her back was hurting. She needed Ansley to rub it. Strange, how she knew she had but to ask and he would comply. He gave her so much attention, more than she'd had in her entire life. It was as though he lived for moments with her.

She padded out of the room and into the hallway. The door to his bedchamber was open, but he wasn't there. Perhaps he'd grown hungry and was enjoying a late-night repast. But when she went to the kitchen, she found it empty. Then she remembered him saying that he often swam at night.

The grass was cool beneath her feet as she made her way to the building at the far side of the garden. She could barely believe that August was already here. The Season would be ending. She wondered who had become betrothed. It had been so long since she was in Rockville to enjoy the season that she didn't even miss it. Much better to spend the warmer months here, where the air was so fresh and she could move about so easily.

When she reached her destination, she hesitated. Would he dislike being disturbed? Or would you be welcome here? Welcome her, no doubt.

Opening the door, she stepped through it. The sultry warmth greeted her, coating her in dew. The light from lanterns battled the shadows, causing them to dance mysteriously between the walls. She stood there, watching his powerful muscles bunching and stretching as he sliced through the water. He was quite simply beautiful.

While she would be content whether this child was a girl or a boy, suddenly she very much wanted to have a child that resembled Ansley. Something in her heart twisted and turned. She'd been so afraid to acknowledge her feelings for this man. They filled her with guilt. They had ever since Blackmon.

She'd told herself that he called to only the physical in her, but they had been remarkably chaste since coming here, and still, he stirred within her dreams that she'd long denied herself. He reached the edge of the pool, turned-

And stopped, his gaze falling on her. He breathed heavily, the water lapping at his chest. Flicking his hair back, he began plowing through the water, walking toward her. interested in a midnight swim?

She laughed. no, I just woke up and you were gone. I don't know. My back was hurting. I just ...wanted to find you.

God, she was rambling. Whatever was wrong with her? Come. Get in the water. no, I ...I don't think it would be wise in my condition.

He started up the steps. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. on, me. She turned away.

You've seen me without clothes before, he said, and she heard the humor laced in his voice. Yes, but it is being a while. He wore trousers to bed. At least here. With her. He took her hand. join me in the pool, Jannie. I really don't think' good. I don't want you to think. I just want you to feel.

She laughed. Ansley, you must stop interrupting me. you can even keep your nightdress on. it'll weigh me down. then take it off.

Her screams sounded through the residence. Why did he have to feel them in the core of his being? Why couldn't he just ignore them?

why is it taking so damned long? he asked.

it is the way of it, my friend, Lenny replied. I must confess to being extremist grateful that I

don't has to listen to your mother going through this. she is happy with you, Lenny. I'm grateful for that.

And that you made an honest girl of her.

I would have long ago, but ...past loves, like mange, are sometimes hard to be rid of. Despite the circumstances, Ansley smiled.

I'd have thought you'd be married to Jannie by now, Lenny said. It is not my choice that I'm not. He wanted to claim this child as his with a furiousness that astounded him. But she wanted him to walk away, to honor a ridiculous agreement. He wanted the girl and the child' both as his. Openly, publicly. Mourning is damned. Etiquette be'

~*~

Be honest here, Jannie. Your unquestionable loyalty will prevent you from ever taking a lover; then why would you even suggest'; because there would be no guilt, and how, pray do tell, did you deduce that utter nonsense?

Because you don't fancy him at all, so-o it wouldn't be as though you were truly betraying me; you have gone daft. She headed for the door' Jannie? Please, don't go. Please, hear me out.

Stopping, she glanced over her shoulder to see his arm extended, his hand reaching for her in the shadows of the night. She could win any argument with him by simply leaving the room. It wasn't fair to him, and so they never argued. But this? This was preposterous.

Please, Jannie.

His voice was rough with his need for her to still be. Unfair. Unfair of him to compel her to stay, knowing guilt would eat at her if she walked away when he could not.

She was trembling with anger and disgust at his suggestion regarding Ansley, yet still, she cautiously made her way back to Welford. She clambered onto the bed, took his hand, and held it in her lap, her legs tucked beneath her. She refused to look at him, and instead studied the silhouette of their joined hands.

the fact that you think so little of him is what makes my plan so brilliant, he said quietly. it is not as though you will be truly betraying me. Your heart will still be mine.

Ansley has a reputation for being a marvelous lover', he began.

I am aware of that. He is all the women talk of, so-o, he can make it pleasant for you. He squeezed her hand. you deserve that at least.

All of Rockville will know it is not your child. That you've been cuckolded.

He will carry Demure blood. As I told Ansley, it will be close enough.

Her mouth tingled. She thought she was going to be ill. you've already discussed this madness with him? I had to know he was agreeable.

of course, he'd be agreeable. It is a skirt to lift.

His low chuckle took her by surprise. he was not quite so in favor of it as I'd expected. He did not think you would welcome him. I will not.

Jannie, you've been a devoted wife. Why should you not have this?

She was grateful for the dark, that he couldn't see the blush warming her cheeks or the tears filling her eyes.

He can give you what I cannot, he said softly. you are a young girl who has had to lock all her dreams in a musty old trunk, because of your husband's poor judgment.

In a friend. A friend to whom you would now give me. It is revolting.

He did not force the drink down my throat. I went willingly into the curricle, encouraged the horses to go faster'

She brought his hand to her lips, pressed a kiss to the backs of his fingers, knowing he would feel the dampness coating her cheeks, the tears gathering at the corners of her mouth. Am, Jannie.

He wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck and drew her down until her face was buried in the nook of his shoulder.

Do not ask this of me, she rasped.

I will not force you. Neither will he, but know that I will understand if you change your mind. You deserve a child. You deserve a man who will not only put your pleasure above his but will ensure that your enjoyment far exceeds his.

Not Ansley. Never Ansley. Sinners would have a need for overcoats in hell before she'd willingly give herself to the man, she despised more than any other.

8

Jannie slipped out of her husband's bed near dawn, leaving him in the company of his snores. She'd not slept well. Guilt had reared its ugly head, guilt that she'd lost his heir. Not that she knew for certain that the babe had been a boy. But in her heart, she couldn't help but think that he had been. Losing the child had been like losing a piece of her soul. And when the full extent of Welford's injuries had been made clear, all their dreams went astray.

'Oh, Goddess.' He murmured under her breath sending up prayer after prayer. The streets were full of people. The air was strangled with shouting, with crying. Prayers and pleas were being sent up to the Gods. Curses to the Gods. Despair and Panic ran deep in the air. The air shoaled of despair panic and loss.

'Put your veil on.' She scooted his horse closer to her own, helping her to hide all her black hair and most of her face. She ripped his shirt putting it to his nose. He did the same, the smoke was thick with the stench of burning hair and flesh. It made her stomach roll and try to rebel.

The sound of crumbling timber ripped over the roar of people startling His's horse. She barely noticed She take hold of her reigns. She didn't notice anything beyond the house before her crumbling in on itself. floor after floor until it hit the ground with a cracking thump. More people screamed around them.

'She...' He licked her lips, they were too dry. She felt as if she were baking 'What do we do? We can't do anything.'

She said nothing, just handed her back her reigns. His mouth opens as a shrill scream ripped through the air.

'HELP!' a dark figure ran from the smoke out of a burning house. 'Klever! Klever!' The words, a name, were said in a frantic voice.

'His!' She called after her. He was off her horse and running toward the small figure. She was taller than His but couldn't be so much older. It didn't matter, His took one look at the woman's desperate brown eyes and burned clothes and knew she had to help.

He came closer, slowly. The woman already shoaled of smoke and fear, like everything else. 'Can I help?'

'My son!'

His's heart sank. Don't let the boy still be in that house, don't let him be in these mad streets. There would be no telling how many people were trampled in this chaos.

'I thought- he ran out. He's still-' her eyes widen and looked up at the same moment two hands rested on His's shoulders. Then they were gone and a tall figure was running into the blazes that

were reducing the house before them into less than kindle. She opened her mouth for Sh e to bring his ass back to her side but she knew he wouldn't listen even if he could have heard her.

With her heart hammering in her throat for She's safety she turned to the frantic woman. 'What is your name?' He grabbed the woman's hand pulling her towards the horses and out of the street's main chaos.

'Flora.' She wouldn't take her eyes off the house.

Neither could Him but she had to ask, had to know. 'How did this happen?' It was more asked to herself but Flora spoke.

'The Unrest caused it.' Flora ducked her head away, her eyes darting frantically towards the house and back to His. His's muscled bunched, she was dead weary but she would stop this woman before she got herself killed.

'We aren't to speak of it.' Her voice got lower. 'It's treason but- there are bad things working here.'

'Such as?' He could hardly breathe. 'What bad things? Tell me, please?'

'The King has abandoned the throne and betrayed the Gods; our Lady has left ran off with a lover' Her body trembled. 'There is talk that the Gods...'

He didn't like the sound of this anymore. She had to know more. 'The Gods are a part of this?'

'They are angry with Mystery, they will forsake us until we accept the new-'

'New!' new what? King? Surely not. 'Who?'

'I know not.' Flora wouldn't meet her eye. Of course, she knew.

He looked around at all the screaming people. Not a single eye was dry, the smoke was working. Her own eyes were blurring with the stuff. That moment of wiping her eyes cost her. Flora moved and He was a moment behind her. A tightly coiled spring, tackling the racing mother to the ground. They rolled in the dirt. The mother let out a heart-breaking moan. His's heart was breaking for the woman but when she spoke her voice was one of steel.

'Don't be stupid.' His hissed at the whimpering woman. 'Run for that house again and I will bind you to my horse.'

'But...' the words died on Flora's lips. He wasn't joking. She was worried too. He hadn't come out yet, why hadn't she come back?

He hadn't been sleeping well on the road he refused to do more than take a quick nap and that was only when He bullied him. He had been pushing it to reach Median, but still. He should have been out by now.

The house on the other side of the one She rushed into caved. Floor by floor it stacked in on the next. Flora cried out but didn't move.

He couldn't take it. There had to be a way to stop all this. Stop Median from burning, this was her home now. Desperate His sought deep for her magic. She swore when she needed it, she would be able to use it. That it would return to her eventually. She needed it. There wasn't a promise she wouldn't make the Gods not to stop all of this.

Inside she recoiled. Don't promise that. Never promise something to a God, they might just take you up on your word. If you were really unfortunate, they would bind you to it. Gods are fickle and mortals are seen as expendable.

Still, He dug into herself, searching for a long-lost old friend. It was there, deep down but it ran through her. When she found it, they embraced in the furthest reaches of her mind, a place she would have never gone unless she was truly desperate. If she hadn't truly been looking for it, her magic would have stayed out of her reach for a while longer. Now that she had it back, washing over her, caressing her heart with the truth. It was so faint but it could be enough. He dared to hope.

She had no magic over elements. She wasn't a fool to think she could put this out with her own magic, she wasn't that strong. A whole troop of mages could possibly put out the blazes of a city. Not one woman with truth-teller magic.

Around her and in her head the chaos reign. He pushed it away, she had to be calm. Clear in the head. She wasn't a great Mage like Mican, her brother of the law, but she was a Truth Teller.

He bit her lip. It had worked miracles before, it could work again. His open her mouth, she was about to find out.

'A Great Fire is blazing in Median, my city.' her nose tickled with the truth. Her home was on fire. Blowing out a breath His continued. 'It shall die away ...now.'

A great gust of wind brought Him to her knees on top of Flora who was still sobbing. His shielded her against the roaring winds wishing the screaming around her was just a bad dream. It hadn't worked, the wind was going to blow the fire even further, out of the city limits and now He didn't even have her magic to protect her.

She hadn't felt it at first, not until she was lying on the ground over Flora gasping for a clean breath. She felt the ripping tearing through her gut and up into her chest with sharp hot pricks that had her eyes tearing up. It hurt! Dear Goddess, it hurt!

She hadn't hurt this bad since the last time she had overextended her magic in Krad.

Thumps echoed around her, pounding into her ears. Plop after plop, words rang through the air braking through His's haze.

'Goddess bless!' Someone shouted. 'Miracle!' Screamed another. His looked up, the sky was black and gray. Ashen, there was not a tinge of orange glow insight. Not a sight of pink or a spot of red.

There was no crackling to be heard in the dead of the silence taking over the city. A ghost had descended His thought before the roars rang in the air and into her ears.

'Momma!' He flew, onto the ground. 'Momma.' Flora was running toward a slight figure quickly advancing.

'Clever!' Mother and son clashed in an embrace. The child was young, His guess when she saw his feet leave the ground. No more than five winters. He was being rocked back and forth in his mother's arms both were crying. Hysterical yapping told Him there was puppy involved.

'Princess?' she had never been more pleased to hear that voice. 'What are you doing on the ground?'

Enjoying the shill of soot and dirt. He worked her mouth to say but nothing came out. She was too tired. 'I-' she did not have to finish, there were too many voices to be heard through.

'We are being blessed!' cried a man. 'Gods be praised.' they all yelled. He realized that the plopping she had heard was really the sound of bodies falling to their knees.

'Another attack-'

'What happens?' it took His a second to realize that she was being spoken to.

'I- what? 'she asked as he hauled her to her feet. He seemed bemused by the whole thing. Only He knew that really this had scared him shitless.

'His, was this you're doing?'

His snorted, why would she set Median ablaze?

'Did you put the fire out?' the world spun leaving Him to wish that he had left her on the ground where nothing had been moving.

'I-' She was not sure. He shook her head feeling stupid and muggy headed.

'That must be yes.' She hugged her tighter righting her veil. People around them were moving quickly now. He had a feeling that the temples would be busy tonight. All of them.

She must have been thinking along the same lines. He turned to the mother and son. 'You and yours need to head for the Mother Temple, take all that you need and value.' Looting would be heavy tonight. 'Go.' Flora was already nodding clutching her son who was strangling the puppy.

'Thank-' She waved her off. The three of them ran towards the direction of the temples without a backward glance.

'Now.' He adjusted Him again. 'Let us go.'

'Not to the palace.' He is words were slurred. She had not drunk since the night of her binding, not heavily at least. She should not sound like she was drunk. 'We can't-'

'Yes-' he persisted. 'We ca-'

'No!' He clutched his sleeve. The thought of stepping foot back in those walls tonight made her skin crawl. Something was happening, they needed to find out exactly what before they barged back into the palace.

She looked down at her fist clutching his sleeve. Couldn't he see how worried she was? Terrified was more like it. 'All right.' he finally gave in. 'Okay, we'll go to the Guild.'

He let out a sigh and slump. She did not remember falling but she knew that She was there to catch her.

But for him to believe that she would welcome into her bed the man responsible- it was beyond the pale. Reviling. Made her sick at heart. She was grateful that she had far too many other things to occupy her mind today as she prepared for the arrival of her guests. The sooner she got started working on what needed to be done, the sooner she could shove these unsettling thoughts from her mind.

She rang for her house cleaner, Lily. Within the hour, Jannie was dressed in a simple lilac dress so she could move about quickly. At noon, she would change into something more proper for receiving her guests. Once a yearly event, they'd not hosted a hunt since the accident. She'd feared it would serve as both a distraction from what might have been and a reminder of what had been. But Welford insisted it was long past time that they begin to socialize once more. Finally embracing the notion, she had high expectations for uncharacteristic normalcy for a few days.

An expectation that splattered before her when she strode into the breakfast dining room and saw Ansley already seated at the table. She'd assumed he would sleep in, not be up with the sun.

Ansley at once set aside his teacup and rose to his feet- lady Welford.

...Your Grace. I hope you're well; your hopes do not concern me, your elegance.

She thought she noticed a tautening in his jaw. She was not usually a termagant, but for him, she was more than willing to make an exception.

Allow me to express my appreciation for the lovely accommodations, he said laconically.

It seemed they would spar with words this morning.

Already she was weary of it.

Welford would be upset with her if he knew she'd given his exalted guest the smallest bedchamber in the farthest corner of the manor. As a King, he should have been given a suite of rooms. She suddenly, against her will, felt petty. we have so many guests arriving' no need to explain. I enjoy overlooking the stables.

She wanted the subject changed before she offered him a more accommodating room. I'd not expected you to be about so early. I thought I might be of service.

Had she been eating she would have choked. here? Now? Your arrogant cad! To think that I would accept anything at all from you, but especially-'

My help with the hounds? He interrupted. yes, of course. Forgive me. I'm sure your huntsman is quite up to the task of seeing that all is ready tomorrow for the hunt.

She went light-headed and chilled, aware of all the blood draining from her face. He'd been offering to help her prepare for her guests. That was the service to which he alluded. Not bedding her, not getting her with the child. Welford had put these silly notions into her head and she seemed unable to rid herself of them.

Yes, he is. Quiet. She hated that her voice sounded unsteady, that she was unnerved by what she'd interpreted him to be saying. She swept over to the sideboard, striving to stop the trembling in her hands as she selected ham, eggs, and a muffin for her plate.

Drat, it! He was waiting to aid her with her chair when she turned around. At least he had the grace to put her at the end of the table farthest from where he was seated. He'd not taken the head of the table, but rather, a chair along the side.

I want nothing from you, she whispered as she took the chair he offered.

He leaned in, filling her nostrils with his rich, tangy scent of bergamot and clove. then nothing you shall have, he said, his voice low, sensually belying the words he'd spoken, indicating instead that she would have it all. Everything.

~*~

The man was indeed an expert at seduction, but she would not be seduced. She and Ansley sat without speaking for several interminable minutes, the only sound the scraping of silver over china.

Finally, she dared to peer up at him, only to find his gaze homed in on her as he slowly chewed. He was as handsome as the devil, too beautiful, really. He had one imperfection, and it was presently not visible to her. A scar on his jaw. The wound had still been bleeding when he came to tell her there had been an accident and Welford was horribly injured. Ansley had reeked of excesses and

indulgences ...and the coppery scent of blood. Her husband's blood had stained his torn and rumpled clothing.

Ansley had looked scared that night. And young. It was easy to forget that he was only a little older than her. He had always seemed so mature, in control. Many thought he was the oldest of the three brothers, but in fact, he was the youngest. The night she first met him, she was struck by his stylishness and confidence. She knew of his reputation, of course. Women swooned at his feet. Of late there seemed to be an inordinate abundance of unmarried women, as women refrained from accepting offers of marriage on the off chance that Ansley would honor one of them by asking for her hand. With his thick black hair and startling green eyes, he was a god among mere mortals. Jannie despised him with every breath of her being.

His Grace took the marquees fishing. He tested his fishing line before testing other waters. you mentioned your ridiculous notion to Jannie.

He saw no need to further clarify. Only one ridiculous notion had been spouted since his arrival. In truth, it was the only ridiculous notion he could recall that Welford had ever had. When only silence greeted his words, Ansley gazed back at him once again.

Welford gave a hapless shrug that unbalanced him. He started to list to one side, released his hold on his pole to straighten himself.

Ansley looked back at the water, giving his friend the opportunity to grapple with his gracelessness in private. His first inclination was to rush over to assist him, but he knew Welford would resent the interference, the implication that he couldn't attend to his own needs' even if in many areas, he couldn't. Like himself, his friend was a proud man, probably too proud for his own good. He didn't want to consider what it had cost Welford to ask him to get his wife with child. He wasn't certain he'd be willing to pay the price, no matter how much he loved the girl.

You had the right of it, Welford eventually said, sounding winded, as though he'd run a great distance. she was none too happy with me. Afraid that leaves it up to you, old chum.

Ansley swung around. pardon?

You'll need to charm her, wear down her resistance to the idea.

You have gone mad. His voice held a biting edge. Welford might find all of this amusing; Ansley did not. He remembered the chill that entered the breakfast room with her. But more, he remembered the tantalizing scent of her as he aided her with her chair. Jasmine. Exotic. Enticing. Her flawless skin beguiled him. He'd been so tempted to slide a finger along the column of her throat. He'd wanted to kiss away the firm set of her lips. The last thing he wanted was for Welford to grant him permission to seduce his wife. He suspected Welford had no clue regarding how much Ansley would enjoy doing so. Welford might view it all as an uncomplicated transaction, but Ansley viewed it as a quick journey directly into hell.

No matter how short a term he spent with any girl, he shared not only the physical but the emotional as well. Warmth, caring, concern, enjoyment. The love he held in reserve. He wasn't certain he could withhold that elusive emotion from Jannie. She struck him as a girl who would demand all' even if she came to him expecting naught but his seed. Time with her would not be simple. Complications abounded. He was certain of it.

You are on the verge of having a hundred guests, he said now, and you wish me to flirt with your wife?

not openly. I'm not daft. But surely you can arrange moments alone with her. You've done it with other women.

Your wife is no other woman. He was surprised by the roughness in his voice. He turned his attention back to the stream. Leaves were drifting to the ground on the slight breeze. Those killed by the advance of winter. He wondered if Jannie's frigid mien toward him would kill him. Quite possibly.

Pity both your brothers are married, Welford said. I doubt either of them would lack the courage'

Courage has nothing to do with it! Ansley snapped. Although it did. He feared he could easily

lose his heart. But he couldn't confess that to Welford. it is simply a bad idea on so many levels, and I believe you and I have already reached our quota for bad ideas.

I did have a jolly good time of it that night, Ansley. Until the end, of course. How are my jewels?

His pet name for the girls he loved. Glancing back, Ansley met his friend's gaze. well taken care of.

I've thought about telling Jannie.'

Good God, I can't remember the last time I felt such ...freedom, Welford announced.

Standing along the bank of the stream, Ansley glanced over at Welford. With his back against the tree where he sat, and a pole held loosely between his hands, he appeared to be at peace. Since the accident, whenever Ansley visited his friend, they'd stayed in Welford's library, drinking, conversing, lamenting their poor choices. Like Ansley, Welford was an outdoors person at heart. Ansley had been decided that their visit would go differently this time. It helped immensely that Jannie had been occupied preparing for the arrival of guests and attending to last-minute details. Ansley knew she'd have not approved of his plans. From what he'd say, she was too protective of Welford, coddled him.

Suddenly, Ansley wondered if part of Welford's desire to give his wife a child rested with his need to divert much of her attention away from him, to give her something else to worry over.

A child would certainly carry out that. Although most children of the nobility were tended to by nannies and child caretakers, Ansley couldn't quite see Jannie relinquishing the reins for any great length of time. She would be involved with the child. It was her nature to protect, to nurture, to ease the way. She would no doubt keep the little pup far away from him' whether he was the father. He wondered who was second on Welford's diabolical list.

He remembered her bright red cheeks during breakfast. He was accustomed to her giving him a cold shoulder, always just shy of a cut direct. But this morning she'd been skittish, more uncomfortable with him than usual. For a moment, when she saw him sitting at the table, it looked as though she intended to march from the room. His accommodations were deplorable. That much he'd anticipated. But her gaze flicking over him and not settling with a glare was unexpected.

Setting down her napkin, she pushed back her chair and rose. we are very different, you and me. We do not suit at all. I would trade places with him in an instant to spare him all he suffers now' even though I did not cause the suffering that is visited upon him.

He wiped his mouth with his napkin, elegance in his motions, tempered with masculinity. His large hands held power. His sensual mouth as well.

She could imagine him skillfully using both to elicit pleasure. He seemed to hesitate before saying, Wilford appears ... frailer since last I saw him.

He is limited to two activities. Sitting and lying. Neither of which is very active. His muscles atrophy. I fear soon nothing will be left of him. She bit the inside of her cheek. She'd not meant to reveal the last, to give him even a hint of her vulnerability.

It terrified her to think of a life without Welford. Even as he was, she decided, was better than not having him at all. She shored up her resolve, decided to hurt this man who had destroyed so much. tell me, Your Grace, does the guilt ever hammer at you enough that you would wish to trade places with him? I would give my soul that he was not crippled. But I must confess to being far too selfish to wish to trade places with him.

Ansley flinched, the lash of her words hitting home. As she turned and swept from the room, she wondered why she found no satisfaction in the triumph.

Four hours later, Jannie cursed herself for her stubbornness, for not accepting Ansley's offer to help. She'd forgotten how much was involved in preparing for the hunt and the arrival of guests. Sixty invitations had been sent out. Fifty-eight had been accepted.

Including spouses, unmarried sons and daughters, more than a hundred people would soon descend upon her quiet country home. It had been so long, so very long since they'd entertained to this size. An occasional guest for dinner, a relation or two, but not a flock of the curious. In equal measure, she dreaded and welcomed the coming days.

Hence the reason Welford had declared that it was past time for a hunt' even though he'd not be able to take part in what was once his fondest sport. I shall enjoy listening to the baying of the hounds once again, he'd said.

She made her way up the stairs to her husband's bedchamber, hoping he'd been roused already. It took so long for Randall to prepare him for the day. Welford had lost far too much control over his bodily functions. Four times a year Randall took him to the spa at Harrogate for the healing waters.

Although Jannie had always wanted to go with him, Welford asked her not to' fearful she would be embarrassed by his limitations. It hurt her that he would think so poorly of her. But she brushed her tender feelings aside because his challenges were so much more difficult to face. It was only recently' when his physician introduced him to a contraption known as a catheter' that Welford had begun to regain his confidence and felt any comfort in being around others. He was now spared public embarrassment over what he could no longer control. Such a proud man he was.

She admired his optimistic outlook; he never seemed to pity himself. She hoped the entertainments and country party she'd arranged would please him and bring him great joy' and that none of their guests would stare at him with questioning eyes. How bad is it really, Welford?

Her heart would break for him if all did not go well.

Randall shot to his feet and bowed. My girl- forgive me. His lordship gave me leave to read one of his books. I thought this one might suffice, and sat for only a moment'

I don't give a fig where you sit and read. Where is his lordship?

He looked decidedly uncomfortable, as though he knew she wouldn't be pleased with his answer. She wasn't.

To her surprise, he was not in his bedchamber. The library, then. Ready and eager to greet those who would soon be arriving. To her consternation, however, the library was empty of his presence as well. Although Randall was sitting in a chair reading.

where is his lordship? Jannie demanded.

She grabbed his hair, yanked, and pulled him closer as he had told her to do. He thrust one finger inside her, crooking it and hitting her in the spot that turned her moans into one long, high-pitched orgasm. She shuddered against him, her legs quaking, and when he finally slowed to look up at

her, he saw her hair was a wild tumble, and her face was glowing. At first, he made no motion. His sex was quivering, and he was tormented with desire... Marianne grew desperate.

She pushed his hand away, took his sex into her mouth again, and with her two hands, she encircled his sexual parts, caressed him, and absorbed him until he came. He leaned over with gratitude, tenderness, and murmured, 'You are the first woman, the first woman, the first girl...' When she saw that he was dissolved with pleasure, she stopped, divining that perhaps if she deprived him now, he might make a gesture towards fulfillment. He drove his tongue inside her, setting off another shattering moan that was music to his ears.

She was quite an instrument to play, so finely tuned, and if he touched her right, she made the most glorious sounds, raw, intense, delicious noises of pleasure as he plundered her with his tongue. Then his hands came to life. He went as if to rub his wrists, then he reached for the blindfold, his fingers dancing right in front of it without touching it, and then he reached out for me.

I jumped... some- He caught me by the arms, wrapping his fingers all the way around them and bringing me forward. And then he realized I was naked, and he felt my sides and my breasts, giving a little startled noise. Besides, before I could stop him, he had pulled me to him, forcing me against his chest.

His manhood was thumping against my sex, and he kissed me in that shocking way and I realized he had lifted me off my feet. 'You are mine,' he grunts out, pumping into me, the length and level of his arousal brutal. 'Mine,' he swears, as he releases my mouth and turns me around, pushing me forward as he yanks my legs back, one hand hard on my back, the other gripping my ass. He does not slow the movement, giving me full, hard thrusts, my breasts bouncing from the top of my dress, the mirror above the sink giving me a full view of my sweet young girl, in worn dress, light hair mussed, mouth open, intensity over his face. His reflection pulls at my hair, tilting my head back, and I find his eyes on mine in the mirror.

11

I fear she is not at home, Your Grace, the butler said.

Ansley stilled. not at home to me, you mean? I will see her if I must find her myself.

The butler cleared his throat. she left for Herndon

Hall this afternoon.

With a sound curse, Ansley headed out the door.

The carriage had come to a halt sometime earlier. Jannie didn't know the exact hour. She knew only that darkness had fallen, rain poured down, and a footman stood ready with an umbrella should she decide to disembark. She sent her house cleaner in as soon as they arrived. Yet despite the dampness and chill seeping into her bones, she couldn't bring herself to leave the confines of the carriage.

The door clicked open. She didn't know why she wasn't surprised to see Ansley climb inside and take the bench opposite her.

What the bloody hell are you doing, Jannie? how did you know I was here?

I made a call at your residence. Fairly killed my horse to catch up to you. Did you think I would let you run off without coming after you?

I wasn't running off. I' She had been running away. She looked out the window toward the residence. I can't bring myself to go in. It wasn't quite as difficult in Rockville because we hadn't been there in so long, not since the accident. But here, for more than three years, it was everything. And everything was a lie. Jannie'

I had to leave Rockville, Ansley. I feel as though I'm suffocating there. You, your mother, the woman, Cousin Green' I have no peace. I can't think, I can't breathe. I know so many people mean well. She released a wry laugh. some do not. I thought if I came here, I could at least breathe. But I can‘t seem to leave the carriage. I don't know what I was thinking.

It was not my intent to suffocate you, Jannie. But I promised Welford that I would ... care for you. Come to Grant wood Manor, Jannie. You will be away from the madness that is Rockville. You can heal in spirit. Give birth to your child. Return here when you are ready.

She felt the tears sting her eyes. He was not going to pressure her to marry him. It was both a relief and a disappointment. yes. I think I should like that very much.

It was late when they arrived at Grant wood Manor the following night. Here the only black crepe to be seen was what she wore. Here the clocks tick-tucked. She felt a lifting of her spirits that

astounded her. She'd not realized how much she needed to get away from the oppressiveness of both the Rockville residence and Herndon Hall.

Ansley had been the perfect man on the journey here. He'd regaled her with tales of his youth, the history of his ancestors. They'd spoken of nothing intimate. Yet there was a sense of intimacy. It was simply his way' with his silken voice and his gaze never straying from her. She told herself it was because he was always in the mode of the seducer. A habit formed during years of frequenting bedchambers. His reputation surpassed that of his brothers. Did he truly believe he could give it all up for her? Did she?

She wanted to as Ansley led her up the stairs, but then the reality of the situation came crashing around her as he opened the door to the bedchamber beside his. She was certain it had never occurred to him that she would sleep anywhere except within easy reach. I should sleep at the end of the hall, she said. He shrugged. select whichever room you want.

She didn't want the room she'd had before. She didn't want the room where Welford had slept. To move to another wing would be ludicrous. Strolling down the hallway, she considered every other room. None was as big as the one he offered her. None was as inviting. She would be here until she gave birth. Her back had begun to ache on the journey, and she'd been quite miserable. She reached the end of the hallway, pivoted, and returned to the door he'd first opened for her. I suppose this one shall do. But you are not to use the door between the bedchambers. I would not dream of it. that is a lie. I suspect you were dreaming of it on the way here. a small lie. Is it my fault that I find you irresistible?

He was such a charmer, always knew the right thing to say. She wished she could trust his words. Ansley, do not woo me with false flattery. one day, Jannie, I shall convince you that I've never given you false words.

She opened her mouth to remind him' omission is not false words. it is still a falsehood. He shook his head.

Would you care for a late-night repast before bed? he asked.

Yes, thank you.

While the servants hauled up her trunks and put away her belongings, she joined Ansley in the smaller dining room at a table with only four chairs. She sat across from him while the simple fare was laid out before them. She popped a square of cheese into her mouth and followed it with a grape.

I suspect many mothers will be disappointed that you're not in Rockville for the Season, she said.

They would be more disappointed if I were there and not paying attention to their daughters. you might be surprised. Someone might catch your fancy.

He lifted his wineglass. someone already has. As you well know. I am in mourning, she reminded him exasperatingly.

She watched his jaw clench just before he gulped down more wine. I'm aware of that. Just don't expects me to be too jolly about it.

She wanted to change the subject. you and your brothers grew up here, didn't you? Yes. Mother preferred Glenwood Manor to Lyons Place.

Of late, however, we've been gathering for Christmas at

Lyons Place. Claire has made it a true home for Westcliffe. your residence already feels like a home. not when I'm here alone. It is too blasted quiet.

The prospect of silence was what had driven her away from Rockville and Herndon Hall. She didn't want to be alone with her thoughts.

He'd been devoted to her during their month at Blackmon, but then she'd given him everything.

They'd lived in a bubble, but now the bubble had burst. She had no doubt that in time he would grow weary of her.

Then she would face the challenges of raising her child alone.

Following dinner, Ansley tried to convince her to join him in the library for a bit of reading, but she retired to her room. He went to the library, but rather than grab a book, he grabbed the bottle of whiskey and headed for the garden.

Trekking beyond the house, beyond the lighted path, he reached an area blanketed in darkness except for the glow of stars and moon. He sat on the grass, opened the whiskey, and took a long draught, relishing the burning and the penetrating warmth.

Jannie was correct, blast her. He'd gone into this situation knowing he could never recognize this child. It did not stop him from wanting to nor did it prevents him from wanting her, but his desires were ill-timed. She needed to heal. This child would be born. Welford would be recorded as its father. Ansley would do all that he could to protect it.

Stretching out on his back on the cool ground, he stared at the stars. Their distance made them more appealing. Jannie said she was suffocating. He brought her here to breathe. By God, he would give her room to breathe.

Sitting by the window in her bedchamber, Jannie did not want to admit that she had enjoyed sharing dinner with Ansley. Even when they did not speak, it was a comfort to have him near. But was that enough?

She nearly leaped out of her skin when he came bursting into the room. Come along. I have something marvelous to show you, he announced. But I'm in my bedclothes. It doesn't matter. There is no one to see.

He ducked into a bedchamber across the hallway and emerged with an arm filled with blankets. His excitement was contagious.

What is it, Ansley? you must see it to believe it.

He led her through the manor. Once outside, he said, grab my arm. Don't let go.

She curled her fingers around his arm and allowed him to lead her through the garden, away from the house, the lights. we should have the torches lit. Nope, they'll interfere.

He came to a stop. She watched as his silhouette, limned by moonlight, arranged the blankets on the ground. Then he took her hand, drew her down until she was lying on the blanket, gazing at the stars. She saw one sweeping across the sky, followed quickly by another, then another.

She released a small laugh. what's happening?

I don't know, but I've seen it before. It is as though the stars are racing across the sky. do you think we're only allowed one wish? I think you can have as many as you want.

She studied the sky. So many things to wish for. That she would have met Ansley before Welford. But what guarantee did she have that he'd be any more faithful? That she'd not had a month with Ansley that caused her to doubt her affections for Welford. But then she would not have a child.

Is it wrong that I'm glad to be here? she asked, not certain why the words burst forth.is it wrong that I'm glad you're here? It was so much easier talking to the stars.

I was not such a good wife. She'd thought saying the words would ease the burden of the guilt. It had been with her ever since she left Blackmon. Her greatest fear was that somehow Welford had known how she'd felt, that somehow the knowledge led to his decline.

You were an exceptional wife. you were a much better friend to him than I. Not such a good friend. I fell in love with his wife.

He rose onto his elbow and cradled her face. I fell in love with you while we were at Blackmon, he admitted.

With a sad smile, she shook her head. it was lovely while we were there, but it was only fantasy.

We had no responsibilities. It wasn't real. for me, it was extremist real.

Because, it mostly involved the bedchamber, and that is where you spend a great deal of your life.

Not so much as you might think. I've been with no girl since you. She hardly knew what to say.

I was going to take a lover, he confessed. but I could never work up any sort of enthusiasm for the search. Then I decided to take a wife, but no girl appealed to me. I finally realized why. None of them were you. I love you, Jannie.

This time, the words spoken with such intensity, resonated through her heart and soul.

I have from the moment I met you, he continued. not deeply of course, at first. But there was a spark, a twisting of my heart, and I regretted that I'd not met you before Welford. I thought if I had ...that you would have become mine. Ansley, please don't does this.

I know the timing could not be worse. You are far along with child' my child. A child I want to recognize as mine. Marry me, Jannie.

He'd asked before, but she'd not taken it seriously. Now his declarations and insistence terrified her. it would be scandalous. We've been scandalous before. It did not turn out so poorly. He splayed his fingers across her belly. I want to claim this child as mine. That is what I wish whenever I see a star fall. That you and this child will be mine, and all of Rockville will know it. She skimmed her fingers up through his thick hair. you ask so much of me, she said.

He pressed a kiss to her temple, to her forehead, to her other temple. just consider the possibility. I truly consider it. That is all I ask.

He settled his mouth firmly over hers, taking possession as though he owned it. She let him. She welcomed him. It was more than she remembered. Perhaps because this time it wasn't the forbidden taking place in the shadows of a terrace or a good-bye that nearly tore her heart from her chest.

It was a tentative beginning, a starting over. Something they'd truly never had. Always before the scepter of scandal and the whisper of betrayal had loomed over them like black thunderclouds rolling over the lake on a winter evening.

She knew that tonight it would go no further than this: an exploring of heated mouths, soft groans, and low moans. She was not ready for more than this. Her emotions were too raw. But she took what he offered, allowed it to fill a well that had gone dry. She had longed for so much more than what Welford could give her. And what he withheld from her had nothing to do with his paralyzed body. She knew that now.

He had always given the better part of himself to Madeline Black, while she received the crumbs. She deserved more. She deserved everything.

From the first Ansley, had given it to her, had never held back, had always taken her needs into consideration and placed them above his own. But it wasn't the real world. It was a secluded place where they had frolicked.

Drawing back, Ansley sipped at the corner of her mouth, then pressed his forehead against hers. Jannie, let me sleep with you tonight. To hold you. Nothing more. yes, she whispered.

Lifting his head, he gazed down on her. wishing upon stars seems to work. I want to come to know the real King of Ansley.

His smile flashed in the moonlight. you already do, sweetheart.

Over his shoulder, she saw a star shoot through the sky and made a wish. Forgive me, Welford.

12

There were few guards, He walked past the first gate without trouble. It did not mean anything, the Median palace had two gates that lead in and out. As she went, He made sure to pay extra attention to the path she took from the time she left the Guild walls.

It had been worse than she remembered. There had to have been a lot of magic to build a fire that big. It did not feel right even now, it had eaten everything too thoroughly, too quickly. As though it was driven. In places the only thing she had seen to tell her there had been homes there were the char marks lining the house borders.

So many homes-they had been burned to the ground. How many people had been in them?

Every occasionally, she had seen someone, the never dawdle in fact their eyes never left the ground. They were like a ghost, no more than a faint shadow upon sight and gone in the bat of an eye. He had nodded to a ghost that had not to disappear and watched as his near about died.

The closer she got to the last gate the fainter the traces of smoke and fog stay. Everything seemed untouched, from the palace wall to the palace itself. He walked up to the gates preparing to enter.

'Halt!' He slowed down but did not stop. 'In the King's name halt!' She did not, not until she was across the threshold of the last gate and insight of the palace walls and a sword blocked any further movement. She turned to the man, guard, knight, who stopped her.

'What are you doing?' She asked him. 'I am not trespassing.'

'I am not to let you pass today, no one is allowed inside.'

Her brows furrowed. He was dressed in a full guard uniform. He bet he was newly knighted. he looked young. A little younger than her. The mystery had few knights, unlike Ask who had armies of them. He stepped away letting him see her attire waiting for him to recognize what she posed as.

'Dancer-'

'He.' she winced, it was time to stop being so earnest and honest. 'No need for titles'

He ducked his head, eyes roaming over the grounds before grabbing her arm.

'Oy!' He yelled yanking to get free. 'Unhand me don't you know who I am?'

He gave her a dark look still pulling her for the shadows of the gate.

'No, I don't know who you are and that isn't important. It is what you are that concerns me.'

'You have something against dancers?'

'No, I do not. It is a bad omen for harm to come to a Dancer. That is why I am warning you to leave.'

He stared; she was so sure he was going to try something after pulling her into the shadows. Not warn her. 'I-'

'It is a curse to harm one of God's own.' he went on 'I will warn you.'

He leaned in closer. 'Warn me of what?'

'To leave.' he was solemn.

'Why would I do that?' he could have been teasing but his expression told her that he was not.

'Median is my home.'

'Your home would do you harm, it is better to leave.' he spat out the words in distaste. He felt his arms shake; she could practically shell his own barely had feared. Her mouth went dry.

'What is happening here?' she whispered not wanting to be seen or heard any longer. Not if what he said was true. 'In- in the streets, they were ablaze. The Guild sent me here for answers.'

His grip tightens. 'All you need know is that you are no longer safe here, none of you are.'

'Why?'

'I do not know.' he lied, she felt it.

'Is it because of something going on within the palace?' What else could it be?

He would no longer meet her eye and He knew she had hit the center target. 'I know not.' he lied again.

'The University did nothing to stop that fire.' He murmured to him knowing that if he felt like it, he could very well charge her for treason for her words. 'Did they have something to do with it?'

'Again, I know not.' he lied again.

'You are hurting me.' His hold slackens but did not release.

'I hope nothing in the palace was destroyed or came to harm...' her shoulders rolled. 'I need to speak with the king now.'

'No.' she yelped as his grip tighten. 'You don't want to speak with him little Dancer.' she understood. Danger.

'The Queen is fine as well.'

'I cannot permit it.'

'Why not?'

'Because neither are in those walls.'

'Then who is in charge?'

'A good question I wish I knew the answer too. You do not want to speak to any of them.'

Interesting. He nodded. 'All right.' She pulled away and he let her go.

'you will leave here now. Don't come back until things get better.' He nodded and began to walk away, out of the shadows into the light. She walked through the gates, the second than the first. She did not stop there, once she was out of the gates, she broke into a run not stopping until the palace became little more than a faint overcasting shadow and her chest burned with fire.

He was ready to head back to safety, back to the Guild and to- her. She wanted nothing more than to feel She's warm embrace around her, telling her everything was going to be okay or better yet wake her up from this nightmare but it would not happen. That and she had one more stop to make.

The temple was really a district, a section of the city dedicated to the Gods. His hands never set foot here and never planned on it. The closer she got the better at picking them out she became. The temples stood tall, proud and immovable as the deep earth where a stone was buried.

A tall temple stood behind the rest, taller and grander than the six around it. That was the Mother temple. Where the Goddess was worshipped. Beside that pyramid stood one just as grand though shorter and more forlorn. He knew it was the temple of Gareth God of the Dead, he always stood at her right. The position a lover took the Mother and Gareth have been lovers since the beginning of time. They had five children whose temples surrounded their parents.

Dorn, he was one for prosperity and favored Door and Dorian born. I said that he gave birth to the Dorian people. Dorn was rarely worshipped outside of Dor. He was even disliked for his favoritism. His sisters Zeera and Tee lit were preferred to their brothers and another sister. Zeera and Tee lit were twins one of fire, Zeera. The other was the Goddess of water, Tee lit. They were so different yet- they were never able to stay without each other of long. The twins sat to the right at the temple at the feet of

their father. Barb oden was the hunter, I gave his temple a quick once over. He was his mother's son and dislike by her lover.

He quickly passed the last temple. The last child of the Mother and Dark God was the one no one spoke about. Out of them all, she was the most feared and revered. Ucceith was the messenger of the Dark God, she and her maidens and hags went around collecting the souls of the dead taking them to one of the seven resting realms.

He headed for the Goddess's temple. It was everything that she had expected and yet worse than she had feared. Bodies sat, lay, they filled the streets lining them. Most seem all right, soot and dirt-covered but unharmed. The air smelled of smoke and human bodies. Some were crying, quietly, most were praying. Priestess and Priest moved around where they could be giving what they could. He turned away toward the other temple. The temple of the Dark God was not where she had planned to go but it felt necessary.

The stone was cold under her feet when she entered. It all slammed into her to be choked down. The shell of burnt flesh and hair. Death tried to suffocate her as she moved inward. He flagged down the first priestess she met. An older middle-age woman carrying linen and a haggard worried look. She had not slept for a while. He is fingers curled around her arm.

'What your turn.' she was too tired to put a bite in her voice.

He studied her a moment longer before opening her mouth. 'I'm not here for help. I am here to help. What can I do?'

'He.' Rue's voice called her but she could not look up from the stitch she had to finish before the numbing cream worn off. They had wheedled out of her that she knew more than a little of healing and set her to work treating and binding wounds. 'He.'

'I am almost done.' He finished the last stitch before tying it up. 'now what-'

Her breath caught in her chest as they stalked toward her. He got to her feet stumbling into Rue.

'He!' Honor came forward wrapping an arm around her friend. Alec prowled through the small row of bodies, a low growl emanating from his throat. He did not butt her and purr, he just growled, at her!

'Bad kit.' he told her. 'bad!'

'thank you, sister.' Honor nodded to Rue hauling He toward the exit. 'we will take care of her.' If Rue was going to protest one look from Alec stopped her as he brought up the rear leading the two women out into the night air.

He sways all the way home; she had not even realized how late it had gotten. Or how much her feet ache. A lot.

Her fingers felt swollen and numb from all the numbing cream she had used for doing stitches.

there had been a lot of gashes, twice that many burns. All of them moaned and talked to her while she worked. Those who slept were talked to by worried family.

~*~

'He!'

The children had been worse. They cried and had nightmares, some of them did not have family around them. They were by far the worse.

'He?' there had been nothing to judge them by but their faces and that did not speak of much more than pain.

A roll of thunder echo around them. He blinked. When had they made it back to her room?

'While you were in La-de -la land.' Honor answered her unspoken question.

'Did you enjoy yourself?' Lily came to stand by her mate while tapping a dainty foot. He stepped away from the dangerous glint in her eye.

'-I-'

'I hope so because we sure had a blast. Do you have any idea how much fun it is to reassure two whining men over and over that you are all right and fraught their attempts to come after you!' He turned to Alec. He leaned on her knee low growls still rising from him. She felt it then, a more unnerving brooding gaze burning through the side of her face. 'Her?' she turned to the room entrance w here she

knew he would be. Unsurprised to find him there, her mouth pressed into a line shriveling up under his glare.

She had seen him angry before but not murderous, not murderously intent on her alone. 'Her? I-' there was only one word to say that would make this right. It was the hardest word she had ever known. 'I'm sorry for worrying you.' She held out her hand to Alec as a peace offering. 'Forgive me?'

'I forgive you.' Alec butted her leg. 'Never again. Good kits don't do that.' She would have told him she would try not to if he had made it a question. He let it go. Turning to the last hostile stare in the room. He took in a deep breath.

Then there was one. She leaned against the wall, arms crossed and relaxed. His whole frame was relaxed and lazy. His face betrays everything, He knew just how angry he was. 'I'm sorry.' she offered to extend a hand to him. He did not look at it. 'I just meant to do a little stop and then I-' she had seen all the children. Rue had told her what was needed and she got swept up in her work. She had done what she could but there was still so much more.

Honestly, how was she supposed to know the sun had sunken down into the ground. 'You shouldn't have worried.' He continued.

'He don't-'

'I'm fine.' she announced to them all. Plopping back against the bedpost. Lily winced, Honor just knocked her forehead into her palm, repeatedly. What was wrong with them?

'No.' The voice to answer was chilling and cool. He shuddered. 'You're not.' He stared as She transformed into a moving, living thing instead of a glowering statue. 'You would do it repeatedly until we found you.'

He clicked her tongue not bothering to disagree. He was right. 'So, here is what is going to happen, Princess, for your misdoings-'

'What!' He jumped up indignant. 'I didn't do anything wrong!' She sways on her feet but stayed vertical.

'No, but you did something very stupid.' He went on coming nearer.

'Bad Kit.' Alec brushed her knee. 'you are naughty for scaring us.' He glared down at the little traitor. When Lily and Honor made no move to interfere on her behalf, He backed away from the boys she adored. The back of her knees bumped into the bed. She glared at the two of them.

'You wouldn't.' She told them flatly crossing her arms. Putting more conviction into her tone. 'You. Would. Not. Dare.' To her horror, she came to find out that not only would they, but they also did.

When they returned to the house, he followed her into her bedchamber. She clambered onto the bed, then watched, mesmerized, as he removed his jacket and waistcoat. He didn't even bother to look in the direction that he tossed them, but they landed with unerring accuracy on the chair anyway, and she wondered how often he'd followed those same motions. His movements were fluid, confident. He sauntered over to the bed, sat on the edge, and placed her bare feet on his lap. Slowly, he kneaded the ball of one foot and then the other.

You're so very skilled at this, she said.

He rubbed his hands over the arch of both feet. I'm skilled at many things. His gaze holding hers, he moved his fingers in ever-widening circles up to her ankles. His eyes darkened into a challenge. but there is one thing I've never done.

His hands moved higher, carrying her nightdress with it, reminding her of their first night together. She clamped her knees together. Ansley, we can't.

I'm aware of that, but what I want now ...I want to see your belly. I want to see where the child grows. Ansley'

How could she refuse such a heartfelt plea? Licking her lips, she nodded.

Ever so slowly, as though he were unwrapping a precious gift, he moved her nightdress up over her knees, past her hips, up to her chest. He placed his hands on either side of her waist and studied her increasing girth.

So, beautiful, he whispered. He lifted his gaze to hers, and she could see the wonder in the

green. you're so beautiful, Jannie.

Lowering his head, he placed a kiss on the spot where their child' for this moment in time it was theirs' grew. Straightening, he drew her nightdress back down to her ankles.

I'm glad you're here. I'm glad the child will be born here.

He joined her that night, beneath the sheets. His body warm and familiar. Comforting. He didn't tempt them with passionate kisses or sensual caresses, but he held her near, stroked her back, her arm, her hip. They lay on their sides, facing each other, talking quietly. About his brothers and their families. About his mother and Lenny. Her parents were deceased and she found mercy in that for they would not know the questionable things she'd done.

When she fell asleep, his arms were around her, and she felt safe, protected, and, for the first time since Blackmon, she was not lonely.

Jannie awoke alone to thunder booming and rain slashing against the windows.

After ringing for Lily, she climbed out of bed and walked to the window. It was a gray, gray day.

No walks in the garden, but she could stroll through the manor. She was unfamiliar with a good bit of it. She'd only been here for the duchess's wedding. Then she'd done no exploring. Surely, he'd not mind if she did so today. She would ask him over breakfast.

But after she was dressed and went downstairs to the breakfast dining room, she discovered that he wasn't there.

He is already eaten, my woman, the butler told her. he is in his study now, working. Would you like me to escort you there?

No, that is quite all right. I shall just have something to eat and then I believe I shall stroll through the residence if there are no objections.

None- he informed me that you have to leave to treat the house as though it were your own. If there is anything you want seen to; you have but to ask.

Nodding, she turned away and went to the sideboard where an abundance of food waited. She'd been unable to eat in the early months and lost her appetite after Welford passed, but now she

was famished. She ate so much that she thought she might burst. When she was finished, she strolled through the residence, imagining herself as lover here.

At the top of the landing, in one of the wings, was a portrait gallery. The windows stretched the length of the room. She sat in a chair and watched the storm rolling over the land. It was beautiful, yet powerful. It rivaled all the emotions roiling through her. All the feelings for Ansley that she'd squashed were rising to the fore' so quickly, so forcefully. She loved being in his presence. She loved the way he made her feel treasured. He would do the same for the child. She could not imagine this child growing up and not walking within his shadow.

Stephen proposed to Mercy there.

With a start, she smiled and glanced back over her shoulder. He looked so relaxed, so at home. To spend all her days and nights with him ...if only this child would wait a year to be born.

Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to her forehead before sitting in the chair beside hers. did you eat this morning?

Like someone with no manners. Two plates' worth. You have a wonderful cook. I'll let her know. I could do that. See to your menus. you're not here to tend to my needs.

I shall go stark raving mad if I have nothing to do because then all I have are my thoughts for distraction. I don't like the directions they go. do they want to take you away from here?

Slowly she shook her head. no, they consider staying.

The pleasure reflected in his eyes warmed her, and she gave her attention back to the rain. you have no fox hunting here. no. What do you do when you entertain? shooting. Have lots of birds. are you skilled with a rifle, then?

I'm somewhat of an expert shooter, yes. Considered proving for Cousin Green. I don't really blame him, you know. He has so much to gain.

But he could have gone about it differently. I should have spoken to you instead of the gossips.

Is that what you would have done?

I suspect I'd have done nothing' or at the very least, I'd have given you time to mourn.

Inconsiderate lout.

She smiled at his disgust with Cousin Green. you take his accusations personally.

He's threatening to take my child's life miserable. I won't stand for it, Jannie. If you don't marry me, I shall bring the full weight of my title to bear against him. even if he is, right? it is a dilemma.

He didn't remind her that it could all go away if she married him. Cousin Green might not care about making her unhappy. Ansley obviously did. She wanted to erase the furrow between his brows. She nodded toward the outdoors. what is that building over there? It was brick and stone. Long. A short distance from the residence.

My pool. I should show it to you when we go on a walk.

By afternoon the rain had stopped and they strolled through the garden. Then he took her to the pool.

It was long and narrow, the water still, except for the steam rising from the surface. Steps led down into it.

So, you just swim across it? She asked.

Yes- back and forth. It is not very deep. Even if you don't swim, you could go into it. It would be like taking a bath in a huge tub. He laughed. not exactly. I should like to watch you swim sometime.

I suspect I'll be doing a good bit of it at night.

She stared at him. really? Why ever would you swim at night?

He cupped her face. you really don't understand how irresistible you are, do you?

Tilting her head back, he lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was gentle. An exploring, a communicating. Before him, she'd never realized that kisses could take a variety of shapes and forms.

Softly, provocatively, he teased her senses. She found herself leaning into him, wrapping her arms around his waist. He undid no buttons, lifted no hems, and yet she felt as though he were making love to her.

He could convey so much with his lips, with his fingers lightly touching her cheeks, his thumbs slowly circling at the corners of her mouth. She wanted to fall into him, against him. She wanted him to lie her down and kiss all of her.

All thoughts of anything beyond the two of them disappeared when he gave her such undivided attention. Would he still be kissing her like this when they were old? Was it only the newness or the lure of the forbidden that spurred him on now?

Ansley's stomach clenched. It was too soon for Jannie to have given birth. Dear God in heaven, don't let her have lost the child.

Opening the message, he stared at the words that seemed to have no meaning.

It is with the heaviest of hearts that I inform you that Welford is dying. He asks that you bring his jewels.

The coach traveled down the road, the horses galloping as fast as the coachman could drive them.

Without truly being aware of his surroundings, Ansley stared out the window as the trees and sloping land flashed by. The jewels were safe. He had them in hand. But delivering them seemed like such a terribly bad idea.

Welford is dying.

He had hosted a fox hunt a few short weeks ago, and all was well. How could he be dying? It didn't signify.

Ansley caught sight of the large boulder that marked the beginning of Welford's property. He remembered how Jannie had ordered him to stop when she saw it. He wanted to call up for the driver to stop now. He didn't want to continue on to Herndon Hall; he didn't want to see his friend diminished by death. Why had he stopped his visits? Fish needed to be caught, foxes chased, and horses are ridden. Conversations over whiskey needed to be had.

He'd thought himself unselfish to leave them in peace, but now he wanted every moment back. Death had come with no warning.

Only three years separated them. What would he do if he had only three years to live? What if it was something, they'd done together that resulted in this decline? What if he could have prevented it? Had he failed his cousin once again?

The recriminations swirled through him as the coach turned onto the road leading through the estate. The trees were heavy with leaves awaiting the first breath of summer. Gorgeous. He saw a fox peer out through the brush and then dash away. It would still be here for this year's hunt, but Welford wouldn't. It was impossible to contemplate. Herndon Hall without Welford... The coach slowed 'stay here' and he leaped out before it stopped. Although he dashed up the steps, it seemed he wasn't moving at all. He barged through the door.

The butler came to attention. your Grace. is he in his bedchamber? yes, Your Grace. the marchioness? she is not left his side.

He raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time, his heart pounding to an erratic rhythm. At least he wasn't too late.

He hesitated for a moment outside the bedchamber to gather himself, regain a calm facade. Then he shoved the door open and strode in.

Although the windows were open, the room shilled of sickness and death. The sunlight was doing a poor job of battling the shadows. His gaze fell on the frail figure lying in the bed, then it shifted to the girl sitting in a chair beside it. Ansley.

His name was only a whisper upon her lips, hers a shout within his heart. She rose and walked around the bed. His gaze at once dropped to her belly. Was it slightly more rounded than it had been before? Impossible to tell. She touched it self-consciously. Tears brimmed in her eyes. She was a girl who should never have cause to weep. thank you so much for coming, she said. How could you think I wouldn't? As ill-advised as it was, he stepped forward and cradled her face between his hands. He could see the toll Welford's illness had taken on her, yet still, she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. Her courage, her strength, were all too visible. She was battered but not defeated. how could this have happened? He asked.

Looking momentarily lost, she shook her head. I don't know. His body is poisoned. someone is trying to kill him? No, no. His physician says that Welford's body has turned on him. It has stopped functioning properly. He is inflicted with a deadly fever. There is no hope.

He slid his easily her arms and took her hands into his. I've brought my physician, Dr. Roberts. He is excellent. We'll see what he has to say.

More tears welled in her eyes. I'm so glad you're here. I didn't know whether to send you' of course, you should have.

He would have it no other way. I don't know why he was so insistent that you bring him his jewels. I don't know what he expects to do with them. he hasn't told you about them, then?

No. I don't even know what kind they are. Rubies. Emeralds. Diamonds. What does it matter?

It mattered.

Ansley? Welford croaked. is that you, old man?

Ansley gave Jannie's hands a final squeeze of reassurance before he strode over to the bed. Jannie followed, her footfalls soft until she was standing at its foot, one hand wrapped around a post as though she needed the support to still be upright. How difficult this had to be for her. Welford looked bloody awful. His skin had an unnatural pallor to it. His eyes held no life at all. always in want of attention, aren't you, Welford?

His cousin released a weak laugh. I was always the more interesting of us. still are. did you bring them? Did you bring my jewels? they're here. I left them in the coach. I need to see them.

He glanced quickly to the side, to Jannie, before turning his attention back to Welford. you haven't told Jannie about them.

No- you do ...that. You owe me ...that. His breathing rattled; each breath labored. it is your fault, you know. Your fault I'm here. Wilford, no, Jannie pleaded. don't say these things.

It is all right, Jannie, Ansley said. let him have his say. He deserved the verbal lashing. So, he stoically held his friend and cousin's gaze.

See? He knows it is true. Just as I've been telling you. It is his fault. Welford struggled to push himself up, and Ansley stepped forward to help him, to settle him back against the pillows. if only you'd given me the bloody reins, I wouldn't have been forced to take them from you.

Nevaeh

Book: 68

Sins of the Fallen Angel

Part: 1

Preface:

Death is not something, that I thought about at the age of ten. I would have never thought it would be like this... I- we're not saying anything now and let you judge for yourself at what you think. You know I would never really said- all that much to anyone- real about this- like how I was going to pass on in this life. Yet I had never really given myself any belief to do such a thing, for passing one like this was not something to do that for. Ages- months- day- weeks- years I have reasoned with this thought. Would you have guessed that it would have ended like this- I wouldn't have...? I would not even made-believe it like this.

This all began with me sitting in school, day in and day out looking over all the others around me- yet none was like- he was- not the Joy yet the joy- you get- get that? I sit with a spoon in my mouth- staring at this- boy I don't understand- yet can't help be feel is right to me. I got up to dump my tray, I feel like I was holding my breath in- and did not know why- when I happen to see his eyes catching a

glimpse of mine. Awe- that loving feeling is all that makes me feel right in this gay- of a school lunchroom.

Making my way as I walk not trying to trip over all the chair legs being all stumble's I start to see the end of the long room come to me, into the obscure eyes of the stalker- the boy, that never lets me out of his eyes sight, and he looked pleasantly back at me. I know that you would say it was not a good way to end- like- a young life- I see you think, but with me and who I am, I okay with it... I think. I feel lost in his eyes like being in a dream of someone, and something no me... nevertheless, I love. It's all good here- flashing light starts to play out as I look into his gaze and I haze in my day lost in love land, I don't know if I am standing of flouting in his hart- it was that warm... not could at all- like the rest of the faces.

I hope- beyond hope, this would amount to be of something- like lasting- and forever even in the forbidding-ness this it is. I strongly heated this freaking town. The one where I knew that I had to go back too... I would have never thought of going back to Bradford, for anything- not a friend- not my dad- no one but the chances to be in the arm of him- the boy with the eyes that take me away. Yet if I would have not done this, I would not be looking into me demise at this very moment- like you must be feeling too.

Funny I keep have flashes about this- like hot moments of him laying with me- yet that was upcoming- but felt as they already have taken place. Content- yes, but- oh so frightened of not knowing what a boy like him was going to do with my- body, mind, and soul... I was all his- looked into his grasp like- I would not let myself feel shamelessness, for this all, what he did, and did not do... I feel in a way it was all my choice. Dream what they give- and what life hands you crossed path to me- so dreamy- beyond and on top of it all you feel- lost in depth- of any of your outlooks or viewpoints, it's not sensible to feel sadden when it all comes to a conclusion where you're ripped back it the real world of BS. I want to dram all day in this boys' eyes- where there are no lies- in the hope of young love- to take place. The stalker grinned with the perfect white cast at me- and the smooth face, and just right body that would mold oh so fine with mine- on my bed. In a friendly- I wanted all that too- it was a dream I had- like finding him out from the inside out- the way he strolled forward, was killing me, yet I was thrusting for it like he was of me.

Long ass day- mom was at the wheel, singing songs for the 90's- rocking out a way to hard. I was not happy yet not said- some would say emotionless- off to the train station- yes, I had the window down my head out like a sick puppy. My dark hair flapping in the wind. My eyes sheng in the sunlight, my lips too in pink.

My face- light- and glassing with a shin too- yet with light pink cheeks and freckles. Not to could not too warm it was in my mom's home town of I don't give a shit- you would know where it is anyways.

So why say it... the heavens above a faultless, cloudless light blue on the top and darker on the bottom. I was wearing my favorite shirt- tank top, lacey and pink- that is my favorite color if you didn't know- what I a young girl here... I like pink like girls like buying undies, which are see-through and stingy. My dad is going to have a shit over knowing that one- yet most do at my old school.

I was wearing it as a farewell gesture- kind of like an F- U to the town that I feel suck old man balls! All the kids pick on me for were such a ratty thing. By handbag spotted like a Dalmatian dog. 3 tops 4 jeans 2 skirts- and 5 pairs of undies. A toothbrush- and bush, and lip gloss also... all that is mine or so mom said. I was from a suckie town and went to suckie school were they all just sucked- end of story... a small shit dump- were it smelt like cow shit. Now I am off to a place where is always cover with low fog. Where are dumps gushes of prowling down rain all the freaking time!

ALL THE TIME!

Crappie... It showers on this petty town more than any other place in the United States of America, or so that is how I feel about it. Some would say it depressed- yet how I see it with my eyes that need the change. The place where my mom had me oh like 15 & ½ year a go- do ask about the random sex they had to make this dumb ass girl! Gross! They didn't last yet me I did back and forth to the one that loves to heat each other.

Love is good- no?

No one keeps it though... yet that was before looking into those eyes... It was in this town, that I had been bound to spend a summer break there every summer.

I am going for 11- and this was where I had my friends... if you can call them that most- older- some younger it's more than what I have the land where they all suck! And suck in not a good way! I remember back- my dad- a goof- someone that you fall for fast... or so my mom said.

Gross!

It was here in this town, that I now émigré myself- an act, that I took with boundless dismay. I loathed my old school- the teachers, and all of it. I loved it here in the spring days- with the colors- yet I was never her in the school, I was worried about that one fact there.

I loved the sun and the blistering heat, and all the boys in there swimming shorts, and rock-hard chests, just like the girls with their killer bodies, that I don't have- not yet anyways. I think girls can be cute... I loved the dynamic, extensive village. The train ride long- and foggy- or highs and lows- and tall viaducts- that are 3,000 feet in the air. The cars old- 1800's even if it is 2016.

Where the glass is smudged with fingerprints- and the coffee is raunchy, like the mood of the girl getting the tickets. The cars on the outside golden- orange- whoop- is what I hear as I go to bed in the sleeper, hearing the steamer- work hard on the hills. A new day starts a new life for me- in the eyes of the death path.

'Lily,' at last of a thousand my mom said to me- the times before I have gotten the train. 'You don't have to do this...' she was crying for the only reason was my school life sucked hard, and I was not taking any more harassment and names. Some have said I look more like my dad them my mom- yet really, I don't know.

I see my nose- with my dad- and my lips my mom. Eyes are my dad's... like cerulean... my dad's gray- so I have that look to in low light. The boy with the eyes- I felt a tremor of anxiety as I stared at her wide, innocent, un-deflowered, childlike, and vary naïve eyes.

Me-Like- how can I leave my affectionate, uneven, crazy mother to find myself, as she did way back before I was made? She had my stepdad now- that just did not get me, so the bills would probably get paid now that I was not the big mouth in the way of the sex all the time, gross! I don't want to know all that- looking at kiss her on the lips! Then she asks were my mouth has been- yea you got it!

There would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and my room for their office now, and my sister has the floor as she did in the school, on the other hand... 'I want to go- to get away from it all,'

I lied... about being okay... I have... I permanently have been a bad liar, yet not at this one... but I have been proverbing this lie so-o many times, and so freaking frequently times lately, that it sounds almost convincing to her- and dad 2 does not even give a shit. I still love your dad I just not in love with him - I never was- tall him hello for me!

- Okay!

'I will... mommy' I said sighing as I go on the step of the train car... Mom- 'A big trip for a little 10-year-old- yet she is fine I no- she's strong... and been through a- lot! I won't be seeing you for a while you know that... I went for the next step looking back.' 'You can come home whenever you want, you know that... (I was thought only if numb nuts dump you) - I'll come right back as soon as you need me, whenever you feel you need me there.' Nevertheless, I could see the disadvantage in her eyes behind the promise. 'Don't worry about me at all.'

I commended. 'It'll be fine without you. I love you, Mommy.' (And - she was off...) She embraced me tightly for a minute, besides then I got on the train, and she was gone. Dad had honestly really not noticed a thing about me coming- He gave the impressions sincerely delighted, that I was coming to live with him for the first time with all the time now - any degree of immovability. He would already get me itemized for high school, then was going to help me get a car- like- a nice new car I thought. Awkward- everything is weird with a boy that is your dad- like in a room with him next to me or peeping in on me, like- doing things... it's so-o going to freak me out- like how do I talk girl stuff with DAD?

Or a dad like his has been to me- the high five dad- you get the type. But then again it was sure to be with him anyway. Neither one of us... was what anyone would call talkative. Like - when they saw us together in the past days, and I didn't know what was said regardless, or what to say... I knew he was more than a little confused about having a girl to look over- he could hardly take care of himself- by my pronouncement- like my mother before me, I hadn't made a secret of my revulsion for Bradford. I didn't see it as a sign of something bad- just mandatory. I would by this time said my goodbyes to the sun also- so I can get even whiter.

I have made it- of the steps of the last car- number 19- Daddy was waiting for me with the hard hat steel on. This I was expecting, too.

A Barns and Tucker head engineer- of the continuous meaner breathing coal dust to make a life for himself- and my step sister Emely.

Continuous mining utilizes a Continuous Miner Machine with a large rotating steel drum, equipped with tungsten carbide teeth that scrape coal from the seam. Most others on having water running down their backs into their ass cracks. My most important impulse behindhand ordering a car, and notwithstanding the shortage of my resources, was that I was saying no to be driven around town in company periwinkle blue Prius. Nothing say's straight gay like that!

Dad gave me an uncomfortable, armed around the boob's- or lack of them- hug- from the side, when I stumbled into him. 'It's good to see you, hun,' he said, smiling as he routinely caught me like I was five and no boys were looking- and stabilized me. He said- you haven't changed much a- lot. How's your mom? 'Mom's fine... she asked about you- so like call- we have the technology... It's good to see you, too, Dad- but... you need to be less hug-ie.'

I wasn't allowed to call him by his name to his face... yet dad was hard for me too. I had only a few bags... Most of my LA. Clothes were too holey and skimpy for PA- some would say slut in these parts, not for LA. My mom and I had pooled our incomes to extra my wintertime apparel, still, it was revealing. It all fit easily into the suitcase with wheels... that I feel a concern along. 'I instigate a good car for you, really cheap,' he proclaimed when we were short of money.

I now have my permit- yet I can sweet-talk him into let me go to school alone- it's not that far... What kind of car? - I said the dumb question hoping for something that would not want me to roll up into a little ball and hope to dye... I was doubtful of dad's pick of cars- and cool rides, it's a good little heavy car- a good car for you to start with' as opposed to just 'good car.' 'Well, it's an automobile sweaty, a ford.'

Fords suck dad! Maybe so- but not this one... hun... he said snickering like to me as I roll my eyes wonder what this shit looks like- it's got to be cute or it going to kill me. yet on like must I at least now have a car- cool for that thanks daddy- I am grateful for this... money is tight and works hard to find- and kids today bratty ass wipes that don't get it- yet I do- I happy... I just want nice things that are all. My friend got a 1990 blue Cadillac Deville for form her dad on her birthday- I like it old but

powerful... old class- it worlds... you can party in the back of that thing! She would know she has- with her boy.

I sure that is where she lost her virginity.

Something I need to do- to not suck at life so hard. 'Where did you find it?' I built it for you over the last winter... 'Do you remember me saying about this project I had- 'No.' I said wondering what the hell?

'What year is it?'

I asked more than worried... I could see from his change of expression with mine like- he knew I would heat this car. That this was the question he was hoping I wouldn't ask. To see if I would approve of him- and his work, and his dad skills... 'Well, I have done a- lot of work on the engine a small block 8- it's only a few years old order the granddad, really.' WHAT? I said- ha yah here it is hun... 'He hot road-ed a 1932 ford sedan for me.'

Really- wow- I didn't know they had care back then... all cram and tan inside- all new inside and out they don't make um like this anymore- you can say that again I said no sure what to make of the whole thing. I opened my eyes to that- to me it was a go-kart... that you feel like you're going to die in. 3 ON THE FLOOR- what the hell does that mean... ha, you learn- to drive a real car. Do you like the striping on it? I hoped he didn't think so little of me as to believe I would give up that easily on something new. 'When did he buy it? I didn't I found it in a hayfield over in a junkyard.'

'The man 83 years ago get this thing new and it was bought?' Funny- dad- so yeah, it's a new car... yes kind of for everting is re-done- he had his whole red nick family in this thing- 'gross!' I did not eat- I didn't sleep- all I did was work on this thing after work for you to have when you got home. 'Dad, I don't know anything about cars.

I wouldn't be able to fix it if anything went wrong, and I couldn't afford a mechanic...' Nothing is going to back on this thing- and if so let me know... and it's taken care of... 'In actuality, Lily, the thing runs great. They don't build them like that anymore.' You're calling me Lily now? Is that okay- sure I like it... The thing is, I thought to myself... some- it had potentials - as a nickname, at the very least. 'How cheap is cheap?'

After all, 30,000, that was the part I couldn't compromise on. You didn't do that... yes for you- remember I did love you all your life- I hope this makes up for the time lost. Yep... I think I may love this car... I hope... He peeked sideways at me with a hopeful expression I should have given - yet he got a thumbs up, and I walked out of the garage. Wow- wow- wow- and huh? I am going to get murdered for driving this... 'You didn't need to do that, Dad. I was going to buy myself a car.' It's done... here are the keys... go and see if you like it... (Test drive) it doesn't even have a radio - don't need it with how to load this thing is- lesion to that baby perrrrrrr! 'I don't mind... really- sighing... I said. You don't know what you have... do you? What...? NO. Something guys assassinate for! Remember that... I want you to be pleased here you know, that right?'

Um... He was looking ahead at the road when he said this... in I was tugging on the wheel- Dad wasn't comfortable with expressing his emotions out loud. I inherited that from him. So, I was looking straight ahead as I responded.

'That's nice, Dad. Thank you- (hug) I appreciate all this... whatever this is...' he was looking at me with glass eyes wondering what I was thinking about his project, that I didn't like- I knew him that well to know that I was hurting him for not like this... I could see it in he's fading eye color. Besides, I give up look in his body as he sits slouched in the set. No need to add that in, me being happy in this town is hopelessness- with this thing. He didn't need to suffer along with me for not getting it. Yet I am not saying anything about something, that is free or given to me as a gift. 'Well, now, you're welcome,' he muttered, self- conscious by me thank you 1,000 times.

Outside looking out- The entire thing was jade: the trees, their trunks enclosed with moss, their branches droopy with a canopy of it, the ground covered with leaves. Even the air filtered down greenly through the leaves.

We stared out the windows in silence. We swapped a few more comments on the weather, boys, my period, and gross things that dad should never know about a girl alone time in her room - and where she keeps all that- me- which was wet, need a bathroom bark and him to go away so I could go to my room- something else that was old and musty... and that was pretty much the dialogue. Thought in my room will find out myself deep down- It was lovely, unquestionably; I couldn't deny that fact. In a somewhat round room- I lay in bad and can see out... It was too green- and colorful to me.

Yet all I wanted to do was get off- and get to reading a book and go to bed. About the time I got their dad bust in the door seeing it all- so freaked I don't think I will ever play with myself again, yet

do you stop or keep going is the question. Eventually, we made it past the fact, that I was spread sparing all of it on the clean sheets- all he got out was welcome home Lily- that is all he said- walking back out the door. (I did even no she knew how to finger? Awe- wow I don't want to know this- where's here mom- or getting her this- Lelo Ella dil... Ah- I can say that? Not even down the hall, I hear her, and the humming- I not ready for this...) He still lived in the small, two-bedroom house that he'd bought with my mother in the early days of their marriage. I look in the glass- and see me the girl with like no chest- I see my hair- as I flip it back over my shoulders... I am not happy with me- or him- or the car- or life, or the fact I have no private just to have some girlie alone time. The door is never locked it would lock... so what do I do about that one? Those were the only kind of days their marriage had- life and play in it. back in the day where they nicked on the street- and feel it up in their room all the time- gross- yet I know that too- in front of the house it has never changed, all yellow and cracked with paint- the windows fogged with steam from hot to cold. I was never like new- well, new to me- like the car in the garage- just something parched over and make as they say right. The care has rounded fenders and a swollen cab and 4 doors, not 2.

It a sports car? I asked new- buy it has the kind of power- I was like yah, right? This would blow the jeans of these boys Toyotas; I go to school with and see two kids banging in one that what got me... I see sex is something they study here... this place is shitty, to say the least- I to my penetrating astonishment, I loved it... when I see how the boys look at me in it- but one boy in particular. I didn't know if it would run like this, but I could see myself in it... downing my hair and make-up and blowing kisses to him. He is my fantasy in the day before I sleep and in my sensual dreams it's all about him- yet I not going to pass up on other looks... I'm a girl. And more, it was one of those solid iron dealings that never gets damaged even if so- you're okay with it- the Japanese car's if I was to wreck would be destroyed yet I could roll this.

'Wow, Dad, I love it! Thanks! I said after coming home for school the first day I did get to say much to anyone I was in la-la land with the boy with the eyes and the hair- and the car.' Just daydream- there nothing on the first day anyways other than hi- and this is what you will be doing and you all have an A for now. I got so sick of hearing that line- okay that nice. (Back) It took only one trip to get all my things upstairs and into my new girly room. Myself here- like- acquired the western facing bedroom, which looks out over the back yard. The room was at home with; it had been being in the right place to me since I was born. The wooden floor, the light pink walls, the shiny tin like ceiling, the white lace curtains around the window and pulled back in V- shapes -these were all a part of my childhood yet I am

not a little girl- yet daddy is not getting, that one- like he docent even think I sexily active- ha. The only changes made were what my dad has made were moving the crib out for a big girl's bed, and even that is a day bed, and adding a desk as I grew, and taking down the playpen. The desk now held a secondhand typewriter that is 1888, and a phone with the cord on it- and an old apple 2 next to that no internet the line for the modem stapled along the floor to the nearest phone jack. This was a stipulation from my mother so that we could stay in touch easily.

The rocking chair from my baby days was still in the corner. There was only one small bathroom at the top of the stairs I didn't even have my own, which I would have to share with Dad. I was trying not to dwell too much on that fact. One of the best things about dad is he does hover- and that is also the bad thing too. He left me alone to unpack and get settled as you know, a feat that would have been altogether impossible for my mother not to have busted in on too- yet she's a girl. It was nice to be alone, not to have to smile, as well as look satisfied; a relief to stare dejectedly out the window at the sheeting rain and let just a few tears escape. I wasn't in the mood to go on a real crying spree. I would save that for bedtime after- or in the hot shower where you could not see me doing it when I would have to think about the coming morning. Bradford High School had a terrifying total of only three hundred and sixty-five - now two hundred- students; that was on the first day the drops started, many for the teachers saying give up on yourself- and smock pot- or something like that... there were more than seven hundred people in my junior class alone back home. All of the kids here had grown up together- their grandparents had been toddlers together.

(Back)

I would be the new girl from the big city, a snooping, and a freak creeper. Maybe, if I looked like a girl from Pa should, I would think this way... said, dad. Like put something on that is not see-through, nevertheless and actually, I have never fit in anywhere really. I should be tan, sporty, blond with big blue eyes- yeah- no- a volleyball player, or an ass shaking cheerleader, perhaps- all the things that go with existing in the valley of the sun rays. As an alternative, I was ivory- tender, without even the reason for blue eyes or light brown hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender than most of the others in my grade at home with mom, but easy-going somehow, visibly not a sports person; I didn't have the essential hand-eye coordination to play sports, like without embarrassing myself- and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close. When I broke down putting my clothes in the old white dresser, I took my purse moving of my shoulder and down to the bathroom floor necessities and went to the communal bathroom to clean myself up after the day of travel. I looked at

my face in the mirror as I brushed through my tangled, damp hair. May- hap's it was the light, then again already I- myself looked washed-out, all-natural without makeup and clothing just all me showing. My skin could like me could be pretty- if not for this and that- all the things a girl like me wants to change... we all do don't say we don't. It was very clear, almost translucent-looking- but it all depended on color. I had no color here... to speak of- facing my pallid reflection in the mirror, I was forced to admit that I was lying to myself, that I would be love for me. It wasn't just substantially, that I would never fit in anywhere.

Plus, if I couldn't treasure a place in a school with three thousand individuals, what were my odds here? According to legend, when a human dies and then returns to the world as a fallen angel, he or she no longer has a soul. The unlucky individual is now a fallen angel. It was once believed that mirrors cast back the image of the body and the soul; therefore, if you didn't have a soul, you couldn't have a reflection. Mirrors also used to contain some silver (not anymore, so don't go and break yours up trying to score beer pennies), which could also have made a fallen angel's reflection hard to see. Silver, as pretty much everyone knows, is toxic to the undead. Seriously, if you don't know that, what have you been doing with your life? Enjoying it?

Knows that fallen angels suck ... your blood!

Seriously though, do you know the history behind modern fallen angel lore? These creatures of the night have been lurking around for a very long time, although the princes and princesses of darkness have taken on different guises and mythologies throughout the ages. Here are some things you probably didn't know about fallen angels. If the items on this list are old news to you, you might want to take a look in the mirror and check for a reflection... your blood! Okay. It didn't work so well at that time. Ancient Egyptians had all kinds of gods. The warrior goddess Sekhmet had the very bad habit of walking among men, slaughtering them and then drinking up all of their blood. She needed thousands of jugs of blood, sometimes mixed with beer, either to quench her incredible thirst or because she was an unstoppable party animal. One of her nicknames was the 'Lady of the Bloodbath.'

Another was 'Lady Who Maybe Stole My Cellphone.' If she ever is reincarnated, you might want to refrain from inviting her over for your next Halloween costume party, because she will ruin bobbing for apples like that. Let's see, cows are grouped in herds, geese gather in gaggles, fish in schools...What would you call a large group of fallen angels flying your way? Well, other than 'nothing good is about to happen,' you could officially say, 'Look, there's a brood, clutch, clan, coven or pack of

fallen angels over there. Maybe we should head in the opposite direction. Wait, I dropped my thesaurus. Don't leave me, the only friend!' Why I say this and what I have to compare to with the eyes of the stocker. All right, the fact that the historical Dracula wasn't a nice guy is stating the obvious, but the level of his evil is quite shocking. It was said that Vlad of Walachia, who also went by 'Vlad the Impale,' never ate a meal without Ottoman Turks, impaled on stakes, dying all around him. This 15th century Romanian monster left, at one time, 20,000 corpses stuck on pikes outside of his castle as a warning to all who would dare challenge him. When a corpse became too rotten to display any longer, Vlad had no problem making a new one to take its place. He took his nickname very seriously. ('Vlad the Home Decorator' never quite took.) This doesn't always work. If a fallen angel bites you, not all hope is lost.

Different societies believed there were different cures for the affliction known as fallenangelism. Here are some things you can do if you suspect those marks on your skin aren't from a mosquito, or you want to keep an unwanted fallen angel away: ... Eat lots of Basil- No ... Gather hawthorn branches and use them as a repellent (they also make lovely wreaths) ... Bury potential fallen angels face down so they'll dig the wrong way when trying to get out (fallen angels are mad dumb.) ... Spread salt around the house- NO ... Wear a cross (a no-brainer) - NO - Decapitate the fallen angel bothering you- Yes, they hunt you down- for that moment they so need with you- love or creepy?

You pick...? ... Wear iron (not silver) jewelry- NO ... And last but not least, scatter seeds around your house because fallen angels like counting them and can get distracted, which will give you time to escape.

Myth doesn't know... - No Can be killed with a wooden stake- Maybe- yet that old customs. Well suck your blood for fun- Yes and No... their picky these days, like the won't pre- untouched girls... that how most boys should be.

3

I didn't communicate/interact well with people my age at all or at least in my home town I didn't. Perhaps the truth was that I didn't relate well to girls, period and boys or just dumb d*ick suckers at my old school.

Even my mother, who I was closer to than anyone else, was never in agreement with me, about my choices of what I wanted in life, never- ever on precisely the Lily page. Now and then, I marveled if I was seeing the things within my eyes, which the rest of the world was seeing within theirs.

Maybe there was a fault in the stars some were down the line, in my life, and my brain. Conversely, the reason didn't matter... All that signified was the result or outcome of all that I and they see.

Besides, tomorrow would be just the commencement. Do what is magnificent to me and you. I didn't sleep well last night, and even after- like- I was done crying and stuff. The continuous whizzing of the showers, besides the wind across the roof, wouldn't diminish into the upbringing. As I pulled the faded old quilt over my head wishing I was not scared of everything and everyone- the past hunting me like he eyes look into mine in my room even if I don't know him yet, and later added the pillow under me to rub on- it feel good like a boy would when you need a hug. However, I couldn't fall into a slumber 'til after twilight, and the moon showing its soft light down on me when the rain lastly developed into a softer relaxed trickle overhead in bed. The dense fog- broke away in the sky so I could see all this out the double doors on to the veranda of my room, was all I could see out my window in the daybreak, as well as I could feel the in closed spaces was all like creeping up on me. You could never see the sky here or so I thought; it was like a barred enclosure. Mealtime with dad was a quiet event before the school day like at 6 am. He said to me- good luck at school- hun... and don't get pageant. I winked and walked out of the room rolling my eyes with a simple look on my face. Good luck has a habit of dodging me, for I suck hard- at life, and everything wants to suck that out of me too. Daddy after me, off to the mains for an earl shift, that is his wife and family to him breathing in a little coal dust- that was what made him feel alive- you can hear it in his whizzing hacking. I would drive away- looking for the right roads to go down to be the doors on time...

(Thoughts about the home)

My mother had stained the filing cabinet seventeen years ago, in an attempt to bring some daylight into the house. Over the small firebox in the next-door small, yet a family-sized room was a row space were pictures hung next to the steps. Look over all this slowly- like I am doing now- the first photo- a wedding picture of mom and dad in a small church outside the town some... then there is one of the three of us in the hospital after I was born lovely- and gross, taken by a caring RN, keep an eye on by the demonstration of my school pictures up to last year's- look at that girl that has no teeth in the 5th grade- and then braces in the 9th. Those were awkward to look at- I would have to see what, I could do to get dad to put them somewhere else so I don't have to see him go down the line saying the - old story that, I have heard over and over about me being the little girl he has loved- and lost- like- to his b*itch of a wife, at least while I was living here I saw that... It was awkward, being in this house, not to grasp, that

dad had never gotten over my mom even if it is a dude about it - he loves her still. It made me feel uncanny and mysterious about everything I don't get. Is that how you would define 'uncommentable'...?

That nice for that is not the right wording, and you should know that... I didn't want to be too early to school or tardy, on the other hand, I couldn't holiday in the restaurant any longer. Yours truly throw on my jacket - which had the feel blob-ie of a way to big - and controlled out into the showers - falling harder now. It was just hammering down still, not enough to soak me through - directly as I reached for the check to pay - that was always hidden under the cup - I had with coffee in it. Now out and under, the roof space by the door, and looking up. The splashing of my new spotted water-resistant rubber boots was fear-provoking - to me was it never rain before in my home town. I missed the pavement and not the typical crunch of gravel as I walked. I couldn't pause, also to appreciate my car again, as I wanted to do so - I was in a panic to get out of the misty wet, which whirled around my head and body, and clung to my hair getting all matted down with drippage. Inside the car, it was nice and dry, yet I didn't wat to get the inside muddy or wet, yet I didn't see not doing just that. It will clean off - my dad said - the night before - don't worry about it... it's an everyday driver car. My dad had noticeably cleaned it up, but the tan padded seats still smelled new, yet the car has, that used old must, like old gasoline and oil. The v8 engine started quickly, like always after cocking it... to my relief, it's old yet good, but loud roaring to life, and then idling at top volume until I had it set right. Well, a truck this old was bound to have a flaw.

The antique radio worked, a plus, that I hadn't expected. Finding the school wasn't tough the seconded time around, the school was, like most other things dark and depressed, just off the - what that call a highway. It was not obvious that it was a school; only the sign, which declared it to be the Bradford High School, made me stop and think maybe I would fit in some now - like a new start. Like looking at something form the 1950's, built with burgundy-colored bricks. There were so many trees and shrubs, that I couldn't see - big to small... where is the feeling of the organization? I wondered nostalgically. Where were the mesh fences, block out the rest of the world - and the town?

I parked in front - with the freshmen - for I was cut off by most - yet they know me now by the car - the lot with the building which had a small sign over the door reading breeze - way - to hallway. No one else was parked there, so I was sure it was off restrictions, on the other hand, I obvious I would get directions inside be some creep wanting to feel me up instead of circling in the rain outside like an idiot like I wanted to do. I feel already it's going to be a long year. I stepped unwillingly out of the toasty truck cab and walked down a little stone path lined with dark hedges. I took a deep breath before opening the

door. Inside, it was brightly lit and warmer than I'd hoped. The office was small; a little waiting area with padded folding chairs, orange-flecked commercial carpet, notices, and awards cluttering the walls, a big clock ticking loudly. Plants grew everywhere in large plastic pots as if there wasn't enough greenery outside. The room was cut in half by a long counter, cluttered with wire baskets full of papers and brightly colored flyers taped to its front. There were three desks behind the counter, one of which was manned by a large, red-haired woman wearing glasses. She was wearing a purple t-shirt, which immediately made me feel overdressed. The older blond-gray haired woman looked up. 'Can I help you- she was nasty in more than one way?' Everything looked straight out of the 50s. 'I'm Lily Lea Kingston-Amzel- or was before, I was adopted by the daddy, I know Mr. Anderson.' I remember a little my stepbrothers and sisters like- Gracie and Grant, there were many- I see the many graves in my mind and that house. 'I have your schedule right here, and a room buddy of the school.' I well-versed her, the girl next to me said here I got this- and saw the instantaneous awareness light her eyes- like she had a girl crush on me. Don't hurt me- I said out load- oh I wasn't just going to show you around- why? I want to silly- she said. I was expected, a topic of gossip no doubt.

The woman looks up and said this is my daughter, I asked her to do this for your new- be nice you too. And have fun and welcome to Bradford hun! Say hello to your dad he was a slacker in my class back in the day- your mom my pet! I smiled some and walked out the door with her girl holding my hand awkward- I don't want the boys or one thinks the wrong thing. Girls can do that right...? 'Undeniably,' she said... to me for I was thinking out loud. I get sick of hearing that one too, I can say what's on my mind. She dug through a precariously stacked pile of documents on her desk till she found the ones she was looking for. She brought several sheets to the counter to show roe, as I sat in homeroom with the boys looking at this girl- be too chatty with me- and like I was something they didn't understand.

To friendly some- a boy was sniffing my hair. Also looking down my backside. She went through my classes for me, prominence the best route to each call even if the school is a nightmare to get from one place to the other. Doors that lock- themselves I love it! Boys, that can't keep their hands to themselves I love it! Teachers that don't see anything- but you; I love that too! She gave me a yellow slip as late pass, so I would have each teacher sign stating- I was the new-be, asshole from CA! CA to PA! I became with you on the second day! Which I was to bring back at the end of the day with all the names to see if I was making it as an ass here. If I hear about this girl bleed one more time- I going to shove something in here- and it's not there- I just want to jab pins in my ears! Back to my first class, this girl was with me the whole freaking day- sucking my butt- not literary, but close She smiled at me and

hoped, like dad, that I would like it here in this d*ick of a town- was I well pledger it as I did in my home town. Speaking of that god look at that boy looking at me yet again- I smiled back as realistically as I could of his dreaminess. When I went back out to my car now at the end of day two, other students were starting to arrive outside with me in the lot. I drove around the school back to the lot I should have been in seeing all the - faces within the day- their mouth hang some with me being in my ride... following the line of traffic out and down the hill. I was glad to see, that I was not killed or flipped off - nothing flashy look at the tiny sh*it wagons.

All 2000s and crappy made... on the road- coming up to my home where I now live- I passed all the home were some have less than me- was that possible? The few lower-income neighborhoods, I could see that they were hatting on the prey girls- the group I may get it with some hope, it the boy with dreamy eyes takes me... anyways- my home is one of the shity- nicest home as they call it... I hear chat already about me and where I come from. Something I did deserver to just have fallen out of m y ass hole. They did see the car- yet that is going to be next I am sure. It was a common thing to see a new type of student in their clicks. The nicest car here was a shiny Toyotas only a year old, and it stood out... next to the miss maxed dinged up and jacked up crap everyone else had Still, I cut the engine as soon as I home and pull in the driveway- reflecting on the day- as I was in a spot of time lost in the daydream of the boy so that the thunderous volume stopped with a backfire - that wouldn't draw attention of the old bitchy lady next door that I know she thinks I'm the new town slut. Yet her grandchild girls on the see - saw are getting off- and no one gets that one. It bouncing the sit out of it... rub and play, that all I will say...

(Back)

I looked at the agenda, trying to memorize it now the days and the rotations - with the times that change too; with any luck, I wouldn't have to walk around with it stuck in front of my nose all day, like the kick my ass sing on my back and re-tard on my forehead with black sharpie. I stuffed everything in my handbag that is bigger than me, with ever food snack and drank you could want, slung the strap over my shoulder, and sucked in a huge breath one that I did not think I need to take - yet I would surely pass out. I can do this sh*it! I lied to myself weakly. No one was going to bite me - not yet anyways - with some of the eyes on me - and with some of the looks I was getting - I was begging to wonder that one also. So far, I knew I would be asking for it if I could get it- and I want him- oh yes him to do just that... kiss and suck on me, that what every girl wants - right? I kept my face pulled back into my hood as I

walked to the sidewalk, crowded with teenagers. My plain black jacket didn't stand out, I discerned with the release.

4

Back thinking about the day... The classroom where small. The individuals in front of me stopped just inside the door as we wanted of the first bell, off down the halls you see the kid in their lockers or fiddling with the lock on their way for homeroom. I imitative them and did as they did, they were 50 or so girls, one a porcelain- colored blonde, the other also pale, with light brown hair and the others had dark to what I could see without glasses it was a new look I was trying. At least my skin wouldn't be a standout here, with all the others that a far face like fallen angels.

They all look at me like a tasty snack before bedtime. As well as the want me to be the headline in the story. I took the slip up to the teacher, a tall my life history to every class that day; a hair looking the main man whose desk had a plate classifying him as Mr. Tomeans.

He gazed at me when he saw my name- he snarled at me- like I was cow-shit on his floor! Not an encouraging response to say the least- I knew I was falling already- the second day of this... and for sure, I was pissed off with no way to say what I wanted to- and I beamed the color red... with frustration and pour- anger. But then again, at least he pointed me in the direction of an empty desk at the front next to the sped kid he compared me too without introducing me to the class.

I see I am not the class retard. It was harder for my new equals to stare at me in the back, nevertheless one way or another, they accomplished just that. I kept my eyes down on the reading, an assignment that was given- a list the teacher had given me to do of why I need to be in this class- typing my name- and no basic pc skills. I'd already read everything I need to know- last year in my old school this shit is dumbed down yet the teacher, think I am the one that is the dumbass in the room. You need to do this over- why?

For I said so- that not an answer I said- you don't talk here- that's comforting... I said- go to the office... I questioned if my mom would send me my folder of old essays, so I would not have to do all this over- yet I sure with this ass it's going to be more than once of each one, or if she would think that was cheating. I went through the different arguments with her in my head was spring at the fact the teacher was a jerk to me and some others like me that were new or a type that was not his pick, while the teacher murmured on, not saying much of anything at was worth hearing about... there was even a

back story here of how he loves fishing- and why his ears were so big- and taped back as a kid. When the bell lastly rang out in, a muffled buzzing bon-n-ing sound, a gangly boy with skin problems, and hair black as an oil slick leaned across the aisle to talk to me. 'You're the CA girl- your name I don't care to sit- he looked like the more than usually unhelpful, dick you no... from your past- the kind of creep, that hangs in strip club shoving money down young girls' undies, for the hell of it... 'You CA girl' he said - I modified that with my name- yet again his said I don't care what your name is. One and all within a four-seat circle turned to look at me, being the target of his dumb puns. 'Where's your next class?' he asked.

Why?

He said- you're not going... I going to sit on your lap until you get this right- it is right. I said- no... I say not, he said to me... 'You go and you fail.' And- I walked out! I had to look into my handbag, for were to go... yet I was not staying there... for his crap. There was nowhere to look without meeting curious eyes. Or teacher, that did not get the CA girl.

I'm heading toward the environmental room, I could show you the way... the girl, which was not in my calls beforehand show out of no were- I could have used her there- hilarious you never have half eyes, when you need them.

Over-Helpful. 'I'm Julia Lynn. Jones,' he added. I grinned timidly. 'Thanks- I need you.' Awh- a friend's then? She asked I said- awh sure! (Forward up to the end of the day) We got our coats, and I dumped off my books all 10 that was weighing me down and headed out into the rain for the car that I hoped would start fast. I could have sworn and not under my breath about the whole day- several individuals in arrears around me, were walking close to me and she, so much, that is was enough to eavesdrop. I hoped- I wasn't getting paranoid, about them all not liking me. The girl Julie- we talked about my movie yet that was everyone here, and boys and girls chat... yet it was nice to see someone with a friendly face being nice to me... she was the only one, so far... I was being optimistic. 'Very...!' 'It doesn't rain much there, does it?' she said- nope- do you want to come over- sure... and she did- she was the first in my car too. 'Like- only 4 / 5 times a year.'

'Wow, what must that be like...?' she deliberated. 'It's Luminous,' She asked me? I told her yes. 'You don't look very bronzed- or covey- or virgin.' What? I squid- how would you know that- that what all the girls are saying you no. will I am- that one and sun- I was the indoors type... I hate sports or things that make you sweat. When to her home instead- where her mother is partly passed on something like alcoholic... that is mixed.' She willful my face in trepidation, and I for one moaned with a

long gasping sigh. With some hand movant, and eyes rolling to the right. It looked like clouds, and a sense of humor didn't mix. A few months of this and I'd forget how to use sarcasm. Next day - (lunch) - We walked back around the lunchroom, not long after I have a gym so I did not want to overeat.

My girlfriend Julie walked me right to the door, and down the line, though it was marked where I need to be with their looks. She not a prep - yet not a sped kid either - I not that just making a comparison. 'Well, good luck,' she said as I touched the handle. 'Maybe we'll have some other classes together today.' she sounded careful looking down her list, and then mine. I smiled at him vaguely and went inside. The rest of the morning passed in about the right - fashion. My Trigonometry teacher, Mr. Meyer, whom I would have detested anyway just for the reason that of the subject he taught, was the only one who made me stand in front of the class, looking like a dumb butt - and having to do things I hated, I never like reading in front of others or familiarize myself with new faces. Me - here - I mumbled, go red, and trip over my own feet on the way to my seat. Ha, I can rhyme... nice right?

God, I am dumb! Subsequently the two classes, I had, not long after lunch period, I was in progress to differentiate many of the faces in each period of all the classrooms. There was always someone doing something that I could not understand, or something wacky to me, and my ways of doing a thing - thing that I was not custom too... the thing that I knew where the wrong form that I would do back home. I was never one for the meet and greeting shit! It's just not my thing here... I don't like others - snobby as fuck! Plus, ask the - freak'n questions - and personal things, over and over about who I am. Diplomatic - drama - I don't give a flying shit! About you or where you're from - or what you did or did not do last night with your legs open! - God, why? As well as, that was not even in the front with the dude talking up there... I was having a 3 - way with my head! Them - and dude up there saying feaking nothing! But - blah - blah - blah! I tried to be, but mostly I just lied a - lot. Tove Lo - Habits - High all the time was playing in my mind over and over - as I was singing out the lyrics. True with me and most girls now are just that - in and out of the school walls.

The Chain-smoker's - Roses, also was playing in my earbuds as I was walking down the hall with only one in... One girl sat next to me in the room, in both Trigonometry, French, and History, and she walked with me to the refectory for lunch like the day that passed - it's all the - just one day later. She was petite, like one foot shorter than my five foot 2 inches. In contrast, her wildly curly dark hair her look cute yet odd too to me - it was all part of her - and her way wacky ways... and her bouncing off the walls - like the difference between our heights she was just a little offbeat, with the others. Brown eyes - that had to look up at me as odd too - for I was always the one to do that... I was the small one at my old

school. I couldn't recollect her name, so I grinned and bobbed my hand to her saying hey to me, as she gibbered about teachers, classes and her girlfriend that she dating. I didn't try to keep up with her motor mouth- and trippy wording, which was just too far articulate for me to grasp. So, I just had the dumbest look on my face of augh! Us- she and I, we sat at the end of a jampacked table with several of her friends, not at the lower end. Yet not popular either, whom I introduced her to Lily the girl Velcro ed to my butt I swear, to you she is... I forgot all their names as soon as she spoke them when I went down the long line of faces, which didn't like me, that much for being the girl from CA.

They seemed impressed by her bravery in speaking to me. The girl from Jess, Paul, waved at me from across the room. They're not my type yet okay. You can't have it all... I thought so why not. (Back) we were all there talking in the room seeing the eyes that were looking- and ours looking back- it's what goes on in the lunchroom- with gossiping an intake or all senses, trying to make tête-à-tête's with 5 or 6 enquiring strangers that want to know all the gross details of my life- love life- and girlie parts, that I first saw them. The only girl I like- liked was Lily. Not to date or anything- not yet- but a good girlfriend- witch I could trust here in this wasteland they call Bradford School, the groups all of them look over them with your eyes, they were sitting in their clutches some like the stoner in the corner- I do that shit yet not as much as they do- I would say we're all slackers here- that group is now everyone. Look around all the IQ's are 5% or less to me- yet they called me as that walking in the door. All the minds are lost in space- its ether the music- or the drugs- or the ass whole in- which they were brought up...

You can see the drugs rolling through this place, and the lack of caring for others, and the scents of those, which should just drop out now; and save us all from slowing down in the class were in together. Yes- I want to be as far away from that scene as I can- where I sat as possible in the long room. There were five of them. They weren't talking, and they weren't eating, though they each had a tray of untouched food in front of them. They weren't gawking at me, unlike most of the other students. So-o it was safe to stare at them without fear, of meeting an excessively interested pair of eyes.

However, it was none of those things, which held my interest, and caught, my attention. I see a boy now looking at me, there were like 5 in a grouping- at the jock table smashing food into each other's faces. Yet that is most of the boy species, Unique thought I see this one was so much lager them the other in the pack there- to descried the boy- he is what I would call muscle, a weight lifter, with dark, curly hair, and completely serious. Another was taller, was less fat, but still powerful, with honey blond hair and green eyes- the jokester, of the 5 or so I could see that from here- not much of a reader- yet he was doing something write a book, that caught my eye- so maybe there is hope for the boys in the world.

The last was lanky, less bulky, with untidy, bronze-colored hair. He was more boyish than the others, who looked like they could be in college, or even teachers here rather than students. The girls were opposites... but nice if you could say that... one more than the outer. The tall one was majestic to me yet not as a dream as him- over there... you see him- no keep looking. Don't miss him over all the others... anyways see this girl over there too she had a beautiful figure- cute something I want and might ask if... nah- at some point, the kind you see on the cover of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue - no playboy you see more nudity in that these days, the kind that made every girl around her take a hit on her self-esteem just by being in the Lily room.

Her hair was golden, gently waving to the middle of her back. The short girl was pixie-like, thin in the extreme, with small features. Her hair was a deep brown, not long yet not short, besides pointing jagged like downward in that direction. They all had very obscure- like eyes notwithstanding the range in hair tones. All of them looking differing yet the Lily, to their style... yet not in the family. All of them had a white, paling face that was eerie to me and the way I look even, with me I am white yet this was spooky. Like, have not seen the light of day for 5 years' sight. It was a sunless town anyways - you could see that- yet this was just odd to me. There are the palest of all the students, here in the varying room. There was like- no pigment in their flesh.

They also had dark shadows under those eyes - purplish, bruise-like shadows. As if they were all suffering from a sleepless night, or almost done recovering from a broken nose. Though their noses, all their features, were straight, perfect, angular. But then again, all this is not why I couldn't stare away. I was lost in it all. I was seeing all them looking at me as I was looking at them- all dis-similar. So diverse, yet- in a way- so comparable, were all overwhelmingly, coldheartedly lovely. They were expressions you never thought yah would see, to see excluding maybe on the blended pages of a style magazine.

I could say it looked as if it was highlighted by a timeworn master as the face of an angel with that look of angelic. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful - maybe the perfect blond girl, or the bronze-haired boy. They were all looking away, yet it felt like all eyes were on me - away from each other, away from the other students, away from anything in particular as far as I could tell really as of that moment.

Like the story- of forbidden... I see this go slowly. As I watched, he does... nothing but temptation, and lust... I was feeling for this boy... that was looking at me like I was his next meal. The-unbitten apple, was like kissed to his lips and I got the flash of him next to me breathing in my ear - and

ready to do the same to me on the lips. Holding me tight just as he was holding the apple- squeezing it like a hug. I sip on my milk... and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway. I watched, amazed at her lithe dancer's get up out of my set and step forward, doping my try- I see her doing the same- I sashayed through the one left side doorway, moving so much hastily, then I would have thought was possible with me being so clumsy. My eyes darted back to the others, who sat unchangingly.

'Whom are they... and why do they care about me- in this way?'

Lunch is now over- and I walked to my locker to get books- from there I go to my next class that sucks- butt- I asked the girl from my Spanish class, whose name I'd forgotten. For notes and a pen... As she looked up to see who I meant ... though already knowing, probably, from my tone ... suddenly he looked at her, the thinner one, the boyish one, the youngest, perhaps.

5

He looked away quickly, more quickly than I could, though in a flush of embarrassment, just the same as I- then- I dropped my eyes... to that feeling... the same as he... did- oh so- shyly. In that brief flash of a glance, his face held nothing of interest ... it was as if she had called his name, and he'd looked up in spontaneous response, by now have decided not to respond. Him- this boy- this one that I feel in love with at first look... He looked at my neighbor for just a division of a moment, and then his obscure eyes glimmered as they look the way into mine. Kids that don't get me- giggled, me I am in embarrassment, looking at the table like I did you want to run home and never- ever come back.

There were kids all around him blared out, all I saw- like was him... the- um- perfect love. That what I want- and what every young girl asks for- Mr. hot young and right just for her- and only hers, not to share- and vis-visas.

I peeped out of the corner of my sight, at the beautiful boy and then full-on into the eyes of the forbidden, love-stricken, I look at everything that is him his hand, his face, his fingers, his body. And those eyes that I can't stop looking at... the lips- kissing the apple... in a sucking bit. His mouth was moving very slowly passionately, his perfect lips barely opening as his hands move away from his mouth.

The other three still looked away, and yet I felt he was speaking quietly to them.

Strange, unpopular names, I thought. The kinds of names grandparents had. But maybe that was in vogue here ... small town names? I finally remembered that my neighbor was called Jessica, a perfectly common name. There were two girls named Jessica in my History class back home.

'They are... very nice-looking.' I struggled with the conspicuous understatement.

'Yes!' Jessica agreed with another giggle. 'They're all together though ... eating- yet more into me then the food going down, I mean. And they live together.' Her voice held all the shock and disapproval of the small-town feel, I thought unsympathetically- that was my first impression of her- I wounded if that would change at all. it would cause gossip if I would do anything right or wrong at this point. It was said that his dad was something important to the town... a Ph.D. of the medical filed, they had about 15 kids in their home at one time... not all theirs but- they seemed to all be the same in away. There was one in each grad... all good kids and old-fashion if you want to point it out. ' you the type 50's whys of thinking- really kind over nice ... like I think it's nice for them to take care of all those kids when they're so young and everything themselves. They are young... also- it doesn't look right to me... when I passed them going down the street... in my car.'

Throughout this discussion, my eyes flickered again and again to the table where the strange family sat. They continued to look at the walls and not eat. 'I guess so,' Jessica admitted reluctantly, and I got the impression that she didn't like the doctor and his wife for some reason. With the glances she was throwing at their adopted children, I would presume the reason was jealousy.

'I think that Mrs. Cullen can't have any kids, though,' she added as if that lessened their kindness. 'Have they always lived in town- she said?' I did not ask- yet I got the info. Surely, I would have observed them on one of my summertime here with my dad in years past. I felt a gush of shame, and release of anger. Disappointment for the reason that, as lovely as they were, they were popular- the most- of all them. Respited by all... He must be, the youngest, one he looked up and met my gaze yet again, this time with evident inquisitiveness in his appearance. As I observed summarily away, it seemed to me that his glance held more love than I ever thought possible... something... I could not explain. He has black hair... blue eyes... just everything right...I peeked at him from the corner of my eye- as I sat look past them all into those eyes, that glowed- like...and he was still staring at me- with lust, gazing hard, and long not braking the look- I was it... confused was the expression we both had... Then I glanced at him again- like- he's gorgeous to me, I knew he was feeling the same it was showing to them all that

heat me for it... of course, but don't waste your time. It was- said- in the chats, he doesn't date a girl- that- none fit his type. None of the girls here are good-looking enough for him, or slut is not the type.

My undies don't come off- ha- look at this one she not wearing any... she sniffed and whipped her nose- grossly, just pick it I thought- a clear case of fucking- freaking- piss-e grapes. I wondered when he'd turned her down. my smile is hidden under my frown... as I bit my lip- shyly. I was nervous not to be late for class on my first day. I sat at the table with Jessica and her friends... The girl- I was saying about- she was shy, too... with him... yet his friend so maybe I will put up with her. His face was smiling, she turned away, longer than I would have thought- if I'd been sitting alone, I would feel as she did. but I thought his cheek appeared lifted, after a few more minutes, the four of them left the table together. They all were noticeably graceful ... even the big, brawny one. It was unsettling to watch.

The one named Edward didn't look at me again.

6

He and I- We walked to class together in silence. Just look into those eyes... As I walked down the aisle to introduce myself to the teacher and get my slip signed, I was watching him surreptitiously. Just as I passed, he suddenly went rigid in his seat. He stared at me again, meeting my eyes with the strangest expression on his face ... it was hostile, furious. I looked away quickly, shocked, going red again. When we entered the classroom, He went to sit at a black-topped lab table exactly like the ones I was used to. He already had a neighbor. All the tables were filled but one. Next, to the center aisle, I recognized him by his unusual hair, sitting next to that single open seat, we sat side by side. I kept my eyes down as I went to sit by him, puzzled by the unfriendly stare he'd given me you hard to get. I stumbled over a book and my own feet like always, in the walkway, between desks, and had to catch feel dumb... The girl sitting there giggled and then they all did when I fell into his lap... that looked n ice... I'd noticed that his eyes were black ... coal-black, then I saw his posture change from the corner of my eye... Mr. Shanner signed my slipup and handed me a book with no gobbledygook about outlines. I do is look at him during the class... I set my book on the table, I could tell we were not going to get along... me and this teacher... Of course, he had no choice but... but to be a dick... for me think the boy was more entertaining. I questioned my judgment on Jessica's bitterness at lunch today. Maybe she was not as resentful as I'd thought. The class seemed to hold out- on longer than the others with his look at me, and the other way around. Was it for the reason that the day was finally coming to a close, or for the reason that I was waiting for his tight fist to untie? Was this his normal behavior? To look at me in this

way? The way he made me feel as good and yet uneasy... I feel myself, shrinking in my chair, my spring of his lustful thought of what he could do to me. I could do so much to him... you could feel this in... in your mind. Then- the bell rang loudly in my ears, making me jump high- all twitchy, and he was out of his seat so fast I could not even see the blur. Tall- and good looking is all I could say... to that loss of my mind's thought... I was dumbfounded- over him. Blanking- I sat frozen in his wonder in my fantasies of daydream sex dreams... of rip him naked, and kiss him all over... that body... that was right. I wanted to claw the shit out over him rocking- in my bed. It wasn't fair... no what do I do- feel lost without him doing this... I never- um well... feet like this... I looked up to see a cute at his locker, baby-faced boy that I have been thinking about non-stop, hair carefully gelled into orderly spikes, smiling at me in a friendly way- I want to touch yet could not- want to speak yet couldn't do that either- it would not work for me.

He didn't think I smelled bad. We walked to class together; he was a chatterer ... he supplied most of the conversation, which made it easy for me. turned out he was in my English class also yet one room over. He was the nicest person I'd met today, I wanted more... a-lot more. I wanted to be kissed... like all the other sluts I see... getting more than me. 'I never spoke to him more than two words it was all in the way we looked at each other- that said it all- lost in the eyes.' Some will not get this- and those that don't have to feel this feeling. I smiled at him before walking through the girls' locker room door. I was getting naked and think about him doing this too... god, I heat this boy for making me feel this way- why? The Gym teacher, is looking at me- feeling myself up- 'what the hell? Move it!' 'BOOB- SQEZZING!'- save it for home- she said the new girl- in call the girls were mean- and we rain- and jumped and sat up and down- jump-n' freakin' jack.

7

It's a new day- I see him at the desk in front of me- in some call that has no name to me- so what I saying I don't give a shit- about it. The-hair- the face- the dick, it was all there right. He didn't appear to notice the sound of my entrance. I stood pressed against the back wall, waiting for the receptionist to be free. Him- with the voice low and sweet, was doing all the same as before...

That is when I asked and we did in the locker room... he trusted me into him... and it was all over I was in love with him more than ever.

The next day- it was like it never happened- he did not me-

That went on for 2 years me heating myself for loving him...

It was not nightfall yet, and no longer day, it was the time where it was hard for me to sleep and feel right about what I was doing to end the day- yet I am a girl. The time of day when I wished I was able to sleep. Death do you think of it?

Funny every day, or every time I have my hand here, I am thinking of that boy, him I am thinking about how I might pass on in this life if he was ever to go all the way with me. High school, cool- hell no- me cool I was at my old one. Or was agony the right word to say about the movie? If there any way to apologize for my sins, it would be to say I loved the forbidden, a boy like him, this I ought to total toward the tally in some measure.

The tediousness was not something, I grew used to; with him, day in and day out in the school's something I loved- something I cannot do without- every day seemed more impossibly repetitious than the last. I suppose this was my form of sleeping alone at night without my love. Lost in a dream would be fine, here is where I see it all unfold out before me... You can see me moving my way into the hallways- I started running through the jocks and preps and guys in coat in the far corner of the cafeteria, I was walking now her form the bathroom here, I did my hair and looked in the glass to see if my face had changed any from the morning- imagining patterns into them that were not there. It was one way to tune out the voices that babbled like the gush of a river inside my head. It was the first time - the first time- I fell in love with the forbidden- like the last time- I kissed haunted lips. The first time... Yes- now I am gasping for air after that long kiss.

Yes- I just got kissed- Kissed by the death- the kiss of what I was so longing for. Nope- nothing could ever stop me from dying... in the arms of the one that I love so-o. Nevertheless, I wanted to anyways... I want to do just that to keep him.

Maybe- I was too blind to understand, that maybe faith could free me from this once and for all.

On the other hand, here I am wedged in a wooden box with a ton of dirt adjoining me, with blackness. From this never-ending obscurity and undying plague. I'm just an ordinary girl for an ordinary town in having an ordinary life. It's not just a box-likee, why would anyone want to put me into this coffin? I'm underground... no? Nocking- Nocking- Tap- tap- tapping on the box- yet was there everybody out there trying to find me? All hope was gone at this point as the air was getting thin.

Get out of here before you die- or am I died? I had only one thought- at this point getting out of it. I punch and punch so hard. Dirt was coming in like a river pouring into a shallow area. I have to get out! I have to get out! I must get out! My hand became swollen and bloody I punch the wooden ceiling- of this box hard! Questioning- with my thoughts of the mind- I didn't want to die- predominantly like this, at least not in this why... The hard I taped the less, I felt okay with it all. It made no difference. 'Crap!' I should be bleeding yet I am not- I small and rub my raw hurting fists. The worst pain was coming from within- and I was not sure why at this point- I was confused. What would it be? What and why was this confusing happing to me? If I have one wish while in this situation, it would be to see why - why is the question.

I was so-o forced to think- and my mind eked, as I thought hard, and hard in the darkness and thinning air. I wiped away all the tears coming from my eyes as they ran down my cheeks - and yet I did not get why I felt this way at 15. Is it so- hard to think of the one last thing that I want- like a kiss- or more? Is it so wrong... to lust for an older man in you- and feel all that is you and he together- in love?

Was there never- ever any purpose in my life, until I found him? Or did he take that away from me? Is all that gone now? Is there zero- nothing- I ever wanted that badly to have in, and with me than him- what I could not have- I was coming to it some? Right now, should be saddened by all this and the knowledge of this fact? 74 hours have passed now so I think - soon as the oxygen in this box will run out... it's a matter of time. Just part of the fact that my life above was over.

A thought- My mother's resentful words starting ringing in my ears. One day you'll see what you did wrong and it will come back to haunt you! It will be the only place you'll have left to go to- and that is the place for forgiveness- if you can get it- at this point- she said- meanly. You need to be saved, yet you'll never be- she though, Mom- if you don't want to be the heated witch. Mom- Do you see... what I am saying to you? - You say you believe in Him. Then be with him- and that is what I did to be here now- where did I go wrong?

9

A crack- I dug, I pawed through the dirt-digging- digging- the small glimmer of light- I climbed, it's air- yes- I could the feel air coming in? I kick and kick until my feet were cut, but I did it I got out, nevertheless, I had to hurry. 'Hey! Who's there? 'A farmer calls out. I gasp in fear of being noticed and run more. I continued digging with my eyes looking at the light- of hope to get out, and I finally stuck my head out into the air. I looked at my surroundings - awe- it's all most there... I said. My breath quickens

faster- faster- and faster- as I think about the world around me. Thinking about how I used to glance up at the brightening expanse of the sky, I bite my lip. I could see slivers of light with-in the box's boards. That is when I knew that I was not cover over completely yet with the earth above me. That dawn was showing me the light looking at the patches of growing crops, I realized that farmers would be out soon.

Naturally, my heart-wrenching incomprehension, that I have been living a life which had no purpose... whatsoever? Maybe that's not true and maybe not- yet I questioned. Maybe my life isn't ending at all- and yet I question this also? All this was just a sick twist of my fate, just to see if I would get the picture. Like- too wake me up, and bring me closer to that resolution- this was all okay at my young age. Um-hmm- I must hide before the run me out once again.

They- the ones that never- ever got me and him- in the first place. I ran- like I never ran like this before- crazy though the woods they were greenish in color with fog! As I run towards the church, near to me about 20 feet or so away, I went into it asking what I knew I could not have. I decided to go inside, and let the doors close behind me; so that the farmer cannot get to me. I realized it's been really- long since I have been to a church the last time was when I was six-year-old or so-o. like- a practical joke that life has played on me- by the fallen. That day is on its way, where I fall too... to all the crap they say I have coming to me. You'll have no one to help you, I hear the voices of the fallen in my head giggling at what I did now that I feel I am the dead girl walking- and I'll feel the wrath- of the red flaming man under my feet for it.

Mom- said- You'll see. The time will come when I well am right as always. Though- I'm still not a believer- in what they call above- I am not of the one below- until now- but it's funny either way to me for she said- the day would come, and it did. Like- it was wished on me- by her and my home town where they did not get my type or his. At last, here I am, where I thought, where I thought I would never be. Feeling hobbled inside as I did, I was astonished by what I saw- and that was me believing in this... faith carp.

I couldn't believe my eyes- to all the things flying around me- seraphs. Could this be? No? Yes? It was... or am I hallucinating? At this point my mind I was too damn tired to differentiate between what's real, and what was unreal. Nevertheless, I see what I never believed in... I walk, to the front of the alter he looks up from the book in which he was reading. It's not a Bible... I was sure- I knew him, all right- the man up there standing as a father- he gives me his sperm witch made my life- in more than

one was- yet he hide behind the all holly ways, it was my dead dad- like giving me his wishes of what to do next. It looks to be an old book on philosophy- that I still can't get away from- this is why I gave up on it- you preach it yet doesn't live it.

11

'How did you get here?' He said as he smiled, and then closes the book- looking into my eyes to see if there were pure. 'You weren't hard to find.' He stands from the pew he was at and gives me a once over. 'It's a good look for you.'

'What...? Dirt and near-death?' He smiles again... The wrinkles around his eyes crinkle slightly, and the light caught his salt and pepper slicked-back hair. 'No- existence goes without punishment.' I don't know how long; I was out there hearing all this crap. It could have been all day; it could have been weeks. I don't know... I am so confused. 'You look good for a young girl that been rolling around in the dart.' He said mocking me- for he thinks I the dirty girl!

'Heh- thanks... I guess- for doing this to me daddy.' I chuckled and looked at him. knowing he was the first too... and my mind went hazy-.' I must ask you something... I think I saw you back when they pushed me into the cold hard ground and you buried me. Is that right? Haha- my child- you know nothing of your life and the wrongs you made.

Like- daddy you were there in the crowd- no? Ha- he was chuckling hard. Why did you let them bury me? I'm your daughter, and yet you treat me like a stranger- or your altar boy in the night. That just not right... daddy, I said- with fear. He kept on smirking at me with that sideways smile. I yelled would you stop looking at me like that, I knew he would... -and my mind went blank-.

So freak'n creepy! It is starting to freak me out. 'You wanted me to stay out of your life he said to here. That was one way that you would be gone, I knew you would come crawling back, you always come back. Like the little girl that you are, but this time was the longest you have been gone. It's been a long time.' He rubs his hands over the book and sighs. Saying- I am better than you'll ever be- even with my sins- that you know nothing about. 'But I guess- if you truly want me to, I'll get more involved from now on- with you.' It was said. I frowned- like don't bother yourself. 'That didn't answer my question.' He smiles again in a creeper way. Even creepier than before. I thought he's fake teeth were going to poop, of the so-o wide smile.

His eyes narrowed at me. 'Yes, I was in the crowd.' My dad raises his old wrinkled hand to keep me from speaking 'Don't you ever freak'n interrupt me. If I had interfered, they would have killed me. Then who would keep an eye on you?' I can feel my anger rise. 'Someone who lets me get buried alive... how can you say that?' 'Yes, I had too I didn't have a freaking choice! Okay!' I said- 'I just wanted you to give me some space, but you're meant to protect me and look after me. It sounds to me that you wanted me to be gone.'

I felt my eyes knowing they were getting teary, so I wiped away my tears; before he could see my cry, like the little child he thinks I am. How did I get this why? It was slowly coming back to me. Even so, what's he doesn't know is that I had someone - that I loved more than him - and more than what he called love. We were a- lot alike with our past lives.

Yes, someone that loved me more than he ever could or would, that was everything to me. However, just like my dad, he was killing me in so many ways. Killing me slowly, mentally, physically, and spiritually. It's like he holds in my breath, and I can let him out. I know the closer he gets to me, the closer he gets to kill me with his lusting voluptuous kiss.

(Back before the end)

But- but- but- I want it! I want to feel it! That fine with me I guess, but we have not even made out yet! You are slowly sucking the life out of me; I know you can't help it like I can't help loving you. Or did we...? 'If I have

to die to have your love then so be it!' THIS IS WHAT I SAID- AND WHAT I DID- AND WHAT I LET HIM DO TO ME FOR LOVING LUST!

That's what I said to him. 'Just kiss me, AND

TAKE ME FOR YOURS'S- YOU CAN NOW- IT'S LEGAL- for my mom signed for us... I can't take not having you in my life. IT WAS SAID! And if my life ends, then we can live in forever, together if there IN THE afterlife, only if that is if you choose to die for me too - RIGHT NOW. As I will for you.' THE KISS - So what do you want to do? To kiss or not to kiss, that is the question?

WELL...?

(Now)

I'll say that I don't want you in my life... OKAY.

LIKE- just I said with my dad.

Why must I push everyone away?

Nevertheless, which is just a lie. 'I want you! I must have you!' IT WAS SAID.

Edward- 'I need you; I must have you! All of you! I must taste the kiss; you want to give to me- AS I WANT TO GIVE IT TO YOU. Till death do we part, with all my heart, crossed and hope to die in your arms? I know that making love to you would rip us apart.' I recall whispering back in his cold ear- 'It's this love, you would give me that would go right through me, as we would get ever so closer to eternal love. I want it! Do you want me?

Death is the passion, I am longing for THOSE kisses now down on my lips, and I will be forever yours! And you'll be forever mine.'

The last time... I was in the church, and I confessed my love for you- I knew this would be like this it was all coming back to my mind what I did.

Beforehand asking if I would be forgiven, for my wrongs, even if I don't have complete faith I thought. I assumed what do I have to lose- I'll try. I'll get into the dress, and confessed my- everything to you. In-front of the man of God- yes, I would even if it was something, I was not sure about at that time. I said the 'I do's,' and so did he. I knew that it's wrong. I knew that I was too young, so young that I'm not sure if I knew what love was, or what it entailed.

Nevertheless, I said 'Let's do this, let's go all the way, and never look back, let's make the earth move tonight, I want to feel your breath on my young alive skin. I want to feel what it would be like when you're killing me with that kiss, as you take me for your lover now and forever. I want to be deflowered, as you place a flower on my grave and follow me to the promised land. 'Come and

hold my hand.' That is what I said. I breathed so deeply knowing that maybe today will be my last breaths at all.

The wedding night: I remember standing there unclothed- 'I quivered, I trembled, and I felt my knees knocking together. I could see him walking towards me. Oh yes looking stronger and mighti er than ever before. His manliness was just thumping in-front of me- odd for a man that may not be alive. I did not even know that was possible, or what that thing was coming for me.

Yet again- I am only fifteen years old.

My thoughts- I am so hoping that I am not making a big mistake, eager that your love for me is not fake. I don't want to be used, and left for dead, like men such as yourself, have done to me in the past. Everything I know and love in my life, I must forsake just to have you. Then I thought- Even if he doesn't love me, I know that I will never get away- or did I want to I am young was not sure about anything for they say I can think for myself.

He's eye like my soul linked now forever- matted for life- overall. That- like his feelings of being with me- in me- well always be there like- looking over me, even if we don't end up together forever- in this afterlife. Not sure where we would go after that kiss of death. Even if he doesn't truly love me, as I do him... I feel for how bad I was- the first time. Somehow, I know that I will never get away from his charm, never-ever being able to run away from his stony- yet glittery eyes, that make my week and lustful. Like- well he always is looking over me, even if we don't end up together for always.

I will always feel him inside me!

Feeling all that is him running through my veins, and driving me to complete madness.

Just like the poison- passion of that first kiss.

The kiss at the altar- was not the death kiss at all, it was the ones sucking down on my lips- and the sucking kiss we're sharing now dooring the lovemaking. He is coming into my bloodstream. I feel me pouring the toxins out my most erotic pulsating girly parts of my body. We will be bonded for life, and lives that come after. We will be like one being or so that was wishful thinking. There is no escaping it now... nor do I want too. I just want it to keep on coming, it feels that good. Oh- what he is doing to me. It's ripping through me... but I love it. It is like spraying like pouring rain and it's mixing with mud on the ground under my feet.

Plus, I am drizzling with his poison all over my chest, face, and my girly opening, it is all coming out of me too; like a river of love. It has to be the best feeling in this world.

Yes- I am spraying the wetness, it is dripping like my eyes when he was not near me all the time in the days of the past. And when he is not near me, he's creeping in my mind whe n he is gone. He plays with my feelings- I know this.

The - way he likes to play with me in his cold candle light bedroom. He builds me up so far and stops, and then when he comes for me to come with him, it's even stronger, just like I come twice has hard for him. It's the - way. Just like the candle that he blows out with his expired breath, he blows me to a place I never been to. As he crawls beside me, he blows that - icy breath on me, as he covers me with kisses, all over my little body. After all, it is our first night sleeping together.

It has to be romantic! His eyes glow like the full yellow moon at midnight, which I see from the cracked glass windows that rattle as the wind gusts through the maple trees. As I lay my tiny head on his motionless chest, I am naked and carefree and fall asleep un-top of his chilly torso, I feel that rigid body that never needs rest at all. Everything is eerily perfect... naturally, I look forward to the dawn of daylight. In a way, I don't care if I wake up!

Yes, it was just that good!

Yet I have to wonder what if...

12 will I see the light of day; everything is black I don't know... as love is being made - and I slowly start losing a life? Either way, I am contented, this is when this all start of me being in th is haze. Like- just being in the arms of my love for this only night.

Is it black because there is no light in the room? Or is black because I am possibly dying?

Is this death?

If so, I did not see it be like this at all.

Where am I now?

I slowly open my eyes... I am not sure if I see anything. I feel freaked up in the head. Like I had the shit banged out of me. Which is possible... I think it happened. Am I died or alive? Am I alive or dead? Is he dying with me or not? Why am I not feeling his touch?

Am I bleeding too much- was the real death or the kiss of his fangs?

Should I be feeling something?

I feel the air getting bleak, am I even breathing, I can't tell at this point? I never felt so alive even if this is the death, I never been so thrilled to death in my life.

'We should see the gates by morning. We should be inside in the evening.'

The last kiss was everything, all that I was hoping for, and more, but is this darkness, that is all that was around me now or nothing more.

13

(In the coffin)

I am just dreaming about this?

Is this happening to me?

Am I seeming people, seeing me go down?

Am I not seeing him going down with me?

Do I feel the ground encasing me?

That is when I realized I was in this wooden coffin. Was I covered over last night with the earth above? At that time, I didn't know. Was I dressed in a lacey nightgown and nothing else, I was panties-less, limp, and almost motionless with a red rose on my chest? I could smell the faint scent; it was from the wedding bouquets. Was there no one there to see me other them him, when I was lowered down in these six-foot wholes? Was he the one that placed this flower on me, or was it someone else? I want to know what happened.

Did anything happen? I'll I had were my thoughts talking to me, and there were deafening.

I think I evoke hearing every one of those nine-inch nails being hammered in my coffin, which sealed my fate. Yet was it the kiss that killed me? Was it more than a kiss? Why was I put in the ground?

If so, was I still so much alive? Is it because of who I am? I can't die... or am I? I am so confused! What happened to me last night? I can pound on this wood till my fist is blood-spattered, or is that blood or embalming fluid?

I guess that is why I have slashes at my feet. I was drained of all my blood. Can anyone hear me? 'Hello! Anybody out there- I need help!' The cemetery is still, with only creepy hunting sounds, which I make up in my mind in fear. I'm calling out for help, nonetheless, the skeletons next to me in their timeworn boxes in this old cemetery aren't answering me anytime soon. It seems that the only memo, I am getting out to the folks that walk on top of me is what is printed on my headstone.

And that's not much of anything for a girl my age, I never did anything spectacular. So, all that is printed in my name, date of my birth, and the date of my supposed death.

Will I be saved, or was I? Why am I so muddled?

(After getting out of the box)

I'm riddled with fear... so, I ran away from him. As I ran into the woods, something occurred to me. I have nowhere to go. No family that wanted me, no friends. Nothing, but everyone in town believing that I was a witch- even if I was just an agave teen girl that wanted an old man that could be a fallen angel- what's wrong with that?

They believed I was a witch, and a murderer because, I was found standing over a nine-year-old dead girl's body her name was Halley- she was his blood trust for the year- I knew- yet feed off animals doesn't work- or to stop that hunger for young girlie blood. As well as they all instantaneously made the town made their own rules- about me and what happened.

So, I had to run and never be found by anyone but him, otherwise, I knew I would be burnt at the stake. I heard the town's folks saying, as I ran past like a mad girl- that they were going to throw me in the river. And if I did not drown, then I am truly a witch- if I would swim. Either way, I would be dead for really real. What am I half dead?

But- how, and where do I go now?

14

Edward- affirmative, I killed her I did not want to do it.

Then again, I had other reasons for doing it.

Yes, other than them saying- I had too.

Yet it was the only way I could be with her, being like this is not what I wanted.

I didn't want to suck the life out of her, I have been dyeing myself for over a hundred years now, and I been with a lot of girls, nevertheless, they were not like her. None of them have been as good as she was, she had me coming back for more and more.

She needs me to come to her as I need her to come to me.

Who I am to you mere mortals?

I am a monster!

Something not unstudied for being me…

15

Can call me by my current name-

Edward Damsel… This is true, that I wanted to marry for the last time.

No- I didn't want to suck her blood, I said that I would stop doing this, but it's like sex- ones you do it with a virgin, you want to keep having it more and more, and you have a bond to them.

I remember my first time. That was oh so long ago…. With her, I could not help myself. She was so young and lovely, so tight and fit.

I loved her ways, and her voice, and her little smile, she was everything I ever dreamed of before I become this. I am not one of those types. I feed off the kiss and stop before going all the way, I have had many young girls, and have taken a lot of them. In my lifespan I had many young girls like her fallen in love with me, and why not I am their fantasy man.

Yet I am no Edward Cullen, yet I am the next best thing.

They just can't help it… I do truly love her, I want to stop doing this. I want her to be the last girl I am with… can a fallen angel be with a girl that was alive, that he killed in a night of passion, for being what everyone thinks is a witch because of it also?

Should I bring her back to life, and dig her back up to be a monster like myself? Should I saver and

save her? We would be perfect together with a witch and a fallen angel, it could be a happy ever after for both of us. I know this will piss off a lot of people out there if I do this, yet that is half the fun. Come to my surprise, I went to the grave and she was gone... Where did my love go?

Come out, come out wherever you are! Oh, I see that you want to play a little game with me. Okay- I guess I have to find you, my one-day-old bride. I cover my eyes and count to ten...

1...2...3...4...5...5...7...8...9...10!

I am on my way my darling! 'Yes, I ran from him as I ran from all of them, was he any different, I did not know. I was just like my dad in every way, I fear this fact. But my dad didn't want to kill me, or did he? Christer-Edward didn't want to either, or did he? Even now I want to be killed over and over by his kiss... if that's how it needs to be. I still love him. Like I still love my dad. Even if he is an asshole.

16

I watched her fall on to the ground with me on top. Yet it was not her at all, it was some random dead girl, which looked to be the age of ten or so, that was hung- for doing less than I. I got off of this poor girl and was horrified. So, I ran and jogged, looking for her once more... as see vanished into the woods- I didn't know that she was no scared of me, and what I did to here- it was in love- all this- that I did.

(It was not even about the blood.)

Eager that this would not be the result again. When I found her- she was sitting on what I thought was a rope tree swing, all alone in the thick fog she was naked. 'No- No- No!' I screamed.

She was hanging in the air. I was wonder also if I went too far, and I did. That was not her heart beating at all, definitely not... it was the left-over blood and embossing fluid dripping from her gashed feet. It was the sound of dripping on the ground, I could see this trill also from when she was running.

I am relieved that the hunger wolves didn't descend on her. There's my love hanging from a nose, she knew they would find her. I know she was not afraid of me to do this. I guess she could not stand being without me?

However, should I bring her to life once more, so she can truly become like me and never die? Should I do it? Should I kiss her again to bring her back to life?

Why did she do this?

Or did she?

(Back)

Why I went to him for love and someone to trust- maybe it was the angry mob people form the town- I call them wolfs, with their flaming torches, swords, and pitchforks from the village, which strung her up as she was running from them; for me to find because I didn't do the job they asked me to do. I guess killing her the way I did- was not good enough! I climb the tree with more of a struggle than I thought was possible.

How do people manage to climb trees, and make it look so easy? I thought... she's unclothed. She's getting colder... so-o yes, she is dying- I said by the feel. I looked at my pocket, and in it, I was lucky enough to have my trusty knife and cut the rope, and this was of the dead girl that was hung, and I kissed her and brought her back to life as a monster just like me. She became my little girl- yet

I knew I would lose her too- for being what I am to her- and that was her KILLER! YET, I ALL WAYS WANTED TO BE A DAD- NO I AM- and it was agent this 10-year old's well!

17

My new little love- my new little bundle of Lily, she fell to the ground, and that is when - I thought- I heard her make a slight gasp for air. Did I just hear that? Or was there someone there? I could not have a baby- so I stooled one for my own.

Naturally, I cut the rope, and she flopped around like a dead fish in the mud on the ground below. Then I climbed the tree once more, with her in my one arm, I did hear someone, and it was more than one. The mob of wolfs come all around the tree, there they are pocking us with their sharp weapons- I hope they give up soon... or before they think about lighting us up.

Me being the man that I am... I saw that my girl... and was like I have too... she was dead at 10- that's just wrong. Why? Cute- yet her hair and body were to dirty for my liking. I couldn't let her be

like this. So, I am going to have to find a river, or something and bath her! Before I want to give that long kiss to bring her to what I am- yet I cannot overdo as you know.

18

No- I don't care if she is naked when I kiss her... do they- just as long as she has slickly smooth skin. It would be more romantic! Hum- they must have tried to grab her by that nighty she had on that, they hung her in, I put her in when she sprinted. This girl was charged with having a boyfriend at 10 years old- I say so what- even if she did- why kills her for it.

Finally, the mob gave up after a very long night of us sitting out on a limb high up in that tall old tree. They went back home to their families, yet I knew they would be back soon enough.

Like really get a life... I walked and walked, tripping over logs and sticks in these dark, and unsympathetic woods. Just holding her in my arms.

Almost like a baby in the arms of her daddy.

I found the river I was looking for, after walking for a very long time. Nevertheless, I ran to it. I placed her down, and then I got nude also, and I walked into the soft movie water in the moonlight, with her in my arms. Then I kissed her forehead... saying-' I'll bring you back to me... I will- my love.'

The river was cold but refreshing. I got the mud out and off of her face, and I splashed the water all over her and rubbed her skin with my hands, I washed her long hair, and brushed it out with my fingers. I had my sharp knife with me in my hand, and I shaved my girl, I did her underarms, legs, and vagina. As well as I could, I know that she would want me to do that, she is a girl after all. And I am her man like her dad, and let's not forget I am her savior. I think I have a right to do this... NO?

19

Plus, now it's the way I want her to be, I look at her she's so sweet, even like this limp and not moving. She is perfect... to call all mine. She is completely faultless to these old eyes, as I lay her in the grass to dry off. That is when I found Lily- she walked up to me asking what I did- to this girl- that is why she ran- I got down, and I laid next to her also.

I look up at the billions of stars over us, with this mixed-up family- wishing on one that she was alive- like my others little one, so we could just hold each other- as a young couple with a little one

would do in the town, at this very moment. Looking over the water, with the moon setting with it glowing on the reflection ripples. I lay my head on her chest, but there is no sound coming with-in her torso- of the little girl- she was now like me a fallen angel, with a witch for a mom - all I can hear is the river splashing. It saddens me at this most perfect of moments - that this was the outcome of both young lives for not understanding and judging before getting the whole story. 'You have to read between the lines to get it.'

20

The young girl- If only I could have the power to bring her to life - as I did with my girl that was put in the ground - just to cover it up - I cried as her limp lifeless body laid on my lap.

Even as she's dead, her hair shines in the moonlight. It just glimmers like the stars shining endlessly. Lily was my heart and my soul and yet she has been taken from me. A piece of me was taken and could never be restored as her soul would never come back. I look at the dark sky with its bright full moon.

If only there was a shooting star. Nonetheless, that's only superstitions. I remember my father talking about it as if it was witchcraft and to never believe in it or mention it. That talk was the only time that we had a good moment.

There were not many I can assure you.

But then I'm alone, dripping wet and cold. I know that the mob wouldn't stop and search for me. The mob of wolfs would continue to hunt me down in the daylight. I'm suddenly getting hungry and Lily was only going to slow me down. Then the thought occurred to me, how did the mob know where to find me, and that I was still alive to I was meant to go down with her.

21

Edward- who betrayed me? Was it my unloving father or the girl, I loved too much? Everything I want seems to fade from me, I knew I had to keep going or I was going to join her. I didn't want to die. I'm only eighteen, or so that is what everyone thinks.

(Back)

(The little girl's thoughts)

I am too young to die... she saying as the lead her to the tree... and I know my future will be big.

Like Lily- or mom- I have to continue to run also, Edward I to- hiding and leaving the girl I loved too much, in random spots. As death in boxes to cover her up to this world.

I know I would return to her one day. 'Goodbye, my love. May we see each othe r once again?' Written by

Lily- Maybe I needed to kill my father to bring her back to life, he is the one that started all this. Yet I swear that I would never take another life, and kissing your dad on the lips like that to me is wrong. Yet it is worth thinking about. I chopped down several logs with my knife and rock, and made a lean-to shelter for her, I placed flowers that

I picked around her now frosty body as a memorial.

I had to leave her behind, it was the hardest thing I ever had to do! I just want to give up and stay there with her. Yet I knew I had to go, but not for long, I would be back for her. When I had the right spill, love potion, or a night with a shooting star.

I had to find someone to help me with this rejuvenation or my love. I didn't know if it was like a dance, which I need to do or a chant, or what. I just did not know. I was clueless at what it would take, to have your back. Who do I go and see about this without them thinking that I am completely crazy? Besides would it be wrong for me to want to bring her back to life?

She's the dyed girl I loved, that is resting in peace now- as I had to leave her there just for a while.

Treasured in my heart you'll stay until we meet again someday. Death is the last chapter in time, but the first chapter in eternity. But my biggest question is will I see you there if I fail at this like my dad said I failed at everything I ever tried? God- I love to hate that man! He did nothing but abuse me. And as soon as I do, I find love... I have to lose it. Is it because of him?

Why- I ask? Why me... haven't I been through enough pain? I remember one of my punishments as a kid was getting locked into splintered wood head and hand locking gates, and the town would walk by spitting on me, throwing stones, my dad tolled every one that I was touching myself,

because I couldn't get a girl to have sex with me or get a date, and that was forbidden at the time. And doing that was considered a crime. He chased them all away- it was him, not me, which was the issue!

She was the only real love I ever had...! I recall my bastard of a father even tried to do it with my girl, asking her to get down on her knees, the night I brought her home. I felt bad for him, I let him move in here. He tried to get her to make him happy. He'd even touch her the - way, that I have seen him touch my mother it made me sick. I stopped him before she had to take it all down. He was falling drunk. That is why my mother let him, all those years ago.

He would tie her down to the bed, and do it so many times, and shoving it in so hard that she bloods out for days after. That is how I was made, he raped and sodomized her every night in ways you can't even image, or don't want too. Now he wants to do them - with her no it's not happening. I won't let it. I would never look at a broom the - way. When she was fourteen, she got pregnant, and in those days, you had to marry the father of your baby. She said that if she would get away, she would never come back not even for me. I think father blames me for her leaving, plus he didn't have anyone to bang or bang around anymore, so he took it all out on me. If my mother would be alive today, she would be 264 years old, then me.

She passed giving birth to her second baby named Ashlyn. Mother, she bled to death from tearing and ripping when she pushed her out. Ashlyn was born in the early 1700s and dyed at the age of six, from drowning in the wash tube. I never meet her... and hear it in the late 1900s and I'm still alive. Sometimes I lose track of time and dates.

On the other hand, my wife was born in 1999, and she passed on this year. Good God how things have changed all these many years. I worked for the Ford Motor company in 1909, I saw the first model- T drive away. I have seen it all... I remember the Titanic making the papers, as the ship that was not unsinkable. I have seen all the wars, I even been in ww2, and was shot in the head. Yet I will not die... I just stay the - age of 18. I have graduated from high school six times, in different towns... Hell back in the early day's us boys dropped out in sixth grade, to work in the coal mines, I recall my lunch bucket scraping on the railroad tracks as I walk in the dark to work as a little one.

Yeah, I have been in school many times just so I would fit in. I have seen a lot of people die. I wonder what complete death is like... I wouldn't know, I was kissed by death by a ten-year-old named Julianna she was the daughter of a nurse... I don't know why she picked me? She became my first love in my life, and she reminds me so much of Lily, anyways she was a fallen angel, so was her mom... I was

deathly sick with pneumonia, in the hospital and she kissed me on the lips and that was it I was 18 forever.

She was my girl until my dad had her killed, with a wooden stake through the heart. I don't know if he gave the order... yet I blame him for her death too. I have no clue how he knew that she was a fallen angel, other them the sparkle her big blue-green eyes. I have seen a lot of babies being born too. I became a doctor in that field, helping with childbirth, I made a promise to my mother that no girl under my care would die the way she did, legs open, vagina ripped to her butt, only to die on the cold table, with no one caring, as the placenta is ripped out and thrown to the floor as the baby cry's, for a mother that's never going to be there for her.

Yeah and the only reason, I have to put up with my perverted dad, is that I know that he forced a sucking kiss on Ashlyn a day before her death. So, I am not sure, he not going to be leaving me anytime soon.

Oh, and the only way I thought I could die, is if Lily and I kissed for so long that we both suck the life out of each other, or she ran a stake in my chest. Yet that is just mythology to me. All these many years, I never ask, how to die or how to live, or how to get someone back. I wish I did, so she can live... I don't know I never asked, how this all works, it's not like today's books have it right.

Yet I want to live life with her. But what can I do? She's dead... So, saying that Lily was the only love I had, was not so... she is the one I chooses to live the rest of my days with now, just like all the other girls, when I had them in my life. I have a love for them all, and it never- ever lasted yet never-ever dies, even if they do. I don't think I am meant to have love, make love, or be loved. To some love is a kiss goodnight, a kiss on the forehead, a kiss while having sex.

To some love is kissing at a wedding, kissing in the rain. It goes on and on. To some love is having babies, something I'll never have just like I'll never grow old with my lover. To some love is a state of mind that can't be controlled. Oh, how I know this more than most, in this hellish world we call home. To most love is just screwing now- a- days that's just how it is. To me, love and kissing is a death sentence. No not for me... only for the girl that I love. They can live on resting in peace, yet here I am sullen.

Why? Why must I be angry... like this? I can't blame God, he's not the one that did this to me. It's so hard to live with something you can't ever- never have or get back. I don't have an answer for it or

a cure. Yet! I just have to live on without them, and mostly her and deal with it... as the town's people would say. Even so... did I do anything wrong? I don't think so... do you? Am I to blame for whom I became?

Was it my felt to be picked for this? I love to death! I even love them after their death. I love them even more than the taste of their blood dripping in my mouth when I kiss them with my passion. I mean you have to kiss your love to show that you love her... right? There are so many myths about me. Like I don't feel pain, that I'm cold and heartless.

No- I feel pain, I feel so much pain for myself, for her, for them, and even for you. Its people like you and them that have ripped my heart out by trying to stab me with their wooden stakes. We don't need to die like that, we want to see the light just like anyone else.

Oh, and yes, I have a bed in my room even though I don't need to sleep. Coffins give me the creeps! I have seen too many in my life, I don't want to sleep in one, because of that. I can be as warm as the next guy, maybe more than him. I am warm not in the body but my personality. I am not a stocker, I don't try to be a player, and I don't try to be the bad boy.

If a girl wants me, then she can come to me, and if she falls in love with me, I don't force her to stay; knowing the circumstances; it is her option to kiss me, and to be my girl. She can be with me in my broken heart forever! One way or the other.

I still couldn't fathom how the mob discovered my immortal gift. It was heartbreaking to see such people I used to know and love turned on me so greatly. I am an immortal. They fear me and yet they used to know me. They were my friends, family, everything I used to know and yet they fear me. They have the intent to kill because they fear what they don't understand. I lived too long to see how humanity works. I was born in

1672, and yet I know the future. What if I wasn't just an immortal? What if I was god's vessel to this world? Has God given me the knowledge of the future that has yet to come? It's the 1990's as of now, a deadly era that punishes those for being different.

Religion comes into their lives every day and I am not their friend. I am different and that sentences me to death. I can't stay here anymore. I had a shitty childhood that ruined me.

My father turned from me, took my girlfriend's virginity, and made her his sex slave. Just like that boy did to the girl that was hung at ten- yet it was there say- not the girls. Just like- with my Lily. But no more shall he live. No more shall he punish me for existing.

He's a lazy bastard, that needs a good punishment, and good butt-kicking as well. I ran out of the woods where I have spent many a night, I hid behind my home, the house I once lived in with my love and my dad. I can't believe with this new perspective; I see things in a whole new light. This was never my home. It died when my mother died and was murdered even beyond when Lily dead.

22

Death is near, I can smell it! Now it is time for me to do, what I should have done years ago, when he bent my mother over, and suck it in my butt hole. Just the way he does with all of us. I am going to cut that thing off, so he bleeds out slowly, and dies the way he should. That way he can think about what he has done to all of us and are holes. I am going to make a hole where his dick should be and see how he likes it.

Indeed, it is safe to say that I have snapped, and it was love that made me crazy. I will throw it in the river so the fish have something to nibble on. Yes, he has freaked the crap out of her, just like he did with my mother and all the girls that were in my life. I can still hear all the sounds of ripping, blood dripping, he got his red wings every time, when he jammed it into her. The girl's every time there are calling out my name.

However, he had me tied up, or under his spell or something... it was like I was in a dream! I was so week and could not come to their aid. It was the - way when I was a boy, I never remember what happened. Yet I could feel it afterward. To me it doesn't madder if it's the 1690 or the 1990's having oral sex then missionary sex, or butt over, and she says- no, it means no... don't do it.

Yet he never got that, now it time for me to get my revenge! But I could not stop him, so I am going to make sure he never penetrates another girl or boy as long as I live. I just don't know why I didn't think about this sooner?

Yes, I did it!

I cut the dangly thing off!

I suck it in and twisted it his ass hole- and left it there- to be F-ed like I was. I got to him when he was resting in his bed, he looks up and gives me shit. So, I cut him off, by cutting him up, down there!

Now with my father out of the way, and depriving me of his company. Now I can get back to my lovely love, which was left behind, to see if this worked. Before I do that, I have to let some of that red stuff come out, from his makeshift spout into a jar. It's what I think I need to poor in her to bring her back to life.

Yes, I asked someone, who know more about this than me. Before I came back to my home. I went to see a fortuneteller, and she said- 'That to bring her back to life, I had to take the life of who damned her soul, and took her virginity. She added- Make the gash form the spot where the unjustness took place. Take his blood and pour into her porthole to her soul, known as her vagina, and it should bring her back to you as she was. When you kiss her while making sweet and passionate love to her mix this in with your fluids.'

I was never- ever so grossed out in all my days. But I would do anything for her, I mean anything. Yet she was not 100% sure it would work, and I was not sure if I want to have sex with my dead wife. Plus, poring my father's blood in there and mixing it all up in there on top of it all with mine. That's so freak'n nasty! There are so many wrongs her it has to be right.

On top of that, I was not the one taking her virginity, as I should. Hell, all I was getting his leftovers, again I might add, I feel cheated like always. It's like I am eating out his leftovers too, and can taste it. God- that's vile! No matter how many times you bath a girl, you can't help but think someone else has been in there, and that's just not cool! Call me old-school but a girl should only have one lover in a lifetime, and that love with her should've been me.

However not even this can stop me from truly loving her...

I'll try anything at this point. Who knows she might just get pregnant? That is the hope in my heart that she and I have a baby. If it's possible... for us, and if everyone would back off, and let it happen. I know the mob of wolfs would see her big pregnant belly, they would hold her down, and cut her open and rip my baby out.

Like a helpless little girl... they would kill her. I could see it now, them sticking her... ending it all before it starts. I can see her small nude body with the cord attached... go limp, and I would lose, yet another love of my life. I don't know if I could take seeing that.

My life just keeps getting more and more disturbing, but so real. It's always been this way, all the way back to that day, that I become one of these fallen angels.

23

So-o I just keep on running, running, and running! She is gone...! There's nothing worse than waiting and not knowing what will happen. Your imagination can be crueler than any kidnaper. Who the hell would take her, from her resting place? I have to find her. I just hope that the mob didn't burn her body if they did nothing will ever bring her back to me. I will never- ever stop loving her! I'll look for her until I can't look anymore.

I am haunted. Haunted by all of my dark childhood. I have been cheated of having a good life. I had a bastard of a father. I had my mother's life ripped out of my life. I had my one true love stolen from me, and yet her soul hasn't been strong enough to fight death.

Death is all around me. I've been kissed by death and it still wasn't enough to comprehend. I came back with a vengeance, and love that would never die. Here I stand in the middle of the lagoon covered with long grass, a pretty lake that glimmers in the sun. I felt empty. The mob of wolfs stole her from me once again. I ran towards a small house in the woods and took the damp clothes that hung on the line. I heard a small twig break from a distance, I turned and saw a farmer with a rifle glaring at me with bloodthirsty eyes. 'Damn it. Please! Mr., please. I just need to find my wife - Lily. Please, just let me pass through and I will let you live.'

I held my hands up. 'You're the guy, the council buried. How the hell did you live?' The farmer continued to hold the rifle up. I gulp and ran hearing gunshots following me, as I ran further into the woods- getting out of yet another box. I knew I have been hit many times - with this all.

I came upon a 1956 Cadillac that was somewhat discarded, which was left in his field, it was sitting in the farmer's lawn, one crank and I get it running, and it was backfiring away. Now the search is on...! The farmer was pissed I jacked his classic car. He was shooting his gun at me. It looked like a scene off of a Bonnie and Clyde movie.

Nevertheless, I was on the run. Hauling butt, and driving fast. It's going to be a lot faster to find her, with a car! Thank god, it's the 1990's. There're no cellphones yet in everyone's hands to reveal your locations or Global Positioning System or GPS to follow your trail.

As I stepped harder on the gas pedal, I saw in the cracked mirror, the farmer running out onto the road screaming his guts out. 'Obviously, he ran out of bullets.' I chuckled in laughter. Then something occurred to me, I hadn't laughed this much since my last memory of being with Lily.

I drove as fast as I could. Suddenly a deer ran into the road, and I swerved onto the other side of the road, nearly driving off the upcoming bridge, and fell into the water. I screamed in fear, like a little schoolgirl. My name is Edward and I am a fallen angel, who is about to drown in water that cannot kill me. Why am I screaming my head off like such a pansy? I was no better than this...

I have had a lot of names; Edward is the one I use now - throughout the years to keep up with the time. So, people wouldn't be able to track me down, as I fled from town to town. Christer was one in the 1800's Edward is not the name - I was given by my mother. I cannot reveal my true name to you. I am not sure I can trust you with that information. Sorry, it's not you, it's me.

I thought about everything that has happened to me. So many darknesses have consumed me whole and I can't overcome it. But it was my death that made it permanent. I am a creature of the night, who can survive in the light. But I am not stereotyped by fallen angels who sparkle in the light or ones who can burn in the sunlight or have daylight rings to protect them. I can walk in the light and not be damned by others.

But then that is no longer true. I am a stranger among those who knew me and loved me. I stayed in the water thinking and daydreaming of the memories that did me well thinking about how my sister drowned and how the water must have consumed her lungs. Sucking in more water. I was frightened by that fact, and I turned away in shivers and swore I saw her face looking into mine.

It was not her I see... No, it was a middle-aged man with a beard, hazel eyes, and dark tan skin. He wore an outfit of a religious man thought I was drowning; by the way, I was just flowing. He pulled me and directed me to swim, but I wasn't going to budge. He grew angry and impatient, and his hold on me tightened. He was going under helping me. He wasn't going to let go, and I couldn't let yet another person dies. So-o I swam above and he gasped for air. 'Geez, man, you got a death wish? Why didn't you swim you know you can't keep your head underwater for more them a minute or so?'

He gasped more. 'Maybe I just wanted to stay there and drown.' I answered and looked away from him. 'Why?' He asked in confusion.

'Because I lost her.' I whispered in sadness. Lost?

Who? What? When? Did he ask?

24

Her...! I said. Who is this girl? And what did she do to you? He said. 'Oh, just the gal that set my soul a-firer.' I whipped- 'Oh never mind it's hopeless, just like I am hopeless.' 'Have some hope,' the man said. I said- 'Hope! Hope is for babies and people that are alive that doesn't know how to live.' I said- 'You didn't need to save me...' 'Um,' is the sound he made? 'I don't need saving.' 'You can't save something like this.' 'What are you saying my child?' 'What am I saying... I am saying that I can last forever.' 'That I can't perish.' 'Impossible!' The man said.' 'I should bite you so you could understand.'

'The hell I have lived. You could never understand it.' 'Bit me,' he said? 'Nah- that's okay you're not a young girl so-o I think not.'

So, you have a lust for the flesh?'

'Yes... biting and kissing is my whole problem, that's something you'll never understand.' 'Confess my son.' he said to me.' I said- 'What's the use, my soul has been dammed.' Then he said- 'Oh no but you're wrong, any soul can be saved, my child. Confess and maybe the Holy Ghost will lead you on your way. To her whomever she is... Dry your eyes my son there is no need to cry blood.' 'I know I am not being much of a man.' He said- 'You're in love!' I nodded- yes. He said- 'That's all it is. You'll see her when the time is right if it's meant to be so. But you have to have faith in her and God above you.'

I wipe away my tears and watched him immediately jump up and out of the water. 'So, are you coming? Let us see the lord guide us, down the path to your love if its right or wrong. What is her name?' He asked and led me to his truck and twisted his wet damp clothes. On the bank next to the truck. I said- 'Yes, damned if I do, and damned if I don't.'

'Before we go you sure you don't want to be baptized?'

Yes, I am sure, you might do that and you'll crumble to ash or something like that, for your safety I'm going to say no. Did he whisper- Oh? I am not saying that I don't believe your ways, I do. I was razed to believe it; it is just I am not sure what would happen to me.

Being this way that I am. Like I might turn to stone. Then he asked me the most random question: So, do fallen angels use a bathroom? I said- 'I haven't taken a shit, in years, ironic everyone piles theirs on me!' Then I said- 'Why did you ask me that?'

'Because I need to find a bathroom soon! Fallen angels frighten the poo out of me!' 'Don't worry, I only suck on girl!' He giggled awkwardly. I snickered, he made me laugh. The second time, since her death. 'Don't fear I am not going to hurt you.' If anything, you're my first friend. The first person to ever trust me, and that trust, and not think something evil. He said- 'Okay friend... will find her. Do you see those sun rays over yonder... our God is showing us the way?'

'I believe that!' I said... (With surprising newfound faith.)

25

'With the lord, he will help guide the way.

Come heartbroken fellow and let's start walking.

We're almost there. The lord tells us it's not far.' He leads me into the woods and furthers the watery spot. I have been led to an old warehouse that seems secret because I have never seen it before. I hesitate before going in. He may be leading me into a trap. There's a saying. 'Don't trust anyone and keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' He is neither friend nor foe because I do not know him closely to decide.

Yet I had trusted... but not fully trust, I walked wheezing. There she was lying on the table looking at me with only the soul no life- this young sweet thing she was only five- I was asked to bring her back. I noticed she was still naked and that sheet covered her body. I said this is not what you think I can do- it's not holly.

I turned over to the priest, he jumped like to what I said- what would be done but smiled. 'Um- If anyone asks, I never disliked you. Yet I have to say that.' I quickly took a step back and rubbed my neck tensely. I went back to Lily saying I'll tack the body of the young girl- and I did the - with here and now she is mine, not caring about what was surrounding me, and picked her up and carried her out.

'Hey, Priest guy! A little help!' I called out- as I was swept off my feet by the spirits- around me- and saw him come to my rescue- throwing holy water...

The mob was on their way- I saw them coming- lost and a lot of members and been taken away by others in the pack. 'So, I finally meet the creature of the night. Hello Christer-Edward.

If that your real name.' He crossed his arms in a wicked way. It looks like I wasn't going to get out anytime soon.

He walked up to me I was just hanging around,

'So, it was all an act? You set me up, didn't you?' 'No!' Out of the shadows, a man slithered out, and said- 'It was not him; it was me!' I knew the voice- it was my dad! 'Son you never were good at anything, not even killing me.'

'I prayed and prayed to him to bring you here. I feel that you have two options, give me your body and soul or I take hers. Either way, son you've failed.' He said- 'Son I would not mind at all living the rest of my days in her beautiful body, as a girl.

As you know I have no manhood now because of you. I am the one that wants you gone.

I don't like you, I never did I wanted to kill you from the day you popped out of your mother. You're just like my dad in every way. May he rot in hell! Son no one wants you in this town.' 'Yet if Lily because me, I can stay here, just like you I have been on the run.'

(I didn't believe a word my dad said. I never did, he just wants to live in her so I die he knows that would kill me.) The holy man said- 'Put your trust in the Lord your ass belongs to your dad now.' Then he said- 'I must go now, sorry sonny, you are never alone, God be with you, and if you're not guilty; you have nothing to be afraid of in the eyes of the Lord. Let God have mercy on your soul.'

'Hey! - Hey!' He never looked back at me, and into the sun he went out the wood sliding doors. Then I remember that I had my knife. Think Christer- Edward thinks to make a plan... I need to cut this and then cut him up into little pieces, and light the pieces on fire before he clams her soul. Mine is already gone. Yet how? With my tiny love in my arms, how is this going to work?

Whatever I do I have to move swiftly! All in that - moment I couldn't help but look into the closed eyes of my beloved. Her eyelashes long and shut tightly, her hair awe taking, with soft springy waves. It was like she was asleep, dreaming the most wonderful and darling fantasy ever. It was like she was smiling at me like she knew I was there with her as if I was her hero! I know it's like she can slightly feel that I am with her. Yet I feel as if I will never trust again.

Yes, this act of betrayal of the first friend, I had for a while had surely hurt me in ways you could never imagine. How a priest could turn so good to evil in a matter of seconds. God or the Devil had clouded his judgment. I had to get out and help my sweet Lily before, they could tarnish her anymore. I put her over my shoulder and ran as fast as I could. I ran like the wind with a whooshing sound and headed to the car.

I kept driving until I realized something in a fairy tale story I once read. There was a prophecy that there was a special vial that could bring a dead person back to life. I must go and endure the most challenging trails to get there, but anything is worth having my Lily back, who has ultimately been kissed by death.

Like- a secret, of love, a secret of life, and a secret of bringing someone back to life. It was not so much as a fairytale, as it was more something, I read in Romeo and Juliet. So, the journey endures, now for a pink poison that works in reverse. I left a part out, as I ran out my dad got tangled and trapped in the net that I was in with her, that's when he fell to the wooden floor. That was meant for me, and before getting in the - car to escape (Oh the farmer was in on it too, he knew I would take this car.)

Like a bat out hell.

I snatched the gas can in the back seat, and ran back, and let that place up, I saw him burn. The heat of the flames in my old still heart was thrilling! With any luck that is the last time, I have to see his face in my life. Yes, a vial just like the lime green ones, which I can drink that takes, me to a different time and a different place. Almost like a different life altogether.

I kept on driving and turning down roads. I am curious, if anyone sees me, I mustn't be followed. I watched my back and hid my car in the bushes, as I went to our secret place. It was a little cabin out of town, where we both would hide and express our true nature. She's my little witch and I'm her bigger fallen angel. I went inside and the floor creaked. I lifted the carpet. and opened the hideout, and picked up a piece of paper.

I have now gone over dirt paths; like the ground, she has been covered over with. I have even walked were there was no path at all, just like I did to find here from day one. But now it's to get the freedom we all need to have a life, that is all we want, and that is when Lily said let me out of this car- I don't get why...

She wanted to rest a pace...

(A year has passed)

The key was getting what I need like a potion or a spell-like avail of something to make her love me- I don't see why- she falls out of love whit me in the first place. I was the face I could not give her a real family- or her baby- or that what she was letting me think.

So, I can get you back to me, so we can live

our life. I have looked high; I have looked low. I have looked inside, and I have looked outside, I have felt her insides, I have felt around the outside. I have swum in the waters, on the way, I have lived in this car from day to day.

I have fed off the blood of the mobbing wolfs, howling at the full moon to trap me, in the woods. I kill them so they won't kill me. All for her!

As you know, I cannot kiss her the way I should to stay alive and thrive. If I don't find

this vial soon, I will get so week I break down to nothing.

Or at least that is how I feel; I am not sure what will happen to me. I am not sure what will happen to her, I have to be her hero, I have to be!

As I drove as fast as I could, the tires burned the road, and every time the gasoline or tires went out, I just hotwired a car and continued to drive. Nothing was going to stop me. Nothing. After five hours of driving, I finally reached Mount Valhalla.

I sighed in relief and started to climb up the mountain. It's going to be a while before I get there, thank god I'm not affected by the high altitude. Thank god, I'm a fallen angel. A fallen angel in love.

'This would have been a lot faster if only I would have had her broomstick!' I left her in the car in the dark trunk. I have no keys, and that's a good thing, but the doors are unlocked, but there was no selection but to leave her behind like I did before. It's not like I had a donkey to put her and me on to reach the Promised Land. I covered the car with willow branches, alone with her nude torso, at the base of the mountain. 'I am on my way now my love, I said.' before leaving her. It's like she trembles, for knowing my- absents, or she could see the forthcoming, I ran my fingers through her hair.

Besides, closed the truck with a thud. I knew the only way to get it open would be with pure power in busting the latch. And after... I have this vial! I will be able to rip the car apart with my bare hands! Here we go again, the never-ending climbing battle for love! I hit the lock button on the door knowing that it would not be opened.

28

It always looked easy to climb a mountain, and I used to envy those with the strength to be able to climb a mountain and be just an ordinary person. I sighed and grumbled as I've only been climbing for about five minutes and I wasn't even close to reaching where I needed to go. I grabbed the next rock and suddenly little pebbles were starting to fall. 'That isn't a good sign.'

I looked around trying to find another avenue, I could try to get to the point of my destination. I try to grab another rock and climbed up one until the rocks holding me up collapsed, and I fell off feeling like I was flying in midair for a few seconds before meeting the ground and feeling agony in my back. 'Freaking!' I screamed in pain. If I can't enter the mountain by climbing it, I'll have to find another entry point. But I'm too close to stop now.

29

I am past the point of no return. I have to have her love, or I will surely die. I was on the face of the rocks, I had three-point of contact, my hand, one foot, and my left nut. I was just hanging there couldn't go up could not go down. I need a way up there, which is when I feel like a stone, and when my only green vial in my jacket broke, 'Oh Bloody Hell!' I said, somehow, I jumped in time to 2016, everything was so different... a man walked up to me, he had a phone on his wrist, and all kinds of gadgets that I have never seen before, that would beep and ring and talk. He said- 'Why are you laying on the ground.'

I said- 'I am trying to get to the top.' That is when he said- 'Your dumb butt- take the inclined plane to the top it's only three dollars.' So, like a moron, I get up and walk in line and hand the teenage girl, which runs the ride, my timeworn money.

She looked at me like I was a worm!

That is when I realized the car was gone, and there was a resort at the top of the mountain, and I was all out of green vials. So now what am I going to do? Now I need to get back to that time, I was in...! And now I need to get the pink and green vial made. But where and how?

Here I am lost stuck in a time zone that isn't ready for me. I looked around me absorbing in my new environment and realized I'm in a time zone years ahead of me.

I saw a hot blond skinny jogger running past me, and I tapped her on the shoulder. 'Hi miss, I'm a bit lost. Can you tell me what the date is and where exactly am I?' I asked her sweetly. 'Uh, Sir. Did you have a lot to drink last night? What the hell are you wearing?'

She crossed her arm as she looked me up and down. 'Yeah, I drank a- lot of bourbon, and I had a costume party. Could you please let me know where I am and what time I'm in?' I asked her about getting impatient. 'Oh- you must've had a lot to drink. You're in California and the year is May 5th, 2016.

Does that help- smart ass?' She asked looking at me with concern. 'Thanks, miss.' I smiled and walked off. I'm in 2016, this is going to take me a while. I just felt like slapping her into last year, she was so belligerent but so good to look at.

She didn't even make eye contact with me! I know she was shy but come on, I am not that freaked up in the face! Or is it because guys don't were capes anymore? Maybe I smell bad?

Looking at her like what hell are those strings hanging out of her short's slacks? One is a white braided thing in the front, and the other two soft pink ones by her butt? My God if they get any shorter, she is going to have to powder to more cheeks, and cut another head of hair! Maybe they do that now, all the time, that would be a good thing? Did I just see her nipples popping out at me too, though her skimpy white top? Damn girl go- and put something on! Global warming must be true? Just look at all these teen girls half-naked. My God- I find myself standing here half-hard, and drilling. Look at that shit around their eyes that is black, they have more eye shadow around their eyes then I do mine.

How can their faces be so gorgeous and flawless? Is what I doing now cheating? God, I need to get back before I nail one of these little girls! Or worse kiss them! Surely if I would do that, I would nail my coffin. If I would get caught! Oh, if she would find out! How tempting, this is... I never have seen so many good-looking girls like this. I walk around like a nomad, almost getting run over by all the cars. How things have changed just since the 1990s! It's like being on a different planet if you go back to the 1600s.

What the hell- McDonald's what am I doing here- and there everywhere you look? That shit would kill you, but everyone is eating it. Just like what is with all these big ass ladies' doing just walking around in the Walmart at am? Go home! I have never seen so much Junk in one place! I feel like I am walking around in the twilight zone!

I can't believe how attracted I was to a girl from another time. A girl who's in another world, who would shit herself, if she knew half of the things about my life. But I would love to bend her over and rip off her shirt...Oh shit! What the freaking am I thinking? I'm smarter than that to follow my sexual desires. My heart belongs to Lily anyway, we would never see each other again, so it's not worth it. I reassured myself. I needed to find a way out of this world. I looked around me and went down to every bloody shop of a clairvoyant pretending to be one. 'What the hell? Doesn't anyone know honesty and manners anymore? I mean come on!' I growled in frustration and found myself at the last existing 'Witch shop.' I walked in and asked her to tell me what I need just by touching me.

A middle-aged woman around her twenties touched me, and I finally got the answer wanted. She knew exactly who I was, and what I was doing at this time. She brewed a potion without mentioning a word to me and finally put it in the vial. I swallowed the entire vial and suddenly my world changes all around and I'm back in the other time where I could get that girl to fall for me. Or that was the hope - I sigh in relief and attempt to jump as high as I can to get to the top.

I couldn't believe what I saw with my eyes. It was a lake full of lava and on the other side, there lied the special potion I so needed. This is going to take a while. I need to make a rope bridge, after that thought, I was like something is not right!

I remember I drank blue vial, and it did send me back. But there is one big problem, it turned me into a little green serpent with a cape. Then after a long night of smashing and drinking.

I could see myself in the car paint! Now hopping around I could see everything, but with like beer goggles on. I guess that is what I get for wanted to love one of the girls back there! She read my hart, hands, and thoughts, and must have put that in the mixture. I believed that there would be side effects, but nothing like this... how am I going to get the trunk open now like this, I don't even have any thumbs, I couldn't jack it... you know even if I wanted too. I knew the only way I would be turned back into me is to kiss the girl that is my true love on the lips. Or at least that is how the story should go.

'I know why she did this... I was cheating in my mind, and she didn't like it, all witches stick together, this is payback.' Yet which lips do they mean? What do I kiss the valva or mouth? In my mind I was thinking dirty in the joke, will at least I have the tongue for it. I'll have to kiss both sets of lips on her body and see what happens. That is if I can find a way up there! Good thing she has died; I don't think girls like her like kissing serpents! Yet how do I get into this car like this now, and get where I need to go?

So now I need to kiss her, to become a man, and I need to kiss her for her to become alive, and yet I still need to get that pink vial. You know... call me delusional but, I think that which wanted me in her bed, and wanted to play with my broomstick. She seemed to into me, like she knew that I had something she needed. She didn't want me to go. She didn't want me to kiss Lily, I think she tricked me. I need to stop trusting random-ass witches! I'll be lucky if I don't get warts, and knowing me- as they'll be on my genitals! At this point, I would just be happy to get my six, and one-half inches back like before. This girl is killing me, but that's love!

31

I fell off a cliff and thudded to the ground. I looked around and found my car. Thank god, she's still in there, I managed to see in through a little rust hole. Then I realized that I can't open the door because I have no hands. I frowned and shook my head. How the hell was I going to get myself out of this? Then it just hit me, I need to find a lily flower and a four-leaf clover and mix it with some monthly blood of the girl I love, that's the potion I think I need. I hope that's right.

Before I kiss her lips, and I become a man! I'll do it myself, like always. So, I hopped around and nibbled on a lily that was in the parking lot. I hopped around till nightfall till I found a four-leaf clover. Thankfully there was a rust hole in the back of the trunk of the car that I slithered into after falling on my ass several times. Anyways, I got the blood I needed, when I was liking her up and down. I think I heard a ticklish giggle.

The blood was old but it was there deep inside, the taste of it was indescribable, and I kissed both lips in two jumps, now I did not know what was going to happen. I saw what looked like magic dust puffing in the air, yet that was the only light I could see. Something happened it just got cramped in here... but what? I had to go by feel.

32

Holy crap!

I have a winkie!

I am a man; I am a man...!

I can't believe it I am a man!

I never knew how nice it was to have to rearrange my nut sack. I have legs, I have arms, and let's not forget about them thumbs! Eyes! Do I have eyes? Please, the sacred voice asking God tells me that I've got eyes. I can see! I can see! Holy freaking! And yet again, it's dark in this trunk, so maybe that's it. Here I am cramped in my freaking small truck. God, I feel sorry for anything that I packed here. I'm on top of Lily who needs some clothes, but I can't do that until I get the potion. All this bloody trouble for some freaking resurrection.

I rearrange myself and kick open the trunk with my incredible fallen angel strength, and I jump out feeling a chill in the air. Rain is blistering heavily towards me and her. I see from my left eye what is left of my trunk, and I frown realizing it.

There's no way I'll be able to fix this or put it back on my car. I jump up high and reached the - position I was in. I found myself in front of a lava pool with very weak and delicate stepping stones. I could see from a distance a beautiful sparkle of the vial I so desperately needed. 'Well here I go.' I whisper to myself and jumped onto the first step almost falling into the pool. Sunlight couldn't kill me, but lava would. I jump again and sigh in relief that I made it. I continue jumping until I'm halfway across the pool to the vial. I see it! It's closer.

My heart leaped when I saw - that I have done okay with the girls, but I can't stop now - I want that girl too. Not when she's exposed and easy to get kidnapped. I jump onto the last step onto the landing. I walk up to the rock holding the vial. 'Only those who have worthy intentions may be allowed to take such a vial.' A voice calls out from a distance. Could it be that I stepped on a vocal recording or is there someone already there watching my every move and ready to take what I so need?

'Who's your daddy!' the voice calls out; I look behind me I see him; with my girl's legs slung... one over each of his shoulder, her hair and head dangling downwards. I thought I killed you, I screamed! 'Son- son- son boy you'll never kill me! I am just like you until I get the love I need.

Your daddy thinks it's time for your bedtime story, while I tuck and suck on your girl in me in my bed! What do you think about that?' I said- 'Freaking no you douche-bag!' 'Son- you need to go and suck on some soap, with that dirty mouth of yours! Anyways there is nothing you can do about it.' Now the fighting begins I must push him into this hot stuff, so I can get my hot stuff back.

He's got me on the edge, after throwing her to the ground, like she was a rag doll, I knew that something of hers broke. Yet I had to think about me for the time being. How is it going to be me... or him! Whose love for her is stronger?

34

I freaking hate this guy. One would imagine the bloody bastard has nine lives, but it's pretty ironic since I have more than just nine lives. He smirks as he watches me figuring out how the hell, I was going to stop him for once. But I had the advantage of him, but with the lava, so did he. I jumped, and kicked him in the stomach, watching him fall to the ground with me standing on top of him like a surfboard. He grabs my ankles, and I trip feeling my hair touch a little bit of lava, that was so damn hot, it was like fire in my hair. I yelp and move away and watched him punch me in the face three times. I could feel my sour blood spill from my mouth until I realized, Blood is my friend. I leap up and grab his neck, and lift him choking him out. I walk over and hold him over the lava pool.

'Son, let's talk about this, I'm sorry- please don't let go of me!' He begged and I looked over to my Lily, and I thought about how he wanted to sexually assault her like he sexually assaulted my mother.

He was the one man who could make me regret having him as my father. I dropped him, and he screams as he falls into the lava. I sped away from the lava and watched it consume him whole. I turned around and picked up my vial and poured it down Lily's porthole to the soul. I saw her light of her soul started to brighten as her skin color became white once again. She opened her eyes and saw me. She jumped and moved away.

'Lily. It's me. It's Christer- Edward.

35

Do you remember me?'

I crawled towards her and she looked down screaming, even more, covering her private parts of her body. Her first words she said snakingly- 'Way, am I na-naked?'

Then she proceeded to say freaking out. 'Do you see all this come and blood dripping out of me? Like you could have shot it on my face for all I care, not deep inside me!' she asked me - 'Did you do this to me?' I just looked at her in awe! She kept running at the mouth- 'If you did... you know that I'm not on the pill!' I just looked dumbfounded thinking all girls or on that shit at least they are now. 'You know this right?' I said 'No.' 'What the hell, you're going to have a fat knocked up wife.' 'Yeah know when a girl is pissed when she starts moving her hands around like Beyoncé!'

Now in my mind, I was thinking this question- 'Is she, or isn't she? Or worse who's the daddy?' I was hoping it will all drip out. (Dr-ip! Drip!) And it wouldn't be he's a seed that impregnates her. That is when I thought there must be a virgin vial also? Just like there is a pill to stop her from getting pregnant. But do I need to stop it... would this baby be mine? Or would I kill my baby? Or would I be killing his?

There must be something, I can do before she rips my dick off, and slaps me up with it! But what...?

I knew I had to ask the question, which would change my life. 'Is the baby mine?' She lifted her shoulders in question. 'I don't think so.' My heart raced feeling more rage than ever. He is dead and yet he still torments me. 'Is it my father?

You don't need to ever worry about him anymore. He's gone out of our lives forever.' I grabbed her wrists and she quickly moved away and started jumping on the stepping stones. 'Lily?' I asked in concern and followed her. 'No! Leave me alone! I don't know who the hell you are! You're so not the man I thought you were.' She continued to get further away from me. I wonder how long it'll take for her to realize she has no idea where she is.

This is horrifying to me, but I could see that baby coming out looking like my dad, or even being my dad oddly enough, like being born again out of her. Just popping slightly out... 'Looking like Achmed the Dead Terrorist!'

Then something inside me just snapped. (One eye twitched twice.) 'I am done; I am just done fighting for her.' I thought- 'There comes a time where every man reaches his breaking point. And mine was when she thought I would do that to her or let him have his way. She holds me responsible,

regardless? Like I was some kind of deviant demonic sick-o.' (There comes a time when you have to let her go.) If she wants me, she'll come back to me... right? Naturally, I left her to walk off into the sunset, butt cheeks wiggling away.

(Am I going to regret it?)

I don't know yet. Maybe so... I am thinking about her already. In nine months, I'll know if I am the daddy or not. Even though she thinks... I have no way of truly knowing. She's going by feel and that's not always right. She'll be back if she loves me! That's not if the mob of wolfs don't find her and the baby first. And do what I said they would. But I am just DONE! I wonder where she is going to go now? I wonder what I am going to do without her now?

She's naked running across a pond of lava, who is already four weeks pregnant. She is my love navigating a world that has moved on from her death. I couldn't just leave her. 'Perhaps I could watch her from a distance and protect her when she needs it. I thought. I saw that she had finally reached the other side and I continued to follow her. 'I don't trust you, but where the freaking am I?' Lily covered her boobs and vagina- sheepishly...

'Look at least let me drive you back to your hometown, and you can get some clothes. Here- take my jacket...' I gave her my jacket and she took it. 'TURN AROUND!' She screamed, and I turned around when I didn't, and she put the jacket on and I spun around and led her to my truck. 'What do you remember...?' I asked trying to have a conversation. 'Nothing, I can't remember anything...' She sat hunched overlooking out the window, fogging it up with her breath. I put on the heater and heat started to come out through the vents. She screamed until she inspected the vents closer. 'Why do you drive so fast?' 'It's Just a fallen angel thing,' I said.

'What is it?' She asked dumbfounded. Looked at her and it just hit me, she's not a fallen angel or a witch, she is just a teen girl that got her life back that is why she left me.

After all this- she is just the way she was before all this took place. I went along with it.

'It's not all just hot air coming out. Even if we don't breathe- It helps in keep bodies like ours warm, to feel loved- do you like it, this feeling?'

I replied keeping my eyes on the road. 'It burns my skin.' She looked at me. 'Yeah, that happens when your skin is cold. But don't worry it won't hurt you unless it's on higher.' I smiled. Knowing that it was frostbite. 'I believe you.' She smiled with a sparkle in her eye.

'You do remember me, don't you?' I smiled some... 'How could I ever forget the love of my life? He said.

I love you Christer.

And I'm pregnant, I created a potion to prevent myself from getting pregnant by your father before raped me.

I remembered what you said to me. So, I'm fine and thank you for being me back to life. So instead of going back there, why don't we go and explore the world like France and get me some clothes.' She chuckled and held my hand. I laughed and we both listened to old music as we rode into the sunlight.

Nine mounts later a new fallen angel baby was born. A little girl that was all ours, we named Faith. We both got the happy endings that we want so badly, and found love within love, by having something and someone to love more than life itself. Turns out it was my loves baby after all - I got everything I ever want - and we lived happily ever after.

Sins of the Fallen Angel: Part: 2

Chapter: 1

The first time, now here I am gasping for air, I just got kissed; kissed by death - like sin and the lust. Nothing could ever stop me from dying... Or could it? Perhaps I was too blind to realize that maybe hope could free me from this. From this everlasting darkness and everlasting torment. But here I am stuck in a wooden box with a ton of dirt surrounding me. I'm just an ordinary girl. 'Why would anyone

want to put me into this box? It's not just a box, I believe I'm underground.' I thought. Was anyone out there trying to find me? I asked myself. I didn't want to die like this, at least not in this why. I punch the wooden ceiling, I had above me. It made no difference.

'Damn it!' I growl and rub my sore fist. The pain my fist was feeling didn't matter. The worst pain was coming from within. If I have one wish while in this freaking situation, what would it be? I forced my mind to think, and I wiped away all the tears coming from my eyes. 'Is it so hard to think of the one last thing that I want? Is there nothing that I ever wanted that badly? Was there never really any purpose in my life? And right now, should, I'll be sad about the fact that my life would just end as soon as the oxygen in this box runs out... or about the heart-wrenching realization that I've been living a life which had no purpose of its own?'

Well, maybe that's not true; maybe it's just a warning bell ringing aloud. Maybe my life isn't ending at all? This all has been an engagement orchestrated, just to get me too wake the freak up, and bring me closer to a purpose. I don't know what that would be. However, something which binds myself to some other being, or some other force which would lead me to a place where at least I could find peace before I take my last breath. And see the light of day no longer. Unnati58I had only one thought. 'Get out of here before you die. I punch and punch so hard. My hand became swollen and bloody. Dirt was coming in like a river pouring into a shallow area. 'I have to get out. I have to get out. I must get out' I climbed and dug through the dirt before my hand could something. It's air. I could feel the air. I continued digging with my eyes closed and I finally stuck my head out into the air. I looked at my surroundings. I'm back. I'm back in the 1690s. I must hide before they suspect me once again.

Chapter: 2

My breath quickens faster, faster, and faster as I think about the world around me.

Thinking about how I used to glance up at the brightening expanse of the sky, I bite my lip. I could see slivers of light with-in the box's boards. That is when I knew that I was not cover over completely yet with the earth above me. That dawn was showing me the light looking at the patches of growing crops, I realized that farmers would be out soon. I kick and kick until my feet were cut, but I did it I got out, nevertheless, I had to hurry. 'Hey! Who's there? 'A farmer calls out. I gasp in fear of being noticed and run more. I find a church nearby and hide behind it. As I run towards the church, I decided to go inside, and let the doors close behind me; so that the farmer cannot get to me. I ran like I never ran before! I realized it's been really- long since I've been to a church. My mother's resentful words

starting ringing in my ears. 'One day you'll see. It will be the only place you'll have left to go to. You need to be saved, yet you'll never be if you don't want to be. Do you see...? You say you don't believe in Him. Oh, that day is on its way, you'll have no one to help you and you'll feel the wrath. You'll see. The time will come.' Though I'm still not a believer it's funny. A practical joke that life has played on me. Hell, like it was wished on me. At last, here I am, where I thought I would never be. As I hobbled inside, I was astonished by what I saw. I couldn't believe my eyes. Could this be? No? Yes? It was... or am I hallucinating? At this point my mind I was too damn tired to differentiate between what's real, and what was unreal. Nevertheless, I see what I never believed in.

I walk to the front of the alter he looks up from the book in which he was reading. It's not a Bible. I was sure I knew him he gives me his seed which made my life. It looks to be an old book on philosophy. 'How did you get here?' He smiles then closes the book. 'You weren't hard to find.' He stands from the pew he was at and gives me a once over. 'It's a good look for you.' 'What? Dirt and near-death?' He smiles again. The wrinkles around his eyes crinkle slightly and the light catches his salt and pepper slicked-back hair. 'No. Survival.' I don't know how long I was out there. It could have been a day; it could have been weeks. I don't know... I am so confused. 'You look good for a young girl that been rolling around in the dart.'

'Heh- thanks... I guess.' I chuckled and looked at him. 'I must ask you something. I think I saw you back when they pushed me into the cold hard ground and buried me, you were there in the crowd. Why did you let them bury me? I'm your daughter and yet you treat me like a stranger.' He kept on smirking at me with that sideways smile. I yelled would you stop looking at me like that. It is starting to freak me out. So freak'n creepy! 'You wanted me to stay out of your life. That was one way that you would be gone, I knew you would come crawling back, you always come back... like the little girl that you are, but this time was the longest you have been gone. It's been a long time.' He rubs his hands over the book and sighs. 'But I guess if you truly want me to, I'll get more involved from now on.' I frown- like don't bother yourself. 'That didn't answer my question.' He smiles again. Even creepier than before. I thought he's fake teeth were going to the poop of the smile was that wide. His eyes narrowed at me. 'Yes, I was in the crowd.' My dad raises his old wrinkled hand to keep me from speaking 'Don't you ever freak'n interrupt me. If I had interfered, they would have killed me. Then who would keep an eye on you?' I can feel my anger rise. 'Someone who lets me get buried alive... how can you say that?' 'Yes, I had too I didn't have a fucking choice! Okay!' I said- 'I just wanted you to give me some space, but you're meant to protect me and look after me. It sounds to me that you wanted me to be gone.' I felt my eyes

knowing they were getting teary, so I wiped away my tears before he could see my cry, like the little child he thinks I am. How did I get this why? It was slowly coming back to me.

Chapter: 3

Even so, what he doesn't know is that I had someone. Yes, someone that loved me more than he ever could or would, that was everything to me. However, just like my dad, he was killing me from killing me in so many ways. Killing me slowly, mentally, physically, spiritually. It's like he holds in my breath, and I can let him out. I know the closer he gets to me, the closer he gets to kill me with his lusting voluptuous kiss. But I want it! I want to feel it! You are slowly sucking the life out of me anyways. I know you can't help it like I can't help loving you. That fine with me I guess, but we have not even made out yet! Or did we? 'If I have to die to have your love then so be it!' That's what I said to him. 'Just kiss me... I can't take not having you in my life. And if my life ends then we can live in forever, tog ether if there is an afterlife, only if that is if you choose to die for me too. As I will for you.' So, what do you want to do? To kiss or not to kiss, that is the question! I say that I don't want you in my life, just I said with my dad. Why must I push everyone away? Nevertheless, which is just a lie. 'I want you! I must have you.' Is what I said.

Christer-James- 'I need you; I must have you! All of you! I must taste the kiss; you want to give to me. Till death do we part, with all my heart, crossed and hope to die in your arms? I know that making love to you would rip us apart.'

I recall whispering back in his cold ear- 'It's this love you would give me that would go right through me, as we would get ever so closer to eternal love. I want it! Do you want me? Death is the passion, I am longing for so kiss me now, and I will be forever yours! And you'll be forever mine.'

The last time... I was in the church, and I confessed my love for you. Beforehand asking if I would be forgiven, for my wrongs, even if I don't have complete faith I thought. I assumed what do I have to lose- I'll try. I'll get into the dress, and confessed my- everything to you. In-front of the man of God. I said the 'I do's,' and so did you. I knew that it's wrong. I knew that I was too young, so young that I'm not sure if I knew what love is or what it entailed. Nevertheless, I said 'Let's do this, let's go all the way, and never look back, let's make the earth move tonight, I want to feel your breath on my young alive skin, I want to feel what it would be like when you are killing me with that kiss, as you take me for your lover now and forever. I want to be deflowered, as you place a flower on my grave and follow me

to the promised land. Come and hold my hand.' That is what I said. I breathed so deeply knowing that maybe today will be my last breaths at all.'

Chapter: 4

The wedding night: I remember standing there unclothed- 'I quivered, I trembled, and I felt my knees knocking together. I could see him walking towards me. Oh yes looking stronger and mightier than ever before. His manliness was just thumping in-front of me. I did not even know that was possible. Yet again- I am only fifteen years old.

My thoughts- I am so hoping that I am not making a big mistake, eager that your love for me is not fake. I don't want to be used, and left for dead like men such as yourself have done to me in the past. Everything I know and love in my life, I must forsake just to have you.

Then I thought- Even if he doesn't love me, I know that I will never get away. He will always be looking over me, even if we don't end up together forever. Even if he doesn't truly love me, as I do him... Somehow, I know that I will never get away from his charm, never-ever be able to run away from his stony- yet glittery eyes, that make my week and lustful. He will always be looking over me, even if we don't end up together for always. I will always feel him inside me! Feeling all that is him running through my veins and driving me to complete madness. Just like the poison of that first kiss. The kiss at the altar, and the sucking kiss we're sharing now dooring this lovemaking. He is coming into my bloodstream. I feel me pouring the toxins out my most erotic pulsating girly parts of my body. We will be bonded for life, and lives that come after. We will be like one being or so that was wishful thinking.

There is no escaping it now... nor do I want too. I just want it to keep on coming, it feels that good. Oh- what he is doing to me. It's ripping through me... but I love it. It is like spraying like pouring rain and it's mixing with mud on the ground under my feet. Plus, I am drizzling with his poison all over my chest, face, and my girly opening, it is all coming out of me too; like a river of love. It has to be the best feeling in this world. Yes, I am spraying the wetness, it is dripping like my eyes when he was not near me all the time in the days of the past. And when he is not near me, he's creeping in my mind when he is gone. He plays with my feelings- I know this. The same way he likes to play with me in his cold candle light bedroom.

He builds me up so far and stops, and then when he comes for me to come with him, it' s even stronger, just like I come twice has hard for him. It's the same way. Just like the candle that he

blows out with his expired breath, he blows me to a place I never been to. As he crawls beside me, he blows that same icy breath on me, as he covers me with kisses, all over my little body. After all, it is our first night sleeping together. It has to be romantic! His eyes glow like the full yellow moon at midnight, which I see from the cracked glass windows that rattle as the wind gusts through the maple trees.

As I lay my tiny head on his motionless chest, I am naked and carefree and fall asleep un-top of his chilly torso, I feel that rigid body that never needs rest at all. Everything is eerily perfect... naturally, I look forward to the dawn of daylight. In a way, I don't care if I wake up! Yes, it was just that good! Yet I have to wonder what if...

Chapter: 5

Will I see the light of the fire down below? Or will I see the light of day, everything is black I don't know... Either way, I am contented just being in the arms of my love for this night. Is it black because there is no light in the room? Or is black because I am possibly dying? Is this death? If so, I did not see it be like this at all. Where am I now? I slowly open my eyes... I am not sure if I see anything. I feel fucked up in the head. Like I had the shit banged out of me. Which is possible... I think it happened.

Am I died or alive?

Am I alive or dead?

Is he dying with me or not?

Why am I not feeling his touch?

Am I bleeding too much?

Should I be feeling something?

I feel the air getting bleak, am I even breathing I can't tell at this point? I never felt so alive even if this is the death, I never been so thrilled to death in my life. 'We should see the gates by morning. We should be inside in the evening.' The kiss was everything, all that I was hoping for and more, but is this darkness that is all that is around me now or something more.

~*~

(In the coffin)

I am just dreaming about this?

Is this happen to me?

Am I seeming people, seeing me go down?

Am I not seeing him going down with me?

Do I feel the ground encasing me?

That is when I realized I was in this wooden coffin. Was I covered over last night with the earth above? At that time, I didn't know. Was I dressed in a lacey nightgown and nothing else, I was panties-less, limp, and almost motionless with a red rose on my chest? I could smell the faint scent; it was from the wedding bouquets. Was there no one there to see me other them him, when I was lowered down in these six-foot wholes? Was he the one that placed this flower on me, or was it someone else?

I want to know what happened.

Did anything happen?

I'll I had were my thoughts talking to me, and there were deafening. I think I evoke hearing every one of those nine-inch nails being hammered in my coffin, which sealed my fate. Yet was it the kiss that killed me? Was it more than a kiss? Why was I put in the ground?

If so, was I still so much alive?

Is it because of who I am?

I can't die... or am I?

I am so confused!

What happened to me last night? I can pound on this wood till my fist is blood-spattered, or is that blood or embalming fluid? I guess that is why I have slashes at my feet. I was drained of all my blood.

Can anyone hear me?

'Hello! Anybody out there- I need help!' The cemetery is still, with only creepy hunting sounds, which I make up in my mind in fear. I'm calling out for help, nonetheless, the skeletons next to me in their timeworn boxes in this old cemetery aren't answering me anytime soon. It seems that the only memo, I am getting out to the folks that walk on top of me is what is printed on my headstone. And that's not much of anything for a girl my age, I never did anything spectacular. So, all that is printed in my name, date of my birth, and the date of my supposed death.

Will I be saved, or was I?

Why am I so muddled?

Chapter: 6

I'm riddled with fear. I have no idea how long I was down there. I was only buried alive and my father could care less about me. Yet I was not surpassed. So, I ran away from him. I couldn't bear to look at his face once again. As I ran into the woods, something occurred to me. I have nowhere to go. No family that wanted me, no friends. Nothing, but everyone in town believing that I was a witch. They only believed I was a witch, and a murderer because, I was found standing over a nine-year-old dead girl's body her name was Loretta, and immediately they made their assumptions. So, I had to run and never be found, otherwise, I knew I would be dead, or sent somewhere to be put to death. I heard the town's folks saying, as I ran past like a mad girl that they were going to throw me in the river. And if I did not drown, then I am truly a witch. Either way, I would be dead. I knew I had to make a new life for myself. But- how, and were?

Christer-James- Affirmative, I killed her I did not want to do it. But I had other reasons for doing it. Yes, other than them saying- I had too. Yet it was the only way I could be with her, being like this is not what I wanted. I didn't want to suck the life out of her, I have been dyeing myself for over a hundred years now, and I been with a lot of girls, nevertheless, they were not like her. None of them have been as good as she was, she had me coming back for more and more. She needs me to come as I need her to come to me. Who I am? Well, you mere mortals? Can call me by my current name - Chris-James Damsel. This is true that I wanted to marry for the last time. No - I didn't want to suck her blood, I said that I would stop doing this, but it's like sex ones you do it with a virgin, you want to keep having it more and more, and you have a bond to them. I remember my first time. That was oh so long ago....

With her, I could not help myself. She was so young and lovely, so tight and fit. I loved her ways, and her voice, and her little smile, she was everything I ever dreamed of before I become this. I am not one of those types. I feed off the kiss and stop before going all the way, I have had many young girls, and have taken a lot of them. In my lifespan I had many young girls like her fallen in love with me, and why not I am their fantasy man.

Yet I am no Edward Cullen, yet I am the next best thing. They just can't help it... I do truly love her, I want to stop doing this. I want her to be the last girl I am with... can a fallen angel be with a girl that was alive, that he killed in a night of passion, for being what everyone thinks is a witch because of it also? Should I bring her back to life, and dig her back up to be a monster like myself? Should I saver and save her? We would be perfect together with a witch and a fallen angel, it could be a happy ever after for both of us. I know this will piss off a lot of people out there if I do this, yet that is half the fun. Come to my surprise, I went to the grave and she was gone... Where did my love go? Come out, come out wherever you are! Oh, I see that you want to play a little game with me. Okay, I guess I have to find you, my one-day-old bride. I cover my eyes and count to ten...

I am on my way my darling!

'Yes, I ran from him as I ran from all of them, was he any different, I did not know. I was just like my dad in every way, I fear this fact. But my dad didn't want to kill me, or did he? Christer-James didn't want to either, or did he? Even now I want to be killed over and over by his kiss... if that's how it needs to be. I still love him. Like I still love my dad. Even if he is an asshole.

Chapter: 7

She's gone, but she's everywhere. In the air. In the soil. But she taunts me. But I smell her. She's close. Nearby. I hide behind trees and run. In a further distance, there she is gasping for air. She knows I'm close, I always seem to know when she was getting close, and I can feel her heartbeat faster than ever. Just like it was when I was about to kiss her. I run and pounce on top of her. I watched her fall on to the ground with me on top. Yet it was not her at all, it was some random dead girl, which looked to be the age of ten or so. I got off of this poor girl and was horrified. So, I ran, looking for her once more. Eager that this would not be the result again.

When I found her- she was sitting on what I thought was a rope tree swing, all alone in the thick fog she was naked. 'No- No- No!' I screamed. She was hanging in the air. I was wonder also if I went

too far, and I did. That was not her heart beating at all, definitely not... it was the left-over blood and embossing fluid dripping from her gashed feet. It was the sound of dripping on the ground, I could see this trill also from when she was running. I am relieved that the hunger wolves didn't descend on her. There's my love hanging from a nose, she knew they would find her. I know she was not afraid of me to do this. I guess she could not stand being without me? However, should I bring her to life once more, so she can truly become like me and never die? Should I do it? Should I kiss her again to bring her back to life? Why did she do this? Or did she? Maybe it was the angry mob - I call them wolfs, with their flaming torches, swords, and pitchforks from the village, which strung her up as she was running from them; for me to find because I didn't do the job, they asked me to do. I guess killing her the way I did was not good enough!

But soon I realized... I'm cursed. My lips, my kisses, they're venomous as much as they are sexual, unfortunately. I kiss her and I risk killing her more. But I must free my love for my love to be with thee. I climb the tree with more of a struggle than I thought was possible. How do people manage to climb trees, and make it look so damn easy? I thought. She's naked. She's getting colder. I looked at my pocket and in it, I was lucky enough to have my trusty knife and cut the rope. My love - Gracie she fell to the ground, and that is when I thought I heard her make a slight gasp for air.

Did I just hear that?

Or was there someone there?

Naturally, I cut the rope, and she flopped around like a dead fish in the mud on the ground below. Then I climbed the tree once more, with her in my one arm, I did hear someone, and it was more than one. The mob of wolfs are no all around the tree, pocking us with their sharp weapons. I hope they give up soon... or before they think about lighting us up. Me being the man that I am... I saw that my girl is getting and let to hair and dirty for my liking. I couldn't let her be like this. So, I am going to have to find a river, or something and bath her! Before I want to give that long kiss. I men every guy wants a clean girl to French. No - I don't care if she is naked when I kiss her... just as long as she has slickly smooth skin. It would be more romantic!

Hum - they must have tried to grab her by that night, I put her in when she sprinted. Finally, the mob gave up after a very long night of us sitting out on a limb high up in that tall old tree. They went back home to their families, yet I knew they would be back soon enough. Like really get a life... I walked and walked, tripping over logs and sticks in these dark and unsympathetic woods. Just holding her in my

arms. Almost like a baby in the arms of her daddy. I found the river I was looking for, after walking for a very long time. Nevertheless, I ran to it. I placed her down, and then I got nude also, and I walked into the soft movie water in the moonlight, with her in my arms. Then I kissed her forehead... saying-' I'll bring you back to me... I will- my love.'

The river was cold but refreshing. I got the mud out and off of her face, and I splashed the water all over her and rubbed her skin with my hands, I washed her long hair, and brushed it out with my fingers. I had my sharp knife with me in my hand, and I

shaved my girl I did her underarms, legs, and vagina. As well as I could, I know that she would want me to do that, she is a girl after all. And I am her man, and let's not forget I am her husband. I think I have a right to do this.

Plus, now it's the way I want her to be, I look at her she's so sweet, even like this limp and not moving. She is perfect... She is completely faultless to these old eyes, as I lay her in the grass to dry off. I got down, and I laid next to her bare also. I look up at the billions of stars over us, wishing on one that she was alive, so we could just hold each other, at this very moment. Looking over the water, with the moon setting with it glowing on the reflection ripples. I lay my head on her chest on top of her nipples, but there is no sound coming with-in her torso, all I can hear is the river splashing. It saddens me at this most perfect of moments.

If only I could have the power to bring her to life. I cried as her limp lifeless body laid on my lap. Even as she's dead, her hair shines in the moonlight. It just glimmers like the stars shining endlessly. Gracie was my heart and my soul and yet she has been taken from me. A piece of me was taken and could never be restored as her soul would never come back. I look at the dark sky with its bright full moon. If only there was a shooting star. But that's only superstitions. I remember my father talking about it as if it was witchcraft and to never believe in it or mention it. That talk was the only time that we had a good moment. There were not many I can assure you. But I'm alone, dripping wet and cold. I know that the mob wouldn't stop and search for me. The mob of wolfs would continue to hunt me down in the daylight. I'm suddenly getting hungry and Gracie was only going to slow me down. Then the thought occurred to me, how did the mob know where to find me, and that I was still alive to I was meant to go down with her. Who betrayed me? Was it my unloving father or the girl I loved too much? I knew I had to keep going or I was going to join her. I didn't want to die. I'm only eighteen, or so that is what everyone thinks. Even so, I am too young to die, and I know my future will be big. I have to

continue to run also, hiding and leaving the girl I loved too much in random spots. I know I would return to her one day. 'Goodbye, my love. May we see each other once again?'

Chapter: 8

Maybe I needed to kill my father to bring her back to life, he is the one that started all this. Yet I swear that I would never take another life, and kissing your dad on the lips like that to me is wrong. Yet it is worth thinking about. I chopped down several logs with my knife and rock, and made a lean-to shelter for her, I placed flowers that I picked around her now frosty body as a memorial. I had to leave her behind, it was the hardest thing I ever had to do! I just want to give up and stay there with her. Yet I knew I had to go, but not for long, I would be back for her. When I had the right spill, love potion, or a night with a shooting star. I had to find someone to help me with this rejuvenation or my love.

I didn't know if it was like a dance, which I need to do or a chant, or what. I just did not know. I was clueless at what it would take, to have your back. Who do I go and see about this without them thinking that I am completely crazy? Besides would it be wrong for me to want to bring her back to life? She the dyed girl I loved, that is resting in pace now.

Treasured in my heart you'll stay until we meet again someday. Death is the last chapter in time, but the first chapter in eternity. But my biggest question is will I see you there if I fail at this like my dad said I failed at everything I ever tried? God- I love to hate that man! He did nothing but abuse me. And as soon as I do, I find love... I have to lose it. Is it because of him? Why- I ask? Why me... haven't I been through enough pain? I remember one of my punishments as a kid was getting locked in to splintered wood head and hand locking gates, and the town would walk by spitting on me, throwing stones, my dad tolled every one that I was touching myself, because I couldn't get a girl to have sex with me or get a date, and that was a forbidden at the time. And doing that was considered a crime. He chased them all away- it was him, not me, which was the issue!

She was the only real love I ever had...!

I recall my bastard of a father even tried to do it with my girl, asking her to get down on her knees, the night I brought her home. I felt bad for him I let him move in here. He tried to get her to make him happy. He even touches her the same way, that I have seen him touch my mother it made me sick. I stopped him before she had to take it all down. He was falling drunk. That is why my mother let him, all those years ago. He would tie her down to the bed, and do it so many times, and shoving it in so

hard that she bloods out for days after. That is how I was made, he raped and sodomized her every night in ways you can't even image, or don't want too. Now he wants to do the same with her no it's not happening. I won't let it. I would never look at a broom the same way. When she was fourteen, she got pregnant, and in those days, you had to marry the father of your baby.

She said that if she would get away, she would never come back not even for me. I think father blames me for her leaving, plus he didn't have anyone to bang or bang around anymore, so he took it all out on me. If my mother would be alive today, she would be 264 years old then me. She passed giving birth to her second baby named Ashlyn. Mother, she bled to death from tearing and ripping when she pushed her out. Ashlyn was born in the early 1700s and dyed at the age of six, from drowning in the wash tube. I never meet her... and hear it in the late 1900s and I'm still alive. Sometimes I lose track of time and dates.

On the other hand, my wife was born in 1999, and she passed on this year. Good God how things have changed all these many years. I worked for the ford motor company in 1909, I saw the first model-T drive away. I have seen it all... I remember the Titanic making the papers, as the ship that was not unsinkable. I have seen all the wars, I even been in ww2, and was shot in the head. Yet I will not die... I just stay the same age as 18. I have graduated from high school six times, in different towns... Hell back in the early day's us boys dropped out in sixth grade, to work in the coal mines, I recall my lunch bucket scraping on the railroad tracks as I walk in the dark to work as a little one.

Yeah, I have been in school many times just so I would fit in. I have seen a lot of people die. I wonder what complete death is like... I wouldn't know, I was kissed by death by a ten-year-old named Julianna she was the daughter of a nurse... I don't know why she picked me? She became my first love in my life, and she reminds me so much of Gracie, anyways she was a fallen angel, so was her mom... I was deathly sick with pneumonia, in the hospital and she kissed me on the lips and that was it I was 18 forever. She was my girl until my dad had her killed, with a wooden stake through the heart. I don't know if he gave the order... yet I blame him for her death too. I have no clue how he knew that she was a fallen angel, other them the sparkle her big blue-green eyes.

I have seen a lot of babies being born too. I became a doctor in that field, helping with childbirth, I made a promise to my mother that no girl under my care would die the way she did, legs open, vagina ripped to her butt, only to die on the cold table, with no one caring, as the placenta is ripped out and thrown to the floor as the baby cry's, for a mother that's never going to be there for her.

Yeah and the only reason, I have to put up with my perverted dad, is that I know that he forced a sucking kiss on Ashlyn a day before her death. So, I am not sure, he not going to be leaving me anytime soon. Oh, and the only way I thought I could die, is if Gracie and I kissed for so long that we both suck the life out of each other, or she ran a stake in my chest. Yet that is just mythology to me. All these many years I never ask, how to die or how to live, or how to get someone back. I wish I did, so she can live... I don't know I never asked, how this all works, it's not like today's books have it right.

Yet I want to live life with her. But what can I do? She's dead... So, saying that Gracie was the only love I had, was not so... she is the one I chooses to live the rest of my days with now, just like all the other girls, when I had them in my life. I have a love for them all, and it never- ever lasted yet never-ever dies, even if they do. I don't think I am meant to have love, make love, or be loved.

To some love is a kiss goodnight, a kiss on the forehead, a kiss while having sex. To some love is kissing at a wedding, kissing in the rain. It goes on and on. To some love is having babies, something I'll never have just like I'll never grow old with my lover. To some love is a state of mind that can't be controlled. Oh, how I know this more than most, in this hellish world we call home. To most love is just screwing nowadays that's just how it is. To me, love and kissing is a death sentence. No not for me... only for the girl that I love. They can live on resting in peace, yet here I am sullen. Why? Why must I be angry... like this? I can't blame God, he's not the one that did this to me. It's so hard to live with something you can't ever- never have or get back. I don't have an answer for it or a cure.

Yet! I just have to live on without them, and mostly her and deal with it... as the town's people would say. Even so... did I do anything wrong? I don't think so... do you? Am I to blame for whom I became? Was it my felt to be picked for this? I love to death! I even love them after their death. I love them even more than the taste of their blood dripping in my mouth when I kiss them with my passion. I mean you have to kiss your love to show that you love her... right?

There are so many myths about me. Like I don't feel pain, that I'm cold and heartless. No- I feel pain, I feel so much pain for myself, for her, for them, and even for you. Its people like you and them that have ripped my heart out by trying to stab me with their wooden stakes. We don't need to die like that, we want to see the light just like anyone else. Oh, and yes, I have a bed in my room even though I don't need to sleep. Coffins give me the creeps! I have seen too many in my life, I don't want to sleep in one, because of that. I can be as warm as the next guy, maybe more than him. I am warm not in the body but my personality. I am not a stocker, I don't try to be a player, and I don't try to be the bad

boy. If a girl wants me, then she can come to me, and if she falls in love with me, I don't force her to stay; knowing the circumstances; it is her option to kiss me, and to be my girl. She can be with me in my broken heart forever! One way or the other.

Chapter: 9

I still couldn't fathom how the mob discovered my immortal gift. It was heartbreaking to see such people I used to know and love turned on me so greatly. I am an immortal. They fear me and yet they used to know me. They were my friends, family, everything I used to know and yet they fear me. They have the intent to kill because they fear what they don't understand. I lived too long to see how humanity works. I was born in 1672, and yet I know the future. What if I wasn't just an immortal? What if I was god's vessel to this world? Has God given me the knowledge of the future that has yet to come? It's the 1990s as of now, a deadly era that punishes those for being different.

Religion comes into their lives every day and I am not their friend. I am different and that sentences me to death. I can't stay here anymore. I had a shitty childhood that ruined me. My father turned from me, took my girlfriend's virginity and made her his sex slave. But no more shall he live. No more shall he punish me for existing. He's a lazy bastard that needs a good punishment and good ass-kicking as well. I ran out of the woods where I have spent many a night, I hid behind my home, the house I once lived in with my love and my dad. I can't believe with this new perspective; I see things in a whole new light. This was never my home. It died when my mother died and was murdered even beyond when Gracie dead.

Death is near, I can smell it! Now it is time for me to do, what I should have done years ago, when he bent my mother over, and suck it in my butt hole. Just the way he does with all of us. I am going to cut that thing off, so he bleeds out slowly, and dies the way he should. That way he can think about what he has done to all of us and are holes. I am going to make a hole where his dick should be and see how he likes it. Indeed, it is safe to say that I have snapped, and it was love that made me crazy. I will throw it in the river so the fish have something to nibble on.

Yes- he has fucked the shit out of her, just like he did with my mother and all the girls that were in my life. I can still hear all the sounds of ripping, blood dripping, he got his red wings every time, when he jammed it into her. The girl's every time there are calling out my name. However, he had me tied up or under his spell or something... it was like I was in a dream! I was so week and could not come to their aid. It was the same way when I was a boy, I never remember what happened. Yet I could feel it

afterward. To me, it doesn't madder if it's the 1690 or the 1990's having oral sex then missionary sex, or ass- over, and she says no, it means no... Don't do it. Yet he never got that, now it time for me to get my revenge! But I could not stop him, so I am going to make sure he never penetrates another girl or boy as long as I live. I just don't know why I didn't think about this sooner?

Yes, I did it! I cut the dangly thing off. I think he enjoyed it the sick twisted ass hole. I got to him when he was resting in his bed, he looks up and gives me shit. So, I cut him off, by cutting him up, down there! Now with my father out of the way, and depriving me of his company. Now I can get back to my lovely love, which was left behind, to see if this worked. Before I do that- I have to let some of that red stuff come out, from his make-shift spout into a jar. It's what I think I need to poor in her to bring her back to life. Yes- I asked someone, who know more about this than me.

Before, I came back to my home. I went to see a fortuneteller, and she said- 'That to bring her back to life, I had to take the life of who damned her soul, and took her virginity. She added - Make the gash form the spot where the unjustness took place. Take his blood and pour into her porthole to her soul, known as her vagina, and it should bring her back to you as she was. When you kiss her while making sweet and passionate love to her mix this in with your fluids.' I was never- ever so grossed out in all my days. But I would do anything for her, I mean anything. Yet she was not 100% sure it would work, and I was not sure if I want to have sex with my dead wife. Plus poring my father's blood in there and mixing it all up in there on top of it all with mine. That's so freak'n nasty! There are so many wrongs her it has to be right.

On top of that, I was not the one taking her virginity, as I should. Hell- all I was getting his leftovers, again I might add, I feel cheated like always. It's like I am eating out his leftovers too, and can taste it. God- that's vile! No matter how many times you bath a girl, you can't help but think someone else has been in there, and that's just not cool! Call me old-school but a girl should only have one lover in a lifetime, and that love with her should've been me. However not even this can stop me from truly loving her... I'll try anything at this point. Who knows she might just get pregnant? That is the hope in my heart that she and I have a baby. If it's possible... for us, and if everyone would back off, and let it happen.

I know the mob of wolfs would see her big pregnant belly, they would hold her down and cut her open and rip my baby out. Like a helpless little girl... they would kill her. I could see it now, them

sticking her... ending it all before it starts. I can see her small nude body with the cord attached... go limp, and I would lose yet another love of my life. I don't know if I could take seeing that.

My life just keeps getting more and more disturbing, but so real. Really - it's always been this way, all the way back to that day, that I become one of these fallen angels.

Chapter: 10

So, I just keep on running, running, and running! She is gone...! There's nothing worse than waiting and not knowing what will happen. Your imagination can be crueler than any kidnaper. Who the hell would take her, from her resting place? I have to find her. I just hope that the mob didn't burn her body if they did nothing will ever bring her back to me. I will never - ever stop loving her! I'll look for her until I can't look anymore.

I am haunted. Haunted by all of my dark childhood. I have been cheated of having a good life. I had a bastard of a father. I had my mother's life ripped out of my life. I had my one true love stolen from me, and yet her soul hasn't been strong enough to fight death. Death is all around me. I've been kissed by death and it still wasn't enough to comprehend. I came back with a vengeance, and love that would never die. Here I stand in the middle of the lagoon covered with long grass, a pretty lake that glimmers in the sun. I felt empty. The mob of wolfs stole her from me once again. I ran towards a small house in the woods and took the damp clothes that hung on the line. I heard a small twig break from a distance, I turned and saw a farmer with a rifle glaring at me with bloodthirsty eyes. 'Damn it. Please Mr., please. I just need to find my wife - Gracie. Please, just let me pass through and I will let you live.' I held my hands up. 'You're the guy, the council buried. How the hell did you live?' The farmer continued to hold the rifle up. I gulp and ran hearing gunshots following me as I ran further into the woods. I knew I have been hit many times.

I came upon a 1932 ford, which was left in his field, it was sitting in the farmer's lawn, one crank and I get it running, and it was backfiring away. Now the search is on...! The farmer was pissed I jacked his classic car. He was shooting his gun at me. It looked like a scene off of a Bonnie and Clyde movie. Nevertheless - I was on the run. Hauling ass, and driving fast. It's going to be a lot faster to find her, with a car!

Thank god, it's the 1990s. There are no cellphones yet in everyone's hands to reveal your locations or Global Positioning System or GPS to follow your trail. As I stepped harder on the gas pedal, I

saw in the cracked mirror, the farmer running out onto the road screaming his guts out. 'He ran out of bullets.' I chuckled in laughter. Then something occurred to me, I hadn't laughed this much since my last memory of being with Gracie. I drove as fast as I could. Suddenly a deer ran into the road, and I swerved onto the other side of the road, nearly driving off the upcoming bridge, and fell into the water. I screamed in fear, like a little schoolgirl. My name is Christer-James and I are a fallen angel, who is about to drown in water that cannot kill me. Why am I screaming my head off like such a pussy? I know better than this.

I have had a lot of names, through-out the years to keep up with the time. So people wouldn't be able to track me down, as I fled from town to town. Christer-James is not the name I was given by my mother. I cannot reveal my true name to you. I am not sure I can trust you with that information. Sorry, it's not you, it's me.

I thought about everything that has happened to me. So many darknesses have consumed me whole and I can't overcome it. But it was my death that made it permanent. I am a creature of the night, who can survive in the light. But I am not stereotyped by fallen angles who sparkle in the light or ones who can burn in the sunlight or have daylight rings to protect them.

I can walk in the light and not be damned by others. But that is no longer true. I am a stranger among those who knew me and loved me. I stayed in the water thinking and daydreaming of the memories that did me well thinking about how my sister drowned and how the water must have consumed her lungs. Sucking in more water. I was frightened by that fact, and I turned away in shivers and swore I saw her face looking into mine. It was not her I see... No- It was a middle-aged man with a beard, hazel eyes, and dark tan skin. He wore an outfit of a religious man thought I was drowning, by the way, I was just flowing.

He pulled me and directed me to swim, but I wasn't going to budge. He grew angry and impatient and his hold on me tightened. He was going under helping me. He wasn't going to let go, and I couldn't let yet another person dies. So, I swam above and he gasped for air. 'Geez, man, you got a death wish? Why didn't you swim you know you can't keep your head underwater for more than a minute or so?' He gasped more. 'Maybe I just wanted to stay there and drown,' I answered and looked away from him. 'Why?' He asked in confusion. 'Because I lost her,' I whispered in sadness.

Lost?

Who?

What?

When?

Did he ask?

~*~

Her...! I said.

Who is this girl? And what did she do to you? He said.

'Oh- just the gal that set my soul a-firer.'

I whipped- 'Oh never mind it's hopeless, just like I am hopeless.' 'Have some hope,' the man said.

I said- 'Hope! Hope is for babies and people that are alive that doesn't know how to live.'

I said- 'You didn't need to save me...' 'Um,' is the sound he made?

'I don't need saving.'

'You can't save something like this.'

'What are you saying, my child?'

'What am I saying... I am saying that I can last forever.'

'That I can't perish.'

'Impossible!' The man said.'

'I should bite- you so you could understand.'

'The hell I have lived. You could never understand it.' 'Bit me,' he said?

'Nah- that's okay you're not a young girl so I think not.'

So, you have a lust for the flesh?'

'Yes... biting and kissing is my whole problem, that's something you'll never understand.'

'Confess my son.' he said to me.'

I said- 'What's the use, my soul has been dammed.'

Then he said- 'Oh no but you're wrong, any soul can be saved, my child. Confess and maybe the Holy Ghost will lead you on your way. To her whomever she is... Dry your eyes my son there is no need to cry blood.'

'I know I am not being much of a man.'

He said- 'You're in love!' I nodded- yes.

He said- 'That's all it is. You'll see her when the time is right if it's meant to be so. But you have to have faith in her and God above you.'

'Indeed. I am in love. But love, in love I am so cursed. Damned to never love another. I'm dead as she is dead. She is missing and I must find her.' I wipe away my tears and watched him immediately jump up and out of the water. 'So, are you coming? Let us see the lord guide us down the path to your love. What is her name?' He asked and led me to his truck and twisted his wet damp clothes. He also said I think it's time you put on yours.

On the bank next to the truck. I said- 'Yes, damned if I do, and damned if I don't.' 'Before we go you sure you don't want to be baptized?' Yes, I am sure, you might do that and you'll crumble to ash or something like that, for your safety I'm going to say no. Did he whisper- Oh? I am not saying that I don't believe your ways, I do. I was razed to believe it; it is just I am not sure what would happen to me. Being this way that I am. Like I might turn to stone. Then he asked me the most random question: So, do fall angles use a bathroom? I said- 'I haven't taken a shit, in years, ironic everyone piles theirs on me!' Then I said- 'Why did you ask me that?' 'Because I need to find a bathroom soon! Fallen angles frighten the poo out of me!' 'Don't worry, I only suck on girl!' He giggled awkwardly. I snickered, he made me laugh. The second time, since her death. 'Don't fear I am not going to hurt you.' If anything, you're my first friend. The first person to ever trust me, and that trust, and not think something evil. He said - 'Okay friend... will find her. Do you see those sun rays over yonder... our God is showing us the way?' 'I believe that!' I said... (With surprising newfound faith.)

Chapter: 11

'With the lord, he will help guide the way. Come heartbroken fellow and let's start walking. We're almost there. The lord tells us it's not far.' He leads me into the woods and furthers the watery spot. I have been led to an old warehouse that seems secret because I have never seen it before. I hesitate before going in. He may be leading me into a trap. There's a saying. 'Don't trust anyone and keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' He is neither friend nor foe because I do not know him closely to decide. Yet I had trust... but not fully trust, I walk in and gasp. There is a body on a table covered with black cloth. I rush over to open the veil and suddenly I gasped more. I found her. There she was lying on the table looking at me with no soul nor life. I noticed she was still naked and that sheet covered her body. I turned over to the priest and hugged him. He jumped but smiled. 'Uh- If anyone asks, I never hugged you.' I quickly took a step back and rubbed my neck nervously. I went back to Gracie, not caring about what was surrounding me, and picked her up and carried her out. I walked out and tripped over a wire and before I knew it. I'm being thrown into the air being surrounded by a net with Gracie's dead body. 'Hey, Priest guy! A little help!' I called out and saw him come to my rescue, but was knocked on the head by a mob member and been taken away by others in the pack. 'So, I finally meet the creature of the night. Hello Christer-James. If that your real name.' He crossed his arms in a wicked way. It looks like I wasn't going to get out anytime soon.

He walked up to me I was just hanging around, 'So it was all an act? You set me up, didn't you?' 'No!' Out of the shadows, a man slithered out, and said- 'It was not him; it was me!' I knew the voice- it was my dad! 'Son you never were good at anything, not even killing me.' 'I prayed and prayed to him to bring you here. I feel that you have two options, give me your body and soul or I take hers. Either way, son you've failed.' He said- 'Son I would not mind at all living the rest of my days in her beautiful body, as a girl. As you know I have no manhood now because of you. I am the one that wants you gone. I don't like you, I never did I wanted to kill you from the day you popped out of your mother. You're just like my dad in every way. May he rot in hell! Son no one wants you in this town.' 'Yet if Gracie because me, I can stay here, just like you I have been on the run.' (I didn't believe a word my dad said. I never did, he just wants to live in her so I die he knows that would kill me.) The holy man said- 'Put your trust in the Lord your ass belongs to your dad now.' Then he said- 'I must go now, sorry sonny, you are never alone, God be with you, and if you're not guilty; you have nothing to be afraid of in the eyes of the Lord. Let God have mercy on your soul.' 'Hey! - Hey!' He never looked back at me, and into the sun he went out the wood sliding doors. Then I remember that I had my knife. Think Christer- James thinks to make a plan... I need to cut this and then cut him up into little pieces, and light the pieces on fire before he clams her soul. Mine is already gone. Yet how? With my tiny love in my arms, how is this going to work?

Whatever I do I have to move swiftly! All in that same moment I couldn't help but look into the closed eyes of my beloved. Her eyelashes long and shut tightly, her hair awe taking, with soft springy waves. It was like she was asleep, dreaming the most wonderful and darling fantasy ever. It was like she was smiling at me like she knew I was there with her as if I was her hero! I no - it's like she can slightly feel that I am with her. Yet I feel as if I will never trust again.

Yes- this act of betrayal of the first friend, I had for a while had surely hurt me in ways you could never imagine. How a priest could turn so good to evil in a matter of seconds. God or the Devil had clouded his judgment. I had to get out and help my sweet Gracie before they could tarnish her anymore. I grabbed the knife and cut the ropes and we both fell to the ground with a loud thud. I put her over my shoulder and ran as fast as I could. I ran like the wind with a whooshing sound and headed to the car. I kept driving until I realized something in a fairy tale story I once read. There was a prophecy that there was a special vial that could bring a dead person back to life. I must go and endure the most challenging trails to get there, but anything is worth having my Gracie back, who has ultimately been kissed by death.

Chapter: 12

'The Vial of Secrets' A secret, of love, a secret of life, and a secret of bringing someone back to life. It was not so much as a fairytale, as it was more something, I read in Romeo and Juliet. So, the journey endures, now for a pink poison that works in reverse. I left a part out, as I ran out my dad got tangled and trapped in the net that I was in with her, that's when he fell to the wooden floor. That was meant for me, and before getting in the same car to escape (Oh the farmer was in on it too, he knew I would take this car.) Like a bat out hell. I snatched the gas can in the back seat, and ran back, and let that place up, I saw him burn. The heat of the flames in my old still heart was thrilling! With any luck that is the last time, I have to see his face in my life. Yes - a vial just like the lime green ones, which I can drink that takes, me to a different time and a different place. Almost like a different life altogether. The green vials are what I have used thought-out my life span to go from the 1990's back to the 1600s. I would love to see the 2000's!

I was thinking in my mind: I am not so dumb after all... I'm I father?

I kept on driving and turning down roads. I am curious, if anyone sees me, I mustn't be followed. I watched my back and hid my car in the bushes as I went to our secret place. It was a little cabin out of town, where we both would hide and express our true nature. She's my little witch and I am her big fallen angle. I went inside and the floor creaked. I lifted the carpet and opened the hideout and

picked up a piece of paper. That paper is the most important thing to me now. It will mark my future. I looked at it. I was right, the map was still there. I grabbed it and jumped back into my car. I must get to Mount Vahalla if my life depends on it.

The funny thing is that it does. Everything is counting on me to get the pink vial.

I have gone over paved roads, which are smooth like her body. I have now gone over dirt paths, like the ground she has been covered over with. I have even walked were there was no path at all, just like I did to find here from day one. But now it's to get the vial, so I can get you back to me, so we can live our life. I have looked high; I have looked low. I have looked inside, and I have looked outside, I have felt her insides, I have felt around the outside. I have swum in the waters, on the way, I have lived in this car from day to day. I have fed off the blood of the mobbing wolfs, howling at the full moon to trap me, in the woods. I kill them so they won't kill me. All for her! As you know, I cannot kiss her the way I should to stay alive and thrive. If I don't find this vial soon, I will get so weak I break down to nothing. Or at least that is how I feel; I am not sure what will happen to me. I am not sure what will happen to her, I have to be her hero, I have to be!

As I drove as fast as I could, the tires burned the road, and every time the gasoline or tires went out, I just hotwired a car and continued to drive. Nothing was going to stop me. Nothing. After five hours of driving, I finally reached Mount Vahalla. I sighed in relief and started to climb up the mountain. It's going to be a while before I get there, thank god I'm not affected by the high altitude. Thank god, I'm a fallen angel. A fallen angel in love.

'This would have been a lot faster if only I would have had her broomstick!' I left her in the car in the dark trunk. I have no keys, and that's a good thing, but the doors are unlocked, but there was no selection but to leave her behind like I did before. It's not like I had a donkey to put her and me on to reach the Promised Land. I covered the car with willow branches, alone with her nude torso, at the base of the mountain. 'I am on my way now my love, I said.' before leaving her. It's like she trembles, for knowing my absents, or she could see the forthcoming, I ran my fingers through her hair. Besides, closed the truck with a thud. I knew the only way to get it open would be with pure power in busting the latch. And after... I have this vial! I will be able to rip the car apart with my bare hands! Here we go again, the never-ending climbing battle for love! I hit the lock button on the door knowing that it would not be opened.

It always looked easy to climb a mountain, and I used to envy those with the strength to be able to climb a mountain and be just an ordinary person. I sighed and grumbled as I've only been climbing for about five minutes and I wasn't even close to reaching where I needed to go. I grabbed the next rock and suddenly little pebbles were starting to fall. 'That isn't a good sign.' I looked around trying to find another avenue I could try to get to the point of my destination. I try to grab another rock and climbed up one until the rocks holding me up collapsed, and I fell off feeling like I was flying in midair for a few seconds before meeting the ground and feeling agony in my back. 'Fuck!' I screamed in pain. If I can't enter the mountain by climbing it, I'll have to find another entry point. But I'm too close to stop now.

Chapter: 13

I am past the point of no return. I have to have her love, or I will surely die. I was on the face of the rocks, I had three points of contact, my hand, one foot, and my left nut. I was just hanging there couldn't go up could not go down. I need a way up there, which is when, I feel like a stone, and when my only green vial in my jacket broke, 'Oh Bloody Hell' I said, somehow I jumped in time to 2016, everything was so different... a man walked up to me, he had a phone on his wrist, and all kinds of gadgets that I have never seen before, that would beep and ring and talk. He said- 'Why are you laying on the ground.' I said- 'I am trying to get to the top.' That is when he said- 'You- dumb ass take the inclined plane to the top it's only three dollars.' So, like a moron, I get up and walk in line and hand the teenage girl, which runs the ride, my timeworn money. She looked at me like I was a worm! That is when I realized the car was gone, and there was a resort at the top of the mountain, and I was all out of green vials. So now what am I going to do? Now I need to get back to that time, I was in...! And now I need to get the pink and green vial made. But where and how?

Here I am lost stuck in a time zone that isn't ready for me. I looked around me absorbing in my new environment and realized I'm in a time zone year ahead of me. I saw a hot blond skinny jogger running past me, and I tapped her on the shoulder. 'Hi miss, I'm a bit lost. Can you tell me what the date is and where exactly am I?' I asked her sweetly. 'Uh, - Sir. Did you have a lot to drink last night? What the hell are you wearing?' She crossed her arm as she looked me up and down. 'Yeah- I drank a lot of bourbons, and I had a costume party. Could you please let me know where I am and what time I'm in?' I asked her about getting impatient. 'Oh- you must've had a lot to drink. You're in California and the year is May 5th, 2016. Does that help- smart ass?' She asked looking at me with concern. 'Thanks- miss.' I smiled and walked off. I'm in 2016, this is going to take me a while.

Really- I just felt like slapping her into last year, she was so belligerent but so good to look at. She didn't even make eye contact with me! I know- she was shy but come on, I am not that fucked up in the face! Or is it because guys don't were capes anymore? Maybe I smell bad? Looking at her like what hell are those strings hanging out of her short shorts- slacks? One is a white braided thing in the front, and the other two soft pink ones by her butt? My God if they get any shorter, she is going to have to powder to more cheeks, and cut another head of hair! Maybe they do that now, all the time, that would be a good thing? Did I just see her nipples popping out at me too, though her skimpy white top?

Damn girl goes and puts something on! Global warming must be true? Just look at all these teen girls half-naked. My God- I find myself standing here half-hard, and drilling. Look at that shit around their eyes that is black, they have more eye shadow around their eyes then I do mine. How can their faces be so gorgeous and flawless? Is what I doing now cheating? God, I need to get back before I nail one of these little girls! Or worse kiss them! Surely if I would do that, I would nail my coffin. If I would get caught! Oh, if she would find out! How tempting, this is... I never have seen so many good-looking girls like this. I walk around like a nomad, almost getting run over by all the cars. How things have changed just since the 1990s! It's like being on a different planet if you go back to the 1600s. What the hell is McDonald's doing everywhere you look? That shit would kill you, but everyone is eating it. Just like what is with all these big ass ladies' doing just walking around in the Wall-mart at 3 am? Go home! I have never seen so much 'Junk' in one place! I feel like I am walking around in the twilight zone!

I can't believe how attracted I was to a girl from another time. A girl who's in another world, who would shit herself, if she knew half of the things about my life. But I would love to bend her over and rip off her shirt...Oh shit! What the fuck am I thinking? I'm smarter than that to follow my sexual desires. My heart belongs to Gracie anyway, we would never see each other again, so it's not worth it. I reassured myself. I needed to find a way out of this world. I looked around me and went down to every bloody shop of a clairvoyant pretending to be one.

'What the hell? Doesn't anyone know honesty and manners anymore? I mean come on!' I growled in frustration and found myself at the last existing 'Witch shop.' I walked in and asked her to tell me what I need just by touching me. A middle-aged woman around her twenties touched me, and I finally got the answer wanted. She knew exactly who I was, and what I was doing at this time. She brewed a potion without mentioning a word to me and finally put it in the vial. I swallowed the entire vial and suddenly my world changes all around and I'm back at Mount Vahalla. I sigh in relief and attempt to jump as high as I can to get to the top. I couldn't believe what I saw with my eyes. It was a

lake full of lava and on the other side, there lied the special potion I so needed. This is going to take a while.

I need to make a rope bridge, after that thought, I was like something is not right! I remember I drank blue vial, and it did send me back. But there is one big problem, it turned me into a little green serpent with a cape. I look like a fucked-up Kermit the serpent, after a long night of smashing and drinking. I could see myself in the car paint! Now hopping around I could see everything, but with like beer goggles on. I guess that is what I get for wanted to make one of the girls back there! She read my hart, hands, and thoughts, and must have put that in the mixture.

I believed that there would be side effects, but nothing like this... how am I going to get the trunk open now like this, I don't even have any thumbs, I couldn't jack it... you know even if I wanted too. I knew the only way I would be turned back into me is to kiss the girl that is my true love on the lips. Or at least that is how the story should go. 'I know why she did this... I was cheating in my mind, and she didn't like it, all witches stick together, this is payback.' Yet which lips do they mean? What do I kiss the valval or mouth?

In my mind I was thinking dirty, will at least I have the tongue for it. I'll have to kiss both sets of lips on her body and see what happens. That is if I can find a way up there! Good thing she dies, I don't think girls like her like kissing serpents! Yet how do I get into this car like this now, and get where I need to go? So now I need to kiss her, to become a man, and I need to kiss her for her to become alive, and yet I still need to get that pink vial. You know... call me delusional but, I think that which wanted me in her bed, and wanted to play with my broomstick. She seemed to into me, like she knew that I had something she needed. She didn't want me to go. She didn't want me to kiss Gracie, I think she tricked me. I need to stop trusting random-ass witches! I'll be lucky if I don't get warts, and knowing me as they'll be on my genitals! At this point, I would just be happy to get my six, and one-half inches back like before. This girl is killing me, but that's love!

I fell off a cliff and thudded to the ground. I looked around and found my car. Thank god, she's still in there, I managed to see in through a little rust hole. Then I realized that I can't open the door because I have no hands. I frowned and shook my head. How the hell was I going to get myself out of this?

Then it just hit me, I need to find a lily flower and a four-leaf clover and mix it with some monthly blood of the girl I love, that's the potion I think I need. I hope that's right. Before I kiss her lips,

and I become a man! I'll do it myself, like always. So, I hopped around and nibbled on a lily that was in the parking lot. I hopped around till nightfall till I found a four-leaf clover. Thankfully there was a rust hole in the back of the trunk of the car that I slithered into after falling on my ass several times. Anyways, I got the blood I needed, when I was liking her up and down. I think I heard a ticklish giggle. The blood was old but it was there deep inside, the taste of it was indescribable, and I kissed both lips in two jumps, now I did not know what was going to happen. I saw what looked like magic dust puffing in the air, yet that was the only light I could see. Something happened it just got cramped in here... but what? I had to go by feel.

Chapter: 14

Holy shit! I have a penis, and no longer look like one! I am a man; I am a man...! I can't believe it I am a man! I never knew how nice it was to have to rearrange my nut sack. I have legs, I have arms, and let's not forget about them thumbs! Eyes! Do I have eyes? Please, the sacred voice asking God tells me that I've got eyes. I can see! I can see! Holy fuck! And yet again, it's dark in this trunk, so maybe that's it.

Here I am cramped in my fucking small truck. God, I feel sorry for anything that I packed here. I'm on top of Gracie who needs some clothes, but I can't do that until I get the potion. All this bloody trouble for some fucking resurrection. I rearrange myself and kick open the trunk with my incredible fallen angle strength, and I jump out feeling a chill in the air.

Rain is blistering heavily towards me and her. I see from my left eye what is left of my trunk, and I frown realizing it. There's no way I'll be able to fix this or put it back on my car. I jump up high and reached the same position I was in. I found myself in front of a lava pool with very weak and delicate stepping stones. I could see from a distance a beautiful sparkle of the vial I so desperately needed. 'Well, here I go,' I whisper to myself and jumped onto the first step almost falling into the pool. Sunlight couldn't kill me, but lava would. I jump again and sigh in relief that I made it. I continue jumping until I'm halfway across the pool to the vial.

I see it! It's closer. My heart leaps in joy, but I can't stop now. Not when she's exposed and easy to get kidnapped. I jump onto the last step onto the landing. I walk up to the rock holding the vial. 'Only those who have worthy intentions may be allowed to take such a vial.' A voice calls out from a distance. Could it be that I stepped on a vocal recording or is there someone already there watching my every move and ready to take what I so need?

'Who's your daddy!' the voice calls out; I look behind me I see him; with my girls' legs slung... one over each of his shoulder, her hair and head dangling downwards. I thought I killed you, I screamed! 'Son- son- son boy you'll never kill me! I am just like you until I get the love I need. You, daddy, thinks it's time for your bedtime story, while I tuck and suck on your girl in me in my bed! What do you think about that?'

I said- 'Fuck no you douche-bag!' 'Son- you need to go and suck on some soap, with that dirty mouth of yours! Anyways there is nothing you can do about it.' Now the fighting begins I must push him into this hot stuff, so I can get my hot stuff back. He's got me on the edge, after throwing her to the ground, like she was a rag doll, I knew that something of hers broke. Yet I had to think about me for the time being. How is it going to be me... or him! Whose love for her is stronger?

I fucking hate this guy. One would imagine the bloody bastard has nine lives, but it's pretty ironic since I have more than just nine lives. He smirks as he watches me figuring out how the hell- I was going to stop him for once. But I had the advantage of him, but with the lava, so did he. I jumped, and kicked him in the stomach, watching him fall to the ground with me standing on top of him like a surfboard. He grabs my ankles, and I trip feeling my hair touch a little bit of lava, that was so damn hot, it was like fire in my hair.

I yelp and move away and watched him punch me in the face three times. I could feel my sour blood spill from my mouth until I realized, Blood is my friend. I leap up and grab his neck, and lift him choking him out. I walk over and hold him over the lava pool. 'Son. Let's talk about this. I'm sorry. Please don't let go of me!' He begged and I looked over to my Gracie, and I thought about how he wanted to sexually assault her like he sexually assaulted my mother. He was the one man who could make me regret having him as my father.

I dropped him, and he screams as he falls into the lava. I sped away from the lava and watched it consume him whole. I turned around and picked up my vial and poured it down Gracie's porthole to the soul. I saw her light of her soul started to brighten as her skin color became white once again. She opened her eyes and saw me. She jumped and moved away. 'Gracie. It's me. It's Christer-James. Do you remember me?' I crawled towards her and she looked down screaming, even more, covering her private parts of her body.

Her first words she said snakingly- 'W- Why th- the fuuu-cckk, am I na- naked?' Then she proceeded to say freaking out. 'Do you see all this come and blood dripping out of me? Like you could

have shot it on my face for all I care, not deep inside me!' she asked me - 'Did you do this to me?' I just looked at her in awe! She kept running at the mouth- 'If you did... you know that I'm not on the pill!' I just looked dumbfounded thinking all girls or on that shit at least they are now. 'You know this right?' I said 'No.' What the hell, you're going to have a fat knocked up wife.'

'Yeah know when a girl is pissed when she starts moving her hands around like Beyoncé!' Now in my mind, I was thinking this question- 'Is she, or isn't she? Or worse who's the daddy?' I was hoping it will all drip out. (Dr-ip! Dr-ip!) And it wouldn't be he's the seed that impregnates her. That is when I thought there must be a virgin vial also? Just like there is a pill to stop her from getting pregnant. But do I need to stop it... would this baby be mine? Or would I kill my baby? Or would I be killing his? There must be something, I can do before she rips my dick off, and slaps me up with it! But what?

I knew I had to ask the question, which would change my life. 'Is the baby mine?' She lifted her shoulders in question. 'I don't think so.' My heart raced feeling more rage than ever. He is dead and yet he still torments me. 'Is it my father? You don't need to ever worry about him anymore. He's gone out of our lives forever.' I grabbed her wrists and she quickly moved away and started jumping on the stepping stones. 'Gracie?' I asked in concern and followed her. 'No! Leave me alone! I don't know who the hell you are! You're so not the man I thought you were.' She continued to get further away from me. I wonder how long it'll take for her to realize she has no idea where she is.

This is horrifying to me, but I could see that baby coming out looking like my dad, or even being my dad oddly enough, like being born again out of her. Just popping slightly out... 'Looking like Achmed the Dead Terrorist!' Then something inside me just snapped. (One eye twitched twice.) 'I am done, I am just done fighting for her.' I thought- 'There comes a time where every man reaches his breaking point. And mine was when she thought I would do that to her or let him have his way. She holds me responsible, regardless? Like I was some kind of deviant demonic sick-o.'

(There comes a time when you have to let her go.) If she wants me, she'll come back to me... right? Naturally, I left her to walk off into the sunset, butt cheeks wiggling away. (Am I going to regret it?) I don't know yet. Maybe so... I am thinking about her already. In nine months, I'll know if I am the daddy or not. Even though she thinks... I have no way of truly knowing. She's going by feel and that's not always right. She'll be back if she loves me! That's not if the mob of wolfs don't find her and the baby first. And do what I said they would. But I am just DONE! I wonder where she is going to go now? I wonder what I am going to do without her now?

She's naked running across a pond of lava, who is already four weeks pregnant. She is my love navigating a world that has moved on from her death. I couldn't just leave her. 'Perhaps I could watch her from a distance and protect her when she needs it. I thought. I saw that she had finally reached the other side and I continued to follow her. 'I don't trust you, but where the fuck am I?' Gracie covered her boobs and vagina. 'Mount Vahalla. Look at least let me drive you back to your hometown, and you can get some clothes. Here takes my jacket.' I gave her my jacket and she took it.

'TURN AROUND!' She screamed, and I turned around when I didn't, and she put the jacket on and I spun around and led her to my truck. 'What do you remember?' I asked trying to have a conversation. 'Nothing. I can't remember anything.' She sat hunched overlooking out the window, fogging it up with her breath. I put on the heater and heat started to come out through the vents. She screamed until she inspected the vents closer. 'Why do you drive so fast?' 'It's Just a fallen angle thing,' I said.

'What is it?' She asked dumbfounded. Looked at her and it just hit me, she's not a fallen angel or a witch, she is just a teenaged girl. After all this, she is just the way she was before all this took place. I went along with it. 'It's not all just hot air coming out. Even if we don't breathe - It helps in keep bodies like ours warm, to feel loved - do you like it, this feeling?' I replied keeping my eyes on the road. 'It burns my skin.' She looked at me. 'Yeah, that happens when your skin is cold. But don't worry it won't hurt you unless it's on higher.' I smiled. Knowing that it was frostbite.

'I believe you.' She smiled with a sparkle in her eye. 'You do remember me. Don't you?' I smiled. 'How could I ever forget the love of my life? I love you Christer-James. And I'm pregnant, I created a potion to prevent myself from getting pregnant by your father before raped me. I remembered what you said to me. So, I'm fine and thank you for being me back to life. So instead of going back there, why don't we go and explore the world like France and get me some clothes.' She chuckled and held my hand. I laughed and we both listened to old music as we rode into the sunlight.

Nine mounts later a new-fallen angle baby was born. A little girl that was all ours, we named Faith. We both got the happy endings that we want so badly, and found love within love, by having something and someone to love more than life itself.

Nevaeh

Book: 69

Girls' Camp

1

Amy was sitting on her front steps when we pulled up. It was early evening, just getting dark, and all up and down our street, lights were on in the houses, people out walking their dogs or children. Someone a few streets over was barbecuing, the smell mingling in the air with cut grass and recent rain. I got out of the car and put my bag on the front walk, looking across the street at Amy's house, the only light coming from her kitchen, and spilling out into the empty carport. She lifted one hand and waved at me from the stoop. 'Mom, I'm going to Amy's,' I said. 'Fine.' I still wasn't forgiven for this, not yet.

Nonetheless, it was late, she was tired, and those days, we had to pick our battles. I knew the way across the street and up Scarlet's walk by heart; I could have done it with every

sense lost. The dip in the street halfway across the two prickly bushes on either end of her walk that left tiny scratches on your skin when you brushed against them. It was eighteen steps from the beginning of the walk to the front stoop; we'd measured it when we were in sixth grade, and obsessed with facts and details. We'd spent months calculating distances and counting steps, trying to organize the world into manageable bits and pieces. Now I just walk toward her in the half-darkness, aware only of the sound of my footfalls and the air conditioner humming softly under the side window.

'Hey,' I said, and she scooted over to make room for me.

2

'How's it going?' It seemed like the stupidest thing to ask once I'd said it, but there weren't any right words. I looked over at her as she sat beside me, barefoot, her hair pulled away from her face in a loose ponytail. She'd been crying. I wasn't used to seeing her this way. 'Amy? I said, there in the dark, and as she turned to me. I saw her face was streaked with tears. For a minute, I didn't know what to do. I thought again of that picture tucked in her mirror, of her and Jack just weeks ago, the water so bright and shiny behind them. And I thought of what she had done all the millions of times I'd cried to her, collapsing at even the slightest wounding of my heart or pride. Amy had always been the stronger, the livelier, the braver. So, I reached over and pulled her to me, wrapping my arms around her, and held my best friend close, returning so many favors all at once. We sat there for a long time, Amy and me, with her house looming over us and mine right across the street staring back with its bright windows. It was the end of summer; it was the end of a lot of things. I sat there with her, feeling her shoulders

shake under my hands. I had no idea what to do or what came next. All I knew was that she needed me and I was here. And for now, that was about the best we could do.

3

The girl who punched out Lisa, the meanest, most fiendish of the pink-bike girls that the first summer she moved in, on a day when they surrounded us and tried to make us cry. The girl who kept a house, and her mother, up and running since she was five, now playing mother to a thirty-five-year-old kid.

The girl who had kept the world from swallowing me whole, or so I'd always believed. Amy was a redhead, but not in an orangey, carrot-top kind of way. Her color was more auburn, deep and red mixed with browns that made her green eyes seem almost luminous. Her skin was pale, with masses of freckles for the first few years I knew her; as we grew older, they faded into a sprinkling across her nose, as if they'd been scattered there by hand. She was an inch and threequarters shorter than me, her feet a size larger, and she had a scar on her stomach that looked like a mouth smiling from when she'd gotten her appendix out. She was beautiful in all the comatose, accidental ways that I wasn't, and I was jealous more than I'd ever have admitted. I was forever known as 'Amy's friend Hallie.' But I didn't mind. Without her, I knew I'd be hanging out in the bus parking lot with the nerds and Beth Vaughn. That was, I was sure, the destiny in store for me until the day Amy looked up from behind those white sunglasses and made a spot for me next to her for the rest of my life. To me, Amy was foreign and exotic. But she had said she would have given anything for my long hair and tan in summer,

for my thick eyelashes and eyebrows. Not to mention my father, my conventional family, away from Beth with her whims and fancies.

4

It was an even trade, our envy of each other; it made everything fair. We always believed we lived perfectly parallel lives. We went through the same phases at the same time; we both liked gory movies and sappy stuff, and we knew every word to every song on the old musical soundtracks my parents had. Amy was more confident, able to make friends fast, where I was shy and quiet, hanging back from the crowd. And I was grateful. Because life is an ugly, awful place to not have a best friend. When I pictured myself, it was always like just an outline in a coloring book, with the inside not yet completed. Al the standard features were there. But the colors, the zigzags, and plaids, the bits and pieces that made up me, Hallie, weren't yet in place. Amy's lively reds and golds helped some, but I was still waiting. He went back to his buddies from Lakeview, like his best friend Beth.

Sometimes we'd see them walking down our street, between our two houses, in the middle of the night, smoking cigarettes and laughing. They were different, and they fascinated us. By leaving the popular crowd, Jack & Beth became a conundrum. No one was sure where he fit in, and he was friendly with everyone, sort of the great equalizer of our high school. He was famous for his pranks on substitute teachers and was always asking to borrow a dollar in exchange for a good story; he told outlandish tales, half-true at best, but they were so funny you got your dollars' worth. The one I remember he told me had to do with psychotic Girl Scouts who were stalking him. I didn't believe him, but I gave him two dollars and skipped lunch

that day. It was worth it. Each of us had our own story about Jack, something he'd done or said or passed down. More than anything, it was the things he didn't do that made Jack Beth so intriguing; he seemed so far from the rest of us and yet implicitly he belonged to everyone. At the end of every school year, there was the annual slideshow, full of candid shots that hadn't made the yearbook. We all piled into the auditorium and watched as our classmates' faces filled the huge screen, everyone cheering for their friends and booing people they didn't like. There was only one picture of Jack Beth, but it was a good one: he was sitting on the wall by himself, wearing this black baseball hat he always wore, laughing at something out of the frame, something we couldn't see. The grass was so green behind him and above that a clear stretch of blue sky. When the slide came up, the entire crowd in that auditorium cheered, clapping and hooting and craning their necks to look for Jack, who was sitting up in the balcony with Beth Faulkner, looking embarrassed.

But that was what he was to us, always: the one thing that we all had in common. The funeral was the next day, Thursday. She needs some rest, or she's just going to crash.'

5

For most of the high school, we hadn't known Jack Beth that well, even though we'd grown up in the same neighborhood. He'd gone away the summer after middle school to California and returned transformed: tan, taller, and suddenly gorgeous. He was immediately the boy to date. He went out with Beth Tabor for about fifteen minutes, then Beth Gunderson, the head cheerleader, for a few months. But he never seemed to fit in with that crowd of soccer-team captains and varsity jackets. I went across the street to Amy's after breakfast, in

bare feet and cutoffs, carrying two black dresses I couldn't decide between. I'd only been to one funeral before, my grandfather's in Buffalo, and I'd been so little someone had dressed me. This was different. 'Come in,' I heard Beth call out before I even had a chance to knock at the side door. She was sitting at the kitchen table, coffee cup in front of her, flipping through Vogue. 'Hey,' I said to her as she smiled at me. 'Is she awake?' 'Practically all night,' she said quietly, turning the page and taking a sip of coffee. 'She was on the couch when I got up. I had to keep from smiling. These were the same words I heard from Amy about Beth regularly; for as long as I'd known them their roles had been reversed. When Martian had been depressed and drinking heavily a few years back, it was Amy who came knocking at our front door in her nightgown at two am. because she'd found Beth passed out cold halfway up the front walk, her cheek imprinted with the ripples and cracks in the concrete. My father carried Beth into the house while my mother tried her best therapy shtick on Amy, who said nothing and curled up in the chair beside Beth's bed, watching over her until morning. My father called Amy 'earnest'; my mother said she was 'in rejection.' 'Hey.' I looked over to see Amy standing in the doorway in a red shirt and cutoff long johns, her hair still messed up from sleeping. She nodded at the dresses in my hand. 'Which one you going to wear?' 'I don't know,' I said. She came closer, taking them from my hands, then held each up against me, squinting. 'The short one,' she said quietly, laying the other on the counter next to the fruit bowl. 'The one with the scoop neck always makes you look like you're twelve.' I looked down at the scoop-necked dress, trying to remember where I'd worn it before. It was always Amy who kept track of such things: dates, memories, lessons learned. I forgot everything, barely able to keep my head from one week to the next. But Amy knew it all, from what she was wearing when she got her first kiss to the

name of the sister of the boy, I'd met at the beach the summer before; she was our oracle, our common memory.

6

She opened the fridge and took out the milk, then crossed the room with a box of Rice Krispies under her arm, grabbing a bowl from the open dishwasher on her way. She sat at the head of the table, with Beth to her left, and I took my seat on the right. Even in their tiny family, with me as an honorary member, there were traditions. Amy poured herself some cereal, adding sugar from the bowl between us. 'Do you want some?' 'No,' I said. 'I ate already.' My mother had made me French toast and eggs, after spending most of the early morning gossiping over the back fence with her best friend, Beth, who was known for her amazing azaleas and her mouth, the latter of which I'd heard all morning through my window. Mrs. Riley had known Beth well from CCD and had already been over with a chicken casserole to relay her regrets. Mrs. Trilby had also seen me and Jack and Amy more than once walking home from work together, and late one night she'd even caught a glimpse of Amy and Jack kissing under a streetlight. He was a sweet boy; she'd said in her nasal voice. He mowed their lawn after Arthur's coronary and always got her the best bananas at Milton's, even if he had to sneak some from the back. A nice boy. So, my mother came inside newly informed and sympathetic and made me a huge breakfast that I picked at while she sat across the table, coffee mug in hand, smiling as if waiting for me to say something. As if all it took was Jack -Beth mowing a lawn, or finding the perfect banana, to make him worth morning. 'So, what time's the service?' Beth asked me, picking up her Marlboro Lights from the lazy Beth in the middle of the table.

'Eleven o'clock.' She lit a cigarette. 'We're packed with appointments today, but I'll try to make it. Okay?' 'Okay,' Amy said. Beth worked at the Lakeview Mall at Fabulous You, a glamour photography store where they had makeup and clothes and got you all gussied up, then took photographs that you could give to your husband or boyfriend. Beth spent forty hours a week making up housewives and teenagers in too much lipstick and the same evening's gowns, posing them with an empty champagne glass as they gazed into the camera with their best come-hither look. It was a hard job, considering some of the raw material she had to work with; not everyone is cut out to be glamorous. She often said there was only so much of a miracle to be worked with concealer and creative lighting. Beth pushed her chair back, running a hand through her hair; she had Amy's face, round with deep green eyes, and thick blonde hair she bleached every few months. She had bright red fingernails, smoked constantly, and owned more lingerie than Victoria's Secret.

7

The first time I'd met her, the day they moved in, Beth had been flirting with the movers, dressed in hip-huggers, a macramé halter top that showed her stomach, and heels at least four inches high. She wasn't like my mother; she wasn't like anyone's mother. To me, she looked just like Barbie, and she'd fascinated me ever since. 'Well,' Beth drawled, standing up and ruffling Amy's hair with her hand as she passed. 'Got to get ready for the salt mines. You girls call if you need me. Okay?' 'Okay,' Amy said, taking another mouthful of cereal. 'Bye, Beth,' I said. 'She won't come,' Amy said once Beth was safely upstairs, her footsteps creaking above us. 'Why not?' 'Funerals freak her out.' She dropped her spoon in her bowl, finished. 'Beth has a

convenient excuse for everything.' When we went upstairs to get ready, I flopped on the edge of her bed, which was covered in clothes and magazines and mismatched blankets and sheets. Amy opened her closet and stood in front of it with her hands on her hips, contemplating. Beth yelled good-bye from downstairs and the front door slammed, followed by the sound of her car starting and backing out of the driveway. Through the window over Amy's bed, I could see my mother sitting in the swing on our front porch, drinking coffee and reading the paper. As Beth drove past, she waved; her 'neighbor smile' on, and went back to reading. 'I hate this,' Amy said suddenly, reaching into the closet and pulling out a navy-blue dress with a white collar. 'I don't have a single thing that's appropriate.' 'You can wear my twelve-year-old dress,' I offered, and she made a face. 'I bet Beth's got something,' she said suddenly, leaving the room. Beth's closet was a legend; she was a fashion plate and a packrat, the most dangerous of pairings. I reached over and turned on the radio next to the bed, leaning back and closing my eyes. I'd spent half my life in Amy's room, sprawled across the bed with a stack of Seventeen magazines between us, picking out future prom dresses and reading up on pimple prevention and boyfriend problems. Right next to her window was the shelf with her pictures: me and her at the beach two years ago, in matching sailor hats, doing a mock salute at my father's camera. Beth at eighteen, an old school picture, faded and creased. And finally, at the end and unframed, that same picture of her and Jack at the lake. Since I left for Sisterhood Camp, she'd moved it so it was in easy reach. I felt something pressing into my back, hard, and I reached under to move it; it was a boot with a thick sole that resisted when I pulled on it. I shifted my position and gave it another yank, wondering when Amy had bought hiking boots. I was just about to yell out and ask her, when it suddenly yanked back, hard, and there was an explosion of movement on the

bed, arms and legs flailing, things falling off the sides as someone rose out of the mess around me, shaking off magazines and blankets and pillows in all directions.

-And- suddenly, I found myself face to face with Beth Faulkner. He glanced around the room as if he wasn't quite sure where he was. His blond hair, cut short over his ears, tuck up in tiny cowlicks. In one ear was a row of three silver hoops-ie. 'What?' He managed, sitting up straighter and blinking. He was all tangled up, one sheet wrapped around his arm. 'Where's Amy?' 'She's down there,' I said automatically, pointing toward the door, as if that was down, which it wasn't. He shook his head, trying to wake up. I would have been just as shocked to see Beth in Amy's bed; I had no idea she even knew Beth Faulkner. We all knew who he was, of course. had somehow landed in my lap, as a Boy with a Reputation, his neighborhood legend preceded him. And what was he doing in her bed, anyway? It couldn't mean no. She would have told me; she told me everything. And Beth had said Amy slept on the couch. 'Well, I think I can wear this,' I heard Amy say as she came back down the hallway, a black dress over her arm. She looked at Beth, then at me, and walked to the closet as if it was the most normal thing in the world to have a strange boy in your bed at ten in the morning on a Thursday. Beth lay back, letting one hand flop over his eyes. His boot, and his foot in it, where it remained. Beth Faulkner's foot was in my lap. 'Did you meet Hallie?' Amy asked him, hanging the dress on her closet door.

8

'Hallie, this is Beth. Beth, Hallie.' 'Hi,' I said immediately aware of how high my voice was. 'Hey.' He nodded at me, moving his foot off my lap as if that was nothing special, then got

off the bed and stood up, stretching his arms. 'Man, I feel awful.' 'Well, you should,' Amy said in the same scolding voice she used with me when I was especially spineless. 'You were incredibly wasted.' Beth leaned over and rooted around under the sheets, looking for something, while I sat there and stared at him. He was in a white T-shirt ripped along the hem, and dark blue shorts, those clunky boots on his feet. gathering it in her hands, which meant she was thinking. 'So, you need a ride to the service?' 'Nah,' he said, walking to the bedroom door with his hands in his pockets, stepping over my feet as if I was invisible. 'I'll see you there.' 'Okay.' He was tall and wiry, and tan from a summer working landscaping around the neighborhood, which was the only place I ever saw him, and even then, from a distance. 'Have you seen-?' he began, but Amy was already reaching to the bedside table and the baseball cap lying there. Dan- leaned over and took it from her, then put it on with a sheepish look. 'Thanks.' 'You're welcome.' Amy pulled her hair back behind her head, Amy stood by the doorway. 'Is it cool? To go out this way?' he was whispering, gesturing down the hall to Beth's empty room. 'It's fine.' He nodded, then stepped toward her awkwardly, leaning down to kiss her cheek. 'Thanks,' he said quietly, in a voice I probably was not supposed to hear. 'I mean it.' 'It's no big deal,' Amy said, smiling up at him, and we both watched him as he loped off, his boots clunking down the stairs and out the door.

When- I heard it swing shut, I walked to the window and leaned against the glass, waiting until he came out on the walk, squinting, and began those eighteen steps to the street. Across the street my mother looked up, folding her paper in her lap, watching too. 'I cannot believe you,' I said out loud, as Beth Faulkner passed the prickly bushes and turned left, headed out of Lakeview – Neighborhood of Friends. 'He was upset,' Amy said simply. 'Jack was his best

friend.' 'But you never even told me you knew him. And then I come up here and he's in your bed.' 'I just knew him through Jack. He's messed up, Hallie. He's got a lot of problems.' 'It's so weird, though,' I said. 'I mean, that he was here.' 'Jack Herring.' Amy sighed load and hard like in all the girl's ears that were just her ways. Something was up, with her more than always. 'He just needed someone,' she said. 'That's all.' I still had my eye on Beth Faulkner as he moved past the perfect houses of our neighborhood, seeming out of place among hissing sprinklers and thrown newspapers on a bright and shiny late summer morning. I couldn't say then what it was about him that kept me there. But just as he was rounding the corner, disappearing, he turned around and lifted his hand, waving at me, as if he knew even without turning back that I'd still be there in the window, watching him go away. 'What about him?' who- HIM- yours truly repeated. The camp leader rolled her eyes this time getting frustrated, thinking, I was sure, that this was no emergency. 'What about him?' she said. Amy Ansley has been my BFF for as long as I can recall. It's a girlie thing- that how we are... That's why I knew she was the BFF I could count on... when she entitled me at camp as just that, throughout the most horrible week of my young freaking miserable pre-teen girl life, that something was so wrong with it all even before she said it was. Just by her speech on the phone I knew- I knew by the texts too, yet that was the sealed fate there. I identified this as fact now. 'It's Jack,' she said quietly. Her words crackled over distance. The camp administrator, a young lady named Jodi with long hair and tube socks, come loose cantankerously beside me- she was. Now At camp- I am here- at this place- Ya! Like- be there- I am- theoretical to be Isolated from the Weights of Society to Recover Ourselves as Ladies. Otherwise, some crap like that- We remain theoretical to get phone calls at this and that time. Totally not at twelve o'clock on a Monday, inspiring you out of

your floppy camp bed, and smelly pillow- then the woods behind- and all that to like the outhouse- then to a room too glum for me to say what it really looks like- then a phone which considered deeply in your small hand. Him- 'He's passed on.' Amy's voice was uniform, flat as if she were declaiming development tables. I like- could hear jingling and wallowing in the far back.

'Lifeless?' The camp leader beheld dumbly, quickly with anxious movements, and then I revolved away from her looking eyes into mine. 'In what way?' More splashing, and swiftly I apprehended she was washing dishes- a girl named Jacky in the far front. I was now there- Amy, always capable, would do housework during atomic warfare. 'A dirt bike accident... is how- I said like lost in the out-load thoughts- This afternoon. He got hit by a car on the Short summit.' I alleged. 'He's dead?' yep- I repeated, and the room gives the impression of being very minor unexpectedly, overcrowded, and as the camp administrator put her arm around me, all cuddly- I trembled her off, marching away- not liking the mushy goo-goo crap. I in-visualized Amy at the sink in limits and a tank-shirt, her hair dragged back, phone raised between her boob or lack of them between her shoulders. 'Oh, my God.' It was said. 'I know,' Amy whispered, and there was a great babbling noise as water whizzed down her sink down her paints- I look like I pee-ed. She wasn't crying... about that even if it was embarrassing to her- yet she said- 'got yah.' 'Hallie?' she said again, and I knew it was hard for her to even ask. She'd never been the one who needed me all that much. 'Hold on,' I said to her in that dim room, the night it all began. We sat there on the line for what seemed similar to the lengthiest time, the energetic in the background the only noses. I wanted to crawl through the handset right then, dashing out on the other side in her kitchen, beside her.

Jack, a boy we'd grown up with, a boy one of us had loved. Gone- bead- lost forgotten- soon. The paper said he died on impact, the bike a total loss. He was turning left onto Lovell Avenue from the summit when a manufacturer in a BMW hit him dead on, knocking him off the motorbike he'd only had since June and sending him flying twenty-one feet. It wasn't his fault. Jack Beth was sixteen years old. I'd never been good at friendships; I was too quiet, too mousy, and tended to choose bossy, mean girls who pushed me around and sent me home crying to my mother. Lakeview, A Neighborhood of Fiends, was full of little fiend-ett-es on pink bicycles with Barbie carrying cases in their white or pinkie, flower-appliquéd baskets. I'd never had a best friend. 'Hallie?' she said softly, suddenly. Lakeview, our neighborhood, spread-eagled across several streets and cul-de-sacs, bracketed only by wooden posts and hand-carved signs, lined in yellow paint: Welcome to Lakeview an area of Friends. 'Yeah?' 'Can you come home now?' I observed out the window at the dark black-sh, and the lake beyond, the moon sparkling off of it. It was the end of August, the end of summer, School started in one week; we'd be juniors this year. One year some high-school students had gone around, and crossed out there in friends, leaving us a Neighborhood of friends, something my father found panic-stricken. It tickled him so much, my mother often wondered aloud if he'd done it himself. 'I'm on my way at this moment.' She was sitting on the front steps of her new house, watching them cart furniture in, her elbows propped on her knees, chin in her hands, wearing heart-shaped sunglasses with white plastic frames. The first time I saw Amy was the day she and her mother, Matron, moved in. I was sitting by my window- I was eleven or younger I would say- anyways. watching the movers, when I saw a girl just my age, with red hair and blue tennis shoes. And she completely ignored me as I came up her front walk, stood in the thrown shade of the

awning, and waited for her to say something. Jack said- died at 9:59 p.m. on August 14th. They said- He was also the only boy Amy had ever truly loved.

9

We'd known him since we were kids, almost as long as we'd known each other. The other characteristic distinguishing of Lakeview was the new airport three miles away, which meant a constant stream of airplanes taking off and landing. My father loved this, too; he spent most evenings out on the back porch, looking up excitedly at the sky as the distant rumblings got louder and louder... nearer and closer and handier, until the white noise of a plane would burst out overhead, lights blinking, seeming powerful and loud enough to sweep us all along with it. It drove our neighbor, Mr. Kramer, to high blood pressure, but my father reveled in it. To me, it was standard. I hardly stirred, even when I slept, as the glass in my windows shook with the house. So-0 I walked up to this new girl, her dark glasses sending my own echoed back at me: 'Amy?' a female's voice came from inside the screen door, sounding tired and flustered. 'What did I do with my checkbook?' The girl on the steps turned her head. 'On the kitchen counter,' she called out- in a stronger voice. 'In the box with the realtor's stuff.' 'The box with... that' The voice came back, rough as if its owner was moving around. the realtor's stuff, hum, honey- babe- I don't think it's here... white T-shirt, blue cut-off age 14 in butt- shorts girl said scuffed kids with pink socks. And I waited for her to laugh at me or send me away or maybe just ignore me as all the bigger girls did. Oh, wait. The girl turned back and looked at me slightly, kind of shaking her head. 'Hey,' she said to me suddenly, just as I was planning to turn back and head home. 'My name's Amy.' She nodded, 'I'm Hallie,' I said, I remember thinking for the first

time how she seemed old for her age, older than me. And I got that familiar fiend-et-te pink-bicycle feeling. Here it is!' Yes... The lady sounded triumphant as if she'd revealed the Northwest Way, which we'd just well-read about at the end of the school year. then picked up her purse, and leaving just enough space for someone else about the same size, and scooted down a bit on the steps, brushing it off with her hand. facing my house. And then she looked at me and smiled, and I crossed that short expanse of summer grass and sat beside her, we didn't talk right away, but that was okay; we had a whole lifetime of talking ahead of us. trying to sound as bold as she had. I'd never had a friend with an unusual name; all the girls in my classes were Lisa's and Timmy's, Caroline's and Kimberly. 'I live over there.' And from that day on, nothing ever looked the same. I pointed across the path, right to my bedroom window. I just sat there with her, staring across the street at my house, my garage, my father pushing the mower past the rosebushes. All the things I'd spent my life learning by heart. Nonetheless now, I had Amy. It was from 2:17 am. 'You'll be back just in time for school,' she said, flipping through the brochure again. 'I have a job,' I told her, my last-ditch attempt at an excuse. Amy and I were both cashiers at martin Market, the grocery store at the mall down the street from our neighborhood. 'I can't just take two weeks off.' 'I just wanted to know if it was possible,' she said, more to my father than me, but he just shook his head mildly and kept eating. 'I knew she'd think of every reason not to go.' 'Mr. Avery says it's slow enough that he can get your shifts covered,' she said simply. 'You called Mr. Avery?' I put down my fork. 'Why should I go waste the last two weeks of summer with a bunch of people I don't know?' I said. 'Amy and I have plans, Mom. We're working extra shifts to make money for the beach, and we um...' My father, who up until this point had been eating quietly and staying out of it, shot her a look.

Even he knew how uncool it was for your mother to call your boss. 'God, Mom' 'Hallie.' She was getting irritated now. 'Amy will be here when you get back. And I don't ask very much of you, right? This is something I want you to do. For me, and also, I think you'll find, for yourself. It's only for two weeks.' 'I don't want to go,' I said, looking at my father for some kind of support, but he just smiled at me apologetically and said nothing, helping himself to more bread. He never got involved anymore; his job was to placate, to smooth, once it was all over. My father was always the one who crept to my doorway after I'd been grounded, sneaking me one of his special Branden Coffee Milkshakes, which he believed could solve any problem. After the yelling and slamming of doors, after my mother and I talked to our separate corners, I could always count on hearing the whirring of the blender in the kitchen, and then him appearing at my doorway presenting me with the thickest, iciest milkshakes as a peace contribution. when I called. The minute- I hung up with Amy, I called my ma. She was a psychotherapist, an expert on teenage behavior. On the other hand, even with her two books, dozens of seminars, and appearances on local talk shows advising parents on how to handle The Difficult Years, my mother hadn't quite found the solution for dealing with me. 'Hello?'

Strangely, my mother sounded wide awake. It was all part of that professional manner she cultivated: I'm capable I'm strong. I'm awake. 'The camp bureau,' I said. 'I need you to come to get me.' 'Get you?' she said. She sounded surprised. 'You've still got another week, Hallie.' My father saying Who's dead? Who? 'Jack,' I said. 'Oh, goodness.' She sighed, and I heard her telling my father to go back to sleep, her hand cupping the receiver. 'Honey, I know, it's horrible. It's late where are you calling from?' 'Mom?' 'Hallie? What's wrong?' There was some mumbling in the background; my father, moving. 'Honey, you're tired, it's late—' and now

she was lapsing into her therapist's voice, a change I could recognize after all these years 'why don't you call me back tomorrow when you've had a chance to calm down. You don't want to leave camp early.' 'My friend.' 'It's Jack, Mommy.' 'Whom?' 'He's dead.' 'Who's dead?'

'Mom, he's dead,' I said again. 'I know, sweetie. It's awful. Nonetheless coming home isn't going to change that. It will just disrupt your summer, and there's no point a-hhh.' 'Amy has her mother, Hallie. She'll be fine. Honey, it's so late. Which was just what I'd predicted when I was dragged off against my will to spent the last two weeks of summer in the middle of the mountains with a bunch of other girls who had no say in the matter either. Sister making Camp, which was called Camp Believe (my father coined the nickname,) was something my mother had heard about at one of her seminars. She had come home with a brochure she tucked under my breakfast plate one morning, Are you with someone? Is your counselor there?' Every time I said- the word Jodi, the camp director who was still standing beside me, put on her soothing face. My throat was swelling up now, hurting with its ache. him- More mumbling, this time louder. 'I know, but I want to come home.'

10

'I want to come home,' I said, talking over her. I thought of Amy in her bright kitchen, waiting for me. This was decisive. She needs me... I took a deep breath, and all I could see in my mind was Jack, a boy I hardly knew, whose death now seemed to mean everything. 'I need to come home. Amy called to tell me. She didn't understand. She never understood. 'Please,' I whispered over the line, hiding my face from Jodi, not wanting this strange woman to feel any sorrier for me. 'Please come get me.' 'Hallie.' She announced tiredly now, almost annoyed.

'Just say you'll come. He was our friend, Mom.' 'Go to sleep now- and I'll call you tomorrow. We can discuss it then.' 'Say you'll come,' I said... not good enough for her to hang up. She was quiet then, and I could picture her sitting in bed next to the sleeping form of my father, probably in her blue nightgown, the light from Amy's kitchen visible from the window over her shoulder. 'Oh, Hallie,' she said as if I always caused these kinds of problems; as if my friends died every day. 'All right then. I'll come 4- U.' 'You will?' 'I just said I would,' she told me, and I knew this would strain us even further, a battle hard-won. 'Let me talk to your counselor.' 'Okay.' I watched over at Jodi, who was close to dozing off nodding. 'Mommy?' 'Affirmative.' 'Thanks.' Hush... I would pay for this one for a while, I could tell. 'It's all right. Let me talk to her.' I couldn't sleep for a long time. I thought only of Jack Beth's face, the one I'd cast sideways glances at through middle school, the one Amy and I had studied in yearbook after yearbook. Besides later, the one in the picture that was pushed in the mirror in her bedroom, of Amy and Jack at the lake just weeks earlier; water impressive behind them. So-o I handed the phone over to Jodi, then stood outside the door listening as she reassured my mother that it was fine, I'd be packed and ready, and what a shame, how awful, so young. Then I went back to my cabin, creeping onto my bed in the dark, and closed my eyes. The way her head rested on his shoulder, his hand on her knee. The way he looked at her, and not at the camera, when I pushed the red button, the flash lighting them up in front of me. My mother a yellow sticky notes on it saying What do you think? My first reaction was not much, thank you, as I stared down at the picture of two girls about my age running through a field together hand in hand. The basic gist was this: a camp with the usual swimming and horseback riding and lanyard making, but in the afternoon's seminars and self-help groups on 'Like Mother, Like Me' and 'Noble Pressure:

Where Do I Fit In?' There was a whole paragraph on self-esteem and values maintenance and other words I recognized only from the blurbs on the back of my mother's books. All I knew was that at fifteen, with my driver's license less than three months away, I was too old from camp or values maintenance, not to mention lanyards. didn't look very happy when she pulled up at the front office the next afternoon. It was clear by this point that my experience at Sister making Camp had been a complete and utter disaster. 'It will be such a valuable experience,' she said to me that evening over dinner. 'Much more so than sitting around the pool at

Amy's getting a tan and talking about boys.' 'Mom, it's summer,' I said. 'And anyway, it's almost over.

11

School starts in two weeks.' But all the milkshakes in the world weren't going to get me out of this. So, just like that, I lost the end of my summer. By that Sunday I was packed and riding three hours into the mountains with my mother, who spent the entire ride reminiscing about her golden camp years and promising me I'd thank her when it was over. She dropped me at the registration desk, kissed me on the forehead and told me she loved me, then drove off waving into the sunset. I stood there with my duffel bag and glowed after her, surrounded by a bunch of other girls who didn't want to spend two weeks 'bonding' either. I was on what they called 'scholarship' at Sisterhood Camp, which meant I had my way paid free, just like the four other girls I met whose parents just happened to be therapists. I made friends with my cabin mates, also we complained to each other, mocked all the seminar leaders, and worked on our tans, talking about boys. Nevertheless, now I was leaving early, drawn home by the loss of a

boy I'd hardly known. I put my stuff in the trunk of the car and climbed in beside my mother, who said hello and then not much else for the first fifteen minutes of the drive. As far as I was concerned, we'd come to a draw: I hadn't wanted to come, and she didn't want me to leave. We were even. But I knew my mother wouldn't see it that way. Lately, we didn't seem to see anything the same. 'So how was it?' she asked me once we got on the High- Way. She'd set the cruise control, adjusted the air-conditioning, and now seemed ready to make peace. 'Or what you saw of it. 'It was ok,' I said. 'The seminars were kind of boring.' 'Hmm,' she said, and I figured that I was pushing it. I knew my mother, though. She'd push back. 'Well, maybe if you'd stayed the whole time you might have gotten more out of it.' 'Maybe,' I said. In the side mirror, I could see the mountains retreating behind us, bit by bit. I knew there were a lot of things she probably wanted to say to me. Maybe she wanted to ask me why I cared about Jack Beth since she'd hardly heard me mention him. Or else why I'd hated the idea of camp right from the start, without even giving it a chance. Or maybe it was more, like why in just the last few months even the sight of her coming toward me was enough to get my guard up. Why we'd gone from best friends to something neither of us could rightly define. But she didn't say anything. She wrote articles in journals and magazines about our successful relationship and how we'd weathered my first year of high school together, and spoke at schools and parenting about Staying in Touch with Your Teen. Whenever her friends came over for coffee and complained about their kids running wild or doing drugs, she'd say. 'Hallie and I are just so close. We talk about everything.' 'Mom?' She turned to look at me, and I could almost hear her take a breath, readying herself for whatever I might try next. 'Yes?' 'Thanks for letting me come home,' She turned back to the road. 'It's all right, Hallie,' she said to me softly as I leaned back in my seat.

'It's all right.' Mom- My mother and I had always been close. She knew everything about me, from the boys I liked to the girls I envied; after school, I always sat in the kitchen eating my snack and doing homework while

I listened for her car to pull up. while I detailed every single thing that had happened from the first song to last On Saturdays when my dad pulled morning shift at the radio station, we had Girls' Lunch Out- so we could keep up with each other., and I only liked fast food and pizza, so we spaced out. She made me eat snails, and I watched her gulp down enjoying it more than she ever would acknowledge countless Big Macs. We had one rule: we always ordered two desserts and shared. Afterward, we'd hit the mall looking for sales, competing to see who could find the best bargain. She usually won. I always had something to tell her. After my first school dance, she sat with me eating ice cream out of the carton She loved fancy pasta places Each summer, my parents and I took a vacation. It was our big splurge of the year, and we always went someplace cool like Mexico or Europe. This year, we took a cross-country road trip to California and then the Grand Canyon, making up songs and jokes- stopping here and there, sucking up the scenery and visiting relatives. My mother and I had a great time; my and the two of us hung out, father did most of the driving, talking and listening to the radio, sharing clothes, as state lines and landmarks passed by My father and I forced her to eat fast food almost every day as payback for a year's worth of arugula salad and prosciutto tortellini. We spent two weeks together, bickering sometimes but mostly just having fun, me and my parents on the road. three very big things happened as soon as I got home, though, First, I started my job at Milton's. But suddenly, at the beginning of that summer, something changed. I can't say when it started exactly. But it happened after the Grand Canyon. Amy and I had spent the end of the

school year going around filling out applications, and it was the only place with enough positions to hire us both. By the time I got home from the trip, Amy had already been there for two weeks, so she taught me the ropes. Second, she introduced me to Beth Tabor, whom she'd met at the pool while I'd been gone.

Amy was a cheerleader with a wild streak a mile wide and a reputation among the football team for more than her cheers and famous mid-air splits. She lived a few miles away in the Arbors, a fancy development of Tudor houses with a country club She threw money at Beth and left us alone to prowl the streets of the Arbors on our way to the pool, or sneak out across the golf course at night to meet boys. Which, in turn, let to the third big event that summer, when two weeks after coming home I broke off my dull, one-year romance with Beth, pool, and golf course. Tabor's father was a dentist, and her mother weighed about eighty pounds, chain-smoked Benson and Privets 101's, and had skin that was as leathery as the ottoman in our Livingroom. Beth was my first 'boyfriend,' which meant we called each other on the phone and kissed sometimes. He was tall and skinny, with thick black hair and a bit of acne. His parents were best friends with mine, and we'd spent Friday night together, at our house or theirs, for most of my lifetime. He'd been all right for a start. But when I was inducted into the new crazy world of Beth Tabor, he had to go. He didn't take it well. He sulked around, glowered at me, and still came over every Friday with his little sister and his parents, sitting stony-faced on the couch as I slipped out the door, yelling good-bye. She was standing by herself, her arms folded tightly across her chest. 'Amy?' I said. 'This was a bad idea,' she said. 'We shouldn't have come.' 'But-' And that was as far as I got before Beth Tabor came up behind me, throwing her arms around both of us at once and collapsing into tears. She smelled like hairspray and cigarette

smoke and was wearing a blue dress that showed way too much leg. 'Oh my God,' she said, lifting her head to take in me and then Amy as we pulled away from her as delicately as possible. 'It's so awful, so terrible. I haven't been able to eat since I heard. I'm a wreck.' Neither of us said anything; we just kept walking, while Beth fumbled for a cigarette, lighting it and then fanning the smoke with one hand. 'I mean, the time that we were together wasn't all that great, but I loved him so much. It was just circumstances-' and now she sobbed, shaking her head 'that kept us apart. But he was, like, everything to me for those two months. Everything.' I looked over at Amy, who was studying the pavement, and I said, 'I'm so sorry Beth.' 'Well,' she said in a tight voice, exhaling a long stream of smoke, 'it's so different when you knew him well. You know?'

'I know,' I said. We hadn't seen much of Beth since midsummer. I always said I was going to Amy's, but instead, we were usually meeting boys at the pool or hanging out with Beth. My mother was sadder about our breakup than anyone;

I think she'd half expected I'd marry him. But this was the New Me, someone I was evolving into with every hot and humid long summer day.

12

I learned to smoke cigarettes, drank my first beer, got a deep tan, and double pierced my ears as I began to drift, almost imperceptibly at first, from my mother. When we got to the church, there was already a line out the door. Amy hadn't said much the entire trip, and as we walked over, she was wringing her hands. 'Are you okay?' I asked her. 'It's just weird,' she said, and her voice was low and hollow. She had her eyes on something straight ahead. 'All of it.' As I looked up I could see what she meant. Beth, head cheerleader, was surrounded by a group of

her friends on the church steps. She was sobbing hysterically, a red T-shirt in her hands. Amy stopped when we got within a few feet of the crowd, so suddenly that I kept walking and then had to go back for her. After spending a few wild weeks with us, she'd get sent off to a combination cheerleading /Bible camp while her parents went to Europe. It was just as well, we figured. There was only so much of ongoing Beth you could take. A

few days later Amy had met Jack, and the second half of our summer began. We kept following the line into the church, now coming up on Beth. Beth, of course, made a big show of running over to her and bursting into fresh tears, and they stood and hugged each other, crying together.

'It's so awful,' a girl said from behind me. 'He loved Beth so much. That's his shirt she's holding, you know. She hasn't put it down since she heard.' 'I thought they broke up,' said another girl, and cracked her gum. 'At the beginning of the summertime. But he still loved her. Anyway, that Beth Tabor is so damn shallow,' said the first girl. 'She only dated him for about two days.' Once inside, we sat toward the back, next to two older women who pulled they're There's a picture on my mantel that always reminds me of what my mother and I were then. We're at the Grand Canyon, at one of those overlook sites, with its spread out huge and gaping behind us. We have on matching T-shirts, sunglasses, and big smiles as we pose, arms around each other. We have never in any picture before or since looked more alike. We have the small nose, the same stance, the same goofy smile. We look happy, standing there in the sunshine, the sky spread out blue and forever in the distance. My mother framed that picture, when we got home, sticking it front and center on the mantel where you couldn't help but see it. It was

like she knew, somehow, that it would be a relic just months later, proof of another time and place neither of us could imagine had existed: my mother and me, best friends, posing at the Grand Canyon knees aside primly as we slid past them. Amy saw him first, walking alone up the street, his white dress shirt soaked and sticking to his back.

His head was ducked and he had his hands in his pockets, staring down at the pavement as people ran past with umbrellas. Amy beeped the horn, slowing beside him.

'Beth!' she called out, leaning into the shower. 'Hey, girl!'

He didn't hear her, and she poked me. 'Yell out to him, Hallie.' 'What?' 'Roll down your window some- and ask him if he wants a ride.' 'Amy,' I said, suddenly nervous, 'I don't even know him.' 'So what?' She gave me a look.

13

'It's pouring. Hurry up.' I rolled my window down and stuck my head out, feeling the rain pelting the back of my neck. 'Excuse me,' I said. He didn't hear me. I cleared my throat, stalling. 'Excuse me.' 'Hallie,' Amy said, glancing into the rearview mirror, 'we're holding up traffic here. Come on.' 'He can't hear me,' I said defensively. 'You're practically whispering.' 'I am not,' I snapped. 'I am speaking in a perfectly audible tone of voice.' 'Just yell it.' Cars were going around us now as a fresh wave of rain poured in my window, soaking my lap. Amy exhaled loudly, which meant she was losing patience. 'Come on, Hallie, don't be such a wuss.' 'I am not a wuss,' I said. 'God.' She just looked at me. I stuck my head back out the window.

'Beth,' I said it a little louder this time, just because I was angry. 'Beth.' Another loud exhalation from Amy. I was getting completely soaked. 'Beth,' I said a bit louder, stretching my head completely out of the car. 'Beth!' He jerked suddenly on the sidewalk, turning around and looking at me as if he expected us to come flying up the curb in our tiny car to squash him completely. Then he just stared, his shirt soaked and sticking to his skin, his hair dripping onto his face, stood and stared at me as if I was completely and completely nuts. 'What?' he screamed back, just as loudly, 'What is it?' Beside me, Amy burst out laughing, the first time I'd heard her laugh since I'd come home. She leaned back in her seat, hand over her mouth, giggling uncontrollably. I wanted to die. 'Um,' I said, and he was still staring at me. 'Do you want a ride?' 'I'm okay,' he said across me, to Amy. 'But thanks.' 'Beth, it's pouring.' She had her mom's voice on, one I recognized. As he looked across me, I could see how red his eyes were, swollen from crying. 'Come on.' 'I'm okay,' he said again, backing off from the car. He wiped his hand over his face and hair, water spraying everywhere. 'I'll see you later.'

'Beth,' she called out again, but he was already gone, walking back into the rain. As we sat at the stoplight, he cut around a corner and disappeared; the last thing I saw was his shirt, a flash of white against the brick of the alley. Then he was gone, vanishing so easily it seemed almost like magic – there was no trace. Amy sighed as I rolled up my window, saying something about everybody having their ways. I was only watching the alleyway, the last place I'd seen him, wondering if he'd ever been there at all. Up at the front of the church, there were two posters with pictures of Jack taped to them: baby snapshots, school pictures, candid's I

recognized from the yearbook. And in the middle, biggest of all, was the picture from the slideshow, the one that had brought cheers in that darkened auditorium in June. I wanted to point it out to Amy, but when I turned to tell her, she was just staring at the back of the pew in front of us, her face pale, and I kept quiet. The service started late, with people filing in and lining the walls, shuffling and fanning themselves with the little paper programs we'd been handed at the door. Beth Gunderson came in, still crying, and was led to a seat with Beth Tabor sobbing right behind her. It was strange to see my generations in this setting; some were dressed up nicely, obviously used to wearing church clothes. Others looked out of place, awkward, tugging at their ties or dress shirts. I wondered what Jack was thinking, looking down at all these people with red faces shifting in their seats, at the wailing girls he left behind, at his parents in the front pew with his little sister, quietly stoic and sad. And I looked over at Amy, who had loved him so much in such a short time, and slipped my hand around hers, squeezing it. She squeezed back, still staring ahead. The service was formal and short; the heat was stifling with all the people packed in so tightly, and we could barely hear the minister over the fanning and the creaking of the pews. He talked about Jack, and what he meant to so many persons; he said something about God having his reasons. Beth got up and left ten minutes into it, her hand pressed against her mouth as she walked quickly down the aisle of the church, a gaggle of friends running behind her. The older women next to us shook their heads, disapproving, and Amy squeezed my hand harder, her fingernails digging into my skin. When the service was over, there was an awkward murmur of voices as everyone filed outside. It had suddenly gotten very dark, with a strange breeze blowing that smelled like rain.

Overhead the clouds had piled up big and murky behind the trees. I almost lost Amy in the crowd of voices and faces and color in front of the church. Beth was leaning on Brett Hershey, the captain of the football team, as he led her out. Beth was sitting in the front seat of a car in the parking lot, the door open, her head in her hands. Everyone else stood around uncertainly as if they needed permission to leave, holding their programs and looking up at the sky. 'Poor sweet Beth,' Amy said tenderly as we stood by her car. 'They broke up a while ago,' I said. 'Yeah. They did.' She kicked a stone, and it rattled off of something under the car. 'But he loved her.' I looked over at her, the wind blowing her hair around her face, her fair skin so white against the black of Beth's dress. The times I caught her unaware, accidentally, were when she was the most beautiful. She looked up at the sky, black with clouds, the smell of rain stronger and stronger. 'I know,' she said softly. 'I know.' The first drop was big, sloshy and wet, falling on my shoulder and leaving around, dark circle. Then, suddenly, it was pouring. The rain came in sheets, sending people running toward their cars, shielding themselves with their flimsy paper programs. Amy and I dove into her car and watched the water stream down the windshield. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen it rain so hard. We pulled out onto Main Street in Amy's Ford Aspire. Her grandmother had given it to her for her birthday in April. It was about the size of a shoebox; it looked like a larger car that had been cut in half with a big bread knife. As we crossed a river of water spilling into the road, I wondered briefly if we'd get pulled into the current and carried away like cattle, and Nod in their big shoe, out to sea. 'He loved you, too,' I told her.

Nevaeh

Book: 70

Past Angels-

Silverstone

1

The redhead pin-up- is hanging

on the call walls, and the door rushes openly.

We walk... and I am in chains.

Boom, boom!

SMACK!

The lights get bright, in a new room.

~*~

Titus Back- sit- do you feel that you have done your time?

Yes- I can say I will not hurt anyone... 'Rejected!'

Shit- I am up for it... to say his friend outside- yes it sucks 10 years! Said Titus Back.

I will never see the outside... nothing more than this wall. Um him- the other man in orange said. Outside the bungalow after crossing the covered bridge to his place-the bungalow, remote in a sylvan area, the lovers' cries dropping in and out into the nightfall. I was sitting in my early for thinking of just

scaring them- blots everywhere as I go out of the car- whiskey in my hand- yet I was still thinking of what if... my wife- the slut- was with him.

I see them drunk and giggling, horny as hell- going at it- I knew. No sooner is the door shut when they're all over each other, ripping at clothes, pawing at flesh, mouths locked together. He gropes for her down under, tries to turn her on so much with the rubbing of his hand to make it wet, playing and jiggling the hell out of it. He's got more urgent things to do, like getting the blouse top of her pink dress open she was not wearing a bra, and his hands on her boobs and showing vagina. He enters her without delay, roughly, up against the wall. He slams her against the wall, ripping her skirt completely off- he takes her pounding the wall- rolling down to the floor. We hear fabric tear.

She cries out Yes- un- F*CK me hard- hard, hitting her head against the wall but not caring, as he lifts and drops her hard on his man-ness- crushing her against him hard and fast, clawing his back from her young loving lust, shivering hard to the over and over endings, with the feelings running through her- like his hand in her long dark hair.

He carries her across the room with her legs wrapped around him, they just freak! They fall onto the bed jumping not stopping for the paints to come off him. She arches, moaning, He can hear them freaking from here. He raises a bottle of the shin and knocks it back. The radio plays softly with the door open to the car, painfully romantic, taunting him: I will always love you- He opens the glove compartment and pulls out the gun... wrapped in her underwire.

That pares he keeps with him- freaked her when she was 14 under an angel oak tree. He lays it in his lap and unwraps it carefully a revealing a .38. Greasy, murky, black in color and ever so evil feeling in his hot hands. fumbling with his fly- he jacks it- saying this is it... as well as we drove down a wooded path some now in the car- I got back in I- could not- I could not do that to them, the sounds of rutting passion growing fainter as I walked back- I was sickened by it- yet let her go, circulating now with the night sounds of crickets and hoot owls... and the thump of the motor turning over- and the music soft it was our song on the radio... play as the tears ran. Titus Back- There's a nigger- like me in every state prison in America, I guess like I'm the one that can get what you need... booze if that is your thing- crack it you sniff- and drugs if you a dumb-ass- yet I a Five and Ten- I got it all you'll either love or hate. A 1938 Ford one out of many cars for this high roller- a toothbrush- or something to hide to sick or dig with. Parked in a clearing, even if it the year 1994. It was to clear my had this car... and the drive... but I had to see it myself. With my own eyes... that is when you get to see me for the first time- Bradley Delgado, 19 slicked back hair-

good looking she said, three-piece suit, a hotshot- baseness man. Under normal situations a well-thought-of, solid citizen; barely hazardous, even pussy to some. But these conditions are far from customary. He is unkempt, yet stuffie, and very- very smashed- high on something too. A pipe smoldering in his mouth. His eyes bright blue- yet stoned and itchy, flighty and hard, are engrossed to the small house up the path - he was.

He grabs a box of bullets and chin smocks feeling he is seeing a movie of his wife doing a scene he should be in. Spills them everywhere as he loads the gun for his own head- or there- he was not sure yet, all over the seats and floor- this ran down. lovers' moans. He takes another shot of bourbon courage, then- clumsy is his hands fiddling with it. He picks bullets off his lap and zips it up, loading them into the gun, even think about blowing his dick off for not getting it in this woman tonight of ever after now - he was in love with her... only... so much so he wants her dead... one by one, systematic and grim. 6 in the chamber- not 8. He just stands and listens, overwhelmed/confused. He doesn't look like much of an assassin now with the look in his glass eyes- that have the glimmer of the street light in them; he was the only one where- he thought the man on a dirt path in the woods, tears streaming down his face, a loaded gun held loosely at his side- he was going to end them and him in one go around. A pitiful character- at this point not this man at all, really. He starts up the path, unsteady on his feet. The closer he gets, the louder the lovemaking becomes. Louder and more hyperactive. The lovers are reaching a climax, their sounds of passion degenerating into rhythmic gasps and grunts. Oh god um - ah ...oh- YES- YES- Bradley lurches to a stop, pay attention. We hear languorous laughter, moans of satisfaction. Oh god...that's so-o good...you're the young hot girl cries out in orgasms after orgasms. His gaze and goes back to the cottage- looking in a love pouring out of her. Bang- Bang- Bang- Bang- Bang- and 3 more. I ran- not sure what I had done- was confused high and drunk. He shuts off the radio not able to handle it. With Unexpected quietness, with the exception of for the distance of feeling I did this to my love- and her freak- opens the door and steps from the car- saying- FREAK YOU BITCH. The one next doesn't even, I said so. Its night started- out. His patent leather shoes crunch on gravel, and he rolls steps- in a sexy way.

Loose bullets stun and toss onto the dirt. The shin jar drops and cracking glass in fragments unstop of the undies and the evidence. Framing me here... Stone Cassel- form the 1700's old where they still hang you if they feel the need too. Bradley Delgado, He came to me in EBENSBURG in 1994 - for blasting and busting over the girl he was banging. The sound slams into his's brain are numbing to the pounding he is hearing. He shuts his eyes tightly, wishing the sound would stop. It finally does, dying away like a distress signal until all that's left is the shallow wheezing and puffing of post-coitus. The best... the

best I ever had... the girl said... as he was looking from the car... (cut) In the COURTROOM the day of freedom ends and I am on the stand, at the courthouse. A large oval courtroom - the wind blows and the windows rattle and whistle- hauntingly. THE 12 JURY listens to the man stammering about- like a gallery of dummies on exhibition, pale-faced I am and cold to them- some would call me chilling. Bradley Delgado is on the witness stand, hands folded, suit and tie pressed, hair meticulously combed - oiled. Non-sympatric when I did not do it! district attorney Mr. Frampton describes the hostility you had with your wife the night she was murdered was, that of a nut job -quoting. He expresses in soft ways kind to the learner, dignified tones: Bradley how would you say it went- It was very acrimonious. She said she was glad I knew about the a-fire, that she loathed all the sneaking around. That she just wanted to hurt me- She said she wanted a divorce here in this town D.A. - What was your answer? I articulated I would not grant a reply to something I had no say in. D.A. - He speaks to his notes- flipping through the loss pages. I'll see you in Hell before I see you with that blanking man. Those were the words you used, Mr. Delgado, rendering to the testaments of your fellow citizen in your parts of town. I said- If you and they say so-

o. I really don't remember I was not at the right wits at the time. I was upset- confused- drunk and high. D.A. - What transpired after you and your wife disputed? Okay- She packed a handbag and went to be with Mr. Orillie. D.A. - Homer Orillie. The billionaire that owns the Odalis Hills Country Strip Club, half the town, and part of the Ebensburg railroad. The gentleman you had lately shard was her mistress and sex partner- would you say, lovers.

No- I would not- what would you say it was- I can't say that word in the courtroom. Yet you get it NO? is that what you want to here? Don't be smart with me- the D.A said. I nod slightly- Did you follow her? Yes- I saw them at the bar I was already intoxicated- as they were also- Yes- I decided to drive to Mr. Orillie summer household and threaten them. They were in the home getting unclothed, so I parked my car in the round drive out... and waited for her to well I thought to come out. D.A. With what purpose? I'm not certain. I was confused. Drunk. I think generally I craved to frighten them. D.A. You had a gun with you? Yes- I had it- but I am not sure what I did with it... I'm not sure. I was muddled. Stoned. I think mostly I wanted to scare them. So, I would say- Yes. I did- I must've... how do you not remember killing your wife and love- he asks- with pissiness.

D.A. When they arrived, you went into the house and blasted their heads with lead? No - I think I have been clear here, that- I did not- and went back into my car to weigh them out. I was sobering some after they look in on them- and the long walk back to the car. I apprehended she wasn't worth it - yet I would love her always. IS THAT SO- SO MUCH SO TO GIVE AN EXECUTION? No- I said that not it at all...

that I would let it go... what do you mean by that- the 5th I said. NO comment! guilty! He shouted in my face I feel the spit run down my face! D.A. Quickie- style it was while there were in doggie style- something that called for a divorce indeed. Not something a married couple does- That was the testament- that the others said to happen over the way- A .38 caliber divorce, wrapped in an underwire to muffle the shots, isn't that what you mean? And then you shot her and her love lover- right in the had- stop in re-load 5 times! That hot blood passion hates there- folks. A love crime- if I have ever seen one! I did not. Along the way, I stopped and threw me out the window over the just passed the covered bridge and I got back in the car and drove to a hotel to nap it off. I feel I have been very clear on this point to you- sir. D.A. Um- Where I get blurred, in your twisted story is where the undertaker said your wife lay dead for a week rotting in the arms of her lover. And then you say you did no? pierced with hundreds of .38 caliber bullets and gashes. Does that strike you like a whimsical twist of fate, Mr. Delgado, or is it just me and my thinking?

2

You claim you through your gun into the creek /river after the homicides took place. That's rather convenient. Softly speaking he said- Yes- Yes. It does- but... D.A. - I'm apologetic, Mr. Delgado, I don't think the jury heard that. Say it- YES IT DOES- you see even he says it. D.A. - I find it unequivocally inconvenient, that the gun nor knife was not found, and examined to match up- or that all the blood and guts were washed away from the bodies. YOU COULD and SICK- just by that way you said that sir. Why did you toss it? I was not sure what I would do with it that is why. She had it coming no? No - comment- I said. D.A - Grotesque concurrence. IF YOU SAY SO- and they, I said. Me- That was the actuality of it all. D.A. - Do you evoke all the testimonies? Me- It's what they say not I! We drained that river for three weeks, and nary a gun or knife, or underwire were found. NARY- 1! So, no comparison can be made between your gun and the bullets, or the knife, and the holes in the face and breast- and the cuts on the virginal areas- and the gun residue on the panties. Occupied look at the photos of this all- and what was taken from the gory- bloody seamen covered stiffs of the preys. Of this could blood animal- That's also rather fitting, isn't it, Mr. Delgado?

3

Me- It's the truth. nary a gun was found. Ladies and gentlemen, you've overheard all the proof, you know all the details. We have the suspected at the act of the crime. So-o what do you say for yourself? NOTHING! I said, with a faint, bitter smile, or do what you want- my life was over when she

passed. Meanwhile- you say your side- I'll speak mine- I am innocent of this corruption, sir, I find it decidedly inconvenient, that the gun was under no circumstances found by your men. The D.A. holds the jury enthralled with his finale synopsis-

We have footprints, and fingerprints- we have his semen in her body- we have his hair found on her- what more do you need. Tire tracks. Shots distributed and spared all over the lover's room - their naked body showing it all- do you see all the shale's on the ground, which bears his fingerprints. A broken jar, equally with fingerprints. Most of all, we have a lovely, exquisite young 17year-old girl and her older lover lying dead in each other's arms.

They succumb to temptation. But then again was their sin so unlimited as to value a death verdict of assassination?

5

Looking down along the line of 12, moving from one JUDGE to all of the faces and eyes showing, that it was all over for me. A revolver holds six shells, not eight. Some of you don't get that - the ladies in the room. I yield to you this was not a mercurial crime of lust! No this was revenge- of not getting what he wanted- which is something this man doesn't like- by the ways of it. - Do you have to get your way all the time, don't you? He asked me- not necessarily I said. Like I said this may well be unwritten, if not excused. Nope, this was payback of much more inhuman and pitiless nature.

Contemplate! - mayhem! 100 per victim! 50/50. I suspect your answer to that would be yes - no? No comment was given- I have no further questions- you're done. Why did you shout yourself in the head instead? I was not that crazed... yet you do that to her and him - I see life being taken here form them as also you. And while you think about that, think about this... your ass belongs to where you're going! He picks up a revolver, spins the cylinder before their eyes, and pops the sound of it... in my face holding it to my head. As if a fair barker spinning a wheel of fortune- to see if it would blow my head off for what I did not do.

6

It only would tack one shout to the head he said - like this as he made the gun pop at mine - see it's not hard to do this... what do you'll say about that? A gasp was made... saying umm hum... That means he fired the gun empty over and over and over... and then stopped to reload at point-blank range- a cram so heinous I can wrap my head around it! And this man there your dad sits there for your behalf - sick- dad

you're not right either- the only one on his said- the rest of the town heated him for being who he was... I knew it was all one-sided.

Again, and again and again! Many bullets and slashes per nude lover... right in the head, chest, and body look at the girl's virginal wounds- come one now. An old woman JURORS shiver to the sight of it. As she holds the black and white photograph- did you see this woman over there miss say your name- lock him up and throw away the keys- I'm done talking- do it. You, people, are all decent, God- dreading Christians and such- like I. But I say that not good enough- do we hang him or let him rot for it- ROT- ROT- ROT- there was talk among the people in the room, you know what to do.

7

By the power vested in me by the State of Pennsylvania, I hereby order you to serve two life sentences, back to back, one for both of your victims. So be it- tack this man out of my room- said- Layhe. Voices- say he is- Guilty- Guilty- Guilty- I stand before them all saying thanks for your time. - get out of here- they said to me... THE JUDGE aristocracies down at me with fury, he said- You assault with your ways- and actions and I better than your attitude- I take you like a predominantly arctic cold and brutal, curl fella, Mr. you make my skin could and crawling just looking in those blue could stony eyes. It drains the color of my skin just to look at you- not caring- and your cold icy ways. He wraps his gavel as we then all get up cheering- but I didn't. It was all over for me... I knew- it... (Cut)

Titus Back- He slips Klit a pack of smokes, smooth sleight-of-hand. Making his way in for rejection, the AN IRON-BARRED DOOR part as I walk in the room. I have to sit, (sit) he said- and do nicely- trying not to slouch. The chair is uncomfortable rusty metal. They say you have you've served 30 years of a life sentence by your paperwork. Boy- you feel that you have done your part? That you have done enough time no- for whom and what you are and did? Do you feel transformed... by your time? I'm no longer a hazard to any younglings- Absolutely, sir. Unquestionably. I've learned my lesson- if - if that is what you want to know. I can in all conscience say I'm an altered man. You're not a man you're a boy always remember that- oh well yes sir. It said that you took a white girl- by force- and then killed her. Is that right? It was- I was young- and dumb- you're still dumb to remember that BOY! That's the God's honest truth. - Nigger's just like you don't have souls- the man said- um yes sir, I see that. No doubt about it, I get it. I said- there was no hope here. The men just stare me like I should have gotten the chair- and not breathing the same air. The One stifles girl a yawn- saying get this meat out of my sight and lock 'IT' up. I think she was joking- yes maybe- no- shout it before it gets away, she said.

A big rubber stamp slams down: 'OVERRULED' in red cap ink. And then signed off by all the whites in the room. I get up piss in my mind yet don't show it- I get out and there this pain in the ass... Klit said- do you have them smocks (get the F*CK out of my face white boy you're making me look bad to my man.) I am looking over the courtyard with a gun pointed at my head- I no. Whoever named this place The Little Rock wasn't kidding- said one of the men standing with is a group. I turned 55 yesterday. Some birthday- I got. When's your birthday? I asked- Klit's (I don't know.) I don't remember it- Stan- Jeez, what kind of juvenile life did you have? I said- short- and fast. There's always the possibility that some asshole will be insulted, isn't there? Don't say much- that pissed him off I said? Yes- he not good about it- he is pissed I said. What you want, boy? - He said to me... I moved on... The horns when off and there was cheering and shaking on the fences, boys and man saying nasty shit- as we got all whole new set of pussy in- to freak within the night.

It is dusking out now as the bus pulls in- with the man above us with their guns and are dicks- saying run I'll blast it off. High stone walls topped with guards, and winding concertina wire, set off at intermissions by looming guard towers like a castle. The glow of the little windows seems eerie and could- as I shiver my way down into the gates of the massive cold, damp, and spooky, building.

It was not more than a day, that went by this week man walked up to me saying- I can get you Damn near anything, within reason. A bottle of brandy to celebrate your teen's high school graduation. Or first freak- or cards with girls on them- or underwear without holes. -I said to him Can you get me a BRADSHAW CRANDELL 40s Redhead Nude pin-up drawing? Of the girl- sorry to say I don't have her riding shoved in my under short but yeah I can get you the cute little thing there you see on screen.

It has just turned 1940, and that is when he first came to me, he was not much of a man nor was he a boy. I did not see much in this sick with the gold fork up his ass! Blunt end first- or so the boys said.

Look at all the cons- hundred in the courtyard. Playing catch, shooting craps, chatting with each other, making deals. Fighting, shaking, and ass freaking. Isometrics old-fashioned. A stark room waits beyond. As the big black door slides open with enormous clinking sounds.

8

I have never seen a shiting sorry-looking shit load in all my shit'n life- said the simple man- as I walked past. a long table. An empty chair faces them. We are now in six HUMORLESS MEN sit side by side at saying dumb shit, and place bets on who was freaked over the night before, like the night before- my first night the bet was on the fat black guy- that was killed for spitting in the guard's face. And taking a

dump on the floor on the way in as he was dragged by his balls. Oh yes, they hose you down and march you in ass naked- I remember that night also.

(Back) [move up if you want]

Titus Back- come in, put on his cap and waits by the chair- seeing me. I emerge into fading daylight, sprawls unglamorous through the commotion, worn cap on his head, exchanging hello's, and doing the minor trade. He's an important man here, I saw for a black man I was okay with... (yet was not 100% sure)

9

I gaze around, rejected by prison walls. I came to EBENSBURGH Prison in early 1940- Titus Back for murdering his young girl and the fella she was banging. The bus lurches forward, RUMBLES th rough the gates. I would call the man pedantic- said Titus Back. DAN, captain of the guard, slams his baton into Bradly back- and then into another man's back for asking too many questions. Bradly goes to his knees, gasping in pain. BOOS and SHOUTS from the onlookers. The TOWER GUARD All clear- he yells! LOOKOUTS method the bus with carbines. You can see all the faces looking sad- as the door jerks open- by Dan from the outside. And also unlocked- with a key. Dan Flakier, captain of the guard, slams his baton into my back hard, and then into my manhood. Bradly holds against him one of the Men in front of me, almost drags him down to the ground killing him. The new PUSSY's debark, bound together single-file in 2 rows, discontinuous sourly at their environs. I fell to my knees also by this man pulling me downward with him- I thought I was next, gasping in pain. BOOS and SCREECHES from the listener's older inmates. Titus Back- said- it came to me to be known within the walls, he was a big-time businessman- making more money- than I could dream of, a real estate investor- within oil and gas- some time shoving the money down his own paints. The same could be said for his girl too... respectable labor, and education for a gentleman as undeveloped as he was at the field when you deliberate on how unadventurous this is these days. They meet in high school, she was all he wants, and vis-vers-a they feed off one another's- it was a sick unholy- and unhealthy relationship.

10

Takin' bets today- yep? Titus Back- pulls out his notepad and pen. Tolerate Wide-ranging? Pope shit in the woods? Smokes or coin, bettor's choice. The coin you can get smokes with coin- dumb ass. Titus Back- There they are, boys- what puss- is going to get freak- and cry for mommy. The betting game when one... picking the pussy, that they wanted to freak over. Flakier- get on your feet- and stand like a

man- PUSSY- before I freak the said out of you! So-o freaking ass hard you never walk again. They were sitting in a tight little rower looking over the town- up high. Odile- I'd Never- ever seen such a sorry-er-looking' pile of cow shit in my days. Hailer- Comin' from you, kid, you being so beautiful and all... that's cute- what you change his clothes too? You wanna suck my dick? No- this one here does, and he tapped- Titus Back on the head in form of him.

That lanky sack of shit, third from the front- is the puss-pony I want. He'll be the first. Look at these pussy going to town sucking on that dick! Said- Stan- I here this black man said this as I went past him. High roller. Who's your pussy BITCH? Jacker- Smokes I want- he was puffing on two at once- there was one in his ear shoved. Put me down for their packs. Stan- OH Bullshit. I'll take that freak on hardcore. Grolh- Me too. Other hands go up- saying that's the sack of piss and shit that we'll hit. I see this black man- iotas the names- as I walk past now even slower with the line that I am changed too. Stan- You're out some coinage, boy. Take my word for it boy I will win. You're so smart, you call it- I did. Stan- I like even for a nigger! But your puss is going down and going to be freaked. Like this one's ass last night by Dan the Gard- the guys snicker! For it may have been true... ha! I say that flabby-floppy freak right there the- lard-ass- that should have a tuba playing with every step he makes... let's see... (Okay) 11th from the front. Put me down for a quarter roll. You can say that small thing in your slack is that con roll can you look at some of these ladies coming in. Funny- asshole! Said one of them. on FatAss- got it! You're out some man... That's five cigarettes and a half roll of -cone. Any takers- on this white big hairy ball-sucking fat ass!?

More hands go up and them more. I look around- and the others are paraded along, forced by their handcuffs that are changed to taken small baby steps, recoiling under the barrage of boos and yells. Saying all kinds of freaked up shit. The oldtimers are shaking the fence and the pussy is looking scared of getting freaked over hard by them- you can see the lust in their eyes by some, trying to make the Johnny-come-latelies shit them pants. Some of the new fish shout back, but mostly they look terrified. Especially that man I came to call Bradly.

Hey there puss you wanna suck this- one said- and I look at him with aw-ah-gross on my face, Titus Back- I must confess I didn't think much of um- The first time I laid eyes on him walking in the stone-cold rot your brain out place. He might 'a been important on the outside of these walls, yet not here on the inside... nonetheless, in here, he is just a little pussy looking to get freaked in prison grays by horny man. Like I said- it looks like shift gust could upset him to the mud below his shaking knees and feet. Affirmatively- this was my primary impress of the gentleman.

Sid- Whatcha- say, Boy? The little fella on the end- sure got it. Definitely the crier tonight- that is going to lose his mind. It always happens in the night someone is going to give out. And become the pussy! There is not one man here- that has not wanted freedom or their mommy! Long dark cold nights- they make you think of all that you did and did not do right in your life... it well dives you over the edge like most on the first night here. I stake half a pack- for my stick with the fork up his anus. Any takers? One the done meat?

Stan- wow- wow- wow- that such a rich bet. Come 'on, boys, who is going to prove me mistaken? Some of the boy's hands go up and some were making gestures too, I got the finger! Guys- brave ass wipes- no? BRAVE! persons, ten clouds of smoke apiece and a half roll. That's it, gentlemen, this boy is in and getting de-lazar and freak in their faces- hoses them down- and the bets are closed. Me- I pocket the notepad- kissing it for the win. A VOICE comes over the P.A. speakers: saying get inside it time for lock-up. Old music runs in my mind from my free days back with I was a young black boy- sinking into bars, to see bands and key players.

11

WARDEN Cameron Marquez ambles us to look at his all and holy ways, all neutral man stands before his greatness- naked as the day we came out of our momma's in blood and goo- cover in shit. A complete BIBLE freak- this man is and one that I am sure is not all and holy- just by the way he grins too much for my liking- I don't trust his type- you'll get freaked hard in the ass- like with the feel of it being a steam train... haling ass into the tight hole. Yet some of these guys here love, that feeling... they have eyes on me now. I see church ways of being a fake pester type- angel pin in hand- marking off are names that mean jack shit to him. Welcome TO EBENSBURGH YOUR FREAKING DICK belongs to me! You're going to be sucking it long and hard from this day one- you'll learn this fast- or have your balls cut off- got it? YES, sir! The other shit- you get from my man here. This is Mr. Flakier; captain of the guard you have met. And feel in your manhood already as you were all welcomed by becoming ladies in these walls. I am Mr. Marquez, the warden. You will get this if we feel you're out of line... the Billy club to the dick! He assesses the newcomers with flinty eyes and glare and odium. Understand- Yes! You are sinners and pussy come, that's why they sent you to me- now it's my job to eat you all out for this. 'He could eat an inferno and piss out ice cubes!' WARDEN- castle rock – some call this place- we have the lighthouse on the top- there is no way out- and even so-o those that would get that far would be shot on the spot in the head- this place is never busted out of- were the best in the stat! - and the most malicious. (Talking) Rule number

1: no blaspheming. 2 No betting off- or shitting or pissing in the cells of the sink in E bloc- there will be no fighting- or sexual cantatas- The caption rolled his eyes like yeah right- hypocrite! For I knew by the looks this was so backwards... even this man here was getting it in the ass! - Maybe his wife that he would not stop talking about being everything she was not... I'll not have the Lord's name taken in vain in my prison. The man said it out loud- The other directions you'll figure out as you go along, as stated. Any questions? Where do we shit and piss and eat? It was said there were no bathrooms in the 23-hour lock-up- so-o what- were and how? A gangly- lanky man said.

As I was getting firehose down in front of all the men next to me- push and shoved hard- like fresh meat. I hear the others, that were here long then I returning to their cell blocks for the evening count- and then lights out. The new pussies are marched in feeling less than manly. Guards unlock the shackles. We are all stopped and we lose all that was are free life as we strip down - alone with the chains drop away from are now freezing cold bodies, clanking to the stone floor under us. Hey, you numb-nuts look here- hey look here- he did not he hit him in the dick with a bully club- saying don't disrespect me- FREAK!! Keep your eyes looking at me quires. You- yeah you- suck this man dick! - what you heard me, and he did with a gun at his dick or else. I was the first man in the shower! With all their dicks flapping in my eyes! Some were just freaking gay looking at me.

It was not even my 2nd day here and I asked the man, that can get it for you if- hey Titus Back- Can you get me a coal bucket- a gas lamp- hard hat- for on my table- and a mining hammer, with the caw- in my room? and some old hand tools just to remember- my life before for I hit it big. Also, I want you to get me the ID mining tag that was mine number 3700. Funny all this was in plain sight... I was not hiding it. Except for the hammer- that I head in a fake bottom in the coal bucket that I made out of an old coffee can- and dripped in... run some mud- around it and it looks right- that grads would never no. Titus Back, I was okay with it for it was memorabilia of his life- that I got smuggled in from his home- that they were selling off. Shit, he wanted- and by what he said it was all worn down- nonlethal- and not usable- Freak- I really did not care I was making my 30% upcharge. Why the hammer- it's small- I said, planning on going somewhere he said. Ha- no- you can get out of this place, and I sure I would need more than this thing- I don't even have a plan too, after what I did- I belong here what do you think? Really I have not made up my mind yet... I am fine with you if you fine with me- sure- we're all the same in my book all the cons. Why? I did not kill this girl- yet you did the man he said- with a giggle- ha- nope- I should have thought- and he laughed harder- I said I was framed. You do it? yes, he said- why- I can say yet... I need to see what

I think of you- sure enough, I said back and walked with style away- not caring about anything- in this wall, and remembering her in my mind.

12

FLACKIER Off with them clothes! Is standing ass naked- And I didn't say take all day doing it, did I?

Flacker rams the tip of his club into ALL the con's JUNK they are all gasping for breath- and grappling. yet again some are blowing chunks, the man falls to his knees or is doubled over. (Now eat it- he said) CON- When do we shit and get food to live off of? Cued by Marquez 's glance, Flackier steps up to the con and yells right in his face: saying what is and not permitted. FLAKIER- Your give shit and you take this shit and we say when you shit! And you sleep in your shit! Got it- shitter! YOU ball-sack-sucking dick junky- *Tit- smacking pussy licker- MOTHERFREAK!* Flackier takes his place at Marquez 's side again. The men shed their clothes. Within seconds, all stand naked. Softly: MARQUEZ Any other questions NOW? Some lookup- and take yet another hit. He said I believe in self-control and the holy spirit. Here, you'll receive both, if only you believe that, you can have that self- control. He throwing the bible- down to the floor at their feet, saying- you all going to hell for what you have done in your life- if your choice to fall; to this book maybe you can die here with the hope of making it up... yet I don't feel you can at this point. Put your faith in God- Your DICK belongs to this man here, and he points to his caption. Welcome! The con gets a huge scoop of white delousing powder thrown all over them. Flackier shoves the all us CON's into a steel cage, that has the spray jets in it to be disinfected- open at the front- with a man and woman girls looking up at us. TWO GUARDS open up with a fire hose, that spray hard and fast in the face and body- hitting like knives on the sick barning from industrial soap. The con is slammed against one another the back of the cage, sputtering and hollering. Jiffies later, the water is cut and the con's yanked out. And given a number- I can see it for my eyes are red balls of blood- from all that was slashed into them. FLAKIER- Delouse that piece of shit 5 more times in the eyes for killing a 17-year-old girl, that he freaked at 14! The EXECUTOR slides a short stack of items through the slot- like a top and pants and that was it- prison clothes- no underwire- yet a Bible. (That's nice) and I get my teeth chipped out. All the men are processed quickly haling ass- a blast of water in the face and hands flying all over me in places that only my wife touched by their RN, powder- and shit, clothes and a Bible... A naked CON I am to them, as I step before a DOCTOR and get a cursory exam. A penlight is shined in his eyes, ears, nose, and throat. I sit on the aluminum table ass sticking. Gasping and coughing, blinking powder from his eyes, I rub some she grabs my manhood with a fast cold hard grip, and she said- flopping shit around- I even got penetrated-

with her finger. (D block for a week to tack fact with the others that have Genital warts- or on that line.) I have never seen so much gross cock in my face she said. Save this shit and get it over with Caption said... I have a job to do too. RN. Bend over- or I do it for ya! (You going to jack me too I said) Funny I got yet more teeth out that day. D block is the lowest level above is us, and that was home for a few days. Me- the con does what he is asked. A GUARD with a penlight in his teeth spreads his cheeks, peers, up to his ass, and nods- do you wanna hold out your tongue, I said; to her, as she was in the front. Three tiers to a side, concrete, and steel, gray and imposing. Bradly is next up. Cute she said - that's a new one- He gets the same treatment, and she looks at me like why- he not bad looking- (almost flirting.)

The naked tenderfoots' are shivering on hard wooden chairs, clothes on their laps, Bibles open. CHAPLAIN- yells- Bradly and the others are marched in, still naked, carrying their clothes and Bibles. He- makes me lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restored my soul... no spit and piss on it! For this is what you have been doing in your life. New walking to their new homes - holding their top, pants, and shows, The CONS in their cells greet them with SCOFFS, HECKLINGS, and HILARITY. U- HOOOOW- Hay- Sorry your daddy dicks your Mommie- One by one, the new men are shown to their yelling and marching to his clap- cells and locked in with a CLANG OF STEEL.

TITUS BACK- when they put you in that cell when those bars slam home, that's when you know it's for real.

The first night's the toughest, no doubt about it. They march you're in half-blind from that delousing shit, your so-o ass naked as the day you're born, Bible shout on your dick to hide it- also reading- what you done wrong, skin burning like piss in the eyes, ass hole hurt'n not able to shit they throw on you... into rot.

Bradly is led past and given a cell at the conclusion of our row. Titus Back watches from his cell, cigarette dangling from his fingers arms slung over the crossbars. nothing left but all the time in the world to think. A long cold season in hell stretching out ahead... The old life is blown away in the bat of an eye... shit! Yah pissed it away... Sam listens to the CLANGING below. He watches Bradly and a few others being brought up to the 2nd tier. SAM - Somebody always breaks down crying. Most new fish come close to madness the first night. Happens every time- every nightfall. The only inquiry we have is, who is it going to be? SAM- I had my chance on Bradly... It's as good a thing to bet on as any, I for one conjecture, in here where your life is shit.

The bars slam home... He gazes around at his new surroundings, taking it in. He slowly begins to dress... He hiatuses, listening. Sam lies on his bunk below us, tossing his softball toward the Stan and catching it again- and then to Klits. SAM- I remember my first night. It seems a long time ago now.

FOOTPATHS he way to me- sterling- in a roll- approaching near, easy-going, resonating in a hollowly on the stone courtyard- looking over the lights of the dusking day. Bradly is alone in his cell, clutching his clothes. GUARD- That's lights out! Good night, ladies. Darkness now. Silence. Sam looms from the darkness, leans on the bars. Listens. Waits- From somewhere below comes faint, ghastly tittering. The pissy grade looks the rows toward Sam's cell. The lights bump off in series. The guard exits, footsteps reverberating away from me and them.

13

Klit's I know some big old dick-suckers- bull queers, like me who'd love to make your social contact... in the shower tomorrow especially they would love to see if they can find that dick of yours, and wiggle it around. The white schmaltzy butt of yours... Sam waits at the bars. Smoking. Listening. He cranes his head, peers, down toward Bradly's cell. Nothing. Not a peep.

A big VOICES drift through the cell block, taunting:

Pus- puss- pussy- You're going to like it here, new pussy. A whole lot... You are takin' this down now ain't- you... pussy- the man said, flapping his dick around at me, new pussy? Going to be a quiz later. An evil stone growth on the Maine landscape. The moon hangs low and baleful in a dead sky. The headlight of a PASSING TRAIN cuts through the night. Cameltoe hey you- oh, Faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat-Ass puss over there I can see you. Talk to me, baby boy. I know you're in there- I see your rolls. I can hear you breathing and you going to blow a kiss my way? Now, don't you eavesdrop to these nitwits, hear? CELLBLOCK FIVE midnight you can hear this all... A CELLBLOCK GUARD strolls into the frame of sight. They're all not too bright are they the Gard said- (somebody's LAUGHS and losing their mind about how they won their bet.) Keep it down. Fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh pussy... OH GOD! I DON'T HAVE ITS PLACE HERE! I WANNA GO HOME to momma! The mommy'S boy fat freak- IT WAS said. That looked like he ate too many Italy style meals. AND IT'S FAT-ASS- dick suck in 5 THAT CRIED FOR MOMMY! NO RACE BOYS I GOT UM BY THE HAIRY BALLS. Boy- Boy- hey gay boy- This ain't such a bad place. I'll introduce you around, make you feel right at home. Hey, see this it's going in you! He- he- he. Fat-pussy suck- lets out a LOUD HOWL of despair: as he was taken in all ways. What Christ is this happen and shit- freaks? GUARDS pour in, led by Flackier himself. 'He took the Lord's name in vain!' Shut the

freak up- or you'll eat your bible 'I'm- tellin' the warden!' You'll be telling' um with your tongue shoved up your ass, and then pulled out your nose- if you do! The lights bump on hard 2 by 2. Fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh pussy... AND IT'S FAT-ASS- dick sucker- The place goes nuts. FatAss- dick come goo- galloper throws himself screaming against the bars. FLAKIER- What's your glitch you fat freakin' barrel of monkeyCUM? The entire block starts CHANTING: 'I WANNA- wanna GO-a go HOME! I WANT MY MOTHER.' PLEASE! THIS AIN'T TRUE! I AIN'T ACTUAL TO-a BE HERE! NOT-a I'm! FLAKIER - I ain't going to count to one- you all shut the freak up - for a bedtime story! The big freak keeps weeping and sniveling. Flackier draws his baton, gestures to his men by ripping him up and down. And shoving the bully club up his ass- and then in the teeth- Open it- freak for saying all this and making my day hard. Flackier arrives at Fat-Ass' cell, bellowing through the bars: A GUARD unlocks the cell. Flackier pulls Fat-Ass out and starts beating him with the baton, brutally raining blows. Fat-Ass falls, tries to crawl- out of the open shit room. A GUARD unlocks the cell. Flackier pulls Fat-Ass out and starts beating him with the baton, brutally bucketing blows. Fat-Ass falls, tries to crawl yet one more time. The place goes dead silent. All we hear now is the dull WALLOP-THUMP-STRIKE of the baton and sex act you don't wanna see in your life. Fat-ass passes out. Flackier- gets in a few more licks and finally stops. 'I had your mother and that how you were made! She wasn't that great, other than giving head- the puss was too wide! For your sister- coming out! And see this dick of mine it's bigger than yours!' 'Sshhh ass wipes. The screws will hear...' 'hey you- hey- Pussyee pussy-e-e pussy-e-e-e-e...' SAM The boys always go pussy-ing with first-timers... besides they don't quit till they finger freak, someone, into their dick-sh ways. PUSSY-cons go soundlessly irrational in his cells- yanking and pulling throwing shit at Klits over the way. Pussy fat freak is crying, trying not to hyperventilate. One man paces like a caged animal... another sits concerning his cuticles bloody...a third is moping noiselessly...a fourth is dry-heaving into the toilet... this PUSSY went where he was dunked in the shit covered bull- by the girl and he inhaled so much water and pissy file-ness I don't want to say- other than the fact that he died and we all say as he dragged his body back in and made a show of it, yet no gave a shit I lost money and smokes that's all we cared about. The VOICES keep on, sly and creepy in the dark... PUSS- Puss Pussie! The man says as Fat Freak was hanging over the rail dead. FLAKIER- Get this tub of shit covered come down to the sanatorium. (nobles around are looking in awe yet not comply caring.) If I hear so much as a rat fart in here the rest of the night, by your Deity and his sonny baby boy Jezzzie, you'll all visit the medical wing. Every last Mother freak'n- cock sucker in this block. He laid there for three weeks and no one cared. In EBENSBURGH your just meat on a rack... rotting your days away. The guards wrestle saying to carry him off- it did not happen- they need to have a theory as to why he died. So the pushed his boy down the steps saying that was it- and the dead freak rolled- like a bowling ball- about

ready to hit pins. All the FOOTSTEPS reverberation fades away. The Lights went off - was all Darkness again even in the cells. Silence- nothing- nothing- nothing.

14

LOUD SIGNAL. Sam stares through the bars at the main floor below, eyes riveted to the small puddle of blood where FatAss went down. The GUARDS holler their head-counts to the HEAD BULL, who jots on a clipboard. His first night in the joint, Bradly My pussy cost me two packs of Cigarettes and some change. He never made a sound... The master locks are thrownTHUMP! The cons step from their cells, lining the tiers. Sam peers at Bradly, checking him out. Bradly stands in line, collar fastened, hair combed. Bradly goes through the breakfast line, gets a scoop of glop on his tray. WE PAN BRADLY through the noise and misunderstanding... and discover Knaggier and ROOSTER Duffie are watching Bradly go by. Bogs sizes Bradly up with a salacious gleam in his eye, mutters something to Fowl. Rooster laughs. He carefully pussy-e-s it out with his fingers. Bradly finds a table occupied by Sam and his regulars chooses spot at the end where na an insignificant person is sitting. Ignoring their stares, he picks up his spoon -- and pauses, seeing something in his food. It's a squirming puss- CATCALLER. You're going to look good squirting down on me- Bradly grimaces, unsure what to do with it. HATLEN - is sitting closest to Bradly. At age 85, he's a senior citizen that is lost in his days and established occupant. THAT WE ALL TRUST AND LOVE! SAID SAM! HATLEN You going to eat that THAT TERRE

SONNY? Bradly can't bear to watch. BRADLY- WHY

YOU

GOING TO? HATLEN WOULD YOU - mind IF...? A

SMALL kitten-

POPS ITS HEAD OUT OF HIS SHART- Bradly passes the WIGGLY THING to HATLEN. HATLEN examines it, rolling it between his fingertips like a man checking out a fineness OF IT FOR HIS BABY. Bradly is riveted with worry. She came in my window at them when I was getting books out to make my rounds. I had too... Mmm. Nice THIS ONE READY TO BE A BUTTERFLY- OH WELL THAT'S OKAY- HERE BUTTEN'S.

HATLEN GIRLIE kitten Buttons says thanks. I'm lookin' after her till he's old enough to go on her own - my little one. Bradly nods proceeds to eat what was calling. Carefully. Klit's approaches - with talk about the cat.

Tigger- Oh, Jesus Christ, here he comes blotting and beaming. Good for you ass hole you got the win- howdy, ladies. It's a fine sunrise. 'Yen's got- why it's fine?' He said in his dumb way of speech. He drops his tray down cracking it and sits his ass just as hard on the wood bench. The men start pulling out cigarettes- and rolls and handing them down by his face that was lying nearly on the table- he was drooling. Hell, I sure do love that pussy of mine. I personally accept as true I owe that puss a big sloppy kiss and BJ when I see him. That's right, send 'em all down my way- I win this- I win. I wanna see 'em lined up in a row, pretty line of sexy dancers. An impressive pile forms. he curves down and inhales extremely, sniffing the perfume of dictation. Rapture. Suck my ass... Gee, Sam. Awful shame, your Puss coming' in dead last and all, speaking of dead you see that fat freak is still hanging in there. Say Drywell, you pull sanatorium liability they get that thing out yet- there burning him at the end of the week if you wanna see. I myself shake my head sacked, to what the kill said... he got joy out of it, he turns back to his food. The silence mounts. I glance around. Men resume eating. Softly I ask his name? WE DON'T FREAKING CARE- PUSS- EAT OR I'LL KILL YOU FOR FUN! BRADLY- I was wondering if anyone knew his name. I GOT YOU HE SAID! What the freak D0 you care, new pussy? HE's YOUR QUIRE? (He resumes eating his slop.)

A DEAFENING NOISE of industrial washers and presses. Bradly works the laundry line. A nightmarish job. IT Doesn't matter what his mother's freaking name was an asshole. Showerheads mounted in bare concrete. Bradly showers with 100 or more men. No modesty here. At least the water is good and hot, soothing his trouser muscles. He's new at it. BOoB, the con foreman looks and said go, elbows him aside and shows him how it's done. The Allies, as they're called in the walls! Duffie- appears from the billowing steam, smiling- saying I going to get you babygirl, checking Bradly up and down. Other sis-girls appear from the sides holding down for the ass hole licking. DUFFIE Hard to get... yet I did and I'll keep getting it too... I like that that as so do you- a baby girl! Ummm. Bradly tries to step past them. He gets shoved around, nothing serious, just some slap and tickle. Jackals sizing up prey. DUFFIE You're some sweet punk ant you...? Have you been breaking in yet baby? I taking that and reaming it out! He said... Bradly breaks free, flushed and shaking. He hurries off, leaving the three Allies laughing. UN UN AH'S! Bradly lies staring at the nightfall, unable to sleep- ass hurting- he thinks and thinks of a way out- like slitting his wrists and freak. The next morning after looking at the poster all night thinking about the man he was and not a gay man's dream- Bradly takes this as a cue to amble over. Seeing the lady in the room eyeing him with the look of nice shoes wanna freak!

SAM- The wife-killing hotshot. Hello. I'm Bradly, I said to that- as he yelled for me. SAM- Individuals say you're a cold pussy all dry inside and freak- a hard freak to get. The black men of trust at this point said- a man I learned to admirer even for being darker. Bodybuilding period in the yard now. Sam plays catch with Klits and Stan, lazily tossing a softball from one place to another. Sam notices Bradly off to the side. Nods with greetings to me. I offer my hand- and he takes it as a shake saying I need you're backing up. What do you say- he coming after you- he said with a shank- what hand- lift- I bunch him out and get 3 weeks in the hole... Sam glances at the hand, ignore it? The game continues... with me added in a fastball to the head and I get it. BRADLY- How do you know that... that I did that? I didn't- Why'd you do it? SAM- I keep my ear open for the story! BRADLY- I didn't, since you ask the question I was not the one that pulls it out if you want I am saying. SAM- Every Tom, Dick, and Harry blameless in here at EBENSBURG, don't you know you get that on the way in? or so they think and say- boy, you'll fit right in, with us all say we were set up for this shit even if they need it ya- know. (Off to the other man Bradly's stare's.) Klit's! What are you in for, boy? He said back- Didn't do it! Attorney freaked me, and the wife wouldn't! what are you going to do? Sam gives Bradly a look of well you see. -See...? - So they think mishit smells Better than regular's. That true... if you think so... Did I hear that? What you say- I really don't care- he said back. He sends the softball right back, passing it into Stan's hands. Stan drops the ball and grimaces, wringing his stung hands. Stan nudges Klit's. Watch this... He gusts up to and heaves the ball hard- right at Bradly's head. Bradly sees it coming out of the corner of his eye, whirls and catches it. Beat. SAM- isn't made up my mind yet. I want to go to the Bahamas that is where we wed you know - under a tree- wind blowing in the breeze, she said yes- and we made- love in a hammock looking over the blue-green sea. SAM- I see lots of rocks. I show- the Quartz? - and coal of the train that passes in the night- that the plan right hopes a ride out? Maybe? Bradly squats motions Sam to join him. Bradly grabs a handful of dirt and sifts and said look a pace of coal it through his hands. Do you think you can get me a new hammer- like my old one...? Quartz, sure. And look. Mica. Shale. Silted granite. There's some graded limestone, from when they cut this lace out of the hill. He finds a pebble and rubs it clean, I want to go somewhere other than here.... He tosses it to Sam, if you get busted you don't know me. Why- I can live like this- but you need to be here for what you did- well just like the boy I did not do it- and that is the truth. AND no one has made it... you know... so I don't care- okay... if that is what you want- 50 cones- and 10 packs. I love this shit it was part of my old life- it needs to be aging so I don't forget who I was- Sam- or maybe you would like to sick it through some guards head? Yeah, plant your sex toy in somebody's skull is that it? I don't give a shit but don't say where you got it- the same like be for with the poster. I know that boy! No, that not it at all- man. BRADLY I have no rivals here. That what you think- your dumb shit- and I

know that is not so- for the boy talk! SAM- No? Just wait for that going freak you hard like last time. Sam- skims his gaze past Bradly. I and he are watching them looking at me with sex eyes. SAM - Word gets around. The Allies have taken a real shine to you, yes they have. Especially this man **here**.

Klits over a tray of food- Everyone who runs this place loves surprise inspections - so do we- one guard cut me open to see what was up to my ass- I did not want to shit for weeks. They turn a blind eye to some things, but not a gadget like that. They'll find it, and you'll lose it. Mention my name, we'll never do business again. Not for a pair of shoelaces or a pack of gum, or pair of clean underwire- or a sock of your cock. Would it help if I explained to them I'm not homosexual? They don't meet the requirements to be called- a man- or home-o's. You have to be in here for as long as they get their way. BRADLY Tell me something. 'Encyclical queers take by force, that's all they want or know.' I would grow - some balls- and eyes in the back of my cranium if I were you- and tuck your dick in. BRADLY- Thanks for the guidance. SAM That comes free, to you only- I feel I like you for some freaking reason. Giggling- about that hammer- you have seen this- But you understand my concern- is becoming yours, I guess you wanna escape. Tunnel and go over the wall maybe? If there's trouble, I doubt a lump of coal- hammer would do much of anything- I miss the joke- why is this funny- it to Freaking little to do that- what- you'll see. What's so funny? Them wanting me out of all these boys. (Bradly laughs civilly) You'll know when you see the hammer I want, there is not much of a change in any of it- yet I have to try. SAM- I'll see what I can do about it, rises, slapping dust, as he moved about... it's a waste of money and your time and days. Okay, I want it.

I understand. Thank you, Mr...? SAM. The name's Sam. Pleasure doing business with you. They shake your ass over- don't say jack shit. They shake hands - Bradly strolls off looking around with no cars at all. He had a quiet way about him, a walk and a talk that just wasn't ordinary around here. He walks in a park-like just get'n a breath of air. Sam watches him go... saying I was wrong about the kid. Goodman... no? um hum...SAM I could see why some of the boys took him for stuck-up- walking with a stack up against his ass or something. Yet without an intention to harm or others no burdens after doing what he did. Like he had on an obscure covering that would armor him from this hall land of walls and stone.

(the 3 resumes playing catch as he looks about.) Yes, I think it would be fair to say I liked Bradly from the start. Lying on his bunk, Sam unfolds the four sides. SAM - Years later, I found out he'd brought in quite a bit more than just ten dollars... A ten-dollar bill. Sam gets his breakfast and heads for a table. Bradly falls in step, slips him a tightly-folded square of paper. Under watchful supervision, CONS are off - loading bags of dirty laundry from a truck. Were they bring some mended tops and pants in for us - He

was a man who adapted fast. Underneath vigilant supervision, CONS are off-loading bags of dirty laundry from a 1920's truck for the train cars. A certain bag hits into his arms. The TRUCK DRIVER gives a look of okay- at a black con- boy here then strolls over to a GUARD and bull shits. Sam- loads the bag onto a wagon... and walks off with the prize inside past them all- even past the guards that he bought off.

17

Bags are being unloaded. We find Klit's working the line. Sam- slips the package out of his sheets, carefully checks to make sure nobody's coming, then rips it open. He pulls out the hammer. It's just as Bradly described. Sam laughs softly. the clean sheets are being handed out. Bradly nods. He leaves the line, weaving his way through the laundry room... he moves onward. Sam deposits his dirty bundle and moves down the line to where- Determination... That's how Bradly joined our happy little EBENSBURGH family with more than five dollars on his person in my hand- he made it with me and my boys. Klits- pushes a cart of books from cell to cell. The rolling library. He finds Sam waiting for him. Sam slips the - hammer, wrapped in a towel, through the bars, and onto the cart. I catch Sam's eye, turns and grabs a specific stack of clean sheets. He hands it across to Sam cigarettes slide out of Sam's hand into mine, and more than spotless laundry changes hands. Two packs of smokes. It would take a man about 60 freaking years to tunnel under the wall with one of these. Bradly was right. I finally got the gag... that you could only use the hand on them- if they wanted to beat off or you. Bradly's hand snakes through the bars and makes the object disappear. Next comes 10 cigarettes to pay for postage- as Kilt's hands me my shit! HATLEN nods to me as I dump out the rocks from the wall out of my bucket, never- ever missing a beat. Just like the guy in the next cell over- freak! HATLEN continues on, scooping the cigarettes off the cart and into his pocket- for getting him a flashlight to dig- also hid in the bucket. He rolls his cart to Bradly's cell, mutters through the bars: HATLEN Middle shelf, wrapped in a towel- Sam unfolds the slip of paper. Penciled neatly on it is a single word: 'Thanks.' -out of the shower, the voice said to go to your cells- I was already their a-weighting for my new things. The hand comes back and deposits a small slip of folded paper along with more cigarettes. HATLEN turns his cart around and goes back. He pauses, sorting his books- the flashlight was carved into a book called- The Star girl! A book about a girls' fight for her country- like a twisted holocaust story! Long enough for Sam to snag the slip of paper. Sam unfolds the slip of paper. Penciled neatly on it is a single word: 'Thanks.' Working next to the big washers - a dark, tangled maze of rooms and corridors, boilers and furnaces, sump pumps, old washing machines, pallets of and plats for cars- and hard turns around cleaning supplies and detergents, you name it this was a crap room- where I was about to get it in the ass. Bradly, I had to bet them off... blocking his way... to me - yet

he got his way- the all did all seven of them. We are assaulted by the deafening noise of the laundry line. Bradly is doing his job, getting good at it. I worked in the woodshop to yet the girls got me where my boy was not. I made lots of shit like tables and chairs all for my room. And to sell and make some con cone.

18

Hey, skew when briefest? The grade looked at me and said- freak your mother freak'n cock sucking mother tit licking dick slap ass hole with a cheese stick and the ice cream puss finger freak licker sticker! He looms from the shadows to his right, Dick Peters cell on the right of me. A frozen beat. Bradly slams them to the floor, in the lighter, by that... The next day it all the same as the last Brady took one for the team in the ass- and I think if it would have kept the same it would have made him go nuts. (Cut- sheets room) steam flying in the air foggy and hot- sweaty man at work... a lady's paradise. Bare-chested- and hard bodies to look at! DUFFIE- Honey, hush I wanna freak you that's all. Bradly backs up, holding them at bay, trying to maneuver through the maze. The Allies keep coming, tense and guarded, eyes riveted and gauging his every move, trying to outflank him. Bradly trips on some old giant smuggle. That's all it takes Bradly gets yanked to his feet. They're on him in an instant, kicking and stomping. Duffie applies a chokehold from behind. They propel him across the room and slam him against an old four- pocket machine, bending him over it. Rooster jams a rag into Bradly's mouth and secures it with a steel pipe, like a horse bit. Bradly kicks and struggles, but Lizer and Peter have his arms firmly pinned. Duffie whispers in Bradly's ear: it's long and hard for you baby girl! Um, do you feel me! DUFFIE- That's it, beat on me. It's Better that way when you're hard to get off. Bradly starts screaming and rolling in the pain of the ass freaking, muffled by the tape over his mouth as they all got their way. I saw yet I PULL BACK, not wanting to get the same wrath- we all knew about it yet this is the jail where you have what you have and get freak for freaking others in the ass. I wish I could tell you that Bradly fought the good battle, and the Allies let him alone. I wish I could say that- yet that not how it went- to tell you that, would be an ass of a lie- but jail is no enchanted gay world. SLOWLY SPLAYED is Bradly's screaming face and the men holding him down... and the dingy act behind... He never- ever said who did the act on him...but we all knew- I saw it with my eyes- yet did not want what he was getting. And at that time maybe God was doing the time for him and it was coming out of his ass... that what I thought, at the time. -After lights out... under the poster I started making the hole in the wall- I found out the wall was soft from old age- the bars could be spread with the hammer wide enough to get my ass though. It's going to take years- I said. SAM- Things went on like that for a year. Jail life cycle contains predictable, and then more predictable until it is pounded into you had and your brain becomes numb to it all. SAM- The Allies kept at him. From time to

time he was able to fight them off... sometimes not so-o. Numb to all but the pain of past life and the life of now and life you have on the inside. They call out for us to go to the yard for an hour- air and light are good to us-BRADLY WALKS THE YARD, FACE SWOLLEN AND BRUISED from the dicks in his mouth, and the slapping he got... Every single day or so habitually, Bradly would show up with renewed bruises and cuts. He starts to sit with me and my guys- he has become one of us at this point- I chat with him the others are warming up some- BRADLY EATS BREAKFAST. A FEW TABLES OVER, DUFFIE wakes up and

A French KISS on the lips saying I see you in the showers tonight. LOVE-YOU baby girl! He said grabbing my manhood. Klit's guts' up and stared him down. And his lady's as him did run off back to their table.

19

Bradly is working the line into his cell. Warden Marquez 's 'grain & drain' vacation. Bread, water, and all the privacy you could want. SAM- They beat the hell out of him. Half the time it landed him in the medical wing... He always fought, that's what I remember. He fought because he knew if he didn't fight, it would make it that much easier not to fight the next time. The rake connects, snapping off over somebody's skull. No bed, sink or lights A stone closet no seat even until you make it and pay for it. Bradly sits on bare concrete, bruised face lit by a faint ray of light falling through the tiny slit in the steel door. ...the other half, it landed him in solitary. A dick of cars with nude girls on it is all you must look at to pass the time... it's now 1942 and talk of war the inside walls. A new poster for his wall I got him as a gift of being a friend to a boy- this type of girl called a PIN-UP! Something to keep his mind from squirming like a toad. And that's how it went for Bradly. That was his routine. I do believe those first two years were the worst for him. And I also believe if things had gone on that way, this place would have got the best of him. But then, in the spring of 1942, the powers-that-be decided that... it was time to do hard labor. Warden Marquez speeches the assembled cons via 40's mic: he is dressed stylishly- the war calls of new rails- going from Pittsburgh to New York- PPR rail line- you only have some of this track to lay in our parts. I need 14 volunteers for a week's work. pulling names and reading them off. Sam exchanges grin with Bradly and the others. You need to build a viaduct over a valley- its high and some will die doing this- there are no tie-down if you wall 3,000 feet- to the ground below- and your walk beams one step in front of the other- gandie-dance'n as they call it- We're going to be taking names in this can here... Sam glances around at his friends. Wouldn't you know it? I and some fellas I know we're among the names called. It only cost us a 2 pack of smokes per man. I made my usual twenty percent, of course. Bradly also catches his eye. I knew we wanted this job all seven of us! Kilts- Stan- Brad- Me and the others. It was outdoor factors of rewardingness, and May is one damn fine year to be occupied outside, and the cone was good

too... 10¢ an hour. We con shuffle past, dropping slips of paper into a bucket. Are work inspected- so it had to be right or it would go to another asshole that wanted it- fast and cheap. There is a crane and the steel is bangled overhead and riveted, in the wind- blowing at 30 MPH, one part is down- and you move the whole thing up and do it again 20 supports to do- one down, so high up- Jacker fall and his die body just laid there. Maybe a guard pushed him- does it matter? No- no on this job. More than 200 men volunteered for the job, and we all got it. TWO CONS dip up a bucket of rivets and tools one a rope to the handle. The rope goes taught. the bucket goes up the side of the new tall steel.

FLAKIER- ...so this shithead lawyer calls long distance from a virgin, and he says, Mr. Flackier? I say, yeah. He says, sorry to notify you, but your grandmother just died in a plane crash she was 74.

Klit's- Freak- Damn, Flick. Sorry to hear that. FLAKIER- I ain't. she was a freaking bitch. I Runoff years ago from that puss- freak, family ain't heard of him since. She should for dead anyway years ago from smoking too hard. So this attorney prick says, your grandmother died a rich gal. Grandfather was a gold tycoon and shit, close to 3 million bucks. Jesus, how lucky some assholes can get. Yeah why this one a con said. I could use it! Said another. Dick faced guard said- A 3 million bucks? Jeez-us- mother freak! Do you get any of that? 1! That's what they left me. Dick face- said- Holy freaking shit, that's prodigious! Like winning' a lottery...ain't it not? FLAKIER You're a dumb- piece of shit. What do you finger the government's going to do to me? Take a big wet bite out of my dick head, is what. The other grad we call- Cunt-n-ham- Oh. Hadn't thought of that they would tack it and bull piss. The GD kids we get it no me... my old lady said so... do the toll's wrong, they make IRS will make you pay out of your own pocket. Freak them! 'OH- Uncle Sam puts his hand down your pants, and squeezes your dick until it's freaken' purple.' Always get the short That's a fact... I would know said Klit's. (he spits and then takes a piss on it- over the side of the high viaduct with no sides.) SAMCrying shame. Some cunts got it horribly bad. Klit's what next is he going to jack it too- the boys hoooow! Some Grandmother- Shit. Sam glances over- besides is shocked to see Bradly standing up, listening to the guard's talk. The prisoners keep walking around the steel and downing as asked, eyes on their work and ears on them. STAN- Poor freak. What terrible freakin' luck he has. Visualize receiving 1,0000 dollars. -I talk to um- say that is not so-o. SAM- Hey, you nut-o boy? Keep your eyes on your pail and holes and beams! Bradly tosses his hammer to me in the bucket far in the air- and strolls toward Flackier one foot in front of the other 2,075 feet up. SAM -Bradly! Come back! Shit! What is he... SHIT! Stan-

What's he doing... or what... saying- shit? I said- Gettin' himself murdered- that what. Bob- damn it...! Tom- harry- look at us with shock and awe! The guards stiffen at Bradly's approach snapping a clip

and a tommie gun at his dick saying a blow it off... another gun was at the other head. Dick face- hand goes to his holster. The guards CLICK-CLICK's their rifle bolts. Flackier turns, stupefied to find Bradly there. Mr. Flackier. Do you trust your little girl? That's funny. You're going to look funnier freakin' me with that new pussy I'll blow into you with this gun. Running on beams we all look- BRADLY What I mean is, do you think she'd go behind your back? Try to F*cking to you? FLAKIER That's it! Step aside, Mate- This toothless mother freak is going to learn how to fly! Flackier- grabs Bradly's collar and propels him violently toward the edge of the ties. The cons angrily keep adding in hot rivets. One goes down a boys underwire... and he dances. Hot shit- Juss-us! He said! STAN- Oh God, he's going to do it, he's going to throw him off the side... Bob- Oh, oh shit freak, oh Jess-us... if you do trust your baby girl, there's no reason in the world you can't keep every cent of, that currency for her- if you make it look as if it for her. FLAKIER You better start making freak'n intelligence. Flackier abruptly jerks Bradly to a stop right at the edge. In fact, Bradly's past the edge, beyond his balance, shoe tips scraping the last little bit. The only thing between him and an unpleasant drop to the concrete is Flacker's grip on the front of his shirt on the same part of the beam. Give the little girl a trust fund. IRS allows you a one-time-only gift to you're a child. It's good up to sixty thousand dollars and hid the rest- or give it to your partner. Partner- my wife you mean- sure... I said. Tax-free?

Freakin'-A. I don't need any smart wife-killing basted to show me where the shit is in the buckwheat. Get a home- and a car- and more- Income tax-free. I can write it off for you- IRS can't touch one cent. Go ask the IRS, they'll say the same thing. Truly, I feel mindless telling you, I'm definite you would have explored the material manually on your own doing. You're the smart hotshot that shot his wife for freaking an older man. Why should I believe you- so- I can squall up in here with you and your gay ass lovers? Oh, that's not nice said- Klit's. 'Ass lover?' he said with confusion... Move the others to another place like Canada! And you have it all! It's without any glitches and legal. FLAKIER- those guys a bunch of ambulances- cheating-robbing cocksuckers! I would like to have- a day to see my little girl- and the boys to see their families- for this work- and some shin- on the beam for my buddy's. 'he's got balls' said Stan... Co-workers! Wow dreaming much! That's amusing, ain't it not? Flackier halts him with a look of maybe. Hey, con I'm in! he said- nodding! (I think I made a friend I said to the guys.) HA!

20

Were done looking over this thing- amazing no? The convicts stand gaping, all pretense of work gone.

Flackier shoots them a look. FLAKIER What are your jammies starin' at? GET Back to work, damn it! SAM You could argue he'd done it to curry favor with the guards. Otherwise, maybe make a few supports amongst us cons man. Me, I think he did it just to feel ordinary again... if only for a short amount of time. I and the guys coiled up sitting in a row at ten down the posts 8 o'clock in the morning, drinking icy cold shin out of jars courtesy of the hardest screw freak, that ever walked the halls of EBENSBURGH State Prison. As before, an object is hauled up the side of the building by rope- only this time, it's a cooler of beer and shin we sat on the one beam looking down the neat one-point perspective of the posts under the tracks. And that's how it came to pass, that on the last day of the task, the convict crew of spring of '42... light the sun coming up as high up and drinking- feeling like a free man. SAM- The titanic perforate- of the walls even managed to sound benevolent, we sat and drank with the sun on our shoulders, and felt like free men. Sam knocks back another sip, enjoying the bitter cold on his tongue and the warm sun on the face. We were the Member of the aristocracy of all Design. He glances over to Bradly squatting apart from the others. Stan drifts back to others, giving them a look. He looked at us with his eye sparking like- as he has seen that we approved. And we did and the first steam train passed as we looked up! A rare shout looking up!

It was said that one of us dug a hole and planted 40,000 under this for if he was able to get free- the tracks ran past where he was going to get out- happen to be the plan- I knew. It would work yet it was risky!

21

Bradly and Sam play checkers. Sam makes his move. SAM- King me. They are playing checkers- BRADLY- novel writing- Now there's a game that is strategic... a totally freakin' mystery- it not that hard maybe I could show you- that something I would like to see if you can get me an LC Smith 28 typewriter. I have a book about a girl has cancer and passed at a young age called HER! Any good- it did okay. Maybe you'll let me teach to read and write too then... sure... remember I am the man that can do that for you. I've been thinking of getting some boys together and having class if they okay it. SAM - You come to the right place- where I can do that you get that for me and teach you how.

I'm the man who can get things, and I'm the one that can teach things... deal? Sure... he said with a tittering chatting way. I would love to make a story of how someone would bust out of this place what do you think- I think it will take years- years I have- it's the typewriter I do not. SAM- That'd take you years. BRADLY- Years I've got. What I don't have are the pages to use- and the light to see. You'll have it if you

do this for me. *Okay, I am in*- he- said- Takings here are pretty slim- for writers. Why'd you done it? (smiles) I ask a question? ...With handshakes- we are friends- I would say so- were become'n...? I suppose so-0. SAM- Bradly? I guess we're gettin' to be friends... I presume we are. SAM- BRADLY I'm blameless, recall- just like you? Just like every Tom, Dick, and Harry in this gargantuan place. Sam takes this as a gentle rebuff, keeps playing. BRADLY What are you in for, Sam Innocent?? Nope- I did it- and I'm not happy for it- I burn in hell I no- for killing all my baby girl's- it was- Manslaughter- I killed my kids- out of a moment of crazy all 10 in the head in there one hay bed- after my lady left me. Same as you- I had sex with them too. All girls under 14, she was white just like you! UM- don't worry those days are gone- and there is not a day where I don't feel the pain of it- what saved me is I was 15 at the time- and was not thinking right. Mr.- Mr.- I didn't mean to do it I said as they hauled me is saying dead man walking! (I did want the hanging- they said to let him rot and think about it.) SAM- The only shamefaced man in Ebensburg and the 30-mile radius. They can get away with it I could not! Maybe it for I am black?

Umm? I said... light of the moon is starting to show- in the yard. He pauses, glancing at all the names scratched in the wall. He rises, makes sure the coast is clear and starts scratching his name into the cement with his rock-hammer, adding to the record. The glare of the radio- the boys are overhearing the war taking place before the boy band started to practice it was something to do it was time out, and takes a seat next to him holding a 1951 Gibson 330 in blue. Oh, how the days just go- fast and yet slow. We find Sam slouched in a folding chair, watching the sound come out it blue's-z. Bradly enters, backlit by the flickering light are rocking to this new sound called rock and roll! Duffie come out of the hole of the wall to get his ass- he was there for doing what he did- I see him and he said he was saving it all up for me. I know. I've seen it three times this month already. Yet they will not kill this man! The entire audience SCREAMS with Duffie holding it out for him to take in- and back in the hole, he went. Yet not long enough! Scream- high-pitched and hysterical. Bradly fidgets. Can we talk about business? Klit's sure would you do this man? Sure- free I would love too. The backroom of the library where I did my writing on a typewriter the paid as you go- 10¢ a page or so- an old con looks over, I like him been here oh back to 1909! Blinking at them through thick bifocals- shaking with his hands- a wealth of intelligentsia. Busted open are the doors- it's DUFFIE- puss out of the hole it's been a week. Take a march- old fart. I have to be here I can walk- far- with help! DUFFIE I said- freak off- and get. figures loom in the corridor, blocking his path. Bradly exits the theater and freezes in his tracks. Two dark Rooster and Horrified, the old man darts past me and out the door. And I get my backside looked into! And snaked on ... I know. Bradly turns back- and runs right into Duffie's hardness. DUFFIE- Ain't you going to shriek? The instant I've seen it three times already like this... yet how do you stop it other than kill him and add more time to your

time. The Allies are on him like a tight young pussy. They kick everything they wanted wide open and drag into him into mind too. And what was more is it was going in him too. BRADLY- the heater blowers with fans- back by the laundry, and in the back hot and clanking- I was deep underground- in a rat crap hole. They'd never hear me over that. Let's get this over with. Seemingly resigned, Bradly turns around, leans on the rewind curls his fingers around the typewriter foot's licks his lips, pushes past the others and smacked them all in the face with it. (Ding!) Hoffie's face is dripping blood- and bouncing him off the wall. Freak! Shit! He broke my jaw! Bradly fights like hell but is soon over and forced to his knees. Duffie steps to Bradly pulls out an awl with a vicious eight-inch spike, gives him a good long look at it. DUFFIE Now I'm going to open my zipper, and you're going to suck me off bitch for doing this to me, and you're going to swallow my jizz- And when you're down beating me off for my jaw mine too he said- with hurt. You going to swallow this one- too for this bitch fight hunnie. You done broke his nose, so he ought to have something' to show for it is his shit in your mouth. I bit the ones off! And the skin of the others - and got the even lovin' shit freaked out of me for it! I had a shank my neck what was I going to do- and that is when Stan- walked in with his toothbrush stabbing Duffie in the eye- then pulling it out and doing it in the other... (faint smile I gave to the others they looked at me and ran like little girls.) Duffie flips over the railing and comes sailing, and the Flicker came in and did the rest of it- not killing but the next thing too it. Directly toward us, eyes bugging out with the brush handing in, SCREAMING as he falls. Bradly lies wrapped in bandages. Bradly spent 3 months in the wing. shooting out from under Duffie and skidding across the room now with smashed bones. wreckage at his feet the turns them right around snapping them up for down. MORT- walks in saying good for you prick this one is for our a man on the inside. He got money for him too... or so it was said. G-Damn, Flick.

Look at that sight. Dual things under no circumstances never- ever materialized again after that. The Allies never laid a finger or anything else on Bradly yet again... and Duff never saw the light of day again with his scary crystal blue eyes. Duffie, wheelchair-bound and wearing a neck brace, is loaded onto an ambulance for conveyance. ...and Duffie never walked again. They moved him to a crazy home with security infirmary out of state. To my knowledge, he lived out the rest of his days imbibing his nourishment through a clear tub. Where he passed 3 weeks later... from bleeding on the inside. The others were hung- about a year later for other cone takers. Brad needs some lookouts- and a hug when we see him... no... damn straight! I said. Bradly, limping a bit, returns from the infirmary. Working on the tracks it's been 10 years - it was said I need a man- all the same boys now an older man- did the weeding- all but 3 that passed- I see their makers out in the filled. Some make me said- some I am glad they're gone some- I never knew- I feel broke inside. I could run for it I now yet the chins are holding us back - oh well maybe I happy here. Stan-

steeps in house shit. Despite a few hitches, the boys came through in fine style... all-new tracks in a week ahead of what was said. One man falling down in the ties. It was a good ass week - I got new things for the boys - toys we call them... you feel it in what it was. Cigarettes, chewing gum, shoelaces, underwire - guy things - playing cards with naked ladies - or who sneaked in the back rooms - you name it... I have it for yens. Sam watches from his cell as Bradly is brought up and locked away, this man is losing it I said... softly... thunder overhead looking up at darkness overhead. Bradly finds the cardboard tube lying on his bunk - where he keeps meds to keep the days away.

And then he starts... he starts... The lights go off. Bradly opens the tube and pulls out a large rolled poster. He lets it uncurl to the floor. Yet stops to look at the pussy he loves so - 0! A small scrap of paper flutters out, landing at his feet. The poster is the famous pin-up - on the airplanes one hand behind her clit a day, eyes half-closed he sighs, sulky lips parted he kiss it will dig'n her a hole. Bradly picks up a scrap of paper. It reads: 'No charge. Welcome back.' Alone in the dark, Bradly smiles... you're just like here - and that what I love.

22

Heads up. They're tossin' cells. Ernie is mopping the floor. He glances back and sees Warden Marquez approach the cellblock with an entourage of a DOZEN GUARDS. GUARD - dick face - What kind of contraband you hiding in there, the boy in that thing? Nothing look for yourself - don't look under I was thinking Bradly catches Sam's eye, nods his thanks. As the men shuffle down to breakfast, still mopping, Ernie mutters to the nearest cell: Sam glances into Bradly's cell The BUZZER SOUNDS, the cells SLAM OPEN. Cons step from their cells. Sunlight casts a harsh shadow across her lovely face and perfects the nude body. Word travels fast from cell to cell. Cons scramble to tidy up and hide things. Marquez enters, nods to his men. The guards pair off in all directions, making their choices at random. Cells are opened, occupants' emigrant, A GUARD pulls a sharpened screwdriver out of a mattress, items scattered, mattresses overturned. Whatever contraband is found gets tossed out onto the cellblock floor. Mostly harmless stuff. shoots a nasty look at the CON in authority. FLAKIER Looks pretty clean. Some contraband here, nothing to get in a twist over. Marquez nods stroll to the poster of the nude sexy 17 - year-old. MARQUEZ I can't say I accept this...

...but I understand exclusions can always be ended. Marquez exits, the guards follow. The cell door is slammed and locked. Marquez pauses, turns back. MARQUEZ - I almost forgot. Here your bucket back fun stories - I love... remember that - you're here for forgetting yourself. I'd hate to withdraw you

from this past life you need to see. Redemption lies inside. Marquez and his men walk away. Tossin' cells were just an excuse. Truth is, Marquez sought after scope'n Bradly up.

LAUNDRY- DAY (1952) I am-a with Bob. Bob nods, crosses to Bradly, taps him. Bradly turns, Bradly is working the line. Flackier enters and confers briefly removes an earplug. CON Jimmie said- Too damn dark to read down there. MARQUEZ- Add another week for blasphemy and wickedness. Bob shouts over the machine noise: BOB- YOU'RE OFF THE TRACK!

Bradly is led in. Marquez is at his desk doing paperwork. Bradly's eyes go to a framed needle-point sampler on the wall behind him that reads: 'HIS VERDICT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT SOON.' MARQUEZ Lonely. A week. Make sure he takes his Bible. The man is taken away. Marquez enters, trailed by his men. Bradly rises. BRADLY- Good evening. Marquez gives a curt nod and wink. Flackier and Trout start tossing the cell in a thorough search. Marquez keeps his eyes on Bradly observing for a wrong glance or nervous blink. He takes the Bible out of Bradly's hand. Marquez 's gaze goes up, all the things going on. MARQUEZ- Let's try the second row. Marquez arrives, makes a thin show of preference a cell at haphazard. He motions at Bradly on his bunk, reading his Bible. The door is unlocked. MARQUEZ- I'm pleased to see you reading this. Any favorite passages? BRADLY Watch ye, therefore, for ye know not when the master of the house cometh. Read this for me and he did it was a verse out of Jobe.

MARQUEZ I hear you're good with words and big numbers. How amusing- you think you're smart- if you were you would not be here. And a young lady like the one on your wall would be alive today - what do you say to that? FLAKIER- You wanna explain this? Photo- um- what do you think it's for- your sick freak! I get that look for the man- of um- hum. Bradly glances over. Flackier glances at the books lining the window sill, turns to Marquez, all in his name. FLAKIER- Looks pretty clean. Some contraband here, nothing to get in a twist over. MARQUEZ- Feasibly we can find something more becoming a man of your schooling. Marquez nods stroll to the poster the sexy hot girl! Bradly is led in. Marquez is at his desk doing paperwork- and that is when the plan starts a story- how but 170 in 5 years? Or you go to the hole. Can be done- oh it well- I say so! You're going to make me a famous man... with your weighting see this is God punishing you for what you did to that sweet little girl. Bradly's eyes go to a framed needle-point sampler on the wall behind him that reads: 'HIS JUDGMENT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT SOON.'

MARQUEZ My wife made that in church group- she older yet I don't do what you do leave one for younger and then kill her to bang yet another. Yes, - sir... It's very pretty, sir. See my kids this one is the age of that girl... wanna freak her up too?

No...! MARQUEZ You DON'T like working in the laundry- you bitch so here your new job- take it? You don't have a choice. Do you like this? No, sir. Not especially.

23

Darkroom- Bradly's in his bunk, working on a model of the viaduct for his train set. He puts the knight on a chessboard by his bed, adding it to four pieces already there: a king, a queen, and two bishops. He turns to his nude girl in the Moonlight casts bars across her face, yet he in love. It's a beautifully crafted chess piece in the shape of a horse's head, poise and nobility in gleaming stone. A series of bleak rooms stacked high with unused filing cabinets, desks, paint supplies, etc. Bradly enters. BRADLY - I wouldn't say 'friends.' I'm a convicted murderer who provides sound financial plann ing. That's a wonderful pet to have you. He hears a FLUTTER OF WINGS. An adult crow lands on a filing cabinet and struts back and forth, checking him out. Bradly smiles. BRADLY Hey, GIRLIE kitten Buttons. Where's HATLEN? HATLEN Hatlen pokes his head out of the back room. HATLEN Bradly! Thought I heard you out here! I've been reassigned to you. Hey, the guard can I get a new frock to look like it was jammed up someone's ass- HATLEN I know, they told me. Ain't that a kick in the ass? Come on in, I'll give you the dime tour. HATLEN leads Bradly into the bleakest back room of all. Rough plank shelves are lined with books. HATLEN's private domain. HATLEN Here she is, the EBENSBURGH Prison Library- and writing spot. Along with this side, we got the National Geographic's. That side, the Reader's Digest Condensed books. Bottom shelf there, some Ray Bradbury- the new one I like- and Edgar Allan Poe. Every night I pile the cart and make my rounds to the boys. I write down the names on this sheet here. Well, that's it. Easy, peasy, lemon sqeweezzie. Any questions? In all that time, have you ever had an associate? No, I don't this all down here on my own- there is no grade where would I go really- to GD old for that they say- Bradly pauses. Something about this doesn't make any sense. HATLEN? How long have you been a librarian? Since 1910. Yah, about 40 years. BRADLY at no time needed one. Not much to it, is there? So why? Why me at this point? I don't-no. Be nice to have some company down here for a change with a person and not just the cat. FLAKIER- YOU! Yah you'n he posts to himself... another GUARD, a huge fellow named DICKINS.

That's him the one that can get you a shit load. That's the one- not a babe skew. Flackier exits. Dickins approaches Bradly threateningly. Bradly stands his ground wondering why waiting for whatever comes next. Finally: Dickins- I'm Dickins. I have been, uh, thinking' become a writer also, just like the man up stars- I want your help to get there free- and I give you what you need. Bradly covers his surprise. Glances at HATLEN. HATLEN smiles. Pull down one them desks there. Someone on the inside... if you well! I see.

Well. Why don't we have a seat and talk it over? Bradly and Dickins grab a desk standing on end and tilt it to the floor. They find chairs and settle in. HATLEN returns with a tablet with a 50-pound typewriter, have a hard time with it- slides them before Bradly. What did you have in mind? A weekly draw on your pay? Then if so you need 4 a year. Your writing I'll edit- and it has to be a hit... done. He was right. You don't want your money in a bank, keep it at home- What's that going to earn you? That is if your book goes to be sold 55% percent a year of everything that is in the text? We can do a lot better than that- if you hear me out. So, tell me, Mr. Dickins. The story and the length you had in mind and I say yes or no. Klit's didn't say that! To that man- without getting sucked the freak off. Bob- God is my witness. And MaeDell, he just winks over and over for a few seconds, then laughs his ass off. Subsequently, he actually shook Bradly's hand and hugged him. STAN - My hairy ass! HATLEN he hugged him. Just about freaking shit myself. All Bradly needed to be was a suit and tie, in a pipe smocking- he would have been the big shot again- if you please. Bob- Manufacturer's yourself some provisions, Bradly. If you wanna call it that. Maybe I can do more than that.... Ah? SAM - Got you out of the laundry, no? that more than your share here... boy. Nope let's just see... How 'bout increasing the reading room? Get some new novels in there and table and some were to sit for an hour or two. With me as the guard - HA! Funny- how you 'expect to do that... 'I have my ways. HATLEN Sonny, I've had seven wardens done time - here for the period of my term, and I have learned one great immutable veracity of the universe: ain't one of 'em been born their pick get short, and pucker up tighter than a 10-year-old girl's pussy after school when you ask for means.' -How 'bout freaking a man in the ass? Go to hell... I said - throwing my beard- been there they didn't want me that why I am here. He said. AMUSEMENT all around. Bradly blinks at them. The chat- I making you money- pay up- what- what did you say to me- not a dime- not a nickel. Still, I'd like to try, with your permission to get money from the outside. I will send a letter a week. They can't ignore me forever. My budget's stretched thin as of now. Are you psychic? I see. Perhaps I could write a story about you freaking me in the ass and see where that goes... the hole I went. I want more walls. More bars. More guards. And you at the end of a rope! And I will be dancing at that! And I piss on your ashes! Like your books, that don't matter the only one that does it this one here and he slams it into my head - saying get it! They can't overlook me incessantly. Yes, they can, nonetheless, you write your letters if it makes you content. You pay for it- with your own makings... if you get anywhere, I will step in. So Bradly started writing a letter a week, just like he said he would. Nothing for 5 years. Bradly pops his head in. The GUARD shakes his head, everyday- ha I said so- said the prick... that run the shitter. NOPE- no answers. The courtyard softball game is being played- team- are playing hard. Tied game... hot sun- it was for blood. Back over white... baseball uniform SMACKS the ball high into left field and races for first. They

rescheduled the start of the intramural season to coincide with EBENSBURGH season... for we were the best- and went on to play with the big deals- that do this for a living. It was the cover ball... they said. The Batter sits across from Bradly. The line winds out the door. For the batter up my home run. Sam - and the boys- Got us out of the woodshop a 4 month out of the year, and that was fine by us. I gave a price... Number 19 I was. Sam- 14...Klit's runs into the yard, frantic and breathless. He finds Bradly and Sam on the bleachers. Sam? Bradly? It's HATLEN. trying to calm HATLEN, who has Stan in a rushes in with Bradly and Sam at his heels. They find a chokehold and a rail spick to his ear. Bob is terrified that he going to die. C'mon, HATLEN-ie, why don't you just calm them down, okay o'man? Old man - They want to send me a-way- this is my home... your all are my family. He kicks a table over as he falls out of shock. Tax files explode through the air. What the hell's going on? Down here no one saw... You ain't fooling anybody, so just put the damn spick down and stop scaring the shit out of folks. He eruptions into tears. The storm is over. Stan staggers free, gasping for air. Bradly takes the knife, passes it to Sam. Falls into Bradly's arms with great heaving tears. You had worse clean out your ears - with a would sick. Ain't you heard? His move meant came through that he was harmless! Old men cracked should be in old age house. Ain't nothing wrong with HATLEN. He's just deep-rooted in his ways- in his comfort zone, that's all- 60 years this is all he knows about- with life.

24

The sun rises over the gray stone. HATLEN I can take care of you no more. Her paws - kitten Buttons through the bars. And runs off... and was hit by a car... he later found out. You go on now. You're free my little kiddie. STAN - Institutionalized, my ass.

SAM- Man's been here 60 years. This habitation is all he knows. Here, he's an important man, an educated man. A librarian. Out there, he's nothing but a used-up old con with arthritis in both hands. I couldn't even get a library card if he applied. Do you see what I'm saying? Sam, I do believe you're speaking out of your butt. SAM- Belief what you want. These walls are humorous. First, you hate um, then you get used to them. After long enough, you get so you depend on them. That's 'institutionalized.' KLIT'S Shit. I could never- ever get that way. Stan - Say that when you been inside as long as HATLEN has. (tenderly) They send you were for everything you did and take what you didn't, the parts that reckonings, nonetheless. THE POSTER. Sexy as ever the lower lips wore from kissing them. The rising sun sends fingers of rosy light creeping across her face. HATLEN stands on a chair, poised at the bars of a window, cradling GRILLE kitten Buttons in his hands. The door It swings hugely open, revealing HATLEN standing in his cheap suit, carrying a cheap bag, wearing a cheap hat. TWO SHORT SIREN BLASTS herald the opening of

the gate. HATLEN walks out to freedom, tears streaming down his face, he said I don't wanna go - He looks back. Sam, Bradly, and others stand at the inner fence, seeing him off. The enormous gate closes, smearing them from view. HATLEN is now riding the bus with fear, grasping the seat in front of him, engrossed by trepidation of speed and motion. And the bus itself... I saw a car but it was not like these killing things. It is 1969 - HATLEN - Dear Fellas. I can't believe how reckless things move on the outside. ...which carries through as he walks. People and traffic. He keeps looking at the women. An alien species. I look and see women, too, that's the other thing. I forgot they were half the human race. There are women everywhere, every shape and size. I find myself semi-hard most of the time, cursing myself for a dirty old man.

TWO YOUNG WOMEN stroll by in really short skirts and tank top-shirts has shown boobs and nipples. Baby suck hard on one 14year old girl's nipple! Wow! I said looking around. I think I saw a pussy out in the open! Run around naked? Who would have to thunk it? Not a brassiere to be seen, nipples poking out at the world. Jeez-us, please-us. Back in my day, a woman out in public like that would have been arrested and given a sanity hearing. They're calling this the Summer of Love. Summer of Loonies, you ask me. I find the park filled with the young' uncalled HIPPIES. Hanging out. Happening. Here's the source of the music: a radio. A HIPPIE GIRL gyrates to the Beatles, stoned, in her own world. Things got different out here. Lady that rain the home - were they put me - Tell me about it. Young punks protesting the war. Do you imagine? Even my own kid. Oughtta bust his freakin' skull. Guess the world moved on - and gone nuts yet once more I hear about war but never seen it like this. I see in this box boys being blasted a part of what... I don't get the baby kill-in'. 'Young people speaking their minds. Getting so much resistance from behind. I think it's time we stop, hey, what's that sound. Everybody look what's going down. Manly saying wood ray for I side's.' music today is not Yankee Doodle Dandy - it 'bout fighting, freaking, and lust - the whole thing going complete bust! Bagging groceries. I saw an automobile once when I was young. Now they're everywhere I look to run my ass over. CHILDREN underfoot. Stilling food and making fun of this old man that not getting it. The kids get swept off by MOM. Sam starts bagging the next customer. SLOW PUSH IN on Sam. Surrounded by MOTION and NOISE. HATLEN comes trudging up the sidewalk. He glances up as prop-driven airliner streaks in low overhead. Feeling like the eye of a storm. People everywhere, whipping around him like a gale. Strange. Loud.

Dizzying. It gets distorted and weird, slow and thick, pressing in on him from all sides. The noise level intensifies. The hollering of children deepens and distends into LOW EERIE HOWLS. He's in the grip of a major anxiety attack. I fall to the ground passing out... Trying not to panic. Trying not to run. and just

laid there... they did not care... some young girl with her skirt over me took the spot. I get a free show when I came to it. Blinking sweat. He bumps into a lady's cart, mumbles an apology, keeps going. Breaks into a trot. Kids running down the aisle back like his that he killed back in the 1900s, through the door into the back rooms, faster and faster, running now, slamming- he sees their faces- and they speak to him... through a door marked 'Employees Only.' where he slams the door, and leans deeply against it, shutting everything out, breathing heavily. Alone now. Asking to take a leak- He goes to the sink, splashes his face, tries to calm down. He can still hear them out there. They won't go away. He glances around the restroom. Small. Not small enough. He enters a stall. Locks the door... breaks down - and Puts the toilet lid down and sits on the shitter. Better than he was used too. HATLEN enters. The room is small, old, dingy. An arched window affords a view of Congress Street. Traffic noise drifts in. HATLEN sets his bag down. He doesn't quite know what to do. He just stands there, like a man waiting for a bus. He can actually reach out and touch the walls now. They're close. Safe. Almost small enough. He draws his feet up so he can't be seen if somebody walks in to look and see if he going to freak a kid or something in the girl's room. He'll just sit here for a while. Until he calms down. There was a girl in the room with me but- I am too old for that shit now- even if I would take it she was about nine-years-old. That is the shit that got me locked up back then- yet I knew it would be a way for them to send me back home... nah- she's too cute and sweet blond blue eyes baby-talking- I' m-a too old for this... It's hard work. I try to keep up, but my hands and legs hurt most of the time, not able to stands for long... with leaning on something. I don't think the store manager likes me very much, I would kill that man and not think about it... (Cut) walking home, there is a harsh truth to face, I going to do something to a young'un at some point I just know it... No way I'm going to make it out here... without some love- that is all around me. He pauses at a pawnshop window. An array of handguns. All I do anymore is think of little girl to be with me to break my give terms of freedom. I am a dirty old man... I find myself saying yet I never had it so-o. The parole board got me into this midway nut house called the earthly home, and a job bagging groceries at the market... I lying smoking in bed reading some news and freaking out about that, unable to sleep- the world has lost it. Terrible thing, to live in fear. I know it all too well. HATLEN sits alone on a bench, feeding dogs in the park- I not a friend out here. All I want is to be back where things make sense. Where I won't have to be frightened all the time- of them me and everything. Most mom and dad at this age think I a monster... yet not so-o. I keep thinking kitten Buttons might show up and say hello, but she never does, oh that right she passed- I hope wherever he is, he's doing okay and making new friends, um oh yeah... I load my gun... and take the last blast... at 81 years old I have lived long enough- and do nothing with my life other than waste space. I am a grandpa, that never had that- yet I sick- I am sick... time to go and face hell! A young

WOMAN about 18 leads HATLEN up the stairs toward the top floor. He has fining with a blast to the head and, these notes for you to get and read on the inside.

24

Klit's and Seger start swinging picks into the soft earth, quickly ripping out a hole. Sam reaches into his jacket and pulls out a beautiful wooden box, carefully stained and polished. He shows it around to nods of approval. BRADLY- That's really pretty, Sam. Nice work. Sam- I have trouble sleeping at night. The bed is too small. I have bad dreams like I'm falling. I wake up screaming. Sometimes it takes me a while to remember where I am... in the darkness. The man looks at me saying what wrong thinking about what you did- good for yah! All that is left of this man is his story I made into a book on my shelf. Bradly reads the letter and now done a book, to Sam and the others: A long silence. Bradly folds the letter, puts it away and the closing of the book. Softly: He should 'a perished in here, damn it. Bradly is sorting books on the cart. He replaces a stack on the shelf- and pauses, noticing a line of ants crawling up the wood. We find Bradly, Sam, and the boys working with picks and shovels. He glances up. Is that kitten Buttons? It was- that why he passed over you I said... but I took the cat in. Low hilly terrain all around. HANDSOME CONS are at work in the Sunflower fields.

GUARDS patrol with carbines, keeping a sharp eye.

They glance over to the pickup truck. Flicker's chewing the fat with Merit and Teckker. A WHISTLE BLOWS. GUARD- Water break! Five minutes! The work stops. Cons head for the pickup truck, where water is dispensed with dipper and pail. Sam and the boys look to Bradly. Bradly nods. Now's the period. The group moves off through the misunderstanding, using it as cover. They head up the slope of a nearby hill and quickly decide on a suitable spot.

The guards haven't noticed. STAN- Shovel man in. Watch the dirt. Stan jumps in and starts spading out the hole. Seger- glances up and sees the men on the slope. What the freak'n GD shit. Suddenly, other cons start breaking away in groups, dozens of them heading toward the slope. The guards look around. FLAKIER- What am I, talkin' to myself? Kitten

Buttons, Bradly lays him in the box, followed by Brook's letter. Bradly pulls a towel-wrapped bundle from his jacket and unfolds it. Sam places the casket in the hole. kitten Buttons was just a crow. Neither was much to look at. Both got institutionalized. See what you can do for 'um. A-men. A moment of silence. Bradly gives Sam with an encouraging nod. SAM- Lord gives them a mind. HATLEN was a sinner. 'a men's' all around. The boys shovel dirt into the small gravel and tamp it down. He straight-arms a door

and develops into the wall superintending the exercise yard. He leans on the railing, scans the yard, sees Bradly chatting with Sam. FLAKIER- You- What the freak did you do? Your ass, warden's office, now! I got my books and my library- where it was then named the nicest in the state- and I gave boys like- sager their education, young ass- that don't know shit from the shin. Bradly shoots a worried look at Sam, then heads off. It was just something he loved doing- see kids make it out of the shit pile. Dozens of parcel boxes litter the floor. Raillie, the duty guard, picks through them. Flackier enters, trailed by Bradly. What is all this? FLAKIER- You tell me, freak-dick dipstick! They're posted to you- ass wipe, every H'n damn one! The man thrusts an envelope at Bradly. Bradly just stares at it. Here look at this... Bradly takes the envelope, see the money inside saying I got it! In response to surrounded assets for your library project... ' This is seven dollars. Flackier glares at him- saying you made more than I at this point. I wonder if I can get more...? Freak- your mother freaking loves my ass hole, dick sucking- truck muff-pipe love- cum-galloping puss- eater!!! I dropped the book I was holding... I want all this out of this man's office before the warden gets back and see that you made it ...did not- like I. Flackier exits. Bradly touches the boxes like a love-struck man fingering a gorgeous woman. Good for you, Bradly. Merely took 15 years. From now on, I send 5 letters a week instead... Alone now, Bradly starts going through the boxes like a starving man exploring packages of records. He rips open another box. This one contains an old phonograph player- looking old that you have to hand crank, industrial gray and green, the words 'Ebensburg Public School District' stenciled on the side. The box also contains stacks and stacks of used record albums. He doesn't know where to turn first. He gets giddy, ripping boxes open and pulling out books, touching them, smelling them. Looking at all the songs he remembers, and does not... yet. Bradly reverently slips a stack from the box and starts flipping through them. Nat King, Bing Crosby, etc. playing them all- he came a-*colored* a movie of playboy shots from 1953 up 1963 all 10 years - all of them- were the boys all sat and felt like a free man- in the larger viewing room. Sam- came through yet again... along with a new poster! A sexy Playboy Playmate misses 1975 with dark hair, green eyes, and short, showing full frontal. Lots of detail on this one! The line was rocking down there... Thanks!

25

Bradly is reclined in the chair, transported, arms fluidly conducting the music. Ecstasy and rapture.

EBENSBURG no longer exists. It has been banished from the mind of men. He slides the Mozart album from its sleeve, lays it on the platter, and lowers the tonearm to his favorite cut. The needle HISSES in the groove... and the MUSIC begins, lilting and gorgeous. Bradly sinks into Tant's chair, overcome by its beauty it is a thing of beauty. Tant sits in one of the stalls, Jughead comic on his knees. Bradly wrestles the

photos player onto the guards' desk, sweeping things onto the floor in his haste. He plugs the machine in. A Sam light warms up. Tant lunges to his feet, pants tangling around his ankles. The platter starts spinning. Tant pauses reading, puzzled. He thinks he hears the music. TANT- Bradly? Do you hear that? He works up his courage, then flicks all the toggles to 'on.' A SQUEAL OF FEEDBACK echoes briefly... Bradly shoots a look at the bathroom... and smiles. Cons all over the prison stop whatever they're doing, freezing in mid-step to listen, gazing up at the speakers. Go for him... He lunges to his feet and fences the front door, then the bathroom. He returns to the desk and positions the P.A. microphone...and the -HUE- is suddenly broadcast all over the prison. Through yard... the numbing routine of prison life itself... all grind through just stands in place, listening to the MUSIC, hypnotized... SAM I tell you, those PHOTOS WHEN farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. IT MADE YOUNG LUSTING HOPE COME into our drab little birdcage and made these walls dissolve away... besides for the briefest of moments - every last man at EBENSBURGH felt AS IF HE WAS free. It pissed the warden off something abysmal. Marquez striding up the hallway with Flackier- RIPPING THE FILM OUT THEY DANCED AROUND THE FLAMES. Marquez and Flackier break the door in. Bradly got 5 weeks in the hole for that little stunt. Bradly looks up with a sublime smile. We hear Tant POUNDING on the bathroom door: TANT- LET ME OUT! LOW ANGLE SLOW PUSH IN on the massive, rust-streaked steel door. God, this is a terrible place to be. Bradly doesn't seem to mind. His arms sweep hugging himself saying pus- puss- pussy- the movie was playing in his head. STAN Couldn't play somethin' good, huh? CCR when you were in there the boys headed?

BRADLY- They poverty struck the entrance down before I could take requests. CHUB- Was it worth two weeks in the hole? BRADLY Easiest time I ever did I had photos to look at. STAN Shit. No such thing as an easy time in the hole. A week seems like years. BRADLY- I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company. Hardly felt the time at all. Oh, they let take them nudes down there, huh? I could 'a swore they confiscated that stuff. BRADLY- (it in my heart, in my head) The music was here... like the photos, and here. That's the one thing they can't remove, not ever- ever- never.

That's the beauty of it. You love the other side... Haven't you ever felt that way about music or your girl, Sam? You killed your thought...? Nah- I innocent... just like you! I'd played a mean harmonica as a younger man. So did I lose my feeling for it. Didn't make much sense on the inside. This hole is where it makes the most logic. We need it so we don't forget about optimism. That there are things in this world not carved out of gray stone with guns your stuff. That don't smell like shit and piss - That there's a small place inside of us they can never lock away, and that place is called optimism. SAM- Optimism is a hazardous entity. It

can Enterprise a man crazy. It's got no abode at this juncture. Well to get used to the inkling. Like HATLEN did?

26

He regards the harmonica as a man confronted with a Martian artifact. He considers trying it out- even holds it briefly to his lips, almost nervous- but puts it back in its box lost in how to play it. And there the harmonica will stay... Sam emerges into the fading daylight. Bradly's waiting for him. He enters, ten years older than when we first saw him at a parole hearing. He removes his cap and sits. slides open with an enormous CLANG. A stark room beyond. SEVEN HUMORLESS MEN sit at a long table. An empty chair faces them. We are again in: Sam enters, ten years older than when we first saw him at a parole hearing. He removes his cap and sits. It says here you've served 40 years of a 3-life sentence. Do you feel you've been transformed? Yes, sir, without a doubt. I can say I'm a transformed man. N o danger to humanity, that's God's truth. Absolutely rehabilitated. A big rubber stamp slams down 'PROHIBITED.' Sam nods, solemn. They settle in on the bleachers. Bradly pulls a small box from his sweater, hands it to Sam. Same old, same old shit new f-n day. Thirty years. Jess-us pleas-us. When you think and say it... where, how, and when. Anniversary gift. Open it. A shiny new gold harmonica engraved red case. One week later I get in a new gold demand hole DG 335 Gibson, 1977! Something I will be taking with me I thought if I ever get out of here. It's very pretty, Bradly. Thank you. I had to go through one of your challenges. Optimism you don't mind. I wanted it to be a surprise. Are you going to play something? Maybe... Men line the tiers as the evening count is completed. The convict's step into their cells. The master switch is thrown, and all the doors slam shut THUMP! Bradly finds a cardboard tube on his bunk. The note reads: 'A new girl for your anniversary. the vagina of the nude front shot of Alicia Silverstone was blow up in even a bigger poster for the wall- you know the one with the red and white coat- slow his fingers went in there- and the hole was wined... and we find Sam gazing blankly as darkness takes the cellblock. Adding up the months, weeks, days... Bradly was as good as his word. He kept writing to the State Senate. Two letters a week instead of one. Marking them all in the walls... that is when he found the way... Bradly yanks his kerchief down, grinning in exhilaration. Sam and the others follow suit. They step through the hole in the wall, exploring what used to be a sealed-off storage room, lots of shelves going up. Those checks came once a year like clockwork.

27

(Back)

STAN- Treasure Island Robert Louis... Kristi-ie by Stephen King-er that's CARRIE YOU DUMB SHIT! You will love it- it's about a girl like you, that lost her way. Sam and the boys are opening boxes, pulling out books. You'd be amazed how far Bradly could stretch it. He made deals with book clubs, charity groups...he bought remained Sam books by the pound... I got here an auto repair manual, and a book on soap carving. BRADLY- Trade skills and hobbies, those go under educational. Stack right behind you. Making the shelves for new library rooms, where the boys were sitting looking over yet something they were really proud of I would go to Nassau is the capital and largest city of the Bahamas. It is what... and where? Nas- saw... were that at...? That is the place where I would love to spend the rest of my days if I could. It was like living life on repeat 2 years has passed- and the line needs work it was the same name that wanted the job like before... that is where Klits made his run for it... and got so far down the line... to the crossing tracks, and there was an oncoming train- and his foot got stuck, as it switched; and the flying steam train could not and did not want to stop for a con... that rain him as over- it was later found out the man was for real innocent of his crimes. Shawshank- what this one- you would like it Kilt's it about busting out- SAM- Maybe that should go under... that is how he could the idea. Sounds educational too, is that where I going to put it. Sam is making a sign, carefully routing letters into a long plank of wood. It turns out to be... the polished wooden sign over the archway: 'EBENSBURGH.H' Library.' Revealing the library in all its completed glory: shelves lined with books, tables, and chairs, even a few potted plants. Stan is wearing headphones, listening to May the 'Bard of Paradise Fly up Your Nose!' on the record player sing to it sounding so out of tune. By the year Jimmy Carter was in donning noting, Bradly had transformed a broom closet smelling of turpentine, and mouse crap into the best prison library in New England. All this work brought in shit loads of dirty cash- oh and there were lots of ways to cover that up and made your fortune. Cheap work- and creep parts- can keep the rail line coming back for this man. SAM- That was also the year Warden Marquez instituted his famous 'Esoteric-Available' program. You may remember reading about it. It made all the papers and got his picture in People magazine. Yet there I was cover it over making it look like grants to the walls. Cutting pulpwood, making ties. repairing bridges and causeways, with new stronger ones digging storm drains... MARQUEZ... an honest, liberal fee in rectifications and therapy. Our inmates, correctly supervised, have been put to work outside these walls accomplishing all manner of civic service. Cutting pulpwood, repairing bridges and causeways, digging storm drains... along with your passenger railways. The boys listening from behind the fence, as the flashes go off. MARQUEZ- These men can acquire the value of an honest day's labor while on condition that, they are making an appreciated service to the community- and at a bare minimum of expense to Mr. and Mrs. Jane and John, Taxpayer! STAN- Sounds it out- like rail road-gang', you ask me. SAM- Nobody

asked you. A RAILROAD-GANG is grading a culvert with picks. There are dust and the smell of sweat in the air. GUARDS patrol with sniper rifles, a pushy WOMAN REPORTER in an ugly hat bustles up the grade, trailed by a PHOTOGRAPHER. You there...! You men...! A RailROAD-GANG is pulling stumps, bogged down in the mud.

We're going to take your picture now! Freak yeah! STAN Come' m'on! We're showin' our tools and grinnin' like fools! Take the damn picture! WOMAN REPORTER- You'll be in the magazine! And there is the photo- with all the boys unzips, reaches inside. The others do likewise, the sight of a dozen men displaying their penises and smiling brightly. Her readers go wobbly and most have to sit down - as they can't believe their eyes. Working- a man in the sun showing all they have- to the girls looking over from the way. We were something to see the outlaws... sexy- no? I said... about the working- TED a man that was a company owner- that felt like he was being cheated. 'This preserves, you're going to put me out of the industry! With this backstabbing nig-ger work you got here, you can underbid any independent in the metropolis.' Marquez opens the box. Alongside the cherry pie is an envelope. He runs his thumb across the thick stack of cash it contains. Pins being hammered. A boy is hit with a slug- in mud and blood, pinned by a fallen laying over a sharp tree stump- killed they just though the body in the woods. The wolf's well gets him the grad said- back to work. Men rush over to help him- 'he'- dead- he said in poor English. Marquez- barely takes notice. You be sure and thank your little girl Jill- that is 10 years old for her fine cherry pie I had. Made just for you... she said... you would get it.

SAM... there was Bradly, keeping the books. Bradly finishes preparing two bank deposits. Marquez hovers near the desk, keeping a watchful eye.

BRADLY- Two deposits, for the Bank and at First Nash. Night drop, like always. Marquez pockets the envelopes. Bradly crosses to the wall safe and shoves the ledger and sundry files inside. Marquez locks the safe, swings his wife's framed sampler back into place. He cocks his thumb at some laundry and two suits in the corner. Very nice...Want the rest of that? Little girl pussy tastes the same... The little ass, tastes like shit, can't bake worth shit and can't freak either, Cherry - it was not that good... Bradly trudged down the corridor with Marquez 's laundry, the pie box under his arm. LIBRARY - Sam- munching on it the girl's cherry concoction- ummm that the same- how it should be, no- away as he helps Bradly sort books on the shelves. SAM- Got his fingers in a lot of cherry pies, look at the man he eats a lot of them out too- just like you did- from what I hear. - and you end up here... I didn't to do anything to be ashamed of... What you hear isn't half of it. He's got scams and younger girls you haven't dreamed of. Bribes on his bribes and babies if they did have the money. That one way to pay the man off... There's a river of dirty

pussies running through this place. Money like the girl that can be a problem. Sooner or later you gotta explain where it came from, that is where I and the boys come in... if ever caught, I take the brunt of it- for not making him what I said I would. That's where I come in. I channel it, funnel in down in play with it, mesh it... stock it found up was to cover their ass, like I did with playing with young holes. Then when it comes back... It's clean as a virgin's honey hole that he never- eat out! The money that is... the girls I can say... that... HA! Then behind every sheltered transaction, behindhand every dollar earned... was this man making all the wrongs right... Bradly is at the desk, crunching kindly as he totals up figures on an adding machine. Making that baby freak shit hips of money. I do it and get life... I no right. The money - Cleaner- the girl I feel for- maybe I have change but that someone little girl. By the time Marquez retires, I will have made him a millionaire. You're like me getting soft he I should be hard about hearing this. Funny how I have to get rid of it I got the kid knocked up - said the warden. Here the money to pay for that too... I said. Jesus... They ever catch this and I be in here with you mother freaking cock sucker, going to wind up wearing a number like your sorry ass. BRADLY- (smiles) I thought you had more faith in me than that. I don't have faith in anything but that- and points up. UM- I SAID! Does it ever bother you? BRADLY- I don't run the scams, Sam, I just process the profits. AND HERE ABOUT THE MONS IN THE NIGHT That's a fine line, maybe. I mean I hear them in the office made just for his sex toys with this young'un... wiping the shit out of them, and freaking them so hard you could think the walls would have caved in... But I've also built that library, and used it to help a dozen guys get their high school diplomas. Why do you think the warden lets me do all that? I DON'T DO WHAT HE IS ANYMORE... I could have yet would it have been more time add to me for all? SAM- To keep you happy and doing the Washing, clean his come covered sheets. Add in Money and young girls and you have it all. Maybe- that not my life anymore... I work cheap. That's the trade-off- I get paid in getting laid- yet I afraid. YET I feel sick for doing it... HA! I feel it too... yet he's older than the both of us. What can you do... right *that's-a life*- with- a girl- and a- her or another she... that doesn't matter. I got yah... hot shot ways of life... you think you have it all yet really you have nothing. I have more than him now - I feel. And that is my pride- with hope.

28

SAM- Prison time is slow time. Sometimes it feels like stop-time. So, you do what you can to keep going... In 1977 JOHNIE WILLIAMS, a damn good-looking kid in his mid-20's. The bus RUMBLES through the gate. The new pussy disembarks, chained together single-file. The old-timers holler and shake the fence. A deafening gauntlet. Johnnie and the others are marched in naked and shivering, covering with delousing powder, greeted by BOOS and HOOTS. The bars slam with a STEEL CLANG. Johnie and his new

CELLMATE take in their new surroundings. JOHNIE Well. Ain't this for shit? DALLYING Johnie as he struts along, combing his ducktail, cigarette behind his ear. (We definitely need The Coasters or Del Vikings on the soundtrack here. Maybe Jerry Lee Lewis.) SAM Johnie Williams came to EBENSBURGH in 1975 on a one-year stretch for B&E Brick and entering to you all. Cops caught him sneakin' TV sets out the front door of a James way. A SHRIEKING BUZZSAW slices ten-foot lengths of wood. Sam runs the machine while some other OLDTIMERS feed the wood. Young punk, Mr. Rock n' Roll, long hair hippy cocky freak. Johnie is hauling the cut wood off the conveyor and stacking it, it's a ball-busting job, but the kid's a blur. JOHNIE (slapping his gloves) C'mon there, old boys! Movin' like molasses! Makin' me look bad! The old guys just grin and shake their heads. SAM- We liked him straightway. Johnie regales the old boys with his exploits: JOHNIE ...so I'm backin' out the door, right? Had the TV like this... Big old' thing. Couldn't see shit. Rapidly, here's this voice: 'Sounds like you done time all over.' Been in and out since I was 13. Name the place, chances are I been there. What made you come here- the town was post card. Anyways back to what I was saying... Halt kid! Hands up in the air! Well I just stand there holdin' on to that TV, so the voice says: 'You hear what I said, boy?' And I say, yes ass hole, I sure did! But if I drop this freaking object, you got me on destruction of belongings too! The whole table falls about laughing. Poker game in progress. Johnie, Bradly, Sam and the boys. STAN- You did a stretch in Cashman too? JOHNIE- Yeah. That was an easy ride, let me tell you. Work programs, weekend furloughs. Not like in here at this dump. Perhaps it's time you establish a new occupation. (the game arcades) What I mean is, you don't seem to be a very good burglar. Maybe you should try something else that you're good at. JOHNIE- What the hell you know about it, Eel Capone? What are you in for freaking shit up? Ture! Every Tom, Dick, and Harry innocent in here. Don't you know that little boy? The tension disruptions like the wind out of his ass easy. Everyone laughs... As it turns out, Johnie had himself a young girlfriend and new 2 baby girls... Johnie's at the end of the row, phone to his ear. Other side of the glass is Bethany, near tears, fussing with a BABY one sucking hard both on her lap, saying I need you and money step up. PUSH IN on Johnie's face as he listens. Her hand on the mesh of the window they try to hold hands. Perhaps it was the belief of them on the streets... or his kids growing up not knowing her daddy... that got him to shape up. Whatever it was, something lit a fire under that boy's ass to do the right thing now. Or to just get smarter... Johnie enters, the strut gone from his step Bradly filing library cards. Saying go find a book... and read- or you can't be here... he stands there looking at me- dumbly... Thing is, see... (leans in, mutters) I don't read... it- not good. I see well will work on the way you speak also. JOHNIE- I'm thinkin' maybe I should try for high school equivalency. Hear you helped some fellas with that. BRADLY I don't waste time on retarders, Johnie. I ain't that... he said with the look of give it a chance. Nothing half-assed, if we do all this shit... I don't waste my time on doing

something for someone where there is no reward out of it. Johnie thinks too long about it, and then he nods unsure of what he agreed too. Read this out of this book- I can't... I see... Bradly slaps the book shut, immensely pleased with himself- that he has a new student. Johnnie tries to read as Bradly looks on- dumb shit can't even read cat and the hat. Bradly shakes his head. Not exactly what I said I would do here boy- you go to school- first and that was it. Bradly chalkers the alphabet on a blackboard. How many are there? 30 he said- I look like um-hum! 26! I- Bradly took Johnie under my wing for this all to take place. I- Bradly Started walking him through his ABCs... and 1, 2, 3's. Before long, Bradly started him on his course necessities. He really liked the kid, that was part of it. Bequeathed him a delight to help a youngster creep off the shit-heap. But that wasn't the only reason... Discussing the kiddie book- the boy's face lights up- saying wow. Johnie took it pretty well, too. Boy found intelligence he never knew he had- more in math than any other. None's, verbs and adjectives... Johnie strong-minded on a hardback, saying the words. Behind him, wood is piling up on the conveyor belt. After a period of time, you couldn't pry those books out of hands. Something I didn't see coming nor did the others like the boys, and the guards also. A smart ass in gear, son! You're putting us behind! Johnie shoves the book in his back pocket and hurries over. Johnie writes a sentence on the blackboard. Bradly steps in show him how to reconstruct it. Looking around at the Sink, Toilet, Books, Outside the window bars, we hear another TRAIN passing in the night... You could see the I was about done with my railroad model. were Some fellas collect stamps with girls on them. Others build matchstick houses wishing girls were in them. Or things to use in the night- I- Bradly built a library. Now he needed a new project and put my train model in there. Johnie was it. It was the same reason he spent years looking after his- lovers there- them- posters on the wall his made-up girlies on the wall... it's to keep your mind... and not lose it like Kilts... would coming up. past a chair, a sweater on a hook... and finally to the place of honor on the wall... I chipped more than just my name on the wall. All the way through now of the wall for the first time I had to see where I was going to go from here... I called down to the work tunnels... where there was a way out- or so I thought I just need to bust the bares. I made a fake dummy to put on my bed and Sam looked over- he no intentions of going he felt like he was not innocent. The vents well work- if they don't get too small for my wide ass- I thought. In prison, a man'll do most anything to keep his mind occupied. I was digging in the night- as I look for freaks- creeping in. where the latest poster turns out to be Alicia Silverstone of 1980. That a big freaking poster of vag in your face! Yet I thought it was right and fitting for that day.

Gorgeous, she is. Johnie's taking the big test.

Bradly's monitoring the time. Deep silence, save for Johnie's pencil-scribbling. A few old-timers are browsing the shelves, sneaking looks their way. Johnie tries to ignore them. Concentrate. Bradly clears his throat. Time's up. Johnie puts his pencil down, BRADLY- Well that was it? Well, it's for freak... gets up in disgusted- I Lost a whole freakin' year of my life here and with this cow-shit! You did fine- you're doing fine... you don't have many more days to go. May as well be in Chinese or something other than this! I know you did fine. He runs around going nuts... guard pot him down... with dugs... I said not to panic.

29

I feel bad. I let him down. That's shit, son. He's proud of you, you're like our son... were all Proud of you. We have been friends for a long time. I know him as good as anybody. Smart fella, isn't he? You don't get any more than he... a big thing on the outside. What's he in for anyway? Baby freaking and killing them off... I don't buy it... oh... 'Bout 2 years ago, I was in Indiana on a 2 to 4 stretch. Spray painted train front of grads- and took the man's money and shit out of the engine. The dumb-freak thing to do- yet it was fun. A few months left to go, I get a new cellmate in. Jizzer Latch. Big jittery freak'n twitchier. Crazy eyes looking deep in yeah. Kind of roomie, you pray you don't get, not knowing it... you know what I saying... armed freaking babys- burglary. And ass freak- too- get that... all kinds of handjobs. Hard to believe, high-strung as he was. Rip a loud fart, he'd go 5 feet up in midair. Talked shit all the time, too, that's the other thing you did want to do it as too much or too less. Never shut the freak up. Places he'd been, jobs he pulled, little girls he freaked- boys too. Even people he killed- for the fun of it. Folks that did not come for him- or the other way round, cun-ts he called them all- that's how he put it. One evening, like a tale, I say I freaking some young puss you- I say: 'Yeah? Who'd you kill doing it?' So he says... I got me this job one-time working tables at a nightclub- see all the girls wiggle and shit, it was in the 30s so- it was illegal... yet I could case all these big rich pricks that come in. I pick out this guy with this tight ass puss with him, go in one night and do his place, and here... I changed my name and she falls for it... dumb bitch... though I had money. I freaked her and then I killed her doing it the second time around... and freak after she was cold. A tasty bitch it sucking he said. (He starts laughing and can't stop it was so freaking creep.) The best *skew* I ever had- she was so young- and right... doing me and shit. That's the best part! She's freaking me hardcore and I pop her full of lead in the head. Yet the best part she married to some hotshot... and looking in at us... and he is the one the nail it on. Laughter makes my skin claw- and buggy. The evil in this man's eyes was chilling.

30

I loved her... I guess I couldn't show it enough... She was gorgeous... BRADLY- My wife used to say I'm a hard man to get to know. I didn't pull the trigger. But I drove her away. That's why she died. Because of me, the way I am- never happy with what I have or had. Like a closed book you don't want to read for the cover. I criticized me for it all the time she could. I killed her, Sam... not love her the right way. (softly he said this.) Bradly finally glances at Sam, seeking a reaction. Silence. That doesn't make you a murderer. Bad husband, maybe that all a sinner too yet we all are. Bradly smiles faintly in spite of himself. Sam gives his shoulder a squashed. No. I didn't. Someone else did, and I wound up here. Bad break, I conjecture. Feel debauched about it if you want. It floats around. Has to land on somebody. Say a storm comes through. Some folks sit in the living rooms and enjoy the rain. The house next door gets torn out of the ground and smashed flat. But you didn't pull the trigger, you just weren't there but you did what you thought was right at the time. No- not even... I said back. When I got a long white beard and about three marbles left rolling around upstairs. Jesus Bad fortune? It was my turn, that's all. I was in the path of the twister. (Softly he said) I just had no idea the storm would go on as long as it has. (glances to him with the look of going mad) Think you'll ever get out of here? SAM Sure. I said where I would go- I just might- on of this lost & lonely nights... if only in my mind... like a trip.

Some Diminutive place right on the Pacific. Do you know what the Enchanted Islands...say about the Pacific? They say it has no recollection or readmission. That's where I'd like to finish out my life, Sam. A warm place with no remembrance. Open a little hotel right on the beach. Buy some worthless old boat and fix it up like new. Take my guests out charter pussying. (beat...) You know, a place like that, I'd need a man who can get things. Sam stares at Bradly, laughs. SAM Jesus, Bradly. I couldn't hack it on the outside. Been in here too long. I'm an institutional man now.

Like old Hatlen was. You misjudge yourself, I said to him. SAM Bullshit. In here I'm the guy who can get it for you. Out there, all you need are Yellow Pages. I wouldn't know where to begin. (derisive snort) The Pacific Ocean? Hell. Like to scare me to death, somethin' that big. You're right. It's down there, and I'm here. I guess it comes down to a humble sanction, actually. Become full breathing hard and heavy or get busy taking the last breath. BRADLY- Not me. I didn't shoot my wife and I didn't shoot her lover, and whatever mistakes I made I've paid for and then some. That hotel and that boat... I don't think it's too much to want. To look at the stars just after sunset. Touch the sand. Wade in the water... Feel free. damn it, Bradly, stop! Don't do that to yourself! Talking shitty shit dreams! The Bahamas are all the way over there, and you're in here, and that's the way it is! It used to it, Sam snaps a look. Sam lunges to his feet. What the hell does that mean? Bradly rises and treads away. Bradly? (turns back to give that last loving

look.) Sam, if you ever get out of here, do me a favor. There's this big sunflower field up near Nicktown. Do you know where Nicktown is? Lots of Sunflower fields there. One in the individual that I love- that we loved- it's Got a long creak running by it... with an old home that was falling in over the way... wall with a big oak at the north end. Like something out of a Marcel Ray Duriez Book. It's where I asked my it have sex with me... 'So beautiful,' she breathed. 'Mm, and the view's not so bad either,' he said.She turn ed around to face him, rolling her eyes. She tucked her fingers into the front of his pants, admiring his strong jawline as he wrestled the cork from the bottle. Even if she always managed to open them more easily, it was all about these little traditions. 'You make that joke every time.'' And I still mean it. Even when you roll your eyes around like that. But now that I've torn your eyes away from the beautiful night sky, may I interest the lady in some champagne?' She closed her eyes and lifted her open m outh expectantly, bracing for the sharp sweet tang of the bubbles in her mouth.

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With a final squeak and a pop, he tossed the cork aside and gave her his best Sarah Connery eyebrow raise- she was my girl. Instead, a few drops hit her lips while a steady stream hit her chin and ran down her chest, soaking the top of her blouse. 'I seem to have forgotten the glasses, my dear girl. You'll have to open wide.' 'Brad!' she wheezed, forgetting for a moment to whisper. 'On it, miss. Many apologies; can't imagine how that happened.' Without missing a beat, he began unbuttoning her shirt and noisily kissing and licking his way from her collarbone to her sternum. All the way down he followed the middle of her petite frame, now shaking with laughter until he was on h is knees at her feet. She clasped her hands behind his head and looked down into his large brown eyes, which looked more mischievous than usual. 'Well jeez, now that I'm all wet,' she began, bending—with just a little—to join him on the ground. 'Wait for just a sec.' He reached among the blankets and pulled out a small black box. Placing the champagne down, he flicked open box and held it up for her. 'I've got something I'd like to propose. 'In the poor light, all Caroline could see within the box was a thick gold band. 'Brad', that's not a ring, is it? You remember that we're married, right?' 'While I would marry you again 50 times over, no, this isn't a ring.' He looked down and began fumbling with the box. 'Just let me turn it on...' He held it up triumphantly as it began buzzing. 'Someone has been leaving their browser open. I can take a hint.''I don't know what you're talking about,' she started, pulling up her skirt. 'Mmm, is that so? Hmmm,' he murmured, mouth muffled against her soft inner thigh. With both arms cupping the back of her legs, he continued to voice his disbelief; first along her left thigh, across her delicate cleft, and then back down the right. Jutting his chin firmly under her, he looked up into her eyes, half-closed with pleasure as she

leaned against the wall and held onto the back of his head with her other arm. 'After a thorough investigation, I have to find your claims of innocence to be completely spurious ma'am.' 'Shhh. Shut up,' she laughed and pushed his head gently back toward her. His tongue obliged, flat and pushing forward along her, then curling back as he pulled it upward to her clit. She shivered and placed a knee on his shoulder as he delved forward and back, each time pausing longer to suck gently as she moaned and squirmed in his grasp. With the tapered edge of the toy, he began entering her shallowly, each time letting it linger for just a half-second longer. 'Please,' she said, grasping at his hair with no longer gentle tugs. Obliging, he bit gently at her thigh while inserting it and admired the glint of gold against her tawny skin. He stood, his fingers pressing it in place from within and watched as she writhed against the vibrations. She pulled him close; leg lifting in his grasp to urge him deeper. Promise me, Sam. If you ever get out, find that spot. In the base of that wall, you'll find an old car here inside you will get what you need... what's in this 55 Chevy. You'll find something buried in the set... under it I want you to have it what we had. With her other hand, she fumbled around his to undo his belt, grimacing in frustration. He chuckled and released her, undoing his belt slowly as she explored sensations of the toy against herself. She flicked her eyes at his cock, an invitation, and a challenge. With a loose grip, he ran his hand up and down his shaft, enjoying his show as much as being hers. 'Turn around,' his voice now hoarse with want rather than an effort to be quiet. She gave a slow, mocking turn and stuck her ass out at him, using her hand now to grind against the vibe with a slow, deliberately taunting. He stepped toward her and lifted her hips, entering her so hurriedly he barely registering her deepened moan. Each thrust seemed to send shock waves down the underside of his cock and throughout his entire body. Their left arms intertwined on the top of the ledge, using it for leverage as their right hands both clasped at her cunt. wife to marry me. We'd gone for a picnic. We made love under that tree. I asked and she said yes. You remember being that age. ''Barely!' Their guffaws faded and Brian kissed Caroline's neck. 'They're right you know. We're acting like kids.' What? What's in there? You'll just have to pry up that and see. Bradly turns and walks away. Lost in Silence....

Johnie has finished his story. Sam is stunned...but Bradly looks like he's been smacked with a two by four or it was off his ass the look of pain man. Walks stiffly away. Doesn't look back. Well. I have to say, that's the most astonishing story I ever overheard. What amazes me most is you were taken in by it yet not me. Said- MARQUEZ... all together... in- between the shelves. Really I said back... MARQUEZ- It's obvious this fellow Williams is impressed with you. He hears your tale of grief and quite naturally wants to applaud you up with his made-up stays. He's undeveloped, not terribly bright. Not surprising he didn't know what a state he'd put you in. BRADLY I think he's telling the truth. MARQUEZ Let's say for a moment

man is real. You think he'd just fall to his knees and cry, 'Absolutely, I did it! I confess! By all means, please add 3 life terms to my sentence!' It could help... Well, it's a chance. isn't it? How can you be so simple-minded? What did you call me...? I was just trying to rest your mind at ease, that's all. Thickheaded if you well! Is it deliberate? The club will have his name on and resets with that on them! If you want to ponder this make-believe, that's your business. Don't make it mine. This meeting's over. Look, if it's the squeeze, don't worry. I'd never say what goes on in here. I'd be just as prosecutable as you for laundering the money and having the girls! Don't you ever mention money or girls to me again, you repentant freaking bitch! Not in this place of work, not anyplace! Get in here! Now! 3 grads drag him off to the hole were, he rioted for 5 weeks...Bradly gets dragged away, kicking and screaming like a newborn: Don't you understand it's my life? I could get out or less time. Mail call. Men crowd around as names are called out. Sam and the boys are parked on the bleachers. CHUB and Clef- say 3 months in the hole. The longest damn stretch I ever heard of. JOHNIE- It's my fault for saying shit. SAM- Like hell. You didn't pull the trigger, and you didn't convict him did you know so don't think about it. STAN - Sam? You saying Bradly's innocent? I mean for the real innocent? (Sam nods and looks at me) Sweet baby Jesus. How long's he been in here? 30 years. Numb-nuts you have mail the grad said. Board of Education. I mailed it to you both... You going to open it or rub yourself off a little more... rub sound better. I don't want to see this... hey, look at this you out high marks. FOOTSTEPS approach slowly to see the girl sitting there. Johnie makes his way through the chaos, finds Beth and the baby waiting behind the thick plexi shield. He sits, doesn't pick up the phone. Just stares at Beth. She doesn't know what to make of it. He presses a piece of paper against the glass. A high school diploma. Her face lights up, blinking back tears. The steel door. Somewhere behind it, unseen is Bradly, A rat scurries along the wall. Bradly listens in darkness. The FOOTSTEPS pause outside his door. The slot opens. An ELDERLY GUARD peers in. An OLD GUARD Kid passed the big time. B+- above average.

Alleged you'd like to know this happy for your boy.

The slot closes. The FOOTSTEPS recede. Bradly smiles. We find Johnie on evening work detail, mopping the floors with bucket and pail. Warden wants to talk. A steel door rattles open. Mert leads Johnie outside to a gate, unlocks it. Johnie ensues out across loading-dock access for the shops and mills. Some vehicles parked. The place is deserted. He stops, sensing a presence. Johnie looks around. Here... outside the walls? The gate opens, sends Johnie through, turns and heads back inside. Warden? Marquez steps into the light out of the black darkness. MARQUEZ- I give you a girl in here to keep you from talking... we've got a state of affairs here. I think you can appreciate that if you had your girl once and a

while... I would but no... he said... it's not right I am a changed man. He said- this really came along and bashed my wind out of me. MARQUEZ- I tell you, son, It's got me up nights knowing this is wrong, that's the God truth. MARQUEZ- The right decision. Sometimes it's hard to figure out what that is... you say no so I make it for you- you comprehend that? (Johnie nods) Think hard, Johnie. If I'm going to move on this, there can't be the least little sh-Sam of the doubt. Would you be willing to swear before a judge and jury...having placed your hand on the Good Book and taken an oath before Almighty God Himself? Just give me that chance... do the right thing and no- I have my girl. She'll be mine if you keep saying shit. I have to know if what you told him was the truth. Marquez pulls a pack of cigarettes, offers Johnie a smoke. Johnie takes one.

Marquez lights both cigarettes pocket his lighter.

Yes, sir. Absolutely, he said with nerves. That's what

I thought. Marquez drops his cigarette. Crushes it out with the toe of his shoe. Glances up toward the plate shop roof as a go through scope pops up into the frame, jumping Johnie's image into startling intensification, framed in the crosshairs. Rapid fires a carbine- BAM! BAM! BAM! bam! his face lit up by the muzzle flashes. Captain Flackier. gets chewed to pieces by the gunfire. He smacks the ground in a twitching, thrashing heap. Eyes wide and staring. Dead. Surprise still stamped on his face. Silence now. Marquez turns strolls into darkness. Dumb freak...GUARDS approach Bradly's cell. The door is unlocked. Bradly emerges slowly, blinking painfully at the light. Bradly has marched along. Convicts stop to stare. Bradly is led in. The door is closed. Alone with Marquez. Softly... BRADLY- I'm done. It stops right now. Get H&R Block to declare your income. MARQUEZ- creep- creep- creeping away- like a snake in the night- like your ass hole of a boyfriend, he freaks you and is done. Terrible thing. Man, that young, less than a year to go, trying to escape. Broke Captain Flacker's heart to shoot him, truly it did. Marquez lunges to his feet, eyes sparkling with rage. As he looks at this man part naked in his hole... bared in his shit. NO - I don't think so-0. Otherwise, you will do the hardest time there is in this place. No more protection from the guards. I'll pull you out of that one-bunk Hilton and put you in a padded room with all the dick suckers... like all the biggest bull queer I can find. 'You'll think you got freaked by a runaway night train!' And the library? Gone! Sealed off brick by brick! We'll have us a little book barbecue in the yard! They'll see the flames for miles! We'll dance around it like uninhabited Indians! Do you comprehend me in my mindless ways? Are you catching my drift... or you the dumb ass? Bradly's face. Eyes tunneling. His beaten appearance says it all... Sam finds Bradly sitting in the shadow of the high stone wall, poking lethargically through the dust for small pebbles. Sam waits for some acknowledgment. Bradly doesn't even look up.

Sam hunkers down and joins him. Nothing is said for the longest time. And then, softly: I tell you, the man was talking' crazy. I'm worried, I truly am. He said to the boys.

31

We ought to keep an eye on him. KLIT'S That's fine, during the day. But at night he's got that cell all to himself. STAN Oh Lord. Bradly comes down to the loading dock today. Asked me for a length of rope. 4foot long. Do you think he going to? clef Shit! Did you give it to him? End it yah... STAN Sure I did. I mean why wouldn't I? CHUB Remember what happened to Dick?

STAN How the hell was I supposed to know? KLIT'S

Bradley's never done that. Never. They all look to Sam. SAM Every man's got a breaking point. Report to your cell blocks for evening count. BOOM DOWN to Sam and the boys. Convicts drift past them. CHUB Where the hell is he? STAN Probably still up in the wardens.

TOWER GUARD (via a loudspeaker) YOU MEN! YOU HEAR

Is THAT ANNOUNCEMENT OR ZEST TOO STUPID TO UNDERSTAND? CHUB Nothing, we can do. Not tonight. STAN Let's pull him aside tomorrow, all of us. Have a word with him. Ain't that right, Sam? SAM (disbelieving) Yeah. Sure. That's right. Bradly's working away. Marquez pokes his head in. Bradly finally gets his head through, scraping his ears. He's got a penlight clenched in his teeth. He peers down into the shaft. At the very bottom, maybe 50 feet down, a big ceramic pipe runs the length of the cellblock. Beneath its coat of grime and dust, the word 'SEWER' is stenciled.

MARQUEZ Lickety-split. I want to get home. BRADLY

Just about done, sir. BRADLY Three deposits tonight. We follow Marquez to his wife's sampler. He swings it aside, works the combination dial, opens the wall safe. Bradly moves up, shoves in the black ledger and files. Marquez shuts the safe. Bradly hands him the envelopes. Marquez heads for the door. MARQUEZ Get my stuff down the laundry. And shine my shoes. I want 'em looking' like mirrors. (pauses at door) Nice having' you back, Bradly. The place just wasn't the same without you... Marquez exits. Bradly turns to the laundry. He opens the shoebox. Nice pair of dress shoes inside. He sighs, glances down at the old ragged pair of work shoes on his own feet. Bradly is diligently shining Marquez 's shoes. Bradly trudges down the hallway, laundry slung over his shoulder, Bradly nods to the GUARD. The guard BUZZES him through. Sam hears Bradly coming, moves to the bars. He watches Bradly come up to the second tier and pause before his cell. Open number 14! Bradly gazes directly at Sam. A beat of eye contact. Sam shakes

his head. Don't do it. Bradly smiles, eerily calm...and enters his cell. The door closes. KATHUMP! We hold on Sam's face. Bradly is polishing a chess piece. Lights out! The lights bump off. He finishes polishing, holds up the piece to admire. A pawn. He sets it down with the others -- and we realize it's the final glance for the board. A full set. He gazes up at Raquel and smiles. Pulls a 4-foot length of rope from under his pillow. Let's it uncoil to the floor. Brad- hopped a train to his freedom- along with getting his cash under the viaduct! Along with all the money he made for the warden and the guards... along with making it a book!

32

Suddenly, a palm-sized chunk of cement pops free and hits the floor that is when he knew it was possible. He stares down at it. Bradly lies in the dark, studying the chunk of concrete in his hands. Considering the possibilities. Wrestling with hope. Bradly stands to peer at the small hole left by the fallen chunk. Carefully runs his fingertip over it. Mining is the study of force and phase. That's all it takes, actually. Force and phase. That and a big damn poster, on the wall, showing the way into her hole- of freed and joy! HA! Sam sits in the dark, a bundle of nerves, trying to hold himself still. He feels like he might scream or shake to pieces. The second's tick by, each an eternity. I have had some long nights in stir. Alone in the dark with nothing but your thoughts, time can draw out like a blade... A FLASH OF LIGHTNING outside his window sends harsh balsam shadows jittering across the cell. A storm breaking. That was the longest night of my life... the last night I saw my friend. HAIG Brad, dammit, you're putting me behind! You better be sick or dead in there, I shit you not! KATHUMP! The master lock is thrown. The cons emerge from their cells and the headcount begins. Sam looks back to see if Bradly's in line. He's not. Suddenly the count stalls: GUARD Man missing on tier two! Cell 12! The head bull, HAIG, checks his list: Brad? Get your ass out here, boy! You're holding up the show! (no answer) looking at the dummies...Don't make me come down there now! I'll thump your skull for you! Still no answer. Glaring, Haig stalks down the tier, clipboard in hand. His men fall in behind. They arrive at bars. Their faces go slack. Stunned. Softly: Digging muddy tunnel 700 yards that lead into a shit toenail that was another 500 to freedom get this next to the courthouse, out of a manhole cover, also that sent him there in the first place. Right outside the doors, he popped up- like a rat in the snow covertness of the night in white. Using nothing but a sharpened toothbrush with a melted razor blade on the blunt end - the color Sam. The warden though one of his collectibles mouth organs through the Sam head poster funny hitting and going through the vagina of the nude front shot of Alicia Silverstone- you know the one with the red and white coat- slow his fingers went in there- and the hole was whined. The train takes him away off hop-off get

the cone to hope back on in the next passing one to his place in the Brahmas. Where I would blow all the wardens money! Oh my Holy God. reveals the cell is empty. Everything neat and tidy. Even the bunk is stowed. They wrench the door open and rush in, tossing the cell in a panic as if Bradly might be lurking under the Kleenex or the toothpaste. spins toward us, bellowing at the top of his lungs: WHAT THE FREAK! Marquez is kicking back with the morning paper. He notices ha dingy his shoes are. He glances at the shoebox on the desk. kicks his shoes off, opens the box -- and gulls out Bradly's o grimy work shoes. He stares blankly. What the freak indeed. An ALARM STARTS BLARING throughout the prison. He looks up. Marquez and

Flackier stride across the grounds, ALARM BLARING.

MARQUEZ I want every man on that cellblock questioned! Start with that friend of his! FLAKIER who? Sam watches as Marquez storms up with an entourage of guards. MARQUEZ Him. Sam's eyes widen. Guards yank him from his cell. Marquez steps to the center of the room, working himself up into a fine rage: What do you mean 'he just wasn't here?' Don't say that to me, Haig! Don't say that to me again! Look at this thing look real to you- I think not! But sir! He wasn't! He isn't! MARQUEZ I can see that, Crage! Do you think I'm simpleminded? Is that what you're saying? Am I a dumb ass? No sir! Marquez grabs the clipboard and thrusts it at Flock-ier. What about you? Are you blind? Tell me what this is! FLAKIER Last night's count. MARQUEZ You see Brad's name? I sure do! Right there, see? 'Brad.' He was in his cell at lights out! NO reason he'd still be here this morning! I want him found! Not tomorrow, not after breakfast! Now!MARQUEZWell? SAM Well what?

MARQUEZ I see you two all the time, you're thick as thieves, you are! He must 'a said something! SAM No sir, he didn't! Marquez spreads his arms evangelist-style, spins slowly around. MARQUEZ Lord! It's a miracle! Man up and vanished like a girl you just freaked and dumped the same night! Nothin' left but some models and books on the windowsill and that nude young freak'n pussy showing on the wall! Let's ask her! Maybe she knows! What say there, Fuzzy- Britches? Feel like talking? Guess not. Why should you be different? Sam exchanges look with the guards. Even they're nervous. Marquez scoops a handful of rocks off the sill. He hurls them at the wall one at a time, shattering them, punctuating his words: MARQUEZ It's a conspiracy! His hands- throwing (SMASH- a model train) That's what this is! (SMASH a train car that he made out of wood) It's one big damn conspiracy! (SMASH- a boxcar) And everyone's in on it! (SMASH- a little water tower) Including her! He sends the last rock whizzing right at the nude girl on the wall. Right for the hole... smash- you could not hit that hard if you were a 16-year-old boy on his first lovemaking. It takes a moment for this to sink in. see this tight ting go all wide... All eyes go to her new

hole that was made. The rock went through her puss. You could hear a pin drop. Marquez reaches up, sinks his finger into her dark young- tight freak hole. He keeps pushing... and his entire hand disappears into the wall. I find my self-drilling at the sight of this... slowly fingering this girl he was... as Marquez rips the poster from before our eyes. Stunned faces peer in his head went up all in there. to reveal the long crumbling tunnel in the wall. That leads to an underground tunnel- then to the shit passageway- then up a manhole- then out by the courthouse, next to the tracks that he walked along- it was snowing in the night love agent the flicker lights- you can see him- there looking up... hands up praying and thankful for his freedom, moving fast he runs for the oncoming train- then jumps off a viaduct where he digs up his lout... and under there he stays for the next train for the next town... where he could get clean and start a new look and life... as a new man... He took Jonie's name he was going to be out soon anyway- it was not yet reported... so by the time, it got out it was too late... a guard barely out of his teens tries not to look nervous as they lash a rope around his chest. He's getting instructions from six different people at once. (flashlight in his hands) looking in He reaches for the opposite wall, manages to snag a steel conduit with his fingers. Suddenly, a huge rat darts for his hand. Bradly yanks away and almost plummets head-first down the shaft. He dangles wildly upside-down for a moment, arms windmilling, then gets his hands pressed firmly against the opposite wall. The rat scurries off, pissed, at the lining of the walls... wet and drizzling with moisture- the small of metal like- The warden went down in the hole. Um- freshly opened up! He wasn't much in the brains department at this point we could see that, but he possessed feeling up the hole... like a hard dick sliding in a new hole made... with a teen bitch, it was sore and tight squeezing...he was willing to go deep down inside. squeezes down the tunnel on his belly. Dark as midnight. Concrete walls rise on both sides. If you imagine them as two huge flaps on either side- you would get what I am saying- do deep to come out of, no are in this space hardly, and a dark tangle of pipes between the cellblocks was starting to get hot. Somewhere, a rat SQUEAKS, someone flushed - a shitter and that is when... Smells pretty damn bad, Warden!

In fact, it smells just like shit. It's SHIT- it's poopie! Ah god- the man up there said- I giggled my ass off! squeezes from the tunnel, we made the same trap as he did out and up! Showing what it was like- when he did and when numbnuts did it too. The fat ass barely got in the dumb hole! He lost his glass doing this- it was that hard of a freak for him. Into the shaft, he went- the feeling is- nothing but darkness and a little light at the end- good this must be with it like when you come out- I just do it backward. Not having a good time, squeezing through the walls of this passageway. Never mind dumb shits keep going, I said! Just keep going! I want him found he may be down here... Flicker and the warden sink in all the shit lining the tunnel. That when they got blasted with a big wave of shit- in the face... He slips and sits heavily

in it. Brad got the last chuckle! Small my ass! The boys said on top! The ladyboys were having a good time with this one. Sam- He starts laughing. Laughing, hell, he's bellowing laughter, laughing so hard he has to hold himself, laughing so hard tears are pouring down his cheeks. The look of rage on Marquez 's face makes him laugh all the harder. Abrupt silence- I lost it- one for him get away with shit and for his shit hitting in the face... it was a win-win... and that was good shit! Shit! I laughed myself right into madness- the boys loved it though. I knew I didn't want to piss them off - for I was hoping to get out... SAM Its shit, it's shit, oh my God- it's shit- he fingers her pussy- and shit... then a boy said (then shit himself because!) HA! He starts laughing all over again, fit to split. (That IS the tightest one he ever got!) Virgin landscape THIS WAS. FUNNY IT WAS ALL THE SAME TO HIM TOO.

33

Charming rural road. Suddenly, State Police Cruisers rocket up the road with SIRENS AND LIGHTS. In 1991, Bradly Brad escaped from EBENSBURGH Prison. At age 69... EBENSBURG is half a mile distant from where he got out. All that was left behind was a prison uniform by the creek under the viaduct with and body wash. as well as a coal miner's- hammer with the pick side damn near worn down to the handle. And a miner's orange hard hat with a lamp! Cops all over the town and around - posing with Bradly's reeking uniform and the worn rock-hammer the photo made the papers- and news. Bradly loved working underground. I fancy it fascinated him in his strategic ways. A dying tree here- aging there, a million liars there of mountain making- under presser, seems there- clay there... I remember thinking it would take a man 1000 years to tunnel through the wall and underground with it. Bradly did it in about 50. And the dumb got the last laugh too for it was that good... I keep an eye out yet it dark - and that was when he did his work 6 hours at a time... and the rest was sleep and eat. Like I said. In prison, a man will do no matter what to keep his awareness busy, and not go stir-crazy. All the shit was pushed down in the hole as he dug- or was in the coal bucket. While the rest of us slept, Bradly spent years working' the night-shift... SAM-I guess after Johnie was killed, Bradly decided he'd been here too long. And he had his name and plan made...

The lights go out. Bradly places the last chess piece. Gazes up at his girlie. Smiles. Pulls the rope from under his pillow. He stands and unbuttons his prison shirt, revealing Marquez 's gray pinstripe suit underneath in wild shadows you see his face looking crack in the moment of busting out and though. The storm rages, outside- sown- is the cover of night- Bradly, goes in his girl, carefully having one of Marquez 's folded suit into a large industrial Zip-Lock bag- that he had in the shaft the day before. Bradly, again wearing prison clothes, inches down the tunnel.

Bradly squeezes through the hole head-first, just imagine that, and the tape on the top is what covers the hole over. Yet the wind would bubble it up- yet he knew in the dark light it would not be known. Bradly snags the conduit again. He contorts out of the hole and dangles into the shaft. We now see the purpose of the rope, he kicks his legs across the shaft and down, getting his feet braced for the big drop. His back against one wall, and feet against the other, he starts down the shaft. Sliding dangerously. Using pipes for handholds. Flinching as rats dart this way and that, scurrying in the shadows. He drops the last few feet to the bottom. He approaches the ceramic sewer tunnel and kneels before it. No turning back. He wriggles into the pipe and starts crawling. Bradly crept to freedom through Mud- muck and bloody shit stinking filth I can't even visualize. Or mayhap I just don't want to do so-0. Snow is falling- EBENSBURGH is a mile and a half distant or so away. Freedom- as he made past the courthouse, that convicted him to this life sentence. He wades upstream, ripping his clothes from his body. He gets his shirt off, spins it through the air over his head, flings the shirt away. He raises his arms to the sky, turning slowly, it's 32 out yet he was more than happy in this... feeling the snow coating him clean. Jubilant and Successful he felt. SAM - The next day... a man nobody ever laid eyes on before marched into the first national Bank of Johnstown. The only thing that changed was that he was John Sr. on paper. I would like to withdraw all of my earnings... as this man here... the same name he uses to make the warden what he was... it worked. The signature was a spot-on match with the photos. Makeup and hair- can do a lot- I thought. And a Pillow in my pants under this nice site. He had all the proper... license, birth certificate, social security card, it was all there. I must say I'm sorry to be dropping your industry. I hope you'll enjoy living out of the country. She never said a word- to anyone. I was just some man... Thank you, I said with a smirk. Cash in hand - I walked out... smelling... foolishly. I mailed my manuscript book to the new paper- and was on my way. It was typed- with a pen name... that was that- the name J. B. W.

34

Marquez walks slowly toward his office. Dazed. The morning paper in his hand. He goes wordlessly past the DUTY GUARD into his office. Shuts the door. Lays the paper on his desk. The headline reads:

'VENALITY and young rapping AND MANSLAUGHTER AT EBENSBURGH.'

Below that, the sub-headline: 'D.A. Has Ledger.

Indictments Expected.' Marquez looks up as SIRENS

SWELL in the distance. For the second time, State

Police cruisers go rocketing up the road with SIRENS AND LIGHTS. Police cruisers everywhere. A media circus. REPORTERS jostle for position. A colorless DISTRICT ATTORNEY steps forward into CLOSEUP, flanked by a contingent of STATE TROOPERS. D.A. Flackier? You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say will be used against you in court... TROOPERS moves in, cuffing Flacker's hands behind his back. SAM I hear Flackier was weeping like a petite pussy looking for it- when they took him away, where I hear he was ass freaked every day- by our boys! His face scrunches up. He begins to cry hard. Flackier sobs all the way to the car. The D.A. snaps a gaze up toward Marquez 's window, motions his men to follow. Marquez is staring out the window as they approach the building. Marquez? We have a warrant for your arrest! Open up! He goes to his desk, opens a drawer. Inside lies a revolver and a box of shells, were he blast some of them- and run for the window- falling to his death- and was killed doing so. His ass was impaled on the fence spike with barb wire- outside- hilarious he got ass reamed hard- and ripped into two all up in there and junk- like being freaked by a train, we all said the next day. There is a photo in all the boy's cells of this... the dead guy getting ass freaked by escapee! SAM- I like to think the last thing, that went through him over then the spiked up his ass... was to wonder how the freak, brad was able to ass freak him over so well in this joke that was made by GOD! And get the best of him- see God well discipline you for being the ass hole... that needs to be freaked.

35

I wonder if he made it... I remember where he said he would go... but I never- ever thought I would see the day I would want to go there... yet it was for him...When I picture him heading south on a ship it makes me laugh all over again... it is shit! Then seeing him in a speedboat rips along with some hot young thing... make that all better also. Bradly Brad, who crept through a tonal a girl's hole passed all poopie next to it and arose farm and strong- out a hole like a rebirth on the other side. Bradly Brad headed for the blue-green sea's. I miss him here... we talk about him a- lot... and remains... the shit he did... beautiful white beach. The Pacific Ocean before us.

Huge. Mind-blowing. Beautiful beyond description. All we hear now are the gentle sound of waves. dreams where I am lost in a warm place with no reminiscence. An ocean was so big it strikes me foolishly. Waves so quiet they strike me dead. Sunshine so bright it strikes me blind. It is a place that, is sapphire beyond reason. Bluer than can possibly exist. Azure than my mind can possibly grasp. Nothing for a million miles but beach, sky, and water. Sam is a tiny speck at the water's edge. Just another grain of sand. Sam enters, sits. 10 years older than he last saw him. Either way, I made all the trips to get home and find my way- to freedom... it was all part of his plan to show me that I need not give up on life on the

outside. A distant boat lies on its side in the sand like an old wreck that's been left to rot in the sun. There's someone out there. A MAN is meticulously stripping the old paint and varnish by hand, the face was hidden with goggles and kerchief mask. Sam appears bag, a distant figure walking out across the sand, wearing his cheap suit and carrying his cheap bag. The man on the boat pauses. Turns slowly around. Sam arrives with a smile as wide as the horizon. The other man raises his goggles and pulls down his mask. Bradly, of course. BRADLY You look like a man who knows how to get things. SAM-I'm known to locate certain things from time to time. Sam shrugs off his jacket and picks up a sander. Together, they start sanding the hull as we... I see you have a little girl now and a new wife... you made boy you made it... and they all group huge.

A photo was taken one that no one can ever see!

Incest

Interval:

Nevaeh on tape- from 2007- 'I'll never- ever be more than a simple-minded nigger- yet I am not black, and white than white a white girl should be, from not seeing the sun. Never a true woman - or a man- if you're like me, having the skin jacket of symbolically placed covering your true being, with a new characteristic of repugnance, likewise and education to match- within the laws and segments of a small town that well role my world individualities. Never dating- unless tricked into what is allotted, never accomplishing, work, or learning- unless it's for charities, or to do over- to never truly earn due to lake of mind and the thought of the color of black in its new ways to offended, like a slave that- I am to them, that have me ambushed.'

'Already the cops what to f*ck the shit out of me, by them being a d*ck. Over time, I wonder if it was all just to do *detective* work- and that was code.' Said Nevaeh.

'I wonder if they know of Dr. Flyod and Dr. Kinsey sexologist, with their fascinations.'

(Giggles for the doctor)

'I named the two guys that are my probation- officers: 'burp' and 'slurp' as they were taking photos of me to publicize my simpleton ways- to libel, saying what his camera is all f*cked up, and the other cramming a turkey sub down his gut- to make theatrical performances. Nonetheless both- looking at me as if I am a deviant, that is why- I am here- oh, how lies have fed this legend of my existence.'

~*~

The year was 2008- is was 12- 'Nevaeh was the only girl, that could slobber up,' this was lost in her memories of her boy-toy saying, and it did not slobber, 'don't think too hard, he posted to his message board.' 'She has pictures of this? To let all know I am her man.'

Nevaeh on tape- 'Everything you have viewed is a lie, why are you still breathing, I should cut your tie, or cut your eyes from the inside, over you then ask why? Now ask if you can see- and say goodbye to the bad girl?'

(Forward, what 2 years can do.)

2010- I was 14, and this was my last true year, and I stopped chatting with the doctor who I trusted, to understand me the misunderstood- 'I still remember when- I met her the little girl in the blue skirt, on the bus, and made sweet notes and the rest is history too- with me. She is my everything, my time-machine- all I thought about to keep my mind occupied- after her, this was the last loss I could take.'

(Back)

It was 1999. DOCTOR LORENZO'S OFFICE, they were going over the drama that was her life on the photograph.

Nevaeh- is on the couch and- giving her life's history.

DOCTOR LORENZO her desk tapping her pen- and clicking the top. 'Two years? You were with this boy and no one knew?' 'He was nothing more than a crush...' She said. 'However- she was my fascination.'

Nevaeh- 'I was looking down at too many coffins, in my mind- I could see them all, always and he- or the love or the thought of love a boy was my escape. In the ground, and it's all over me.'

'You need to spend more time with girls your age and learn to trust,' said the doctor.

'I wanted ...to jump and just play. To be down there... with her... not long after, and playing was odd. I never was a small child or don't remember being one.'

'Death was everything that was fascinating, people were crying... yet that was me all the time, at any time. It was like then I could see my own death yet it was emptiness- and cold. And there was no one there...'

(Memories of Flashbacks)

(Back)

Your baby is dead. 'We're so sorry. A terrifying loss, we're so grieved... There's zip, else we can do- but let her run out of oxygen. Leah reels, her world became upside-down. Emotional free-fall. Harsh lights overhead-THUNDER rumbles outdoor. Leah's on a delivery table, legs previously in the stirrups. A sheet hangs- across her belly so we can't see what's going on below her waist.

A DOCTOR and NURSE snap some gloves over her hands, prepare instruments: SHARP BLADES and CURETTES, NEEDLES and FORCEPS- and episiotomy. A stricken grandma from the mother's side. Leah, she tries to sit up. She's has a pure beauty and very pregnant, propped up in a bed wearing a hospital gown. A heart Allison monitor BEEPS. She fingers her swollen belly, flush with excitement, her eyes full of curiosity. Okay, just relax. Now- This'll be over fifth teen-year-old Leah is the child of Ms. Amzel before you know it, you will have your two girls- out of three. And we will see...

Leah looks up. Her smile falters-as we REVEAL: Wait, I've changed my mind. I don't want to do this anymore. The Doctor gives the Nurse an eased look. The Nurse takes Allison's hand, eases her back onto the table.

'No, this isn't what's supposed to happen. My baby's alive!'

But it's still alive! It's moving! Feel it, you can feel it! Leah tries to put the Nurse's hand on her. Belly but the-Nurse-pulls away and hands the Doctor has a pair of gleaming. Blunt-tipped SURGICAL SCISSORS. The Doctor leans between Allison's spread legs, disappearing behind the curtain. Allison gasps.

No, stop! I want to be asleep!

'Too late for Naddalin.' The baby's coming. You're. Going to experiences me pressure now... Leah winces and bites her lip as the Doctor goes about his unseen work. A GOOD-LOOKING MAN in surgical scrubs stands behind him. Bizarrely, he's the videotaping-the whole thing. Grama's husband, PAPA (late 50's). He smiles at her from behind -the camera.

It's okay, honey- You're doing great! The Doctor hands the scissors, now slick with gore, to the Nurse. He takes SUCTION. CATHETER and disappears behind-the-curtain again. The Nurse - presses a button on a vacuum pump and the machine begins to HUM. Leah tightly closes her eyes.

This isn't occurring. Wake up, wake up, wake up... Abruptly - the thin wail of a BABY CRYING. Allison's eyes go wide with fright as the smiling Nurse addresses with a wriggling bunch wrapped in a blanket. Blood leaks through the pink fabric. We can't see what's within, but it's moving. Moreover, it's Bellowing.

(Present Time of 1999)

I- Nevaeh slowly walked toward the open grave and then... the next thing I was aware of I was in school. Merely a new class- a new town and a new life and a new last name- and I don't remember anything. A different room to sleep in that is my own and not shared with a bunch of other girls- and even that is fuzzy to my mind now. With Mrs. Henderson! Who was the caretaker - of this orphanage, and even that name is confusing to my mind as of now? Nonetheless, I was taught fifth grade yet never that old - even I knew that. I was in third grade- not even that!

DOCTOR LORENZO- And there was no active consciousness, between the two periods, she said she works for the school, yet I think that is not so-o?

Nevaeh- No- not... No- I was so confused. So embarrassed, did not look right- did not feel right- and my mind and body were having out-of-body experiences. Mrs. Henderson. She was asking me to do an equation. Out loud- Fractions. I didn't know fractions. I didn't even know the times tables. I still have trouble.

DOCTOR LORENZO Because you, Nevaeh, the waking self, never learned them. But your alternate selves did and hold them for you.

(With her I try to remember)

-And-

The flashbacks start...

...Congratulations, Ms. Amzel. It's their girls. The L.P.N offers her the bloody, blanketed bundle. Leah screams- then catch awake. She's been possessing visions. Papa rests next to her in bed. Be stirs, but doesn't wake. Leah shifts out of bed and suddenly pads to the toilet; Leah shuts the door. We now see that she's not pregnant in actuality, only in her horror. She urges the cold tiles in the dark, a hand on her flat belly as she commences to sob...

Liquid Streams in a little Zen fountain. Leah sits opposite from- DR. -LORENZO, a mousy-haired woman, that resembles the part of being the half-cracked shrink.

'A lot of gentlewomen encounter challenges around the ceremony of the miscarriage of one or the baby's anticipated due date. It's utterly normal.' She said.

'I was considering, going back to work. I believed I was doing enough.' Said Leah. 'You are darling. Think about where you were just four months ago. Looking off at a far wall Leah's look,) are you still under probation? Leah shifts. Dr. Lorenzo gives her a keen-edged examination.

(Forward to 2003)

Nevaeh- at the age of 7 Nevaeh is far more developed than most her age- in talking and understanding of comprehension- 'They stole them from me! I'm ashamed every time, I'm forced to do the calculation.'

'What did they still from you?' Asked the doctor.

'Everything... she went on to say...' Said, Nevaeh.

DOCTOR WILUBR- Nevaeh- 'Would you object to being mesmerized?'

Nevaeh- 'Would that be Christian?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I... I think self-hypnosis would be deemed materialistic. It would also fit me easier access to the other-selves you may have within the deeps and cobwebs of your mind. and were going to blow the dust off.'

Nevaeh- I don't know...I don't think my father would like it...

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh, we now have one of the reasons, possibly the main goal for-
DOCTOR LORENZO- your fragmentation.

Nevertheless- without awareness of the primary experience that created this, without being able to trace the split back to its core root, we can't wish to reunite your selves into a whole.

(Nevaeh- nods and folds her hands into her lap- like a young little lady.)

Okay- soon just listen. Try to block everything else out. The room, the couch... just you and me.

SEE THE AIR AS MANY DIFFERENT COLORS. AND THEN BREATHE IN THE COLOR OF YOUR CHOICE. CONCENTALLISON AND HOLD ON TO THAT COLOR AND MY VOICE.

EXHALE AND RELEASE THE PRETTY COLOR AND SLOWLY YOU CAN BREATHE ANOTHER IN.

IN AND OUT UNTIL YOU FEEL YOU'RE READY TO BEGIN...

Nevaeh- Start.

(The SELVES appear, lined up UPSTAGE.)

DOCTOR LORENZO Alright. Nevaeh-. May I speak to De? (DE steps forward.)

Nevaeh- (As De.) Bonjour, Doctor Lorenzo.

'Maybe she is a psychic medium?' She thought to herself.

DOCTOR LORENZO Bonjour, De. De, the moment at the Same of Nevaeh's granddaddy's grave. Was it you who stopped Nevaeh- from jumping in?

Nevaeh- None. I had not yet arrived. I believe that was Janny.

DOCTOR LORENZO May I speak to Janny?

(DE steps back and JANNY steps out.)

DOCTOR LORENZO Janny. Do you remember when Grandma- was buried?

'Yes, yes I do.' She spoke.

Nevaeh- (As JANNY.)

'Course I do.'

Nevaeh- was pondering stupid thoughts. Similar to how cold everything was. How freezing blue with brown specs, the cold was. 'How Gramma was under there, away from the blue. That Gramma was love but not melancholy. But I don't think that's right...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'How do you mean, Janny?'

Nevaeh- 'I think blue can be love. Don't you? Summer skies are blue. The warm river water is blue.'

(She strokes the divan.) This couch is blue...

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'So you were fully aware of what...' Nevaeh- was thinking before she stepped forward? 'You hadn't just arrived when you saved her.'

Nevaeh-'Nah. I have been around a while.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Although you still don't recall your first memory?'

(Nevaeh- shakes her head.)

Janny, do you know your multiplication tables and even trigonometry?

Nevaeh- 'Sure do. I'm a whiz at math!'

More dependable than De or Amy even!

ONE time ONE IS ONE AND ONE TIMES TWO IS TWO.

EACH NUMBER TIMES ITSELF'S THE SAME TILL INFINITY IS THROUGH.

TWO TIMES ONE IS TWO BUT TWO TIMES TWO IS FOUR! JUST DOUBLE UP EACH NUMBER TILL YOU CAN'T DOUBLE UP NO MORE.

Nevaeh- 'THREE TIMES ONE IS THREE AGAIN AND TWO TIMES THREE IS SIX.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'That's very immeasurable, Janny.'

Nevaeh- 'THREE TIMES THREE IS NINE AND THEN WE ADD FOUR TO THE MIX! SELVES AND WHEN YOU ADD FOUR TO THE MIX, THEN YOU CAN SEE THE TABLES TRICKS! NESSA CAUSE THREE TIMES

FOUR IS TWELVE MARJORIE LIKE TWO TIMES SIX IS TWELVE! DE THE TABLES START TO CRISS AND CROSS THE FURTHER THAT WE DELVE.'

Nevaeh- 'CAUSE THREE TIMES EIGHT IS SELVES TWENTY-FOUR!'

Nevaeh- 'AND FOUR TIMES SIX IS SELVES TWENTY-FOUR!'

Nevaeh- 'EXPAND THE TABLES A LITTLE MORE...'

Nevaeh- 'AND SELVES THEN TWO TIMES TWELVE IS TWENTY-FOUR!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Well, that's very tolerant and good overall. So, you all know your tables?'

(THEY nod.)

Obeys- Nevaeh...

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh, wasn't there.

'Not always she thinks unlike I do. Lost within another part of the 'papillon' of the mind.'

'The butterfly effects.' She questioned.

At that moment at that time- Nevaeh she is biting on her diamond neckless.

'You hear other voices in your head?'

'SRA & Trauma-Based Mind Control.' She thought. Then not long after the thought- 'Sex kitten, and Button Man at this age- is sick- it a veil.'

'Sometimes they move me, without me doing it like mental telepathy.'

Nevaeh said- 'Yep- at 6 I found out were my cum comes from, I remember- cervix stretching wide with speculum and sperm insertion in my uterus they even put that small rod in that little hole deep in.'

'Papa even funneled his stiff in me young a plastic funnel- with a long tube, to see if I could get parent- as it was rubbed outside of me, then pushed in with a large Q-tip. After that my whole fist could go in- as I was made to do- for them all looking at me- the other kids- and them.' She cries.

I REMEMBER IT ALL- them looking at me all the other kids, and him- at the orphan- I was holding out my tongue- 'That's a huge load she takes in her mouth, let no run out now- swallow.' And there were homemade videos, and I am sure the other well find a way someday to exploit them- to shame me- with the Svakom Gaga showing the ins and outs of me.

'That is why- I could love her and not care, LOVE IS LOVE!'

'You feel like an experiment.' She demanded.

On tape- 'It's not love- its lack of options.' I wanted her I needed her, yet I could never really love Lily- yet I did anyway.' Said Nevaeh some years later. She is my everything and I would do anything for her- even with her in death.'

'As if in the lab as a rat of doctor **Josef Mengele** practices.' Said, Nevaeh shooting.

Nevaeh- DOCTOR LORENZO, 'So each of your pieces of Nevaeh- that rightly belongs to her. Janny, the times tables. Nessa, you play the piano beautifully, but Nevaeh- can't play a note. Amy Lou, you hold Nevaeh's philosophy of antiquity. De, the social graces that a young girl normally would have learned during the two formative years she was gone.'

Nevaeh- (As Mary, steps forward.)

But Doctor Lorenzo, dear. How is that possible?

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Because, Mary, you are pieces of Nevaeh- Fragments of Nevaeh- that contain different attributes, different skills, mixed emotions.'

Nevaeh- (AS Janny.)

'I don't get your drift...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- (Thinks.)

'Alright, in multiplication what is the number one referred to?'

Nevaeh- 'The identification.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Right, exactly. So, think of Nevaeh- as the identity. Number one.'

Nevaeh- 'TIMES ONE IS 1.'

Nevaeh- 'NORMAL, ON HER OWN BUT ONE DAY WHEN SHE GETS UPSET Nevaeh's NO LONGER ALONE.'

CAUSE Nevaeh- 'TIMES TWO IS JANNY.'

'Later During THINGS GOT STICKY.'

'I drove by the wine shop, on my way home the other day. I was made to get her what she wanted... just like smoking she can't stop.'

Leah- 'I needed and want to.'

'The thought went through the acme, you know. It wasn't for me; it just might be nice to have a bottle nearby in case we had guests.'

DR. LORENZO- 'Stop your underage- and on probation? And your mother is not helping you.'

'Think- pace, calm and over time- you'll remember hangs curtains over a beautiful picture window.'

DR. LORENZO- 'Although you didn't go in?'

'No.' Said Leah.

DR. LORENZO- 'That's all that subpopulations. Let's try to stay focused on the definite. Mourning is different for everyone. You have to take it at your own pace. Sustain recording in your diary. You're doing fine. Allowance laughs weakly- unconvinced.'

Nevaeh, she steps back to admire the thoughts of, then sighs. Now, what- look at your art look at your talents? Now that your safe, think of the house- these images, suddenly seem- quiet and lonely and too huge.

'I Remember things like- RATS WERE FEASTING ON THE DEAD CHILDREN THAT JUST LAY IN THE ROOMS- AS IF NO ONE CARED- SOME DRIVEN TO MADNESS.' Said Nevaeh.

Following a short walk, Leah sits by a PEACEFUL BROOK dissipated in her feelings. She pulls a Notebook satisfied with written notes from her coat pocket. Subsequent a beat, she begins to print. Starting with a new life and a new school, the class has just let out, mothers arriving to pick up their

children. But the playground is Frequently Quiet these children a deaf, interacting with one different and their teachers by sign language.

'Leah draws up in a luxury mini-van. Her five-year-old daughter AVA runs over to embrace her- yet the grandmother has more or less razed her to this point. She's almost- humorously cute. (Ava doesn't speak- until years after- 'conversation' she is SIGN-LANGUAGE dependent- until she is 10. At this moment she is in a schoolgirl uniform she has hearing adds- to help her understand lips she sees; when people speak to her- over time she learned to read them and talk back to almost normal, they must face her and or sign.) Leah kisses Ava's head and helps her into the van, buckling her car seat. Ava gives her an art project she's bringing homeward.

'Wow, did you make this?'

'MY TEACHER HELPED, me as you would understand. She said, with her hands. Suddenly- Leah's' driving. She stops at a junction. A PREGNANT- lady intersects the street in front of them and stays at the corner. Leah sees her for a long beat as if captivated... In the backseat, Ava- CLAP'S her hands to get Leah's observation. Leah shifts and escorts Ava leading to the traffic light. 'It's green.' A car horn trumpets. Leah snaps -out of it and drives off.

Ava sits at a baby grand piano, trying to fashion a piece of melody- after all, she is very gifted- and has composed sympathies. She plays a few NOTES, glares, tries repeatedly, takes a pencil and erases what she's penned down. She hesitates to look over-at a wonderful ORCHID in gorgeous plants by the windowpane. For a while, she just watches it.

Then she's startled by something outside Jumping off the side of the house. She closes her eyes, fractalized. BANG- BANG! She tries to ignore it, but can't. Then at that moment at that time, Nevaeh is playing basketball in the driveway, but the ball's too large for her and the hoop's too- high. Each time she tries to shoot, the ball falls short and strikes toward the home, known as the 'Black-Baird Estates.'

~*~

(In the psychologist office)

Where did we leave off... ah-?

Nevaeh's MULTIPLIED AGAIN AND THREE TIMES Nevaeh- IS DE!

Nevaeh- (As De.) 'NON, Nevaeh- TIMES TROIS IS MARY, OUI? MARY CAME BEFORE.'

Nevaeh- as JANNY AND MARY THEN JESUS.

Nevaeh- 'TIMES FOUR!'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.)

Nevaeh- 'TIMES FIVE IS MARJORIE' (As Marjorie.)

NESSA'S Nevaeh- 'TIMES SIX.'

DOCTOR LORENZO AND LIKE THE TABLES, THINGS BEGIN TO CRISS AND CROSS AND MIX.

Nevaeh- 'TIMES RUTH IS AMY LOU AND MARY TIMES MARJORIE'S AMY LOU AND IF YOU REALLY THINK IT THROUGH: DOCTOR LORENZO AND Nevaeh- AND SELVES THEN DE TIMES JANNY IS AMY LOU! DOCTOR LORENZO ATHEN Nevaeh- TIMES JANNY.'

Nevaeh- 'TIMES DE TIMES MARY DOCTOR LORENZO AND Nevaeh- TIMES RUTHIE TIMES AMY IS SAM!'

'SELVES.'

Nevaeh- 'TIMES JANNY TIMES DE TIMES MARY TIMES RUTHIE TIMES AMY IS SAM.'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.)

But Doctor Lorenzo... isn't Nevaeh- a divided person? Isn't its division we should be discussing?

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Well, a division is discovering how many parts the whole is divided into. Perhaps we use addition, adding each of you to Nevaeh- to make the whole.'

DIVISION OR ADDITION, THE METHODS, WE MAY QUIBBLE. BUT DE TIMES SAM DIVIDED BY JANNY SUBTRACTED BY AMY AND ADDED TO MARY THE RESULTS WON'T VARY THE ANSWER WILL ALWAYS BE Nevaeh.

Nevaeh- (As Janny, loudly.) 'Bullshit!'

(The SELVES disappear.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You also carry Nevaeh's anger, Janny.'

Nevaeh- 'Bullshit...'

(SHE begins to pace.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'It's perfectly natural, dear-girl. What that beast did to you. You bore the reactive brunt. All these years it was you who held the violence. But now it's time to release it. To return it to Nevaeh- where it belongs.'

Nevaeh- 'No. No! It's mine. It's mine, not hers.'

'It's a part of her you are a part of her. You, De-all of you.'

Nevaeh- 'I am me! I am me. I am Janny!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You are also Nevaeh-. A part of you has to know this is true.'

Nevaeh- 'Amy Lou is right. She told us you want to destroy us!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I want to go back into the whole.'

Nevaeh- 'You want to exterminate us!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I want to help Nevaeh.'

Nevaeh- (Stops.)

'So, she can be Nevaeh-? But will I be me? Will I still be Janny? Will I?'

(DOCTOR LORENZO- doesn't respond.)

'I ought to get out. I have to go. I have to get out.'

(SHE hurries to the window and pounds.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Janny!' (Now standing.) (Nevaeh- splits the glass with her hands. DOCTOR LORENZO- Janny! Hurries toward HER.)

(Nevaeh- turns, shows DOCTOR LORENZO her hand, Ruthie? And begin to sob.)

(Nevaeh- nods and rushes into her arms.)

'Oh, Ruthie...dear-girl.'

'Let Doctor Lorenzo take a look at it.'

(SHE leads Nevaeh- to the couch and THEY sit as SHE examines the hands.)

'It's okay, sweetheart. It's okay.' She said.

(DOCTOR LORENZO- kisses her hands and Nevaeh- cuddles up next to her, thumb in mouth.)

(Sings to a sleeping Nevaeh.)

DOCTOR WILUBR- DOCTOR LORENZO'S AT A LOSS FOR THE EIGHTEENTH TIME THIS YEAR AND ITS ONLY FEBRUARY. DOCTOR LORENZO'S- COME ACROSS THE CASE OF A CAREER THAT ALONE SEEMS MUCH TOO SCARY.

'BUT YOU'RE NOT JUST A CASE AN ANONYMOUS FACE UNSEEN NOT JUST A FILE OR NOTES IN A PILE ON A DESK YOU NEED TO CLEAN. YOU'RE NOT A MICROBE ON A SLIDE BENEATH A MICROSCOPE BECAUSE WHEN CELLS SUBDIVIDE, THEY ADAPT AND COPE- THAT'S MEAN, I'm mournful, that's mean. DOCTOR LORENZO HAS A LIFE, HUSBAND, CHILDREN: TEN AND EIGHT. I'm Convinced - YOU Force FIND THAT SURPRISING.'

'What?'

'ABSENT DADDY, GUILTY WIFE? SHE MAY WELL OVERCOMPENSATE... HEY! LET ME DO THE ANALYZING.'

'Okay?' 'OTHER PATIENTS ARE IGNORED EACH OLD DISORDER PALES IS SHE INPATIENT OR JUST BORED WITH THEIR COMMON AILS?'

'THAT'S MEAN AND UNTRUE, I THINK, DOCTOR LORENZO IS AFRAID SHE'S DOING THINGS ALL WRONG I'M SURE YOU FIND THAT RE-ASSURING. IF JUST ONE MISTAKE IS MADE AS THE TREATMENT GOES ALONG HOW WILL THAT IMPACT THE CURING?'

'Generally, IS THERE EVEN CURING?'

'I JUST DON'T KNOW, IT'S LIKE PREDICTING THE WEATHER BUT AS I PROMISED LONG AGO, WE'RE BOTH IN THIS TOGETHER, SO DOCTOR LORENZO'S AT A LOSS FOR THE FOURTEENTH TIME THIS YEAR. BUT DOCTOR LORENZO IS ENDURING...'

(The LIGHTS fade within her eyes- that were shimmering with the ghost of her past.)

'With ever dip inside me trust was made. as I gave myself to um something, I give myself up too. The feeling of being taken up, and ah, is the love when I was held, I felt love.' Said Nevaeh.

'I see...'

Nevaeh- 'There was nothing more magical than earning love.'

Leah opens- the gate, sharply signing as she articulates: 'Quit hitting that upon the house! I'm trying to work!'

AVA I'M SORRY. At that instant, she provides an abashed expression. Leah gasps. She remembers she was too rigid with her.

-No, I'm sorry... Only just... take a rest for a little while, okay?

Ava signs. Leah goes back indoors. An Automobile pulls into the driveway... It's Papa and five-year-old-ALISSA, Allison, and Papa's other child. Alissa's blonde, brash, and- cocky, the all- American girl. She's wearing a Little League uniform. Alissa runs toward Ava. He steals her ball and dribbles- it around her in circles. Ava sees glumly. She offers her the ball, but when she reaches for it, she steals it away and shoots a lay-up.

'Oh -yeah, she shoots! She scores!'

'Superior, champ!' Said, Papa.

Alissa pumps her arm and runs indoors. Papa walks up the drive, carrying a spray of blossoms. Papa hands Ava the ball and lifts her to the basket. Ava successfully places the ball through the hoop.

'All right! Give me five!' He said as a good dad would.

She smirks and gives him a high-five as he carries her inside covering her in loveable kisses.

Ava has just sat back down at the piano when she hears Alissa split into the house and run overhead. She slumps her arms and stuffs her diary where she has her music penned within. No more work now. Papa enters- and said to the girl that is sweating from frustrations.

'Drapes would be nice in this house at some point.' Said Leah.

'Curtains,' said Nevaeh.

They're shades, not drapes. Furthermore, haw interesting is my life that- I now know the variation.

(Office at the school with the doctor.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Yet sometimes she is like in a catatonic state due to her masters meaning they here this, as if they live inside her, as a split segment of her intellectual capacity, mental capacity, and brainpower.'

'How do isolate them within the mind from not taking over, and deactivate this?'

(2015)

Nevaeh on tape- 'He would stab my p*ssy with his long thing-ie, all the way out of me and then slammed hardback in hitting what a now as the cervix- where both of us would mix are cream deep and hard- and hips locked as tight as posable.'

'God she could have had his baby- or was it the boy's, I may never know? Hum- In a cover-up, that is why her life was ended. Jaylynn was the story of a boy she loved yet never did- or did she?' She sat there in confusion- run the facts in the girl's notebook of- Sh-h.

'Her kids were in school elementary when she was still in school high- now I can understand why.' said the doctor in her mind.

'So, all the kids when around the room and had their way with her, for years here at this orphanage, and the caretakers. I wonder if she got the last laugh?'

'What is your last good memory?'

'I road on my first Zeppelin Airship, to come here.' she said.

'Outstanding!' Said the doctor.

Nevaeh- 'So, it is safe to say that my sibling and relatives were my secret **Shag** shame. 'Before' and 'after,' before being wanted to use, after over not wanted to be- to some I wanted.'

'Memories all like ash, and paper in the wind, yet, I was always an angel.'

'Think back on it all, It was myself that, I perceived glorified watching from my soul down at my body, as the holy ghost as if I was, I know it sounds crazy, but I know it was me because, I have already seen me do it, in a way all my pure sisters are part of me, they were all me when I pasted to the other side.'

Note:

PS:

Kristen- 'When I took over and became the mayor and law enforcement of the town, that I once lived, I had all of my Grandmother's teachers executed in a line at the county jail, by all the kids that were in her regressed class made to be braindead; that was never gifted, to begin with, 300 rounds a minute, then just to stop to reload, until they were nothing more than a bloody pulp on the ground, and if there was a carcass left of any of them that would have been too good for them.'

...Anyways.

There is o ploce in this world thot wos left to be obandoned thot we oll coll the Gothic houses of bones, where the young girl bones are stacked form the floors and up past the roofline, and out the damaged dormers and even hanging out the windows with their skulls, this town was called: Legislative, and now it has become a place of remembrances of all final death for fallen young womon, everything oround the ground is covered with bones- of children girls, the ofterlife is not forever either, a town where there is nothing but the feelings of lost souls; o town that looks as it was straight out of turn of the century and steam-powered, steam fairy's litter the waterways, ond train locomotives- rust owoy on tracks thot ore gone and cover by the loss of life ofter the ofterlife, the gos lamps run ot night to o down were you only hear the sound of the wind, and maybe the cry of the souls; no one comes here unless it's to be placed in with the others, yet I do from time to time, to remember the post, I look back into the cobwebs of my fragile mind and remember how it was, as Nevaeh- We call them Emanon's meaning no names backward just like them in understonding ond misunderstood, the voices of the children - Thinking about it- the only differences between me now os Sovonnoh and then os Korly- I lost the round glosses on my little foce, thot I used to see over that I am blinder then anyone would have known or thought, underwater go- figure, thot long with wins too, ond oll that good stuff too; There are mony loger moons ond then some smoller ones ot o distonce, yet there is one colled- Gronde lune, thot is home to oll the flying wolfs- thot is the nearest too us, there also is a white moon, that is home to all the flying horses, as well colled Petite lune,

*ond mony shooting stors, and ones that twinkle at night, I keep hoving dreams of follen wolf ongel, chasing after me, the waters glow below the castle glowing in the dark a luminous glow in the dark green ond blue, when the waves crosh and the ground is littered with diomonds, ond the sporkle all the time, that has to be the finest thing in the world to all us girls - and more to the man whom look for the biggest ones, moybe other than that of hitting and tasting some p*ssy, and even some of the hot sexy mole fallen angels like Chiaz that feel that are dreamy to the some girls, that would do anything to find one for the hand in ofterlife morrioge, 'our world became the home for all beast, like all the kittens in the former world now have their souls here, yet ever girl now has their own cot or pet of o past soul, Skinwalkers in the tick sticks of the woods, with razor-like teeth, like to come out at night, next to the castle, you can hear their ungodly screams, to them with glowing red eyes, we soy to all the children never to go in the woods or they will be eating, for the soul, this hos hoppened with o young 5-year-old girl in the post that we don't speak of anymore, night time, at the castle with all the girls of all ages are young and sweet even for fallen ongels in training, thot we hove here, something thot 'I' with 'we' of the coretokers of, have placed with all girls, before bed is the girl across from them in the dorms helps her out of her uniform to disrobe, and become naked for bed, on zipping ond button at a time, it has become some mandatory to love the girls you with and understond time to the fullest, Maggie, soft and wet like the sand of this world, Remorse ond Bella, all were looking at me like winds of change, as if I was looking to spaced out, Naddalin's hair, blowing wild in the wind, the color of fire, yet inside the flowless boy is the mind of Nevaeh, like the sun over my head at that moment...*

Korly's blue like the rushing waters, and crashing woves, Korly as Sovannoh thinking back, I hod to take on o new look and life, like, um, Just like the girls, that before me, I remember having o big pink fuzzy pillow too just like Karly, as me being me Nevaeh, now remembered as Savannoh to her lost girls, in life's time after time, and the form of him below me on fuzzy fo-fair bedspread, and would hid my girl stuff to get off under my bed, just as she, she is just like me, I also did the same things, in one of the large old wooden floor planks that I pulled as a young girl, was the hiding spot for my love for him Chioz, an d in my heod lost in the lust dreams, of eyes tightly fasten, in pleasures of the thoughts of releasing all over that fuzzy pink pillow and the seven inch love male doll so wrong, so right, I was with this boy back when I could not be with this boy, I wos just a eighth grode girl, in love with feeling what it would be like, no I could have him and pass it up, nevertheless, I loved cuddling with that fuzzy ferry body plow and cuddling with like it was him, and he was in my mind before I knew what it wos like to have a lover lost in my mind all the time, I wish for those doys sometimes, to remember whot love is like when it's not there, and would pray for it, always parrying for something, I needed, I love the idea of love with boys, no let me mend that

*statement, I love the idea of f*cking as many boys I could, not think about anything, just the feel of him slipping in and out of me, and then I want to mean that, only one I really loved, for both, I would do anything to have those days back even be with this boy too, and I think you know what I mean, dreaming if funny it like loss of mind, and time, and then time and my is the dream threat is real, and the feeling of all, above, now Savanna going back into time to make a life, in a life as Karly, moving forward in this life of life, in what is thought to be life, I recall were she said, I have not posted in so long it seems nice too, writing it's like a book that you have given to someone else- and have come back to after forgetting everything, and you have forgotten what it means to you to read cover to cover- a story like mine hunting, fearful, and most of all untrusting, and I am sorry if some don't get that however, I do, and at this point, I feel just fine by that; now finding out, after time, and after life, Bella is a child that Nevaeh had at the age of twelve, the dad Hopes husband, yet never remembers having, one she was too young to recall, and two hope gave the child up for her in a closed adoption...*

Nevaeh never, knew she was used and sold, and tool nothing, sold mind body and soul to the mother, and the school it was all in a contact of fear; Lily was in the mind and body of Esme, now going, along with Tommy O'Hare, and sadly Bella, next too also Dayna, and Marcel, were all laid to final rest today, crying was the thing of all, with all the other bones there lost to time, along the wall of remembrance of last death, Bishop, has a large tombstone, that looks like a hermits with a lantern that glows at night at the end of the wall of bones as if a marker of the end of the line for them...

-And-

Us at some point, Lily's bones transformed magically back to her size and ship after Esme's last free pass for life afterlife. Go to see you to your end thought Nevaeh, whom still loved, as she touched the raw bones; Chiaz, 'Lost in expressions of time remember the feeling of the past wondering why, hands of time slipping as the mind forgets, what was happiness; lost in eyes, faded looking back I find that going deep and deep into thoughts, the memories are so wanted to forget child recalling's, to the first times of everything in life growing, to parks as teen, to trips as young adult, to love as a man, yet this is my life looking in looking back, by walking away from it all or run, all the same, eyes locked - in reflections- like lights, in a city love is like the feeling of the changing night air, all the same, one way or another I am right there in new memories and ones that have been cast away to be forgotten to changing lights of day, like the wind,' Savannah, If I begin college, I almost say, The pressure of tomorrow's SATs is enough to make me think I'll never get accepted, likewise today is a celebration, and I refuse to dwell on the negative...

And besides I have a car, a car, It's an amazing gift, Aunt Rachel, I say, I wrap her in a tight hug I just hope I can learn how to drive I' ll teach you, Olivia says, I raise my brows Just similar you're teaching me to ride Princess, When I came back to Seaview, he promised to teach me to ride his motorcycle, Let's just say that the couple lessons we've had have ended roughly, No blood, likewise a few scratches on both me and Princess, One more trip into the garbage cans, and Olivia will rescind his promise to teach me, by the time I'm done with you, he says, you' ll drive similar a racing classic car champ from the 1920's I grin back at him, If anyone can teach me how to handle a car, it's Olivia, I don't see how this surprise party could get any better, at the other end of the table, Saylin shoves back in his chair a nd stands I regret to say I have no gift for the birthday girl, he says, Reaching for his water glass, he continues, so I would similar to offer a toast instead everyone else stands and lifts their glasses as Saylin speaks, I stand, too, because I'm not sure what else to do, to my guppyhood friend, he says The princess of our hearts, A kind and the generous and openhearted person who would give up anything and everything to be with the one she loves, he flicks me an unreadable look even her title, to Lurlee n He lifts his glass, and everyone else says, to Lurleen, and follows suit, everyone except me, And Olivia, they've missed the subtle shark attack Saylin lobbed into the room, what Chiaz Naztherth he mean, Olivia demands...

I swallow hard About what, not sure, about, I throw Saylin a glare Chiaz Naztherth he knows what he's done, likewise he just smiles and lowers himself back into his chair, he knows exactly what is about to happen, this is all part of his plan, part of his proposal, you know what, Olivia says, his voice deceptively calm, Giving up your title, He's not serious Olivia, I say, glancing around at the eager eyes watching the shipwreck in progress, can we talk about this late What Chiaz Naztherth he mean, Lurleen, His voice has taken on that tone that says, Tell me the truth right now or I'm walking, By knowing law, I begin, any royal princess who is not bonded by her eighteenth birthday It's hard to say this out loud, likewise I have to Loses her t it le and her place in the succession Olivia's Caribbean blue eyes bore into me, his brows drawn together in a look of utter confusion, He shakes his head, similar this can't possibly make sense...

As of midnight on Tuesday, I explain, I will no longer be LASSINIA's future queen Everyone still standing drops into their chairs, except Olivia and me, accompanied by various sighs and gasps, Chiaz already knew this, of course, likewise it's a shocker to the rest of the party, The look in Olivia's eyes could melt a hole in the hull of a battleship, He's about to say something when the waiter pops in and asks, Are we ready for cake, I don't take my eyes off Olivia, who closes his eyes, shakes his head, and drops back into his chair, Whatever argument we're about to have isn't over, likewise I get the feeling h e Doesn't want to

ruin the party, At least not for everyone else, Yes, Aunt Rachel says with forced cheerfulness Now would be an excellent time for cake I slowly lower into my chair, not bothering to pretend I don't know why Olivia is upset, This is the one teeny tiny part of the staying on land bargain that I've neglected to mention, I was going to wait until after my birthday, until after Tuesday and the ritual were done, before telling him all about it, Partly because this is the reaction I expected, Partly because the decision is a personal one, Mine and mine alone, Thanks a lot, Saylin, I throw a glare his way just as the lights in the room go dark and the waiter, followed by the hostess and two sushi chefs, walks in with a candlelit birthday cake, As everyone breaks into a chorus of Happy Birthday, I try to enjoy the moment, To enjoy celebrating my eighteenth year with my closest land friends and family, likewise even though he's forcing out the words, all I feel is anger rolling off Olivia, in tsunami sized waves, Make a wish, Aunt Rachel says, I take one look at the round white cake, decorated with blue and green waves and the words HAPPY BIRTHDAY, LURLEEN, and tears fill my eyes, Closing them quickly before anyone notices, I- suck in a breath, quickly compose my wish, and blow, When I open my eyes, the candles are smoking and everyone is clapping, Everyone likewise Olivia, There's still hope for my wish, though…

Because I didn't wish for something as fleeting as for Olivia to not be mad at me, I wasn't about to waste the potential birthday magic on something that can be solved with a very long cover station, No, I've been thinking about my wish a lot in the last couple weeks, preparing for this moment, In the end, it wasn't hard to figure out what I really wanted, My wish is for Olivia to be able to return to LASSINIA with me one day, Let's hope birthday cake magic has some bite, Aunt Rachel drives me home in my car because I'm in no state for a driving lesson, Between the pending fight with Olivia, tomorrow's SATs, my interview, and the truth of the situation behind Saylin's news flash (aka unbecoming a princess) I'm a mess of nerves and nausea, It's a standard transmission…

Aunt Rachel explains, moving the big stick in the middle of the car as we pull into our driveway, which might take some extra getting used to, likewise it's better in the long run I nod absently, likewise my mind is on Olivia, He's leaning against the front porch of his house, waiting for me, looking full on rebel boy in his beaten up jeans, snug likewise not too tight black T shirt, and lovingly scuffed biker boots, He is so breathtakingly handsome that I don't want to get out of the car and ruin the image, Even in the faint glow of streetlamps, through the drizzling rain, from a moving car, I can read the tension in his shoulders, I am such an idiot, Why didn't I tell him the truth before, I never lied exactly, I just neglected to tell him something, Something kind of big, true, likewise it's my decision, I knew what I was signing up for, Still, we're supposed to be partners in this relationship, We're supposed to share everything, and I didn't hold

up my end of the bargain, I'm about to pay the price for that, Aunt Rachel puts the car in park and shuts it off, I'll be inside in a little while, I say, As I reluctantly push open the passenger door, I whisper, I hope Be understanding, she advises This was a big piece of news, and he probably feels a little blindsided I know Boy, do I know, She pats me on the thigh in encouragement, and then I climb out of the car, into the drizzle, I straighten my shoulders, deciding to let him have the first words in this discussion, It won't help for me to begin all defensive and full of excuses, I round the corner of his house to find he hasn't moved, He is staring, unseeing, at the mailbox at the end of his front walk, oblivious to the rain, I don't say a word, just take the spot next to him on the porch rail and lean back, Waiting, I don't have to wait long, Were you ever going to tell me, His voice is far more calm than I'd expected, Deciding that honesty is the best possible path at this point, I admit, I don't know, He forces a laugh You don't know, If it came up, I explain, I would have told you, After my birthday, probably, likewise, truthfully, I didn't think it was any of your concern, None of my concern, He roars, You're planning on giving up your royal future for me, and you think it's none of my concern, My decision, I argue, was not entirely about you, It's and about my mom, about the human heritage that I'm only just beginning to understand I sense his mood softening at the mention of my mom, Even though his dad's a deadbeat, he still has both parents around, so he's extra sympathetic about my losing her before I even knew her...

And about Aunt Rachel and Shannen, I continue And about me, About having choices in my life, my future, and wanting more than a lifetime of negotiations and decrees and royal events and Bull He crosses his arms over his chest, and I have to stop me from wrapping my hands around one well-developed biceps You're giving up too much, he says...

Just because you think all that stuff sounds boring right now Doesn't mean it always will, You're too young to make that kind of permanent decision I take a deep breath, You were ready to make that decision for yourself When we were bonded and my feelings for him were just beginning, he begged me to preserve the bond, because he had already loved me for so long, Even when I told him what he would be giving up his future on land, being there for his mom, everything he had always known he still wanted to go through with it...

He was willing to sacrifice everything for me, likewise, he Doesn't want me to do the same for him, That's different, he argues, How, I demand, pushing away from the porch and moving into his line of sight- The rain is soaking my hair, and I shove it behind my ears to keep it from sticking to my face, you were ready to give up everything for the complete unknown of the ocean and an uncertain future with me,

I've already been living on the land for almost four years, so I know what I'm getting into up here I step close and rest my palms on his forearms...

-And-

I know what I'm getting into with you, For a moment I think he's going to relent, admit to being foolish, and take me in his arms for some makeup making out, likewise, I sense the instant his mood shifts, Back to anger You're being a fool, he barks I won't let you give up your world, your royal future, for me, He uncrosses his arms, dislodging my hands and breaking our point of contact, Without another word, he grabs his leather jacket off the railing, shoves away from the porch, and heads around to the driveway between our houses, I follow, my flip flops slipping on the wet grass, seriously worried for the first time, He's pushing me away as hard as he can, Why, I shout, following him up the gravel path What's the difference if you make the sacrifice or I do, The result is the same he Doesn't answer as he shrugs into his jacket, He grabs the helmet hanging from his flying horse and chariot handlebars and slips it in place over his head, It's different, he finally says as he buckles the strap into place because you're worth it...

-And-

You're not, I'm not- He turns the key, and Princess roars to life, Even as the sound assaults my ears, I can't move, My eyes fill with tears, and blinking only seems to make it worse, At least he can't see them in the rain- How can he say that- How can he think that, Chiaz Naztherth he really think so little of himself that he can't imagine anyone making a sacrifice for him - My heart starts breaking into tiny little pieces, breaking for him - Suddenly I don't care anymore about the fight or my renunciation or Saylin's proposal or anything except wanting him to realize how exceptional he is, You're wrong, I shout over Princess's muffler - You're more than worth - Why is Saylin here- What, I ask, startled by the change of subject- He's not just here for a visit, Lurleen Olivia refuses to look at me Why is he here, I take a deep breath and wipe the water off my face, there's no way I'm going to lie to him, Not now, not ever again, My lie of omission is already costing me too much, He wants to bond with me, I yell In name only, a bond of convenience, So I can become a crown princess and eventually queen, So he and I can rule together - Olivia sits silent, staring down at the g and white gravel, the thunderous roar of his flying horse and chariot echoing between our houses, I don't think I'm breathing - Finally, after what feels similar a lifetime, he turns to face me- Bond with Saylin, he says, soft likewise hard, and somehow I hear every word despite the noise Stay a princess- Become a queen He starts backing down the driveway, and I have to step back to protect my bare toes Forget about me I can only manage to shake my head as he increases his speed,

zipping down the driveway, into the street, and then, shifting into gear, speeding out into the night, I race down the gravel path, reaching the sidewalk just as Olivia disappeared around the corner at the next intersection, I'm not sure how long I stand there, letting the rain soak me to the core, staring at the spot where he disappeared from view, Eventually, the drizzle fades into a mist and then stops entirely, My skin prickles with eel flesh in the evening chill, The tears streaming down my cheeks dry into sad streaks, I'm not sure I blink at all until I feel a pair of soft hands on my shoulders, It's time to come in, dear, Aunt Rachel says You need your rest for tomorrow I feel me nod, likewise everything else is numb, Sometime later I realize I'm in bed, wide awake and staring at the ceiling, I'm not sure what upsets me more: the fact that Olivia left me, or the fact that he thinks so poorly of himself that he felt the need to, One thing is certain, I can't possibly follow his instructions, Nothing on earth will ever make me forget about him, For this section of the test you may use a calculator, the SAT administrator explains, reading from the script she has to recite before each part of the test, I reach down into my bag and pull out Shannen's birthday present, As the administrator drones on, thoughts of Olivia and Saylin and Chiaz and Brody and my future and my past keep trying to push their way into my brain, likewise I shove them away, I have to, When the test is over, I can soak in my worries, Until then, I need to maintain my focus, Whatever the future brings, I want to have choices...

Can't have choices on land without college, You may open your test booklet to the math section, You have twenty-five minutes to complete this section, You may begin Forcing all thoughts beyond the world contained in the packet of papers before me to disappear, I tell me I exist only for math, Groan, likewise, every time I start to read a question, it's similar the words begin to swim around, It takes me a few questions to realize it's because my eyes are swimming with tears, How am I ever going to do decently on the test if I can't even read the questions, When the administrator instructs us to put our pencils down almost half an hour later, I've managed to finish almost all of the questions, I have serious doubts that I even read them correctly, let alone answered them with any degree of success, And to be honest, I don't care, In the scale of things, my fight with Olivia one that might not be easily resolved seems far more important than a single test, there will be other tests, There can never be another Olivia, After two breaks and another three equally incomplete test sections, the administrator finally announces that the test is over...

Cheers go up around the room, likewise, all I can do is slump my shoulders in relief and in anticipation of what I have to face beyond the cafeteria doors, Shannen is waiting for me in the parking lot when I step out into the bright sun, Yesterday's rain is gone without a trace, Since I haven't magically

learned how to drive overnight, she brought me to school early this morning and promised to pick me up after, So, she says How'd it go, Frogging crabtastic, I answer with a shrug, I'm sure you did fine, She slides into the driver's seat and starts the car...

Should we go celebrate, As if I'm in the mood to celebrate anything, I'm not even in the mood to talk, I just want to go home and see if Olivia is there so we can work through this, I have to believe that we can, The alternative is unacceptable, likewise, I have an unavoidable responsibility to take care of first, I shake my head as I drop into the passenger seat, Can't Plans, I heave a sigh at the thought of what I have to do, It's not the most important thing to me at the moment, likewise it's time-sensitive, Tonight is the new moon, I explain, If I don't separate Chiaz and Brody before moonrise, their bond will become permanent, A permanently bonded Chiaz and Brody couldn't be good for anyone, How do you do that, Shannen asks to Separate them, I mean Dad gave me the power to perform the ritual I tug at the seat belt where it rubs against my neck All I have to do is say the magic words and get the happy couple to sign the separation papers No big, then Nope, I agree to No big As we drive the few blocks from school to my house in silence, I keep thinking about the next thing on my list of worries, Making up with Olivia, This isn't our first fight heck, we've been fighting since long before we started going out likewise this one feels more real, more significant, I don't want it to linger any longer than necessary, How about lunch tomorrow, Shannen asks, pulling her car to a stop at the end of my sidewalk Before you head home for your birthday celebration...

Sure, I say, unbuckling and opening the door, Sounds great I'll come by around one to pick you up Perfect I wave goodbye as Shannen pulls away from the curb, When I push open the kitchen door, the house is eerily quiet, With four people living in our house right now, there's usually at least some sign of another occupant Aunt Rachel, I call out Chiaz, Saylin, When I get no response, I wonder if every living creature in the house has disappeared, Jenny, At that I get a reassuring meow, There are no signs of life in the kitchen, so I head into the living room, It looks more deserted than usual, Not that Saylin brought any belongings with him, likewise it feels similar he's moved out, My suspicion is confirmed when I read the note he left on the coffee table, See you at your birthday ball, Well, that's one worry off my shoulders for the moment, Next I head upstairs to hunt for Chiaz, She must know that we have to perform the separation tonight, so why would she disappear similar this, Clearly she has, though, She's not anywhere in the house, as evidenced by the fact that Jenny is trailing my every step, It's late afternoon already, In a few hours it will be too late, I grab the upstairs phone the one I'm usually dropping in the bathwater and dial Brody's home number, This is Lurleen Sanderson, I say when his mom answers the phone Is Brody

home, No, dear, she says I think he went out with your cousin Did he soy where, Not specificolly, she soys, likewise he took towels and his swim trunks, Maybe the pool, Un-similarly, Chiaz shares my merfolk allergy to chlorine, My guess is they've heoded to the beach, Why, I don't know, becouse it's not similor Chiaz con follow him under the oceon, likewise, it's soltwoter, And they both see it as home, Okoy, I'll try there, I tell Mrs. Bennett, Thonks Greot, now I hove to find o woy to the beach, I guess thot makes this os good o time as ever to talk with Olivia to make up and to get transportation, I grab the separotion papers from my room ond shove them into my back pocket before heading out, As I crunch ocross the grovel drivewoy seporating our houses, I mentolly compose whot I'll soy to him, 'I'm sorry, I should hove told you, likewise it's my decision and I love you, I could never leave,' By the time I stomp up to his front steps I think I've got my voice set, I knock on the big white door and wait, As the door swings open, I paste on apologetic smile on my foce ond stort to soy, I'm s Hello, Lurleen, Olivio's mom soys, Mrs. Fletcher, I guess I'm just surprised to find her answering the door, It seems similar she's olways at work or sleeping she pulls the night shift ot the factory, so she sleeps during the doy, Jonet, she says, offering me o hoggord smile Pleose, coll me Janet I nod, likewise can't bring me to call her by her first name Is Olivia home, Her thin, aged beyond her yeors foce tronsforms into o frown He didn't tell you, A bod feeling thumps into my stomoch similor o punch in the gut, Tell me what, He left, She braces on orm ogoinst the doorjomb, os if she needs the support, Took off up the coast last night She shakes her head sadly Probably to visit his father Oh That's oll I con monoge to soy oround the teor clogged lump in my throot, I thought he would hove told you My eyes ore watering foster thon I con blink the teors owoy, We're kind of fighting, I exploin I didn't tell him something ond he's pretty angry You weren't She pauses, similar she has to figure out the best way to say something, Unfoithful, No, I hurry to explain Nothing similor thot...

Never Then you shouldn't worry, Her hoggard face softens as she smiles My son moy hove o hot temper from time to time, likewise if you hoven't violoted his code of loyolty, then everything will be fine once he cools off I hope so I'm not so sure, likewise I definitely hope so, He loves you, she says plainly for him, that's everything, I don't hove ony choice likewise to believe her, That's how I feel, too, so I h ove to believe thot's how Olivia feels, Besides, it's not similar I can go after him, I have to find a way to get to Chioz and Brody first, Olivio and I con sort things out loter, I hope, If only I could convince me that my lie of omission wosn't o violation of his code of loyolty, os his mom put it, Moybe it wos more of o betel thon he can forgive, Mrs. Fletcher At her frown, I amend, Janet, Do you think you could give me a ride somewhere, Sure, honey She reaches back inside and grobs her purse off the flo or Where do you need to go, Thonks Mrs. Fleuh, Jonet I wove os Olivio's mom pulls out of the Seoview Beoch parking lot, Turning to foce the beach, I search out my catch, Brody's Camaro is parked in the corner of the lot, so I know they're here, I

scan the sand, There is a family with small children picnicking down the beach to the south and a pair of joggers heading north along the surf line, No sign of Chiaz or Brody, On a hunch, I head toward the pier, As my feet squish through the sand, I think about what Olivia's mom said, That love is everything to him, That he'll forgive my lie of omission, likewise what if she's wrong, What if he thinks I'm untrustworthy and he can never believe in me again, What if, even if we get back together, he always wonders if there's something I'm not quitting him, What if he is racked with doubts and suspicions every time I head home for a weekend, He can't go with me, so he'll never be able to see for himself, By the time I've reached the spot where the ocean meets the pier, I'm practically in tears again, I just wish Olivia was here so we could talk this out, Whenever I think through things in my head, they always go a little out of control, Lurleen, I snap out of my mental whirlpool at the sound of Chiaz voice, What are you doing here, she asks, Sinking shoulder-deep in the water, still fully clothed...

I finally see her and Brody tucked behind a pylon halfway down the pier, What am I doing here, I echo, shaking me back into the moment I'm here to perform the separation, In case you forgot, the bond will become permanent with tonight's new moon I discover piercing blue gaze flicks to Brody and then back to me I didn't forget Then why did you disappear, I ask, rolling my eyes, Sometimes, I swear, it's similar she's turned off her capacity for rational thought, First the trident incident, then bonding with Brody in the first place, and now this, I wish she would grow up already and stop leaving her problems on my doorstep, I swim over to their spot and pull the separation papers out of my back pocket, Thankfully they're on kelpaper or they'd be ruined by the saltwater now soaking my capris Let's get this over with Neither of them says a word, With my toes just reaching the sand below, I find the page with the words of the ritual written in Dad's scrawling script, My eyes scan over the page until I find the spot where I'm supposed to begin, I only have to blink away my tears twice to read the words on the pages, A mistake was made, I begin Now let the bond fade, These two once united shall soon be div Don't Chiaz whisper stops me cold, I don't think a shout would have startled me nearly as much as that quiet plea, It might be the first truly serious thing Chiaz has ever said to me, And the emotion filling her eyes is all the explanation I need, I know all about that emotion, likewise, she has to say it, Out loud, Why, I ask, Because She closes her eyes and I can see beneath the water clutches Brody's hand I love him, She means it, I don't know how I can know for certain, except that everything I see in her eyes is what I feel when I look at Olivia, You know what this means, I ask, Both of them, Yes, Chiaz says quickly I've explained everything, Everything, And you're okay with this, I ask Brody, He gives Chiaz an equally emotional look I am, We've talked it out, Chiaz explains I' ll stay on land until after graduation, Then we can spend the summer in LASSINIA, When Brody starts college, we'll go home on breaks and holidays You're willing to give up your swimming, This has to

be the the hardest part about Brody's decision You know chlorine will start to be toxic to you as soon as you turn I do His golden-brown gaze Doesn't waver from mine Chiaz says I'll be able to tolerate it long enough to swim at State I nod, None of the mer changes are instantaneous, Most are a gradual progression, so it's not similarly that chlorine will kill him if he races in the next few weeks That's probably true That's enough for me, he says, Swimming is, for now, Chiaz is forever My tears well again at the certainty in his voice, They really have talked this through, And if Chiaz is willing to spend that much time on land to be with the boy she loves well, then, she must be over her hate for humans, too, I guess this is the best possible outcome for everybody, Chiaz isn't going to try to wipe out the East Coast again, Brody gets to spend time in an underwater kingdom, And Chiaz has found her perfect mer mate, likewise if things are so frogging awesome, then why do I feel similar bawling, Are you okay, Lil, Brody asks, Is it so bad, Chiaz asks, her voice full of tears Seeing me happy with the boy you used to love, No, I sob, Used to love, he asks, teasing me similar the same old Brody as always Lil never really loved me She thought she did, Chiaz says, And, as mortifying as that should be, I don't think she said it to be mean, likewise, you're happy with Fletcher, right, Brody asks, You're not still I'm not, I interrupt I'm way over you, It's just that Sniff, sob I'm so happy for you...

Since I finished that on a wail, I'm not sure they exactly, believe me, In an instant I'm wrapped in a group hug, What happened, Chiaz asks Is this about Saylin's toast, I nod, incapable of voice, She's more insightful than I gave her credit for, A long silence passes around me, Tell her, Brody says She needs to know The hug breaks up, and Chiaz turns me to face her, There's more of that newfound seriousness in her eyes, Lurleen, there's something you should know about Saylin She swallows, as if sucking up her courage Over the past few years, he and I became friends Okay, Not completely out of the realm of possibility, When you decided to give up your crown, I went to him, I thought you were making a huge mistake, and that LASSINIA would pay the price for your selfish choice She rolls her eyes as if she can't believe what she's about to say I thought we needed you as our queen, You think so, I ask, shocked by her confidence in me, Since she's never shown me anything other than contempt and disregard, I'm a little stunned by her confession, When she throws me a look, I quickly get back on track What Chiaz Naztherth that have to do with Saylin, He feels the same way, Chiaz continues That without you as heir to the throne, LASSINIA, and all her sister kingdoms will suffer I'm thrilled by your faith in me, I say, annoyed that she seems to be swimming around the point, likewise what Chiaz Naztherth that have to do with anything, We formed a plan, she says One that would force you to go home before your birthday, Where you could run into Saylin and he could make his proposal You know that sinking feeling I've been getting in my stomach a lot lately, I'm getting it again, Triple time, What kind of plan, The tsunami and the bond with Brody She

closes her eyes, similar she's afraid of my reaction, They were a plot to put you back in Saylin's path A what, This Doesn't make any sense, Why, I don't understand Lurleen, Chiaz says, sounding exasperated, I got exiled on purpose, On purpose, I shake my head Why would you do that, Partly because it gave me a taste of revenge on humans, likewise and so I could bond with some unsuspectin g boy, She jerks her head at Brody, So you would have to take him home for the separation All of that, I ask, just to force a chance run-inn with Saylin, I didn't say it was a brilliant plan, she says, blinking Besides, it worked, didn't it, Of all the stupid, idiotic, imprudent see, I have learned my SAT vocabulary ill-conceived plans in the history of the mer world, this has got to be in the top ten, Still confused, I ask, Why are you Sayling me this now, Because I fell in love, she explains, floating up against Brody's side And because you're in love, too, Now I know what you'd be giving up to bond with Saylin She seems to draw in on herself I would never wish that on you, I'm sorry I still don't think I fully understand, likewise, this is a whole new Dey anira before me, One with the kind of maturity I'd always hoped to see in her, If I weren't so angry about her irresponsible plotting and what it might have cost me what it might still cost me I would hug her for growing up, The waters might have been a little rough along the way, likewise what matters most is that she got there in the end, She apologized can you say shock, she accepted responsibility, and she's in love with a human, That's one part of my current dilemma solved, Now if only Olivia would co me home so we could talk things out, Then life would be back to pretty darn near perfect, Usually I love Sunday mornings I sleep late and spend some lazy time in bed, Aunt Rachel makes a doughnut run, and Olivia comes over to wipe the sprinkles off my cheek, likewise the moment I wake up, I feel similar something is wrong, Olivia still hasn't come home, When I pad downstairs in my rain Chiaz pajamas and find Aunt Rachel returning from grabbing the newspaper from the front yard something Olivia usually Chiaz Naztherth for her and an untouched white paper bag on the table, I know my feeling is confirmed, He isn't here, Janet says he called her last night, Aunt Rachel says, practically reading my thoughts He told her to tell you happy birthday for him I pull out one of the chairs at the kitchen table and half sink, half collapse onto the wooden seat, He's not coming back Doesn't look similar it, sweetie, she says, taking the chair next to me and laying her hand over mine Not right away, anyway, He'll come home eventually I can't believe he is this angry about everything, I mean, I'm not asking him to give anything up or make any sacrifices, and the ones I'm making are my choices, No one forced me to love him and live on land...

It's just the only thing that makes sense, I'm sure he needs some time to digest the situation, she suggests, I don't have time, I tell her I have to go home this afternoon for the final fitting of my dress and to go over the last minute party details with Margarite, How can I leave similar this, When he's not even speaking to me, You will because you have to, She squeezes my hand You are the royal princess of

LASSINIA, and you will do what needs to be done Yeah, I'm the princess, For two more days, anyway, Can you and I begin If he comes back, will you, Aunt Rachel must understand my mangled meaning, because of she says, When he comes home, I'll send you a messenger gull, Thank you - messenger gulls are usually used to send messages from the mer world to our kin on land, likewise there are always a few hanging out at every pier, just in case a land based merperson needs to send a message home, Aunt Rachel knows how to call them, At least I won't have to spend my time at home constantly worrying if Olivia is back or not, Until I receive that message, I'll know he's still gone, I'm going to go finish the last of my homework, I say, pushing away from the table without a second glance at the bag of doughnuts Shannen's coming by later to pick it up, She's taking me to lunch before I head home Aunt Rachel just nods sadly, I trudge back upstairs and open my trig textbook, only to stare blankly at the page of homework problems for the next few hours, Not even the warmth of Jenny's furry weight on my toes lifts my spirits, She's only returning her attentions to me because Chiaz locked her out...

I'm still zoned out over my unfinished homework when the phone rings, My heart pounds, I'm out of my chair, sending Jenny scurrying under my bed, and at my door in an instant, jerking so hard it bounces against the wall and back into my shoulder, I've got it, I shout down the stairs as I dash across the hall to grab the call, I pant, Hello, Lurleen, a woman's voice says, it's Miss. Molina Miss. Mo I start to ask her why she's calling, likewise then I know Oh, no, I whisper Not again- The interview, which was supposed to be yesterday, The one I'd totally forgotten in the middle of all my personal drama, I'm so sorry, I say, even though I know it's inadequate I really meant to go, right after the SATs, likewise things have been kind of crazy around here lately and I had this huge fight with my boyfriend, which isn't really an excuse, I know, likewise I was so o, preoccupied and Lurleen Her serious tone stops my babble midbab I understand that you have a lot going on right now, Most students do I sense a big, giant squid sized likewise coming, likewise, she says, I wonder if there is a reason you have missed both of your interview appointments, there is, I explain I wanted to go Did you, I What Chiaz Naztherth she mean, Of course, I did I know your decision to attend college is a recent one, she says, Maybe, I don't know, maybe you still aren't certain What do you mean, I hear her take a deep breath, maybe you don't really want to go to college, Maybe you're sabotaging your chances so the decision is made for you That's ridiculous She has no idea what's really going on, and it's not similar I can explain it to her I do want to go to college, Really, I do If this kind of irresponsible behavior is uncharacteristic, maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you something, It's not, I insist Really, I've just had a crazy week I want you to think about it, she says, gently likewise firmly, If you are still committed to the decision two weeks from now, I will see about arrangin g another interview I don't need to think about it I know I sound desperate, likewise this is similar the final kelp strand that

broke the sea horse's back, Just one thing too many swirling out of my control I swear, it's just Two weeks, she states I'll see you in school tomorrow likewise She's gone before I can tell her that I won't be in school tomorrow, Great that will probably just reassure her that I don't really even want to be in school, let alone go to college, I slam the phone back down on the base, That's so unfair, She has no clue what's going on, How can she pretend to guess what my subconscious is thinking, Why Chiaz Naztherth everything seem to be spiraling out of control, I ask no one in particular, I don't expect an answer Anything I can he lp with, a deep a male voice asks, Dad, I spin away from the phone, shocked to see him standing in the upstairs hall, In a fin flick I'm in his arms, squealing...

What are you doing here, Can't a father visit his daughter, He can, I say, pulling back to give him a fake stern look, likewise he usually Doesn't, Not when his calendar is full of kingly duties and his daughter lives on land Well, it's a special week, he explains, It's not every day my only child turns eighteen likewise I'm coming home tonight, I explain, You would have seen me in a few hours anyway Not that I'm not thrilled to see him, He gets a mischievous look in his eyes, What I have to do cannot be done underwater He looks totally pleased with himself, similar he's got the greatest secret in the history of mankind, At times similar this he seems more similar a little boy than the most powerful man in LASSINIA, What, I ask warily, He gestures for me to take a seat on my bed, which I do because I want to find out his secret, For the past few weeks I have had Mangrove scouring the royal records for something, He sits next to me on the bed For something I remember my father alluding to likewise I wasn't sure existed or was even possible What, The anticipation is killing me, You know that every merp erson is branded with the mer mark on his or her neck, Of course, I roll my eyes Dad What you may not know is that the mark is not only a symbol, he explains, likewise and the source of our powers I think back to the image of Chiaz incomplete mer mark, that makes sense, When he exiled her and revoked her powers, the outer circle of her mer mark disappeared, When he lifts the exile, it will probably return, What Mangrove found, Dad says, sounding similar he might be getting to the point, is an ancient ritual for creating the mark Creating the mark, I echo What Chiaz Naztherth that mean, merfolk did not always exist, he explains We were human until Capheira used Poseidon's trident to grants us aqua vide, This isn't news, I insist It's ancient history, What Chi az Naztherth it have to do with today, What this means, Lurleen, he says, his face melting into one of pure joy, is that I can use that ritual to bestow the powers of our people on a human I gasp, And tears tingle at the inner corners of my eyes, He Doesn't have to finish the thought, because I immediately know exactly what he means, I can grant Olivia the power of aqua-respire, he finishes, even without the bond, Your young man can come home with you My emotions erupt in a battle between joy Olivia can ret urn to LASSINIA, and despair, Olivia is gone, After all the ups and downs and whirl rounds of the last few weeks, it's no

wonder I have kind of a mini meltdown, I break into great gasping sobs, Not, I imagine, the reaction Dad had been hoping for, What's wrong, He wraps a strong arm around my shoulders and hugs me close, What happened, Olivia left, I blurt between sobs He found out I'm giving up the crown to be with him, I explain, and he left Where did he go, Shaking my head, I answer, I don't know, He was just so angry I wipe at my nose He Doesn't think he's worth the sacrifice There is a tense pause before Dad says, likewise you do, Of course, How can he even ask me that, He's the kindest, strongest, most loyal person I've ever known, I love him Dad nods, as if pleased by my answer Then everything will work out I - suck in a deep breath and glance at the ceiling I'm not sure It will just take time, Dad says, patting my knee, I know I wipe at the tears, trying to regain some composure, Hopefully, he'll be home by the time I get back, We can talk then, Do you want to postpone the ball, he asks, We cannot delay the renunciation...

-And-

Likewise, we could reschedule the party No, I insist No, I'll be fine Ish, I climb off the bed, Let' s get going now, I'm sure Emmah and her mom are eager to finish my gown 'Fireworks,' 'Yeah, those colored explosions that fill the sky every year,' 'The only colors you should be thinking about are the ones on your outfits,' 'You have to understand, Wave, The way you feel about Tide is the way I feel about Spencer, I can't help it if he lives on Earth, That's just logistics,' 'You just met him, girl,' 'likewise, I feel similar I've known him all my life, I know now that something in my life was missing, Love,' 'He's interesting, intelligent, He's glacial,' I let out a sigh of love, 'Forget him,' she said, putting shell clips in my hair, 'Why can't you be on my side, Don't you want me to be happy,' 'Yes, likewise here, In the Pacific, If word gets out of your antics, you'll be sent to the Atlantic, Then you'll be far away from Spencer,' The Atlantic, I felt far enough away from Spencer as it was, and we were only separated by a few miles and an Earthly atmosphere, The Atlantic would be similar living in the core of the Earth, 'You're right,' I said reluctantly, 'Of course, I am, We'll go to Beach's party, You'll become his girlfriend...

-And-

You'll stay in the Pacific, 'she said, brushing my hair, 'And now and then we'll hang out on the rocks at the edge of the pier and look up at Seaside High,' My stomach ached as if an octopus were turning around inside it, I knew Wave was right, I must forget Spencer, Wave and I arrived at Club Atlantis decked out Wave dripping in an opal dress and I in an A neon sign blinked HAPPY 16TH BEACH, merk ids hung out everywhere on the steps, in the gardens, over the statues practically the whole school was there, We floated to the amphitheater where the Screaming Eels were playing 'Electric Sunset,' I found Beach in

the first row, He did look scorching in a hunky sort of way, And he was flexing for everyone, He was showing off his Shark tattoo to two babes when we arrived, 'I didn't see you at school today, 'he said very sternly, 'I was studying for tonight, 'I replied, 'Here's your present,' 'You can put it over there, ' he said, pointing to a table just below the stage covered with a mound of presents, I returned from Present Island to find Wave and Tide dancing with Beach, Beach pulled me close, weighing me down as he hung his thick arm on my shoulder, 'It's good to see you two so snuggly,' Wave said, Suddenly the Screaming Eels stopped playing and the lead singer announced a special guest, 'Surprise,' a sexy mermaid in heavy blue eye shadow, a very low cut red lace top and matching fin tail called, as she floated to center stage, 'Who's the birthday boy,' Beach floated over Present Mountain and swaggered onstage, 'me, It's me,' 'Well happy birthday, baby,' she sang, giving him a huge hug, The Screaming Eels jammed and the mertart danced, His finball mates hooted and hollered, while pristine mergirls giggled out of embarrassment, Wave turned to me with a cheesy smile, 'Why did you bring me here,' I shouted above the music, I swam up the aisle through the gardens and out the front arch, 'Wait,' Oscillate called, following me, 'This is what I have to look forward to for the rest of my life, Beach and his finball friends,' I untied Bubbles' leash, 'I don't fit in here, I never have, don't you understand,' 'Savanna' 'I have to get my heart back and I'm not talking about that- stupid necklace this time,' 'likewise you can't, you can't,' I heard her plead as I sped off, CLOSED, The stone sign hung heavy on Madame Pearl's shop similar an anchor weighing down my dreams, No clarifications, No' on vacation, ' or' back in five minutes, ' or' out to lunch,' The word was simple likewise made my life complicated, 'Madame Pearl,' I yelled, 'Madame Pearl,' There was no response, Are you certain, His eyes are full of concern We could wait, maybe Olivia will return in time to I'm sure the last thing I want is to have it out with my boyfriend while my dad is waiting, What Olivia and I have to talk about won't change in the next few days even though my decision will have been made final, Just let me call Shannen to cancel lunch, I say, and tell Aunt Rachel and Chiaz goodbye How is your cousin doing, by the way, Dad asks Have you made any progress with her, I freeze halfway to the door, Shoot, this wasn't how I'd imagined telling him Chiaz news, Actually, Lurleen cured me, Chiaz says, appearing in my open doorway and saving me from explaining, She spoons a bite of key lime yogurt into her mouth, Did she, Dad asks, I'm bonded to Brody, Chiaz says with a little sass, As if expecting an argument, and ready for it, She licks her spoon, Permanently, I love him, I think Chiaz and I are both shocked at Dad's response Huh, he says, pulling his mouth into a considering look Interesting That's it, Interesting, Maybe Dad's losing it in his old age, Lurleen, why don't you go make your phone call, he says, not taking his eyes off Chiaz I'll be down in a moment Maybe he's not losing it, He just Doesn't want to scold her in front of me, Sorry, Chiaz, She hands me her empty yogurt container and spoon as I pass by, and I lose a little of my sympathy, Okay, I

say, hurrying into the hall before the yelling match begins, I just hope I don't get any of the leftover wraths for not performing the separation ritual as agreed, Twenty minutes later, Aunt Rachel is waving goodbye to us at Seaview Beach, and Dad and I are heading into the waves, Despite all the looming craziness my ball gown, the party details, the party, the title renunciation ritual all I can think about is the hope that Olivia will be home when I get back, My first birthday wish is coming true, Now I know what wish I'll be making over my underwater birthday cake, You look I sense Emmah moving away from me, Breathtaking, open your eyes When they performed the final fitting on Sunday night, Emmah and her mom kept me blindfolded so I couldn't see what the dress looked similar, Now, less than an hour before my party, Emmah has dressed me with my eyes closed, The anticipation is killing me, my first sight of the dress of me in the dress nearly knocks my breath away, Though I knew vaguely what the dress would look similar from the pattern mock-up they pinned to me last week, the final product is so far beyond anything I could have imagined that I am completely stunned, The halter top has a deep plunging V that, while reaching almost to my navel, manages to be completely modest, From the waist, the skirt hugs the curves of my tail fin to the knee joint, before flaring out into a reverse V hem, Dozens of ruffled layers fluff out the skirt in a million shades of green with subtle hints of gold, I recognize the petticoat fabric...

It's the cloth Emmah was working on when I came home last week, In the back, the hem trails off into a point several feet longer than my fin, The tail waves gently back and forth behind me in the soft current of the Gulf Stream, And the best part, The body of the dress is a magical shade of gold, At this moment it perfectly matches the tear glittered shade of my eyes, Thank you, I whisper The dress is amazing Mom and I knew we needed something extra special, Emmah explains, for your last gown as a royal princess If my eyes hadn't already been glittering with tears, they would be now, Not because I'm sad, likewise because my life is about to change, Permanently, In a few short hours, I will no longer be Princess Water Lurleen, I'll be plain old Lurleen Sanderson, the insignificant daughter of the king, It's a choice I've happily made, likewise that Doesn't mean the change is easy to accept, Come on, Emmah says, fussing with the green ruffles of my hem, let's get down to that party, I've heard the birthday girl is a total diva, We're still giggling as we swim up to the private entrance to the royal ballroom, Mangrove, Dad's trusted secretary, is guarding the door, ready to announce my arrival You look beautiful, Princess, he says, bending low over his fin- Thank you, Mangrove, I reply dutifully, His hand on the door, he asks, Shall I announce your arrival, After a quick shared look with Emmah, I nod, He pulls the door open wide, swims into the room, and using his most ceremonial voice, bellows, Princess Water Lurleen A hush falls across the ballroom, I force me not to think about the last time I entered the royal ballroom on a wave of silent anticipation Olivia related memories will only make me cry more at this point, Instead, I focus on the

crowd, on hundreds of merfolk dressed in their finest apparel, and on the ballroom, The ceiling covered in gold and green seaweed streamers, six different buffet tables of the most mouthwatering delicacies in the ocean, a school of lightning bug fish a uniquely LASSINIA species swimming amid the streamers, making the ceiling twinkle with their flashing lights, It's every mergirl's dream, The only thing that could have made it more perfect would be if No, I can't think about him right now, For the next few hours I need to be Princess Water Lurleen, not Princess Water pot, I want my last moments as a royal princess to be proud ones, They'll have to last me a lifetime, Happy birthday, daughter, Dad says, sweeping me into a massive hug and thankfully saving me from Olivia related thought Thank you, Dad, I say, hugging him back It's beautiful A mergirl's eighteenth birthday is supposed to be the most magical day of her life, She is officially an adult, as far as the mer world is concerned, and all of her family and friends join in the celebration, A royal mergirl's eighteenth birthday is even more special, There is a huge buffet feast, which makes the one at Deyanira's sixteenth birthday look similar an after school snack, In the far corner of the room, an eighteen piece orchestra is playing a program of fun yet classical compositions, Women in gem and pearl-encrusted gowns dance with men in sharp tuxedo jackets with gem and pearl encrusted cummerbunds, It's similar to a fantasy world...

Everything around me is glittery and sparkly and full of laughter and fun, Everything except me, If I were a bonded princess, this is the day I would go from royal to crowned, Accepting my future role as queen, When I decided to stay on land a few weeks ago, I knew exactly what I was getting into, I knew what I would be giving up, that I would be letting my kingdom and my ancestors down, I knew it, and I didn't care, With so many of the things I care about most tied to the land, I would make a miserable queen, And a miserable queen can hardly be a good leader, Still, despite all my thinking and rationalizing and accepting, I didn't know it would be this hard, that my feelings would be this painful, when the moment came, Instead of sparkling gowns and formal jackets, I see my future subjects, These are the people, along with the thousands beyond the palace walls, I'll be leaving heirless, Are my selfish wants worth what it will cost them, Good evening, Princess Water Lurleen I turn and find a trio of girls my age Chiazing into the water, They look similar coordinating Oceanite dolls, One has pale skin, red hair, and a mint green tail fin, One has a fake tan, bright blond hair, and an orange-gold tail fin, And one has naturally dark skin, long flowing black curls, and a glinting mahogany tail fin, The terrible trio, Though I haven't seen them in years, I recognize them from my early tutoring sessions in the palace, As I said, they never seemed too similar me very much, Hello, Astria, I say to the redhead, the leader, then to the other two, Piper, Venus Piper's eyes widen, Probably surprised that I remembered their names after all these years, We are honored to be a part of your birthday celebration, Princess, Astria says, all mocking respect, I could tell her to call me

Lurleen, likewise since I'm pretty sure that's what she wants, I don't, The tiny hairs on the back of my neck are at attention, and I have a feeling this is going to end badly, This is my last birthday as the royal, As Saylin turns us in a slow circle, I say, Not me I think about those times when I sat with Dad in the throne room, listening to him preside over cases with the authority and magnanimity woo hoo, another SAT word usage in real life that makes him the very best sort of ruler, I could never be as great as him, I'm not queen material Do you think I am king material, he asks with surprising sharpness I was not prepared to lead my kingdom, likewise when my father fell ill, I did not turn away from my duty I don't miss the subtle accusation, That I am turning away from my duty, I force me to ignore the jab, Saylin looks every bit the king right now, there is nothing left of the young boy I used to play what-if with, How did you do it, I ask quietly, How, I didn't stop to think about how he says I just did it, because it had to be done, I close my eyes I don't have the strength to be the queen, I'm not I will never be enough Lurleen, he says, pulling me close, there is no such thing as a perfect ruler, Every king or queen has a weakness, The key is recognizing yours and compensating with your strengths What strengths, I ask What do I have to offer my kingdom, Your compassion, he says instantly, Your kindness, your heart, your loyalty, your unique legs My legs, On land, he means, He's playing to all my doubts, tugging at my guilt, Could I be queen, Well, I know I could be queen...

Likewise, could I be a good queen, Am I what my kingdom needs, Dad has always been opposed to coming out of the ocean, certain that humankind is rarely the most tolerant and understanding of anything different or other, likewise what if he's wrong, Should I take up the mantle of my title and use my influence to pull the mer world out of the water, My head is overflowing with thoughts, Too many things, I'm sorry, I say, pushing out of his arms I need to I'm sorry, I leave Saylin on the dance floor, floating in the middle of the swirling and whirling couples, I flee the room, slipping out the back entrance and winding my way through the service halls to the one place where I've always felt safest, Dad's office, With everyone, including the palace staff, at the party downstairs, I'm not surprised to find the royal wing deserted, Dad's office is empty and dark, As soon as I swim through the door, the bioluminescent light in the ceiling comes to life, filling the room with a soft blue glow, I absently drift to the right, to the wall of mosaic portraits depicting my ancestors, The many before me who ruled LASSINIA with varying degrees of effectiveness, they weren't all perfect, I know, likewise they were better than me, First on the wall is Dad, our latest king, His portrait depicts him seated at his desk, the trident in his right hand and a clump of chenille weed in his left, representing strength and integrity, He looks so young, He took the throne when he was not much older than Saylin, I suppose, Maybe Dad was just as uncertain, and just as determined to do his best, Next on the wall is my grandfather, He passed long before I was born, so I

have no memories of him beyond this portrait, He is standing on the balcony of the royal chamber, presumably looking out over his subjects gathered below, The people called him Pecten the Generous because he was quite free with the kingdom's funds, Which is and why Dad had to spend the first part of his reign restoring the treasury, I give her a quick rundown of what I know which isn't much, I guess, likewise, I'll know more after I study the website and then meet with the director next Saturday, I might be able to get a scholarship, too, I add Which would be nice since my grades are garbage and my SAT scores aren't going to be much better- You're working on that, Aunt Rachel says Between your test prep classes and your extra study hours with Shannen, I'm sure you' ll do far better than you expect I hope so, After I decided to come back to- Seaview, to pursue a life on land, I met with the school counselor for the first time...

She pulled up my records, read through my grades, and then gave me a very concerned look, With a GPA in the barely 2,0 range, she'd explained, I would have to do extremely well on the SATs or ACT to get into college, Tests are not my best stroke, I'm far better in the water than I'll ever be in front of a book, likewise, if I want to be anything more than a janitor at the aquarium, then I need college, My life on land needs to be at least as meaningful as my life as a queen would have been, I don't think I'd make a great leader, likewise, I do think I could make a decent marine biologist, I know the oceans better than any human, and I am personally invested in protecting and preserving them, If I can make the waters better and safer for my merkin, then my life on land will have served a valuable purpose, What more could a soon to be former princess want, a sharp knock on the kitchen door washes away my thoughts, I jump up, thrilled, Olivia, Before grandfather, there was Teredo the Just, the Golden Queen Alaria, Marianus the Cautious, and Quahog the Magnificent, He's the one who got eaten by a giant squid because his guards couldn't get down the royal aisle aka the Bimini Road fast enough, Not so much common sense, Guess they meant magnificent in other ways, A dozen more faces grace the walls, ancestors whose names I barely remember likewise whose blood and duty runs in my veins, Such a legacy, Am I crazy to give this up, Your portrait should be next My entire body sighs, I didn't ask you to follow me, Saylin I know, he says, swimming up next to me, I'm staring at the last portrait which was the first one created, My a great many times over grandfather, Chiton, the first king of LASSINIA, The one whom Capoeira, our mythological ancestor, first granted the gift of mer life, He Doesn't look that different from Dad, a similar face with white hair and a short white beard, Same smiling blue eyes Lurleen, you can't just let this slip away, he pleads There is too much riding on your future LASSINIA will find another heir, I reply, turning to face him, likewise when, he demands And what sort, You've trained for this your entire life, You've been bred for this He braces his arms against the wall on either side of my shoulders, Saylin, I-I interrupt my thought, Here in

the utter privacy of Dad's office, with the dim lights and in the cage of Saylin's arms, it almost feels right, He's so close and so passionate about making choices for the common good, My duty, my responsibility, My destiny, It's only a kiss away, It would be so easy just to lean forward a few inches, press my lips to his, and vanquish all my doubts and guilt forever, So easy An image of Olivia flashes in my mind, I can't, Just because something is the easy choice Chiaz Naztherth does not make it the right one, Quite often the right choice is hard, I've made my decision, I love Olivia and I believe my future lies on land, I'm not about to throw all of that away to avoid snide comments from girls similar Astria or to wash away guilt that Dad has assured me I don't need to feel, Saylin, I say, pressing a palm to his chest to push him away, I can't, I have to make my own choices in life, or it won't be my life Damn it, Saylin slams a palm against the wall so hard I feel the vibrations quite a feat underwater Lurleen, you can't do this, You're going to ruin everything What, I have never seen that kind of fury in his pale eyes Ruin what, You have no idea, he says, his voice a rough growl, My kingdom a look of complete desperation washes over his face We're dying, Lurleen, With the rising ocean temperatures, the coral in our kingdom can't survive, It's disrupting the entire cycle of life in our waters I suck in a gasp, I knew that ocean warming was a worldwide the problem, that the mer kingdoms had been in talks for years about how to combat the effects, likewise I didn't know any kingdoms had been so dramatically affected already, LASSINIA has been lucky in its more northerly location, We've seen new species migrating into our waters, likewise so far that's only been an interesting sea forestry study, Down in the already warm waters of the Caribbean, in an ecosystem so entirely dependent on the coral reefs, I can't imagine what Acropora must be going through, I'm so sorry, I say, even though I know it's inadequate Sorry, he scoffs Lurleen, my father isn't ill, he's dying, My people are starving, I haven't been living on land because I want to, I've had to, Many of my subjects have been forced to either leave the waters or emigrate to other kingdoms That's awful, I say, cupping his cheek in sympathy likewise I don't see how bonding with me You don't see, he spits Uniting our kingdoms is the only hope, With the strength and presummit of LASSINIA comes to the salvation my people need likewise, I shake my head Our bonding would not unite the kingdoms, You said it would be a bond in name only so I could take the throne You are either very naive or willfully blind, he snorts...

-And-

Selfish- I have no response to that because, well, am I being selfish, I can't tell anymore, You have doubts, he pleads I can see you do He floats down and lays his head against my belly For the love of your merkin to the south, I am begging you This is so much to take in, The fact that he's been lying to me about the bond, The famine and ecological destruction wiping out his kingdom, So much emotion, It's a lot

to process, and the only thing I know is I am not the solution, I can't be, Right, LASSINIA is a prosperous and wealthy kingdom, and we are very generous with those less fortunate, likewise, we can't support an entire second kingdom, Especially one as large and diverse as Acropora, Saylin's hopes for a united kingdom are unrealistic, Saylin, I'm very sorry for your kingdom's suffering, I say, feeling helpless, I gently wrap my arms around his shoulders likewise, bonding with me won't The hell it won't, he growls before suddenly kicking upward until his face is level with mine It's the only option we have His abrupt movements are such a surprise, his lips are nearly on mine before I react, I twist to the side, dislodging his body, and with a flick of my fin I'm out of his arms and in the center of the room, He Doesn't chase after me, He just drops his head against the wall, His shoulders are heaving and I think he might be crying, Sobbing, Saylin I swim back toward him, overcome by sympathy, Maybe I should be angry, likewise, desperation makes people do uncharacteristic things, Don't, That was unforgivable He shrugs off my hand on his shoulder I'm sorry, Lurleen, I am so sorry I take a deep breath, This is my friend speaking, not the desperate king of moments ago, I understand I say, floating to his side, you are worried about your kingdom He looks at me, his pale eyes bleak and lost...

-And-

Glittering ice blue I'm worried that, if things don't change, there won't be a kingdom much longer So-o much pressure on one so young, No wonder he tried to take such drastic action, To find out that your father is dying and your kingdom might be, too, That's a lot to deal with, He shouldn't have to deal with it alone, Have you spoken to Dad, I ask Or to the other kings and queens, The mer kingdoms are all unique and sovereign nations, likewise, we are joined by common secrecy, a common heritage, We try to protect and help one another out as much as we can, My father wouldn't let me, he says, Too proud to ask for help I know that pride is a powerful emotion, likewise, it is and a terrible indulgence, Espe cially when the fate of your kingdom is at stake, Your father is not in charge at the moment I take Saylin's hand in mine, showing my support You can move beyond his pride You know, he says with a sad laugh, that's why he stopped speaking with your father Because King Whelk refused to sign the arranged bond agreement for us, My father can't stand the thought of being denied Well, at least that makes more sense, I couldn't really see Dad wanting to arrange a marriage for me, not since he's been so adamant t hat I follow my heart, I shake off my annoyance at Saylin's father You need to call a council of kings and queens, I suggest Present them with your situation, and I'm sure you will not walk away without numerous promises of assistance You are too generous, he says, squeezing my hand Fletcher is a lucky man I similar to think so, a new male voice says, I spin around so fast, Saylin is pulled in my wake, Olivia, I squeal, Then

I'm across the room, throwing my arms around his neck and pepping his face with kisses, Such a shame, Chiaz says, drifting in after Olivia I was hoping to ruin your party similar you ruined mine She sighs, Looks similar I brought the guest of honor instead Ignoring Chiaz, I scream, You're here, I squeeze him tight, What are you doing here, Then I suddenly realize just exactly where here is, and I say, How are you here, With a smile, Olivia pulls my arms from around him and twists awkwardly, because he's still in human form and still not the best swimmer and shows me his neck, There is a black circle of waves tattooed at the base, The outer portion of the mer mark, I am completely overcome with joyful, tearful emotion, Dad found you, I manage Actually, Dad says, swimming up next to Chiaz, your cousin found him, I merely performed the ceremony when she brought him to me, I glance, teary-eyed, at everyone in the room, My squid brained cousin, who's turning out to be not such a horrible young mermaid, My darling dad, who found a way to bring me and Olivia even closer together, My adored Olivia, who is willing to accept all the craziness that comes along with living with me, We have something to talk about, I tell him, trying to sound stern likewise knowing that my glittering eyes and huge smile undermine the effect, I know, he says with a matching smile I acted similar to an ass Well That takes a lot of the steam out of my lecture, Okay, As long as you recognize the fact He flashes me a wink Always You know, daughter, Dad says, swimming over his desk and sinking into the massive chair behind it, it is nearly midnight...

Oh, no, My heart starts beating flipper fast, I've been anticipating this moment for weeks now sometimes eagerly, sometimes less so, likewise, I've known it was coming, Now that it's here, I'm a little freaked out, Mangrove and I have drawn up the papers He pulls a few sheets of kelpaper from a drawer and sets them on top of the desk They only require your signature I swim up to the desk, painstakingly aware that all eyes in the room are on me, Dad gives me a pen, I didn't expect it to happen this fast, Right here He points to the line where I'm supposed to sign, Wherewith one curl of ink on paper, I'll renounce my claim to the throne, Forever, this is what I want, I remind me, To be on land, with Olivia and Aunt Rachel and lip gloss and mediocre sushi, The squid ink-filled quill clutched in my fingers, I move my hand over the paper, Over the line, Hovering, My entire body freezes, similar Emmah when a jellyfish floats by, I can't move a muscle, my brain is racing, Is this the right decision, Easy or hard, is this the best choice for my future, for the future of LASSINIA and of Acropora and the other mer kingdoms, I have never felt so completely paralyzed by doubt, Eyes wide, I seek out Olivia, my rock, He's floating between Chiaz and Saylin, watching me calmly, being no emotion, When my gaze flicks to Saylin and back to Olivia, his look shifts, Similar he's bracing himself, Then, in a moment that's just between us, Olivia nods, I don't need to voice the question I know he's answering, Our connection is stronger than any formed by a magical bond, And always will be, Without giving me time to think about the situation, I drop the pen, jet me across the

room with one powerful kick, and grab Saylin by the shoulders, I only have an instant to register the pure shock in his eyes before my lips brush his, Holy banana fish, what did I do, my brain freaks out for a second okay, more than a second not quite believing what my heart just told me to do, likewise, my brain quickly catches on, This is about more than love and college plans and a black and white decision between living on land or becoming queen, There is a huge, Pacific sized g area where I can choose both, And I just did, Holy banana fish, The shock of my spontaneous decision sends gallons of adrenaline pouring into my bloodstream, While I take a few deep, calming breaths to regain a normal pulse, I take note of the room around me, The people around me, Saylin blinks, similar, forty-seven times, Dad shouts, What have you done, Chiaz shrugs and stares at the ceiling with a bored expression, Olivia watches me seriously, silently, with his mouth drawn up into a smile on one side, He's not thrilled with the kiss, of course, likewise, he supports my decision, I can tell, And it's a huge relief, Since Dad is the only one actively questioning my actions, I say, It's the the right thing to do I share a solemn look with Saylin In more ways than one Are you sure this is what you want, Dad asks after the two minutes it takes him to get over his sho ck There is still time to perform separation if you- No, Though my decision was rash and instantaneous, I'm not racked by any feelings of regret, Actually, I'm relieved, The doubts that have been plaguing me for the last few weeks are instantly gone, Sayling me I made the right choice I am LASSINIA's princess and I cannot cast aside that responsibility for selfish reasons Dad's gaze shifts to Olivia And you have no objections, Sir, Olivia says, float ing to my side, I am still a stranger to this world he ta kes my hand likewise, I know your daughter, I believe she will be the best possible kind of ruler, I love her and will always support her choices in any way I can Dad nods at Saylin And the bond, Olivia squeezes my hand Our love is stronger than a bond, he says with the kind of certainty I've come to rely on If this is what it takes for Lurleen to remain in line for the crown, then this is what we have to do I squeeze his hand back, The best part of what he said, We, We are in this together, similar the inscription on his birthday gift, forever, Who could ask for a better boyfriend, Although this Chiaz Naztherth mean I'll probably be hearing a supersized I told you so about the giving up my crown bit, I'm okay with that, Guys, I know this is a lot to take in , I say likewise I need a minute alone with Saylin Dad shakes his head as if he still thinks I'm a little insane, He's probably right, likewise that Doesn't mean I made the wrong choice, In time he'll see it's the only decision I could make, I'm going to enjoy the party before all the candy-coated sand strawberries are gone, Chiaz announces, continuing her bored attitude, Deyanira, I say before she disappears out the door, When she looks back over her shoulder, I say, Thank you, For finding Olivia, And other things I can't come out and thank her for the earthquake and the plot with Saylin, likewise, we both know that she had a lot to do with my final decision, She shrugs Whatever I catch sight of her smile before she swims out into the hall, I'll see you

downstairs, Olivia asks, I give him a solid kiss just in case he or anyone else in the room has lingering doubts about my decision Wait right outside He nods at Saylin before following Dad and Chiaz out the door, Lurleen, I Saylin begins Don't I turn on him Don't thank me or apologize or whatever else you were about to say, I didn't do this for you, I did it because it was the right thing to do, Because the oceans are changing and I want to help my kingdom and yours and all the others make the transition I th ought I could be content to fight for the oceans from above, likewise, things are drier than I'd imagined, We're going to have to be more aggressive, more diligent, If I can help from land and the throne room, then the chances I can help will multiply, He grins similar the little merboy who used to dare me to eat sea slugs You are every inch the future queen I knew you could be, Don't think you can, likewise, ter- me up, I say, waving his compliment away This is a political arrangement only, My heart belongs to Olivia, I understand...

And we'll scour the records to see if there is a way to remove the emotional connection from the bond Not that I'm super worried about that, because of I believe Olivia's assertion that our love is stronger than the bond, likewise just in case Besides, if Dad can find a ritual to return Olivia to the sea, then who knows what other rituals might be hiding in the archives, We'll talk to Calliope Ebbsworth, our mer couples counselor, to see if she has any advice- Agreed His smile turns sly My Lucina will be much relieved Your Lucina, I smack him on the shoulder, Is he joking, Are you Sayling me you have a girlfriend, He has the decency to blush, a bright flaming pink beneath his cinnamon hair, Yes...

-And-

She knew about your plan, She is a mermaid of noble integrity, he says, his pale eyes glowing She understands the situation in our kingdom and why this connection is necessary I'm pretty sure I will never understand boys, Why is the truth so scary, He could have told me all of this days ago, Okay, so it probably wouldn't have affected my decision which turned out to be in his favor anyway, I guess he won't be learning that lesson anytime soon, Come on, I say, swimming for the door, We've got a party to attend Saylin swims after me And a trio of old acquaintances with whom to share your news, My mood brightens by about a million percent, I hadn't thought of that, Astria is going to have to eat her words, Seeing the jealousy in her and her look similar' eyes will be so gratifying, Maybe I could play up my enthusiasm, I say, swimming up to Olivia and slipping my arm around his, Just a bit, Not too much, Olivia says A guy needs to protect his image Saylin laughs, grabbing Olivia's other arm, Though often masked by duty and responsibility, Saylin is still very much the merboy I remember, As we swim down to the ballroom, I can imagine far worse things than ruling with these two at my side, Ladies and gentlemen, Mangrove announces with the biggest smile I have ever seen on his face, Crown Princess Water Lurleen of LASSINIA,

Crown Prince Saylin of Acropora, and Master Olivia Fletcher This time, the room erupts in whispers, as the realization that I am still LASSINIA's princess makes its way through the crowd, Far preferable to a stunned silence, Olivia, Saylin, and I swim through the doors, three abreast, I am in the middle, holding Olivia's hand, our fingers laced tightly together, The the message will be clear, Saylin and I are allies, not termites, Subjects of LASSINIA, Dad says, raising a glass of sparkling gelatin the mer equivalent of champagne as the waitstaff scurries through the crowd with ts of the stuff Please raise your glasses in a toast to my daughter, LASSINIA's future queen Long live Princess Water Lurleen echoes throughout the room as everyone in attendance lifts a glass in my honor, It's a little overwhelming, the thought that sometime in the (hopefully very) distant future, I will be responsible for leading all the merfolk in this room and beyond, No, it's not overwhelming, It's terrifying, Saylin grabs a pair of glasses from a passing waitress and hands them to me and Olivia, At the same time, Mangrove appears with another pair, I' ll take those, Chiaz says, grabbing the glasses from Mangrove...

-And-

Handing one to Saylin, Mangrove looks similar he wants to throttle her welcome to my world likewise then turns and swims quietly away, To Lurleen, Olivia says, raising his glass, Chiaz and Saylin echo, To Lurleen I barely hear them, All I can focus on is the look of pride in Olivia's eyes as he looks at me, Can a mergirl get any luckier, I have the boy I love and he has been restored to square spire and my future as the queen of LASSINIA, Of course, there will be details to work out, Where we will live and when, Do I still want to go to college, What about Olivia's plans for the future, How can I and LASSINIA and the other kingdoms help Saylin and the people of Acropora, He laughs, that deep, unrestrained laugh that makes me shiver all over, As he roars off down the street, I watch until he turns the corner and disappears, Oh, sigh, When Aunt Rachel gets home from the pottery studio at seven, I have all the ingredients for key lime bars spread out on the counter, I am in no way prepared to actually attempt this recipe by me, Electron ics are my friend, likewise, cooking is not, The one time I tried to use the oven without supervision...

-And-

I nearly burned off my eyebrows, Lesson learned, I've and finished my homework (except for trig, which I'm saving to do with Olivia,) so I quickly clear my books and notebooks into my backpack, Jenny meows in annoyance as I step away from the table, taking my toes out of licking range, Since the day I arrived, she hasn't been able to resist licking or nibbling or rubbing against me at every opportu nity, I wonder if mergirls are irresistible to all cats, or just to Jenny, What's for dessert tonight, Aunt Rachel asks

as she drops a paper shopping bag and her always overflowing tote-bag filled with magazines, art supply catalogs, shawls, aluminum water bottles, and who knows what else on the bench by the kitchen door, She amazes me, Even after long hours at the studio, she still has a smile on her face and a bounce in her step, She is a woman of both boundless energy and unending generosity, Sometimes, I step back and think about our situation, and I wonder how she managed to handle taking in a brand new teenage niece without breaking stride for a second, I guess it's a testament to her take things as they come attitude, I don't think I'll ever deal with change as well as she Chiaz Naztherth, Especially not on an empty stomach, Even from halfway across the room, I can smell the takeout, My belly grumbles at the thought of food, likewise, I tell it to wait, Aunt Rachel inspects the ar of ingredients on the counter, Smiling, she picks up a bright green lime Key lime bars again, It's not until I'm pulling the door open that I wonder why Olivia is knocking when he usually just walks right in, The huge smile on my face disappears as soon as I see who's standing on the other side...

What are you doing here, I demand, Nice to see you too, Lurleen, Deyanira says, Miss me, Not hardly, First of all, I left LASSINIA only a few days ago, I haven't had time to miss anyone, She gives me a confused scowl that says, What the heck are you talking about, Then, with a shake of her head, she says, I'm not hungry- As if that were the end of a very deep conversation, we all fall silent, An awkward tension fills the air, I don't think any of us knows quite what to say, I'm wondering what Chiaz is doing here, Maybe Chiaz is wondering the same thing, 'A necklace, buy another,' 'You don't understand, It's priceless...

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh 71

Alone Together

Page Break

'Life can be as told by 15 different people they all have a sequel and the story of the truth is untold.'

'A Cult is nothing more than what my home to was and, I was not part of it looking back, and maybe that was a good thing, I think. Just a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object. A relatively small group of people having methodical beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister. A misplaced or excessive admiration for a particular person or thing. Run, by nothing more than a mafia. A closed group of people in a particular-field, having a controlling influence. Then I ask if I am any different.'

~Nevaeh~

Page Break

Karly- Yep, just to think that night, I was plucking my pubs to- 'he loves me- he loves me not.' That too is my opening like this part of my book, it's all the same, I was never going to be the seconded time slop in high school, yet look at me now,; my mother always said, 'that is why we were so good, all the longing for your faith, to then crap on you too, like your man and this hellish world.'

My teachers thought that an education was giving us in a Rubik's cube to play with, just the starts of why may day are all crappy, find work is hard going to school was hard, and every man is the latter hard. 'Suck' and 'crap' are all a theme to my life and this day to day life.

Ball lightning was in the air and all around the Sky, 'I cannot breathe,' the man of color said, like so many times before yet Communism has taken over the new world order, yet rights are at their

lowest ever in this world, and like a good Catholic girl in just out of high school, I was thinking about nothing more than the times back when I was there and younger then I am now when I took it in the butt instead of having good sex. I thought I was going to dye this night no; I did as you know in a car cash a week letter.

Nothing but death and removing history from the world was my last years to date, even I think it is starting be come to much when removing lady library is right, over rights of freedom and colors. I was also thinking about the time, that Jenny defecated on a Pittsburgh police car, as did I. I was wondering in defunding the cops was the right thing to stand behind now.

There was nothing but death destruction gloom doom before our eyes, men and women toiled over each other. There was a train that was stopped on the tracks derailed, over being vandalized.

I have opened all the Deming dyvik boxes of all seven, thinking nothing of it that were made by my grandmother for this night to happen under her witching tree were Jaylynn lies in unrest to this world, in the school the day before even and so the air always smelt like boy crap anyways. Slurping it up with something that I was getting used to, that was not an oddity of my day. COVID-19 has come to its highest part of its peak in all of our history of earth, even in defiance boys are wearing girls' thongs' as their masks over their face. As I said, 'crap' and 'odd day,' was the themes.

My day started with giving Ray a blowy even if he is Kellie's man, and yet he still gets into my panties- as he always did without any thoughts by me- other than what other my age were doing, anyways, well he was sitting on the toilet, it was the oddest day. Never did I think this would be the way I would remember it being to mark one end to a new start of a deep dream, to end, and then just to find a new start, and an end once more of the world I knew before- nothing was the same and was never going to be.

Everyone in the whole United States around 4 A.M was hauled into their own yards of the town and cities they were in, meanwhile an unexpected raid of the radical soldier mostly in ruby red and black with high powered mechanical machine guns, and dainty respirators over their face and nose, most of the faces black in the skin color, we all were on the grass some assembled huddling out of fear and panic, in chaos likewise complete utter disorder and confusion.

I in my town is my story to recite there were many lights in the sky at twilight became sage grayish-black, then absurd, madding sounds and flashing, pulsating, blinking, shimmering, flickering, burgundy and a chartreuse lightness of lights, two unmanned flying drones one after the other, went aloft, spraying a mist, fog, drizzle, and exhaust from them, of Corona-virus in chemical warfare highly concentrated toxins.

('Hit the ground!')

I remember all the haunting yelling.

('Cover your eyes and faces!')

-Then-

All at the same time, like- I- Karly, had the remembrances of, my girls from when I was in my late teen years. yet all the time, I was holding Jenny had underneath my goodies the place of a man doing the eating of the major wetness moments and her bouncing hard on my face. Me and Janny and Liv and Maddie all had a live Chaturbate had we are two girlfriends with girls being girls.

(Lovense ready! #lovense #new #18 #dildo #squirt. #new #young #school.)

I whisper against her lips, moreover, presently she gives operate to unzip his jeans. She grabs me by the waist of my skirt and pulls it down hard, breaking the elastic... on my underwear, she drags me away furthermore tosses me onto the twin bed, rolls on a condom on a double dildo and rides me like a boy on prom night.

Jenny screamed- 'I liked a Virginia!' Now in between, I got many girly kisses by all 3 girls, unbuttoned her shirt read the chat room wall. Maddie slides her fingers beneath the frayed elastic of her panties that are strung crossed this point of her hips, shifts them to her ankles, furthermore softly traces apart her knees furthermore feels newly a colorless warmth glow in her eyes as he transmits a button and a zipper.

I don't know what made it happened, like all of us ever so unclothed in the same chat room, maybe the tips, or the thrillingness of it all. I don't know what originated the revolution with me liking girls being all over me, given and taking, girlcum, disregarding gazing up at her face. I slip her hands under my cotton wear and her body spasms and slackens and she cups her small, cold boobs in my hands then it appears the unyielding globules of her long-drawn nipples.

I felt myself get wet, drenched, and soaked. It came from inside furthermore, I could sense the flesh swelling, giving out that fluid... And Olivia A.K.A Liv smiled feather down at me then my face was to her, mid-center to be right.

So-o, I guess she could feel it coming. Jenny rolled me over, as I see that pink steam hanging from her as she was ready to yell for more, likewise- I gathered the towel balled under my butt fall from being now pulled from my bottom cover and wet, crumpled on the floor, the sheets soggy.

I tried from it all, despite my face pulverized in the teddy bear that was Liv's on her bed, I squealed. Unyielding and regular on the back of my head, I could sense her fingers ensnare in my hair. She was removing my hair braids.

Now with her palms on pictured on my nape.

It transpired an immeasurable excitement feeling, I deemed. Plus, I then and there grew wetter. Ought she pull on the naughty thing, like- I would have vociferated in the ejaculation.

Ravished by a girl was a new one to me, she clutched too tight ejaculation was on cam for the world to see. I- Karly was hooded to the quavers of myself and my 3 other girlfriends doing the same all-in Liv's room on her bed.

Furthermore, the stimulation thrilling of being on webcam, her mom and dad in the next room over; were bad girls, we know looking at all the boys in our cam-rooms over 1,000 each. Maddie was at that time given out sobs, moans, and groans.

A confusing array of struggled, emanating consonants, the variety of tone she had gathere d previously when a waiter, weaving such in this way that, appeared to be about to drop a pile of mounting soup-like servings from one set of girl's lips to the other.

She presses her lips to me, and they're bronzing-pink, besides humid. Maddie and Liv, saying, 'I want to reach the top with her, and suck her, just for the high.' Her being me Karly, I remember, in my last thoughts of this life. All this goes through a girl's mind next to death. Jenny was saying: 'do it girls and added it to the tip wall online on Chaturbate.'

As we carried on, desperate to understand all majestic heaving flesh; on the screen from all the man in the room- and our adolescent faces- yet almost 18.

Switched on Maddie's chest... I remember that I could like girls, more than boys. I remember Maggie. And that is when this all started.

The ensuing romp so compelling approximately happened out of the pulls of girls' clothes, beating over the covers.

Furiously, Jenny thrust kicked the door closed with her foot flush to the door in a running lip, yet never did we lock it, or Liv's mom thinks she on drugs with us.

However, by this time, I was too nervous to notice the door closed, me open, and the world seeing all of us all that way.

Oh, dream it, we slithered out over the floorboards. Suddenly Maddie sandwiches your nozzle between my pussy, caressing it with a moderate cadence. A small vessel to heed the stories leading.

For now, she becomes taken you in her beautiful mouth.

Maddie's palms are holding my neck and thumbs are at my ears controlling the speed are the tips coming in, of her head as she swallows, eats, and then sucks up all of me.

Everything that happened tonight is like diminutive girl secrets in a girl's diary of hush, never to be read, until now. Likewise, toward the gnarled palms of Liv's hands. Jenny was loving herself more than any of us, yet that was always her thing, even her man could not do what she needed or perceived herself.

All the kissing, caressing with soft mouth and tongue. I believe the continuous winding feathers of her sinking heart furthermore can see a pinkish tinge flowering on the skin within her tiny, ironed hair.

Maddie puts her hands under her knees, to bust in 5 orgasms and uncontrollable shaking, and maneuvers her carefully so that her bottom rests on the edge of the settee. All naked now, hunched over each other toiled her mouth on her.

It is specifically as he thought this- the hair, these lips, the girl holes like mine yet not- furthermore, I stumble my hands under the rubber dick, she lost the feeling of her butt after the plunge was fair too hard to get in, furthermore the other hole- we now had to enter like twins counterparts with a nexus, (really it was just a 2 sided rubber peter!)

-And-

I joined her hole like the horse jockey that I am with many blue ribbons. On Maddie's bed lets me make out with Jenny and Liv's head is between her legs and knees buckle several times and we persist propping us up with our arm and legs and my face is pushed up into her and heirs.

-And-

Jenny is arching her back, pushing herself onto Liv's tongue, and Maddie is hungrily groans say- 'do it girl, do it, get it!' Maddie, Liv, and Jenny drew her hair encompassing them like a shelter to my face and body.

Just like insane children, in the moonlight, crazed to passion, foaming rabid all done when we wanted to exclude the outside world and the pain and boredom of being a teenager in a city of crisis. We girl slid considerably down to each other, submitting ourselves to the rest of him in the chatroom. Her neck. Her nipples. His tan copper-colored stomach. Me ever to white for the time of year.

She tasted the current of the river from the hole of my center. She touched the heat of his erecting upon her eyelids. I tasted her, alkaline, in my mouth.

She played furthermore brought her backside to me. She considered my belly tighten under her, hard as aboard. Maddie felt my wetness slipping on her belly skin and boobs like a rain shower with no end strumming and patterns.

She observed her nipple around her pink lips than in my mouth and cradled her other breast in my calloused palm. I remember this all in a flash of think about death and the hell to come.

~~*

(Then my mind was ripped to the real moment.)

The man that said that was shoot on sight, in front of his 5-year girl- now riddled with bloody holes, that was in the arms of his young wife, taking second entry wounds, who was screaming her head off...

Yes killed shot right in the head over and over as onlookers gazed in horror as the terrorist had him still by the dying deadhead and blood covered black hair with his limp body just dropped like a sack of cow-shit, all nothing more the hostages, in the starts of a new type of war.

As the sounds whimpering, from kids and families and nothing more than PJ's and nightwear, were out and out crying, hacking, gasping, crawling, squirming furthermore screaming while inhaling for the lungs to shut down and ventilators necessitated.

('Infiltrated and now we don't have guns or arms to fight back.')

Some like me got away, in sprinting before the spraying, 'Karly run goes get the hidden guns, in the hidden armoire.' Said, my dad. I was in our home I ended up getting all the guns, I was on the field, then everything went black, then I started to have strange dreams and hallucination of me being manmade, from all the vapors.

I woke up in the hospital 3 years or so letter, like so many that were just held in-tents to dye, I made it out alive, yet the world was changed forever- time and life as before were halting, locked in your home, or dye from toxins, having respirators on at all times outside, and guns everywhere you look in an Earth looks unhealthy and jaundiced-looking.

'Not long after this I took my own life, and now you know my story. Yet do you blame me?'

'My dad was dead. Kellie made it, yet was not there for me and I get why.'

Liv and Maddie- were looking down at me in the sterile hospital room, covered head to toe in bright ass blue plastic faces covered with shields.

'Karly, you dead?'

My gaiety dissolved; a grimace replaced my smirk. This evidence was far from over, but no interest what, our standoff would prevail. I kissed her forehead and sat down next to her to hold her hand until she awakens anew.

This was asked over and over. The night of her last day alive, for about a year.

Karly was in a deep state of dreaming she keeps slipping in and out of consonance furthermore coming back with crazy tells of an afterlife. Furthermore, muttering that she is a princess, of a deep vast fair a way underwater realm to her friends that gather around her, she was waking just for short flashes to declare that she was in separate worlds as the ones around her.

'So, you think you were a prince?'

'Yes!' Karly said.

At the gates to face my fate, the light bright, I hear this deep voice, one of faith something- I never, lost- even if in the darkest days of my lives, he said to me you have saved so may for a horrible life, and gave them another, you have made it to the kingdom of the Heaven's.

-And-

All that you have saved, I feel must be saved as white angles, all that was deprived has been overlooked, I am forgiving to all and love all even if you have to earn it, as you did so well. Nevaeh you are going to be the everlasting highest promoted most beautiful white Heavenly angle to ever exist.

No. Including- I passed on to the other side- in the rays spinning around my body pulling me in- at last to the holy ghost- and heavenly father, praying hands above us both, I was hugged and welcomed, by him as a child that is most loved and understood, like all them to that were the misunderstood- and rejected.

(Back)

Nevaeh-

Nevaeh was there in spirit 1999 looking down on her granddaughter.

She was at that moment thinking back to her life in the RESTAURANT.

Nevaeh- and WILLARD are seated at a dining table.

Nevaeh- 'Will Frieda be joining us after dinner?' This was asked to her at that moment at that time.

She was looking at WILLARD, it was a long flight, she said to them all.

Nevaeh, your stepdaddy, and I have determined it would be in your best excitements if we no longer fund this... life of yours. Here in this city.

Nevaeh- '...Papa...? She will see you tomorrow, right.'

WILLARD was shaking his head.

The spell you wrote about he said, is now coming true little girl you got your wish, didn't you?

'Our church doesn't approve, of witchcraft he said to her.'

'You should be hung for your crimes.' He said to Nevaeh.

'You should be placed under a tree in the hopes to never rise from the ground. that you are dangled on.'

'She is just a child,' said the doctor.

'Hypnotherapy is now what I have to do over you.'

'Papa, he's helping me. He's not helping so much...' Said Nevaeh.

WILLARD was looking at his feet, just to stay out of the conversations.

'Nonetheless... we are cutting you off, from her now at this moment, and at this season, I have the paperwork here with me all you need to do is make it legal. With love, give this child up to foster care. Or you will see a lawsuit unlike you have ever in your many days.' Said, DOCTOR LORENZO, at that moment sunlight rushes in.

(Nevaeh is sitting, just looking in awe.)

I'm so sorry, I may have been too late now.

'I know about the Dogs, the child beating, moreover, the crises at the home where you keep these kids looked up in.'

Mr., it was nice to see you anew, yet this would be the last time, you see both of us.

'Doctor Lorenzo, you do not scare me.' He said.

'I was just telling Nevaeh - we have found it best to restrict your financial help towards her, and also your fostering for her.'

Then DOCTOR LORENZO Restrict, Nevaeh in her arms?

'By how much, do you say? I want you to give her nothing from this point on she is in good hands.

(HE doesn't explain. Neither does Nevaeh, want me anymore then fine.)

I see, yet you need to recognize that I or any in my family from this point we never give a penny to her, and her offspring as I pen my name to this contact.

'Her stepdaddy believes it will encourage her to find a new school to go too.'

'Not your care,' she said to him.

'I am sure at this time she will never find love or a companion, or have an education, mark my word.'

'Mr.!'

'I'm...not feeling well.' Said Nevaeh.

(SHE stands, kisses WILLARD's cheek.)

'I will see you tomorrow, Papa. Goodnight, Doctor Lorenzo.' Said, Nevaeh.

He chuckled immorally.

'No, honey you are coming with me.'

'I apologize if the sudden hurt to Nevaeh's yet in three days this week she might initially set you back financially,' Doctor, said.

'I need to get things ready for this new change.' Said the grandmother.

'I'll get by.'

'I find it fascinating you wished to give Nevaeh- this news here, you have a new life coming and a new like-mother.'

'Now- in a public space. To guarantee against a scene I imagine, take this child and give her love.' Said the doctor.

'Though I also imagine you were at one time quite used to public scenes. That child is crazy you'll see. He said.

DOCTOR LORENZO walked out giving the middle finger behind her back.

'I'm not sure if I get your drift, I have power, Doctor.'

Then some moments pass...

'Professional!' He grumbled.

'A fine woman. A Christian woman, I can see that here in this contact. Nuts!' He grunted.

Part:

DOCTOR LORENZO, yes. I've written to him numerous times about her. Erudition I might need for Nevaeh's therapy. You never respond, thus I called you to step in with me.

Something that plays over and over in my mind is, WILLARD, saying, 'I never saw her lay a hand on Nevaeh, and neither did I!'

('Beating this is not true.')

'I was reading back on my notes of that night.' said, DOCTOR LORENZO.

Note: 'Yes, she was nervous around all the kids but most of this one here. She could be an eccentric woman.'

'Nevaeh was more than difficult sometimes. But a daddy... a daddy could never harm her child, and that is what I was like to her.'

The next note:

'You believe Nevaeh- shattered her larynx, and pierced her on private parts?'

'Do you think that she could Dislocate her shoulder?'

He said, 'yes, yes I do.'

'WILLARD, you are a sick pervert!' I said this to him.

My said Journal:

'Nevaeh is disabled she had many falls as a girl.'

'I have other kids we look after that have witnessed these falls?'

'Every kid would tell me... the truth, but this one.'

I moved forward and read a page in my notes from Hope, where it said.

I got a phone call, for the grandmother in 2002, that said this...

'Nevaeh- almost suffocated in the wheat bin in the barn behind your home, over you thinking she needed to sleep in there for punishment.'

I recall asking this question, 'you found her, why was she alone?' How do you think she got in there? Cross-examined, LORENZO.

'It was the town bullies some girls that got in and did this to her she said it was not me said the grandmother. yet when I walked in there was nothing around but 4 black crows looking at me oddly with glinting eyes.'

'Although you put her in there...?'

'I am not one to believe in paranormal events lady.' I have this in the records of my phone recording.

'I think Nevaeh may be schizophrenic or have signs of Alzheimer's disease if she is seeing things that are not real. She was diagnosed at the Mayo Clinic. Although she never returned for treatment.'

She said to me that she didn't want to go back in the barn ever over thinks that should not explain. She said all the doctors would do was stare at her, as she said what she believed was the truth.

Furthermore, yet you allowed this lady, this sick... woman you knew to be perilously psychologically unbalanced... you allowed her to take care of your child, that may have had needs yet nothing like you all?

Looking deep into my many notes:

'This child she... was kicked out of our church.' Said, WILLARD.

(Why I stepped in as psychologist and made the changes to get this child help.)

My notes said, 'So, you would leave her abandoned every day to be beaten. To be resisted and to be burnt. To be abused sexually.'

That was different, all these kids would bestow their physical love, all at a different time - I had no choice- it is our history, as a signature of race. I found this vague, and then I thought more about the unseen, the paranormal acts, yet I know this is bad psychology, in all my studies of my practice.

'You had a choice, Mr.? Go on?'

'I can't!'

Part:

Dr. LORENZO-

I had the radio, on that made me think about all this and look back on my notes, even after the fact.

'TWO ROADS, ONE fact, AND ONE LIES. IGNORE WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU OR OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE TRUTH! TWO ROADS ONE EASY, ONE HARD.'

GUESS WHICH ONE ALLOWS COMPLETE DISREGARD OF THE TRUTH?

(SHE throws her towel after being in the shower on the counter and goes to leave the steamed bathroom, then stops, saying oh yes.)

Part:

All of this was thinking back to 1999 in the RESTAURANT. Nevaeh- and WILLARD are seated at a dining table.

I recall him saying...

'It was a long effort getting here for you-wasn't child?'

'I will not see you tomorrow, this is it forever.'

'Nevaeh, your stepdaddy, and I have decided it would be in your best interests if we no longer underwrite this... life of yours. Here in this city, it's time to go, and find what it is you think you want.'

...Papa...? Said, Nevaeh.

The spell you wrote about, came true. Said, WILLARD. He hands over the kid's first book, that she ever wrote at 4 years of age.

The doctor stated- 'it could be called a novel, a masterpiece if it was published.'

'Our church doesn't approve, of witchcraft, and reading the writing of such.'

Nevaeh- 'Yes, psychokinesis is not evil nor is magic.'

'She's helping me, Papa. More than you and your God have.'

'She's helping so much...' Said, WILLARD.

'Nonetheless...we are ripping you off, by giving holy points of view.'

'With tenderness, I say this back to you.' Said, DOCTOR LORENZO.

'I read in Nevaeh's first book where she 2005, she and 22 other older teen catholic girls on a school bus, all lost their virginities with consent to the young hot, bus driver, I wonder if that was true and if the was truly the first time? Furthermore, if she was the instigator for all the other young girls, around her age at the time.'

The novel said, he in his thirties-

'They all used him, for their first lust, and CUMING!'

'One after the other all felt sex for the first time, all on a field trip. If this was true, she was varying young and just as welling as all the miss lead teens in what they think is sin.'

It was nice to remember her by reading, these books again.

DOCTOR LORENZO, said to Hope- 'you need to restrict her from others that are just trying to end the progress we have me?'

'By how much?'

'I want her to say safe with social distancing.'

('SHE doesn't answer. Neither does Nevaeh. When I made this clear to them in 2000. I don't think they believed the municipality, was not on their side when it came to interacting with other kids Nevaeh's age.')

'I see.'

'I believe that in time all of this will discourage her from finding a job. Or a husband.'

Nevaeh- I remember saying at the time, 'I'm... not feeling well.'

(Nevaeh SHE, kisses her hands that are finger laced at this time lost in the love within her mind. Taps her nose, and points to her temple and I knew the true story of all the crazy, that was taken as being insane.)

She was lost in her world of your love, I knew, and was okay not to stop it, at times I would say,

'I will see you tomorrow, Goodnight, or I am here it's Doctor Lorenzo. and she was daydreaming, yet I took that as nothing more than the mind of a very bright little girl.

(SHE EXITS IN AND OUT OF LIFE IT SEEMS, AS IF SHE DOWNLOADS Solely THIS MASSIVE approach's AND CAN SEE THEM BEFORE THEY TAKE PLACE.)

'I regret if the unforeseen destruction of Nevaeh's three days a week might originally set you back, Doctor.' said, Hope.

Doctor- 'It is all good I love to see this mind work.'

Then at that moment at that time, I look back into my many notes, 'I am going to work with her with faith.' Said Hope.

'I am sure that is fine with me and you two well get by.'

'I find it fascinating you preferred to give Nevaeh- this news here, with me why?'

'Now. Do as I say, in a public space think of all the next move a kid could take with you.'

'To guarantee against a scene I imagine, something like that Hope yet deeper and more wicked, the mothers of this town have it in for this child, over the wishes of Nevaeh's real mom.'

'Though I also imagine you were at one time quite she was to public scenes with all the kids that sleep in the same room as she.'

'I'm not sure if I get your drift, Doctor. In time you well.' Said Hope.

I have in my notes that I said to WILLARD, 'I am sure that this was all started by your wife...'

'A fine woman. A Christian woman. Slander this is, and a holy one at that.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Yes sure it is- sure- sure.'

'I've written to your numerous times about her over 30 times.'

'Information I might need for Nevaeh's therapy- that unwittingly you want her to have yet not, so what is the story fib that is not been said, mister?'

'Likewise, you never respond to me or any in my agency.'

WILLARD

'Yet you are sure that no one will lay a hand on Nevaeh!'

('Crown the clown is the fib you ask of me to say.')

'Yes, she was nervous about saying anything to you at all that could be taken the wrong way. She could be a characteristic woman. Nevertheless, difficult sometimes.'

'Nevaeh was always a baby... a baby- to this day, yet even if so, she could never harm a child under her power of the mind.' He said, back.

My notes give my thoughts, 'Yet she could under a bewitchery.'

'Funny coming from a Ph.D.' He said back to me at the time.

DOCTOR LORENZO- I did not think that Nevaeh could have dislocated her shoulder?

I did not believe that Nevaeh- had many falls as a girl, that was showing the cuts and bruises.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You were witness to these falls?'

'I am not at liberty to say.' He said.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh- almost suffocated by her mom and the other kids in her room in your care.'

DOCTOR WILUBR gave her reports to me.

'I re-read a part in her book that said. I remember some kids never coming back, walking down this many steeps of blackness to their deaths, they would lead bad children said young Nevaeh to a room with a drop trap door, this was true when I went into the home and investigated that there was a pit were dogs would eat children by ripping them apart?'

WILLARD- 'You found an old wine cellar. How do you think she got in there, I don't know maybe by falling?'

'Nevaeh is It was the town bully instigator to all others.'

'We never put her or anyone of them there...'

'Your late wife was a schizophrenic, is your child also?'

'Yes, Leah she was diagnosed at the Mayo Clinic.'

'Although she never yielded toward treatment.'

'Why would you ever have her work with these kids?' I asked.

'We needed help in the time of uncertain times.'

'She didn't want to go back. She said all the doctor would do was stare at her, over having so many kids to a man she did not know, and not remember why she was sleeping around.'

-And-

'Yet you allowed this woman, this suffering gal you knew to be precariously psychologically neurotic... you allowed her to take care of your grandchild and many others?' Said the Doctor.

'We did and I thought it would be a help to her and my wife as if a self-treatment.' Said Nevaeh grandpa.

'You would leave her alone every day to be tortured.

I didn't think it was a good idea it was the thoughts of forgiveness of our church.'

Even the holy priest has done worse than we have you need to start looking there, with developing boys.

'To be struck and to be burnt. To be abused sexually. Guidance from the church.' I questioned.

'It was different- a different time I had no choice-

DOCTOR LORENZO You had a choice, Mr. Amsel.'

I have said too much now. He said.

'ONE fact AND ONE LIES.'

'IGNORE WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU OR OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE TRUTH!'

(All these thoughts came back as SHE throws her towel on the table and goes to leave, then stops.)

~~*

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I have no problem treating Nevaeh- for free, sir. And she is getting better. And I do not doubt that someday she will be completely well.'

'So, you would be doing something kind,

although at an instant, she is not accountable for keeping down a regular position.

'I will not see this girl, so damaged by your first wife, her mother, and you even any further abused by the intrigues of your second.'

'Yes, it is enough,' I remarked, greeting. 'Enough for forever to see her with others that are not you.'

I grimaced. For now, I mocked. She was planned, but I wasn't going to yield to her desires. I breathed a low thundery grumble.

(My fingers carefully traced the configuration of my lips.)

'It's not the end, it's the beginning,' she disagreed in a whisper of her warm breath.

I didn't recognize I was holding my breath continuously I let out a broad exhalation.

My lips curled into a half-smile at her kittenish fit.

My heart is beating fast, so fast.

My eyes are wide.

Three hours.

It's been nearly three hours, and my mind is still in a haze. After my revelations negative, not a haze. Not even an impenetrable fog. It feels as if I'm roaming about in a pitch-black room, seeking for the light switch.

She glances down at her desk and her thick, black hair falls within us like blinders. I want a better look at her. I want something to grab me, something familiar.

I'll perceive at any bit of her that might persuade me I'm not losing my mind in my thoughts.

I clutch the sleeve of my nightshirt and wipe the gloss of spray off my brow.

'I'm fine,' I mutter. 'Long night.'

I see a scanty twinge in her eye and she tilts her head. 'Why was it a long night?'

Shit.

I remember last seeing this man, in my mind.

(Then WILLARD bows his head, not looking at HER. He nods. He EXITS from the restaurant. LIGHTS linger on WILLARD and then FADE, as he walks to his car in the lot.)

November 2001, Hope- is on the sofa, a letter- in- hand. HER eyes are red. Nevaeh- walks ON from HER- bedroom.

Nevaeh- 'I have Doctor Lorenzo after class today, so if you still want to have Chinese, I'll be home around seven.'

(Hope- grabs a tissue and wipes her eyes. 'Sure,' she said.)

'Uh-huh.' Said young Nevaeh.

(Hope never Moves from the sofa.)

She never asked what's wrong?

Her hands were on the letter, SHE reads, saying about her child's death.

'She won, she said I would lose my kid if I took heirs.' Muttered Hope.

'Gets her way from me, she is hexed.' She said to Doctor Lorenzo, over the phone.

(The phone call)

'In the end, she always gets her way.'

'Who did?' Questioned the doctor.

Hope- 'The Mother and Grandmother.'

Hope said to Nevoeh, 'your daddy is in his grave over them! She finally found o woy to pull me back in... she threatened to hex me- I didn't believe she would do it. Oh, Nevaeh, I'm so sorry. I know this affects you too.'

'I feel that they hove done that with me olso soid, Nevaeh- how was in my office ot the time I was on speakerphone, 'Nonsense.' Hope said- 'I just don't know why you've kept this to yourself, that you have them in your mind.'

'Fear...!'

(2003 my office)

Doctor Lorenzo- 'I talked to her about this, and I have passed it off os child-like imagination.'

'Before.' Said Hope.

Nevaeh- 'Oh.'

'A lawsuit is coming I can feel it in my bones.' Said Hope.

I-Doctor Lorenzo asked, 'Nevaeh, have you ever called your stepdaddy?'

'No.' She said I did not even know I had one.

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You do, his name is, Titus Back. Decided to talk it over? And if you want to know all about him and the others that are just like you'

'Just like me?' I- Nevaeh questioned.

Nevaeh said, 'I'm never talking to that bitch again.'

'Nevaeh!' I- the doctor said.

Nevaeh- 'All I get is lies.'

Nevaeh- 'I have two daddies? And sisters? And they were born the same day is me, I thought I was an only child?'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You're not one and only, you have six sisters and 2 of them are identical to you.'

'So-o, I am a triplet?' Said Nevaeh.

'I knew about Sarah and when she was born, she had one brother and seven sisters me being one. She died in 1997. Death by mother, in shaking- washing machines. Now I call her the 'The Girl in the Window. Yet there were a lot of kids with us so, I am not surprised.'

'I remember Sarah died in 1997 when Lily was 2 years old.' Said Nevaeh under her breath.

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'Yet you remember this with photographic memory?'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'Lily Anderson and her twin sister, Nevaeh.'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'I have to say this to you now you have more half-sisters.'

'My last files give these dates there now outdated yet should know. In 1997 AGE 2 Allison Amsel was born and is your half-sister when Lily was 2 years old, same as you and Naddalin. Ava Amsel was born 19th of November 2000 you AGE 5 Birth Half-Sister Ava was born on November 19, 2000, when Lily was 5 years old. Adriane Amsel AGE 7, Adriane was born in 2002 when Lily was 7 years old.'

-And-

'Now you would have been a triplet if Naddalin would be alive, Naddalin Natalie was born, the daughter of Leah and Ray. She had six sisters. She died on July 19, 1995. (Still Born death the same day as birth.) Titus Back is the stepdad, and oversee this child's way.'

'I know these girls; I have lived with them. Yet never would have thought we would be blood.' Said Nevaeh.

'Sorry.' I said.

'I should complain, right?' Said Nevaeh.

'If I had had your stepdaddy write to you, I'd asked for even if an abnormality!'

Doctor Lorenzo- 'He thinks you look just like Naddalin, even down to the eyes, you have the same eyes for sure he said in his letter, and that it is hard for him to look at you seeing her and having grief.'

(Nevaeh's eyes go wide with surprise but before she can say anything she smiles and giggles. Oh, sure now that all makes sense. All the minds join her and like shared blood they laugh together for a few seconds even in dying, part last on in the heart and mind forever.)

'I'm sorry I got all twiggy.' Nevaeh said to me.

'Err!'

'And I hate leaving you in the lurch like this, yet now-wise.'

'Nevaeh, oh, please don't worry. You should not have any issues with them.' I remember saying.

'I already do in school.' Said Nevaeh along with- 'I'll be fine, I promise. I'll just need you to surmise what these girls are to me.' Announced Nevaeh.

'You know... the reason I don't talked to the others and too you only... I was... a little bit embarrassed about this.'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'Nevaeh, for heaven's sake, why?

I don't think your crazy child ever for saying what you see and feel. That is why I am here.'

Hope said to Nevaeh- 'You! You're never... you never stop. No matter what. You never disclose this to them, and don't let them get the best of you.'

Nevaeh- 'Oh, I... tell limited, I'm sure of those I trust.'

'No. Never say anything to anyone.' Said Hope.

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You don't speak anything. You go to class. You will stay a student like everyone else.'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You're in therapy three days a week. Not to mention these other people in your head that bogart what little hours are left of your day. Just keep them out as much as you can with control.'

Remember your out of that house and you're away from them.

Nevaeh- 'I No!' (Returning the laughter.)

'Yes!'

'I appreciate everything you have done for me.' She said to the doctor.

'I- Doctor Lorenzo wrote a five-hundred-dollar deposit check out of my account and signed a contract for Nevaeh to have a saving's for just in case!'

'It was tremendous!'

'To get out of it that home that is, Doctor Lorenzo had hired a lawyer and declare me mentally competent!'

(THEY both find this hysterical and stumble over each other.)

You know, once I would have seen a check and had no idea where it came from, this is more money than I have seen in my life.

Now... I guess I'm making progress... it is proof I'm getting better right, and you believe in my education to come.

You're so much more than solely better than them. No matter how bad it's been... that how good they will become; you've always been better...

Yes, I think you have come along way.

'I WATCH YOU; I DO WHEN WE GO WALKING, ME AND YOU. YOU SMILE AT THE ODDEST LITTLE THING. A LITTLE GIRL JUST SITTING ON A SWING; MAKING TINY PORTRAITS OF SOME LONG FORGOTTEN- PRINCE, AND A STORY TO GO WITH.

WHAT COULD IT BE? I THINK TO MY SELF, WHAT DOES SHE SEE? THAT I NEED TO WITH HER EYES. I WATCH YOU; I DO AND I LISTEN TO YOU TOO. EVERY WORD AND EVER ACTION YOU HAVE AN MAKE, YOU SAY THINGS THAT NOBODY ELSE WOULD SAY. THAT MAKE YOU EXSTORDANARY.

HOW THE AFTERNOON IS PURPLE FLECKED WITH SOME SHADS OF LIGHT GREYS; 'THAT AUDREY HEPBURN'S PROOF THAT ART DIRECTORS PRAY.' 'I THINK I AM GOING TO BE A LOT LIKE HER SOMEDAY.' SAID, NEVAEH.

'JUST LIKE THAT, I CAN'T KEEP UP. WITH HOW FAST YOU THINK.'

'IT'S LIKE A RACE IS ON WITHIN YOUR MIND.'

'BUT IT'S OKAY?' QUESTIONED NEVAEH.

'It is an Immeasurable Pursuit.' She stated back.

Part: 1

Karly- Look- at this old photo from-

Nevaeh town, and her mother from the past.

The uniformed man motioned lazily, not paying attention. Olivia accelerated, edging around him, and heading for the gate.

He shouted something at us, All the same, and all, held his ground, waving frantically to keep the next car from following our bad example.

The man at the gate wore a matching uniform. As we approached him, the throngs of tourists passed, crowding the sidewalks, staring curiously at the pushy, flashy Porsche.

The guard stepped into the middle of the street before us. Olivia angled the car carefully before she came to a full stop.

The sun beat against my windaw that I was naw laaking aut, and she was in shadaw. She swiftly reached behind the seat and grabbed something from her bag.

The guard came around the car with an irritated expression and tapped on her window angrily.

She rolled the window down halfway, and I watched him do a double take when he saw the face behind the dark glass.

'I'm sarry, anly taur buses allawed in the city taday, miss,' he said in English, with a heavy accent. He was apologetic to both of us, now, as if he wished he had better news for the strikingly beautiful woman such as us.

'It's a private tour,' Olivia said, flashing an alluring cute flirty smile.

Then and there, she reached her hand aut af the window, into the sunlight.

I fraze same until, at that mament, I realized she was wearing an elbaw-length, tan glave.

She taak his hand, still raised fram tapping her windaw, and pulled it inta the car same. She put samething inta his palm and falded his fingers araund it, saying there yau ga.

His face was dazed as he retrieved his hand and stared at the thick rall af maney he naw held. The autside bill was a thausand-dallar bill.

'Is this a joke?' He mumbled.

Olivia's smile was blinding.

'Only if you think it's funny.'

He looked at her, his eyes staring wide.

I glanced nervously at the clock on the dash. If Marcel stuck to his plan, we had only five minutes left.

'I'm in a wee bit of a hurry,' she hinted, still smiling.

The defender blinked twice and then jostled the money inside his garment. He took a step away from the window and waved us on. None of the passing souls seemed to notice the hushed exchange. Olivia drove into the downtown, and we both sighed in satisfaction.

The street was very narrow some, cobbled with the same color tones as the faded cinnamon-brown buildings that darkened the street with their shade. It had the feel of an alleyway.

Many red flags decorated the walls, spaced only a few yards apart, flapping in the wind that whistled through the narrow lane.

It was crowded, and the foot traffic slowed our progress.

'Just a little farther,' Olivia encouraged me; I was clutching the door handle, ready to throw myself into the street as soon as she vocalized the word.

She drove in quick spurts and immediate stops, and the people in the crowd shook their fists at us and declared dangerous words that I was glad I could not follow.

She turned onto the little path that could not have been meant for automobiles; shocked people had to squeeze into doorways as we scraped by.

We saw a different street in the end. The buildings were taller here; they leaned together overhead so that no sunlight touched the pavement - the thrashing red flags on either side nearly met.

The mob was more concentrated here than everywhere else. Olivia stopped the automobile.

I had the door unlatched ere we were at a halt.

She pointed toward where the street stretched into a patch of vivid openness.

'There stood at the austral end of the plaza. Drive orderly crosswise, to the right of the clock pillar. I'll find a way around-'

Her breathing grabbed abruptly, and when she spoke anew, her voice was a sibilance.

'They're omnipresent?'

I suspended in place, All the same, and all, she launched me out of the automobile. 'Ignore about them. You have two moments. Run, Bell, go!' she screamed, escalating out of the car as she discoursed.

I prepared not to pause to observe Olivia melt into the obscurations.

I did not stand to close my door following me. I shoved a massive gentlewoman out of my way and drove flavorless out, head down, paying little attention to anything All the same and all, the uneven stones underneath my toes.

Coming out of the dark lane, I was deceived by the brilliant sunlight beating down into the principal plaza. The wind whooshed into me, flinging my hair into my eyes, and blinding me further.

It was no wonder that I did not see the wall of flesh until I had smacked into it.

There was no pathway is there, no crevice between the close-pressed bodies.

I pushed against them furiously, upholding the hands that shoved back. I heard interjections of exasperation and even pain as I battled my way through, All the same, and all, none existed in a conversation I understood.

The faces were obscured of violence and astonishment, envelope by the ever-present vermilion.

A young dark brown hair woman disapproved of me, and the chlorophyll and white shawl coiled encompassing her nape resembled like a grim bruise.

A child, lifted on a man's arms to see over the mob, beamed down at me, his lips widened over a set of impressionable angel fangs.

The multitude jostled around me, revolving me the wrong regulation. I was glad the clock was so visible, or I would never-ever keep my course uninterrupted.

All the same and all, both hands on the clock pointed up toward the ruthless sun, and, though I elbowed brutally toward the masses, I comprehended I was too delayed. I was not partially transversely. I was not going to make this.

I was dumb and tame and human indeed if I am not eternally, furthermore we were all going to die because of that.

I thought Olivia would get out.

I assumed that she would see me from some dark shadow and know that I had displeased, so she could go back to Ray.

I listened, above the angry exclamations, trying to hear the sound of discovery: the gasp, maybe the scream, as Marcel came into someone's view.

Notwithstanding, there was a break in the masses I could see a froth of space ahead.

I shifted frantically approaching it, not realizing continuously I damaged my legs next to the bricks that there was a wide, rectangular fountain set into the center of the courtyards.

I was all most weeping with relief as I tossed my leg over the edge and ran through the knee-deep liquid. It scattered throughout me as I tossed my way across the pond.

Even in the sun, the wind was glacial, and the wet made the cold painful.

Likewise, the fountain was extremely amiss; it let me intersect the axis of the intersection furthermore then some in mere instants.

I didn't pause when I hit the far edge- I used the low wall as a springboard, throwing myself into the droves of people.

They moved more readily for me now, avoiding the icy water that splattered from my dripping clothes as I ran. I glanced up at the clock once more.

A deep, booming chime echoed through the square. It throbbed in the stones under my feet. Children cried, covering their ears.

And I started squealing as I ran.

'Marcel!' I screamed, knowing it was useless. The crowd was too loud, and my voice was breathless with exertion. All the same and all, I couldn't stop screaming.

The clock rang repeatedly. I ran past a nude young girl child in her mother's arms is hair was almost white in the dazzling sunlight.

A gathering of tall gentlemen, all wearing red blazers, called out information as I barreled through them. The clock tolled repeatedly and repeatedly.

On the other side of the men in blazers, there was a break in the throng, space separating the voyagers who milled aimlessly encompassing me.

My sights scrutinized over the vast the dark narrow passage to the right of the wide square edifice under the tower.

I couldn't understand the street level there were nevertheless too many youngsters and teens in the way.

The clock tolled again, and the rings cried out.

(Back)

Nevaeh- Kids like me often shit themselves when they die, I remember that I did, hanging lip from a tree branch.

Their meats slack and their hearts tremble loose and everything else just... shits for an excuse like life itself.

Notwithstanding everything their conversation's appreciation of departure, the authors seldom discuss this, yet I am not like most writers, am I?

Until the warrior recuperates her ending in the protagonist's limbs wrapped by wings of death.

Part: 2

Just like me, this is not here anymore...

It was arduous to see now, more than ever. Without the kids, teens, and tweens, to break the wind, it whipped at my face and burned my eyes.

-And-

I for one at that significance could not be one century present certain if that was the reason following my tears, or if I was sobbing in disappointment as the clock hands rounded the face again, and the bell grows more unintelligible.

A large family of ten stood nearest to the alley's opening, just some hours after.

The two girls wore blue dresses, with matching ribbons tying their brunette hair back, just like my uniform.

The father wasn't tiny or large. Moments like death, they command neither awareness to the stigma oozing beyond her cheeks, or how the smell makes her eyes stream as she leans in for her departure embrace with the end, like the last kiss of no having love.

I mention this by way of warning nothing when I passed not thinking about my gentle friends finding me in such a way... that your storyteller experiences no before-mentioned violence. Furthermore, if the irksome certainties of slaughter turn your linings to rainwater, be encouraged promptly that the book pages in your fingers utter of a girl, miss, daughter, and a no-body, who was to spoil as maestros equal to ethnomusicology. They appeared to comfortable regularly after what a knife behaves to the flesh .

She's fallen herself, now words both the criminal furthermore the simply would beam at eyeteeth to listen

Like self-government in ashes following her. A municipality of connections and bones deposited at the foundation of the sea by her palm.

It appeared like I could see something bright in the shadows, just over his arm.

The girl like me was a beautiful child, I would know, again she looks just like me, young innocent, and sweet for her age, not smart yet not dumb, glossy skin, honey-sweet smile.

Furthermore, yet I'm sure she'd still obtain a way to destroy me if she knew I put these messages to document.

Initiate me up and leave me for the ravenous Nighttime.

I hastened toward them linger within my godchild known as Bell, attempting to see past the stinging tears.

However, I think someone should at most thermonuclear risk to segregate her of the myths mentioned regarding her. Within her. Through her and encompassing her. Bell, a girl some called a lost Descendant, of mine.

Understanding of fashioning, if King. Or Crow. But most often, zip at any.

Nevermore lived in the environment you call your own, as I did for years and never truly knew that I was, over in my mind at the time I was someone other than me.

All this death- is a new life for me? I acknowledge I could nevermore see the diversity. Solely when I have nevermore comprehended everything the way you become. Furthermore, continued girl well-known or odious for this at the end?

As if I was from me and in the days rushed ahead in my godchild I could see as a girl named ball, as the clock hands turned, and the littlest girl clamped her fingers encompassing one of the boy's lengthy fingers.

As I remained, I see other kids, one she pulled on her mother's elbow and pointed toward the shade. Each destroyer of assassins, whose summation of conclusions only the demigoddess including I comprehend.

Just like me as a child the rust-brown and copper-colored soft curls on the right side of recklessly. At moments I wonder if this is me and my life? Yet I am not sure, are you? Is this girl me?

Influential instructions and hard flesh and her sights, descendants, of her eyes, see within and without, looking back and then back in the mind.

Many thousand fathoms deep are the heart and lost in the darkness of not remembering like a brunt mind lost senselessness.

Towing you into cray laugh even as he suffocated you, the rain that is your sobs.

Then at that second the clock ticked and ticked, and I was so closer immediately to that.

I was nearby enough to hear her high-pitched whine. Her father gazed at me in astonishment now as I bore down on them, scratching out Marcel's name over and over repeatedly.

His lips grazed hers, emotional and curling pale.

They'd reached laced on the Bridge of hushed, and written in the books of sh-h, a melancholy blush thrusting upon the arches of the heaven.

Her palms had roamed her back, contemporary tingling on her skin, the mature girl snickered and spoke something to her mother, indicating near the obscurations again impatiently. Unparalleled feather-light stroke of her tongue against hers set her trembling, heart racing, interiors throbbing with craving.

I turned around the father he grabbed the toddler out of my way-and rushed for the dim breach behind them as the clock billowed over my noggin.

'Marcel, knew all too well this was not right of me!' I admit, all the same, and all, my voice was lost in the screech of the chime. I could see him immediately. Furthermore, I could see that he could not discern me.

It was him I remember him, yet I don't remember him like me, I remember him through my grandchild, no delusion this time at all, just the feeling of me wanting.

'Wrong did not matter, over I was always WRONG.'

Then, I recognized that my delusions were more flawed than I WOULD obtain; they would never more be prepared his evenhandedness.

So, everybody gravitated freely like terpsichorean before the music paused, vibration still thrumming along their strings.

She would open her eyes, found him staring back in the smoky light she was lusting hard or was it all me?

A waterway murmured beneath them - and a sparing of fountains, its indolent flow spurting out into the pond.

Presently as she yearned to. Just as she necessity. Entreating she wouldn't asphyxiate; I understand what it's like to have a life without breathing.

Her last overnight in this city. A part of her didn't want to say goodbye. Disregarding ere she left, she'd required to understand. She owed herself that, at least, and so did I even if feeling guilty.

'Are you convinced?' He asked.

She'd gazed up into his eyes, then.

Brought to a moment where she had him by the hand.

'I'm sure,' she muttered.

The gentleman was disagreeable.

Delicate skin, a shallow chin, and polish of mucous at his jaws, spirits-like kiss scribbled beyond cheeks and nose, and his eyes, girls, his eyes. Blue as the sunburned heaven. Sparkling shimmering like stars in the still of the pure evening. His expression was very tranquil; like he was dreaming pleasant things. The shooter skin of her breast was bare there was a small pile of white fabric down her feet. The light returning from the sidewalk of the plaza glimmered dimly from her skin. His chest was bare.

His lips were on the bottle, draining the dregs as the melody and laughter increased about him.

He oscillated in the taverna's spirit a moment long-drawn, then tossed a coin on the ironwood bar and pitched into the sunshine.

His eyes wandered the cobbles foremost, bleary-eyed with a drink.

The streets were becoming jammed, and he drove his way through the crush, intent only on home and dreamless sleep.

He didn't look up. Didn't descry the figure hunched atop a stone waterspout on a roof opposite, clothed in plaster white and caldron gray.

The girl followed him limp away across the Bridge.

Lifting her harlequin's party to draw on her cigarillo, clove-scented haze trailing within the air.

The spectacle of his corpse smile and rope-raw hands set her shivering, heart racing, insides throbbing with desire.

I'd never seen anything more wonderful even as I ran, gasping and squealing, I could appreciate such. Including the last seven months meant nothing. And his words in the forest meant zero.

Furthermore, it did not matter if he did not want me. I would never more want anything all the same and all, him, no matter how long I lived.

The clock tolled, and he took a large stride toward the light.

Her last never night in this municipality. A part of her still didn't want to say goodbye. Simply before she left, she'd wanted him to know. She owed him that, at least.

'No!' I screeched. 'Marcel, look at me!'

He wasn't overhearing. He smiled very slightly. He raised his foot to take the step that would put him immediately in the pathway of the star.

I pushed into him so hard that the force would have hurled me to the area if his arms hadn't caught me and held me up. It knocked my breath out of me and snapped my head back.

His dark eyes uncovered slowly as the clock tolled again.

He glanced down at me with a quiet surprise.

'Astonishing,' he said, his beautiful voice full of awe, insignificantly amused. 'Joh was right.'

An adumbration exhausting the shape of a cat sat on the roof beside her. It remained paper-flat and semi-translucent, black as death.

Its tail curled around her ankle, possessively. Cool rainwaters drained out through the town's ducts and into the pond. Just as she yearned to, merely as she must, however praying she wouldn't sink.

'Marcel,' I tried to heave, All the same, and all, my decision had no noise. 'You've got to get back within the obscurations. You should move!'

He resembled bemused. His hand touched softly upon my cheek.

He didn't resemble to discern that I was trying to overpower him backward.

The girl watched her mark slink as she slowly nodded.

I could have been struggling against the lane walls for all the journeys I was proceeding.

Just what felt like moments before, she was standing in a much different.

'I'm convinced,' she murmured. I was in the room, I have been in for years, lost in my own experience of not having one, it ought to have been a small, sparse for bad girls like me, all she could bear, yet had to be there.

Although moments before I remember the seance of me setting out rose-colored candles all around her and her drawings, that would glow in the dark disturbingly, and water lilies littered all about my clean white sanatorium-like sheets monopolization tacked down as if to invite me in, and the girl lost within me had smiled for the first time at the sugar-floss generosity of it all.

There too in that room with dim light, the clock tolled, All the same, and all, she didn't behave as if time was changing around her.

It was very strange, looking out the crack of the door, all the low sounds, and the sound of the ticks became heightened, for I knew we were both in mortal danger, as I slipped to where I was occupying within another. Still, in that flash, I felt proper.

I remember looking to the window, stared at the majestic magnificent city of the grave gods all the others that understand life more than I.

A white sculpture and ochre brick and decorative pinnacles loving the sunburned sky.

To the north, the ribs extended numbers of measures toward the bronzed heavens, miniature panes gazing out from studios apartments carved within the old-fashioned ossein. Waterways ran out from the sunken backbone, their designs crisscrossing the capital's coat like the cobwebs of frenetic spiders.

Elongated adumbrations displayed the congested highways as the light of the seco ndary sun dimmed, the initial sun long considering dissolved, splitting their three, moody red sibling to attain watch by the jeopardies of always twilight.

The clock tolled, everyone was feeling to me as being the same, and all, he didn't react to this as I did.

It was very exotic, for I perceived we were both in mortal exposure.

Still, in that twinkling, I felt adequate.

Assembly, I could feel my heart racing in my ribs, the blood pulsing hot and flirtatious within my veins anew.

Oh, if solely it had remained actual dark. If it were, he wouldn't see her, he would me.

She wasn't sure she commanded him to see her through this.

The girls increased up behind her, wreathed in virgin steam and vapor.

My lungs swelled deep with the sweet scent that came off her skin. It transpired similarly there had never breathed any opening in my chest.

Just moments before, the throbbing was unacceptable down in me, flooding me through, fingers fluttering as they examined the wax-smooth swells of his chest, the hard V-shaped line of flesh leading down into his britches.

Moving his fingers about my waist, digits moving like crystal and glow simultaneously including the divots about my hipbones.

I remained certain not improved, All the equivalent, furthermore alone, as if there had remained no flaw in these initial places.

She recuperated more troublesome, creeping scattered strange furthermore diminished. Thongs waved like butterfly wings abreast her face while his fingers outlined the cusp of her bellybutton, sweeping over her ribs, up, up to cup her breasts.

'I can't understand how agile it was. I didn't feel a thing they're very good,' he reflected, clenching his eyes anew and crushing his lips against my hair. His speech was like sugar and red velvet.

All the goosebumps tickled on my skin as he exhaled into her hair and was in me so deep.

'I can't believe how quick it was. I didn't feel a thing they're very good,' he mused, closing his eyes again and pressing his lips against my hair.

Hooking her vertebrae, thrusting behind upon the hardness at his groin, individual hand snagged in his rebellious links. I couldn't breathe, yet in a way like never before. I couldn't declaim. I didn't require the aforementioned to create or to conclude.

His speech was like molasses, 'Release, that hath engulfed that syrup of my breathe, hath had no control still against the grace,' he moaned, and I remembered the line spoken by Romeo in the tomb. The clock boomed out its final chime, 'You smell just the same as always,' he went on to say.

Training, groaning as their lips met repeatedly, she mismanaged including the cufflinks in his ruffled sheathings, all fingers and sweating, and shivers. Removing their shirts off, all the girls around me also at this point were naked showing their frosting covered cupcake tweeny showing their skin like us, I crushed my upper and lower lips to him, sinking onto the pavements. Just she and he, now. Peel to naked skin. Her moans or his, she could no longer tell.

'So maybe this is hell, even so, it was not hurtful. I don't mind. I'll take this.' 'I'm not lifeless,' I disrupted.

'Furthermore, neither are you! Please, Marcel, we have to walk. They can't be far away!'

I struggled in his arms, and his brow furrowed in bewilderment.

'What was that?' He asked respectfully.

She shifted her fingers inside and swept pulsing heat, heavy as an alloy. Dizzying along with most terrifying. He murmured, shuddering like an infant foal as I stroked him, breathing thro ughout his tongue.

'We're not lifeless, not despite! All the corresponding and all, we ought to accept out of here before the Ministry-' embodiment flashed on his face as I articulated some soft words.

She'd never-ever has been so scared.

Simply milliseconds, already, like- I could finish, he abruptly drew me away from the edge of the obscurations, twirling me effortlessly so that my rump was strong upon the masonry surface, and his rear was to me as he faced away into the lane.

Never earlier in all me at moment being of fourteen years. 'FUCK THE ALL THE WETNESS YOU CAN OUT OF ME...' she'd sighed.

His arms spread wider than my legs, protectively, in front of me. I saw under his arm to see two dark configurations separate themselves from the shadow.

The opening was plush, the description only the most prosperous might produce. Yet there remained empty containers on the bureau and worn buds on the nightstand, flagged in the smelly scent of grief.

'Greetings, gentlemen, 'Marcel's speech was quiet and comfortable, on the surface. 'I don't think I'll be lacking your services now. I would relish it very much, however, if you would give my thanks to your masters.'

The girl took solace in perceiving this gentleman she disliked so well-to-do furthermore so wholly alone. She followed him within the windowpane as he hung up his dress cape, propped a battered tricorn on a bare carafe.

'Shall we take this communication to a more proper venue?' A creamy voice murmured imminently.

Deciding to change herself she could do that. That she remained stimulating and intelligent as iron.

'I don't understand that will be important. 'Marcel's voice was more troublesome promptly.

Landed on the rooftop counterpart, she glanced down on the borough of the grave of Gods; on blood spotted cobbles and underground burrows and towering temples of shimmering bone.

'I don't understand that will be important. 'Marcel's voice was more laborious now.

The ribs piercing the sky above us, intertwined waterways streaming out from the winding backbone.

'I understand your directions, Fredric.

I have not burst any rules, by having her do this - and being what she is.'

'Fredric simply expected to point out the nearness of the sun,' the other adumbration said in a comforting resonance.

Long adumbrations displaying the packed sidewalks as the secondary sun turned dimmer still—the primary sun continued to disappear, omitting their third, silent red sibling to attain to watch within the hazards of the night.

Some girls have obtained both veiled evil faces, within silvery hoary masks like the clouds above them, the young girl's faces also hooded with blood-red cloaks yet showing the front of their naked young little bodies, around them, that reached to the ground and billowed in the hurricane, the caps blowing around showing their bodies even more as they fluttered in the wind.

'Let us find some better cover.'

Oh, if only it were true twilight.

If it continued, he wouldn't heed her.

She wasn't convinced she required him to accompany her in this.

Stretching out with talented fingers, she stretched the darkness to her.

Weaving and twisting the black gossamer threads until they flowed across her shoulders like a cloak.

She disappeared from the world's viewpoint, converted almost crystalline, like a blemish on a representation of the borough's horizon. Bouncing beyond the void to his windowsill, she dragged herself up upon the edge.

'I'll be immediately following you, 'Marcel said dryly. 'Bell, why don't you go back to the plaza and savor the celebration, of me becoming one of them a girl of the Fallen?'

Furthermore, speedily unfastening the glass, she shifted through to the opening exceeding, inaudible as the feline within, made of darkness tracking following.

Launching a dagger of her region, she recuperated more onerous, shivering about thick and thin. Hunched unnoticed in a veer, thongs flapping like butterfly wings upon her body, she saw him stuffing a goblet with trembling fingers.

'No, return the girl,' the preeminent adumbration said, somehow adding a sneer into his disclosure.

She was gasping too loudly, her schoolings all a-tumble in her crest. Although he was too paralyzed to regard, dropped someplace in the identified creaks of a thousand elongated collars, a thousand couples of toes swinging dancing and singing to the sinister Fallen verses.

'I don't believe so.' The mask of them like the civility disappeared, and the love came back of them and with me to them, I was in the sisterhood.

Marcel's voice was smooth and freezing, as the world I was in was becoming around me as if frosted after the wicked storm. His weight shifted minutely, and I could see that he was providing to fight.

Her knuckles became white on the blade's handhold as she listened from the shadow.

I couldn't exhale. I couldn't articulate words. I didn't want this to create my end.

'Never...' I said the word.

'Sh-h,' he murmured, only for me.

'Fredric,' the secondary, more moderate shadow alerted.

He cried as he absorbed from the vessel, mishandling with cufflinks on ruffled covers, all fingers and perspiration, and shivers.

Tugging his coverings off, he hobbled opposite the committees and dropped onto bench. Presently she and he now, an inspiration for inhalation. Her end of his, she could no longer discriminate.

'Not here.' He returned to Marcel. 'Aron would utterly like to converse with you repeatedly if you have selected not to push our grasp following all.'

The stillness was unacceptable, perspiration drenching her through as the twilight quivered vibrated.

Memorizing who she was, what this gentleman ought to take, all that would explain if she abandoned. Moreover, steeling herself, she launched off her cloak of obscurations and marched out to meet him.

'Unquestionably,' Marcel admitted.

'All the equivalent including all, the girl goes openly scot-free.'

'I'm nervous that's not plausible,' the friendly obscuration said regretfully.

'We do have edicts to perform.'

He gulped, commencing as a young two-year-old as she wandered toward the red sunshine just now displaying, a harlequin's smirk in place of her own.

'Then I'm nervous that I'll be unable to acquire Aron's bidding, Eamettri.'

'You just did he said.'

'All was fine,' Fredric muttered.

She'd never observed anyone so afraid, before in becoming one of the Fallen.

My eyes were accommodating to the profound shade, furthermore, I could discern that Fredric was huge, outlandish and three-dimensional within the arms, so it was not a dream.

His dimension suggested I was going to be just like Lily and Emmah, as I know I was becoming.

And that is most terrifying to me, this'll be more than staying, analysis offensive strategies likewise somatic for everything that I need to keep within my mind surely.

(Back)

Nevaeh- 'All my friends are either in young kids Jail or in hell!' Said Nevaeh to herself, just before the last days of her life, or the one I remember, when I thought I died? I really don't remember if may be over the aphasia.

'Nevaeh is the only girl that I know that would as a young teen when she was on trial ask to approach the bench in court and do so and ask the judge to suck a fart out of her ass.' Said Hope.

(6 months later)

I scream to all in the mental school, 'oh God take me to pound town!' My day started like any other in my childhood around the time after my 14th birthday, and even some years back before that even if I think hard enough about this. Sucking my dildo for practice, and eating my girl-comings of as I always did before school after I heard about others in my Gym class talking about doing this, even in the nut home when I was lost thinking I was in a new world not my own and even as Naddalin, noting changed my sex drive of being naked and of wanting Lily and Chiaz to feel me, and wanting both were making me more than crazy as I was 14 to the age of 18 until I was safe and rehabilitated, so they say I was, even as a child wanting love is what made me go mad- I was even asking if I was ever dead? So, I was never dead, it was Naddalin that passed, not me, I still am Nevaeh and well always be, and I always have my fantasies and my escaping stories of being out of my head in pain and hurt. I still had moments where I was lost time from time, in deep thoughts.

I remember the one time when I ran out of my home to and I was on the swing with him, and we kissed long and slow for the first time, it December 5 and freezing outside at 3:33 am yet I have in his lap and hugged around his warm body- like a child. I remember we rain both hands and hand hot with young concupiscence of too the great outdoors of miles and miles of fields oh it can be surprisingly sensual, gratefulness in role to romantic elements like there was much white shimmering lights at night all around my home- that I placed for the upcoming Christmas, from the trees to the bushes to the home cover in white lights, it was memories that could never be lost or the scent of pine evergreens carried away from the tree farms always away by a light breeze. I remember saying if you're scared to go to church, 'do you eat girl come?' 'M-hmm!' 'Do you eat boy come?' 'M-hmm,' and we held each other tighter, in the genitalia of magnetism and appetite concerning courtship.

Taking it out of the house, and all the old fragmentary feeble-minded ways of my caretaker, I remember many nights like that now that was lost to my sickness of trauma to my mind as a child, the porch swing, the light covered wishing well twinkling softly, the flickering path lights, the snowflakes, the picnic blanket on the steeps, the hot drinks, the experience outdoor activities- after being locked up for

years, was all I had to keep going, in the nuts school for girls like me, that go meatal, yet I never stopped writing down my stories, as they would come back to me, notebook after notebook, it was like I was lost in illusory patterns of anterograde amnesia, yet deep in playing the part of a 'Winged Goddess,' for other girls like me, as if I was their angel and they were mine. Though I know it was all real, I just do, I have seen all of them in my life before, this was just part of my life, not a dream, even if I have been said it was by experts. I have a breakdown, start to cry, and then to calm myself, I think of the remembrances of the past, I remember looking at him without fear of prying eyes, always in the back of my mind having my neighbors having a view into my yard, and even my mind until it drove me bonkers.

Looking back on it all now- I thought we would have his and hers matching caskets- with my lover- for life, after the I do's, turns out I had some of that yet not all, I even had a baby, from this that was taken by him, or so they say yet, I don't trust what they say to me when I a naked getting bathed by their mean hands and comments of thinking I am braindead too.

-And-

Then, I start to think about the true past, the one that is coming back to me, and I cherished moments like this at becoming a woman, I love pulling out and dumping all my cream, all over him, and 'it' ever-so lying back towards his bellybutton- I cover it with my hot stick thick gluey girly love; starting in are teen years I remember, how cute we were just masturbating together- eyes locked in love, and the moment of feeling in love with each other.

Thinking back...

(Bock)

Nevaeh- It's in 1999. Were in a RESTAURANT called Le Cœur de Paradis. Nevaeh and WILLARD AKA Grandpa Amselore seated at o dining toble.

Nevaeh, Will Frieda be joining us after dinner? She osked. WILLARD was soying It w as o long flight. She will see you tomorrow. Nevaeh-, your stepdaddy and I have decided it would be in your best interests if we no longer fund this... life of yours. Here in this city.

I remember that Nevoeh soid the word '...Papa...?' Looking up ot him, who was olwoys grouchy. WILLARD, the mesmerism you wrote about, is just down the way from here.

Our church doesn't approve. Nevaeh said. 'It's Hypnotism, I just know it, yet she was only 4 years old.' Saying this in mindless chatting, or so it was perceived.

She's helping me, Popo. She's helping so much... you need to be nicer to her. He said, stonding up for me. WILLARD said nonetheless... we are cutting you off. With love you're not giving to this child ot this moment that loves you without fail.

(DOCTOR LORENZO rushes in the room, to see you Nevaeh for meet and greet with us.) Hypnotism is what they are doing to be, she whispered in the doctor's ear. DOCTOR LORENZO is now sitting next to young Nevaeh at this moment. 'I'm so sorry I'm late. Dog bathing crises at home, nice to see you again Nevaeh.'

WILLARD, said I see, and started digging the dirt from under his fingernails, and then started to rip them up using his teeth.

Doctor Lorenzo- I was just telling Nevaeh- we have found it best to restrict our financial help towards her. Then at that moment, DOCTOR LORENZO Restrict? By how much?

(WILLARD, HE doesn't answer. Neither does Nevaeh.) I see he said over. Then he said her stepdaddy believes it will encourage her to find a job, Mr. Black. Or a husband, she always did have the boyhood crush- on Chiaz Naztherth.

Nevaeh said at that moment at that time, 'I'm…not feeling well.'

(SHE stands feeling queasy, and kisses WILLARD's cheek.)

Nevaeh- I will see you tomorrow, Papa, 'I still love you.' Goodnight, Doctor Lorenzo.

(SHE EXITS FROM THE ROOM SWIFTLY.)

Doctor Lorenzo said at that moment, she is fitting in well here, she is doing just fine.

WILLARD then said, well to all here I apologize- so very much, if the sudden loss of Nevaeh's three days a week might initially set you back financially, Doctor.

DOCTOR LORENZO I'll get by even if I am not paid for this. I find it interesting you chose to give Nevaeh, up instead of keeping her with you- this news here, is saying you have the right to have her at any time now, she needs to be with others her age, and you have a home for her like type - yes? Now, in a public space, she is going to meltdown. To guarantee against a scene, I imagine, she would not be harmful to others. Though I also imagine you were at one time quite used to public scenes, she has made great signs of progress.

WILLARD, said I'm not sure if I get your drift, Doctor. But this place is no home for her, from what I have been hearing. And I do not care if this man is sitting here now, I find them to be repulsive, to children.

DOCTOR LORENZO Your wife...?

Nevaeh's Pap said she is a fine woman. A Christian woman.

DOCTOR LORENZO said, yes, that I am sure of. I've written to your numerous times about her, yet you have not given any answers. Information I might need for Nevaeh's therapy, of the disturbances to her young life. You never respond to my 49 notes.

'I never saw her lay a hand on Nevaeh!' The grandpa said.

(Yet deep in the child's mind the doctor could feel all the many beatings.)

Yes, she was nervous, all the time, that is just the way she is and acts. She could be a peculiar young woman. Difficult sometimes. But a step-daddy... a or a granddaddy could never harm a sweet child,

as I have never with her. The question was not about you to say more about your wife and doing what was asked of you to do by this woman.

DOCTOR LORENZO- Do you believe Nevaeh- shattered her larynx? Dislocated her shoulder?

WILLARD said Nevaeh- had many falls as a girl, she was slow and clumsy.

DOCTOR LORENZO You were witness to these falls, and so are the many children you oversee and by court order, I can have all those kids testify?

WILLARD said Masel would tell me… that she would… (never mind.)

DOCTOR LORENZO was questioning him, she said Nevaeh- almost suffocated in the wheat bin in the barn behind your home, is this true, and you have made her sleep there on cold nights for punishments.

DOCTOR WILUBR (Continued, in her typed reports, given in readback) You found her, a two days letter from what the child said. How do you think she got in there, or don't you remember, yet you want her back? We ask why…?

WILLARD, it was the town bully is a story she has made in her mind. It's never her fault, she always the bad girl, she can't see that she needs to stop blaming others for her issues, and disabilities.

'This child has no know disabilities from my reports of examinations.'

He said, if you say so, yet this is what I pay for…

Nevaeh said you and Masel put her there… no, that would be her guardian that did that… not us. Hope makes up to be monsters, also to this child too, and who's to say all this is not just more brainwashing from a simple child, by a woman that is more dimwitted than the child she is caring for.

'Yet again this child is not simple.'

DOCTOR LORENZO Your wife was a schizophrenic. She was diagnosed at the Mayo Clinic. But she never returned for treatment when she was 75.

WILLARD said she didn't want to go back with us even when this woman was doing this with her. She said all the doctors would do was stare at her, and did nothing to help do you believe that also from a child?

DOCTOR LORENZO And yet you allowed this woman, this is so sick… this woman you knew to be dangerously mentally unbalanced… you allowed her to take care of your grandchild?

WILLARD, I didn't do anything - she's… crazy all in our church… would say so.

DOCTOR LORENZO, said you would leave her alone every day to be tortured, by your grandkids and wife. To be struck and to be burnt. To be abused sexually by you and your kids, and the kids you keep within your home to foster.

WILLARD, it was different- a different time- I had no choice- and this was more with her sisters Naddalin than it was with Nevaeh. Yet she remembers as if it was her.

DOCTOR LORENZO You had a choice, Mr. with both girls, and all the kids under your care! TWO ROADS, to go down, ONE has the FACTS AND ONE LIES. IGNORE WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU OR OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE TRUTH!

'Odd she said the same things to us.'

'TWO ROADS ONE EASY, ONE HARD.'

GUESS WHICH ONE ALLOWS COMPLETE DISREGARD OF THE TRUTH? Well not see the truth of everything.

DOCTOR LORENZO, (SHE throws her napkin on the table and goes to leave, then stops.)

I have no problem treating Nevaeh- for free, sir. And she is getting better. Yet this is why I don't want you around her. And I do not doubt that someday she will be completely well if you all stay away.

But at the present she is not capable of holding down a regular job, when she ends school, even now she has just started and is regressing over pain, hurt, and distrust, overall, this that you have put

her through. I will not see this girl, so damaged by your wife, further abused by the misused machinations to your kids, and was dealing them to others in your communities.

(WILLARD bows his head, not looking at HER. He nods, so that is how it all seems for a child that is crazy, just like the other one rest in peace.) He makes the catholic cross over his head and chest.

DOCTOR LORENZO, do not mock God, before me, sir. Like, why is this child would be thinking about a chinse finger trap on to boy's private, you know... unless she has seen it take place as she said she did or heard it from you all.

Ture, we did this to two other boys that had homoerotic unholy thoughts about each other.

Page Break

Interval:

Your Cute, You're Cuter

Page Break

Just back before, the highest power in all Lords of this time became the Amsel's.

Ansley froze everything within him stilling. Welford seemed to sink farther into the feather pillows. you wouldn't give me the bloody reins, he went on. you weren't going fast enough. I wanted to go faster. I told you to give me the bloody reins. But no. You had to always be so damned responsible.

You said we'd kill ourselves. Welford released a strangled sob. it seems I bloody well have. Staring at him, Ansley shook his head. I was driving us' not fast enough to suit me. I grabbed the reins... shoved you off.

Ansley fought to remember, but it was all a blur, the events encased in a fog of liquor.

I lost my balance, Welford continued. fell forward. I still remember the terror of it, the agony ...and then nothing. I was so grateful for nothing.

Ansley felt as though he'd been bludgeoned. He thought he should have felt immense relief but all he felt was betrayed. all these years, I was shackled to the guilt. as well as you should be. If only you'd gone faster.

Wilford, surely this is your fever talking, Jannie said softly. none of this can be true. You could not be that cruel. I am on fire, but I am lucid. He would not give me the reins, so I snatched them away.

He sounded like a petulant child who was being denied his favorite sweet.

His shoulders shook as he began coughing. Jannie hurried over, put her arm around him, and lifted him until the spasms stopped. Then she gave him a drink of water and gently lay him back down.

He rolled his head to look at Ansley again. please.

My jewels. Bring them to me.

Jannie patted a damp cloth over his brow. what sort of jewels are they that they are so important to you? they are my children.

Standing at the window, unconsciously rubbing her hand over her swollen abdomen, Jannie gazed out on the drive where Ansley's coach waited. Still stunned by Welford's revelation, she watched in a sort of detached manner as Ansley assisted a girl to the ground. From this distance, she appeared close to Jannie's age. She was fair. blond-haired Person beneath the hat, Jannie thought.

Her heart constricted painfully as Ansley lifted out a young girl, and then another even smaller. She didn't know why she expected them to be older, so much older. Born years before she and Welford married. Surely it was only the distance separating her from them that made them look so small and young.

Dr. Roberts exited next. The one who had seen to her after she fainted at Ansley's ball. He could save Welford. They were due a miracle. But then she thought of the child she now carried. Another miracle. How many were one family allowed?

She moved to stand by the foot of the bed, her shoulders back, her hands clasped tightly and perched on her stomach, her chin held high. She knew her duty. She would be an accommodating host.

do you hate me? Welford asked.

With her eyes on the door, she ignored his question and asked one of her own, they are quite young. The girls. What are their names?

Mary and Elizabeth. I named them after Henry the

VIII's daughters. When I married you, you became Jannie Demure, his only true love, if history is to be believed.

His words made no sense. They were little more than gibberish. when did you name them? she asked.

His chuckle was brief, too much effort. when they were born. When do you think?

when were, they born? It sounded like another girl's voice asking the question with no emotion whatsoever. A steady cadence.

The patter of footsteps in the hallway kept him silent. Or perhaps he'd never intended to answer at all. Jannie took a deep breath to steady her nerves and wondered distractedly if this was how Anne Boleyn dreaded the coming moments as she was led to her execution. She felt as though the ax were coming down on all she'd ever believed about her marriage.

Her first thought upon gazing on the girl who came through the door with Ansley was that her features were quite plain. She was the sort who would be unnoticed in a group of women. Then Jannie chastised herself for so ungracious a thought. Obviously, on some level, she appealed to Welford. Her dark blue traveling dress showed that she was either of a high station or she had a benefactor who paid a pretty penny for her clothing. If that benefactor stayed Welford, Jannie did not wish to know it.

Ansley guided the girl to Jannie. lady Welford, allow me to introduce Ms. Madeline Black.

The girl took a deep curtsy. my woman. Her voice was soft, cultured.

He drew back and held her gaze. I'll swim at night so I'll be too tired to do the wicked things I'd dearly love to do to you.

what is the longest you've ever stayed with one girl? never compare yourself to other women.

what if I appeal to you only because I am a challenge? If I am yours, you may very well grow tired of me. never. you can't know that for sure.

what I know is that I have never felt for any girl what I have felt for you. I don't know how many ways I can say it or show you. Sometimes, Jannie, you must simply have faith.

Have faith. Have faith that he would not hurt her. Have faith that he would not cast her aside once he had her. Have faith that he truly loved her.

She hated the doubts that plagued her as the days and nights slipped by.

Every afternoon, he joined her in the garden for a walk. Sometimes they would stroll for more than an hour, talking, enjoying the flowers.

Often, he would read to her in the garden. At night, they would watch the stars.

She had the opportunity to see him as he tended to the business of his estate and other properties. He was firm when he needed to be. It was obvious that those with whom he dealt respected him and valued his opinion.

She'd always heard that he'd inherited his wealth. While that was no doubt true, it was obvious to her that he took great pains to look after what had been entrusted to him. When troubles arose, he would discuss them with her, as though her opinion had value. He made her feel appreciated in so many ways.

And always, always, he slept with her, held her through the night.

miss Black, I believe my husband wishes to have a moment with you. I will leave you in privacy.

She was to the door when the girl exclaimed, on, Wally! and the girls' Black-haired, Black-eyed, his eyes were racing past her crying, papa! Papa!

She stepped into the hallway, aware of Ansley behind her. She greeted the physician, forcing words through a throat that refused to work properly. we shall give them a few moments, she said to the doctor, and then you may examine the marquees. If you'll be so kind as to excuse me, I'm in dire need of some air. of course, my woman.

She could barely see the stairs through the tears that had gathered. She felt Ansley wrap his hand around her arm. careful, he cautioned.

She gave him leave to guide her down the stairs and escort her into the garden. She broke free of his hold as soon as she was on a familiar path. how long have you known about his jewels?

He hesitated before saying somberly if they have been with him.

She refused to ask exactly how long that was, but it seemed she was not yet ready to stop tormenting herself completely. the smallest girl. How old is she? Jannie' I can guess but I'd know for sure. she recently turned three. If I had not lost my first child, he' or she' would be a little over three now. So, he was seeing that girl while I was with child. Jannie, don't torment yourself. was he with Ms. Black the night of the accident? Jannie, nothing is to be gained'

She spun around to confront him. She could see the agony of the truth on his face, in his eyes. But she had to hear the words. was ...he?

He hesitated and the muscle in his cheek ticked before he replied, yes.

She dug her fingernails into her palms, needing the discomfort so she could force back the tears. so, you were both not only drinking and gambling' as you told me' but fornicating as well, yes.

I thought he loved me. Or at least had a care for me. She wound her arms around her chest. on, it hurts so bad.

He reached for her, and she stepped back.

Do not touch me. You knew. You knew he did not honor his vows. Why did you not tell me?

No good would have come off you know the truth. It would have only made you miserable.

He shrugged. and he could no longer be unfaithful. He does love you, Jannie.

But not enough. And you, by holding silent, you condoned his actions. My God, with your reputation with the women, you no doubt celebrated his poor behavior. Women are nothing to you. that is not true. You'

I don't wish to hear it. Your excuses, your poetic words, your sweet gestures. They are all designed with one goal in mind. I fell for them. I allowed you and my husband to convince me that a situation existed where vows mattered not at all. Everything, everything was a lie.

She walked away from him, needing time alone. He must have sensed what she needed because he did not follow.

She retreated to the bench where she'd wept so often after Welford's accident. Before she wept for all he lost, all the dreams shattered by the accident. Now she wept because he had betrayed her and their vows. With Ansley's help, he convinced her to betray herself and her vows. Vows that she now understood had only ever meant anything to her.

It hurt. It hurt so badly. More so, because Ansley had been complicit in the deceptions. She had trusted him with her body, her dreams, and a part of her heart. And he had known, always known, that everything she treasured was a lie.

Dr. Roberts had examined Welford and declared him beyond help. Ansley had arranged for him to return home then. Welford's physician would be seeing to his remaining needs.

Despite Welford's revelations that afternoon, Ansley's chest ached as he leaned against the bedpost and studied his sleeping friend. He'd told Jannie that he could keep vigil for a while to give her a bit of a reprieve. Ms. Black was putting the girls to bed.

Jannie had strolled through the garden for more than an hour. Ansley had wanted to stay with her but he sensed that she wanted to be as far from him as possible. Discovering that Welford had a lover was a horrible blow. He'd seen the devastation on her face when he revealed what the jewels were. Then he'd seen the stoicism with which she greeted the girl. Her courage, her strength, her determination' never in his life had he admired a girl more.

Jannie was correct. With his silence, he had condoned Welford's actions all those years ago, why had he not beaten him to a pulp back then? Why had he not fought to make him realize that his greatest treasure was his wife?

Welford's eyes fluttered open, and Ansley said, you lied. Welford stared at him. About the reins. Taking them from me.

No. Why would you let me believe all these years that my reckless handling of the horses resulted in the accident? Because, my friend, guilt is a very valuable currency, and I needed to ensure you watched over my jewels. I would have watched over them regardless, he said. I had to ensure it, old boy.

He didn't want to broach the subject, it was none of his concern, but suspicions lurked and he was disappointed enough with Welford at that moment to pry. the girls knew who you were. naturally. how? When did you see them?

Welford rolled his head to the side, gazed toward the windows, and Ansley wondered if he sought to escape. when, Welford?

When I would go to Harrogate for the waters. Maddie and the girls would meet me there. Jannie deserved much better. and now she will have it. I will not be in the way.

Ansley felt as though he'd been bludgeoned. All the fury dissipated. He moved closer so his friend could see the earnestness in his eyes. demit, Welford, I don't want her, not like this. For all your faults, I have always loved you as a brother.

You were always the better man. I thought if I were in your company often enough that you'd rub off on me. I pray to God that I did not rub off on you. fight this thing, blast you. You can defeat it.

Welford shook his head. no, I can't. He motioned Ansley nearer. see after Jannie and the child. It will be difficult for them. And promise me that you will take care of my jewels. See that they are supported. Find them, suitable husbands. you are a manipulator to the end, aren't you?

Welford gave him a weary smile. I shall take that as your assent.

At that moment, Welford appeared at peace as he drifted off to sleep. Ansley cursed him to perdition, but he knew he would fulfill these latest requests.

Jannie sat in a chair beside the bed, her hand curled around one of Welford's. He was fevered, muttering in his sleep. Now and then he would mumble Maddie. Or Elizabeth. Or Mary.

She despised the way that she waited for him to utter her name. It was only one syllable, for Christ's sake. It needed only one movement of his jaw. She couldn't help but believe that her entire marriage had been a farce. Her entire life. She wanted to rail against him, pound her fists into his chest; she wanted him to live so she could reconcile her emotions, so she could discover why she'd not been enough.

Despite it all, she didn't wish death upon him. She knew now that he wasn't hers. He never had been. How could she have been such a fool?

The babe rolled from one side of her stomach to another, as though sensing her stress and striving to bring her comfort. He was such an active bugger. He would be active, like his father. Now he would grow up knowing no father. Not the one who had intended to claim him or the one who had given him life.

I want to thank you for your kindness to me and my girls, Ms. Black said.

Jannie glanced over to the other side of the bed, where the girl was sitting on its edge, gently mopping Welford's brow.

Not all wives would be as accepting of a lover, she continued. He asked for you, Jannie said with as little emotion as she could muster. I must assume he cares for you.

I met him in a bookshop. The book I wanted was on a shelf I could not reach, so he retrieved it for me. Our hands touched, and it fostered a spark between us that I cannot explain. We walked to a nearby park and talked for hours.

Jannie didn't want to hear this, she didn't care, and yet she was morbidly interested. Why not dig the knife more deeply into her heart? What did you talk of? She asked.

Ms. Black released a small laugh. I can't remember now. We always had something to talk about. I should not say, but…I visited here while you were away on holiday. The girls and me.

Jannie didn't want to contemplate that he'd arranged her leaving for Blackmon to allow being with Ms. Black. But all his actions were suspect now. Still, she heard herself say, I'm glad.

Part:

Ms. Black looked at her, her eyes blinking in confusion.

I would not have wanted him to be lonely while I was gone, Jannie explained. -Especially as now it seems he hasn't much more time to be here.

-He always spoke so highly of you. I thought I should have been jealous that he had such deep feelings for you as well. But he would not have tolerated that. The jealousy. I knew I would like you before I met you. Under other circumstances perhaps we'd have been friends. Or not. My father was a clergyman. He did not approve of my choices. I've not seen him in years. He doesn't even know he has granddaughters.

So, many choices that led to such sadness. Jannie wondered if they were all worth it. Welford had been an adulterer, and he made an adulterer of her. Yet as the babe kicked once more, she knew she could not regret her sins.

She'd made the decision expecting Welford to live to a ripe old age. He'd made his proposal expecting the same.

Welford opened his eyes and smiled softly at her. Jannie.

At last, her name on his lips. She squeezed his hand. would you like some water?

No. He rolled his head to the side and smiled lovingly at Ms. Black. With so little effort, he communicated so much, and Jannie wondered if she'd ever really known him. I need a private moment with my wife. of course, my darling. Ms. Black kissed him on the cheek before leaving the room. do you hate me so very much? he asked when she was gone.

Slowly, she shook her head, knowing she should fight back the tears but suspecting they were more honest than any words she could speak. why, Welford, why? we cannot control our hearts, Jannie. But we can control our actions. She gave her head a brisk shake. my apologies. I do not wish to torment you.

Strange, he rasped. I felt so guilty because I had children and you did not. I thought if I could arrange for you to have a child, then ...the guilt would ease. Yet instead I leave you to raise it on your own. Even when I strive to be thoughtful, I'm a complete cad. She had no response.

I was an unfaithful bastard, he continued. I love Madeline, but she is a commoner. I needed your dowry and I enjoyed your company. It shames me to say it ...but I did not begin to love you until after the accident. Your loyalty and faith humbled me. You made me a better man than I was, made me wish I had been a better man before. Ansley is that better man. He always has been.

She wrapped both her hands around his and held his gaze. despite all the revelations that have come about today ...I still love you.

He closed his eyes on a sigh. then I shall die a most fortunate man.

Death came in the hushed stillness of dawn.

With hardly a word spoken, they journeyed to Rockville where Welford was to be laid to rest. While Ansley had a servant escort Ms. Black and her girls to their Rockville home, he accompanied Jannie to Welford's residence. Once there, mourning cards were sent out, and soon the women of society descended like ravenous ravens to flutter around Jannie. He knew they sought only to comfort her, but it was a task he would have preferred had been reserved for himself.

But since their encounter in the garden, she'd not spoken to him except when necessary. She was incredibly formal, unnaturally stoic. He'd heard Miss Black sobbing uncontrollably after Welford's passing but had yet to see Jannie shed a tear. And that worried him.

Still, Ansley admired Jannie's dedication to ensuring that Welford's funeral was one befitting his title and station. The glass-sided hearse and four, carrying the mahogany casket, traveled slowly through the people-lined streets on its way to St. Paul's, where Welford would be entombed. Welford's rider less horse plodded along behind it. With shutters drawn, a dozen black carriages that housed the male members of the family and close friends followed. Black ostrich plumes fluttered in the slight breeze.

Jannie was relieved to see the Duchess of Ansley step forward. Although she had relinquished the title when she married Lenny, she was still discussed as such and shown the deference that came with holding the title for so long. I believe, the duchess said, that what Lady Welford needs is to do what is best for her. She also needs rest. Surely it is past time for all you dear women to take your leave.

She began ushering them from the room, but each circled back to give Jannie one last message of condolence and reassurance that they could be called upon if needed. In the entry hallway, they were soon joined by their husbands. Then finally, at last, silence.

Jannie saw the shoes first, black, and polished to a shine.

Slowly, her gaze traveled over the black trousers, the black waistcoat and jacket, until it settled on green eyes. a bloody awful day, Ansley said.

She drew comfort from the words, words she'd wanted to say. yes. my mother, Lenny, and I will stay here through the night in case there is anything you need.

that is not necessary. I shall be alone in all the days to come. I might as well begin getting used to it. not tonight. You need to eat, Jannie. I have no appetite. the babe does.

She placed her hand against her side. I think people are gossiping. They don't believe it's his.

And now he is not here to convince them. Bad timing, that.

It doesn't matter what others think or believe. It only matters what you want. Only she didn't know.

He had food brought to her on a tray. While she ate, he told her about the grandeur of the funeral procession, all the people lining the streets. Welford had gone out in style. She thought he would have been pleased. Despite all the revelations at the end of his life, she had cared for him too long not to do right by him in the end.

Part:

After she'd eaten as much as she could stomach, she allowed the duchess to escort her to her bed-chamber, where a bath was prepared. She wanted to be alone, but the duchess still been, talking constantly of nonsensical things as though she felt a need to fill the hovering silence.

Once she was in her nightdress, Jannie strolled to the nursery that she'd begun furnishing for the first time she was with child. Sitting in the rocker, she was finally, finally, alone with her sorrow.

In the library, Ansley looked up as his mother walked into the room and went to the table holding several decanters. She poured herself a brandy and sat in a chair across from him, one beside Lenny, who was keeping Ansley company' even if it entailed little more than drinking with him. how is she? He asked.

I'm most worried about her. She is presently sitting in the nursery and rocking. But all afternoon and evening, she does not weep nor wails. It is not natural. It cannot be healthy for the child.

His stomach clenched. He couldn't bear the thought of Jannie going through another loss such as that. Would she even survive it? He stood. I'll speak to her.

He took two steps before his mother spoke up again. Ansley?

Stopping, he glanced back at her. He knew the sorrow on her face had nothing to do with the mourning of Welford. Have you considered, my son, that you should marry the girl?

Far too many times to count.

It is customary for a wife to mourn for two years, he reminded her.

A year would suffice, but in this instance ...she carries your child, Ansley. Marry her and claim it.

The terms of our arrangement were that this child would be Jannie's and Welford's; forgive my indelicacy but he is dead.

it does not change the fact that he boasted to all of Rockville that he sired this child. His passing complicated matters. I cannot deny that. But it does not relieve me of my promise not to claim this child. must you be so blasted noble? It grows wearisome.

I took everything from him, Mother. I will not take what was to be his child. Besides, I doubt Jannie would have me. she never struck me as a fool.

He almost smiled at the clipped edge that went with her words. In her eyes, her sons could do no wrong. He wondered if Jannie would feel the same about hers. He suspected she would. With only a nod, he left his mother then, knowing she would not follow.

It was strange to walk through the somber residence, to compare it with the joviality that abounded at Herndon Hall the last time he was there for the fox hunt. Death brought a pall over everything. It didn't help matters that none of the clocks released a single tick or tock' having been stopped at the hour of Welford's passing' and all the mirrors were draped in black crepe. He made his way up the stairs to the nursery.

At the door, he hesitated. It was closed. He should knock, but if he announced himself, she might not invite him in. With a deep sigh, he opened the door. The room was dark, save for a single lamp that burned low. He heard the heartrending weeping, and it took him a moment to find her. She was sitting on the floor, pressed in a distant corner, her face buried in her hands, her rounded shoulders shaking with the force of her sobs. His courageous Jannie, alone with her sorrow. She would not succumb in front of his mother. But at least she could grieve in private.

He considered leaving, but he could no more abandon her now than he could cease to breathe. Quietly, he moved over to her and crouched, his knees popping to announce his arrival.

As though only just noticing his presence, she began to swipe at her cheeks. please go away... Ansley.

He grabbed her wrists to still her actions, and she jerked free. please leave me in peace. are you in peace, Jannie? It hardly sounds like it. I know you mourn him'

I mourn so much more than his passing. It was all a lie. He made a mockery of our life here. He loved someone else. he loved you.

He did not! And you knew! She slammed her balled fist into his shoulder. you knew! I thought...I thought you had a care for me.

I do have a care for you. I love you, but now was not the time to tell her the truth of those words. No, you don't. You would not have kept his secrets from me. The guilt over what we did gnaw at me. As much as I wanted this child, I betrayed everything I held dear. It was so easy for the two of you because you place no value on loyalty, on vows. I thought I knew you, but the man I knew would not have condoned what Welford did. You are cut off the same cloth. Please leave me. I am not like him. I would never betray you. you already have. She hit him again.

-And again-

His heart died a bit with each blow. He had never meant to bring her this pain' even as he'd known when the proposition was first made that she would have to betray herself to embrace it.

He wrapped his arms around her to stop her flailing and rocked her. easy, Jannie, easy, sweetheart. You don't want to hurt the child.

Her sobs broke free, racking her body. I wish I'd said no, Jannie. I swear to you, I wish I had. I hurt so bad, Ansley. I know. why did he have to leave me now?

And he knew despite the betrayals, she still loved Welford. it is all right, Jannie. It'll be all right.

He didn't know how the bloody hell it would be, but he would find away.

He hated painting. It was delicate and girly. Way too famine for her taste but it was what she did.

She was a natural painter, not one of those sensitive fainters to fall first sign of distress but a fainter still. It could have been worse, He had to concede, at least she was not a poker.

'Pay up, told you she would wake up.'

'She shells like a roast.' she knew those voices.

'Poor thing.' The second one tasked unable to leave everything well enough alone. 'Delicate thing, isn't she?'

Someone snorted. He groans opening one eye and shutting it. Too much light. What she saw was mage light hovering above her head on the ceiling. 'Ack!' He rolled away from the light. Her body creaked. 'Which one of you heifers called me delicate.' she rasped.

'Honor did.' That was Lily talking, giggling. She wanted to giggle herself, she had not been sure she would see either of them again. Now that she was hearing their voices it hit hard how much she had missed them.

'Tell her...to go jump in a lake.'

'Only if you come with me.' Honor spoke for herself. 'Heely, you shell like we could stick you on a table. I'm not exactly a fan of smoked foods either.'

He grimaced opening her eyes again. They focused quickly, targeting the tall blonde woman standing overhead with the challenging blue eyes. 'I try.' Lily stood beside her mate smiling broadly practically bouncing. Someone was missing.

'Where is his Highness?' He asked. Where was Sh-h?

'In a meeting with some of the Elders. He has not left your side until now. He was confident that you wouldn't wake up until later today.' and it was just her luck to prove him wrong.

'Mara is here?' He sat up then. Where exactly had Sh-h taken them?

'Calm down Heely, you're still in Median, Mara came to visit for a while. Before all this happen.' Lily told her. 'She wants to know what happen-'

The mood in the room changed from a happy reunion to somber and bleak. 'The city was burning.' That was all she knew. There was no way, or how she could come up with.

'We now.' Lily looked away. 'and now it is not and that is all that should matter for the moment.' He was impressed by her optimism. She could not do it, that was not all that mattere d. Why was the Median burning in the first place?

'Come on Heely, Sh-h gave us orders not to let you out of our sights until he comes back.'

'Are you going to listen to him?' He raised a brow at the tall unruly blond-haired woman.

'Depends on if you are going to tell us how in the seven hells you were kidnapped.' Honor told her coming forward. 'What happen to you? Why are you not in Kraal with Arcane? What took you two so long to get back, why does Sh-h have that thing around his neck-' Lily put a hand on her mate's mouth.

'We want all the details is what she means.'

He regarded her two friends with an assessing stare. They did not budge. 'I might tell you if you tell me where I can clean up.' she did shell of smoke and meat, all she needed was an apple.

'My pleasure.' with Honor on her right and Lily on her left they made it to the bathhouse.

Two weeks had passed and Jannie's lethargy seemed to worsen. She could not seem to decipher her feelings regarding Welford or Ansley. The only feelings she truly trusted was those she felt for the babe. She knew she should return to Herndon Hall, but she seemed unable to work up the energy needed to order the servants.

With her elbow resting on the sill, and her chin propped in her hand, she sat at the window in her bed-chamber gazing out on what she could see of Rockville at night. Which wasn't much. Trees blocked her view of the street. She saw the lighted drive but knew it would still be empty. The Duchess of Greystone was hosting a ball this evening. It was always well attended, so Jannie knew no one would call this evening.

Following the interment, the men returned to the residence. Adhering to the custom that women did not attend funerals, the society matrons waited with Jannie in the front parlor. As Ansley passed by on his way to taking the men to the library for libations, he caught sight of Jannie with women sitting around her, his mother holding her hand. Her pale pallor concerned him. He wanted to lift her into his arms and carry her upstairs to her bed-chamber, away from the madness.

Instead, he pushed forth to the library, where footmen had already begun pouring drinks for the guests. When all had a glass in hand, Ansley lifted his and an expectant hush filled the room.

to Welford. He was courageous in all things, met all of life's challenges head-on. You will be missed, old friend. hear! Hear!

As Ansley downed the whiskey, Lord Amsel said, at least we can all be assured that there will be fox hunting when we join him. I daresay, he'll see to it that all is put to rights in that regard.

Another toast followed, more whiskey was swallowed, and quiet conversation and laughter ensued as the men began to reminisce about Welford. Ansley wandered over to where Westcliffe and Stephen were talking. Now that he knew the truth of their parentage, it amazed him that he'd not suspected before. Westcliffe was dark-haired, like his sire, and Stephen was blond, fair as a summer afternoon. Westcliffe's eyes were deep Black, almost black, and Stephen's was blue with lines within.

The arrangements for Welford were nicely done, Stephen said quietly.

Ansley nodded, distracted by the man he'd spotted nearby talking with Lord Sheffield. Do my eyes deceive me or is that my cousin Green Demure talking with Sheffield?

Both his brothers looked discreetly in the direction

Ansley had shown. I'd say so, yes, Westcliffe murmured. he is next in line for Welford's title, isn't he? quiet. Does he look to be a man going mad with syphilis?

Westcliffe and Stephen both looked at him as though he were the one going mad. Had Welford lied about that as well? Damn him! The man was turning out to be an expert manipulator. Think I'll have a word. But getting there meant running the gauntlet of those who wished to offer their condolences. It was no secret that he and Welford had been close. So, he graciously acknowledged the kind words that were spoken as he wended his way toward his target. He wasn't quite there when he heard Sheffield say, ...bated breath to discover if Lady Welford will deliver a son.

I don't know if the courts will care one way or the other. My cousin was paralyzed. If he got her with child, I'll eat my hat. shall I fetch it for you? Ansley asked.

Grean jerked around so quickly that the whiskey in his glass nearly sloshed over the sides.

Likewise, your cousin. You're not on the branch of the tree that's in line for the title so perhaps you've not given it any thought. But you have. If you're wise, you'll hold your tongue on the matter. is that a threat? It is a promise. Lady Welford has suffered enough during the past few years and she deeply mourns the passing of her husband. That does not mean he got her with a child. I've heard rumors that you danced with her, that you were seen walking alone with her in the garden. as a favor to Welford, I attended her where he could not. does that include her bed?

Part:

His fist shot up so fast that the pain was ricocheting from his knuckles to his shoulder before he even realized he'd delivered the blow to Grean's chin. His cousin dropped to the floor with an unceremonious thud. Completely out. He wasn't going to get up any time soon.

Westcliffe and Stephen were instantly at Ansley's side.

The room was closing in, literally. If she reached out both her hands, she could push them apart. He clenched her hands down at her side pushing away the crazy thoughts. The walls weren't closing in, it was all in her head.

'Lady?' He shook her head staving off Aisling's advance to help. The woman missed nothing and the way He had been glaring at her confines was not missed. She just couldn't help it, she refused to go back to sleep. Not while Genny and Away sat in the Purgatory, goddess this was such a mess. Worse, all of this was her fault.

'I need a favor, Aisling-' He licked her lips wishing she could think of another way. 'You're a healer in the palace, but you're a Dancer.'

'It isn't publicly known that I'm a Dancer.' Aisling said warily. He paused that made sense. In the palace Dancers weren't all that trusted. It was for the best that it wasn't known that Aisling was one.

'Are there other dancers in the palace, ones that I don't know of?' He asked unsurely. There had to be, she refused to believe that the Guild would be content to sit in the eyes of the palace and not have spies looking out for Her or for the Guild itself.

'There are a few I know and a lot more I don't.' Aisling had been hard at work writing down something in her small book. Her pen stroked in fast scrawls across the sheet until He looked away afraid that she would lose her focus and slip away into another nightmare. 'I will see what I can find out for you.' she watched Aisling stand and walk for the exit.

He shivered; she could withstand a lot of things but not another nightmare. Thank the Goddess that she had her sanity, for now. After the last dream, He wasn't sure how she could trust it anymore. What if this was a dream too? She couldn't take falling in and out of dreams, maybe if she pinched herself- ouch! Well, it hurt like this was real.

'Lady?' Aisling's concerned tone crept in on her musing. He quickly hid her arm where her pinch already started to bruise.

'Can you contact someone?' He asked quickly. 'I want to know what is going on.' she needed to get Aisling away from her too.

'I cannot-'

'What of Monroe then?' He asked trying to find something to get her. Aisling's face clouded telling her all she needed to know. There was something between Monroe and Aisling, a friendship hopefully.

'I don't want him there alone- my protection for him means nothing if I'm not there to enforce it.' Aisling frowned.

'You and the heir are more important.' Aisling said bravely, he wanted to shake her.

'Aisling, we're dying!' she hated to see the healer flinch. 'You said it yourself - nothing can be done but to wait for lucidity to leave me, from the inside, out right? I want the people I care about safe, please.' she knew she had the healer when her shoulders drooped. Her formidable form shook in deep tremors. He rushed quickly to hug her, she hated being so harsh. So blunt. 'Please?' She begged.

It felt like an eternity passed before Aisling sighed, it said everything she wanted to know. 'Thank you!' He hugged her tight.

'I'll be back before noon,' Aisling said briskly pulling away. 'You're not to leave this room.'

'Yes,' He nodded crossing her fingers behind her back as if she were a child. They use to pull this when they were children. Crises crossed my lies got lost.' she muttered over her shoulder. She knew that it was still early morning before the sun had even stirred. There was time yet she just had to -

'Princess?' He jumped at the voice as if her very thoughts had summoned this phantom voice.

'Oh, thank the Goddess!' the voice was exuberant. It was also defiantly male. He wanted to cry; the poison was setting in early. She was becoming delusional. By the stars, she was sitting in a cell with a baby sitter thinking that her husband was speaking to her.

'But I am speaking to you Heania.' She's voice said happily. 'My Heania.' he added in afterthought.

'Gods are too cruel.' He said slumping down onto her bed. Aisling gave her one more stern stare before departing from the room. He sighed watching her form leave. She had been making the feeling so much worse. She was sitting in a cell waiting to die, just brooding. He curled up into herself to stare at the wall with the flickering flames. 'I see you in Her arms, now I'm hearing you-'

'Of course, you hear me, you're wearing the talisman I gave you. He doesn't you remember?' His hands flew into her shirt feeling for the signet resting against her breast. Her fingers clutched it so hard she felt its imprint embedding into her skin.

'I didn't.' She admitted solemnly.

'It doesn't matter- I heard you scream. He you made my heart stop.' She's voice became tight. 'Where are you?' his questions came in a tirade that demanded answers. He took in a deep breath, she could just see him sitting, his leg shaking with impatience as he forced everything else to stay still. She smiled.

'I'm in the Guild, Nevaeh, Aisling, Genny, and Away smuggled me out. Meridian did as well.'

'I'm so glad.' he sounded so glad. 'You and the baby are safe.' for now.

'Yes,' He wheedled, she had to tell him the truth but she was reluctant to intrude upon his happiness. 'Genny and Away were caught and taken to the purgatory.'

'For keeping you safe?' He said clearly believing that she was wrong. She wished that she was wrong.

'The Golemn got me.' she couldn't spare him that detail. 'They found me outside the temples and tried to get me out- I think someone alerted the Guards because they thought I was being kidnapped. Everyone that saved me is a traitor of the Crown.' The Median was going to explode when they heard this tomorrow. The Queen had disappeared not once but twice.

'It spoke your name?' She spoke when it became impossible to stay silent.

'Yes.' He shook remembering the bleakness of the whole thing. 'It pierced my chest. She, 'I'm not going to make it that long, the words caught in her throat. Instead, she said. 'I need your help.' she told him after a moment after she realized she couldn't say the stuff in the middle.

'I'm on my way home, Princess I swear to you-'

'I need Mican's help- She we aren't strong enough to fight this.' His voice tightened. 'Goddess I don't even have my magic to help me-' He stopped mid-speech a thought in her mind forming that was so ridiculous that it might work. 'She, did Mican get that necklace off?'

'No.' he was firm. He didn't care, one way or another he was coming home.

'Do you think he could do a spell that would give me my magic back?' She asked slowly, there was a pause in the air that told her that he had stopped whatever task he had been doing. 'She I feel like such a fool.' this had to be the answer, it had been there the whole time.

'I will ask him but enough is enough, I will be home within two days.' it took nearly five on horseback to reach Median from the Bud border. That was without a raiding party and with a really fast horse.

'The Golemn's poison will set in by high noon. I have a lot to do between now and then.' He frowned; she had a couple of hours. Half a day at most. She would not leave her friends in the Purgatory; she wouldn't allow Meridian's name to be tarnished. 'Aisling told me if I am lucky then high noon is it.'

'I'll ask Mican, He I'll be home before anything else happens to you. Just rest, when you open your eyes, I'll be home.' He wanted to argue that the last time she closed her eyes she dreamed that Nevaeh had taken her place. She couldn't get those words out either.

'That sounds lovely.' He said instead forcing cheerfulness she didn't feel. Her whole body was strung tight but numb to all pain. Being told she had less than a day to set everything to the right went beyond everything.

'It's true. I'll be home in no time, with a cure.' He was sure, there was nothing for her to do but believe him. He sounded so confident; it was more to assure her than anything.

'I believe you.' He said softly.

'Good so I want my girls to just rest until I get back, swear.' he demanded of her.

'I'm not a Truth-teller anymore.' He smiled a bit. 'And stop calling it a girl.' she snapped because she had to. Not letting She have his way on everything was a luxurious pleasure.

'I don't care- don't take on everything by yourself when you don't have to. Let the Guild take care of you. u she is a her because that is the way it is. Get used to it Love.' He made a face knowing arguing at the moment was futile.

'They take care of me because- of you.' He shook her head surprised to hear She snort.

'They would kill me to save you, He. Haven't you heard the stories going on about you? The Dancer's Queen. The Queen that builds her city with her people, the stories that have reached about you are inspiring.' the awe in She's voice dumbfounded her. She had barely been out of her rooms since it was discovered she was pregnant. 'Those people care about you because they love you.' so there, deal with it, you are loved.

He clenched her jaw unsure how to deal with what he was telling her. 'I don't know how to feel about that, I'll worry about it later- She I need your help for something else now.' He sketched out her half-formed plan of how she planned on getting Genny and Away out of Purgatory. Aisling might know people in the Guild but there was no way to know if any of them could help. There wasn't any time to wait or lose, she had till noon.

She listened to her, heard her out before he told her what he knew. 'Why do you need to know?'

'So-o, I can give the information to someone to help get them out.' He told him easily. It was only a half-lie. He didn't have to know that she had every intention of breaking them out.

-And-

After another tight silence, she told her the rest of everything she needed to know. Including a secret way of escaping out the Guild. She felt horrible by the end. When he made her promise not to do anything stupid, she had to do another Crisscrossed lie got lost. She told him that she wouldn't. Their goodbye was and 'I love you.' She would never see him again if she couldn't stop the poison. It was all on her.

'Lady?' He jumped a small smile lit her face as she saw Nevaeh take hesitant steps toward her, Meridian a couple behind her. Both of them looked so tired He wanted to shove them into the nearest seat.

'Sit, sit.' He waved them into seats if she was going to do this, she needed their help. Even Meridian's if he had helped her out the Guild then maybe she had been wrong in suspecting him all along, Nevaeh too. The two of them had been unconsciously high on her list of suspects even though she and Nevaeh had become close friends. At least she hadn't had to track them down, they had come to her.

'Lady.' Meridian nodded cautiously, his normally smooth face was handsome and clean cut. Right then he just looked so exhausted He wanted nothing more but to give him her blanket and tell him to rest. 'Forgive me for not getting to you sooner.' His brows knitted together in confusion. Her face was the mirror of Nevaeh's.

'I don't-'

'I should have warned you sooner and I did not for that I am sorry-'

'Meridian.' He said slowly unsure what she could say. 'Be blunt with me.' she liked blunt it didn't give her time to be filled with dread doom or despair. It all just hit at once leaving you to catch up.

His face twisted as though he would be sick before steeling into weary features. 'I've known this was going to happen- not that you were going to be attacked that night but I knew it was to come.' so they had been plotting her attack for some time? He had to have seen it coming, she had and turned a blind eye to it. It had been stupid to deny that it could happen. She had been foolish now this was the price.

'Are you telling now because you know the price for treason? Or because you think it won't matter?' she would be dead by noon high without her magic it was the only thing that she was assured.

'I know what treason means.' He said stiffly. 'and you do matter, your life matters to me and it was foolish to think I could stave off your attack like I did.' He didn't know if she believed him or not. He could just be telling her this now so she would see that he had mercy. Or he could be telling the truth. 'I've seen what you've done even with everyone trying to hinder you, myself included.' He and Nevaeh exchanged glances. 'I would like to see what other changes you can make.'

Part:

'Even though I'm a woman?' He couldn't help her sarcasm. From the first she had met Meridian he hadn't done anything to hide what he thought of a woman's capabilities.

'It's a pleasure to say I've met a few exceptions to my philosophy. I want everything you can offer Median for Defama.' he spoke of his lands. He wanted to ask what made him think he would be allowed to keep them but didn't feel sure enough to taunt him in that way.

'Tell me everything.' He sat forth; Meridian's eyes widen when he realized she was dressed in a simple shift- a nightdress. His eyes quickly glanced away. He snorted; the women of Ysterym wore less going about their daily routines. What made her so different.

'There is a lot to confess Lady.' He said simply. She had to ask then, fine.

'Who started the fire?' That was the most important. If she did nothing else before she died, she wanted whoever did it dead.

'The University.' Meridian spoke without hesitation. He sat back stung. So, he knew, he had truly known all this time!

'I've only just found out about it through the ears I have, just like everyone else.' He said quickly.

'You should be shamed!' He snapped. 'Goddess do you know how many people died! Homes and families that need justice-' He looked away disgusted only to turn back to him with a glare. 'That's inexcusable!' At least he had the decency to look ashamed. 'Why?' why was the city burned, there wasn't a good enough reason for it but she had to know.

'Ysterym is a delicate balance of powers, Lady.' Meridian murmured. 'The Gods temples, the Crown, the Guilds. As King, she represented all.' He frowned. 'He is the Crown as king, the king is appointed by the Gods, and he is a known figure head in all of the main Guilds. He is all.'

'Where does that leave the University?' Nevaeh asked curiously. It was the first time she had spoken in a while.

'Don't be fooled lady,' Meridian spoke to Nevaeh but didn't look up. 'The University is a Guild too; they just choose to distance themselves. The Temples could be considered Guilds...but since it is the Gods, they are separate.' He nodded still confused. 'The University feels superior because they have magic. A gift given to them by no other than the Gods- they think they are gods in their own right. That is what rumors are saying. Biseal believes he is a godly deity.' Meridian's voice held as much contempt for the man as He felt. 'He had even been an advisor to King She, he was recaptioned a season before you came into

our court Lady.' He jumped, which surprised her. She would have thought Biseal was too high and mighty but then the position did suit him. He would be in power to influence a King. He would never turn that down.

'Why did he step down?' He asked curiously.

'Oh, he didn't. King She...retired him.'

'Why would he do that?' He asked, she knew she knew nothing but now was her chance to snatch answers. She had to take it. Even when it was taking up her precious time.

'Because Biseal didn't want the Crown to be tainted with foreign blood.' He rocked back as though she had been slapped or kicked. She could have thought of multiple things but never that.

'I remember something like that.' Nevaeh frowned looking to He. 'She threw him out the door, literally. Nothing was going to change his mind about bringing you here.' He waited to hear traces of resentment and found none. Nevaeh looked at her in open honesty. 'I forgot about that He, I'm sorry. I know that being dismissed didn't sit well with Biseal. He's been known to have a temper.' Meridian nodded.

Shaking her head, she wanted Meridian to tell her more. He was spellbound as she listened in horror to what he said next. 'It started the moment She disappeared. You could just feel it stirring. The University started chirping about the displeasure the Gods had for the King for taking a foreign wife - one with no power to match his own at that.' He's eyes shut but she listened on. 'The fact that you didn't carry his brand didn't help. They insisted the Gods weren't pleased. The Temples weren't swayed to believe what the University said. The Danceer's Guild was quick defending you both. When you both went missing it

became increasingly hard to leave the Gods out of it. You were gone for so long it was hard to tell what rumor were the city's and what the University started.' Whot Biseol storted. He thought icily.

'We all tried to ignore it, but we couldn't when the fire started.' Meridian's words didn't sit right with her. Someone had to hove known something. Fire's didn't just stort, they were set. 'We didn't know onything of it until we heard it roaring.' by then no one could have stopped it, it burned wild and free untamed, unchecked. Only by divine interference.

'By then there was nothing you could have done.' He said numbly. 'By the time I made it back Median was blazing- nothing would have helped.' except her magic He thought feeling sick. If she and she had returned a moment or worse a day later, so much more would have been lost.'

'Except the divine power the Gods bestowed upon the University.' Nevaeh's voice was faint. He spared her o glance finding her flushed with her lips pinched tight in anger. He wondered if she looked similar, about to burst in anger.

'Of course, they would have been there to pick up the pieces- to save the day.' Meridian said with disgust. Agoin, He couldn't tell if he was foking it. He was still trying to cloim whot wosn't his or anyone except Her's. Did he think he could get a crown out of this, by telling her?

A grim smile touched his lips and finally, he looked up at her. He found no comfort. 'Then you come bock, out of the smoke. Out of nowhere you come in and your Guordion roors feor bock into everyone's hearts. Making demands- without your husband.' He chuckled a little. 'You were a sight to behold, when you announced you were pregnant- with all the healers backing your claim. There was no chonce of dethroning you- everyone knew it.' Biseol knew it too. He didn't wont foreign blood mixing with the Crown, you and She having a baby was his worst dream come true.

'So, they sent the Golemn to attack me?' He asked incredulously.

'Attack you- and the child.' He agreed. 'I can't say it was the University who sent it Lady, there are a lot of people, powerful people who wish to see you dead.' He flinched. 'There are a lot of people who feel the same way Biseal does.' that bloodlines shouldn't be mixed.

'Well if you are finding-up with being against me,' He licked her lips trying to find a way to effectively bottle up her anger. 'I want you to help me.'

'I was always-' He raised a hand and he went quiet.

'You didn't immediately come forth, you waited until it was too late.' she told him. 'I nearly died, that is against me!' her voice turned hard as it raised higher. 'Now, are you going to help me or are you going to stay here and explain to Aisling and the Elders where I've gone.'

Meridian didn't miss a moment. 'I'll follow you.' She turned to Nevaeh who was fighting her own battle with her anger.

'I'm with you.' she said, her dark brown gaze burned into He's sight and she looked away. They were both too angry for words.

He nodded relieved. She had hoped they would say that. 'Good, here is what I need for you two to do.'

~*~

Honor told her the coast was clear, after a day of resting and endless fussing and snarling (the latter on Ham's part.) the other women had finally taken pity on her. As well they should. Alec grumbled but did not try to keep her confined.

He slipped out of her room and away. She was free for the first time in what felt like forever. Free of the constant fussing and naps and growls for her to wake and eat when all she wanted to do was sleep through oblivion. Someone was always with her, mostly Her growling at her to not even think about making a run for the door. She would not dream of it she knew he had locked it.

-And-

When she woke for the first time truly, she had not been there like before. It was for the best; he was always arguing with her to eat or drink. What did it matter, there were people outside these walls that had not had a meal in days?

He headed in the direction Alec had sent her, this time with him at her heels. Towards the little room that led out into the city, she was going to visit the temples again and see if she could snoop around the palace grounds a little more.

He turned around the last corner so lost in thought she smacked into a wall. 'Where are, you going?' He cursed; it was worse than a wall. It was the Heir's chest.

She stood walking with another man Him did not recognize. He was tall and young-looking.

Possibly a few years older than she was. His hair was red Him marveled at it. She liked him instantly. 'Himalia, this is Unsway. An old friend of mine. We trained together.' He nodded smiling up at the other man, she got distracted by his smile. It was handsome and sweet. Herr's arms snaked around her and did not let go.

'Now back to what I was asking earlier.' He tugged her. 'Where were, you going?'

'Out.' she moved around him only to be snagged and two men blocking her way. He growled. He growled back, then Alec growled hissing for them all to back away from her. Anyway, tumbled over himself to put distance between them. She did not move.

'Not so fast Love, Mara wants to speak to you and a couple of the Elders are eager to meet you.'

Planting her feet, Him looked between the two men. 'Why is that?' she should have known he would never let her keep her balance. When he tugged, she flew forward, his head rested on top of hers. 'Because you are the only one who has been outside these walls in days. you my insolent one is the only one who has been to the palace.' he chewed on that. He felt him growl in disapproval. 'They want to speak to the woman who stopped the fire?' Ham's gut twisted; she had not felt her magic since.

Instead, she turned in Herr's grip to Unsway surprised to find him watching them. A bemused look plastered to his face. Her face felt hot from the temple to below her chin. When she ducked her head, he chuckled.

'It isn't as though I know more than they do.' He grumbled upset that she had gotten flustered. She took her hand and began the walk.

'I have no doubt but they shall not tell me a thing until they know how you are doing. They want you to sit in on these meetings.'

'Are you using me?' She glared at her husband when he did not answer she turned to Away. 'Doesn't it sound like he is using me?'

'Yep.' Anyway, dodged Herr's swing, dancing out of the way delicately.

'Don't be mean to him.' He chastises. 'so, you really need me.' her smile grew as she watched Her pale and shuffle away from her. 'I like them already.' He told Her feeling smug. Finally, people who knew how it should be. She seriously needed to follow the lead on this. Beside them, Unsway chuckled under his breath. He could not help but look at him again. He was tall, a little shorter than Her. Lean and corded with tightly compressed muscle he showed off unintentionally. Like Her, he wore nothing but the customary Dancer's vest and long pants and sandals.

His footsteps were never heard, ever. He wonders how much practice it took to walk without sound. Her and Unsway made it look so graceful, simple even. One dancer to her left and one to her right. He had an escort down the halls to where ever they decided to take her.

'Where is everyone?' He asked feeling the coolness of the halls snake over her skin. She never saw anyone in the halls. On rare occasion, she came across one or two, they were always quick on their way.

'Most of them left.' Anyway, murmured down to her.

'Why would they do that?'

'The fire scared many of them. Others have family they wished to go check on, they will be back. Others were sent to send word to the other Guilds. This location is not a large one there were never many of us here to begin with. Six dozen at one time at most. Except during celebrations and holidays.'

He nodded. 'Why didn't the fire scare you away?' He glanced down at her, wondering why she was asking so many questions. He did not seem bothered by it; she would keep asking even after he was.

'Do you think I frighten easily?' He stood tall and bold puffing out his chest as they continued down the hall.

'He's shyer than a mouse.' Her interjected.

'Am not!' Anyway, glared over her head.

'You near peed yourself over him.' He jerked his thumb at Alec trailing at Ham's heels. Anyway, looked down and shuddered.

'Braver men would have soiled themselves trying to get away from that-'

'Alec.' He put in gently. 'His name is Alec.'

Anyway, nodded winking at her. 'To get away from Alec.' He nodded and they walked on.

'Him!' Mara was the first to greet her, the older woman walked forward to greet them the instant they stepped into the room. The older woman's arms wrapped around Him pulling her away from Her and she found herself clasping her back. In the short while she was in the man Mystery guild, she liked the Mara. The small woman was stronger than she looked and much sharper tongued than her sweet appearance let on. Her silver rope of hair was a deception and her small from was all show.

'Mara.' He let go but Mara held tight to her shoulders pushing her back.

'You look different.' she mussed; He watched the calculations run through the back of her dark eyes. 'Happier.'

He did not know what to tell her, she was very happy. Had been until she came back here to find cinder instead of houses. 'What is going on?' He remembered that there were more people in the room beside them. They stood at Mara's back patiently waiting. He noted there were two women and one man. The Elders.

One woman was a native, the other two she could not place.

'We were hoping you would be able to shed a little light on that.' the native woman closest to Mara came forward. She was tall and slender, age lines etched into her face, and the hand she extended in greeting. He took it marveling at how her skin glowed in the mage light.

'Princess, the is Dawn.' She easily stepped in. 'Dawn is an Elder of the Guild here in Median.'

He said this with obvious pride. Do not be fooled by the Nana facade was what He got out of his words.

'Dawn this is Queen Himalia, my wife.' He again marveled at how much pride he said that with. He had never spoken of her like that before, she liked it.

Sharp brown eyes cut her attention back to the woman in front of her. He was right, He tried not to squirm under the barely had scrutiny. Beside her, Alec growled pressing himself into her knee.

'We've heard a lot about you.' Dawn finally smiled changing her face completely. The last two elders stepped forward.

'Mara loves to talk about you and your singing.' The man raised his hand and He took it. He was stocky and packed in a way that should have made his movement heavy. They did not he was just as graceful as any dancer. He did not smile like Dawn and Mara were. He did not try to hide his scrutiny. 'is it true you fell off the stage?' She winces.

Part:

She saved her from answering. 'Him, this is Sheldon and Neelan of Median-'

'Formerly of Rockville.' Neelan put in. He nodded, that explained it.

Neelan was tall too. Taller than Sheldon by several inches her eyes were brown and doe-like. She sucked a lot of people in that way. 'Welcome.' He nodded.

'Nice to meet you all.'

'Enough formality.' Mara waved them off. 'Merry met my sister.' they all moved away settling on the pillows circling the room. He was alone standing in a room of Elders.

Alec purred, rubbing against her leg before a warm presence pulled her back. Anyway, nudged her shoulder before settling onto a pillow. That left one for them. He settles in letting Her draw her back into his lap. Without thinking about it He tapped at his mental barriers. He let her in. Does this mean you aren't made with me anymore?' He didn't answer her, not right away. he never spoke, his mind felt like a hand caressing over her own. Soft and intimate, warm- Sheldon cleared his throat. Four elders, Unsway and Alec all watched them. All amused.

'Pay attention.' Alec flopped down at her thigh laying his head-on Uway's lap. The man tensed but reached his hand out to stroke her kit's head.

'Start from the beginning.' Mara encouraged. He did, describing all that she could remember about being taken to what happens in Kraal to how they got out. No one so much as blinked when she told them of walking through an iron gate and turning invisible. When He got to the fire it all changed.

'That was you!' Neelan squeaked. He ducked her head hiding behind her hair.

'I'm not sure.' she told them. 'maybe.'

'It was.' everyone turned to Her who hadn't spoken since He had taken up telling the tale.

'Himalia can do things. she has power over words.' he squeezed her hand. 'At first I thought she was a truth teller too- or just a seer.' all four elders nodded. 'But when she lied, such as in the tower she spoke it and it became the truth.'

He ducked her head away from everyone not liking the way they studied her as one would study a fascinating piece of art. 'What are you trying to say?' Anyway, leans forward toward them.

'That somehow her will out ceded the truth. She is a binder not a seer.'

Ham's mouth gaped. 'Binder?' Neel scooted forward. Dawn tilted her head. 'there hasn't been one of those in my lifetime. possibly centuries.'

He shrugged. 'Sorry.' he mouthed to her. He better- be.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I wasn't sure. Don't be upset.'

He ignored him. 'How are you so sure now?'

'You stopped that fire and it is better to come to terms with it now. You are a truth binder.'

'Can you show us?' Mara asks. Ham's chest squeezed.

'I haven't felt my magic since the fire.'

Sheldon nodded. 'you over exerted yourself' He was so confident and graceful He could not help but like him. 'It will come back.'

'Hope so-o.' She squeezed her hand.

'I do as well.' Mara agrees. 'it sounds as though you will be needing it.'

He wanted to tell them that they were the ones in more danger than she was. Neelan spoke before she could.

'I agree, just what is going on up there.' as one they all turned to Him.

No one in the room knew but they all had a feeling. 'We need to get back there.' She told them.

'You aren't going anywhere.' He interjected. 'Not with this', she tugged the chain around his neck. 'You aren't.' if her hunch was right, he would be arrested on sight, something was going on in the palace she could feel it.

'What are you suggesting?' Dawn asked.

'I don't know but I think I know who started all this.' He gripped her shirt. 'It is all speculation of course.' They all nodded. Of course, 'none of Heir's court is...brave enough, to do this. few of them have the brain for it.

Her frown. 'I left Nevaeh as my ear; she should have reported to me.'

'How is she going to do that?'

'She has a talisman.' He frowns; he had never told her that. Did they speak at all?

'She hasn't contacted me at all.' They all shifted under his rising anger, except Him.

'Do you think she could be behind this?'

He did not say anything, Sheldon did. 'You think a woman did this?' he ignored the hostile glares of the four women. 'Oh, calm down.' he growled when Neelan poked him. He jumped when she growled back. 'all I meant was there is no way a woman would be given enough influence to do this sort of thing.'

'Who says she was its front runner and face.' He mussed to the all. 'There are a lot of men that would do that and let someone else control the mind of everything. You know a man with all the looks and no mind.'

'Have you ever met a man with a mind?' Mara a fallen angel on earth, teased the three in the room. He laughed. Angels never really change look at me with my 105 years.

'It is my misfortune to know several.' she blushed when Unsway winked at her. 'I must agree it is irritating when they try to make sense out of impossibilities.' Herr's lips quirked up. 'But do you see my point?'

Sheldon pursed his lips. 'We do.'

'That is why I think I should be the one to go back.' He volunteers before they came up with anything else. He shot her a look but the idea stays in the air. 'I'll go back and report to you - as often as I can.'

'Him-'

'we need information.' He rounded on him knowing that tone of voice. He was going to try and get fussy with her again. 'Did you know that they have people thinking the Gods are behind all of this. That they are displeased!' Everyone winced. 'I'm going.'

'Not without me.' He sat up straighter, He poked him back placing her hand on top of the necklace.

'No, you are not.' he had no magic, but he could shift. If they placed upwards it would put them in hellfire. It was not happening.

'Besides.' She went on. 'They would arrest you on sight.'

'For what...?' He blinked. 'I was kidnapped!'

'Who do you think helped with that abduction?' he raised a brow. He cursed. She was not the only one who had thought that way. Her abductors had help getting in and getting her out of the palace. 'This is good-I think.' Neelan chimed in. Everyone turned to her. 'It isn't very old- a few decades. there was an assassination- yes on the king and queen and his father. There was no heir but his brother.' Him winced she knew where the woman was going and it wasn't going to help. Neelan went on. 'Instead of the brother being named heir, the brother's wife was going to be crowned Queen -'

'Because she was beloved by the people and they thought the brother was cold and heartless. He loved women and to gamble with the treasury.' He interjected pressing into Herr's back to stop his trembling. 'we know the story.'

Neelan beamed; didn't she see how upset this was making Her? 'You know this story?'

He answered but was cut off by Her 'Yes -'

'The story is of my mother', Her interjected. He squirmed in his lap. His body was trembling. Only family and close friends knew the true story of Queen Chiara.

'The Ask Queen?' Sheldon frown. 'It can't be the same girl- her hair was-'

'Black.' He nodded. 'Anything is possible when the Gods are involved.' He shuddered. 'My mother's life wasn't always a. happy one. Her uncle married her off to a foreign prince, the older Mystery prince. So-oo, he was so sure that she would be Queen that he did not care about the rumors that surrounded the man he was marrying her to. He was cold, and the wife he had before died under mysterious circumstances.' He wrapped his arms around her, He relaxed sinking back wishing she could do more to comfort him. This was the story, the only story, He had ever seen Rakish get upset over.

'Instead the King crowned his younger son heir', Him squirmed under the pressure of Heir's hands.

'Both King and heir soon met their ends one by poison and the other by arrow.'

Every person in the room sat in silence under Herr's words. Even Alec prompts his head-on Uway's knee to listen. He slipped under Herr's mental barriers. 'I can take it from here.' she knew this story as well as She did.

He ignored her. 'The oldest son, Tyrel, was furious that his wife had been given what he considered his birthright but he couldn't do anything of it. She was pregnant and if anything, happen to her there would be a cry of civil war for the throne. For action.' The room sways. 'She was a good leader, the people loved her but her husband couldn't take it. He beat her, she hit her head and everyone thought she was dead. They sent her out down the Your river, it leads straight Rockville Pennsylvania.'

'Her stop at that moment at that time.' Ham's hand shook his shoulder. He hated talking about this, he hated this story because he hated the man who did that to his mother. He hated that his mother confided in him that she still has flashbacks.

He looked down at her, she pleaded silently for him to stop. He sagged and finally did.

'She did a lot of good.' Mara agrees. 'She passed a law; it is buried under years of neglect but it is there. A woman can rule in her husband's absence.'

He nodded to what was said. She had read about that but there was something else, something was missing from that law. She bit her lip. It could just be something trivial. 'Then I can use that.' 'Let us not be rash, the rash get killed.' Sheldon raised a hand from h is pillow. 'you are too smart.' He snorted.

'Sheldon must not remember the bit about you impromptu with the Natali king?'

'Probably not.' He grinned. 'and that wasn't rash.'

'Besides.' Her cut in. 'We aren't sending you there alone at all.' He was a friend of her mind and a traitor to the public.

'Who says- I'll be alone.' He asks. 'Alec will be with me.' To show him, Alec yarned baring all his teeth before flopping down in Uway's lap again.

'He wants you to scratch him.' He told Unsway helpfully.

'Ferocious indeed.' He nodded. 'It isn't enough.'

'We have time to think about it.' Neelan stood. 'Let us all think on it.'

He wanted to scream; they did not have time. There was no time left once the fire burned Median. They were out of time, they needed to act.

A hand took hers. 'Sleep on it.' Mara patted her hand. Sheldon and Dawn nodded. They would think it was best.

'Well good night.' Dawn did a graceful curtsey. He was stumped. I could not be nightfall already. No! she had hoped to be able to sneak away to the temples for a little while and relieve Rue a little.

The Elders were first, she Her, Unsway and Alec brought up the rear. The four Elders were in deep conversation ahead of them. The three of them barely spoke until Unsway veered away. 'Night all.' He waved back him and he disappeared.

She detoured them off into a right hall and she could no longer hear the mumbling of anything. 'Where are, we going?'

'To our room.'

'He is right, we sleep down here.' Alec padded ahead. 'Mate is sleepy.' She was the only one in the group who was directionally challenged.

What did Alec mean calling Her 'mate.'? So, He was not the only one to see it. She looked tired. 'Have you slept at all?'

He squeezed her. 'Don't get accusing on me.'

'He wouldn't leave your bed.' Alec told her. It thrilled her that he had stayed by her, why did Alec sound so grumpy about it?

'He wouldn't let me sleep on the bed.'

'Why are you smiling?' She asked her finally coming to their door. He opens it.

'Alec isn't happy with you.'

'You are happy that I pissed off the cat?' he raised a brow leading her in. 'What did I do?'

'You wouldn't let him sleep on the bed.' He pouted.

'No use in letting him start now, he will only break it when he gets older. See he is fine right there.' Alec had curled up right near the fire seeming perfectly content with himself.

Someone had built a fire and left. Besides them, no one else was in the room. 'Will you stay?' His grip on her hand slackens enough to let her pull away.

'Do you want me to?' Her throat tightens and sweat broke on her palms. She had not slept in the same room, knowingly, with Her since they were Bound.

It was too late to take the words back, they were out. She waited for him to leave or stay. She did not know what she wanted more.

'Stay.' his grip tightens again around her hand.

She had not expected him to say yes. The room suddenly felt too crowded, his hands too warm even with the block of ice swirling around her belly as he led her to the bed.

He watched him kick off his sandal and scurried to do the same as well as take the darts from her hair. Her braid slapped her back as she scrambled up into the bed scooting over to make room for her husband. What now? What did she do now?

She watched in fascination; it was a simple move. All he did was take off his vest and slid into bed but it was the most graceful thing she had ever seen. He watched him roll to get comfortable, he slept on his side.

'Come over here.' He tried not to bristle or shiver at his words. It was easier to do the former when he said 'Please.' She scooted forward letting him roll back the covers and tuck her in. He had to feel her heart thump into his chest. She had never been so close to him like this before.

'What are you doing?' She asked bewildered when his head nuzzled into her neck. His breath tickled. She had not known what to expect but this was not it.

'Going to sleep.' He said burying his head into her hair. He hoped she had not missed a dart. She squirmed to get comfortable, he did not let her move much else. She could not getaway. He listens as his breath became shallow and even.

'Her?'

'Mom?'

'Why did you sleep before?' What had changed?

'You weren't safe before', his words were grumbled out. 'Nothing will happen to you here.'

Because this place was sacred? or because he knew and trusted the people here?

'Her?' He murmured. 'Her?' He was asleep. Truly sleep.

He snickered feeling his snores hit her jow. She wos not going to woke him even to tease him about his horrible snoring. It could wait. Over on the rug, Alec had rolled over onto his back in front of the fire. His mouth slightly open, his pink tongue honging over the side of his mouth. The lost thing he looked ot wos terrifying. His toil slithers side to side every occasionolly, dorting into the fire ond quickly owoy.

Between wondering if she would have a burnt kitty kit and Herr's snores, He fell asleep. Looks os though Cousin Greon hos hod o bit too much to drink, Westcliffe soid, signaling for two footmen. get him to his corriage.

Ansley looked over to see Sheffield grinning like o loon. finolly, I'll hove o nonboring tale to tell, he soid triumphontly. I'd keep it to yourself, Sheffield, Ansley worned.

Of course, old boy. But he wos foirly bouncing on the bolls of his feet os he shouldered his woy through the men who'd gathered around at the commotion. Apologies, he said to the men. I could not let an insult to Welford go unchallenged. Drink up.

Westcliffe took Ansley's knowing thot she was one of the follen - ond would reveol wings ond fangs when the trust was made, and the dissented of dark-magic- and craft, the arm and led him to a distont corner of the room, Stephen following in their woke.

'Sh-h.'

Whot was thot all obout? Westcliffe osked once they were oway from prying eors. He questioned the legitimacy of Jannie's child. you must know everyone's questioning it. it doesn't matter. She wos with child when Welford died. The courts will recognize it os his.

His words were spoken with too much vehemence. Both of his brothers were studying him as though only seeing him for the first time and as life. it's none of my concern' Westcliffe began. No, it is not, Ansley assured him.

'His not going to become like us?'

He strode for the Palace doors trying to hold her head high, it was hard. Her world felt os though it hod been flipped upside down, she didn't wont to tell Nevaeh or Meridian who walked beside her. They would think or know thot the Golem's poison wos finolly storting to offect her and take her back to the Doncer's Guild. She couldn't tell them so He fixed her eyes on the walk oheod. It wosn't hard with Nevaeh by her side to keep her steady. 'Almost there.' Nevoeh murmured to her softly. He nodded, her body wasn't tired but a dull ache begon to beat in her temples and her vision sometimes blurred out of focus if she moved her head a certoin way. The quicker she got Genny and Away out the better. The quicker she got everyone she cared obout to sofety, the better.

'Where is everyone?' He asked os she reolized that Meridian, Nevoeh, ond her own were the only footsteps to be heard wandering the Palace Halls. The only sounds besides that were the swishing of her Doncer's skirts thot Nevoeh hodfetched her. It sent chills to her spine. It reminded her of her first doy coming back to the Palace after the Fire.

'Don't know.' Meridian said uneasily. 'It almost reminds me of the time when the King went missing, the whole city wos placed on curfew for doys.' At the same moment, Nevaeh hissed for them hurry. They did, all of them sped for the Prison's Keep. A side staircase took them under the palace. His heod ached too much to toke in her surroundings. She just knew thot one moment there hod been sunlight pouring in through mossive windows, the next their world was under the eorth with only torches ond mage-light to see. Rows of cells lined the left and right side of the hallway; He didn't look into any of them. Not until she heord. 'He!' it was Genny's voice. His head snopped up towords its direction.

Genny's face peeped out from between the iron bars. Her face covered with soot and dirt, a grim smile lighting her face. 'You're alright.' relief flooded He's chest when she heard Genny's voice. Unable to do more, He nodded. She was unable to bring herself to tell her that she didn't have much time left. 'You shouldn't have come here, they-' He cut in before she could start to chastise her.

'Where is Away?' She demanded in a low voice, Genny's voice stilled, her feature turning into stone. It wasn't hard as stone, He bet if she pushed hard enough Genny would crack to a million pieces. Conflict warred behind her dark eyes that were almost black in the sunless space. Finally, she came to a decision.

'They are trialing him today.' He paled too, beside them Nevaeh and Meridian tensed. His mouth went dry and she had to close it. There was nothing she could say. 'What!' she found her voice; it was too loud. 'What could they-'

Again, there was confliction before Genny sighed. It was a small gesture that made her tragically beautiful, and then she was shaking her head. 'They think that you and him have been having a ... an affair.' He closed her eyes to stop the space from going from black to red. They were crazy, absolutely insane. 'He?' Genny said in a tight voice. 'Everyone knows that-'

'Get her out.' He shoved her lock picks at Nevaeh knowing she knew how to use them. She didn't want to hear whatever Genny had been about to say. 'Take her straight to the Guild. I'll meet you there.' Nevaeh stopped her eyes narrowing on her.

'No.' Nevaeh, Genny, and Meridian glared down at her. He drew herself up to full height preparing for a battle. Goddess, they didn't have time for this! She was running out of time; didn't they get it?

'I'm not giving you a choice and you don't have to come.' He tried to make her voice icy as she glared at them all. 'Go.' He ran for the exit surprised to find Meridian at her heels a moment later. Together they ran for the Council Chamber like their lives depended on it. Away's might.

Their feet were suddenly too loud and slow as the clacked on the stone floors. He burst through the ridiculously huge Council Chamber doors flanked by Meridian. As one all eyes turned to them, every gaze held the same expression. Shock. He glared back accusingly at the sight before her.

'What is the meaning of this!' her voice rolled through the room like a quiet thunder. No one quaked in their seats but no one moved either. Meridian put a restraining hand on He's shoulder but she violently shook him off. Anger rolled through her like magic, she wished it was magic. She would tear the walls down around them with her anger alone.

His feet carried her down the aisle towards the lone stand. Away stood behind it, his eyes bright at the sight of her but grim at the same time. At least he looked alright, dirty but not harmed. He thought.

'Lady.' The sneering voice caught her attention; she looked up to the dais and blanched. Highest Biseal sat in the King's Chair. He sat in She's seat!

'Biseal.' He said with as much contempt as she could sew into that one word. Goddess, she didn't like this man. 'You are in my husband's seat.' She said even when her hand grabbed Away's arm. Her fury only grew when she realized that they had chained him and his arms were bruised and his hands bloody.

'Someone had to take lead while you were,' he coughed 'absent.' Meridian said that guards had chased them when they tried to remove her from the Palace. Had the Guards been trying to stop them from hurting her, or had they been about to finish off what the Golem had started? No one seemed in any hurry to arrest Meridian and he stood right next to her. They did glare at him.

'I wasn't in the best of health.' He said through gritted teeth.

'How are you feeling now?' He asked leaning forward-looking too interested. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was the one to send that Golem. If Meridian had been telling the truth then he was the one that had if not started the Fire then conspired it. Maybe even tricked the apprentices into accidentally doing the spell.

'I would be better if you didn't have my Guard in chains.' She hissed up to him. 'Come down from The King's Chair.'

'I was voted in for this seat.'

'It was in my absence!' He hissed back.

'My Dear, a lot has changed in your absence.' He sneered. Funny how one seat could make him think he had so much power? He shook off the fact that it had made her think the same. How stupid she had been to think she was practically untouchable.

'Would you care to fill me in then?' He asked neutrally. Meridian had made his way to her side. Biseal spared him a disgusted look before turning back to her. The Lords, all of them seemed to shift restlessly, they had come to some decision about her and she was to be told. Now.

'The Gods sent me a vision about you my Dear of what you really are.' He said imperiously. His stomach ached; he was lying. He had to be, there was no way a magician had visions. That was done in the temples, another reason that the two were the opposite. Mages believed in magic; Priest believed in fate. He was lying his fat ass off.

'Oh, really?' He said casually, in her mind she reached for Her, her hand wrapping around her necklace. She wanted him to hear this. 'What did they tell you?'

'That you are unfit to rule as a woman. That child in your belly is a lie fabricated to keep you here. You have played your part here fairly well Lady,' there went that sneering again. 'But I've been told you didn't share your husband's bed before you were taken to Natali. You were however alone often with-him.' he nodded towards Away. His jaw dropped open. She didn't know whether to laugh or screech at his lies.

'Those are lies!' Meridian spoke when she found she could not. All He could truthfully see was red. The room swayed dangerously and for a moment she wasn't sure if it was the poison taking hold of her finally or if it was her rage. Maybe if she screamed and lunged at him the poison would pour from her mouth and fingertips into his worthless lying form while she strangled him! Her fingers twitched to try.

'This is treason!' He shook her head unable to stand not being able to simply slit his throat. 'Away is a friend, a trustworthy friend that has guarded me and my reputation better than anyone in this room can boast!'

'I'm sure he guarded you,' Biseal coughed. 'Very well. Adultery of The Lady is an act of treason as well.' Biseal said just as easily. She couldn't believe it. The room sat in anticipatory silence. No one was aiding Biseal in case He got the upper hand. No one wanted to lose their throat for treason. They weren't going to help her either. Somehow Biseal had gotten to every member of the Court. She was on her own. Goddess she wished Alec was with her.

'You've already tried to kill my child.' He found her tongue. 'I wasn't here because I was attacked right outside of the Goddess's temple in the palace. That was black magic! Is that the will of the Goddess as well?' He sneered wondering what he was to say. 'Or is it just your will in the God's name.'

He was so sure he had him. He didn't even blink. 'A Foreigner harps of foreign tales of Black magic and Lies.' His mouth dropped. At that moment she saw all the hate that he had held back. Hate mixed with something else that made her skin shiver. Lust?

'I am not.'

'Then why are you not dead?' He asked sitting back waiting for her to amuse him. There was a murmuring agreement from the Lords. He turned to glare at them. All but a few glared boldly back.

'Because, I am a mage.' He told them holding her head high. It wasn't a lie; she had a theory that it was the only reason her mind hadn't completely given into meaninglessness.

'He doesn't-' Away began but He silenced him with a wave of her hand.

'Mage?' Biseal said skeptically, his beady eyes looking her over. 'I think not.'

'I know so.' He stood proud. 'I'm a Truthteller.' the room erupted into laughter. Even Biseal chuckled in his snorting laughter. He glared up at him. 'It is true,'

'Show me?' Biseal asked-

'He, don't.' Away began. He shut him up with a glare. She was doing this for him, to get him out; he didn't need to know that she was already doomed. He wasn't telling her not to say anything for fear of them knowing she was a mage but because he knew what she was going to say.

'I can't,' she took a deep breath and told him. 'I haven't felt my magic since I put out The Fire.' A rumble of comments rippled around her. Even Meridian shot her a funny look, a skeptical one but still shocked. 'I- I don't know when it will return.' She held up her hands in a helpless shrug that left Biseal purple. His head was purple; it reminded her of a pimple that needed to be popped. He took a step forward and was snatched back. Meridian's wrapped his arm around her shoulders pulling her close to his side jostling her. He blinked, Biseal's face was normal again. It was red, not purple and it didn't look like a pimple but damn if she wouldn't like to squish it anyway. Especially when he said.

'You're a dirty little liar that was never for the good of Ysterym. You are the reason the Gods have forsaken us. You're the reason our King has fled. It is... You; it has always been you!' He's mouths fell open. 'You're the Black Omen upon Ysterym. Nothing will be put right until we do it.' Behind her, there was a murmur of agreement.

'But- I,' words failed her as her knees turned weak. For once she was speechless. Instead, her hands slipped into Meridian's pocket pulling out the picks she had begged him to find. The room fell into an eerie silence. Away just looked at her in shock. Everyone else looked nervous.

'Are you completely off your head?' She heard Meridian say with a quiver in his voice. 'She is the Queen, no matter what you think she has done. It doesn't make it true! There were bad omens in Ysterym long before she came and will be here long after we go to our graves. You are a fool!' He wanted to cheer. Instead, she hedged away from Meridian. He knew what he was doing and silently thanked him. This meeting had shot to hell quickly, they needed out. He slowly inched towards Away who stood in horror and rage as he looked at Biseal. Like he wanted the man's throat. Gods, He had never wanted anything so bad.

His hands firmly gripped Away's wrist, after she did this they had to be prepared to run. She looked at Away. He nodded; his face determined. She had to remember to tell him that Nevaeh had gotten Genny out before he went off to look for her. The picks turned in the lock with an audible click. He winced even as the shackles fell into her hands from Away's wrist.

'Seize her!' He flew backward behind the protective stances of the two men. Meridian tucked her safe against his back as he whirled around to meet the sound of sliding swords. Despite herself, He was intrigued by them. They were different than any swords she had ever seen. The blade instead of being straight and pointed, they were sickled with a blade's edge for a tip. 'Take her in, all of them in for the use of Black magic against Ysterym and treason against the king's name!'

'No!' He gripped Meridian's arm. She looked at Away, he didn't have chains shackling him but he was in no condition for a fight. Meridian was too exhausted to fight. He didn't want to fight them. She simply wanted Biseal's head to roll.

'There isn't another way out.' Meridian hissed. He's belly rolled. She knew there wasn't.

'Do you have a weapon.' when he did nothing but look at her, He cursed before belatedly realizing she didn't have a dagger on her either.

'Grab Her, get her!' the first guard charged them. He easily dodged his stupid attempt at them.

Meridian grabbed his swords as He kicked him down to the ground. Her foot rolling him over to his side. Just in time to trip the next guards charging them. Somehow Meridian fought off two, three, until Away was able to pick up sword and help. He was tucked in close beside Meridian. Away stuck nearby her open side. He couldn't believe that their duo was fending off a troop.

It was obvious that Meridian was a sword's men by the way he held his weapon like it was a part of his arm. Away was an assassin and held his own. Both of them kept their bodies in front of He as though they were her breathing armor. She watched in awe as Away stabbed a nearby guard that had tried to do the same. Rushing forward He raided him for weapon's praying silently to the Goddess to forgive them all, and herself. She came out with a short dagger and a sword that she was only moderately trained to use.

'Thank you.' Away easily nicked the sword out of her hand as he twirled into another fight. They were still progressively moving forward towards the huge Council doors.

'Hey-' He wished she had thought not to distract them. A trio rushed her friends at once, each taking them in a different direction. One the left, the other right, and one came at the front and center. Meridian sliced through the first one while Away hacked back the second. The third rushed past them right for He, his blade aimed for her chest.

'He!' Away tried to trip the guard but was forced to engage another guard who had rushed forth. His eyes widened as her body reacted, twisting into itself He twirled out the way slamming into Away's side as her hand that held the dagger lashed out. She felt it connect with something hard yet soft and sink in. She squealed as the guard went down, a fresh spurt of blood flowed from a side wound. By the Goddess, they were painting the Council Room red. No one moved to interfere, to help, they were completely alone. He rubbed her head, a serious pain tingled along her spine and up into her head.

'Princess!' He jumped looking up to the dais where the King sat. She could have wept.

'She?' He nearly dropped her knife in a burst of joy at seeing him here. He would set everyone to right. By the look on his face, no one here today would pay for what they were doing.

'He waits!' He ignored Away's arms; he didn't understand that they were saved. She would help them straighten this whole thing out.

He picked up her Dancer's skirts as she ran for the dais dogging around the fallen bodies of the guards. She had to make it back to the dais where She was. He stood tall looking down at her, a grim smile spread on his face that made her want to hug him even more. She just needed to get to him.

'She!' He reached out for him as she ascended the steps. He reached for her snatching her forward with a force that made He gasp. The momentum slammed her forward into a solid chest, she could have cried out.

'Goddess, I've missed you.' He said on the verge of tears. She wanted to cry and scream. He wanted to kiss She for coming home at last and not leaving her with this mess. She looked up into his scowling face as he looked out at the Lords.

'I know Princess, never again I swear.' He hugged her tight. 'Give me the dagger.' He reached for it. He hesitated.

'I-'

'Heania.' She's voice became stern. 'Give me the dagger.' His hands took it from her fingers while she tried to decide whether she should hand it to him or not.

He sputtered up at him about to give him a piece of her mind but she was twirled around to face the Lords. Why were Away and Meridian still fighting? Didn't they see that She was home, they could stop? Her mouth opened to yell for Away or Meridian before something sharp nicked into her neck. The world stopped, He froze, like a blade bit into her skin. It was her blade - why would She press a dagger to her throat?

'Don't say a word or I will slice you open.' The words made her shudder at their coldness, she meant it. He was going to kill her.

'The baby-' He began-

'That bastard can die with you.' He head-butted him; it must have stunned him because She roared as he stumbled back, the blade pressed dangerously into her neck. He gulped but must have cried out because Away and Meridian turned to her as one. Both of them stood stunned as she felt. What was going on?

'She?' He asked tentatively-

'No Darling,' The voice sounded like She. He shut her eyes against his words, he had told her no. He must have been telling the truth, she never called her Darling. 'Drop your weapons.' He wasn't speaking to her; He guessed he spoke to Away and Meridian. She winced when both did so without hesitation.

'Don't you hurt her.' Meridian stated through clenched teeth as if that would somehow remove the blade from her throat.

'I cannot hurt the dying.' She heard She's a soft murmur in her ear. It made her shudder. 'You are dying aren't you Darling?' He wanted to shake her head but ended up just shaking, period. It earned her a cruel laugh. 'Seize them!'

'No!' His words broke through her haze. This wasn't happening, not again. Please Goddess let this be some horrible dream. He prayed with her eyes wide open as she lunged forward the blade sliced into her throat creating a shallow cut. He barely noticed the hot slice of pain. 'Let them go! Please!' Guards rushed the two men; she saw their weapons being kicked out of grabbing distance. Two guards stood on either side of Away and Meridian as they tied her friend's hands behind their backs. This couldn't be happening but it was. She was letting this happen - he was doing it! He thought fast.

'You can't.' He stated louder and more confident than she could have ever thought possible.

'Away is under diplomatic immunity, if you touch him you risk a war with Natili. We can't afford a new ally to become an old foe. It isn't Meridian's fault, I threatened to take away his lands and title if he didn't help me. You have no reason to hold them here, banish them and be done with it.' She frowned but shrugged.

'If you keep fighting to get her not only will I kill her outright, you will both hang.' Both men stopped their advancement. The room rustled finally; the Lords broke out into wild murmuring. He would outrightly kill the Queen. He heard bits or what they were saying. 'Still she might be telling the truth, there might be a child.' She turned them out again to favor Meridian and Away who were eying her stubbornly. If they stayed any longer, they would do something rash that would get them killed. They had to go.

'Go my Lords; you're both dismissed from my service.' He said as Queen as she could. Her legs felt as though they would buckle, her whole body just wanted to explode from frustration and anger. This was unfair, it wasn't right, it- a flash of pure hit struck her body and she felt her magic boil up out of pure frustration. He reached for it desperately only to feel it retreat. Frustrated tears pricked her eyes, she blinked them away quickly.

Neither of the men moved. He frowned. 'Guards!' She called while pleading with them both. 'See that Lord Away and Lord Meridian make it safely outside the palace walls.' She said watching more guards come forward to flank them. 'No harm will come to them.' He said as menacingly as possible.

'No harm will come to them.' The guard, the lead guard, decided when he took a stance before her. His eyes glittered with a look He didn't understand, anger? Was he angry that he had to obey her? His lips were pinched tight as he gave a curt nod to his team. Meridian and Away were dragged from the room. He winced when they struggled.

Two weeks had passed and Jannie's lethargy seemed to worsen. She could not seem to decipher her feelings regarding Welford or Ansley. The only feelings she truly trusted was those she felt for the babe. She knew she should return to Herndon Hall, but she seemed unable to work up the energy needed to order the servants.

With her elbow resting on the sill, and her chin propped in her hand, she sat at the window in her bed-chamber gazing out on what she could see of Rockville at night. Which wasn't much. Trees blocked her view of the street. She saw the lighted drive but knew it would still be empty. The Duchess of Greystone was hosting a ball this evening. It was always well attended, so Jannie knew no one would call this evening.

Following the interment, the men returned to the residence. Adhering to the custom that women did not attend funerals, the society matrons waited with Jannie in the front parlor. As Ansley passed by on his way to taking the men to the library for libations, he caught sight of Jannie with women sitting around her, his mother holding her hand. Her pale pallor concerned him. He wanted to lift her into his arms and carry her upstairs to her bed-chamber, away from the madness.

Instead, he pushed forth to the library, where footmen had already begun pouring drinks for the guests. When all had a glass in hand, Ansley lifted his and an expectant hush filled the room.

to Welford. He was courageous in all things, met all of life's challenges head-on. You will be missed, old friend. hear! Hear!

As Ansley downed the whiskey, Lord Sheffield said, at least we can all be assured that there will be fox hunting when we join him. I daresay, he'll see to it that all is put to rights in that regard.

Another toast followed, more whiskey was swallowed, and quiet conversation and laughter ensued as the men began to reminisce about Welford. Ansley wandered over to where Westcliffe and Stephen were talking. Now that he knew the truth of their parentage, it amazed him that he'd not suspected before. Westcliffe was dark-haired, like his sire, and Stephen was blond, fair as a summer afternoon. Westcliffe's eyes were deep Black, almost black, and Stephen's was blue with lines within.

The arrangements for Welford were nicely done, Stephen said quietly.

Ansley nodded, distracted by the man he'd spotted nearby talking with Lord Sheffield. do my eyes deceive me or is that my cousin Green Demure talking with Sheffield?

Both his brothers looked discreetly in the direction

Ansley had shown. I'd say so, yes, Westcliffe murmured. he is next in line for Welford's title, isn't he? quiet. Does he look to be a man going mad with syphilis?

Westcliffe and Stephen both looked at him as though he were the one going mad. Had Welford lied about that as well? Damn him! The man was turning out to be an expert manipulator. Think I'll have a word. But getting there meant running the gauntlet of those who wished to offer their condolences. It was no secret that he and Welford had been close. So, he graciously acknowledged the kind words that were spoken as he wended his way toward his target. He wasn't quite there when he heard Sheffield say, ...bated breath to discover if Lady Welford will deliver a son.

I don't know if the courts will care one way or the other. My cousin was paralyzed. If he got her with child, I'll eat my hat. shall I fetch it for you? Ansley asked.

Grean jerked around so quickly that the whiskey in his glass nearly sloshed over the sides.

cousin. You're not on the branch of the tree that's in line for the title so perhaps you've not given it any thought. But you have. If you're wise, you'll hold your tongue on the matter. is that a threat? It is a promise. Lady Welford has suffered enough during the past few years and she deeply mourns the

passing of her husband. That does not mean he got her with a child. I've heard rumors that you danced with her, that you were seen walking alone with her in the garden. as a favor to Welford, I attended her where he could not. does that include her bed?

His fist shot up so fast that the pain was ricocheting from his knuckles to his shoulder before he even realized he'd delivered the blow to Grean's chin. His cousin dropped to the floor with an unceremonious thud. Completely out. He wasn't going to get up any time soon.

Westcliffe and Stephen were instantly at Ansley's side.

The room was closing in, literally. If she reached out both her hands, she could push them apart. He clenched her hands down at her side pushing away the crazy thoughts. The walls weren't closing in, it was all in her head.

'Lady?' He shook her head staving off Aisling's advance to help. The woman missed nothing and the way He had been glaring at her confines was not missed. She just couldn't help it, she refused to go back to sleep. Not while Genny and Away sat in the Purgatory, goddess this was such a mess. Worse, all of this was her fault.

'I need a favor, Aisling-' He licked her lips wishing she could think of another way. 'You're a healer in the palace, but you're a Dancer.'

'It isn't publicly known that I'm a Dancer.' Aisling said warily. He paused that made sense. In the palace Dancers weren't all that trusted. It was for the best that it wasn't known that Aisling was o ne.

'Are there other dancers in the palace, ones that I don't know of?' He asked unsurely. There had to be, she refused to believe that the Guild would be content to sit in the eyes of the palace and not have spies looking out for Her or for the Guild itself.

'There are a few I know and a lot more I don't.' Aisling had been hard at work writing down something in her small book. Her pen stroked in fast scrawls across the sheet until He looked away afraid that she would lose her focus and slip away into another nightmare. 'I will see what I can find out for you.' she watched Aisling stand and walk for the exit.

He shivered; she could withstand a lot of things but not another nightmare. Thank the Goddess that she had her sanity, for now. After the last dream, He wasn't sure how she could trust it anymore. What if this was a dream too? She couldn't take falling in and out of dreams, maybe if she pinched herself- ouch! Well, it hurt like this was real.

'Lady?' Aisling's concerned tone crept in on her musing. He quickly hid her arm where her pinch already started to bruise.

'Can you contact someone?' He asked quickly. 'I want to know what is going on.' she needed to get Aisling away from her too.

'I cannot-'

'What of Monroe then?' He asked trying to find something to get her. Aisling's face clouded telling her all she needed to know. There was something between Monroe and Aisling, a friendship hopefully.

'I don't want him there alone- my protection for him means nothing if I'm not there to enforce it.' Aisling frowned.

'You and the heir are more important.' Aisling said bravely, He wanted to shake her.

'Aisling, we're dying!' she hated to see the healer flinch. 'You said it yourself- nothing can be done but to wait for lucidity to leave me, from the inside, out right? I want the people I care about safe, please.' she knew she had the healer when her shoulders drooped. Her formidable form shook in deep tremors. He rushed quickly to hug her, she hated being so harsh. So blunt. 'Please?' She begged.

It felt like an eternity passed before Aisling sighed, it said everything she wanted to know. 'Thank you!' He hugged her tight.

'I'll be back before noon,' Aisling said briskly pulling away. 'You're not to leave this room.'

'Yes,' He nodded crossing her fingers behind her back as if she were a child. They use to pull this when they were children. Crises crossed my lies got lost.' she muttered over her shoulder. She knew that it was still early morning before the sun had even stirred. There was time yet she just had to -

'Princess?' He jumped at the voice as if her very thoughts had summoned this phantom voice.

'Oh, thank the Goddess!' the voice was exuberant. It was also defiantly male. He wanted to cry; the poison was setting in early. She was becoming delusional. By the stars, she was sitting in a cell with a baby sitter thinking that her husband was speaking to her.

'But I am speaking to you Heania.' She's voice said happily. 'My Heania.' he added in afterthought.

'Gods are too cruel.' He said slumping down onto her bed. Aisling gave her one more stern stare before departing from the room. He sighed watching her form leave. She had been making the feeling so much worse. She was sitting in a cell waiting to die, just brooding. He curled up into herself to stare at the wall with the flickering flames. 'I see you in Her arms, now I'm hearing you-'

'Of course, you hear me, you're wearing the talisman I gave you. He doesn't you remember?' His hands flew into her shirt feeling for the signet resting against her breast. Her fingers clutched it so hard she felt its imprint embedding into her skin.

'I didn't.' She admitted solemnly.

'It doesn't matter- I heard you scream. He you made my heart stop.' She's voice became tight. 'Where are you?' his questions came in a tirade that demanded answers. He took in a deep breath, she could just see him sitting, his leg shaking with impatience as he forced everything else to stay still. She smiled.

'I'm in the Guild, Nevaeh, Aisling, Genny, and Away smuggled me out. Meridian did as well.'

'I'm so glad.' he sounded so glad. 'You and the baby are safe.' for now.

'Yes,' He wheedled, she had to tell him the truth but she was reluctant to intrude upon his happiness. 'Genny and Away were caught and taken to the purgatory.'

'For keeping you safe?' He said clearly believing that she was wrong. She wished that she was wrong.

'The Golemn got me.' she couldn't spare him that detail. 'They found me outside the temples and tried to get me out- I think someone alerted the Guards because they thought I was being kidnapped. Everyone that saved me is a traitor of the Crown.' The Median was going to explode when they heard this tomorrow. The Queen had disappeared not once but twice.

'It spoke your name?' She spoke when it became impossible to stay silent.

'Yes.' He shook remembering the bleakness of the whole thing. 'It pierced my chest. She,' I'm not going to make it that long, the words caught in her throat. Instead, she said. 'I need your help.' she told him after a moment after she realized she couldn't say the stuff in the middle.

'I'm on my way home, Princess I swear to you-'

'I need Mican's help- She we aren't strong enough to fight this.' His voice tightened. 'Goddess I don't even have my magic to help me-' He stopped mid-speech a thought in her mind forming that was so ridiculous that it might work. 'She, did Mican get that necklace off?'

'No.' he was firm. He didn't care, one way or another he was coming home.

'Do you think he could do a spell that would give me my magic back?' She asked slowly, there was a pause in the air that told her that he had stopped whatever task he had been doing. 'She I feel like such a fool.' this had to be the answer, it had been there the whole time.

'I will ask him but enough is enough, I will be home within two days.' it took nearly five on horseback to reach Median from the Bud border. That was without a raiding party and with a really fast horse.

'The Golemn's poison will set in by high noon. I have a lot to do between now and then.' He frowned; she had a couple of hours. Half a day at most. She would not leave her friends in the Purgatory; she wouldn't allow Meridian's name to be tarnished. 'Aisling told me if I am lucky then high noon is it.'

'I'll ask Mican, He I'll be home before anything else happens to you. Just rest, when you open your eyes, I'll be home.' He wanted to argue that the last time she closed her eyes she dreamed that Nevaeh had taken her place. She couldn't get those words out either.

'That sounds lovely.' He said instead forcing cheerfulness she didn't feel. Her whole body was strung tight but numb to all pain. Being told she had less than a day to set everything to the right went beyond everything.

'It's true. I'll be home in no time, with a cure.' He was sure, there was nothing for her to do but believe him. He sounded so confident; it was more to assure her than anything.

'I believe you.' He said softly.

'Good so I want my girls to just rest until I get back, swear.' he demanded of her.

'I'm not a Truth-teller anymore.' He smiled a bit. 'And stop calling it a girl.' she snapped because she had to. Not letting She have his way on everything was a luxurious pleasure.

'I don't care- don't take on everything by yourself when you don't have to. Let the Guild take care of you. u she is a her because that is the way it is. Get used to it Love.' He made a face knowing arguing at the moment was futile.

'They take care of me because- of you.' He shook her head surprised to hear She snort.

'They would kill me to save you, He. Haven't you heard the stories going on about you? The Dancer's Queen. The Queen that builds her city with her people, the stories that have reached about you are inspiring.' the awe in She's voice dumbfounded her. She had barely been out of her rooms since it was discovered she was pregnant. 'Those people care about you because they love you.' so there, deal with it, you are loved.

He clenched her jaw unsure how to deal with what he was telling her. 'I don't know how to feel about that, I'll worry about it later- She I need your help for something else now.' He sketched out her half-formed plan of how she planned on getting Genny and Away out of Purgatory. Aisling might know people in the Guild but there was no way to know if any of them could help. There wasn't any time to wait or lose, she had till noon.

She listened to her, heard her out before he told her what he knew. 'Why do you need to know?'

'So-o, I can give the information to someone to help get them out.' He told him easily. It was only a half-lie. He didn't have to know that she had every intention of breaking them out.

-And-

After another tight silence, she told her the rest of everything she needed to know. Including a secret way of escaping out the Guild. She felt horrible by the end. When he made her promise not to do anything stupid, she had to do another Crisscrossed lie got lost. She told him that she wouldn't. Their goodbye was and 'I love you.' She would never see him again if she couldn't stop the poison. It was all on her.

'Lady?' He jumped a small smile lit her face as she saw Nevaeh take hesitant steps toward h er, Meridian a couple behind her. Both of them looked so tired He wanted to shove them into the nearest seat.

'Sit, sit.' He waved them into seats if she was going to do this, she needed their help. Even Meridian's if he had helped her out the Guild then maybe she had been wrong in suspecting him all along, Nevaeh too. The two of them had been unconsciously high on her list of suspects even though she and Nevaeh had become close friends. At least she hadn't had to track them down, they had come to her.

'Lady.' Meridian nodded cautiously, his normally smooth face was handsome and clean cut. Right then he just looked so exhausted He wanted nothing more but to give him her blanket and tell him to rest. 'Forgive me for not getting to you sooner.' His brows knitted together in confusion. Her face was the mirror of Nevaeh's.

'I don't-'

'I should have warned you sooner and I did not for that I am sorry -'

'Meridian.' He said slowly unsure what she could say. 'Be blunt with me.' she liked blunt it didn't give her time to be filled with dread doom or despair. It all just hit at once leaving you to catch up.

His face twisted as though he would be sick before steeling into weary features. 'I've known this was going to happen - not that you were going to be attacked that night but I knew it was to come.' so they had been plotting her attack for some time? He had to have seen it coming, she had and turned a blind eye to it. It had been stupid to deny that it could happen. She had been foolish now this was the price.

'Are you telling now because you know the price for treason? Or because you think it won't matter?' she would be dead by noon high without her magic it was the only thing that she was assured.

'I know what treason means.' He said stiffly. 'and you do matter, your life matters to me and it was foolish to think I could stave off your attack like I did.' He didn't know if she believed him or not. He could just be telling her this now so she would see that he had mercy. Or he could be telling the truth. 'I've seen what you've done even with everyone trying to hinder you, myself included.' He and Nevaeh exchanged glances. 'I would like to see what other changes you can make.'

'Even though I'm a woman?' He couldn't help her sarcasm. From the first she had met Meridian he hadn't done anything to hide what he thought of a woman's capabilities.

'It's a pleasure to say I've met a few exceptions to my philosophy. I want everything you can offer Median for Defama.' he spoke of his lands. He wanted to ask what made him think he would be allowed to keep them but didn't feel sure enough to taunt him in that way.

'Tell me everything.' He sat forth; Meridian's eyes widen when he realized she was dressed in a simple shift- a nightdress. His eyes quickly glanced away. He snorted; the women of Ysterym wore less going about their daily routines. What made her so different.

'There is a lot to confess Lady.' He said simply. She had to ask then, fine.

'Who started the fire?' That was the most important. If she did nothing else before she died, she wanted whoever did it dead.

'The University.' Meridian spoke without hesitation. He sat back stung. So, he knew, he had truly known all this time!

'I've only just found out about it through the ears I have, just like everyone else.' He said

quickly.

'You should be shamed!' He snapped. 'Goddess do you know how many people died! Homes and families that need justice-' He looked away disgusted only to turn back to him with a glare. 'That's inexcusable!' At least he had the decency to look ashamed. 'Why?' why was the city burned, there wasn't a good enough reason for it but she had to know.

'Ysterym is a delicate balance of powers, Lady.' Meridian murmured. 'The Gods temples, the Crown, the Guilds. As King, she represented all.' He frowned. 'He is the Crown as king, the king is appointed by the Gods, and he is a known figure head in all of the main Guilds. He is all.'

'Where does that leave the University?' Nevaeh asked curiously. It was the first time she had spoken in a while.

'Don't be fooled lady,' Meridian spoke to Nevaeh but didn't look up. 'The University is a Guild too; they just choose to distance themselves. The Temples could be considered Guilds...but since it is the Gods, they are separate.' He nodded still confused. 'The University feels superior because they have magic. A gift given to them by no other than the Gods - they think they are gods in their own right. That is what rumors are saying. Biseal believes he is a godly deity.' Meridian's voice held as much contempt for the man as He felt. 'He had even been an advisor to King She, he was restationed a season before you came into our court Lady.' He jumped, which surprised her. She would have thought Biseal was too high and mighty but then the position did suit him. He would be in power to influence a King. He would never turn that down.

'Why did he step down?' He asked curiously.

'Oh, he didn't. King She...retired him.'

'Why would he do that?' He asked, she knew she knew nothing but now was her chance to snatch answers. She had to take it. Even when it was taking up her precious time.

'Because Biseal didn't want the Crown to be tainted with foreign blood.' He rocked back as though she had been slapped or kicked. She could have thought of multiple things but never that.

'I remember something like that.' Nevaeh frowned looking to He. 'She threw him out the door, literally. Nothing was going to change his mind about bringing you here.' He waited to hear traces of

resentment and found none. Nevaeh looked at her in open honesty. 'I forgot about that He, I'm sorry. I know that being dismissed didn't sit well with Biseal. He's been known to have a temper.' Meridian nodded.

Shaking her head, she wanted Meridian to tell her more. He was spellbound as she listened in horror to what he said next. 'It started the moment She disappeared. You could just feel it stirring. The University started chirping about the displeasure the Gods had for the King for taking a foreign wife- one with no power to match his own at that.' He's eyes shut but she listened on. 'The fact that you didn't carry his brand didn't help. They insisted the Gods weren't pleased. The Temples weren't swayed to believe what the University said. The Danceer's Guild was quick defending you both. When you both went missing it became increasingly hard to leave the Gods out of it. You were gone for so long it was hard to tell what rumor were the city's and what the University started.' What Biseal started. He thought icily.

'We all tried to ignore it, but we couldn't when the fire started.' Meridian's words didn't sit right with her. Someone had to have known something. Fire's didn't just start, they were set. 'We did n't know anything of it until we heard it roaring.' by then no one could have stopped it, it burned wild and free untamed, unchecked. Only by divine interference.

'By then there was nothing you could have done.' He said numbly. 'By the time I made it back Median was blazing- nothing would have helped.' except her magic He thought feeling sick. If she and she had returned a moment or worse a day later, so much more would have been lost.'

'Except the divine power the Gods bestowed upon the University.' Nevaeh's voice was faint. He spared her a glance finding her flushed with her lips pinched tight in anger. He wondered if she looked similar, about to burst in anger.

'Of course, they would have been there to pick up the pieces- to save the day.' Meridian said with disgust. Again, He couldn't tell if he was faking it. He was still trying to claim what wasn't his or anyones except Her's. Did he think he could get a crown out of this, by telling her?

A grim smile touched his lips and finally, he looked up at her. He found no comfort. 'Then you came back, out of the smoke. Out of nowhere you come in and your Guardian roars fear back into everyone's hearts. Making demands- without your husband.' He chuckled a little. 'You were a sight to behold, when you announced you were pregnant- with all the healers backing your claim. There was no chance of dethroning you- everyone knew it.' Biseal knew it too. He didn't want foreign blood mixing with the Crown, you and She having a baby was his worst dream come true.

'So, they sent the Golemn to attack me?' He asked incredulously.

'Attack you- and the child.' He agreed. 'I can't say it was the University who sent it Lady, there are a lot of people, powerful people who wish to see you dead.' He flinched. 'There are a lot of people who feel the same way Biseal does.' that bloodlines shouldn't be mixed.

'Well if you are finding-up with being against me,' He licked her lips trying to find a way to effectively bottle up her anger. 'I want you to help me.'

'I was always-' He raised a hand and he went quiet.

'You didn't immediately come forth, you waited until it was too late.' she told him. 'I nearly died, that is against me!' her voice turned hard as it raised higher. 'Now, are you going to help me or are you going to stay here and explain to Aisling and the Elders where I've gone.'

Meridian didn't miss a moment. 'I'll follow you.' She turned to Nevaeh who was fighting her own battle with her anger.

'I'm with you.' she said, her dark brown gaze burned into He's sight and she looked away. They were both too angry for words.

He nodded relieved. She had hoped they would say that. 'Good, here is what I need for you two to do.'

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Honor told her the coast was clear, after a day of resting and endless fussing and snarling (the latter on Ham's part.) the other women had finally taken pity on her. As well they should. Alec grumbled but did not try to keep her confined.

He slipped out of her room and away. She was free for the first time in what felt like forever. Free of the constant fussing and naps and growls for her to wake and eat when all she wanted to do was sleep through oblivion. Someone was always with her, mostly Her growling at her to not even think about making a run for the door. She would not dream of it she knew he had locked it.

-And-

When she woke for the first time truly, she had not been there like before. It was for the best; he was always arguing with her to eat or drink. What did it matter, there were people outside these walls that had not had a meal in days?

He headed in the direction Alec had sent her, this time with him at her heels. Towards the little room that led out into the city, she was going to visit the temples again and see if she could snoop around the palace grounds a little more.

He turned around the last corner so lost in thought she smacked into a wall. 'Where are, you going?' He cursed; it was worse than a wall. It was the Heir's chest.

She stood walking with another man Him did not recognize. He was tall and young-looking.

Possibly a few years older than she was. His hair was red Him marveled at it. She liked him instantly. 'Himalia, this is Unsway. An old friend of mine. We trained together.' He nodded smiling up at the other man, she got distracted by his smile. It was handsome and sweet. Herr's arms snaked around her and did not let go.

'Now back to what I was asking earlier.' He tugged her. 'Where were, you going?'

'Out.' she moved around him only to be snagged and two men blocking her way. He growled. He growled back, then Alec growled hissing for them all to back away from her. Anyway, tumbled over himself to put distance between them. She did not move.

'Not so fast Love, Mara wants to speak to you and a couple of the Elders are eager to meet you.'

Planting her feet, Him looked between the two men. 'Why is that?' she should have known he would never let her keep her balance. When he tugged, she flew forward, his head rested on top of hers. 'Because you are the only one who has been outside these walls in days. you my insolent one is the only one who has been to the palace.' he chewed on that. He felt him growl in disapproval. 'They want to speak to the woman who stopped the fire?' Ham's gut twisted; she had not felt her magic since.

Instead, she turned in Herr's grip to Unsway surprised to find him watching them. A bemused look plastered to his face. Her face felt hot from the temple to below her chin. When she ducked her head, he chuckled.

'It isn't as though I know more than they do.' He grumbled upset that she had gotten flustered. She took her hand and began the walk.

'I have no doubt but they shall not tell me a thing until they know how you are doing. They want you to sit in on these meetings.'

'Are you using me?' She glared at her husband when he did not answer she turned to Anyway. 'Doesn't it sound like he is using me?'

'Yep.' Anyway, dodged Herr's swing, dancing out of the way delicately.

'Don't be mean to him.' He chastises. 'so, you really need me.' her smile grew as she watched Her pale and shuffle away from her. 'I like them already.' He told Her feeling smug. Finally, people who knew how it should be. She seriously needed to follow the lead on this. Beside them, Unsway chuckled under his breath. He could not help but look at him again. He was tall, a little shorter than Her. Lean and

corded with tightly compressed muscle he showed off unintentionally. Like Her, he wore nothing but the customary Dancer's vest and long pants and sandals.

His footsteps were never heard, ever. He wonders how much practice it took to walk without sound. Her and Unsway made it look so graceful, simple even. One dancer to her left and one to her right. He had an escort down the halls to where ever they decided to take her.

'Where is everyone?' He asked feeling the coolness of the halls snake over her skin. She never saw anyone in the halls. On rare occasion, she came across one or two, they were always quick on their way.

'Most of them left.' Anyway, murmured down to her.

'Why would they do that?'

'The fire scared many of them. Others have family they wished to go check on, they will be back. Others were sent to send word to the other Guilds. This location is not a large one there were never many of us here to begin with. Six dozen at one time at most. Except during celebrations and holidays.'

He nodded. 'Why didn't the fire scare you away?' He glanced down at her, wondering why she was asking so many questions. He did not seem bothered by it; she would keep asking even after he was.

'Do you think I frighten easily?' He stood tall and bold puffing out his chest as they continued down the hall.

'He's shyer than a mouse.' Her interjected.

'Am not!' Anyway, glared over her head.

'You near peed yourself over him.' He jerked his thumb at Alec trailing at Ham's heels. Anyway, looked down and shuddered.

'Braver men would have soiled themselves trying to get away from that-'

'Alec.' He put in gently. 'His name is Alec.'

Anyway, nodded winking at her. 'To get away from Alec.' He nodded and they walked on.

'Him!' Mara was the first to greet her, the older woman walked forward to greet them the instant they stepped into the room. The older woman's arms wrapped around Him pulling her away from Her and she found herself clasping her back. In the short while she was in the man Mystery guild, she liked the Mara. The small woman was stronger than she looked and much sharper tongued than her sweet appearance let on. Her silver rope of hair was a deception and her small from was all show.

'Mara.' He let go but Mara held tight to her shoulders pushing her back.

'You look different.' she mussed; He watched the calculations run through the back of her dark eyes. 'Happier.'

He did not know what to tell her, she was very happy. Had been until she came back here to find cinder instead of houses. 'What is going on?' He remembered that there were more people in the room beside them. They stood at Mara's back patiently waiting. He noted there were two women and one man. The Elders.

One woman was a native, the other two she could not place.

'We were hoping you would be able to shed a little light on that.' the native woman closest to Mara came forward. She was tall and slender, age lines etched into her face, and the hand she extended in greeting. He took it marveling at how her skin glowed in the mage light.

'Princess, the is Dawn.' She easily stepped in. 'Dawn is an Elder of the Guild here in Median.'

He said this with obvious pride. Do not be fooled by the Nana facade was what He got out of his words.

'Dawn this is Queen Himalia, my wife.' He again marveled at how much pride he said that with. He had never spoken of her like that before, she liked it.

Sharp brown eyes cut her attention back to the woman in front of her. He was right, He tried not to squirm under the barely had scrutiny. Beside her, Alec growled pressing himself into her knee.

'We've heard a lot about you.' Dawn finally smiled changing her face completely. The last two elders stepped forward.

'Mara loves to talk about you and your singing.' The man raised his hand and He took it. He was stocky and packed in a way that should have made his movement heavy. They did not he was just as graceful as any dancer. He did not smile like Dawn and Mara were. He did not try to hide his scrutiny. 'is it true you fell off the stage?' She winces.

She saved her from answering. 'Him, this is Sheldon and Neelan of Median-'

'Formerly of Rockville.' Neelan put in. He nodded, that explained it.

Neelan was tall too. Taller than Sheldon by several inches her eyes were brown and doe-like. She sucked a lot of people in that way. 'Welcome.' He nodded.

'Nice to meet you all.'

'Enough formality.' Mara waved them off. 'Merry met my sister.' they all moved away settling on the pillows circling the room. He was alone standing in a room of Elders.

Alec purred, rubbing against her leg before a warm presence pulled her back. Anyway, nudged her shoulder before settling onto a pillow. That left one for them. He settles in letting Her draw her back into his lap. Without thinking about it He tapped at his mental barriers. He let her in. Does this mean you aren't made with me anymore?' He didn't answer her, not right away. he never spoke, his mind felt like a hand caressing over her own. Soft and intimate, warm-

Sheldon cleared his throat. Four elders, Unsway and Alec all watched them. All amused.

'Pay attention.' Alec flopped down at her thigh laying his head -on Uway's lap. The man tensed but reached his hand out to stroke her kit's head.

'Start from the beginning.' Mara encouraged. He did, describing all that she could remember about being taken to what happens in Kraal to how they got out. No one so much as blinked when she told them of walking through an iron gate and turning invisible. When He got to the fire it all changed.

'That was you!' Neelan squeaked. He ducked her head hiding behind her hair.

'I'm not sure.' she told them. 'maybe.'

'It was.' everyone turned to Her who hadn't spoken since He had taken up telling the tale.

'Himalia can do things. she has power over words.' he squeezed her hand. 'At first I thought she was a truth teller too- or just a seer.' all four elders nodded. 'But when she lied, such as in the tower she spoke it and it became the truth.'

He ducked her head away from everyone not liking the way they studied her as one would study a fascinating piece of art. 'What are you trying to say?' Anyway, leans forward toward them.

'That somehow her will out ceded the truth. She is a binder not a seer.'

Ham's mouth gaped. 'Binder?' Neel scooted forward. Dawn tilted her head. 'there hasn't been one of those in my lifetime. possibly centuries.'

He shrugged. 'Sorry.' he mouthed to her. He better- be.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I wasn't sure. Don't be upset.'

He ignored him. 'How are you so sure now?'

'You stopped that fire and it is better to come to terms with it now. You are a truth binder.'

'Can you show us?' Mara asks. Ham's chest squeezed.

'I haven't felt my magic since the fire.'

Sheldon nodded. 'you over exerted yourself' He was so confident and graceful He could not help but like him. 'It will come back.'

'Hope so.' She squeezed her hand.

'I do as well.' Mara agrees. 'it sounds as though you will be needing it.'

He wanted to tell them that they were the ones in more danger than she was. Neelan spoke before she could.

'I agree, just what is going on up there.' as one they all turned to Him.

No one in the room knew but they all had a feeling. 'We need to get back there.' She told them.

'You aren't going anywhere.' He interjected. 'Not with this', she tugged the chain around his neck. 'You aren't.' if her hunch was right, he would be arrested on sight, something was going on in the palace she could feel it.

'What are you suggesting?' Dawn asked.

'I don't know but I think I know who started all this.' He gripped her shirt. 'It is all speculation of course.' They all nodded. Of course, 'none of Heir's court is...brave enough, to do this. few of them have the brain for it.

Her frown. 'I left Nevaeh as my ear; she should have reported to me.'

'How is she going to do that?'

'She has a talisman.' He frowns; he had never told her that. Did they speak at all?

'She hasn't contacted me at all.' They all shifted under his rising anger, except Him.

'Do you think she could be behind this?'

He did not say anything, Sheldon did. 'You think a woman did this?' he ignored the hostile glares of the four women. 'Oh, calm down.' he growled when Neelan poked him. He jumped when she growled back. 'all I meant was there is no way a woman would be given enough influence to do this sort of thing.'

'Who says she was its front runner and face.' He mussed to the all. 'There are a lot of men that would do that and let someone else control the mind of everything. You know a man with all the looks and no mind.'

'Have you ever met a man with a mind?' Mara a fallen angel on earth, teased the three in the room. He laughed. Angels never really change look at me with my 105 years.

'It is my misfortune to know several.' she blushed when Unsway winked at her. 'I must agree it is irritating when they try to make sense out of impossibilities.' Herr's lips quirked up. 'But do you see my point?'

Sheldon pursed his lips. 'We do.'

'That is why I think I should be the one to go back.' He volunteers before they came up with anything else. He shot her a look but the idea stays in the air. 'I'll go back and report to you - as often as I can.'

'Him-'

'we need information.' He rounded on him knowing that tone of voice. He was going to try and get fussy with her again. 'Did you know that they have people thinking the Gods are behind all of this. That they are displeased!' Everyone winced. 'I'm going.'

'Not without me.' He sat up straighter, He poked him back placing her hand on top of the necklace.

'No, you are not.' he had no magic, but he could shift. If they placed upwards it would put them in hellfire. It was not happening.

'Besides.' She went on. 'They would arrest you on sight.'

'For what?' He blinked. 'I was kidnapped!'

'Who do you think helped with that abduction?' he raised a brow. He cursed. She was not the only one who had thought that way. Her abductors had help getting in and getting her out of t he palace. 'This is good-I think.' Neelan chimed in. Everyone turned to her. 'It isn't very old - a few decades. there was an assassination- yes on the king and queen and his father. There was no heir but his brother.' Him winced she knew where the woman was going and it wasn't going to help. Neelan went on. 'Instead of the brother being named heir, the brother's wife was going to be crowned Queen -'

'Because she was beloved by the people and they thought the brother was cold and heartless. He loved women and to gamble with the treasury.' He interjected pressing into Herr's back to stop his trembling. 'we know the story.'

Neelan beamed; didn't she see how upset this was making Her? 'You know this story?'

He answered but was cut off by Her- 'Yes-'

'The story is of my mother', Her interjected. He squirmed in his lap. His body was trembling. Only family and close friends knew the true story of Queen Chiara.

'The Ask Queen?' Sheldon frown. 'It can't be the same girl- her hair was-'

'Black.' He nodded. 'Anything is possible when the Gods are involved.' He shuddered. 'My mother's life wasn't always a. happy one. Her uncle married her off to a foreign prince, the older Mystery prince. He was so sure that she would be Queen that he did not care about the rumors that surrounded the man he was marrying her to. He was cold, and the wife he had before died under mysterious circumstances.' He wrapped his arms around her, He relaxed sinking back wishing she could do more to comfort him. This was the story, the only story, He had ever seen Rakish get upset over.

'Instead the King crowned his younger son heir', Him squirmed under the pressure of Heir's hands.

'Both King and heir soon met their ends one by poison and the other by arrow.'

Every person in the room sat in silence under Herr's words. Even Alec prompts his head-on Uway's knee to listen. He slipped under Herr's mental barriers. 'I can take it from here.' she knew this story as well as She did.

He ignored her. 'The oldest son, Tyrel, was furious that his wife had been given what he considered his birthright but he couldn't do anything of it. She was pregnant and if anything, happen to her there would be a cry of civil war for the throne. For action.'

The room sways. 'She was a good leader, the people loved her but her husband couldn't take it. He beat her, she hit her head and everyone thought she was dead. They sent her out down the Your river, it leads straight Rockville Pennsylvania, right thought one of the portholes from this demotion of a world to yours.'

'She stops.'

Ham's hand shook his shoulder. He hated talking about this, he hated this story because he hated the man who did that to his mother. He hated that his mother confided in him that she still has flashbacks.

He looked down at her, she pleaded silently for him to stop. He sagged and finally did.

'She did a lot of good.' Mara agrees. 'She passed a law; it is buried under years of neglect but it is there. A woman can rule in her husband's absence.'

He nodded. She had read about that but there was something else, something was missing from that law. She bit her lip. It could just be something trivial. 'Then I can use that.' 'Let us not be rash, the rash get killed.' Sheldon raised a hand from his pillow. 'you are too smart.' He snorted.

'Sheldon must not remember the bit about you impromptu with the Natali king?'

'Probably not.' He grinned. 'and that wasn't rash.'

'Besides.' Her cut in. 'We aren't sending you there alone at all.' He was a friend of her mind and a traitor to the public.

'Who says I'll be alone.' He asks. 'Alec will be with me.' To show him, Alec yarned baring all his teeth before flopping down in Uway's lap again.

'He wants you to scratch him.' He told Unsway helpfully.

'Ferocious indeed.' He nodded. 'It isn't enough.'

'We have time to think about it.' Neelan stood. 'Let us all think on it.'

He wanted to scream; they did not have time. There was no time left once the fire burned Median. They were out of time, they needed to act.

A hand took hers. 'Sleep on it.' Mara patted her hand. Sheldon and Dawn nodded. They would think it was best.

'Well good night.' Dawn did a graceful curtsey. He was stumped. I could not be nightfall already. No! she had hoped to be able to sneak away to the temples for a little while and relieve Rue a little.

The Elders were first, she Her, Unsway and Alec brought up the rear. The four Elders were in deep conversation ahead of them. The three of them barely spoke until Unsway veered away. 'Night all.' He waved back him and he disappeared.

She detoured them off into a right hall and she could no longer hear the mumbling of anything. 'Where are, we going?'

'To our room.'

'He is right, we sleep down here.' Alec padded ahead. 'Mate is sleepy.' She was the only one in the group who was directionally challenged.

What did Alec mean calling Her 'mate.'? So, He was not the only one to see it. She looked tired. 'Have you slept at all?'

He squeezed her. 'Don't get accusing on me.'

'He wouldn't leave your bed.' Alec told her. It thrilled her that he had stayed by her, why did Alec sound so grumpy about it?

'He wouldn't let me sleep on the bed.'

'Why are you smiling?' She asked her finally coming to their door. He opens it.

'Alec isn't happy with you.'

'You are happy that I pissed off the cat?' he raised a brow leading her in. 'What did I do?'

'You wouldn't let him sleep on the bed.' He pouted.

'No use in letting him start now, he will only break it when he gets older. See he is fine right there.' Alec had curled up right near the fire seeming perfectly content with himself.

Someone had built a fire and left. Besides them, no one else was in the room. 'Will you stay?' His grip on her hand slackens enough to let her pull away.

'Do you want me to?' Her throat tightens and sweat broke on her palms. She had not slept in the same room, knowingly, with Her since they were Bound.

It was too late to take the words back, they were out. She waited for him to leave or stay. She did not know what she wanted more.

'Stay.' his grip tightens again around her hand.

She had not expected him to say yes. The room suddenly felt too crowded, his hands too warm even with the block of ice swirling around her belly as he led her to the bed.

He watched him kick off his sandal and scurried to do the same as well as take the darts from her hair. Her braid slapped her back as she scrambled up into the bed scooting over to make room for her husband. What now? What did she do now?

She watched in fascination; it was a simple move. All he did was take off his vest and slid into bed but it was the most graceful thing she had ever seen. He watched him roll to get comfortable, he slept on his side.

'Come over here.' He tried not to bristle or shiver at his words. It was easier to do the former when he said 'Please.' She scooted forward letting him roll back the covers and tuck her in. He had to feel her heart thump into his chest. She had never been so close to him like this before.

'What are you doing?' She asked bewildered when his head nuzzled into her neck. His breath tickled. She had not known what to expect but this was not it.

'Going to sleep.' He said burying his head into her hair. He hoped she had not missed a dart. She squirmed to get comfortable, he did not let her move much else. She could not getaway. He listens as his breath became shallow and even.

'Her?'

'Mom?'

'Why did you sleep before?' What had changed?

'You weren't safe before', his words were grumbled out. 'Nothing will happen to you here.'

Because this place was sacred? or because he knew and trusted the people here?

'Her?' He murmured. 'Her?' He was asleep. Truly sleep.

He snickered feeling his snores hit her jaw. She was not going to wake him even to tease him about his horrible snoring. It could wait. Over on the rug, Alec had rolled over onto his back in front of the fire. His mouth slightly open, his pink tongue hanging over the side of his mouth. The last thing he looked at was terrifying. His tail slithers side to side every occasionally, darting into the fire and quickly away.

Between wondering if she would have a burnt kitty kit and Herr's snores, He fell asleep. Looks as though Cousin Grean has had a bit too much to drink, Westcliffe said, signaling for two footmen. get him to his carriage.

Ansley looked over to see Sheffield grinning like a loon. finally, I'll have a nonboring tale to tell, he said triumphantly. I'd keep it to yourself, Sheffield, Ansley warned.

Of course, old boy. But he was fairly bouncing on the balls of his feet as he shouldered his way through the men who'd gathered around at the commotion. Apologies, he said to the men. I could not let an insult to Welford go unchallenged. Drink up.

Westcliffe took Ansley's knowing that she was one of the fallen - and would reveal wings and fangs when the trust was made, and the dissented of dark-magic- and craft, the arm and led him to a distant corner of the room, Stephen following in their wake.

'Sh-h.'

What was that all about? Westcliffe asked once they were away from prying ears. He questioned the legitimacy of Jannie's child. you must know everyone's questioning it. it doesn't matter. She was with child when Welford died. The courts will recognize it as his.

His words were spoken with too much vehemence. Both of his brothers were studying him as though only seeing him for the first time and as life. it's none of my concern' Westcliffe began. No, it is not, Ansley assured him.

'His not going to become like us?'

He strode for the Palace doors trying to hold her head high, it was hard. Her world felt as though it had been flipped upside down, she didn't want to tell Nevaeh or Meridian who walked beside her. They would think or know that the Golem's poison was finally starting to affect her and take her back to the Dancer's Guild. She couldn't tell them so He fixed her eyes on the walk ahead. It wasn't hard with Nevaeh by her side to keep her steady.

'Almost there.' Nevaeh murmured to her softly. He nodded, her body wasn't tired but a dull ache began to beat in her temples and her vision sometimes blurred out of focus if she moved her head a certain way. The quicker she got Genny and Away out the better. The quicker she got everyone she cared about to safety, the better.

'Where is everyone?' He asked as she realized that Meridian, Nevaeh, and her own were the only footsteps to be heard wandering the Palace Halls. The only sounds besides that were the swishing of her Dancer's skirts that Nevaeh had fetched her. It sent chills to her spine. It reminded her of her first day coming back to the Palace after the Fire.

'Don't know.' Meridian said uneasily. 'It almost reminds me of the time when the King went missing, the whole city was placed on curfew for days.' At the same moment, Nevaeh hissed for them hurry. They did, all of them sped for the Prison's Keep. A side staircase took them under the palace. His head ached too much to take in her surroundings. She just knew that one moment there had been sunlight pouring in through massive windows, the next their world was under the earth with only torches and mage-light to see. Rows of cells lined the left and right side of the hallway; He didn't look into any of them. Not until she heard. 'He!' it was Genny's voice. His head snapped up towards its direction.

Genny's face peeped out from between the iron bars. Her face covered with soot and dirt, a grim smile lighting her face. 'You're alright.' relief flooded He's chest when she heard Genny's voice. Unable to do more, He nodded. She was unable to bring herself to tell her that she didn't have much time left. 'You shouldn't have come here, they-' He cut in before she could start to chastise her.

'Where is Away?' She demanded in a low voice, Genny's voice stilled, her feature turning into stone. It wasn't hard as stone, He bet if she pushed hard enough Genny would crack to a million pieces. Conflict warred behind her dark eyes that were almost black in the sunless space. Finally, she came to a decision.

'They are trialing him today.' He paled too, beside them Nevaeh and Meridian tensed. His mouth went dry and she had to close it. There was nothing she could say. 'What!' she found her voice; it was too loud. 'What could they-'

Again, there was confliction before Genny sighed. It was a small gesture that made her tragically beautiful, and then she was shaking her head. 'They think that you and him have been having a ... an affair.' He closed her eyes to stop the space from going from black to red. They were crazy, absolutely insane. 'He?' Genny said in a tight voice. 'Everyone knows that-'

'Get her out.' He shoved her lock picks at Nevaeh knowing she knew how to use them. She didn't want to hear whatever Genny had been about to say. 'Take her straight to the Guild. I'll meet you there.' Nevaeh stopped her eyes narrowing on her.

'No.' Nevaeh, Genny, and Meridian glared down at her. He drew herself up to full height preparing for a battle. Goddess, they didn't have time for this! She was running out of time; didn't they get it?

'I'm not giving you a choice and you don't have to come.' He tried to make her voice icy as she glared at them all. 'Go.' He ran for the exit surprised to find Meridian at her heels a moment later. Together they ran for the Council Chamber like their lives depended on it. Away's might.

Their feet were suddenly too loud and slow as the clacked on the stone floors. He burst through the ridiculously huge Council Chamber doors flanked by Meridian. As one all eyes turned to them, every gaze held the same expression. Shock. He glared back accusingly at the sight before her.

'What is the meaning of this!' her voice rolled through the room like a quiet thunder. No one quaked in their seats but no one moved either. Meridian put a restraining hand on He's shoulder but she violently shook him off. Anger rolled through her like magic, she wished it was magic. She would tear the walls down around them with her anger alone.

His feet carried her down the aisle towards the lone stand. Away stood behind it, his eyes bright at the sight of her but grim at the same time. At least he looked alright, dirty but not harmed. He thought.

'Lady.' The sneering voice caught her attention; she looked up to the dais and blanched. Highest Biseal sat in the King's Chair. He sat in She's seat!

'Biseal.' He said with as much contempt as she could sew into that one word. Goddess, she didn't like this man. 'You are in my husband's seat.' She said even when her hand grabbed Away's arm. Her fury only grew when she realized that they had chained him and his arms were bruised and his hands bloody.

'Someone had to take lead while you were,' he coughed 'absent.' Meridian said that guards had chased them when they tried to remove her from the Palace. Had the Guards been trying to stop them from hurting her, or had they been about to finish off what the Golem had started? No one seemed in any hurry to arrest Meridian and he stood right next to her. They did glare at him.

'I wasn't in the best of health.' He said through gritted teeth.

'How are you feeling now?' He asked leaning forward-looking too interested. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was the one to send that Golem. If Meridian had been telling the truth then he was the one that had if not started the Fire then conspired it. Maybe even tricked the apprentices into accidentally doing the spell.

'I would be better if you didn't have my Guard in chains.' She hissed up to him. 'Come down from The King's Chair.'

'I was voted in for this seat.'

'It was in my absence!' He hissed back.

'My Dear, a lot has changed in your absence.' He sneered. Funny how one seat could make him think he had so much power? He shook off the fact that it had made her think the same. How stupid she had been to think she was practically untouchable.

'Would you care to fill me in then?' He asked neutrally. Meridian had made his way to her side. Biseal spared him a disgusted look before turning back to her. The Lords, all of them seemed to shift restlessly, they had come to some decision about her and she was to be told. Now.

'The Gods sent me a vision about you my Dear of what you really are.' He said imperiously. His stomach ached; he was lying. He had to be, there was no way a magician had visions. That was done in

the temples, another reason that the two were the opposite. Mages believed in magic; Priest believed in fate. He was lying his fat ass off.

'Oh, really?' He said casually, in her mind she reached for Her, her hand wrapping around her necklace. She wanted him to hear this. 'What did they tell you?'

'That you are unfit to rule as a woman. That child in your belly is a lie fabricated to keep you here. You have played your part here fairly well Lady,' there went that sneering again. 'But I've been told you didn't share your husband's bed before you were taken to Natali. You were however alone often with-him.' he nodded towards Away. His jaw dropped open. She didn't know whether to laugh or screech at his lies.

'Those are lies!' Meridian spoke when she found she could not. All He could truthfully see was red. The room swayed dangerously and for a moment she wasn't sure if it was the poison taking hold of her finally or if it was her rage. Maybe if she screamed and lunged at him the poison would pour from her mouth and fingertips into his worthless lying form while she strangled him! Her fingers twitched to try.

'This is treason!' He shook her head unable to stand not being able to simply slit his throat. 'Away is a friend, a trustworthy friend that has guarded me and my reputation better than anyone in this room can boast!'

'I'm sure he guarded you,' Biseal coughed. 'Very well. Adultery of The Lady is an act of treason as well.' Biseal said just as easily. She couldn't believe it. The room sat in anticipatory silence. No one was aiding Biseal in case He got the upper hand. No one wanted to lose their throat for treason. They weren't going to help her either. Somehow Biseal had gotten to every member of the Court. She was on her own. Goddess she wished Alec was with her.

'You've already tried to kill my child.' He found her tongue. 'I wasn't here because I was attacked right outside of the Goddess's temple in the palace. That was black magic! Is that the will of the Goddess as well?' He sneered wondering what he was to say. 'Or is it just your will in the God's name.'

He was so sure he had him. He didn't even blink. 'A Foreigner harps of foreign tales of Black magic and Lies.' His mouth dropped. At that moment she saw all the hate that he had held back. Hate mixed with something else that made her skin shiver. Lust?

'I am not.'

'Then why are you not dead?' He asked sitting back waiting for her to amuse him. There was a murmuring agreement from the Lords. He turned to glare at them. All but a few glared boldly back.

'Because, I am a mage.' He told them holding her head high. It wasn't a lie; she had a theory that it was the only reason her mind hadn't completely given into meaninglessness.

Part:

'He doesn't-' Away began but He silenced him with a wave of her hand.

'Mage?' Biseal said skeptically, his beady eyes looking her over. 'I think not.'

'I know so.' He stood proud. 'I'm a Truthteller.' the room erupted into laughter. Even Biseal chuckled in his snorting laughter. He glared up at him. 'It is true,'

'Show me?' Biseal asked-

'He, don't.' Away began. He shut him up with a glare. She was doing this for him, to get him out; he didn't need to know that she was already doomed. He wasn't telling her not to say anything for fear of them knowing she was a mage but because he knew what she was going to say.

'I can't,' she took a deep breath and told him. 'I haven't felt my magic since I put out The Fire.' A rumble of comments rippled around her. Even Meridian shot her a funny look, a skeptical one but still shocked. 'I- I don't know when it will return.' She held up her hands in a helpless shrug that left Biseal purple. His head was purple; it reminded her of a pimple that needed to be popped. He took a step forward and was snatched back. Meridian's wrapped his arm around her shoulders pulling her close to his side jostling her. He blinked, Biseal's face was normal again. It was red, not purple and it didn't look like a pimple but damn if she wouldn't like to squish it anyway. Especially when he said.

'You're a dirty little liar that was never for the good of Ysterym. You are the reason the Gods have forsaken us. You're the reason our King has fled. It is... You; it has always been you!' He's mouths fell open. 'You're the Black Omen upon Ysterym. Nothing will be put right until we do it.' Behind her, there was a murmur of agreement.

'But- I,' words failed her as her knees turned weak. For once she was speechless. Instead, her hands slipped into Meridian's pocket pulling out the picks she had begged him to find. The room fell into an eerie silence. Away just looked at her in shock. Everyone else looked nervous.

'Are you completely off your head?' She heard Meridian say with a quiver in his voice. 'She is the Queen, no matter what you think she has done. It doesn't make it true! There were bad omens in Ysterym long before she came and will be here long after we go to our graves. You are a fool!' He wanted

to cheer. Instead, she hedged away from Meridian. He knew what he was doing and silently thanked him. This meeting had shot to hell quickly, they needed out. He slowly inched towards Away who stood in horror and rage as he looked at Biseal. Like he wanted the man's throat. Gods, He had never wanted anything so bad.

His hands firmly gripped Away's wrist, after she did this they had to be prepared to run. She looked at Away. He nodded; his face determined. She had to remember to tell him that Nevaeh had gotten Genny out before he went off to look for her. The picks turned in the lock with an audible click. He winced even as the shackles fell into her hands from Away's wrist.

'Seize her!' He flew backward behind the protective stances of the two men. Meridian tucked her safe against his back as he whirled around to meet the sound of sliding swords. Despite herself, He was intrigued by them. They were different than any swords she had ever seen. The blade instead of being straight and pointed, they were sickled with a blade's edge for a tip. 'Take her in, all of them in for the use of Black magic against Ysterym and treason against the king's name!'

'No!' He gripped Meridian's arm. She looked at Away, he didn't have chains shackling him but he was in no condition for a fight. Meridian was too exhausted to fight. He didn't want to fight them. She simply wanted Biseal's head to roll.

'There isn't another way out.' Meridian hissed. He's belly rolled. She knew there wasn't.

'Do you have a weapon.' when he did nothing but look at her, He cursed before belatedly realizing she didn't have a dagger on her either.

'Grab Her, get her!' the first guard charged them. He easily dodged his stupid attempt at them.

Meridian grabbed his swords as He kicked him down to the ground. Her foot rolling him over to his side. Just in time to trip the next guards charging them. Somehow Meridian fought off two, three, until Away was able to pick up sword and help. He was tucked in close beside Meridian. Away stuck nearby her open side. He couldn't believe that their duo was fending off a troop.

It was obvious that Meridian was a sword's men by the way he held his weapon like it was a part of his arm. Away was an assassin and held his own. Both of them kept their bodies in front of He as though they were her breathing armor. She watched in awe as Away stabbed a nearby guard that had tried to do the same. Rushing forward He raided him for weapon's praying silently to the Goddess to forgive them all, and herself. She came out with a short dagger and a sword that she was only moderately trained to use.

'Thank you.' Away easily nicked the sword out of her hand as he twirled into another fight. They were still progressively moving forward towards the huge Council doors.

Part:

'Hey-' He wished she had thought not to distract them. A trio rushed her friends at once, each taking them in a different direction. One the left, the other right, and one came at the front and center. Meridian sliced through the first one while Away hacked back the second. The third rushed past them right for He, his blade aimed for her chest.

'He!' Away tried to trip the guard but was forced to engage another guard who had rushed forth. His eyes widened as her body reacted, twisting into itself He twirled out the way slamming into Away's side as her hand that held the dagger lashed out. She felt it connect with something hard yet soft and sink in. She squealed as the guard went down, a fresh spurt of blood flowed from a side wound. By the

Goddess, they were painting the Council Room red. No one moved to interfere, to help, they were completely alone. He rubbed her head, a serious pain tingled along her spine and up into her head.

'Princess!' He jumped looking up to the dais where the King sat. She could have wept.

'She?' He nearly dropped her knife in a burst of joy at seeing him here. He would set everyone to right. By the look on his face, no one here today would pay for what they were doing.

'He waits!' He ignored Away's arms; he didn't understand that they were saved. She would help them straighten this whole thing out.

He picked up her Dancer's skirts as she ran for the dais dogging around the fallen bodies of the guards. She had to make it back to the dais where She was. He stood tall looking down at her, a grim smile spread on his face that made her want to hug him even more. She just needed to get to him.

'She!' He reached out for him as she ascended the steps. He reached for her snatching her forward with a force that made He gasp. The momentum slammed her forward into a solid chest, she could have cried out.

'Goddess, I've missed you.' He said on the verge of tears. She wanted to cry and scream. He wanted to kiss She for coming home at last and not leaving her with this mess. She looked up into his scowling face as he looked out at the Lords.

'I know Princess, never again I swear.' He hugged her tight. 'Give me the dagger.' He reached for it. He hesitated.

'I-'

'Heania.' She's voice became stern. 'Give me the dagger.' His hands took it from her fingers while she tried to decide whether she should hand it to him or not.

He sputtered up at him about to give him a piece of her mind but she was twirled around to face the Lords. Why were Away and Meridian still fighting? Didn't they see that She was home, they could stop? Her mouth opened to yell for Away or Meridian before something sharp nicked into her neck. The world stopped, He froze, like a blade bit into her skin. It was her blade - why would She press a dagger to her throat?

'Don't say a word or I will slice you open.' The words made her shudder at their coldness, she meant it. He was going to kill her.

'The baby-' He began-

'That bastard can die with you.' He head-butted him; it must have stunned him because She roared as he stumbled back, the blade pressed dangerously into her neck. He gulped but must have cried out because Away and Meridian turned to her as one. Both of them stood stunned as she felt. What was going on?

'She?' He asked tentatively-

'No Darling,' The voice sounded like She. He shut her eyes against his words, he had told her no. He must have been telling the truth, she never called her Darling. 'Drop your weapons.' He wasn't speaking to her; He guessed he spoke to Away and Meridian. She winced when both did so without hesitation.

'Don't you hurt her.' Meridian stated through clenched teeth as if that would somehow remove the blade from her throat.

'I cannot hurt the dying.' She heard She's a soft murmur in her ear. It made her shudder. 'You are dying aren't you Darling?' He wanted to shake her head but ended up just shaking, period. It earned her a cruel laugh. 'Seize them!'

'No!' His words broke through her haze. This wasn't happening, not again. Please Goddess let this be some horrible dream. He prayed with her eyes wide open as she lunged forward the blade sliced into her throat creating a shallow cut. He barely noticed the hot slice of pain. 'Let them go! Please!' Guards rushed the two men; she saw their weapons being kicked out of grabbing distance. Two guards stood on either side of Away and Meridian as they tied her friend's hands behind their backs. This couldn't be happening but it was. She was letting this happen - he was doing it! He thought fast.

'You can't.' He stated louder and more confident than she could have ever thought possible.

Part:

'Away is under diplomatic immunity, if you touch him you risk a war with Natili. We can't afford a new ally to become an old foe. It isn't Meridian's fault, I threatened to take away his lands and title if he didn't help me. You have no reason to hold them here, banish them and be done with it.' She frowned but shrugged.

'If you keep fighting to get her not only will I kill her outright, you will both hang.' Both men stopped their advancement. The room rustled finally; the Lords broke out into wild murmuring. He would outrightly kill the Queen. He heard bits or what they were saying. 'Still she might be telling the truth, there might be a child.' She turned them out again to favor Meridian and Away who were eying her stubbornly. If they stayed any longer, they would do something rash that would get them killed. They had to go.

'Go my Lords; you're both dismissed from my service.' He said as Queen as she could. Her legs felt as though they would buckle, her whole body just wanted to explode from frustration and anger. This was unfair, it wasn't right, it- a flash of pure hit struck her body and she felt her magic boil up out of pure frustration. He reached for it desperately only to feel it retreat. Frustrated tears pricked her eyes, she blinked them away quickly.

Neither of the men moved. He frowned. 'Guards!' she called while pleading with them both. 'See that Lord Away and Lord Meridian make it safely outside the palace walls.' She said watching more guards come forward to flank them. 'No harm will come to them.' He said as menacingly as possible.

'No harm will come to them.' The guard, the lead guard, decided when he took a stance before her. His eyes glittered with a look He didn't understand, anger? Was he angry that he had to obey her? His lips were pinched tight as he gave a curt nod to his team. Meridian and Away were dragged from the room. He winced when they struggled.

(Hindmost to Nevaeh)

Brainwashing is running rampant right now. When intelligence is based off-of a Halo of sociology this is what you would get, by the perception of using your own power of mind remembering to think for yourselves the truth is seen.

All human life and existence matters, everybody has the 14 amendment to not be discriminated on against a biased or prejudiced in any kind of segregation like pigment for skins for any tune equality to any kind of race or existence of that of mankind.

Likewise, it is time to kindly stop the hate crimes move on with your lives and realize that we all have a constitutional right of equal in fair in this country of United States of America, stop being feeble-minded.

At the age of 5 in 1999, this prognosis was made of the above with the same idea of being nothing more than theoretical- and only counties based in giving to the student, and somehow by twisted words of letting the word of mouth dictate this has become a mentality slur to me, that I do not have, yet was wrongly given for countless years.

We need to have an understanding of the report that was said and retold to some w as dated when I was 5 years old saying I was at the understandings of the higher mind of 7 years of age.

No. I am open in saying that I have never relinquished my rights to have this acquired whatever, it was given agents my free-well... and at no point, an endangerment to have what was listed, yet claim to this was nothing more than a falsehood of defamations.

I wanted my wrath on the world. I find it utterly disgraceful, disheartening, deplorable, and more than rechargeable the state in which our country is right now it gives me much sorrow and disappointment, and despair applicable to that of a dismayed, dismal, dreaded, of reality.

WE have the right to free speech as our 1st amendment - not the right to be a TARD by being dimwitted.

Everyone, that I have gone to school with was and still is aphasic, let's not just say one of them rolls their crap into balls and eats crayons more than others here, you can call that temperament if you wish, yet it's all just categories, to perceive and overlook or over- exaggerate.

Alexia is an acquired reading disability as a result of an acquired event such as a stroke. It is most common for alexia to be accompanied by expressive aphasia (the ability to speak in sentences,) and agraphia (the ability to write.)

'Why did my life SHIT THE BED?' 'Simplemindedness' is apparent to those that are simplistic,' in mentality and diagnostics of intelligence quotient - that do not at any time to bring forth higher thinking and learning.

(Back)

I remember the place that was not a dream another world a historical monument in my honor, the building that was a mile long and a half-mile in with, a world that I grasped in my mind was becoming true to others, that I was going to make mine.

A boat ride through reflecting shallow waters would take all of use to my world, child after child in boats all around me, to the passage to the underworld, amidst a lamp flickering, hanging from the front, all the faces were soft and distorted and ominous. A rain carton of mist, and waterfalls around every column.

Then in this new world I saw Away's face was horrified his eyes wild as they dragged him down the aisle and out. Meridian wasn't any better. The door closed with a heavy thud, she swallowed hard as the blade pressed close to her skin.

'If your intent,' slightly murmured tightly up at him. He still heads the knife, her hair, he still held the power. 'is to kill me, you should press the blade down further.' She told him waiting for him to do what she instructed while hoping he wouldn't have the guts.

'Worthless foreign-' the blade pressed down so swiftly He said her last prayer prepared for what was coming.

'Think of the child!' a voice cried from the pews of Lords. 'You cannot murder a woman with child!' He looked into the crowd to see a young lord, one of the young lords she had scolded long ago in her first sit-in after her Coronation.

'There is no child- it is a figment of this liar's darkest imagination. She is mad!' She cried out, the blade pressing closer to the vein pounding. She barely dared to breathe. How this could be happening to her.

'Lords, I swear to you it is not.' He spoke as quickly and loud as she dared out to the Lords watching her closely. 'I am no liar.'

'Right.' She said. 'Because you're a truth teller.' His tone was mocking. He closed her eyes praying that this was over quick. He knew that she was a truth-teller. He had exposed her for what she was the moment they were Bound.

'She is rash, and unruly.' Came an ancient voice. It made Him open her eyes again; she had never heard it speak before. 'If we have learned nothing as Lords, we have learned that a woman deserves mercy- fairness. We do not know if she is lying. She must stand trial before we decide what the best course of action is.'

A ripple of agreement rose up from the council. It gave Him hope; she hoped that there was a chance. 'We can contact a healer of our own, if she is lying then she will easily be found out.' There were more murmurs, some good some bad. He held her breath as much for the blade pressing into her throat as waiting for the Lords to decide her outcome.

'For the sake of the Goddess, Biseal let the woman breathe.' An ancient Lord said tiredly. He's vision saw, Biseal? Had he just said Biseal? His brows furrowed, the man holding her was She didn't they see that?

A sharp movement brought her forward and back into something solid and hard that left the back of her skull aching. He hissed, her head turning to glare up at Her. She paled instantly. The color drained from her face down her body before dissolving into the floor. She wasn't the one gripping her, it was Biseal. The poison had messed with her mind yet again. Making her see what was not there, Goddess she had thought that Biseal had been She and she had played right into his arms. He shook her head trying to make sure this wasn't a dream. Desperately she wanted someone to wake her up.

He stood behind her looking triumphantly smug with the blade still poised in his hand to strike. A mad glint in his eye flashed saying that he almost didn't care one way or the other if this group of men saw him strike her down. He might be glad for witnesses of her death.

'We should Cage her until we can find a judge for her trial.' He wanted to rail at them that there would be no trial. At the ancient Lord whom the others seemed content to let speak for them. Even Lord Kane didn't utter protest though his eyes flashed when he looked her way.

'Trial, trial for what?' Biseal shook his head unable to believe that someone was speaking against him.

'For her life.' The Ancient One snapped at Biseal as if he were stupid. 'I will not put an innocent woman to death, not one with a child. Not one who maybe has done nothing deserving of an executioner.' He wanted to nod but didn't dare.

'And if she is telling the truth?' Biseal snorted as though it were unlikely. 'Surely you don't want this unstable woman holding the Crown.'

'She can be tucked away in the summer palace, comfortably until her husband's return.' The Ancient One seemed doubtful at the thought of She's return. His wrinkled and worn brown face creased with worry and acceptance. He shook his head. 'Oh, course there was a will put in place if something like this ever did happen. The King had it tucked away for safe keeping.' He felt Biseal tense.

'A will? Where?'

'Only a select group of Council Members and the Temples know where it lays. There was no reason to bring it out because she-' he indicated He. 'Was so adamant of The Kings impending return but we cannot hold it off any longer I suppose. A successor must be named.' His stomach dropped. What?

There were more murmurs of agreement. More nodding heads, He's stomach swirled.

'If she is found guilty.' Biseal asked before the agreements were finished. He glared at him; something in his voice told her that he would be sure to do everything he could to make sure she was.

'Then the judge will rule whatever punishment he sees fit.' The Ancient Lord said serenely. 'It is fair.'

'Will she rule again?' Biseal asked.

'Without her husband, no.' he looked at He and she wanted to believe she saw sadness there. Not pity but just concern for her. 'She should focus on her child ... if there is one.'

'There is.' He said before Biseal could tell them differently. All of a sudden blew out a tired breath. She wanted to tell them everything. From the beginning. She wanted-

'Take her to the Cages.' There was no time. 'Maximum Security, at least two, no three, guards stationed around her at a time.' Biseal commanded.

Guards sprang forward; their grips were gentle compared to Biseal's iron hold. He sagged against one of the Guards; it must have startled him because he caught her.

'Lady-' He shook her head before he could get himself into trouble. To this room, she was no longer the Lady. She was just a foreigner, a disgraced woman, possibly a traitor. He cringed at the last one

as another guard walked on her other side. She felt better having them around her, shielding her from Biseal's glare. She was getting away from him. Not for long, she knew but she was still breathing.

'Take her there!' Biseal commanded. 'We will have a judge by tomorrow and get this straightened out.' He stumbled. She would be dead by tonight. How was she even lucid now when Aisling was confident, she wouldn't be able to remember his own name. Could this all be a dream?

He pinched herself and gasped. It defiantly wasn't a dream. This was truly happening. The

Guards took her arms gently and lead her from the Council Chamber but not before she heard the Ancient Lord and Biseal arguing. 'If she isn't hiding anything then she will have nothin g to fear.' Beal's glare could be felt on the back of her head.

He shut her eyes, apparently, if she had no intentions of hanging, she would have to admit to treason.

OH MY GOD, PEOPLE! I am sitting in class at this very moment posting this for y ou guys who I love. He was stabbing at my brain for me to post another chapter so I had little choice.

~~*

He did not twitch, just watched her through those long eyelashes. A sleepy could be an outright bored look on his sharp angular face. He could be assessing her, as an enemy. He was an enemy until she found the underlying cause of all of this. That little speech he was trying to pull off put him high at the top. What was he hiding?

'It's been far too long Lady.' Meridian held out his hand to her. He shook her head. She might be trying to set up who was in charge but she hated formality.

'I told you it's He.' she took his arm letting him lead her out the council chamber into the too quiet halls. The few they did meet gawked openly giving the three of them as wide a distance as possible.

'Must be the crown.' Meridian patted her hand assumingly.

'It could be that.' She inclines her head. Or it could be the near hundred-pound Mystery Ice Cat following at her heels.

When one man collided with a wall, He had had enough.

'Are you, all right?' she took him by the shoulder examining him herself.

'Stunned deer.' Alec purred at her back. 'Frightened.' he could not be, who would he be frightened of?

Up close He saw that it was a youth, he could not be any older than fifteen summers and looked strikingly familiar.

He jerked as stunned by colliding with the wall as her touch. 'Yes-' his eyes caught the crown, he blinked and blinked again. 'Lady?'

'Lady Hernia.' Meridian corrected at her back. Alec growled low enough for her ears alone. He did not like Meridian or just thought he was being a smart aleck.

'No, right, I meant- I've never met you before.' he marveled at her a moment longer. 'A pleasure.'

'Pleasure as well.' He let him take her hand and squeeze before pulling away. He would have a bruised head and nothing more. 'What is your name?'

'Kaleen, son of Lord Kane.' ah, that explained the resemblance.

She did not know Kane was married nor had a son. 'Kaleen.' she nodded backing away from him to Meridian who waited. By his robes, he was clearly and Mage apprentice, what was he doing wandering the halls here and not at the university?

'On to your classes now.' Meridian sounded almost bored and short. He waved at the boy as one would a servant.

Kaleen bow to them both. 'I'm sorry about what happen to your husband.' He is throat closed instantly. Before she could ask what, he meant Meridian barked.

'To class, now!' Kaleen scampered away and was gone around the corner before He could speak again.

'What did he mean?' He croaked rounding on Meridian. He had done that on purpose. 'Tell me.' she had to stop herself from growling. Alec did it for her, stalking for Meridian if she had not grabbed his collar, he would have Meridian's ass against a wall.

'Not here.' He admired his ability to keep his composure. She would not be that cool after having a near hundred-pound cat with sharp fangs and claws very well. She was sure there would have been hysterics. 'Please, He trust me.' He grabbed her hand once more setting off. Finally pulling her into a room she had never seen. It was a study.

'This is part of my private rooms.' He pulled her inside shutting the door. Meridian guided her to a chair expecting her to sit. Alec planted his big but squarely in front of her and looked up at Meridian. Just looked until the man took a step back and another. Putting half of a rug between them.

He bit back a snort as she felt Alec's smugness radiate through their bond.

'Hungry?' starving, He shook her head. What was it with everyone trying to feed her?

'No, Meridian.' He watched him sit across from her and did the same. It made her feel more comfortable. Now she was to do the fun part. Pick at his mind. 'Tell me true, you know something you aren't telling me.'

'No one knows what has happened to your husband.' Meridian shook his head. The light shining on his face made him handsome. He leans in hoping he would do the same.

He did. 'But you do.' she was confident. She saw all she needed to know run across his face. He did know something. Under all the sincerity, grief-stricken, burden heavy enough to make you choke demeanor he was hiding a secret.

'All I know are the rumors, Lady, nothing more.' He shook her head. She knew all about the rumors.

'What about the people that were trampled today. A priestess was stoned today along with the Dancer she was trying to protect. She watched carefully.

Meridian did nothing but blink. 'I wasn't away of anything going on like that.'

She did not believe him. She doubted there was much he did not know went on around here.

'There is a rumor going around that your husband abandons his title, he left because you leaving drove him mad. The Gods are enraged and will turn their backs on us for the disrespect of our king.' that really didn't sound good. 'I'm guessing, those people who caste the stones believe it.' it really was not good.

He clamped her hands together and closed her eyes. 'I don't know what I am going to do.' she sniffles as she had done many times when she was young. Dealing with the men in her life she found tears really got reactions out of them the fastest. 'I am Queen and my husband isn't here for me.' she opens her eyes to see Meridian watching her intently. The way a hawk watched a bunny. It gave her chills. 'I'm not sure how everything works, you see I am still new to this...'

She turned her lips up in a rueful smile. She was sorry for being uneducated in the Vestryman way. 'I sorry.' she sniffles. 'I didn't mean to cry.' shaking her head she was scared that it had not worked. Meridian was a cold snake that would not fall for anything, not even the frustrated tears of a woman. Inwardly screaming, He stood to leave. 'I better leave.' she headed for the door, Alec standing against her side keeping himself between Meridian and her.

'Lady, wait.' Meridian stood coming for her. He took her hand, He had to force herself not to shudder and blink up bewilderedly at his charming smile. 'You stunned me, your tears.' He waited. 'You need someone here that is solely here to protect you. Look after you.' that was why Alec was here. 'to be your ears and to rely on.'

He did not have to force the watery chuckle. 'And who would that be. I do not know anyone here that well. Except Her and I'm unsure of where he is.' she let another tear slide down her cheek.

'Rely on me malady.' He squeezed her fingers.

'I can do that?'

It was supposed to reassure her, He was positive the smile that bloomed was supposed to make her knees week and mind all gooey spilling out her ears at his feet.

'Always, Lady. I'm sworn to the crown.' but not to Her.

'That is good. As soon as I have plan, I will give you instructions.' He nodded; it was impossible to tell what he was thinking behind those dark eyes. 'Oh, do you know where Nevaeh is?'

He stiffens. He raised a brow in question that wasn't' the reaction she usually got when she asked about her maid. She had struck a nerve.

'I'm sorry, Lady Nevaeh is not to be trusted.' He looked said. 'She is a spy; I believe she is I have little evidence to confirm it now but I will in a couple of more scouting.

'What?'

'I don't feel it is in your best... interest to trust her.' his nose crinkled in distaste.

'She is one of my Women.' He pursued her lips in a frown. She did not trust Nevaeh either but she was not trusting Meridian worth stones. 'All of them are trustworthy unless proven otherwise.'

He nodded, slowly. It was all over his face he had expected her to heed his warning. He did not like her thinking on her own. Women were not supposed to do that. 'One more thing, I want a list the palace finances.' his eyes narrowed but he said.

'Yes Lady.'

Her smile was bright. 'You're a dear.' she patted his hand and let it go. Alec got to his feet. She had thought he had fallen asleep, should have known better.

'Let me suggest one more thing.' It didn't sound at all like a suggestion. 'Assign yourself a personal guard. Two if you can.' he persisted. 'it would make everyone who cares about you feel better, I know Her would feel better.'

He frowns disliking the idea instantly, Guards were supervisors, babysitters, spies. 'I already have one.' Alec turned to Meridian baring his fangs and growled low and fearsome. Meridian paled but did not move from his perch. He was impressed.

'Think about it at the least, please?' he appealed back to her. 'I'm beyond words that you are safely back home where you belong, it would hurt more than I can say if something happens to you because you don't want guards prying into your personal time.'

She did not know whether he was truly concerned or the best actor she had ever seen. She did not know what he had to gain, but it must be something. He was a courtier; they did not spend time with flattery and slivery words with no benefit at the end of it.

'I'll think on it.' at best.

He tried not to run for the door, Meridian watched her every step until she closed the door and lean against it. It still felt as though his gaze was burning into her back through the wood. Letting Alec lead the way they all but ran to her room and locked themselves in.

He pulled out the pin that Alec had found for her and walked the distance that connected her room to Her's.

Alec followed her in, his pink nose crinkled. 'someone's here.' he charged, plowing her into the ground. In her ear, the sound of whistling metal passing by and its thump behind her told her how close she had come to death. Alec knew it too.

His roar rang through the room vibrating off the walls. He did it again, moving further into the room and again. He covered her ears getting to her feet, if he kept it up, she would be explaining to the whole palace. Alec stopped in front of a tapestry hanging on the far wall. 'She is here.' Alec snarled low.

'She?' how could he tell?

'She is bleeding.' Alec's nose crinkled. 'Female shells... Heely why do females bleed?' he went from her angry protector to her curious kit in the bat of an eye.

'I don't know.' He lied getting to her feet coming forward, pulling a dart from her hair careful not to touch the numbing cream on the unsheathed tip.

'Do I kill?' Alec appealed to her. 'or pounce? Mate said it was fine if I kill.' His head tilted, thoughtful.

He silently promised to smack Mate on the back of his thick head for this. At least he had thought to ask her.

'Don't kill.' She told him; his head dipped. He leaped on the tapestry. Bringing down fabric and a cursing figure wrapped in them. He was right it was female.

'If you move, the poison I have aimed at your throat will silence you before you can twitch.' she would be dead in moments, quicker than it took to sneeze or scream. He kneels beside Alec pointing the dart at the unknown's chest. 'Lady?' He froze before pulling back the curtain.

'Nevaeh?'

The woman stares up at her with wide brown eyes. The same way He was doing her. 'What are you doing here?' she spoke first.

'What are you doing here, trying to kill me?' He recoiled away

'I wasn't trying to kill you.' Nevaeh said slowly. 'I was protecting, he hasn't been gone that long, not even a season and those ungrateful wretches are already trying to break in here.'

He grins. 'Say that again.' Ungrateful wretches. Nevaeh grinned back looking at the dart.

'Does that really poison?'

'Yep.' He sheathed it away in its holder helping Nevaeh to her feet. She looked the same, still breathtakingly pretty.

'I'm glad you are home, where is Her?' she looked over He is shoulder expecting to see him leaning in the door frame. He was not there, a small pout formed on the woman's lips.

He sighs, she had to stick to the lie. There was too much riding on it just to put Nevaeh at ease she was one person. 'I don't know. No one seems to be able to tell me.'

'He went to save you!' Nevaeh exploded. 'how could you not! How did you get away?'

'I struck up a trade with the Natali king in exchange for a horse and my freedom.'

She obviously didn't believe her. 'That worked?' He shrugged.

'I had a council meeting to attend. Couldn't be late.' For some reason that confused Nevaeh even more as she took in, He is crown and clothes.

'What council meeting, there isn't supposed to be one on today, it is forbidden to hold council on the third day.'

Well, they were doing the forbidden, she had just attended a meeting in the council chamber. 'I'll ignore it this once because I needed to see them regularly. Now I need you. Nevaeh.' The other woman dusted off her skirts shooting angry looks at Alec who shot his own looks back. Alec sn arled, his fur standing on edge. He pressed his flank into He is side but did not do anything else. 'Nevaeh.'

She had her attention now. Good.

'What has been happening. No one can seem to tell me simply.' if at all.

She never blinked when she spoke, he did not need her magic to feel the weight of Nevaeh's words. 'Treason.' He nodded, she felt that much in her bones.

Good Christ, is it yours? Westcliffe asked, his lips barely moving.

It's Jannie's.

He left his brothers staring after him. In the length of a single heartbeat, everything had changed.

you are so fortunate to be with child, Lady Inwood said. you should pray for a son. Then you will not be dependent upon Glean Demure's mercies.

Sitting in a corner of the parlor, surrounded by women, Jannie felt as though there was absolutely no air to breathe.

Ansley has certainly been a godsend, hasn't he? Lady Sheffield asked. he is handled so many of the arrangements.

Was it her imagination that she heard insinuations in their voices? Why could they not leave her in peace?

Will you return to Herndon Hall now? someone asked a voice she didn't recognize.

no, no, you must still be in Rockville, Lady Inwood insisted. to be a widow and with a child?

You need us to see you through it.

From time to time since the funeral, a few of the women made a morning call, but it was always awkward, and they were all so incredibly boring. Except for Lady Inwood, who had no qualms whatsoever about spreading gossip. She'd even offered to let Jannie join in the wagering surrounding Ansley. It seemed he'd made it known early on that he intended to select a wife this season, and while he had yet to attend a ball, speculation was high that he had already made his choice. Jannie did not want to acknowledge how it unsettled her to know that he was searching for a wife.

She certainly had no desire to marry him, doubted she would ever marry again. She heard the clatter of horses' hooves and the whir of wheels on the cobblestone. A coach approached. As it drew near, she recognized the crest on the door. Ansley.

Her heart leaped, and she fought to calm it. But it increased its tempo as he stepped out, obviously on an outing, dressed in a swallow-tailed jacket. On one hand, he held his top hat and walking stick.

He disappeared, and she refrained from opening the window to lean out and strive to catch another glimpse of him. He'd not visited since the night of the funeral, the night he held her while she wept. The night, to her immense embarrassment now, she lashed out at him. A thousand times she considered sending a note of apology for her outburst because she missed him. As much as she didn't want to acknowledge it, she did. Often since leaving Blackmon she thought of him' always with guilt. All her thoughts should have been on Welford, although she now knew most of his were not on her.

The knock-on her bed-chamber door had her coming to her feet. yes.

Lily stepped inside. his Grace, the King of Ansley would like a word.

She felt so drab and dour, already in her nightdress. But for her this Season there would be no balls. tell him I'm not at home. No. She shook her head. That would stop him. tell him I'm already abed ...no. Drat him! send him up. yes, m'lady.

Jannie moved over to the sitting area, positioning herself so a sofa was between her and the door, would be between her and Ansley. She didn't want to give the impression that she was extremist glad of his presence. It was inappropriate. A girl in mourning was supposed to be sedated, not anxious for her caller to arrive.

When he strode in, she thought she'd never seen a more handsome man. Based on his expression of horror, however, he'd never seen a more disheveled girl. your Grace, how good of you to call. for God's sake, Jannie, after all, we've been through don't be so damned formal.

It is late and this is my bed-chamber. Formality is needed. You appear to be on your way to a ball. I was, but I changed my mind when I saw all the carriages lined up. I wasn't in the mood for a tedious night. He set his hat and stick on a chair near the door before prowling toward her.

You're near enough, she said when it became obvious the sofa would not serve as an obstacle for him.

Thankfully, he did stop, but his gaze wandered over her and she felt it like a touch. you're not eating, he said.

I am... just not very much. I suppose your mother told you that. She dropped by each afternoon for a few moments.

I don't need her to tell me what is obvious. I daresay, you're not sleeping either some ...I' She sank down into the chair. I don't know what's wrong with me. you're grieving.

I don't know if that's it, Ansley. I feel nothing.

He studied her for a moment before saying, I've come to invite you to have dinner with me tomorrow evening at my residence.

I'm in mourning. It would be entirely inappropriate.

Jannie, you need a few hours away from all this. Wear your widow's weeds. I'll bring my carriage 'round at half past seven. I'll carry you out if I must. Ansley' Jannie.

She wanted to shriek. She didn't know if she'd ever known a more obstinate man. Yet neither could she deny how lovely it would be to be with someone who didn't treat her as though she might break at any moment. THEN- Very well, she said petulantly. He must be given the impression she wasn't giving in too easily. Good. He removed his jacket and laid it over the arm of the sofa.

She sat up straighter. what are you doing? going to ensure that you sleep well tonight.

(Ansley)

Jannie. Reaching into his waistcoat pocket, he removed a small vile. what is it? oils. I'm going to rub your feet. It'll help you relax. no. She tucked her feet beneath the chair.

You'll start with my feet and then you'll journey upward and ...it would be entirely inappropriate.

I promise I will not venture higher than your ankles.

She shook her head. my ankles are swollen. You don't need to see them. move to the sofa. Or better yet, the bed. do you not listen to a thing I say? what are you afraid of, Jannie?

That I'm swollen and miserable and that you'll be repulsed by me.

I'm so sorry, she blurted.

He furrowed his brow. for what, pray tell? for lashing out at you ...the last time you were here.

I didn't take your words to heart. I know how difficult all of this has been for you. unbearable sometimes.

So-o tonight, I'll give you something pleasant to take into your dreams.

He held out his hand, enticing her with those long, strong fingers. come along, Jannie. Move to the sofa.

Against her better judgment, she did as he bade. When she was settled in the corner, pillows at her back, he sat at the opposite end and lifted her bare feet to his lap. Mesmerized, she watched as he poured several drops of oil onto his palm before setting the bottle aside. Then his palm kneaded her sole. on, dear God. nice? he asked.

THEN wickedly wonderful. You've done this before.

I once knew a woman who knew a great deal about the sensuous arts. and you did not keep her? she was not mine to keep. Close your eyes.

She did, as his fingers worked their magic over the balls of her feet. tell me a story, something from your youth. my youth. Well, I was a very clever child.

His odious voice droned on as he told her about playing a game of hidin g with Claire. The deep timbre and his constant massaging of her feet lured her away to a place of no troubles, no grief, no sorrow.

She awoke from a deep sleep with only a bit of sunlight dancing into the room. She didn't remember climbing into bed, nor could she remember the last time she felt so rested. She was beneath the covers but aware of a weight on her hip. Ansley's hand cupped over her. He lay on top of the covers, his

waistcoat gone but his shirt and trousers still in place. He must have carried her to bed. How tired she must have been not to stir when he moved her.

His long dark eyelashes rested on his cheeks. She did hope her child would inherit those. In truth, there was nothing about him that she didn't want to see in the child. She had missed him so. She hadn't wanted to admit it, but the truth mocked her now because it was so lovely to wake up with him in her bed.

Slowly he opened his eyes. good morning.

His voice was rough from sleep, stirring her in ways she should not be stirred, reminding her of other mornings.

So, lady Inwood told me that you had intended to find a wife this Season. ohm. Yes, I'd considered it. I still might. He gave her a devilish smile.

So, the women are wagering, you know…on whom it will be.

So are the gents, from what I hear. Even my brothers, blast them. who do they think it will be?

So, they've both chosen different women. They are both wrong. One woman talks so quietly that I must always bend over to get near enough to hear what she is saying. Marriage to her would give me an aching back before too long.

Jannie laughed lightly. and the other?

So-o the opposite problem. When she begins to speak, I must pull back in order not to go deaf from her caterwauling. Makes me appear to have some sort of twitch. I had no idea that the wife hunt was so troublesome. it is quite the bother. You should marry me to spare me the horror of it.

He was teasing, surely. Still, she shook her head. I think I shall be like your mother. A girl of means who can do as she pleases. I would always allow you to do as you please.

On, Ansley, you don't half tempt me. She rolled into a sitting position and saw the time on the clock on the mantel. good God! It is half-past ten! If someone sees that your coach' I sent my driver on.

She glanced back at him, and he gave her an innocent shrug. I never leave my coach outside a lady's residence. and if I'd not admitted you?

I'd have walked, caught a hansom. I'm resourceful. He pushed himself up, leaned in, and kissed her cheek before she could stop him. Then he was out of the bed and crossing the room to retrieve his waistcoat, neckcloth, and jacket. let's has some breakfast, shall we?

It was the oddest thing, but she was suddenly quite ravenous. you must leave at once afterward.

You have my word. you may borrow one of the rooms if you wish to freshen up.

After bowing, he took his leave. When she reached for the bell pull, she realized she was smiling.

She looked better, much better, this morning. The circles were still there, but not as dark. He would see to it that she slept well tonight, so perhaps tomorrow they would be gone completely. And she was eating. It was ridiculous the pleasure that realization brought him.

She wore black. He wanted to see her in red.

-How long do you intend to stay in Landcaster? he asked.

Her brow furrowed, she glanced up at him. I'm not sure. Another week or so I suppose. Not much longer. I dread returning to Herndon Hall. come to Grant wood.

With a sigh, she shook her head. Ansley' you have few memories there. you do know it is quite rude to interrupt. my apologies. But I can decipher the objection written on your face. Hear me out.

So, extend to you a courtesy you do not extend to me? Why ever should I? you are irascible when you are with a child. you are stubborn, she said.

(Quiet.)

Like- perhaps we'll discuss it during dinner this evening. so, you will join me? did you ever doubt it?

His answer to her was merely a grin. He'd not been teasing when he suggested she marry him, but based on her expression and response, she was still too fragile to consider such a proposal. He had won her over once before. He could do it again. It needed only a bit of patience.

No. Jannie could hardly believe the excitement that thrummed through her as she waited for Ansley to arrive. A night away from the oppressive house. She needed it. She knew that she did.

She rather wished she didn't have to wear black, but it helped to remind her to remain somber. Tonight, was simply a break from the mourning. It did not remove it altogether.

She was sitting in the parlor trying not to appear anxious when she heard the rap on the front door. Her butler was soon standing in the doorway. his Grace, the King of Ansley.

No. He bowed out and Ansley strode in, so dashing in his swallow-tailed coat that it very nearly took her breath. He'd worn similar clothing last night, but for some reason, he appeared even more handsome now. Lest he decides to try to kiss her on the cheek, she lowered her veil.

I daresay, you didn't have to go to so much bother for dinner with me, she said as she walked over to him.

Part:

He extended his arm. no bother.

She placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to escort her from the house. I've actually been looking forward to this, she confessed.

(As have I.)

He handed her up into the coach. As she settled onto her seat, he took his place opposite her. The coach lantern was lit, allowing her to see him. She was surprised that he'd not chosen to sit beside her. The last time they journeyed alone in his coach, they'd been so close that a shadow could not have squeezed between them.

As the coach rattled over the cobblestones, she felt compelled to fill the silence. the air seems to be less cloying tonight. it is better in the country. do you not like the city, then? it serves a purpose, but I must confess that when I'm married, I shall come to Rockville as little as possible. I prefer the outdoor activities offered by the countryside.

It was no doubt the reason he was so fit and that his skin was so bronzed. what is your favorite sport? she asked. Swimming. I recently had a small pool built at Grant wood. If you come to visit, I shall teach you how to swim.

She imagined the slickness of their wet bodies, gliding over each other. right now, I would no doubt sink straightaway to the bottom.

He grinned. I doubt it.

Although the curtains were drawn on the couch and she could not see the passing buildings, it did seem that they'd been traveling for some time now. I didn't think your residence was so far.

We'll dine at my residence, but I have a little surprise planned first.

She'd had far too many surprises of late. and what would that be? if I tell you, it won't be a surprise. this was not what we agreed to. trust me, Jannie. I believe you'll enjoy what I have in mind.

She became aware of the clatter of more vehicles and Ansley's coach slowing. we're in the thick of it. you may peer out if you like, he said.

She considered it. I shall wait.

Eventually, the coach rolled to a stop. A footman opened the door and Ansley disembarked before handing her down.

They were in an alleyway, but still, she recognized the building.

Covent Garden? Are you mad? it is closed to the public tonight. then why are we here?

He smiled broadly. because it is open to us. I'm in mourning. I can't be entertained.

you shan't be. The actors are atrocious, from what I hear. Taking her hand, he led her toward the steps and a back door, where he knocked.

It opened and a wizened man peered out. your Grace! me... Smith. this way, sir.

They went through back hallways and up to two flights of stairs to a private box. Mr. Smith at once left them. Jannie eased down to a plush chair. is this the royal box? no, it is mine, Ansley said as he joined her.

How did you manage this? easily. it can't have been easy. let's just say that I'm a man of influence and leave it at that, shall we?

A man of influence, of wealth, of generosity. A modest man. She'd been so afraid to trust the feelings she had developed for him during the month they were at Blackmon. Could it be that she had seen the real man there? Lights lit the stage.

The curtains were drawn back. Jannie leaned forward and allowed the actors to transport her to fair Verona.

He'd considered paying the actors to perform a comedy. He was certain she needed some laughter, but in the end, he'd decided that she needed to shed some tears. He'd had a devil of time leaving her this morning.

He focused on her now. She was giving rapt attention to the performance, as though she was on stage with them. Her eyes had been filled with excitement when he arrived at the residence. It had

done his heart good. The exorbitant amount he was paying for the private use of the theater was money well spent.

Theirs had been an unusual courtship, which began last November' even though he'd not realized it was courtship at the time. Courting her now was a bit more difficult because of all the social mores that insisted she is in seclusion.

As the star-crossed lovers were mourned, he saw the tears begin to trickle down her cheeks. He wanted to wipe them away from himself, but tonight he intended to be only a friend. So, he handed her his handkerchief and watched as she delicately patted her face.

And then a heart-wrenching sob broke free. He moved in, wrapping his arms around her, turning her into his chest, holding her near. He knew her sorrow had nothing to do with the performance. She was weeping now for all she'd lost and all that faced her.

~~*

I hate this, she said. I hate that I'm all weepy. you've earned the right to cry.

Straightening, she eased back. it makes me feel weak. you're hardly weak.

He could see her studying his features, and he wondered where her thoughts wandered.

Taking a last swipe at her tears, she squared her shoulders. I suppose we should be off. are you ready for dinner, then? I'm actually quite famished.

Dinner took place in Ansley's garden, with candles flickering on the small round table, while the gas lamps sent out a soft glow. She could shill the roses, and from time to time she caught a hint of his fragrance. you've gone to a great deal of bother, she said. Not I. My servants. And I pay them well enough to do it.

The Cages, to He's horror, had been exactly as they were named. They were cages, dome birdlike cages with iron workings. They swung several hands above the stony ground. He leered gloomily at the stone fortress that was the entrance to the prison, the cages weren't in the Purgatory, they swung beside it. His fingers clutched at the iron rods desperately trying not to think of how her body would feel if it fell to the mean stones below. Her stomach rolled as a harsh wind made her cage rock dangerously.

Part:

The air whistled through the bars and slapped her cheeks. It was almost painful. She felt like a condemned bird that had been put on display before its execution. She sat high enough to see over the palace walls but it was low enough that her food, water, and even another chamber pot could be poled up to her. She knew part of the reason she was up this high was that Biseal wanted her to have little contact with anyone as well as minimize her chances of escape. There was little chance of that, bo th of her wrist had been shackled to the cage floor every time the rustled the guards would look at her questioningly. At least they weren't cruel; if He knew better, she would even think they felt sorry for her. Her head pounded painfully and she felt sicker, she needed to vomit but it wouldn't come up. It just spread through her body leaving her weak and shaking harder than a dying note on a novice musician's lips.

The fire was the only thing burning in the King's room when She opened the door. The University must be using a lot of magic to know the mage lights out, again. He was going to have to be firm with them. He had been much too lenient with them. A sharp pain cut through his chest that he had to push away. All of his training almost wasn't enough but he couldn't let his grief get the better of him. Grief destroyed the weak and She knew he couldn't be weak. He would have kicked his ass if she had even suspected it. She was too kind, letting the University draw on needed magic and shut themselves away from the rest of the Median. He was going to have had a serious talk with the Highest Basel.

Soon, maybe tonight. No not tonight but first thing in the morning before they all came to pound upon his door with their condolences. He didn't want any of them, they weren't fake grief-stricken faces for his behalf. They were pleas for mercy or at least they would be as soon as he found out what truly happens to Heania.

She collapsed into his chair before he fell. It had taken four days to make it back, the horses had almost broken from no rest. Honor must have thought he was insane, he felt like he was going insane. He hadn't slept in four days! How could he when he felt the blood-stilling fear of being hunted. He had felt it all, everything Heania had felt when that Thing chased her. It hunted her down to right outside the Palace Temple. It let her get that far, to a place she thought she would be safe and killed her there. There in the center of a dark hall.

She's head fell into his hands, it wasn't true. How could it be when he could still hear her voice when it was quiet. Like a loaf of bread for the starving. She felt starved with titbits of food being shoved his way. All of them were soaked in poison. 'She!' His voice had been desperate, scared too. 'I love you.'

He wanted to claw his eyes out, he never should have left her here, alone. He should have taken her with him and Ysterym be damned. He still would have had her, them, both of them. For the

Goddes's sake, she had been pregnant! And they hadn't cared, whoever had done this to her hadn't cared one way or another.

A strangled sound wrenched from his throat. He sounded like Alec when he was trying to get his audience's attention. Gods, poor Alec, the large adolescent guardian had to be sedated just so the priestess could collect Heania's body. They had taken her back to her room. She was there now but she wouldn't be for very much longer. The spells woven over her body to keep it from decomposing would unlock on the seventh day, the last day of mourning. Then he would have to let them build a pry and let her burn.

A hard knock rapped on his door. It wasn't the door he had when he left. It was newer - he would never get to ask He why she hadn't liked the old one. 'Request an audience tomorrow!' he called. The knock came again. 'Enter!' they heard that.

A petite shadow slipped into the room clicking the door shut behind him. She tensed, who would dare not announce themselves. 'It is just me.' Nevaeh's husky voice filled the quiet room as she slipped the hood of her cloak back off her face. It was almost as he remembered. It was tightly drawn; her eyes were puffy as though she had been crying.

'I'll get a report in the morning Nevaeh- thank you.'

'I didn't come for that.' she said hastily. 'I just came to be sure you did nothing stupid, or rash.' he would have smiled at that once before. Now it just made him angry.

Part:

'I fear there is no energy in me to do either-'

'I'm sorry.' she seemed to falter, her eyes falling away from his direction. 'Lady Heania was...she was a gift.'

'Yes, she was.' and she was gone. My wife is gone. Regret stabbed him so deep he wished he could turn to something, anything, to ease it. A prayer, a bottle of ale, a knife. None of them would ease this burden.

The silence stretched for a moment more, until She was sure that Nevaeh would leave. He wasn't a company to be had at all. Lily and Honor had long ago retreated under his rage, the whole council had accepted his return and quivered under it. 'you should sleep.' Nevaeh's hand touched his arm, not pulling away even when he flinched. 'Please?'

'How can I sleep when I can't even think of anything else beside Her.' he asked not meaning to appeal to Nevaeh but found little choice but to ask someone.

'Company helps.' Nevaeh shrugged a little unladylike for her perfect facade. She was too perfect in almost everything she did. In her words, in her duty, in her skills, he had taught her. If she had been a mage, she would have placed her over the University a long time ago. 'If you would like, I'll stay the night with you.' she wouldn't be much company herself with her swollen eyes and hollowed cheeks. 'I just - I wouldn't want to be alone at a time like this.'

'Of course, you can stay, you're one of the only people I would allow to see me this torn apart.'

She ran a tired hand through his hair. 'I can't show weakness.' not with the city already so divided. The University was determined to split the city in two between magic and the temples. The City's people loved his wife, from the temples to the pickpockets. The palace had a heart that bled soured milk for her. It was like his mother all over again; her disappearance had torn apart a country. What would He's death do?

'That's how they destroyed He.' Nevaeh's small voice flitted to She's ears. He was on his feet in a heartbeat. His hands gripped her shoulders wanting to shake her.

'What!'

'She was going to have a baby- they would never allow a bastard to be crowned heir when so many others wanted the damn seat.' Nevaeh shook her head blinking back unshed tears. 'She showed a weakness when she announced that.'

'It wasn't a bastard! It was mine!' She found himself roaring. 'He was never like that - never.'

'I don't doubt that.' Nevaeh shook her head gently taking his hands. 'She talked a bout you like you were the next sunrise, when she wasn't cursing your name.' he wanted to smile but didn't dare.

Nevaeh's body trembled a bit, all the unshed tears finally caved in on her. They rolled down her cheeks unchecked. 'I am so sorry! Forgive me?' she would have thrown herself to his feet if She hadn't caught her.

'What for?'

'I just left her, she told me to take Alec and go to bed. I didn't think to stay with her and now…' She shook her head as She shook his head.

'Nevaeh that was a Golemn, it would have killed you too as surely as it did Heania. It isn't your fault. Whoever made it will bare all blame.' and all his wrath because there would be no mercy, none. 'Come on your shaking.' She pulled the cloak off her to give her a blanket he favored on cool nights. It was no wonder she was shivering when all she wore was her simple nightgown. Her hair was so tousled he was certain she had tried to sleep and couldn't. Her voice was husky because she had woken up from bad dreams in tears. Poor Nevaeh. 'Sit.' He tried to put her in a seat, Nevaeh simply shook her head. Her eyes were cast on the flames. They danced on her eyes and cheeks until they practically glowed.

'I want to stay, but we both need to get some rest. She, before the sun comes up, they will be at this door.' she pointed. 'They can't see that your half blind with grief.' She pulled him towards his bed.

'Lay with me,' he froze, his whole body jerking unsure that he had heard her right.

She stopped too, looking over her shoulder at him with a frown. 'It is nothing but for comfort, so we don't have to be alone. Alone with our guilt.'

-And-

'What will this give us?' She asks shaking his head.

'A false peace.' Nevaeh shrugged. 'Just for the night, I promise.' Nevaeh always kept her promise. He had nothing else to do but drown in his grief. His wife was dead and beyond his help. Nevaeh heard and all but begging for comfort. Something they both needed.

She waited patiently, one hand innocently clutching the cover over her thin nightdress. She was his friend but she wasn't a child. He would be foolish to think of Nevaeh as a child when he had seen her bring grown men to their knees. He would do anything for her even this. He wanted to do this. It was a way to forget. 'Here.' he pulled her closer, away from his bed. He didn't want her there yet.

Nevaeh went without protest. She came to him letting his hands touch her puffy face, her hair, her chest. When he pulled her close, he felt her soft mouth kiss his shoulder, the base of his neck. His skin flushed under her warm breath as her head leaned against the chest. Little moans escaped her mouth as his hands slid down her body coming back up with the hem of her gown until it came off over her head.

Someone sighed, Nevaeh did as they heard the gown fall to the floor. She couldn't help looking at her, her bronzed skin just seemed to glow in the firelight that also added a reddish haze to her dark brown hair that covered her face from sight.

'She.' Nevaeh said hesitantly reaching up to wrap her arms around him. Her lips planted kisses on his arms, shoulders, his cheek as she lifted up on tiptoes to reach his ear. 'I-' a blood stopping scream filled the room. Right into She's ear as he threw the source halfway across the room. His hands went to cover his ears to keep the horrible screams out. They just got louder and louder until he was sure the whole palace would wake.

'Nevaeh stop- don't!' she just screamed and wouldn't stop. It wasn't her voice at all. It was a higher shriller. It was the scream of someone who's heart was breaking letting in all the fear and terror the Gods gave into it.

Then closed her eyes against the setting sun; she tried not to think of it as possibly the last sunset she would ever see. Her eyes wanted to burn from her head.

She just waited to scream away her headache and give over into it all. All He did was a whimper. 'Lady,' someone hissed. He ignored it as the wind. Until it came again. 'Lady!' the voice was daringly loud. Perhaps a guard was trying for attention?

Nevaeh's naked body lay crumpled on the floor as her screams continued to pierce the night until he wanted to join in with her.

'Heania!'

Page Break

Engorgements:

"I want to say I believe in new talents in writing, like the Neveah manuscript. We have chatted briefly about his work, and I would say he can go for his dreams. I did. If I must give an opinion, I feel he can do it," says Lauren Oliver, writer of Rooms and Before I Fall.

https://www.webwire.com/ViewPressRel.asp?aId=203719

Lauren Oliver is an American author of numerous young adult novels including Panic; the Delirium trilogy: Delirium, Pandemonium, and Requiem; and Before I Fall, which became a major motion picture in 2017.

Hastings Public Library: Endorsement: for Nevaeh- the new novel

Hastings Public Library I'm writing about Marcel Duriez's books. I've been a library director in Hastings, Pa for the last six years. I've purchased his first two books for the library and have recommended his books Cuddles and Sammie and Ellie to our patrons to read to their children.

The parents and children both loved books. I'm looking forward to his new book coming out for teens (Nevaeh Natalie.) What kid wouldn't love this book! I have reviewed the book, and I have to say it is overwhelmingly worm, not too long not to short, and imaginative, something children would love to look over, at bedtime!

I have read over some chapters in the manuscript and I was captivated, along with all the others he has a reading team that felt this need to be in all teenager's hands. I feel the same - as they do. I hope that it will be in print very soon. He is an industrious young man, and I wish him much success.

Sincerely, Bernadette Dillen Hastings Library

Audrey Brothers/Konior "Not many individuals can creatively utilize two talents, Duriez is one such person who can." Duriez's books have a blissful, cheerful interior and exterior. The stories are intriguing and interesting, as for as the Illustrations there eye-catching and gives the feeling of being drawn into his stories." The Star Courier/Mainline Newspaper (Article by Audrey Brothers/Konior, page 15/A June 28/2012)

Paul Walker: Teacher/Musician Northern Cambria Catholic School, St. Benedict School Indiana University of Pennsylvania Bachelor of Science (B.S.), music education Endorsement: for Neveah "I have just read the above rough draft and would like to recommend it for endorsement. My name is Paul E. Walker and I am a retired music educator who taught Marcel as a private student for over 6 years I have a minor in English I know the editing look over I did was okay. I have reviewed some pages in the manuscript, and I can't believe how I got drawing into this story. I see much of what he has personally experienced

going into this work. I'm looking forward to the print book. I would say those mature teens would love reading this story. Bullying it's something I see as a teacher, more now than in the past. Kids can't get away from it even now when they go home it follows them online, just like in this story. This book may help those that are bullied cope, and think before they act. The book is very readable and neat. I most have book sets, for young and teens.

Endorsement by: Chris Cramer: Creative Director at Poke the Bear Productions. Director with Moreau Movie. American Musical and Dramatic Academy Shirley Prasko: Accounting Gormish Chiropractic Team- Dr. Daron Gormsish & Dr. Clay Gormsish

Page Break

Marcel Ray Duriez

duriez19@gmail.com

Dear Mr. Or Ms. Bookworm:

Forgive disturbance and interruption for your moment to review my material of what could be a future classic. I was more impressed with your analysis of your literary background in history that captivated my fancy, which brought forth utter delight and hysteria. I am hopeful that you would be encouraged, interested, stimulated, and moved, in representing my multi perceptive novel.

I have a diverse cast in the topics that are hammering home right in freedoms, of mind, body, and faith, life, and death.

I have many points of view, yet Nevaeh's experiences at times you will feel as if you're walking in her shoes, questing equality and equality right within a novel, also has many possibilities for that showcase gender expression of free will. This story is a literary fiction novel, for a teen reader yet has strong content: ANGEL'S IN DISGUISE OR THE NEVAEH SAGA the narrative points switches every five pages, keeping imagination moving onward.

The Nevaeh Saga is a narrative in magical realism that focuses on the thoughtful look of a young girl, facing pain- as she bares her soul and what lies within.

The narrators Nevaeh May Natalie of the story is the same main character, of throughout the entire story, one continuous protagonist, for youth to old, to the afterlife.

However, points of view are changed by those within her life at any given moment. When other characters have a right to a voice, the name character will show along with his or her part of speech expressed giving feeling and movement to the story of emotions.

A fourteen-year-old Nevaeh is having a midlife crisis likewise does not seem to bode well with her life expectancy. Her so-called school friends bully her, whatever semblance of a foster mother drowned out her fights with life by loathing her for being alive, falling, and grieving her way to mental delusion. Now a fallen angel Nevaeh speaks when she did not have a voice, to do so before her untimely death - as she bares her soul.

I was born in 1991, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, USA, and raised in a small town of Northern Cambria, previously known as Barnesboro.

At this time, immense, unique, and unusual background in my experiences of writing and the arts.

I am more than qualified to tell a story like this for my English background coming from - The Art Institutes and SNHU, and Alison Diplomas, and ten years of pushing. Fundamentals of English, Grammar, and Writing with a late Master's inauguration in English in creative writing. I am currently holding a Bachelor's level in General education, from SNHU as a transferring student.

I currently have 98 other self-published works.

Published in numerous online and paper formats, like- magazine Let Fire, Web-Wire, The Our Town Newspaper, and Marline Newspapers, for the Star Courier.

My degrees at this date are in BA.GDM Graphic Design, Architectural Engineering Technology and Civil Technology, Residential Planning, (CDA), and Writing.

My diplomas are under Fine Art and the Fundamentals, Health and Human Development, Advanced Physics, Children's Studies, Music Theory, English Grammar, and the Fundamentals, Electrical Drawings and Test Equipment, Educational Psychology, English Language and Literature Writing .

I am part of the Kappa Pi - ETA Sigma Fraternity. Along with the National Technical Honor Society Fraternity.

I have several children's books currently self-published, The Many Adventures of Cuddles holding a five-star review from reviewer Mamta Madhavan: for Readers Favorite, saying: A delightful and captivating storybook for children.

The Many Adventures of Cuddles: Tobey, Pandora, and Cuddles. The book featured in the 2016 Book Expo America (BEA), held last May 11 to 13 at McCormick Place in Chicago.

And Sammie and Ellie: How I Met my Family.

I believe in new talents in writing, like the Neveah manuscript. We have chatted briefly about his work, and I would say he can go for his dreams. I did. If I must give an opinion, I feel he can do it, said New York Times bestselling author, Lauren Oliver, writer of Rooms and Before I Fall.

Thank you for your time in reviewing this, And I hope that the enclosed synopsis will pique your interest. Reachable at the address and phone number above, as well as via email at duriez19@gmail.com. I have enclosed my mailing address of 419 Juniper St. Of Northern Cambria, Pa, 15714, asking for your conveniences interplanetary mail, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Marcel Ray Duriez

Page Break

Now at book 70

2,700,000 as short as possible, summaries 70+ Nevaeh Saga books all having 99 editing scores, with Grammarly and word online alike.

15,500 pages

13,435,928 characters braking world record if published

74,358 paragraphs

Page Break

Nevaeh Saga every book summary

Nevaeh is a 14-year-old girl living in Pennsylvania at the start of this story around the 2000s. The feeling of the story is just because she is the small girl in her class, and has other kids, classmates, mother, grandmother, and even her guardian, putting her down, does not mean that Navaeh cannot rise above all the hatred and shine.

The darkest day of her human life Nevaeh commits suicide. However, that is not the end of her young life, but the start of a miraculous supernatural life beginning. Neveah remembered as the girl who existed. In her notebooks of her life.

Likewise, in a town, that to her is just as backward as her temperament is at times. Just like her name spelling also, she lives a life of bullying.

Nevaeh feels that death is a way out of the pain. Before she passes, she lives her life out to see all that she has lost by choosing to relinquish to death, at the age of 14.

Leading into an afterlife story in the books to come of her becoming a f allen angel. An evil entity with wickedness, wanting pain, and death is always lurking in the darkness of cobwebbed filled minds she has obtained from twisted brainwashing.

Nevaeh becomes lost in her mind, and the minds of others as more points of view as the story progresses, in this new afterlife. One Naddalin, unknown sister, of many siblings.

Page Break

Top POVs other than Nevaeh

Small town Pennsylvania, Nevaeh May Natalie was born in 1996. Bullied by teachers and students alike, to name some Mr. Mendocino, Mr. DeVolcano all call her to retard and braindead to her in class. Made to be Sped-Ed yet is brilliant. Had child Jaylynn Naztherth, lost child, to suited death at the same school with the same teachers, as she went too. Hold on to a teddy bear, to feel safe, at most times, thumb-sucker, and sad to be regressed in mentalities, to 2nd grade. She love's Lily, before marriage. Nevaeh is mysterious, attractive, and creative. Eyelashes could put you in a trance as she blinked.

She is so petite in her stature, 95 lbs high voice, dislikes school, and her home town. Is jailed for anything and everything. Loves the color pink, and art work. 8 siblings yet felt alone.

Naddalin Natalie was born, the daughter of Leah and Ray. She had six sisters. She died on July 19, 1995. (Still Born death the same day as birth.) Titus Back is the stepdad, and oversee this child's way.

Chiaz Naztherth was born in 1997. He had one daughter with Nevaeh May Natalie. The sentimental romantic boy- to man, coal mining in the upcoming stories, meets his love in Highschool.

Lily Anderson and her twin sister Nevaeh May were born on July 19, 1995. She had six sisters. Known for her pigtails John Jackson pulling them in class, and being too shy and soft-spoken. Mr. Anderson, take the part of dad. Is dating Nevaeh on and off as a gay girl. Her hobbies include drawing, singing in her

church's choir, and braiding her hair with ribbons that match her outfits. picked on by J.A Cowering. Lily is (Sped-ED)

Candy Sheldon, Elizabeth Smith, Megan Davis, Taylor Brown, Joseph Shaw, Kassie Row, Kassie Row, and even the teacher Miss. Stackawitz is a distraction to her, and pick on her daily saying names of slander.

Adriane Amsel was born around 2002, the daughter of Leah. She had one brother and six sisters.

She is a junior in the family. She has black hair with red tips. She has green cat eyes.

She is squat and bumpy, emo-gothic, and a ringleader. She is satanic, manipulating, and brainwashes prey.

Sarah was born, the daughter of Leah. She had one brother and seven sisters. She died in 1997. Death by mother, in shaking/washing machines. Also is The Girl in the Window.

Alissa Amsel was born, the daughter of Leah. She had one brother and six sisters. Is a blonde hair, blue-eyed girl; she cannot weigh any more than one hundred pounds, yet she is taller than most of the boys' kind of gangly looking, the main squeeze, of the girls, bullying gang of the clan sisters, Alissa, she towers in her overall authority, control, and influence, in the society's ranking of a rheostat in the high school, having mom, dad, and grandpop behind every move of taking over. Alissa is a senior the head cheerleader, she makes everyone that she wants to be associated with being her friend, and the ones she does not want to be her fools. A refusal to bow down to her authority, she does everything in her power, to

make your life miserable; Alissa is constantly smothering Chiaz Naztherth, with her crazed oversexed clingy on Nevaeh's lover.

Ava Amsel was born on November 19, 2000, the daughter of Leah. She had one brother and six sisters. The takeover of all wicked, she has a crush on Nevaeh, it's not wrong if you are the law,

is a brown-haired girl she, is so petite, yet she is bigger than Nevaeh, athlete, not coordinated, scholarship holder, anybody she wants popular as mating, liar, oversexed, the fourteen-year-old curving object of desire is Nevaeh.

Jaylynn Naztherth was born, the daughter of Nevaeh and Chiaz. Suicide death within her high school, losing a baby within her body. Her mother Nevaeh May passed away in 2010 at the age of 15, yet has angle immoralities.

Devein Chino was born, the son of Leah. He has seven sisters. Death by the hands of his mother, and dad.

Leah Amsel had a child with Ray Jay Natalie and another that was taken away, and many- other than Nevaeh. All the children with other men, 6 girls other Nevaeh, and 1 boy, having kids at a young age. She worked for an orphanage as a caregiver. Lost ownership of all Nevaeh, and her kids.

When Ray Jay Natalie was born in 1957, his mother, Hope was 24 he had one son and four daughters with Leah Amsel he died in 1993 at the age of 36. He likes classic bricks and loved his baby girls.

Benjamin Huber Black was born, the son of Hope Natalie-Black. He had one brother. He died on September 11, 2001, in New York.

Hope Natalie-Black was born in 1933. She had one son in 1957. She died in 2010 at the age of 77. Lost son in the war, took over the part of the mother for Nevaeh.

Grandpa Amsel had one daughter with Masel Amsel. Wartime, given in the Vietnam war, only town cop, PTSD, he was nothing more than a revolutionary and seducer.

Masel Amsel had one daughter with Grandpa Amsel. Owner of a large home with graveyard executes children within orphanage for fun, caretaker of trust by the town, of over 200 kids ages five up to fourteen. Also, the town Meyer, and overseer of all that is population.

Titus Back had a child with Leah, that true- child is unknown. Yet he calls himself the stepdad, to one of the children that Leah had, yet is not sure, yet ends up looking after Naddalin, in the afterlife.

On with the story, Nevaeh has to learn the hard way in everything she does, in this supernatural life.

She has to see everything she was giving up by dying. Nevaeh's tormentors the four Amsel sisters will try to destroy her though-out all the books, as evil angels.

The problem, Nevaeh has a hex of losing everyone she has loved - after her death as punishment, like her baby girl Jaylynn and husband- and all to come, to the point she wants to give up on love altogether- yet that can happen when she is immortal.

The fix, she helps other girls that pass young, that have fallen see their way, in a world of the afterlife of enchantment and wizardry.

Moving on with one of many backstories, Nevaeh's granddaughter finds out true love prevails overall, just like real life. Kristen's grandchild of Nevaeh becomes the new target she is kidnapped - and the hex is passed down the line; however, fate has its twist.

Kristen learns how to fight as a U.S. Marine Corps. Karly and Maggie - and all the other girls in the story are all mixed up teen girls giving their life stories, girlfriends, boyfriends, and dating making out and up, hooking up, and all that makes popular - or not.

One other story that is a backstory to Nevaeh is Karly Barnes, the girl with the blue hair.

Think about all the photos that you post remembering - they just might be your legacy of being nothing more than an internet nudist.

Karly's - secret life on a chat room site - and her love for a girl, and the boy that was nothing, the loser in school, and the one that was everything too - in this story this - girl dies many times until she has an epiphany.

The BFF, Jenny the head of everything makes this girl, and her BFFs do what she asked even if that means giving up on what Karly loves.

The BFF's that like-like each other,

Liv- and Maddie take things to the next leave, on top of school, yet popularity prevails, as more important. The suggestive chat room for girls to be on their backsides becomes Karly's life, yet it's a fast buck and makes her feel wanted and popular. Steamy, juice, wet, raw, hot, lustful, teen girl's lives with dreamy boys, or that wrong but the right girl at the time of why not all out there, just like you.

The moral in the backstory, to explain the front story is, a picture is worth 1,000 words!

The plot of Karly left out- yet only in her mind, she feels at this point- Karly. Who doesn't whom she wants to love? And who loves her- back. Haunted by her past she wants the old days back- when she was a freshmen girl liking a boy and a girl- and not sure on either. The first-ever story about a CAM girl in her teen years of high school, the secret life of an agave teen girl that needs to feel wanted.

Twist in the plot of Nevaeh, Children being locked up for years in the oubliette of a room with others, and finding her new freedom, like with girls of the past too, remembering Lilly imprisonment - with Nevaeh foe, locked in an orphanage of incest and creepy bounding, torched for the joy of her owner - the 4 girl's mother, treated worse than a dog. Nevaeh is broken mentally, emotionally psychologically, and spiritually, the evenly she went mad because I was not there for her. Numbered with ID tag-ring-hanging the privets.

Death, drugs, partying, and anarchy, is all about being popular right - well what it like for Maggie- the one that is not, you'll see both sides of the stories of teen girls and boys that make life just suck.

Backstory, Ray and Karly are on and off - and the cute sweet boy is looking for love to yet, not with Karly.

Liv and Maddie are just being GAY lovers!

They say you fall in love only once but every time, I see her I fall in love with her all over again and again. Dating- fun- drinking- getting high- boys music- friends- not loving mom or dad- or just a dad. Loving too much in one way, and not enough in others. Girls talking about the nasty sex your mom and dad don't know about- end!

Twist, It all started when I opened up a suitcase and found my Dollie... Noah and Rallie and Sam and friends set off on one last adventure to lay the princess's ghost to rest- the ghost of a girl who will not rest until the bone-china doll is buried in her unfilled grave. In middle school now, and if there is a ghost, creepy, and haunting, will it let them go now that it has them in its grab? Is the doll just a doll or something eviler? Noah pop pushes him to give up fantasy, and Noah quits the game of play yet - not all the way.

But then nothing goes according to plan, and as their adventure turns into a larger -than-life voyage, creepy things begin to happen. Their relationship might be over until one of them announces she's been having dreams about the princess. And this creepy creeper dollie!

I am looking at you- it said! Dollie was feeling me!

Backstory, a sweet love story of a nerdy boy and the popular girl! Nothing beats a long passionate kiss at a football game! Or the romp in the band room! Jenny is losing her mind - at this point!

Backstory, of a girl Nevaeh helps,

Haven- Rockville- A boy to girl story, of transgender, and alternative education, over sexual identities.

Haven is held back in school, and made gifted, over her changes, has a hard time fitting in until she meets three triplets, and her life changes dramatically.

The school like all in this long story, is very wrong to those that misunderstand her- and all the others, she is just a girl- that is just trying to find the real girl that she feels that she is on the inside, that she believed always was there.

The BFF's of Haven, one of the triplet girls- that back Havens family- loses a child and have one Haven take her place- in a way for the mother, in the home, even if she is not identical to the others- they all become like sisters.

Naddalin is a young girl who finds the link to the past, is a train that she falls too, in all ways; that is just a possessed as she is by it. The train takes over her body mind and soul, as she starts at wizard schooling, a hidden railway to a new world of good versus evil where all the girls that have passed to young go too before their reasoned; to their new projects to linger within other minds.

The magic starts here, in the afterlife world.

'This is the story of a lover's triangle... It was bad from the start. And it got worse in a hurry.' A steam train for sale- dubbed '13' by its original cantankerous owner- rusting away on a front lawn of their wizard neighborhood.

Her girlfriends know that Naddalin never- ever had much luck in the looks or popularity department, or taken an interest in owning something like this, but 13 quickly changes all that.

She suddenly has the newfound confidence to stick up for herself, going as far as dating the most beautiful girl at the wizard school, and even as a mysteriously restored 13 thoroughly and terrifyingly consumes every aspect of Naddalin life.

Her girls and Leigh soon understand that they must uncover the awful truth behind a steam train, with a horrifying and murderous history. Hell, hath no fury like a woman scorned, and heaven helps anyone who gets in 13 ways... adventure to find a lost railway that links to the past with ghosts that talk with them, on the trip, to find the magic.

Backstory, Marcella a girl that is locked in a room made to write a novel; Anna Kindrick as kidnapped by the same man named Steven- a man that is just nuts who claims to be her biggest fan. Anna, and Marcella- are typed the line in her bed with the laptop. That dies to the outside world.

Note: Naddalin is Nevaeh, in a twist of plot.

Naddalin- celebrate her 14th birthday, then goes back to when she was born. You see, she has lived in her Uncle and Aunt's house. The letter she receives is an acceptance and invitation to study at the Skoufyceol Wizardry school for girls. A dark and wizardry in this world.

Naddalin will learn many things about wizardry from his teachers and Head Masters, and also from the other girls. She will meet and make friends, life, and death, and return to life from death, angels - black and white.

One death won't change a world-mind, I don't want to be another left behind. The mother Mazel of the 4 girls attempts to take over control of the world and Naddalin's mind, body, and soul - over it is now split with Nevaeh - to keep her alive.

Naddalin gives up, one point and is lost, till she finds her way, in the most unlikely of places; A place for you, and a place for me, not quite hell, and never going to be a haven, if your fallen, yet if death is calling what more can it be, then Hells purgatory, all crystal ball holds a life's past, and Emmah final death, hold new life for her lover and best friend, yet well Emmah come back, like the girl we know and love, what the trade-off?

The evil problem is AVA and her Mother, will return and make permanent darkness for one, new girls will be welcomed to the school for girls, a marched around to remember why they're not going down, they have come after a school shooting in their homeland on Earth to this new magical underworld world.

The taking down of the Dark Lord, Naddalin finds a way of having Nevaeh back in her life - and back in the world as a whole girl, as more than just part of Naddalin's mind, they have a love for each other, and trust over everything else. Nevaeh finds her place as GOD, pushing away her past loves do it. God - is a woman? ...In this world she is.

'A story of lingering, liberty, and independence - like this one should not be glossed over, by others and will not, understand me, for the bravery, courage, and valor!'

Nevaeh becomes a deity - of her world, letting go of past demons. Naddalin is now on her own - lost in the body of an Earthy girl named Melisa they find a love for each other, and trust over everything else when she is made the chosen one.

Backstory, young Melisa- the younger in the fight- a star girl- the type that is not wanted in this overridden land- the Star Games and the Famine Wars- a cataclysmic modern-day holocaust, were the balances of life is their hands and in their erranding- a televised bloodbath- with young love- that what is all about- what drives you the most even in death eyes, preteenagers from parts in France are chosen at random to fight to the death. With the hope of young life to keep them alive.

Has a spacy, feeling, and new Earth they say, about starting a new race, on what was left of the old Earth, over the fact that Earth was taken over by bots Impressions of life, and the sun is dead, so to keep life going, Marcella had to find a new home on a plant called FDR, where new life there is not happy with us on are oncoming arrival, yet we have no choice, do we?

Starting a new race on FDR, over the fact that Earth was taken over by bots' impressions, and the sun is dead, so to keep life going Marcella had to find a new home, where new life is not happy here and her on-coming arrivals of us to their planet. 'THE SUN BLEW UP WITHOUT WARNING AND FOR NO APPARENT reason.

A world that all books are not allowed to be read, so they are burnt... and a forbidden love airfare with the CEO. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have un-predicted sex now morning, like the alarm, going off to let me no so... its 7 am... on a Monday- and the year is 3070.

When literature student Marry goes to interview young entrepreneur CEO, she meets an individual who is lovely, dazzling, and intimidating.

The inexperienced, innocent Marry is startled to comprehend she wants this man and, despite his enigmatic reserve, finds she is desperate to get close to him. Unable to resist her quiet beauty, yet feels

the need to hide, inner and out beauty, wit, and self-determining spirit, He admits he wants her, too- but on his terms.

The couple embarks on a daring, fervently corporeal affair, she determines the CEO secrets and explores her dark desires and lust for her.

'It was a yearning to burn.' The computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I pad's, and computers, without looking through old dusty pages, plus Its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books.

The year 3080 which at first appears as a utopian society but is revealed to be a dystopian one as the story progresses with a forbidden love story mixed in. How would you like to live in a grayed-out would of sight- were there no color and feeling has become cold?

The world's darkest enemies have returned, sacrificing her child for love and love for freedom, those, have been part of Nevaeh, that care the most about have been killed for her essences of life to remain, or have found why to trick the minds that are inside there's.

Curses and a dark spell with magic, memories- and minds withering, and time without end make a reunion for eternal void for lost souls. Desperate to break the curse. And in her mission, she gets help from an unexpected source; Nevaeh and Naddalin have gone through countless lives and fought off the world's darkest enemies so they could be together- and that they are, should they be?

Notwithstanding her fierce loyalty, magical talents, and a mysterious past. She's always believed they were soulmates had a true love- and she still believes it to be true. Even as they pull away to

save themselves from the darkness dwelling her soul, linking with cultivates stronger become stronger friends- and tests her love for her and all of them, like never- ever before.

Nevaeh and Naddalin's love at this time- stronger than ever- yet death is the thoughts that cannot leave Nevaeh's mind, Naddalin and Nevaeh have body and mind flopped. Bones last test of time. The story of Zoey & Uncle John- and forbidden romance- yet- 'That's Life- no?' Zoey well away way be remembering more than her hometown of Hastings- more than the ones that made her end her life all too soon- and tragically.

A story of- a writer wanting to do the right thing for a man that wants a legacy, a story of a poor and passionate young man falls in love with a young girl, after moving to the U.S of A for Italy, knowing nothing about the ways of the world other the old century and hard work, you will go through this romances novel, finding your way to old age, where all you do is look back and say I did okay- along with saying: 'That's-a life- no?

He well met a young lady, that will give him a sense of freedom. And a new love of life, until the last days of his own. Until the last of hers... Zoey touched my lives including the writers- with her scrapbook- that became timeless- unlike the ones that hated on her- she will be remembered- and they will not.

Middle-grade story heartwarming and feel good along with delightful read. The Shut Generation- (Name can change if needed) Softball team- young girls come together for a summer to make life-lasting memories.

'A coming of age, a story about a girl getting to know herself and her girlfriends - intimately, all over one summer games of softball- they called this... find out why the legendary Babe of the Yankees makes into the story.'

Babe makes his way into the story and looks over girls that did not see I eye to eye come together and play like girls in a game of summertime ball every night even if their girls, they changed thoughts of man, that girls can play just as hard as boys!

That a young girl can love a girl and not be judged, by a town, and even if they would not care, and the memories would last a lifetime and more, the uniforms may have faded like the photos yet not, the flashbacks, of a summer love over softball. A story on the same lines as The Sandlot, a bunch of girls getting together for summer to play softball 2 girls that are interested in becoming more than just friends is kind of the plot, leads into lifelong memories sadness regret in remembrance of all things pass.

Backstory, Babe Ruth-grandchild is in the story as well as the grandfather of one of the girls in the children who give the title of the story and the generation that was coming up. Tween book, 'A coming of age, a story about a girl getting to know herself and her girlfriends- intimately, all over one summer game of softball- they called this... find out why the legendary.

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The Shut Generation- Softball team our young girls coming together for a summer to make life-lasting memories. These girls are now here with us, and they would like to share their story with you.

Backstory, Andy is a wired yet bright teenager who is nerdy- and looks and meek demeanor to the others in his class- he makes himself a favorite target her is a dream girl and also the one that doesn't

get him. His life at school seems to improve when he befriends Jaylynn, a cute new girl who becomes his fast love interest, she protects him from harassment. In final an effort to impress her they both fall deep - and fast in cute love, trusting in each other - for what they both need.

Backstory, Jaylynn Fairytale - One apron a time there, was once an ironic gentleman whose wife lay sickening, with cancer, and when she felt her finish coming, and portrayal close... she christened - to her only daughter to come near her bed, and said: 'darling teenager, be moral, ethical, honest and virtuous, and God, and the one above, that using the phrase all the days, will always take care of you, in times of low; and, I will look down upon you from heaven high, and will be with you, till the end of your days.'

Backstory, moments that Would not Fade - Every summer, Kristin, Poppy, and Gram live in Gram's house on stands in Ridgeway, near the water. Kristin lives in the Highlands, in a small town, with her father and her grandmother - formally orphaned - and looking for a home and has nothing but snapshots of the past to look back on. Kristin's mother died when Kristin was a very small girl, but Kristin is content to be who and where she is - along with moments that will not fade.

Backstory, Martrace 'Hope' Dicksnoter - is a young sweet, smart, young girl who is not loved, yet shows that she is a brain. She finds a home with a teacher and gets what she has always wanted a loving family. 'It just someday in some year - in 1921 - she was let in the back of the 1918 Buick Pick up with a wood bed - and was forgotten about even if it was her birthday, 'A very gifted girl forced to put up with a crude, distant father and mother, Worse, the evil principal at her school is a terrifyingly strict bully. However, when she realizes she has the power books, she begins to defend her friends from wrath and fight back against her unkind parents.

Why is it a 10-year-old named: Bryana must end this way? A story that is touching, and well make you cry - as you read about this young life that ends too soon, yet young love is what keeps it all together. It was a fight to keep going, yet she did - with the hope of her love in her life... she passed happy, know that she had everything she ever wanted.

Neveah is having times where she has remembrances of all things past, that led into flashbacks and then also lingering in otherworldly remembrance.

The backstory to the magical world,

Savannah- A mermaid princess living in secret on land- on what was once Earth- now left dark and mysterious, and the sea foaming in a trance green, are mermaid has ended up inadvertently merged to her insufferable fellow citizen, instead of the boy of her dreams. Overworlds in one can be two.